

The image is a magazine cover for Game Informer. At the top, the word "gameinformer" is written in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font, with a small orange dot above the 'i'. To the right of the logo, the text "THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE" is written in a smaller, white, uppercase font. The main visual is a dynamic action scene from the game Titanfall. A female character, likely a Pilot, is in the center, wearing a dark, tactical suit with a red headband. She is firing a weapon, creating a bright orange and yellow explosion. She is positioned on top of a large, dark, metallic Titan. In the background, another Titan is visible, and the sky is filled with debris and other Titans. The overall scene is set in a war-torn, urban environment.

gameinformer®

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE

# TITANFALL

AFTER A **BITTER SPLIT** WITH **ACTIVISION** AND **CALL OF DUTY**  
**RESPAWN** DEBUTS ITS **BOLD VISION** FOR **NEXT-GEN MULTIPLAYER**

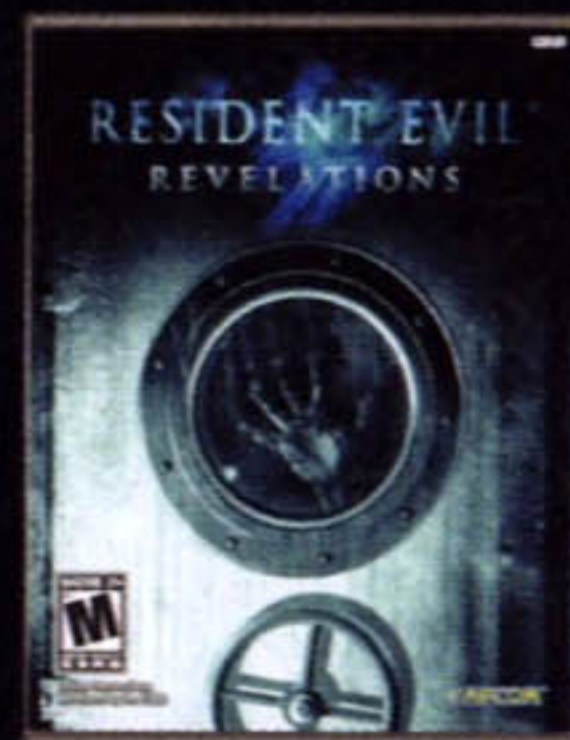
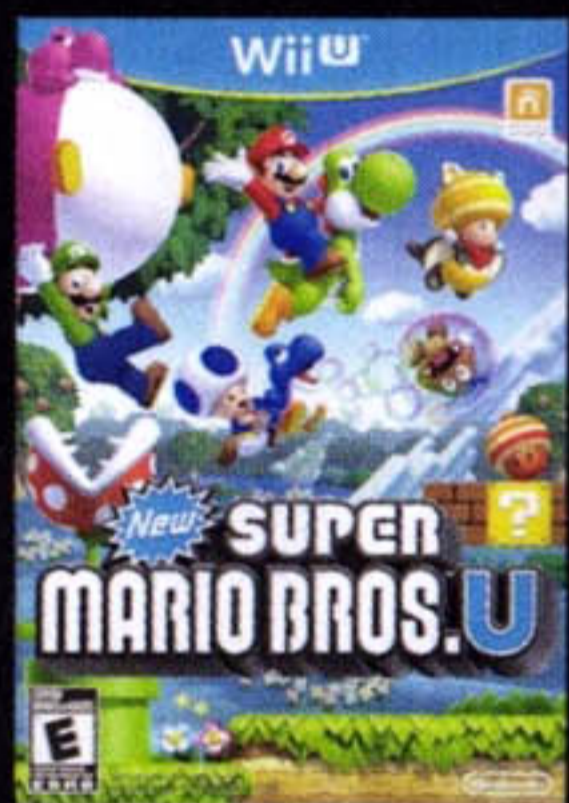
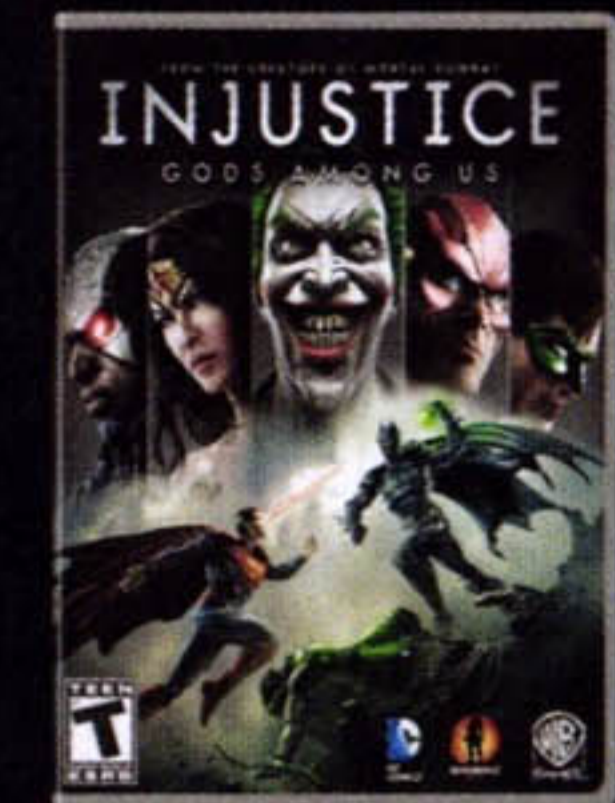
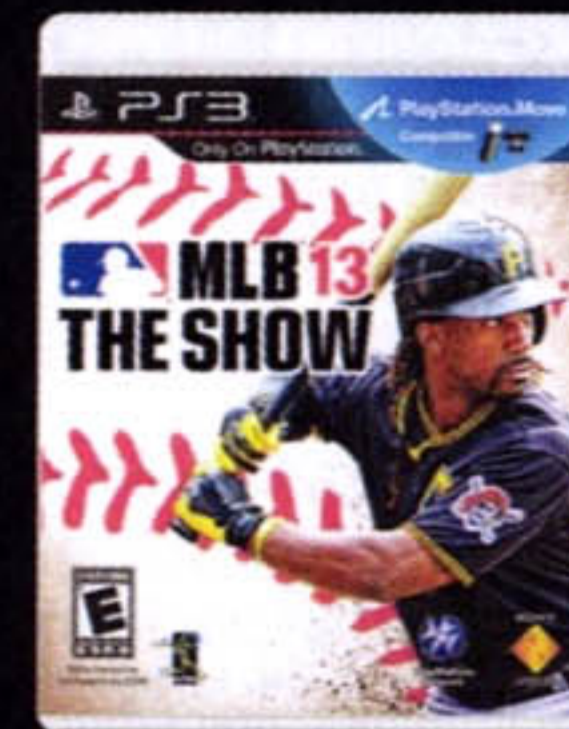
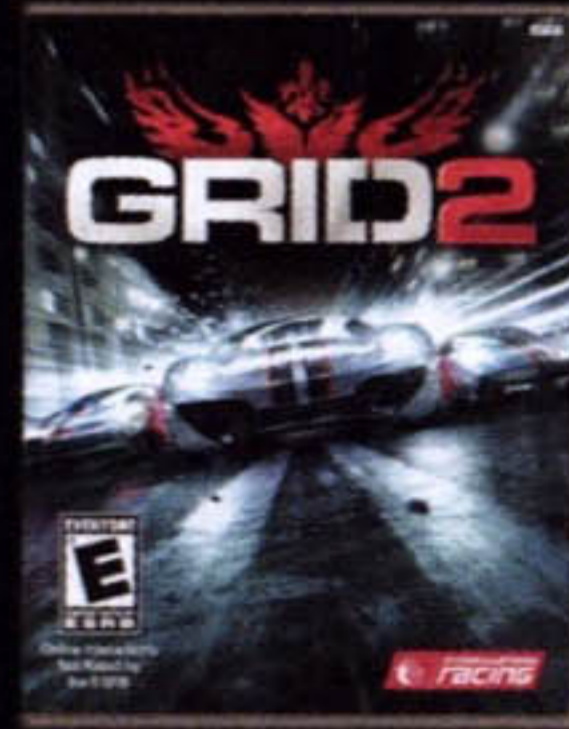
# YOUR GAMES AND DEVICES ARE WORTH SOME SERIOUS CHEDDAR

WATCH THE MONEY PILE UP WHEN YOU BRING IN YOUR GAMES. PLUS, NOW YOU CAN GET KILLER TRADE VALUES FOR YOUR SMARTPHONES AND TABLETS.



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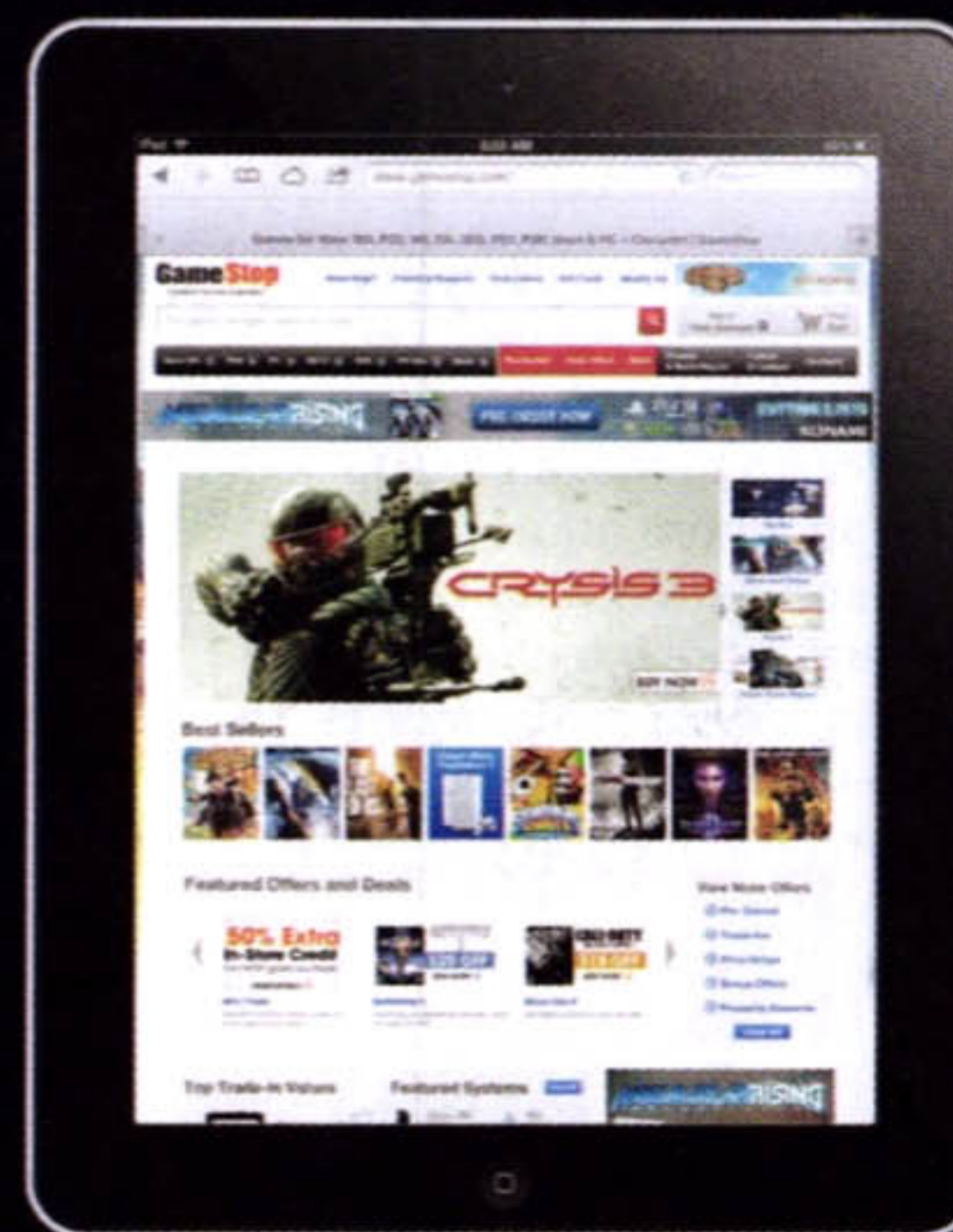
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ANDY McNAMARA  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF  
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or  
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## Now You're Playing With Power

After the Xbox One reveal, a tangible level of hate echoed around the world. An overwhelming battle cry claimed Microsoft had abandoned gamers everywhere by emphasizing other forms of entertainment over games. It doesn't take a team of rocket scientists to figure out that gamers are largely interested in more than one form of entertainment or pop culture. The truth of the matter is, there are few items in electronics anymore that do just one thing.

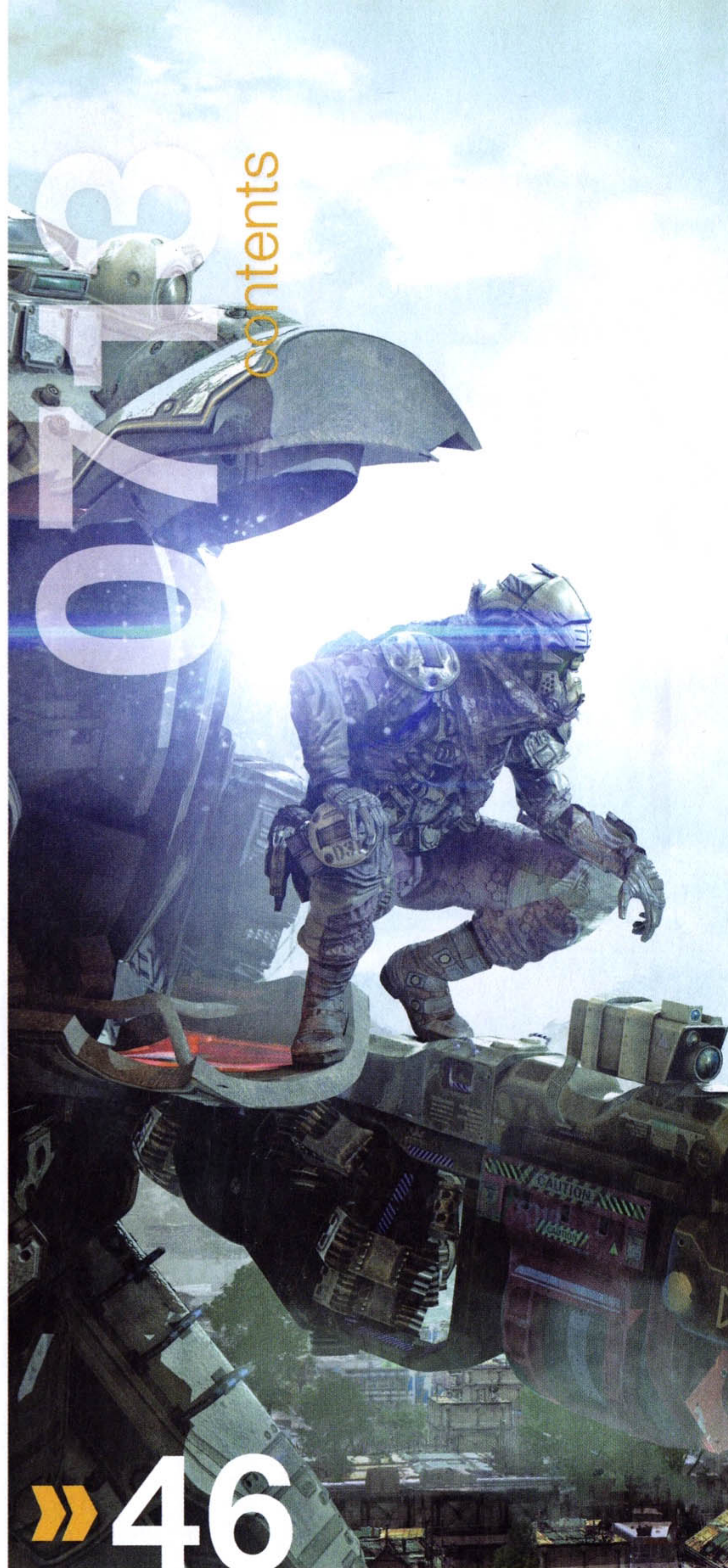
Every console manufacturer knows that to grow console gaming or get gamers back that have switched to other platforms like mobile or tablet they must design systems that are attractive to both core gamers and the larger consumer audience. The current generation of consoles were some of the first connected devices to offer Netflix and other video services to your TV, and those services brought added value to a console investment. But now you can't throw a stick without hitting a smart TV, Blu-ray player, or Roku box that can also provide these services to your living room at a fraction of the cost. Gaming needs to offer more to give consoles value.

Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo must offer new and interesting ways to interact in the living room, or they – like any other company that stagnates – will perish. To avoid such peril they must create that perfect mix of games, entertainment, ease of use, and value to amaze and attract consumers.

The players in this console war are putting their cards on the table, and now the power is in our hands. We get to choose which system gives us what we want in entertainment, which games we want to play, and how we want to play them. Regardless of whether games or entertainment is your focus, don't forget that at the end of the day, they need us as much as we need them.

Cutting off consumers with requirements that limit our abilities to play to the way we want to play simply won't win the console war this generation. They need to make gaming easier, more flexible, and more attractive than ever before. Gamers and games aren't going anywhere, but if the hardware manufacturers, game publishers, and game developers that rule this industry now don't listen to what the consumer wants, I can promise you someone else will.

Cheers,



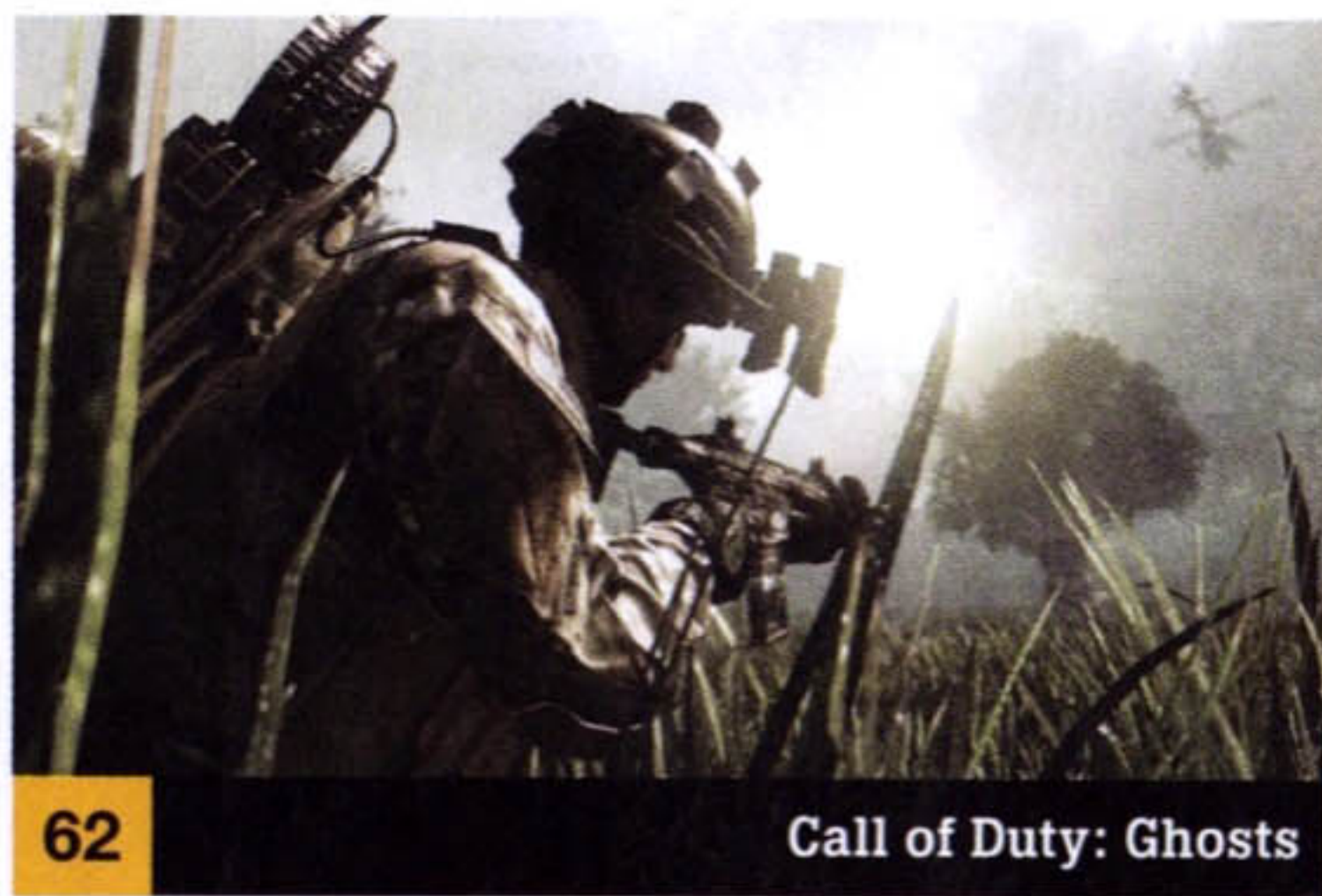
## Titanfall

From the ashes of Infinity Ward, the developer that made Call of Duty the phenomenon it is today, rose the aptly named Respawn Entertainment. After years of silence, the development studio is finally ready to discuss its next-gen science-fiction universe and share its brave new vision for the future of multiplayer games.

by **Matt Bertz**

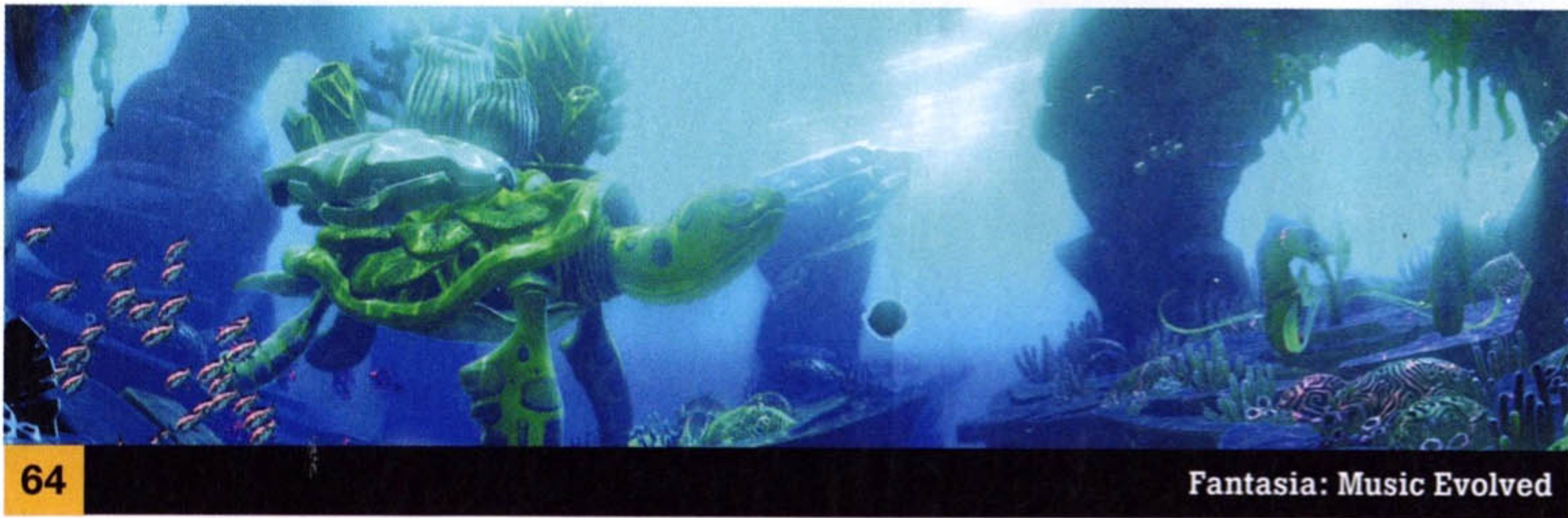


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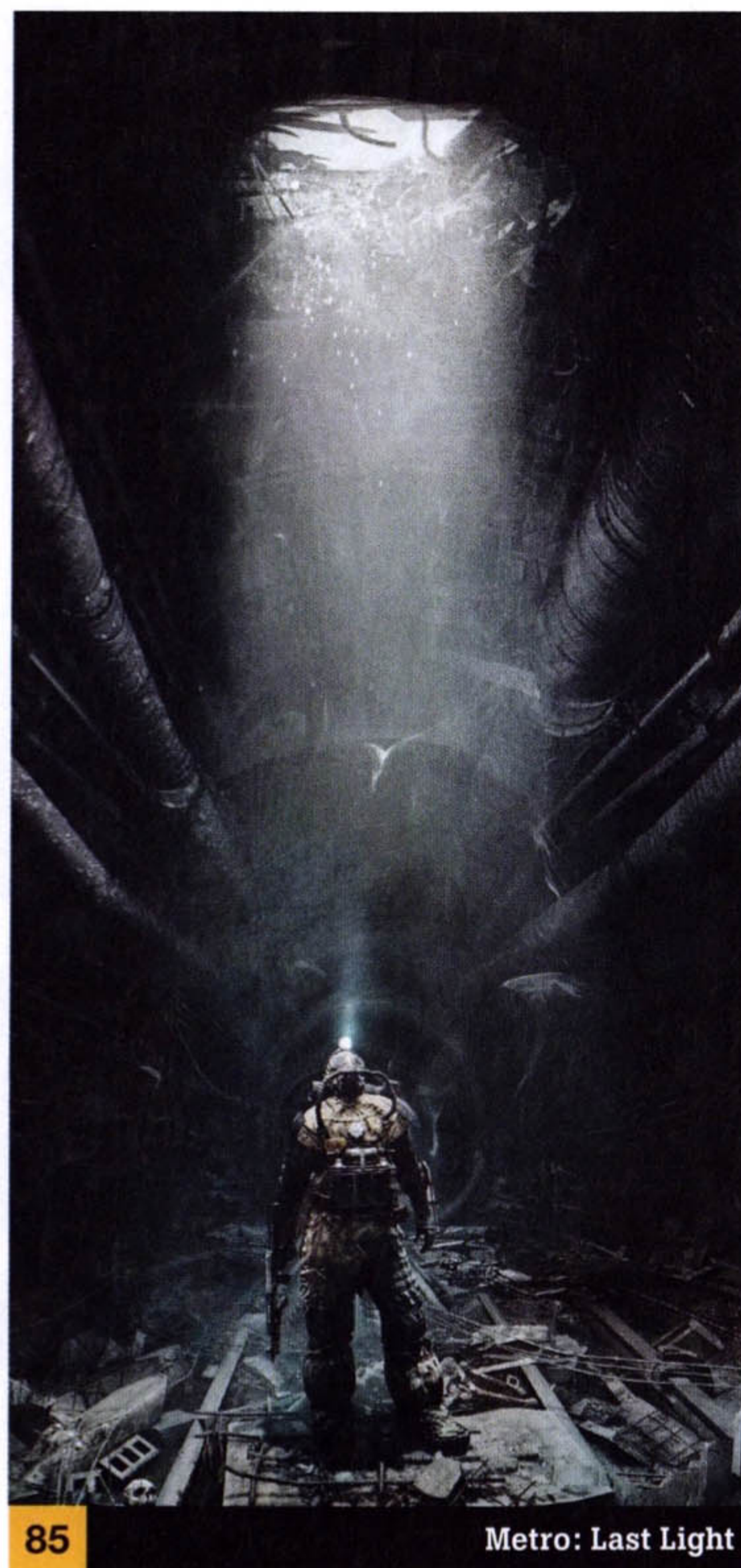
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### » 6 Feedback

This month readers reminisce with us over Maniac Mansion, debate indie games versus triple-A blockbusters, let us know that when a game is “not a complete cash-grab” it’s pretty good, and remind us that they are still upset about SimCity.

### » 10 Connect

Microsoft has revealed what its next generation will look like, and we’re diving in head-first to explore every inch of the Xbox One. We also check in on the subjects of *Indie Game: The Movie* a year after the film’s release and explore the most impressive homes of The Sims most devoted players.

### » 62 Previews

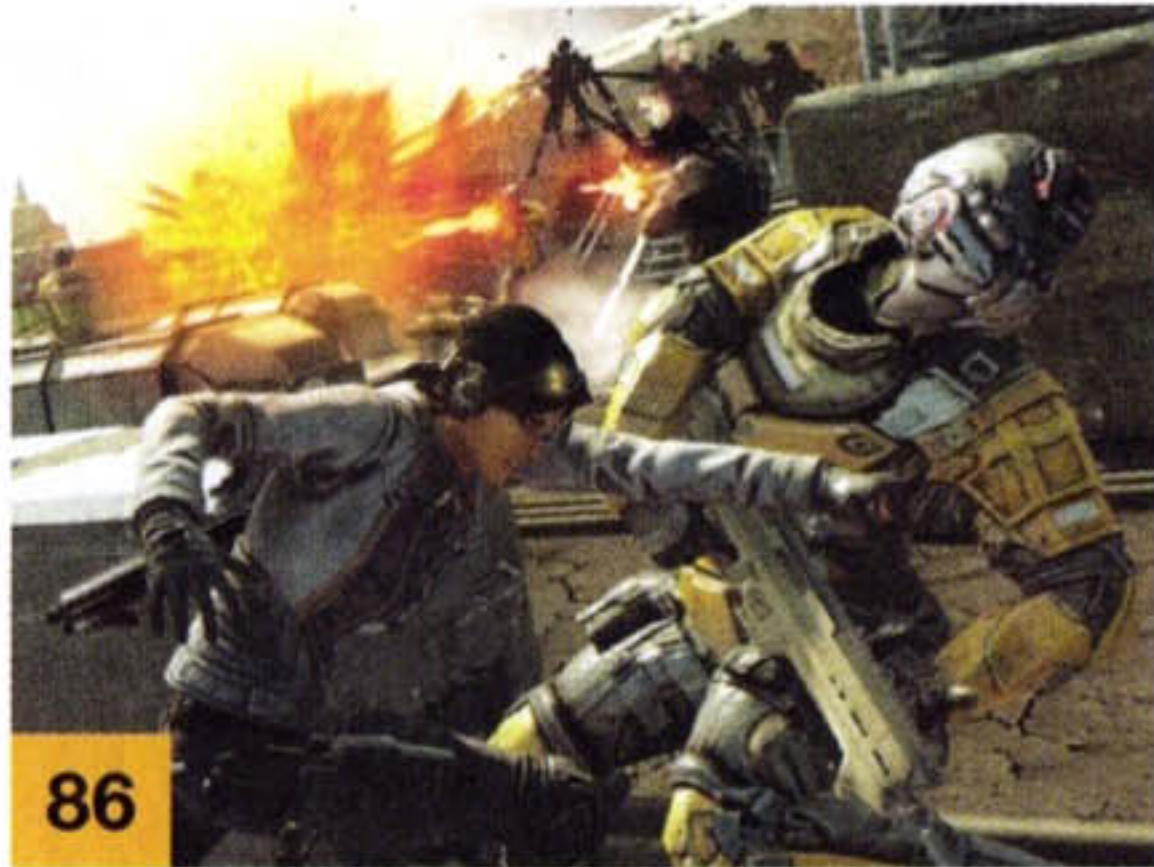
We take our first look at *Call of Duty: Ghosts* this month, see what Harmonix has planned with its partnership with Disney, explore a digital Chicago in *Watch Dogs*, and pick up where *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* left off with a hands-on peek at its sequel.

### » 84 Reviews

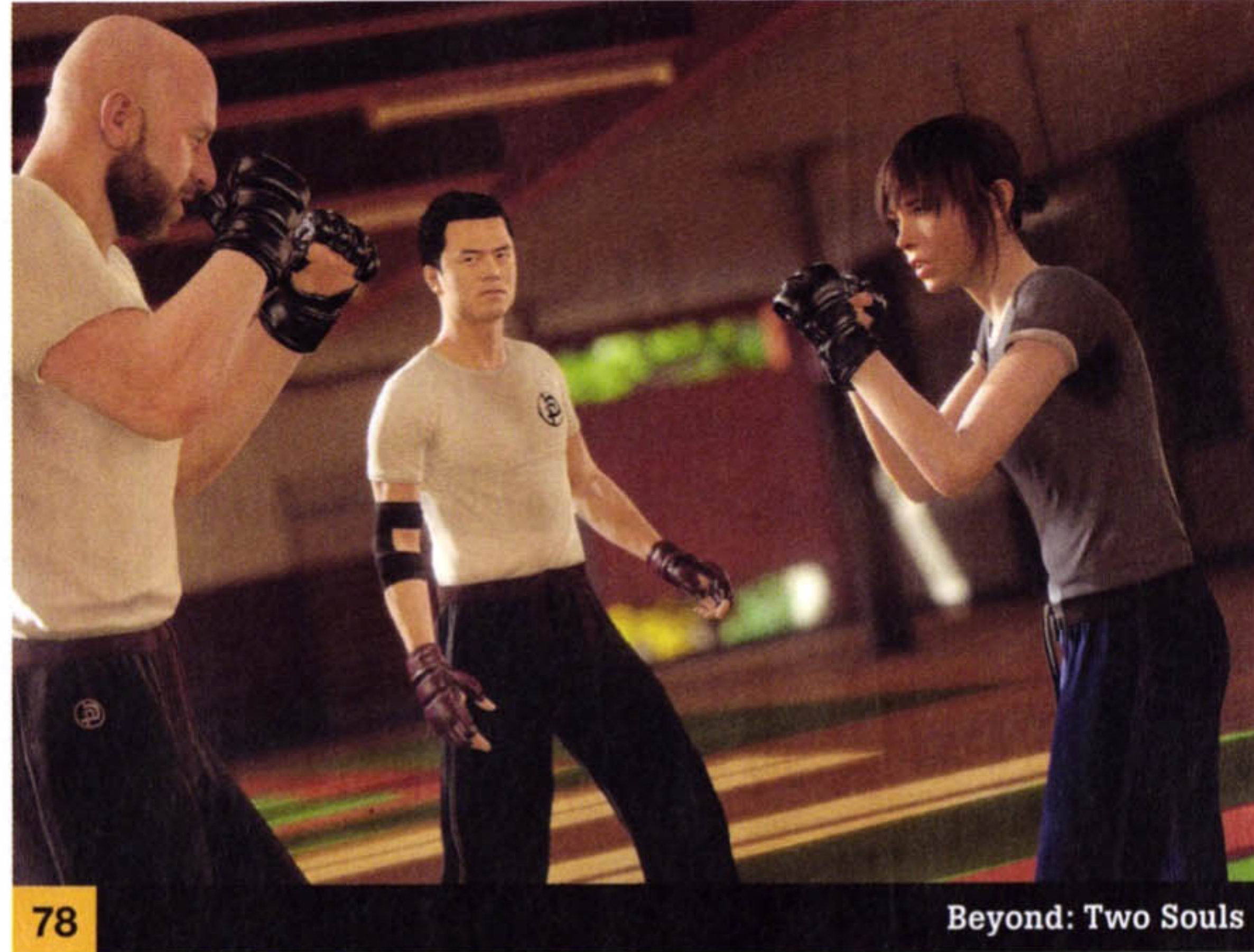
We look into the darkened underground tunnels of a post-apocalyptic Russia in *Metro: Last Light*, and review what may be some of the last brand-new non-sequels of this console generation with Insomniac Games’ *Fuse* and Capcom’s *Remember Me*.

### » 100 Game Over

The next Xbox has been announced, and we wanted to know how our readers have felt about their time with Microsoft’s gaming consoles. We had over 9,000 responses to our unscientific online poll about the Xbox and the 360, and we have gathered the statistics.



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Beyond: Two Souls



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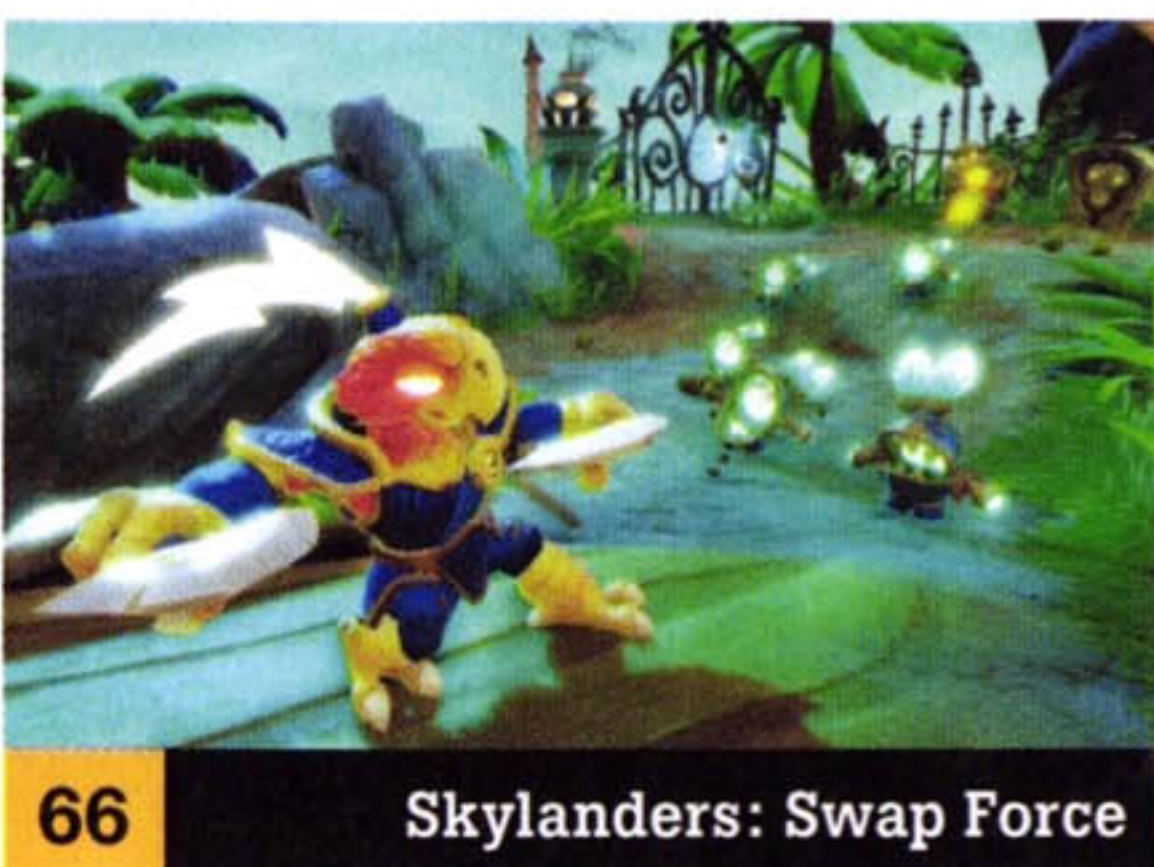


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# DON'T JUST READ IT, EXPERIENCE IT

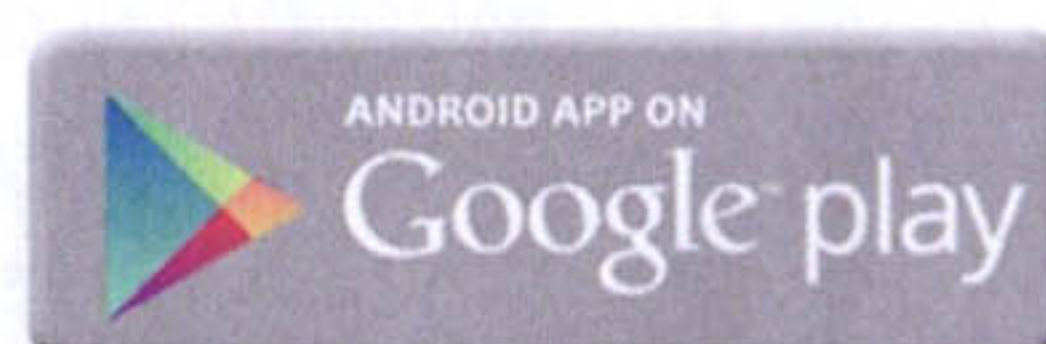
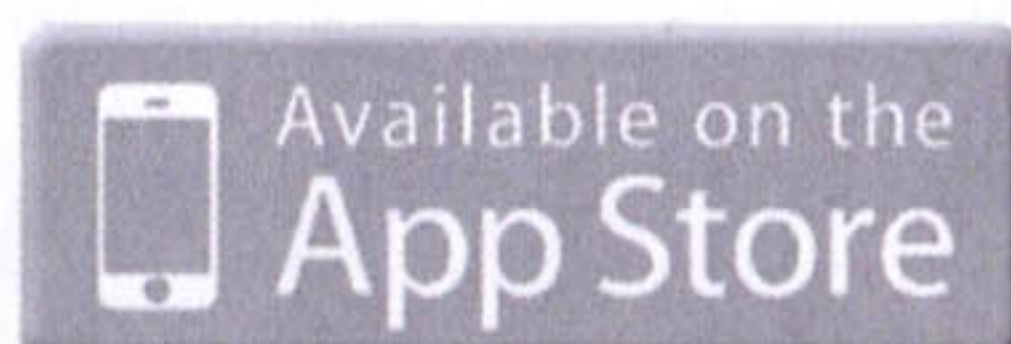


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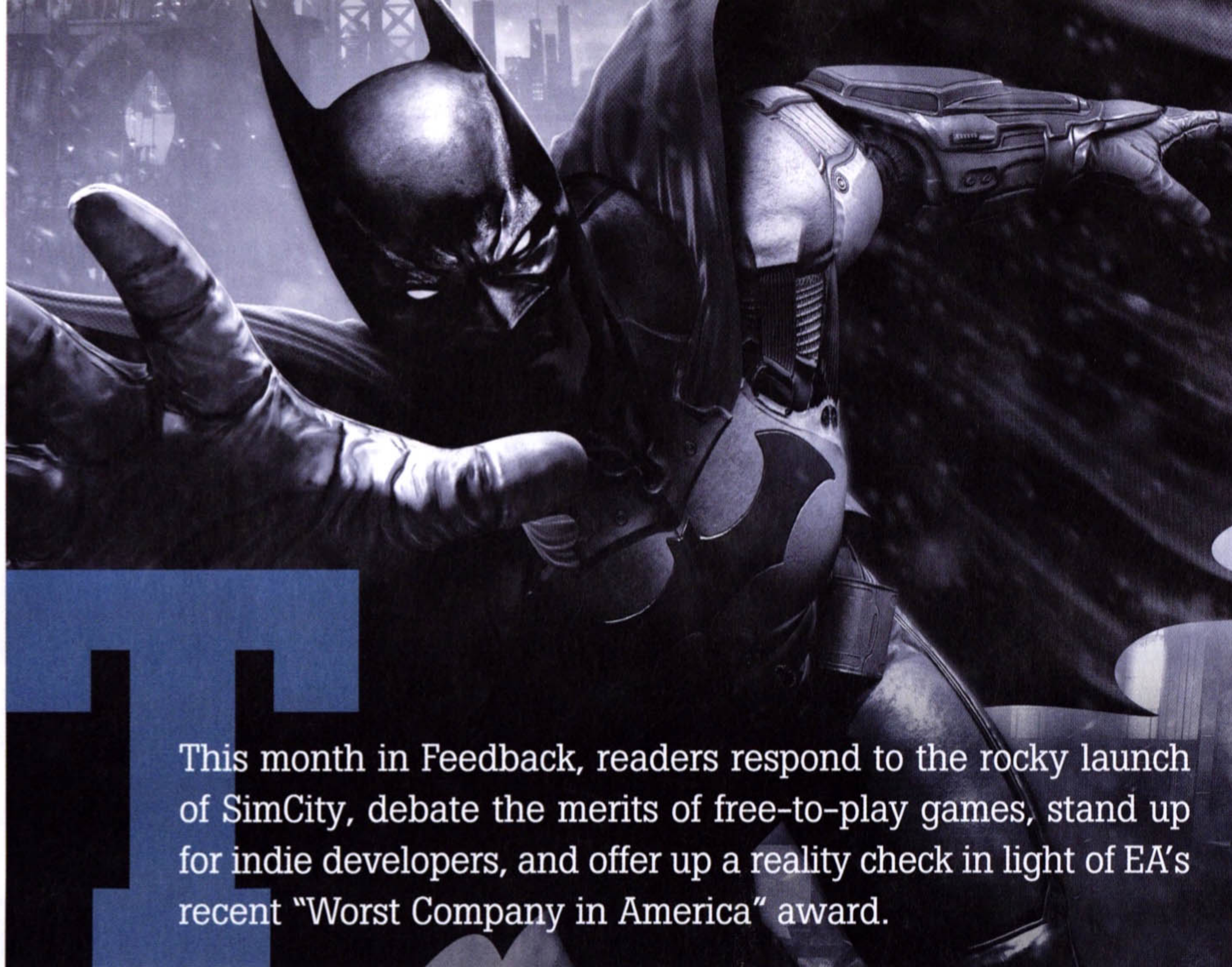
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This month in Feedback, readers respond to the rocky launch of SimCity, debate the merits of free-to-play games, stand up for indie developers, and offer up a reality check in light of EA's recent "Worst Company in America" award.

### Bat Mania

I just received the Batman: Arkham Origins issue and read every word of the feature; it was an excellent read. I enjoyed learning about the new characters, including Deathstroke and Branden. The fact that Rocksteady isn't developing it won't deter me from buying it on day one. I look forward to more info on the game in the coming months (and hopefully at E3).

**Dwayne Lowe**  
New York, NY

To say I was excited to get issue 241 with Batman on the cover would be an understatement. Just imagine a 30-year-old man screeching like a teenage girl at a Jonas Brothers concert. I had heard that the next Batman game would be a prequel before I got the issue – I'm still really excited about it, but I have my reservations. How can you follow up and improve upon a game that got a perfect 10? Will this game suffer the same fate as most prequel games? Can Warner Bros. Games Montreal really deliver the same quality as Rocksteady? I guess I'll just have to tune in at the same Bat-time, same Bat-channel to find out what happens.

**Matt Recher**  
via email

Following up Arkham City is certainly an unenviable task, but our time at Warner Bros. Games Montreal reassured us that the new developer shares Rocksteady's enthusiasm for the source material. Learn more about the studio and game at [gameinformer.com/arkhamorigins](http://gameinformer.com/arkhamorigins).

### Simply the Worst?

It seems that a lot of people on the web are getting all worked up over EA being named "The Worst Company in America" by Consumerist. Everyone is coming out with their personal sob stories about SimCity being online-only and game endings not being what they wanted, blah, blah, blah. What's interesting is that very few people seem to have read EA's response. They admit that they are not perfect, but they make valid points about how there are far worse companies. Bad service stories should not trump extortion and massive oil spills. It seems that people need to get their priorities straight, and not just when it comes to naming the worst company. I for one am looking forward to Battlefield 4 and hope

everything goes smoothly. Thanks, EA, for all the good games and I hope you can get the bad stuff sorted out.

**Jon Glass**  
via email

**You're right, Jon. We don't agree with all of EA's business practices, and some of its decisions have left gamers rightfully upset. However, other companies in Consumerist's poll have literally ruined people's lives. Until EA starts foreclosing on our homes or crashing cruise ships in our backyards, maybe we can all take a deep breath and cut back on the hyperbole we throw at the video game companies we're inconvenienced by.**



### Contact Us

[feedback@gameinformer.com](mailto:feedback@gameinformer.com)



## Sad Over SimCity

I had SimCity preordered, but after reading your review, I plan to request the down payment be returned to me. I was aware of the impending always-on requirement, and despite living in a very rural area where only my phone offers me sporadic connectivity. I hoped that unlike MMOs, I would be able to play some rudimentary form of one of my beloved franchises. Joe's review and candid opinion revealed that my sinking suspicion that SimCity would be among the growing

list of games I cannot play reliably is sadly all too accurate. There go my high hopes. When we moved to the country, I knew that I would most likely be seeing the end of about 10 years of MMO playing. Little did I know that even single-player games would also fall victim. It is with great regret that I must thank Joe for giving SimCity the review it deserved, without holding any punches. How sad I was to see that 6.5.

**Koby A. Cox**  
via email

Based on your SimCity review, it seems that Game Informer is taking a strong position against games that require day-one patches. So, will we no longer see just a half-point deduction for early bugs like we did with the release of Skyrim? It just seems strange that SimCity, which like Skyrim is now patched and past the issues that plagued its opening days, is being crucified for stumbling out of the gates. I've been greatly enjoying SimCity and would hate for people to miss out due to early hysteria around problems that were quickly addressed. Imagine what people would have missed if you took this same stance with Skyrim? For the record, I'm certainly not excusing the issues SimCity has; rather, it just seems like some consistency or clear rules might be in order, especially given that all games now seem to force patches or have numerous day-one issues.

**Bill Korict**  
via email

**The fact that many games have launch issues does not excuse those issues. We can only review a game in the state that we play it; if the experience is flawed, that needs to be addressed – regardless of the potential for improvements in the coming months. Reviews should represent the product that gamers are spending their money on. We don't have standard score deductions for anything, including bugs. Every game has bugs; the issue is how much they interfere with a reviewer's enjoyment, which is going to vary from case to case.**

## Handle With Care

I just wanted to let you guys know that as a carrier for the U.S. Postal Service, I usually don't care if I bend magazines or accidentally rip a cover or two. That sort of thing happens. But, whenever I get issues of Game Informer, I treat those things carefully. I open the bundle slowly and make sure that not a single wrinkle damages the cover along the way. I know I'd be upset if my copy got jacked up.

**Dustin P.**  
via email

**Thanks, Dustin. We feel sorry for the poor souls who get any other publication on your route, but at least we know our readers are in good hands.**

## Short Answers to Readers' Burning Questions:

"Is anyone at Game Informer married?"

**Yes.**

"Can I burn down your Headquarters?"

**No!**

"What advice do you have for a person who owns a plethora of fantastic games, yet refuses to play anything but the newest Call of Duty?"

**Hoo-ha! Are we pronouncing that right?**

## Worst Opening Line to a Feedback Letter:

"I am appalled at the lack of anything Monster Hunter in your magazine."

## Quantified!

Approximately once a month, a parent sends us a picture of their child reading Game Informer on the toilet. We appreciate the enthusiasm, but some things are better left unshared.

## Question of the Month:

What's the worst thing you've ever done in a video game?



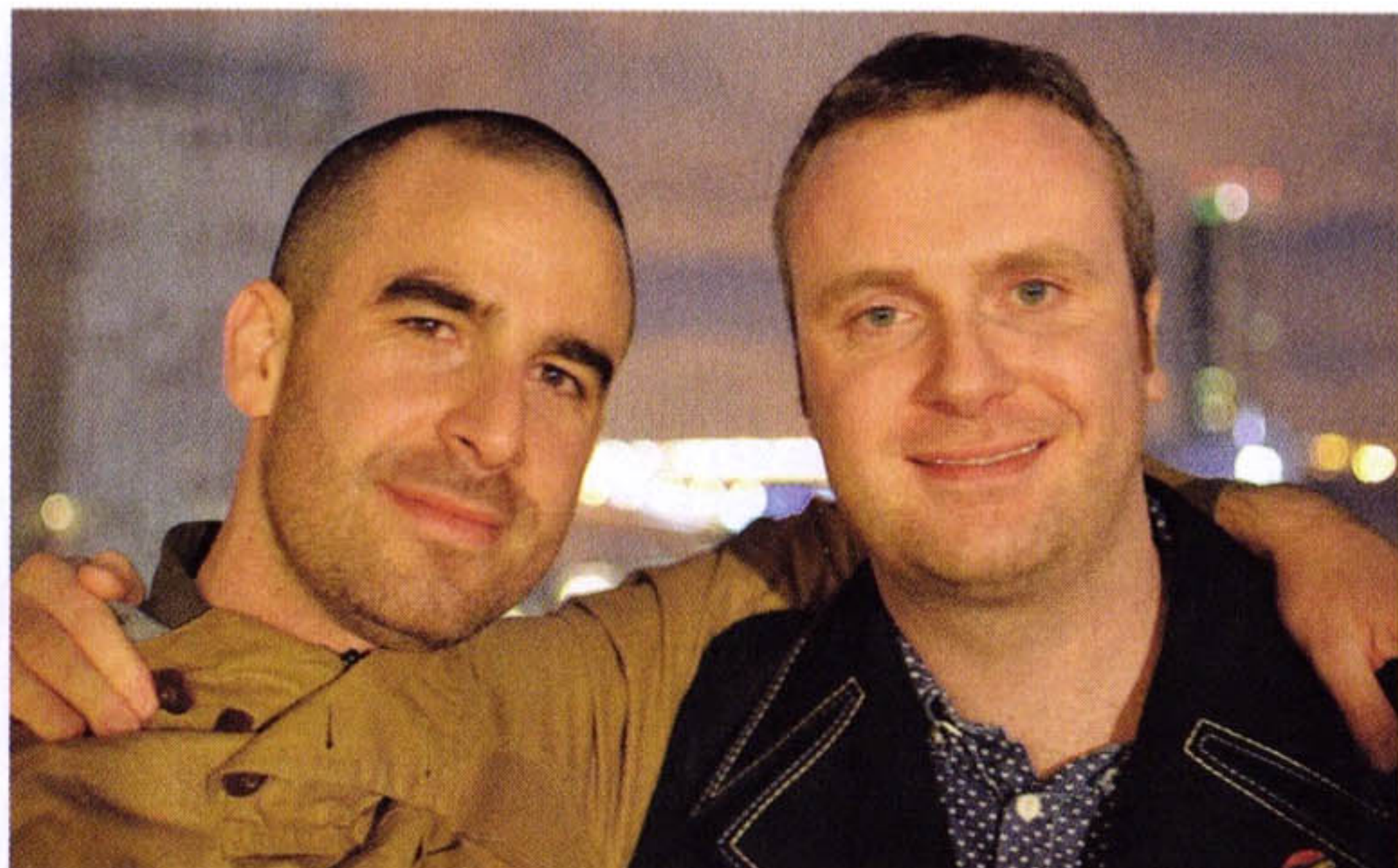
## Returning to Maniac Mansion

I was so pleased to see Maniac Mansion featured in Classic in issue 241. When I turned the page and saw the title and that familiar pixelated mansion, I smiled from ear to ear. This was my absolute favorite game on NES as a kid. Seeing Maniac Mansion and its creator recognized in GI seriously made my day! It brought back fond memories of hamster abuse and prank calling the meteor police. Kudos and thank you for this wonderful dose of nostalgia!

**Jenna Vega**  
Arlington, TX

I wanted to express my sincere appreciation for the "Classic" section of GI. It not only is incredibly nostalgic for those of us who grew up with the featured games, but also educational for younger audiences as well. I think it is great that you provide the information for people to link a current game to its roots, and you continue to take the thoughts right out of my head; my friend and I have been reminiscing about Maniac Mansion as he is playing through The Cave.

**Rhad Davis**  
Portland, ME

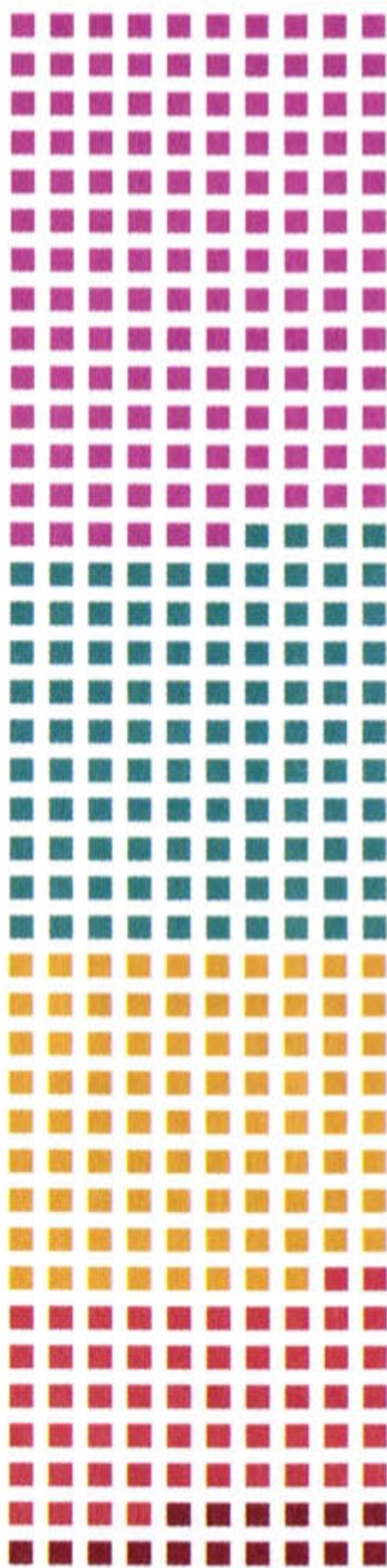


**(Left)** This year at GDC, we caught up with Capybara's Nathan Vella and Media Molecule's Kenneth Young. **(Right)** Vella also joined fellow Capybara co-founder Kris Piotrowski for a post-GDC winetasting.

GI SPY  
continued on page 8

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

## On Your Mind



- 34% Next-Gen Rumors
- 26% Indie vs. Triple-A
- 22% Bat Fever
- 14% Always-Online Complaints
- 4% R.I.P. LucasArts

## Size Doesn't Matter

In issue 241, we asked readers whether they prefer indie games or triple-A blockbusters. While a few readers picked the big-budget spectacle that only triple-A development can provide, most were won over by the creative innovation present in indie games. Here are some of the responses.

I prefer a triple-A blockbuster because of the content, plain and simple. Big-production games have high-quality voice acting coupled with amazing, in-depth plots and universes. So I say go big or go home.

**Robert Hussey**

Indie gaming is tops, and it's not even close. Big publishers are no longer willing to pay for the risk of innovation, so instead we get an annual deluge of the same twenty properties, or lazy clones thereof. I can't even stomach another frame of Call of Duty, especially when you can get a dozen well-crafted indies for the same price. Indies have the courage to put what little money they have into their dream; triple-A companies use their huge war chests to repeat themselves ad infinitum to a timid marketplace.

**Morgan Carlson**

I like indie games in a sense that it's easier to find some variety. It seems like most big-budget games are all different versions of similar games. I get more excited seeing interesting games like Amnesia: The Dark Descent or Limbo than seeing more COD and Halo. Heck, I'm more interested in seeing silly, pointless indie games than more COD and Halo.

**Shelby Perry**

I don't have a preference for either. I have been playing more indie games lately, but not purposely. Regardless if a game is indie or not, as long as it looks fun I will play it. I've noticed a lot of people say they only play one or the other, and I think that's incredibly stupid. Whether a game is made by one person or 1,000 people, if it's fun, play it!

**Shaine Krue**

## Seeing Red

I loved your article "The Red Flags of Modern Gaming" and agree 100 percent with everything you wrote. I used to love the Zynga games on Facebook, until everyone else stopped playing them, which effectively ended my run as well. I understand companies need to make money, but all their tactics are underhanded to say the least. Too bad more people don't realize this and cut them off. I'd rather pay \$10 and enjoy a game when I want it, then have a free one and be microtransacted into bankruptcy.

**Steve Golden**  
via email

In response to your "The Red Flags of Modern Gaming" article, I wish to provide a counterexample to the warning about games featuring multiple in-game currencies. In League of Legends and other MOBAs, when a new character is introduced, they typically can only be purchased using the paid secondary currency. However, as the character becomes less "new," cheaper options become available, which allow players to purchase the character using currency acquired through normal gameplay. The idea is still generally the same, but this kind of variation on the formula doesn't make it a complete cash-grab.

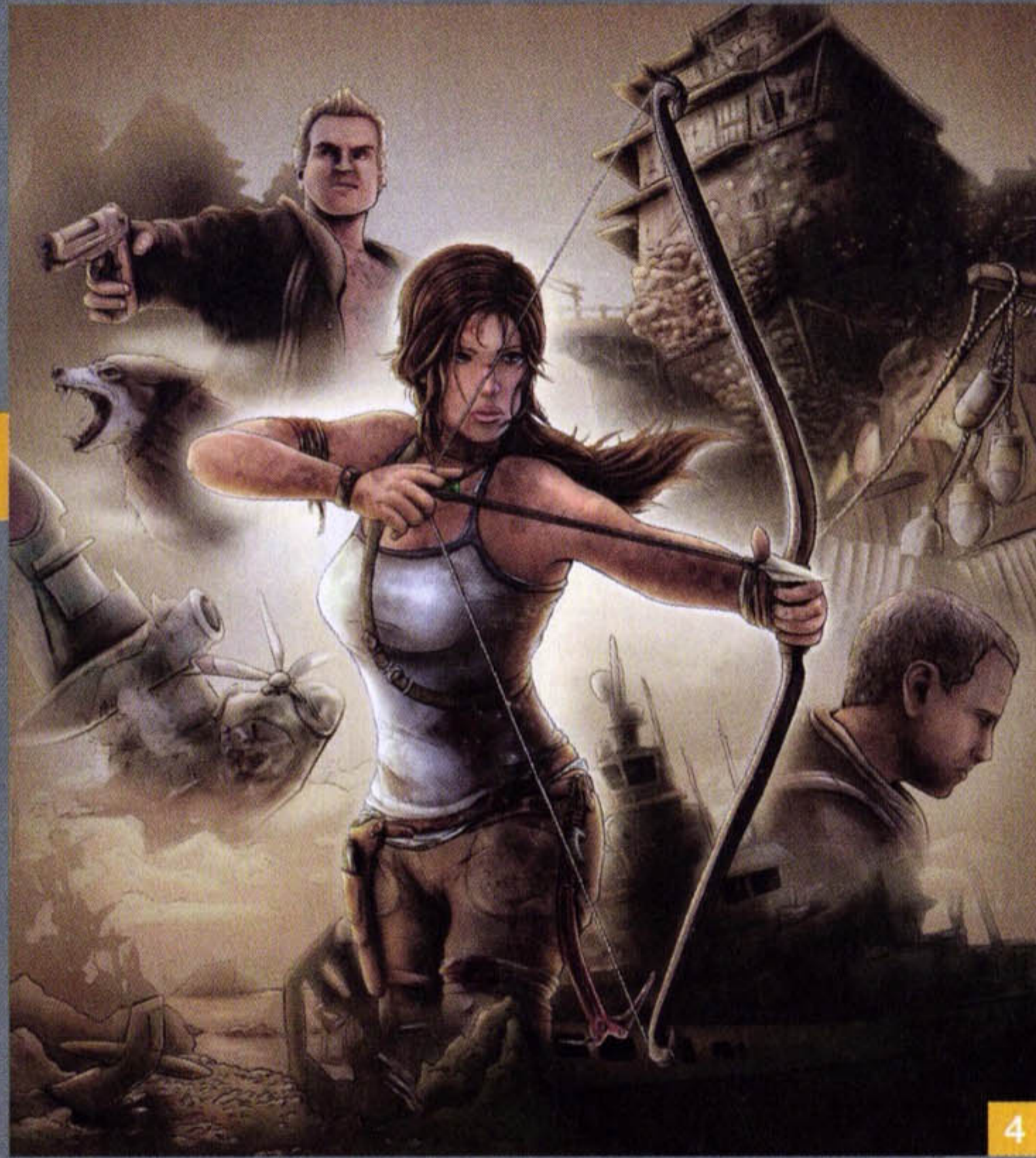
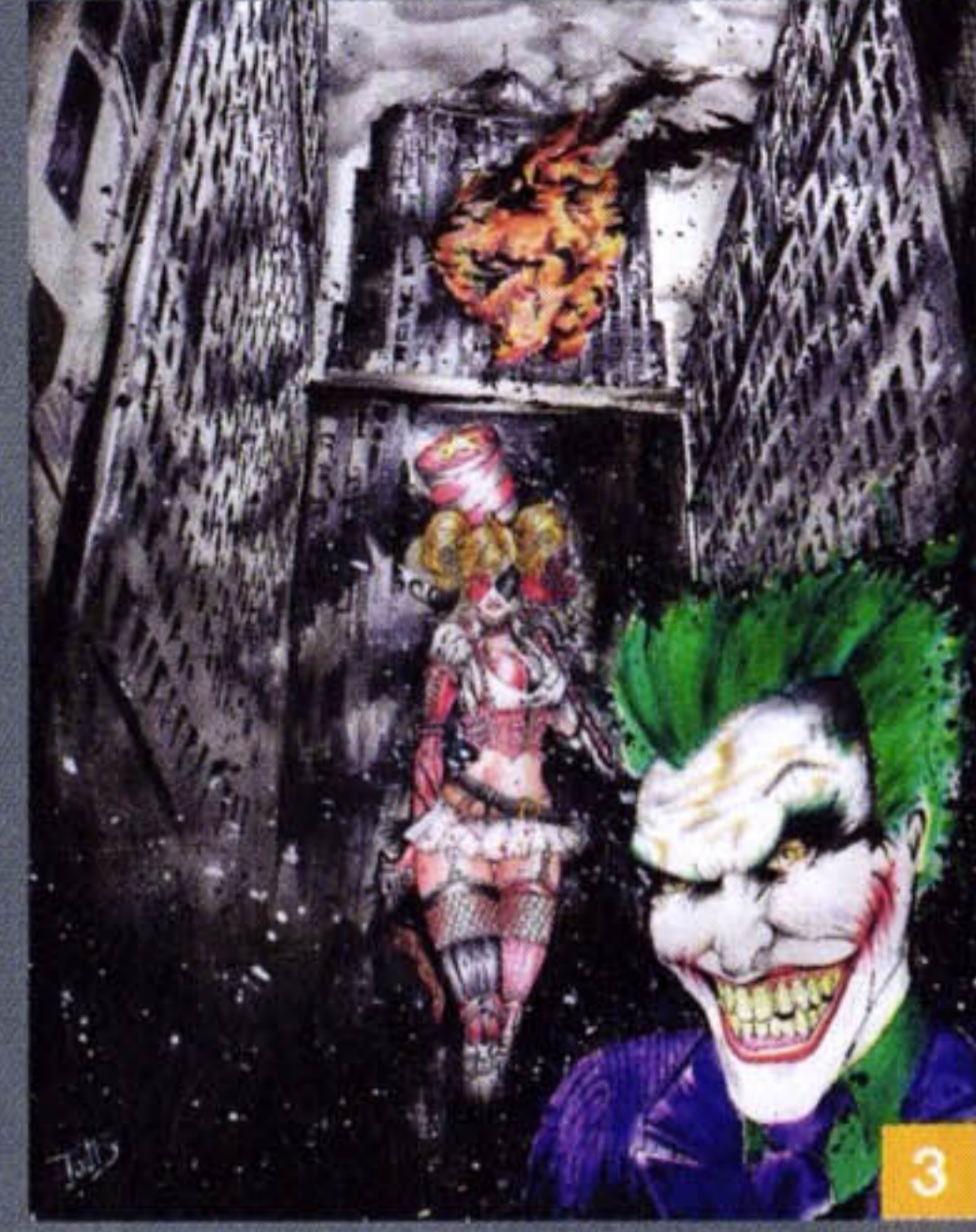
**Adam Blalock**  
via email

"Not a complete cash-grab" is a somewhat dubious endorsement, but there certainly are games that exhibit the warning signs outlined in the article and are still fun, including League of Legends. Ultimately it's up to players to decide how much inconvenience they're willing to live with, but we share Steve's opinion that we'd rather pay for a game once and then play it as we please.



(Left) Also at GDC: Fireproof Studios' Barry Meade and Hotsauce Interactive's Georg Backer. (Right) After checking out Transistor, Dan snapped a quick pic with Supergiant Games' Greg Kasavin at Pax East.





**WINNER**

- 1 Bryan Collins**  
*Green goatees are so 2001*
- 2 Olivia Roberts**  
*A failed audition for the Call of Duty: Ghosts reveal trailer*
- 3 Todd Frazer**  
*Cool people don't look at explosions*
- 4 Christine Creber**  
*Lara on the hunt*

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**(Left)** Dan also ran into GI reader Ivan Favelevic, who had quite the fancy notebook.  
**(Right)** Never get between Andy, Giant Bomb's Jeff Gerstmann, and a bag of homemade Cheez-Its baked with love by Spike TV's Jeremy Hoffman.

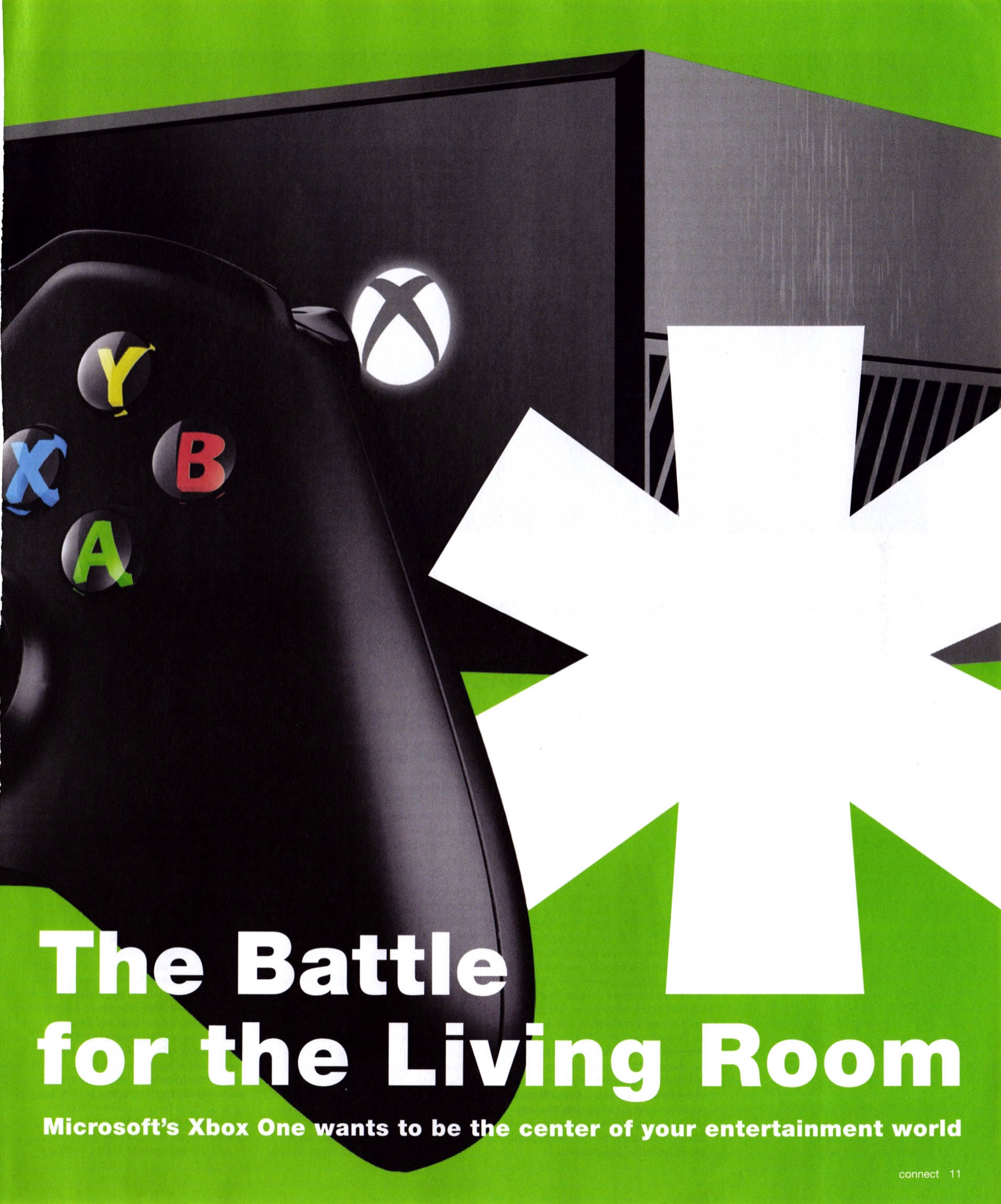
by Matt Helgeson

TECHNOLOGY



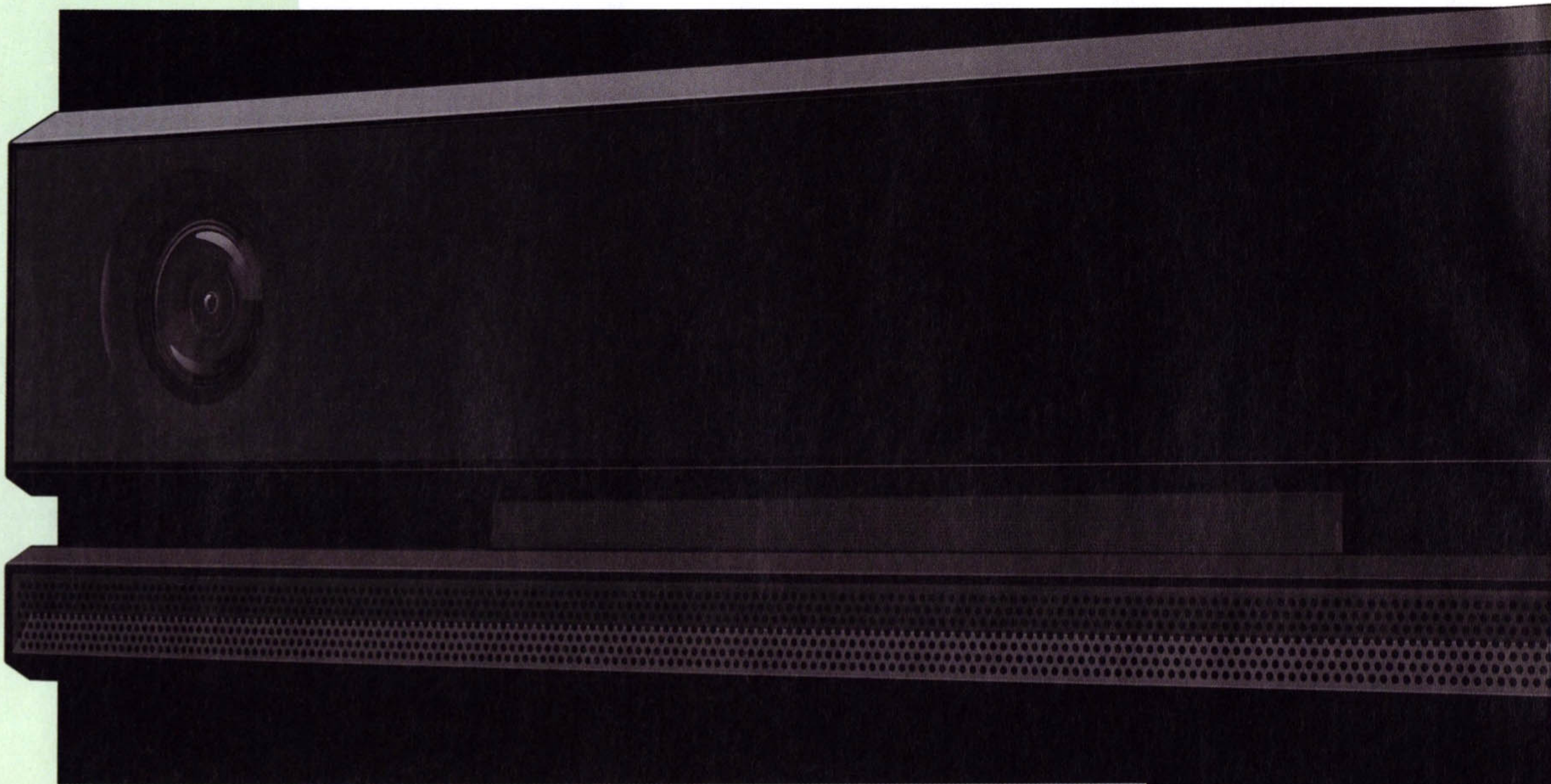
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- 34 the best mobile games of 2013 (so far)



# The Battle for the Living Room

Microsoft's Xbox One wants to be the center of your entertainment world



**The cynics say consoles are dying.** Beset by disruptive mobile platforms and a revitalized PC market flooded with cheap or free-to-play experiences, many industry pundits seem to feel that the days of the traditional home console market are a thing of the past. Microsoft doesn't see it that way.



have a Windows phone or iPhone, you personalize your apps. I put my live tiles the way that I want them. My news feed matches my friends and my priorities. All that magic that you get across these different devices doesn't really exist in the living room. You have the UI on your TV that you have to learn. You have all these devices that are manufactured by different companies for single purposes that don't talk together. How can we simplify that with an all-in-one box that actually knows where you get your TV from, knows your friends, that knows what sound system you have – that knows how to be the brains of your home entertainment system?"

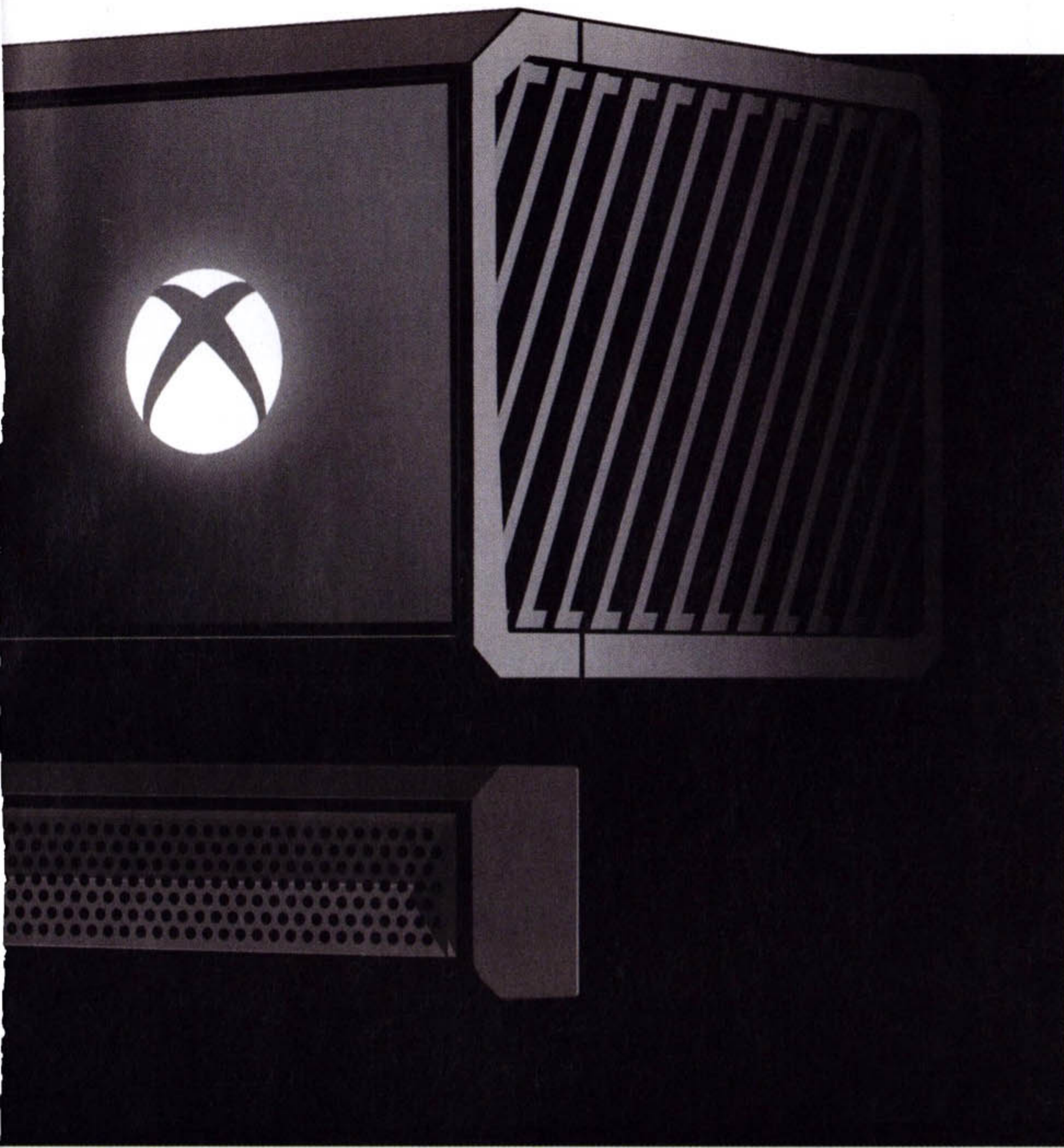
The fruit of this effort is the Xbox One. While it's most definitely a next-gen gaming platform, it's also a whole lot more. In its third-generation console hardware, Microsoft wants to connect all the games and entertainment you enjoy in one box – and maybe even blur the lines between the two. It's a bold gamble that could pay off handsomely for both the company and its consumers. To Microsoft's Don Mattrick, president of internet and entertainment business, this is only the beginning. "We're getting our feet in the running blocks and we know we're going to have to constantly innovate to keep pace with all of the opportunities that are being presented in the TV and gaming arenas," Mattrick says.

**“M**ore people are playing games than ever before, and they are spending more time across multiple devices,” says Microsoft chief of staff Aaron Greenberg at a special press-only event unveiling the company's new console at its headquarters outside Seattle. He details the console market that, despite new competition, still accounts for over 40 percent of the total spend on video games worldwide on all platforms. He shows stats demonstrating the growth that this generation, which should eventually top out at 300 million consoles sold, has had over the last. Nearly 100 million more consoles are in the marketplace now than were during the PlayStation 2 generation.

Microsoft believes that the future of consoles is bright, but it also believes that tomorrow's video game console must be different than today's: more open, more connected, and created to deliver a new living room experience. The Xbox One is not just a video game machine; it is built from the ground up to be the center of your entertainment and social life.

"In many ways, we could have taken an easier path," Greenberg says. "We could have made a box that focused solely on one thing. We know we can deliver great games, and we're investing heavily in our first-party studios. But we really felt like, if we think about all the different devices and experiences that exist today, people want things to be simple, personalized, and integrated.

"I think about my phone. Whether you



# THE WORLD REVOLVES AROUND YOU

The Xbox One is a complex mesh of hardware, cloud, and networking technology. It's possibly the most ambitious home entertainment device ever created. All this complicated engineering is in service to creating what Microsoft hopes will be an intuitive, simple experience that allows consumers to access a broad range of gaming and entertainment content with the slightest command – and do it all instantly.

Here's how Microsoft hopes it's going to work: You walk in the living room and say, "Xbox on." The next-gen Kinect sensor (see sidebar on page 14) recognizes your face and voice, instantly taking the system out of its low-power sleep state and logging you in to your profile.

Now, you're logged into both the system and Xbox Live. From here, the system uses advanced social and preference tracking software to suggest games, TV shows, movies, or other experiences you might want to enjoy. However, unlike

today, you don't necessarily have to choose one experience at the expense of another. Because of its multiple operating systems (see page 20), the Xbox One keeps apps and other programs running in the background while you play games. While this may sound simple, in practice it changes the way you interact with your games and entertainment.

As rumored, the Xbox One has an HDMI input, which allows the console to receive a signal from your cable or satellite TV box. This means you can browse and record television with your Xbox using the system's interface. But here's where it gets interesting: Because the system can keep programs running in the background, you can switch instantly between games, movies, television, and other apps. Now, instead of having to log out of Netflix to play a game, you can flip between a game and a movie at will – never losing progress on either. This functionality is even more useful for live

TV and multiplayer gaming. Imagine being able to seamlessly switch to a first-person shooter during halftime of the football game, or watch *Mad Men* while you wait for the Xbox One to notify you that the multiplayer lobby you signed in to has finally been filled with enough players. Microsoft's SmartGlass (which is also used on the Xbox One) was just the first shot in the company's attempt to connect all the devices with which you consume media. In this new Xbox ecosystem, you won't have to use an input device at all. By saying, "Xbox watch *Sons of Anarchy*," "Xbox show me what's on HBO," or "Xbox play Forza," you can instantly switch console functions.

While instant switching is a great feature, you won't necessarily have to choose between programming if you want to. Thanks to a feature called "Snap" you can multitask on your Xbox One, using your TV screen, phone, and tablet to display multiple apps, media,

and games. With simple hand gestures, you can set certain functionality – like, for example, a trailer or web page for the new *Star Trek* movie or your fantasy football team's stats – on a sidebar window while continuing to watch another program.

Because everyone who uses the Xbox is signed into a unique profile via Kinect, the content surfaced on the system is tailored to you. You can interact with friends via Skype (which functions as the communications hub for the Xbox One) both in video and audio chat – anytime, in any game or entertainment application. By eliminating the boundaries between games, media, and social functions, Microsoft hopes that the Xbox One becomes the hub of your entertainment world. In the following pages, we detail the complex elements of the Xbox One that come together to create what Microsoft hopes is a revolutionary experience for consumers.



## Xbox One Basics

- **CPU:** AMD 8-Core with 64-bit architecture
- **GPU:** AMD (with DirectX 11.1 and 32MB of ESRAM memory)
- **Memory:** 8GB DDR3 RAM
- **Storage:** 500GB Hard Drive
- **Optical Drive:** Slot-loading Blu-ray
- **Input/Output:** 3 USB 3.0
- **Communication:** Gigabit Ethernet, 802.11n
- **A/V:** HDMI out, HDMI in, digital output (optical)



# THE NEXT KINECT

After the considerable investment Microsoft made in motion-tracking technology during this generation, it should be no surprise that Kinect is an integral part of the Xbox One. In fact, the next-generation Kinect ships with every Xbox One, and the system does not function without the peripheral. Now, instead of the unit only being used for Kinect-centric games like Dance Central, developers of any type of game can leverage any or all of its features. Core games can take advantage of more subtle gestures or voice commands à la carte. This ability to pick and choose Kinect features is enhanced by the new sensor bar's highly advanced capabilities.

"The idea is that [Kinect] is not an accessory, that it is a critical part of the program

that is always available to creators," says Microsoft chief product officer Marc Whitten. "It is always there for users to create the experience that we think can only come with the next generation."

From a technical perspective, the new Kinect is a vast improvement over the 360 version. It can record high-definition, 1080p video and also has a vastly improved microphone array that Microsoft claims virtually eliminates environmental noise, allowing the system to use voice recognition for user accounts. Field of

view has been improved by 60 percent, and depth recognition is two-and-a-half-times better. It also functions better in the small living rooms and low lighting conditions the original Kinect struggled with.

The new Kinect accomplishes this with photon and infrared sensing systems. The unit sends out blasts of photons toward the player, and records how long it takes them to bounce back. The photon sensor helps the unit distinguish depth to a much greater degree, and also sort out who's standing where in a room.

The infrared camera allows Kinect to work much better in low-light (or virtually dark) conditions without much loss of accuracy. Along with the conventional video camera, these let the unit achieve a level of skeletal tracking and joint rotation far beyond anything the 360 version can do. In one demonstration, the new Kinect articulated individual fingers on the subject's hand, and could even tell when she was moving her fingers and thumb to make a "bang, bang" gun gesture – something that could presumably be used in gameplay down the road.

Another demonstration showcased a mocked-up shooter level built to show the next Kinect's ability to push what Microsoft is calling "small gesture" gameplay – in this case, allowing the

player to lean their torso and "peek" around corners while otherwise playing the game as a conventional shooter.

We didn't try Kinect's audio or video chat ourselves, but Microsoft is confident that it's going to be a clean enough experience to function as your primary audio interface. The company confirmed to us that, while they will offer aftermarket headsets for purchase, a communicator headset does not come packed in with the system.

The Kinect also improves its functionality in ways you wouldn't expect. The facial recognition is so accurate that it can detect expressions and tell whether or not players have one or both eyes closed. Microsoft says this expression data and eye tracking can be used by developers to help the game respond to the player, helping determine how engaged (or not) a player is with the product. We expect to see this technology used in ways we can't even begin to anticipate. In our interview with Microsoft's Phil Spencer (page 20), he hints at a few of the possibilities already being explored. This time around, we hope the enhanced technology and standardized platform make Kinect more than just the novel curiosity it was during the 360 generation.





# THE NEW CONTROLLER IMPROVES D-PAD & RUMBLE

The Xbox 360 had its problems – its propensity to fail with the legendary “red ring of death” among them – but its controller was generally considered to be the finest console gamepad ever made. Because of this, the company wasn't intent on drastically altering the controller without good reason. “The bottom line is that we were extremely proud of the work we had done,” says Microsoft general manager of hardware accessories Zulfy Alam. “The bar for making changes was very, very high.”

As you can see, the new controller isn't a dramatic departure from the 360 version. That's a good thing for the millions of gamers who are already comfortable with the input device. However, Microsoft has made several minor changes to improve an already great controller.

First off, the engineers finally tackled one of the few ergonomic flaws of the previous controller: the bulky battery bay that bulged out of the bottom of the wireless controller. By changing the orientation of the batteries, they created a flush bottom on the controller.

Hardcore gamers – and fans of fighting games especially – have reason to rejoice at another major change to the controller. Finally, Microsoft has abandoned the clumsy disc-style d-pads of the past in favor of a traditional, cross-shaped d-pad. For those of us who have been asking for this for two successive generations of Xbox hardware, it's better late than never. Alam claims that the analog sticks are more precise as well. They appear to be slightly taller than

those on the previous controller and use a new material to give them a better grip.

Under the hood, the team has worked hard to decrease the controller's wireless latency, which means even more accurate and fast controller inputs. The controller is also equipped with a high-speed data port, which should allow for peripherals like stereo headsets to connect directly to the gamepad.

The most interesting new aspect of the controller is the small-motor rumble that works with the shoulder triggers. Very small rumble motors reside under the triggers, allowing them to perform many subtle gradations of vibration. “Think of it like high-definition rumble,” Alam says. “The idea being that the fingers are the most sensitive parts of your hands.

When you have small, subtle moments that you really want to immerse the subject in a game design, like firing a gun. Firing a bazooka is different from firing off a gun. Traditionally, you see the same feeling when you're using a big round mortar. Now we can give you a whole different degree of fidelity.”

After a hands-on demonstration of the new rumble, we came away impressed. One demo showed a car being started, taking us through all the variations on the rumble response, from the small waves of vibrations associated with the starter to the heavy rumble that came when the car was fully revved up. The only question is how this new rumble will impact the controller's battery life.



## GAME DVR RECORDS YOUR FINEST MOMENTS

Though the PlayStation 4 and the Xbox One offer very different experiences, Microsoft and Sony seem to be thinking about next-generation gaming similarly in at least one way. Much has been made out of the “Share” button on the DualShock 4 controller, and Microsoft has also been thinking about ways to let you record and share your best gameplay moments. “We're always running a game DVR in the background, keeping track of your gameplay, allowing you to manage your magic moments and share that, and that becomes part of the achievement system,” says Microsoft chief product officer Marc Whitten.

Microsoft isn't talking specifics regarding the game DVR, but the core idea is the same: You record, archive, and share your most memorable gameplay experiences with your friends on Xbox Live. The system automatically stores footage of all your achievements, so you can brag about your accomplishments and show off exactly how you did them. Through Live, players also have access to easy-to-use

editing tools for crafting the perfect highlights to share with friends.

“The shift from what achievements are today...It goes from ‘Did you get the crazy killtacular?’ or something else to the, ‘Oh my god, how did you flip the warthog while you threw the grenade and did that big flip?’” Whitten says. “We think that experience is going to be a ton of fun, and we think it will really change how personal this is.”

Microsoft recently announced a partnership with Twitch.tv, a popular live game streaming service that also has a deal in place with Sony. “We think it's a really cool space,” Whitten says. “I think you're going to see a lot from us in those areas. If you imagine our system, the ability to have a Kinect with every system that has both great voice capture and other abilities, plus the ability to run things at the same time that you're running the game, and the ability to switch between those experiences quickly – you can imagine those capabilities lead to a lot of those types of scenarios.”

# XBOX LIVE FOR A NEW GENERATION

Microsoft's Xbox Live service is nearly as important to the company as the console itself. Over 46 million Xbox Live accounts are driving digital sales that have helped make the company's digital entertainment division one of its most profitable sectors.

While Microsoft assures us that not much is changing in terms of pricing and structure, Live is adapting to match the evolving hardware. The most noticeable enhancements are being handled through the power of cloud computing. One of the most important ways Xbox Live is changing is in a new, dynamic achievement system that gives developers the ability to add, change, and modify a game's achievements over time.

"We find a pattern where a user will purchase a game, they'll play the game,

and they've maxed out achievements within three to four weeks but they're playing the game six months later, which is why in this [next] generation we've got cloud achievements," says Xbox Live group manager Chad Gibson. "Achievements are decoupled from the actual client of the game, so a game developer can add achievements weekly, monthly, or quarterly, and constantly be adding new opportunities for the game player."

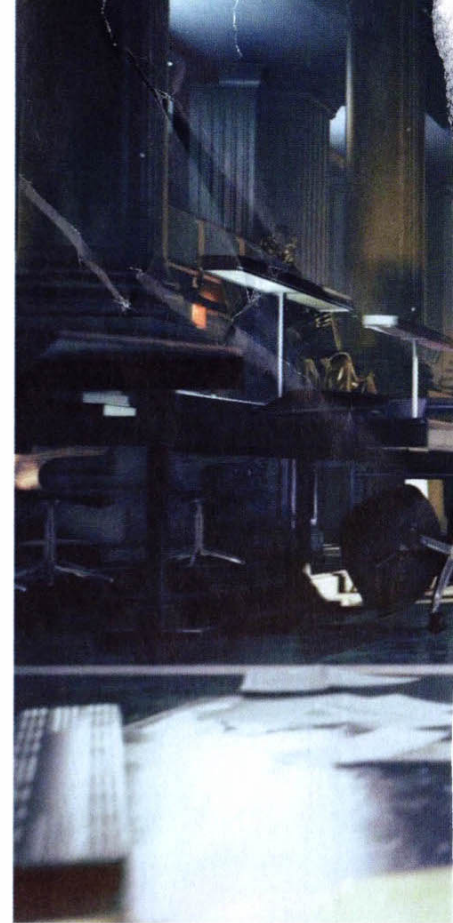
If you are a 360 owner, your Gamer-score migrates to the new system, so all the hard work you put in on Xbox 360 is not lost. However, it remains to be seen how the new Live update will integrate avatars; we did not see avatars in any of the examples of the user interface that Microsoft showed us.

This cloud/Live integration also allows developers to do things like instantly update rosters for sports games based on real-life injuries or trades that just happened in real life.

Microsoft's heavy investment in Skype is coming to fruition with Xbox in this new generation as well. The video chat service is basically Xbox Live's global communication conduit across all games and applications. The system can be tailored to your specifications (e.g. you can turn off any or all notifications if you want to lose yourself in a single-player game), but if you want to stay connected, it is easy to maintain a video or audio chat with a friend as you seamlessly switch between a game, movie, or live TV. Parties are also receiving improvements, allowing for other members of the party to watch TV while they wait for another person to set up all the settings for an online match. If not all of your friends have migrated to the Xbox One, you can still communicate with 360 owners via Skype.

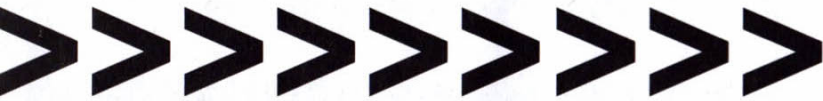
While Xbox Live has been one of the biggest drivers of online multiplayer in the history of the industry, many people have found certain game communities on the service hostile. In many ways, the biggest barrier to the growth of multiplayer hasn't been technology, but the behavior of people. While Microsoft did not go into specifics about how it would accomplish its goals, a humorous video shown to journalists poked fun at some classic Internet creep archetypes and essentially acknowledged that matchmaking needs to be improved. According to Microsoft, new algorithms allow Live to better track player behavior, reputation, and tastes. The end goal is to allow you to connect with the people you want to connect with – and more importantly, avoid those you don't.

Addressing one of the major gripes players had with the 360, Microsoft is allowing Xbox One users to connect with more people as well. Whitten confirmed that the 100-friend limit on Xbox Live is



being scrapped and the total cap will increase to 1,000.

Microsoft is intent that every user of a console have a personalized, tailored Xbox One experience. The importance of truly personalized content may also mean changes are coming for how Xbox Live accounts are handled – specifically in terms of family accounts. "We'll talk more about the way that Gold works [later]," Whitten says. "You'll see a little bit more about [accounts], which is 'How do we make it work in the house the way that you would expect it to?' Which is, my babysitter came over and can have access to the experience or my kids want to have access to the experience and their own identities while still getting all the value out of that experience. That's all really central for us. I think you're going to see some really cool stuff about how we make that experience work. Because, if we don't, everyone will just go behind one account and you'll lose that ability."





# INVESTING IN NEXT-GEN GAMING

While many of the Xbox One's innovations are focused around connecting the living room experience into one box, Microsoft insists it is keeping a keen focus on ensuring that the console is the best game system on the market.

"There's a lot of fear that we've forgotten about games," Greenberg says. "Trust me – we love games. We live and breathe games. We have more games in development than at any time in development."

During the last half of the 360 cycle, many wondered where Microsoft's first-party development dollars were going. Rather than introducing new games, the company seemed content to ride its Halo, Gears of War, and Forza franchises. Recognizing the much smaller stable of exclusive titles, Microsoft Studios corporate vice president Phil Spencer assures us that the company has a lot to show gamers in the coming months. "Core

content is incredibly important to the platform," Spencer says. "We completely understand the early adopter, the guy that's going to line up in front of GameStop the night before launch, and the kind of gaming experiences that they are looking for – those core gaming experiences from first-party and third-party as well. We want to make sure that those experiences show up. We have a significant amount of large, triple-A, new core IP in development right now – a lot. I could probably say more than we've had at any point."

To that end, Spencer says Microsoft plans to release fifteen exclusive titles for Xbox One in the first year, and eight are entirely new franchises.

Microsoft has been quietly building up its studio structure around the world, and even brought on a past competitor, ex-director of Sony Computer Entertainment Phil Harrison – one of the most respected

executives in the world of game development. Harrison has helped Microsoft build up new studios in the U.K., as well as working with existing studios like Rare.

While Microsoft is investing in its in-house games and entertainment properties – especially new IP – it's also being aggressive in securing third-party exclusive software from its development and publishing partners. You can read about the first big Xbox One exclusive – Respawn Entertainment's Titanfall – on page 46.

Spencer also says the company is working on a broad range of content to address an increasingly unpredictable market. "Last E3, I stood in front of a stage with a billboard behind me that said Minecraft," he says. "I think half the people in our organization that were console-focused had no idea what Minecraft was. Now we're at six million units at \$20 each on the 360. It's just a juggernaut. Who would have thought that would have sold six million units? I thought it was interesting that we were bringing it to the platform – but to say that [Minecraft] is probably as relevant as any other piece of content on Xbox 360 now, I don't know that anybody in the room last E3 was telling me that was going to be the case. But it has. I don't know what the next heroes will be. Whether it'll be a blocky art style or some new bald guy with armor running around shooting things."

## Bring Out the Games

In regards to the Xbox One first-party game lineup, Microsoft says the big guns will be announced at a later date, but it did reveal a couple new projects. Check them out, as well as a list of all known Xbox One games in development.



### Forza Motorsport 5

Turn 10's venerable racing franchise is, not surprisingly, racing its way towards the Xbox One. Details on the game are scant, but Microsoft promises that it is a graphical powerhouse, allowing you to see such fine details as slight imperfections in a car's paintjob or the scuff marks on disc brakes.



### Quantum Break

Remedy Entertainment's new project might be an indication of Microsoft's larger plans for transmedia. Quantum Break is both a live-action television show and a game, revolving around a girl with strange mental powers. How the show and the game interact remains to be seen, but we're always curious about a game made by Remedy.

### Confirmed Xbox One Games:

- **Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag** (UBISOFT/UBISOFT MONTREAL)
- **Battlefield 4** (ELECTRONIC ARTS/DICE)
- **Call of Duty: Ghosts** (ACTIVISION/INFINITY WARD)
- **Destiny** (ACTIVISION/BUNGIE)
- **FIFA 14** (EA SPORTS/EA CANADA)
- **Madden NFL 25** (EA SPORTS/EA TIBURON)
- **NBA Live** (EA SPORTS/EA TIBURON)
- **Thief** (SQUARE ENIX/EIDOS MONTREAL)
- **UFC** (EA SPORTS/EA CANADA)
- **Watch Dogs** (UBISOFT/UBISOFT MONTREAL)

### Next-Gen Games Not Confirmed But Likely Coming to Xbox One:

- **The Evil Within** (BETHESDA/TANGO GAMEWORKS)
- **The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt** (CD PROJEKT RED)
- **Wolfenstein: The New Order** (BETHESDA/MACHINE GAMES)



# BUILDING A BETTER BOX

While the games are ultimately what define a console, the industrial design can create a perception of quality (or lack thereof) with consumers. Microsoft has steadily improved its console designs over the years, from the hulking eyesore of the original Xbox up to the sleek, modern Xbox 360 Slim – the company's best-looking hardware to date.

The design team, which has grown to twenty-seven people from the two-man team that designed the original 360, wanted to emphasize that this was a different system with larger goals in mind than just video games.

"We chose this direction because it felt understated, it felt more premium, and it felt more like entertainment," says senior principal creative director Carl Ledbetter. "This isn't just a gaming console. It's really bringing a whole lot more in addition to games to people. We wanted it to feel like more about the entertainment system that people have at home and fit in with what people have."

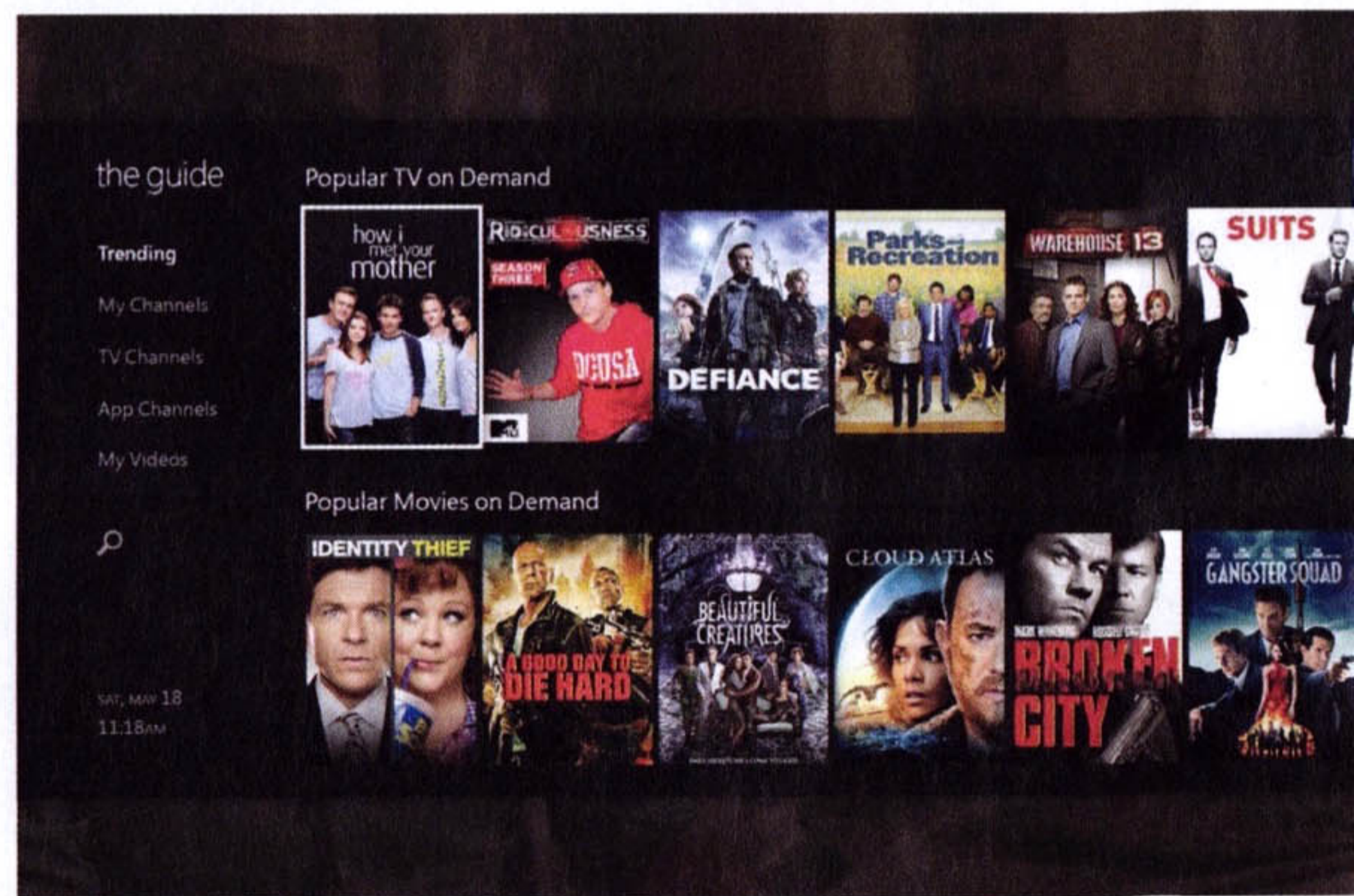
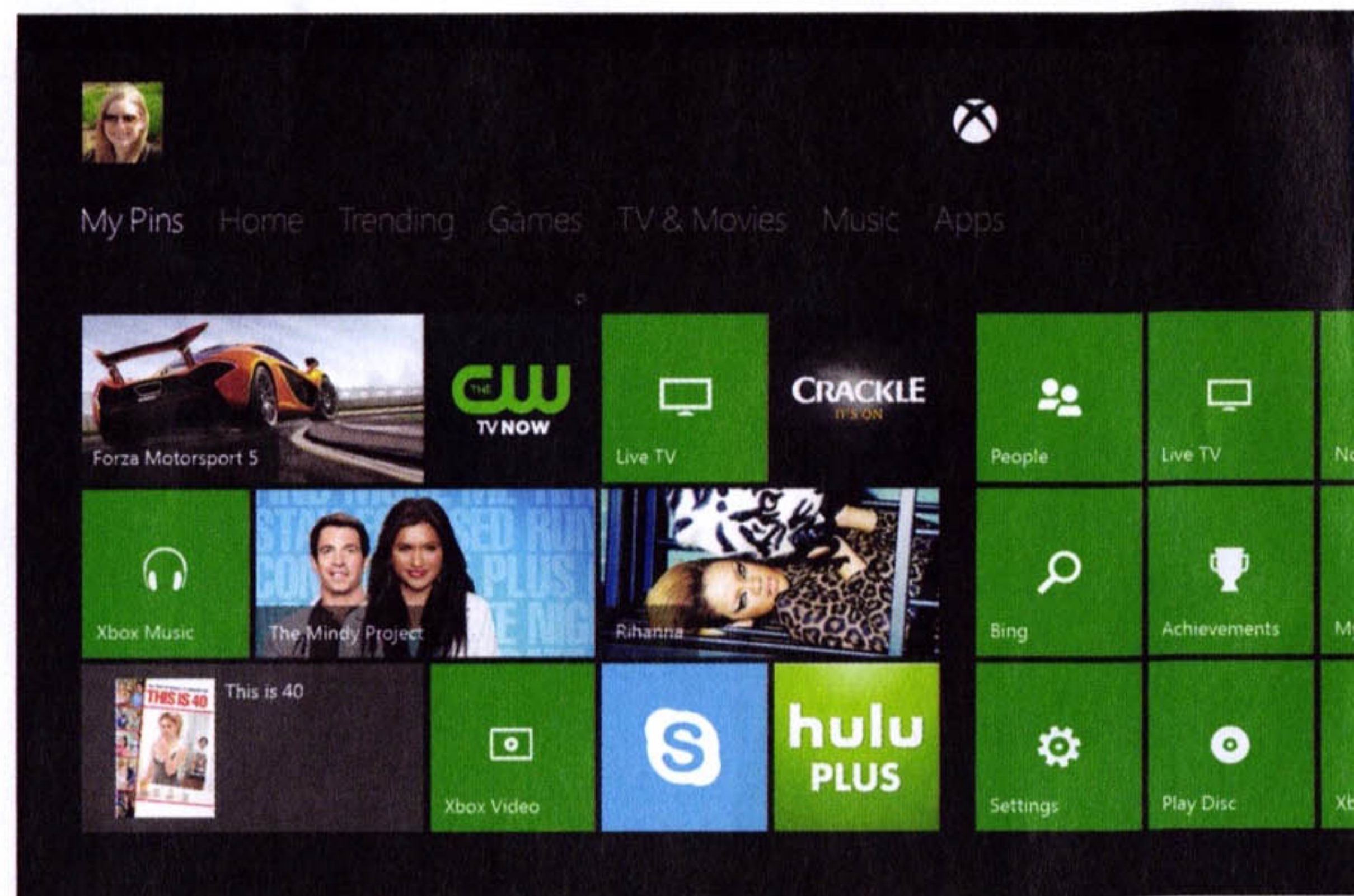
The unit they came up with feels at once modern and retro – its sleek "liquid black" finish on some parts set off against the industrial-style matte venting. The boxy form factor was selected to suggest a 16:9 aspect ratio (the aspect ratio at which theatrical films are shot)

and the Xbox One's size and shape may remind older gamers of the VCRs from the '80s or '90s.

The extensive venting helps cool the unit – which should hopefully aid in avoiding the infamous "red ring of death" problems that plagued the 360. Also, Microsoft has made efforts to ensure that the Xbox One is the quietest Xbox console yet.

The system features most of the audio input and outputs (as well as future-proofed 4K video compatibility) you would imagine, including the new HDMI input that allows it to connect to your cable box. Each unit ships with a 500GB hard drive; Microsoft says that there is only one model of the system planned, so don't hold out for a larger hard drive model. You can completely install Blu-ray games on the hard drive, so they can be played without the disc being in the drive (and in fact are required to do so in order to play any Xbox One game). You'll also be able to play the early portion of the game while the game is being ripped to the hard drive.

Finally, Microsoft says that all Live and game updates will take place during off-use hours, when the unit is powered down to its sleep state – meaning that five minute update will already be finished when you boot up the unit to play a game.



## Answering the Questions About Always-On Internet and Used Games

In the past six months, rumors have circulated regarding the next Xbox console and its policy towards Internet connectivity and used games. Many of these rumors contended that the next Xbox would require an "always-on" Internet connection and block the playing of used games.

As of press time, both these issues are a bit unclear. When we spoke to Microsoft corporate vice president and chief product officer Marc Whitten on our trip to Microsoft, we asked him directly about whether or not the system supported used games. His answer was equally direct: "Like today, they'll be able to take their physical games back to a retailer and sell a used game, and buy them," he says.

However, new information has surfaced that suggests that he was being evasive. Right after Microsoft's unveiling event, rumors started flying regarding licensing fees from used games – and the requirement for an always-on connection. Before this issue went to press, we spoke with a Microsoft representative, and here's what we know right now.

When you buy an Xbox game on disc or digitally, it will be linked to your Xbox Live identity (disc games must be fully installed on your hard drive). If you were to go to a friend's house, you could play any game you've purchased on his or her system by logging in to your Xbox account. Even if you didn't have the physical disc, you could download the game from the cloud. However, even if you leave your disc behind, your friend could not play the game unless they remained signed in to your ID. This will effectively end the practice of lending games to friends, something that's not likely to go over well with gamers.

As far as used game sales go, Microsoft says it's still evaluating its policies, but many speculate that a new licensing fee will be attached to buying a used game at retail. The official statement we received was:

"We are designing Xbox One to enable customers to trade in and resell games. We'll have more details to share later."

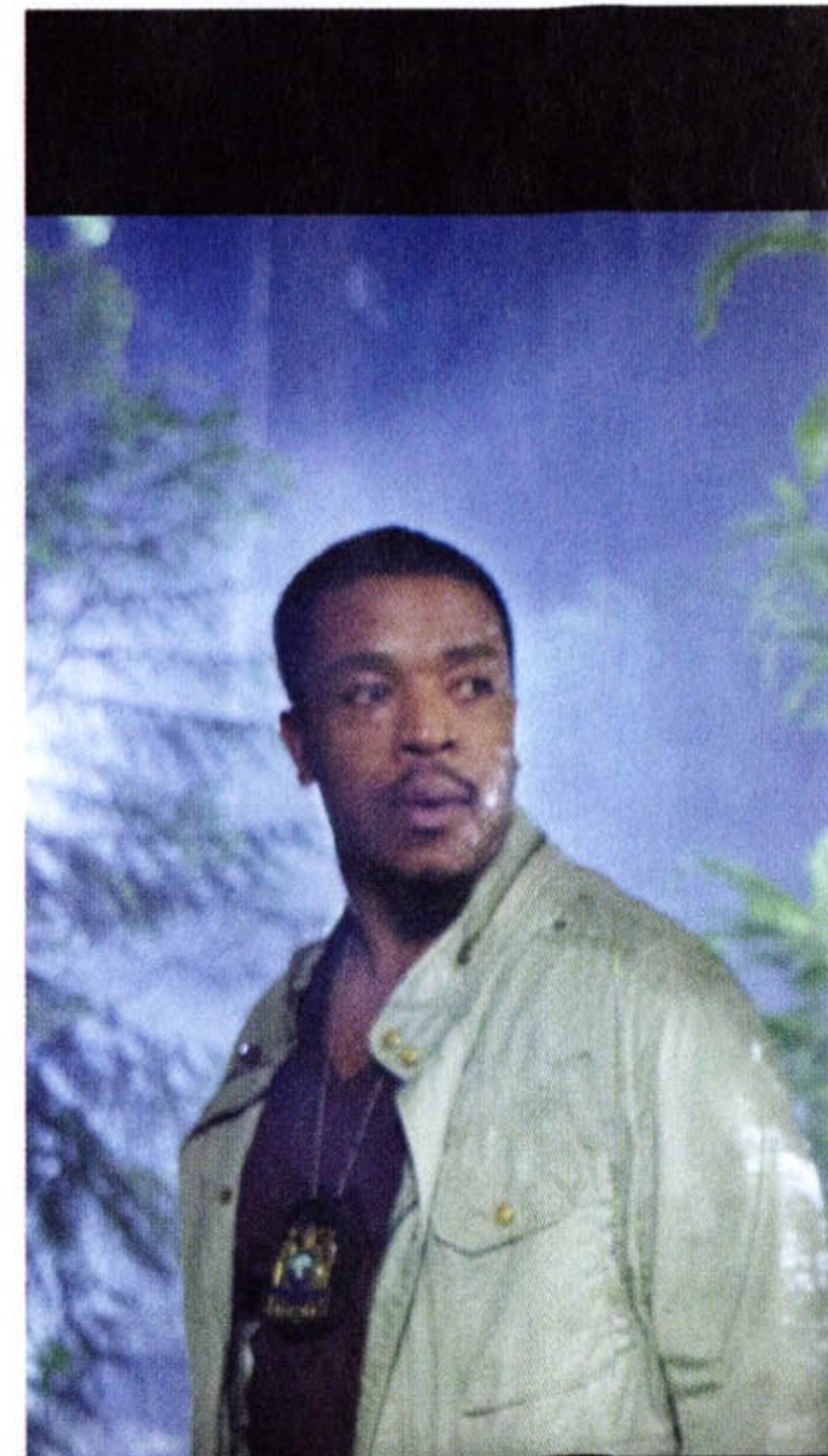
We'll have to wait for a definitive answer on what Microsoft's plans for used games are – but we believe that there will be some major changes coming to the used-game market.

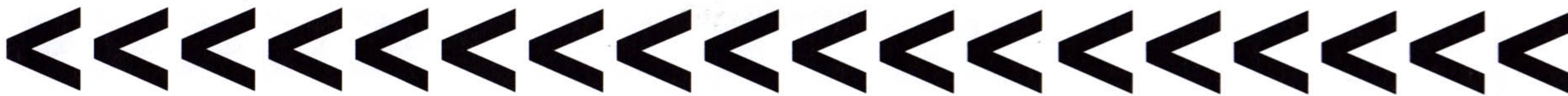
On the issue of whether or not the next Xbox requires an always-on Internet connection, the reality of the situation is also fuzzy. In strict terms, Microsoft does not require it for all games. Many single-player modes may be fully playable offline. Since the system offers developers the opportunity to use cloud processing from Microsoft's servers to help calculate in-game functions like AI via the Internet, any game that leverages these resources will not be playable offline.

"If you build a game in such a way that the access to that world was dependent on being able to access the running side of it online, you're only going to do that online," Whitten says. If one of the core game functions is being run off the cloud, the game will either be unplayable or have to be dramatically scaled back in an offline setting.

However, it's not just down to individual games. Microsoft told us that the Xbox One does need to "check in" with the network at certain times to check for system and game updates (which it will do in its low-power state when not in use). If the Internet is not available for a time, you will be able to do things like play single-player games and watch Blu-ray movies. The time between check-ins – whether 24 hours or more – has yet to be determined.

The bottom line? When we asked a Microsoft rep if it would be possible to own and operate an Xbox One without broadband Internet service, the answer was: "You probably wouldn't want to. We've made it a connected device."





# THE EVOLUTION OF TELEVISION

Microsoft believes the Xbox One's ability to integrate live cable television programming into its Xbox Live ecosystem is a huge opportunity.

"What does the living room of the 21st century look like? How will things change? Today's pretty simple," says Microsoft senior vice president of marketing and strategy Yusef Mehdi. "You sit back in a chair, you have your remote control in your hand, and you watch TV passively. Already we know that the smart devices are always in the living room, but they're not connected with TV. So we need to architect for that world."

If successful, Mehdi feels that company could start a revolution in "smart television" akin to what's occurred for Apple in the mobile space. "If you think back about eight years, people were walking around going, 'Hey, I've got a smartphone,'" Mehdi says. "And then along comes Apple and they introduce the iPhone, and people say, 'Oh, wow. Now I get it.' We think that moment is going to happen in the next two years, and we would like to be able to usher that moment in with the new Xbox."

The Xbox One has been built from the ground up with television integration in mind, allowing the system to connect

to your cable box through the new HDMI input. With their cable box coupled to the Xbox One, users can quickly switch back between a game and live TV, while conducting video or audio chat with friends over Xbox Live. While this sounds promising, Microsoft has not yet said which cable providers are participating with Xbox One television integration at launch and which particular models of cable boxes will be compatible. Eventually, the company hopes to integrate all cable and satellite companies.

The integration with Live and the ability to have television interact with multiple devices through SmartGlass is another area where Microsoft intends to innovate in the television space. We already know that you can watch programming and other content on your phone and use it as a remote control. On the 360, we saw hints of this strategy with some of the interactive functions on the ESPN app and Microsoft's 1 vs. 100 interactive game show (which was sadly canceled).

"We want to make sure we're out there showing the television industry what's possible on our box when you bring in identity, social and community, and interactivity all together," says Phil Spencer, corporate vice president of Microsoft Game

Studios. "It's pretty exciting to see the road map that's being created right now."

Microsoft also intends to make the TV experience better by helping you find content that you would enjoy – both based on

analyzing your past watching behavior and seeing what's trending (in a section of the UI called "Trending") among your Xbox Live friends. "[It will show] what people are doing on the console right now, whether it's watching season two of *Downton Abbey* or the NBA game on tonight," Spencer says. Once you discover shows you like, you can pin them to your personal favorites section, which makes it easy to keep up with new episodes.

When asked whether this trending feature would extend to integration of other social networks like Twitter and Facebook, Spencer seemed to indicate that it was in the plans. "We have partnerships with other 'trending sites' today," he says. "Looking at the whole ecosystem of connected people communicating what they like, we understand that there are other social networks out there and linking those in is part of our long-term vision."

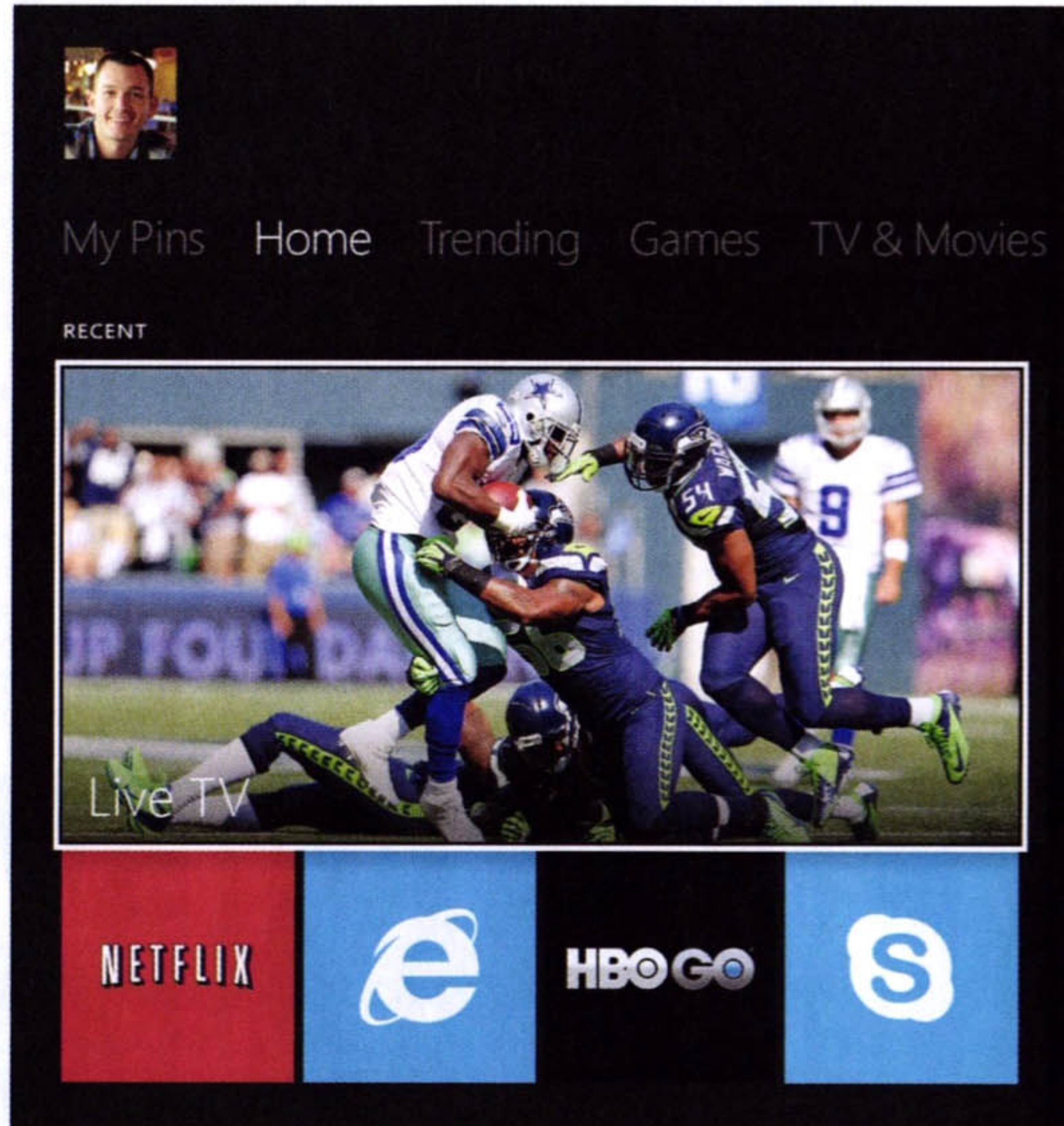
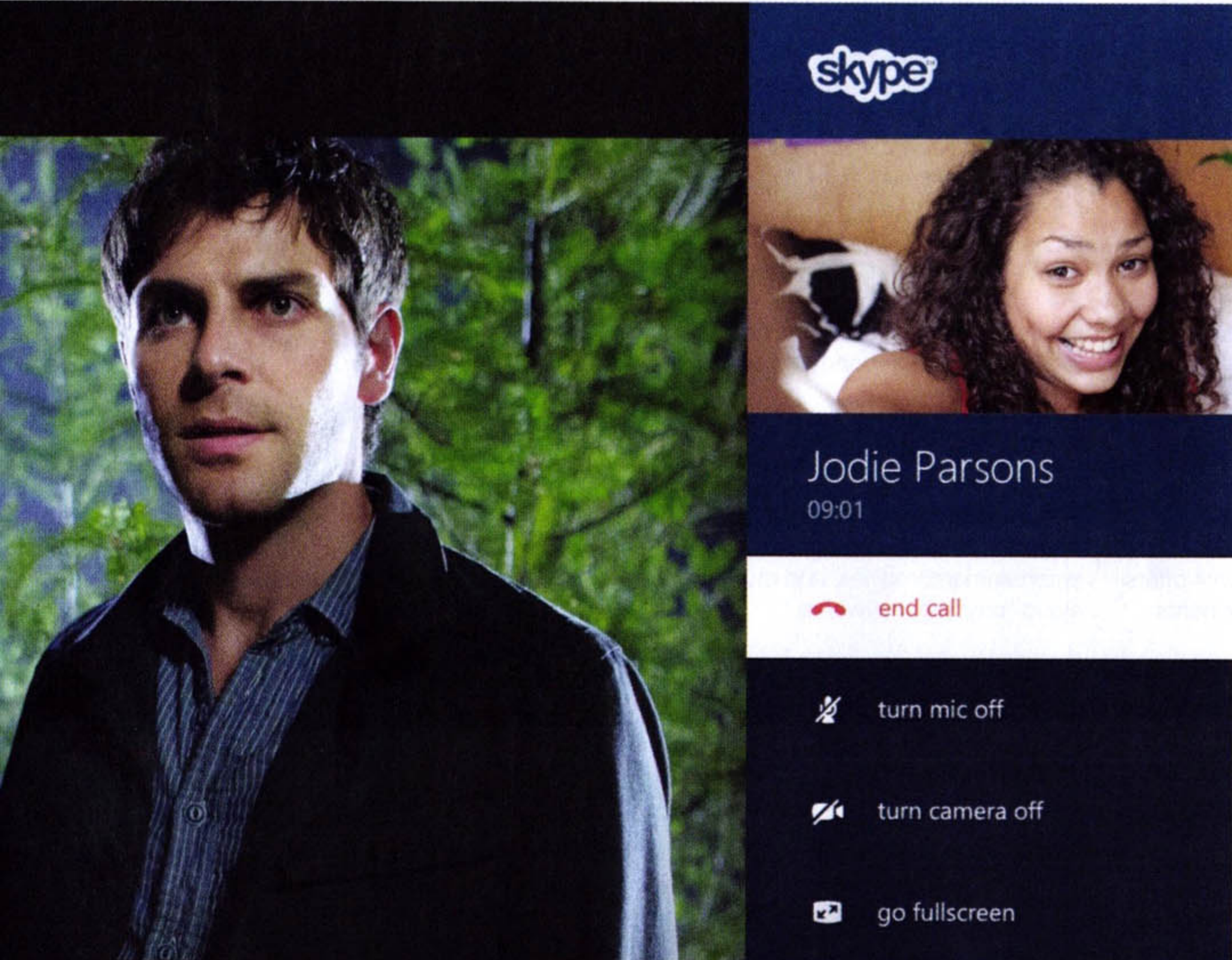
The company isn't just relying on traditional TV partners to create innovative content. In 2012, Microsoft hired Nancy Tellem, the former head of CBS television, to create an entertainment studio in Los Angeles focused around creating new entertainment properties for Xbox One. Tellem is known in the industry for turning

around CBS's fortunes – moving the network from third to first in the ratings with shows like *The Big Bang Theory*, *How I Met Your Mother*, and the *CSI* franchise.

Tellem's group is creating new original content for Xbox One – something Spencer feels is necessary. "It falls back to what it means to be a first-party, whether it's in the gaming space or the television space," he says. "We think it's our job to go out and pioneer new experiences that maybe third parties, based on their platform agnostic view, wouldn't dive deeper into."

Expect Microsoft to push the boundaries between video games and television with cross-media franchises that play out across both mediums, like *Alan Wake* developer Remedy's *Quantum Break*. The company also plans to produce more traditional TV-style programming based on new IPs. The first announced project seems to indicate Microsoft's level of ambition: a live-action television show set in the Halo universe produced by Steven Spielberg.

The company is also continuing its big push for the sports TV market thanks to a new deal with the NFL, which, according to ESPN business reporter Darren Rovell, cost Microsoft \$400 million dollars. Right now, all we've seen is some functionality that allows you to check your fantasy team, live stat updates, and customized highlights for the members of your team. However, the steep price tag would indicate that the partnership is much deeper than that – perhaps NFL Sunday Ticket will be exclusive to the system? We'll have to wait to find out.



# POWER UNDER THE HOOD AND IN THE CLOUD

While new online service and television integration sounds intriguing, ultimately the core of a video game console is the guts – the CPU, GPU, and operating systems that make the thing work. With the Xbox One, Microsoft has conceived a multi-purpose device that it claims can run a wide-range of apps and entertainment content without sacrificing game performance.

"It's been eight years since we designed our last console," says Todd Holmdahl, corporate vice president of hardware. "We focused on three things during these last few years. The first, of course, was delivering great games and great entertainment experiences. The second, and maybe even more important, is we focused on delivering a box for today's living room. The living room has changed a lot over the last eight years. The Internet has come – you have Skype and all these apps. You have multiple devices in the living room, be it your phone, tablet, or PC. We've made sure, working with our software partners, that we've made an architecture that accommodates this new living room. Last, and certainly not least, we've gone all in on Kinect. It's a game changer for us and it's going to ship with every box. We've taken the next step in sensor development."

In raw terms, Holmdahl says the unit is roughly eight times more powerful than the Xbox 360 thanks to its 64-bit architecture, custom-built eight-core AMD chipset, and DirectX 11.1-enabled GPU with 32MB of ESRAM memory. "One of the points of reference I like to use is the number of transistors we have in the compute units – both the CPU and GPU," he says. "In the 360, we had 500 million that did CPU and GPU computations. In this generation, we have five billion transistors that we use for gaming and entertainment experience – ten times the number of transistors."

The operating system architecture is designed to be a multi-purpose box. However, the problem arose of how to balance the needs of game development – which needs consistent, easy-to-access processing power – with

the demand for the constantly running programs that make instant switching between different types of apps and media possible. Microsoft's answer to this problem was to create three separate operating systems.

"The next-generation gamer is a multi-tasker," says Xbox director of development Boyd Multerer. "I watch my nieces as they're watching movies, and it drives me crazy. They're sitting there watching a movie and they're texting all the time. I just didn't do that, it's not part of my life. But it's just part of theirs; they don't even think of it.... The Xbox One's operating system is very unlike any previous operating system. We had to serve these two different needs: the need to provide predictability to the games, and to provide change to meet the needs of the modern lifestyle. What we chose was an operating-system strategy [where] we're running more than one."

The core games operating system can access the lion's share of the power (approximately 5GB of the 8GB DDR3 total available). This gives developers a clean, simple computing power that's as close to the bare machine as possible. The second Windows kernel – the "shared side" – stays in constant operation, allowing for things like TV apps, social networks, or other game-specific functions to be running in the background. This second partition makes it possible for you to switch instantly between a Netflix movie and a game. Contrast that with the 360, where each app must be loaded and then closed down if you want to change to another. Finally, there's a "host" OS that balances the system's resources between the gaming and apps partitions. While that sounds complicated, Microsoft says it's a relatively easy way to make sure that the new entertainment and social features don't compromise gaming functionality.

The 3GB of RAM that goes to running the always-on apps and UI means that only 5GB is left to the gaming side. This stands in stark contrast to the 8GB of fast GDDR5 RAM the PlayStation 4 offers developers. However, the components

in the box aren't the end of the story in terms of the processing power of the Xbox One.

"There's also been innovations in the cloud," Multerer says. "The amount of compute power isn't necessarily limited to the box that's in the room. It also includes a set of compute power that's one node hop away on the network."

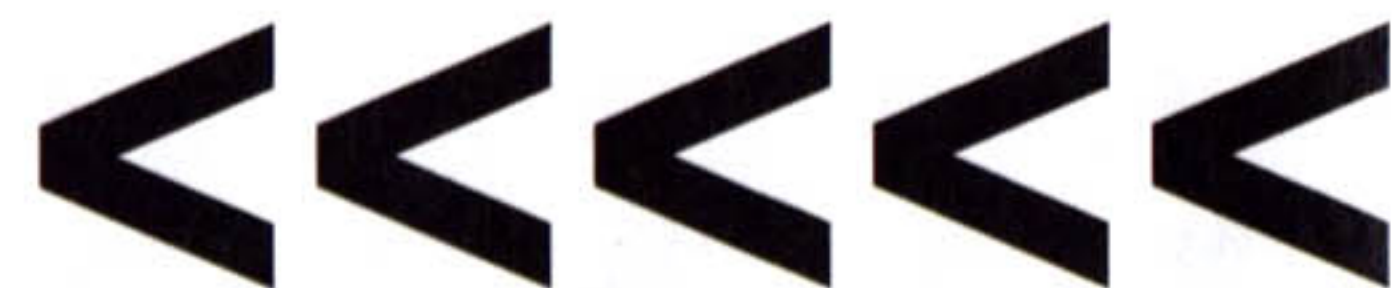
"In a nutshell, what we're doing with cloud power is we're allowing every game and application on this system to fully use cloud-compute resources," says Xbox Live group manager Chad Gibson. "We love in our developer conferences to ask the question to game developers, 'What would you do with unlimited cloud computing for your game?' There are a lot of transformative things that we want to do such as allow large-scale systems to move to the cloud, such as artificial intelligence systems, allow more epic 100-person battles, allow more of this sort of concurrent permanent experience to happen in these games."

How most developers use the cloud remains to be seen, but the team at Respawn is using cloud processing in its Xbox exclusive Titanfall (page 46) and are enthusiastic about the potential it has.

"It's got a huge benefit," says Respawn Entertainment producer Drew McCoy. "One, for consistency of match quality. Two, it offloads a lot of work from the client. When you have player-hosted matches like most games do right now, the hosting duties require CPU cycles. When you're making games like that you can't assume that someone is going to be a client. You have to assume they are going to be a server so you have to reserve some amount of CPU time even if they're not a server. This allows us to always know we're going to be connected to a dedicated server, so the console itself can always use as much power as possible. It has a lot of good effects for the end user experience. It gets rid of crazy router or NAT issues."

One downside of developers using the cloud processing is that even single-player games that leverage this tech would essentially require an Internet connection.

Microsoft is also unlocking the cloud for users. According to Marc Whitten at the Xbox One reveal event, players can use an even easier cloud saving system, as well as have access to all their games, entertainment, movies, and music on the cloud "anytime, anywhere."



Talk about the entertainment properties that you are doing at the LA studio. Is that original TV-style entertainment, or is it transmedia based on existing IPs like *Halo: Forward Unto Dawn*?

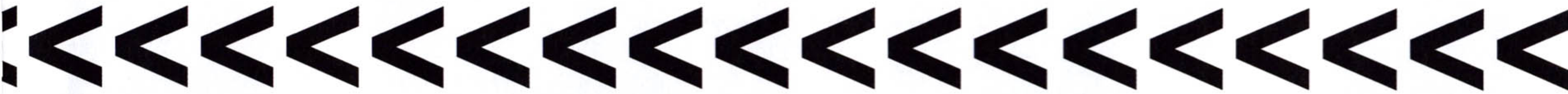
We started the organization specifically to think about new, original programming – areas not necessarily tied to the franchises we're currently working on. I would say that the majority of their effort is thinking about new television, which at its core, has to be about great storytelling, characters, compelling ideas. I'll say that, as Nancy [Tellem, former head of CBS television – *Ed.*] has been around our studio leadership team and been involved in some of our greenlight meetings and other things, that more opportunities than I would have expected leveraging existing IP have come up. But, definitely, we started the studio organization there and our goal is to build original content for people based on new concepts that Nancy and her team come up with.

In terms of the mix, will there be both "interactive" television media and traditional, passive TV programming?

Obviously, we have the sports category today that we're invested in with your partnerships with ESPN, NBA, Sky, and others around the world. I think sports television leads to a certain amount of customization rather than interactivity, where you want to curate who your favorite teams and players are, what highlights you want to see, what games you want to watch live. So, in the sports category, and this applies in other categories as well, knowing who the viewer is and building an experience that's dedicated and specialized for them is definitely part of what we think we bring to the television area.

When you think of things like reality TV and game shows, you can think about that fourth wall being broken down and having the viewer participate in the show, through either something as simple as a voting mechanic or something more integrated like *1 vs. 100*. Obviously, scripted television is a huge genre when you think of *The Walking Dead*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Breaking Bad* – those are some great shows. I think most of that interactivity [in those shows] will show up as additional information as to what's happening. You can look at the way HBO Go does *Game of Thrones* as a good example. We'll definitely take

## INTERVIEW: PHIL SPENCER, CORPORATE VICE PRESIDENT, MICROSOFT STUDIOS



advantage of the interactive, social, and communication capabilities of our boxes, at times more deeply when the medium and the genre calls for it. Others, I think we'll keep the interactivity in the background, because people want to be engrossed with the television content that they see onscreen.

**What's the benefit for Microsoft for going into original entertainment, especially when you have so many entertainment partnerships with HBO, Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and now cable TV integration?**

It falls back to what it means to be a first party, whether it's in the gaming space or the television space. We think it's our job to go out and pioneer new experiences that maybe third parties, based on their platform agnostic view, wouldn't dive deeper into. I think we've done that in gaming in certain areas when we invested in Xbox Live or things like Kinect and matchmaking. Specifically in the television category, we have some great partnerships today, and partnerships will definitely be part of our strategy moving forward.

We think there are certain techniques and capabilities that we're going to more aggressively pursue as a first party, because we're deeply wedded to the entire platform that we've created. The feedback loop for us between the creators and the platform builders is pretty important for us as well. We want to be experts in the creation of the content that runs on our platform. We think that television will be more and more important for our platform, so we wanted to get television experts inside of the organization to push the boundaries of what people think about as television and try some new, adventurous things over the next few years as we start off on our true television journey with the launch coming. We've learned a lot on 360, but it is important for the first-party platform holder to be out there, maybe pushing the boundaries a bit to make sure that we learn and share that learning with other content creators in the industry.

**Does that indicate that you want be a model to Hollywood or others in the entertainment sphere leading them towards the possibilities of an interactive and connected system that also has TV?**

That's exactly right. Even something as simple as the ability to know who's in the room and, when people opt in, to let the television creator know that they are there. What does that mean? Obviously, there are things like verbal communication back and forth, but also things like in the sports area in terms of curating what I see based on what my preferences are – things that traditionally aren't possible through a one-way medium like television

through your set-top [cable] box. We want to make sure we're out there showing the television industry what's possible on our box when you bring in identity, social and community, and interactivity all together. It's pretty exciting to see the road map that's being created right now.

**A lot of publishers and developers, like Wargaming.net, MMO providers, or Blizzard with Battle.net, have built up their own services and customer relationships and they don't want to give that up. They also want more control over pushing their updates. Will you be open to allowing third-party publishers to more directly service their customers?**

I'll try to answer. The relationship between publishers, developers, and the consumer is critical for us on Xbox Live. Whether you're EA running your EA online service through Xbox Live, or just to use our example, a small game like Happy Wars or Crash Course 2, where you want to have that direct analytic capability to understand what your consumers are doing to craft your experience on the fly. I think those tools are there today for a lot of people to do that, whether you're a gaming company, Netflix, or a television company looking at what people are doing on your platform.

You're right, there are some other big connected ecosystems out there today. You'll hear about some of these partnerships in the coming weeks that maybe will shed some light on how open we're going to be in terms of bringing people into the system. Again, there's this trade-off between customer experience and ease of login and identity, knowing who your friends are for a family-gated scenario. We want to make sure that we have good partnerships who share the same principles as we do as far as the content that should show up on the TV and making sure it's appropriate. But the ability to partner with different platforms, whether it's Netflix, EA, or a smaller developer is definitely part of our path forward.

**Now that Kinect is an integral part of the next Xbox, developers can leverage it in new ways and use a la carte Kinect functionality. Based on what you're seeing both internally and with external developers, what are some of the Kinect features that seem to be rising to the top and are being used most frequently in upcoming games?**

I think you've identified the opportunity exactly right. As people look at this as a ubiquitous part of the platform, they look at it much like they look at all the buttons on the controller. They think about, "How do I take advantage of this input device?"

Voice input is one of the things that we're seeing pop all over the place. User

interface has always been a challenge in games. I know that probably sounds funny to someone who doesn't develop games. The UI ends up being one of the complexities in developing a title. So if you give the ability for the player to verbally communicate with the game to let the game know what they want, whether it's as simple as starting the game, beginning a multiplayer session, or something else without having to map everything to every button that's available at all times – that's something that I'm seeing all over the place.

One of the things that's uniquely delightful – and I won't share which game it is, because they are trying to keep it as an Easter egg – using the RGB camera in Kinect to do something, which is capture photos at different times. If they know there's a scary part of the game – sharing the photo with the player at the end.

**Like when they take a picture of you on a roller coaster at Six Flags?**

Yeah, which is pretty funny. Obviously, the Kinect has to be pointed at the person and stuff, but we have the ability to track sound and where people are. I think there are going to be some surprising highlights there. That's not really part of the game, it's a side feature. The other things I'll say that's [being used] is light gesture. Not to get too into the weeds on tech, but there's a tracking system on Kinect where it's tracking all the joints in the body and understanding if someone's standing or seated – every movement. There are also things around pointing and more simple arm gestures, head gestures, that I'm seeing show up in a lot of games, where things can be easier than mapping something to a controller.

**Will digital versions of games that are being released on Blu-ray at retail be available on the same day digitally? Or will there be a delay?**

I don't know what we've announced about that, and I want to stay within our PR swim lanes. Our relationship with consumers is incredibly important and we want to make sure that, like many other forms of content, our ecosystem is as robust as it needs to be to match today's consumer expectations.

**You talked about how matchmaking and reputation services will help weed out unpleasant members of the community online. How is that actually being accomplished? Is it up/down voting? Flagging?**

For a few reasons, we're going into some of that detail later. I'm not going to share a lot about the details of how we're doing that. I will say that, even after we launch, there will probably be a certain amount of that. People are always trying to game the system, either for a laugh or, regretfully, some more nefarious goals. So, there will

probably be some amount of it that we will want to keep closer to the vest. That's one that we'll go into more detail on post-E3 in terms of explaining how some of those systems are working.

**How many internally developed titles will there be for launch? Is it similar in number to previous launches?**

[Laughs] You realize you're asking me to predict ship schedules of games, which you and I both know is not the easiest thing to do.

**Do you have a goal or ballpark figure?**

I'll get to an answer, but my goal is that we have a steady flow of content from the time we launch. I can say this because I was in charge of it on the 360, and I felt like we did a decent job on our three launch games – not an amazing job, but a good job. Then, we went silent again. If you remember, we had Perfect Dark Zero, Kameo, and Project Gotham Racing 3 as launch games. Then, it took us a while to come out with our next game. I thought that was kind of a miss on our part. This time around, I'm trying to look at the full first two years, and say, "Do we have a good pacing of content that's coming out?" Because everything coming out on one day doesn't help the game either. It just results in what I call the "stack of shame." That said, I would love it if we had, across all sizes, I'd say somewhere between three to nine [first-party] things launch day-ish. Nine might be high and three might be low. But between the first-party and the third-party we're going to have a lot of great stuff, and I want to make sure the content continues to flow.

**The new Kinect can track and process user facial expressions. Could you give an example of how that data will be used in an upcoming next-gen Xbox game?**

Here's an example. There's one game... I don't want to tell you which one it is, because they want this to be emergent. If someone is not paying attention; if they've turned their head and looked away from the screen, the game might throw up some cheats to surprise the person, then when they turn back it will go away. It's kind of like if you played Eternal Darkness back in the day on the GameCube, it started to play with you about deleting your saved game. There are some instances where people are going to play with them knowing that you're paying attention and not paying attention. It's probably more tongue-in-cheek than anything; it's cute. But the surprise, delight, how are people reacting to the content onscreen, is great data for us as creators as we try to make things more enjoyable for consumers. I think you'll see more and more of that emerge as the platform evolves. ☺



by Matthew Kato

# Electronic Arts Signs Exclusive Star Wars Deal



## BioWare, DICE & Visceral Put to Work

**N**ew Star Wars owner Disney didn't take long to find a partner to put out games for the lucrative license formerly owned by LucasArts. Disney and Electronic Arts have inked an exclusive multi-year deal that will allow the giant publisher/developer to create console titles based on the space opera. Disney, meanwhile, will handle Star Wars titles on the mobile, social, tablet, and online platforms. Terms of the deal – such as its length, stipulations, and amount – were not released.

Frank Gibeau, president of the EA Games label, has already stated that internal studios Visceral, BioWare, and DICE will create Star Wars titles for the publisher using DICE's next-generation Frostbite 3 engine. The titles will span multiple platforms and genres, and draw from both the movies and tell their own original tales. EA's use of its wholly owned studios and emphasis on proprietary technology likely kills the possibility that any of LucasArts' existing internal projects – from Star Wars 1313 (above) to Battlefront III – will ever see the light of day as we have seen them.

When Disney purchased Lucasfilm and its properties last year, including the LucasArts video game division, it stated that it would likely license out its console business and stick to mobile and other cost-effective formats. Electronic Arts has its share of detractors, but the company not only has the bandwidth to handle a license of Star

Wars' scope, but might also be able to – for better or worse – provide a modicum of stability to a license that has seen plenty of ups and downs in quality.

Then again, a quick look at some of the existing licenses that Electronic Arts has controlled for extended periods of time – James Bond, Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings, Godfather, and The Simpsons – reveals an uneven track record.

Putting the quality of the EA studios currently assigned to make Star Wars games aside for a moment, it will be interesting to see how the publisher fares with wearing the many hats that the property has dabbled with in the past. Star Wars is a large entity that has spanned genres like real-time strategy, fighting, racing, space combat, FPS, third-person action, and more.

EA says no Star Wars games will come out before March 31, 2014.

Here's a quick look at the EA studios involved and some of the existing former LucasArts properties they could tackle if they don't create their own series or movie adaptations.



**Visceral:** The Dead Space studio created a tense, atmospheric experience with that space horror franchise, and it could go numerous directions with their talents, from the Jedi Knight franchise to The Force Unleashed. Interestingly, before Visceral was renamed, it was EA Redwood Shores – the studio that handled legacy licenses such as James Bond, The Lord of the Rings, and The Godfather.



**BioWare:** As part of the deal, Disney says it retains the rights to make Star Wars online games, but companies often consider MMOs a separate entity. Therefore, we fully expect BioWare to continue in the Star Wars MMO space with The Old Republic. Of course, we'd love for the Mass Effect developer to return to RPG space with another Knights of the Old Republic (shown). Given BioWare's success in handling first- and third-person combat in Mass Effect, the developer could also handle the Jedi Knight franchise.



**DICE:** The Swedish developer's proficiency with the online, class-based skirmishes of the Battlefield franchise make it a perfect fit to resurrect the Battlefront series and its similar template. The studio's racing heritage and experience with the Mirror's Edge series could also give it an advantage if it wanted to go a different direction. DICE is creating a new studio in LA to handle its Star Wars games. ♦



## The Good



## THE HALO

series has shown itself more than proficient with a gun, and now the franchise is turning its attention to the twin-stick shooting genre with Halo: Spartan Assault. The Robotron-esque title comes out this July for Windows 8 devices, and features a new story related to Halo 4's Sarah Palmer as well as unlocks for that game.

## The Bad



**ELECTRONIC ARTS** is going through some massive changes. Its third-party distribution wing – EA Partners – has closed down and the publisher/developer has shed 10 percent of its global workforce. On the games side, EA announced more bad news, revealing that Dead Space 3 and Crysis 3 (shown) did not meet internal sales expectations.

## Quotable

“Did we need a generically dark, monochromatic, FPS, kill-the-Nazi-giant-robot game? Uh. No. The world did not. I am so tired of stuff like this.”



– **Warren Spector** offers his thoughts on Wolfenstein: The New Order. He later apologized to the development team at Machine Games.

## The Ugly

**PATRICE DÉSILETS**, the former creative director for the Assassin's Creed series has been let go by Ubisoft – the second time he has departed the company. Désilets left the company in 2010 to head THQ's newly formed THQ Montreal. That studio was later sold at auction to Ubisoft, along with Désilets and his two projects – 1666 and Underdog. Ubisoft says the move was made because discussions on the pair's visions were “inconclusive,” while Désilets himself told us his termination was “baseless and without merit” and that he intended to fight for his rights and his work. Shortly after Désilets was let go, Jean-Francois Boivin – a colleague of Désilets and an Assassin's Creed alum – was also fired.



UBISOFT®



# INDIE GAME: THE MOVIE

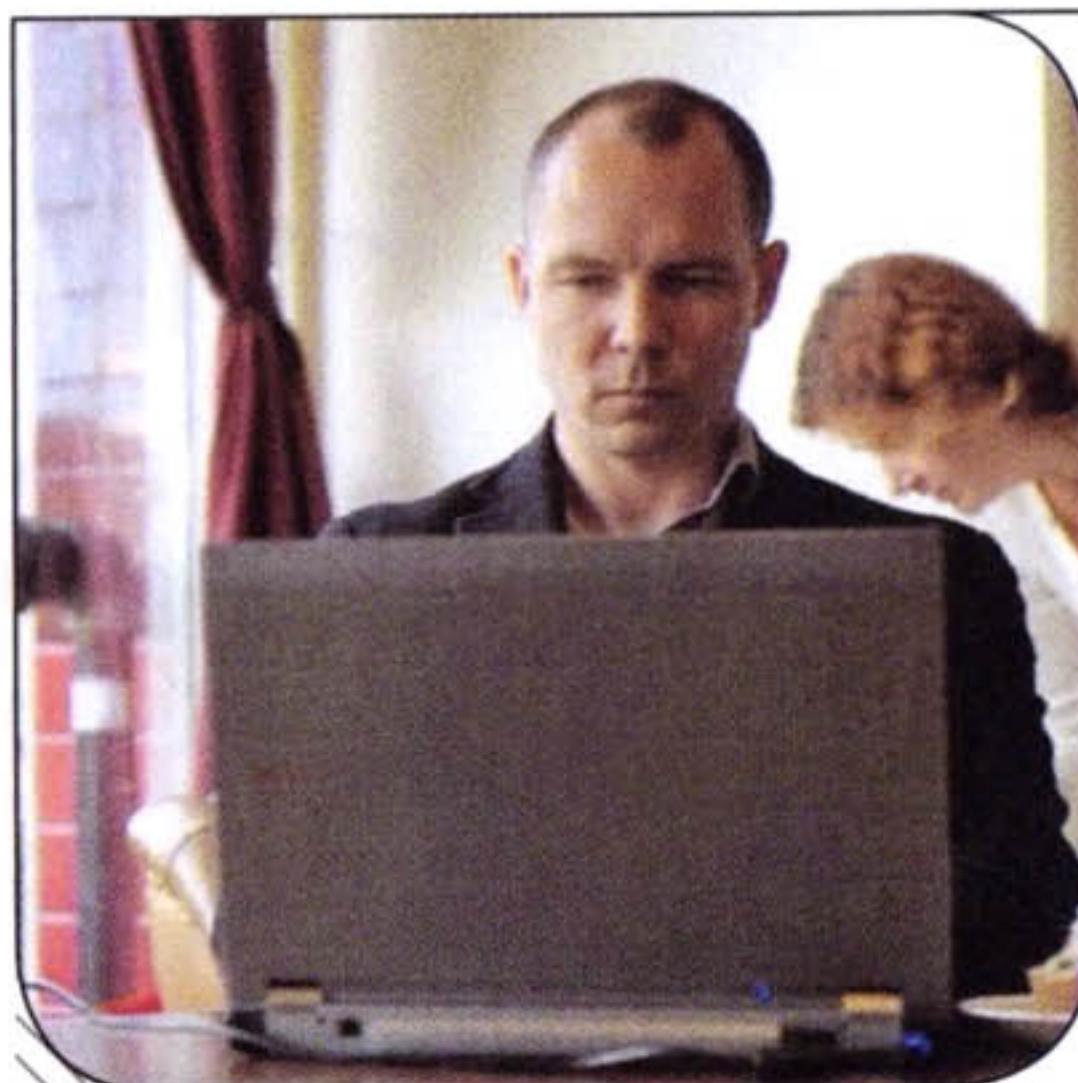
Where Are They Now?

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n June of 2012, filmmakers Lisanne Pajot and James Swirsky released *Indie Game: The Movie*, offering an up-close and personal look at the creators of some of the most successful independent games in the industry. Jonathan Blow and his game *Braid*, Edmund McMillan and Tommy Refene's *Super Meat Boy*, and Phil Fish and Renaud Bédard's *Fez* are all featured in the film.

The movie showcases not only the technical difficulties of building a video game, but also the emotional trials that independent developers go through during the process. As a result, the movie is in some ways more about the people making the games than the games themselves – and ends up being a more emotional ride than many viewers expected.

Now that the film has been out for over a year, and all the games featured in the film have released, we decided to check in with the developers showcased in the film to see what they are up to now and find out how the film affected their careers and personal lives.



## Jonathan Blow – *Braid*

*Braid* is the only game featured in the film that had already released during the filming of the documentary. In the year since, Blow has been hard at work on his upcoming game, *The Witness*. *Braid* was already a successful game when *Indie Game: The Movie* released, but Blow did see a small spike in sales after the release of the film. Blow is a completely independent developer, so appearing in the film did little to boost his already successful game design career or open new doors. Still, he was happy to be involved, saying, "I almost turned down being in the movie; at that time I had a pretty low opinion of the ways game development was getting represented on television and in the movies. But from talking to the filmmakers I could tell they were going to have a more respectful approach." The biggest change in Blow's life resulting from his appearance in the film is getting approached by fans. "I get recognized in public more often, but that is not a goal that I have been striving for or anything," says Blow, "In fact, it gets hard to deal with sometimes."

**Current Favorite developers and games:** *Drogen's Starseed Pilgrim*, Michael Brough's *Corrupt* and *Game Title: Lost Levels*, and IonFX's *Miasmata*.

by Kyle Hilliard



## Phil Fish – Fez

The outspoken Phil Fish is arguably the most memorable developer featured in the film. The long-in-development Fez was subject to legal complications from former development partners. This situation caused Fish a lot of stress – which he wasn't shy about expressing in the film. Since the release of the film, Fish has ported Fez to PC with the help of his partner on the project, Renaud Bédard. He's also dropped hints about the game coming to other platforms, including Sony's consoles.

Fish, even before the release of *Indie Game: The Movie*, was not scared to voice his often-controversial views on video games in public forums. Quotes from personal appearances at assorted conferences, as well as from his Twitter account, were often the topic of news posts on video game websites vilifying Fish and his opinions. Fish recently grew tired of it, opting to

no longer speak with press. He left Twitter in May by tweeting, "people see me in a documentary and they think they know everything about me. i feel so f---ing naked and constantly under attack." Shortly after, he tweeted, "im going to get off twitter for a while i think." The formerly frequent tweeter has been quiet ever since, appearing only on the Vine social network to post short videos that rarely have anything to do with video games.

Before silencing his Twitter voice, Fish did appear on Reddit for an "Ask Me Anything" session, where he said that he is currently working on porting Fez, but otherwise hasn't done anything particularly creative. Fish said, "I haven't really 'made' anything since the game came out. A necessary evil I suppose but life has generally been really good!"

## Edmund McMillen – Super Meat Boy

Since the release of *Super Meat Boy* and his appearance in the film, Edmund McMillen has released *The Binding of Isaac* and an expansion, *The Wrath of the Lamb*, which just broke 2 million units sold. Currently, McMillen is hard at work on *Mew-Genics* with his *Team Meat* and *Super Meat Boy* collaborator, Tommy Refenes. He is also working with Nicalis on porting *The Binding of Isaac* to consoles and fostering a classic Game Boy game collection, buying large bundles of Japanese games online.

Appearing in the film has created a few life changes for McMillen. He now gets recognized in public by fans, something he's not entirely comfortable with. "I put my foot in my mouth a lot," McMillen says, "I'm not the most appropriate person when it comes to joking and I always just assume that people know

my sense of humor and I end up saying something weird."

He is glad that he appeared in the film, even if it has become a sort of 'be careful what you wish for' situation. "I didn't want people to recognize me. I didn't want to be this poster boy for indie games. I want my games to be them," McMillen says. "I don't know how to take a compliment like, 'Hey, I like you.' – 'Really? Cause I'm not a huge fan myself, so I question your taste.'" McMillen loves talking about what he does, but for the near future, he will be doing it off-camera.

**Current Favorite developers and games:** *Surgery Simulator*, games from Tyrone, *1001 Spikes*, *Spy Party*, *Spelunky*, *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*, *Jonathan Blow's The Witness*, and *Kid Dracula for the Game Boy*.



## Tommy Refenes – Super Meat Boy

During the film, Tommy Refenes was struggling, financially, mentally, and physically. Things have gotten better for Refenes since the film and game released. "It was tough. I was working about 20 hours a day and getting very restless sleep where I'd often wake up taking panic gasps of air," Refenes says. "The success of the game helped in a way, but really just not being in that situation anymore was a much bigger help." Refenes is hard at work on *Mew-Genics* with McMillen, and is also working on two side-project tools that will help developers create games.

Refenes is mostly happy that he appeared in the film. Refenes says, "I'm honored to be a part of the movie; but I do wish that it wasn't being filmed at the most stressful time in my entire life." In retrospect, Refenes said he might have opted not to be filmed at certain points, and he would have chosen different words to express his distaste for non-independent games. "Everyone

thinks I hate triple-A games because I said Halo and Call of Duty suck," Refenes says. "I don't think those are good games, but I never discount the work and time that went into them – but that's not something that comes across in the movie."

Much like McMillen, Refenes gets recognized in public now. "I never know what to say to people when they come up and talk to me. I'm always nice but when they say stuff like 'You were really inspiring' it still catches me off guard and I stumble over myself. It's always flattering when it happens, but it's just weird."

**Current Favorite developers and games:** *Cactus' Hotline Miami*, *Mossmouth's Spelunky*, *Fire Emblem Awakening*, *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon*, *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, *Grand Theft Auto V*, and *Jonathan Blow's The Witness*.

## Renaud Bédard – Fez

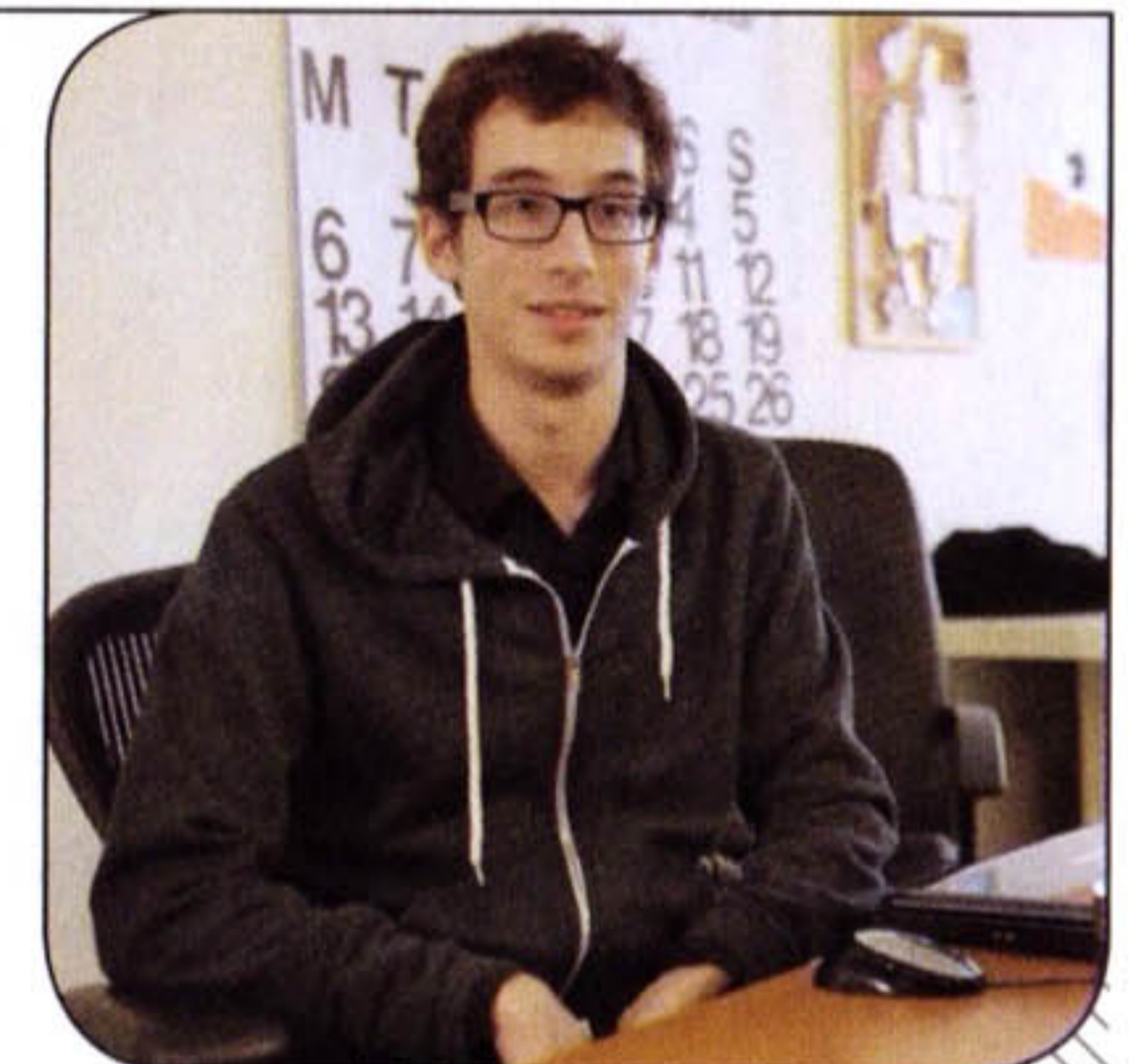
Renaud Bédard was a small part of *Indie Game: The Movie*, but he played a large role in the creation of Fez. Bédard had planned to leave Polytron after Fez was completed and shipped, but decided to continue working on the game through the PC port, which released in May 2013. "I wanted to leave because I'd been working five years with one other guy on one project, and I needed to get some fresh air," Bédard says. "Right now, I don't think single-programmer indie development is good for me." Currently, Bédard is working on an unannounced title with Capybara Games in Toronto.

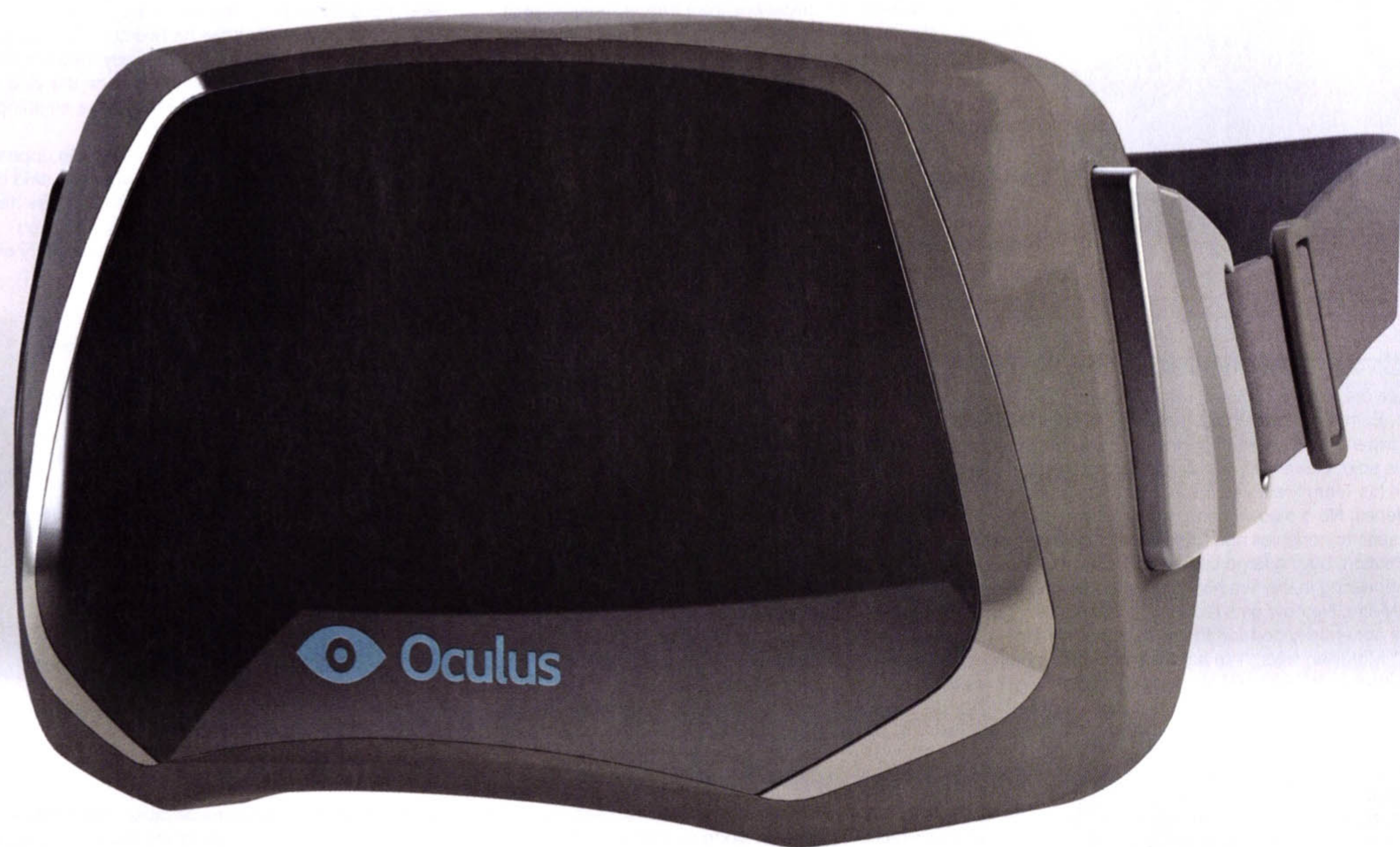
There was some controversy surrounding the representation of Fez's legal struggles in the film, and it is one of the few elements of the film that Bédard is unsure about. In the film, Polytron is at odds with its co-founder who is threatening legal action, and it is unclear if the filmmakers reached out to him for comment. Bédard says, "People that have seen the movie ask me questions about that, and where I stand with that,

which goes a bit into personal space and it's not something that's much fun to address. Still, I completely understand (and respect) [filmmakers] James [Swirsky] and Lisanne [Pajot]'s approach. They were trying to show the emotional and mental distress that a situation like that can cause, and how Phil goes through it. Bad breakups happen, it gets messy, and it's not a bad thing to show that it happens."

Otherwise, Bédard is happy he was able to be involved with Fez. It has created many opportunities for Bédard, who says, "I'm not sure how much of that to attribute to the movie itself, but reaching a general audience, students, and bedroom developers is definitely something."

**Current Favorite developers and games:** *Candy Box*, *Québécois Gamesbyrno's A.N.N.E.*, games from *Aliceфект*, *Guacamelee*, *Starseed Pilgrim*, *Ni No Kuni*, *Monaco*, *Fract*, and *Xra's Memory of a Broken Dimension*.



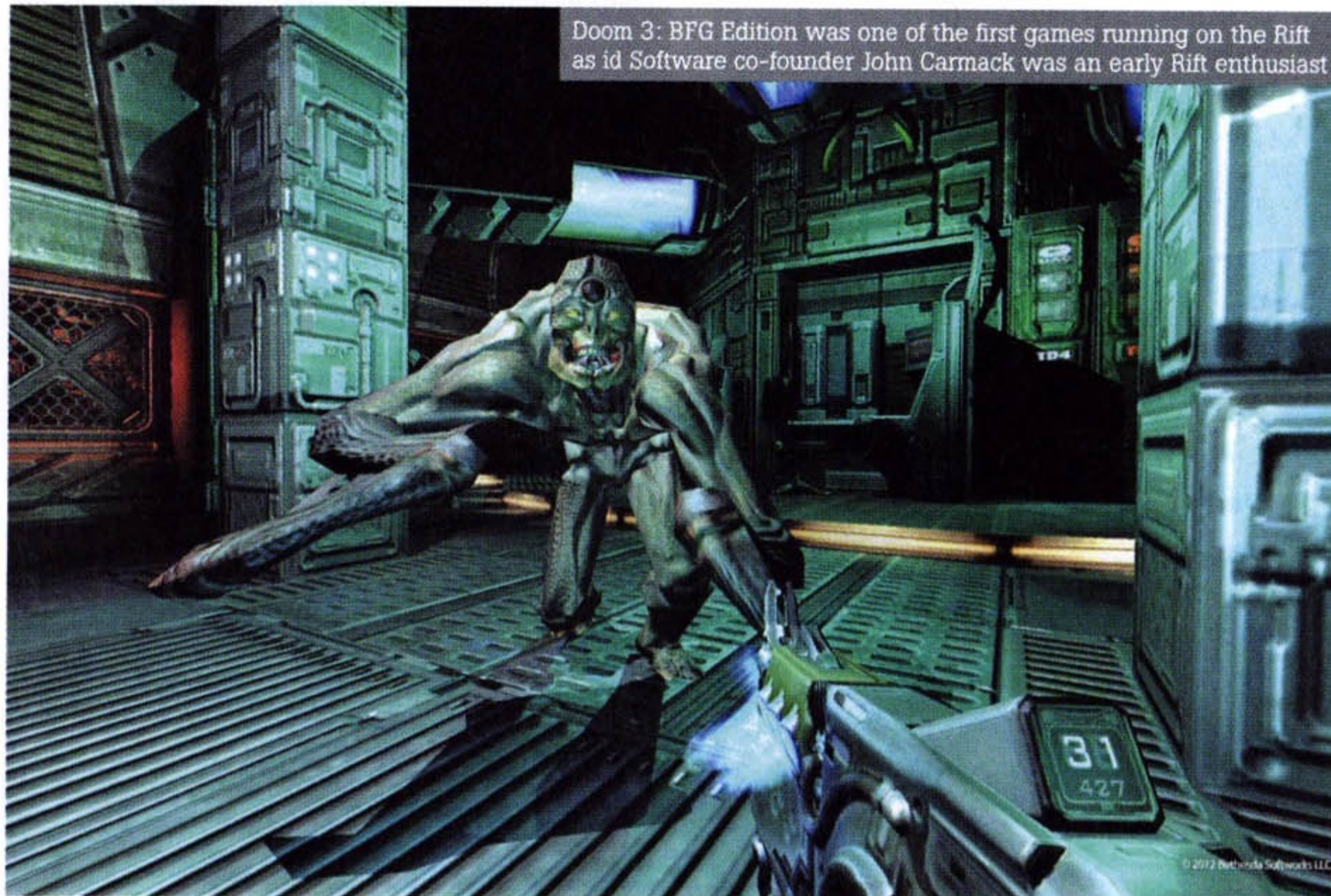


# VR Mission

*How Oculus' new VR headset creates  
new game development challenges  
...and why it might be worth it*

*by Ben Reeves*

**T**he traditional game interface is fairly abstract: Players move a mouse or thumbstick, and an avatar on a 2D plane in front of them looks around. Using this interface, game designers have developed a wealth of entertainment over the years, but this system keeps players separated from their games. Game and gamer are two distinct entities, tethered together only by a controller. One company is hoping to change that by creating a more natural and immersive display system. Using state-of-the-art virtual reality technology, Oculus hopes to wrap players in their digital entertainment. The technology is impressive, but before virtual reality becomes the next big thing in gaming, it has a number of hurdles to overcome.



Doom 3: BFG Edition was one of the first games running on the Rift as id Software co-founder John Carmack was an early Rift enthusiast

### STEPPING INTO THE MATRIX

Palmer Luckey grew up dreaming about virtual reality. A self-taught optical and electrical engineer, hacker, and VR enthusiast, Luckey slowly amassed a collection of over 40 virtual reality headsets (possibly the world's largest private collection). Luckey dreamed of someday stepping into the Matrix – of walking around a virtual world that looks and feels like the real thing. As computer engineering advanced and the technology inside virtual reality headsets became more and more sophisticated, it seemed like gaming was getting close to achieving that dream. However, no one was building the technology that would allow us to interface with a 3D virtual world. After spending a year working in a military VR research lab, Luckey decided to start his own company, Oculus, and do something about that.

The technology to make virtual reality headsets has been available for decades, but only recently has that technology become cheap enough to be commercially viable. Even still, most head-mounted displays on the market today are heavy, clunky devices with a diagonal field of view of only about 30 to 40 degrees. Worse, the very best commercial sets sell for over \$100,000. Luckey knew the technology existed to make a better, cheaper headset, so he began tinkering with prototypes in his parents' garage in Long Beach, Calif.

Soon Luckey's work caught the attention of industry luminary John Carmack, who decided to integrate VR compatibility into the rerelease of Doom 3's BFG Edition. "I believe that I've actually made the best VR demo for this type of thing ever made," Carmack told G4 when he showed off one of Luckey's

prototypes at E3 in 2012.

Carmack wasn't the only industry vet impressed with the technology. Designers like Gabe Newell, Cliff Bleszinski, and Markus "Notch" Persson all endorsed Luckey's design, and when Oculus announced its Kickstarter campaign for the Rift VR Headset for PCs, it brushed passed its fundraising goal of \$250,000 in only four hours – eventually raising nearly \$2.5 million.

It's easy to see why so many people are excited about this kind of technology. During

this year's Game Developers Conference, we slipped on a pair of prototype goggles and weren't eager to take them off. The Rift gives players a virtual window of 110 degrees, creating a field of view far more lifelike than that of traditional VR goggles. More importantly, Oculus has been able to reduce the head tracking latency to a matter of milliseconds. Virtually no lag exists between a user's head movements and the movement of the in-game camera, something that virtual reality headsets have traditionally struggled with.

Our biggest complaint about the headset is the slight amount of motion blur we experienced when turning. The development kits features two low-resolution panels. Each panel sends a 640 x 800 pixel image into one eye, which adds up to a display image of 1,280 x 800 in total. While this technically qualifies as HD, the images aren't fine enough to eliminate motion blur. The good news is that Oculus is working to incorporate higher-resolution display panels for the commercial version of the Rift, which it says will eliminate this problem altogether.

Developers are able to buy development kits for only \$300, and Oculus hopes to keep the price of the consumer model in that range, but the company isn't ready to announce anything further about price or release dates. However, Oculus' biggest problem isn't keeping costs down while improving the hardware (Oculus has four Ph.Ds on staff already working on those problems). The primary challenge is helping developers overcome the unique challenges and oddities of developing games in virtual reality.



Oculus showed off early prototypes of the Rift to Valve, and the developer was so excited by the technology it asked for early systems to make Team Fortress 2 Rift compatible



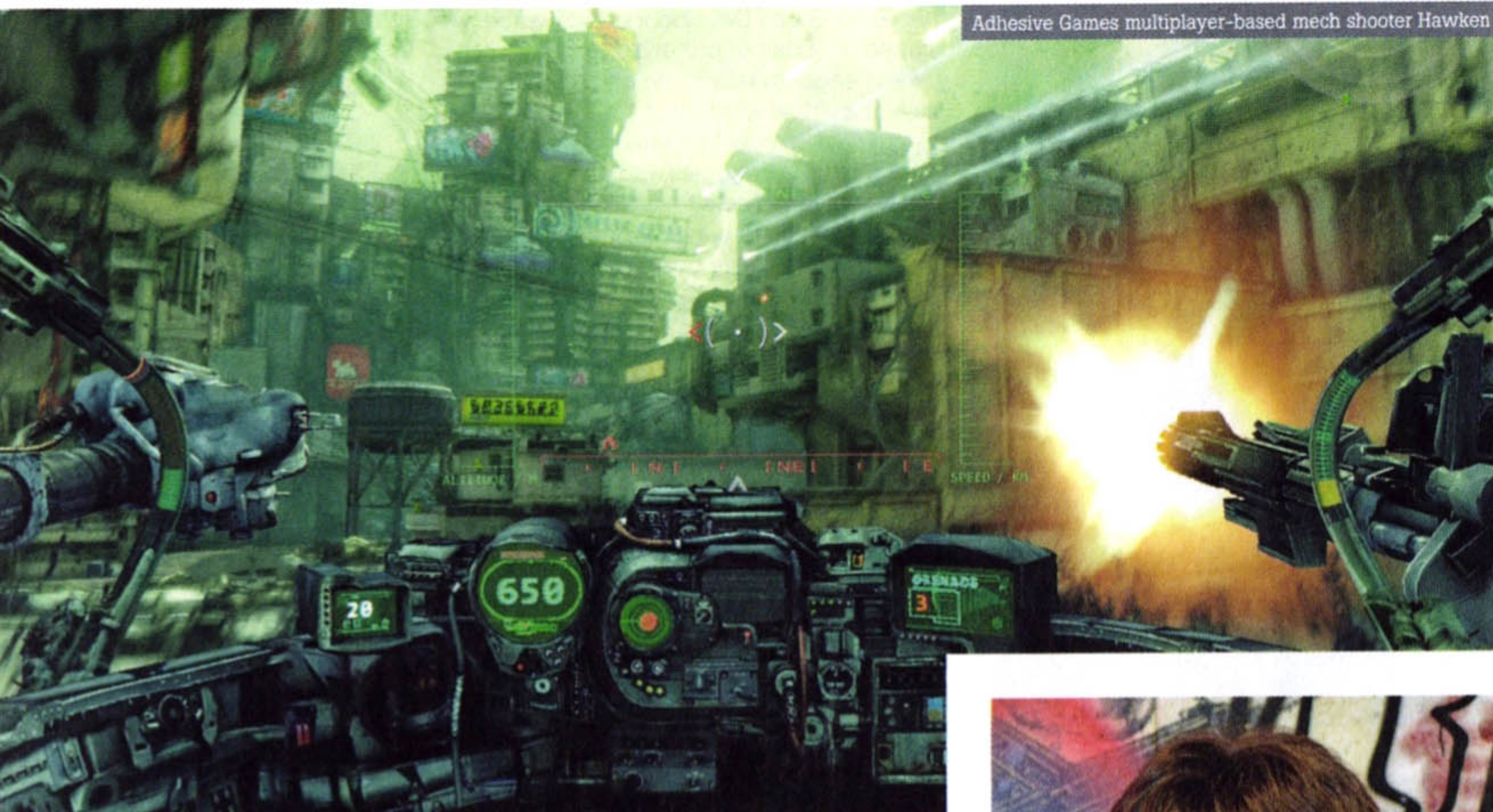
### The Rift Experience

During my hands-on time with the system, I played Adhesive Games' mech combat shooter Hawken. Immersive is a word that is often overused in reference to video games, but it's hard to describe the Rift experience without using the term. I turned my head and the screen around me shifted to show me another piece of my environment. I looked back and could see the inside of our mech's cockpit. My stomach even lurched a little after I jumped off the roof of a building and had that dreamlike sensation of falling. The Oculus Rift makes you feel like you're soaking in a game world. It's immersive.

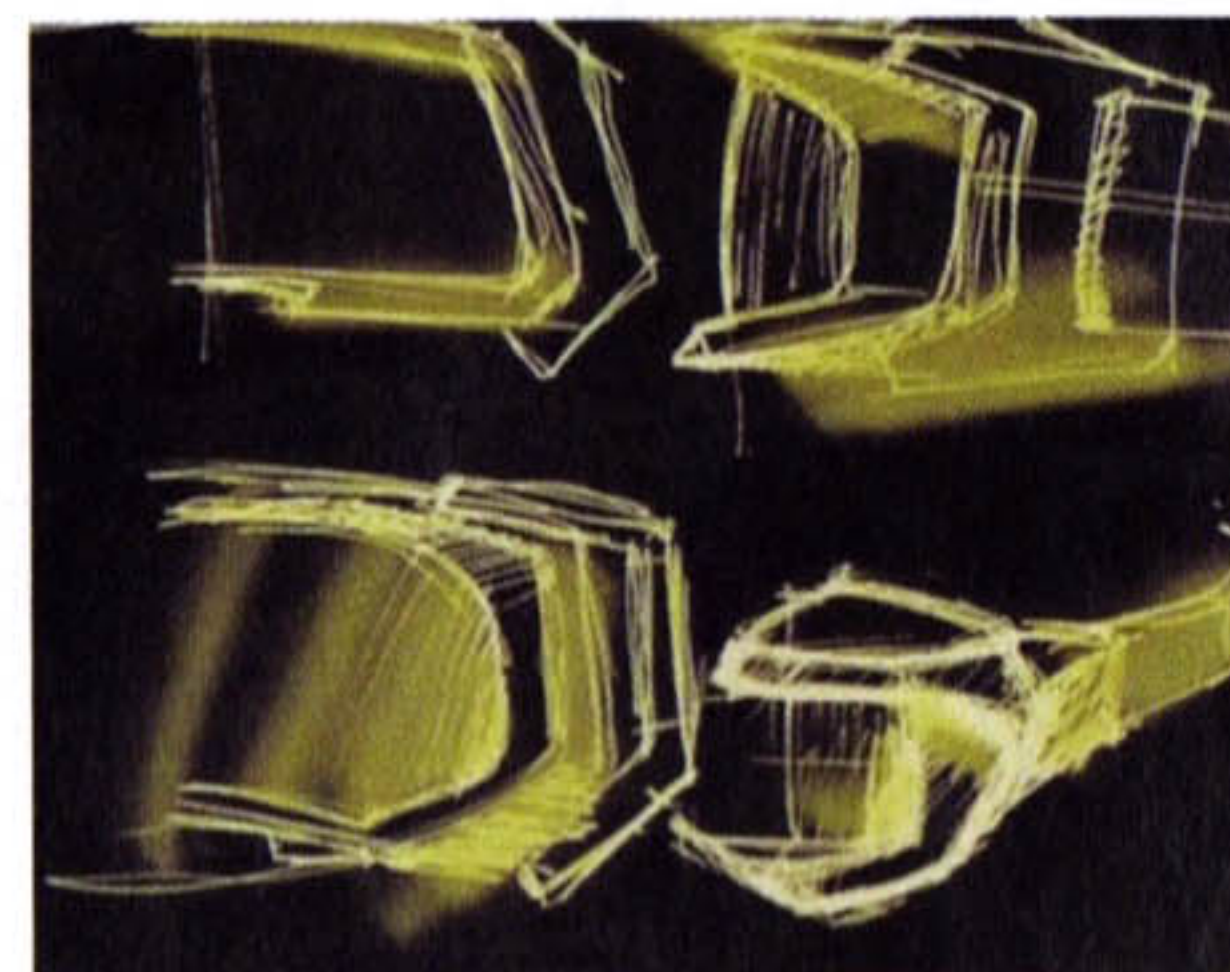
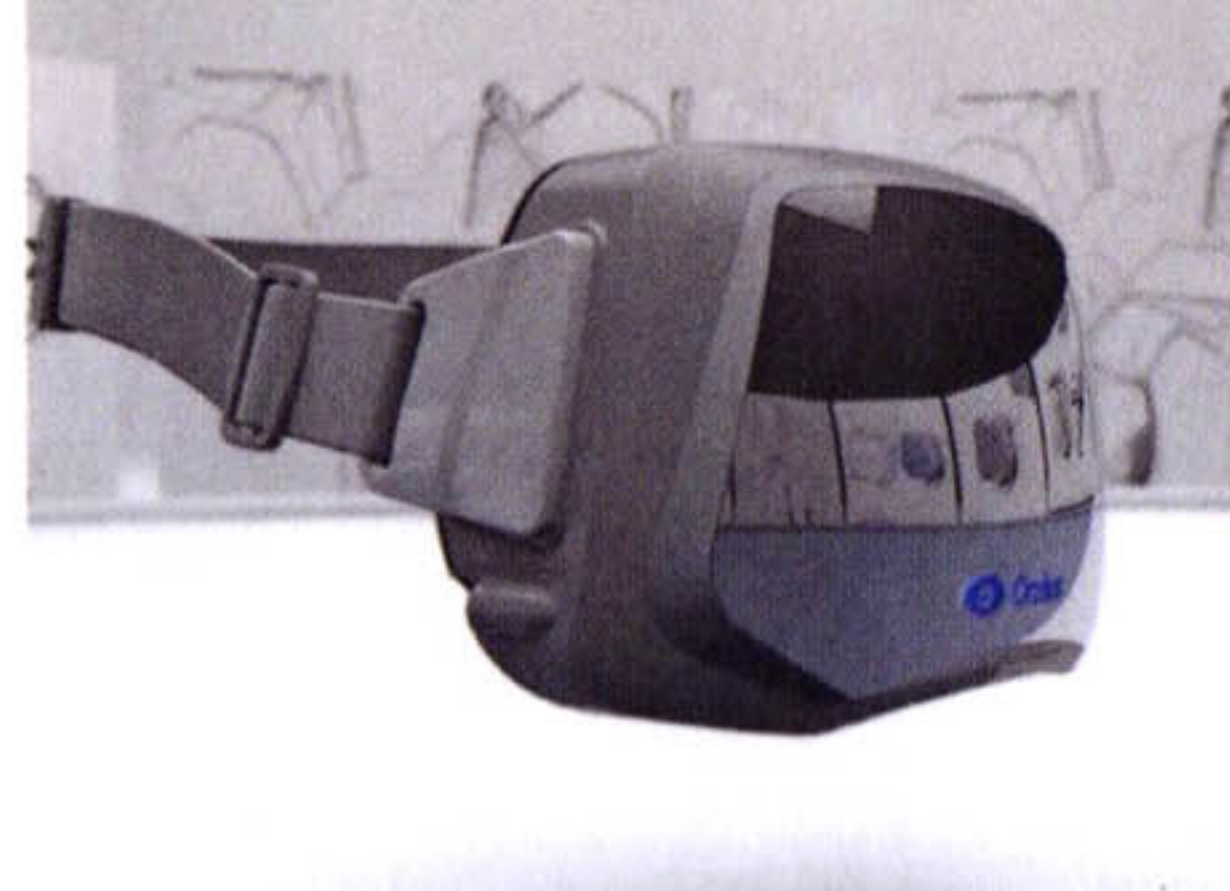
### What Will I Be Able to Play on This?

With over 900 kits in developer's hands, we should start hearing about more Rift projects soon. Here is a short list of some notable titles we already know about.

- **Ox10c** – A science-fiction sandbox from Minecraft developer Mojang
- **Among the Sleep** – A surreal first-person survival horror tale about a two-year-old and his pet teddy bear
- **Doom 4**
- **FRACT OSC** – A first-person, open-world adventure/puzzle game
- **The Gallery: Six Elements** – An adventure game inspired by classics like Myst
- **Hawken**
- **Half-Life 2**
- **Minecraft**
- **Rift Rush** – A first-person, multi-player platformer with racing elements
- **SoundSelf** – A musical experiment designed to push users into a trancelike state
- **Star Citizen** – A space trading and combat simulator MMO from Wing Commander creator Chris Roberts
- **Team Fortress 2**



Adhesive Games multiplayer-based mech shooter Hawken



## The Future of VR Gaming

The Oculus Rift is a peripheral that connects to existing PCs. In a sense, it functions like a second monitor, but as GPUs get smaller and more powerful, and as battery technology continues to improve, it's not hard to imagine that the graphical processing for virtual reality could shift over to the headset itself. Oculus envisions that at some point, VR headsets will be standalone all-in-one devices with their own digital store and unique applications. And that's just the beginning. "I'd hope that in 25 years we have virtual reality experiences that are indistinguishable from reality, where you can't even tell you are in a simulation," says Luckey. "I think we can do that in 25 years."

### OPENING UP GAME DESIGN

The Oculus Rift's development kit includes a software package that helps developers integrate the headset with their software. Oculus continues to improve this SDK, making it more user-friendly, but getting a game to run on the Rift is the easy part. Making it fun to play in VR is the real challenge. Valve Software got early access to Oculus' technology and the company only spent a couple days getting an early Rift prototype to work with Team Fortress 2. By contrast, it spent the following six months iterating on the system's inputs and rebalancing character classes.

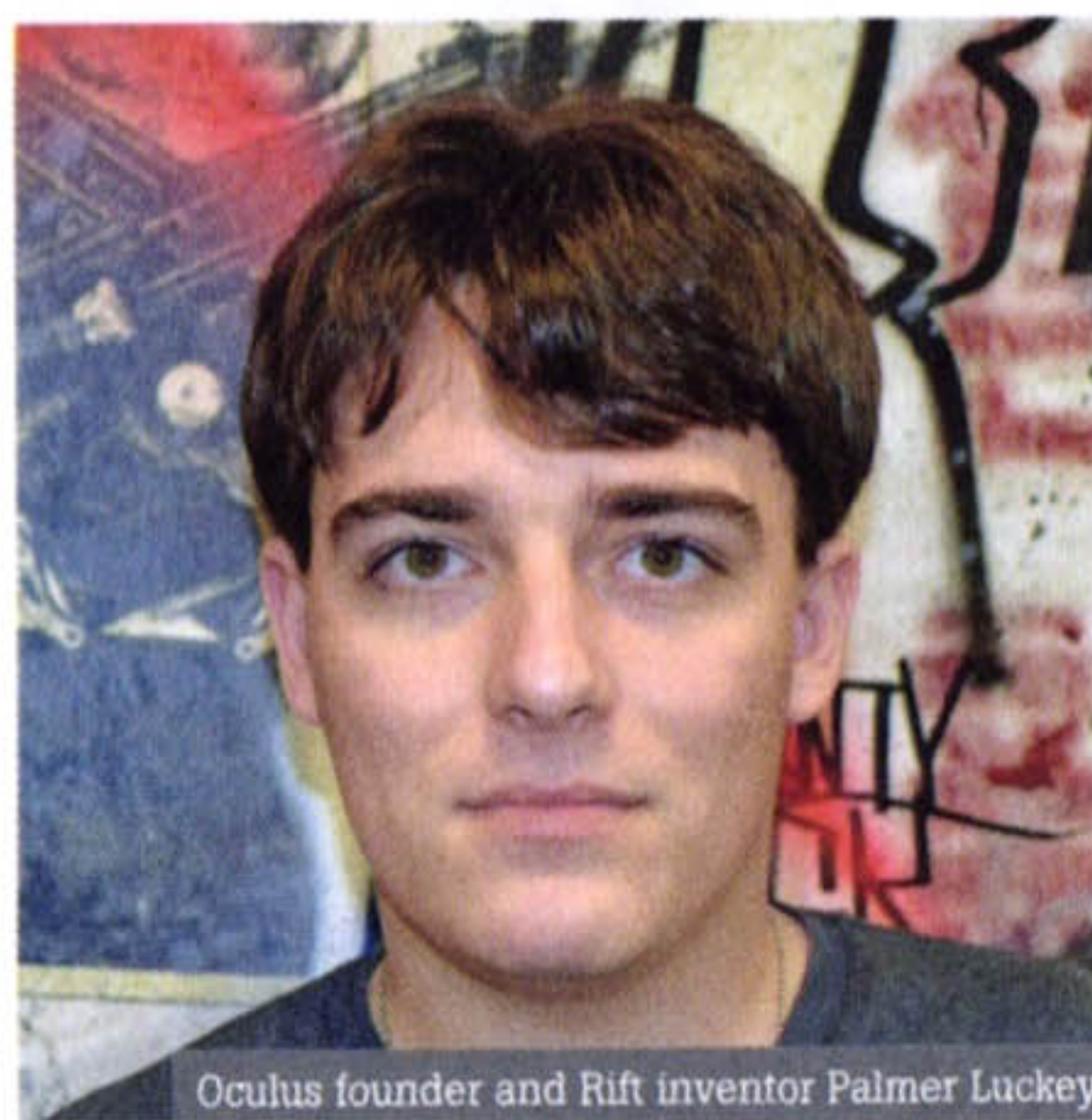
Traditional game design breaks down when a game is ported over to virtual reality. This is because many developers use a series of software tricks to optimize their games for a flat screen, and these tricks no longer work in VR. Players don't usually notice the digital magic, but it exists.

For example, most first-person cameras are rarely as high off the ground as players might think. The first-person camera in Skyrim is actually placed only four feet off the ground. Players feel like they're of average height while playing Skyrim on a TV or monitor, but the truth is apparent while playing in virtual reality.

Player movement is another example. Acceleration feels slower when viewed off a 2D plane (like a television set). As a result, many developers crank up their characters' travel speeds. For example, the default running speed for Unreal Tournament 3 is 35 mph, while the Scout in Team Fortress 2 travels at an insane clip of over 40 mph.

"Those were gameplay decisions they made for a monitor," says Luckey, "but in VR it's like, 'How in the world does this work? It feels like I'm a freakishly short person running at an absurd rate of travel.' We're going for immersion. Sometimes that's for better or worse. It's a double-edged sword."

Even something as simple as designing a user interface becomes a challenge in VR. A user's HUD is traditionally relegated to the side of a screen, but when you can move your head and look anywhere in the environment, there is no side of the screen. Game designers have



Oculus founder and Rift inventor Palmer Luckey

to rethink not only how their players move through the world, but how they convey information such as ammo count or health while working in VR.

### IS VR WORTH IT?

VR game design still has a number of wrinkles, but the Oculus Rift has the potential to change the way players interface with their games. Many functions such as jumping, attacking, and object manipulation are still controlled through a traditional mouse and keyboard interface, but the Rift effectively creates a 360-degree wrap around a player's head, pulling the user into the game. Players no longer have to use a controller or mouse to move the game's camera, but can simply look around their environment with the tilt of their head or shoot a glance behind them to see if they're being tailed. This simple change in mechanics sends immersion skyrocketing. Virtual reality has the potential to create a whole new branch of gaming that could suck in a new crowd of gamers who, for whatever reason, never caught on to traditional gaming.

On the other hand, similar arguments were made about 3D gaming. Proponents touted the increased immersion and added level of realism seen in 3D gaming, and yet 3D televisions and games failed to catch on to the degree that many within the industry had hoped. Why should virtual reality be any different?

That is a question that Oculus needs to answer in order to succeed, and it is an answer that will take the form of gaming software. For Oculus to sell the general population

on virtual reality, it needs to showcase some stellar gaming experiences that can't be had elsewhere. The most popular mobile games on the market today aren't ports of Call of Duty and Grand Theft Auto; they're experiences that are unique to the touchscreen technology. Likewise, the best virtual reality applications will be those that take advantage of the technology's unique features.

The original Nintendo Entertainment System came bundled with Super Mario Bros., which did a fantastic job of selling consumers on the merits of the system. The original Xbox shipped with Halo, which helped Microsoft gain a foothold in the market and become a relevant publisher in the console space. In order to succeed, the Rift will need a Super Mario Bros. or a Halo of its own.

So does the Rift have any killer apps coming down the pipe? Right now this is a big question mark. Up to this point, the Rift has only received promises of support for existing games like Minecraft and Half-Life 2, as well as assurances of future compatibility for titles like Doom 4 and Hawken. However, Oculus recently sent over 900 development kits out to interested parties, so hopefully someone is working on that special project that gets both players and other developers excited about the Rift's functionality. Otherwise the Rift could end up a niche consumer electronics peripheral that only a handful of enthusiasts use to play the next Doom.

Luckey doesn't seem too worried about any of this. "The technology is finally here. In the past, VR had to rely on specialized hardware that was either expensive, terrible, or both. Now we have mobile phone displays that have higher resolutions than most televisions. We have motion-tracker chips that are very high performance and cheap. Sensors that used to cost thousands of dollars now cost a couple bucks. We're seeing developers saying, 'Let's do this right, because this is awesome. This is what we've been waiting for.'"

Unfortunately, the rest of us are still waiting. After getting our hands on the Rift, we're excited to see the system's final specs when Oculus is ready to announce a release. We're excited to see what big publishers and indie studios might announce for the system. And we're excited to jack into the Matrix; we just need something to do when we get there. ♦

A.N.N.E.  
(PC, Mac, Linux)

## Two Retro-Inspired Indies Aim High

by Matt Miller

**T**he independent game scene is thriving. Numerous small development studios are exploring innovative ideas by pushing gameplay and tech in surprising new directions, but an equal number of talented developers are going back to what they grew up on, creating exciting projects that recall classic gaming from a fresh perspective.

**A.N.N.E.** is one of my recent favorites to fall into that latter camp. Coming off the recent success of its Kickstarter, I played an extended demo of the 16-bit style game and came away hungry for more. The game stars a robot named Number 25 who travels to the mysterious Planet Gomi to track down his girlfriend A.N.N.E., who is taken there to be dismantled and destroyed. You gradually collect her scattered pieces hidden about the world, playing through a mish-mash of styles that harken back to a number of familiar classics. While the core experience is reminiscent of gear-gated exploration games like *Metroid*, another big inspiration is space shooters like *Gradius*.

That melding of genres plays out in two separate styles of play. Much of the time, players guide Number 25 around a maze of corridors and platforms, gathering items, defeating enemies, and using upgrades to pass through previously blocked paths. However, this little cute robot has another big trick up his sleeve – he can board a spaceship called the Great Whale and fly around the environment. During these sequences, a tractor beam lets you grab large objects, like boulders, and fling them to form paths to new locations. You can then land and the view zooms in close to your robot, and he can use the newly built stairway to reach other areas. Beyond serving as a towboat for heavy platforms, your ship also engages in combat that sees

bullets filling the screen as the Great Whale dodges about and fires back. In practice, it's a lot like if Samus Aran had access to her spaceship during her adventures.

The half hour I played in *A.N.N.E.* showed great promise. Defeated enemies drop a universal pick up that serves to level up your character and act as currency for new purchases. Special abilities offer Number 25 a cool edge in combat, like the ability to deploy a personal energy shield that blocks oncoming projectiles, and his gun rotates 360 degrees to enable precise aiming. New custom weapons can be created as you continue playing, and the pause screen reveals a tantalizing number of options for ship customization that are as yet undetailed. Finally, the whole thing is backed up by a stellar chiptune soundtrack. I love the interplay between ground and flying vehicle sections, and using both perspectives to explore the world is fun. I'm thrilled to see how all the pieces fit together when developer Gamesbymo releases the final version in April of next year.

I'm equally stoked for another big Kickstarter success story; **Shovel Knight** has drawn a lot of love at recent convention showings, and the early levels I've played are rock-solid. While *Yacht Club's* game stars an armored knight wielding his trusty shovel, it looks and plays like an 8-bit *Mega Man* game.

*Shovel Knight* has come to a mysterious valley to confront the evil enchantress and save his beloved, and he's using his mystical Shovel Blade to get the job done. The Enchantress maintains knights of her own – The Order of No Quarter – and each of the leading knights governs a portion of her kingdom that matches his theme, like the Plague Knight's disease-ridden stage, or the Polar Knight's icy domain.

Where *Mega Man* focuses on ranged attacks, *Shovel Knight's* multi-purpose implement can be used to slash at enemies, bounce off their heads à la *Scrooge McDuck*, or even reflect projectiles back at foes. I enjoyed the challenging platforming sequences, several of which required that I bounce from one enemy's head to the next to reach the best treasure chests.

If the entire experience is as fun as the demo, *Shovel Knight* may emerge as one of the most promising platforming/action games in years. *Yacht Club Games* hasn't announced a release date, but expect the game to appear on Wii U, 3DS, PC, Mac, and Linux. ♦

Looking for more info on downloadable and independent games? Check out [gameinformer.com/impulse](http://gameinformer.com/impulse) for regular updates, news, previews, and reviews. For more in this issue, check out our list of the best mobile games that have come out in the first half of 2013 on p. 34. Also, don't miss our preview of *Plants vs. Zombies 2* on p. 75, our reviews of *Star Drive* and *Eador: Masters of the Broken World* on p. 90-91, and our scores for *Poker Night 2*, *Draw Something 2*, *Don't Starve*, *Sanctum 2*, and *Haunted Hollow* on p. 94.



**Shovel Knight**  
(Wii U, 3DS, PC, Mac, Linux)



01

## Dan Forden

*Mortal Kombat series*

Though he might not be as recognizable by his proper name, Dan Forden is known to gamers everywhere as “the toasty guy.” After a particularly brutal uppercut, a digitized Forden quickly slides in to say “toasty!” The phrase originated as an inside joke during development, but Forden’s smiling face and hilarious falsetto are now among *Mortal Kombat*’s most recognizable signatures.



02

## Richard Garriott - *Ultima series*

Most developers only appear briefly in their own games – if at all. Richard Garriott installed himself as king. Garriott’s alter ego, Lord British, rules over *Ultima*’s Britannia. Players are stuck doing all of the dirty work, though Lord British occasionally lends a helping hand.



03

## Shigeki Morimoto - *Pokémon Black and White*

RPG fans are familiar with difficult post-game bosses, but rarely are these challenging opponents members of the development team. GameFreak’s Shigeki Morimoto inconspicuously stands around in an office building, but trainers who find him are in for one of the toughest fights in the game.



04

## John Romero - *Doom II*

The ever-humble John Romero (also of *Daikatana* infamy) was the mind behind *Doom II*. In a more literal sense, he was also the mind behind the game’s final boss. By using cheat codes, players could clip through the goat-like skull in the last level to get a closer look at its weak spot: Romero’s severed head.



05

## Developers' Room - *Chrono Trigger*

*Chrono Trigger* has 16 different endings, and one of them transports you to a special area full of the game’s development team. Wandering through the various rooms, players can rub elbows with some of the big names behind the project, including custom sprites for Akira Toriyama, Yuji Hori, and Hironobu Sakaguchi.



06

## Sid Meier - *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*

Customizing your squad is one of the highlights in *XCOM*, but changing names can have surprising results. When you name a unit after Firaxis’ Sid Meier, the character transforms into a hero unit that looks like Meier, along with impressive stats befitting the legendary developer.



07

## Will Wright - *Spore Creature Creator*

When *Spore*’s creature creator released, most people were so eager to try it that they probably didn’t spend much time in the main menu. However, clicking around while looking at the galaxy results in a strange Easter egg: by spinning the galaxy around quickly, and you can make designer Will Wright’s head emerge.



08

## Ken Levine - *BioShock*

This cameo is easy to miss, since Irrational Games’ Ken Levine doesn’t appear in person. However, Levine provides the irritating voice of the clown on *Circus of Values* vending machines. If you’ve played *BioShock*, you are probably sick of hearing him say, “Welcome to the *Circus of Values!*”



09

## Swery - *Deadly Premonition*

*Deadly Premonition* already has a bar named after designer Hidetaka “Swery” Suehiro, but the developer makes an even more obvious appearance. After completing the game, players can unlock the secret Swery trading card, which notes that he “loves big hamburgers, and can’t live without ketchup.”



10

## Kenny the Kid -

*Freddy Pharkas: Frontier Pharmacist*  
Ken Williams was the president of Sierra On-Line during its adventure-game glory days, and was given the dubious honor of several cameos. Freddy Pharkas has the best of them, casting Williams as “Kenny the Kid,” the evil gunslinger who shot off Freddy’s ear in a duel.





# The Man Who Won John Carmack's Ferrari

Before becoming the founder of companies like Gamers.com and Raptr, Dennis Fong helped establish pro gaming as a viable career path during the late 1990s. However, his most unique accomplishment is one that will never be duplicated: winning id Software legend John Carmack's Ferrari in a gaming tournament. We recently spoke to Fong to get the story straight from the source.

## Dennis "Thresh" Fong

**Age**

33

**Location**

California

**Background**

Retired Pro Gamer,  
Founder of Gamers.com,  
Lithium, Xfire, Raptr

interview by Matt Helgeson

**How did you become a pro gamer? The circuit wasn't very established back then.** I'm in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the first pro gamer. I used to play Wolfenstein and Doom back in the day with my brothers. Then, there was this online gaming service that launched called DWANGO. We all logged on to that and I started to realize that I never lost. The first tournament was a Microsoft tournament that they hosted through DWANGO. [They] flew the local winners to Redmond to compete in the first big tournament of its kind. They had \$10,000 or \$15,000 for first place, which I ended up winning.

Right around that time, I think it was '95 or '96, in the online circles I was very well known. Everyone knew Thresh, and they knew I was the best player. *The Wall Street Journal* heard about it somehow. A reporter asked if he could follow me around for a few days to see what my life was like. I had no idea what *The Wall Street Journal* was at the time, so I said, "Yeah, sure, whatever." He followed me around for a day and a half. I think it was originally supposed to be a story about online gaming, this whole new thing. But he ended up doing the whole story on me because he thought it was interesting. That is what really kicked it off. A bunch of CEOs of different companies called me up and asked if they could sponsor

me or asked me to consult on stuff. That's how it started – it was by accident. From 1995 to 2001, when I retired, I never lost in a tournament. I was the world champion of Doom, Doom II, Quake, Quake II, and then I stopped at Quake III.

**Were you able to live off the proceeds of the tournaments at that point or did you need a day job?**

Back then, gaming was much more consolidated. There wasn't Counter-Strike, Dota, League of Legends, and all that. Everyone played the same game, basically. It was Quake and Quake II, period. Until Counter-Strike came around. So all the prize money and all the sponsorships were in one game. Even though it wasn't nearly as big, it was all concentrated. Also, it was a one-on-one game. That was where all the prize money was. Also, I was sponsored. On tournament money alone, I wouldn't have been able to do it, but I was making six figures just from sponsorships alone. That's how it all started; it was really by accident. Because I never lost a tournament in all that time, there was a very love/hate thing going on. I was the favorite in every tournament. Half of the people wanted me to lose and half wanted me to win. It was a simpler time.

**How did you end up winning John Carmack's Ferrari?**

This online gaming service

called M-Player decided to host this tournament and John Carmack decided to put up his Ferrari as a prize for first place.

**Did that cause a big stir in the community?**

Yeah – it was huge! It would be huge even today. There were online qualifiers for everyone who played Quake, which was pretty much everyone who played games at the time. The online qualifiers whittled it down. Then, the top 32 players in the country, plus a couple spots from Europe, were flown out to E3 in 1997. E3 was in Atlanta that year. They did a round robin-style tournament and eventually it came down to a guy named "Entropy" [Tom Kizmey – *Ed.*] and myself. Everyone knew I was the best player on the west coast, at least. Everyone said that [Entropy] was the Thresh of the east and he was going to spank me.

**So this was a "Clash of the Titans" kind of thing?**

Yes, everyone expected us both to make the finals. It just so happened that we didn't face each other in the round robin up until the final match. Basically, we couldn't really agree on a map to play. You have to pick a map that you are going to play on and agree. He didn't want to play me on the three most popular ones. So we picked some random map and I ended up winning 13 to negative one, which was pretty shocking because

it's hard to get negative in these games unless you blow yourself up. I remember that the Ferrari was parked in the booth. It just so happened that, in the match, it was parked behind me. So when there was 10 seconds left in the match, there was a countdown in the game. I remember this particular moment. I was up 13 to -1, and there was no way in hell I could lose at that point. When I realized that I was going to win it, I could see the Ferrari in the reflection of the monitor. That was the first time I got nervous in the whole tournament, just because I realized I was going to win.

**When you won, did you get the keys right then? Did you meet Carmack?**

Yes, he was there. We'd met before, since I was the champion of all his games. We knew each other and were friends. He watched the final match and then he came up to me afterwards and handed me the keys and said, "How are you getting this thing back to California?" I said, "I have no clue." Actually, I didn't even know how to drive a stick. He said, "Okay, wait here." He came back 20 minutes later and gave me a bunch of cash to ship it back to California. That wasn't even part of the prize, he was just like, "Here." [Laughs]


**Do you have the car to this day?**

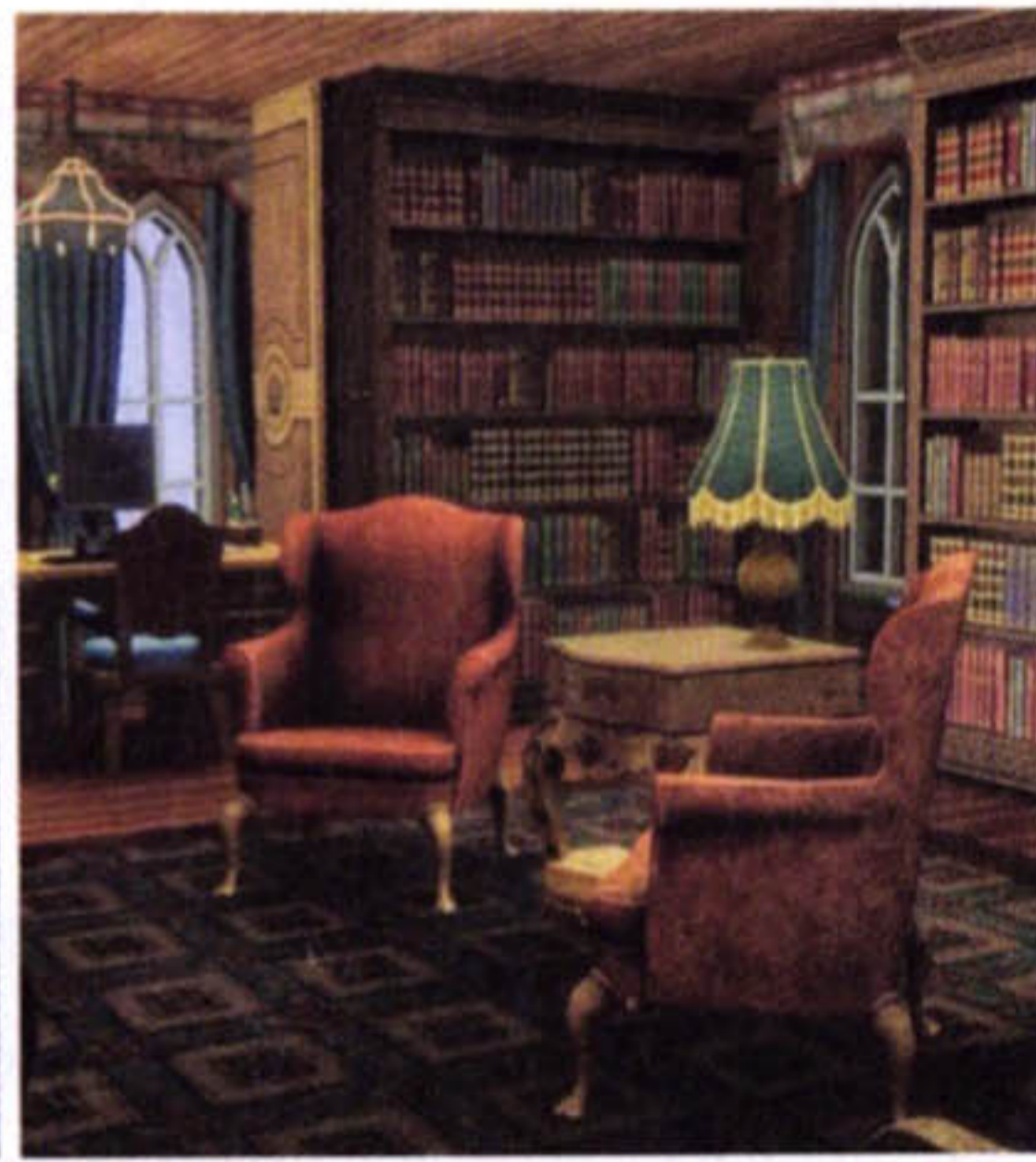
No, I kept the car for about 10 years. ♦

gamer

# The Sims 3: Cribs Edition

by Kimberley Wallace

The Sims series has always provided a creative portal for the imagination. Besides making characters to control under the iconic green plumbob, the building tools allow users to create amazing structures with detail and artistry. With the Sims 4 on the horizon, now is the perfect time to show off the best creations from the Sims 3. These cribs aren't your everyday virtual locales; these builders used resources cleverly and differently than the average player. Take a look around and picture your Sims living out all their dreams in one of these luxurious pads. You can download these lots by visiting each user's community page. 



## RAVENSBROCK MANOR

7 bedrooms, 6 baths

It was inspired by the trailer for *Cloud Atlas* that showed an old English country manor. I wanted to create something that felt gothic and slightly forbidding, like it had been in the same family for many generations...and perhaps had a few secrets to tell.  
by: [ruthless\\_kk](#)

Community page:  
<http://goo.gl/4kSys>



## CUPCAKE CASTLE

3 bedrooms, 3 baths

Cake Island needed a castle, and what better than a Cupcake Castle? I built it for players who love the sweet and funny side of the game.  
by: [Rflong7](#)

Community page:  
<http://goo.gl/Zc0xD>



## CASA DI ARCHI

6 bedrooms, 4 full baths and 3 half baths

Casa Di Archi is a home request that I did for the D.N.A. request team. It started as a house plan that I altered to give a Mediterranean feel for use in the Monte Vista world. Being one of my absolute favorite styles, it was not hard to get inspired while creating this.  
by: [SimEve](#)

Community page:  
<http://goo.gl/iXYM7>



## THE WHITE HOUSE

22 bedrooms, 9 baths

You know...where the President lives. Now your Sims have an appropriate place to hang when they reach the top of the political career. For only 466,000 simoleons, living out the dreams of presidency can be yours.

by: *edhaught58 (Ed Haught)*

Community page: <http://goo.gl/NnPd2>



## BROOKLYN LOFT

1 bedroom, 1 bathroom

This custom-built apartment block was inspired by the Humphrey loft from the TV show *Gossip Girl*. The interior focuses on indie/artistic motifs.

by: *Joolster*

Community page: <http://goo.gl/tORQF>



## PORTOFINO BAY

4 bedrooms, 5 baths

To build this house, I took inspiration from Portofino houses lying on the sea in the Italian fishing village. I designed it for Monte Vista, but it can be placed in every world. Obviously, the best choice is in front of the sea.

by: *Susanna827*

Community page: <http://goo.gl/M8WlQ>



# THE BEST MOBILE GAMES OF

# 2013 (SO FAR)

Recent months have seen an explosion of quality content in the mobile scene. A bevy of new games stretches beyond what many have come to expect out of tablet and phone games, and appeals to longtime gamers through innovative design and clever gameplay loops. We've gathered our favorites from the first half of 2013, with an eye towards guiding you to the quality amid the boundless sea of content. *by Matt Miller*



## 1 Year Walk

**Platform:** iOS **Developer:** Simogo

Weaving Swedish folklore, horror storytelling, and classic adventure-game puzzling into one incredible experience, Year Walk is a brief but mesmerizing escape. The unfolding mystery is accompanied by a second free app called the Year Walk Companion that is essential for enjoying the full breadth of the beautifully imagined tale. Turn off the lights and devote an evening to this thought-provoking gem.



## 2 Ridiculous Fishing

**Platform:** iOS  
**Developer:** Vlabeer

Don't skip past this one just because you don't like fishing games. That's not really the point of this aptly titled slice of insanity, in which you send chainsaw-equipped fishing lines plummeting hundreds of meters into the ocean before yanking dozens of fish high into the air, where you blast them for points with shotguns and uzis. A seamless difficulty curve, hilarious upgrades, and retro visuals all make this an easy recommendation.



## 3 Eclipse: New Dawn for the Galaxy

**Platform:** iOS **Developer:** Big Daddy's Creations

One of the best board games of recent years gets a fantastic iOS adaptation. This game should be on the radar of anyone who loves good strategy. A classic turn-based 4X game, Eclipse puts you in charge of one of seven distinct alien societies, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Discrete turns keep the game from becoming unmanageable, while ship customization and tech trees ensure gameplay is deep and satisfying. Eclipse plays fantastically as a solo vs. AI experience, or with up to six friends playing together.



## 4 Sorcery!

**Platform:** iOS  
**Developer:** inkle

Take a choose-your-own-adventure book, add in an innovative combat and magic system, and fill the world with beautiful map art, characters, and monsters. The interactive-fiction tale puts story front and center. Each of hundreds of choices you can make matters; multiple playthroughs result in completely different adventures. This first episode of a multi-part epic is a must-play for RPG enthusiasts hungry for something different.

## Badland

**Platform:** iOS  
**Developer:** Frogmind

One-touch controls rarely translate to complex gameplay, but Badland proves it can be done. Players fly a rotund bat creature through a surreal alien wilderness, even as spinning saw blades, jutting spikes, and other obstacles aim to halt your progress. Power-ups change your creature's physical properties, like size or speed, and even clone new creatures to join a growing flock. A brilliantly designed single-player campaign offers plenty of challenge, and a fun four-player multiplayer mode makes for a chaotic ride.



## 6 Star Wars Pinball

**Platform:** iOS, Android  
**Developer:** Zen Studios

The recognized masters of video pinball tackle the Star Wars universe, and the resulting tables don't disappoint. An initial purchase nets you the excellent Empire Strikes Back table, and subsequent purchases add Clone Wars and Boba Fett tables to the mix. Especially noteworthy is the way the mobile version offers such a clear view of the entire vertical playfield. Perfect ball physics and classic Star Wars music and visuals make this an easy pick for series fans.

## Magicka

**Platform:** iOS, Android  
**Developer:** Paradox Interactive

In a rollicking and humor-filled adventure, players guide their wizard through a rich fantasy world inspired by Nordic history. However, it's the highly customizable and flexible combat system that helps Magicka stand out from the crowd. Taps of individual elements, like water or fire, are combined to create a stunning array of different spell effects to blast your foes, revive your allies, and shield yourself from assault with. The game supports up to four players casting spells simultaneously, which inevitably results in plenty of accidental deaths by magic. This one is fun by yourself, but also one of the best cooperative experiences on mobile.





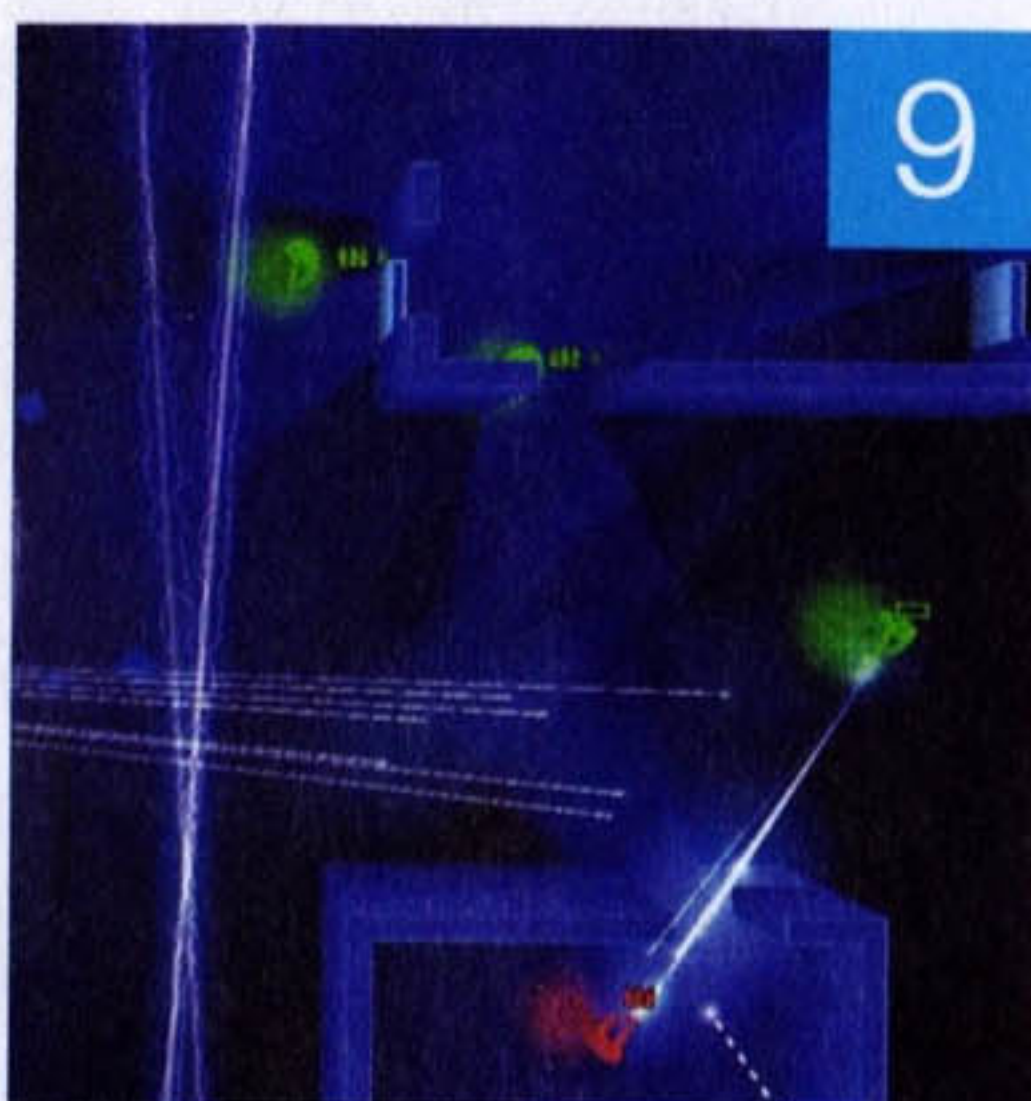
8

## Little Inferno

**Platform:** iOS

**Developer:** Experimental Gameplay Group/Tomorrow Corporation

The simple act of burning up toys in a fireplace seems like such an unusual premise, but it's the challenge of uncovering combos that turns Little Inferno into a great puzzle game. Touch devices work particularly well to communicate the fun of setting things alight, and the game lends itself well to short drop-in gameplay sessions. And for such a seemingly inane concept, Little Inferno has some profound things to say by the end.



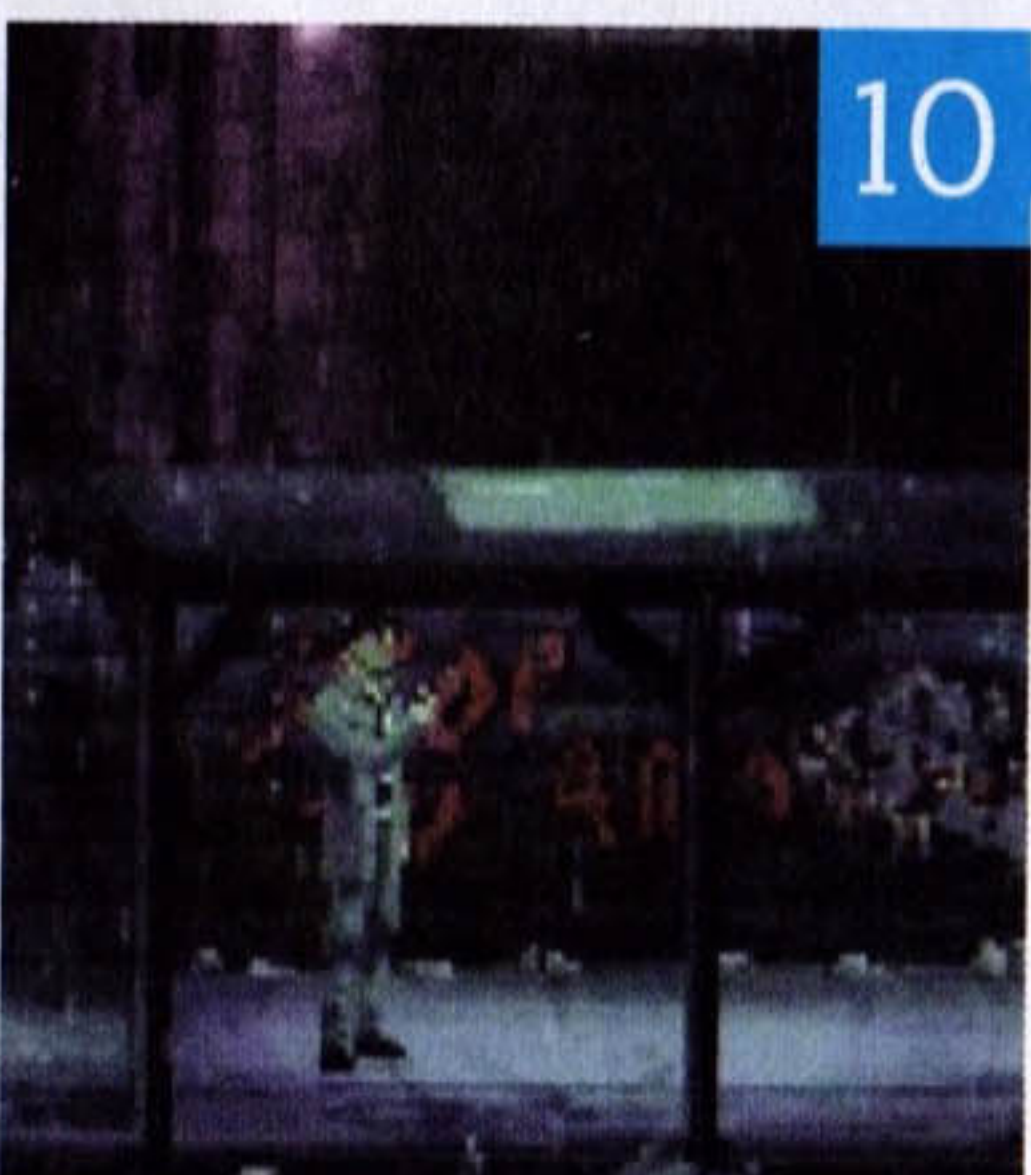
9

## Frozen Synapse

**Platform:** iOS, Android

**Developer:** Mode 7

The excellent indie tactical combat game jumps from PC to a very natural home on touch devices. Players control a squad of combatants in a variety of assault, escort, and other missions, giving them commands that play out in brief five-second clips before another set of orders is received. An excellent electronica score and high tactical complexity make this a perfect choice for strategy fans.



10

## Gemini Rue

**Platform:** iOS

**Developer:** Wadjet Eye Games

The classic adventure genre gets a dose of new energy in Gemini Rue. Mixing science fiction with noir detective overtones, Gemini Rue has gamers hopping back and forth between two protagonists – one a world-weary investigator and former assassin, and the other an amnesiac being held in a mysterious training facility. Tight storytelling and a richly illustrated atmospheric world guarantee an ideal pick for players looking for longer, sit-down game sessions.



11

## Joe Danger Touch

**Platform:** iOS **Developer:** Hello Games

Emulating the model established by the excellent Rayman: Jungle Run, Hello Games took its successful console game and adapted it with smart touch controls and newly designed levels. The jocular stuntman makes for a great lead as he jumps and dodges around obstacles aboard his motorbike, and each stage provides plenty of replayability thanks to multiple objectives. With its bright visuals and silly music, Joe Danger Touch is a fantastic option for kids, but devoted players both young and old could invest a lot of time to excel.

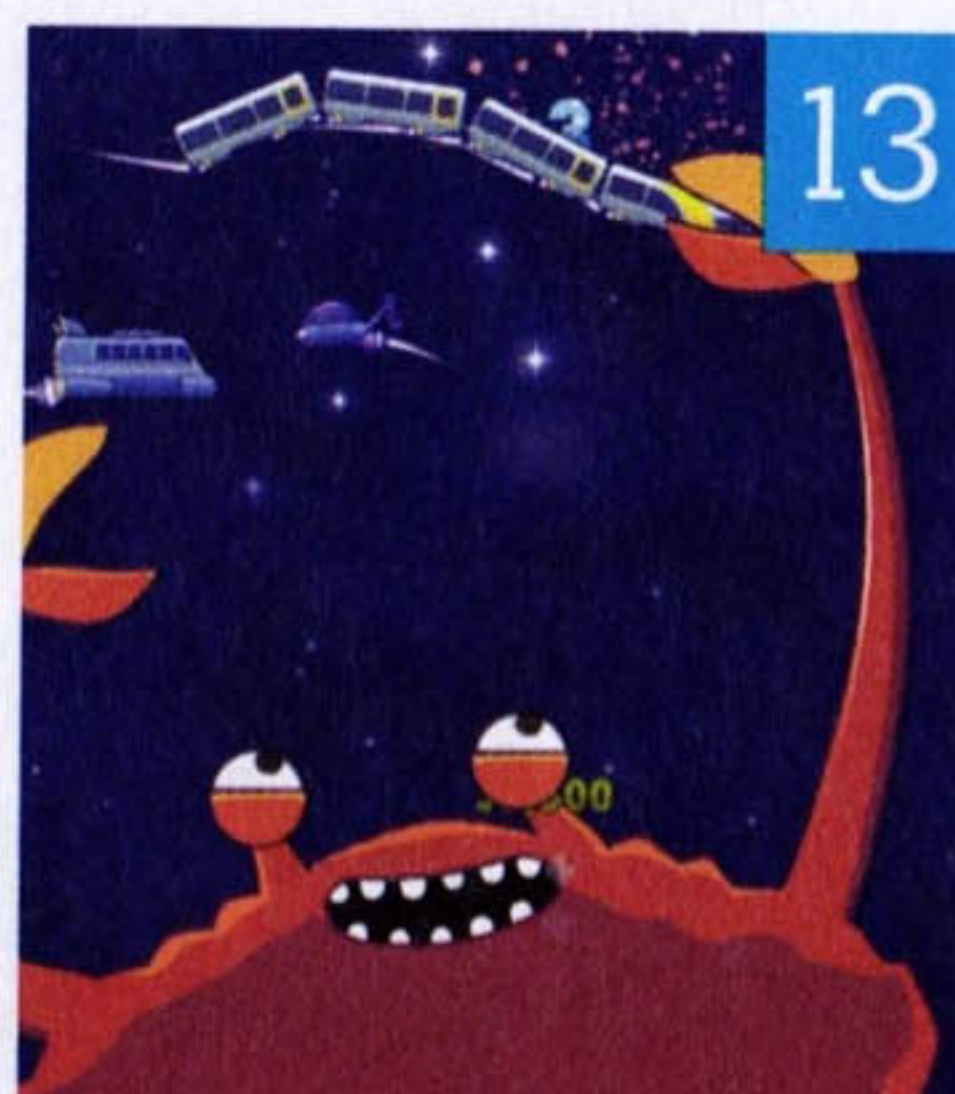


12

## Star Command

**Platform:** iOS **Developer:** Star Command

The human race is threatened, and you captain the only ship in the fleet with a hope of facing the alien menace. Players build a starship filled with weapon, shield, and medical rooms, and slowly expand a crew of humans and aliens in order to confront one battle after the next against devastating vessels and their boarding parties. While it shares traits with recent indie darling FTL: Faster Than Light, Star Command emerges with its own brand of fun by capitalizing on the potential of the touchscreen control scheme.



13

## Crabtron

**Platform:** iOS

**Developer:** Two Lives Left

A simple but fun premise can carry you a long way. By using the multi-touch functionality of the screen input, Crabtron puts players in control of the two snapping claw arms of a giant space crab as it gobbles up passing ships and clocks oncoming missiles, meteors, and other objects. Snapping your fingers closed to grab a ship is incredibly satisfying, and Crabtron includes a surprising amount of variety as you advance through the endless tracts of outer space.



14

## Slayin

**Platform:** iOS **Developer:** FDG Entertainment

Distill the sword and sorcery genre to its most basic components, and you have a character killing an endless stream of increasingly challenging monsters. Slayin embraces that core premise, with a single character moving back and forth on a single tiny screen as a stream of slimes, skeletons, and other creatures spawn into place. Retro visuals and music are enough to charm you at first, and the subsequent unlocking of new character classes and game modes keeps you around long after you'd expect.



15

## Cut the Rope: Time Travel

**Platform:** iOS, Android

**Developer:** ZeptoLab

The adorable little OmNom returns in a new time-travel adventure, but it's the addition of a second candy-chomping monster on screen that makes this a series worth returning to. Physics-based puzzles have added complexity this time around thanks to new devices to juggle, and the need to get candy into two hungry mouths makes for more interesting level layouts. Cut the Rope: Time Travel is simple, cute, and ideal for quick pick-up-and-play sessions. Read the full review on page 92.

# NEVERWINTER



Cryptic's latest probably isn't what most would picture as a Dungeons & Dragons MMORPG, but it works surprisingly well as a multiplayer fantasy action game. Plus, Neverwinter's powerful creation tools have already borne delicious fruit in the form of player-crafted adventures.

by Adam Biessener

**T**he last two titles from Cryptic Studios, *Star Trek Online* and *Champions Online*, left me cold. *Fourth Edition Dungeons & Dragons* is a weird departure for the venerable tabletop role-playing system. The idea of combining the two into a free-to-play MMORPG didn't exactly fill me with confidence, but *Neverwinter* succeeds despite its questionable provenance by not hewing too closely to either side of its heritage. More of an action game than a tactical RPG and more of a dungeon-crawler than an MMO, *Neverwinter* has an identity of its own.

The forgettable story centers around the aftermath of the devastating *Spellplague* in late-period *Forgotten Realms* canon, and a subsequent undead siege that threatens the bustling *Sword Coast* city of *Neverwinter*. The single storyline that runs from character creation to endgame dungeons casts you as the hero who delivers the city from its ills, ignoring the MMO part of the game in classic hand-waving fashion. The uninspired questing isn't awful, but the only use I have for the boilerplate fantasy adventuring in *Neverwinter* is as a backdrop for the genuinely entertaining combat.

The immediate gameplay is closer to *Guild Wars* than anything else out there. Like in *ArenaNet's* exceptional franchise, avoiding attacks through positioning, lining up area-effect abilities, and juggling cooldowns

are all critical skills. The strategy ends up being "sloppier," for lack of a better term, but the chaos is fun in its own way, especially when every build of every class throws out explosive attacks that would be laughably overpowered in any other MMO.

Nearly every non-trivial fight (read: dungeon bosses and not much else) involves waves of minions that must be dealt with while not letting the main boss kick anyone's face in. The general idea is to mash your most powerful attack that isn't on cooldown, dodge like a madman to avoid big-windup telegraphed attacks, and slap any loose monsters with whatever disabling effects you have available. Forget "tank-and-spank," because even the *Guardian Fighter* can't really tank in any meaningful sense and encounters are too chaotic to control anyway. Fortunately, every class has built-in mechanics that let them largely survive on their own without relying on allies to bail them out.

Player-versus-player matches channel the exceptional combat well, with two important caveats bringing down the overall experience. The emphasis on movement powers, ground-based targeting, and manual dodging strain *Neverwinter's* netcode to the limit, even in these instanced five-on-five matches. Expect to curse at your screen as the game regularly fails to register a hit for a spell that looked like it connected on your screen. Also, the general

wonky class balance (even by just-launched MMO standards) is a particular problem in PvP. Pity the poor souls playing fighters.

Combat is far and away the best thing *Neverwinter* has going for it. The ancillary systems that make up an MMO are mediocre at best. Gear is hideously boring, with passive stats that have tiny individual impacts on your character's abilities. The auction house has been badly broken for most of the time it's been implemented, with searches often returning nonsensical results. An exploit even allowed players to place negative-value bids that both won auctions and sent them the specified sum of money. Leveling is well-paced but sadly lacking in choices until you're over halfway to the level cap, and even then you're mostly choosing between small passive stat boosts and which flavor of "attack" or "disable" you prefer. Crafting is built around a neat paradigm that has you sending minions on offscreen tasks, but creating any worthwhile gear requires an absurd amount of grinding and effectively mandatory real-money purchases.

The economy is one of the worst I've seen in years of playing MMOs. Two in-game currencies (astral diamonds and gold) are used for different items and services, and the real-money currency (zen) can be spent at the cash shop or bought from other players for astral diamonds. Most things worth spending astral diamonds on cost obscenely high amounts

that require either selling rare drops from end-game dungeons to other players, purchasing via real money, or months of grinding. Many all-but-obligatory convenience items, like inventory and bank space, are extremely difficult to come by except through real-money purchase. The whole system is a hard-to-understand mess, and layers pointless complexity onto every phase of the game for no seeming purpose other than to sow confusion in players.

I'm not generally one to moan about publishers pushing real-money purchases in free games – these things cost money to make, and you're getting the game for free – but Neverwinter grinds your face into its business model with increasingly uncomfortable regularity as you progress. Crafting is one notable area where it's nearly impossible to make effective progress without dropping cash, but it's hardly the only one. I find the ubiquity of blind-purchase "grab bags" particularly distasteful, preying as it does on a well-known foible in human psychology to encourage players with poor impulse control or self-discipline to spend more money. You still get an awful lot of game for free here (and thank goodness no energy meter or dungeons-per-day limit exists), and you can avoid most of the cash purchases, but the grab bags are pushed at you with distasteful frequency.

The powerful Foundry tools allow players to create modules for their fellow adventurers to take part in, and Cryptic smartly built it to scale content to the user's level and give reasonable rewards in XP, money, and loot. My experience with it has been mixed, but

### A Beta Open For Business

Neverwinter is still in "open beta" as of this writing. However, letting the public play, taking their money in the cash shop, and committing to having no further character wipes before "full" release sounds an awful lot like a game being "out" to me.

the best player-created adventures are better than any of the "official" content, and the framework allows authors to be creative with branching paths and scripted enemy spawns. Finding the good stuff is still much too difficult, but Cryptic has acknowledged that problem and says that a better system for surfacing quality player-created content is in the works.

Neverwinter isn't perfect and it's not at all what I expected, but it's fun. Each class is amusing in its own way, and blowing apart enemies with powerful skills is a blast even when the narrative excuse for doing so is so thin as to be translucent. Approach this as more of a multiplayer dungeon-crawler with the potential for cool player-created content than as a true long-term MMO with an endless endgame, and you shouldn't come away disappointed. ♦



[System Notify] Reward Collected  
[System Notify] Successfully created Foundry Quest review for The Secret of Blacklake  
[System Notify] Left channel "Zone"  
[System Notify] Joined channel "Zone"  
[Admin] You must Discard a currency to search again  
[System Notify] You discarded Mount Requisition Token.  
[System Notify] You received 2,000 Rough Astral Diamonds.  
[System Notify] Left channel "Zone"  
[System Notify] Joined channel "Zone"  
[System Notify] Left channel "Zone"  
[System Notify] Joined channel "Zone"  
[System Notify] Interaction interrupted.  
[Admin] Admin has acquired a Heavy Inferno Nightmare.

# interview



photo: Brett Beadle



# Surviving THQ's Downfall

Relic Entertainment fetched a serious price from Sega as the bankruptcy court auctioned off imploding publisher THQ's assets, due in part to the nearly completed *Company of Heroes 2*. We spoke to game director **Quinn Duffy** about the developer's latest parent company, next-gen hardware, and why Relic is comfortable in its PC niche.

interview by Adam Biessener

## How would you describe Relic's relationships with THQ and now Sega?

I think in some ways the relationship with THQ was really positive because we had some stability and we were able to work on some games like *Company of Heroes*, which were complex and took a long time to develop. THQ had that patience at the time. But I think as their fortunes changed, their involvement with us changed. The relationship changed. You started to hear "quarterly" more often, and there were a lot of direction changes and leadership changes. Every time that happens, there's a little seismic shift in development that ripples down. So I think the last couple of years have been a little tense. We felt that THQ was on a trajectory that they were going to have trouble recovering from. When Jason Rubin came in we thought that was going to breathe some real life into – and it did, I think, for a while – but I think THQ at that point was mortally wounded and would have been very hard to resuscitate.

But the Sega thing, the bankruptcy, from my personal perspective – really, it wasn't so much that we were desired as a studio, because I think we felt that Relic would survive. We had a game that was really far along in development that was looking good, the buzz was good, the team felt good. We had completed some really big milestones. I think there was this massive boost of confidence when we saw the final tally. I'd never thought a number would have that kind of significance, but I think when we saw that Sega had paid, what was it, 26.6 million [dollars] for Relic, that was a vote of confidence unlike any we'd had in years and years.

## Relic has carried the RTS torch through some dark times for the genre. Why has the studio stuck with it over the years?

We struggled with that question a lot. Is the genre dying? Is PC dying? We moved into consoles a couple of times. Those were moderately successful, but they're not our core competency and not really what we're known for. I think the Relic brand has meaning in RTS and strategy. I think we can look at that market, and it's still a really big niche. It's a niche, we'll admit that, but it's a big niche and if we can control a big part of a big niche, we can earn a decent living as a company and survive and make great games and keep working on the PC stuff.

## Relic bucked the industry trend by killing the free-to-play *Company of Heroes Online* and going with the traditionally priced *Company of Heroes 2*. What was the reasoning behind that?

I think in some ways we were maybe slightly ahead of the curve, but what we ended up

with was a slight mismatch of goals and infrastructure. We had a goal to go free-to-play with that game and build a live service. We did three unique launches in China, Korea, and North America.... I don't think THQ or maybe even Relic understood what it was going to take to manage and maintain a live game from the publishing end, from the server end, and partnerships with companies in Asia. The sales team, they didn't know what to do with it. I don't even think they knew how to figure out the money for their shareholders, like, "How do we report this kind of thing?" That was all really new on their end, and there was also a desire at THQ internally to go back to core games...in the Danny Bilson era, to reinvigorate THQ as a high-quality developer of slightly more traditional properties.

## What are your thoughts on the general PC trend toward online logins, server-based games, and the DRM/piracy conundrum?

There are probably a lot of people at all the various publishers looking at a lot of spreadsheets trying to figure out what's the best approach. I think, with Sega's approach, if we can look at our future earnings and profits and loss, if you can demonstrate a profit, the delivery is less important in how that profit is made. That allows the team some flexibility in how things are done. I think as a company we really need to explore what a product looks like in its entirety, because people are going to spend 60 bucks and they're going to buy *Company of Heroes 2* and they're going to get a campaign and they're going to get a theater of war and they're going to get hundreds of hours of multiplayer that they can play for free, and that's a pretty decent value. But not everybody wants all of those pieces, and maybe when we look at the future, we don't deliver all those bits in one big chunk. You could bundle it and get everything, but maybe the campaign comes out separately and we do the armies before we do the campaign development because doing both at the same time is really challenging. So we look at what the consumer's interest is and maybe also what helps us build a game better as a studio.

I have a feeling what we'll really see in the next few years is that box-product price go down and more of that money tried to be recovered on the downloadable content end where we can. Instead of doing a game and supporting it for five years, we do pieces of the game distributed over four or five years. Maybe in small chunks and big chunks – I don't think we're interested in super-micro-transaction kind of stuff, buying bullets and those kinds of things – we'll try some stuff.

## Are the next-gen console platforms more interesting to you because of their more PC-like architecture?

Technically, moving onto the next generation of consoles I don't think would be an issue

for Relic, because we've got great engineers and tech people. But the kind of games we do would be harder. I don't think the consoles are really suited for deep tactical RTS games like *Company of Heroes*. I don't see a fit there in the short term.

## What advantages do you see the PC still enjoying as a platform over consoles?

There's a few things, like ubiquity. They're all over the place. They're increasingly powerful, and I think PCs are still going to be more powerful than the next-gen consoles. There might be a bit of an overlap for a while, but the PC always moves ahead. Maybe it's distribution, access, the ability to put things a bunch of different places your fans can find. It's access. It's flexibility. People are starting to get used to things like downloadable content and paying for things like that, so there's a willingness to pay small amounts to try gameplay in that market, but I don't know if the console supports that kind of feel yet.

## With more and more PC gaming moving into the living room and onto televisions, are you starting to think more about gamepad control for your titles?

Not much for this generation. I think the kind of gameplay and the precision control – that purity of experience is best served with mouse and keyboard. Longer-term, that's a future trend or an emerging trend that we can't ignore, so we look at those kind of things. I think strategy games, and touch, and tablets, there's some potential for some tactile, really cool haptic-type feedback on unit control. Touchpads and those kinds of things I think have some really good potential for strategy gaming.

## What about additional interfaces like Kinect, Move, and Smartglass?

If I'm thinking of the kinds of games that we work on, it doesn't come up. We never have discussions around Kinect or Move or those kinds of things. It's hard to say. You get this strange, maybe not a disconnect, but this sort of idea of core games with a very casual-based control system is a tough mix. The latency issues and things that you might have with those systems is a tough mix for core games. So it doesn't come up a whole lot in our discussions.

## Even though Gearbox now owns the rights to *Homeworld*, do you see Relic returning to sci-fi?

People like an outlet for creativity. One of the things with, say, a *World War II* game is you're doing *World War II* stuff. I think there's a lot of room for doing *World War II* stuff well, in terms of how it looks and how you deliver it, but I think there are artists and animators, people who would love to get to the spot where they can invent as opposed to emulate. ♦

## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

**1995 PRE-INTERNET GAMING**  
Duffy leaves the University of Calgary in his final year to join a friend at Virtual Games, a subsidiary of voice/data provider Virtual Universe

**1996 STRIKING OUT**  
Duffy starts RayGun Entertainment, a short-lived company looking to provide content to early Internet portals and subscription game services like Mplayer and TEN

**1998 JOINING UP**  
After his brother buys a motorbike from Relic founder Alex Garden, Duffy casually meets with Garden in Vancouver and is surprised to find a job offer in his email a week later

**1999 NEW FRONTIERS**  
The first game Duffy works on at Relic, the space-based real-time strategy epic *Homeworld*, launches to critical and commercial success

**2002 EXPLORING POSSIBILITIES**  
Duffy continues as a designer at Relic and helps ship his (and the studio's) second title, *Impossible Creatures*

**2004 GOING IN-HOUSE**  
THQ purchases Relic for \$10 million in cash, looking to boost its stable of studios known for producing quality titles

**2006 CHANGING WAR**  
Now a senior designer, Duffy helps to launch the seminal *World War II* RTS, *Company of Heroes*. The game goes on to be one of the consensus best entries in the genre

**2011 CONSOLE EXPERIMENTS**  
Duffy serves as lead designer on Relic's second console title, *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine*

**2013 BACK TO THE PAST**  
Duffy prepares to ship the much-anticipated *Company of Heroes 2* in the wake of Relic being purchased by Sega after former parent company THQ goes bankrupt

Dear



## EVIL CONTROLLERS

*Custom 360 Controllers*

**E**vil Controllers have a reputation for giving unscrupulous gamers an edge in online shooters. Game-enhancing mods like perfectly timed burst fire and quick knifing might not win you friends online, but they do improve your kill-to-death ratio. Evil Controllers' customization offerings are vast, and improve on the original controller's design in some cases. In particular, its new Vision Backplate features a lithium-ion battery capable of an impressive 60 hours of uptime. Another design improvement is the Evil D-Pad, a frontplate alternative that removes the notoriously imprecise d-pad on the 360 and replaces it with four separate buttons. They're too spaced out for platforming and fighting games, but accurate for functions like menu navigation or switching weapons.

You can also customize the aesthetics with Evil Controllers' online controller creator, which features a number of faceplates, thumbsticks, light-up buttons, and trim. If pink zebra stripes define you as a gamer, Evil Controllers has you covered. A basic wireless controller with Vision Backplate and Evil D-Pad is around \$100, but tricking out a controller with everything is even more expensive. Using the online controller creator, we attempted to make the most garish controller possible (does it flash? add it!) and were quickly staring at a \$200 bill.

Using a modded controller in online matches is unsporting, but if you're looking to use Evil Controllers' products for single-player games, you won't be disappointed. While some mods can apply to any game, most are geared toward specific series. For example, fast reload restocks your weapons up to three times faster in most Call of Duty games, while auto mark automatically marks enemies on your map whenever you fire at them in Gears of War 3 and Gears of War: Judgment. Unfortunately, activating these mods require a series of confusing button presses, so you need to keep the instructions nearby. It's a shame that you don't get any sort of included software that allows you to hook your controller up to a PC and save the configuration you want.

Evil Controllers offers its products for both PS3 and Xbox 360, but our review unit was a blaze-orange, urban camo design for Xbox 360 that featured all the trimmings. Although it may have seared our eyes, the controller itself felt great and performed without hiccups. Perhaps evil isn't so bad.



*by Game Informer Staff*

VERY GOOD

Starting at \$69.99 | [evilcontrollers.com](http://evilcontrollers.com)



1

### 1 14-Inch Razer Blade Gaming Laptop

Razer took everything we loved about its 17-inch gaming laptop and squeezed it into a 0.66-inch aluminum chassis. Combining Intel's fourth-generation Core processor with 8GB of memory and Nvidia's GeForce GTX 765M, Razer's new blade chops through today's beefiest games while staying sleek and light. We didn't get enough hands-on time for a review, but we loved the system's fully programmable anti-ghosting backlit keyboard and pre-installed Razer Synapse 2.0 software, which saves all your personal preferences on the cloud. Unfortunately, the laptop's track pad is a little too sensitive, but that shouldn't deter you from giving the Blade a shot if you're in the market for a new gaming machine.

Starting at \$1,799 | [razerzone.com](http://razerzone.com)



2

### 2 SMS Street by 50 On-Ear Wired Headphones

SMS and 50 Cent's line of headphones is clearly positioned as a competitor to the phenomenally successful Beats by Dr. Dre. As such, SMS Street by 50 headphones are slickly designed, extremely bassy, and incredibly overpriced – just like Beats. The audio quality is decent, though it sounds slightly boxy in the midrange and muffled on the high end. Our set sounded far less impressive than Beyerdynamic 235s (\$75), Grado SR60s (\$79), and Beats by Dr. Dre (\$249). To be honest, they barely outperformed some \$8 Monoprice earbuds. This is a decent-quality set of cans, but they do not remotely justify the cost.

PASSABLE

\$179 | [smsby50.com](http://smsby50.com)



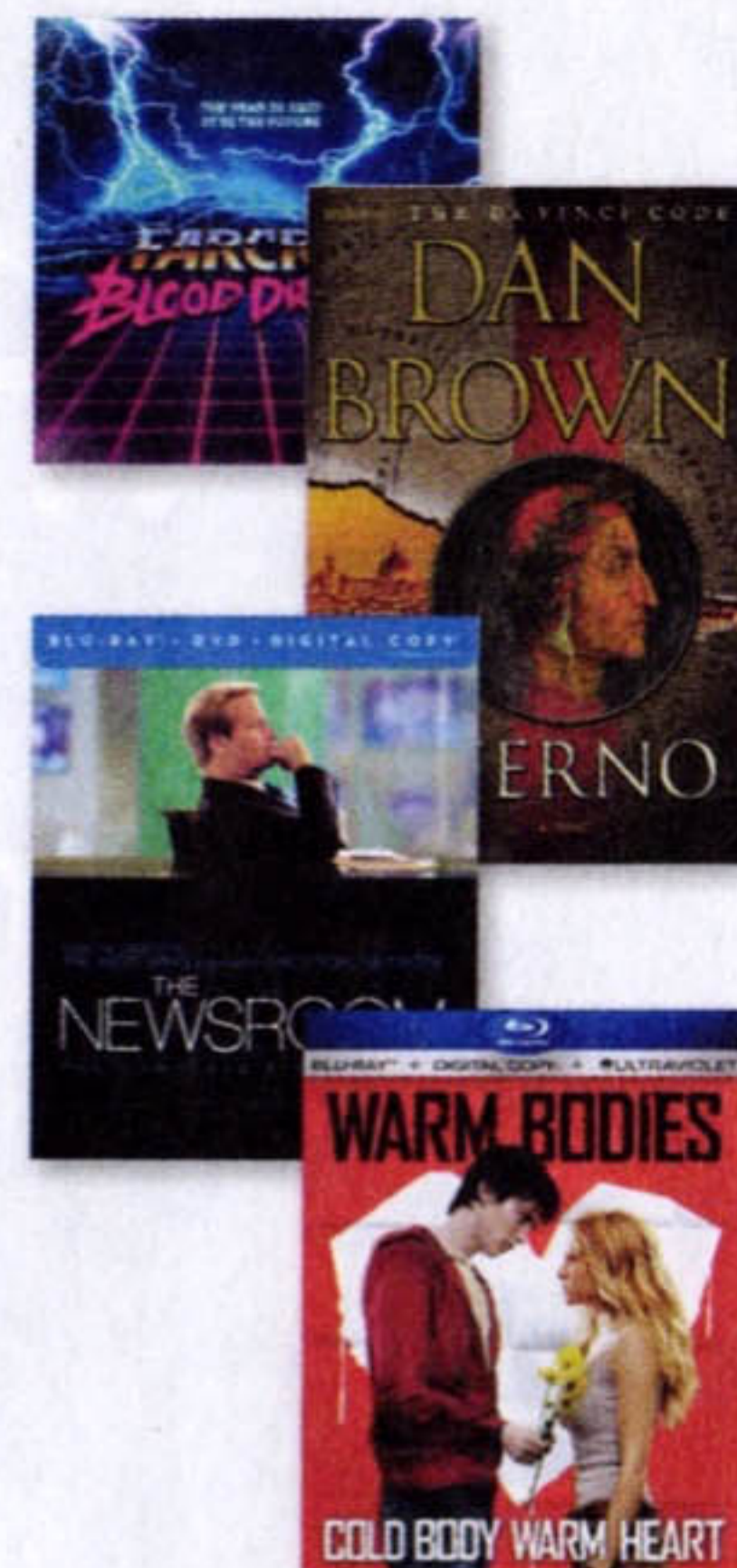
3

### 3 Nerf Super Soaker Arctic Shock Water Blaster

If the name of the game is leaving your prey soaked and shivering, look no further than the Arctic Shock. Super Soaker's new water cannon has a range of 30 feet and a clip capacity of 25 ounces. Its oversized cap is designed to accommodate ice cubes, but that's for suckers. Save space (and maximize firing capacity) by using cold water. Combine this with the Super Soaker Hydro Pack, which is a backpack that holds 100 ounces of water to soak everything.

VERY GOOD

\$19.99 (each) | [hasbro.com/nerf](http://hasbro.com/nerf)



### FAR CRY 3: BLOOD DRAGON ORIGINAL SOUNDTRACK

Ubisoft's '80s-inspired Far Cry 3 spin-off is totally rad, thanks in part to Power Glove's retro, synthesized soundtrack. Many of these tracks sound like polished riffs cut from *The Terminator*, but they fit this game like a glove.

\$8.99  
[soundcloud.com/powerglove](http://soundcloud.com/powerglove)

### INFERNO BY DAN BROWN

Continuing Robert Langdon's story after the adventures of *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Lost Symbol*, Harvard's professor of symbology travels to Italy and grapples with ingenious riddles centering on Dante's dark epic, *Inferno*. No, you haven't read this one. It's new.

\$25.95  
[danbrown.com/inferno](http://danbrown.com/inferno)

### THE NEWSROOM: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing*, *The Social Network*, *Moneyball*) returns to TV with a clever look at how news is generated. Referencing real life events and people, this HBO drama provides a heartbreaking, though aspirational, commentary on the nature of American journalism.

\$79.98  
[hbo.com/the-newsroom](http://hbo.com/the-newsroom)

### WARM BODIES

*Warm Bodies* set out to prove that even zombies can find romance. Unfortunately, Julie's zombie-hunting father might stand in the way of true love. The film is a goofy and unconventional romantic comedy, but we can relate to goofy and unconventional romance.

\$39.99  
[warmbodiesmovie.com](http://warmbodiesmovie.com)

Media Shelf

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## THE **ULTIMATE** GAMING EXPERIENCE

**AP.2**

WIRELESS CONTROLLER  
FOR PLAYSTATION®3



**AP.3**

BLUETOOTH® COMMUNICATOR  
FOR PLAYSTATION®3



**AX.1**

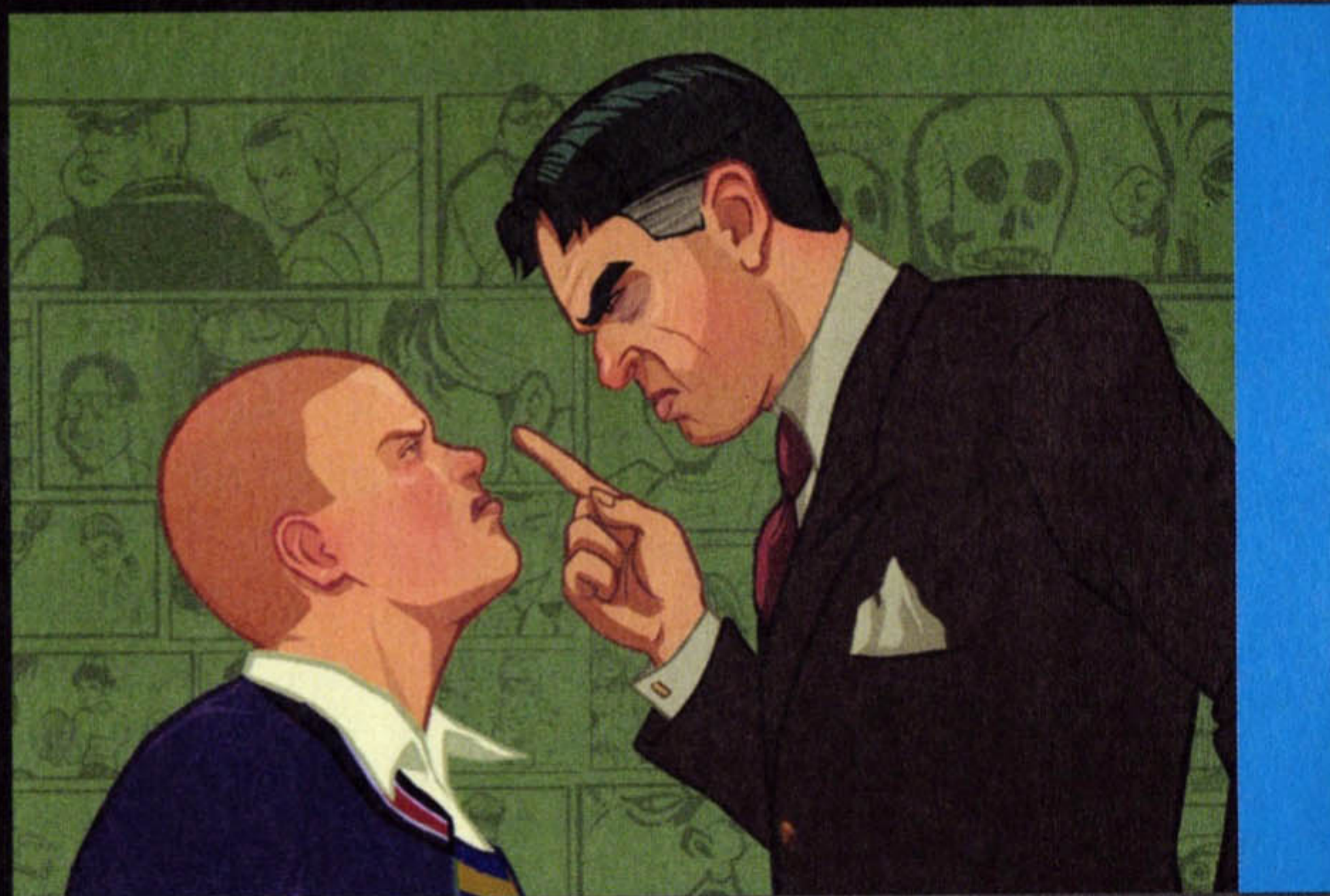
WIRED CONTROLLER  
FOR XBOX 360®



**AX.3**  
WIRED COMMUNICATOR  
FOR XBOX 360®

**AGU.1S**  
UNIVERSAL  
WIRELESS HEADSET

# Why Can't We All Just Get Along?



by Alex Hutchinson, creative director, Ubisoft Montreal

**L**

et's cut to the chase: I'm tired of this perceived war between "mainstream" developers and "indie" developers. I don't even really understand how to define the term "indie developer." Does it mean you aren't published by a third party? Does it mean you are not a publisher yourself? Does it mean you only have one person on your team? Fewer than 10 people? That you're not connected to a big publisher? All of these are problematic. Is Valve indie? They certainly do their own thing. But they're so big! They're also morphing into a kind of publisher these days anyway, with Steam taking a cut of anyone who puts their game out on that service. Is thatgamecompany indie if they're completely funded by Sony? Why do we care?

It's an artificial definition. As a general rule, I don't believe there's any real difference in the quality, personal ownership, or level of innovation in either part of the industry. There are crap games self-published by passionate developers living on ramen noodles in their

mothers' basements, and great games developed by huge teams and published by multinational corporations. The complete opposite is true as well.

What I'm tired of is indie developers criticizing iterative sequels to existing mainstream games when their own work is often an iteration on mainstream games from the 1980s. Adding a mechanic to an existing 2D platformer template set down by Nintendo many years ago is not a million miles away from adding a mechanic to the shooter template set down by id Software and refined by Infinity Ward.

If we're going to dismiss iterative development as a model, then we really need to stop reading any crime fiction after Edgar Allan Poe, which would get rid of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett and many other brilliant writers who were building on Poe's work. Or maybe anything after *The Rector of Veilbye* by the Danish author Steen Steenson Blicher, published in 1829, which you've never heard of before; I certainly hadn't until I Googled it. And the same is true of science fiction. And fantasy. And romance novels. And film. And, basically, everything.

Actually, what I'm truly tired of is this shallow, broken-record argument about how if we don't grow as a medium, if we don't get rid of all these simplistic power fantasies that are driving the sales of mega franchises like Call of Duty or whatever, then we're doomed to be as small as the comic book industry. That is especially funny considering that the most successful and widely watched movies in the world right now are power fantasies based on, you guessed it, comic book characters. We can argue about whether they're brilliant movies or not, but they're hardly out of the public eye.

The idea that we can't embrace all kinds of different audiences is ridiculous. If your cousin wants to buy Call of Duty every year, then let him! If your brother loves Madden, and wants to buy it every year (incidentally, the sport is on an annual cycle, too) – great. Those sales are funding experiments like Mirror's Edge and Dead Space.

We certainly need to grow and find new audiences. I spent a good many years working on games like Spore trying to do that very thing. But I was also happy to work on more mainstream games like Assassin's Creed III.

We need to encourage the search for diversity and innovation wherever it lives. I see as many positive signs from big studios as I do from the independents. If you could sit at my desk right now and see what Ubisoft has cooking for the future, you'd have a smile on your face. I'm sure not everything will be perfect, but I can promise it'll be an exciting time to be a gamer.

I truly believe we're living in the golden age of gaming, or at least a golden age. It's hard to tell while it's happening. There is more diversity than ever before, more opportunity for small teams without the need for a traditional publishing or distribution model, and there are still more than 40 million hardcore gamers who'll buy your \$60 blockbuster if you make it good enough. To put that in perspective, you don't need to go back too far in time to find the number one game in the world selling less than a million. Now, that's considered a failure.

But being in the midst of a golden age does not mean you'll like everything there is on offer – quite the opposite in fact. With greater variety comes greater extremes of taste and style. I used to start speeches with a slide about the historical game audience, game developer, and game reviewer. The joke was that the photo representing each group was identical: This was an industry making games for itself and then giving themselves glowing reviews.

Today, there are whole sections of the gaming world that I have little interest in. This is absolutely, positively one of the best things to happen in years. I shouldn't be able to enjoy every single game released any more than I should like every film. It's a sign of diversity and maturity for the medium.

The biggest issue we need to overcome is intolerance of those areas we are not personally invested in. We need to support developers. We need to be kind to those people trying to make something special, even if they don't always succeed, and even if it's not to our personal taste. If you think people like Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk of BioWare didn't leave the industry partly because they were tired of being screamed at by anonymous hatemongers online, you're wrong. Many online video game commenters are hurting the very thing they profess to love.

I guess the thing that I'm actually incredibly and utterly exhausted by is the blinkered criticism offered by many within the industry, be they part of this nebulous indie community, mainstream developers, or the players themselves. Maybe this kind of "us versus them" mentality is inevitable in an industry that has its roots in competitive play and leaderboards, but it's not helping anybody. Let's celebrate our diversity. Let's cheer our successes, even if they're sequels. Let's stop caring whether they are made by individuals, large teams, or the Dutch, and just focus on whether they deliver on their stated promises or not. There's room for everybody. ♦

Alex Hutchinson is currently a creative director at Ubisoft Montreal. His most recent game was Assassin's Creed III.

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



03



09.1  
NCAA Football 14



09.3



16  
Shin Megami Tensei IV



09.2



18  
SAN DIEGO  
COMIC CON  
INTERNATIONAL



12



16  
Dynasty Warriors 8



23  
The Smurfs 2



26

## July

### 03 Hi Ho, Silver!

Johnny Depp and the team behind *Pirates of the Caribbean* return with *The Lone Ranger*, opening in theaters today. Despite what you may think, Depp plays Tonto instead of the leading role (which is played by Armie Hammer). The film looks like a *Pirates* sequel, only with trains instead of ships. Be sure to tell your grandparents, as they are probably the only ones excited about a *Lone Ranger* reboot.

### 09.1 New Releases

- › Civilization V: Brave New World (PC)
- › NCAA Football 14 (PS3, 360)

### 09.2 Marvel's Digital Year

Starting today, Marvel Comics is releasing a new digital "Infinite" comic every week for a full year. The first story is *Wolverine: Japan's Most Wanted*, and it will run for 13 weeks. The first issue is available today via Marvel Comics' app for iOS, Android, PC, and Mac.

### 09.3 GameStick Launches

PlayJam's Android-based micro-console, GameStick, hits store shelves today. GameStick is a small USB drive-like device that plugs directly into a TV's HDMI port. All of the games are downloadable and are saved directly onto the Stick, which offers 8GB of storage. Games are played using a Bluetooth controller, which comes in the package. GameStick retails for \$79.99. Check out [gameinformer.com](http://gameinformer.com) for a full hands-on report with this new console.

### 12 Transformers Done Right

Do you want to see giant robots fighting without Michael Bay crapping it up? Guillermo del Toro's *Pacific Rim* emerges in theaters today. The film features giant mechs, giant lizards, and a giant budget to make them awesome. The voice of GLaDOS has a cameo role, but gamers were going to flock to this movie anyway.

### 15 Breaking Bad Returns

Walter White is back for *Breaking Bad*'s final episodes. We won't say anything for fear of spoilers, but fans know to clear their calendars tonight for what looks to be one of the most exciting conclusions to a television series yet.

### 16 New Releases

- › Dynasty Warriors 8 (PS3, 360)
- › Rune Factory 4 (3DS)
- › Shin Megami Tensei IV (3DS)
- › Time and Eternity (PS3)
- › Turbo: Super Stunt Squad (Wii U, PS3, 360, 3DS, DS)

### 18 San Diego Comic Con Begins

Expect big news for movies, video games, and comic books to flood your social network streams over the next four days. San Diego Comic Con is a hotbed for new entertainment announcements. Activision announced the *Deadpool* game at last year's show. Could a new *Spider-Man* game be shown this year?

### 19.1 PAX Travels Down Under

The first international Penny Arcade Expo kicks off today in Melbourne, Victoria. Ron Gilbert (creator of *Monkey Island* and *The Cave*) is delivering the keynote speech for this three-day show. Next-gen consoles and games are expected to be on display.

### 19.2 R.I.P.D. Off

It's ironic that today's big release is called *R.I.P.D.*, because the movie is just a copy of *Men In Black*. Instead of a crusty old Tommy Lee Jones, viewers get a crusty old Jeff Bridges. Wise-ass Ryan Reynolds stands in for wise-ass Will Smith. Instead of fighting aliens, they battle demons. The scriptwriters must

be former Zynga employees; they found something that worked, then shamelessly stole it.

### 23 New Releases

- › The Smurfs 2 (Wii U, PS3, 360, Wii)

### 26 Snikt!!!

When people go see a movie about Marvel Comics' *Wolverine*, they don't want to see him kicking ass and chopping dudes apart with his claws. They want to see him moping about immortality and complaining about his awesome powers. That's what *The Wolverine* delivers to theaters today. For a character that never ages, *Wolverine* is looking about 13 years older than we first saw him in *X-Men*. Too bad Hugh Jackman isn't actually immortal.

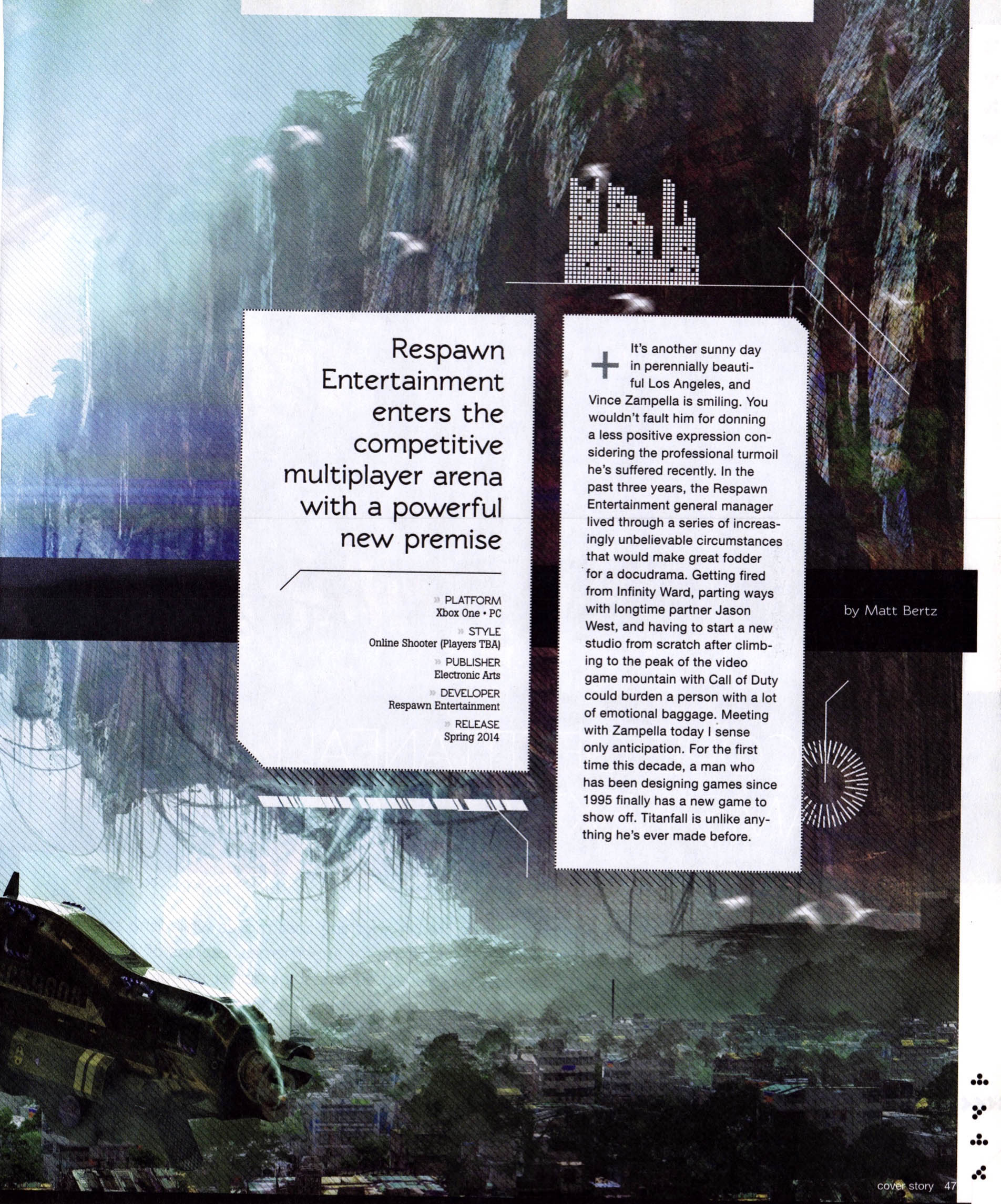
2013



## the Fall and Rise of a Titan







## Respawn Entertainment enters the competitive multiplayer arena with a powerful new premise

» PLATFORM  
Xbox One • PC

» STYLE  
Online Shooter (Players TBA)

» PUBLISHER  
Electronic Arts

» DEVELOPER  
Respawn Entertainment

» RELEASE  
Spring 2014

+

It's another sunny day in perennially beautiful Los Angeles, and Vince Zampella is smiling. You wouldn't fault him for donning a less positive expression considering the professional turmoil he's suffered recently. In the past three years, the Respawn Entertainment general manager lived through a series of increasingly unbelievable circumstances that would make great fodder for a docudrama. Getting fired from Infinity Ward, parting ways with longtime partner Jason West, and having to start a new studio from scratch after climbing to the peak of the video game mountain with Call of Duty could burden a person with a lot of emotional baggage. Meeting with Zampella today I sense only anticipation. For the first time this decade, a man who has been designing games since 1995 finally has a new game to show off. Titanfall is unlike anything he's ever made before.

by Matt Bertz



# THE SCOPE OF TITANFALL SCREAMS NEXT-GEN GAMING.

Hulking, 24-foot-tall mechs concentrate heavy fire on anything that moves while lithe soldiers zip across the map with a swiftness normally reserved for superheroes. Legions of AI soldiers pour in and out of buildings on a large-scale battlefield as dropships deliver reinforcements from above. The futuristic weapons soldiers wield are capable of vaporizing multiple enemies at once, but if they aren't careful, the mechs can repel the shots right back at them. Did we mention this is a full-fledged multiplayer game running on the Xbox One?

Titanfall is a next-generation competitive multiplayer title that blurs the lines between traditional online shooters and single-player campaigns. The design goals are undeniably ambitious, but before we can delve into the particulars of this impressive new project, it helps to understand the conditions out of which it was born.





### THE UGLY DIVORCE

In February of 2010, Infinity Ward was just four months removed from releasing *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, a 94-rated title on Metacritic well on its way to becoming the highest-grossing video game of all time (a distinction now held by another *Call of Duty* game, *Black Ops*). Riding high off their unprecedented success, Infinity Ward CEO Vince Zampella and president Jason West were in the midst of negotiating a new deal with Activision that would have kept them at the company after their contracts were due to expire.

In the third day of negotiating a new contract that would give the Infinity Ward heads the freedom to become an independent studio after the creation of *Modern Warfare 3*, the talks hit a snag. The duo wanted to take some Infinity Ward employees with them to form the new studio, which Activision disapproved of even though the employees were not contractually barred from doing so. After hours of haggling back and forth on this

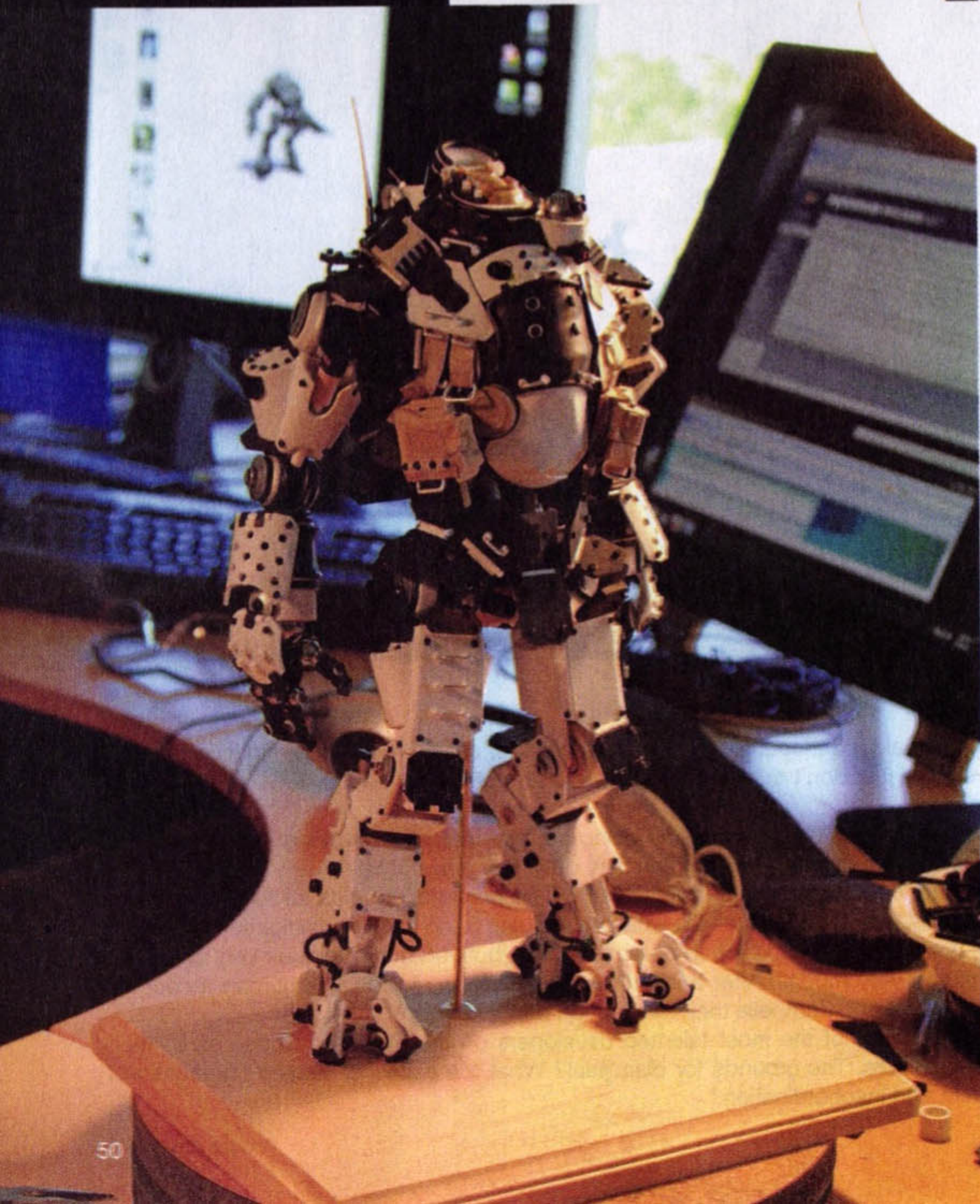
point, the lieutenant counsel reached into his brief case, procured termination papers, and said, "I just don't think we can come to an agreement on this. Give this to Jason and Vince."

The paper read: "You are hereby being notified that you are being investigated for improper conduct and breach of fiduciary duty. You may not talk to anybody about this and must cooperate in full or that in itself will be potential grounds for termination. We haven't made any decision about what we're going to do in this investigation - whether there is any discipline to be had or termination - but you better take us very seriously. Thank you very much." After a month of investigation, Activision's human resources handed West and Zampella their termination papers.

Suddenly, two of the most talented developers on the planet had been given their walking papers. The grounds for dismissal? What the publisher termed "breaches of contract and insubordination."



Before settling on the look for Titanfall, Respawn artists explored designs by creating maquettes



At Infinity Ward headquarters, the development team was stunned. Zampella and West were unceremoniously escorted out of the Activision building by a security team, leaving the rest of the studio employees to wonder what was going on. Later that day, Kotick broke the news to the staff: Their leaders were no longer at the company. He also laid out the new terms of employment for the remainder of the studio. Kotick told them that their *Modern Warfare 2* bonuses would not be paid in full at the scheduled time. Instead, they would be parsed out over the course of the development of *Modern Warfare 3*, provided the game came out on time.

These strong-arm tactics didn't sit right with many of the developers who had spent years in the trenches with West and Zampella. Communication between the remaining Infinity Ward employees was often uncomfortable because of the presence of Activision's legal and human resources teams. The hostile work environment left many of them questioning their future.

"The most insane part about that entire process is, because of the legalities of the situation, no one could ever discuss [leaving Infinity Ward] as a group," remembers former Infinity Ward and current Respawn lead artist Joel Emslie. "Everybody was on their own. Everyone had to make their own decision...It was such a pressure situation and the stakes were so unbelievably high. We didn't know what was going to happen.



+ “The interest that we received after being fired from Activision was pretty astounding,” remembers Zampella. “We decided, ‘Let’s do this again. Let’s make another run of it.’”

You didn’t know what Activision was going to do to us. It was just a very, very hostile environment.”

To make matters more complicated, many Infinity Ward employees were in the process of making major life decisions, like getting married and having children.

“I closed on a house two days before Vince and Jason got fired,” remembers former Infinity Ward developer Drew McCoy, who now works as a producer at Respawn. “A month later they announced Respawn, and there was no contact with Vince and Jason. These people I had spent five years with every day – more time than I spent with my family – and no contact? You’re just like, what is going on? It’s confusing, and you’re getting screwed by Activision – it sucked.”

Most of the team stayed on in the months following the shake-up, but after some serious reflection an exodus of discontented individuals slowly gathered steam.

“I had this crazy moment sitting down with my wife in our new house, and I was just like, ‘What do I do?’” McCoy recalls. “I could stay – I know that I have a paycheck, and I can work on games that make money. I could pay for this house I just bought, or do I have a soul and go jump in the deep end and have faith that it would be successful?”

McCoy jumped ship, as did Emslie.

“I made my decision with my wife,” Emslie says. “She saw how miserable I was. It was like this really crazy soul search. Everybody was going in and doing it on their own to the point that when I walked in the door [at Respawn] on the

first day I saw people and went, ‘Wow, awesome! You guys are here?’”

More than 40 Infinity Ward employees, including several in critical leadership roles, eventually abandoned the franchise they had worked so hard to make the most popular game on the planet. As a result, Activision was forced to scramble to keep the development of Modern Warfare 3 moving, pulling Sledgehammer Games over from another project to keep the game on track as it rebuilt Infinity Ward with new talent.

In the months that followed, lawsuits were thrown from all sides of this ugly divorce. West and Zampella sued Activision for “breach of contract, breach of the implied covenant of good faith and fair dealing, wrong termination in violation of public policy, and declaratory relief.” Activision counter-sued, even dragging EA into the mix for allegedly trying to lure away its prized developers. At the same time, the Infinity Ward employees who weren’t given their Modern Warfare 2 bonuses sued Activision for damages. All of these cases were eventually settled out of court last year.

#### LIVING IN LIMBO

After the initial firing, West and Zampella thought about laying low to let all the chaos die down. But when the rest of the publishing world found out that the two people who spearheaded the creation of the biggest moneymaker in video games were free agents, it didn’t take long for the courtship to begin. Even with lawsuits hanging around their necks like albatrosses, West and Zampella had nearly every publisher asking for a meeting.

“The interest that we received after being fired from Activision was pretty astounding,” remembers Zampella. “We decided, ‘Let’s do this again. Let’s make another run of it.’”

Gun-shy about falling into another subservient role after the Call of Duty fallout, the duo attached a major condition to any deal it would consider – they had to own the intellectual property of whatever game they would be creating. These deals are extremely

Introducing Respawn Entertainment. From left to right: community manager Abbie Heppie, general manager Vince Zampella, producer Drew McCoy, and lead artist Joel Emslie



rare in the AAA game space, where publishers risk millions of dollars on development.

“To be in creative control of our intellectual property meant a lot to us, so we could set the tone for what we work on and why we do things – for the good of the product and for what the game players are going to see,” Zampella says. “We can make our decisions based on the best thing for this game and the future of the IP, so for us it was important to hold the ownership.”

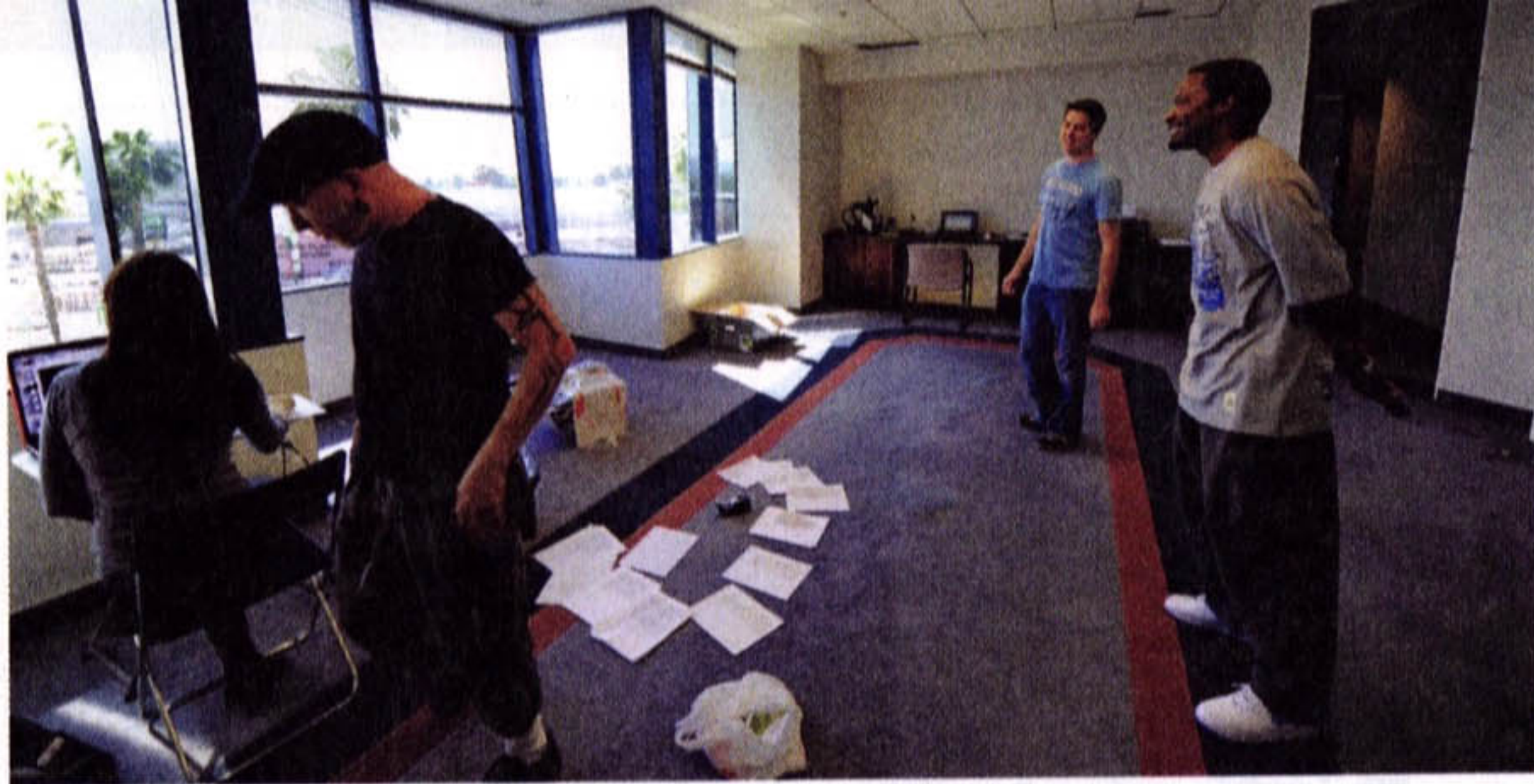
Once publishers understood the duo’s expectations, the pool of interested parties dwindled to two serious suitors: Electronic Arts and THQ. The two companies offered very different opportunities. At THQ, the duo would be a big fish in a relatively small pond. EA obviously had many more resources at its disposal, but a bit of history existed between the groups. Zampella and West originally formed Infinity Ward after falling out with EA during the creation of Medal of Honor: Allied Assault. In the end, they felt comfortable enough with the proposal to give it another go with EA, which turned out to be a prescient decision considering the implosion of THQ late last year.

Zampella and West once again found themselves in control of a new studio, the cleverly named Respawn Entertainment.

## //// WEST GOES EAST

Shortly after news broke of the settlement between Activision and its former rock star game developers in 2012, Jason West and Vince Zampella decided to end their longstanding partnership. After Kotaku broke the news a few months later, Respawn formally announced that Jason West was leaving the company to take care of some family issues in North Carolina.

“In starting up [Respawn], it’s a different team, it’s a different dynamic,” Zampella says. “We’ve lost some people along the way that just didn’t fit in with what we were doing or the way we were doing things. Jason was one of them. We’ve done some amazing things together in the past and I have a ton of respect for him, but I think it was time for that to happen. I think we’ll both grow professionally and personally because of it, and I wish him all the best.”



With no computers, desks, or internet, Respawn Entertainment started its company meetings the old fashioned way



### THE ART OF RESPAWNING

Merely one month removed from being on top of the video game world, West and Zampella found themselves in a position normally inhabited by young kids looking to get their foot in the door of the industry. The duo had no technology, no office, no game idea, and no employees. To use the parlance of Call of Duty, they had prestiged and now were starting over from scratch.

As soon as the contracts were in place with Electronic Arts, the rebuilding process began in earnest. Communicating with their former employees was tricky thanks to the legal hawks hovering around Infinity Ward, but once a person left the company they were free to seek employment anywhere they wished. For many, the first choice was reuniting with their old bosses at Respawn.

"[Walking into Respawn] that day was a breath of fresh air," Emslie remembers. "I saw Vince and I gave him a hug, because when these guys got let go, it was like someone came in and – this is a strong word to use – but it was like they were killed or something. There was radio silence, you couldn't talk to anybody, and it was just a very crazy situation."

The first team meetings were held in less than ideal circumstances. Respawn hadn't finalized the lease for its office space in Van Nuys, so the team essentially squatted in a run-down office building. Broken glass and dead roaches littered the floor, and the Internet wouldn't be hooked up for weeks. The team got by as best it could, bringing in folding chairs, personal laptops, mini-fridges, and whiteboards. To connect to the web, many tethered their notebooks to cell phones.

Before Respawn could start working on new game designs, it needed to pick a technology base. Activision retained sole control of the Infinity Ward engine, which took the greater part of a decade to hone. The team agreed that building a brand-new engine from the ground up would take too long, so after kicking the tires on the various third-party engines, Respawn chose Valve's Source, which is best known for games like Half-Life 2, Left 4 Dead, and Portal. Source gave the team the flexible base it required, while also allowing them to hit the critical 60 frames-per-second benchmark the designers demanded.

While Respawn's engineers started gutting the engine and rewriting major portions of it to bring it up to par with current tech, a few scripting-language enhancements allowed the designers to start prototyping. To better foster creativity, the studio broke into small teams after settling on three basic rules: Make it new, make it fun, and make it relatable. Anything else was fair game.

### BLANK PAGE SYNDROME

Giving a team carte blanche to create a game can be both empowering and crippling. While talent recruitment expanded beyond the rodeo of former Infinity Ward members (roughly half the employees come from other backgrounds), the reality is most of these developers had spent the greater part of their careers working on sequels, honing previously implemented ideas. Not many had experience pulling a new game idea from the ether.

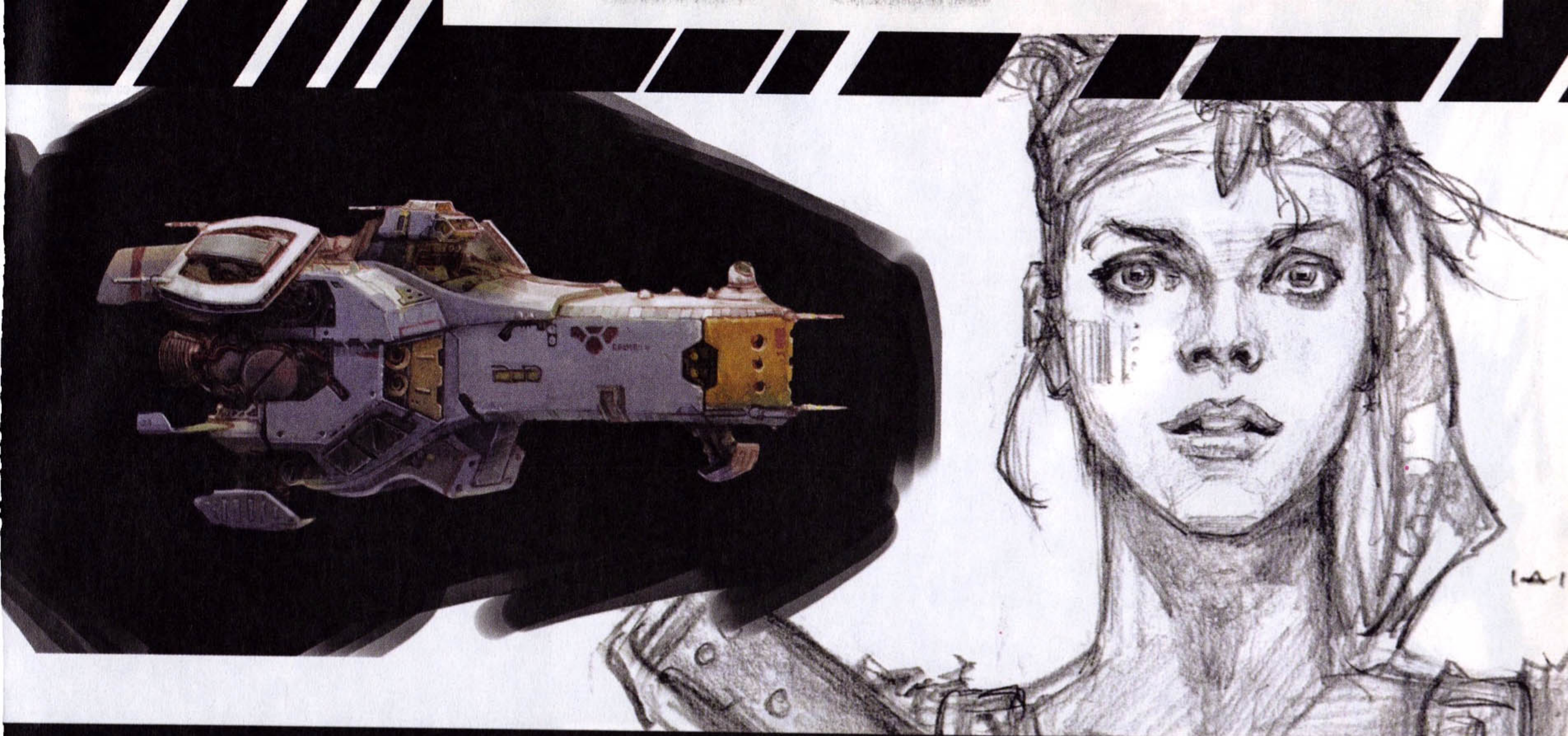
"When a bunch of creative people are at the top of their game and experimenting

heavily with stuff it can be very frightening," Emslie says. "It's a very uncomfortable position to be in where you're really out there on the fringe trying stuff new. It's not even the process, it's about putting a lot of trust into design, art, and engineering because a lot of this stuff comes around in phases."

Ideas for all sorts of games, art styles, and genres started pouring in as the team looked for that one concept to rise to the top and galvanize the studio. Some toyed with third-person hack n' slash games, while animators tinkered with new systems and artists scratch-built plastic maquettes.

"Clearly you can do anything, but when you can do anything what do you do?" Zampella says. "Our team grew pretty fast, so we had a lot of people with a lot of ideas, and they all wanted their idea to be number one. So we had to figure out, 'How do you focus that down and keep everybody happy?' It was a pretty tough process."





## //// THE SCIENCE OF FICTION

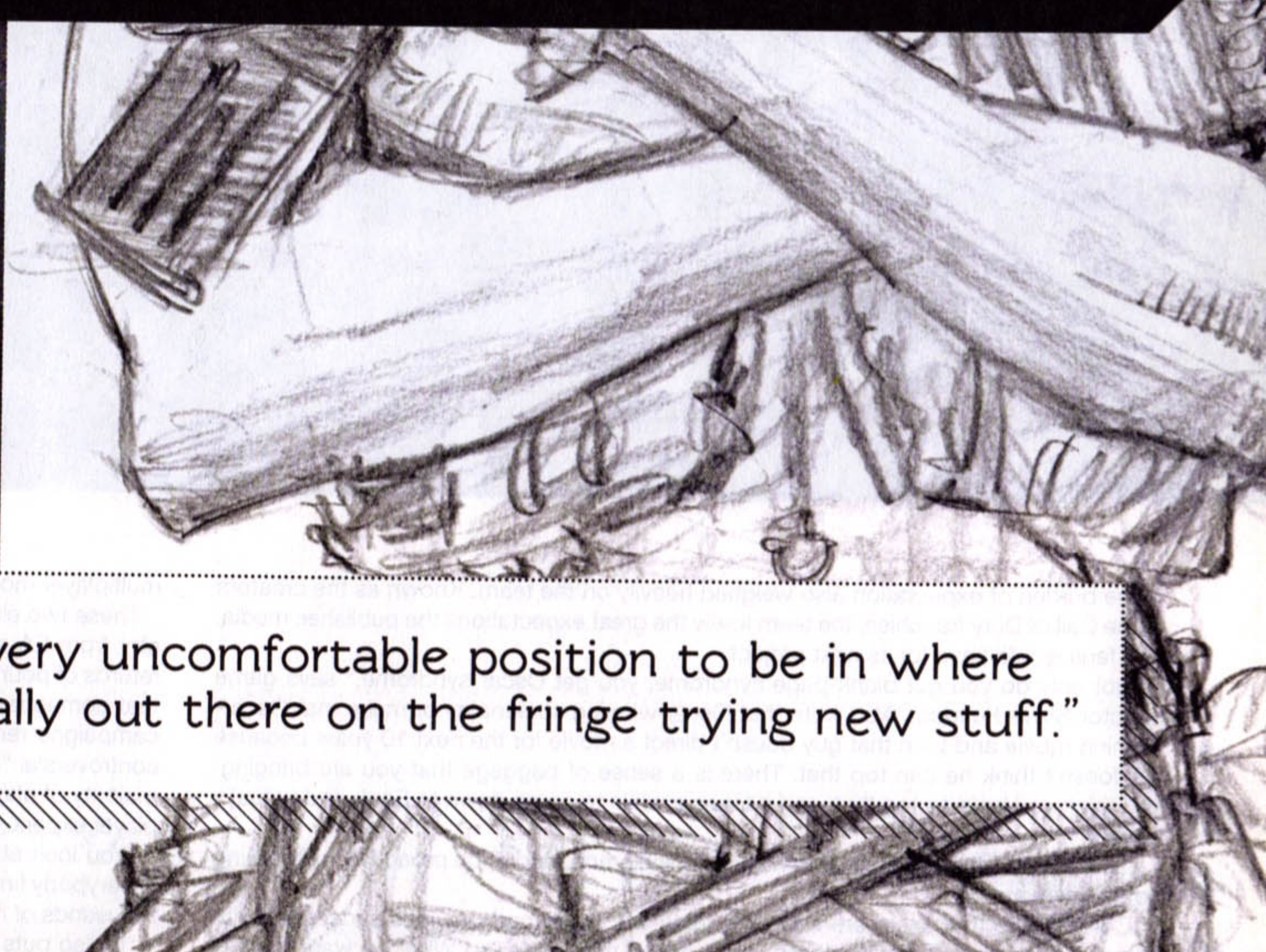
ary military setting with *Modern Warfare*, another setting with no shortage of gaming options. For *Titanfall*, Respawn is transitioning into the future, entering the crowded science fiction shooter genre currently inhabited by big-name franchises like *Halo*, *Gears of War*, *Killzone*, and *Destiny*. Why move into such a hotly contested space? For Respawn, it came down to innovation opportunities.

"There's only so far you can go when you're portraying military," says game director Steve Fukuda. "If you want a guy who can leap buildings in a single bound and if you want people to be able to cloak, it makes it easier if you can explain it away. Sci-fi serves that purpose."

Embracing sci-fi also gives the artists free rein to come up with interesting new looks. For *Titanfall*, lead artist Joel Emslie wants the team to eschew the clean presentation of many modern sci-fi films and games in favor of a dirtier, lived-in approach.

"When people hear sci-fi in a video game they have this preconceived idea of what it's going to look like," Emslie says. "When we discussed how this game should look, ultimately it was a big deal to not look completely sci-fi, but to look believable and genuine. Authentic and grounded. It's more the *Blade Runner* or *District 9* vibe."

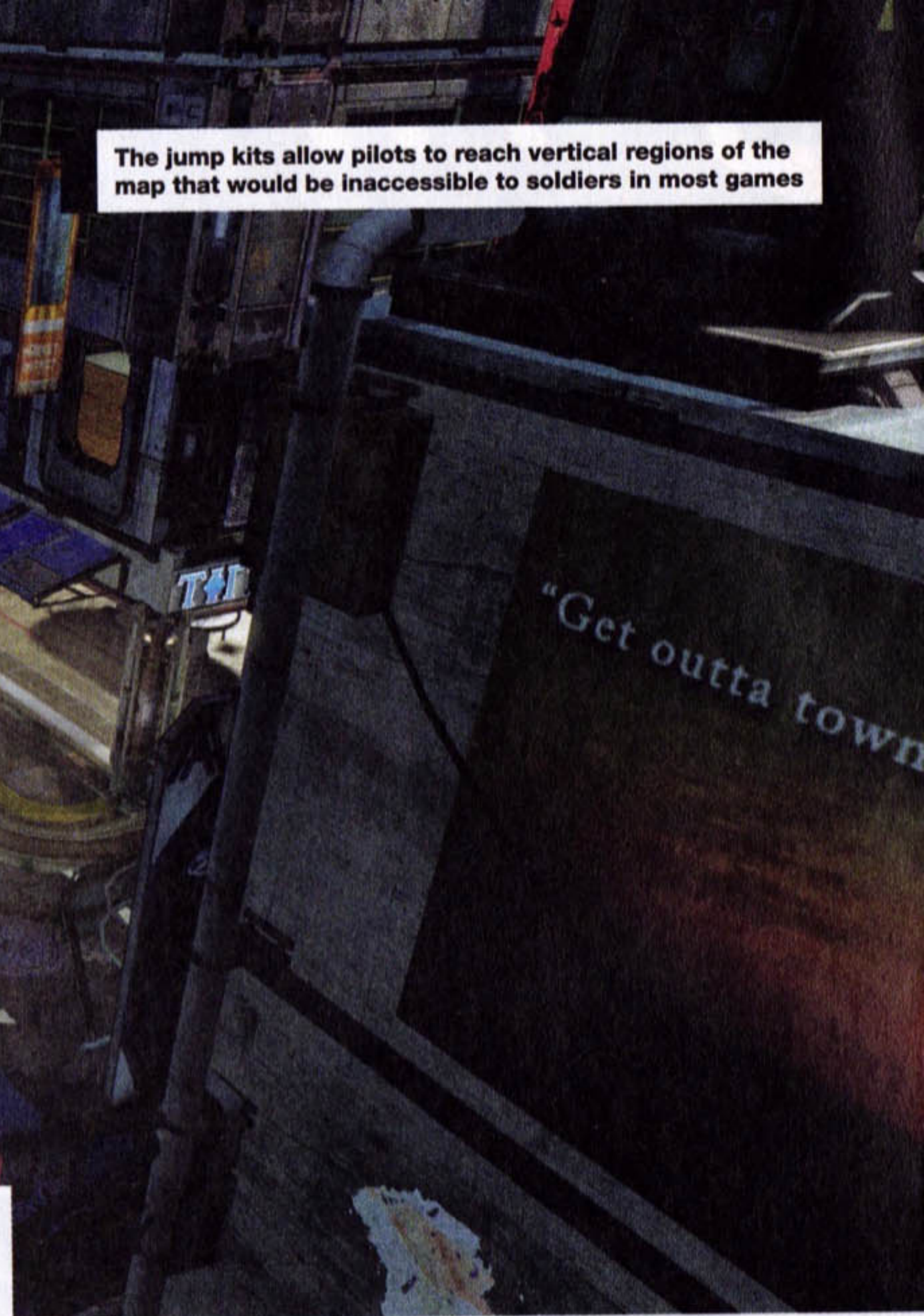
THE SCIENCE OF FICTION  
How we look to the future



+ "It's a very uncomfortable position to be in where you're really out there on the fringe trying new stuff."



The jump kits allow pilots to reach vertical regions of the map that would be inaccessible to soldiers in most games



make a game that is the most fun that we can make. Put something together that we are proud of, that we would play, and let that be the guide. Don't be handicapped by what you might have done or be worried about failing or succeeding. Make something amazing, and it will be a success."

#### THE BIRTH OF A TITAN

After a lengthy incubation period, Respawn rounded up the fruits of the experimentation process to see which ideas had the most traction and could be coalesced into one project. Blending ideas from the different pockets of exploration was a painstaking process, as each artist or designer had to vigorously defend their concept to the larger group.

The resulting concept put the team in a position to capitalize on the studio's pedigree, while at the same time offering a fresh change of scenery and enough innovation potential to excite them.

"We wanted the idea to be different and new in terms of gameplay and mechanics," Zampella says. "Breaking farther beyond that and doing a racing game or something we're not familiar with wasn't the smart thing to do. For us it's something that's in our wheelhouse, military games, that we can innovate on and do something new and expand from there. [Making another first-person shooter] was just kind of a natural choice."

Discussing the project, Respawn realized it had two core strengths: making memorable moments in single-player campaigns and delivering hyperactive first-person shooter

multiplayer modes buttressed by a deep sense of progression.

These two elements don't typically have a lot of crossover. In reviewing some telemetry from EA and going off past experiences, Respawn understood the diminishing returns of pouring hundreds of man-hours into building an epic single-player set pieces that someone blows through in maybe 10 minutes. People who played through the campaigns reminisce about the "All Ghillied Up" mission in Call of Duty 4 and the controversial "No Russian" mission in Modern Warfare 2, but the hard truth is the vast majority of players forgo the campaign altogether in favor of diving into the deep multiplayer experience filled with unlockable perks, weapon upgrades, and killstreak awards.

"You look at the amount of people who finish a single-player game," McCoy says. "Everybody finished the first level, and then five percent of people finish it and we spend thousands of hours building it."

"It also puts the team in competition with itself," Emslie adds. "You're jockeying for

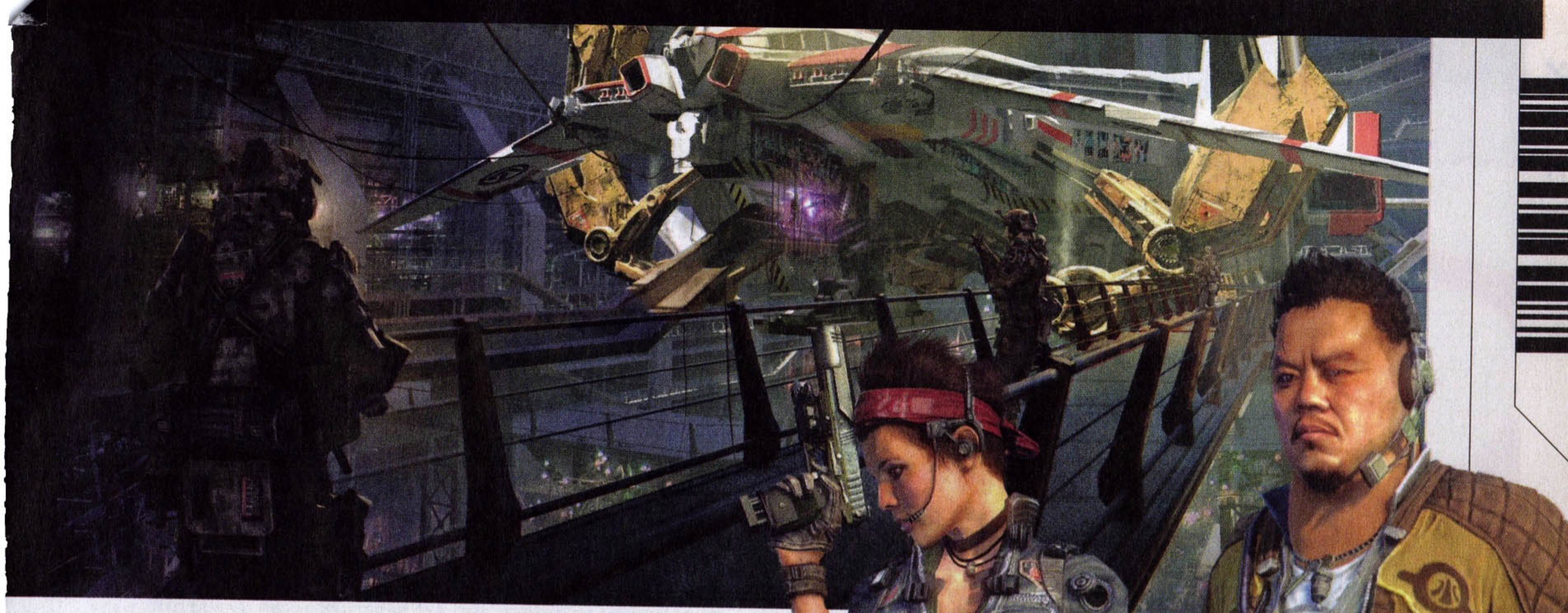
The burden of expectation also weighed heavily on the team. Known as the creators of the Call of Duty franchise, the team knew the great expectations the publisher, media, and fans would have for its next project.

"Not only do you get blank-page syndrome, you get Oscar syndrome," says game director Steve Fukuda. "You write that Oscar-winning screenplay or make that Oscar-winning movie and then that guy doesn't direct a movie for the next 10 years because he doesn't think he can top that. There is a sense of baggage that you are bringing. You think you have to top that, and it takes a while to come down to Earth and actually be real."

Zampella saw the danger in this way of thinking, and tried to be proactive in stomping out these fears.

"Coming into this, there are a lot of people who have had previous successes with games," he says. "My big goal was, 'Let's not let that guide us.' What we want to do is





resources, in this case, scripting resources. What if we could take all of these resources and pull them into one thing?"

Splitting the resources on a development team of 80 to create a standalone experience not many people finish didn't add up. Instead, the team started finding ways to integrate those water-cooler moments into the second-to-second experience of a multiplayer mode. Respawn dubs this new approach "campaign multiplayer." Titanfall was born.

#### CREATING A NEW UNIVERSE

Titanfall takes place in a future where humanity is divided between its predominant civilization on Earth and a series of settlements in the far frontiers of space. Much like pioneers traversing the Oregon Trail during the westward expansion, adventurous travelers must undertake a difficult journey to reach the colonies.

Settlers have formed self-sustaining cities on these far-reaching planets, but now the Interstellar Manufacturing Corporation (IMC), with the backing of Earth's leadership, is making inroads to secure the valuable natural resources of these regions. Battle lines quickly form between a ragtag militia driven by the wish to protect the settlements it risked so much to create and the unsympathetic capitalist juggernaut.

Titanfall's campaign multiplayer doesn't chronicle the genesis of this skirmish, but rather uses it as a backdrop for its frenetic multiplayer battles. You don't choose sides during the campaign multiplayer as you would declare your allegiance to the Horde or Alliance in World of Warcraft, but instead you're shown both perspectives of this conflict. Much as you would expect, the truth likely lies in the gray zone between the two entrenched positions.

Respawn isn't interested in telling an involving story as much as it is in selling the universe. To do so, the team is embracing the visual storytelling approach found in multiplayer games like Left 4 Dead. When battling in an abandoned upscale neighborhood, for instance, you may notice eviction notices on doors, flooded apartments with children's drawings taped to the refrigerator, and other evidence that suggests the denizens of this settlement were forced to make a hasty departure. These subtle clues give players brief insight into the conflict and let them make their own assumptions.

"The whole idea is with a single-player game you're trying to sell a universe as well," Fukuda says. "There's a philosophy of, 'Here's the single-player. Experience that story and sequence of events to take in that universe so at some point you'll know enough that you'll have your own sense of backstory and you internalize that story.' Then when you go into multiplayer land it won't matter if stuff makes perfect logical sense. You know what that game is about. Here, what we're doing is taking that and putting it into multiplayer directly. You have quicker battles, so it's not going to be exactly like single-player, but it's more of a universe-building experience."

*continued on page 58 >>*



## SERVICING CURRENT GENERATION

If you don't own a high-end PC or Xbox One, you still have a chance to play Titanfall. Respawn Entertainment hand selected an unnamed studio to create an Xbox 360 version as well. Given Titanfall's reliance on cloud computing and the increased processing power afforded by the Xbox One and PCs, however, we're curious to see if features end up on the chopping block for the current generation version.



WAR

# THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED

At first glance, the core dynamic of 24-foot tall robots versus regular-sized soldiers looks like an extreme mismatch. But in the world of Titanfall, each has its advantages and disadvantages. Respawn broke down the strengths and weaknesses for us.

## THE TITAN

When you say the word "mech" to some people, you can see them immediately tune out. Not everyone grew up playing Battletech or sees the appeal of controlling massive robots that move at the speed of a senior citizen with a walker. Many of the designers at Respawn feel the same way, which is why they made the titans to be different from the prototypical mech.

"These titans don't feel like your granddaddy's mech," says lead artist Joel Emslie. "Mech is kind of a dirty word with us; we don't like it. These things aren't mechs. They are something totally new or different."

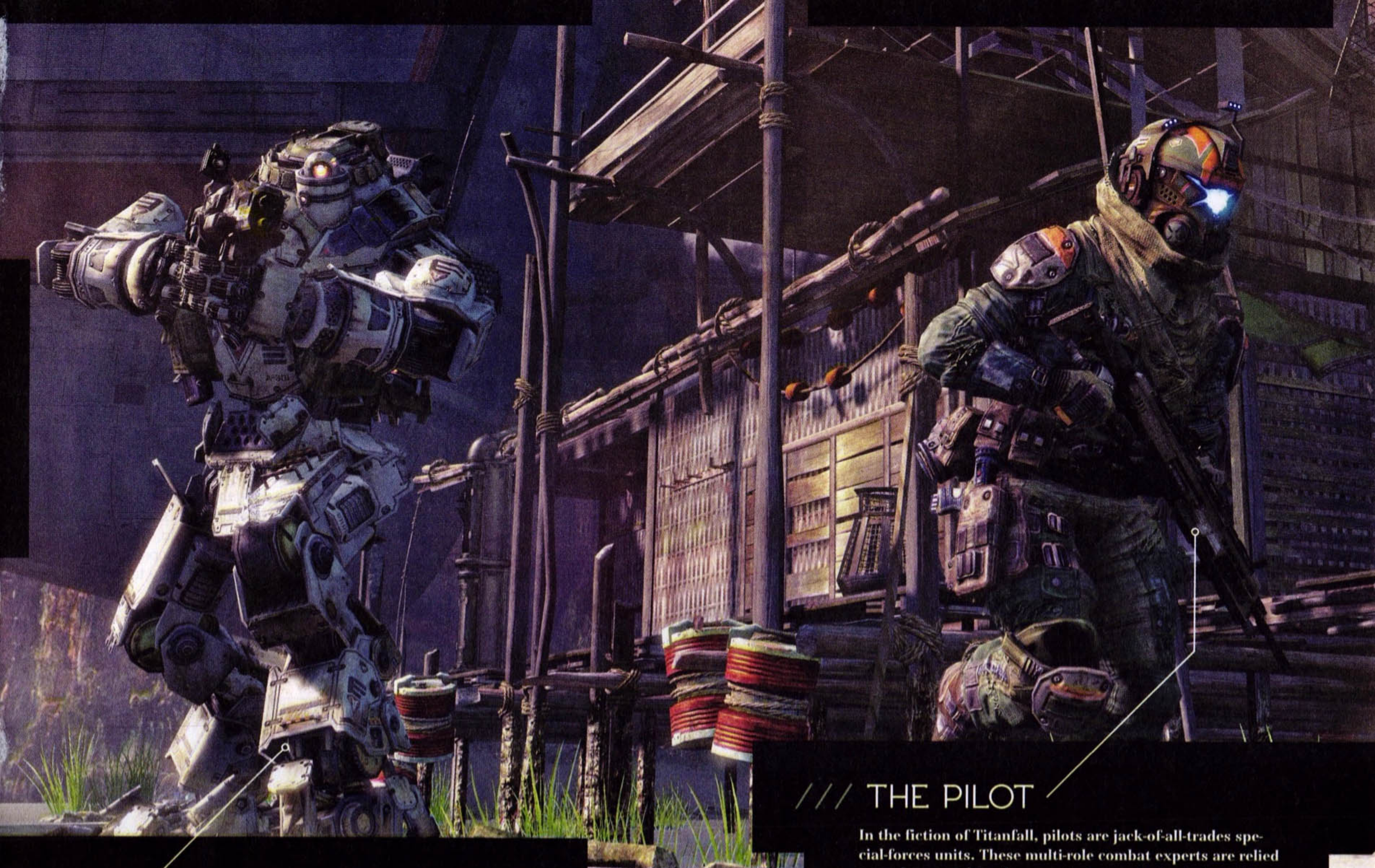
The titans move at the speed of a regular soldier in many first-person shooters and feature an array of heavy firepower that make them formidable adversaries in open spaces.

"The titans are really an extension of the player," says general manager Vince Zampella. "They are bigger, they're heavily armored, and they give you kind of a second life, but they are agile, fun, and fast. They can dodge. It's not a feeling of something slow and lumbering. It really is an extension of you. You lose a little bit of agility because you can't jump, but on the ground these things are super-agile tanks."

Depending on how you approach the titan, you may get a different stylized embark animation. Slide between its legs and it uses its hand to scoop you into the cockpit. Jump on it from overhead and you enter through a top hatch.

Titans are armed with powerful weapons that make most mechs look like toys. The arc cannon is a chain-lightning gun that players can charge to do more damage. When enemies are grouped up,





## /// THE PILOT

the damage can extend to multiple threats. It's great for shooting descending pilots out of the sky but less useful against other titans. In addition, each titan has specialized weaponry like a 40mm explosive weapon that's great for clearing buildings, and/or a rocket launcher for squaring off against other titans.

The best offense in a titan is good defense. The vortex ability essentially operates like a block in fighting games. If you press the button at the right time, you can collect bullets and rockets and throw them back at an enemy of your choosing. Seeing the outstretched hand collect the ammunition and repel them gives the titans a sense of identity beyond just being a giant weapon of mass destruction. If you overload the vortex by holding it too long, however, all those bullets and missiles will reach their intended target.

If you don't feel like piloting your titan, you can order it to guard your current area or to follow you around with a simple command on the d-pad. When in follow mode, titans kill nearby enemies and score points for you automatically. Some players use the titan's eject boost ability to catapult themselves in the air to reach higher perches for sniping as a pilot. Fellow pilots can also jump on the back of your titan to fight from a new vantage point.

When a titan is badly damaged, it enters a doomed state. Here, the player has two options. You can eject and continue on foot, or ride the red line and try to squeak through the remainder of your skirmish. Be careful when pushing on while in a doomed state, however, because opposing titans can rip you from the cockpit, toss you against a nearby wall, and admire the blood splatter your corpse leaves on the concrete.



In the fiction of Titanfall, pilots are jack-of-all-trades special-forces units. These multi-role combat experts are relied upon for everything from capturing control points and defending high value targets to fetch-and-grab missions.

What pilots lack in size they make up for with amazing agility. Pilots can dart around environments, wall-running to reach places where a soldier in your regular first-person shooter could never reach. Jump kits allow pilots to perform multiple jumps at once and also prevent them from ever taking falling damage.

Using their speed and climbing abilities, pilots often employ hit-and-fade tactics. They can drop onto the backs of titans from vertical positions to destroy them, and disappear back into the buildings before being targeted. Pilots also have a short-lived cloaking ability that allows them to cross wide-open expanses safely.

"Surviving requires cunning, guile, and a little bit of luck on the pilot's part," says game director Steve Fukuda. "He's got to try and outsmart the titan. He's got to do hit-and-fade tactics, like hit it with a rocket, displace, and go to another rooftop while the titan is trying to find him in the first building. Or jump down on top of him, rip open a panel, and jam a gun into his 'brain' and start shooting it."

Each pilot comes equipped with several weapons. The smart pistol is a great noob-friendly weapon capable of locking onto multiple targets at once and taking them out with one pull of the trigger. It's great for clearing a room full of grunts, but human opponents receive a target-lock warning so you need to finish the job quickly before they can get out of the way. This gun cannot lock onto titans.

The pilot's other weapons include a standard-issue assault rifle, an anti-titan rocket launcher, and a data knife that can reprogram computer-controlled characters to fight for your side.

Your inclination may be to think that most people prefer the titans, but in tracking playtesting data, Respawn has found that typical matches have a healthy mix of players controlling titans and running around as pilots.

### NEXT-GENERATION MULTIPLAYER

Respawn got the majority of Titanfall's core gameplay systems up and running five months ago, but not all of the team's campaign multiplayer ideas were meshing. To get everyone on the same page, the studio produced a gameplay target video to solidify its vision for the minute-to-minute experience.

This video starts with the player assuming the role of a militia pilot, the term used for special-forces soldiers in the Titanfall universe. The IMC is over-fracking this outdoor region for natural gasses, and the militia wants to recapture some of the fuel. Before they can do so, the team needs to deactivate a nearby heavy turret.

As the battle unfolds, it feels recognizable and foreign at the same time. A healthy



number of computer-controlled grunts fight on both sides of this multiplayer match, with six human players on each side rounding out the ranks. The increased amount of gun-toting baddies gives the match the feeling of a larger-scale skirmish like those that populate single-player campaigns.

The pilots don't stand a chance taking this turret head-on, but a woman on a video intercom tells the player that she's picking up a signal nearby that may be emanating from the control station. Circumnavigating the map thanks to cover provided by rock formations, the pilot showcases his exceptional mobility by wall-running up the side of a building to an elevated position. Here he pulls out a smart pistol and takes aim at a trio of enemies below. The automated targeting system aligns reticles on the soldiers simultaneously, and he pulls the trigger while dropping down, executing all three in a flash. Inside this building he sees a hardline that guides him to the turret controls. He descends down a long shaft, taking no damage upon landing thanks to the jump kit each pilot is equipped with.

Three more enemies are facing the other way, unaware of the imminent threat. The player sneaks up behind one of the grunts and quickly breaks his neck with a satisfying twist, which causes the soldier to toss his shotgun upwards. It rotates two times in the air, lands in the pilot's hands, and he nonchalantly clears the rest of the room with two satisfying shots. Again, these types of stylish sequences are often seen in single-player games, not in the simply animated multiplayer matches you typically find.

The pilot continues his infiltration by sneaking up behind a spectre, one of the computer-controlled militarized robots each side uses to fortify its ranks. By jamming a data knife into the back of its head, the pilot converts the spectre to his side. It begins scanning for enemy presence while the pilot uses the data knife again to deactivate the heavy turret via the control panel.

With the major threat deactivated, a man shows up on the video intercom to inform the pilot that a titan is ready for deployment. The player selects a

+ Thanks to the more open maps, healthy mix of enemy AI and real players, and the ultra-powerful titans, the gameplay loop in Titanfall is more accommodating to newcomers.



# /// LENDING A SENSE OF PROGRESS

As you would expect from a studio featuring more than 40 former Call of Duty designers, Respawn has big plans for the progression system in Titanfall. Though

it wouldn't go into detail, the studio promises a robust system filled with unlocks for both your pilot and titan. Respawn also confirmed to us that the game has playable female characters, SmartGlass integration, and some level of Kinect support.

In addition to the campaign multiplayer, Titanfall has a more traditional multiplayer mode, as well as a one-player mode the studio isn't ready to talk about yet.



landing spot for his heavy machinery, and watches from the sky as the titan descends from space and lands next to him with a violent thud.

Hopping into the cockpit, the pilot takes control of this 24-foot titan. Within seconds, the titan is fully functional and ready for battle. This isn't your everyday mech found in games like Hawken or MechAssault. The titan moves with speed and grace normally reserved for general infantry and handles like an extension of the pilot himself, holding a weapon in a first-person view.

The pilot starts wreaking havoc with his newfound toy, stomping on nearby grunts and using a chain-lightning gun called the arc cannon to eviscerate four enemies standing near each other. Another soldier fires on the titan, but the pilot quickly uses the vortex ability to absorb the bullets and send them careening back to their sender.

The voice on the video com instructs the pilot to disembark and take an alternative route on foot to the rendezvous point where a ship is supposed to beam in and begin siphoning the fuel. Upon arrival, the militia calls in two dropships full of spectres to aid in the defense of the heist.

As the ship gathers the fuel, an enemy ogre (read: titan) moves in to stymie the operation. The pilot draws the short end of the stick, and is ordered to keep the ogre preoccupied. Firing off a couple pot shots to draw its attention, the pilot then hightails it, dodging fire with his exceptional mobility as the ogre gives chase.

The pilot darts quickly between buildings, climbs to an elevated position, and arrives above the ogre as it scans the area. Jumping on its back, the pilot plants explosives, jumps down to the ground,

and cripples the massive enemy with the detonation.

The celebration of this amazing feat is short-lived. Suddenly, the communication systems jam and the pilot turns his gaze to the sky. A huge mothership big enough to block out the sun moves into orbit immediately above this fracking operation, and suddenly it's raining titans. The video comes to a close with the pilot surrounded by the hulking menaces.

Though the video is brief, a second viewing communicates how jam-packed Titanfall is with interesting concepts. Cat-and-mouse gameplay between titans and pilots, badass moments normally reserved for single-player campaigns, powerful weaponry, a battlefield filled with enemies of varying skill, and titans that don't sacrifice mobility for firepower all speak to a new paradigm in multiplayer game development.

Watching a live match in action, perhaps the most powerful new gameplay concept in Titanfall is survivability. Some Call of Duty players I know jokingly refer to the series as "Shot In The Back" due to the aggressively small maps that keep players only a heartbeat away from the action. For new players jumping into a match with skilled veterans who know every inch of the map, the quickened pace of defeat can be suffocating. Thanks to the more open maps, healthy mix of enemy AI and real players, and the ultra-powerful titans, the gameplay loop in Titanfall is more accommodating to newcomers.

A typical match might start with a few firefights with easily dispatchable AI grunts. After surviving a while on the battlefield the player is awarded a titan, which delivers the empowering experience of wielding massive firepower while offering the added protection of armor. When a titan takes too much damage, it goes into a doomed state, which allows the player to safely disembark and continue fighting on foot. A nice risk/reward element exists when deciding to bail or sticking around in doomed state, killing enemies while the meter inches closer and closer to the red zone. Seeing a match play out on three different player screens in a short demo after the watching the target gameplay video, the average time of life seems drastically increased over the average Call of Duty, Battlefield, or Halo match.



## LEAPING INTO NEXT-GEN

When Respawn finalized its goals for Titanfall, it planned to target current-generation hardware. But when the team realized many of its lofty goals were perhaps too ambitious for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, it started asking around about how far out the next-generation plans were from becoming a reality. The answer they received from Microsoft changed their approach altogether. The new studio was working on a new game concept with a new technology base. Why not make it for new consoles as well?

"Around a year and a half ago we started thinking we wanted to do something big, and the current consoles didn't have the infrastructure behind them to allow for it," McCoy says.

With only 80 developers working on the project, however, creating three different versions of the game for PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC would triple the potential pitfalls. In an effort to keep the project from running into too many time-sucking dead ends, Respawn decided to focus its development for one new console rather than two.

"Working on a sole platform allows you to focus your resources and engineering time," McCoy says. "There's always a fixed cost with doing things, but this fixed cost varies per platform. You kind of have to compromise each thing you do to fit it into each respective architecture. It just allows you to really laser-focus what you do, how you do it, and what you put into a game. There are not triple the amount of issues you potentially have for every platform you add. It just opens a can of worms. Not to say we won't

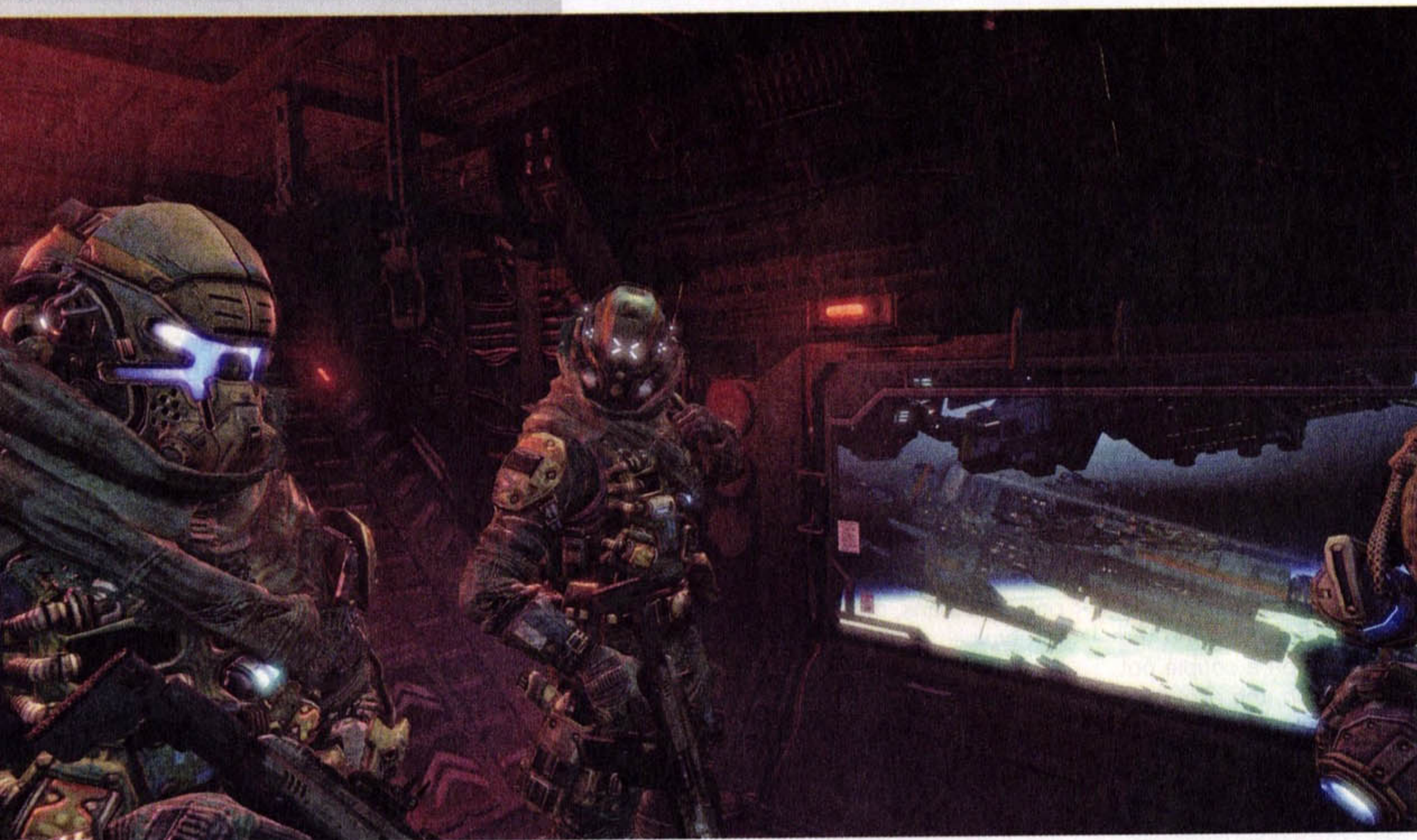
do it in the future, but for our first game we wanted to focus on making the best game we could."

With eight times the processing power of the Xbox 360, the Xbox One provides Respawn the resources it needs to actualize its vision of merging single-player elements into a multiplayer arena that features at least 12 titans doing battle on a field filled with AI characters. Most of that horsepower is going to the art team, which now has the freedom to create more unique textures. One titan has more texture demands than all of the playable characters in a last-generation multiplayer shooter. Grunts have a variety of faces, and players should see more diversity in the environments as well.

"The fidelity we're allowed to reach with the extra memory and processing power allows us to bring things more to life than we would have been able to do on the current gen," McCoy says. "We're less hindered."

One of the major differences between the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One is Microsoft's new console has only 5GB of dedicated GDDR3 RAM for gaming, whereas Sony's provides developers with 8GB of high speed DDR5 RAM. When asked about the memory gap between the two, Respawn doesn't seem to think the difference is that meaningful in the context of Titanfall.

"The reality is you're loading everything off a hard drive, and a hard drive is infinitely slower than actual memory," McCoy says. "With a full 8GB of



## LEVEL DESIGN EVOLVED

When Respawn settled on making a game featuring 24-foot tall titans and lithe pilots, set-piece moments, and environmental storytelling, the studio had to completely rethink its approach to

level design. Balancing the maps to make both classes fun to play was critical.

"It's two games in one," explains game director Steve Fukuda. "You've got the foot game and the titan game. Those two things layered on top are sort of the crux of the challenge of making levels. The size differential, the speed differential, trying to figure out how to make it possible to get around a level quickly as both and have this fast-paced feel."

The large, open spaces give titans space to roam, and the tight corridors and vertical perches provide pilots a respite from the heavy arsenal of their much bigger adversaries. To give pilots a fighting chance, the developers say they are trying to design the maps so pilots are never more than five seconds away from safety.

To preserve this dynamic, Respawn opted against integrating a Battlefield level of destructibility. "It's often bragged about, but when you think of practical reasons it would not help this particular game," says lead artist Joel Emslie. "You really rely on tunnels and buildings. [If you integrated destructibility you] would lose so much. It would make being a pilot not fun."

The inclusion of teammate and enemy AI also gives the designers new opportunities to make these maps feel more alive than the stale cardboard cutouts of most multiplayer experiences. Not all the AI grunts tote weapons or participate in the fights. Some robots, which Respawn calls 'marvins,' go about the business they've been programmed to do whether or not a battle is raging around them. Walk into an apartment and you may see one Marvin washing the windows as bullets fly outside. Military grunts even acknowledge the player when they are around.

"The idea with the grunts is to really make the world feel single-player alive," Emslie says. "They'll salute you, talk about you, they'll get excited if you're around them and friendly, and if you're a bad guy they'll get really scared. If you're in a giant titan they'll scatter, run away, and scream. Getting them to react to you has been the fun part."

The designers also use the grunts to orient players after a respawn, pointing them in the direction of the objective or leading them to the front line of a firefight. Savvy players can also trail these AI soldiers, watch them draw fire from enemies, and use this opportunity to slip into a base or building undetected.

To better set the narrative table, each level has a playable prologue and epilogue sequence. In one match we watched, players started on a spaceship in orbit and descended to the ground to start the assault. At the end of the match players were instructed to move to the extraction point. Making it back in one piece results in a huge XP reward.





have virtually an unlimited amount of dedicated servers available for players to play on so we can always have a fast machine on a fast connection physically close to the player to play on," McCoy says. "It allows us to have a few dozen AI running around doing all the cool things that they are doing. It handles all the complex physics calculations we're doing, and also allows for quicker and more accurate matchmaking. This game wouldn't be possible without it. We wouldn't have even attempted to do it."

The Xbox One offers developers many more tools to use as well, such as player expression tracking, game recording, and updatable achievements. Many of these features are still in their infancy, so Respawn isn't sure how Titanfall will leverage them.

"It's a little rough going at times when we're dealing with unfinished software on our side, unfinished software on the first-party side, and unfinished hardware as well," McCoy says.

#### ANSWERING THE CALL OF DUTY

Though the wounds from the messy Activision fallout still haven't faded completely (using the 3DS Street Pass revealed that one employee's slogan was "Eat It Activision"), talking to the studio members gives a firm sense that this team is ready to leave the divorce in the past and embrace its new, unpredictable future. If anything, the death of Infinity Ward as we once knew it and birth of Respawn has increased these developers' sense of camaraderie, and integrating a considerable amount of new talent from different backgrounds has allowed the team to forge a new identity.

Titanfall is this new studio's brave new vision of the future of multiplayer games. Combining big set-piece moments and competitive multiplayer into one package for a next-generation platform is a daunting task, but the initial playtests leave Respawn feeling confident in its vision.

"When I go and play another FPS, there are features that I miss because they are not in that game," Zampella says. "To me, that is a good indication that we are doing something right."

Respawn is ready to try and prestige again. ♦

Visit [gameinformer.com/titanfall](http://gameinformer.com/titanfall) for video interviews with Respawn Entertainment and much more

memory from a hard drive, you're talking an enormous load time. You still have to do tricks. You still have to get someone into a game as fast as possible using what you have. You're not going to fill 5GB at a time with a reasonable load. There are always bottlenecks and up and downs. If they gave us all eight gigs we wouldn't really use it. It's not practical right now until we figure out the tricks of the box."

What the Xbox One lacks in RAM, it potentially makes up for in offering the developers the ability to offload processing onto cloud servers provided by Microsoft. For Titanfall, Respawn plans to use the additional resources to great effect, providing dedicated servers and using them to handle all the physics calculations and AI for non-player characters.

"Microsoft's cloud computing initiative for the Xbox One allows us to dynamically





# Call of Duty: Ghosts

Infinity Ward details the next generation

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

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

» **Publisher**  
Activision

» **Developer**  
Infinity Ward

» **Release**  
November 5

The graphical leap into each new console generation has become less obvious with each cycle. In years past, visuals shifted from 2D to 3D, hands became articulated, and characters gained subtle emotion. The graphical improvements coming with the PS4 and Xbox One are less apparent than past generation shifts. We can tell the games of tomorrow look better, but explaining how is difficult. Infinity Ward sheds light on the technical achievements coming to next-gen systems with Call of Duty: Ghosts.

## A Perfect Circle

In past Call of Duty games, the iron sights are slightly blurry when held up to your virtual eye. Activision reveals this was a trick to mask

a gun's jagged circles while aiming. Finding a perfectly round object in video games is rare, but Infinity Ward is fixing that with sub-d rendering. This technology removes the polygonal lines from round shapes and replaces them with seamless curves – an effect demonstrated by the smooth visor of a pilot's helmet and the flawless circle of a rifle's sight.

## No Stone Unturned

Many games feature textures that present the illusion of depth, but Infinity Ward is employing a system that automatically adds geometry to these flat surfaces. For instance, we saw a tech demo of an in-game riverbed lined with individually articulated stones. Thanks

to displacement mapping, these stones gain three-dimensional geometry as you draw nearer. Environments gain added detail without you even knowing this system is working behind the scenes. Infinity Ward also uses the same technology to add depth and realism to a cracked cliff face.

## Man's Best Friend

Many gamers fondly remember their canine companions from games like Fallout 3 and Fable II, and now Call of Duty: Ghosts joins the club. The new dog companion can sniff out explosives, attack enemies, and more. Infinity Ward also suggests that the dog was implemented to hit an emotional chord with gamers, pointing to films like *I Am Legend*





This underwater diving ends with a dramatic explosion

as inspiration. The development team even motion captured a service canine and collected stories about heroic war dogs for reference.

#### Dynamic Multiplayer Maps

Not much is being revealed about multiplayer, but fans can expect maps that change shape along the course of a match. Earthquakes alter the terrain, floods make certain areas unreachable, and player-activated traps are strewn about. One example shows a soldier releasing a truck's load, setting loose huge pipes to roll towards unfortunate opponents.

#### A Slice of The Campaign

Infinity Ward is saying very little about Call of Duty: Ghosts' narrative. The studio did say there is an entirely new storyline that takes place after a catastrophic global event, and that the plot is being penned by filmmaker Stephen Gaghan (*Traffic*, *Syriana*)

One sequence we saw occurs beneath the sea. Two soldiers scuba dive among coral reefs detailed with colorful plant life and schools of fish that dart out of the way. The duo is trailing below a gigantic vessel floating overhead. Loud sonar pings echo as it glides across the ocean. The ruins of a sunken



lighthouse appear in the distance, and the divers swim through its shattered base and up its spiraling staircase. One soldier pulls out a remote-controlled torpedo and takes aim. The explosive detonates near the ship and a tremendous shockwave sends the protagonist flying. After regaining consciousness, the player is pinned beneath a rusted piece of debris with his severed oxygen line spraying bubbles in his face. His partner

rescues him just in time, and the two quickly swim to safety as ship debris rains from above. Enemy divers close in on the duo just as they escape the sinking chunks of exploded ship. An underwater firefight erupts as the presentation comes to a close.

Learning what's going on under the hood of this next-gen Call of Duty title is exciting, but we hope Activision delves into gameplay changes next. » **Tim Turi**

This jungle scene is filled with ambient life





# Fantasia: Music Evolved

The Disney classic enters a new generation

» **Platform**  
Xbox One  
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**  
Disney Interactive

» **Developer**  
Harmonix

» **Release**  
2014

**F**antasia is a surprising follow-up to Rock Band and Dance Central until you think a little bit more about the roots of the classic Disney film. The original 1940 *Fantasia* aimed to break free from genre conventions, and present music in a new way to the public. That mission has been echoed by Harmonix throughout its existence, and the developer has some innovative ideas on how to transpose *Fantasia* into the interactive world.

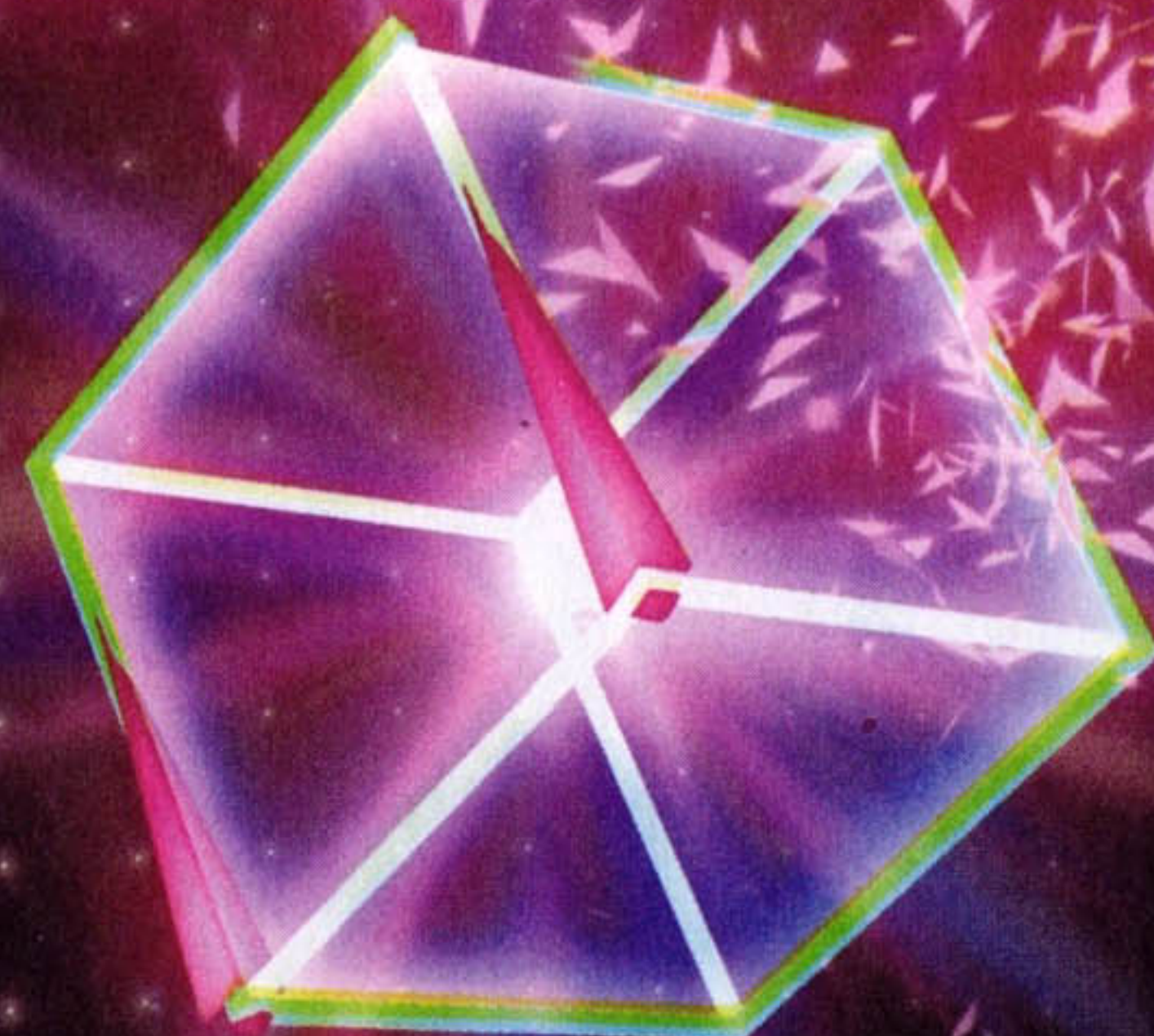
In the Kinect-exclusive title, players step into the role of the sorcerer's apprentice, merging magic and music. Like the *Fantasia*

films, the game is split up into independent scenes that are each shaped by opportunities for interaction. I played one called the Shoal, an undersea reef filled with opportunities for exploration. Stepping side to side in front of the scene floats the view across a large panorama, and hand motions help bring the world to life. A massive turtle serves as the home to some drum-beating clams. A swipe brings an enthusiastic seahorse out to play. In certain hidden spots on screen, I craft my own musical loops by playing with impromptu underwater instruments, and my

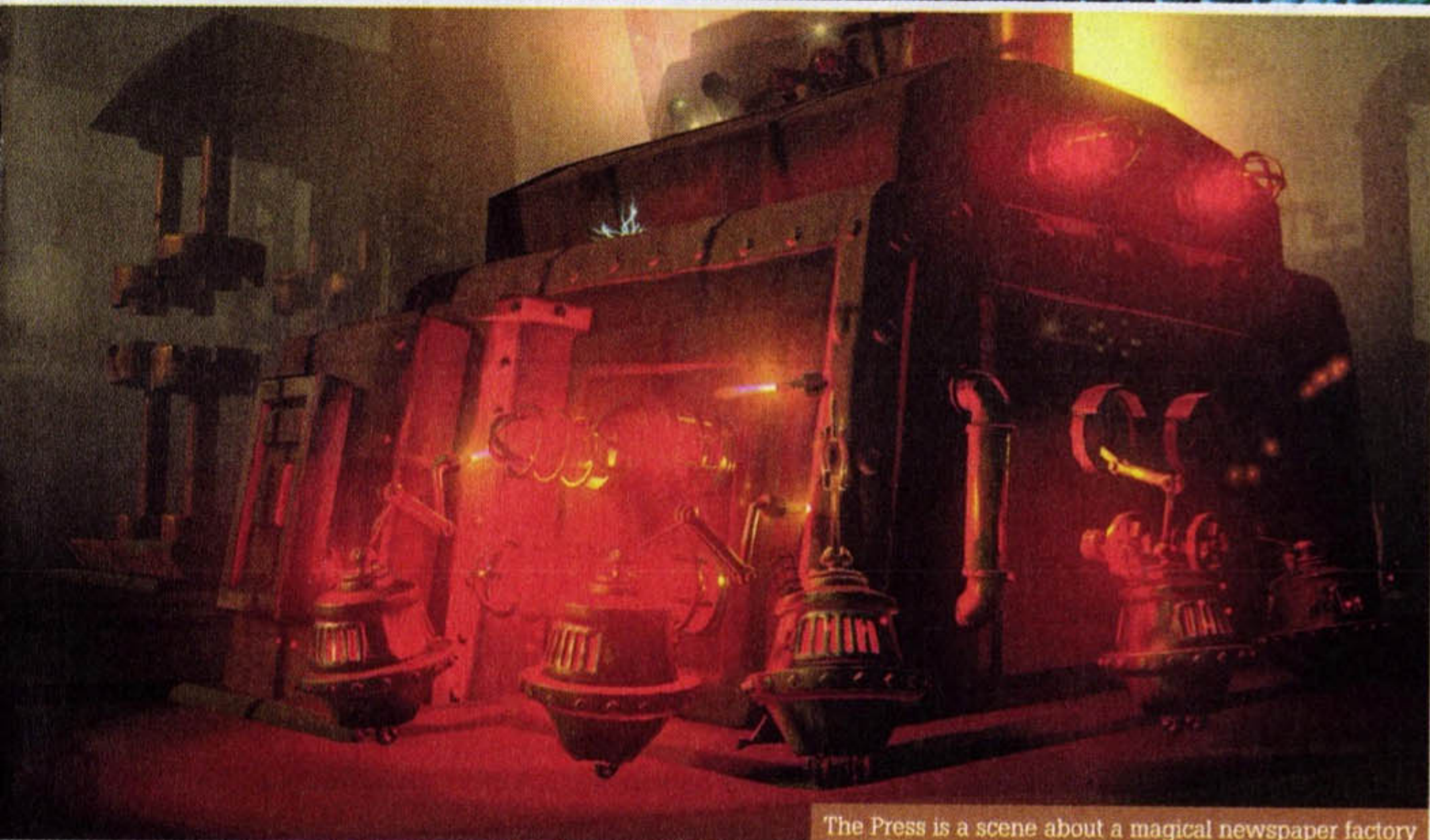
tunes then integrate into the growing musical tapestry outside.

These discoveries are interesting, but the locations that sweep players away into full-fledged performance songs are even better. The performance stages form the core of *Fantasia*'s gameplay; as a level-appropriate backdrop sweeps by, the player becomes the conductor of the song, shifting musical elements on the fly. Hand gestures and other movements must be completed as they appear on the screen in time with the melodies and beats, and new hand gestures layer

51,500



Here, you can see a move that would have the player sweeping both hands up and to the left to fill in the edges of the box



The Press is a scene about a magical newspaper factory



in over time. Swipes are simple flicks of the hands in specific directions. Pushes demand that you punch your hand forward at the right moment, like the universal sign for stop. Traces demand you reach your hand out and trace a slow-moving circle as it moves in an arc along the screen.

As you play, numerous junctures in the song offer opportunities to remix familiar elements into a new style. What would Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" sound like as a metal ballad? Or an orchestral take on Fun's "Some

Nights"? Better yet, what about an electronica drumbeat beneath Kimbra's vocals, accompanied by a separate track of acoustic guitar? These sorts of choices came up at least three of four times in each song, assuring that a replay of any given track can sound completely different. Moreover, the experience has a riotous party atmosphere when playing with a group, as people shout over each other for their favorite musical choices at each path switch.

Beyond these discrete track switches, I

also encounter more subtle opportunities for shaping the song through manipulators. Built as freestyle moments within the larger song, these brief remix sections let me author my own clips from a sample, or add effects to existing sounds. The Beat Chopper manipulator appears as a wheel of tiny sampled clips, and my hand motions along the wheel make a distinct melodic loop. The FX Sculptor had me moving my hands closer and further apart on various onscreen effects, which in turn affected the potency of various delays, echoes, and other sound alterations. These are just a couple of the promised manipulators Harmonix has planned.

Fantasia: Music Evolved has a long road ahead, both in proving the fun of these types of musical manipulations, and convincing players that the game's worlds are worth exploring. We also have yet to hear about the possibility of multiplayer, which seems likely after Harmonix's success in that arena in Dance Central. Even with these unknowns, standing in front of the game and playing went a long way towards selling me on the concept. Having simple swipes of my hands bring a song to life is a little bit magical, and in the days since I played it last, I find myself eager to try those songs one more time, and discover others hidden away in the world.

» Matt Miller

### The Soundtrack

We've been told that the Fantasia soundtrack includes all sorts of music, potentially even genres like classical or jazz. However, the initial announced songs represent the game's focus on popular modern songs, which is a departure from expectations for the *Fantasia* concept.

- AVICII** — "Levels"
- Bruno Mars** — "Locked Out of Heaven"
- Fun.** — "Some Nights"
- Kimbra** — "Settle Down"
- Queen** — "Bohemian Rhapsody"



# Skylanders: Swap Force

War of the action figures



» **Platform**  
PlayStation 4  
Xbox One • WiiU  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360  
Wii • 3DS

» **Style**  
1 or 2-Player  
Action

» **Publisher**  
Activision

» **Developer**  
Vicarious Visions  
(PlayStation 4,  
Xbox One, Wii  
U, PlayStation 3,  
Xbox 360)  
Beenox (Wii)  
n-Space (3DS)

» **Release**  
Fall

A storm cloud in the shape of Mickey Mouse's ears hangs over the Skylanders brand. Later this year, Disney Interactive is releasing *Infinity*, an action figure-based video game starring some of the Magic Kingdom's most recognizable faces. Spyro and his monster friends are the talk of the town now, but their star power pales in comparison to the likes of Jack Sparrow, Lightning McQueen, Buzz Lightyear, and most of *Infinity*'s launch characters.

With a war of action figures waging across retail shelves, Activision is also drawing fire for its decision to annualize Skylanders. Franchise fatigue isn't the only concern with the annual releases; similar to Activision's

approach to the *Call of Duty* series, Skylanders' future is the hands of two different development teams. Toys for Bob, the studio that created the Skylanders universe and charted a course for it across two successful games, is not working on the third installment. That duty lies with Vicarious Visions, the team that brought Spyro's *Adventure* and *Giants* to 3DS.

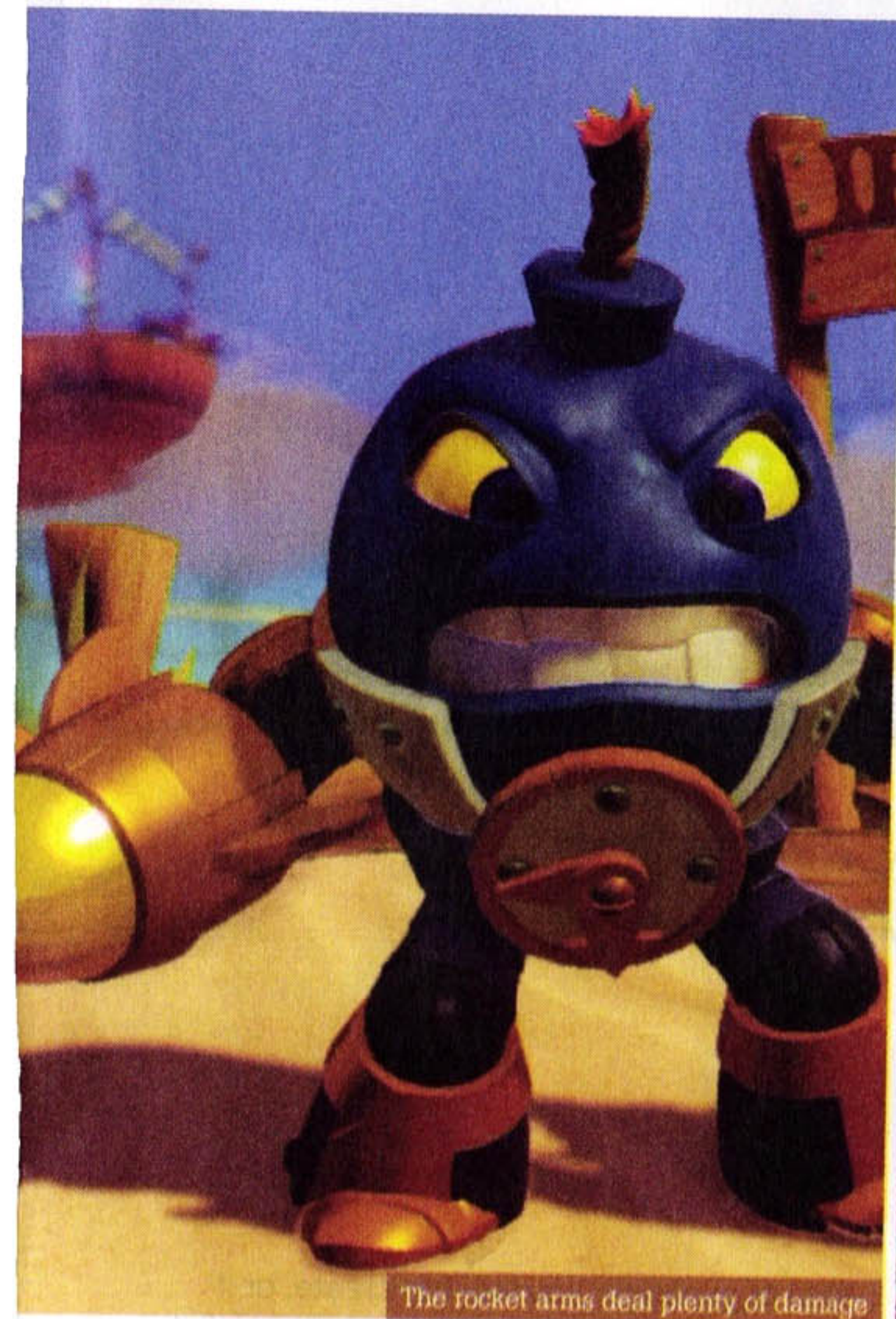
All of the existing Skylanders action figures are compatible with *Swap Force*, but oddly, the *Portal of Power* is not. The first Skylanders game kicked off the craze. The second game added lumbering giants to the mix. The third game introduces a new technology that supports interchangeable action figure parts that

Lou Studdert, *Swap Force*'s associate producer, calls "dynamic swapability."

All *Swap Force* characters can be split in two, leaving behind pieces that typically correspond to movement or mayhem. The bottom halves include features like legs, tentacles, and wheels, while the top segments often dictate powers. As the name of the game implies, these parts can be switched on the fly to create new characters that bring different abilities to the battlefield.

"Younger players will often swap for cosmetic reasons, because it's just simply awesome to take the top half of 'Stink Bomb' and the bottom half of 'Blast Zone' to create 'Stink Zone,'" Studdert says. "More savvy





The rocket arms deal plenty of damage



Over 250 swap options are available to players, but only if they purchase all 16 Swap Force characters

players will find other reasons. For example, if you're fighting off hordes of Chompies plus a larger Gear Golem, you might want to combine 'Hoot Loop' and 'Free Ranger' to create 'Hoot Ranger.' By using the lower half of Free Ranger, players can utilize the tornado attack to eliminate those pesky Chompies, while still utilizing the Hoot's ranged magic attacks to take down the Gear Golem from a safe distance."

With 16 Swap Force characters to choose from, players can assemble over 250 different combinations. If Activision sniffs out money as well as I think they do, don't be surprised if an achievement or trophy is awarded for assembling all variations.

Speaking of empty wallets, in addition to the 16 Swap Force figures, collectors should keep their eyes peeled for 16 new core figures, 8 new LightCore figures, and 16 redesigned versions of previously released characters. The redesigned characters each come with a new power. Some, like Ninja Stealth Elf, also have new costumes.

All of Skylanders: Giants content could be accessed with just one Giant figure. This isn't the case with Swap Force. To see everything that the game has to offer, you need figures representing the eight different Swap Force powers. "Swap Force zones are kind of like Elemental zones, but instead of being tied to the Skylanders' element type, the Swap Force zones are tied to the characters' traversal ability," Studdart says. From what we know so far, these characters can either fly, climb, dig, bounce, or teleport. On top of these unique abilities, they can also jump. Every character in the game – even the returning characters from previous titles – can now leap across platforms or merrily bound around the hub world.

The expanded maneuverability will be used extensively for collectible items and secrets. Hats make a return in Swap Force, and Studdart hints there are other things to find. "There will be a good bit of returning items

from the previous games and a variety of new hidden items to find as well," he says.

The character level cap is expanding to 20, and Studdart says that post-launch support includes "adventure and battle packs." One of the big drawbacks to Skylanders: Giants was hardly any additional game content released outside of figures.

Swap Force holds true to its brethren in offering local cooperative play for two players. Online still isn't a part of the picture, even

with the online-savvy PlayStation 4 and Xbox One as destination platforms. With a new developer at the helm and a stronger focus being applied to players having to purchase numerous figures to see all of the game's content, my first taste of Swap Force is a bit sour. Activision has found success with two development teams leading the Call of Duty charge, and it will need to again if it hopes to fight off Disney this holiday season.

» **Andrew Reiner**

## The Roster

Here are the known figures releasing with Swap Force.

Blast Zone  
Free Ranger (see below)  
Freeze Blade  
Hoot Loop (see below)  
Magna Charge  
Night Shift  
Stealth Elf  
Wash Buckler  
Stink Bomb



### FREE RANGER

**Element:** Air

**Swap Ability:** Spin

**Phrase:** Whip Up a Storm!

As a Skylander of the Air Element, both his upper and lower halves have storm-related powers. For his upper half, Free Ranger wields two unique blades that shoot gusts of wind when completing combos. He can also shoot lightning from his eyes. For his lower half, Free Ranger can whip up a whirling tornado that can be used to throw enemies around.



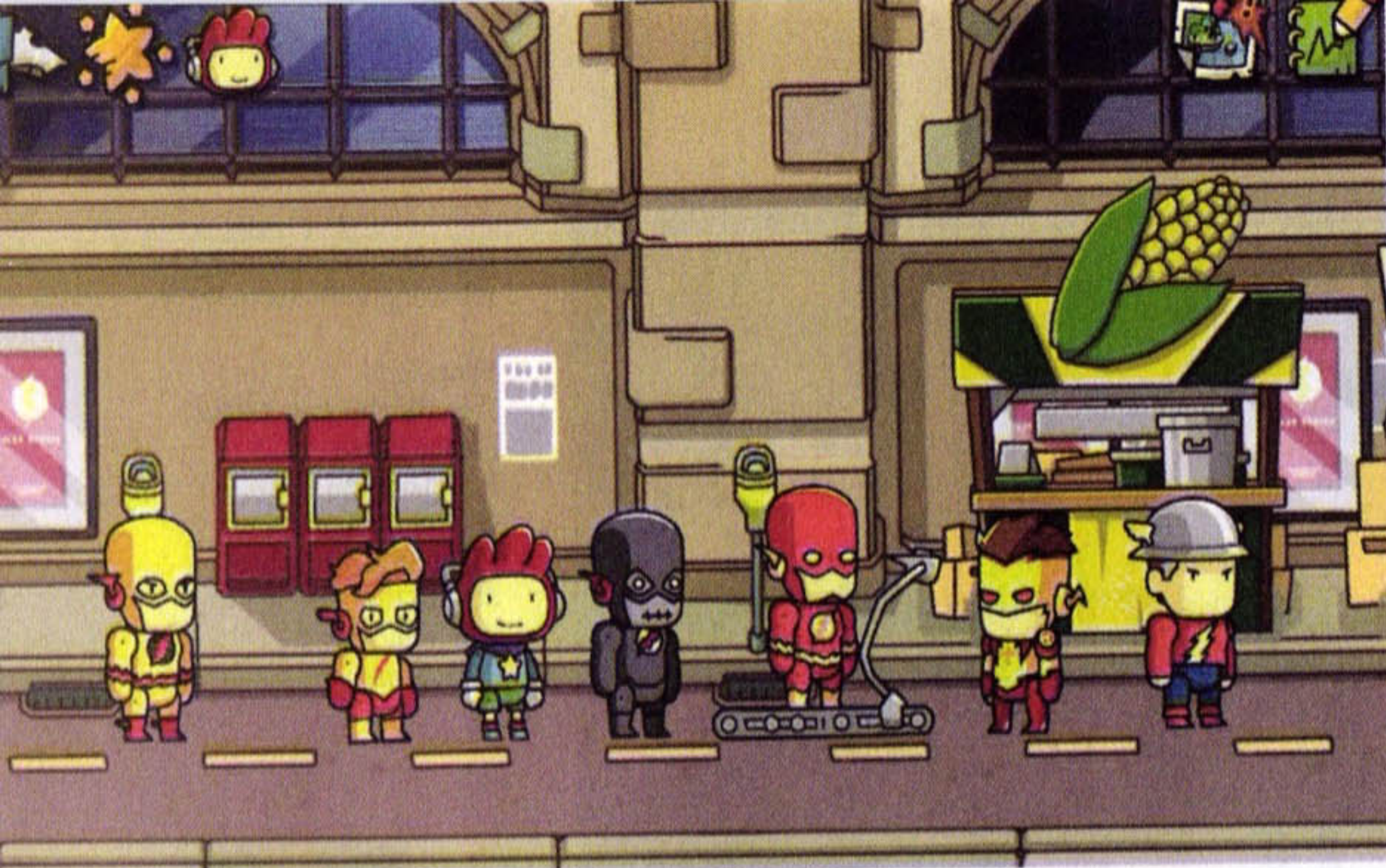
### HOOT LOOP

**Element:** Magic

**Swap Ability:** Teleport

**Phrase:** Let's Ruffle Some Feathers!

He has a magic staff that he uses to attack with bursts of magic, and hypnotic eyes that he can use to slow enemies down, making them easier to strike. Those abilities are tied to his upper half. His lower half abilities revolve around magic hoop rings that hover beneath his feet, which he can use to teleport to other locations. This ability can be used defensively, to evade enemies, or as a surprise attack.



# Scribblenauts Unmasked: A DC Comics Adventure

Maxwell joins the DC universe

- » **Platform**  
Wii U  
3DS • PC
- » **Style**  
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**  
Warner Bros.  
Interactive
- » **Developer**  
5th Cell
- » **Release**  
Fall

Each entry in the Scribblenauts series allows players to conjure up anything they can imagine, from zombie krakens to angry whales, to solve cute puzzles. Maxwell's magic ability to summon up whatever he wants puts certain super heroes to shame. But Maxwell isn't interested in shaming comic-book heroes with his prowess, he wants to help them, and in Scribblenauts Unmasked: A DC Comics Adventure, he will. Maxwell loves Batman, but his sister Lily thinks Superman is the superior crime fighter. The siblings use their magic abilities to settle the bet, but end up immersed in a time of chaos in the DC universe. Scribblenauts Unmasked tasks the duo with helping the denizens of Gotham City, Metropolis, the Green Lanterns' Planetary Citadel, and more. 5th Cell developed a flexible puzzle system that takes basic situations, like someone trapped in a flaming vehicle, and will swap out the location and folks involved to add variety. In one instance, at the Green Lantern Corps' base, there was a cop trapped in a flaming ice cream truck that needed rescuing.

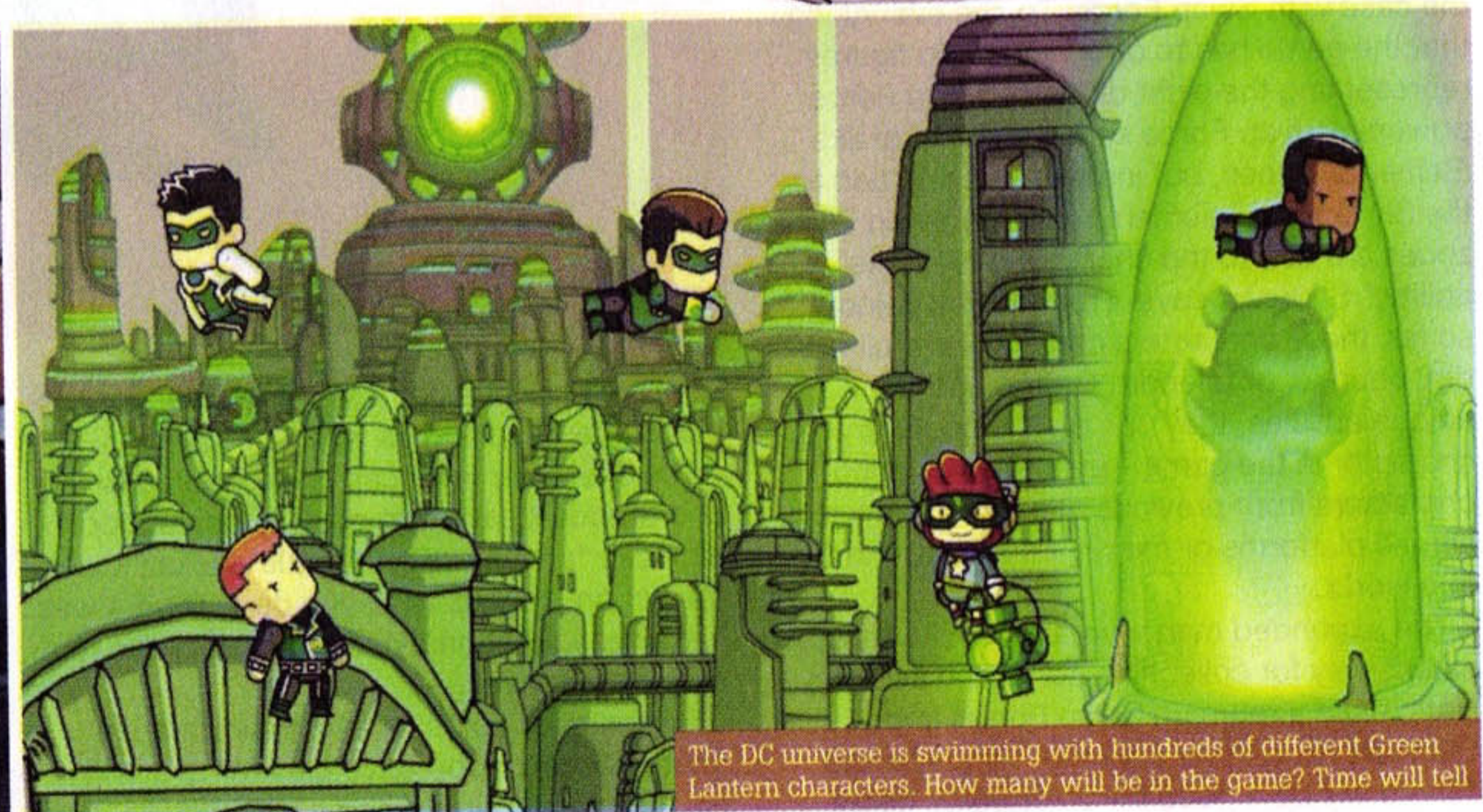
Speaking of variety, Scribblenauts Unmasked has it in spades. The game boasts more than 2,000 DC characters and objects.

5th Cell showed off a screen filled with dozens of iconic characters, each rendered in the developer's adorable, cartoony style. The game includes your favorites like Wonder Woman, the Flash, and Batman. It also contains many obscure characters, including 32 other versions of Batman. The 5th Cell team member at the controls had fun with the mass gathering of DC denizens by tossing a zombified character in the mix, resulting in a real-time Marvel Zombies-like outbreak. He also conjured up the villain War, whose mere presence caused the throngs of characters to begin battling. 5th Cell says if there's a DC character who was only featured in one panel of one comic and never shown again, they're in the game. There are 130 different Green Lanterns, including Mogo – a planet that wields a power ring.

Scribblenauts Unmasked also includes a character editor and comprehensive DC database. The editor allows you to combine the looks and abilities of your favorite heroes and villains into one villain. 5th Cell's Super Cool Man had a mohawk, stylish shades, Aqua Man's arms, Superman's torso, the Flash's mask, and a variety of super powers. If you need to do some research to figure out what

kind of character you want to create, or if you're just interested in learning more about the DC universe, the Batcomputer is your friend. This Wikipedia-style resource contains detailed information on every character and object in the game.

The premise for the Scribblenauts franchise is a seemingly limitless one, but I found myself growing bored with the games' puzzles and environments. For example, Scribblenauts Unlimited's first level takes place on a farm. Not that there's anything wrong with farms, but the prospect of helping Maxwell perform heroic feats on the streets of Gotham City is far more enticing. » **Tim Turi**



The DC universe is swimming with hundreds of different Green Lantern characters. How many will be in the game? Time will tell



# Gran Turismo 6

The start of another fifteen years of racing

Even as gamers prepare for the onslaught of next-generation game announcements, Sony isn't abandoning the PlayStation 3. That's the clear message that comes with the announcement of Gran Turismo 6 on PlayStation 3. Series creator Kazunori Yamauchi took advantage of a recent event celebrating the 15-year anniversary of the franchise to reveal the new game.

Gran Turismo 6 builds on the framework of previous installments, so players should

expect the return of dozens of familiar tracks and hundreds of vehicles seen in the last entry. However, several hundred more automobiles are planned for inclusion, bringing the total up to an impressive 1,200 cars. Seven new locations are added into the mix, so players can look forward to 33 separate backdrops to their races.

Sony and Polyphony are putting a big focus on post-release content. A new version of the course creator allows players to customize

and shape a variety of new courses to share online. Official new cars and tracks are also being planned for addition after the game launches, in a bid to keep players involved long after the initial release. Polyphony is also prepping a mobile and web application that should allow users to track online race events while away from the game and stay involved with a community of fellow racers.

Polyphony has a questionable reputation for timely delivery of recent Gran Turismo games, so the announced holiday 2013 time frame sounds like an iffy proposition. Nonetheless, since the game is returning to the PlayStation 3, we can cross our fingers that the team's previous experience on the system should speed things along. Yamauchi says that a PS4 version might be considered, but that the team is focused on the PS3 version for this holiday. Any way you cut it, it's great to see Sony continuing support for the current prevailing console with such a popular franchise, even as DriveClub and other racing titles aim to take the first steps into the PlayStation 4 life cycle. » **Matt Miller**

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3

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

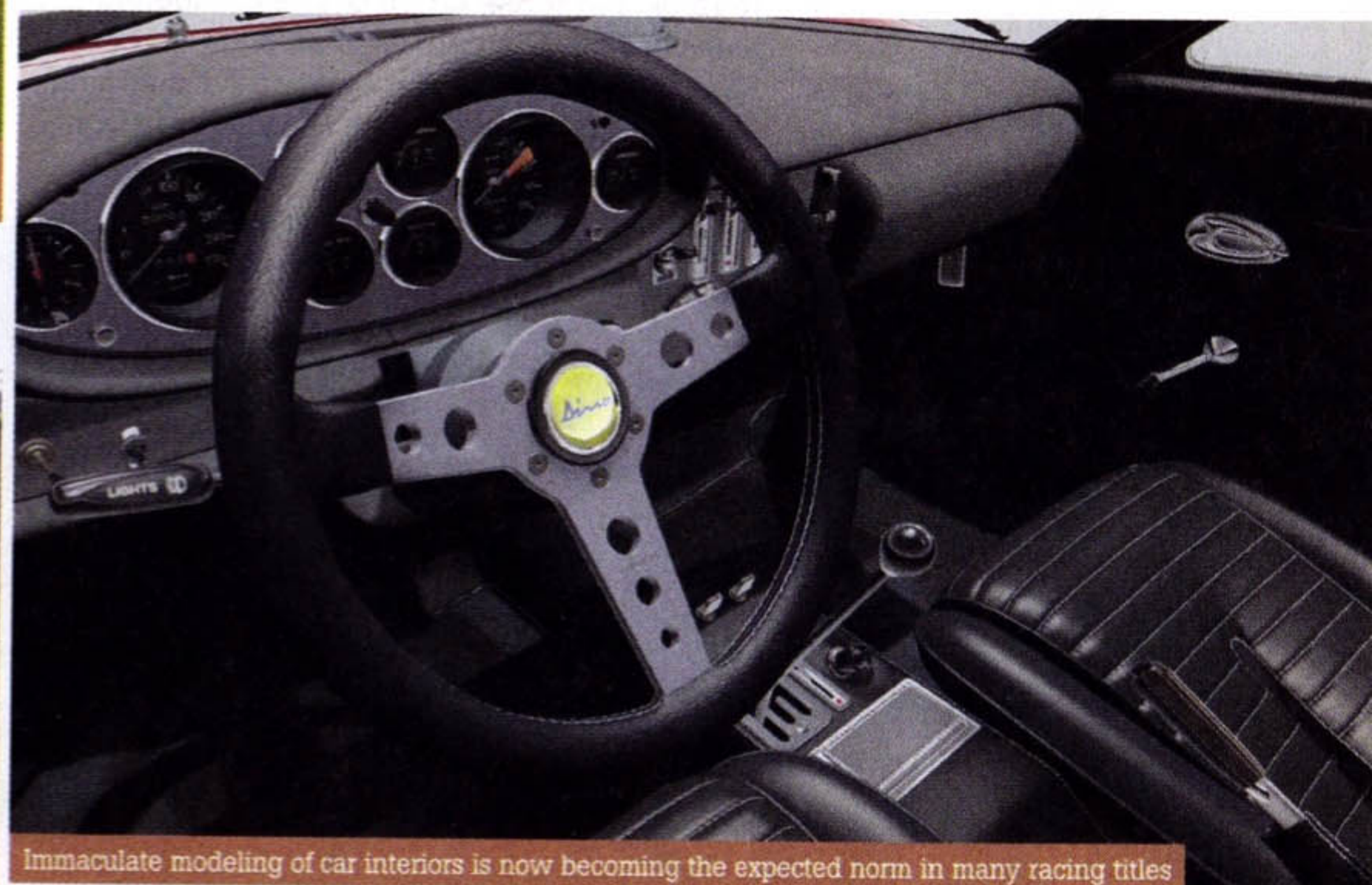
» **Publisher**  
Sony Computer  
Entertainment

» **Developer**  
Polyphony Digital

» **Release**  
Winter 2013



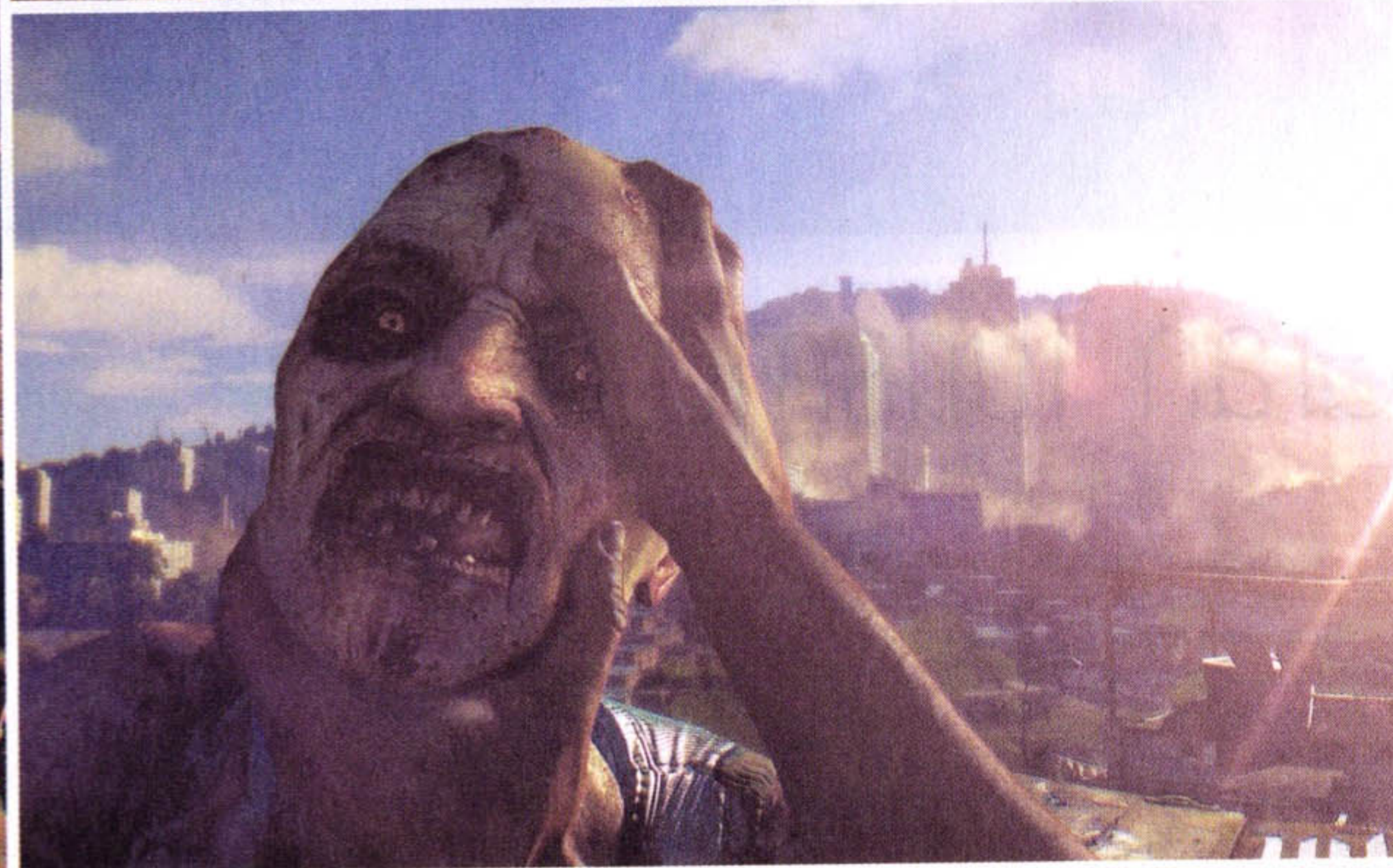
A planned Gran Turismo 6 release on PlayStation 3 helps indicate Sony's continued support for its older system



Immaculate modeling of car interiors is now becoming the expected norm in many racing titles

# Dying Light

Dead by dawn



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

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

» **Publisher**  
Warner Bros.  
Interactive

» **Developer**  
Techland

» **Release**  
2014

Techland's *Dead Island* focuses on exploring tropical environments while beating zombies to a bloody pulp. The developer is up to its old tricks again, but this time it's called *Dying Light*. Techland showed a hands-off demo that highlights first-person parkour action evocative of *Mirror's Edge*, and a day/night cycle that builds tension similar to *Minecraft*. It is reminiscent of the *Dead Island* series, but *Dying Light* may inject a new sense of omnipresent dread into the genre.

By day, players run, slide, and leap through an ocean-side city hunting for survival resources. In the demo, a helicopter airdrops two cargo containers. A woman on a wireless communicator named Jade orders you to book it to those drops before competing survivors do. The hero slips among the rooftops and shanty interiors, weaving in sprinting kicks against zombies with ease. The daylight details every nasty gash on these walking

monsters and individual leaves swaying in the breeze – impressive visuals accomplished by a high-end PC that Techland says is comparable to next-gen consoles.

On his way to the drop zone, the hero stops as we hear the sounds of a whimpering child coming from an apartment. He dispatches a zombie with a fluid swing of his electrified machete. The head rolls off its shoulders like a bowling ball. The door is locked, so he begins examining his surroundings. Bingo – a telephone pole stands near the apartment, which he slowly scales to leap into the second-floor balcony. A zombie grabs his ankle and chows down, which is countered by a brutal head stomp. A Techland developer says this protagonist is already infected, so this bite is of lesser consequence. The developer hints that the infection gives players some unique abilities. The hero finds a little girl crying in a closet, who warns him about

her angry father. Jade says she'll come to pick up the girl and that he should hurry to the drop zone.

It's too late. Heavily armed men have already secured the care package and hold the hero at gunpoint. The protagonist automatically raises his hands and backs away slowly. He makes it to the next package as the sun approaches the horizon, securing something that looks like a vial. *Dying Light* has a shortened day/night cycle. Expect daytime to last roughly 30 minutes, and nighttime slightly less. Scavenging during the day prepares you to defend against stronger foes come nightfall.

"Dammit, I'm late," says the protagonist. Here the game shifts from empowering zombie-slaying action to a frightful, stealth-focused skulk back towards the base camp. The hero's zombie infection allows him to send sonar pulses into the environment, which ping the locations of the fast, extra-deadly monsters. Eventually he is caught, and an intense, fast-paced chase begins. Players can look over their shoulders in slow motion to gauge their pursuer's distance. The demo concludes with one of the speedy undead tackling the hero to the ground.

The lack of polish in the first two *Dead Island* titles may have some gamers doubting *Dying Light*, and the similarities between the two IPs are impossible to ignore. Further linking them is the inclusion of four-player co-op in *Dying Light*, something Techland isn't elaborating on yet. Despite the *Dead Island* titles' mixed reception, many saw vast potential in them. Based on what we've seen, Techland may have found a winning formula. » **Tim Turi**







# Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

## Tinkering with Lightning's new repertoire

The world is in rough shape by the end of Final Fantasy XIII-2, and Lightning has to pick up the pieces in the next entry. She only has 13 days before the apocalypse strikes, a time limit represented by a count-down timer that runs as you play. I played an early version of the third chapter in the Final Fantasy XIII saga, testing out the more action-oriented combat. Lightning Returns moves away from the multi-character, role-swapping battle system of past games, but still provides a good time.

Lightning is alone this time, but the basic flow of combat feels familiar. During my hands-on demo, I stalked through a chaotic city on the trail of FF XIII hero Snow, who Lightning is pursuing for mysterious reasons. I sneaked around foes, jockeying for position to strike them from behind. Sneaky assaults like these grant you advantages in battle, like enemies starting with 10 percent fewer hit points. Once engaged, battles play similarly to previous games, but with an added sense of urgency. In past FF XIII games, players had to wait for a meter to fill before casting

magic spells or attacking. In Lightning Returns, players can wait on their foes until their ATB meter drains. Attacks like lightning strikes or dashing blade thrusts are mapped to face buttons. If you press the corresponding button, Lightning attacks immediately. Once an ATB bar is depleted, you can swap to a new schema (this entry's version of paradigms) for a fresh assault. Meanwhile, the ATB meters of Lightning's other schema replenish.

These schema let Lightning instantly swap between a selection of offensive and defense maneuvers. A magic-based schema lets her damage enemies with frost or fire-based spells, while a melee-focused option lets her choose between heavy and light sword strikes. Like Final Fantasy X-2, these combat modes are linked to various outfits, but I was too focused on the action to notice Lightning's skimpy costume changes. Each schema I used included a block command, which allows players to mitigate damage from incoming assaults with a quick button press. Swapping between schema and doling out

attacks feels like a snappier version of the previous games' battle systems. Up to three schema can be equipped at a time.

Near the end of the demo Lightning crosses paths with a female antagonist cloaked in a veil of dark magic. The woman verbally prods and taunts Lightning. The mysterious lady looks exactly like Lightning's sister, Serah. We suspect the two women launch into a battle here, but we'll have to wait until Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII hits this fall for more answers. If our hands-on time is any indication, this encounter will be a frenetic trial of Lightning's new skills. » **Tim Turi**

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360

» **Style**  
1-Player  
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**  
Square Enix

» **Developer**  
Square Enix

» **Release**  
Fall

Lightning's moveset changes as she switches between outfits on the fly



This Lady looks an awful lot like Serah





# Watch Dogs

New engine, new hardware, new possibilities

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

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

» **Publisher**  
Ubisoft

» **Developer**  
Ubisoft Montreal

» **Release**  
November 19

Ubisoft unveiled *Watch Dogs* a year ago, and much has changed in that time. We now know most of what Sony and Microsoft have planned for the next generation, and along with that, how *Watch Dogs* will be taking advantage of the new hardware. The cornerstone of Ubisoft Montreal's work on its open-world action title is the new Disrupt engine. The city of Chicago is alive and bustling in a way that many other sandbox titles don't quite achieve. Disrupt simulates everything from wind speed to the behavior of pedestrians. This complements *Watch Dogs*' premise of a Chicago managed by a Central Operating System (CtOS), which gives anti-hero Aiden Pearce the tools to manipulate his surroundings.

Citizens react to Aiden's actions in varying and unpredictable ways that keep players on their toes, while also creating the foundation for emergent narrative. Drivers behave differently based on time of day and weather conditions (all simulated by the Disrupt engine), and pedestrians might handle Aiden waving a gun around differently depending on individual personalities. Hacking allows Aiden to see into private lives, and every pedestrian NPC who is vulnerable has a different backstory.

In addition to Aiden's story, players get to experience small, encapsulated narrative moments that are uncovered via hacking and exploration. By spying on people with devices connected to unsecured Wi-Fi, Aiden catches glimpses of the darkest parts of people's lives (like a man who has a secret love of life-sized "action figures"). For players, these brief dramatic encounters add significant texture on top of a vibrant representation of Chicago that

appears more alive and reactive than cities in other open-world titles. Certainly the visual fidelity is impressive, but the application of the Disrupt simulation engine is the more notable application of next-generation power.

Combat is fluid, though not necessary. Aiden can slip in and out of cover, free-run over and around objects, and smoothly transition from ranged firearm combat into melee attacks with an extendable baton. Or he can simply use his skills to distract guards and create cover to slip in and out of restricted areas without notice. The team has endeavored to put control into the hands of players, and this includes agency over how *Watch Dogs* can be played. Hacking and stealth are viable options, but those looking for a more aggressive experience will have no problem creating scenarios for bloodshed.

Anything can be used as cover, which plays into the organic nature of Aiden's interaction with vehicular traffic. Causing accidents or congestion can give players more opportunities to remain low, stay hidden from quarry, or evade authorities. Aiden can also steal any car quietly by hacking the locks in order to travel quickly across the city.

Players can explore Aiden's Chicago on their own in an offline game, but much can be gained by staying connected. "We've all been there in an open-world, action-adventure game and we play the epic adventure of the hero, but when we go into multiplayer, we have a lobby and end up playing capture the flag or something," producer Dominic Guay tells us. "It's not really answering my need to be on an epic quest, and it feels a little clunky. What we want to do is connect single-player

and multiplayer in new ways."

The team isn't yet talking much about the "seamless multiplayer" experience other than to assure that it's going to be something new (as hinted at the E3 2012 reveal and PlayStation 4 announcement event). Multiplayer takes place in the same, full version of Chicago without compromise to population density or interaction.

Another aspect of multiplayer will be a mobile extension (Guay isn't fond of the term "companion app"). With it, players will be able to control Chicago just as Aiden does while interacting with friends across platforms.

We expect to learn more in the coming months about Aiden's dark past, his quest for revenge, the friends he'll be relying on, and just how Guay and his team intend to revolutionize multiplayer with the assistance of next-generation hardware power. » **Mike Futter**





# The Bureau: XCOM Declassified

Begin the story, continue the legacy

Just like the alien invasion the series depicts, the world was not ready for a shooter based in the XCOM universe when it was first announced in 2010. Franchise faithful, who had been clamoring for another traditional strategy installment, were grabbing pitchforks and lighting torches to march on 2K Games. Many others were simply unmoved by the premise. 2K Games made the decision and delayed the project multiple times as its Marin studio tried to find the right angle.

Fast-forward to last year's strategy revival, XCOM: Enemy Unknown. 2K put the series in the hands of the genre experts at Firaxis Games, bringing accessible-yet-challenging gameplay to fans old and new. The mob had been satisfied and dispersed. 2K Marin could finally step out of the shadows with its rebranded, re-envisioned third-person take on the XCOM universe. No longer a disconnected project, The Bureau: XCOM Declassified is tethered to the pillars of the franchise and tells the story of how the agency was formed.

The Bureau is set in 1962 at the height of the Cold War. The titular clandestine organization was established to be a first response unit to a communist invasion, while also protecting the American people from panic. When the aliens arrive in middle America, Agent William Carter and his team must fight back.

The Bureau is a tactical experience that presents similar challenges to those found in Enemy Unknown, but through the lens of a third-person, squad-based shooter. In execution, The Bureau feels similar to the later Mass Effect titles on the battlefield.

A power wheel, called Battle Focus, enables Carter to almost entirely stop time to use abilities. He can also instruct his two teammates to lay down traps, taunt enemies out of cover, or create a diversion. Guiding movement for each of the allies has a similar feel to Enemy Unknown, with a slightly pulled-back camera, shield icons to indicate cover (partial and full), and pop-ups when a flanking bonus is conferred against a foe. The AI can take over and hunker down without

guidance, but conducting the flow of combat is important. From my time playing, I found that Battle Focus quickly becomes second nature, though it feels a little odd to rejoin the fight after directing traffic.

Decisions matter in The Bureau, and just like in Enemy Unknown, agents level up in one of four classes, with two skills to choose from at each of the five ranks. As the game progresses, protecting those operatives becomes crucial. With the threat of perma-death, players can find themselves in challenging positions if too many experienced allies perish. Playing smart and resisting the urge to run and gun is of paramount importance.

Your safety net takes the form of secondary missions and dispatch assignments. Taking on an optional encounter or sending an agent off on a task are both ways to rank up low-level operatives or simply keep an experienced team up to speed without being forced into rotating agents for primary missions.

The Bureau: XCOM Declassified is firmly rooted in the traditions of the strategy series. The concepts that cross over, the unified art style, and the attention to cerebral play might be enough to invite diehard strategy fans to give a third-person shooter a try.

» Mike Futter

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

» **Style**  
1-Player Shooter

» **Publisher**  
2K Marin

» **Developer**  
2K Games

» **Release**  
August 20



Agent William Carter and his men are the only thing that stand between the invaders and the American people





# Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2

Test-driving Dracula, fangs and all

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

» **Style**  
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**  
Konami

» **Developer**  
MercurySteam

» **Release**  
Winter 2013

Castlevania fans have been battling Dracula for decades, but the Dark Lord's powers are finally in their hands with Lords of Shadow 2. We got a taste of his evil powers in a playable preview build.

The end of the first Lords of Shadow reveals that Dracula has survived until present day. He resides in a Gothic castle that a modern city has been built around. Players will be able to travel back and forth between the city and castle freely. MercurySteam is offering a more open world this time, which expands as you explore. The city contains bright lights and a Times Square-like area, but still has tight corridors, hints of medieval architecture, and gargoyles to maintain that oppressive Castlevania feeling. The castle itself is more dreamlike, toying with reality as you trek through its dark halls.

The demo highlights the beginning of the game, which takes place 1,000 years in the past. An army of soldiers is sieging Dracula's castle. The Prince of Darkness sits casually at his throne as a battering ram bashes against his door. The action begins when they finally breach the room, a perfect opportunity to test out Dracula's full suite of abilities. Like the



This paladin battles Dracula in the name of God

previous game, players lay waste to lesser foes like these knights with a series of whip attacks. You can now control the camera at will, making it easier to steer the fury of Dracula's glowing red Blood Whip. The dodge ability is snappier now, and even knocks over foes in your path.

Swapping between light and dark magic played a large role in the first Lords of Shadow, and that combat variety continues with multiple weapons. Dracula can swap between the Void Sword and Chaos Claws on the fly. The flaming Chaos Claws allow you to perform slow, heavy attacks that are great for shattering enemy armor and shields. The Void Sword replenishes your health as you hew through the opposition. Should you run low on health or magic (which lets you use the sword and claws), Dracula can replenish himself by drinking the blood of dazed foes.

The action eventually spills out into the castle yard, where a tremendous army encroaches upon the fortress. A huge Siege Titan breaks through the fray, and a golden, winged paladin soars towards Dracula. This boss pesters Dracula intermittently throughout this intro sequence. Dismantling the Titan mixes together combat and platforming as you scale the machine. Enemies pour out of openings, engaging you in battle on the Titan's arm as it pounds against the castle.

The Paladin flies nearby, firing arrows at Dracula as he climbs. One of my favorite elements of this dramatic encounter involves baiting the Paladin to shoot critical rivets on the Siege Titan, causing sections of the mechanical monster to fall off. After a series of leaps through deadly gears and more skirmishing, Dracula finds the Titan's controls and vomits blood all over them. The demo ends as the mechanical giant malfunctions and crashes to the ground.

Konami says Dracula encounters his son, Alucard, shortly after destroying the Siege Titan. After the father-and-son encounter, Dracula wakes up 1,000 years into the future in present day as a paler, gaunt vampire. He's been stripped of all his armaments, beginning his quest to free himself from the shackles of immortality with his bare fists.

The gameplay improvements and large-scale encounters become even more impressive as you realize Lords of Shadow 2 never pauses to load. Everything we saw is seamless. Even after dying in the Siege Giant's grinding cogs, players are resurrected a short distance away without skipping a beat. Technical advances such as this indicate that Konami and MercurySteam aren't happy with "good enough," and are striving to make Lords of Shadow 2 a high-water mark for the series. » **Tim Turi**



Dracula was formerly of the Belmont clan

# Plants vs. Zombies 2

PopCap's lawn defense game returns, and it's about time



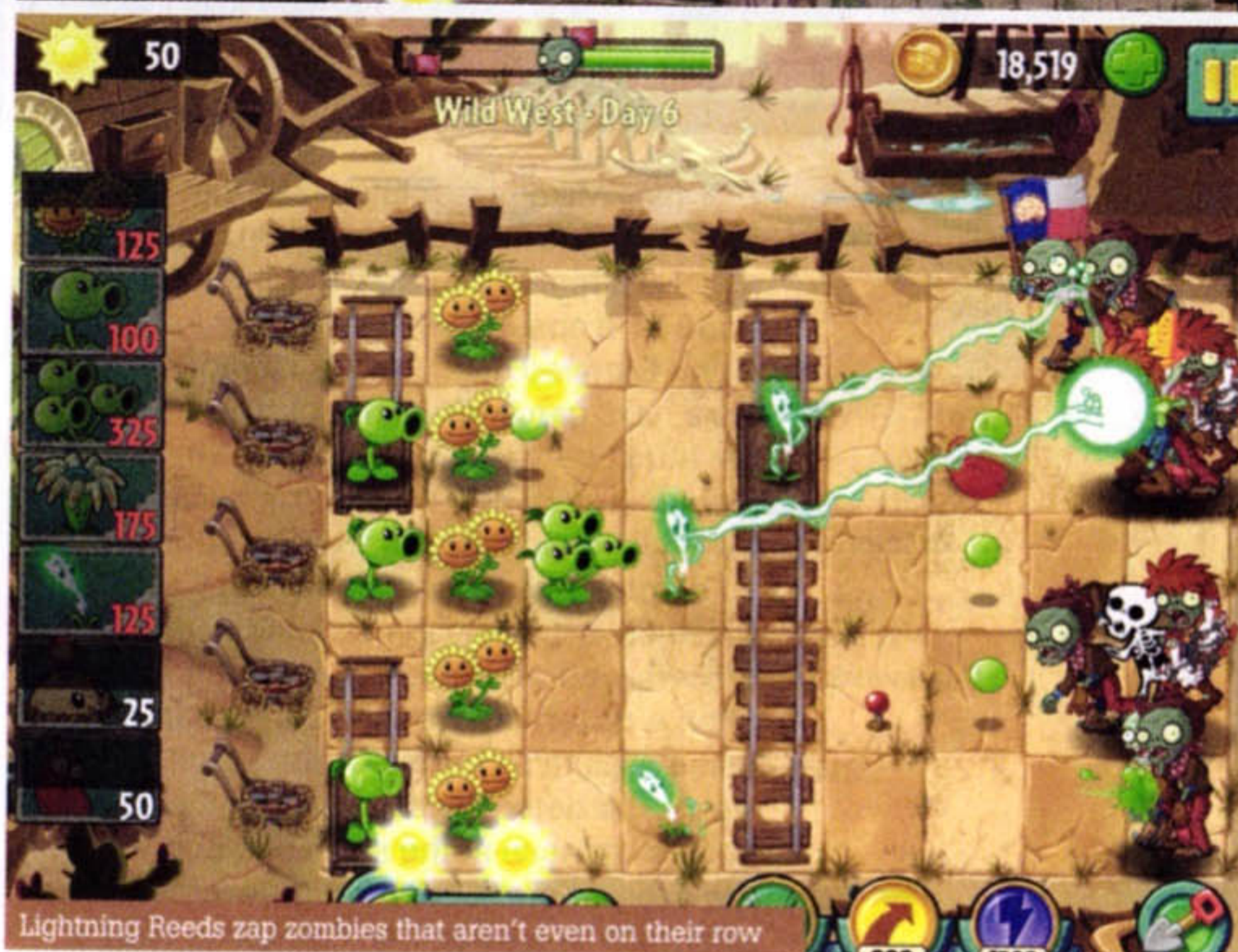
During the original *Plants vs. Zombies*, players acquired an item called the Magic Taco. This taco didn't grant players with any benefits in battle, but they could exchange the taco for money if they gave it to PvZ's shopkeeper, Crazy Dave. This exchange was one of the game's many humorous moments, but it also laid the foundation for the sequel. Crazy Dave was so impressed with this taco treat that he wants to eat it again – not another taco like that one, but that exact same taco. In order to do this, Crazy Dave has built himself a time machine. Unfortunately, things quickly go awry and the machine sends Dave quantum leaping through various points in history. Now zombies have invaded every time period, from Ancient Egypt to The Old West, and only you and your green thumb can subdue the hordes.

"All the zombies in PvZ 2 are different from the ones in the original *Plants vs. Zombies*," says senior producer Allen Murray. One example of these new zombies types is the cowboy-themed Poncho Zombies who take more hits to bring down than your average zombie. Meanwhile, in Ancient Egypt, Ra Zombies will attempt to steal your sun if you don't kill them fast enough. But you encounter more than just human zombies in your trip through time. Zombie Chickens come in flocks, move quickly, and love to chow down on plants.

You have a variety of new plant types to combat all the undead. Bonk Choy plants are close-range fighters that have a wicked uppercut, while Lightning Reeds fry zombies like bug zappers. The Bloomerang even has petals shaped like a boomerang. "What's great about the Bloomerang," says Murray, "is that his petals sail across the screen hitting any and all zombies in their path, then do a quick u-turn and sail back across the same row, hitting everything again."

If *Plants vs. Zombies 2*'s base plants don't push back the waves of zombies fast enough, you can supercharge your produce with plant food. Plant food affects every plant differently, but it always has a powerful effect that might help turn the tide of battle. After using plant food on sunflowers, for example, the perky little plant starts to produce lots of sun in quick bursts. Alternatively, using plant food on a regular peashooter turns it into a rapid-fire machinegun.

When you're tired of watching the plants do all the work, *Plants vs. Zombies 2* allows you to get your own hands dirty. Using coins that you collect during gameplay, you can initiate touchscreen power-ups that enable you to directly combat the zombies with a finger or two. The Power Toss ability lets you bump zombies backward and even chuck them off the screen. Power Pinch lets you squeeze a zombie between your thumb and forefinger. Finally, Power Zap gives the tip of your finger



Lightning Reeds zap zombies that aren't even on their row



PvZ 2 will take place in different points through history. So far we know about Ancient Egypt, Pirates, and The Old West. Yes, Pirates are a historical time

an electrifying effect.

Even though the original game first released on PC, the game performed extremely well on mobile devices, so PopCap has shifted focus to mobile for the sequel. *Plants vs. Zombies 2* will release initially on iOS, but PopCap is planning to bring the game to other platforms, such as Android, later this summer. Some fans might also worry about PvZ 2's new free-to-play model, but Murray doesn't want players to think that they're getting a simplified experience.

"Our philosophy is and has always been to make the best, most entertaining games period. *Plants vs. Zombies 2* improves on the original in every way," says Murray. "You can play every level, unlock every challenge, face every new zombie, visit every world and play through the entire game for free. For those players who want to accelerate their play, try a few premium plants, or stock up on extra plant food, those and other upgrades are available in the store."

We're not going to complain about getting a free sequel to one of our favorite strategy titles of the last few years, but if the game is as polished and fun to play as the first *Plants vs. Zombies*, we'd be happy to throw PopCap a couple of bucks. » **Ben Reeves**

- » **Platform**  
iOS • Android
- » **Style**  
1-Player Strategy
- » **Publisher**  
Electronic Arts
- » **Developer**  
PopCap Games
- » **Release**  
July 18 (iOS)  
TBA (Android)

# The Evil Within

A glimpse into Mikami's next nightmare



» **Platform**  
Next-gen TBA  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**  
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**  
Bethesda  
Softworks

» **Developer**  
Tango  
Gameworks

» **Release**  
2014

Shinji Mikami revolutionized the Resident Evil series and third-person gunplay with Resident Evil 4. He combined horror with Suda 51's absurd sense of humor in *Shadows of the Damned*. But now his studio is crafting a next-gen survival horror game that's not attached to Capcom or Grasshopper Manufacture. *The Evil Within* is a mainline into Mikami's brain, and it's a twisted place.

The prologue follows Sebastian Castellanos, a detective investigating a handful of police officers who went missing at a mental hospital. A dozen or so squad cars are parked in the asylum's courtyard with no officers in sight. The detective cracks open the door and covers his nose at the smell of blood. Bodies are everywhere. Streaks of gore indicate the aftermath of a slaughter. Sebastian finds a security room and spots a camera feed showing a group of officers fleeing down a hallway. The cops fire at something off-camera. Ribbons of blood fly from their necks as a translucent figure teleports between them. The hooded figure slowly turns toward the security camera, looking the detective in the

eye. The spectral figure is suddenly behind our hero, arm raised to strike.

When he comes to, Sebastian finds himself hanging upside down in a meat locker filled with hanging corpses. A knife protrudes from the abdomen of a nearby victim. A hulking man caked in blood stalks into the room and hacks away at one of the decaying bodies. Pints of blood splatter on the ground at once, and the butcher drags a torso across the room by its head. The brute is busy slicing up the poor soul's trunk on a huge cutting board – the perfect opportunity to escape.

Gameplay resumes as Sebastian swings back and forth, gaining enough momentum to snag the knife from the nearby corpse. He cuts himself free and sneaks towards an apparent exit. It's locked. A loud buzzer sounds and a body slides through a chute, landing in a pile of corpses behind him. The developer at the controls sneaks up near the doorway leading to the butcher block. The huge man walks away from the table, revealing a set of keys hanging from a meat hook. A suspenseful attempt to creep up and snatch

the keys succeeds. He unlocks the door and escapes.

Sebastian trips an invisible alarm on a catwalk above the butcher's room. Heavy footsteps boom from the stairway behind him. The butcher revs up a huge chainsaw and a chase begins. The detective sprints down a long hallway, but the butcher catches up in what appears to be a scripted moment. He slices Sebastian's leg, who then falls to the ground.

The butcher slams a gate shut, trapping him in a dark room. Lights flick on overhead, cascading down the long hallway to reveal rotating blades on either side. The detective limps down the hallway as the walls of death close in. He narrowly escapes into an open area filled with hospital beds and sheet partitions. The developer at the controls evades the butcher once again during this tense sequence. He eventually escapes the mental hospital in one piece, but the world outside is in ruin. The streets have split open and buildings and vehicles are sinking into the yawning abyss.

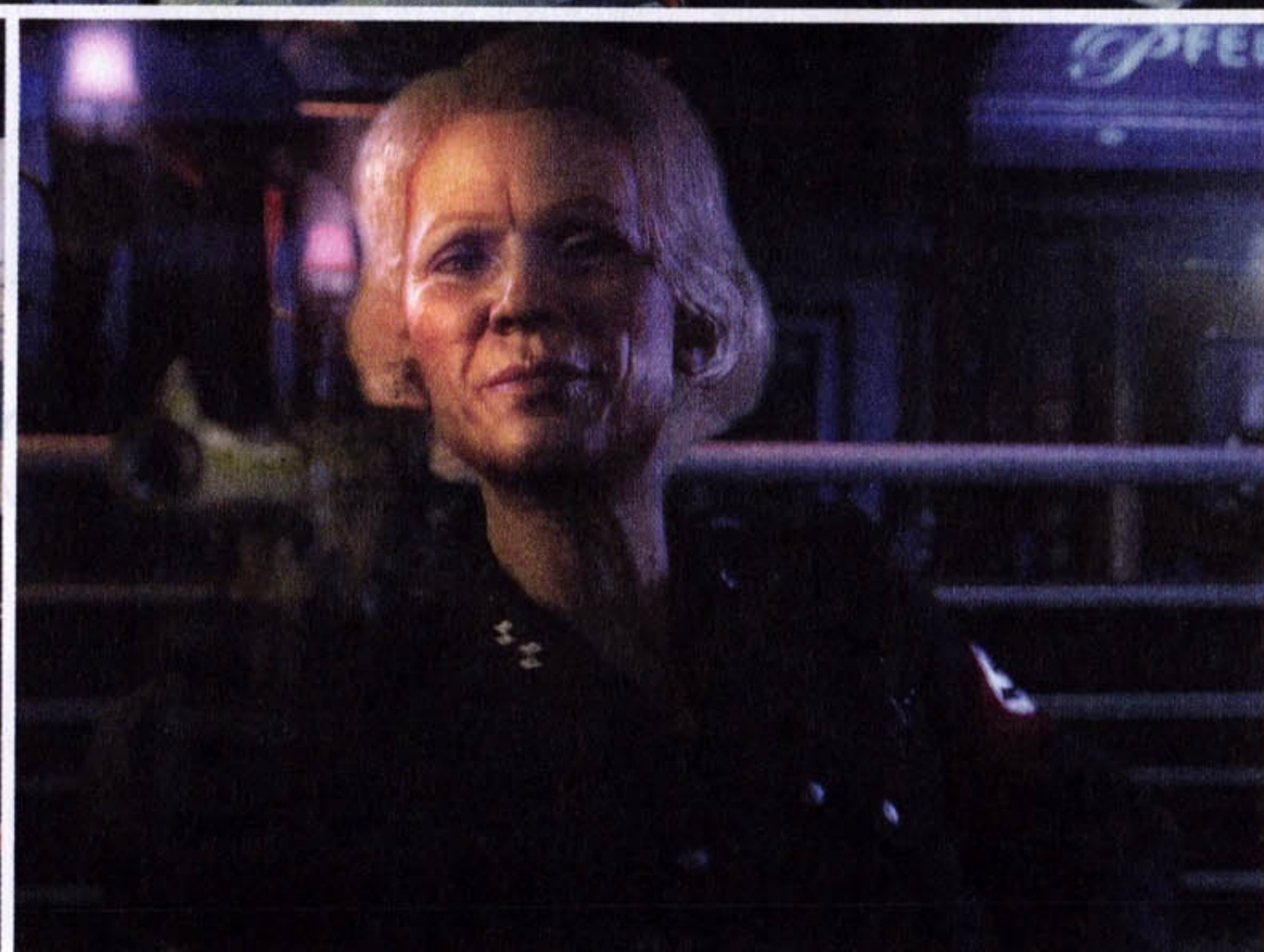
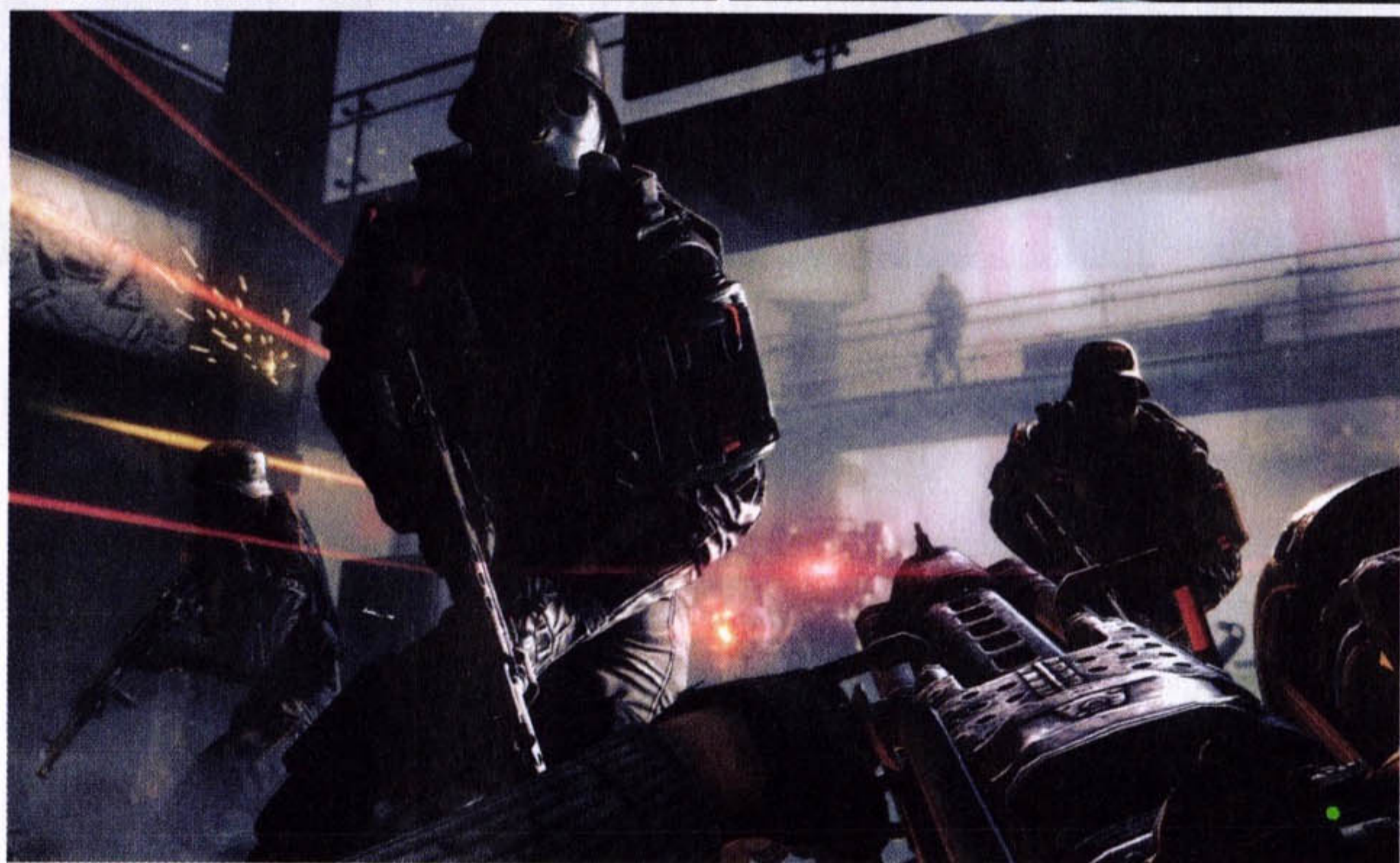
Tango Gameworks also showed off some gameplay in a later segment of the game. Zombie-like creatures assault a house similar to the defense sequence in Resident Evil 4. The over-the-shoulder gunplay looks a lot like the aforementioned Capcom title, but players can conserve ammo by incinerating fallen enemies with torches. Mine traps can also be placed near windows, which explode when enemies bust inside. This sequence ends with a surprise attack from a multi-limbed abomination that looks like a demented version of Samara from *The Ring*.

Mikami's newest creation looks like it covers familiar genre tropes while ratcheting up the showmanship and brutality to unforgiving levels. All the pieces are in place: the unstoppable stalker, jump scares, hallucinations, and gameplay rooted in a nearly decade-old blockbuster. Fortunately for horror fans, *The Evil Within* is shaping up to be more unnerving than the sum of its parts.

» **Tim Turi**



Players can use these hospital bed partitions to break line of sight with the stalker



# Wolfenstein: The New Order

An alternate-history take on the legendary FPS series

The tinny gunshots and Nazi cries of *Wolfenstein 3D* triggered an avalanche of FPS popularity. The genre's first franchise has mostly enjoyed success, save for the last polarizing entry developed by Raven Software. Machine Games is taking up the mantle this time, a development studio mainly comprised of talent from *Starbreeze* (*The Darkness*, *The Chronicles of Riddick* series). The year is 1960, and the Nazis rule the world with advanced sci-fi weaponry. *Wolfenstein: The New Order* is a continuation of the previous storyline, but it's a fresh take on the formula.

The tone of Machine Games' next-gen take on the iconic FPS series has the same unpredictability of Quentin Tarantino's films. One moment, a psychotic Nazi villainess and her vacant-eyed boy toy are testing hero B.J. Blazkowicz for Jewish blood at gun point. The next moment, our hero is scrutinizing a memorial to the first German to land on the moon, muttering "F--- you, moon." It sounds jarring, but the unapologetic shifts between dire situations and corny one-liners feels self-aware and smart.

The mood was all over the place during my time with the game, but the gunplay hit a consistent note of dumb fun. In the mission I played, Blazkowicz launches a solo

assault on a Nazi research facility in London. After dropping him off, Blazkowicz's driver speeds towards the front gate. An explosion rocks the building and nearly sends a statue down on top of our hero. A huge robotic dog stalks the fresh ruins outside the complex. The beast chases me over and under the maze of concrete. Eventually my path is blocked by a mesh grate. Fortunately, a laser tool allows me to trace a hole in the obstacle like a cat burglar cutting through a window. The robo-canine gives chase again, but gets crushed by slabs of rubble during a scripted sequence.

I test my marksmanship on the disoriented Nazis inside the facility. Gunplay feels responsive on an Xbox 360 controller (which was plugged into a high-end PC running the game). Aiming down the iron sights feels similar to other FPS titles, but who wants to fine-tune a shot when almost every weapon can be dual-wielded? The most empowering moment of the demo for me involves clearing a Nazi-packed hallway by unloading all 40 shells of my twin semi-automatic shotguns. In another sequence, I spray a gatling gun towards little robot sentries flying around a gigantic replica of the moon, sending panels of the model flying.

Sometimes you're outgunned, which

requires smart use of the cover system. Holding down the left bumper adheres you to cover, allowing you to lean out and fire with precision. Clever players can use an upgraded laser tool to cut a hole into their cover and fire through it. This technique comes in handy when facing off against one of the heavily armed bipedal mechs, which Machine Games suggests players will eventually commandeer.

Firefights seem to be straightforward tests of bravado and reflexes, but some intelligence is required to pass certain environmental puzzles. In one situation, players fire the brakes off an elevator and ride its counterweight up the shaft. Later, Blazkowicz uses his laser tool to melt the chain holding up a fake satellite, which drops to create an improvised bridge between catwalks. Overcoming roadblocks using the laser tool helped fill the void between firefights in an engaging way.

The build of *Wolfenstein I* played was a decent challenge. I died a couple times, but partially regenerating health mitigates frustration, and Machine Games is still tweaking the default difficulty. The developer can adjust damage counters and hit point totals all it wants, but I don't want the eccentric narrative and teeth-clenching gunplay to change one bit. » **Tim Turi**

» **Platform**  
Next-gen TBA  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360 • PC

» **Style**  
1-Player Shooter

» **Publisher**  
Bethesda  
Softworks

» **Developer**  
Machine Games

» **Release**  
Winter 2013



# Beyond: Two Souls

Ellen Page brings Quantic Dream's new title to life at Tribeca Film Festival

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3

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

» **Publisher**  
Sony Computer  
Entertainment

» **Developer**  
Quantic Dream

» **Release**  
October 8

Sitting in the SVA Theatre in New York City's Tribeca neighborhood, I wasn't quite sure what to expect from a screening of *Beyond: Two Souls*. Quantic Dream's latest is only the second video game to grace the festival founded by Tribeca native Robert De Niro (the first was *L.A. Noire* from Rockstar and Team Bondi), and I was skeptical that the impact of an interactive experience would retain its weight in a passive setting. I think about the medium not only as story and action, but also in terms of player agency and avatar manipulation. The former could certainly come across, but how would director David Cage convey the tactile sensation of moving Ellen Page's digital persona through her environment?

Watching 35 minutes of *Beyond: Two Souls* wasn't identical to playing a video game, but as someone versed in the language of the medium, it wasn't a completely disconnected experience either. From a mechanical perspective it was unclear how Jodie Holmes, on the run from authorities and forced to live on the streets, was connected to the controller guiding her movements. However, the

game underneath the stunning visual display and superb theatrical performances was not entirely obfuscated.

A significant aspect of the project is Jodie's interaction with a disembodied, otherworldly guardian named Aiden. Though the specific mechanics of this did not surface, moving between Jodie and her spectral companion appeared to be fluid, as if the two are not completely distinct beings. A tether, a physical bond that prevents the entity from moving too far away from his charge, connects the pair. Much like a poltergeist (though Cage was loathe to use any word other than "entity"), Aiden can disrupt the environment, open doors, and survey dangerous situations. He also seems keyed into the game's brutal fisticuffs.

Jodie is a former CIA operative and a trained hand-to-hand combatant. In the sequence we were shown, she is forced to apply her skills in the name of survival. As such, the damage she inflicts is more realistic, graphic, and jarring than that featured in many other games intended for an adult audience.

When I spoke with David Cage after the

screening, I asked him about his feelings on violence, especially as he recently spoke out against frivolous bloodshed.

"I'm fine with violence as long as it comes with a meaning," he told me. "If it means something, if it allows you to tell something about the character or to create a specific emotional state, I'm fine with that."

In fact, violence plays a central role in the scene we were shown. It is woven throughout as Jodie tries to end her own life, as she brutally fights off a pack of vicious predators, and as she closes her eyes one last time as the sequence concludes and, for us, the lights come up in the theater. The bloodshed and physical strife are not everything, though. There are moments of innocence and tenderness as Jodie is welcomed into a small group of indigents who offer what little they have, showing that true humanity and kindness does not come from wealth or power.

It is in moments of simplicity such as this that the full range of Quantic Dream's enhanced performance-capture technique proves its worth. Cage explained to the audience that *Beyond* marks a huge step forward for his studio. What was once a two-step recording endeavor involving traditional voice over and subsequent pantomime is now a fluid process that enables the actors to remain in the moment physically. The end result is a more authentic performance that, while still imperfect, is the closest anyone has come to capturing humanity in digital form.

For those who played and enjoyed *Heavy Rain* and *Indigo Prophecy* before it, elements will seem familiar. The mechanisms for choosing dialog responses, the visual representation of Jodie's stress, and the impact of moment-to-moment decisions all seem unchanged. But *Beyond: Two Souls* is new, and as we follow 15 years of Jodie's life, it has the chance to impart what David Cage has always known: games can engage our humanity. » **Mike Futter**

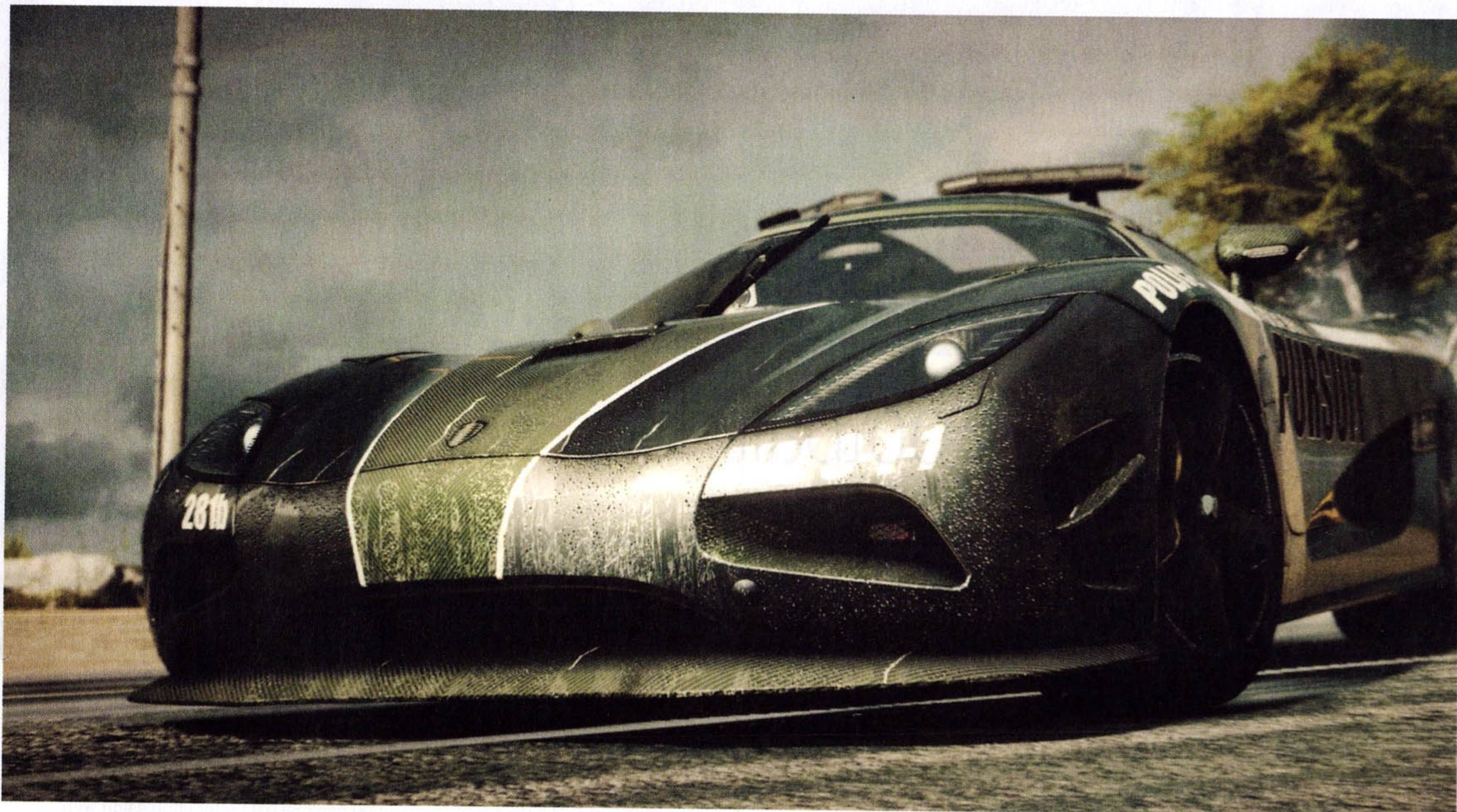
As a child, Jodie is forced to confront her connection with the entity she calls Aiden





# Need for Speed: Rivals

The never-ending game of cat and mouse



The Need for Speed franchise has splintered off into a variety of strains in the past years, with each title seeking to serve a particular need. The most recent effort – Criterion Games' Most Wanted – features rival racers and cops out on the prowl, but Electronic Arts and the franchise are not done with this fundamental racing relationship. Need for Speed: Rivals is being handled by the newly inaugurated Ghost Games (formerly EA Gothenburg) in Sweden with the help of Criterion, and the game appears to take a page from some of the latter developer's innovations within the series:

separate career modes for both the cops and the racers, as well as a lack of a distinction between single- and multiplayer modes.

Similar to Criterion's Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit, Rivals contains full career paths for both cops and racers and lets you switch between the two by accessing Hideouts for the racers and Command Posts for the police. Both sides have various technological tricks up their sleeves, including jammers and electromagnetic pulses for the outlaws, and shockwaves, roadblocks, and helicopter patrols for the cops. Further interplay between the two sides occurs via a scoring

system involving wagers of speed points that you've earned.

Rivals takes place in a fictional location known as Redview County, which creative director Craig Sullivan says contains over 100 miles of road and features varied weather states such as snow, hail, fog, dust storms, and more. The weather isn't restricted to specific races, but instead changes globally as you drive around.

This feature isn't exclusive to the next-gen versions of the game, but Rivals will dip its toe into the upcoming generation. Although Sullivan did not go into great detail, he said that Rivals uses the PlayStation 4's ability to instantly post videos. Sullivan declined to state whether the game would use the PS4 controller's touchpad, and was equally tight-lipped about any other next-gen features, although it will use Kinect.

One futuristic feature Sullivan is open about is the next step in Need For Speed's always-on Autolog online component. Rivals features AllDrive, which allows your friends to play in your world simultaneously (with no waiting in lobbies) and also lets them help or hurt you. If you're a cop, for instance, a friend can jump in your session and team up with you to do things you otherwise couldn't do yourself.

EA has upped the output of the Need For Speed series, therefore it's more important than ever to make each one matter. Rivals may tread on familiar ground, but it aims to expand series' staples to bring us even closer to the thrill of the chase. » **Matthew Kato**

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

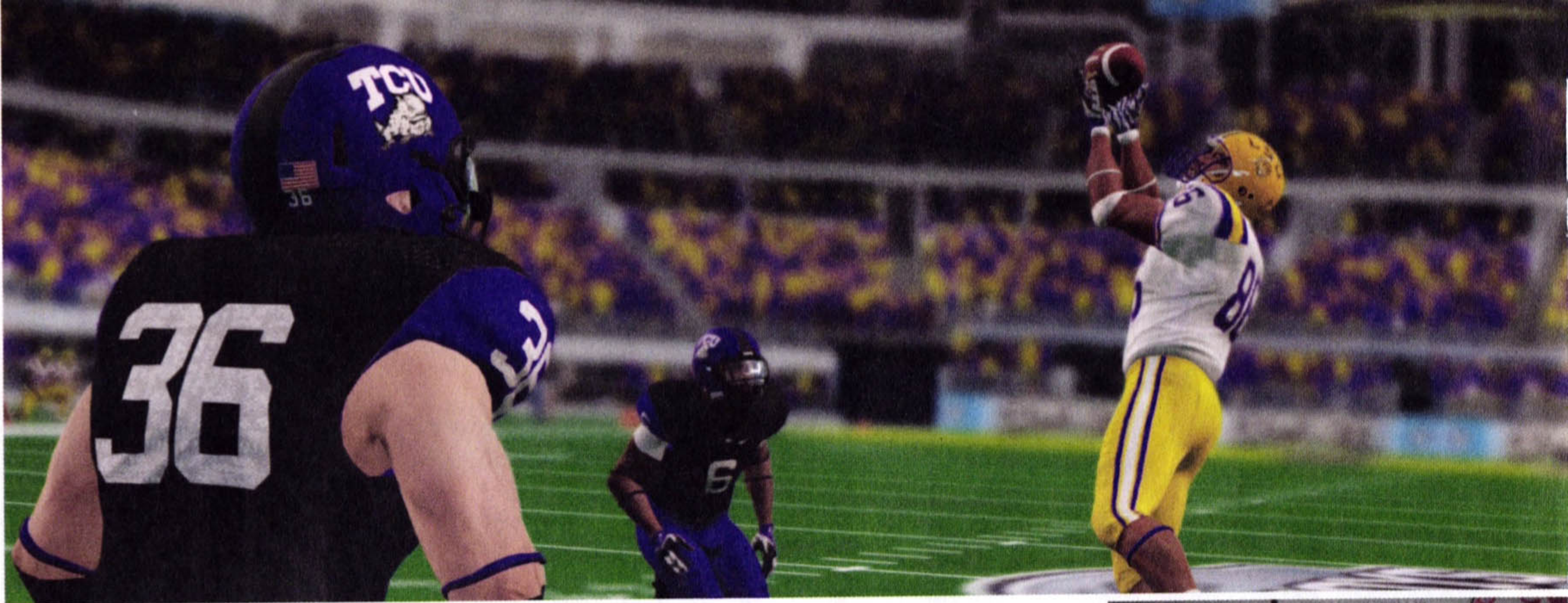
» **Style**  
1-Player Racing  
(Online TBA)

» **Publisher**  
EA Games

» **Developer**  
Ghost Games

» **Release**  
November 19





# NCAA Football 14

## A more efficient dynasty

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**  
EA Sports

» **Developer**  
EA Tiburon

» **Release**  
July 9

Recruiting new players is the lifeblood of NCAA's Dynasty mode, and this year's game streamlines the way you create a dominating program. Here are the new changes infusing every step of the recruiting process.

### The Players

NCAA 14 ditches the phone call aspect of recruiting in favor of a more direct, less time-consuming process. A pool of points, which you spend on recruiting players, is at your disposal every week. Each player has a maximum amount of points you can spend on him during the season. You can set up how many points you want to spend on each player and have it automatically carry forward every week, or you can tinker with it as the season goes on.

### The Pitch

The pitch process is more streamlined than in the past, but that doesn't mean it's necessarily easier. The relative strengths and

weaknesses of your school still influence a recruit's decision. Aspects like your school's conference prestige or academics are automatically applied in the form of bonus points each week. Like last year, these are dynamic, so if your prestige as a championship contender takes a hit during the season, that is reflected in fewer bonus points awarded toward that recruit.

Additionally, some players have deal-breakers that preclude your team from recruiting them. However, the dynamic pitches again come into play, meaning that if your team's prestige changes, you could find yourself in or out of luck with a recruit (see the coach sidebar for more).

### The Visit

Plenty of things remain the same in NCAA 14, such as the overall balance of points distributed to players, scouting, scholarships, and campus visits. The latter is tweaked, however, with the timing and mix of players you have visit being more important. Developer

ALL POSITIONS (35)	
1 Ron Cooper	500
2 Maurice Miller	0
3 Brent Young	50
4 Travis Brink	500
5 Donta Carpenter	500
6 Brad Newell	300
7 John Richardson	0

PROSPECT OVERVIEW	
<b>TRAVIS BRINK</b>	81 OVR
6'7", 227 lbs	#4 DE - Pass Rusher
1 LEAD	
2 -1,440	
3 -1,730	
4 -4,375	
5 -4,680	

SCHOLARSHIP OFFERED (25 LEFT)

EA Tiburon talked with recruiters from West Virginia University who told them that a school would never bring in multiple quarterbacks for a visit in the same week because then they wouldn't feel special. Accordingly, you can make a better impression with potential players if they visit with complementary players, like quarterbacks coming in with receivers.

### The Last Chance

After the season ends you still have a chance to land your recruits. Unlike last year, however, where it was spread over four weeks, in NCAA 14 you'll get one big pool of points to spend in a single week with no per-player limit. » **Matthew Kato**

## The Ultimate College Team

The Ultimate Team mode makes its debut in NCAA 14, and it lets you collect and play games with player cards. It features over 2,500 former college players (like Peyton Manning in his Tennessee days), with multiple versions of many of them. Although NCAA's Ultimate Team borrows FIFA's 10-game season format with promotion and relegation up and down multiple divisions, apart from cards that bestow players more games, it unfortunately doesn't have consumables like fitness cards. Team chemistry is also not taken into account.

**HC GEORGE CAMPBELL** LEVEL 11

1 UPGRADE AVAILABLE 1,160 / 3,680

**THE CLOSER (1/3)**  
You have an edge on your competition, towards the end of the season, for recruiting.

CURRENT LEVEL  
Increase your recruiting points total by +500 points in weeks 8 through 15.

NEXT LEVEL  
Increase your recruiting points total by +1000 points in weeks 8 through 15.

RECRUITING - LEVEL 10 UPGRADE TO LEVEL 2

EA SPORTS EXIT UNDO 1 HC / 0 OC / 0 DC UPGRADE AVAILABLE! COACH XP 1160 / 3680

## Coach Skills

Continuing to elevate the importance of coaches in a college program, NCAA 14 has coach skill points that your head coach and coordinators can earn for your performance on the field and in recruiting. Head coaches spend these on two different trees: recruiting and game management. The former lets you level up skills such as getting more recruiting points depending on what week in the season it is, the ability to get a recruit to instantly commit, or being able to recruit a player even if he has a deal-breaker against your school. Game Management skills allow you to remove an opponent's home field advantage on your quarterback (no more pre-play confusion), offset the ice-the-kicker effect, and more. Coordinator skills manifest themselves as per-game player ratings adjustments depending on that coordinator's particular area of expertise, such as a defensive coordinator giving his backs a boost in their coverage abilities.



# NHL 14

In serving two masters, can NHL regain its balance?

Like a player who is held to different standards by the fans and his head coach, the NHL development team at EA Sports serves two masters. The hardcore fans repeatedly sound the drum for a deeper simulation experience that more accurately captures the essence of their favorite sport, while business realities no doubt drive the studio to try and reach a wider audience with more accessible gameplay. EA Canada hopes that by honing the gameplay to properly balance hockey's sense of aggression, speed, and skill, it can appease both parties.

The centerpiece of this effort is the integration of FIFA's player-impact engine. Taking into account player size, speed, and momentum, EA says the new system does a better job of delivering believable results when two players collide on the ice. Take a run at a hulking defenseman like Zdeno Chara with a smaller player, and you may bounce off like a fly. Crash into an unaware player with a bruiser and you create the kind of hit that dominates *NHL Tonight* highlight reels. You might want to be careful exercising your new-found crushing capabilities as well, because if you take a run at a star you may end up starting a fight.

In previous NHL games, fights were typically divorced from the action. No other players

were on the ice, and the majority of skirmishes took place after a whistle. With the new Enforcer Engine, you can still pick fights before and after whistles, but antagonizing hits may also cause the opposing team to drop their gloves. In a new third-person perspective, the rest of your team stays on the ice (sometimes getting into it themselves) as you settle the dispute with your fists using a new fighting engine that takes cues from the *Fight Night* series. Since size and strength play a big role in how effective your fighter is, if you find yourself in a skirmish as a smaller skill player, you may want to skate away.

Not every change in NHL 14 is aimed at bruisers. The team has tweaked the True Performance Skating system introduced last year to give you more control at top speeds and allow defensemen to pivot and turn more responsively. The newcomer-focused one-touch deke system puts more moves at players' fingertips as well, but don't expect to spam these buttons and dance down the ice. String together two spin moves in a row and you may find yourself at a standstill – a terrible place to be with a defender bearing down at top speed.

Off the ice, EA has many changes in store for its two franchise modes. Both GM Connected and the offline Be A GM

incorporate most of the major CBA changes, including salary cap/floor adjustments, the ability to retain salary in trades, and player contract term limits. In addition, EA is introducing an offline trade difficulty slider so you can adjust how hard it is to fleece AI GMs. For GM Connected, which had a rough debut in NHL 13, the tweaked menu system should be less sluggish, and new tools make it easier to message other GMs, respond to trades, and get a clear picture of how many games need to be played before the commissioner needs to advance the schedule.

Time will tell if EA can coalesce these features into an appealing package to both longtime fans and newcomers. Madden spent the majority of this hardware generation being tugged between these two masters and suffered because of it. The NHL team has fared much better over the past seven years, so perhaps it can pull off this tricky feat with the deftness of a Pavel Datsyuk. » **Matt Bertz**

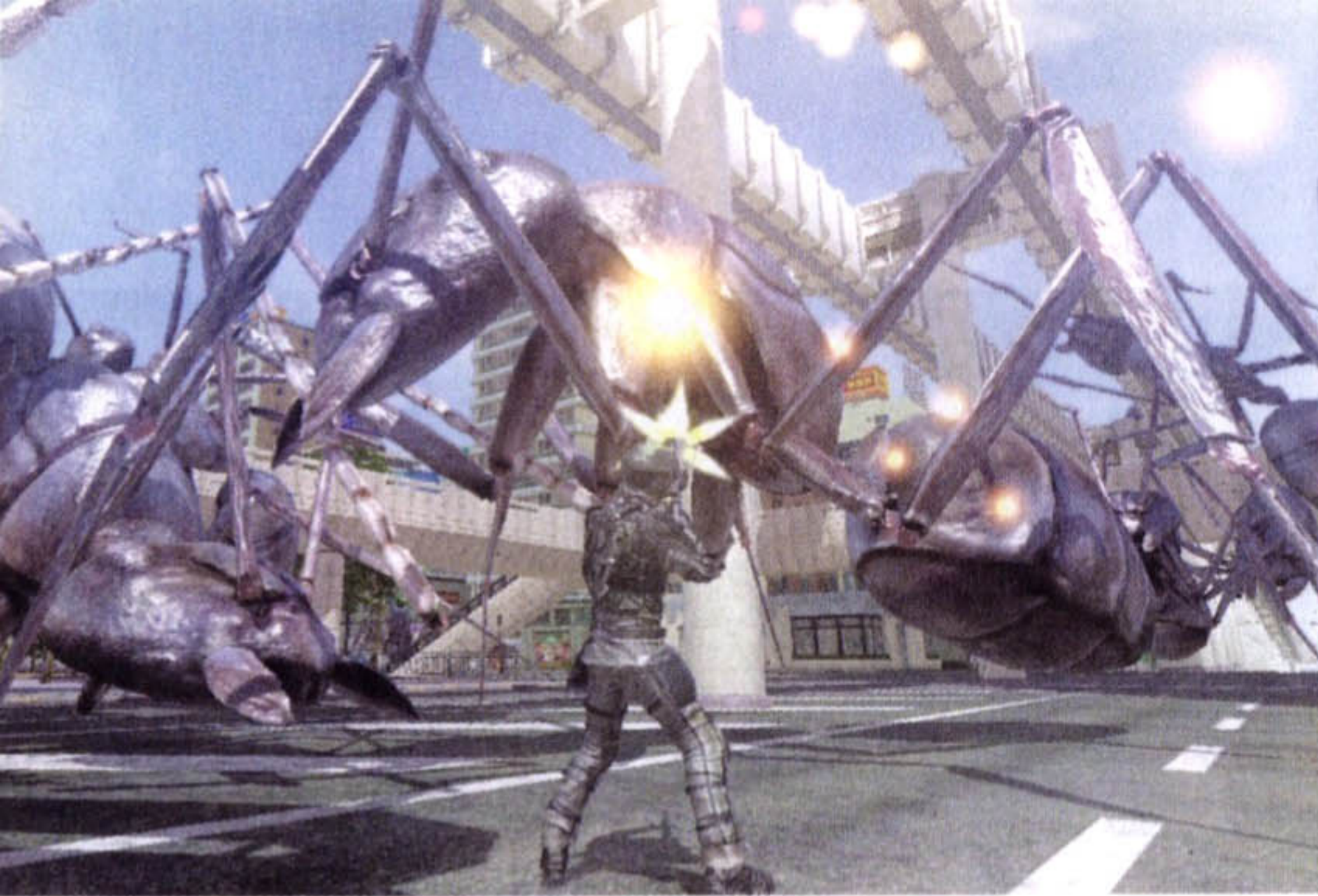
» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360

» **Style**  
1 to 6-Player  
Sports (PS3),  
1 to 4-Player  
Sports (Xbox 360),  
12-Player Online

» **Publisher**  
EA Sports

» **Developer**  
EA Canada

» **Release**  
September 10



# Earth Defense Force 2025

The invasion begins again

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3  
Xbox 360

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

» **Publisher**  
D3 Publisher

» **Developer**  
Sandlot

» **Release**  
2013

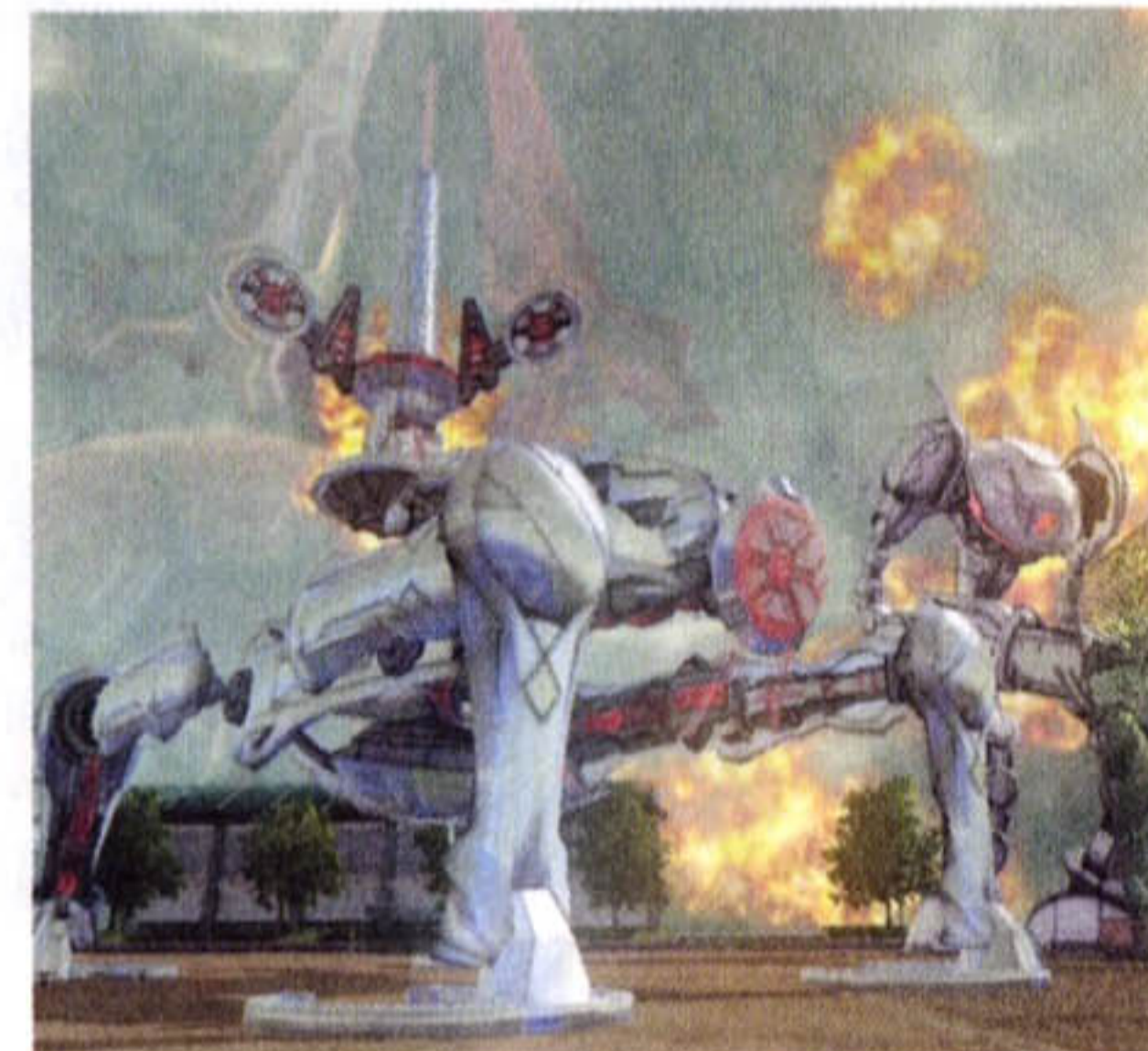
Thanks to the Earth Defense Force, humanity was saved. The Ravagers – an invading alien race of robots and giant insects – were defeated in 2017. Cities have been rebuilt in the eight years since the final battle, and the military has used the alien technology to enhance its own weapons and protect Earth's future. Things seem peaceful, but when the Ravagers resurface in 2025, the EDF is called into action once more.

Original developer Sandlot is returning to the sci-fi series after a break (2011's *Earth Defense Force: Insect Armageddon* was made by Vicious Cycle), but fans will appreciate how EDF 2025 integrates classic mechanics with new ideas. I played a few missions on an early version of the game, and instantly felt comfortable despite a few changes to the formula.

Players choose from four different classes, all of which are unlocked from the start. Fans should recognize the ranger and wing diver classes, as they resemble previous heroes in the series. The two new additions are the air raider (a support class that can call in

vehicles) and the fencer (a heavily armored, dual-wielding soldier). Since EDF 2025 supports four-player online co-op (or two-player split-screen), players have the opportunity to plan their tactics and pick weapons and loadouts that complement their teammates' abilities. "Each class provides completely different gameplay and strategy," says game director Toshio Noguchi. "With these classes having different abilities, please enjoy the thrill of co-op to the fullest by helping each other."

On the battlefield, the EDF encounters familiar faces. Giant ants, spiders, and robots still rampage through the cities – but the Ravagers have added new units to their ranks. Shield-generating walkers are among the recent additions, and their energy fields protect them and other enemies in range, meaning that players need to get close to take them down. Even then, powerful weapons are required. Luckily, you have hundreds of different weapons at your disposal – more than any other game in the series. In traditional EDF fashion, every gun isn't useful all the time.

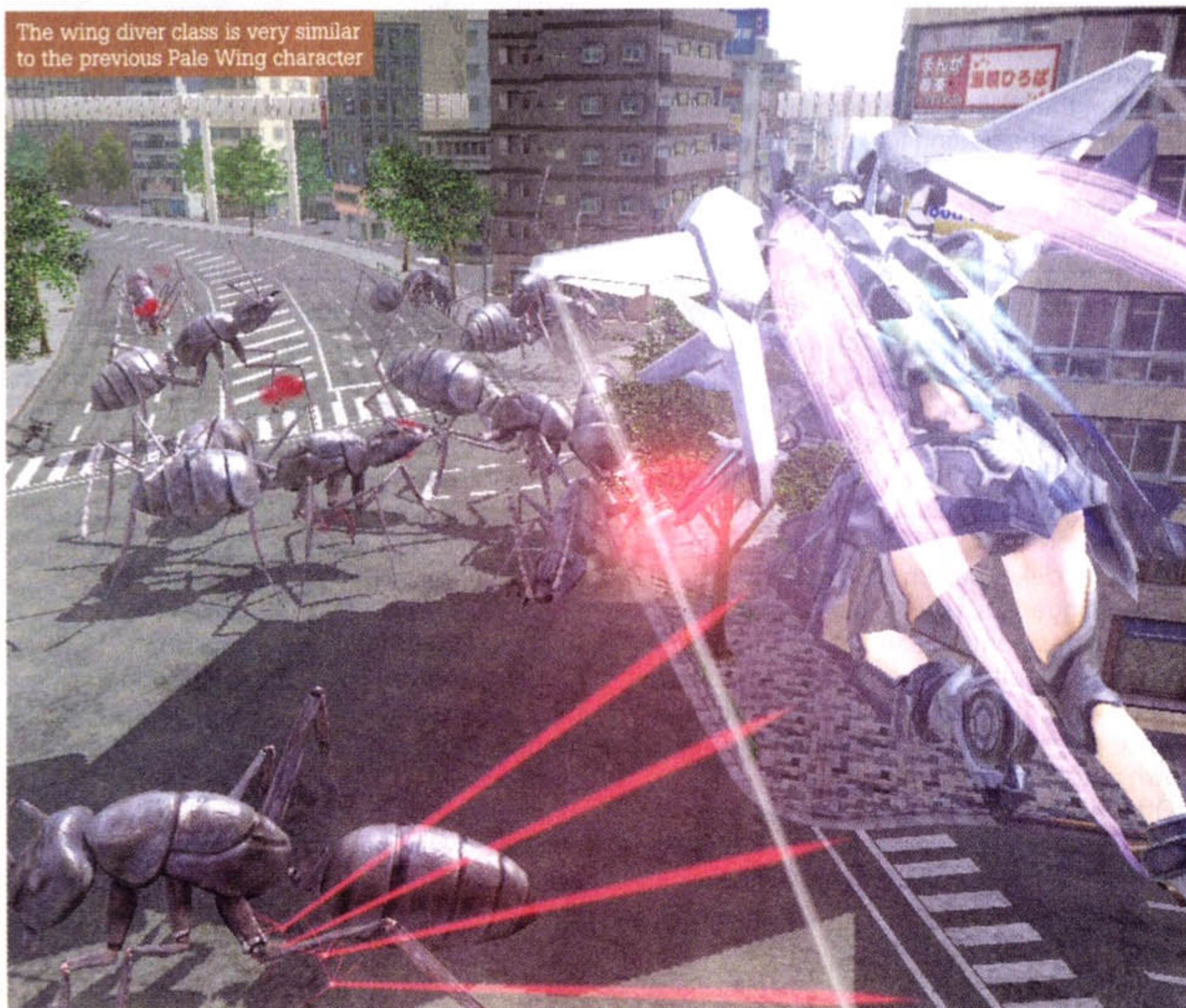


"Although some weapons don't appear to be so helpful...I'm hoping players can find the weapons that work for them among the uneven mixture of the strong weapons and the seemingly trashy ones," says director Takehiro Homma. "In some cases for earlier titles, players found the way to use the weapons that we thought were not so powerful, and incorporated them into their strategies."

At this phase of development, EDF 2025 already presents the same action-packed, B-movie thrills of its predecessors. More weapons, huge enemies, dozens of missions, and lots of dialogue between the support soldiers give fans more of what they love. I had a blast playing it in this early form, and I can't wait to suit up and join the war effort again.

» **Joe Juba**

The wing diver class is very similar to the previous Pale Wing character

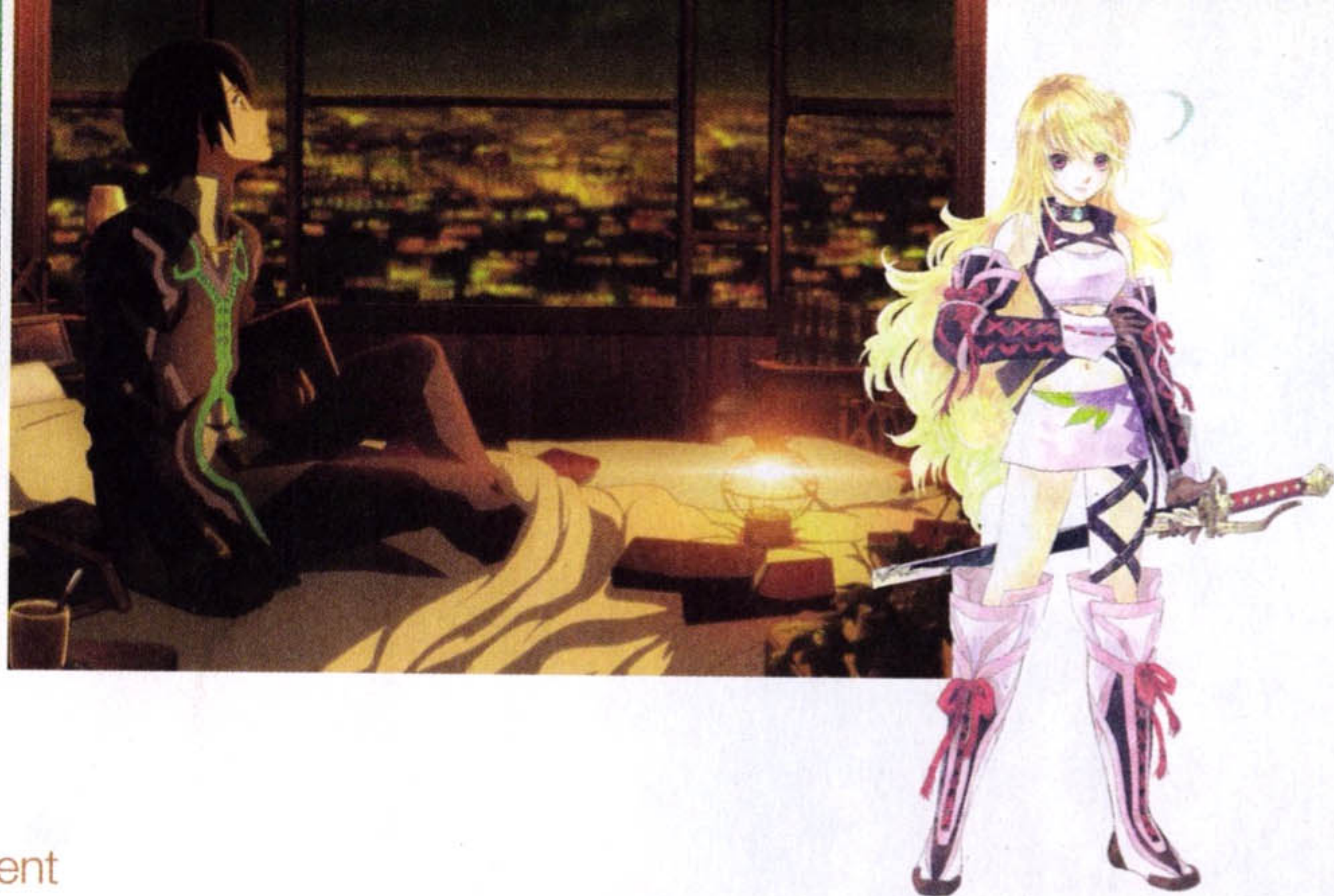


## Storm 1: MIA?

EDF 2017 put players in control of Storm 1, the hero who overcame improbable odds and defeated the Ravager mothership. What has he been doing in the years since his victory? "It's said that he has not been heard from since then," says director Takehiro Homma. "Is Storm 1 dead? Or if he is still alive, where is he now? The secret will be revealed in EDF 2025. In the game, EDF troopers are talking about him every now and then. If you listen to what they're saying, you'll know his secret."

## Insect Armageddon

The last EDF game was 2011's *Insect Armageddon*, which had players defending the North American city of New Detroit. However, don't expect to see the events of that struggle referenced in EDF 2025. "Insect Armageddon is like a spin-off title, and the event occurs in the world that is different from the original EDF series," says director Takehiro Homma. D3 Producer Nobuyuki Okajima adds, "EDF: IA has the same idea of earth defense, but the developer is in the US, and different. It's a different title that has different story, so please don't get confused."



## Tales of Xillia

More mature characters make this journey different

Once a series passes its 15th anniversary, surprise usually isn't in the cards, but Namco Bandai is up for the challenge with Tales of Xillia. Namco Bandai decided to focus this entry on a more mature cast, a fact I realized quickly as I played through the game's opening hours.

Milla and Jude, Xillia's protagonists, both have intriguing qualities. Milla, a spirit summoner, isn't typical: The opening moments reveal she has an intriguing connection with nature. Still, she's been sheltered and it shows, often acting guarded and cold, not letting emotions dictate her decisions.

Jude, a medical student, is her polar opposite. He's extremely courteous and mild-

mannered. Sometimes you want him to finally take charge, but Jude's apprehension makes sense. He is just discovering who he is and his lack of confidence while he's on the cusp of entering the real world with his profession is relatable.

Jude and Milla's different personalities play off each other well. It feels like Milla is urging Jude to take more control, while Jude is influencing Milla to be more kind-hearted. The two embark on a journey together after an accident occurs and alerts both of them that something isn't right. Milla worries that an enigmatic power will get in human hands, and its dangers are beyond their comprehension.

Not long after their initial unease, the duo

meet the suave Alvin, a cocky mercenary who uses charm to his benefit. Get ready for plenty of winking. His first encounter with Milla and Jude is a ploy to exploit money from them, but to his disappointment, they're broke. Alvin is a mysterious soul, so his true intentions and why he stays with the group once he learns this is a mystery.

The introduction to three of the main characters showed promise, and Tales' trademark skits further solidified the dynamic. Alvin acts like a cool older brother to Jude, while Jude tries to moralize Milla. I'm most interested in seeing how these characters grow throughout the journey. Thankfully, I won't have to wait too much longer. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3

» **Style**  
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**  
Namco Bandai

» **Developer**  
Namco Bandai

» **Release**  
August 6

## Tales of Symphonia Collection

Symphonia fans and newcomers get an HD delight

While not every one of the numerous Tales games has made its way to our shores, the heralded Tales of Symphonia came to the GameCube in 2004. The release was so successful that Namco Bandai even released a sequel on the Wii, Dawn of the New World. Now fans and newcomers alike have something new to look forward to: Both games are coming to the PlayStation 3 in an HD collection.

The remastered world of Sylvarant not only

has revamped graphics, but also includes the original Japanese voice tracks for both games. Symphonia centers on the cocky Lloyd Irving and his friend Colette, the chosen one, as they attempt to return Mana to the world. With memorable characters, like the ladies' man Zelos and the intense Kratos, this cast is one of the most beloved of the franchise. The HD collection of Tales of Symphonia also has skits and bonus content that were added to the Japanese PlayStation 2 version that never

made it to North America.

Its sequel, Dawn of the New World, takes place two years later and focuses on the young man Emil. He becomes a Knight of Ratatosk as he attempts to save a world that's now filled with troubles like destructive weather and warring nations. Symphonia's cast returns, but they're relegated to guest roles within the story, though the single exception is Lloyd. Lloyd apparently murdered Emil's parents, something completely out of character for the hero of Sylvarant.

Each title also uses a version of the trademark LMBS battle system, playing out much like a fighting game. Unlike most RPGs, both games support four-person multiplayer, with each player controlling a different character during battle.

The collection is sure to bring back fond memories to those who enjoyed the Symphonia games. The HD graphics on top of a quality battle system promise to be the icing on the cake. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**  
PlayStation 3

» **Style**  
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**  
Namco Bandai

» **Developer**  
Namco Bandai

» **Release**  
Q1 2014



# reviews



gameinformer  
**GAME OF THE MONTH**

**89** Metro: Last Light

Despite some flaws, Metro 2033 was lauded by critics for its multi-dimensional narrative and haunting atmosphere. For the sequel, 4A Games has not only improved upon these strengths, but tightened up its core stealth and shooting mechanics to provide gameplay that lives up to the series' exceptional storytelling.

## THE SCORING SYSTEM

<b>10</b>	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.	<b>5</b>	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.
<b>9</b>	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	<b>4</b>	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.
<b>8</b>	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.	<b>3</b>	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.
<b>7</b>	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.	<b>2</b>	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
<b>6</b>	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	<b>1</b>	Running out of controller batteries during a boss fight.

## AWARDS

gameinformer <b>PLATINUM</b>	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer <b>GOLD</b>	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer <b>SILVER</b>	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer <b>GAME OF THE MONTH</b>	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

# Metro: Last Light

Finding refuge in the shadows



gameinformer  
**GAME OF THE MONTH**

gameinformer  
**SILVER**

Style 1-Player Shooter Publisher Deep Silver Developer 4A Games Release May 14 ESRB M

Like the ill-fated survivors in Metro 2033's rundown subway system, players had to work to enjoy 4A Games' inaugural shooter. Enjoying the superior story and atmosphere meant overlooking some bad AI and loose gunplay. Metro: Last Light fixes most of its predecessor's flaws while also improving upon its strengths, delivering gameplay that lives up to the exceptional storytelling.

The myriad improvements 4A introduces in Last Light transform the series' punishing survival experience into an engaging – albeit appropriately grim – adventure. The heavy toll of life in post-apocalyptic Russia is still readily apparent in every dreary inhabitant you meet and corpse-ridden tunnel you explore, but the minute-to-minute burdens of replacing mask filters and charging batteries have been toned down, allowing players to soak in the atmosphere and narrative with minimal distractions.

Last Light continues the story of Artyom's attempt to save the few remaining human colonies living in Russia's underground metro system. The narrative revolves around Artyom's quest to find a surviving Dark One – a supernatural species capable of living on Moscow's radioactive surface. The real threat to mankind's survival, however, comes from the various armed factions inhabiting the railway stations, which are poised for all-out war over the Metro. Artyom's skirmishes with these local militias comprise the majority of Last Light, providing a satisfying balance between action and stealth.

Human enemies exhibit improved AI as they patrol areas and investigate noises. They're particularly deadly in groups and are quick to

call for reinforcements, providing a formidable threat and an incentive to remain unseen. Monsters are much less interesting, as most just charge in and swarm you with cheap melee attacks. A few scripted combat scenarios and boss battles also fall flat. While these moments are frustrating, they are quickly forgotten once you're over the hurdle and back to the meat of the game.

Last Light features tighter controls and improved sound design for its arsenal, which now puts the gunplay on par with most triple-A shooters. However, I was more enthralled by the upgraded stealth mechanics. A light meter on your watch indicates your visibility, while dynamic music cues alert you when enemies are actively searching for you. Despite still being a linear affair, most of the underground environments are designed around light and shadow, a visual feature A4's custom engine excels at. You can stalk and pick off patrolling enemies in the order and style of your choosing. Sneaking my way through storage facilities and engine rooms swarming with Red Line soldiers provided a tense and satisfying game of cat-and-mouse, as I flipped circuit breakers and unscrewed light bulbs to create extra cover. After dispatching all of the patrolling guards with a combination of throwing knives and silent, distant headshots, I sneaked out of the station undetected. Other stations I blasted through with little care for stealth. I even managed to slink my way across a monster-infested bridge without firing a single shot – a testament to Last Light's accommodation of multiple play styles.

Last Light packs a powerful one-two

combination of story and atmosphere. A nice visual upgrade is accompanied by a little more color and variety in the subway station communities, and a massive amount of exposition and ambient conversations flesh out the world and Artyom's evolving perspective on mankind's post-apocalyptic existence. Character animations can be a little wooden and the voice-acting crew features more than a few bad Russian accents, but in a genre where most titles don't try half this hard to tell a compelling story, Last Light pulled me into its world and kept me engaged.

This sequel plays more like a shooter than its predecessor, but doesn't sacrifice its intricate narrative or creative vision in the process. Masochistic fans will appreciate the harder difficulties that recreate the grueling experience of the original, but no matter how you approach it, exploring Last Light's absorbing world is wholly entertaining.

» **Jeff Marchiafava**

# 8.75

PC

» **Concept**

Smooth out the series' rough edges for a return trip to Russia's metro system

» **Graphics**

Gorgeous textures and lighting make up for the wooden character animations

» **Sound**

Guns pack a satisfying punch, and the metro's beasts once again sound terrifying

» **Playability**

Developer 4A Games tightened up the gunplay, and the stealth mechanics are great. The inventory system is convoluted, though

» **Entertainment**

A few frustrating patches can't overshadow Last Light's memorable story, atmosphere, and gameplay

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

## The Console Difference 8.5

PS3 • 360

Graphics aren't everything, but they make a difference in this case. The vastly superior textures and lighting of the PC version go a long way towards smoothing over some unconvincing character animations, and are the difference between "pretty good" and "breath-taking" when it comes to the look of environments. While the console versions still provide the same great gameplay and immersive story, the tragically beautiful world is less impactful than its PC counterpart.



# Fuse

Don't fight this battle alone

7.75

PS3 • 360

» **Concept**

Grab some friends and use unique weapons to slaughter hundreds of enemies

» **Graphics**

Generic visuals make you wish Insomniac stuck with the original art style

» **Sound**

Its music and voice acting is as forgettable as the visuals

» **Playability**

Gunplay is solid, with fast-paced and entertaining shootouts

» **Entertainment**

Fuse can be a blast as long as you're not playing by yourself

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



**Style** 1 or 2-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Electronic Arts **Developer** Insomniac Games **Release** May 28 **ESRB** M

For over a decade, Insomniac has proven itself to be one of the industry's leaders when it comes to creating unique weaponry. Across numerous Ratchet & Clank and Resistance titles, the star of the show has typically been the varied tools of destruction. This trend continues in Fuse, a solid new IP with several annoyances sprinkled throughout.

If you're interested in playing Fuse, you should absolutely make playing with friends a priority (either online or via its split screen mode). Much of the appeal comes from the ridiculous combination of four super-powered weapons. Jacob shoots flaming crossbow bolts that explode into scalding mercury, Naya tears enemies apart with a gun that creates black holes, Izzy crystallizes enemies with her rifle, and Dalton tosses enemy ammo back at them with his powerful Mag Shield.

When four humans are taking on waves of enemies, it's often hilariously chaotic. Black holes create chain reactions, bodies melt away, and so many helicopters crash. The crazy action are fun for a while, but it eventually becomes routine. Destroying the same small variety of standard grunts, shielded enemies, helicopters, and larger mech enemies (all controlled by the game's mediocre AI) can only stay novel for so long.

Playing by yourself is a soulless experience. Using the leap mechanic, you're able to inhabit any character you want at any time. This doesn't alleviate the problem of having three brain-dead AI partners standing alongside you, however. Without having a few friends on the couch or laughing with you over a headset, the shootouts are muted.

Amplifying the level of destruction is the upgrade system, which looks more promising than it is. This tiered series of combat enhancements seems cool at first, with

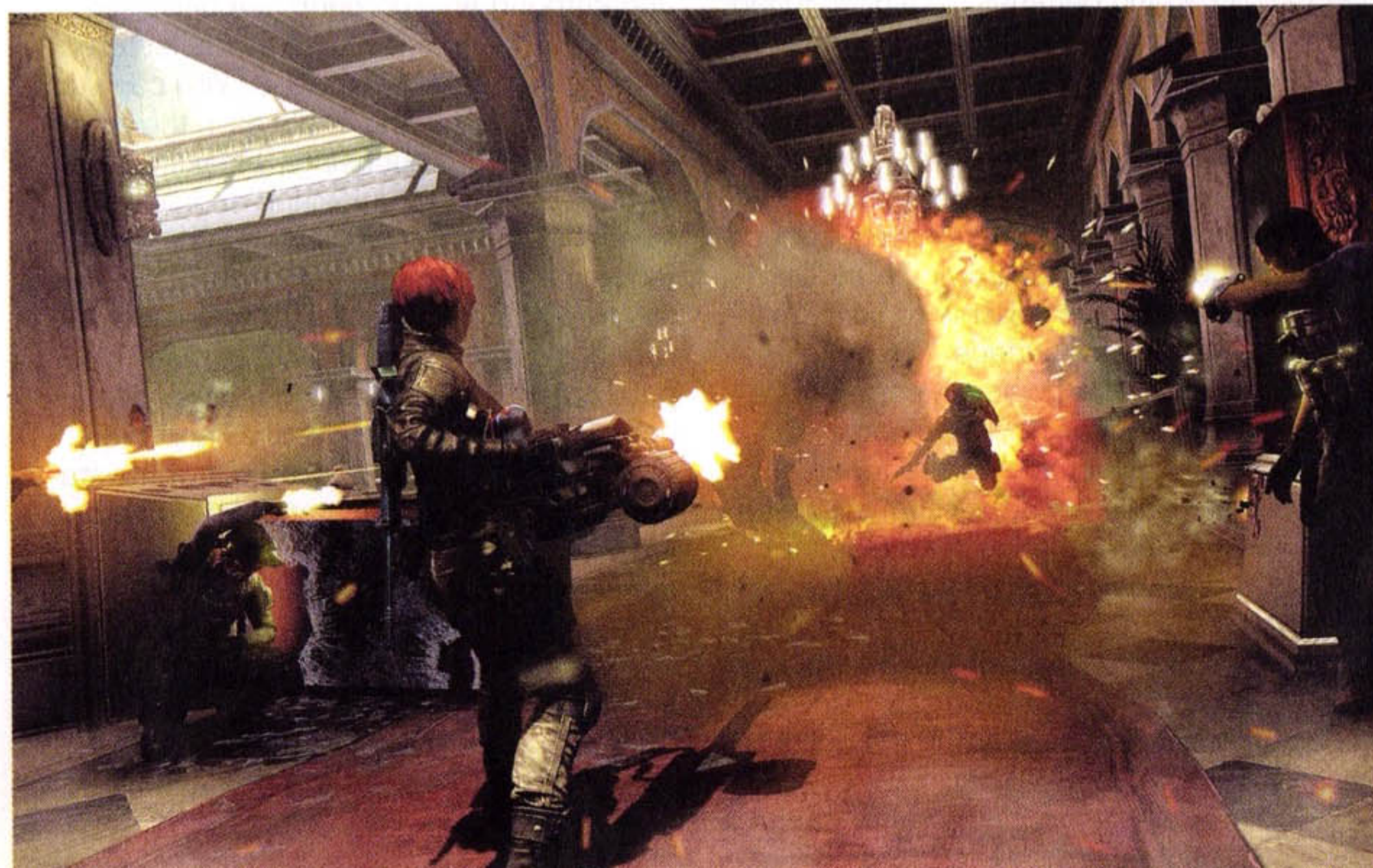
bonuses that power your grenades with the volatile Fuse element, unlock powerful Fusion abilities that grant infinite ammo, and add homing tendrils to your grenade blasts. I was excited to see the different skill trees offered to each character, but disappointed to learn how similar they are. Giving each character a unique Fusion ability at the end of the tree would be a nice reward, but they're all saddled with the same bonus.

At roughly seven hours long, it seems like a game that should be ripe for replayability. There are four different characters to level up, and plenty of collectibles to go back and find. Unfortunately, you can't skip cutscenes, even if you've seen them plenty of times. I'd be much more inclined to jump into a quick mission with some friends if I knew I didn't have to watch the same scenes over and over again.

If you've beaten the game and want to level

your characters without rewatching these cutscenes, the Horde-like Echelon mode is the perfect arena. With several maps that feature huge waves of enemies, it's a great way to hop in and blast baddies without being saddled with the mediocre story. However, it doesn't add any innovation to the basic Horde mode formula; it's main use is just grinding levels.

I left Fuse with several frustrations sticking in my head. I was bothered by the cutscene situation, the basic AI (both friendly and enemy), a couple of glitches that forced restarts, and the dramatic change in fun factor when playing solo. That said, I can't deny that I spent a lot of time laughing while playing with three others. If chaotic, over-the-top shootouts are your thing, there's plenty to like in Fuse amongst the frustrations. Just be sure to bring some friends along for the ride. » **Dan Ryckert**





# Remember Me

A fun adventure, but not entirely memorable

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Capcom Developer Dontnod Entertainment Release June 4 ESRB M

After Nilin wakes up in a prison with no memory of her past, she is befriended by a mysterious benefactor who puts her on the path to regaining her life. Nilin was once a memory hunter – a covert operative who could slice through people’s memories and remove select fragments. Throughout her adventure, Nilin carves up her opponents’ psyches, reshaping their personalities as well as their memories. If this technology actually existed, developer Dontnod could remix my memories and make me forget Remember Me’s faults; I almost wish it could, because Remember Me comes so close to greatness that I’m genuinely sad it misses the mark.

Remember Me envisions a world where people can order popular memories from vending machines, sell cherished moments for cash, and even overdose on someone else’s thoughts. Dontnod’s vibrant vision of Neo-Paris is reminiscent of films like *Blade Runner* and *Total Recall*. Robotic drones bustle about doing their masters’ bidding, and Nilin’s augmented eye continually provides her with details about her surroundings, displaying the operating hours for local shops or even pointing out environmental dangers such as electrified pools of water.

Unfortunately, none of the characters are as interesting as the world they inhabit. Nilin is a capable warrior and memory hunter, but she doesn’t have much of a personality of her own, leaving her to blithely follow the orders of others. Your mysterious benefactor remains a disembodied voice for much of

the game, and the few other NPCs don’t get much of a chance to develop a personality. The tale that unites the characters fails to clearly convey a sense of purpose (why am I supposed to hate Memoreyes?), and the twist near the end falls flat.

Combat is another area that could use refinement. You unlock a few base combos, but all of these can be programmed with various attributes. For example, you can start off with a low-powered attack that restores some of your health, end with a power attack that deals extra damage, and then link the two with a chain attack that amplifies whichever attacks it sits near. Special moves round out your toolset, allowing you to stun every enemy in the room or corrupt mechanical enemies so that they fight for you.

I love the creativity of the entire system. Some enemies are more susceptible to certain types of attacks, which makes every encounter feel a bit like a puzzle. Unfortunately, the intricacy of this jigsaw means that sometimes the pieces don’t fit together in your favor. For example, certain late-game enemies wear electric body armor so you take damage every time you attack them. You can use a few of Nilin’s special moves to counteract this, but if you are low on the Focus that fuels your special attacks, then you’re left whittling down their health with low-powered regenerative attacks that counteract their armor. Other enemies can cause similar conundrums, and I constantly felt like I had approached a battle the wrong way, but

by that point my best option was to die and start over from the last checkpoint.

If you put up with Remember Me’s passionless plot and fluctuating combat, then you reach the game’s true highlight: the memory remixing sequences. At certain beats in the story, Nilin enters a person’s mind and shuffles a few key memories, which change the way that person sees the world. For example, Nilin remixes a bounty hunter’s memory of her ill husband so that she believes that he died on the operating table. Her husband may be alive, but her new outlook gives the huntress a hunger for revenge against the doctors she believes are responsible, and she offers to help Nilin.

These sequences function a bit like story puzzles, where you rewind a cutscene looking for memory glitches that allow you to alter a person’s perception of previous events. Moving a tray table might not do much, but switching the medicine a doctor gives his patient could have drastic results. Not only did I find it exciting to watch events play out in different ways after I made a glitch switch, but it was fun to see how different glitch combinations often resulted in disaster. These sequences are the best parts of Remember Me; I only wish they were more prominent. You only remix four memories throughout the approximately 10-hour campaign.

The detailed world of Neo-Paris seems like it should be full of great stories, but the one Dontnod tells is uninspired. The environmental climbing sequences offer some simple fun, but the linear paths diminish any sense of exploration this otherwise would have achieved. Combat is filled with fresh ideas, but that creativity inhibits your capability in combat. Hopefully Dontnod doesn’t forget any of the lessons it learned this time around, because a sequel could be truly memorable. » Ben Reeves

## 7.75

PS3 • 360 • PC

### » Concept

An action adventure game set in a 2084 version of Paris featuring some unique combat mechanics

### » Graphics

The art direction is good, but a neon-lit Neo Paris teases you from the background and makes you wish you could explore the environments more

### » Sound

This soundtrack gets the job done, and so do the voice actors; unfortunately, a few of them sound a little overacted and almost cartoonish

### » Playability

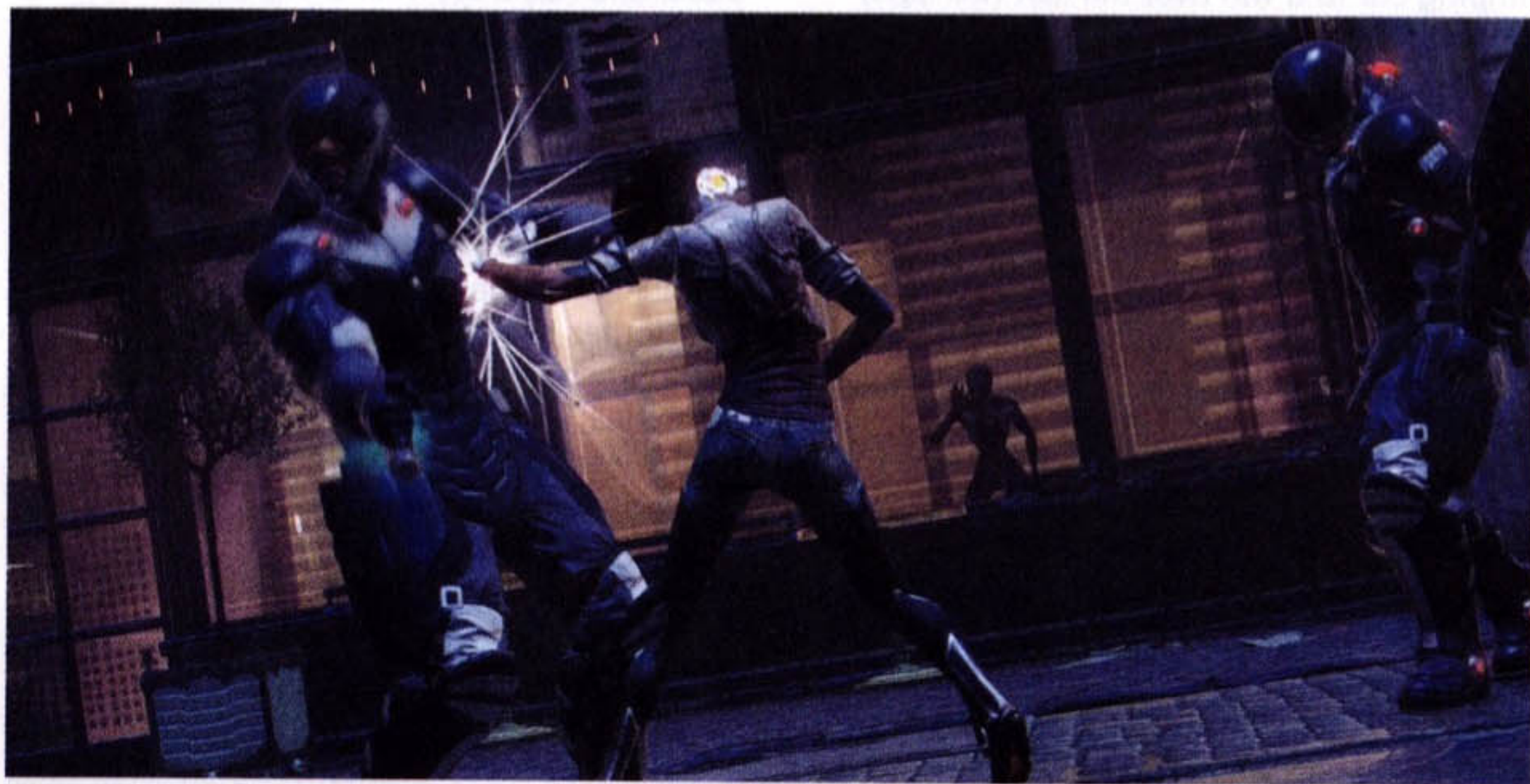
Dontnod tried to do some unique things with the combat, allowing you to create your own combos, but certain powers are required to defeat special enemies, which diminishes the freedom

### » Entertainment

Remember Me is filled with several exciting ideas, especially the remixing memory sequences, but a few key flaws prevent it from standing out

### » Replay Value

Moderate



Neo-Paris is a lot of fun to look at, but Dontnod doesn't give you many opportunities to venture off the beaten path

You can customize the combos in Remember Me to allow your attacks to heal, do bonus damage, or refill your focus gauge



8TH

01 | AUSTIN PAGE

05 | CHRISTIAN ROMAN

06 | SAM CLARK

04 | CARLOS ALVAREZ

08 | PLAYER ONE

00:04

01:56.24



# Grid 2

Can Codemasters invigorate the genre once again?

## 8.25

PS3 • 360

### » Concept

Recruit the best racers around the world by taking them on in events, and then go up against them in World Series Racing seasons

### » Graphics

The LiveRoutes sections of tracks fill in without any trouble, which helps make these races a lot of fun

### » Sound

Your engineer's chatter is repetitive and annoying, but he mentions sections of the track you've had trouble with in the past. Also, on the last lap dramatic music kicks in

### » Playability

A lot of the cars and courses favor those who can handle RWD cars

### » Entertainment

The racing is fun, but the hype surrounding the World Series Racing league doesn't pay off

### » Replay Value

Moderately High

Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (12-Player Online) Publisher Codemasters Developer Codemasters Racing Studios Release May 28 ESRB E

Just like Patrick Callahan's fictional WSR league in Grid 2, the Grid racing franchise has a reputation to think about. While Callahan is trying to build his, Grid has one to maintain. The series has been absent for almost five years, and some of its key elements such as multi-discipline racing, flashbacks, and a certain slickness and sense of style have been used by other racing titles. Time may have moved on, but my expectation for the Grid series to remain at the forefront of the genre has not changed. Grid 2 retains much of what made the first alluring, but falls short of pushing racing games forward like the original.

The WSR (World Series Racing) league is the wrapper for the single-player experience, and your mission is to help it gain prominence by recruiting different racing clubs (by beating them in races, naturally) from around the globe who specialize in various race events to gain their participation in subsequent seasons of the WSR. In turn, these are amalgamations of the different racing types (like elimination, Touge, one-one Faceoffs, checkpoint, etc.). You progress by earning fans for the WSR, which are gained through races and special promo events that present other modes like the fun Overtake races (where you try and pass as many slower trucks on the track as you can).

The WSR experience may be punctuated by special in-studio ESPN segments, a garage operation that grows with you, and sponsorship requirements, but the actual act of growing the league isn't the strong motivator that it's supposed to be. Racing in the league itself feels repetitive by the time you get through the club recruiting process, and when the WSR season racing starts, your opponents'

clubs don't really matter. The league is supposed to be about determining who the best racer on the planet is, but it lacks the storyline and general sports drama to make that search compelling. Perhaps including situational races (like going worst to first or nursing a limping car to a win over the last two laps) would have helped.

Grid 2's LiveRoutes system – where upcoming junctions are populated on the fly to avoid track repetition – helps alleviate the lack of drama, and is where this game shines. Not having a mini map during these races elevates the heart rate a few beats and puts your racing abilities to the test. LiveRoute races make you balance the instinct to be cautious because you don't know what's around the next corner with the urge to drive as fast as you can.

Further diversity occurs in the multiplayer,

which lets you generate a playlist of races and includes new matchmaking for racers to tell you who races naughty versus nice. It also contains Codemasters' free, account-based RaceNet platform. This generates weekly rivals and challenges, keeps track of stats, and has a browser component. Like in the single-player, vehicles are grouped in four tiers, but these unlock as you attain higher levels, and the cars themselves can be upgraded (unlike single-player).

I like that Grid 2's multiplayer carrot tastes slightly different than the single-player one, but ultimately the game – apart from the LiveRoutes system – isn't the revelation that I was hoping for. Codemasters has proven that it can deliver a compelling racing experience on the track, but we'll have to keep on waiting for the next big leap forward. » **Matthew Kato**



# Star Trek

## Namco Bandai sets phasers to failure

**Style** 1 or 2-Player Action (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Namco Bandai Games, Paramount Pictures **Developer** Digital Extremes **Release** April 23 **ESRB** T

Digital Extremes' newest game, based on the J.J. Abrams film series, reminds me more of the original series than the recent films; the game has a few clever mechanics and moments, but its overall lack of polish ensures that it doesn't stand the test of time.

This game slides into the timeline somewhere between the 2009 film and this year's *Star Trek Into Darkness*. After losing their home world, the Vulcan race has settled on a new planet. To aid construction, the Vulcans build a machine called the Helios Device, which collects and harnesses the power from a pair of nearby suns. Unfortunately, the reptilian Gorn race gets their hands on the contraption and begins using it as a doomsday device. The only things standing in the Gorn's way are Captain James T. Kirk and his logical science officer, Mr. Spock.

The story starts out promising, and is filled with fun little character moments, but quickly devolves into a race for the Helios Device that shuffles players from one firefight to the next. Maybe that wouldn't be a problem if Star Trek's third-person cover-based shooting was compelling, but everything – the alien planets, the weaponry, the occasional climbing sections – feels generic.

As you travel through alien worlds and

derelict space stations, you power up your equipment with credits earned from scanning objects throughout the environment. These upgrades allow you to turn your phaser into an automatic weapon or boost your tricorder so that you can level up your teammate's shields. Unfortunately, this upgrade system feels thin and fails to encourage experimentation.

Star Trek occasionally pushes you to be stealthy, but these sequences are so tedious that I often found it easier to just run through with my guns blazing. Thankfully, you don't have to be a chameleon to sneak past a Gorn; enemies often fail to notice their companions getting stunned in the face by a phaser blast.

Big action moments serve as a counterpoint to the stealth. Calling down an airstrike from the Enterprise and chasing a Gorn through the interior of a turbolift are ultimately marred by an overall lack of polish. Background textures flicker, characters fall through the

world, and my system crashed completely. These distractions make it impossible to enjoy what should have been the most impressive moments.

Co-op might have saved the experience if Digital Extremes had fixed the bugs, polished the controls, and made the AI repeat basic training – but that's a lot of work just to bring the game up to baseline standards. The Star Trek franchise is built on the concept of a hopeful future, but fans should keep looking toward the horizon, because this present trek is hopeless. » **Ben Reeves**



# 5.75

PS3 • 360

### » Concept

A shooter built from the ground up for co-op and set in J.J. Abrams' rebooted Star Trek universe

### » Graphics

Digital Extremes worked with Paramount to get official movie assets, which helps everything look authentic

### » Sound

The movie soundtrack is great and most of the actors reprise their roles. Unfortunately, many of them phoned in their recording sessions

### » Playability


A by-the-numbers shooter with poor AI and unpolished controls

### » Entertainment

The action is so buggy that it will be hard for even the most dedicated Star Trek fans to power through this mission

### » Replay Value

Low

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# StarDrive

Endless options, little explanation

## 7.25

PC

### » Concept

Run an interstellar empire and conquer foes while juggling endless tech, ship, and expansion options

### » Graphics

The top-down 2D view of the galaxy is simple, but it gets the job done admirably

### » Sound

Mostly atmospheric synths punctuated by the sounds of lasers and planetary bombardments

### » Playability

Extensive in-game video and text tutorials only scratch the surface of the complex systems

### » Entertainment

Just because it's challenging to grasp doesn't mean it's not filled with great ideas

### » Replay Value

Moderately High



Style 1-Player Strategy Publisher Iceberg Interactive Developer Zero Sum Games Release April 26 ESRB N/A

Running a space empire is no easy task. Technology must be researched, ships built, planets colonized, and enemies torpedoed. The list of responsibilities goes on and on, but you're in this by yourself. StarDrive is filled with innovative ideas and an endless stream of customization options, but players are left to figure out how it all works. This lack of hand-holding or guided tutorials translates to plenty of time looking up in-game manual terms, seeking guidance from the game's community, and a painful process of trial and error that might see your interstellar civilization fall around you. However, when you finally uncover the secrets to ancient alien technology or build a frigate that wins a deep space battle, StarDrive provides a sense of accomplishment few games can.

StarDrive plays in real time unlike other 4X games such as Civilization or Master of Orion, but it includes a forgiving feature that allows players to pause and set orders or make choices without penalty. Those choices

begin right away, as you're asked to create and customize your own spacefaring society. You choose from a long list of potential options, each with its advantages and disadvantages. You're then thrown into the deep end, given control of a lonely planet and a few small ships floating in orbit. A smartly written text guide offers the basics of conducting research, beginning colonization efforts, and confronting foes in space and ground combat, but those essentials barely scratch the surface of what you need to learn.

More than once, my playtime was stalled as I desperately sought answers to what should have been simple procedures. How do I launch my troops into orbit? How do I acquire that alien artifact? Where do I adjust my tax rate? In retrospect, most of the answers I was looking for were a simple mouse click or button press away, but taken together, StarDrive presents an incredible barrier to entry.

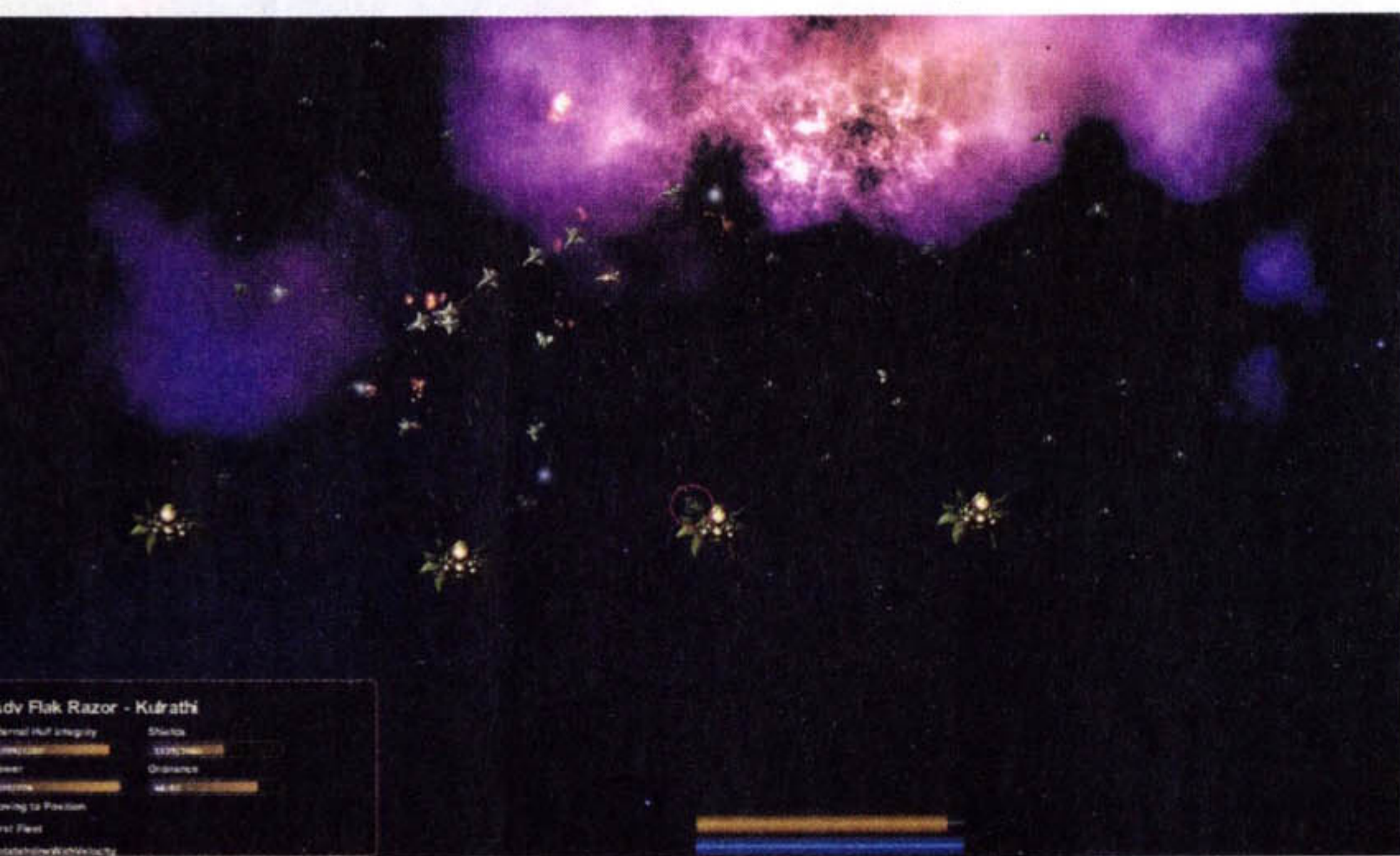
Experimentation leads to great moments of discovery, and I love the slow unfolding of the galaxy that occurs in each game, charting planets, meeting species, and terraforming colonies. StarDrive lets you automate the more mundane aspects of management. Planetary governors can be established on some or all planets to make good decisions about growth, and both trade and expansion can be set to continue largely without your involvement. This allows you to focus on research choices, interactions with alien species (including creating your own spy network), and the inevitable interstellar wars that follow.

Battles often involve dozens of tiny ships blasting away at each other in the void, and the spectacle is great fun to watch even if it takes a long time before you develop any sense of ownership or how to contribute to victory. Ground combat is simplistic, but gets

across the scope of battles both above and below. StarDrive's coolest feature comes before the battles, as you slowly unlock new hulls and ship components, and then build each vessel from scratch by placing tiny modules onto a blueprint. Again, a lack of guidance makes ship building a big challenge to figure out, but the process is rewarding.

AI is a mixed bag of clever automation and inexplicable actions. Enemy and ally ships sometimes perform irrational course changes, but at other times set up complex trade routes far more efficient than anything I could have figured out on my own. Ultimately, I have to give the game an appreciative nod for some of the ways it surprised me – swooping in with an enemy attack when I'm most vulnerable, or overwhelming me with assaults on multiple fronts at the same time. Certainly, it makes the game harder, but I appreciate playing against a canny opponent.

While StarDrive can be a lot of fun for patient, detail-minded strategy players, it still feels like a game in progress. The focus on conquest or alliance as the primary victory conditions is limiting; I'm hopeful that new diplomatic, economic, or other paths to a win are patched in over time, but they're not present as of this writing. I also long to see more opportunities for cool social and story interactions with the awesome alien species you encounter, if only because I adored the art and culture design that went into each one. Finally, I ran into my fair share of technical problems, including a couple of crashes, sound cut-outs, and slow-down. That latter problem only showed up once hundreds of ships were active across the largest available galaxy size. Even with its foibles, StarDrive is a rare treat for those with the fortitude to marshal past its rough spots; invest the time it takes to understand, and the galaxy has a lot to offer. » Matt Miller



# Eador: Masters of the Broken World

A beautiful design viewed through a flawed lens

**Style** 1-Player Strategy (4-Player Local or Online) **Publisher** Snowbird Games **Developer** Snowbird Games **Release** April 19 **ESRB** N/A

This indie strategy title exemplifies both why I love strategy games so much and why many of my favorite titles will never gain mainstream acceptance. Eador: Masters of the Broken World has an adamantium skeleton of a gorgeous design buried under the pasty, unappealing flesh of poor technical execution.

As an immortal Master, your goal is to conquer the shards of land that float in the chaotic void until you control enough to piece together a world of your own. This metagame forms a fine narrative framework for assaulting a series of randomly generated 4X maps. On each, you hire heroes and armies for them to lead, build up your stronghold and outlying provinces, and dominate the shard through magical and martial force.

Each hero has the potential to wield god-like power, but achieving that status requires extensive adventuring. The provinces that make up a shard are full of ancient ruins, dank crypts, and other locations filled with hostile monsters. Clearing these lairs is often more important than conquering new lands, as the treasures they hold fuel your war machine with powerful items and large influxes of cash and experience.

These dens of evil play a role in the extensive random event system as well. Text-narrated events pop up regularly, often taking players on a choose-your-own-adventure vignette with randomized outcomes that can help or harm their empires. Giant slugs could start breeding ferociously, causing havoc and terrifying your populace until you can clear the lair (or shell out the cash to hire a team of adventurers). Corrupt officials can get you a nice influx of bribe money if you're willing to take the karmic hit, which has a subtle influence on many game systems. The Inquisition could land on your shores, liberating your provinces and uniting them under its watchful gaze. These events can be a royal pain in the neck, but they also add a delightful narrative element and shake up the flow with



much-needed randomness.

Battles take place on the tactical map, where the immaculately balanced combat requires serious thought to prevail. Every seemingly tiny detail matters, from the terrain to units' special abilities and the individual promotions of each troop or monster. Simply charging into melee is usually a quick death; using magic to drain enemies' stamina before you pick off their tired fighters with numerically inferior forces is what passes for baseline strategy, and it only gets more intricate from there.

Eventually your armies clash with rival lords and Masters, and the AI does not disappoint. Computer-controlled opponents make few missteps in combat, expand aggressively, and develop their holdings nearly as well as a human player. If the AI cheats (outside of the economic bonuses at higher difficulty levels), it's hidden well.

Unfortunately, the AI regularly ends up winning by default simply by lasting long enough to make the human player quit in frustration at the technical problems. I've had enemy heroes show up with insane, obviously bugged stats that render them

nearly invincible. I've had heroes die for no reason between turns. Turns on larger shards can take upwards of a minute to process, more than doubling the already-serious time investment Eador requires.

The interface itself is a mess. No consistent paradigm for right- and left-clicking exists. Critical menus that you interact with hundreds of times per shard disappear if your mouse pointer leaves their borders, which happens constantly because the controls you need to click on are right up against their edges. The stronghold building interface – which you likely look at every single turn – is wholly unusable in its default state and only workable at all once you click into the hideous “advanced” mode, which you must do every time you enter it. Hours of practice with its foibles can make the interface navigable, but no amount of time and effort can keep it from being frustrating.

Multiplayer unsurprisingly has its share of bugs as well, but Eador is such a slow game to begin with that I can't imagine the levels of patience required to play much multiplayer in the first place. The barebones implementation here does nothing to address the issue of pacing or downtime, and so I can't recommend it.

Eador's problems are disappointing. This is a remake of Eador: Genesis, which is basically a one-man project from 2009 with primitive graphics and a simple-but-functional interface. The design is largely unchanged, but the small tweaks like faster progression through the campaign and unique rules for each shard are welcome. The improved presentation and small improvements to the gameplay are nearly overshadowed by technical problems, though. As encouraged as I am by the patches Snowbird has already released for Masters of the Broken World (it was much worse when it first launched), and as much as I adore the ideas it is built on, my recommendation has to come with serious caveats. Despite its often-disastrous implementation, Eador's design is worth your time – a testament to its strength.

» Adam Biessener

# 8.25

PC

## » Concept

Combine adventure and role-playing ideas with tactical battles to make one of the largest, most epic strategy designs in the business

## » Graphics

Landscapes are pretty and the units look cool, but animations are horrendously slow and don't line up very well

## » Sound

The minimal sound design is hardly noticeable

## » Playability

The interface is terrible in almost all respects, which is particularly damning for an intricate strategy game

## » Entertainment

If you can forgive its many flaws, the elegant design is unrivaled in its ability to create complex strategic and tactical problems from a simple ruleset

## » Replay Value

High

Morale, stamina, and terrain are all just as important as hit points and attack strength



# Cut the Rope: Time Travel

Om Nom gorges with ancestors in this solid sequel

8.5

gameformer  
SILVER

Style 1-Player Puzzle Publisher ZeptoLab Developer ZeptoLab Release April 18 ESRB N/A

iOS • Android

» **Concept**

Add another Om Nom to the successful Cut the Rope equation

» **Graphics**

Bright, vivid, and adorable as always

» **Sound**

Catchy tunes fit in with the lighthearted gameplay

» **Playability**

All of the new elements are great fits for touchscreen gameplay

» **Entertainment**

ZeptoLab again proves that it's a premiere mobile developer

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

In the original Cut the Rope, players were tasked with cutting ropes in an effort to drop a piece of candy into green blob Om Nom's mouth. Achieving this goal isn't always a simple affair, since the game encourages you to collect three stars on each level to truly clear it. Cut the Rope: Time Travel takes all of the elements that worked so well for the original title and adds a fun new wrinkle that shakes up the gameplay: Om Nom is accompanied by ancestors from various historical periods.

If you've never played previous Cut the Rope titles, it won't take long to become acquainted with its primary concept. An adorable green creature really likes sweets, and you're tasked with cutting ropes and manipulating objects on the touchscreen in an effort to deliver a piece of candy to his mouth.

Cutting ropes is still the name of the game in Time Travel, but you have to feed both Om Noms before you move on to the next stage. It amounts to one more mouth to feed, but it also forces you to approach stages in a different manner than in previous games. In the original (and Cut the Rope: Experiments), each stage's goal is basically "get these stars and then feed Om Nom." With the addition

of the ancestors, the game forces you to plan ahead so that both characters get their reward. I thought I had figured out several stages after feeding the first Om Nom, only to head back to the drawing board when I realized I had no way to feed his ancestor.

New gameplay elements are introduced frequently throughout the six time periods. Portals alter the path of candy, clock hands can be rotated to affect the placement of objects, and flying pieces of candy mimic the path of standard pieces. I enjoyed all of these new elements, and they interact well with each other, as well as with previously introduced objects like rockets and bounce pads.

Later stages can require thorough investigation before you act, as numerous moving parts all play off each other. A single stage may have you juggling a freeze button, a clock that changes the locations of portals when you rotate it, and the physics of falling candy all at once. It sounds complicated, but the game's gradual introduction of elements insures that it never becomes overwhelming.

No element is dwelled upon long enough to become tiresome, as each stage offers a novel challenge. Even if a particular stage proves too challenging, it's easy to pass most levels with the minimum requirement of delivering the candy.

Adding another Om Nom doesn't drastically alter the feel of Cut the Rope, but it's enough of a change to make Time Travel feel like a proper sequel. It won't take you too long to collect three stars in each level, but the developer promises new levels on the way soon. Cut the Rope: Time Travel is a great follow-up to one of the most successful games on iOS, and proves to be well worth the asking price.

» **Dan Ryckert**



# Mario and Donkey Kong: Minis on the Move

Send these toys to the garage sale

Style 1-Player Puzzle Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release May 9 ESRB E

I've been a huge fan of the Mario vs. Donkey Kong series ever since the first entry back in 1994 on GameBoy (simply titled Donkey Kong). From its first sequel onward, mini Mario wind-up toys have become an increasingly large part of the gameplay. Now, in Minis on the Move, they have completely taken over. The two stars aren't even fighting anymore (as indicated with "versus" being removed from the title). I'm fine with a series evolving over time, but the new top-down puzzle gameplay in this eShop release loses steam the deeper you get into it.

In all four of the game's modes, you guide a toy from point A to point B by forming a path with tiles. The core mode, Mario's Main Event, drops various tiles along the right side of the screen that you can drag over to the playfield. The challenge comes on two fronts: You have to keep a path going in front of the toy or it falls off, and you can't let the tiles stack up too high. Both result in a game over. Narrowly scraping by (and watching the toys dance around at the finish line) is initially satisfying, and new gadgets like moving walkways and teleportation pipes keep gas in the tank for a bit.

Once things get more complex, puzzles devolve to a game of trial and error; you can

build a path one direction only to be denied a crucial piece. The pain might be lessened by an instant restart, but only one of the modes offers this. The rest force you to tap through a screen or two or watch the toy's death animation. Even if I made it through with flying colors on the first try with minimal frustration, the levels slide further and further into boring territory. Upon trying different modes that tweak the rules I'd think, "Maybe this is the one I can hang my hat on," only to have them turn stale just like the rest.

I initially made sure to collect the three special coins in each level to earn the perfect star rating. Once I realized that you are only rewarded with lame minigames and a toy viewing gallery, I skipped all that malarkey and went straight for the exits. As I chipped

away at puzzle after puzzle, I couldn't help but dream what it would have been like if Nintendo had evolved the traditional platforming puzzle mechanics or simply gone in another direction entirely. Rather than the fun and addicting challenge of past Mario vs. Donkey Kong titles, Minis on the Move feels more like homework. » **Bryan Vore**



## 6.5

3DS

» **Concept**  
Take the Mario vs. Donkey Kong gimmick from its 2D platforming roots to a top-down puzzler

» **Graphics**  
The 3D top screen imagery looks nice, but you spend all your time looking at the more practical, barebones bottom screen

» **Sound**  
The theme gets mashed up with the classic Super Mario Bros. tune to interesting results

» **Playability**  
Tapping and dragging on the touchscreen works fine for the most part, but a missed tile drop can screw you when the clock's running out

» **Entertainment**  
Everything works well mechanically. It simply gets boring after a while

» **Replay Value**  
Moderate

# Soul Sacrifice

Monotony Hunter

Style 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online) Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Marvelous AQL Release April 30 ESRB M

Soul Sacrifice seems designed to fill the void for Vita owners who want a Monster Hunter-style experience. The two games undoubtedly share some similarities, and Soul Sacrifice even attempts to streamline the experience by minimizing busywork. It steps out of Monster Hunter's shadow with fast-paced combat, but technical issues and repetitive missions keep it from taking the crown.

Soul Sacrifice's focus on flexibility is one of the best things it offers; you might be a ranged spellcaster for a while, then get up close and personal later in the fight. This is possible thanks to the dozens of different spell types that allow for an overwhelming amount of character customization. Many types carry elemental iterations, which seem insignificant at first, but using the right tools for each fight proves to be an integral part of combat once enemies start posing a challenge.

When you take the time to explore the depth of combat, it pays dividends later when you encounter demanding foes. The archfiend Cerberus stopped my progression dead in its tracks. After several failed attempts, I begrudgingly went back to the drawing board to find a new tactical approach. This setback forced me to explore my large collection

of weapon types, shields, and elemental options. Balancing these factors is when battle is most rewarding – though it requires you suffer through some repetition early on.

As a fan of Monster Hunter style games, I'm not a stranger to grinding, but Soul Sacrifice doesn't provide a clear roadmap of how or where to obtain new costumes or specific spells. Mission objectives and environments are unashamedly recycled, and even rewards are often iterative making for a repetitive experience with little promise of payoff. Other variables also drag the experience down. The massive archfiends have serious clipping issues, and the lack of an on-screen timer also leads to you missing opportunities (or

eating damage) since you can't tell when certain effects are about to expire.

Soul Sacrifice gives you the ability to play co-op with up to four players either online or ad-hoc. While you don't progress through the main storyline in this mode, you encounter unique creature and spell variants. These missions are also available offline with AI partners, but playing with real people increases the difficulty and rewards earned.

Soul Sacrifice has some shining components, and should hold its head high. The depth of customization, strategic layer of combat, and robust multiplayer offerings kept me invested and having fun – even in the face of frustration. » **Jason Oestreich**



## 7.25

Vita

» **Concept**  
Mission-based gameplay, grinding for better loot, and huge multiplayer boss battles

» **Graphics**  
Everything from mutated sludge cats to towering colossi are well-modeled. The macabre theme is consistent throughout

» **Sound**  
A masterly crafted score that's simultaneously enchanting and creepy. NPC companions incessantly chatter with the same sound bytes

» **Playability**  
Fast-paced, but some flawed combat mechanics. Deep weapon customization and flexibility

» **Entertainment**  
If you love grinding, moderate rewards, and repeated environments, Soul Sacrifice is entertaining

» **Replay Value**  
High

**PLAYSTATION 3**

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Amazing Spider-Man, The	6.75	Sep-12
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## 9 | Injustice: Gods Among Us

Platform PS3 • 360 • Wii U Release April 16 ESRB T Issue Jun '13

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

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance	7.75	Apr-13	Persona 4 Arena	8.5	Oct-12	Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
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			Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Jul-12	Tekken Tag Tournament 2	8.5	Nov-12
						Terraria	8	Jun-13

the score

## 7.25 | Black Rock Shooter

Platform PSP Release April 23 ESRB T

*Black Rock Shooter is competent at what it does and, for the most part, entertaining to play. However, it could use a bit more polish and imagination in its design. It doesn't turn the genre on its head, but with my guns blazing through the chaos, I found a more meaningful story than I expected. — Kimberley Wallace*

## 6 | Poker Night 2

Platform 360 Release April 24 ESRB M

*Rather than luring gamers in with a bevy of multiplayer options or the potential of real payoffs, Poker Night 2 (like its predecessor) relies on the personalities of several memorable characters. Once you've heard all the dialogue, you won't have much reason to come back to Poker Night 2. — Dan Ryckert*

## 7 | Draw Something 2

Platform iOS Release April 25 ESRB N/A

*In many ways, this is a quality sequel. However, for those who quickly burned out on the first game, I'm not sure this is enough to get them to pick up their virtual art pad again. — Matt Helgeson*

## 8.5 | Sanctum 2

Platform 360 • PC Release May 15 ESRB T

*Planning gets you ahead, but making choices in the heat of the moment is just as important. This dichotomy makes Sanctum 2 some of the most fun I've had with a tower defense game in a long time. — Kimberly Wallace*

## 6.75 | Haunted Hollow

Platform iOS Release May 2 ESRB N/A

*Haunted Hollow scales back [Firaxis'] tactical inclinations, resulting in a competent — but ultimately shallow — experience. — Kyle Hilliard*

## 6.5 | Iron Man 3

Platform iOS • Android Release April 25 ESRB N/A

*If you're a fan of endless runners and you can put up with the game constantly asking you to post to Facebook or purchase more ISO-8, then you might find this a fun diversion while you wait in line to see Iron Man 3 in theaters. — Ben Reeves*

## 7 | Don't Starve

Platform PC Release April 23 ESRB N/A

*While the first few hours of every game are filled with exciting opportunity, the resource-heavy maintenance of your character and deadly threats inhabiting the world make Don't Starve a long, slow grind to nowhere. — Jeff Marchiafava*



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BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
Borderlands 2	9.75	Oct-12
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Counter-Strike: Global Offensive	8	Nov-12
Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dance Central 3	8.75	Nov-12
Darksiders II	9	Oct-12
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13
Dead or Alive 5	6	Nov-12
Dead Space 3	9.75	Mar-13
Deadlight	8	Oct-12
Devil May Cry	9	Feb-13
Dirt Showdown	7.5	Jul-12
Dishonored	8.75	Dec-12
Dollar Dash	6	May-13
Double Dragon Neon	8.25	Nov-12
Dragon's Dogma	8.5	Jun-12
Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen	8.5	Jun-13
Dust: An Elysian Tail	8.75	Oct-12
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dragonborn, The	8.5	Feb-13
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Dawnguard, The	8	Sep-12
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
F1 2012	7.75	Nov-12
Fable Heroes	4	Jul-12
Fable: The Journey	5	Dec-12
Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse	4.5	Feb-13
Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon	8.5	Jun-13
Fez	9.25	Jun-12
FIFA 13	8.75	Nov-12
Forza Horizon	8.5	Dec-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Gateways	9	Dec-12
Gears of War: Judgment	8.5	May-13
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5	Jul-12
Guardians of Middle-earth	7.5	Feb-13
Halo 4	9.25	Dec-12
Hell Yeah! Wrath of the Dead Rabbit	8.5	Dec-12
Hitman: Absolution	8.75	Dec-12
Hybrid	6	Oct-12
Injustice: Gods Among Us	9	Jun-13
Inversion	6	Aug-12
Jet Set Radio	6.5	Nov-12
Joe Danger 2: The Movie	8.25	Nov-12

Karateka	8	Dec-12
Kinect Star Wars	5.5	Jun-12
Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes	8.25	Aug-12
Lego The Lord of the Rings	8.5	Jan-13
Lollipop Chainsaw	7.5	Aug-12
Madden NFL 13	8.25	Oct-12
Mark of the Ninja	9	Nov-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Max Payne 3	9.25	Jul-12
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	5	Jan-13
Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance	7.75	Apr-13
Minecraft Xbox 360 Edition	8.75	Jul-12
MLB 2K13	4	May-13
Monaco	8.75	Jun-13
Mud – FIM Motocross World Championship	6	Apr-13
NASCAR The Game: Inside Line	7.25	Dec-12
NBA 2K13	8.75	Dec-12
NCAA Football 13	8.75	Aug-12
Need For Speed: Most Wanted	9	Dec-12
NHL 13	8	Nov-12
Omerta: City of Gangsters	6	Apr-13
Penny Arcade's On The Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness 3	8	Sep-12
Persona 4 Arena	8.5	Oct-12
Phantom Breaker: Battle Grounds	8	May-13
Pid	6.5	Dec-12
Planets Under Attack	7.25	Feb-13
Pro Evolution Soccer 2013	8.75	Nov-12
Prototype 2	8.5	Jun-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Realms of Ancient War	4	Dec-12
Resident Evil 6	8.75	Nov-12
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Ridge Racer Unbounded	6.75	Jul-12
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Risen 2: Dark Waters	5.5	Oct-12
Rock Band Blitz	8	Oct-12
Sine Mora	8	Jun-12
Skulls of the Shogun	8.5	Feb-13
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12
Sleeping Dogs	7.75	Sep-12
Sniper Elite V2	8.25	Jul-12
Sonic and All-Stars Racing Transformed	8	Jan-13
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
Spelunky	8	Sep-12
Splatters, The	8	Jul-12
Steel Battalion: Heavy Armor	3	Aug-12
Street Fighter X Tekken	8.75	May-12
Tekken Tag Tournament 2	8.5	Nov-12
Terraria	8	Jun-13
Test Drive: Ferrari Racing Legends	6.5	Aug-12
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14	8.5	May-13
Tomb Raider	9.25	Apr-13
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD	7.5	Sep-12
Transformers: Fall of Cybertron	9	Oct-12
Trials Evolution	9	Jun-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12
Walking Dead Episode 1: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 2: Starved For Help, The	8	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 3: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Walking Dead: Survival Instincts, The	5	Jun-13
Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings – Enhanced Edition, The	9.5	May-12
World Gone Sour	6.75	Jun-12
Wreckateer, The	7.5	Oct-12
WWE '13	9	Dec-12
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12
Zuma's Revenge	8	Sep-12

Wii U

Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Chasing Aurora	6.5	Feb-13
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
Lego City Undercover	8.5	Apr-13
Little Inferno	8.5	Feb-13
Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate	8.75	Jun-13
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	8.5	May-13
New Super Mario Bros. U	9.25	Jan-13
Nintendo Land	7	Jan-13
Rabbids Land	4	Jan-13
Rise of the Guardians	6.5	Feb-13
Scribblenauts Unlimited	8.25	Jan-13
Transformers: Prime	6.5	Feb-13
ZombiU	5	Jan-13

Wii

Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	5.75	Jan-13
La-Mulana	8.5	Dec-12
Last Story, The	6	Sep-12
Pandora's Tower	6	Jun-13
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Skylanders Giants	8	Dec-12
Xenoblade Chronicles	9.5	May-12

PC

A Valley Without Wind 2	6.75	May-13
Aliens: Colonial Marines	4	Apr-13
Antichamber	9	Apr-13
BioShock Infinite	10	May-13
Botanicula	8.25	Jul-12
Call of Duty: Black Ops II	8.5	Jan-13
Cave, The	7.75	Mar-13
Civilization V: Gods & Kings	8.5	Aug-12
Crysis 3	8.5	Apr-13
Dead Island Riptide	8	Jun-13
Diablo III	9	Aug-12
Dishonored	8.75	Dec-12
Dollar Dash	6	May-13
Dungeon Hearts	6	Jun-13
Elemental: Fallen Enchantress	8.25	Jan-13
Endless Space	7.25	Sep-12
Far Cry 3	9	Jan-13
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon	8.5	Jun-13
FTL: Faster Than Light	8	Dec-12
Game of Thrones	6	Jul-12
Hotline Miami	7.75	Jan-13
Impire	5	May-13
King's Bounty: Warriors of the North	7.75	Jan-13
Krater	6	Sep-12
Legend of Grimrock	7.25	Jun-12
Mass Effect 3	10	May-12
Medal of Honor: Warfighter	5	Jan-13
Monaco	8.75	Jun-13
Omerta: City of Gangsters	6	Apr-13
Orcs Must Die 2	9.25	Oct-12
Penny Arcade's On The Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness 3	8	Sep-12
Quantum Conundrum	8.5	Aug-12
Realms of Ancient War	4	Dec-12
Resident Evil: Revelations	8.75	Jun-13
Resonance	8	Sep-12
Risen 2: Dark Waters	6	Jul-12
Runner2: Future Legend of Rhythm Alien	9	Apr-13
SimCity	6.5	May-13
Sins of a Solar Empire: Rebellion	8	Aug-12
Sniper Elite: Nazi Zombie Army	8	May-13
Spec Ops: The Line	7.75	Aug-12
StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm	8.75	May-13
Torchlight II	9.25	Dec-12
Total War: Shogun 2 – Fall of the Samurai	9.25	May-12
Tribes: Ascend	8.5	Jul-12
Tropico 4: Modern Times	8.5	May-12
UEFA Euro 2012	6.75	Jun-12
Walking Dead Episode 1: A New Day, The	8.25	Jul-12
Walking Dead Episode 2: Starved For Help, The	8	Jul-12

Walking Dead Episode 3: Long Road Ahead, The	8.5	Nov-12
Walking Dead Episode 4: Around Every Corner, The	8.25	Dec-12
Walking Dead Episode 5: No Time Left, The	8.5	Jan-13
Warlock: Master of the Arcane	6.5	Jul-12
Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings – Enhanced Edition, The	9.5	May-12
XCOM: Enemy Unknown	9.5	Nov-12

3DS

Aero Porter	5	Mar-13
Brain Age: Concentration Training	6	Apr-13
Castlevania: Lords of Shadow – Mirror of Fate	8.5	Apr-13
Code of Princess	7.5	Dec-12
Crashmo	8.5	Feb-13
Crimson Shroud	7.5	Mar-13
Dillon's Rolling Western: The Last Ranger	7.75	Jun-13
Donkey Kong Country Returns 3D	8.5	Jun-13
Epic Mickey: Power Of Illusion	5	Jan-13
Etrian Odyssey IV: Legends of the Titan	8	May-13
Fire Emblem: Awakening	9	Mar-13
HarmoKnight	8.25	Jun-13
Heroes of Ruin	6	Aug-12
Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance	8.25	Sep-12
Lego City Undercover: The Chase Begins	6	Jun-13
Liberation Maiden	7	Jan-13
Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon	8.5	May-13
Mario Tennis Open	8	Jul-12
Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate	8.75	Jun-13
New Super Mario Bros. 2	8.25	Oct-12
Paper Mario: Sticker Star	8.75	Dec-12
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates to Infinity	6.75	May-13
Professor Layton and the Miracle Mask	8	Dec-12
Resident Evil: Revelations	9	Feb-11
Shin Megami Tensei: Devil Summoner – Soul Hackers	8.75	Jun-13
Shinobi	6.5	Feb-11
Spirit Camera: The Cursed Memoir	5	Jun-12
Theatrhythm Final Fantasy	8	Sep-12
Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward	8.75	Dec-12

VITA

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation	7.75	Jan-13
Call of Duty: Black Ops: Declassified	3	Jan-13
Dokuro	6	Dec-12
Gravity Rush	8	Aug-12
Guacamelee	9	Jun-13
Jet Set Radio	6.5	Nov-12
Knytt Underground	7.5	Mar-13
LittleBigPlanet PS Vita	8.75	Nov-12
Metal Gear Solid HD Collection	7.75	Aug-12
MLB 12: The Show	8	May-12
Mortal Kombat	9	Jun-12
Persona 4 Golden	8.5	Jan-13
PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale	7.5	Jan-13
Resistance: Burning Skies	7	Aug-12
Retro City Rampage	7	Dec-12
Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time	9	Mar-13
Sound Shapes	9	Oct-12
Zero Escape: Virtue's Last Reward	8.75	Dec-12

IOS

Beastie Bay	7.5	Apr-13
Dungeon Hearts	6	Jun-13
Final Fantasy Dimensions	7.5	Nov-12
Hundreds	8	Mar-13
Joe Danger Touch	8.25	Mar-13
Middle Manager of Justice	6	Mar-13
Pocket Planes	7.5	Sep-12
Year Walk	8.75	May-13

# TOP 25 DS GAMES

by Joe Juba

**W**ith Nintendo's 3DS finally hitting its stride, the time to close the book on the DS has arrived. The system had a rocky start when it released in 2004, but nine years and several redesigns later, the DS boasts the most impressive library of any handheld to date. With so many quality games, narrowing down the list was difficult, but these are the best of the best – the titles that highlight what made the DS great.

## 1. New Super Mario Bros.

*Release date: 2006*

Leave it to Nintendo to take a familiar concept and make it fresh again. Leaving 3D by the wayside, New Super Mario Bros. taps into the nostalgia surrounding the 16-bit era by returning to the series' side-scrolling roots. Mario and Luigi bust bricks and stomp koopas like the good ol' days, collecting clever power-ups and facing new challenges along the way. This return to form instantly became a definitive DS title, and has helped shape the future of the Mario franchise in the years since.



## 2. The Legend of Zelda: Phantom Hourglass

*Release date: 2007*

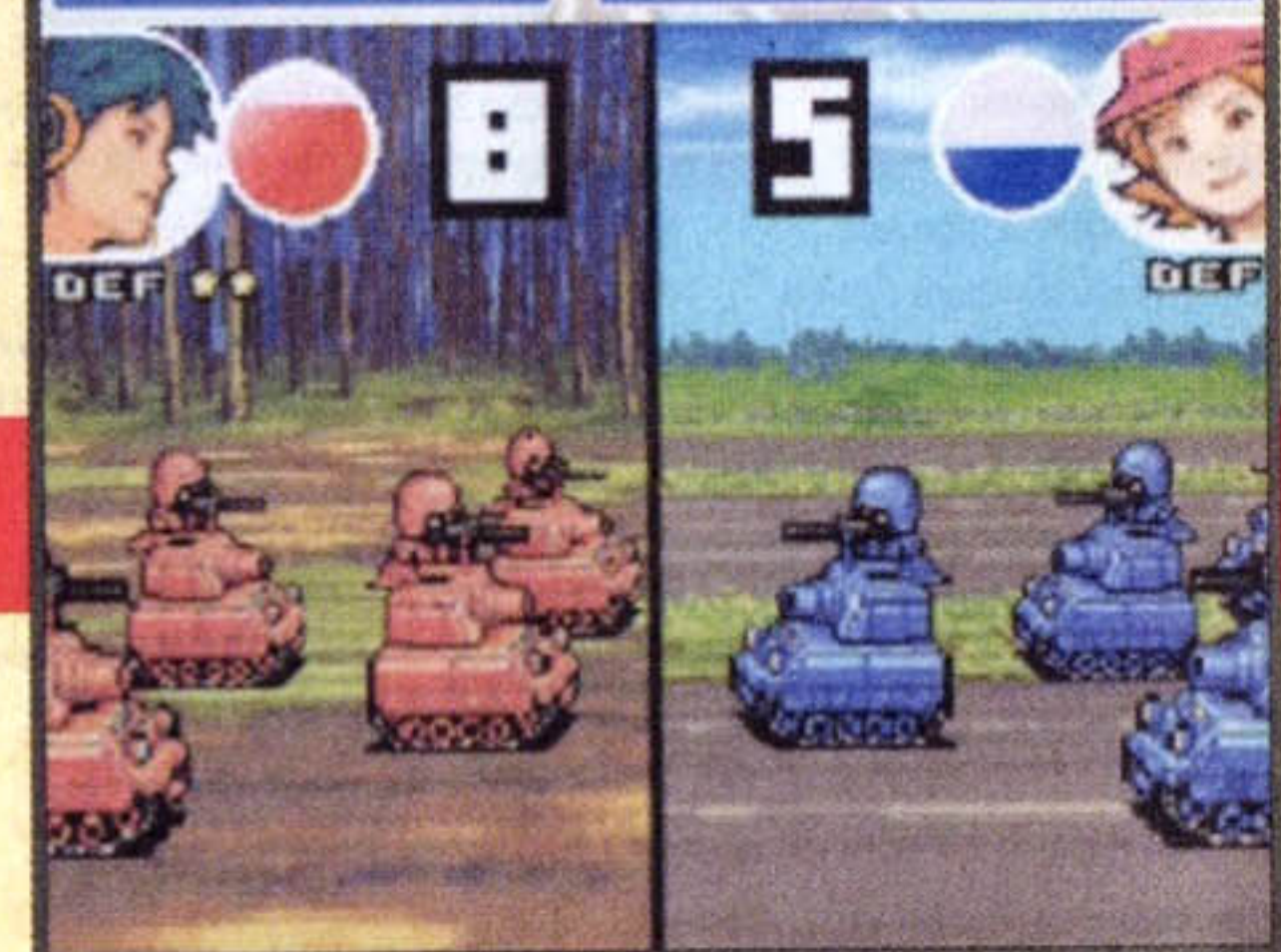
In a rare move for the Zelda series, Phantom Hourglass is a direct sequel. Following the events of Wind Waker, Link must rescue Tetra and take to the seas once again. The cel-shaded visual style looks great on DS, and the cool touchscreen elements – like plotting your sailing course – fit in perfectly with the traditional Zelda experience.



## 3. Advance Wars: Dual Strike

*Release date: 2005*

Advance Wars was already a hit on the Game Boy Advance, but two screens allow the turn-based tactical combat to reach new heights. A second front on the top screen requires just as much attention as the main battlefield, which is dominated by a cool assortment of land, sea, and air units. In the war for handheld strategy superiority, Dual Strike is victorious.





#### 4. Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars

**Release date:** 2009

Nintendo's family-friendly image might seem at odds with the Grand Theft Auto series. Nevertheless, Chinatown Wars delivers authentic GTA action. Players navigate a volatile drug war, viewing the mayhem from the top-down perspective of the franchise's early entries. Plenty of side missions and other activities make this the complete GTA package.

#### 5. Pokémon Black and White

**Release date:** 2011

Despite their similarities, not all Pokémon games are created equal. Pokémon Black and White is a fantastic entry in the long-running series, due mainly to the way it balances tradition and innovation. It captures everything fans love about collecting, training, and battling Pokémon, while adding new features to keep the adventure fresh.



#### 6. Professor Layton and the Curious Village

**Release date:** 2008

In Professor Layton's world, everyone loves a good puzzle. That works out well for players, who are treated to brain teasers around every corner. A mystery surrounding a strange town propels Layton and his apprentice through the story, and the endearing characters and fun puzzles make the journey memorable.

#### 7. Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow

**Release date:** 2005

If you want to play Castlevania on the DS, Dawn of Sorrow should be your first stop. The tactical soul system makes combat and exploration as addicting as ever, and Dracula's castle hides plenty of secrets. While other titles (like Order of Ecclesia) embrace the series' punishing difficulty, this one still dishes out equal parts challenge and entertainment.

#### 8. Contra 4

**Release date:** 2007

The DS has plenty of innovative titles, but it also opened the door for developers to revisit a style of gaming that had been dormant for years. Contra 4 faithfully recaptures the challenge and fun of cooperatively blasting tons of bad guys, proving that old-school design and difficulty will always have a home among the hardcore.

#### 9. Final Fantasy Tactics A2: Grimoire of the Rift

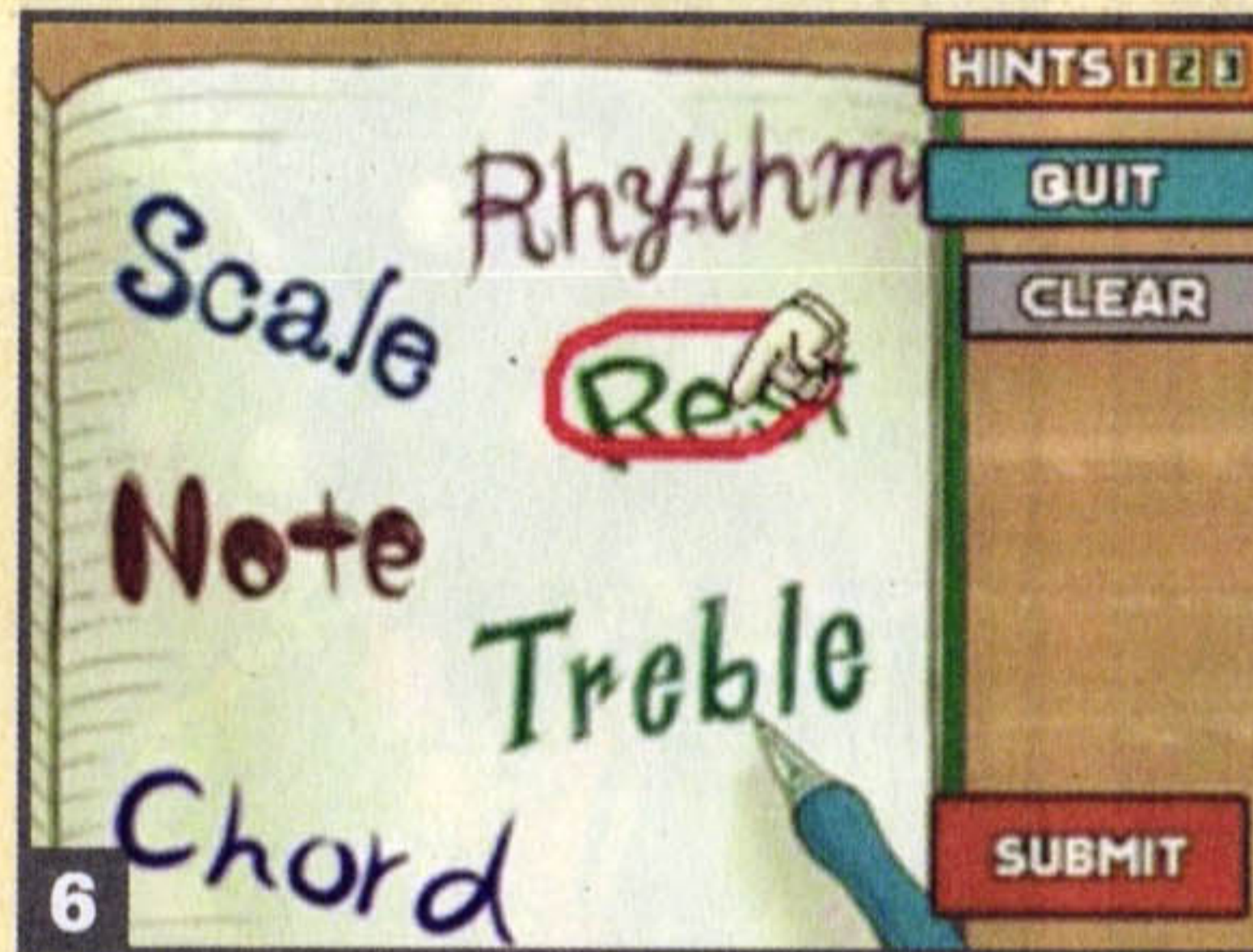
**Release date:** 2008

Final Fantasy Tactics is one of the most trusted names in grid-based strategy, and this installment adds even more depth and strategy. New races and jobs provide extra options on the battlefield, and improvements to the law system mean that players aren't punished for breaking the rules. This is one of the best strategy RPGs out there, handheld or not.

#### 10. Animal Crossing: Wild World

**Release date:** 2005

As the second Animal Crossing title, Wild World still gives players the freedom to explore and customize a simulated world. Collecting items, talking to anthropomorphic animals, and checking out your friends' villages is the backbone of the experience. If you're in the mood for some stress-free simulation, Animal Crossing is the place to be.





### 11. Radiant Historia

*Release date: 2011*

Several classic RPGs saw re-releases and remakes on the DS, but Radiant Historia isn't one of them. You'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise; it looks and plays like a lost gem from the 16-bit era. Though it hits the right notes in terms of old-school appeal, the unpredictable story and strategic combat are sharp enough to meet any modern standards.

### 12. Kirby: Canvas Curse

*Release date: 2005*

Kirby fans expect to see the little puffball sucking in enemies and absorbing powers, but this DS outing is something completely different. Using the stylus, players draw lines on the touchscreen to serve as platforms and ramps for a rolling Kirby. This departure from tradition was a smart move, as it created the best game in the early life of the DS.

### 13. The World Ends With You

*Release date: 2008*

Don't let the spikey-haired kid fool you: This isn't your typical "save the world" RPG. Set in modern-day Japan, the story is dark and full of twists. In combat, players manage two fronts simultaneously, stringing together combos up top and casting spells below – one of the most inventive uses of the system's dual screens. We'd still love to see a sequel.

### 14. Super Scribblenauts

*Release date: 2010*

Games have rules and limits, which means that players can't harness their full imagination to solve problems. Super Scribblenauts breaks down that barrier, letting players type in the names of various objects and living things. These things then appear and interact with the world, giving players unprecedented freedom to use their creativity while solving puzzles.

### 15. Mario & Luigi: Bowser's Inside Story

*Release date: 2009*

Everyone knows about their princess-saving skills, but the Mario brothers rarely get a chance to show their sense of humor. That's where this spin-off RPG series shines, highlighting quirky characters and top-notch dialogue. This entry is the funniest and most refined yet, and the belligerent Bowser steals the show as a playable character.

### 16. Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Trials & Tribulations

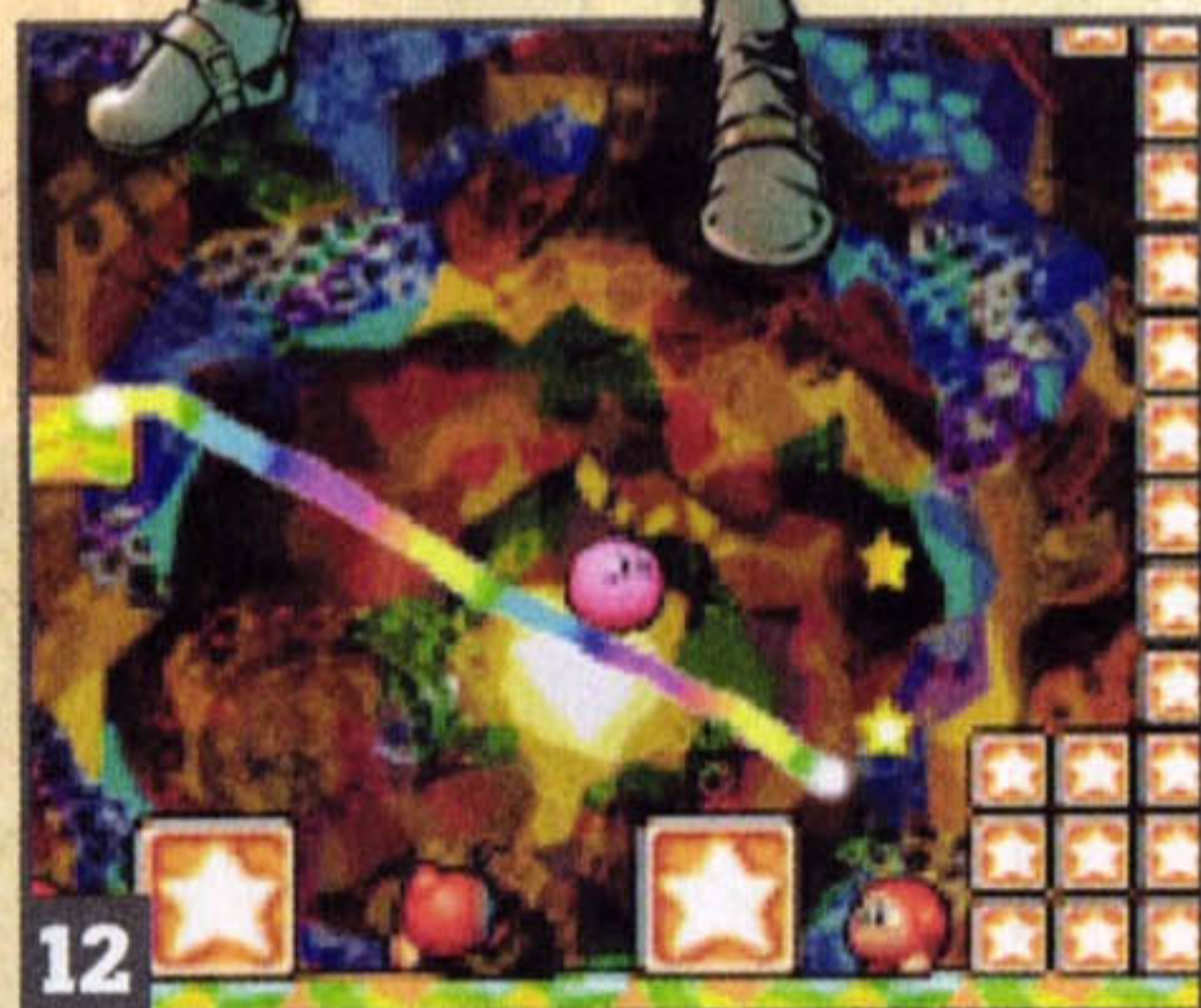
*Release date: 2007*

Trials & Tribulations completes the initial arc of defense attorney Phoenix Wright. Your participation is mainly reading text and selecting items from a menu, but the compelling and hilarious courtroom drama makes this stand out as the best in the series. To enjoy it to its fullest, you should also play the first two – a prospect that should raise no objections.

### 17. Metroid Prime Pinball

*Release date: 2005*

Metroid Prime Pinball isn't the traditional Metroid experience many fans were hoping for, but holding a grudge is hard when the final product is so much fun. Engaging pinball elements blend seamlessly with the touchstones from the Metroid universe, creating an excellent (if unlikely) combination that appeals to fans of Metroid and pinball alike.



## 18. Dragon Quest Heroes: Rocket Slime

Release date: 2006

Of all the Dragon Quest titles to appear on DS, the most engrossing is the one that strays the furthest from series tradition. Rocket Slime is an action/adventure that puts players in charge of a little blue slime who rescues his comrades. He also collects ammunition to use in huge tank battles, leading to a lot of depth behind that slime's dopey smile.

## 19. Tetris DS

Release date: 2006

No puzzle game has endured like Tetris. The title has appeared in different iterations on multiple systems, and it's fun every time. Tetris DS continues the trend, with new modes (some competitive) that add new layers to the block-dropping formula. Messing with perfection is risky, but Tetris DS strikes the right balance between old and new.

## 20. Trauma Center: Under the Knife

Release date: 2005

Without the advent of the DS touchscreen, a game about a supernaturally gifted surgeon might never have happened. Thankfully, we don't live in that world. Under the Knife features demanding gameplay that has players performing delicate operations like extracting glass, defusing bombs, and fighting off lethal bioweapons.

## 21. Okamiden

Release date: 2011

Okami was a standout title on the PS2, and many elements from that game make the transition to this handheld follow-up – especially the drawing. As the young wolf Chibiterasu, players use the Celestial Brush to battle foes and interact with the world. The mechanic is a natural fit for the DS, and a perfect reason to revisit Okami's charming style.

## 22. Picross 3D

Release date: 2010

An addictive puzzler in the vein of Sudoku and Minesweeper, Picross 3D challenges players to chip away cubes from a larger block to create an image (like a dog, rocket ship, etc). This title moves the concept into 3D, producing more challenging and rewarding puzzles than its 2D counterpart (also on DS). It also has a cool puzzle creator for you test your own design skills.

## 23. Mario Kart DS

Release date: 2005

Mario Kart doesn't change drastically between installments, but you have to admire the series for its consistency. This installment has the solid racing, cool tracks, and crazy action of its predecessors, but adds online multiplayer. This lets players fire off those awful blue shells without worrying about any real-world repercussions.

## 24. Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

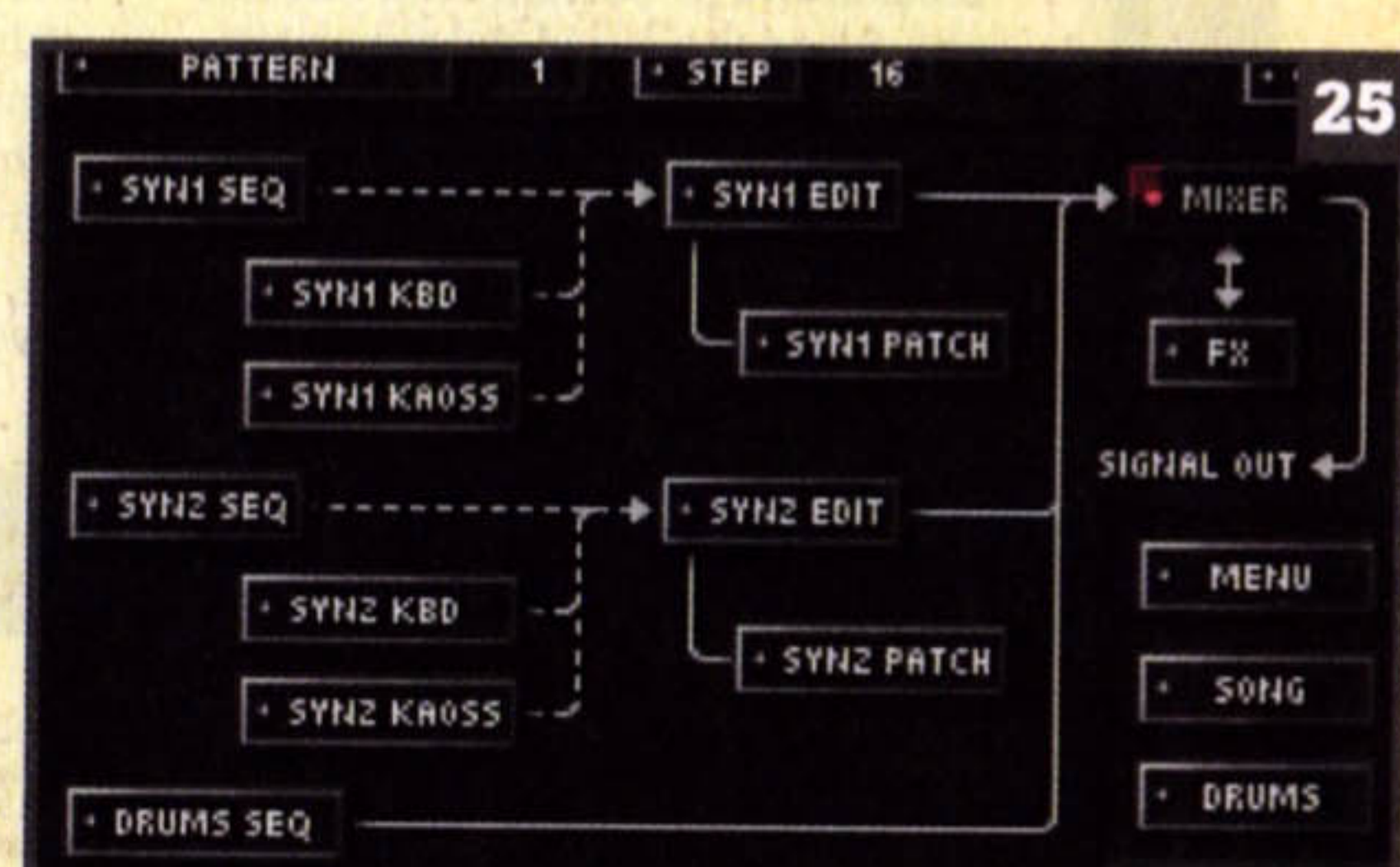
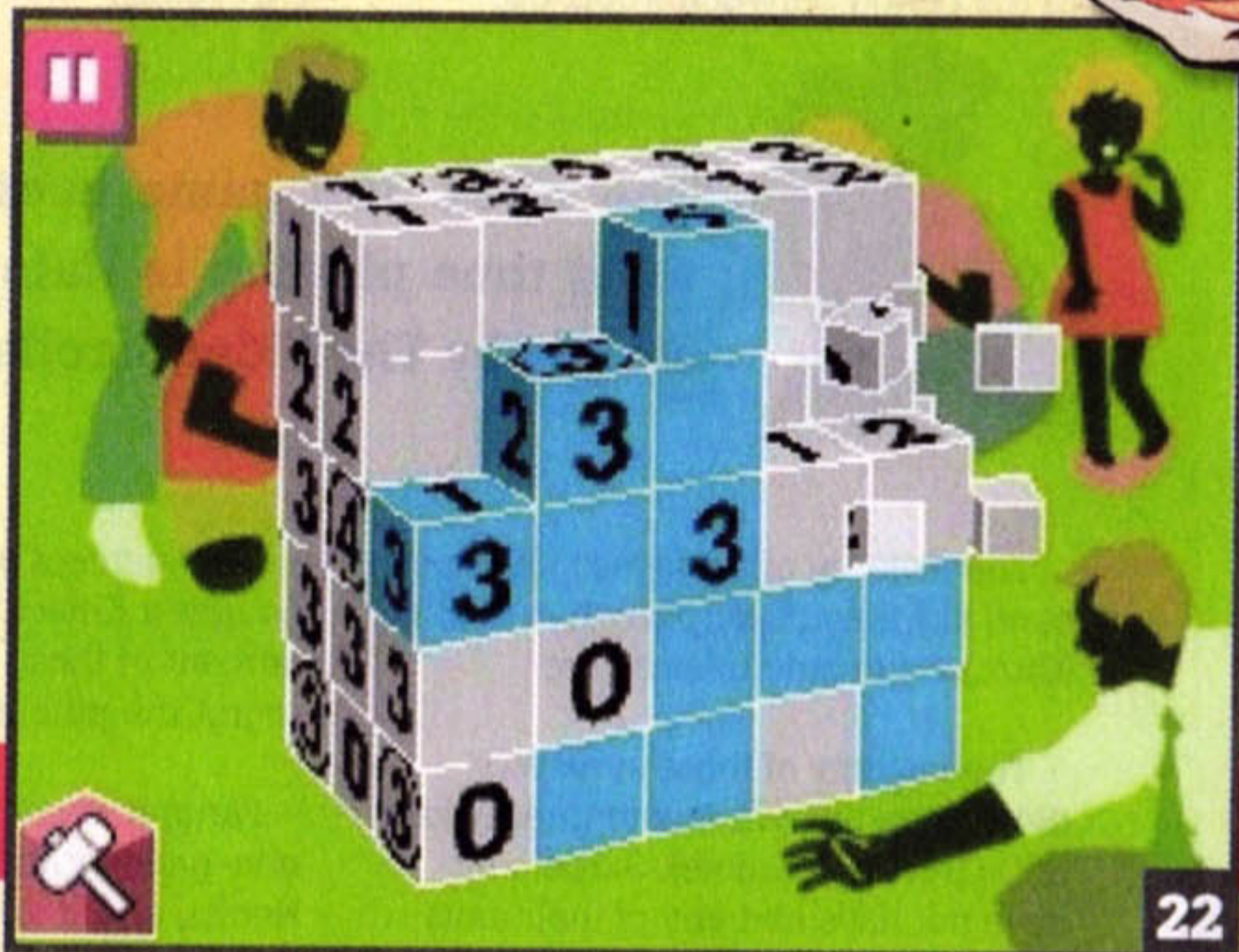
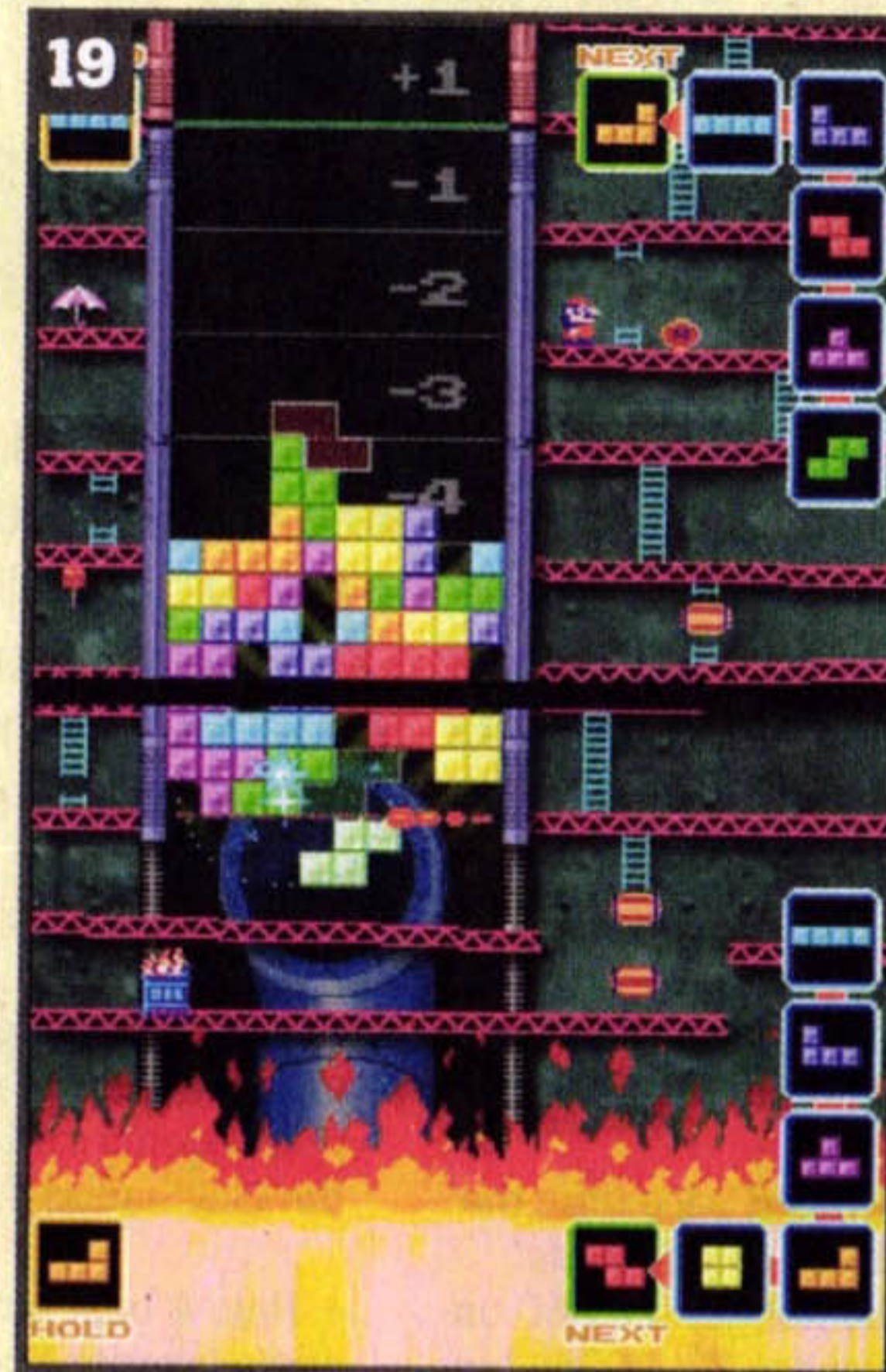
Release date: 2011

Sissel has lost his memory. To make matters worse, he's also dead. That's the set-up for this story-driven puzzle game, which has players possessing various objects to manipulate the world and nearby characters. The premise is interesting, but Ghost Trick also has charm to spare thanks to the outstanding writing, music, and animation.

## 25. Korg DS-10 Synthesizer

Release date: 2008

This one technically isn't a game; it's a piece of software that emulates Korg's popular MS-10 synthesizer. Korg DS-10 is a music-making program done right, with great options and effects, an intuitive interface, and the ability to save and share your compositions. For music lovers, this is a must-have. ♦



# \* A Short History of Xbox

**T**he next Xbox has been announced, and gamers are excited to get their hands on the upcoming system. The original Xbox came out in 2001, and since then Microsoft has solidified its place in the home console business. We surveyed over 9,000 people on gameinformer.com\* about their thoughts on the Xbox consoles as a whole to see how the brand has performed through the years.

+ Just over 60 percent of those surveyed bought an original Xbox.

+ Despite the installed base from the Xbox, the majority of respondents (42.7 percent) did not get the 360 on launch day (November 22, 2005), but in the period between 2006-08.

+ 5,381 respondents said they are going to buy the new Xbox. 4,464 respondents said they plan on getting the PlayStation 4.

+ Halo 4 beat out Halo 3 as everyone's favorite Xbox 360 exclusive by two votes.



**The Xbox 360 game users spent the most time playing is Halo 3, followed closely by The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim.**

+ The majority of surveyees (39.8 percent) say they usually buy two to four Xbox Live Arcade titles a year.

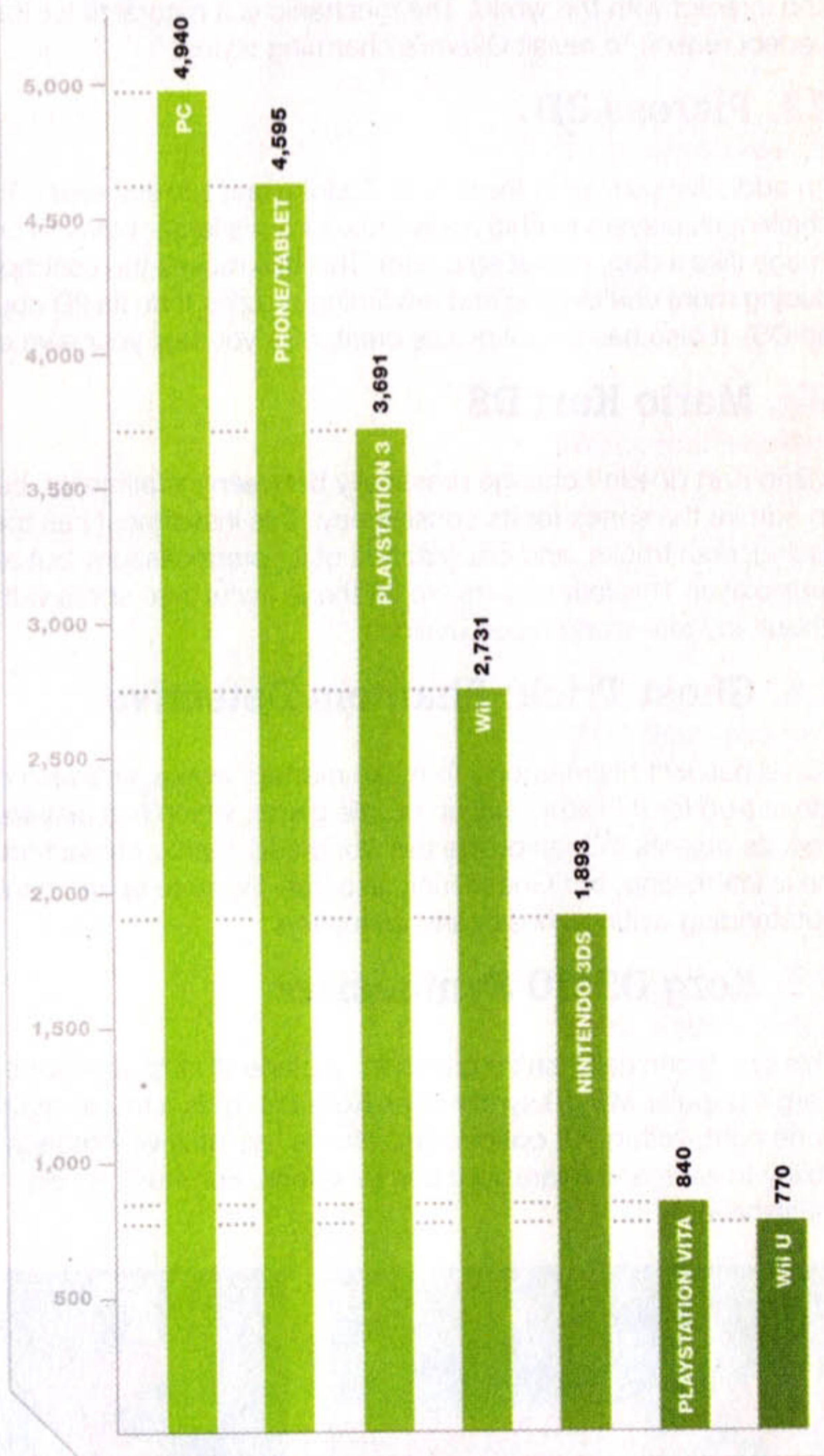
+ The majority of those surveyed (84.3 percent) own one to three Xbox 360s (vs. four or more). 32 percent have not have had any of their units breakdown, 37 percent have had one unit fail on them, and the remaining 31 percent had multiple failures. The Red Ring of Death accounted for 87.2 percent of those failures.

+ 58.6 percent of Xbox owners never bought a Kinect. Approximately 31 percent of those who did buy a Kinect regret the purchase.

+ Far and away the most listed non-gaming Xbox 360 app was Netflix, and it wasn't even close. People who listed "None" or "Nothing" outnumbered mentions of ESPN, Amazon, HBO, Hulu, and the Internet combined. Facebook was tabbed four times.

Head to [gameinformer.com/mag](http://gameinformer.com/mag) for more details on the survey results

**Which current non-Xbox platforms do you own and play games on?\***



\*Some questions could be skipped or allowed multiple responses, so total people surveyed per question and the subsequent data may vary \*\*7,762 people surveyed

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