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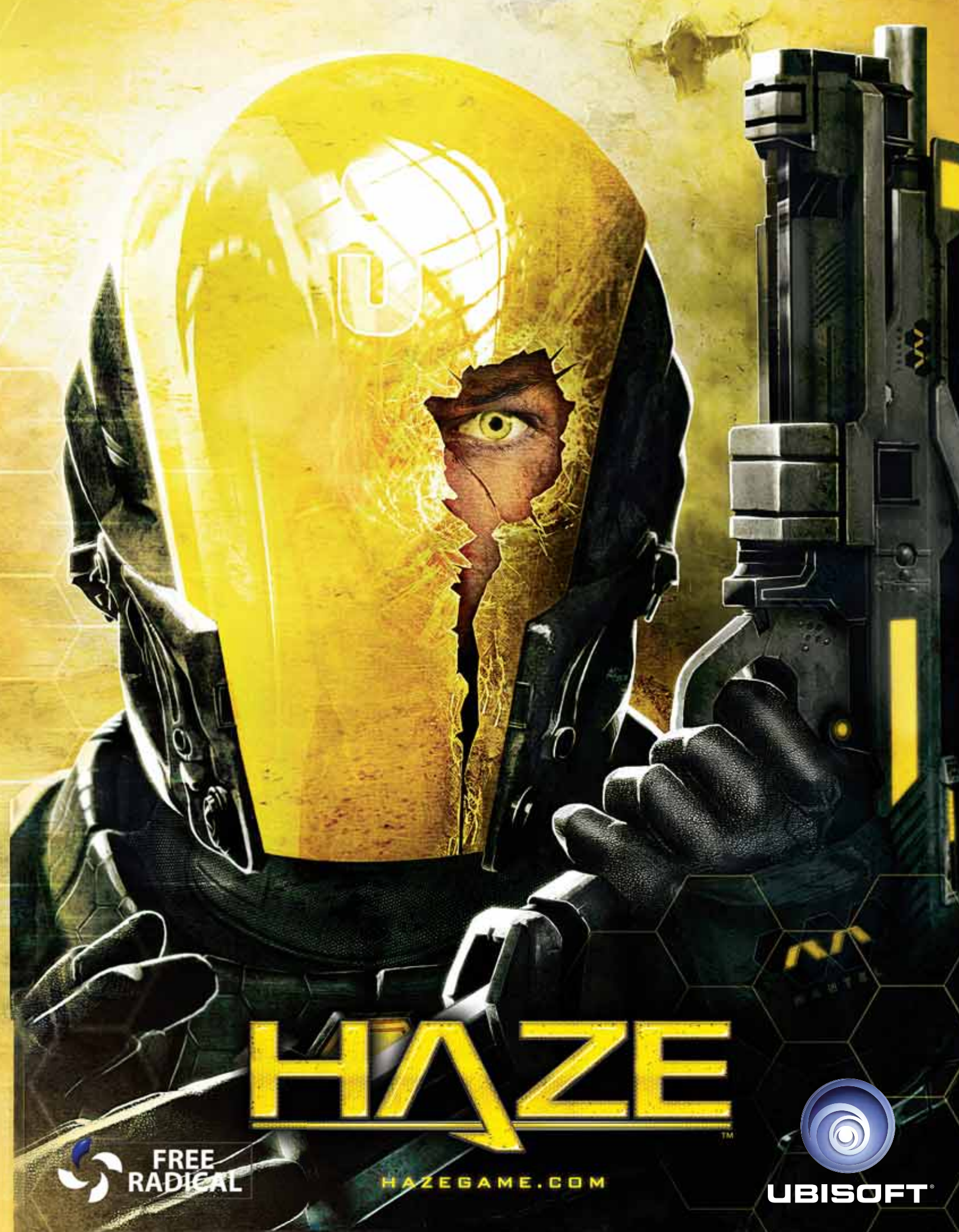
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PLAYSTATION 3



XBOX 360 LIVE



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Nudity
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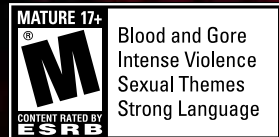
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PLAYSTATION 3



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Printed in the United States of America



DJPubba_Tim Lindquist

I recently succeeded at putting the video chip from a ColecoVision into a TI-99/4a computer and using an RGB interface board from a Gorf arcade machine to get 15.75 KHz analog RGB + sync out of a TI-99/4a (which normally only outputs composite video). Now I just need to tidy it up and write an article about how to do it. :-)

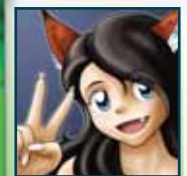
Now Playing: *Pakmans Brothers Revenge*



Wanderer_Thomas Wilde

You know, I'm actually vaguely embarrassed by how much I like *Halo 3*. The first few levels definitely suffer from the lack of Cortana, though.

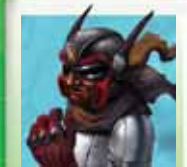
Now Playing: *Halo 3, Jeanne D'Arc, BioShock, World of Warcraft*



Lynxara_Alicia Ashby

You know, *Halo 3* is about the only thing I'm not going to end up playing this Q4. My inner RPG fiend must be sated first.

Now Playing: *Culdcept, Culdcept Saga, Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness, Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions*



Racewing_Geson Hatchett

I don't know what the hell Omega Force did, but I found myself unable to play anything but *Dynasty Warriors: Gundam* for two whole weeks. Doman Kasshu's scenario rocked so hard that I was actually motivated to watch *G Gundam*, which rocked my world *double hard*. Unfortunately, now I want to find whoever's idea it was to exclude Allenby Beardsley from the game, and give them the SHIIIIIIING FINGEEERRRRR. I mean, *seriously*.



Daniel Kayser_Daniel Kayser

In honor of Bioware this Thanksgiving I am making a *Mass Effect*-themed feast. "Shepard's Pie", "Krogan Cakes", and "Salted Saren" are just a few of the trimmings amongst my lunar buggo shaped bird. Let us say grace...



KouAidou_Elizabeth Ellis

I didn't do any work this issue, but that's okay, because I spent the month translating 200 guide pages. It's fun!

Now playing: *Picross DS, Final Fantasy XII: Revenant Wings*



Dack_Steve Hannley

If my main man Damon doesn't want to play ball with having his likeness in the new *Bourne* game, that's fine! I'm willing to license the rights to my likeness for three-quarters — no, half of what he wants. Just imagine the response the game would get from the ladies — it would literally sell another million copies of it.

Now Playing: *Syphon Filter: LS, MP-3 Corruption, BioShock, Clowns like you on the BBall Court.*



Roger Danish_Greg Off

I haven't caught the *Halo* fever just yet (mostly because of the deluge of other Q4 titles keeping me busy), but I am looking forward to spending some time with the Campaign Mode during a break in the chaos. In other news, it's great to see the Wii blazing a trail and Nintendo back on top, but sad that the PS3 is still stumbling out of the gate. Now Playing: *Ratchet & Clank Future: ToD, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga.*



4thletter_David Brothers

"Nowadays, man, I can't complain." Truer words? Never spoken.

Now Playing: *Bioshock, NCAA Football 08 (360) (Go Buckeyes!)*



James_James Cunningham

Training for my new job had me up at 7AM for five weeks straight, but that part is over now. I can actually look at the world and not resent every miserable thing about it, barely quenching the desire to take a crowbar to everything in my path. It's nice to have a life not defined by lack of sleep. Now Playing: *Test Drive Unlimited (360), Dewy's Adventure, Monster Hunter Freedom 2, Tingle's Rosy Rupeeland*



HonestGamer_Jason Venter

I seem to have developed an allergy to new games that only the other magazine staff know about, meaning you won't see my pretty face elsewhere in this issue. That doesn't mean I have nothing to say, though! You can check out my blog on the magazine's official web site (and hear from other editors, too), all for the low cost of absolutely nothing! Visit us online. It's good for you! Now Playing: *Broken Sword, Wild Arms 5, Eternal Sonata*



Hitoshura_Iaian Ross

With the glut of guide work out of the way for this year (I think), I have a hell of a backlog I need to start clearing.

Now Playing: *Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions, Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness, Final Fantasy XII: International Zodiac Job System.*



Sardius_Danny Cowan

A new *Samba de Amigo* from the *Brothers in Arms* guys? *Silent Hill 5* being developed by the people who did *Marc Ecko's Getting Up*? It's like the whole world has gone *mad!* Man, I can't wait to see Cavia's take on *Kid Icarus*, or what Top Heavy Studios has in store for *Grim Fandango*.

Now Playing: *Pokemon Channel, Rush'n Attack, Lumines II, Bad Cat*



Princess Cowboy_Abbie Heppe

By the time you read this, *Team Fortress 2* will be out and I may not have seen the light of day for a month. It's plausible that this has been the longest wait of my life, and I've been to the DMV before.

Now Playing: Well...duh.



Wolfie_Terry Wolfinger

I just finished watching the *Heroes* Season 1 DVD and all the extras and am now enjoying the start of Season 2. Brad Pitt keeps calling me to double for him in yet *another* red carpet ceremony... I'm so tired of him calling me. Oh well, it's a living...

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft, Halo 3*



Metalbolt_Anthony Mertz

Uh-oh! Now I've gone and done it! Kyle, you're welcome, buddy, and you owe me *big* for this one: real big!

Now Playing: *Runnin' from Troyimus Prime: Gonna get Eaten Edition*



Arlieih_Thomas Shin

I've been re-acquainted with an ex-girlfriend of mine named Picross. Back in the old SNES days, she was really picky and only gave me half an hour to finish the job. Nowadays she fits in my hands, likes strokes and taps with my stylus and gives me all the time in the world. Hey wait, that sounded wrong...

Now Playing: *Picross DS, Pocket UFO AKA X-Com (Pocket PC/Mobile)*



Ashura_Brady Hartel

I figure if they edited Death Note for children's TV, it might be kind of interesting. Seriously. It'd probably go something like this: Larry Yagami points dramatically, "SOON I will send L on VACATION. Once I know his REAL NAME, so I can BUY THE TICKETS. >:O" | L chinrubs, "I could use a vacation. Perhaps I will tell Larry my real name. 8|a" | Larry Yagami looks at Lisa :O "You must trade half of your remaining sick days to get the eyes.. we must send L on vacation!!" I bet the new title would be even more intriguing.



Jeremy_Jeremy Peeples

Unlike Dack, I don't resemble anyone famous (unless the nerdy-looking star of *Napoleon Dynamite* counts), so my visage adorning a video game character model won't increase the sales a lick. To overcome this sadness, I'll continue the DC marathon I started to celebrate the system's U.S. launch eight years ago.

Now Playing: *Fire Pro Wrestling D, Jet Grind Radio, Shenmue, Yakuza, Stranglehold, Tetris DS*



Mads_Amadeo Garcia III

Persona 3, Phoenix Wright 3, Metroid Prime 3, Halo 3. There seems to be a rash of threes lately, and they're all good stuff! Well... except maybe the third *Resident Evil* movie. You really have to feel sorry for those people whose job it is to watch and review things like that. True heroes, every one of them.

Now Playing: *Phoenix Wright 3, Team Fortress 2, Persona 3, Izuna: Legend of the Unemployed Ninja, Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions*



Big Wyrn_Jeb Haught

Looks like holiday game release madness is in full swing. How can I squeeze in time for daily showers when there are so many great games to play? At least I'm doing my part for water conservation, but lately, nobody seems to be returning my phone calls.

Now Playing: *Halo 3, Warhawk, Metroid Prime 3*

Previews

Q4 may be over, but there's an entire universe of hot games ready to hit in Winter, Spring, and beyond! This issue we give four pages to spotlight *Ratchet & Clank Future*, cover *Devil May Cry 4* hands-on, take a first look at *The Bourne Conspiracy*, showcase an obscure little gem called *Culdcept Saga*, and a whole lot more. Get ready to make your post-*Halo 3* gaming plans, starting on page 14.

Ratchet & Clank Future: p32

Prototype: p27

Soul Calibur IV: p15

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Features

We infiltrated Penny Arcade Expo to give those of you who stayed at home the inside scoop on gaming's biggest and best weekend-long party. Get the inside scoop on all the exhibits, tournaments, and launch parties you could ever want to see! Get ready, because your trip to PAX starts on page 47.



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On the cover



Uncharted is the latest from Naughty Dog, creators of HGM favorite *Jak & Daxter*, and probably the best reason to pick up a PS3 this Q1. The irrepressible Geson Hatchett talks about what makes it memorable, what makes the protagonist a classic video game hero, and why you might mistake this game for next-gen *Pitfall*. Hit the jungles on page 36.

**UNCHARTED
DRAKE'S FORTUNE**

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A Special Operations Chinook Helicopter Crew Chief prepares the aircraft over a drop zone before a jump. ©2007. Paid for by the United States Army. All rights reserved.



CRYING FOR AN ENGINE

Most people are familiar with Epic's Unreal Engine, Valve's Source Engine (*Half-Life 2*), or id Software's Quake Engine, but Crytek is starting to get attention from third-party developers for its new CryEngine 2, which is currently being used in its EA-published FPS, *Crysis*.

One of the most visually stunning MMOs at this year's E3 was NCSoft's *Aion*, which showed off the flexibility of Crytek's latest creation. Jake Song, former NCSoft founder and creator of *Lineage*, is licensing the CryEngine 2 for use in his new, unannounced MMORPG. Staying with the MMO theme, Korean developer Reloaded Studios has also signed on with Crytek to use its middleware engine for an action/strategy MMORPG.

To further show off its diverse usage, Sarasota, Fla.-based Ringling College of Art and Design is the first educational institution to sign a license agreement with Crytek to use its latest engine for teaching purposes. The goal is to better prepare its students for working in the computer graphics industry when they graduate.



IT'S A NUMBERS GAME

Over the past few years, there have been various discussions regarding the importance of review scores and their impact on retail sales. A recent study by Electronic Entertainment Design and Research, looking at the correlation between game review scores and retail success, concluded that titles achieving scores above 90 grossed sales up to 531% more than the industry average.



Mature-rated titles, comprising 10% of all U.S. retail games examined, have the highest average scores and the highest average gross sales, despite not being offered for sale at some major retailers.

Speaking of which, Rockstar's latest controversial title, *Manhunt 2*, has been toned down to accommodate the ESRB's Mature label and should currently be available in stores. However, if you wonder what all the frenzy was about, you can import the game from the Netherlands, where its Justice Minister says that no ban on *Manhunt 2* is possible under current Dutch law.

If you're baffled by the overwhelming success of Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*, you'd better sit down. A recent study by Strategy Analytics reveals that the MMO market is rapidly expanding, and, together with digital distribution of PC and console titles, will triple from roughly \$4 billion to \$12 billion by 2011, accounting for 30% of the games industry's total revenue.

GAME DELAYS

During its latest quarterly financial results conference call, Take-Two executives revealed that *L.A. Noire* and *Beaterator* have both been delayed and will most likely not be released before November 2008.

Although several online retailers, including GameStop and EBGames, had already updated their respective web site product listings, Pandemic waited several weeks before confirming that its multiplatform action game *Mercenaries 2* has been delayed until early 2008 in order to give them extra time to properly polish the title.

Ubisoft has revealed its holiday lineup, with titles ranging from *Haze* to *Nitrobike* to *Rayman Raving Rabbids 2* and *Beowulf*, but the list revealed that its WWII FPS, *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway*, has been pushed back to January-March 2008. The schedule also indicated that while the PS3 and Xbox 360 editions of *Assassin's Creed* are still on track for the holidays (November), the PC version has been delayed until early 2008.

Perpetual Entertainment's MMO, *Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising*, has once again been delayed, and its launch is now set for early 2008. The title was originally planned for an early 2007 release and then pushed back until summer after a round of layoffs. Perpetual decided to trim down the development team by another thirty to forty employees, claiming the game content is complete, and the scaling down of the team is a normal course of events as the title nears its final stages.

Lighthouse Interactive's adventure game *Belief & Betrayal* was originally scheduled for later this year, but the Dutch publisher decided that the game needed more refinement and has moved its release to Q1 2008.



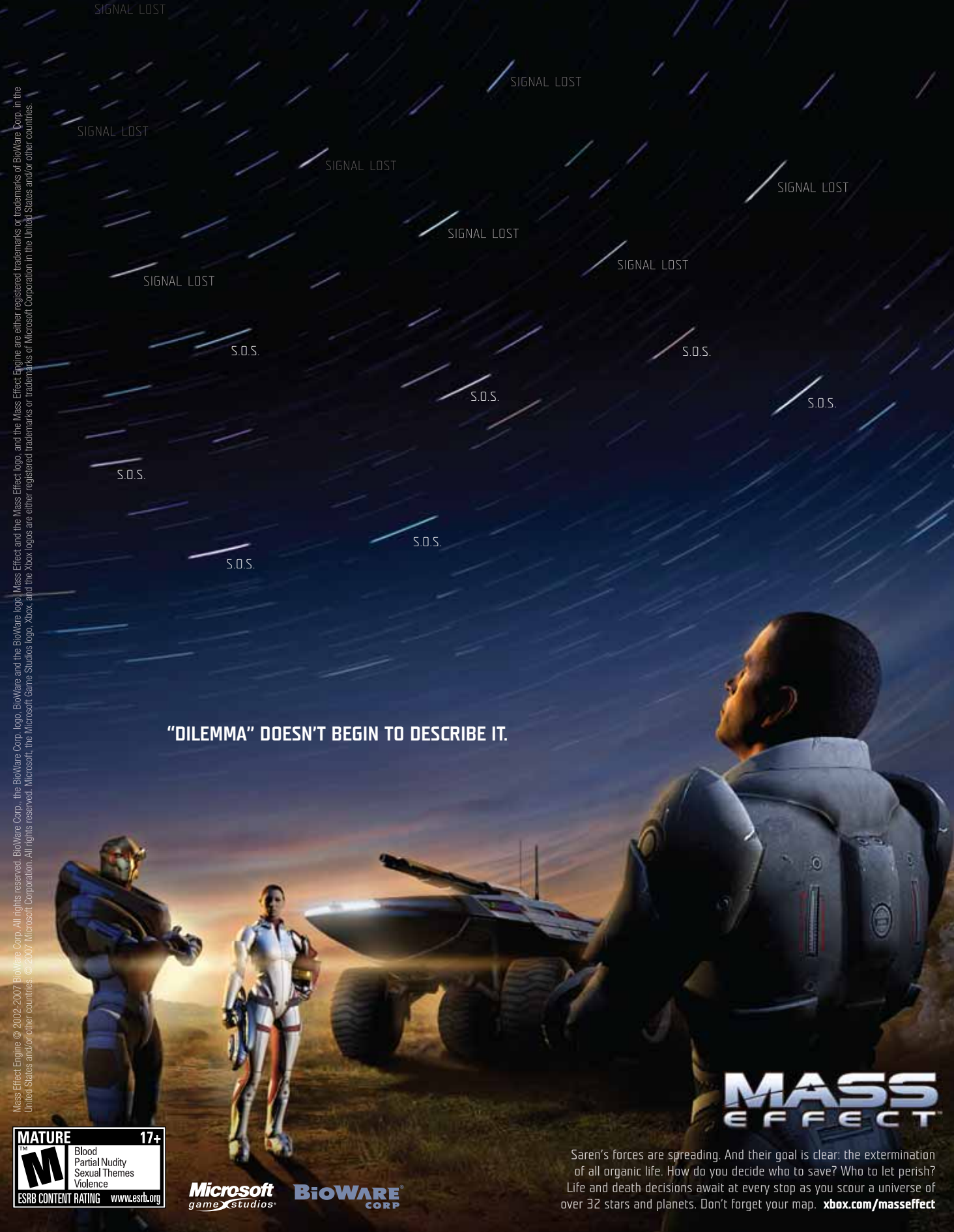
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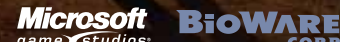
The "Conan Weapon Scavenger Hunt" has begun on *HardcoreGamer.com* and in THIS VERY ISSUE! The Scavenger Hunt runs from October 1st - October 31st so it's NOT TOO LATE! *HGM* Readers be on the lookout! With over 20 useable Weapons in THQ's new game *Conan* we have hidden 22 pictures of them each accompanied by a Unique ID #.

It is up to YOU to find these Weapons and go to www.HardcoreGamer.com to enter each Unique ID # you find. You will receive points for each ID # you enter (1,500 total points possible). The First 6 readers to submit ALL 22 ID #'s will win a copy of the game (3 Xbox 360 copies or 3 PS3 copies)!!!

Once every few days or so, for the entire month of October, these Weapons will appear along with their Unique ID #'s. One may appear on the *Hardcore Gamer* message boards, another may appear in the PDF version of our magazine that is only available online for download, and others may appear only in a hard copy of *Hardcore Gamer Magazine*, (like this one), who knows? We're just silly like that... Now, get outta here and get to Huntin'!!!



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The Lines Are Drawn...

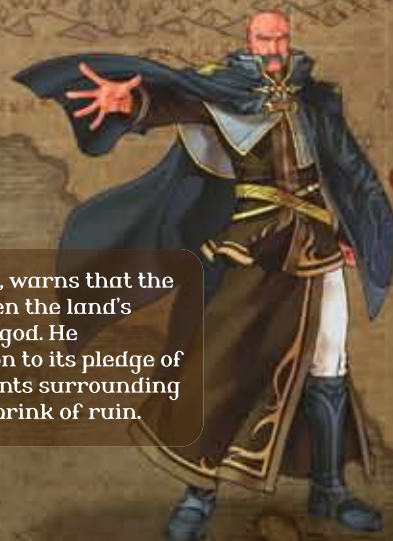
Three years ago, Queen Elincia of Crimea won the war against the Mad King Ashnard of Daein, but the Crimean knights, led by Geoffrey, must quell unrest within Crimea's own borders. Ike and the Greil Mercenaries, meanwhile, find themselves facing an old threat.



The laguz tribes unite to seek justice for a crime long unpunished. They are led by Skrimir, an untested general and heir to the throne of Gallia. Can he tame his thirst for battle long enough to see his troops to victory and peace, or will his rage lead all nations to the brink of ruin?



Dheginsea, king of Goldoa, warns that the chaos of war may threaten the land's covenant with an ancient god. He struggles to hold his nation to its pledge of neutrality even as the events surrounding him lead the world to the brink of ruin.



Tibarn and Naesala put aside their differences to lead their clans to war. The raven king, however, carries a secret burden that may cause their alliance to crumble—and seal the fate of their cause.



...But Every Story Has Two Sides.

With King Ashnard's death, Daein fell under the harsh rule of the Begnion Empire. Years later, Micaiah, Sothe, and the Dawn Brigade have taken up the struggle to liberate Daein. They pin their hopes on newfound Prince Pelleas, but can this mysterious youth rally Daein to rise up against her tyrants?



Begnion's senators now rule Daein. They have given their military commanders free rein, all the while hiding their actions from the Apostle Sanaki. Beset by turmoil at home and abroad, Sanaki seems fated to be her nation's last apostle. Is Zelgius's sword enough to help her save all she holds dear?



Two Sides to Every War.

In a war fueled by chaos, who can say what is right and wrong? In a Fire Emblem first, you will play both sides of the war and judge for yourself. Fire Emblem: Radiant Dawn introduces a host of new features that make it a snap to pick up and a challenge to beat.





Publisher: Namco Bandai
 Developer: Omiya Soft & Jamsworks
 Release Date: Q1 2008
 Genre(s): Strategy
 Category: Cardy, Boardy
 # of Players: 1-4

The original *Culdcept* is a PS2 game so hard to accurately describe that instead of even trying in the scope of this preview, we just stuffed a review of it in the Ware section at the back of the book. Suffice it to say that *Culdcept* is the result of marrying a complex territory-control board game like *Risk* to a CCG like *Magic: The Gathering*. The result is an unusual but engrossing game of strategy, where you're trying to out-manuever your opponent by deftly using just the right card at just the right time. It's a complete change of pace from the usual obsessions of video game strategy, out-building and out-fighting.

Culdcept Saga presents the original's gameplay with a new storyline and a much-needed audiovisual overhaul that takes advantage of the 360's high-def graphics and superior sound output. Now you can design your card-battling champion, called a Cepter, in 3D with customizable parts unlocked by defeating opponents, and listen to a fantastic new score. The massive library of 470 cards you can use to design your deck features both old favorites from the PS2 version, and all-new cards with beautiful new 2D artwork by a variety of illustrators.

Probably the coolest new feature of *Culdcept Saga*, though, is the online multiplayer. While the single-player game features a variety of AI opponents to battle as you try to rack up Achievements and unlock new cards and maps, there's little to do with the game once you've beaten them. Versus battle is where the game really shines, and online gives you the advantage of being able to create matches with up to three other opponents quickly and easily via Xbox Live. With players able to battle it out for top rank on the Leaderboards and fewer games to compete with, *Culdcept Saga* will hopefully find the attention denied its PS2 predecessor.



Preview by Lynara



Culdcept SAGA

SOUL CALIBUR IV



Preview by Dack

Publisher: Namco Bandai
 Developer: Project Soul
 Release Date: Q1 2008
 Genre(s): Fighting
 Category: Your Soul is Mine!
 # of Players: Many

Starting with its debut as a Dreamcast killer-app, through its multi-platform sequel which showed how good looking a next-gen game could be, and its last showing as the PS2-exclusive *Soul Calibur III*, *Soul Calibur* has proved to be one of gaming's best fighting series. Maybe it's the realistically proportioned women, or maybe it's because it's got such solid gameplay, but *Soul Calibur* has proved itself time and time again.

Launching in 2008, *Soul Calibur IV* will be the first of its series to debut on the PS3 and Xbox 360. Just like *Soul Calibur III*, *SCIV* will not be appearing in arcades, so unfortunately there will yet again not be teams of glove-wielding people playing Conquest mode at your local arcade. One of the main draws to *SCIV* is its online play, which is a series first. Although there are not many details on the online mode as of now, it'll obviously let you face off against friends, most of whom will probably be playing with the new controversial Ivy, who is wearing even less. Adding to the already impressive list of returning fighters from the first three titles in the series, there will be a number of newcomers. Leading the pack will be the new character Hilde, a woman proudly wearing knight's armor and wielding a short sword and red lance. The game looks stunning running at an impressive 60 FPS, and having shiny, detailed character models and backgrounds.

With its flawless predecessors, there is little doubt *SCIV* will be an amazing fighting game. If the online play and new characters prove to be more than just a hook, *Soul Calibur IV* could prove to be 2008's first great game.

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IN-STORES NOVEMBER 2007

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 **Games for Windows LIVE**

 **XBOX 360 LIVE**

 **Io-Interactive** 

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MATURE 17+
M
Blood
Drug Reference
Intense Violence
Strong Language
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

BLADESTORM

The Hundred Years' War

PUBLISHER : KOEI | DEVELOPER : OMEGA FORCE | RELEASE DATE : Q4 2007 | GENRE(S) : ACTION/STRATEGY
CATEGORY : DON'T CALL IT EUROPEAN WARRIORS | # OF PLAYERS : 1



DEPLOY

Starting Point
Position
Crépon
Enalzes
Norolles
Cheltry
Esmaut

Select position to attack.



Preview by Racewing

The sub-title says it all, really. Omega Force's new war title is a game set during England and France's Hundred Years' War. You're cast as a rogue commander in charge of a number of mercenary battalions. Your task is to make a load of cash, and make a name for yourself in the process. The actions you take, the sides you choose, and your efficiency in battle will determine the outcome of the war, regardless of whether or not it may be historically accurate. Expect to run into or clash swords with a number of the era's historical figures, two of the most notable being England's "Black" Prince Edward, and France's Joan of Arc.

During each skirmish, you'll be placed in a battlefield with different kinds of units, such as archers, mounted cavalries, and bladed soldiers. Other battalions will follow as you progress, and you may even get to command special units such as elephants or cannons. All of these battalions have special strengths, weaknesses, and abilities which you must master as you fight in pseudo-real-time. Trample castle guards underfoot, hold large-scale melee battles within strongholds, or pick off advancing armies with pinpoint archery; it's all up to you to figure out how to get the job done. In *Bladestorm*, you command as you fight, and your mind is just as important as your trigger finger. Do well, and you'll earn riches, fame, and better troops.

Bladestorm is set to join the fourth quarter barrage of games, and has enough individuality to warrant a look. If the thought of endless hack-and-slash action or stat-and-tile strategy bores you to tears, Koei and Omega Force may well have the answer to your problems, by offering a subtle blend of the best of both worlds.



WARHAMMER ONLINE

AGE OF RECKONING



Publisher: EA
Developer: Mythic
Release Date: Q1 2008

Genre(s): Goblins Hate Dwarves
Category: Dwarves Hate Goblins
of Players: 1



Preview by Wanderer

The team that brought you *Dark Age of Camelot* is now preparing to bring you the MMO version of *Warhammer Online*, based on the fantasy roleplaying arm of the popular and long-running tabletop war game. As an orc, goblin, dwarf, or high elf, you'll get to knock the teeth out of wayward members of the opposite faction.

Warhammer essentially puts you on the front lines of an ongoing and very real conflict, so there aren't any essentially pointless delivery quests (everything you do will relate directly back to the war somehow), and the character classes don't break down quite as neatly as you might expect. There aren't designated tanks, healers, and DPS in structured roles as there are in many other MMOs; there are simply soldiers, whose natural talents extend in a variety of different directions. Every character can dish out some serious punishment on par with members of every other class.

At EA's recent event at their offices in Redwood Shores, California, I got the chance to play as a dwarf hammerer and a greenskin (read: orc) berserker. Both classes generate momentum over the course of combat, allowing them to unlock and use various moves. The greenskin went from an effective brawler to actively devastating when he went into a frenzy, with a host of new and powerful moves only available when he was enraged. The hammerer was lower-level, but provided a wide variety of skull-crushing moves.

Combine that with a healthy dose of *Warhammer's* typical black humor, and *Warhammer Online* delivers a solid MMO experience, whether you know the universe or not.



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Language

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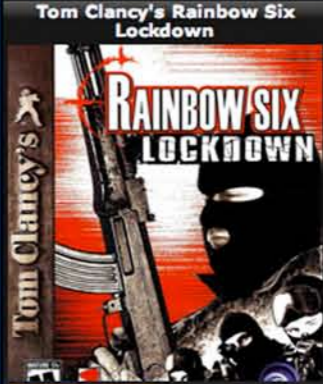


FEATURED GAMES **TOP PICKS** 4 of 8

Tomb Raider Anniversary

Games for Windows PC DVD

 \$29.90
The female equivalent of Indiana Jones returns for a special encore performance in this enhanced update of 1996's Tomb Raider, which made Lara Croft a household name and the object of affection for prepubescent boys.

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Lockdown


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In Rainbow Six: Lockdown, players lead Team Rainbow, the world's most elite counter-terrorist unit, as they are called into action and dispatched into unfamiliar territory to battle a bioterrorist threat. Stakes escalate.

Medieval II: Total War Kingdoms

EXPANSION PACK

 \$29.90
Medieval II: Total War Kingdoms is the official expansion to last year's award-winning Medieval II: Total War, presenting players with all-new territories to explore, troops to command, and enemies to conquer. Kingdoms is the most

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There's been a full playable demo of *Devil May Cry 4* floating around at Capcom's various press events ever since it made its debut at Capcom's Gamers' Day event. Every time it appears, the buzz preceding this much-anticipated game's release grows a little bit louder. Nothing sells a game's potential like getting to go hands-on with it, and playing *Devil May Cry 4* for the duration of the half-hour demo reveals a deliciously fine-tuned engine, some fantastic puzzles to solve in the gorgeously gothic environment, and no shortage of the blisteringly stylish action.

Players intimidated by *Devil May Cry 3*'s occasionally-brutal difficulty can take heart: judging from the demo, *Devil May Cry 4* is a bit friendlier to beginners and mere button-mashers. This is not to say there's no finesse to be found in combat, as the game design just tends to present both an elite and a noobish way around every obstacle. Take the battle with the enormous boss monster at the end of the demo; you can just try to hit-and-run your way through the fight, or use a series of spectacularly tricky jumping maneuvers to disable him before pouring on the hurt with your weapons.

Everything about *Devil May Cry 4*'s gameplay feels "just right," which makes it a little odd that the game doesn't star the usual series protagonist, Dante. Instead, players follow around a new guy named Nero, who just happens to look and fight quite a bit like Dante. If that's not authentic enough for you, don't worry: the storyline does bring Dante back, using moves based on his *Devil May Cry 3* animation sets. So, *Devil May Cry 4* is shaping up to be the rare title that offers something for everyone, without disappointing anybody in particular. Given how finicky gamers can be, that's an impressive hat trick.

Publisher: Capcom
Developer: Capcom
Release Date: 1/2008
Genre(s): Fighty
Categories: Swordy, Guny
of players: 1

Preview by Lynara

DEVIL MAY CRY

THE WITCHER

— ROLE-PLAYING GAME —



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ROBERT LUDLUM'S THE BOURNE CONSPIRACY

Publisher: Sierra Genre(s): Beat-'Em-Up
Developer: High Moon Studios Category: Feeding A Dude His Desk
Release Date: Q3 2008 # of Players: 1



Preview by Wanderer

One of the notable things about special forces training is that it emphasizes putting the other guy on the ground right damn now. In the *Bourne* movies, you can see this principle in effect in many of the action scenes: Matt Damon as Jason Bourne does not appear in fight scenes so much as in ten-second bursts of spectacular violence.

When you look at it in that light, it is not perhaps that surprising that *The Bourne Conspiracy* is sort of a beat-'em-up. It leads directly into the events of the first movie, as you carry out the fateful mission that caused Jason Bourne to lose his identity. Right now, however, the game does not feature Matt Damon's voice or face, which I'm sure is making HGM's Dack cry bitter, bitter tears even as I write this.

Bourne Conspiracy combines fistfights and action sequences with the sort of push-the-button-for-*awesome* gameplay from games like *Indigo Prophecy*. As Bourne is trying to escape an embassy before a police dragnet closes in on him, you'll have to press buttons that flash suddenly on screen to avoid pursuit; if you want to outshoot a group of thugs on the Marseilles waterfront, you once again press buttons to take each one out with a single precise shot.

The fistfights are perhaps the meatiest part of the game, and emphasize Bourne's ability to think on his feet. With the right timing, you can use the environment to deliver punishing, bone-cracking special moves that'll seriously injure or knock out an opponent, like slamming them into a wall or smashing their head into a desk. It's fast-paced, brutal, and decidedly in keeping with the spirit of the films.



To end his thirst for blood, you must develop one of your own.



Castlevania The Dracula X Chronicles

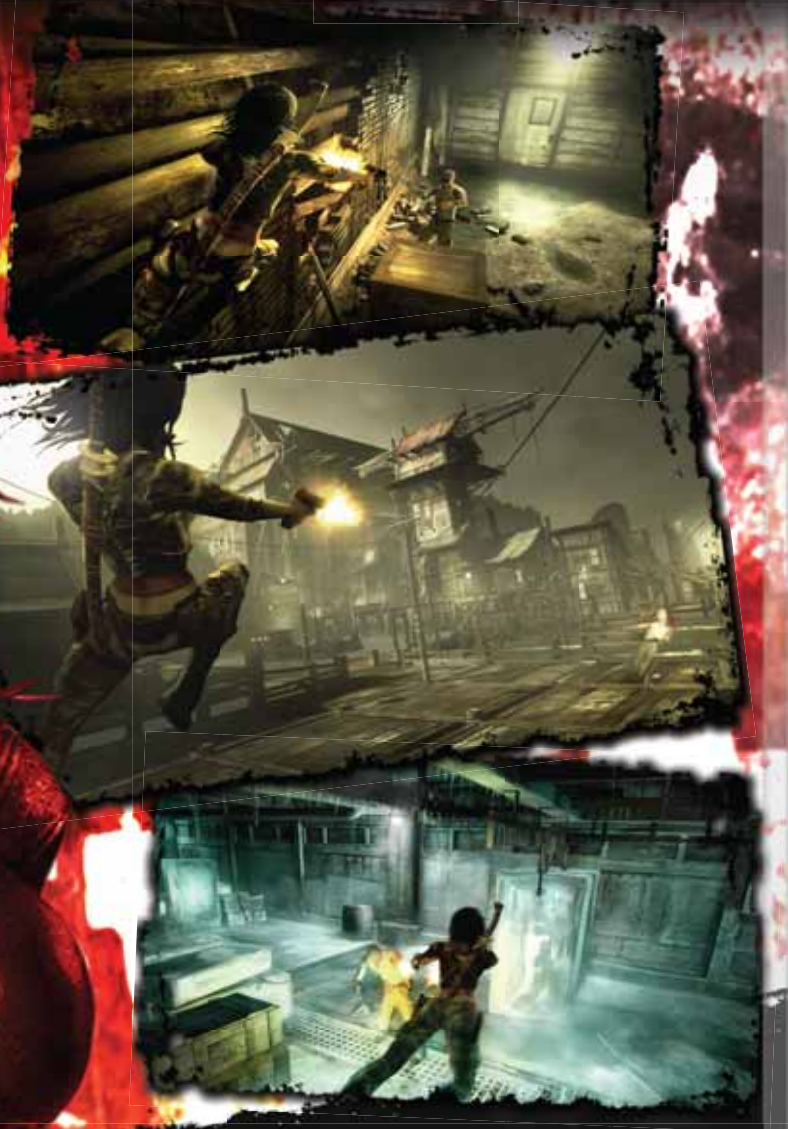
Coming October 2007

At long last the Belmont family's quest to destroy Dracula is here for the PSP. This time it's a double curse featuring *Symphony of the Night* and the first ever U.S. release of *Rondo of Blood*. *The Dracula X Chronicles* will let you drink up new game modes, items and enemies in gruesome 2D or blood-curdling 3D graphics.



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Publisher: Sierra
Developer: Artificial Mind and Movement
Release Date: 2008
Genre(s): Action
Categories: Dramatic Slow-Motion
of players: 1



Wet, seen in motion, looks like somebody gave the Prince of Persia twin pistols. Also, boobs. This is because the developer, Artificial Mind and Movement, is made up of Ubisoft veterans who worked on PoP and Splinter Cell.

The gunwoman in question is Rubi, who solves problems for a living. Specifically, she solves problems that involve a great many people's continued consumption of oxygen, through the use of a slow-motion acrobatic fighting style that employs both guns and swords to devastating effect. As Rubi jumps, flips, wall-runs, and slides through her surroundings like a cross between Inspector Tequila and Lara Croft, you'll automatically enter slow-motion targeting sequences every time you pull out your guns. Rubi can also employ her sword for devastating close-combat moves that honestly have to be seen to be believed (especially the one that the developers refer to as the "taint splitter").

Wet, perhaps more notably than the action itself, looks like what you'd expect if Quentin Tarantino designed a game. The design is pure retro, Rubi looks vaguely like Beatrix Kiddo, and she's on a roaring rampage of revenge, out to find and kill the man who doublecrossed her.

Why's it called Wet? No idea. Ask me next year.



Preview by Wanderer



Preview by Wanderer

[PROTOTYPE]

Publisher: Sierra
Developer: Radical
Release Date: Q3 2008
Genre(s): Open-World
Category: Splatterpunk
of Players: 1

Radical is a developer that's built a reputation on licensed open-world games like *Hulk: Ultimate Destruction*. *Prototype* represents their first stab at an original IP, and they've held absolutely nothing back. It makes previous open-world antiheroes like the average *Grand Theft Auto* protagonist look like they're helping old ladies and small children cross the street.

Alex Mercer wakes up in New York one day with no idea who he is, a host of superpowers, and a taste for human flesh. By devouring people, Alex can immediately assume their form and learn everything they know, allowing him to flawlessly masquerade as them. At the same time, the city is under martial law, as a bizarre disease reshapes people into hideous monsters. The military takes over parts of the city, while others remain neutral and the monsters run rampant in the rest.

As Alex, you're in the middle of all of this, a one-man army fighting armies. Battles in *Prototype* are vicious, bloody, and utterly destructive; Alex can throw cars, steal soldiers' vehicles, devour passersby, or use his shapeshifting ability both offensively and defensively. Your immediate goal is simple survival, and, if you feel like it, unraveling the conspiracy that surrounds your own creation.

Prototype is easily one of the bloodiest and most violent games in years. Even if you think you have a high tolerance for video game violence, *Prototype* may change your mind. The word that comes immediately to mind is "unflinching"; you're a powerful antihero up against equally powerful forces, and when you fight, the bystanders tend to be the ones who lose. This is going to raise the bar for open-world games yet again.



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LEFT 4 DEAD



Publisher: EA/Valve
Developer: Turtle Rock
Release Date: Q1 2008

Genre(s): Survival Horror
Category: Jump, Gypsy!
of Players: 1-8



Preview by Wanderer

If you're at all interested in zombies and the shooting thereof, odds are decent that you've been tracking the progress of *Left 4 Dead* for quite some time. It uses Valve's Source engine to put together a nearly pure adrenaline rush, pitting up to four player-controlled survivors (with bots controlling any that humans aren't) against not only a nearly infinite tide of fast, angry zombies, but up to four player-controlled special monsters. The ensuing running gun battle is the perfect small dose of shooter gameplay.

Each survivor can carry one large weapon, up to two pistols, one explosive device (a pipe bomb or Molotov), one bottle of painkillers, and one first aid kit. They can replenish these at occasional safe zones, but up until that point, they must watch each other's backs as they fight across a given map to a final destination. Every step of the way, they'll be harassed by mobs of fast, angry zombies that can surround and beat a survivor down in seconds. If you stray from the group, you are dead. It's that simple.

If you're not a survivor, you can jump into the game at any time as one of the larger monsters, whereupon it's your job to kill the survivors. As a high-powered Tank, a disgustingly explosive Boomer, an agile Hunter, or the Smoker, which basically has a *Half-Life* barnacle trap in its mouth, you present a major threat to the survivors, who'll need to coordinate their attacks to take you down.

Left 4 Dead is one of the better zombie games ever released, and fans of cooperative shooter gameplay will find a lot to like in it too. The only real complaint I have at this point is that it has too few maps, but hopefully that'll be remedied shortly after launch.



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RATCHET & CLANK FUTURE TOOLS OF DESTRUCTION



THE HERO TYPE

What makes a hero, in a video game, or otherwise?

Is it the powers? Is it the lives they live? Is it their motives? Or is it their ability to always somehow triumph when the odds are against them? Whatever makes an individual hero, the one constant truth about them is that they come in all shapes and sizes. A hero can be found in pretty much anyone, provided the circumstances are right.

This holiday season, two of Sony's most well-known third parties will be bringing forth two action heroes—one familiar and one new — as exclusive PlayStation 3 properties. It's clear that Sony wants to facilitate faster and higher system sales by tapping these two acclaimed developers, and the two games that are being produced from these studios may well do the trick.

They're both action-adventure heroes. They both bring fun gameplay to the table. They're also both complete and total opposites.

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune features a character who has nothing to rely on but his wits and survival instincts. Nate is brash, he's insecure, he screws up parachute jumps, and generally makes his female companion look like Lara Croft in comparison. All of his weapons are lifted off of his would-be killers, and the rest of his adventurer's assets (running, jumping, climbing, etc.) are simply that of a normal human.

He's also got a case of hard luck. The second you, the player, presses the Start button and set him off on his adventure, things go terribly wrong. Lives are lost, and the survivors are sent running to keep their own. From a boat under machine gun fire, to a deadly tomb, to a botched plane ride and an occupied fortress, Nate has no time to wonder just how he got himself into all of these messes. His is simply to get out of them alive, with no advantages whatsoever.

On the other side of the coin, we've got Ratchet. Compared to a human, much less the foes he fights, Ratchet's got a bit of a height disadvantage, being a small furry thing and all. However, he makes up for it with a mind the size of Texas. His sidekick is an even smaller, but just as useful, robot named Clank, who in this new title, gains even more powers of his own. Together, they're a one-and-a-half-person army, capable of traveling galaxies, laying robotic armies to waste, and turning just about any situation they're in into an adventure.

In *Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction*, they're on the adventure of a lifetime, fighting to uncover the secrets of Ratchet's past, and liberate the galaxy from an invading warlord emperor at the same time. Having been in five adventures prior to this one, this is pretty much all in a day's work.

This October and November, two very different characters will be performing similarly heroic feats. The sense scope may be different, and the abilities of each most certainly are, but both are motivated by the drive to do what's right... or, at the very least, conducive to continued survival in the face of overwhelming odds...



HEROES' HISTORY

Unlike *Uncharted*, *Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction* needed no formal introduction when it was first showcased at the 2006 GDC. The classic Lombax-meets-robot series has been a staple of the PS2 library during the machine's entire lifespan, and has been synonymous with quality gaming. This is Ratchet's fifth go on a PlayStation, and Sony's banking on the series's established positive position amongst gamers to draw them to their new machine. Fans of the older titles will be happy to know that after the arena madness of *Deadlocked*, the series will be shifting back to its action/platforming roots.

Ratchet games have always been huge, and thus, creating a game in the series which manages to broaden its sense of scope is no easy task. However, Insomniac managed to do just that for the PS3. You've seen trailers thus far, but it's still hard to believe until you actually see a real-time bustling futuristic metropolis on-screen, towering high above Ratchet and Clank's diminutive forms, and stretching for miles in each direction. It's the kind of sight that makes you wonder if, maybe, just maybe, there really is something to this "next-generation" stuff all the kids keep talking about lately.



LOMBAX VS. HIMSELF

If you've played the older *Ratchet & Clank* games, you pretty much know what to expect from *Future*. It's just much bigger this time around. However, this isn't a bad thing. With full manipulation of the game's camera on his side, Ratchet runs, jumps, high-jumps, climbs, and floats with the help of Clank to his destinations. It's the solid 3D platforming action that *Ratchet & Clank* has been known for... only this time, it's very, very shiny.

With the help of devices, Ratchet's abilities are further extended. The Gelanator is a cannon that, as its name suggests, fires blobs of green goo that Ratchet can bounce on to reach greater heights. Analog control makes for much of Ratchet's movement, except for a couple of situations where the SIXAXIS takes over. See the "Total Hero Control" sidebar for more on exactly how. Ratchet's actions are fast-paced, but not too much so. It's just as well, since there are actually three ways to control the little guy.

Two of these control methods can be accessed in the Options screen. The Third-Person mode allows Ratchet to move in all directions like any other 3D platformer. You can turn him in any angle, and deal with enemies with the game's built-in automatic lock-on system. Lock-Strafe, however, allows Ratchet to strafe from side to side while still being able to move forward, sort of like a third-person on-rails shooter. The last control scheme is a behind-the-shoulder view that players can operate like a console FPS, for precise blasting purposes. Holding the L2 button will toggle it.



TOTAL HERO CONTROL

SIXAXIS control rears its head in the first stage, as Ratchet does his best to escape a city under attack. After having much of the ground shot out from under them, Ratchet and Clank are forced to take a freefall from one of the city's many skyscrapers. However, this being a city of the future, most rush-hour traffic is of the flying sort. Ratchet now doesn't have just the first step to worry about, but multiple bumps and bruises brought on by aerial collisions the way to that final splat. Enter the SIXAXIS. Tilting it in any direction allows Ratchet to steer his freefall and avoid the traffic that would otherwise make up numerous flying hazards.

Later in the game, Clank mysteriously gains the ability to sprout wings and fly himself and Ratchet around after stepping on special launching pads. These flights can be either on-rails or free-form exploratory aerial sequences, facilitated by tilting the controller. Think yourself as being in a cockpit, grasping a dual-handed flight stick, and you've pretty much got the idea.

It's definitely an upgrade to analog movement in that the tilting corresponds to the actual speed of your hands rather than some sort of analog or digital response mechanism. Anyone who's flown the tilt-controlled magic carpet in *Sonic and the Secret Rings* or used the SIXAXIS flight controls in *Warhawk* knows how this can be an asset.

One last implementation of Sony's tilt-sensing controller takes the form of computer hacking puzzles, in which an electrical circuit is completely by rolling around a conductive marble into a gap (similar to the old board game *Labyrinth*, or the Wii's *Koroninpa: Marble Mania*) so that a current can pass through it.

PORTRAIT OF A HERO

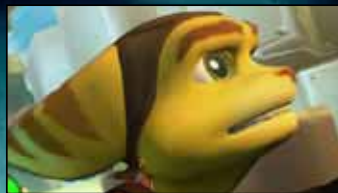
Name: Ratchet
Type: Lombax (don't ask us what that is), Male

Abilities: Running, Jumping, Climbing, Engineer's Mind, An Assortment Of Tech, Swings A Mean Wrench

Goal: Staying Alive, Learning About His Past, Saving The Galaxy

Profile: Quite possibly the last of his kind, Ratchet staves off the loneliness of depression by tinkering away on anything he can find, and engaging in galaxy-spanning adventures while wielding a vast array of mechanical weaponry. While out fixing his vehicle, he and Clank get a call from Captain Qwark, resident "superhero," which warns of a robotic invasion that makes itself apparent only seconds later. Rushing to the scene, Ratchet finds out that the invasion force is actually gunning for him. Cragmite Emperor Percival Tachyon has a grudge against Lombaxes, and is bent on their extinction. Escaping from him sends Ratchet on a quest to find out the secrets of his race.

First Shining Moment: Ratchet uses every trick in the book to escape a futuristic city under siege, from grinding on monorail tracks to freefalling through traffic. Blasting through hordes of robots with high-powered fusion ordinance is nothing to sneeze at, either.



HEROES HAVE GOOD HELP

Name: Clank
Type: Robot (very possibly descended from a toaster)

Occupation: Weapon, Mode of Transportation, Backpack

Abilities: Robotic/Electronic Telecommunication, Transformation, Modification Potential, Item Storage

Profile: He's spent half his life as a backpack, played a secret agent on interstellar TV, and grown to city-size, smashing his foes underfoot. In Ratchet's adventures, Clank serves as Ratchet's balance and conscience, often playing the "straight man" to Ratchet's energetic attitude and adventurous style. He also often serves as a means of transport through both air and water. Clank's no stranger to being modified, but *Future* is the first time that these modifications have seemingly taken place under his own power.

First Shining Moment: This time around, Clank develops the ability to see strange, ghost-like robots that Ratchet can't. These robots, in turn, give him powers, the first of which is the ability to sprout bat-like wings that enable Ratchet to fly while Clank is strapped to his back. See the "Total Hero Control" sidebar for more details.



LOMBAX VS. THE GALAXY

It's impossible to predict what feats the game will ask Ratchet to perform over the course of the game, because the planets he visits are all set up differently. (There will also sometimes be on-rails space combat *between planets*.)

Some planets are technological, and in these places you'll see Ratchet do everything from grind rails to drop from buildings. Crates loaded with power-ups are waiting to be broken, and robots swarm from every direction. Ratchet's Swingshot can be used to ferry himself through the air in lieu of any immediately available flight mode by grappling and swinging onto specific points, or even grabbing onto a part of sky-traffic. Launching pads may also be present to allow Ratchet to jump very high or activate Clank's flight mode.

Another stage is a swampland, where Ratchet must make precise jumps across instant-death sludge. Enemies here are more of the organic kind, and move a bit more skittishly. The power of the PS3 allows for larger-scale battles than in previous games; indeed, Ratchet and Clank almost always have to face battlefields of foes at a time. For that reason, it seems that he's given access to explosive devices pretty early on in the game. Between all of this combat, and solving the puzzles of many of the installations he enters, our heroes will be very busy indeed.



LOMBAX VS. HEAVILY ARMED ROBOTIC COMMANDOS

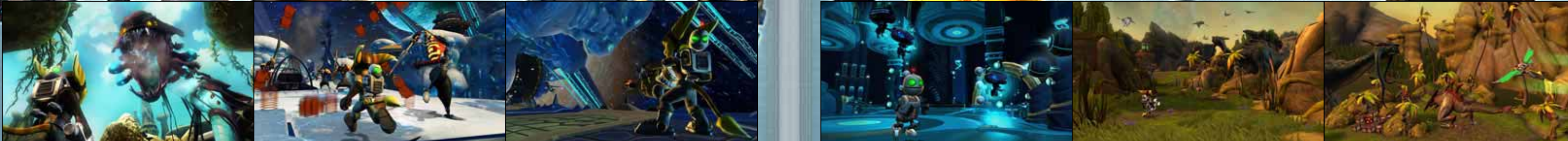
Over the course of the game, Ratchet will gain access to over thirty weapons, gadgets and devices with which to take down his foes. Some are used solely for defeating puzzles, others kick butt, and some, like the Groovitron, disable enemies in a variety of funny ways, such as, in this case, causing them to dance uncontrollably.

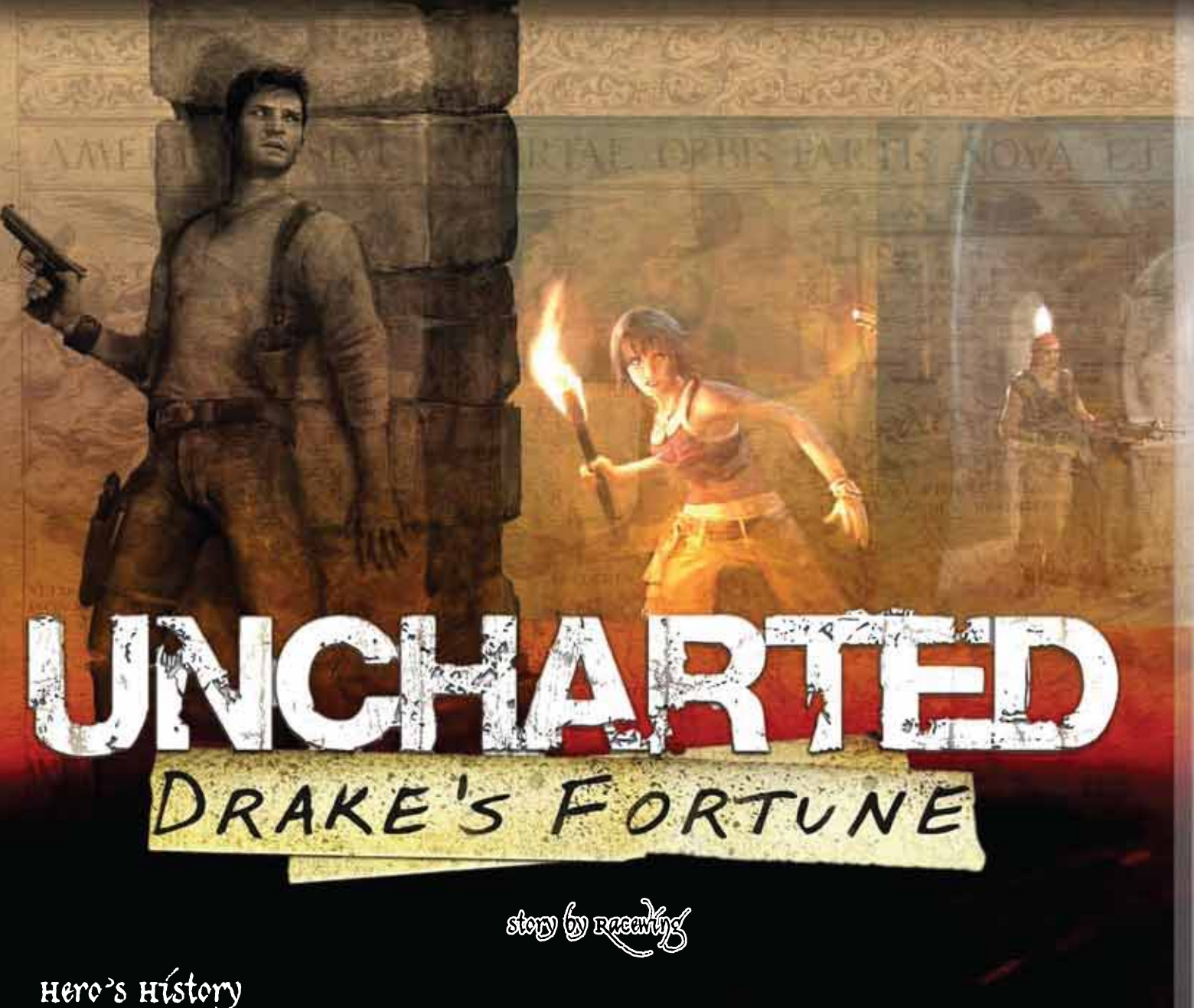
Devices are purchasable with Bolts. Each of the offensive weapons is upgradable via a power-up tree, and through the use of Raritanium, and many of them gain a special attribute once they're powered-up completely. Ratchet's trusty Combuster, for example, will leave the ground ablaze for a short time once it's been shot. The predictable happens to hapless enemies who walk into the flames. Because of the abundance of weapons, it doesn't take an immense amount of Raritanium to power up each one. What's more, weapons gain experience and increase in level with frequent use.

Ratchet, mind you, can run out of ammunition. If all else fails, he can always fall back on his trusty wrench, which he can swing while running, jumping, or standing still. Jumping will cause him to bring the metal head down on enemies like a hammer, taking out small fry in one shot and doing considerable damage to larger enemies. If the wrench is used while squatting, then Ratchet can toss it at enemies, boomerang-style.

HERO'S COMING

It's always a great thing when a quality franchise is taken into a new console generation with care, and this is no exception. By the time you read this article, Ratchet and Clank should be embarking on their futuristic adventure in a matter of days. It's a harmonic blend of the old and the new — an old world reimagined with a new amount of technological power, but not in a way that comes off as a cheap cash-in. It's a safe bet that if you're already a fan of the series, then Sony already has your money. If not... well, the PS3 will run the first four titles as well, won't it?





Hero's History

Uncharted: Drake's Fortune actually made its first appearance at E3 2006, as simply an untitled project. Even so, from the looks of the trailers — which featured jungles, close quarters hand-to-hand fighting, human moves and forms of survival, and an overarching treasure hunter motif — comparisons were made on the spot to *Indiana Jones*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Prince of Persia*. Some people even wondered if Sony and Naughty Dog had somehow acquired the *Pitfall* license.

Uncharted turned out to be none of these things. It is, in fact, its own beast, despite its looks. On the surface, it certainly looks to be a derivative adventure game with little new to bring to the table. When you play it, though, you'll notice the subtleties, the polish, and the little innovations that add up. While none of them actually blow the roof off of the action/adventure genre, they still come together to create make an experience that is easily worth playing, and will definitely make you wonder how you ever lived with some of those earlier games' feature sets... or lack thereof.



Man vs. Himself

A year into the system's life, the PlayStation 3 is finally starting to come into its own. Developers are learning the ins and outs of the system, and enhancing their games accordingly. While multiplatform releases that employ middleware still abound, there are fewer titles being released for the PS3 that follow the "take a PS2 game and jazz up its resolution" mindset, something plagued the system during its launch (*Genji* and *Gundam*, anyone?). The technological "potential" that Sony's top brass have been preaching about from day one to justify its high price tag is only now beginning to bear some fruit. It's not yet the abundance that would quench the famine PS3 owners have had thus far, but it's a start, and *Uncharted* is one of the best examples of this.

You'll notice when you first take control of Nate, he's very "animated." None of these animations look out of place, or as if the studio were trying too hard. Press buttons along with moving that analog stick, and you'll be able to chain actions into one another. Long jumps go into rolls, as do punching moves. Breaking into a run

Portrait of a Hero

Name: Nathan "Nate" Drake

Type: Human, Male

Occupation: Explorer

Abilities: Running, Jumping, Climbing, Swimming, Hanging From Ledges, Fistcuffs, Good With Firearms, Able To Heal From Bullet Wounds By Standing Still

Goals: Recovery of His Ancestor's Treasure, Staying Alive

Profile: Nate is the fictional descendant of Sir Francis Drake, cut in his ancestor's cloth. He's an explorer out to uncover the secrets of his family legacy, and earn a boatload of cash in the bargain. Unfortunately, when things go terribly wrong, and the lives of himself and his companions are either lost or put in immediate danger, he's forced to bring out the best and the worst in himself. Drake's no action hero, but he knows he doesn't want to die. There are too many mysteries to be solved, both about the treasure and about his past — and hey, getting rich is always good. Therefore, from here on in, it's kill or be killed. A lot of people who are arguably just "doing their jobs" are going to have to get shot.

First Shining Moment: For Drake, there really isn't just one that can be focused on. From the word "go," Drake manages to navigate an entire ruin full of tricks, traps, switches, collapsing floors and underwater passageways, straight out of certain popular movies centered around the theme. It's clear he's done this before, and is more than adept at doing it. His challenge, then, is now doing the same thing, only with a couple of hundred people waiting around every turn, and hiding in corners, wanting him dead. We'll see how it goes.

and pressing the Square button to punch will result in a different, momentum-based sort of fighting move than just pressing the button when standing still. More than that, after the punch, Nate will still continue to run. Holding the Circle button will allow Nate to sprint, opening the way to scenarios where Nate gives opponents a run-by decking as he zooms to safety. Simply put, you'll be able to navigate the game simply by reading Nate's movements.

Zoom the camera in even closer to Nate whenever you hear him talk, and you'll notice his face move in perfect sync with the speech, down to the inflections. In fact, you'll notice that Nate is very talkative, even outside of the script. He'll pseudo-curse when he gets shot, and give off a grunt or "okay" of determination when he manages to reload and regroup. Usually the player fills in this sort of dialogue by themselves; in *Uncharted*, Nate's emotions correspond along with yours, driving home his "everyman" persona.

Man vs. Nature

The innovations extend to environmental control as well. Nate runs, jumps, climbs and swims as well as any action hero before him, but with subtle differences and enhancements. When Nate navigates handholds on a wall, for example, he isn't limited to horizontal or vertical movement. He can go diagonally, and switch directions at the drop of the hat with quick flicks of the analog stick and taps on the X button. SIXAXIS control allows him to balance on narrow ledges (see "Total Hero Control" sidebar). It's touches like these that make even the likes of *Prince of Persia* seem clunky.

Any surface of a lush and detailed jungle, or a rocky and uneven temple floor, Nate can climb on to so long as he can jump high enough. As this is an exploration game, much of this territory contains puzzles that must be solved to progress to the next area. Most of these puzzles fit perfectly into the flow of the game, not feeling as if they've been simply shoehorned in to impede progress. (While the design team has gone on record to say that there won't be any crate puzzles in the game, there are still a good amount centering around exploding barrels. We'll have to wait to see if Naughty Dog is able to tone these down to seem less of a cliché.)

Furthermore, if you're particularly stumped, the game will give you a gentle nudge in the right direction. If your traveling companion won't give you a hint after a certain amount of time, odds are the game will prompt you to press one of the shoulder buttons for an automatic sight to your goal. In other cases, Nate will be able to open Sir Francis Drake's diary every once in a while to find clues. If all else fails, the game may outright tell you what you need to do, either with words or button-press icons. All of this ensures that the adventure continues unimpeded, making the game one smooth ride.

Man vs. Man

Pirates, bandits, and overall shady people. What's a single person to do when he's outnumbered a couple hundred to one, especially when he's got no futuristic armor or innate super powers to fall back on? The answer is: anything he can.

Dealing with conflict in *Uncharted* falls into two main categories: close physical combat, and weaponry. The weaponry side is easy enough to figure out. Drake picks up firearms, ammunition and grenades from fallen foes to use on other foes. He can only hold two weapons (one small gun such as a pistol or SMG, and one larger weapon such as a shotgun or AK-47) plus grenades with him at all times. Since he's totally outnumbered, outgunned and outmatched, he's encouraged to use these weapons from cover, using the Circle button to hide behind any structure he can, and combinations of the analog stick and the Circle button to dart and roll between pieces of cover. Both blind-firing and focused aim behind cover are options.

(Yes, we *know* it sounds familiar. Wait for it.)

The cover system in this game is unique, however. It begins with the fact that a sort of "zooming" function is attached to every weapon Nate has by pressing the L1 button. It allows you to zero

in on enemies with a slightly closer view than the default, which is important for getting off the all-important headshot. While in this looking mode, Drake can move forward slowly, allowing you to use the camera to survey the area. However, in this mode, he can still change weapons, and he can still reload. Imagine sneaking through a fortified area, picking off one enemy from afar with a pistol, then quickly switching to a shotgun or grenade as the rest notice and try to rush in close. That's what you can do in *Uncharted*. A shotgun has arguably never been more fun to use than in this game.

The physical combat is actually less precise than the gun aspect of *Uncharted*. Unless one goes in close to an enemy, all Nate will do is punch away. However, if Nate manages to land a punch (provided it isn't interrupted — this is also a possible outcome), he will have access to kicks and power moves to quickly lay down his foe, based on timed presses. It's a bit to get used to at first, but once you get used to it, you'll find it invaluable against enemies that try to rush you, who are impossible to draw a gun bead on at close range.

Oddly enough, the only "videogame-ish" aspect of Drake's survival is the way that he seems to be able to shrug off multiple bullet wounds. The only "power-ups" in this game come in the form of armaments. Therefore, Nate regains health simply by staying in one place without getting hit. There's also no HUD in the game. Instead, in order to let you know when to get Drake out of harm's way, the screen becomes increasingly washed-out, as does the sound. When the environment is bathed in white, and things get moving a little bit slower than normal, that's your cue to get the heck out of whatever firefight you've involved yourself in, and find some cover to hide behind instead.

Hero's Coming

While current signs don't quite yet point to *Uncharted* as being a killer-app for the PS3, it contains a few much-needed justifications for the system in itself. The road to the PS3's ideal next-generation experience is being traveled via baby steps, but each of these steps is significant. Playing *Uncharted*, one sees a sign of things to come in terms of immersive game control. It's a blend of old and new techniques that doesn't force the player to adapt too quickly to a single type of control scheme, but rather, lets them ease into the innovation at their own pace, and with practice. *Uncharted's* set to make its way to store shelves in November, and time will tell if players decide that they're ready to wade into the pool as opposed to take a plunge.

Total Hero Control

SIXAXIS technology has two notable uses for Nate during his exploratory quest. The first is balance. In most games where climbing and platforming are involved, there are tight, narrow planks, logs, or otherwise unstable surfaces that must be crossed. In these situations, the player is usually enticed to move the left analog stick horizontally to keep themselves balanced as they still push it in a vertical direction. While it's intuitive, it can be a bit of a strain.

Uncharted goes a different route, encouraging you to tilt the SIXAXIS as you push and balance you way across statues or trees that have been made into narrow makeshift bridges. The key is to not tilt in either direction too far. Note Drake's onscreen visual cues and you'll be able to stay on your feet and cross safely. If his arms end up out of place, you're in trouble.

Of course, much like in those analog-controlled games, if you fail at this task, Nate will slip, and still manage to hold on to the platform. You're then enticed to mash the X button as much as possible in order to get back on your feet, and try the whole thing over again.

The other notable aspect of SIXAXIS control is how Drake throws grenades. *Uncharted* takes a nod from *Gears of War* in allowing you to set your throwing arc in real-time via a line of expected trajectory. However, tilting the SIXAXIS in any direction will allow you to change that trajectory without the use of sticks, which is very useful when trying to keep the camera steady, keep enemies in your sights, or stay close to cover.

Heroes Have Good Help

Name: Elena Fisher

Type: Human, Female

Occupation: Television Reporter

Abilities: Pretty Much Everything Drake Has, Plus An Enormous Amount Of Willpower

Profile: Like most reporter-types in fiction, Elena's out to get the "story of the year." Her camera is always with her (though she's smart enough to put the thing away when things get too dangerous) and she pokes around nooks, crannies and conversations. Oh, and she seems to be determined to be the trip's narrator.

First Shining Moment: Near the beginning of the game, Drake is convinced by traveling companion Victor Sullivan to actually ditch Elena alone on an island dock while heading for another tropical island to continue her treasure hunt. Elena manages to track them down anyway, and fights alongside Drake just when things start going horribly wrong, to avoid being gunned down. She also faces down situations head-on that Drake finds himself insecure about, such as parachuting from burning planes. Helpless woman, this one is not. She's a trooper, and she's certainly athletic enough for the explorer role. Unlike many action/adventure games with both a male and female lead, she doesn't need help climbing cliffs or traversing rough terrain, nor does she need very much in the way of defense.



Interview

With **Richard Lemarchand** (Lead Game Designer) and **Neil Druckmann's** (Game Designer)

- *Uncharted* is definitely a departure from the cartoon-like characters and worlds of *Crash Bandicoot* and *Jak & Daxter*. What made you decide to shift to a more real-world game and setting? How did this project come to be?

Richard Lemarchand: Each new hardware platform has seen Naughty Dog strike out in a new direction — *Crash Bandicoot* on the original PlayStation, *Jak and Daxter* on the PS2, and now *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* on the PS3. Each series of games has seen us pushing ourselves forward in terms of gameplay, storytelling and production values.

When Sony asked us to make a game that would showcase the capabilities of the PlayStation 3 we knew that we had the chance to do something really special. We love a challenge here at the 'Dog, and we deliberately set ourselves a big one — to create an exciting, sophisticated action-adventure game that would capture the spirit of fun of our previous games, but that would give people something that they had never been seen before.

The PlayStation 3's power has really opened new doors for game developers in terms of what's possible when creating a realistic world and believable human characters. We quickly decided that exploring that avenue was a perfect fit with all our other goals. We figured that if we could bring all the fun and adventure of our previous games to a real-world setting, then we'd have something really original and unique.

- If you were to nail it down to just one, what's the main overarching theme of *Uncharted*? (i.e. survival, love, etc.)

Neil Druckmann: Greed is the one overarching theme of *Uncharted*. As we were putting the story together we found that the idea of greed — and how far are people willing to go to pursue their desires — kept coming up over and over again.

Most of our tale takes place in a lost sixteenth century Spanish colony on a mysterious island. Throughout the history of the island people have been drawn to it by their greed. However, not many people have left its shores alive.

As the story starts, greed is what brings Nathan Drake, our hero, to this same island. He and Elena Fisher come to the island in pursuit of the lost treasure of El Dorado. Without giving too much away, I can tell you that as the story unfolds you'll see how greed can consume people and bring out some pretty horrible characteristics. It's the people that can overcome their selfish desires — the ones that make true sacrifices for others — that are the heroes.

- Did any existing games/books/movies/legends serve as inspiration for *Uncharted*? Aside from the game's *El Dorado* premise, we've seen comparisons already drawn to *Pitfall*, *Prince of Persia*, *Tomb Raider*, *Gears of War*, and even *Indiana Jones*.

Richard Lemarchand: Being compared to all those awesome games is really flattering, but the kernel of inspiration for *Uncharted* comes from much older sources.

When we set out to make the game we decided almost straight away that we wanted to reinvent the classic action-adventure genre



HUMAN HISTORY JUST GOT A LITTLE LESS HUMAN.

with a contemporary hero. By classic action-adventure we weren't just thinking of *Indy* and *The Mummy*, but of the great two-fisted tales from the twenties and thirties — silent classics that spawned the genre like *The Thief of Baghdad*, or the adventure films and Saturday-morning serials from the following decades that famously influenced George Lucas in the creation of his hallmark adventures.

We even looked back as far as the "*Penny Dreadfuls*" of the Victorian era — the scandalizing (for the time) tales of murder and romance that ushered in the modern era of great pop-media storytelling. The more we researched, the more we found common themes emerging in all these stories. Frantic chases, narrow escapes, eccentric characters, shifting allegiances and cliff-hangers seemed to be what made all these stories so eternally compelling.

So then we created a hero that you immediately recognize as a regular and believable guy from our early twenty-first century world. As soon as we placed Nate Drake down among all these exciting classic adventure scenarios, we knew we were onto something hot.

- What would you say sets the game and its main character (Nate) apart from other action/adventure games and their protagonists? What unique gameplay aspects are present?

Neil Druckmann: Unlike many other videogame characters, Nathan Drake is not a super soldier and he is definitely not a self-professed hero. Everything that went into the design of the character was all done to create an authentic, down-to-earth, and believable protagonist — from his outward appearance, his mannerisms, even down to the way he flinches when he gets shot. When you play the game we want you to feel more like you're controlling someone like Bruce Willis in *Die Hard*, rather than Arnold Schwarzenegger.

The core of our gameplay is a unique combination of cover-based shooting and platforming mechanics we're calling Traversal-Gunplay. This means that finding new cover points and better angles on your enemies might require you to leap over gaps, climb up dilapidated walls, or swim across flooded alleyways. There's nothing like finding a really good high position to surprise your enemies, only to have your new spot compromised — either because our AI has flanked you or because your destructible cover has been whittled away — and to be forced to run-and-gun to a different cover spot. Of course, you might have to pull off a few haymaker combos along the way with our hand-to-hand brawling system.



Now having said all that, our game isn't just a shooter, but a full action-adventure experience in the grand Naughty Dog tradition. Expect to also be exploring large environments and solving puzzles while following a deep story with lots of twists and turns.

- Being your first PS3 title, have you learned any lessons during the development process? Are you enjoying programming for the hardware? How much of it do you feel you are tapping with *Uncharted*?

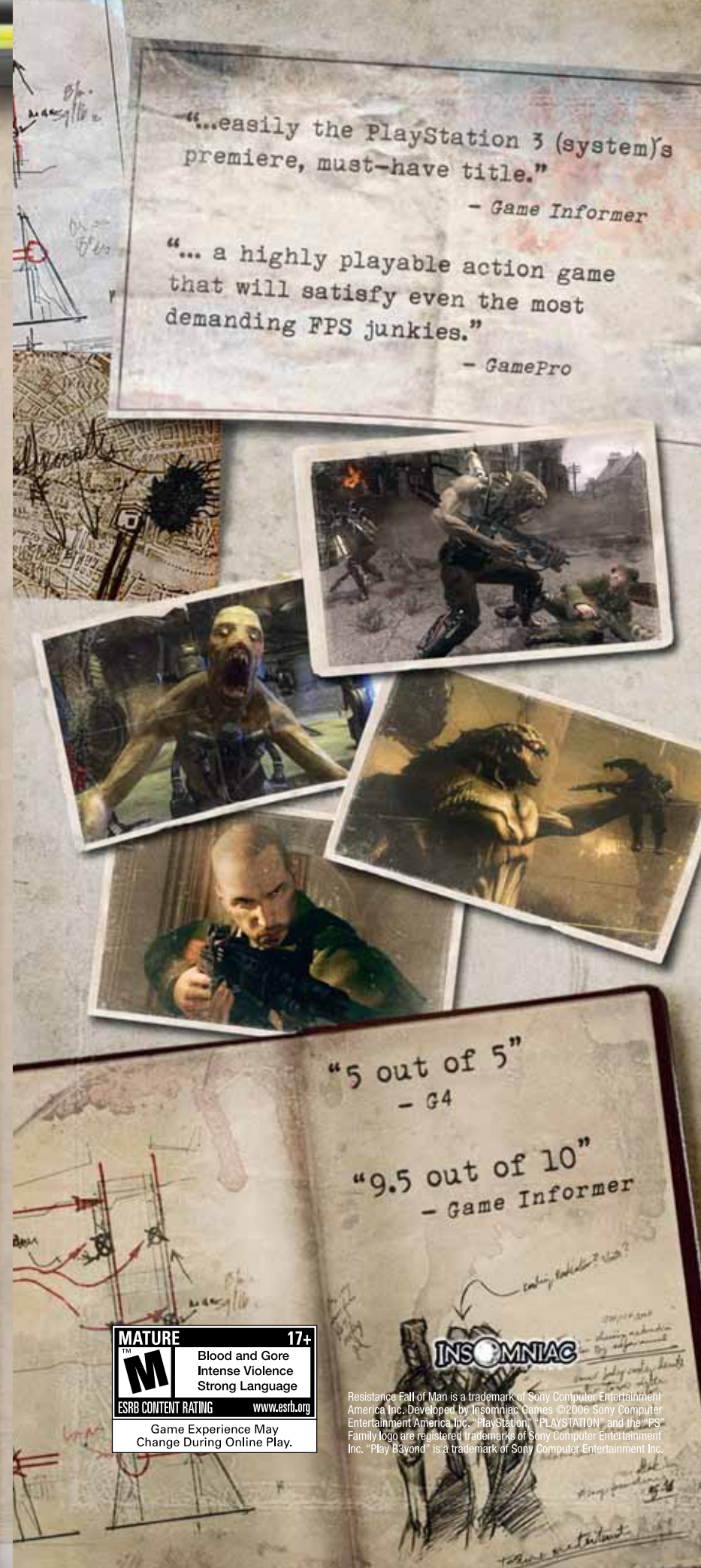
Neil Druckmann: There have been many hard lessons that we had to learn as we evolved our production pipeline from making the cartoon-inspired world of *Jak and Daxter* on the PS2 to the stylized reality of *Uncharted* on the PS3. For example, it took us a long time to develop the advanced animation system that we use to layer together the thousands of animations that make our human characters look and behave in a believable way. Our background artists worked closely with our programmers to create the amazing vistas we have in the game. Our streaming textures, water dynamics, and rendering filters all are critically important for the breathtaking look of our environments. I can confidently say that people will be floored when they run around in our world for the first time.

This level of polish couldn't have been accomplished without a passionate and cooperative approach from our technical and artistic teams. The Playstation 3 is a complex, powerful system and we are regularly finding new ways of squeezing better performance from its architecture. Still, as great as our game looks and plays, there is still a lot untapped power in this baby. As we wrap up production on this game we are already looking into which systems we can improve and what new ones we will create for our next title.

- Any special messages for gamers that you wish to share?

Richard Lemarchand: Whatever you do, give it your all. A big part of our success at Naughty Dog is to do with sheer hard work, and we always hope that our games will inspire future game creators to make the amazing play experiences of tomorrow.

We hope that everyone enjoys *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* when it ships this holiday season, and we can't wait to see what gamers round the world have to say about it!



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

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R F O M . C O M

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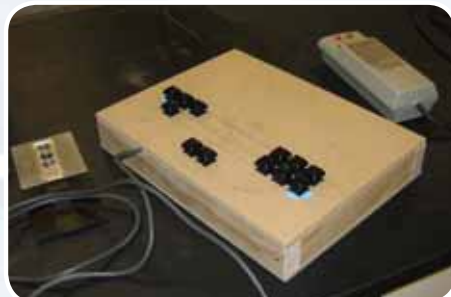
Evolution, the premiere fighting game tournament in North America, has completed another successful year of events. Starting from four regional qualifiers throughout the United States, it culminated last August at Green Valley Ranch in Las Vegas. With top Japanese contenders flying in once again, the only thing guaranteed for players was a long, hard fight to the top.



Run by the crack staff of Shoryuken.com and offering over \$80,000 in prizes at the Finals, the event spanned three days and consisted of *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike*, *Capcom vs. SNK 2*, *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*, *Gully Gear XX: Accent Core*, *Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection*, *Virtua Fighter 5*, *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*, and *Super Smash Bros. Melee*. It was odd to see perfectly normal families, waiting in line to sign their children up for *Smash Bros.*, to look over and witness a pitched battle of epic proportions

as *MVC 2* grudge matches clashed between the warring factions of the East and West Coasts. I almost expected Dr. Doom to jump off the big-screen and molecularly disintegrate some kid's Pikachu.

Aside from the events, one of the best reasons for going to Evolution is the chance to meet up with fellow players throughout the world. Catching up with old friends and rivals, running into cocky newbies looking to cut their teeth on veterans, and getting to ruthlessly crush them (in other words: taking their lunch money) is absolutely priceless. The spoils of war from a money match is just icing on the cake, however. There were plenty of surprises as well, including one player who brought a custom controller that was mapped out like a keyboard, WASD position and all! His execution was flawless, easily pulling off Red Parries and Super Cancels in *3rd Strike*, but alas, it wasn't enough against the top-seeded players in each pool who made it into Semi-Finals.



Another feature of Evolution and its annual opportunities is the BYOC (Bring Your Own Console) area, and the bizarre range of tournaments held within. From a singles *Guilty Gear XX: Accent Core* tournament to complement the official Evolution 2v2 Teams, several PC fighters such as *Melty Blood: Act Cadenza*, to *Breakers Revenge*, there was a scene for it. However, one major issue this year was the commitment of time and resources that these side tournaments consume. Because players were often involved in a side-tourney and an Evolution event simultaneously, it led to some near-disqualifications. As a result, there is a discussion regarding the future of the BYOC section in Evolution 2008.

While events were run on time and without serious mishaps, one major controversy involved *Street Fighter III: 3rd Strike*. Because of the massive amount of entries involved (about four hundred players), the inclusion of over forty last-minute entries caused a disruption in the schedule, causing Evolution staff to mandate a change from best-of-three format to single-match. While this was accepted during qualification pools, this caused huge upsets in the sixty-four player Semifinals. Because of this, several top-ranked players from both Japan and the United States failed to make it to the coveted Final Eight, leading many to doubt the legitimacy of this year's results. Nevertheless, Japanese Robo-Chun player Shinya Ohnuki defeated fellow powerhouse Tokido in the Grand Finals, with Alex Valle's 3rd place ranking leading the pack for the American scene (Yours truly tied for a measly 17th).

This year's defining Evo Moment was Justin Wong's unbelievable one-man comeback against Yipes in *Marvel vs. Capcom 2* Finals. In the words of commentator Finesse, "WE JUST GOT A REAL MATCH!" Cyclops, Wong's last X-Man standing, single-handedly wiped out a full-strength team of Storm/Psylocke/Magneto with SIX well-placed Super Optic Blasts. Alas, in the end, Yipes reigned supreme and took the title of Champion from Justin Wong's reign of terror. The U.S. *Guilty Gear* scene also got a nice surprise, with the American team of Marn(Eddie)/Flash Metroid(Jam)/Alex Garvin(Dizzy) taking second place and scaring the bejeezus out of Japan, proving that even elite otaku gamers who never see real sunlight (or real women) exist outside the motherland. In *Capcom vs. SNK 2*, D44 Bas, the undisputed master of custom combos, took first in a neck-to-neck struggle with Ricky Ortiz and Justin Wong. Finally for the 2-D fighters, Tokido's Vega clawed his way to 1st Place in Evolution's Geriatric Ward, a.k.a. *Super Street Fighter II Turbo*, with five other American players (Choi, Graham Wolfe, AfroLegends, Sirlin and NKI) placing ahead of Ohnuki, who was the next highest Japanese player in the finals, and tied with Alex Valle for 7th. *Super Turbo* remains the oldest game in Evolution's lineup, being released in 1996 and still collecting Medicare benefits.

For 3-D games, *Tekken 5: Dark Resurrection* remains strong for the United States, where Tekken Zaibatsu's "The Business" Arario took the title of the King of Iron Fist. Surprisingly, Korea failed to show up this year. But Spero Gin (not Korean), Bronson (AzN, but still not Korean) and

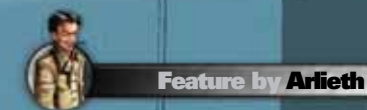
KaNE (who's Korean, but not *Korean*) took 2nd through 4th for some very entertaining finals as Watson and JaHa clowned the players and the crowd on the mike. *Super Smash Bros. Melee* had some rather surprising results according to scene veterans, with Ken's Marth taking first, Hugs' Samus placing second and Mango's Jigglypuff ending in third. Unfortunately, *Virtua Fighter 5* didn't even pull half of what most other games rated in signups, but Itazan's Shun Di won regardless, with Ohnuki's Pai and Otome's Jacky filling out the top three. In interviews, Ohnuki stated that *Virtua Fighter 4* was actually more fun to play than *VF5*, due to revisions leading to severe character imbalances, thus making Shun Di and Pai rise to untouchable-tier.



After all was said and done, it appears that Tokyo University student Tokido was the biggest winner at Evolution 2007, raking in a cool \$8,250.00, or about 950,000 yen. Ohnuki came in second with \$7,125.00, which is roughly 820,500 yen. Not bad for three day's work!



"DO YOU LIKE MY CHAIR? DOES IT FIT GOOD?"



The Future of Evolution

Time constraints may affect *Super Smash Bros. Melee* next year. Because of the game's nature, a best-of-three format is necessary to allow players to counter-pick advantageous levels for their characters. However, current tournament rules also allow for five stocks (lives) per game, and this may be lowered to three stocks in future Evolution events.

The fate of two games, *Guliy Gear XX: Accent Core* and *Virtua Fighter 5*, are also up in the air for Evolution 2008. It is rumored that one of the two (most likely *VF5*) will not return for next year due to poor turnout, which evokes memories of the ill-fated *Dead or Alive 4* tournament at Evolution 2006. *DoA4* has a lot of good things going for it — inclusion in several professional gaming leagues and television coverage, for example — but still fails to pull in a respectable amount of players for the nation's most competitive fighting game event. Whereas *DoA4* is criticized for not being deep enough, the *VF* series receives complaints for being too deep and inaccessible for casual gamers. It appears that an organized, cohesive effort will be necessary for these games to match the hundreds of players that Evolution's most popular games bring in, despite (or because of) their rapidly advancing age; *3rd Strike*, *MVC2* and *Smash Bros.* are all versions of the game that are at least six years old.

Fortunately, these are minor issues. The fact remains that Evolution, which started as an out-of-pocket project by the Cannon Brothers, has grown (you thought I was going to say Evolved, didn't you?) into an international pinnacle of video gaming, eclipsed only by the Japanese-produced Super Battle Opera. However, Super Battle Opera remains a qualifier-only event, which makes it problematic for foreign teams to compete on the same scale. In contrast, Evolution is an open-entry event, with qualifiers being entirely optional and thus accomplishes within a single weekend what Super Battle Opera manages over a three-month period. As long as Evolution can deal with these logistical difficulties, players throughout the entire world, Japan included, can look forward to a lasting legacy of fighting game competition. For a niche genre with a notoriously steep entry curve, this is welcome news indeed.



This Year's Weapon of Choice

Hardcore Gamer conducted a survey of players from Evolution about the controllers they used. For reference, Stock-level sticks are typically \$60.00 or cheaper, and do not feature interchangeable parts. Arcade-spec Joysticks feature genuine arcade components by Happ, Sanwa or Seimitsu that are interchangeable, and typically cost \$90.00 or more.

Here are the results:

- 7.35%: Stock/Standard American Joystick
- 13.97%: Stock/Standard Japanese Joystick
- 22.06%: Custom/Arcade-spec American Joystick
- 47.06%: Custom/Arcade-spec Japanese Joystick
- 3.68%: Other Controller Type/Pad
- 5.88%: Borrowed Someone's Stick (Slacker)

Total American Joystick Percentage: 29.41%
Total Japanese Joystick Percentage: 61.03%

On the average, twice as many players preferred Japanese hardware over American. There are several reasons for this: Japanese components are reported to last many times longer, have a smaller 'dead-zone' for quicker response time, and require less force to manipulate, reducing controller movement in one's lap. However, for U.S. players to acquire Arcade-spec Japanese controls requires importation as well as exhaustive searching for items often in limited supply.

HAAAA
hardcoregamer.com



Feature by Kitty

The fourth-annual Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) set up shop at the Washington State Convention and Trade Center in Seattle, Washington, from August 24 to August 26, 2007. The Convention and Trade Center is a much larger than the Meydenbauer Center in Bellevue, the previous PAX location. It's a good thing too, as the gaming festival held over 37,000 attendees over the three-day weekend.

All the extra space meant for significantly more content, including three large theatres that exhibitors constantly packed with tons of wonderful things. The theatres held no less than 43 different and exciting events, not including nightly concerts or the OMEGATHON tournament rounds. Everything from Q&A sessions to "pitch your game idea" panels to *Metroid* speed run displays packed the rooms with eager on-lookers. Even the Exhibition Hall itself hosted 53 exhibitors, surpassing this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3).

The Convention and Trade Center dedicated four of its massive floors to PAX '07. Each of the floors were grouped by event: attendees entered at Level 1, engaged in casual Freeplay or tournaments on Levels 2 and 3, or checked out the main theatre and Exhibit Hall on Level 4.

Levels 2 and 3 split up into rooms, each with their own "theme" which was anything from type of game to the name of the particular exhibitor renting out the location. Some of these rooms were rather large; the PC area offered a breathtaking display of several hundred computers linked together, monitors aglow with all sorts of feverish LAN games. Likewise, about a dozen rounds of *Halo 2* lit up some of the console areas, while *Magic: The Gathering* competitions ran late into the night on the tabletop floor.

Perhaps some of the biggest draws to these dedicated gaming floors were the 25 console, PC, and handheld tournaments. Some returning competitions included *Super Smash Bros.: Melee* and *Tetris*. New to the show this year was a PC-versus-console *Shadowrun* tournament. The cross-platform bout served as something of a symbol for the entire event; gamers of all sorts coming together in one place, uniting under one banner, ready to frag each other for ultimate glory.

Along with the electronic tournaments came tabletop competitions and events. With over 30 events, everything from *HeroClix* to *The Spoils* to *Dungeons & Dragons* made an appearance in some form. Even after the tournaments concluded at 11pm each day, convention-goers still crawled around in dungeons or fought each other in friendly duels until the doors finally closed at 3am. With the sound of so many clinking dice or flipping cards, it was hard not to feel good about cramming that one extra deck into a back pocket before entering the show.

The Exhibit Hall was also a significant draw, as it contained a wealth of developers showing off their games, including titles that the public had never seen before. Nearly every booth had a hands-on component to let attendees run wild with the latest games. Most booths had at least a dozen monitors set up to allow anyone to get in quality playtime.

Hothood Games presented a playable version of *On the Rain-Slick Precipice of Darkness*, the game based off *Penny Arcade* itself. Every couple of minutes, a large monitor would replay the game's trailer, while several game stations allowed participants to toy around with several game mechanics. Players were encouraged to build likenesses of themselves with the character generator, and then jump into the hilarious action. The story and action sequences never failed to be entertaining, and it's a safe bet to say that if you enjoy *Penny Arcade*, you'll like the game.

Just across the way, the *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* demo attracted just as many gamers. Helpful staff members were on hand to walk viewers through the different scenarios, outlining different features as they went along. One of the scenarios involved making a daring escape from a bank, and the experience resembled something out of a high-quality action movie. *Kane & Lynch* offers an impressive array of features, including a fully destructible environment, realistic weaponry and an adaptive A.I. (both enemy and ally).

One booth over, the Rockstar Games booth was abuzz with *Table Tennis* tournaments, and in the same area a host of Wii games were on display. *Mario Strikers Charged*, *Pokémon Battle Revolution* and *Metroid Prime 3* all collected long lines of attendees itching to get their hands on a Wii remote. If that weren't enough, Harmonix even had a booth set up to show off *Rock Band*, which let groups of four people band together to rock out on a variety of demo songs.

Card games and board games were also out in force, with Upper Deck previewing the most recent expansion of the *World of Warcraft* TCG. Players got a chance to see *Fires of Outland* up close and personal. Several tables were set up with demo decks built using the new cards, and staff was on hand to play teaching games and show off all the cool extras.

The TableStar Games booth was complete with an Orc King, who gleefully invited onlookers to sit down and be slaughtered by a run-through of the new *Orc Wars* installment to the *HeroCard* system. Building marvelously on the standard dueling system, *Orc Wars* adds another entertaining game to the series; and, like previous titles, all previous *HeroCard* decks are fully compatible with the new game.

Even booths that were not directly related to gaming were a blast. The Udon area sported their artistic wares, complete with the artist on-hand to sign them. Sweet Kitty also made an appearance with their inventory of anime- and game-related swag, and many other booths offered everything from *Dungeons & Dragons* miniatures to *Magic: The Gathering* cards. Beyond the Exhibition Hall and game tournaments, however, there was still a lot of show to experience.

PAX '07 hosted several musical guests that gave rocking performances. Featured guests included MC Frontalot, Jonathan Coulton, The OneUps, Freezepop, the Neskimos, Optimus Rhyme and The Minibosses. Some of the songs played were truly memorable, such as the touching rendition of the *Excitebike* theme by The Minibosses, or Jonathan Coulton's "re: Your Brains." Any event that includes a few hundred singing faux zombies is definitely a winner.

One of the defining moments of the event was Wil Wheaton's keynote speech. Wheaton talked at length about his life growing up with games, including his early obsession with arcade games, and fondly recalled the "[most] advanced computer system" ever made, the Nintendo Entertainment System. Wheaton's hilarious keynote kicked off the convention in the best of moods, which could not have made the packed audience happier.

PAX '07 also included a secret guest, who was sprung on the crowd at the last moment. Uwe Boll, the filmmaker specializing in game-to-film adaptations, spoke at a panel previewing his latest work, *Postal*. Boll delivered an introductory speech, and then showed several minutes of his most recent work. He then held a short question and answer session, some of which outlined his views of his work, as well as how he is trying to push the envelope of political and cultural significance with his films. Originally, outspoken video game critic Jack Thompson was supposed to appear, but due to disagreements with event organizers Thompson declined to attend.

Another important event during PAX '07 was the OMEGATHON competition. Held over the course of the entire weekend, the OMEGATHON pitted an initial 20 contestants against each other for the ultimate prize: a trip for two to the Tokyo Game Show and \$5,000 in spending money.



Competitors battled it out over six rounds and six different games. The premise of each match was simple enough; the bottom four players would be eliminated, and play would proceed at the scheduled times through each successive game. The first match saw *Jenga*, the second *Calling All Cars*, the third *Quake III* deathmatch and so on. The crown jewel of the OMEGATHON, however, would have to be the final round. The final round of the OMEGATHON always remains a secret until the very last day, with the actual game announced on stage.

The last match opened with The Minibosses playing a remarkable cover of the *Halo 3* theme, with a similarly themed video playing in the background. The move was unexpected, even for the secret round, and evoked a lot of cheering and applause. Taking a major turn away from previous OMEGATHONS, whose final rounds had always included classic games like *Pong* and *Tetris* the '07 OMEGATHON featured *Halo 3*.

Bungie set up the event with new levels which had never been seen before, and entirely new weapons which had never been fired before which ensured a level playing field. The final contestants, MNC Dover and Accelon, squared off over a best-of-three match, with Accelon ultimately claiming the prize after only two rounds. The creators of *Penny Arcade*, Mike "Gabe" Krahulik and Jerry "Tycho" Holkins came out and awarded both finalists with swords, and then sat down to amuse the crowd with their own *Halo 3* match. Eventually, Krahulik won out 5-2 over Holkins, ending PAX '07.

Despite everything the show has to offer, the one thing that keeps people coming back year after year is the sense of community that pervades all of PAX. Ever since the first PAX, Holkins and Krahulik have always organized the convention as a giant, weekend-long party instead of a traditional show. This mentality influences every aspect of the event, including what happens after the doors close for the night.

After regular show hours each day, there were several dozen parties happening around the Trade and Convention Center at any given time. The parties are so big and so essential to the entire experience that there is actually an official guide to not only throwing one, but also attending one (<http://forums.penny-arcade.com/showthread.php?t=15790>). Many of the bigger-name exhibitors host parties, and even some games hold launch parties as part of PAX; this year, it was *Massive's World in Conflict*. The show itself is so big that it is impossible to go to all the events, and the same thing is true for the parties. One is almost forced to make two schedules: one for the convention itself, and a second to fit in all the after-hours bashes and maybe a little sleep.

Simply traveling to PAX itself becomes something of an event. Each year, people plan to drive from one end of the country to the other, and they form large caravans of like-minded individuals. These groups become a huge motor exodus, called "Supertrips." This year even included a train supertrip, which promised a constant party from LA to Seattle. Pages of sign-ups and carpool listings can be found on the official PAX forums each year, as hundreds of dedicated gamers pile into trucks, vans and cars, eager to make their way to the biggest gaming party of the year.

This bonding between complete strangers is what makes PAX more than just another, bigger E3. People willingly opened up their rooms to fellow convention-goers with no place to stay, merely smiling and acknowledging "the more the merrier." Restaurants near the Trade and Convention Center quickly filled with hungry attendees, eager to share their victories, thoughts on panels, or stories of the drive up from their home city. This larger sense of community and assumed friendship is the driving force behind the success of PAX, and is probably the reason why attendance continues to double each year. If PAX is supposed to be the biggest gaming party of the year, it delivers that much and more.

Overall, the show was a smashing success. There was something fun to do at literally all hours of the day and night, as hundreds of gaming enthusiasts passionately shared their interests. Truly, it was a great weekend to be a gamer.

NEVER BETTER LATE THAN

a belated, mini-review
of bioshock



Review by Wanderer

The biggest problem I have with *BioShock* is how difficult it is to evaluate. One half of the game is a groundbreaking tour de force that'll shape how games are made for the next decade; the other half is a gameplay experiment gone horrifyingly wrong that shoots the game's atmosphere in the foot. Depending on what you play games for and why, *BioShock* will either be one of the greatest experiences of 2007 or twenty-odd hours of killed time.

BioShock has a surprisingly deep and vivid storyline. It doesn't just throw you a few curveballs; it refines how stories are told in gaming. It's almost impossible to discuss the sheer elegance of the game's central twist without spoilers, but I'll say this much: *BioShock's* major triumph may be that it manages to take one of the most standard gameplay tropes there is (it is in fact so omnipresent that it takes a certain degree of cleverness to recognize that it's there at all) and turn it on its head. Everything you do in the game fits flawlessly into the game's narrative.

Unfortunately and conversely, *BioShock* is driven by its narrative to such an extent that it's unwilling to let you fail. Even on the hardest setting, every resource you have is unlimited, including your own life. When you die, you simply respawn with no penalty whatsoever, allowing you to overcome any challenge by simply dying your way through it. That, and the strangely plentiful cash, ammo, health, and food, removes any sense of tension or danger from the otherwise horrific environment, and makes your eventual victory a *fait accompli*.

As a work in an experiential medium, *BioShock* is an unequivocal success. As a game, it fails, because any challenge it has must be imposed on the player by himself. There's no sense of accomplishment. You're an unstoppable force of nature, and even death only slows you down. It's like playing *Doom* on Nightmare as the demons.

That's what makes *BioShock* hard to rate. One half would earn a 5 from us without hesitation; the other, maybe a 3. It's still an exciting game, because it tries several new things. Some work and many don't, but the important thing is that *BioShock*, instead of slavishly following trends, does in fact try something new and different. It's the kind of game that makes you look forward to its sequel, where they can fix what went wrong.

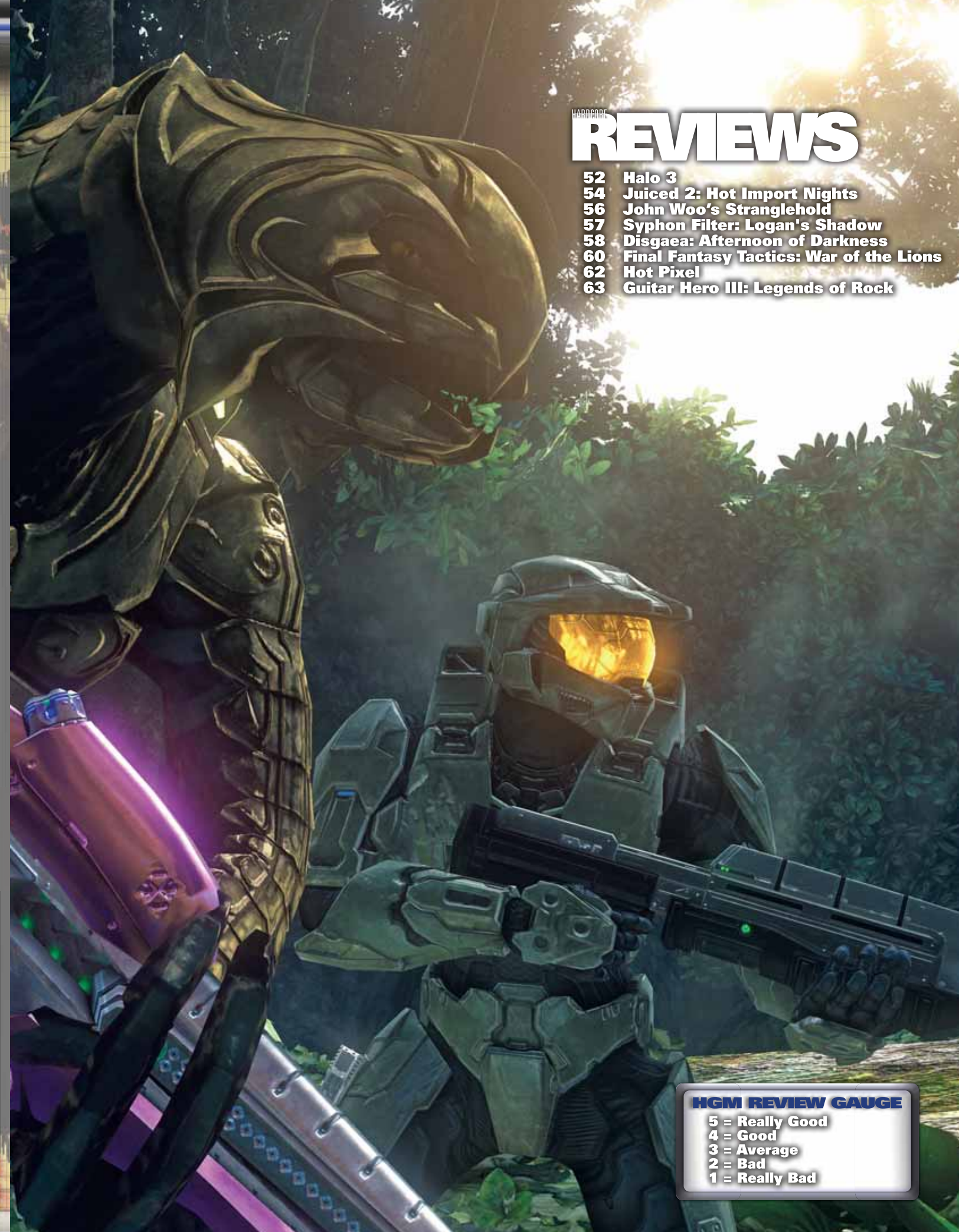
Score: 3.5 of 5

SECOND OPINION

Second Opinion by: Dack • Score: 5 of 5

Because of its non-penalizing respawn points, *BioShock* does arguably lose the majority of its tension and toughness halfway through. This point, when put up against the game's groundbreaking graphics, beautiful music, and thought-provoking story and themes, however, seems moot.

FINAL SCORE: 4.25 of 5



REVIEWS

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HGM REVIEW GAUGE

- 5 = Really Good
- 4 = Good
- 3 = Average
- 2 = Bad
- 1 = Really Bad



READ BETWEEN THE GAMES

by Wanderer

Halo has spawned several novels, which isn't unusual. What is unusual is that, instead of being written by some random mook who's probably never touched a controller and who's had zero contact with the developers, most of *Halo's* novels are by Microsoft staff writer Eric Nylund. They actually serve to answer questions and fill in details about the wider *Halo* universe and the goings-on between games. For example, if you want to know how Avery Johnson escaped almost certain death at the hands of the Flood to appear in the intro of *Halo 2*, you have to read *Halo: First Strike*.

There are two noteworthy books out right now that you should read to get the full impact of *Halo 3's* storyline (which admittedly starts very slowly and only kicks into high gear as you reach the latter half of the game). One is *Halo: Uprising*, a Marvel comic book by Brian Michael Bendis and Alex Maleev, which explains how the Master Chief goes from a Covenant stowaway in *Halo 2* to making unassisted planetfall in Africa at the start of *Halo 3*.

The other is Nylund's novel *Ghosts of Onyx*, which is largely about the other Spartans that graduated from the program that created the Master Chief. It has little to do with the plot of *Halo 3*, but if you want to understand the bonus cutscene that appears when you beat the game on Legendary, you must read *Ghosts of Onyx*.

Publisher : Microsoft
Developer : Bungie
Release Date : 9/25/2007
Rating : Mature

Genre(s) : Halo
Category : Halo
of players : 1 to 4 (Offline Splitscreen),
1 to 16 (via System Link and Xbox Live)

Review by Racewing

HALO 3

Let's face it: by the time you read this article, you'll be sick of and/or knee-deep in *Halo 3*. The hype surrounding this is such that you know of Master Chief's return to Earth even if you live under a rock — God help you if you actually live a normal life and have a computer or television. It's easy to let those anger-reflexes take over, where if people don't shut up about something, it gradually becomes an object of loathing.

Every time that reflex kicks in for me, though, there's a problem. The problem is that *Halo 3* is actually quite good — so good, in fact, that I can't bring myself to dislike it, no matter how much distaste I may have for its marketing blitz. *Halo 3* is the product of six years of praise, criticism, tweaks, learned lessons and design refinements, and it won't take long for players to realize it.



Its campaign is suitably epic, and contains the tightest *Halo* gameplay to date. The extra horsepower of the 360 isn't used for a massive graphics upgrade, or even an extensive soundtrack (what is there, however, is wonderful, mainly consisting of remixes of the best of the previous two games' tunes). Instead, it means that where Master Chief once had to face waves of enemies, he now has to face entire battlefields at once. You will have to figure out how to get past all of these varied enemies with your limited resources, much like cracking a safe. At times you will have help from an AI sidekick or Marines, all of which are now actually worth their salt in a fight.

Even so, provided you're not playing on the easiest difficulties, the odds are always against Master Chief, even when he has help. You will always feel as if you're in a desperate fight for your life against a planet's worth of mortal enemies — because you are.



Chief is a hero, but not a superhero. From mowing down enemy Brutes, to jacking Covenant technology to avoid fire, to actually getting in a fight with the massive army-decimating Scarab unit, you and he do it all, and every objective presented to you comes with a massive sense of accomplishment once you complete it.

Now, if I were to judge *Halo 3* on the strength of its campaign alone, it'd easily get somewhere between a 3.5 and a 4, but definitely no more. While it's indeed the combination and augmentation of all that was good about the previous two games, it also doesn't bring much new to the table. If you've played the other two *Halo* games, this campaign experience is old hat, and if you haven't, the story and pacing is such that you're better off playing the prequels anyway before jumping into this deep end of the pool.

Fortunately, *Halo 3* is more than just a single-player campaign. It always has been, and never has this fact been more apparent than now. The strength of *Halo* has always been in its multiplayer, and Bungie knows this. That's why we've got things like online 4-player campaign co-op, multiple player skins, freeform game type creation, and the ability to customize every aspect of gameplay imaginable.

(Instead of trying to list everything you can do, I'll give an example that you can put into practice, and thus get my point. Here's a quick recipe for ultimate awesomeness that got cooked up at Bungie's reviewer's session: Halve the game session's gravity, and double its speed. Give each player a Gravity Hammer and Shotgun, and make the only weapon pickups Rocket Launchers. For vehicles, turn only Wraiths and Banshees on. Now, place everyone on a nice, open map with lots of space and no ceilings, and get set to enjoy the sweetest FPS fightin' this side of *Shonen Jump!* This is the power of *Halo 3's* multiplayer: no matter what you imagine, here you can make it a reality.)

Mind you, I'm this far in, and I haven't even talked about the Forge, which is essentially *Sonic the Hedgehog's* Debug Mode adapted to the *Halo* engine, or the User Movies, which finally let you document those Stupid *Halo* Tricks without having to resort to capture card wizardry, and from all angles to boot. Every single thing produced by this game is shareable amongst other users on Xbox Live, which means that *Halo 3* is essentially a party on a disc. It has something that's fun for all situations.

Halo 3 is the combination of a thoroughly decent single-player campaign, a great multiplayer component, and absolutely *incredible* enhancements to each. There's quality, polish, and dare I say *love* present in this title that can be easily felt. It's true that sometimes a game gets hyped more than we'd like. However, sometimes a game comes along that actually *deserves* its existence to be shouted from the rooftops. People who are already determined to be jaded about this game no matter what probably won't find much here to change their minds — but for the rest of us, *Halo 3* has finally arrived, and it is *good*.

Rating : 5 of 5

THE SECOND OPINION!

2nd opinion by Wanderer • Alternate Rating : 5 of 5

There's nothing I can say that would make any real difference at this point, but here goes: *Halo 3* is as smooth and polished as an FPS gets. The more shooters you've played, the more you'll appreciate Bungie's sheer craftsmanship.



FINAL SCORE :

5 of 5



Review by 4thletter

Publisher : THQ
Developer : Juice Games
Release Date : 9/18/07
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Racing
Category : Shiny
of players : 1-2



There's a song from a few years back with a chorus that describes THQ's *Juiced 2: Hot Import Nights* almost perfectly. T.I.'s "24s" has a chorus that isn't entirely appropriate for a family magazine (or HGM), but I can tell you that it goes something like "Money, girls, cars, and clothes, that's how all my partners roll." That's *Juiced 2* in a nutshell. Let's take it from the top.

How do you feel about gambling? If you feel like the best way to earn money is tax-free, then *Juiced 2* is the game you want. You can bet on races before you hit the starting line. The other racers have their own personalities, which makes betting an interesting experience. Some go directly for the huge payoff and bet large, while others will take your bet and halve it in an attempt to play it safe. Betting is an easy way to turn a decent win into a great one.

It's also an easy way to turn an easy win into a catastrophe, because pink slip races are back. Do you figure that you can smoke any and all comers? Are you willing to put your car on it? You can, and when you lose that car that you spent hours customizing, you'll regret it. It's really easy to put a lot of work into your car, as odd as that sounds. There are a host of customization options, from spoilers to seats to license plates to paint jobs, and an in-depth upgrade system that will make the car enthusiasts extremely happy.

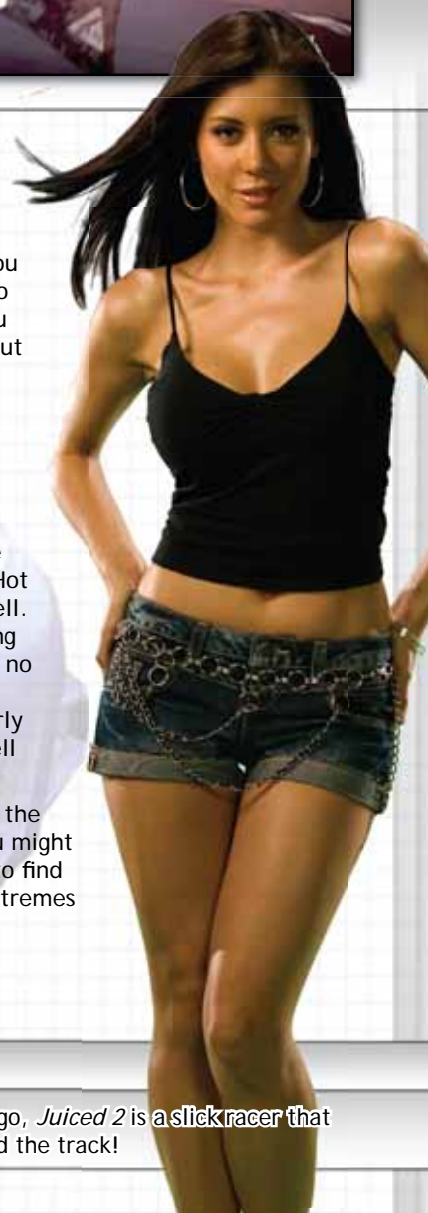
The cars are unsurprisingly solid, but the most interesting feature in the game is the Driver DNA. Your driving style will be recorded while you race. How closely you take a turn, how often you scrape another car, or your drifting skills, amongst many other criteria, will all go into this file. You can use this to check and see your own driving style, giving you a chance

to improve your racing style. If you notice that your cornering is too aggressive, you can make that mental correction and try to adjust. You can also send this Driver DNA to a friend, allowing everyone you know to play against you without actually being present.

Juiced 2 is all about the flash, and I mean that in the most flattering way possible. It's fun to watch and fun to play. It's loud, flashy, gaudy, and completely ridiculous in all the right ways. It lives up to the "Hot Import Nights" subtitle very well. You can go from tuning to racing to drifting and back again with no trouble at all, while the stages go from bright and shiny to fairly rustic. It all just works very well together.

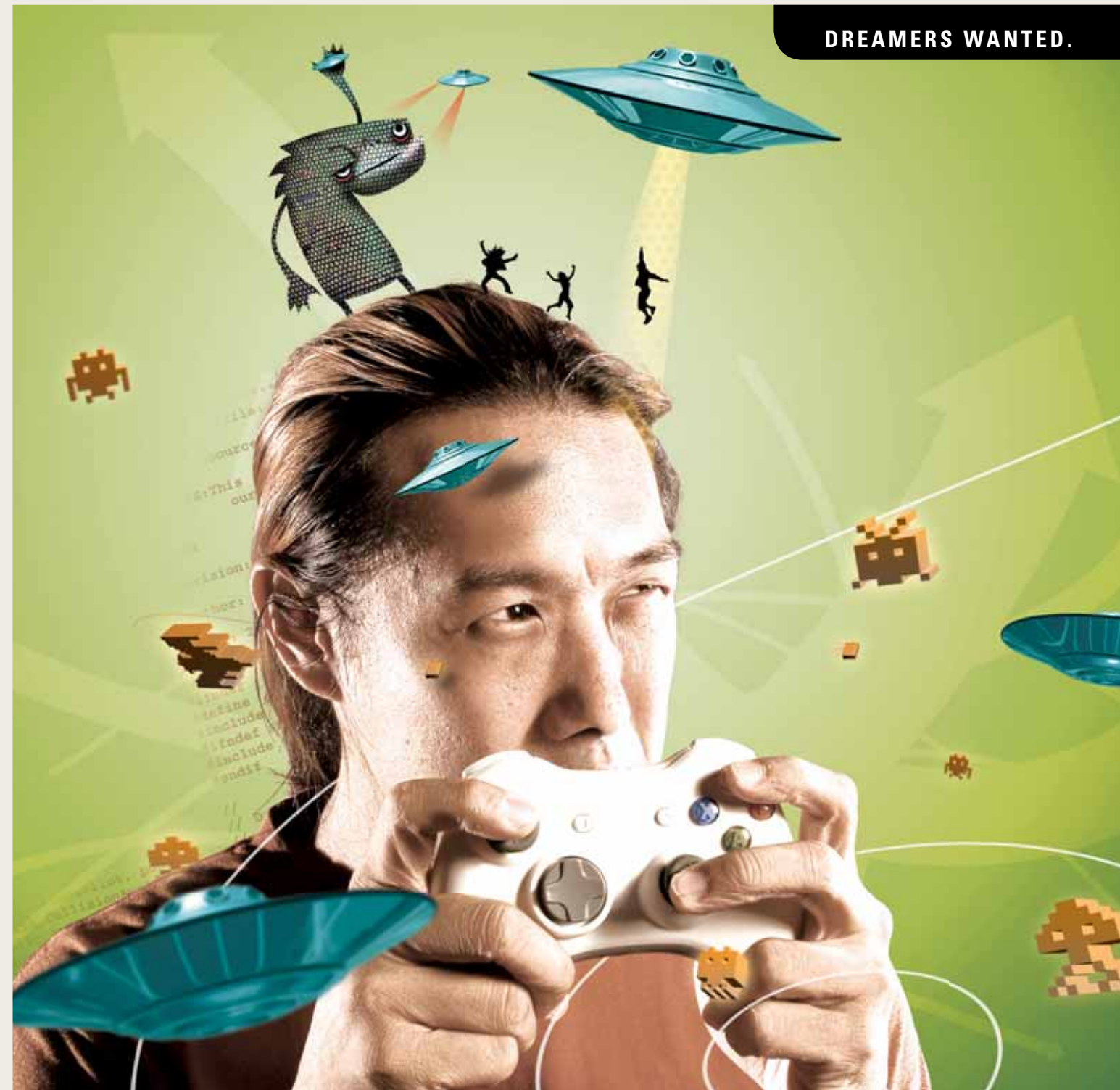
Juiced 2 is a nice change from the hardcore, but ascetic, sims you might be used to. This one manages to find a nice mix between the two extremes while remaining fun.

Rating : 3.5 of 5



2nd opinion by Roger Danish • Alternate Rating : 3.5 of 5

Like 4thL says, It's fun, flashy, and fast. As far as street racers go, *Juiced 2* is a slick racer that almost keeps up with the big boys. Definitely worth a go around the track!



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JOHN WOO PRESENTS STRANGLEHOLD



Review by **Racewing**

Publisher : Midway
Developer : Midway
Release Date : 9/5/2007
Rating : Mature (Drug References, Intense Violence, Language)
Genre(s) : Action
Category : SHOOT!: The Game
of players : 1 (up to 6 online)



Fifteen years after John Woo and Chow Yun-Fat's *Hard Boiled* set the record for cinematic body counts, the two men responsible for the achievement decided to translate the experience to a video game. *Stranglehold* may be marketed as a "sequel" to *Hard Boiled* but in reality, this is *Hard Boiled*. The story still makes no sense, you won't be able to tell many characters apart from one another, and odds are that they're all going to die anyway. However, just like *Hard Boiled*, *Stranglehold* is gunplay made flesh — and that's good enough.

Imagine *Gungrave: Overdose* with maneuverability, *God Hand* with guns, or a three-dimensional *Gunstar Heroes* (yes, *I went there*). Waves of enemies swarm at you from all sides, all of whom pose just enough of a threat for the game to not be boring. You walk on beams, swing from lights, leap from heights, run up and kick off walls, dive onto roller carts, and pick off explosive barrels from hundreds of feet away, killing off nearby victims who *had it coming*. Just when things start to feel repetitive, a new power or a new hazard is thrown into the mix. Suddenly, Tequila gets to use semi-automatics or grenades. Vision-obscuring gas starts filling a room. Twenty guys with assault rifles. *Lasers*. Everything breaks, making no cover safe for too long. This is the type of game that *begs* for repeat plays and speedrunning.

I never thought I'd use this word in a sentence, but there's no other way to describe it: *John Woo's Stranglehold* is *hardcore*. This is old-school shoot-'em-up fun brought into the new millennium. You are Inspector Tequila, and nothing can stop you so long as you keep your wits about yourself. It is, as one of our Funnies verbalized on the subject, "SOOOOOO AWESOOOOOME."

Why aren't I giving this a perfect Hardcore score, then? Well, the main game's over in just a few hours, though harder difficulty levels (and Achievements if you're playing the Xbox 360 version) certainly up the replay value. However, my main gripe is with the multiplayer: it's simply lacking. You wouldn't expect it to be, because on paper,

Midway actually kept all of the John Woo powers intact: the Spin Attack, the Barrage, the whole nine yards. Unfortunately, manual activation of Tequila Time slow-motion was removed, which takes out half of the fun of the game all on its own. Furthermore, the powers don't work as well in multiplayer as they do in single player. In attempting to balance the multiplayer, the developers inadvertently ended up removing what makes the game so much of a fun adrenaline rush in the first place.

So, that's where we stand. You're Inspector Tequila, a one-man army. You shoot guys. There is no other objective. There are those that would call a game such as this "shallow," and with good reason: most games like this are. However, most games that subscribe to this concept don't allow you the freedom of movement or tactics that *Stranglehold* does. That is why I feel this game is a must-play. If only it were worth playing with friends as well.

Rating : 4 of 5

2nd opinion by **4thletter** • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

Stranglehold could have been great, but instead comes off a little more generic than its pedigree would suggest. It's decent for an afternoon.



syphonfilter LOGAN'S SHADOW



Review by **Dack**

Publisher : SCEA
Developer : Sony Bend
Release Date : 10/2/2007
Rating : Teen
Genre(s) : Third Person Shooter
Category : Shoot 'Em Up
of players : 1



Despite its near-perfect track record, beginning with the first incarnation of the series back in 1999 right up to *Logan's Shadow*, *Syphon Filter* has yet to run out of steam. After the mediocre reception of *The Omega Strain*, the series thankfully went back to its roots with *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror*, a game that was rightly hailed as one of PSP's best titles. Now, just a year later, Gabe Logan is back in the sequel to *Dark Mirror* — *Logan's Shadow*.



Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow features a well-crafted story written by one of my favorite authors, Greg Rucka (author of the *Queen and Country* and *Perfect Dark* novels). Gabe Logan, the hero of the *Syphon Filter* games, is sent on a mission to retrieve a dangerous piece of technology from a naval ship that has been taken over by terrorists. When Robert Cordell, the man who sent Gabe on the mission, starts to act strange, Gabe and his team suspect things might not be as they

appear. With plenty of plot twists, betrayals, and new characters thrown into the mix, *Logan's Shadow* will intrigue you with this more-than-meets the eye spy story. The beautiful music composed by Azam Ali really adds to this atmosphere. Almost every track has vocals, which is rarely seen in a game, let alone a handheld game. Part *Metal Gear Solid*, part *Splinter Cell*, and even part *Gears of War*, *Logan's Shadow* boasts some solid and genuinely fun gameplay. Because of the lack of two analog sticks, all aiming and moving of the camera is done with the PSP's face buttons. Although this control scheme has a learning curve, it is perfect for a handheld shooter. *Logan's Shadow* has a lengthy tutorial that teaches you enough that you'll come out of it a pro, and makes you laugh enough that you're not bored. In the main Story Mode, missions are split up into six chapters that will send you all around the world. Underwater combat and exploration are added to the *Syphon Filter* series with this game, and they're done so well that they're some of the best parts of the game. With its massive amounts of weapons that range from machine guns to sniper rifles, shooting is always fresh. You'll be using the duck and shoot method seen in games like *Gears of War*, to take care of enemies in your way. To aid you in your mission, you are almost always equipped with night-vision, UV, and thermal goggles which function perfectly, and are useful in many situations.

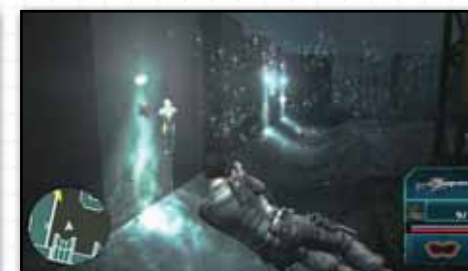
Syphon Filter: Logan's Shadow is a great addition to the series, and even tops its PSP predecessor. With a ten to fifteen-hour playtime, hidden unlockables to look for in every level, and fleshed-out online mode, *Logan's Shadow* is one of the PSP's best games to date.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

2nd opinion by **James** • Alternate Rating : 3.5 of 5

Syphon Filter's duck-and-cover gameplay is well done, if a bit repetitive, but the dumb AI opponents are too easy to take down with head shots. Still, it's not bad despite the slightly awkward controls.

FINAL SCORE : **4** of 5



DISGAEA Afternoon of Darkness



Publisher : NIS America
Developer : Nippon Ichi
Release Date : 10/30/2007
Rating : Teen (Mild Blood, Mild Fantasy Violence, Mild Language)

Genre(s) : Strategy
Category : Grindy
of players : 1-2 (ad-hoc wireless)

Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness joins the mighty legion of PS2 titles that are becoming available for PSP play, but it's in the relatively elite group of ports that aren't marred by some sort of horrible technical issue. You'll find no improperly mapped controls, grotesque load times, or awful sound problems here. Nippon Ichi somehow managed to create a perfect port of the original *Disgaea* in its entirety (arguably, better than perfect: players using the Japanese language option now hear Japanese voicework during battles as well as cutscenes). Perfectly porting a PS2 game to the PSP is a goal that has eluded many larger publishers, so what Nippon Ichi has done here is really a remarkable achievement.



The only two enhancements that really feel like major additions are the new item-collecting minigame, and the ability to purchase songs from the game's soundtrack as you run across them. Once you've collected Rare, Legendary, and Normal versions of every item in the game, you get rewarded with an otherwise unobtainable item exclusive to the PSP version that makes Stealing easier. When you purchase songs from the soundtrack, you can choose to listen to them during your Item World trawls. This feature could only be better if it somehow supported custom soundtracks, letting you use

MP3s on the memory stick as well. There's a host of new optional battles guest-starring characters from other N1 games, including Zetta, Adell, and Rozalin, but these battles amount to little more than a few more punching bags to unleash your high-level optimized characters upon. Etna Mode, a new storyline that lets you play with Etna as the protagonist, is a mere twenty-one battles long, and yet still feels tedious to play through. The story isn't as funny or entertaining as you might expect, there are only a few new maps, and the difficulty curve is steep in an unpleasant way. Where grinding is an optional but a truly delightful experience in the original *Disgaea*, Etna Mode forces a player to grind while simultaneously denying a lot of the resources needed to make grinding fun.

The English release of *AoD* has an exclusive wireless two-player mode. What's great about it is the ability to let players trade items with each other. This makes it easier to complete the item collecting minigame, but overall just feels like a feature *Disgaea* should've had to begin with. Versus multiplayer mode has a lot of potential, but as it stands is only enjoyable if both players are equally powerful. In theory the game uses throttles on character level, a plethora of optional settings, and the semi-random Geo Cubes to make it possible for players of disparate levels to have fun battles. Unfortunately, Nippon Ichi forgot to add throttles for equipment quality. While it's possible for the player with the better equipment to lose, it happens far less frequently than it should.

While the new content is a bit disappointing on the whole, the port of *Disgaea*, is perfect enough (and the useful new features are welcome enough) that *AoD* doesn't feel like a disappointment. *Disgaea* is as addictively fun as it ever was, and its fast-paced style is perfect for portable gaming. A *Disgaea* veteran who is interested only in the new content may find *AoD* to not be worth the purchase, but it's a must-buy for any PSP owner who's been yearning for an engrossing strategy RPG.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Hitoshura • Alternate Rating : 4.5 of 5

If you buy *Afternoon of Darkness* for the Wi-Fi battles you will be sorely disappointed. However, this game is an obsessive completionist's dream come true.

FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5



DISGAEA Afternoon of Darkness

Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness tells the story of Prince Laharl and his outlandish group of misfits as he battles for ultimate rule over the Netherworld.



JOIN THE DISGAEA WAR
TO GET YOUR LIFE BACK!

MULTI-PLAYER MODE
Gratify your ego and humiliate your friends on the multi-player mode!

FOG OF WAR OPTION
Less visibility, more strategy!

GEO CUBE
Outwit your friends with the Geo Cube!

NEW STORY MODE
Discover what would happen if Etna killed Laharl!

AVAILABLE NOW
WWW.DISGAEAPSP.COM





FINAL FANTASY TACTICS

THE WAR OF THE LIONS

Review by Hitoshura

Publisher : Square-Enix
Developer : Square-Enix
Release Date : 10/09/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Strategy
of players : 1-2

Final Fantasy is celebrating its twentieth anniversary this year and Final Fantasy Tactics, which was released ten years ago, is tucked neatly into the middle of it. In celebration of this event, Square-Enix is giving a gift that all FFT fans have been clamoring for for years: multiplayer. The multiplayer game in FFT is everything a FFT fan could hope for. You can either fight against each other or take part in special co-op missions to gain JP, money, and items without fear of losing anything you've earned.

At its core, FFT: The War of the Lions is a straight port but Square-Enix has seen fit to remaster it in the process. This includes a complete localization overhaul to put it in line with FFXII's style of dialogue. While the new translation is certainly laudable given the original's infamously bad script, the dialogue is heavier on the Shakespearean English than FFXII and Vagrant Story before it. Many sentences require a split-second or so of thought to work out just

what's being meant, which prevents the lines flowing smoothly. A quibble that many fans are sure to have is that a lot of characters, abilities, and items have been renamed too, such as Orlando being renamed to Orlandeau. Despite those issues with the localization, it is still far better than the original.

Many important scenes in FFT's story have been redone in a very distinctive form of FMV. FFT's FMVs appear to be

real-time 3-D, but there's a heavy pencil-type filter which lets the story to be told using faithfully adapted illustrations. S-E even went one step further and included some astoundingly accurate voices for the characters in those scenes.



All that good stuff, however, is marred by some obvious technical problems that can slow the game's flow tremendously. As was reported by many people who played the Japanese version, the game suffered from some horrible graphical slowdown. S-E has since alleviated the slowdown, but did not eliminate it completely. The slowdown also plagues the multiplayer missions, since so many units are crammed onto tiny maps, and also comes on top of the laggy communication between the PSPs. Another issue that likely could not be helped is that the sound quality has taken a hit. None of the echoing effects could be replicated from the PSX original, resulting in a flat, almost SNES-quality, feel to the audio.

While the flow of the battles are definitely slower by today's gaming standards, the strategic depth is still far better than most games released today. That sense of depth is an important aspect of a good strategy game. The original FFT by itself is still a five-star game. S-E went and made the port even better than the original, so the technical issues aren't a big deal.

Rating : 4.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Lynxara • Alternate Rating : 4 of 5

The slowdown and flattened soundtrack are issues Square-Enix should have fixed before letting this ship. Regardless, the new content is fantastic. With fewer technical flaws, this game would be a perfect 5.

FINAL SCORE :
4.25 of 5



START YOUR ENGINES... ...AND DRIVE INTO ACTION!

TOPGEAR DOWNFORCE

Race on tracks featuring a variety of terrains, alternate paths, and shortcuts

Manually place hazards to hinder your opponents while avoiding the traps others have set for you

Race against your friends with DS wireless communications, featuring multi-card and single-card play



Customize your racing experience with 6 car models, a variety of skins, and dozens of personal emblems

Smart, competitive AI for fender bashing racing

Master the power slide technique to get ahead of the competition

COMING WINTER 2007 TO ALL RETAILERS!

The speed and fury of strategic top-down racing explodes on the Nintendo DS in the form of Top Gear: Downforce. Blast the competition off the track with lightning clouds, avalanches, tornadoes, and more. Buckle up and get ready for the most action-packed racing game yet!

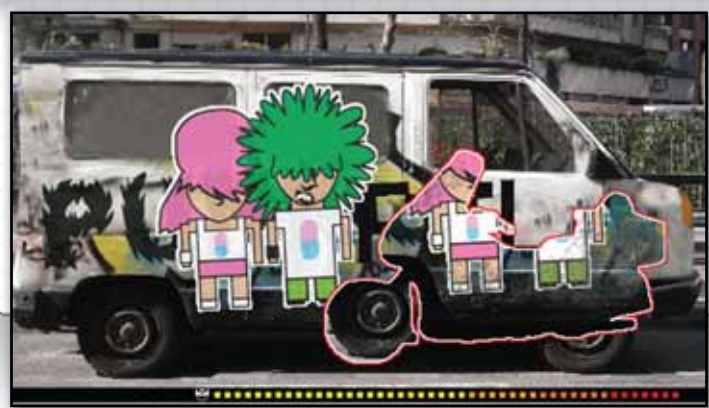


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HOT PIXEL



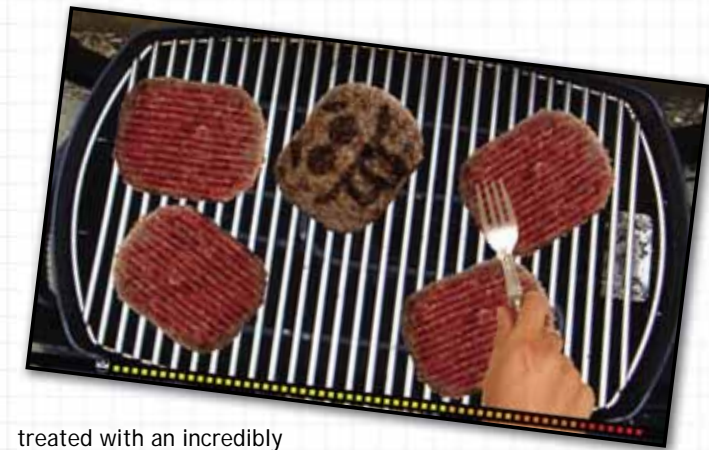
Publisher : Atari
Developer : zslide
Release Date : 9/26/2007
Rating : Teen
Genre(s) : Puzzle
Category : Mini-games!
of players : 1



Sometimes, a great game will come along that is influenced by previous titles in its genre, a true gem that improves on the best parts of the game it's spiritually based on, while at the same time paying homage to it. Other times though, a game just blatantly rips off another game, which is the case with *Hot Pixel*, Atari's foray into the random mini-game genre started by Nintendo's *WarioWare*. *WarioWare* is such a fun game that even if the formula is copied, the game should still be entertaining. Sadly, *Hot Pixel* isn't even a well-done copy, with its headache-inducing music, menus, and gameplay, and its many idiotic mini-games.

Hot Pixel is all about passing a large amount of mini-games in the shortest time possible. Like *WarioWare*, the games are very short and generally only last a few seconds. The mini-games in *Hot Pixel* aren't very hard, and can be easily passed. You'll probably only fail on games that are annoyingly cheap so they can come off as "Challenging." Many of *Hot Pixel*'s more than two hundred mini-games have you doing random things, such as tying a shoe, or rubbing a girl's tattoo (which I've learned will make a girl moan very loudly). Games that aren't random events are based on classic Atari games. What could have been one of the game's major draws is instead executed very poorly, opting to simply use skins from the classic games instead of using a piece of the actual gameplay. The only classic Atari game that you'll really play is *Breakout*, which is overdone in the game with mini-games that have you thinking that you will be performing a certain action, when in reality you are thrown into another easy game of *Breakout*.

Hot Pixel's mini-games are broken up into ten episodes that each contain between eight and twelve mini-games. You must progress to and win the boss game without losing three mini-games in the duration of the episode. There is really no motivation to want to win the episode, because whether you win or lose, you will be



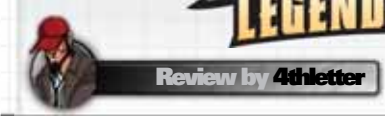
treated with an incredibly dumb, and even a bit scary video of a weird guy wearing Atari-branded clothing doing something painfully stupid, which is supposed to come off as humorous. The ten episodes can be completed in as little as an hour, making *Hot Pixel* especially short for a title boasting over two hundred games inside it. Although you can download new mini-games to your PSP from the *Hot Pixel* website, I don't see why you would want to voluntarily subject yourself to more of them.

What could have been a good game inspired by the great *WarioWare* series instead is nothing more than a poor imitation. Unless you are addicted to minigames on the PSP, and aren't into the pen-cap-screwing antics that *Work Time Fun* offers, there is no reason to pick up *Hot Pixel*.

Rating : 2 of 5

2nd opinion by James • Alternate Rating : 2.5 of 5

Maybe I'm not urban-cool enough to appreciate *Hot Pixel*, but while its mini-games aren't bad, the theme of stupidity that covers them gets annoying fast. The classic Atari homages are nice, though.



Publisher : Red Octane
Developer : Neversoft Entertainment
Release Date : 10/29/2007
Rating : Teen
Genre(s) : Rhythm
Category : Loving Rock & Roll
of players : 1-2

I shouldn't have to explain *Guitar Hero* to you. It's easily one of the biggest franchises to hit in the past few years and a definite staple at parties. *Guitar Hero III* features tons of new songs and a few new modes, and is kind of a shocking step backward for the series.

The overall package is great. The graphics are better, the new Star Power effects are dope, and the revamped tabs look pretty neat. They have a slick sheen that keeps them from looking drab. The menus are clean and cool-looking, but that isn't really why you're reading this review, is it?

The song selection is great. There are some great surprises to be found in the track list, and the really awesome songs tend to run one or two per tier. Sure, you might have to sit through a song you aren't really into or play an encore featuring something a little too obscure, but it's all worth it when you crack that next tier and get to watch two grown men cry after playing Metallica's "One" on Expert.

One of the big draws of *Guitar Hero*, though, has been the multiplayer. Break out the guitars at a party and you're going to start a riot. In honor of that, *Guitar Hero III* has a new co-op career mode. It's a great idea and it is pretty rocking when you first get going. Each player can use their own difficulty level, too.

The problem comes when you either get better, and thus want

to increase your difficulty, or you switch off with another player. The unlocked songs are tied to the easiest difficulty level you've played on. If you beat forty songs while you play on Easy and your friend is on Expert, guess what happens when your better buddy switches to Medium? You have to start over entirely.

This wouldn't be a huge deal if the old Multiplayer mode had been left in, but Co-op Career takes the place of it. The only other multiplayer modes to be found are all head-to-head. This is a serious buzzkill in a series that's renowned for letting two people rock out with minimal trouble. It's awkward and kind of cringe-inducing, to be honest. Battle mode is okay, but you can't really relax when playing it. It's too competitive. Co-op Career would've been perfect if it was possible to unlock the songs as you go, instead of tying the progression to the lowest difficulty level.

I won't lie. I had a lot of fun playing *Guitar Hero III*. I got a gang of friends together to test it out and we spent hours unlocking songs and fooling around, but, because some of us are guitar heroes and some are guitar zeroes, having a truly quality time is a tougher than it should be. It's still well worth a look.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Roger Danish • Alternate Rating : 4 of 5

What else can you say about *Guitar Hero* at this point? Even without Harmonix, the game rocks, and the few new bells and whistles (as well as the playlist) make it well worth a purchase.



FINAL SCORE : 3.75 of 5

PLATFORM



GETTING GUTTA! OOOH~

ONLINE GAMER WARHAWK

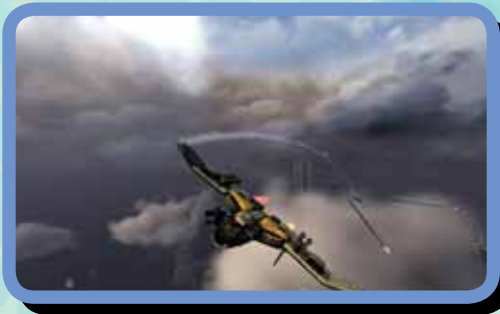
Editorial by Big Wym



Fortunately, we had just taken the middle base, so I respawned there and hopped into the gunner position of a jeep. My chauffeur zigzagged between mini-battles and we finally arrived at the enemy headquarters. Jumping out of the jeep, I chucked some grenades around the flag's spawn point to detonate any mines that may have been left there. With grenades blowing up to my left and right, I snatched the flag and jumped back into the jeep. Now comes the hard part!

Although we had one friendly Warhawk escort, two Eucadian Warhawks screamed in from out of nowhere and started lighting us up with machine gun fire. I can't describe how fast my heart was racing as we dodged several missiles and a hail of gunfire. During this time, I was firing the mounted machine gun on the jeep, and combined with the escort's efforts, we took down one enemy Warhawk. Just then, the other one swooped in beside us, and literally flipped the jeep upside down using its aircraft's wing. Now that's some skilled flying! Still under fire, I managed to get into a tank and head off towards my home base. It only took

Sony's PS3 remake of the popular air combat franchise, *Warhawk*, transforms the single-player flying game into a bona-fide thirty-two player frag-fest that rivals the likes of the *Battlefield* series. Sporting enough simultaneous action to make even Paris Hilton blush, this futuristic online-only shooter lets players duke it out with Warhawks (futuristic airplanes), jeeps, tanks, mounted weapons, AA guns, and homing rockets on highly-detailed maps.



Capture the Flag isn't the only available mode, but it's my favorite because it requires the most teamwork. Vehicles are essential because no one wants to hoof it across the huge maps, especially when being chased by the enemy. Since most servers don't let players fly with the flag, the jeep is the best choice for grabbing flags and making a quick getaway. It can carry three players and sports a heavy machine gun, making it lethal against infantry (especially when they get splattered against the windshield). As The Badlands match begins, my fellow Chernovans and I scramble for whatever vehicles and weapons we can find. I snatch up the rocket launcher and head for a jeep (never go into battle with only the default weapon) After I grab some mines from a favored location, I lay a few in the road for future use. These trusty round surprises pack quite a punch, and detonate when enemy infantry and vehicles come close. When I arrived at the middle base, a hectic battle was already underway. Time for some rocket launching fun! I headed upstairs and noticed a tank near some barrels, so instead of using the homing function, I dumbfired the rocket into the barrels.

They immediately exploded, killing two enemies and dealing additional damage to the tank. Just as I was about to fire off the finishing shot, a sniper round pierced my chest and I found myself staring at the respawn screen.

one tank round to eliminate the chasing Warhawk, but now two jeeps are on my tail.

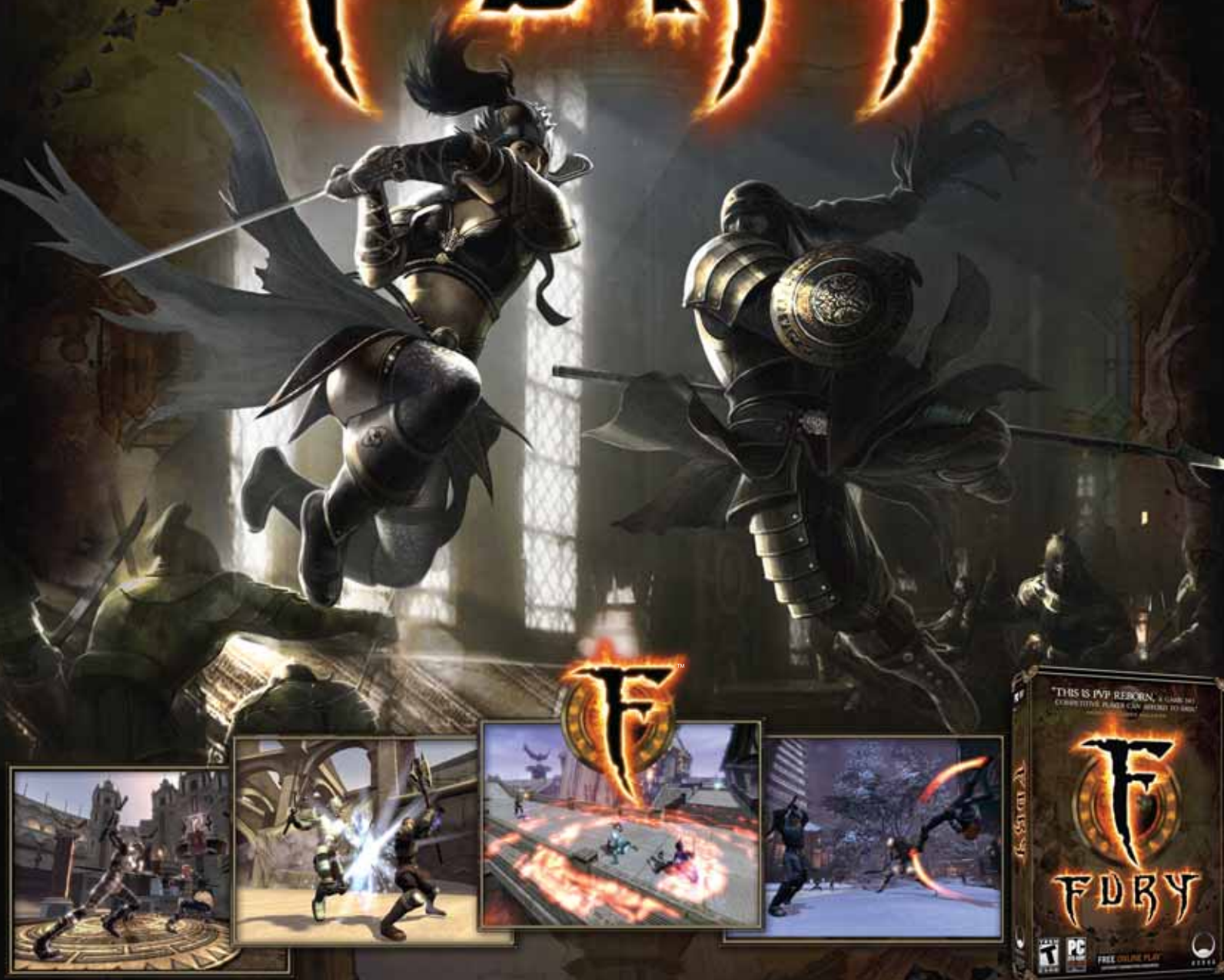
Not far to go now as I round a familiar corner. If I can just make it a little further. Just then, both jeeps explode as the mines that I had left earlier blow them to hell. I snicker to myself. "Suckers." Even after I captured the flag and ended the match, my heart was still pounding. One down, hundreds more to go...



WARHAWK

WASTE ENEMIES, NOT TIME.

FURY



"THIS IS PVP REBORN, A GAME NO COMPETITIVE PLAYER CAN AFFORD TO MISS."

HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE



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Game Experience May Change During Online Play

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ON THE DOWNLOAD

GAMES YOU CAN DOWNLOAD AND PLAY ON YOUR CONSOLES AND COMPUTING MACHINES



Developer: Sony Japan Studios * Platform: PS3
Genre: Puzzle Platformer * Category: Relentlessly Happy
of Players: 1 * Price: \$6.99 * Get it at: PlayStation Network

LocoRoco Cocoreccho! is an odd and wonderful little sequel. It's got an all-new control scheme that completely changes how the game is played, giving the



LOCOROCO COCORECCHO!

player even less direct control over the 'Roco than before. A butterfly acts as a cursor, and holding the O button sends out a circle of influence. Any 'Roco in that circle will follow the butterfly, and rapidly tapping the button will make them move faster and jump higher. It's inaccurate, of course, but you're making suggestions to a troop of happy singing blobs and they're doing the best they can. *Cocoreccho!*'s biggest strength and weakness is the lack of direct control, because it gives a great illusion of life to the 'Roco while simultaneously taking away the instant response most gamers are used to. As it turns out, it's a fair trade.

Cocoreccho! also makes excellent use of the PS3's motion controls. Shaking the controller causes Muimui to jump on triggers to send the 'Roco flying, and tilting it back and forth controls the angle of certain platforms. Guiding a 'Roco with the butterfly while holding the controller at a precise angle and wailing on the O button takes some practice, but finding one of *Cocoreccho!*'s dozens of secrets makes it worth the effort. Exploring every nook and cranny, not to mention the three separate mini-games, is the only way to to earn all 200 'Roco in the game. Despite being only one level long, *Cocoreccho!* is packed to the brim with excellence and fun, and that one level is worth ten from any other game.

SCORE: 4.5 of 5



Developer: Sinnesloschen * Platform: PC
Genre: Arcade Shooter
Category: Mind Control
of Players: 1 * Price: Free
Get it at: <http://www.sinnesloschen.com/1.php>

The legend lives! The government mind-control game from 1981, which may or may not have existed depending on your level of paranoia, has been lovingly recreated based on reports, rumors, and outright speculation. *Polybius* is an odd combination of puzzle, shooter, and eye-melting psychedelia with more subliminals than you can shake a fnoard at. Playing like a bizarre *Gyruss* with simple math, *Polybius* sets the player ship on the right side of the screen while a central construct sends out satellites and



POLYBIUS

numbered power-ups. Shooting the power-up back into the construct, when the numbers align properly, sends the construct's number down to zero, and then it's on to the next level and its set of audio-visual mind-f***s. *Polybius* is a bit awkward to control, and keeping track of the numbers amidst the psychedelia is harder than it should be, but what can you expect from government-funded mind control?

SCORE: THE CIA SAYS 5



Developer: Hudson * Platform: Wii
Genre: Action/RPG * Category: Clone
of Players: 1 * Price: 600 points (\$6.00)
Get it at: Wii Virtual Console

Life in the post-*Legend of Zelda* world couldn't have been easy. An action/RPG template had been set in stone and by god, it was going to get copied by every game that wanted to be "like *Zelda*, but..." *Neutopia II* follows the formula to a T, complete with hidden passages to bomb open, a boomerang to pick up distant objects, and anything else Link



NEUTOPIA II

might have found useful. Derivative doesn't necessarily mean bad, however, and *Neutopia II* manages to get by on strong presentation and solid action. The visuals look great, and our sword-wielding hero can move in eight whole directions, four more than Link could have ever dreamed of. There are a small number of original ideas, such as the flame wand that gets weaker the lower on health you are, but for the most part *Neutopia II*'s biggest strength is that it swipes from the best.

SCORE: 3.5 of 5



Developer: Q-Games * Platform: PS3
Genre: Racer * Category: Ultra-Tiny
of Players: 1-7 * Price: \$6.99
Get it at: PlayStation Network

PixelJunk Racers is a cute little game that, despite the huge variety of game modes, doesn't have enough substance to be more than a mildly interesting diversion for the ten minutes it takes to play the demo. A tiny little car races along a track packed with literally dozens of other tiny cars, and pressing left or right moves it one lane over like a slot car.



PIXELJUNK RACERS

Straight-up racing is rare, and is more likely replaced by the goal of racking up a huge combo by passing cars without crashing, with each passed car making you move just a little bit faster. Alternately, you might have to inflate the car like a balloon at the starting line, using that one boost to take you as far as possible while avoiding the junk on the track. The many creative modes don't make up for the simplistic gameplay, though, leaving *PixelJunk Racers* feeling bland and forgettable.

SCORE: 3 of 5



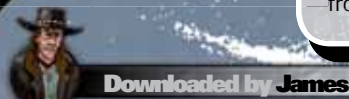
Developer: Niffias' Games * Platform: PC
Genre: Platformer
Category: Serene Exploration
of Players: 1 * Price: Free
Get it at: <http://niffias.ni2.se/>



KNYTT STORIES

Well, that didn't take long. It's been less than a year since the release of the wonderfully surreal multiscreen platform/adventure game *Knytt*, and now the sequel has shown up complete with level editor. *Knytt Stories* takes the Metroid-vania route, with power-ups that add defensive and movement skills to the non-aggressive heroine. Monsters, and the generous projectiles they spew, are to be avoided rather than confronted, and exploration of the quietly beautiful 2D landscapes takes the place of killing everything you come across. Finding new skills like See Invisible or the ever-popular Double Jump opens up new areas, as one would expect, but it's a comfortable formula that works. At present *Knytt Stories* includes one short adventure with the initial download and several other self-contained levels freely available, with more on the way. *Knytt Stories* is off to an excellent start, and seeing where it goes should be a real treat.

SCORE: 4 of 5



THE DARK SIDE OF RETROGAMING

Back to the Future was a great movie. *Back to the Future Part II* was an even better movie. *Back to the Future Part III* was... a movie. *BttF's* on-again, off-again reign of terror in the games industry, however, has resulted in some of the worst barbarities ever committed by non-cannibal humans. YouTube's army of shrill Angry Nintendo Nerd fume-coasters will have you believe that *Back to the Future* for the Nintendo Entertainment System is the worst the series has to offer. They're wrong. To discover the most grievous injuries that each of the *Back to the Future* movies has inflicted upon video games, you need to do some detective work. You need to dig. You may even need to go... to Europe.

Back to the Future

Worst Offender: *Back to the Future* (Amstrad CPC)

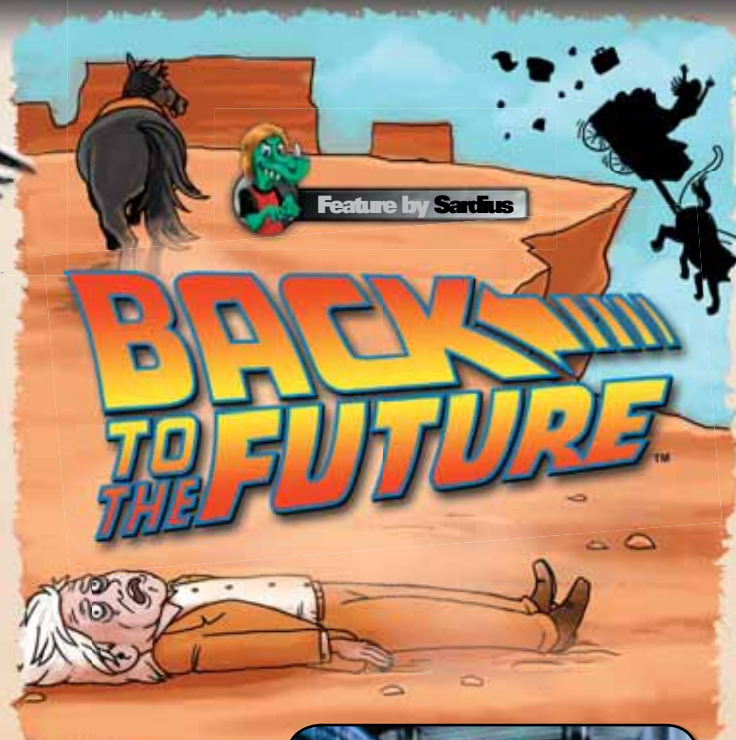
Released in the UK in 1985 for a computer system that you're lucky to have never heard of, *Back to the Future* for the Amstrad CPC is buried under so many layers of abstraction that you might as well be playing a *Back to the Future* game inside of your own imagination by thinking about it really hard. As Red Guy (Marty), you have to slowly trudge through Block Town (1950s Hill Valley) and somehow

make Blue Blob (Marty's dad) fall in love with Yellow Thing (Marty's mom). Watch out for Orange Splotch (Biff), and enlist the help of Snowman Grandpa (Doc Brown), and you might get Back to the Future!

I'll be straight with you: I have no idea how to play this game. Just look at it, though. Tell me how this has a chance of not sucking.

Runner-Up: *Universal Studios Theme Parks Adventure* (GameCube)

While not technically retro, the GameCube masterwork that is *Universal Studios* hosts a barely playable *Chase HQ* clone based on the first *Back to the Future* movie. Woody Woodpecker himself charges you with catching Biff, who has stolen Doc's DeLorean. To do this, you must chase him through time using,



uh, "the other DeLorean." Whatever you say, Woody. Your exciting journey will take you through familiar *Back to the Future* locations like the streets of Hill Valley, the icy caves of Antarctica, and the fiery depths of hell itself. After enduring a nonstop assault of neo-Biffisms like "Are you okay?" and an oddly AI Pacino-like "Hoo-hah!", you're rewarded with the opportunity to watch the climactic scene from *Waterworld* from one of five different camera angles!



Back to the Future II

Worst Offender: *Back to the Future II* (Sega Master System)

Continuing in the tradition of absurd difficulty started by *Back to the Future* on the NES, everything kills you in the Europe-exclusive Sega Master System take on *Back to the Future II*.

A puddle of water? Death. Grandpa crossing the street? Made of Marty poison. Don't try to jump on the sidewalk, either; you will instantly break every bone in your 8-bit body. Really, the most fun you can have with this game is getting together



with friends and reenacting the hilarious introduction sequence, wherein Marty and an inconsolable Doc Brown share the following exchange:

Doc: "MARTY, YOU HAVE GOT TO COME BACK WITH ME!!!"

Marty: "WHERE???"

Doc: "BACK TO THE FUTURE!!!"

It's all in the punctuation, really. Dramatic gestures and unintelligibly anguished vocals are optional, but recommended. This thing is ludicrously hard. I conducted a scientific difficulty study using a dozen nerds at SGE 2K7, and a grand total of two of them made it to the second half of the first stage before losing all their lives. The demo loop later offered us a helpful walkthrough. In order to beat stage one, you apparently have to glitch Marty through the sidewalk. "MISSION COMPLETE!"

Runner-Up: *Super Back to the Future II* (Super Famicom)

Released only in Japan by Toshiba EMI (programmed by "Puppet Ishizuka," with graphics by "Endorphin Konappy," and music by... *Final Fantasy XII's* Hitoshi Sakimoto?!), *Super Back to the Future II* is noteworthy in that it's one of the few titles based on the franchise to resemble an actual video game. Don't be fooled, though; Super-Deformed Doc "Cutie Pie"



Back to the Future III

Worst Offender: *Back to the Future III* (Sega Genesis)

The word "broken" gets bandied about too much by people describing things that they don't like. The jerks here at HGM take fetish-like pleasure in assigning me the worst games they can find on a monthly basis, but few are ever broken to the point of unplayability. *Back to the Future III* for the Sega Genesis, on the



other hand, is an honest-to-God broken game. It's impossible to play, and I mean *actually* impossible, in the sense that eating the sun is impossible. Thanks to a bug introduced into the U.S. version released by Arena, *Back to the Future III* plays exponentially faster than it does in its original European form, and as a result, you just can't play it.



Frustration soon turns to farce, however, thanks to dialogue that grows increasingly more impatient as you drain through your infinite supply of lives. As Doc Brown refuses Marty's assistance for the fiftieth consecutive time while Clara wishes aloud that she was Mary Poppins and falls to her death over and over again, you *will* believe in the concept of gaming as parody. The idea that this parody was unlabeled and retailed for \$49.99, however, is a bit harder to swallow.

Runner-Up: *Back to the Future II & III* (NES)

It's been shrieked a million times before by the autistic buttheads at YouTube, but *Back to the Future II & III* really is an ill-conceived mess. The *Back to the Future II* portion is torture with bees. *Back to the Future III* is even better, though, since it's exactly the same as the *BttF II* section, only it's so short and simplistic that it barely qualifies as a game. It's a back-of-the-box bullet point marketized into



a major feature, but in reality, it's only a stripped-down, less fun version of *Back to the Future II*.

You know, just like the movie version of *Back to the Future III*! Oh, disssss.





HGM has previously covered Square-Enix's irritating habit of re-releasing enhanced versions of their flagship games around a year after the initial release, with additional tweaks and extras that American gamers never get to see in an official English release. For the Final Fantasy franchise, Square-Enix calls these games International editions, despite how slim the possibility of gamers outside of Japan ever getting to play them is. Final Fantasy X International was released as the PAL version of FFX, and that's really been about it. So there was little shock when Square-Enix released an International version of FFXII in August that featured the English cast, Japanese text, and a host of promising new features. Those of you who think you're missing out on a superior version of FFXII might hold that thought for a minute before rushing out to import this.

FFXII, despite being critically acclaimed (4 out of 5 in HGM) had a number of basic gameplay problems. The most severe of them were complaints about the License Board, the game's system for determining which special abilities and equipment a character could use. Aside from gamers not being too happy that they had to spend License Points just to make a character able to wear basic equipment, the way the License Board was laid out encouraged smart players to optimize their characters by building them all in basically the same way, often with only weapon types and Quickenings differentiating them.

There's every indication that Square took these criticisms to heart when putting together FFXII: International Zodiac Job System. The game's greatest selling point, in fact, is a series of new License Boards that ostensibly give players the chance to build parties of strong characters without essentially giving them all the same skills and equipment. Each of the twelve License Boards is a blueprint for classic Final Fantasy jobs, and each one looks like a Zodiac sign. Once a character

enters a given class's License Board, they can never change classes at all.

Square-Enix clearly designed this new License Board with the idea it'd be ten times better than the old one, but the idea really backfired. Each class requires specific Esper licenses in order to use all of its abilities, but you can only license one character for any given Esper. Since you can't change classes, you can't go to a different board if one of their important licenses becomes inaccessible from giving an Esper to another character. Even more bizarre is the way licenses were broken up among the different classes, which just don't make any sense at all. Time Mages can use crossbows, but Archers can't? White Mages wield two-handed swords? Black Mages can steal, poach, and wear heavy armor?

Since the Jobs just don't indicate what licenses a board is going to contain in any reasonable way, you have no choice but to scope out every single license one by one on the board to make sure that you want that job for that character. If you're unsure of what Job to give a character, expect to spend a few hours scouring license boards before you actually assign one. This game's self-proclaimed "improvement" is such a



half-baked turkey that it actually takes the worst part of FFXII's original gameplay and then makes it even less fun.

There are some tweaks that do make the game a little better to play. The Gambit store in Rabanastre will sell every Gambit in the game once it opens. This allows for far greater flexibility in arranging Gambits for your characters than before. You can also have full control over guest characters like Vossler, and even Espers. Another tweak related to Espers and Quickenings is that they no longer deplete your MP. When you learn a Quikening your MP is no longer multiplied, but you'll gain a Mist Charge. Instead, the MP growth of your characters has been increased dramatically to compensate for the lack of MP being multiplied. This means that it is easier to use Quickenings and Espers, but also very hard to get your Mist Charges back because each Mist Charge is equal to your MP Max. While Ethers and Elixirs do refill your Mist Charge, you obviously won't get any MP on top of that if your MP is already full. The end result is that you're forced to think carefully on how and when to use those precious items, because you can no longer spam Quickenings on bosses as easily as before.



button causes the game to run at about 5 fps as a sacrifice for playing twice as fast.

Finally, there are a few special bonus game modes. Trial Mode, accessed from the title screen via your current save file, pits your party in a 100-battle marathon of increasing difficulty. You're allowed to save after every 10th battle, but there's no way at all to tell what's coming up next. It's entirely possible to get to the 10th battle and die because you weren't strong enough. Trial mode sounds like it'd be great a great addition for FFXII, but it's really just a pointless add-on that's best avoided until you've completely thrashed the main game. Once you're strong enough to actually beat Trial Mode, you won't need any of the items it unlocks and you'll smash through enemies with boring ease. The only reason anyone would want to complete Trial mode is because it offers up a New Game+ mode called Weak Mode, where you can play through the game without your characters ever leveling up. There's also a Strong Mode unlocked by beating the main game, where your characters start at level 90. Strong Mode makes FFXII boring, and Weak Mode is just frustrating. There's no middle ground to be found.

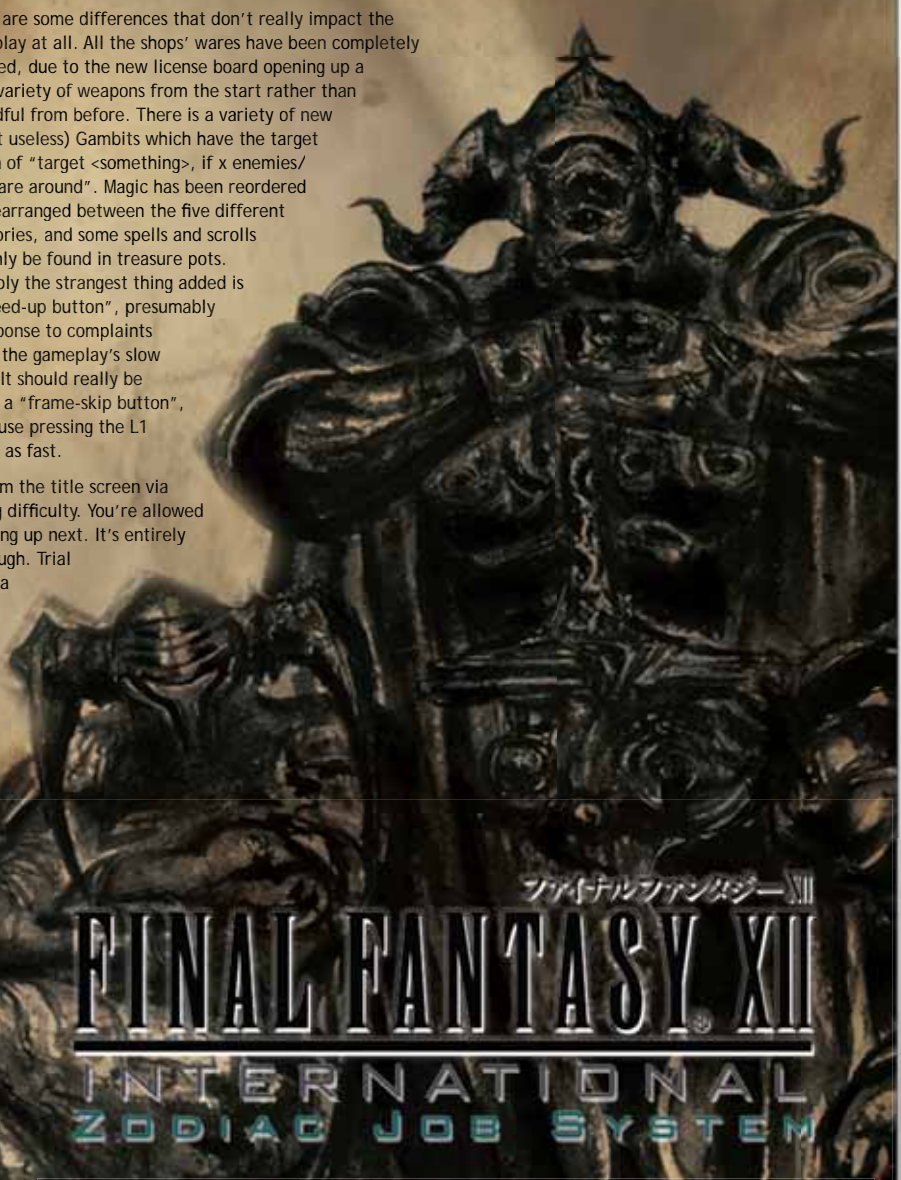
What's so astonishing about the International Zodiac Job System is that the titular feature is easily the worst thing about the game. The changes were clearly meant as apologies to disgruntled FFXII players, but all they did was replace the original License Board with something far worse. You can't even choose to use the old License Board instead of the new ones, similar to FFX: International's new and old Sphere Grid option. While the changes made to the Quickenings, Espers and Gambits do wonders for the game balance, it's not enough to make the game feel any better than it was before. It's just a different version of FFXII with different flaws, and none of the fixes make it less of a grinding RPG than it was previously.

WORTH IMPORTING?

This is just a different version of FFXII, not a better one. Fans that were disappointed with FFXII should save their money, and other fans would probably be happier just replaying the English release of FFXII.

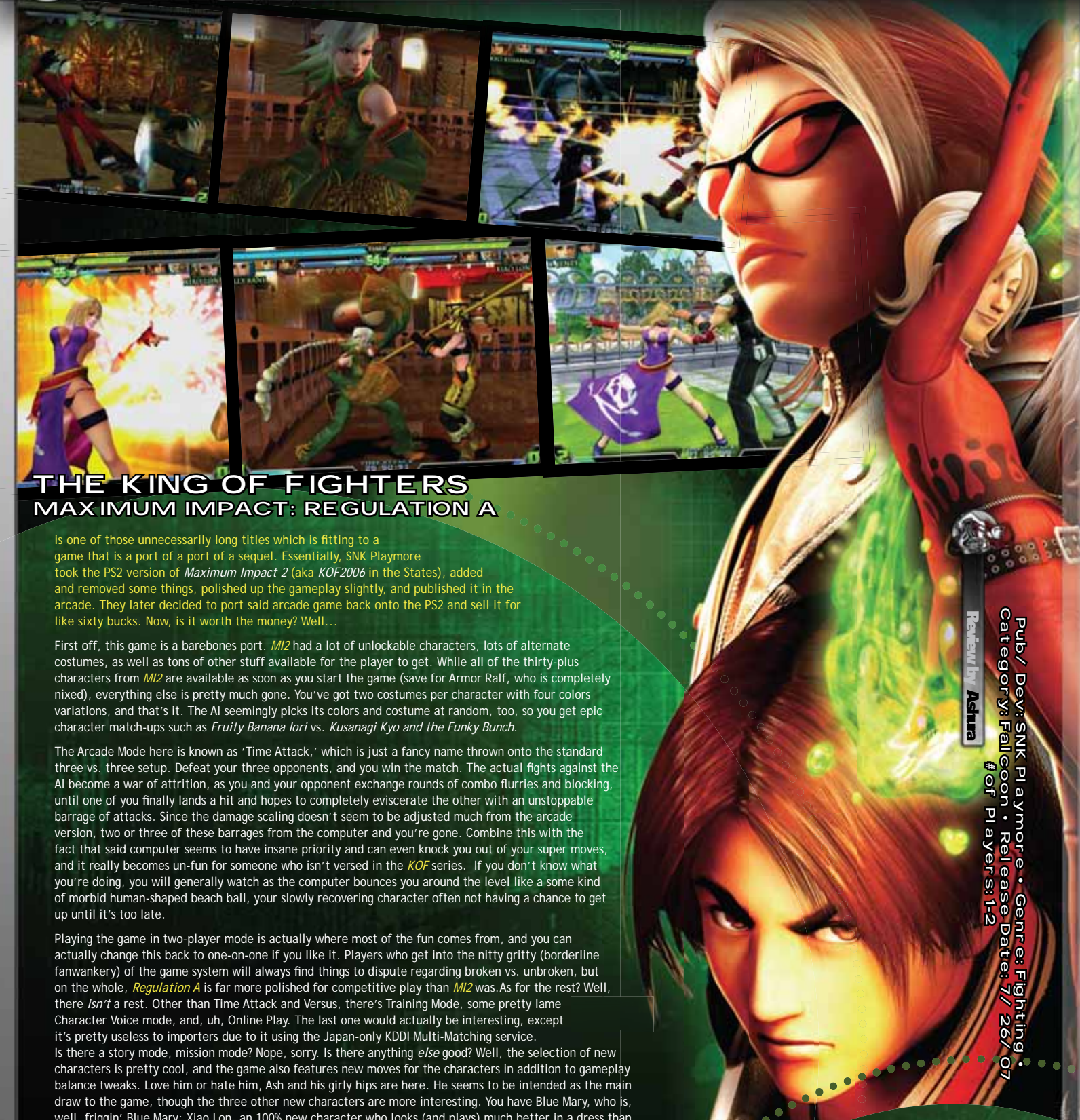
SCORE: 3.5 of 5

Review by Hitoshura



Publisher: Square-Enix
Developer: Square-Enix
Release Date: 8/9/2007
Genre(s): RPG
Category: MMO-ish
of players: 1





Pub/ Dev: SNK Playmore • Genre: Fighting • Category: Fallicoön • Release Date: 7/ 26/ 07 # of Player: 1-2 Review by: Ashura

THE KING OF FIGHTERS MAXIMUM IMPACT: REGULATION A

is one of those unnecessarily long titles which is fitting to a game that is a port of a port of a sequel. Essentially, SNK Playmore took the PS2 version of *Maximum Impact 2* (aka *KOF2006* in the States), added and removed some things, polished up the gameplay slightly, and published it in the arcade. They later decided to port said arcade game back onto the PS2 and sell it for like sixty bucks. Now, is it worth the money? Well...

First off, this game is a barebones port. *Mi2* had a lot of unlockable characters, lots of alternate costumes, as well as tons of other stuff available for the player to get. While all of the thirty-plus characters from *Mi2* are available as soon as you start the game (save for Armor Ralf, who is completely nixed), everything else is pretty much gone. You've got two costumes per character with four colors variations, and that's it. The AI seemingly picks its colors and costume at random, too, so you get epic character match-ups such as *Fruity Banana Iori* vs. *Kusanagi Kyo* and *the Funky Bunch*.

The Arcade Mode here is known as 'Time Attack,' which is just a fancy name thrown onto the standard three vs. three setup. Defeat your three opponents, and you win the match. The actual fights against the AI become a war of attrition, as you and your opponent exchange rounds of combo flurries and blocking, until one of you finally lands a hit and hopes to completely eviscerate the other with an unstoppable barrage of attacks. Since the damage scaling doesn't seem to be adjusted much from the arcade version, two or three of these barrages from the computer and you're gone. Combine this with the fact that said computer seems to have insane priority and can even knock you out of your super moves, and it really becomes un-fun for someone who isn't versed in the *KOF* series. If you don't know what you're doing, you will generally watch as the computer bounces you around the level like a some kind of morbid human-shaped beach ball, your slowly recovering character often not having a chance to get up until it's too late.

Playing the game in two-player mode is actually where most of the fun comes from, and you can actually change this back to one-on-one if you like it. Players who get into the nitty gritty (borderline fanwankery) of the game system will always find things to dispute regarding broken vs. unbroken, but on the whole, *Regulation A* is far more polished for competitive play than *Mi2* was. As for the rest? Well, there *isn't* a rest. Other than Time Attack and Versus, there's Training Mode, some pretty lame Character Voice mode, and, uh, Online Play. The last one would actually be interesting, except it's pretty useless to importers due to it using the Japan-only KDDI Multi-Matching service.

Is there a story mode, mission mode? Nope, sorry. Is there anything *else* good? Well, the selection of new characters is pretty cool, and the game also features new moves for the characters in addition to gameplay balance tweaks. Love him or hate him, Ash and his girly hips are here. He seems to be intended as the main draw to the game, though the three other new characters are more interesting. You have Blue Mary, who is, well, friggin' Blue Mary; Xiao Lon, an 100% new character who looks (and plays) much better in a dress than her brother Duo Lon; and finally, the awesome Makoto Mizoguchi from *Fighter's History*, who might not look like a highschool student, but dangit, he is. The additional moves are actually pretty fun (like Kula's new snowman drop), but that's really all they are: fun. The stages are a bit more polished, with a few new ones to replace those which were completely removed; as with *Mi2*, they look either really good or really bad. I'm looking at you, *Kyokugen Dojo*.

The loading surprisingly isn't too offensive, which is only noteworthy because the game has to load a new character every time one falls in Time Attack mode. Of course, complimenting the load times is one step away from complimenting the font that the 'Do not remove this memory card while saving' message is written in, and that's where we are.

Worth Importing?

It's a better deal to pick up *Mi2/KOF2006* from Gamestop's bargain bin for \$15 if you want a taste of 3D *KOF*. The only real reason to get this is for the new characters, or if you love game rebalances. I actually really like this game, but there are cheaper alternatives.

FINAL SCORE: 3.0

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INFO!

Publisher: NEC Interchannel
 Developer: Omiya Soft
 Release Date: 8/12/2003
 Genre: Strategy
 Category: Cardy
 # of Players: 1-5

CULDCEPT

Culdcept is, essentially, a board game and a card game simulated on your PS2. There's no particular reason you couldn't play it with an actual board, cards, and tokens if you cared to construct them and memorize the horrendously complex rules. It's a rather obscure game, and doesn't have much of a fan-following. You should be able to pick up a copy for around \$10 anywhere that happens to stock it.

In the game, you generate a character called a Cepter, who uses cards to summon monsters and cast spells. You summon monsters not to, say, battle other hordes of monsters, but to take control of territory. By controlling territory, leveling it up, and lapping the board as many times as possible, your Cepter increases his or her overall magical power (denoted with an S). If you increase it to the map's goal amount before your opponent(s), you win the game. This sounds simple, but the actual mechanics of determining who controls what territory, its value, and the power levels of the monsters on it is absurdly complex.

Land has elemental properties, what territory you control can generate chain combos, and there's the all-important factor of rolling the (seven-sided) dice. Monsters only battle when a Cepter lands on a rival's square and tries to seize control of it. The battles are short and simple, much like monster fights in *Magic: the Gathering*. When two monsters fight, the battle resolves in a single swift stat-calculation, and using nothing that could be fairly considered a combat animation. The computer crunches the numbers, the losing monster's card explodes, and that's about it. Victory determines control of the land, and a failed invasion forces you to pay a toll fee out of your magic pool to the defender.

This graphical sparseness, as the screencaps clearly attest, is probably the real reason why *Culdcept* has such a small following. Much of the game is spent swimming through static menus, with few animations ever appearing onscreen. When 3D graphics make their brief appearances, the quality is laughably poor. The single-player campaign also suffers from an AI that flagrantly cheats, rolling bigger numbers for your enemy as you start pulling into the lead. The game's localization is choppy, with some amazingly cheesy voiceovers, and the music has a droning quality that doesn't work well in longer battles.

Culdcept is also a little on the short side, despite how long individual battles can be. After you beat the single-player mode, get all the Medals (which work like Achievements), and unlock all the cards and maps, there's not much left. You can play Versus matches using all of your acquired cards with up to four other players, but it's hard to get a very large group together (and playing against the AI isn't much fun). It's a shame, because the Versus play has real potential to give *Culdcept* some meaty re-playability. Here's hoping *Culdcept Saga*'s online versus gets it right.

While *Culdcept* is not without its flaws, it's still a game that can become completely entrancing. Part of why it feels short is that it's hard to play anything else once you've gotten into it. As the maps grow more complex, so do the strategies you use to clear them, which keeps each new battle feeling fresh and encourages you keep trying to clear one more map. It's the perfect game for a jaded gamer who's getting sick of playing the same superficial formulas ad nauseam, provided you can tolerate the crude graphics. For a \$10 price of admission, that shouldn't be too hard.



IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

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GAMES & MARKETING pt. 1

BY RICHARD IGGO, MARKETING MASTER FOR GAMECOCK

I'm the suit, the man, the crushing death of creativity. I suck the life from the universe! At least, that's what some of you might believe. There's a dirty word that causes many in the game industry to grimace like they just threw up a little. That word, ladies and gentlemen, is marketing.

Somebody has to market video games, and one of those people is me. It's a dirty horse, but someone's gotta ride it. Marketing is one part of one half of the video games industry... those halves being development and publishing. Sometimes, you tell people you're in marketing and you see that they don't really hear marketing; they hear pedophile, Sanjaya from American Idol and/or midichlorians. Yeah, it's that bad.

Why? Well, one reason is what I'm here to tell you about: the tale of the developer/publisher divide, and how it could lead to the end of creativity and games that don't end with a sequel number.

I got into the industry as a wide-eyed, long-haired twenty-something at a developer/publisher called Gremlin Interactive. I'd been working in retail for a few years, and for me to get a job in the gaming industry was like a dream come true. I was hired not because I had a background in marketing (I studied Applied Biology in college), but because I loved games, knew everything about them (so I thought) and had an understanding of what the consumer wanted since I'd had face to face contact with them for the past four years.

All of the 'suits' at Gremlin were on the top floor of the building. Since I was in marketing, I was 'one of them' (although I didn't and never have worn a suit to the office). During my first week of employment, I stood up from my desk and decided to head downstairs to talk to the dev teams and introduce myself. It was like I tripped a silent alarm. Immediately, someone stood to block my path.

"Where are you going?" my assailant asked. "They don't like us; you really shouldn't go down there."

It wasn't so much of a warning as a threat. I'm 6'5" and reckoned I could take her, but alas, *Splinter Cell* was a few years away and I didn't know about Sam Fisher's special moves at that point, so I quietly backed away to my desk.

The 'none shall pass' incident was my first indication that something was (and still is) wrong with the games industry. If even at a small developer/publisher like Gremlin there could be a gulf of mistrust between the people who make the games and those that publish them, something must be very broken. But what had caused that gulf to open and where are we now with that same problem? I suspect that when video games started to make a lot of money, suits got involved and it was their dabbling that forever mired the relationship of the publisher and the developer.

They might have had good intentions. Who knows? I don't know exactly what they did, but they probably decided that the developer's vision of what was good didn't match with their sales figures. Suits began thinking that their input was more important, and thus started making more decisions, on things like the logo, the packaging, the advertising and even the holy of holies, the game design itself. Fast forward to today where the big publishers have a vice-like grip on game design and, in turn, what you get to play.

I'm just sayin'...

Hear, hear!
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I, the exquisite Etoile Rosenqueen have reserved this space to bring your attention to the many superior products I am bringing to the RosenQueen Company, just in time for summer!

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