

gameinformer

THE WORLD'S #1 VIDEO GAME MAGAZINE



BUNGIE REVEALS THE STAGGERING SCOPE OF

DESTINY

14 PAGES OF EXCLUSIVE DETAILS



AVAILABLE AT
GameStop
 POWER TO THE PLAYERS



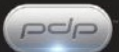
OFFICIAL WIRED CONTROLLER



AVAILABLE FOR XBOX 360® AND PLAYSTATION®3

©2013 Performance Designed Products, LLC. Performance Designed Products, PDP, SmartTrack and their respective logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Performance Designed Products, LLC. EA, EA SPORTS, and the EA SPORTS logo are trademarks of Electronic Arts Inc. All rights reserved. All other trademarks are property of their respective owners. PlayStation 3 and PS3 are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment, Inc. This product is not designed, manufactured, sponsored or endorsed by Sony.

PERFORMANCE DESIGNED PRODUCTS®



BATTLEFIELD 4

OFFICIAL WIRED CONTROLLER

THE MOST ADVANCED WEAPON IN YOUR ARSENAL... IS IN YOUR HANDS



AVAILABLE FOR
PLAYSTATION®3
 AND **XBOX 360®**

SUPERIOR ANALOG STICKS

Upgraded with SmartTrack™ for superior targeting and control



DUAL MULTI-FUNCTION WHEELS

Customizable with 6 programmable functions

Move your most important actions from the buttons to your fingertips

www.pdp.com

©2013 Performance Designed Products, LLC. Performance Designed Products, PDP, SmartTrack and their respective logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Performance Designed Products, LLC. ©2013 Electronic Arts Inc. Battlefield, Battlefield 4 and the DICE logo are trademarks of EA Digital Illusions CE AB. EA and the EA logo are trademarks of Electronic Arts Inc. All other trademarks are property of their respective owners. PlayStation 3 and PS3 are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment, Inc. This product is not designed, manufactured, sponsored or endorsed by Sony.

DICE



 **AFTERGLOW**[®]

**PRISMATIC UNIVERSAL
WIRELESS HEADSETS**



PRISMATIC WIRELESS

STUDIO TUNED
ACOUSTICS

EXTREME
COMFORT

MULTIPLE SYSTEM
COMPATIBILITY

 **PRISMATIC**
COLOR SELECT LIGHTING



YOU CHOOSE THE COLOR

PRISMATIC DOLBY 5.1 DIGITAL
COMPATIBLE WITH PLAYSTATION[®] 4



© 2013 Performance Designed Products LLC. All Rights Reserved.
The PDP logo is a trademark and AFTERGLOW is a registered trademark
of Performance Designed Products LLC.



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

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

The Tie-Breaker

We dedicated a lot of space in this issue to telling you which game is better than the other, and which system does this functionality better than the other. In fact, we spend a lot of time here in the office telling each other what is or isn't good. Defending a position that we believe in is what makes us good at debate, and by extension in my opinion, good game journalists.

We are critics by nature (and job description), and the banter is how we sharpen our proverbial pencils. With the launch of Xbox One and PlayStation 4, the holiday game rush, and the looming Top 50 Games of 2013 feature that we will tackle next issue, we have had our fair share of opinions bouncing back and forth around the office.

But at the end of the day, myself and every other gamer out there knows what type of player they are. I know what I want from my games. I know what I want from a system. At times there are innovations that show me something that I didn't know I wanted, but those times are rare.

We are who we thought we were.

Some will say that by giving the Xbox One and the PlayStation 4 the same grade we took the easy way out. Perhaps we did. But don't think for a second we reached these verdicts without navigating a minefield of discussion and judgment amongst the editors here at Game Informer and in our own heads.

Ultimately, it's hard to say what is right or wrong. I know what type of gamer I am, you know what type of gamer you are. Perhaps you value the Xbox achievements system and love what Kinect brings to your games and your home entertainment. Perhaps you love the extra little hardware punch the PlayStation 4 has to offer, or value its stable of exclusive games over those offered by its competitors. Maybe you are going to stick with your Wii U or trusty PC.

These are the final pieces to the puzzle. They are the questions that only you can answer because only you...know you. We are merely here to guide you to the answer that only you can find.

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,

0114
contents



» 48

Destiny

After leaving Microsoft and Halo behind, Bungie decided to wander into the treacherous waters of the multi-console release with Destiny. It's a huge game in a fully realized science-fiction universe with innovative multiplayer backed by a proven developer – and we've played it. **by Matt Miller**



10

Game Informer Reviews The Xbox One And PlayStation 4



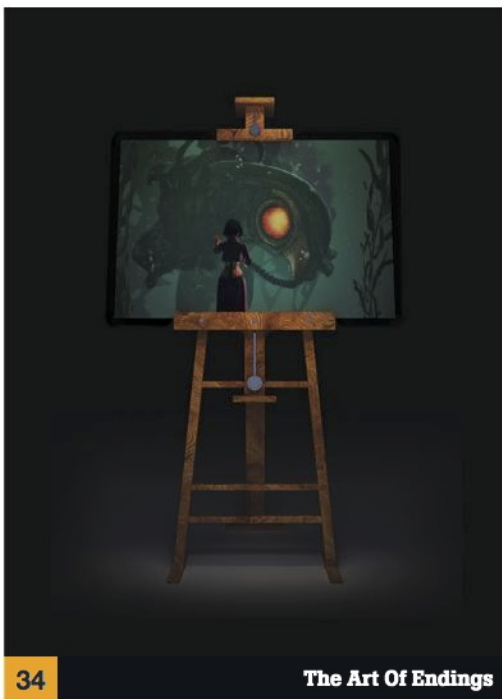
28

Game Hijackings



72

Project Spark



34

The Art Of Endings



62



70



24

Old And Shiny: Cross-Generation Ports

regulars

» 6 Feedback

This month readers wonder why preferring the Wii U labels them a Nintendo fanboy, and not a fan of video games. Readers also thank us for our cautionary tale about colleges with video game curriculum, and tell us about their experiences in Grand Theft Auto V.

» 10 Connect

Xbox One and PlayStation 4 are in the wild, and we're ready to unleash our hardware reviews. We also take a look back while stepping forward, to compare the current and previous generations, and examine the art of the video game ending.

» 68 Previews

We get our hands on Infamous: Second Son for the first time, learn more about Kingdom Hearts III and Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare, and find out what Blizzard has planned for the future of WoW and its franchise mash-up multiplayer game, Heroes of the Storm.

» 80 Reviews

We've got our first Xbox One and PlayStation 4 reviews with Knack, Killzone: Shadowfall, Resogun, Dead Rising 3, Forza Motorsport 5, Ryse: Son of Rome, and Killer Instinct. Don't worry though – we didn't forget about Super Mario 3D World, BioShock Infinite: Burial at Sea, or Tearaway.

» 100 Game Over

It's a new year, and that means resolutions. We take a look at some of the biggest video game companies in the industry and offer them potential resolutions that are sure to make fans happy.



96



91

Forza Motorsport 5

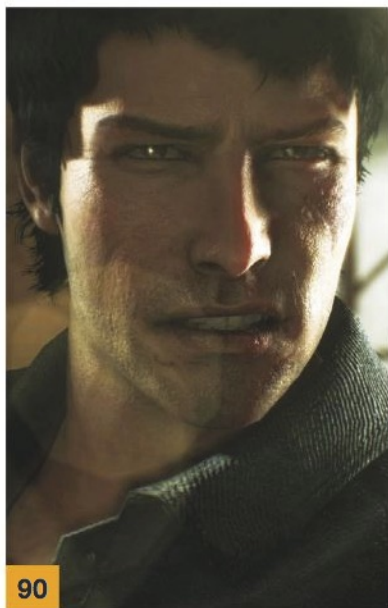


75



46

Opinion: Much Ado About Launches



90

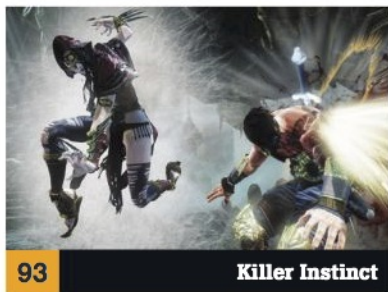


74

Heroes Of The Storm

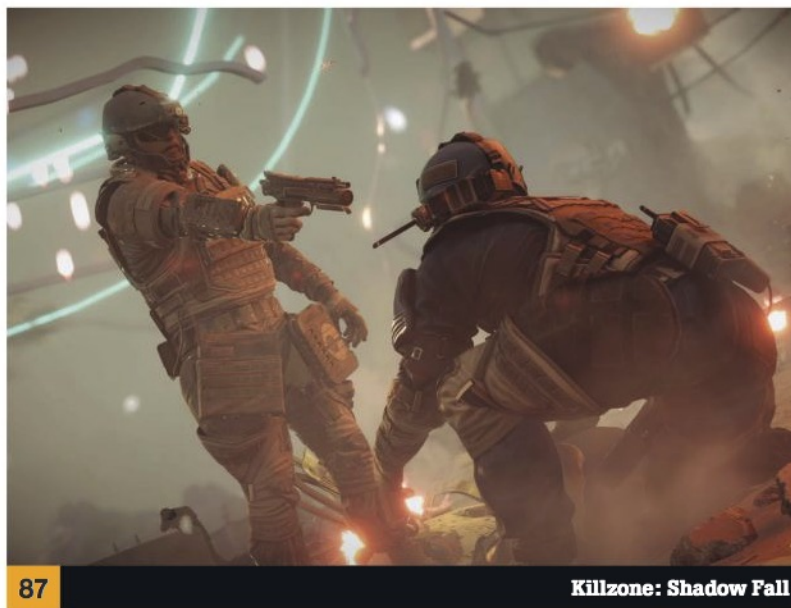


42



93

Killer Instinct



87

Killzone: Shadow Fall

games index

BioShock Infinite: Burial at Sea – Episode 1	83
Bravely Default: Flying Fairy	79
Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2	75
Conception II: Children of the Seven Stars	78
Contrast	85
Crimson Dragon	94
Dead Rising 3	90
Deadfall Adventures	98
Destiny	48
Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze	62
Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z	78
EverQuest Next Landmark	76
Forza Motorsport 5	91
Heroes of the Storm	74
Lego Marvel Super Heroes	86
Infamous: Second Son	68
Killer Instinct	93
Killzone: Shadow Fall	87
Kingdom Hearts III	73
Knack	86
Lococycle	94
Mario Party: Island Storm	98
NBA 2K14	84
NBA Live 14	85
Need For Speed: Rivals	82
Path of Exile	95
Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare	70
Powerstar Golf	93
Professor Layton and the Azran Legacy	79
Project Spark	72
Ratchet & Clank: Into the Nexus	89
Resogun	88
Ryse: Son of Rome	92
Shadowrun: Dragonfall	32
Super Mario 3D World	96
Super Motherload	86
Tearaway	97
The Stanley Parable	40
World of Warcraft: Warlords of Draenor	77

ASSASSIN'S —CREED® IV— FREEDOM CRY

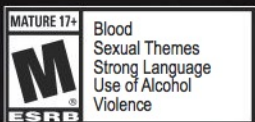


The Highly Anticipated Assassin's Creed® IV Black Flag™ Downloadable Content
NEW 4+ HOUR SINGLE-PLAYER STORY

From Slave to Assassin

Born a slave, Adewale found freedom as a pirate aboard the *Jackdaw*, where he became Edward Kenway's second-in-command. Now, 15 years later, Adewale has become a trained Assassin. Forced to face his past, Adewale sets out to free slaves and bring death to their captors.

DOWNLOAD DECEMBER 17



© 2013 Ubisoft Entertainment. All Rights Reserved. Assassin's Creed, Black Flag, Ubisoft, and the Ubisoft logo are trademarks of Ubisoft Entertainment in the US and/or other countries. The "PS" Family logo and "PS3" are registered trademarks and "PS4" is a trademark of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc.



UBISOFT



Grand Theft Auto V is the game on everyone's mind, as readers discuss what lived up to the hype and what didn't. Fans also share their excitement for The Order: 1886, question a classic, and praise Game Infarcer's ability to predict the future.

Getting Things In Order

After reading your cover story on The Order: 1886, I'm now more excited than ever to get my hands on the game. The concept of the knights protecting humanity from the beastly half-breeds is very intriguing to me. Being a fan of alternate history sci-fi, I'll have a joyous time exploring 19th century London, blasting half-breeds with a slew of interesting weaponry. Kudos to the people at Ready At Dawn for crafting what looks to be a gorgeous masterpiece. I'm hoping this game will make me love the PS4 just as much as Resistance: Fall of Man made me love the PS3 many years ago.

Zack Bachman
Kirksville, MO

Thank you for the excellent cover story for The Order: 1886. From the interesting alternate history to the crazy-but-intriguing weapons that the knights utilize, The Order sounds amazing and has my complete attention. I also want to commend the GI staff on the recent video interview with members of Ready At Dawn. The interview and cover story both have me excited for what looks to be a very promising new game for the PS4.

Jonathan Moore
via email

Ready At Dawn's first original IP has gamers taking notice of both the developer and the possibilities of next-gen gaming. To learn more about The Order: 1886 and Ready at Dawn, check out our exclusive bonus coverage at gameinformer.com/theorder. To see if the PlayStation 4 is all it's cracked up to be, check out our hardware review on page 10.

Higher Learning

I want to thank you for the article, "How Not To Become A Game Developer" (issue 247). In 2006, I pursued a programming degree at a prestigious four-year university in Illinois. The program was for a Bachelor of Applied Science, specifically Game Simulation and Programming. We were the first class of the new program. In other words, we were the guinea pigs. I completed the program in 2009, but had no luck finding a job. Companies were looking for candidates with three-plus years experience, and I felt unqualified for the other prerequisites, which included knowledge of the Unreal engine and Microsoft SQL server, both of which I didn't have a chance to use in school. I have since switched careers and am now working at a hospital as a surgical technician. I am very happy with my job, but have always wondered what my other career would've been like if I had been more prepared. I wish I could've read your article back in high school! I would've researched the program more and had better questions for my admissions representative. I can only hope that other people, particularly students, read this article. I guarantee that they will save a lot of time, money, and stress!

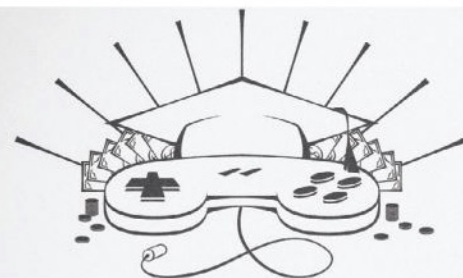
Richard Reyes
via email

Reading Brian Albert's "How Not to Become a Game Developer" article was like turning to a chapter in my personal history book. Two years prior to Brian, I had the exact same experience in Westwood's Game Design and Development "program." It infuriates me that to this day that "school" is allowed to continue with its business model. The recruiters do a

fantastic job of preying on prospective students, especially those who feel there are so few options that will get them into the gaming industry. That the Westwood institution calls itself a university is a sham, and I am so glad to finally see the word get out there publicly. Right now I am a junior at a local, non-profit university where I am majoring in English and writing, and can safely say I have a much more solid grasp on design and development, and a far better portfolio than what came out of my three years at Westwood. Oh, and at a third of the cost too.

Tara Campbell
via email

Unfortunately, we received a number of letters empathizing with Brian's experience. Just because you've chosen to pursue your dream career doesn't mean you should do it with your head in the clouds. Setting realistic expectations, asking tough questions to admissions officers, and formulating a solid backup plan can all help minimize the risk of trying to land a job in the video games industry.



Contact Us

feedback@gameinformer.com

Infinity And Beyond

Disney Infinity might be the most cynical product I've seen in my three decades of gaming. I understand GI gave the game a high score, so I am likely to be dismissed or mocked in your pages for my strong distaste of it, but I bristled with disbelief when I read your preview for the Toy Story expansion in issue 246. Any parent not reading the fine print will buy the game for their youngster and open it up to play an adventure in the Toy Story universe with Woody and Buzz...only to find that Woody is sold separately?! Where does this end? Will we get a Lion King set with just Pumbaa? Maybe a Little Mermaid expansion where Ariel is confined to the ocean unless you buy her human legs to enable the on-land portions? By purchasing this, we're telling game creators that this is acceptable. If we're going to stand pat for things like this, we can never make horse armor jokes again.

Justin Cooper
San Marcos, TX

You're not the only one who's turned off by Disney Infinity's business model, Justin. Many gamers and critics alike have decried how the series (along with Skylanders) panders to children with pricey action figures. Ultimately, however, Disney Infinity presents players with the same purchasing decision they have to make for every game; if you don't enjoy it enough to justify the more expensive price tag, then don't buy it.



Friends Like These

Every single one of my friends is talking about getting the Xbox One or PlayStation 4 for Christmas. When they ask me what I'm getting, I tell them the Wii U. Instead of saying something like, "That looked pretty cool when I saw it," they label me a "Nintendo fanboy" and list off reasons why the Wii U is bad. Why doesn't anyone like the Wii U? The games look really fun and the GamePad opens up new opportunities for fun games.

Matt Milliot
via email

It sounds like your friends are a bunch of jerks, Matt. While the Wii U may not feature the power or third-party support of Microsoft and Sony's next-gen systems, if you're interested in Nintendo's games (which remain as entertaining as ever), you shouldn't feel bad about buying one. Wanting a Wii U doesn't make someone a fanatic – blindly dismissing someone else's platform of choice and ridiculing them for it does.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"I friended Ben Reeves on my 360, and I think he un-friended me or something. Can you tell him to re-friend me?"

Unfortunately Ben doesn't believe in re-friending.

"What are some points I can make to my mom that proves that GTA V isn't just a 'car-jacking murder game' as she calls it?"

How about "you can also do drugs and sleep with prostitutes in the game"?

"Why does Dan always wear a t-shirt of some crappy '70s rock band?"

That's what Dan considers formal attire. It's kind of his version of a tuxedo t-shirt, only not as classy.

Worst Opening Line To A Feedback Letter:

"I would like to start off by saying: How dare you sir!"

Worst News Tip Of The Month:

"To put more than just new games put old ones to"

Question Of The Month:

Are lives in video games obsolete? Why or why not?

gi spy



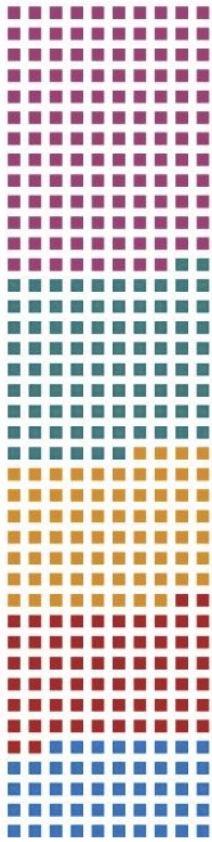
(Left) Shadowrun creator Jordan Weisman recently showed off Harebrained Schemes' new board game/video game hybrid, Golem Arcana, to Tim and Miller. Read Miller's preview at gameinformer.com.

(Right) Kim didn't just dress up as a hockey player for this year's Halloween – she played the part by beating up Jason, who we think was supposed to be dressed as Michael Jackson from Thriller.

GI SPY
continued on page 8

CANDID PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



- 32% GTA V Love
- 22% The Order Excitement
- 18% "Shut Up And Play" Editorial Praise
- 16% Next-Gen Questions
- 12% Game Degree Horror Stories

Oracle Of Ages

I'm a normal 13-year-old Texan kid suffering from video game grounding fatigue. While re-reading last year's Game Infarcer in issue 228, I found your parody entitled "Nintendo 2DS?" It joked how the 3D sliders didn't work on 3DS handhelds, but no one noticed. As I read it, I glanced up at the TV, and right then the new "Nintendo 2DS" commercial came on. I was amazed. You guys know the future! Were you actually thinking about Nintendo developing a two-dimensional 3DS, or was Darth Clark just being a dark time-machine wizard?

Blake Hensley
Arlington, TX

Nintendo abandoning the 3D effect of its latest handheld and renaming it the 2DS is only the latest example of Game Infarcer's soothsaying abilities. The parody section also prophesied the Wii U (i.e. WiiDS), Team Ninja taking over the Metroid series, and Nintendo's since-canceled Vitality Sensor – though we envisioned it more as a pillow accessory. It just goes to show you that the truth is stranger than fiction – at least when Nintendo is concerned.

Get A Half-Life

I bought The Orange Box a few weeks back, mainly to play Half-Life 2. I was six when it originally came out, so I wasn't able to play it then. I thought now was the perfect time to buy it. I played through the main game, both episodes, and Lost Coast. Yes, they were good games, and I enjoyed them. However, I don't see why Half-Life 2 is fawned over by so many people. I'm not bashing the game in any way; I liked it very much. But what is so incredible about it, that it is spoken about as the "Citizen Kane" of video games?

Otso Castrén
Oakton, VA

The love for Half-Life 2 has ballooned to mythical heights over the years, partly due to fans' incessant yearning for a sequel. However, you have to remember that the game you still enjoyed today was originally released in 2004. Back then, Half-Life 2 was nothing short of revolutionary, introducing players to a higher caliber of storytelling, pacing, and gameplay than they had seen before. It may seem somewhat run-of-the-mill now, but most trendsetters do after being copied by other developers for almost a decade.



Great Expectations

In issue 247, we asked readers if GTA V lived up to their expectations or not. With the exception of a few disillusioned gamers, most readers expressed happiness with their purchase, despite GTA Online's early server woes.

GTA V surpassed my expectations. I love the fact that you can play as three different characters. Even though the online servers had an extremely rocky start, it's still one of the best games out there.

Carolyn N.

Hell yeah! Knowing full well that Rockstar wouldn't be able to support the demand for GTA Online's launch, I continued my exploits with Trevor, Michael and Franklin for a few days. When I finally did venture into the online world, I was thoroughly surprised to find a second full game to play. If this were Activision or EA's IP, we would have been paying \$120 to play this. Kudos to Rockstar for making the last hurrah of current-gen a true blockbuster.

Jeremy Halkin

Did GTA V meet my expectations? Yes and no. The storyline is pretty decent, and the open world and improved gameplay left me satisfied with my purchase. The online, however, makes me wish Rockstar had taken gamers' character – or lack thereof – into account. I deal with a—holes all day; when I come home and sit down to play a game, I don't want to spend time between missions being chased down by kids too young to buy the game. I wish Rockstar had created a better passive mode that allowed you to enjoy the full online experience and even watch the idiots around you without having to deal with their lack of impulse control.

Chris Smith

(Left) During this month's cover story trip, Bryan and Miller met with Bungie co-founder Jason Jones.

(Right) Miller also interviewed Destiny's composer, Marty O'Donnell. Watch the interview on gameinformer.com.



1



WINNER

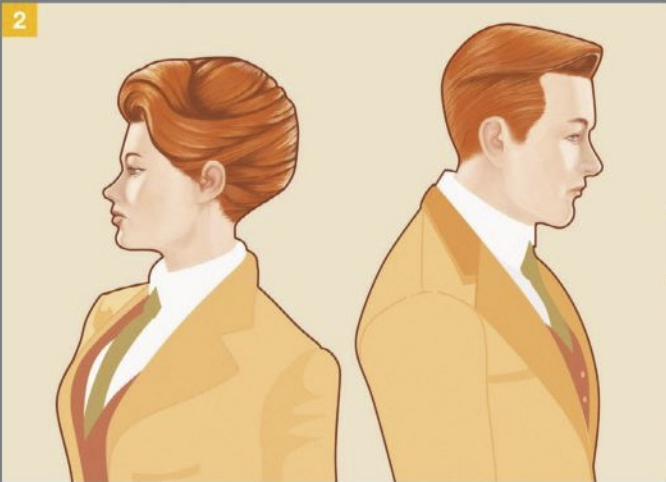
1 Max Duford
Considering he's using a rhino as his chair and using bananas for his bets, we're guessing DK is the guy no one wants to show up for poker night

2 Camille Manaor
Bioshock Infinite's Luteces pose for their indie rock album cover

3 Claudia Cossi
There's a whole lotta head-grabbin' going on in the world of Professor Layton

4 Julian Elwood
In the harsh light of day, Slender Man is less "terrifying nightmare" and more "Q-tip in a suit"

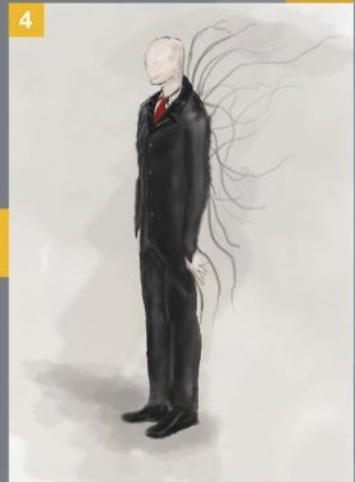
2



3



4



► Submit your art for a chance to win our monthly prize. Please include your name and return address. Entries become the property of Game Informer and cannot be returned. Send to: Game Informer Reader Art Contest | 724 First Street North, 3rd Floor | Mpls, MN 55401 or Email to: ReaderArt@gameinformer.com

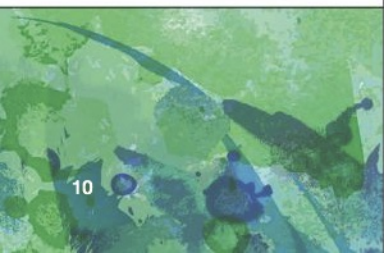


(Left) Meet the creative minds behind Ready at Dawn: Marc Turndorf, Andrea Pessino, Ru Weerasuriya, Garret Foster, and Dana Jan. **(Right)** Game Informer reader and all-around nice guy Zach Pligge (being photo-bombed by former intern Jack Gardner) spearheaded GI's participation in the Extra Life marathon this year, helping us raise over \$16,000 for the Children's Miracle Network. Great job, Zach!



NOTABLES

- 27 afterwords: the stanley parable
- 28 game hijackings: when a game is more than a spiritual successor
- 33 top ten new yorks
- 34 the art of endings
- 40 gamer: the man with the most games
- 46 opinion: much ado about launches





The Next Generation Is **Now**

Game Informer reviews the Xbox One and PlayStation 4

questions still remain. How well does Kinect 2.0 work? Is it easy to share videos on the PS4? We test both units and explore and examine their positives and negatives.

The PlayStation 4 and Xbox One have been on the minds of gamers since before the systems were even officially introduced, but



It's been a long journey from the introduction of Xbox One to its launch, but despite all the detours and dead ends, Microsoft's system vision is still largely intact. The hardware ably works as a multi-use console capable of putting gaming and media content at your fingertips. Or, thanks to the Kinect, at the sound of your voice. We spent significant time with the unit and are here to dissect it and give you a guided tour. **by Matthew Kato**

Note: There may be slight differences to the day-one launch experience depending on the system's update and other unforeseen changes

THE HARDWARE

Microsoft envisions the Xbox One as the center of your home electronics hub, and perhaps as such, the system looks neither like the pure gaming systems of the past nor like a traditional media player. Although at first glance it looks like a relatively plain box, the asymmetry of its matte and glossy finishes gives it a more interesting look.

Whether we were watching TV, updating, or playing games, the unit was very quiet

The unit is well ventilated, and although you can feel air coming through all of the vents, it's not a particularly hot system

The Xbox One has a power brick like previous systems. The end of the plug that goes into the console looks like the one from the slim 360, but is in fact proprietary to the Xbox One

The Xbox One weighs in at 7.8 lbs – heavier than both the 360 Elite (7.5 lbs) and the redesigned slim model (6.2 lbs)



Unlike the 360, Microsoft is advising against standing the Xbox One vertically up on its side, citing possible but not guaranteed overheating issues

Some of the console's design features are hidden in plain sight. You can touch the Xbox symbol at the front to turn it on (similar to the digital buttons of the original version of the PlayStation 3), and the analog disc-eject button is tucked in to the right of the disc slot. Along the side of the console you can find the controller sync button and one of the USB 3.0 ports

The Instant-On mode lets you wake the system up with your voice via Kinect, and lets you turn on your TV/cable/satellite box with the console. It also lets you automatically download updates and start the system up faster than the Energy Saver mode (about 12 seconds vs. 47 seconds)

What's In The Box

- ▶ Xbox One
- ▶ Kinect
- ▶ Controller (w/ 2 AA batteries)
- ▶ HDMI (6'6")
- ▶ Headset
- ▶ Power Brick

Tech Specs

CPU ▶ 8 core, 1.75 GHz
AMD custom CPU

GPU ▶ AMD 853 MHz
Radeon GPU

Optical Drive ▶ Blu-ray/
DVD drive

Memory ▶ 8GB DDR 3
+ 32MB eSRAM

Storage ▶ 500GB,
plus external hard drive
compatibility after launch

I/O ▶ 3 x USB 3.0

A/V ▶ HDMI out, HDMI in,
digital output (optical),
IR out

Communication ▶ Gigabit
Ethernet, 803.11n

Gamers can charge their controllers using a micro-USB cord as opposed to the proprietary port on the 360 controller

The View button will bring up game-specific menus, and enables you to switch between a snapped app and the main window

The Menu button acts as a pause button

The face buttons are slightly closer together and have a slightly lower profile

The Xbox One supports eight controllers simultaneously



The controller's IR port enables the Kinect to see where players are in relation to each other. This can be useful for games to configure a game's splitscreen panels to match where players are sitting. It also allows the controller to be used as a TV/cable remote

The battery compartment is relatively hidden

THE CONTROLLER

The Xbox One controller may be very similar to that of the Xbox 360, but make no mistake about it, it features subtle but important refinements, as well as one big jump forward for video games.

If you close your eyes and only hold the controller, your palms might not perceive much of a difference. However, your fingers would beg to differ. The analog sticks are taller and their tops are not as wide as the 360 controller, but they feel and grip better because the cups are slightly deeper and are comprised of two different materials. The analog stick rims are coated in a hard, finely textured plastic that is more tactile than the uniform, sometimes slippery construction of the 360 sticks. The new height on the analog sticks makes them feel more responsive, as you don't have to move them as far to reach the edge of their range.

The d-pad has also been replaced wholesale. Now it's clean and simple and even clicks as if to underscore how responsive and functional it is.

The biggest improvement, however, for the Xbox One controller is the triggers. While the triggers for all of Microsoft's controllers have been better than Sony's, the Xbox One takes it a step further. Not content to simply replicate those on the 360, these triggers curve outward slightly more and are wider. The outside edge of the triggers angle outward so the trigger itself is a lot bigger but not obtrusive. Similarly, your fingers rest on more of the bumper buttons' surface area because the bumpers slope down at a shallower angle than those on the Xbox 360 controller.

The fact that more of your finger is in contact with the trigger is no doubt related to the triggers' most important feature – rumble. The vibration you feel through the triggers gives a big boost to the gameplay experience. In particular, I loved it in *Forza Motorsport 5*. I could feel the skidding of the car and locking of the brakes (including the pulsing of the anti-lock brake system), all valuable information as I tried to maintain control of the car.



KINECT

Microsoft reversed course to make plugging in the Kinect optional, but the device is unmistakably a key component of the full Xbox One experience. Not only do its voice commands make navigating easy, the camera allows you to store multiple profiles on one Xbox One.

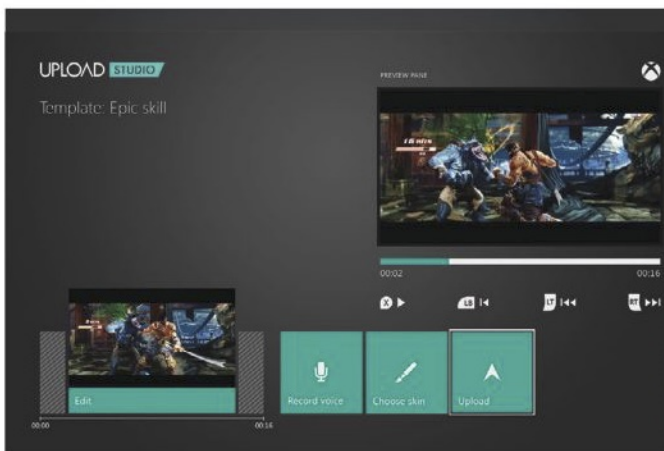
When a friend or family member steps in front of Kinect, it automatically recognizes them and brings up their own customized dashboard. They can even download games they've bought for play on your system if you don't have them on your box.

The camera's ability to recognize different people in the room is impressive, and it can even do so when someone is six feet away. Microsoft advises that you be a minimum of four feet away when using the camera, but we've tried it closer and it still worked, which should make it a feasible option for those with smaller entertainment rooms. The Kinect can also read who is holding the controller, which can be useful for splitscreen games. For instance, Kinect could read which side

of the couch each player is on and arrange the screen accordingly.

The voice command recognition is improved from the 360, but still makes some wrong selections at times. In particular I had difficulty using the voice commands in the One Guide locating specific TV stations and remote functions. This makes me wonder how the Kinect is going to pick up peculiar-sounding games and apps. Those looking to grief Xbox One players will have no problem doing so by shouting at the Kinect, "Xbox, turn off" while walking by.

The Kinect can function as a game mic, but it's not very loud, and although you can mute yourself, you cannot mute other party members unless they do it themselves. Instead, the pack-in mono headset is the better way to go. The headset sounds great. Its volume controls are handily located where the unit plugs into your controller, and the mute button lights up when activated. Likewise, there are audio indicators when you toggle the volume up or down.



The Xbox One lets you record up to five minutes of video and upload it for anyone to see. After using Kinect Voice commands ("Xbox, Record That") the system automatically grabs the last 30 seconds. You can also bring up the Game DVR app and start recording whenever you like.

Clips can be edited in the Upload Studio app (which requires the Kinect), and it includes some stylistic touches as well, such as recording your own video commentary in a separate screen. While you're watching clips you can also fast forward or rewind.

Video streaming of gameplay using Twitch will be available in the first half of 2014. Until then, you can at least watch videos on the Twitch app.

GAME DVR



THE DASHBOARD

The Xbox One interface is not that different from the 360 or Windows 8. When you first start up the unit, the system walks you through the initial setup, including signing in to your existing profile or creating a new one, configuring Kinect, and updating the system via the mandatory one-time Internet connection. Some steps can be skipped if you like.

The dashboard consists of three areas: Home, Pins, and Store, which you can toggle between with the bumper buttons. Each area has its own panels within them, and there is content repetition among them. While this may be slightly confusing (the home screen, for instance, shows the content you accessed chronologically), it's easy to find what you want. For instance, the Pins screen is a place where you can post your favorite apps or games for quick selection (available only if you're online). The quickest way to move around the dashboard is by using the Kinect. You can say, "Xbox, Go to..." and name your game or app. You can navigate the dashboard with SmartGlass, but it's not that interesting.

The console's storefront for games, music, TV/movies, and apps has a side-scrolling menu layout with columns of content arranged along similar lines; surfacing new releases, recommendations, top-rated titles, and new releases. It all makes sense, but the repetition can be overwhelming. For example, what's the difference between a game in the Top Games column and a game in the Popular Games column? It will be interesting to see how Microsoft surfaces indie titles once that initiative takes off.

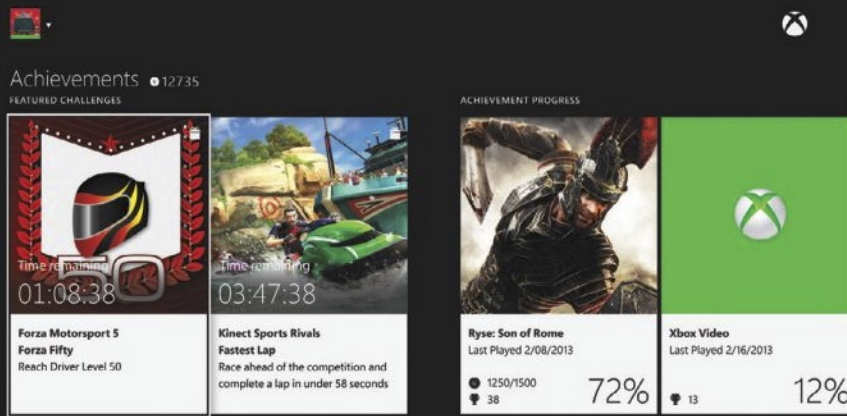
The console's separate OSs allows you to resume where you left off in any game or app. This is obviously very helpful when multitasking, and switching between a game and your apps is seamless. There are limits, however. You can't switch between the media streaming apps like Netflix and Hulu Plus and keep your place in a movie you were watching,



for example. Should you ever want to go back to your home screen, pushing the Xbox Guide button on your controller takes you there.

The unit comes with some pretty powerful apps at launch, including Hulu Plus, Netflix, Skype, and Xbox One services like Xbox Fitness and Upload Studio. The latter is how you can edit game clips from the Game DVR. Each of these apps must first be downloaded and installed, and some of them require periodic manual updates. Neither of these actions take much time, but we would prefer automatic updates for all apps. Downloads for larger files like games can be queued while you do other things, and you can start playing games after a certain percentage of it is downloaded. An Xbox Gold-level membership is needed for many Xbox One features such as the Upload Studio, the OneGuide, Skype, Internet Explorer, Game DVR, and apps like NFL, Netflix, Twitch, and Hulu Plus.

One thing you won't find on the dashboard is how much hard drive space you have remaining. While connected systems will have the benefit of Microsoft's cloud storage for game saves, settings, and other smaller bits of system info, the large GB game installs will still take up space on your hard drive. How much is actually there will be a mystery.



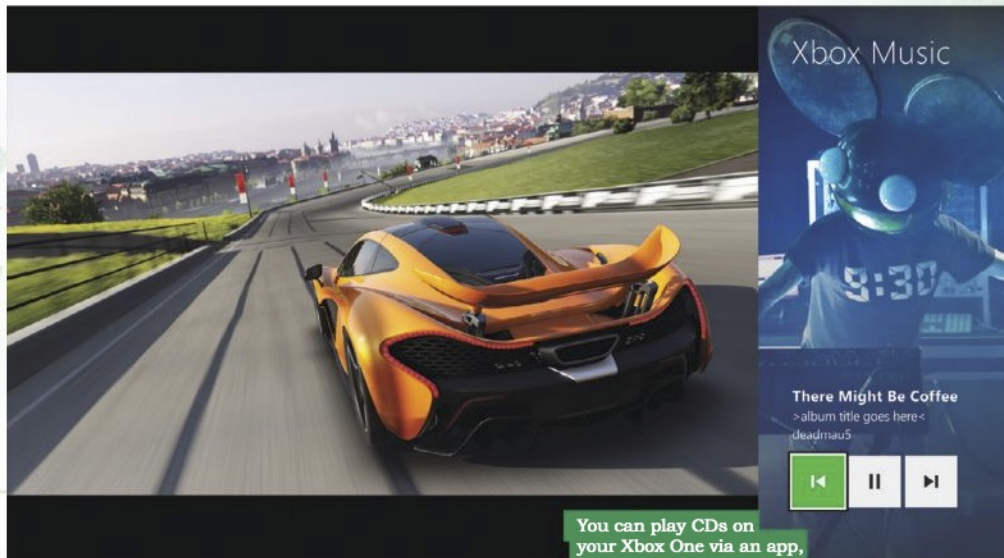
Friends & Achievements

Your existing Live profile is the same, but the Xbox One is a different environment. Your profile uses a large icon (but you can't import your own picture). Inside your profile you can see your friends list (which has expanded from 100 to 1,000), designate your favorite friends, and create a party (with up to 31 people). The Xbox One also introduces followers, who are people who can see what you're doing, but who aren't officially your friends. You can have an unlimited number of followers. In addition, your profile features a timeline feed that shows what your friends are up to. Achievements and clips from the Game DVR are also housed here.

Achievements take another step with Xbox One. Not only can developers create new ones on the fly, but the system also presents challenges related to in-game activities. These are separate from achievements (but are accessible by selecting your profile's achievements) and instead of contributing to your gamerscore, they reward you with in-game items. The achievements from your 360 carry over, and you can click on a game or app to see how much progress you have left.

Snap An App

Those who like to multitask can snap selected games and apps to the right-hand side of their screen. Apps vary in their functionality once they are shrunk down and snapped to your screen, and the sound from both windows is automatically played simultaneously. Some websites, for instance, scale better than others, and its usefulness is limited. It can be handy to keep a game guide available or the game DVR options, but it's too small to use it to watch TV in a meaningful way. Some Xbox One functions, like watching a Blu-ray movie, can't be snapped. Navigating within the Snap window can be annoying depending on the app or website you're using. We hope Microsoft eventually allows users the ability to resize the Snap window or move it.



You can play CDs on your Xbox One via an app, but not rip them

Under Construction

The connected online functionality of the Xbox One gives it enormous flexibility, but in terms of launch, it also means that some features of the box will be added later. The sky's the limit, but Microsoft has also specifically mentioned a few amenities of the system that are planned, but just aren't ready on day one.

Ability To Use An External USB Hard Drive ▶ The Xbox One does not allow the installation of a new internal hard drive, but users will eventually be able to add external storage via one of its USB 3.0 ports. Any external hard drive can store the same data the internal HDD can, such as game downloads and installations. Microsoft has not announced when it plans to green light this functionality.

Third-Party Headsets ▶ The Xbox One comes with a wired, mono headset, but if you want to use an existing one – or even Turtle Beach's officially sanctioned Xbox One headsets – you have to wait until sometime in early 2014 for Microsoft to release an adapter that makes this possible.

Using Your Real Name ▶ Given that the friends list cap has gone up to 1,000, you could be forgiven for not remembering who each Gamertag associates too. Unfortunately, at launch you won't be able to see or search friends' real names.

Digital Game Gifting/Licensing ▶ When asked about the possibility of allowing gamers to gift digital titles to friends, Larry Hyrb, director of programming for Xbox Live, told an audience on Reddit, "Great feature we'd like to add in someday, but won't be there at launch."

ID@Xbox ▶ Microsoft and the Xbox 360 came under fire for its stance towards indie games, including its pricing and release policies. The company originally required that all indie developers find a publisher to get on Xbox One, but since has relented and set up the self-publishing ID@Xbox program. Unfortunately, it's such a late addition that gamers won't see the fruits of the program until after launch.

Game DVR Video Sharing To Facebook And YouTube ▶ Right now the videos you create can only be shared across Xbox Live, but Microsoft says it plans to extend this coverage to the two major social networks.

10 Percent More GPU ▶ *Eurogamer* reports that the console saves 10 percent of its GPU's graphical power for Kinect and other apps. Reportedly this extra horsepower will be made available to developers at some point without compromising functionality.

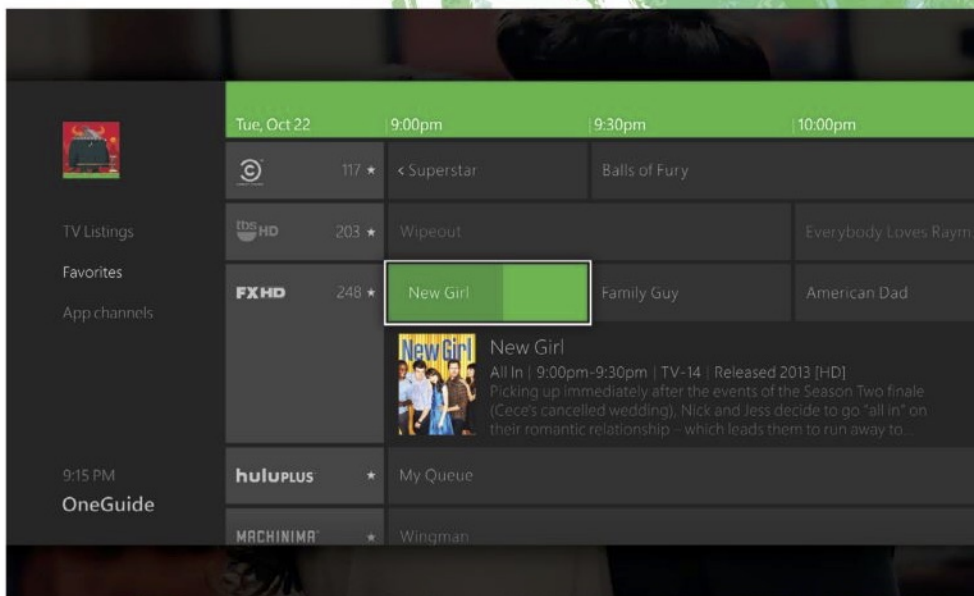
Sound Selection For Snap ▶ Microsoft senior director of product management Albert Penello told us the company is working to allow players to choose their sound source when using a main window and a snapped app.

Returning To Games Mid-Save After Powering Down ▶ This is also something that Penello told us is on the post-launch wish list.

Twitch Game Broadcasting ▶ Coming in the first half of 2014.

Launch Window Apps

- Amazon Instant Video
- Crackle
- CWTV
- ESPN
- FOX NOW
- FXNOW
- Hulu Plus
- Internet Explorer
- Machinima
- MUZU TV
- Netflix
- Redbox Instant by Verizon
- Skype
- Skydrive
- Target Ticket
- TED
- The NFL on Xbox One
- Twitch
- Univision Deportes
- Upload/Upload Studio
- Verizon FiOS TV
- VUDU
- Xbox Fitness
- Xbox Music
- Xbox Video



TELEVISION

Microsoft markets the Xbox One as a total home entertainment device, but don't be fooled by its simple ability to capture a signal from your cable or satellite box without having to change the input on your TV. While it integrates watching TV into the console, it doesn't record like a DVR, and even though it can broadcast what's on your DVR, this requires the use of your normal remote (and of course the cable box itself) – thus making the Xbox One something less than a total home device.

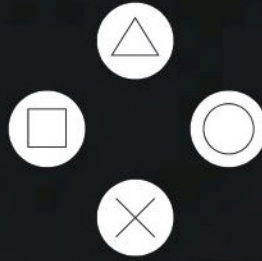
Setting up your TV and cable/satellite box with the Xbox One is easy. Going through a few guided menus allows you to access your local programming guide (online connection required), which the Xbox One then visualizes as the One Guide. The console even tries to find the IR codes for your remotes so you can access some – but not all – of the remotes' features via the Xbox One. For instance, you can link your TV, Xbox One, audio setup, and cable box so they all turn off together when you say, "Xbox Off." However, the console doesn't replicate all the commands of a universal or standard DVR remote, meaning you have to keep that handy if you want to access your DVR or streaming options from the cable box. We had varying luck getting Kinect to recognize our channel changing commands.

Regardless of the Xbox One's limited TV features, it makes good on its promise to allow you to transition from game playing or other tasks into watching TV seamlessly, and the One Guide also lets you pick your favorite channels and pin media apps like Netflix and Hulu Plus to the Guide as channels. These apps are accessible elsewhere in the dashboard, but being able to arrange them with your other TV content is smart.

The Xbox One makes its case for being an all-purpose total home entertainment console, but comes up short. The TV integration is useful, but its inability to totally supplant your cable box or even access its DVR shows makes the system less than crucial. Regardless, the Xbox One's multitasking without missing a beat is impressive. Being able to pause your game, check something online or on TV, and then resume play without a hitch is addictive. Kinect's ability to read body structure has gaming capabilities that outstrip its still uneven voice recognition. Despite Microsoft's reversal of some of its earlier policies, the Xbox One is clearly at its best when it's used as it was originally intended – online and with the Kinect. The console gets better as more features are added via updates, but it's still a highly proficient machine on day one.

B+

THE FINAL GRADE



Once the upstart challenger to Nintendo's throne, Sony is now an enduring player in the console market. It's now on its fourth generation of PlayStation hardware, a testament to the strength of the brand. However, this console launch feels more critical than perhaps any other in Sony's history. With Microsoft's Xbox One also coming to market, it can't afford to repeat the sluggish start that PlayStation 3 had. The company's PR and marketing momentum has been strong in the months leading up to launch. Even better, the PlayStation 4 looks to be the best-designed and most complete system the company has ever brought to market. How good is it? Read on to find out. **by Matt Helgeson**

Note: There may be slight differences to the day-one launch experience depending on the system's update and other unforeseen changes

THE HARDWARE

It wasn't hard to guess that the PlayStation 4 was going to be some sort of black rectangle. While not daring, the unit itself is attractive, sleek, and surprisingly small. The flat design allows it to fit alongside your other entertainment components more easily. While it's a bit plain looking, the slanted front and back panels and the mix of matte and glossy plastic on the unit give it a modern, streamlined look. Our only real concern about the core hardware is the 500GB hard drive, which only gives you around 380GB of usable space. With some games clocking in at over 40GB and all the mandatory installs, it's going to fill up fast – something that will limit Sony's push towards digital distribution.

The back of the unit has an HDMI out, a digital optical audio out, input port for the PlayStation Camera, and an Ethernet port. It also has 802.11 Wi-Fi Internet and Bluetooth 2.1 for the wireless controllers



The unit runs fairly cool, even after we had it powered on for hours. It's also significantly quieter than the PS3, with little disc or fan noise. However, the Xbox One seems to be the quieter of the two

Unlike the Xbox One, the PlayStation 4 can be placed either horizontally or vertically. A vertical stand is available for around \$17.99, or it can be placed vertically on its own

The line that divides the matte and glossy sections of the top flashes slowly when powering up and down, and glows while the system is powered on

The unit has a standby mode. This low power state allows it to perform game updates while not in use (only available to PlayStation Plus members). The unit also charges controllers while in standby

Like the PS3, the PS4 plays Blu-ray and DVD, but does not currently support CD playback



The 500GB hard drive can be swapped out for a larger drive – something that you can't do with the Xbox One. It can even use a faster, solid-state drive. However, it's a bit of a process, requiring you to open up the unit, unscrew the old drive, and replace it. Then, you have to manually install the 1.5 system update via USB stick. We advise finding a good tutorial video before you try it

The glossy finish on this section is a magnet for fingerprints

After plugging in the PS4, you might struggle to turn it on. That's because the power and eject buttons are extremely thin, located on the front panel in the divide between the glossy and matte sections of the unit. After the initial set up, you can use your controller for these functions

What's In The Box

- » PlayStation 4 console
- » DualShock 4 controller (rechargeable)
- » HDMI (6')
- » Mono earpiece headset
- » Power Cord
- » Quick Start Guide
- » Vouchers for one month of PlayStation Plus and Music Unlimited
- » \$10 PlayStation Store credit

Tech Specs


- CPU** » 8-core AMD x86-64 Jaguar CPU
- GPU** » 1.84 Teraflops AMD Radeon Graphics Core Next Engine GPU
- Optical Drive** » 6X Blu-ray, 8X DVD optical drive
- Memory** » 8GB GDDR5 RAM

Storage » 500GB hard drive (upgradable)

I/O » 2 x USB 3.0

A/V » HDMI out, digital output (optical), Ethernet port (10BASE-T, 100BASE-TX, 1000BASE-T)

Communication » Integrated 802.11 b/g/n Wi-Fi wireless Internet, Bluetooth 2.1



The one downside to the controller is the battery life. While it's not terrible, it does not hold a charge as long as the DualShock 3. However, you can now charge your controller when the system is in standby mode

The underside of the controller is lightly textured, making it easier to maintain a good grip compared to the DualShock 3

The front of the controller features a glowing light, which can display a number of colors. It also allows it to be detected by the PlayStation Camera for use as a Move-style motion controller

Right below the touchpad is a small speaker. Some games are already using it, and it seems to be of much better quality than the Wii remote's speaker

THE CONTROLLER

Though it shares the same name as its predecessors, the DualShock 4 represents a large step forward in Sony's controller design. The original three iterations of the controller made slight variations on a similar form factor; this time around Sony made more radical changes. By and large, it's a tremendous improvement over the DualShock 3.

The first thing we noticed is how comfortable it is. Though not as large as the Xbox One controller, the wings and back feel fuller and more contoured, making for a controller that fits like a glove. This was done without adding a significant amount of weight to the controller. Overall, the materials and construction feel very solid.

The main inputs are of a much higher quality as well. After the floppy, domed sticks of the DualShock 3, the new concave analogs are a revelation. The tension is greater, and they seem to maintain a more uniform throw throughout the full range of motion. They are made of a tackier-feeling plastic, and have a lip and recessed dimple to ensure your thumbs don't slide off. While we wish they'd switched to

an offset analog layout, the bottom positioning feels better than before due to the larger size of the controller itself. The shoulder triggers are also improved, with a less clicky, more true throw. The face buttons and d-pad are essentially the same, but the Start and Select buttons have been replaced by Share and Options (which is now the pause button). Below the PlayStation button is a jack for the included headset, which is similar to a cell-phone earpiece and offers surprisingly good sound quality.

In general, it feels like a true next-generation DualShock – a smart update of past controllers. The one promising but unproven feature is the center touchpad. So far, it seems impressively accurate, and is already being used for things like commanding a sentry drone with swipe gestures in *Killzone: Shadow Fall*. If nothing else, it's clickable, which means it gives developers one more button to use. The touchpad has a lot of potential, and the fact that it was added to the controller in a way that compromises none of its core functions is a real feat of engineering.

This is the best controller Sony has made, by a mile.



THE CAMERA

Unlike Microsoft, Sony's not making voice and motion control a core part of its console. However, it is selling an official PlayStation Camera for \$59.99. It's similar to Kinect, with a stereo camera array and microphone. The unit is a bit smaller, and easily mounts on your television with an included stand. It also rotates up and down to adjust the viewing height.

What is it good for? At this point, not much. It can allow the DualShock 4 to function as a motion controller like the Move controller. This functionality is really only used in Playroom, a preloaded collection of a couple minigames involving small robots that you can see overlaid on your living room. Cute, but inessential.

Like the Kinect, it also enables voice commands and facial recognition, but to a more limited degree. You can give simple commands like "Start [game or app]" and that's about it. The facial-recognition profile log-in seemed somewhat impressive – until we did some experimenting and found out that a couple similar looking coworkers (Tim Turi and Joe Juba) could log in to my profile with the camera. It didn't work for everyone – like Kim Wallace and the bearded Jeff Cork – but this feature needs some work.

The biggest selling point for the camera right now is its use for livestreaming games on Twitch or uStream, as it allows you to put a small live video feed of your face next to the game stream.



The included earpiece is small, but provides surprisingly good audio quality

The PlayStation 4 has most of the media functions you'd expect from a modern day console. Thirteen media apps are available at launch (see sidebar), and they seem to work as they should. The instant switching (done by double clicking the PS button) is nice and extremely fast. You can switch between a movie and a game seamlessly, and it keeps your place in both. However, right now this feature isn't working for all applications.

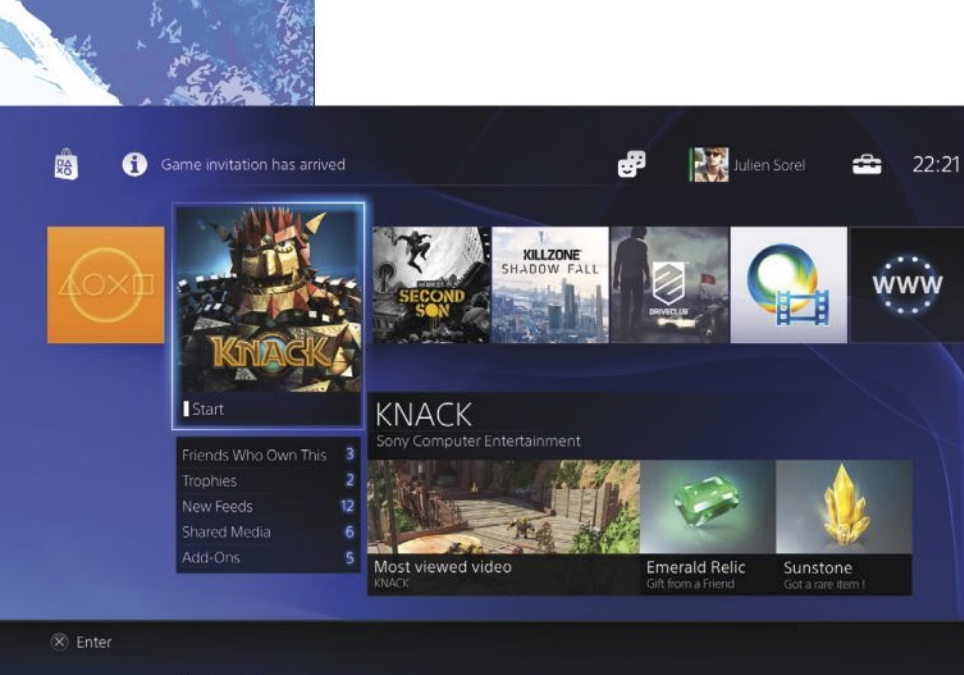
The PlayStation 4 does lag behind the Xbox One in a couple of key ways. One, it doesn't have the "snap" functionality that lets Xbox users put a movie or another app in a smaller window next to their game. It won't interact with your existing cable television box like Xbox One, either, so don't expect this to be your all-in-one entertainment box unless you've cut the cord.

Music playback is also limited, as Sony's subscription-only Music Unlimited service is the only option at launch. Worse, the system doesn't allow for MP3 or CD playback, something that Sony plans to add in an upcoming update. On the plus side, Music Unlimited has a large selection of music, and can even play while you're on the dashboard or in games (though you have to manually turn down the in-game music in the options menu).

MEDIA MACHINE

Launch Window Apps

- Amazon
- Instant Video
- Crackle
- Crunchyroll
- Epix
- Hulu Plus
- Music Unlimited
- Movies Unlimited
- NBA Game Time
- Netflix
- NHL Game Center
- Redbox Instant
- Vudu
- Yupp TV



THE DASHBOARD

Sony's dashboards have never impressed, so it had a lot of work to do with the new console. The Xross Media bar used for the PS3 and PSP did a poor job of surfacing games, entertainment, and apps, and buried lots of settings and features in obtuse menus. The PlayStation 4's new dynamic menu positions itself somewhere between the PlayStation 3 and the Xbox One's tile-based UI, and (mostly) succeeds at the important thing: You can access the content and features you want more quickly than in the past.

Setup is a breeze, taking only a few minutes. Internet connectivity is much easier than the PS3's maze of options – we simply plugged in, and the PS4 detected the settings automatically. It was also a breeze to log in to PlayStation Network and connect profiles to Facebook accounts

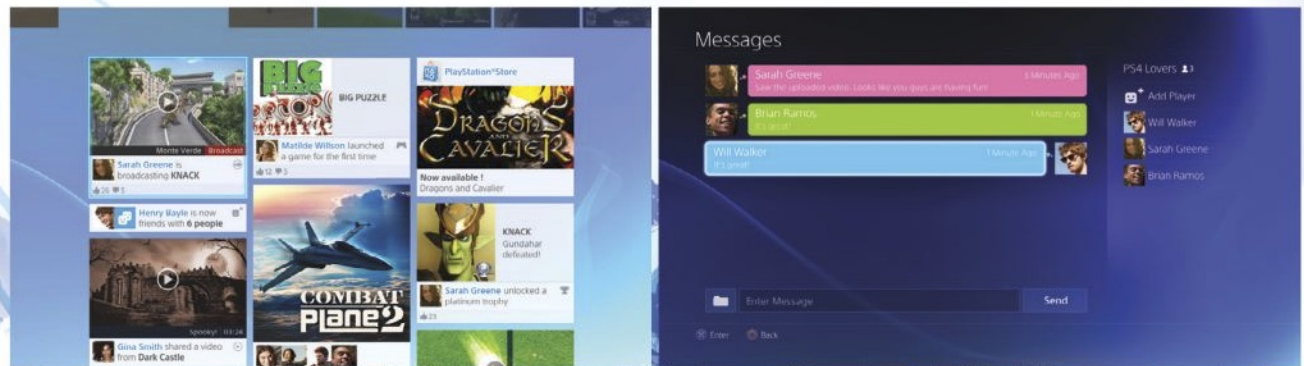
(something that is important if you want to take full advantage of the PS4's sharing capabilities).

The dashboard is made up of two sets of options. The one you'll spend the most time in features larger, graphical tiles. The first tile is "What's New," which is a Facebook-style feed that shows what your friends have been doing. Scroll down and you can see updates telling you which games and movies they've been enjoying, which videos they've been watching, who is livestreaming a gaming session, and how many new friends they've made online. You can change how much of your activity is shared in your profile options. Updates from Sony and the PlayStation Store also inform you about new titles that are available and other announcements. Thankfully, all this is hidden unless you click down from the What's New tile, meaning that you don't have to see it if you don't want to.

The rest of the tiles you see upon boot up include Sony's Music Unlimited and Movies Unlimited apps, a web browser, a TV icon that lets you click down to see your media apps like Netflix and Hulu Plus, and the recent games you've played. It's a dynamic menu because the last thing you did will always be in the second spot (after What's New) when you come back to the system, making resuming a game a much quicker process. Like the Xbox One, you can also suspend apps and quickly return to them by pressing the PS button, which toggles between your last two applications. We experimented with watching *Skyfall* (rented through the PlayStation Store) and playing *Injustice* and the switching was instantaneous – though it only works for the last two applications. We wish there was a way to "pin" frequently used applications like Netflix to the main bar and subtract others, like Sony's Music Unlimited and Movies Unlimited services.

Above the tiles is another tier of icons for things like your friends list, profile, settings, etc., which are reminiscent of the Xross Media bar. Some options are still buried, and things like approving a friend request still take too many clicks. Still, it's usually pretty easy, with some exceptions, to quickly get to what you want to do. There are also a lot of nice touches like threaded private messages between friends, and a new rating for trophies that shows their relative rarity based on how many people have earned them.

These interface improvements have carried over to the PlayStation Store, which enables better discoverability and sorting.



THE SOCIAL CONSOLE

Sony has touted the PlayStation 4 as a console focused on social networking and sharing game experiences with your friends. It delivers on this promise. During the initial setup, you're asked to link your Facebook account to your PSN account, which is necessary to make the most of the system. Be careful about the auto-posting Facebook settings. For testing purposes, we turned everything on and were horrified to see our Facebook feed become spammed with all of our PS4 activity. Because we were using the quick switching between game and movie apps, it posted that we were playing *Injustice: Gods Among Us* four times in one hour – one post for each time we resumed. Add in auto-postings for every trophy we earned, and we had some severely annoyed Facebook friends.

Once we turned auto-posting off, things went smoothly, and we like the fact there are separate settings for auto-posting to your PSN feed

and Facebook feed. Another great new feature is the ability to appear under your real name on PSN – and request real names from your friends. Given that you can now have 2,000 friends, it's going to come in handy, and should prevent you from having to remember if John from junior high is NinjaKillah69 or NinjaKillah420.

The PS4 is constantly keeping stills and video from your gameplay and allows you to easily share them with friends via Facebook (pictures and video) and Twitter (pictures only).

Finally, Sony addressed PlayStation 3's single biggest online flaw with the inclusions of real, universal party chat. Now, just like on Xbox Live, you can be in a party of friends and engage in voice chat while switching across multiple games and apps. It is worth noting that all this progress does come at a price: While many of the new social features are free to all users, you must now subscribe to PlayStation Plus (\$49.99 a year) to access online multiplayer.

Under Construction

With frequent system updates, today's consoles are an endless work in progress. Here are some of the features and functionality that Sony promises to add to the PS4 in the future.

Gaikai & Streaming Games ▶ Sony purchased the streaming gameplay service Gaikai in 2012 for \$380 million. It's promised that cloud-based streaming games is a big part of the PS4's future. Given that the PS4 isn't backwards compatible, this may be the way that Sony supports its extensive back catalog of games.

Remote Control Gameplay ▶ One of the more interesting features discussed at the PlayStation 4 worldwide unveiling event was the ability for you to take over a friend's game and play it remotely to get them past a particularly hard sequence. Sony says this feature will be added in a future system update.

External Capture ▶ Sony faced some criticism for its use of copyright protection that effectively blocks the use of external capture software with PlayStation 4. The YouTube community, especially those who make their living producing "let's play" videos, protested, and Sony relented. External HDMI capture compatibility is now on the PS4's "coming soon" list.

YouTube ▶ Sony plans to add YouTube support for sharing, in addition to the current Facebook video sharing feature and possibly other services.

Twitch & uStream Archiving ▶ Right now, you can broadcast gameplay via Twitch and uStream, but you can't archive streams for future viewing. This feature will be added in the future.

CD & MP3 Playback ▶ Sony's Music Unlimited subscription service is the only music playback option currently on the PlayStation 4, but Sony will be correcting that in the future.



Another aspect of the PS4 with the potential to be a game changer is the integration of Twitch and uStream livestreaming capabilities. These services have become hugely popular, but PS4 makes them more accessible than they've ever been. Most Game Informer editors had never livestreamed a second of gameplay in their lives. Including the time it took them to go on the computer and register a Twitch account, it took about five minutes for them to press the Share button, link their Twitch accounts to their PSN accounts, automatically post about it on Facebook and Twitter, and begin broadcasting gameplay to the world.

After this initial setup, it's almost instantaneous: Push the share button, click a couple options, and you're live. People can watch you through the official Twitch and uStream sites, but there's also a new destination on PSN called Live from PlayStation that lets you watch livestreaming using the console interface.

MOBILE APP.

If Sony has its way, you won't ever be far from the PlayStation Network. A new mobile app for iOS and Android allows you to view and send invitations, friend requests, and peruse the PlayStation Store. The "What's New" feed from the dynamic menu is also reproduced so you can keep up with your friends' gaming activity on the go. One of the better features connects the app to your PlayStation 4 for use as a second-screen gaming device like Microsoft's SmartGlass. A few games like Knack are taking advantage of it, but right now the second-screen experience is mostly untapped potential.



The PlayStation 4 makes significant strides forward in correcting many of the PlayStation 3's shortcomings. The new controller is more comfortable, better designed, and features a new touchpad that has a lot of potential. The system's architecture is simple, powerful, based on familiar PC architecture, and will be a boon to third-party developers who were frustrated by the PS3's complicated Cell processor.

It also offers Sony's most complete and polished interface and online experience to date. The new dashboard still lags behind the Xbox One's slick UI and seamless media integration, but it does a great job of putting the games and applications that are most important to you front and center. Universal party chat and real name integration should help close the gap between online gaming on PSN and Xbox Live. The Share button makes sharing screens and video via Facebook and Twitter effortless, and the deep integration of Twitch and uStream have the potential to make livestreaming a staple of console gaming.

There's still some work to be done in fixing the odd annoyances in the user interface, and some of the PS4's exciting features, like taking direct control of a friend's game and the upcoming Gaikai streaming game service, are not available at launch. Still, the PlayStation 4 is off to a great start, and is in many ways the best system Sony has made to date – and did it all while coming out at \$100 less than the Xbox One. **B+**

Trim Video



10 sec

Preview

OK

Share

How do you want to share your experience?



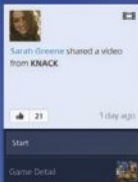
Share Screenshot



Share Video Clip



Broadcast Video



Search results to define the games without getting lost

LIVESTREAMING

THE FINAL GRADE

B+

OLD AND SHINY

Sizing Up The Cross-Generation Ports

The launches of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One may not be punctuated by landscape-changing exclusives, but a healthy dose of cross-generation titles are filling out gamers' launch libraries. The next-generation of consoles brings some new bells and whistles, and we run through what those are for each of the cross-gen games. ♦



Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag

Score: **8.25**

The content isn't any different, but next-gen systems are the superior way to play Black Flag. The main advantage is technical; the game has a more stable framerate on PS4 and Xbox One. The graphical improvements are a nice bonus, with better shadows and other effects like billowing sails and clouds of smoke. It still feels like the exact same game, but it looks better across the board. — Joe Juba



Lego Marvel Super Heroes

Score: **9**

Next-gen players don't get any additional content with Lego Marvel Super Heroes, but this is the definitive version of the game. Character models and environments are more detailed, and load times have shrunk. The most noticeable improvement is in how quickly players can swap from the roster of 150-plus characters. As with other cross-gen games, the framerate is also heroically solid on next-gen. — Jeff Cork





Battlefield 4

Score: **8.75**


Like the PC version, the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions of Battlefield 4 are recommended for their superior graphics and 64-player conquest battles (the current-gen console games cap out at 24-player). If everything is working, Battlefield 4 is the premiere multiplayer shooter on next-generation consoles. At the time of this writing, that's a big if, as the DICE game is plagued with a multitude of server issues preventing people from playing online. — *Matt Bertz*



Madden 25

Score: **7.75**

Madden 25 might not look as great as initially advertised, but its slick graphics still pop and the animations run fairly smooth. Runners' footwork produces cuts and changes in speed, but other gameplay details such as deficient AI blocking and general awareness (as well as the shallow Owners mode content) reveal that more work needs to be done. Not bad for a console debut, but it's haunted by some of the same problems as the current-gen edition. — *Matthew Kato*



FIFA 14

Score: **8.75**

This FIFA has not reset back to zero with this first next-gen installment, but it's too much like the FIFA 14 that's already out. The visual sheen and presentation advantages are minimal, as are the ones for gameplay. Player movements have a slight extra smoothness, and their improved footwork for shots on goal — something the current-gen version also does well — is noteworthy. If you were holding out for the next-gen iteration, you'll enjoy much of what is here. But if you already own FIFA 14, there's no reason to upgrade. — *Matthew Kato*



Call of Duty: Ghosts

Score: **8**

Activision's shooter franchise has always featured a robust selection of modes and options, and they're all intact regardless of which console generation you decide to play Ghosts on. While the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One versions feature generally smoother visuals and better lighting, the gameplay experience is smooth and satisfying no matter what. — *Dan Ryckert*



Injustice: Gods Among Us — Ultimate Edition

Score: **8.5**

High Voltage Software ported an identical version of Injustice: Gods Among Us — Ultimate Edition to PlayStation 4. There are no graphical differences. Since this iteration is hitting well after the original launch date, all of the DLC is included on the disc. This consists of six new characters, over 30 skins, and 60 new S.T.A.R. labs missions. — *Andrew Reiner*



Skylanders: Swap Force

Score: **8.5**

Skylanders: Swap Force runs at a smooth 60 frames per second and at 1080p on both PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. Outside of crisper details in the character models and environments, the only notable visual upgrade is improved lighting on metallic surfaces. The game content is identical to the current-gen counterparts, meaning you should think twice about purchasing it again, but if you're new to the game, the minor graphical nods give the PS4 and Xbox One versions a slight edge. — *Andrew Reiner*

g-b-u.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, & THE UGLY

Quotable

"...We will be eliminating the Uplay Passport program from all future Ubisoft games moving forward."



— In one fell swoop, **Ubisoft** canceled its code-based initiative that turned on online multiplayer after *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* locked some single-player content behind the online pass.

The Good



UNCHARTED for the PS4? Naughty Dog says yes, although no details have been announced. The short teaser trailer is voiced by Todd Stashwick (*The Riches*) and not trademark Nathan Drake voice actor Nolan North.

In other Naughty Dog news, *The Last of Us* is getting story-based DLC in 2014 called *Left Behind*. The extra content features Ellie in a prequel story with her friend Riley — a key figure in Ellie's backstory.



The Bad

TITANFALL is staying an Xbox One exclusive on next-gen consoles — bad news for PlayStation 4 fans hoping that the Respawn Entertainment title was only a timed exclusive. The title is also coming to Xbox 360 and PC.



EA CANCELED

the free-to-play *Command & Conquer* title and disbanded the development team at Victory Games. The studio stated, "Your feedback from the alpha trial is clear: We are not making the game you want to play."

The Ugly



THE STANLEY PARABLE

Galactic Cafe's standalone release, *The Stanley Parable*, defies easy classification. That hasn't stopped the experiment in interactive fiction from being a runaway success, selling 200,000 copies in under a month. We talked with creator Davey Wreden to get his thoughts on the final product. *by Jeff Marchiafava*

You originally released *The Stanley Parable* as a mod back in 2011. What were your goals for the HD remake?

At first they were very modest, just to visually touch it up. Then we decided it would be fun to add some extra content, then a few months later we decided to change up some of the previous endings, then a few months later we asked if there were any bigger structural changes we could make, then a few months later, etc. So it very much snowballed into what it is today.

Did you accomplish everything with the HD remake that you wanted to?

I did not even understand what this game was until weeks before launching it, and even now I'm still discovering what it is. I would say there was no time during development of the game where my understanding of it lined up with what it became in the end; it splintered off and morphed and dissolved and reformed in so many ways it's impossible for me to describe. All I think I wanted for most of development was to put a few ideas into the game that had been on my mind since the original and to bring it to a bigger

audience and to make a little money. What I got was a hell of a lot more.

The game doesn't provide feedback on which endings you've seen or how to uncover them. Did you ever consider including a way to help players track or discover content they may have missed?

We had a map in-game for a while and it completely killed the sense of discovery and surprise. People knew exactly how much they'd done and could tell me when they were "finished." Suddenly the experience becomes knowable. I didn't want that. I wanted players to be lost, never finished, always keeping an eye out, always just a little uncertain of what might be around this next corner.

On the other hand, many players in the Steam forums have been hard at work mapping out and detailing all of the endings. Do you see this as a positive or negative?

It's what people do! I've made my peace with the fact that people will play and interpret the game in many ways that I don't intend and may not care for, but it's not my game anymore; it's

theirs. The fact that so many people have played the game and each bring their own sensibilities and desires and thoughts to it, regardless of whether they overlap with my own, to me is a tremendous positive.

One of the endings pays homage to *Portal* and *Minecraft*. Why did you decide to reference those games specifically, and what was the approval process like for including them?

It stemmed from *Half-Life 2* being in the original *Stanley Parable* mod, which we were planning to keep, but decided it would be fun to surprise those who were familiar with the original game. So *Portal* seemed like a good fit because we were already working in the engine, and a friend knew how to recreate *Minecraft* in *Source*, so we decided to give it a shot. *Portal* we got rights to through some legal mumbo jumbo, and Notch gave his approval for us to recreate *Minecraft*.

We were concerned for a while about whether these references would actually contribute something meaningful as opposed to simply being a blank pop-culture

reference, but as with many of the concerns we had during design, it turned out to not be a problem in the slightest. People really like those sections.

Would you ever consider doing a sequel or more content for *The Stanley Parable*? Or do you view it as a one-off experiment?

I've thought about *Stanley Parable* enough for several lifetimes, so I think it's high time I took a long, long break from that and did something completely different for a change. However, it's possible I may be sitting down with the narrator [Kevan Brighting] soon to record a few lines in the style of a *Dota 2* announcer...

Would you ever want to create a triple-A game, or do you intend to continue working on indie projects?

The form is less interesting to me than the function. I want to work on something that offers a fulfilling outlet to creating something that is meaningful and engaging for an audience. At the moment I consider that to be indie games, but I'm not ruling out triple-A as being one possible source for that (or even film, music, theater, cooking, acrobatics). ♦

Read our full interview with Davey Wreden at gameinformer.com



GAME HIJACKINGS

When a game is more than a spiritual successor

by Ben Reeves

E

very game maker draws inspiration from one or more of the countless games that have come before them, but the parallels between some titles are stronger than others. The term spiritual successor is often used for games that draw heavy influence from other

titles – building off its themes and concepts without basing it in the same fiction. The term works well for titles like *BioShock*, which expanded on *System Shock*'s heavy focus on atmosphere and storytelling as well as its mix of FPS and RPG gameplay, while creating an entirely new world to explore.

However, some games borrow more heavily from their source material than others. These

games feature many of the same character archetypes, themes, and gameplay elements previously “owned” by another game – often published by a completely different company. Another word better describes this type of borrowing: hijacking.

The events leading up to developmental copycatting are rarely simple. Industry politics and the cutthroat practices of big business often make the management of intellectual property a tricky business. Yes, some developers unabashedly set out to steal the core elements of another publisher's franchise – EA told us they actually reverse engineered *God of War* while making *Dante's Inferno* – but most of the time the motivations are less sinister. Sometimes a designer is trying to fill a gap left by a publisher who has abandoned a gaming franchise but refuses to sell its rights. Others just want to keep making the type of games they made when working for the original company. Here's a breakdown of some of the biggest gaming hijackings.



Getting The Band Back Together

Peripheral manufacturer RedOctane wanted to develop a console game similar to Konami's GuitarFreaks arcade series – a game in which players used a plastic instrument to simulate playing a real electric guitar. RedOctane designed and manufactured the controller, and then asked the developer of some of its favorite music games, including Frequency and Amplitude, to design the software. The studio was Harmonix, which released Guitar Hero in 2005 and quickly sparked a musical gaming fad. Activision took notice and bought RedOctane a year later, but the new publisher decided to handle software development in-house, which left Harmonix to fend for itself. But Harmonix wasn't done playing with plastic guitars. The developer buckled down and began work on Rock Band, a game that refined the concepts established in Guitar Hero and expanded the repertoire to multiple instruments.

A Ball Game

Visual Concepts loved football. The independent studio helped EA develop Madden NFL '94 and '95, and had started work on Madden '96. However, after several delays, EA wasn't happy with the game's quality and took the project away. EA moved production of the Madden series to current developer EA Tiburon. Fortunately for Visual Concepts, the developer had established a relationship with Sega, and the Japanese publisher opted to buy the company. The studio's new owner tasked it with building a library of sports titles for the launch of Sega's upcoming Dreamcast console. Visual Concepts created the NFL 2K series, which may have never achieved Madden's level of popularity but gave EA a run for its money with the critically acclaimed NFL 2K5. The increased heat led EA to ink an exclusivity deal with the NFL in 2004, killing off all direct competition.



Reporting For Duty

In the late '90s and early 2000s, EA's Medal of Honor was a first-person shooter powerhouse. The franchise helped popularize the World War II genre and spawned a host of copycats. The most critically lauded entry in the series was Medal of Honor: Allied Assault, developed by a studio called 2015 Inc. After Allied Assault's release, a group of developers including Vince Zampella and Jason West split off from 2015 and formed Infinity Ward. This new studio began work on another Medal of Honor game, but EA quickly pulled the plug on the project. Days before the studio was set to close, Activision offered Infinity Ward a contract to make a Medal of Honor-like title that could go head-to-head with EA's franchise. The result was a new military shooter based on some of the real life conflicts of WWII; it was called Call of Duty.

A Falling Out

War never changes, but game development does. In the late '80s, a team of designers at Interplay crafted an epic role-playing game that was different from the traditional sword-and-sorcery fare. Their sprawling narrative took place decades after a nuclear holocaust left the Earth in shambles. Players had to fight to survive in this harsh apocalyptic environment and perform errands for a cast of eccentric characters while leveling up their heroes with dozens of useful perks. The game was called *Wasteland*, and it shouldn't be surprising that its back of the box synopsis sounds remarkably similar to another post-apocalyptic RPG. A decade after *Wasteland*'s release, Interplay began work on a sequel, but quickly ran into a small snag: Electronic Arts still owned the property. Interplay sought EA's help publishing the original *Wasteland*, but in the intervening decade Interplay had started self-publishing all its titles. EA had its own ideas about how to use the *Wasteland* IP, so Interplay decided to work around this problem by changing the name of its new game to *Fallout*.



A Mighty Man

In 1987, Capcom introduced gamers to a blue sprite called Mega Man. The series eventually caught fire, and grew into one of the most beloved platformers of the era. Mega Man creator Keiji Inafune went on to work on franchises like *Onimusha* and *Dead Rising*. After 23 years with Capcom, Inafune abruptly left. Capcom canned the remainder of its Mega Man projects Inafune had been working on and the Blue Bomber's 25th anniversary passed him by with little fanfare. Though Inafune no longer had access to the Mega Man name, he still loved cutesy 2D platformers. Last August, Inafune announced a Kickstarter campaign for a side-scrolling game designed by a team of veteran Mega Man developers. *Mighty No. 9* quickly blasted its way past Kickstarter stretch goals and raised close to \$4 million. We haven't played *Mighty No. 9* yet, but Inafune has made it clear that it won't be much of a departure from his previous work.





A League Of Their Own

In 1993, EA took the engine it had used for Madden and designed a football game that featured a little more brutality – a sports parody featuring aliens, skeletons, and trolls called Mutant League Football. This sporting oddity amassed a strong cult following and spawned a hockey variant as well as a short-lived animated series. For years, Mutant League Football creator Michael Mendheim tried in vain to get EA to resurrect the series, but the publisher wasn't interested. In fact, in 2001 EA let the trademark on the game lapse. This past September, Mendheim turned to Kickstarter to raise support for another game like Mutant League Football (Mendheim actually flipped the words "league" and "football" to help avoid any possible legal snafus). Unfortunately, interest in the series had waned considerably in the two decades since Mutant League Football first released, and Mendheim's Kickstarter campaign raised only \$141,000 of a proposed \$750,000 budget. This might be a failed hijacking, but Mendheim was unashamed about his desire to ape the concepts and macabre hijinks of EA's 1993 original.

Soul Stealing

From Software's Demon's Souls was a divisive title. Many gamers latched onto the risk/reward progression system and unforgiving combat, while others felt that it was too archaic to be enjoyable. While fans might not understand why anyone would turn up their nose at From Software's intense action/RPG, Demon's Souls publishing history is far more confusing. Sony published the game in Japan, but didn't have any interest in translating the game into English. Altus brought the title to U.S. soil, but it didn't ship the title to the UK, so Namco Bandai stepped in to publish the game in Europe. Namco Bandai was so happy with the game's European release that it wanted to make a sequel it could release worldwide for multiple platforms. But since Sony owned the Demon's Souls brand, Namco Bandai made a deal with developer From Software to publish an unofficial sequel that tapped into the same vein of dark fantasy and difficult-but-satisfying combat. Dark Souls was born.



Blood Dragons

In an effort to pad out the Saturn's library, Sega encouraged its in-house development teams to design games that would fill specific niches. Sega felt that one of its biggest holes was the third-person shooter genre. Inspired by on-rails shooters like Space Harrier and Star Fox, a young designer named Yukio Futatsugi dreamed up a post-apocalyptic shooter called Panzer Dragoon where players rode atop armored dragons. Decades later, Futatsugi wanted to return to this style of gameplay, but Sega wasn't interested. Fortunately, he had a budding relationship with Microsoft. Crimson Dragon started out as a Kinect-only game for Xbox 360, but was eventually given proper controller support and rescheduled for Xbox One's launch. It may not bear the name, but its on-rails gameplay and Japanese fantasy art style are clearly inspired by Panzer Dragoon. ♦



The Next Step For Shadowrun

by Matt Miller

Fans of the Shadowrun universe had a lot to celebrate in 2013. The launch of Shadowrun Returns on PC and tablets along with a new edition of the long-running tabletop RPG felt like an overdue resurgence for the fictional universe. Developer Harebrained Schemes is wasting no time adding more fuel to the franchise revival fire. **Shadowrun: Dragonfall** is a brand-new adventure and story using the Shadowrun Returns engine, playable as an expansion to the base game.

Dragonfall features a new setting, characters, and features distinct from the base game campaign. The story takes players to Berlin, striking a decidedly different tone than the Seattle-based tale from the base game. "Where Dead Man's Switch embroiled you in a noir-like mystery – a lone runner with a job to do – Dragonfall places you at the head of a team of runners caught in a dangerous plot and struggling to stay alive in a European city rife with conspiracy and intrigue," says executive producer Mitch Gitelman. The plot

revolves around a dragon that was shot down over France and Germany decades earlier coming back to haunt the people of the city.

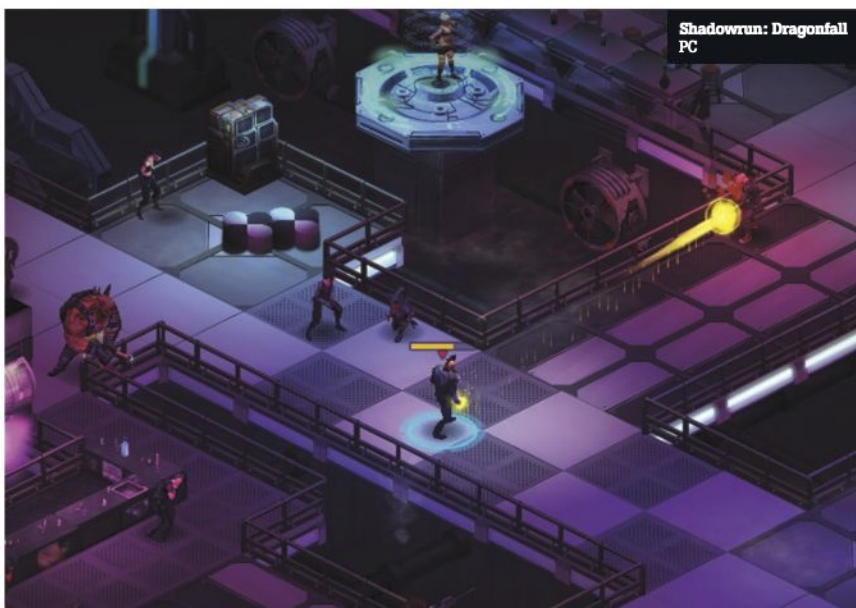
The developers at Harebrained Schemes have listened closely to comments from critics and fans alike regarding the best and worst elements of Shadowrun Returns. The biggest knock against it was the linear structure, so Dragonfall offers a more choice-driven and open experience. "Players will have the ability to choose which runs to complete first, and a larger assortment of side missions

to select from," Gitelman says. "In addition, you can complete optional objectives for factions in the story with their own agendas." Rather than a single building acting as the hub for missions, Dragonfall opens up an entire kiez – a German neighborhood – for exploration, conversations, and vendors in between runs.

Shadowrun Returns also missed opportunities to offer more depth with its non-player character party members. With just a few exceptions, most of your group was made up of disposable mercenaries. In Dragonfall, the characters all have interesting backstories that get fleshed out as you interact with them. "Each of the characters has a unique set of skills, abilities, and equipment, and is designed to play a role on the team," Gitelman says.

Beyond deeper RPG choices in plot structure and character selection, several other small but notable additions are on the way. Due to popular demand, a reworked save system now allows you to save at any time during your adventure. New weapons like sniper rifles, grenade launchers, and tasers offer arsenal alternatives, and the alternate setting comes along with new environment art, enemies, starting character-archetypes, and soundtrack.

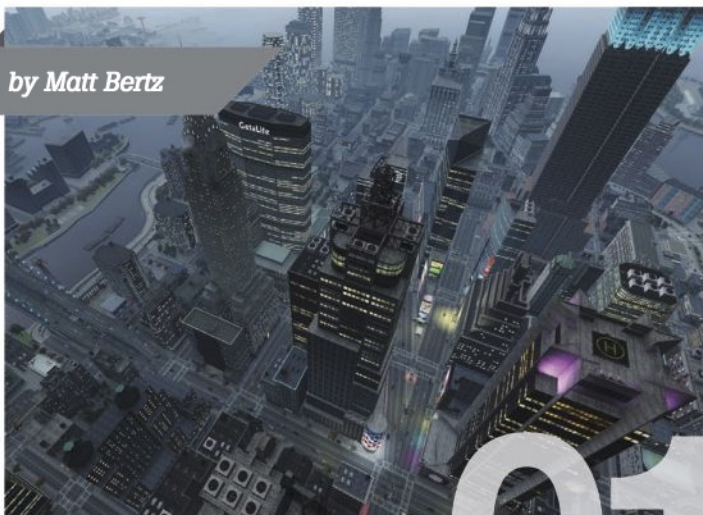
Shadowrun: Dragonfall sounds like a brand-new project, albeit one that uses the same engine template as the base Shadowrun Returns. Harebrained Schemes plans to release a campaign pack that includes both the original Shadowrun Returns campaign and the new Dragonfall campaign at a reduced price, or you can get the expansion by itself. Dragonfall releases in January on PC, Mac, and Linux. It hits iOS and Android a little later. ♦



Looking for more on downloadable and independent games? Check out gameinformer.com/impulse for regular updates, news, previews, and reviews. For more downloadable games in this issue, check out our reviews of Contrast (p. 85), Resogun (p. 88), Super Motherload (p. 88), Lococycle (p. 94), Crimson Dragon (p. 94), and Path of Exile (p. 95).

New Yorks

by Matt Bertz



Grand Theft Auto IV

No studio is better at capturing the true essence of the Big Apple than denizens Rockstar Games. GTA IV's NYC doppelganger Liberty City is the its most impressive homage, accurately portraying everything from the gentrified glitz of tourism havens like Times Square to the grittier look of outer boroughs.



Parasite Eve

Like the survival horror version of a Frommer's travel guide, Parasite Eve features several iconic New York destinations like Carnegie Hall, the Chrysler building, Museum of Natural History, Central Park, and Statue of Liberty. Just be sure to watch out for mutant encounters and occasional spontaneous combustion.



The Darkness series

Starbreeze Studio's cult favorite first-person shooter highlights off-the-beaten-path New York locations like Trinity Church Cemetery, the Canal Street subway station, Chinatown, and the Lower East Side. The sequel spends a lot of time in the aromatic, ever-shrinking tourist haven known as Little Italy.



NBA Street Vol. 2

From NBA legends like Dr. J to modern-day gunslingers like Carmelo Anthony, New York has always been a hotbed of basketball talent. NBA Street Vol. 2 celebrates the courts these all-stars grew up on, including Harlem's Rucker Park, The Cage on West 4th St, the NYC rec center, and a street ball site across the East River in Bed-Stuy.



Spider-Man 2

New York City's streets were hardly bustling in this open-world recreation, but few things in video games were as liberating in 2004 as swinging between skyscrapers as Spidey. This web-slinging playground included Manhattan, Roosevelt Island, Ellis Island, and Liberty Island.



Crysis 2

One of many games that love tearing apart the Capital of the World, Crysis 2 imagines New York City after a plague and alien outbreak have transformed it into an urban jungle complete with waterfalls pouring out of skyscrapers.



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

For a city that has survived the September 11 attacks and Hurricane Sandy, what's another world war? Another title obsessed with taking a bite out of the Big Apple, Modern Warfare 3 brings World War III to the center of the financial district. After fighting off a naval invasion off the coast of Battery Park, soldiers take back the New York Stock Exchange.



Assassin's Creed III

Ubisoft takes players back in time to an era where grass acreage outnumbered concrete slabs and skyscrapers hadn't yet blocked out the sun. Touring revolutionary era Manhattan is an interesting history lesson that painstakingly recreates the British occupation and the Great Fire of New York.



Max Payne series

Bridge and tunnel NYPD detective Max Payne introduces gamers to the seedy underbelly of the city that never sleeps, as players trade bullets with multiple mob outfits, corrupt bureaucracies, and shady corporations.



Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2

Pro Skater 2 is a globetrotting affair, but one of its most memorable levels is the NYC hybrid that features an approximation of the skateboarding mecca Brooklyn Banks. Tucked under the Manhattan side of the Brooklyn Bridge, pro skateboarder Mike Vallely calls this unique destination the best skate park in the world.

THE ART OF ENDINGS

Tales of ending a game

by Kimberley Wallace

Endings are tricky. A good ending can resonate with you long after you've finished an experience and live on in your conversations and memories. However, an unsatisfying one can cast a cloud over an otherwise solid story. So much can hinge on a finale that writers often struggle to bring everything together to leave a strong statement. Writers across all media can relate to the dilemma, but video games present a unique challenge.

Decades ago, many cared only about one thing: playing the game. Games like Super Mario Bros. started with just pure gameplay, throwing you into the game without any story beats. Only later did you realize you were rescuing a princess. It was about the fun and the challenge of platforming, not what the ending would reveal.

As the nascent industry grew, games started venturing further into narrative with character development, overarching themes, and full story arcs, making endings a bigger deal. It makes sense; an ending is the last thing the player is left with, a culmination of everything achieved in a game, and where the story reaches its shocking reveals and resolutions.

Developers are getting even craftier and experimenting with new techniques, which has led to the explosion of creative approaches we've seen over the past year. Are you still trying to figure out what Ellie's last statement meant in *The Last of Us*? Have you pieced together everything in *BioShock Infinite*? Are you still haunted by that final scene in *The Walking Dead*? Maybe you're still echoing your disappointment with *Mass Effect 3*'s ending on forums. The point is, gamers are talking about endings more than ever. They clearly have power, whether it's to evoke emotion or sour an entire experience. So, just how difficult is it to deliver a satisfying end for a video game? A lot harder than you think.

*Note: We were careful about spoilers, but details about different game endings are brought up in this article. Discussed games include *The Last of Us*, *BioShock Infinite*, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, *Gone Home*, *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*, and *Braid**



The Difference With Games

Unfortunately, developers can't just devote all their time to story. While other forms of media are passive experiences, developers must always consider what a player is doing. Cutscenes can't go too long, and interactivity needs to be the driving force whenever possible, even during the ending. Ken Levine and Irrational Games had to overcome this challenge when executing BioShock Infinite's final moments where Elizabeth enlightens Booker.

"You have a very narrow gauge of storytelling compared to a book or movie, because long scenes with people talking to each other are really tricky," says Irrational Games co-founder and creative director Ken Levine. "The whole

also conceptually a complicated notion."

The ending Levine tackled dealt with quantum mechanics and string theory, so the interactivity of walking you through the concepts as Booker was essential in making players grasp these challenging notions. Levine's team presented the many-worlds theory without a hitch by showing all the different interpretations of the lighthouse and the world surrounding it. The "constants and variables" not only tie the story together for Infinite, but deftly ties Infinite to the original BioShock's world of Rapture.

To make sure these interactive tales work, though, writers must be in constant contact with level designers. Naughty Dog creative director Neil Druckmann found out just how much of an asset this could be when working on the final moments of The Last of Us. Remember that hospital scene where you're carrying Ellie that harkens back to the game's opening?

Originally, that was one big cutscene from the moment you entered the hospital. "There was one designer, Peter Fields, who kept arguing that that sequence should be playable, and he was right," Druckmann says. "Even though that scene was already being animated, we threw it away and reworked that sequence to

make it playable."

The studio's stressing of interactivity also helped establish another key moment to the The Last of Us' ending. Did you resonate more with Ellie's point of view than Joel's as you entered their final conversation of the game? It was deliberate. Druckmann shed some light on it, saying, "I don't think the ending conversation with Joel and Ellie would work outside of a cinematic for us, but the whole walk-up to that point, you're playing as Ellie, now emphasizing as Ellie, and you're viewing Joel now from the outside," he says. "We're using interactivity to give you a certain perspective. I think a lot of players enter that scene with the viewpoint of Ellie, kind of looking at Joel [saying], 'What have you done?'"

One of the more successful interactive experiences achieved in an ending recently was Starbreeze Studios' Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons. Director Josef Fares made it a point to put interaction front and center and thinks it helped make his ending mean more to players. "If the ending of Brothers happened in a cutscene, people wouldn't react at all," Fares says. Fares twisted the way players experienced an ending by making the controls play into a young boy dealing with loss, but not everybody was instantly onboard. "From a technical perspective, people were like, 'Can't we do this as a cutscene?'" he says. "But for me, no. The interactivity is extremely important for making the player feel something emotional and strong."

"If the ending of Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons happened in a cutscene, people wouldn't react at all."

—Josef Fares, Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons

ending we could have had as a cutscene with people talking to each other. Elizabeth could have explained everything, like her and the tears and the lighthouses, but we had to make that whole sequence interactive. That was really tricky because it wasn't just complicated from a development standpoint, but it was

Behind The Scenes: Making Endings Work

With publisher demands, development schedules, and last-minute changes, so much happens before we see the ending that gets shipped. Sometimes tough cuts need to be made. Other times, studios scramble to add an element for clarification at the last minute. Every once in a while, epiphanies hit that change how the entire finale plays out. Development schedules are stressful and time is of the utmost importance, so honing endings during the process isn't exactly the easiest or smoothest venture.

Just ask Deus Ex: Human Revolution's executive game director Jean-Francois Dugas and narrative design/writing director, Mary DeMarle. The duo had only a week to write the four different monologues and twelve variations for the endings to Deus Ex: Human Revolution. Dugas and DeMarle were prepared for the task, as they both had researched the philosophical angles they wanted to take well before the endings had to be written. "We knew all along what we wanted for the endings, but we couldn't really crystallize it for a very, very long time," DeMarle says. Both were heavily involved in other aspects of the game, so they both would work full workdays on other parts before turning their attention to the narrative. DeMarle remembers being in the motion capture studio all day and then meeting Dugas and working from 6 p.m.

until at least midnight to get the job done.

Even when DeMarle and Dugas had set their endings, things still had to change. Dugas envisioned much more startling imagery pulled from real historical events to go with the final monologues. "I had much more graphic stuff," he says. "Not in the sense of gore or anything like that, but we're going back into the history of mankind. We had more powerful imagery

originally in those endings and we had to edit it for the company. I can respect that, but for me from the creator's standpoint, it was, 'How do I respect the company without compromising the vision of those endings?' I worked two months reworking the imagery and going back and forth until we got something powerful that the company was also comfortable with."





Irrational Games also struggled making all the pieces of BioShock Infinite come together in the end. "I knew what I wanted the ending to be when we worked on it for a long time, but then it was like, 'Okay, here's where we want to go. How the hell do we get there in a way that's going to be clear to the player?'" Levine says. He wanted players to understand certain connections, which lead to his idea to give Elizabeth her missing little finger and thimble, but he didn't have this epiphany until

late in development. "Her pinky became a big component of solving a lot of our problems," Levine says. "If you look at the E3 demo from 2011, she's not missing half her pinky."

Naughty Dog's Neil Druckmann also has experience with last-minute changes, but in his case, it was to take the ending in a different direction. Originally, The Last of Us' ending wasn't as ambiguous, with Ellie believing Joel's infamous lie. "The more Ellie got developed...it felt dishonest to end it that way," Druckmann says. "It felt that Ellie would be more aware of what's going on, and as I started writing that final scene, it took on a whole different tone where Ellie challenges Joel and confronts him."

Even games without blockbuster budgets still need to make changes late in the game. Jonathan Blow didn't decide on the ending for Braid until nine months into development. His vision also changed while he was creating the game. "I didn't know what the ending was going to be, but my assumption was that the princess didn't actually exist," Blow says. "That was the working assumption that I went with from the start of development: That she didn't exist. That it was an existentialist kind of situation where she's always in another castle."

Blow didn't settle on that idea, but it informed him in how he wanted to cast the end. "When it comes to making an ending like a natural outgrowth of that thought," he says.

"The princess isn't what Tim expected, and the situation is not what he expected. When he gets wherever he's trying to go, it's maybe not what he envisioned."

Fullbright Company co-founder Steve Gaynor, who helped create Gone Home, has a similar tale. "We did not arrive at the ending we ended up shipping until two weeks before we went into the recording studio to do the last round of voice recording, which is a month and a half before we finished the game," he says. He recalls having an ending he thought he was going to be happy with, but realized it wasn't working. "It was a much more melancholy ending," Gaynor says. "I started writing it and I just wasn't happy with it."

From then on, Gaynor wrote a bunch of different endings to see what worked and didn't. "We went down some of these blind alleys trying different endings. We didn't keep them, but it gave us material that we ended up incorporating into the game," he says. One example Gaynor recalls is having Lonnie run off to be in a band. While this didn't become the ending, it gave him the idea to have Lonnie join a band in the first place.

While Blow and Gaynor were able to change things around much later in the process, bigger budget games often don't have this luxury.

Corey May, a consultant for Ubisoft's narrative talent group who wrote much of the Assassin's Creed series, says he starts planning for the ending as soon as discussion starts for the games. "You want to avoid not knowing where you're going, especially when you have finite time and resources like you do with a game," May says. "If you're writing a novel you can sit on it and see where it takes you; when you know you have a deadline, you don't want to be unaware or surprised at the end."

May also says that advanced tech like motion capturing makes tweaking ending moments difficult. "The challenge has always been that we as writers don't have enough time or as much of a chance to iterate as other people do because of the motion capture pipeline," May says. "Once that stuff is recorded and then put into the engine, cleaned up, and edited, it's very hard to go back and say, 'Well, I want to tweak that or we should change that line.'"

Once cutscenes are motion captured, they're often set in stone. "You have to figure out clever ways to get around it, like dropping in additional voiceovers where you don't have to worry about lip sync, or surrounding cutscenes with narrative information because you can't go back in and tweak cutscenes," May says.



The Last Of Us' Infamous Last Word

Naughty Dog creative director Neil Druckmann didn't always plan for the game to end on the word, "Okay." Ashley Johnston, Ellie's voice actress, would often inject the word unscripted into Ellie's interactions, which got Druckmann thinking about how it would make an impact for the finale. "I thought it would be interesting to take that simple word, but the way she would play it would have such a different subtext, and people could interpret it in different ways, even though in our discussions she played it in a very specific way," Druckmann says. "In the whole game we tried doing this, having dialogue that doesn't tell you much about how the characters feel, but it's more about how you're going to read them and their expressions and delivery about how they truly felt about something."

The Art Of Different Ending Types

Each developer may have a different agenda when it comes endings. Some tease a future release, others close out a tale, and many writers prefer to leave things open-ended. As with all creative mediums, the results vary depending on the tactics.

Assassin's Creed usually goes for two different endings: one that resolves the historical tale, and one that leaves the present-day on a cliffhanger. According to May, the meta-story of Assassin's Creed exists in studio documents, so the writers are always prepared for what's coming and can tease that.

"We never knew sitting down that the franchise would grow as large as it did, so I'm

of other obstacles. How do you make sure one ending doesn't overshadow the others? How do you let players make choices that matter, but not judge them for it in how you cast the conclusion? For Deus Ex: Human Revolution, Eidos Montreal tried to include a shade of gray to every ending outcome. "We didn't want endings that said, 'You made the wrong choice,'" DeMarle says. "We wanted endings that embraced the good and the bad of the decision and that tried to show you that."

When adding an element of choice to the narrative, many studios struggle with balancing how much power you put in the player's hands while still being able to tell an authored story. The Mass Effect trilogy is the most ambitious and controversial of these attempts.

"When we did Mass Effect 1, we wanted to be building a trilogy, but...we weren't greenlit for a part two," says BioWare executive producer Casey Hudson. "We didn't know if it was going to be success-

ful enough to be a trilogy. We wanted [the first Mass Effect game] to feel like the first act — your call to glory. But we also wanted it to be able to stand alone in case we didn't end up building the other two."

Once work on Mass Effect 2 started, BioWare knew it would be a full trilogy, so it kept things uncertain to enhance the player's concern for the future. The goal was simple for the third game: resolution. "For 3, we were trying to wrap up the whole trilogy, show you what your story meant, but leave things there for you to think about and interpret," Hudson says.

BioWare experimented with having player choice span throughout the three games, but the choices available in the final endings didn't meet many fans' expectations. This started one of the most raucous uproars ever over a game ending. BioWare learned firsthand the danger of balancing player choice with an

authored story. "I think different people have different ideas," Hudson says. "Even for Mass Effect, many people play the exact same games, but come out with very different ideas to what degree they should be able to see their choices reflected in the story, and to what degree they're going to see the impact of what they've done versus the authored story."

Hudson recognizes it's a difficult balancing act, but believes it's worth the effort. "Our goal is always to put the story in the hands of the player as much as possible, but to somehow also ensure that that story is always going to be a good one," he says. "The idea of total freedom and choice in the way that the story unfolds obviously do compete with each other to some degree. Our goal is to try and create enough of an illusion of total freedom, while taking you on at least a variety of options that we've been able to author and telling a really compelling story. It's definitely challenging to find that balance."

Choice and multiple endings are so difficult to nail down that developers are often lukewarm about them; Levine doesn't want to attempt an ending that embraces choice again unless he knows he can deliver on it. "In BioShock 1 we had multiple endings, and that was the one thing the publisher insisted upon that I didn't agree with, but, hey, they were paying for the party," Levine says. "So that time, I was like, 'I'll do it,' but I didn't want to do it again because I felt like it wasn't something we could really deliver on, not just as a game, but as an industry, we still have problems delivering on that level of choice in a narrative experience."

Levine prefers to leave some open-endedness to allow a degree of player interpretation and spark discussion. "My favorite endings are the endings that leave you piecing everything together...where it makes you reexamine everything you saw before and you have to go back through it all and rethink everything." You can see this in BioShock Infinite's ending; Levine still gets people asking him for the correct interpretation, which he always declines to answer. "It's much more interesting to let people imagine what it is, and if I answer it all those conversations would come to an end. I think that would be a shame," Levine says.

"A cliffhanger doesn't work unless an episode tells a compelling experience. You could have an amazing cliffhanger and a bummer of an episode and nobody's going to care."

—Mick Herman, *The Walking Dead* and *The Wolf Among Us*

really glad that we took the time to establish some rules for our world and the different factions and the different potential events both in the past and the present, so we can draw on that to move things forward," May says. He also compares Assassin's Creed's ending formula to a TV season cliffhanger. "We'll wrap up the conflict and drama for a given season and then introduce what comes next, but

since there is a much longer arc that's been planned and plotted, it's easy for us from that. It's been designed with those peaks and valleys in mind."

Telltale Games mastered the art of the cliffhanger in *The Walking Dead*, using it for each episode. Telltale's newest venture, *The Wolf Among Us*, is striving to find the same fanfare, but how do you please people with the knowledge you're going to leave them hanging after each episode? "The hope is that...you come out of it with a level of resolution that makes you feel like, 'I got my money's worth and I want more,'" says lead writer Pierre Shorette. "A cliffhanger doesn't work unless an episode tells a compelling experience," says director Nick Herman. "You could have an amazing cliffhanger and a bummer of an episode and nobody's going to care."

While the cliffhanger is a popular ending technique, there's no denying the appeal of player choice and multiple endings. These approaches come with a slew

Digesting An Ending: Braid's Epilogue

With all the different things going on in endings, is it possible we're just not properly digesting these larger reveals? Jonathan Blow took a unique approach with *Braid* by including an epilogue that provided a bit more insight into what happened, giving you plenty to piece together and work through in your head. Blow's reasoning for including the epilogue is interesting. "There needs to be some space for digesting a surprise," he says. "Otherwise, it's like someone just punched you in the face and then it's over. It's like, 'Well...that doesn't feel very good.' In terms of the fiction, there needs to be some kind of space if the character had a surprise happen to him. There needs to be some response to that or you're not letting the character develop or come to a final place." The epilogue also has some things with the game mechanics going on that Blow won't spoil because he feels not many people have figured them out. "[They're] about trying to develop maturity a little bit in the space of solving puzzles," he says.





Game Endings: Present And Future

Look at most message boards, and multiple topics arise regarding game endings. Gamers are placing more importance on them than ever, but what is so often forgotten is just how young the art form is. Developers are still trying to figure out how to do endings, and most agree the medium still isn't where it needs to be for storytelling.

Hudson, who's working on the next Mass Effect game and a new IP, is also trying to figure out a way to combat story issues. "Our main focus is to find ways to tell story in a more free form way, where it's what you're doing that is the story, so that the story is always with you. It is as much about total freedom as possible," Hudson says. "Over time, games have become more and more about the interactivity and the freedom. So, every time you're showing a cutscene, you're taking control away from the player to tell an authored story. I think we have to get closer and closer toward always being fully interactive, and through that complete interactivity we are able to tell you a story."

"We're in this situation where... we're still discovering a lot about what works versus what doesn't with different kinds of games..."

—Steve Gaynor, *Gone Home*

The focus on interactivity is a hot topic amongst designers. Because of a game's interactive nature, are endings even what the experience of playing a game is about? Darby McDevitt, lead writer of Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, is not so sure. "I actually almost think that it's a tragedy so much focus is put on the endings," he says. "I prefer experimental literature where the endings don't matter; it's about the journey. The pleasure is in the doing. I find that has a weird connection with games. If games aren't fun to play with and within themselves then there's something wrong."

Levine thinks so far games haven't struck gold with stories, but the worlds are part of the magic. "Games do worlds better than they do stories," he says. "One thing that games can do is immerse you in a space in a way no other media can. But I think we have a way to go because our narratives don't allow us the freedom that the gaming experience does or that the exploratory experience does. That can get frustrating for gamers, and I'm not sure how to

really solve it. It's something I've been thinking a lot about lately. I have some thoughts, but I don't have what I would call a plan."

Druckmann echoes similar sentiments to Levine. "We do have a long way to go, only because we don't fully understand the language or what stories we're capable telling

within in games. We're constantly coming up against limitations where gameplay can dictate the types of stories we tell, and sometimes those things are in conflict, but I feel like we're figuring more and more of that stuff out."

Developers will continue to experiment and discover new ways to make stories thrive, but endings will always be tricky; that's a given no matter the medium. It is thrilling that games are evolving in the ways they tell stories, and we're right in the middle of it. Look at *Papers, Please*; you do busy work as border control to understand human empathy.

Gone Home co-creator Gaynor sees this experimental time as equally scary and exciting. "We're in this situation where...we're still discovering a lot about what works versus what doesn't with different kinds of games and finding new conventions that haven't existed before and seeing how other people are doing things for the first time," he says. "I think that's a really exciting time to be in, but it also means as a creator, you don't have as many examples to draw from, so you have to be very in tune with what you're making and do something that's right for [your game]."

Ken Levine sums it up, saying, "I think we're in the Stone Age, honestly. It's tough when people ask questions like, 'What do you think of the state of game narrative?' It has a long way to go to figure out what it is. [In film,] everything had to be invented – the reverse angle shot, the tracking shot – the first films had several years before they came into the idea of cutting in time and spacing, moving from one scene to another. All of those things had to be learned along the way, and we have a lot of learning to do." ♦

Five Games That Get Endings Right

Red Dead Redemption

Red Dead Redemption's ending is tragic and downright traumatizing as you watch a family become even further embroiled in the government's violent schemes. Few will forget the impact of shifting from farming to murdering and how revenge can change a life's course.

The Last of Us

Watching Joel and Ellie's relationship grow into something meaningful is a highlight of *The Last of Us*. However, the ending challenges this dynamic in unexpected ways with shades of gray. Do we always do what's best for the ones we love?

Journey

Journey's relaxing nature takes a turn when you must survive climbing a mountain in a blizzard. Your triumph of making it to the summit and seeing what's there speaks even more to the game's themes, leaving plenty to ponder.

The Walking Dead

Keeping Clementine alive during a zombie apocalypse is the most important and emotionally trying part of *The Walking Dead*. The ending follows suit as you watch what must be done to keep her safe; it's enough to bring on the tears.

Ico

The ending of *Ico* leaves plenty up to interpretation and keeps you thinking long after it's over. The last scenes are absolutely breathtaking as you watch Yorda and Ico's final interactions, and then pick up control again after the credits.

The Man With The Most Games



Shelves stretching from floor to ceiling hold pristinely packaged video games dating from the industry's inception to the latest releases. **Michael Thomasson** takes game collecting to the extreme, holding the Guinness world record for the "largest collection of video games." We talked to Thomasson about his collecting, gaming, and how much he spends on his hobby each year.

Michael Thomasson

Age
43

Profession
Stay-at-home dad,
college professor

interview by Andrew Reiner

How many games are in your collection?

I just went over 11,000 a couple days ago. The [Guinness] count was done on December 3, 2012, and that number was 10,607.

How did the collection start? Were you a gamer when you were growing up?

In 1978, my brother, sister, and I got on our bicycles and rode down to the local Dairy Queen. I had a pocket full of change to buy a Mr. Misty. I walked inside and there's this huge, hulking box with scary-looking aliens on the side of it and people surrounding it. It was Space Invaders. I didn't get my Mr. Misty that day; I ended up dropping all my quarters into

[the coin-op]. That's kind of how it started. The first video game that I actually owned was Cosmic Avenger for ColecoVision.

I guess my parents and my grandparents weren't on the same page, because on Christmas Eve, I went to my grandparents' house and their gift to me was Cosmic Avenger. I was convinced the next morning I would have a machine to play it on, but that didn't happen. The ColecoVision was a hard-to-get item, and even when my birthday came in April, we still didn't have one. I waited a full year until the following Christmas until I finally got one.

Do you still have that game?

Absolutely. My ColecoVision's the system I play the most, still. That and the Xbox 360 I play a lot. I have more than 110 consoles now. The Coleco is my first love, and I got the Atari adaptor for it that allows you to play Atari VCS games on it.

Is that 110 unique consoles, or does that include duplicates?

Different and unique systems. I have really obscure stuff. I have a Mega Duck out of Netherlands, and a Cougar Boy out of Brazil. There are about 120 of them. I'm missing a few, like the Halcyon, which was Rick Dyer's machine. It was never officially released, but a couple of prototype units came out. You'll see news reports

where he's being interviewed saying that it was released, but it never was. I have one of the games for it – there are only two games that made it out.

Where are you storing this collection?

Most of it's in my basement, but it's leaked into several other rooms into the house. I have custom-made shelves – they're nothing fancy, but they're measured appropriately so I can fit the games in tightly, all columned in alphabetical order. I can locate any game in my collection of 11,000 within 20 seconds. I've had storage units here and there, too, but I like to have hands-on – because I play the games. I'm a



player moreso than I'd say I'm a collector. I mean, obviously I'm a collector, but I play what I have. So it gets used.

When did you make the decision to collect games?

I really started collecting when the 3DO and the Jaguar came out. I was at my cousin's house helping clean his basement, and he came across an old Odyssey 2 and he threw it in the garbage. I said, "Hey, I never had one of those. I always wanted one. Can I have it?" And he's like, "Sure, take it." He had a handful of games, and as we cleaned up more, he was throwing out a Sega Master System. I said, "Hey, I never had one of those. I'd love to have it." And he gave it to me. This was around 1994. I brought them home, hooked

them up, and I had a good time with them. So I went to some flea markets and some pawn shops, and found out the games were selling for a buck a piece – this was before the collectors got into it – and I'm like, "A dollar a piece? I'll buy everything." The next thing you know, I'm swimming in games. It just exploded from there.

Do you have any complete collections for specific machines?

Almost all of them are near-complete, because to get to that number you have to have most of them. I have about 800 NES games, but I have a complete Saturn collection, a complete Sega CD, a complete Dreamcast collection. I like Sega a lot. I have a complete Odyssey collection, a complete Atari 7800 collection,

a complete Atari 5200 collection, a complete LaserActive library. I have a PCSX complete collection, Jaguar and Jag CD complete collections, complete 3DO.

How do you track these games down? Do you wait for them to drop in price?

I figure I spend about \$3,000 a year, over the last 20 years. I'm on a pretty tight budget. I don't have an unlimited wallet. I sometimes find someone that has a collection, and I'll buy the whole collection from them, pull out what I need, and then sell the rest to fund the next purchase.

How do you stay current with new releases retailing for \$60 or more?

The last game I paid full price for was Shenmue on the Dreamcast.

I pretty much won't buy anything until it's under \$20.

What about digital titles?

Guinness does not count digital. Computer games aren't counted, either.

What is one of the rarer prizes in your collection?

I have Iron Soldier for the Nuon, it's kind of obscure, but it's hard to get and a great game.

What do you think your collection's worth?

I've pieced it out unit-by-unit, and I'd say it's probably worth about \$700,000. But I keep seeing these collections on eBay going for \$1 million, and they're a third of my size – and my stuff is pristine. About a third of my inventory, my collection, is new and sealed. ♦

interview



photo: Steve Scoll

The Big Picture

As president and CEO of Activision Publishing, **Eric Hirshberg** manages a portfolio of blockbuster gaming franchises. We recently spoke with him about the company's focused publishing philosophy, Call of Duty, Skylanders, and Bungie's ambitious Destiny project.

interview by Matt Helgeson

Let's talk about Call of Duty. It's one of the cornerstones of Activision, and of the industry as a whole. Sales of Ghosts were slightly off as compared to last year. Are you concerned at all about franchise fatigue?

No. We've been pretty transparent all year that we think, because of the challenges of the console transition year, that that was likely in the short-term. I think it would be a mistake to conflate the challenges of the console transition year with any indications about the health of the franchise. Call of Duty: Black Ops II was the most played game we've ever made. People played longer after the launch cycle, bought more DLC, and had longer play sessions than ever before. They logged four billion hours of playing that game this year. That's a pretty incredible statistic. Ghosts immediately became the number one most-played game on Xbox Live upon its launch, and is seeing even longer average play sessions.

You guys have rotating teams to make sure there is a Call of Duty out every year. Ghosts' reviews came in a little weaker than previous years. Are you concerned that annualizing a franchise has the potential to damage the brand?

Well no, obviously not – and obviously I don't agree with the critics there. I know that Call of Duty's a polarizing franchise with some of the critics, and it's clear to me that not all the critics like our strategy of making a game every year, but thankfully our fans do. It's also clear to me that the critical response doesn't always mirror the fans' appreciation of a game. We actually do read the critics' comments and take them into consideration during our creative process, but we just can't measure ourselves by that yardstick alone. Our most important audience is our fans, so we try to stay laser-focused on making games that they love. If you look at the fact that it's the most pre-ordered game of the year, it's the most pre-ordered next-gen game of the year, it's already the number one most played on Xbox Live, and that we're seeing longer average playtimes than ever before, we're confident that we're doing well by the criteria that matter most.

Skylanders' phenomenal success was pretty unanticipated. It would seem to me a fairly risky project; you're not only investing in software development, but manufacturing toys as well. What made you think that this was worth taking that level of a risk on?

Magic [laughs]. It was a magical idea. We saw

a prototype of a toy being placed on a portal and coming to life inside a game and it was just irresistible. It immediately emboldened the company to take a risky bet on it. We were doing a lot of playtesting with kids and we were seeing incredibly consistent response. Usually, you test any creative idea and you usually get three populations: rejectors, people who are neutral, and people who are enthusiastic about it. In this case there was only one population: Everybody loved it. You're right – it was a risky proposition. It was hard to find the chart or the graph or the industry trend that told us that was a good idea, but sometimes in a creative business the best opportunities defy industry trends and conventional logic. I think Skylanders is one of those.

How do you plan to manage Skylanders in the long term? Sometimes there can be that effect that something that burns so hot can kind of burn off quickly as well. Guitar Hero was an example of that.

Yeah, that question gets asked a lot, and I understand why. I mean, they're both video games with a hardware component and they both became incredibly popular incredibly fast. But I do think there's fundamental differences between them. First of all, Guitar Hero really created a market. A lot of the Guitar Hero audience were not committed gamers. They were people who were visiting gaming as an activity because of that franchise. Skylanders is the opposite. Skylanders is built on two incredibly stable audiences. One is kids who like toys, and the other is kids who like video games. So those are two markets that I see as being very stable and large and passionate about both of those industries that we brought together in a new way. The other thing, frankly, [is that] we're holding ourselves to a high standard of innovation in each game. I think that in hindsight, some of the Guitar Hero games were highly iterative and the Skylanders games have not been.

Activision tends to have a smaller portfolio than most large publishers, focusing on a few core franchises. What's the reason for that?

That's definitely been our strategy, and I think it's served us well. I also think it follows the habits of gamers lately; they're going deeper into a handful of franchises that they love and really committing to those. But I also think that sometimes this question gets used as a synonym for a kind of aversion to innovation. Yes, we do strive to do a handful of things and do them exceptionally well, but that doesn't mean that amongst those handful of things there won't be tremendous risk-taking. We talked about Skylanders being a big risk that a lot of people didn't see the wisdom of. I certainly think that Destiny is a super innovative game that's genre-bending in its vision. I think

sometimes publishers take the false security in having a wide slate and having a game in every single category. If you do fewer things, you can generally focus on them more and hopefully make them better.

Destiny is a huge project and a huge partnership with Bungie. Is that the biggest investment you've made in a new IP?

It sure seems like it. I don't know if I can make a historically accurate statement with confidence. I've only been in the company for three years. I feel confident in saying it's one of the biggest investments in a new IP that's ever been made. The ambition and the scope of the idea requires that. In order to do it right, there's only one way to do it. You have to go big. We really believe in Bungie. Who wouldn't? They're one of the best developers in the industry. Beyond that, we really believe in the game. It's a big idea and we've tried to support it wherever we can to make it great.

Destiny is an interesting hybrid of traditional single-player, multiplayer, and persistent MMOs. What are the challenges of trying to communicate that to the audience?

It's something we came into very early. It was a while ago now that I was sitting in a meeting with the Bungie guys and the team from Activision and I remember saying, "Guys. We need to coin a new genre for this. This doesn't quite fit into the current menu of genres in the industry." As you said, it certainly has elements of first-person shooters. It has an element of persistent-world MMORPG games. It brings multiplayer and single player within shooters together. We've coined the phrase "shared world shooter." Lots of the times the name of the genre itself can do the work of communicating what's special about the game. Beyond that, you can also make your job more complicated than what it needs to be. To get people to try the game you don't have to describe every last element of it. You have to captivate their imagination and you have to show them a world that they want to be in with characters they want to hang out with doing stuff that looks awesome and fun. A lot of the best marketing in this business boils complicated ideas down to something that's fairly simple.

How will you add content to the Destiny universe? Will it be handled with expansions, new retail games, microtransactions, or subscription fees?

Not a subscription, that's for sure. In terms of the other things listed, it's sort of all of the above. You'll see more as it unfolds and it's revealed more, but I think that if we can draw a big audience into the world of Destiny, I have a lot of confidence we'll have a great stream of ongoing content to keep them engaged, but that will come in many forms. ♦

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1990

HIGH ART

Hirshberg, who started school as an art major, graduates from UCLA with a graphic design degree

1990

EARLY PEAK

Hirshberg gets a job at the entertainment ad agency Fattal & Collins. There he works on an award-winning campaign for David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*

1998

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

After eight years at Fattal & Collins, Hirshberg is tapped to start the L.A. branch of the Deutsch Inc. agency

2009

BOOM!

At Deutsch, Hirshberg helps create the Kevin Butler ad campaign for Sony, which becomes a phenomenon among gamers, revitalizing the PlayStation brand

2010

NEW ARENA

His experience with game marketing leads Hirshberg to Activision, where he assumes the roles of president and CEO at Activision Publishing

2010

RECORD SETTING

Call of Duty: Black Ops II is released, setting a new record for launch sales, with over 5.6 million units sold in the U.S. and U.K. combined

2010

THE BIG GET

Activision signs the biggest free agents in games, the newly independent Halo creators Bungie, to a huge 10-year publishing and development deal

2011

A NEW PHENOMENON

Released to little fanfare, Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure, a game that interacts with collectible figures, quickly becomes the hot item of the holiday shopping season

pixel perfect

You just got your hands on a new console, but chances are you're still playing games on the same TV you've owned for years. If the colors on your primary gaming display are starting to fade, then it's time to upgrade to a television that does justice to the new generation of games. We rounded up some of the best televisions on the market and put them through the paces. We listed the manufacturer's suggested retail prices for these five sets, but you can find them for hundreds of dollars cheaper online at various retailers. We recommend shopping around.

by Ben Reeves



1 Panasonic Viera TC-P60VT60

Panasonic's Viera line comes at a premium price, but it's also a premium product. This 60-inch plasma TV looks fantastic thanks to its single sheet of glass design and sleek base, but the modern design is overshadowed by its performance. The Viera's vibrant plasma screen features rich, lifelike colors and deeper blacks than the Mariana trench. PS4 games like *Killzone: Shadow Fall* and *Resogun* look fantastic on this high-definition display. The Viera's touchpad remote, internal camera, and voice commands also make the Xbox One's feature list seem a little less impressive. Panasonic even threw in a set of high-quality speakers (in case you don't have a surround sound setup) for a perfectly well-rounded package.

SUPERS
■
■
■
■
■
■
■
■
■
■
■

\$2,299 | shop.panasonic.com



2



3



4



5

2 LG LA7400

This 55-inch LED screen has a great color spectrum, and its local dimming feature – which automatically adjusts the LED screen's backlight to improve contrast and color – is great for watching dark films or playing horror titles like *The Last of Us* or *Dead Space 3*. As with the Sony sets, LG's Dual Play technology uses 3D glasses to give players their own view of the whole screen while playing local co-op. LG's simplified, magic remote is also nifty at times, letting you voice activate TV apps or control a mouse-like cursor while browsing the Internet. This system's refresh rate isn't as high as some of the other systems we tested, but its game mode helps reduce input lag. This remains one of the most well-rounded gaming sets on the market.

VERY GOOD

\$2,099 | lg.com

3 Samsung PN51F5500

Samsung's newest 51-inch plasma screen comes with a great price tag, but that price has a cost of its own: inferior screen quality. The PN51F5500 actually has a great viewing angle and some solid blacks, but if you're watching the TV in a bright room, the picture quality quickly deteriorates. The system's voice search works well, and the touchpad remote is cool, but we wish the standard remote wasn't sold separately. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*'s water effects really shine thanks to Samsung's high refresh rate, but unless you have blackout curtains in your house, if you have a bright room you'll probably have to look elsewhere for a TV that doesn't shy away from the sun like a vampire.

AVERAGE

\$849 | samsung.com

4 Sony W802A

Sony's price makes the W802A an appealing option, but this 55-inch LED TV is a mixed bag. We love the burnished metal trim around the screen, but the display suffers from poor color saturation and motion blur. Sony's SimulView, which uses the TV's 3D effects to project two different displays to different viewers, is useful for couch co-op. The input lag is also extremely low, making this set ideal for fighting-game fans and competitive gamers. However, if you don't measure the milliseconds while gaming, you could find a display with a little more flash for your cash.

AVERAGE

\$1,499 | store.sony.com

5 Sharp Aquos LC-60LE757U

Sharp's boring, uninspired design is only the beginning of the Aquos' problems. Many of this 60-inch LED TV's colors are desaturated, and its blacks are grayer than an 80-year-old. Sharp trumpets this set's dual-core processor, which processes all of the Smart TV apps, but streaming Netflix or updating Facebook wasn't remarkably faster on this TV than any of the other sets we tested. The Aquos' speakers crank out some full effects, and we noticed the active 3D featured a lot of depth, but that doesn't make up for the inferior screen quality or high price tag.

LIMITED APPEAL

\$1,899 | sharpusa.com

Know The Basics

What's the difference between LED and Plasma?

Plasma TVs illuminate a thin layer of gas in order to light the pixels inside a television's display, while an LED TV uses a grid of light-emitting diodes to perform a similar trick. The details aren't as important as the results. In general, plasma TVs offer better contrast, deeper black levels, and more uniform illumination. In comparison, LEDs are generally thinner, lighter, and offer a brighter picture while remaining more energy efficient. Ultimately, display quality depends largely on how the manufacturer has integrated the technology with its own computational algorithms that help control motion flow, contrast, and dimming, which is why it's always best to get your eyes on the display you're thinking about buying before you throw down money.

What screen size is right for me?

While this is largely a matter of preference over price, bigger is generally better. On the other hand, you may want to keep in mind that you could notice pixels or other artifacts if you sit too close to a big set. A 32-inch set might be best for a cramped bedroom, but a larger TV of 55 inches or more may be ideal for a living room. One rule of thumb is to divide the number of inches you sit from your television set by 1.5 to find the size for your space. For example, if you sit seven feet from your display, you'll probably want a TV that's around 56 inches. All of the TVs we reviewed come in varying sizes, so decide how big your screen needs to be before you buy.

Shouldn't I buy a 4K television?

HDTVs first hit retail shelves in 1998, but it took nearly a decade for HD to reach mainstream adoption. Technology moves a little faster now, but we still expect a slow adoption for 4K sets. The 4K sets are enticing because they produce four times as much detail as current HD displays, but the early generation of 4K sets that are starting to hit the market are prohibitively expensive and don't have much media to render in 4K. Neither the PlayStation 4 nor Xbox One support true 4K gaming (at least not at playable framerates), only video playback. If you absolutely want to be on the bleeding edge of technology, take the plunge, but don't expect 4K to hit its stride for years to come.

Much Ado About Launches



by Matt Helgeson, Senior Features Editor

By the time you read this, the next console generation will have started. Around the world, gaming websites (ours included) will publish hundreds of stories on the games, the systems, the lines at the midnight store launches. Analysts and business publications will pontificate on who sold how many. Was it more than expected? Less? How was the attach rate on software? Which games sold the most? What does it all mean for Microsoft and Sony? Who won? Who lost?

Thousands of words will be written. Comments sections and message boards will explode in sectarian fighting. Both Sony and Microsoft will release gloating press releases the days following their system's launch, proclaiming it a historic day for the game industry. By some magic of accounting, the gross sales of both consoles will break some

record or another. Each will tout the excitement surrounding launch day as another indicator of the tremendous momentum of the PlayStation 4 or Xbox One.

And in a year, none of it will matter.

Console launches are exciting. All gamers love the anticipation of a shiny black box that promises a whole new world of gaming. It is the duty of the gaming press to cover console launches extensively. They are significant events, but they aren't indicative of how well a system will do in the future.

The fact is, due to either the limitations of manufacturing or a concerted effort to engineer a short-age, Sony and Microsoft are going to sell as many units as they can get out to retail by the end of the year. A vast majority of those are already sold to customers who pre-ordered. Stories will emerge of parents trying to track down the consoles, and people trying to sell systems on eBay for twice the retail price.

All this creates a media buzz – and the all-important perception that these are highly desired products – but it has very little to do with the long-term success of a console. Sega's doomed Dreamcast launched with much media hype, and was – at the time – the largest grossing entertainment launch in history. We all know how that turned out. Nintendo touted selling 888,000 Wii U units in its first two months of release in the U.S. alone, but the momentum didn't last. This year, between April and June, it sold only 160,000 Wii U systems globally.

Enough hardcore gamers exist to ensure that each major console will be a near sell-out on day one. All the money spent on advertising at launch is really about establishing brand awareness and planting a seed with the more casual consumers who will eventually decide the outcome of this next console war. It's not about the people who buy the Xbox One or PlayStation 4 this holiday season; it's about the people who will buy it over the next few holidays.

That's why I never believed all the doom and gloom regarding Microsoft and Xbox One's public relations failures over the last year. Sure, the unveiling event could have gone better, and Adam Orth's now-infamous tweets regarding an "always-on" Xbox One earned the ire of the entire Internet. Both of these events allowed Sony to capitalize with a crowd-pleasing E3 press conference.

As much as media outlets and forum dwellers discussed these events, they are in the past, and Microsoft's better off for it. These incidents allowed the company to reverse policies that would have alienated its audience months before the system hit shelves. Even if these controversies gave

PlayStation 4 a bit of an edge over Xbox One at launch (and publicized pre-order numbers seem to confirm this), it's not necessarily something that Sony can translate into a meaningful advantage down the line. Initial PS4 sales are bound only by Sony's production capability – all of Microsoft's failings may not translate into one more PlayStation 4 sold in the first year.

Don't let the industry analysts fool you into thinking whoever sells the most units at launch has some sort of legitimate long-term lead. Aside from a few first-party exclusives, these systems are heading to retail with software lineups largely composed of third-party titles that are already available for current-generation consoles.

After the smoke clears, then the real work begins. As we move into the next year and we see what new titles are announced for both platforms, a clearer picture will emerge of which company has secured the best software lineup. We'll start to understand whose network structure and approach to multimedia is best. A year from now, the majority of games we'll be playing will finally be built from the ground up for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One – not the same old current-gen franchises with a fresh coat of paint.

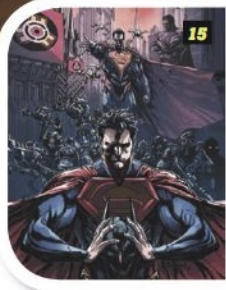
Eventually, a handful of those games will emerge as difference makers. For Microsoft, maybe that's Respawn's exclusive Titanfall. For Sony, it might be an unannounced project from the Naughty Dog or God of War teams. Or, more likely, it's a game that we aren't even anticipating.

Console launches are a lot of fun. Nothing quite matches the thrill of being one of the first to jump into a new era of video games. But make no mistake: Console wars are a marathon, not a sprint. ♦

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



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



January

01 A New Year For Marvel Comics

The latest events in Marvel's ever-expanding and ever-changing universe give way to a handful of new series starting in January. Fans can look forward to new number ones of Black Widow, Inhuman, All-New Invaders, Avengers World, All-New X-Factor, and Miracleman. Many of these titles ship twice each month.

02 MAGFest 2014

Video game music is once again front and center at this year's MAGFest. Held in National Harbor, MD, this four-day festival features two stages occupied by famed video game cover bands and DJs. The show also offers a number of panels, an arcade, console and LAN gaming, and a handful of different events including video game improv, cosplay competitions, and a Child's Play charity.

03 VGC 2014

Over 40 years of video games will be on display in one giant room at this year's VGC 2014, held at Bell Jeff High School in Burbank, CA. Most of the consoles from

yesteryear and today will be playable. This is the first year with a board game room, and a section dedicated to user-created games and experiences. VGC runs Friday and Saturday.

03 January TV Premieres

The New Year welcomes a host of must-see TV premieres, starting today with the return of NBC's *Community*. PBS' *Downton Abbey* hits January 5, NBC's *Parks and Recreation* on January 9, Showtime's *Banshee* on January 10, HBO's *Girls* on January 12, and PBS' *Sherlock* on January 19.

07 CES 2014

Come see the latest in technology and entertainment at this year's Consumer Electronics Show, starting today in Las Vegas, NV, and running through January 10. Kazuo Hirai, Sony's president and CEO, is giving a keynote speech.

07 New Releases

› *Archer*: Season 4 (Blu-Ray, DVD)

13 New Releases

› *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (PS4, PC)

14 New Releases

› *Assassin's Creed: Liberation HD* (PSN, PC)

15 Sequel To The Prequel

We don't know if we'll see another *Injustice: Gods Among Us* video game, but its story continues in comic book form. Today marks the release of the first issue of *Injustice: Year Two*, a sequel to last year's hit comic series. This story details Superman's reign over Earth.

17 Star Wars Beats Star Trek Again

Hollywood action hunk Chris Pine is the lead in today's theatrical release, *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit*.

The character was previously played by Harrison Ford (among others). Pine has big shoes to fill, since Ford can out-act him in any role. Best space ship captain? Ford. Best romantic comedy love interest? Ford. Best young guy who is getting all of the great leading roles? Ford.

22 Imagination Crisis

Scribblenauts Unmasked: A Crisis of Imagination is a new comic book series by DC Comics. The first issue, releasing today, follows Maxwell and Lily on a new adventure that brings most of DC's famed heroes and villains together. We'll get a chance to see how Maxwell and Lily solve problems without the player's input.

24 "From The Producers Of Underworld..."

Think of all of the generic apocalyptic supernatural movies you've ever seen – *Constantine*, *Priest*, *End of Days* – and roll them all together. Then, make Frankenstein's Monster the main character...and make him sexy. That gives you a good idea of what to expect from today's new release, *I, Frankenstein*. That's right; we now live in a world where a movie named *I, Frankenstein* exists.

28 New Releases

› *Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z* (PS3, 360)

2014

» **PLATFORM**

PlayStation 4 • Xbox One
PlayStation 3 • Xbox 360

» **STYLE**

Online Multiplayer Shooter

» **PUBLISHER**

Activision Publishing

» **DEVELOPER**

Bungie

» **RELEASE**

2014

A

PLAYER'S
JOURNEY

DEEST



BY MATT MILLER

For over a year, gamers have known about Destiny. The upcoming sci-fi epic is the next big thing from Bungie, a studio that helped to shape the last two console generations with its Halo series. But for all that time in the public consciousness, Destiny has remained a project defined more by questions than answers. Ask three different fans, and you'll get three different answers about what the game is – a shooter, an MMO, an RPG. In truth, Destiny is one of the most audacious and risky projects ever attempted in gaming. We should know. We played it, and then dug deep with every branch of the development team to push past the generalizations and get to a concrete answer of what exactly this game is all about.

DESTINY

The shortest answer is that Destiny is an action-focused shooter. Throughout our days visiting Bungie's sprawling 85,000 square foot studio, different members of the team tell us the same thing. Destiny's core gameplay is rooted in the studio's experience with Halo, and our time playing various sections of the game bears that description out. Destiny presents a tight loop of one action scene after another fighting against varied enemies, with lots of toys to make the experience distinct each time. In our experience, Destiny never loses sight of its fundamentals – fast, reactive, and intense first-person combat. But from this core it expands in bold new directions. "We're trying to build a game that we have wanted to play that doesn't exist," says Bungie co-founder and design director Jason Jones. "I think that's really the genesis of Destiny. When you look out at the shooter experiences on consoles, there are a lot of great action experiences, but they're only starting to scratch the surface of cooperative play, aspirational goals, and player-to-player interaction."

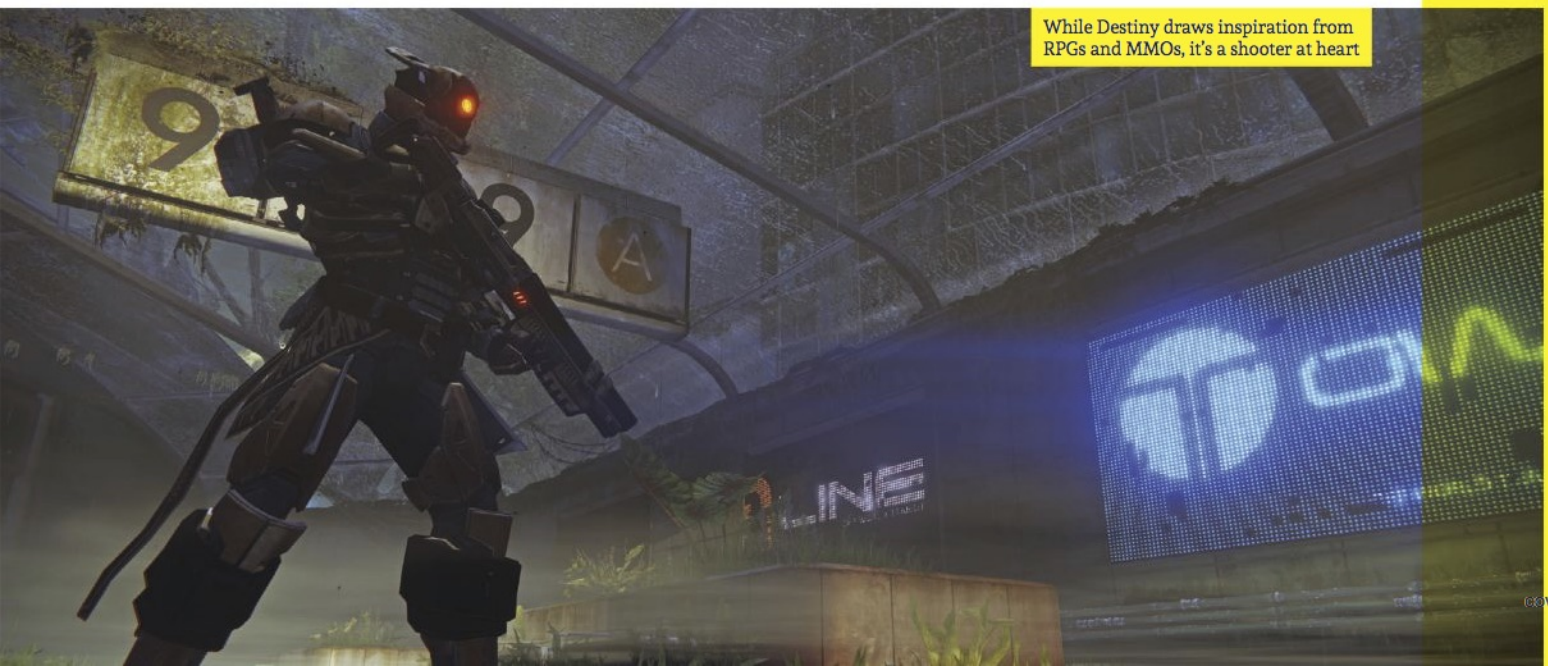
What sets Destiny apart is its ambition. On top of its shooter essence, Bungie is layering those other features that have made the project so hard to define. Characters level up along branching upgrade trees, story plays a central role in everything you do, and personalization of character appearance, gear, and vehicles is vital, just like in role-playing games. Its persistent world and multitude of ways to play with other people call to mind the MMO genre. "MMO is a loaded term; it always puts some mental image in people's heads about what the game is," says technical art director Ryan Ellis. "Our game is different, and kind of hard to describe, which is why we don't use that term. But I do think that people who like that sort of thing are going to find things to love in this game."

The scope of Destiny is suitably impressive to warrant its presumptive role as a flag-bearer for next-generation software. That scope is still a work in progress, with months of work ahead that will determine its success. However, Bungie certainly has the groundwork in place. Nearly 500 developers now call Bungie home, all working together over the last five years to make Destiny a reality. The art team alone is pushing 150 individuals. This level of investment of resources and manpower would have been unheard of in the gaming industry just a few short years ago, but it's necessary to redefine expectations for an online-enabled shooter.

Much of what we saw and played during our two-day visit to Bungie was brand new to us – from the competitive multi-player to the detailed look at how character investment and progression functions. Other things we learned were like filling in missing colors in a painting, revealing new details on enemy sub-groups, weapons, and setting. The picture that developed is an amalgam of experiences that finally starts to present a comprehensive understanding of Bungie's new adventure.



continued on page 53 >>

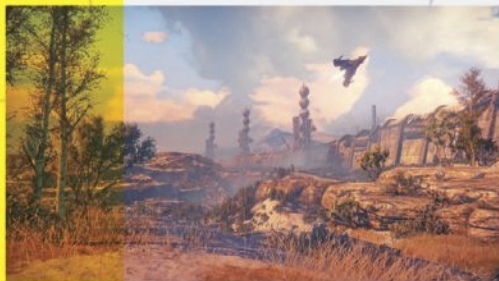


While Destiny draws inspiration from RPGs and MMOs, it's a shooter at heart

EXPLORING THE SOLAR SYSTEM

Generations ago, the Traveler came to the solar system and prepared the way for humanity's expansion into the stars. It reshaped planets and moons, and taught us new technologies and mystical powers that led to a golden age. Then the Traveler's ancient enemy returned. The mysterious Darkness swept through the system, devastating civilization and leading to the Collapse. Few humans survived, due only to the intervention of the Traveler, leaving one last city on Earth protected from devastation. Now, many years later, humanity's guardians are departing the safety of the City to reclaim their legacy across Earth and its many neighboring celestial neighbors.

Each location in Destiny is a grand open space for exploration, adventures, and discovery. These first five destinations are a sampling of what's to come; Destiny's fiction clearly establishes all the planets, moons, asteroids, and other features of our solar system as fair game for exploration. "There is an overarching storyline to Destiny, but a lot of the story of Destiny is about these places that you go to," says technical director Chris Butcher. "What happened on the Moon? Who are the factions and the groups of aliens there? What are they trying to do, and what are you trying to do?"



Old Russia

While players will explore many areas of Earth in the long-term Destiny storyline, the first major location is Old Russia. Specifically, guardians explore the devastated ruins of the Cosmodrome and its surrounding area – a real-world site in modern-day Kazakhstan that has long been the launch site for the Russian space program. In the Destiny fiction, the Cosmodrome remained a vital link to outer space during humanity's golden age, and players can see the remnants of forgotten colony ships left on the launch pad during the cataclysmic Collapse. Orange, burnt grass steppes and dimly lit interiors of old buildings are a magnet for invading Fallen soldiers.



Venus

Crackling lightning flashes through the sulfuric yellow sky, and the jungle has grown over the remnants of the scientific research settlement that humanity once held here. Now, the city's buildings are slowly being swallowed up by the Venusian ocean. Instead, the towering Vex citadel now draws the eye – a hulking obelisk Jenga tower of weird geometric shapes. Its purpose remains unknown, but the robotic Vex unceasingly defend it.



Mars

A thriving metropolis once dominated the skyline of Mars, a bastion of human life in the red dunes. That city now lies buried beneath a mountain of sand, and only the once-soaring skyscraper peaks are visible. Guardians can climb into those upper windows and delve down toward what was once ground level. Along the way, you're likely to see the heavily entrenched armies of the Cabal blocking your way. The Vex are also at odds with the Cabal, and it won't be unusual to see the two forces in combat with one another.



The Tower

The quintessential home base, the Tower is the place where guardians return under the shelter of the Traveler. This large hub stronghold is described as Earth's Camelot – a glimmering stronghold surrounded by shadow. You can visit vendors, turn in quest items, and interact with fellow players in large, open plazas. The Tower also houses class-focused areas for titans, warlocks, and hunters to each meet with their fellows.



Earth's Moon

The forces of the Hive have infested Earth's moon, and pieces of the surface have cracked and broken off into space. The moon once housed a thriving human colony of interconnected bases, but now only broken domes and scattered space suits half-buried in the lunar soil mark humanity's faded dominance. An iconic view of the looming Earth hangs in the skybox, but guardians would be wise to keep their eyes closer to the ground. A massive hellmouth gapes open where the Hive began their dig, and sprawling networks of caves and fortified strongpoints wait inside. Out on the surface, forgotten treasures hide in the dust.



Much of the adventure can be played solo or with a small group of one or two other friends

<< continued from page 50

BUILDING A GUARDIAN

Most shooters (including Bungie's previous Halo work) establish a static character with a distinct set of abilities, and set that character loose within the story. A few, like *Borderlands* or *Mass Effect*, offer more opportunities for choice. *Destiny* aims to broaden that scope of choice with a flexible suite of character-creation tools and upgrades that leave room for rebuilding your character without losing previous progress. The game also includes the opportunity to create guardians in multiple character slots, ensuring replay potential without sacrificing progress.

During character creation, your guardian starts out with several basic choices. Your race is a cosmetic decision; the face you present in the shared, non-combat spaces of *Destiny* where you roam without wearing a helmet. Humans offer an

uncomplicated and familiar experience; they are survivors of the Collapse picking up the pieces of civilization. The Awoken also survived the Collapse, but were forever changed; they appear otherworldly and aloof. Finally, the exo are self-aware machines built during humanity's Golden Age; they have been rebooted with no memory of their original purpose, and come across as unyielding and tireless. Each draws on familiar fantasy and science fiction archetypes. In addition to race, you pick a gender, and customize your face, hair style, and even tattoos to help set your guardian apart.

Choosing your class sets the tone for your experience. "We're doing something that's a little different from normal RPGs in which each class has a strongly defined role," says investment lead Tyson Green. "If you want to think about it in MMO terms, all of our classes are damage-per-second characters. Every character is capable of going into a situation and solving it. They may do it in different ways. The class is really more of an emotional archetype." While your

CUSTOM BUILT

Bungie wants players to personalize their character at every step of development. Take a look at just some of the variety available for your guardian's visual style.



choice between titan, warlock, and hunter establishes the style of abilities that follow, it doesn't determine the abilities themselves.

That designation comes from your focus. Each guardian bears a class-specific focus, which in practice functions like a sub-class. Focuses are the primary way you level and improve characters. Each focus advances from level one all the way up to twenty, with new abilities, passive bonuses, grenade types, and more unlocking over time. "The focus is the thing that carries all your abilities," Green explains. "[It] allows you to take the Traveler's light and turn it into effects in the world. The focus defines how you're going to be playing the game right now, much more so than your class."

You shape your focus' abilities as you level, and each upgrade tree is distinct. In any given focus, one tier offers a selection of grenade types, including everything from homing to proximity options. Another choice determines your vertical movement mode, like a short-range teleport or a double jump. Yet another tier offers a choice about melee bonuses. Weapon specialties, passive bonuses, and upgrades to your focus' super ability are also on the table.

Every class has numerous focuses to acquire and develop, each with its own specialties. However, unlike a traditional MMO character build, your focus is effectively a piece of equipment that can be changed out at will, like selecting a new weapon. "You can think of the focus as carrying the character level – a different way of approaching level," Green says. "We didn't want players to have the sense that they were creating a disposable character. We didn't want people to be leveling a character up to 20 and then deciding to try something different, and then being forced to throw themselves away. That sucks. We looked for a different way to approach that problem." One focus could be built out for your preferred competitive multiplayer loadout, while a second healing-oriented focus could be reserved for cooperative raid work.

Each class represents a particular player fantasy. Warlocks draw on the power of the mysterious Traveler to create impressive spell effects, but they're not like casters in many games that never get to enjoy the big guns. Instead, just like everything in *Destiny*, the core experience always comes back to time-honored shooting gameplay. Warlocks just get to throw in some cool mystical powers along the way. Each class has one piece of gear unique to them. For warlocks, their robes set them apart. Warlocks begin the game with the Circle of Night focus – a glass cannon with an impressive suite of damage-dealing skills, but less protection when the fight gets heated. This focus' super ability is the nova bomb – a devastating burst that can often wipe out whole groups of enemies from a distance. Alternately, you might level up your Heart of Fusion warlock focus. This support-focused build uses the radiance super ability to revive and buff allies.



Titans sit at the opposite end of the spectrum – the heavily armored look harkens to Bungie's previous fixation on space marines and powered metallic suits. They're all about busting in and breaking through, and likely taking a little more damage in the process. The badges they wear run down one leg like a sash – a symbol of honor earned in battle that is unique to the class. You start out with a focus centered on close-quarters devastation, built to handle the punishment it takes to get in next to enemies and then deploy a super ability, called Fist of Havoc, that

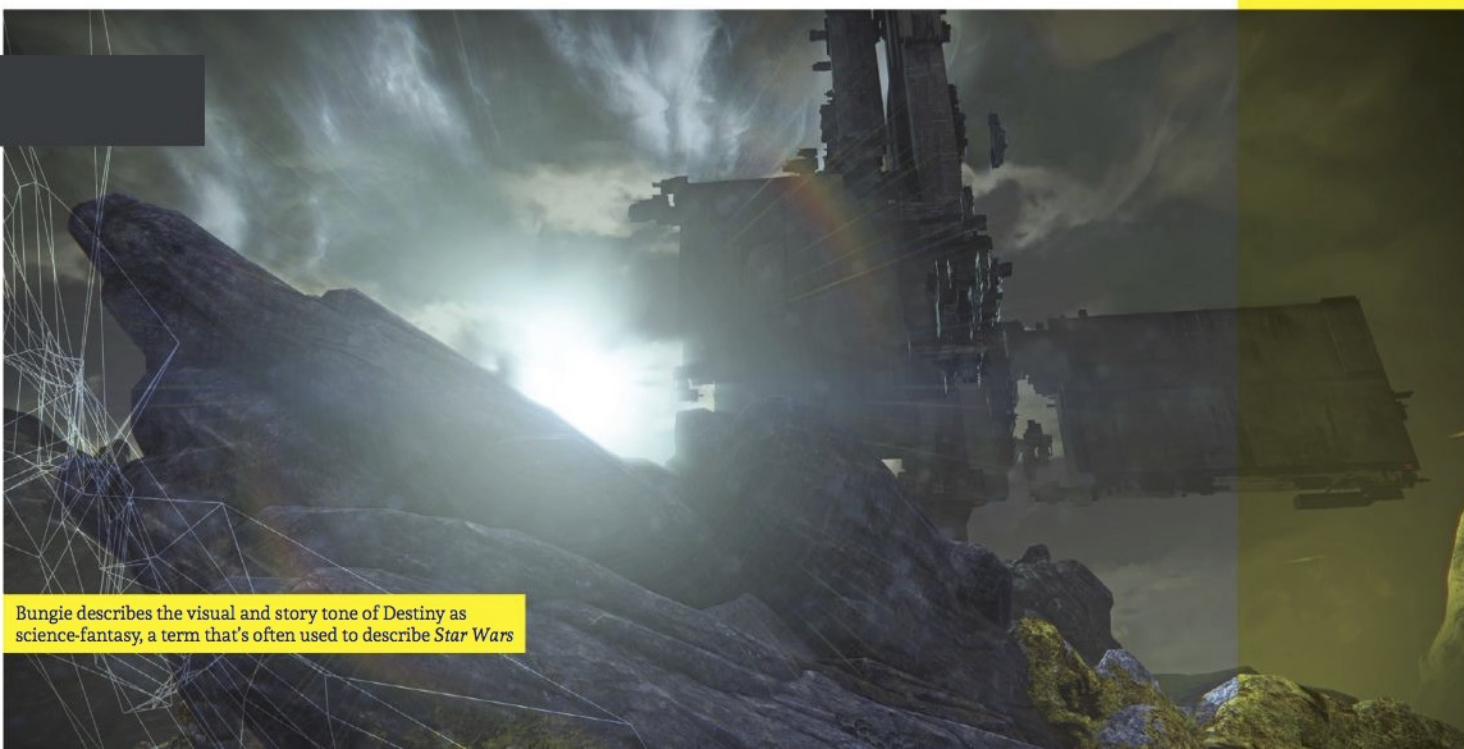
creates a resounding shockwave. Later upgrades make the shockwave even more powerful, adding electrical or damage-over-time areas that remain in place even after you leave.

The Hunter bridges the gap. These pistol-spinning bounty hunters stalk their prey with skill and precision. Visually, they are a mix of the other two classes – a 50/50 split of cloth and metal. Their class-specific cloaks make them look like space cowboys. You begin the game with the gunslinger focus, perfect for high value single-target damage. In a pinch, you can pull out your super; the ghost gun is a fearsome mystical weapon that can one-hit kill most opponents. Perhaps later you'll upgrade ghost gun with an immolation perk.

Before you head out exploring, your guardian also needs gear to capitalize on your chosen focus. "Focuses are meant to be synergistic with the gear that's available," Green says. "You're starting with a character, taking a focus, and then starting to find the armor and weapons that work the best with that focus." A primary weapon, secondary weapon, and heavy weapon each have color-coded ammo types to find in the field, and you carry one of each type into play. Like your focus, you set the weapon you want for any given scenario before heading into the fight, picking from an arsenal you've acquired over the course of your journey. In addition to class-specific armor, you also need to select a helmet, arm protection, torso armor, and leg equipment – each of which carries its own bonuses and abilities.

Three additional pieces of gear finalize your character. Your ghost is an accompanying AI companion – a floating metal device that serves multiple roles, such as being a flashlight in dark places. A customizable personal vehicle looks and functions like the speeder bikes from the *Star Wars* movies, and you can hop on these non-combat vehicles to zip between locations in the large, open-world environments. Finally, you have a personal spaceship. Each guardian's ship is different. Bungie says *Destiny* is not about space combat, but your ship is still frequently on display to other players. As your home away from home, your ship is visible as you warp from one planet to the next, and you see it hanging in orbit with other guardians' ships before a shared competitive or cooperative match – a bragging point that shows off your style and accomplishments.

continued on page 56 >>



Bungie describes the visual and story tone of *Destiny* as science-fantasy, a term that's often used to describe *Star Wars*

A TIDE OF DARKNESS

While humanity huddles behind the safety of its city, the solar system is overrun by a multitude of alien species, each with its own goals and abilities, but all linked to the force of Darkness that threatens to wipe out our species. Like Bungie's work designing the Covenant and Flood enemies in Halo, each of the alien groups has its own culture, weapons, and architecture, and none of them are monolithic. We got a glimpse into the sub-groups that make up each of these enemy aliens.



THE FALLEN

This vicious race of pirates is a scavenging menace from deep space. Once a proud and honorable species split into various noble houses, they have fallen from grace into a nomadic and parasitic path. Its members still wear distinct sigils representing their house allegiance, amid the mismatched and tattered armor and cloth they've each pilfered. Their bodies have an arachnid-like quality, visually reinforced by four arms. Shoot a Fallen in the head, and their souls seem to lift up and away like wisps. Their mechanized vehicle units carry overtones of Japanese mecha, and their ships appear like rusted futuristic submarines. The Fallen **Dregs** are the lowest rung of society, so reviled that they've had two of their arms removed. The **Vandals** are a tier above, wielding swords and guns as they charge into battle. Fallen **Captains** coordinate battles, and their hulking armor, long capes, and energy shields give them an unmistakable authority in the field. Sometimes, Fallen enter battle with mechanical **Shanks** to aid them – hovering turrets to harry their foes.



THE CABAL

The unstoppable engine of war powers the Cabal, an industrial, militaristic empire that spreads its corruption through organized and efficient expansion and unwavering resolve. Everything about the Cabal is big, from their bulky capital ships to their heavily armored soldiers, who appear as lumbering space rhinos. Cabal architecture is dirty and menacing, smoke issuing from vents and messy oil pouring down the sides. Kill a Cabal soldier, and they collapse with a crash and squirt dark oil from their livery. Like an unstoppable Roman empire from space, the hierarchical Cabal is spreading out to take the solar system for their own. **Legionnaires** toe the line and charge straight into battle. The tougher **Centurions** stay mobile thanks to jump jets that blast them across the battlefield. **Gladiators** lead through their own ferocious size and strength, often wielding devastating gatling guns. In addition, a smaller Cabal variant called **Psions** harness the power of their minds to confront enemies and pilot the Cabal's barn-like ships, adding an unexpected twist to the otherwise uniform army.



THE VEX

Picture the classic science fiction machine race, and mix it with the inscrutable motives of a timeworn Lovecraftian nightmare monster, and you get the Vex. They arrive in the solar system via warp gates, likely from another time in the past or future. Robotic bodies still carry a hint of organic components, and individual bodies might be humanoid, creature-shaped, or in-between, but often with long, vicious clawed fingers. The seemingly illogical geometric designs of their structures come together like giant ant hills, but these stone citadels must hold some significance that is unknown to humanity. Head shots do little to slow their advance, but target their abdomen power cores, and a burst of glowing liquid signals their destruction. Vex bear names drawn from mythology. Plentiful swarms of **Goblins** harass and overwhelm, and their larger **Hobgoblin** cousins are distinguished by their tails. **Minotaurs** are larger still – broad-shouldered robotic menaces that glare out from three glowing eyes. **Hydras** are segmented machines that float through the air to attack; each segment bears its own turret, and these robotic centipedes fire those turrets as they wriggle through the air. Finally, the smaller **Harpies** fly rapidly in and out of a fight, occasionally pausing to open up their shells to reveal a writhing mass of filaments before they begin firing.



THE HIVE

Inspired by the classic undead from fantasy fiction, the Hive are an impossibly ancient race that has kept themselves alive on tomb-like sarcophagus ships. The Hive delve deep into a planetoid, unheeding of the damage they do in the process, crafting linked caverns and gothic-inspired columns. Their underground spaces are like a dungeon that has only recently been pulled up from too long underwater. Destroy them, and their dry, mummy-like flesh ignites in a shower of dust and embers. In keeping with the theme, the Hive have names drawn from fantasy. **Thralls** attack in a shambling mob, usually unarmored and without weapons. **Troopers** do the bulk of the combat, but are often assisted by **Knights** wielding enormous cleavers. **Wizards** wear long, crumbling robes and fly overhead to unleash their spells, drawing on the power of the Darkness to fuel their powers. Delve deep enough, and eventually you're likely to find an **Ogre**, a gigantic mass of muscle and rage that might stomp you to death if it doesn't catch you with a blast of violet energy from its head.



<< continued from page 54

SETTING OUT

While *Destiny* offers a robust multiplayer experience, everything branches out from the exploration, leveling, and shooting. *Destiny* encourages you to move in and out of interactions with other players at your leisure, but you can also spend entire sessions tackling story missions and side content without the aid of others. "There is a very defined storyline, with a beginning, middle, and end," says head of community Eric Osborne. "For those who want to binge and concentrate on story, you can have what feels like a very directed, cinematic experience."

The integration of solo adventuring and multiplayer comes together through some clever technology that constantly handles matchmaking in the background. "For *Halo*, the party system and Xbox Live was important, but it was just one part of the game," says technical director Chris Butcher. "It was a mode you went into. With *Destiny*...the whole game is match-made, in one sense. When you are going through these public areas, we have that technology running all the time invisibly."

Unlike many MMOs that run on separate servers, *Destiny* has all players together in one massive world, and seeks to link you with small groups of other

players at appropriate locations and times. "There's all these things going on in the spaces, and our hope is that players won't need to think about it," Butcher says. "It will just be a place to go to, and that place is always filled with things to do and people to do them with."

Many spaces are set aside for you or a chosen fire team of up to three friends playing together, and other players won't arrive to interrupt those battles, story scenes, or missions. "Three people is a very natural number for cooperative gameplay," Butcher says. "Two people is certainly interesting, but the third person makes it into a real team experience – a really nice, social dynamic."

Meanwhile, other locations are designated as public areas, and the game seamlessly introduces additional players to scale to the challenge at hand. For instance, a few fire teams might be thrown together in a large open space to confront an invading Husk Wizard. Unlike some MMOs, in which dozens of players could swarm a public boss, the battle is appropriately challenging, since the game limits the population of players in any given instance of a space. Afterward, you can depart the public area and progress alone, or continue on with a small group of friends. "You're continually moving around between these groups of consoles and dedicated servers that are hosting it," Butcher says. "That's the thing I'm really excited that we've been able to do."

A tour through Old Russia offers a clear representation of free-roaming flow. Some may remember the E3 demo of *Destiny*. A scripted mission played out underneath a massive wall, ending in a larger public battle against a Fallen



tank mech. However, turn a few different corners, and you emerge beyond the wall into a free-roaming countryside. Small squads of Fallen soldiers lurk in the ruins of half-buried tanks and old ramshackle buildings. You stop at a few groups and fight your way through them, flinging grenades, dropping supers, and sending bursts from a pulse rifle. With each kill, an XP counter ticks up, and all your currently equipped gear (including your focus) moves a step closer to the next level. As you explore, a few enemies are clearly beyond your gear level – your gun doesn't make a dent in their armor, so you move on. You'll be back for them later.

With a button press, you hop on your personal vehicle and skim across the grasslands at high speed. Off to the side, a small sea gleams in the sunlight, with ancient rusted ship hulks jutting up from the shoals. Your target is a building called the Array, but when an ambient mission pops up to kill a certain number of Hive and Fallen enemies in the area, you stop to tackle some fights. "It's not just a bright line through story," Osborne says. "We want people to come back to these places, explore, find new places to go, and have new reasons to come back."

The shooting in Destiny should feel second nature to longtime Halo players. "Responsive action gameplay is always the core of what we do," Ellis says. "We always make decisions to keep that true. We never want anything that introduces too much latency into the controls. We never want to sacrifice the feel of shooting a weapon, throwing a grenade, or driving a vehicle." In the control scheme we witnessed, movement, camera, and shooting all map to the expected sticks and buttons. The left trigger is a designated ironsights button, available on all weapons. The right bumper is a quick melee attack that is different for each focus. A click of the left stick triggers sprint. The top face button still changes weapons between primary and secondary armaments, but hold down the button and you brandish your chosen heavy weapon.

The left bumper flings out a grenade, distinct to your focus, such as a seeking grenade that homes in on targets. After you throw, a quick timer meter fills before another grenade is ready. Tap the bottom face button to jump, and tap it again to trigger your focus' movement mode, such as the warlock's parabolic glide. Finally, hold down both bumpers and you get the satisfying wind-up for your super, which is always a potent attack, buff, heal, or other action that can turn

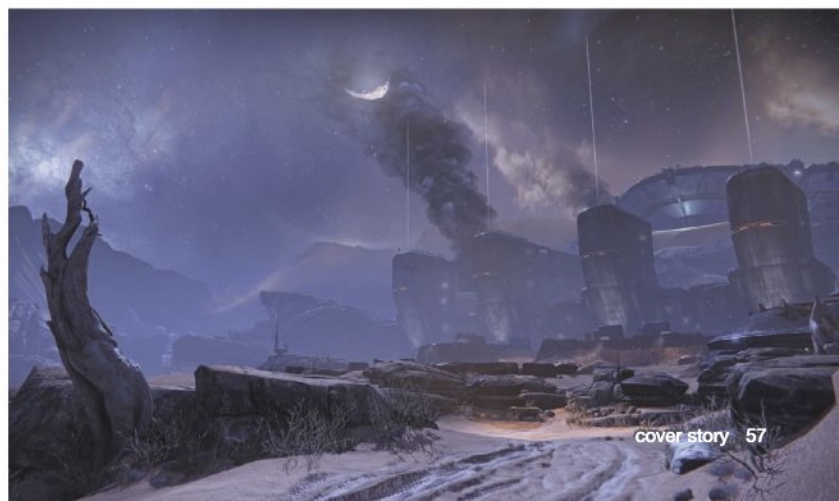
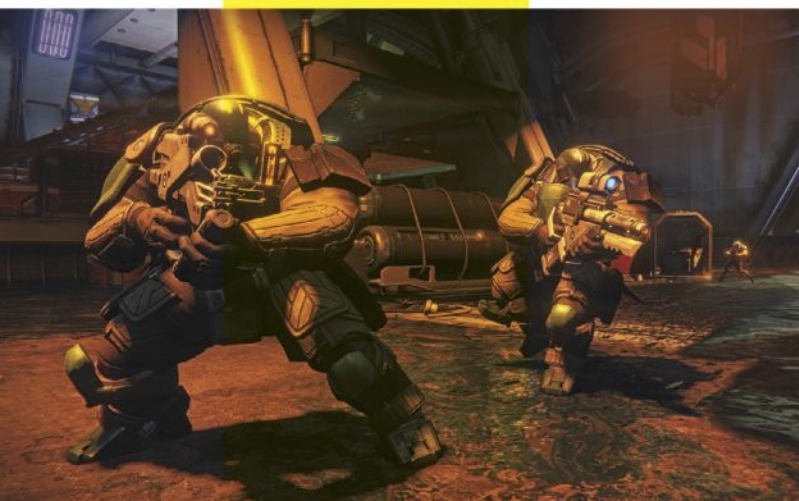
the tide of a fight. These features help Destiny stand apart. Every class and focus has its own special grenades, supers, bonuses, and upgrades, lending a variety to the visual style and gameplay of any given fight.

After taking out several enemies in the area, a public mission shows up to escort a nearby VIP to safety, but you decide instead to bypass the mission and continue to your destination. You hop on a Fallen vehicle with cannons on the front to close the distance, and then disembark to go inside. The building you enter offers a more linear path to your objective – in this case a patrol to check for infiltrators. It could just as easily be a mission to defend a checkpoint or track down a gun upgrade. The enemy soldiers you take down drop glimmer, the currency of Destiny – a rare, energy-based substance left over from humanity's golden age.

With your Array patrol complete, you emerge back into the sunlight a few steps away from a public event. A high-level named Fallen Captain is being hammered by half a dozen fellow guardians, and you join in on the fight. "We think of the game as being structured in terms of activities," Butcher says. "Depending on your mood, you choose an activity that suits that mood. You're going to a place, and you have a reason to be there. Sometimes that reason is more open ended, and sometimes it's very directed. But you always have an activity."

These moments of free exploration and random missions are ideal for some game sessions, but alternately, Destiny has a separate, targeted entry portal into the action. You can pull up a screen-filling game map littered with icons for story missions, cooperative strikes, competitive matches, and more. If you're in the mood to tackle one particular play style, this map gives you instant access, and your ship zooms out of orbit to reach the site of the action. You decide to tackle some directed multiplayer, and moments later you're in a mission far from Earth.

Battles have the same desperate pacing and speed that Bungie established with its Halo games



JOINING UP

Your chosen cooperative mission takes you to a cave mouth on the surface of the moon. The game mode is a strike – a cooperative adventure ideal for pick-up groups or friends looking for a quick battle together. Coordination won't be an absolute necessity for success, but it certainly helps.

You enter the Pit of Chains with your companions beside you, and it's not long before shambling Hive Troopers detect your presence. In the first big fight of the strike, you and your fellow guardians must hold off waves of foes as a nearby door slowly unlocks. Your group gets separated and quickly overwhelmed. It's a wipe. However, a generous checkpoint system pops you right back at the start of the fight, and a modicum of teamwork is enough to win the day the second time around. With your foes defeated, you tap a direction on your d-pad, and your guardian exhibits a cheering animation, which is returned by your buddies.

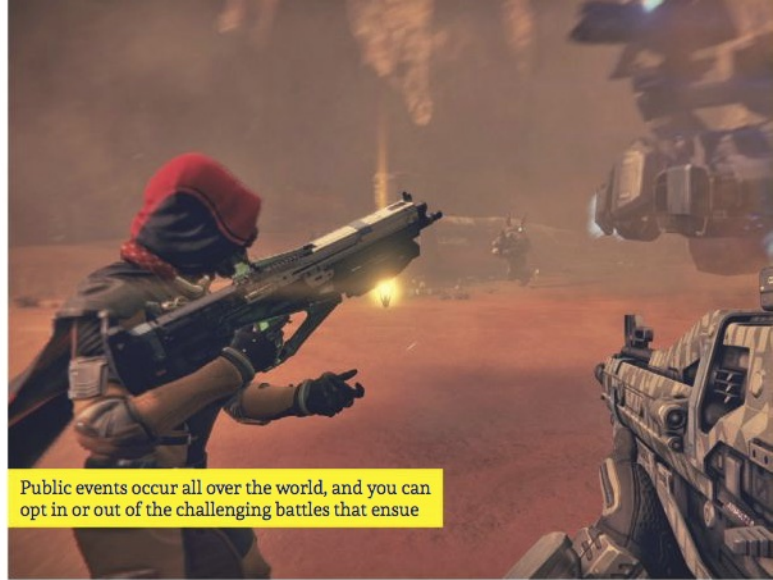
Beyond the unlocked gate, you find a massive cavern filled with teeming hordes of Hive soldiers, but this time you have more help. The area is a designated public space, so a couple of other fire teams join in as you work your way across the cave.

Leaving the other players behind, your fire team continues deeper into the dungeon, and eventually encounters the final boss of the strike – a raging Hive Ogre. Concentrated fire from your team whittles away at its health, while other monsters spawn to distract you. You leap from a cliff top towards a distant ledge, and use your short-range teleport to cross the distance. From here, you've got a good angle on the giant, and one final nova blast sends the creature tumbling to the ground. With the strike complete, you pick up an intriguing new fusion rifle left behind by the ogre. The dynamic loot system provides distinct treasure for every player in the group. With your rewards in hand, your team is instantly transported back into orbit.

From orbit, you decide it's time to test out the new gear against your fellow players, and proceed into several games of competitive multiplayer. Within the fiction, guardians fight against one another in support of various competing factions in the City, and battles play out in contested areas across the solar system. "You are being employed by these factions," says design lead Lars Bakken. "The factions helped and were integral to the forming of the city. They are very interested in pushing guardians out into the universe, and helping them to reestablish and take back these places."

Competitive game modes in Destiny run the gamut, and show the same flair for clever construction that Bungie is known for, both in concept and environment design. One battle pits groups of fire teams going head-to-head in a straightforward area capture style; holding any of the three points gives you scoring multipliers for kills, assists, and other actions.

After a few games capturing zones, you head into a smaller, deathmatch-style mode with an interesting tactical layer; points are awarded for kills, but also



Public events occur all over the world, and you can opt in or out of the challenging battles that ensue

for finding your downed teammates and reviving them before they respawn – presuming your enemies aren't camping the corpse.

Guardians begin competitive matches without access to heavy ammo, and occasional drops of the precious pick-ups are focal points for action. Maps have lots of verticality, and it's easy to reach high ledges thanks to the wide variety of vertical movement modes available to each class. Shifting environmental features add complexity, like giant mechanisms that move to alter sight lines, or even using the glare from the distant sun to approach an enemy unawares. The broad range of grenade types and supers on display keeps everyone on their toes, but ultimately the action is still focused on quick reflexes and smart weapon use. "When you play Destiny, if you are just interested in competitive multiplayer, we are going to scratch that itch," Bakken says. "There's going to be an awesome amount of stuff for you to dig into and play. But we're going to balance that with the fact that we're giving players a bunch of other new activities as well."

continued on page 61 >>

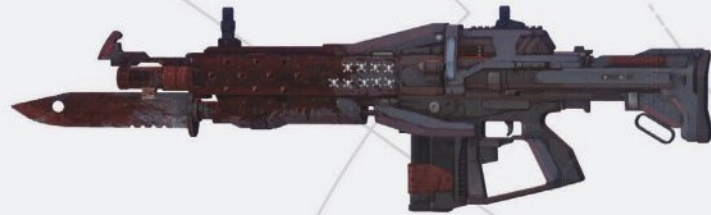
Each destination is a wide open world of its own to explore, filled with secrets, story, and missions



A WEAPON FOR ANY OCCASION

Including your focus, gear in Destiny is the primary way to set yourself apart from fellow players, and you spend a lot of time working to acquire new equipment and improve existing pieces. "When you get a new piece of gear, you're always making decisions about how is this going to help me?" says technical art director Ryan Ellis. "Is it going to enhance the abilities I already have? Is it going to improve the weapons I like to use? Is it going to make me tougher? Or faster?" Weapons and armor profiles offer basic data that communicate damage or defense potential, but most items are more descriptive than focused on incremental differences in numbers. You're more likely to change to a different helmet because it boosts a certain potent ability, rather than because its numerical value is some small percentage point better than your existing headwear.

Like a focus, gear items have their own short upgrade tree, and your item gets better and even acquires new abilities the longer you use it. Gear is loosely gathered into four tiers: basic (white), common (green), superior (purple), and the coveted exotic items (gold). Characters can only wield one exotic weapon and one exotic armor piece, but you can carry as many as you like, and switch between them at your leisure. Exotics are game changing in their power, and might dramatically alter your playstyle. The following three exotic weapons help show off the variety in offensive options, but armor exotics are equally powerful and varied, like a helmet that might dramatically reduce all headshot damage you receive.



RED DEATH

This potent pulse rifle offers a bevy of perks to your character that trigger more frequently during competitive multiplayer. In addition to inflicting some serious hurt on any foe that gets in its way, it shines strongest after getting some upgrades, including the invaluable ability to regenerate health at an increased rate.



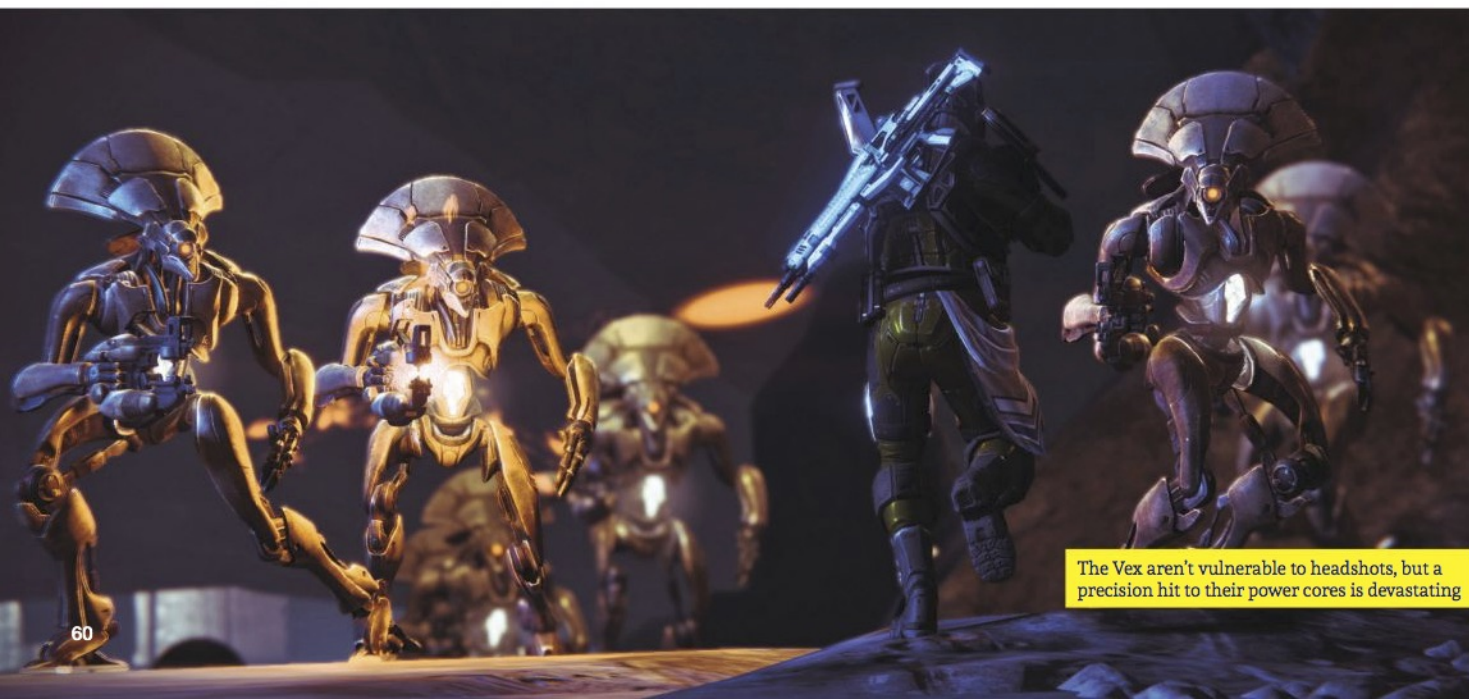
CLOSING TIME

The perfect weapon for the camper on your team, this exotic sniper rifle camouflages your entire body whenever you are in zoomed view. Plus, shoot an ammo pick-up from a concealed location and the ordnance goes straight into your bags.



GJALLARHORN

An ideal weapon for a titan specializing in zone control. The launcher shoots out rockets, and secondary sentries deploy at the site of impact to devastate foes that pass nearby.



The Vex aren't vulnerable to headshots, but a precision hit to their power cores is devastating





Guardians can use any weapons they desire in combat, regardless of class or focus, but different focuses might provide bonuses to particular weapon types



<< continued from page 58

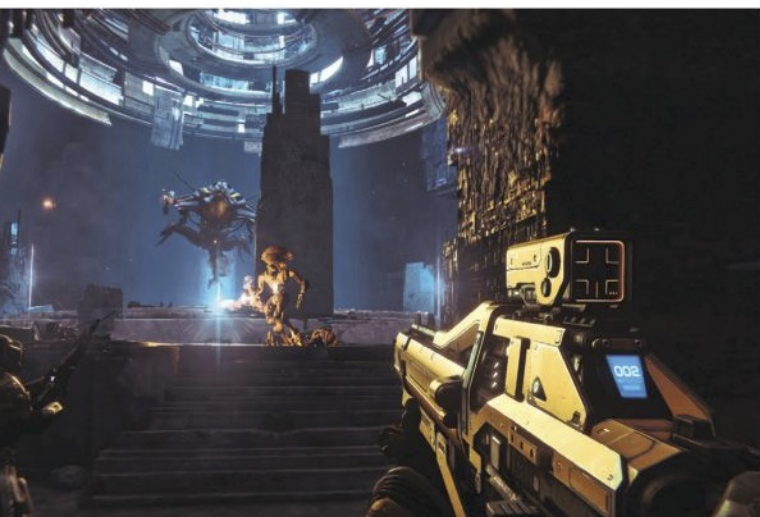
BEYOND THE HORIZON

Like a traditional single-player shooter, *Destiny* features a cinematic story with a clear conclusion, but Bungie hopes to keep you invested long past that story's completion. The cooperative, competitive, and solo gameplay we witnessed was just a smattering of the tantalizing game modes and missions visible on the wider map. Some of that content is purposefully built as aspirational – modes and locations that require powerful gear and heavily leveled focuses. Included in the mix are highly challenging raids – cooperative story missions meant to be tackled by organized groups against seemingly insurmountable odds. “There are activities that will push you harder and further than you’re ready for at the beginning or even the mid-level of the game,” Bakken says. “So, when you start to get to the end of the first initial story we release, there are multiple places to spend time with your high level characters. It won’t just be raids, but other activities shift into a mode where they’re more about high level play.”

While the initial release of *Destiny* is promised as a story in its own right, it's clear that Bungie is building the game for a long haul. Subsequent new locations, storylines, and other content are virtually guaranteed. “We definitely plan on making sure that the world is updated and alive over time,” Butcher says. “We’ve designed the world of *Destiny* to be a place where we can tell a lot of stories. We think of *Destiny* as being an ongoing conversation with our players.” No matter how Activision and Bungie decide to monetize that new content, one thing is for sure. “We’re not charging a subscription fee for *Destiny*,” Butcher confirms. As you wait for new adventures to show up, perhaps you’ll embrace the challenge of rising through the competitive ladders. Maybe the game becomes a go-to option for your friends to tackle cooperative challenges. *Destiny* is built to encourage replay and long-term investment in your character and the wider story.

When discussing an upcoming game, especially from a time-tested developer like Bungie, it's tempting to be carried away by the simmering potential of the project. Undoubtedly, features can change, technology can fail to pan out, or storylines can fizzle. However, *Destiny*'s sheer breadth and depth stands out as one of the most daring experiments in modern game development. Drawing from conventions established in a handful of other genres, Bungie is shaping an experience that plays unlike anything else. Your anticipation and excitement is justified; start planning your journey into the unknown. ♦

Want the full picture on *Destiny*? We've got an interview with Bungie co-founder Jason Jones, more information on matchmaking, details on the *Destiny* soundtrack, the opportunity to win *Destiny* beta codes, and much more rolling out throughout the month at gameinformer.com/destiny





DONKEY KONG COUNTRY

TROPICAL FREEZE

THREE HOURS CHILLING
WITH THE DK CREW



Wiking armies of arctic creatures, known as Snowmads, have sailed onto DK Island's tropical shores. Like the Old Norse seafarers, they sweep across the land, conquering its inhabitants and corrupting the soil. With a single blow from a magical horn, the leader of the Snowmads summons a monstrous ice dragon that coats the tropical forest with a blanket of snow. Caught off guard, Donkey Kong is ejected from his home and banished to a neighboring island. If he ever wants to see his birthplace again, the big ape must navigate the hazards of a small island chain.

BY BEN REEVES

► PLATFORM
Wii U

► STYLE
1 or 2-Player
Platforming

► PUBLISHER
Nintendo

► DEVELOPER
Retro Studios

► RELEASE
February



Tropical Freeze's levels are dense with secrets. We couldn't throw a banana without hitting a KONG letter, finding a puzzle piece, or uncovering a secret stash of bananas



FROZEN IN TIME

Donkey Kong's lineage is nearly as old as the industry itself. Originally conceived in the early '80s as a King Kong-like scoundrel who abducted women and pinned them to the top of construction girders, Donkey Kong was Nintendo's biggest cash cow and one of gaming's most iconic characters. But as Mario's star rose, Donkey Kong took a back seat and fell out of the limelight.

In the early '90s, Nintendo approached a relatively obscure UK developer and asked them if they could make a game that looked better than any platformer on the market. The developer was Rare. Nintendo handed them the Donkey Kong brand and tasked the studio with making something fresh. The result was Donkey Kong Country, and even though it was released during a heyday of 2D platformers, the game stood out as a refreshing take on the genre. It was one of the best looking titles on

the SNES, turning heads even though it released only weeks before Sony's new PlayStation console hit Japan.

Donkey Kong Country was so successful that it spawned a series of new games and helped established Rare as one of the premier developers of the 1990s. Donkey Kong finally had his own identity again out from the shadow of Mario. He rode wild animals through mine-filled jungles and blasted out of the mouths of wooden barrels to soar over canyons.

When Retro Studios revived the series with the 2010 Wii title Donkey Kong Country Returns, the new developer held true to the design principles Rare established nearly two decades ago. With the company's follow-up title, Tropical Freeze, Retro doesn't shake up the formula, either. Instead, Donkey Kong's handlers are doubling down on polish, crafting a platforming experience that will challenge fans and hopefully give Wii U owners something to brag about.



The end boss of Juicy Jungle is a polar bear with a giant hammer



The basic Penguin enemy is called a Tuck. Tucks with helmets are called Tuff Tucks and penguins with spiked helmets and spears are called Papa Painguins

FROSTY FUN

With a name like *Tropical Freeze* you might expect Donkey Kong's new game to be full of ice-capped trees and crystalized lakes, but the worlds in DK's new adventure are more diverse than ever (see sidebar on page 66). During our three hours of hands-on time, we bounded across the tops of hot air balloons while dodging giant owls, bounced off giant squares of Jell-O to climb over bamboo fences, and swam through electrified coral reefs teeming with colorful fish.

Donkey Kong uses vines to swing over bottomless death traps, rides rollercoaster-like mine carts through dim caves, and blasts out of barrels while trees topple to the ground all around him. In all the right ways, *Tropical Freeze* feels like a classic Donkey Kong Country title.

However, Donkey Kong isn't stomping on the same old enemies he's been wrestling with for decades. In the Rare-designed Donkey Kong Country classics, Donkey Kong battled an army of crocodiles called Kremlings. In *Returns*, the DK crew battled a group of tribal-looking creatures called Tikis. For *Tropical Freeze*, Nintendo's brutish gorilla

now has an army of Nordic animals to face off against. The Snowmads are a legion of penguins, owls, rabbits, sea lions, and walruses obsessed with turning Donkey Kong's home into a winter wonderland.

Each enemy type slowly evolves as Donkey Kong gets closer to his home. For example, Tucks (the penguin-like enemy) are a fairly standard foe that Donkey Kong encounters throughout his journey. At the beginning of the game, Donkey Kong can easily knock them out of the way by jumping on their heads or rolling into them. However, as the game progresses, Donkey Kong comes across Tucks equipped with spears and helmets that can only be attacked from behind. Later on, tucks begin equipping themselves with double-sided spears and spiked helmets, which hurt the Kongs when they jump into them. These enemy types must be stunned before they can be attacked. The Snowmads seem like an unrelenting army, so it's fortunate that Donkey Kong has some reinforcements of his own.

continued on page 67 >>

THE DK CREW

Each member of the Donkey Kong tribe performs essentially the same basic moves, but their subtle differences make them useful in different situations. *Tropical Freeze* features four playable characters, but Nintendo isn't ready to reveal the fourth character. Here's what we know about the first three.

DONKEY KONG

Donkey Kong is the star of this show, and the first player always controls him. All of the other characters can loan him their abilities by riding on his back. Donkey Kong has a basic roll attack and a powerful ground pound that allows him to defeat certain foes or break special blocks to access hidden areas.

DIDDY KONG

Donkey Kong's nephew has two peanut guns, which can be used to stun enemies from a distance. His cartwheel attack is useful for up close and personal attacks, while his jet pack allows him to hover in the air for short periods, giving him a longer jump distance. Performing a Kong Pow with Diddy turns all of the enemies onscreen into extra life balloons.

DIXIE KONG

Donkey Kong Country's ponytailed heroine has her own gumball popgun, which works remarkably like Diddy Kong's peanut guns. Dixie's ponytail acts like a propeller underwater, giving her an extra boost of speed, while her helicopter spin pushes her higher into the air than the boys, making it easier for her to reach top-shelf goodies. Performing a Kong Pow with Dixie turns all onscreen enemies into gold hearts, which give the Kongs twice the hit points.



ISLAND HOPPING WITH DK

Donkey Kong: Tropical Freeze takes place across a chain of six diverse islands. Each world features around six to seven levels, as well as a boss stage and a bonus level that unlocks once you collect the KONG letters in each level. Here is each isle at a glance.

WORLD 1: LOST MANGROVES

Lost Mangroves is a lush tropical rainforest full of vine grabbing and zip-lining. Here Donkey Kong assembles his crew and learns the basics of Tropical Freeze's platforming, but that doesn't mean it is a cakewalk.

WORLD 2: AUTUMN HEIGHTS

Autumn Heights is a Bavarian-like mountain isle full of mine carts, hot-air balloons, and giant owls. Donkey Kong will have to watch his step or end up plummeting down the sheer edges of these jagged cliff faces.

WORLD 3: BRIGHT SAVANNAH

Full of tall grass and a spectrum of oranges and browns, a trip through Bright Savannah is like going on an African safari. Several of the levels have Donkey Kong dodging uncontained brush fire as well as spear-toting penguins.

WORLD 4: SEA BREEZE COVE

Sea Breeze Cove is a fish's tropical paradise. Full of blue harbors and sandy inlets, this world features a lot of swimming levels. Donkey Kong must dodge electric seaweed and manage his air supply to avoid sleeping with the fishes that call this island home.

WORLD 5: JUICY JUNGLE

Juicy Jungle is another tropical forest, but the trees in this jungle produce a rare fruit that is perfect for juice. As a result, this island is home to an elaborate processing plant, and Donkey Kong can bounce off the jellies this plant produces to reach new heights.

WORLD 6: DK ISLAND

DK Island is where Donkey Kong lays his hat, but his tree house has been frosted over by an army of Snowmads. Here, Donkey Kong Country Returns players will see several homages to levels from DK's last adventure.



THE KONG FAMILY

Rare's first Donkey Kong game introduced fans to Diddy Kong, Donkey Kong's nephew and frequent sidekick. Rare originally wanted this new character to be Donkey Kong's son and called him Donkey Kong Jr. However, Nintendo wasn't comfortable with the changes made to the character design since his arcade appearance in the '80s, so Rare changed the name of the character, considering titles like Dinky Kong and Diet DK before settling on Diddy Kong.

Since Rare wanted to keep Donkey Kong Country's screen as clean as possible, Diddy was originally envisioned as a way to visually represent the extra hit a player could take before dying. But as the series evolved, Diddy took on a larger supporting role, developing his own suite of abilities that set him apart from his uncle.

In Donkey Kong Country Returns, Retro expanded on this idea by giving Diddy Kong twin peanut pogguns, which let him stun enemies.

Retro also strapped a barrel jet to his back, which lets him hover in the air for a short period of time. In single-player, Diddy Kong hopped on Donkey Kong's back and granted the gorilla the use of his tools, but in multiplayer both characters had to help each other navigate the platforming challenges (though the second player could choose to ride on Donkey Kong's back during harder sequences). All of these tricks return for Tropical Freeze, but Donkey and Diddy are now joined by two new playable characters: Dixie Kong and one other character that Nintendo isn't ready to talk about.

Playing solo, you always retain control of Donkey Kong, while these side characters serve to augment Donkey Kong's abilities. Diddy and Dixie are largely the same, but they possess subtle differences that might make you choose one character over the other. For example, Dixie's helicopter spin jump lifts her higher into the air, while Diddy's jet pack keeps him at a constant hover to help him cover a

great distance. Both are useful, but you might find that one or the other is more suited for a particular platforming challenge. Donkey Kong can switch between companions by breaking buddy barrels scattered throughout the levels. The icons on these barrels slowly rotate through his sidekick's initials, letting DK know which companion will soon be hopping on his back.

Donkey Kong's companions unlock another new feature, which Retro is calling Kong Pow. As the Kongs platform through the world and collect bananas, they slowly fill up a Pow meter; once full, this meter can be used to perform a team attack that instantly kills every enemy onscreen. If Donkey Kong performs a Kong Pow with Dixie, all of these enemies are replaced with hearts, offering a quick health refill. If Donkey Kong performs a Kong Pow with Diddy, then all of the enemies on screen are turned into balloons, offering a quick restock of extra lives.

THE POLAR PLUNGE

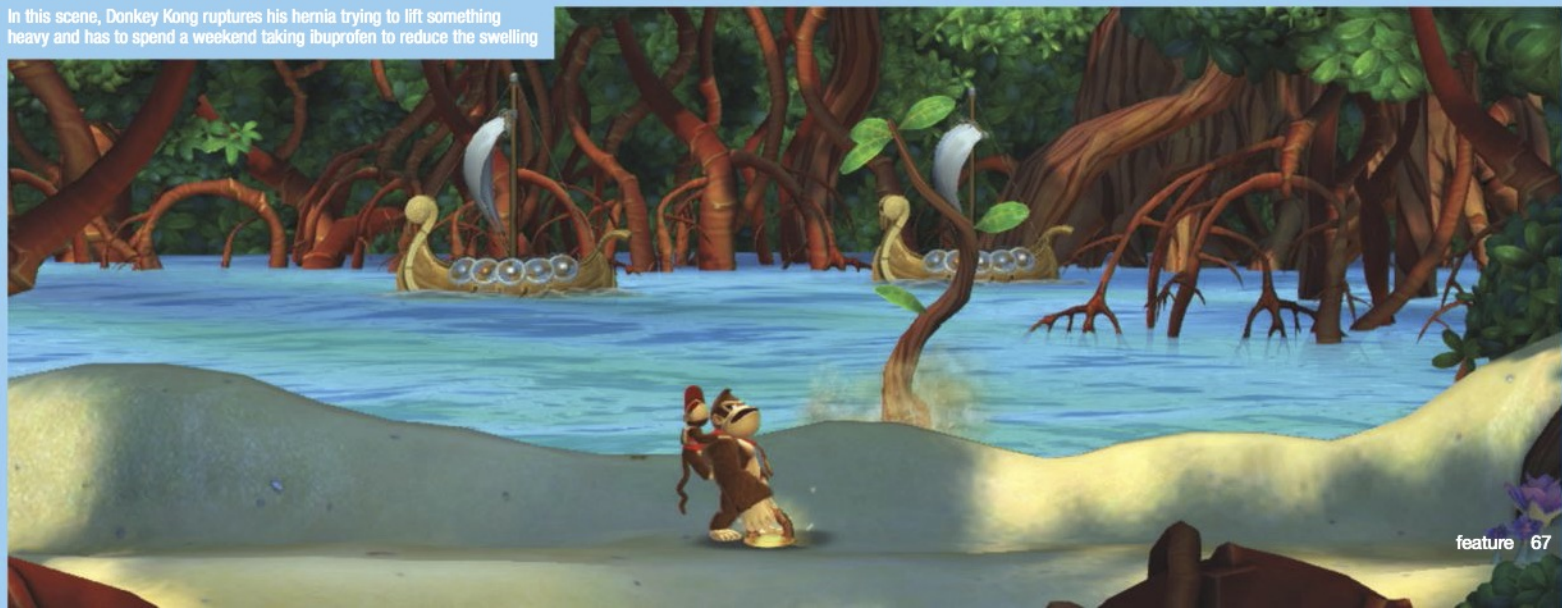
Five minutes with Tropical Freeze is enough to remind players that Donkey Kong isn't a forgiving platformer. If Mario is Nintendo's most well-rounded and accessible platforming series, then Donkey Kong is the series that more experienced players can graduate to when looking for a rewarding challenge. Donkey Kong is just as polished as Nintendo's other series, but its finely tuned jumps and collapsing death traps require a little bit of trial and error to master. Thankfully, that's exactly the challenge that Donkey Kong fans crave.

A rewarding challenge isn't the only thing that Donkey Kong fans have to look forward to when Tropical Freeze releases this February. Whether we were jumping from one track to another during an Indiana Jones-like mine cart race, trying to collect rows of floating bananas as we blasted out of exploding barrels, or stomping on the silhouettes of sea lions while a raging inferno turned a forest to ash behind us, every level in Donkey Kong Country: Tropical Freeze felt completely fresh. We're eager to help Donkey Kong liberate his homeland this February. ♦



Donkey Kong Country's original composer, David Weiss, is returning to write Tropical Freeze's score

In this scene, Donkey Kong ruptures his hernia trying to lift something heavy and has to spend a weekend taking ibuprofen to reduce the swelling





Infamous Second Son

Wreaking havoc with super powers in Sucker Punch's Seattle

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Sony Computer Entertainment
- » **Developer**
Sucker Punch
- » **Release**
February

At the PlayStation 4 launch event in New York City, Sony's focus wasn't just on the present, but also the future. In addition to launch titles, the publisher gave us a glimpse of what's coming in the next few months.

We've written much about Infamous Second Son (see issue 242), but this is the first time we've taken control of new protagonist Delsin Rowe. Second Son needs its remaining four months for polish, but it absolutely feels like Infamous. We were right at home from the start.

From the first moments of our Infamous Second Son demo, Sucker Punch sets the stage for tension. Delsin and his brother Reggie are about to enter Seattle for the first time. In order to get past the Department of Unified Protection (DUP) patrol, both must submit to a biological test.

Players use the touchpad on the DualShock 4 controller to mimic Delsin placing his own finger on the scanner. He's immediately identified as a "prime conduit," and the DUP open fire on him. It's a situation of "shoot first, ask questions later," and Delsin has no choice but to defend himself.

Delsin has a number of ways to fight back against the heavily armed thugs. He can sweep in with melee attacks using the chain on his arm. He can also fire smoke bolts or charge them up for a powerful assault capable of taking down a guard tower. Controls have been tweaked since Infamous 2, giving Delsin more mobility in battle.

Delsin can perform short-range smoke dashes. These are used to get the brash protagonist out of trouble and into a flanking position. His smoke form also allows him to blast through vents at ground level to quickly

reach rooftops.

Traversal feels natural and familiar. Delsin has a smoke-based form of Cole MacGrath's static thrusters. This glide ability gives players a bit more reach when jumping from the top of tall buildings.

During the fight with the DUP, icons appear above some soldiers' heads. This is the first glimpse of the karma system. A pop-up tells us we can subdue or kill the soldier in question, and the temporary animations indicate that there's a karmic change when choosing one. Sucker Punch isn't talking much about the karma system yet, but it's clearly making a return. Delsin seems to be similar to Cole in that his brashness and immense power could lead him to boldly heroic action or corrupt, selfish deeds. We don't yet know how or if Delsin's appearance will change as he reaches the extremes, but that certainly



was a standout feature from past titles.

Before pushing through to the end of the demo, our Sucker Punch guide nudges us toward an alley with a neon sign hanging above it. Once there, a prompt appears that allows us to absorb the neon. This unlocks a new power set, though many of the abilities were locked.

The most notable change when equipping the neon power is how traversal is handled. Instead of the smoke ability's short-range bursts, neon offers a more extended sprint. Delsin moves in a straight line, running over (and up) any obstacle he encounters. Instead of using vents to get to the top of buildings, neon allows him to run straight up the side.

After playing with that for a bit, we are instructed to find a smokestack on a roof to switch back to our original moveset. There, we encounter a number of guards and their

super-powered friends. Fans of the past two *Infamous* titles will recall that the combat opens up and becomes more strategic when dealing with enemy conduits.

Our final task is to destroy a large, armored vehicle. We shoot panels off the side, obliterate the sensitive bits underneath, and finally jump on top to lift the core of the vehicle up and smash it. This last action requires a swipe of the touchpad combined with a button press. That part takes getting used to.

Our demo ends with a launch into the air that gave Delsin the height to perform a powerful drop attack. This short animation shows the young hero cracking a wry smile at the camera before laying waste to the ground below.

Infamous Second Son feels like a faithful follow-up to the PlayStation 3 titles. We'll find out whether or not that is enough to stoke the flames of the PlayStation 4 when it releases in February. » **Michael Futter**

Plants Vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare

Taking the war out of the backyard

» **Platform**
Xbox One • Xbox 360

» **Style**
1 to 24-Player
Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Electronic Arts

» **Developer**
PopCap Games

» **Release**
February 18

One of E3's biggest surprises this year was *Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare*. We're accustomed to seeing sequel reveals and watching franchises move out of their element into different genres, but we never expected PopCap, a developer known for its incredibly fun but small mobile games, to move into the team-based, online shooter arena. This highly competitive genre is usually reserved for the Battlefields and Team Fortresses of the world, built by large, experienced teams.

Gary Clay, the senior franchise manager for *Plants vs. Zombies*, says one of the big advantages of PopCap being acquired by Electronic Arts is the ability to expand its scope on projects like *Garden Warfare*. "If we'd have been just PopCap, we never would have been able to do something like this," Clay says.

After the acquisition, Electronic Arts asked PopCap if it had all the time and all the money in the world to do whatever they wanted, what would it do? "We had to keep it super quiet, I genuinely had shower curtains on my office door for months," Clay says. The team had to make sure visitors to the studio didn't see what it was working on.

PopCap also knew when the game was revealed, it had to be shown in action, because otherwise people wouldn't get it. *Garden Warfare* senior producer Brian Lindley says when describing the game internally, without any assets, people would be confused by the project. "You have to see how fun it is to really get a good idea of the product, because on paper it sounds crazy," Lindley says.

Garden Warfare is a cooperative, class-driven, third-person shooter that, as the title implies, pits plants against zombies. Each side of the conflict has four similarly powered classes, but every one is distinct in its abilities and its visuals.

The plants' Peashooter and the zombies' Foot Soldier replace the basic soldier class, but are different from one another. The Peashooter is the fastest plant class, with impressive jumping and the ability to plant itself into the ground to fire more peas per second. The Foot Soldier has an assault blaster, which functions like the standard machine gun, and a rocket launcher, which it can fire at enemies, or use to fire itself into the air.



You can see a factory setting here. PopCap promises that the final game will have a diverse set of battlegrounds



Monetization

Plants vs. Zombies 2 recently launched on iOS and Android devices as a free-to-play game, which led us to wonder if *Garden Warfare* would adopt a similar model. *Garden Warfare*'s producers promise all of the post-launch maps and characters will be free to download to everyone. To place those elements behind a pay wall would split the audience, which PopCap does not want to do. Players use coins to unlock card packs with new weapons and customization options (much like *Mass Effect 3*'s randomized kits). If you want to speed up the process, you have the option to purchase coins.



The Sunflower is a familiar and important part of the *Plants vs. Zombies* tower defense games. While it can fire its sunburst weapon in *Garden Warfare*, its main role is one of support. Placing marigold pots around the battlefield is key to keeping teammates in the fight, as they drop healing items incrementally. The Scientist Zombie can also drop healing stations, and has the ability to warp himself forward a few yards and throw the explody sticky ball, which functions much like Halo's sticky grenade.

The Chomper is a plant-side beast without a comparable class when looking at other popular shooters. It has no long-range weaponry to speak of, but it has a powerful melee attack, the ability to move underground to get close to his enemies, and comes armed with the spike-weed, which acts a little like a claymore mine.

The zombie's All-Star can launch footballs at enemies, throw up tackle dummies as instant cover, and unleash the Imp, a short zombie holding explosives who runs in whichever direction the All-Star tells him to.

The Cactus acts as the sniper of the plant team, with the ability to shoot long-range needles and throw up the Wall-nut barrier for cover. The Cactus can also send out a remote-controlled garlic drone, which can rain down a popcorn-flavored air strike. The zombie's Engineer can similarly unleash the remote-controlled engineer drone, has grenades to uproot Chompers, and a mountable jackhammer to move him around the level at a much faster pace. His character model

also has what Lindley refers to as, "gratuitous amounts of butt-crack." Clay follows up saying, "Brian and I spent a significant amount of time measuring the butt-crack to ensure optimum hilarity" – a sentence he couldn't even finish without laughing.

Every class has its base weapons and abilities, but like *Battlefield*, each also has a separate progression tree that unlocks new weapons and customizations. We saw a marine biologist version of the scientist complete with a porpoise for a gun, a hockey-themed version of the All-Star, and an electricity-powered sunflower. Every class has a range of customizations affecting how they

look, how they play, and what they can do.

PopCap has never made a shooter before, but the team is intimately familiar with the best of the best. Throughout our discussion, constant references to games like *Team Fortress 2*, *Left 4 Dead*, and *Halo* were used to describe gameplay elements. The game is also being built using DICE's Frostbite engine, forcing the team (without complaint) to research the developer's successful military shooter, *Battlefield*.

Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare may not have been the game we were expecting when it was first unveiled, but the more we see, the more it becomes a game we never knew we wanted. » **Kyle Hilliard**



Split Screen

Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare is coming to Xbox 360 and Xbox One in February. The two are visually disparate, but one of the big advantages of playing on Xbox One as opposed to Xbox 360 is that it offers split-screen. Regardless of which system you go for, however, the game is available at a discount price. The Xbox 360 version of the game is \$29.99, and the Xbox One version is \$39.99.

Project Spark

Microsoft demonstrates impressive creation tools



» **Platform**
Xbox One
Xbox 360 • PC

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

» **Publisher**
Microsoft Studios

» **Developer**
Team Dakota

» **Release**
2014

When Microsoft demonstrated Project Spark at E3, it only had a matter of minutes to show off one of the more complex creation tools seen in console gaming. I recently checked out a more extensive demo of the World Wizard creation mode on Xbox One, and came away impressed with the wide array of customization available.

Developer Team Dakota was reluctant to mention a built-in story mode of any sort, but the tools I saw in the demo should guarantee some unique gameplay experiences made by gamers. Comparisons to *LittleBigPlanet* are inevitable with such a community-focused

game, but Project Spark may offer gamers even more freedom when it comes to making their own vision come to life.

Upon opening the World Wizard, you can assign a blanket genre to your creation. The three I saw were first-person shooter, third-person brawler, and isometric brawler, although the X button shuffles the choices to reveal other options. After customizing your player character's appearance, the option to alter the game world itself opens up. A simple sculpt tool makes it possible to add mountains and hills, or you can switch to erode mode to create valleys and craters.

Modification tools make it easy to paint different terrain over the land if you want a snowy or grassy look.

Once you're done modifying the world, you can start populating it by switching over to the prop menu. Here, you can place a variety of allies and enemies, and each of their AI programs can be modified extensively using the brain gallery. Default brains are available if you want generic behavior patterns, but almost any aspect can be tailored to your liking. If you want to create a healer-type enemy, you can select the exact health bar percentage his allies have to reach before he automatically begins healing his fellow soldiers.

Modifying your own character's abilities is simple as well, and the tools allow for some crazy skills. I watched as a Team Dakota developer used Kinect to record his own body performing a *Street Fighter*-like fireball motion, and then applied it to a new skill that he created. This skill involved hitting the LB button to automatically turn enemies' brains into those of birds. With the press of LB, the player character performed the recorded motion and several goblin-like enemies suddenly took off into the sky.

The interface seems as user-friendly as possible considering how deep the creation mode gets, so I'm hoping that players can start making their own worlds without having to go through hours of tutorials. But after an extended demo of Project Spark, I feel that gamers will have a lot to learn to get the most out of these extensive tools. They can get a head start when the beta launches on Xbox One in early 2014. » **Dan Ryckert**

The AI of enemies and allies can be tweaked to your liking





Kingdom Hearts III

Taking Disney attractions for a joyride

After finally announcing the official development of Kingdom Hearts III at E3, Square Enix gave us a taste of what's cooking in a new trailer revealed at Disney's D2 event in Japan. The teaser showed off some new gameplay additions, and we had the chance to ask creator Tetsuya Nomura about these new features and his plans for Kingdom Hearts III.

Dream Drop Distance left us with a revelation: Seven keyblade wielders must be gathered to take on Xehanort. Kingdom Hearts III's main story concludes Xehanort's arc, and Nomura says it picks up "immediately after the events of Dream Drop Distance."

Nomura also reveals some main plot points. "The process of the wielders coming together will be the main storyline, but one of the highlights of the climax is going to be who is part of the seven lights and thirteen darkneses when they get to the final battle," he says. "Would it be as everyone expected, or will there be unexpected members added to the mix? That is something to look forward to."

The plot isn't the only thing to anticipate, though, as the trailer reveals Sora's keyblade can now transform into different weapons. The trailer shows Sora wielding dual guns mid-battle. "All keyblades transform, and in many different ways," Nomura says. "Throughout the series, various other skilled keyblade wielders had transformed their weapon; it may serve as a hint to see what they transformed their keyblades into, in order to understand the different ways in which they changed their form."

The biggest revelation is that attractions are now a part of Sora's arsenal as special attacks. One of these is Big Magic Mountain, where Sora rides a train through the sky, going upside down and taking twists and turns to damage a towering golem. Nomura confirms it's not tied to the keyblade abilities, but instead the enemy you're up against.



The latest trailer shows a special attack using a pirate ride that spins to damage enemies

"When the appropriate attack becomes available, the player can activate it," he says. This is by far the most exciting innovation we've seen for the new installment.

We have to wait to learn more details about Kingdom Hearts III, but Nomura gives some insight into his vision. "It will be a summation of everything accumulated up to this point, in terms of both the story and game mechanics," he says. "I'm sure that those who've followed the series up to now are very eager to see what's next, but I think it's also important to

create wonder and awe, much like when the first game in the series came out."

He leaves us with one last interesting tease. "The end also means a new beginning, and I'm certain that as this story arc ends, players will be able to look forward – carrying this excitement – for something new and different, never-before-seen in the series," he says. Where Kingdom Hearts III will lead us is anyone's guess, but it's far from the end of the franchise, and that's a good thing for dedicated fans. » **Kimberley Wallace**



- » **Platform**
PlayStation 4
Xbox One
- » **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Square Enix
- » **Developer**
Square Enix
- » **Release**
TBA



Heroes Of The Storm

Blizzard's heroes and villains come together in epic battle



Paying off Blackheart is easier said than done

» **Platform**
PC • Mac

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

» **Publisher**
Activision Blizzard

» **Developer**
Blizzard

» **Release**
2014

Blizzard's multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) has had three names, but this most recent one is going to stick. First it was called Blizzard Dota, but a tiff with Valve forced a name change. Then the name changed to Blizzard All-Stars, which was descriptive, if a little hokey. Now, the developer has settled on something a bit more compelling: Heroes of the Storm.

Blizzard is hoping to challenge Riot's League of Legends and Valve's Dota 2 by introducing a MOBA with multiple battlegrounds (maps), each with its own unique objectives.

Blackheart's Bay has players collect coins to bribe a spectral pirate. Once properly compensated, he turns the cannons of his ghost ship on the opposing team. Whoever has the coins becomes the target, and should that person fall, the coins scatter.

Haunted Mines is a competitive mode that tasks you with fighting an NPC hero as well as the opposing team. Players must defeat skeletons and collect their skulls. The amount of skulls each team collects determines the power of the Grave Golems that spawn on each side. Taking out the opposing team's golem is key to keeping your base intact.

Dragon Shire puts players in a race to control the Obelisk of the Sun and the Obelisk of the Moon. Once one team captures both, the Dragon Altar emerges. From there, one member of the team can temporarily turn into an extremely powerful Dragon Knight.

Fans of Blizzard games will be happy to know that characters from Warcraft (Uther, Arthas), Starcraft (Kerrigan, Raynor, Nova), and Diablo (Diablo, Tyrael, Demon Hunter) fill some of the roster. As with most MOBAs, you can purchase additional skins to customize your character. Heroes of the Storm beta registrations are open now. » **Michael Futter**



Arthas raising an army of the undead

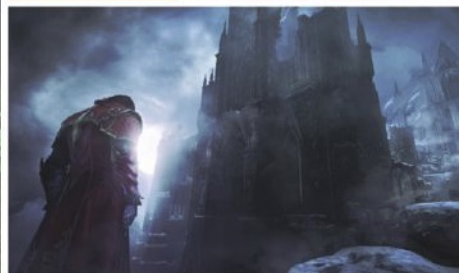




Dracula in his decrepit state from the end of Lords of Shadow



This appears to be Dracula's dragon form



Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2

Konami reveals Dracula's vampiric abilities

Dracula's suite of powers has been on display in almost every Castlevania game. His dark magic usually involves teleporting around the screen, shooting some fireballs, then morphing into some terrible abomination. Now that players are finally controlling the Prince of Darkness in Lords of Shadow 2, MercurySteam is spicing up his repertoire by building on the satisfying combat established in the 2010 reboot.

Similar to Alucard's set of skills in Castlevania: Symphony of the Night, many of Dracula's powers open up access to new locations on top of granting new battle tactics. One example is the Mist Form, which allows Dracula to phase through enemies during fights, dodge powerful blows, and pass certain barriers.

Mist Form isn't the only trick up Dracula's sleeve that allows him to bypass threats. Stealth sections are a new addition to the series, which Konami says are necessary due to his initially incomplete set of talents. Since Dracula begins Lords of Shadow 2 without all his powers intact, he must take a sneakier approach to certain situations.

Dracula can't turn into a bat and fly around the game world, but he can summon swarms of the flying pests to distract foes. Bats can also be used to even the odds in combat by temporarily flustering enemies. This ability is great for distracting opponents, but Dracula can take it one step further by glamoring them. After charming his enemies into servitude, he can take control of them to avoid unwanted encounters.

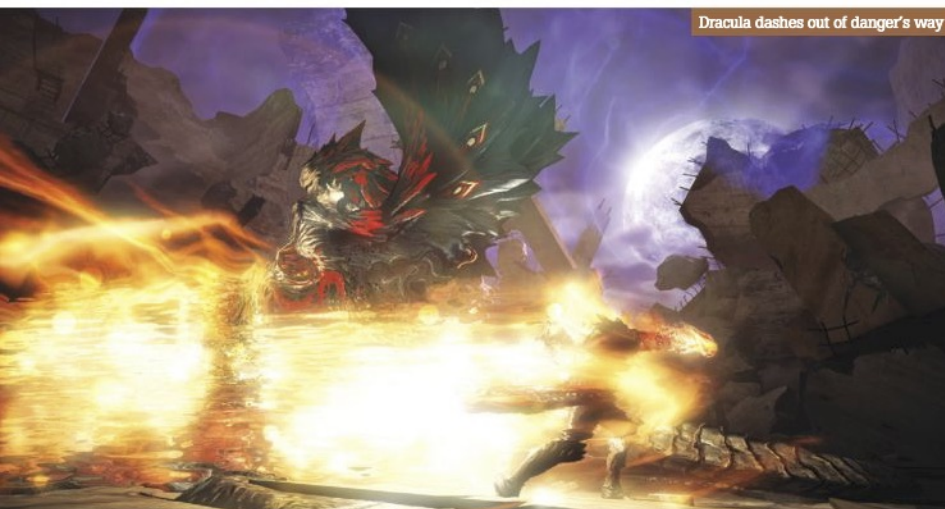
Players hungry to play a whip-cracking, blood-drinking vampire shouldn't worry. Dracula spends plenty of time kicking ass outside the shadows. In trailers for Lords of Shadow 2, Dracula refers to himself as "The Dragon," and the name gets literal thanks to a new metamorphosis; he changes into the legendary beast with the aid of a mythical talisman. To activate the relic, Dracula must collect ancient dragon scales. Details regarding specific draconic powers are scarce, but it seems to be a nuclear option for when things get dicey.

Most of Dracula's abilities are reliant on his blood supply, which is replenished by siphoning from foes. Dracula uses his own blood energy to manifest his blood whip, but that dark magic further extends to shadow daggers. In a macabre act of self-mutilation, Dracula creates bloody blades by cutting his wrist. These high-speed projectiles can stun enemies during combat.

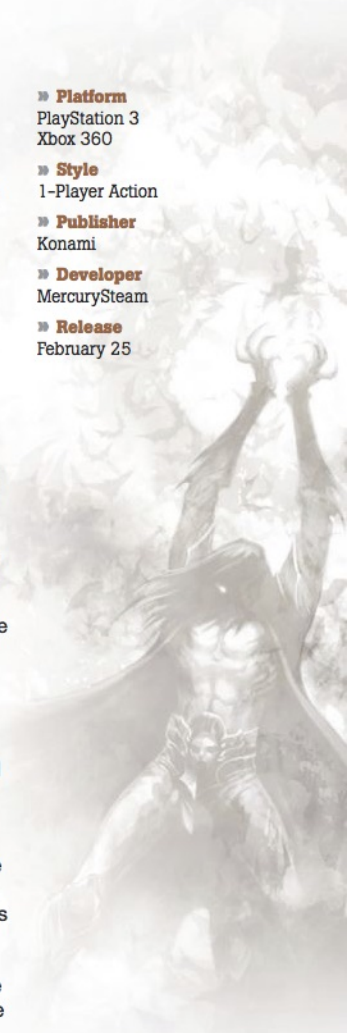
Dracula rounds out his bag of tricks with the help of other relics and potions. Once activated, the Seal of Alastor unlocks every skill for each of Dracula's weapons, temporarily granting him power beyond his capabilities. The Stolas' Clock can be shattered against the ground to momentarily slow enemies and grant an experience point boost for each attack (used to unlock new skills).

Commanding colonies of bats and turning into a dragon are exciting new abilities for the vampire formerly known as Gabriel Belmont. These skills will come in handy when it comes time to explore the huge castle and the sprawling modern city enveloping it. While these powers are enticing on their own, we're confident MercurySteam is hiding a few more in the shadows. » **Tim Turi**

- » **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
- » **Style**
1-Player Action
- » **Publisher**
Konami
- » **Developer**
MercurySteam
- » **Release**
February 25



Dracula dashes out of danger's way





EverQuest Next Landmark

Building in Sony Online's sandbox

- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
Massively Multiplayer Online
Role-Playing Game
- » **Publisher**
Sony Online Entertainment
- » **Developer**
Sony Online Entertainment
- » **Release**
2014

When Everquest director of development Dave Georgeson took the stage at Sony Online's SOE Live event in August, he announced not one, but two different EverQuest games. In addition to the upcoming traditional MMO EverQuest Next, he introduced EverQuest Next Landmark, a sandbox building experience that gives fans immense power over Norrath.

EverQuest Next Landmark ties into EverQuest Next by selecting the best player-made Landmark creations for inclusion, but it is also a full MMO in its own right. While my hands-on experience was limited to the building tools, Georgeson told me about the combat, guild, and exploration systems also present in the game. Essentially, Sony Online is giving players the means to stake a claim in Norrath, build on it, populate it with creatures, and welcome other adventurers to explore it.

Players start with rudimentary tools and mundane building supplies. By exploring the world, they can collect new resources with which to customize their creations. Unlike Minecraft, EverQuest Next Landmark allows players to change the voxel size, use spherical tools, round edges, and paint over existing creations with new materials. The most stunning of these are gems, which reflect light in real time from the prop lanterns that can be hung on walls.

Landmark is still in pre-alpha, but I walked around some amazing creations left by the development team. I started in a man-made keep, and as Georgeson coaxed me outside, I was confronted with an enormous golem made of stone and wood. I saw treehouses and castles formed from cubes, globes, and custom surfaces created with a line tool that makes dramatic angles easy to create in seconds. Unlike Minecraft, the creations in Landmark rarely belie their cubical construct.

My own creation was less impressive. I started to create a simple house structure, but accidentally dug too deep at first. Thankfully, the "heal" tool restored the land to its former contour as stored in the server.

I then experimented with the line tool, intersecting a number of different angles. Using the smoothing tool created a believable pile of rock. I then painted over my house, making it stone instead of wood. With the help of the delete and smoothing tools, I changed it into a large, ancient face, half of which had collapsed. Menacing eyes and teeth were easy to add to complete the effect.

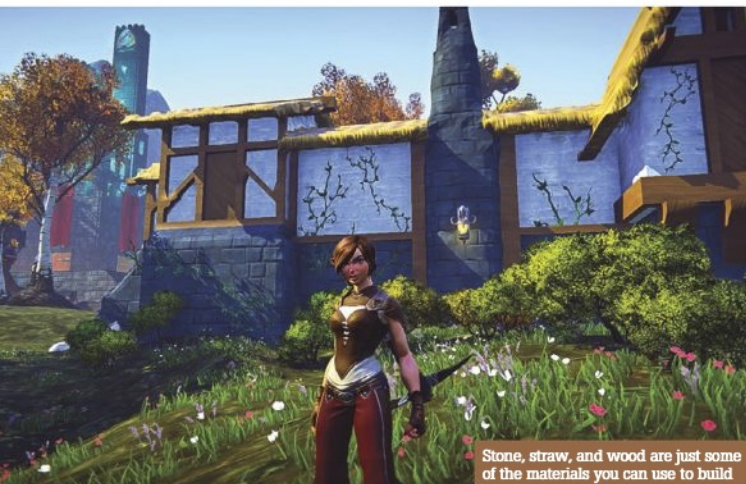
Landmark also allows users to easily copy and paste creations once selected. For example, should you wish to build a wall around your stake, simply make one, copy it, paste it, and rotate it into place. Conventional editing



Will your stake be a home or an altar?



Will you leave this bridge unfinished or will your adventure continue to the other side?



Stone, straw, and wood are just some of the materials you can use to build

commands (Ctrl-C to copy, Ctrl-X to cut, and Ctrl-V to paste) make it easy to manipulate the environment.

EverQuest Next Landmark allows room for great precision, but it also welcomes accidental artists. I am no designer, but I would have gleefully lost myself in my piece of Norrath if time hadn't run out for my hands-on session.

Sony Online plans to start letting players into EverQuest Next Landmark soon. Three different founders packages are available ranging in price from \$20 to \$100 that grant alpha and/or beta access along with other in-game perks. The alpha will begin no later than February 28, with the beta slated to start by March 31.

» **Michael Futter**



World Of Warcraft: Warlords Of Draenor

Blizzard sends World of Warcraft fans back through the Dark Portal

Blizzard is taking World of Warcraft back in time to relive the stories of the series' real-time strategy roots. The next expansion, Warlords of Draenor, sends players through the Dark Portal once more to encounter new, savage creatures.

Warlords of Draenor introduces a number of features for long-time fans and new players. The level cap is being raised to 100, but Blizzard wants to be sure that those interested in the new content can jump in right away.

To make this happen, the studio is offering something called "Boost to 90." One character on each profile can immediately be set at the previous level cap to experience the new story and lands. Character models are being revamped as well, and while Blizzard hasn't committed to which is getting an overhaul first, all of the races and classes are receiving a visual update.

Warlords of Draenor also introduces garrisons, a form of player housing. You can recruit followers, task them with gathering resources and crafting, build new segments of your garrison and upgrade them, and customize the look. You can invite people in, and Blizzard is considering how players might be able to show off past accomplishments as trophies.

Blizzard plans on delivering loads of fan service for those that have been following the Warcraft lore since the franchise's early days. Unlike Burning Crusade, this trip through the Dark Portal sends players back in time to a critical moment in history. The Iron Horde is forming, and players will encounter legendary Orcs, including Grommash Hellscream, Blackhand, and Ner'zhul. Whether history repeats or is subverted is up to the millions of World of Warcraft players. » **Michael Futter**



Garrisons allow players to build up their own land, staff it with workers, and send those characters on missions to gather resources or craft

» **Platform**

PC • Mac

» **Style**

Massively Multiplayer
Online Role-Playing Game

» **Publisher**

Activision Blizzard

» **Developer**

Blizzard

» **Release**

2014



Dragon Ball Z: Battle Of Z

Goku and pals enter a battle royale

» **Platform**
PlayStation 3
Xbox 360
PlayStation Vita

» **Style**
1 to 4-Player Fighting
(8-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Namco Bandai

» **Developer**
Artdink

» **Release**
January 28

Since Dragon Ball Z found an audience in North America, most of its video game adaptations have been handled by developers Dimps or Spike. For Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Z, Artdink is trying its hand at bringing Goku's story to life for the first time.

Battle of Z is still a fighting game, but the perspective is shifting. Battles take place in fully navigable 3D environments, allowing players to fly through the air and run on the ground in any direction without locking in on their opponent. You can fire energy from distance, move in for close-quarters combat, or run in the opposite direction and hope for the best.

Up to eight players can duke it out online with four-player teams. Groups can also take on some of the show's larger bosses, like Vegeta's Great Ape form. Teams work together using synchronized rush and meteor chain moves to execute impressive team combos. Active players can also revive downed teammates in the middle of combat.

The cast is nearly as large as the show itself, with 70 promised playable characters, including recent additions like Birus from the film *Dragon Ball Z: Battle of Gods*.

One of the more enticing features appealing to anyone who has followed Dragon Ball Z is the ability to create impossible dream teams. For example, players can pit all of Goku's Super Saiyan forms against a team of Frieza's evolutions.

Battle of Z is the first non-Kinect Dragon Ball Z fighting game in a few years. We'll find out soon whether a new developer and a fresh style of combat can reinvent the franchise. » **Kyle Hilliard**



Conception II: Children Of The Seven Stars

Making babies, RPG style



» **Platform**
Vita • 3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Atlus USA

» **Developer**
Spike Chunsoft

» **Release**
Spring

Seeing a game like Conception II: Children of the Seven Stars come to North America is surprising. After all, the original PSP game was roughly subtitled, "Please Have My Children!" Rather than being dirty, as the name might imply, Conception II instead involves Disciples – mortals bestowed with the power of the Star Gods – who have the power to defeat the monsters overrunning the world. How do you tap into their power? Combine your powers with these Disciples and procreate some Star Children, of course!

Not just anyone can make these children, though. The protagonist has a special power to bond with those blessed with the Star Brand...all of whom happen to be female. In a process called "classmating," the children are brought to life, but their strength is based on the quality of relationship between the two "parents." A Star Child's available classes are based on the statistics, so you don't want a toddler from a shaky relationship. With seven women to woo, different personalities abound.

But what do you do with these babies aside from equipping them with heavy armor and weaponry? The answer is simple: Put them to work by having them smite foes through dungeons. The tots flank enemies in Conception II's turn-based battle system. As they strike from each direction with their tiny fists, a foe's weakest points are uncovered, letting the little tykes get an upper edge for takedowns.

Clearly, Conception II doesn't take itself too seriously, and that is one of its selling points. Those who love relationship management, quirky RPG premises, or enjoy traditional battle systems with some twists should keep their eye on it. After all, not many games give you the opportunity to customize child creation. » **Kimberley Wallace**





Bravelly Default: Flying Fairy

Strangers unite for challenging fights

Fans fought hard for Bravelly Default: Flying Fairy's localization after its strong critical reception in Japan. After playing the prologue, I enjoy how it harkens back to old-school RPGs like Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest, but also updates the traditional battle system.

The opening to this spiritual successor to Final Fantasy: The 4 Heroes of Light joins four characters before a great catastrophe occurs. Agnés, a vessel to the crystal of wind, is preparing to perform her duties. Ringabel, a man with amnesia and a book that forecasts the future, is chatting up ladies. Edea, a daughter of a Templar, is about to set off to prove herself by apprehending a vessel. Lastly, the main protagonist, Tiz, is enjoying his time with his brother in his serene village. Suddenly, a chasm swallows the entire town. Tiz is the only survivor, waking up to the harsh reality a week later. He's determined to find something to live for and rebuild his village (which you actually do through StreetPass), and he soon encounters Agnés, Ringabel, and Edea.

The biggest draw to Bravelly Default is its turn-based battle system. Based on a system where each turn costs one point, you can stock points by choosing "default" to defend or spend your points by selecting "brave," which allows you to link up to four commands. It gives plenty to consider when executing turns. For instance, if you need to heal up, you can sacrifice a future turn, or stock a bunch of turns to unleash a flurry of attacks. Everyone starts as a freelancer, but a class system allows you to acquire new jobs as the story unfolds. The prologue let me test the monk and white mage.

Bravelly Default doesn't hand out victories easily – even in the prologue. The first big boss cast tons of status ailments, and most of them stuck. At times, it felt futile because he never let up. The long, hard-fought battle had its frustrations and rewards, but I'm unlikely to forget its unforgiving plight. » **Kimberley Wallace**

- » **Platform**
3DS
- » **Style**
1-Player Role-Playing
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Square Enix
- » **Release**
February 7

Professor Layton And The Azran Legacy

High-altitude puzzle solving

Professor Layton's adventures stretch over five games and two portable Nintendo platforms.

The upcoming Azran Legacy closes out the second trilogy (which is actually a prequel to the first three games) and developer Level-5 claims that it will be the final game to star the series' titular hero. I played through the prologue and first chapter to see what's new this time around.

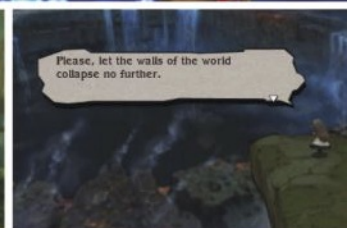
A familiar setup beckons Layton and his trusty assistants Luke Triton and Emmy Altava to a snowy mountain town called Froenborg. Another random colleague has stoked the puzzle-solver's curiosity with word that he's found a living mummy. Professor Desmond Sycamore sends his personal airship to pick up the team, so how could they resist?

Showing caution in a world known for rampant use of disguises, pilot Raymond demands Layton solve a puzzle before he will take him anywhere. The puzzle challenges you to pilot a mini airship through a square grid of cities and refueling stations. You have to stop at each location all without running out of gas. The mechanics allow you to experiment freely with various routes without penalty. If you get stuck you can reset back to the beginning or simply reverse course one turn at a time.

Once the puzzle's clear, Raymond takes the group to the mountains and drops them in Froenborg. The town is loaded with the standard assortment of quirky citizens, hidden puzzles, and hint coins. While asking around about Sycamore's location, I come across the new Dress Up minigame. For some reason, certain NPCs trust Layton and Luke to design outfits for them. You can collect clothing items throughout the game and combine them to hit the customer's preference ratings in multiple categories (cute, trendy, formal, casual, glam). I didn't have the decorative cat ears necessary to please my client, but she said she'd try on the outfit once I got the proper materials.

I won't spoil the rest of the action-packed chapter, but I will say it does a great job of kicking off the excitement. Speaking of spoilers, don't look into this game too much on the Internet. It's been out for almost a year in Japan, and Europe and Australia will have had the game for a month by the time you read this. What happened to North America getting games before the rest of the English-speaking world, Nintendo? » **Bryan Vore**

- » **Platform**
3DS
- » **Style**
1-Player
Puzzle/Adventure
- » **Publisher**
Nintendo
- » **Developer**
Level-5
- » **Release**
February 28





game.informer
★ GAME OF THE MONTH

96 Super Mario 3D World

Mario and friends have enjoyed multiplayer in 2D for years. Now, Nintendo has brought the fun into the 3D realm with imaginative worlds, a handy new cat suit, and playable characters that all feel unique (including the long-lost Princess Peach). If you have a Wii U, you'd be nuts to pass this one by.

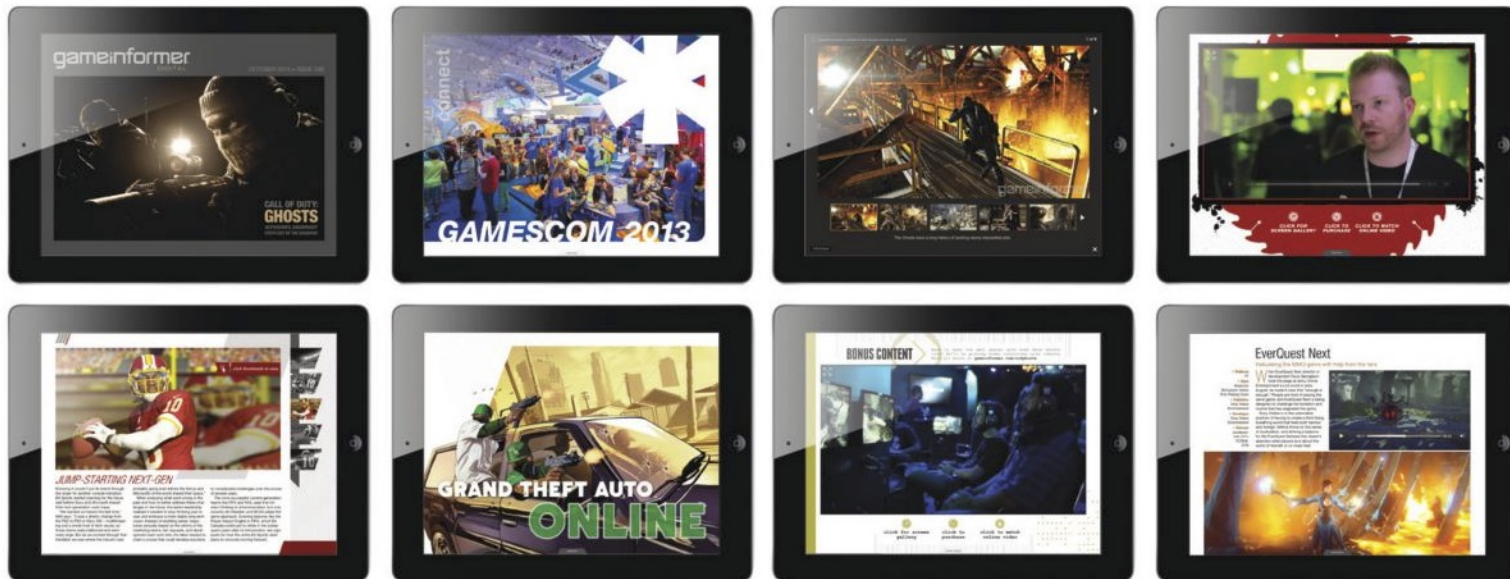
THE SCORING SYSTEM

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

AWARDS

game.informer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
game.informer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
game.informer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
game.informer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

DON'T JUST READ IT, EXPERIENCE IT



gameinformer[®] DIGITAL

- ◆ GameStop PowerUp Rewards Pro members who choose Game Informer Digital get full access to multiple platforms, including the new Google Play magazine edition, the iPad app, Android tablet app and PC/Mac editions.
- ◆ Get earlier access to new and expanded content than print subscribers.
- ◆ Watch embedded videos organized by your favorite subjects.
- ◆ Access interactive galleries and explore exclusive bonus content.

Google Play
Magazine Edition
Now Available to
Digital Subscribers

Access All with One Digital Subscription

ANDROID APP ON
Google play

GET IT ON
Google play
Magazines

Available on the
App Store

Compatible with
PC/Mac

GameStop
POWER UP
REWARDS PRO

Switch to the Monthly Digital Edition for Free!
gameinformer.com/godigitalnow



Need For Speed: Rivals

Unexpected mayhem

9

gameformer
GOLD

Style 1-Player Racing (6-Player Online) Publisher Electronic Arts Developer Ghost Games Release November 15 Rating E10+

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**

Ghost Games' first Need for Speed title successfully melds single- and multiplayer to create a racing experience unlike any other

» **Graphics**

Drop dead gorgeous. Racing at breakneck speeds with a storm of leaves zipping past your car and police lights blurring on the road is a welcome visual overload

» **Sound**

Heavy-handed voicework provides laughs, and the arrangement of driving techno beats blends well with the heart-racing excitement

» **Playability**

A silky smooth racing experience couples nicely with powerful weapons and the thrill of being chased

» **Entertainment**

Retains many of the staples from the Need for Speed series, but paves its own path with its dynamic shared worlds

» **Replay Value**

High

A burst of turbo ignites a blue flame from my Dodge Challenger's exhaust. At 150 mph, my eyes are fixated on the straightaway ahead. A slow-moving vehicle forces me into oncoming traffic. If I can hold onto this lead, I'll grasp gold in less than a mile. The police aren't going to make this easy. A spike strip forces me back into the right lane. This evasive maneuver couldn't have come at a worse time; another player-controlled car roars off of a side street and is heading straight toward me. His race is colliding with mine. We're both towing four rival racers and police platoons toward one another. We narrowly avoid exchanging paint, but my quick juke to the left sends me sailing headfirst into one of the other player's opponents. My car is mangled beyond belief, and I wreck out of the race. I didn't just miss the gold – I lost all of the Speed Points I was banking. The player I avoided laughs into the headset, thanking me for helping him gain first in his race. I vow revenge. With one click of the button, I switch to my police campaign and begin my pursuit to interfere with his next race.

This dynamic series of events is a common occurrence in Need for Speed: Rivals, a racer that brilliantly blurs the lines between single- and multiplayer experiences. Through a feature called "AllDrive," up to six-players can race in the same world, and all of their activity is applied to their individual campaigns' progress. It's like six parallel worlds overlapping.

In a couple of sessions, my friends and I drove around in a pack tackling challenges cooperatively. In these moments, with six rambunctious drivers smashing into each other and turning Redview County's streets into junkyards, the scale of Rivals' open-world chaos is put on display, and it's glorious. Whether I was minding my own business, gunning for other players, competing against them, or helping get police off of their tails, being able to switch gears so quickly is amazing.

Developer Ghost Games has forged a sprawling open world that impresses with its harrowing track designs. Many of the longer events evolve as they unfold. A Pursuit challenge that starts on a wide-open highway could conclude in a dense redwood forest packed

with tight turns and difficult visual conditions.

The sense of speed achieved at any given moment is intoxicating and somewhat terrifying. The stunning surroundings are unfairly distracting in a game where disaster can strike at any given second. Fog rolls down mountains, light dances through rustling trees, and you see beads of water rolling down your windshield.

Since this is an open world, getting to desired destinations can be a time-consuming pain, but garages and command posts allow for fast travel to any event, and AI-controlled opponents are always around for impromptu races should you not want to take any uneventful drives.

Rivals is almost two games in one, with independent police and racer campaigns. The racers try to evade the cops, and the cops try to bust the racers. Both avenues of play are exciting, but light on challenge variety. This isn't always a bad thing, since track conditions and the competitive AI do a nice job of pulling you into the moment and upping the intensity as the finish line draws near.

Gunning for first isn't your only goal for the racing campaign. Rivals offers a fascinating risk/reward system tied to Speed Points, the currency you use to purchase new vehicles, upgrades, and tech. All of your points accumulate, and can only be banked when you return to a garage or command post. Staying in the world and completing events raises a

multiplier, but also brings more trouble your way. If you wreck or get busted, you lose it all. If you make it to safety, a shopping spree awaits. This system is amazing when it works to your advantage, and crushing when it strips you of all of your hard work. The police campaign is a little simpler in scope, stripping away the multiplier and giving players non-upgradeable cars as rewards.

Seeing that all of Rivals' cars are equipped with crazy gadgets and weapons, Electronic Arts should consider obtaining the James Bond license again. Any car can be outfitted with two Pursuit Tech items, allowing for the deployment of mines, shockwaves, EMP blasts, electrostatic fields, and jammers. If your car hits a spike trap, its tires will re-inflate in time. All of these powers are ridiculous and fun, periodically producing a cackle-worthy wreck.

Ghost Games has crafted an exceptional experience that captures the classic battle of racers and police in a new light for next-generation machines. The shared-world concept is the driving force, making it easy for players to switch factions, team up, and continue making progress in their campaigns. I can't stress enough just how great of a multiplayer experience this is for friends.

» **Andrew Reiner**

This review is based on the PS4 and Xbox One versions.

Need for Speed Rivals is also available on PS3 and Xbox 360.



BioShock Infinite: Burial At Sea – Episode 1

More constants than variables

Style 1-Player Shooter Publisher 2K Games Developer Irrational Games Release November 12 Rating M

8

PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**

Return to Rapture as a different incarnation of Booker DeWitt

» **Graphics**

The underwater city looks even better than you remember, especially since you see parts that aren't destroyed

» **Sound**

Booker and Elizabeth's excellent voice performers, Troy Baker and Courtney Draper, reprise their roles

» **Playability**

Adding the weapon wheel was a good decision, but the controls are otherwise familiar

» **Entertainment**

The mystery of how these characters fit into this setting is the big draw, but don't expect a complete answer until the second (and final) episode hits

» **Replay Value**

Moderately Low



The way seemingly trivial choices ripple out and create larger consequences is part of BioShock Infinite's core. In the story, small changes can have a significant impact on events; Irrational Games aims for the same effect on the gameplay front with Infinite's first story-focused DLC. A "new" setting and minor changes to the combat present something different, but Burial at Sea isn't so far removed that it's unrecognizable.

The highlight happens right away. As a version of Booker DeWitt who lives in Rapture, you step out the door into a pristine version of the iconic setting from BioShock 1 and 2. You see a new side to the underwater city, unclaimed by the ocean and unmarred by excessive genetic manipulation. Shops are open for business. Citizens use plasmids to make their lives easier. The Big Daddies dutifully maintain the outer structure. You don't engage in any combat during this introductory segment, so you're free to explore, eavesdrop, and find audio logs. For fans of the series, the opportunity to see Rapture thriving is worth the price of admission (\$14.99).

You can't bask in the glow of civilization forever. The story propels Booker and Elizabeth – now a noir detective/dame duo – to search for a missing girl in a sunken prison. Since the plot holds the biggest surprises in the DLC, I'm won't say too much about it beyond this: You should make sure you finish the main game before playing this DLC. The characters are the same, but their motivations are different; you aren't just playing through a compact and reskinned version of BioShock Infinite. Whether or not the story ultimately pays off remains to be seen (this is only the first of two episodes), but I enjoyed the direction it takes in this installment, and I'm anxiously awaiting the resolution.

Once Booker and Elizabeth descend to the more decrepit parts of Rapture, Burial at Sea

starts feeling more like a retreat. The prison isn't much different from the Rapture players already know from previous entries. The rubble, broken storefronts, puddles of water, and assorted corpses convey the same sense of ruin that Rapture always has, without adding any additional layers. Rapture is still an interesting location, so it isn't unforgivable that the majority of this episode takes place in these desolate areas. However, returning to the formula is disappointing after the strong (and novel) opening showing the city in its prime.

Combat also doesn't stray far off the beaten path. The nuts and bolts of the gunplay are the same, with rails to ride, tears to open, and bad guys to shoot. Minor tweaks produce a different (though not necessarily better) battlefield. The weapon wheel returns

after being absent in Infinite, so you can hold more than two weapons at a time. Expect to swap your equipped gun frequently, since you can't hold much ammunition anymore. This adds a higher degree of tension and desperation to combat, forcing you to be more careful with your shots and resources. Expect more moments where you're low on EVE and only have one more shot in your shotgun – and even though Elizabeth can scrounge up items, they aren't always enough to keep you comfortable. I had fun experimenting with new approaches, but a few more new weapons and powers would have gone a long way.

The biggest letdown in the whole package is the implementation of the new items. These additions just don't inject fresh excitement into combat. For instance, the new gun is a hilarious radar beam that turns opponents into living bombs, but you get it so late (like, the last 15 minutes) that you don't have the chance to appreciate it. The extra plasmid is called Old Man Winter, but it is practically identical to Winter Blast from BioShock 1 and 2. Plus, you don't have access to the full complement of weapons and abilities from BioShock Infinite, so I often felt hamstrung instead of powerful, despite the new additions.

On one hand, I'm thankful Irrational Games took this unconventional approach to DLC. Instead of re-using all of the same assets from Infinite, the team recreated Rapture and found a way to meld successful elements from several games in the series. On the other hand, the additions are minimal at best, leaving players to go through the same motions with a different backdrop. For a world that invites infinite possibilities, I was hoping for less familiarity. » **Joe Juba**

Elizabeth will be your playable character in the second episode of Burial at Sea, which does not currently have a release date



NBA 2K14

Starting next-gen with a swish

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**

Bring in the next-gen consoles with revamped MyCareer and MyGM modes

» **Graphics**

The player models are drastically improved over last-generation consoles. Facial hair finally looks realistic

» **Sound**

The wooden MyCareer voice work stands in stark contrast to the fantastic commentary, which is mostly unchanged from the 360/PS3 versions

» **Playability**

The controls remain largely unchanged

» **Entertainment**

If you're going to buy an NBA game this year, 2K14 should be your choice

» **Replay Value**
High

gameinformer
SILVER

Style 1-Player Sports (8-Player Online) Publisher 2K Sports Developer Visual Concepts Release October 25 Rating E

What a long, strange trip my first NBA season has been. After dominating my rival at the rookie showcase, I expected to go in the top five, but after the Phoenix Suns shunned me for that same rival, the New Orleans Pelicans grabbed me sixth overall. Being a high draft pick, I expected to get regular minutes, but with Jrue Holiday and Eric Gordon cemented in the starting lineup, I was relegated to the bench for my first few games. Only after Gordon twisted an ankle did I get my first taste of the NBA experience.

From here, unpredictability was the rule of the day. I faithfully suffered through rookie hazing by agreeing to carry Jason Smith's luggage for every road game, but drew the line at wearing a clown nose during press conferences. A few good games boosted my league popularity and earned me more minutes, but then I hit a slump. During this rough patch Holiday acted like a true leader, taking me under his wing and spending off-hours watching film and practicing with me.

My game rebounded, and after a particularly strong performance some teammates encouraged me to join them out on the town. I obliged and woke up the next day with a crippling hangover already late for practice. Photos emerged on social media of me leaving a club at 6:00 a.m., and management was none too pleased. At a sit-down with the GM following my transgression, he suspended me a game for conduct detrimental to the team. Later at practice, I had a heated run-in with Smith, the player who invited me out, after taking him to the floor while running through his pick. Reports of the scuffle emerged on social media, again casting my reputation in a negative light. Welcome to the life.

Since it debuted the MyPlayer mode in NBA 2K10, Visual Concepts has been at the vanguard of the single-player sports experience, allowing you to shape the career of a professional basketball player from his performance on the court to his conduct in press conferences. To kick off the next generation, the studio has doubled down on this mode (redubbed MyCareer last year) by incorporating these storytelling elements, which hasn't been present in a video game since NBA 06, the Sony title that dabbled with telling the story of an NBA rookie but never had the gameplay to support it.

While playing the actual games is still the centerpiece of MyCareer, you now get a deeper glimpse into the life of a professional athlete by managing relationships with teammates, conversing with the general manager and coach, and carrying a rivalry throughout your career. Much of this is handled via cutscenes with a Mass Effect-like dialogue system. All of your choices have repercussions. If you lean on the general manager for more minutes, it may fracture your relationship with your head coach. If you don't stand up for a teammate who gets fouled hard in the middle of a game, your chemistry with the



team suffers but you avoid taking a hit to your public reputation. Turning down that offer to hit the town after the game costs you a valuable opportunity to bond with teammates, but doing so also keeps you out of trouble.

This depth of storytelling creates a greater degree of immersion than any other sports game I've ever played. That said, the mode would benefit from another layer of polish. Some major locker-room moments, such as star players getting injured or the general manager trading for new blood, go by without so much as a news update. The dialogue also jarringly alternates between spoken segments with the fictitious characters and written conversations with real players and coaches (an understandable hurdle that won't likely be cleared any time soon). Because the story plays such a big role in the mode now, you cannot sim to key games like you could in previous versions, either.

Visual Concepts took a similar kitchen-sink approach to rebuilding MyGM. Much like the MyCareer mode, this new version of Association mode puts you in the role of a fledgling general manager responsible for overseeing the draft, signing free agents, keeping players happy, and working together with a staff that oversees finances, coaching, and training. Many of your duties are surfaced in a conversation system, so you don't spend hours diving into menus to ensure you don't miss a scouting opportunity or a chance to sign your star player to a contract extension. As you win games and perform tasks assigned to you by the owner, you earn virtual currency (VC) to spend on upgrading skills that affect your ability to sign free agents, make palatable trade offers, improve team facilities, and manage the organization's budget.

If you play every game, it's easy to progress. By simming, you can only earn the paltry amount of VC awarded for completing

the ownership goals. This leaves you at a major disadvantage when it comes to upgrading your abilities, spending VC on player improvements, or responding to the wishes of your coach. Rick Adelman constantly requested that I build a film room so the players could study, but in three years of managing the organization via simming I still didn't have enough VC to even unlock the ability to buy new facilities.

Though I generally appreciate MyGM's new approach to franchise modes, it has its share of birth pangs. Sometimes the conversations you have are completely out of context. While my team was on a 9-1 tear, my starting point guard (who has a happiness rating of 100) came to my office to complain about the team's direction. You also can't look at the list of prospects during the draft, which makes it tough to assess whether or not you want to trade up or down. Since the mode operates on auto-saves, if you accidentally hit the wrong option when negotiating a contract you have zero recourse for going back.

On the court, don't expect much of a difference between the next-gen version of NBA 2K14 and the current generations outside of the drastically improved graphics. Player models look fantastic, especially the facial animations. I noticed more clipping than I remember seeing while reviewing the 360 version, particularly when players are banging in the paint.

Rather than simply port the current generation version of NBA 2K14, Visual Concepts deserves praise for drastically renovating its two most popular modes for its next-generation console debut. Both MyGM and MyCareer are promising redesigns that take the franchise and single-player modes in interesting new directions, making this the definitive version of NBA 2K14 to own. But once again, Visual Concepts has left online fans wanting, which needs to change if it wants to take this series to the next level. » **Matt Bertz**

Online Play Disappoints



If you prefer playing online, your options aren't great. Many of the basics are here, including MyTeam, head-to-head matchups, and an abridged online season that caps out at 56 games. A new mode called The Park (which is oddly hidden within MyCareer mode) lets you play pickup games with your MyPlayer, but it lacks a proper league structure and suffers from wildly inconsistent performance. I had trouble getting into The Park at all on most attempts, and when I finally was able to play a game the framerate was far from smooth. No options exist for those who like online franchise modes.

NBA Live 14

A failed comeback attempt

Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online)
Publisher EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon
Release November 19 **Rating** E

After a three-year absence including two aborted games, EA Sports is finally stepping back onto the hardwood with NBA Live 14. Over the course of its struggles, EA continued to express its unwavering commitment to the NBA, promising a return to the glory years where Live was a formidable sports franchise. Perhaps that dedication was misguided, because even if it's viewed as a first step in a multi-year rebuilding project, NBA Live 14 is in rough shape.

From the unintelligent commentary and overenthusiastic crowd to the inferior player models and awkward movements that lack transitional animations, NBA Live 14 feels like a game in arrested development. Players stand around on offense waiting for something to happen instead of ad-libbing with dynamic decision-making. When you do call plays, you have no idea what's supposed to happen unless you memorize the play in the coaching menu. Limbs and balls clip through player bodies at every turn.

NBA Live 14's BounceTek dribbling system doesn't feel dramatically different from other basketball games I've played. It takes a while to get the hang of jump shooting; EA clearly had trouble with it too, because I saw several players shoot with their backs to the basket. Since help defense is largely an afterthought, you can consistently score by driving the lane, taking a eurostep, and shooting a layup whether you are playing the CPU or another person online.

The game modes are in similar sorry shape. Dynasty operates like it has been designed by former Timberwolves GM David Kahn, brought down by terrible trade logic, imbalanced rosters, and a league-wide salary cap mess due to inflated contract extensions for middling players.

The EA Sports equivalent to MyCareer, Rising Star, should be renamed First Round Bust. It follows the same trajectory as the 2K mode, starting at a draft showcase and leading into your first year as an NBA player, but your progress is communicated in boring menu boxes instead of cutscenes, and the punitive rating system is a constant source of frustration.

Other play options – Ultimate Team, head-to-head online seasons, and Live Season events that allow you to relive big moments from the current season every day – are ultimately undermined by the lackluster action on the court.

I've always argued that competition breeds innovation in sports games, so I am rooting for EA Sports to succeed in resurrecting its basketball franchise. But the vast gulf in quality between NBA 2K and NBA Live right now makes this a tough matchup to watch. Like an old player attempting a comeback after multiple knee reconstructions and several years away from the game, NBA Live 14 doesn't have enough skill or composure to keep up with the competition. » **Matt Bertz**



4

PS4 • Xbox One

» Concept

Attempt a comeback with a hoops game that fails in every shot attempt

» Graphics

From the bland character models to the listless crowd, NBA Live 14 pales in comparison to NBA 2K14

» Sound

The commentary from the flat Mike Breen and exuberant Jeff Van Gundy sounds forcefully stitched together. Arguably the worst broadcast booth in sports games

» Playability

Learning the subtleties of the shooting mechanic and post game takes time, and no tutorial mode exists to help you get up to speed. A.I. players have no sense of direction on the court and do little to contribute

» Entertainment

Like a former star player struggling to rediscover his form, NBA Live 14 is tough to watch

» Replay Value

Low



Contrast

A shadow of what might have been

Style 1-Player Puzzle/Platformer
Publisher Focus Home Entertainment **Developer** Compulsion Games
Release November 15 (PS4, 360, PC) November 19 (PS3) **Rating** 12+

7.5

PS4 • PS3 • 360 • PC

» Concept

Shift between the shadow and physical worlds to bring together a broken family

» Graphics

Pretty environments complemented well by the minimalist shadow world

» Sound

Voice actors, music, and sound effects all provide a quality ambiance and don't overwhelm

» Playability

Controls can be frustrating, especially when swapping between worlds

» Entertainment

Lovely story and atmosphere marred by bad pacing and some broken puzzles

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

Combining unique visuals, a vanguard concept, and atmosphere aplenty, Contrast is full of promise with its 3D platforming shifting to a 2D shadow world. Unfortunately, the end product isn't as appetizing as the pretty picture Contrast paints. Faulty puzzles drag down a promising premise and an intriguing story.

You play as an acrobat, Dawn, who possesses the power to shift between the real world and a two-dimensional shadow world. Her goal is simple: Navigate the real world to manipulate light sources and objects to provide her a landscape to solve puzzles in the shadow world. While the aforementioned basics are introduced early, advanced puzzle-solving tactics, like taking objects with you into the shadow realm, don't appear until later on. Most of the early puzzles are simply droll and require fighting the controls more than requiring actual thought.

Contrast peaks near the end when all of its different elements, like moving lights and transforming objects between worlds, come together as a whole to create inspiring, well-constructed challenges. Unfortunately, the advanced puzzles don't always work as planned. I cheated my way through two of them by placing boxes where they shouldn't go (due to shoddy collision detection). Even when doing the right thing, I lost required objects and had to load a checkpoint, losing three puzzles' worth of progress. The controls don't help. The shift from 2D to 3D changes the movement orientation, and I found myself jumping out of shadow to a swift death in the real world.

While I expected the puzzles to be Contrast's main draw, it ended up being the imaginative world and characters. The story follows a young girl named Didi and her imaginary friend, Dawn (who players control) through an early 20th century cabaret club, circus, and lighthouse in a quest to mend a broken relationship. Despite its film noir sensibilities, Contrast ends up asking a whole lot more questions about Dawn and her shadow world than it answers, leaving something to be desired.

That's not to say there aren't clever ideas, as waltzing across the shadows of carousels and cabaret singers is intriguing and the end-game begins to catch up to the promise of the concept. If the entire game were full of complex, thought-provoking puzzles, I would have been much happier with Dawn's adventures. As it stands, Contrast is simply a shadow of what it should be; the ideas are there, but the unsound execution hurts the immersion of such a thrilling world. » **Kimberley Wallace**



Knack

Bringing old-school platforming to next-gen

8.25

Style 1 or 2-Player Action/Platform **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** SCE Japan Studio **Release** November 5 **Rating** E

PS4

» **Concept**

Knack kicks off gaming's future with a polished, well-done nod to its past

» **Graphics**

It's not going to turn heads, but there's a lot of color and detail to be seen. Knack himself is a visually impressive creation

» **Sound**

The subtle, understated score is packed with variety and strong melodies

» **Playability**

Combat is well designed, expertly balanced, and extremely challenging

» **Entertainment**

Knack offers up a fine adventure, with gameplay that slowly reveals its strength

» **Replay Value**

Moderate

Directed by legendary designer Mark Cerny – who is also the architect of the PlayStation 4 – Knack is a relative rarity. Firstly, it's a brand-new franchise releasing alongside a new console. Secondly, it's an action/platform game based around a cute (and sometime fearsome) creature with a cartoonish look – a genre that's long past its commercial prime. While I doubt Knack will ever be the public mascot for PlayStation 4, it's a well-crafted game and a quality title in the system's launch lineup.

Cerny's background includes work on such franchises as Crash Bandicoot, Ratchet & Clank, and Jak and Daxter. He's an expert in this style of game, and that experience shows. While it's not really innovative, Knack nails the basics of gameplay and design to an extent that make it a pleasure to play from start to finish.

The story revolves around a mysterious attack on human civilization by a previously primitive race of trolls, who are now equipped with the latest in military tanks, weapons, and airships. To help thwart the threat, a government scientist and rogue adventurer form a party to go investigate. They bring along Knack, a being created by the doctor and composed of hundreds of relics – the same relics that have been used by humans as a never-ending source of power.

The story relies heavily on some well-worn sci-fi clichés, but it's well told and populated with some engaging characters. The few twists in the final stretch are telegraphed hours earlier, but overall it serves its purpose of moving things along a series of exotic locales.

Like the Crash Bandicoot games, Knack uses a fixed camera that allows the developers to use a range of perspectives. While

this can be problematic in some games, there was rarely a moment when the camera wasn't where I wanted it to be – no small feat. However, don't be fooled by appearances; Knack places an emphasis on the "action" side of the action/platform formula, dishing out combat that's as challenging as anything I've played this year.

The basic mechanics are simple; you have one attack button, a dodge move on the right analog stick, and three special attacks that unleash moves like a shockwave or one that turns Knack into a deadly tornado of relic shards. It doesn't sound like much, but the myriad enemies you face force you to use this small selection of moves in a wide variety of ways. Even on normal difficulty, you die often. Surprisingly, the tense battles often made me recall the God of War series. Many larger enemies can deliver one-hit kills, so learning to dodge and counter effectively is crucial to conquering this game. The basics are handled so well that I wish they were expanded upon; there are no unlockable moves or specials.

While combat is excellent, the platforming is routine. I enjoyed the handful of memorable sequences, but they are largely things that fans of the genre have seen dozens of times. While the platforming control isn't bad, I had the slight feeling that Knack was only gliding over the levels, not fully connected. It lacks that perfect feel that the best in the genre attain. Still, the platforming serves its purpose, balancing out the pace between the hectic bouts of combat.

Though it's a launch game for a next-gen system, Knack is almost nostalgic; it's the kind of game they don't make that often anymore. As such, it's not the most innovative or the most visually dazzling game. This won't be the one you put in to show off your new console to your friends. However, when you're done with the prettied-up versions of the big franchises, you'll find yourself wanting to return to Knack. It's got charm and heart, and offers a whole lot of good gameplay. Ultimately, that's still what's important – no matter which generation we're in. » **Matt Helgeson**



Killzone: Shadow Fall

A beautiful and unsurprising next-gen debut

Style 1-Player Shooter (22-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Guerrilla Games **Release** November 15 **Rating** M

With 30 years separating it from the lore of previous Killzone games and new hardware driving it, Shadow Fall is the perfect time to freshen up the series. The original trilogy is frequently discussed more in terms of technology than gameplay – however competent it may be. With this fourth console installment, Guerrilla Games presents a great showcase title for the graphical capability of the PlayStation 4, but Shadow Fall also succeeds in being the best gameplay experience in the series.

Featuring a new cast of characters, the campaign places you in the middle of a tense standoff between Vektan forces and the angry Helghast. After these antagonists from the series' past witnessed the destruction of their home planet of Helghan, the refugees now reside in slums outside beautiful Vekta City. Missions take place within the city, but also push into enemy territory beyond the wall. The variety in environments is impressive; chaotic shootouts take place in futuristic train stations, refugee camps, and space.

It's not all run-and-gun firefights, however. Shadow Fall occasionally tosses in a vehicular section or stealth sequence, and these diversions are welcome breaks from the standard shooter fare. When the action does devolve into a hail of gunfire, there is one awesome tool at your disposal throughout the majority of the campaign. The hovering OWL drone can be set to different modes using the PS4 controller's touchpad, and it proves invaluable during difficult shootouts. If you're hiding behind cover or trying to avoid shielded enemies, you can send the OWL to attack from the left. Once the enemies are engaging your

drone, it's easy to flank to the right and take them out from the side or behind.

While the attack mode is what I used the most when ordering the OWL around, it has three other functions for various situations. Its ability to put up a shield can be a lifesaver in near-death situations, and it can also hack computer terminals and set up ziplines for increased navigation. In a genre that frequently features friendly soldiers running alongside you, I found the OWL more useful than any fellow Marine or intergalactic soldier in other franchises.

With many modern shooters clocking in around the five hour mark, it's nice to get a beefier experience thanks to the 8-10 hours you can expect to spend with Shadow Fall's campaign. It features the standard assortment of collectibles and intel drops, which cater to fans of the franchise's lore. I stayed interested in my various objectives throughout, despite a couple of frustrating sections that involve free-falling through a collapsing city and sneaking around an enemy area filled with guards and cameras. Considering how much I like the OWL, it might not be a coincidence that these two areas do not feature the drone.

The OWL doesn't appear in multiplayer, either, but certain classes have attack and support drones that are regulated by a cooldown meter. Shadow Fall's online component doesn't feature the amount of micromanagement offered by other shooters, but it presents an interesting alternative to the standard XP leveling system. Instead of grinding XP in an effort to earn new weapons and abilities, this system is far more focused on completing weapon and mode-specific challenges. Over

1,500 challenges are available, which should keep completionists busy for a long time.

If you're new to the Killzone series, you may be surprised to see the dynamic Warzone mode is the main mode that players engage. It is still the marquee multiplayer match type, shifting between a collection of genre staples like team deathmatch and capture the flag variants within a single match. This objective-shifting format is a refreshing change of pace from traditional FPS modes. If you're into a more frantic and streamlined multiplayer experience, the Run n' Gun mode outfits everyone with an assault rifle, limits the amount of health they spawn with, and features capture-based match types. These modes are fun, but don't highlight anything that hasn't been seen before.

When you look past the gorgeous visuals, Killzone: Shadow Fall is a competent shooter in terms of both campaign gameplay and multiplayer offerings. It may not be the most innovative title on the market, but it's certainly one of the top stars of the PlayStation 4's launch lineup. » **Dan Ryckert**

8

PS4

» **Concept**

Kick off the next generation with a gorgeous shooter

» **Graphics**

The city of Vekta is stunning, and the visuals are fantastic throughout

» **Sound**

Voice acting is passable, and the futuristic music fits the tone of the game

» **Playability**

Even with the added commands of the OWL, the control layout is always manageable

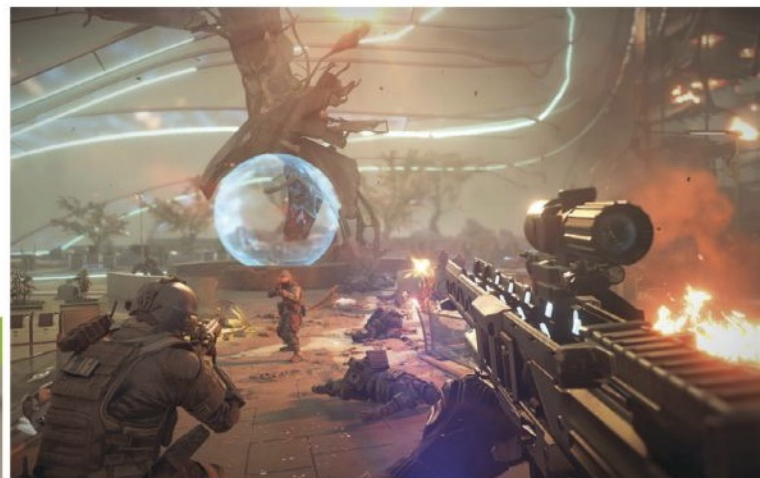
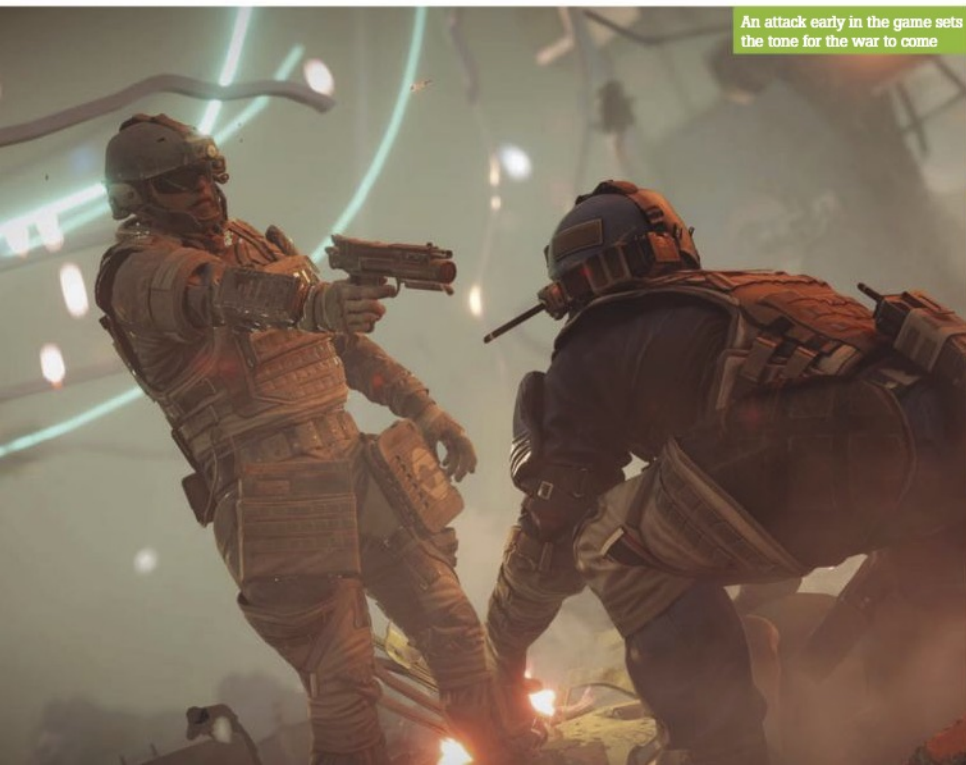
» **Entertainment**

I had more fun with this entry than any other game in the series

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

An attack early in the game sets the tone for the war to come



Vekta City is visually stunning



Resogun

The accessible next-gen shooter

Style 1-Player Shooter (2-Player Online) **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer Housemarque **Release** November 15 **Rating** E



8

PS4

» Concept

Follow-up on Housemarque's Super Stardust shooters with a more accessible experience for the next generation

» Graphics

With the exception of the impressive particle effects, it does little to showcase the next generation – but it still looks good

» Sound

A forgettable-yet-appropriate techno soundtrack sounds exactly like you'd expect

» Playability

Perfect controls make every mistake and every success completely your own

» Entertainment

Worthy of your time, but the lack of content doesn't encourage you to continually return to the game

» Replay Value

Moderate

One problem that goes along with the launch of a new console is the biggest games are sometimes months or years away. Resogun attempts to deliver a small game that invites repeated play-throughs and inspires competition while you are waiting for the heavy hitters. Geometry Wars admirably served this role when the Xbox 360 launched in 2005, and while Resogun does provide some quick thrills it won't keep players coming back.

Resogun's base gameplay takes the premise of twin-stick shooter – stay in one area and blast enemies from all directions – and simplifies it into a more accessible game. Your shooting is limited to just the left and right, so your attention is focused in fewer directions. The playing field is wrapped around a transparent cylinder, instead of a flat playing field. This setup helps tremendously, since you can see enemies before they become threats. When levels fill up with too many enemies – which they will – the ability to quickly assess danger makes everything feel much more manageable. Resogun is not an easy game, but if you find the challenge too high, you can drop the difficulty at any time.

Your main goal is to stay alive and defeat the boss at the end of each level, but a secondary goal to save humans adds an additional worthwhile challenge. Defeating certain enemies causes humans to fall from their safety cells and begin aimlessly exploring the cylinder. Activating your temporary high-speed invincible boost to snap up wandering humans before they are killed, and chucking them to safety are some of the most intense and enjoyable moments.

Partnering up with a friend online is quick and easy thanks to the PlayStation 4's improved online party system. It's fun to have a friend around to play catch with humans before dropping them off in the safe zones, and to help collect power-ups for you. Adding an extra set of guns helps, but it does little to add additional tactical layers beyond "Let's shoot everything and make sure we don't die."

Resogun doesn't define the future of next-gen graphics, but the particle effects and voxel explosions that fill the screen without slowing anything down are impressive. Five short levels and three distinct ships make up Resogun's offering, so getting through the game and seeing the credits can be done in one relaxed sitting. The leaderboards are organized by level, but comparing those results doesn't inspire the same spirit of competition as sharing a single high score. It's great for showing off your new system and acclimating to a new controller, but a dearth of content prevents Resogun from earning much praise beyond being a solid, fun launch title. » **Kyle Hilliard**



Super Motherload

Digging deep, shallow play

6.75

Style 1 to 4-Player Action **Publisher** XGen Studios
Developer XGen Studios **Release** November 15 **Rating** E10+

Xbox One

» Concept

Travel to Mars in an alternate timeline of the Cold War, and dig deep into the planet's crust in search of minerals

» Graphics

A simple-but-charming visual style does its job of showcasing the many objects hidden in the depths

» Sound

The soundtrack shifts as you dig deeper and encounter new story events, helping to add drama

» Playability

Navigating your mining vehicle is great fun in open areas, but banging around in tight corridors gets frustrating

» Entertainment

The Mars underground is a rich sandbox, but the repetitive nature of digging and climbing back to refuel gets tedious

» Replay Value

Moderate

Playing in a big sandbox is fun, and sandboxes don't get much bigger than Mars. Super Motherload is all about digging ever deeper down into the ground, and regularly returning to the surface to refuel, sell items, and upgrade your abilities. The repetition of going up and down so many times gets increasingly tedious, and little changes about the gameplay over time. After several hours I had mined deep into the planet, but I was hungry for a little more depth in the action.

You are employee 1001 of the Solarus Corporation, and you must reinvigorate the company's mining operations on the red planet. Each new tunnel you dig fills your cargo space with new minerals, but it's not long before you need to turn around and start again. A story of madness and ancient Martian secrets unfolds through occasional pop-up text boxes and spoken dialogue. While these interludes provide overtones of horror, they're not frequent or involved enough to paint a complete picture. The best part of Super Motherload is the fun of upgrading your vehicle, speeding up your drill, and increasing the size of your fuel tank – though everything in between is a grind.

The richest rewards are hidden behind small puzzles, challenging you to use your explosives in interesting ways to acquire the goods. However, I didn't feel compelled to engage with these puzzles, since I knew that ever-better rewards await just a little farther down. Mounting frustration comes through the endless cycle of dig, climb, and repeat. The depths between outposts get longer, until by the end you're spending many minutes just to reach the site of the final boss. Die in that encounter (which you will), and it's back to the last outpost to start the whole process over.

I appreciate the opportunity for some 4-player local (but not online) cooperative play, and some minor strategy is involved in combining different minerals during a dig to create more valuable objects. These small wrinkles aren't enough to keep players invested. Play Super Motherload if you love the pure joy of the Dig Dug-style carving out of the ground, but don't be surprised if there's not enough buried beneath that layer. » **Matt Miller**

This review is based on the PS4 version. Super Motherload is also available on PS3.



Ratchet & Clank: Into The Nexus

Short but sweet

Style 1-Player Action Publisher Sony Computer Entertainment Developer Insomniac Games Release November 12 Rating E10+

8

PS3

» Concept

Ratchet and Clank must battle an interdimensional threat in this true-to-form sequel that packs a big (albeit short) punch

» Graphics

The series shows its age in the texture work and character models. Regardless, the level of visual destruction is impressive, often covering the screen with explosions, particles, and flying nuts and bolts

» Sound

The soundtrack is playful and energetic. The blizz-o-matic's melodies give this entry a little holiday cheer

» Playability

Some environmental exploration is tiring (like taking time to spin bolts to open doors), but the weapons and gadgets steal the show and offer plenty of variety

» Entertainment

Insomniac Games rediscovers its form, but the encore is short-lived, ending just when it seems the second act is about to begin

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Ratchet and Clank have been going through a bit of an identity crisis. After saving the universe time and time again, this oddly paired duo sought outside help in their most recent endeavors. They expanded their team to four members in Ratchet & Clank: All 4 One, and called upon automated defenses to aid them in Ratchet & Clank: Full Frontal Assault. Such deviations from their traditional formula didn't convince me that these well-known characters should be doing anything other than blowing away aliens with ridiculously overpowered weapons. Insomniac's attempt to reinvent this franchise smacked of the problems Sonic the Hedgehog has exhibited for years.

It didn't take long for Insomniac to recognize what needed to be done. Ratchet & Clank: Into the Nexus is a return to classic form. The Lombax and his metal companion are aging well, losing neither their ability to transform enemy legions into smoldering messes of nuts and bolts nor the allure that makes this action so much fun.

The controls and overall design fit like the same glove we've worn since 2002, but the new weapons and gadgets give this well-worn formula new life. Ratchet can whip up a lethal cocktail on the battlefield, blending the sheer might of Warmonger rockets with the diversionary Nightmare Box, which creates a ghoulish image that sends enemies reeling into an overly dramatic state of shock. Another weapon tears open the dimensional fabric to unleash flying serpents upon your foes. The weapon selection is diverse – allowing for numerous strategies to be deployed – and satisfying to wield. And yes, there's a new RYNO to construct and use.

Clank detaches from his compatriot's back to save the cosmos in side-scrolling

platforming sequences heavily inspired by Terry Cavanagh's indie game VVVVVV. In these sequences, Clank alters gravity to cling to the ceiling, floor, and walls to solve puzzle-like sequences and dodge deadly pits and spikes. These sections are a welcome challenge and a nice wrinkle that changes up the action at the right times.

Into the Nexus is a short game, consisting of just four planets to explore. Insomniac infuses new ideas into the traversal methods, touching slightly on Portal 2's style of gameplay with the Grav Tether gadget, which connects two points with a gravity beam. Most of these worlds are straightforward, but completionists will like the design of Planet Thram, which disperses items to collect and side missions across a large, deadly swamp. Arena mode is a part of the mix, but the challenges are mundane and hardly any of them last more

than a minute.

I invested roughly 10 hours into this enjoyable little game. About five hours went to a thorough sweep of the critical path campaign, and another five to Challenge mode (a harder version of the game that unlocks powered-up Omega weapons). The story is predictable, but filled with some smirk-worthy jokes, and a couple of large events that will have long-standing effects on Ratchet and company. The ending is a nice tease that should put a smile on the face of fans of the series, as it points to another big adventure that Insomniac will likely bring to PlayStation 4.

Into the Nexus' gameplay holds true to what we've known and enjoyed for over a decade. Should we be demanding bigger and better things? Maybe, but there's something about this formula that just works. I walked away hungry for more. » **Andrew Reiner**

As usual, creative weapons steal the spotlight



Dead Rising 3

Zombies and bugs run amok in Capcom's ambitious sandbox

8.75

Xbox One

» Concept

Shatter the series' record for most zombies on-screen, and then streamline exotic weapon crafting

» Graphics

The framerate never hiccuped once, even when steamrolling through dense crowds of zombies and sending limbs flying

» Sound

The '80s horror-style synths fit perfectly, and the chorus of groans coming from the hundreds of zombies is nerve-racking

» Playability

Combat, crafting, and driving are all easy to learn and master. The Kinect voice commands are fun (when they work)

» Entertainment

The absurd sense of humor and massive crowds of zombies are an irresistible combination. A variety of nagging bugs and glitches distract from the overall joy

» Replay Value

Moderately High



Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) Publisher Microsoft Developer Capcom Vancouver Release November 22 Rating M

In a new generation of hardware with several multi-platform, cross-generation launch titles, many gamers are struggling to point out exactly how the new hardware unlocks new possibilities – Dead Rising 3 stands as a clear example. The winding city streets are packed sidewalk to sidewalk with more zombies than you can count, and turning the asphalt red with their blood is as fun as ever. However, the technical leap in the undead population comes with its share of distracting bugs.

Dead Rising 3 expands the scale of its open world while making everything easier – from weapon crafting to exploration. Story Mode extends the constantly ticking doomsday clock so players have plenty of time to complete sidequests and hunt for weapon combinations. Nightmare Mode keeps the series' traditional speedier clock in place for those who want a tenser experience. Four city sections of Los Perdidos (a Los Angeles doppelganger) are connected by ruinous highways congested with the shambling dead. Using the minimap to spot collectibles, set waypoints, and hunt down your next objective is so easy

and fun that I found myself playing for hours before activating the next story mission.

Speaking of distractions, I routinely dropped everything to hack my way through throngs of enemies. Weapon combinations return with a host of outlandish new concoctions ranging from hilarious to bad-ass. For instance, combine a dragon mask and umbrella to turn yourself into a gliding, head-butting dragon man. Adding gasoline or a katana gives you fire breath or bladed claws, respectively. Combining the katana and a scythe produces my favorite weapon, the Grim Reaper. Light and heavy attacks are now conveniently mapped to separate buttons, giving players more options in the fray.

Clearing away 300 or more zombies in one spree isn't uncommon, and the chained kills result in massive experience point boosts. The sting of using up all your gear (durability returns) is softened by weapons lockers that let you instantly retrieve any item you've collected in the game, even combo weapons. If you've got the constituent parts on you, you can craft any weapon on the fly, no bench necessary. These improvements make thinning out the gargantuan zombie presence more satisfying than ever.

Vehicle combos enter the mix this time, with cathartic results. They can be built in the garage or on the streets by simply parking two vehicles next to each other. The steamroller/motorcycle combination is my favorite; turning zombies into clouds of red mist and activating the flamethrowers clears a path through the undead like hot water through snow. I didn't notice a single stutter in the framerate when trucking full bore into throngs of foes. A co-op partner can hop on any vehicle and often join in the fun with a secondary weapon, like chucking dynamite or manning a turret.

The drop-in, drop-out co-op is as simple and stress free as it was in Dead Rising 2. After a

brief prologue, players can enter other games with no restrictions. Every weapon combo and experience point carries over to your own game. Co-op features two unique heroes with distinct personalities. Seeing how the kindly mechanic Nick and salty trucker Dick react differently to situations differently is part of the joy of playing with a friend.

In previous entries, players had no control over which new abilities and stat boosts they earned with each level up. Dead Rising 3 finally lets players spend points to improve the skills they value most. Being able to control whether you want to increase your life, inventory size, sprint speed, or crafting prowess is a welcome change.

Dead Rising 3 is the most fun I've had with the franchise, but the impressive technical accomplishment comes with its share of problems. Items dropped onto the ground sometimes fall through the world, becoming unobtainable. Crowds of zombies can suddenly fade away, leaving you swinging at the air. Equipped weapons occasionally disappear from your hands. Despite the impressive draw distance, objects can pop-up out of nowhere. The optional Kinect commands, like yelling "over here" to attract groups of zombies were cool when they worked – about one out of five times. These annoyances never stalled my overall progress or dramatically impacted the sheer joy of wasting untold numbers of zombies, but they're enough to make me wish the developers could have spent more time ironing them out.

Capcom Vancouver's latest entry in the Dead Rising saga is an impressive display of big, dumb fun, and a must-play for fans. It's also a great demonstration of the outstanding capabilities of next-gen hardware right out of the gate. Thinning out the undead of Los Perdidos is worth your time, but the bugs infesting the sandbox are an unwelcome scourge. » **Tim Turi**

The survivors of Los Perdidos regroup





Forza Motorsport 5

Racing ahead only to lag behind



Style 1 or 2-Player Racing (16-Player online) **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** Turn 10 Studios **Release** November 22 **Rating** E

8.75

Xbox One

» **Concept**

A finely tuned version of the racing series that also serves as a restart of sorts

» **Graphics**

Little touches like seeing the reflection of your drivers' hands in the windshield and the slight shaking of the camera at high speeds is impressive. I didn't notice any background objects pop in, either

» **Sound**

Top Gear presenters and a narrator introduce cars, game features, and racing series, but I wish there was a way to skip past them

» **Playability**

The rumble on the triggers is a great way to get feedback from your car's handling. It makes a difference

» **Entertainment**

Forza 5 is a lot of fun to drive, but its structure off the track should be better

» **Replay Value**

Moderately High

The launch of the Xbox One may seem like a fitting place to host the newest Forza game, but five titles in, the franchise itself is not a newcomer. As such, the expectations for Forza 5 are high; it needs to exhibit the new power of the system and continue the series' ascending trajectory. By those criteria, Forza 5 succeeds on one hand and fails on the other. This is the most fun I've had racing in a Forza title, and yet it's not the most complete entry in the franchise.

Forza 5 is the prime example of how useful the Xbox One controller's rumble triggers are. The gas and brake triggers vibrate when your wheels are slipping or skidding, respectively. This valuable feedback displays true progress in the genre, because it communicates how your car is performing and adds a sensory depth to what you see on the track. The trigger rumble doesn't make Forza 5 a one-trick-pony, however. The physics mean that racing these cars is an incredible sensation that dares you to attack every curve, imbuing the belief that you can always snatch victory even as defeat approaches at high speeds. The cars are responsive, and their performance and power is conveyed. A cockpit camera subtly shakes at high speeds, and dips and bobs with sudden braking or hard turns. Speaking of your head, Forza 5 uses the Kinect for headtracking as well as voice-based menu commands. Neither feature is a great boon, but leaning your body from side to side to move the in-game camera is kind of cool.

If your system is online, Drivatars created from the racing habits of real-life gamers populate all your races in single-player, and the game pulls off the feature with aplomb. Drivatars react unpredictably enough to add excitement to each turn, but they don't

drive as out-of-control as I know some of us do. When collisions occur, the damage system strikes the right balance. It punishes you with a variety of afflictions, but it's not ticky-tack. You can nurse a car home with a few knocks instead of constantly restarting or rewinding.

As dynamic as most of the game is, restructuring Forza 4's excellent career setup is a mistake. Instead of presenting you with races based on the car you've picked, Forza 5 follows the staid format where you must buy a car in accordance with pre-determined gauntlets of races. This shifts my desire to buy cars from those I want to those I need. Perhaps to emphasize each individual race—and the Drivatars in them—the overall racing structure is watered down. Where you finish in a race is broken down into XP tiers, making your specific placement less important. Thus,

second and third place are interchangeable, since they are both in the same tier. Similarly, multi-race series are empty since your results aren't aggregated from race to race.

Experience points and credits can also be racked up in multiplayer, but even this is not the slam dunk you'd expect. At launch, the multiplayer race modes show a lack of smoothness in bigger races, and previous race types like cat and mouse or tag are missing. I'm confident that developer Turn 10 will add race modes as time goes on, but I don't like having to wait for the game to open up. In another roadblock for the online community, car clubs are absent.

Forza 5 takes a big step forward only to be held back by what it has removed. I'd rather not have to be subject to such a tradeoff—but then again, a racer's fortune is always made out on the track. » **Matthew Kato**

Slight damage like this is common but not crippling. You don't have to pay to repair your cars at the end of a race





Ryse: Son of Rome

Promising until the final blow

6

Style 1-Player Action (2-Player Online) Publisher Microsoft Game Studios Developer Crytek Release November 22 Rating M

Xbox One

» Concept

An angry Roman soldier brutalizes bandits in this visually stunning brawler

» Graphics

The animations, facial technology, and beautiful cinematography are towering achievements of visual design. Every little detail harnesses a high level of realism

» Sound

All of the voice actors are quite good...except for the player, who uses Kinect to yell basic commands like "fire arrows." The score is majestic and exciting

» Playability

Combat succeeds and fails through its timing windows.

The basics of battle are excellently crafted until the atrocious finishers come into play. They demand no skill and are used in excess

» Entertainment

In the five hours it took to complete Ryse, I experienced a whirlwind of excitement and disgust. I loved the sights, sounds, and basic combat, and loathed the finishers and gameplay deviations

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

When protagonist Marius Titus lowers a foe's defenses and goes in for the kill, the speed of the fray slows to a crawl, giving us a good look at why Ryse: Son of Rome will simultaneously draw gawking glances and be rendered unappealing.

In this measured moment, we see Marius' segmented armor shift with the contortion of his body, the cloth beneath it rippling as he raises his arm, and the skin on his face tightening as his mouth opens in a furious rage before he slits his opponent's throat. This spectacle is every bit as breathtaking as it is brutal, standing tall as a showpiece of next-generation technology. But what hand did the player have in this execution? Little to none.

All of Ryse's final blows are delivered through timed button presses, prompted by flashing colors on the victim's body. These visual cues represent the colors on the controller's face buttons. Successfully hitting the correct sequence rewards the player with additional experience points and health rewards. The only penalties for hitting the wrong button or not hitting a button at all are a lower rating and less of the aforementioned rewards. Marius won't botch the kill, and the opponent won't counter the attack. This entire animation sequence is scripted and it's going to play out exactly the same no matter how much you interact with it.

Since experience points are valuable and used to upgrade Marius' health, Focus meter, and projectile supply, it's in the player's best interest to initiate these execution sequences and play the awful game of Simon Says. This leads to the tiring monotony of watching the animations play out.

This perplexing execution design completely derails what is otherwise a respectable brawling system. Marius doesn't have a wealth of combos to unleash, and is more a student of perfect timing who looks for small attack windows. Enemies often swarm him from all sides, and are quick to engage him if he

leaves himself open as he attacks another adversary. The player has the ability to quickly transition to a shield block in mid-strike to repel a flanking attack. These encounters are intense, and the mixture of different enemy types within them requires strategy and evasive positioning.

Some foes deliver both blockable and unblockable attacks, meaning you have to act quickly to determine whether to use your shield or an evasive roll. Factoring in when to use your focus power – a state of rage that allows Marius to quickly slash any foe without first having to reveal their weaknesses – is another layer of strategy that is carefully balanced and nicely designed. You can bring two enemies to the brink of death then initiate a finisher that drops both of them at once. I enjoyed most of the bouts...until I was called upon to perform a finisher. The thrill of combat is sapped at that point.

Marius occasionally is tasked with mounting a ballista to deal with approaching bandit waves. These sequences end up being unintentionally comedic, given just how quickly Marius fires off shots to send foes tumbling to the ground. In many of the standard combat encounters, Marius hurls spears at his assailants. The throwing mechanic is crude and unreliable.

When the Roman army is on the move, Marius can unite with his fellow shield carriers to create a moving wall to combat archers. The gameplay used for this setup is incredibly simple: Move forward, hold the shield up to block arrows, return a volley of your own, and move on. In some of these sequences, you march aimlessly through caves and openings with nothing happening. After a long stretch, you eventually confront another archer legion.

All of Ryse's action is framed with a cinematic eye. The camera is always in the right place to capture the enormous scale of some of the conflicts, give players close-up shots

of devastating sword slices (complete with exposed bones), and panning to capture the drama in a story sequence.

Marius' tale is an encyclopedia of motion-picture clichés, touching on most of the hallmark moments seen in films depicting this era. It starts on a somber note with Marius losing his family to bandits that are invading his home and immediately shifts gears to a lust for revenge. He remains a boiling pot of rage all the way up to the final moments. I thought the story was a fun ride, filled with despicable politicians who get their dues spread across a nice selection of beautifully realized locations.

From warships at sea to the luxuries found in palaces, Crytek gives us a detailed look at Rome as it was. I often would take the time to pan the camera around the environments to soak in all of their impressive details. The only setting that veers into the realm of fantasy is the Colosseum. With a mechanized floor that raises plates containing wilderness, wooden structures, death traps, and a wild variety of things, you'd think this arena was created by GLaDOS or is seconds away from transforming into Unicon. It's ridiculous, and just happens to be the setting for the game's two-player cooperative component. You and a friend can enter this battle contraption to fell waves of enemies and complete missions to earn currency that can be exchanged for booster packs filled with new armors and healing items. Ryse's co-op is a good time, delivering plenty of maps and playlists and a decent challenge. Again, though, the combat falls back on the unwanted execution moves crutch.

When I show my friends what Xbox One is capable of graphically, I'm going to pop in Ryse. The visuals are breathtaking, but the gameplay flips on a dime between being legitimately fun and downright bad. There is no middle ground. It's very much the extreme of both. » **Andrew Reiner**

Killer Instinct

Combo-breaking new ground



Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) Publisher Microsoft Studios Developer Double Helix Games Release November 22 Rating T



I have fond memories of playing *Killer Instinct* in the arcades nearly 20 years ago. Lengthy combo counts, the guttural shouts of the announcer, and the excitement of pulling off an ultra combo always brings a smile to my face. Its ridiculousness set itself apart from the juggernauts of the era (like *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat*), and I expected no less from this reboot of the series. *Killer Instinct* on Xbox One stays true to the fun and silliness of its past, but also has a deep, competent, and innovative engine driving the action.

The base formula for stringing together combos is largely unchanged from the original game. You start with an opening special move, press a button for an auto double, another special move for a linker, another auto, and finally a finisher. This approach isn't as rigid as it seems; it's more of a starter recipe that you can add to or take away from as desired. The engine gives a lot of wiggle room to allow the player to create freeflow combos. Execution requirements are lenient, giving the player ample time to buffer their next attack in a string. This leniency in execution ensures that you won't have to commit several hours in the training room, and lets the player have fun and pull off kick-ass combos right out of the gate.

Being attacked in other fighting games is usually a frustratingly passive affair, but *Killer Instinct* lets you take more of an active role in how badly you get pummeled. The iconic "C-C-C-COMBO BREAKER" was an innovative mechanic back in the original, and the tradition continues. At a glance, combo breakers may seem like a glorified game of rock-paper-scissors. You need to press a button combination of the same strength level of the attack you're attempting to break, but the combo-breaker metagame only begins there. If you anticipate your combo being broken, you can now perform a counter

breaker to shut down your opponent and continue with your onslaught. Attempting to break a combo or a counter is risky; incorrectly guessing can open you up to all sorts of hurt – even locking you out of combo-breaker attempts for a short duration. Dishing out damage by getting in your opponent's head is hugely satisfying. The risk/reward of performing combo breakers is ripe with opportunities for mind games.

Obviously, getting in the head of an AI opponent is impossible, but if you do want to duke it out with a computer, there aren't many options available to you. The never-ending survival mode helps you earn points to unlock some cool collectibles. Costumes and accessories for your fighter are available as well as titles, icons, and taunts for your profile. KI nostalgists will likely spend some time racking up points in order to unlock audio tracks from the old "Killer Cuts" CD or

to enable the classic announcer voice. The lack of a traditional story or arcade mode might be a bummer for some, but shouldn't be a deal-breaker.

Playing against real opponents is where the fun lies. The offline multiplayer captures a classic arcade experience, but online offerings are disappointingly limited. Exhibition matches are only one-on-one with no spectator capabilities. Ranked matches are handled by the developer's own SmartMatch system, but I'd rather set criteria like latency and player rank for myself. Online experiences will vary, but the netcode seemed solid in my time playing ranked matches.

Killer Instinct doesn't cost any money up front; you get one character for free – Jago at launch – and the other five are available as a bundle (\$20) or individually (\$5 each). The scant number of characters is atypical of modern fighters (though two more are promised via DLC). On the other hand, KI focuses on strengthening archetypes instead of padding the roster with carbon copies. Well-balanced, rushdown, mixup, projectile, and grapple types are all represented, and each feels different. Though the faces are familiar, most characters' movesets and command motions have been altered significantly. The new kid on the block is a character named Sadira – a female assassin with high mobility and speed that lead to mind-boggling mix-up situations.

Killer Instinct is an absolute blast to play, and appeals to both my casual and hardcore fighter sensibilities. It has one of my favorite fighting game engines in recent memory. I hope that more characters are added, and players get the ability to create spectator lobbies in the future. Despite those problems, Double Helix has exceeded expectations in resurrecting this franchise as a fun and accessible fighter. » **Jason Oestreicher**

8.75

Xbox One

» **Concept**
UUUUUUULTRAAAA
COOOOMB0000

» **Graphics**
Fast and flashy. The special effects turn every match into a spectacle

» **Sound**
An impressive, reactive soundtrack and subtle audio cues enhance gameplay

» **Playability**
Combos are easy to perform, but battles still present deep mind game possibilities

» **Entertainment**
Stringing together long combos and hearing the announcer's excitement never gets old

» **Replay Value**
High



Lococycle

Monotonous combat drags down a hilarious adventure

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Developer Twisted Pixel Games **Release** November 22 **Rating** T



7 An SUV speeds ahead, packed with machine gun-firing goons. Your friend is with you, but he isn't making any sense. You shred the vehicle apart with your own guns, hit the turbo, and speed under the flaming wreck – you need to get to Scottsburg, Indiana soon if you want to make the freedom rally in time. Then you start thinking about *Weekend at Bernie's 2*, and how it wasn't as good as the first one. The voodoo curse was pretty cool, though. Welcome to *Lococycle*, the best game about a sentient motorcycle dragging a guy around that has ever been made.

Xbox One

» Concept

Steer a sentient motorcycle toward freedom, dragging your hapless mechanic along the way

» Graphics

Lococycle looks good, but it's not breaking new ground

» Sound

I.R.I.S. makes the game with her stream of references and obliviousness to the danger she's constantly facing

» Playability

The difficulty is forgiving – almost to a fault. You can't crash, and the combat often feels like it's on autopilot

» Entertainment

You can tell that Twisted Pixel had a great time making *Lococycle*. It's a fun, quick experience, but not one you're likely to repeat

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

As I.R.I.S. the motorcycle, you were built by defense contractor Big Arms for combat. After being struck by lightning, you gain sentience à la Johnny Five from *Short Circuit*. While your mechanic, Pablo, attempts to undo the damage, you spy a commercial for the freedom rally. Freedom sounds good, so off you go. Unfortunately for Pablo, his leg gets snagged on I.R.I.S., so he becomes an unwitting participant on the field trip. Much of the game's abundant humor comes from I.R.I.S.' keen interest in bad movies and her inability to understand her friend's desperate pleas for help (her Spanish-language translator was damaged in the accident).

Big Arms is understandably upset that one of their flagship weapons has taken off, so they send out an army of private contractors to stop her. Combat starts simple, and doesn't rise much above that. I.R.I.S. is a capable brawler, knocking enemies around with her wheels, and doing the motorcycle equivalent of punching and kicking – all at high speeds. You're usually fighting several enemies at once, and you can temporarily detach Pablo and throw him at other bad guys like a boomerang. It's mindless, but fun nonetheless.

Some enemies do sneaky things, like zip ahead of I.R.I.S. and fire off lasers, so you have to turbo up to them while avoiding their attacks. Once you get close enough, however, it's the same button-mashing song and dance. You don't crash when you hit the rails on the sides of the road, leaving the impression that you're just rolling along on a treadmill. Fortunately, there are boss battles and minigame-like diversions that pop up at regular intervals. I enjoyed one section in particular, where I played as Pablo and blasted a hulking robot apart in several extended shooting sequences.

Lococycle isn't complex, but I was easily sucked into its silliness. I wanted to see where this intentionally stupid story was headed, and it was worth the trip – even if the combat ultimately isn't very deep.

» Jeff Cork



Crimson Dragon

Grounding's on-rails shooter derails its own fun

6

Style 1-Player Shooter **Publisher** Microsoft Studios
Developer Grounding, Inc.
Release November 22 **Rating** T

Xbox One

» Concept

Resurrect the on-rails shooter genre with a spiritual successor to Sega's classic *Panzer Dragoon* series, but fail to recapture the glory

» Graphics

The environmental design is exotic, but the graphical detail isn't much better than last-gen games. Not surprising, since it originally began as an Xbox 360 title

» Sound

The music is moody and dramatic, but mostly unremarkable. The voice acting sounds like a Saturday-morning cartoon

» Playability

You control your dragon with the left analog stick and your aiming reticle with the right stick, which takes a bit of getting used to

» Entertainment

Crimson Dragon might offer fans a few cheap thrills of rail shooters, but the repetitive gameplay grows old quickly

» Replay Value

Moderately Low

Crimson Dragon started out as a Kinect-only title for the Xbox 360, but switched to standard controls along the way. Unfortunately, you can't change the recipe after you've started cooking.

The team at Grounding, Inc. has created this fictional universe from scratch, but much of the rest of the experience lacks an identity of its own. From the beginning, Grounding has stated that *Crimson Dragon* is a spiritual successor to *Panzer Dragoon*, Sega's classic Saturn series. Unfortunately, even with *Panzer Dragoon*'s creator Yukio Futatsugi on board, Grounding fails to capture the spirit of that cult series.

Like *Panzer Dragoon*, you spend the entire game on the back of a dragon, locking onto enemies and dodging giant projectiles with little control over your destination. *Crimson Dragon* even adds some AI-controlled wingmen, a wider variety of weapon types, and a store full of items to feed and evolve your dragon. These seem like reasonable ways to advance the genre, but most of the weapon types are inferior to the standard lock-on fire attack, and your wingmen do little to change up the gameplay. I actually played through a couple missions solo because my old wingman had left and I needed to hire a new one. I didn't even notice he was gone, which speaks volumes to his contributions in battle.

Crimson Dragon's bigger problem is that the levels feel tired and repetitive. The art direction is admittedly stunning and colorful, but its dazzle grows thin after playing through a single environment five or six times. *Crimson Dragon*'s mission list might keep you busy for a while, but many of the tasks send you back to environments you've already seen. You may fight different sets of enemies, but scenery is familiar. If that wasn't bad enough, some of the main story missions are locked until you collect certain antibodies from fallen enemies, meaning you have to go replay levels and make sure you kill creatures you missed the first time around.

I loved the original *Panzer Dragoon* games, so just to make sure I wasn't misremembering the quality of the series I went back and sampled the library. I had more fun playing the first levels of Sega's old shooters than I did the entirety of *Crimson Dragon*. Hardcore fans of classic on-rails shooters like *Star Fox* or *Space Harrier* might be able to play through this while wearing rose-tinted glasses, but it doesn't hold a candle to its precursors. » Ben Reeves



8

PC

» **Concept**

Using Diablo as an inspirational model, bring an impressive level of quality to a free-to-play, hack 'n slash action/RPG

» **Graphics**

A lot of browns and deep blacks keep everything muddy and fairly bland, but from a technical perspective, the game looks great

» **Sound**

Effective mood-establishing sounds frame your adventure, as opposed to memorable music. The voice acting is well done

» **Playability**

It's a simple matter of pointing and clicking, followed by excessive clicking. Many aspects of the interface are small and difficult to navigate

» **Entertainment**

Combat and loot collection don't do much to separate the game from others in its genre, but other additions make Path of Exile stand alone

» **Replay Value**

High

Path Of Exile

Clicking and collecting on its own path

Style 1 to 6-Player Online Role-Playing **Publisher** Grinding Gear Games **Developer** Grinding Gear Games **Release** October 23 **Rating** N/A

When my co-workers saw me playing Path of Exile at my desk, they usually asked why I was playing Diablo. I can't blame them for their confusion. At a glance, Path of Exile looks just like Blizzard's click-and-collect action series, but a few innovations separate the game from its clear inspiration.

At its outset, Path of Exile throws a lot at you with little direction. Tiny icons dot your user interface, and a comically huge skill tree resembling Final Fantasy X's sphere grid looks intimidating even before you zoom out to see its entirety. The experience is not friendly to newcomers, but it rewards you for spending the time and effort to learn its intricacies.

For anyone who has dabbled in Diablo or Torchlight, Path of Exile feels familiar in its combat, co-op, and loot collection, but a few key deviations change the formula.

Money is conspicuously absent; currency is tied to loot, meaning transactions with shops and players is a matter of trade. This bartering prevents rampant inflation and auction house debacles.

Special skills are also handled differently, as they are unlocked outside of the skill tree (which is mainly for passive buffs) and are instead assigned to found crystals attached to weapons and gear. The crystals are not compatible with everything, so loot management becomes an interesting process that uses more than simple stat comparison.

Perhaps Path of Exile's most impressive bullet-point is its free-to-play model, whose monetization features are difficult to track down. Real money is used to purchase additional inventory slots and make cosmetic changes. I never once saw anything resembling a

pop-up or an alert reaching out to remind me I could spend money on the game.

Path of Exile's loot collection and combat looks and plays like others in the genre, but its innovations have widespread effects separating it from the competition. Its multi-player longevity is difficult to predict, but as a campaign-driven action/RPG, Path of Exile succeeds. » **Kyle Hilliard**

Always Online

Path of Exile is always online, which makes cooperative play with up to six others simple and easy. If you want to play by yourself, however, it is very easy to ignore those around you to quest on your own.



FULL SAIL UNIVERSITY

THE POWER TO CREATE

DEGREE PROGRAMS IN:

Game Art

Game Development

Game Design

3300 University Boulevard • Winter Park, FL

Financial aid available for those who qualify • Career development assistance • Accredited University, ACCSC
To view detailed information regarding tuition, student outcomes, and related statistics, please visit fullsail.edu/outcomes-and-statistics.

800.226.7625

fullsail.edu

© 2013 Full Sail, LLC

Super Mario 3D World

Multiplayer mania enters the third dimension

9.25

Wii U

» Concept

Introduce New Super Mario-style multiplayer to the 3D Land structure

» Graphics

Mario and the new Sprixie Kingdom look great in HD

» Sound

The soundtrack is amazing. I can't help but hum the music for a good hour after each session

» Playability

Essentially every Wii U controller option is supported. Be thankful you hung on to all of those Wii remotes

» Entertainment

Nintendo does it again, blending novelty with nostalgia to offer some of the best couch co-op out there

» Replay Value

Moderately High

gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH

gameinformer
GOLD

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Platforming Publisher Nintendo Developer Nintendo Release November 22 Rating E

Mario, Luigi, Peach, and Toad go for a night stroll on the castle grounds to catch some fireworks. Out of nowhere, a clear pipe busts out of the ground and a small fairy creature pleads for them to rescue her friends. Bowser pops out of the pipe, grabs her, and leaves with the team in hot pursuit. After 25 years as a damsel in distress, Princess Peach finally rejoins the playable cast of a mainline Mario title for the first time since Super Mario Bros. 2. This refreshing change of the formula gets things off to a great start and teases Nintendo's willingness to tweak tradition throughout the rest of the game.

While 3D World shines in single-player, the fun multiplies with others. This merges clever and flexible 3D maps with New Super Mario Bros.' wild four-player gameplay. Everyone fights over their favorite characters not just for looks, but also for their unique traits. Will you go for Luigi's high jump, Toad's speed, Peach's mid-air float, or Mario's balanced skills? As long as a character isn't already taken, you can easily swap before every level. Players can jump in and out at practically any time – and use almost any controller setup. It's as versatile a system as you could ask for.

So many great co-op memories abound: zipping around in go-kart sized ice skates, protecting your pals from ghosts with head-mounted lights, clinging to life together on top of a giant angry-faced gemstone, and riding on the back of a friendly dinosaur named Plessie. But working together is only half of the fun. Tossing friends off a cliff, scrambling past them to get power-ups, and doing whatever it takes to get higher on the end-of-stage flagpole always gets everyone hollering. Nintendo never encouraged or discouraged this behavior before, but now players watch their points tally up at the end of each level. The best performer gets to wear an ornate crown. It's a subtle-yet-effective system that keeps you looking out for number one even when you're supposed to be working together.

The new power-up on the marquee is a fuzzy cat suit (favorites like the fire suit, tanooki suit, and boomerang suit return). What could have been a creepy getup turns out to be unbelievably adorable thanks to spot-on cat animations. Characters trot around on all fours and even do a little butt wiggle before they pounce on foes. Each character's unique



“meow” celebration after beating a level is endlessly charming. This upgrade also allows Mario and company to scale walls, helping them get out of jams and find hidden paths, and the scratch attacks and dive bombs add valuable offensive options.

A new double cherry item allows you to control several duplicates of your character. While it's a neat gimmick, it's not viable as a fulltime power. Once a copy strays away from the group, it's only a matter of time before it falls into a hole or runs into an enemy.

New green stars replace traditional star coins, providing incentive to search for secret paths. Some minimal roadblocks appear from

time to time, but if you're grabbing all the low-hanging fruit, you won't be halted in the standard worlds. Bonus stages abound after you see the credits, encouraging you to run back and clean up on stars. It's satisfying to revisit levels and clear them completely and in turn receive a new cluster of levels to enjoy. You also unlock an awesome, recognizable bonus character with several unique powers.

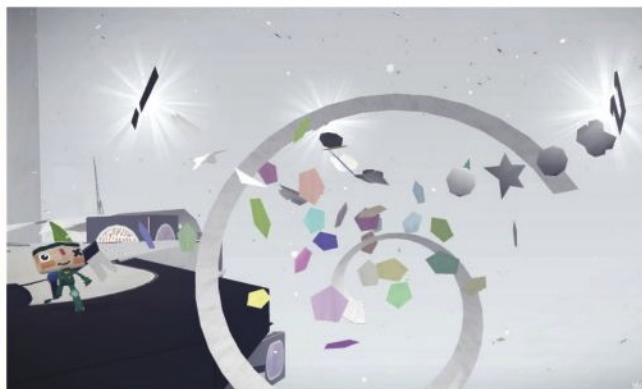
My only big complaint stems from the item grab button being the same as the run button. This leads to players picking up co-op partners constantly when they don't intend to. What makes it worse is that there are several unused or redundant buttons on most of the compatible controllers that could have easily taken on this function.

Despite this annoyance, I loved Bowser's egocentric concept for the final world in the main campaign, and the last boss battle is plenty entertaining. Any Mario game runs the risk of the final encounter being too traditional or featuring a frustrating gimmick, but this one brought a smile to everyone's faces on my co-op team from beginning to end. While it's not the most difficult challenge, it is suitably epic and entertaining – an exceptional finisher to an excellent entry in the series. » **Bryan Vore**



Tearaway

More than an iota of charm



Style 1-Player Action/Platform **Publisher** Sony Computer Entertainment **Developer** Media Molecule **Release** November 22 **Rating** E

I love games, but I seem to spend an undue amount of time around virtual jerks. Foul-mouthed criminals, shouting marines, evil nemeses of various stripes – it gets old after awhile. Thank god for Media Molecule. The English studio, which won acclaim for the LittleBigPlanet series, has a knack for creating worlds and characters that exude a playful charm, something that's in short supply in both gaming and popular culture today.

In many ways, it's a simple game. You play as Iota (or his female counterpart Atoi), a living envelope tasked with delivering a message to a mysterious figure in the sky. Thanks to the Vita camera, this godlike figure is actually you peeking out of the sun. Iota journeys through a series of surreal worlds, engaging in fairly straightforward 3D platforming.

Tearaway doesn't reinvent the genre, but rather builds a strange version of it made entirely of paper. Inspired by papercraft, Media Molecule has created a world that feels unlike any other I've experienced. It's a pop-up book come to life, with worlds and creatures that unfold and move in ingenious ways. Drag a finger across a level, and it folds out to reveal a new path. Moving platforms don't magically float – they are propelled up and down by accordion-like structures.

Along the way, the game encourages you to take part in the creativity. You can take pictures with the in-game camera (which pays off to great effect at the end) that even has Instagram-style filters you can buy. Iota can be altered and tweaked with dozens of cut-out eyes, mouths, and other silly objects. By taking pictures of certain creatures, you unlock real-life papercraft plans that can be printed out on your computer. When's the last time a game inspired you to take up a new hobby?

At certain points, you find a character who wants a new hat or some other object. Here, you are sent to a virtual work table where you can design and cut out paper designs with pencil and scissor tools. It's fun and gives you a sense of ownership in the game; I loved seeing my sad, asymmetrical cowboy hat display on my character throughout the adventure.

The papercraft theme carries over to the

controls, which offer a more tactile experience than most games. You can unroll walkways like wrapping paper or even poke your finger through the bottom of the world and send enemies flying. Your finger actually appears to burst through the game world, and the back camera even displays a bit of the tear below you around the edge of the tear to add to the illusion. Later, you use this mechanic to solve environmental puzzles, moving bridges and the like to let Iota pass. Much of the platforming is done with the back touchpad, as you bang on large drums that send Iota bouncing to the next checkpoint. In the last third of the game, you even use the Vita's tilt functions. In many ways, it's the game the Vita was created for – not one aspect of the hardware goes unused.

It's not perfect; developing a 3D platformer is a new challenge for Media Molecule, and there are some technical hiccups. At times, the framerate lags, and I experienced some camera

issues. Iota's movements feel a bit sluggish, and the combat is fairly repetitive and hampered by a very small selection of enemies. These are flaws that should be acknowledged, but none of them impact the sense of wonder and fun this game provides.

Tearaway is brilliantly out of step with much of mainstream game development. It's gentle, distinctly British brand of whimsy and imaginative visual style makes it an experience unlike any other you'll have this year. The core gameplay isn't exceptional, but it's solid enough to let the brilliant puzzles, art, and level designs shine.

It's a journey worth taking, and just when you think you've reached the end, you encounter a surreal third act that cemented its place as one of my favorite games of the year. I hope Tearaway can find its place among all the blockbusters and new consoles that will be vying for your attention this year. It certainly deserves it. » **Matt Helgeson**

9

Vita

» Concept

A magical platformer that creates pop-up book worlds made of virtual paper

» Graphics

The artistry and design on display goes far beyond mere technical prowess

» Sound

The beguiling score is inventive and remarkably diverse, evoking everything from UK folk to electronica

» Playability

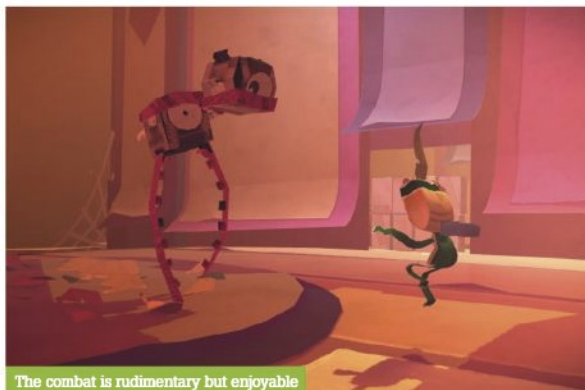
The controls aren't as tight as LittleBigPlanet's, and there are some odd camera issues at points

» Entertainment

I can't remember the last time I was so completely and utterly charmed by a game

» Replay Value

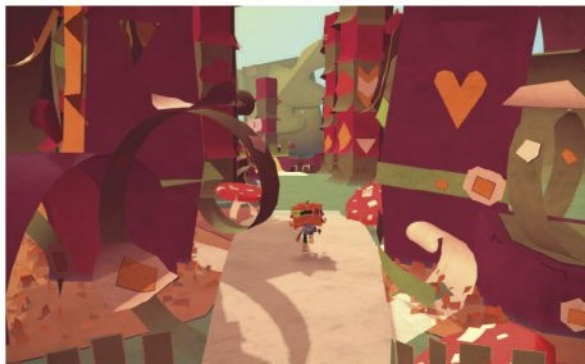
Moderate



The combat is rudimentary but enjoyable



The level designs are gorgeous



Here's an example of the use of old newsprint as a building material



New Year's Resolutions For The Gaming Industry

For many people, ringing in the new year often involves making personal pledges to improve their lives. Unfortunately, most people waste their New Year's resolutions on stupid things like diets or spending more time with their families.

That's why we took it upon ourselves to dream up some cooler resolutions for our favorite developers and publishers that would make 2014 an unforgettable year for gamers.

+ We pledge to stop wasting time and money on single-player campaigns for Battlefield. We also promise not to screw up the new Star Wars Battlefront by adding anything from the prequel trilogy. **-DICE**

+ We promise to stop jerking fans around and admit we have no idea what we're going to do for Half-Life 3. **-Valve**

+ You know all those things you hated about our original plan for the Xbox One? We totally swear we won't patch them into your console in a future update. **-Microsoft**

+ After reading the kind of online fan fiction that has been written about Joel and Ellie, we vow to never make a sequel to The Last of Us. **-Naughty Dog**

+ We vow to stop shoehorning every damn gameplay mechanic and style of character we can think of into Assassin's Creed. Except for ninjas. We might still do Assassin's Creed Ninjas. **-Ubisoft**

+ Per the requests of scientists everywhere, we promise to stop pretending that quantum mechanics can explain everything that happens in BioShock Infinite. We'll also finish up BioShock Infinite's DLC before 2015... probably. **-Irrational Games**

+ The next time we start working on a new console, we promise we won't forget to tell Polyphony Digital about it. **-Sony**

+ We promise to be as rich as the ancient kings. What? That qualifies as a resolution. **-Activision**

+ We swear we'll stop blaming our financial woes on our successful western developers just to cover the fact that Final Fantasy has gone completely off the rails. **-Square Enix**

+ We vow to break the cycle of publishers screwing over Vincent Zampella and instead let Respawn make us a ton of money by creating whatever games it wants to make. **-Electronic Arts**

+ Seeing how popular Riley has been with fans, we promise that the next Call of Duty will feature an all-canine cast, and be called Modern Woof-are. **-Infinity Ward**

+ We promise to give you a new 2D Metroid, if in return, you promise to shut up about it. **-Nintendo** ♦

YOU MAKE



GSM COMPATIBLE

NET10
WIRELESS

Unlimited*
Nationwide **4G LTE**
Available

BRING YOUR OWN PHONE

DUAL SIM CARD  WORKS WITH MOST COMPATIBLE OR UNLOCKED GSM PHONES INCLUDING 4G LTE AND HSPA+*, ANDROID™ AND OTHER SMARTPHONES

ACTUAL SPEEDS DEPEND ON YOUR DEVICE AND THE COVERAGE IN YOUR LOCAL AREA

WHAT'S INCLUDED:

- DUAL SIM FORMAT (STANDARD AND MICRO IN ONE CARD)
- ACTIVATION INSTRUCTIONS

EXCLUSIVELY FOR NO CONTRACT 30-DAY MONTHLY PLANS

KEEP YOUR EXISTING NUMBER OR GET A NEW ONE

 **NATIONWIDE**
COVERAGE ON AMERICA'S LARGEST GSM NETWORK

PLANS SOLD SEPARATELY

4G LTE⁺ on one of America's Largest and Most Dependable Networks

\$50 NO-CONTRACT 30-Day Plan
UNLIMITED
DATA, TEXT, TALK*

NET10
WIRELESS

Best Networks. Half the Cost.™

www.NET10Wireless.com

30 day Unlimited Plans include 2.5 GB of high speed data per 30 day cycle. After 2.5 GB, your data speed will be reduced for the remainder of the 30 day cycle. High speed data is restored once a new 30 day plan is redeemed at the end of the 30 day plan cycle. Other limitations, terms and conditions of service apply. NET10 Wireless reserves the right to terminate your service for unauthorized or abnormal usage. Please refer always to the latest Terms and Conditions of Service at NET10Wireless.com. The NET10 Wireless BYOP will only operate with the NET10 Wireless Unlimited 30-day plans. Certain mobile phone features may not be available throughout the entire network or their functionality may be limited. ©2013 TracFone Wireless, Inc. All rights reserved. The stylized spiral logo and NET10 Wireless are registered trademarks of TracFone Wireless, Inc. *4G/4G LTE networks are not available in all locations and require capable device and SIM card. Actual availability, coverage, and speed may vary. LTE is a trademark of ETSI.



US \$5.99 | EUR €5.99 | UK £3.99



Issue 249 • January 2014

www.gameinformer.com