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rAge report back

COD: Black Ops II multiplayer

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TO BRING THEM
ALL AND IN
THE DARKNESS
BIND THEM

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When the country's biggest and best gaming extravaganza comes to a close, it's only natural to feel profound panic and despair at the thought of having to wait a whole year for the next one. But instead of getting bogged down in the wait ahead, we're playing optimist, thinking of the good times rAge 2012 contained.

38 CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II
We stare long and hard into the unblinking eyes of *Black Ops II*'s revitalised multiplayer suite, and discover how Treyarch plans to make this the most attractive *COD* multiplayer offering yet.

44 LEGO THE LORD OF THE RINGS
A *LEGO The Lord of the Rings* feature is never late, dear reader. Nor is it early. It arrives precisely when it means to. Does that quote work?

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Taipei, Taiwan played host to MSI's Master Overclocking Arena this year, and we travelled all the way there to cover every aspect of the prestigious event.

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rAge 2012

There's a press release on the official site: www.rageexpo.co.za, and an article in this issue to tell you everything you need to know about what happened... officially. I'm going to tell you what really happened.

Everything in the press release and article is all true; it was a great show and we had more people than ever before but it also taught us a few lessons (as it always does). First up it was too busy on Saturday. It got so bad at one point that the Dome safety and security people had to stop people from coming in until people let. This crisis lasted about 45 minutes and a few people got grumpy and said organisation was bad. I disagree: bad organisation would have been people getting hurt because we didn't have good organisation. The lines to get in were also a bit long and of course we had a heat wave. Standing in the sun isn't fun. The ATM machines were also too busy and at one point weren't working due to some outside link problem that was resolved eventually. The credit card machines that used wireless were a bit of a joke because over the rAge weekend wireless at the Dome doesn't exist – there are just too many signals flying around for anything to work. The stage area was too crowded. As for the LAN, some internet link to Europe went down on Friday (we think a great white ate the cable), resulting in zero connectivity on Friday; the network wasn't 100% perfect thanks to the truck strike so some of our expensive kit was stranded in customs, and apparently some games didn't like the configuration. It was our tenth year – you think things would run smoothly. LOL... End of the day it all worked out and I'd say around 99% of the people are happy people. Sorry to the 1%; I wish everything ran perfectly but I guess because it's year 10 we were due for a bit of a wakeup call – more of a friendly reminder not to be complacent and to respect our position at the top. Here are some of the things we're doing for 2013 to improve on this year: We're going to have the NAG LAN 100% sorted out and confirmed to work by 1 June 2013 or we're not going to have the LAN at rAge. We're talking to the various ISPs about a new Internet system that will work just like it does if you were connecting from home (not as quick but more or less). We're going to add more people in the front to deal with the lines of people quickly but please consider coming on Sunday or Friday (the less busy days). We're adding more ATM machines (maybe those portable ones outside). We're going to insist that all retailers use hard lines for their credit card machines. We're going to increase the size of the aisles (by 2 meters on the main ones and 1 meter on the secondary). We're going to move the stage around and add more seats (1-2 more bleachers) and more standing room. All this has already been decided and that's before we've even had out first meeting for rAge 2013.

It was an awesome show and the best we've ever done. This is just here to let you all know that we're even more committed to making it better each year. Thanks for coming and see you in 2013.

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I ordered some stuff from these guys the other week and was running late to collect it (I was going to be there at about 20 minutes after their closing time). "No problem," I was told. "We'll wait for you." They didn't know who I was either. So thanks guys, you've earned your free plug here.

COMPETITION WINNERS

Sorry for this boring stuff, I don't know why all these wieners are being put on this page. I feel like I'm not in charge of this magazine sometimes. Next month this goes in the news section or not at all. Anyway – well done all you people – your skill at sending an SMS has been rewarded. *Borderlands 2* competition winners: main winner – Bryan Banfield, second place winners – Duncan Smith; Johan Dreyer; JP Steyn and the rest – Nathan Stewart; Christopher Doran; Richard Steyn; Jason Rip; Ruben Janse Van Ransburg; JL Hendrikse. The guy with some actual skill is Keith Milton of Roodepoort who won the arcade machine at the NAG stand at rAge by playing *Ghosts and Goblins* with a score of 154,600 (he clocked it twice). Oh, just been sent more: September Evetech competition – Louis Ainslie; Johan Mackay; Lumart Wiechers; Brendon Morris; Stefan Engelbrecht.

Before I go, we've brought back a favourite section – **Everything Else** – this is all that stuff you love and surround yourself with. Yoda backpacks, figurines, toys, board games and so on.

What a ride
- RedTide
Editor

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INBOX

LETTER OF THE MONTH NOVEMBER 2012

From: Ivan
Subject: Call of Disrespect

The servers on COD MW3 seem infested with veterans trying to discourage the entertainment that the game provides. Recently, while playing online, I personally received a lot of hate mail, after finishing a game with a K/D of 3/1, for using the "wrong" gun and being "[*nasty words, Ed*]". No "well done" or "I couldn't do that asleep dosed up on heroin" was mentioned, only mindless rage for using such a noob gun. The weapon in question was the PP90M1 and last weekend it was still accepted as a "right" weapon to use. For a community parading "noob acceptance" we as a community are not very tolerating to anything other than the right set of weapons, perks, killstreaks and obviously lag. If you cannot cross-map 360 no-scope through a wall with the MSR you have no business playing Search and Destroy. New players are not welcomed into the game with open arms but rather a rule-book full of do's and do not's. If you do not want to be ripped to shreds by a guy with a shotgun in a maze, do not run into the maze with your sniper then complain when you inevitably die. It has gotten to a point where I cannot, in good faith, try to persuade friends to play the multiplayer on the premise of fun. We cannot grow as a community if we keep on neglecting and insulting anyone that does not fall within the pre-conceived norm of ideal weaponry. Yes COD is not the SA gaming community as a whole but it is a sizable chunk of it. Players who condemn new players are bad and should feel bad. The next time you are mowed down by a hail of bullets spewed by a "rapid fire noob" for the sake of the community keep your opinion to yourself and enjoy the game like it was meant to be played.

You are so right. Here's an official message from NAG magazine: Use whatever weapon, tactic, method, mode, style and/or technique you please when playing games. The developers put all the guns in the game for you to use and they patch often to balance them, so don't let some pompous know it all hothead (who probably heard his opinion from some other twit) tell you how to play, what to use, when to shoot or anything of the sort. I have found that the best way to play is to turn off all chat windows, voice communications and let the only interaction with these "pro" players be your rapidly fired bullets, RPG shots into crowded rooms and spammed grenades. This is your new motto, "it's none of my business what you think of my playing style". The only thing you shouldn't do is cheat or camp because that's lame. Ed.

From: Sharna
Subject: Gayness in gaming

Has anyone noticed the sudden boost of homosexuality in games these days? I have sat in front of my big screen and played more headlines than is likely healthy, and I have noticed this trend. Mass Effect is a sparkling example. At first LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender groups) seemed to ok the potential for semi-lesbian scenes between a female Shepard and the Asari, Liara in the first game. However, by game three EA seemed to have been pressured into furthering their homosexual scope to boy-on-boy action, as well as "normal lesbianism": a.k.a. Not just a woman coupling with an all-female alien race able to reproduce with any gender of any species.

Of course, this isn't the only big title. Many games, RPGs in the forefront, are opening up to the idea of appealing to the gay gaming community. Fable II and III also gave me the option of choosing my character's sexuality (which of course I took advantage of by marrying everyone in sight, before regretting the crippling spouse allowance fees). I also saw hints of a homosexual relationship in BioShock, between Sander Cohen and the game's antagonist, Andrew Ryan, as I picked up audio tapes [You sure about that? We're on the fence on that one, Ed].

Fallout 3 (between two female ghouls you meet on the course of your adventures) also joined the party. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas comes complete with a bunch of police officers who say suggestive things like: "Let's wrestle to submission!" and "Don't drop the soap, honey!" You can also find gay pride flags on the streets, along with a clearly homosexual store clerk who flirts unabashedly with the male protagonist. The fourth title in this series even features a flamboyant night-club entrepreneur named Tony Prince, or "Gay Tony".

Everywhere you look in many popular titles, you see hints and outright statements concerning homosexual relationships between characters. It has even come to the point where game companies (BioWare being the main, proud culprit) are allowing gamers to choose same-sex partners for their own characters.

I, personally see this as a growth as well as a sign of maturity for the entire industry. Creating a new game is a work of art, and should not be restricted in any fashion. We'd all become extremely bored otherwise, by lily white, stiff-faced, clean-worded and violence-free future selections. I'm curious as to what others think of this evolution, and whether they think it will have any repercussions for gaming?

I think it's great that game developers are embracing all things when making their games. Do you have a well thought out intelligent opinion on this topic? Let us know here: letters@nag.co.za. For

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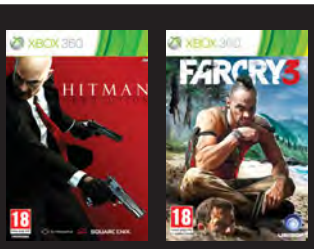

LETTER OF THE MONTH

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...

the rest let us know here: applications@school4morons.com. Ed.

From: Elias
Subject: Razer
I get your magazine every month and if there are alternate covers I buy all of them. Once I've finished reading them I nail them up on my wall. I love the magazine and I love the way you write and the small attempts at humour but there's one thing I've been wondering about: Why haven't you written a review on the Razer Blade or any Razer products? I have decided to buy the new Razer Blade but I'm still not 100% sure about my choice and if you wanted to wright a review I'm sure you can get your hands on one. And I don't think I've seen any reviews of Razer products I would also love to see ones on the Tiamat 7.1 and the Razer Mamba I'm not asking you to wright a review on those but I've just been wondering why you never write on Razer products.

What do you mean by small attempts at humour exactly? On a creepier note: are you really nailing whole copies of NAG *on your wall – this makes me a little scared. Anyway, you asked for a review of the Razer Blade, so here goes: Early man had no way of removing facial hair which is why we often see Neanderthals depicted with unruly wild beards. Later, as we became more civilised, we started cutting facial hair with sharpened rocks, tools and eventually things like knives and so on, culminating in the straight razer. Early man did sometimes end up with no facial hair but this was largely thanks to failed experiments with lava and/or fire. Today, advanced engineering scientifically technologies can fit up to five razer blades on a single ergonomic handheld device. As you can see the modern razer blade is so much better than all those other things in the past. I give it 92%. Ed.*

From: Richard
Subject: NAG employment queries
Tarryn's opinion column in the August issue of NAG caused me to re-evaluate my stance on writing and whether it would be something I'd want to pursue as a career path. I would highly appreciate it if you'd be able to answer some of my questions if not all or at least direct me to someone who could. I'll present my questions in a numbered format below for ease of reading.

1. How large is the staff compliment at NAG?
2. Do the writers at NAG earn a salary or are they paid per article?
3. What are the required qualifications for a NAG journalist/editor?
4. Do you ever have interns working for you?
5. Do the staff at NAG find that they have to hold down other writing jobs for other companies/publishers?
6. Why did you personally get into gaming journalism and are you happy you decided to?
7. Do you feel your passion for gaming as a hobby has deteriorated as a result working within the gaming industry?
8. Lastly do you still agree with Tarryn's sentiments that if you're passionate about both writing and gaming that this is a good path to actively chase?

First up don't listen to Tarryn, she operates outside of what people consider normal. We can't get rid of her because out of all the people writing for NAG she's the most likely to go postal at the drop of a hat. Anyhow, back to your questions.

1. *About 21 people including all freelancers and minions (mostly freelancers).*
2. *Some earn a salary and some are paid per article. I'm notoriously bad at paying freelancers. They don't mind usually because when guilt finally forces me to pay them they get nice large lump sums once or twice a year.*
3. *You have to be the most sexy person in the room. And... be multitalented, must write good and know your games and gaming industry and hardware and everything IT related and be awesome.*
4. *No. They are a bore and usually sit around staring at us with idiot grins. Also, any work they do is such a screw-up that it takes us longer to fix than doing it from scratch ourselves. They smell too.*
5. *No. They wear cowboy hats and hang out near cinema complexes.*
6. *I love games and gaming hardware. This job is just the best way to get both of those things for free.*
7. *No. My love for games runs deep.*

ON THE **FORUMS**

Go right ahead and have a little bitch and moan. We'll pretend to care, just like everyone else: **www.nag.co.za/forums**

Q: What was your favourite thing/part/event/game/person/fruit-flavoured snack/etc. at rAge this year?

"Nothing, CUZ I WASN'T THERE!!!!!! "
{G}Zulu

"Nothing, CAUSE it's too far away so I NEVER GET TO GO! (Q___Q) "
James Donaldson

"Free stuff! The Cosplay was epic as well a lot better"
Z1OC

"Having a dream that it might actually come to Cape Town one day... "
DXeXodus

"I dunno if anyone saw the sledding game with the Wii balance board. I had real tears (of laughter) while watching people compete at this. Let's just say when you launch, it doesn't look very "graceful". I can't find any videos of it online, but it really is one of the funniest things I've seen in my life. "
massacre_101

8. If you like swimming and dolphins should you become a dolphin trainer... Ed.

From: David
Subject: Thank you
I've been gaming since I could walk. I spent the better half of my childhood taking on the Empire in X-Wing and thwarting the plans of Le Chuck in Monkey Island. But now I've found myself in the position where I have to work from 9am to midnight every day, so my game time is zero. But I'm not writing this for pity. In fact I'm writing this to say thank you! I want to thank NAG for keeping me up to date with the latest games and technology and I want to thank all the gamers out there on the web, on forums, Facebook or Twitter. Through you my gaming spirit still burns and will never die. So thank you!

It's a pleasure. Also, get a new job – you're getting screwed with hours like that. ;) Ed.

From: Justin
Subject: A Cry from Far
My hands pull themselves away from the controller and I return Far Cry 2 to its case, carefully I shut the Play Station off and make sure my uniform is secured. With poise I stride from the room. Shuffling keys lock up the safe house and I cautiously leave the area, making sure that there is no one lurking in the nearby bushes or behind a wall.

Pleased that I lack any pursuers I head out onto the road, my eyes dart back and forth. No cars, nothing that can kill me with one simple shot. All my buddies are already at the location. They may need me and so I rush across the road.

No car has run me down and no buggy has tried to get at me. With no protection but a pocket kni- I mean machete of course, I head towards the location. There are civilians and I'm not used to that, so I hurry. There are cars ahead and so I hide behind a tree. They soon disappear.

With that obstacle gone, I head across the road. The front entrance looms but I go around instead, they won't catch me that way. My buddies are also hiding around that side and so I think that it would be best that way.

No guards, I rush to my buddies, they greet me kindly enough.

'Do anything last night?' My buddy asked.

'Well I played some Far Cry.'

'Cool.'

I scratch my head, wondering if a sniper had me in his sights... then wondered what Far Cry 3 would do to me (sharks are already on my beaches, you know).

You know what is weird? This is the third letter this month about Far Cry 2. What is going on here? Ed.

Adrian Martinescu, "I've been using Blender for about a year and a half now and wanted to make something for the NAG Magazine because you guys are awesome. This was my attempt."

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.

From: Josh
Subject: Is life a game?
Death is something we all have in common. We all come into this world the same and go out the same, it's what we do in between which separates us. Death is very much the driving force behind many of our choices, we will make lists of activities we want to do before our lives end and scream out terms like "YOLO [you only live once, Ed]," to motivate our choices.

When you think about it doesn't a games lifetime go the same way? We will receive a long awaited game and start playing it with huge enthusiasm just as a child will find enjoyment in anything. As our time with the game grows we too will grow accustomed to the game's (life's) ways and will adapt to any situation that the game (life) can throw at us and will do what is necessary to level(grow) up.

We will eventually reach a stage where we hit the level cap (grow old) and need to look for things to do before we eventually stop playing the game (pass away). Maybe we need to explore that cave once more or kill that last troll, but we will never feel satisfied, never feel like we have done everything. Nonetheless our time with the game (life) will come to an end and we will be left wondering what would of been the outcome had we took another path in the game (life).

I guess my point is that games share more similarities with life than many believe, maybe not in the story or graphics but in the basic principles that dictate them. Whether you can replay life is another story.

I'm actually replaying my life right now. In the previous life I was born with a coordination deficiency, I was also illiterate and a little idiotic and my thumbs bent the wrong way. My name was Dudley. Everyone around me played games, spoke about games and even made games while all I did was stare at the screen knowing if I touched a controller it would end up in someone's eye socket. I was cursed to love games but never play them. I died unhappy. This is why I decided to come back again but as a gaming magazine editor. I still have a few of those past life problems but the great team here at NAG always manages to make me look good. Ed.

THE SHORTS

Extracts of n00b from NAG letters

"While on the topic, it would be awesome if you guys did a second "Inbox" section of the weirdest and most unintelligible letters you guys have received."
- Matthew

"Bring on them heads!"
- Julian

"Mario taught me that everyone can be a hero, even a plumber."
- Zelda

"I have two aspirations in life; to miraculously find a cure for herpes, and to play Assassins Creed 3"
- Kerry

"I was a n00b before that word even existed."
- Quinton

ON TWITTER

Look a birdie @nagcoza

Chantelle Alexander
This weekend it isn't #GangnamStyle, it's #GamingStyle B) :D #rAge2012

Han
One can win an arcade machine? You lie! Don't be such a tease!!!

NAG Magazine Online
ADDICTED to #GuildWars2 please send help

Miktar
@nagcoza Can't, too busy playing GW2.

Alwyn Venter
Gaming FTW! Well done on organising another spectacular event! See you next year.

Andrew Jackson
@nagcoza "What is this" Sparta, obviously.

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I, Gamer

Smashheadkeyboard

It was bound to happen sooner or later, but another game has come along and usurped *Skyrim*'s place as my current gaming obsession. The best part about it is that the arrival of this attention-glutton was unexpected. *Borderlands 2* has joy-puked its cel-shaded glory directly into my brain. Dovahkiin is out and Claptrap is in, mainly because he kept calling me his "minion" throughout the first section of the game, and that on its own won me over completely. But the heady mix of gratuitous looting, quirky characters and gun binging didn't come without a fair amount of effort.

The herculean task began with the surprise local delay in the release of *Borderlands 2*. I wasn't the only one who felt crestfallen when it was revealed that the game was going to be a week late, but instead of moping I decided to cancel my pre-order and go the digital download route. Believe it or not, *Borderlands 2* was the first "triple-A" title that I've bought digitally. I've bought dozens of Xbox LIVE Arcade games, PSN games and smaller indie games, but this was most definitely my first stab at shunning the excitement of getting a new boxed game, for something a little less physical.

"Perhaps it was the series of unfortunate ensuing events that led me to this conclusion, but forsaking physical for digital is a load of bollocks"

Perhaps it was the series of unfortunate ensuing events that led me to this conclusion, but forsaking physical for digital is a load of bollocks. What should have, by today's standards, been a seamless exercise turned into the complete opposite. Like expecting to spend the day at Disney World but ending up getting repeatedly punched in the penis by a mob of angry midgets. With knuckledusters.

I pre-purchased the game the night before it released so I could begin pre-loading it. South Africa's Internet offerings have most definitely improved, and our 4MB line was sucking the game down at great speeds. While our country may be getting its ass into gear when it comes to online access, it's got its thumb rammed so far up its butt when it comes to something else: electricity. Turns out that slow Internet speeds aren't the only deterrent for would-be digital purchasers in SA – electricity is too because about 20 minutes into my download, the power went out and stayed out for 11 hours.

So I did what any other determined gamer would have: I installed Steam on my laptop and restarted the download at work the next day. Unfortunately, because the company's phone lines were stolen nearly two years ago and were never replaced by Telkom, my workplace runs off a ludicrously overpriced wireless ISP – a wireless ISP that throttles downloads from services like Steam. It took me 14 hours to download *Borderlands 2* and after that I still had to back up the files, transfer them to my gaming PC at home and reinstall the game. At that stage, however, Steam's servers were taking a serious beating because, obviously, *Borderlands 2* was now out. It took me another hour to log in, bringing my total time (from digital purchase to actually playing the game) up to around 15 hours excluding the 11 hour electricity outage.

Fortunately *Borderlands 2* was entirely worth the test in patience, but I'd have been disappointed if I'd decided to pop my digital shopping cherry with a game I ended up loathing. Worth it or not, the effort has reiterated something: I'm nowhere near ready to give up physical for digital.

- Miklós Szecsei

Cliffy B leaves Epic Games

This year has had its fair share of surprise departures by influential developers. Following on from Peter Molyneux's switch to the indie scene earlier this year and the recent announcement of the departure of BioWare's famed pair of doctors, Cliff "Look at all mah *Gears of War*!" Bleszinski has left Epic Games.

The split is a huge surprise, considering that Cliff has pretty much been the face of Epic for the last few years, in addition to being an indomitable creative force at the studio. He's credited in the design of everything from *Gears of War* and *Unreal*, to *Jazz Jackrabbit*, and he's been with Epic for 20 years. In a letter to colleagues, Bleszinski explained his departure, and Epic posted a portion of that letter online:

"I've been doing this since I was a teenager, and outside of my sabbatical last year, I have been going non-stop," wrote Cliff. "I literally grew up in this business, as Mike [Capps] likes to say. And now that I'm grown up, it's time for a much needed break."

"I will miss the projects, the playtests, the debates, and most importantly, the people. Epic only hires the best of the best, and it has been a joy working with each and every one of you on a daily basis, whether you were hired weeks ago or decades ago. I have been fortunate enough to collaborate with a variety of disciplines, from code to art to marketing and PR – it's been one big, rewarding learning experience. I'm confident that each project that is being built, whether at Epic, Chair, PCF, or Impossible will be top notch and will please gamers and critics alike."

Cliff and Epic wouldn't reveal what the prolific developer's next step will be, but Epic's technical director Tim Sweeney said this: "In 20 wonderful years with Epic, Cliff Bleszinski has grown into a true design luminary, and his contributions to the 'Unreal' and 'Gears' series have helped shape the game industry into what it is today. Cliff leaves Epic with our gratitude for his many contributions, and our wishes for continued success in the next chapter of his life!"

Having had such a remarkable, intensely busy career, we don't blame Cliffy for calling a (hopefully temporary) time-out. We wish him all the best.

Mass Effect series gets box set, awful DLC planning

All three *Mass Effect* games are getting crammed into one gorgeous package known as the *Mass Effect Trilogy*. The best part about the whole thing, however, is that it's coming to PC, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 making this the first time ever that PS3 gamers will get to play through *Mass Effect 1*.

The box set is due out on 6 November and will cost $59.99, or the same as any new console release so expect it to be about R600 at retail in South Africa.

Now for the bad news.

There is a ton of *Mass Effect DLC* that's been spread over the three games. All in all, there's probably close on 15-20 hours of additional missions and gameplay to be found. For reasons that defy all logic, BioWare and Electronic Arts have decided to make a complete hash of what DLC is included in the *Mass Effect Trilogy*. DLC inclusion is dependent on which platform you buy the box set for.

The PC version gets the best DLC inclusion but even that is woefully stingy. PC players will get "Bring Down the Sky" and "Pinnacle Station" DLC from *Mass Effect 1*. They'll also get the Cerberus Network Pass (with access to Zaeed as a squad mate and his coupled loyalty missions for *Mass Effect 2*) and the *Mass Effect 3* multiplayer pass.

Those who choose to pick up the *Trilogy* box set on Xbox 360 won't get any *Mass Effect 1* DLC but will get the Cerberus Network Pass and the *Mass Effect 3* multiplayer pass.

PlayStation 3 players will get... who knows? At time of writing, BioWare and Electronic Arts have yet to confirm what DLC will be included in the PlayStation 3 version. That being said, for those of you who have recently picked up copies of *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3* for PlayStation 3, the good news is that you'll be able to buy a digital copy of *Mass Effect 1* on its own. *Mass Effect 1* will be available on 6 November 2012 and will cost $14.99 via the PlayStation Store.

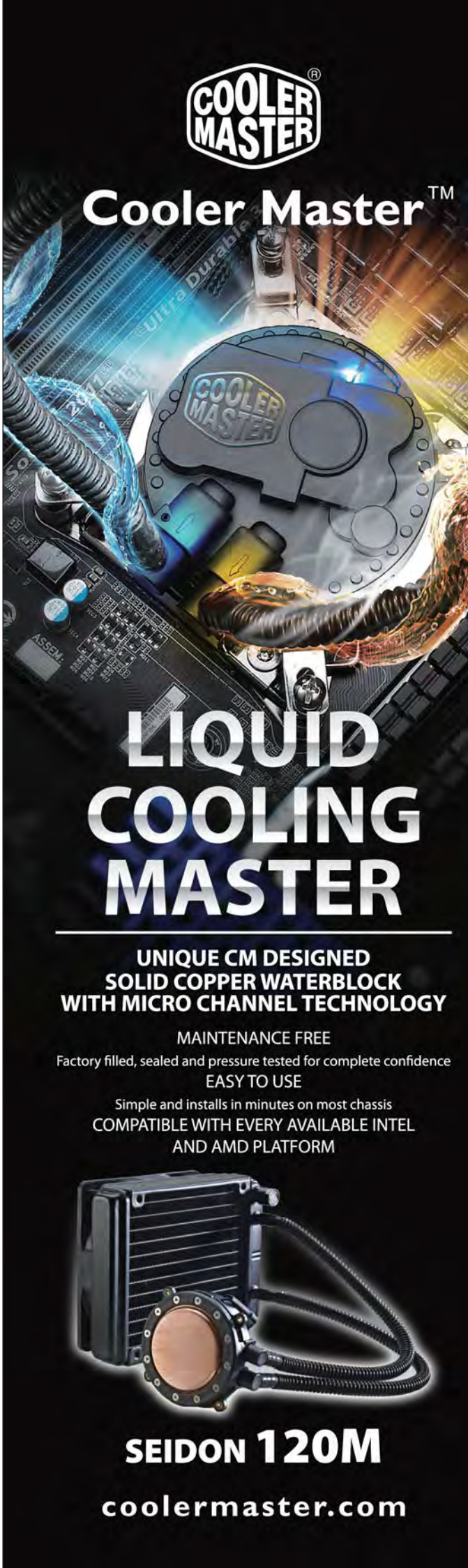
Want to know what DLC is missing? Aside from the two DLC packs for *Mass Effect 1* missing from the Xbox 360 and PS3 versions, the following will be absent across all platforms: "Lair of the Shadow Broker", "Arrival", "Kasumi – Stolen Memory" and "Overlord" for *Mass Effect 2*. "From Ashes", all of the multiplayer DLC packs, "Leviathan" and the newly announced "Omega" will be missing from *Mass Effect 3*.

All in all we estimate that that's about fifteen hours of DLC that won't be included in the *Mass Effect Trilogy* box set – the same box set that has been dubbed "the definitive *Mass Effect* experience".

A NEW CONTENDER ENTERS THE RING

At this year's Tokyo Game Show, SEGA showed off their MMORPG *Phantasy Star Online 2* on Sony's diminutive but powerful PS Vita, which will soon be the new home for the game alongside its PC and mobile counterparts. Don't be fooled by the move to these tiny platforms; *PSO2* looks just as fully-formed as any action-focused MMORPG, with the freedom to explore, fight, customise and socialise.

While news of *Phantasy Star Online 2* has been floating around Japan for some time, it's now been confirmed that the game will indeed make its way to Europe, which means us locals might actually have a chance to get stuck in, although it's likely that we'll have to go the digital distribution route. Regardless of how it pans out in our market, you can expect availability of the title in its F2P form (there's talk of an optional retail bundle, presumably for the Vita release) on PC during Q1/Q2 next year and hopefully the remaining platforms soon after.



The Game Stalker

Give me a reason, bro

Unsurprisingly I always seem to write a column about rAge around this time of year. It makes sense I think, considering this is probably the biggest event on the South African gaming calendar, and gamers come from all over the country to attend. And of course by the time this goes to print, rAge will be over and starting to fade in our memories as we prepare ourselves for the end of year gaming rush.

Every year for me rAge is a different experience. I've been attending almost as long as it's been running, and from what I've been told (I'm getting old, I don't remember!) that's a decade this year. Ten years of bringing gaming direct to the public in one smorgasbord – that's pretty impressive.

My experience of rAge has changed fundamentally over the years. I went from visitor, to journalist, to personality, to exhibitor – and this year I'm occupying the strange territory of independent journo crossed with exhibitor.

I look forward to it every year, regardless of the stress that often accompanies attending. For many who are either LANning or simply visiting it's an intense experience but you can actually go home at any time, which means it's not generally physically exhausting.

For those who are there, working every day however, the less glamorous side of the show often emerges as we approach it with both a sense of anticipation and excitement, coupled with anxiety and dread. The sore feet from hours of standing. The exhaustion at the end of the day. The fact that you still need to go to work the following week (a day off? What is that?) and you don't really feel rested. The sore face from constantly smiling seems like a minor complaint in amongst all that but you feel it at the end of the weekend.

Some of us spend hours standing around merely supervising our products and staving off the boredom of being confined to a single space for three days. Some of us wear our voices hoarse as we talk constantly for three days running, promoting our products, emceeing tournaments, giving presentations and in between it all talking to friends who share our passion for all things gaming related.

And yet we return year after year, complaints and all. Why is this? Is it because it's a great marketing opportunity for all involved? 25,000 people through the doors is nothing to be sneezed at.

Is it for the opportunity to network with potential business contacts? With around 80 exhibitors, again this is indeed a brilliant opportunity.

rAge is indeed an important opportunity to take advantage of all the marketing and networking opportunities that present themselves over the three days, however the real reason people continue to attend rAge, year after year after year is for the love of video games.

Say what you like, that's the only real reason.

Exhibitors, gamers, journalists, LANners, nerds, geeks – and I proudly count myself in the latter categories as well – the love of video games is what draws us together as a community.

The opportunity to play beta code before release date. To meet developers. To see the latest gaming and geeky merchandise on offer. Love it or hate it, the weird and wonderful cosplay. To stay on top of the latest trends in gaming, in accessories, in comic book culture.

This is the reason we attend the really Awesome gaming expo.

- Pippa Tshabalala

Sales figures! Get yer sales figures right here!

People who like to justify their purchases of games by waving sales numbers at other peoples' faces and yelling, "See, I'm totally in there with X number of similarly cool, hip people who've bought these exact games on which I've splurged all my money!" can look forward to some exciting validation in this news post.

First up, the ever-ludicrous figures of the *FIFA* series with *FIFA 13*. The game managed to move over 4.5 million units within its first five days of being on store shelves. This includes sales across all platforms. One million of those units were sold in the UK alone, and within the first 48 hours of the game having gone on sale, it became responsible for holding the lofty title of being the game with the highest concurrent online user count of all EA's titles to date. 800,000 *FIFA 13* players were mixing it up online on September 30th.

Next we have *Resident Evil 6*: a game which we didn't like very much, giving it a score of 58 in last month's issue. However, we don't strictly have sales figures as of yet: only the number of units Capcom has shipped onto store shelves. It's a game that's polarised both critics and the public, but Capcom seems confident that shipping 4.5 million copies to store shelves worldwide for the game's launch was not a gamble for which they're destined to be burnt. They've revealed that as of June 2012, the *Resi* franchise has sold over 50 million units worldwide, and they believe that the series is "just as popular today as it was 15 years ago when the first title made its debut." Time will tell how this works out for them.

Finally, there's *Mists of Pandaria*, the panda-laden expansion to Blizzard's eternal MMORPG behemoth *World of Warcraft*. In its first week, it moved 2.7 million units – not counting sales in China. Blizzard has reported that the expansion has caused the game's global player base to surge beyond the ten-million subscriber mark once again. "With *Mists of Pandaria*, we set out to expand on the sense of fun and discovery that's always been at the heart of *World of Warcraft* – in addition to adding a huge variety of new content and features to the game," said Mike Morhaime, Blizzard CEO. "It's been gratifying to see the results of all of the work we put into this expansion and to hear all of the positive feedback from players so far."

Now is your chance, Obsidian

Obsidian Entertainment – once a proud studio put together from the remains of Black Isle after its closure – has had more than its share of turmoil these last few years. After publisher issues during the development of *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Alpha Protocol* and the lacklustre performance of *Dungeon Siege III*, the studio has decided to undergo a radical shift in direction. No more publishers, no more nonsense; Obsidian has now joined Double Fine Productions in the attempt to build a triple-A game off the funding from Kickstarter.

The studio's game, currently entitled *Project Eternity*, is set to be a party-based isometric RPG with rich tactical combat, immersive narrative elements and plenty of character customisation. One of the aspects that the team seems to be most excited about is the opportunity to introduce dark, adult themes to the game that would usually put off a publisher. Of course, with crowd funding, the gamers get to decide which projects look enticing to them, and from the success of this project it's clear that they like what they've seen so far. Obsidian went in with a goal of $1.1M and at the time of writing, with just one week to go, has more than doubled that – don't be surprised if they manage to crack the $3M mark.

Don't drop the BASS

As a rather sneaky addition to Revolution Software's recently successful Kickstarter campaign for a new *Broken Sword* game, the studio told backers that they'd get started on a sequel to their 1994 gritty science-fiction adventure game *Beneath a Steel Sky* if they reached $1M in pledges. However, once the campaign closed with the one million mark nowhere in sight, *BASS* fans became worried. Thankfully, Revolution has now told eager gamers that *BASS 2* will go ahead regardless, with work beginning on the game as soon as *Broken Sword* is out the door. Hooray!

WILL DEVELOP GAMES FOR FOOD

Throwing your money at game developers with a pipe dream is all well and good, but what if you could actually *invest* your cash in their endeavours? Well now you can with Gambitious, a new crowd funding website designed purely for game developers looking for more than a simple hand-out.

Gambitious allows for two types of crowd funding: pledges and investments. When a game project is created, the developers can specify how much they're looking for as pledges, investments, or both – the key difference between the two is that investors actually have a stake in the company they're giving money to, and, consequently, the studios can be held responsible by the investors. Additionally, investors don't get any fancy perks like pre-orders, beta access or oversized T-shirts: it's a straight-forward business investment in exchange for equity.

It's too early to tell how this new way of going about crowd-funding will pan out, but we've already seen a couple of high-level studios jump on board or express interest in working this way, including *Stronghold* creators Firefly Studios and even 3D Realms. You know, in case the catastrophe that was the development of *Duke Nukem Forever* isn't enough to put off every single person on the planet.

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The Indie Investigator

Content versus mechanics

At a recent game dev meet-up in Cape Town, I offered a rather broad presentation on the subject of mechanics-driven vs. content-driven design. Within that murky, brackish body of ideas, there was the half-formed opinion that a lot of developers make the entirely wrong choice when creating their own games.

To be clear, all games have a basic level of both mechanics and content. A perfectly mechanics-free game is just a film. A perfectly content-free game is... well, literally nothing. So when a game is being "driven" by one or the other, it's more of an attitude or focal point than an absolute philosophy.

"Content-driven design is all about focusing on the classic sprawl, the "sandbox game", the idea of getting lost in a huge world with X many enemies, Y many environments..."

Generally speaking, a good mechanics-driven game contains just a few components linked in a tight web of interactivity, much like the "unified design" theory mentioned in this column a few months back. If you want a game built around a gravity gun, time rewinding and Scarlett Johannson (for some reason or another), you should be maximising your fun by getting all of those components functioning with one another instead of in isolation. So at some hypothetical game point, Scarlett Johannson should appear from a portal to the future, wielding said gun against you. Gravity fights for everyone!

Content-driven design is all about focusing on the classic sprawl, the "sandbox game", the idea of getting lost in a huge world with X many enemies, Y many environments, hundreds of item combinations and, of course, a bajillion guns ala *Borderlands 2* (extra wub wub optional, but always a nice touch). Instead of relying on the exploration and combination of a few elements to extend an initially small playspace, you're spreading your bets by making the starting playspace a lot bigger. Instead of just a gravity gun, you also have a portal creator, a glue gun and a snackwich maker. Instead of Scarlett, you have the entire cast of *The Avengers*.

Which approach should you be taking? Generally speaking, the games which survive (and thrive) in most indie communities are the ones that focus on the mechanics first and content second. Both are important, but mechanics should come first simply because they are easier to prototype: a well-designed demo of your idea can be rattled out in a few days rather than a few weeks (or months!) and the overall investment is lower if it turns out your idea needs to be scrapped. And since scrapping *will* happen nine times out of ten no matter what your Game Developer Power Level may be, this represents an important saving of valuable time and effort.

Content is a valuable component of any game's design, but it can usually be brought in *after* the core concept has been proven. Some of the best completed games out there strike a remarkably good balance between mechanics and content, but when you have to start somewhere, it won't be with the sprawling world. It'll be with a far more intimate situation involving just the most important elements of the game, a couple of "trial" scenarios and just enough content to hold everything together.

That, and preferably something related to Scarlett Johannson.

- Rodain Joubert

Black Ops II's zombie mode dials it up to 1,000

We've always had a very, very soft, brain-flavoured spot for Treyarch's zombie mode that has become a staple of all their *Call of Duty* games since *World at War*. It's a deliciously fun bit of cooperative survival, and we always knew the undead would return in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* when it releases on November 13th. Now, Treyarch has seen fit to reveal details on what we can expect from the latest iteration.

First on the list of exciting changes and fresh features is an entire zombie campaign, called Tranzit. It's the biggest zombie world the Treyarch team has ever created. You're not staying in one place this time: instead, you travel to multiple areas, reaching them either by foot or by bus (it's not yet clear if this bus is controllable, or completely on-rails), all the way fighting off the undead, defending yourself and your mates. Tranzit now includes buildable objects, which Treyarch describes as elements that can be combined to open up new parts of the world, or to make weapons. So, basically, Tranzit it a sort of rolling zombie campaign, spread across multiple defensible areas rather than the zombie mode tradition of a single, large area to defend. No word yet on what happens when you actually finish this campaign.

If you prefer defending a single map against increasingly difficult waves of zombies in Survival mode, however, the game will still cater for that. It can still be played solo or with friends, and you'll build defenses and hold out as long as possible. The maps Survival mode is set in are custom-made takes on environments from Tranzit.

Another exciting piece of zombie info involves the inclusion of competitive play. It's set in a mode dubbed Grief – but the folks at Treyarch have nicknamed it "4z4". Your sole objective is to outlive an opposing team of four survivors. To aid you in this, you're able to "grief" the other team – which we're guessing involves activating various obstacles and annoyances that'll make it difficult for the enemy team to keep the zombie threat contained, leading to their demise.

In addition to all this, you're able to tweak and customise the three game modes in various ways in custom games. So if you'd prefer to make it so only headshots can kill zombies, or if you'd like to set your starting round in Survival mode, you can. With all these changes, the zombie mode is practically an entirely new game bundled with *Black Ops II*. Not bad for something that evolved from a silly distraction at the end of *World at War*, 'ey?

Old-school games industry veterans attempt old-school role-playing game

If you stroll over to the magical land of Kickstarter (depending on when you're reading this), you might spot a project simply dubbed *Old-School RPG* – although that's likely not the final title. What makes this project tickle our excite zone the way that it does is the fact that long-time industry veterans Tom Hall and Brenda Brathwaite are at the helm of this crowd-funded endeavour. Also, John Romero's involved, because his development studio Loot Drop is developing the game in conjunction with Brathwaite and Hall.

If you're scratching your head, wondering who Brathwaite and Hall are, the former is a veteran of the *Wizardry* series (following which she worked on *Dungeons & Dragons*), while Hall was a founder of id Software, and he's worked on titles like *Commander Keen, Doom, Wolfenstein* and *Anachronox*. They're looking for one million dollars to make their old-school RPG happen, and at the time of writing, they're sitting at $205,992 with 27 days to go. It's described as a "classic first-person, fantasy/sci-fi RPG" in which you create four characters and explore. It's got everything you expect from the RPGs of yesteryear, like skills (!) and characters (!) and NPCs (!) and combat (!). The most unique facet of its Kickstarter campaign is that, if the game reaches its stretch goal of 1.9 million dollars, we'll get two separate, but intertwined games.

"If you're kind enough to help us reach this amount of funding, we'll create TWO FULL games – one designed by Brenda Brathwaite and one designed by Tom Hall. Not only will you cast, smash and slash your way through two full games, the endings of each game provide exclusive NEW game beginnings in the other! Import your crew from Tom's game into Brenda's and vice versa. The ending you create affects not only your new game beginning (if you choose it), but also provides unique advantages that you earn no other way."

If you head over to **www.kickstarter.com** before November 4th, you'll be able to help back the project. $15 gets you a digital copy of the game. Pledge $10,000 or more and Brathwaite, Hall and Romero will deliver the game in a box on a red velvet pillow to your door.

The Secret World stays afloat

Funcom's latest foray into the MMO space has had its ups and downs; *The Secret World* had a few good ideas going for it but ultimately the execution of the game as a whole lead to average performance in the market. Down but not beaten, the studio has spent the last couple of months restructuring its internal teams and has actually managed to pull itself up to a level which is profitable. From here on out, CEO Ole Schreiner says that the future for the game could lie in the free-to-play model, and that they "definitely have the tools to turn *The Secret World* into a free-to-play game – or even a hybrid – should we decide to do that somewhere down the line."

However, they seem confident that the solution they're currently running with is working for them, both in terms of their internal workings and what they can offer their players.

HOW UNEXPECTED!

One of gaming's worse-kept secrets, the development of a third core game in the *Dragon Age* series, has now been confirmed by EA. It's called *Dragon Age III: Inquisition*; it's going to run on DICE's Frostbite 2 engine; and it's set to be released in late 2013. This release window has one giant implication: it's likely set for release on next-gen consoles which all rumours and sources say will arrive around that same time. Of course, you can expect it to launch on PCs as well. As for Wii U, well, we can definitely see an RPG working with the console's tablet controller, and we know that Frostbite is highly scalable to fit different levels of hardware, so it could certainly happen. No promises though.

Other than a handful of rumours, there's not much information available about the game itself. We do know that the development team has taken on tons of player feedback and will try to incorporate some of the more popular requests into the new title. There's also talk of the game following the open-world exploration of the *Elder Scrolls* series, especially the recent and highly-successful *Skyrim*, which the team has reportedly explored in great detail to see what makes it tick.

Miktar's Meanderings

Ceti eel, in your ear, can you hear? Rump-Titty-Titty-Tum-TAH-Tee!

I don't remember who it was that introduced me to the term "earworm," but it got stuck in my head, much like the concept it describes. I think it came from German research into the "stuck song syndrome" phenomenon: the way a song, or part of one, will get wedged into your thinker and just sit there, looping. Earworms aren't new: Edgar Allan Poe had an 1845 short-story called "The Imp of the Perverse" that mentioned the idea.

With modern music producers trying very hard to make sure their song is the one you remember, research into more effective "hooks" has led to some truly insidiously designed chord progressions. Which when combined with catchy open-ended lyrics, result in earworms like Carly Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe" [*dammit Miktar, Ed*].

"If the brain were so simple we could understand it, we would be so simple we couldn't."

- Lyall Watson

Why do earworms get affixed in our heads? It's not that well understood. People with damage to their temporal lobe, which is involved in auditory perception and houses the primary auditory cortex, often get a condition known as "palinacousis". They'll keep hearing a sound, even when the physical sound has long since stopped playing. So it's likely, and perhaps obvious, that the auditory cortex is responsible to some degree.

Auditory imagery – the subjective experience of hearing something in the absence of auditory stimulation – has been studied to some length. But since we can't just flip up the hood and peek inside the brain-engine while it's running to see what's making the noise, research is tricky. In 1909 the German anatomist Korbinian Brodmann used the "Nissl stain" technique to "dye" parts of the brain, giving us the Brodmann regional map of the cerebral cortex. Thanks to his research, we have a general understanding of which parts of the cerebral cortex do what, based on their activity and cytoarchitectonics (structure). That's why we know which bits of the brain are involved in motor functions, sight, sound, blood pressure, reward anticipation, decision-making, empathy, and so on. Or at least, we know which bits light up with neural activity, when we're exposed to certain stimulus.

So we know areas 41 and 42 of the Brodmann area, the Primary and Auditory Association Cortex, are prime suspects in the case of earworms. A friend made the astute, if conjectural, observation that earworms are probably just our brain's affinity for the purity of mathematical structures: since repeating a known structure takes less energy than assimilating or constructing a new one. Still doesn't explain why they trigger arbitrarily though.

Tangentially related is "procedural memory", responsible for us knowing how to do things like tying our shoes, reading, or driving a car. By repeating a complex action over and over, we gain the ability to trigger the relevant neural systems without the need for conscious control or attention. We see this echoed in "Game Transfer Phenomena", a relatively modern examination of residual thoughts, images, and feelings that remain after playing a game. Devote sufficient time and attention to a repeating activity, and before Pavlov's dog can bark, we've gained a weird autonomous playback of the activity, that for some people even manifest in dreams.

And since games are by their nature, looping, repeating sets of call/response systems, it's no wonder we get so easily conditioned.

- Miktar Dracon

Angry Birds Star Wars is a thing

And it's a thing that's coming to every conceivable platform known to mankind: iOS, Android, Amazon Kindle Fire, Mac, PC and Windows Phone. We're betting you'll be able to buy the game on a toaster as well.

Rovio's phenomenon is no stranger to movie cross-overs what with *Angry Birds Rio* hitting iOS devices alongside the Twentieth Century Fox film. Now, however, it's Lucasfilm's turn to team up with the world's most identifiable mobile games IP.

Angry Birds Star Wars will feature iconic locations and moments from the original trilogy, only populated with birds and pigs. The red bird will be playing Luke Skywalker, the yellow bird will be Han Solo and that stupid, egg-laying white bird will play the equally stupid role of C-3PO. The pigs will naturally be the Empire, with a Darth Vader king pig and pig-shaped Death Star shown off in artwork released so far.

The game will take on-board the gravity gameplay mechanics that made a recent debut in *Angry Birds Space*. Rovio, however, is insisting that this won't be a simple re-skinning of Space, and that the birds and pigs will have proper characters and personalities. John Williams' iconic soundtrack will also be a part of the whole package.

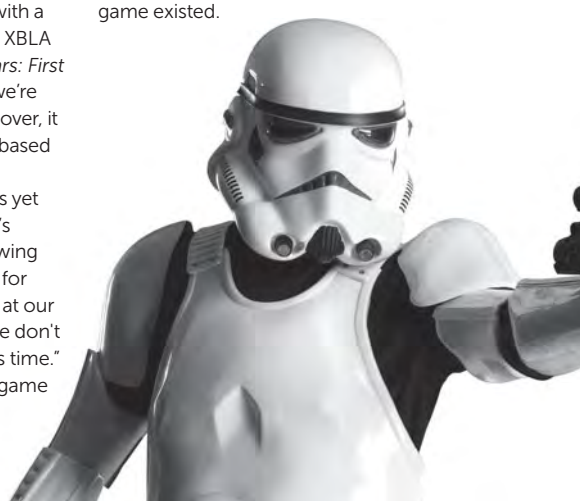
Angry Birds Star Wars will be out on 8 November; listen closely and you might hear millions of voices suddenly cry out in terror. Sales figures will probably silence them. That or fan-rage-induced suicide

Star Wars: First Assault crops up again

Back in August, a trademark filing for a game called *Star Wars: First Assault* appeared online. Now, however, "box art" for an Xbox LIVE Arcade game has been dug up and shared on NeoGAF (along with a plethora of other unannounced XBLA titles). The artwork is for *Star Wars: First Assault* and despite how often we're told never to judge things by a cover, it looks as if this could be a team-based online shooter of sorts.

At time of writing, LucasArts is yet to even acknowledge the game's existence. They issued the following statement to IGN when pushed for comment: "It is an exciting time at our company right now, however we don't have any announcements at this time."

It's been speculated that this game might be the remnants of *Star Wars: Battlefront III*, which was reported as cancelled by numerous developers who worked on the project, despite LucasArts never even admitting the game existed.



StarCraft II might go free-to-play

Over the last year or so, Blizzard has experimented with free-to-play as a viable model for some of its games. *WoW* already includes limited F2P gameplay which is very common among those MMOs that still run subscription charges, and now *StarCraft II*'s lead designer has said that Blizzard is "looking at free-to-play as an option for the multiplayer". This is by no means a confirmation, but if it turns out to be the case, we could see a radical change in both the competitive and casual online RTS scene – especially considering that *C&C* is already heading in this direction.

Ubisoft rewrites history with three-part Assassin's Creed III DLC

Ubisoft has announced a three-part, single-player DLC pack for *Assassin's Creed III*. Entitled *The Tyranny of King George*, the DLC will be episodic in nature and aims to throw out the series' penchant for historical accuracy in favour of something a little quirky.

The Tyranny of King George takes place after the end of the American Revolution. Instead of returning power to the people and becoming the American hero he is today, George Washington seizes control of the fledgling nation and crowns himself king of the New World. This goes against everything Connor has been fighting against and as such King Washington finds himself on the assassin's "to-do" list.

Along with this announcement, Ubisoft unveiled two multiplayer DLC packs. This brings the total amount of DLC up to five portions, which means *Assassin's Creed III* will be getting a Season Pass as well. Pricing is set at $30 for the Season Pass, which will result in an eventual 25% saving on all five pieces.

PS3 LOSES SOME WEIGHT

Just in time to take on Nintendo's upcoming Wii U, Sony has announced the long-rumoured new PS3. Dubbed the "Super Slim", it's smaller than the current Slim model by 20% and weights a quarter less, but the most interesting change is how Sony has decided to emulate Microsoft's approach to built-in storage. Two versions will reach our shores: an HDD bundle that features an internal 500GB hard drive, at a recommended retail price of R3,999.99, and an HDD-less version that has just 12GB of flash storage built-in and will retail for R2,899.99. If you'd like to expand the storage capabilities of the 12GB model, a separate 250GB hard drive can be purchased for an as-yet undetermined price. This extra drive can only be used with the new PS3.

To be clear, that's a R1,100 price premium for the expanded storage. While the low price of the 12GB model will obviously suit those people looking to use the PS3 as a media centre, or those who don't plan on buying many downloadable titles, we can't help but baulk at the price difference between the two. It's not clear yet if the local versions will have any other bundle differences like included games, cables or controllers, but we certainly hope that they do.

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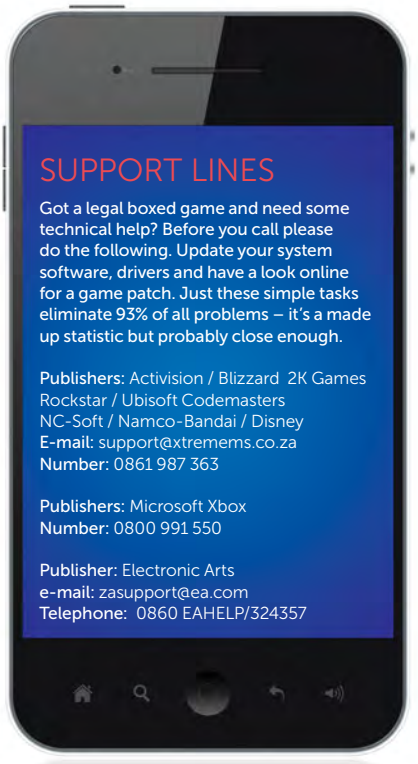

Where's that other XCOM gone then?

Firaxis' proper turn-based isometric strategy remake of the classic *X-Com* series, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, has been getting all of the attention lately, given that the game will have only recently launched by time you read this and is an appropriately excellent rebirth of the series. Nobody's been casting many thoughts to the *other XCOM*, the first-person shooter from 2K Marin that caused so much controversy among series fans when first announced. We haven't heard anything about it for a really long time.

Now, *Kotaku* are reporting that – as was apparently alluded to in a recent marketing survey – the game has gone back to the drawing board. If it's to be believed, then the game has retained its 1960s setting and the general vibe that it's conveyed when previously marketed, but it's now switched to a third-person perspective, with squad-based gameplay mechanics similar to those of *Star Wars: Republic Commando* where you're in charge of a squad of agents who can be ordered around each level.

There's allegedly also no mention of PC as a platform in the survey either, only 360 and PS3, with surveyed people apparently being asked how they'd feel if the game was made available as a $30 downloadable title, or if it was a full, $60 retail release. More on this later, when/if it becomes official.

No Doubt/Activision lawsuit finally draws to a close

Chances are you've probably completely forgotten about this by now, but back in 2009 band No Doubt went after Activision, filing a lawsuit that stated Activision were only meant to use the in-game likenesses of No Doubt's members when their own tracks were played in *Band Hero*. Instead, Activision made their likenesses usable across the game's entire song catalogue. The case was finally due to appear in the Los Angeles Superior Court on October 15th, but the two parties instead agreed to settle out of court.

STARBREEZE ANNOUNCE THEIR NEW PROJECT

In a colourful change of pace for the Swedish developer, Starbreeze Studios has announced their newest title: a vibrant fantasy affair entitled *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*. It's still early days, but given the look and tone of the game seen thus far, it's a change in direction compared to Starbreeze's previous efforts with *Chronicles of Riddick*, *The Darkness* and *Syndicate*. This is how they describe their newly announced title:

"A man, clinging to life. His two sons, desperate to cure their ailing father, are left with but one option. They must set out upon a journey to find and bring back the 'Water of Life' as they come to rely on one another to survive. One must be strong where the other is weak, brave where the other is fearful, they must be... Brothers."

Swedish filmmaker Josef Fares is apparently involved in the project. Fares has a history of directing comedies, so we'll see what that means for this game. In a teaser trailer, the brothers aid each other in moving across a fantasy land, with a green giant seemingly joining them. More details when we have them.

ROVER
FULLY LOADED BOX MEAL
IT'S NOT A MOUTHFUL, IT'S AN ARMFUL
sogood
NASA images courtesy of nasaimages.org

Bethesda forms new development studio, is on the hunt for free-to-play experts

Bethesda Softworks has revealed that they're setting up a new development house in Austin, Texas, going by the grandiose name of Battlecry Studios. The studio is headed up by Rich Vogel, a former vice president of BioWare Austin. He most recently served as executive producer on *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Vogel's been working on MMOs for the past ten years, both at Electronic Arts and Sony Online Entertainment.

While the announcement of the studio's formation also contained word that it'll be working on an "unannounced project", job postings that immediately followed allude to the fact that the studio's looking to dive straight into the online free-to-play space. *Eurogamer* spotted job postings which include a "monetization designer" and a platform lead position which requires experience with "design and implementation of microtransaction systems and services." The listings also suggest a release on consoles, as Bethesda state that "console experience – preferably next generation (PS3, Xbox 360)" would be preferred. There's speculation that this all could relate to *Fallout* in some way. Anyone fancy a free-to-play *Fallout* MMO?

Ding dong, the witch isn't dead just yet

PlatinumGames has confirmed that *Bayonetta 2* is in development, but here's something that might come as a shock: it's going to be a Wii U exclusive.

The reasons for this move are numerous but amount to a simple little thing one needs to develop games at this level: money. *Bayonetta* publisher SEGA decided not to back the game's sequel, forcing Platinum to seek a partner elsewhere. They found Nintendo who were interested both in covering the costs and, more importantly for them, securing another potential must-have title for their upcoming platform.

The studio has only praise for their new partner, claiming in a press release that "Nintendo, as a company, is dedicated to establishing a new future for the games industry" and that they needed to secure this partnership because "the console games market is in a state of upheaval, so establishing a new game franchise requires a considerable amount of will, determination, and love." Or cash, in other words.

Before you get too excited, bear in mind that this exclusivity doesn't mean that *Bayonetta 2* will be a launch title for the new console. If we were to guess, we'd say you could start expecting something around this time next year.

Look & Listen

Pre-orders **www.lookandlisten.co.za**

PC

F1 Race Stars	November
Assassin's Creed III	November 23rd
BioShock Infinite	February 26th 2013

Xbox 360

Halo 4	November 6th
Crysis 3	March 2013
Tomb Raider	March 5th 2013

PS3

Hitman: Absolution	November 20th
Far Cry 3	November 30th
Dead Space 3	March

Wii

WWE 13	November 2nd
Rise of the Guardians	November 23rd
Cabela's Dangerous Hunts 2013	November 30th

3DS

Dragon Ball Heroes: Ultimate Mission	November
Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed	November 16th
Wreck-It Ralph	November 30th

Slenderman is watching you...

If you've lost faith in big AAA companies' abilities to put together a seriously scary game, then maybe you need to start digging into the world of indie studios. In particular, anything to do with *Slender*: a chilling first-person exploration game that recently took the online world by storm with its incredible mood and immersive qualities. Now the game's developer has teamed up with indie devs Blue Isle Studios to bring about a fully-featured sequel entitled *Slender: The Arrival*.

The game is still in early stages of development but the few screenshots available indicate that the visuals will be taken to a level more fitting of a game that will cost you money. In addition to a better looking game, the developers are keen to bring in a strong narrative as well as a much larger game world to explore.

There's no word on a release date yet, but we know that it's in development for PC only at this stage. We suggest that you keep an eye on Steam and Desura as likely release platforms.

22 CANS WILL MAKE ONLY ONE GAME, SAYS MOLYNEUX

Peter Molyneux's sudden switch to indie life, free of Microsoft's ever-watchful gaze, hasn't stopped him from making his trademark grandiose promises and sweeping statements that make people sit back and say, "Wait... what?"

In his latest burst of weirdness, Molyneux told *VG24/7* that his new development studio, 22 Cans, is "only going to make one game and that's it." That game will only come after the 22 "experiments" that his studio is currently working on, the first being *Curiosity: What's Inside the Cube*? – a game where millions of players chip away at a single, giant cube until one player discovers the secret at its core, a secret which Molyneux says is "life-changing."

"But everything that we do, every thought that we have, every moment of a day, is all working towards this full game," he says. "22 Cans is only going to make one game and that's it. You just release that single experience then you refine it and adapt it like – and don't think of this in any way other than an analogy – when a TV company makes a soap opera."

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Well hello, sexy lady!

Ladies and germs, we'd like to introduce you to Roxy, our official rAge mascot for 2012. It's not that we don't love Scarlett anymore, it's just that rAge turns 10 this year, and we thought it was time for a new babe sporting some cool gear. So we briefed South African illustrator Warren Louw, who also did Scarlett for us back in 2010, and our vision for a rAge/NAG gaming chick was created. We think she's hot and would play her in a video game any day.

Every month we'll hide her somewhere in the magazine – your mission is to go find her.

Send your sighting to ed@nag.co.za with the subject line "November Roxy", and of course your contact details, and you could win a prize.

October losers - you!

Nobody found her; we win!

THIS MONTH'S LOOT

PS3 Phenom Wireless Controller valued at R449.95. Sponsored by dreamGEAR and Musica

dreamGEAR

MUSICA A WORLD AWAITS

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 *Of Orcs and Men* for PC from Apex. Send your captions to **ed@nag.co.za** with the subject line "**November caption**".

NAG's lame attempt at humour
Gollum's yonger brother Dave, waited in vain for his brother to come home.

Last months winner
OPPA GANGNAM STYLE! - Ricardo De Vasconcelos

DMC: DEVIL MAY CRY DELAYED ON PC, PORTING OUTSOURCED

Ninja Theory's reimagining of Hideki Kamiya's *Devil May Cry* series is coming to consoles on 15 January 2013. It's also coming to PC but Capcom has now revealed that the PC version has been delayed as the porting project has been outsourced to another developer.

A company called Polish QA is handling the PC port. They've done porting and localisation work for Capcom in the past, which includes porting *Super Street Fighter 4 Arcade Edition* and *Street Fighter X Tekken* to the PC.

According to Capcom: "Because it's being developed out of house by a different developer from Ninja Theory there are logistical things involved. But the plan is to get it out shortly after the ship date for the console version."

Unfortunately, at the recent Tokyo Game Show, Capcom confirmed that they cannot give a concrete release date for the PC version.

MaK is where Super Mario Galaxy collides with Minecraft

New construction-/invention-/crafting-centric games seem to be announced every ten minutes, and *MaK* (pronounced "make") is one of them. At first glance, it's a game about building, naturally drawing comparison to *Minecraft*, but it's set in space, and your character is able to jump between different floating asteroid- and planet-like floating objects, flipping gravity across them in analogous fashion to moving around similarly floating bodies in *Super Mario Galaxy*. Where it differs from *Minecraft* and puts its own spin on construction, is that it seems to be more about putting together contraptions than manipulating the actual game world. You do so using predefined blocks in a physics-based environment. Developer Verge Game Studio describes it better than we could:

"With our project, *MaK*, we're setting out to capture the feeling of exploring something really new. To that end, we're building a unique world with its own laws of physics and we're serving up the player with a set of freeform building blocks to build structures and functional contraptions. At its core *MaK* is a physics sandbox with tethers, rockets, explosives, teleportation, relative gravity and potentially unlimited room for creativity."

"The gameplay comes from a variety of fun game modes that we're wrapping around this sandbox. From single player mind benders to competitive multiplayer modes like our recently implemented 'Bombing Run' style game, the weird physics and contraption building add an element of unpredictable mayhem to the proceedings."

Release list

Dates subject to change without notice

November week 1

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation	Vita
Assassin's Creed III	360 / PS3
LEGO The Lord of the Rings	360 / 3DS / DS / PC PS3 / Wii / Vita
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	360 / PC / PS3 / Vita
Marvel Avengers: Battle for Earth	360
WWE 13	360 / PS3 / Wii
Halo 4	360
Mass Effect Trilogy	360 / PC
Rocksmith	360 / PC / PS3

November week 2

Call of Duty: Black Ops II	360 / PC / PS3 / Vita
The Hip-Hop Dance Experience	360 / Wii
Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed	360 / 3DS / PC / PS3 / Wii U / Vita
Spy Hunter	3DS
The Sims 3: Seasons	PC
Wonderbook: Book of Spells	PS3

November week 3

Hitman: Absolution	360 / PC / PS3
Assassin's Creed III	PC
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	360 / PC / PS3 / Wii
Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion	3DS

November week 4

Assassin's Creed III	Wii U
Cabela's Dangerous Hunts 2013	360 / PS3 / Wii / Wii U
F1 Race Stars	360 / PC / PS3
Far Cry 3	360 / PC / PS3
LittleBigPlanet Karting	PS3
PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale	PS3 / Vita
Rabbids Party Land	Wii U
Rayman Legends	Wii U
Rise of the Guardians	360 / 3DS / DS PS3 / Wii / Wii U
New Super Mario Bros. U	Wii U
Nintendo Land	Wii U
Wreck-It Ralph	3DS / DS / Wii
ZombiU	Wii U

RAGE 2012

BEAUTIFUL CHAOS

"I'm 50 kilometres from home, but I've never felt more at home." – rAge visitor

Far Cry 3, one of the many hands-on games on offer at rAge 2012.

IT's 9:55 a.m. on Friday the 5th of October, 2012. The next five minutes might as well be five hours. There's growing anticipation, impatient anxiety at the sight of the crowd gathered outside the doors to the Coca-Cola Dome's main entrance. This is the zombie apocalypse, where the zombies are instead energized gamers and the apocalypse is ultimate joy. There's nervous excitement, the sort that builds around the start of a race before the starting pistol sounds its intent. A minute passes. Tension grows. Frantic radio chatter emanates from nearby walkie-talkies, but it seems nobody's actually paying attention to the words being transmitted on the airwaves. All focus is on the doors.

Another minute. Static camera crews check their equipment, ensuring it's set up perfectly. People ready their phones, preparing them to snap quick photos of the upcoming charge of unleashed enthusiasm. After a temporary forever, 10 a.m. finally arrives. It seems we're running a little late. One final check, another five-minute eternity, and the doors are finally yanked open. There's excited screaming from the crowd pouring down the steps and filtering into the entrance booths. Look around and you'll see one common sight: everyone's face is plastered with the biggest, most absurd smile it can muster – organisers, media and visitors alike. Look closely, and you might spot a few joyful tears to match. There's a palpable mix of relief, anticipation and enthusiasm for what the next three days will bring. It's on.

TAP X REPEATEDLY TO PANIC

Rewind to Monday of that week, and it all begins with an empty Dome, due to house the biggest, most important gaming event in the country

(and on the entire African continent) for a single weekend of the year; an unceremonious beginning for great things to come. Event organisers burst into action, bringing to fruition plans that had been set many months in advance. By the end of this week (Monday to Monday), Samantha Gabriel, rAge project manager, will have walked a total of 97,872 frenzied steps – a mad total of 68.51 kilometres. Fun fact: that's about ten kilometres more than the average NAG employee will walk in their entire lifetime.

Exhibitor stands slowly rise from the Dome's floor. Some are simple shells, modest but effective in promoting their exhibitor's purpose. Others are grand designs, perfectly located to draw maximum attention and exposure, loaded with games to play and competitions to enter. Others are mini-stores, eager to hand over merchandise lowered by ludicrous show specials to a fraction of their original price. By close of rAge on Sunday the 7th of October, these exhibitors will have showcased their wares to 28,930 people.

It's practically impossible to accurately convey just how much planning, work and overall effort (complete with the obligatory mix of blood, sweat and tears) goes into an event like this to someone who's never actually seen it from behind the visitor veil. It's why you'll spot a few elated organisers' tears when the doors first open: it's watching an infant you've nurtured for so many months finally take its first steps, stumbling awkwardly over its own feet and precariously fighting with its balance, occasionally losing control and mashing its face on the corner of a table, immediately sending its parents into a flurry. But it's every bit as joyous as it is terrifying.

PRESS START

Fast-forward back to Friday, and the show is in full swing. The magic is happening, to put a more grandiose spin on it. Animated faces stream up and down the aisles, likely in search of free stuff given out by the various exhibitors. Stands of all types are packed with people. Somewhere, someone is kicking themselves for thinking that bringing gym equipment to the most awesomely nerdy convention in Africa was a good idea. A few spots immediately prove more impressive and attention-worthy than the rest.

Telkom's excellent weekend MC is broadcasting furiously, drawing in crowds from across the expo. People flock to Megarom's five-stage exhibit, eager to get their hands on games only due to be released months from now, as well as some popular recently released titles. Similarly, the towering Nintendo stand has people eager to try out the Wii U prior to its release, and try their hand at some 3DS titles. A pair of promoters dressed as Mario and Luigi can't walk three steps without being accosted by punters eager for a photo with them.

Master Chief casually patrols Microsoft's Xbox stand, occasionally posing for photos with visitors. It seems even the Chief isn't immune to the naturally alluring spectacle of all the pre-released games. It's a special moment in any gamer's life when you get to see Master Chief, assault rifle in hand, intently watching someone play *Forza Horizon*, while enraptured visitors play *Halo 4* behind them. Ster Kinekor's booth shows off games of all types, providing quick-fire access to video games for all audiences. EA has everything ranging from *The Sims* to *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* available to play, catering to gamers of all tastes. Inconspicuously hidden amongst the crowd are a few international game

CoD4 is still alive and well in the eSports arena. bvd beat BfB lArd in the finals of the DGL Championships. Loving those fluffy pink slippers dude.

developers, flown to SA for the sole purpose of demonstrating their works at the expo.

Early admission to gaming's many thrill-rides isn't the only thing enrapturing people: expensive hardware and gadgetry occupy display cabinets across the show floor. Some of South Africa's top overclockers showcase their craft for the masses. Gamer lifestyle is everywhere. The flea market has on display countless board games, figurines and pen and paper RPGs. A short walk away, people play a variety of board games and collectible card games, demoing them for anyone who'll stop and watch. The Dark Carnival's attractive stand constantly has people crowding around it, staring in awe at the incredible statues, collectibles and assorted merchandise, practically throwing money at the cashiers.

HIT CTRL TO ACTIVATE RAGE MODE

There are moments during rAge, as you're moving through the crowds, when the sights and sounds and spectacles of the expo all converge, a stunning crescendo of gaming-themed chaos. You'll hear a faint chiptune rendition of a popular song in the distance, then round a corner and be confronted by an impromptu dance troupe happily jamming along to *Sing Party*. Suddenly you find yourself at the main stage, where people are cheering at the end of a demonstration of *ZombiU* by two of the game's French developers. And then you'll bump into someone cosplaying *Team Fortress 2*'s Pyro, and your brain will officially have a mini-orgasm.

Speaking of cosplay, one of the main attractions was a cosplay competition that saw some incredibly talented individuals dress up as their favourite characters from comic books, games, movies, anime and more, all vying for the affection of a panel of judges. Behind a fence dividing it and the expo lies the NAG LAN @ rAge: 2,580 gamers on a single network, gaming, engaging in friendly multiplayer competition, socialising and just having a good time for 53 hours straight. Peer beyond the fence after day one, and you'll spot LANners passed out in sleeping bags, on air mattresses and on their keyboards. Downstairs, Telkom's Do Gaming League sees competitive gamers duking it in various games across various genres for fame, fortune and glory, but mostly so they're able to justify all their smacktalk.

Over 70 cosplayers strutted their stuff on the main stage on Saturday.

"Just when we think that the show cannot get any bigger, we experience another rAge and we are completely blown away. This show celebrates and feeds South Africa's gaming culture and without our visitors' passion and dedication, rAge would not be the success that it is today."

– Michael James, rAge's senior project manager

ZombiU had a great reception at the show. After three days of gaming this is how most of us felt. But with more nose.

THANKS FOR PLAYING

To know what makes rAge so special, invite someone who's completely unaware of gaming and its huge, yet ever-growing presence in South Africa to join you at the expo on Saturday, the expo's busiest day [*can you actually make that Sunday – we have enough crowd control problems as it is on Saturday. ;) Ed.*]. Watch as their eyes widen when they spot the queue forming outside the Dome's doors, mouth agape as if they're watching a T-rex pick its teeth with a kitten. Chances are, they'll be left utterly speechless by the number of people in the Dome, all there to celebrate and envelop themselves in gaming, technology and the lifestyle surrounding it. Their stunned awe should be more than enough to prove rAge's importance, and why it's such an influential event for gamers across the country, and even beyond: visitors all the way from Mozambique, Namibia and Botswana passed through the Dome's entrance. Here's an indication of just how busy the expo got: on Saturday around lunchtime, the numbers within the Dome grew so large that, for safety reasons, people were temporarily stopped from entering until people inside had left [*The crisis lasted about 40 minutes, then it was business as usual again. Ed.*].

At the end of it all, rAge is the most important event on any South African gamer's calendar for one reason: it's a celebration of gaming. To quote something we overheard from an onlooker in the crowd during an on-stage presentation of *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*, "there are so many f***ing games to play." And we can't think of a better way to describe everything that rAge represents. Thanks so much to everyone who joined us at this year's rAge and helped make it the amazing event it was, and if you didn't manage to make it this year, firstly, what even?!, and secondly, we hope you'll join us next year. See you all at rAge 2013! **NAG**

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Jump in.

Black to the future

CUSTOM GAMES

All modes can be played as a custom game, and bots can be used to fill out a team (except for Party Play modes). You can customise everything, from defining the pre-built classes, restricting content (no claymores, ha ha), to adjusting the Pick 10 system to a Pick 3 or Pick 17.

II

GAME MODES & BRIC-À-BRAC

All the fan-favourite game modes are back (except Team Defender, unfortunately), and all of them are playable in Combat Training. The new Party Games option lets you play variations like Gun Game, One in the Chamber, Sharpshooter, Sticks and Stones, and so on.

In which we travel to the far-flung present to play *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*'s multiplayer

Developer
Treyarch
Publisher
Activision
Platforms
360 / PC / PS3 / Wii U
Release date
November 13, 2012
Genre
First-person shooter

HANDS ON

As a follow-up to our coverage of the single-player portion of *Black Ops II* (*NAG* June, 2012), we were invited back to Treyarch's studios in Los Angeles for some hands-on with the multiplayer side of things. Back in June, Treyarch boasted that their approach to developing the multiplayer would have "no sacred cows": nothing was off-limits to be scrapped or re-tooled if they felt it was necessary. Brave words, when dealing with a vocal and, shall we say, *enthusiastic* fan base – one that demands change and innovation, yet paradoxically, hates it when things aren't the same as they were before.

HANDS-ON WITH THE FUTURE

"Not everyone that plays *Call of Duty* plays the multiplayer." says David Vonderhaar, Game design director at Treyarch Studios. "Quite frankly, that bugs the shit out of us."

David paces a little as he explains why Treyarch felt the need to rework things so as to entice new players, in what had by now become a pretty conventional multiplayer package. What some might call "cookie-cutter", if they were playing the part of the hostile critic. Saying it's been "reworked" undersells it: if you were to remove all branding and series nomenclature from the multiplayer in *Black Ops II*, even the most ardent *Call of Duty* fan might not recognise what they were looking at. It would be familiar, yes, but so very *different* as well.

We spent five hours playing a variety of team game types across the three maps Treyarch was ready to show. Sometimes in groups of 6 versus 6, other times in the novel configuration of 4 versus 4 versus 4, which made for some interesting situations when trying to capture and hold a point in the Hardpoint game type. The weight and speed of characters felt less like *Black Ops* and more like *Modern Warfare 3*, with an emphasis on solid physicality. It felt *good*. You can take a little more damage than usual (we chalk it up to more modern armour), so fire fights feel a little less insta-death.

CREATE-A-CLASS

The most noticeable change is how Create-A-Class works. Due to the new "Pick 10" system, when designing your customised loadout, you can leave out things you don't want and pile on things you do. Everything uses up a point when slotted in, so a basic 10-point loadout would be a primary weapon (with two attachments), a secondary weapon (with one attachment), three Perks (one per tier), one lethal grenade type and one tactical grenade type. There are three Wildcard slots, which are used to "cheat" the system and design more interesting or tailored loadouts.

Wildcards allow for things like picking two primary weapons instead of a secondary, using more Perks, carrying more grenades, and so on. If you decided to use the three Wildcards that allowed for an extra Perk in each of the

COMPETITIVE PLAY & ESPORTS

Taking inspiration from how StarCraft II *does things, there is a fully-functional league system in* Black Ops II. *You choose to participate, get ranked into a division after some preliminary matches, and then you're matched up against people of similar rank. There will be seven divisions, (Bronze, Silver, Platinum, Gold, you get the idea), with league rankings likely to be used for seeding in the major eSports events.*

*To complete the eSports package, there are new "*COD *Casting" elements during spectator mode: a score HUD to give it that sporty feel, nameplates of the players when you're spectating through their view, a full-screen map showing all player locations, and picture-in-picture so you can see the team list on the right (which also shows what actions each player is taking, making it easier to zoom to the action). You can listen-in to the voice comms of a player as well.*

All this comes together in the new livestreaming functions. You'll be able to livestream a match to the web, adding your own commentary to the action. Treyarch does reserve the right to dictate streaming conditions and locations, though.

three tiers, you could run into battle with six Perks, but at the cost of having blown 9 points, leaving you with only enough for a gun with no attachments, or a grenade. Another style might involve picking Wildcards that let you layer on more than two attachments on your primary gun, and for carrying more grenades.

If you pick something after having already used up all 10 points, you're shown a quick visual list of everything you have, and asked which one to drop in favour of your new choice. Designing your custom class in this way is surprisingly fast, letting you make quick, hard calls on which things you really need (or want), and what you can live without.

SCORE STREAKS

The second major change is the removal of Killstreaks and Deathstreaks. Instead, Scorestreaks are rewards gained from doing pretty much anything: defending points, capturing the flag, and of course, shooting that other guy, all within one life. Scorestreaks look and smell like Killstreaks, allowing you to call in UAV drones, remote-controlled sentry turrets, the new Hellfire Missile (think the Predator Missile, but able to split into smaller mini-missiles) as well as attack dogs. But since their deployment is based on score, not kills, it shifts the focus more towards achieving the objectives on the map, such as defending the flag in Capture the Flag. You even get score from each kill your teammates make after you've called in a UAV to reveal enemies on the radar. If this smells a little like *Battlefield 3*'s scoring system, you're not alone, except this has a tangible influence on the match.

We spotted 22 Scorestreaks on the loadout screen: you pick the three you want, with the more lethal and potent ones requiring a much higher score. Once you've gained enough score during a match for a Scorestreak, hitting right on the d-pad calls it in. If you've stored up to three (they persist across lives), up and down on the d-pad cycles which one you call in when hitting right.

FILLING THOSE BARS

It would have been easy to just add more numbers: more levels, more Prestige ranks, in an attempt to create more content. Instead, *Black Ops II* aims for "less, but more meaningful". There are only 55 levels, and 10 Prestige ranks. You gain experience from pretty much everything, with the lion's share coming from the after-action "medals". Again, with an unmistakable nod to *Battlefield 3*, everything you do in a match grants you additional

COMBAT TRAINING

Combat Training is no longer an entirely separate system, and is integrated into the multiplayer experience. It serves as training wheels that ease you into proper online play. Combat Training is divided into three modes: Boot Camp, Objective and Bot Stomp. Boot Camp is 6-on-6, with three players and three bots taking on a team of three players and three bots. You'll be able to play Boot Camp up to level 10, for full experience. Objective lets you play all modes except Search and Destroy, and is also three players plus three bots vs. a team of the same, but you'll only earn half experience. Bot Stomp gets you no experience, but allows six players take on six bots for fun, or training.

experience points after the match, as you're awarded medals. There are over 100 events that grant medals, everything from calling in a certain amount of Scorestreaks, to defending points, to getting lots of headshots.

Each time you level up, you're given an unlock token which can be used to unlock a new weapon, Scorestreak or Perk. Certain items are gated by level, so you won't be able to unlock just anything from the start. There is more content than there are levels, making it feel more like a role-playing game skill-tree. Which ties into the refund token you can get when you Prestige.

When you hit max level, you're given the chance to Prestige, which drops your level back down to 1 and takes away all the weapons and items you've unlocked. Except this time, it doesn't reset your weapon XP (used for unlocking attachments) or the progress you've made on challenges. When you Prestige, you're given a Prestige token (used to ignore the level gate and permanently unlock a weapon/item), and you get to choose between resetting your stats, or a refund token. The refund token is useful: if you were partway through, say, the claymore challenges and you Prestige, you can unlock the claymore, finish the challenges, then use the refund token to get all your unlock tokens back. Kind of like the respec option of an RPG.

Once you hit max Prestige, you gain the rank of Master and all content is unlocked. We were shown all the Prestige icons, except the final one, and they're all visually distinct, not just colour-variations of the same thing. The fourth one in particular was awesome: a huge boar's head with giant tusks. NAG

- Miktar

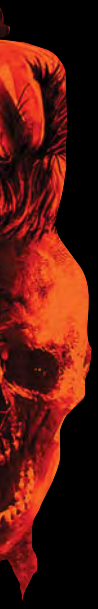
THEATRE

The Theatre Mode is now a full production tool for research and training. You can bookmark a match right after playing to find it easier, or just go straight to the new recent victories list that shows you recorded matches in which you win. There's a community tab that shows an activity feed from your friends, and you can vote replays up or down. The whole thing is displayed big and bold, visually, like Netflix.

The real winner here is the new highlight reel function. You give it a replay, and it will automatically edit together a "best moments" show reel, which you can adjust and edit afterwards. All the important editing features are back, like the dolly camera and Theatre Party viewing mode. What's new: you can now have 20 clips per film, and the ability to merge clips. If you merge 20 clips into one, you free up 19 more, for really fine-tuned camerawork or editing. You can now also attach the camera to an object, like a rocket, or Scorestreak reward like the assault drone.

CHALLENGES

All Challenges bring cosmetic /personalisation rewards. There are over a thousand challenges; completing one gives you experience, and there are camo unlocks for all weapons this time, including rocket launchers and knives. Each weapon has 10 base skins to unlock via that weapon's challenges, and six high-end challenges unlock special skins like carbon and gold. You can even earn new reticle graphics by completing scope/attachment challenges.



ZOMBIES

Yes, zombies return, surprising no-one. The new mode ties into the end of Resurrection, *and contains four new characters, new zombie types, new weapons, and a surprisingly large story mode called Transit. Up to four players playing cooperatively, explore an expansive world, using a bus to reach new areas. Treyarch isn't showing much yet, but have confirmed two additional game types: Survival and Grief. Survival mode (for up to four players) takes place in smaller, custom-made maps where you're not playing the main characters, and instead are competing for a place on the leaderboards. Grief involves the CIA facing off the CDC (Center for Disease Control), in a competitive four-versus-four-versus-zombies setup. The last team alive wins; and you earn "grief" deployable toys which are used to make the other team's life miserable since you can't directly interact with them. Everything will be wrapped up in full stat-tracking, improved matchmaking, and you can set up a custom game if you want to select the starting round, restrict it to headshots only, remove the magical items, or adjust the difficulty setting.*

ÜBER UBISOFT

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Main prize

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Release date
October 2012
Platforms
360 / 3DS / DS / PC
PS3 / Vita / Wii
Genre
Action adventure
Developer
Traveller's Tales
Website
thelordoftherings.lego.com
Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive

The endlessly enduring video game franchise bearing the endlessly enduring LEGO logo marches ever onwards, this time giving the beloved *The Lord of the Rings* franchise a big ol' blocky hug. It's a video game series that's become perfectly comfortable altering its subject material as it sees fit, repurposing popular franchises to cater to its addictive formula, recreating iconic scenes in its own unique image. It's naturally grown immensely popular, appealing to players of all ages with its trademark charm and adorable humour. You may imagine that tackling an IP as undeniably influential as *The Lord of the Rings* would be a challenge even for this series – but, as always, Traveller's Tales are making it look easy, retrofitting the fantasy epic with all of the *LEGO* series' fantastically fun and addictive elements, while still attempting to stay as true to the classic tale as possible.

My hands-on time with the game proved immediately familiar and much too short, but there was enough in there to showcase the developer's intention for the game. Taking place during the siege of Helm's Deep, we were given control of three characters for the majority of it: the trio of Legolas, Gimli and Aragorn. A short cut-scene reveals the game's use of voice work pulled straight from the films. Hearing the recognisable lines delivered with such emotional impact by the *LotR* trilogy's excellent roster of actors, yet seeing them acted out by the comical LEGO minifigures proves quite jarring at first. However, the moment the familiar slapstick, offbeat humour

I THINK THERE'S MORE TO THIS HOBBIT THAN MEETS THE EYE

A staple of the *LEGO* series is to pack as many characters from the source material into the games as possible. Each character then has their own unique combat style and special abilities, used to progress through levels. In Story Mode, you're generally confined to the characters provided at the start of the level, switching between them (or working in tandem with your fellow player if you're playing cooperatively) to leverage their abilities and overcome each level's unique obstacles. In Story Mode, you'll often find locked paths inaccessible to the available roster of characters. Complete the level and unlock it for Free Play, however, and you're able to go back and use any characters you've thus far unlocked to access those previously inaccessible areas, changing the dynamic of the level and giving good reason to revisit areas.

In the demo I played, for example, Gimli is able to use his axe to smash specially marked LEGO blocks, opening new paths through the level, or for smashing down siege ladders on the side of the keep's walls. His small stature also enables him to crawl through confined spaces. Legolas' bow is useful for shooting targets at range, perhaps hitting a highlighted object that spills LEGO bricks used to construct new in-game objects to solve puzzles, or simply to pick off enemies from afar. Both Legolas and Aragorn are able to grab Gimli and launch him at specially marked targets. In *LEGO The Lord of the Rings*, there's now another consideration to bear in mind: characters are able to carry multiple items for solving various puzzles when they're needed, and multiple weapons for use in different situations, all selectable from a selection wheel. Legolas carries both his twin blades and his bow, for example.

becomes apparent amidst the inherent seriousness of the scenes, seeing this hilariously ridiculous contradiction in action becomes much more comfortable and likable. Legolas' excited wave when his fellow Elves arrive to lend their aid for the upcoming battle; Aragorn's LEGO-accented face palm at Theoden's arrogance when it comes to defending his keep; the live pig that's being carried around in the background to serve as extra weight to barricade a door; all these subtle touches play off the natural humour of the films (Gimli imploring Aragorn "don't tell the Elf" before Aragorn tosses the dwarf across a chasm) to maintain the grim importance of the original narrative, while still preserving the light-hearted playfulness for which these games are known.

Getting down to the actual gameplay, those who've not had a go at the *LEGO* series before should expect a mixture of light puzzle solving and simplistic, button-mashing combat playing as dozens of different *LotR* characters, using their unique special abilities to overcome the challenges contained within each level. It's what you'll be doing for the majority of your time with the game, although at set times throughout the gameplay gets changed up a bit in various ways – like one instance in which you charge out of Helm's Deep on horseback in a mostly on-rails segment, knocking over foes and dodging swings of massive troll weaponry. For *LEGO The Lord of the Rings*, there'll reportedly be 84 characters to unlock and play as (both in Story Mode and Free Play – more explanation on this elsewhere) throughout the journey. Each character boasts the same lovingly crafted digital likeness of the LEGO minifigures present in the actual *Lord of the Rings* LEGO playsets, which in turn are adorable adaptations of our favourite characters from the film trilogy. They're all excellently animated, and boast a range of facial expressions that actually do a surprisingly good job of conveying their plastic emotions.

"AS WITH THE *LEGO STAR WARS* SERIES, WHICH MANAGED TO SHOVE ENTIRE FILM TRILOGIES INTO SINGLE GAMES, *LEGO THE LORD OF THE RINGS* COMPRESSES ALL THREE OF PETER JACKSON'S EPICS INTO THIS ONE PACKAGE."

As with the *LEGO Star Wars* series, which managed to shove entire film trilogies into single games, *LEGO The Lord of the Rings* compresses all three of Peter Jackson's epics into this one package. Compresses might not actually be the best word to use, because these games are always enormous, packed with hours of gameplay, tons of secrets to discover and all manner of collectibles to obsessively hunt. All of the scenes you expect to see are in there. Gandalf's battle with the Balrog sees you freefalling down that seemingly endless crevice after the Bridge of Khazad Dum collapses, guiding Gandalf's descent to prevent him from colliding with the stony sides. Catch up to the Balrog, and you can slash and stab at it, using the analogue stick to dodge its fiery breath, repeating this until the wizard and his monstrous foe reach the end of their deadly dive. At the same time, a new feature called Palantir Mode lets your co-op partner guide the rest of the fellowship to safety, dodging arrows as they exit the Mines of Moria. This asynchronous co-op isn't mandatory – playing solo will still let you control both Gandalf and the rest of the fellowship during all this. As you've probably realised by now, drop-in, drop-out split-screen cooperative will of course return. These games thrive when played cooperatively, and are a perfect match for family play – their youthful appeal makes them an obvious choice for kids, while mom and dad are sure to get plenty of enjoyment out of the simplistic, but thoughtful gameplay and endless charm.

Basically, it's a *LEGO* game, and the series has proven so popular that chances are you know exactly what that means. Based on everything I've seen, they're doing excellent work with the *Lord of the Rings* franchise, faithfully recreating it while still cramming in the charismatic humour, lovable aesthetic and enjoyably addictive gameplay that has made this series such a hit amongst players of all ages.

- Barkskin

THERE ARE OLDER AND FOULER THINGS THAN ORCS IN THE DEEP PLACES OF THE WORLD

The pool of beasties and baddies from the trilogy will all star in the game. Uruk-hai, goblins, trolls and more are always eager to turn you into a pile of bouncing LEGO studs. But it's the other, more significant bad dudes who really steal the show. The Balrog, reconstructed as a LEGO figure, is something you don't want to miss. Saruman, the Witch-king and the Nazgûl, and all the rest of the story's villains appear. Gollum seems to be as excellently animated and articulate as he is in the films. Many of them can be unlocked for use in Free Play as well. It's not just the villains who'll leave a lasting impression throughout your journey either – don't forget the Ents.

The name "LEGO" comes from the Danish phrase *"leg godt,"* which means "play well."

Q&A

NICK RICKS INTERVIEW, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER AT TT FOR LEGO LOTR

NAG: Could you tell us what your role is on development of *LEGO: The Lord of the Rings*?
[Nick Ricks] As TT Games Publishing's Executive Producer, my role is leading the publishing effort, liaise and guide the development teams and ensure that both LEGO Company and Middle-earth enterprises are fully involved in the creative process. It's a busy and challenging job, but one I relish as, when I play the game, I'm completely blown away by what the teams have achieved.

NAG: Has it been a challenge to adapt such a beloved, influential universe to digital plastic blocks and *LEGO* figures? Have you borrowed any elements from Tolkien's novels, or is the game purely tied to the films?
[NR] It's an enormous responsibility to take on the adaptation of such a treasured piece of literary and theatrical work. At the same time we strive to ensure that the fun, creativity and action that is inherent in all our LEGO games is as strongly represented as ever. Our approach has principally been to adapt the films, and it's our first LEGO re-telling of an Academy Award winning movie! Peter Jackson, the cast and crew and New Line did such an amazing job; that we've taken inspiration from their direction, which in turn has pushed us to new heights cinematically. However we're also conscious that a great many adults and older children will be well versed with the written fiction. So they will find a few surprises woven into the game that weren't in either the theatrical releases or the director's cut.

NAG: The *LEGO* series has travelled everywhere from *Batman* to *Indiana Jones*, with varying degrees of success. What unique opportunities does the *Lord of the Rings* license bring to the gameplay, design and mechanics of the *LEGO* formula?
[NR] The first thing the teams do when approaching a new game is to try to distil what is unique about the story that we're adapting. *Indiana Jones* introduced a greater emphasis on puzzle-solving and set-piece action; *Batman* had fantastic gadgets, vehicles and action!

The Lord of the Rings at its essence is a quest or journey: both physical; as the ring is carried to Mordor: and emotional; as the heroes grow and live up to their destinies.

The physical journey was conceptually simple, but technically very challenging, as we've created our own vast LEGO Middle-earth into which all of the story events, quests and battles are woven. The players have absolute freedom to explore it all, and standing on top of Minas Tirith, being able to see Edoras, Isengard and the burning clouds of Mordor, creates an incredibly fun, compelling and authentic world for the player to enjoy.

As for the emotional journey the characters' abilities grow and develop as the game progresses. For example Aragorn begins as a ranger with tracking skills, but develops the power to control the Army of the Dead, wield Anduril (which can shatter Morgul LEGO blocks). In this way each character's growth is reflected both in the narrative, but also in the increased ways they can interact with the LEGO elements around them.

NAG: With the open-world that's on offer, how much tertiary distraction will exist in the game? We're assuming that, at the very least, there'll still be the traditional obsessive stud collection and unlocking of new bonus areas between missions?
[NR] Of course, providing tangible rewards for exploratory gameplay is at the heart of what makes the LEGO games so enjoyable. This is particularly true with LEGO Middle-earth, which is the biggest environment we've ever created. We want young gamers and their families to be inquisitive and explore it all. In order to achieve this we've filled the landscape with mini-quests,

> YOU STEP ONTO THE ROAD, AND IF YOU DON'T KEEP YOUR FEET, THERE'S NO TELLING WHERE YOU MIGHT BE SWEPT OFF TO
>
> With a world as richly detailed and diverse as Middle-earth, there's plenty for the game's developers to work with when it comes to locations and levels. In constructing the world, it seems the developers have opted to turn Middle-earth into an open-world hub from which you access all your adventuring – although the story will still be told in linear fashion. You'll visit iconic locales like Minas Tirith from the trilogy, all lovingly forged out of digital LEGO. When the wall of the keep is destroyed during the battle for Helm's Deep, it's not masonry that's sent soaring through the air, but rather LEGO bricks. It's an effect that'll bring a smile to your face, and don't let the fact that it's all plastic bricks fool you: this game boasts some astounding visual wizardry, and it's often nothing less than beautiful.

dungeons and characters to interact with. When not actively pursuing the epic story line, we want people to ask themselves "what's around this corner?" and they will only do this if they know there is something there to discover. LEGO Middle-earth is filled with Mithril Blocks to uncover, magical items that can be found or forged that grant new powers, or new characters to collect. All of these, and many more besides, await and reward the players' exploration.

NAG: There's talk of item crafting – how does this work, and how complex will the system be? What sort of benefits can players expect to see from crafting items?
[NR] There are numerous ways that the player can wield new and powerful magical items, crafting being one of them. As they progress through the game, players will uncover precious LEGO Mithril blocks. Additionally plans and schematics for items are hidden throughout the levels. The Mithril can be taken to the blacksmiths and used to forge new weapons and armour based on the plans that have been discovered. Some give the wearer greater health (Mithril armour) or do more damage (Mithril weapons) but the rarer plans unlock more powerful magical items, with bonus and sometimes hilarious results.

NAG: In order to recreate the immense scale of Middle-earth and its many beautiful locations, as well as the huge battles that take place at key points in the story, have you had to make any significant improvements to the game engine?
[NR] Many, in particular the technology that allows for the seamless streaming of LEGO Middle-earth. It really is breath-taking, climbing to the top of the Falls of Rauros and gazing over at Minas Tirith in the far distance, or seeing the burning gaze of Sauron, literally emanating from Barad-dur, cast down on Osgiliath. Without these investments the team wouldn't have been able to do justice to the fiction, and the vistas that they have created are simply stunning.

NAG: What prompted the decision to use voiceovers from the films for character dialogue, rather than recording new lines of talkies or using the *LEGO* series' staple speech-free style?
[NR] We always are striving to bring new and fresh ideas to our *LEGO* games, and the introduction of dialogue was something we thought long and hard about. Its inclusion certainly adds to the cinematic feel we're conjuring, and having actors of the calibre of Sir Ian McKellen, or Elijah Wood speaking through the mouths of the mini-figures adds drama and excitement. Equally we were conscious that we didn't want to lose the light-heartedness that has characterised our previous games, and our cut-scene team is still able to add lashings of slap-stick and physical humour throughout.

NAG: One of the most renowned facets of these games has been their wonderful humour. Has the serious, sombre tone of some voiceovers and the narrative's darker points made it difficult to keep things light and humorous?
[NR] It's always a challenge to bring material to a younger audience, but all our games have some darker moments, it's a necessary part of the story telling and not something we ever shy away from. We often find that the more sombre moments of the films end up being the funniest when they are re-imagined in LEGO form. Moreover the inclusion of the voiceovers enhances the comedy, giving us the opportunity to twist the dialogue with ironic effect.

NAG: What was the greatest challenge in creating a game of this scope and what was the most rewarding part of the whole process.
[NR] To make a game of this scope requires an incredible effort by a lot of dedicated and talented people. Everyone involved from the dev teams, to our partners at WB Games, LEGO Company and Middle-earth Enterprises have collaborated to bring the most authentic, fun, action-filled adventure we could possible make. It's been a both a privilege and immensely rewarding to see it all come together.

NAG: Who is the biggest *Lord of the Rings* fan-boy in the office and why?
[NR] Whilst there are many *Lord of the Rings* aficionados in the office, I guess I'd have to put my hand up and say I'm up there with the biggest ones. I first read *The Lord of the Rings* after watching the original animated adaptation, and have been hooked ever since. What I enjoyed about them was the depth and timelessness of the universe in which it was set. The fact that wars have been fought and kingdoms have risen and fallen, in just the 3rd Age, really gripped me and led me to read on with the Tolkien's other novels. All of them fed back into this epic continuum, and I've never read anything since that really had that same degree of heritage. **NAG**

Company of Heroes 2

HANDS ON

Who left the fridge open?

DETAILS
Release date
Q1/Q2 2013
Platforms
PC
Genre
Real-time strategy
Developer
Relic
Website
www.companyofheroes.com
Publisher
THQ

The *Company of Heroes* franchise is the real-time strategy series with the highest ratings of all time. Originally released in 2006, the first *Company of Heroes* became the most critically acclaimed PC game of that year. The game's two expansions, *Opposing Fronts* and *Tales of Valor*, released in 2007 and 2009 respectively. Both were extremely well received by fans and critics alike. Now, more than six years after *Company of Heroes* debuted, developer Relic is bringing us a sequel.

Company of Heroes 2 sees you taking charge of the Russian army during World War II. As such, the game takes place on the eastern front while German forces are invading the Soviet motherland. To date, this theatre of war remains the bloodiest of any conflict, with casualties from both sides mounting into the tens of millions. It wasn't only the fighting that caused the casualties; it was the weather as well, with temperatures dropping as low as -40° Celsius.

NAG recently got the chance to partake in the first ever hands-on event for *Company of Heroes 2*, and what we played did a fantastic job of reminding us exactly why this series holds the RTS crown.

A number of series staples make a return: you still need Fuel, Ammunition and Manpower in order to recruit troops and vehicles and build your base; you'll still be completing multiple objectives during missions or vying for control of the numerous resource points to devalue your opposition's ticket count. There are, however, a number of improvements and additional gameplay mechanics that make *Company of Heroes 2* a very different beast.

For a start, there's the weather. Relic has developed something that they've dubbed and trademarked "ColdTech". This new addition to the Essence Engine (which is now running on version 3.0) governs the entire game's weather and how units react to it. On a purely visual level the system is rather stunning with sunlight glinting off the surface of frozen lakes, tank tracks turning snow into churned-up slush, and blizzards obscuring the battlefield. It also *sounds* excellent as wind howls across the maps, obscuring troop chatter.

A further addition is one that's practically revolutionised the fog-of-war mechanic found in real-time strategy games. Relic is calling it "True Sight".

The Battles of Rzhev were a series of skirmishes fought in and around the Russian town of Rzhev. The battles have earned the nickname "Rzhev Meat Grinder" because of the massive casualties sustained by Russian and German forces. Some of the missions in *Company of Heroes 2* will follow these historical battles.

The weather does, however, make things much more difficult. Every single unit move needs to take an additional factor into consideration: will troops die of hypothermia before they reach their target? During our hands-on time, dozens of our men succumbed to winter's icy grip. We lost three very expensive Katyusha Rocket Trucks because the enemy shot the ice *around* our vehicles as we tried to push across a river and into opposing territory; the ice cracked and our vehicles sank to the frigid depths below. Some of these elements can obviously be used to your advantage, but during our hands-on we couldn't help but feel as if the amount of time your troops have before exposure kills them is a little too low. Basically, it's now a necessity to have a unit of combat engineers moving with your troops so that they can build fire pits if you happen to be in an area without structures to shelter inside. You're essentially fighting two opponents in *Company of Heroes 2*: the Nazis and winter.

Before World War II, Rzhev had 56, 000 civilians. After the war ended, there were only 150 civilians left alive.

A further addition is one that's practically revolutionised the fog-of-war mechanic found in real-time strategy games. Relic is calling it "True Sight" and it's one of the main bullet point features for *Company of Heroes 2*. Those who have played *Warhammer 40, 000: Dawn of War II* would have encountered what could be considered the roots of True Sight, but for *Company of Heroes 2*, line-of-sight will add a new layer to your strategy. Your units don't have the typical RTS, 360° field of vision; now they only see what's in front of them and in their field of view. If there's an enemy tank sitting around the corner of a house, you won't see it until your troops have rounded that corner and come face-to-face with it. Even calling in an IL-2 Sturmovik attack plane for a strafing run resulted in the fog-of-war being lifted depending on which direction the plane was flying.

Two fancy mechanics with trademarked names aren't the only new additions that promise to change the way we approach this RTS franchise. Relic has included minor additions as well, like the ability for your men to vault over obstacles, which makes the scramble for cover that much more intuitive. Your men can now hop over a wall instead of having to run along it to reach its end before being able to access the other side to hide behind. Vehicles can also be abandoned, which means you might, on occasion, get lucky and end up killing the men inside an enemy tank instead of blowing it up. You'll then have a free tank to commandeer. Then there are the cosmetic additions like propagating fires. Fire spreads and buildings gradually burn to the ground. This presents a catch-22: flamethrowers are the easiest way to get enemy troops out of garrisoned buildings, but don't expect to be able to use that building, seeing as it's now slowly burning to the ground.

The exciting thing is that all of these new features will force you to rethink your approach to *Company of Heroes*. It seems as if we're in for a sequel that tweaks core gameplay mechanics, rather than one that simply adds more fluff and padding before slapping a "2" on the cover. **NAG**

- Mikit0707

REVIEWSINTRO

People usually feel up fresh produce to determine ripeness – this is what we found at the bottom of the fruit stand... right at the bottom.. Meet your reviewers.

Name the best gaming event/function/launch/expo/thing you've ever been to and why that particular one was so special to you.

RedTide

Definitely the first time I went to E3. That trip laid the foundation for what rAge is today. Another highlight was going to Bahrain for the Formula 1 Grand Prix (thanks Intel). Lobster for breakfast was interesting.

Miktar

rAge 2002. It was the largest gaming event since the 1000-man LAN, and everything just came together perfectly. All my friends were there, the game releases were huge and hype. And since it was the first rAge, it'll always be special.

Azimuth

rAge, obviously. It's so cool, and awesome, and... cool. And rad. And stuff. Everybody should go. (What was my endorsement fee again, Michael?)

Mikit0707

The *Assassin's Creed III* reveal in London. I love the series and this was its world premiere. Also, Ubisoft's PR people are frighteningly organised with events like these.

GeometriX

My first time at Gamescom. There's simply no comparison in terms of the sheer size of the expo, and so much is hands-on.

Barkskin

This isn't gaming related but my best trip was going to Ireland for the crochet blanket knit off festival. I'm into *much* older ladies so I was in heaven. My cheeks haven't ached like that since... Love you Ethel.

MINIREVIEWS

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

KINGDOM HEARTS 3D: DREAM DROP DISTANCE

The *Kingdom Hearts* franchise stands as testament to the fact that two different universes (Disney and *Final Fantasy*) can successfully be mixed to form a popular series of games. And this series has made its way to the 3DS with the peculiarly titled *Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance*. It revisits earlier plot lines by making use of the original characters, but it adds some great new ideas.

The first is a new "Flowmotion" combat system that uses the environment and allows for a steady stream of fighting, once you get used to the controls. It's pretty unique for a JRPG, and can be great fun.

The second is the idea of dropping; the game will, at predetermined times, pull the player out of one character's story line and throw them into the other. This predetermination is literally time-based; you may be in the middle of a heated combat, and the game will yank you away. It's disconcerting at first, but it adds a feel of cohesion between the two story lines, almost like brisk editing in a movie.

Dream Drop Distance is a great addition to the series, and a game that appreciators of a deep story line will enjoy.

79

"Tomorrow I'm going to fart candy floss"

- Jacqui

Ramjet
E3 2006. It was the last E3 I managed to go to, so the memory keeps me going until the next time. Why was it awesome? Stupid question...

SAVAGE
E3 2012, because it was f****** E3! And also America yay: root beer, burgers, pizzas and dinosaur museums.

ShockG
rAge 2006, Xbox 360 was new and at the time it was next gen console gaming. Probably the most important thing that year in all of gaming and it was at rAge as well. Epic!

REVIEWSCORESGUIDELINE

1-39 This game is broken. 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 you'd play it for a bit if you got it for free, but it's not something you'd recommend to friends.

50-59 Acceptable, but nothing special. It's generic or uninspired, but playable, and might be worth spending some time hunting for achievements.

60-69 Now we're getting somewhere. This game has something interesting about it, and fans of the genre or series should enjoy it, but something significant holds back this game from greatness.

70-79 This game is very good. Anyone who enjoys this type of game 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 An excellent game; one that you'd happily play through multiple times and recommend to friends. It adds interesting, if imperfect, advancements to the genre or series.

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.

home_coded

Inside the South African indie development industry...

Celestial Games

Website: www.celestial-games.com

Poke around the local game development scene and you'll struggle to find anyone as passionate, as driven, as crazy, and (perhaps most importantly) as industry-savvy as Travis Bulford, founder of Celestial Games. If you've been doing this gaming thing for long enough you might remember the name; they put together the caffeine-fuelled *Toxic Bunny* in 1996 and a lesser-known action RPG called *The Tainted* in 1999. Then Celestial sort-of disappeared.

Now they're back. Packing an HD remake of *Toxic Bunny* and a barrelful of ideas to get the local game development industry up to the level it ought to be, Celestial is determined to stay in the saddle for as long as it takes to produce the games they want to (including a list to keep them busy for at least the next few years), and raise the stature of game development in the eyes of local businesses.

Bulford points out that there's still a perception in the country that games aren't worth investing in, unlike film and music which has seen substantial growth over the years. "Where is the financial investment and support to help South Africa get a footprint in the largest electronic entertainment industry in the world?" he asks.

Truer words were never spoken, and we're excited to see the renewal of a beloved local game and its makers. The future awaits!

If you have an established local game development company or project and would like to be featured in NAG, send an email to ed@nag.co.za

Look & Listen
For the Fans

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Humanity's last hope returns

Let's be clear on one thing: *XCOM* could not be brought to today's market as a pure clone of the original. It's not that customers wouldn't reward such a game; it's that Firaxis has made it their goal to deliver a product that doesn't just suit the hardcore veterans but the masses as well, without dumbing it down. The team at Firaxis has made a lot of changes to the original formula, but everything in *XCOM* has been designed with a holistic approach and fits together as though it was always meant to be.

If I thought it would make anyone happy, I'd list all the features that *XCOM* does or doesn't have compared to the original but then some crazed flannel-wearing '90s enthusiast would take it all out of context, but I will point out a few noteworthy changes. The most obvious is the shift from action points to a two-phase system used in combat. When your soldiers are out on the field they can move and/or shoot depending on their class, equipped weapon and the perks you've chosen for them as they gained experience levels. Early in the game, this simple system feels very limiting, but as they gain perks they also gain flexibility in combat, like the chance to quickly evade enemy fire, take free reaction shots, shoot multiple times per turn or cover large amounts of ground to rush to the aid of a dying ally. But a consequence of this simplification is that movement is ultimately less complex than some may like. There are no options to crouch, go prone change direction, take cover, or vault over an obstacle –these actions simply happen automatically as your units move to the positions you send them to. The result is combat that feels fluid, fast and engaging yet somewhat stifling in the early game, although it is still filled with all of the tension and suspense of the old titles.

Between those terrifying experiences out on the field you'll manage your home base, chosen from one of five sites around the world. Unlike the original *X-COM*, you'll manage just a single base of operations but you can deploy aircraft to hangars stationed around the globe for increased response times. There's plenty to do at home base, including the management of troops and loadouts, assigning research and engineering projects, maintaining positive relationships with world leaders and expanding your premises to accommodate new technologies as they're researched.

It's at your home base that the management side of *XCOM* reveals itself as one of the greatest improvements over the original, and it's also where most of the game's story is told. While there is a linear, driven story for you to get through, it pokes its head in so patiently that you're free to go about your business and only engage when it suits you. Outside of a few key story missions, the details of the aliens, their plans and their origins become known to you through researching both living and dead extraterrestrial specimens (the former being quite a challenge to catch). As you'd expect of a game that tries to straddle the line between hardcore and

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PC / PS3
Genre
Tactical strategy game
Age restriction
18
Multiplayer
Local
None
Online
2 players
Developer
Firaxis Games
Website
www.xcom.com
Publisher
2K Games
Distributor
Megarom

SEE JOHN RUN

The closest thing that *XCOM* has to a real issue is the camera and how it copes with the action-driven sequences. It's buggy, and is prone to clipping, slow-downs, missing the action entirely or failing to hide pieces of the environment that obscure the gameplay. Thankfully, the action camera can be disabled, but the replacement version doesn't fare much better.

1 The game includes a heavily guided tutorial that introduces players to the complexities of turn-based tactics. But more than that, it serves as an example of how linear and scripted *XCOM* could've been, which it absolutely isn't. What we've seen of the game's demo shows otherwise, though, but don't be put off if it creates the wrong impression.

2 As you crank up the difficulty levels, the aliens become not only smarter in combat but their entire invasion picks up pace. It becomes dangerously easy to fall behind on the macro level; knowing where and when to deploy your troops, aircraft and observation satellites to balance international panic and financial aid is crucial.

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makro

Origin

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EANFSNAG001

PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS

You wouldn't expect it, but *XCOM* includes a multiplayer offering that feels surprisingly suitable. There's just one game mode, deathmatch, which pits two players against each other, each with a custom team of up to six units made up of a mix of *XCOM* operatives and aliens. Each unit is worth a defined number of points, and players can choose to set the points limit per team or leave the lid off for a battle of the all-powerful.

Games are played out in a number of maps built for a balanced multiplayer experience, and feel reminiscent of a small version of Warhammer, or any number of tactics games like *Ogre Tactics* and *Front Mission*. The multiplayer mode works well, but there's room for expansion over here.

"Between those **terrifying experiences out on the field you'll manage your home base**, chosen from one of five sites around the world."

3 Every action you make in combat can have lasting repercussions. Alien weapons, fragments and alloys are gathered after many engagements and are the key to a strong research and engineering pipeline; explosives make for easy damage in the field but render many artefacts useless to your team back at the base.

4 Each map in the game is designed by hand, which means there are no more randomly-generated levels. However, the engagements themselves are randomly assigned which means you're unlikely to see all of the available maps in a single play-through. Additionally, alien placement in the maps is determined at random.

accessible, the back-story is only there for those who care to read it, but if you do take the time to do so you'll be rewarded with a richly-detailed narrative environment and a real sense of place in the game.

HURT ME PLENTY

XCOM is a game about balance: knowing you don't have it, hunting it down, clinging to it for dear life and losing it. Striving for balance is the source of those "*XCOM* moments" you find yourself in, when you spent your precious few remaining credits on a plasma sniper rifle only to lose your last sniper to a heavy's panicked fire, or when you skirt through a mission with a rookie near death and the closest thing to a sense of accomplishment you've felt in hours.

There are four difficulty ratings: easy is for newcomers; medium offers the "challenging, but fair" approach that sometimes surprises you with its moments both good and bad; classic mode is there for the masochists who want to feel like they're always a step behind the alien invasion; and impossible mode is best not spoken about without the presence of a licensed psychiatrist. To top them off, there's an optional toggle called Iron Man that sets the game to only use a single autosave, nothing else – no going back on those bad decisions. It's the best way to play, and we recommend that once you've found your feet on your first play-through, start up another game with Iron Man enabled for the true *XCOM* experience.

- GeometriX

90

***XCOM* is both a remake and a game that can stand on its own merits. So much has changed from the original, but it still manages to recreate many of the nuances that gave the old game its charm. Some will claim that there are too many casualties in the quest for accessibility, but the final package is one that knows exactly what it is, and does a fantastic job of it.**

PLUS

Well-balanced redesign of classic systems / Plenty of replayability / Multiplayer mode is a good fit

MINUS

Buggy camera / Combat is too limiting in early game

PC available November 2012
PS3 and XBOX360 releases February 2013

PC XBOX 360 PLAYSTATION 3 The Farm 51 nordic games SILVERSCREEN trading POWERED BY UNREAL TECHNOLOGY

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Look & Listen
For the Fans

Torchlight II

Just you, your pet, your friends, and endless fields of loot-based organisms...

The first *Torchlight*, while being an indie tribute to the original *Diablo*, still managed to feel like its own game. By taking place in a single stratified dungeon, it had a very "arcade" feel, with an emphasis on making you feel powerful and useful right from the start. There was enough variety in the weapons and enemies to keep you interested, but with a small enough scope to allow for ever-refined runs down to the depths. The retirement system meant you could roll your own legacy, complete with an ever-improving heirloom weapon or armour, adding notches to your lineage every night if you played hard and fast. It was lonely, with no multiplayer, but user-created mods that streamlined things and an ever-faithful mutating pet could suffice.

In contrast, *Torchlight II* feels too self-aware of its positioning as "the alternative to *Diablo III*". It's too aware of its status of being the David to *Diablo III*'s Goliath, thus aiming to "beat" *Diablo III* directly in two areas it knows the competition has trouble: features and pricing. That said, *Torchlight II* may sacrifice too much of its own style in an attempt to ensure a certain laundry list of features. It feels like Runic fell into the trap of thinking that people appreciated *Torchlight* for being "the little *Diablo*", and so focused too much on making sure *Torchlight II* hit all those *Diablo II* notes. Even so, while it may not be a unique medley, there's no denying Runic plays the tune effortlessly.

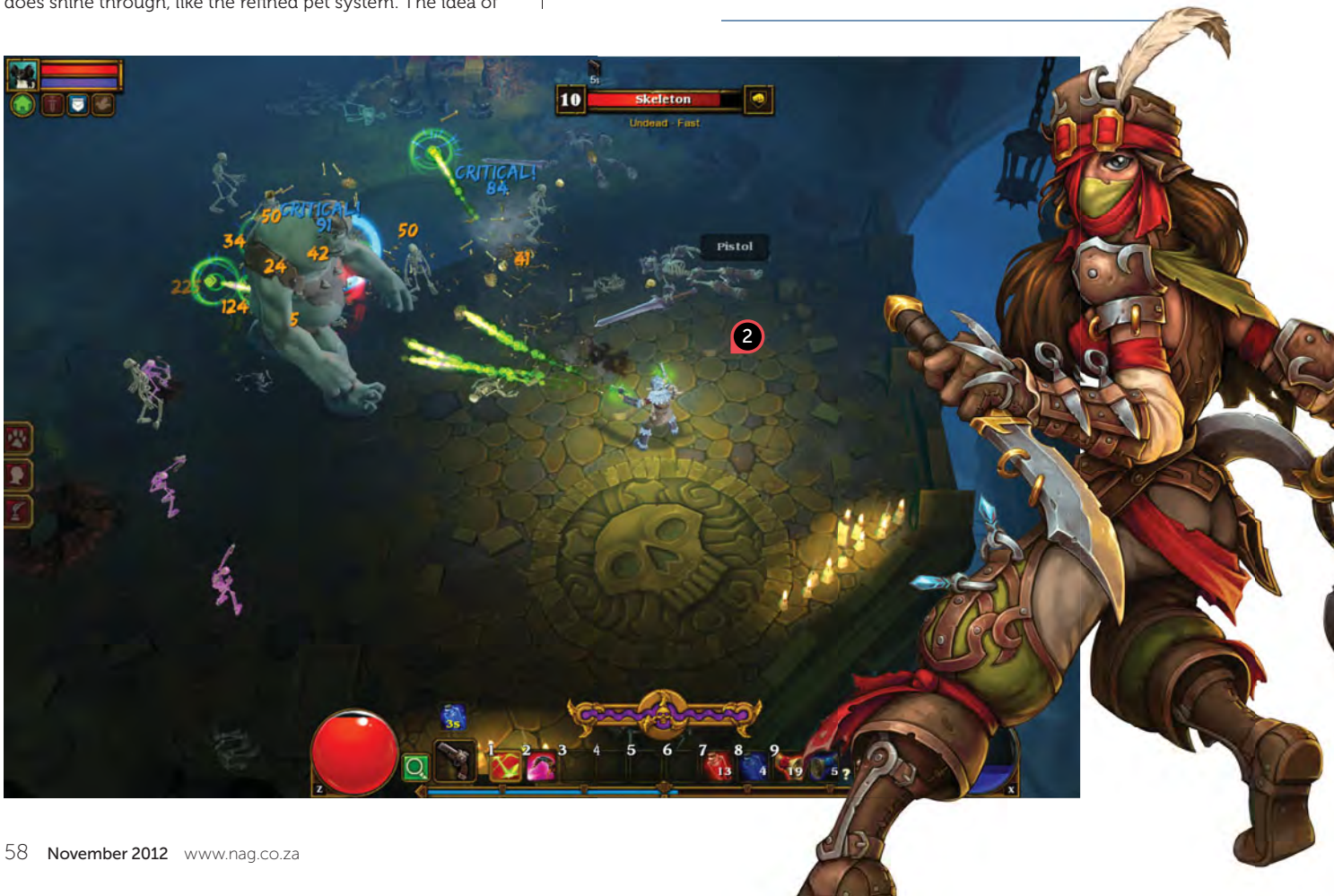
Some elements of Runic's own thinking on the genre does shine through, like the refined pet system. The idea of

DETAILS

Platforms
PC
Genre
Action role-playing game
Age restriction
12
Multiplayer
Local
None
Online
6 players
Developer
Runic Games
Website
www.torchlight2game.com
Publisher
Perfect WorldRunic Games
Distributor
Steam / TBC locally

1 It looks like a *Diablo* game took a cartoon pill and then spat out goofier monsters.

2 The classes are unique and interesting and different. So much so that for a change you won't immediately find a favourite.



having a pet that fights with you, and is well-trained enough to handle selling your junk in town, isn't new. You can find the system wholesale in WildTangent's *Fate*, which precedes *Torchlight* by almost half a decade. It's no surprise though, since *Fate* was designed by the same person who went on to design *Torchlight*. For the sequel, your pet has learned a new trick: reading a shopping list. You can specify up to four consumables, like town portal scrolls and mana potions that the pet should bring back from town if you send it off to sell the junk you packed in its trunk. It's a small thing, but small things add up over time.

Four new character classes replace the original three, and each has its own "system" bar that fills up when damaging enemies. The Engineer uses heavy steampunk-themed weapons, which get powered up when your bar is full. The Berserker uses animal-themed special powers and super-punchy-fist action, and gets all critical hits for a while when their bar is full. The Embermage casts spells and gets 12 seconds to cast spells free of charge when their special bar is full. Lastly, the Outlander uses ranged weapons and tribal magic, getting improved dodge and critical chance when their bar fills up. All classes can use all weapon types, for the most part, though you will find some items with class-restricting affixes.

Four new character classes replace the **original three, and each has its own "system" bar** that fills up when damaging enemies

Where *Torchlight* took place in, well, the town of Torchlight, the sequel starts by destroying that town, not just symbolically. The cute and vapid plot (one of the three original classes from the first game goes nuts, powers up and starts sucking the life-force from very important guardian animals) acts as barely sufficient scaffolding to support your reason for going from place to place. Not that we need a reason: the world is made of loot. The game spans across four acts, following the overly conventional structure of grassy-mountains, desert, forest-swamp and <removed for spoilers>. New Game Plus replaces the Retirement system, letting you restart the game with the same character and stats as when you finished, but with ever-increasing monster difficulty. You also gain access to a Mapworks vendor that lets you buy level-specific randomly-generated maps (an excellent idea that *Path of Exile* also implements), giving you endless replayability, in theory. NAG

- Miktar

75

Read this in a sad voice: "It's more of the same." Now read this in a happy voice: "It's more of the same!" That's *Torchlight II* in a nutshell: it's everything we know and love of the genre, executed flawlessly, and little else. That's either awesome, or it's not, depending on you.

PLUS

Matt Uelmen's music is still wonderful / Plenty of content Can be played offline / Has LAN play

MINUS

Run speed too damn high / Insta-death mobs / Follows the *Diablo II* template too religiously / Another desert act...

F1 2012

Almost there; F1 racing at its finest

Unlike any other kind of game, racing simulators are measured by how true to life they are by individuals who have never experienced actual racing [*same thing can be said about shooting zombies with a shotgun, Ed*]. What essentially happens then is that the developer must cater for or at least satisfy the theoretical knowledge players have about the sport, while at the same time making sure there is some actual parity between the game and the discipline. As such, the third instalment in the series from Codemasters attempts to navigate its way through this in the most inconsistent way since the series started.

Gone are the player interviews, team busses and such. Not losses at all as these were distractions more than anything else. Instead virtually everything is text-based apart from the track previews and info pages where you are guided through a single lap of the track with advice on car setup, gearing and car placement.

Graphically, the game is superb; if you can forgive the embarrassingly low resolution textures in some places, the game looks solid with more natural rendering of outdoor environments, better lighting and notably improved track detail; *F1 2012* is amongst the best looking racing simulators on any platform. A mixed bag then, much like car handling which is supposedly improved, and for the most part it is. Of note is tyre wear, which is unusual to say the least. On some tracks it's predictable, but on others it's rather annoying because the fall off in grip is much steeper than it should be. Tyres that are supposed to last 16 laps are all but worn out by lap four and given that the minimum race distance is 25%, you'll be two-stopping in a race where all the others cars have one stop to make.

There are other bugs in the game as well, where your team engineer insists that you're holding a position that you are clearly not and this is particularly in the drivers' championship screen where you'll be told for instance that you're still 8th as opposed to 17th which is your actual position. Race expectations are also very unreasonable, where your qualifying position exclusively determines where your expected finishing position should be on race day. A tall order, if by some chance your HRT car managed to deliver a mundane lap when it was dry but most of the other cars were out when it was raining, hence the slower lap times.

In such a situation, your expected finishing position would always be above where you qualified, which is impossible in an HRT and subsequently you'll fail weekend targets.

With Codemasters, it seems they keep taking two steps forward and one step back, *F1 2012* is good, but just not as good as it should have been. NAG

- ShockG

The forest in the background has lung cancer

80

***F1 2012* is the most polished version of the title since inception, but one can't help but feel it's getting very repetitive and lacking in real improvements over the previous titles. *F1 2012* still remains the best F1 simulator around however despite its problems.**

PLUS

Great car modelling / Improved driving dynamic
Presentation

MINUS

Annoying bugs / Not necessarily better than *F1 2011*

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / iOS
PC / PS3
Genre
Racing simulator
Age restriction
3
Multiplayer
Local
2 players
Online
None
Developer
Codemasters
Website
www.codemasters.com
Publisher
Codemasters
Distributor
Megarom

FARCRY3

OUT 30.11.12

PS3 XBOX 360 XBOX LIVE PC DVD ROM

fpb 18LV

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UBISOFT

Look & Listen
For the Fans

PES 2013

That's better!

The *Pro Evolution Soccer* franchise has had a hard run of things for a while now. Once it was a solid competitor, but certain direction changes managed to lay it low in its on-going competition with EA's football franchise. For a number of years, *PES* has felt a little directionless at best and a little desperate at worst.

With the release of *PES 2013*, things seem a little different. Over the previous two releases, the developers of this popular franchise have added some great new ideas (although the implementation of those ideas may not have been ideal). Now, those elements of the game dynamic are being merged and tweaked, creating an experience that feels more level and reasonable.

But *PES* is not really moving into the field of super-realistic sports simulation. It seems as though the developers know that EA has this market more or less sewn up, and don't want to try take the giant *FIFA* on these terms. Rather, *PES 2013* treads a balanced middle ground between simulation and arcade action, carving its own niche as a result.

Another area in which *PES* doesn't challenge *FIFA*, but rather follows its own path, is in the on-field play itself. While *FIFA* tends towards a team experience, *PES* makes the whole thing about the player who has the ball at the time. Sure, the team AI will still be trying to get those all-important goals, but the overall control scheme allows the player to focus on the moment. This is not done at the expense of strategy; rather it adds an over-the-top flair to the title that some may find very appealing.

Jumping in and just going for it is still an option with this latest iteration, but the clever player will go through tutorials and take the time to master the nuanced moves that *PES 2013* has on offer. These really are an edge, particularly in player vs. player games. The player that has the better grasp of the way the controls work will most certainly dominate, and look better doing so.

This includes the precision ball control that *PES 2013* has on offer. Once you have the controls down, you will be able to put the ball pretty much anywhere that you want it to go (within realistic limits, of course). Team members can also be guided more than before, allowing the player to pull off some really spectacular tactics.

On the whole, fans will be able to breathe a sigh of relief when they tackle *PES 2013*. Sure, the game still has some issues and quirks (not least of which is the still-overly-whistle-happy referee). But, as an overall game, *PES 2013* offers a much better experience than we have seen in a few years from the franchise. **NAG**

- Ramjet

82 **The best offering in a few years, *PES 2013* refines elements of the previous two titles.**

PLUS
Improved ideas / Best version in a few years

MINUS
Twitchy ref / Sometimes complex controls

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / 3DS / PC
PS2 / PS3 / Wii
Genre
Sports
Age restriction
3
Multiplayer
Local
7 players
Online
4 players
Developer
Konami
Website
www.konami-europe.com/games
Publisher
Konami
Distributor
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Look & Listen For the Fans

FIFA 13

Refinement

MUST PLAY

The *FIFA* franchise seems to go through development phases. There are years when major innovations take place and there are years when the changes seem less prominent. But it is these years in which the game becomes more refined, and stages for further advancement are set.

Even if it didn't seem like it to some, last's year's *FIFA* game was one in which some major changes were implemented. Improved ball control, collision mechanics and similar concepts were added to *FIFA 12*, making it an even more challenging virtual football experience. This time around – with *FIFA 13* – those changes have been refined, with tweaks that make the game feel more real than ever.

Part of the realism of football, though, is chaos. Yes, there are footballers out there who are immensely skilled, but even the most brilliant player can make mistakes – and these mistakes become more prevalent in *FIFA 13*. The result is a game that is potentially more frustrating, but also more realistic.

A large part of this comes from the refined First Touch Control. The player needs to exercise more skill now, with less predictable ball dynamics meaning that steaming full speed into a pass may not necessarily be a great idea.

The result, though, is that the game becomes more hardcore... this idea removes a degree of accessibility from the game, which may lead to some frustration for less experienced players. Yet, even with this idea in mind, it is a massive improvement in terms of *FIFA 13* representing a soccer match that feels like the real thing.

Some tweaks, though, have lessened the chaos and oddities of the previous title. The physicality of players has been tweaked, meaning that a collision of bodies is less likely to result in bizarre (and often comical) consequences. The game has also added more dribbling control, using mechanics derived from last year's *FIFA Street*. It takes some getting used to, but the clever player will now be able to use improved ball handling skills to make a difference.

While last year saw a major tweak to the defensive AI, this year sees a big improvement to attacking play. That means that the player will be able to make use of far more reliable team tactics. AI players will move more intelligently, setting up for potential attacking manoeuvres far more effectively than before.

Motion controls have been added too; the *Kinect* implementation allows the player to use voice control while playing, which enables them to be a manager as well as player. Voice commands can be used to change tactics, make substitutions and more. The *PlayStation Move*, though, is less well implemented. It requires the player to point the wand at the screen to control where the ball ends up and manage player movements. It takes some getting used to, to say the least.

On the whole, this is a great new iteration of the franchise... this year; once again, we can say that this is probably the best *FIFA* title yet. NAG

- Ramjet

It's my turn to dive next!

88

It's a tweak year for the *FIFA* franchise, but the improved ball dynamics and control systems make it an awesome addition to the series.

PLUS

Awesome tweaks / Improved attacking AI / Ball control

MINUS

A little more chaotic / Less accessible than before

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / 3DS / PC
PS2 / PS3 / PSP
PS Vita / Wii / Wii U
Genre
Sports
Age restriction
3
Multiplayer
Local
7 players
Online
22 players
Developer
EA Sports
Website
fifa.easports.com
Publisher
Electronic Arts
Distributor
EA South Africa

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Look & Listen
For the Fans

Tekken Tag Tournament 2

MUST PLAY

Rave War picks up the beat

Tekken Tag Tournament 2's opening cinematic begins with a huge glowing man in the backseat of a limousine.

"Good evening sir. Where to?" asks the driver.

"Can't you tell where?" says the supernatural bruiser. "I must unleash this awesome power!"

The essence of *TTT2* is in this. It's good to be reminded that it's okay for a fighting game to be a fighting game. It feels weird to say but the contemporary emphasis for the genre has shifted to accessibility: leave no gamer behind. Make sure there's more to the package than just fighting.

A sequel eleven years in the making, *TTT2* dispenses with attempts to shoehorn in "value added game modes" from past editions of *Tekken*. Gone is the side scrolling Tekken Force, the improbably named Scenario Campaign Mode from *Tekken 6*. *TTT2* rebuilds the previous entry from the ground up complete with fresh models for a cast of 50+ characters. Over 20 brand new stages. A plethora of tweaks and balance adjustments, and the eponymous tag play which is even optional, as you can select a solo character for 1v1 or 2v1 matchups. Wrap it up in the sparkling presentation of an entertainment sport, and you have the pro wrestling federation for the fighting game world.

Single-player content does exist, centered primarily on a perfected Ghost Battle mode: fight an endless stream of custom characters, with different names, AI flavours, and strength levels. Win loot every few matches in the form of movies (every character does have a lengthy CG ending), costume parts, and in-game cash. Every time the online menu is accessed, fresh ghosts are automatically downloaded and your own played characters uploaded.

Perhaps the single most critical feature of *TTT2* is the most ubiquitous: it has amazing net code. There was legitimate cause for concern after *Tekken 6*'s questionable online play. Ken Harada, *Tekken* producer, made much of improving things this time around and playing is believing: it's more refined than the excellent performance of Namco's own *Soul Calibur V;* online play for the majority of persons appears superior.

Reviewing fighters is tough. I'm nothing like a *Tekken* expert; but you can detect a pristine game system when you see it. *Tekken* is not easy to learn. *TTT2* is no different and it is not a beginner's game. But neither is *Tekken* obtuse. Perhaps the flattest feature is Fight Lab, an attempted story tutorial involving "Combot" the amazing robot. It's fun, but doesn't provide the direction needed. It will get you started, but *TTT2* is less a game and more of a competitive client. It deserves to be recognised that it all comes together as perhaps the best one yet in its class. **NAG**

- Miktar

90 **Everything *Tekken* from the past decade rolled into one, with no deficiencies. The last fighting game you'll ever need if you go hardcore. Has a dinosaur with boxing gloves [*Nice, Ed*].**

PLUS

More characters than God intended / Online rocks / Catchy soundtrack

MINUS

Fight Lab doesn't cut it / Steep, though reasonable, learning curve

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PS3 / Wii U
Genre
Fighting
Age restriction
16
Multiplayer
Local
4 players
Online
4 players
Developer
Namco Bandai Games
Website
www.tekken.com
Publisher
Namco Bandai Games
Distributor
Megarom

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Look & Listen
For the Fans

Dead or Alive 5

The jiggles...

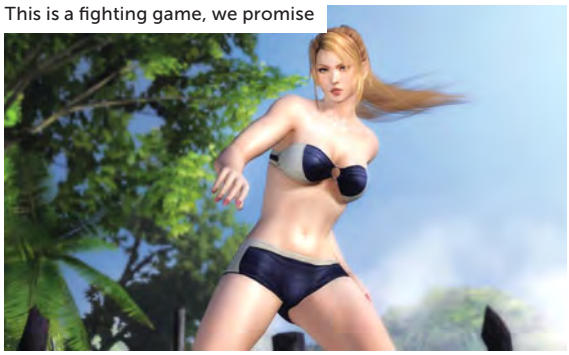
The *Dead or Alive* franchise has – in terms of fighting games – always played second fiddle to names like *Street Fighter, Tekken* and *Mortal Kombat*. But that may change a little with the release of the latest iteration of the franchise; *Dead or Alive 5* addresses many of the issues that held it back, resulting in a game that is what it is meant to be... a fighting game.

Not at the expense of eye-candy, though. *Dead or Alive 5* is still crammed with beautiful characters beating up each other in beautiful locations. The characters are modelled better than before, and improved physics and animations add a lot more believability to them. The lady fighters still appear to have gyroscopic jelly-filled breast implants, though. Someone on the development team really should find out how boobs move naturally.

The jiggling doesn't do too much to distract from the rest of the game, although the overall effect of the visuals can almost be overwhelming. The environments, for example, are beautifully handled, believable and, above all, interactive. There will be more than one occasion in which you will send an opponent flying into something that smashes or explodes, and the often multi-tiered levels are also enhanced with "cinematic" events that add to the chaos of the matches.

Not that the fighting is overly chaotic, mind you... *Dead or Alive 5* allows the player – regardless of skill level – to engage in huge, strategic fights. This is in part due to the fact that the overall fighting system has been tweaked rather nicely. Some of the highly-exploitable moves and ideas from previous iterations have been solidly adjusted. It is more difficult for a button-masher to dominate now, and those that learned secret moves that could be exploited in never-ending cycles of carnage will have less of an unfair advantage this time around. Basically, as far as being a fighting game, *Dead or Alive 5* is very decent, and most certainly the best title the franchise has to offer.

This is a fighting game, we promise



The game does lack in certain areas... some of the plot points and situations in the story-mode smack of bad kung fu movies (the kind of "I'm bored, wanna fight" ideas that are utterly ridiculous) but, for the most part, these can be ignored. Rather, improved controls, excellent implementation of side stepping – really excellent, in fact – and an overall presentation that can be breath-taking at times combine to form a game that is not only enjoyable, but extremely appealing.

Has the red-headed step-child of the fighting genre finally reached a point where it may get some valued recognition? Perhaps... That depends on the community, of course, but Team Ninja have made all the right moves to bring the *Dead or Alive* franchise to the fore with this latest instalment. **NAG**

- Ramjet

82

Undoubtedly the best *DOA* title to date, *Dead or Alive 5* concentrates less on eye candy and more on fighting.

PLUS
Much improved / Awesome visuals

MINUS
Some silly plot devices / Ridiculous breast physics

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PS3
Genre
Fighting
Age restriction
16
Multiplayer
Local
4 players
Online
16 players
Developer
Team Ninja
Website
teamninja-studio.com/teamninja/doa5/
Publisher
Tecmo Koei
Distributor
Silverscreen Trading

The Sims 3: Supernatural

Not so magical

The Sims 3 has chugged along for a few years now, releasing expansions from time to time that have enhanced the game, added new dynamics and provided the players with more to do. The idea behind these expansions is to make the game even more compelling and draw the player further in, with more complexity in the lives of their virtual people. And, for the most part, expansions like *Ambitions* and *World Adventures* have done just that. But *The Sims 3: Supernatural* manages to fail where others have succeeded. Where other expansions introduced great new ideas and careers, *Supernatural* introduces only one rather shallow career path, and adds a lot of chaotic random events that can, quite literally, ruin an established game.

The player will also have the ability to become one of the magical races introduced in the title, but there are limited benefits to doing this. And those benefits aren't passed on to offspring, either. You can avoid the fetch-and-carry quests that will transform your character by simply creating one that is a member of a new race, but the problem persists... they just aren't all that cool.

Instead of being a great enhancement, *Supernatural* feels more like a bad *True Blood* episode, and the demands on the player's system don't help either. Perhaps the next expansion will make up for the limited fun this one offers. NAG

- Ramjet

DETAILS

Platforms
PC
Genre
Life simulator
Age restriction
12
Multiplayer
Local
None
Online
None
Developer
The Sims Studio
Maxis
Website
www.thesims3.com
Publisher
Electronic Arts
Distributor
EA South Africa

How women see men

50

This is the first expansion for *The Sims 3* that feels non-essential. It doesn't do much to enhance the experience.

PLUS
New races / Some fun to be had

MINUS
Can ruin an established game / System resource heavy / Buggy

Look & Listen
For the Fans

Rocksmith

No more clickety-clack!

Many local gamers have been clacking away at plastic guitars since *Guitar Hero 2* first launched, but when *Rock Band* and its drum kit was released, suddenly, players could learn some actual musical ability from playing a video game. The next evolution was obvious: we needed be able to plug in and play with a real guitar. Well, now we're at that point – that's what *Rocksmith* lets you do: any guitar (or bass, with the downloadable addon) with a pickup is supported; you simply plug it in to your console or PC using the included cable, and away you go. Only instead of pressing plastic buttons as the colours fly towards you, you're fretting and strumming real strings.

Unlike *Guitar Hero, Rock Band* and almost every other music game on the market, *Rocksmith* focuses less on traditional video game elements and more on the idea that it's a virtual instructor. It's meant to be played by people of all skill levels, from beginner to pro, and it does a pretty good job at that with its huge selection of lessons on techniques and chords in addition to the 50+ full music tracks.

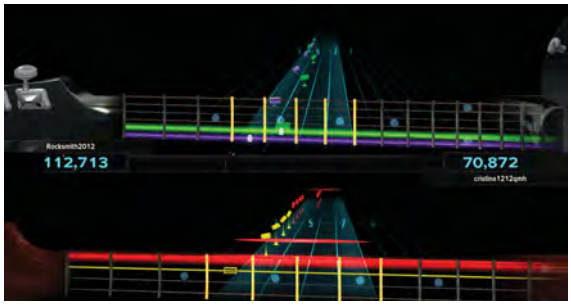
Those music tracks are the star of the show, and can either be played in a progressive career mode which groups together songs of similar challenge levels, or entirely at your own pace from the songs menu. As you play through a track (and most of the technique challenges), the game dynamically scales the difficulty level to match your performance. This tries to match the method of learning to play a song the traditional way, but it can be a little daunting if you find yourself doing too well and all of a sudden have to deal with a new chord or technique. *Rocksmith* is in desperate need of a function to pause the game in mid-song and provide a clear view of the upcoming chords to give players a chance to prepare ahead of time. And, while there is a feature to pick out and play specific phrases from specific songs, the process is far more bulky and time-consuming than any methods outside of the gaming scope. What's worse, you have to keep going back to your controller to navigate the menu; there's no implementation of the guitar input for moving through the user interface.

Technical issues aside, let's answer the burning question: does *Rocksmith* teach you how to play the guitar? Yes, at a basic level, but more importantly it sets you on the right track by teaching you the techniques you need to play certain songs and string together plenty of chords to make your own sounds. You won't be able to get on stage and rock out with a pack of college kids, but once you've mastered *Rocksmith*, you will be well on your way. From there on out, it's up to you to grab a couple of books on the theory, jam with friends, find a human instructor, or buy a copy of Guitar Pro, download some tablature and keep going down the long road of practice makes perfect. NAG

- GeometriX

1 While the game requires real-time input from your guitar, the feedback is in snippets of pre-recorded audio. This leads to a little bit of aural confusion at first (especially when you only slightly miss a note), but it's not noticeable once you pick up the pace and start to play all the notes in a song. If you want to hear just your own strumming, there's a free play mode with customisable amps and pedals with which you can play.

2 *Rocksmith* features a set of mini-games in the form of Guitarcade which help you to practise finger exercises like scales, slides and bends while competing for high scores.



82

***Rocksmith* is held back from perfection by a few technical issues, but it's the best real guitar learning experience you can have right now on your gaming console or PC. It's challenging, exciting and, above all – practical.**

PLUS

Wide variety of lessons, songs and exercises / Excellent learning tool

MINUS

Poorly implemented interface / Practising individual phrases and chords is a sluggish process / Long (and too frequent) loading

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PC / PS3
Genre
Music/rhythm
Age restriction
12
Multiplayer
Local
2 players
Online
None
Developer
Ubisoft
Website
rocksmith.ubi.com
Publisher
Ubisoft
Distributor
Megarom

Port Royale 3: Pirates & Merchants

Arrrrh!

As the sort that lack action, adventure and intrigue, management games need to have that something special – that hook that digs in so surreptitiously you wouldn't notice, but once it's got you, you'll know – it's usually around 3am and you've just realised that the sun has set. These games don't need incredible visuals, but what they do need is a well organised user interface to go with compelling gameplay. Bad luck then for *Port Royale 3* – it has none of those features.

Pirates & Merchants is, as you'd expect, about plundering and/or trading throughout the many towns dotted about the Caribbean during a time when swashes were frequently buckled and seaside taverns were as much of a place for a brawl as a pint. In addition to single- and multiplayer free play modes (with all the expected sliders to adjust the game world), the game offers up two campaigns: one focused on trading, and the other on adventuring. But both serve as little more than elaborate tutorials and last only a few hours at best, and once you've completed the pleasant but otherwise inane story of each, it simply converts to free-play mode anyway.

While the act of trading and the mechanisms that drive this part of the game are solid enough, the other associated activities of upgrading towns and dealing with national politics are less well-formed. The pirating side is a similar mixed bag: naval combat is fun, but attacking ports is simply a matter of steamrolling with superior numbers instead of requiring any form of tactical thinking. **NAG**

- GeometriX

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PC / PS3
Genre
Management simulation
Age restriction
12
Multiplayer
Local
None
Online
4 players
Developer
Gaming Minds Studio
Website
www.port-royale3.com
Publisher
Kalypso Media
Distributor
Silverscreen Trading

55

Most players will ultimately play somewhere in the middle of *Port Royale 3*'s offering, and if you do so, you'll be able to keep yourself entertained for a few hours with the game's finer points; past that, there's not enough depth to the management aspects to keep one coming back for much longer.

PLUS
It's fun for a bit / Naval combat is entertaining

MINUS
Bulky user interface / Few overall tactical challenges / Management aspects lack depth / Dated visuals

Everything Else

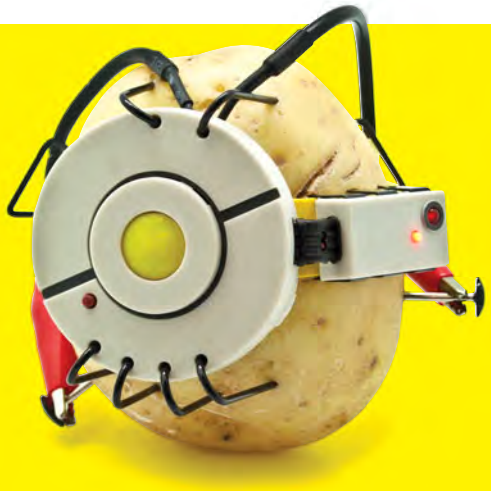
Bits and bobs that can all be filed under gaming lifestyle

ADVENTURE TIME: FINN 10" SUPER POSEABLE FIGURE

If you're not familiar with *Adventure Time*, you're probably on the safer side of sanity, but for those who have become lost to this terrifyingly hilarious cartoon, this is just what you need to show your love. This deluxe version of Finn has interchangeable faces mounted *inside his head*, a busted-up sword and a big ol' green backpack (which we couldn't figure out how to fit, but we're sure you'll manage because you're probably a lot smarter than us).
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R380

MAGIC: THE GATHERING: RETURN TO RAVNICA EXPANSION PACK

Just last month we told you about M13 – this year's collection of new core cards for Magic: The Gathering. Return to Ravnica is the next expansion for this popular card game and can be yours in the form of themed, dual-element intro packs (each includes two boosters and playing instructions), booster packs and a "fat pack", for a total of 274 cards. This new edition sees a return of the Exile mechanic, and introduces Populate (a nasty little ability that will help anyone grow their armies of tokens to almost preposterous scales) as well as Overload – a menacing ability that can turn innocent and cheap spells into game-changers.
Supplier: Blowfish Entertainment
RRP: R189.95 (intro packs); R49.95 (booster packs); R499.95 (fat packs)

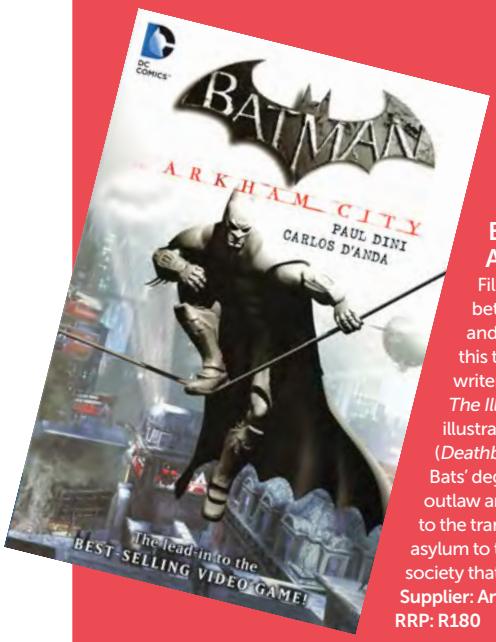


PORTAL 2: POTATOS SCIENCE KIT

Potatoes are power! Plug this DIY spud-powered GladOS kit into any real, actual potato and witness it come to life. If you've been looking for an opportunity to combine your love of starchy tubers with sarcastic AI, you won't find a better one that this.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R345

FEAR ITSELF

Avengers! Nazis! Bright colours! Punchy text! It's a big fat trade paperback about superheroes and supervillains, expertly illustrated by Stuart Immonen and written by Matt Fraction to the level that you'd expect from Marvel.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R320

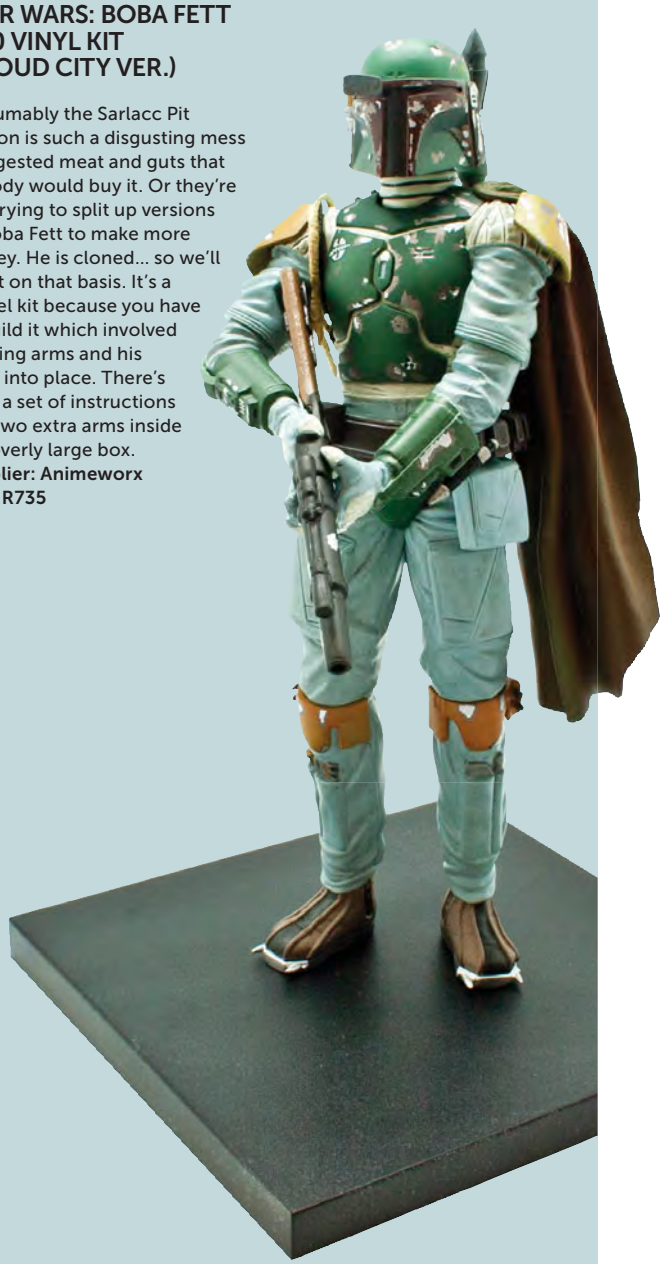


BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY

Fill in those narrative gaps between *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City* with this trade paperback from writer Paul Dini (*Batman: The Illustrated Series*) and illustrator Carlos D'anda (*Deathblow*). The story follows Bats' degradation from hero to outlaw and introduces readers to the transition of the infamous asylum to the practically free society that it becomes.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R180

STAR WARS: BOBA FETT 1/10 VINYL KIT (CLOUD CITY VER.)

Presumably the Sarlacc Pit version is such a disgusting mess of digested meat and guts that nobody would buy it. Or they're just trying to split up versions of Boba Fett to make more money. He is cloned... so we'll buy it on that basis. It's a model kit because you have to build it which involved pushing arms and his head into place. There's even a set of instructions and two extra arms inside the overly large box.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R735



THEMED SKELANIMALS

Just when you thought these undead plushies couldn't get any more adorable, they've started playing dress-up as characters from the Toynami, Warner and DC stables.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R465 (full-size); R170 (clip-ons)

DREAMMACHINE

A new headset and the fastest SSD money can buy right now. All these come together in this issue to make an already great machine, that much closer to perfection. The price is high, but the gaming experience unparalleled.

Cooler Master Silent Pro M2 1500Watt PSU
R3,300 / www.coolermaster.com

GIGABYTE GV-N680SO-2GD
R7,329 / www.gigabyte.com

NEW

Corsair Neutron GTX 240GB
R2,499 / www.corsair.com

Seagate Barracuda 3TB
R1,799 / www.seagate.com

Cooler Master COSMOS II
R3,399 / www.coolermaster.com

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

GIGABYTE Aivia Osmium Mechanical Gaming Keyboard
R1,299 / www.gigabyte.com

Roccat Kone [+]
R899 / www.roccat.org

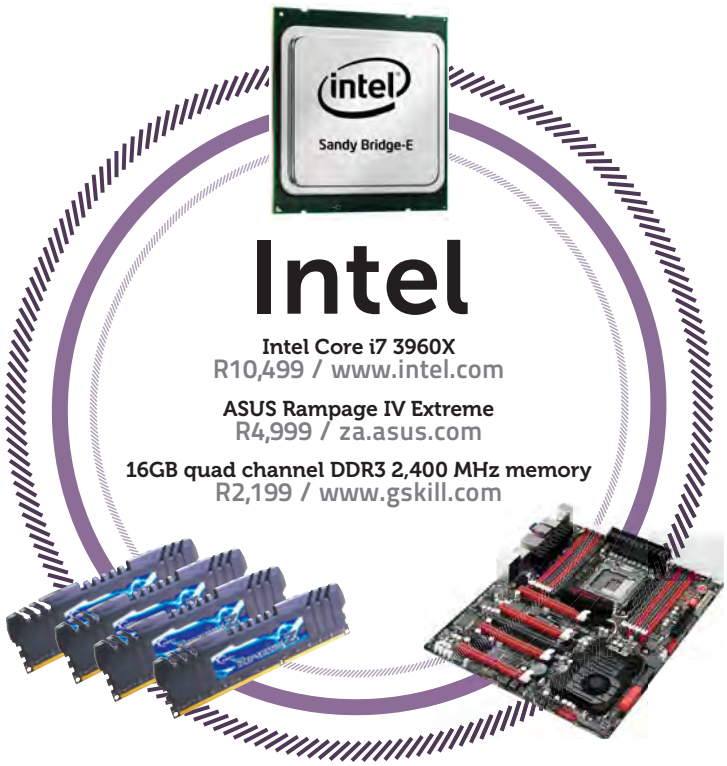
Roccat Alumic
R319 / www.roccat.org

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

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

NEW

Creative Labs Sound Blaster Recon3D Omega
R2,995/ www.creativelabs.com



Intel

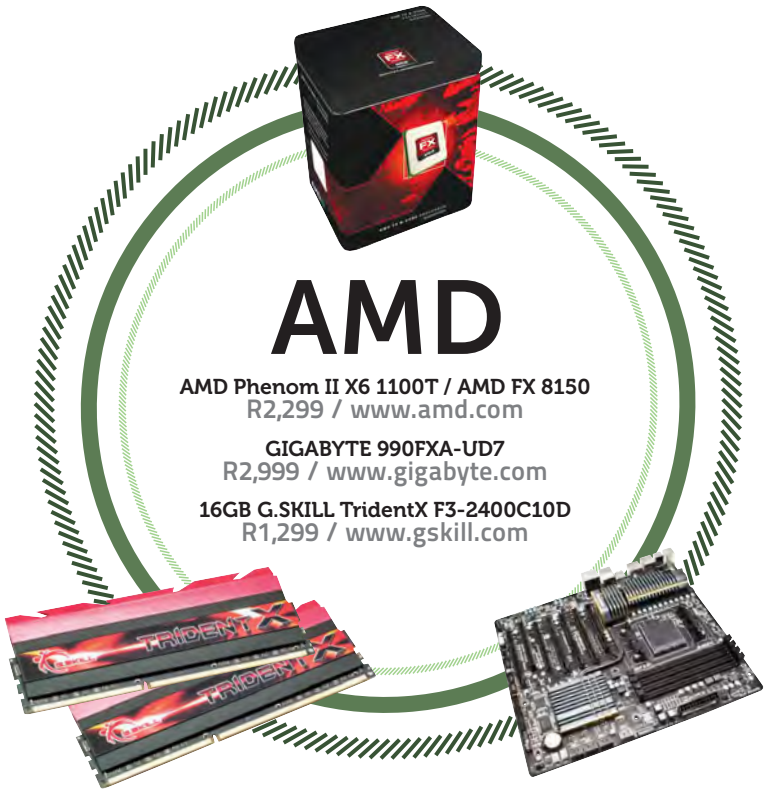
Intel Core i7 3960X
R10,499 / www.intel.com

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

16GB quad channel DDR3 2,400 MHz memory
R2,199 / www.gskill.com

Intel Dream Machine price:

R58,632



AMD

AMD Phenom II X6 1100T / AMD FX 8150
R2,299 / www.amd.com

GIGABYTE 990FXA-UD7
R2,999 / www.gigabyte.com

16GB G.SKILL TridentX F3-2400C10D
R1,299 / www.gskill.com

AMD Dream Machine price:

R41,533

Hardwired

Technology and you

There aren't many ways in which technology progresses in this world. There's the natural progression of miniaturization and maturity and then there's the other, more natural force which is the introduction and evolution of technologies from pure necessity and nothing else. As with most things, it's best if these are both present in the technological evolution.

Smartphones are a great example of miniaturization. That is how we have quad core host CPUs and fairly competent GPUs in our phones. That there's very little to do with them is a direct consequence of this miniaturization process. It's true that technology allows us to be more innovative and dream grander dreams than before, however that only holds provided that the progress we make in our devices is tethered to our imagination in some meaningful way. In the case of smartphones, or "super phones", it is not.

Simply put, from the days of the first cellular phones, at least GSM phones, we've had the same compression and voice quality as we do today. So that's at least 25 years of cellular technology in the public space that's not changed in any way. That we still have

> "Everything in and around the phones has improved other than the primary function."

trouble hearing people on our phones sometimes is something that should be concerning to all of us. Imagine if telephone quality improved a little – to 22 KHz with a 16-bit sample rate, for example. That would be significantly better than what we have right now. It doesn't necessarily have to be these properties, but I use them just to highlight how poor the audio quality we accept on our phones is.

Everything in and around the phones has improved other than the primary function. So we've essentially ended up with very powerful computers which happen to have telephonic capabilities.

On the flip side to that, we have surface/touch computing that's becoming ever more prevalent. This kind of interaction with computing devices is a necessary progression because it's the most natural way to interact with anything. Be it touch, speech and everything in between, the only thing preventing that kind of interaction was the lack of computing power. Now that we are creeping ever more steadily to teraflop processing in our everyday devices, it'll only be a matter of time before we have a massive convergence between all sensory input, and natural speech interaction.

How simple it will seem will be a direct measure of how far we've come in processing capabilities. This is but one instance of necessity driving technology. With such possibilities our imaginations are once again liberated from the plateau which we find ourselves in presently.

Technology is more inspired when it addresses a fundamental problem for humanity or society. Powerful phones work to the exclusion of some, whereas complete sensory input computing and interaction works to the inclusion of most if not everyone. Both are progressions in technology, but underpinned differently at a fundamental level. That which should inspire any kind of research or scientific endeavor should necessarily be, "How would the world be improved if we eliminated this problem or hurdle?" rather than "What can we add to something that already exists?"

- Neo Sibeko

TECHNEWS

KNOW**YOUR**TECHNOLOGY

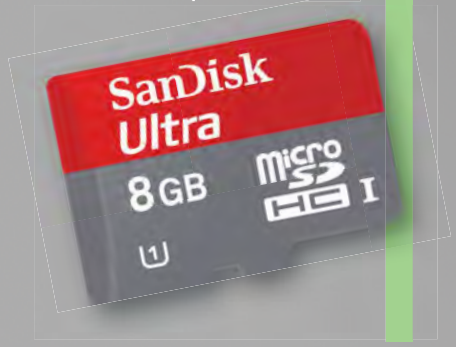
AIFF
AIFF is an audio file format that was commonly used on Apple Macintosh systems of old. The standard caught traction and is still used today in more professional environments as an alternative to other uncompressed formats such as WAV. AIFF is both a container and file format, and as such includes some features like loop point data and musical note samples which can be used by hardware samplers and musical application.

PCI-X
PCI-eXtended is a slightly older expansion standard that was superseded by PCI Express. It operated at speeds ranging from 133 to 533MHz. It was backwards compatible with the still present PCI system, so it was parallel in nature. The standard did not gain ground when introduced in 1998 and subsequently saw its demise in 2004 when PCI Express offered not only simpler logic, but significantly more bandwidth.

PROM
Programmable Read-Only Memory is a type of ROM that is programmed after the memory is constructed. PROM chips are used in cell phones, video game consoles, RFID tags, medical devices and other electronics. A standard PROM can only be programmed once, as PROMs are manufactured using fuses which are burned to program a specific binary pattern. While this is a one time process, there are other PROMs that do allow rewriting like EPROMs.

SAS
Serial Attached SCSI is a communication protocol used to move data to and from computer storage devices such as hard drives and tape drives. SAS is a point-to-point serial protocol that replaces the parallel SCSI bus technology but it uses the standard SCSI command set. SAS offers backwards-compatibility with second-generation SATA drives so drives may be connected to SAS backplanes but SAS drives may not be connected to SATA backplanes.

SANDISK ULTRA FOR ANDROID MICRO SD CARD WITH ADAPTER 8GB
Load your apps, images and, most importantly, games, faster with this high-speed Micro SD card that will fit into most Android phones and tablets.
R110 | www.sandisk.com



NZXT HUE RGB LED CONTROLLER
Keen to adjust the colour, brightness and pulse speed of the lighting kit inside your case? This 5.25" bay device allows you to do just that. You can mix and match your colour options, and create effects such as fading and pulsating. Includes a 2m LED strip
R499 | www.evetech.co.za

DID YOU KNOW?

Ever wonder what it takes to setup the NAG LAN @ rAge? The infrastructure for this year's LAN consisted of the following ...

- 35 km network cable
- 2,580 gamer network points
- 5,300 power outlets
- 1,500 tables
- 2,600 chairs
- 100 switches
- Multiple 8 port gigabit trunks
- 10G fibre links
- 5 days to setup
- 1 day to break down

Mosh Pit

COOLERMASTER ROC MACBOOK PRO AND IPAD STAND

Want to watch movies on your iPad without holding it up? The cross-slit design of the ROC stand allows for easy display of many of your Apple devices. Available in black or white.
R449 | www.coolermaster.com

ADATA DASHDRIVE ELITE HE720 500GB

Measuring a mere 8.9mm thick and covered in a stylish brushed stainless steel casing, this 500GB drive supports both USB 2.0 and 3.0.
R908 | www.titan-ice.co.za

ECS EZ BUN

Simply plug the Ez BUN into your phone and enjoy crystal clear audio through the built-in stereo speakers and omnidirectional microphone. Works with virtually every phone and also doubles as a portable speaker.
R999 | www.ecs.com.tw

"At Dell, we listen to customers, value their feedback, and adapt our approach based on these needs. Meeting our customers' needs has always been Dell's priority - since its inception in 1984. The feedback from customers suggested a need for more options and variety of the Alienware brand available in South Africa, so that users can select the unit that meets both their needs and their pockets. Therefore, I am proud to announce the launch of **www.alienware.co.za**."
Gavin Slevin, Dell South Africa and developing countries retail manager

#40 Mbps

BY THE NUMBERS

Telkom Internet is currently doing a high speed broadband pilot programme. Broadband speeds of up to 40 Mbps will be tested in the pilot where Telkom has deployed new generation access network kits in five areas of three provinces in South Africa: Benmore Gardens, Fourways and Waterkloof in Gauteng; Durban North in Kwa-Zulu Natal and Durbanville in the Western Cape. The trial takes place from now until end of January 2013.

Tt eSports Level 10M Gaming Mouse

Website www.corex.co.za **RRP** R1,199

There's no shortage of fancy-looking, wallet-punching, high-performing gaming mice on the market, but with so many dedicated peripheral manufacturers like Razer, Logitech, SteelSeries, Mad Catz and Roccat, we're still not entirely sure why Thermaltake has been so keen to take on this intensely competitive industry. Their previous offerings have been decent enough, and sometimes a little weird (we're looking at you, Cyclone), but the Level 10M is obviously Tt's way of saying "step aside, sissies, let a real man show you how it's done."

TECHNICAL

Sensor
up to 8,200 DPI, four levels
Onboard storage
218kb
Programmable buttons
11
Gaming profiles
5
Colour selection
four regions, seven colour options

PROS
- Great performance
- Looks cool
- High DPI sensor

CONS
- Not suitable for claw grip
- Superfluous styling and adjustments

ALTERNATIVES
- Cyborg R.A.T. 7

WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT?

Look at this thing; it's like a half-transformed Decepticon! The 10M's showy exterior might look like it houses a number of incredible features alongside a flux capacitor and coffee maker, but despite the flash, this is a pretty bog-standard, if high-end, gaming mouse. The hex grill on top does nothing but let you peer inside from another angle (it's meant to increase airflow to reduce sweaty hands, but it fails at that); the LED rectangle thing on the main button is just there for show; the horseshoe pattern on the scroll-wheel has no noticeable impact on traction; and the seemingly missing bits on the sides and back really only serve to provide fewer gripping positions and reduced structural integrity.

GAME ON

As soon as you fire up your favourite game, you'll know that, for all its flair, the 10M really does mean business. This mouse glides with ease thanks to its overall light weight (which is unfortunately not adjustable) and smooth pads on the underside. The included software is capable of configuring the device's sensitivity, setting up macro keys and adjusting the LEDs – everything you'd expect from a mouse of this calibre and price.

GET A GRIP

The 10M bears a striking resemblance to the Mad Catz RAT series with its deconstructed, industrial styling, and it includes a couple of tricks from the competitor's bag. There are two points of adjustment – the rear palm rest can be raised or lowered, and the whole bottom part can be adjusted to pivot to the left or the right. To be frank, we didn't notice much improvement one way or the other with the latter tweak, but the ability to raise the palm rest is certainly welcome. On that note, if you're the type who favours a poised claw grip over the deeper palm style, then you might want to shop around: with so few points available for you to grip the mouse on its sides, you might find that extended periods of gaming result in cramped digits if those bits that are available aren't where you're used to sticking your fingers. NAG

MSI

A GATHERING OF THE BEST OVERCLOCKERS OF 2012

MOA

TAIPEI WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.

2012

Say what you may about MSI, but out of all the major mainboard vendors, they are the only ones who have hosted an extreme overclocking competition every year for the last five years. If that doesn't speak of the vendor's dedication to the enthusiasts then nothing else will.

This year in its usual fashion, MSI had seeding events all over the world and the winners from each region were the ones who met this year in Taipei, Taiwan. MSI gathered 16 teams in total, each represented by two individuals. One would think that with five years of overclocking competitions, teams would vary by the year to some degree, but it turns out that this is pretty much the same group of people from many years back.

As such, these competitors are putting on an exhibition for the public more than they are trying to best each other. The atmosphere for MOA 2012 was easily the most relaxed in all overclocking competitions to date. Despite all the mishaps that are part and parcel of live overclocking, there wasn't any animosity, aggression or otherwise negative sentiment amongst any of the teams. This was easily the best overclocking competition in that regard and possibly in other ways as well as we will highlight to you.

THE HARDWARE

MSI chose the X79 platform for this competition but you may think that Z77 was more appropriate since MSI's best motherboard at present is based on the Z77 chipset. However, MSI's decision to go with the X79 platform makes sense if only because it's a simpler platform to overclock and the margins between samples are smaller compared to Ivy Bridge CPUs. The clock ceiling for most SNB-E CPUs is around 5.4GHz and the ones termed "bad" are usually capable of 5.2GHz. Not only did this reduce the luck element in component selection but it also meant that the competitors could focus on tweaking their machines to get the best scores rather than fighting for those 6.5GHz+ frequencies and battling for stability. As for motherboards, MSI naturally chose their Big Bang X Power as it's their flagship X79 offering. The board may not have been to everyone's liking but nobody complained about being held back by any indelicacies, in fact some competitors had only praise for the mainboard, which is rare to hear at an overclocking competition. The graphics card of choice and the real diamond here was the GTX 680 Lightning Edition which has proved to be the most powerful GTX 680 on the market, at least in terms of the sheer number of people who have managed to reach speeds above 1.8GHz with it. Memory was courtesy of Kingston and their 2,400MHz Hyper-X Genesis kits, 1,275Watt PSUs from Thermaltake and Velociraptor drives

More than 1,000 litres of liquid Nitrogen was used during the entire day.

from Western Digital. MSI had a great lineup of hardware, a package more than capable of the task at hand.

THE BENCHMARKS

This is another area where MSI struck gold, offering not only the most straightforward benchmarks at MOA, but possibly of all competitions. It's true that different overclockers prefer different benchmarks but when we asked around there wasn't a single one who had any issue with the three chosen programs. 32M was possibly the most technical as it was not sheer clock speed, but tweaking a lot and knowing how to extract the most from the system. Easily the most boring of the lot, if only because it's not visual and it takes a long time.

3DMark03 followed and things started to get interesting there because it was the first of two 3D benchmarks. Clock speeds were going to matter here for both the CPU and GPU and this is where things either got very hairy for competitors or they potentially secured their victory. The GPU clock speeds for 3DMark03 and 3DMark11 would be similar and if your score wasn't up to par in 3DMark03, you would likely suffer the same fate in the benchmark that followed.

Last, and easily our favourite, was 3DMark11. With records being broken recently in the benchmark, MSI had a great incentive for the competitors (or warriors as they were referred to) encouraging them to not only try to win in the benchmark but break the world record. Suffice to say this didn't happen, but the scores were impressive nonetheless with a couple over the 15,000 point mark. Overall this was the perfect selection of benchmarks and should any other vendor consider hosting another live competition, these are definitely the benchmarks to go with. They are fairly straightforward, visually appealing (other than SuperPi 32M) and without too much bias to any one component.

THE COMPETITORS

Out of the 16 invited teams, only 15 showed up as there was a problem with visas and the Greek team. Many expressed their disappointment as Greece has some of the most prolific overclockers the scene has ever known. Despite this, the competition went on as planned and it's fair to say each region was represented by the best or at least fairly competent overclockers. Well known people such as OC_WINDFORCE, Splave, Romdominance, Hazzan, Rbuass, Ryba, Alva (the winner of MSI's first MOA competition), Smoke, Stoola, Matose, Deanzo, Vivi and a host of others.

Mutual respect was the order of the day and each team was very honest about the capabilities of their hardware when asked even by competitors. The venue had other overclockers as well who were not competing, and the top four overclockers of the world who each once held the number one position

RIGHT: NVIDIA booth babes and rep. Odd to see NVIDIA at an overclocking competition given their position on the hobby of late.

BOTTOM: By the time this photo was taken the contestants had, gone through more than six straight hours of overclocking.

LEFT: Andrew and Vivi representing SA

ABOVE: Joanna and Ryba, who took 3rd place at the end of the day

showed up to support the event. MSI's resident overclocking expert and demigod Elmor all the way from Sweden showed up as well, which really helped sell the competition as the premier overclocking contest of the world and making it the best one the community had ever seen.

THE COMPETITION

The competition wasn't as dramatic when compared to previous years. This was probably the result of the platform, but it's fair to say that the simplicity or rather the absence of unnecessary complexity lent itself to a fairly consistent distribution of results. Team Korea, with littleboy and OC_Windforce dominated the competition, followed by the USA team with Splave and Romdominance and finally Joanna and Ryba. The best looking team of the competition, not because of Ryba, but Joanna was particularly appealing to the overclockers it seemed. Team Korea not only had the fastest CPU, but with so much experience between the two overclockers, they quickly secured a decent placing in Super Pi 32M even though they didn't win it. From then on they simply walked away from the competition at each stage, and in the end it had been a forgone conclusion as to who would win.

Our own South African team tried valiantly but despite their best efforts, weren't able to secure a place higher than 8th. Not a bad placing considering that the two competitors have only ever had a single overclocking session together and they could not prepare in advance. Problems with the VGA card and cold boots prevented them from scoring any higher, but they did submit respectable scores in each benchmark, even though they had amongst the lowest clocking CPUs of the day.

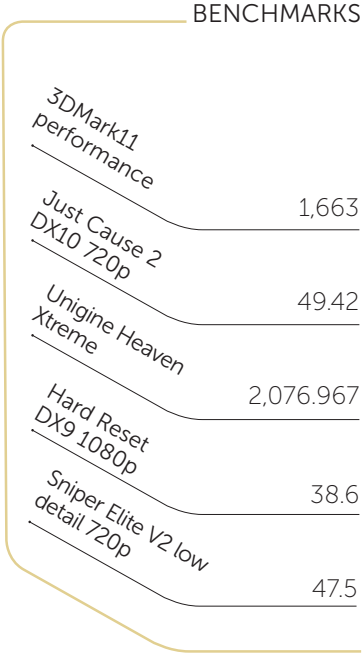
Indonesia had three teams and a fourth Indonesian veteran overclocker Hazzan who had teamed up with the extremely talented overclocker Rbuass all the way from Sao-Paulo. Once again they could not prepare together prior to the competition and they battled with the hardware, even though both are amongst the best overclockers active today.

The New Zealand team suffered a catastrophic loss of two graphics cards and they had to bow out of the competition, proving once again that live overclocking events are nothing like overclocking at home in the comfort of familiar surroundings with unlimited time. It was a grueling nine hours of overclocking and by the time the competition was finished, one could see the wear and tear on the faces. Even though they had plenty of fuel courtesy of McDonalds and Red Bull, the sheer amount of time and concentration required exhausted all the competitors. Having said that, they all came alive at the MSI after party at Hooters, which was the perfect ending to a near perfect competition.

IN CLOSING

In closing, we would like to like thank MSI and all the partners for a great competition. With each successive year the competition gets more refined and as stated before, this was the best live overclocking competition that has ever been hosted. From the hardware to the benchmarks, the judging and the hosting, MSI have become almost masterful with these kinds of competitions. Next year should be even better and we shall return to cover MOA 2013. Until then look forward to the MSI GTX 680 Lightning review in the next issue, the graphics card that was used in the competition and easily the best GTX 680 for overclocking right now. NAG

BENCHMARKS



AMD A10 5800K APU

Supplier AMD **Website** www.amd.com **RRP** TBA

The last six years have been very difficult for AMD in every way. There's no denying that the outfit has gone from being a true market leader in some segments to obscurity in others, and no existence at the worst. One needs only to look at the history as is recorded in the numbers to realize that AMD is but a shadow of its former self.

That, however, isn't news and that's now what this component we have here is about. In fact, this second attempt at their aptly named APU just may swing things in AMD's favor in a meaningful manner. Given that it's taken what seems to be an eternity for AMD's purchase of ATI to pay off. Our first experience with AMD's previous generation A8 APUs left us underwhelmed ever so slightly. The idea was sound but the execution was anything but that. In fact, we were rather disappointed with how it all came together, leveraging a mediocre CPU technology with a less than aggressive GPU configuration. Despite all this, AMD's APUs showed some promise and measured up well against Intel's offerings.

With the Trinity cores, and in particular the high-end 5800K model, we have a different animal to study. Based on the refined and updated Bulldozer architecture, the CPU side of things leverages a few improvements and as such the CPU resembles the upcoming (at the time) Vishera CPUs more than it does the original Bulldozer. Essentially, it's another attempt by AMD to execute a philosophically plausible idea that just didn't translate as well with their first attempt.

So what we have with the 5800K is an APU with a total package TDP of 100W, not surprising there as it's still based on the 32nm node from Global Foundries. In addition to that, we have two modules equaling four execution cores, so in both logic and at a silicon level, if you will you have four execution cores via two modules. The memory controller has been beefed up a little and speeds as high as 2,133MHz are officially supported. This isn't just a check box upgrade but is very important as the memory speed directly determines the graphics performance. This is what we are primarily concerned with actually because this is what negates the passable performance of the host CPU.

Going back to what we stated earlier, we tested the system with different memory configurations. Since this is a dual channel system, memory bandwidth isn't plentiful so every bit counts. If you are going to use 1,600MHz memory then you'll be doing yourself a huge disservice as you'll only get a fraction of the performance this APU has to offer. The faster the memory you have, the better your gaming performance will be. We'd have liked to go into detailed scaling results, but we simply don't have the space here, so take our word for it that you want as fast a memory set as possible, within reason of course. Given the price point it would be absurd to spend as much on a set of memory as you would on the actual APU, but suffice to say those sub-2,000MHz kits are highly discouraged.

The most interesting part about the A10 5800K is that despite its very low CPU performance as compared to the Intel CPUs, when you compare the performance in games, the 5800K wins by a sizeable margin. Simply put, there's no amount of overclocking you can perform on the Intel Core CPUs that would make them comparable in gaming performance to this APU. Finally the ATI acquisition is paying off directly and proof of that is in how virtually all games are playable on the 5800K provided you make some sacrifices in visual fidelity specifically where rendering resolution is concerned. As stated earlier, bandwidth is limited and resolution is heavily dependent on the available memory bus width. As the core of a media center PC or HTPC there is very little that should incentivize someone to look

SPECS

Core
Quad core Trinity (32nm)
Frequency
3.8GHz
Cache
4,290KB (2MB L2)
Package
FM2
GPU
AMD Radeon HD 7660D

PLUS

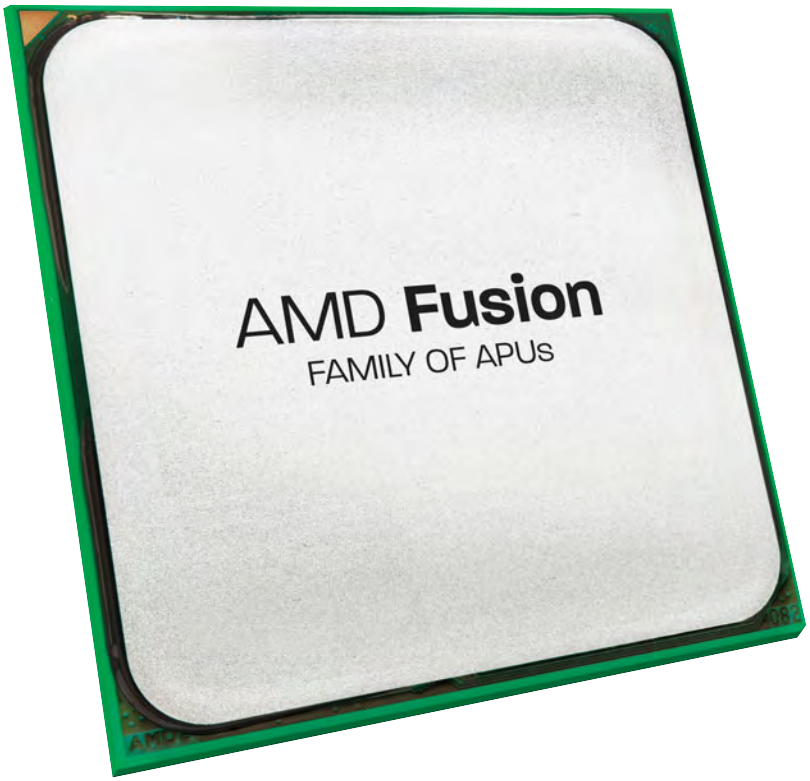
- Best IGP on the market
- Great value
- Pricing

MINUS

- Not as cool as it should be
- Main CPU still lacking

BOTTOM LINE

AMD's second attempt at an APU is excellent, delivering the fastest IGP we have seen yet.



"The most interesting part about the A10 5800K is that **despite its very low CPU performance as compared to the Intel CPUs**, when you compare the performance in games, the 5800K wins by a sizeable margin."

elsewhere because the 5800K and the rest of the family for that matter are truly the first host processor and GPU combination that actually deliver game capable performance. You will be limited to 1280x720 in most titles, but in a few you may be able to get away with full 1080p gaming. For example, we tried as with all the others, several different configurations for *Hard Reset*, but eventually settled on 1920x1080p with the high visual setting. The frame rate was comfortable enough at 38fps, which takes it far ahead of what Intel is presently offering in Ivy-Bridge based CPUs.

We are further impressed by the feature set of the 7000 series GPU on the 5800K. Not only does it support DX11, but it has full compute features and an impressive 384 compute cores. That's not bad at all considering that the HD 4870 from not too long ago had a total of 400.

There's a lot more to say about the APU, but we have briefly discussed all the important parts. Despite some issues regarding specific memory modules we could not get to work, (this could very well be a motherboard issue and unrelated to the CPU) we like this APU a lot. If a discreet GPU is not an option for you, then you have no choice but to go with the 5800K or the rest of the family as you'll not find anything better from Intel. Sure enough you'll have significantly better CPU performance, but it doesn't mean anything for the most part if all you'll be doing is watching movies, listening to music and playing games on your TV. For that kind of usage scenario, the AMD 10 APU is the best bar none. We here at NAG are fans of the A10 5800K. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

CM Storm Recon

Supplier Sonic Informed **Website** www.cmstorm.com **RRP** 475

SPECS
Sensor
Avago 3090 optical sensor (up to 4,000 DPI)
Polling rate / response time
1,000Hz / 1ms
Response time
1ms
Onboard memory
Stores up to five profiles and 36 macros
Cable length
1.8 metres

PLUS
- Inexpensive
- Quality construction
- Comfortable to use

MINUS
- Button placement
- Obtuse driver package

BOTTOM LINE
Affordable and perfectly functional, the CM Storm Recon is a good choice for gamers on a tight budget.

Entering the gaming mouse arena at R475, CM Storm's Recon is obviously targeted at those who desire all the functionality of a basic gaming mouse without having to spend crazy amounts of cash for extra layers of superfluous features. Its low price does not equate to low quality, however – it's a mouse that boasts solid, comfortable design, with only a few design faults.

It boasts all the features you expect, with on-the-fly adjustable DPI (via two buttons south of the mouse wheel) between four presets of 800, 1,600, 3,200 and 4,000 DPI, but these four levels can be customised by downloading the Recon's driver package. From the somewhat finicky driver interface, you can adjust a number of different settings – such as changing the colour of the Recon's LED lighting, assigning different colours to different DPI settings so you'll know at a glance what sensitivity setting is selected. You're also able to create new mouse profiles, assign macros to buttons (with delay options and the like) and more.

While the design of the mouse is mostly comfortable (depending on your preferences, of course), there are annoyances with button placement. It's an ambidextrous mouse, and CM Storm has opted to cater to both lefties and righties by having back/forward buttons on both sides of the mouse – which is fine, except you'll find that your ring finger will constantly, accidentally hit these buttons (which are highly sensitive), which can be annoying when browsing the web, for example. It's a simple enough fix, if you use the driver interface to disable the offending buttons – but it does mean that if you decide to assign macros to those same buttons, you might find yourself accidentally activating those macros at undesirable moments. You'll eventually get used to it though, and once you have, you'll be happy with the Recon. NAG

- Dane Remendes

8

Creative Labs Sound Blaster Recon3D Omega

DREAM MACHINE

Supplier Corex **Website** www.creativelabs.com **RRP** R2,995

PLUS
- Incredible audio performance
- Scout Mode works
- Excellent overall quality

MINUS
- Look at the price

BOTTOM LINE
For those who want nothing but the best and are willing to pay for it, this is a fantastic gaming headset.

Creative Labs has clearly set out to dominate the wireless gaming headset market with the ridiculously named Creative Labs Sound Blaster Recon3D Omega – and after spending some time with it, we'd say they've absolutely succeeded. It's comfortable to use, with a cushioned band running along the top of the adjustable headband and cushioned ear cups that provide enough tilt to ensure a comfortable fit. It's ruggedly constructed, but it's actually quite light for a high-end wireless headset.

It ships with a USB control hub that also houses an excellent sound card. For Xbox 360 and PS3, you'll find an optical cable that plugs into your console and the hub. Volume controls are built into the back of the left ear cup, as well as on the hub itself. For PC, you simply plug the hub into a USB port, install the drivers (which let you alter a range of audio options) and you're good to go. There's also the detachable microphone on a flexible boom, which connects to the left ear cup.

Audio quality is where this set justifies its high price tag. It boasts excellent clarity, with a high-end that never seems to falter even at maximum volume, crisp mid-range tones and powerful bass making this set brilliant for music or video. Its primary purpose as a gaming headset is where it truly excels, and most players understand that, in certain games, a good headset can be the difference between victory and defeat when knowing your opponent's location is crucial. To this end, the hub features a Scout Mode button – which seems to use witchcraft and alchemical wizardry to alter the audio production and highlight important in-game sounds like footsteps, so you can get the drop on your opponent. And it actually works. It's simply an excellent gaming headset. NAG

- Dane Remendes

10

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PATRIOT Intel Extreme Masters 2133MHz Dual Channel Kit

Manufacturer Patriot Memory **Website** www.patriotmemory.com **RRP** R699

SPECS
Density
8GB (4x 2GB)
Voltage
1.5V
Timings
11-11-11-27
XMP
Yes 1.3

PLUS
- Reliability
- Lifetime Warranty
- Looks Great

MINUS
- Default XMP profile sets CL12
- Average performance

BOTTOM LINE
Easily the most reliable set of gaming memory from Patriot.

As you can obviously tell from the rated speed and timings of this set, a performance set it is not. 2,133MHz was once impressive, but now, is considered by the community the minimum speed required out of a set of memory, as anything slower limits just about every platform available right now.

You may wonder then why Patriot, a veteran of sorts in the DRAM industry, is producing such an average set, under a new name. Well, the answer is simply because Patriot is the official memory sponsor of Intel's Extreme Masters league. Intel has a gaming league and Patriot is the official memory supplier for the league. This shouldn't mean much for us, but it actually has some relevance in that it guarantees that each set of memory is tested in the most stringent manner.

In addition to the standard machine testing, the memory is all hand tested and sold with a limited lifetime warranty. You're essentially buying server-grade memory for the desktop, without the pricing to match. It's easy to overlook this as we did initially, but when visiting several memory factories we realized that the testing procedure and binning process for such memory is much higher than it is for regular, high-speed and even overclocking memory. You're promised with such a set that should there be any instability in your system after hours on end of gaming, that it won't be the memory.

Naturally as stated earlier, we aren't particularly moved by 2,133MHz so we decided to see how far we could push the memory without going past 1.5V, but we didn't get very far at all. Even 2,200MHz proved to be too much. However 1.6V allowed the system to boot into windows and it was fairly stable. However, 2,200MHz isn't a multiplier we would recommend, and that's because it actually delivers lower performance than the 2,133MHz setting, so we opted instead for tighter timings at the default 1.5V. The set managed 10-11-10-27 and we were fairly satisfied with these settings given the purpose of this RAM. This not overclocking RAM, but if stability is paramount above all else for you, you should give this set some serious consideration. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

8

Tt eSports MEKA G-Unit Mechanical Keyboard

Distributor Corex **Website** www.ttesports.com **RRP** R1,137

PLUS
- Tactile feel is great
- Primary gaming keys light up
- Well packaged

MINUS
- No audio pass-through capability

BOTTOM LINE
One of the better gaming keyboards on the market right now.

We don't have a lot of room for this review so we'll get right into the meaty bits of this gaming keyboard from Tt eSports.

As with all things, perfect it is not. For one, it's shorter than we'd prefer so it feels a little cramped when compared to our current Dream Machine keyboard – the GIGABYTE Osmium. Build quality is good but once again not up to our standard benchmark because while it is heavy, the weight distribution seems to only prevent the keyboard from slipping rather than coming as a result of quality materials.

There's an audio controller on the keyboard (but no audio pass-through cable) so you can continue to use your dedicated audio card with this keyboard should you wish to minimize cable clutter. Having said all that, this keyboard is still amongst the better ones available today, and if you can overlook some of the small issues, it's a fantastic keyboard to use. It is feature-packed and macro keys are not something you'll ever run out of regardless of the game you are playing.

The key press is precise courtesy of the MX-Black switches. They do need a little more force because they are the most resistive switches available in the range, but you soon get used to the force required and it actually becomes pretty hard to go back to gaming on a membrane keyboard afterwards. Maybe not the best for typing, but for gaming, there are few keyboards that can claim to have a better feel to the key-presses.

Overall, this is a well put together package; it actually has significantly more going for it that we are able to express here and the price is incredible. The Meka G-Unit may be competing in an increasingly crowded market but it's certainly amongst the top runners and definitely worth considering. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

8

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Discrete GPU Performance	up to 50%
Z77 + Discrete GPU + 3rd Gen. Intel® Core™ procesor + Virtu MVP	
Z68 + Discrete GPU + 2nd Gen. Intel® Core™ procesor	3DMark Vantage (Extreme)

Benchmarks for reference only. Results may differ according to system configuration.

*PCIe Gen. 3 is dependent on CPU and expansion card compatibility.
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Corsair Neutron Series 240GB SSDs

DREAM MACHINE

Supplier Frontosa **Website** www.frontosa.co.za **RRP** R2,499

Do not be alarmed by the double SSD review in this issue. It is not a comparison but a parallel review of the first two SSDs from Corsair's new line-up of drives. They are essentially identical drives, but the GTX offers slightly better performance at an ever slightly steeper price.

Before we get into the performance, it's worth detailing what makes the Neutron drives different from Corsair's previous offerings. These are the first drives from the manufacturer that feature the LAMB LM87800 controller. With this series,or at least thus far, the typical and common SF-2000 series controllers have been replaced by what is looking like a very good controller in all regards.

Of paramount importance is that this controller doesn't suffer the performance shortfall that SandForce-powered drives are prone to. Compressed and uncompressible data work equally well and, more than that, the numbers we obtained with these drives were nothing short of amazing.

As a side note, do not be alarmed with the vastly different numbers in the benchmark results. We moved to a new methodology and a mixture of suites here at NAG for testing SSDs. The results are not comparable with previous SSD reviews directly, but suffice to say the new suite better reflects the drives claims than before, where we were getting nowhere near the advertised performance (especially IOPS) with any drive.

SSDs are pretty much the same aesthetically, so there's nothing to say about that, but inside is where the magic happens and there's lots of that within these drives. The measured and tested performance of these drives was surprisingly close. This isn't in the sequential transactions speeds per say, but the IOPS performance was analogous to the claims Corsair makes on the packaging. Something important and rarely ever seen when dealing with storage.

We recorded read and write IOPS performance numbers that were above 85% of Corsair's claims. By the same token we also noticed that there really isn't much between the GTX and the regular drive. We initially thought something had gone wrong with our data, but upon repeated testing under different conditions we concluded that our data was indeed correct. The regular Neutron drive only suffered against the GTX in sequential writes and maximum IO response time. To put into perspective how little this means we should make you aware that the Neutron beat our previous fastest drive, the Plextor M3 PRO, in sequential write operations. While we can't re-run the Plextor M3 PRO tests again with the new suite, we are confident in saying the Neutron drive would be faster, and obviously the GTX even faster. Part of that speed is due to the Toshiba 2nm Toggle NAND used within the drives.

We are happy to say that the troubles that plagued the previous SF-based drives from Corsair are gone. All we experienced was blisteringly quick performance. Not only did Corsair manage to produce two notable drives, but they are now offering a five year warranty on the drives, which is marvellous considering that only Intel was willing to cover the life of their SSDs for that amount of time.

There just really isn't anything to dislike about these drives. They get our vote and the Neutron GTX becomes the new NAG Dream Machine SSD. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

SPECS
Controller
LAMB LM8700
NAND type
24nm Toggle NAND
Form factor
2.5"
Interface
SATA 6Gbps

PLUS
- Very fast SSDs
- Fast with compressed and uncompressed data
- Five year warranty

MINUS
- Nothing

BOTTOM LINE
Corsair's Neutron family of drives are blisteringly quick, but affordable.

BENCHMARKS

BASELINE: NEUTRON GTX

Average read	457.3 473.6
Average write	370.9 496
4K read (QD16)	284.9 294.3
4K write	316.2

9

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Build quality on the Sonuz pair is as with the Sirus: **impressive through the use of solid materials and attention to detail** rivalling that of headphones costing ten times the price.

CM Storm Sonuz Gaming Headset

Distributor Sonic Informed **Website** www.sonicinformed.co.za **RRP** R820

As a result of our previous experience with the Sirus headset from CM Storm almost a full calendar year ago, our expectations of the Sonuz headset were inherently high. The previous headset blew us away in acoustic agility and precision. For a gaming headset the Sirus remains one of the most underrated products around, but easily the best.

The Sonuz for all intents and purposes is a lesser version of the Sirus. As such it comes in at a lower price point and without many of the extras that were present on the Sirus, mainly the surround sound support and the audio controller hub. This in itself isn't an issue at all because the audio hub on the Sirus wasn't particularly useful because all the magic was in the headset itself. So this isn't a loss at all as far as we're concerned.

Build quality on the Sonuz pair is as with the Sirus: impressive through the use of solid materials and attention to detail rivalling that of headphones costing ten times the price. From here on in we'll have to assume this is an inherent feature of CM Storm products as they really do stand out in this regard while other competing products are gimmicky and feel flimsy through the use of cheap materials.

A direct comparison with the Sirus unit was not possible because we changed audio cards and as such, any variances in the sound quality could have easily been attributed to the different hardware. However, despite the differences, it was very obvious that the Sirus still had an edge in performance. The difference between the two varies depending on the usage but it's fairly easy to pick up on especially when listening to the highly detailed audio passages. The Sonuz drivers are much bigger at 53mm, but they just aren't as responsive. The sound isn't necessarily duller, but it just isn't as inspiring even though it's far superior to many other gaming headsets. To get the best from the Sonuz however, you'll still need a dedicated or at least 3rd-party audio solution as the generic on-board offerings are still no match for these much like it was with the Sirus.

Another favourable aspect of this set, often overlooked, is comfort. The Sonuz set is very comfortable, probably more so than the Sirus, actually. For those very long gaming and listening sessions you may still find it necessary to own both sets, if only because you can game for many more hours on these.

SPECS

Frequency response
10 ~ 20,000 Hz
Impedance
45 Ohm
Input sensitivity
93dB
Driver size
53mm

PLUS
- Very comfortable
- Acoustics
- Build quality

MINUS
- Nothing

BOTTOM LINE
One of the better gaming headsets currently. Unmatched acoustics at this price.

The Sonuz headphones feature a robust and sensitive removable microphone only made better by the fact that you can install it on either side of the headphones. The performance of the microphone is as you'd expect: clear and relatively sensitive to the angle at which it's placed. It eliminates background noise sufficiently that it may negate the need to have noise cancelling features as found on some recent sound cards.

Back to the audio performance, and we have to say, given the price differences between this set and the Sirus, we would still advocate for the Sirus as it really is a class above. If your budget is very stringent then obviously you'll have to settle for the Sonuz. Despite the slightly lower acoustic performance, for the price you're unlikely to find a better gaming solution. CM Storm has once again produced a winner and this should prove a favourite amongst gamers. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

8

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BENCHMARKS

BASELINE: ASUS Rampage IV Extreme

3DMark Vantage CPU	32,874 46,760
Cinebench 11.5	9.45 13.43
AIDA 64 Copy	28,514MB/s 20,396MB/s
3DMark03	112,431 127,025

SPECS
Chipset
Intel Z77
Memory
4x 240-pin DDR3
CPU support
Intel Core i7 SNB/IB (LGA1155)
Slots
4x PCIe 3.0 x16, 3x PCIe x1

HARDWARE

GIGABYTE Z77X-UP7

Supplier Rectron **Website** www.gigabyte.com **RRP** R5,500

After having reviewed so many Z77 motherboards here at NAG, what has become very clear to us, and probably you the reader, is that pretty much any Z77 motherboard on the market is relatively good. Not surprising given that it's a relatively simple platform, much like its predecessor the P67 and Z68. Granted, things are somewhat more detailed with Z77, it doesn't change the fact that if a vendor sticks to Intel's guidelines and builds from there, they'll have a solid motherboard.

So after so many iterations of GIGABYTE Z77 motherboards in particular one would imagine there just isn't anything more to be said about them. We loved the UD3H, then subsequently the UP5TH we reviewed in the September issue and if you still have that issue you'll recall that we said the only superior board in the line-up was the then unreleased UP7.

Well, we finally got our hands on the UP7 and as we had suspected it's better in all conceivable ways. The problem however is that not everyone will be able to appreciate that, in fact we firmly believe that for the most part, the vast majority of people are better off with the UP5TH as all the additions to this board will be lost to everyone but the dedicated and competitive overclocker.

Technically this board is marvellous; there's nothing to fault here – Ultra Durable 5 technology, 32-phase PWM, moisture protection – you name it, it's there and it's not important to go into that kind of detail here. Feature-wise it's near identical to the UP5TH, apart from the fact that it has 4-way SLI/Crossfire X support. However it's not just all PCIe lanes being fed to the switching chip, no, it's done intelligently so that if you're only using a single graphics card there's no switching chip between the CPU and the graphics card, hence there are no latency issues and you are at optimum performance. Engage several GPUs in tandem however and the switching chip comes into play. So you really get the best of both worlds: 4-way graphics but without the penalty suffered by traditional lane distribution designs when using a single graphics card.

To best describe this board, one would have to say: think of the original X58-OC motherboard, the first black and orange board from GIGABYTE. This may not be a direct successor as that was the X79-UD7, but in efficiency, features and characteristics this is its true successor. There's no need to recount the numerous overclocking world records set with this board, but suffice to say if you have a capable CPU it will not be the board holding you back. With a new LN2 mode and a bclk/CPU multiplier control system that's transparent to the operating system, GIGABYTE has perfected the UP7 like they never have any other board.

Much like the other Z77 boards in this current generation from GIGABYTE, memory is tuned pretty aggressively so memory frequency records, while possible, will be a little harder to achieve compared to what the competition offers. With some tuning this can obviously be remedied, but for those who prefer to reach high speeds as-is rather than tweaking the board to allow such, you may want to look somewhere else. For the rest of the overclocking community or power users, this board is near perfect. You'll be hard pressed to find a situation where this board was the limiting factor and not your particular components you have installed. This board is absolutely fantastic and is very easy to advocate for. If you want the ultimate machine for speed, give this some serious consideration as its better than even we have stated. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

PLUS
- Very good overclocking features
- Great efficiency
- 32-phase PWM
- 4-way SLI/Crossfire X

MINUS
- Nothing

BOTTOM LINE
The Z77X-UP7 is an overclocker's dream motherboard. Easily in competition for the best Z77 motherboard ever made.

9

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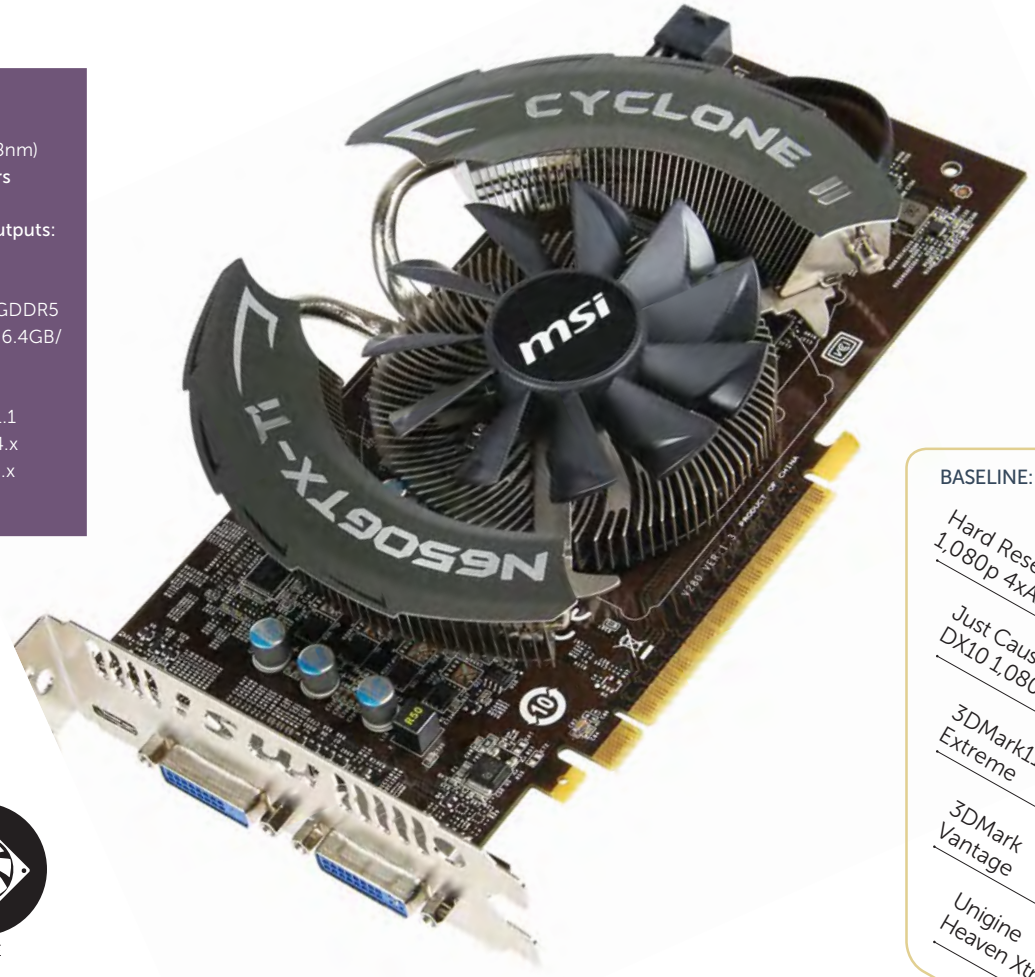


HARDWARE

BENCHMARKS
BASELINE: ASUS GEFORCE GTX680

Hard Reset DX9 1,080p 4xAA	42 99.6
Just Cause 2 DX10 1,080p	73.82 155.72
3DMark11 Extreme	1,534 3,343
3DMark Vantage	19,316 39,722
Unigine Heaven Xtreme	881.9,506 1,871.607

MSI GTX 650Ti Power Edition

Distributor Corex **Website** www.msi.com **RRP** R1,999

The first thing we need to mention before we get into detail about this graphics card is that NVIDIA has been rather silly in naming or segmenting their graphics cards of late. The GTX 650 Ti is a great example to this. One would think that the difference between the underwhelming GTX 650 and the 650 Ti is clock speeds or at most a few more shader cores. However nothing could be further from the truth. The GTX 650 Ti we have here features exactly double the number of compute cores that the GTX 650 has at a total of 768 versus 384 on the GTX 650. How this is only worth a "Ti" at the end is perplexing but we are glad such a part exists, if only to redeem the 650 SKU from complete ridicule. To further make this naming scheme odd, the GTX 650 Ti is actually based on the GK106 silicon and not the GK107 as the 650 is.

With a more capable core at its disposal, the GTX 650 Ti packs a total of 16 render outputs for a 15.9Gpixel/s fill-rate. Definitely not impressive by any means but it does allow gaming at 1080p resolutions so there's something to be said about specs not telling the entire story. We truly didn't expect much from this and despite MSI's overclocking efforts, it was doomed from the beginning if it performed anything like what we've seen from the GK107 parts.

Fortunately this graphics card reminded us more of the GTX 560 Ti than anything else. Much like the GTX 560 Ti as well, it overclocks very well, in fact we think even better. We aren't sure if this is due to MSI's proficiency at manufacturing graphics cards, an inherent feature of the silicon (as witnessed with the GTX 650 overclocking) or both, but whatever it may be, we had some fairly interesting overclocking sessions with this graphics card. Not only did it run very cool at its default settings peaking at an impressive 48°C under load, but the overclocking only increased that to 57°C which is still very impressive. So there's something to be said about the large and unsightly cooler. It actually does a fantastic job and having to choose between a good looking cooler and this kind of performance, we'd have to lean towards the higher frame rates in our games and higher scores in the benchmarks.

How far exactly did we manage to take the GTX 650 Ti? Very far – to a respectable 1.187GHz and since there is no Turbo to deal with, we were constantly at this speed with no random variations in repeated benchmark results. That's a 200MHz boost in clock speed and one that should not only impress the overclockers amongst us, but the gamers as well – particularly those on a budget. Out the box the card performs admirably but add the overclocking potential to it and it starts to make more sense than the GTX 660. As for the memory, it was even more impressive. From the shipping 5.4GHz clock we managed a scorching 6.5GHz without so much as touching the memory voltage. So despite this being a fairly low to mid-range card, MSI has not cut corners with the component quality and it's deserving of the "Power Edition" label. We didn't bother much with further overclocking of the memory using the reference cooler, but we are confident that one could use the 6.5GHz memory clock for everyday gaming and not suffer a single rendering artifact or increased temperatures for it.

Our first impression of the GTX 650 Ti via the MSI Power Edition has left us thoroughly impressed, almost as if this graphics card is better than it should be. If you can find it for a decent price, definitely buy this one. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

PLUS
- Much better than the GTX 650
- Boost clock shenanigan free
- Massive overclocking headroom

MINUS
- Pricing may be an issue

BOTTOM LINE
The regular GTX 650 is rubbish, but the GTX 650 Ti is good, the MSI Power Edition easily the best thus far.

9

Thermaltake Water 2.0 PRO

Distributor Corex **Website** www.corex.co.za **RRP** TBA

SPECS
Radiator size
120x120x38.3mm
Compatibility
2011
1366
775
1156
1155
AM2
AM3
FM1
FM2

PLUS
- Good performance
- Affordable

MINUS
- Slightly complex setup

BOTTOM LINE
An above average water cooler with a good price.

Thermaltake is no stranger to heat sinks, fans, and cooling solutions in general. With each successive generation, the lack of improvement to the standard coolers that Intel and AMD provide for their CPUs give new life to outfits such as Thermaltake. The Water 2.0, despite its lamentable name, is a closed loop cooling system that is miles ahead of what the reference cooler both AMD and Intel provide.

The Water 2.0 PRO is a slightly larger version of the basic Performer model. This increase in size obviously allows better radiation of heat and with two fans installed the performance difference between the Performer and the PRO should be notable. However, in isolation we have to say that the additional fan doesn't do much to improve the cooling efficiency.

The difference is there with two fans, but the problem is that amount of additional noise generated by the cooler for a two degree temperature variation isn't worth it. We would rather use the one fan and use the other somewhere else in the system as it will do a lot more there than when used on the radiator.

Build quality-wise, the Water 2.0 is not too different to what other vendors offer. The tubing seems slightly thicker but that doesn't necessarily mean the flow rate is higher as the rubber housing could just have a bigger diameter.

Setup is simple enough in that you're unlikely to need a manual, however we do feel that there is one too many steps to follow when compared with the H100 for example. This is especially true when mounting the water cooling on an AMD system. You can't use the standard back plate and you have to rely on the one included in the package. This shouldn't be an issue for most users because you're unlikely going to want to upgrade from the Water 2.0 PRO, at least for this generation of CPUs. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

GG

The dating game for gamers

But seriously, dating isn't a game and everybody should disabuse themselves of this vapid trope instantly, although the people behind the UK's *Date A Gamer* website must've missed that very important memo. Among a bunch of others, apparently, but I'll get back to that.

In a recent *Date A Gamer* YouTube instructional video series[1] including such enduring classics as "How to date a sexy gamer girl", "What to do on a first date with a single gamer", and "How to impress a girl into bed after the first date", hired models with orange skin in frilly underwear posing as the otherwise elusive she-gamer attempt to persuade unsuspecting[2] men that dating women is basically exactly the same thing as administrating an enterprise-level network. Kind of, anyway, because even the Wikipedia entry on mixed metaphors has nothing on this:

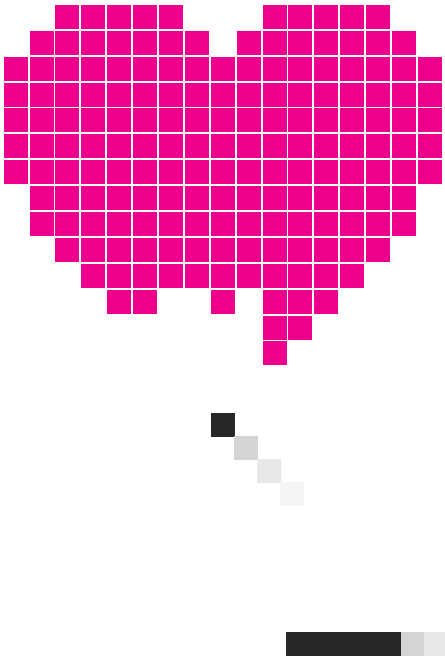
"If he can feel my vibe and fill my bandwidth, it could turn into a physical relationship," says hired-model-in-frilly-underwear Jessica, presumably concentrating really hard to read off a large font prompter, because I can't work out why else she seems so unconvinced about it. "At the end of the day, everyone has sexual needs. And sometimes I need someone to overload my buffer."

Elsewhere, a 1:29-minute exposé of the role of women in video games offers this profoundly thought-provoking conclusion:

"Some men think women are high maintenance. They obviously haven't played *Diablo III*."

And I mean thought-provoking because it doesn't make any sense whatsoever when you think about it, and it makes even less sense if you think about it anymore than that.

There's a whole lot wrong with *Date A Gamer* – perhaps the most offensive being the presumption that gamers are exclusively male and so socially incompetent that they need to be taught how to interact with women like we're a series of plot objectives in a video game instead of, you know, regular human beings just like everybody else.



> "Some men think women are high maintenance. They obviously haven't played *Diablo III*."

Pro tip: We're regular human beings just like everybody else.

The big secret that *Date A Gamer* doesn't want you to know without first paying a substantial monthly subscription fee is that dating gamers is actually totally simple – just be yourself, and what happens, happens[3]. It's also the same principle that applies to dating anybody, not just gamers. Who knew it would be that obvious?

- Tarryn van der Byl

1 Which was subsequently yanked for being too gross even for YouTube – an impressive, if also impressively ignominious accomplishment – and then later reinstated because, you know, it's still YouTube.

2 Unsuspecting. Gullible. Really, *really* desperate. It's a semantics thing.

3 And if it doesn't, blame biology or something. Attraction is way more complicated than a checklist of "PLAYS GAMES [Y/N]?".

Extra Life

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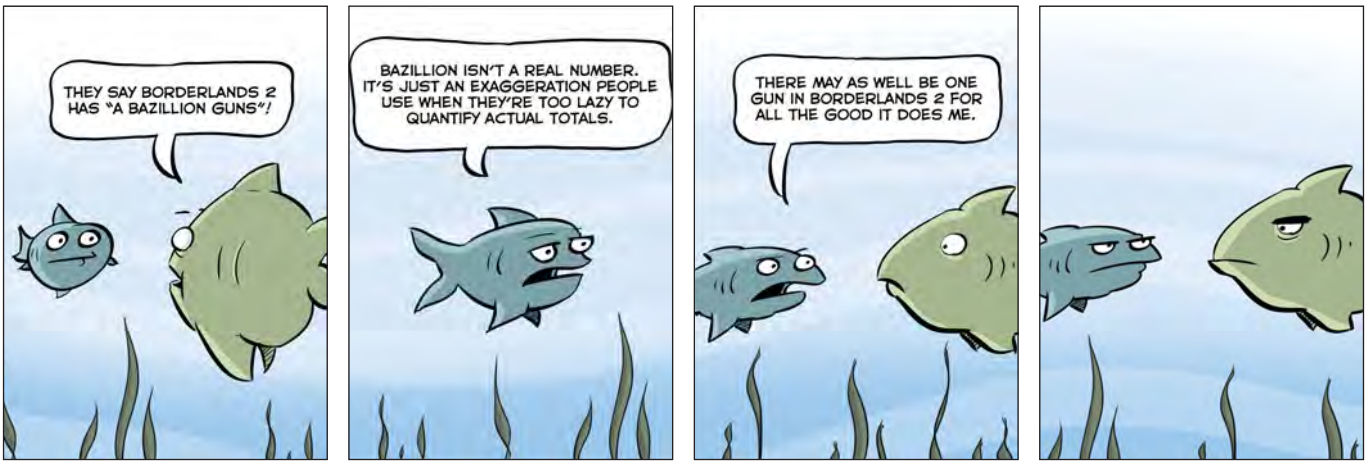

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We stare long and hard into the unblinking eyes of *Black Ops II*'s revitalised multiplayer suite, and discover how Treyarch plans to make this the most attractive *COD* multiplayer offering yet.

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A *LEGO The Lord of the Rings* feature is never late, dear reader. Nor is it early. It arrives precisely when it means to. Does that quote work?

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rAge 2012

There's a press release on the official site: www.rageexpo.co.za, and an article in this issue to tell you everything you need to know about what happened... officially. I'm going to tell you what really happened.

Everything in the press release and article is all true; it was a great show and we had more people than ever before but it also taught us a few lessons (as it always does). First up it was too busy on Saturday. It got so bad at one point that the Dome safety and security people had to stop people from coming in until people let. This crisis lasted about 45 minutes and a few people got grumpy and said organisation was bad. I disagree: bad organisation would have been people getting hurt because we didn't have good organisation. The lines to get in were also a bit long and of course we had a heat wave. Standing in the sun isn't fun. The ATM machines were also too busy and at one point weren't working due to some outside link problem that was resolved eventually. The credit card machines that used wireless were a bit of a joke because over the rAge weekend wireless at the Dome doesn't exist – there are just too many signals flying around for anything to work. The stage area was too crowded. As for the LAN, some internet link to Europe went down on Friday (we think a great white ate the cable), resulting in zero connectivity on Friday; the network wasn't 100% perfect thanks to the truck strike so some of our expensive kit was stranded in customs, and apparently some games didn't like the configuration. It was our tenth year – you think things would run smoothly. LOL... End of the day it all worked out and I'd say around 99% of the people are happy people. Sorry to the 1%; I wish everything ran perfectly but I guess because it's year 10 we were due for a bit of a wakeup call – more of a friendly reminder not to be complacent and to respect our position at the top. Here are some of the things we're doing for 2013 to improve on this year: We're going to have the NAG LAN 100% sorted out and confirmed to work by 1 June 2013 or we're not going to have the LAN at rAge. We're talking to the various ISPs about a new Internet system that will work just like it does if you were connecting from home (not as quick but more or less). We're going to add more people in the front to deal with the lines of people quickly but please consider coming on Sunday or Friday (the less busy days). We're adding more ATM machines (maybe those portable ones outside). We're going to insist that all retailers use hard lines for their credit card machines. We're going to increase the size of the aisles (by 2 meters on the main ones and 1 meter on the secondary). We're going to move the stage around and add more seats (1-2 more bleachers) and more standing room. All this has already been decided and that's before we've even had out first meeting for rAge 2013.

It was an awesome show and the best we've ever done. This is just here to let you all know that we're even more committed to making it better each year. Thanks for coming and see you in 2013.

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I ordered some stuff from these guys the other week and was running late to collect it (I was going to be there at about 20 minutes after their closing time). "No problem," I was told. "We'll wait for you." They didn't know who I was either. So thanks guys, you've earned your free plug here.

COMPETITION WINNERS

Sorry for this boring stuff, I don't know why all these wieners are being put on this page. I feel like I'm not in charge of this magazine sometimes. Next month this goes in the news section or not at all. Anyway – well done all you people – your skill at sending an SMS has been rewarded. *Borderlands 2* competition winners: main winner – Bryan Banfield, second place winners – Duncan Smith; Johan Dreyer; JP Steyn and the rest – Nathan Stewart; Christopher Doran; Richard Steyn; Jason Rip; Ruben Janse Van Ransburg; JL Hendrikse. The guy with some actual skill is Keith Milton of Roodepoort who won the arcade machine at the NAG stand at rAge by playing *Ghosts and Goblins* with a score of 154,600 (he clocked it twice). Oh, just been sent more: September Evetech competition – Louis Ainslie; Johan Mackay; Lumart Wiechers; Brendon Morris; Stefan Engelbrecht.

Before I go, we've brought back a favourite section – **Everything Else** – this is all that stuff you love and surround yourself with. Yoda backpacks, figurines, toys, board games and so on.

What a ride
- RedTide
Editor

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INBOX

LETTER OF THE MONTH NOVEMBER 2012

From: Ivan
Subject: Call of Disrespect

The servers on COD MW3 seem infested with veterans trying to discourage the entertainment that the game provides. Recently, while playing online, I personally received a lot of hate mail, after finishing a game with a K/D of 3/1, for using the "wrong" gun and being "[*nasty words, Ed*]". No "well done" or "I couldn't do that asleep dosed up on heroin" was mentioned, only mindless rage for using such a noob gun. The weapon in question was the PP90M1 and last weekend it was still accepted as a "right" weapon to use. For a community parading "noob acceptance" we as a community are not very tolerating to anything other than the right set of weapons, perks, killstreaks and obviously lag. If you cannot cross-map 360 no-scope through a wall with the MSR you have no business playing Search and Destroy. New players are not welcomed into the game with open arms but rather a rule-book full of do's and do not's. If you do not want to be ripped to shreds by a guy with a shotgun in a maze, do not run into the maze with your sniper then complain when you inevitably die. It has gotten to a point where I cannot, in good faith, try to persuade friends to play the multiplayer on the premise of fun. We cannot grow as a community if we keep on neglecting and insulting anyone that does not fall within the pre-conceived norm of ideal weaponry. Yes COD is not the SA gaming community as a whole but it is a sizable chunk of it. Players who condemn new players are bad and should feel bad. The next time you are mowed down by a hail of bullets spewed by a "rapid fire noob" for the sake of the community keep your opinion to yourself and enjoy the game like it was meant to be played.

You are so right. Here's an official message from NAG magazine: Use whatever weapon, tactic, method, mode, style and/or technique you please when playing games. The developers put all the guns in the game for you to use and they patch often to balance them, so don't let some pompous know it all hothead (who probably heard his opinion from some other twit) tell you how to play, what to use, when to shoot or anything of the sort. I have found that the best way to play is to turn off all chat windows, voice communications and let the only interaction with these "pro" players be your rapidly fired bullets, RPG shots into crowded rooms and spammed grenades. This is your new motto, "it's none of my business what you think of my playing style". The only thing you shouldn't do is cheat or camp because that's lame. Ed.

From: Sharna
Subject: Gayness in gaming

Has anyone noticed the sudden boost of homosexuality in games these days? I have sat in front of my big screen and played more headlines than is likely healthy, and I have noticed this trend. Mass Effect is a sparkling example. At first LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender groups) seemed to ok the potential for semi-lesbian scenes between a female Shepard and the Asari, Liara in the first game. However, by game three EA seemed to have been pressured into furthering their homosexual scope to boy-on-boy action, as well as "normal lesbianism": a.k.a. Not just a woman coupling with an all-female alien race able to reproduce with any gender of any species.

Of course, this isn't the only big title. Many games, RPGs in the forefront, are opening up to the idea of appealing to the gay gaming community. Fable II and III also gave me the option of choosing my character's sexuality (which of course I took advantage of by marrying everyone in sight, before regretting the crippling spouse allowance fees). I also saw hints of a homosexual relationship in BioShock, between Sander Cohen and the game's antagonist, Andrew Ryan, as I picked up audio tapes [You sure about that? We're on the fence on that one, Ed].

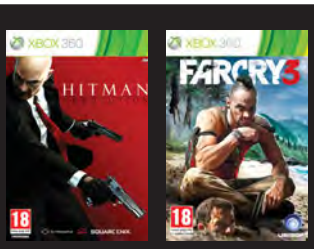
Fallout 3 (between two female ghouls you meet on the course of your adventures) also joined the party. Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas comes complete with a bunch of police officers who say suggestive things like: "Let's wrestle to submission!" and "Don't drop the soap, honey!" You can also find gay pride flags on the streets, along with a clearly homosexual store clerk who flirts unabashedly with the male protagonist. The fourth title in this series even features a flamboyant night-club entrepreneur named Tony Prince, or "Gay Tony".

Everywhere you look in many popular titles, you see hints and outright statements concerning homosexual relationships between characters. It has even come to the point where game companies (BioWare being the main, proud culprit) are allowing gamers to choose same-sex partners for their own characters.

I, personally see this as a growth as well as a sign of maturity for the entire industry. Creating a new game is a work of art, and should not be restricted in any fashion. We'd all become extremely bored otherwise, by lily white, stiff-faced, clean-worded and violence-free future selections. I'm curious as to what others think of this evolution, and whether they think it will have any repercussions for gaming?

I think it's great that game developers are embracing all things when making their games. Do you have a well thought out intelligent opinion on this topic? Let us know here: letters@nag.co.za. For

*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...

the rest let us know here: applications@school4morons.com. Ed.

From: Elias
Subject: Razer
I get your magazine every month and if there are alternate covers I buy all of them. Once I've finished reading them I nail them up on my wall. I love the magazine and I love the way you write and the small attempts at humour but there's one thing I've been wondering about: Why haven't you written a review on the Razer Blade or any Razer products? I have decided to buy the new Razer Blade but I'm still not 100% sure about my choice and if you wanted to wright a review I'm sure you can get your hands on one. And I don't think I've seen any reviews of Razer products I would also love to see ones on the Tiamat 7.1 and the Razer Mamba I'm not asking you to wright a review on those but I've just been wondering why you never write on Razer products.

What do you mean by small attempts at humour exactly? On a creepier note: are you really nailing whole copies of NAG *on your wall – this makes me a little scared. Anyway, you asked for a review of the Razer Blade, so here goes: Early man had no way of removing facial hair which is why we often see Neanderthals depicted with unruly wild beards. Later, as we became more civilised, we started cutting facial hair with sharpened rocks, tools and eventually things like knives and so on, culminating in the straight razer. Early man did sometimes end up with no facial hair but this was largely thanks to failed experiments with lava and/or fire. Today, advanced engineering scientifically technologies can fit up to five razer blades on a single ergonomic handheld device. As you can see the modern razer blade is so much better than all those other things in the past. I give it 92%. Ed.*

From: Richard
Subject: NAG employment queries
Tarryn's opinion column in the August issue of NAG caused me to re-evaluate my stance on writing and whether it would be something I'd want to pursue as a career path. I would highly appreciate it if you'd be able to answer some of my questions if not all or at least direct me to someone who could. I'll present my questions in a numbered format below for ease of reading.

1. How large is the staff compliment at NAG?
2. Do the writers at NAG earn a salary or are they paid per article?
3. What are the required qualifications for a NAG journalist/editor?
4. Do you ever have interns working for you?
5. Do the staff at NAG find that they have to hold down other writing jobs for other companies/publishers?
6. Why did you personally get into gaming journalism and are you happy you decided to?
7. Do you feel your passion for gaming as a hobby has deteriorated as a result working within the gaming industry?
8. Lastly do you still agree with Tarryn's sentiments that if you're passionate about both writing and gaming that this is a good path to actively chase?

First up don't listen to Tarryn, she operates outside of what people consider normal. We can't get rid of her because out of all the people writing for NAG she's the most likely to go postal at the drop of a hat. Anyhow, back to your questions.

1. *About 21 people including all freelancers and minions (mostly freelancers).*
2. *Some earn a salary and some are paid per article. I'm notoriously bad at paying freelancers. They don't mind usually because when guilt finally forces me to pay them they get nice large lump sums once or twice a year.*
3. *You have to be the most sexy person in the room. And... be multitalented, must write good and know your games and gaming industry and hardware and everything IT related and be awesome.*
4. *No. They are a bore and usually sit around staring at us with idiot grins. Also, any work they do is such a screw-up that it takes us longer to fix than doing it from scratch ourselves. They smell too.*
5. *No. They wear cowboy hats and hang out near cinema complexes.*
6. *I love games and gaming hardware. This job is just the best way to get both of those things for free.*
7. *No. My love for games runs deep.*

ON THE **FORUMS**

Go right ahead and have a little bitch and moan. We'll pretend to care, just like everyone else: **www.nag.co.za/forums**

Q: What was your favourite thing/part/event/game/person/fruit-flavoured snack/etc. at rAge this year?

"Nothing, CUZ I WASN'T THERE!!!!!! "
{G}Zulu

"Nothing, CAUSE it's too far away so I NEVER GET TO GO! (Q___Q) "
James Donaldson

"Free stuff! The Cosplay was epic as well a lot better"
Z1OC

"Having a dream that it might actually come to Cape Town one day... "
DXeXodus

"I dunno if anyone saw the sledding game with the Wii balance board. I had real tears (of laughter) while watching people compete at this. Let's just say when you launch, it doesn't look very "graceful". I can't find any videos of it online, but it really is one of the funniest things I've seen in my life. "
massacre_101

8. If you like swimming and dolphins should you become a dolphin trainer... Ed.

From: David
Subject: Thank you
I've been gaming since I could walk. I spent the better half of my childhood taking on the Empire in X-Wing and thwarting the plans of Le Chuck in Monkey Island. But now I've found myself in the position where I have to work from 9am to midnight every day, so my game time is zero. But I'm not writing this for pity. In fact I'm writing this to say thank you! I want to thank NAG for keeping me up to date with the latest games and technology and I want to thank all the gamers out there on the web, on forums, Facebook or Twitter. Through you my gaming spirit still burns and will never die. So thank you!

It's a pleasure. Also, get a new job – you're getting screwed with hours like that. ;) Ed.

From: Justin
Subject: A Cry from Far
My hands pull themselves away from the controller and I return Far Cry 2 to its case, carefully I shut the Play Station off and make sure my uniform is secured. With poise I stride from the room. Shuffling keys lock up the safe house and I cautiously leave the area, making sure that there is no one lurking in the nearby bushes or behind a wall.

Pleased that I lack any pursuers I head out onto the road, my eyes dart back and forth. No cars, nothing that can kill me with one simple shot. All my buddies are already at the location. They may need me and so I rush across the road.

No car has run me down and no buggy has tried to get at me. With no protection but a pocket kni- I mean machete of course, I head towards the location. There are civilians and I'm not used to that, so I hurry. There are cars ahead and so I hide behind a tree. They soon disappear.

With that obstacle gone, I head across the road. The front entrance looms but I go around instead, they won't catch me that way. My buddies are also hiding around that side and so I think that it would be best that way.

No guards, I rush to my buddies, they greet me kindly enough.

'Do anything last night?' My buddy asked.

'Well I played some Far Cry.'

'Cool.'

I scratch my head, wondering if a sniper had me in his sights... then wondered what Far Cry 3 would do to me (sharks are already on my beaches, you know).

You know what is weird? This is the third letter this month about Far Cry 2. What is going on here? Ed.

Adrian Martinescu, "I've been using Blender for about a year and a half now and wanted to make something for the NAG Magazine because you guys are awesome. This was my attempt."

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.

From: Josh
Subject: Is life a game?
Death is something we all have in common. We all come into this world the same and go out the same, it's what we do in between which separates us. Death is very much the driving force behind many of our choices, we will make lists of activities we want to do before our lives end and scream out terms like "YOLO [you only live once, Ed]," to motivate our choices.

When you think about it doesn't a games lifetime go the same way? We will receive a long awaited game and start playing it with huge enthusiasm just as a child will find enjoyment in anything. As our time with the game grows we too will grow accustomed to the game's (life's) ways and will adapt to any situation that the game (life) can throw at us and will do what is necessary to level(grow) up.

We will eventually reach a stage where we hit the level cap (grow old) and need to look for things to do before we eventually stop playing the game (pass away). Maybe we need to explore that cave once more or kill that last troll, but we will never feel satisfied, never feel like we have done everything. Nonetheless our time with the game (life) will come to an end and we will be left wondering what would of been the outcome had we took another path in the game (life).

I guess my point is that games share more similarities with life than many believe, maybe not in the story or graphics but in the basic principles that dictate them. Whether you can replay life is another story.

I'm actually replaying my life right now. In the previous life I was born with a coordination deficiency, I was also illiterate and a little idiotic and my thumbs bent the wrong way. My name was Dudley. Everyone around me played games, spoke about games and even made games while all I did was stare at the screen knowing if I touched a controller it would end up in someone's eye socket. I was cursed to love games but never play them. I died unhappy. This is why I decided to come back again but as a gaming magazine editor. I still have a few of those past life problems but the great team here at NAG always manages to make me look good. Ed.

THE SHORTS

Extracts of n00b from NAG letters

"While on the topic, it would be awesome if you guys did a second "Inbox" section of the weirdest and most unintelligible letters you guys have received."
- Matthew

"Bring on them heads!"
- Julian

"Mario taught me that everyone can be a hero, even a plumber."
- Zelda

"I have two aspirations in life; to miraculously find a cure for herpes, and to play Assassins Creed 3"
- Kerry

"I was a n00b before that word even existed."
- Quinton

ON TWITTER

Look a birdie @nagcoza

Chantelle Alexander
This weekend it isn't #GangnamStyle, it's #GamingStyle B) :D #rAge2012

Han
One can win an arcade machine? You lie! Don't be such a tease!!!

NAG Magazine Online
ADDICTED to #GuildWars2 please send help

Miktar
@nagcoza Can't, too busy playing GW2.

Alwyn Venter
Gaming FTW! Well done on organising another spectacular event! See you next year.

Andrew Jackson
@nagcoza "What is this" Sparta, obviously.

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I, Gamer

Smashheadkeyboard

It was bound to happen sooner or later, but another game has come along and usurped *Skyrim*'s place as my current gaming obsession. The best part about it is that the arrival of this attention-glutton was unexpected. *Borderlands 2* has joy-puked its cel-shaded glory directly into my brain. Dovahkiin is out and Claptrap is in, mainly because he kept calling me his "minion" throughout the first section of the game, and that on its own won me over completely. But the heady mix of gratuitous looting, quirky characters and gun binging didn't come without a fair amount of effort.

The herculean task began with the surprise local delay in the release of *Borderlands 2*. I wasn't the only one who felt crestfallen when it was revealed that the game was going to be a week late, but instead of moping I decided to cancel my pre-order and go the digital download route. Believe it or not, *Borderlands 2* was the first "triple-A" title that I've bought digitally. I've bought dozens of Xbox LIVE Arcade games, PSN games and smaller indie games, but this was most definitely my first stab at shunning the excitement of getting a new boxed game, for something a little less physical.

"Perhaps it was the series of unfortunate ensuing events that led me to this conclusion, but forsaking physical for digital is a load of bollocks"

Perhaps it was the series of unfortunate ensuing events that led me to this conclusion, but forsaking physical for digital is a load of bollocks. What should have, by today's standards, been a seamless exercise turned into the complete opposite. Like expecting to spend the day at Disney World but ending up getting repeatedly punched in the penis by a mob of angry midgets. With knuckledusters.

I pre-purchased the game the night before it released so I could begin pre-loading it. South Africa's Internet offerings have most definitely improved, and our 4MB line was sucking the game down at great speeds. While our country may be getting its ass into gear when it comes to online access, it's got its thumb rammed so far up its butt when it comes to something else: electricity. Turns out that slow Internet speeds aren't the only deterrent for would-be digital purchasers in SA – electricity is too because about 20 minutes into my download, the power went out and stayed out for 11 hours.

So I did what any other determined gamer would have: I installed Steam on my laptop and restarted the download at work the next day. Unfortunately, because the company's phone lines were stolen nearly two years ago and were never replaced by Telkom, my workplace runs off a ludicrously overpriced wireless ISP – a wireless ISP that throttles downloads from services like Steam. It took me 14 hours to download *Borderlands 2* and after that I still had to back up the files, transfer them to my gaming PC at home and reinstall the game. At that stage, however, Steam's servers were taking a serious beating because, obviously, *Borderlands 2* was now out. It took me another hour to log in, bringing my total time (from digital purchase to actually playing the game) up to around 15 hours excluding the 11 hour electricity outage.

Fortunately *Borderlands 2* was entirely worth the test in patience, but I'd have been disappointed if I'd decided to pop my digital shopping cherry with a game I ended up loathing. Worth it or not, the effort has reiterated something: I'm nowhere near ready to give up physical for digital.

- Miklós Szecsei

Cliffy B leaves Epic Games

This year has had its fair share of surprise departures by influential developers. Following on from Peter Molyneux's switch to the indie scene earlier this year and the recent announcement of the departure of BioWare's famed pair of doctors, Cliff "Look at all mah *Gears of War*!" Bleszinski has left Epic Games.

The split is a huge surprise, considering that Cliff has pretty much been the face of Epic for the last few years, in addition to being an indomitable creative force at the studio. He's credited in the design of everything from *Gears of War* and *Unreal*, to *Jazz Jackrabbit*, and he's been with Epic for 20 years. In a letter to colleagues, Bleszinski explained his departure, and Epic posted a portion of that letter online:

"I've been doing this since I was a teenager, and outside of my sabbatical last year, I have been going non-stop," wrote Cliff. "I literally grew up in this business, as Mike [Capps] likes to say. And now that I'm grown up, it's time for a much needed break."

"I will miss the projects, the playtests, the debates, and most importantly, the people. Epic only hires the best of the best, and it has been a joy working with each and every one of you on a daily basis, whether you were hired weeks ago or decades ago. I have been fortunate enough to collaborate with a variety of disciplines, from code to art to marketing and PR – it's been one big, rewarding learning experience. I'm confident that each project that is being built, whether at Epic, Chair, PCF, or Impossible will be top notch and will please gamers and critics alike."

Cliff and Epic wouldn't reveal what the prolific developer's next step will be, but Epic's technical director Tim Sweeney said this: "In 20 wonderful years with Epic, Cliff Bleszinski has grown into a true design luminary, and his contributions to the 'Unreal' and 'Gears' series have helped shape the game industry into what it is today. Cliff leaves Epic with our gratitude for his many contributions, and our wishes for continued success in the next chapter of his life!"

Having had such a remarkable, intensely busy career, we don't blame Cliffy for calling a (hopefully temporary) time-out. We wish him all the best.

Mass Effect series gets box set, awful DLC planning

All three *Mass Effect* games are getting crammed into one gorgeous package known as the *Mass Effect Trilogy*. The best part about the whole thing, however, is that it's coming to PC, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 making this the first time ever that PS3 gamers will get to play through *Mass Effect 1*.

The box set is due out on 6 November and will cost $59.99, or the same as any new console release so expect it to be about R600 at retail in South Africa.

Now for the bad news.

There is a ton of *Mass Effect DLC* that's been spread over the three games. All in all, there's probably close on 15-20 hours of additional missions and gameplay to be found. For reasons that defy all logic, BioWare and Electronic Arts have decided to make a complete hash of what DLC is included in the *Mass Effect Trilogy*. DLC inclusion is dependent on which platform you buy the box set for.

The PC version gets the best DLC inclusion but even that is woefully stingy. PC players will get "Bring Down the Sky" and "Pinnacle Station" DLC from *Mass Effect 1*. They'll also get the Cerberus Network Pass (with access to Zaeed as a squad mate and his coupled loyalty missions for *Mass Effect 2*) and the *Mass Effect 3* multiplayer pass.

Those who choose to pick up the *Trilogy* box set on Xbox 360 won't get any *Mass Effect 1* DLC but will get the Cerberus Network Pass and the *Mass Effect 3* multiplayer pass.

PlayStation 3 players will get... who knows? At time of writing, BioWare and Electronic Arts have yet to confirm what DLC will be included in the PlayStation 3 version. That being said, for those of you who have recently picked up copies of *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3* for PlayStation 3, the good news is that you'll be able to buy a digital copy of *Mass Effect 1* on its own. *Mass Effect 1* will be available on 6 November 2012 and will cost $14.99 via the PlayStation Store.

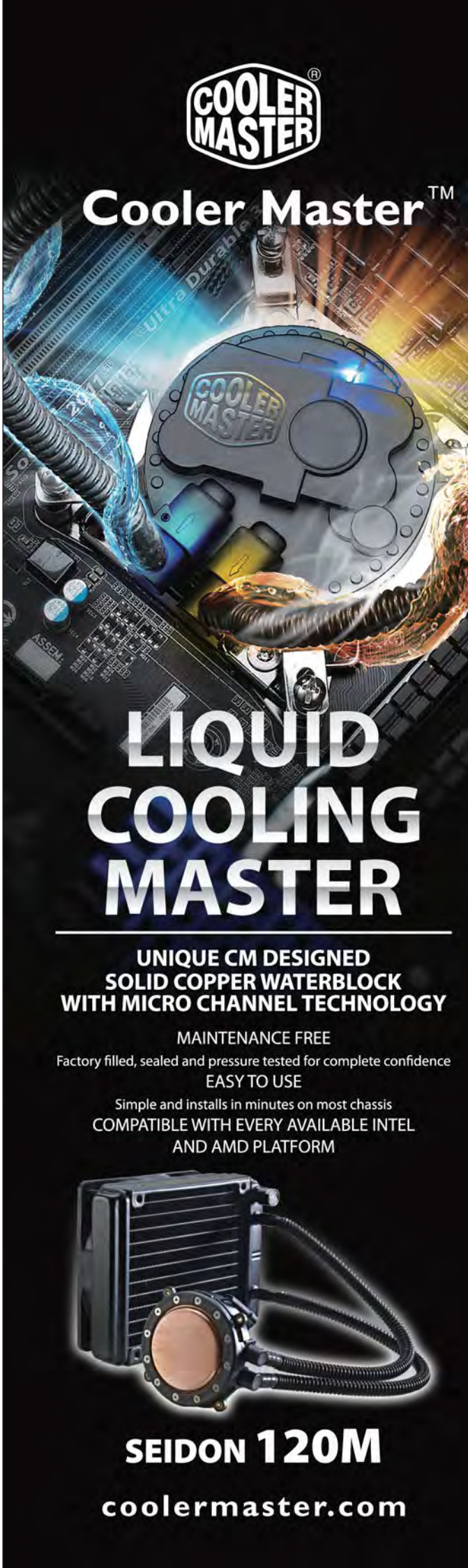
Want to know what DLC is missing? Aside from the two DLC packs for *Mass Effect 1* missing from the Xbox 360 and PS3 versions, the following will be absent across all platforms: "Lair of the Shadow Broker", "Arrival", "Kasumi – Stolen Memory" and "Overlord" for *Mass Effect 2*. "From Ashes", all of the multiplayer DLC packs, "Leviathan" and the newly announced "Omega" will be missing from *Mass Effect 3*.

All in all we estimate that that's about fifteen hours of DLC that won't be included in the *Mass Effect Trilogy* box set – the same box set that has been dubbed "the definitive *Mass Effect* experience".

A NEW CONTENDER ENTERS THE RING

At this year's Tokyo Game Show, SEGA showed off their MMORPG *Phantasy Star Online 2* on Sony's diminutive but powerful PS Vita, which will soon be the new home for the game alongside its PC and mobile counterparts. Don't be fooled by the move to these tiny platforms; *PSO2* looks just as fully-formed as any action-focused MMORPG, with the freedom to explore, fight, customise and socialise.

While news of *Phantasy Star Online 2* has been floating around Japan for some time, it's now been confirmed that the game will indeed make its way to Europe, which means us locals might actually have a chance to get stuck in, although it's likely that we'll have to go the digital distribution route. Regardless of how it pans out in our market, you can expect availability of the title in its F2P form (there's talk of an optional retail bundle, presumably for the Vita release) on PC during Q1/Q2 next year and hopefully the remaining platforms soon after.



The Game Stalker

Give me a reason, bro

Unsurprisingly I always seem to write a column about rAge around this time of year. It makes sense I think, considering this is probably the biggest event on the South African gaming calendar, and gamers come from all over the country to attend. And of course by the time this goes to print, rAge will be over and starting to fade in our memories as we prepare ourselves for the end of year gaming rush.

Every year for me rAge is a different experience. I've been attending almost as long as it's been running, and from what I've been told (I'm getting old, I don't remember!) that's a decade this year. Ten years of bringing gaming direct to the public in one smorgasbord – that's pretty impressive.

My experience of rAge has changed fundamentally over the years. I went from visitor, to journalist, to personality, to exhibitor – and this year I'm occupying the strange territory of independent journo crossed with exhibitor.

I look forward to it every year, regardless of the stress that often accompanies attending. For many who are either LANning or simply visiting it's an intense experience but you can actually go home at any time, which means it's not generally physically exhausting.

For those who are there, working every day however, the less glamorous side of the show often emerges as we approach it with both a sense of anticipation and excitement, coupled with anxiety and dread. The sore feet from hours of standing. The exhaustion at the end of the day. The fact that you still need to go to work the following week (a day off? What is that?) and you don't really feel rested. The sore face from constantly smiling seems like a minor complaint in amongst all that but you feel it at the end of the weekend.

Some of us spend hours standing around merely supervising our products and staving off the boredom of being confined to a single space for three days. Some of us wear our voices hoarse as we talk constantly for three days running, promoting our products, emceeing tournaments, giving presentations and in between it all talking to friends who share our passion for all things gaming related.

And yet we return year after year, complaints and all. Why is this? Is it because it's a great marketing opportunity for all involved? 25,000 people through the doors is nothing to be sneezed at.

Is it for the opportunity to network with potential business contacts? With around 80 exhibitors, again this is indeed a brilliant opportunity.

rAge is indeed an important opportunity to take advantage of all the marketing and networking opportunities that present themselves over the three days, however the real reason people continue to attend rAge, year after year after year is for the love of video games.

Say what you like, that's the only real reason.

Exhibitors, gamers, journalists, LANners, nerds, geeks – and I proudly count myself in the latter categories as well – the love of video games is what draws us together as a community.

The opportunity to play beta code before release date. To meet developers. To see the latest gaming and geeky merchandise on offer. Love it or hate it, the weird and wonderful cosplay. To stay on top of the latest trends in gaming, in accessories, in comic book culture.

This is the reason we attend the really Awesome gaming expo.

- Pippa Tshabalala

Sales figures! Get yer sales figures right here!

People who like to justify their purchases of games by waving sales numbers at other peoples' faces and yelling, "See, I'm totally in there with X number of similarly cool, hip people who've bought these exact games on which I've splurged all my money!" can look forward to some exciting validation in this news post.

First up, the ever-ludicrous figures of the *FIFA* series with *FIFA 13*. The game managed to move over 4.5 million units within its first five days of being on store shelves. This includes sales across all platforms. One million of those units were sold in the UK alone, and within the first 48 hours of the game having gone on sale, it became responsible for holding the lofty title of being the game with the highest concurrent online user count of all EA's titles to date. 800,000 *FIFA 13* players were mixing it up online on September 30th.

Next we have *Resident Evil 6*: a game which we didn't like very much, giving it a score of 58 in last month's issue. However, we don't strictly have sales figures as of yet: only the number of units Capcom has shipped onto store shelves. It's a game that's polarised both critics and the public, but Capcom seems confident that shipping 4.5 million copies to store shelves worldwide for the game's launch was not a gamble for which they're destined to be burnt. They've revealed that as of June 2012, the *Resi* franchise has sold over 50 million units worldwide, and they believe that the series is "just as popular today as it was 15 years ago when the first title made its debut." Time will tell how this works out for them.

Finally, there's *Mists of Pandaria*, the panda-laden expansion to Blizzard's eternal MMORPG behemoth *World of Warcraft*. In its first week, it moved 2.7 million units – not counting sales in China. Blizzard has reported that the expansion has caused the game's global player base to surge beyond the ten-million subscriber mark once again. "With *Mists of Pandaria*, we set out to expand on the sense of fun and discovery that's always been at the heart of *World of Warcraft* – in addition to adding a huge variety of new content and features to the game," said Mike Morhaime, Blizzard CEO. "It's been gratifying to see the results of all of the work we put into this expansion and to hear all of the positive feedback from players so far."

Now is your chance, Obsidian

Obsidian Entertainment – once a proud studio put together from the remains of Black Isle after its closure – has had more than its share of turmoil these last few years. After publisher issues during the development of *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Alpha Protocol* and the lacklustre performance of *Dungeon Siege III*, the studio has decided to undergo a radical shift in direction. No more publishers, no more nonsense; Obsidian has now joined Double Fine Productions in the attempt to build a triple-A game off the funding from Kickstarter.

The studio's game, currently entitled *Project Eternity*, is set to be a party-based isometric RPG with rich tactical combat, immersive narrative elements and plenty of character customisation. One of the aspects that the team seems to be most excited about is the opportunity to introduce dark, adult themes to the game that would usually put off a publisher. Of course, with crowd funding, the gamers get to decide which projects look enticing to them, and from the success of this project it's clear that they like what they've seen so far. Obsidian went in with a goal of $1.1M and at the time of writing, with just one week to go, has more than doubled that – don't be surprised if they manage to crack the $3M mark.

Don't drop the BASS

As a rather sneaky addition to Revolution Software's recently successful Kickstarter campaign for a new *Broken Sword* game, the studio told backers that they'd get started on a sequel to their 1994 gritty science-fiction adventure game *Beneath a Steel Sky* if they reached $1M in pledges. However, once the campaign closed with the one million mark nowhere in sight, *BASS* fans became worried. Thankfully, Revolution has now told eager gamers that *BASS 2* will go ahead regardless, with work beginning on the game as soon as *Broken Sword* is out the door. Hooray!

WILL DEVELOP GAMES FOR FOOD

Throwing your money at game developers with a pipe dream is all well and good, but what if you could actually *invest* your cash in their endeavours? Well now you can with Gambitious, a new crowd funding website designed purely for game developers looking for more than a simple hand-out.

Gambitious allows for two types of crowd funding: pledges and investments. When a game project is created, the developers can specify how much they're looking for as pledges, investments, or both – the key difference between the two is that investors actually have a stake in the company they're giving money to, and, consequently, the studios can be held responsible by the investors. Additionally, investors don't get any fancy perks like pre-orders, beta access or oversized T-shirts: it's a straight-forward business investment in exchange for equity.

It's too early to tell how this new way of going about crowd-funding will pan out, but we've already seen a couple of high-level studios jump on board or express interest in working this way, including *Stronghold* creators Firefly Studios and even 3D Realms. You know, in case the catastrophe that was the development of *Duke Nukem Forever* isn't enough to put off every single person on the planet.

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The Indie Investigator

Content versus mechanics

At a recent game dev meet-up in Cape Town, I offered a rather broad presentation on the subject of mechanics-driven vs. content-driven design. Within that murky, brackish body of ideas, there was the half-formed opinion that a lot of developers make the entirely wrong choice when creating their own games.

To be clear, all games have a basic level of both mechanics and content. A perfectly mechanics-free game is just a film. A perfectly content-free game is... well, literally nothing. So when a game is being "driven" by one or the other, it's more of an attitude or focal point than an absolute philosophy.

"Content-driven design is all about focusing on the classic sprawl, the "sandbox game", the idea of getting lost in a huge world with X many enemies, Y many environments..."

Generally speaking, a good mechanics-driven game contains just a few components linked in a tight web of interactivity, much like the "unified design" theory mentioned in this column a few months back. If you want a game built around a gravity gun, time rewinding and Scarlett Johannson (for some reason or another), you should be maximising your fun by getting all of those components functioning with one another instead of in isolation. So at some hypothetical game point, Scarlett Johannson should appear from a portal to the future, wielding said gun against you. Gravity fights for everyone!

Content-driven design is all about focusing on the classic sprawl, the "sandbox game", the idea of getting lost in a huge world with X many enemies, Y many environments, hundreds of item combinations and, of course, a bajillion guns ala *Borderlands 2* (extra wub wub optional, but always a nice touch). Instead of relying on the exploration and combination of a few elements to extend an initially small playspace, you're spreading your bets by making the starting playspace a lot bigger. Instead of just a gravity gun, you also have a portal creator, a glue gun and a snackwich maker. Instead of Scarlett, you have the entire cast of *The Avengers*.

Which approach should you be taking? Generally speaking, the games which survive (and thrive) in most indie communities are the ones that focus on the mechanics first and content second. Both are important, but mechanics should come first simply because they are easier to prototype: a well-designed demo of your idea can be rattled out in a few days rather than a few weeks (or months!) and the overall investment is lower if it turns out your idea needs to be scrapped. And since scrapping *will* happen nine times out of ten no matter what your Game Developer Power Level may be, this represents an important saving of valuable time and effort.

Content is a valuable component of any game's design, but it can usually be brought in *after* the core concept has been proven. Some of the best completed games out there strike a remarkably good balance between mechanics and content, but when you have to start somewhere, it won't be with the sprawling world. It'll be with a far more intimate situation involving just the most important elements of the game, a couple of "trial" scenarios and just enough content to hold everything together.

That, and preferably something related to Scarlett Johannson.

- Rodain Joubert

Black Ops II's zombie mode dials it up to 1,000

We've always had a very, very soft, brain-flavoured spot for Treyarch's zombie mode that has become a staple of all their *Call of Duty* games since *World at War*. It's a deliciously fun bit of cooperative survival, and we always knew the undead would return in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* when it releases on November 13th. Now, Treyarch has seen fit to reveal details on what we can expect from the latest iteration.

First on the list of exciting changes and fresh features is an entire zombie campaign, called Tranzit. It's the biggest zombie world the Treyarch team has ever created. You're not staying in one place this time: instead, you travel to multiple areas, reaching them either by foot or by bus (it's not yet clear if this bus is controllable, or completely on-rails), all the way fighting off the undead, defending yourself and your mates. Tranzit now includes buildable objects, which Treyarch describes as elements that can be combined to open up new parts of the world, or to make weapons. So, basically, Tranzit it a sort of rolling zombie campaign, spread across multiple defensible areas rather than the zombie mode tradition of a single, large area to defend. No word yet on what happens when you actually finish this campaign.

If you prefer defending a single map against increasingly difficult waves of zombies in Survival mode, however, the game will still cater for that. It can still be played solo or with friends, and you'll build defenses and hold out as long as possible. The maps Survival mode is set in are custom-made takes on environments from Tranzit.

Another exciting piece of zombie info involves the inclusion of competitive play. It's set in a mode dubbed Grief – but the folks at Treyarch have nicknamed it "4z4". Your sole objective is to outlive an opposing team of four survivors. To aid you in this, you're able to "grief" the other team – which we're guessing involves activating various obstacles and annoyances that'll make it difficult for the enemy team to keep the zombie threat contained, leading to their demise.

In addition to all this, you're able to tweak and customise the three game modes in various ways in custom games. So if you'd prefer to make it so only headshots can kill zombies, or if you'd like to set your starting round in Survival mode, you can. With all these changes, the zombie mode is practically an entirely new game bundled with *Black Ops II*. Not bad for something that evolved from a silly distraction at the end of *World at War*, 'ey?

Old-school games industry veterans attempt old-school role-playing game

If you stroll over to the magical land of Kickstarter (depending on when you're reading this), you might spot a project simply dubbed *Old-School RPG* – although that's likely not the final title. What makes this project tickle our excite zone the way that it does is the fact that long-time industry veterans Tom Hall and Brenda Brathwaite are at the helm of this crowd-funded endeavour. Also, John Romero's involved, because his development studio Loot Drop is developing the game in conjunction with Brathwaite and Hall.

If you're scratching your head, wondering who Brathwaite and Hall are, the former is a veteran of the *Wizardry* series (following which she worked on *Dungeons & Dragons*), while Hall was a founder of id Software, and he's worked on titles like *Commander Keen, Doom, Wolfenstein* and *Anachronox*. They're looking for one million dollars to make their old-school RPG happen, and at the time of writing, they're sitting at $205,992 with 27 days to go. It's described as a "classic first-person, fantasy/sci-fi RPG" in which you create four characters and explore. It's got everything you expect from the RPGs of yesteryear, like skills (!) and characters (!) and NPCs (!) and combat (!). The most unique facet of its Kickstarter campaign is that, if the game reaches its stretch goal of 1.9 million dollars, we'll get two separate, but intertwined games.

"If you're kind enough to help us reach this amount of funding, we'll create TWO FULL games – one designed by Brenda Brathwaite and one designed by Tom Hall. Not only will you cast, smash and slash your way through two full games, the endings of each game provide exclusive NEW game beginnings in the other! Import your crew from Tom's game into Brenda's and vice versa. The ending you create affects not only your new game beginning (if you choose it), but also provides unique advantages that you earn no other way."

If you head over to **www.kickstarter.com** before November 4th, you'll be able to help back the project. $15 gets you a digital copy of the game. Pledge $10,000 or more and Brathwaite, Hall and Romero will deliver the game in a box on a red velvet pillow to your door.

The Secret World stays afloat

Funcom's latest foray into the MMO space has had its ups and downs; *The Secret World* had a few good ideas going for it but ultimately the execution of the game as a whole lead to average performance in the market. Down but not beaten, the studio has spent the last couple of months restructuring its internal teams and has actually managed to pull itself up to a level which is profitable. From here on out, CEO Ole Schreiner says that the future for the game could lie in the free-to-play model, and that they "definitely have the tools to turn *The Secret World* into a free-to-play game – or even a hybrid – should we decide to do that somewhere down the line."

However, they seem confident that the solution they're currently running with is working for them, both in terms of their internal workings and what they can offer their players.

HOW UNEXPECTED!

One of gaming's worse-kept secrets, the development of a third core game in the *Dragon Age* series, has now been confirmed by EA. It's called *Dragon Age III: Inquisition*; it's going to run on DICE's Frostbite 2 engine; and it's set to be released in late 2013. This release window has one giant implication: it's likely set for release on next-gen consoles which all rumours and sources say will arrive around that same time. Of course, you can expect it to launch on PCs as well. As for Wii U, well, we can definitely see an RPG working with the console's tablet controller, and we know that Frostbite is highly scalable to fit different levels of hardware, so it could certainly happen. No promises though.

Other than a handful of rumours, there's not much information available about the game itself. We do know that the development team has taken on tons of player feedback and will try to incorporate some of the more popular requests into the new title. There's also talk of the game following the open-world exploration of the *Elder Scrolls* series, especially the recent and highly-successful *Skyrim*, which the team has reportedly explored in great detail to see what makes it tick.

Miktar's Meanderings

Ceti eel, in your ear, can you hear? Rump-Titty-Titty-Tum-TAH-Tee!

I don't remember who it was that introduced me to the term "earworm," but it got stuck in my head, much like the concept it describes. I think it came from German research into the "stuck song syndrome" phenomenon: the way a song, or part of one, will get wedged into your thinker and just sit there, looping. Earworms aren't new: Edgar Allan Poe had an 1845 short-story called "The Imp of the Perverse" that mentioned the idea.

With modern music producers trying very hard to make sure their song is the one you remember, research into more effective "hooks" has led to some truly insidiously designed chord progressions. Which when combined with catchy open-ended lyrics, result in earworms like Carly Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe" [*dammit Miktar, Ed*].

"If the brain were so simple we could understand it, we would be so simple we couldn't."

- Lyall Watson

Why do earworms get affixed in our heads? It's not that well understood. People with damage to their temporal lobe, which is involved in auditory perception and houses the primary auditory cortex, often get a condition known as "palinacousis". They'll keep hearing a sound, even when the physical sound has long since stopped playing. So it's likely, and perhaps obvious, that the auditory cortex is responsible to some degree.

Auditory imagery – the subjective experience of hearing something in the absence of auditory stimulation – has been studied to some length. But since we can't just flip up the hood and peek inside the brain-engine while it's running to see what's making the noise, research is tricky. In 1909 the German anatomist Korbinian Brodmann used the "Nissl stain" technique to "dye" parts of the brain, giving us the Brodmann regional map of the cerebral cortex. Thanks to his research, we have a general understanding of which parts of the cerebral cortex do what, based on their activity and cytoarchitectonics (structure). That's why we know which bits of the brain are involved in motor functions, sight, sound, blood pressure, reward anticipation, decision-making, empathy, and so on. Or at least, we know which bits light up with neural activity, when we're exposed to certain stimulus.

So we know areas 41 and 42 of the Brodmann area, the Primary and Auditory Association Cortex, are prime suspects in the case of earworms. A friend made the astute, if conjectural, observation that earworms are probably just our brain's affinity for the purity of mathematical structures: since repeating a known structure takes less energy than assimilating or constructing a new one. Still doesn't explain why they trigger arbitrarily though.

Tangentially related is "procedural memory", responsible for us knowing how to do things like tying our shoes, reading, or driving a car. By repeating a complex action over and over, we gain the ability to trigger the relevant neural systems without the need for conscious control or attention. We see this echoed in "Game Transfer Phenomena", a relatively modern examination of residual thoughts, images, and feelings that remain after playing a game. Devote sufficient time and attention to a repeating activity, and before Pavlov's dog can bark, we've gained a weird autonomous playback of the activity, that for some people even manifest in dreams.

And since games are by their nature, looping, repeating sets of call/response systems, it's no wonder we get so easily conditioned.

- Miktar Dracon

Angry Birds Star Wars is a thing

And it's a thing that's coming to every conceivable platform known to mankind: iOS, Android, Amazon Kindle Fire, Mac, PC and Windows Phone. We're betting you'll be able to buy the game on a toaster as well.

Rovio's phenomenon is no stranger to movie cross-overs what with *Angry Birds Rio* hitting iOS devices alongside the Twentieth Century Fox film. Now, however, it's Lucasfilm's turn to team up with the world's most identifiable mobile games IP.

Angry Birds Star Wars will feature iconic locations and moments from the original trilogy, only populated with birds and pigs. The red bird will be playing Luke Skywalker, the yellow bird will be Han Solo and that stupid, egg-laying white bird will play the equally stupid role of C-3PO. The pigs will naturally be the Empire, with a Darth Vader king pig and pig-shaped Death Star shown off in artwork released so far.

The game will take on-board the gravity gameplay mechanics that made a recent debut in *Angry Birds Space*. Rovio, however, is insisting that this won't be a simple re-skinning of Space, and that the birds and pigs will have proper characters and personalities. John Williams' iconic soundtrack will also be a part of the whole package.

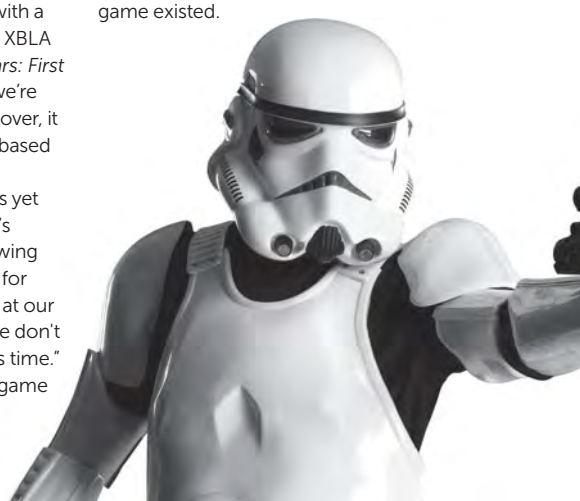
Angry Birds Star Wars will be out on 8 November; listen closely and you might hear millions of voices suddenly cry out in terror. Sales figures will probably silence them. That or fan-rage-induced suicide

Star Wars: First Assault crops up again

Back in August, a trademark filing for a game called *Star Wars: First Assault* appeared online. Now, however, "box art" for an Xbox LIVE Arcade game has been dug up and shared on NeoGAF (along with a plethora of other unannounced XBLA titles). The artwork is for *Star Wars: First Assault* and despite how often we're told never to judge things by a cover, it looks as if this could be a team-based online shooter of sorts.

At time of writing, LucasArts is yet to even acknowledge the game's existence. They issued the following statement to IGN when pushed for comment: "It is an exciting time at our company right now, however we don't have any announcements at this time."

It's been speculated that this game might be the remnants of *Star Wars: Battlefront III*, which was reported as cancelled by numerous developers who worked on the project, despite LucasArts never even admitting the game existed.



StarCraft II might go free-to-play

Over the last year or so, Blizzard has experimented with free-to-play as a viable model for some of its games. *WoW* already includes limited F2P gameplay which is very common among those MMOs that still run subscription charges, and now *StarCraft II*'s lead designer has said that Blizzard is "looking at free-to-play as an option for the multiplayer". This is by no means a confirmation, but if it turns out to be the case, we could see a radical change in both the competitive and casual online RTS scene – especially considering that *C&C* is already heading in this direction.

Ubisoft rewrites history with three-part Assassin's Creed III DLC

Ubisoft has announced a three-part, single-player DLC pack for *Assassin's Creed III*. Entitled *The Tyranny of King George*, the DLC will be episodic in nature and aims to throw out the series' penchant for historical accuracy in favour of something a little quirky.

The Tyranny of King George takes place after the end of the American Revolution. Instead of returning power to the people and becoming the American hero he is today, George Washington seizes control of the fledgling nation and crowns himself king of the New World. This goes against everything Connor has been fighting against and as such King Washington finds himself on the assassin's "to-do" list.

Along with this announcement, Ubisoft unveiled two multiplayer DLC packs. This brings the total amount of DLC up to five portions, which means *Assassin's Creed III* will be getting a Season Pass as well. Pricing is set at $30 for the Season Pass, which will result in an eventual 25% saving on all five pieces.

PS3 LOSES SOME WEIGHT

Just in time to take on Nintendo's upcoming Wii U, Sony has announced the long-rumoured new PS3. Dubbed the "Super Slim", it's smaller than the current Slim model by 20% and weights a quarter less, but the most interesting change is how Sony has decided to emulate Microsoft's approach to built-in storage. Two versions will reach our shores: an HDD bundle that features an internal 500GB hard drive, at a recommended retail price of R3,999.99, and an HDD-less version that has just 12GB of flash storage built-in and will retail for R2,899.99. If you'd like to expand the storage capabilities of the 12GB model, a separate 250GB hard drive can be purchased for an as-yet undetermined price. This extra drive can only be used with the new PS3.

To be clear, that's a R1,100 price premium for the expanded storage. While the low price of the 12GB model will obviously suit those people looking to use the PS3 as a media centre, or those who don't plan on buying many downloadable titles, we can't help but baulk at the price difference between the two. It's not clear yet if the local versions will have any other bundle differences like included games, cables or controllers, but we certainly hope that they do.

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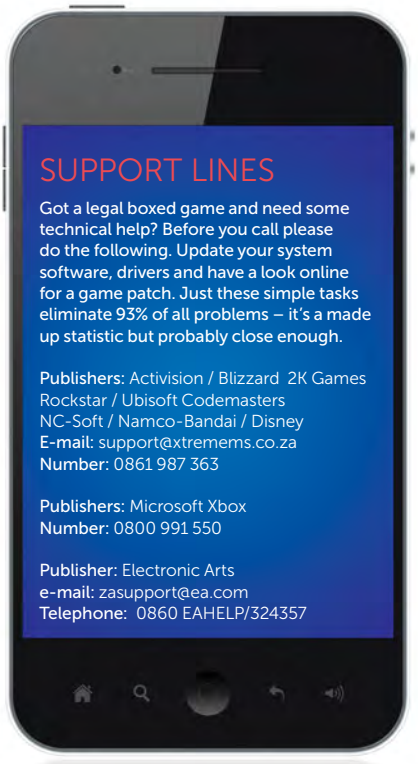

Where's that other XCOM gone then?

Firaxis' proper turn-based isometric strategy remake of the classic *X-Com* series, *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, has been getting all of the attention lately, given that the game will have only recently launched by time you read this and is an appropriately excellent rebirth of the series. Nobody's been casting many thoughts to the *other XCOM*, the first-person shooter from 2K Marin that caused so much controversy among series fans when first announced. We haven't heard anything about it for a really long time.

Now, *Kotaku* are reporting that – as was apparently alluded to in a recent marketing survey – the game has gone back to the drawing board. If it's to be believed, then the game has retained its 1960s setting and the general vibe that it's conveyed when previously marketed, but it's now switched to a third-person perspective, with squad-based gameplay mechanics similar to those of *Star Wars: Republic Commando* where you're in charge of a squad of agents who can be ordered around each level.

There's allegedly also no mention of PC as a platform in the survey either, only 360 and PS3, with surveyed people apparently being asked how they'd feel if the game was made available as a $30 downloadable title, or if it was a full, $60 retail release. More on this later, when/if it becomes official.

No Doubt/Activision lawsuit finally draws to a close

Chances are you've probably completely forgotten about this by now, but back in 2009 band No Doubt went after Activision, filing a lawsuit that stated Activision were only meant to use the in-game likenesses of No Doubt's members when their own tracks were played in *Band Hero*. Instead, Activision made their likenesses usable across the game's entire song catalogue. The case was finally due to appear in the Los Angeles Superior Court on October 15th, but the two parties instead agreed to settle out of court.

STARBREEZE ANNOUNCE THEIR NEW PROJECT

In a colourful change of pace for the Swedish developer, Starbreeze Studios has announced their newest title: a vibrant fantasy affair entitled *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*. It's still early days, but given the look and tone of the game seen thus far, it's a change in direction compared to Starbreeze's previous efforts with *Chronicles of Riddick*, *The Darkness* and *Syndicate*. This is how they describe their newly announced title:

"A man, clinging to life. His two sons, desperate to cure their ailing father, are left with but one option. They must set out upon a journey to find and bring back the 'Water of Life' as they come to rely on one another to survive. One must be strong where the other is weak, brave where the other is fearful, they must be... Brothers."

Swedish filmmaker Josef Fares is apparently involved in the project. Fares has a history of directing comedies, so we'll see what that means for this game. In a teaser trailer, the brothers aid each other in moving across a fantasy land, with a green giant seemingly joining them. More details when we have them.

ROVER
FULLY LOADED BOX MEAL
IT'S NOT A MOUTHFUL, IT'S AN ARMFUL
sogood
NASA images courtesy of nasaimages.org

Bethesda forms new development studio, is on the hunt for free-to-play experts

Bethesda Softworks has revealed that they're setting up a new development house in Austin, Texas, going by the grandiose name of Battlecry Studios. The studio is headed up by Rich Vogel, a former vice president of BioWare Austin. He most recently served as executive producer on *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. Vogel's been working on MMOs for the past ten years, both at Electronic Arts and Sony Online Entertainment.

While the announcement of the studio's formation also contained word that it'll be working on an "unannounced project", job postings that immediately followed allude to the fact that the studio's looking to dive straight into the online free-to-play space. *Eurogamer* spotted job postings which include a "monetization designer" and a platform lead position which requires experience with "design and implementation of microtransaction systems and services." The listings also suggest a release on consoles, as Bethesda state that "console experience – preferably next generation (PS3, Xbox 360)" would be preferred. There's speculation that this all could relate to *Fallout* in some way. Anyone fancy a free-to-play *Fallout* MMO?

Ding dong, the witch isn't dead just yet

PlatinumGames has confirmed that *Bayonetta 2* is in development, but here's something that might come as a shock: it's going to be a Wii U exclusive.

The reasons for this move are numerous but amount to a simple little thing one needs to develop games at this level: money. *Bayonetta* publisher SEGA decided not to back the game's sequel, forcing Platinum to seek a partner elsewhere. They found Nintendo who were interested both in covering the costs and, more importantly for them, securing another potential must-have title for their upcoming platform.

The studio has only praise for their new partner, claiming in a press release that "Nintendo, as a company, is dedicated to establishing a new future for the games industry" and that they needed to secure this partnership because "the console games market is in a state of upheaval, so establishing a new game franchise requires a considerable amount of will, determination, and love." Or cash, in other words.

Before you get too excited, bear in mind that this exclusivity doesn't mean that *Bayonetta 2* will be a launch title for the new console. If we were to guess, we'd say you could start expecting something around this time next year.

Look & Listen

Pre-orders **www.lookandlisten.co.za**

PC

F1 Race Stars	November
Assassin's Creed III	November 23rd
BioShock Infinite	February 26th 2013

Xbox 360

Halo 4	November 6th
Crysis 3	March 2013
Tomb Raider	March 5th 2013

PS3

Hitman: Absolution	November 20th
Far Cry 3	November 30th
Dead Space 3	March

Wii

WWE 13	November 2nd
Rise of the Guardians	November 23rd
Cabela's Dangerous Hunts 2013	November 30th

3DS

Dragon Ball Heroes: Ultimate Mission	November
Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed	November 16th
Wreck-It Ralph	November 30th

Slenderman is watching you...

If you've lost faith in big AAA companies' abilities to put together a seriously scary game, then maybe you need to start digging into the world of indie studios. In particular, anything to do with *Slender*: a chilling first-person exploration game that recently took the online world by storm with its incredible mood and immersive qualities. Now the game's developer has teamed up with indie devs Blue Isle Studios to bring about a fully-featured sequel entitled *Slender: The Arrival*.

The game is still in early stages of development but the few screenshots available indicate that the visuals will be taken to a level more fitting of a game that will cost you money. In addition to a better looking game, the developers are keen to bring in a strong narrative as well as a much larger game world to explore.

There's no word on a release date yet, but we know that it's in development for PC only at this stage. We suggest that you keep an eye on Steam and Desura as likely release platforms.

22 CANS WILL MAKE ONLY ONE GAME, SAYS MOLYNEUX

Peter Molyneux's sudden switch to indie life, free of Microsoft's ever-watchful gaze, hasn't stopped him from making his trademark grandiose promises and sweeping statements that make people sit back and say, "Wait... what?"

In his latest burst of weirdness, Molyneux told *VG24/7* that his new development studio, 22 Cans, is "only going to make one game and that's it." That game will only come after the 22 "experiments" that his studio is currently working on, the first being *Curiosity: What's Inside the Cube*? – a game where millions of players chip away at a single, giant cube until one player discovers the secret at its core, a secret which Molyneux says is "life-changing."

"But everything that we do, every thought that we have, every moment of a day, is all working towards this full game," he says. "22 Cans is only going to make one game and that's it. You just release that single experience then you refine it and adapt it like – and don't think of this in any way other than an analogy – when a TV company makes a soap opera."

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Well hello, sexy lady!

Ladies and germs, we'd like to introduce you to Roxy, our official rAge mascot for 2012. It's not that we don't love Scarlett anymore, it's just that rAge turns 10 this year, and we thought it was time for a new babe sporting some cool gear. So we briefed South African illustrator Warren Louw, who also did Scarlett for us back in 2010, and our vision for a rAge/NAG gaming chick was created. We think she's hot and would play her in a video game any day.

Every month we'll hide her somewhere in the magazine – your mission is to go find her.

Send your sighting to ed@nag.co.za with the subject line "November Roxy", and of course your contact details, and you could win a prize.

October losers - you!

Nobody found her; we win!

THIS MONTH'S LOOT

PS3 Phenom Wireless Controller valued at R449.95. Sponsored by dreamGEAR and Musica

dreamGEAR

MUSICA A WORLD AWAITS

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 *Of Orcs and Men* for PC from Apex. Send your captions to **ed@nag.co.za** with the subject line "**November caption**".

NAG's lame attempt at humour
Gollum's yonger brother Dave, waited in vain for his brother to come home.

Last months winner
OPPA GANGNAM STYLE! - Ricardo De Vasconcelos

DMC: DEVIL MAY CRY DELAYED ON PC, PORTING OUTSOURCED

Ninja Theory's reimagining of Hideki Kamiya's *Devil May Cry* series is coming to consoles on 15 January 2013. It's also coming to PC but Capcom has now revealed that the PC version has been delayed as the porting project has been outsourced to another developer.

A company called Polish QA is handling the PC port. They've done porting and localisation work for Capcom in the past, which includes porting *Super Street Fighter 4 Arcade Edition* and *Street Fighter X Tekken* to the PC.

According to Capcom: "Because it's being developed out of house by a different developer from Ninja Theory there are logistical things involved. But the plan is to get it out shortly after the ship date for the console version."

Unfortunately, at the recent Tokyo Game Show, Capcom confirmed that they cannot give a concrete release date for the PC version.

MaK is where Super Mario Galaxy collides with Minecraft

New construction-/invention-/crafting-centric games seem to be announced every ten minutes, and *MaK* (pronounced "make") is one of them. At first glance, it's a game about building, naturally drawing comparison to *Minecraft*, but it's set in space, and your character is able to jump between different floating asteroid- and planet-like floating objects, flipping gravity across them in analogous fashion to moving around similarly floating bodies in *Super Mario Galaxy*. Where it differs from *Minecraft* and puts its own spin on construction, is that it seems to be more about putting together contraptions than manipulating the actual game world. You do so using predefined blocks in a physics-based environment. Developer Verge Game Studio describes it better than we could:

"With our project, *MaK*, we're setting out to capture the feeling of exploring something really new. To that end, we're building a unique world with its own laws of physics and we're serving up the player with a set of freeform building blocks to build structures and functional contraptions. At its core *MaK* is a physics sandbox with tethers, rockets, explosives, teleportation, relative gravity and potentially unlimited room for creativity."

"The gameplay comes from a variety of fun game modes that we're wrapping around this sandbox. From single player mind benders to competitive multiplayer modes like our recently implemented 'Bombing Run' style game, the weird physics and contraption building add an element of unpredictable mayhem to the proceedings."

Release list

Dates subject to change without notice

November week 1

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation	Vita
Assassin's Creed III	360 / PS3
LEGO The Lord of the Rings	360 / 3DS / DS / PC PS3 / Wii / Vita
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	360 / PC / PS3 / Vita
Marvel Avengers: Battle for Earth	360
WWE 13	360 / PS3 / Wii
Halo 4	360
Mass Effect Trilogy	360 / PC
Rocksmith	360 / PC / PS3

November week 2

Call of Duty: Black Ops II	360 / PC / PS3 / Vita
The Hip-Hop Dance Experience	360 / Wii
Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed	360 / 3DS / PC / PS3 / Wii U / Vita
Spy Hunter	3DS
The Sims 3: Seasons	PC
Wonderbook: Book of Spells	PS3

November week 3

Hitman: Absolution	360 / PC / PS3
Assassin's Creed III	PC
Epic Mickey 2: The Power of Two	360 / PC / PS3 / Wii
Epic Mickey: Power of Illusion	3DS

November week 4

Assassin's Creed III	Wii U
Cabela's Dangerous Hunts 2013	360 / PS3 / Wii / Wii U
F1 Race Stars	360 / PC / PS3
Far Cry 3	360 / PC / PS3
LittleBigPlanet Karting	PS3
PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale	PS3 / Vita
Rabbids Party Land	Wii U
Rayman Legends	Wii U
Rise of the Guardians	360 / 3DS / DS PS3 / Wii / Wii U
New Super Mario Bros. U	Wii U
Nintendo Land	Wii U
Wreck-It Ralph	3DS / DS / Wii
ZombiU	Wii U

RAGE 2012

BEAUTIFUL CHAOS

"I'm 50 kilometres from home, but I've never felt more at home." – rAge visitor

Far Cry 3, one of the many hands-on games on offer at rAge 2012.

IT's 9:55 a.m. on Friday the 5th of October, 2012. The next five minutes might as well be five hours. There's growing anticipation, impatient anxiety at the sight of the crowd gathered outside the doors to the Coca-Cola Dome's main entrance. This is the zombie apocalypse, where the zombies are instead energized gamers and the apocalypse is ultimate joy. There's nervous excitement, the sort that builds around the start of a race before the starting pistol sounds its intent. A minute passes. Tension grows. Frantic radio chatter emanates from nearby walkie-talkies, but it seems nobody's actually paying attention to the words being transmitted on the airwaves. All focus is on the doors.

Another minute. Static camera crews check their equipment, ensuring it's set up perfectly. People ready their phones, preparing them to snap quick photos of the upcoming charge of unleashed enthusiasm. After a temporary forever, 10 a.m. finally arrives. It seems we're running a little late. One final check, another five-minute eternity, and the doors are finally yanked open. There's excited screaming from the crowd pouring down the steps and filtering into the entrance booths. Look around and you'll see one common sight: everyone's face is plastered with the biggest, most absurd smile it can muster – organisers, media and visitors alike. Look closely, and you might spot a few joyful tears to match. There's a palpable mix of relief, anticipation and enthusiasm for what the next three days will bring. It's on.

TAP X REPEATEDLY TO PANIC

Rewind to Monday of that week, and it all begins with an empty Dome, due to house the biggest, most important gaming event in the country

(and on the entire African continent) for a single weekend of the year; an unceremonious beginning for great things to come. Event organisers burst into action, bringing to fruition plans that had been set many months in advance. By the end of this week (Monday to Monday), Samantha Gabriel, rAge project manager, will have walked a total of 97,872 frenzied steps – a mad total of 68.51 kilometres. Fun fact: that's about ten kilometres more than the average NAG employee will walk in their entire lifetime.

Exhibitor stands slowly rise from the Dome's floor. Some are simple shells, modest but effective in promoting their exhibitor's purpose. Others are grand designs, perfectly located to draw maximum attention and exposure, loaded with games to play and competitions to enter. Others are mini-stores, eager to hand over merchandise lowered by ludicrous show specials to a fraction of their original price. By close of rAge on Sunday the 7th of October, these exhibitors will have showcased their wares to 28,930 people.

It's practically impossible to accurately convey just how much planning, work and overall effort (complete with the obligatory mix of blood, sweat and tears) goes into an event like this to someone who's never actually seen it from behind the visitor veil. It's why you'll spot a few elated organisers' tears when the doors first open: it's watching an infant you've nurtured for so many months finally take its first steps, stumbling awkwardly over its own feet and precariously fighting with its balance, occasionally losing control and mashing its face on the corner of a table, immediately sending its parents into a flurry. But it's every bit as joyous as it is terrifying.

PRESS START

Fast-forward back to Friday, and the show is in full swing. The magic is happening, to put a more grandiose spin on it. Animated faces stream up and down the aisles, likely in search of free stuff given out by the various exhibitors. Stands of all types are packed with people. Somewhere, someone is kicking themselves for thinking that bringing gym equipment to the most awesomely nerdy convention in Africa was a good idea. A few spots immediately prove more impressive and attention-worthy than the rest.

Telkom's excellent weekend MC is broadcasting furiously, drawing in crowds from across the expo. People flock to Megarom's five-stage exhibit, eager to get their hands on games only due to be released months from now, as well as some popular recently released titles. Similarly, the towering Nintendo stand has people eager to try out the Wii U prior to its release, and try their hand at some 3DS titles. A pair of promoters dressed as Mario and Luigi can't walk three steps without being accosted by punters eager for a photo with them.

Master Chief casually patrols Microsoft's Xbox stand, occasionally posing for photos with visitors. It seems even the Chief isn't immune to the naturally alluring spectacle of all the pre-released games. It's a special moment in any gamer's life when you get to see Master Chief, assault rifle in hand, intently watching someone play *Forza Horizon*, while enraptured visitors play *Halo 4* behind them. Ster Kinekor's booth shows off games of all types, providing quick-fire access to video games for all audiences. EA has everything ranging from *The Sims* to *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* available to play, catering to gamers of all tastes. Inconspicuously hidden amongst the crowd are a few international game

CoD4 is still alive and well in the eSports arena. bvd beat BfB lArd in the finals of the DGL Championships. Loving those fluffy pink slippers dude.

developers, flown to SA for the sole purpose of demonstrating their works at the expo.

Early admission to gaming's many thrill-rides isn't the only thing enrapturing people: expensive hardware and gadgetry occupy display cabinets across the show floor. Some of South Africa's top overclockers showcase their craft for the masses. Gamer lifestyle is everywhere. The flea market has on display countless board games, figurines and pen and paper RPGs. A short walk away, people play a variety of board games and collectible card games, demoing them for anyone who'll stop and watch. The Dark Carnival's attractive stand constantly has people crowding around it, staring in awe at the incredible statues, collectibles and assorted merchandise, practically throwing money at the cashiers.

HIT CTRL TO ACTIVATE RAGE MODE

There are moments during rAge, as you're moving through the crowds, when the sights and sounds and spectacles of the expo all converge, a stunning crescendo of gaming-themed chaos. You'll hear a faint chiptune rendition of a popular song in the distance, then round a corner and be confronted by an impromptu dance troupe happily jamming along to *Sing Party*. Suddenly you find yourself at the main stage, where people are cheering at the end of a demonstration of *ZombiU* by two of the game's French developers. And then you'll bump into someone cosplaying *Team Fortress 2*'s Pyro, and your brain will officially have a mini-orgasm.

Speaking of cosplay, one of the main attractions was a cosplay competition that saw some incredibly talented individuals dress up as their favourite characters from comic books, games, movies, anime and more, all vying for the affection of a panel of judges. Behind a fence dividing it and the expo lies the NAG LAN @ rAge: 2,580 gamers on a single network, gaming, engaging in friendly multiplayer competition, socialising and just having a good time for 53 hours straight. Peer beyond the fence after day one, and you'll spot LANners passed out in sleeping bags, on air mattresses and on their keyboards. Downstairs, Telkom's Do Gaming League sees competitive gamers duking it in various games across various genres for fame, fortune and glory, but mostly so they're able to justify all their smacktalk.

Over 70 cosplayers strutted their stuff on the main stage on Saturday.

"Just when we think that the show cannot get any bigger, we experience another rAge and we are completely blown away. This show celebrates and feeds South Africa's gaming culture and without our visitors' passion and dedication, rAge would not be the success that it is today."

– Michael James, rAge's senior project manager

ZombiU had a great reception at the show. After three days of gaming this is how most of us felt. But with more nose.

THANKS FOR PLAYING

To know what makes rAge so special, invite someone who's completely unaware of gaming and its huge, yet ever-growing presence in South Africa to join you at the expo on Saturday, the expo's busiest day [*can you actually make that Sunday – we have enough crowd control problems as it is on Saturday. ;) Ed.*]. Watch as their eyes widen when they spot the queue forming outside the Dome's doors, mouth agape as if they're watching a T-rex pick its teeth with a kitten. Chances are, they'll be left utterly speechless by the number of people in the Dome, all there to celebrate and envelop themselves in gaming, technology and the lifestyle surrounding it. Their stunned awe should be more than enough to prove rAge's importance, and why it's such an influential event for gamers across the country, and even beyond: visitors all the way from Mozambique, Namibia and Botswana passed through the Dome's entrance. Here's an indication of just how busy the expo got: on Saturday around lunchtime, the numbers within the Dome grew so large that, for safety reasons, people were temporarily stopped from entering until people inside had left [*The crisis lasted about 40 minutes, then it was business as usual again. Ed.*].

At the end of it all, rAge is the most important event on any South African gamer's calendar for one reason: it's a celebration of gaming. To quote something we overheard from an onlooker in the crowd during an on-stage presentation of *Splinter Cell: Blacklist*, "there are so many f***ing games to play." And we can't think of a better way to describe everything that rAge represents. Thanks so much to everyone who joined us at this year's rAge and helped make it the amazing event it was, and if you didn't manage to make it this year, firstly, what even?!, and secondly, we hope you'll join us next year. See you all at rAge 2013! **NAG**

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Jump in.

Black to the future

CUSTOM GAMES

All modes can be played as a custom game, and bots can be used to fill out a team (except for Party Play modes). You can customise everything, from defining the pre-built classes, restricting content (no claymores, ha ha), to adjusting the Pick 10 system to a Pick 3 or Pick 17.

II

GAME MODES & BRIC-À-BRAC

All the fan-favourite game modes are back (except Team Defender, unfortunately), and all of them are playable in Combat Training. The new Party Games option lets you play variations like Gun Game, One in the Chamber, Sharpshooter, Sticks and Stones, and so on.

In which we travel to the far-flung present to play *Call of Duty: Black Ops II*'s multiplayer

Developer
Treyarch
Publisher
Activision
Platforms
360 / PC / PS3 / Wii U
Release date
November 13, 2012
Genre
First-person shooter

HANDS ON

As a follow-up to our coverage of the single-player portion of *Black Ops II* (*NAG* June, 2012), we were invited back to Treyarch's studios in Los Angeles for some hands-on with the multiplayer side of things. Back in June, Treyarch boasted that their approach to developing the multiplayer would have "no sacred cows": nothing was off-limits to be scrapped or re-tooled if they felt it was necessary. Brave words, when dealing with a vocal and, shall we say, *enthusiastic* fan base – one that demands change and innovation, yet paradoxically, hates it when things aren't the same as they were before.

HANDS-ON WITH THE FUTURE

"Not everyone that plays *Call of Duty* plays the multiplayer." says David Vonderhaar, Game design director at Treyarch Studios. "Quite frankly, that bugs the shit out of us."

David paces a little as he explains why Treyarch felt the need to rework things so as to entice new players, in what had by now become a pretty conventional multiplayer package. What some might call "cookie-cutter", if they were playing the part of the hostile critic. Saying it's been "reworked" undersells it: if you were to remove all branding and series nomenclature from the multiplayer in *Black Ops II*, even the most ardent *Call of Duty* fan might not recognise what they were looking at. It would be familiar, yes, but so very *different* as well.

We spent five hours playing a variety of team game types across the three maps Treyarch was ready to show. Sometimes in groups of 6 versus 6, other times in the novel configuration of 4 versus 4 versus 4, which made for some interesting situations when trying to capture and hold a point in the Hardpoint game type. The weight and speed of characters felt less like *Black Ops* and more like *Modern Warfare 3*, with an emphasis on solid physicality. It felt *good*. You can take a little more damage than usual (we chalk it up to more modern armour), so fire fights feel a little less insta-death.

CREATE-A-CLASS

The most noticeable change is how Create-A-Class works. Due to the new "Pick 10" system, when designing your customised loadout, you can leave out things you don't want and pile on things you do. Everything uses up a point when slotted in, so a basic 10-point loadout would be a primary weapon (with two attachments), a secondary weapon (with one attachment), three Perks (one per tier), one lethal grenade type and one tactical grenade type. There are three Wildcard slots, which are used to "cheat" the system and design more interesting or tailored loadouts.

Wildcards allow for things like picking two primary weapons instead of a secondary, using more Perks, carrying more grenades, and so on. If you decided to use the three Wildcards that allowed for an extra Perk in each of the

COMPETITIVE PLAY & ESPORTS

Taking inspiration from how StarCraft II *does things, there is a fully-functional league system in* Black Ops II. *You choose to participate, get ranked into a division after some preliminary matches, and then you're matched up against people of similar rank. There will be seven divisions, (Bronze, Silver, Platinum, Gold, you get the idea), with league rankings likely to be used for seeding in the major eSports events.*

*To complete the eSports package, there are new "*COD *Casting" elements during spectator mode: a score HUD to give it that sporty feel, nameplates of the players when you're spectating through their view, a full-screen map showing all player locations, and picture-in-picture so you can see the team list on the right (which also shows what actions each player is taking, making it easier to zoom to the action). You can listen-in to the voice comms of a player as well.*

All this comes together in the new livestreaming functions. You'll be able to livestream a match to the web, adding your own commentary to the action. Treyarch does reserve the right to dictate streaming conditions and locations, though.

three tiers, you could run into battle with six Perks, but at the cost of having blown 9 points, leaving you with only enough for a gun with no attachments, or a grenade. Another style might involve picking Wildcards that let you layer on more than two attachments on your primary gun, and for carrying more grenades.

If you pick something after having already used up all 10 points, you're shown a quick visual list of everything you have, and asked which one to drop in favour of your new choice. Designing your custom class in this way is surprisingly fast, letting you make quick, hard calls on which things you really need (or want), and what you can live without.

SCORE STREAKS

The second major change is the removal of Killstreaks and Deathstreaks. Instead, Scorestreaks are rewards gained from doing pretty much anything: defending points, capturing the flag, and of course, shooting that other guy, all within one life. Scorestreaks look and smell like Killstreaks, allowing you to call in UAV drones, remote-controlled sentry turrets, the new Hellfire Missile (think the Predator Missile, but able to split into smaller mini-missiles) as well as attack dogs. But since their deployment is based on score, not kills, it shifts the focus more towards achieving the objectives on the map, such as defending the flag in Capture the Flag. You even get score from each kill your teammates make after you've called in a UAV to reveal enemies on the radar. If this smells a little like *Battlefield 3*'s scoring system, you're not alone, except this has a tangible influence on the match.

We spotted 22 Scorestreaks on the loadout screen: you pick the three you want, with the more lethal and potent ones requiring a much higher score. Once you've gained enough score during a match for a Scorestreak, hitting right on the d-pad calls it in. If you've stored up to three (they persist across lives), up and down on the d-pad cycles which one you call in when hitting right.

FILLING THOSE BARS

It would have been easy to just add more numbers: more levels, more Prestige ranks, in an attempt to create more content. Instead, *Black Ops II* aims for "less, but more meaningful". There are only 55 levels, and 10 Prestige ranks. You gain experience from pretty much everything, with the lion's share coming from the after-action "medals". Again, with an unmistakable nod to *Battlefield 3*, everything you do in a match grants you additional

COMBAT TRAINING

Combat Training is no longer an entirely separate system, and is integrated into the multiplayer experience. It serves as training wheels that ease you into proper online play. Combat Training is divided into three modes: Boot Camp, Objective and Bot Stomp. Boot Camp is 6-on-6, with three players and three bots taking on a team of three players and three bots. You'll be able to play Boot Camp up to level 10, for full experience. Objective lets you play all modes except Search and Destroy, and is also three players plus three bots vs. a team of the same, but you'll only earn half experience. Bot Stomp gets you no experience, but allows six players take on six bots for fun, or training.

experience points after the match, as you're awarded medals. There are over 100 events that grant medals, everything from calling in a certain amount of Scorestreaks, to defending points, to getting lots of headshots.

Each time you level up, you're given an unlock token which can be used to unlock a new weapon, Scorestreak or Perk. Certain items are gated by level, so you won't be able to unlock just anything from the start. There is more content than there are levels, making it feel more like a role-playing game skill-tree. Which ties into the refund token you can get when you Prestige.

When you hit max level, you're given the chance to Prestige, which drops your level back down to 1 and takes away all the weapons and items you've unlocked. Except this time, it doesn't reset your weapon XP (used for unlocking attachments) or the progress you've made on challenges. When you Prestige, you're given a Prestige token (used to ignore the level gate and permanently unlock a weapon/item), and you get to choose between resetting your stats, or a refund token. The refund token is useful: if you were partway through, say, the claymore challenges and you Prestige, you can unlock the claymore, finish the challenges, then use the refund token to get all your unlock tokens back. Kind of like the respec option of an RPG.

Once you hit max Prestige, you gain the rank of Master and all content is unlocked. We were shown all the Prestige icons, except the final one, and they're all visually distinct, not just colour-variations of the same thing. The fourth one in particular was awesome: a huge boar's head with giant tusks. NAG

- Miktar

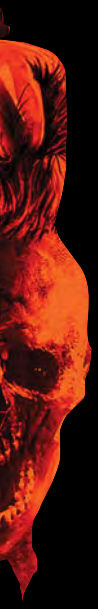
THEATRE

The Theatre Mode is now a full production tool for research and training. You can bookmark a match right after playing to find it easier, or just go straight to the new recent victories list that shows you recorded matches in which you win. There's a community tab that shows an activity feed from your friends, and you can vote replays up or down. The whole thing is displayed big and bold, visually, like Netflix.

The real winner here is the new highlight reel function. You give it a replay, and it will automatically edit together a "best moments" show reel, which you can adjust and edit afterwards. All the important editing features are back, like the dolly camera and Theatre Party viewing mode. What's new: you can now have 20 clips per film, and the ability to merge clips. If you merge 20 clips into one, you free up 19 more, for really fine-tuned camerawork or editing. You can now also attach the camera to an object, like a rocket, or Scorestreak reward like the assault drone.

CHALLENGES

All Challenges bring cosmetic /personalisation rewards. There are over a thousand challenges; completing one gives you experience, and there are camo unlocks for all weapons this time, including rocket launchers and knives. Each weapon has 10 base skins to unlock via that weapon's challenges, and six high-end challenges unlock special skins like carbon and gold. You can even earn new reticle graphics by completing scope/attachment challenges.



ZOMBIES

Yes, zombies return, surprising no-one. The new mode ties into the end of Resurrection, *and contains four new characters, new zombie types, new weapons, and a surprisingly large story mode called Transit. Up to four players playing cooperatively, explore an expansive world, using a bus to reach new areas. Treyarch isn't showing much yet, but have confirmed two additional game types: Survival and Grief. Survival mode (for up to four players) takes place in smaller, custom-made maps where you're not playing the main characters, and instead are competing for a place on the leaderboards. Grief involves the CIA facing off the CDC (Center for Disease Control), in a competitive four-versus-four-versus-zombies setup. The last team alive wins; and you earn "grief" deployable toys which are used to make the other team's life miserable since you can't directly interact with them. Everything will be wrapped up in full stat-tracking, improved matchmaking, and you can set up a custom game if you want to select the starting round, restrict it to headshots only, remove the magical items, or adjust the difficulty setting.*

ÜBER UBISOFT

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October 2012
Platforms
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PS3 / Vita / Wii
Genre
Action adventure
Developer
Traveller's Tales
Website
thelordoftherings.lego.com
Publisher
Warner Bros. Interactive

The endlessly enduring video game franchise bearing the endlessly enduring LEGO logo marches ever onwards, this time giving the beloved *The Lord of the Rings* franchise a big ol' blocky hug. It's a video game series that's become perfectly comfortable altering its subject material as it sees fit, repurposing popular franchises to cater to its addictive formula, recreating iconic scenes in its own unique image. It's naturally grown immensely popular, appealing to players of all ages with its trademark charm and adorable humour. You may imagine that tackling an IP as undeniably influential as *The Lord of the Rings* would be a challenge even for this series – but, as always, Traveller's Tales are making it look easy, retrofitting the fantasy epic with all of the *LEGO* series' fantastically fun and addictive elements, while still attempting to stay as true to the classic tale as possible.

My hands-on time with the game proved immediately familiar and much too short, but there was enough in there to showcase the developer's intention for the game. Taking place during the siege of Helm's Deep, we were given control of three characters for the majority of it: the trio of Legolas, Gimli and Aragorn. A short cut-scene reveals the game's use of voice work pulled straight from the films. Hearing the recognisable lines delivered with such emotional impact by the *LotR* trilogy's excellent roster of actors, yet seeing them acted out by the comical LEGO minifigures proves quite jarring at first. However, the moment the familiar slapstick, offbeat humour

I THINK THERE'S MORE TO THIS HOBBIT THAN MEETS THE EYE

A staple of the *LEGO* series is to pack as many characters from the source material into the games as possible. Each character then has their own unique combat style and special abilities, used to progress through levels. In Story Mode, you're generally confined to the characters provided at the start of the level, switching between them (or working in tandem with your fellow player if you're playing cooperatively) to leverage their abilities and overcome each level's unique obstacles. In Story Mode, you'll often find locked paths inaccessible to the available roster of characters. Complete the level and unlock it for Free Play, however, and you're able to go back and use any characters you've thus far unlocked to access those previously inaccessible areas, changing the dynamic of the level and giving good reason to revisit areas.

In the demo I played, for example, Gimli is able to use his axe to smash specially marked LEGO blocks, opening new paths through the level, or for smashing down siege ladders on the side of the keep's walls. His small stature also enables him to crawl through confined spaces. Legolas' bow is useful for shooting targets at range, perhaps hitting a highlighted object that spills LEGO bricks used to construct new in-game objects to solve puzzles, or simply to pick off enemies from afar. Both Legolas and Aragorn are able to grab Gimli and launch him at specially marked targets. In *LEGO The Lord of the Rings*, there's now another consideration to bear in mind: characters are able to carry multiple items for solving various puzzles when they're needed, and multiple weapons for use in different situations, all selectable from a selection wheel. Legolas carries both his twin blades and his bow, for example.

becomes apparent amidst the inherent seriousness of the scenes, seeing this hilariously ridiculous contradiction in action becomes much more comfortable and likable. Legolas' excited wave when his fellow Elves arrive to lend their aid for the upcoming battle; Aragorn's LEGO-accented face palm at Theoden's arrogance when it comes to defending his keep; the live pig that's being carried around in the background to serve as extra weight to barricade a door; all these subtle touches play off the natural humour of the films (Gimli imploring Aragorn "don't tell the Elf" before Aragorn tosses the dwarf across a chasm) to maintain the grim importance of the original narrative, while still preserving the light-hearted playfulness for which these games are known.

Getting down to the actual gameplay, those who've not had a go at the *LEGO* series before should expect a mixture of light puzzle solving and simplistic, button-mashing combat playing as dozens of different *LotR* characters, using their unique special abilities to overcome the challenges contained within each level. It's what you'll be doing for the majority of your time with the game, although at set times throughout the gameplay gets changed up a bit in various ways – like one instance in which you charge out of Helm's Deep on horseback in a mostly on-rails segment, knocking over foes and dodging swings of massive troll weaponry. For *LEGO The Lord of the Rings*, there'll reportedly be 84 characters to unlock and play as (both in Story Mode and Free Play – more explanation on this elsewhere) throughout the journey. Each character boasts the same lovingly crafted digital likeness of the LEGO minifigures present in the actual *Lord of the Rings* LEGO playsets, which in turn are adorable adaptations of our favourite characters from the film trilogy. They're all excellently animated, and boast a range of facial expressions that actually do a surprisingly good job of conveying their plastic emotions.

"AS WITH THE *LEGO STAR WARS* SERIES, WHICH MANAGED TO SHOVE ENTIRE FILM TRILOGIES INTO SINGLE GAMES, *LEGO THE LORD OF THE RINGS* COMPRESSES ALL THREE OF PETER JACKSON'S EPICS INTO THIS ONE PACKAGE."

As with the *LEGO Star Wars* series, which managed to shove entire film trilogies into single games, *LEGO The Lord of the Rings* compresses all three of Peter Jackson's epics into this one package. Compresses might not actually be the best word to use, because these games are always enormous, packed with hours of gameplay, tons of secrets to discover and all manner of collectibles to obsessively hunt. All of the scenes you expect to see are in there. Gandalf's battle with the Balrog sees you freefalling down that seemingly endless crevice after the Bridge of Khazad Dum collapses, guiding Gandalf's descent to prevent him from colliding with the stony sides. Catch up to the Balrog, and you can slash and stab at it, using the analogue stick to dodge its fiery breath, repeating this until the wizard and his monstrous foe reach the end of their deadly dive. At the same time, a new feature called Palantir Mode lets your co-op partner guide the rest of the fellowship to safety, dodging arrows as they exit the Mines of Moria. This asynchronous co-op isn't mandatory – playing solo will still let you control both Gandalf and the rest of the fellowship during all this. As you've probably realised by now, drop-in, drop-out split-screen cooperative will of course return. These games thrive when played cooperatively, and are a perfect match for family play – their youthful appeal makes them an obvious choice for kids, while mom and dad are sure to get plenty of enjoyment out of the simplistic, but thoughtful gameplay and endless charm.

Basically, it's a *LEGO* game, and the series has proven so popular that chances are you know exactly what that means. Based on everything I've seen, they're doing excellent work with the *Lord of the Rings* franchise, faithfully recreating it while still cramming in the charismatic humour, lovable aesthetic and enjoyably addictive gameplay that has made this series such a hit amongst players of all ages.

- Barkskin

THERE ARE OLDER AND FOULER THINGS THAN ORCS IN THE DEEP PLACES OF THE WORLD

The pool of beasties and baddies from the trilogy will all star in the game. Uruk-hai, goblins, trolls and more are always eager to turn you into a pile of bouncing LEGO studs. But it's the other, more significant bad dudes who really steal the show. The Balrog, reconstructed as a LEGO figure, is something you don't want to miss. Saruman, the Witch-king and the Nazgûl, and all the rest of the story's villains appear. Gollum seems to be as excellently animated and articulate as he is in the films. Many of them can be unlocked for use in Free Play as well. It's not just the villains who'll leave a lasting impression throughout your journey either – don't forget the Ents.

The name "LEGO" comes from the Danish phrase *"leg godt,"* which means "play well."

Q&A

NICK RICKS INTERVIEW, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER AT TT FOR LEGO LOTR

NAG: Could you tell us what your role is on development of *LEGO: The Lord of the Rings*?
[Nick Ricks] As TT Games Publishing's Executive Producer, my role is leading the publishing effort, liaise and guide the development teams and ensure that both LEGO Company and Middle-earth enterprises are fully involved in the creative process. It's a busy and challenging job, but one I relish as, when I play the game, I'm completely blown away by what the teams have achieved.

NAG: Has it been a challenge to adapt such a beloved, influential universe to digital plastic blocks and *LEGO* figures? Have you borrowed any elements from Tolkien's novels, or is the game purely tied to the films?
[NR] It's an enormous responsibility to take on the adaptation of such a treasured piece of literary and theatrical work. At the same time we strive to ensure that the fun, creativity and action that is inherent in all our LEGO games is as strongly represented as ever. Our approach has principally been to adapt the films, and it's our first LEGO re-telling of an Academy Award winning movie! Peter Jackson, the cast and crew and New Line did such an amazing job; that we've taken inspiration from their direction, which in turn has pushed us to new heights cinematically. However we're also conscious that a great many adults and older children will be well versed with the written fiction. So they will find a few surprises woven into the game that weren't in either the theatrical releases or the director's cut.

NAG: The *LEGO* series has travelled everywhere from *Batman* to *Indiana Jones*, with varying degrees of success. What unique opportunities does the *Lord of the Rings* license bring to the gameplay, design and mechanics of the *LEGO* formula?
[NR] The first thing the teams do when approaching a new game is to try to distil what is unique about the story that we're adapting. *Indiana Jones* introduced a greater emphasis on puzzle-solving and set-piece action; *Batman* had fantastic gadgets, vehicles and action!

The Lord of the Rings at its essence is a quest or journey: both physical; as the ring is carried to Mordor: and emotional; as the heroes grow and live up to their destinies.

The physical journey was conceptually simple, but technically very challenging, as we've created our own vast LEGO Middle-earth into which all of the story events, quests and battles are woven. The players have absolute freedom to explore it all, and standing on top of Minas Tirith, being able to see Edoras, Isengard and the burning clouds of Mordor, creates an incredibly fun, compelling and authentic world for the player to enjoy.

As for the emotional journey the characters' abilities grow and develop as the game progresses. For example Aragorn begins as a ranger with tracking skills, but develops the power to control the Army of the Dead, wield Anduril (which can shatter Morgul LEGO blocks). In this way each character's growth is reflected both in the narrative, but also in the increased ways they can interact with the LEGO elements around them.

NAG: With the open-world that's on offer, how much tertiary distraction will exist in the game? We're assuming that, at the very least, there'll still be the traditional obsessive stud collection and unlocking of new bonus areas between missions?
[NR] Of course, providing tangible rewards for exploratory gameplay is at the heart of what makes the LEGO games so enjoyable. This is particularly true with LEGO Middle-earth, which is the biggest environment we've ever created. We want young gamers and their families to be inquisitive and explore it all. In order to achieve this we've filled the landscape with mini-quests,

> YOU STEP ONTO THE ROAD, AND IF YOU DON'T KEEP YOUR FEET, THERE'S NO TELLING WHERE YOU MIGHT BE SWEPT OFF TO
>
> With a world as richly detailed and diverse as Middle-earth, there's plenty for the game's developers to work with when it comes to locations and levels. In constructing the world, it seems the developers have opted to turn Middle-earth into an open-world hub from which you access all your adventuring – although the story will still be told in linear fashion. You'll visit iconic locales like Minas Tirith from the trilogy, all lovingly forged out of digital LEGO. When the wall of the keep is destroyed during the battle for Helm's Deep, it's not masonry that's sent soaring through the air, but rather LEGO bricks. It's an effect that'll bring a smile to your face, and don't let the fact that it's all plastic bricks fool you: this game boasts some astounding visual wizardry, and it's often nothing less than beautiful.

dungeons and characters to interact with. When not actively pursuing the epic story line, we want people to ask themselves "what's around this corner?" and they will only do this if they know there is something there to discover. LEGO Middle-earth is filled with Mithril Blocks to uncover, magical items that can be found or forged that grant new powers, or new characters to collect. All of these, and many more besides, await and reward the players' exploration.

NAG: There's talk of item crafting – how does this work, and how complex will the system be? What sort of benefits can players expect to see from crafting items?
[NR] There are numerous ways that the player can wield new and powerful magical items, crafting being one of them. As they progress through the game, players will uncover precious LEGO Mithril blocks. Additionally plans and schematics for items are hidden throughout the levels. The Mithril can be taken to the blacksmiths and used to forge new weapons and armour based on the plans that have been discovered. Some give the wearer greater health (Mithril armour) or do more damage (Mithril weapons) but the rarer plans unlock more powerful magical items, with bonus and sometimes hilarious results.

NAG: In order to recreate the immense scale of Middle-earth and its many beautiful locations, as well as the huge battles that take place at key points in the story, have you had to make any significant improvements to the game engine?
[NR] Many, in particular the technology that allows for the seamless streaming of LEGO Middle-earth. It really is breath-taking, climbing to the top of the Falls of Rauros and gazing over at Minas Tirith in the far distance, or seeing the burning gaze of Sauron, literally emanating from Barad-dur, cast down on Osgiliath. Without these investments the team wouldn't have been able to do justice to the fiction, and the vistas that they have created are simply stunning.

NAG: What prompted the decision to use voiceovers from the films for character dialogue, rather than recording new lines of talkies or using the *LEGO* series' staple speech-free style?
[NR] We always are striving to bring new and fresh ideas to our *LEGO* games, and the introduction of dialogue was something we thought long and hard about. Its inclusion certainly adds to the cinematic feel we're conjuring, and having actors of the calibre of Sir Ian McKellen, or Elijah Wood speaking through the mouths of the mini-figures adds drama and excitement. Equally we were conscious that we didn't want to lose the light-heartedness that has characterised our previous games, and our cut-scene team is still able to add lashings of slap-stick and physical humour throughout.

NAG: One of the most renowned facets of these games has been their wonderful humour. Has the serious, sombre tone of some voiceovers and the narrative's darker points made it difficult to keep things light and humorous?
[NR] It's always a challenge to bring material to a younger audience, but all our games have some darker moments, it's a necessary part of the story telling and not something we ever shy away from. We often find that the more sombre moments of the films end up being the funniest when they are re-imagined in LEGO form. Moreover the inclusion of the voiceovers enhances the comedy, giving us the opportunity to twist the dialogue with ironic effect.

NAG: What was the greatest challenge in creating a game of this scope and what was the most rewarding part of the whole process.
[NR] To make a game of this scope requires an incredible effort by a lot of dedicated and talented people. Everyone involved from the dev teams, to our partners at WB Games, LEGO Company and Middle-earth Enterprises have collaborated to bring the most authentic, fun, action-filled adventure we could possible make. It's been a both a privilege and immensely rewarding to see it all come together.

NAG: Who is the biggest *Lord of the Rings* fan-boy in the office and why?
[NR] Whilst there are many *Lord of the Rings* aficionados in the office, I guess I'd have to put my hand up and say I'm up there with the biggest ones. I first read *The Lord of the Rings* after watching the original animated adaptation, and have been hooked ever since. What I enjoyed about them was the depth and timelessness of the universe in which it was set. The fact that wars have been fought and kingdoms have risen and fallen, in just the 3rd Age, really gripped me and led me to read on with the Tolkien's other novels. All of them fed back into this epic continuum, and I've never read anything since that really had that same degree of heritage. **NAG**

Company of Heroes 2

HANDS ON

Who left the fridge open?

DETAILS
Release date
Q1/Q2 2013
Platforms
PC
Genre
Real-time strategy
Developer
Relic
Website
www.companyofheroes.com
Publisher
THQ

The *Company of Heroes* franchise is the real-time strategy series with the highest ratings of all time. Originally released in 2006, the first *Company of Heroes* became the most critically acclaimed PC game of that year. The game's two expansions, *Opposing Fronts* and *Tales of Valor*, released in 2007 and 2009 respectively. Both were extremely well received by fans and critics alike. Now, more than six years after *Company of Heroes* debuted, developer Relic is bringing us a sequel.

Company of Heroes 2 sees you taking charge of the Russian army during World War II. As such, the game takes place on the eastern front while German forces are invading the Soviet motherland. To date, this theatre of war remains the bloodiest of any conflict, with casualties from both sides mounting into the tens of millions. It wasn't only the fighting that caused the casualties; it was the weather as well, with temperatures dropping as low as -40° Celsius.

NAG recently got the chance to partake in the first ever hands-on event for *Company of Heroes 2*, and what we played did a fantastic job of reminding us exactly why this series holds the RTS crown.

A number of series staples make a return: you still need Fuel, Ammunition and Manpower in order to recruit troops and vehicles and build your base; you'll still be completing multiple objectives during missions or vying for control of the numerous resource points to devalue your opposition's ticket count. There are, however, a number of improvements and additional gameplay mechanics that make *Company of Heroes 2* a very different beast.

For a start, there's the weather. Relic has developed something that they've dubbed and trademarked "ColdTech". This new addition to the Essence Engine (which is now running on version 3.0) governs the entire game's weather and how units react to it. On a purely visual level the system is rather stunning with sunlight glinting off the surface of frozen lakes, tank tracks turning snow into churned-up slush, and blizzards obscuring the battlefield. It also *sounds* excellent as wind howls across the maps, obscuring troop chatter.

A further addition is one that's practically revolutionised the fog-of-war mechanic found in real-time strategy games. Relic is calling it "True Sight".

The Battles of Rzhev were a series of skirmishes fought in and around the Russian town of Rzhev. The battles have earned the nickname "Rzhev Meat Grinder" because of the massive casualties sustained by Russian and German forces. Some of the missions in *Company of Heroes 2* will follow these historical battles.

The weather does, however, make things much more difficult. Every single unit move needs to take an additional factor into consideration: will troops die of hypothermia before they reach their target? During our hands-on time, dozens of our men succumbed to winter's icy grip. We lost three very expensive Katyusha Rocket Trucks because the enemy shot the ice *around* our vehicles as we tried to push across a river and into opposing territory; the ice cracked and our vehicles sank to the frigid depths below. Some of these elements can obviously be used to your advantage, but during our hands-on we couldn't help but feel as if the amount of time your troops have before exposure kills them is a little too low. Basically, it's now a necessity to have a unit of combat engineers moving with your troops so that they can build fire pits if you happen to be in an area without structures to shelter inside. You're essentially fighting two opponents in *Company of Heroes 2*: the Nazis and winter.

Before World War II, Rzhev had 56, 000 civilians. After the war ended, there were only 150 civilians left alive.

A further addition is one that's practically revolutionised the fog-of-war mechanic found in real-time strategy games. Relic is calling it "True Sight" and it's one of the main bullet point features for *Company of Heroes 2*. Those who have played *Warhammer 40, 000: Dawn of War II* would have encountered what could be considered the roots of True Sight, but for *Company of Heroes 2*, line-of-sight will add a new layer to your strategy. Your units don't have the typical RTS, 360° field of vision; now they only see what's in front of them and in their field of view. If there's an enemy tank sitting around the corner of a house, you won't see it until your troops have rounded that corner and come face-to-face with it. Even calling in an IL-2 Sturmovik attack plane for a strafing run resulted in the fog-of-war being lifted depending on which direction the plane was flying.

Two fancy mechanics with trademarked names aren't the only new additions that promise to change the way we approach this RTS franchise. Relic has included minor additions as well, like the ability for your men to vault over obstacles, which makes the scramble for cover that much more intuitive. Your men can now hop over a wall instead of having to run along it to reach its end before being able to access the other side to hide behind. Vehicles can also be abandoned, which means you might, on occasion, get lucky and end up killing the men inside an enemy tank instead of blowing it up. You'll then have a free tank to commandeer. Then there are the cosmetic additions like propagating fires. Fire spreads and buildings gradually burn to the ground. This presents a catch-22: flamethrowers are the easiest way to get enemy troops out of garrisoned buildings, but don't expect to be able to use that building, seeing as it's now slowly burning to the ground.

The exciting thing is that all of these new features will force you to rethink your approach to *Company of Heroes*. It seems as if we're in for a sequel that tweaks core gameplay mechanics, rather than one that simply adds more fluff and padding before slapping a "2" on the cover. **NAG**

- Mikit0707

REVIEWSINTRO

People usually feel up fresh produce to determine ripeness – this is what we found at the bottom of the fruit stand... right at the bottom.. Meet your reviewers.

Name the best gaming event/function/launch/expo/thing you've ever been to and why that particular one was so special to you.

RedTide

Definitely the first time I went to E3. That trip laid the foundation for what rAge is today. Another highlight was going to Bahrain for the Formula 1 Grand Prix (thanks Intel). Lobster for breakfast was interesting.

Miktar

rAge 2002. It was the largest gaming event since the 1000-man LAN, and everything just came together perfectly. All my friends were there, the game releases were huge and hype. And since it was the first rAge, it'll always be special.

Azimuth

rAge, obviously. It's so cool, and awesome, and... cool. And rad. And stuff. Everybody should go. (What was my endorsement fee again, Michael?)

Mikit0707

The *Assassin's Creed III* reveal in London. I love the series and this was its world premiere. Also, Ubisoft's PR people are frighteningly organised with events like these.

GeometriX

My first time at Gamescom. There's simply no comparison in terms of the sheer size of the expo, and so much is hands-on.

Barkskin

This isn't gaming related but my best trip was going to Ireland for the crochet blanket knit off festival. I'm into *much* older ladies so I was in heaven. My cheeks haven't ached like that since... Love you Ethel.

MINIREVIEWS

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

KINGDOM HEARTS 3D: DREAM DROP DISTANCE

The *Kingdom Hearts* franchise stands as testament to the fact that two different universes (Disney and *Final Fantasy*) can successfully be mixed to form a popular series of games. And this series has made its way to the 3DS with the peculiarly titled *Kingdom Hearts 3D: Dream Drop Distance*. It revisits earlier plot lines by making use of the original characters, but it adds some great new ideas.

The first is a new "Flowmotion" combat system that uses the environment and allows for a steady stream of fighting, once you get used to the controls. It's pretty unique for a JRPG, and can be great fun.

The second is the idea of dropping; the game will, at predetermined times, pull the player out of one character's story line and throw them into the other. This predetermination is literally time-based; you may be in the middle of a heated combat, and the game will yank you away. It's disconcerting at first, but it adds a feel of cohesion between the two story lines, almost like brisk editing in a movie.

Dream Drop Distance is a great addition to the series, and a game that appreciators of a deep story line will enjoy.

79

"Tomorrow I'm going to fart candy floss"

- Jacqui

Ramjet
E3 2006. It was the last E3 I managed to go to, so the memory keeps me going until the next time. Why was it awesome? Stupid question...

SAVAGE
E3 2012, because it was f****** E3! And also America yay: root beer, burgers, pizzas and dinosaur museums.

ShockG
rAge 2006, Xbox 360 was new and at the time it was next gen console gaming. Probably the most important thing that year in all of gaming and it was at rAge as well. Epic!

REVIEWSCORESGUIDELINE

1-39 This game is broken. 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 you'd play it for a bit if you got it for free, but it's not something you'd recommend to friends.

50-59 Acceptable, but nothing special. It's generic or uninspired, but playable, and might be worth spending some time hunting for achievements.

60-69 Now we're getting somewhere. This game has something interesting about it, and fans of the genre or series should enjoy it, but something significant holds back this game from greatness.

70-79 This game is very good. Anyone who enjoys this type of game 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 An excellent game; one that you'd happily play through multiple times and recommend to friends. It adds interesting, if imperfect, advancements to the genre or series.

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.

home_coded

Inside the South African indie development industry...

Celestial Games

Website: www.celestial-games.com

Poke around the local game development scene and you'll struggle to find anyone as passionate, as driven, as crazy, and (perhaps most importantly) as industry-savvy as Travis Bulford, founder of Celestial Games. If you've been doing this gaming thing for long enough you might remember the name; they put together the caffeine-fuelled *Toxic Bunny* in 1996 and a lesser-known action RPG called *The Tainted* in 1999. Then Celestial sort-of disappeared.

Now they're back. Packing an HD remake of *Toxic Bunny* and a barrelful of ideas to get the local game development industry up to the level it ought to be, Celestial is determined to stay in the saddle for as long as it takes to produce the games they want to (including a list to keep them busy for at least the next few years), and raise the stature of game development in the eyes of local businesses.

Bulford points out that there's still a perception in the country that games aren't worth investing in, unlike film and music which has seen substantial growth over the years. "Where is the financial investment and support to help South Africa get a footprint in the largest electronic entertainment industry in the world?" he asks.

Truer words were never spoken, and we're excited to see the renewal of a beloved local game and its makers. The future awaits!

If you have an established local game development company or project and would like to be featured in NAG, send an email to ed@nag.co.za

Look & Listen
For the Fans

XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Humanity's last hope returns

Let's be clear on one thing: *XCOM* could not be brought to today's market as a pure clone of the original. It's not that customers wouldn't reward such a game; it's that Firaxis has made it their goal to deliver a product that doesn't just suit the hardcore veterans but the masses as well, without dumbing it down. The team at Firaxis has made a lot of changes to the original formula, but everything in *XCOM* has been designed with a holistic approach and fits together as though it was always meant to be.

If I thought it would make anyone happy, I'd list all the features that *XCOM* does or doesn't have compared to the original but then some crazed flannel-wearing '90s enthusiast would take it all out of context, but I will point out a few noteworthy changes. The most obvious is the shift from action points to a two-phase system used in combat. When your soldiers are out on the field they can move and/or shoot depending on their class, equipped weapon and the perks you've chosen for them as they gained experience levels. Early in the game, this simple system feels very limiting, but as they gain perks they also gain flexibility in combat, like the chance to quickly evade enemy fire, take free reaction shots, shoot multiple times per turn or cover large amounts of ground to rush to the aid of a dying ally. But a consequence of this simplification is that movement is ultimately less complex than some may like. There are no options to crouch, go prone change direction, take cover, or vault over an obstacle –these actions simply happen automatically as your units move to the positions you send them to. The result is combat that feels fluid, fast and engaging yet somewhat stifling in the early game, although it is still filled with all of the tension and suspense of the old titles.

Between those terrifying experiences out on the field you'll manage your home base, chosen from one of five sites around the world. Unlike the original *X-COM*, you'll manage just a single base of operations but you can deploy aircraft to hangars stationed around the globe for increased response times. There's plenty to do at home base, including the management of troops and loadouts, assigning research and engineering projects, maintaining positive relationships with world leaders and expanding your premises to accommodate new technologies as they're researched.

It's at your home base that the management side of *XCOM* reveals itself as one of the greatest improvements over the original, and it's also where most of the game's story is told. While there is a linear, driven story for you to get through, it pokes its head in so patiently that you're free to go about your business and only engage when it suits you. Outside of a few key story missions, the details of the aliens, their plans and their origins become known to you through researching both living and dead extraterrestrial specimens (the former being quite a challenge to catch). As you'd expect of a game that tries to straddle the line between hardcore and

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PC / PS3
Genre
Tactical strategy game
Age restriction
18
Multiplayer
Local
None
Online
2 players
Developer
Firaxis Games
Website
www.xcom.com
Publisher
2K Games
Distributor
Megarom

SEE JOHN RUN

The closest thing that *XCOM* has to a real issue is the camera and how it copes with the action-driven sequences. It's buggy, and is prone to clipping, slow-downs, missing the action entirely or failing to hide pieces of the environment that obscure the gameplay. Thankfully, the action camera can be disabled, but the replacement version doesn't fare much better.

1 The game includes a heavily guided tutorial that introduces players to the complexities of turn-based tactics. But more than that, it serves as an example of how linear and scripted *XCOM* could've been, which it absolutely isn't. What we've seen of the game's demo shows otherwise, though, but don't be put off if it creates the wrong impression.

2 As you crank up the difficulty levels, the aliens become not only smarter in combat but their entire invasion picks up pace. It becomes dangerously easy to fall behind on the macro level; knowing where and when to deploy your troops, aircraft and observation satellites to balance international panic and financial aid is crucial.

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makro

Origin

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EANFSNAG001

PLAYS WELL WITH OTHERS

You wouldn't expect it, but *XCOM* includes a multiplayer offering that feels surprisingly suitable. There's just one game mode, deathmatch, which pits two players against each other, each with a custom team of up to six units made up of a mix of *XCOM* operatives and aliens. Each unit is worth a defined number of points, and players can choose to set the points limit per team or leave the lid off for a battle of the all-powerful.

Games are played out in a number of maps built for a balanced multiplayer experience, and feel reminiscent of a small version of Warhammer, or any number of tactics games like *Ogre Tactics* and *Front Mission*. The multiplayer mode works well, but there's room for expansion over here.

"Between those **terrifying experiences out on the field you'll manage your home base**, chosen from one of five sites around the world."

3 Every action you make in combat can have lasting repercussions. Alien weapons, fragments and alloys are gathered after many engagements and are the key to a strong research and engineering pipeline; explosives make for easy damage in the field but render many artefacts useless to your team back at the base.

4 Each map in the game is designed by hand, which means there are no more randomly-generated levels. However, the engagements themselves are randomly assigned which means you're unlikely to see all of the available maps in a single play-through. Additionally, alien placement in the maps is determined at random.

accessible, the back-story is only there for those who care to read it, but if you do take the time to do so you'll be rewarded with a richly-detailed narrative environment and a real sense of place in the game.

HURT ME PLENTY

XCOM is a game about balance: knowing you don't have it, hunting it down, clinging to it for dear life and losing it. Striving for balance is the source of those "*XCOM* moments" you find yourself in, when you spent your precious few remaining credits on a plasma sniper rifle only to lose your last sniper to a heavy's panicked fire, or when you skirt through a mission with a rookie near death and the closest thing to a sense of accomplishment you've felt in hours.

There are four difficulty ratings: easy is for newcomers; medium offers the "challenging, but fair" approach that sometimes surprises you with its moments both good and bad; classic mode is there for the masochists who want to feel like they're always a step behind the alien invasion; and impossible mode is best not spoken about without the presence of a licensed psychiatrist. To top them off, there's an optional toggle called Iron Man that sets the game to only use a single autosave, nothing else – no going back on those bad decisions. It's the best way to play, and we recommend that once you've found your feet on your first play-through, start up another game with Iron Man enabled for the true *XCOM* experience.

- GeometriX

90

***XCOM* is both a remake and a game that can stand on its own merits. So much has changed from the original, but it still manages to recreate many of the nuances that gave the old game its charm. Some will claim that there are too many casualties in the quest for accessibility, but the final package is one that knows exactly what it is, and does a fantastic job of it.**

PLUS

Well-balanced redesign of classic systems / Plenty of replayability / Multiplayer mode is a good fit

MINUS

Buggy camera / Combat is too limiting in early game

PC available November 2012
PS3 and XBOX360 releases February 2013

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Look & Listen
For the Fans

Torchlight II

Just you, your pet, your friends, and endless fields of loot-based organisms...

The first *Torchlight*, while being an indie tribute to the original *Diablo*, still managed to feel like its own game. By taking place in a single stratified dungeon, it had a very "arcade" feel, with an emphasis on making you feel powerful and useful right from the start. There was enough variety in the weapons and enemies to keep you interested, but with a small enough scope to allow for ever-refined runs down to the depths. The retirement system meant you could roll your own legacy, complete with an ever-improving heirloom weapon or armour, adding notches to your lineage every night if you played hard and fast. It was lonely, with no multiplayer, but user-created mods that streamlined things and an ever-faithful mutating pet could suffice.

In contrast, *Torchlight II* feels too self-aware of its positioning as "the alternative to *Diablo III*". It's too aware of its status of being the David to *Diablo III*'s Goliath, thus aiming to "beat" *Diablo III* directly in two areas it knows the competition has trouble: features and pricing. That said, *Torchlight II* may sacrifice too much of its own style in an attempt to ensure a certain laundry list of features. It feels like Runic fell into the trap of thinking that people appreciated *Torchlight* for being "the little *Diablo*", and so focused too much on making sure *Torchlight II* hit all those *Diablo II* notes. Even so, while it may not be a unique medley, there's no denying Runic plays the tune effortlessly.

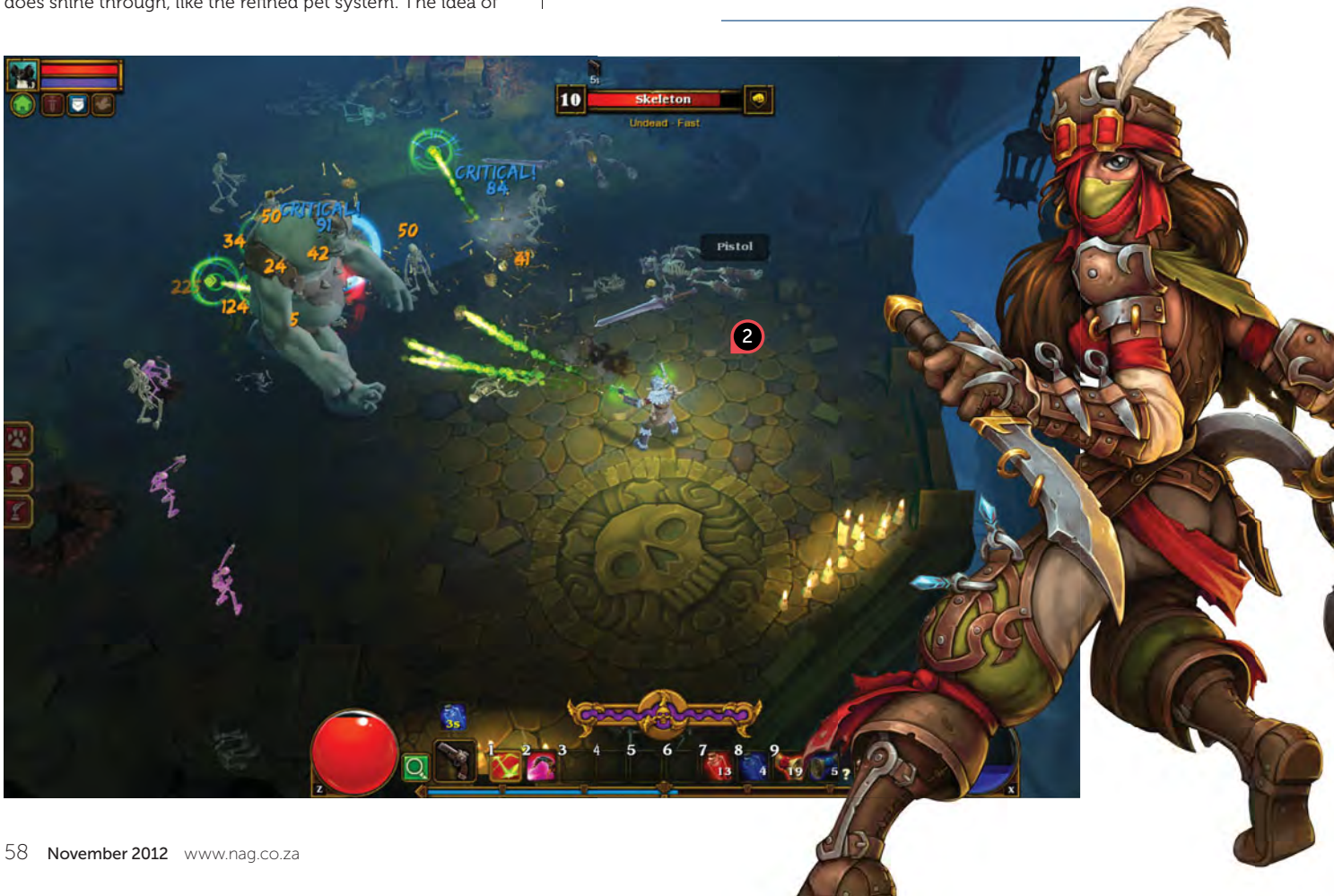
Some elements of Runic's own thinking on the genre does shine through, like the refined pet system. The idea of

DETAILS

Platforms
PC
Genre
Action role-playing game
Age restriction
12
Multiplayer
Local
None
Online
6 players
Developer
Runic Games
Website
www.torchlight2game.com
Publisher
Perfect WorldRunic Games
Distributor
Steam / TBC locally

1 It looks like a *Diablo* game took a cartoon pill and then spat out goofier monsters.

2 The classes are unique and interesting and different. So much so that for a change you won't immediately find a favourite.



having a pet that fights with you, and is well-trained enough to handle selling your junk in town, isn't new. You can find the system wholesale in WildTangent's *Fate*, which precedes *Torchlight* by almost half a decade. It's no surprise though, since *Fate* was designed by the same person who went on to design *Torchlight*. For the sequel, your pet has learned a new trick: reading a shopping list. You can specify up to four consumables, like town portal scrolls and mana potions that the pet should bring back from town if you send it off to sell the junk you packed in its trunk. It's a small thing, but small things add up over time.

Four new character classes replace the original three, and each has its own "system" bar that fills up when damaging enemies. The Engineer uses heavy steampunk-themed weapons, which get powered up when your bar is full. The Berserker uses animal-themed special powers and super-punchy-fist action, and gets all critical hits for a while when their bar is full. The Embermage casts spells and gets 12 seconds to cast spells free of charge when their special bar is full. Lastly, the Outlander uses ranged weapons and tribal magic, getting improved dodge and critical chance when their bar fills up. All classes can use all weapon types, for the most part, though you will find some items with class-restricting affixes.

Four new character classes replace the **original three, and each has its own "system" bar** that fills up when damaging enemies

Where *Torchlight* took place in, well, the town of Torchlight, the sequel starts by destroying that town, not just symbolically. The cute and vapid plot (one of the three original classes from the first game goes nuts, powers up and starts sucking the life-force from very important guardian animals) acts as barely sufficient scaffolding to support your reason for going from place to place. Not that we need a reason: the world is made of loot. The game spans across four acts, following the overly conventional structure of grassy-mountains, desert, forest-swamp and <removed for spoilers>. New Game Plus replaces the Retirement system, letting you restart the game with the same character and stats as when you finished, but with ever-increasing monster difficulty. You also gain access to a Mapworks vendor that lets you buy level-specific randomly-generated maps (an excellent idea that *Path of Exile* also implements), giving you endless replayability, in theory. NAG

- Miktar

75

Read this in a sad voice: "It's more of the same." Now read this in a happy voice: "It's more of the same!" That's *Torchlight II* in a nutshell: it's everything we know and love of the genre, executed flawlessly, and little else. That's either awesome, or it's not, depending on you.

PLUS

Matt Uelmen's music is still wonderful / Plenty of content Can be played offline / Has LAN play

MINUS

Run speed too damn high / Insta-death mobs / Follows the *Diablo II* template too religiously / Another desert act...

F1 2012

Almost there; F1 racing at its finest

Unlike any other kind of game, racing simulators are measured by how true to life they are by individuals who have never experienced actual racing [*same thing can be said about shooting zombies with a shotgun, Ed*]. What essentially happens then is that the developer must cater for or at least satisfy the theoretical knowledge players have about the sport, while at the same time making sure there is some actual parity between the game and the discipline. As such, the third instalment in the series from Codemasters attempts to navigate its way through this in the most inconsistent way since the series started.

Gone are the player interviews, team busses and such. Not losses at all as these were distractions more than anything else. Instead virtually everything is text-based apart from the track previews and info pages where you are guided through a single lap of the track with advice on car setup, gearing and car placement.

Graphically, the game is superb; if you can forgive the embarrassingly low resolution textures in some places, the game looks solid with more natural rendering of outdoor environments, better lighting and notably improved track detail; *F1 2012* is amongst the best looking racing simulators on any platform. A mixed bag then, much like car handling which is supposedly improved, and for the most part it is. Of note is tyre wear, which is unusual to say the least. On some tracks it's predictable, but on others it's rather annoying because the fall off in grip is much steeper than it should be. Tyres that are supposed to last 16 laps are all but worn out by lap four and given that the minimum race distance is 25%, you'll be two-stopping in a race where all the others cars have one stop to make.

There are other bugs in the game as well, where your team engineer insists that you're holding a position that you are clearly not and this is particularly in the drivers' championship screen where you'll be told for instance that you're still 8th as opposed to 17th which is your actual position. Race expectations are also very unreasonable, where your qualifying position exclusively determines where your expected finishing position should be on race day. A tall order, if by some chance your HRT car managed to deliver a mundane lap when it was dry but most of the other cars were out when it was raining, hence the slower lap times.

In such a situation, your expected finishing position would always be above where you qualified, which is impossible in an HRT and subsequently you'll fail weekend targets.

With Codemasters, it seems they keep taking two steps forward and one step back, *F1 2012* is good, but just not as good as it should have been. NAG

- ShockG

The forest in the background has lung cancer

80

***F1 2012* is the most polished version of the title since inception, but one can't help but feel it's getting very repetitive and lacking in real improvements over the previous titles. *F1 2012* still remains the best F1 simulator around however despite its problems.**

PLUS

Great car modelling / Improved driving dynamic
Presentation

MINUS

Annoying bugs / Not necessarily better than *F1 2011*

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / iOS
PC / PS3
Genre
Racing simulator
Age restriction
3
Multiplayer
Local
2 players
Online
None
Developer
Codemasters
Website
www.codemasters.com
Publisher
Codemasters
Distributor
Megarom

FARCRY3

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UBISOFT

Look & Listen
For the Fans

PES 2013

That's better!

The *Pro Evolution Soccer* franchise has had a hard run of things for a while now. Once it was a solid competitor, but certain direction changes managed to lay it low in its on-going competition with EA's football franchise. For a number of years, *PES* has felt a little directionless at best and a little desperate at worst.

With the release of *PES 2013*, things seem a little different. Over the previous two releases, the developers of this popular franchise have added some great new ideas (although the implementation of those ideas may not have been ideal). Now, those elements of the game dynamic are being merged and tweaked, creating an experience that feels more level and reasonable.

But *PES* is not really moving into the field of super-realistic sports simulation. It seems as though the developers know that EA has this market more or less sewn up, and don't want to try take the giant *FIFA* on these terms. Rather, *PES 2013* treads a balanced middle ground between simulation and arcade action, carving its own niche as a result.

Another area in which *PES* doesn't challenge *FIFA*, but rather follows its own path, is in the on-field play itself. While *FIFA* tends towards a team experience, *PES* makes the whole thing about the player who has the ball at the time. Sure, the team AI will still be trying to get those all-important goals, but the overall control scheme allows the player to focus on the moment. This is not done at the expense of strategy; rather it adds an over-the-top flair to the title that some may find very appealing.

Jumping in and just going for it is still an option with this latest iteration, but the clever player will go through tutorials and take the time to master the nuanced moves that *PES 2013* has on offer. These really are an edge, particularly in player vs. player games. The player that has the better grasp of the way the controls work will most certainly dominate, and look better doing so.

This includes the precision ball control that *PES 2013* has on offer. Once you have the controls down, you will be able to put the ball pretty much anywhere that you want it to go (within realistic limits, of course). Team members can also be guided more than before, allowing the player to pull off some really spectacular tactics.

On the whole, fans will be able to breathe a sigh of relief when they tackle *PES 2013*. Sure, the game still has some issues and quirks (not least of which is the still-overly-whistle-happy referee). But, as an overall game, *PES 2013* offers a much better experience than we have seen in a few years from the franchise. **NAG**

- Ramjet

82 **The best offering in a few years, *PES 2013* refines elements of the previous two titles.**

PLUS
Improved ideas / Best version in a few years

MINUS
Twitchy ref / Sometimes complex controls

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / 3DS / PC
PS2 / PS3 / Wii
Genre
Sports
Age restriction
3
Multiplayer
Local
7 players
Online
4 players
Developer
Konami
Website
www.konami-europe.com/games
Publisher
Konami
Distributor
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Look & Listen For the Fans

FIFA 13

Refinement

MUST PLAY

The *FIFA* franchise seems to go through development phases. There are years when major innovations take place and there are years when the changes seem less prominent. But it is these years in which the game becomes more refined, and stages for further advancement are set.

Even if it didn't seem like it to some, last's year's *FIFA* game was one in which some major changes were implemented. Improved ball control, collision mechanics and similar concepts were added to *FIFA 12*, making it an even more challenging virtual football experience. This time around – with *FIFA 13* – those changes have been refined, with tweaks that make the game feel more real than ever.

Part of the realism of football, though, is chaos. Yes, there are footballers out there who are immensely skilled, but even the most brilliant player can make mistakes – and these mistakes become more prevalent in *FIFA 13*. The result is a game that is potentially more frustrating, but also more realistic.

A large part of this comes from the refined First Touch Control. The player needs to exercise more skill now, with less predictable ball dynamics meaning that steaming full speed into a pass may not necessarily be a great idea.

The result, though, is that the game becomes more hardcore... this idea removes a degree of accessibility from the game, which may lead to some frustration for less experienced players. Yet, even with this idea in mind, it is a massive improvement in terms of *FIFA 13* representing a soccer match that feels like the real thing.

Some tweaks, though, have lessened the chaos and oddities of the previous title. The physicality of players has been tweaked, meaning that a collision of bodies is less likely to result in bizarre (and often comical) consequences. The game has also added more dribbling control, using mechanics derived from last year's *FIFA Street*. It takes some getting used to, but the clever player will now be able to use improved ball handling skills to make a difference.

While last year saw a major tweak to the defensive AI, this year sees a big improvement to attacking play. That means that the player will be able to make use of far more reliable team tactics. AI players will move more intelligently, setting up for potential attacking manoeuvres far more effectively than before.

Motion controls have been added too; the *Kinect* implementation allows the player to use voice control while playing, which enables them to be a manager as well as player. Voice commands can be used to change tactics, make substitutions and more. The *PlayStation Move*, though, is less well implemented. It requires the player to point the wand at the screen to control where the ball ends up and manage player movements. It takes some getting used to, to say the least.

On the whole, this is a great new iteration of the franchise... this year; once again, we can say that this is probably the best *FIFA* title yet. NAG

- Ramjet

It's my turn to dive next!

88

It's a tweak year for the *FIFA* franchise, but the improved ball dynamics and control systems make it an awesome addition to the series.

PLUS

Awesome tweaks / Improved attacking AI / Ball control

MINUS

A little more chaotic / Less accessible than before

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / 3DS / PC
PS2 / PS3 / PSP
PS Vita / Wii / Wii U
Genre
Sports
Age restriction
3
Multiplayer
Local
7 players
Online
22 players
Developer
EA Sports
Website
fifa.easports.com
Publisher
Electronic Arts
Distributor
EA South Africa

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Look & Listen
For the Fans

Tekken Tag Tournament 2

MUST PLAY

Rave War picks up the beat

Tekken Tag Tournament 2's opening cinematic begins with a huge glowing man in the backseat of a limousine.

"Good evening sir. Where to?" asks the driver.

"Can't you tell where?" says the supernatural bruiser. "I must unleash this awesome power!"

The essence of *TTT2* is in this. It's good to be reminded that it's okay for a fighting game to be a fighting game. It feels weird to say but the contemporary emphasis for the genre has shifted to accessibility: leave no gamer behind. Make sure there's more to the package than just fighting.

A sequel eleven years in the making, *TTT2* dispenses with attempts to shoehorn in "value added game modes" from past editions of *Tekken*. Gone is the side scrolling Tekken Force, the improbably named Scenario Campaign Mode from *Tekken 6*. *TTT2* rebuilds the previous entry from the ground up complete with fresh models for a cast of 50+ characters. Over 20 brand new stages. A plethora of tweaks and balance adjustments, and the eponymous tag play which is even optional, as you can select a solo character for 1v1 or 2v1 matchups. Wrap it up in the sparkling presentation of an entertainment sport, and you have the pro wrestling federation for the fighting game world.

Single-player content does exist, centered primarily on a perfected Ghost Battle mode: fight an endless stream of custom characters, with different names, AI flavours, and strength levels. Win loot every few matches in the form of movies (every character does have a lengthy CG ending), costume parts, and in-game cash. Every time the online menu is accessed, fresh ghosts are automatically downloaded and your own played characters uploaded.

Perhaps the single most critical feature of *TTT2* is the most ubiquitous: it has amazing net code. There was legitimate cause for concern after *Tekken 6*'s questionable online play. Ken Harada, *Tekken* producer, made much of improving things this time around and playing is believing: it's more refined than the excellent performance of Namco's own *Soul Calibur V;* online play for the majority of persons appears superior.

Reviewing fighters is tough. I'm nothing like a *Tekken* expert; but you can detect a pristine game system when you see it. *Tekken* is not easy to learn. *TTT2* is no different and it is not a beginner's game. But neither is *Tekken* obtuse. Perhaps the flattest feature is Fight Lab, an attempted story tutorial involving "Combot" the amazing robot. It's fun, but doesn't provide the direction needed. It will get you started, but *TTT2* is less a game and more of a competitive client. It deserves to be recognised that it all comes together as perhaps the best one yet in its class. **NAG**

- Miktar

90 **Everything *Tekken* from the past decade rolled into one, with no deficiencies. The last fighting game you'll ever need if you go hardcore. Has a dinosaur with boxing gloves [*Nice, Ed*].**

PLUS

More characters than God intended / Online rocks / Catchy soundtrack

MINUS

Fight Lab doesn't cut it / Steep, though reasonable, learning curve

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PS3 / Wii U
Genre
Fighting
Age restriction
16
Multiplayer
Local
4 players
Online
4 players
Developer
Namco Bandai Games
Website
www.tekken.com
Publisher
Namco Bandai Games
Distributor
Megarom

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Look & Listen
For the Fans

Dead or Alive 5

The jiggles...

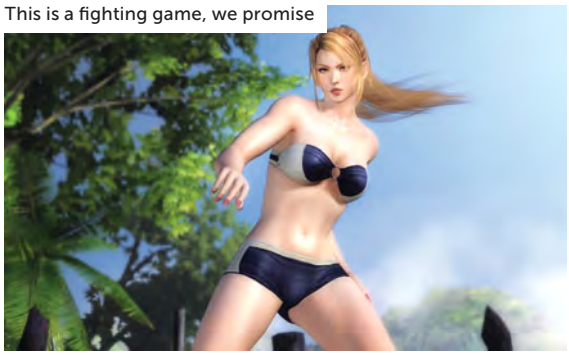
The *Dead or Alive* franchise has – in terms of fighting games – always played second fiddle to names like *Street Fighter, Tekken* and *Mortal Kombat*. But that may change a little with the release of the latest iteration of the franchise; *Dead or Alive 5* addresses many of the issues that held it back, resulting in a game that is what it is meant to be... a fighting game.

Not at the expense of eye-candy, though. *Dead or Alive 5* is still crammed with beautiful characters beating up each other in beautiful locations. The characters are modelled better than before, and improved physics and animations add a lot more believability to them. The lady fighters still appear to have gyroscopic jelly-filled breast implants, though. Someone on the development team really should find out how boobs move naturally.

The jiggling doesn't do too much to distract from the rest of the game, although the overall effect of the visuals can almost be overwhelming. The environments, for example, are beautifully handled, believable and, above all, interactive. There will be more than one occasion in which you will send an opponent flying into something that smashes or explodes, and the often multi-tiered levels are also enhanced with "cinematic" events that add to the chaos of the matches.

Not that the fighting is overly chaotic, mind you... *Dead or Alive 5* allows the player – regardless of skill level – to engage in huge, strategic fights. This is in part due to the fact that the overall fighting system has been tweaked rather nicely. Some of the highly-exploitable moves and ideas from previous iterations have been solidly adjusted. It is more difficult for a button-masher to dominate now, and those that learned secret moves that could be exploited in never-ending cycles of carnage will have less of an unfair advantage this time around. Basically, as far as being a fighting game, *Dead or Alive 5* is very decent, and most certainly the best title the franchise has to offer.

This is a fighting game, we promise



The game does lack in certain areas... some of the plot points and situations in the story-mode smack of bad kung fu movies (the kind of "I'm bored, wanna fight" ideas that are utterly ridiculous) but, for the most part, these can be ignored. Rather, improved controls, excellent implementation of side stepping – really excellent, in fact – and an overall presentation that can be breath-taking at times combine to form a game that is not only enjoyable, but extremely appealing.

Has the red-headed step-child of the fighting genre finally reached a point where it may get some valued recognition? Perhaps... That depends on the community, of course, but Team Ninja have made all the right moves to bring the *Dead or Alive* franchise to the fore with this latest instalment. **NAG**

- Ramjet

82

Undoubtedly the best *DOA* title to date, *Dead or Alive 5* concentrates less on eye candy and more on fighting.

PLUS
Much improved / Awesome visuals

MINUS
Some silly plot devices / Ridiculous breast physics

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PS3
Genre
Fighting
Age restriction
16
Multiplayer
Local
4 players
Online
16 players
Developer
Team Ninja
Website
teamninja-studio.com/teamninja/doa5/
Publisher
Tecmo Koei
Distributor
Silverscreen Trading

The Sims 3: Supernatural

Not so magical

The Sims 3 has chugged along for a few years now, releasing expansions from time to time that have enhanced the game, added new dynamics and provided the players with more to do. The idea behind these expansions is to make the game even more compelling and draw the player further in, with more complexity in the lives of their virtual people. And, for the most part, expansions like *Ambitions* and *World Adventures* have done just that. But *The Sims 3: Supernatural* manages to fail where others have succeeded. Where other expansions introduced great new ideas and careers, *Supernatural* introduces only one rather shallow career path, and adds a lot of chaotic random events that can, quite literally, ruin an established game.

The player will also have the ability to become one of the magical races introduced in the title, but there are limited benefits to doing this. And those benefits aren't passed on to offspring, either. You can avoid the fetch-and-carry quests that will transform your character by simply creating one that is a member of a new race, but the problem persists... they just aren't all that cool.

Instead of being a great enhancement, *Supernatural* feels more like a bad *True Blood* episode, and the demands on the player's system don't help either. Perhaps the next expansion will make up for the limited fun this one offers. NAG

- Ramjet

DETAILS

Platforms
PC
Genre
Life simulator
Age restriction
12
Multiplayer
Local
None
Online
None
Developer
The Sims Studio
Maxis
Website
www.thesims3.com
Publisher
Electronic Arts
Distributor
EA South Africa

How women see men

50

This is the first expansion for *The Sims 3* that feels non-essential. It doesn't do much to enhance the experience.

PLUS
New races / Some fun to be had

MINUS
Can ruin an established game / System resource heavy / Buggy

Look & Listen
For the Fans

Rocksmith

No more clickety-clack!

Many local gamers have been clacking away at plastic guitars since *Guitar Hero 2* first launched, but when *Rock Band* and its drum kit was released, suddenly, players could learn some actual musical ability from playing a video game. The next evolution was obvious: we needed be able to plug in and play with a real guitar. Well, now we're at that point – that's what *Rocksmith* lets you do: any guitar (or bass, with the downloadable addon) with a pickup is supported; you simply plug it in to your console or PC using the included cable, and away you go. Only instead of pressing plastic buttons as the colours fly towards you, you're fretting and strumming real strings.

Unlike *Guitar Hero, Rock Band* and almost every other music game on the market, *Rocksmith* focuses less on traditional video game elements and more on the idea that it's a virtual instructor. It's meant to be played by people of all skill levels, from beginner to pro, and it does a pretty good job at that with its huge selection of lessons on techniques and chords in addition to the 50+ full music tracks.

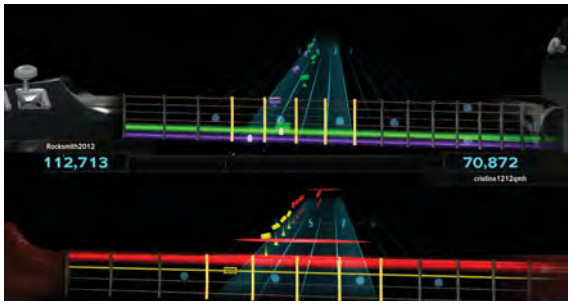
Those music tracks are the star of the show, and can either be played in a progressive career mode which groups together songs of similar challenge levels, or entirely at your own pace from the songs menu. As you play through a track (and most of the technique challenges), the game dynamically scales the difficulty level to match your performance. This tries to match the method of learning to play a song the traditional way, but it can be a little daunting if you find yourself doing too well and all of a sudden have to deal with a new chord or technique. *Rocksmith* is in desperate need of a function to pause the game in mid-song and provide a clear view of the upcoming chords to give players a chance to prepare ahead of time. And, while there is a feature to pick out and play specific phrases from specific songs, the process is far more bulky and time-consuming than any methods outside of the gaming scope. What's worse, you have to keep going back to your controller to navigate the menu; there's no implementation of the guitar input for moving through the user interface.

Technical issues aside, let's answer the burning question: does *Rocksmith* teach you how to play the guitar? Yes, at a basic level, but more importantly it sets you on the right track by teaching you the techniques you need to play certain songs and string together plenty of chords to make your own sounds. You won't be able to get on stage and rock out with a pack of college kids, but once you've mastered *Rocksmith*, you will be well on your way. From there on out, it's up to you to grab a couple of books on the theory, jam with friends, find a human instructor, or buy a copy of Guitar Pro, download some tablature and keep going down the long road of practice makes perfect. NAG

- GeometriX

1 While the game requires real-time input from your guitar, the feedback is in snippets of pre-recorded audio. This leads to a little bit of aural confusion at first (especially when you only slightly miss a note), but it's not noticeable once you pick up the pace and start to play all the notes in a song. If you want to hear just your own strumming, there's a free play mode with customisable amps and pedals with which you can play.

2 *Rocksmith* features a set of mini-games in the form of Guitarcade which help you to practise finger exercises like scales, slides and bends while competing for high scores.



82

***Rocksmith* is held back from perfection by a few technical issues, but it's the best real guitar learning experience you can have right now on your gaming console or PC. It's challenging, exciting and, above all – practical.**

PLUS

Wide variety of lessons, songs and exercises / Excellent learning tool

MINUS

Poorly implemented interface / Practising individual phrases and chords is a sluggish process / Long (and too frequent) loading

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PC / PS3
Genre
Music/rhythm
Age restriction
12
Multiplayer
Local
2 players
Online
None
Developer
Ubisoft
Website
rocksmith.ubi.com
Publisher
Ubisoft
Distributor
Megarom

Port Royale 3: Pirates & Merchants

Arrrrh!

As the sort that lack action, adventure and intrigue, management games need to have that something special – that hook that digs in so surreptitiously you wouldn't notice, but once it's got you, you'll know – it's usually around 3am and you've just realised that the sun has set. These games don't need incredible visuals, but what they do need is a well organised user interface to go with compelling gameplay. Bad luck then for *Port Royale 3* – it has none of those features.

Pirates & Merchants is, as you'd expect, about plundering and/or trading throughout the many towns dotted about the Caribbean during a time when swashes were frequently buckled and seaside taverns were as much of a place for a brawl as a pint. In addition to single- and multiplayer free play modes (with all the expected sliders to adjust the game world), the game offers up two campaigns: one focused on trading, and the other on adventuring. But both serve as little more than elaborate tutorials and last only a few hours at best, and once you've completed the pleasant but otherwise inane story of each, it simply converts to free-play mode anyway.

While the act of trading and the mechanisms that drive this part of the game are solid enough, the other associated activities of upgrading towns and dealing with national politics are less well-formed. The pirating side is a similar mixed bag: naval combat is fun, but attacking ports is simply a matter of steamrolling with superior numbers instead of requiring any form of tactical thinking. **NAG**

- GeometriX

DETAILS

Platforms
360 / PC / PS3
Genre
Management simulation
Age restriction
12
Multiplayer
Local
None
Online
4 players
Developer
Gaming Minds Studio
Website
www.port-royale3.com
Publisher
Kalypso Media
Distributor
Silverscreen Trading

55

Most players will ultimately play somewhere in the middle of *Port Royale 3*'s offering, and if you do so, you'll be able to keep yourself entertained for a few hours with the game's finer points; past that, there's not enough depth to the management aspects to keep one coming back for much longer.

PLUS
It's fun for a bit / Naval combat is entertaining

MINUS
Bulky user interface / Few overall tactical challenges / Management aspects lack depth / Dated visuals

Everything Else

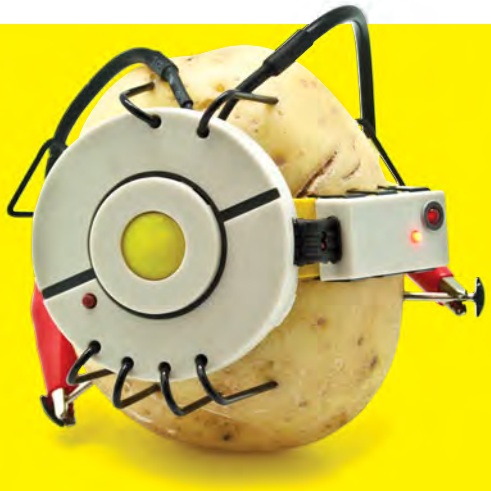
Bits and bobs that can all be filed under gaming lifestyle

ADVENTURE TIME: FINN 10" SUPER POSEABLE FIGURE

If you're not familiar with *Adventure Time*, you're probably on the safer side of sanity, but for those who have become lost to this terrifyingly hilarious cartoon, this is just what you need to show your love. This deluxe version of Finn has interchangeable faces mounted *inside his head*, a busted-up sword and a big ol' green backpack (which we couldn't figure out how to fit, but we're sure you'll manage because you're probably a lot smarter than us).
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R380

MAGIC: THE GATHERING: RETURN TO RAVNICA EXPANSION PACK

Just last month we told you about M13 – this year's collection of new core cards for Magic: The Gathering. Return to Ravnica is the next expansion for this popular card game and can be yours in the form of themed, dual-element intro packs (each includes two boosters and playing instructions), booster packs and a "fat pack", for a total of 274 cards. This new edition sees a return of the Exile mechanic, and introduces Populate (a nasty little ability that will help anyone grow their armies of tokens to almost preposterous scales) as well as Overload – a menacing ability that can turn innocent and cheap spells into game-changers.
Supplier: Blowfish Entertainment
RRP: R189.95 (intro packs); R49.95 (booster packs); R499.95 (fat packs)

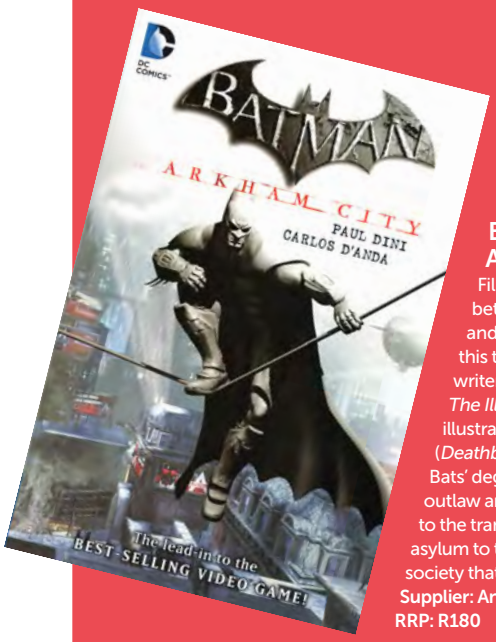


PORTAL 2: POTATOS SCIENCE KIT

Potatoes are power! Plug this DIY spud-powered GladOS kit into any real, actual potato and witness it come to life. If you've been looking for an opportunity to combine your love of starchy tubers with sarcastic AI, you won't find a better one that this.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R345

FEAR ITSELF

Avengers! Nazis! Bright colours! Punchy text! It's a big fat trade paperback about superheroes and supervillains, expertly illustrated by Stuart Immonen and written by Matt Fraction to the level that you'd expect from Marvel.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R320

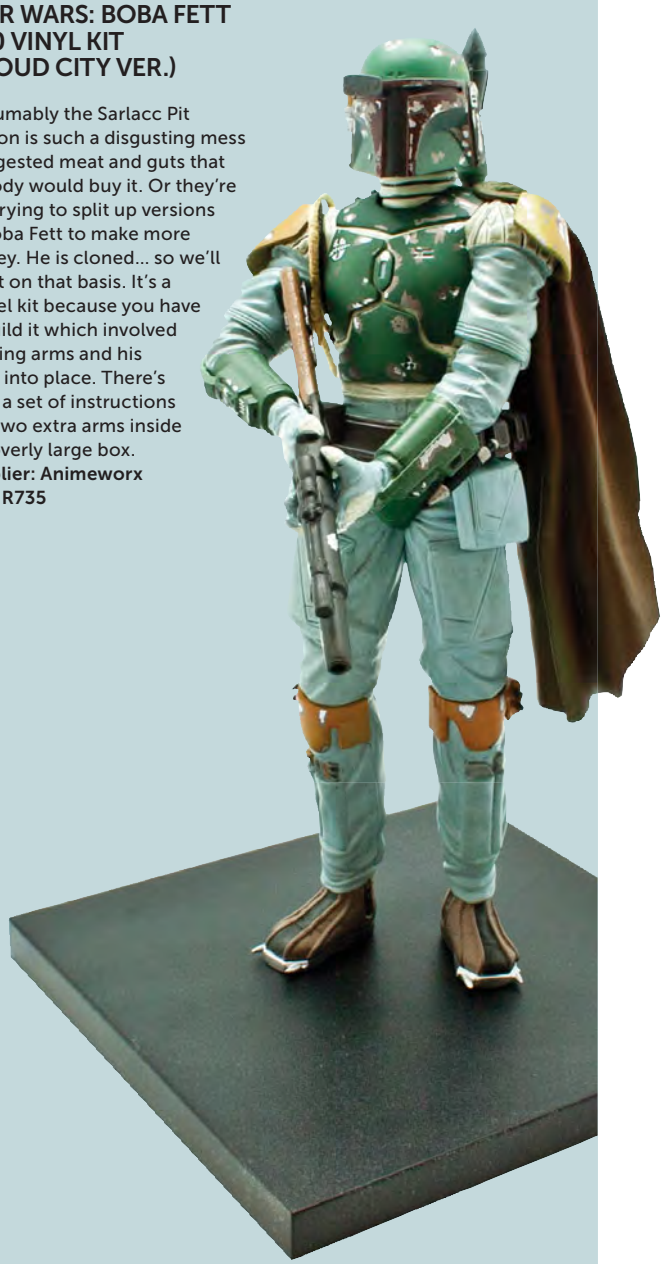


BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY

Fill in those narrative gaps between *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City* with this trade paperback from writer Paul Dini (*Batman: The Illustrated Series*) and illustrator Carlos D'anda (*Deathblow*). The story follows Bats' degradation from hero to outlaw and introduces readers to the transition of the infamous asylum to the practically free society that it becomes.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R180

STAR WARS: BOBA FETT 1/10 VINYL KIT (CLOUD CITY VER.)

Presumably the Sarlacc Pit version is such a disgusting mess of digested meat and guts that nobody would buy it. Or they're just trying to split up versions of Boba Fett to make more money. He is cloned... so we'll buy it on that basis. It's a model kit because you have to build it which involved pushing arms and his head into place. There's even a set of instructions and two extra arms inside the overly large box.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R735



THEMED SKELANIMALS

Just when you thought these undead plushies couldn't get any more adorable, they've started playing dress-up as characters from the Toynami, Warner and DC stables.
Supplier: Animeworx
RRP: R465 (full-size); R170 (clip-ons)

DREAMMACHINE

A new headset and the fastest SSD money can buy right now. All these come together in this issue to make an already great machine, that much closer to perfection. The price is high, but the gaming experience unparalleled.

Cooler Master Silent Pro M2 1500Watt PSU
R3,300 / www.coolermaster.com

GIGABYTE GV-N680SO-2GD
R7,329 / www.gigabyte.com

NEW

Corsair Neutron GTX 240GB
R2,499 / www.corsair.com

Seagate Barracuda 3TB
R1,799 / www.seagate.com

Cooler Master COSMOS II
R3,399 / www.coolermaster.com

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

GIGABYTE Aivia Osmium Mechanical Gaming Keyboard
R1,299 / www.gigabyte.com

Roccat Kone [+]
R899 / www.roccat.org

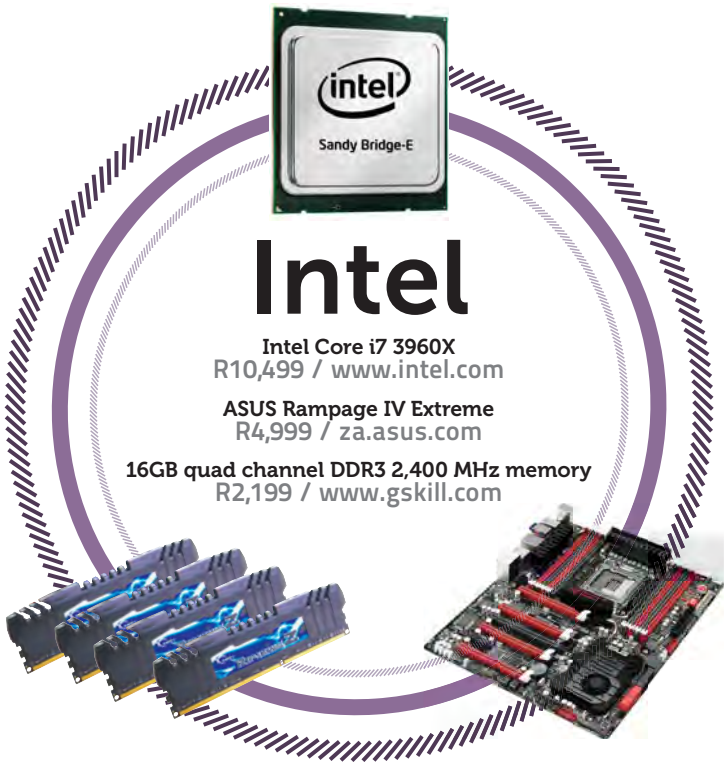
Roccat Alumic
R319 / www.roccat.org

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

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

NEW

Creative Labs Sound Blaster Recon3D Omega
R2,995/ www.creativelabs.com



Intel

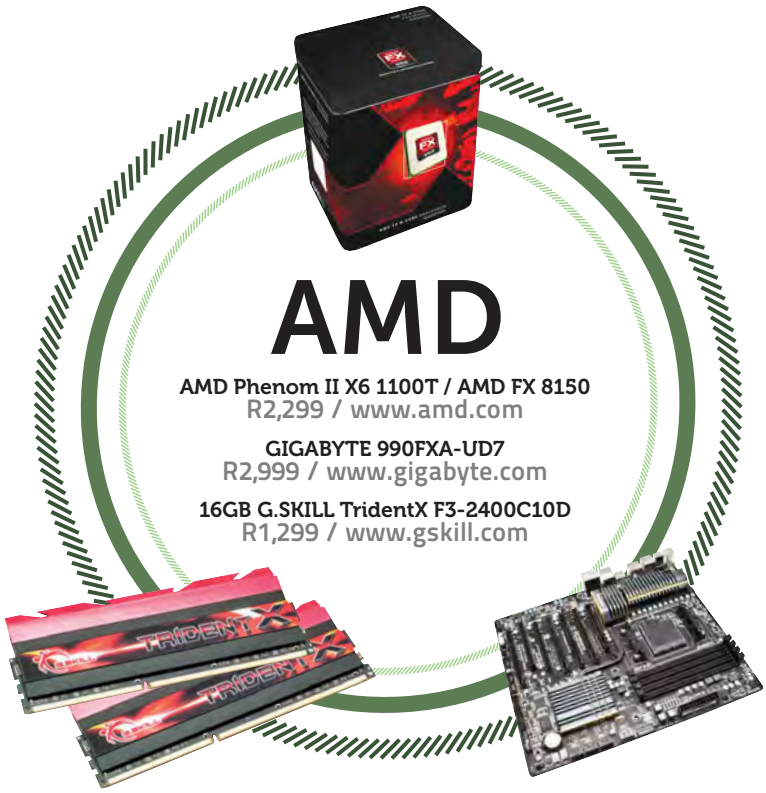
Intel Core i7 3960X
R10,499 / www.intel.com

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

16GB quad channel DDR3 2,400 MHz memory
R2,199 / www.gskill.com

Intel Dream Machine price:

R58,632



AMD

AMD Phenom II X6 1100T / AMD FX 8150
R2,299 / www.amd.com

GIGABYTE 990FXA-UD7
R2,999 / www.gigabyte.com

16GB G.SKILL TridentX F3-2400C10D
R1,299 / www.gskill.com

AMD Dream Machine price:

R41,533

Hardwired

Technology and you

There aren't many ways in which technology progresses in this world. There's the natural progression of miniaturization and maturity and then there's the other, more natural force which is the introduction and evolution of technologies from pure necessity and nothing else. As with most things, it's best if these are both present in the technological evolution.

Smartphones are a great example of miniaturization. That is how we have quad core host CPUs and fairly competent GPUs in our phones. That there's very little to do with them is a direct consequence of this miniaturization process. It's true that technology allows us to be more innovative and dream grander dreams than before, however that only holds provided that the progress we make in our devices is tethered to our imagination in some meaningful way. In the case of smartphones, or "super phones", it is not.

Simply put, from the days of the first cellular phones, at least GSM phones, we've had the same compression and voice quality as we do today. So that's at least 25 years of cellular technology in the public space that's not changed in any way. That we still have

> "Everything in and around the phones has improved other than the primary function."

trouble hearing people on our phones sometimes is something that should be concerning to all of us. Imagine if telephone quality improved a little – to 22 KHz with a 16-bit sample rate, for example. That would be significantly better than what we have right now. It doesn't necessarily have to be these properties, but I use them just to highlight how poor the audio quality we accept on our phones is.

Everything in and around the phones has improved other than the primary function. So we've essentially ended up with very powerful computers which happen to have telephonic capabilities.

On the flip side to that, we have surface/touch computing that's becoming ever more prevalent. This kind of interaction with computing devices is a necessary progression because it's the most natural way to interact with anything. Be it touch, speech and everything in between, the only thing preventing that kind of interaction was the lack of computing power. Now that we are creeping ever more steadily to teraflop processing in our everyday devices, it'll only be a matter of time before we have a massive convergence between all sensory input, and natural speech interaction.

How simple it will seem will be a direct measure of how far we've come in processing capabilities. This is but one instance of necessity driving technology. With such possibilities our imaginations are once again liberated from the plateau which we find ourselves in presently.

Technology is more inspired when it addresses a fundamental problem for humanity or society. Powerful phones work to the exclusion of some, whereas complete sensory input computing and interaction works to the inclusion of most if not everyone. Both are progressions in technology, but underpinned differently at a fundamental level. That which should inspire any kind of research or scientific endeavor should necessarily be, "How would the world be improved if we eliminated this problem or hurdle?" rather than "What can we add to something that already exists?"

- Neo Sibeko

TECHNEWS

KNOW**YOUR**TECHNOLOGY

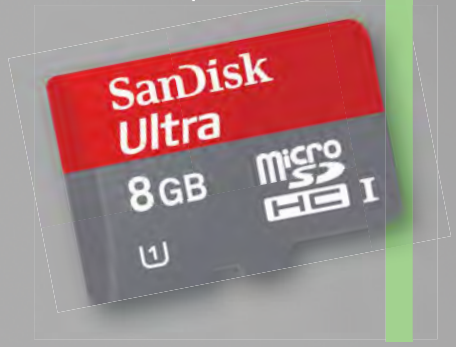
AIFF
AIFF is an audio file format that was commonly used on Apple Macintosh systems of old. The standard caught traction and is still used today in more professional environments as an alternative to other uncompressed formats such as WAV. AIFF is both a container and file format, and as such includes some features like loop point data and musical note samples which can be used by hardware samplers and musical application.

PCI-X
PCI-eXtended is a slightly older expansion standard that was superseded by PCI Express. It operated at speeds ranging from 133 to 533MHz. It was backwards compatible with the still present PCI system, so it was parallel in nature. The standard did not gain ground when introduced in 1998 and subsequently saw its demise in 2004 when PCI Express offered not only simpler logic, but significantly more bandwidth.

PROM
Programmable Read-Only Memory is a type of ROM that is programmed after the memory is constructed. PROM chips are used in cell phones, video game consoles, RFID tags, medical devices and other electronics. A standard PROM can only be programmed once, as PROMs are manufactured using fuses which are burned to program a specific binary pattern. While this is a one time process, there are other PROMs that do allow rewriting like EPROMs.

SAS
Serial Attached SCSI is a communication protocol used to move data to and from computer storage devices such as hard drives and tape drives. SAS is a point-to-point serial protocol that replaces the parallel SCSI bus technology but it uses the standard SCSI command set. SAS offers backwards-compatibility with second-generation SATA drives so drives may be connected to SAS backplanes but SAS drives may not be connected to SATA backplanes.

SANDISK ULTRA FOR ANDROID MICRO SD CARD WITH ADAPTER 8GB
Load your apps, images and, most importantly, games, faster with this high-speed Micro SD card that will fit into most Android phones and tablets.
R110 | www.sandisk.com



NZXT HUE RGB LED CONTROLLER
Keen to adjust the colour, brightness and pulse speed of the lighting kit inside your case? This 5.25" bay device allows you to do just that. You can mix and match your colour options, and create effects such as fading and pulsating. Includes a 2m LED strip
R499 | www.evetech.co.za

DID YOU KNOW?

Ever wonder what it takes to setup the NAG LAN @ rAge? The infrastructure for this year's LAN consisted of the following ...

- 35 km network cable
- 2,580 gamer network points
- 5,300 power outlets
- 1,500 tables
- 2,600 chairs
- 100 switches
- Multiple 8 port gigabit trunks
- 10G fibre links
- 5 days to setup
- 1 day to break down

Mosh Pit

COOLERMASTER ROC MACBOOK PRO AND IPAD STAND

Want to watch movies on your iPad without holding it up? The cross-slit design of the ROC stand allows for easy display of many of your Apple devices. Available in black or white.
R449 | www.coolermaster.com

ADATA DASHDRIVE ELITE HE720 500GB

Measuring a mere 8.9mm thick and covered in a stylish brushed stainless steel casing, this 500GB drive supports both USB 2.0 and 3.0.
R908 | www.titan-ice.co.za

ECS EZ BUN

Simply plug the Ez BUN into your phone and enjoy crystal clear audio through the built-in stereo speakers and omnidirectional microphone. Works with virtually every phone and also doubles as a portable speaker.
R999 | www.ecs.com.tw

"At Dell, we listen to customers, value their feedback, and adapt our approach based on these needs. Meeting our customers' needs has always been Dell's priority - since its inception in 1984. The feedback from customers suggested a need for more options and variety of the Alienware brand available in South Africa, so that users can select the unit that meets both their needs and their pockets. Therefore, I am proud to announce the launch of **www.alienware.co.za**."
Gavin Slevin, Dell South Africa and developing countries retail manager

#40 Mbps

BY THE NUMBERS

Telkom Internet is currently doing a high speed broadband pilot programme. Broadband speeds of up to 40 Mbps will be tested in the pilot where Telkom has deployed new generation access network kits in five areas of three provinces in South Africa: Benmore Gardens, Fourways and Waterkloof in Gauteng; Durban North in Kwa-Zulu Natal and Durbanville in the Western Cape. The trial takes place from now until end of January 2013.

Tt eSports Level 10M Gaming Mouse

Website www.corex.co.za **RRP** R1,199

There's no shortage of fancy-looking, wallet-punching, high-performing gaming mice on the market, but with so many dedicated peripheral manufacturers like Razer, Logitech, SteelSeries, Mad Catz and Roccat, we're still not entirely sure why Thermaltake has been so keen to take on this intensely competitive industry. Their previous offerings have been decent enough, and sometimes a little weird (we're looking at you, Cyclone), but the Level 10M is obviously Tt's way of saying "step aside, sissies, let a real man show you how it's done."

TECHNICAL

Sensor
up to 8,200 DPI, four levels
Onboard storage
218kb
Programmable buttons
11
Gaming profiles
5
Colour selection
four regions, seven colour options

PROS
- Great performance
- Looks cool
- High DPI sensor

CONS
- Not suitable for claw grip
- Superfluous styling and adjustments

ALTERNATIVES
- Cyborg R.A.T. 7

WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT?

Look at this thing; it's like a half-transformed Decepticon! The 10M's showy exterior might look like it houses a number of incredible features alongside a flux capacitor and coffee maker, but despite the flash, this is a pretty bog-standard, if high-end, gaming mouse. The hex grill on top does nothing but let you peer inside from another angle (it's meant to increase airflow to reduce sweaty hands, but it fails at that); the LED rectangle thing on the main button is just there for show; the horseshoe pattern on the scroll-wheel has no noticeable impact on traction; and the seemingly missing bits on the sides and back really only serve to provide fewer gripping positions and reduced structural integrity.

GAME ON

As soon as you fire up your favourite game, you'll know that, for all its flair, the 10M really does mean business. This mouse glides with ease thanks to its overall light weight (which is unfortunately not adjustable) and smooth pads on the underside. The included software is capable of configuring the device's sensitivity, setting up macro keys and adjusting the LEDs – everything you'd expect from a mouse of this calibre and price.

GET A GRIP

The 10M bears a striking resemblance to the Mad Catz RAT series with its deconstructed, industrial styling, and it includes a couple of tricks from the competitor's bag. There are two points of adjustment – the rear palm rest can be raised or lowered, and the whole bottom part can be adjusted to pivot to the left or the right. To be frank, we didn't notice much improvement one way or the other with the latter tweak, but the ability to raise the palm rest is certainly welcome. On that note, if you're the type who favours a poised claw grip over the deeper palm style, then you might want to shop around: with so few points available for you to grip the mouse on its sides, you might find that extended periods of gaming result in cramped digits if those bits that are available aren't where you're used to sticking your fingers. NAG

MSI

A GATHERING OF THE BEST OVERCLOCKERS OF 2012

MOA

TAIPEI WILL NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN.

2012

Say what you may about MSI, but out of all the major mainboard vendors, they are the only ones who have hosted an extreme overclocking competition every year for the last five years. If that doesn't speak of the vendor's dedication to the enthusiasts then nothing else will.

This year in its usual fashion, MSI had seeding events all over the world and the winners from each region were the ones who met this year in Taipei, Taiwan. MSI gathered 16 teams in total, each represented by two individuals. One would think that with five years of overclocking competitions, teams would vary by the year to some degree, but it turns out that this is pretty much the same group of people from many years back.

As such, these competitors are putting on an exhibition for the public more than they are trying to best each other. The atmosphere for MOA 2012 was easily the most relaxed in all overclocking competitions to date. Despite all the mishaps that are part and parcel of live overclocking, there wasn't any animosity, aggression or otherwise negative sentiment amongst any of the teams. This was easily the best overclocking competition in that regard and possibly in other ways as well as we will highlight to you.

THE HARDWARE

MSI chose the X79 platform for this competition but you may think that Z77 was more appropriate since MSI's best motherboard at present is based on the Z77 chipset. However, MSI's decision to go with the X79 platform makes sense if only because it's a simpler platform to overclock and the margins between samples are smaller compared to Ivy Bridge CPUs. The clock ceiling for most SNB-E CPUs is around 5.4GHz and the ones termed "bad" are usually capable of 5.2GHz. Not only did this reduce the luck element in component selection but it also meant that the competitors could focus on tweaking their machines to get the best scores rather than fighting for those 6.5GHz+ frequencies and battling for stability. As for motherboards, MSI naturally chose their Big Bang X Power as it's their flagship X79 offering. The board may not have been to everyone's liking but nobody complained about being held back by any indelicacies, in fact some competitors had only praise for the mainboard, which is rare to hear at an overclocking competition. The graphics card of choice and the real diamond here was the GTX 680 Lightning Edition which has proved to be the most powerful GTX 680 on the market, at least in terms of the sheer number of people who have managed to reach speeds above 1.8GHz with it. Memory was courtesy of Kingston and their 2,400MHz Hyper-X Genesis kits, 1,275Watt PSUs from Thermaltake and Velociraptor drives

More than 1,000 litres of liquid Nitrogen was used during the entire day.

from Western Digital. MSI had a great lineup of hardware, a package more than capable of the task at hand.

THE BENCHMARKS

This is another area where MSI struck gold, offering not only the most straightforward benchmarks at MOA, but possibly of all competitions. It's true that different overclockers prefer different benchmarks but when we asked around there wasn't a single one who had any issue with the three chosen programs. 32M was possibly the most technical as it was not sheer clock speed, but tweaking a lot and knowing how to extract the most from the system. Easily the most boring of the lot, if only because it's not visual and it takes a long time.

3DMark03 followed and things started to get interesting there because it was the first of two 3D benchmarks. Clock speeds were going to matter here for both the CPU and GPU and this is where things either got very hairy for competitors or they potentially secured their victory. The GPU clock speeds for 3DMark03 and 3DMark11 would be similar and if your score wasn't up to par in 3DMark03, you would likely suffer the same fate in the benchmark that followed.

Last, and easily our favourite, was 3DMark11. With records being broken recently in the benchmark, MSI had a great incentive for the competitors (or warriors as they were referred to) encouraging them to not only try to win in the benchmark but break the world record. Suffice to say this didn't happen, but the scores were impressive nonetheless with a couple over the 15,000 point mark. Overall this was the perfect selection of benchmarks and should any other vendor consider hosting another live competition, these are definitely the benchmarks to go with. They are fairly straightforward, visually appealing (other than SuperPi 32M) and without too much bias to any one component.

THE COMPETITORS

Out of the 16 invited teams, only 15 showed up as there was a problem with visas and the Greek team. Many expressed their disappointment as Greece has some of the most prolific overclockers the scene has ever known. Despite this, the competition went on as planned and it's fair to say each region was represented by the best or at least fairly competent overclockers. Well known people such as OC_WINDFORCE, Splave, Romdominance, Hazzan, Rbuass, Ryba, Alva (the winner of MSI's first MOA competition), Smoke, Stoola, Matose, Deanzo, Vivi and a host of others.

Mutual respect was the order of the day and each team was very honest about the capabilities of their hardware when asked even by competitors. The venue had other overclockers as well who were not competing, and the top four overclockers of the world who each once held the number one position

RIGHT: NVIDIA booth babes and rep. Odd to see NVIDIA at an overclocking competition given their position on the hobby of late.

BOTTOM: By the time this photo was taken the contestants had, gone through more than six straight hours of overclocking.

LEFT: Andrew and Vivi representing SA

ABOVE: Joanna and Ryba, who took 3rd place at the end of the day

showed up to support the event. MSI's resident overclocking expert and demigod Elmor all the way from Sweden showed up as well, which really helped sell the competition as the premier overclocking contest of the world and making it the best one the community had ever seen.

THE COMPETITION

The competition wasn't as dramatic when compared to previous years. This was probably the result of the platform, but it's fair to say that the simplicity or rather the absence of unnecessary complexity lent itself to a fairly consistent distribution of results. Team Korea, with littleboy and OC_Windforce dominated the competition, followed by the USA team with Splave and Romdominance and finally Joanna and Ryba. The best looking team of the competition, not because of Ryba, but Joanna was particularly appealing to the overclockers it seemed. Team Korea not only had the fastest CPU, but with so much experience between the two overclockers, they quickly secured a decent placing in Super Pi 32M even though they didn't win it. From then on they simply walked away from the competition at each stage, and in the end it had been a forgone conclusion as to who would win.

Our own South African team tried valiantly but despite their best efforts, weren't able to secure a place higher than 8th. Not a bad placing considering that the two competitors have only ever had a single overclocking session together and they could not prepare in advance. Problems with the VGA card and cold boots prevented them from scoring any higher, but they did submit respectable scores in each benchmark, even though they had amongst the lowest clocking CPUs of the day.

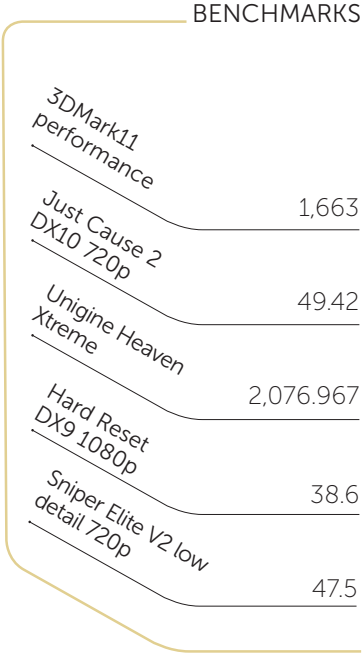
Indonesia had three teams and a fourth Indonesian veteran overclocker Hazzan who had teamed up with the extremely talented overclocker Rbuass all the way from Sao-Paulo. Once again they could not prepare together prior to the competition and they battled with the hardware, even though both are amongst the best overclockers active today.

The New Zealand team suffered a catastrophic loss of two graphics cards and they had to bow out of the competition, proving once again that live overclocking events are nothing like overclocking at home in the comfort of familiar surroundings with unlimited time. It was a grueling nine hours of overclocking and by the time the competition was finished, one could see the wear and tear on the faces. Even though they had plenty of fuel courtesy of McDonalds and Red Bull, the sheer amount of time and concentration required exhausted all the competitors. Having said that, they all came alive at the MSI after party at Hooters, which was the perfect ending to a near perfect competition.

IN CLOSING

In closing, we would like to like thank MSI and all the partners for a great competition. With each successive year the competition gets more refined and as stated before, this was the best live overclocking competition that has ever been hosted. From the hardware to the benchmarks, the judging and the hosting, MSI have become almost masterful with these kinds of competitions. Next year should be even better and we shall return to cover MOA 2013. Until then look forward to the MSI GTX 680 Lightning review in the next issue, the graphics card that was used in the competition and easily the best GTX 680 for overclocking right now. NAG

BENCHMARKS



AMD A10 5800K APU

Supplier AMD **Website** www.amd.com **RRP** TBA

The last six years have been very difficult for AMD in every way. There's no denying that the outfit has gone from being a true market leader in some segments to obscurity in others, and no existence at the worst. One needs only to look at the history as is recorded in the numbers to realize that AMD is but a shadow of its former self.

That, however, isn't news and that's now what this component we have here is about. In fact, this second attempt at their aptly named APU just may swing things in AMD's favor in a meaningful manner. Given that it's taken what seems to be an eternity for AMD's purchase of ATI to pay off. Our first experience with AMD's previous generation A8 APUs left us underwhelmed ever so slightly. The idea was sound but the execution was anything but that. In fact, we were rather disappointed with how it all came together, leveraging a mediocre CPU technology with a less than aggressive GPU configuration. Despite all this, AMD's APUs showed some promise and measured up well against Intel's offerings.

With the Trinity cores, and in particular the high-end 5800K model, we have a different animal to study. Based on the refined and updated Bulldozer architecture, the CPU side of things leverages a few improvements and as such the CPU resembles the upcoming (at the time) Vishera CPUs more than it does the original Bulldozer. Essentially, it's another attempt by AMD to execute a philosophically plausible idea that just didn't translate as well with their first attempt.

So what we have with the 5800K is an APU with a total package TDP of 100W, not surprising there as it's still based on the 32nm node from Global Foundries. In addition to that, we have two modules equaling four execution cores, so in both logic and at a silicon level, if you will you have four execution cores via two modules. The memory controller has been beefed up a little and speeds as high as 2,133MHz are officially supported. This isn't just a check box upgrade but is very important as the memory speed directly determines the graphics performance. This is what we are primarily concerned with actually because this is what negates the passable performance of the host CPU.

Going back to what we stated earlier, we tested the system with different memory configurations. Since this is a dual channel system, memory bandwidth isn't plentiful so every bit counts. If you are going to use 1,600MHz memory then you'll be doing yourself a huge disservice as you'll only get a fraction of the performance this APU has to offer. The faster the memory you have, the better your gaming performance will be. We'd have liked to go into detailed scaling results, but we simply don't have the space here, so take our word for it that you want as fast a memory set as possible, within reason of course. Given the price point it would be absurd to spend as much on a set of memory as you would on the actual APU, but suffice to say those sub-2,000MHz kits are highly discouraged.

The most interesting part about the A10 5800K is that despite its very low CPU performance as compared to the Intel CPUs, when you compare the performance in games, the 5800K wins by a sizeable margin. Simply put, there's no amount of overclocking you can perform on the Intel Core CPUs that would make them comparable in gaming performance to this APU. Finally the ATI acquisition is paying off directly and proof of that is in how virtually all games are playable on the 5800K provided you make some sacrifices in visual fidelity specifically where rendering resolution is concerned. As stated earlier, bandwidth is limited and resolution is heavily dependent on the available memory bus width. As the core of a media center PC or HTPC there is very little that should incentivize someone to look

SPECS

Core
Quad core Trinity (32nm)
Frequency
3.8GHz
Cache
4,290KB (2MB L2)
Package
FM2
GPU
AMD Radeon HD 7660D

PLUS

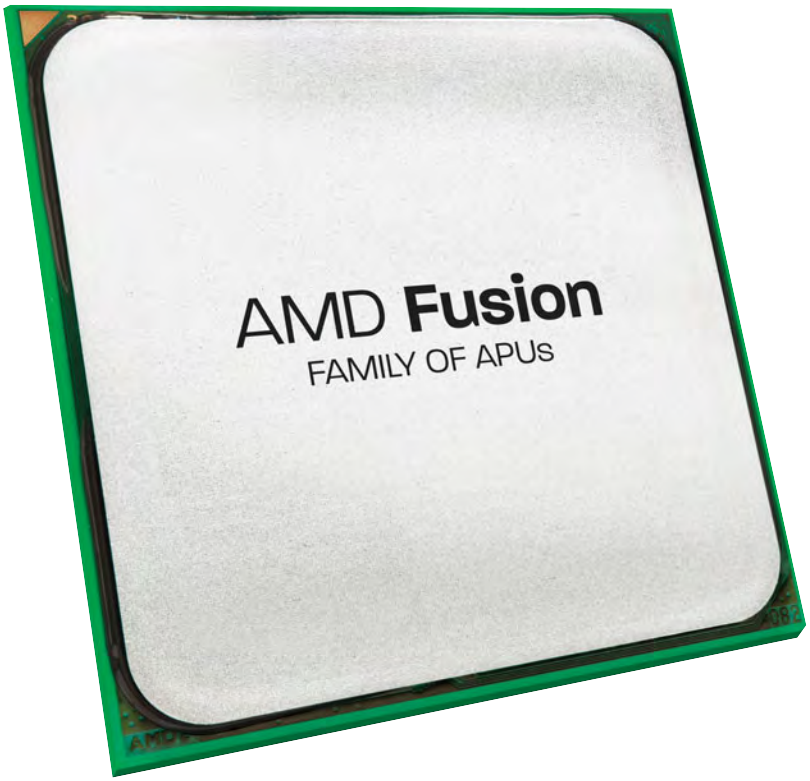
- Best IGP on the market
- Great value
- Pricing

MINUS

- Not as cool as it should be
- Main CPU still lacking

BOTTOM LINE

AMD's second attempt at an APU is excellent, delivering the fastest IGP we have seen yet.



"The most interesting part about the A10 5800K is that **despite its very low CPU performance as compared to the Intel CPUs**, when you compare the performance in games, the 5800K wins by a sizeable margin."

elsewhere because the 5800K and the rest of the family for that matter are truly the first host processor and GPU combination that actually deliver game capable performance. You will be limited to 1280x720 in most titles, but in a few you may be able to get away with full 1080p gaming. For example, we tried as with all the others, several different configurations for *Hard Reset*, but eventually settled on 1920x1080p with the high visual setting. The frame rate was comfortable enough at 38fps, which takes it far ahead of what Intel is presently offering in Ivy-Bridge based CPUs.

We are further impressed by the feature set of the 7000 series GPU on the 5800K. Not only does it support DX11, but it has full compute features and an impressive 384 compute cores. That's not bad at all considering that the HD 4870 from not too long ago had a total of 400.

There's a lot more to say about the APU, but we have briefly discussed all the important parts. Despite some issues regarding specific memory modules we could not get to work, (this could very well be a motherboard issue and unrelated to the CPU) we like this APU a lot. If a discreet GPU is not an option for you, then you have no choice but to go with the 5800K or the rest of the family as you'll not find anything better from Intel. Sure enough you'll have significantly better CPU performance, but it doesn't mean anything for the most part if all you'll be doing is watching movies, listening to music and playing games on your TV. For that kind of usage scenario, the AMD 10 APU is the best bar none. We here at NAG are fans of the A10 5800K. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

CM Storm Recon

Supplier Sonic Informed **Website** www.cmstorm.com **RRP** 475

SPECS
Sensor
Avago 3090 optical sensor (up to 4,000 DPI)
Polling rate / response time
1,000Hz / 1ms
Response time
1ms
Onboard memory
Stores up to five profiles and 36 macros
Cable length
1.8 metres

PLUS
- Inexpensive
- Quality construction
- Comfortable to use

MINUS
- Button placement
- Obtuse driver package

BOTTOM LINE
Affordable and perfectly functional, the CM Storm Recon is a good choice for gamers on a tight budget.

Entering the gaming mouse arena at R475, CM Storm's Recon is obviously targeted at those who desire all the functionality of a basic gaming mouse without having to spend crazy amounts of cash for extra layers of superfluous features. Its low price does not equate to low quality, however – it's a mouse that boasts solid, comfortable design, with only a few design faults.

It boasts all the features you expect, with on-the-fly adjustable DPI (via two buttons south of the mouse wheel) between four presets of 800, 1,600, 3,200 and 4,000 DPI, but these four levels can be customised by downloading the Recon's driver package. From the somewhat finicky driver interface, you can adjust a number of different settings – such as changing the colour of the Recon's LED lighting, assigning different colours to different DPI settings so you'll know at a glance what sensitivity setting is selected. You're also able to create new mouse profiles, assign macros to buttons (with delay options and the like) and more.

While the design of the mouse is mostly comfortable (depending on your preferences, of course), there are annoyances with button placement. It's an ambidextrous mouse, and CM Storm has opted to cater to both lefties and righties by having back/forward buttons on both sides of the mouse – which is fine, except you'll find that your ring finger will constantly, accidentally hit these buttons (which are highly sensitive), which can be annoying when browsing the web, for example. It's a simple enough fix, if you use the driver interface to disable the offending buttons – but it does mean that if you decide to assign macros to those same buttons, you might find yourself accidentally activating those macros at undesirable moments. You'll eventually get used to it though, and once you have, you'll be happy with the Recon. NAG

- Dane Remendes

8

Creative Labs Sound Blaster Recon3D Omega

DREAM MACHINE

Supplier Corex **Website** www.creativelabs.com **RRP** R2,995

PLUS
- Incredible audio performance
- Scout Mode works
- Excellent overall quality

MINUS
- Look at the price

BOTTOM LINE
For those who want nothing but the best and are willing to pay for it, this is a fantastic gaming headset.

Creative Labs has clearly set out to dominate the wireless gaming headset market with the ridiculously named Creative Labs Sound Blaster Recon3D Omega – and after spending some time with it, we'd say they've absolutely succeeded. It's comfortable to use, with a cushioned band running along the top of the adjustable headband and cushioned ear cups that provide enough tilt to ensure a comfortable fit. It's ruggedly constructed, but it's actually quite light for a high-end wireless headset.

It ships with a USB control hub that also houses an excellent sound card. For Xbox 360 and PS3, you'll find an optical cable that plugs into your console and the hub. Volume controls are built into the back of the left ear cup, as well as on the hub itself. For PC, you simply plug the hub into a USB port, install the drivers (which let you alter a range of audio options) and you're good to go. There's also the detachable microphone on a flexible boom, which connects to the left ear cup.

Audio quality is where this set justifies its high price tag. It boasts excellent clarity, with a high-end that never seems to falter even at maximum volume, crisp mid-range tones and powerful bass making this set brilliant for music or video. Its primary purpose as a gaming headset is where it truly excels, and most players understand that, in certain games, a good headset can be the difference between victory and defeat when knowing your opponent's location is crucial. To this end, the hub features a Scout Mode button – which seems to use witchcraft and alchemical wizardry to alter the audio production and highlight important in-game sounds like footsteps, so you can get the drop on your opponent. And it actually works. It's simply an excellent gaming headset. NAG

- Dane Remendes

10

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PATRIOT Intel Extreme Masters 2133MHz Dual Channel Kit

Manufacturer Patriot Memory **Website** www.patriotmemory.com **RRP** R699

SPECS
Density
8GB (4x 2GB)
Voltage
1.5V
Timings
11-11-11-27
XMP
Yes 1.3

PLUS
- Reliability
- Lifetime Warranty
- Looks Great

MINUS
- Default XMP profile sets CL12
- Average performance

BOTTOM LINE
Easily the most reliable set of gaming memory from Patriot.

As you can obviously tell from the rated speed and timings of this set, a performance set it is not. 2,133MHz was once impressive, but now, is considered by the community the minimum speed required out of a set of memory, as anything slower limits just about every platform available right now.

You may wonder then why Patriot, a veteran of sorts in the DRAM industry, is producing such an average set, under a new name. Well, the answer is simply because Patriot is the official memory sponsor of Intel's Extreme Masters league. Intel has a gaming league and Patriot is the official memory supplier for the league. This shouldn't mean much for us, but it actually has some relevance in that it guarantees that each set of memory is tested in the most stringent manner.

In addition to the standard machine testing, the memory is all hand tested and sold with a limited lifetime warranty. You're essentially buying server-grade memory for the desktop, without the pricing to match. It's easy to overlook this as we did initially, but when visiting several memory factories we realized that the testing procedure and binning process for such memory is much higher than it is for regular, high-speed and even overclocking memory. You're promised with such a set that should there be any instability in your system after hours on end of gaming, that it won't be the memory.

Naturally as stated earlier, we aren't particularly moved by 2,133MHz so we decided to see how far we could push the memory without going past 1.5V, but we didn't get very far at all. Even 2,200MHz proved to be too much. However 1.6V allowed the system to boot into windows and it was fairly stable. However, 2,200MHz isn't a multiplier we would recommend, and that's because it actually delivers lower performance than the 2,133MHz setting, so we opted instead for tighter timings at the default 1.5V. The set managed 10-11-10-27 and we were fairly satisfied with these settings given the purpose of this RAM. This not overclocking RAM, but if stability is paramount above all else for you, you should give this set some serious consideration. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

8

Tt eSports MEKA G-Unit Mechanical Keyboard

Distributor Corex **Website** www.ttesports.com **RRP** R1,137

PLUS
- Tactile feel is great
- Primary gaming keys light up
- Well packaged

MINUS
- No audio pass-through capability

BOTTOM LINE
One of the better gaming keyboards on the market right now.

We don't have a lot of room for this review so we'll get right into the meaty bits of this gaming keyboard from Tt eSports.

As with all things, perfect it is not. For one, it's shorter than we'd prefer so it feels a little cramped when compared to our current Dream Machine keyboard – the GIGABYTE Osmium. Build quality is good but once again not up to our standard benchmark because while it is heavy, the weight distribution seems to only prevent the keyboard from slipping rather than coming as a result of quality materials.

There's an audio controller on the keyboard (but no audio pass-through cable) so you can continue to use your dedicated audio card with this keyboard should you wish to minimize cable clutter. Having said all that, this keyboard is still amongst the better ones available today, and if you can overlook some of the small issues, it's a fantastic keyboard to use. It is feature-packed and macro keys are not something you'll ever run out of regardless of the game you are playing.

The key press is precise courtesy of the MX-Black switches. They do need a little more force because they are the most resistive switches available in the range, but you soon get used to the force required and it actually becomes pretty hard to go back to gaming on a membrane keyboard afterwards. Maybe not the best for typing, but for gaming, there are few keyboards that can claim to have a better feel to the key-presses.

Overall, this is a well put together package; it actually has significantly more going for it that we are able to express here and the price is incredible. The Meka G-Unit may be competing in an increasingly crowded market but it's certainly amongst the top runners and definitely worth considering. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

8

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Z68 + 2nd Gen. Intel® Core™ procesor	3DMark Vantage (Performance)
Discrete GPU Performance	up to 50%
Z77 + Discrete GPU + 3rd Gen. Intel® Core™ procesor + Virtu MVP	
Z68 + Discrete GPU + 2nd Gen. Intel® Core™ procesor	3DMark Vantage (Extreme)

Benchmarks for reference only. Results may differ according to system configuration.

*PCIe Gen. 3 is dependent on CPU and expansion card compatibility.
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Corsair Neutron Series 240GB SSDs

DREAM MACHINE

Supplier Frontosa **Website** www.frontosa.co.za **RRP** R2,499

Do not be alarmed by the double SSD review in this issue. It is not a comparison but a parallel review of the first two SSDs from Corsair's new line-up of drives. They are essentially identical drives, but the GTX offers slightly better performance at an ever slightly steeper price.

Before we get into the performance, it's worth detailing what makes the Neutron drives different from Corsair's previous offerings. These are the first drives from the manufacturer that feature the LAMB LM87800 controller. With this series,or at least thus far, the typical and common SF-2000 series controllers have been replaced by what is looking like a very good controller in all regards.

Of paramount importance is that this controller doesn't suffer the performance shortfall that SandForce-powered drives are prone to. Compressed and uncompressible data work equally well and, more than that, the numbers we obtained with these drives were nothing short of amazing.

As a side note, do not be alarmed with the vastly different numbers in the benchmark results. We moved to a new methodology and a mixture of suites here at NAG for testing SSDs. The results are not comparable with previous SSD reviews directly, but suffice to say the new suite better reflects the drives claims than before, where we were getting nowhere near the advertised performance (especially IOPS) with any drive.

SSDs are pretty much the same aesthetically, so there's nothing to say about that, but inside is where the magic happens and there's lots of that within these drives. The measured and tested performance of these drives was surprisingly close. This isn't in the sequential transactions speeds per say, but the IOPS performance was analogous to the claims Corsair makes on the packaging. Something important and rarely ever seen when dealing with storage.

We recorded read and write IOPS performance numbers that were above 85% of Corsair's claims. By the same token we also noticed that there really isn't much between the GTX and the regular drive. We initially thought something had gone wrong with our data, but upon repeated testing under different conditions we concluded that our data was indeed correct. The regular Neutron drive only suffered against the GTX in sequential writes and maximum IO response time. To put into perspective how little this means we should make you aware that the Neutron beat our previous fastest drive, the Plextor M3 PRO, in sequential write operations. While we can't re-run the Plextor M3 PRO tests again with the new suite, we are confident in saying the Neutron drive would be faster, and obviously the GTX even faster. Part of that speed is due to the Toshiba 2nm Toggle NAND used within the drives.

We are happy to say that the troubles that plagued the previous SF-based drives from Corsair are gone. All we experienced was blisteringly quick performance. Not only did Corsair manage to produce two notable drives, but they are now offering a five year warranty on the drives, which is marvellous considering that only Intel was willing to cover the life of their SSDs for that amount of time.

There just really isn't anything to dislike about these drives. They get our vote and the Neutron GTX becomes the new NAG Dream Machine SSD. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

SPECS
Controller
LAMB LM8700
NAND type
24nm Toggle NAND
Form factor
2.5"
Interface
SATA 6Gbps

PLUS
- Very fast SSDs
- Fast with compressed and uncompressed data
- Five year warranty

MINUS
- Nothing

BOTTOM LINE
Corsair's Neutron family of drives are blisteringly quick, but affordable.

BENCHMARKS

BASELINE: NEUTRON GTX

Average read	457.3 473.6
Average write	370.9 496
4K read (QD16)	284.9 294.3
4K write	316.2

9

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With Campuses Across The Globe OUR WORLD IS YOUR STAGE

Build quality on the Sonuz pair is as with the Sirus: **impressive through the use of solid materials and attention to detail** rivalling that of headphones costing ten times the price.

CM Storm Sonuz Gaming Headset

Distributor Sonic Informed **Website** www.sonicinformed.co.za **RRP** R820

As a result of our previous experience with the Sirus headset from CM Storm almost a full calendar year ago, our expectations of the Sonuz headset were inherently high. The previous headset blew us away in acoustic agility and precision. For a gaming headset the Sirus remains one of the most underrated products around, but easily the best.

The Sonuz for all intents and purposes is a lesser version of the Sirus. As such it comes in at a lower price point and without many of the extras that were present on the Sirus, mainly the surround sound support and the audio controller hub. This in itself isn't an issue at all because the audio hub on the Sirus wasn't particularly useful because all the magic was in the headset itself. So this isn't a loss at all as far as we're concerned.

Build quality on the Sonuz pair is as with the Sirus: impressive through the use of solid materials and attention to detail rivalling that of headphones costing ten times the price. From here on in we'll have to assume this is an inherent feature of CM Storm products as they really do stand out in this regard while other competing products are gimmicky and feel flimsy through the use of cheap materials.

A direct comparison with the Sirus unit was not possible because we changed audio cards and as such, any variances in the sound quality could have easily been attributed to the different hardware. However, despite the differences, it was very obvious that the Sirus still had an edge in performance. The difference between the two varies depending on the usage but it's fairly easy to pick up on especially when listening to the highly detailed audio passages. The Sonuz drivers are much bigger at 53mm, but they just aren't as responsive. The sound isn't necessarily duller, but it just isn't as inspiring even though it's far superior to many other gaming headsets. To get the best from the Sonuz however, you'll still need a dedicated or at least 3rd-party audio solution as the generic on-board offerings are still no match for these much like it was with the Sirus.

Another favourable aspect of this set, often overlooked, is comfort. The Sonuz set is very comfortable, probably more so than the Sirus, actually. For those very long gaming and listening sessions you may still find it necessary to own both sets, if only because you can game for many more hours on these.

SPECS

Frequency response
10 ~ 20,000 Hz
Impedance
45 Ohm
Input sensitivity
93dB
Driver size
53mm

PLUS
- Very comfortable
- Acoustics
- Build quality

MINUS
- Nothing

BOTTOM LINE
One of the better gaming headsets currently. Unmatched acoustics at this price.

The Sonuz headphones feature a robust and sensitive removable microphone only made better by the fact that you can install it on either side of the headphones. The performance of the microphone is as you'd expect: clear and relatively sensitive to the angle at which it's placed. It eliminates background noise sufficiently that it may negate the need to have noise cancelling features as found on some recent sound cards.

Back to the audio performance, and we have to say, given the price differences between this set and the Sirus, we would still advocate for the Sirus as it really is a class above. If your budget is very stringent then obviously you'll have to settle for the Sonuz. Despite the slightly lower acoustic performance, for the price you're unlikely to find a better gaming solution. CM Storm has once again produced a winner and this should prove a favourite amongst gamers. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

8

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BENCHMARKS

BASELINE: ASUS Rampage IV Extreme

3DMark Vantage CPU	32,874 46,760
Cinebench 11.5	9.45 13.43
AIDA 64 Copy	28,514MB/s 20,396MB/s
3DMark03	112,431 127,025

SPECS
Chipset
Intel Z77
Memory
4x 240-pin DDR3
CPU support
Intel Core i7 SNB/IB (LGA1155)
Slots
4x PCIe 3.0 x16, 3x PCIe x1

HARDWARE

GIGABYTE Z77X-UP7

Supplier Rectron **Website** www.gigabyte.com **RRP** R5,500

After having reviewed so many Z77 motherboards here at NAG, what has become very clear to us, and probably you the reader, is that pretty much any Z77 motherboard on the market is relatively good. Not surprising given that it's a relatively simple platform, much like its predecessor the P67 and Z68. Granted, things are somewhat more detailed with Z77, it doesn't change the fact that if a vendor sticks to Intel's guidelines and builds from there, they'll have a solid motherboard.

So after so many iterations of GIGABYTE Z77 motherboards in particular one would imagine there just isn't anything more to be said about them. We loved the UD3H, then subsequently the UP5TH we reviewed in the September issue and if you still have that issue you'll recall that we said the only superior board in the line-up was the then unreleased UP7.

Well, we finally got our hands on the UP7 and as we had suspected it's better in all conceivable ways. The problem however is that not everyone will be able to appreciate that, in fact we firmly believe that for the most part, the vast majority of people are better off with the UP5TH as all the additions to this board will be lost to everyone but the dedicated and competitive overclocker.

Technically this board is marvellous; there's nothing to fault here – Ultra Durable 5 technology, 32-phase PWM, moisture protection – you name it, it's there and it's not important to go into that kind of detail here. Feature-wise it's near identical to the UP5TH, apart from the fact that it has 4-way SLI/Crossfire X support. However it's not just all PCIe lanes being fed to the switching chip, no, it's done intelligently so that if you're only using a single graphics card there's no switching chip between the CPU and the graphics card, hence there are no latency issues and you are at optimum performance. Engage several GPUs in tandem however and the switching chip comes into play. So you really get the best of both worlds: 4-way graphics but without the penalty suffered by traditional lane distribution designs when using a single graphics card.

To best describe this board, one would have to say: think of the original X58-OC motherboard, the first black and orange board from GIGABYTE. This may not be a direct successor as that was the X79-UD7, but in efficiency, features and characteristics this is its true successor. There's no need to recount the numerous overclocking world records set with this board, but suffice to say if you have a capable CPU it will not be the board holding you back. With a new LN2 mode and a bclk/CPU multiplier control system that's transparent to the operating system, GIGABYTE has perfected the UP7 like they never have any other board.

Much like the other Z77 boards in this current generation from GIGABYTE, memory is tuned pretty aggressively so memory frequency records, while possible, will be a little harder to achieve compared to what the competition offers. With some tuning this can obviously be remedied, but for those who prefer to reach high speeds as-is rather than tweaking the board to allow such, you may want to look somewhere else. For the rest of the overclocking community or power users, this board is near perfect. You'll be hard pressed to find a situation where this board was the limiting factor and not your particular components you have installed. This board is absolutely fantastic and is very easy to advocate for. If you want the ultimate machine for speed, give this some serious consideration as its better than even we have stated. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

PLUS
- Very good overclocking features
- Great efficiency
- 32-phase PWM
- 4-way SLI/Crossfire X

MINUS
- Nothing

BOTTOM LINE
The Z77X-UP7 is an overclocker's dream motherboard. Easily in competition for the best Z77 motherboard ever made.

9

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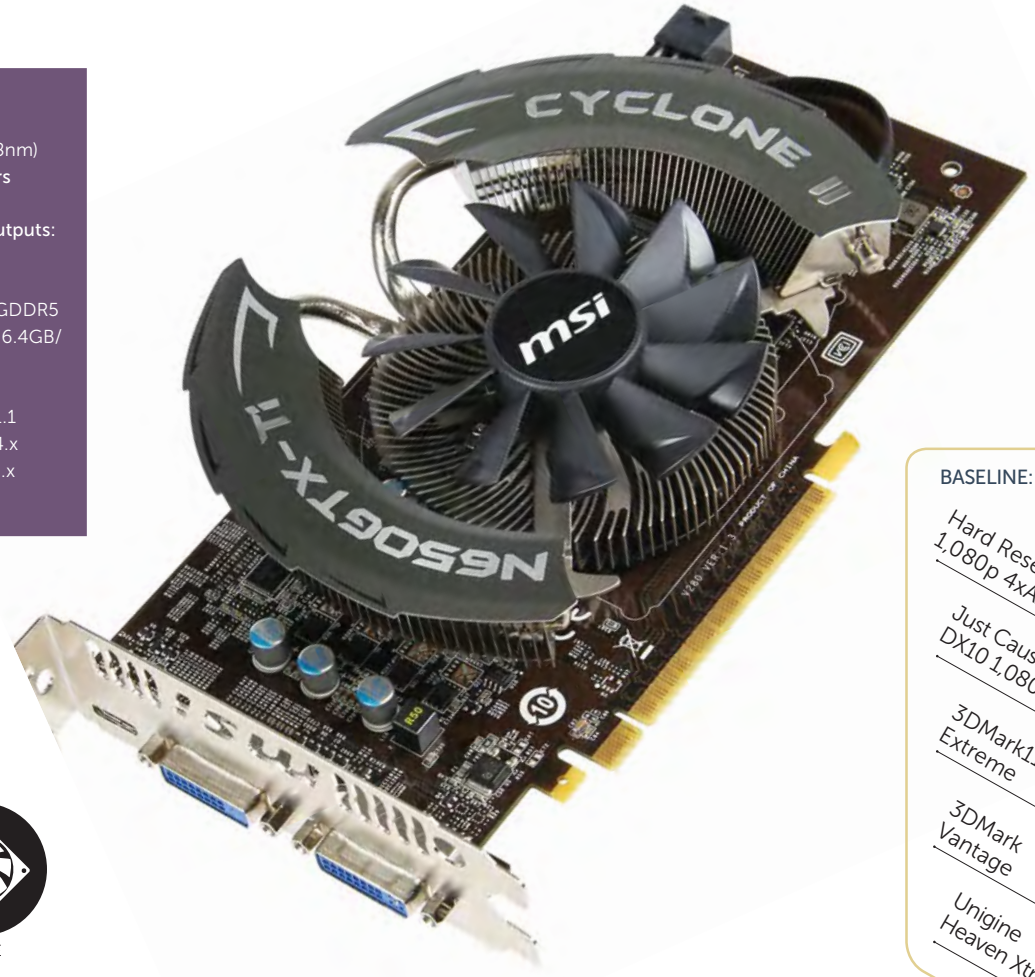
MOVEMBER AND SONS

SPECS
Core
GK106 (28nm)
Processors
768
Render outputs:
16
Memory
1,024MB GDDR5
5.4GHz (86.4GB/sec)
API
DirectX 11.1
OpenGL 4.x
OpenCL 1.x
PhysX



HARDWARE

BENCHMARKS
BASELINE: ASUS GEFORCE GTX680

Hard Reset DX9 1,080p 4xAA	42 99.6
Just Cause 2 DX10 1,080p	73.82 155.72
3DMark11 Extreme	1,534 3,343
3DMark Vantage	19,316 39,722
Unigine Heaven Xtreme	881.9,506 1,871.607

MSI GTX 650Ti Power Edition

Distributor Corex **Website** www.msi.com **RRP** R1,999

The first thing we need to mention before we get into detail about this graphics card is that NVIDIA has been rather silly in naming or segmenting their graphics cards of late. The GTX 650 Ti is a great example to this. One would think that the difference between the underwhelming GTX 650 and the 650 Ti is clock speeds or at most a few more shader cores. However nothing could be further from the truth. The GTX 650 Ti we have here features exactly double the number of compute cores that the GTX 650 has at a total of 768 versus 384 on the GTX 650. How this is only worth a "Ti" at the end is perplexing but we are glad such a part exists, if only to redeem the 650 SKU from complete ridicule. To further make this naming scheme odd, the GTX 650 Ti is actually based on the GK106 silicon and not the GK107 as the 650 is.

With a more capable core at its disposal, the GTX 650 Ti packs a total of 16 render outputs for a 15.9Gpixel/s fill-rate. Definitely not impressive by any means but it does allow gaming at 1080p resolutions so there's something to be said about specs not telling the entire story. We truly didn't expect much from this and despite MSI's overclocking efforts, it was doomed from the beginning if it performed anything like what we've seen from the GK107 parts.

Fortunately this graphics card reminded us more of the GTX 560 Ti than anything else. Much like the GTX 560 Ti as well, it overclocks very well, in fact we think even better. We aren't sure if this is due to MSI's proficiency at manufacturing graphics cards, an inherent feature of the silicon (as witnessed with the GTX 650 overclocking) or both, but whatever it may be, we had some fairly interesting overclocking sessions with this graphics card. Not only did it run very cool at its default settings peaking at an impressive 48°C under load, but the overclocking only increased that to 57°C which is still very impressive. So there's something to be said about the large and unsightly cooler. It actually does a fantastic job and having to choose between a good looking cooler and this kind of performance, we'd have to lean towards the higher frame rates in our games and higher scores in the benchmarks.

How far exactly did we manage to take the GTX 650 Ti? Very far – to a respectable 1.187GHz and since there is no Turbo to deal with, we were constantly at this speed with no random variations in repeated benchmark results. That's a 200MHz boost in clock speed and one that should not only impress the overclockers amongst us, but the gamers as well – particularly those on a budget. Out the box the card performs admirably but add the overclocking potential to it and it starts to make more sense than the GTX 660. As for the memory, it was even more impressive. From the shipping 5.4GHz clock we managed a scorching 6.5GHz without so much as touching the memory voltage. So despite this being a fairly low to mid-range card, MSI has not cut corners with the component quality and it's deserving of the "Power Edition" label. We didn't bother much with further overclocking of the memory using the reference cooler, but we are confident that one could use the 6.5GHz memory clock for everyday gaming and not suffer a single rendering artifact or increased temperatures for it.

Our first impression of the GTX 650 Ti via the MSI Power Edition has left us thoroughly impressed, almost as if this graphics card is better than it should be. If you can find it for a decent price, definitely buy this one. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

PLUS
- Much better than the GTX 650
- Boost clock shenanigan free
- Massive overclocking headroom

MINUS
- Pricing may be an issue

BOTTOM LINE
The regular GTX 650 is rubbish, but the GTX 650 Ti is good, the MSI Power Edition easily the best thus far.

9

Thermaltake Water 2.0 PRO

Distributor Corex **Website** www.corex.co.za **RRP** TBA

SPECS
Radiator size
120x120x38.3mm
Compatibility
2011
1366
775
1156
1155
AM2
AM3
FM1
FM2

PLUS
- Good performance
- Affordable

MINUS
- Slightly complex setup

BOTTOM LINE
An above average water cooler with a good price.

Thermaltake is no stranger to heat sinks, fans, and cooling solutions in general. With each successive generation, the lack of improvement to the standard coolers that Intel and AMD provide for their CPUs give new life to outfits such as Thermaltake. The Water 2.0, despite its lamentable name, is a closed loop cooling system that is miles ahead of what the reference cooler both AMD and Intel provide.

The Water 2.0 PRO is a slightly larger version of the basic Performer model. This increase in size obviously allows better radiation of heat and with two fans installed the performance difference between the Performer and the PRO should be notable. However, in isolation we have to say that the additional fan doesn't do much to improve the cooling efficiency.

The difference is there with two fans, but the problem is that amount of additional noise generated by the cooler for a two degree temperature variation isn't worth it. We would rather use the one fan and use the other somewhere else in the system as it will do a lot more there than when used on the radiator.

Build quality-wise, the Water 2.0 is not too different to what other vendors offer. The tubing seems slightly thicker but that doesn't necessarily mean the flow rate is higher as the rubber housing could just have a bigger diameter.

Setup is simple enough in that you're unlikely to need a manual, however we do feel that there is one too many steps to follow when compared with the H100 for example. This is especially true when mounting the water cooling on an AMD system. You can't use the standard back plate and you have to rely on the one included in the package. This shouldn't be an issue for most users because you're unlikely going to want to upgrade from the Water 2.0 PRO, at least for this generation of CPUs. NAG

- Neo Sibeko

GG

The dating game for gamers

But seriously, dating isn't a game and everybody should disabuse themselves of this vapid trope instantly, although the people behind the UK's *Date A Gamer* website must've missed that very important memo. Among a bunch of others, apparently, but I'll get back to that.

In a recent *Date A Gamer* YouTube instructional video series[1] including such enduring classics as "How to date a sexy gamer girl", "What to do on a first date with a single gamer", and "How to impress a girl into bed after the first date", hired models with orange skin in frilly underwear posing as the otherwise elusive she-gamer attempt to persuade unsuspecting[2] men that dating women is basically exactly the same thing as administrating an enterprise-level network. Kind of, anyway, because even the Wikipedia entry on mixed metaphors has nothing on this:

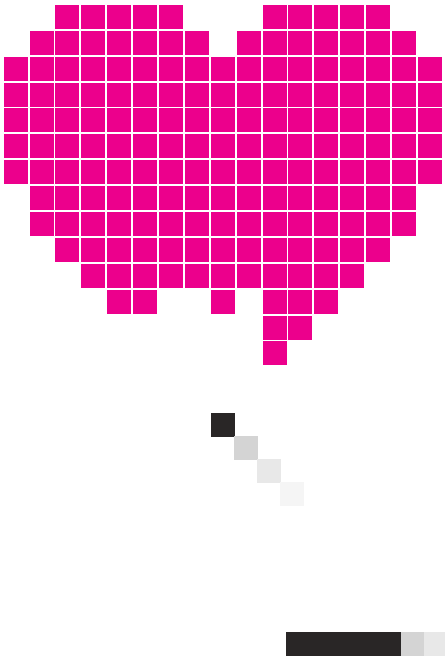
"If he can feel my vibe and fill my bandwidth, it could turn into a physical relationship," says hired-model-in-frilly-underwear Jessica, presumably concentrating really hard to read off a large font prompter, because I can't work out why else she seems so unconvinced about it. "At the end of the day, everyone has sexual needs. And sometimes I need someone to overload my buffer."

Elsewhere, a 1:29-minute exposé of the role of women in video games offers this profoundly thought-provoking conclusion:

"Some men think women are high maintenance. They obviously haven't played *Diablo III*."

And I mean thought-provoking because it doesn't make any sense whatsoever when you think about it, and it makes even less sense if you think about it anymore than that.

There's a whole lot wrong with *Date A Gamer* – perhaps the most offensive being the presumption that gamers are exclusively male and so socially incompetent that they need to be taught how to interact with women like we're a series of plot objectives in a video game instead of, you know, regular human beings just like everybody else.



> "Some men think women are high maintenance. They obviously haven't played *Diablo III*."

Pro tip: We're regular human beings just like everybody else.

The big secret that *Date A Gamer* doesn't want you to know without first paying a substantial monthly subscription fee is that dating gamers is actually totally simple – just be yourself, and what happens, happens[3]. It's also the same principle that applies to dating anybody, not just gamers. Who knew it would be that obvious?

- Tarryn van der Byl

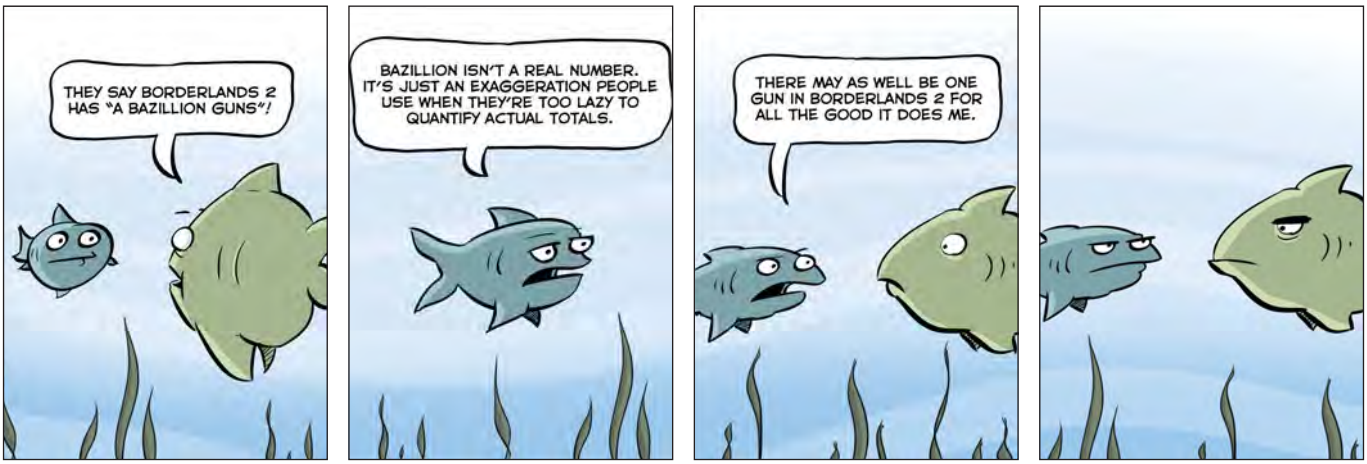
1 Which was subsequently yanked for being too gross even for YouTube – an impressive, if also impressively ignominious accomplishment – and then later reinstated because, you know, it's still YouTube.

2 Unsuspecting. Gullible. Really, *really* desperate. It's a semantics thing.

3 And if it doesn't, blame biology or something. Attraction is way more complicated than a checklist of "PLAYS GAMES [Y/N]?".

Extra Life

By Scott Johnson – ©2012 All rights reserved – ***Myextralife.com***



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GAMING G SERIES

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intel inside™ CORE™ i7

GT70

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MSI GE60/70 powered by 3rd Generation Intel® Core™ i5 Processor are also available now, please check with your local retailer.

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Naga

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