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360

December 2006
Issue 3

INIDER

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INSIDE! THE DARKNESS LOST PLANET STRANGLEHOLD



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Achievements

James won't tell us what his column is about this month, other than it has to do with those pesky Achievements. We're slightly afraid of what you might find on the back page this issue, so wear safety goggles.



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Jump in.



EDITOR SPEAK

AND HE SAID, "LET THERE BE RING OF LIGHT"



It's like herding wet cats, it is. Incredibly, South Africa is growing a rather respectable number of Xbox Live players.

Gamers from all around the country are defying the wishes of local telecommunications and heading online with their 360s, entering the burgeoning community and duking it out in the magical world of the internetsuperhighwaycyberspacevillage. The only catch - trying to get most of these anxious and eager players playing the same game at the same time, hence the moist cat steering statement at the beginning of this here bit of text.

Thanks to the efforts of homegrown Websites Xbox-360 [www.xbox-360.co.za] and The Xbox Lounge [www.txl.co.za], local Live players are usually looking in the same direction and it works. There have been (and continue to be) plenty of *Table Tennis*-ing, *Halo 2*-ing, *Call of Duty 2*-ing and *Burnout Revenge*-ing on predetermined nights. A full server is a happy server, after all, and a full server filled with local players and their reasonable ping times, is even better.

Such efforts I feel should not go unnoticed - so it is here that I personally say thank you for the valiant efforts of individuals such as *MiNeM*, *DuncThePunk*, *DrifZilla*, *koldFUSION* and the many others who are selflessly helping the Xbox 360 grow and succeed locally in tandem with the efforts of Microsoft South Africa and distributor MIDigital.

It is not idle commentary when I say that local support for the Xbox 360 has been nothing short of astounding, breaking the old paradigms that have haunted video-games in South Africa over the last decade. For once, the local gaming public seems united around a product, a stark change from the usual segregated self-serving cliques that have, in the past, formed around new entries into the market.

It feels good to be able to say, Go Team South Africa. Let's show the rest of the world just what we're made of.

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STUCK IN THE MIDDLEWARE

360 GETS SOURCE

Much to the delight of PC-based developers who have been eyeing the 360 as a potential platform for their games, Valve has announced that their Source engine is now an official 360 middleware option for developers. That means that the engine behind *Half Life 2*, *Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines* and *Dark Messiah of Might & Magic*, can now be used to develop Xbox 360 games. Valve claims that the Source engine has been optimized to utilize the 360's graphics hardware and now even provides full support for Xbox Live.

"The combination of Source and the Xbox 360 provides game designers throughout the industry the chance to create powerful entertainment experiences," said Gabe Newell, president and co-founder of Valve. "Whether they're pursuing a traditional FPS, RTS, RPG or delving into new genres, Source and the Xbox 360 are designed to offer the flexibility and tools to allow designers to pursue any design imaginable."

Valve has mentioned however that this does not necessarily mean that Source-based games that appear on both PC and Xbox 360, will be able to play multiplayer with each other. Apparently, Microsoft has very strict policies against this idea right now, despite the upcoming *Shadowrun* game claiming that the 360 and PC versions will be able to play multiplayer against each other.



LOCALS REPRESENT

If you feel that the official Xbox 360 website [www.xbox.com/en-ZA] lacks some local flavour, then both Xbox-360 [www.xbox-360.co.za] and The Xbox Lounge [txl.co.za/] shall provide. Created and run by dedicated fans, both websites are a hub for local events, news, reviews and more. Both have active forums where you can hook up with other 360 owners to organize some online gaming or just to chat and share information, opinions and helpful hints. There is no lack of fan support for the Xbox 360 locally, and it is heartening to see the community taking up the mantle and providing user-run websites dedicated to the Xbox 360. So head on over to Xbox-360 or The Xbox Lounge (or both!) and sign up today!

HACK THIS!

IS MICROSOFT BANNING 360 FIRMWARE MODDERS?

Some recent posts on the official Xbox.com forums have sparked rumours that Microsoft may have started taking action against people who have modified the firmware on their 360s. Several months ago, firmware hacks started to appear that allow owners to play backup discs. The firmware hack modifies the firmware on the DVD drive inside the 360, and essentially reports a game as authentic even when it's just a copied DVD-R.

The posts on Xbox.com by user Furydog indicate that his Xbox 360 has been banned off Xbox Live, although he claims that he has not modified his console. His post states:

"I have two xbox 360's and since Friday October 13 2006 I have not been able to connect with my two 360's. According to MS customer support my status codes indicate that I have MODDED 360's which I don't. I have

contacted several different people and I only one person (GreenJohnny) has responded to me but he was not able to assist me. Although, he did confirm that the status codes I received indicate that my systems Mac addresses are banned because their supposedly MODDED. I am hoping they can get someones attention and this can help solve this issue because I have done nothing wrong and I am being screwed. Here are the status codes I receive under Xbox Live Failed W:0000-0021, X:0000-F001, Y:00A8-6820, Z:8015-190D. Y being the important one"

Microsoft has been quiet on the issue, saying that it's looking into Furydog's problem. It is currently not known whether this particular instance is indeed due to Microsoft beginning to ban modified Xbox 360s, or whether the affected gamer Furydog is just suffering from some other problem.

WE ARE THE KNIGHTS WHO SAY "NINE!"



KNIGHTS OF THE NINE NOT JUST FOR PS3

Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion developer Bethesda Softworks has finally admitted that the bonus content coming to the PlayStation 3 edition of the expansive role-playing game will also be coming to the PC and Xbox 360 versions, despite initial claims of exclusivity.

The new content arrives as a boxed expansion, but will also be available for download on Xbox Live Marketplace and through www.obliviondownloads.com. The boxed PC version also includes the seven previous expansion modules.

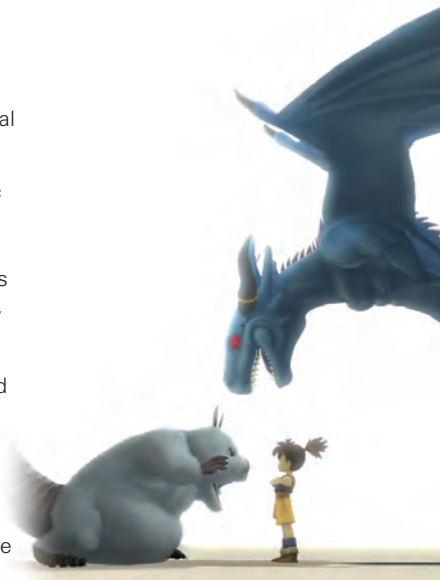
The *Knights of the Nine* update adds an entirely new faction and host of associated missions, making *Oblivion* even more massive than before. Naturally, the new content won't be free on Xbox Live Marketplace, just like the previous additions. Despite the developer claiming that the previous content additions have been "easily the most popular downloadable content on Xbox Live Marketplace", the company took a lot of heat when it sold the infamous Horse Armour pack which charged players for equine apparel.

PLAYING THE DRAGON CARD

XBOX 360 CRACKS JAPANESE MARKET

After months of disinterest from the Japanese public towards the Xbox 360, Microsoft has finally managed to hit upon the right combination to make the Xbox 360 sell out in Japan. The success of the *Blue Dragon* bundle came as a bit of a surprise, with 10,000 units selling out immediately and with an additional 90,000 units selling out almost as fast. The bundle includes an Xbox 360 core system with *Blue Dragon* as well as other bundled games for the rather cheap price of ¥29,800 (R2,000).

Blue Dragon becoming the lynchpin for 360 in Japan is not that surprising, however, when you consider the origins of the game. The studio behind *Blue Dragon* is Mistwalker, which was founded by Hironobu Sakaguchi. Sakaguchi himself has the distinction of being the creator of the *Final Fantasy* series. The characters in *Blue Dragon* are designed by Akira Toriyama, who was responsible for creating the *Dragon Ball* series. The game itself involves players controlling a young boy named Shu, who battles enemies using his "Dragon Shadow". The gameplay itself is a mix of *Final Fantasy* and *Pokémon*. With all these elements combined, it's no wonder that *Blue Dragon* would ignite the Xbox 360 fires for the Japanese gaming market.



SHEEPISH



360 ROCKING DOWN UNDER

Since its March launch in Australia, the Xbox 360 has set a new record for initial sales. Selling over 100,000 units since the launch, the 360 has eclipsed the previous PlayStation 2-held record of 78,000 units in the first seven months. Market research firm GfK has also affirmed that the 360 has also set a new record in software sales. Over 400,000 games have sold since launch, more than double the previous 190,000 PS2 games sold over the same period.

"Xbox 360 has taken off in Australia, demonstrating that the game has changed and consumers are ready for the next generation of gaming now," commented David McLean, regional director for Xbox Australia and New Zealand. "Xbox 360 provides amazing value for the whole family and, with the biggest line-up of next-generation games and accessories, we are confident that there will be lots of Xbox 360s sitting under Christmas trees this year."

Your Guide To

SALUBRIOUS GAMING

W

ARNING: Playing videogames can make your muscles, joints, skin or eyes hurt after a few hours. You know that quick

warning message that flies by before the title screen, or that game manual you never even take out of the case? Well, that's what they say. They also warn that gaming can cause problems such as tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome, skin irritation, and eye strain, unless you do certain simple things like "avoid excessive play". For the casual gamer, taking a 10-15 minute break every hour is a cinch. They probably won't even be on that long anyway. But what about the gamer determined to be the first on his Friends List to drive 5,000 miles in Test Drive Unlimited, or the countless gamers who insist on "just one more" Halo match? Anyone who's ever tried to stop to go to the bathroom while levelling with a party in Qufim knows that taking breaks and avoiding "excessive play" (considered by some health care physicians to be any more than 30 minutes a day) is simply not an option. So what's the worst that can happen anyway?

THE WINDOWS TO THE SOUL

We live in a world where we can explore alien planets and go on epic quests without ever leaving our couch. What we do need, however, is our eyes. Without those two little things, we wouldn't even know what our GamerScore was, or know what colour Kameo's underwear is, or be able to try to count how many hits are in an omnislash. But when you use a tool long enough, it eventually gets worn out, right? And it's

HEALTH EXPERT: WILLIAM HALEY



not like you can simply run to the grocery store and pick up a new pair of eyes (unless you live in a Steven Spielberg movie, of course, in which case aliens are going to inexplicably show up on Earth sooner or later anyway, so it doesn't really matter).

The good news is that playing videogames isn't going to make you go blind. Eyes are tough cookies, so long as no one tries to eat them. Your eyes may get dry from not blinking or staring at the same area for long periods of time, but that's not going to have a permanent effect. All you need in order to maintain healthy eyes is sufficient vitamins and nutrients, and resting your eyes once in a while. Vitamins A, C and E are essential, as is a proper weight, blood pressure and cholesterol level. Cigarette smoke is linked to many serious eye conditions, and smoke or exhaust fumes in general are very bad for your eyes. When playing a game or other concentrated activity, resting your eyes for a few minutes every half hour or so will keep them from getting strained. According to William C. Loyd, MD: "Blinking regularly also helps reduce evaporation of the liquid that protects your cornea." He adds: "Forceful blinking also breaks the continuous focus when you have been reading or looking at a computer screen, increasing the amount of concentrated activity you can perform." Sitting up straight and maintaining the proper distance from the screen (about 10 feet) is also very important.

WEAK POINTS

In the not-so-distant future, games won't even need a controller to be played, even though Nintendo will likely be trying to peddle some sort of S&M-style sensory feedback harness for its Wii Wii (the natural successor to the Wii). Until then, however, your hands are going to be doing just as much work as your eyes and, unfortunately, your bones are much easier to break down. Even over time, bone weakness and disease is commonplace. Add to that a hobby where you are constantly in the same position and repeating similar actions and you are slowly but surely wearing yourself away.

Everyone is familiar with arthritis, and if you live long enough you will get to know the disease in one form or another on a first-hand basis. However, studies have shown that constant keyboard or controller use can speed up the process. Arthritis affects approximately 1 in 3 people and is actually a general term for more than 100 different diseases (with Osteoarthritis being the most common type) according to The Cleveland Clinic Department of Rheumatic and Immunologic Diseases. Osteoarthritis is a disease in which the cartilage on the bones of a joint wear away, eventually causing the bones to grind against each other, and the resulting friction causes immense pain and swelling. It is not unusual for older arthritis patients to be unable to make a fist or open their hand because of the mind-numbing pain. Arthritis is not limited to the hand, as it can occur in any joint, but is most common in the wrist, fingers, and weight-bearing joints such as the knees, hips and some joints in the spine.

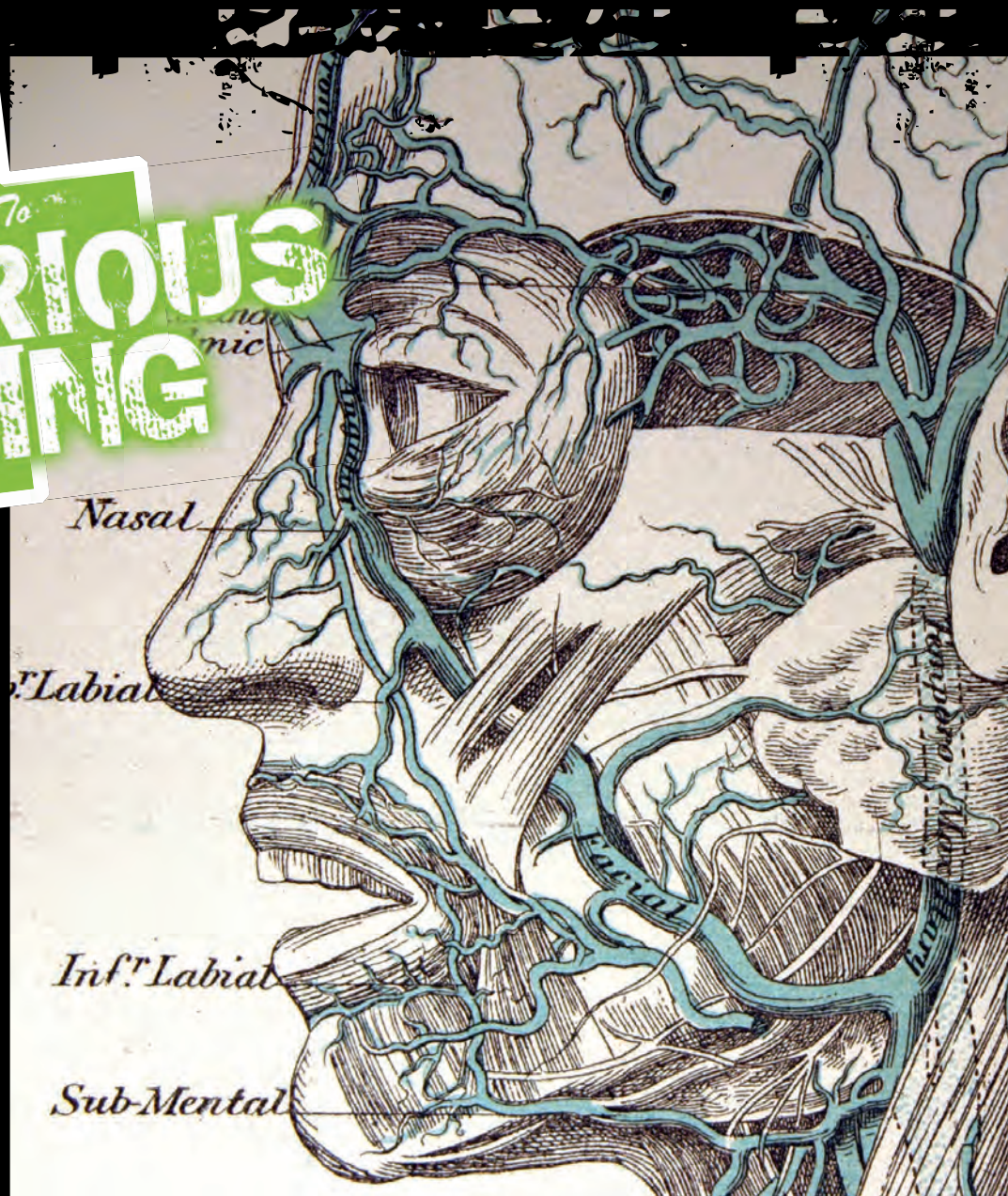
Your Guide To SALUBRIOUS GAMING

DEATH BY VIDEOGAME

Sleep deprivation and malnutrition aren't the only ways gamers can be eternally powered off. All over the world, unusual game-related murders are occurring. In 2004, a 17 year old lured a 14-year-old boy to a park in the UK. He was then beaten and killed with a knife and claw hammer. Naturally, a search of the killer's home turned up a copy of *Manhunt*, causing Britain's top game retailer, Dixons, to yank the title off shelves immediately and allow the parents of said teenager to blame someone other than themselves. Of course, *Manhunt* was rated with an 18 certificate, meaning a 17 year old shouldn't have been playing it at all, unless of course a parent had bought it for him.

And if you're Asian, you're apparently much more likely to die due to videogames. Whether it's being killed by your fiancée for playing too much, being killed by your own body for playing too much, or, in China, being killed for selling a valuable in-game item that didn't belong to you. That's right, in 2004 Qiu Chengwei, 41, lent his friend – Zhu Caoyuan – a *Dragon Sabre* in the MMORPG, *Legend Of Mir 3*. Caoyuan subsequently sold the virtual item for approximately 7,200 yaun (or about £1,700). When police would not do anything about the "theft", Chengwei decided to stab his friend in the chest until all his hit points were gone. Later reports suggest that if Chengwei had been a White Mage he may have considered rezzing him, but he instead opted to be a Dark Knight, which we all know is a fighter and not a healer.

The bottom line is that gaming is a dangerous hobby and should be banned unequivocally across the universe – especially if you are stupid and have no life. For the record, extensive research shows that being killed is definitely not very good for your health.



Being overweight is also a major contributor to joint degeneration. To avoid back problems and arthritis, or at least minimise the effects, it's important to maintain a healthy weight. All that excess poundage puts a strain on your joints. Exercising will also keep your muscles strong, which in turn protects your joints. A nutritious diet can help strengthen your bones and regenerate the fluid that makes joints move smoothly and without friction. If all of that just seems like too much work for you, and you'd prefer to be lazy now and need a nurse to feed you later on because your hands hurt too much to hold your fork, then the least you could do is sit up straight. Proper posture goes a long way in preventing bone problems and muscle cramps, among other things.

POWER UP

Caffeine. Caffeine. Caffeine. Everyone throws that word around and how much they need it to get through their day, but does anyone really know what it is exactly? Of course they do, no one would consume mass quantities of something every day without knowing exactly what it is, and what it will eventually do to

them. For the two or three people who don't know, however, caffeine is a central nervous system stimulant, having the effect of warding off drowsiness and restoring alertness – for humans that is. Caffeine originates as a plant alkaloid, found in numerous plant species where it acts as a natural pesticide that paralyzes and kills insects. That's right, caffeine is nature's bug zapper. And it's not all that good for humans either. Excessive caffeine has been linked to medical complications ranging from interrupted sleep to headaches to women giving birth to smaller babies. Caffeine has also been linked to increased heart rate and blood pressure. Dietitian Cynthia Sass, RD, says caffeine's effect on the body varies from person to person. "Some people can have a really strong cup of coffee and go right to sleep and other people get that jittery, nervous, overstimulated feeling from the same amount of caffeine." She adds that just as with other stimulants, using caffeine to combat fatigue may make you feel better temporarily, but your body definitely pays for it later. "When you are fatigued, your body needs sleep and you aren't going to function well until you get



CAFFEINE COMPARISON

Below is a comparison of the drinks most commonly associated with a pick-me-up. There are countless other drinks out there, but if your idea of a manly drink is Orange Berry Blast soda, then this article can't help you anyway. It should be mentioned that tea does not make an appearance because there are so many different types and ways to prepare tea that the amount of caffeine in any given serving varies widely.

PRODUCT	SERVING	CAFFEINE
Brewed Coffee	8oz	135mg
Instant Coffee	8oz	95mg
Red Bull	8oz	80mg
Monster	8oz	80mg
Mountain Dew	12oz	55mg
Diet Coke	12oz	46.5
Coca Cola	12oz	34.5

And the winner for best source of caffeine? NoDoz, an over-the-counter drug that lacks the extra ingredients that make all the sodas and energy drinks so unhealthy, and a box of 60 pills will run you roughly the price of a can of Red Bull at your local pub. A single Maximum Strength tablet is 200mg of pure, unadulterated caffeine. That's enough juice to keep you awake through another Dynasty Warriors game, assuming you don't die from the self-inflicted wrist wounds first...

“CAFFEINISM MAY AFFECT AS MUCH AS TEN PERCENT OF THE TOTAL POPULATION OF CAFFEINE CONSUMERS”

it,” she says. “Using a stimulant like caffeine is a temporary band-aid to the problem.” Consumption of caffeine does not eliminate the need for sleep: it only reduces the sensation of being tired for a short while. Caffeine is similar in structure to a chemical in the brain that slows down mental activity: adenosine. The two compete, meaning the more caffeine you drink the less adenosine is available. That's why caffeine temporarily heightens concentration and wards off fatigue. Within 30 to 60 minutes of drinking a cup of coffee, caffeine reaches peak concentrations in the bloodstream. It typically takes four to six hours for its effects to wear off. Smokers remove caffeine from their blood twice as fast as nonsmokers, which probably explains why smokers tend to drink more coffee (you know, aside from that whole addiction thing). John Hopkins, Professor of Behavioural Biology, Roland Griffiths, PhD, agrees. Griffiths has been studying the effect of caffeine on the body for many years, and he says the stimulant is the most widely used mood-altering drug in the world, a worldwide fact in our day and age. However, Griffiths says energy drink consumers are being misled

by advertising for the products: “The ads give people the idea that they are getting a cocktail of various ingredients fine-tuned to synergistically enhance energy. This is bogus. The effects of these drinks are largely due to the presence of added caffeine, and the magnitude of the effect is completely caffeine-dose dependent.”

...MUST COME DOWN

Caffeine is a drug that, in large amounts, especially over an extended period of time, can lead to a condition known as “caffeinism”. Caffeinism usually combines physical addiction with a wide range of unpleasant physical and mental conditions, including nervousness, irritability, anxiety, muscle twitching, insomnia, heart palpitations, and so on. Also, because caffeine increases the production of stomach acid, high usage over time can lead to ulcers and all sorts of other problems and diseases. A study in the British Journal Of Addiction concluded that caffeinism may

affect as much as ten per cent of the total population of caffeine consumers. It is quite possible to overdose on caffeine, usually in excess of 250 milligrams (more than 2-3 cups of coffee). This results in a state of central nervous system overstimulation called caffeine intoxication. The symptoms of caffeine intoxication include restlessness, nervousness, insomnia, increased urination, intestinal problems, a rambling flow of thought and speech, more muscle twitching, irregular or rapid heart beat (starting to notice a trend?). Long-term use of caffeine can elicit quite a significant number of psychiatric disturbances, such as caffeine-induced sleep disorder and caffeine-induced anxiety disorder. According to the Diagnostic And Statistical Manual Of Mental Disorders, “In some individuals, the large amounts of caffeine can induce anxiety severe enough to necessitate clinical attention. This caffeine-induced anxiety disorder can take many forms, from generalised anxiety to panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive symptoms or even phobic symptoms. As this condition can mimic

Your Guide To SALUBRIOUS GAMING

organic mental disorders, such as panic disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, or even schizophrenia, a number of medical professionals believe caffeine-intoxicated people are routinely misdiagnosed and unnecessarily medicated when the treatment for caffeine-induced psychosis would simply be to withhold further caffeine."

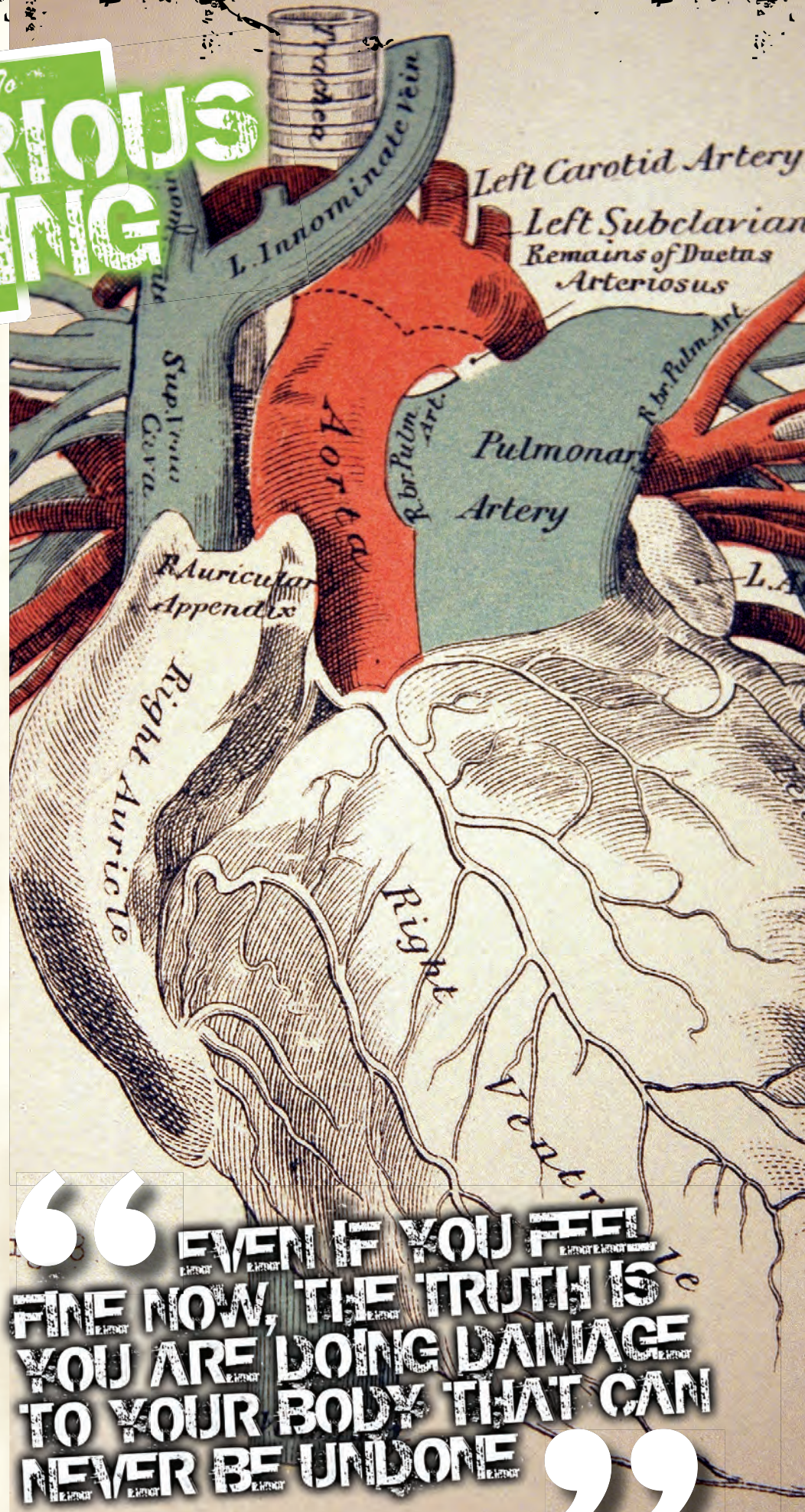
While not probable, it is also possible to die from an overdose of caffeine, but the required amount is something akin to roughly 140 cups of coffee for an average adult over a period of several days. Still, with some Starbucks drinks reaching into the 500 and 600mg of caffeine range, it does happen from time to time, especially when society is under the impression that the more caffeine the better. All this makes caffeine a formidable health risk on its own, but it isn't the only thing gamers are vulnerable to...

THE TICKER

For the past decade, as games and their effects on gamers have become more and more of a concern, several studies have been focused not on whether violent games put you at risk mentally, but whether games in general can put you at risk physically. More specifically, whether gamers should be concerned about their heart, and the unanimous answer is yes, they should be.

One such study out of Simon Fraser University, Canada, showed the physiological impact of videogames on players between 10 and 16 years of age. The findings showed that heart rates rose from an average 77 beats per minute to 126 beats per minute for males, and almost twice as much for females. Heart beats and anxiety levels rose whether the games were violent or non-violent, but higher increases were registered when youths played games that involved decapitating on-screen characters, as well as other gruesome activities.

Elevated blood pressure puts stress on artery walls and causes microscopic lesions, much like weakened areas that occur in an overblown balloon. Unlike epilepsy or a gamer in the top 100 who doesn't use game saves, heart disease isn't one of those things you only hear about but never see. Everyone knows at



“EVEN IF YOU FEEL FINE NOW, THE TRUTH IS YOU ARE DOING DAMAGE TO YOUR BODY THAT CAN NEVER BE UNDONE”

TWITCH GAMING

Gamers may have noticed warnings of epileptic seizures in game manuals and loading screens. While many shrug it off and think that as long as they're not watching Pokémon they're safe, the fact of the matter is many people with epilepsy already have it, they just don't know it yet. The particular type of epilepsy that gamers should worry about is called Photosensitive Epilepsy, which is triggered by visual stimuli such as flashing lights, moving patterns, and those weird tie-dye T-shirts that look wet but really aren't. If you are under the age of 18 or over the age of 65, there's a slightly higher chance you could just start flopping around one day, but at least now you'll know why it's happened.

Still, epilepsy is a somewhat rare affliction. It affects approximately 50 million people worldwide (about 1 in 130, with Photosensitive

“ If you're under 18 or over 65, there's a chance you could just start flopping around one day... ”

Epilepsy only comprising about five per cent of those people). So how do you get it? Genetic conditions, complications during pregnancy (your Mum's, not yours), a stroke or head injury, various infections and alcohol. That's right, your favourite out-with-the-gals drink could make those blackouts and embarrassing spasms followed by uncontrollable vomiting (sometimes referred to as you dancing) an everyday occurrence. You won't even have to get all liquored up anymore, you'll be having them for free!

Did you know? In the early Nineties there was what scientific experts believed to be a mass outbreak of epilepsy, but after in-depth studies it was revealed to simply be something called "rap music".

least one family member who has died because their heart decided to take the day off. Even if you feel fine now and laugh it off, the very real truth is that you are doing damage to your body now that can never be undone. All this, coupled with the fact that gamers often consume mass amounts of caffeine that also raises heart rate, as well as not getting the proper exercise to coincide with the elevated heart activity, and there is no doubt that gaming can eventually cause serious problems (ie grabbing your arm one day, screaming "It hurts!" and then never waking up).

A HEALTHIER LIFESTYLE

The very simple solutions to the health risks that come with your favourite hobby are a bit of exercise and a proper diet. While it may be too late for many lazy gamers who prefer to get to level 99 tonight rather than see their grandchildren graduate from college tomorrow, it is especially important that kids be taught healthy living. Forming the correct habits at an early age will go a long way to providing a much more healthy life in the long haul. After all, how many times have you seen a fat kid on the corner holding a Happy Meal with ice cream all over his face and thought, "Now that's some excellent parenting"? No doubt that same kid will grow up to be the obese fool that pushes helpless bystanders out of the way in order to nab the last of the chicken wings at the buffet. If only Mummy and Daddy had loved him enough to just say NO to fast food.

The body is an interesting thing. Even if you aren't motivated enough to hit the gym every day, a little exercise goes a long way. After all, even in Oblivion if all you do is walk around, eventually you will level up. The same goes for your body. And exercising comes in a myriad of flavours, so there's something for everyone - from that lucky punk who eats whatever he wants and never gains a pound to the kid who can eerily reproduce the "truffle shuffle" from The Goonies. For instance, a good habit to get into is compromise (if you have ever been married, you should be all too familiar with the concept). Rather than drive the few blocks to your favourite fast food joint, try walking. By spending a little extra time outside in the big scary world you're getting sun, which is scientifically proven to make you happier; a cardiovascular workout, which will reduce chances of heart disease; and you're saving quite a bit of money on petrol and that future triple-bypass surgery you will no longer be needing.

Videogaming is undoubtedly the laziest sport in the world. It's the only one where the better you are the more likely you are to require multiple seats on an aeroplane. No one expects a group of people bred by laziness to suddenly get off their bums and become bodybuilders, but it's the little

things that can really make a difference. Self-restraint and a little discipline (that word they so regularly threw around in school) are an excellent start. Separating need and want is important here. Do you really need that last pint, or the extra large fries, or that box of doughnuts? Unless you are afflicted with some sort of alien poison that can only be cured by submerging your internal organs in sugar and lard, chances are you don't. As painful as it may be at first, resist the urge and pass. Your body will thank you later.

VIDEO GAMES FOR THE GOOD OF ALL MANKIND

While the media definitely prefers to focus on the alleged negative effects of videogames, there are quite a few ways in which gaming is being used to rehabilitate people with various afflictions and even cure diseases. According to NASA, recreational videogames have the potential to help both children and adults with a variety of health problems, from concentration difficulties to physical stress.

Videogames have also been useful in combating certain disabilities, such as Amblyopia, or lazy eye. Traditionally, fixing the problem requires patients to force the bad eye to work harder by wearing a patch over the good eye. The treatment usually involves patching for around 400 hours and can cause the eyes not to work together, resulting in double vision. Researchers at Nottingham University have found an experimental treatment using virtual reality may offer the best of both worlds, encouraging the lazy eye to be more active and getting both eyes to work together. "We thought we'd develop a system that needed about 400 hours of treatment like patching," said Dr Richard Eastgate of the university's Virtual Reality Applications Research Team. "In the end we achieved the same effect in an hour."

It is also a potent alternative to pain medication. "The degree of attention needed to play such a game," begins Mark Griffiths, Professor of Gambling Studies at Nottingham Trent University, "can distract the player from the sensation of pain, a strategy that has been reported and evaluated among pediatric patients. Videogames have also been used in comprehensive programs to help develop social and spatial ability skills in children and adolescents with a severe learning disability or other developmental problems, including autism, children with multiple handicaps (for example, severely limited acquisition of speech), and children with impulsive and attention deficit disorders."

So there you have it: Videogames cure the sick. What have you done lately?

Release date/ March '07



YOOF CULTURE

The environs of Jackie's New York are pretty nasty. Let's just say you'll not be taking coffee at Central Perk.

DARKLINGS

These are the Darklings, ghoulish imps that help Jackie along the way. 'Orrible little bastards.

HIT 'N RUN

Jackie is a professional hit man, so despite the addition of his Darkness powers, this is still very much a first-person shooter.



NEED TO KNOW

Publisher/ Take 2
Developer/ Starbreeze
Genre/ First-person shooter
Players/ 1-32
Xbox Live/ Yes

Briefly

Mafia hit man acquires super powers in the dark. Cue much gruesome death when the lights go out...

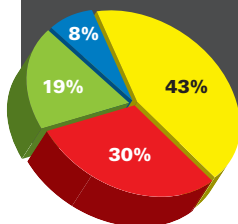


DRIVE LIKE CRAZY! That's one way to enter a building without a key – don't try this at home, folks

IN THE PIE

What you'll find at night:

- Darkness
- Guns
- Darklings
- Beheadings



Liveaware

- Deathmatches are present, but will probably involve the Darklings rather than lots of Jackies
- This means no Darkness powers online. Boo!

THE DARKNESS

Please... Someone switch the light on...

You could be forgiven for thinking that *The Darkness* is the kind of generic FPS that most gamers will only consider as a stopgap until the likes of *Halo 3* hit our glorious console. It stars a comic book hero, and to the uninitiated, the PR blurb reads like numerous other 'nothing' titles. Delve a little deeper, however, and you'll see a title that, despite not being a truly next-gen effort, has us wetter than a heavily chested Northern lass in an Ibiza wet T-shirt competition.

It's probably worth noting early on that *The Darkness* is a title with a unique pedigree. Starbreeze studios – the house behind the critically acclaimed *Chronicles Of Riddick* – is the development muscle behind this endeavour, while Top Cow comics is the company fronting the intellectual property. Anyone familiar with Top Cow will know it is home to the new kids on the graphic novel block – a group

of passionate and talented individuals including industry titan Marc Silvestri. Of course, as with every game based on a film or comic licence, the waffle states quite clearly that Top Cow productions has had unprecedented input into the creation of this title, and whilst we're normally sceptical of these kinds of claims, it's clear from having seen the game in action that there's been more than a passing collaboration, as the game captures the atmosphere of the comic's New York beautifully. Indeed, building the kind of over-the-top gruesomeness, while adding a heavy dose of realism and character to proceedings, has been one of Starbreeze's primary objectives.

We may not be getting across the right level of enthusiasm here, but we're still not quite sure why this is such an appealing title. Essentially, it's just a fairly ordinary FPS as contemporary videogames go, but

THE DARKLING COMETH

Getting by with a little help from your friends

1 These 'orrible things are Darklings – ghoulish devils that reside in only the most evil of evil-doers.

When you meet the corpse of someone suitably nasty they'll come and join in your quest for death.

2 Each one has a particular method of disposing

of your enemies. Here the little sod is using a saw, but we've seen numerous weapons such as hammers and drills in action. Yeurgh!

3 Once you summon the little beasts they'll pretty much work things out for themselves. They're not a replacement for the blasting action though, as they'll often pull enemies into the open for you to kill.



“The Darkness has us wetter than a heavily chested Northern lass in an Ibiza wet T-shirt competition”

2

VERSION TESTED

60% COMPLETE



1

CREATURES OF THE NIGHT

Say hello to Mr Tickle with teeth

Another of The Darkness's powers, tentacles can be used to spy on people in the next room using vents and blast holes. These two on the right are probably talking about who's 'whacked' the most people. One is probably called Frankie, as well.



3

there's much about it that makes our shootered-out fingers want to get back in the saddle. Horribly mixed metaphors aside, though, the only real difference between this and any other FPS you'll find on the shelves come March is in the form of the Darkness powers possessed by the lead

COPS/ Pretty much everyone you meet is out to get you on the streets of New York. Meet the cops – they'll try to kill you



character, Jackie Estacado.

Formerly living out a happy life as a Mafia hit man, upon turning 21 the young Mr Estacado finds that he has the uncanny ability to use the dark to his advantage. What this means in the real world is a range of abilities that complement rather than replace the classic FPS action. No, there's been little attempt to shy away from the fact that this is an all-out blast-a-thon. Those thinking of Chronicles' more measured, intelligent approach had better put those thoughts aside, as while *The Darkness* still requires a fair degree more thought than your average shooter, it's a very different game. The powers given to Jackie by the underworld range from the Darklings (horrible impish creatures that'll happily run about chopping folk up with a grimly enthusiastic zeal) to whacking great tentacles that can be used to launch cars, barrels and other assorted

debris at the enemies.

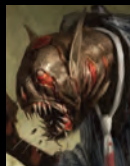
The greatest draw comes in the quality of the piece. We suspect that this will be a launching pad for many other Top Cow products, as the sheer weight of unfettered brutality is something intrinsically appealing to many gamers deprived of some good old-fashioned gut-churning gore. **Tom Leclerc**

FACT: Jackie Estacado has something in common with Lara Croft! Comic producer Top Cow is also responsible for the *Tomb Raider* graphic novel franchise. It's true!

HOW'S IT LOOKING?

At first we thought this might be just another sub-par FPS, but when we actually got to see it running, our flabber was almost entirely gasted.

Thriller?



BIOG

NAME/ Jens Andersson
COMPANY / Starbreeze
JOB TITLE/ Lead Designer
WORKING ON/ The Darkness

Will there be cameo appearances by Sara Pezzini (*Witchblade*) or *The Magdalena*?

No, there will be no cameos for this game. The license with Top Cow to do a game about *Darkness* doesn't cover any other characters.

How many different types of darklings will the player be able to use?

The Darklings are the evil creatures that roam around and do whatever interests them at the moment, which luckily often enough is to help Jackie out. There are a bunch of different ones with different abilities that you can find the scattered throughout the game, and once you've found one, you can summon him in dark areas. I can't give you a specific number since the feature is still being modified. Each darkling will be different from the others in terms of abilities – some more combat-based and some with other abilities. You might like to watch out for the sledge hammer wielding one... and there's a really nasty one armed with a hacksaw who goes straight for the neck.

What kind of multiplayer is planned? There were reports of a multiplayer mode where you play not as Jackie, but as the various Darklings.

We sadly can't give more information than just that. It will be a tight multiplayer with a number of different modes. In one mode you will be able to play as a Darkling, where you can run along walls and ceilings and stuff, which makes for pretty fast-paced multiplayer. We want to give the player something new and different, something that complements the game setting.

How will Live Achievements be implemented? Some games go for 'do X things', while others reward simply for completing the level.

Many of our 50-plus-man team are avid Xbox 360 players, so we care a lot for this feature. We are planning to have a

We run a few questions past Jens Andersson, the Lead Designer for *The Darkness*. We did it, because we're curious that way.

bunch of them [Achievements], and we will have quite a spread on what you need to do to get them. Personally, I don't see too much point in awarding achievements for just playing through a campaign, so about 2/3s of them will be related to the single-player campaign and will encourage players to try out some different things with the game. The rest will be for multiplayer, but they will still be very achievable.

“ I think the most important thing we learned was that we, as a team, are able to do a good game, and we got a hunch of what is important to make that. ”

How much of the history of *The Darkness* (the malevolent entity) is going to be covered in the game, or is that not really the main focus?

The ancient demonic entity called *The Darkness* is definitely the focus of this game. We wanted to have a story where it wasn't necessary for people to have read the comic to fully appreciate it. So, the game takes off at Jackie's 21st birthday: the day that Jackie gets possessed by the Darkness. To adapt the story into a videogame we had to make a lot of changes, and to make sure we didn't get strangled by fans of the comic for changing the wrong things Paul Jenkins, one of the writers of the comic, helped us to do that.

The game story also covers a lot more than just finding out what *The Darkness* is and how you can control it. It is also about Jackie's family, the mafia, with uncle Paulie at the helm – a very evil man who doesn't like Jackie very much.

How much of *The Darkness* is based on the *Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* technology?

With *Riddick*, we had already done one of the big leaps needed for a next-generation game. We developed an engine where everything was built from millions of polygons and was rendered using per-pixel lighting and normal-mapping, and had dynamic shadows. It was a perfect base to start working on an Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 game. Of course, now we have a lot more power under the hood and a lot of the limitations we had in *Riddick* are now gone. We've also continued developing the engine with a bunch of new shiny features like semi-deferred rendering, light-field mapping, HDR, rigid-body physics and cloth.

Are there any major differences between the PS3 and the 360 versions?

We are intentionally trying to keep the two versions as similar as possible and, visually and performance-wise, we are expecting them to be pretty identical, but there are some differences in hardware that may make some small differences, like for example the Blu-Ray on the PS3, where we possibly will be able to cram more TV-content onto the disc than we can on the 360 version.

What lessons were learned from doing *Riddick*?

Ouch. That's like asking "What did you learn during your years in school". We learned so much doing *Riddick*, as we did when we developed the game before that, *Enclave*. *Riddick* turned out to be a pretty good game, and we are

“ To adapt the story into a videogame we had to make a lot of changes, and to make sure we didn't get strangled by fans of the comic for changing the wrong things Paul Jenkins, one of the writers of the comic, helped us to do that. ”

enormously proud of the response it got, but there were so many things that didn't go as planned and didn't turn out the way we expected. I think the most important thing we learned was that we, as a team, are able to do a good game, and we got a hunch of what is important to make that. But I guess we have to prove that with *The Darkness*, don't we?

Why the decision to go with *The Darkness*, instead of other Top Cow franchises such as *Witchblade*?

We wanted to do another first-person game after *Riddick*, and *The Darkness* with Jackie Estacado as a hit-man was the best fit for us. It's very dark, which we like, and pretty brutal, which we like, and has a very interesting story to tell. There's also a lot of business mumbo-jumbo that always affect why a specific project is signed and Top Cow was currently looking for a developer for *The Darkness* license at the same time that we were looking for a cool next-gen project to develop.





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NEED TO KNOW

Publisher/ Capcom
Developer/ In-house
Genre/ Action/
Adventure
Players/ Yes
Xbox Live/ Yes

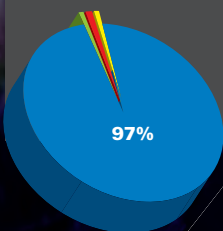
Briefly

When the Akrid stomp their slimy bug feet all over Earth, mech pilot Wayne leads the fight back

IN THE PIE

You'll be lost in a planet full of...

- Giant weapons
- Giant moths
- Giant worms
- Snow



“If this doesn't put hairs on your chest and make you feel like a man, nothing will”

Release date/ January '07

LOST PLANET: EXTREME CONDITION

What do you get if you cross mechs, 80-foot worms and Bernie?

thankfully, and gone for a world of ice instead. Blustery winds, frozen bridges, brittle architecture and vast open snowfields all combine to make this action-adventure feel a little different.

Ice, ice, baby

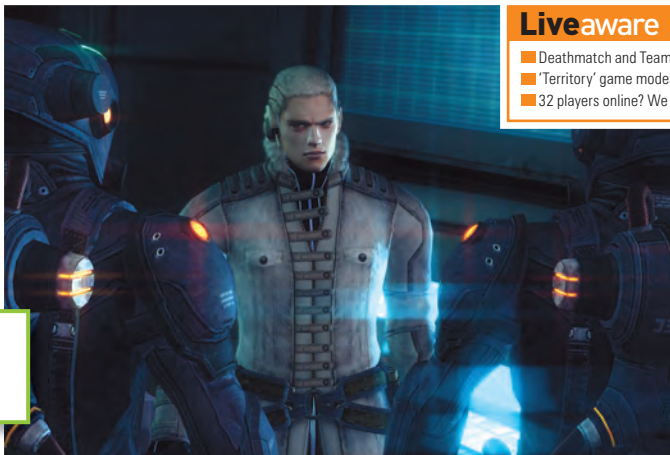
Icy world, post-apocalyptic world, what's the difference? Same thing, different colour. "Not so!" we triumphantly shout, slamming our podgy fists on the table for effect. The ice world isn't just an artificial touch but means Capcom has been able to play around with the actual gameplay itself. Rather than plumping for a traditional health system, you have to keep a careful eye on your thermal energy. No one knows whether "thermal energy" should be capitalised, but it's so important to *Lost Planet's* gameplay, we feel that it demands bigger letters. Cleverly renamed T-ENG to save on-screen clutter, thermal energy is what dictates whether you survive or die. Take a rocket to the face and you'll draw on thermal energy to replenish your missing chunk of life bar. Mechs are also fuelled by thermal energy, allowing you to boost your way through levels and double-jump to the top of rocky mountains and the like. More importantly, thermal energy is what ensures you survive when you step outside.

Lost Planet is cold. Really cold. So, to survive, main character Wayne has to draw on thermal energy to keep warm. Kind of like a perma-Cup a Soup but without the cheap nasty chemicals that are supposed to taste of onion but taste of hot horse wee. Your thermal energy constantly ticks down as you

Short of curing cancer and stopping global warming, Capcom can do anything. The development team turned a Goth with a Duran Duran haircut into the guy the girls loved and the men wanted to be, turned a photojournalist with a boxer's nose into a modern-day hero and turned a shotokan practitioner with a red hairband into a videogames icon. Its latest trick: Capcom has made snow exciting. Snow? Exciting?

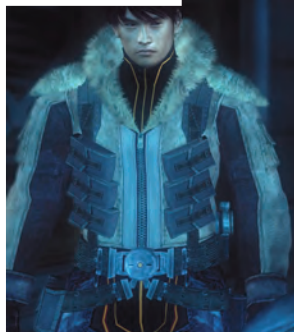
Yes. Although, admittedly, Capcom has cheated slightly by calling upon the aid of rocket-firing mechs, 80-foot worms, eye-watering explosions and sniper rifles – and, let's face it – sniper rifles could make anything exciting. *Lost Planet* is the bastard love child of mech anime, *Starship Troopers* and pulp sci-fi, too busy making snow angels in the unoccupied Xbox 360 leftfield to notice it's carving out an interesting niche for itself. Most developers plump for the clichéd post-apocalyptic worlds, where dull brown textures and eternal fires compete for room and you find your interest levels sagging as soon as you clap your eyes on another burnt-out building. Capcom has ignored that,

1



Liveaware

- Deathmatch and Team Deathmatch
- "Territory" game mode involving beacons
- 32 players online? We bloody hope so



3

WHAT'S THE STORY

Watch as Wayne and Yuri's friendship falls apart

1 "Oh noes!" Is Yuri working with the bad guys?" we screamed during this cut-scene, while the Capcom PR gave us a strange look. The storyline's main hook is the mysterious NEVEC organisation and the role it plays.

2 Wayne himself has a spot of amnesia and is helping out his rescuers. However,

he doesn't remember who he is, anything from his past or how he likes his steak cooked. This annoys him greatly.

3 "Eaves-dropping huh?" That's not a very nice thing to do." Yuri knows Wayne was listening! Wayne doesn't trust Yuri! We have no idea what Yuri thinks of Wayne! It's all rather exciting.

2



stay outside, as your suit battles to keep the cold away. *Lost Planet* is the first videogame we can think of where you're forced to check the weather before heading outside, but doing so can be the difference between life and death. No one likes the lonely trek back to where you died from the last checkpoint simply because you were careless. To keep your thermal energy topped up, you have to collect orange blobs from fallen enemies. This means you have to strike a careful balance between attacking enemies, making sure you don't have to lose too much life when doing so, and maintaining healthy thermal energy levels.

What's the story?

As for what happens if you ever let your thermal energy hit zero, it's explained in a wonky cut-scene, where Wayne's father appears in a dream his sleeping son is having. "If your thermal energy runs out..." says Wayne's Dad in a spooky voice, the camera zooming in on his unshaven tramp face and picking out bits of Kellogg's Cornflakes in his beard. "DEATH." Needless to say, if you like your dialogue to be cheesy enough

to be served up with wine and biscuits ("fighting... is all I know") and if you like your characters to have nonsensical names (Bernie and Wayne), *Lost Planet* ticks all the right boxes. This is classic Capcom, delivering a ridiculous storyline that's light, frothy and has something hiding under its murky depths that you can't quite put your finger on, but it keeps you interested. To cut the long plot short, giant insects known as the Akrid are stomping all over Earth, which has become a desolate, frozen wasteland. Humans are trying to fight back against them, using mechs to counter the threat.

You play Wayne, as he tags along with survivors who rescue him from certain death in an Akrid encounter gone awry, and he now suffers from amnesia. The eccentric bunch – led by Yuri – send him on missions that involve defeating the snow pirates, Akrid and tangling with a mysterious group known as NEVEC (the Neo Venus Construction Corporation). However, it soon turns out that Yuri might not be all he seems and that Wayne's involvement might not be what he was initially led to believe. The early set-up reeks of further double-crossing and

betrayal down the line, but it's not as if it even matters. All the storyline had to be is Yuri saying: "Wayne, go out there and shoot lots and lots of Akrid. Do this multiple times in varying environments, each of these environments known as levels, and I'll be happy." And hey! That's exactly what Wayne does.

In addition to the thermal energy management that plays a huge part in the decisions you make, there's a hidden depth in the *Lost Planet* combat through the Akrid you fight. The initial bunch of Akrid are giant black bugs, looking like a cross between an armadillo and a lobster, who roll round and roar before smashing into you, breaking buildings and causing carnage. Each Akrid has a giant, pulsating orange bottom, as if recovering from a hefty vindaloo. This is its thermal energy weakspot. Blast away with the shotgun and its thermal energy will spill out, causing it to freeze up and die. Easy enough, you may think. Now try it with another Akrid rolling around the place. And buildings falling down. And other snow pirates firing at you. And your own thermal energy ticking down. Have fun!



FIRE! Twin Gatling Guns make a nice rattling noise as they fire. It feels like Terminator but way cooler

Smith & Wesson

It's not that one-sided, though. Wayne has a ridiculous number of weapons at his disposal, from the traditional shotgun to the more wacky disc grenades, which fly like a Frisbee until they hit something and explode. Nice. Wayne is tooled up throughout and can get his hands on weapons that slowly and steadily get bigger, in traditional videogame weapon style. You start with a machine gun and you finish with a laser gun that requires two arms to hold and was ripped off the side of a broken mech earlier in the level. If tearing weapons off a mech and running around with them in your hands doesn't put hairs on your chest and make you feel like a man, nothing will. Seriously.

If you don't want to feel like a man, then you can feel like a mecha geek instead. There are several mechs dotted around for you to hop into and use. The mechs in Lost Planet stagger about with the weight and appetite for destruction you'd expect from a metal beast built primarily to destroy and crush anything in its path and what makes them such a great addition to the game is that they're not enforced. They're just an option to attack with. A damn good option, admittedly, but those turned off by the idea of piloting a mech (and we know a few people like that) can stick to being on foot instead. As for the mech pilots, they can double-jump their way to glory and hover around in exchange for thermal energy, while sweating buckets

BANG! The guns make a better noise than "bang" obviously. It needs an exclamation mark, really



Multiplicity

How's the multiplayer shaping up?



EXPLOSIONS

ARE the spice of life! Lost Planet certainly does them better than most, filling the screen with Chernobyl oranges and reds to blind your grateful, crying eyes. There will be explosions like this in multiplayer. Not exactly the same, obviously.



SEE THAT

small beacon the players are crowding around? You have to hammer the A button for five to ten seconds to activate the beacon and you can bet this will form the crux of certain multiplayer modes. Plenty of room for strategy then...



BIG STOMPY

mechs, crushing everything in their path and shooting everything that isn't in their path with huge missiles. Yes, they can be used for multiplayer too. Fun? Yes.



GRENADES ARE

much of a muchness in single-player, but should make a huge difference in multiplayer. Plasma grenades to deal with mechs, disc grenades for distant enemies, gum grenades to set traps and so on... nice.



THE SPEED

of the players is extremely sluggish, which means they make for big, easy targets. This is good news. Why? Well, it will force the emphasis on strategy and teamwork rather than every-man-for-himself nonsense, that's why... and that can only be good.

PREVIEW

MIX 'N MECH

Choose your weapons wisely

Mechs come equipped with at least one weapon, but you can change both arms to any weapon you find while milling about. Gatling guns, rocket launchers, grenade launchers, laser guns... you can mix and match for the situation ahead. The laser gun has infinite fire but uses thermal energy rather than ammo, so is best twinned with a Gatling Gun should you get low on thermal energy.

Better yet, you can even detach a mech's arm, carry it around with your two manly arms and then deal out death and destruction to anyone who may be in your way. Sweet.

LIFE 

T-ENG **0494**

GETTING HOT

Remember Nelly's song, about taking off your clothes because it was getting too hot? He was singing about thermal energy. What's worse, get too cold and you die. He never sang about that!



300

Gatling Gun

WHOOSH

You can hover in the air using the mech, in exchange for some precious thermal energy. You can even double-jump. Sadly, there are no convenient lines of gold rings to collect as you do so.



VERSION TESTED
70%
COMPLETE



CHECK IT OUT! Those things flying around are weak and incredibly easy to kill but attack you in huge swarms. Quick firing arms at the ready... aim... [censored]! Reload first! Argh!

**WEAK SPOT**

All Akrid have a weak spot – attack it for massive damage! There are no giant enemy crabs, but you can look forward to giant enemy worms and giant enemy moths to shoot at.

of excitement at just how destructive the damn things feel.

I'm lost without you

The real star of *Lost Planet* isn't Wayne, isn't the snow, isn't the enemies – it isn't even the mechs. It's the bosses. Good god, the bosses. Capcom loves excess and exuberant design for its bosses – see chainsaw clown in *Dead Rising* or icy three-headed dogs in *Devil May Cry 3* for proof – but *Lost Planet* takes the biscuit and then crushes it underfoot. The bosses here are an exercise in excess, an exhilarating rush that truly does justice to the 'boss' label. Wayne is sent across a vast snowfield to investigate a thermal energy source at the far end. It seems like a gentle stroll in a snowbike when the ground starts shaking, a huge roar is heard and a giant 80-foot worm crashes out of the ground. Oh. Dear. God.

The worm thrashes around, breaks up the ground with its huge writhing body and attacks by slamming itself at you. With all the snow kicked up, smoke from your wild gunfire and general confusion, it's almost impossible to stay calm. Especially not when you spot a wrecked mech in the distance, rip its arm off and land yourself a tasty grenade launcher. *Lost Planet* is solid throughout and has the perfect base to create moments like these, moments where the player is plunged headfirst into monstrous boss battles with monstrous weapons to fight back. Capcom is the master of that. *Lost Planet* proves that.

Want more proof? Another level sees you scaling an ice station buried in the side of a cliff, when a huge mutant moth ten times your size swoops past, its backdraft knocking over the nearby barrels and crates. Later, as you try to scale the ruins of another ice station, the

mutant moth will casually fly by, fluttering its wings to try to knock you off. You can't help but be impressed by the size of it and also the clever thinking behind it – you don't have to kill the moth as you can quite easily avoid it, but if you're feeling brave, it's there as a prize trophy for you to collect. Happy hunting.

There are more traditional boss battles throughout *Lost Planet*. For example, there's a giant insect trapped underground – with two huge pincers to attack you with – who adheres to the classic 'study my pattern, then attack my weak spot!' philosophy. Either way, all bosses in *Lost Planet* share the same themes. They're big, they're brutal and they'll provide a good reason for you to wave frantically to get the attention of anyone else in the room.

We need nine lives

It's hard. Damn hard. While it's nowhere near as tough as *Devil May Cry 3* was, thanks to checkpoints generously refilling your life bar upon retrying should you snuff it, *Lost Planet* isn't a cakewalk. Even on Normal difficulty, we were dying far too much to feel comfortable, desperately trying to think of excuses for our lame performance as the Capcom PR stifled a giggle. It gets easier as you get used to the system. Checkpoints are beacons through the level, which are activated when you stand next to them and hammer A. Hammer away until it pops open et voilà, checkpoint. Even so, the need to balance thermal energy, ammo and health means you have to keep on top of every single situation that arises in *Lost Planet*, lest you start on a desperate downward spiral where thermal energy starts ticking away and you start to panic.

Hardcore gamers will get a kick out of the higher difficulty. Capcom fans will get a kick out of the arcade blood running through *Lost Planet's* veins. Xbox 360 fans will get a kick out of the fact that this is looking like another stellar addition to the white-and-green line-up. But then, should we be surprised? *Dead Rising* has proved – and *Lost Planet* is proving – that Capcom can do anything. **Ryan King**

FACT: *Lost Planet's* forgetful-human-in-mechs-fighting-against-hardened-bugs-with-tiny-weak-spot styling is very, very similar to obscure but brilliant anime *Blue Gender*.

HOW'S IT LOOKING?

Fantastic shooter with Capcom's arcade blood in its veins, this has the single-player excess to match its multiplayer potential. A Capcom classic? It certainly looks like it...

Thriller?

INSECT KILLER**OMG! Kill worm, 50 Achievement points are yours!**

The majority of *Lost Planet's* Achievements are wrapped up in the 'Secret' shroud that most Xbox 360 games come in these days. Damn. Still, there are the usual Achievements for progressing through the levels, but most interestingly of all, there are Achievements for taking out the giant worm that ambushes

you in the snowfield and the giant moth that tries to knock you off the mountaintop by fluttering its wings. It's refreshing that these Achievements should actually prove fun to obtain, something that seems to have been missing from some recent games. No "get 1,000 headshots if you're a loser!"-style nonsense here, thank the flippin' Lord.





HOLE IN ONE

Environmental damage is persistent, which means you can walk into a pristine building, engage in furious gunplay and then, having dispatched your foes, appreciate the full extent of the devastation you've caused.

TEQUILA DIVE BOMB

Inspector Tequila dives over the bar – a dangerous manoeuvre unless you're Chow Yun-Fat. You'll be performing these acrobatics frequently and they are often accompanied by Tequila Time.

GANGSTER'S PARADISE

You won't always be fighting three-fingered Asian mobsters. Tequila's daughter eventually gets carried off into the hands of the Russian Mafia, where the Inspector gets more new and interesting places to trash.

Release date/ Q4 '06



RUSSIAN ROULETTE/ Tequila meets a Russian Mafia mobster. Someone should tell him his pistol's semi-automatic



THIRSTY WORK/ Tequila's the first to be served at every bar with his unusual way of grabbing the barmaid's attention

NEED TO KNOW

Publisher/ Midway
Developer/ Midway
Genre/ Third-person shooter
Players/ 8
Xbox Live/ Yes

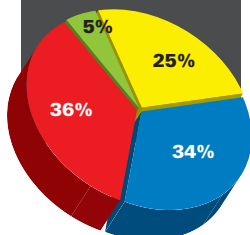
Briefly

A visceral blend of John Woo cinematic style, hardcore third-person action and 360 technology

IN THE PIE

In on the action...

- Chow Yun-Fat
- Gratuitous violence
- Mindless vandalism
- Doves



STRANGLEHOLD

John Woo gets tired of brainless action films and turns his hand to brainless action games instead

Prestigious director that he is, John Woo's films often merely flirt with an insubstantial plot and predominantly focus on a mass of gunfire, kung fu and scenes of carnage to pull it off. Not that it's to his discredit, as his massively popular action flicks alone have brought a wealth of innovative directorial inspiration and classic movies to the genre.

In a similar vein, action games – especially shooters – are all about maximising visual impact, whopping great explosions, the tangible blast of high calibre pistols and furiously frenetic showdowns with multiple enemies. And the plot? Well, that takes a back seat, really; it's a bit

like an extra in a B-movie – surplus to requirements. If the player's base senses are being bombarded with input, they're not going to worry too much about the cerebral stimulation they're not receiving. And in retrospect, it's likely that they won't even miss it anyway.

This, at least, appears to be John Woo's vision for games. Stranglehold isn't his first foray into videogames, as his Bullet Time method featured as John Woo Mode in Rebellion's Alien Versus Predator games. But this is John Woo's first videogame in which he's been so deeply involved that a film buff with no knowledge of the games industry could name Stranglehold's major influence.

Stranglehold is effectively pitched as the videogame sequel to John Woo's Hard Boiled. Set 18 years after these events, protagonist Inspector Tequila is the archetypal tough cop fighting two Triad gangs in downtown Hong Kong when his daughter is kidnapped by one of these gangs. Tequila must infiltrate their turf and... well, fight. A lot.

Liveaware

- Deathmatch mode will see an intriguing use of online Tequila Time
- A boat, in addition to other vehicles, can be used in multiplayer games

TEQUILA TECHNIQUES

Inspector Tequila has a variety of tricks at his disposal

Massive Destructibility

1 allows you to blast your environment beyond recognition. You won't even be safe taking cover behind a concrete pillar as your enemies can – and will – continue to fire until it completely disintegrates. So get out there and fight.

Critical hit

zones enable Tequila to inflict greater damage when hitting

Triad thugs in specific areas. Gangsters will often respond to their injury by clutching the wounded area as they go down.

It's Tequila Time!

Unfortunately, no one gets to make merry at the bar. The slow-mo mode featured in the Max Payne series, but its creator is behind the game this time, and gravity-defying gymnastics go hand-in-hand with a Woo production.



VERSION TESTED
80%
COMPLETE

THE FACE OF IT

Immortalising a Hollywood actor

John Woo's champion, Chow Yun-Fat, adds further authenticity to Stranglehold by lending his visage to the character of Inspector Tequila. In fact, a full body scan of the Hard Boiled actor was taken in order to give the game's lead character a resemblance that, powered by the graphical beef of the 360, really is quite uncanny.

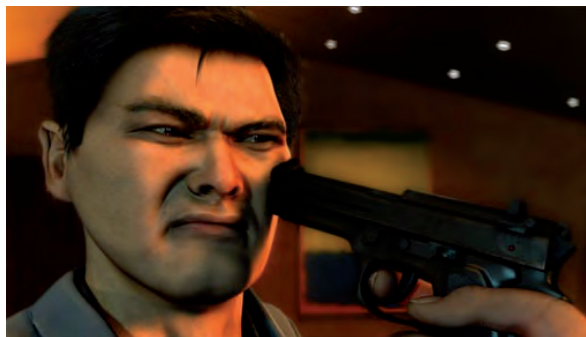
There's really not much more to it than that. It's hardly the basis of a thrilling novel, but bulldozing the action through a wafer-thin plot does seem to work on the silver screen and, in theory, should translate smoothly into a game.

Stranglehold's two main gameplay features include Tequila Time, which is a slo-mo Bullet Time mode that allows the player to target enemies at normal speed while Inspector Tequila's environment, enemies and all, slows down. It also gives you the chance to perform some fab-looking stunts, such as sliding across bars and even up banisters while unleashing a barrage of projectiles from your twin pistols. Critical hit zones will inflict a suitably agonised response from gangsters when struck in the appropriate area and – depending on the accuracy of your targeting – you will be awarded style points. These enable

you to perform special moves that include the Tequila Bomb: a spinning gunfire attack with doves flying in the background – the trademark of a John Woo film.

If annihilating all your enemies in a single scenario doesn't satisfy your appetite for destruction, then take comfort in Stranglehold's second main gameplay feature – Massive Destructibility. This allows you

CLOSE-UP/ Is that a Colt .45? Yuck darling. That's, like, soooo passé



to tear the dinosaur exhibition, marketplace, restaurant and even the famous Terracotta Warriors to pieces. Plus you can continue to fire upon an object until there's literally nothing left.

In the words of Stranglehold's director, Brian Eddy, "Woo's movies are perfect material for a game". While we should take any vote of confidence from the Midway camp with a pinch of salt, if the game plays as good as it looks so far, then it should get a rubber stamp of approval from both gamers and Woo fans alike. **Ben Biggs**

FACT: Midway has stressed that Stranglehold will look and play exactly the same regardless of format. So we'd like to think that this will be reflected in the 360 version's price tag – a PC-like £34.99 please Midway?

HOW'S IT LOOKING?

How far you can take this action-for-purists title hinges on how Midway structures gameplay and scenarios. However, it oozes the John Woo style.

Thriller?

“ It's hardly the basis of a thrilling novel, but bulldozing the action through a wafer-thin plot does seem to work on the silver screen ”



Release date/ March '07



Hard hits/Smashing the ball as hard as possible at your opponent is a sure-fire way of getting them to make a mistake



Face facts/ The character models do look impressive. Close scrutiny reveals flaws, but at first glance Maria almost looks real!

NEED TO KNOW

Publisher/ Sega
Developer/ Sumo Digital
Genre/ Sports
Players/ 1-4
Xbox Live/ Yes

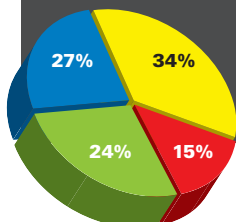
Briefly

Henman and co. go next-gen with this latest entry in the popular series. New balls please!

IN THE PIE

On court please:

- Ball jokes
- Henmania
- Female grunting
- Mini-games



VIRTUA TENNIS 3

Can Sega score an ace against Top Spin?

Let's face it, Tim Henman (bless him), is never likely to get his hands on the Wimbledon trophy. It's possible he could still surprise us, but every year that passes it looks less and less probable. That's why we love tennis games; not only can you control good old Tim, but you can also succeed where he has failed and serve and volley your way through to victory.

So what exactly has changed for this third iteration? To be honest, not a whole lot. That's not a criticism, however, and the *Virtua Tennis* series has never been about hardcore simulation that takes hours to master. Anyone can pick up a pad and smash a few shots over the net with relative ease. That's not to say the game is overly simple; it caters to those looking

for a more authentic experience, too, with a range of shots at your disposal. The series has always been about your position on the court rather than performing the best shot, and a little bit of anticipation is all that is required to ensure that you reach the ball in time so you can return it. The more time you have before the ball reaches you, the longer you can hold down the button for and, in turn, the harder your shot will be. Not only that, but you'll also have longer to read your opponent's movements and decide where to place the ball. Obviously, there are different shot types achieved through the face buttons, but for the most part, you'll find yourself using just the one button.

Virtua Tennis therefore keeps it very simple and, unlike Top Spin, it

Liveaware

- Two-player, five-set marathons
- Four-player doubles matches
- Online mini-games, possibly

GOT THE LOOK

Everything about Virtua Tennis looks suitably polished

1 The play style and movement of each tennis star has been faithfully captured and looks strikingly realistic. Even the mildly irritating yet somehow arousing grunts let out by Sharapova and co. are present.

2 At the moment the players, while looking really nice, do have that slightly plastic sheen to them. Sega has shown the Xbox 360 and PS3

versions side by side and although we hate to admit it, the PS3 does have the slight graphical edge.

3 The backgrounds aren't quite as impressive as everything else, but there's still plenty going on and they're certainly a lot livelier than in Rockstar's *Table Tennis*. The crowd still gets into the game as well, with plenty of 'oohs' and 'aahs' in all the right places.



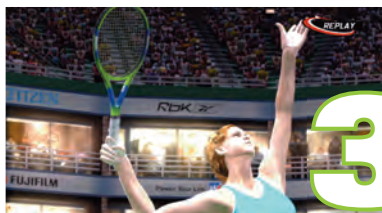
Tea break/ All the umpires seem to have gone AWOL for this game: expect it to turn into a bloodbath



VIRTUA FRIENDS

Broadband backhand

It's a given that *Virtua Tennis* will support four-player doubles online, so it's likely that there'll be a ranking system of some sort and possibly an online championship for the best players. It's time to dust off that copy of VT2 and get practising.



doesn't have any sort of energy bar or special shot meter to build up. In fact, the only meter you'll see on screen is the one for service power, which is pretty much essential. This means you'll need to make sure you're in the right place at the right time, instead of relying on some fanciful energy boost to save you.

All this running around after the ball inevitably results in some off-balance shots or even the odd

Party hard/ The mini-games were always fun on your own, but now that three other players can take part they'll be even better

dive or tumble as you stretch just that little bit too far. The animation for this has always been pretty good, but with the extra power now available to developers, the movements, whether they be an exhilarating mid-air smash or an embarrassing fall, all look stunningly lifelike. As you'd expect, clothes are no longer stuck to players' bodies and flow almost like the real thing – and yes, that does include Maria Sharapova's micro skirt.

Looks aside, the gameplay has been bolstered by the arrival of ten new mini-games. Sadly, these aren't in addition to the old roster, but we've been assured that two will survive the transition to join the new ones. The biggest news regarding these mini-games is the addition of four-player involvement, which should certainly liven up proceedings and will give the game a much-needed bit of variety in the multiplayer stakes. Whether the

mini-games will be playable online hasn't yet been confirmed, but we'd say it's a pretty safe assumption that they will be.

The *Virtua Tennis* series has always been a favourite with fans, and this third edition looks set to continue that tradition. Right, time for some VT2 practice we think.

Simon Griffin

FACT: Maria Sharapova won the US Open while we were writing this preview. It's her second Grand Slam title after winning Wimbledon at just 17. That girl sure has talent.



HOW'S IT LOOKING?

It certainly looks special at the moment – even if the players do have a slight Plasticine look. New multiplayer mini-games look like they'll provide hours of online fun.

Thriller?

Global Warming

Why are Americans so arrogant? Has Xbox 360 really flopped in Asia? Do Australians resent their five-years-later Xbox 360 launch? And what do the Swiss know about games? One mildly xenophobic feature where we talk to the top Xbox 360 gamers from each country to reveal the answers!

X CANADIAN (4TH IN CANADA)



Is there animosity between Canada and America on Live?

I don't believe that there is any animosity between Canadians and Americans on Xbox Live. The majority of the time everyone is cool and you don't have any problems no matter where they are from.

What Xbox 360 games have been popular in Canada?

The 360 games that have been popular in Canada would be the same games that are popular in the United States. This includes games like *Oblivion* and *Ghost Recon*, as well as others.

Do games like *Madden NFL* and *NBA Live* sell as well in Canada as they do in America?

Sports games always do well. It depends on the time of the year and what is going on in that particular sport. I would have to say that *Madden* does extremely well in the summer, but I would have to say that the NHL hockey games are probably the most popular.



QBIT (8TH IN SWITZERLAND)



Was it easy getting an Xbox 360 when it launched in Switzerland?

No, it was not so easy, most had sold out in a few hours. I took the Core version because the Premium pack was completely sold out everywhere.

Is Xbox 360 a popular console in Switzerland?

Yes, here in Switzerland we are very interested about new technologies and high quality games. A lot of people bought the 360 because of the date change of PlayStation3.

What Xbox 360 games are popular in Switzerland?

The most popular games are *Ghost Recon*, *FIFA*, *Prey*, *Kameo* and *Table Tennis*.

How do American players react to players from Switzerland online?

Most are very friendly and it is funny to play with them, only the Internet connection is not so good and it gives a lot of lag in many games.

STRIPCLUBDJ (1ST IN USA)



What is the main difference between American and British gamers, do you think?

Americans always think they have to be best at everything. Sad, but most of the people on my Friends List are British because we run the same hours. To most Americans it's a cockfight.

Why are there so many Americans in the top 25 world GamerScores?

Because they all use game saves. That's the truth. Sad thing is I'm so tired of the

cheating, I'm about to start doing it. That's sad, but I waste so much money and on what? Because I'm number one on the USA. Wow – when is Bill Gates gonna throw me a barbecue? Never.

Xbox 360 has been most popular in the USA. Why is that?

One word – Achievements. Americans always played games, now you can get points to show off your skill or the amount of time you waste in front of your TV. They're like drugs.

NEOS XTC**(3RD IN HONG KONG)****Xbox 360 has struggled in Japan, but how has it fared in Hong Kong?**

It was a slight struggle here as well. Not enough consoles were shipped here when it was released in March. Guess they thought Hong Kong wasn't going to be their main moneymaker. It is a little bit better now that the launch is over. People are able to go to stores now and there are always a few 360s there.

Who's been buying the majority Xbox 360s in Hong Kong, expats or Chinese?

Most definitely would have to say the China boys.

What Xbox 360 games have been popular with Hong Kong gamers?

Right now, *The Lord Of The Rings* and *Chromehounds* seem to be the most bought. Before those, there were quite a few *Ninety-Nine Nights* copies being sold.

How does Hong Kong Xbox Live Marketplace compare to American Xbox Live Marketplace?

I'm not sure. How is the American Marketplace? Ha ha! I know that on Hong Kong's Marketplace we get different movie trailers here and there. That's about all I know.

LORD FLESH**(3RD IN NEW ZEALAND)****Why do you think most New Zealand GamerScores are low?**

I thought my GamerScore was pretty high until I saw the world leaders, ha ha. Those Americans are crazy! I would say it's because most New Zealanders are casual gamers.

Is there any Xbox Live rivalry between Australians and New Zealand players?

I think there may be some truth to that, yes. My mates would often brag to me about fragging Aussies in *Call*

Of Duty 2. I personally love beating anyone from another country online, especially Americans, ha ha! They swear way too much.

What's the broadband situation like in New Zealand at the moment?

Stronger than ever. New Zealanders have always been somewhat slow with adopting new technologies but faster Internet is something no one over here can truly deny.

NEO SISYPHUS**(2ND IN AUSTRALIA)****Was it easy getting an Xbox 360 in Australia?**

Yes it was; I was able to purchase one about two weeks after launch just walking into my local Electronics Boutique. It cost \$650 AUD (£266) for a Premium console.

Do you think Xbox 360 has been hurt by its delayed launch over there?

I don't think the 360 has been hurt as Australians are fairly enthusiastic about the Xbox brand. However, proportionally, I believe Australia had the highest adoption of the first Xbox relative to its population. I think this fact disappointed some people, as it felt like a slight against Australia by delaying the 360's launch, even though we were one of the biggest supporters for the first Xbox.

What's the broadband situation like over there? Do most people have it?

In Perth, where I live, broadband is pretty accessible if you live within the metro area. Broadband is spotty if you're outside that zone and in a rural area.

TOUGHKID CST**(1ST IN SOUTH KOREA)****How well has the 360 been selling in South Korea?**

The Xbox 360 has not performed well in Korea. Microsoft promised that 80 per cent of the games released at launch would be localised, but the number of localised games barely topped 20 per cent at launch. The users have criticised Microsoft for its false marketing and failure to deliver.

What do South Koreans think of Xbox 360?

Korea's videogame market has been formed by Japanese software for many years. It is no secret that the Korean game market was influenced by the quality and cultural aspects of its neighbour's games. Koreans associate Xbox with the gaming platform for North America and Europe. As the appeal for North American and European games has grown, that growth segment has been supported by the hardcore gamers in Korea.

Has Final Fantasy XI on the 360 been popular there?

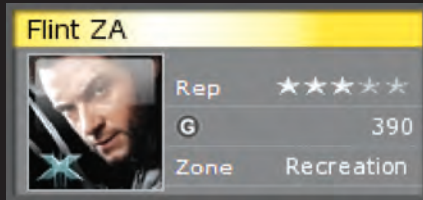
FFXI has never been localised for the Korean market. MMORPG success relies on the game's language and story. Microsoft promised they would release a localised version of *FFXI* for the 360's launch, but after six months we have yet to see it.

PPFM (10TH IN JAPAN)**Would you be interested in doing a quick interview with 360 Insider about the 360?**

I cannot speak English so much. The voice chat is impossible. But answers in message. Please do not expect it so much. Correspondence is hoped for in Japanese.

Ah. Never mind. Thanks anyway PPFM.

360 Insider ran fast and caught up with a few of the local 360 owners, and asked them some questions in a polite and courteous way. Thankfully for us, they put their guns down and answered, proving once again that once you get past the tough, rough exterior of our local gamers, they're all sweethearts inside.



FLINT ZA

What would you like to see on the 360, game-wise?

I would like to see more creative use of the community aspects of Live, as seen in TDU and (apparently) Viva Pinata. I'd also like to see more creative experimentation with new game ideas-possible with XNA and the creators club.

Do you use the Media Center capabilities of your 360?

If you mean do I use it to play media, yes. If you mean do I stream media from my PC, no.

What upcoming game are you most looking forward to?

Viva Pinata.

Do you own any other consoles?

Xbox, PSP.

What advice do you have for newcomers to the 360?

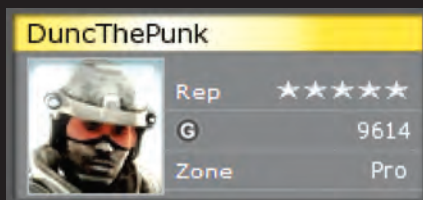
Get online, make friends, play online!

Do you play Standard-Definition or High-Definition?

Standard Definition.

What's better, wireless controllers or wired?

Wireless, without a doubt!



DUNCTHEPUNK

What do you consider the best Live-enabled game?

Right now, I'd probably say Test Drive Unlimited. The way it uses Live to put other players on the map all the time, and the car club races, etc, is very original. The most fun I have is probably with Call of Duty 2, but that is just standard multiplayer gaming, and is not really special, but it's a blast.

What would you like to see on the 360, game-wise?

I would like to see some decent flight combat games such as Crimson Skies. Otherwise, I am currently well catered for, being a driving game nut mostly, since there are some really good games of that genre out or coming out soon.

Do you use the Media Center capabilities of your 360?

I do use the Extender quite a lot. I have an XP Media Center PC, as well as an original Xbox Extender. I am very impressed that they built the Extender into the unit for free.

What upcoming game are you most looking forward to?

I am most looking forward to Call of Duty 3 and Forza Motorsport 2.

What advice do you have for newcomers to the 360?

Make sure you get 5.1 surround and an HD screen. Then you'll weep with joy whenever you play on your 360!

What's better, wireless controllers or wired?

Wireless controllers are awesome.



JASONK ZA

What do you love most about the 360?

Firstly, I don't really call my Xbox 360 an 'it': her name's Carol... don't ask me why, but after spending a couple days with her, it was the only name that felt right! So, simply, I love everything about her!

What do you consider the best Live-enabled game?

GRAW, I enjoy killing people and CO-OP is the way to go!

What would you like to see on the 360, game-wise?

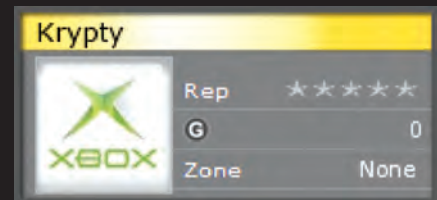
More sports games, Madden and NHL would be awesome to play, but sadly they aren't coming to S.A.

Do you use the Media Center capabilities of your 360?

Yes, this way when I show pics to people we don't have to huddle around my computer.

Do you own any other consoles?

Yes, pretty much everything apart from Dreamcast, Gamecube and DS.



KRYPTY

What do you love most about the 360?

The games, and how it brings people closer.

What do you consider the best Live-enabled game?

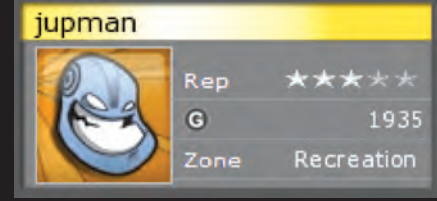
I think Gears of War is going to be at the top of them, and then also Splinter Cell and do not forget Halo.

What upcoming game are you most looking forward to?

Gears of War, Bioshock and Halo3.

What's better, wireless controllers or wired?

Wireless, the dogs had me running up the ceiling because they pulled the wires out of the old Xbox.



JUPMAN

What do you love most about the 360?

So many things. Games are great, Live is amazing and there are so many different things integrated into the Xbox - streaming etc.

How much online gaming do you do on Live?

Very little, as I currently only have a Sentech Wireless link and the lag is a problem.

What would you like to see on the 360, game-wise?

Most areas are covered except for a good combat flight simulator. The most important thing game wise is to keep seeing improvements in games which are launched. There is so much power in these consoles - the games must use it!

X GAMES



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CUSTOM XBOX 360 CASEMODS

People do it to their PCs, their iPods and their cars – naturally, the idea of modifying the case of the Xbox 360 wouldn't be too far behind. We've already seen someone take the entire 360 and lump it into a laptop, but the adventures of the eclectic Llama.com group deserve merit. Their most recent casemod: a Rockstar Games themed modification.

The case itself got a two-stage paint job, complete with mixing hardener so that nothing could scratch the brilliant silver metal flake, orange pearlescent and black base coats. Every bit of the two controllers was custom painted, including the triggers and shoulder buttons. The Rockstar logo involved a multi-layered process; first black, then a mask, then the whole face painted silver. Once dry, the mask was removed to reveal the black logo. A clear coat finished the job, over the entire controller. Even the LEDs were changed to orange, and to top it all off original black Xbox thumb-sticks and D-pad replaced the 360 ones.

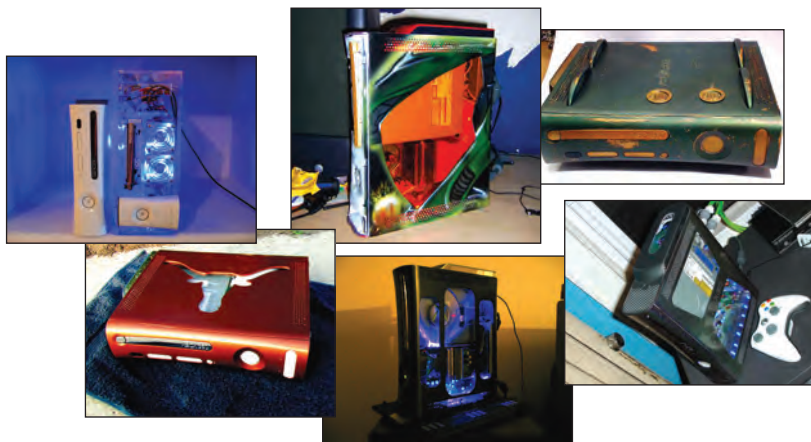
The DVD lid was cut with a Perspex window so you can see what game is in the drive. The side window was additionally adorned with a custom made jewel, showing off the *Bully* coat of arms. The faceplate received a double racing stripe, for a little *Midnight Club: Dub Edition* flavour.

To top it all off, a variable fan controller was installed, so that the fan can be dialled to a 12V speed (well above the 5.4V stock), though Llama.com admits they prefer around 8V for the best overall fan performance, while keeping the system nice and quiet.

The finished result: looks good enough to steal.



Only a small sampling of what people have done to their 360s, all in the name of art.



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The advertisement features two covers of the magazine and a DVD. The left cover is for the October/November 2006 issue, priced at R26.95 in South Africa. It features a photograph of Kirsten Dunst and includes headlines such as 'Bond: We meet the new girls', 'DANIEL CRAIG: Is he too blond to be Bond?', and 'KIRSTEN DUNST: Spidey's girlfriend is... Marie Antoinette'. A 'FREE DVD!' badge is present. The right cover is for the December/January 2007 issue, priced at R29.95 in South Africa. It features cartoon characters from 'Flushed Away' and includes a 'FREE DVD Movie Trailers' badge. A circular DVD in the foreground is for the October/November 2006 issue, featuring 'CASINO ROYALE' and 'FREE MOVIE TRAILER DVD'. It also includes a 'FREE DVD!' badge and a 'PERMANENTLY IN YOUR CAR' badge. A disclaimer at the bottom of the DVD reads 'Read the disclaimer on the contents page.'

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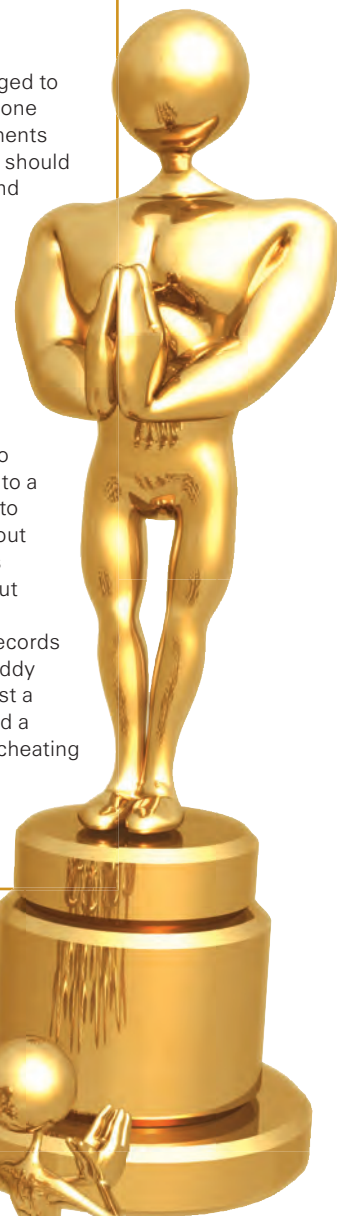
By James Francis

What the hell is the point of the achievement system? At first, it encouraged everyone into competition to see who has the higher score. Soon, there were challenges from the top scorers across the globe to take the number one spot. I wonder whether that gets them more dates? Imagine that, walking up to a sultry, curvy seductress in a bar and smoothly dropping that you have a game score of over 50k. I'm sure that would work wonderfully and you'd score a lot. Really. So I guess the reason to have a top game score is to be the envy of fellow gamers trying to do the same thing, and small kids who think that kind of thing is important. It has, of course, all gone to hell in a hand basket now, because bragging about your game score and achievements has become such a big thing that people are just cheating to get them. I'm not referring to the old way - type in god mode and 'finish' a game that otherwise would kick your ass. Gamers have found that if they just copied a more complete save game to their profile, they unlock the attached achievements. That's not even cheating; it's just really, really sad. I can appreciate that you want to be at the top of your game, but there's no explanation for adding achievements that you never actually got.

I like achievements on their own. It's nice that, for example, *Doom* recognizes that you finished an episode and *Call of Duty 2* will reward you for every level you complete on the hellish Veteran difficulty. It's nice to get a pat on the back for the effort you

put in and, in return, you are more encouraged to play the game a little more, just to get that one achievement you are so close to. Achievements rock, but the game scores don't. Microsoft should just dump the scoring system altogether and only give us the achievements. I've got no plans to match my paltry list to a top scorer, but I doubt a top scorer gets the same kick as the general gamer does, anyway. They are in it for the competition and 15 minutes of fame. The cheaters... well, who knows why someone would cheat to get achievements. It sounds like a serious case of lack of confidence, if you ask me. It reminds me of the guy who would bring his level 99 *Diablo 2* character to a LAN, bragging about it, but he used hacks to achieve it. What's the point of bragging about something when it took you a few seconds to accomplish? That's like being proud about flushing the toilet.

Still, it's nice that there's a system that records your progress in games and gives you a nobby badge when you achieve something. It's just a pity that some decided to take it too far, and a bigger pity that others don't get the point, cheating instead. If one of these cheating losers is a friend of yours, feed his hard drive to your dog and delete his Live account. We'll all be thankful.



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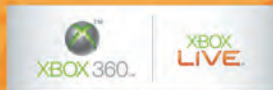
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