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Binary Domain
+ MORE



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WHERE TECHNOLOGY & HUMANITY MEET

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There's a lot to love about the work we do. Sure, it's often tough and occasionally the only food the staffers can afford is the crumbs left on the floor of Michael's new Land Rover, but we'd not trade it for anything in the world. Let us tell you why.

30 DO IT YOURSELF

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Michael went to Burger King. Along the way, he stopped to have a look at the real X-COM remake. He saw many nice things. The end.

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It's tough to decide which tablet to go for in a world overflowing with the things. We'll help you decide which horse to bet on.

ON THE DVD

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DEMOS

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DRIVERS

NVIDIA Forceware 295.73 WHQL Vista/7 32/64-bit / AMD [Unchanged from March NAG DVD 2012]

EXTRAS

Cheatbook Database + updates to March 2012
Gamecca volume 3 Issue 33 March 2012
[Free Games]: 8-Bit Halloween / Deity / DOOMRL
Frostbite / Kerbal Space Program / SCP-087 Shark Attack / Space Quest II remake
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A funny thing happened on the way to space...

<Some Mass Effect 1 and 2 spoilers exist here>

I've been playing games longer than anyone I know. I've never really cared too much about characters or consequences; I think I grasped early on that it was all just fun and games. This was of course a time when a blob of coloured pixels represented your hero and your imagination had to fill in the rest. Anyhow, the other week along came something that hasn't happened to me before. Perhaps I wasn't paying attention all along, or I've just been playing the wrong kind of games up until now. Not sure why it hasn't happened but that's not important - it did.

In the first *Mass Effect* I chose Liara T'Soni as my girlfriend because I thought some alien action would be interesting and different. It was all good and didn't really mean anything until I met her in *Mass Effect 2* where she shunned me (I was presumed dead for the last two years) over her career. I was a bit miffed but then I did have a ship full of other girls that needed attention including Miranda (a gorgeous sexy human) and Tali (a mysterious alien with a covered face) and Jack (a tough as nails tattooed human) and, of course, my assistant Kelly. They are all decent options except Kelly, because she works for me. As the game went along a moment came where I had to choose who would be the next one, also remembering that my choices here go through to *Mass Effect 3*...

I left the response cursor lingering over the option for about five minutes - pondering options; I didn't really know what to do. Should I go for the obvious choice and choose Miranda or try something different with Tali even though my last alien encounter left a lingering sour taste? What to do, what to do. I then started mentally tallying pros and cons, I'm not completely sure of Miranda because she's got plenty of baggage and the last thing I wanted is endless hours of in-game dialogue about how insecure she is and so on. The mysterious Tali is more consistent and straightforward but who knows what she's hiding behind that mask...

So there I was, caught between two women and not knowing who to choose. I had also resisted the easy out by taking advantage of one tough tattooed girl (Jack); she was eager and keen but I knew it would never last. She's way too unstable as well and might end up killing me while I sleep. So I chose Tali at the end of the day and was a little sad about the lost potential with Miranda. Later that day I went to my captain's quarters and the picture of Liara (my first alien love) was turned down; she had been looking at me the whole game while I wondered why I wasn't good enough anymore. But when I chose Tali the game state altered and the picture was face down - simply incredible, such a small thing. At



Jack



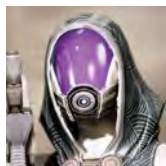
Kelly



Liara



Miranda



Tali

some point I will remember that I am only playing a game and none of this is real, and I'll also stop trying to think about it when I'm not playing it. I've got *Mass Effect 3* ready to play but I need to finish *ME2* and this deadline and so on...

Oh, the thing that hadn't happened before was me caring about something I did in a game. I'm still wondering if I did the right thing.

14 YEARS...

It's our birthday issue. I'm not really sure what to say after 14 years of doing this so I'll end it here. The redesign is all done and dusted and I must say a huge thanks to Chris for putting in all those extra hours. From experience I know it's not easy. Please let us know what you think. In this issue we have three mega competitions and they're all linked to www.facebook.com/NAGMagazine. Our plan is to increase our exposure and for that you could win stuff. Go do the right thing; I'm sure you'll agree those prizes are epic.

XCOM: THE PROTOTYPE OF MAX PAYNE

Thanks must go out this issue to the guys and girls at Firaxis, Rockstar, Radical Entertainment, Activision and 2K Games and of course Megarom. They all had a hand in making the *Prototype 2* cover feature happen as well as our big previews on *Max Payne 3* and *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*. There's just no better way to get the skinny on an upcoming game than going on an airplane somewhere far and playing it yourself. Enjoy the articles and know that they took a little more blood, sweat and tears to get than normal.

PERKY NANA

This is a quest for all you NAG readers (and you can win a free subscription for a year). Seeing that the clowns over at Cadbury aren't replying to mail at info@cadbury.co.za I thought I'd ask our readers to help me. I'm looking for any shop that sells the Perky Nana. I remember this from my youth but can't find it anywhere. The first reader to mail me with a confirmed location gets the subscription. Go!

Have a fun one and send us love and happy thoughts.

RedTide
Editor





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LETTERS@NAG.CO.ZA

INBOX

LETTER OF THE MONTH APRIL 2012

From: Danielle
Subject: NAG:
Neurotic Addicted Gamers

So on the last Thursday of every month the most epic magazine is available. As I enter the shop my stomach tightens in anticipation. My breath catches as I spot NAG on the shelf, all glossy and beautifully packaged. My fingers tingle as I gently pick it up and take it to the cashier. After paying for it I hurry home. As soon as I get home I sit down and gently remove it from the package. The smooth surface is cold to the touch, and as I run my fingertips over the title 'NAG', time stops and nothing exists except me, and NAG <3. My heart beats

faster as I open the pages and carefully look through. Each word is like food to the soul. Every bit of information absorbed and stored for future use. I am left feeling exhilarated as I close the magazine and place it gently back into the package... one empty month until the next Thursday. On the top of my 2 year collection it goes. :D I love NAG! I am truly, über addicted... Thank you for the God like magazine! Peace. :)

Because it's our birthday and you make us feel special, have a cool prize. Please note that saying nice things about us doesn't always mean you get a prize. Ed.

*Disclaimer: Most of the letters sent to this fine publication are printed more or less verbatim (that means we don't edit or fix them for you slow kids at the back), so ignore any spelling or grammatical errors. It's not us... it's you.



LETTER OF THE MONTH

The 'Letter of the Month' prize is sponsored by the good folks at Megarom. The winner receives two games for coming up with the most inspired bit of wisdom of cleverness. Note: You can't change the games or the platform they come on.

HARD TECHNICAL STUFF

Land mail: P.O. Box 237, Olivedale, 2158

Better mail: letters@nag.co.za

Important: Include your details when mailing us or you'll never get your prize if you win...

From: Andreas
Subject: Gimmi.k

Griß euch allerweil, my fellow NAG compatriots. The world is in disarray, Japan is fulfilling their end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it-campaign (and let's face it, expectation - world domination) by creating technology America could only dream of (at least that is what you're led to believe), and this, decades before anyone even knew about it, or it became legal. General Sergeant - Says turned out to be one of those technological advancements, an advanced AI robot (in this case), so security shot him up while the president and his 'subjects' hosted a telco-party with the mad scientist, and to top it off, there are now hundreds of AI's roaming the streets of America... again, what you are led to believe... very exciting... yes, Binary Domain, how captivating. The clip (on the March NAG Cover DVD) would easily make a movie intro, and, with the right staff, probably be a big hit... sound familiar? We have our James Cameron's, Steven Spielberg's, George Lucas' and the like, and their respective counterparts in the gaming industry, leaving their mark, just like 20th Century Fox to Ubisoft, or sometimes even both, "LucasArts". The sad reality, though, is the, now, blurry line between the two entertainment mediums. Media does not commercialise gaming anymore, gaming, now, actually sets to commercialise their own media for the 'general' public!

Anyone remember those "Got Milk?" ads? (Beat up woman comes on screen crying, saying something pertaining to drugs and her husband beating her, followed by a narrative whispering "Got Milk?") Absolutely pointless advertising scheme, but it got people thinking about, and, remembering it, so, in retrospect, it accomplished its goal. And, of course, it was obvious that the ad referred to milk.

Now sure, they show you some flashy "in-game" clip that gets the crowd all excited, but, what on earth IS the game actually? An FPS/3PS, RPG, hell, even another Command and Conquer RTS or Sims-like Simulation? There is zero indication, so, what (or rather, how) have they achieved anything but "remembering that name"? This, and many more titles, advertise as though there is only one genre (like with movies, where "actual footage" indicates from which perspective it will be shot), and leave the rest to namesake and expectation.

Thus, we are (voluntarily, of course) forced to rely on our NAG-heroes to counteract this media gimmick by publishing previews, and, yes, reviews no-less (unless, of course, you're in on this scheme, and take advantage so you can boast more magazine sales!!!). NAG, keep the flares burning.

Well I'm glad someone finally said it, whatever it is you're trying to say. This

letter is only here as an example of how not to write a letter. I read it twice and I'm still not sure what's going on. No matter, as long as I can help Andreas get all of this off his chest then I'm happy. Ed.

From: Bryan
Subject: Thanks

First to explain the situation, when I bought your February issue of NAG and only when I got home I was shocked to find that the NAG DVD had no protective sleeve, so I'm just emailing you guys to say thanks for sending me another protective sleeve in your March issue.

No problem. I'm glad someone actually [a.] reads the magazine and [b.] figured out what the sleeve was for. Some people sent me mail asking about the extra sleeve, one lady called because her son thought he won something and the best use so far: some guy folded up his survey and stuck it in the plastic DVD pouch and mailed it to us like that. :) Ed

From: Desmond
Subject: So much going on...

Once again the year has kicked off with some amazing stuff this year. Mass Effect 3, Assassins Creed 3, Max Payne 3 what is this year? The year of trilogies and the ending of good IP's but I guessed Halo already been on 3 it's on to 4 now. So enough with the jibber jabber and let me get into my e-mail, which is about

nothing and yet about everything. So for the normal praises (as if this hasn't been done before) great mag guys once again I am impressed. To the team you guys really do an excellent job so big ups to all. The price increase I heartily welcome (that's only because I'm getting and increase this year) but to the editor thanks for being straight up. It makes me feel so much better knowing that I pay for your lifestyle and hopefully you will be enjoying the bonus. The extra DVD (already completed my survey and e-mailed it... yes I did) why are we still running around this idea. This is something that is going on for too long now. So let's just do it (sorry Nike). Have a nice day until my next e-mail. Maybe I'll have something that will make me win letter of the month.

Let's get through all the survey entries and see what's what. An extra DVD and big price increase isn't something we can enter into lightly. We have to be 1000% sure before doing something like that. Ed.

From: Dirk
Subject: Racing games

Here I sit and read your great mag and I wonder what happened to racing games like street legal and gearhead garage? We only get racing games for PC from EA games and Eden games etc. The racing game world was taken by storm with the Need for Speed: Underground series and Most Wanted and from there on it's a copy & paste game world, I mean the NFS games are the same just new graphics and a new map. Same with Test Drive Unlimited 2, It's the same as the first game just removed the bikes and added a new map with SUVs and wreck cars and a new gameplay element like walking around your own house. I think you might ask me what do I think will be a great racing game [not really but go ahead anyway, Ed] and I would say If they want to create a good game take Street Legal and Test Drive and combine the two, just think of it you buy a fancy car you take it home and park it in your garage and start stripping her down manually and fitting upgrade parts yourself and it should have the game physics and damage engine of the Flatout series. All I'm saying is great racing games are almost dead we need something new and challenging something that can be called Skyrim of the racing world.

You are missing a few games in your list there, what about Need for Speed: Shift and the sequel, The DiRT games, Grid and how about the F1 games. All on PC and all rather good last time I checked. The whole car kits and upgrading thing happened a while ago – a bit like a fad and never really took off in a big way (in the gaming world) although some of the games back

ON THE FORUMS

Gamers are welcome. Zombies are welcome. Vampires you are invited. Trolls keep out. Everyone else – take a number: www.nag.co.za/forums/

Q: Tell us which past issue of NAG was your favourite.

"The Red Dead Redemption cover for sure. Simply because I'm just a massive fanboy of Rockstar games. I also have a special connection to the MGS3 cover as it was my first ever NAG and I must have read it close to 50 times."

echo



"Nostalgic Choice: July 1999, my first issue with Dungeon Keeper/Star Wars on the front, which I happened to purchase twice for reasons unknown to this day."

nukehead

"I've always loved the May 2008 issue for LEGO Indiana Jones. But the recent Lollipop Chainsaw cover is also great because neon pink."

Mikit0707

"Tarryn's Dead Space review remains the greatest style of review (and most entertaining) that I have ever read, and my favourite of all the things I've seen in NAG."

CaViE



then were amazing. Try doing a little research online and you'll be amazed at what's out there. Ed.

From: Floris
Subject: Where can I find the damn magazine?

First up, great magazine... Is what I would say if I was able to read it the last three months?! I found the February NAG on the 25th of February which is weird seeing as the March version should have already been out on the 23 of February. When I say I found the NAG that's an understatement I had to go to an ass load of stores who rejected me. Why is this happening? Why is NAG suddenly an endangered species. I know what it is its total bullshit and totally inexcusable and it won't help that you talk trash to me editor because I probably don't have next month's issue. So LOL you are dumb. I'm just kidding about the dumb thing but please look into this problem so I can get my fix and don't have to walk into the

NAG building with an axe and mutilate every one of you including Tarryn.

Sorry for the aggravation. For the January and February issues we did have some problems with distribution because our old distribution company closed down unexpectedly. The new company is still finding its feet and the sweet spot for NAG – it's not like every other publication. We're really sorry if you missed the issue – it is online at www.zinio.com as an alternative or we can send you one (while stocks last) for a nominal fee. This probably won't happen again. Ed.

From: Hans
Subject: Love the NAG!

When I started out in gaming, just after the release of the PS2, I would sometimes buy games only to realise that they were utter crap – wasting time and money. Then NAG came to my rescue and I only bought quality games. Thanks NAG! But

(there is always a "butt") sometimes NAG ignores certain important games, even if they sold millions worldwide (think for example JRPGs). But I miss turning the crisp pages of the newest NAG magazine. Gaming magazines' sales will drop as people migrate to online websites that aggregates reviews of games for free. Please NAG, be true to your name, New Age Gaming, and write reviews for all genres. Love the NAG!

As a rule we only review games available in South Africa – same with the hardware. The kind of games you're talking about only come to us occasionally and without much support locally. We also have space considerations to think about. An aggregated review score system is a fairly decent way of seeing what's good or rubbish at a glance but it lacks personality and doesn't tell you why something is getting a particular good or bad score. A game might score under 50 but let's say you don't mind the flaws the reviewers had problems with... you'd never know this and might miss something good. Ed.

From: Marc

Subject: Games of yonder

I recently had a discussion with some friends about our favourite games of all time, and I discovered something quite interesting. That despite the incredible graphics of games today, combined with open-ended stories, awesome soundtracks and great playability, we all chose our favourite games from our childhood, whether it be Gran Turismo 2, Jak and Daxter or Syndicate. So even though we have the most current games available to us, I never find myself coming home desperately needing to play an Xbox game, however I do find myself reminiscing about the joys I had playing games on a PlayStation 1. We found that we would much rather revisit those games which we held dear years ago, compared to any game on current consoles. Maybe it's just me, but I just don't find games as fun, or as absorbing, as I did when I played the original Need for Speed or Spyro as a child, compared to their sequels today. Does anyone else agree?

This is because you're a different person now. That little kid has grown up, gotten hurt, failed and succeeded, been in love and out, seen new things and old, developed different priorities, become jaded, had a child of their own and so on. There's no chance of recapturing that innocence or the time and patience to spend the WHOLE of Saturday playing Lemmings with your mates. Nostalgia is best protected and left in the past. Try and recapture your inner child by not



This is the best bit of fan created artwork we received at NAG this month. If you insert, use or create a piece of gaming artwork incorporating the NAG logo you might also end up here for your three lines of fame. Just don't go and stick the NAG logo on a picture and send it in because that is dumb and dumb people don't win things.

Theo McPherson, "Since my last fan art got lost and ended up on the October Ed's Note page (who knows how it got itself up there) – I decided to try again and this is the result."

Monthly prize sponsored by Phoenix Software

looking at the world so critically and pretending for a second that you can one day be a spaceman or journey to the centre of the Earth and find a dinosaur. Ed.

From: Branden

Subject: A Dynasty Born

From a World War II first-person shooter to a globe-conquering entertainment juggernaut in less than ten years, Call of Duty's rise to dominance has been so swift and brutal that it can only be described as a superpower in the entertainment industry. It has transcended a game and become an activity for millions of people who meet millions more, all while trying to kill each other.

I ask you this is there a war game series out there with a greater reach than Call of Duty of which the answer will always be no. The world's most popular shooter has managed to cover 77 years of human conflict in its short nine year existence – from the historical to the fantastical – one things always for sure CoD does warfare with a style like no other.

2003 the year it all started and gamers first got to feel the true extent of war. Call of Duty 1 let people experience World War II through the eyes of the soldier on the frontlines of Russia and France. This game changed the face of the gaming industry and virtually killed off their Medal of Honour rivals. This was to be a dawn of a new time.

The second coming was truly on hand with the release of Call of Duty 2 in 2005. This was the first CoD to touchdown on consoles. In its release it became the standout launch title as CoD usually does and became famous for dumping the healthpacks of its

THE SHORTS

Extracts of n00b from NAG letters

"The way you combine knowledge, fact, and a good measure of pure insanity into one magazine while tolerating NOOBS and Know it all's makes me want you guys KNIGHTED"
- Josh

"I bought games as regularly as I can and even studied harder as I was rewarded a game and a KFC meal for a good report."
- Simoné

"I think I might just marry her. Hey, she'll probably renew the subscription then!"
- Michael

"While you're reminiscing of the day your dad had you on he's lap warning you about guys like me giving you free alcohol."
- Iwan

older namesake and introduces the series to regenerating health.

Activision was quick to release their next title just one year later with CoD 3. A massive leap forward was made with the cinematics as they were influenced heavily by Saving Private Ryan and Band of Brothers. CoD 3 was also the first to introduce a female character, Isabelle Dufontaine who would go on to die in the later part of the game.

2007 would be a watershed year with the fourth iteration of the franchise famously ditching the World War II theme and relocated to a modern setting. Call of Duty 4 Modern Warfare became famous for its insane plot twists as it showed players they weren't afraid to detonate nukes of kill lead characters, sgt. Jackson and Gaz to name a few.

From 2007 the CoD franchise would continue to expand four more times up and till now. In the years to follow we would see zombies galore, Russian airport massacres, a dictatorship rise, betrayals, executions, brain washings, JFK die supposedly, along with Castro to the death of a hero Soap Mactavish and the death of a villain Makarov.

The greatest thing about this series is that it always goes above and beyond, yes, the call of duty to be the most entertaining and exciting game out there. I can only imagine what future installments might hold in-store for us and for this CoD we salute you.

I wrote this as an essay for school and my english teacher only gave me 70% so help me out and publish this in your fine magazine so i can "stick it to the man" so to speak and prove her wrong.

Consider it stuck, Ed.



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I, Gamer

A three-headed monkey and two sides of nostalgia, please

Tim Schafer! You've surely heard of him. He's just had millions of dollars thrown at him over Kickstarter, but he's also been behind amazing games like: *The Secret of Monkey Island*, *Full Throttle*, *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge*, the list goes on. These are the titles that got me utterly hooked on games when I was younger. While I was growing up, the works of Tim Schafer, Ron Gilbert and Dave Grossman kept me captivated by the point-and-click adventure genre. In fact, *The Secret of Monkey Island* was the first original, boxed game I ever owned.

When I was young, my dad and I had this deal whereby whenever he'd borrow my PC for work purposes (I had my own PC from about the age eight – very spoiled), I'd be compensated by him buying me a new game. My dad's business required numerous PCs for various projects and consequently, as certain projects would begin, my PC would be snaffled up by the greedy jaws of his company. It was equal parts excitement and dejection as I'd face weeks and weeks without a PC, but I'd always know that a new game would be waiting at the end.

The first time my dad struck this deal with me, I remember entering into it somewhat reluctantly. At that point it was all about *Quest for Glory*, and without a PC, how was I going to get my fix? Not that I ever got anywhere in that game; I was too young (or I had way too short an attention span) to figure out what to do. I vaguely recall playing *Quest for Glory* for the last time prior to my PC being whisked away. When my PC returned, it did so with a copy of *The Secret of Monkey Island* – code wheels, 5.25 inch floppy disks and all. Guybrush's first adventure would be my introduction to the wholly accessible point-and-click input method, and my new obsession with the genre. Text parser-based adventures would be dead to me.

I sank hours into *The Secret of Monkey Island*. I'd get to a certain point, get stuck and start all over again. I was young so it didn't matter that I'd played the same sequences dozens of times; I didn't have that tenacious itch for something new in a game. I was completely enthralled despite being stranded on Méléé Island for months. I suppose, in fairness, adventure games took longer to get through because there were no walkthroughs online; possibly because "online" back then wasn't the "online" it is now.

My eventual victory with *The Secret of Monkey Island* would only come years later, but my infatuation with the genre was firmly entrenched. It led to other adventure games: *Indiana Jones and the Fate of Atlantis*, *ECO Quest*, *Pepper's Adventures in Time* and the later *Space Quest* games, but I have no hesitation in pointing towards *The Secret of Monkey Island* as the start of it all.

With all this in mind, it's pretty obvious that I'm stupidly excited about Tim Schafer's recent success with Kickstarter. The thought of him producing an old-school point-and-click adventure game is a nostalgic gift from gaming heaven. It's going to be amazing! There's no chance it could suck in any way! Of course the millions of dollars pledged over Kickstarter cannot possibly skew expectations. It'll never be a flop. Could it? Oh God, what if it sucks...

- Miklós Szecsei

A typical example of a fire mage.



DOTA 2 confirms LAN support and prepares for battle

Valve's highly anticipated *DOTA 2* is set for release some time this year, and the studio recently made an announcement that should crank up every potentially interested gamer's hype-o-meter by at least 20%: *DOTA 2* will support LAN play. While the e-sports scene has managed to make do with online-only multiplayer titles like *StarCraft II* thanks to some fancy network traffic management tricks, the confirmation that *DOTA 2* will be playable offline is sure to strike a chord with LANners throughout the world and, most notably, here at home. LANs in South Africa are still the best place to compete in e-sports tournaments due to reduced latency and (generally) fewer technical hiccups. Certainly, gamers at this year's rAge will ensure that *DOTA 2* is one of the most played titles there if the game is released in time.

In other *DOTA 2* news, a law suit from November 2011 has come to light in which Blizzard challenges Valve's use of the game title,

citing that Blizzard's long-running association with the *DOTA* name entitles the company to formally oppose Valve's registration of the title. However, Blizzard hasn't registered the *DOTA* (or *DotA/Dota*) brand itself, but explains that it has been a part of the distribution of the map through Battle.Net and that entitles them to some form of control over the brand. The company also claims that, since the Ancients in "Defense of the Ancients" refers to its own intellectual property, it has a strong claim here.

What's interesting about the court case is that Blizzard is not claiming ownership over *DotA/DOTA* – it's only opposed to Valve doing so. Should Blizzard win this case, it could speak volumes for the future of mod-based game content and who exactly owns these mods. You can bet that any company that ships game-modding tools with its games will pay close attention to the outcome of this case, and may adjust their respective EULAs to include a content ownership rights waiver.

How to make a million in 24 hours



Many publishers have got it into their collective heads that classic adventure games are a lost cause. That's the reason why we have so few these days, despite the clamouring of thousands of gamers world-wide. That's all about to change, however, with the combination of clever marketing, an awesome idea and two of the most respected individuals in the adventure games business

Tim Schafer and Ron Gilbert of Double Fine Productions have been messing around with all sorts of not-exactly-what-the-public-wants games since their days at LucasArts, where they worked on a number of classic adventure titles including *Monkey Island*. The two went their own ways to separately develop games including *Psychonauts*, *DeathSpank*, *Brütal Legend* and *Penny Arcade Adventures*, and now they're back, ready to get stuck into the development of a "proper" classic point-and-click adventure game. But they needed money.

In comes Kickstarter, a collaborative funding website that gives backers access to projects in search of funding. Double Fine went out looking to raise \$400,000 over a period of 33 days. Within 24 hours they had over \$1 million. At the end of the countdown, they had raised over \$3.3 million from more than 87,000 individual backers, including *Minecraft* creator Markus Persson who donated \$100,000. The unparalleled success of this funding initiative means that the game will be developed for multiple platforms, will be translated into multiple languages and will be fully voiced in English. That's all we know for now, and more details will be made available over the course of development, which is set to conclude at the end of this year.

SOMETHING IS ON THE HORIZON FOR COD ELITE

PC gamers who have been holding out on a release of Activision's *Call of Duty Elite* service could either be waiting for a lot longer, or will get their wishes fulfilled soon – it all depends on the development of the next iteration of the service which is due for release alongside the next *Call of Duty*.

It turns out that the *Elite* developers are already hard at work on *Elite 2.0*, which will feature "several innovative features being developed to work hand-in-hand with our new *Call of Duty* release," according to the publisher. During the same announcement, Activision also confirmed that there are additional features for the existing service that are set for release within the month of April. What exactly those features are, we're not sure, but a PC release isn't entirely unlikely. If it doesn't happen then, we can only hope that *Elite 2.0* will include support for the neglected platform.

Let's look at some *Darkstalkers 4* rumours!

Every once in a while, you'll spot legions of fighting fans out there openly longing for a new title in the *Darkstalkers* franchise. It's understandable, considering the series hasn't received a proper sequel since *Darkstalkers 3* back in 1998. Those fans will be happy to learn that there's a rumour going around that Capcom might be working on *Darkstalkers 4*. Yoshinori Ono, producer/project manager on *Street Fighter IV*, is supposedly helping the project, which is allegedly built on a modified version of the *Street Fighter X Tekken* engine. If

this rumour turns out to be true, we'd not be too surprised – Capcom has been reviving and remaking so many of their fighting franchises recently that a new *Darkstalkers* does not seem unlikely. Late last year, Capcom rekindled fan interest by re-releasing the original *Darkstalkers* on PSN, and a recent ESRB rating alludes to a release of *Darkstalkers 3* on PSN as well. Then there's the curious registering of a new *Darkstalkers* trademark in Europe. We'd say these signs all point to the fact that something is possibly happening involving *Darkstalkers*.



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The Game Stalker



Hi I'm Pippa...

Most of us have some experience with someone that has had a problem with addiction. But have we ever stepped back and examined ourselves? Asked, "has my habit gotten out of control?" In these times of need, when temptation looms at every turn, we should take the opportunity to revert back to the tried and tested 12 steps.

Well, kinda. With just a little (ok, a lot) of modification...

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over our addiction – that our saves had become unmanageable. Delete all unnecessary save games! This is the first step towards cleaning up your habit.

Step 2: Came to believe that when the power comes back on, we are restored to sanity. Power outages happen at the WORST times! When you've just finished a big boss battle that you'd been at for hours and just before you reach that check point...

Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our multiple lives over to the care of the person who gives us the missions. Without whom we would have no direction in any game. There is always someone telling you who to talk to and where to go... Otherwise we'd wander about aimlessly... like *The Sims*...

Step 4: Fearlessly searched our inventory. I know it's here somewhere. I remember picking up that +90 Amazing Elven Crafted Armor (Fine) when I completed that random mission a few days ago...

Step 5: Admitted to another gamer that maybe, just maybe, ok fine you won that round but I'm gonna whip your ass the next time. You know it's happened.

Step 6: Were entirely ready to level up and remove any defects in our character. The best part about levelling up is new skills. Especially ones that don't disappoint and tend to make you think "Phwoooooaaarrrrr!"

Step 7: Demanded the relevant in-game deity to give us blessings. You know, to make us stronger, regenerate health faster and so on...

Step 8: Made a list of all games we had abandoned, and became willing to revisit them all. There's always the game that makes you feel guilty because you meant to finish it... honestly!

Step 9: Made direct amends to NPCs wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. Except of course that's not entirely true, because often we have to injure NPCs. Quite directly. With a sword. Or even a sharp stick. We wouldn't win otherwise. But you can feel bad about it briefly if you want to.

Step 10: Continued to look through other people's inventory and when we wanted stuff, promptly looted it. This is always the battle, what to take from random chests...

Step 11: Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our skills, attempting to decide which one would be the best to assign our points to. The real skill of course is in assigning it to something that will in the long term yield great results as opposed to instant gratification that looks flashy but isn't effective. Fireballs for instance.

Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other gamers, and to practice these principles in our RL. Although making sure we rifle through other people's things probably isn't the best way to win friends and influence people...

Keep coming back it works if you work it so work it you're worth it!

- Pippa Tshabalala

"I don't think [adventure games] ever died. I think today adventure games are as popular as they were back when *Monkey Island* came out. The problem is that all these other games have become a lot *more* popular."

-Ron Gilbert, co-creator of the *Monkey Island* series



It's reboot time!

SimCity is back and looking good

While *Cities XL* does a decent job at filling the city management gap that's been left wide open since the release of *SimCity 4* in 2003, gamers who prefer this genre done the Maxis way have been strapped for entertainment. Now, EA has confirmed that a new game in the series is in development – the simply-titled *SimCity* – with a release date of TBA 2013 for PC only.

This new *SimCity* adds a number of new features, some of which may have been gently liberated from the *Cities* series. Players can run multiple cities that can specialise in various industries and share their goods and services amongst each other. These specialist cities will take on a particular look and feel, so you can create university towns, industrial cities, or casino resorts that light up at night.

Another new feature is the inclusion of multiplayer support for up to 16 players. Multiplayer regions will feature multiple cities operating

simultaneously – affecting other cities directly by helping them in emergency situations, spreading their smog over neighbouring towns, or simply providing excess electrical power. Multiplayer regions can also work together to perform great feats and complete global challenges like reducing total population or launching shuttles into space.

SimCity will make use of what Maxis calls their GlassBox Engine, which simulates your city right down to the individual level. Sims will go about their business in a realistic manner – travelling between work and home and even taking some time to perform leisure activities or do some shopping. All of these interactions will impact your city and its supply of various resources. Zones will make a return but Maxis is promising revamped road and zoning tools to allow for curved paths. If it's anything like *Cities XL 2012*'s impressive toolset (but hopefully less buggy), we'll be happy.



All for one

Game development is becoming more expensive every year. With average development budgets running into the tens of millions of dollars – and sometimes getting as high as \$100 million – it's important for publishers to keep a close eye on their studios or face the unfortunate task of downsizing or even closing those that run too costly. In this age of rampant studio closures, it's good to see that Namco Bandai is taking pro-active measures to ensure that their studios remain cost-effective, by combining the staff of a number of their studios into a single, massive entity, much like what Ubisoft, Capcom and EA have done.

The studio, which is to be simply named Namco Bandai Studio, will include the teams from *Soul Calibur*, *Ace Combat*, *Tekken*, *Pac-Man*, *Naruto*, *Gundam*, the *Tales* series, and many others. This move obviously cuts down on administrative personnel, but will allow for a streamlined development process and, given the publisher's history of cross-game collaboration, could allow for a number of interesting new developments within the studio. It'll also provide a greater range of specialised personnel to be utilised by those studios previously too small to afford such staff, which could make for some interesting new IP.

The move will take place in April and isn't expected to affect any titles currently in development.

DARK ENERGY DIGITAL'S WATERY GRAVE

It's always a sad day when developers are forced to close their doors, but this particular studio – *Hydrophobia* creators Dark Energy Digital – should have seen this coming.

Hydrophobia was a generally bad game; it had a few good things going for it, but for the most part, its Metacritic average score of 59 is deserved, even a little generous. If that wasn't enough to damage the studio's reputation, a mountain of PR boos that include accusing certain reviewers of not even playing the game only served to further ruin their chances of making a comeback.

Unsurprisingly, DED has now entered administration. Staff members will be made redundant, and many are unsure if they'll even be paid wages still owed to them. The studio's intellectual property will be sold to those willing to pay (the Hydro Engine should interest a few parties, no doubt), and that'll be the last we hear of the company.



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The Indie Investigator



Gee dee cee crash course

As I write this, I'm sitting somewhere in San Francisco with a bunch of other game developers and a session of Thunderstone sprawled across a table. A hamburger and some peanut M&M's are at hand, ready to be devoured as I shoo away fellow conference-goers and figure out what to write about this year's GDC.

The annual Game Developers Conference, for those not in the know, is one of the hottest events on the industry's calendar. Its importance pretty much entails a yearly mention of some form in my columns — while many people may know of the event's significance and keep track of it well enough on their own, there are always new devs out there who come in with fresh eyes and fresh minds.

GDC is one huge-ass conference. Being an amalgamation of many smaller festivals (including the Indie Games Summit and Game Developers Choice awards), those who are drawn to this event are guaranteed engagement with marketers, designers, coders, indies, publishers and loads of other people who are in the business of producing games. Or, in non-comma-separated terms: everyone you could possibly want to meet. Ever.

There's an amazing amount to see and do, but unfortunately the number of interested readers who'll actually get to see this event is quite low (this year, we had a humble platoon of about seven South Africans sallying forth). Attending the conference is no mean task if you're sitting across the globe, which means that it's no easy task trying to figure out something relevant to discuss about it. Fortunately, there actually are some interesting pieces of info available to those who cannot attend.

By the time you read this, the results of the 2012 Indie Games Festival (www.igf.com/ozfinalists.html) will have long ago been announced at the conference's prize giving event. A quick look at the finalists will give you a convenient list of up-and-coming quality indie titles, a smattering of which are already available and even free to play. The student showcase also provides some fine examples of games created by people working on projects for their institutions, using limited time and resources to craft wondrous, oft-experimental experiences.

Lesser-known to the game development community, however, is the existence of the GDC Vault (www.gdcvault.com/free), an archive of all the talks, panels and slideshows from previous conferences that allow the full educational experience to reach anyone with the time and inclination to have a look. Although a lot of content is barred to non-paying users, the free material can provide a lot on its own — a tantalising window into the community experience of the conference proper.

For more information on GDC and related events, follow Gamasutra (www.gamasutra.com) and its sister publications. They usually cover the conference extensively and spend the rest of the year being an excellent industry news source.

You can also chat to local companies and individuals who have visited GDC in the past: a large group of Cape Town developers attended the 2012 event, including members of QCF Design (www.qcfdesign.com) and Free Lives (www.freelives.net). Get in contact with us to find out about the monthly community meet ups in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

- Rodain Joubert

Un-fun times in the World of Warcraft

Blizzard's long-running, money-printing MMO *World of Warcraft* continues to play host to a steady decline in subscriber numbers; and it's now resulted in massive staff layoffs. The last quarter saw subscriber numbers drop down to 10.2 million (which is still a ridiculous number), down from the 12-million strong that the game was enjoying back in 2010.

The drop in subscribers led Blizzard to layoff approximately 12 percent of its employees, which equates to 600 people with a lot of newfound free time — and it'd be awesomely ironic if they used it all to pump more time into their WoW characters. Blizzard has stated that the majority of affected staff are in customer service and support roles, with "only" around 60 actual developers getting the axe. Regardless, Blizzard has reassured fans that this will not alter any release or development schedules. Here's what Blizzard CEO Mike Morhaime had to say about it all:

"Over the last several years, we've grown our organisation tremendously and made large investments in our infrastructure

in order to better serve our global community. However, as Blizzard and the industry have evolved we've also had to make some difficult decisions in order to address the changing needs of our company. Knowing that, it still does not make letting go of some of our team members any easier. We're grateful to have had the opportunity to work with the people impacted by today's announcement, we're proud of the contributions they made here at Blizzard, and we wish them well."

We wish all the best to those who suddenly find themselves unemployed. Seemingly in a bid to up subscriber numbers, Blizzard have begun issuing rewards to players who can convince their friends and former *WoW* players to return to the lands of Azeroth. Do so, and you'll get a special mount: either a Spectral Wind Rider, or a Spectral Gryphon, provided the referred friend opts to subscribe for 30 days. Meanwhile, the returning friend gets one character instantly bumped to level 80, a free upgrade to *WoW: Cataclysm*, a free character transfer to the referring player's faction/realms and seven days of free game time.

Three new games from Paradox incoming

Paradox Interactive have announced a trio of upcoming games that we can giddily look forward to from them. The first, *The Showdown Effect*, is a joint effort between Pixeldiet Entertainment and Arrowhead Game Studios — the latter are the folks behind friendship-destroying *Magicka*. Set in Neo Tokyo in the year 2027, it's described as "a 2.5D multiplayer action game in which players will be participating in death-matches to gain glory and fame." Arrowhead say that they're following the principle of "more is

more," applying it to the weapons, characters, levels and game modes.

Dungeonland is in development at Brazil-based Critical Studio. In it, three players control heroes adventuring through a twisted theme park, while a fourth controls the Dungeon Master, whose goal it is to use all the tools at his/her disposal (traps and such) to stop the heroes from progressing. Meanwhile, *Red Frontier* is a competitive RTS in the works over at Zeal Game Studio. It boasts extensive unit customisation, commander development and more.

Lionhead reveals Fable Heroes



In a very unexpected move, developer Lionhead Studios has unveiled *Fable Heroes*, a 4-player brawler set in the world of Albion. While the intellectual property and setting will be familiar, the art direction is definitely not, with *Fable Heroes* taking

on a rather lovely cartoon style. Each of the player characters have been modelled after the Hero Dolls you had to find in the *Fable* RPG series. You'll be able to play as Hero Doll versions of Hammer, Garth, Reaver and The Hero, who resembles your kingly character from *Fable III*. There'll be loads of familiar enemies including trolls, Hobbes and Hollow Men.

The game looks like a typical side-scrolling brawler with plenty of enemies, power-ups and coins to collect in order to unlock new items. *Fable Heroes* will also allow you to work towards unlocks for the upcoming Kinect game *Fable: The Journey*.

According to the listing on Xbox.com, *Fable Heroes* will feature both offline and online co-op for up to four people. No release date has been set as yet, but the game will be hitting Xbox LIVE Arcade at some point.

Ever-evolving Battlefield

How's everybody enjoying *Battlefield 3*? Still playing it? We are. There's no other multiplayer offering quite like it. Over the course of this year, it's set to expand thrice more with themed expansion packs. Promising "fresh and innovative gameplay, new modes, unique environments and more ways to wage all-out-war on the battlefield," the three expansions are dubbed *Close Quarters*, *Armored Kill* and *End Game*.

Close Quarters is due in June, focusing specifically on infantry-only battles. Tighter level design and vertical gameplay complement new weapons, assignments and dog tags. *Armored Kill* follows close behind, specialising in vehicular exploits. New vehicles, including tanks, ATVs, mobile artillery and more can be used on huge maps, promising the inclusion of the "biggest map in *Battlefield* history" – which ought to be incredible. Finally, *End Game* will bring even more *Battlefield* goodness: but the intricate details of said additional goodness are being kept under lock and key for now. You'll know more when we do.

In other *Battlefield 3* news, DICE CEO Karl-Magnus Troedsson has announced that customisable servers will become available for console players in the future. "All active players out there playing on consoles today will now have the opportunity to customize their servers and set them up exactly how they want them to play," he said. "Now this is a feature that in *Battlefield* on PC we've had for some time, but it's an absolute first on console. So, we're pretty excited about this."

RUMOUR: THERE'LL BE NO DISC DRIVE IN THE NEXT XBOX CONSOLE

Trade website MCV has claimed to have exclusive information regarding the next Xbox console.

According to them, there will be no optical disc drive in Microsoft's Xbox 360 successor, which has been codenamed "Durango". Instead of a DVD or Blu-ray drive, MCV claims that the next Xbox will make use of an "interchangeable solid-state card storage" device instead. It's not clear whether this new format will be a proprietary format or one based off existing sold-state storage mediums such as SD cards.

On top of this rumour, MCV claims that the next Xbox will definitely be out on shelves by 2013. They also maintain that an E3 2012 reveal is still very probable.

Shortly after MCV published these rumours, Microsoft issued a response that stated the following: "Xbox 360 has found new ways to extend its lifecycle like introducing the world to controller-free experiences with Kinect and re-inventing the console with a new dashboard and new entertainment content partnerships. We are always thinking about what is next for our platform and how to continue to defy the lifecycle convention. Beyond that we do not comment on rumours or speculation."

Read into that what you will. We're certain that opinion would be divided when it comes to the idea of the next Xbox having no optical drive.



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Miktar's Meanderings



Neuroscience and perception

The following is paraphrased from an actual review of the *Nintendo 3DS* at launch, about a year ago, found on one of the major gaming websites: "It only has a 6 hour battery life. That's unacceptable. Nintendo should be ashamed. Don't buy this."

The following is paraphrased from an actual review of the *PlayStation Vita's* recent launch, by the *same reviewer*, on the same website: "While it only has a 6 hour battery, that's not a big deal, just remember to plug it in to charge when you get home every time."

Preconceptions are powerful things. The dictionary defines preconception as "an opinion or conception formed in advance of adequate knowledge or experience, especially a prejudice or bias." If someone decides (consciously or unconsciously) beforehand that they like something, they will more readily overlook flaws in favour of the benefits or highlights. If they've decided in advance they dislike a thing, they will fixate on its negative elements and flaws, ignoring the rest.

For example, I'm sure you've seen this: a person's favourite sports team isn't terrible at what they do; they're "just having bad luck" or are "being mismanaged". Someone beating you in an online game didn't do so through skill, they were "camping" or "cheating" or "resorting to cheap gimmicks".

I've yet to meet anyone immune from preconceptions, myself included. Preconceptions seem a natural evolutionary element, even observable in most higher-functioning animals. Which shouldn't surprise anyone, unless you think humans aren't animals for some reason, like we're *special*, biologically. I have met people who think that way. Delusions are also powerful things.

Reality has very little hold on the human mind. Philosophically, reality is our *observable* existence. That with which we observe, we interpret through several layers of abstraction. What the mind *experiences*, and what the brain *perceives* through its various sensory apparatus, *aren't the same thing*. More simply, what we consider reality is a model we've continually built and refined since the day we were born (and perhaps earlier), based on the data our body gives us. It's in no way a complete model (ask any animal that can see ultraviolet or sense the Earth's magnetic field), and as Alfred Korzybski said, "the map is not the territory". [Is everyone as lost as I am about now? Ed] [Yes. Art director] [Yup. Ass. ed]

Individuals do not have absolute knowledge of reality, only a set of beliefs built up over time, about reality. It may be semantics, but such semantics are kind of important when dealing with a mind that exists in and through a semantic-driven programming language.

My separation of "mind" and "brain" is because conceptually they strike me as two different things. For simplicity, let's refer to the brain as hardware, and the mind as software. The brain is hard-coded and autonomic (genetic imperatives, imprints), while the mind "software" (created through conditioning and learning) exists entirely in that transcendental space science still has a hard time quantifying. Where exactly the two intersect, is still up for debate.

At the most basic root level, every multi-cellular organism is a single bio-survival circuit, hard-coded with a simple choice: go forward, or go back. Forward towards food/nourishment, retreat from the threat/predator. The more complex the organism, the more detailed and flexible the software running on the hardware. The more complex the software, the higher the possibility for badly-written or poorly-implemented programs. You use computers, you should know what I mean.

You expecting me to make a point? *Preconceptions*, man.

- Miktar Dracon

Rainbow 6: Patriots development team does some shuffling



Revealed just a few short months ago, *Rainbow 6: Patriots* stunned everyone with its exceptionally gritty narrative devices and mechanics. The moral grey area was prominent, even going so far as forcing players to decide whether sacrificing civilian lives was worth it for the greater good. It's affectingly dark stuff – and it might've been a bit too much for publisher Ubisoft.

A report from *Game Informer* reveals that the game's development team has seen some major restructuring, with creative director David Sears, narrative director Richard Rouse III, lead designer Philippe Therien and animation director Brent George all having left the project. Sears has been replaced by new creative director Jean-Sebastien Decant, whose recent work includes his role as creative director on *Driver: San Francisco*, as well as narrative director for *Far Cry 3*.

CEO of Ubisoft Montreal, Yannis

Mallat, assured everyone that Sears' departure was not, as was originally speculated, due to the possibly controversial storyline boasted by the game. Instead, it was a mutual decision, with Mallat stating that Ubisoft is "evolving the vision that came from David's initial input" – which, for all we know, could mean that they're stifling its morally ambiguous focus. Sears is supposedly still employed by Ubisoft Montreal, having moved on to a "major project for a major brand." Regarding the departures of the other employees, all that's been said is that they are no longer with Team Rainbow.

What this all means for the future of the title is uncertain, but *Rainbow 6: Patriots* is apparently still on track for a 2013 release and "the development team is still hard at work to deliver the next instalment of the revered Tom Clancy series and more details on the game will be revealed at a later date."

The way of the karateka

Anyone who grew up playing games from the '80s will remember the iconic *Karateka*.

Developed entirely by Jordan Mechner (who, a few years later, went on to create the original *Prince of Persia*), *Karateka* was both a marvel in terms of gameplay and technological prowess. In fact, Mechner is credited as an influence in *Wolfenstein 3D* creator John Romero's understanding of animation and graphics

programming, despite only being a few years older than Romero.

Now, Mechner, who's been in and out of game development, film and comics for the last decade, has announced that he's working on a remake of *Karateka*. He describes the game as "closer than the 2003 *POP: SOT* was to the original, side-scrolling *Prince of Persia*. But it's a more radical reinvention than, say, the 2007 XBLA *Prince of Persia Classic*."



RESIDENT EVIL: OPERATION RACCOON CITY GETS NEMESIS MODE ON 360

Capcom has announced that adopters of the Xbox 360 version of their upcoming team-based multiplayer offering, *Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City*, will be able to spend more money on launch day to gain access to a multiplayer mode menacingly titled "Nemesis Mode" – and anyone who's played *Resident Evil 3* will know where this is going.

For 320 Microsoft Points (\$4), the game's eight-player battles will be spiced up by allowing one team to control Nemesis while the other tracks down a control unit. The team in control of the hulking brute can "give the Nemesis orders to destroy the opposition." No word yet on whether the DLC will become available on other platforms, but we're sure the 360 exclusivity deal will eventually end, allowing everyone to get in on the Nemesis action.

PvP arenas dropped from Diablo III

But don't throw your toys just yet! Blizzard has decided to drop the player-versus-player arenas from upcoming *Diablo III* so as to ensure that they don't have to delay the release of the game any longer. At present, the team tinkering away at the long-in-development action RPG has decided that the PvP arenas are not up to scratch, and as such they're being removed from the game for now.

Writing on the game's official website, game director Jay Wilson said that the PvP arenas would be patched into the game at a later stage. When that patch hits, it'll bring multiple theme-based arenas, matchmaking and a set of arena achievements.

"We know a lot of you are looking forward to PvP, and we'll be focusing our post-launch efforts on making sure the arenas are as brutal, bloody, fast-paced, and awesome as we know they can be. In the meantime, we're in the process of putting the finishing touches on what we think is a truly epic campaign and co-op experience for launch."

While this might be somewhat disappointing for the more multiplayer-minded amongst you, at least it'll give you more time to develop some solid character builds while you get used to the game's new systems.

The as-yet unnamed title is in development for Xbox 360 and PS3 (with other platforms in mind), and will be released as a downloadable title only. It's set for release at some point this year. Mechner is working with a small, independent team to ensure that the game matches the "design integrity and strong artistic choices" usually associated with games such as indie hits *Braid* and *Limbo*.



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Cliffy B directs noobs to PC

GDG 2012 brought a lot of interesting industry insight from the best developers in gaming. One such piece of insight came from Epic Games' Cliff "Cliffy B" Bleszinski, who advised that anyone starting up as a developer of these things we love should start on PC before heading to other platforms. Xbox LIVE, PSN, iOS, Android, Windows Phone – these should all be avoided by start-ups.

His brief talk placed heavy emphasis on the PC (facetiously suggesting new devs use Epic's UDK to develop their titles), criticising the way Microsoft and Sony treat indie studios and cautioning that they likely won't give your game the promotion it deserves, even if you choose to eventually create games for their respective platforms once you've earned experience. He all but completely dismissed mobile platforms as well,

saying that you could eventually make the move to iOS, provided you can get touch controls to function properly with your title.

Stressing that your early games will likely be terrible, Cliffy ensured that persistence and passion would be pivotal in achieving eventual success, using Rovio as an example in that they made around 50 games before hitting the big time with *Angry Birds*. Once you've got your game made, Bleszinski advised that focus groups are a waste of time and should not be used, suggesting imagination as your ultimate marketing tool. He went so far as to suggest that tweeting him or *Minecraft* creator Markus "Notch" Persson might get you a ton of attention, because if they like your game, they'll retweet it. In closing, he offered these wise words: "Do it because you love it, but make sure you get paid."

LIONHEAD FOUNDER SEEKS GREENER PASTURES

Either the recently announced *Fable Heroes* was the last straw for Peter Molyneux or this has been brewing for some time, but the founder of Lionhead Studios has left the company as well as its owner, Microsoft. Molyneux immediately joined indie studio, 22 Cans, which was founded by former Lionhead CTO Tim Rance, and has already sat himself down in front of a PC to begin writing code. At the moment, there's no telling what the team is working on but we imagine they'll try to keep things small for now.



Don't call it The Godfather

Kalypso have announced *Omerta: City of Gangsters*, a tactical turn-based strategy game set in Atlantic City in the 1920s and focussing on organised crime. The idea is to allow you to become Don of your very own criminal empire, and it looks like it's built in the same engine that powers *Tropico 3* and *4*.

Your character in the game has just arrived in Atlantic City, and decides that a life of crime is obviously the way to go. The

world map is divided into 20 colour-coded districts, each one belonging to a rival family. As you slowly gain control of these zones, you can add new buildings to them that'll have a variety of useful functions. Erect a bar, for example, and you could hire an experienced bartender, who might overhear some useful information regarding a rival family, which you can then put to use. Your sole currency – money – can be acquired via legitimate

businesses, or more shady affairs.

When you're not busy allocating your resources and engaging in management-style fiddling, there's turn-based gunplay to be had. "The turn-based combat in *Omerta – City of Gangsters* focuses on the tactical command of 'The Boss' and his henchmen," say Kalypso. "Cover and stealth are essential parts of any shootout in the game." This one definitely sounds like it has potential.



Hacking group LulzSec brought to justice

On the 7th of June 2011, an FBI team quietly arrested a 28 year-old man in New York; his name is Hector Xavier Monsegur, although he's probably better known online as "Sabu," the leader of hacking group LulzSec. The "hacktivist" group was responsible for the spate of online attacks against companies like Sony, Nintendo and BioWare. LulzSec also hacked various financial institutions as well as the *Minecraft* login server, causing developer Mojang all sorts of issues.

During last year, LulzSec was on a campaign to show the world just how terrible online security could be. They'd regularly hack the databases of companies and expose user details to the masses. If no user accounts could be pilfered, they'd initiate DDoS attacks on servers, causing online services to be disrupted. During their month-long crusade it is estimated that the hacking collective caused billions of dollars in damages.

Since his arrest, Monsegur has been cooperating with the FBI; this cooperation culminated in the recent arrests of Monsegur's fellow hackers. The five additional arrests occurred in Ireland, London and Chicago, essentially shutting down the leadership of LulzSec.

According to FBI reports, Monsegur is an extremely talented hacker who could have by now been a multi-millionaire had he chosen to head up the network security for a major corporation. Instead, he chose to be the reason corporations have heads of security in the first place.

Guild Wars 2's console version teased

Guild Wars 2's release date is still unknown, but with a large-scale beta test scheduled to go live by time you read this, it's likely that we'll at least see the title some time during Q3 or Q4 this year, although it's been made clear that NCSoft will take into account "seasonality factors" to determine the final release window. Then there's the little matter of the console version of the game, which the publisher has claimed will not be available alongside the release of the game's native PC release, but will come sometime afterwards.

"We stated multiple times in public that we have a small team working on a console version, but that we are fully dedicated to make the most kickass game for PC," said ArenaNet's Martin Kerstein on an officially sanctioned *Guild Wars 2* message board.

It's expected that the console team will swell in numbers once the PC version of *Guild Wars 2* is done, so it's certainly possible that we'll see a release on other platforms within a year of the PC version's release.



Look & Listen

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PC

Prototype 2	April
Diablo III	May 15th
Spec Ops: The Line	June

Xbox 360

Max Payne 3	May 18th
Darksiders II	June 29th
Borderlands 2	September

PS3

Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	May 25th
Assassin's Creed III	October
Tomb Raider	November 13th

Wii

Men in Black 3: The Video Game	May 18th
The Amazing Spider-Man	June 29th
Cabela's Big Game Hunter 2012	June

3DS

Puzzler Crosswords 3D	June 8th
Funky Barn 3D	June 8th
Monster 4x4	June 8th

COUNTER-STRIKE: GO DROPS CROSS-PLATFORM

When Valve first announced *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive*, they confirmed that the game will feature cross-platform play between PC and PS3 gamers. Now, that feature has been dropped. During recent beta testing, the developers discovered just how frequently game updates would need to be delivered to the PC platform – a practice which would be virtually impossible on PS3 due to stringent and lengthy software certification processes. As a result, the two platforms have been separated "so that one doesn't hamstring the other," said Valve's Chet Faliszek.

CD Projekt RED destroys DRM

CD Projekt RED CEO Marcin Iwinski boldly declared at this year's GDC that the developer will never again use DRM (Digital Rights Management) on any of their future titles. We say "boldly" because of the estimated stats released earlier this year regarding the millions of times the developer's excellent RPG, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, was illegally downloaded by filthy pirates.

"Every subsequent game we will never use any DRM anymore, it's just overcomplicating things," said Iwinski. Iwinski then went on to explain that, on a modest budget and even with their game being so heavily pirated, *The Witcher 2* still managed to shift more than a million copies. DRM just

got in the way.

"We release the game. It's cracked in two hours; it was no time for *Witcher 2*. What really surprised me is that the pirates didn't use the GOG version, which was not protected. They took the SecuROM retail version, cracked it and said 'we cracked it' – meanwhile there's a non-secure version with a simultaneous release. You'd think the GOG version would be the one floating around."

Speaking with *Joystiq* after his presentation, Iwinski added: "DRM does not protect your game. If there are examples that it does, then people maybe should consider it, but then there are complications with legit users."

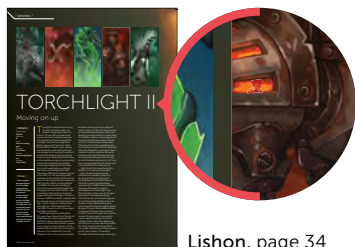
What's that noise?!



There's a whole backstory for Scarlett involving prototype game development, evil henchmen, unlikely heroes and many of everyone's favourite video game characters. It's an epic yarn that we started working on one day at the Wimpy up the road. It was going to be a comic strip leading up to rAge – an elaborate marketing plan of sorts that would be fun and exciting and actually worth reading. What happened to it you all scream? Not sure really... we had a few drawings and a page of text written but then rAge actually happened and that stole all our time away. She's still of some use today as we hide her in each issue. Perhaps one day we'll get back to that comic but for now see if you can her hiding somewhere in this month's NAG.

Send your sighting to ed@nag.co.za with the subject line "April Scarlett" and don't get it wrong or deleted it will be.

March winner



Lishon, page 34

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Caption of the month

Every month we'll choose a screenshot from a random game and write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better one. The winner will get a copy of *MUD: FIM Motocross World Championship* for Xbox 360 from Ster-Kinekor Entertainment. Send your captions to ed@nag.co.za with the subject line "April caption".



NAG's lame attempt at humour

"No, kitteh. I am your father." "Seriously? That's highly unlikely."



Last months winner

"A 'cats rule'-activist ends up on the wrong island." Joannette de Klerk

VALVE SHUTS DOWN HARDWARE RUMOURS

A short while ago, Gabe Newell remarked that developer/digital distribution leader Valve would not be against making hardware if the future demanded it. Shortly thereafter, rumours exploded onto the Internet that Valve were in fact making a console-style "Steam Box" for use with their digital distribution platform, Steam, and that it came standard with a customisable controller and mood-tracking biometric feedback systems that would measure player heart rate and galvanic skin response, which could obviously be put to use in game design in numerous ways.

Valve's marketing director Doug Lombardi quickly debunked the rumours, however, telling *Kotaku*: "We're prepping the Steam Big Picture Mode UI and getting ready to ship that, so we're building boxes to test that on." Big Picture Mode allows users who use a television as their display to properly take advantage of Steam.



Assassin's Creed III revealed – sharpen your tomahawks



Endless rumours about the next *Assassin's Creed* game being set during the American Revolution have turned out to be true. Ubisoft has officially unveiled *Assassin's Creed III*, which will star a new protagonist called Ratohnhaké:ton (pronounced "Ra-doon-ha-gay-doo") who is of British and Native American descent. Luckily for all of us who write about games for a living, Ubisoft has given Ratohnhaké:ton another name: Connor.

The game will take place during the latter half of the 18th century and will follow Connor's actions over the course of 30 years. The age-old war between the Assassins and the Templars has spilled across the Atlantic Ocean and into the New World. The cities of Boston and New York have been confirmed for the game, but what's even more exciting is that "the frontier" will also be a playable area. When you're not free-running between 18th century American cities, you'll be crossing the vast wilderness areas of the New World. The frontier is said to be a massive area that's at least one-and-a-half times larger than

the entire gameplay area of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*.

Owing to his heritage, Connor has a very different set of weapons at his disposal. Artwork, trailers and snippets of information released so far have shown Connor with tomahawks, pistols, bows and arrows and of course the assassin's signature weapon, the hidden blade.

Multiplayer will be making a return, but not much has been revealed as yet. That being said, an Xbox.com listing for the game accidentally revealed that 4-player co-op will be featured as well – that information has, however, been removed from the website.

Assassin's Creed III will run on an entirely new engine that has been dubbed the Ubisoft-AnvilNext engine. Ubisoft promises that the engine provides "breakthroughs in visual quality, character models and artificial intelligence."

The game has been given a release date of 31 October 2012 and will be hitting the PC, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360. Ubisoft has confirmed that a Wii U version is also in the works.

Release list

Dates subject to change without notice

April week 1

Kinect Star Wars	360
Devil May Cry HD Collection	360 / PS3
Alvin and the Chipmunks: Chipwrecked	360 / DS / Wii
MUD: FIM World Motorcross World Championship	360 / PC / PS3

April week 3

Prototype 2	360 / PC (delayed) / PS3
The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings Enhanced Edition	360
Port Royale 3	360 / PC / PS3
Bejeweled	360 / DS / PS3
Uncharted Trilogy Edition	PS3
Disgaea 3: Absence of Detention	PS Vita

April week 4

Capcom Digital Collection	360
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Civ turns to the gods

Firaxis' world-conquering management/sim *Civilization V* was released in 2010 but still hasn't seen a full expansion pack. Perhaps it's a symptom of modern DLC distribution, but add-on content doesn't hold a candle to a balanced, well thought-out expansion pack. Now, the studio has announced that *Civ 5*'s first expansion is on its way, entitled *Gods & Kings*.

As you might guess, *Gods & Kings* brings with it a return of religion as a gameplay mechanism that allows you to lure over rival cities without the need to resort to violence. Espionage will also make a return, giving players access to spies who can infiltrate opposing cities to steal technology, rig elections, and perform reconnaissance and other missions. Both new systems are expected to add a new layer of complexity to inter-player dealings, with religion coming in quite early in the timeline, to be replaced by espionage during later centuries.

The expansion pack will also introduce nine new civilizations with unique leaders, units and buildings, bringing the amount of new content to 27 units, 13 buildings and nine wonders. Among these new civilisations will be Byzantium, Carthage, Celtia, Huns, Mayans and Netherlands.

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8 LOTS AND LOTS OF FREE GAMES

This is the most obvious point, but it has to be said. We get a lot of games for free. Well, for review, and reviewing a game isn't quite the same as simply playing it, but there's still a lot of playing of said games that takes place. And, yes, we do buy games as well. We're all about supporting those developers that we love and what better way to show our squishy feelings than with money?



7 PLENTY OF FREE HARDWARE

While we don't all have super high-end gaming rigs around every corner [*what they don't know will never hurt them, Ed*], there's always a spare motherboard or video card hanging around. And, no, you can't have them.



6 MEETING FAMOUS DEVELOPERS AND VISITING DEVELOPMENT STUDIOS

This is easily the most exciting part of this business. If we had a rand for every famous person we've met, we'd have, like, hundreds of them by now. If you can think of someone cool in the game development industry, someone who you look up to and with whom you wish you could work, someone here at NAG has met them. We've probably fawned over them as well – you're never too cool to ask for an autograph.

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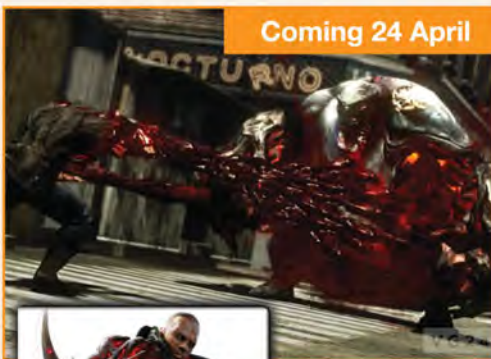
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5

PLAYING EARLY PREVIEW CODE

This isn't always a walk in the park – messing around with buggy code and painfully disruptive DRM can get on ones nerves – but there's nothing quite like getting your hands on a game that you've been dying to play for years before almost everyone on the planet.



4

ATTENDING PRESS EVENTS

This is the part where we pretend to be real journalists – rubbing shoulders with newspaper editors and important people who wear suits to these sorts of things. If we arrive in a button-up shirt, it's smart. We might own a single tie between all of us here.



3

SHARING OUR OPINIONS WITH LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE

That's you, our readers. We really do enjoy writing about games, and the opportunity to have those words soaked up (or at least read, or maybe briefly noticed) by our beloved fans and customers is endlessly pleasurable.

2

BEING ABLE TO IMMERSE OURSELVES IN GAMING WITHOUT FEELING BAD ABOUT IT

It's important for games journalists to really get stuck into the industry. We need to keep our fingers on the pulse of gaming and that requires a lot of time and effort. It's probably the same thing you do, but we get paid to do it.



1

STAYING UP LATE AT NIGHT TO PLAY GAMES AND CALLING IT "WORK"

While that does mean that we sometimes eat dinner at 10pm, when you're stuck into a game there's no coming back from it until that save point is reached or your number of deaths is greater than the hours passed since your last meal. And our friends think it's neat when we fob off an evening of socialising to stay at home to push through those last few hours of a game. There's also the inevitable 3am review writing session that follows, but it's best to keep quiet about those and hope nobody notices.



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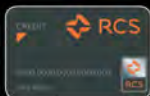


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DO IT YOURSELF

Getting started in game development



In last month's *NAG*, we told you all about the wonderful world of indie games. We did this to show you not just how good games can be when their development isn't constrained by corporate whims, but how simple a game can be in presentation while still being incredibly fun and deep. What we're getting at, is that you – yes, you over there, reading this magazine – can make your own games. It starts with an idea, and then requires a lot of hard work and dedication, but it's entirely possible. You don't have to get a formal education to make your own games, but it'll certainly help. Gamers with mathematics or art skills are at an immediate advantage, but those who wish to design games purely on paper will find that there are a number of ways to go about creating your own game, usually with a team that fills the gaps in your skill set. In this article, we look at the options you have to kick-start your career in video game development, and we chat to the people who know what it takes to become successful.

PS: If you ever do develop a game, be sure to drop us a copy of it and we'll be happy to give you our honest opinion.



INSIDE THE MIND OF RODAIN JOUBERT 1

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT ME

I suppose I may be classified as an "informal" game developer, at least in terms of my training. I started young and put a lot of time into making gradually less awful game projects. A big part of my influence was the Game.Dev community on the NAG forums – I spent a few years there entering competitions, engaging with other members and helping with the co-ordination of the group's own development e-zine. Although I'd spent far longer developing on my own beforehand, I found that my skills shot up far more quickly when I was able to exchange ideas and advice on the craft with others.

Through this and other networking efforts, I got the attention of some indie journalists and key bloggers from around the globe. I wrote everywhere I could and spoke to everyone I could. Then I wound up making a game that was halfway decent and its free alpha ended up exploding across the Internet. I signed up with QCF Design, an independent

company started by Game.Dev's founders, and we've been working on projects ever since.

HOW TO GET INTO THE INDUSTRY

While schools and colleges aimed at game design may be helpful, they're not the only route to take. Raw experience and community involvement cannot be underestimated as teaching tools, and doing your best with the craft – especially if you're going the informal way – often involves putting yourself out there as often as possible and with as much material as possible. That does not entail popping magically into existence on a local forum or two when you want to sell your game. Reputations don't come out of nowhere: they're built up over time. Becoming active on a place like TIGSource (and reading their rules before posting) would be a good start. And contacting local game companies like QCF Design can help you find out when and where local developers meet up and talk shop.

"Raw experience and community involvement cannot be underestimated as teaching tools..."



2



INSIDE THE MIND OF DAN WAGNER 2

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT ME

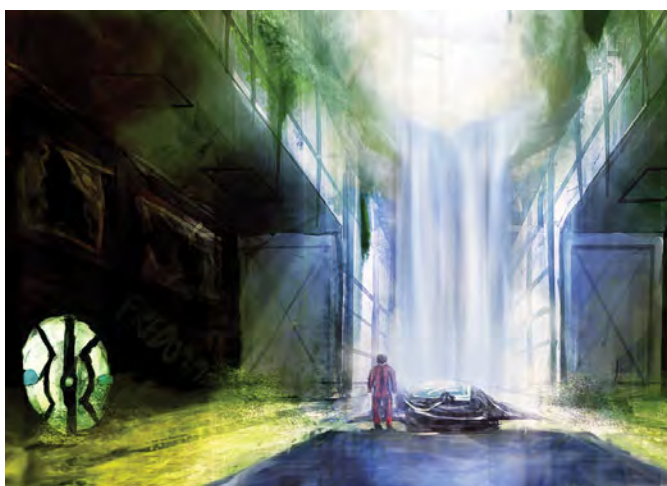
I started my career in the games industry working for the local distributor of Creative Labs, selling CD-Rom kits and sound cards. Soon after I landed a job at the local distributor for SEGA. While having access to games for free was a major perk of my position, my ultimate goal was to develop them. So when the opportunity arose I packed my bags and flew to Digipen (the first North American video game school). My passion for the subject allowed me to graduate with excellence, and soon after I had many job offers. Unfortunately being a South African at the time made it very hard to get approved for a work permit in the USA, so instead I contracted my services to game companies. During my time doing small jobs for studios overseas I decided to start my own company. I-Imagine Interactive was established in 1999. The company was the first developer worldwide selected for Microsoft's Incubator program, subsequently releasing *Chase Hollywood Stunt Driver* for Xbox worldwide.

I-Imagine has since released original titles on mobile devices, PS2, PSP, Xbox 360 and PS3.

HOW TO GET INTO THE INDUSTRY

My first advice is of caution: the industry in South Africa is very small. If you're looking for a game development job within South Africa, keep in mind that positions are limited. If you are willing to take a little risk and develop your own products, then there is good news. The growth of app stores has made it very easy for even a hobbyist to publish a game. So whether you're developing for PC, Mac or mobile devices you can publish your game without too many obstacles. For those taking this route my biggest piece of advice is take small steps. Don't try and develop the next massive multiplayer online game as your first project, work on smaller, faster projects that allow you the time to test your gameplay and polish your graphics. Most of all have fun, and keep in mind that making games is not the same as playing them.

"Unfortunately being a South African at the time made it very hard to get approved for a work permit in the USA, so instead I contracted my services to game companies."



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

You don't need to go out and spend R250,000 on software and licences if you're just getting started, but being familiar with the kind of applications that big studios use will definitely give you an edge in your career. For those starting off, however, it's important to develop your base skills with this brief selection of free or relatively cheap software.

ART

Paint.NET – 2D graphic design
Website: getpaint.net

Graphics Gale – static and animated pixel art
Website: www.humanbalance.net/gale/us

Blender – 3D modelling, animation, rendering and game engine
Website: www.blender.org

Softimage Mod Tool – 3D modelling, animation and game modding
Website: autode.sk/YbEoS

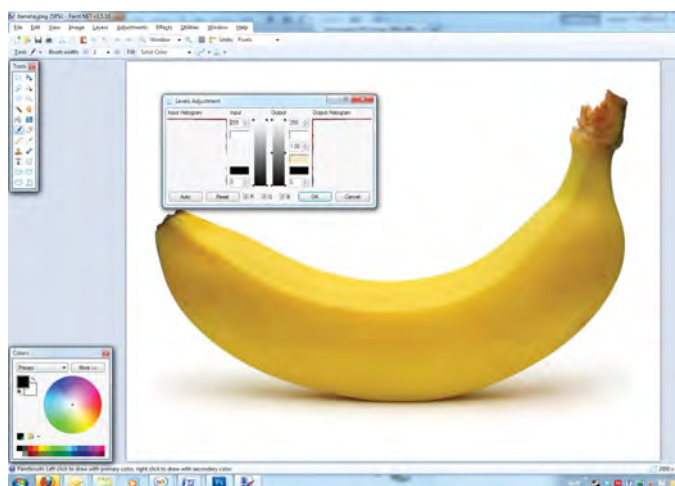
CODE

Adventure Game Studio – 2D classic point-and-click adventure game engine
Website: www.adventuregamestudio.co.uk

Game Maker – 2D/3D multi-purpose game creation tool for desktop or Web (mobile coming soon)
Website: www.yoyogames.com/make

Unity – Collection of 2D and 3D multi-platform game creation tools
Website: www.blender.org

XNA – Development tools for Xbox 360, PC and Windows Phone 7
Website: create.msdn.com





INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH FIKE 3

Deborah Fike is currently the Social Media Manager for Luma Arcade, which means she gets to play on Facebook and Twitter for a living. In the past, she's been a producer for the Disney Interactive Media Group, a game writer for InstantAction, and product manager for GarageGames. Luma Arcade is an international game development company with offices in Johannesburg, San Francisco and Portland. They're currently putting the finishing touches on the Unity 3D-powered Bladeslinger for Android devices.



"Students that just earn a degree are not attractive to employers. A student with a solid portfolio, even with no degree, can go places."

NAG: What should proficient programmers or artists do if they want to break into the game development industry?

Deborah Fike: If you have the skills, then it's a matter of knowing the right people that will land you that first crucial job. Start networking now. The Internet makes it easy to connect with people without needing to live in a big city. Read blogs and email people already in the industry for advice. Attend any local development get-togethers that you can. It will be hard at first, but once you make those first few connections, you'll be surprised how easily you'll expand your network.

NAG: What sort of education should a prospective student – let's say a high-school student – look at if they wanted to get started in a game development career?

DF: First, decide on what type of job you want. That should lead you to find the right education. Prospective programmers should look for colleges that have strong, practical computer science degrees. 3D modellers should look for schools that use Max and Maya heavily in their projects. Of course, you can always look into game design and development schools, but they will likely be pricier than local or national universities. One last tip: It's not the degree that matters nearly as much as your dedication. No matter what you're doing, build games in your spare time. Students that just earn a degree are not attractive to employers. A student with a solid portfolio, even with no degree, can go places.

NAG: If I have a brilliant idea for a game but no skills required to actually build it, what should I do? Is there room in the industry for a non-technical "game designer"?

DF: Set aside a little bit of time and start learning how games are made. Even if you don't get very good at it, you should learn enough to understand what's going on. It's best if you pick up a prototyping tool and at least try creating a little game on your own. Otherwise, you'll end up looking naive at best.

I have friends who started out as non-technical game designers, but all of them eventually learned to script. As a game designer, you have to be willing to adapt quickly to meet your team's needs. Most designers I know have to work with studio tools, so they're quick learners. Don't be one of those "aspiring game designers" who just has a brilliant idea. Everyone has an idea. You have to learn to implement to succeed.

NAG: I want to work for Firaxis/Epic/Visceral/Game Developer X – how do I make that happen?

DF: You may have to work for another company before you land at your "dream job." That's true of any field. Find out what Game Developer X is looking for, and if you don't have what it takes today to get there, start building the skills you need now. And while you're at it, network. Very few companies will hire from the "resume pile," so start making those connections that will help you land the job once you have your skill set beefed up.

NAG: What sort of tools should small game development studios (or even single developers) use to help them build games quicker and smarter?

DF: Every studio needs its own set of specific programming, art, game engine, and project management tools. For the most part, you should let the people performing the job function pick their own tools (e.g. let the artists decide what art tools they use) because they will be more proficient at them out of the gate. Your team should also evaluate whether you want to use a pre-packaged game engine like Unity or roll your own, which might also dictate what tools you'll need. Ultimately, you can't go wrong choosing the tools that will get you to that first game prototype. You don't have a game until you can give it to players and start seeing if it's actually *fun*. :)

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INTERVIEW WITH LEARN 3D 4

Learn3D is a Johannesburg-based college that teaches computer animation and video editing, and has recently added video game development to their offerings. The college is lead by Gustavo Edward de Mùelenaere Corrêa, who was the first-ever Autodesk Certified Instructor in Africa. Werner Zwarts lectures the game development course and is a qualified animator and programmer with several years of experience teaching C# and XNA.

NAG: What made you decide to start a game development course?

Gustavo: Following the growth of the casual games market, with platforms such as tablets and smartphones growing in popularity, we thought the time was right to offer a games course targeting this market, since with some knowledge of 3D and programming/scripting pretty much anyone can create a casual game.

NAG: How did you go about deciding on Unity 3D as your development environment?

Gustavo: Unity 3D proved to be the most flexible game authoring tool for the different platforms, from Android to iOS, from the PC to Xbox. And since it could also work with C#, it was a natural progression from the C# and XNA parts of our course.

NAG: Any plans for expanding the course in the future?

Gustavo: Since we already offer the art side of games, with our 2D and 3D animation courses, as well as the programming side with the game development course, we are now concentrating on having the students from all courses working together on actual games projects.

NAG: What are the most important skills for a prospective student to have when they look for a game development course?

Werner: It is favorable for students to have some experience with drawing, modeling and animating. They don't need prior programming knowledge or experience, we teach programming from the ground up. Hard workers are a must.

NAG: The question that we're sure is on everyone's mind is: will students be able to build their own game once they've completed the course?

Werner: Of course! At the end of the year, they will have made a complete texture-based, 2D and 3D game (provided of course they put in the effort required). They should then have the knowledge required to start developing their own games.

NAG: What advice would you give to someone who's looking to get into the local game development industry?

Gustavo: Get involved with the games community. Attend user groups, share ideas, let people know about (and review) your work in progress. Share your experience too: the more help you give the more help you will receive!

Werner: Work hard and make a few small games. Build up your portfolio to such a degree that you can't be ignored, do research of the studios you want to join and apply to all of them.

WE DON'T NEED NO EDUCATION (BUT IT HELPS)

There are a few local educational facilities that offer specific game development courses, but this is a relatively new concept in South Africa. If you can't find the right course for you, then go ahead and look for a more general computer science or art course that will act as a stepping-stone into the game development field. There are also a number of online colleges (such as www.gameinstitute.com) and, of course, colleges and universities in other countries that have extensive offerings.

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND (JHB)

BEngSc Digital Art or BA PVA in Game Design

Website: bit.ly/zEOdkq

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN (CPT)

BSc Computer Game Design

Website: bit.ly/x77GjR

LEARN3D (JHB)

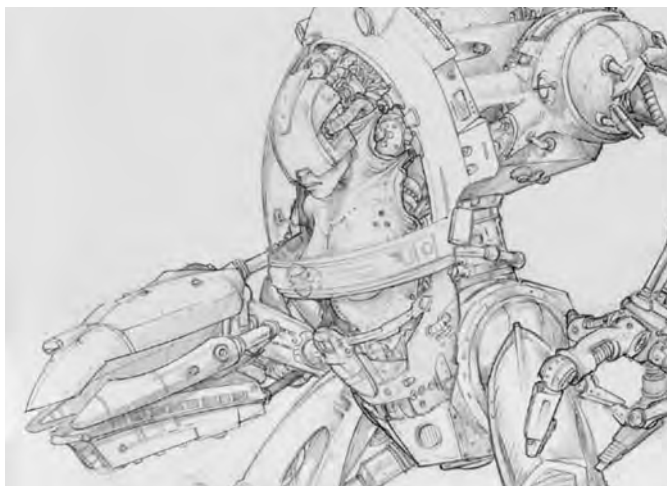
Game Development with Max/Maya/Mudbox/MotionBuilder/Unity 3D

Website: bit.ly/yUy3wA

FRIENDS OF DESIGN – ACADEMY OF DIGITAL ARTS (CPT)

Game Technology and Multimedia Entertainment

Website: bit.ly/r3UOZT





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XBOX
LIVE

CDPROJEKT

megarom



XBOX 360

Jump in.

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Release date: 2012
Platforms: 360 / PC / PS3
Genre: Strategy
Developer: Firaxis Games
Website: www.xcom.com/enemyunknown
Publisher: 2K Games

Extraterrestrial combat unit, hoorah!

The world is panicking. Yes, the whole thing. Pesky aliens with indeterminable intent have started whizzing around in their flying saucers, stealing cows and probing bums. Incredibly, the nations of Earth band together, set up a fund and give you millions and billions of lovely money (you know how expensive gym equipment can be) to investigate what's going on and put a stop to it. As commander of XCOM, the pressure is on right from the start. You need to figure out where to put your base, where to scan for aliens, what to research, how to equip your soldiers and even under what hair colour Private Jenkins looks better. Then, once you've built a base and begun operating, you'll eventually encounter aliens and the meat of the game – the turn-based strategy bit. Should a particular mission's outcome be favourable, you return to base as triumphant hero. Positives of this include getting your scientist types working on assimilating captured alien technology or even poking around inside the bum of a captured alien. If you fail the mission not only do you lose resources, like Private Jenkins and all his gear, but potentially critical funding from the country you failed to protect. The more missions you fail at, the

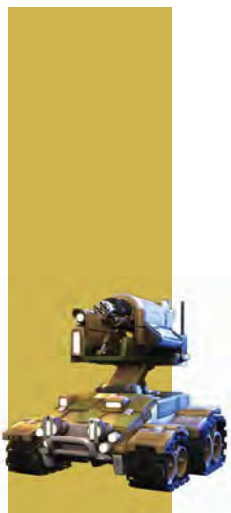
less funding and the harder your job becomes. Each new game is procedurally generated from scratch and this random element means potential commanders will be required to think on their feet. Out of the randomness there is a planned schedule of events throughout the game – story bits that push along the overall plot. There is a win scenario so the game can be finished but the developers (we chatted to them in the UK this month) are holding off on more detailed information. This is the nutshell of the XCOM experience. The developers were empathic about how important both elements of the game are to each other. If you don't fund the right line of research it could come back to haunt you during a mission; meanwhile on the field you must make the right calls or everything is lost. It's all about balancing resources, making tough choices and living with the consequences – good or bad.

ALIEN ANT FARM

The look of the XCOM HQ is an important part of the game. It's just like an ant farm but with people where you can move around and zoom in and out of different areas. There are labs, a gym, power plants, a hangar, an

SHIV

These **Super Heavy Infantry Vehicles** can replace human soldiers on the battlefield at any time. The catch... they take ages to research and eat through resources like a fat kid patrolling the sweet table at a party. SHIVs gain no experience from battles and their destruction is permanent and expensive. Commanders can mix and match chassis and payloads for different strategic options.





The term "UFO" was first coined in 1952 by Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, head of Project Blue Book (then the USAF's official investigation of UFOs). Ruppelt felt that "flying saucer" did not reflect the diversity of the sightings.



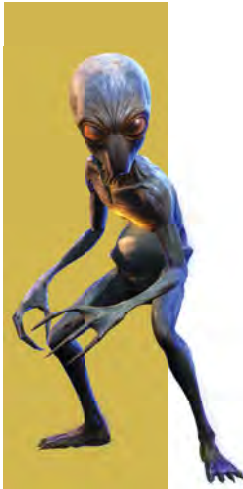
"Fans of the original do not hesitate when this comes out – you will love it to death, all of it."

In April 1962, Joseph Walker (NASA pilot), filmed five cylindrical and disc-shaped objects from his X-15 aircraft.

ALIENS

SECTOID

If you played the original you'll remember these chaps as the first aliens you encountered in the game – often referred to as "Greys". They shouldn't be underestimated, however, as they make up in higher mental functions what they lack in size and power. Sektoids are usually found in packs and can be recognised by their high-pitched insect-like speech patterns. Something to watch out for are Psionic links between Sektoids, these links boost combat abilities – find the originator and terminate the link.



MUTON

These elite units pack a powerful punch and are strategically coordinated on the battlefield. Mutons are heavily armoured tribal aliens that demand respect and require distance to eliminate. The best strategy (if you don't have a nuclear missile) is a rocket launcher to the face. Beware of their "Blood Call" which is a motivating call to arms for nearby Mutons.



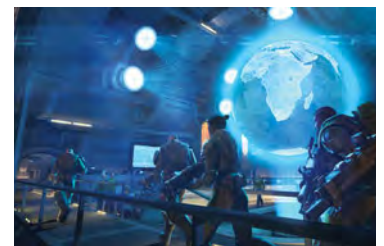
CYBERDISC

Think transformers and you've got the right idea here. These discs pack a formidable punch once they "unpack" into their arachnid-like weapons platform form. As for weaknesses, the best time to attack is when you see one of these puppies deploying. Miss the gap and it's a closed coffin for you and most of your team. Some reports suggest they work alongside other aliens.



THIN MAN

Looking a lot like humans (but not exact if you know what to look for); these tall "thins" are here to blend in and study us. When engaged in battle the real differences are easier to spot. Thin men seem to defy gravity with their ability to leap huge distances both horizontally and vertically. But it doesn't end there, get too close and they'll vomit acid on you, kill them and enjoy the ensuing acid shower. Bring plenty of milk.



engineering department and so on. The fun part is that you get to bolt the whole thing together yourself so it's your "home" away from home. Once done your soldiers will go about their soldiering business within the confines of the base, including any R&R activities. Certain bits work better next to other bits so some experimentation is required. The "ant farm" is where you prepare for your missions, it's where your engineers build the newly researched technology that your labs discovered and it's where you manage your entire operation. The particular look here is important as the developers want you to get close to your soldiers so when they die your soul dies a little too. What better way of doing this than putting them on display 24/7, sleeping, laughing, eating and being normal. It's a hook they want you to bite to get you emotionally invested.

Of course the other part of the game is all turn-based and strategic. On the ground the game will choose from a number of locations where you'll be fighting, examples include a petrol station, a cabin in the woods, an abandoned highway intersection and so on.

Again, each game is procedurally generated, so you won't get to experience all the available locations in the game in one sitting. The pace and scope of the mission action is controlled using time units. Using these units you can walk a certain number of steps or fire your weapon in a specific way, each action eats up these units and they are limited per turn. When your turn is done the aliens get a chance and they're probably much smarter than you so be careful and take it slow. It's important to use cover at all times and each soldier's unique abilities. Snipers can scale buildings to gain a height advantage and your "heavy" can lay down suppressive fire allowing other members of your squad to move from cover to cover. Once a side has exhausted all their time units and ended their turn the game takes over and the camera zooms in on the action showing off the result of each decision. The type and success of the different strategies you can use stem back to the base: Did you pack enough grenades, did you actually bring a sniper and are your assault rifles upgraded enough? Not the kind of issues you want to discover when it's too late.

X-COM: THE SERIES

When it appeared back in 1994 (technically 1993 – the first game was released on December 31st in that year), it won awards and captivated minds. It had everything games should have and at the time introduced a few new ideas to the mix. *X-COM* games also co-founded the concept of the cheap death as joy was often replaced by despair as some random grenade took out your whole team. Those that remember the games will also forget the infinite patience and perseverance of youth and trying them now is something we don't recommend for the impatient. Here's a brief look see and how we ended up here:

X-COM: UFO DEFENSE (ALSO KNOWN AS: UFO: ENEMY UNKNOWN) – 1994

This is the classic that started it all, pure magic when it was released and probably one of the most important games of all time. Unforgettable turn-based strategy fun and frustration mixed with saving the planet helped it gather all the important awards in 1994.

X-COM: TERROR FROM THE DEEP – 1995

Terror from the Deep is pretty much identical to the first game except you're underwater now so it's seaweed instead of wheat and fish instead of birds. Somehow they managed to make this one even more frustrating and difficult than the first one. If you think you're safe choosing the easiest difficulty setting, you're in for a nasty surprise.

X-COM: APOCALYPSE – 1997

Thanks to the onward march of technology this one was a bit more modern than the first two and also the last "proper" *X-COM* game until this new one you're reading about now in 2012. Instead of travelling around the world the action in *Apocalypse* took place in Mega-Primus, a futuristic self-contained city. Slick graphics and an improved interface made things better and it's wasn't too tough either.

X-COM: INTERCEPTOR – 1998

This one had all the base building of the first three but now everything happened in space. Not too bad until you realise that there's no strategy part anymore, just an easy, dull and pointless knock-off of a space shooting "simulator". The beginning of the end really and probably more inspired by the success of *Wing Commander: Prophecy* than anything else. They missed the plot here entirely.

X-COM: ENFORCER – 2001

Millions of voices cried out "what the..." *Enforcer* is a dull third-person shooter and you must collect things. No strategy, no base, no hope. It's really an insult even putting it on this list. Gaming died a little inside the day this was released; clearly another victim of following what was popular at the time. Interestingly this is exactly what the FPS version of *XCOM* (2K Marin) is doing and is why everyone got so angry. Thankfully we have Firaxis at the helm on this proper cool one.



"This "new look, old concept" game might be a tough sell to the current generation of gamers who have no fond memories of the original series."

WATER COOLER

The experience is everything with *XCOM*. In the original, players sometimes named their soldiers after people they knew (friends, family and even co-workers), so it was a little sad when one of them was eliminated. The ant farm concept creates an emotional link for players as they're more likely to get attached to their soldiers if they see them in the gym or mess hall every day acting like regular people. You can't help but feel some kind of loss when they die in battle and you have to hire a fresh face greenhorn n00b.

The other part of the experience is the stories within the game. Remember that one time a random grenade took out your number one ace (Aunt Mildred) just before the mission ended or how about that time a panicked soldier (Dad), accidentally killed an alien while firing blindly in all directions. These

unique experiences are what the developers are hoping gamers will be sharing with each other. Special memories, the stuff of legends, about that time the other day when you saved planet Earth... by accident.

This "new look, old concept" game might be a tough sell to the current generation of gamers who have no fond memories of the original series. Add to this the hit and miss following games like this seem to have and *XCOM* has a tough fight ahead of it. Fans of the original do not hesitate when this comes out – you will love it to death, all of it. Newcomers to the series and genre owe it to themselves to take a good long look at potentially the best rooting tooting squad-based, turn-based alien hunting strategy game we've seen in ten years. **NAG**

- RedTide

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MAX PAYNE

DID YOU KNOW?

The voice of Max Payne in the video game franchise is done by James McCaffrey who also makes a cameo appearance in the *Max Payne* movie. Despite earlier reports to the contrary, James McCaffrey is returning as *Max Payne 3*, not only as the voice but physically via extensive motion capture.

3

Release date:
15 May 2012 [console] / 29 May [PC]

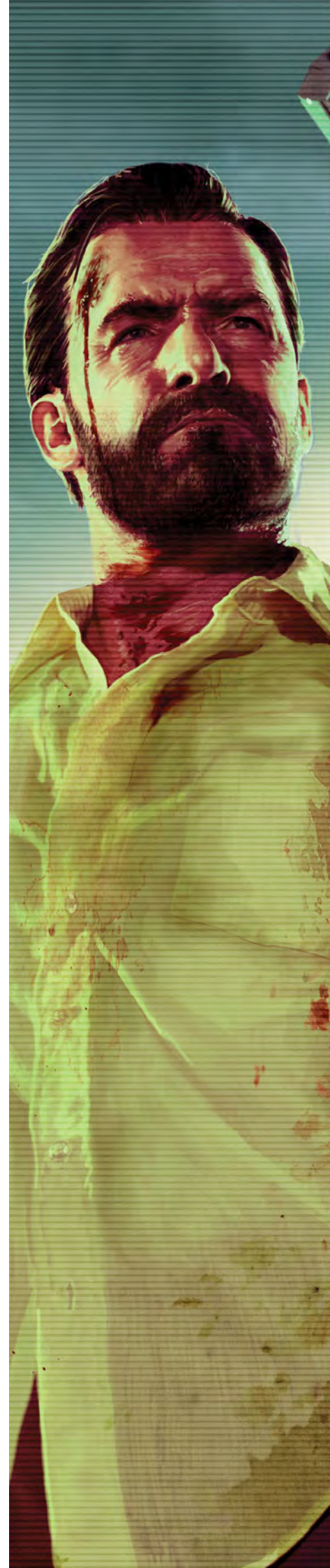
Platforms:
360 / PC / PS3

Genre:
Third person action

Developer:
Rockstar

Website:
www.rockstargames.com/maxpayne3

Publisher:
Take-Two Interactive





Isn't MP3 a music format?

The first two *Max Payne* games had a lot of style – narrated comic book story sequences, Bullet Time and some rough scenarios.

Now Rockstar have taken over from Remedy Entertainment for the third game, almost ten years later. The Rockstar we know present players with wide open blank canvases onto which they must tell their own story, *Red Dead Redemption* is a good example. *Max Payne 3* is a little different in that it's slick and tight and by Rockstar standards restrictive in both freedom of choice and movement. Of course there's nothing to worry about, this is Rockstar after all and if they can make the best cowboy adventure in the history of modern video games they can certainly handle all the grit and grim of *Max Payne*.

CITY OF DRIZZLE

In this third game you're going to get to know São Paulo (or Sampa as it's known by the locals) very well. It's the perfect location for conflict and the lines between the wealthy and the poor often cross with explosive results. The greed and corruption of the concrete jungle is replaced by the desperation of the poor and classism of the wealthy. It's a powder keg and Max is the flaming interloper. Spread throughout the game there will be some action in New York – levels that are actually memories triggered by events in Brazil.

The beginning of the game sees the Max you remember washing down painkillers with a bottle of whatever's cheapest at the bar. He's no longer a cop and spends his days wasting away until he meets an old colleague from his past (Raul Passos) with a job offer. Regardless of what Max thinks he needs or wants, fate steps in and plays its hand leaving Max with no choice but to ditch New York and head to Brazil. In São Paulo, Max and Raul are private security for wealthy industrialist Rodrigo Branco and his two sons: Victor

and Marcelo. It doesn't take long before trouble brews, Rodrigo's wife is kidnapped for a hefty ransom and Max and Raul must make the drop at a local soccer stadium. For this third game there are no comic strips to tell the story, instead Rockstar have opted for a stylish blend of dramatic game engine scenes that tip a hat to the old style while reinventing it. We still have Max's thick and heavy narration throughout but dramatic words are pulled from conversations, stamped on the screen and highlighted for effect. The camera also follows the story elements with drama and intensity creating a compelling world that draws you in. The artists and world builders of *Max Payne 3* spent a lot of time in São Paulo taking pictures and absorbing as much culture as possible so that the game oozes authenticity. Movies like *The Elite Squad* (*Tropa de Elite*) were used for inspiration, close-up shots of graffiti on city walls was taken to get the look and feel just right. Brazil is soccer mad so expect to see kids kicking dirty balls around in the Favela and so on. This kind of detail is evident in every setting and character in the *Max Payne 3* game world.

JOHN MCCLANE'S VEST

NAG was invited to the Rockstar offices in London for a play session with the new *Max Payne 3*. We played the Stadium level; this is where Max and Raul try to hand over the ransom money and things go wrong. We also got to play the Favela level where Max is left to fend for himself without a gun or clear memory of how he got here. The levels themselves and what happens in them aren't that important in this discussion. Sure, they tick all the right boxes in terms of setting, story and action game staples but they won't highlight the most important part of this new *Max Payne* game – the technology running the show in the background.

Max Payne 3 uses the game engine to render the video sequences that push the story along. That in itself



STADIUM AND FAVELA

Here's a quick rundown of the standout features of the two levels we played in London: The stadium is all about open spaces but has its fair share of tight corners and hallways of death. Stand out moments include a fierce battle in the seating area of the stadium against very tough opponents while dodging sniper fire. These guys flanked our position, threw grenades when we tried to hide and in total killed us about 15 times – it actually got a bit embarrassing in front of the Rockstar guys. The level also featured Max taking up a sniper position to keep the bad guys off Raul. The favela was entirely different; dirty and full of a million little details most players will never see. Kids play soccer, housewives hang up washing and the locals carry on about their business like it was just another day. The place feels alive and regardless of your presence things keep on ticking in the favela. Max doesn't have a weapon initially but soon finds his way into strip joint where all hell breaks loose. This level is all about tight alleyways, confusing location and enemies all around and above you. You can use the terrain for help such as shooting gas canisters and so on. Two very different types of location but both engaging and interesting – we can't wait to see what they've done with the New York levels.



DID YOU KNOW?

In *Max Payne 2: The Fall of Max Payne* when you completed the game on the "Dead on Arrival" difficulty level, Mona Sax survives the fatal gunshot wound that kills her in the previous 'easier' difficulty levels. Her dying is considered as the proper "canon" ending to the game.



isn't new because we've seen this type of thing before. What's different here is that the game character and all of his polygons stay the same during these sequences. If Max was carrying an assault rifle into the story sequence then that's what he'll be holding during the sequence. If Max has a blood stain on his shirt then that stain will stay there until he changes his clothing. Remember the vest Bruce Willis wore in *Die Hard* and how it just got filthier and filthier as the movie went on – the same kind of thinking applies to *Max Payne 3*. The game features an updated version of RAGE (Rockstar Advanced Game Engine) and of course is complimented by Natural Motion's Euphoria technology so no two animation sequences look the same (this same technology has been employed in previous Rockstar games such as *GTA IV*). Everything has weight and "feels" right especially when flying through the air using Bullet Time, if Max hits a wall he crumples to the ground, if he dives into a chair it moves under his weight. This is a technological quantum leap from the *Max Payne* you might remember. Each bullet that connects will work together with the animation system and the game engine to generate a realistic physics-based reaction. You can even shoot out lights. The combination of all this means you'll never see the same thing twice (even after reloading). Another nice touch is a featured final kill where you can keep squeezing rounds off into a bad guy's face as the camera takes over and pans around the carnage. Players can also control the speed of the bullets in this festival of pain and promises to make multiplayer games that much more interesting.

Unlike current shooters where your health recovers over time, in *Max Payne 3* you must find and take painkillers to replenish health. Be sure to leave one pill in the bottle because if you suffer a fatal shot and go down you'll enter Bullet Time one last time and automatically aim at your killer. In this last man standing mode

you'll have a chance to return fire and take him out; if successful you'll recover and gain a little health. So, no matter how tasty those pills are, take it easy. Cover is also now a thing in *Max Payne 3*, purists might shun this gaming crutch but it certainly did come in handy more than a few times during the play sessions. So there it is: a heap of refinements, around nine years of technology improvement, physics, and Bullet Time along with and all the moody grit only *Max Payne* can bring.

BURSTS

There is multiplayer in *Max Payne 3* – Bullet Time and all. Rockstar say it best, "Our approach is to take Max's kinetic sense of movement and artistry with weapons including Bullet Time and directly translate that into a multiplayer environment that builds on the themes and fiction of the single player game, and lives up to the single-player game in terms of sophistication, storytelling and cinematic presentation." The main trust of the multiplayer will be focused on Gang Wars, a type of persistent objective-based game where the results of the preceding game dictate events in the next. For example, the player with the most kills in the last game may now become the target of a hit squad in the current game. This multiplayer "story" will use all the story telling mechanisms (narration and cut scenes) from the single player to create drama and excitement in the multiplayer environment. Bullet Time will be handled dynamically as the player using it and the target in their line of sight will both enter Bullet Time. This has worked in the past with the *F.E.A.R.* games but always runs the risk of being clumsy. Kill streaks are called bursts but not much more had been said about this. *Max Payne 3* should be very close to release by the time you read this and watch out for a full review in a future issue of NAG. **NAG**
- RedTide

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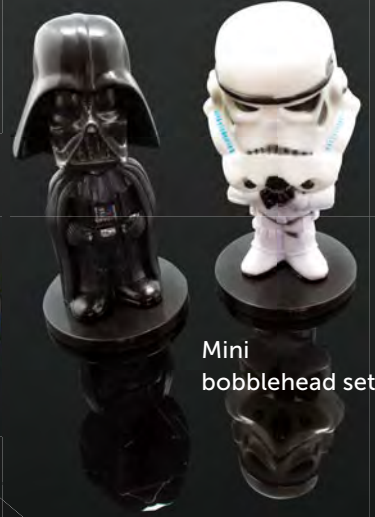
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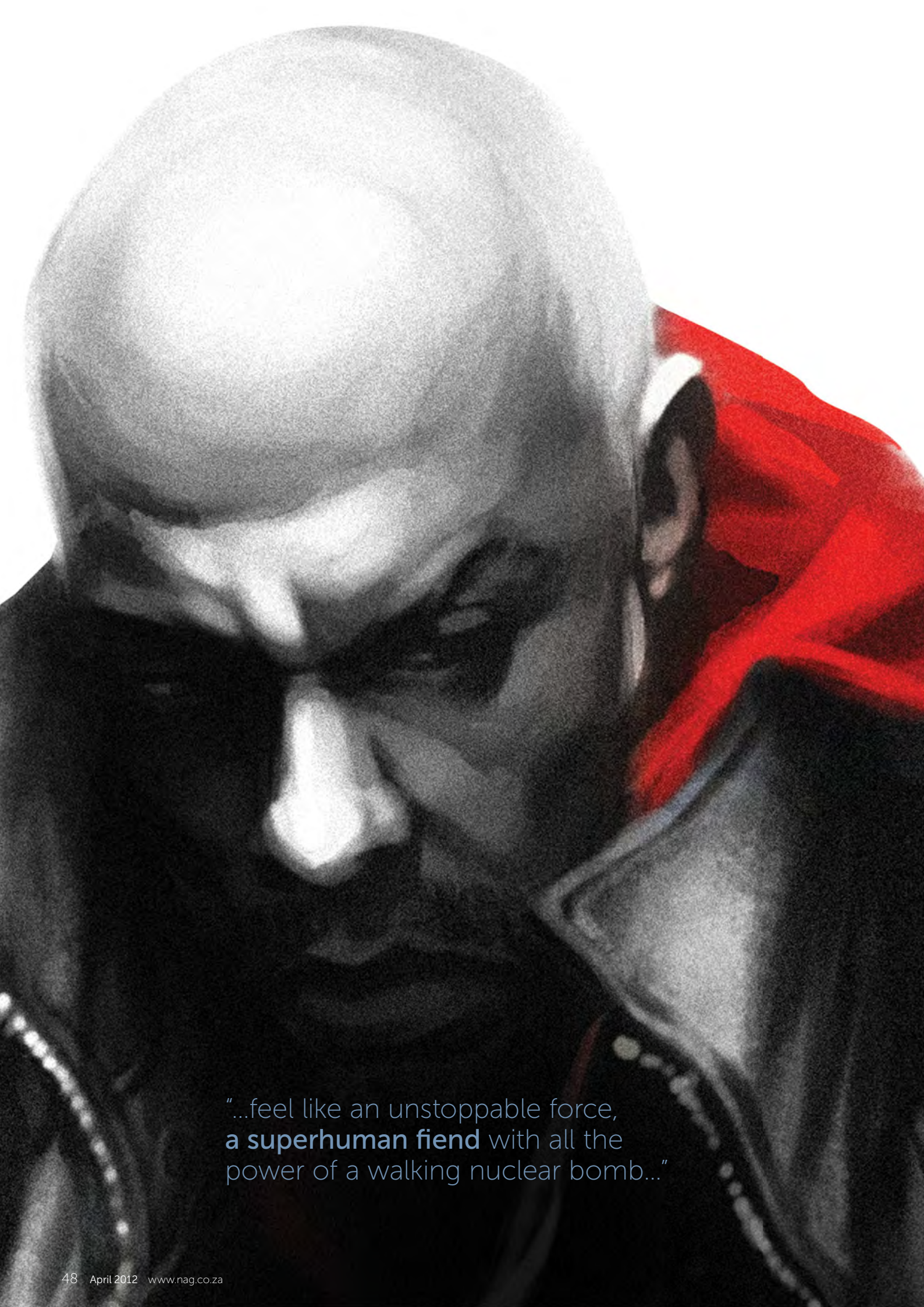


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Release Date:

Q1 2012

Platforms:

360 / PC / PS3

Genre:

Action

Developer:

Radical Entertainment

Website:

prototypegame.com

Publisher:

Activision



HANDS ON

If there's one thing the original *Prototype* excelled at, it was disguising limitation. Not entirely, mind you – the world and its mechanics were understandably fettered by the invisible walls that confine game worlds and the mechanics within. However, it simultaneously made you feel like an unstoppable force, a superhuman fiend with all the power of a walking nuclear bomb, able to turn any obstacle into a steaming, groaning pile of hurt with the press of a few buttons and a perpetual grin. Pure, maniacal fun inhabited its design, turning its admittedly paper-thin core into a winning combination of flashy party tricks. I loved it. And now, having had some hands-on time with its bigger, bolder and meaner successor, I get the feeling I'm going to love it as well.

There's all this talk of "murdering your maker" in the marketing hype that envelops *Prototype 2*. It's born of the relationship between original protagonist Alex Mercer and new guy Sergeant James Heller. Heller's a military man and was off in the Middle East when the Blacklight Virus (aka the Mercer Virus) was unleashed on New York City (now known as New York Zero, or NYZ), where Heller's wife and young daughter await his return. Things get messy when Heller receives a distressing phone call from his wife, telling him that the area has been quarantined and Blackwatch (a black ops military division given carte blanche



“Heller quickly realises what those of us on this side of the screen knew all along: that **he’ll never be able to combat Mercer as a mere man.**”



to do whatever is necessary – no matter how callous – in containing viral outbreaks) troops had rolled in. Heller vows to return, but when he does, he finds his family dead. Like everyone else, Heller trusts the word of Blackwatch (who’ve pinned the outbreak on Mercer) and immediately seeks revenge against the man he believes is responsible for the murder of his loved ones. But Alex Mercer is no ordinary man, and this is no ordinary tale of woe and revenge.

In the fourteen months since the events of the original game, NYZ has been divided into three different zones: Green, Yellow and Red, depending on the level of infection therein. Naturally, Mercer has taken to inhabiting the Red Zone (essentially the whole of Manhattan Island) – the most dangerous and infection-riddled of the three. Heller joins up with Blackwatch on an incursion into the Red Zone, hoping to find Mercer. And he does. But Heller quickly realises what those of us on this side of the screen knew all along: that he’ll never be able to combat Mercer as a mere

man. Still, he gives it a go and by the end of it all Mercer, presumably impressed by Heller’s tenacity and prowess, opts to infect him with his strain of the Blacklight virus rather than killing him. And that’s how you employ an entirely new protagonist, kids!

With its revenge-driven theme and focus on Heller’s loss, it’s fair to assume that *Prototype 2* has the potential for a more meaningful, personal narrative than its forebear. Well, as meaningful and personal as the narrative can get in a game in which you can run up walls and toss cars at helicopters. Then again, it could just end up being nothing more than an obnoxiously blatant excuse to run up walls and toss cars at helicopters – which I might be okay with. And once again, there’ll be a lot of wall running and ten-car helicopter bowling. Augmented with his own unique moves and powers, Heller has even greater destructive capability than his creator. Some of his abilities are inherited from Mercer – like the Whipfist and Blade weapon



I’M BATMAN

Remember how, in the original *Prototype*, you’d occasionally have to hunt down and consume enemies with particularly useful information to further the story? As Mercer, tracking them down was very mechanical – all you had to do was follow a marker on your map to find the required consumption victim. As Heller, however, things have been made a bit more engaging. He’s developed a sort of sonar ability: tap a button, and Heller sends out a “ping,” which will return to him from the direction of the designated individual, allowing you to gradually track them down and absorb their delicious knowledge. Even though it might seem like a minor alteration, it’s effective at making you feel like a hunter stalking your prey.



Infected civilians don't pose much of a threat individually, but in a group, they can be mildly annoying. Most of the time though, they're just impressively gory punching bags.



HUMAN INTERACTION

Heller's still got the ability to consume people in order to regain lost health, simultaneously accessing their memories and, if desired, assuming their identity. Identity theft is useful for evading pursuers and lowering alert levels, or for infiltrating restricted areas. Moreover, consuming important-looking ninnies is also a way of

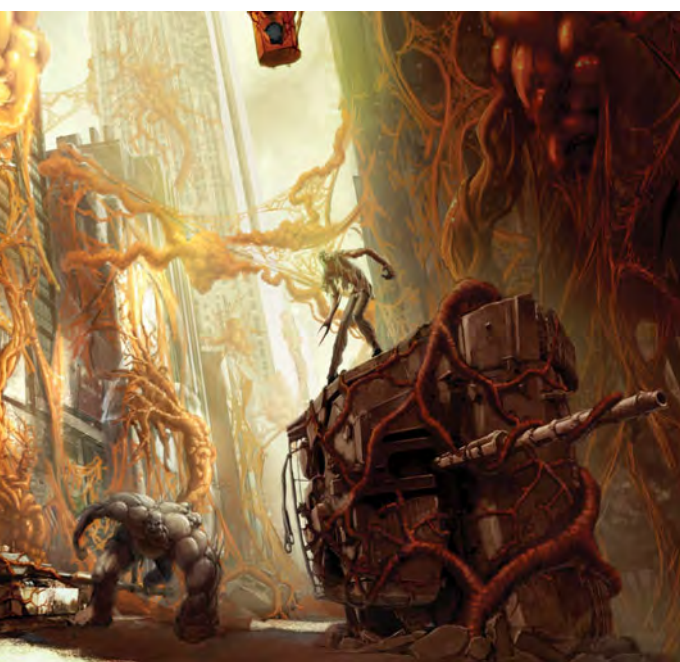
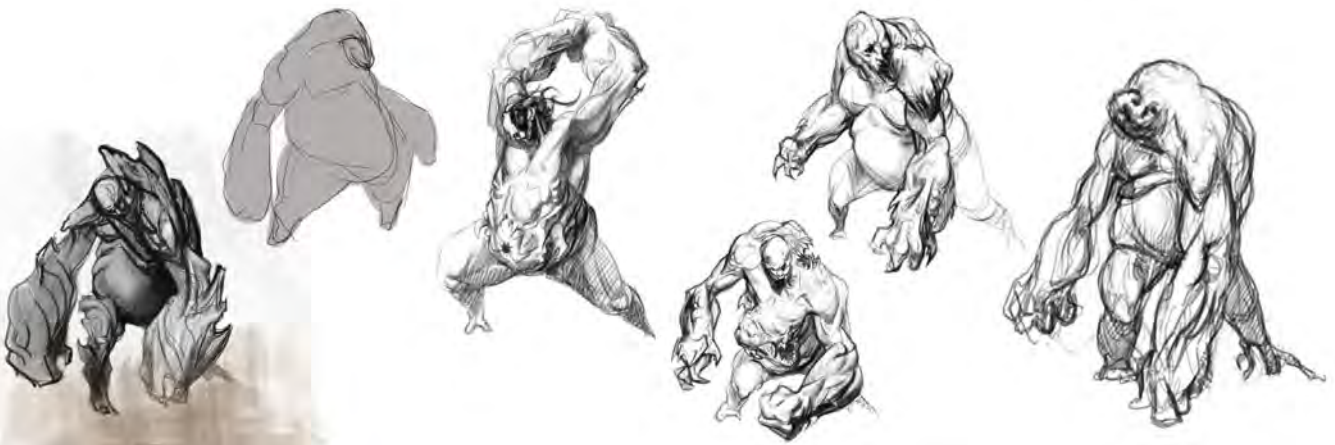
organically growing objectives. Need to find out where the military is holding that adorable litter of puppies for interrogation? Find someone who looks like they might know things you don't, consume them and access their brain juice to discover the location of the puppy detention centre.

There's more you can do with the fragile inhabitants of

NYZ. New to *Prototype 2* is the ability to turn hapless humans into Biobombs. Do this, and then drop them in the middle of a crowd. Wait a few moments, and then watch as a mass of tendrils explode out of the infected individual, forcefully pulling in anything they touch (cars, enemies, bits of debris) to meet with a bang in the centre, effectively turning the unlucky

twit into a human smoothie and murdering anything that finds itself nearby.

If all of this sounds a bit too new-school, there's always the old mainstay of manufacturing your own fun by grabbing an enemy, running up the side of a building to the roof, and then throwing them into a crowd of infected below while eagerly yelling out "feeding time!"



mutations (which have been given their own unique Heller flavour), his ability to glide as a travel power and more – but he's definitely got some of his own tricks up his blood-splattered sleeve. The new Tendrils weapon mutation, for example, not only acts as a satisfyingly potent new way to tear things to shreds, but it's massively appealing in its presentation as well. As you fire them forth towards those you'd like a little less alive, they leave behind a vulgar trail of sinewy devastation, like a fleshy spider web. Sticky tendrils stretch between buildings, latch onto cars and attach themselves to pretty much any surface. This has practical applications as well. It's common to see two tendrils conjoined by a human foe in the middle. Eventually, the force of the opposing tentacles will tear the unfortunate sap in two in a spray of blood and gore, a revolting squelching noise marking

their sudden, violent passing. Use the tendrils against some of the larger enemies and its similarity to a spider's web reveals itself again, rooting the brute in place and giving you time to perform mini-finishees that'll chop a load off its health bar – or will even allow you to gradually dismember them throughout a fight before delivering the killing blow.

Missions in the game are still acquired in largely the same way: via various contacts you'll meet during your vengeful spree. Mission types on offer will vary depending on which of the three zones you're in. As you play, you'll gain points towards upgrading Heller's many abilities, tweaking his powers and stats to suit your tastes. And you'll need all the power you can get – both for satisfaction value and to simply survive some of the game's more intense scenarios. Not that it's particularly difficult to come out triumphant in most situations:

THERE'S A FLY IN MY BIOMASS

Who needs guns when you're essentially a human Swiss Army knife? Like Mercer, Heller's shapeshifting abilities have all manner of practical applications. We hear his Blade works particularly well as a can opener, provided you don't plan on actually using the can's contents afterwards.

Your ability to have two of these powers selected at any given moment means you can dynamically switch between powers at the touch of a button, depending on what you think will work best.

CLAWS

The Claw weapon mutation is all about speed. Heller moves incredibly nimbly when using them, hacking and slashing enemies in twain with minimal effort. It's especially great against smaller, non-armoured foes. Holding down the attack button has Heller leap towards his target, quickly closing the distance.

HAMMERFIST

Effectively turns Heller into a slow, lumbering oaf with two wrecking balls hanging menacingly where his forearms used to be. The Hammerfists are sluggish, but powerful. Hold down the attack button high up in the air, and Heller dive-bombs, crashing down with a thunderous boom. It's primarily meant for use against vehicles, but time your attacks right, and the Hammerfists can be overwhelmingly potent versus anything.

BLADE

A sort of middle ground between Claw and Hammerfist, Heller's Blade turns one of his arms into a razor-sharp dealer of death. Works well against pretty much everything, and has a variety of uses. Hold down the attack button and Heller becomes a deadly whirlwind of bladed doom, spinning around while still allowing you to control his movement.

WHIPFIST

Just as the name suggests, it's like an elongated, whip-like arm – except it's covered in blades. It's great for long-range dealings with large numbers of squishier opponents, Heller whipping it left and right to dispose of tight-knit groups in almost the entire area surrounding him. It can also be used as an impromptu grappling hook, allowing Heller to yank foes toward him or to latch on to vehicles.

TENDRILS

An ability unique to Heller, the tendrils are fleshy death dealers with a unique visual impact. Tendrils grab onto either end of enemies and rip them in two, and are particularly useful for subduing larger enemies. Hold down the attack button and Heller turns the enemy he's targeting into a living black hole, tendrils bursting forth to grab nearby objects and enemies and sending them careening into the helpless fool caught in the middle.

If you've not had your fill of Prototype 2 info, head over here to read an interview with Dave Fracchia, studio VP of Radical Entertainment: <http://bit.ly/yVeNhw>



Heller is easily able to take on entire military divisions in the later stages of the game. Tanks become nothing more than momentary distractions, streams of dizzily dancing rockets might as well be no more than oddly explosive gnats, and helicopters only manage to be predictably pesky because of their ability to nimbly stay on your tail and mark your location when you're trying to evade pursuers. Like the first, this sequel aims to make you feel like the dominant predator at the top of a particularly sadistic food chain. It's all impressively fluid and easy to control as well, even in the early build I played. Devastation is never more than a quick finger movement away. Switching between weapon mutations is organically done via a menu accessed by holding a button, selecting two mutations therein to assign them to two of your

controller's face buttons, and then simply mashing those face buttons until everything around you stops twitching. Picking up objects and using them as projectile weapons is smooth, and the targeting for it seems to do a good job of selecting enemies that pose the greatest threat in busy battles first. Again, you're able to use ranged weapons (like assault rifles and rocket launchers) liberated from the military as well. Even vehicular weaponry isn't safe from your wrath: use the grab button on a vehicle when you're close enough, and Heller will deftly mount it, providing a number of options. You could quickly destroy the vehicle, rewarding you with a stylish kill animation in which Heller tears the rotors off a chopper, or uses a tank's own turret to murder it. Hijacking the vehicle gives you some mechanical firepower

“Like the first, this sequel aims to make you feel like the dominant predator at the top of a particularly sadistic food chain.”





Fun fact: Heller's clothing isn't exactly made from, y'know, clothes. It seems that all he does is shift some Biomass here, some Biomass there, and voila: killer digs. Which is actually also kind of gross.



GREEN ZONE

This zone is heavily militarised, and is the zone in which people are free to go about their daily lives without fear of infection. Life goes on as though the outbreak never occurred; or it would, if not for the constant and severe oppression at the hands of Blackwatch.



YELLOW ZONE

As the virus slowly spreads through this quarantined zone, people are forced into shanty towns and refugee camps by Blackwatch. Overcrowding is commonplace, and most people are unaware of the research that Blackwatch and biological/genetic research company Gentek carry out on the infected in this zone.

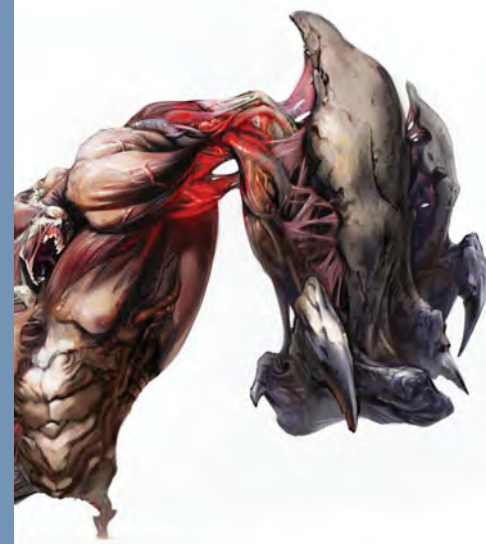


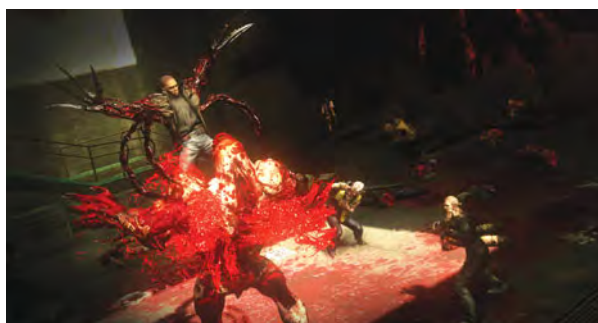
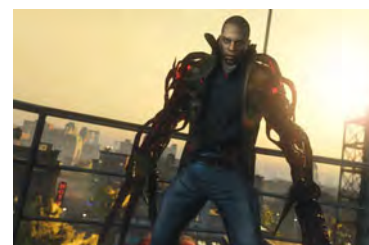
RED ZONE

Alex Mercer's personal playground is rife with infection. It literally clings to the buildings here, and you can't walk down the street without stepping in something squidgy and covered in gross. Ruin is widespread, infected civilians and deadly mutants roam the streets, and the potential for sandbox-style destruction is impressively tantalising.

IN THE ZONE

Fourteen months after the original outbreak of the Blacklight Virus, NYZ has been separated into three distinct zones.





The weapon mutation (Claws, Blade, etc.) you have selected also changes certain animations for actions, such as those when consuming enemies or destroying vehicles, to add to the flavour.



DOES THIS LOOK INFECTED?

The technology behind the sequel has been utilised to much greater effect compared to what we saw in *Prototype*. Not only is it visually cleaner and much more striking, but the

world is also a huge deal more vibrant and filled with incidental details. Somehow, there also seems to be more destructibility – an impressive feat, all things considered. NPCs in the Green and Yellow

Zones go about their routines with enough purpose to make the world feel more plausible, and the menacing, ever-dangerous feel of the Red Zone is palpable. We didn't have much time to

appreciate all the small details (much too busy hurling cars at tanks, you see), but rest assured that *Prototype 2's* will be a much more appealing world to visit than the original's was.

“Augmented with his own **unique moves and powers**, Heller has even greater destructive capability than his creator.”

for a while. Or you could go the “weaponise” route – which has Heller rip off one of the vehicle's weapons for your maniacal enjoyment. The ability to tear off the .50 cal machine gun of a tank, or rip off the huge rocket launcher of a helicopter means that even the military's most powerful hardware can suddenly go from being their mightiest weapon against you to being their gravest mistake. Interestingly, it also means that the more deterrents that get placed in your path, the more options you actually have to dispose of them. Then again, given the sheer size of some of the enemies that will be thrown at you in the game, a few tanks and APCs are going to be the least of your worries.

Playing *Prototype 2* felt like bumping into an old friend at the mall. The rhythm and flow of its carnage adhere to that old “like riding a bike” chestnut, and as such, it's definitely more refinement than renovation. Haters of the original will probably be haters here as well. Although, honestly: I don't see how anyone could hate *Prototype*. It's an outrageously destructive sandbox, wherein you'll find memorable powers and that indomitable sense of glee that can only be felt when mowing down 30 ravenous infected with a car you've just randomly hurled into a crowd. Limitation: it's something you won't even notice when you're hijacking a helicopter mid-flight. **NAG**

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DETAILS

Release date:

Q3 2012

Platforms:

3DS

Genre:

Action role-playing game

Developer:

Capcom Production Studio 1

Website:

www.capcom.com/monsterhunter

Publisher:

Capcom

Monster Hunter 3G

The bigger they are, the better their skin for making stuff.

If you're not familiar with this particular franchise, which has been a huge hit in the East since 2004, here's the complete rundown: You hunt monsters. The monsters are huge. And smart. You're going to need better armour and bigger weapons. Crafting such things requires components from killed or captured monsters.

It sounds simplistic, but the genius is in the execution. *Monster Hunter* is a unique franchise, a simulation of hunting in a world filled with dinosaurs and dragons. Success requires strategy, skill, forethought and experience. Your character does not level up or gain new skills, it's up to the player to become more proficient, more aware and more skilled. Crafting new gear helps with damage reduction and output, but won't win you any fights.

Monster Hunter 3G is an enhanced "director's cut" of *Monster Hunter Tri* (Wii), with more content, refinements to the controls and of course, it's portable. Some of the refinements include the Target Camera, which lets you "lock on" to nearby large monsters, something many Western gamers have been begging for. The bottom screen can be customised, such as moving the health bars and mini-map to it, freeing up space on the top screen. Combining items is a breeze thanks to drag-and-drop.

A new comrade called Kayanba joins your expeditions, assisting you alongside the existing series staple sidekick Cha-Cha. Initially Kayanba and Cha-Cha don't get along, but as you take

them on excursions they'll gain experience and develop a camaraderie, which results in them being more useful (by gathering resources or applying buffs to your character). They'll also do little dances together.

All 12 weapon types will be present, with the Dual Sword, Gunlance, Hunting Horn and bow now usable underwater for the first time. Swimming and underwater combat, first introduced in *Monster Hunter Tri*, returns with more emphasis. The Plesioth creature from earlier games makes a comeback, able to fight on both land and underwater, moving like a cross between a dragon and a frog.

The real star of the show is the new flagship monster, Bracchidios, this giant bright blue dragon with vivid green radioactive plasma-covered fists lives in the volcano. It attacks with punches and horn thrusts, leaving puddles of plasma that explode after a while. Never

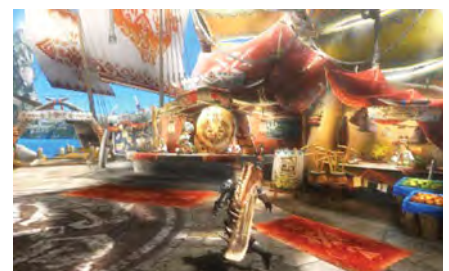
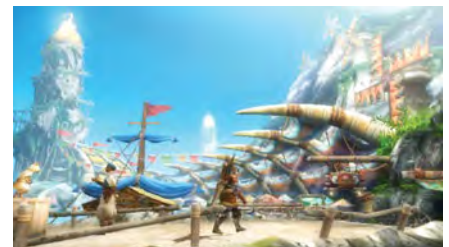
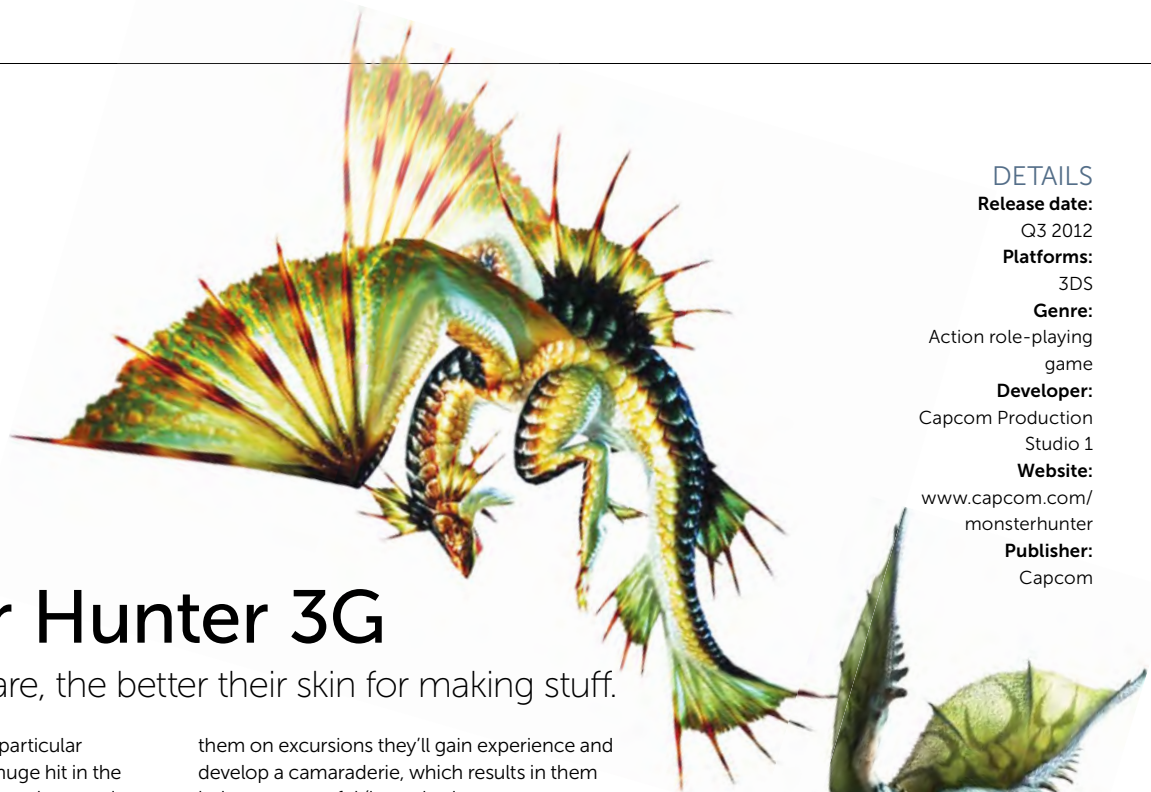
before has a creature been so specifically designed to ruin your day, reiterating that in *Monster Hunter*, the bosses are the boss.

There is local wireless play for up to four players (empty slots can be filled with companions), but no online play. Downloadable quests make a return, delivered via SpotPass, while StreetPass exchanges Guild Cards with other players in your physical proximity. The Circle Pad Pro (or SlidePad as it's known in the East) is fully supported, the right analogue slide-stick used to control the camera. **NAG**

- Miktar

"Monster Hunter 3G is an enhanced "director's cut" of Monster Hunter Tri (Wii), with more content, refinements to the controls and of course, portable."

There have been five games in the main *Monster Hunter* series, five in the *Freedom* portable series, and four spin-off titles including an MMO.





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2. Working keyboard (missing the F key). We saw about three other keyboards in the boxes.

3. There are at least

40+ games in all these boxes. Some old, some new and some that nobody remembers. Probably more like 50+.

4. This is brand new in the box and definitely works – but Michael helped us pack up and

he wasn't gentle. At least one thing that was new now isn't after the shoot.

5. A pack of connectors for stuff you don't have.

6. There are about eight cardboard boxes full of stuff. We've been

collecting junk for about two years.

7. This is a UPS that doesn't work (lightning).

8. Gaming memorabilia. There is a lot of stuff (T-shirts, trinkets and coffee mats) that game

publishers send us to try and get us to like their games. We kept the really good stuff, the rest is yours.

9. 500 Duke dollars – value: 0

10. There are also:

hard drives, fans, motherboards, a graphics card or four, cases, oats, boxes, mice, a broken coffee cup (unwashed), cables, magazines, console peripherals, USB sticks, a collector's NAG cap, much more.

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FRONTOSA
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Street Fighter X Tekken

Everybody was kung fu fighting, even the bear.



With fighting games, some people only want to understand just enough of how the game works, to have fun. Others want to understand how the game really works under the hood, to improve not only how they play, but how much enjoyment they take away from the experience. Most of the traditional conflicts between people who play fighting games stems from this basic division.

Street Fighter X Tekken, perhaps the most natural crossover game since *Capcom vs. SNK*, is more than the crossover of two franchises. It's a deliberate attempt to cross over between these two kinds of fighting game players. The most obvious indication: the first time you start the game it asks if you'd like to proceed directly to the tutorial. The tutorial meticulously goes through even the most basic concepts; someone who has never played a fighting game before will learn enough to immediately start having fun.

The character-specific Trials, much like those in *Street Fighter IV*, represent the more serious challenge, teaching both bread-and-button combination attacks and more high-level combos that require precise timing and an understanding of how things link together.

SfXT uses six buttons: three punches, three kicks. The *Street Fighter* characters are translated faithfully with only a few alterations (simplifications) to their move sets, the *Tekken* characters retain most of their moves, gaining a few due to the two additional. There are no complex "dexterity tests" to activate special moves, everything is usually a single "quarter circle forward" motion (down, down-forward, forward) plus one or more attack buttons.

Part of what makes *SfXT* accessible is Cross



Rush, a new universal combo system. Much like the Magic Series from *Darkstalkers* and *Marvel vs. Capcom*, hitting the light, medium, and then

heavy attack buttons quickly in sequence performs an automatic combo. If you hit heavy attack a second time, you will automatically launch your opponent into the air and tag in your partner.

There are a great deal of systems in *SfXT* to master, most using the three-segmented

Cross Gauge that fills when you do pretty much anything, or get hit in the face. Every character can do EX (more powerful) versions of their standard special moves, and a powerful Super Art. Perhaps the most humorous is the Cross Assault, activated through a simple quarter-circle-forward plus both medium attack buttons. It calls both characters in, their life bars are averaged together, and both fight simultaneously for a short while. If you don't have a human partner, the second character is CPU controlled.

Scramble Mode allows for 2-on-2 duels, online or offline, all four characters fighting simultaneously on the same playfield much like *Cross Fever* from *Marvel vs. Capcom: Clash of Super Heroes*. It's outrageous to behold.

- Miktar

"The tutorial meticulously goes through even the most basic concepts; someone who has never played a fighting game before will learn enough to immediately start having fun."

DETAILS

Release date:
Q1 2012

Platforms:
360 / PC
PS3 / PS Vita

Genre:
Fighting

Developer:
Dimps Corporation /
Capcom

Website:
www.streetfighter.com/us/sfxtk/

Publisher:
Capcom



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NuMetro
Interactive

As you unlock new combat roles via the skill tree, you'll be able to switch between them at will.



DETAILS

Release date:

2012

Platforms:

PC

Genre:

MMOFPS

Developer:

Sony Online Entertainment

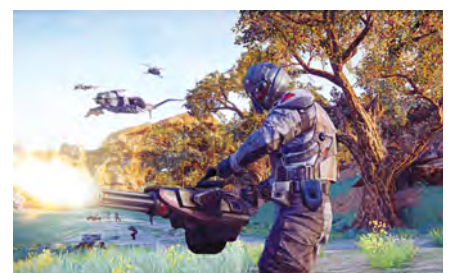
Website:

www.planetside2.com

Publisher:

Sony Online Entertainment

PlanetSide 2 is using Sony's new Forgelight Engine, which is also being used in the upcoming *EverQuest Next* (working title).



PlanetSide 2

The original thousand-player first-person shooter returns

Released in 2003, *PlanetSide* was a technological marvel. Three factions, populated by thousands of players a side, fought to control territory on the planet Auraxis. Taking on roles such as infantry, combat medic, infiltrator and more, players participated in large-scale first-person fights across deserts, mountains, swamps and forests, on foot or in the air. Battles could last for days or weeks, depending on tenacity.

Incidentally, *Battlefield 1942* allowed up to 64 players, and was released only a year earlier. *Tribes 2* allowed for up to 128 players (with jetpacks), and released a year before *Battlefield 1942*.

In spite of its scope and scale, *PlanetSide* remained a niche culture, mostly due to underexposure and high bandwidth requirements. Now we're in the era of high-speed Internet, advanced networking code, and a gaming culture more open to online play – perfect time for a *PlanetSide* sequel.

"For years we've talked about creating another *PlanetSide* game, and we're thrilled that technology has caught up with our vision," said John Smedley, President of SOE. "I'm incredibly impressed by what our team has done with *PlanetSide 2*. They've made everything as big, bold and brutal as possible. *PlanetSide 2* is truly representative of what a next generation MMOFPS will look and feel like."

Players will start by choosing which empire to support. The Terran Republic is militaristic, using Imperial authority to force a

peaceful coexistence on humanity, by force if necessary. The New Conglomerate is a loose grouping of rebel factions, idealistic freedom fighters against the Terran hegemony. The Vanu Sovereignty is a technocratic transhumanist faction that believes by tapping the technology of the Vanu (the lost ancient alien species of Auraxis), humanity can evolve.

"With huge war zones populated by thousands of fighters at once, the size and intensity of *PlanetSide 2* are simply unequalled. Both long time players of the series and FPS fans are going to be blown away by the massive scale of *PlanetSide* battles," said Matt Higby, creative director of *PlanetSide 2*."

Like its predecessor, the core mechanics revolve around capturing and holding key territories and valuable resources. The planet is divided into demarcated battlegrounds; the empire that can conquer an area is rewarded with fuel bonuses for vehicles, ammo bonuses, tech bonuses, and so on.

Taking control of a base might take days of coordinated effort, so we're hoping the yet-to-be-revealed community tools will make this easier, such as letting an empire vote on where to assault next, or which areas to defend. Even if an area has no notable installations or features, just capturing territory alone benefits your side – the more territory an empire controls, the more bonus it receives.

As expected from most massively-multiplayer games, there will be guild support. Guilds will be able to customise their outfits so as to develop their reputation on the battlefield, and communicate over built-in voice chat. *PlanetSide 2* will be free to play, but the exact details are still unknown other than it will feature a cash shop for selling vanity customisations.

NAG
- Miktar

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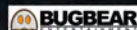
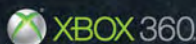
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DETAILS

Release date:
Q1 year
Platforms:
PC
Genre:
First-person shooter
Developer:
Hi-Rez Studios
Website:
www.tribesascend.com
Publisher:
Hi-Rez Studios

Tribes: Ascend

Up, up and awaa...
BOOM! Headshot!

Since the death of the *Tribes* series (see *Tribes: Vengeance*), fans of the franchise have been salivating for a return to form. There was a brief resurgence of excitement when InstantAction announced that they were building a *Tribes* clone for their browser-based service, but then that fizzled out and nobody heard anything. As it turns out, Hi-Rez Studios bought the licence from InstantAction and got to work on *Tribes: Ascend*. That was a year and a half ago, and now the game has entered its open beta phase. We played it (actually, we're still playing it), we loved it, and now we'll tell you all about it.

For those of you who've never before played *Tribes*, here's the most important thing: everyone has a jetpack. In this fast-paced multiplayer-only game, players battle it out in massive open-air arenas, flying high overhead, raining down death from above, or skiing across ground and water alike at impossible speeds courtesy of their hover boots. Players take on various roles from a selection of nine customisable classes based on three body types: light, medium and heavy. Light players are flag cappers, scouts, snipers and chasers – easy to kill if you can manage to hit them, and prone to sneaking up on you when you least expect it. Mediums cover the range of offence and defence, armed with a range of offensive weaponry and defensive tools; they're capable flag cappers but need to be a good shot if they plan to fend off any chasers. Heavies can soak up an impossible amount of damage but sacrifice manoeuvrability for power. While best left to defensive roles, heavies can lay waste to

“For those of you who've never before played *Tribes*, here's the most important thing: everyone has a jetpack.”



base defences (and defenders) if they manage to sneak within range of an enemy base.

Unlike previous games in the series, *Ascend* will be free to play. Players earn XP that can be redeemed for weapon and equipment upgrades and unlocks, as well as unlocking new classes (only three are available from the start). At the current price of unlocks, it's fairly easy to earn sufficient XP to unlock at least half of the game's content, but those who want the big guns and access to additional perks might find that the XP requirements for these are prohibitively high. This is where your money comes in, as players can buy "Tribes Gold" which can be exchanged for instant unlocks. It's a fair system, and one that works well if the initial game is both of high quality and free, so we can't complain. Besides, everything that you can expect to naturally unlock will give you plenty of tactical options and powerful weaponry.

Ascend isn't perfect, and we hope that Hi-Rez will listen to feedback from players to make it exactly the game that veterans of the series have been waiting for. But if the beta has proved anything to us it's that Hi-Rez know their audience and understand what *Tribes* means to people. They want to do this right. **NAG**

- GeometriX



There's no telling if all four original tribes will make it into the game. In its current form, only the Blood Eagles and Diamond Swords are present.

During the beta, we gained access to four game modes: team deathmatch, a 5-vs-5 TDM variant, capture the flag, and "rabbit" – a free-for-all mode in which a central flag must be held by individuals for them to earn points.

Skullgirls

The most meticulously designed fighting game yet.

When programmer Mike "Mike Z" Zaimont and artist Alex Ahad were introduced through mutual friends, *Skullgirls* was born. Eight bizarre female fighters clash to claim the legendary artifact "Skull Heart", which grants a young woman a single wish every seven years.

With a crisp "dark deco" style, *Skullgirls* has the lofty ambition of trying to teach complex fighting game terminology and systems even to complete newcomers. Its tutorial system starts with the utter basics and builds up to high-level concepts like cancels, DHCs (Delayed Hyper Cancels), mix-ups and hit confirms. It will also explain the systems unique to *Skullgirls*, like the infinite-combo detection system that gives players a one-button combo breaker, and how even "whiffed" moves (moves that barely missed) will build super meter.

So as to be tournament-ready from the start, all the little touches are there: a button-check on the character select screen, pause-protection requiring start to be held down for a second during a match, and more. You're not locked into three-on-three fights either, as *Skullgirls* borrows the *Capcom vs. SNK* "ratio system" which allows for one-on-three or two-on-three, scaling health and damage output to compensate.

Online play will use the newest GGPO networking system, with user-definable tolerance (a first for any fighter). Fans of the genre, get hyped. **NAG**

- Miktar



Renowned tournament fighter Mike "Mike Z" Zaimont had been working on his own fighting game engine for years. Alex Ahad was working on a world, story and characters for a fighting game since high-school.

DETAILS

Release date:

Q1 2012

Platforms:

360 / PS3

Genre:

Fighting

Developer:

Reverge Labs

Website:

skullgirls.com

Publisher:

Autumn Games



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REVIEWS INTRO

Robin Hood had his merry men and we got stuck with this bunch. Meet your reviewers.

What is the best memory you have working at/for/with/in NAG?



RedTide

Everything all the time everyday.



Miktar

(I thought about this all morning, and honestly, I couldn't pick an individual thing, it's been almost 10 years, that's a lot of memories). If I had to really pick one, it would be the time I got asked by a certain idiot, "So, do you want to work full-time?". Because that's when everything good in my life started.



Azimuth

Spending a day in the office and confirming they're all just as mad, disorganised, and instantly distracted as I a- hey, check out this funny cat video, guys.



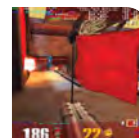
Mikit0707

Getting sent to Gamescom with Geometrix; meeting and interviewing the people who make the games we all love; realising those people are still just people like you and me.



GeometriX

Seeing my very first piece published in the magazine – a portion of the Far Cry 2 cover feature for the August 2008 issue.



Barksin

Hmm... Probably the games of Quake III CTF we used to play, back when we had enough people working in-office to balance the teams. Those were some frag-tastic times right there.

MINIREVIEWS

Kinda like regular reviews, only bite-sized and with less of those pesky words.

LITTLE DEVIANTS

Every new console needs that one game that does nothing but make gratuitous use of said console's fancy new thingamajig. Little Deviants is that game, and those thingamajigs are the PlayStation Vita's touch screen and rear touch pad.

The majority of the game takes place from a top-down viewpoint, in which you must guide the Deviants (small blob-like monsters) through numerous levels, avoiding traps and robots, and collecting stars and a key to unlock a portal through which you ultimately travel. It plays rather a bit like Marble Madness, but instead of directly controlling your Deviant, you use the rear touch pad to "push" up the terrain to make it roll around. It almost works, but the input is a little too difficult to use effectively and would be much better suited to gyro controls.

The game includes a number of side arcade-style games, none of which are terribly clever or much more than acceptably entertaining, and they all rely on some sort of alternative control system. Sadly, this is both the most interesting and most damning feature of the game.

62

MODNATION RACERS: ROAD TRIP

ModNation Racers has been scaled down to fit on the Vita, and the result is almost a complete success. The Vita is suited for this type of casual kart racing game, and the racing aspect of MNR translates very well to this powerful platform, delivering great visuals and smooth frame-rates, although we were a little disappointed with the lengthy load times. Unfortunately, some of the interface elements haven't fared as well. This is particularly true of the menu elements which require touch screen input, even though the d-pad or analogue sticks are perfectly suited for navigation.

Player-generated content is once-again the big pull factor, and players can create their own racers and vehicles, as well as race tracks. The track editor's options are vast, allowing players to lay out the track by drawing on the touch screen or driving on a blank canvas, but the tweaking process afterwards is too laborious for a quick session. Nonetheless, those who put in the effort will be able to build high quality tracks and share them with friends or strangers online.

70

DUNGEON HUNTER: ALLIANCE

A pure Diablo clone, Dungeon Hunter Alliance does everything it can to copy the granddaddy of hack-'n'-slash RPGs, but where it innovates, it fails miserably. You'll play as one of three archetypal character classes – rogue, warrior or wizard – and take on the role of a murdered king who's been raised by magical forces to retake the throne.

During your quest, you will, for some utterly bizarre reason, keep your identity a secret and decide to partake in a number of brain-numbing side-quests on your way to your goal. You'll journey through poorly designed, painfully repetitive environments and kill the same monsters over and over again. Occasionally an easy-to-beat but mercilessly hit-point-heavy boss will appear and cause you to consume a few potions. There's a random loot system that generates items that are about as exciting as a piece of dry toast, and there's an annoying fairy that follows you around, alerting you to hidden objects and providing a powerful cooldown-based spell when you can get the double-tapping on the touch screen to work properly.

43



Ramjet

There is no such thing as a good memory of working for NAG... KIDDING! Best memory: The conspiracy to ruin Michael's Quake 3 railgun skills by moving his Prestik ball aiming aid slightly off centre on his monitor... Ah, fun times!



SAVAGE

Playing games all day at work, and then working through the night to meet the deadline... Every month! *[Including working on this page at 23.16 two nights before deadline, Art Director]*



ShockG

Neo has no memories of the last few years. All he remembers was a big white flash and the soothing cold fingers of liquid nitrogen around his neck before he blacked out.

REVIEW SCORES GUIDELINE

Here at NAG, our reviewers are gamers first, and, while we strive to be as objective as possible with our reviews, each reviewer has their own preferences, opinion and style that will come through in their reviews. It's not an exact science – anyone telling you otherwise is fibbing. We love playing games and, sometimes, certain genres and series will stand out for an individual reviewer; it's not uncommon for those preferences to reflect in their review score. Having said that, we've put together this little guide to help you understand how we rate our games – more or less.

1-39 This game is broken, both technically and in terms of gameplay. Even if you get it to run, playing it is a painful experience that you wouldn't wish upon your worst enemy.

40-49 It barely functions, but there's little real game here. Maybe if you got it for free, you'd spend a few hours with it, but it's not something you'd recommend to friends.

50-59 Acceptable, but nothing special. It's generic in every conceivable way, but it's solid enough and might be worth spending some time hunting for achievements.

60-69 Now we're getting somewhere. This game is good; it has something interesting about it, and fans of the genre or series should enjoy it, but something significant holds it back from greatness and might prevent newcomers from latching on.

70-79 This game is solid. Anyone who enjoys this type of genre will have a great time and could finish it without too much aggravation. It shows care and polish, but falls short in a number of areas.

80-89 Excellent has been achieved; a game that you'd happily play through multiple times and recommend to friends. It adds interesting, if imperfect, advancements to the genre or series, or ticks all the expected boxes with flair and polish. It's technically superior to many other games but perhaps misses an opportunity or two, or doesn't innovate enough.

90-100 As close to perfection as possible. This game is highly innovative; it has incredible visuals; it plays like a dream and you can't get enough of it. You have to look for faults just to avoid giving it a perfect score. You'll go back and play this in ten years and shed a tear of joy when you do.

WEBScores

How do we measure up? We scour the Net to find out what the rest of the world thinks.

ALAN WAKE (PC)

NAG: 88
Metacritic: 83
Gamerankings: 83

ALAN WAKE'S AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

NAG: 75
Metacritic: 77
Gamerankings: 78

ASURA'S WRATH

NAG: 80
Metacritic: 73
Gamerankings: 73

BINARY DOMAIN

NAG: 79
Metacritic: 74
Gamerankings: 75

FINAL FANTASY XIII-2

NAG: 75
Metacritic: 74
Gamerankings: 80

GOTHAM CITY IMPOSTORS

NAG: 62
Metacritic: 71
Gamerankings: 74

GRAND SLAM TENNIS 2

NAG: 80
Metacritic: 72
Gamerankings: 72

KINGDOMS OF AMALUR: RECKONING

NAG: 85
Metacritic: 84
Gamerankings: 80

MASS EFFECT 3

NAG: 90
Metacritic: 94
Gamerankings: 94

METAL GEAR SOLID HD COLLECTION

NAG: 78
Metacritic: 90
Gamerankings: 90

SOUL CALIBUR V

NAG: 85
Metacritic: 81
Gamerankings: 80

SYNDICATE

NAG: 75
Metacritic: 74
Gamerankings: 75

UFC UNDISPUTED 3

NAG: 88
Metacritic: 85
Gamerankings: 85

WIPEOUT 2048

NAG: 81
Metacritic: 79
Gamerankings: 81

Mass Effect 3



More like lens flare effect, amirite? Amirite, guys? ...Guys?

Earth, 2186. As a consequence of a, uh, diplomatic incident in Batarian space, Commander Shepard of the Human Systems Alliance, intergalactic hero and Citadel shopping fan, has found himself indefinitely relieved of duty pending a formal enquiry into this mad theory he has about a race of sentient machines plotting to death-ray everything in the universe. Around about the same time, conveniently enough, a race of sentient machines turns up and starts death-raying everything on the planet, in what appears for all intents and purposes to be part of a greater plot to death-ray everything in the universe. So... that worked out, or something.

Instantly looking a bit stupid and/or dead, the Human Systems Alliance reinstates Shepard and dispatches him to plzplz win the day LOL & soz about the misunderstanding LOL. At least, that's what I'm sure the text message on his phone must have said. Okay, I don't even know if Shepard has a phone. Does he? It doesn't matter. Anyway. There's a new plan, and it involves building this gigantic Prothean lollipop in space then figuring out how to make it do whatever it's supposed to do. That's the plan. It's not a very good plan, but it's a better plan than no plan.

So it's the big finish, and BioWare has come to the party with everything. Well, *mostly* everything.

Because, totally honestly, *Mass Effect* has never been much good at being a proper action game. The cover system is completely unreliable, for starters, Velcroing you when you're just trying to rush past, un-Velcroing you when you're trying to stay Velcroed because enemies and death and stuff, and randomly playing to-Velcro-or-not-to-Velcro in between. If *Mass Effect* was a documentary film, everything would have been over before it started and humanity would be done and dusted, forever, because Commander Shepard stood up into a face-rocket for no reason whatsoever.

DETAILS

Platforms:

360 / PC / PS3

Genre:

RPG

Age restriction:

16+

Multiplayer:

None

Local:

None

Online:

4 players

Developer:

BioWare

Website:

www.masseffect.com

Publisher:

EA

Distributor:

Electronic Arts
South Africa

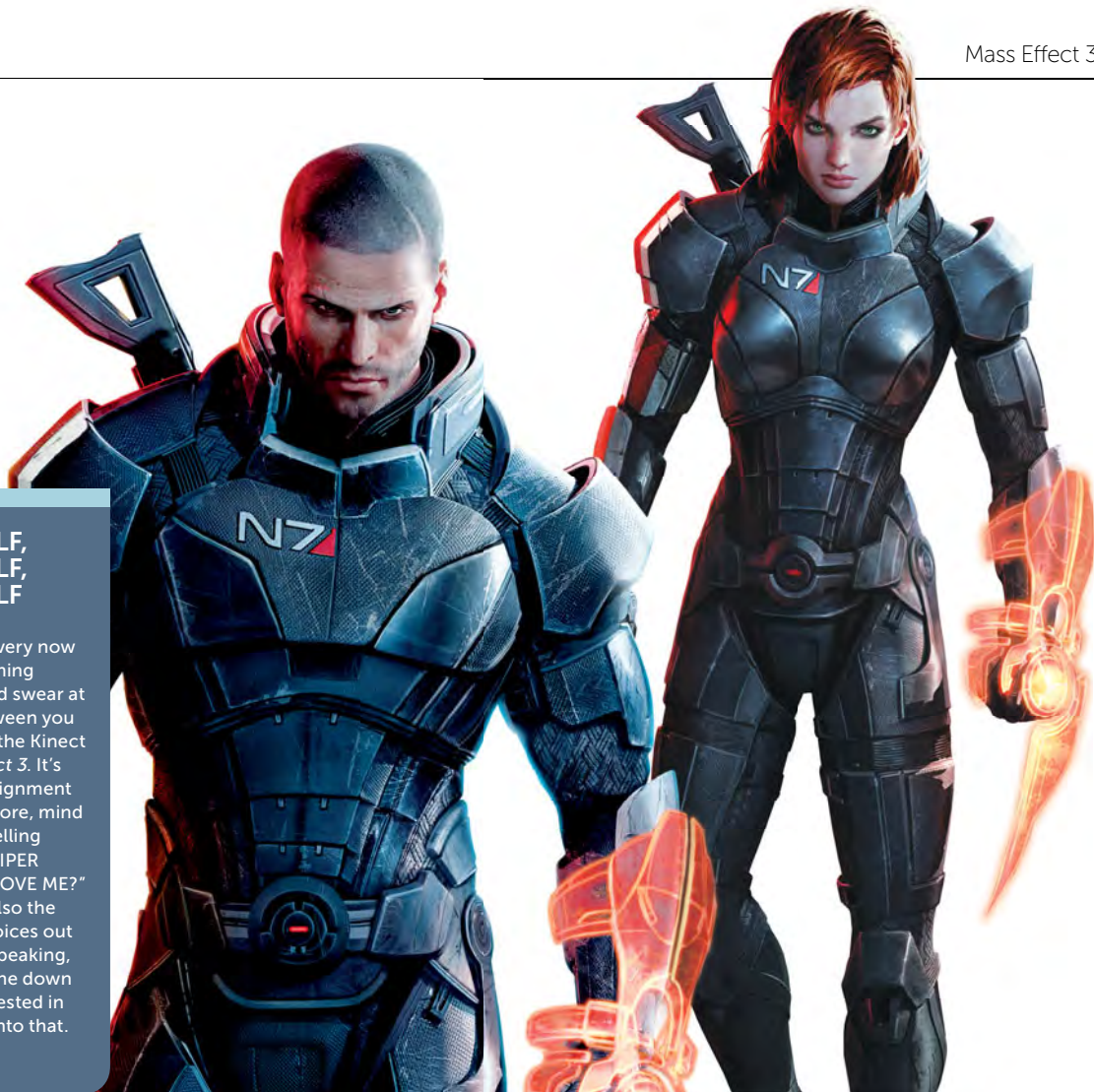


Robot Boy lights a methane discharge.



GOTTA GET MYSELF, GOTTA GET MYSELF, GOTTA GET MYSELF KINECTED

I hate Kinect, I really do. Every now and then, I'll look at that thing sitting on top of my TV and swear at it. But, and this is just between you and me, I did actually use the Kinect voice control in *Mass Effect 3*. It's not that pulling up the assignment wheel is such a tedious chore, mind you, but rather because yelling "GARRUS! OVERLOAD! SNIPER RIFLE! WHY WON'T YOU LOVE ME?" is way more fun. There's also the option to say dialogue choices out loud, and hypothetically speaking, when you're half a box-wine down and really emotionally invested in the game, you might get into that. *Hypothetically.*



So it's the big finish, and BioWare has come to the party with everything. Well, mostly everything.



Although this random dice-rolling wasn't such an issue in previous games, this one has a lot of combat, and that makes for a lot of thrilling new opportunities to introduce your controller to your lounge wall. That's especially if you're playing on the hardest and appropriately named Insanity difficulty, which is supposed to be, you know, insane, I totally get it, but if we've learned anything from the *Call of Duty* series, it's that grenade spam doesn't make a game harder, it makes it sh*ttier. It's a subtle distinction, perhaps, but also a significant one and not just because of the spelling.

And on the subject of lessons learned from other games, apparently nobody at BioWare played *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*. There's a boss fight towards the end of *Mass Effect 3* that proves boss fights in class-based games just don't work (See: *Deus Ex: Revolution*). Oh, you're playing an Infiltrator? Game over, deploy rofcopters. After clocking up 35 hours on Insanity difficulty, I was forced to dial it down to Casual difficulty to get through the last bit, although I'll admit that striding, Terminator-like, through the final two missions and one-shot head-popping everything with a pistol was better than chocolate. But still.

Then there's weapon swapping. Before starting a mission, you get to choose what gear you're packing with you, which makes sense, right? Exactly. During the course of that mission, however, you might find a new gun – and you're given the option to switch over to that, but without an opportunity to test-fire the thing first, and if you don't like your new gun after switching, you're stuck with it regardless until you're back on the Normandy. Maybe I'm over-analysing this, but if you can't just pick up your old gun off the floor again, I'm having some serious doubts getting behind the whole idea of the future.

But enough griping, and back to the adventure. In a lot of ways, *Mass Effect 3's* campaign is pretty much *Mass Effect 2's*

As the final chapter in one of this generation's most loved series, *Mass Effect 3* was simply never going to be good enough. It's not, but it got close.



I TAKE BACK THE EARTH WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

Mass Effect 3 debuts the series' first multiplayer mode, a standard-issue co-operative survival mode putting you and up to three battle buddies up against ten waves of increasingly formidable enemies to see who dies first. It's probably going to be you. While the mode conspicuously lacks some features like target spotting and teamie markers, it's considerably better than the cheap add-on everybody expected. As a value-added incentive, completing multiplayer missions increases your single-player campaign's Galactic Readiness rating, a number factored into whether or not you make it to the end in one piece.

campaign with some new backdrops. You're basically zooming around galaxies and star clusters, persuading other squishies to join you in a final, apocalyptic showdown against the robots, and – at least once – accidentally committing genocide with one admittedly quite... impulsive decision. Choices and consequences, people, they're everything that matters, and if the <REDACTED> were still around, I'm sure they'd understand.

Speaking of choices and consequences, and depending on how things turned out last time around, you may or may not see some old friends in *Mass Effect 3*. Having multiple-choiced my own way through *Mass Effect 2*'s finale without a single casualty (not even Miranda, who I actually *tried* to leave with the Collectors), I was bumping into ex-Normandy crew members all over the place. Finding my old flame Jack was particularly awkward. Not because I messed around a bit with Liara in the Lair of the Shadow Broker, mind you, but because Jack snogged me while my helmet was still on, and it looked super uncomfortable.

Although these cameos were interesting in an "oh, hi" kind of way, they don't have any real impact on the way the game plays out, instead providing a somewhat more personal or sentimental context for events as they escalate rapidly towards a cataclysmic conclusion.

As the final chapter in one of this generation's most loved series, *Mass Effect 3* was simply never going to be good enough. It's not, but it got close. The game is as compelling as it is ambitious, and easily makes up for its mistakes with an emotionally engaging narrative and a sense of purpose and drama entirely unprecedented in its genre. Whether or not the controversial ending does it for you, there's no denying it ends unforgettably. And what could be more important than that? **NAG**

- Azimuth

90 We're leaving together, but still it's farewell - and maybe we'll come back to earth, who can tell? I guess there is no one to blame, we're leaving ground, will things ever be the same again? It's the final countdown, duh-duh duuuuh-duh, duh duh duh-duh duh, duh-duh duuuuh-duh, duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh, duh-duh-duuuuh, duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duuuuuuh-duuuuuuuuh-duuuuuuuuuuh.

PLUS
You get your own spaceship!

MINUS
It's not a *real* spaceship / Some questionable design issues



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Look & Listen
For the Fans

Soul Calibur V

Now with 100% more malfested

As you may know from our *Soul Calibur V* preview (November 2011), this entry into the series almost didn't happen. After *Soul Calibur IV*, the team at Project Soul was disbanded to work on other projects. It was only due to a fan-petition on Facebook that the team was brought back in to create a sequel.

The narrative follows 17 years after Siegfried's ending from *Soul Calibur IV* and goes from there. While story isn't all that important in a fighting game (though it can be used to great effect like in the recent *Mortal Kombat*), *Soul Calibur V* makes a decent attempt at one. It's a bit silly at times, jumping between having you play whiny man-child Patroklos in his never-ending quest to find his sister Pyrrha. He goes about this task by being an asshole, until finally meeting up with Siegfried who gives him a magical sword. Patroklos "Digivolves" into Alpha Patroklos, finds his sister, and the two try to work through their mommy issues.

Okay, it's not *that* bad, but the overwrought voice-acting and static-panel cut scenes do tend to detract from the story they're trying to tell. Occasionally control switches over to Pyrrha or newcomer Z.W.E.I. and his magical portal wolf, which mixes things up a bit, but ultimately the campaign is there to be beaten for the achievement and some gear for Create-A-Soul.

Quick Battle has the real meat if you're looking for offline play. There are 200 "ghost" players to fight, each one representing a specific challenge to overcome. Some are masters at blocking; others favour the rush down, and so on. Their "titles" give you a clue as to their style of play.

It's a bit silly at times, jumping between having you play whiny man-child Patroklos in his never-ending quest to find his sister Pyrrha.

DETAILS

Platforms:

360 / PS3

Genre:

Fighting

Age restriction:

16+

Multiplayer:

Local:

2 players

Online:

2 players

Developer:

Project Soul

Website:

www.

soulcalibur.com

Publisher:

Namco Bandai

Games

Distributor:

Megarom



GLOBAL COLLOSEO

The Global Colloseo is a kind of extended lobby for online play where up to 50 players can hang out and fight each other or enter into the "twice a month" automated tournament. There is a Global Colloseo for each major city per region, per country, but mostly just for Europe and the United States. All of the online areas in *Soul Calibur* have a text chat box, the Global Colloseo included, so you can talk smack without needing to use your real voice. It's a very visual lobby, each player is represented by their custom card which you can examine or use to challenge them directly, and you can move your card around the lobby area, just for fun.

CREATE-A-SOUL

When fighting against random people online, either in the Global Colloseo or through Ranked/Player matches, it can be very entertaining to see what types of custom characters people have made. Most tend to be recreations of iconic characters, like Finn (Adventure Time), Deadpool, Spawn, Kratos, Scorpion from *Mortal Kombat*, etc.

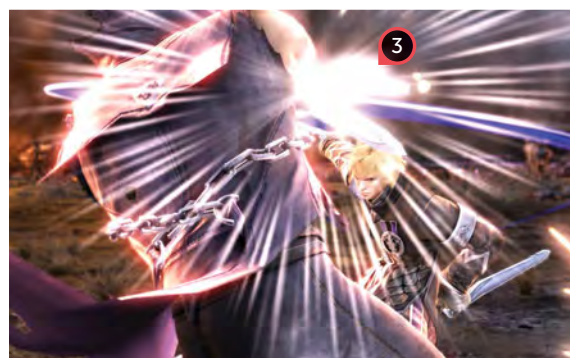
The customisation options in Create-A-Soul are vast. You can choose your height and between two body styles,

adjust the pitch and tone of the voice style you select and apply stickers to everything. Armour and weapons can be swapped out, colour-edited, customised with patterns and three "accessory" slots lets you place things anywhere you'd like. Some people like to abuse this by making a character surrounded by the "drum circle" accessory, making them impossible to see.

You can create a custom character using any of the existing fighting styles

from the regular cast members, or the special "Devil Jin" fighting style unlocked when you beat *Tekken* producer Katsuhiro Harada in the Quick Battle mode. Equipment and weapons are purely aesthetic, with no special effects; all weapons have the same stats.

You can edit the regular cast members as well, swapping out select pieces of armour. Certain characters lack anything beyond adjusting their colour palettes, like Aeon.



1

The Critical Gauge bar, used for Guard Intercept, and Brave Edge / Critical Edge attacks, can fill up twice and contains four sub-stocks per bar.

2 Brave Edge (powered-up) moves and Guard Intercept use up two sub-stocks (half a bar), while Critical Edge moves use up four sub-stocks (one full bar).

3 If your opponent blocks too much, their health bar will start to flash. If they keep blocking attacks, eventually you'll Guard Burst through their block, leaving them vulnerable.



SOUL LINK

On the main menu, there are three Soul Link boxes. You can select up to three friends to monitor via Soul Link, which will replace those boxes with detailed stats of their progress. If you're inside the Online menu, it will change to reflect their online stats, such as their Ranked class and win/loss ratio. If you're in the Single Player portion of the menu, it will show their progress through the campaign, or their best time from the Arcade Mode.

They start easy (if you select C-rank or lower ghosts), but once you hit the B-rank and higher you'll have to learn the specific techniques needed to defeat them. Arcade Mode has the standard six-fight system, but new are the selectable routes that change the opponent line-up. There are no character-specific endings in Arcade Mode, which is a pity.

The combat system is excellent. The return of a Super Meter (Critical Gauge) balances out the power moves through resource management, though the change of Guard Intercept into one that requires meter to use is a controversial one. There is the new Just Guard (tapping block right as an attack lands) which is free, but only blocks low if you're also crouching. Guard Intercept (tapping back plus all three attack buttons) uses two sub-stocks of meter but defends both high and low simultaneously, also putting your opponent at a severe impetus disadvantage.

Online play is testy at the moment, with frequent disconnects through no fault of the actual Internet connection of either player. This is something Namco needs to fix via a patch. When it *does* work, and both players have good connections, the lag is almost imperceptible. Ultimately, time will tell how the character balance works out, as there are still adjustments to be made in spite of the game having had location testing in Japan. **NAG**

- Miktar

85 *Soul Calibur V* represents the best the series has to offer in terms of game balance and functionality, even if some players will be sad to see their favourite characters vanish from the roster or replaced by offspring.

PLUS
Comprehensive online modes / Fantastic visuals

MINUS
No per-character voice selection / Lacks decent tutorial mode / No "Fight Request" mode

Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning



Manifest destiny

Created by an unholy alliance of fantasy all-stars, *Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning* is one of those lovely surprises that comes along every once in a while. That's mostly because I didn't allow myself to get overly excited for it. Still, even if I'd built up its release in my mind, eagerly awaiting its arrival like a kid waiting for Santa to nom the milk and cookies he/she left out, *KoA* would've pleasantly surprised me, digging its hooks into me the moment I first set foot in the eponymous fantasy lands of Amalur. And it's to be expected. With such people as Ken Rolston (lead designer on the third and fourth *Elder Scrolls* games and now *KoA*'s executive designer), Todd McFarlane (creator of long-running comic book *Spawn*, who worked on the game's art), R.A. Salvatore (best-selling author of numerous fantasy works, imbuing the game's story and dialogue with his magicks) and a former Major League baseball player (what is this I don't even?) all lending their expertise to this game, excellence is expected. And excellence has been delivered. Mostly.

Just as it's been created by a number of acclaimed minds behind various otherworldly exploits, so too is it a potent blend of numerous games that have come before it. Obvious RPG comparisons can be made to games like *Diablo*, the *Elder Scrolls* series, *Fable* and a bunch of BioWare titles. The real-time, timing- and combo-based action has a very *Fable* feel to it (and the game's art style shares obvious similarities), with a pinch of influence from action-y stuff like *God of War* also readily noticeable. The most alarming similarity can be drawn to MMORPGs, as RPG inspirations have seemingly come full circle now that our offline, single-player RPGs are behaving in strange, MMO-like fashion. It's naturally odd, but it definitely works here.

Its story centres on destiny and fate, in that you (and your character) have the power to change seemingly preordained events with your actions. You're supposedly the last, desperate hope for the mortal races (humans, gnomes and don't-call-us-elves) of Amalur, who are at war with a renegade offshoot of Amalur's normally placid immortal inhabitants, the Fae. It's generally exceedingly



well written, right down to the dialogue of individual characters – even though the dialogue trees are, more often than not, very basic question and answer affairs. Unlike the MMOs that it's so oddly similar to, every NPC you'll meet in the game is fully voiced (and often superbly so, I'll add) and most will share their different outlook on the events unfolding around them. It's impressive considering the sheer scope of the world, and the number of inhabitants within.

The concept of altering fate ties into everything. The organic class (classes are called Destinies here) system, for example, allows you to change your role (and subsequently the bonuses it provides you) whenever you feel it's necessary. It works like this: Skills are divided into three trees: Might, Finesse and Sorcery, representing the three fantasy archetypes of warrior, rogue and mage respectively. Each tree has multiple abilities and skills to invest in as you level up, and you're free to distribute your points across different trees without fear of penalty. The way you distribute your points determines which Destinies you can unlock and specialise in. Put all your points into Might and you'll unlock Destinies that give bonuses to your melee prowess. Split your points

DETAILS

Platforms:
360 / PC / PS3
Genre:
Action role-playing game
Age restriction:
18+
Multiplayer:
Local:
None
Online:
None
Developer:
38 Studios / Big Huge Games
Website:
reckoning.amalur.com
Publisher:
EA
Distributor:
Electronic Arts
South Africa



1 Many of the enemy designs in *Amalur* are quite striking and imaginative. However, in typical ARPG fashion, many enemy designs are renamed and reused as you progress further.





KoA's gameplay is rock-solid and engaging. **Combat flows fast and fluid no matter your chosen character build**, with pleasing variety in the weaponry and their individual effects.

between Might and Sorcery, however, and you'll unlock multi-class Destinies like Battlemage – which provides bonuses to both your magical and melee abilities. Occasionally, these Destinies alter your existing abilities. All characters can dodge, for example, rolling away from danger. But unlock the aforementioned Battlemage Destiny, and your dodge ability becomes Blink, a short-distance teleport away from danger. These Destinies are a refined way of giving you semi-freedom to build your character the way you want to, rather than simply selecting your class upon creating your character. The old RPG mainstay of respecting your character's skills and abilities when you're not happy with your past choices, or when you feel like altering your build a bit also naturally lends itself to this idea that you're able to alter destiny on a whim. Problems arise when, even with all this talk of fate shifting and you being the chosen one, KoA's otherwise enormously detailed world still feels one-dimensional, and the effect you're able to have on it is minimal. It's a world that warrants exploration and is extremely nice to look at, but it feels a bit like window shopping because it's never really yours.

That aside, KoA's gameplay is rock-solid and engaging. Combat flows fast and fluid no matter your chosen character build, with pleasing variety in the weaponry and their individual effects. This is unquestionably an action RPG, containing all the idiosyncrasies expected of the genre. Constant loot drops kit you out with items of varying, colour-coded rarity (sorting through it all can be quite annoying, however, since you'll have to deal with menus that are functional, but clumsy), and there's plenty of reward to be had for the time you put into the game. And you'll be able to pump a shocking amount of time into it:

the dizzying amount of side quests you can take on and personal goals you can set for yourself means that this game could easily become your next obsession – provided you don't mind dealing with many, many tedious fetch quests and humdrum, grind-filled content. Like a morbidly obese person at an all-you-can-eat buffet, quantity trumps quality when it comes to the quest offerings in KoA, although that's not necessarily true in all cases: a few of the quest lines (the House of Ballads faction's quests spring to mind) are actually quite engaging and inventive. Several different avenues for crafting your own gear and items are presented to you in basic, but effective fashion, leaving you with something to do when you're not out bashing things over the head with comically large hammers. **NAG**

- Barkskin

85

There really is a hell of a lot to like about *Kingdoms of Amalur*. This is a brilliantly made ARPG: polished, alluring and bursting with content and exploration opportunities. Set in a beautifully inviting world and brilliantly designed in the story, gameplay and art departments, it's a game that could easily keep you busy for an embarrassing amount of time if you let it.

/ PLUS /

Huge, beautiful world / Loads of content = a ton of game time / Well-crafted mechanics

/ MINUS /

Your effect on the world feels inconsequential / Menu interface could be better / Side quests are largely uninspired

Final Fantasy XIII-2

Back to the future

It might sound like typical gamer entitlement attitude, but Square Enix owed their fans a better *FFXIII*. It wasn't an absolutely awful game, but it lacked content that series veterans expect from a *Final Fantasy*. That's what *XIII-2* is for – it's an apology, an attempt to right the wrongs of the past and show gamers that Square can still make a *Final Fantasy* the way they're expected to. While this demanding attitude might be considered a death sentence for innovation, *XIII-2* proves that they can stick to a formula and give people what's expected, and still manage to innovate.

Final Fantasy XIII-2 is a direct sequel to *XIII*, which means the return of a few key characters and a continued storyline. Players take on the role of Lightning's younger sister, Serah, and her new-found friend Noel, and together the pair will travel through time solving paradoxes (which usually involves killing things) and attempting to put right a corrupt timeline. The game's storytelling strength falls a bit behind that of its predecessor, as *XIII* had the luxury (or curse, rather) of linear gameplay to aid the narrative. *XIII-2* mercifully ditches the linearity but trades it for a massively reduced cast of playable characters – it's just Serah and Noel. This trade-off has an interesting effect. On the one hand, it changes the combat dynamics, forcing the pair to learn multiple roles to overcome more complex foes and boss

battles, but it also lends strength and believability to the relationship that develops between the two.

With a vast army of playable characters off the table, we now have access to controllable monsters that fill the gaps we'd otherwise have. Serah and Noel are always in the party (with the exception of a few scripted parts of the game), and three additional party slots (but only a single combat slot) are available for monsters that you've captured through normal battle. These monsters can learn new skills and develop their base stats by spending certain items in the Crystarium, which has moved to a linear series of nodes that occasionally give new abilities and resistances as you unlock them. The two human characters make use of a similar Crystarium, but instead spend Crystarium Points to unlock nodes. Initially, the Crystarium feels both dull and overwhelming, as there are few choices to make early in the game and new abilities pop up at a blistering speed, but once you've travelled the node fully, characters jump to the next level and can choose to learn a new combat role or take other bonuses. Sadly, the Crystarium suffers from a case of repetition, and about two-thirds of the way through progress of a single role, you'll find that no new abilities are learned. Eventually you'll unlock a single Ultima ability per role, but the act of doing so is so unceremonious that you'll

DETAILS

Platforms:
360 / PS3
Genre:
Japanese role-playing game
Age restriction:
16+
Multiplayer:
Local:
None
Online:
None
Developer:
Square Enix / tri-Ace
Website:
www.finalfantasy13-2game.com
Publisher:
Square Enix
Distributor:
Megarom



1 The game's soundtrack is constantly blaring in the background. A mix of upbeat J-pop/rock and supposedly soothing vocal pieces that sound like they're fresh out of an anime intro, these songs do their best to be noticed without becoming a nuisance.

2 In a nod to *FFVII*, players can visit the location of Sanctuary which features gambling and even Chocobo races. Unfortunately, the Chocobo husbandry is nowhere near as deep and interesting as that of *VII*'s, but it's a nice touch nonetheless.



MIKTAR'S OPINION

Final Fantasy XIII-2 is actually good. What *FFXIII* did wrong, was force you down a single corridor bereft of meaningful choice, alongside some amazingly vapid characters powered only by motivational speeches and belt-centric clothing.

In *FFXIII-2*, advancement is genuinely player-driven. You don't just press forward to go from battle to battle. You are responsible for choosing which era to visit, when to "rewind" an era to its initial state after having visited it before, and there are plenty of meaningful side-quests. The first three quarters of the game manage to avoid cheesy plot-related catchphrases ("fight for the future!"), faltering only in the final stretch. The two lead characters are mostly likeable, but do occasionally suffer from idiotic internal monologues. There will be times you'll want to strangle Mog the Moogle, but at least you can throw him around.

What *FFXIII* did right, was take the Active Time Battle system from *Final Fantasy IV* and, in automating the obvious choices like casting fire on enemies weak to fire, changed the player from a button pusher into a squad leader. By "Paradigm Shifting" the team's various roles in fluid response to enemy actions, so as to most effectively increase a foe's Stagger Bar, it brought value to a player's active participation.

In *FFXIII-2*, the battle system is mostly untouched except for a few refinements around the edges, and the inclusion of a monster-catching system for filling the third slot on your team. You can assign up to three monsters at a time, choosing when they fight based on their position in your user-defined Paradigm layouts. Since the two lead characters can't learn all skills, you'll want to track down and tame specific monsters to use, or for infusing their abilities into your favorite critters.

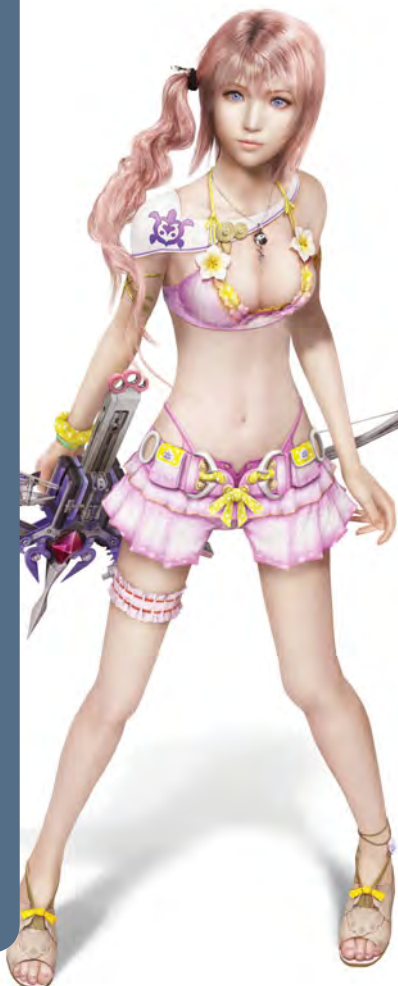
From the Historia Crux, a "place outside of time", you choose which era to visit, tracking down new gates that lead to undiscovered eras. There are eight paradox endings to find, each acting as a kind of "game over" but rewarding you skill points and fragments before dumping you back at the Historia Crux. Fragments are important for unlocking the true ending.

The whole thing comes across like the closest thing we'll ever see to a *Chrono Trigger 3*. Visiting eras at different time-frames is interesting, exploring tangent time-lines created by your actions, strangely rewarding. It's no *Quantum Leap* for the series, but not a waste of time either.

85



"*Final Fantasy XIII-2* is a direct sequel to *XIII*, which means the return of a few key characters and a continued storyline."



find yourself forgetting you had it.

Through the act of time travel, *FFXIII-2* ditches the world map and airship concept in favour of time gates and enclosed locations. Serah and Noel travel to various locations within a time frame of 700 years, and many of the locations have multiple time periods that you can visit. It's not a perfect take on free exploration, however, as you're limited to which times and locations you can visit by gates which take you to pre-programmed destinations. Eventually, you'll have a large number of gates open and the gameplay does indeed feel as open as *Final Fantasy* games of the past, but unfortunately at that stage, the gameplay mechanics start to lose steam and much of the game feels like a grind from that point on. Trading in dynamic and fresh gameplay mechanics for open world freedom feels like the exact opposite of what *FFXIII* delivered, but at least we have a good balance between the two for a decent chunk of time around the middle of the game. It feels like the developers still had plenty of story to tell, but didn't have sufficient gameplay to keep up. **NAG**

- GeometriX

75

FFXIII-2 makes up for the transgressions of its predecessor, and the combination of the two games certainly feels like a "proper" *Final Fantasy*. Unfortunately, the gameplay falters soon after the halfway point in the game, leaving players forced to grind their way through an otherwise compelling story.

PLUS

Plenty of supporting content / Finely-tuned combat / Monster wrangling is fun / Lots of new gameplay features

MINUS

Becomes repetitive around two-thirds of the way in / Some might not like the limited cast of playable characters

Syndicate

Ha! That's not a Gauss Rifle...

It's 2069. It's a future where Bullfrog's *Syndicate* received a sequel true to its roots – a real-time tactical game filled with nostalgic, but beautifully updated deliciousness that didn't mess with anyone's childhood gaming memories. That's my way of sulking about this not being the *Syndicate* that I so affectionately remember. Boo! Hiss! And all that. *Syndicate: The FPS Reboot* is a fine game in its own right, regardless of what I wanted it to be. Set in the not-too-distant future, it presents a world sans politicians or governments, where people are governed (read: controlled) by global mega corporations known as Syndicates. A huge chunk of the world's population is connected to the Dataverse (tomorrow's Internet) via chips implanted in their heads, allowing them to interface with almost everything around them in unparalleled fashion, imbuing them with certain superhuman traits. It also allows the corporations to maintain strict control over their subjects. Democratic policies are replaced by the desire to increase market share in any way possible and corporate espionage is the new war, with chipped Agents the elite foot soldiers spearheading each Syndicate's advance. You are Miles Kilo, one of these Agents, and EuroCorp – the Syndicate holding your leash – has just outfitted you with a fancy new prototype chip called DART 6.

Syndicate's often been compared to *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* in the past few months, and with its cyberpunk dystopian future and technologically augmented population, it's not surprising. In action, however, they're completely different. *Deus Ex* is a shooter with a very firm grounding in the realm of RPGs. *Syndicate*, meanwhile, is really just a shooter with mild customisation options and some flashy abilities. It's a linear, scripted romp through futuristic settings, in which all

you really ever do is attempt to murder soldiers emblazoned with hostile corporate logos in the most inventive ways possible with the tools available to you. To aid you, you've got three Breach Applications for hacking enemy chips, as well as your DART overlay and an arsenal of occasionally inventive weaponry. The DART overlay is useful for a number of reasons: activate it and your health and damage output get a small boost, you move faster and any enemies you've previously spotted are highlighted, even when behind cover. Its use is limited, however, so use it sparingly. Your three Applications are Backfire, Suicide and Persuade. Backfire stuns enemies by causing their weapons to malfunction. Suicide convinces an enemy to lose their sh*t and detonate a grenade, killing themselves and nearby foes. Persuade persuades (obviously) an enemy to switch allegiance and fight by your side for a short while before eventually taking their own life. Certain foes (like hostile Agents) can have their chips extracted once you've whittled down their health, following which you'll get upgrade points to spend on advancements for your own chip. These provide bonuses like increased health, faster reload times and prolonged DART overlay duration.

Then there are the actual guns – the meat of the game. I'd be lying if I said I didn't let out a sigh of disappointment the first time I picked up a Gauss Rifle and used its wimpy target-tracking bullets, but the weapons in *Syndicate* are nevertheless remarkably satisfying when put to use. They all pack serious punch, particularly the heavy weapons that you'll occasionally gain access to as the game progresses. There's a lot to like about the moment-to-moment action here: it's intense and brutal, with appropriately energetic tunes serving as a backdrop to the violent snarl of your bullet-slingers and

DETAILS

Platforms:
360 / PC / PS3

Genre:
First-person shooter

Age restriction:
18+

Multiplayer:
Local:
None

Online:
4 players

Developer:
Starbreeze Studios

Website:
www.ea.com/syndicate

Publisher:
EA

Distributor:
Electronic Arts
South Africa

1 Certain enemies in the game are protected by armour that makes them immune to your future-bullets. You'll need to breach and disable the armour before you'll be able to kill 'em.

2 There's a lot of death to be suffered in the co-op. Don't judge us. It's tough.

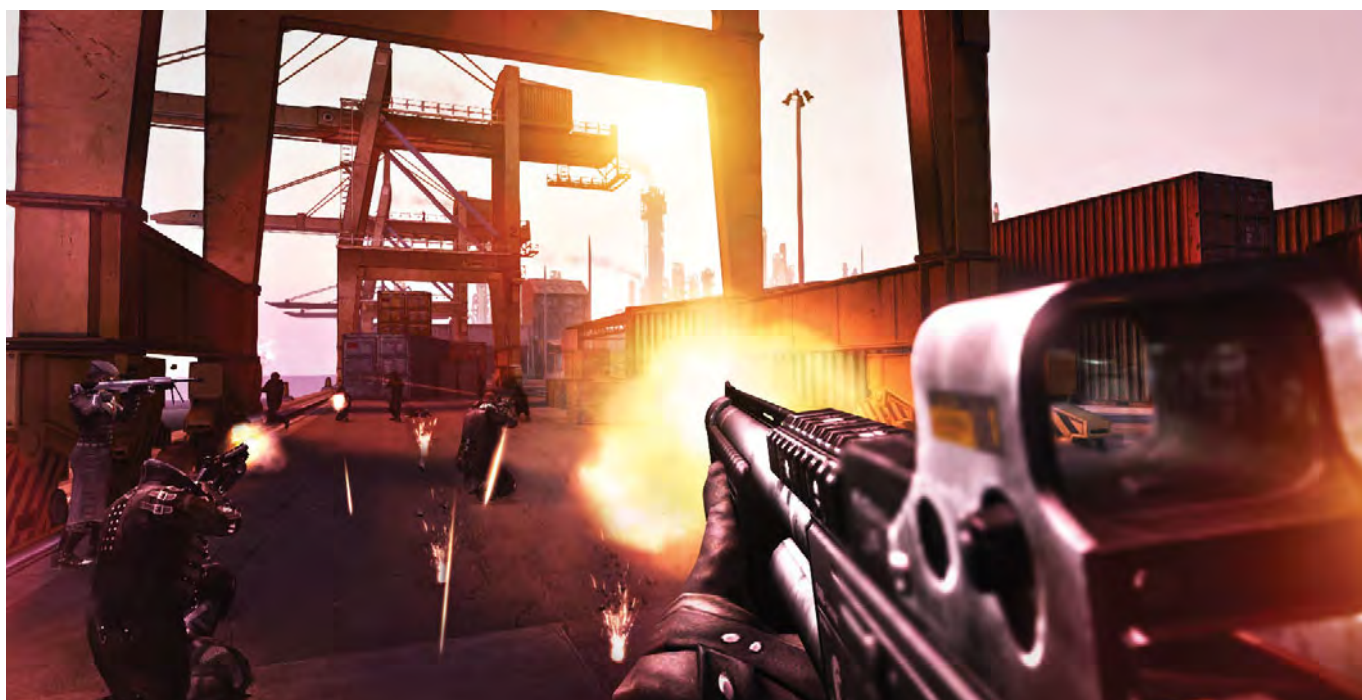
3 Killing enemies in quick succession generates adrenaline, which recharges your Breach Applications faster and allows you to use them more frequently.

4 LOL – breaching...





"Syndicate's often been compared to *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* in the past few months, and **with its cyberpunk dystopian future and technologically augmented population, it's not surprising.**"



the panicked cries of foes unfortunate enough to stand in your way. Aside from how good it all feels and how stylishly the combat is capable of progressing, it really is quite generic. There's nothing here that's extraordinary, aside from the chip functions. And yet, it's still a great deal of fun. Mowing through the story has more downs than ups, but there are enough throwbacks to the original games to make fans smile – like those odd, egg-shaped cars, now seen from ground level for the first time. Actually, seeing all of this on the ground does manage to be oddly engaging to the *Syndicate* fan in me, and there's so much tertiary data to collect and read about this imperfect future that it undoubtedly feels more fleshed out in terms of overall narrative than the original games ever did. This feels like a future that could exist, for whatever that's worth. It does feel a bit sloppy at times, with broken animations and a melee system that just decides that it's tired of working every once in a while, but thankfully none of the technical problems are too jarring. As an aside, I cannot wait for game developers to get over this weird quick-time event obsession, because I'm really getting sick of mashing buttons just to open doors or remove vent covers.

Four-player co-op is arguably the game's strongest feature, with more weaponry, more Breach Applications, more chip upgrades and basically more everything than the single player. I appreciate the fact that you and a group of friends can found your own cooperative *Syndicate*, and then see how your performance in the missions ranks against other players' *Syndicates* across the globe. You've the option of

choosing which weapons you'd like to take into missions, and can then upgrade them (along with your Applications) as you unlock upgrade tokens to do so. Earning points in missions by killing enemies, hacking objectives and healing your fellow Agents increases your rank, and higher ranks mean more chip upgrades. The missions and their objectives exist separate from anything in the single player and tend to be completely unforgiving in terms of difficulty, making teamwork key to progression here. Obviously, the quality of the missions varies, but for the most part, they're well worth playing through with friends. **NAG**

- **Barkskin**

75

As sad as it makes me to see *Syndicate* modernised in such an unimaginative way, this solid, smooth (mostly) and satisfying reboot didn't offend me.

It's not about to change the first-person shooter genre, but I never expected it to anyway. Choose to play it, and you'll find frivolous and stylish shooter fun.

PLUS

Solid gunplay and weaponry / Co-op is a fun time / Looks and sounds good

MINUS

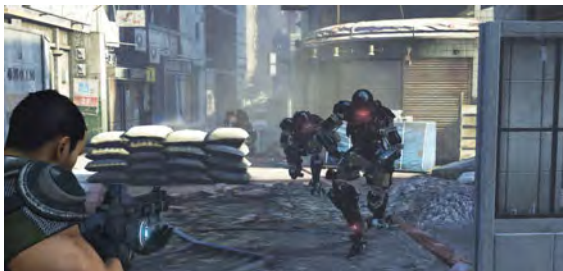
A bit generic and bland / Occasionally broken / Co-op menu navigation is a mess

Binary Domain

The only thing more awesome than robots is shooting at them...

"Save the world from impending apocalypse" seems to be a relatively common design brief for video game developers, particularly in the first-person shooter genre, and SEGA's latest offering follows the same well-established trend. What sets *Binary Domain* apart from its countless peers is that the threat you face is neither undead nor extraterrestrial in nature; rather, it's a robotic one. The idea that humanity might one day be enslaved by its own mechanical creations has inspired many a science fiction author, but it's a concept that has been relatively under-explored in video games, and it provides a fascinating backdrop to *Binary Domain's* story. The game puts you in the role of one Dan Marshall, leader of a so-called "Rust Crew" – a crack team of stereotypical operatives whose task it is to stop the ever-growing robotic menace that threatens humanity in a 2080 post-apocalyptic Tokyo.

The game is, at its heart, a fairly straightforward squad-based shooter that implements the same "cover and fire" mechanics that are typical to genre stalwarts like the *Gears of War* franchise. What makes *Binary Domain* somewhat more interesting is the nature of the enemies you'll face – in true *Terminator* style, your foes will gradually disintegrate as you fill their metallic frames with bullets, and their relentless pursuit won't cease until you've turned them into a pile of shredded scrap metal. The game's fast pacing means that the action is liberally interspersed with chase sequences, vehicular combat and other diversions that keep the campaign feeling fresh through its ten-hour lifespan.



"You're coming out? Now!?"



You'll also find that if you own a suitable headset, you'll be able to issue some rudimentary voice commands to your squad (the members of which you're periodically allowed to replace). The game also tries to expand on the squad dynamic by tracking your relationships with your squad members; offer them praise, support and encouragement and they'll be much more likely to follow your orders than if you constantly belittle them. This "relationship" system is an innovative idea, but one that's just a little too shallow in its implementation. Although your "relationships" affect the behaviour of your squad-mates during the course of a mission, they have no impact on the game's overarching story-line, and one can't help but feel that the developers missed an opportunity to turn a fascinating gimmick into a truly game-changing innovation.

Although it's let down by an underwhelming multiplayer component (with the omission of co-operative play feeling particularly tragic), *Binary Domain* is a solid and well-constructed shooter, and one that benefits from its unique setting and thought-provoking plot. It's not a revolutionary step forward for the genre, but it's a refreshing change of pace and one that manages to be compelling and engaging in spite of its shortfalls. **NAG**

- Madman

79

Binary Domain is a well-crafted and enjoyable futuristic shooter with a refreshing setting and engaging plot. The game's mechanics aren't groundbreaking, and the multiplayer component suffers from the omission of co-operative play, but its lengthy and varied campaign make *Binary Domain* one of the more entertaining entries in its genre.

PLUS

Great visual detail / Thought-provoking plot / Fast paced action

MINUS

Sparse multiplayer offering / Derivative game mechanics

DETAILS

Platforms:

360 / PS3

Genre:

First-person shooter

Age restriction:

18+

Multiplayer:

Local:

None

Online:

None

Developer:

SEGA

Website:

www.sega.com/binarydomain

binarydomain.com

Publisher:

SEGA Europe

Distributor:

Ster Kinekor Entertainment

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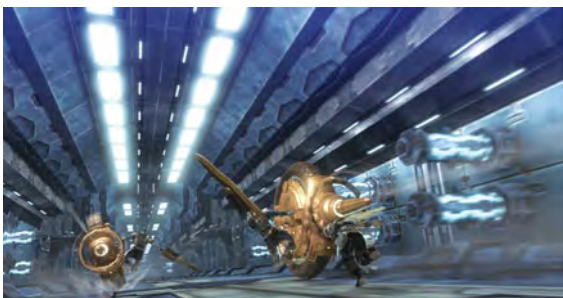
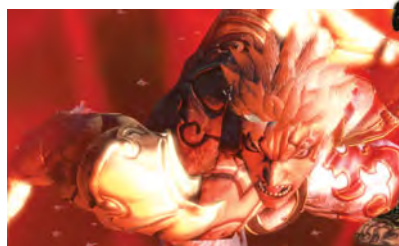
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Asura's Wrath

It's a game, but not as we know it

Asura's *Wrath* is a bizarre amalgamation of anime, over-the-top melee combat and quick-time events that straddles the line between interactive fiction and video game, and does so in an exceedingly gutsy fashion. It needs to be clarified at the outset that this lovechild of Capcom and CyberConnect2 is by no means a conventional video game and, as such, it makes little sense to judge it by conventional video game standards. *Asura's Wrath* tells the story of a slighted demigod, wrongfully imprisoned in a purgatory known as Naraka for a crime he didn't commit. To make matters worse for the protagonist, his former allies have killed his wife and abducted his daughter. Over the course of about 12,000 years, Asura's anger mounts and he eventually escapes his mythical prison to exact bloody revenge on those who wronged him.

The "game" comprises almost 20 episodes (one of which must be unlocked), each replete with an intro sequence and end credits, leaving little doubt that *Asura's Wrath* is far more an interactive anime series than it is a game. Each episode is in the vicinity of 20 minutes in length, and a good portion of that time is spent watching lavishly animated cut-scenes that depict the sequence of increasingly bizarre situations and confrontations in which Asura finds himself. The remaining time is devoted to combat sequences and boss fights that are spectacular in their absurdity. Although the combat dynamic itself is shallow, it's the visual prowess of *Asura's Wrath* that keeps things entertaining; there aren't many games that allow you to do battle with an oversized



finger in outer space, and it's that sort of quirkiness that is the driving force behind the game.

Of course, the relative lack of interactivity is a thorn in the side of *Asura's Wrath*, especially when considering that the entire game spans only around six hours, and that two-thirds of that time is spent watching events unfold rather than participating in them. The concept is undeniably unique, and anime aficionados will be enamoured with the off-beat plot and stunning visual presentation that *Asura's Wrath* offers – it's an all-out feast for the senses from start to finish, and a compelling one at that. It's a truly outlandish and gutsy effort on the part of the developers, but it's by no means a game in the usual sense of the word. Anyone looking for a hack-and-slash romp that spans hours will be sorely disappointed, but as an exercise in interactive fiction, *Asura's Wrath* is an unmitigated success – just be sure that you know what you're getting yourself into before you lay down your hard earned cash on it. **NAG**

- Madman

80

Asura's Wrath is not really a game at all – it's an interactive anime series with a sprinkling of combat and the odd boss fight thrown in for good measure; anyone expecting a combat-laden action romp will be horribly disappointed.

It's a niche title, but for those who inhabit that niche, it's a bold and entertaining experience.

PLUS

Very unique concept / Engaging story-line / Superb visual presentation

MINUS

Too short / Lacks interactivity

DETAILS

Platforms:

360 / PS3

Genre:

Action

Age restriction:

16+

Multiplayer:

None

Local:

None

Online:

None

Developer:

CyberConnect2

Website:

www.capcom-europe.com

Publisher:

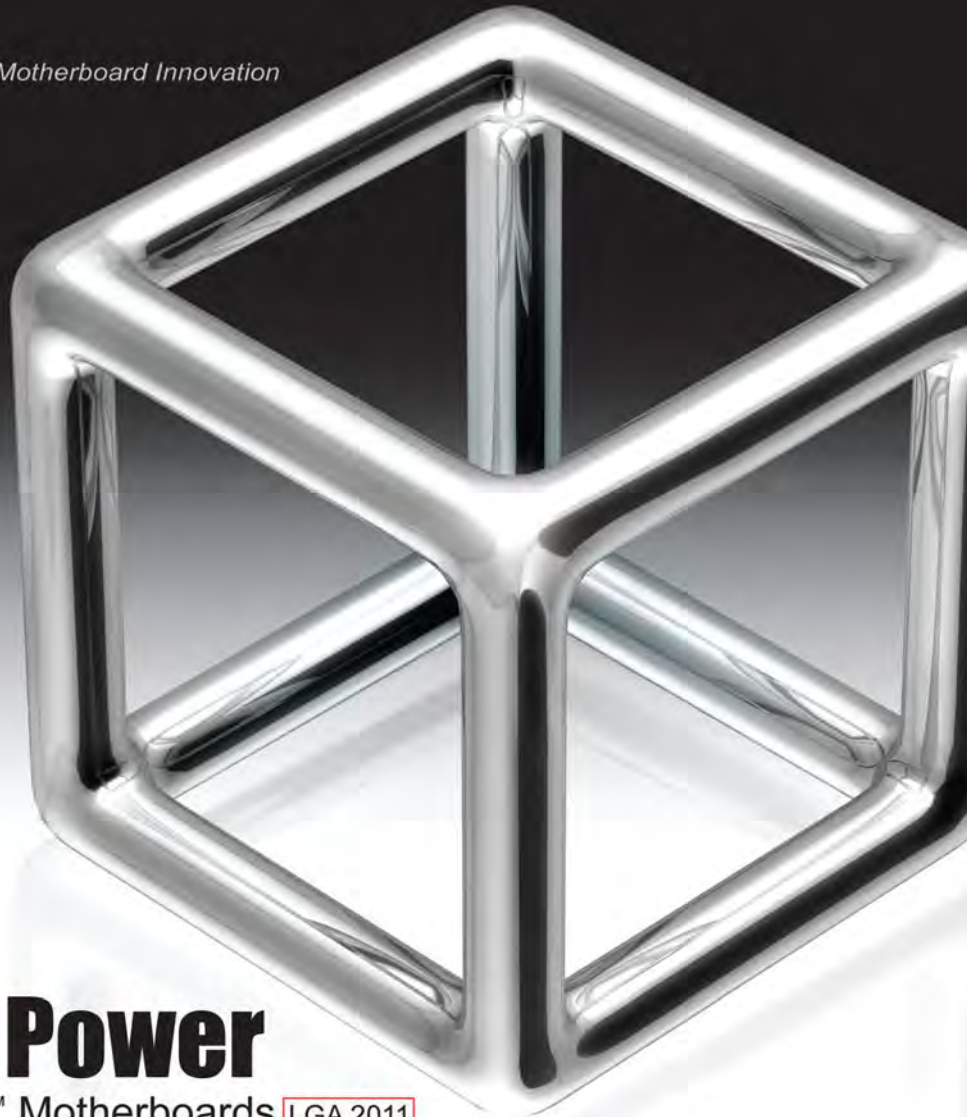
Capcom

Distributor:

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Grand Slam Tennis 2

Served up

Tennis games have not been dominated by an EA franchise. That's actually quite the surprise, considering how EA Sports has managed to work its way to the top of so many other sports disciplines, or their virtual counterparts, at least. The market has, historically, been governed by the more serious *Top Spin* series, as well as the slightly more flippant *Virtua Tennis* games. But Electronic Arts did not get to where they are by meekly standing by and watching the competition serve up aces. And so, with the second bout of *Grand Slam Tennis*, the company has foregone the more casual nature of the first game to produce a serious contender for the title.

Grand Slam Tennis 2 is a far more serious game than the original, which really only served as a bit of a backslapping session in showing off Wii MotionPlus implementation. This time around, though, the company leaves behind the Nintendo platform, bringing the franchise onto HD consoles. It also places far less emphasis on movement-based control systems, rather resorting to the dual stick control idea that seems to be pervading everything EA Sports does these days. It also leaves the flippant, cartoon-like graphical approach in the dust, opting for some intensely good looking, realistic visuals.

The control system is the biggest thing that will take getting used to. The right analogue stick is used to determine shot-type,

which can be extremely tricky at first. However, the company hasn't eschewed the use of buttons for this simulator; the player can resort to those if the sticks just aren't doing the job.

While the graphics are great, presenting the player with recognisable stars from the various ages of tennis, the sound does leave a bit to be desired. At least, the commentary does. Having John McEnroe and Pat Cash deliver the commentary is great, for the first few games, but it gets awfully repetitive before long.

Other than that, this is a great tennis simulator. It lacks depth, sure, but the career mode is challenging (at later stages, at least, being far too easy in the beginning). Additionally, the player can create their own tennis star, using in-game settings or EA's Game Face system, for that personal touch.

EA have managed to capture the spirits and play styles of the large number of licensed players that the game includes. This means that the player will have to accommodate, if using one of these players, tuning in to what the real-world version of the player is best at. It also means that the player will not have to face similar opponents all the time, which is refreshing.

In the end, this is a very good tennis game, and one that might just stand a chance of moving up the ranks. **NAG**

- Ramjet

DETAILS

Platforms:
360 / PS3
Genre:
Sports simulator
Age restriction:
3+
Multiplayer:
Local:
4 players
Online:
4 players
Developer:
EA Sports
Website:
www.ea.com/
grand-slam-tennis-2
Publisher:
EA
Distributor:
Electronic Arts
South Africa



1 Lots of licensed players appear in this one. Plenty of great visuals too, although the controls take some getting used to.



80

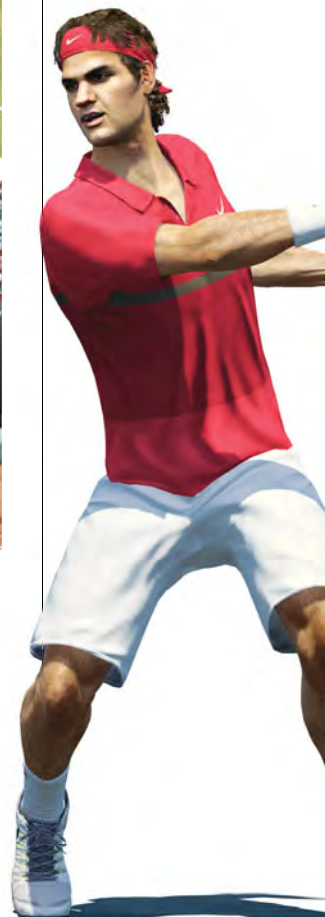
Moving away from the flippant style of the first game, *Grand Slam Tennis 2* uses an innovative control scheme and great visuals to take on the other big names in the genre. And it does a good job of it, too.

PLUS

Great visuals / Interesting new controls / Lots of licensed content

MINUS

Repetitive commentary / Controls take getting used to





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UFC Undisputed 3



The real thing

The UFC juggernaut keeps rolling, with more and more adherent joining this brutal fighting discipline by the day. As a sport, it is getting the recognition it craves, and the brutal fights have spawned more than just superstars of the octagon. They have created a host of fans across the globe. And seeing as many of these fans will never have the guts to climb into the octagon and show what they are made of, there are video games to allow them to vicariously, digitally, enjoy the action... the greatest threat being a bruised thumb.

The *UFC Undisputed* franchise really does hold the position as the best of the best, even though EA have made an attempt to enter the fray (we are still wondering if there will be a second title added to their stable.) But THQ's title was always hampered by an extremely complex – even daunting – control scheme, something which excluded the more casual gamers.

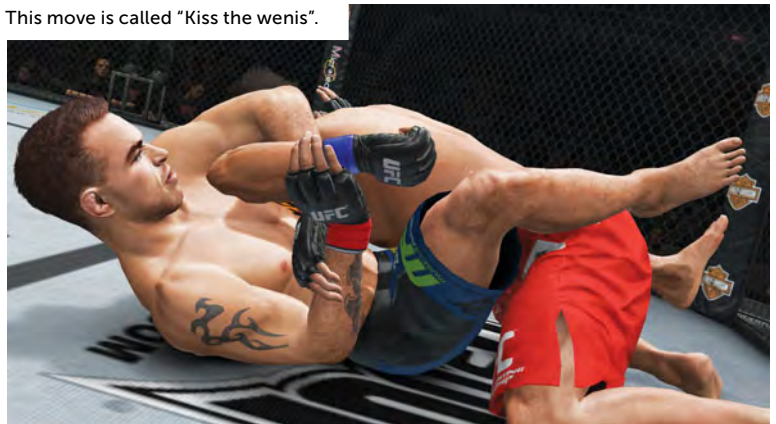
That has all changed with *UFC Undisputed 3*, and that change is just one of the many things that places this game at the top of the list. Players can select varied control schemes now, opting for more simplicity or complexity, as they prefer. This is a big win for the franchise, as more players will now be able to take to the ring and beat all kinds of bloody hell out of their opponents.

Another new element is the inclusion of the defunct Pride franchise, which allows players to add the brutality of head stomps and kicking opponents while they're on the ground to their repertoire of pain-dealing. These



“This is a big win for the franchise, as more players will now be able to **take to the ring and beat all kinds of bloody hell** out of their opponents.”

This move is called “Kiss the wenis”.



moves may have been too brutal for the real world, but they fit right in here, making the game more exciting, more strategic and definitely more vicious.

The career mode has also been streamlined, allowing players to concentrate more on the fights and less on the piles of stats that the previous two titles presented. And yet, despite this simplification, the career mode still holds massive amounts of depth for the player to explore, whether with a licensed real-world fighter or a combatant of their own creation.

There are tons of game modes beyond the career mode, and the inclusion of online, community based elements adds even more scope to the enjoyment the player can wring out of this exceptional title.

As always, the visuals are stunning in their savagery, with great character models and animations complemented by accurate bruising and deformation, as well as little elements like sweat and the like. It is a visual feast, adding realism to the whole thing on an excellent level. You can almost feel every shuddering blow that lands.

THQ have outdone themselves with this latest instalment... it is exactly what fans and newcomers want. **NAG**

- Ramjet

88

This latest iteration in the *UFC Undisputed* franchise makes all the right moves. Great graphics and sound combine with improved controls and a great career mode to make it the best UFC title yet.

PLUS

Excellent new controls / Great graphics / Pride mode

MINUS

Can still be somewhat complex / Repetitive commentary

DETAILS

Platforms:

360 / PS3

Genre:

Fighting simulator

Age restriction:

16+

Multiplayer:

Local:

2 players

Online:

2 players

Developer:

Yuke's

Website:

www.ufcundisputed.com

Publisher:

THQ

Distributor:

Ster Kinekor Entertainment

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Wipeout 2048

The future is now tomorrow!

Wipeout is not known for its surprisingly rich fiction. Most people, when asked what they know about the anti-gravity racing series, would comment either on its unique neo-neon artistic futurism, how hard the games tend to be, or that it's "just racing a kind-of-flying car down a track."

All of which are true. The franchise has a distinctive anti-establishment art direction, first styled by the brash constructivism of The Designers Republic in 1995 for Psygnosis' *Wipeout*. The game's visual style became a blueprint for how to look cool in the mid-nineties.

Since its inception, the franchise has remained difficult to approach and hard to master. And yet, with sport racing an easily understood conceit, *Wipeout* remains our only imaginative look into what the future might hold if ever our racing vehicles become untangled from gravity's shackles [*how quickly you forget pod racing. Oh, hang on. Ed*]

In the game's fiction, thanks to the duplicity of one Pierre Belmondo, 36 years from now we have working anti-gravity generators. A decade earlier, Belmondo shattered scientific preconceptions by unveiling a working AG unit that didn't actually function, but nobody knew that except him. He goaded the scientific community to reproduce his work, gambling it all on a huge bluff. They succeeded. Science fiction became science fact, and physics was reinvented.

In 2048, anti-gravity racing emerged, bringing with it the formative years of the Anti-Grav Racing Championships. Five teams compete in the first league event, hoping to cement their place in the history of the new "ballistic racing" motorsport. The single-player campaign runs three seasons (2048 - 2050), across 10 tracks. Events on the grid range from races and time trials to combat events and "zone mode" speed challenges. Each team has a specific craft for each race type: Speed, Agility, Fighter and Prototype, unlocked as you progress

through the campaign. If you have trouble with an event, after a while the game will give you the option to skip it. Branching events on the grid present additional challenges not required to progress.

Flying over speed boost pads on the track gives you a kick, while power-ups have been divided into two coloured crosses: green for defensive such as shields and auto-pilot, yellow for offensive like missiles and cannons. Everything runs at a smooth 30 frames per second, though levels can take up to 30 seconds to load. There is Cross-Play (cross-platform) racing with *Wipeout HD* on the PlayStation 3, allowing you to hop into online races against PS3 players.

Multiplayer has been simplified so as to get you into a race as fast as possible. Online play has its own kind-of campaign with missions that unlock based on your performance, such as getting into the top three. The promised "augmented reality" ship viewer will be added later via a patch, claims the developer. **NAG**

- Miktar

81

When it comes to *Wipeout*, opinions are very divisive. If you love AG racing, 2048 has much to love. If you've never been a fan, 2048 may change your mind by being the most approachable entry in the series thanks to wider-than-normal tracks.

PLUS

Easy to get into / Simplified online experience
Great music / Stunning visuals

MINUS

Lacks multiplayer lobby customisation
Can be quite difficult / Long load times

1 While it can make certain areas of the track hard to see, the fusion of old and new in their design is fresh. All the tracks exist in a single city, in this case Nova State City.

1 Keeping close to the fiction, team Piranha is still called "Pir-Hana" in 2048, referencing its creation in 2044 via the merger of two smaller Brazilian companies: Pir and Hana.



DETAILS

Platforms:

PS Vita

Genre:

Racing

Age restriction:

7+

Multiplayer:

Local:

8 players

Online:

8 players

Developer:

Studio Liverpool

Website:

uk.playstation.

com/

wipeout2048

Publisher:

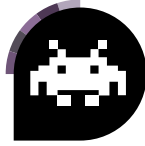
Sony Computer

Entertainment

Distributor:

Ster Kinekor

Entertainment



Alan Wake (PC)

Light in the dark



After nearly two years, Remedy's action horror title has finally made its way onto PC and, for better or worse, it's been largely unaffected by the transition. With two years under its belt, *Alan Wake* does show a few signs of its age despite receiving a texture overhaul and a sprinkling of physics-enabled objects. The character and environment models seem to be unchanged, but the addition of improved volumetric lighting helps to soften their polygonal edges. Oddly enough, the game's cinematics look to be the same ones recorded for the Xbox version, and as a result are low-resolution, rather ugly affairs.

The game's controls have also been tweaked, obviously to accommodate the PC's native control system (a gamepad is still supported), and the resulting system is as acceptable as one can expect. With the sluggishness of an analogue stick out of the way, Wake can twitch and dance his torchlight in an instant. The result, however, makes the controls feel too loose; they lack the tactile feedback that a controller delivers.

Included in this PC release are both special episodes – *The Signal* and *The Writer*. Both are challenging and deep additions to the core game's story that fit perfectly. They also experiment with the gameplay a bit, with *The Signal* being more action-oriented and *The Writer* leaning more on the side of the original game's weak puzzle-platformer elements – without any improvements being made to Wake's controls. Despite being a tad on the frustrating side, *The Writer* includes one of the most interesting and innovative game levels we've seen for a while. **NAG**

- GeometriX

88

A solid port with just enough updates to set it apart from the original release. *Alan Wake* for PC is a must-own for anyone who likes a few scares served up with their action games.

PLUS

Improved textures and lighting / Included DLC

MINUS

Controls aren't perfect / Some dated visuals

DETAILS

Platforms:

360 / PC

Genre:

Action thriller

Age restriction:

18+

Multiplayer:

Local:

None

Online:

None

Developer:

Remedy Entertainment

Website:

www.alanwake.com

Publisher:

Nordic Games Publishing

Distributor:

Silverscreen Trading

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Alan Wake's American Nightmare

Come for the story, stay for the arcade mode

Remedy has produced an action-driven arcade offering, but fans of the original *Alan Wake* will feel at home with *American Nightmare* thanks to the tweaked yet familiar combat and the thriller-infused plotline. While the two to three hours of story mode do a good job of answering lingering questions from the original game's ending, the whole experience is slightly undermined by suspect narrative devices that could be construed as a means of artificially lengthening *American Nightmare's* story mode. Furthermore, the cheesy narration throughout the story (meant to mimic the narrator of the *Night Springs* TV series from the original *Alan Wake*) detracts from what could have been a creepy experience – don't expect the same atmosphere of the original game. The plus side of this campy tone is antagonist Mr. Scratch, who is genuinely funny at times.

In addition to the slightly disappointing story mode is a new mode that is equal parts arcade action and sphincter-tightening terror. Dubbed "Fight Till Dawn", you have to last ten minutes on various maps against waves of The Taken. It's all about high scores and maintaining score multipliers. This new arcade mode is where *American Nightmare* comes into its own. With online leaderboards and a Nightmare difficulty level to unlock, you'll find yourself spending way more time here than you did with the story. **NAG**

- Mikit0707



75

It's more *Alan Wake*, only with streamlined combat and a very different setting. While the concise story mode is underwhelming, the new arcade mode has longevity and is undeniably good fun. Fans will definitely love learning about what's happened to Alan since the end of the first game.

PLUS

Great arcade mode / Answers questions from the original game / A nail gun!

MINUS

Rigid dialogue animation / Cheesy narration throughout / Artificially lengthened story mode

DETAILS

Platforms:

360

Genre:

Action

Age restriction:

18+

Multiplayer:

Local:

None

Online:

None

Developer:

Remedy
Entertainment

Website:

www.alanwake.com/american-nightmare

Publisher:

Microsoft Studios

Distributor:

Xbox LIVE
Arcade

Metal Gear Solid HD Collection

Solid memories

Metal Gear Solid is a franchise that has built up quite a fan base, and it is specifically for these fans that this collection has been released. Comprised of *Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance*, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence* and *Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker*, fans are in for a treat as they relive their memories of these titles, now presented in HD.

But as fun as going through these adventures again is, one must always remember that these titles hail from a very different era. Many aspects of this collection feel anachronistic. In fact, the only game in which the controls feel slightly familiar is *Peace Walker*; the others feel extremely old in their execution.

That goes for the graphics too. Sure, they have been given an HD overhaul, but that doesn't mean that they're going to be of a standard that can compete with some of the titles we have been seeing lately.

With all that said, fans will appreciate the ability to play their favourites over again, this time with a bit of a spit-shine. And it is the fans who will appreciate this collection the most. It really is aimed at them, as newcomers may well find the numerous cut-scenes and old fashioned approach frustrating. Still, the memories are great to relive for those that want to. **NAG**

- Ramjet



78

It's a great collection, but it really is meant for fans. They will draw the greatest value from the sentimentality of the title. Newcomers may be disappointed by its anachronisms.

PLUS

Great memories! / Three games at a good price

MINUS

Anachronistic / For fans only

DETAILS

Platforms:

360 / PS3 /

PS Vita

Genre:

Third person
action

Age restriction:

16+

Multiplayer:

Local:

None

Online:

None

Developer:

Kojima
Productions

Website:

www.konami.com/games/mgshd

Publisher:

Konami

Distributor:

Ster Kinekor
Entertainment

1 Even in HD, things look a little old.

Gotham City Impostors

"I'm Batman!" "No, I'm Batman!"

The first-person shooter multiplayer versus market is saturated – a handful of titles rule the roost while every second new FPS that emerges squeezes out its own decent but generally bland multiplayer component. Considering that, it's an odd move to release *Gotham City Impostors* – a game that features only multiplayer and doesn't do much to innovate even there.

GCI plays like a game designed by people who enjoy *Call of Duty* and *Team Fortress* and thought it'd be a swell idea to throw the two together in the Batman universe. The "impostors" bit is explained through an intro which says, but never explains why, Batman (and we have to assume The Joker as well) has left Gotham City, leaving the heroics in the barely capable hands of

its people. The bad guys do the same, and the result is a civil war between The Bats and The Jokerz.

During each of the three game modes, players will earn coins and unlock points to customise their costumes and weapons, going through the oh-so-familiar motion of grinding away to get the best stuff. Those who aren't interested in the grind can cough up real money, which explains why this title costs just \$15 or 1,200MSP – it's designed to generate cash. While this practice isn't entirely nefarious, one can't help but feel that the game should have been free considering its limited number of game modes and maps, and punishing crawl through the content unlock process. **NAG**

- GeometriX



62 It won't cost you much, and you'll get exactly what you paid for. Despite making a brief effort, *Gotham City Impostors* can't match the fun-factor of *Team Fortress 2* or the polish of *Call of Duty*.

PLUS

Some fun antics do crop up / A couple of interesting gadgets / Gameplay is generally solid

MINUS

Uninspired game modes / Lack of content / Unlocks take too long to achieve

DETAILS

Platforms: 360 / PC / PS3
Genre: First-person shooter
Age restriction: 16+
Multiplayer: Local: None
Online: None
Developer: Monolith Productions
Website: www.gothamcityimpostors.com
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Distributor: PSN / Steam / XBLA

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OpenCL:

The Open Computing Language, now at version 1.2, was initially developed by Apple in 2008 and is a framework for writing programs that can execute on both CPUs and GPUs. It provides a parallel computing capability granting applications access to the GPUs for processing non-graphical data. Now controlled by the Khronos Group, it is one of the competing standards for GPGPU general programming.

DirectCompute:

Part of the DirectX API, it aims to support general purpose computing on GPUs on Windows Vista 7 and onwards. It shares many computational interfaces and features with its competitors such as OpenCL and NVIDIA's CUDA. DirectCompute was introduced with DirectX 11, but also supports DirectX 10 hardware

Cg:

C for Graphics is a high level shading language developed by NVIDIA and Microsoft for programming pixel and vertex shaders. Some of the functions in the programming language have equivalents making Cg easier to use than traditional low level vertex and pixel shader programming. Cg is almost identical to Microsoft's own HLSL.

GLSL:

OpenGL Shading Language is a high-level shading language that uses the C syntax, created to give developers more direct control of the graphics pipeline without having to write assembly language for hardware specific features. It essentially serves the same purpose as Microsoft's HLSL; however, as it is part of an open standard it's not tied to any single platform but can be used on any supporting architecture which has the relevant ICD.

ECS WI-BRIDGE

Wirelessly connect any of your smart devices such as a PC, notebook, iPad or Android phone/tablet to your HDTV or HDMI screen using the Wi-Bridge. It's small enough to carry with you and can be controlled using a wireless mouse or remote control.

TBA / www.ecs.com.tw



CORSAIR CARBIDE 300R

Packed with features that a gamer would appreciate, the 300R can fit extra-long graphics cards of up to 450mm length, and also extended length PSUs. The black interior sports a CPU cutout for quick installing or upgrading of CPU heatsinks, as well as a cable management system. R789 / www.frontosa.co.za



DID YOU KNOW?

Gabe Newell, Valve's co-founder and managing director, ranks 854th out of 1,226 global billionaires in Forbes' list. Newell, who owns over 50% of Valve, has a net worth of \$1.5 billion.



LOGIC3 WIRELESS SENSOR BAR

If you despise the tangled mess that all your console cables end up in then the Wireless Sensor Bar for the Wii is a must-have item. It gives you 30 hours of gameplay through the use of 4x AA batteries, and can be used with all TVs. R159.95 / www.apexinteractive.co.za



COOLERMASTER SILENCIO 450

Looking for a quiet case with reduced noise levels and soundproof foam? The Silencio mid tower chassis, with its clean lines and silent fans, should be your first stop. It also accommodates larger video cards, USB 3.0 and SD cards. R699 / www.sonicinformed.co.za



CORSAIR VENGEANCE M60

The M60 is a laser gaming mouse with an FPS-optimised design in the form of a dedicated sniper button that will automatically lower your DPI. The exposed aluminium design adds a hardcore feel that looks quite sexy. R539 / www.frontosa.co.za

"It's very inspiring that more and more hardware testing professionals as well as tech enthusiasts find Heaven Benchmark useful. Our technology platform is constantly growing and we can bring Heaven Benchmark to new platforms and new hardware"

Denis Shergin, CEO of UNIGINE Corp.

UNIGINE Corp. have released an improved version (3.0) of its renowned Heaven DX11 Benchmark based on its proprietary UNIGINE engine. It now runs on Mac, and supports a variety of new hardware, including extended support for multi-monitor configurations.

\$18.6 billion BY THE NUMBERS

According to the third annual "Horizons" research report released by the PC Gaming Alliance (PCGA), in 2011 the industry reached a global record \$18.6 billion, a growth of 15 percent over the prior year. Looking forward, the report speculates that the industry will grow to \$25.5 billion (37 percent increase) by 2015, thanks to increased broadband penetration and digital delivery.

DREAMMACHINE

Nothing much has changed this month besides the GIGABYTE HD7970 WINDFORCE edition which replaces the reference ASUS HD 7970. The ASUS HD7970 is still a good card, but we're going with the HD7970 WINDFORCE because it is clocked higher and has a much better cooler while retailing at similar prices. Everything else stays as is. If you were hoping to see NVIDIA'S GeForce GTX680 in the Dream Machine, you'll have to wait for the review in the May issue where it may or may not displace the HD7970.



PSU
ANTEC HCP 1200
R2,399 / www.evetech.co.za



GRAPHICS NEW
GIGABYTE HD7970 WINDFORCE
R7,499 / www.gigabyte.com



OS DRIVE
Plextor M3 256GB SSD
R2,999 / www.plextor-digital.com



STORAGE DRIVE
Seagate Barracuda 3TB
R1,999 / www.seagate.com



CHASSIS
Cooler Master COSMOS II
R3,755 / www.cooler-master.com



DISPLAY
ASUS VG278H 3D Monitor
R8,999 / za.asus.com



KEYBOARD
Logitech G19
R1,899 / www.logitech.com



MOUSE
Roccat Kone [+]
R899 / www.sonicinformed.com



MOUSE MAT
Roccat Alumic
R319 / www.roccat.org



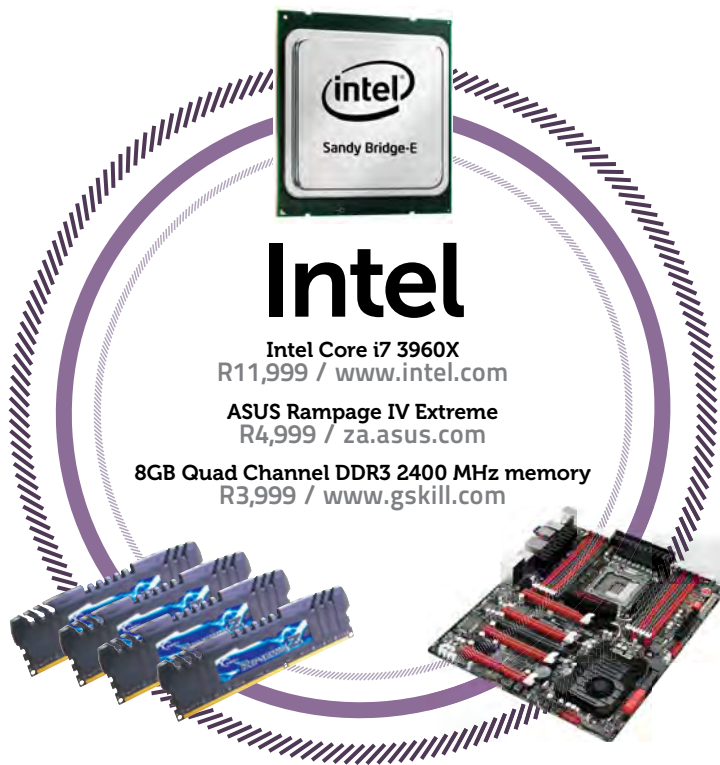
SOUND
Asus Xonar Essence STX
R1,399 / za.asus.com



SPEAKERS
Logitech Z-5500 Digital
R3,699 / www.logitech.com



HEADPHONES
CMStorm SIRUS
R1,199 / www.sonicinformed.com



Intel

Intel Core i7 3960X
R11,999 / www.intel.com

ASUS Rampage IV Extreme
R4,999 / za.asus.com

8GB Quad Channel DDR3 2400 MHz memory
R3,999 / www.gskill.com

Intel Dream Machine price:

R59,061



AMD

AMD Phenom II X6 1100T / AMD FX 8150
R2,699 / www.amd.com

GIGABYTE 990FXA-UD7
R3,499 / www.gigabyte.com

Corsair Dominator GT DDR3
2000 MHz 8GB Dual Channel
R1,999 / www.corsair.com

AMD Dream Machine price:

R45,561

Hardwired



DirectX 10 came and went, the hardware was there but nothing came of it. Short of *Crysis*, there wasn't another game to take real advantage of the platform. In retrospect it seems DX10, right next to DirectX 5 (and their competing APIs) were the most disappointing versions in DirectX's history. One popular opinion on why this was so proposes that DirectX 10 wasn't too different from its previous iteration and had no killer feature like DirectX 11. Fortunately with DirectX 11, uptake seems to have been much quicker and right now, one can count several titles that take advantage of the programmability and flexibility of this API.

I don't disagree with the popular opinion on why DirectX 10 was underwhelming, but I'd like to think there could just be other reasons why DirectX 10 was shunned, whereas DirectX 11 has received a very warm welcome. I suspect it has much to do with the console release schedules for example. We're likely to see new generation DX11 class consoles in 2013, so the tools required to take advantage of next generation platforms are permeating the industry as we speak. If not the tools, the power gains expected from these consoles are likely

"Soon enough you'll actually have a valid reason for owning a R7,000 graphics card, copious amounts of RAM and that twelve thread CPU"

well documented. Thus, it makes sense for all interested parties to try their skill sets and SDKs on the only platform that supports all the features they're likely to work with next year, the PC.

Great news for PC gamers or at least the power user is that, soon enough you'll actually have a valid reason for owning a R7,000 graphics card, copious amounts of RAM and that twelve thread CPU. I would imagine some truly stunning titles are on the way in the next twelve to twenty-four months because of this. Tessellation and all the fancy features OpenGL (does anybody still use this?) and DirectX support will have some real value.

The other reason why DirectX 10 may have gotten the short end of the stick could be because it was part of an operating system change. There was no backwards compatibility with Windows XP, Windows Vista was underwhelming to say the least, and the consoles that had just released at the time were firmly DirectX 9 class hardware. With the vast majority of developers working to keep up with the staggering growth of home console games, DirectX 10 was unlikely to ever become anything but a sideshow.

These are but a few possible reasons, but one that is a little more esoteric but equally valid is the differences in the PS3 and the Xbox 360. The Xbox 360 XENOS remains a hybrid DX9.0c in function but DX10 in layout if you will, whereas the PS3 is a pure DirectX 9.0c part in every way. As with most things in this context, they cater for the lowest common denominator. That was the PS3 in its discreet vertex and fragment program processors. So taking advantage of the unified shader hardware on the Xbox 360 and subsequently the PC GPUs was almost impossible. As such, creating elaborate visual effects using this mechanism was rarely, if ever, exercised. However, it looks like there will be a very high level of parity between all platforms once again come 2013, as for the first time ever, all platforms will have DirectX 11 equivalent functionality. In a way that will be the unifying API, and that can only be good for everyone.

NAG


- Neo Sibeko

Parrot AR.Drone



Website ardrone.parrot.com **RRP** R2,999

We're willing to bet that, as a gamer, you wanted (or still want (or actually own)) a remote-controlled helicopter, aeroplane or one of those gigantic model monster trucks that destroy your little sister's dolls faster than a rabid Chihuahua. There's an innate appeal in playing with such devices (or "toys" if you must) because your finely-honed game controller abilities can actually affect something in the real world. It's like riding those lawnmower tractor things, but less boring and smaller. Imagine, then, our delight when the Parrot AR.Drone was dropped off at the office, with its quad-blade design and support for gyroscopic controls. You've never seen a group of adults regress to child-like behaviour so fast in your life.



The AR.Drone's battery life is a little on the limp side, but from what we understand it's to be expected of such devices. At best, you can expect no more than 30 minutes of flight time from your AR.Drone.



If you want to see the AR.Drone in action in our very own hands, head over to youtu.be/fw9cGqUx3kY and bear witness to our superior flying skills. Mind the tree!

TECHNICAL

Motors:
4x brushless 15W electric

Connectivity:
Wi-Fi 802.11 b/g; USB

Guidance system:
MEMS 3-axis accelerometer; 2-axis gyrometer; single-axis yaw precision gyrometer

Cameras:
Front wide-angle VGA 30fps; vertical 60fps

Battery:
3-cell 11.1V 1000 mAh

PROS

- Great controls
- Moves surprisingly fast
- Seriously good fun

CONS

- Poor battery life
- Low-resolution camera

ALTERNATIVES

Remote-controlled aeroplanes or helicopters

DESIGN

Four blades officially designate this as a "quadcopter", but since that's etymologically incorrect, we'll just call it a drone or a "quadrotor".

1 The central part of the unit is the heaviest part and houses the battery bay, CPU and Wi-Fi access point. An ultrasound altimeter has a range of 6m and aids the AR.Drone's vertical stabilisation. The high-speed vertical camera faces straight down and is capable of capturing footage at 60 frames per second. This helps the drone to stabilise horizontally, even in light winds.

2 Each blade is powered by its own 15W electric motor capable of spinning at up to 35,000rpm.

3 The front-facing camera features a resolution of 640x480 and is capable of

distance detection at up to 5m.

4 The AR.Drone includes two interchangeable hulls. The "indoor" frame is made from polystyrene and protects the drone's fragile blades from your walls (or the other way round). The "outdoor" hull trades the bulky frame for an aerodynamic design that improves manoeuvrability when used outdoors.

CONTROLS

Easily the most impressive part of the AR.Drone's whole package is its control scheme. No controller is included in the box. Instead, it's designed to be used with a smartphone or tablet (currently limited to iOS, Android, Nokia N8/C7/E7, and Samsung Wave Bada devices) with which the drone synchronises using

a built-in Wi-Fi access point. Setup is quick and secure, and it won't be more than a couple of minutes before you've got the front-facing camera's feed directly on your device.

The AR.Drone uses a combination of gyro controls for lateral movement and an on-screen circle pad that controls rotation and altitude. Getting used to the control scheme will take a bit of effort, but you should be able to control the drone well enough to perform basic manoeuvres like a figure-8 by the end of your first battery charge. There's also an advanced user toggle for those feeling particularly brave. Alternatively, Linux users can download the software from Parrot's website and play it using a joystick. **NAG**

Tablet

162X1108

TABLET TESTING

Tablets are the new gadgets to have. They've gained popularity at a phenomenal rate and are expected to eclipse notebook shipments by the end of the year. Blurring the lines between smartphones and notebooks, tablets come in various sizes and fall mainly into two camps. The Apple iPad and Android tablets. The iPad experience is uniform and purchasing decisions are easy in that family, however for the Android devices there are vastly different price ranges, user experiences and hardware. So we gathered a few of these devices and did some tablet testing.

A WORD FROM GEOFF

The tablet market is huge. Every second hardware manufacturer has its own range of tablets and it's often difficult to find "the one" – whether that "one" is a cheap and quick solution that'll get the job done, or a technological marvel that would put your gaming PC to shame.

When looking at the tablets in this roundup, my focus was on the user experience: how easy and comfortable it was to navigate through the operating system; how quick and responsive the Web browsing experience was; and how the tablets handled multimedia. It's also important to mention that most of the tablets in this roundup run Google's Android operating system. As a result, they have similar interfaces but usually, each manufacturer tweaks and adjusts the interfaces to suit their hardware, which affects the overall user experience.

A WORD FROM NEO

Much like netbooks were going to replace notebooks, the so-called market "analysts" suggest that tablets will replace ultrabooks. Odd, considering that ultrabooks are gaining popularity, maybe not at the rate that tablets are, but they are certainly doing better than netbooks. Whichever prevails in the end, it's pretty obvious that mobile platforms are how most people are doing their

computing. Tablets may have initially served as "cool" devices but in 2012 they are being handed out in all sectors to people that would have traditionally bought a notebook and in some cases a desktop.

Tablets today feature screen resolutions that were not common on high-end desktops a mere five years ago. How users interact with their media and information has changed dramatically. True portability, user interfaces and ease-of-use are things brought about largely because of the ever-increasing power in hardware. What high-end tablets are capable of today was only possible on desktops a mere six to seven years ago. To put that in perspective, the quad-core CPU found in the Tegra3 SOC is more powerful in FPU computational power than what high-end AMD FX CPUs had in 2005. That CPU alone cost more at the time than any tablet here.

With ever smaller nodes and improved process technology, we can drive ever more powerful devices for longer and put them in increasingly smaller packages like we have with the many ARM powered SOCs out there. The more power we have at our disposal, the more natural our interaction with electronic devices. Tablets are at the forefront of this technology and herein lies our analysis of several tablets at different price points all vying for your attention.

Tabletworld Colpad 2

GEOFF

The Colpad 2 is the lowest-priced tablet in our roundup, but is also the one which delivers the most pleasant surprise. Our expectations were low, given the price, but at almost every turn the Colpad 2 managed to surpass those expectations and deliver a product that should be ample for students on a tight budget or anyone looking for a low-end Android tablet.

The 1GHz CPU manages to power the Colpad 2 through its interface at an acceptable speed. Obviously, it's slower than the mid-range and high-end offerings in this roundup, and multimedia as well as Web browsing is noticeably sluggish, but for general purpose usage (including e-mail), it should suffice.

The Colpad 2 also manages to outshine even some of the high-end offerings with the inclusion of a full-size USB 2.0 host port, as well as expandable storage thanks to MicroSD Card support. If the little things are what matter

to you, then you'll be happy with this device.

NEO

The greatest thing that Google and various SOC manufacturers did for the industry was allow just about every manufacturer, or vendor if you will, access to the tablet market. This tablet is a classic example. It has an ARM 7/NEON SOC (Vivante

Graphics) combo which is probably the most common hardware configuration at this price point. You're looking at a single core configuration here, so performance isn't going to be this tablet's strong point, but it is better than the other Tabletworld Android tablet.

The benchmark results speak for themselves, as this unit is a little less than half the processing

power found in the Galaxy Tab 10.1 and in turn less than one fourth of the power in the Transformer Prime. The 800x480 TFT screen has a surprisingly limited viewing angle and the low resolution display even on such a small screen is visible, but for the price it's acceptable. If you're on a shoe-string budget and you have to have a tablet, consider this unit.

7

Supplier:
Tabletworld
Website:
www.tabletworld.co.za
Price:
R1,299



Tabletworld Dynapad

GEOFF

The next step up from the Colpad 2, the Dynapad includes a few hardware features that almost push it into the mid-range. The most notable addition is the 3G HSDPA modem which ups this tablet's price by R1,000 over the Colpad 2. Web browsing and multimedia playback is just as sluggish; browsing through the stock-standard Android interface on the Dynapad was the slowest experience we had in this roundup; and the screen reorientation animations were delayed by as much as two seconds.

While the price of this device is fairly low, we were nonetheless disappointed with the touch screen. Not only is it limited to just two points of contact, this screen's accuracy and responsiveness is low. It's usable, but will frustrate you.

NEO

This is the slowest tablet of the lot. It uses an old ARM6

CPU/Adreno 200 SOC and it shows in the benchmarks. The FPU performance is so poor that it's 130X slower than the performance offered by the Transformer Prime. The only redeeming feature of this tablet is that it has a 5MP rear facing camera and has 3G capabilities.

Short of that it has no other redeeming feature.

A few years ago maybe this would have been an acceptable tablet, but right now it is hardly suitable for Gingerbread let alone Ice Cream Sandwich. It's not even the cheapest out of the lot, so it doesn't even have

price on its side. I'm loathe to recommend this unit so if you must buy a tablet on a budget, I would strongly suggest the Colpad 2 instead. It may not have the camera or the 3G capabilities, but it's significantly better in every other way.

5

Supplier:
Tabletworld
Website:
www.tabletworld.co.za
Price:
R2,299



Samsung Galaxy Tab 10.1

GEOFF

Samsung's Galaxy Tab 10.1 was the hero of the Tegra 2 generation. Fast, slim, Android-based – it satisfied everyone's need for a mainstream tablet from a reputable manufacturer, but even now it's starting to show its age. The humble dual-core CPU keeps the interface moving along at a decent clip, but it's not uncommon to spot slowdowns during visually intensive procedures. Even opening up the apps menu from the home screen results in a brief delay. Of course, these animations can be tweaked or altogether disabled for those who demand a more responsive environment.

With its large, beautifully vibrant screen, the Tab 10.1 is well suited for Web browsing and multimedia playback, and, while its browsing doesn't manage the smooth performance of the two leading tablets in this roundup, you'll be able to watch videos at 720p with practically no stuttering.

NEO

Arguably the best tablet on the market, at least according to the Android fans, the Galaxy Tab 10.1 ticks all the right boxes, and on paper is better than its direct rival the iPad 2. It isn't just a preference however, because half of Apple's lawsuits against Samsung are because of the Galaxy Tablet and more specifically this model.



Supplier:
Samsung
Website:
www.samsung.co.za
Price:
TBA

It's lighter, thinner, has a better pixel density, native 720p video playback and recording, and 3.15MP camera to name just a few of the benefits.

On paper, it is in every conceivable way better than the iPad 2. All this, however, is let down by its Google reliant ecosystem. Google's Honeycomb

is a far cry from their earlier offerings and while TouchWiz UX makes it even better, it still can't match Apple's iOS. With ICS or JellyBean, things will get significantly better, but the user experience is definitely second to that of the iPad 2. Though its power and features are vastly superior.

8

ASUS Eee Pad Transformer Prime TF201

GEOFF

When the original Transformer released among the slew of Tegra 2-based devices, it sparked notice from the hardcore techie crowd thanks to its optional keyboard dock, but didn't gain the recognition many felt it deserved. Now, this high-powered, Tegra 3-based sequel is ready to take over the world. It's a powerful device, and that power translates meaningfully into the interface and everyday usage. You'll barely notice a slow-down anywhere in the operating system, although it still manages to lag behind the iPad 2's Web browsing experience just a touch.

The dock is the real deal-maker, boasting an extra eight hours of battery life and a netbook-sized (or "ultrabook", or whatever the cool kids are calling them these days) keyboard that's only just too small for heavy usage. For

those looking to take a light, quick, easy notebook with them on business trips or holidays, however, you'll find that it's the perfect balance of size vs. performance.

NEO

What one has to appreciate about ASUS is that the company knows how to make beautiful products. The Transformer Prime, much like their lifestyle notebooks, is a work of art that goes a long way into selling this as *the* Android tablet. Where hardware is concerned, this is the most powerful tablet we have ever had. In fact, at the time of writing it was the most powerful tablet the world had ever seen courtesy of its NVIDIA Tegra 3 guts. And with an 8MP camera, 1080p video recording, quad-core 1.6GHz processor and NVIDIA GeForce graphics, this is the Android



Supplier:
ASUS
Website:
eee.asus.com
Price:
R5,999

tablet to beat. Sure enough it weighs a little more than the Galaxy Tab 10.1 (but lighter than the iPad 2), but it is thinner and more powerful.

If you don't need 3G capabilities, the Transformer Prime is what you should buy. It's just blows everything else out the water.

9

Apple iPad 2

GEOFF

Like everything Apple produces, the company's iPad range has been a huge success despite dragging its feet on a few technological issues. And, despite being almost a full year old and running comparatively outdated hardware, the iPad 2 still manages to hold the user experience crown.

Whether the closed nature of iOS appeals to you or not, one can't deny that it works incredibly well. App designs feel consistent across the board, but you'll have to sift through a mountain of shovelware to get to the good stuff. There are pros and cons to having an apps market as big as the App Store.

The iPad 2 won't appeal to everyone, but even tech-heads will struggle to avoid its charm and solid performance. It's not perfect, and the continued lack of Flash support baffles us, there are many more points for the iPad 2 than against it.

NEO

The iPad 2 is only the third fastest tablet in this roundup according to its specs, yet it is easily the most responsive. The tight iOS integration with the underlying hardware makes the tablet the most compelling device of the lot. With a prioritized visual thread, interaction with the iPad 2 is the

smoothest and most engaging. With an Android tablet, one can't help but notice lag in screen composition, rotation, closing apps and sometimes even opening them. The Apple iPad 2 may not be directly comparable to the other tablets, but as a unified, closed system experience, there is

nothing better on the market.

The lamentable 0.7MP camera is annoying, having to deal with iTunes at every turn is annoying, but as with such a purpose-built device, one can't help but appreciate what Apple has produced. The iPad 2 receives two thumbs up from me.

Supplier:
Core Group
Website:
www.myistore.co.za
Price:
R7,599



CONCLUSION

Geoff

Transformer Prime or iPad 2? These tablets are the two most powerful and most popular devices in the market right now, and both have good reasons to be at the top. Fortunately, there's a fairly easy process to decide which of the two is best for you. It comes down to the keyboard dock, as we've found that Apple's supposed clincher (its wide range of available apps) just doesn't matter as much these days as it once did. Do you need a tablet with incredible battery life? Do you expect to spend as much time typing as you do playing games, using apps and browsing the 'Net? If so, then the Transformer Prime is a clear winner. If, on the other hand, you're on the lookout for a pure tablet experience, and can get by with the occasional touch screen typing, then you cannot go wrong with the iPad 2.

Neo

The Apple iPad 2 is easily the most compelling entry here. It is slick, polished and despite all its short-comings, is the benchmark on tablets right now. If I had to buy a tablet right now however, my money would be on the ASUS Transformer Prime (especially the newer full 1080p TF700); it simply outshines every other Android tablet on the market.

Benchmarks and Specs

AnTuTu is a benchmark tool for Android devices that tests CPU, GPU, RAM and storage performance to give users an overall score that determines how powerful their device is. A higher score is better.



COLPAD 2

AnTuTu score:
2,380

CPU:
ARMv7 rev 2 @
1,008MHz

GPU:
GC800

RAM:
256MB

Built-in storage:
512MB

Storage expansion:
MicroSD Card support,
2GB included

Connectivity:
Wi-Fi 802.11b/g;
USB 2.0 host

Display:
7" LCD @ 800x480
capacitive multi-touch

Operating system:
Android 2.3.1

Battery:
4000mAh

Dimensions:
193x119x13.5mm

Weight:
334.5g



DYNAPAD

AnTuTu score:
1,592

CPU:
Qualcomm MSM7227-T
800MHz

GPU:
Adreno 200

RAM:
512MB

Built-in storage:
512MB

Storage expansion:
microSD Card support,
4GB included

Connectivity:
Wi-Fi 802.11b/g; 3G
HSDPA; GSM;
Bluetooth 2.0

Display:
7" LCD @ 800x480
capacitive dual-touch

Operating system:
Android
2.2.2

Battery:
4250mAh

Dimensions:
197x120x13.2mm

Weight:
382g



SAMSUNG GALAXY TAB 10.1

AnTuTu score:
5,089

CPU:
Dual-core 1GHz
Cortex-A9

GPU:
GeForce ULP

RAM:
1GB

Built-in storage:
32GB

Storage expansion:
N/A

Connectivity:
Wi-Fi 802.11b/g/n;
Bluetooth 3.0; 3G
HSDPA 21Mbps

Display:
10.1" LCD @ 1280x800
capacitive multi-touch

Operating system:
Android 3.2

Battery:
7,000mAh

Dimensions:
256.7x175.3x8.6mm

Weight:
565g



ASUS EEE PAD TRANSFORMER PRIME TF201

AnTuTu score:
10,046

CPU:
ARMv7 quad-core @
1.6GHz

GPU:
NVIDIA Tegra 3

RAM:
1GB

Built-in storage:
32GB

Storage expansion:
MicroSD Card support;
SD Card support (dock)

Connectivity:
Wi-Fi 801.11b/g/n;
Bluetooth 2.1; 3G
HSDPA; micro HDMI;
USB 2.0 host (dock)

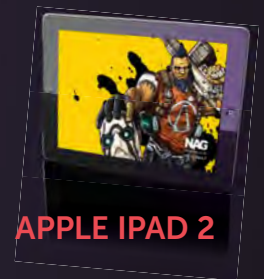
Display:
10.1" LED-backlit TFT
@ 1280x800 capacitive
multi-touch

Operating system:
Android 4.0.3

Battery:
6,580mAh (pad only);
5,790mAh (dock only)

Dimensions:
263x180.8x8.3mm
(pad only);
263x180.8x8~10.4mm
(dock only)

Weight:
586g (pad only); 537g
(dock only)



APPLE IPAD 2

AnTuTu score:
N/A

CPU:
Cortex-A9 dual-core @
1GHz

GPU:
PowerVR SGX543MP2

RAM:
512MB

Built-in storage:
32GB

Storage expansion:
N/A

Connectivity:
Wi-Fi 802.11a/b/g/n;
Bluetooth 2.1; 3G
HSDPA

Display:
9.7" LED-backlit TFT @
768x1024 capacitive
multi-touch

Operating system:
iOS 5

Battery:
6,580mAh

Dimensions:
241.2x185.7x8.8mm

Weight:
613g



WIN!

In celebration of NAG's 14th birthday,
kalahari.com is giving away 5x R,1000 vouchers
redeemable on any gaming merchandise.
Visit the **kalahari.com** and **NAG** Facebook pages for details.



Find us on
Facebook

www.facebook.com/NAGMagazine



kalahari.com



“The 3930K CPU, much like the 3960X, is based on the same SB-E die that in total houses eight cores, sixteen threads and 20MB of level 3 cache in its true XEON form.”

Intel Core i7 3930K



HARDWARE

Supplier Intel Website www.intel.com ERP R6,099

By the time you read this, Intel's Ivy Bridge CPUs should be available. In particular the 3770K for the LGA1155 platform, which is sure to become a favourite with gamers. This is unlike the SB-E CPUs, like the one we have here, which were not received with much enthusiasm. They were rare, cost a fortune, were by and large poor overclockers (at least where the 3960X is concerned) and we all knew what Intel was launching soon.

Like it or not however, this platform is here to stay and, unlike with the 3rd generation Core i7 1155 CPUs, the SB-E will only get the 22nm tri-gate treatment in 2013 in the form of IB-E. That's right, Intel's premium platform will only use the company's latest technology around a year after the mainstream products. Confusing to say the least, but there seems to be reasoning behind this apparent madness at Chipzilla.

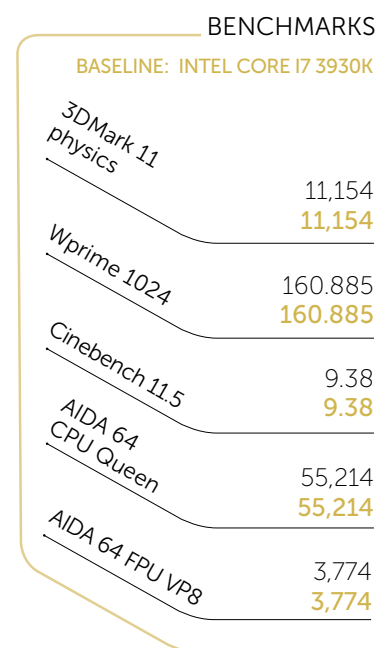
SB-E dies are actually XEON dies, much like Gulftown cores before (980X and 990X CPUs) were also derived from the server parts. As such, there are several technologies and features that exist on these CPUs that are disabled in the desktop parts. In theory, all SB-E dies should live out their lives as XEON CPUs but due to manufacturing and yield variances, some end up as desktop products instead of being binned entirely. This is true to varying degrees; but there's also the matter

of establishing a platform that will last several years for the desktop market. So some perfectly good and capable dies will end up as desktop parts which have some silicon fused off. Since Intel would not be able to charge XEON prices on desktop parts, that's potential revenue "lost" so supply of these CPUs is strictly controlled.

This in part explains why SB-E CPUs were so few. The platform's ecosystem is inherently expensive and as such only tried and tested technology can be implemented, hence the year long delay in inheriting cutting edge features.

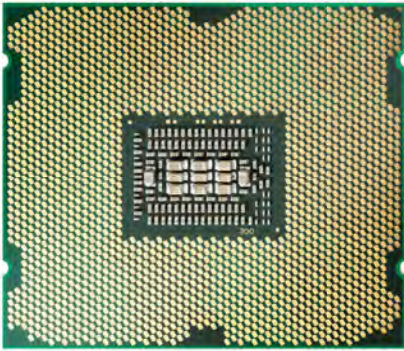
The 3930K CPU, much like the 3960X, is based on the same SB-E die that in total houses eight cores, sixteen threads and 20MB of Level 3 Cache in its true XEON form. The 3930K is about one third of this configuration disabled. It features a lower clock speed than the 3960X and 3MB less of level 3 cache (512Kb per core) for a total of 12MB. Everything else is identical and this is what makes the 3930K appealing.

There are several usage scenarios in modern day x86 computing that allow advanced applications to take full advantage of on-die caches. Those programs however are hardly used in the home environment as they are mainly reserved for the HPC space, data centres and large volume data analysis. In our home applications, games, video editing, encoding and the like, there's a steep



falloff in performance after a specific amount of cache is made available to the system. In the case of the Sandy Bridge CPUs, it seems the fall off was just after 7MB at least where the L3 is concerned. The 2700K had 8MB while the 2500K had 6MB, however the performance difference was usually unimportant between the two when examining per thread/core efficiency. The SB-E CPUs are based on this very same architecture with some differences including a higher latency and larger L3 cache to deal with the four-channel IMC, at least in the case of the 3960X. With the 3930K the cache organization has increased in a linear fashion from the SB CPUs. So for the additional two cores, there's an additional 4MB of L3 cache. It's of the lower latency type than what's on SB but the larger pool of memory overall allows the CPU to store more locally (these not exclusive, but shared caches so threads are not limited to a fixed size).

All of this translates into the 3930K performing identically



to the 3960X in the vast majority of tasks at the same clock speed. Granted the 3960X has a higher reference and turbo clock, but ignoring that and operating both at an identical and fixed frequency shows negligible to zero performance differences. Since the 3930K is an unlocked SKU, one can easily use the same multiplier that's applied to the 3960X and achieve the same performance.

Why would one want to use the SB-E platform when Ivy Bridge is around is simple however. Despite the many advantages that a CPU such as the 3770K would have over the 3930K, the SB-E CPUs have masses of bandwidth (courtesy of the four-channel memory access), more thread capability and many more PCI Express lanes (40). As a CPU featured on a premium platform, installing three or even four graphics cards in a system is not uncommon and this is precisely where the advantage and appeal is.

X79 provides enough raw computing horsepower to keep the data flowing to such configurations, while SB and IB platforms will suffer. Add to which, it's not possible to run 4-way SLI using PCIe 3.0 cards on the LGA1155 platform, as the lanes are much fewer and there's no multiplexing PCIe 3.0 chip from NVIDIA that is capable of this.

If you add GPU computing to the mix, all of a sudden the SB-E platform with CPUs like the 3930K hold more value than the higher IPC and lower TDP Ivy-Bridge offerings. This CPU is expensive, and in games it will offer similar or lower performance to the 3770K, but add some serious workload to the configuration and watch the roles reverse.

The 3930K is cheaper than the 3960X, but it's still not a CPU most users can afford as it still retails for more than a high-end graphics card. However, it is a more cost effective way to get on to the SB-E platform. The 3820 and the 3960X aren't worth it, but the 3930K is where the real value lies with X79. This CPU is easy to recommend and it would be the Dream Machine CPU for all intents and purposes had it not been for the lower clock speed.

NAG

9

- Neo Sibeko

SPECS

Core: 32nm Sandy Bridge-E
 Frequency: 3,200MHz
 Cache: 13.9MB total (12MB L3)
 TDP: 130W
 Platform: LGA 2011 (X79)

PLUS

- AVX instructions
- Overclocks better than the 3960X
- Cheaper than 3960X
- Very fast

MINUS

- Still a little pricey

BOTTOM LINE

The 3930K is just as powerful as the 3960X, it just costs less.

i7 GTX 580 Extreme Gamer



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- Noctua NH-D14 Extreme CPU Cooling
- Corsair TX750M 80+ Modular PSU

i5 GTX 570 Pro Gamer



4.6 GHz OVERCLOCK



R11,499
Including VAT



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MSI Big Bang-XPower II

Supplier **Corex** Website www.msi.com ERP R4,399

The X79 platform, since its introduction last year, has perplexed many power users and enthusiasts alike. On the one hand, it is easily the most feature-rich platform on the market (not counting Z77) and indeed is the premier chipset from Intel. However, there are equally compelling arguments against X79 as well. CPU shortages, high pricing and odd timing – it was almost as if Intel was trying hard to sabotage X79.

Regardless, this platform brought us the best motherboard we had ever seen in the channel, that direct competitor to this board, the ASUS Rampage IV Extreme. Sadly, it meant every other offering on this platform would be measured against this board and, in a way, that was a little unfair because not only does it cost that much more, it's also a lot harder to find in stores, which isn't the issue with the other competitor boards such as this one.

The XPower II is in essence an evolution of MSI's premier X58 motherboard. It has everything that board had and more. For starters, the layout is improved: PCIe spacing is better by merely having more slots than any other board on the market. The audio controller is not necessarily better, but at the least it matches MSI's previous offering in features and signal clarity. Where the real improvements lie is how technically advanced the board sound is, especially its PWM. You can ignore all the military-grade

components, as that's a statement that holds no merit to anyone, really, but what you should pay attention to is just how stable power delivery on this board is even under severe load. We are not talking CPU Vcore load, as that's pretty good on most high-end boards these days, but the other rails are rock solid. Whatever you set, the board keeps regardless of the load.

Overclocking this board can be a little tricky, but once you nail it down it's pretty straight forward. The BIOS recovery option doesn't work well at all and you'll sometimes find an issue where the system reports a failure to POST at a previously very stable setting. These things can be very frustrating, but just using a command rate of 2N fixed most of these problems, while keeping the CPU multiplier low made sure that we could boot the system and all we needed to do was increase the CPU clock using the software utility.

Physically, there really isn't anything to fault the board on and it's near perfect, but once again the BIOS could do with some work. The presentation is overly flashy and navigating it can be tedious, it's one of those situations where less is more. It's possibly the biggest sore point of this motherboard.

Performance is as expected and even though we ran a slower command rate, the performance difference was negligible. An issue for those concerned with Super Pi, but this isn't a Super Pi board or platform

SPECS

Chipset:
Intel X79
Memory:
8x240-pin DDR3
CPU support:
Intel Core i7 SB-E
(LGA2011)
Slots:
7x PCIe 16x

PLUS

- Plenty of PCIe slots
- Looks good
- Great component quality

MINUS

- Annoying BIOS issues
- Average performance
- Pricing

BOTTOM LINE

A good improvement on the original X58 XPower motherboard. Packed with features and plenty of PCIe slots.

BENCHMARKS

BASELINE:
ASUS Rampage IV Extreme

3DMark Vantage CPU	46,724 46,760
Cinebench 11.5	13.46 13.43
AIDA 64 Copy	19,638MB/s 20,396MB/s
3DMark03	126,874 127,025

for that matter, this here is for 3D gaming and benchmarks. For that purpose the XPower is well equipped and isn't lacking at all.

X79 is going to remain with us for a while and with every successive revision of the CPUs and motherboard BIOS updates, things are sure to improve. For high-end, power users and competitive overclockers alike, the XPower II is a worthwhile consideration. This is certainly the best MSI motherboard we have tested to date and it's easy to recommend if you can find it for the right price.

NAG
- Neo Sibeko

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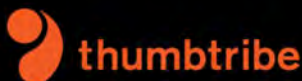
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HARDWARE

SPECS

CPU:
quad-core
ARM Cortex-A9
MPCore

GPU:
quad-core
SGX543MP4+

RAM:
512MB system
memory; 128MB
dedicated VRAM

Display:
5" Super AMOLED
@ 960x544

Controls:
Multi-touch
capacitive touch
screen; rear
touch pad; dual
analogue sticks;
d-pad; 12 buttons;
SIXAXIS motion
sensor; three-
axis electronic
compass.

Game media:
Proprietary
PlayStation Vita
card

Storage media:
Proprietary
PlayStation Vita
memory card
(4-32GB available)

Connectivity:
Wi-Fi 802.11
b/g/n; Bluetooth
2.1; 3G (optional)

Sony PlayStation Vita

Supplier Ster Kinkeor Entertainment

Website za.playstation.com/psvita **RRP** R2,999 (Wi-Fi only); R3,599 (Wi-Fi + 3G)

Since the release of the PSP Go, Sony's foothold on the handheld market has slipped. UMD was a failure in every respect – and was subsequently removed in the Go – but the PSP had a number of licences that performed well throughout its lifetime. However, unlike the diehard PS2, the PSP's time came to a very definite end without much fanfare or sadness. People had moved on to home consoles, mobile gaming (that boasted better visuals) and Nintendo's DS/3DS. So how does Sony go about their re-entry into the market? With the massively powerful, feature-packed PS Vita.

The Vita is big – wider and taller than the original PSP-1000 – but manages to be both thinner and a tad lighter. Manoeuvring ones hands around the device to activate the touch screen or rear touch pad requires a bit of practice, but the light weight goes a long way to aid this exercise. Perhaps the only downfall of the device, in terms of ergonomics, is the design of the shoulder buttons. Their edges are too sharp and, in games that require prolonged use (like *ModNation Racers: Road Trip*), you'll find yourself wishing for an alternate control scheme.

Sony has learnt a lesson from the UMD debacle, and the result is Vita game cards. Smaller form-factor, zero

"The Vita is a technological marvel, finally matching the PS3 in terms of impressiveness, but it's not perfect."

noise and reduced battery drain are benefits of this long-overdue shift, but those who prefer to download their games can do just that – the entire library of retail games (as well as a large selection of PSP classics, Vita demos, "Minis", trailers and apps) is available on the PS Store – at a reduced price, no less. Unfortunately, Sony has decided to stick with the use of proprietary memory cards for storage, and the device ships with neither a card in the box nor built-in storage, forcing users to fork out for the expensive cards to store downloaded content and even save game files.

Also gone from the PSP legacy is the XrossMediaBar interface. It's been replaced with the bright and cheerful touch-based LiveArea concept. Apps and games are organised as a series of icons on the multi-page desktop and, when selected, take the user to a

PLUS

- Great launch line-up of titles
- Powerful hardware
- Sleek interface
- Lightweight

MINUS

- Expensive
- Proprietary memory cards
- Weak retail bundle

BOTTOM LINE

A powerful, impressive device that will stand comfortably alongside your PS3.

LiveArea dedicated to the app. From this screen, one can launch the app, access the user manual, check for updates or browse through recent activities. Multi-tasking and cross-game chat also make an appearance thanks to the system's ample RAM, and the whole package comes together to deliver a slick, expensive feeling and highly usable experience.

The Vita is a technological marvel, finally matching the PS3 in terms of impressiveness, but it's not perfect. The price will undoubtedly put off a lot of prospective buyers, and it doesn't help that the retail package includes nothing but the essential hardware – no memory card, pouch, headphones or even a carry strap. Expect to spend another R199 on the accessory bundle (starter kit) and R199 on a 4GB memory card.

NAG

- Geoff Burrows

WD Elements Play

Supplier Drive Control **Website** www.drivecon.net
ERP 1TB – R1,730 / 2TB – R2,070

The WD Elements Play is a unique device. It exists in limbo, somewhere between portable hard drive and TV streamer. Imagine a bulky black box, one that houses a 1TB or 2TB drive like a hard drive enclosure, but then add in a bunch of audiovisual outputs and you've got the Elements Play – a sort of transitional multimedia box. It'll handle playback of videos, music and photo galleries.

You've got a number of different options for connecting it to your television. There's HDMI and component out, as well as an optical audio port. Connect it to your TV and you're presented with a clean, simple interface, with just five menus for videos, music, photos, file management and settings. In addition, you'll also find a dedicated USB port specifically for use with your PC. On the side, you'll find a regular USB 2.0 port for connecting other standard USB mass storage devices. Connect the Elements Play to your PC via USB, and it'll function as a regular drive – but it can't be used as a player and drive simultaneously. Couple it with another mass storage device and it's possible to transfer files to and from each of them from within the Elements Play's interface. Browse your media with another storage device connected and it'll ask you to select which device you'd like to browse. Browsing is simple enough, and media files display in a small preview window as you search. Moving through the menus is noticeably sluggish at times, however, which may become frustrating.

Video playback, even at 1080p, is smooth with the Elements Play – but we expected that, given that this is not a streaming device. It supports an adequate variety of video and audio formats as well. That's all there is to say really. The lack of streaming/network functionality makes the Elements Play difficult to recommend, especially if you already have a gaming console connected to your TV – since all you'd have to do then is buy a cheap portable hard drive, transfer your media to it, and then connect it to your console to achieve similar results (although the Elements Play does support a wider variety of file formats than, say, your Xbox does). If you can think of a reason you'd need the Elements Play's functionality, however, then I'd say go for it, because it works well enough. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes

6



PLUS

- Supports a variety of file types

MINUS

- No network streaming
- Interface is a bit sluggish

BOTTOM LINE

It's a hard drive with AV output. There's not much else to it really.

SPECS

Supported video formats:

AVI (XviD, AVC, MPEG-1/2/4), MPG/MPEG, VOB/ISO, MP4/MOV (MPEG-4, H.264), MKV (H.264, x.264, AVC, MPEG-1/2/4), TS/TP/M2TS (MPEG-1/2/4, AVC), FLV (D1 resolution only) and RM or RMVB 8/9/10

Supported audio formats:

MP3, WAV/PCM/LPCM, WMA, AAC, FLAC, MKA, OGG, APE and Dolby Digital (only inside video files)

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PS3



BENCHMARKS

BASELINE: GIGABYTE HD7970 WINDFORCE

Lost Planet 2 1080p DX11	64.5 64.5
Crysis 2 1080p DX11	64.14 64.14
Crysis: Warhead 1080p DX10	61.41 61.41
3DMark11 Extreme	2,935 2,935
3DMark Vantage	38,244 38,244
Unigine Heaven Xtreme	1,976.2 1,976.2



GIGABYTE HD7970 WINDFORCE

Supplier Rectron Website www.gigabyte.com ERP R7,499

After AMD's dismal attempt at a revival of the once sought-after FX CPUs, no one could have imagined that AMD's much touted GCN architecture on the Southern Islands GPUs would be anything more than an evolution of what we had already seen with the previous generation GPUs. After all, AMD had been refining what they had essentially designed many years ago with the ill-fated R600. Whatever resemblance the CaymanXT GPU had in common with 2007's R600 had been reduced to theory, for in practice the 6970 was light years ahead in performance.

The real revolution in performance is with the Tahiti cores and all the other SKUs derived from it. With each driver version AMD releases, things improve notably. Performance goes up and the feature list is extended. The premier product, the HD7970 is virtually flawless and, if anything, is a downer to AMD's lethargic driver update schedule. Other than that, we always were impressed with the HD7970 and we are even more so impressed with GIGABYTE's OC WINDFORCE HD7970.

It's everything the reference HD7970 is but a little better. You see, it's not in the 1GHz GPU clock where the graphics card wins our praise but in the WINDFORCE cooler. It's not revolutionary in any practical way,

but it is super quiet and works really well. Indeed, the HD7970 is cool when operating at reference clocks but on the GIGABYTE OC card it's quieter while offering better performance. Even when the fans are operating at their maximum speed, they are significantly quieter than the reference cards. Best of all, the price premium for this card is negligible. HD7970 cards are expensive and once you commit to these GPUs, the price premium for this card is not going to impact your buying decision much.

What makes this card more compelling is that it actually uses the reference PCB. Unlike some models like the DCU11 from ASUS, the Lightning from MSI and GIGABYTE's yet unannounced SOC version, this card overlocks just as well as the normal HD7970. This may sound strange, but so far every other custom PCB card (like the DCU11) results in lower overlocks than the standard cards. This is using both normal air coolers and under liquid nitrogen. Currently there's just no incentive to buy either of those cards where performance is concerned.

An odd situation indeed, as all these exotic models offer better power delivery, higher quality PCBs and, for the most part, better GDDR5 memory. Speculation suggests that the overlocking potential of these Tahiti GPUs is more reliant on the quality of

SPECS

Core: 1000MHz Tahiti (40nm)
Processors: 2,048
Render outputs: 32
Memory: 3,072MB GDDR5 5.5GHz (264GB/sec)
API: DirectX 11.1 / OpenGL 4.x / OpenCL 1.X

PLUS

- Runs cool
- Quiet
- Great performance

MINUS

- Price

BOTTOM LINE
If you're looking for an HD7970, this is the one to get.

the specific die on any particular card than the components that support it. That is, if you happen to have a marginally inferior GPU on your particular card, regardless of what this GPU is paired with, it will have a much lower overlocking ceiling than an ordinary GPU on the standard PCB.

Good news for everyone (end-users at least) in general really because it means costs remain relatively uniform throughout the various vendors, but cooling solutions and pricing will make all the difference. As it stands this is the quietest, coolest and fastest HD7970 we had to date. Overlocking was a hair better than it was with the regular HD7970, but it's where both cards stopped scaling this card was much cooler, in the order of 10°C. Doesn't sound like much, but it makes a massive difference when you're comparing a GPU operating at 89°C and one at 79°C at 1,275MHz and a GPU voltage of 1.25V. Realistically though, you should be able to operate this graphics card on a daily basis at 1,100MHz with no vGPU adjustment. For the memory, an impressive 6.4GHz provides massive amounts of bandwidth allowing you to experiment with ridiculous levels of AA. If you're looking for the best HD7970, this is probably your best bet right now.

NAG
- Neo Sibeko

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Supplier Kingston **Website** www.kingston.com
ERP R6,399



We receive a lot of premium products for review at NAG every issue and once in a while are tasked with reviewing a product that in some way defies logic, or most importantly purpose. A R15,000 graphics card like the MARS II we admire for its engineering qualities more than we do its practicality. However, since a graphics card isn't a product, but a component, it can be somewhat forgiven for fulfilling a need that isn't there. When it comes to USB flash drives however, these actually have a practical use across many devices and are indispensable to many.

So then one should appreciate not only the fastest USB 3.0 flash drive money can buy, but also the largest USB flash drive we have ever come across. Oddly enough this isn't the case because where the Kingston DataTraveler HyperX 3.0 is concerned, we can't see a useful usage scenario for this drive. At more than R6,000 retail we have to wonder why anyone would invest in such a drive and for what purpose. A USB 3.0 enclosure with a Kingston HyperX 240GB SSD will cost you significantly less and it's faster. Sure you lose a few gigabytes of storage, but do you really want to travel with 200GB of sensitive data on your key-ring?

So the question of why this drive exists, we cannot answer. We have absolutely no idea. It's a "massive" SSD in USB flash drive form that retails for more than any similarly sized SSD from Kingston will cost with an enclosure. It is however incredibly fast and you're unlikely to find a faster drive. We must however encourage some sensibility and rather point your attention to the 128GB and 64GB models. The performance is near identical but the price much easier to swallow. Add to which losing data is always stressful, but we would imagine if you had to choose, 64GB of lost data is more palatable than 256GB. For its speed and capacity though, it is peerless. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko



SPEC

Dimensions:
74.99mm x
23.29mm x
15.9mm

- Supports Windows 7, Vista, XP & Mac
- 8-channel architecture
- Five-year warranty

PLUS

- Unparalleled performance
- Capacity
- Build quality

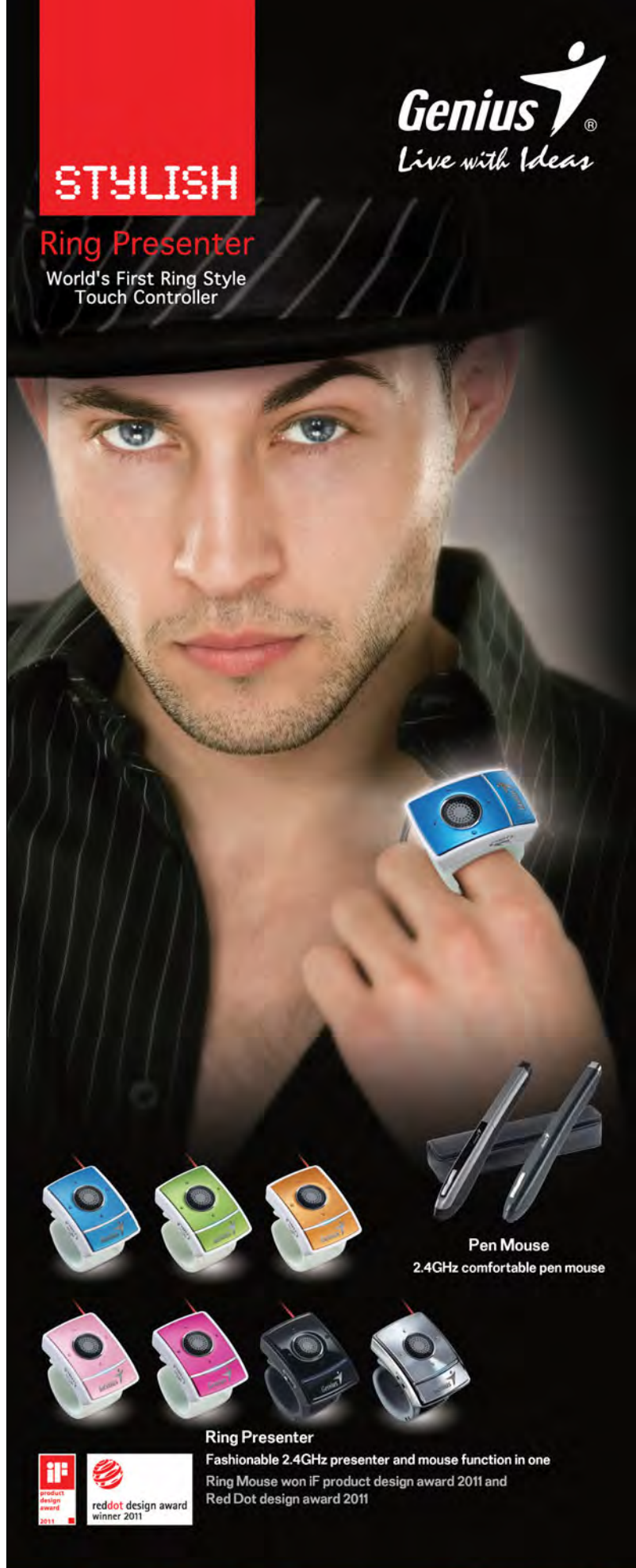
MINUS

- Astronomical price
- Availability

BOTTOM LINE

The fastest USB flash drive on the market, but easily the most expensive one as well. Truly for the well-heeled.

7



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PowerColor HD7950 3GB GDDR5

Supplier Evetech **Website** www.powercolor.com.tw **ERP** R5,299

PowerColor is one of the lesser known brands in the graphics card circles, but one that's been around for many years. Initially the outfit produced NVIDIA and ATI powered products, but several years ago switched to an AMD-exclusive partner.

As such we should expect some interesting designs for their premium graphics cards, particularly anything in the 7900 series of GPUs which are currently the most popular GPUs on the market. Unfortunately this isn't one of those products; instead, PowerColor only offers a standard version of this card. So if you're looking for that little extra, it's sadly not going to be there. However, that doesn't mean there isn't some value to be had here.

With no additional tweaking of any kind from PowerColor, the price is low for a Radeon HD7950. It isn't pre-overclocked, but our testing revealed that this sample will reach some impressive speeds provided we weren't too aggressive with the settings. By merely moving the sliders in the AMD Overdrive menu we managed some sizeable performance gains across all game tests and benchmarks.

Individual cards will vary but the sample we had was outfitted with the same Hynix GDDR5 DRAM that is on many HD7970 cards. As a result our overclocking allowed us to reach 1.75GHz from the reference 1.25GHz. Not particularly useful for 1080p gaming, but will dramatically boost the performance at the ultra-high resolutions like 2560x1600 or in Infinity configurations. With a 970MHz GPU clock and the above mentioned memory frequency, the PowerColor HD7950



was delivering identical performance to the HD7970. These frequencies did not result in meaningfully warmer temperatures even though power draw was increased sizeably.

These clock speeds are not promised on every card and individual samples will vary in mileage; suffice to say, if you do manage frequencies anywhere near what we did you'll essentially have yourself HD7970 performance for the price of a 7950. If you can find this card at this price or even lower, it's certainly worth the purchase. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

SPECS

Core:
800MHz Tahiti
(28nm)
Processors:
1792
Render outputs:
32
Memory:
3,072MB GDDR5
5GHz (240GB/sec)
API:
DirectX 11.1 /
OpenGL 4.x /
OpenCL 1.X

PLUS

- Much quieter than the HD7970

MINUS

- Standard PCB and cooler

BOTTOM LINE
Standard Radeon HD7950 that is thoroughly fast in all benchmarks.

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