



XBOX

OFFICIAL XBOX

MODERN WARFARE 3

Holy \$&@%!
America is
under attack!

TOO MUCH GOOD STUFF

- ♦ Dead Island
- ♦ Need for Speed
- ♦ Assassin's Creed
- ♦ Final Fantasy

EXCLUSIVE
HANDS-ON

GEARS OF WAR 3

Can you survive the onslaught?
Full details on the all-new Horde mode!

WHAT'S IN THE NEXT XBOX? PG. 56

AUGUST 2011 • ISSUE 125



Letter from the Editor

Hero is a four-letter word

I can see it coming from a mile away: no videogame character these days could be as spotless as Rockstar paints *L.A. Noire*’s Boy Scout-of-the-Year detective Cole Phelps. At the moment, I’ve only just graduated from Homicide to Vice, but I’ve already begun harboring suspicion that there’s more to this Phelps yokel than meets the eye.

Maybe I’ve been influenced by all the outcries of “Phelps is badly written!” and “This isn’t what Cole was made out to be at first!” that I’ve inadvertently skimmed past in my Twitter feed and online. But I don’t need any intrusive, spoiler-style foreshadowing from the internet to predict where this one’s going. I’ve seen my share of David Lynch movies, where even in Small Town, USA, nothing is ever as it appears. Or perhaps I’m just a jaded poke who’s seen enough of human nature to know that gray trumps black and white.

So in eras past (back when heroes blandly stood for all that was “right”), I may have blindly accepted Phelps’ do-the-right-thing act. But nowadays, when all of our videogame protags are beginning to reveal complexities? When even *Ninja Gaiden*’s stoic, black-clad Ryu Hayabusa is being touted as being more reflective about the havoc he wreaks in his upcoming game? Absolutely no way.

The fact that a videogame character can possess so many conflicting qualities — like Phelps, or what Booker Dewitt in *BioShock Infinite* promises to be — is what I find fascinating. Outside of *L.A. Noire*’s much-touted facial animations, it’s the current push to make our videogame characters more relatable and complicated that’s driving where the future of the medium goes. Tech will keep evolving, but we’re at a point where the fiction is the motivating factor. We’ve moved past the arms race for the prettiest water (or hair) physics.

I’ll wait to see if *L.A. Noire* surprises me when I finish it. But the journey it’s put me on — and how it’s made me examine what we think our heroes are supposed to be — has already made it well-worth my while.



Francesca

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

WHAT PART OF THE *GEARS OF WAR* universe do you most wish were real?

FRAN: No irony or cheekiness (okay, maybe a little cheekiness), but it’d have to be the bro-titude going on between Marcus and Dom. Those dudes are loyal, and nowadays, that’s really all anyone can ask for: someone who’ll chainsaw an encroaching Locust while you’re mourning your dead wife.

My first thought was “the way characters talk,” but come to think of it, we already do lots of monosyllabic barking around here every time we’re finishing an issue. So I’ll go with the roadie run. If I could sprint that fast while hunched over, I’d be the best professional ball boy (one of those guys who grabs foul balls) the tennis world has ever seen.

Corey Cohen EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Easy pick here: Jack. Who wouldn’t want a little robot that floats behind you, opens doors, zaps people that get uncomfortably close, and cloaks when it’s not needed? It’s like having a 24-hour butler/bodyguard who never needs to eat, sleep, or get paid. And he never complains.

Ryan McCaffrey SENIOR EDITOR

Lancer for cutting cigars aside, I’m going with the Armadillo. Not sure how much it would cost to gas that thing up, but it seems like you could pretty much drive wherever you wanted to, traffic be damned. And you can’t put a high enough value on guaranteed post-apocalyptic transportation these days.

Kevin W. Smith FEATURES EDITOR

The Lancer Assault Rifle. It’d come in mighty handy while cruising through my neighborhood — maybe next time I stop to fill up my gas tank, I won’t get any more guys who try to hustle me for money while I’m at the pump.

Alaina Yee MANAGING EDITOR

Well, I feel the military is pretty close to creating a chainsaw/gun combo weapon, so that’s out. However, I’m consistently amazed by the *Gears* trailers released by Epic — I’d want to be part of those and have my life be narrated by Tears for Fears’ “Everybody Wants to Rule the World.”

Dave Rudden WEB EDITOR

I’m going to go with the obvious choice and pick the Lancer with the chainsaw bayonet. The way I see it, if it were real, I could go hunt me some deer, and then saw up some hickory wood and smoke me some venison for the winter. Mmm-mmm, good.

David Cordon ART DIRECTOR

Got a QOTM for us? Email letters@officialxboxmagazine.com!



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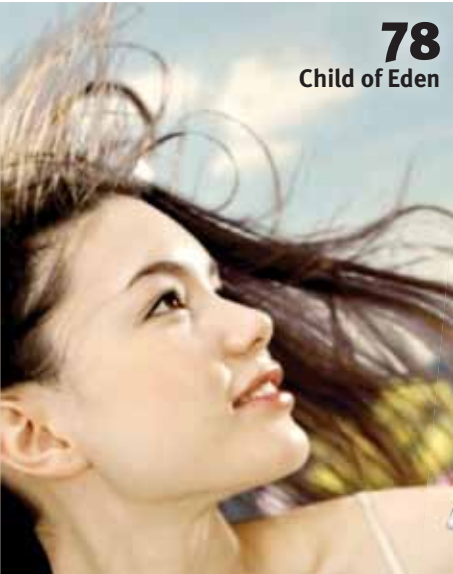
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I Wanna (Learn to) Rock!

Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury Controls
Fired up about the Bangai-O HD demo? Use this cheat sheet to blast through!

► **MOVE**
Left Stick: Move
> Gravity will take effect when neutral.
RB: Hover
Left Stick + RB: Move slowly

► **SHOOT**
Right Stick: Aim and shoot
> Enemies within the Lock-on Area (the outer blue circle) are dealt a 2x power shot.
> Enemies within the Counter Area (inner yellow circle) are dealt a 3x power shot.
LB: Change weapons
A Button: Toggle auto-shot

► **COUNTER ATTACK**
LT: Hold LT to charge (uses 1 EX on the EX Gauge) and release to shoot
> You become invincible until it charges up to 100.
> If the Right Stick is neutral, it will shoot in all directions.
> Move the Right Stick to concentrate the attack in one direction.
> Upon shooting, all enemy bullets within the Counter Area (inner yellow circle) will disappear. The more enemies/bullets within the Counter Area, and enemies within the Lock-on Area (outer blue circle), the more shots you can fire.
> The EX gauge will recover by obtaining fruits from defeated enemies.

LT (Hold) + RT (Press): Charge up a Counter Attack to add a multiplier (up to 4x) to the number of missiles released in the Counter

► **DASH ATTACK**
RT + Left Stick: Dash Attack (uses 1 dash on the Dash Gauge)
> You are invincible while attacking.
RB: Cancel the Dash Attack
> Enemies or bullets that you hit will explode.
> Hold RT to continue the attack.
> The Dash Gauge will fully recover when you deal a counter attack, or 3 seconds after invincibility mode ends.
> The Dash Gauge will fully recover when you deal a counter attack, or 3 seconds after invincibility mode ends.



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BioShock Infinite

PLUS THESE DEMOS!

- Red Faction: Armageddon
- NIN2-JUMP
- Moon Diver
- Rush'N Attack: Ex-Patriot
- SEGA Rally Online Arcade
- Red Faction: Battlegrounds
- Bangai-O HD: Missile Fury

LEGO PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN



PLAY IT NOW!

Vision in White

A grizzled Ezio returns for *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*

Series publisher Ubisoft may have called our favorite stabby guy “wiser” and “more efficient” in a recent announcement about this next chapter in the stealthy series, but we know better. The graying Ezio Auditore is no spring chicken in his next outing, but he’s also not alone — *Revelations* will be the first time since the first *Assassin's Creed* to feature the original gut-shivving badass, Altaïr.

You’ll soak in the sights of Third Crusade-era locales like Constantinople, equipped with goodies like a hookblade for gliding down zipwire-like ropes and the ability to craft bombs. On top of all this newness, Ubisoft assures us that the online multiplayer that debuted in *Brotherhood* is back with surprises like new modes and maps. Now where did that Animus wander off to...?



"Shep, we know you were hoping to get this thing wrapped up this year, but...Don't make that face."

Delayed Reaction

What benefits do game developers or publishers get from announcing release dates early in production? Is it part of the hype machine? *Homefront*, *Red Dead Redemption*, *F.E.A.R. 3* were all delayed from their original announced release dates — and now *Mass Effect 3* will be as well. It seems unprofessional that game companies throw out random dates and then change them. I can't recall the last time a movie, album, or book was delayed. — **Bradley, via e-mail**

We say: While release date delays may seem unique to the games industry, it happens in the music industry pretty frequently. Think about how many times Dr. Dre's upcoming album *Detox* has been pushed back. Or maybe the most famous example up until its underwhelming release in 2008, Guns 'N Roses' Chinese Democracy? Books get bumped because authors can't finish in time, but it's not typically a headline-worthy event. Granted, the games industry seems to be the clear leader in this field, but these are products that are incredibly tech-dependent, unlike books, most music, and even movies, to some degree. Those are all closed-medium experiences that often don't involve the level of tactile interaction that games do. This is a big reason why publishers will usually announce more general

release windows like "Holiday 2011" or even "4th Quarter 2012" rather than giving a specific day for much of a game's early development cycle. Once a month and numerical date are publicized, fans start crossing off the days on calendars. As for reasons why a game might stroll into your local retailer months after it was originally slated to, factors vary: technical issues, early feedback from fans or focus groups, financial calendar year hijinks, or even a newly announced monster title moving its release date to the week of yours. The reality is, piles of money are invested into games, jobs and earnings are on the line, and developers and publishers don't want to get the final products in your hands until they are 100% ready. Sure, delays suck, but cancellations and half-baked releases suck harder.

UNHOLY ALLIANCE

I want to see Sony and Microsoft collaborate on a single, unifying console that will deliver all the glorious technology coming down the road. Microsoft's Kinect, Sony's Move, and all the first-party software goodness stuffed into one magical box sounds like a dream scenario to me. Why did I leave Nintendo out? One, competition is good. And two, I don't really like the Wii. — **David, via e-mail**

We say: While the prospect may seem tantalizing as a daydream, technology tends to mostly diverge rather than converge. And right now, there's really no financial reason for either company to join forces à la the Miami Heat's LeBron James and Dwyane Wade. For instance, Microsoft didn't just invest billions in Skype only to team up with its rival. True, we recognize you probably just wanted us to take a second and

imagine the possibilities with you, but for the realistic, foreseeable future — viva brand loyalty and independence!



WHAT WE'RE LISTENING TO, PT. 1: Kevin: *Alright You Restless* by Agesan-dages; Dave R.: *Angles* by The Strokes; Dave C.: *Born This Way* by Lady Gaga.



Chuck Greene knew how to paint Fortune City red. We'll see about that Frank West.

▲ SO APPALLED

So blood, gore, dismemberment, cannibalism, nudity, and shotgun blasts to the face are all acceptable, but throw in a couple swear words, and it's all, "Oh no, we can't have that! We need a filter!" Why is it that people are offended by foul language but not violence? I worked at a GameStop for many years and was appalled by the number of parents buying M-rated games for their children, as long as it didn't contain any foul language. One parent even went so far as to tell me, "I don't care if he kills people, just so long as he doesn't swear." — **Marcos, via e-mail**

We say: Hey, all you gamer parents reading this right now: what's your take? Let us know at letters@officialxboxmagazine.com

THEME FROM THE BOTTOM ▶

We are a vanishing segment of gaming: no connection to the internet, and we buy our games in a box. There is no one to champion our cause, so we will quietly fade away. — **Tom, via e-mail and smoke-signal**

We say: Trust us, Tom — you aren't the only gamer out there not connected to Xbox Live. We get letters all the time from kindred souls. Unfortunately, offline gamers aren't the group of consumers that publishers are currently targeting. We don't necessarily agree with making and marketing games to only one demographic of gamers, but as long as the games industry keeps making single-player campaigns or components for their titles — which they still will for a long time — you're good.

Stephen Colbert's greatest bear nightmare realized.

LIL' MAG

Have you ever considered coming out with another Xbox magazine geared toward the younger player? I can no longer let my son read the magazine because he begs and pleads for games that are entirely inappropriate for an 11-year-old. All of his friends play [the M-rated] *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, but we don't let him play M-rated games. Maybe you could put out a magazine for the younger set and/or the tween set? — **Sarah, via e-mail**

We say: That's an interesting idea, but it would significantly limit the games we'd be able to cover and, therefore, our audience! There are lots of great games that are perfect for younger gamers, though — *Portal 2*, *Limbo*, *Castle Crashers*, etc. Would our readers like to see a tween-appropriate version of OXM? Drop us a line via email!



▼ ON THE HUNT

I've tried lots of hunting games like the *Cabela's* series, but nothing has been very good. Is the entire hunting genre flawed, or have developers yet to step up to make a quality game? — **Jack, via Facebook**

We say: Games that focus on hunting tend to have pretty tight budgets because they're usually sold at a lower price point right out of the gate — often releasing as low as \$30 for console versions. Early hunting titles were made affordable and sold in then-unorthodox outlets like Wal-Mart and other big-box stores to coax folks who didn't otherwise play games into picking them up, since the price barrier was so low. And it worked; the fledgling iterations of the *Cabela's* hunting series sold well. Granted, a big budget isn't

the only issue at work here; lots of great games are made with little funding. There's clearly an audience for hunting games, but unless players demand higher quality with their purchasing power, publishers will keep dev teams on strict cycles with low overhead for max profits. You could also read this as a prime opportunity for some innovative developers to really own this genre of shooters.

WHAT WE'RE LISTENING TO, PT. 2: Ryan: *Fizzy Fuzzy Big & Buzzy* by The Refreshments; Corey: *21* by Adele; Alaina: *The Lady Killer* by Cee-Lo Green.



CORPORATE SIN-ERGY

As I was reading through the June 2011 issue of your magazine, I noticed that both *Saints Row 2* and *Red Faction: Armageddon* feature a mega-corporation named Ultor. Is there some joke going on that I'm not a part of?
—Stephen, via e-mail

We say: Glad you asked! Steve Jaros, Lead Writer for *Saints Row: The Third* told us this: “In the original *Red Faction*, Ultor was a successful mining corporation, made so by sadistic nanotechnology experiments on its employees that created waves of bloodthirsty mutants. And they didn’t even qualify for workers’ comp. In *Saints Row*, I was naming clothing companies and I thought it would be a nice Easter egg for *Red Faction* fans to see the evil mining corporation from Mars start out as a trendy clothing company. Because *Saints Row 2* took place years after the original, it made sense to have Ultor rise to power from its humble beginnings as a clothing manufacturer, showcasing the evil seeds of a company that would one day colonize (and subjugate) the whole of Mars. Since then I’ve

been kind of in love with them and am happy to see them return in *Saints Row: The Third*...and some other upcoming projects. *Business at Ultor is still booming...*”

A GAME BY ANY OTHER NAME

EA is trying to kill off the used market by creating games that need more DLC to be “complete” and use DRM (digital rights management) to control the purchasers of their games. This may be the last generation of consoles that I purchase.
— Rich, via e-mail

We say: We hope you’re not done with games, Rich, but we hear you. We’re okay with DLC as long as it doesn’t feel like it’s been ripped from the original game and held hostage from the purchased package. One solution, though, could be to hold off on purchasing a game that has a lot of add-on content until the publisher releases a “Game of the Year”—version of the title. In the case of blockbusters like *Borderlands* and *Dragon Age: Origins*, later DLC-studded versions were released at a cheaper price and had all the additional content included in the one package.

KOXM PLAYLIST

What’s your favorite custom soundtrack for your favorite Xbox 360 game? Email your five-song playlist, the game it goes with, your Gamertag, and a digital pic of yourself to letters@officialxboxmagazine.com with the subject line “KOXM Playlist.”



PLAYLIST “PLAYLIST 1”

1. “NOT FALLING”
MUDVAYNE
2. “EVERYTHING ENDS”
SLIPKNOT
3. “BULLET WITH A NAME”
NONPOINT
4. “SUN DOESN’T RISE”
MUSHROOMHEAD
5. “GET INSIDE”
STONE SOUR



CHART ATTACK FILLING OUR MINDS AND MAILBOXES

Aren’t you glad you’re not writing about PSN? (Srsly.)

14%

2%

Duke Nukem could totally get Bayonetta if he wanted to. Just saying.

Portal 2!

37%

1%

Why do you guys write in the plural first-person?

46%

OMG, can you believe _____ happened at E3?!



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

Would you like some “shock and awe” with that?

• PUBLISHER: Activision • DEVELOPER: Infinity Ward/Sledgehammer Games • MULTIPLAYER: Yes • RELEASE DATE: November 2011 • FOR FANS OF: Explosions, shooters, multiplayer mayhem



Washington, D.C., is in flames. New York City has been decimated and is now occupied by hostile Russian forces. And you're just waking up in an upended military transport, fighting through the hazy-headed confusion to release your seat belt and open the skyward-facing vehicle door. The minute you do, the cityscape above shows just how screwed you are. Blackhawks are buzzing around wrecked skyscrapers, and the pavement and buildings have been completely torn up by

the war raging on Manhattan's streets.

This is our introduction to the mayhem of “Black Tuesday” — one of *Modern Warfare 3*'s levels that take place on U.S. soil — and it's entirely apparent from the get-go that the game isn't out to coddle you.

“We're taking players from the outskirts into the heart of major cities around the world,” says Robert Bowling, creative strategist at *MW3* development studio Infinity Ward. “All over Europe, parts of Africa, Russia, the Himalayas — it's a conflict that really covers the entire globe.”

Underwater recon? Hell, yes. We didn't see any of these missions in our *MW3* demos, but we can't wait to play them come November!

With the Delta Team accompanying you through NYC streets, the firefights and level of sheer spectacle are what we've come to anticipate from every *Call of Duty* game. But the choice to bring the wide-scale skirmish to an American city, with its familiar landmarks — your first objective in “Black Tuesday” is to make it to the NYC Stock Exchange building — gives all the onscreen action an intensity that surprised us.

Playing heavily into the demo's running and gunning is a new rifle with an adjustable scope that lets you maneuver it to the side for closer-



THE WAR HITS THE WEB

“We will not be charging for single-player or multiplayer,” Activision publishing CEO Eric Hirshberg tells a crowded room before the company's pre-E3 press conference. A collective sigh of relief comes from the audience. And can you blame them? Just moments earlier, Hirshberg announced a mysterious digital online web service called Call of Duty: Elite. With no previous lead-in, it was anyone's guess as to what Elite offered...or *charged*.

But rest easy, Mr. Prestige. In the hands of Beachhead Studios — the group acquired to create a “digital platform and special services” for *Call of Duty*, according to Activision boss Bobby Kotick — CoD: Elite works a lot like Bungie.net for the *Halo* series, but is also accessible in-game. Based on the three “pillars” of “Connect,” “Compete,” and “Improve” (as outlined by Beachhead's Chacko Sonny during the demonstration), Elite will let you get all nitty-gritty with your gaming-session stats, doing everything from forming groups of friends to examining very detailed heat maps of the in-game action, and even participating in an ongoing series of contests.

“Connect” is where you can party up with your friends, or form new groups based on common interests. In this area of the website, you can also find matches and post both screenshots and video snippets from your *CoD* play sessions. The video section — dubbed “Theater” — is structured to work a lot like a YouTube or Facebook channel in that you can tag friends, vote on the clips you like, leave or read comments from other Elite members, and view staff picks or the most popular posted

videos. In the “Career” tab, you can revisit the most minute details of your play sessions with heat maps that show kills, deaths, and other minutiae, along with your friends' stats. Use what you've learned here to improve your game or prey on your buddies' weak spots.

The “Compete” area works much like Bungie.net's Active Challenges: the staff will issue around-the-clock contests based on everything from skill to savvy. One of the examples we were shown, “Let Me Get That,” was a competition to submit the best sniper headshot video. Each competition has a specific start and end date, and you'll be able to enter using any of the tools available through Elite, be it taking in-game screenshots, videos, and so on. The winners of each contest will receive real-world prizes.

“Improve” is more of a leg-up for less seasoned *CoD* players. With a roll-call list of every mode, weapon, and map in the game, you're able to eke out strategies based on the facts and tips available.

But Elite doesn't end here. Jamie Berger, Activision's VP of digital, announced that the online service would offer a premium membership, but hard details on what it'd include remain vague. Both the Compete and Connect portions of Elite will be free to all players, says Berger, but beyond making a fuzzy reference to a premium membership including DLC multiplayer maps, he didn't outline any other facts.

With its friendly interface, Elite could be a great one-stop in-game/online destination for *CoD* players. But we'll have to wait and see how the remaining details shake out.



A lot of the buildings in downtown NYC have been destroyed, but the wreckage creates some interesting paths through the war-torn landscape.



LEFT: The Delta Team leader who wakes you at the start of “Black Tuesday” goes by the handle Sandman. He’ll save your bacon. **MIDDLE LEFT:** Ruh roh. Let’s hope you weren’t planning on being anywhere right after this whole “chasing a subway train through tunnels” affair. **MIDDLE RIGHT:** Wine-tasting rooms. Chandeliers. Suicidal driver barreling through a crowded indoor plaza in a delivery truck. Which one doesn’t belong? **RIGHT:** This view is similar to using the Reaper weapon to call in a powerful air strike — something you do from the roof of the Stock Exchange.

range targeting, or to the top of the barrel for sniper-style shots. Meanwhile, other touches made the experience feel eerily intimate, like snaking through a demolished building and exiting through a high-end jewelry store littered with blue boxes reminiscent of the iconic Tiffany’s storefront, or seeing the famous signage for Wall Street. When a Russian-controlled armored jeep came busting through a pile of rubble, guns blazing, it was a genuine shock.

The entire stage culminates in a heated gunfight atop the Stock Exchange, where your team is tasked with taking down the enemy’s jamming system. Strapping a few well-placed bits of C4 to it does the trick and moves the fight from the rooftop to the gunner seat of an arriving Blackhawk. As you mow down pursuing hostile-controlled copters, your time in NYC comes to a close — capped off by a *Call of Duty*–appropriate plunge to the ground after your aircraft gets knocked out of the sky. From a series like this, would you really expect anything less intense?

The explosions and carnage continue when the demo shifts to the London-based level “Mind the Gap,” which kicks off with you as British SAS Sgt. Burns doing some air surveillance on a suspicious nighttime shipment at the docks. Once you make it groundside, the game re-enters more familiar territory, with enemy shoot-outs as you clear the surrounding warehouses of well-armed riffraff.

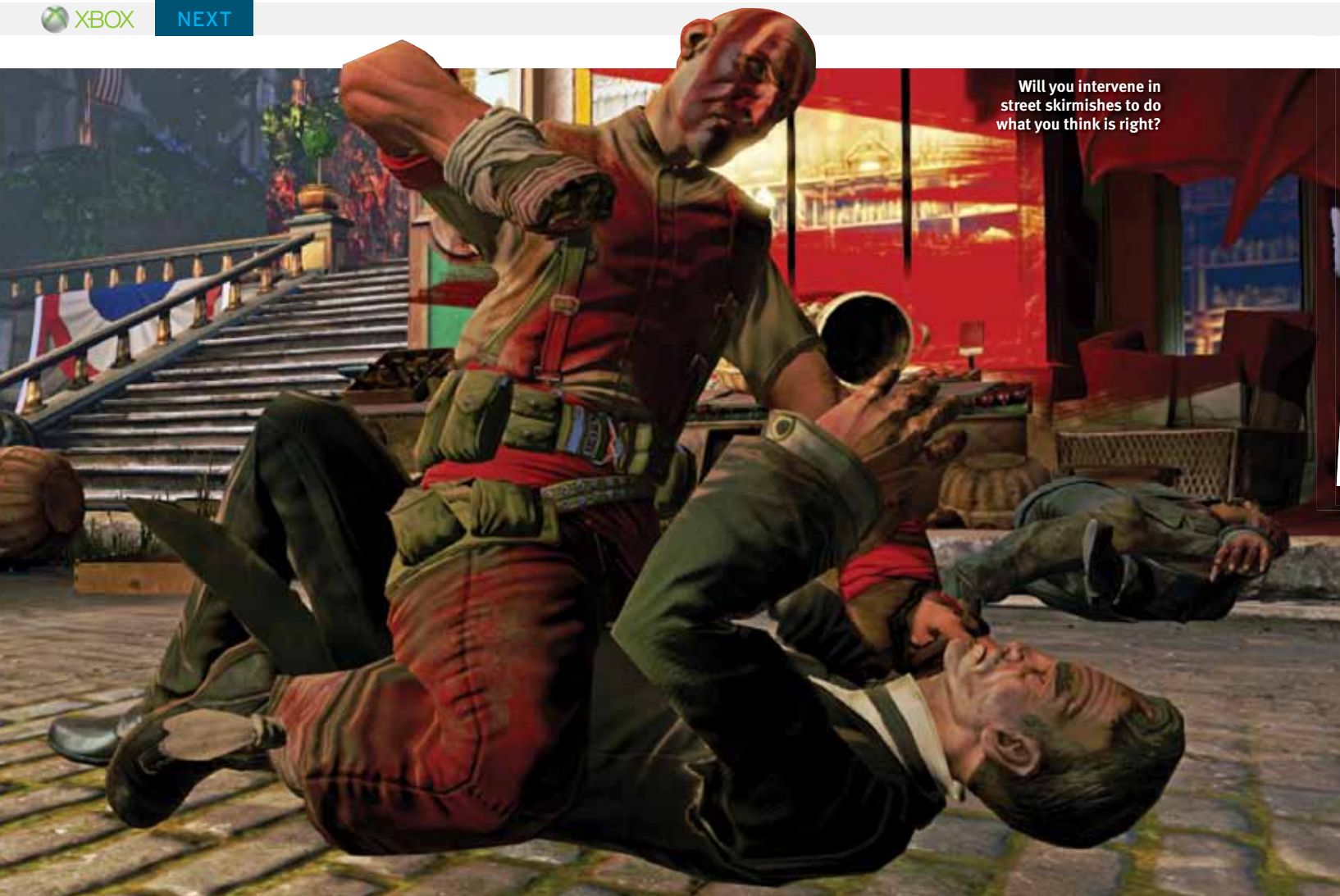
A surprise rappelling jaunt through a window with your troops and a discovery that the truck you’re supposed to seize is, in fact, empty are all just appetizers for “Mind the Gap”’s crown jewel: a pulse-pounding chase in the underground subway tunnels of London. You and your team pursue a subway train through dark tunnels in a small convoy of military trucks, exchanging gunfire the whole time until you enter the short stretches of civilian-populated station platforms. It may not surprise seasoned *CoD* vets, but it’s no less harrowing to race an out-of-control commuter train in the claustrophobic subway

system. But as soon as you catch up and put enough lead into the bad guys at the train’s controls, it derails and bounces around the underground structure like a rubber ball...jettisoning its wreckage straight at your truck. End scene.

“The campaign is all about that cinematic intensity,” says Bowling — and he’s not joking. But will our demo’s white-knuckle ride be enough to sate the fleet of *Call of Duty* fans weaned on the series’ trademark adrenaline rush of over-the-top spectacle? Does it even matter at this point? Though the game’s multiplayer modes are still unspecified, the return of the Spec Ops co-op component has been confirmed, another dozen-plus battlefields will be there to earn Prestige on, and Infinity Ward promises a full complement of online features supported by the newly announced *Call of Duty: Elite* stat-tracking feature (see pg. 15 for full details). *Modern Warfare 3* clearly doesn’t have to fix anything that isn’t broke just yet; it need only keep up the series’ breathless pace. — **Francesca Reyes**

Your journey takes you to most of the major European countries, including Germany and France.





BioShock Infinite

A promise worth keeping

► PUBLISHER: 2K Games ► DEVELOPER: Irrational Games ► MULTIPLAYER: TBA ► RELEASE DATE: 2012 ► FOR FANS OF: First-person action, airborne-city living, redemptive allegories



“Promise me,” pleads Elizabeth, the teary-eyed woman you’ve been asked to steal away from a tower high in the skies of the fabled city of Columbia, “that if it comes to it, you will not let him take me back.”

As you gently place your hand on her cheek, she wraps it around her throat to imply the lengths she’s willing to go to avoid recapture. The “you” in our demo of *BioShock Infinite* is Booker DeWitt, a former Pinkerton agent forced to seek out Elizabeth and bring her back to New York to settle a debt. The “him” she’s referring to in such hushed tones is Songbird — a hulking, beaked, flying metallic beast who’s served as Elizabeth’s strong-armed guardian and jailor since she was 5 years old. He’s kept her secure in a prison tower, “safely” out of the grasp of Columbia’s two warring factions: the “interna-

tionalist, anti-capitalist, sort of Karl-Marxian” Vox Populi (as described by Irrational Games boss Ken Levine) and the Founders, Columbia’s powerbase embracing “ultra-nationalist” values like “faith, family, and fatherland.”

The Founders want to keep Elizabeth in the tower, while the Vox Populi see her death as key to destroying the city. And lucky Booker, he just wants to pay his debtor by helping her escape from it all. But it’s in the journey that both he and Elizabeth — who’s never left the tower and has no idea why she’s at the center of the city’s turmoil — form a relationship. “This is the story of two people going through the worst time in their life together,” says Levine. “It seems like Booker’s attitude is to turn her in and get the money. I assume we can expect that relationship to evolve, right?”

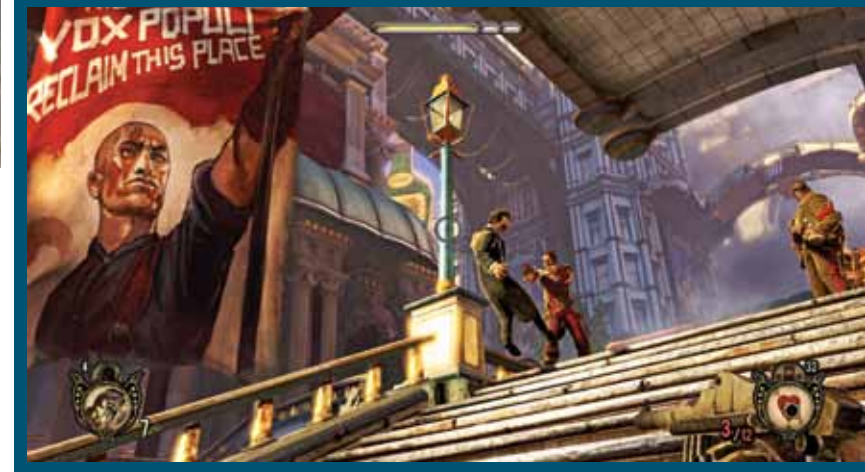
And during our demo, we see how Booker

and Elizabeth play off each other both in combat and in quieter scenes — in part due to Elizabeth’s evolving power to manipulate fluctuations in time, called “tears.”

Outside of battle, she attempts to revive a mortally injured horse, despite Booker’s warning that her ability isn’t developed enough for her to control. (“It’s too powerful; you won’t be able to stop it!” Booker yells. “I wasn’t asking for permission,” she snaps back.) But as the tear grows and seemingly infuses the surrounding area with life — a small radius of dirt around them sprouts grass and flowers, while the wounded horse slowly regains vitality — it goes out of control, ripping a portal that sucks them into a wholly different realm. And it’s one that contains a movie theater (with the curiously named *Revenge of the Jedi* gracing its marquee) along a busy, ’80s-era city street.



ABOVE LEFT: The Vox Populi’s floating zeppelin showers Booker with projectiles. Hop a sky-line to get in close for attack! ABOVE RIGHT: Elizabeth isn’t the angel on your shoulder. She’s just as human (and flawed) as Booker. BELOW: Our demo took us through dangerous Vox Populi territory.



Booker panics. “Close it! Close it!” Elizabeth struggles, and finally returns them to their own timeline — dead horse and all. It’s a fascinating peek at not only her fledgling powers, but at what possibilities lie in *Infinite*’s mesmerizing setting.

“This is a very morally compromised world,” explains Levine. “Any decision you make, to me, feels like real life... It’s a dynamic we’re playing with — Booker and Liz being in a position where they’re looking at each other wondering, ‘What can we do?’ I think that’s really important for how their relationship works.”

At the tail end of our tantalizingly brief demo, we get to see just how much the interactions between the duo have already affected us. When a

scrabble with the Vox Populi attracts Songbird’s attention, he swoops in to attack Booker. Before he can strike a killing blow, Elizabeth calls out to him. “Stop it! I’m sorry. I never should have left,” she halfheartedly tells the hulking, metallic, flying beaked beast mournfully. “Take me back. Take me home. Please.”

In an instant — as she turns to face you with tears streaming down her face — she’s carried away. And in that moment, it dawns on you that you’ve broken your promise to never let her be returned to the tower. And then you realize that 2012 is an unbearably long time to wait before you can return to Columbia to try to get her back.

— Francesca Reyes



Holding LT to enter the third-person cover mode is an essential function of *Human Revolution*.



ABOVE LEFT: Objects highlighted in yellow note what you can interact with. ABOVE RIGHT: Consider the aggro-free Sarif Industries HQ a good place to practice your breaking-and-entering skills. LEFT: Starting a riot in the streets of Detroit probably isn't a good idea.



Clearly, this guy stayed at a Holiday Inn Express last night.



Win over hostage-taking Zeke Sanders now and he'll provide valuable intel later.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution

The revolution will be tranquilized

• PUBLISHER: Square Enix • DEVELOPER: Eidos Montreal • MULTIPLAYER: No • RELEASE DATE: August 23, 2011 • FOR FANS OF: Emergent gameplay, bionic implants



If the name *Deus Ex* means anything to you, then you know how much is riding on the imminent prequel, subtitled *Human Revolution*. For superfans like us, it's our chance to once again experience the emergent-gameplay spirit of original designer Warren Spector's (*Thief: Deadly Shadows*, *System Shock*) legendary freeform role-playing shooter. For publisher Square Enix, it's a golden opportunity to relaunch a beloved franchise for a new generation of both players and consoles. In a rare move, Square sent us a whopping 6-plus-hour chunk of the almost-finished 20- to 30-hour game, allowing us to get a remarkably concrete idea of how it's shaping up.

The beginning of *Human Revolution* covers the same ground we detailed in our last

preview (April 2011 issue): protagonist and Sarif Industries security chief Adam Jensen is critically wounded in a targeted corporate attack, and only intensive use of his own company's bionic body augmentations can save his life. Adam 2.0 now has unique abilities all over his body — from seeing through walls to punching through them — and each skill is unlockable and/or upgradable as you earn XP.

The first mission, as we chronicled, sent us wandering around a Montreal industrial facility, where we almost always had multiple paths through the building and a bevy of options for dealing with the bad guys. That hands-on playtime left us optimistic, but our updated build gave us a much better idea of exactly what *Human Revolution* is.

For starters, we're now 100% confident that

the new *Deus Ex* is, first and foremost, a role-playing game. Yes, it offers plenty of shooting, but conversations abound here, including times when you'll have to read the subject's personality (example: do they have alpha tendencies?) and then react accordingly. In one scene, we rolled alpha-style and convinced a detective to cough up an item we needed on the spot, instead of waiting to get it after we did a fetch quest for him.

Another enlightening development arose just after we completed the first mission. It turns out that *Human Revolution* completely opens up at this point, giving you free reign of Detroit in both the geographical and gameplay senses. An entire urban hub unspools for you to roam, complete with sewer passages, ladders to rooftops, subway stations, and dozens of

pedestrians to chat with. Gameplay-wise, you're suddenly bombarded with a half-dozen missions of various sorts, of both the critical-path and side-quest variety.

In one very gratifying secondary mission, the grieving mother of Dr. Megan Reed — Jensen's former girlfriend and the chief researcher at Sarif, who was killed in the attack — asked us to look into her daughter's death, believing it was premeditated. To do so, we had to speak with the aforementioned detective, break into a captain's office at the Detroit police station, then locate and access a "cold case" storage locker elsewhere in the city. After that, we could present all of the evidence to Mama Reed and either give her the gory details or empathize with her and tell her that yes, she was right — something fishy is going on — while withholding the unnecessary specifics.

The police station, in fact, proved to be a central location where a handful of primary and secondary objectives converged. As in our last hands-on session, we tried to play stealthily and avoid killing anyone, but an extreme shortage of tranquilizer darts and some unfortunate (for

us) security-camera placement meant the alarms sounded and the place was soon crawling with hostile cops looking to ship us downstairs to the morgue. We had no choice but to open fire with our upgraded pistol (careful exploration of the city led us to discover laser-sight, faster-reload, and lessened-recoil modules), and before long we'd literally emptied the station, *Terminator*-style. Even with corpses piled around every corner, we still needed to bypass dozens of security measures to access what we came for. It's frustrating to meet a door you can't unlock: we'd advise pumping plenty of points into your hacking skills.

Six hours later, we still found stealth to be overly difficult, and the controls we complained about last time were better but still a bit stiff. The visuals, meanwhile, leave a lot to be desired, but then again, the original was no beauty queen back in its day — and we'd happily trade cutting-edge graphics for *Deus Ex*'s unique brand of gameplay. Fortunately,

ly, these are all the exact types of issues that are addressed during a game's final-polish phase of development, so we're optimistic that *Human Revolution* will capture at least some portion of its progenitor's glory. — Ryan McCaffrey



We've always wanted to speed down a San Francisco alley.



Driver: San Francisco

Paging Whoopi Goldberg and Patrick Swayze...

• PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** • DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Reflections** • MULTIPLAYER: **Yes** • RELEASE DATE: **August 30, 2011** • FOR FANS OF: **The City by the Bay**, *out-of-body experiences*



It takes a deft touch to create an open-world driving game that has a comatose hero who can possess the bodies of anyone he wants — and that doesn't instantly come off as eye-rolling, eff-this-ess kind of stupid. Hell, it takes a ballsy development team to even *pitch* that premise to a publisher, but Ubisoft Reflections has somehow managed both with their imminent driver...er, *Driver: San Francisco*.

After some extra time in the garage (we haven't heard from *Driver* in nearly a year, so maybe an "Expect Delays" road sign in the intro is a playful poke from the team?), the game is finally ready to roll out. We played the first 90 minutes of *San Francisco* with creative director Martin Edmondson serving as our backseat driver, eager to figure out how (or if) they were going to pull off this whole possess-whomever-you-want thing.

You'll star as Tanner, a police force hero with a head injury. The game's story unfolds with Tanner keeping a close eye on *Driv3r* rival Jericho as the latter is transferred between prisons. Of course, the convict has an escape plan in place, and the ensuing pursuit ends in a head-on collision that leaves Tanner half-dead but with Patrick Swayze-in-*Ghost*-style abilities.



Believe it or not, *Driver: SF* does a great job of selling its whacked-out premise with highly polished cutscenes and plenty of witty banter between Tanner and his partner Jones that make it clear the game doesn't take itself too seriously. The early missions cleverly serve two purposes: to introduce gameplay mechanics and to convince shotgun-riding partner Jones that you're not certifiably insane.

For instance, one setup tasks you with jumping into the body of a driver's-ed student and driving erratically enough to get the instructor's heart rate high enough so that he has a heart attack. You get a handle on the feats and stunts that make up the core of the game by drifting, dodging oncoming traffic at high speeds, and getting the car airborne. Another similar mission has you taking possession of someone test driving a Ford GT. Push the car as hard as it will go in order to make the car salesman soil his pants (okay, not *really*...though that would be hilarious).

To convince Jones, you'll tell him you're going to make a nearby little red sports car get pursued by multiple police vehicles. So you body-jump into the car's driver and then incite the nearest police officer by hitting his car, setting off a high-speed chase that you'll need to guide past Jones in your Dodge Challenger.

SHARP: The new *Driver* is running on proprietary technology that runs at 60 frames per second and keeps the streets populated with plenty of cars and pedestrians.



ABOVE: Porsche sightings in Marin County (north of SF) are a daily occurrence in real life. **RIGHT:** The T-1000 was relentless in its pursuit of John Connor.



For maximum body-possessing effect, play from the cockpit view.

Naturally, he's still not convinced, so you then have to promise him that the red ride is going to hitch up to a tow truck at high speeds. As you'd expect, it's up to you to ram the car into the back of a moving tow truck. And another hilarious encounter challenged us to get behind the eyeballs of a reality-TV-series news van driver, using nearby cars to do crazy stunts in the intersection where the van is parked so that they can be filmed for the show.

Our session ended just as Jones was beginning to accept Tanner's supernatural abilities, but Edmondson explained a few other interesting nuggets about the game. First, completing missions earns you Willpower — the currency used to possess other drivers. As that skill levels up, you'll be able to zoom farther and farther out within the City, letting you zip anywhere you want, be it one block over or clear across town.

For car buffs, around 140 real-life rides have been licensed, ranging from mundane Cadillac sedans to rare six-figure exotics. Helping you to manage your menagerie of metal is a citywide garage network. Buy these locations and you'll be able to get any car you own out of any of them. And with over 200 miles of roads in the recreated City by the Bay, you'll have plenty of ground to cover. It would seem that *San Francisco* is shaping up to be the *Driver* of our dreams. — **Ryan McCaffrey**

COOL: Movie Challenges are scattered around. Drive over one and you'll get to play a recreated version of a famous movie-car-chase scene.



The mysterious Noel takes up arms alongside the returning Serah. But where's Snow?

A meter will appear when you encounter an enemy on the world map — play your cards right and you'll gain an advantage going into battle.



Final Fantasy XIII-2

The fantasy's far from over

• PUBLISHER: Square Enix • DEVELOPER: Square • MULTIPLAYER: No • RELEASE DATE: Early 2012
• FOR FANS OF: Japanese RPGs, direct sequels, perky do-gooders, battling giant bosses



When last year's sprawling *Final Fantasy XIII* came to a close after hours and hours of monster-bashing world-saving, we assumed the adventure had reached its end. But lo and behold: developer Square Enix isn't ready to let that ship sail just yet.

But where to from here for tough-minded, pink-coiffed heroine Lightning and her friends? During a recent hands-on demo with *FFXIII-2*, those answers weren't exactly spilling from the developer's lips. Instead, we got to check out a good chunk of the JRPG's gameplay via a sampling of how the battle system and world-exploration will work.

Our slice of *FFXIII-2* first begins with a struggle: while Lightning's nowhere to be seen, her sister Serah and a newcomer named Noel are beating back a towering boss named Atlas. The giant goon's arm has managed to breach a portal into our world, and now it's attempting to break through and wreak unholy havoc. The ensuing battle gives us a taste of a few new combat features, including a cinematic action in mid-fight that you can trigger to activate a quick-time event of sorts. Spam the

correct button in time and your character can execute a critical hit or gain an increase in certain abilities. Fail and you'll be penalized with no bonus stat buffs.

You're also able to recruit certain stock enemy monsters as your third party member. Defeating specific foes — in our demo we had a Flan and a Feral Behemoth on our side — lets you collect the creature's essence in a crystal at battle's end. Depending on which Paradigm (the preset combat class roles you can assign to your party members returns from *FFXIII*) you activate during battle, that beast will appear at your side with their own selectable actions. Have them fight for a set period of time and you'll power up their "Feral Link" meter which, when used, unleashes a powerful attack specific to that particular monster.

In addition, your new adventure includes branching paths with the ability to receive advice from your party on which direction to take, a sidekick Moogles who can detect special "Artefacts" in the environment, areas with NPCs to chat and do business with...the list goes on. Clearly, *Final Fantasy* fans will have their hands full with all the new goodies that beckon. — **Francesca Reyes**

Y'all Come Back Now

3 familiar faces from *Final Fantasy XIII* that we want to see in the sequel.



Fang

Cool as ice, she out-toughed lead lady Lightning by miles and her story was far from over at the close of *FFXIII*.



Sazh

We loved this father-figure for his relationship with both his son and the (sometimes gratingly) plucky Vanille.



Snow

Serah's squeeze might've bro'ed up the joint, but voice actor Nolan North made him likeable.



ABOVE: Feeling lonely? Local co-op lets a second player join you as sage pal Bunniguru (not shown). BELOW: Using your tentacle arm, you can pick up baddies and fling them all around to inflict damage.



Scarygirl

Who needs words?

• PUBLISHER: TikGames • DEVELOPER: TikGames
• MULTIPLAYER: Yes • RELEASE DATE: Summer 2011
• FOR FANS OF: Stylish sidescrollers, quirky graphic novels



By now, it's a familiar formula: a Live Arcade game hinged on stylized graphics and a bizarre plot.

But the graphic novel *Scarygirl* is intriguing source material. Besides being truly gorgeous — with an art style screaming "happy, twisted children's book" — it tells the odd tale of a strange-looking girl, her giant-octopus guardian, and the man behind her disturbing dreams.

Like its printed counterpart, this side-scroller uses pictograms, not words, to give you information — how to use Scarygirl's eight special moves, for instance. And judging from the three (of 20-some) levels we played, TikGames has done a good job of emulating Nathan Jurevicius' dazzling illustrations. The controls in our early build were a bit iffy — right now, it's harder than it should be to do uppercuts and other moves using the right stick — but the developers say they're still making tweaks, so hopefully they'll address this issue.

Even with it, though, sequences such as a dark-tunnel race and protecting the Tree of Knowledge piqued our interest. Hopefully, at long last, we'll find the elusive Dr. Maybee... — **Corey Cohen**



BUSY BODIES: Developer Techland will have two games out within two months of each other this summer, with *Dead Island* releasing shortly after *Call of Juarez: The Cartel*.



The barflies hate it when beer-thirty is delayed by gunfire.

Call of Juarez: The Cartel

The Wild Wild West...side of Hollywood

• PUBLISHER: Ubisoft • DEVELOPER: Techland • MULTIPLAYER: Yes
• RELEASE DATE: Summer 2011 • FOR FANS OF: *Call of Juarez* series, *Desperado*



The premise of the modern-day *Call of Juarez* is a familiar one: three cops who don't get along team up to take on a two-pronged battle against both police corruption and gang warfare on the gritty, crime-ridden streets of Los Angeles and Juarez, Mexico. Both the voice actors and the hammy script emphasize scenery-chewing, with rampant, inane swearing. In particular, when one of the trio of *The Cartel*'s heroes, McCall, fills up the series' trademark "concentration meter," it triggers a slow-motion killing spree — complete with an expletive-laden warcry along the crazy lines of, "...And you will feel my f***ing wrath..."

And yet, we laughed along, though the story definitely takes some serious turns, too. Each character has some kind of dark past, which even manifests itself in the gameplay. During each mission, for instance, you might get a call from a "professional lady friend" of yours

who needs a favor. Snag that "secret agenda" item in the level — and also try to pull off other shady deeds like stealing various valuables — and you'll earn dirty cop points that net you experience. That XP, in turn, gains you levels and unlocks new weapons.

The core gunplay is surprisingly satisfying, led by the use of pistols akimbo and concentration mode. Well-placed shots are one-hit kills, so you can John Woo your way through each stage, dropping gangster fools with single bullets to the brain. Other sections proved to be fun as well, such as car chases where you're either driving or leaning out the car window and shooting at 60mph. Add in three-player co-op — including unique endings for each character — and a standard adversarial multiplayer to boot.

If the cheesy goofiness holds over the course of the entire game, *The Cartel* could be a surprise summer popcorn fun-fest. — **Ryan McCaffrey**



Dual-wielding plus one-shot kills makes for very fun gunplay.



LEFT: Enemies will gang up on you in tight corridors, so break out the weapons to cut a path to the other side. **RIGHT:** “Hold still, lemme get that for you.”



You'd be pretty homicidal too if someone replaced your arm with a gold metal thingie and put a potato sack over your head.

Rise of Nightmares

Deep into that darkness peering

• PUBLISHER: Sega • DEVELOPER: Sega • MULTIPLAYER: No • RELEASE DATE: Fall 2011 • FOR FANS OF: *Manually hacking and slashing, survival-horror games, physical activity*



We have no idea how we ended up strapped to a chair in some dingy, gross dungeon basement with a clearly mad doctor — in an appropriately blood-spattered smock — grinning at us. But we do know one thing: we have to get hell out of here.

Standing in front of Kinect-powered *Rise of Nightmares* in this scenario has us squirming. In fact, you can wriggle around a bit to get your bound-up in-game character to do the same — but it's all for naught. Those shackles aren't falling away anytime soon...at least not until a mysterious rescuer busts in and frees you from an undead nurse ready to deal out doom as the doctor scuttles off for — of all things — a personal phone call. It's pretty clear from this madcap intro that *Nightmares* aims to stir-fry

the gritty gore of torture-porn flicks with the high-camp of Sega's classic *House of the Dead* light-gun shooter series.

As our rescuer guides us down a cobblestone hallway, we get a taste of just how *Nightmares'* first-person, Kinect-enabled controls work. Put up your dukes and you'll be able to punch and even kick enemies. Find a weapon and pick it up anything from a particularly lethal ice saw to brass knuckles — hold your hand out to interact with objects and grab items. Walking down a hallway or moving around a room requires you to put one leg out in front of the other, while changing direction or turning side to side is a mere rotation of your shoulders. Wandering rooms peppered with homicidal zombies and blood-filled toilets (guess what you have to grope around in to find a key?) only to stumble

into a death-trap-riddled area populated by spinning blades and a banshee-like creature (whose screaming attack requires you to physically cover your ears) certainly separates Sega's oddball offering from the dance/fitness/pet-raising Kinect crowd.

From our brief time with the game, there's no doubt that *Nightmares* has a bit of a control-scheme learning curve on it. After all, this horror actioner takes Kinect gaming into some truly unprecedented territory. But will it hold up over the entirety of the terror-addled journey? Or will the campy, goofy hijinks fade into an endless stream of kicking, punching, and putting one foot in front of the other? We'll have to wait and see, but for now *Nightmare's* territory is one where we're eager to stab, explore, and plunge our hands into toilets. — **Francesca Reyes**



ABOVE: Wanna get across that water? Then you'll need Gill Grunt to navigate the wet stuff. **BELOW:** Take your flame-breathing Spyro from your Xbox to a friend's PS3 by just totting your toy to their house.



Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure

The joy of toys

• PUBLISHER: Activision • DEVELOPER: XPEC Ent. • MULTIPLAYER: Yes • RELEASE DATE: Fall 2011 • FOR FANS OF: Toy collecting, fantasy platformers, youthful gaming



The idea behind upcoming action-platformer *Skylanders: Spyro's Adventure* is ambitious. Using real-world figurine-style toys, a copy of the game, and a wireless “hub” called a Portal, you'll be able to bash, jump, and scoot around the fantasy-riddled world of Spyro with different characters — based on the toy you're using. Each character, like the purple dragon Spyro, has their own abilities that give you access to different areas of the game's world. For instance, a water elemental creature can cross lakes, while a fire character trails flames to do area damage. You can swap toys — which are placed on the Portal to activate in the game — at any time to move around the game-world.

The catch, though? When you purchase *Skylanders*, you'll receive a “starter kit” that includes three character toys and a Portal. Any extra characters you want to play as must be purchased, in a way that feels a lot like a card-collecting game. It's a bit of clever tech wizardry that has the chance to hook younger gamers...and spawn a new generation of hoarders. — **Francesca Reyes**

Like *Rock Band 3*, the UI in *Rocksmith* shows you where to put your fingers on the fret board.



Rocksmith

No, it doesn't star Aerosmith, but it *is* a music game

• PUBLISHER: Ubisoft • DEVELOPER: Ubisoft San Francisco • MULTIPLAYER: No • RELEASE DATE: Fall 2011 • FOR FANS OF: *Rock Band 3, Power Gig: Rise of the SixString*

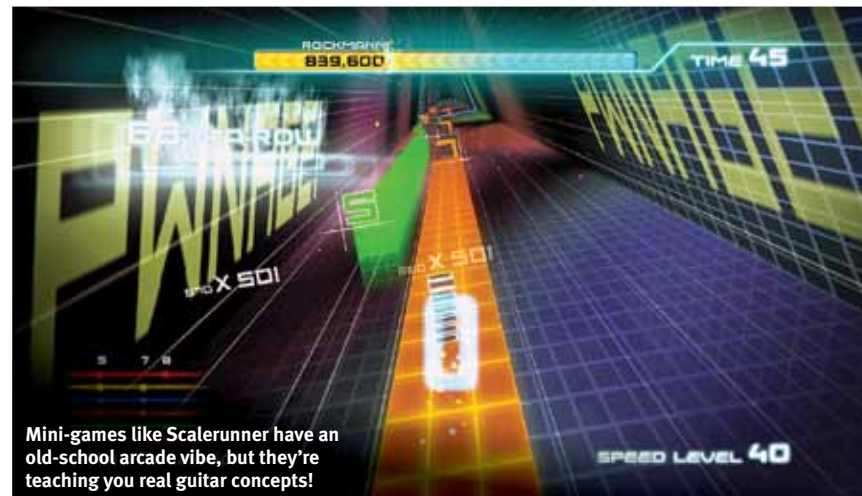


Eschewing the latest trend of trying to appeal to everyone, new music-game *Rocksmith* embraces one timeless principle: dudes just want to rock. And not just listen to it, but create it. Though *Rock Band 3* brought real-life guitar lessons to us with the release of the custom Fender Squier Stratocaster (see pg. 68), *Rocksmith* looks to further your axe-wielding education by offering no plastic toys and no colored fret notes. Instead, it's only compatible with actual guitars, but any electric six-string will do, thanks to a proprietary adapter that ships with every copy of the game.

Our look at *Rocksmith* was admittedly an early one: the interface was a mere skeleton of its final self, but the core ideas were already there. The most obvious difference between *Rocksmith* and *RB3's* Pro mode is the perspective: where *Rock Band's* screen looks down the neck of the guitar, *Rocksmith* peers across it, mirroring how you hold the instrument.

The contrasts continue. Intriguingly, *Rocksmith* has no difficulty levels. Instead, it starts easy and then scales up and down on the fly, adding notes, chords, and other elements of the real song as you play accurately and removing them as you start to miss. And if you struggle with a concept (such as note-bending), the game will automatically offer you a challenge to help you practice it.

The soundtrack, meanwhile, is almost purely alternative and classic rock. We spied hits from The Rolling Stones, Neil Young, Lenny Kravitz, Stone Temple Pilots, Nirvana, The Cure, Tom Petty, Incubus, Franz Ferdinand, Kings of Leon, Titus Andronicus, and Rage Against the Machine among the promised 50 playable tunes. Whether or not *Rocksmith* can win prospective rockers over with its high price tag (after all, guitars don't come cheap) remains to be seen, but we'll raise our lighters for any product that can help us learn to shred. — **Ryan McCaffrey**



Mini-games like *Scalerunner* have an old-school arcade vibe, but they're teaching you real guitar concepts!



"Hitting the streets" takes on a whole new meaning in *The Run*.

Need for Speed: The Run

Road trip redux

• PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts • DEVELOPER: EA Black Box • MULTIPLAYER: Yes • RELEASE DATE: November 15, 2011 • FOR FANS OF: *Test Drive Unlimited 2*, *The Fast and the Furious*, tire smoke



You encounter your first "WTF?" moment five minutes after your initial sitdown with *Need for Speed: The Run*. You're enthusiastically battling a cluster of A.I. cars through the streets of Chicago when an unnoticed interloper violently T-bones you and flips your Ford Shelby GT500 onto its roof. Cue a pre-rendered cutscene depicting your character scrambling out of the car and running into a nearby building with gunmen hot on his heels.

Moments later you're on the roof and controlling your fleet-of-foot hero's actions with the gamepad as you leap from rooftop to rooftop

and dodge machinegun fire from a pursuing helicopter. Soon after, you render an arriving cop unconscious with some aggressive UFC moves and scamper off in his cruiser — lethally armed chopper in hot pursuit. Behind the wheel once more (albeit briefly until the next equally startling out-of-car sequence), you'll reflect with a wry smirk that this definitely isn't your typical *Need for Speed* game.

In fact, *The Run*'s calculated new gameplay mechanics contrast so sharply with previous *NFS* releases — including EA Black Box's earlier *Underground*, *Carbon*, and *ProStreet* offerings — you'd be excused for thinking you were inside

a free-roaming Rockstar shooter. Despite some occasional *GTA* moments, however, *NFS: The Run* is first and foremost a driving game. One that integrates an illicit (and *non*-free-roaming) cross-country-racing premise with a comprehensively storyboarded script featuring a protagonist who must sometimes perform demanding out-of-car heroics to stay in the race. (These interactive sequences reportedly represent less than 10% of the game, in case you're worried.)

The Run's ambitious point-to-point race course is the other big talking point: Black Box has brushed aside the make-believe environments from earlier *NFS* installments to produce

Frosting on the Cake

DICE's revolutionary new *Frostbite 2.0* game engine (as seen in the upcoming *Battlefield 3*) gives the EA Black Box team a significant leg up in creating some of *The Run*'s advanced visual effects, and they can't seem to say enough about it.

"He has 97 markers on his face," raves story producer Adam Myhill, displaying a photograph of the actor who portrays the game's hero (wearing motion-capture markers on his face to represent facial bones). "That's *film* resolution. Normally we'd have to boil these down to 20 or so bones, but because we're using *Frostbite 2.0*, we're using *all* 97... more bones than any other videogame has ever shipped with."

Driving producer Alex Grimbley is similarly impressed. "As a producer, when you sit down with the designers and say, 'Hey, wouldn't it be cool if the track went this way a bit or did this a bit?' — well, those changes used to take hours or sometimes even a day to implement," he recalls. "With *Frostbite*, we can make these changes and be driving the new route in *minutes*. It's a powerful tool."

You could do worse than make a cross-country trip in a Porsche.



Wait, Jason Bourne! We just want to be friends!



"The Run" also references what happens in your pants after stops at Taco Bell.

a truly daunting coast-to-coast magnum opus. Throttling through real-world locales like San Francisco, Las Vegas, the Rocky Mountains, and Chicago en route to a New York checkered flag, your goal is to flaunt all traffic laws and beat hundreds of A.I. competitors to the finish line.

EA remains tight-lipped about many of *The Run*'s key features — including storyline specifics, licensed cars, stage details, and multiplayer options — but we were able to glean a few things in our short time with the game. Our on-screen hero appears to have a ruthless criminal organization chasing him (hence his ongoing out-of-car drama); we anticipate the licensed-car count will

match up with those in previous *NFS* chapters (you can also change vehicles regularly as you progress); and, while we may not see all 2,500-plus miles of the real Frisco to NYC route, Black Box promises to deliver "a big chunk" of it. Also, the gamepad-friendly vehicle physics, at least in the brief Chicago section we played, rate halfway between Criterion's arcade-like *Hot Pursuit* and Slightly Mad Studio's sim-themed *Shift* projects for overall driving fidelity and challenge (and any incurred car damage is purely cosmetic).

Powered by DICE's

latest *Frostbite 2* engine (see sidebar), *NFS: The Run* demonstrates a lot of promise. If the other racing stages look half as good as Chicago and the interactive out-of-car heroics can ramp up the game's intensity without hiccups, EA Black Box may trailblaze an intriguing new future for action-racing games. — **Andy Mahood**



Weapons are so detailed, this Beretta-style gun has a moving slide and hammer components.



TOP: "And when you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you." **ABOVE:** This time, you can dual-wield any one-handed weapons. **RIGHT:** Rockstar snapped loads of reference photos to make a convincing São Paulo.



Running headlong into danger is vintage Payne.



Euphoria engine + hundreds of hours of motion-capture footage = foes who move realistically.

Max Payne 3

Teaching gunplay to a new generation

► PUBLISHER: Rockstar Games ► DEVELOPER: Rockstar Vancouver ► MULTIPLAYER: TBA ► RELEASE DATE: 2012 ► FOR FANS OF: Crime thrillers, shoot-'em-ups, Michael Mann



Remember when bullet time was brand-new — when diving around while firing twin pistols was the Cool New Thing? A decade ago, *Max Payne* took those *Matrix*-y concepts and turned them into gaming legend... only to disappear two years later, after one killer sequel and, in 2008, a horrible Hollywood film.

We've waited a long time for Max's proper return, but it looks like that huge gap between installments may prove advantageous for Bully maker Rockstar Vancouver, which has replaced Remedy Entertainment (of *Alan Wake* fame) as the series' developer. Clearly, Rockstar's putting a ton of thought into our hero's next outing.

Max Payne 3's story seems as gritty and hard-boiled as franchise fans would expect — more so, even. Eight years after his struggle with mobster Vladimir Lem and the Inner Circle, the former detective has left the NYPD...and the country. He's working as a private security contractor in the massive city of São Paulo, Brazil, protecting a super-rich property mogul and his family. As these new screenshots suggest, though, not *all* of the game is set eight years later, when Max is the balding, paunchy, wifebeater-wearing alcoholic shown in early screenshots. The narrative will jump around chronologically, including an early mission in which our troubled anti-hero — still with a full head of hair — has to recover his

client's trophy wife, who's been kidnapped by the Commando Sombre street gang.

Naturally, everything goes kablooey: when Max and a partner go to a giant football stadium to make a ransom drop and get the hostage, a second group arrives and starts shooting. What the hell? This surprise leads into a series of action sequences around the stadium, intercut with the replacement for *Max Payne*'s narrative comic-book panels: in-engine collages of action footage, reminiscent of the multi-screen visuals in the TV show *24*. These storytelling devices are a way of moving seamlessly from cutscene to gameplay, says Rockstar, while adding the same kind of mood and feel as Max's narration, which

returns here (along with the character's previous voice actor, James McCaffrey).

The developers have retooled more than just presentation, though. They've also revised the combat mechanics — the wicked-intense running and gunning that the first two games dazzled us with in their day. Max's trademark dive-and-fire moves are no longer canned animations: he can dive in any direction, and when he lands, he'll react to the environment — thrusting out a hand or shoulder to absorb the impact, or tumbling down stairs, legs flailing. Moreover, a new cover system will let you pop-out-and-shoot (or blind-fire) from behind cover, adding a strategic element to gameplay.

And though you'll still activate bullet time yourself, the game includes set-pieces that trigger it as well. In the end of the stadium scene mentioned earlier, Max will spot a sniper locked away in a commentator's booth, at which point he'll climb onto a lighting rig and swing down, crashing through the window — in bullet time.

It's one of many ways the designers are making the gameplay more cinematic; having enemies duck behind cover, fire behind them as they run, and react differently to various gunshots (even ducking to avoid near-hits!) is another.

Rockstar is keeping quiet about where other missions take place, but we know that they'll span the city's many locales, from mansions to shantytowns. The publisher has also confirmed that several plot

threads from the earlier games will continue here, so it's a safe bet that the Inner Circle will appear, joined by an assortment of corrupt police chiefs, politicians, gangsters, and hitmen. Plus, we'll learn why Max was forced to leave New York in the first place. As eager as we are to jump in and start shooting, this mystery sounds intriguing. — **Corey Cohen**



No hair, Hawaiian shirt, bags under his eyes...what did this do to you, Max?

TECHNICALLY: Various Rockstar studios worked on the PS2 and Xbox ports of *Max Payne* and *Max Payne 2*, while Rockstar Games published all of these versions.

INCENTIVE: At the end of *Max Payne 2*, love interest Mona Sax dies in your arms...unless you beat the game on the hardest difficulty. In that case, she lives!



ABOVE: Vincent's run-in with minx-y Catherine is far from coincidental. **RIGHT:** Scaling nightmare towers is not for the meek. **BELOW:** Everybody in your nightmare sees themselves as humans surrounded by sheep.



Vincent's longtime girlfriend Katherine just wants to settle down. Or does she?



Catherine

A wild sheep chase

• PUBLISHER: Atlus • DEVELOPER: Atlus • MULTIPLAYER: Yes • RELEASE DATE: July 26, 2011 • FOR FANS OF: Quirky subjects, tough choices, Haruki Murakami



Part action-puzzler, part anime-style adventure, *Catherine* works like an interactive, screwball tale of infidelity gone surreal in protagonist Vincent's stressed-out psyche. The game itself starts off with a tutorial masquerading as one of many tower-based puzzles. You'll have to guide Vincent up a teetering tower of carefully placed blocks to reach an exit far above. The lower tiers of the tower will start to crumble, so not only are you faced with pushing, pulling, and scaling blocks just so in order to keep climbing upward — you're also up against a time limit. Take too long figuring out how to stack those cubes and you might find yourself plummeting into the abyss below.

Certain items like magical blocks (which create a block out of thin air) and pillows (which grant one retry if you fail) may help you out in a pinch, but it's these "nightmare" segments that'll tax your dexterity and puzzling prowess under pressure. "Boss" challenges tighten the screws by ratcheting up the time crunch and adding new rules. In one boss encounter against "Fist of Grudge" — we could only see its nicely-manicured hands as it stabbed the tower's façade with a fork — each "attack" transformed a portion of blocks into ones that took longer to move, slowing down Vincent's progress.

When you complete a stage in a nightmare, you'll reach a "landing" where you can save your progress, talk with sheep that have uncanny

similarities to dudes you've met in Vincent's daytime travels, and purchase items with collected Enigma Coins. To move onto the next stage or wake up from your nightmare, you must first enter the confessional. Here you're asked a question — in our demo, we had to answer if marriage is "Where life begins" or "Where life ends." Your response affects your Law of Chaos meter, which in turn affects which of seven different endings you'll receive. If you're playing on Xbox Live, your answer will be pooled into a poll that shows, in handy pie-chart format, how others playing *Catherine* have answered. It's goofy, but the results are riveting. Your interactions with various "sheep" in these landing areas can also affect your playthrough — some chats will give

Tasty Tie-up

Tokyo gamers got a mouthful of *Catherine*. Jealous?

For about a month and a half in the swanky Tokyo district of Omotesando, Italian restaurant Collabo Dining promoted *Catherine*'s Japanese release with an all-*Catherine* theme — even down to its drink menu!

"Atlus usually does its game launches in places like Akihabara [Tokyo's otaku hotspot], but this time they wanted to target young women, and the ladies love Omotesando," Ryosuke Funabashi, a higher-up at Snout Corporation (owner of Collabo Dining), told us.

"It's just like being in the game — [main character] Vincent and his friends are always at the Stray Sheep bar drinking and eating pizza," noted Yukiko, one of the restaurant's diners and a fan of the game.

In addition to the *Catherine*-specific pepperoni-pizza special, there were ten custom-made cocktails, each modeled after a different character in the game.

"For [Vincent's girlfriend] Katherine, we made a cocktail that contains milk, like her pale skin, and black Sambuca, like her clothes and strong will," explained Funabashi. "When you mix them up it turns gray, like her hair. And the drink we made for the character of [seductress] Catherine is extremely sweet — it might give you sweet dreams too!" — **Daniel Robson**



Catherine at Collabo Dining in Tokyo: Pizza and a sweet cocktail — sounds like a dinner plan to us.



you a choice how to respond. What you tell them may lead to their survival...or deaths. Atlus tells us there are Achievements for saving each one.

But it's not all about frantic nightmare-tower-scaling and sheep-chatting. Outside of your nightmares, you'll juggle dates with girlfriend



LEFT/ABOVE: At the Stray Sheep bar, you can play a pixel-ated arcade cabinet version — called *Rapunzel* — of the nightmare tower puzzles. There are 64 levels of *Rapunzel* to play through.

You're graded on your performance after clearing each stage of a tower. It's brutal stuff.



Katherine, the mysterious appearance of waifish sexpot Catherine (who you may or may not have cheated on Katherine with while utterly sloshed), and nightly sojourns to The Stray Sheep to hang with your buddies. Talking to various guys at the bar yields interesting nuggets of info, but your optional alcohol consumption will limit how many you can chat with and your efficiency during each of the eight nights' (composed of up to several stages each) tower stages. The fact that rumors are swirling that unfaithful male acquaintances are mysteriously dying in their sleep is no comfort either. Drink responsibly? Probably a wise idea.

We can safely say we've never met a game quite like *Catherine*. It's easy to brush it off as cheeky otaku zani-ness, what with its hypersexualized images and quizzical storyline. But during our demo, we found a labyrinth of sophisticated themes woven throughout the game's crazy, dense series of gameplay quirks. There's much more to this one than meets the eye. — **Francesca Reyes**



Like the other two player-characters, Aimi Yoshida is now officially a part of *X-Men*/Marvel canon. Will she die and then return *when we least expect it*?

X-Men Destiny

Choose and choose again

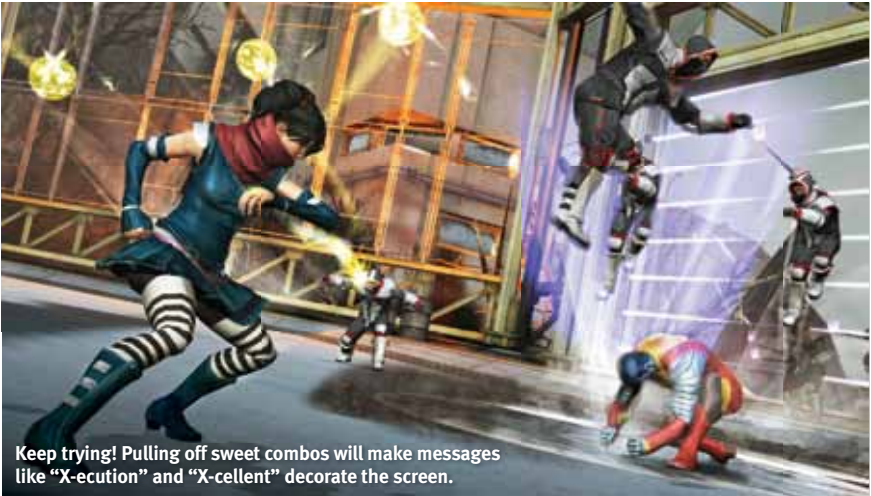
► PUBLISHER: Activision ► DEVELOPER: Silicon Knights ► MULTIPLAYER: No
► RELEASE DATE: September 2011 ► FOR FANS OF: *Marvel's Merry Mutants*, third-person smackathons



A licensed game where you play as *new* characters, not the ones you know and love? An action-RPG where making key story-altering decisions is a main feature? *X-Men Destiny* certainly looks like one of the more unusual superhero games we've seen, and the fact that Activision's been so tight-lipped about it — and that developer Silicon Knights so obviously needs a success after tepid response to its last project, the heavily hyped *Too Human* — just fascinates us all the more.

Lucky for us, we now have a clearer picture of the game than we did after our first look (February 2011 issue). A more recent demo showcased Aimi Yoshida, a Japanese refugee who — along with Adrian Luca (son of a mutant-hating Purifier) and football jock Grant Alexander — is one of the three player-characters you choose from at the start of the game. As the demo opens, Aimi is in a San Francisco subway station, looking for Gambit. After a quick rendezvous with a hipster

version of Nightcrawler, she continues on, only to encounter some Purifiers. Aimi immediately cuts loose with the Energy Projection powerset (the other options are Density Control and Shadow Matter), which lets her fling energy balls, fire energy bolts, build a force field, and perform multiple radial attacks. Pummeling peons certainly looks cathartic, if not quite as polished or attractive as the combat in, say, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*. As the battle spills upstairs into Chinatown, another X-Man — flying speedster Northstar — helps you trounce a bunch of choppered-in enemies. Our demo ends with a boss battle covered in our last preview, against a U-Man whose injected X-Genes give him the powers of Surge, Quicksilver, and Colossus. Once we beat him, which faction do we give the X-Gene to — Colossus (i.e., the X-Men) or Gambit (i.e., the Brotherhood)? Hopefully, the other decision moments are this dramatic. — **Corey Cohen**



Keep trying! Pulling off sweet combos will make messages like "X-ecution" and "X-cellent" decorate the screen.



TOP: Please do not attempt this at your local grocer. ABOVE: How Sprite is made. BELOW: Margaritas, anyone?



Fruit Ninja Kinect

Chiquita Banana best watch out

► PUBLISHER: Microsoft ► DEVELOPER: Halfbrick
► MULTIPLAYER: Yes ► RELEASE DATE: August 10, 2011
► FOR FANS OF: Jamba Juice, Gallagher, people with swords for hands



Though playing the upcoming Kinect version of popular iOS game *Fruit Ninja* might make you feel like a stand-up comic who's bombing at open mic night and being stoned to career-death with fruit, you're more like Freddy Krueger at a Gallagher performance; you'll use your arms to slice and dice the incoming tasty treats with satisfying precision cuts. Slashing the fruit leaves delicious-looking juicy entrails that are sure to make you thirsty.

Gameplay-wise, the goal of *Fruit Ninja Kinect* is to rack up as high a score as possible without cutting one of the bombs occasionally tossed in to throw you off, and without letting more than three fruits drop off the screen. *Fruit Ninja* also has a Zen Mode where you have only 90 seconds to cut as much fruit as possible, so combos are a must. A pair of multiplayer modes — one cooperative, one competitive — will also fill your fruit basket with joy. Who needs blenders, anyway? — **Josh Abrams**

Dead Island

Breathing fresh life into an undead genre

► PUBLISHER: Deep Silver ► DEVELOPER: Techland ► MULTIPLAYER: Yes ► RELEASE DATE: September 6, 2011 ► FOR FANS OF: *Zombie apocalypses, ruined vacations, gore*



If you've read anything about this first-person zombie game (or seen any horror movie ever), you already know that its island setting of Banoi is no tranquil paradise. In fact, it's positively hellish — and as we found in some recent playtime, *Dead Island*'s melee-heavy action can be quick, taut, and unpredictable.

The tension is already brewing in the opening cutscene, where your drunk-and-wobbling character is watching a rap group performing at an outdoor bar. Another patron picks a fight with you and knocks you down; before long, you're back in your room, chugging some sketchy-looking pills, and then...darkness.

You wake up to find the island overrun by zombies, although our demo skipped ahead a bit to find you encamped with fellow survivors at

a lifeguard tower near the main resort. Missions abound in this open world: we turn down a quest to fetch spark plugs for a guy's broken-down car (sorry, dude) and choose a couple of other missions, including going to a lighthouse to find a signal amplifier so our party can contact the mainland.

As we proceed to our destinations, we're rushed by various undead attackers who are definitely *Left 4 Dead*-style "fast zombies." Fortunately, we're playing as Xian Mei, a tough receptionist who's especially skilled with bladed weapons — and before embarking, we'd armed ourselves with a baseball, diving knife, and cleaver. (Special tables let you upgrade weapons' stats and combine them à la *Dead Rising 2*, so our bat actually has nails in it; later, we tape explosives to a machete to make it a throwable sticky bomb.) As blood sprays everywhere, we

viciously carve up the zombies, carefully aiming so we hack off limbs and even decapitate one ghoul (who takes another step or two, not realizing his predicament).

Elsewhere, we battle some more unique ghouls, including a heartier, more muscular zombie who's vulnerable from behind, plus a guy similar to *Dead Space*'s Exploder (shoot — or hurl a knife at — his bubbly sacks to make him blow up). We face our detonating foe in a city area two hours into the game, with bodies strewn about and a nearby church marked SAFE ZONE. Inside, a traumatized survivor sits with hands over ears; another mutters sadly to himself. As a nun, Helen, tells about us the refuge, we're struck by the coolness of this quiet moment. Hopefully, it's one of many intriguing story beats in what may be our most anticipated summer release. — **Corey Cohen**



LEFT: The Ram Zombie will rush you, then stop to struggle with his straitjacket, giving you a chance to attack. RIGHT: You're immune to infection; that poor NPC isn't. Shoot those bad-dies in the head!



BE CAREFUL: During our *Dead Island* demo, we were so busy retreating from two zombies, we back-pedaled right off a small cliff! Somehow, we survived, but it was a sobering reminder to keep our senses.



Choplifter HD

Up, up, and away

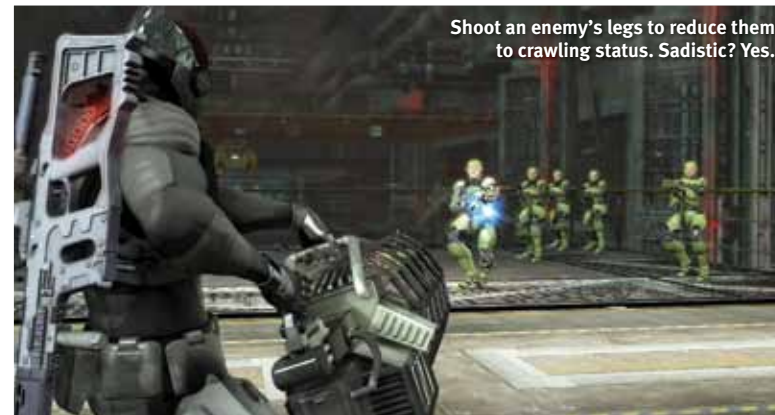
► PUBLISHER: inXile entertainment ► DEVELOPER: inXile entertainment ► MULTIPLAYER: No ► RELEASE DATE: Fall ► FOR FANS OF: *Old-school Choplifter, Apache: Air Assault, Jerry Bruckheimer*



In reviving a nostalgic title from almost 30 years ago, the *Choplifter HD* developer inXile knew that the landscape for military-related games had changed dramatically. To that end, maybe the element *Choplifter HD* takes most seriously is fun. The reboot celebrates humor, be it fainting goats, wisecracking pilots, or over-the-top domino-effect explosions. Why so much overblown zaniness? "We want to be the Jerry Bruckheimer of military games," says one developer.

The primary task is the same as the original: rescuing people stranded in a variety of situations, whether it's an on-the-scene reporter stuck in a zombie outbreak or POWs fleeing a war zone. To do this, you'll have to clear areas of any potential threats (including dudes with RPGs), load up the passengers, and then get them to safety as fast as possible. You'll have to be careful in landings, because if you're not (like us, during one try), you can crush some of your potential commuters.

You'll also have to monitor your armor and gas, which can be replenished with quick stops, and you'll have unlimited weapon ammo but a finite supply of missiles. After a few tries, we got the hang of the game's controls (thankfully, they include a turbo button to speed up drop-off runs); overall, the feel was lighthearted and arcade-y. And keeping with the game's big personality, inXile promises tons of Easter eggs, including one special guest passenger we caught sight of: Super Meat Boy. — **Kevin W. Smith**



Binary Domain

A sign of the metalocalypse

► PUBLISHER: Sega ► DEVELOPER: Sega ► MULTIPLAYER: No ► RELEASE DATE: 2011 ► FOR FANS OF: *Robot overlords, shooters, choices*



The *Terminator* movies may have the sentient threat of SkyNet, but Sega has *Binary Domain* — a squad-based shooter that takes the impending rise of robot rule very, very seriously. Thank goodness you have plenty of firearms, the ability to use cover to your advantage, and a handful of grizzled, gun-savvy soldier allies to help beat back the steely tide.

And while the guns and cover are handy in any of the game's heated firefights against marauding mechanical men (whose limbs are individually target-able if you want to merely cripple them in sadistic fashion), it's your ability to actually chat with your squadmates that gives *Binary Domain* an interesting edge over other shooters on 360. In fact, your level of trust with your brothers-(and ladies)-in-arms plays a key role in how the game shakes out.

In between shoot-outs with enemies, there'll be chatter among your teammates that can trigger a button prompt to appear above the dialogue. Press it and you'll bring up a set of response options; how you talk to your robot-battling buddies can determine their level of trust, which in turn affects the direction of *Binary Domain*'s story. It's an interesting twist among all the shooting, grenade-lobbing, and general mayhem. In addition, longtime Sega producer Toshihiro Nagoshi (*Super Monkey Ball* series) is at the helm, which makes this shooter all the more intriguing. — **Francesca Reyes**

PLATFORMS HIGH AND LOW: The original *Choplifter* appeared on a ton of gaming platforms: everything from the Apple IIc to arcades to the NES.



ABOVE: "Either of you guys know where I can get a slice of pizza, or maybe some fried dough?"
LEFT: Poor guy thought he was in line for the Tilt-a-Whirl. Sorry pal, this ain't no E-ticket!
BELOW LEFT: You know what the Darkness hates more than anything else in this world? Carnies.
BELOW RIGHT: Your Darkling sidekick is a great asset on the battlefield. He's also a cat lover.



The Darkness II

Mafia hit-men are no longer Jackie's biggest problem

• PUBLISHER: 2K Games • DEVELOPER: Digital Extremes • MULTIPLAYER: TBA • RELEASE DATE: October 4, 2011 • FOR FANS OF: Using evil powers to kill things



Last we saw *The Darkness II*'s possessed protagonist Jackie Estacado, he was ripping mob goons to bloody ribbons with dual demon-arms and packing a pair of pistols in his human hands (a combination affectionately dubbed "quad-wielding" by new developer Digital Extremes). The mafia-hitman-turned-don was also tangoing with a beyond-creepy interrogator whose image now appears regularly in our nightmares. While we enjoyed witnessing Jackie ventilate baddies from brain to belly and be tortured by this mysterious madman, our previous time with the title left many questions dangling like a limp corpse from a Darkling's fanged jaw.

Thankfully, our latest descent into the gore-soaked sequel put us behind the controls and shed some light on Jackie's twisted new tale. The first portion of our demo took us through the same Italian eatery and New York City streets we'd previously seen, only now we were the one unleashing the hot lead (and terrifying tentacles). Using the triggers to empty clips and the bumpers to slice and dice with the ass-kicking appendages felt surprisingly uncomplicated; within minutes we were using the evil arms to effortlessly strip taxis of their doors before using them as makeshift shields while spraying bullets through the rolled-down windows. Munching on health-rejuvenating hearts, nailing mafioso thugs to walls with javelin-like pipes,

and executing the "Anaconda" — a finisher that makes *Alien*'s stomach-erupting scene look tame — offered similarly visceral thrills.

Turns out though, the chumps we turned into pulpy piles were mere bullet fodder, lined up like sacrificial lambs to let us get comfortable with the controls. The remainder of the demo took place later in the story, at Hellgate Field — an aptly-named abandoned carnival that looked as though it'd sold its last funnel cake a very long time ago. This one was especially effective at playing on frayed nerves: its atmospheric use of lights, shadows, and enveloping mist were capable of conjuring a few night terrors...even if the place wasn't already crawling with a new breed of bad guys.

The enemies here don't erupt into fleshy confetti after a smack from Jackie's lethal limbs, nor do they spout expletives when he turns one of their buddies into soup. Nope, these guys know exactly who and what they're up against — and they want it for themselves. Dubbed the "Brotherhood," this secret society is a bunch of evil dudes who, according to narrative designer Ryan Mole, "feed off human suffering." Charming, right? Their leader, high priest Victor Valenti, is Jackie's crazed captor from the earlier demo. With a mind as twisted as his deformed body, Victor will stop at nothing to take the Darkness away from Jackie and, with the aid of some ancient relics, he's assembled an army to help him complete his selfish goal.

Digital Extremes lead designer Tom Galt wants players to "think about combat," and these new threats perfectly complement that philosophy. The "Rookies," for example, are protected by dark relic-infused headgear, so forget about downing them with a simple slug between the eyes. They're also trained sharpshooters that utilize cover and know how to recognize when Jackie's weak. Less tactical but equally deadly are the "Melee" Brotherhood; crazed devotees to the cause, these hulking threats rush Jackie with a vicious up-close attack befitting their nickname. Encased in a hardened shell made from dark relics, their baton-like weapon — and the arm wielding it — doesn't easily succumb to Jackie's possessed pals.

While these well-equipped chaps keep players from falling into button-spamming complacency, it's the "Support" Brotherhood that literally sends Jackie's demon arms slithering back to momma. Their only weapon is a floodlight, but it works like Kryptonite against Jackie's light-phobic powers. The portable beams can be taken out, but unlike stationary street lamps, they're a tough target. The most intense battles we witnessed at Hellgate Field saw Jackie stripped of his powers by these lights just before melee attackers swarmed to take advantage of his weakened state.

Seeing these new enemies and the fresh environment was a treat, but we were especially impressed with the dynamic combat spawned by the presence of the Brotherhood. While painting levels with the entrails of clueless henchmen is undeniably fun, it can grow repetitive. Plus, in addition to presenting a real, evolving threat, the Brotherhood provides fertile ground for conspiracy-riddled storytelling. Now we'll never get Valenti out of our nightmares. — **Matt Cabral**

Executing the "Anaconda" — a finisher that makes *Alien*'s stomach-erupting scene look tame — offered visceral thrills.

5 for Fighting

By Ryan McCaffrey

With *Gears of War 3*'s fully reloaded, five-player Horde 2.0 mode, you'll need a group of reliable buddies to carve the most out of the game. Join us as we saw, slice, and fortify our way through 50 waves of Locust on the sequel's hottest map.

Three lumberjacks converge on the tree simultaneously. As if racing to see who can chop it down first, each man revs his chainsaw and engages the specimen.

BRAWNGGGGGGGGGGGG!!!!

The trio obliterates the trunk into a million useless chips.

Timber!

One turns to the other two and shouts, "Woo!" while another expresses his machismo with an enthusiastic "Sh*t yeah!"

As you've already guessed, these guys aren't lumberjacks and the

"tree" actually used to walk around on two legs and sport a hideous monster mug — it was a Locust Drone who deserved his three-man saw-bang fate. Bummer, then, that these amigos will have to rely on more than just Locust deforestation-via-Lancer to combat the incoming, towering Brumak.

Welcome to Wave 40 of *Gears of War 3*'s insanely revamped Horde 2.0 mode. To say we're knee-deep in it doesn't begin to tell the story. You have no idea what's waiting for you in the biggest Xbox 360 game of 2011...

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS
DEVELOPER: EPIC GAMES
MULTIPLAYER: YES
RELEASE DATE: SEPT. 20, 2011



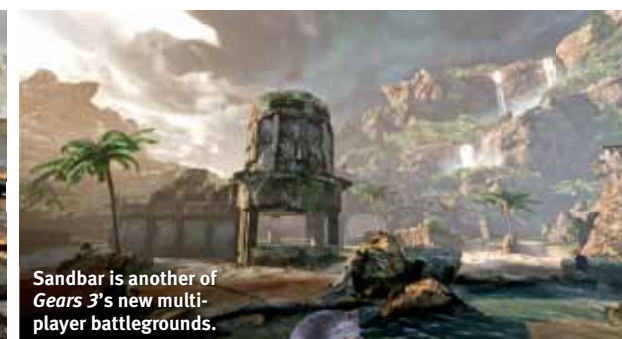
Hint: an electric fence is not going to stop one Berserker, let alone two.



Uh, maybe it's time to surrender and beg for mercy.



A calm, overhead view of Drydock.



Sandbar is another of Gears 3's new multi-player battlegrounds.

PUTTING THE "FENCE" IN DEFENSE

The Drydock isn't the worst place to engage over four-dozen waves of Locust uglies. With each of its four cardinal-direction zones suitable to hole up in and prepare for battle — the north and south ends are on ground level, while the east/west base sites are up on elevated platforms connected by a bridge — we've got plenty of options for fortifying our defenses and loads of shipping containers to take cover behind. We choose the west zone up on one end of the bridge, pressing Y to designate it as our base. With that critical decision out of the way, all our team has to decide now

is how to spend our initial allocation of money. Buy a turret? Throw down some defensive spike strips along the ground? Toss up a decoy?

Wait, bases? Buying turrets? Yup. See, in *Gears 2*'s original Horde mode, Epic says, user data and feedback indicated that teams tended to create their own makeshift bases by picking the most secure pockets of the maps they could find and letting planet Sera's Locust denizens come to them. So for Horde 2.0 in *Gears 3*, the developers fleshed out the fans' desired playstyle and built the game around it. The result is a cash-driven Horde economy that adds a healthy dose of tower-defense gameplay to the flesh-shredding, sawed-off shotgun—blasting third-person carnage you've grown accustomed to over the series' first five years.

Don't panic, *Gears* purists: it's actually quite simple and melds seamlessly with the gameplay. For every kill or assist you get (pro tip: if you tag an enemy by aiming at them and click-

ing the left stick, you'll earn money when they're killed, even if you didn't personally score the frag), you'll pocket some coin, which is denoted by a simple-but-addictive ringing-cash-register sound. You'll also bring home the Benjamins by completing randomly assigned bonus objectives, like completing the wave in a certain amount of time or chainsawing or executing a certain number of Locust during a round.

Your hard-earned scratch is then used not only to fortify your base, but also upgrade it. The aforementioned ground-spike barrier is only level one. Additional money will turn those spikes into barbed wire, then an electric fence, and ultimately a laser fence (shown at left). None of them will stop your enemies cold, but they will slow opponents and do progressively more damage. Same goes for the gun emplacements — they'll start as a couple of Retro Lancers strapped together, then upgrade to a pair of chainsaw Lancers on a stick, before doubling to four of them and even beyond that. Other buildable fortifications include turrets, decoys (which start as literal cardboard cutouts of Thrashball-era Cole

and work their way up to fully armored tackling dummies), and the ultimate prize: a Silverback exosuit (think Iron Man version 1.0) that fires machineguns and missiles, and can even anchor down and become mobile cover for your bros.

Before you start worrying that all this strategy is interfering with your war against the Locusts, rest assured that it's all easier than it sounds. You can't build anywhere — the game will instead indicate green areas you can afford, red bits you can't, and blue objects that are upgradable — and you can build only before each wave begins. Everything is done with just one button, too. Further simplifying matters, you can give money to other players, and also pool your resources by having everyone click on the desired object to pump money into it until it's fully paid off. This type of group effort is practically the only way to afford the Silverback.

The overall objective remains the same as always: wipe out every single Locust scum on the map. Easy enough to wrap your head around, right? Good. Now let's get back to the meat of the action.

One Bling to Rule Them All

Like making others jealous? Then you've probably had a great time during the past few years, given that many publishers have been releasing various expensive collector's editions of their games to convince you to spend \$150. Epic's upcoming *Gears of War 3: Epic Edition* takes it to a whole new level, dwarfing *Halo: Reach*'s Noble Team statue and making *Black Ops*' toy R/C car look like...well, a toy.

The centerpiece is a behemoth statue (not figure or figurine, but a freakin' statue) of Marcus Fenix that's so big and weighty that you could easily bludgeon a burglar to death with it. Seriously, it's a gigantic 11.2 inches tall and tips the scales at almost four pounds. Epic says it's a 3D "printout" of their actual, mega-high-polygon Marcus model, making it dead-on accurate to what you see in the game. And the Day-Glo paint will make certain parts of Marcus' armor light up. Suck it, shrumpy Spartans!



GEARS OF WAR 3

PRE-ORDER WARS: Want the Commando Dom character, in all his earpiece-wearing glory? Pre-order *Gears 3* at GameStop. How about a goggle-tastic Mechanic Baird? Hit Best Buy.

MORE EPIC-NESS: *Gears of War 3's Epic Edition* will also include a series-retrospective book, a COG paperweight, an in-game Adam Fenix soldier model, a COG flag, and other paper collectibles.



Good teammates give you cover while you cleave the head off of some ill-tempered Locust.



KNEE-DEEP IN THE DEAD

When the Brumak showed up and began stomping toward our team, someone channeled Marcus Fenix and let out an audible “Aww, come on!” in disbelief. The gigantic boss monster slowly plodded toward us, and our fully upgraded laser-fence defense system that seemed so badass five minutes ago against the regular grunts was suddenly no more than a splinter in the hindquarters of *Gears of War*’s biggest beast. Someone — we’re going to guess it was a person from Epic who’d have experience in this kind of thing — shouted, “Aim for the guns and the fuel tank on its back!” So blast away we did, but not before having to risk life and limb darting out into the open field to resuscitate two downed teammates (another activity that earns you money, by the way). Eventually, we brought down the Brumak, but not before it pushed our team to the very brink of doom.

These apocalyptic “boss waves” rock you every 10 rounds, pounding your base and setting you back on your heels. And it’s designed that way. “[Bosses] tear your base up,” admits executive producer Rod Fergusson. And as scary as the Brumak is, the tougher fight came against the Lambent Berserker. Remember her — the blind beastess

from the first *Gears* who hunted you based on sound? The Lambent-infected version also charges you, but instead of scorching her with a Hammer of Dawn, you’ll have to wait until she charges and her chest cavity opens up, exposing her glowing yellow heart. It’s her one truly vulnerable spot. So if you read that and ask yourself, “Wait, you mean I have to stand in the path of a charging Berserker to damage her?” — the answer is yes. Yes, you do.

But the 45 non-boss waves are where all of Horde 2.0’s new elements can really be appreciated. Take the all-new mech-like Silverback, for instance. Our team had to collectively save up for it, as, again, its stratospheric price tag makes it far too expensive for one COG to afford. So, over the course of many rounds, we kept feeding our money to one teammate, who finally built the sucker. He kindly stepped aside, though, so we hopped in!

Ripping off missiles and high-caliber chaingun rounds, we quickly turned the Locust attackers to mulch. The Silverback isn’t invincible, though. In fact, it’s rather vulnerable from the rear, making it a good idea to bring one or two teammates with you so they can watch your back. And it’s critical that you repair the exosuit



BONUS: When you complete the bonus objectives on certain waves, loot boxes will drop into the map. They usually contain weapons or goodies, but sometimes they’ve got Tickers. Run!

Cliff’s Notes

Epic design director and Gears creator chats about the franchise and more



On whether Horde 2.0 is a tower-defense game:

“A little bit. We wanted the creatures to still go for you and chew through your fortifications to get there. Their endgame is to kill you, not to take out the base, and that’s a key difference.”

On other influences on Horde 2.0: “Something we were influenced by was the bonus objectives that *Halo* [Firefight mode] had done, like, ‘Now in this round, get 16 headshots.’ That’s one thing where we can do our own twist on it, and we are perfectly willing to cop to that.”

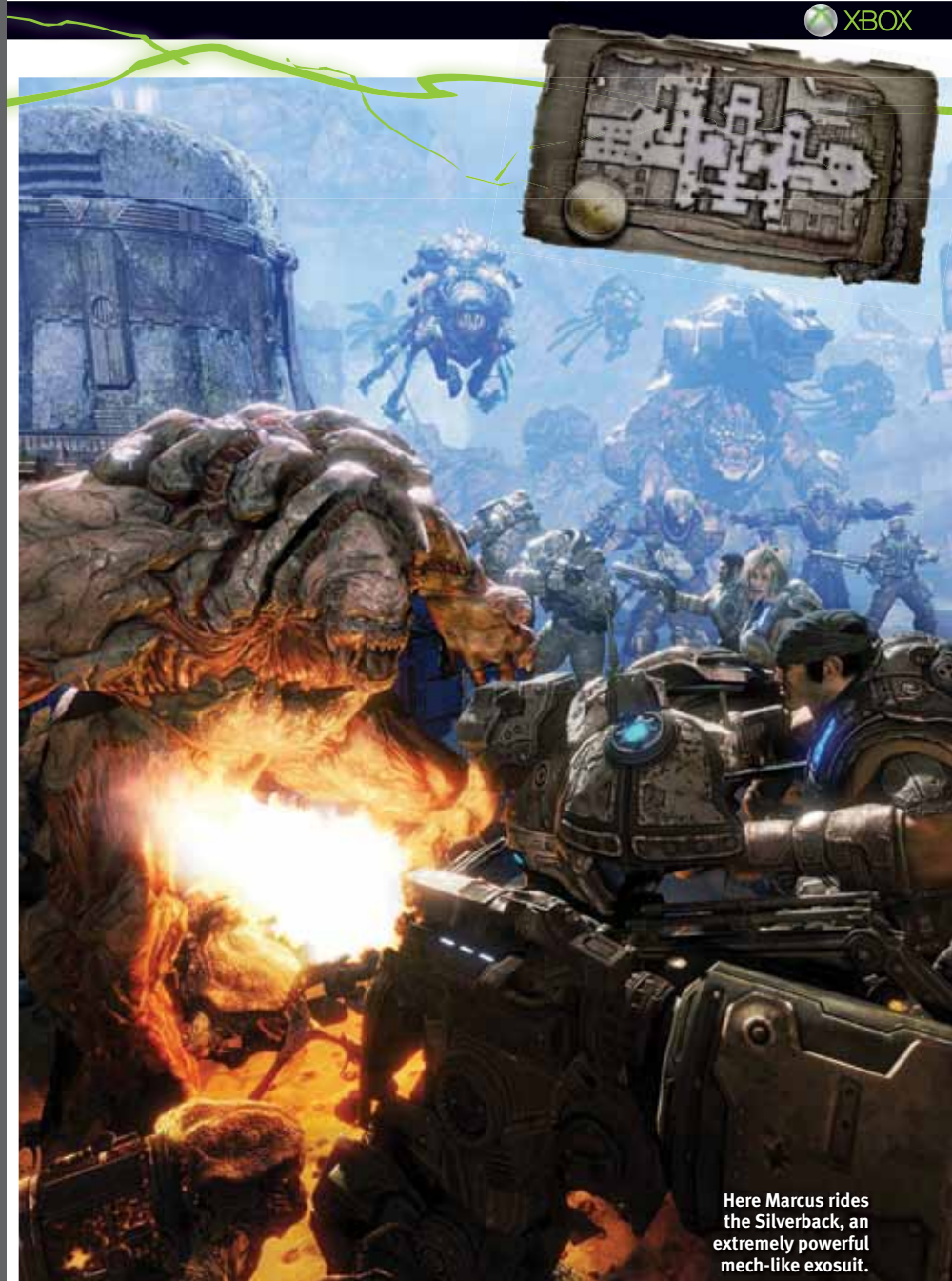
On mixing-and-matching Mutators in Gears 3’s multiplayer modes: “You can kind of cross-pollinate them. One person brings in one Mutator, one person brings in another. It’s like, ‘Get Ryan because he has Big Head [unlocked] and get this guy because he has Gore.’ You can make this kind of potluck dinner of mayhem that modifies the game, and you can bring that to the table.”

On whether he could step away from Gears in the future, à la Bungie with Halo: “There is no way I’m going to vanish anytime in the future if there is a *Gears of War* follow-up. With that said, in order for me to stay interested in any sort of follow-up, it can’t just be the same exact thing we’ve been doing the whole time. It needs some kind of continued, unique twist to stretch those creative muscles and get those juices flowing, which I think is also necessary to keep the fans interested.”

On how long Gears can continue to thrive as an Xbox 360 exclusive: “As long as Microsoft wants it to. We have found through our history that we do well when we align our interests with those of our corporate partners. Microsoft needs a *Mortal Kombat* to *Halo’s Street Fighter*. They need a game in a genre that is slightly harder-edged and that will be their holiday game to go against everything else. We are happy to do that, and it makes sense for us from a business standpoint.”

On the secret to launching two successful new IPs (the other being *Bulletstorm*) this generation: “There is no magic formula. At some point you make the game you want to make and are cognizant of the market you are launching it into. Be aware of a competitive product. I’m happy that when *Gears* comes out this holiday that we aren’t going against *Battlefield* and *Call of Duty*. Let those two slug it out for the ‘hoo-rah army genre’ [crown].”

On whether Gears 2’s storyline was a bit hokey: “Yeah, in hindsight, it was. [*Gears 3* will have] less of the gimmicky sh*t because we got a little too hung up on that last time.”



Here Marcus rides the Silverback, an extremely powerful mech-like exosuit.

between rounds — same goes for your fortifications, actually — lest it disappear and be lost forever between waves.

One other new toy worth a shoutout is the Cleaver. For anyone who’s ever wanted to wield the Butcher Locust’s weapon after he dies, *Gears 3* grants you that wish. It’s a special weapon, meaning you can’t take cover while using it, and even though it reverently homages *Final Fantasy VII* by dragging behind you when you roadie-run with it, it didn’t quite satisfy: the Cleaver’s slow, finite number of swings didn’t chop Locust in half with one swoop as we’d hoped. It was the only mild letdown in what was otherwise a flawless day on Sera. Of course, that didn’t stop us from using the Cleaver to single-handedly finish off the last Lambent Drone. On to Wave 50...

FOUR-MIDABLE PACKAGE

With a Versus mode powered by better maps than *Gears 2* and dedicated servers, the table-turning Beast mode, a four-player co-op-enabled campaign, and the amazing Horde 2.0, Epic design director Cliff Bleszinski (see sidebar) proclaims, “We’re shipping almost four games in one now.” And we didn’t even get to see the “Big Head mode” (yes, seriously) or any of the other 14 *Unreal*-style Mutators in action. It’s hard to argue with him — we might as well start calling this game *Gears of Four*. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we’re going to go think up a way to have four lumberjacks chop down a tree at the same time. 🌲

CLARIFICATION: We asked, and Bleszinski says that dedicated servers are only for Versus mode, but they do offer host migration for the other modes in case the server (read: host) drops.



The Next Box

In anticipation of this year's E3, we talked with folks in and outside the games industry to forecast the trends that may shape the next Xbox

Story by Kevin W. Smith & Illustrations by Martin Abel

Donnie Darko or maybe Desmond from *Assassin's Creed* aside, no one can really foretell the future. That's why whatever will replace the Xbox 360 — and when — is anyone's guess. "The industry's going through a huge amount of change," says Neal Robison, director of ISV relationship management at AMD, a technology company that supplies graphics hardware to the 360. "There's a lot of anxiety over what's coming next."

This year, the Xbox brand turns 10 years old, while the 360 will blow out its sixth set of birthday candles. Going off industry chatter, and barring any colossal surprises, we're assuming we won't get a major technological overhaul of the next Xbox until somewhere around 2014. By then, experts are predicting much more immersive, intuitive gaming experiences and a push to ensure the next Xbox will be the only home entertainment device you need.



This kind of redesign would make the 360 S look downright hefty.

Maybe you'd prefer more of a horizontal design next time?

MORE THAN A CONSOLE

There was a time, maybe when your parents were young and sprightly, that the name "Xbox" was synonymous with just videogames.

Load up your Dashboard now and, assuming you have high-speed Internet, you can do everything from notifying your Facebook friends you're single, to watching live games of your favorite sports teams on ESPN, to catching up on episodes of *Modern Family* on Hulu Plus, all without paying for cable TV or opening your laptop.

It should be no surprise then that many see the next Xbox as being even more of an all-around entertainment distribution source... potentially even Microsoft.

One week before this year's E3, Frank X. Shaw, Microsoft's Corporate Vice President of Corporate Communications, posted on the company's official blog that 40 percent of all Xbox activity is now non-gaming and that its consoles are averaging 30 hours of video consumption per month. In the post, Shaw also acknowledged that "you'll see Xbox marketed more as an entertainment brand this year." This led to speculation that there'd soon be the debut of a system that would fuse Xbox Live, Kinect, and Internet Protocol television (IPTV) together, and all the couch potato possibilities something

like that could provide.

"Content is king," says Wes Keltner, president of gaming consulting firm Gun, which works with corporate brands, advertisers, and game publishers, including Xbox Live. You may have noticed more media partnerships popping up on Xbox Live, like 2010's addition of ESPN and, more recently, Hulu Plus. Microsoft's \$8.5 billion purchase of Internet communications giant Skype in May has many dreaming of converting living rooms into videochat phone booths instead of just the place you go to mow down Cheetos and pass out while playing *Black Ops*.

If you don't mind paying monthly subscription fees for certain services like Hulu Plus or hypothetically something like HBO GO, you can pretty much plan on telling Comcast you're going with another option that's more customizable for customers. "I think Microsoft would like to be your cable provider," says industry analyst Michael Pachter.

Likewise, the more time you spend being entertained on Xbox Live, the greater opportunities there are for third-party advertisers to reach you. And those folks are starting to take notice. "If we just say the word 'Xbox' [to an advertiser], that doesn't mean you're a billboard in a racing game," Keltner says. "We're talking about some-

thing else here."

Evolving Xbox and Xbox Live beyond being just a system to play games on is the one thing everyone seems to agree with. "In the long run, Microsoft's strategy should be, and almost certainly is, to own the living room," says Ben Ellinger, program director for game design at DigiPen University in Redmond, Washington.

It's unlikely Microsoft would abandon Xbox's gaming roots to concentrate exclusively on home entertainment, but you can almost certainly expect a stronger push to broaden its base. Stuff like Netflix Instant and Kinect have made significant progress in terms of outreach to a broader audience, but how far that effort extends could impact even the name "Xbox" itself.

"The more you continue to call it a game console, and use game vocabulary, the more [Microsoft] boxes themselves into a corner instead of moving towards entertainment [...] that would let them spread out," says Scott Klososky, author of several books on business and technology.

Xbox has an advantage over alternative content providers jockeying for your eyes and dollars, like Apple TV or Google TV, because it's already attached to so many televisions. Right now though, "anybody who's not a gamer, they're not a customer," Klososky says.



GAMES STILL MATTER

Before you storm Microsoft's headquarters in Master Chief armor to avenge the fall of Reach and ensure those Spartans didn't die in vain, hang on a second — good games, the developers that make them, and the industry that supports them aren't going anywhere.

"Right now, the higher-end game developers are really maxing out what the 360 is capable of doing," Robison says. Even still, publishers are asking Microsoft to keep putting off the next generation of hardware as long as possible, he says, since they've already invested so much money in figuring out the current system's capabilities.

In response to recent visual innovations in games like *L.A. Noire* — which captured realistic facial performances strongly enough to make them a central part of the gameplay — Robison says you haven't seen anything yet: "We can take this so much further."

Through faster, more powerful hardware, the technology included in next-gen systems will allow for ultra-realistic, ridiculously rich visual experiences, with marked improvement for things like physics and A.I. With A.I., for instance, Robison claims that currently, if you're on an in-game city street with hordes of pedestrians around, they're all scripted to do one particular thing if you, say, decide to start shooting up in the air: scream and run away. The kind of computing power you'll see in the next-gen system will allow developers to give individual personalities to each pedestrian, allowing them to react less with mob mentality and more as singular characters.

And *Avatar*-esque graphical realism? "We're pretty darn close," Robison says. He wouldn't comment on whether or not AMD is already working on the next Xbox console, but says that gamers have a lot to be excited about.

Impressive and sophisticated work from indie developers will continue in the coming years, but for his part, Keltner also predicts more AAA-level games with deeper narratives, like *Alan Wake*

Sweet Dreams

Other potential features for Microsoft's next gaming box



Cloud Storage

Imagine if for storage, your Gamertag, saves, and installed games were kept on

virtual servers instead of physical hardware — ensuring you'd never have to delete a game to make room for another again. "I don't like being penalized for wanting to play more games," Keltner says.

"I know there are people who like having the physical discs," Ellinger says, "but I think that'll fade over time. It'll get to the point where the advantage of being able to access things from anywhere becomes a much bigger advantage."



100% Digital Distribution/Cloud Processing

The other cloud option is maybe a

little more far-fetched for Xbox, and often heralded as a "console killer" by some, but would offer an online streaming service over Xbox Live, or via a micro-console like OnLive — which streams games and holds saves and data. Since it's not clear whether current high-speed connections have sufficient bandwidth, and the saturation for broadband access isn't 100% across North America (or other territories), this seems more like something to happen further down the line, if at all. "The folks in North America may have wonderful access to broadband, but there are a lot of places around the world where this device is going to be sold that don't have access, and [those people will] still want to buy product via physical medium," Robison says.



Videochat 2.0

There's little doubt Skype is coming to Xbox with Microsoft's recent purchase of the

VoIP application. It's the possibilities here that continue to fascinate. "The microphones and the way they deal with sound on the Kinect are really sophisticated," Ellinger says. "Combined with the visuals, you get this magical effect where Kinect knows who's speaking, it knows who you are, it can center the camera on your face properly...if you get the infrastructure in there well enough, that's a science-fiction app." Or as Pachter more bluntly puts it: "Skype, Kinect, Xbox 360: I can talk to my mom from my living room? You know what? I'm getting my mom an Xbox 360, and you are too."



Controls

You've got Skype, you've got Microsoft Windows 7 phones, and you've got Xbox's

already beloved standard game controller. Tom Standage, digital editor at *The Economist*, says the next Xbox could capitalize on Microsoft's many communications ventures by incorporating mobile phones into your gamepad. "The innovation's got to be in the controller," he says.

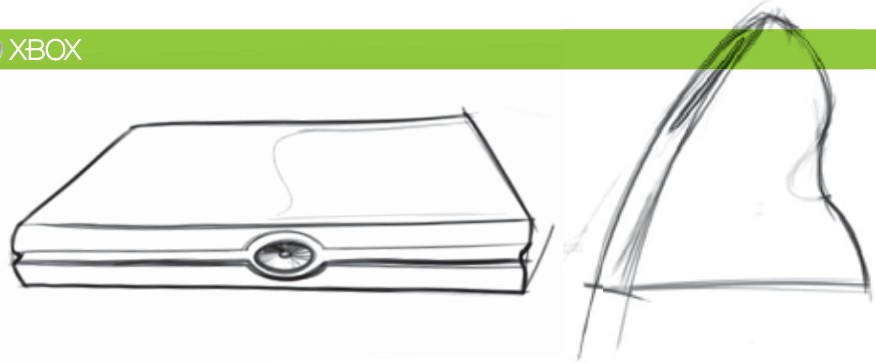
Keltner agrees, offering up a theory that you could click your phone into your controller and all your data could be kept up to speed. Or you could design a game's level on your phone during your commute into the office, then come home at the end of the day and play your creation on your console.



"X" marks the box? We asked our experts if Microsoft should abandon the name "Xbox" in favor of something else that would appeal to a broader audience.

Ellinger: Possibly. "Xbox is a hardcore name...I'd be tempted to come up with a name you can do a mass-market campaign [for] and really grab people. It would go hand-in-hand with the [idea of] the pure entertainment box." **Keltner:** No. "Not the 720 though, that'd be so predictable and lame." **Pachter:** "Never." **Klososky:** "Yes, it would allow them to expand their audience." **Standage:** "I'd be surprised [if they dropped it]...[Xbox] is a much cooler, hipper brand than Microsoft."

WEIGHING IN ON THE NEXT XBOX, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: Brett Lovelady; Scott Klososky; Neal Robison; Tom Standage; Wes Keltner; Ben Ellinger; Michael Pachter.



“This is gaming. Every time you come out with something, you can make some crazy, iconic, artful statement because you have that license to.”

or PlayStation 3’s *Heavy Rain*, written by more of those who frequent circles in Hollywood than gaming conferences.

Meanwhile, the limits of Kinect’s abilities have barely been tested. In fact, Pachter says the next real iteration of gaming on Xbox isn’t going to be graphics or processing power for framerates — it’s going to be processing power for fully immersive experiences like facial recognition. His hypothesis revolves around the idea that Kinect’s camera will be able to read your face and body language — allowing various on-screen characters to respond to your emotions and thus alter gameplay accordingly.

Klososky says you could also see Kinect open up the door for things like augmented reality (AR) experiences, like projecting game elements into a depiction of your real life living room onscreen, instead of placing your image within a created game-world.

How all these experiences get delivered to you is another question altogether, though.

FUNCTIONALITY

“We all knew [the Xbox 360] was going to be hot,” says Brett Lovelady, CEO of the San Francisco-based ASTRO Studios, co-designers of the Xbox 360. “In fact, [Microsoft] kept packing more technology inside the product, so we had to vent it as much as possible. And even then, I think we underestimated that and that’s pretty well-documented at this point. You could fry an egg on that thing in the early days.”

No one wants a repeat of the Red Ring of Death/system-failure debacle that plagued Xbox 360’s early years on the market, but one thing you can say about Microsoft is they don’t often repeat mistakes. So such a forehead-slapping scenario for the next-gen console — no matter how much power is packed in — seems highly (and hopefully) unlikely.

While ASTRO Studios is not currently working on designing the next Xbox console (Chicago’s MNML Studios, who helped design the 360 S and Kinect, declined comment for this story),

Lovelady says he could imagine Microsoft offering a range of different physical presentation options.

Aside from the traditional, free-standing console, Lovelady says Microsoft could build its next system into a HD 3D television monitor, like Apple’s iMac computers. In this way, Microsoft would fully control the system’s presentation, Kinect’s cameras could be integrated into the screen, and there’d be less clutter overall. Another idea would be to build the console into pieces of furniture, giving it a more seamless feel of integration within your living room, and making it more personalized.

As for how a standalone console could appear, Lovelady says there are two schools of thought: One is to refine the existing design, while keeping the same basic iconography, like the small step from the 360 to the 360 S. On the other hand, he says: “This is gaming. Every time you come out with something, you can make some kind of crazy, iconic, artful statement because you have that license to.”

Obviously the next Xbox’s features set, like whether or not Kinect will be fully integrated, is going to have a lot of influence on the design and how you might best utilize the device in your home. For instance, during the creation of the 360, research found that people preferred keeping the device vertical as much as horizontal. “We had to design the product with a 360-degree design language,” Lovelady says, “so that it looked good at all angles: up, down, back, and front. So that’s actually where the name sort of evolved from as well.”

You can count on continued advancements in technology and consumer trends to help mold the next Xbox, but gaming is increasingly looking like only one piece of strategy for the next generation of consoles. Soon it might not just be your best friend sending you messages on Xbox Live — it could be your Grandpa too, in between watching reruns on History Channel Instant. You might want to set your status to “Appear Offline” now. ❖

More Ideas for the next Xbox



An Exclusive MMO

If Blizzard creates a major MMO IP exclusively on Xbox, in the vein of *World of Warcraft* or *Diablo*, custom made for a console that couldn’t be ported to PC? “That would be the nuclear bomb,” Ellinger says.



Internet Browser

“Xbox Live is such a walled-off garden,” Keltner says. “It’s a one-way conversation. There is no two-way traffic happening outside of being able to talk on Facebook or Twitter.” But would it be in Microsoft’s interest to relinquish control of Xbox Live to the unruly seas of the Internet? Probably not.



The world’s not always in black and white. Maybe diversify console colors?



THE SCIENCE OF FEAR

Using technology that measures the physical and emotional responses of gamers, we play through three of the Xbox 360's most frightening titles to discover the secrets of terror.

By Will Porter

I'm playing *Condemned*, and it's dark. The hair stands up on the back of my neck as I walk through an abandoned warehouse — the site of serial killer Match Maker's most recent atrocity — and I begin to suspect there are rabid tramps lurking up ahead. When I suddenly knock over a bottle blocking my path, I jolt and unthinkingly bark a rude word not suitable for print.

In the room next door, four men are watching a live video feed of me playing the game. They can also see the effects that one sound effect of a fallen bottle has had on my physiology: their readings tell them that the surface temperature of my skin is dropping,

a graph shows the electrical conductivity beneath my fingernails jetting upwards, my heart rate leaps, and my respiration biometrics reveal a new pattern. Not only did I give myself away by swearing at a broken bottle — science has now unmercifully quantified *exactly* how cowardly I am.

I'm the guinea pig that UK-based biometric games-research company Vertical Slice is testing on before it opens its doors to a collection of gamers who will help them — and us — discover what Xbox 360's scariest game is and why. As my body's reaction to frights has already shown, this weird science goes even deeper.



"It's all part of a flight-and-fight protection mechanism," explains Paul Wright, who's part of the fear specialists at PhobiaGone. "When we're under threat, or even just perceive [it], the body starts getting ready to either run away or protect itself. When the body is in that state, it sends a message to release adrenaline, and when that hits, it's what gives us a surge of energy."

To get an idea of how best to trigger this sort of reaction, who better to ask than legendary Hollywood director John Carpenter (*The Thing*, *Halloween*, *F.E.A.R. 3*)? "I think people enjoy being scared in an environment they know is safe: watching a movie, playing a videogame, or riding a rollercoaster," he explains. "It allows them to experience their fears without actually having to worry about being harmed permanently."

In many ways, videogames are the perfect way to interact with a truly terrifying situation. You're at the center of the experience, but temporary salvation is always just a button push away. "In videogames you're partly calling the shots or shocks," explains Adam Phillips, screenwriter for horror flick *13 Hours*. "It's up to you how quickly you want to run down that dark corridor, or if you want to pause for a moment." By identifying with the lead character, you're actively put into frightening moments with none of the mortal injuries.

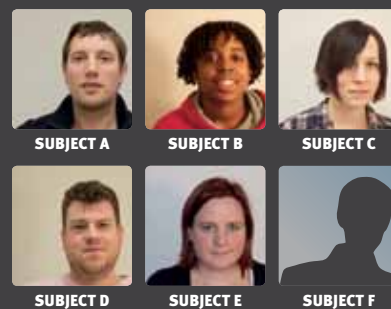
Okay, but which Xbox 360 games do it best? We teamed up with the guys at Vertical Slice to find out. Six locally sourced gamers (three hardcore types, three casual) were called in to play the first half-hour of three fright-fests — *Alan Wake*, *Condemned: Criminal Origins*, and *Dead Space 2* — in a gloomy Brighton, England game dungeon while hooked up to secret-revealing technology.

None of the test subjects had played any of the games before, and, along with Vertical Slice's recorded biometric feedback, each was encouraged to speak their thoughts. "In terms of recording biometric feedback, in this instance, we're measuring several readings," explains Vertical Slice boss Graham McAllister. "First off, the Galvanic Skin Response (GSR), which measures arousal through electrical conductivity. This, for example, could indicate any excitement or frustration that the player is feeling. At the same time, we're measuring skin temperature, which is an indicator of [moods] like happiness and sadness — while also keeping an eye on the players' breathing patterns."

All right, enough science. Let the testing — and screaming — begin...

Testing Times

What it's like being hooked to the mainframe



Our test subjects (some pictured above) were attached to systems that monitored fear, engagement, frustration, and boredom — all assessed through various real-time recordings taken as they played. Two fingers were rubbed with a conductive gel, and wires recorded body temperature and GSR (the skin's conductivity). On top of this, a sensor was attached to the leg to monitor heartbeat, while a strap was wrapped around the chest to measure respiration through the movement of the lungs. At first you can't help but notice the new presence dangling on the end of your fingers and you're aware that a group of people is staring at your every move. Once the game starts, however, you get caught up in the moment and completely forget that Big Brother is watching.



ABOVE: The testing team at Vertical Slice.
BELOW: Connecting wires to fingers helps gauge body temperature during gameplay.



Case Study #1

Alan Wake

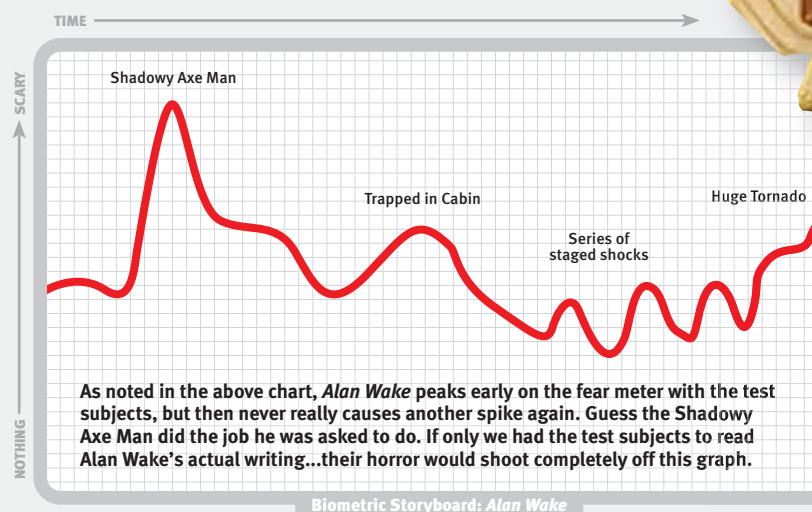
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios • DEVELOPER: Remedy Entertainment • YEAR: 2010

The tale of a horror-novel author whose wife goes missing...just as darkness engulfs the small Pacific Northwest town he's vacationing in.

RESULTS: The beginning of *Alan Wake* sees our hero live through a nightmare — pursued by a dark, weapon-wielding man — as players are introduced to the game's systems of light and dark. Alan's confrontation with the threatening, deeply-voiced shadow, who lunges at him with an axe, sparks the first signs of adrenaline. "The first confrontation is almost always the scariest," explains Vertical Slice's Joel Windels. True words, indeed: the panic that resulted from the sudden shift between being in relative safety and then under attack provoked noticeable, sharp, and sudden responses from all surveyed.

And in a pattern that would repeat across the entire study, the casual players reacted far more significantly. Whereas the house vibrating, the lights flickering, voices screaming out and antlers falling off the walls scared the socks off those who rarely played games, there was a comfort zone for hardcore players who knew how scripted sequences in games worked. One test subject, Matt, explained: "I knew I couldn't die at this bit, so I wasn't scared at all." However, casual player biometrics showed the scene was tense, with both the GSR (electrical conductivity) and respiration metrics highlighting their stimulation.

Having an underlying knowledge of how games work seems to affect how established gamers respond to deliberately scary scenes. In fact, another factor highlighted by the entire study was that longtime gamers aren't as overtly energized or scared by cutscenes compared to their casual counterparts. They're often seen as respite from gameplay — a time when they know they're definitely safe.



Case Study #2

Condemned: Criminal Origins

PUBLISHER: Sega • DEVELOPER: Monolith Productions • YEAR: 2005

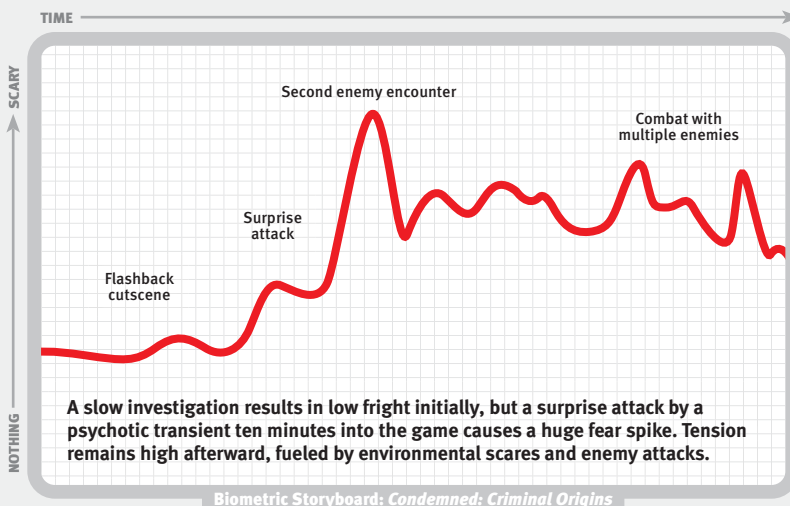
As Serial Crime Unit investigator Ethan Thomas, you must track down Serial Killer X and other violent psychos.

RESULTS: *Condemned's* opening is a slow-burner, with its investigative processes causing flickers of engagement in our rookie detectives. Pulses only truly got racing with the first surprise hobo attack. *Condemned's* lead designer, Frank Rooke, reveals that this was certainly the intention in the game's development. "What made *Condemned* scary was its sudden brutality," he explains. "Right out of the gate we said that, at any moment, a 2x4 could be in your face. We also forced you to think, which would often make you feel vulnerable."

The rest of the level frightened players in different ways. There were no more particularly unified shocks, just biometric feedback from individual responses to moans, enemy attacks, and sudden flashback cutscenes. For instance, there were mild responses to the game's gnawing tension: hearing the player's footsteps, seeing his shadow, and the noises of distant enemies. This, again, fits in with Rooke's views on the game's development. "It was important to lay the groundwork for the player to be scared," he adds. "This means the backdrop of the world had to be believably uncomfortable and filled with the possibility of the unknown. We worked very hard at making sure the player was 'primed' to be scared."

Unfortunately, the game has appalling early directional issues, and nearly all players got lost at some point, with the casual folks the worst affected. The players who got the most out of *Condemned* were the hardcore. They got less frustrated and kept more engaged — their shocks were deeper and their jumps higher.

Another factor, and a prime conclusion of the study, is that hardcore players are far more shocked by the unexpected. "The less scripted a game, the more core players are scared," says Windels. "The closer a game resembles a film, the more casual players are scared."



Master of F.E.A.R.

The honcho of horror, director John Carpenter, provides some reasons to be fearful.

John Carpenter has a pedigree in shocks and scares like no other. The director of *Halloween*, *The Thing*, *Escape from New York* and (obviously) *John Carpenter's Vampires* recently oversaw the creation of *F.E.A.R. 3's* cutscenes. We took the opportunity to find out what makes a good scare from the man who created iconic shock-slasher Michael Myers.



JOHN CARPENTER

OXM: What themes do audiences always find unsettling?

JC: Everyone is scared by the same kinds of things, like death, loss of a loved one, disfigurement... Those themes can be applied to a variety of mediums from movies to videogames.

OXM: What input did you have for *F.E.A.R. 3's* cutscenes?

JC: It was great working with Day 1 Studios on *F.E.A.R. 3*. I was able to share with them some of the things that I've learned about horror over the years, and they taught me so much about the development of videogames. It was a neat creative back and forth, and adding Steve Niles [writer of *30 Days of Night*] to the mix really made it a cool process.

OXM: When it comes to creating a great horror game, are all the necessary components very different from those in a compelling horror movie?

JC: Videogames have a vastly different structure than movies. In movies, you're dealing with essentially a three-act narrative which has a beginning, middle and end — and a corresponding emotional and story-driven curve. In videogames, the player's experience is very much quest-driven, and therefore the tempo is not necessarily the three-act narrative. Because of that, you have to have different goals in mind while making a videogame than with a movie.

OXM: Do you think that any of your other classic movies would suit a videogame treatment? We'd kill for games in the worlds of *Escape From NY* or *John Carpenter's Vampires*.

JC: I'd love to be involved with creating and developing games based upon some of my movies! I honestly think a couple of my old projects might make really exciting videogames.

Graphic icons created by Joseph Wain, www.glyphish.com

Case Study #3

Dead Space 2

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts • DEVELOPER: Visceral Games • YEAR: 2011

As stoic protagonist Isaac Clarke, you make your way through The Sprawl, battling freakish Necromorphs that seem to just keep increasing in number.

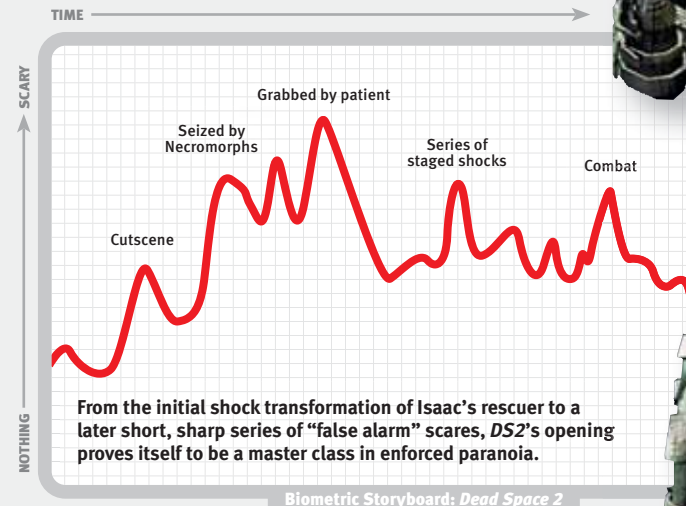
RESULTS: As players continued Isaac Clarke's deep-space adventures, fear peaks came heavy and fast for the whole group, with test subjects' responses suggesting that the abruptness and potency of the shocks were doubled down by the extreme gore. Case in point: the opening mutilation of the man waking Isaac up in the psychiatric wing of The Sprawl's hospital.

"Gore in isolation can be provocative, but not scary," says Windels. "In some cases, though, the grotesque can make scenes scarier, providing there are other contributing factors."

The ensuing chaotic chase has Clarke in a straitjacket and powerless against his multiple foes. As ever, the most profound burst of fear came during the first instance of attack — but didn't fade away when other Necromorphs piled in. In fact, player response strengthened the closer they got to death.

After this early fright-fest, *DS2* settles in for some more environmental scares amid the general blood-spattered walls. Hair-raising moments, including a blue-skied screen suddenly turning on and blaring at Isaac as he skulks past, a bit where an orderly grabs him with a knife, and a point where a vent he's crawling through collapses, all caused dramatic changes in GSR and an immediately altered breathing pattern.

It seems *DS2's* fear isn't dished out simply through the impact of individual scares. Before most of these shock points, our gamers showed a period of unstable biometric responses. "This heightened tension can be created by a potent atmosphere," says Windels. "It'll keep the player engaged and, ultimately, make the scares bigger."



WHO'S THAT ISAAC?: The Isaac pictured in the story above is from the first *Dead Space* (2008) — another front runner for scariest game on Xbox 360.



KINDA SCARY: Alan Wake

Alan Wake got positive fright feedback from all of the test subjects who played it, but experienced gamers knew that they could relax during many of its scripted scenes. The casual crowd posted strong readings, though...

PRETTY SCARY: Condemned: Criminal Origins

Casual gamers got lost and frustrated, but regular Xbox 360-ites relished the intensely spooky atmosphere and enemy attacks that appeared to come out of nowhere. A superbly macabre atmosphere resulted in some pulsating feedback.

ACTUALLY TERRIFYING: Dead Space 2

Science has proved that in the minds and bodies of both hardcore and casual gamers, Visceral's deep-space nightmare is the scariest game on Xbox 360. Congratulations Isaac Clarke, wherever you are, and however many bits you've been mulched into.

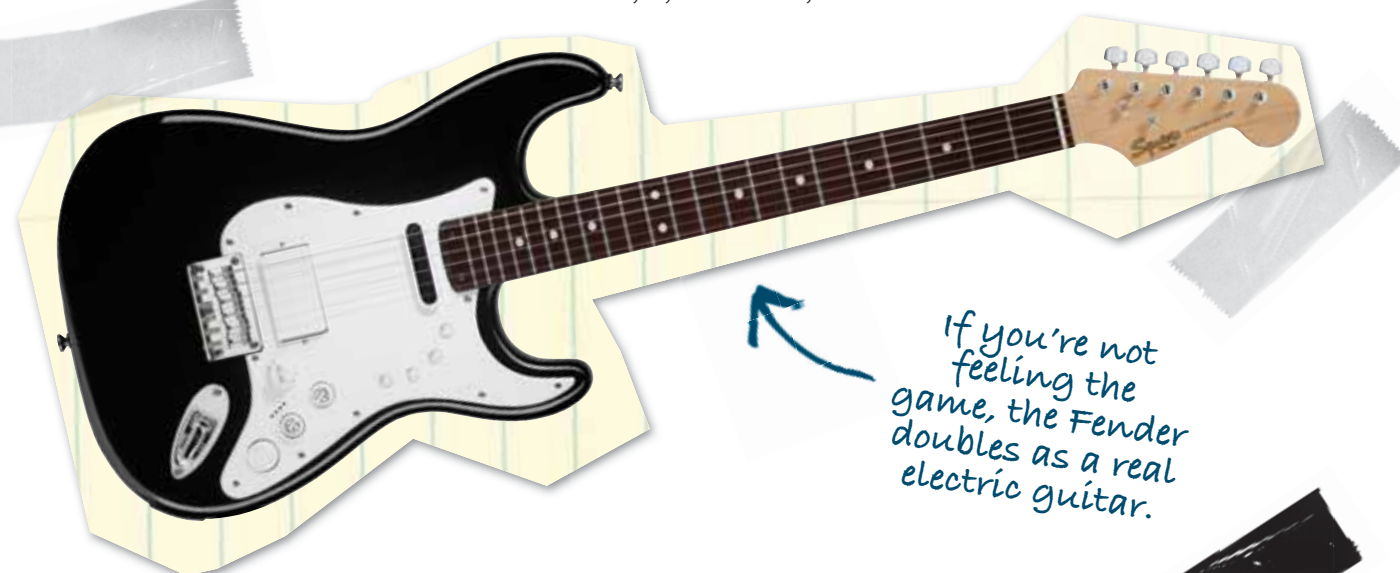


I WANNA (Learn to) ROCK!

Can *Rock Band 3*'s Pro mode, paired with a real Fender guitar, actually teach you how to shred? One editor's finger-bending experiment...

Last year, I lauded *Rock Band 3* for finally reaching its full potential and building in the tutorials and hardware that can — time and energy willing — teach you how to play a real guitar. But can someone really pick up the art of the axe from a videogame? Finding the 105-button MadCatz Mustang guitar nothing more than a toy, I instead opted for the long-delayed, *Rock Band 3*-compatible Fender Squier Stratocaster — and gave myself a week to figure it out. With zero previous guitar training, I grabbed a pick, fired up the Xbox, and began a running chronological journal of my efforts to rock on. Here we go...

By Ryan McCaffrey



If you're not feeling the game, the Fender doubles as a real electric guitar.

Day 1

10:00pm

With everything hooked up, I start the first lesson. It says I'm failing. How is it I suck *already*? Oh. I don't have the guitar itself switched on. Duh! Off to a flying start here. Sigh...

10:07pm

This \$280 guitar doesn't even come with a pick. Friends tell me this is normal, but for a product that's obviously aimed at teaching newbies like me how to play, you'd think Fender would be kind enough to include a 10-cent guitar pick. Good thing I'd been keeping one in my wallet for just this occasion.

10:15pm

OK, we're golden. Everything works and I'm ready. I'm doing the second lesson, which is showing me E-string notes on frets, 3, 2, 1, and open E notes.

10:25pm

The vibration of the strings is causing a couple of false notes to be detected. Time to press the mute button near the string box to quiet (and deaden) the strings. Much better.

10:30pm

The thought occurs to me: is this guitar even tuned? Then I remembered: before I started this project a few weeks back, I had former *OXM* Senior Editor and real-life guitarist Dan Amrich tune it for me. Yay for thinking ahead!

10:43pm

Still moving through the "Note Basics" lessons. I'm up to the B string segment, which is asking me to move back and forth between the first and third frets. I get through it fairly quickly and have what I perceive to be my first mini-breakthrough: I can feel the bumps between frets that tell me I'm moving from Fret 1, to Fret 2, to Fret 3. The baby-step pace of this tutorial is, pardon the pun, note-perfect so far.

10:44pm

Crap, I forgot about my laundry. How can I learn to rock without my trusty *Guitar Hero*: *Metallica* t-shirt? Oh, the irony. BRB.

10:52pm

I'm back now, with folded laundry in tow and proper rock 'n' roll attire donned.

10:55pm

Working on the high-E string lesson now — referring to the "last" note, the skinniest string that's closest to the floor for a right-hander like me. Another mini-breakthrough occurs: I notice that the tutorial text at the top of the screen suggests which fingers to use. The game recommends I use my index finger for the first fret, middle finger for the second, and ring finger for the third. Combining this with my first little "aha!" moment about feeling the fret-change-indicating bump, I'm a bit more comfortable with this already.

10:57pm

My dog, her super-hearing no doubt captivated by the irresistible sounds of one-note tutorial rock emanating from my fingertips, trots in, hops on the couch, and officially becomes my first fan.

11:01pm

Yeah baby! "Note Basics" lessons completed! At this rate, I'll be a world-famous guitar god by sunrise!

11:07pm

Woo! I've just played the most stripped-down version of the simplest riff in the game: "The Hardest Button to Button" by The White Stripes. I had to get down to the fifth fret on that one. It took me an embarrassingly large number of retries to get it right, but once I did it enough, my hand's muscles were able to learn where they needed to go.

11:17pm

I played a real song! With a score and everything! I earned three stars on the aforementioned White Stripes tune on "Pro Easy" difficulty, netting a 15G Achievement in the process. Hey, I didn't fail — it's a start! I wasn't sure heading into this, but am I

actually going to be able to learn something useful here? Either I am, or *Rock Band 3* is fooling me into thinking I will...

11:26pm

After a couple of quick basic instructions, I've now hit my first real roadblock: having to shift between the first three frets *and* move down to the D and G (third and fourth, respectively) notes simultaneously. In other words, shifting both hands at the same time. Time to slow this lesson down, then work my way back up to full speed.

11:39pm

The muscle memory is taking time to build. I'm still not getting this, but I can feel it slowly (*soooooo*ly) getting a bit easier. The pad of my index finger is starting to hurt from pressing and sliding it along the strings, however, so I think I'm going to quit before I get frustrated. In the music biz, we call this "going out on a high note."

Day 2

12:11pm

Picking up where I left off — gotta slow all the way down to 60% again. I just need to learn the pattern via repetition. I get a few 100-percents on the riff. Time to nudge up to 75% speed.

12:21pm

Got it! Nailed the riff perfectly three times — which is what's required in order to pass the lesson. That felt good.

12:36pm

Yes! That "Jangle Riff" lesson worked in the high E. Feeling really capable after starting at 75%, and then acing it at full speed. I predict that confidence is going to play a big role in this learning process.

12:38pm

OK, I'm going to be taught how to "mute" notes now, whatever that means...

12:44pm

Well, I don't understand that *at all*. I was able to pass it simply by open-strumming (that is, strumming without holding a fret) the "mute" note, but I'm not grasping the concept. If only Slash were here to explain it to me...

What You Need

- ☒ Xbox 360 (\$200)
- ☒ Copy of *Rock Band 3* (\$20)
- ☒ Fender Squier Stratocaster: *Rock Band 3* edition (\$280)
- ☒ MadCatz MIDI adapter (\$30)
- ☒ Guitar pick (\$3 for large pack)
- ☒ Unlimited supply of patience and perseverance

Total: \$533

12:51pm
Slides are the new topic. I'm sustaining notes and sliding my hand up and down the fret board. This is fun. I might need to slow it down a bit, but I can get this.

1:36pm
Practiced that Overdrive-deploying riff over and over and over. But got it down! At least this expensive-ass guitar can be tilted up to deploy Overdrive. Next it's on to "Basic Finger Exercises"...

1:37pm
...But first, lunch. Rockin' builds your appetite.

3:24pm
The game is teaching me sustains now. So far, so good. I didn't even have to slow this one down!

3:43pm
Time for an alternate picking lesson, meaning up-strumming. Ugh. It just seems so weird to pluck a note from the bottom up. I couldn't even do this on the fake plastic guitar. I fear what may lie before me.

4:06pm
That wasn't so bad. And now I'm done with this entire first "Trainer" lesson. I made it! I'm a real guitar player! I'm...oh, wait. I still have three more Trainers – from "Introducing Pro Guitar Part 2" on up through "Mastering Pro Guitar." Gulp. I think I'll stop for today...but maybe I'll try a quick song on Easy first.

4:13pm
Played The Sounds' "Living in America" – complete with three stars! Sure, it was ludicrously simplified, but I felt like I just ripped through an encore at Madison Square Garden. Raise a devil-horn fist!



Day 3

5:09pm
A video is attempting to explain chords to me now.

5:11pm
Uh...I think my mind just got blown. Gulp. Here comes the "Power Chords" lesson...

5:19pm
Mega-roadblock. I'm being told to put my index finger on the low-E string (the "top" one) on the third fret and my ring finger on the A-string (the "middle" one) fifth fret, but I don't see how my hands are physically capable of that.

5:34pm
Seriously, my hand literally can't do what the game is asking.

5:44pm
I can do it with my index finger and pinky, but my pinky doesn't have enough strength or dexterity to make it work reliably. How the hell do real guitar players do this!? (And don't say "heroin.")

5:59pm
I'm about at my wit's end. Can I not do this because I broke my left wrist as a teenager? Did that kill my guitar-playing career before it even began without me knowing it? Damn you, younger self!

6:13pm
F**k it, I'm skipping ahead to the next lesson.

6:14pm
Nope, that one is only harder than the last one.

6:15pm
This one too.

6:16pm
Aaaand so is this. Argh!

6:17pm
OK, "Medium Song Lessons #1," let's see if you can teach me The Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated" and get me back in a good mood again.

6:20pm
Really trying here. But when I try moving the chord grip up and down the fret board, my fingers just keep cinching up as if my hand is morphing into a claw. A claw!!!

6:23pm
Jumping into the Pro Easy career. Ha! Take that, game! I just got three stars on Joan Jett & the Blackhearts' "I Love Rock 'n Roll"! You can keep your stupid "chords."

6:26pm
Next song – War's "Low Rider" – is complete. Another three stars in the books. Eat it, chords!



6:30pm
Five mutha-effin' stars on The Ramonettes' "Last Dance." Sure, it's on Pro Easy, but it's a real guitar, dammit.

6:34pm
Marilyn Manson's "The Beautiful People" now. Tougher, but I managed three stars.

6:50pm
Flaming Lips' "Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots Pt. 1"! Four freakin' stars! One more song and I've made it through the whole set!

6:55pm
And Faith No More's "Midlife Crisis" goes down via a three-star shred and the "Easy Warm-up Pro Guitar" set is complete. It's the smallest of victories, but still feels good.

Day 4

11:14am
Still can't get my left hand to bend the laws of physics in order to work that chord. I hate to say it, but I can't see myself clearing this roadblock. I think my experiment is over. I'm disappointed, but apparently I wasn't born to be a guitar legend. That doesn't mean you can't be, though. To be clear: this guitar, this software, and this method of learning *does* work. The pacing of the lessons is perfect and the rewards are tangible. But though it's nice to have a non-judgmental software program that allows me to practice 24/7, it would've been great to have a human teacher help work through my troubles by offering alternatives and suggestions too. Perhaps *Rock Band 3* is best used as a supplement to lessons from a real instructor.

Anyway, see you on stage – I'll be the one cheering from the audience playing air guitar. 🎸





OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE
EDITORS' CHOICE

THE VERDICT

How do we determine review scores? With a special quantum microscope that measures game quality at a subatomic level, of course! It's a flawless process, but we always get questions about it, so here's how to interpret the results:

11: Perfect

MECHA GODZILLA'S CHOICE

The unicorn. Will never happen. Never.

10: Classic

EDITORS' CHOICE

One of those rare and very best of games. Every Xbox gamer simply must buy it and play it, regardless of whether they're a fan of the genre.

9.0 OR 9.5: Awesome

EDITORS' CHOICE

Very impressive. One of the best games around. May have a few minor problems, but they're small and very easily tolerated.

8.0 OR 8.5: Great

A great game and an A-list title, but it either has niche appeal, suffers from minor technical or design issues, or has peripheral problems like a crummy interface.

7.0 OR 7.5: Good

Has a lot of good things going for it, but there's a big problem or two — something that limits its appeal or gets downright annoying. Could also be a game that aims low but hits surprisingly high.

6.0 OR 6.5: Decent

An adequate game with something interesting to offer, but it has some truly significant issues. Otaku won't mind much, but the rest of the world will.

5.0 OR 5.5: Mediocre

Very unspecial and average in the worst sense of that word. You can't pound it for being terrible, but it's hard to find something that makes it worthy of recommendation.

4.0 OR 4.5: Deficient

It has some very serious flaws and problems, but you can play it if you're interested. It works and does what it sets out to do, but it probably never aimed that high in the first place.

3.0 OR 3.5: Wounded

It has some crippling problems and is poorly conceived and designed. You can imagine someone wanting to try it, but not that many people, and they all should rent before they buy.

0.0 – 2.5: Broken

Just really bad. Lacks a single redeeming quality, and/or it's busted to varying degrees in its design, quality, or basic functionality. No gamer of any stripe should bother.



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Child of Eden pg. 78



Dungeon Siege III, pg. 84

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77 Thor: God of Thunder

73 Trenched



FAR LEFT: Blitzers: glowing, explosive enemies. Also known as the bane of our existence.
MIDDLE: In co-op games, everyone shares loot drops.

Trenched

Showing the world how it's done

• PLATFORM: Xbox Live Arcade • PUB: Microsoft Game Studios • DEV: Double Fine • ESRB: Teen • MULTIPLAYER: 4 on Xbox Live • ACHIEVEMENTS: Doable • COST: 1,200 Microsoft Points (\$15)



If *South Park Let's Go* and *Toy Soldiers* have proved anything about tower-defense games, it's that passive participation is a thing of the past. But neither of these great Live Arcade offerings goes as far with the idea of aggressive defense as we'd have liked, which is why *Trenched* is exactly the kind of game we've been waiting for.

You'll find the same kind of off-the-wall characters and hilarious writing as you did in previous Double Fine releases like *Brütal Legend* and *Psychonauts*, but charisma takes a backseat to the engaging, involving gameplay. *Trenched* is a strategically complex third-person action game that barely feels like tower defense — especially in the co-op campaign, where robot allies ram-page around the battlefield.

Trenched is offense-oriented tower defense: if teams don't take the initiative, it's game over. Even with four mechs pumping bullets into bug-like baddies, the game's still challenging.

Defeating an overwhelming number of enemies led to lots of loud celebration with our co-op buds: we had to truly cooperate, and it felt great. With spendable resources split between players, squads need to discuss what kind of turret placements should go where, all while covering those support sentries, each other, and the vulnerable home base.

Half the fun of *Trenched* is its immense customization options. Earning kills, nabbing loot drops, and completing missions (be it holding out to protect a hospital or going for the villains' throat in huge boss battles) nets new weapons, robo-chassis, and turret types. Size isn't everything, though, as much as our massive robot may have led us to believe. Sacrificing firepower and size for the sake of engineering ability — ordering more of the different turret classes, and at a cheaper rate — is often the best way to finish specific missions, and equipping speedier legs or bringing landmines is a must when keeping three structures safe. We preferred beefing up on massive firepower, and changed

to a turret-centric support role when the going got tough, giving us a greater understanding of the different paths to victory.

We'll be replaying the campaign a bunch just to experiment with various robot types — half for kicks, half to gold-medal each mission. We cooked up a few emergent objectives to challenge ourselves further: try completing a late-game mission without flak cannons, or give a mission a go without equipping any of your robot's weapons — turrets-only is *tough*. This control, both in and out of the warzone, makes *Trenched* a marvelous action game that out-shines everything in its class. — Mitch Dyer

- ♦ Robots! Explosions! Co-op! Robots! Even bigger explosions!
- ♦ Versatile customization enables enormous replayability.
- ♦ Expert balance of action and strategy.
- ♦ What new toys will we see in the inevitable DLC?



OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE
VERDICT
9.0

There's no blood shortage in Hell, but most of it winds up on the walls.



Shadows of the Damned

All aboard the underworld express!

• PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts • DEVELOPER: Grasshopper Manufacture • ESRB: Mature • MULTIPLAYER: None • ACHIEVEMENTS: Liberal • COST: \$60



When a hot-blooded Mexican with the unlikely name of Garcia Hotspur finds his girlfriend hanging from a noose, his bad day's just beginning. See, Paula just bought herself a trip to Hell, where a pervy six-eyed demon lord plans to make her his concubine for all eternity. Our tattooed friend slips into his favorite purple leather jacket, grabs his flaming-skull-on-a-stick sidekick, and heads off on an eight-hour rampage through the grisly burrows of the damned.

The first hour or so is awkward. Jokes don't quite land, and Garcia seems more a hollow caricature than an appealing action hero. But once *Shadows of the Damned* has introduced you to basics like switching weapons and guzzling health-restoring liquor, the whole shebang picks up steam in a hurry. How much you giggle depends on your appetite for scatological references and sexual innuendo. Childish crotch gags

and horses that lay supernatural street-apples won't amuse everyone, but with nearly every chapter introducing some bizarre new creature or power-up, you certainly won't be bored.

That's a little surprising, since half the game involves gathering keys and stalking around visually striking but simplistically linear environments. Okay, so you collect brains, eyeballs, and strawberries instead of carved metal, then cram them into squalling infant faces instead of locks. Big whoop. Though it's enjoyable enough, and the oddball trappings make for a serviceable disguise, it all remains a shade too familiar. Only near the intense finale will you run into interesting puzzles that require you to lob explosive skulls at targets behind unbreakable barriers, or even twist chunks of the world into place (see screenshot on middle of next page).

Shadows' combat, on the other hand, is a fluid and darkly beautiful display of vivid carnage. Switching between weapons could be

more responsive, and you'll take damage every great now and then because the camera decided something riveting was happening on the ceiling. But everything else about blasting a gruesome collection of emaciated minions just feels *right*. Smooth thumbstick targeting, 180-degree spins, and the ability to elbow anyone behind you in the kisser make you feel like a complete badass even when you're surrounded and near death.

You get only three weapons — the Boner pistol, a shotgun, and a machinegun that shoots teeth — but a steady stream of nutty upgrades keeps each feeling brand-new. Tag armored opponents with explosive balls of sticky goop, fill the air with locked-on bullets from a hilariously nonsensical bouquet of gun barrels, and reduce anyone who gets in your face to crimson mush. You'll find and purchase dozens of red upgrade gems on your journey, too, and use them to increase damage, boost ammo capacity, and reduce reload speed.



BUTCHER SHOP

If you score a perfect headshot, the game treats you to a slow-motion close-up of bloody squirts and airborne viscera. Blasting off limbs isn't as dramatic, but deprive a glowing-eyed creep of an arm and he'll pause to reconsider his life choices. Displace legs, and you'll earn the opportunity to put your fancy biker boots to work stamping demon skulls to dust.



ABOVE: Bullets can't hurt demons slathered in darkness, but a "light shot" strips them of that armor. **LEFT:** The final act has some fun environmental block puzzles.



The shotgun leaves just enough of your target to scrape into a dustpan.



Once you've upgraded your machinegun to "The Dentist," you can lock onto multiple targets at once.



PAPER GARCIA

Much of the fourth act sends Garcia floating through 2D side-scrolling shooter levels. Why? Your guess is as good as ours. Just watch for diamonds as you blast leaping meanies that look like they shambled out of *South Park*: collecting all 50 earns you a red upgrade gem. Garcia even faces a towering version of his tortured girlfriend at the end of the last stage.

- Excellent basic combat; fun boss battles; constant weapon upgrades.
- Looks and sounds great; humorous tone nicely complements the grim atmosphere.
- Hunting keys along linear paths dulls the novelty of exploring hell; starts off slow.
- How many ghastly deaths does poor Paula have to suffer?



VERDICT
8.0

Hell is more than just some glorified shooting gallery, though. True to its title, *Shadows'* masterstroke is its use of darkness as a hostile living substance. This suffocating ether slows you to a crawl, while granting enemies a glistening armored coating that only special "light shots" can banish. Instead of merely swiveling between targets, you'll have to light and defend lamps fashioned from ever-chewing goat heads, partner with creeping bioluminescent slugs, and exploit the temporary safety of fireworks stations. It's not just a matter of keeping fires lit, either, because some targets are vulnerable only when you're enveloped in darkness.

As tense and exciting as the more crowded

encounters are, the real high points of *Shadows of the Damned* belong to the bosses. They're not the most challenging contenders, and popping glowing weak spots doesn't exactly scream innovation. But figuring out how to tear a horse-headed behemoth, a foul-mouthed phoenix, and even Death himself to pieces is great fun, and plentiful checkpoints minimize frustration and repetition.

Shadows of the Damned saddles itself with too much fetch-the-widget downtime to be the wholly unpredictable thrill-ride it aspires to be, but it is stuffed full of boisterous personality and pulse-pounding bloodshed. With any luck, this is just the beginning of Garcia Hotspur's legend. — **Cameron Lewis**



Coordinating complementary weapon loadouts with friends will improve your chances of survival.



Hit Y to unleash a screen-clearing special attack, preceded by a goofy character-specific pose (shown).



Thanks to their rigid patterns, bosses that seem tough at first quickly become easy.

Otomedius Excellent

Flying by the seat of your underpants

• PUBLISHER: Konami • DEVELOPER: Konami • ESRB: Teen • MULTIPLAYER: 3 on same screen or on Xbox Live • ACHIEVEMENTS: Piecemeal • COST: \$30 (regular), \$50 (Special Edition)



Who'll defend the planet when squadrons of gleaming saucers and stomping mechs invade? A manic clique of scantily clad anime maidens, of course. Duh. Who did you think it'd be? *Otomedius Excellent's* brand of sidescrolling shoot-'em-up action draws heavily from Konami's aged *Gradius* playbook. Rust-colored ships and zigzagging formations leave behind power-up bursts you can nab to speed up your ship, upgrade your weapons, or summon floating turrets. Which girl you choose has quite an impact on your customization options, too: Madoka can use a flamethrower, for example, while Tita Nium's turrets stick beside her instead of following behind in a conga line of personalized firepower. The seven stages you fly through offer only occasional glimpses of colorful scenery, and

offbeat hazards like collapsing platforms are too rare to elicit much excitement. Frequent encounters with large, powerful boss ships help, but even genre newbies will master their uncomplicated patterns with minimal practice. The only thing that'll encourage solitary pilots to replay the half-hour experience a few times is the steady acquisition of Weapon Cards — collectibles that alter the upgrades available to you in a given playthrough. Curiosity about what target-seeking lasers and gravity guns look like in action might draw you back in a few times, but they sure don't make the armies of generic foes much more fun to annihilate. Co-op *could've* been *Otomedius Excellent's* saving grace — filling the screen with bullets and competing for power-ups with two friends is definitely the most satisfying way to play — but some bewildering limitations hobble the

experience. Solo players can continue indefinitely, but multiplayer partnerships can't do so even once. If your online pals run out of lives, they're unceremoniously dumped to a final score screen while you finish up alone. Meanwhile, if Player One is the first to lose his last ship, the game immediately ends for *everyone*. It's frustrating, it makes no sense, and it just makes everyone involved want to play something else. — **Cameron Lewis**

- ✦ Cutie-pies obliterate everything with unusual weapons; 30 bucks.
- ✦ Just seven tepid stages that are short on surprises; simplistic and predictable enemies.
- ✦ Co-op potential spoiled by nonsensical limitations; occasional slowdown.
- ❓ Why are videogame women always doing battle in lingerie?

OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT

5.0

Sweet Dreams

Not getting enough anime eye candy in your waking hours? Drop an extra \$20 for the Special Edition and you can snuggle up with an *Otomedius Excellent* pillowcase. (At last: the perfect companion to the *Record of Agarest* mousepad!) You'll also snag a bonus art book and soundtrack CD.



ABOVE/BELOW: Grapple a boss after a slugout to deliver the final, deadly blow.



Thor: God of Thunder

All flash, no boom

• PUBLISHER: Sega • DEVELOPER: Liquid Entertainment • ESRB: Teen • MULTIPLAYER: None • ACHIEVEMENTS: Simple • COST: \$50



Marvel's mighty Thor — borne of Norse mythology and extreme butt-kicking — certainly deserves a big-budget cinematic slug-a-thon that'd make our consoles tremble. But you won't find that legendary treatment here, despite the goal of nonstop combat and skyscraper-sized bosses. Ultimately, this pedestrian third-person action game turns the Odinson into a puny shadow of his comic-book self. The game takes place prior to the events of the recent movie, which means it's set entirely in realms other than Midgard (a.k.a. Earth) and you battle scores of frost giants, trolls, and lizard men. Loki has yet to reveal himself as a villain to Thor, so the game boils down to Thor smacking lots of same-looking monsters with his famed hammer (Mjolnir) while unleashing wind, thunder, and lightning attacks.

With a great story and production values, that might've been enough. But everything about the game is less-than-heroic, including Thor himself. Usually appearing tiny amid the murky visuals, and with his cape clipping through his body, the fearsome deity is pretty much a God of Bore. — **Chuck Osborn**

- ✦ The film's Thor and Loki voice actors reprise their roles.
- ✦ Definitely not the worst movie game we've played.
- ✦ *God of War* with a fraction of the ambition and production quality.
- ❓ Why can't Thor fly around the game world at will? He does it all the time in the comics!

OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT

4.5



LEFT: Is there anything a blowtorch can't fix? RIGHT: Always wanted to look like a South Beach bouncer? Here you go!



Bullets don't kill on contact. After a few hits, you'll fall and writhe around in pain.

Brink

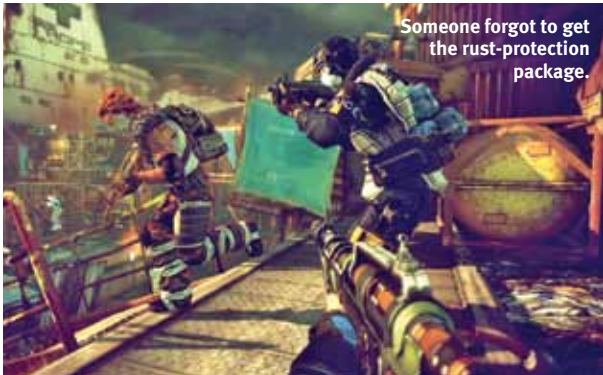
On the verge of mediocrity

• PUBLISHER: Bethesda Softworks • DEVELOPER: Splash Damage • ESRB: Teen • MULTIPLAYER: 16 on Xbox Live • ACHIEVEMENTS: Lenient • COST: \$60



As resources dwindle, the residents of the near-future Ark split into first-person-shooting factions composed of security goons and resistance fighters. You'll start your game of *Brink* by pimping out your wardrobe, watching an unnecessarily long tutorial video, and then jumping into short campaigns that tell both sides of a tale that goes nowhere. What the game lacks in narrative appeal, it could've made up for with some pretty cool ideas. Engineers, operatives, medics, and soldiers unlock sweet special abilities, from deployable turrets and enemy disguises to speed and damage buffs for comrades. Complete four surprisingly brief skill challenges to unlock bolt-on parts for weapons that at least *sound* powerful, even if they sometimes handle like jackhammers. Coolest of all, a parkour system promises to let you quickly and easily

traverse obstacles using the left bumper. Tragically, most of that potential dissolves on the battlefield. Each lifeless map is a tangled mess of halls that too often makes pathfinding a complete pain. You'll curse the whole concept of parkour every time you accidentally rub against a piece of furniture. And heaven help you if you play alone: enemy bots operate like clockwork, but your allies are drooling simpletons who stroll past opponents and ignore objectives. Not that playing with friends helps much. Repeatedly protecting or destroying the same VIPs and generic scenery becomes excruciatingly painful when it so often leads to 10 full minutes of fighting over one stretch of carpet, and taking breaks to capture neutral command posts offers little relief. Gearheads might keep coming back for the toys and outfits, but everyone else will run like hell. — **Cameron Lewis**



Someone forgot to get the rust-protection package.

- ✦ Four classes, 50-plus abilities, an arsenal of customizable weapons, and plentiful dress-up options.
- ✦ Atrocious A.I.; objectives offer little variety; maddening parkour; pointless story.
- ✦ Maps favor clutter and sprawl over organic flow and well-crafted choke points.
- ❓ No female fighters on the Ark?

OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT

4.5

Brilliantly, every shot you take on-screen emits a sound or musical passage to tell the story.



Child of Eden

A space-age love story for humankind

• PLATFORM: Xbox 360 (Kinect-compatible) • PUBLISHER: Ubisoft • DEVELOPER: Q Entertainment • ESRB: Everyone 10+ • MULTIPLAYER: No • ACHIEVEMENTS: Secretive • COST: \$50



We've all played dozens of games where an asteroid's careening toward Earth or some ancient alien race wants to wipe us out. So it's no surprise that the sublimely artsy Kinect "shooter" *Child of Eden* features a world in peril.

But this world isn't a planet or a village — it's a "project," one that needs reviving in the weird, alien reality of a futuristic internet called Eden. The project you're trying to save is the thoughts, memories, and personality of a woman named Lumi, the first human to be born in space. Yes, it sounds New Age-y as all get out, but trust us when we say that the experience — a culmination of wildly imaginative sights, blissfully trance-y tunes, and liberating motion, thanks to Kinect — transcends its odd premise to become something pretty damn astounding.

Saving Project Lumi from an encroaching virus requires you to work through chapters

called Archives, wherein you'll shoot objects and creatures to purify them. Two weapons that you can map to your respective hands — lock-on missiles and rapid-fire lasers — plus a smart bomb-esque Euphoria attack are yours to exploit throughout the game's five main stages (plus an unlockable "challenge" stage called "Hope"). A dazzling boss fight caps off each Archive, and you can replay completed levels to unlock gallery art, visual filters, various new creatures that'll populate the game hub, and other goodies. It's the kind of stuff you'd see in an old-school arcade shooter. Also old-school: the fact that if you run out of health at any point in an Archive, you have to start over from the beginning — a slightly archaic-feeling gameplay speedbump that can frustrate players hoping for a zippy trip through *Eden's* visually dense wonderland.

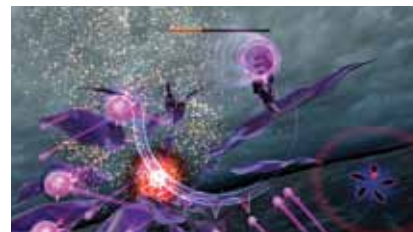
But you'd be doing yourself a disservice to approach this game as just an arcade shooter. Like its predecessor, *Rez HD*, *Child of Eden* is an

experience. Sure, you could play through the entire game with a 360 controller — and swapping to and from Kinect control is sublimely intuitive — but playing this way is surprisingly less wieldy and distances you from the action. More than almost any Kinect game since *Dance Central*, *Child of Eden* feels incredibly fine-tuned and highly responsive to playing without a controller, and doing so provides the last brick in building a feeling akin to an orchestrated sensory epiphany. Without any of the separate elements — music, motion, visuals — this could be any other game; but with them all working together, the gameplay is at times gloriously transcendent.

Though *Child's* somewhat brief run-time (five to eight hours) and replay value depend a little too much on revisiting stages to unlock more goodies, by the time you reach the tail end of the game's final story stage, you probably won't care. You'll most likely find yourself just as emotionally invested in Lumi's fate as we were,



TOP: Every Archive you complete brings you closer to restoring Project Lumi.
ABOVE: Say "hello" to Lumi — she'll appear throughout gameplay and during cutscenes.
BELOW: Boss fights are a sight to behold.
BOTTOM: Using your lasers is the only way to take out enemy projectiles.



and that's something we absolutely weren't expecting — certainly not from a game as bright, beautiful, and slightly loopy as this. Because where superbly thinky games like *BioShock* and *Alan Wake* aim to challenge us by plumbing the dark places lurking in men's hearts, *Child of Eden* instead places its unwavering faith in humanity's very best traits to arrive at something less intellectual but equally enlightening — even joyous. Games take this approach so rarely that when one pulls it off successfully, it's an event worth celebrating. — **Francesca Reyes**

✦ Breathtaking combination of visuals, music, and motion.
 ✦ Incredibly responsive Kinect controls.
 ✦ Replay value is stretched a bit thin by making you constantly revisit completed stages; lack of mid-level checkpoints can be frustrating.
 ? Will Ubisoft release a complete *Child of Eden* soundtrack? (Please?)



Sega Rally Online Arcade

Easy on content and your wallet

• PUBLISHER: Sega • DEVELOPER: Sumo Digital • ESRB: Everyone
 • MULTIPLAYER: 6 on Xbox Live, 2 on split-screen • ACHIEVEMENTS: Comprehensive • COST: 800 Microsoft Points (\$10)



Want a quick rally fix without buying a full-price 360 game? You'll get your money's worth from *Sega Rally Online Arcade*, which packages the core content from the *Sega Rally 3* coin-op into a downloadable XBLA game.

Without a career mode or car upgrades, this low-frills racer simply tosses you right into loose, fast-paced battles on dirt, mud, snow, or tarmac. The game does feature a few different play options, though, including single offline and online races and varying split-screen duels, plus a championship mode

where your goal is moving from 22nd place to first place over the course of three races — with a one-on-one bonus shootout as the reward. It even contains a classic race option, which spotlights the original Desert track and starting cars from the very first *Sega Rally* game.

This franchise spinoff is perfect for a few quick races and a nostalgic flashback, but with five total tracks, it lacks staying power. Rally diehards are better off dropping the extra cash for the excellent *Dirt 3*, or even 2007's *Sega Rally Revo*. — **Andrew Hayward**



Watch out for that dust cloud! Oh, and the car within it.

✦ Fast and fun arcade-style rally racing for just \$10.
 ✦ Several play options, including online and split-screen races.
 ✦ Only five tracks means you'll see the same sights over and over.
 ? Will *Sega Rally* rise again as a full-fledged franchise?



VERDICT
7.0

History: Great Battles Medieval

As thrilling as high-school history class

• PUBLISHER: Slitherine • DEVELOPER: Slitherine • ESRB: Teen • MULTIPLAYER: 2 on Xbox Live
 • ACHIEVEMENTS: Merciful • COST: \$40



The Hundred Years' War has a lot to offer a strategy-RPG. Royal intrigue, medieval scenery, and clashing armies of knights and infantry should've made *Great Battles* a blast. Instead, the whole sorry affair is ugly as sin, and absurdly clunky.

Separate English and French campaigns might educate you about the conflict, but the dismal clanking and shuffling that passes for battle offers little entertainment. You can pause the action at will to issue orders or drop Battle Card bonuses on troubled units, and strategy staples such as flanking and

varying terrain play their parts. But keeping your forces effective demands perpetual and dreadfully tedious point-and-click micromanagement that'll wear down even the most masochistic commander.

You'll purchase and unlock many weapons and skills for your squad, and you can bring that customized crew online should you manage to find a willing opponent. But there's not one good reason to visit the same no-frills battlefield a dozen times or more just to grind out the improvements needed to conquer the next chapter. — **Cameron Lewis**



Online multiplayer is serviceable, but the lobbies are deserted.

✦ Lots of historically accurate units, weapons, and armor.
 ✦ Mind-numbing point-and-click order-issuing; not the least bit attractive or engaging.
 ✦ Earning units, skills, and equipment requires grinding the same missions repeatedly.
 ? Why do archers look like they're wearing creepy masks?



VERDICT
3.5



Drilling holes in your skull, leeches, straitjackets: the finest in asylum living during the late 1800s. Betcha Alice would have killed for a Valium.

Alice: Madness Returns

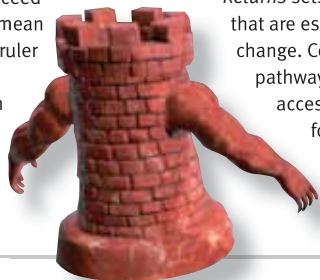
We're all mad here

► PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts ► DEVELOPER: Spicy Horse Games ► ESRB: Mature ► MULTIPLAYER: No ► ACHIEVEMENTS: A breeze ► COST: \$60



Back in 2000, *American McGee's Alice* introduced a macabre, twisted version of the world dreamed up by *Alice in Wonderland*'s whimsical heroine. The third-person PC action game escorted players through a dark, warped Wonderland filled with terrors and puzzles that no child ever imagined.

Now, over a decade later, *Alice: Madness Returns* drops you back into its forebear's mix of action, platforming, and puzzling. Why? Well, the Red Queen's been dethroned, but as she notes, "You've allowed another to succeed in my role" — and she doesn't mean Alice. In fact, this new mystery ruler has been causing havoc in our girl's mind: Wonderland's been fractured and ravaged even further than when we last saw it. And unfortunately, so has this beloved franchise.



You won't notice the change right away. Chapter One — the first of six segments — gives you time to delight in blasting pesky Bolterflies out of the sky with the Pepper Grinder gun, slashing viciously at goopy Insidious Ruins with the Vorpall Blade, and deftly floating from ledge to ledge. Best of all are the collectibles — particularly the teeth you can spend to upgrade your weapons, and the memory fragments, which trigger voiceovers when shattered.

But don't expect the game to build more upon any of these core gameplay elements. *Madness Returns* sets you up for a grind: the patterns that are established at the outset never change. Concepts such as finding invisible pathways, shooting timed triggers to access new ledges, and weighted platforms stay pretty much the same, without added difficulty or trickiness. (For a slight challenge, you can opt to *not* buy

the DLC that unlocks the final level of weapon upgrades, but we disagree with this structuring of the game on EA's part.)

Encounters with baddies operate the same way — in general, you'll find no real bosses until the very end of the game. Instead, as you progress through a chapter, you'll periodically walk into an open area and trigger a clump of thugs. Sure, the number and difficulty of those enemies fluctuate (and the situations get a *little* tougher as the chapters progress), but generally, once you figure out what type of foe you're up against — "Any weapon applies" vs. "Disable with a particular weapon (such as the Teapot Cannon or Hobby Horse), then any weapon applies" — you can button-mash your way through. That is, if you can work around the game's frustrating autotargeting. At the outset, it's very simple to hit LT to lock onto an ugly and then toggle between him and his companion with the right stick, but as the numbers of beasts increase (and the camera

Maddening DLC

When *American McGee's Alice* hit shelves in 2000, the PC gaming world hadn't quite seen such a richly elaborate, brooding twist on fantasy. That experience has now been ported to Xbox 360, but this rendition, available only as DLC for *Madness Returns*, hardly thrills. Though its graphics have been rez'd up, its controls lack the necessary adjustments to make it comfortable to play using a controller: aiming is often painfully inaccurate, and we frequently plummeted off platforms when the game didn't respond quickly enough to our pressing the jump button.

Still, for those who get *Alice* as a freebie with a new copy of *Madness Returns* (otherwise, it'll cost you \$10 to download it), you'll have the chance to step into the original game and gain some great context. And if you can handle the poor controls, you might even be able to enjoy how gorgeous it still looks, even after 11 years.



Pummel Card Guards with the Vorpall Blade, Pepper Grinder, Hobby Horse, or Teapot Cannon.



You'll step into several Asian wall scrolls for some 2D sidescrolling adventures.



ABOVE: The 2D cutscenes are the epitome of what joy and delight *Madness Returns* can yield. BELOW: Hatter's Domain contains some of the game's best cinematics and vistas.



One of the more satisfying moments is when Alice goes super-sized and smooshes Card Guards like ants.

angles get awkward), you'll struggle to quickly switch to the one specific Samurai Wasp that's whaling on you. And thanks to random camera swings, you'll often run right into the very creature you're trying to dodge, allowing them to smack you around.

The only substantial thing that varies throughout the game is the pacing — but not in a good way. *Madness Returns* often jerks in different directions abruptly, and at a whim: for example, while Chapter One's finale is surprisingly novel, you'll have no sense for when Chapter Two or Chapter Three will conclude — and while you're in either, you'll often wonder if they'll ever end. And the game's finish, in which Alice confronts the fiend who's been ruining her mind further, speeds you straight through the event and then screeches to a shout-at-your-TV-in-disbelief halt.

However, what saves *Alice* from getting completely trapped under its humdrum mechanics,

unpredictable pacing, and sometimes uneven platforming (some areas offer more forgiveness in hitting the edge of a ledge) is the strength of its art direction and character-focus. Don't underestimate the power of each: every chapter provides a new form of visual impact, be it steampunk-y cogs and steam jets, fanciful sidescrolling sections, or a bald, zombie-like Alice in a straitjacket. And the family-oriented memories illustrate — in delicious, emotional little slices — the depth of Alice's imagination and how happy her childhood was. As a result, the 2D paper cutout-styled cutscenes, which combine fantastic art and fascinating story, are a pure pleasure to watch.

The maze of Alice's mind is the journey you're really on

— you'll feel this most keenly when no enemies are around and you're just exploring her world, seeing what you'll discover next. But at the end of our 17-hour trip through Wonderland, we kept wishing there'd been so much more. *Madness Returns* shows substantial flashes of being equal to its predecessor, but its strongest detractors — middling gameplay mechanics, the rushed ending, and that last tier of weapon upgrades being available only as paid DLC — hold it back. — **Alaina Yee**

- ♦ Vivid, imaginative environments.
- ♦ Compelling story, with fascinating glimpses into Alice's happy childhood.
- ♦ Aggravating targeting system; lackluster gameplay mechanics; odd variations in platforming controls.
- ❓ Can we get DLC that properly fleshes out the last part of the story? *Please?*





Unlike many other games, *Dungeon Siege III* makes your A.I. companion very useful. Shocking, huh?

Dungeon Siege III

Click, click, boom

• PUBLISHER: Square Enix • DEVELOPER: Obsidian Entertainment • ESRB: Teen • MULTIPLAYER: 2 on same screen, 2–4 over Xbox Live • ACHIEVEMENTS: Stingy • COST: \$60



The idea of clicking a button thousands of times per hour should have all the appeal of a Jonas Brothers concert, but like Live Arcade's *Torchlight* before it, *Dungeon Siege III* makes all this mashing near-irresistible. The third entry in the previously PC-only action-RPG series requires no knowledge of its earlier iterations. All that matters is that when you slay the world of Ehb's evil creatures, glorious loot will explode from their corpses like piñatas being cracked open at a 5-year-old's birthday party.

For once, though, the plot merits more than a passing mention. The tale of your "last of his kind" hero reclaiming his people's honor is hardly an original one, but the way in which it's told — through frequent narrated cutscenes and informative chats with the world's inhabitants — keeps it compelling. Even more laudable are the choices you're asked to make along the way. We opted to play our warrior Lucas as a patron saint

who never accepts rewards and always gives evildoers a second chance, and this choice aided our overarching mission by netting us allies and shop discounts we otherwise wouldn't have had. Topping the engaging arc is a lengthy, rewarding end-cinematic that varies based on the choices you've made during your 15-hour journey.

And what of the core gameplay? It's all about the goodies. En route to the level cap of 30, you'll attack, kill, loot, and repeat, gaining talents, abilities, skills, and proficiencies that allow you to kit out your hero to your specific preference. The many layers of these buffs and talents is a bit overwhelming at first, but before long you'll have a firm handle on it. The same could be said of the Equip screen, where you'll spend a lot of time trying on all of the new gear you scoop up from fallen foes. As soon as you realize that the best item is always at the top of the inventory list, you'll be fine.

The combat, meanwhile, mixes in plenty of colorful special attacks with enough oomph to

really make you feel powerful. When fighting an enemy, your killing blow will sometimes send them soaring halfway across the screen. And gameplay is a lot less repetitive than all of our button-spamming talk makes it sound, thanks to frequent mini-bosses and full-fledged boss fights.

Aiding you in battle is an A.I. companion — your choice of one of the other three character classes. We stuck with battlemage Anjali simply because we liked her personality, but regardless of who's by your side, they'll fight admirably and, more important, will spare you many a "Game Over" screen by serving as your own personal defibrillator, reviving you when you die.

Of course, any good action-RPG shines as a co-op adventure, so *Siege* offers friends a chance to kick the A.I. ally to the curb and take up arms by your side, either online (four players) or same-screen (two). Sadly, the otherwise fun times are marred by scaling difficulty that makes the campaign significantly harder in multiplayer,



TOP: Narrated storyboard cutscenes help keep the plot interesting throughout the campaign. **ABOVE:** Choices in conversation allow you to shape gameplay. **BELOW/BOTTOM:** Expect plenty of boss fights, ranging from mini-bosses to *huge* bosses.



a fixed camera height that's a bit too close to the action, and an odd restriction that requires everyone to stay on the same screen together, even when playing on separate consoles.

We also wish the game had fast-travel options as well as a world map to give it a proper sense of scale, and that camera issues didn't occasionally put the view in an awkward position. Nevertheless, *Dungeon Siege III* is among the finer ways you can dungeon-crawl on your 360 these days, and if the developers can iron out its quirks, a sequel (which this game sets up nicely) could be epic. — **Ryan McCaffrey**

- Quality dungeon-crawl, loot-collectin' gameplay; solid graphics.
- Interesting storyline with multiple dialogue options and endings.
- Annoying multiplayer issues; minor camera and navigation bugaboos.
- Why does Odo always sound like he's got a gallon of mucus lodged in his throat? Is there any in-game antihistamine for sale?

VERDICT

8.5

Gatling Gears

Rat-a-tat-tat, just like that

• PUBLISHER: EA Games • DEVELOPER: Vanguard Games • ESRB: Everyone 10+ • MULTIPLAYER: 2 on same screen or Xbox Live • ACHIEVEMENTS: Decent • COST: 1,200 Microsoft Points (\$15)



With its cheery steampunk visuals and cartoony load screens, *Gatling Gears* could easily be mistaken for a peaceful sort of game...until you unleash your first hailstorm of bullets. From then on, you know — this is all about carnage.

As you march your heavily armed mech (er, Gatling Gear) through 25 levels of top-down action, you'll blast the crap out of tanks, walkers, gliders, and pesky infantry toting RPGs and flamethrowers. Everything — even enormous enemy buildings — explodes with spectacular fury, especially when you've fully upgraded your mighty rocket launcher and grenade launcher.

Smooth twin-stick controls make moving around and firing your gatling gun feel terrific, and in co-op games, an already fast-paced, bullet hell-style experience becomes even more hectic. Thankfully, hitting X gives your vehicle a brief glow, in case you lose sight of it amid all the projectiles — and trust us, that *will* happen.

The game's threadbare story is immediately forgotten, and we do wish you could backtrack through levels to get XP- and multiplier-providing targets you may've tromped past. Otherwise, though, this breezy shoot-'em-up is five-plus hours of mindless fun. — **Corey Cohen**



Feeling overwhelmed? Once per level, you can use your screen-clearing spark gun (not shown).



Fans of *Greed Corp* (also set in the Mistbound universe) will recognize scripted events like the ground collapsing due to environmental damage.



- Thrilling mix of twin-stick shooting and bullet-hell dodging; controls feel terrific; game rewards you for stepping on (not shooting) infantry!
- Fun campaign is even better in local and online co-op.
- Minimal story; can't backtrack through levels.
- Will we ever harm the Earth enough that it starts crumbling, too?



VERDICT

8.0

Pinball FX 2 DLC roundup

More flippin' fun

► PUBLISHER: Zen Studios ► DEVELOPER: Zen Studios ► ESRB: Everyone ► MULTIPLAYER: 2 in local split-screen, 2 in hotseat play over Xbox Live ► ACHIEVEMENTS: Obtainable ► COST: 240 Microsoft Points (\$3) per table



Eight months after its release, *Pinball FX 2* is still in regular rotation on our playlist — and not just because it's a great pinball sim. A steady stream of downloadable content has kept the ball rolling, offering different table styles and more detailed playfields.

Debuting just in time for the summer movie, the new **Captain America Table** is a delight, boasting a colorful field, fun mini-games, and snazzy use of its World War II theme. Better yet, detailed 3D representations of Cap, sidekick Bucky, and villains Red Skull and Baron Zemo — and a giant robot for the multiball payoff — allow the table to keep giving cool new mission types (such as timed challenges to hit ramps) that you won't unlock in your first few playthroughs. High replay value, plenty of dialogue, tough but attainable mission goals — yup, this one's a winner.

CAPTAIN AMERICA TABLE: 8.5 / FANTASTIC FOUR TABLE: 8.0 / MARS: 7.0



TOP: Captain America's table perfectly captures his patriotic world. BOTTOM LEFT: Human Torch and Thing get most of the lines on the Fantastic Four's beautifully animated table. BOTTOM RIGHT: Lots of bright lights, flashing scores, and other animations detract from Mars' simple, open layout.

Another recent Marvel tie-in, the **Fantastic Four Table**, is also enjoyable, even if it's not quite as diverse as the Cap table. Heroes' dialogue repeats more often, and some mission objectives — such as hitting Mr. Fantastic's elasticized hand as it stretches across the playfield — are just plain kooky. Still, the table oozes with Fantastic Four style, and comic-book fans will get a real kick out of discovering each character's mission types and objectives.

Skewing on the slightly less-fun side is **Mars**, a table that seems to overcompensate for its fairly simple (and after a while, dull) playfield with distracting graphical doohickeys of Martian symbols. Swooshing space shuttles and other animations ensure there's fairly consistent activity, and the mission types are definitely challenging, but Mars isn't quite on-par with the game's core tables. — Alex Clark



Magic: The Gathering — Duels of the Planeswalkers 2012

One hell of a draw

► PUBLISHER: Wizards of the Coast ► DEVELOPER: Stainless Games ► ESRB: Teen ► MULTIPLAYER: 4 on Xbox Live ► ACHIEVEMENTS: Expected ► COST: 800 MS Points (\$10)



There's a reason Magic has remained so popular since its inception in 1993: It's one of the deepest collectible card games ever, with tens of thousands of unique cards that can be combined into a near-infinite number of decks. Its only problem is its high barrier of entry. Fortunately, this follow-up to 2009's *Duels of the Planeswalkers* is amazingly friendly to new recruits.

With a fantastic tutorial that's one of the best ways to learn the game, plus a campaign mode (featuring all-new decks) that ramps up in difficulty through its 13 matches, newbies will slide easily into the game. Veterans will love the Challenge modes, where you figure out how to kill your opponent in one turn without dying yourself, as well as the brand-new Archenemy mode, which pits three players against one super-powered opponent and is probably the coolest addition. Though you can't build your own decks from scratch, the deck editor is hugely improved, allowing you to remove any number of cards from your deck, rather than just the cards you unlocked (as in the previous *Duels*).

For new and old players alike, this sequel is a superb adaptation of the classic CCG.

— Taylor Cocke

- Great tutorial for new players, while the Archenemy and Challenge modes will keep old-school folks busy for a while.
- Vastly improved deck editor.
- You still can't build your own custom decks.
- Where can we download some booster packs?



VERDICT 8.5



L.A. Noire

Leave it to Rockstar to take hard-boiled detective fiction — a genre embraced all too rarely by our industry — and make an amazing game out of it. As LAPD officer Cole Phelps, you'll solve cases for Homicide, Vice, and other departments, with groundbreaking performance-capture technology that turns every interrogation into its own mini-movie. Repetitive side missions and a weak finale steal some thunder, but for the most part, *Noire's* investigations are compelling stuff.



VERDICT 8.0

Odds & Ends

Contrary to our recent review (June 2011 issue), *Might & Magic: Clash of Heroes* does let you go back into finished campaigns. Sorry for the goof....*Portal* DLC #1, as Valve is calling it, will feature new test chambers, single- and multiplayer challenge modes, leaderboards, and more. It's slated for summer, and better yet, it'll be free....Regrettably, we were unable to get reviewable builds of *Duke Nukem Forever* and *F.E.A.R. 3* in time for this issue. For both reviews, visit *OXMonline.com* (or wait for our next issue).



MISSING BRICKS: The Lego games haven't towered quite so high lately, but we'd still love to see a few franchises get the plastic treatment, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Gears of War*.

The Back Button ◀



I'll shank as many guys as needed to figure out what's up with those pieces of Eden.

Head Over Heels

We've all been there. You're playing through a game you like, zipping around like you're ruler of the universe. Then there's an unexpected setback: a horribly impossible boss arena, that one guy who keeps sniping you from across the map, or just a terrible section of platforming (hello, death). Out pops the numerous f-bombs, insults directed at enemies' mothers, and on occasion, flinging of the controller into a couch cushion. Generally, all the frustration leads to one conclusion: the rage-quit.

"Eff this," I've snarled as I jab my finger unceremoniously at the "Off" button. At that moment, I definitely don't *%#^@ care about losing my unsaved progress.

Except, sometimes, some titles capture you in just the right way so you can't put down that controller despite the aggravation. You might be swearing more than talking, stomping your foot on the floor during particularly irritating sections, or even flat-out roaring incomprehensibly,

but only a power outage could force you to give up. Not even stubborn resolution to *beat this level* is the cause of the refusal to stop. A part of you genuinely loves the game, even during the deepest, most passionate moments of rip-your-hair-out madness.

For me, it's games with great narratives — like *Alice: Madness Returns* or even *Assassin's Creed II*, which have characters and plots so fascinating that you find yourself Googling for hours to glean just a little bit more insight into their world — that can keep me glued to my controller no matter what. I might be exasperated with the mechanics, I might even be truly angry with the camera system, but I entered a world that I don't want to voluntarily leave. Call me crazy, but I know I'm not the only one who reacts to certain titles this way. There are just some games that, no matter what the review scores, will always have a special place in a gamer's heart. — Alaina Yee



WHAT'S THE SCORE?

GAME	ISSUE REVIEWED	PLATFORM	SCORE
Dirt 3	July 2011	Xbox 360	8.5
Lego Pirates of the Caribbean	July 2011	Xbox 360	7.5 ▲
Man vs. Wild	July 2011	Xbox 360	5.0
Section 8: Prejudice	July 2011	XBLA	8.0

Every OXM review...on our disc!

You've been clamoring for it, and with each release of our amazing disc, you get it. Every single Xbox 360 and Xbox Live Arcade review can be read in its entirety on the OXM Disc, complete with scores, screenshots, and game-box covers. To find them, scroll to the right on the main menu and click on the Reviews Database slide. Don't stay up too late reading!



IDENTITY CRISIS: As Marvel Comics fans know, Bucky Barnes (Cap's WWII sidekick-turned-Cold War assassin) took over as Captain America in 2008, but original Cap Steve Rogers returns to the role this summer.

Hackers vs. Gamers

Could the PlayStation Network data breach happen to Xbox Live?

by Chris Morris

Given how fierce the console wars can get — and how loyal some users are to one brand — it's not surprising there was a little bit of *schadenfreude* when Sony announced it had been hacked and shut down the PlayStation Network in April.

As the sophistication and extent of that data breach came to light, though, feelings began to change fast. If a company as big as Sony could be caught unaware by an attack this big, was Microsoft really any more prepared?

Microsoft won't talk specifics about how it handles security for Live and their other online services. In fact, given the scrutiny surrounding security issues after the PSN hack, they won't even talk generalities. When contacted to discuss whether Xbox Live could withstand a similar attack, the company declined to comment except for a brief statement:

"The security around our Xbox Live service and member information is our highest priority," it said. "While we don't share specific details, we invest considerable resources to preserve network safety and ensure customer information remains secure."

The theft of detailed personal information from over 100 million PlayStation Network accounts is one of the largest data breaches of all time. And Sony's innumerable missteps in the days and weeks following the cyberattack are sure to become study points in future courses on disaster PR.

But from a technical side, the company seems to have had its ducks in a row. Early reports that Sony was running out of date software appear to have been mistaken. And the company took ample time to rebuild the network, despite being under a glaring media spotlight and hav-

ing its customers clamoring to jump back into *Call of Duty* and *SOCOM 4* multiplayer action.

Online security experts say that though Microsoft may have layers of security Sony did not, it houses a lot more credit card information along with names, addresses, and phone numbers — making it a tempting enough target that determined hackers could set their minds to getting at that data.

"The only way to protect your data online is not to give your data online," says Bruce Schneier, author of several books on computer security and the founder and chief technology officer of BT Counterpane. "[Users] have no visibility into the security of these services and no control — and they have precious little leverage."

That's not exactly reassuring, but don't expect the Sony breach to have a particularly strong impact on gamers' — or the general populace

at large's — decisions about forking over their personal information online.

The reason's pretty simple: gaming is increasingly moving online, both with online and co-op multiplayer modes as well as digital distribution like Xbox Live Arcade and Games on Demand. To live completely offline shuts gamers off from the industry's future.

On top of that, gamers have incredibly short memories about these sorts of things.

"As an audience, we're exceptionally loud, but we're also very quick to change judgment," says Mike Hickey, an analyst with Janco Partners. "There's always a risk that if you go online your information will be jeopardized. I think the message to the videogame industry is they need to take the necessary measures to protect user information."

At the same time, there are some preventive steps that you can take to limit the damage

should Xbox Live be the victim of a similar hack one day.

Step one: Change your password. Everyone knows they should have a different password for every online account, but few people actually put it into practice. And if one place you've done business with online is compromised, then plenty of other accounts may be at risk as well.

Step two: Change your secret question and answer. Just like passwords, people often choose the same security questions. When thieves have that information, they can brute force their way into other accounts in your name — even when there's a flag on the account to watch for possible fraudulent activity.

"Those security questions are critical," says Avivah Litan, vice president and distinguished analyst at Gartner. "When an account is flagged as high risk, the service provider will typically

ask you the answer to your secret question. Typically, these questions are very similar across the board. Once the criminal gives it, he's in."

And while it's not feasible to have a separate credit card for every online account, consider having a specific card for online subscriptions than the one you use on a day-to-day basis. That way, you have a buffer should either be compromised in any online security breach situation.

Better yet, pay for games and DLC with points cards, which you can get from local retailers.

In the end, the odds of a cyberattack against Xbox Live are increasingly slim. The company hasn't raised the ire of the hacker community and has undoubtedly been checking and rechecking the system for holes following the PSN intrusion. But when you're dealing with something as scary as identity and credit card theft, it's always best to play it safe.

Action: Xbox Live 500
Diagnosis: Code: X-Profile: No

Somehow, Drew Brees avoided the "Madden Curse"; his head didn't detach from his body.



Inbox

RIGGED Is the so-called "fan vote" to determine which athlete gets to be on the cover of the new *Madden NFL* game. Or so we thought. After last year's final vote pitted Super Bowl MVP and high-profile quarterback Drew Brees against nationally anonymous players Jared Allen and Reggie Wayne, we suspected something fishy. Especially when, as expected, Brees won. So this year when the vote came down to infamous/famous Eagles QB Michael Vick and some dude from the Browns named Peyton Hillis, we cried shenanigans. But lo and behold, Hillis won, proving that if you mess with man's best friend, people will never vote you onto the cover of a *Madden* videogame again.

HACKED Was the PlayStation Network, allegedly by a group who call themselves Anonymous. The infiltration is no laughing matter. It leveled Sony's Xbox Live competitor, preventing gamers from accessing any online features (downloadable games, online multiplayer,

etc.) as Sony rebuilt the network from scratch. Worse, the personal information of the service's millions of members — possibly including their credit card numbers — was compromised by the hackers. Publishers have also suffered, with Capcom estimating that PSN's inoperability has cost them "hundreds of thousands, if not millions" of dollars in potential lost revenue from people's inability to purchase their digitally distributed games. This was, truly, the Revenge of the Nerds.



DISCONTINUED By the aforementioned Sony (as confirmed by Japanese site Phile-web) was the PSPgo, a sleek and sexy UMD disc-less version of the PlayStation Portable handheld. Released a day late and a dollar short, the slick device's production lines are being shut down, likely so those same resources can be used to build the upcoming PlayStation Portable 2, codenamed "Next Generation Portable." We haven't seen a product introduced, then yanked from production this quickly since the Virtual Boy ("I see red people!").

CHECK IT: If you have a PSN account, contact your bank to watch for fraudulent card activity.

SO FASHION-CONSCIOUS, IT WAS PROBABLY MADE UP



PRESS RELEASE OF THE MONTH

Konami Digital Entertainment, Inc. today announced a partnership to launch a branded clothing line for men based on KONAMI's *METAL GEAR SOLID®: PEACE WALKER* for the PSP® (PlayStation®Portable) system, released in 2010. This will be the first complete clothing collection for the franchise, allowing fans to show their *METAL GEAR SOLID* love by dressing the part from head to toe.

“Our partnership will give fans the opportunity to ‘suit up’ for one of the most successful videogame franchises of all time, specifically for *METAL GEAR SOLID: PEACE WALKER*,” said Carreen Yapp, Vice President of Acquisitions and Franchise Development of Konami Digital Entertainment Inc. “The mass success and support for our latest *METAL GEAR SOLID* hit has allowed us to expand beyond what we’ve done in the past with the series, and we are very much looking forward to offering this new line to a global community of fans.”

SUCKING The proverbial "It" is Roger Ebert after games were officially, legally declared art by the U.S. government's National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The organization amended its rules this year, allowing a category called The Arts in Media, which includes videogames. As a result, anyone can now apply for a grant for up to \$200,000 to make their art/game. And so, Mr. Film-Critic-Who-Doesn't-Understand-Videogames, it's time to let this issue go. After all, if the mediocre B-movie you made in the 1970s can be considered art*, so can games.

RATING Games at the ESRB from now on will be...robots? Yes, it's true: the videogame business has gotten so big that it's now impossible for the Entertainment Software Ratings Board to keep up with every single release. So now, according to *The New York Times*, "the



organization has written a program designed to replicate the ingrained cultural norms and predilections of the everyday American consumer." In other words, *South Park*'s Funnybot will now be deciding whether or not Sub-Zero tearing off Scorpion's arm and beating him to death with it merits a cartoony "T" or an actual "M" rating.

PLOTTING To use Sega Genesis game cartridges to aid in terrorist attacks was Al Qaeda member and Guantanamo Bay high-value detainee Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, according to documents released by WikiLeaks. "Detainee discussed remote-controlled firing devices (RCFDS) which were found during raids in Karachi in September 2002. These RCFDS were built inside black Sega Genesis videogame cartridges to protect the RCFDS and to make them appear innocuous." Dude, Genesis carts? Seriously? Does he think this is 1992? We sentence him to an eternity of playing the abominable *Pulse Racer* with nothing



CRYSTAL BALL

Time's up, according to The Ball: expect *Grand Theft Auto V* to be announced later this summer...Speaking of announcements, don't anticipate hearing about any *Gears* Kinect titles anytime soon, says The Ball...A *Voltron* videogame? Yep, and it'll tie in with the movie in development. We'll form the head!



but an original Xbox "Duke" controller...on a 7" standard-def, black-and-white TV.

HOPPED Onto the Unreal Engine bandwagon — which is more like a cruise ship at this point — did LucasArts, who signed a studio license with Epic Games, meaning the House That Wookiees Built is free to use the *Gears of War* technology on any project it wants for the foreseeable future. "Unreal Engine 3 is a forward-looking solution that shortens the path between inspiration and execution on a wide variety of gaming platforms," said a PR person who attributed the quote to Zak Phelps, director of technology at LucasArts. We look forward to experiencing the hyper-realism of Chewbacca's fur rustling in the Kashyyyk-ian breeze.

DITCHING Printed game instruction manuals is EA, who cites environmental friendliness as the reason for switching from paper books to in-game helpers. It's a conveniently positive spin on the situation, really, when you consider that the change will also save EA thousands upon thousands of dollars. Of course, we'd ask how this is really different from how the company handles instruction manuals currently. Have you seen EA's instruction manuals in the last couple of years (or for that matter, most publishers' game manuals)? They're eight pages of black-and-white monotony if you're lucky.

So, *South Park*'s Funnybot will now be deciding whether or not Sub-Zero tearing off Scorpion's arm merits a cartoony "T" or an actual "M" rating.

KEPT HIS DAY JOB: Roger Ebert wrote 1970's *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*, a movie considered so "meh" it proved he was better off reviewing films instead of making them.



The next *Lego Star Wars* will be so Unreal it'll be real! ...Or something.

Hard Stuff

Razer Onza Tournament Edition

More like a yowl than a roar

• COST: **\$49.99 MSRP** • MANUFACTURER: www.razerzone.com

Razer's long tradition of naming gaming peripherals after obscure animals (a rare cousin of the cougar, in this case) continues with the Onza Tournament Edition. This \$50 wired controller wants to give you an edge in your favorite shooters with its customizability, but ends up being an awkward Frankenstein of useful and unnecessary — like a six-foot spoiler mounted to a custom car.

Adjustable analog sticks are the flagship feature. Each stick can be tightened or loosened by winding it. This doesn't alter the in-game sensitivity; it simply increases or decreases the physical force required to move each stick — like changing gears on a bike. We tightened our right analog to make it taut (while keeping the left one loose for easy movement), and as a result, our sniping in *Halo: Reach* improved thanks to the steady, controlled movements we were able to make.

The other functionalities, however, feel like tacked-on features. Stacked above each bumper are multifunction buttons that can be reprogrammed to clone the function of any

other button. This lets you group similar feats (like smoke and frag grenades), but it's awkward that these inputs rest right in another button's shadow.

We never adapted to the extended, banana-shaped triggers, either: the stroke required to fully compress them feels slightly longer. It's admittedly hard to reinvent the wheel and create a controller that's both familiar and improved, but the Onza is still half-flash, half-function. — **Evan Lahti**

- ✦ Adjustable analog sticks; grips accommodate your whole hand.
- ✦ Expensive; bony, long triggers; shallow action buttons.
- ✦ Even with a fancy braided cable, it's still a \$50 wired controller.
- ❓ If Rapunzel were a gamer, would her cord be 15' long?



OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT

6.5



Marvel Edition Versus Fighting Pad

Fight harder with fewer buttons

• COST: **\$39.99 MSRP** • MANUFACTURER: www.pdp.com

Not satisfied with the stock 360 pad's see-sawing, rigid plastic plus-sign (a.k.a., the d-pad)? But also don't want the bulk of a full-sized arcade stick? Rejoice, for Marvel Edition Versus Fighting Pad is just for you.

Manufacturer PDP's solution is a single, rubberized, lightly concave thumb

stick. It has all the mobility of a normal analog stick, but with the feeling of precise input that a d-pad would provide. Microswitches embedded in the pad — one for all eight directions of the thumbstick — place all inputs on a hair trigger, and generate crucial auidal feedback — every flick produces a click (at about the volume you'd get from your computer's mouse), giving you a constant cue of how many directional inputs you've tapped out. As a 360 gamer, shoryukens have never felt so effortless.

Anyone buying this controller, however, is probably doing so because they don't prefer a full-

sized fighting stick — so why change the button layout to mirror one? Moving the bumpers onto the face of the controller is less of an issue than rotating A, B, X, Y to a row configuration rather than a diamond. If you've used a standard-issue 360 pad for years, you'll need time to adapt to this layout.

Light, comfortable, and lightning-fast, the Versus is a worthy investment for the fighting fan who wants an edge in online matches, but doesn't want to throw a hundred-something bucks at an arcade stick. — **Evan Lahti**

- ✦ Clicky, responsive, and tactile inputs; perfect for *MvC3*.
- ✦ Featherweight, rounded body; comfortable, grippy underside.
- ✦ Unnatural button layout; expensive for a single-purpose pad.
- ❓ Was the superhero mural art picked by a 10-year-old?



OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT

8.5



LiveSpace

Xbox Live is full of nice people looking for a good game — folks with manners who are good sports and want to meet more people like themselves. That's where LiveSpace comes in. To count yourself among their ranks, send an email to letters@officialxboxmagazine.com with the subject line “LiveSpace,” and include the following information:

GAMERTAG: Yours, of course

ACHIEVEMENTS: Which *specific* Achievements do you take the most pride in having earned? What made them special?

WANTS TO PLAY: Which games do you currently own that you'd like to play with other people on Xbox Live?

HI, MY NAME IS: Your first name, where you're from, and your hobbies — gaming-related and otherwise. Basically, tell us more about the gamer behind the tag.

◆ RickSlayer

Achievements: “Orb Hunter” (collect 300 hidden orbs) in *Crackdown*. I used guides and scoured the entire city multiple times for 18 months — finding that last orb to hear the Achievement was worth every second.

Wants to Play: *Duke Nukem Forever* (when it releases)

Hi, My Name Is: Rick, and I'm a 36-year-old gamer from Columbus, Ohio. I've been playing since 1982, and I still play PC games with my 60-year-old dad. I hope to crack 100,000 Gamerscore eventually.



◆ josteen628

Achievements: “Redeemed” in *Red Dead Redemption* (attain 100% in the single-player game completion stat) and “Bleeding Fingers” in *Rock Band 3* (get 85% on all guitar solos on Hard or Expert).

Wants to Play: *Rock Band 3*, *CoD: Black Ops*, *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*

Hi, My Name Is: Jason, 32. I'm a police officer in Georgia who plays a lot of Xbox when I'm not working or spending time with my family. I'd love to play *RB3* with anyone who sends me an invite.



◆ NationalLeech92

Achievements: My personal favorite was *Fable 3*'s “Magnate Personality” (build a property empire worth 2,000,000 gold) because I got to put my talent for business to good use.

Wants to Play: *Halo: Reach*, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, *Fable 3*, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, and *Gears of War 3* (when it releases)

Hi, My Name Is: Liam, 14, from Cannington, Ontario. I love to kick back and watch *Red vs. Blue* as well as Tobuscus. Nostalgia Critic rocks, too!



◆ SoulOfASamurai

Achievements: Epic Tier 3 Engineer in *Dead Space* (complete the game on the hardest difficulty setting) and Tenpeat in *Super Street Fighter IV* (Win 10 Ranked Matches in a row).

Wants to Play: *Gears of War 2*, *Left 4 Dead*, *Super Street Fighter IV*, *Red Dead Redemption*, *Tekken 6*

Hi, My Name Is: Tim, 26, from New York. I got out of the military last year, so now I go to school for Computer Business Technology and play with my clan, P.R.Y.D.



Once again, expect strong sales from this year's *Madden*.

The 20 Most Anticipated Xbox 360 Games*

- 1. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3**
Finding this 10-ton franchise in the No. 1 spot? No surprise there. But we're curious to see what, if any, effect the massive plot spoilers leaked online (on May 13 — the tail end of this list's polling period) will have on your excitement for the game. Our guess is little-to-none.
- 2. Gears of War 3**
- 3. Battlefield 3**
- 4. Madden NFL 12**
Summer's here, and once again, loads of you are fired-up to hit the field. This year's game promises some interesting updates, including an expanded Franchise mode, custom playbooks, and players whose performance changes over time. Nifty!
- 5. BioShock Infinite**
- 6. Mass Effect 3**
- 7. Final Fantasy XIII-2**
- 8. Batman: Arkham City**
We're skeptical that its spinoff, *Gotham City Imposters*, will make much of an impact on Live Arcade. But *Arkham City* — as you'll know if you read last month's *OXM* — seems as amazing as we'd hoped. It'll start climbing this list soon.
- 9. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim**
- 10. Duke Nukem Forever**
- 11. F.E.A.R. 3**
- 12. NCAA Football 12**
- 13. Forza Motorsport 4**
- 13. Kinect: Star Wars**
- 15. Max Payne 3**
Even with minimal press, this loooooong-awaited sequel (*Max Payne 2* was eight years ago!) is high on gamers' minds. Don't miss our preview on page 38; so far, the game's looking like it'll reward our patience big-time.
- 16. Transformers: Dark of the Moon**
- 16. X-Men: Destiny**
- 18. Dead Island**
- 19. Rage**
- 20. UFC Trainer**

*Source: Ipsos OTX MediaCT's GamePlan Insights. Games are Xbox 360 titles scheduled to release June 14, 2011, or later. Polling period was May 1, 2011 through May 14, 2011. Note: Similarly numbered games indicate a tie.

Indieverse

Scouring the Indie Games channel for signs of intelligent life



ABOVE: Looking to sink a shot in *Balls*.
LEFT: The vast, blocky land of *FortressCraft*.
BELOW: The colorful world of flying ninjas.



Balls

•Vagabond1982uk
80 MS Points (\$1)

Sometimes the simplest concepts for Indie Games are the best executed. The unfortunately named *Balls* is an Avatar pool game set in a small, non-alcoholic tavern, complete with background chatter and stained-glass windows. Modes include a four-player tournament option and quick play. A great game if you like pool but suck at it in real life.

Sky Ninja War

•Winglay
240 MS Points (\$3)

You're a sword-brandishing ninja — armed with throwing stars and other weapons — who can also fly. Your primary goal is to kill other ninjas, some of whom can also take flight, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*-style. The game's bright, cartoony visuals and upbeat Far East-influenced music make it a fun (if repetitive and slightly pricey) ride.

FortressCraft Chapter 1

•Projector Games
240 MS Points (\$3)

Yes, it resembles the PC indie smash *Minecraft*, but guess what's not on Xbox right now? *Minecraft*. Developer Projector Games has made a fun 3D building game where you can use blocks to freely construct almost anything you can imagine. Watch for more chapters of *FortressCraft* to hit the Indie Games channel in the near future.

CRAFTING SUCCESS

Game dev strikes Indie gold



No matter what crystal ball you're staring into, you wouldn't have predicted the runaway success of *FortressCraft* on the Indie Games channel.

The game's developer, who goes by the pseudonym DJ Arcas, works full time for Sumo Digital in the UK. He's been creating Indie Games in his spare time, founding Projector Games, which has released more than 10 games since it started in 2000.

Back in February 2009, Arcas says, he was logging a lot of time in a PC title called *Dwarf Fortress*. Thinking a game like that would be way cooler if it had better graphics and a good UI, he started tinkering with Microsoft's XNA software to build his idea, but he eventually abandoned it.

Around a year later, he started getting into the PC game *Minecraft* and reading its forums. One post begged for *Minecraft* to come to the Xbox 360, and the discussion was about whether the console was powerful enough to support the game. Arcas, a 10-year games-industry vet, posted saying it could be done, to which another forum member replied, "LOL noob, you know nothing."

Arcas took that as a challenge, and began resurrecting the work he'd done for his project inspired by *Dwarf Fortress*, this time using rendering and Avatars. He then posted a screen-shot of his game in the *Minecraft* forum thread. After commenters claimed the image was fake, Arcas took video of his game-in-progress and posted it, silencing the thread.

With the help of seven others, Arcas and his team finished *FortressCraft* in about 11 weeks and released it on Xbox Marketplace on April 8. The first day, Arcas says, it had 20,000 trial downloads, and 78 percent of those players ended up buying the full game. When we spoke to him at the beginning of May, *FortressCraft* had sold 125,000 copies.

There's been some controversy about the similarities between *FortressCraft* and *Minecraft*, but Arcas believes his game is reaching a different audience — those "who've never heard of *Minecraft* or *FortressCraft*, but want a game where they can express themselves." — Kevin W. Smith

CHECK OUT THE OXM REPORT!



Seeking insider insight on the latest games? Look no further than the Inside Xbox channel on the Xbox Live dashboard! That's where you'll find The OXM Report — our bi-weekly, totally-free streaming videos that give you in-depth access to the minds behind the hottest upcoming games on Xbox and XBLA. From the coolest downloadable titles to interviews with game developers and more, you can check out new content from us every other Sunday right on your 360!*



Duke Nukem Forever > Thursday, June 30



Section 8: Prejudice > Thursday, July 28



OXM Versus

Once a month we set aside our piles of work and pick up our controllers to scrap and co-op over Xbox Live with you! Look for **Alaina OXM, Corey OXM, DaveR OXM, Francesca OXM, Intern OXM, Kevin OXM & Ryan OXM** on Xbox Live at 7 p.m. Eastern/4 p.m. Pacific on the dates listed above and be ready to tear it up in those games!

KOXM: Our Official Podcast

Every Friday senior editor Ryan McCaffrey joins up with podcast producer Andy Bauman to dish out the latest Xbox news, insights, analysis, and general snarkitude. *OXM's* weekly audio podcast covers all the recent happenings relevant to Xbox gamers, along with top-tier developer interviews, no-holds-barred opinion, and community input from you! Ask us your burning questions by calling the KOXM Voice Mailbox any time at 1-877-404-1337, extension 696 — then tune in or subscribe on iTunes (just search "OXM" or "Xbox" in the iTunes Store) or on our podcast website located at oxmpodcast.podbean.com. You might just make it on to the show!



Bastion takes a path less traveled: it includes voiceover narration throughout.

More Than Fun

Deep game-worlds come from three scary choices

I'D WANTED TO GET INTO GAME DEVELOPMENT since I was a little kid — so when I finally started, I set my mind to getting the most out of one of the most terrifying, rewarding decisions I'd made: I'd do everything in my power to make games that were worth something. But first, I needed to figure out what "worth something" even meant.

I realized the games that I remember most are ones that create meaningful, emotional experiences through their worlds and characters. They're ones that stick in my mind and get under my skin. My favorite examples range from massive blockbusters like *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and *Red Dead Redemption* to smaller, unassuming games like *Braid* and *Limbo*. Despite their differences, these games all have something in common: they give us, as gamers, a lot of credit, whether it involves piecing together an intriguing narrative or making sense of challenging mechanics. To me, this boils down to making these three choices during development:

BACKSTORY BEATS STORY

Making good games takes a lot of time, so it might seem like a bad idea to spend any of that time making content no one will ever see. That's not true of backstory. Sometimes you'll start a game like *Red Dead* or *Limbo* and get blown away by the level of detail in the world. The little

touches, the way the characters look and move, even the layout of the menus — all of it feels motivated and purposeful. Such experiences don't just come from good art direction; plenty of great-looking games are filled with clichés. Rather, I think the secret to deep and interesting game-worlds is having a lot of rich backstory beneath the surface. It's the unspoken stuff about why a game's world is the way it is, what the characters in it want, and what it's all really about. When you play a game where the world comes alive and sucks you in, that stems from the developers having carefully crafted a backstory.

COHESION BEATS CONVENTION

As gamers we're more than willing to suspend our disbelief and immerse ourselves. All we want from a game's universe is for it to be internally consistent — to play by its own set of defined rules. Yet many instead play it safe, borrowing other games' conventions rather than justifying their own design choices. This standardization makes these games easier to pick up and play, but it can also make them less interesting. Games that bother to sweat the minutiae and do things their own way have the greatest chance of leaving a lasting impression. Take the very first *Halo*. Its design choices centered around letting you carry

only two weapons and having a recharging shield — features that became standard for the shooter genre, in part because *Halo* went to special lengths to make these sys-

tems feel integral to the game. No wonder so many new shooters still feel like copies.

FEEL BEATS FUN

Games like *BioShock* and *Modern Warfare* don't stay with us simply because they're fun. They're memorable because they transported us, got us thinking, and genuinely surprised us. Accepting that not everything in games needs to be fun is no excuse for clunky, awkward gameplay, of course. A game needs to do everything possible to get you quickly feeling comfortable with its mechanics, so that you're primed and ready to go through the journey in store. The controls should make you believe you're in the world of the game. One of the best horror games in years is a PC game called *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* — it's atmospheric and unsettling. Rather than *try* to be fun, it makes you feel trapped inside a haunted castle, like only a game could.

The reason these choices feel so scary is because they're counterintuitive...maybe even wrong. After all, if you're making a game, it's tempting to follow the successes of what's come before or to make decisions designed to reach the broadest possible audience. But that's not how the most memorable games are produced. I'm lucky to be able to make games for a living, so hey — I might as well take a chance on doing it the way I think is best, no matter how scary that is.

— Greg Kasavin

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