NAG

Vol. 16 Issue **TWO**

PC / PLAYSTATION / XBOX / NINTENDO

16 REVIEWS INCLUDING

BioShock Infinite
Gears of War: Judgement
God of War: Ascension
StarCraft 2: Heart of the Swarm
Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2
LEGO City Undercover

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NAG

Contents

Regulars

Opinion

Previews

Reviews

Hardware

Features

**28 IT PAX A PUNCH
– FOR THE GLORY OF GAMING**
Assuming you exist on the same reality tangent as
the rest of us, you've likely heard of the Penny Arcade
Expo, or PAX. Often known as "the people's expo", it's
one of the largest, most influential gaming events in
the world. Disguising ourselves as Important People,
we managed to sneak our way into PAX East 2013. This
is how that went.

32 AN INTERESTING DEVELOPMENT
We sent a human to 2013's Game Developers
Conference in San Francisco, and said human
returned to South African shores 70% intact! This is a
momentous breakthrough, because everyone we've
sent in the past mysteriously disappeared somewhere
over the Atlantic. Anyway, here's what happened.

44 BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS
There's a new developer steering Rocksteady's
Batmobile, eager to detail the origins of the Caped
Crusader's supervillain-bashing exploits. We were right
there for the reveal, face pressed so close to the screen
we could almost taste the pixels. Or Batman's sweat.
It's difficult to tell.

Games are growing up

Or are they? *BioShock Infinite* has been tearing (yeah, I went there) the office apart and sparking a number of interesting discussion about why it's important. Opinions vary from it's amazing and important and I love it to amazing game with an average play dynamic. General consensus seems to be that it's not perfect but it takes gaming to a new level: an important game for the whole industry. But we're not here to talk about that city in the clouds, I just needed an introduction to set the scene and get to this point where I can talk about what I'm here to talk about: balancing story, narrative and design with a compelling play dynamic, action and the parts that make it a game that everyone (hardcore gamers to newcomers) can access, understand and enjoy. The dream is having a game that has action sequences like any recent *Call of Duty* or *Battlefield* single player experience with a narrative and backstory and artificial intelligence companion and environment like Columbia from *BioShock Infinite*. Old LucasArts adventure games have great puzzles and humour that could be added and then of course the exploration and freedom of something like the original *Tomb Raider* and the randomness of each world in *Minecraft*. Then we can add in the sense of freedom and desolation *Half-Life 2* gives you. Of course let's not forget all the goodness of *Skyrim*. Bear in mind I'm talking about some of these titles and what they brought to the table when they came out. *BioShock Infinite* caused all this debate because we can all sense it's doing something important for our hobby, not like just adding sound and colour to movies but more killing a popular actress off right in the beginning (Hitchcock's *Psycho*). It's

pushing the genre along in what many consider to be the right direction. That direction is games that make us think about them and talk about them long after we've finished them. Games that are doing something different and new and interesting while shunning a few conventions and not being exactly what everyone expects them to be. Whenever a game like this comes along everyone ends up talking about their old favourites and how they might have made a similar game with everything in it that they love from games in the past. The perfect game... The team at Irrational Games and Ken Levine have taken a step in this direction. Let's hope everyone else learns a little something from them before churning out the next soulless shooter or dull adventure game.

STUFF IN THIS ISSUE

Dane went to go see *Batman: Arkham Origins* in London thanks to Ster Kinekor and Rob from Warner. The funny part of this story is him taking a week long holiday at the same time and then sweating his way through the end of deadline week. He was up until 02h00 on the last day finishing *BioShock Infinite*. Of course it did take him over 30 hours to finish the game which is funny because it's an 18 hour game max. He looks tired but happy, like a fisherman with a six foot tuna. See kids, being a game reviewer is a very hard job. Then, because we're all too dumb, we sent someone who knows a little something about game development to GDC – thanks to Werner Scaife for making the trip and writing the words and taking the pictures. Lastly Miktar went to PAX East to report back on that event. I can't remember the last time we had so much convention stuff so well

covered in NAG. Of course next up is the big one, E3, and this year it's going to be something special – like most years really but the new Xbox and more on PS4 will take centre stage.

RAGE 2013

In this issue of *NAG* we've announced the dates and venue for rAge 2013. We don't have information on the LAN yet because we're still busy securing proper Internet as well as servers and the network. You can keep an eye on **www.rageexpo.co.za** for updates but the tickets will only go on sale later in the year (typically August). You can't pre-book tickets because this isn't fair to those people who stand in the queue to buy tickets on the day. I know it's not much information but it's something. :D

Well that's about it for this month. I hope you're all getting ready for a crispy cold winter (piles of new games, hot chocolate and unhealthy snacks; oh, and a blanket). I was going to say a heater but then Eskom won't be able to cope and you'll end up going to bed early in the dark. **NAG**

- RedTide
Editor

INBox

letters@nag.co.za

*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 May 2013

From: Ash
Subject: Hardcore games not fun anymore?
The other day I was summoned by my younger brother because he wanted me to play a game he had discovered. So with a heavy heart I stopped shooting the stuffing out of some bandits in Borderlands 2 and strolled over to his PC. I got to his room expecting something like the new Tomb Raider or something like that, but it wasn't. What he wanted me to try was London 2012, the official Olympics game. I really didn't want to but I started playing some events anyway and it wasn't half bad. I played some table tennis and was losing badly, but I was really enjoying it. I was smiling, and quite a big smile it was. He eventually chased me away and I went back to killing Skags and Bullymongs, but it wasn't the same. I thought back a little while and couldn't think of a game that made me smile like that since I started gaming. Sure there were smirks and hearty laughs whilst slaughtering warriors and assorted monsters, but nothing like this before, which brings me to my point: Are hardcore killing games as fun as the platforms and sport titles?

Really, if you think about it, today's games are all about who has killed the most enemies or how brutally you can mutilate a thug or something, there is no enjoyment in it anymore. Sure it is fun to get the achievements, but the gameplay isn't as enjoyable or immersive as some of the "lesser" titles. There are exceptions such as Skyrim and Guildwars, to name a few. I think developers should pay more attention to making the games fun and having an awesome storyline than just the killing. They should focus on giving us a game that makes us smile like we just found a R50 note in our pocket.

Spot on. While I do still really (really) enjoy killing guys in Call of Battlefield Duty Honour, there's nothing that beats a game that does something different or even does the same things in a different way. Case in point is BioShock Infinite. Now here is a game that is all different while still retaining that which makes a game a game – the killing and shooting and running around. It makes you smile, not because of the fun you're having but rather because of the way it does things. Same result as playing ping pong. We need more games like this and fewer that focus on hiding behind cover, paying for new hats and downloading DLC. The revolution is coming. Ed

From: Letter of the month May 2013
Subject: Muhammad
How would you know if you won a letter of the month prize or if your letter will be in the next issue of the magazine? Do you guys wait till a specific day then decide which letter you liked the best, but how does a person know if his/her letter will be in the magazine? For selecting the best letter do you just add a few letters to favourites then at a later time choose from those letters? I just wanted to aware everyone reading this (if this ends up in the magazine) that the length of the letter doesn't matter; I once saw a letter of the month that was very short. In the magazine is the letter of the month the one that's right on the top and then the ones below it go in order of favourite and best? Who reads the letters and determines which the best are?

Well you did aware everyone of something – how not to win the letter of the month prize. Just kidding buddy, let me answer your questions. You will know when Jacqui sends you a mail telling you that you've won. There is no specific day, but I only reply to letters in batches on certain days of the deadline cycle. This is why you might wait a while to get a reply (but you will get a reply). I read all the letters and then choose the winning letter based on nothing really specific. If a letter resonates or makes a good point it can win. Or a silly one can win too – there is no formula. Sorry. Ed.

From: Julian
Subject: Losing Your Gamer
Hey all you awesome people at NAG. Happy birthday! Hope you guys get as old and ancient as a woolly mammoth. Everyone has their own "unique" thing that makes them, well, them. All of us are wired to like different things in life. This same principle applies to games. Some of us like RPGs and some love FPS. This is a fact. I'm the kind of guy that started off with The Sims when I was 8 years old. I then progressed to getting into RPGs of various kinds and expanded into FPS and Action-Adventure genres. I always defined myself as a science-fiction-fantasy kind of person. But as I delved into the many different worlds of games such as Assassin's Creed, Star Wars, Mass Effect, Dead Space and Borderlands, I felt that I fulfilled my "gamer". I recently saw the new trailer to the new Splinter Cell, titled Blacklist and really got to liking this and matter-of-factly: the entire Splinter Cell series. Now this was all good and well, until my girlfriend asked me this question: Are you losing your gamer? Now this got me thinking. What if a gamer can actually lose his gamer? I mean, think about it. Can someone, who has played games for more than a decade, lose their path? Fall short of what defined them as a gamer? Perhaps, I don't know. The argument is: Do you play for the sake of playing or do you play because you like the game and the universe it is based in. I would like to say that I have been playing because I am a gamer, and being a gamer, it is expected of me to play games and try new things. Just because I have found a new IP I love

doesn't mean that I have changed. Or does it? What do you think Ed? If I refuse to eat a hamburger does this make me a vegetarian? Is it a crime to play all of the games on the market or to stick to what lies in your interest category? I beg to differ. If I had not taken the decision to move away from Sims and try Star Wars: Battlefront 2 all those years ago, I would still be playing Sims, or would I still be a gamer? I probably wouldn't. I would have missed out on the countless opportunities regarding Assassin's Creed, BioShock, Dead Space and so many IPS that I have come to love over the years. The conclusion of the matter is that people are afraid of change. People were outraged because Dead Space 3 changed the direction of the franchise from horror to action (no comment). People hated the review of Dead Space 2 in your magazine because it was different. Fans criticize the new Assassin's Creed (Black Flag) game because it dwells too far away from its roots. I for one am open to such changes, for good and for bad, because without them, we would still be stuck playing Packman or Tetris.

I've always said that you should move on from what you're doing and try different things. The indie scene is a perfect example of this; it gives you the opportunity to try different things without investing huge amounts of money or time. Personally, Minecraft is a good example of this. I wouldn't have normally tried a game like this until Dane said I should. Now I've got a whole world with my own hand built seaside home and an impressive castle on the hill and I'm always discovering new and interesting things. So yes, ignore those soulless drones that are stuck in their ruts. Try new things – it won't kill you. Ed.

From: Devan
Subject: Hello Ed...
Dear Ed. I am not here to tell you how to do your job since in your eyes I am probably a total buffoon or what not. You really give some of the guy's great advice when it comes to the letters they send in, and then again in some you're not so "nice". I don't want to question your means of business but sometimes you're a bit harsh on some off the letters. We all can't be great with... communicating or be creative creatures. Like some of the letters in a few editions. You destroy and terminate some of the sad nerd's dreams. Rather just... block their e-mail as if nothing ever happened. Better not bag me now... Then it's GG WP.

I only criticize writing style and grammar when it's painfully clear that the person didn't even bother reading over it once before sending it. If you're going to spend the time and

ON THE FORUMS

The NAG forums; where all the DLC is free forever: www.nag.co.za/forums

Q: If you could host your own show/expo/convention and you could make anything happen or get anyone to come out, what would be your star attraction?

"Simple - a proper, endorsed Comic Con. Guest Star, D-Piddy. It isn't Comic Con without D-Piddy."
Azraphael

"Jim Sterling. Just so I can hold him... and get millions of people at the doors, clamouring for his head on a platter."
CaViE

"I'd host a series of discussion panels with a range of topics. International guests welcome. Topics include game design, writing and narrative in games and a discussion on video game journalism including a portion of the NAG staff."
Shaderow

"Animation Expo - get Pixar, Deamworks and the likes to have their own panels as well as animators from gaming companies to do workshops."
Bouncer

effort sending a mail to a magazine for publication, at least read it once before clicking send. Your mail needed a lot of work before I could read it for example. ;) What do you want me to do, pretend that I'm some caring agony aunt? I'm a gamer just like all of you reading this magazine. I'm only harsh in some of my replies because sometimes people need to hear the truth; I make it sarcastic and "funny" because I've got readers expecting entertainment on these pages. You've seen those terrible singers on American Idol – how embarrassing. If only someone had sat them down and told them they suck at singing instead of lying to them. I do the same thing – more or less. Ed.

From: Edmund
Subject: Where are game developers getting their ideas from?
Hello NAG developers [*sigh, Ed*] and fellow gamers .I like to start off by saying

I'm not too much of a dedicated gamer nor am I a good gamer. Every time I play a campaign on a game I always play on easy but I play games as a hobby when I get free time. I feel like games are evolving every year bit by bit. But when I see the new titles like Black Ops 2, StarCraft 2 and other new titles I feel like the big game developers get their ideas for the games story lines, game mechanics and races from looking at big games and titles like Quake and the Warhammer universe. A good example of a new game that got its ideas from old titles is Blizzard's StarCraft 2. If you look at the Warhammer 40000 universe and examine the types of races and compare it to the races in StarCraft you can see similarities, for example the space marine race looks exactly like the human race in StarCraft the same goes for the Tyranids and the Zerg they both have that alien theme. To conclude a lot of the games we get today resemble games of the past I'm not saying that all games we

Hubert Knoblauch, "Here is a TRON Inspired NAG logo. I created this in Blender 2.65 and all post was done in Blender's Compositor."

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.

This months Fan Art winner recieves a wireless speed wheel valued at R599. Sponsored by Prima Interactive.

get today are unoriginal there are a lot of new games that have fresh ideas a good example of a new game that is original is Spec Ops The Line with its compelling story line based in Dubai and its new way of making a FPS. It gives me hope that there are game companies that are making new games with fresh ideas. I know that this is not a good conclusion to end my letter to you the NAG developers, but I'm not very sure how to end my letter it's a hard subject to tackle! But any way keep up the good work!

Well yes, and before Warhammer 40,000 *we had Robert A. Heinlein who wrote* Starship Troopers *which was all about marines against alien bugs (propaganda aside). It's better to accept that new ideas only come around once in a blue moon. The thing to look out for is the new execution of the old ideas. Are the people that are copying these old themes trying anything new or different? It's all just a copy of a copy of a copy because we're just a simulation being run in a simulation – or something along those lines. Ed.*

From: Justin
Subject: Lanning
I have an issue, I'm sure just about every gamer and his cat share this dilemma. So here I sit on a Friday night when get a text from a mate of mine saying let's LAN. Sweet, now I don't have to forever alone it on the couch with a bag of chips and the latest episode of Walking Dead. That actually doesn't sound so bad right now... [*Well yeah, Ed*] But I diverge from the point. My pet hate is packing up, and setting up my PC. I know, I know. This coming from someone who enjoys lanning, you could beat me with the irony. So here's my question for the all might gods of NAG, is there any way us gamers can easily move our rigs around with quick and painless set up and set down? A LAN bag does spring to mind, but now what exactly is the best LAN bag? Sounds like a recipe for intriguing

article to me. Or maybe the best place to set up your PC? My dirty little secret is I once set up on stacked bricks and a door as a table. Yes, I'm sure we have all been there. Thanks for your time, keep up the great work guys. Looking forward to the next issue.

We do review LAN bags on occasion; they just don't come around all that often. I can't even remember when last we had one in NAG. *Some guys have their PC on wheels with a clip thing on the top of the case to hold the screen secure. You could also try finding a strong girlfriend who really loves you. Or you could buy a notebook. Or you could stop being so damn lazy. :D Ed.*

From: Dale
Subject: You say Swag I say Gentleman
Does the world still need Gentlemen and their good deeds? Unless all the fair maidens out there would rather have their prison door broken down by a flourish of SWAG. The hero wearing the favourable +25 to strength armour would be replaced with a douche bag supporting an oversized baseball cap stylishly (ya'right) worn to the side and accompanied by his ass hanging out which gets a -30 to charisma penalty. The only reason he managed to slay the dragon was that he probably had an app for that. Without gentlemen there would be no maidens to save. Women create gentlemen and gentlemen turn woman into ladies. No white Knight no damsel in distress. No Princess Peach no Mario. It isn't whether it's cool or not. It's a duty that we have to uphold. I stand in front of you not just a man... No Sir... by the Gods I stand in front of you... as a gentleman. A man ready to do battle against the tyrants that stole thy sweet princess, to be fair she was most likely walking in a dreaded forest without any supervision. Be that it may, the fight shall be fought. A gentleman does not ask why. We simply responded with a Great sword to the face.

THE SHORTS

Extracts of n00b from NAG letters

"I wasn't really sure what to do, but then my brain clicked into Call of Duty mode and my friends become the enemy."
- Muhammad

"Okay, so maybe Paris wasn't such a resounding success but every war has its losses, right?"
- Etienne

"Hey, before I begin let me just say you people at NAG make the climax of my month."
- Carl

So carry on fighting the good fight. Reload the shotguns, unsheathe the swords and put more into the world then we take out. "Thank You Mario, your quest is over" is our only reward. For we are NAG! We are the New Age Gentleman.

Well said I think. I actually wanted a few girls to respond to those questions, but you'll have to do I suppose. Ed.

ON TWITTER

Quack like a duck @nagcoza

Ciaran Sexy-Lemon
@nagcoza Played the Truck Simulator Demo until 3am. What have you done to me?

Gerhard
@nagcoza: You guys are awesome, keep up the good work. My mom saw the December issue. She freaked out at the front page. Then she tried Slender...

Morne Zeelie
Just received my MSG confirming my free year supply on @nagcoza, all thanks to the man cave on @TuksFM1072, you guys rock

Ryan Robin Henkerman
@nagcoza Nice new DVD interface and the April cover looks rather epic

Johannes Meintjes
Ahhhh @nagcoza.... another awesome issue of the NAG... Especially the part where I got sand with my CD. :/

Johannes Meintjes
@nagcoza Don't worry... It's not the disc that makes the magazine awesome :P..... And I just cleaned it with some deodorant... Good as new...

I, Gamer

Saying Goodbye

I feel as if I'm writing a eulogy of sorts; not that I'm one for melodrama or anything. The recent closure of LucasArts at the hands of The Walt Disney Company left me feeling decidedly more dejected than I could have anticipated. The notion that Disney could close LucasArts didn't even enter into my mind when the House of Mouse purchased LucasEverything back in late October 2012. In retrospect it really should have. Let's face it: LucasArts has been in its death throes for years already. Looking back on the plethora of LucasArts releases, the most recent title that I remember really enjoying was *Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*, and that was all the way back in 2002. Adding insult to injury, it wasn't even developed by LucasArts; it was a Raven Software game and publishing rights were shared between LucasArts and Activision. That means that the last true LucasArts developed and published game that I really enjoyed, was 1997's *The Curse of Monkey Island.*

The more I think about it, the more absurd the situation becomes: in eight years, a software developer doesn't release anything that really appeals to me, and yet I feel completely heartbroken at their closing. Nostalgia is a powerful thing.

When news of the LucasArts closure hit the Internet, I got that funny gut-churning feeling in my stomach. Later that day I went home and said to my wife: "Something terrible happened today."

"Oh no, did somebody die?" she asked, genuinely concerned.

"Yes, my childhood," I said with deadpan face and all the over-the-top melancholy I could muster.

"Don't be such a drama queen," she retorted, rolling her eyes.

LucasArts, for me, represented the apex of my gaming childhood. I'd always had access to PCs while growing up, but despite the fact that I played earlier text parser adventure games like *Space Quest*, I never really identified myself as somebody who played lots of games. It was the early SCUMM adventure games by LucasArts which convinced me that video games were something I really loved; they kick-started a passion for something that would end up consuming the vast majority of my spare time. The very first boxed game I ever bought was *The Secret of Monkey Island.* I still have it; 5.25-inch floppy disks, garish purple Dial-A-Pirate code wheel and all. If you're one for believing in that butterfly effect idea, then I probably wouldn't even be writing in this magazine had it not been for the early LucasArts games that hooked me so completely.

The LucasArts of my memory has been dead for years, but there was something unconsciously reassuring knowing that it still existed and that maybe, just maybe, one day they'd experience a renaissance. The irony is that all of the actual people who made up the LucasArts of the nineties are no longer a part of the company. Those responsible for actually bringing us the LucasArts gems are now making other games with different companies. The creative minds are still out there, and they're still working.

So yes, when Disney announced the end to development and publication of games at the hands of LucasArts, I was genuinely saddened. I wasn't saddened because the closure meant that there would be no new LucasArts games; I was saddened because it felt like an official end to an incredibly formative era of my life – even though that era technically ended eight years ago.

- Miklós Szecsei -

Rumour: next Xbox will need to be online to launch all games and apps

This isn't the first time we've heard rumours to this effect; a few months ago it was suggested that the next Xbox console would require an Internet connection. Now, this rumour has returned but with a little further insight into what could be a very negative console feature for many South Africans. New sources (that have unfortunately been proven to be 100% accurate in the past) have revealed that the next Xbox won't even be able to launch games or applications unless it's online. What's more, should the Internet connection be interrupted during gameplay, then after three minutes the game will close and the console's network troubleshooting application will start.

Obviously until Microsoft unveils the next Xbox (rumoured to be happening on 21 May; also don't forget that Microsoft hasn't publically admitted that there even *is* a next Xbox) there really isn't much to get upset about. By the time the next Microsoft console is revealed, it might turn out that this feature has been scrapped.

Rumour or not, this news didn't stop people from taking to the Internet to rant. In the case of Microsoft Studios' creative director Adam Orth, he took to Twitter to voice his indignation at those who did have a problem with an "always online" console. Orth claimed that every device requires Internet these days so why should a gaming console be different? He likened people's concerns to an absurd scenario in which somebody refuses to buy a vacuum cleaner in case the electricity goes out. When challenged by other Twitter users (including prominent developers from BioWare), Orth basically said that anyone who has unreliable Internet connections should move to another area or city that has a better infrastructure. While he didn't come outright and say it, his seniority within Microsoft and his championing of an "always connected" console was enough reason for many to worry about the next Xbox.

In the wake of Orth's Twitter tirade, Microsoft had to issue a formal apology for the "inappropriate comments made by an employee on Twitter". Orth has since gone very quiet and changed his Twitter account to private.
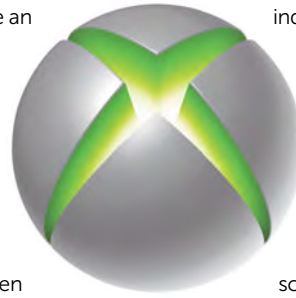
Humanity's last hope goes mobile

Have you ever thought just how well Firaxis Games' *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* would play on an iPad? Well today's your lucky day, because you're about to discover that the game is indeed headed to the portable platform in all its glory: absolutely no gameplay elements will be sacrificed in this transition.

"It was something we were really excited to do," says Jake Solomon, *XCOM*'s lead designer at Firaxis. "We weren't sure if it was technically possible, but with the Unreal Engine it made it easy to port over."

The game has reportedly been in the works at 2K's China studio since before its big brother was released last year October, and will also be available on iPhone, where it'll undergo heavy UI adjustments to get it to fit on the tiny screen.

There's no word yet on cost, but Solomon said it'll be a "premium game", and there seem to be no plans to release the game on Android devices just yet. Expect the game to be available within the next few months.

Sony fostering greater game diversity for PS4

Sony hopes to make the PlayStation 4 appeal to a wider market, doing the so far seemingly impossible act of appealing to both casual and hardcore gamers. Key to this strategy is securing a wide variety of developers.

In a recent interview, Sony Computer Entertainment CEO Andrew House said that "the key is to have people – and increasingly women – with different sensibilities creating different games."

House believes that the console's new DualShock 4 controller will be a key aspect for this wider market appeal and developer variety – more specifically the controller's touchpad. It's hoped that the touchpad will allow developers to produce titles that appeal to a market beyond Sony's typical core gamer. Developers like Tim Schafer's Double Fine are already in possession of PlayStation 4 hardware. According to Schafer, Double Fine has "already got some guys playing with some of the new features to see what we can do with it."

Sony's desire to secure a large and varied developer stable has resulted in them adopting a "developer first" focus when it comes to making development deals. According to Schafer, this approach will win Sony a lot of friends among developers: "All we want is to be treated with just a little bit of reason... Just doing things like letting us patch our games when we want to, put our games on sale and release our games in territories that they should be released in — just doing a few things like that can make a developer very enamoured of you."

Keep it on speed dial

Neon-powered, top-down murder spree simulator *Hotline Miami* was always designed as a one-off game, but due to abundant player demand and a keenness from the development duo, the proposed DLC has now bloomed into a full-blown sequel.

Taking place some ten years after the first game but featuring otherwise similar gameplay, *Hotline Miami 2* sees players take on the role of a new protagonist, although there have been hints that the first game's lead known as "Jacket" will make an appearance. A number of musicians from HM1 are also lined up to return in the sequel, and there will be a number of new bands on the soundtrack to help deliver a decidedly '90s flavour to the game.

There's no word yet on a proposed release date, but it seems likely that the game will be launched simultaneously on PC, PS3 and Vita, with the crew responsible for porting the first title well familiar with the process by now and rearing to go. After this sequel, Dennaton Digital is adamant that they'll move onto new properties.

The Game Stalker

In the beginning

In the beginning, (insert appropriate deity here) made the world. Don't they all start like that?

Nevertheless, one of the things I love most about really good games is the world mythology. All games with a narrative have some kind of backstory, but there are some games that are so rich, so immersive, that you can't help but be sucked in.

I like it when games have this added dimension. The story doesn't merely depend on the action that is happening on screen, there is an entire universe with a mythology that is going on around you, from NPC's personal histories, to the worlds history, racial history, enemy profiles and behaviour, culture, language, the list goes on.

I mention this because I've just played *BioShock Infinite*, and apart from the combat, characters and general storyline that exude brilliance, I also love the context in which this universe exists. Set against a backdrop of American Exceptionalism, *BioShock Infinite* not only brings these ideas into the story in the form of the racist and xenophobic themes coupled with technological brilliance, but also into the short kinetoscope films you can watch throughout the different levels that explain the backstory of The Prophet, The Lamb and the False Shepherd. There are both thematic and very visual indications of the history of this parallel world, one which exists as a part of our own, and so is immediately familiar, but which also has elements of the unreal.

The look and feel of Rapture and Columbia has been thought about from every angle, and it is the immersive nature of games such as these, which contribute to their success. If you scratch away the surface you won't find an empty universe, but rather a rich and elaborate history which adds substance to the game as a whole.

In a similar manner, but on a much larger scale is the world of *The Elder Scrolls*. Not only do you discover snippets about the world of Tamriel as you progress through the games, from the different provinces and lands, to the races that occupy them, you also discover an entire background mythology and history of the land such as the origins of the rule of the Septims, who feature strongly in *Oblivion*.

The history and the land are both vast and interconnected when it comes to cultural values, societies and religions and this is something I really appreciate. Yes, I hate seeing the Biography of Barenziah pop up in every single dungeon you enter, but overall the fact that there are books that actually have a story that contributes to the overall history of the land and aren't merely quest based is the reason the world of *The Elder Scrolls* is such an immersive one. The developers have considered almost every aspect of this land, right up to the varied religions and prolific deities, and you could spend hours investigating this knowledge if you so wished.

You never get the sense that these things were tacked on as they progressed through the series, but rather that they all existed from the beginning, and the various games are merely episodes of a larger, pre-existing and ultimately persistent world.

It is games like these that really push the boundaries of the immersive nature of games. We can talk about the Kinect and virtual reality but these are merely physical things, visually immersive but ultimately so many of them are left wanting because the *stories* are lacking in substance and quality.

- Pippa Tshabalala -

The Kid develops for a while, announces Transistor

After the immense success of indie super-hit *Bastion*, developer Supergiant Games has to pull out all the stops, and then create new ones just to pull those out too in order to top the inimitable loveliness of their previous game. And they hope to do just that with *Transistor*, their newly announced sci-fi action role-playing game. "We're designing our next game to seamlessly integrate thoughtful strategic planning into a fast-paced action experience, complete with our studio's signature melding of responsive gameplay and rich atmospheric storytelling," say Supergiant.

The whole dev team behind *Bastion* is on the project, along with some new faces that've joined since its 2011 release. It follows the tale of a young singer called Red (so named because of the colour of her hair), who's attacked and very nearly killed by a group of mysterious assailants who "steal" her voice. But Red survives, and gains possession of the powerful weapon (the titular Transistor) with which they tried to end her life. Now, Red must "fight from street to street against forces that will stop at nothing to recover the weapon." The weapon also happens to be possessed by a dead man's consciousness, and it becomes both a companion for Red and an unlikely narrator.

While at first glance it may seem strangely similar to *Bastion*, it boasts a number of differentiating traits beyond its move from fantasy to science fiction. There's a turn-based, strategic element to *Transistor*, with the player able to pause the game and set up a sequence of actions that'll play out when they unpause events. The team plan to have it available early in 2014, but they've not yet decided on which platforms it'll appear.

"If poker card games and chess both have the players sitting down and are considered sports, why not virtual gaming as well? There is no good reason to debunk virtual gaming as a sport, and I believe the participants of such virtual PvP events have the same mentality as physical athletes."

-Jet Li, actor and martial artist

Sneak your own adventure

I t's that time again: at this year's GDC, Hideo Kojima unveiled the next game in the long-running *Metal Gear Solid* franchise: *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*.

The game is running on an all-new engine built by Kojima Productions: FOX Engine. With this new tech, Kojima hopes to up the realism ante with some impressive features like built-in 3D scanning (as a dev tool, not in the actual game), advanced clothing simulation and some truly incredible lighting. This new tech is necessary to power a very different *MGS*. Snake (of nonspecific molecular phase) will once-again star in the game, but will not be limited to sneak-fests through restricted game environments: *The Phantom Pain* will instead incorporate the previously revealed *MGS: Ground Solid* gameplay to deliver a combination of the two games: the *MGS* that we all know, together with a non-linear open game world. We're not sure yet of the size of the world, but the gameplay implications are massive if it's even anything near the relatively small scope of *Mafia* or *Saints Row: The Third*.

Perhaps the biggest surprise in this announcement is that *MGS V* is on its way to Xbox 360 and PS3; we would have expected that, with a new engine running the show, this would be a prime candidate for next-gen consoles, but perhaps this is just the start for Kojima's FOX Engine.

A tender age

Double Fine Productions' mostly Kickstarter-funded point and click adventure game has finally been given a name, so we can all stop calling it "Double Fine Adventure" or its codename "Reds". Instead, the game that sparked the Kickstarter revolution will forever be known as *Broken Age*, and it tells a story of a boy and a girl who live parallel lives. The player will control both characters as they struggle with their unique but intertwined destinies, with the girl about to be sacrificed to an evil monster by her fellow villagers and the boy stuck in a spaceship floating in space under the care of an overprotective computer. Both children yearn for freedom and adventure, and it'll be up to the player to help them achieve their goals, and maybe even meet one day.

As we reported previously, *Broken Age* is due for release later this year. While the official Kickstarter campaign is long since done, those wishing to pre-order the game can do so at **www.brokenagegame.com**; pre-orders start at $15 and grant you beta access when the time comes, or access to the secret backers-only forums for a higher price.

More war, less pay

C reative Assembly's *Rome: Total War 2* is coming along well, but the studio has been working on another project on the sly which they've now revealed: *Total War: Arena*.

Arena will be a free-to-play, multiplayer-only strategy game that combines the real-time strategy elements of the *Total War* series with MOBA-like gameplay. Players will be able to re-enact great military clashes from throughout history in epic team-based combat.

The game is currently open for beta applications, although no release date has yet been announced. If you'd like to make yourself eligible for the beta then head over to www.totalwar.com and sign up.

The Indie Investigator

Presenting a game

So, you've got a project going, and you want to show an early build to your first group of players. Maybe you're demoing at a developer meet up or something. You're not really good at making presentations for whatever reason. You don't want the whole thing to be messy and awkward, but you're not really sure what you can do.

This problem is shared by almost everyone delivering their first game peek (with the exception, perhaps, of the truly shameless and Petri Purho). This means that at some point, some people found some helpful ways to maintain that calm, cool and relaxed façade which conceals our nerves like over-applied eyeliner. Here are a few suggestions:

(1) Come prepared. If you haven't had time to write a proper tutorial, make sure that you at least have a command printout on your temporary menu screen, or whatever. If your game is at least somewhat clear to new players, you'll have way fewer stilted back-and-fourths about controls, objectives and your chosen backing track, which may or may not be a sped-up Taylor Swift song. Don't get me wrong, these awkward convos will be a part of every presentation ("no ... no, you gotta hold down the spacebar ... no, *hold it down*"), but at least you can minimise the buggers.

(2) Use an economy of words. If you don't consider yourself very capable of delivering presentations, remember that less tends to be more. Confident presenters are less verbose and get to the point more quickly, anyway. They certainly don't mention three times in a row how strange their choice of backing track happens to be, or that the song in particular was Taylor Swift's *I Knew You Were Trouble*. Over-explaining can bore your audience. Under-explaining, funnily enough, can sometimes turn out quite well: it often encourages people to ask you questions and engage directly.

(3) Don't take yourself too seriously. Remember, you could be presenting that one game idea out of ten that ultimately leads to awesomeness. You could also be presenting one of the other nine. A game designer who can embrace the low quality of an early build – and *own* it – will come across as more realistic and much easier to communicate with. Better still, you get to play the modesty card if it turns out your project is more successful than anticipated: so go ahead and joke about the terrible ninja pug theme that your audience may or may not secretly love.

(4) Be prepared for feedback. Step up to the podium knowing that people will have suggestions for your game. Revisions. Ideas. Confusions. You'll have to not only weather this, but *learn* from it. While it's not as pat-on-the-head gratifying as, for example, a swooning audience or a literal pat on the head, this is the meat of any early game presentation and can improve your design ideas massively in the space of just a few short minutes. Do you feel the need to revise your design... or scrap the project? Or just replace your music with a tasteful edit of *Always On My Mind* by the Pet Shop Boys?

Don't let anxiety get you down. Remember that we're all in this together.

- Rodain Joubert -

The Force leaves LucasArts

When Disney acquired Lucasfilm in its entirety last year, there was plenty of attention diverted to the future of the *Star Wars* film series, but little heed was paid to the company's game development and publishing studio – LucasArts. We suppose everyone just assumed that they'd be allowed to carry on as usual, but Disney clearly had other plans, and has now officially shut down the development segment of the company and terminated production of *Star Wars 1313*, as well as a little-known game called *Star Wars: First Assault*. This move comes just months after Disney closed the doors of *Epic Mickey* creators Junction Point, putting studio lead Warren Spector out of the job.

"After evaluating our position in the games market, we've decided to shift LucasArts from an internal development to a licensing model, minimizing the company's risk while achieving a broader portfolio of quality *Star Wars* games," said a Disney representative in a recent interview with Game Informer.

It has been reported that development of *Star Wars 1313* was in disarray, with the game's storyline and focus having been scrapped multiple times. Before it was given the axe, *1313* was shifted to put players in the role of Bobba Fett, but production stalled following the change and it looks like it might not ever have seen the light of day anyway.

As sad as it is to see the end of an era, in reality it's been some time since LucasArts developed a product that really blew us away: this is far from the same studio that created *Monkey Island, Grim Fandango* and *Day of the Tentacle*. Bear in mind that this does not mean the end of all *Star Wars* games – LucasArts itself is not closed and will continue to act as a publisher, as it did with many excellent titles including *Jedi Knight, Star Wars Battlefront* and *Knights of the Old Republic*.

The world in your hand

Square Enix continues to show its commitment to mobile platforms with its recent release of *Final Fantasy V* for iOS devices. The game will feature enhanced visuals, a custom touch-centric interface and new character jobs including the Gladiator, Cannoneer, Oracle, and Necromancer. The game will launch at Square's now-common price point of $15.99 (R145), and we hope to see an Android release in the not-too-distant future.

SEGA cancels the Wii U version of Aliens: Colonial Marines

The release of *Aliens: Colonial Marines* was a disaster. The game had been in development for years and had had its fair share of setbacks and restarts. However, against all odds, Gearbox finally released it to unanimous damnation by critics and gamers.

It was subsequently revealed that a large portion of development had been farmed off by Gearbox to an outside developer. There were also allegations that Gearbox had used SEGA funding in their development of *Borderlands 2*.

Now it seems that Gearbox and SEGA have smashed the final nail into the game's coffin. The Wii U version has quietly missed its release date of March 2013. SEGA has now announced that the Wii U version had been cancelled. The publisher said in a statement: "We are constantly looking at all areas of our business and in this case have made the decision to not continue development of the Wii U version."

"Game over man" indeed.

Mojang teases a new addition to Minecraft, 0x10c put on ice

To date, *Minecraft* has sold more than 20 million copies across PC, mobile and Xbox 360. Not bad for a little indie game, is it? The most recent sales milestone involved the PC version hitting 10 million copies sold. To celebrate, the game's lead developer Jens Bergensten Tweeted a "subtle hint" of what to expect in the upcoming 1.6 update for the game. You see that rather fetching horse and its owner over there? Yeah, that was the "subtle hint" that Mojang provided.

It looks like Steve and his blocky compatriots will be able to gallop across the endless procedurally generated *Minecraft* landscapes once the 1.6 patch hits. We better get the option to craft cowboy hats out of diamonds as well.

Sticking with Mojang news, Notch has revealed that he's put development of *0x10c* aside for now until he figures out how to make the game fun. Good idea that.

Sanctum 2 exists, builds bigger bugs

We quite liked *Sanctum* and its peculiar but satisfying mix of first-person shooting and tower defending. It was the kind of indie that showed equal parts wacky inventiveness and high-quality polish. We're mighty pleased then that Coffee Stain Studios has declared it necessary to announce a sequel to it, subtly dubbed *Sanctum 2*.

On the surface, it looks like more of the same, but the developers are adding more character and gameplay customisation to its four-player cooperative mayhem with the introduction of a perk system. "To illustrate an example, there is one perk that doubles your clip size and rate of fire," they explain. "Combine this with the Adrenaline Rush perk that increases your movement speed every time your shots hit an enemy, and throw in the Rymdskor perk that allows you to double-jump and do damage to enemies you land on and you'll be a lightning-fast, bouncing & shooting ball of doom!"

In addition, there'll be new tower types, mad boss critters, mecha bug things, modifiers that'll keep levels fresh, interesting and tough, and a whole bunch of other cool stuff. It'll be out later this year.

Miktar's Meanderings

We've (not) got all the time in the world...

I've always wanted every console/system. And, over the last 30 years I've managed to own each one for a time. I traded up my NES for a Genesis, traded my Genesis for a SNES. When I sold my SNES, it helped me afford my first proper PC. From there, thanks to work and life in general, I managed to get and play pretty much every major gaming device ever made. This last generation, my gaming habits were split across the PC, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Nintendo DS/3DS, and Sony PlayStation Portable/Vita. You get the idea. When someone tells me they're a gamer, and then ask what system I have, I'm sure the expression on my face must be amusing. "System? As in, singular? No, no, you don't understand. I'm a gamer – I play ALL the things!"

But this isn't really the norm. It's unrealistic to expect everyone to own all systems, to have the opportunity and/or money to play all the things. And as time goes by, it's becoming increasingly difficult for me to keep doing so myself. There are so many games released these days, consoles are becoming expensive if you want to own and maintain them all, keeping a PC current enough so that 60fps is the norm no matter what you play... it's just not that feasible anymore. Not for me, anyway.

Even if I adopt a picky attitude towards what I play, foregoing things like *BioShock Infinite* and the new *Tomb Raider* – not because I don't think they're good, but because I already know what they're like without having played them – there is just too much. Sure, I could dabble, spending no more than an hour or so per game, but then what's the point? That's not why I game: I want depth, I want systems to understand. I want to play games that reward me for figuring out how they work. There are plenty of games that reward you for having the manual dexterity to press "A" when it flashes a giant "PRESS A NOW" on the screen, and those are fine. But they're not for me.

So now comes Generation 8: the Wii U, Xbox 720 (tentative) and PlayStation 4, and I realize it's time to make a choice. One of those has to go, not just because I don't have the time/money for it, but because I need to be even choosier over what gaming means to me. And since I already own a Wii U...

I've realized that the next console I likely won't purchase is the Xbox 720. The direction Microsoft has been headed of late, with their increasing focus on ramming Kinect down people's throats and trying to compete with Apple for the "multimedia living room", just isn't *gaming* to me. At least Sony, having learned some hard lessons with the PlayStation 3, seems to be getting back on track with what matters: games, and the culture around games. Microsoft isn't convincing me that they're about games anymore. A pity, since the Xbox 360 has defined a generation of gamers, and had such a strong start in building a PlayStation 2 style legacy.

Of course, things can change. I'll give Microsoft the benefit of the doubt until they officially unveil the 720. But the rumours of "always online" being a *requirement*, aren't helping.

- Miktar Dracon -

Maxis raises eyebrows with first lot of free SimCity DLC

Maxis has always planned to bring DLC to the latest *SimCity* game and the first item is now available. It's a "plopable" Nissan Leaf charging station and it's free to download for the next six months beginning 2nd April. So why is free DLC raising eyebrows? Well, it's because the DLC is very obviously an advert for Nissan's electric car. Even reading the information page over on the EA Forums sees the DLC referred to as the "Nissan LEAF®" with little registered trademark icons slathered everywhere. The in-game building itself is also branded with a massive red Nissan logo, ensuring you can spot the automotive manufacturer's insignia no matter what zoom level you're playing in.

The Nissan Leaf charging station provides a 100% positive addition to any city, with literally zero negative attributes for you to have to control. It'll provide an instant but temporary Happiness boost to all surrounding businesses and buildings, and every Sim who pulls up to charge their electric Leaf vehicle will get a shot of Happiness alongside a charged battery. The building produces no garbage and no sewage. On top of that, the Nissan Leaf charging station doesn't take power from your city's electricity grid, it doesn't use water and it doesn't take workers away from your city.

Many people have expressed concern regarding the DLC and are understandably questioning Maxis's motives. Concern has also been raised that an instant Happiness bonus will have a negative effect on the game's online leaderboards.

Lock and load

Since PCs first allowed us to save our games' progress, these little files have become almost as precious as the hardware that runs those games. It's for this reason that local software development company Kratos Software – a self-declared bunch of hardcore PC gamers – has taken it upon itself to launch a Kickstarter for a project that they hold very dear: Reload.

Simply put, Reload is a management tool for your PC's saved games. It will work across digital distribution networks, offering you offline, cloud or manual storage and backups of all your saved game files across multiple PCs. But it goes even further than that, and will even add iterative saved game support and quicksave support to those games that lack those features. It's really quite an ingenious idea, and if you'd like to show your interest in this nifty piece of software, head to **kck.st/YWs8jG** and throw a couple of bucks their way.

Civilization V explores, expands and... expands again

A h, *Civilization V.* Some *NAG* staffers still can't bring themselves to finally give in and uninstall you, even though we've not actually, you know, played you in ages. "Impossible to ever want to uninstall" is practically a built-in feature of any good *Civilization* game, and we're now being rewarded for sticking to tradition, because it'll make getting the newly announced expansion pack for *Civ V* installed and ready to go much, much simpler and quicker.

Subtitled *Brave New World,* this second "massive expansion" (as developer Firaxis calls it) sets its sights on improving trading systems and adding new cultural ideologies, whereas previous expansion *Gods & Kings* was more obsessed with religion and espionage. It'll also include nine new civilizations (at time of this writing, only the Polish Empire has been revealed), two new scenarios and eight new wonders, in amongst exciting new stuff like more interesting paths to take in order to achieve cultural victories. It's due to hit store shelves on June 12th, and by the looks of things will make *Civ V* a much richer, more rewarding experience, particularly in the mid-to-late game.

There's more where that came from

W e have to be honest: the new piratical *Assassin's Creed* looks pretty good, but only because we really dig pirates. If there was a zombie version we'd probably be all over that, too. But no matter the setting, this is a series that's gone from something special and unique to repetitive and formulaic over the years, and it looks like this trend is set to continue until its eventual slow, painful death at the hands of bored gamers who vote with their wallets.

When asked at GDC when the series will be put to rest, Ubisoft's CEO Yannis Mallat said "the players will tell us. Right now there are more and more coming into the franchise, so I don't see that day. It's our breakthrough. When you have quality content, the frequency of coming out with the game is not an issue at all."

Those are some pretty confident words, and we wish that we could get on board with them, but for now we'll just have to wait and see the impact that these annual releases has on the series.

WildStar details player housing

NCsoft's upcoming massively multiplayer extravaganza *WildStar* continues the drip-feed of info leading up to its proposed 2013 release. Developer Carbine Studios has now released info on player-owned housing, which they say is a core component of the game. Bought from specific NPCs, your house is built on a plot of land you're provided, once you've cleared it of hostiles. Your house will generate an array of useful bonuses, too many to fully list here.

Starting with a simple campsite, you can eventually evolve your home into pretty much anything you'd like, decorating and customising its walls, roof, furniture, doors and pretty much any other aspect of it that you feel needs customising. Even the yard outside the house can be altered, allowing you to construct additional facilities like mines from which to gather ore, or workbenches for crafting. Carbine ensure that your house is not just a tertiary, meaningless addition, instead making the lofty claim that it's "woven into your entire gameplay experience".

Items to add to your house can be found in numerous ways, like as quest rewards or random drops. Having a house bestows various bonuses, like extra rest XP when you log off in your house. Your home will even generate daily quests. You're able to teleport to your home from anywhere in the game world, and if you're particularly proud of it, you can invite friends to your house, or open it up entirely to the public.

"I know so many game developers, and so many of them are wonderful, smart, creative, considerate and adult, and somehow those personalities are not always reflected in the games that we make."
– *freelance game writer Susan O'Connor, speaking at 2013's Game Developer's Conference about "evolving the emotional content of games".*

EA's big boss steps down

The last few years have been rough for EA. Despite publishing a few successful titles (*Battlefield 3, Mass Effect 3, Dragon Age II* and more recently *Crysis 3*), even those games were faced with harsh criticisms for being too safe or not quite what the public wanted. On the other hand, titles like MMO *The Old Republic, Need for Speed: Most Wanted*, and *Medal of Honor* – as well as the upcoming free-to-play *Command and Conquer* – have put the publisher in a lot of peoples' bad books – investors included.

It's for these reasons – and their effects on EA's bottom line – that the company's CEO John Riccitiello has left EA, which is expected to post revenues right on the bottom end of their predictions, or even lower, for the last quarter. Considering that this is a man who thinks DLC and micro-transactions are the best way forward for this industry (he's been quoted as saying he'd charge players a dollar to reload their weapons in the middle of a battle, if he could), we can't say that we're exactly sad to see his back.

So where will EA go from here? The future of the company is definitely an interesting one, and at the time of writing there was nobody yet chosen to permanently replace Riccitiello. We'd like to be optimistic and say that this is the time for EA to remarket themselves as the nice guys in the industry – the publisher that will promote innovation where it matters and choose new, exciting IP over regurgitating last night's games as today's sequels, but that might be a little far-fetched. If anything, now is certainly a good time to pay attention to EA – their next moves will be critical.di

Dungeon Defenders announces more competitive sequel

Trendy Entertainment have announced a sequel to their adorably chaotic third-person tower defense title *Dungeon Defenders*. It'll reportedly be more narratively driven this time around, with the team having hired a full-time writer to flesh out the game's world and lore. It'll also be free-to-play (but not pay-to-win, they're quick to stress), which Trendy hopes will ensure that newcomers to the game will always have new people to play with and against. That's right: against.

New in *Dungeon Defenders 2* will be a 5v5 competitive MOBA-like (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) game mode. It promises to be a more RPG-style take on MOBAs, with a much lighter learning curve that'll be gentler on newcomers. In it, your team of five players defends your towers from the attacks of opponents. Playable heroes can be bought to permanently gain access to them, or you can choose from a periodically rotated selection of free heroes. The team promises that the original cooperative mode will not be ignored, with new heroes, new towers and other new features like a 24-player overworld all looking to make their way into this sequel.

The competitive mode is currently in closed beta at the time of writing, so head over to **dungeondefenders2.com/register** to sign up for potential access if it's still available. The cooperative mode, meanwhile, will launch later (late 2013, early 2014), so expect a beta closer to then. It's due out on PC, Mac, iOS and Android.

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Borderlands 2 adds place for a hero

Borderlands 2 wants you to take a revitalised swing at it and its newly announced DLC, the Psycho Pack. The pack will introduce a sixth playable Vault Hunter to the game. Krieg the Psycho is primarily a melee character, with three divergent skill trees dubbed Mania, Insane and Hellborn. The Psycho Pack is due out in May, and is not included in the game's Season Pass. It'll cost you $9.99 (on PC and PS3) or 800 Microsoft Points.

In case you've not yet discovered, you may like to know that the game was also recently updated with the Ultimate Vault Hunter Upgrade, free to Season Pass holders but $4.99 (400 MSP) for everyone else. It raised the game's level cap to 61, added a new difficulty mode and unlocked a new ultra-rare tier of pearlescent items.
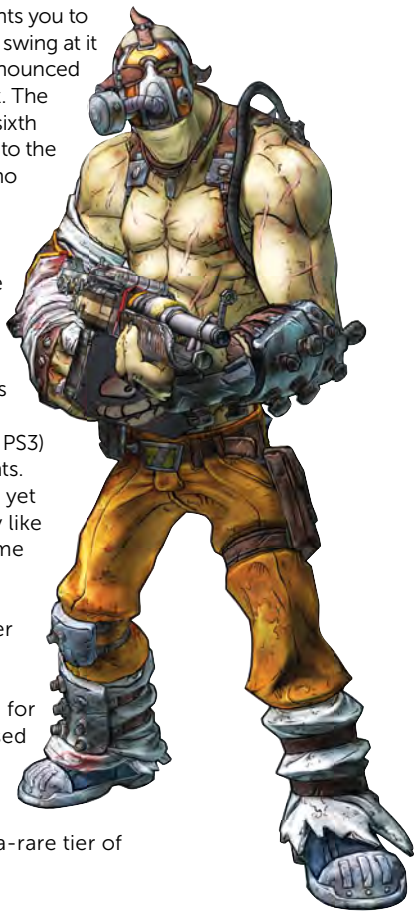
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Release dates are subject to change at the discretion of the supplier

PC

Remember Me	June
The Sims 3: Island Paradise	June
Batman: Arkham Origins	October

360

Fuse	May 31st
Grand Theft Auto V	September 17th
Battlefield 4	TBA

PS3

The Last of Us	June
Madden NFL 25	August 30th
Deadpool	August

"DRM is a failed dead-end strategy; it's not a viable strategy for the gaming business"

-Frank Gibeau, EA Labels president

A new threat, commander

There's something new and exciting on the horizon for *XCOM*. A recently unveiled trailer is light on details but big on teasing, and features the faceless council leader from *XCOM* explaining that there's a new threat, and then cutting out to static seconds later. When we visited Firaxis during development of *XCOM* they expressed interest in tackling a remake of *Terror from the Deep*, but gave zero indication that they'd actually do so. Whatever this new threat is, we're happy to have more *XCOM*, and hope that the team continues to learn from player feedback with this possible DLC, expansion or even full sequel.

OMG Feeder! on Infinite Earths
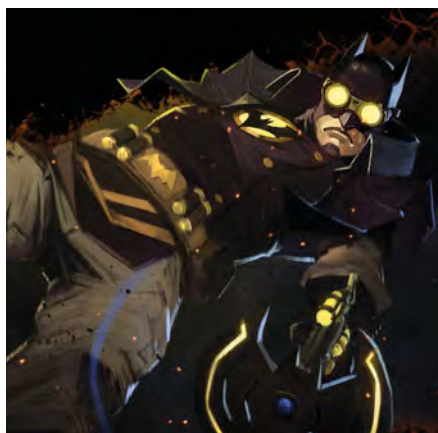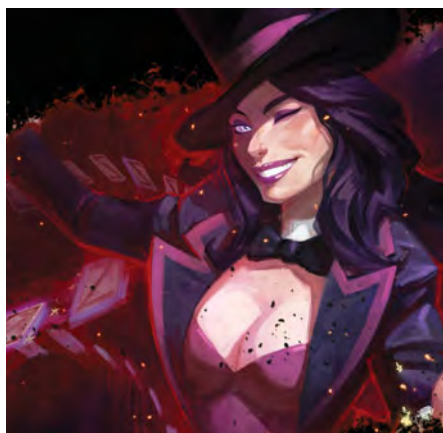
You know what's a really obviously good idea? The kind of good idea that we wish we'd thought of first just so that when it inevitably got announced we could've totally taken pseudo-credit for it? A MOBA (i.e. *DotA*-like) that takes full advantage of the DC Multiverse's extensive roster of existing superheroes and supervillains, that's what. And that's exactly what Warner Bros. recently unveiled.

As you'd expect, it's set to be free-to-play, and it's going by the name of *Infinite Crisis*. It's in development over at Turbine (they of *The Lord of the Rings Online* fame), and they're promising exciting stuff like destructible scenery, "catastrophic events" and "a major story arc".

Then there's obviously the list of iconic characters that naturally lend themselves to this genre of game with their already established powers and abilities. Thus far you can expect to see the likes of Green Lantern, Catwoman, Batman, Joker and more in it, with alternate versions of each (like Nightmare Batman or Gaslight Catwoman) that we're assuming you'll have to cough up cash to unlock.

Whether it'll successfully compete with existing MOBA powerhouses like *League of Legends* and *Dota 2* remains to be seen, but the prospect of it is certainly intriguing. It's due out on PC sometime this year, with a beta due somewhere down the line. To sign up for it, go to **www.infinitecrisis.com**.
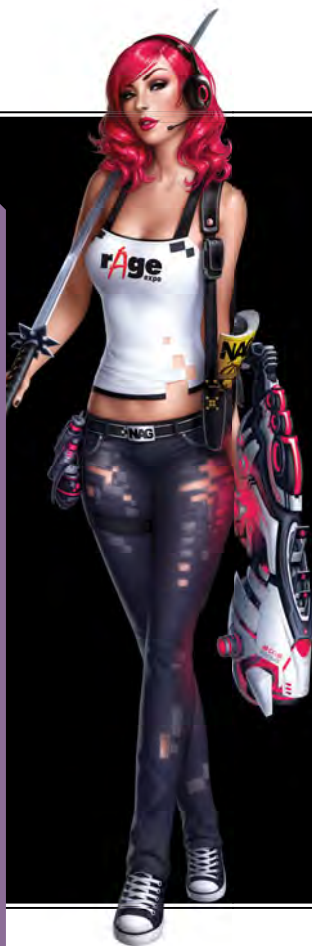
Foxy Roxy

Some call her the ultimate gamer grill. Then we smack them and tell them that Roxy isn't food (this is what eating too much of mom's meatloaf will do to you), she's the official rAge/*NAG* mascot. She was lovingly created in 2012 by South African illustrator Warren Louw for the 10th anniversary of rAge. Seeing that we (much like the gaming industry) like to squeeze the blood out of every IP we create, we've got her working it hard in *NAG* each month. Her job is to hide somewhere in the magazine for you to find. Go, do it now!

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

APRIL WINNER

Andre Venter, page 87

THIS MONTH'S LOOT
Xbox 6 in 1 Starter Kit valued at R499.95. 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 *Metro: Last Light* for PC from Apex Interactive. Send your captions to **ed@nag. co.za** with the subject line "**May caption**".
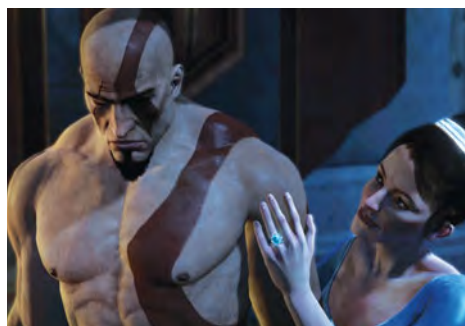
NAG's lame attempt at humour
"...and then he called me a big poep."

Last months winner
I think your mom should get off the bridge. - Luke Lonse

Super PixelJunk Soup Force is not a game title, but should be

Q-Games, the Japanese developer behind the much-loved Pixelunk series of various game-type things (like *PixelJunk Racer, PixelJunk Shooter* and *PixelJunk Eden*), has announced a new project. Breaking their tradition of debuting their titles on platforms bearing PlayStation's logo, *PixelJunk Inc.* (previously known as *PixelJunk 1-6*) is instead launching on the PC via Steam.

The game is described as a "genre-bender" by its creators, who've drawn inspiration from the likes of *Spelunky* and *Terraria*. You'll discover elements of tower defense, real-time strategy and multiplayer 2D platforming. The goal is to manage a soup factory, manipulating the environment, controlling manufacture and distribution, defending your factory from attack and gradually improving your capabilities. If it sounds equal parts outrageous and intriguing, that's pretty much the point. "It's unlike anything out there. That's why I wanted to make it," says lead designer Rowan Parker.

Time to rewrite history

Remakes of classic games always make for an interesting story since they tend to be highly polarised experiences, either doing their predecessors the justice they deserve or ending up as a miserable pile of nostalgia and disappointment. From what we've seen, the HD remake of the NES *DuckTales* platform game is looking pretty darn good.

The game is currently in development by WayForward – the studio behind the DS-exclusive *Contra 4* and, more recently, the Vita-bound *Silent Hill: Book of Memories*. The simply titled *DuckTales Remastered*, which will make its way to Xbox 360, PS3, and Wii U in the next few months, features the entire original game remade from scratch, along with deeper story elements and a few extra areas/stages to help bring together the game in a more logical, contemporary fashion.

RELEASE LIST
Dates subject to change without notice

May week 3	
Metro: Last Light	360 / PC / PS3

May week 4	
Might & Magic Heroes VI: Shades of Darkness	PC
Resident Evil: Revelations	360 / PC / PS3 / Wii U
Magic: The Gathering: Dragon's Maze	Trading card game
Fast & Furious: Showdown	360 / PS3

May week 5	
Soul Sacrifice	Vita
Wonderbook: Diggs Nightcrawler	PS3
Fuse	360 / PS3
Grid 2	360 / PC / PS3

May unconfirmed	
Donkey Kong Country Returns 3D	3DS
Pokémon Mystery Dungeon: Gates to Infinity	3DS

Square needs to start thinking outside the box

EA isn't the only publisher facing financial turmoil in recent months, and as a result, won't be the only publisher to lose its big chief. Square Enix's president Yoichi Wada is said to be stepping down in June this year, after the publisher faced "extraordinary" losses in the last quarter due to "slow sales of major console game titles in North American and European markets," as well as a "sluggish performance" in the arcade sector.

These sales hits are projected to take Square's market performance from a 3.5 billion yen profit in the last quarter to a 13 billion yen loss.

Yoichi's replacement, Yosuke Matsuda, is readying himself for the task of reviewing the entire company to help cut further losses and ensure a safe future for the company and its 3,000+ employees. The company's LA office has already experienced an unknown number of staff cuts.

IT.

PAX

A PUNCH

FOR THE GLORY OF GAMING

It took us nine years, but we have finally managed to attend the Penny Arcade Expo, East Edition [*to be honest we only really started trying this year, Ed*]. One of the largest gaming-related events in the world, PAX East was a whirlwind of cosplayers (people dressing up like characters from games/shows they like), big game reveals, consoles, PC hardware, panel discussions, and during one calm moment at the *Rock Band* free play area, a pitch-perfect rendition of A-ha's *Take On Me* by some random guy.

What is the Penny Arcade Expo?

Isn't Penny Arcade (**www.penny-arcade. com**) that crude webcomic about gaming? Correct! Ten points for Gryffindor.

Launched in 1998, the Penny Arcade webcomic has grown to encompass gaming and everything that surrounds it, including culture and commentary. Written by Jerry Holkins (Tycho) and illustrated by Mike Krahulik (Gabe), they earn their living from their work. In 2010, the webcomic was reported to have over 3.5 million readers. So perhaps it's no surprise that eventually an expo would arise out of it. After all, even NAG has the rAge expo.

The Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) started in 2004 as a two-day event and has grown exponentially since, rocketing from 3,330 attendants in 2004 to 80,000+ in 2013 for PAX East alone. Originally there was only one PAX per year (PAX Prime), taking place in Seattle, Washington. By 2010 the demand to attend was so high, an additional date and venue was added for East Coast inhabitants of the United States. Taking place in Boston, Massachusetts, the first PAX East exceeded the number of attendees of any previous PAX. PAX Prime continues to represent the West Coast, and this year also marks the first time PAX goes international with PAX Australia taking place in Melbourne, Victoria. Next year, PAX Prime will be the first four-day PAX.

What goes on at PAX?

If it has to do with gaming, it happens at PAX. While we didn't personally see it, we're sure there were even some rage quitters. The primary pillars of PAX are the concerts, Omegathon, panel discussions, tabletop area, handheld lounge, exhibit hall, tournaments, and the PC/console freeplay areas.

CONCERTS: Since 2004, live music has been one of the main attractions of PAX. Popular geek/nerd/gamer acts like Minibosses, MC Frontalot, Video Game Orchestra, Those Who Fight, The Protomen, Sam Hart, and Jonathan Coulton feature regularly at the evening concerts. We managed to get into the Saturday concert and were treated to MC Frontalot's catchy rhymes about being eaten by a grue, Sam Hart's love ballads about Pokémon, and Coulton's always-impressive lyrics. No surprise that the crowd sang along heartily to *Still Alive* and *Want You Gone*.

EXHIBIT HALL: Publishers and developers strut their stuff for the fans in the exhibit hall, unlike the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) where they peddle their wares for investors. Before PAX, the only place you could see an E3 style exhibition floor was E3 (and to a degree, rAge). This year, over 200 publishers/developers were on the show floor with hot product like Blizzard's free-to-play collectable card game *Hearthstone, Transistor* (from the creators of *Bastion*) and of course, everything new from publishers like Capcom, Square Enix, Deep Silver, and more. NVIDIA was there as well, giving people hands-on time with their new Android-powered handheld, the Shield.

CONSOLE/PC FREEPLAY: For those who don't have every console or the strongest/best ninja-Millenium-Falcon PC, the freeplay areas provide. Most of the classic consoles going back as far as the '80s, and of course all the modern ones are there and free to play. PAX provides a huge library of titles, you check out the one you want to try, find an empty station and get gaming. Intel provided

high-end rigs for the PC freeplay area this year, pre-loaded with almost everything you could want. The only noticeable exception was *Guild Wars 2*, for some reason. The staff would not comment on this omission. Console and PC tournaments are held regularly for the duration of PAX, with plenty of impromptu prizes. This year, the tournaments included *Persona 4 Arena, Goldeneye, NBA Jam, Halo 4, Minecraft, Warsow, Shootmania* and much more.

HANDHELD LOUNGE: Really just a long hallway full of bean bags, it was not uncommon to see tired attendees passed out here. Those there not to sleep were jamming multiplayer games on their 3DS, PSP or Vita, and PAX provided plenty of titles one could borrow. Several tournaments were held as well, involving *Mario Kart 7, Star Fox 64 3D, Spaceteam, Tetris DS* and more.

OMEGATHON: Each year, a random group of people who pre-registered are chosen to compete in the Omegathon. It's a great lark: 16 teams, paired at random, fight across four games throughout the weekend. The first round was a bizarre variant of *Bomberman* Live!, the second a daring duel in *NBA Jam: On Fire Edition*, and the third involved a game of "giant *Jenga*" where the team members

were tied together comically. The final round involved the excellent *Spaceteam*, but due to technical issues a clear winner could not be found. So both teams in the finals were awarded the win, all four participants going to Gamescom in Germany later this year.

PANELS: Storytime with Cliff Bleszinski, Games Journalism in the Age of Independence, Con Costuming: A Survival Guide, The Future of Dungeons and Dragons, The Future of Online Games, and many "Making Of" panels are just some of the talks you could sit in on this year. Sorry, there was no "Where the Hell is *Half-Life 3*" panel. Most sessions had around 400 people, and if you didn't queue for the more popular ones hours in advance, tough luck. Actual industry veterans, game designers and other important peeps hosted these panels, and some even handed out prizes (like the NVIDIA panel that gave one lucky person a $1,000 gaming rig).

TABLETOP: All the board games, all the role-playing games, a huge library of rulebooks to check out, and of course every collectable card-game. The tabletop area, replete with tournaments and much bad acting, was far bigger than one would expect. Plenty of tournaments, too.

LIVE COVERAGE: REWIND
If you missed it, we covered PAX East live on the NAG website (in as much capacity as we could with just one person there). You can find all the posts collected at this convenient URL: www.nag.co.za/tag/pax-east-2013/

BELOW
Hidden away in one of the meeting rooms was some serious business: an entire 16-player *Steel Battalion* setup, complete with the complex controller that came with the game. If you so much as peeked into the room, they tried to get you to come in and learn how to play.

The crowds were insane. Most of the exhibits had up to a two hour long wait to get in, though once people realized the *Watch Dogs* booth was only showing an old trailer, that line disappeared fast.

The Family PAX & Dickwolves

As a webcomic, Penny Arcade has been around a long time. As such, it's built up a huge backlog of jokes, some of which straddle "the line", perhaps. As Gabe himself said: "If jokes about violence, rape, AIDS, paedophilia, bestiality, drugs, cancer, homosexuality and religion bother you, then I recommend reading a different webcomic."

And yet, PAX managed to come across as a family-friendly event. A large portion of attendees were families after all, gamers grown up and now with little gamers of their own. It's not that PAX aims to be a family event, although there is a ban on booth babes. And then there's the "Dickwolves" saga of 2011...

Based off one of the comic strips involving a Worgen refusing to save a sixth prisoner because the quest only called for five, a T-shirt was made with a sports-team style logo reading "Dickwolves" and

put up for sale on the Penny Arcade store. It caused a bit of controversy, with many fans claiming they would no longer be attending PAX because they believe Gabe and Tycho are "supporting rape culture". In response, the T-shirt was removed from the store and would not be sold at the merchandise booth at PAX itself. This created a secondary controversy of people claiming Gabe and Tycho caved to pressure from a vocal minority, but the two insist that is not the case.

Our own PAX experience took an amusing turn when during a heated debate about something or other, several swear words peppered the discussion. We didn't realize that small children were nearby, and sheepishly apologized to the parents. They were amused, saying they'd heard much worse while there, but appreciate the thought nonetheless.

PAX, the Personal Story

My visit to PAX was not an officially sanctioned trip. I did not attend as "media", and thus, did not have the magical Media badge which would have let me skip to the front of the two-hour-wait queues. I was there as a lowly Attendant, and originally did not plan to be there at all.

When an acquaintance suggested a pilgrimage to what is now considered the Mecca of gaming, I initially turned it down. The day I would have to fly up to New York (and then take a bus on to Boston to attend PAX), was an anniversary of sorts. You may recall Toby Hudon, a.k.a. "Gldm", who used to write for *NAG*. The date marked his passing a year ago from pneumonia, and I miss him. I realized my ex-husband would have wanted me to go. So I went, because I still hate to let him down.

Toby was born in New York, a single child, and grew up to be as much of a gamer as myself (a feat surprisingly

rare). We met online in the late '90s, met personally in 2004 when he flew to South Africa to see me, and got married shortly after. He was the brains of the outfit, equipped with a startling intellect yet still able to be the dumbest person I know. Life took us down different paths in 2010, but we remained family.

He would have loved PAX, and being a huge Penny Arcade fan, had always wanted to go. He wouldn't have liked the crowds, but would have revelled in the atmosphere, the vibe, the endless nattering and arguing over all things gaming. In my mind's eye, I could see him everywhere I went at PAX, almost as if he was there. So there you go, Toby. I told you we'd go to PAX together one day. It was a blast.

Cherish the time you have with your co-op partners. You never know when they'll be needed elsewhere.   **NAG**

- Miktar

An interesting GDC

Game developers are weird. If I didn't know that before the doors of GDC opened, it would have come as quite a shock. They swoon at the very utterance of new technology, they look wide-eyed at interesting mathematical equations and they are incredibly proud when they develop a new way to optimize the frame rate in their games. They are extraordinary people who find their passion in attempting to create interactive experiences that all of us can enjoy. Few people have more love for what they do for a living and GDC provides them with a chance to show the world what they have accomplished. I entered GDC with confidence and eager eyes, not really knowing what to expect, and in short, it blew my mind.

You don't actually play as some sort of weird animal-man hybrid in *Hotline Miami* – these are masks that you select at the start of each mission.
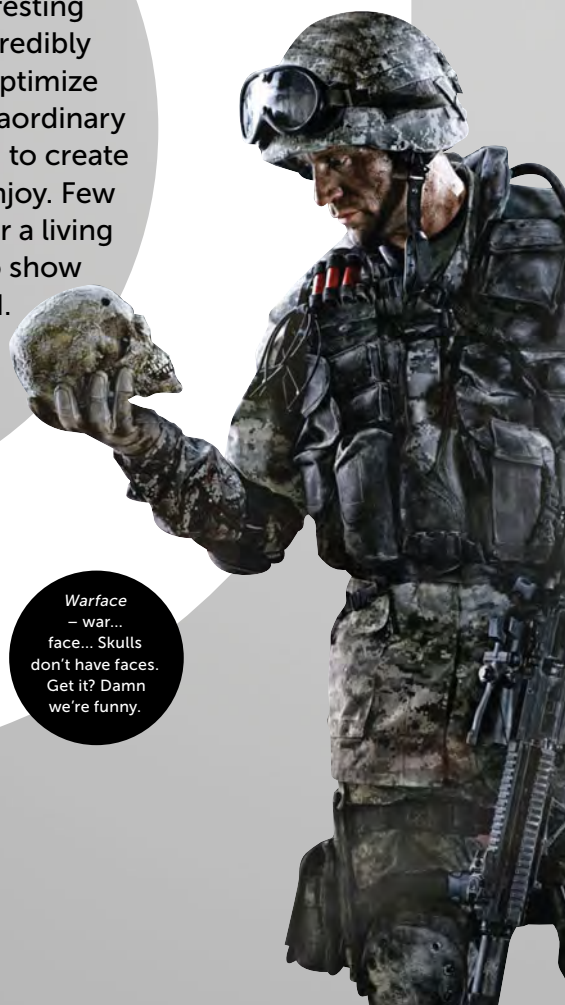
Warface – war... face... Skulls don't have faces. Get it? Damn we're funny.

development

INSIDE THE IGF

The gem of the show to most people was the battalion of indie games that were playable in the IGF section of GDC. For those of you who are not in the know, IGF stands for Independent Games Festival and I think the name is pretty self-explanatory. There were so many indie games on show that getting through them whilst still seeing the rest of GDC proved impossible. The list of games included *Intrusion 2, Hotline Miami, FTL, Kentucky Route Zero, Gone Home, Cart Life, 140, Dys4ia* and *Super Hexagon* to name but a few.

The IGF awards ceremony happened halfway through GDC. *FTL* and *Cartlife* made the most noise, taking most of the awards. Cartlife won the ultimate prize in the form of the Seumas McNally Grand Prize, which means the developer bagged $30,000! The developer was just a single person by the way, so he doesn't have to share the money with anyone.

Cart Life is a weird little game in which you perform mundane retail duties while looking at depressing gray-scale pixel graphics. Because games as art, man.

"I entered GDC with confidence and eager eyes, not really knowing what to expect, and in short, it blew my mind."
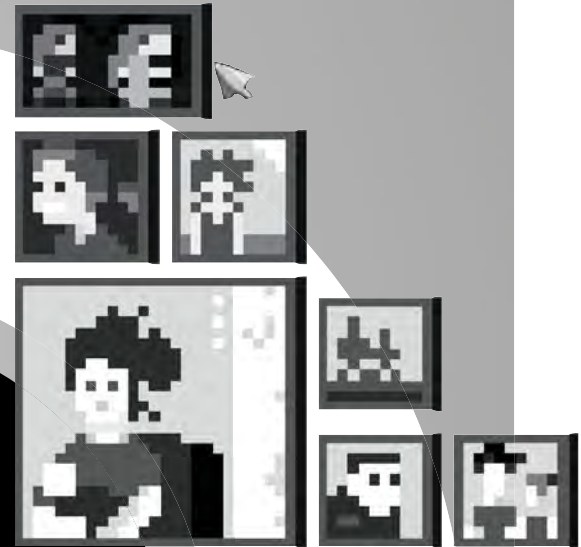
So, what is GDC you ask? The abbreviation stands for "Game Developer's Conference" and, officially, it is where both hardware and software developers get together to show off their latest achievements. There is an expo floor where the developers are organized into booths (in similar fashion to rAge) and a countless number of rooms with discussion panels where industry professionals are able to present their developments and interact with the crowd or provide lectures. On the outskirts of GDC you can find the business centre where triple-A developers are looking to hire new talent.

The main difference between GDC and other gaming-related expos is that this one doesn't sport quite as many playable games, despite having a great number of playable indie titles. As the name suggests, the main focus of this conference is the development behind the games we know and love. That means programming, software development kits, 3D modelling and animation software, motion capture technology and game development education, to mention but a few. Boring stuff to most people I reckon. Another difference is the amount of attendees. This year GDC broke its previous record by welcoming over 15,000 people. That's a lot of people, but a lot less than the amount of attendees at PAX or E3 (or rAge!).

Unofficially though, GDC is an excuse for developers all over the world to get together and party. The fun doesn't end when the conference does – it carries on into the night with every second developer and their dog hosting a party. There were almost as many parties as there were booths on the expo floor. It turned out to be a difficult task to choose which party to go to, especially
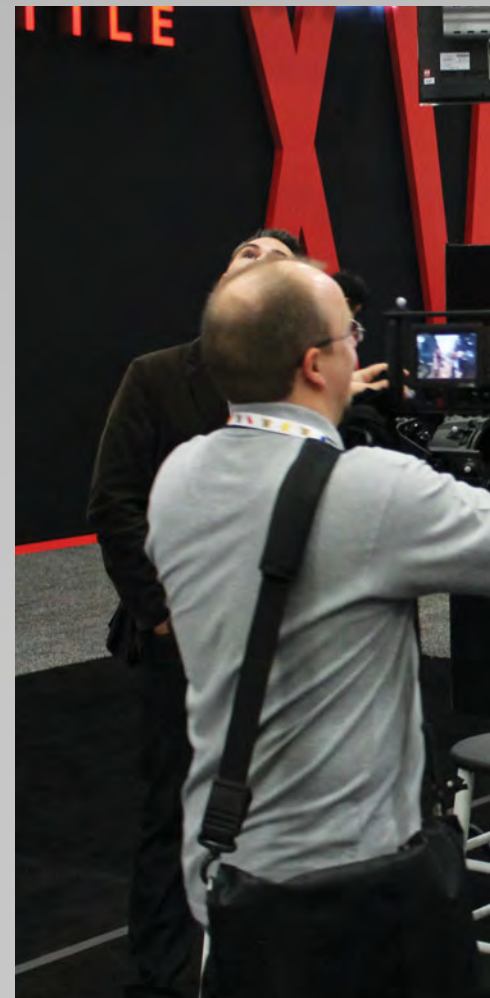
"For but a moment I had died and gone to nostalgia heaven (or would that be retro heaven?)."

HANDS-ON WITH WARFACE

GDC had an extremely strong indie focus, but the triple-A presence was not unfelt. The only playable triple-A game I could find was *Warface*, the new FPS from Crytek. It's their first entry into the free-to-play market. It is still in development and I did have some issues with it, but it felt polished and ended up being a lot of fun to play (I lost more time there than I will ever admit). I interviewed Wim Coveliers, the senior producer for *Warface* and asked him how far the development on the game has come. He told me that the game has already been released in Russia and currently has over five million users there. I was also told that there are plans to release soon in China and Korea and a little later in Europe and North America. Unfortunately South Africa is going to have to wait patiently for *Warface* because of a combination of a lack of servers and terrible Internet in Africa. You can still try and apply for the beta, but Wim suspects the lag will be beyond terrible (but go ahead and try if you're interested, you never know!). Wim assured me that he will make sure the game does end up getting released in SA, so there is hope. Crytek also showed off the newest features of their latest CryEngine, cry being the operative word as I almost collapsed into tears when the software engineer loaded up a forest level to showcase the improvements to the lighting system and switched on the god rays.

UNITED FRONT

Unity absolutely stole the show on the expo floor this year; they had the single biggest stand and announced a new partnership with Nintendo. The fruit of this new relationship is a brand new Unity package that works exclusively with the Wii U, and works immediately with no extra cost, as long as you are already a licensed Nintendo developer.

The Unity developers also presented demonstrations on all of Unity's new features, especially Mecanim, the new built-in animation system that was introduced in version 4. It blends different animation cycles together and gets rid of the "sliding foot" problem by anchoring the feet on the ground whenever the character is moving.

A second partnership was announced with Mixamo. I spoke with the CEO Stefano Corazza about the history and future of Mixamo. They primarily existed as a place where you can upload a model and have it automatically rigged, but that's not where the magic stops. Mixamo has a huge library of saved animations which can be applied immediately to the newly generated rig. This speeds up the development process for games by a considerable amount. It turns out that Mixamo and Unity have been working together for a while already and the result is the integration of the Mixamo features straight into Unity, including the animation clips which can be applied to any humanoid character within Unity and it blends seamlessly with the functionality of Mecanim. Words alone can't describe just how much of a leap forward this is for game development. Mixamo have also partnered up with AMD to create facial recognition software that can update a game model head in real-time.

when not knowing what to expect. The trouble was that most of the parties weren't "official" and you only learned about them as you interacted with people, so it turned into an interesting game of "find the secret party". I will admit however, the conference became increasingly taxing each day and I attended fewer and fewer parties until eventually I became too exhausted to partake in the night life. After a few days I ended up passing out at the hostel like a boring person.

The most notable late night experience was in a little club on Eleventh Street. It had different games littered across the club, including Sifteo cubes and, at the same time, live bands that were all focused around gaming culture. That was the fateful night I was introduced to music known as "chip tune". It's pretty similar to regular electronic music, but the main difference being that everything is made to sound

like old school 8-bit music, even the vocals. Apart from sounding amazing, it spawned a hefty amount of nostalgia.

GDC is held at the Moscone centre in San Francisco, California. It is split over three buildings, known individually as the North, South and West halls. The North hall sports the expo floor, the press room and a few rooms for panels and lectures. Across the street the South hall features the business centre and the lunch room, as well as a few more lecture rooms. The West hall was dedicated to only panels and lectures and is also the biggest building out of the three, boasting three floors and a small video game history museum on the second floor where all the oldest gaming consoles were not just available for viewing, but connected up to old televisions and ready to play a variety of old titles. It was a great opportunity for me to play a few games on the Dreamcast and the
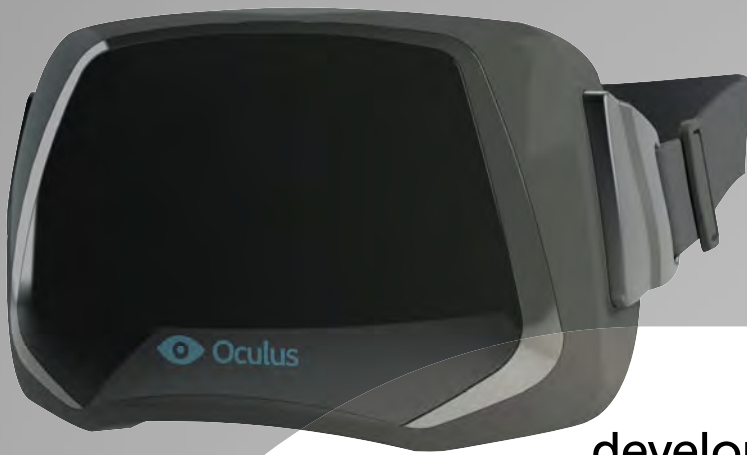
Despite having only put the Oculus Rift on our face a single time, we want one. Or ten. Actually we'd love to have a hundred so we can share with you just how cool this tech is.

"GDC is an excuse for developers all over the world to get together and party."

CHIT-CHAT

I spoke with plenty of indie developers and two companies that caught my attention were Megapop and Phoenix Online Studios. Megapop is the developer of *Trolls vs. Vikings*. At first glance it seems very similar to *Plants vs. Zombies*, but after just a few minutes it was clear that this was a completely different game. It takes the tower defence formula and adds boss fights and even moveable units. *Trolls vs. Vikings* is definitely a game to look out for if you're a tower defence fan. Phoenix Online Studios focus on creating point-and-click adventure games with awesome stories. The team is assembled of people who all have a very strong narrative background in gaming. They started their development career by making a spiritual successor for *King's Quest*, a project that kept them busy for ten years. Afterwards they started developing their own games. They are the minds behind *Cognition*, an episodic adventure game where you play as an FBI agent attempting to track down a serial killer. The protagonist, Erica Reed has the power to see the past of certain objects that she touches. I spoke with CEO Cesar Bittar and vice-president Vitek Goyel and they allowed me a sneak peek at the latest unreleased episode. They are also currently developing a game called *Moebius*, a game designed by Jane Jensen.

See, you've got to keep your dead animal scarf clean, or else you get flies. Nobody likes flies. Not even Vikings.

Sifteo Cubes are these neat things that can be connected together to form games that use a shifting layout. The display *is* the controller — it's all quite clever.
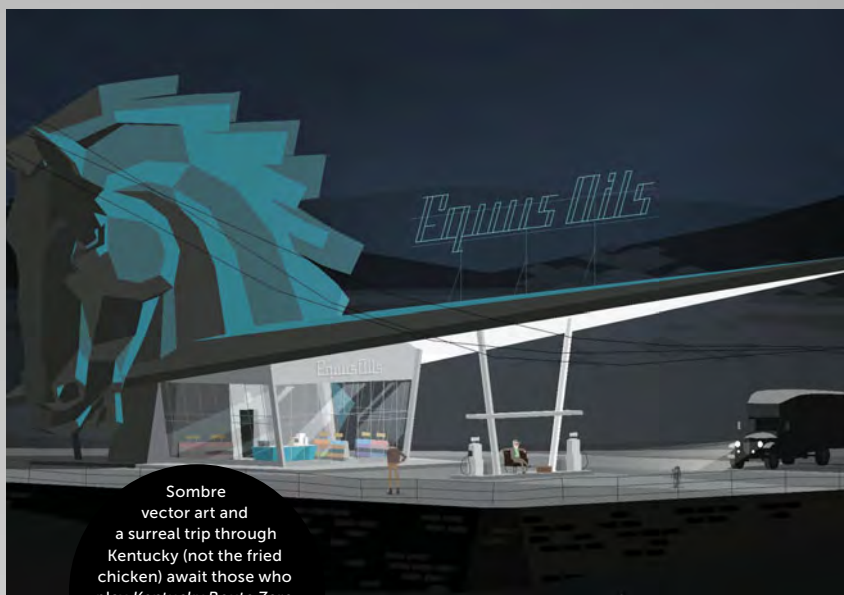
Sombre vector art and a surreal trip through Kentucky (not the fried chicken) await those who play *Kentucky Route Zero*. This adventure game is one for those who enjoy deep characterisation and storytelling.

VIRTUAL INSANITY

The latest hardware developments at GDC featured the Oculus Rift, NeuroSky's MindWave controller and a variety of motion controllers. Playing with the MindWave controller was one of my favourite moments of GDC; I made a tiny helicopter fly around using nothing but the power of my attention span. I have been very anxious to try the Oculus Rift for some time now and I stood in a queue for hours just to get three minutes with it. Finally my curiosity was satisfied and it was so worth it, I became completely lost in the world of *Hawken* and I would still be there if I wasn't asked to take the Oculus off. For the first time in my gaming career I had no way of looking outside the game, I became completely immersed in just a few seconds. My only complaint is that the resolution on the Oculus is still rather low, but soon we will all be able to have VR experiences in the comfort of our own homes. NASA surprised everyone with a visit and demonstration of the new Leap Motion controller. They remotely controlled a six-legged one-ton robot at the Jet Propulsion Lab in Pasadena from their panel at GDC.

Unity continues to show that it can stand up to the big boys of Unreal Engine and id Tech, and with a wealth of ready-to-go code kits and asset packs, it's becoming increasingly easy to get into 3D game development.

Genesis (Mega Drive), among others. For but a moment I had died and gone to nostalgia heaven (or would that be retro heaven?).

The panel and lecture rooms provided me with even more opportunity, I was able to meet and listen to some of my favourite people in the industry and I'll mention only a few. David Gaider, a senior writer at Bioware who worked on titles such as *Baldur's Gate 2, Neverwinter Nights* and more recently the *Dragon Age* franchise did a very interesting presentation on gender issues in gaming (you know the ones). He is responsible for most of the romance options you see that are so popular in Bioware games. David discussed not only the gender issues, but also the lack of maturity in both the industry and the gaming community at large and he talked about ways to improve it. It was the first time that I heard a triple-A developer acknowledge this issue, I had always thought that they simply turned a blind eye to the matter. Jane McGonigal, the creator of *SuperBetter* and author of the best-selling book *Reality is broken* presented an interesting discussion about escapism and how it is negatively affecting us as a gaming community and our public image. She is on a mission to find a way for the games we play every day to increase the quality of our real lives.

Furthermore, I attended panels by developers from NetherRealm, Capybara, Unity, Nintendo, Blizzard and Valve. They all showed off their latest tech and some of them shared their dark histories and stories of how they became who we know them to be today. I have never been happier to own a camera.

I didn't want GDC to end and I will never forget how much fun I had there, I highly recommend going there to anyone who is even remotely interested in game development and can afford it. Goodbye San Francisco. And thank you. **NAG**

-Werner Scaife

Resident Evil: Revelations (HD port)

They grow up so fast

You know how when you're fighting zombies and you want to protect your body except for one thigh? No? Neither do we.

It's no secret that the *Resident Evil* series has struggled of late. Not in terms of sales, mind you – *Resi 6* defied all logic and good in the world by outselling any other title in the series – but the fact remains that most people (including us) thought it was rather rubbish. But there's light at the end of this tunnel: last year Capcom announced that they're returning the series to its survival horror roots – they might even reboot it, and the act of making an HD port of *Revelations* shows that they're sticking to their word.

When *Revelations* first launched on the 3DS, it made a big splash in the market but for most gamers in South Africa, where the

> **"This HD port contains every bit of gooey suspense from the 3DS version, with tarted-up visuals and a reworked control system."**

3DS is one of the less popular consoles, it was sadly ignored. This is a travesty, but we can finally stop condemning people ("what do you mean you haven't played *Revelations*!?") because this HD port contains every bit of gooey suspense from the 3DS version, with tarted-up visuals and a reworked control system that's sure to satisfy that crotchety grandpa you have in the back of your head who keeps reminding you about how much better the old *Resident Evil* games are.

Revelations takes place between the events of *Resi 4* and *Resi 5* – which presents a bit of a narrative challenge to satisfy those who actually pay attention

The "t-Abyss virus" in Revelations behaves in much the same way as every other virus we've seen in the series – mutating living creatures and turning them into hideous, murderous monsters. Even the little fish are affected.

PLAY WITH ME

The controls in the 3DS version of *Revelations* were some of the best we've seen on the platform, and this was technically the first of the series to allow players to move and aim at the same time, courtesy of the 3DS gyro or optional Circle Pad Pro accessory. These excellent controls have been taken a step further in the remake, and feel like a natural fit. Players who yearn for the good old days will still have the option of a "classic" control scheme, but we imagine most players will be only too happy to stick with the "shooter" scheme.

DEFINING MOMENT

Despite being a handheld game, the 3DS version of *Revelations* was plentiful in gameplay, meaning this HD remake doesn't need all that much attention to bring it up to spec on console and PC. Of course, the visuals have been overhauled – a task made infinitely easier than you'd expect since *Revelations* uses a mobile version of Capcom's MT Framework. Scaling up the game means it's had most of its textures redesigned at high resolution, and player characters seem to have been entirely remodelled to ensure they don't look the least bit blocky. Mind you, the 3DS version was perhaps the best-looking game we've seen on the platform, so the starting point was a good one.

NEVER SAY DIE

Easily the most overlooked feature of the 3DS release was Raid Mode, which makes a return with a few new features and characters to unlock. While the concept of Raid Mode has been with the series since *RE3* in the form of Mercenaries, *Revelations*' take on this side-game moves away from the endless horde style approach, opting instead to go back to the roots established in *Nemesis*. Players will select a stage from a pool of 20, and each of these will challenge the players (two-player co-op is available) to reach the end goal by fighting through swaths of enemies. Throughout each level you'll collect ammunition as well as cash, weapon parts and new weapons with which to equip your character (chosen from a selection of 12; each with their own perks and specialties) to help tackle later, more challenging levels. Raid Mode is without a doubt the most fully-formed, entertaining side-game we've ever seen in a *Resident Evil*.

Two new characters are available in Raid Mode: newcomer to the series Rachael, and Umbrella's HUNK super soldier.

to the story in *Resident Evil*. The solution was to create a new, throwaway narrative that doesn't impact the overarching story all too much, but gave the developers an excuse to put Jill Valentine and Chris Redfield together as playable characters for the first time since the original *Resident Evil*. *Revelations* revolves around a popup bio-terrorist organisation called Il Veltro, which, in years past, launched a viral attack on the utopian city of Terragrigia. Now, with the fall of the city in the past and the Bio-Organic Weapons (BOWs – *Resi*'s "zombies") under control, Il Veltro has once-again risen up to cause all sorts of trouble. Enter the BSAA – Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance – or the heroes of the *Resident Evil* series, to you and me.

The common practice of alternating playable characters makes a return, with players switching between the stories of Chris Redfield and his partner Jessica Sherawat, and Jill Valentine who is paired up with Parker Luciani. Jessica and Parker are new to the series, but have been fleshed out with their own backstories and reasons for being part of the BSAA. The intertwining stories of Chris and Jill mean you'll get to see a few different locations in the game world, but the majority of your game time will be spent stalking the eerie corridors of the abandoned ship *Queen Zenobia*, fighting off the variety of creatures mutated by the t-Abyss virus in the search for the truth behind Il Veltro. The pace of the game is more like that of the older *Resi* titles, which means fewer, more meaningful encounters and plenty of tension in-between. Puzzles, hidden rooms and monsters crawling out of the walls are guaranteed – endless waves of ammo-dropping enemies simply do not make an appearance in *Revelations*. You will need to conserve your ammo, think about each encounter, run when the time comes and hunt for those green herbs like your life depends on it – because it does, obviously. **NAG**

- GeometriX

Transistor

From the creators of *Bastion*...

Around the outer edge of the PAX East show floor, you could find the indie scene. Here roost the quirky things, odd products and dubious-looking iPad games. This perimeter of defiant counter-culture, a district of hip independence, contained plenty of curios to catch the interest of those seeking refuge from the "big budget" titles dominating centre stage. Tucked away in one corner of this self-styled bohemia – an unexpected surprise. Surrounded by giant murals of the familiar-looking, wide-eyed characters from 2011's surprise indie hit *Bastion*, was a playable alpha of Supergiant's next game.

While opinions over the actual gameplay of *Bastion* remain mixed, praise for its style and presentation seems unanimous. With *Transistor*, Supergiant has managed to elevate their game design, while

> "Strange white walls burst from the ground, transforming a simple hall or room into a variable arena."
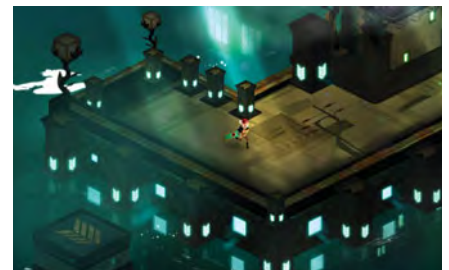
retaining that painterly aesthetic and strong emphasis on music that gives them their unique signature. We only had a few minutes with *Transistor*, the show floor speakers insisting we "exit the hall, the expo is now closed." But those few minutes were enough.

A science-fiction themed role-playing game taking place in an art deco styled cyberpunk city, you play as a singer named Red. When Red finds the Transistor, a weapon of unknown origins, it speaks to her using the voice of a long-dead friend. The voice is that of the unmistakable *Bastion* narrator, albeit playing a different character. *Transistor* keeps the 2.5D isometric perspective of *Bastion*, as well as the fast-paced combat, but that's where any similarities to *Bastion* end.

Bizarre robots appear, smooth and curved,

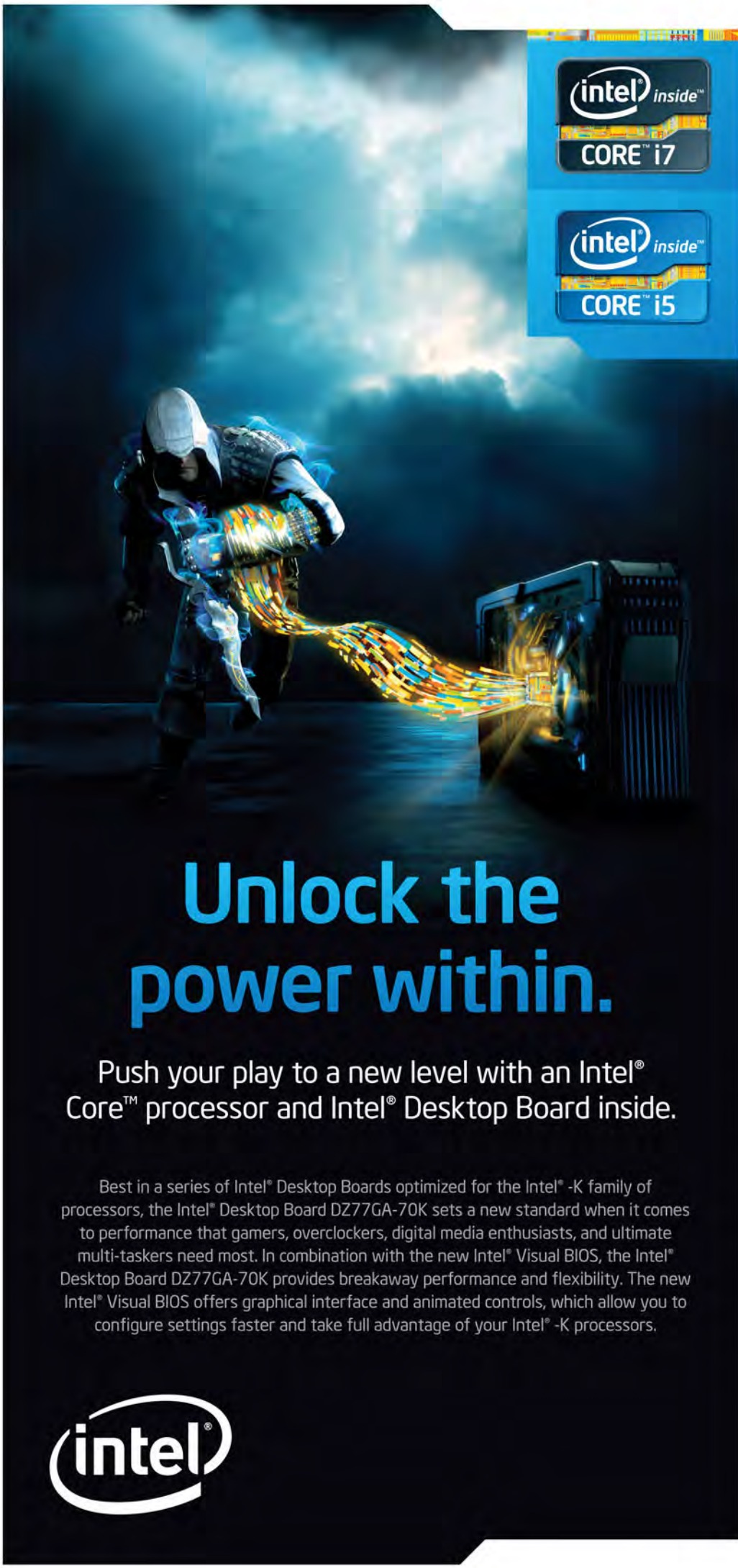*Originally, Bastion didn't have its syrupy narrator, only text boxes telling the story. The narrator was added last-minute, on a hunch. Good hunch.*

Supergiant Games was formed from several former Electronics Arts developers, who worked on the Command & Conquer series.

coloured in a clinical white with dangerous red accents. They attack Red, who has no choice but to defend herself. Initially the combat seems simple enough, with basic attacks dispatching enemies quickly. Soon, the screws start to tighten and enemies become more dangerous, more numerous. Strange white walls burst from the ground, transforming a simple hall or room into a variable arena. The enemies use cover to their advantage, making sure to stay out of your range while sniping, or flanking with a smash attack. The Transistor gives Red the ability to freeze the "system" for a limited time, represented by a "processing power" bar that quickly empties. While processing power remains, you can queue up movement and attacks (which drains the bar faster), chaining actions together until – when time resumes – they play out near-instantaneously. Some attack types have arcs or lines indicating where the damage will be dealt, allowing for combination attacks or focus-fire.

It's mildly reminiscent of *Fallout 3*'s VATS, or the "mark and execute" of *Splinter Cell Conviction*, but with a deeper emphasis on tactics. But if you prefer, you can stay real-time. Supergiant is thinking of adding co-op, "inspired by *Dark Souls*", but nothing is set in stone yet. **NAG**

- Miktar

Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft

Gathering the magic

It was impossible to get anywhere near the Blizzard booth during PAX East. Before the Penny Arcade Expo started, Blizzard had announced they'd be revealing something super-awesome there, and so the masses flocked. Much to everyone's surprise, it wasn't the fabled *Project Titan* that Blizzard unveiled, but a free-to-play collectible card game (CCG).

Instead of waiting in line for two hours to try it out, we were smart. Ten minutes before PAX ended and the show floor was closed, we rushed to the Blizzard booth to find it mostly empty. We didn't

> "Battles are kinetic with lots of spell effects, monster cards shatter satisfyingly when killed, and everything has that quality we've come to expect from Blizzard."

think that would actually work, but it did. We managed a full round versus a friend, and even snuck in some quick playtime of the PlayStation 3 build of *Diablo 3*.

Hearthstone, if you've ever touched Magic: The Gathering or other conventional CCGs, is instantly familiar. You build a deck of cards (ours was pre-built), sling spells at your opponent to bring their health to zero, summon creatures to deal and block damage, and use card synergies to turn things in your favour. Blizzard's trademark style of making things easy to understand works

According to Blizzard, they "love" collectible card games and have been playing them since their Silicon & Synapse days
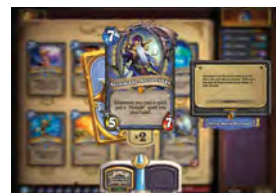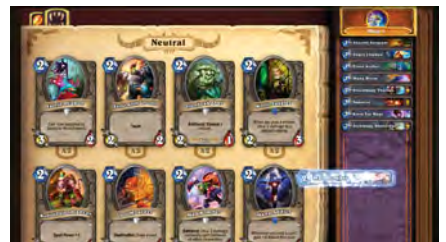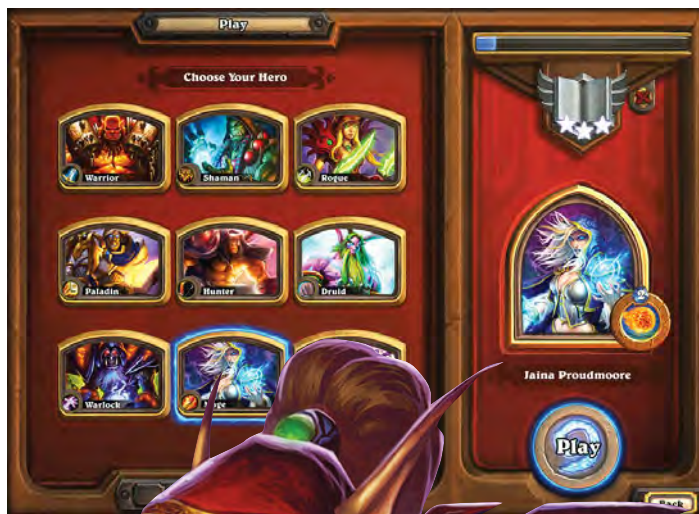
Blizzard was founded in 1991 under the name Silicon & Synapse, originally focused on porting other people's games.

well here: even a complete novice can play *Hearthstone* and have fun. The cards are bright, colourful, and the text descriptions explaining what they do are easy to understand. Battles are kinetic with lots of spell effects, monster cards shatter satisfyingly when killed, and everything has that quality we've come to expect from Blizzard. Hero cards give you unique mechanics related to the *World of Warcraft* classes, like Shamans being able to summon totems.

You'll be able to win card packs (with common, rare, epic and legendary cards) as you play, or pay real money to buy boosters if you're impatient. There's no launch date yet, or elaboration on how the "Forge" will work, which has something to do with gaining/upgrading cards. **NAG**
- Miktar

HANDS ON TESTED · HANDS ON TESTED ·

RELEASE DATE Q4 2013
PLATFORMS 360 / PC / PS3 / Wii U
GENRE Action adventure
DEVELOPER WB Games Montreal
WEBSITE www.batmanarkhamorigins.com
PUBLISHER Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

THE LEGEND IS BORN

I DON'T WANT A
LOT FOR CHRISTMAS...

Batman: Arkham Asylum was the very definition of a sleeper hit. It seems an odd thing to say, I know. Its title was graced by the name of one of the most iconic superheroes in existence – and beyond that one of the most iconic fictional characters across any medium ever – and yet its massive success was almost completely unexpected. Perhaps not in the commercial sense, because with Batman himself at the helm it was always practically guaranteed at least a small boatload of attention and sales. Critically, however, it was obvious that many did not foresee such resounding praise would arise for Bats' first adventure in the *Arkham* series.

You can blame the legacy of shitty licensed games for that: a legacy which leads practically every seasoned gamer out there to immediately ignore any game based on an established multi-media franchise for cynical fear of it being an utterly shameless cash-grab. And yet, when it finally arrived in August 2009, *Arkham Asylum* put a batarang between the eyes of all those misled preconceptions. Rocksteady Studios proved that they know not only Batman himself, but possess an intimate knowledge of the entire mythos enshrouding him. They succeeded in creating a game that was fun and accessible for casual gamers and Batman's less feverish fans, but also boasted enough gameplay depth to satisfy more devout gamers and layered the fan service on thick enough to keep even the most demanding Bat connoisseur smiling. It was a veritable treasure trove of appropriately flavoured narrative, Bats-heavy atmosphere and gameplay that truly turned anyone who

◗ We're promised that telling a fresh, impactful story will play a crucial role in *Arkham Origins*. While Paul Dini isn't returning to pen its narrative, two new writers have enlisted their services: Corey May and Dooma Wendschuh. You may not recognise the names, but you'll spot them in the credits of some major projects like *Army of Two, Prince of Persia* and *Assassin's Creed.* Inspiration for the game and its story was drawn from the *Legends of the Dark Knight* comic book series, which also boasted many fresh retellings of the origins of Batman's relationships.

◗ Kevin Conroy (the voice of Batman in the DC animated universe) unfortunately doesn't return as the voice of our hero. To fit this younger vision of the Caped Crusader, WB Games Montreal decided to go with new voice talent. A big question mark as well is Mark Hamill. Assuming the Joker is in the game (which we're guessing he will be), will Mr Skywalker return to give life to the Crown Prince of Crime? We seem to remember him saying he'd never voice Joker again after *Arkham City...*

BATMAN BEGINS. AGAIN

In the presentation, *Arkham Origins*' Batman was described as version 0.9 to *Arkham CIty*'s version 5.0. His suit is nowhere near as advanced, and his methods aren't as subtly potent. As an example, in the demo, Batman accidentally causes a thug he's interrogating to pass out by squeezing his neck too tightly. One of the team's main goals is to "make Batman scary again", and while it's difficult to imagine how they could convey this from a gameplay perspective, it'll be interesting to see how it's managed. There are already minor touches in place to show it off: thugs in the game are still in absolute awe of the Bat, debating whether or not he's even human. Beyond that, Batman's upgrade and skill systems (along with the UI that displays them) are being rethought and refined to be more immediately clear in the benefits they'll offer.

took hold of the controller into a fully capable Caped Crusader.

Now, *Batman: Arkham Origins* is the tale before the tale that started this all: a prequel to the original Arkham-crawl. And steering its development is an all-new studio, with Rocksteady off on other top-secret works. I'm going to toss in some needless speculation here, softly stroking my glorious (imaginary) beard and musing that Rocksteady is off developing an *Arkham* game for the next generation of consoles. In the interim, WB Games Montreal – a studio comprised of some of the best development talent Canada's extensive roster of game-making greats has to offer – has stepped in to deliver Arkham Origins, and they're eager to prove that they're every bit as capable of providing an adventure worthy of Batman's beloved history.

Here's the setup, described with almost elegant simplicity by Ben Mattes, the game's senior producer: "Young Batman battles Black Mask's assassins on Christmas Eve". It's set a number of years before the events of *Arkham Asylum*, and Batman's only been doing the whole "crime-bashing dressed as a Bat" thing for a couple of years. To hear Mattes describe him, Batman is "younger, rawer and more ferocious"; to my mind, I imagine him as still being more Bruce Wayne than full-on Batman, more intensely-dramatic vigilante than legendary superhero. He's got loads of experience battling Gotham City's thugs, and he's used to ruling the roost, being the most formidable, fearsome entity in the city. Organised crime is perhaps his biggest challenge, and even that is managed with relative ease. That all changes on *Arkham Origin*'s Christmas Eve – Batman's deadly first date with an explosive
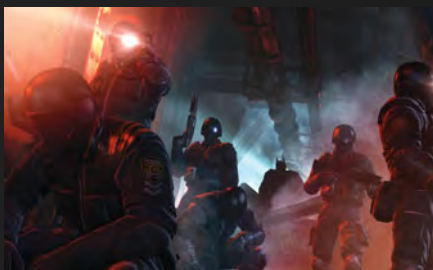
Deathstroke ❯

Deathstroke (aka Slade Wilson) appeared very briefly in the demo, and reportedly went through many iterations throughout development. The version they've settled on, however, was unofficially deemed the coolest version ever by Geoff Johns, American comic book writer and current Chief Creative Officer of DC Comics. On that note, WB Games Montreal has been consulting with Johns throughout the development of *Arkham Origins*, which certain comic book aficionados will be mighty excited about. Deathstroke is surgically enhanced and will apparently challenge Batman both physically and mentally.

GOTHAM, REVISITED

Arkham Asylum was confined to the popular supervillain holiday resort of the same name. It was open for exploration, but relatively restrictive in size (compared to its successor), with the player able to revisit areas and buildings to uncover more secrets and solve Riddler-powered puzzles they might've missed earlier. *Arkham City* presented a similar open-world experience, increasing the size of the playground in which Bats (and by extension, you) was unleashed by cordoning off an entire section of Gotham City to turn it into a makeshift, open-plan prison.

Now, with *Arkham Origins*, the area in which you and Batman are free to operate has again been expanded. It's roughly twice the size of *Arkham City*, with Gotham split into two distinct zones: Old Gotham and New

Gotham. Importantly, it's big enough to warrant the need for a fast-travel system – and thus enters the Batwing. Once certain gameplay requirements have been met, you can call it in for rapid extraction and transport to your areas of choice. The developers want the two districts to feel completely different, each boasting a unique architectural feel and gameplay flavour. Thanks to the relentless crime wave that's battered the city following the appearance of Black Mask's assassins, the city is a bit of a ghost town – but the developers still want it to feel lived-in. To this end, streets are filled with tertiary details: like cars that have been hurriedly abandoned and now litter the streets. Naturally, with it being Christmas Eve, you can expect all the festive decor that goes with it. Also, snow!

OLD GOTHAM
Old Gotham is essentially the same location we explored in *Arkham City*. Senior producer Ben Mattes compares it to Brooklyn in New York City. As the name suggests, it's the older, more dilapidated side of Gotham, with smaller buildings populated by the city's less wealthy inhabitants.

NEW GOTHAM
New Gotham, meanwhile, is more upmarket, more commercial, home to vast wealth. It'll boast the tallest buildings (much taller than anything seen in *Arkham City*), meaning that you can attempt in-game recreations of those memorable artworks of Batman perched high atop a skyscraper surveying the city below. And Mattes stresses that when you're on a skyscraper in New Gotham, it'll *feel* like you're on a skyscraper.

You never forget your first

With this being an origin story, Batman will be encountering many of his most familiar friends and foes for the first time. WB Games Montreal is keeping their full character list close to their chest, but a few were mentioned and even briefly shown at the reveal event. Bearing in mind that there's a bounty on Batman's head, the developers will often shove Bats into games of cat and mouse between him and the game's villains. We're guessing it'll become difficult to tell who's who in these cat/mouse extravaganzas, because Batman.

Branden
Branden (his full name wasn't revealed) is the head of GCPD's SWAT division. While most of the GCPD suffers from corruption, SWAT is the dirtiest of the lot. When Black Mask puts the bounty on Batman, Branden immediately wants in and plans to use all of SWAT's resources to bag the cash.

The Penguin
Oswald Cobblepot, better known as the Penguin, is still a fledgling criminal mastermind in *Arkham Origins*, eager to wrestle some control of Gotham away from Black Mask. The team at WB Games Montreal really liked the design of Penguin in *Arkham City* and the credibility with which his character was imbued, and they've tried to apply the same level of legitimacy to all their characters. In the demo we were shown, one of the levels takes place on Penguin's boat, the *Final Offer*: a nuclear-powered ship that's half luxury liner, half cargo cruiser (and is actually inspired by a real-life ship), where Penguin negotiates arms deals.

A SUPERHERO'S JOB IS NEVER DONE

One of the key focuses of *Arkham Origins* is to ensure that its open world is rife with stuff to see, things to do and thugs to KRAKOW! into oblivion. With that in mind, three systems have been specifically introduced to make the city feel alive with heroic opportunity. First up is the Crime in Progress system. The name says it all really: the city will randomly spit out tertiary crime-fighting opportunities, like armed robberies and the like. Intercept police dispatches, and you'll find a wealth of gameplay opportunities and buckets of Bat-experience to gather. Crimes will have difficulty spikes, however, and you'll only be able to foil certain crimes once you've packed on the upgrades and XP.

Second is the Most Wanted system. The assassins aren't the only villains you'll encounter in Gotham, and pursuing the optional Most Wanted side plots will reward you with a delicious helping of mini-stories as you track down these enemies. Finally, there's the Dark Knight system. It's really a clever way of baiting you into becoming a better Batman by challenging players to up their game. Stuff like dishing out increasingly impressive combos, or using specific gadgets during combat. It'll net you cool rewards too, like gadget unlocks. It ties in nicely with the story, because as you become more capable, so too does Batman show progression and growth in dealing with Gotham's newest threat.

In addition to these three systems, there are radio towers scattered all over the city which have been hacked by a mysterious invader. You'll need to individually reclaim these towers in order to unlock Batwing-powered fast travel to the area covered by each tower. There's apparently an entire sub-plot in there as well, which sees you tracking down the hacker and discovering their identity. Don't be surprised if it's the Riddler.

mix of super villains that will come to define his crime-fighting career and transform him into the superhero we know so well. It's the birth of Batman's own personal rogues gallery, and we'll be right there to witness its infamous inception.

It all starts when a new, masked face appears on the scene and puts a hit out on Batman, offering up a hefty reward for his bloodied cowl. Black Mask's bounty inspires eight deadly assassins and their respective gangs (each of which has their own villainous style and methods) to descend upon Gotham, hunting down our hero and leaving a trail of crime and devastation in their wake. As with past *Arkham* games, it's a grand adventure condensed into the space of a single in-game evening. Deliberately setting it on a snowy Christmas Eve to create a disturbing juxtaposition between festive joy and the grim reality of Gotham's present situation, Batman will be pushed to

Captain James Gordon

Even Jim Gordon has yet to encounter Batman in person. The GCPD still isn't sure exactly what Batman is, and treats him purely as a vigilante that must be brought to justice. Jim isn't yet Commissioner of the GCPD and is still serving as Captain. He's younger, more gung-ho, and the developers are keen to show Jim's action-hero side.

Black Mask

Black Mask (real name Roman Sionis) is the reason for the Dark Knight's current predicament. As the leader of Gotham's most dangerous gang, he's as sadistic as he is wealthy, happy to brutally torture his foes as he deems necessary.
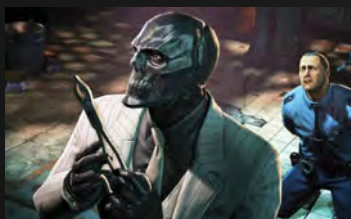
his absolute limits by these new foes, and naturally it means that we'll get to experience an array of thrilling boss battles as Batman's struggle for survival escalates and the narrative unravels.

What's an origin story mean for the *Arkham* series and its core gameplay though? To be perfectly blunt based on what I saw and played at the reveal event: it means nothing revolutionary. There's definite progression on display, and the new developers are obviously refining and fine-tuning the experience in a great many ways – but you can rest assured that the core game will still be exactly what you'd expect, exactly what you remember. It's early days of course, and we weren't shown much at all, but I immediately felt at home controlling Bats, swooping down from ledges high above, landing confidently right in the middle of a group of startled thugs and waiting for them to make the first move

before launching into a flurry of seemingly endless combos and counters until only I was left standing, badass incarnate.

The combat, the control scheme, the look, the animations, the weight of Batman's movement, the way gadgets are intertwined with its every aspect of gameplay – it's all comfortably reminiscent of *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City*. You'll still spend plenty of time crawling through vents, silently and systematically taking down enemies, and watching foes from perches high above, surveying the scenario you're presented using your trusty Detective Vision. You've still got your grappling hook for environmental traversal, along with other returning gadgets like the Batclaw to tear off vent covers at distance. Skirmishes with thugs play out as fluidly and with as much ferocious flair as they have done in the previous games. There'll obviously be a range of new additions to look forward to, but what'll

ultimately set it apart are the size and variety of its open world, the multitude of gameplay mechanics employed within (detailed elsewhere on these pages) and the origin story it's so eager to tell.

The new developers clearly understand that there's a lot riding on this, that they've got huge expectations to meet and, with any luck, completely surpass. They seem to be rising to the challenge with complete confidence, however, and they're eager to make their own mark on the series, hopefully making it the best *Arkham* game yet. Perhaps some may be irked by the lack of radical change to its fundamentals, but for those who want another *Arkham* experience that's wrapped in the familiar, yet prettied up with an inviting assortment of evolutionary enhancements, *Arkham Origins* will likely be an automatic purchase when its Bat-signal shines later this year.
- Barkskin

THE INTERVIEW

Travel-drunk and wracked by fatigue-induced brain failure, I sat down with **Ben Mattes**, *Batman: Arkham Origins*' senior producer, to have an informative chat about what sets their game apart from Rocksteady's Arkham excursions. This is an abridged version of how that went.

NAG: Could you let our readers know who you are, and detail the work you do on the game?

Ben Mattes: My name's Ben Mattes. I'm the senior producer on Arkham Origins. Along with our very talented creative director Eric Holmes, he and I co-lead the project; I more on the organisational, operational, planning side of things and Eric more from a content point of view.

NAG: First question: that's not Kevin Conroy as Batman, is it?

BM: That's an interesting question: when we were writing this game and we were voice casting, what mattered to us is that we were authentic, that we were credible and that the narrative choices that we made were clearly felt in everything that we did. From Batman's stance to his gameplay to his voice to the UI, we wanted it to feel early career, to feel rawer and younger and just a little bit more rough around the edges. We're not speaking about specific choices in terms of who we're using for which voices right now, but I can certainly say that there are some voices who have returned, some actors who have returned, and then there are some instances where we chose different actors in order to make sure that we were really communicating this origins story, this early career experience.

NAG: How much input has Geoff Johns had on the project?

BM: He was a collaborative consultant; he didn't write the lines, but he reviewed what we were doing and he made sure that we were on the right track. I would say that as his confidence grew in our ability, he was able to take more of a step back. He

didn't write this game, we did. But certainly having access to his almost encyclopaedic depth of understanding of the overall lore was very helpful in our early, formative days on this project.

NAG: What do you think sets your game apart from its predecessors?

BM: I think the fact that we are an origin story gives us a very ripe narrative playground. It allows us to do things with the characters that weren't able to be done within the timeframes of the previous games. I think the setting, the fact that you've got these assassins who are coming after you, this chaotic maelstrom of horror that happens in the space of a single night where the stakes just get higher and higher with each passing hour, we think it creates

CSI GOTHAM CITY

You may not realise this, but Batman's more than just a super-intelligent, hyper-tough crime fighter with a trendy eye for outlandish fashion: he's also the World's Greatest Detective. *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City* toyed with this in a few novel ways, but *Arkham Origins* really plans to sell Batman's penchant for detective-ising and make it a core feature. New detective gameplay sees you rebuilding important crime scenes by gathering puzzle pieces hidden within evidence, affording you the opportunity to pause, rewind, fast-forward and examine the scene from myriad angles in first-person Bat-view to solve each mystery. They won't bog you down by being overly obtuse. There'll be many of these detective scenes scattered across the game, a chunk of which will be purely optional — but they'll all enhance the story greatly and further thrust you into the role of Batman.

a very fertile ground for a really exciting story. And then of course we think we're adding a lot of Arkham-quality gameplay to the overall experience so that not only are people getting new content and a new narrative, and the familiar experience of previous Arkham games, but they're getting stuff they've never seen before. They're getting new enemy types, new gadgets, an expanded open world with new gameplay systems and the expanded detective system. So we're pretty confident that people are not going to look at this and say, "Yeah, I played this game before." It's going to stand on its own two legs.

NAG: We're assuming there are other threatening forces beyond the eight assassins?
BM: [laughs] This is an Arkham game, man — it's never simple. There's never just, "Oh I've got this problem, solve the problem, game over, I'm finished!" The rogues gallery comes out of the woodwork on this night and then everything that could go wrong for Batman, does. The assassins are the main narrative arc, the main challenge, but there's so much more that's rocking the foundations of Gotham on this wonderful Christmas Eve.

NAG: Is there any particular feature in the game or aspect of development that you're most proud of?
BM: There's a lot. I think one of the things that gets me most excited is something I spoke about during the presentation, the concept of learning to be "a black belt at being Batman". I really believe very firmly that a lot of players are going to feel very powerful in this game as they master all of the tools and gadgets and combat abilities that Batman has, and that we will have encouraged them to do this through the core fantasy of being Batman rather than force-feeding them some set of mandatory tutorials that they have to do a thousand times before they actually get good at the game, and that that mastery that comes from things like the Dark Knight system and other supporting systems — which honestly we're not talking about yet — will infuse their overall appreciation for the title because they're going to feel like they're so powerful long before the end of the game. They're going to feel that sense of empowerment much more as part of the overall narrative, which is something that I'm personally very excited about.

NAG: Thanks for your time!   **NAG**

Win BioShock Infinite goodies

Reviews Intro

The primordial soup was a little stagnant in places – this is what evolved from those places... Meet your reviewers.

If you wanted to make a game (or gaming peripheral) that changed the way the world viewed gaming, what kind of game or thing would you make? A Lightsaber doesn't count.

RedTide

I present the "tea bag coupler", a device that is filled with warm water and placed on your chair. Need to be careful here. There is another device that hooks up to an armature that hangs over your head – also filled with warm water. So when performing an in-game tea bagging you can experience it in real life.

Miktar

A peripheral that monitors your voice, heart rate and blood-sugar levels, then changes the game you're playing to one you'll probably enjoy more. So many people play things they don't like, then think that constitutes all of gaming.

Azimuth

A game with a credible female protagonist. Or a dinosaur game that isn't terrible. Or maybe a game starring a feminist velociraptor.

Mikit0707

A First-Person Healer. You run around popular missions from *COD*/*MOH*/*Halo*/etc. healing all the NPCs that players have murdered. Obviously you also get a gun that shoots marshmallows and rainbows.

GeometriX

An MMO that donates money to a charitable cause every time you complete a quest / gain a level / etc. More challenging quests generates higher donations, and there'd be a bonus for working in teams or within a certain time.

Barkskin

I'd create a two-player cooperative title. One of the players enjoys a bit of solid shooter action. The other plays the role of virtual buzzkill, their sole purpose to constantly remind their co-op partner that "video-game violence is bad, mkay".

Mini *reviews*

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

The Showdown Effect

An ultra-violent love letter to '80s action movies, *The Showdown Effect* is a side-scrolling multiplayer shooter with a metric ton of stylish attitude. In it, you take control of one of a range of characters that imbue all the expected Hollywood action stereotypes. You then shoot, explode and dismember enemy players with an assortment of high-powered weaponry. RPGs, submachine guns, battle axes, shotguns, katanas, pseudo-lightsabers and even pillows are just some of the deadly tools at your disposal, and you've got a list of moves like dives and slides that'll help you stay agile, alive and dangerous.

Game modes include a variation of team deathmatch wherein each death increases your team's collective respawn time, and the first team to kill every enemy before their chums can respawn wins the match. As you play, you obtain points with which to unlock new weapons, accessories and characters. All the characters play similarly, with the exception of a single unique ability for each. It's fun, frantic and boasts satisfying gameplay depth – but its lack of a decent solo tutorial beyond a rudimentary training level is an irritation. Still, at only $9.99 on Steam, it's worth a look. Best played with friends for loads of laughs. **NAG**

80

"What the hell is wrong with this Tomb Raider figurine? Why does she have tumours in her elbows?"

- Barkskin

Shryke
As clichéd as it sounds, something that truly involves the player in a virtual reality… sight, sound, smell, the works.

SAVAGE
A TRON-type scanner where I could be pixel scanned into the game.

ShockG
Tactile feedback suit that had pressure points anywhere in the body where you got shot or pwned in some way you'd feel it. See how many people like playing RPGs after that.

home_coded

Exposure for South African indie developers…

Tasty Poison Games

WWW.TASTYPOISONGAMES.COM

Developing a hack-and-slash RPG for mobile devices is a hefty task, but shortly after their formation, the team at Tasty Poison Games knew that this was a challenge they were excited to tackle. And tackle it they did – quite successfully, too. *Pocket RPG* is currently enjoying ratings of 4.4 and 5/5 on Android and iOS, meeting a niche demand for a casual mobile RPG that even the more hardened players would enjoy.

But this 10-person team is aiming even higher, and nobler, with a few interesting projects in the pipeline. Their soon-to-be-released *Rhino Raid*, which was commissioned by the WWF and local pro-NGO design company Flynt Sky, will not only aid in the fight against rhino poaching by contributing all proceeds towards the fund, but will help TPG tap into a new, potentially massive market.

Their other, more conventional game in development is *Dig!* – a modern-day spin on the classic arcade game *QiX* that is giving the team an opportunity to diversify their portfolio before moving onto more serious titles – including a port of Pocket RPG to Ouya. After that, well, we've been told that three new Ouyas will soon arrive at the TPG office to go along with their development kit, so expect this studio to start making big waves in this exciting new home console market. **NAG**
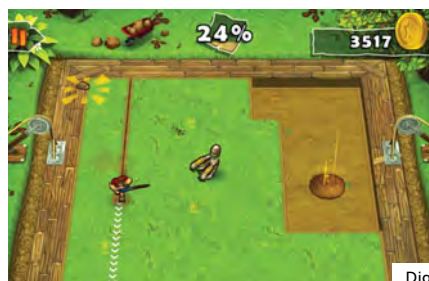
Dig!

Pocket RPG

Rhino Raid

EDITOR'S CHOICE

Reviewed
BioShock Infinite
Wipe away the debt

Columbia. A city in the clouds. Like something born amidst the vivid creations of a wondrous fever-dream, the city floats high above the world we know, a scientific marvel far ahead of its time. Entire buildings drift from dock to dock, the shops housed within briefly affording customers a chance to browse their wares before disappearing again. Airships dot the sky and a barbershop quartet delivers melodies to captivated crowds below from atop a weightless stage. Man-made beaches are suspended miles above the real ocean far below, their horizon a thunderous waterfall colliding with a blanket of puffy marshmallow sky; a perfectly engineered holiday destination nestled within the heavens. It's 1912, and this is utopia. Or so it would seem.

You are Booker DeWitt, former military man and Pinkerton agent. A life filled with bitter regrets has led you to embrace an existence fuelled by the bottle and over-enthusiastic gambling. It's put you in debt with the wrong sort of crowd – so when mysterious benefactors offer to settle your bill, you can't help but pay attention. In exchange, they want you to travel to Columbia, recover a young woman named Elizabeth and bring her back to New York

City. It's far simpler said than done, and it's probably best not to ask questions. But questions are what you'll find around every street corner in Columbia, and they're tough to ignore.

I feel as though revealing any more than that basic outline of *BioShock Infinite*'s main plot line would risk taking away the joy that comes with unravelling its expertly twisted narrative. As with the original *BioShock*, *Infinite*'s is a thoughtful, intelligent and highly affecting journey, one which you're sure to remember and ponder over long after the credits have rolled. It's of a highly mature nature, and a huge chunk of its narrative and overarching atmosphere stares down sensitive subjects like racism, religious exploitation and general intolerance. In other words, the type of real-world issues that other AAA titles wouldn't dare venture near. It's a slow realisation that Columbia is plagued by such problems, and the truth of the place is carefully, disturbingly revealed after the game's idyllic opening, which initially promises the perfect society. And rainbows. Instead, there's a civil war brewing in Columbia between its totalitarian government and the Vox Populi: a collection of militant revolutionaries fighting to liberate
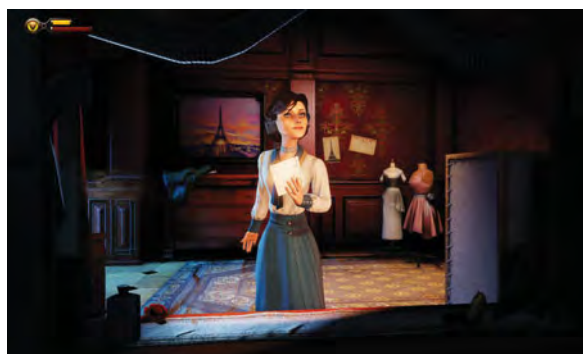
80

> *"You are Booker DeWitt, former military man and Pinkerton agent. A life filled with bitter regrets has led you to embrace an existence fuelled by the bottle and over-enthusiastic gambling. "*

1 Similarly to the original *BioShock*, eccentric vending machines will sell you various things. Ammo, health kits and upgrades for your weapons and Vigors can be bought here.

2 Salt is the substance used to power your Vigors. You've got a limited supply of it, but thankfully there's loads of Salt hidden in bins, handbags and boxes of chocolate. What?

the city's oppressed lower class. This conflict envelops the central story arc, and provides the basis for much of *Infinite*'s action.

The experience is comfortably *BioShock*, and anyone who played Irrational's previous outing (or its polarising sequel, handled by another developer) will feel at home here. Scattered elements have been casually re-employed here, hand-me-downs from its older sibling that cement this as a *BioShock*-flavoured excursion. The interface for searching containers, for example, will prove instantly familiar, and even the sound effect when receiving a new objective is the same. The weight of movement and the feel of the combat is similarly recognisable. Where previously we had Plasmids, we now have Vigors: a selection of powerful abilities that let you quickly swing difficult skirmishes in your favour. The Murder of Crows Vigor dispatches angry crows to peck at the fleshy bits of foes, while Undertow summons a wave of water to wash away enemies. Vigors are made doubly useful by offering secondary effects: Shock Jockey can either be used to stun foes with direct zaps of electricity, or you can lay a set of Shock Jockey traps. You've also got access to a fairly extensive arsenal of weaponry: appropriately themed variations on the standard mix of submachine guns, shotguns and grenade launchers.

It's perhaps not got the same level of depth as the combat in the original *BioShock*
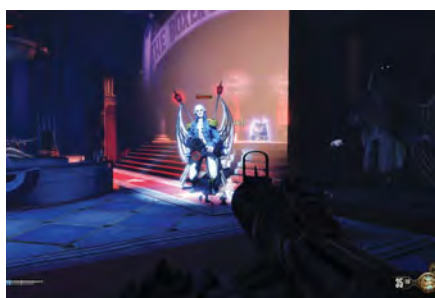
❸ When you're riding the sky-lines you're able to control your speed, change direction and shoot enemies as per usual – and you can also perform powerful attacks from above.

– there are no different ammo types, for example – but there's a definite focus on making battles more mobile, more fluid. Enemy turrets can still be hacked, but on-the-move using a Vigor rather than via a stationary mini-game. In larger combat areas, rollercoaster-style sky-lines snake through the environment and you can hop on them to quickly traverse areas and approach enemies from different angles. Throw in some of the bigger, tougher foes (like the Handyman, or the Motorized Patriot), and combat can often become a ferocious, fluid string of satisfyingly close encounters dealt with by lightning-fast reflexes and cunning use of all your abilities. That is, if you don't spend all your time hiding on a perch off in the distance, picking off foes one by one, far away from most of the danger – which I find is all too easy to do in many of the game's combat areas, robbing the combat system of much of its grace.

Key to the game is the much-publicised relationship between Booker and Elizabeth. Narratively, Elizabeth is this game's heart and soul, her child-like innocence and unbridled optimism in stark contrast to Booker's cynical, damaged worldview. Watching the pair develop across the course of the narrative is one of the game's many touches of brilliance. She'll help you out during combat as well by occasionally passing you ammo, health kits and more when you're low, and she doesn't need any looking after at all. She's also capable of opening "Tears" in the fabric of reality to summon useful stuff like friendly turrets or a weapon cache in dire times.

BioShock Infinite is, put simply, a sublime experience. I can't decide if I like it better than its undersea counterpart, mostly because it lacks some of the original's subtle gameplay depth, but it more than makes up for that in other areas. Columbia is a beautifully realised location, its brilliance spurred on by fantastic visuals and remarkable attention to every little detail. Its characters are masterfully developed and enchantingly brought to life by excellent voice acting. There is delight to be found in so much of its meticulous design, and the story it tells so brilliantly has obviously been crafted with intense care. Make no mistake, it's not without problems, ranging from silly niggles to more serious concerns, but they're almost completely overshadowed by the outstanding quality of the overall experience. I'm rapidly running out of space here, so I'll leave you with this: play *BioShock Infinite*. If you want an intelligent, meaningful experience, you'll find it here. **NAG**

- Barkskin

94

BioShock Infinite boasts outstanding design right down to the most delicate detail, and weaves a wonderfully captivating narrative that meanders in increasingly unexpected directions. Look for problems with it, and you will undoubtedly find them: but there's so much to love about the rest of it that its issues quickly vanish from my mind.

PLUS
Riveting story / Satisfying combat / Impressive design in almost every respect

MINUS
Combat doesn't always hit the right notes / Lacks some of its predecessor's depth

PLATFORMS
PS3 / PSV

REVIEWED ON
PS3

GENRE
Action/adventure

AGE RESTRICTION
7

MULTIPLAYER

Local
None

Online
None

DEVELOPER
Sanzaru Games

WEBSITE
www.doyouknowsly.com

PUBLISHER
SCEE

DISTRIBUTOR
Ster Kinekor Entertainment
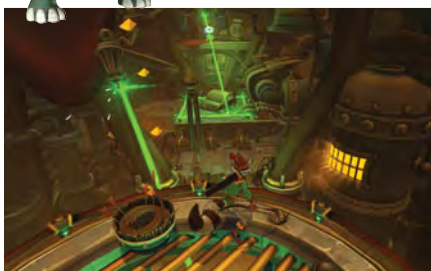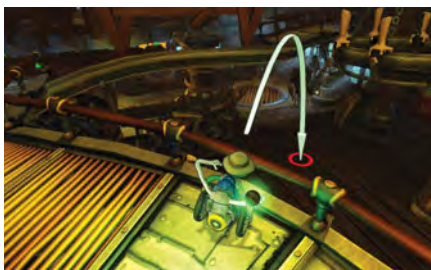
Reviewed

Sly Cooper: Thieves in Time

Master thief Sly Cooper makes his long awaited return

It's been eight long years since a new game in the *Sly Cooper* series has been released, and in the intervening time, the franchise's renowned development house Sucker Punch has moved on to bigger and better things (*inFamous*, in particular). Sanzaru Games have picked up where Sucker Punch left off, and *Thieves in Time* continues the tale of the debonair raccoon burglar, opening shortly after the events of 2005's *Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves*.

Sly himself is lured out of retirement when he realises that pages from the *Thievius Raccoonus*, his family's most closely guarded treasure, have been mysteriously disappearing, He soon discovers that his family's fortunes are being plundered in a complex heist that stretches back in time across generations and, like any good protagonist would do, he sets out to stop the nefarious mastermind behind all of these wrongdoings. Although the plot verges on the nonsensical, it's all presented with the sort of charm and humour that's become a hallmark of the franchise, and it provides a perfunctory backdrop for the action.

The game itself spans five distinct periods of time, including the prehistoric era, feudal Japan, the American Wild West, and medieval England. In each of these settings, you'll control one of Sly's ancestors, each of whom has a unique personality and physical capabilities. For example, Rioshi is a Samurai and part-time sushi chef, while Bob is Sly's caveman forebear. In addition to the Coopers themselves, Murray, Bentley & Carmelita return as playable characters, as does Sly himself. The levels employ the same mix of platform and stealth action as is familiar to the series, with the odd inventive mini-game thrown in to keep any trace of tedium well at bay.

Since the game is aimed at both adults and children, it should be noted that *Thieves in Time* is a little less challenging than it could be. The enemies you'll face will often evoke a laugh because of their humorous design, and they'll seldom prove difficult to overcome. Even the environmental puzzles that have been thrown in feel at times that they're too easily completed, though the game compensates for its lack of challenge by providing players with plenty of variety. PlayStation Vita owners will also be pleased to know that the full Vita version of the game is included on the PS3 disc.

Sanzaru Games have made a commendable effort with *Thieves in Time* by producing a sequel that fits perfectly into the framework of this well-established series. The game has the same polish and tongue-in-cheek humour that Sucker Punch's titles became known for. It's a solid, if unambitious, starting point for the continuation of this endearing franchise, and hopefully a portent of better, and more daring, things to come for the lovable raccoon.

- Madman

Sly's latest adventure stretches across multiple beautifully rendered locations and time periods

71

Sly makes a solid return in *Thieves in Time*, and the game is an enjoyable continuation of the *Sly Cooper* series, albeit one that's not particularly innovative or revolutionary. It's a solid platform title with endearing characters and great humour, though it doesn't represent any great strides forward for the genre.

PLUS
Superb humour / Plenty of variety / Vita version included

MINUS
Little innovation over its predecessors / Slightly too easy

MUST PLAY · MUST PLAY · MUST PLAY · MUST

Reviewed
StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm

Banelings, banelings, banelings oooooh!

» We've debated this extensively (probably far too much) in the office, but "For the Swarm!" is actually a line from the game, much like *WarCraft*'s catchy "For the Horde!" line.

Expansions to Blizzard games have a weird habit of becoming must-buys. Perhaps this is engineered from the start – a long-established version on the DLC that we so vehemently complain about today. It certainly feels like that with *Heart of the Swarm*; the first game – *Wings of Liberty* – annoyed a lot of people by only including a Terran campaign (with a bit of Protoss love on the side), but that single campaign was so gosh-darn entertaining that by the end, it didn't really matter.

Which brings us here, to a new campaign now focused on the Zerg (with just a single non-Zerg mission), being sold at full price. For your cash you get a campaign somewhat shorter than that of *Wings of Liberty* and access to the extensively, but subtly, updated multiplayer component featuring seven new units and a ton of rebalanced ones. For those people who don't play multiplayer (either competitive/skirmish or the excellent Arcade mode), this is a potentially tough sell. For everyone else, well, it's a no-brainer: you need *Heart of the Swarm* if you want to stay current.

Heart of the Swarm continues from where *Wings of Liberty* left off. Players will now take on the role of Sarah Kerrigan, and will thus almost solely control the Zerg forces. This presents a daunting task that Blizzard has no-doubt put a lot of thought into: delivering a campaign that is challenge enough for those players who understand and enjoy the Zerg gameplay mechanics (which are quite different from Terran and Protoss), and still provide enough accessibility to those who hate the idea of playing Zerg to the point

CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

Heart of the Swarm experienced a lot of changes during its lengthy beta testing phase. What began as a torrent of new, massively unbalanced units slowly transformed into the lean, thoroughly polished game that it is now. For the geeks, here's a quick breakdown of the racial updates, just bear in mind that the game is still being closely monitored, so things could change from the time of writing:

TERRAN has been made even more versatile, much to the lamenting wails of other players. Mech is now a viable strategy against both Zerg and Protoss, and it's easier to incorporate air units into the build. Reapers were made practically useless as anything but scouts, but Siege Tanks get Siege Mode out of the door, so keep quiet. Medivacs are also faster, so your dropping capabilities are even better than before.

PROTOSS has seen many changes to its air composition. Tempests are highly specialised anti massive units and can't really hold their own unless accompanied by other units, much like Siege Tanks. Oracles are brutally effective early- to mid-game harassment units with a couple of neat tricks. The Mothership Core is an early-game capital spellcaster that is almost always a good idea to have. Carriers are back and slightly tweaked. Void Rays can now chew through armoured units like a bulldog in a bunny pit. Ouch, my Stalkers.

ZERG has a new mid-game siege unit / siege breaker in the form of the Swarm Host, which can be a real pest when paired with the now speedy Hydralisks to deal with air units. The new Viper is proving to be very useful for those players with the micro skills to spare, and forms part of Zerg's updated anti-siege composition. This might seem small, but to combat Protoss' early-game air harass, Zerg can now build Spore Crawlers with only a Spawning Pool – hooray!
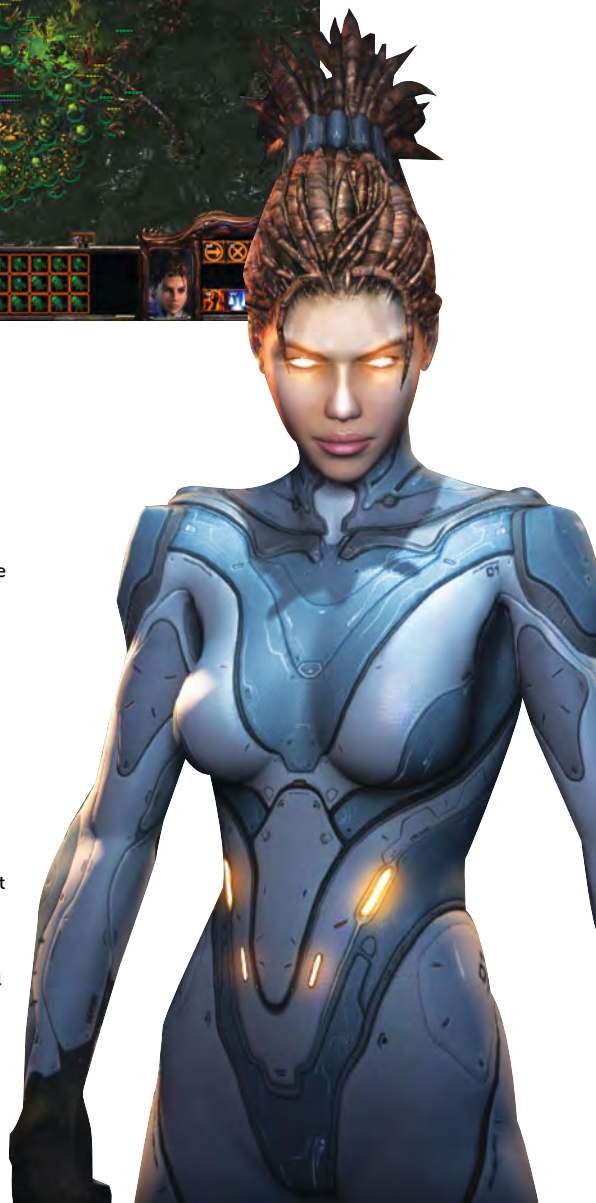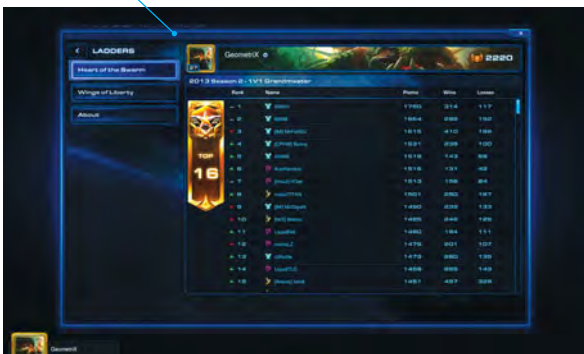
1 With the advent of *Heart of the Swarm*, Blizzard decided to implement a number of changes to Battle.net. Player levels add a new dimension of online ego-stroking and unlock access to new portraits, unit skins and even dances.

where they'd rather just avoid this expansion altogether. As someone who plays random (i.e.: effectively all races) it's difficult to put myself into those noob shoes, but it's clear that Blizzard has gone to great lengths to not just instruct on the basics of playing Zerg, but to massively simplify many core mechanisms in the campaign. What you're left with is a series of missions that manages to feel very Zerg-like − a factor aided by the deep exploration of Zerg history and lore − but at the same time approachable.

While the story itself is shallow and one-dimensional sci-fi schlock (even more so than the *WoL* campaign), it's sufficient as a mechanism to deliver missions to the player, and the characters you'll meet along the way are truly a delight, even funny, and make up for the slightly repetitive nature of a few of the missions. At least by the end of the campaign you'll have a firm grasp on how to build an army and use it to overrun enemy bases. Veteran Zerg players will also have a great time exploring the different evolution options and playing with units that you'll be begging to have included in the multiplayer. While this component of the campaign might be confusing for Zerg initiates, you can't really go wrong with any of your decisions, and many of them are reversible if you find yourself struggling on certain missions.

If you are of the anti-Zerg camp (and shame on you for being there) then you'll definitely want to play this campaign on the medium difficulty level, but those comfortable with this gooey species have the safety of hard or even insane to fall to. In short: there's something for everyone; don't be a wuss. **NAG**
- GeometriX

83

Blizzard delivers their typical level of quality with this excellent expansion to *StarCraft II*. While you shouldn't expect too much in the narrative department for the game's single player campaign, it's a fun introduction to the Zerg and one that players familiar with the race should find highly enjoyable.

PLUS

Extensive updates to Battle.net / Loads of cool new stuff in multiplayer / Campaign has plenty for Zerg fans

MINUS

Cheesy single-player storyline / Some missions feel too similar / Fewer "full" missions than *WoL*

Reviewed

God of War: Ascension

Kratos returns for one final PS3 bloodbath

The *God of War* franchise has become one of the PlayStation's most iconic series since its 2005 debut. Renowned for its unique blend of fast-paced action, over-the-top gore, frank irreverence and rich storyline, the series has made Kratos, its surly and overly aggressive protagonist, a household name amongst gamers the world over. *God of War: Ascension* is a prequel, telling of the events that befell Kratos shortly after he broke his blood-bond to Ares, and it's sure to be the character's last outing on the current generation PlayStation.

Fans of the series might be a little surprised that *Ascension*'s Kratos is a more reflective and thoughtful version of the character, lacking the insatiable bloodlust and near-mindless fury that has characterised him through the rest of the series. The story begins with Kratos as a prisoner of the Furies, ancient beings whose task it is to punish anyone who breaks a blood oath. Of course, Kratos' first order of business is to escape their clutches, and then to set about on his quest for revenge. Although the story is competent, it's not as engaging as prior instalments of Kratos' tale have been, and there's a slightly jarring disconnect between the melancholic Kratos portrayed in the game's cut-scenes, and the perpetual and unrelenting bloodbath that characterises the actual game dynamic.

The single-player mode comprises the bulk of *God of War: Ascension*, and the campaign itself is good for just under ten hours of entertainment. *Ascension* follows the familiar *God of War* formula, blending the odd platform or puzzle sequence with plenty of hack-and-slash action, and a fair number of set-pieces that hinge around quick-time-events. The combat system has been subject to a few revisions this time around, with the most notable change being that Kratos is now restricted to wielding only his Blades of Chaos throughout the campaign, save for limited uses of equipment scavenged from fallen enemies. He is, however, capable of infusing elemental magic into the Blades, allowing access to powerful magic attacks and devastating combinations. The character progression system has also been overhauled, and now players will need to focus their spending of experience points more carefully in order to acquire the more powerful magic techniques that Kratos is capable of performing.

Another addition comes in the form of the "Amulet of Urobotus", a relic that once acquired allows Kratos to manipulate time, either to restore ruined objects in its vicinity to their former selves, or to rapidly decay them in order to achieve his goals. It's a novel if underused innovation that adds to some of the environmental puzzles that perpetuate the game's locales.

God of War: Ascension's primary challenge comes not in the form of particularly strong foes, but rather in the sheer quantity of enemies that Kratos is forced to despatch.

"Ascension is a prequel, telling of the events that befell Kratos shortly after he broke his blood-bond to Ares, and it's sure to be the character's last outing on the current generation PlayStation."
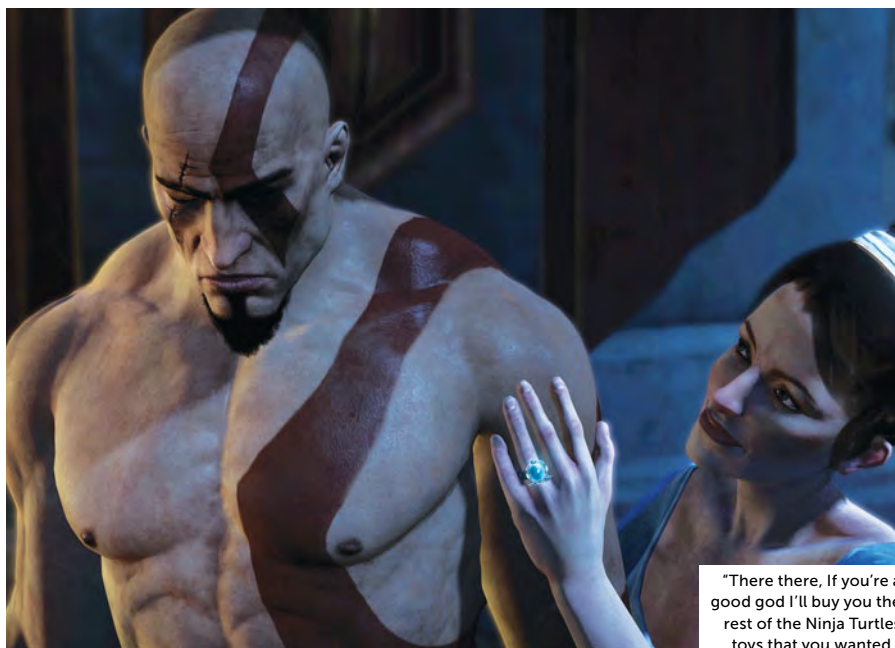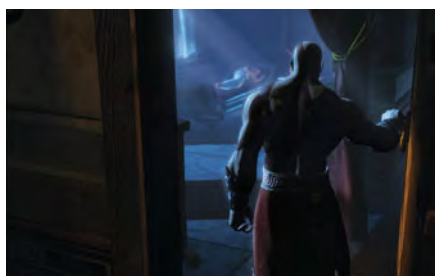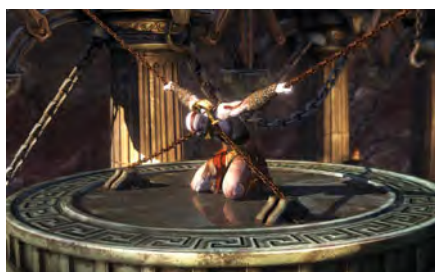
"There there, If you're a good god I'll buy you the rest of the Ninja Turtles toys that you wanted."
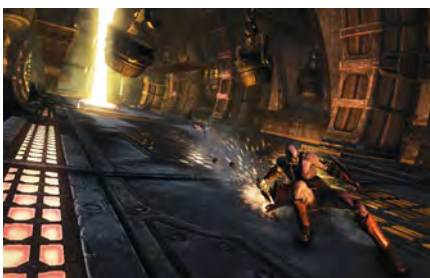
The frustration that this generates is tempered somewhat by the generous scattering of checkpoints, though there are still sequences that will test the resolve of even the most patient gamers. One in particular, the Trials of Archimedes, is diabolically infuriating to the point of feeling unfair. Fortunately, such sequences are few and far between, and aside from these isolated difficulty spikes, the game tends to flow well and feels quite balanced.

The other significant addition present in *Ascension* is its multiplayer component. When creating an avatar, players choose an allegiance to one of four gods, each of which grants access to a different set of abilities (in other words, it's the functional equivalent of choosing a character class). Depending on your choice, your character will be either a mage, stealth combatant, melee fighter or support fighter. The different multiplayer modes on offer are the rough approximates of deathmatch, team deathmatch, capture-the-flag, capture-the-point, and a novel "Trial of the Gods" mode, in which a team of two players undertake a survival challenge against waves of AI-controlled foes.

In many of the modes, players compete to accumulate "Favour of the Gods", which functionally acts as *Ascension*'s score system. Players are also able to use experience points earned in matches to progress their characters, gaining access to new skills and abilities, but the sheer quantity of experience points that the game doles out at every opportunity mean that there's little reward on offer for truly skilful play as opposed to simple button-mashing. Despite its apparent variety, *Ascension*'s multiplayer mode feels ultimately lacking in depth, and it seems to be more of an afterthought rather than one of the developer's primary concerns.

Visually, the *God of War* series has always been impressive, and *Ascension* continues the trend. Everything from the massive locales and landscapes to the gargantuan bosses are beautifully detailed, and the animations are both fluid as well as viscerally violent. The game has an overall feel of polish and attention to detail, and this is readily apparent from start to finish.

Ultimately, *God of War: Ascension* is easily the strongest entry in its franchise, from at least a technical perspective. It's a blend of stunning visuals and slick combat, packaged in the rich mythos that has popularised the entire series. Despite its technical accomplishments, however, the game never manages to feel truly special, and it never reaches the memorable, emotion-infused peaks that prior entries in the series have. Make no mistake, *Ascension* is an enjoyable, fast-paced and action-packed outing every step of the way, it's just not as soulful or compelling an endeavour as we've been treated to in the past. **NAG**

- Madman

72

Whilst being technically competent and fun to play, *God of War: Ascension* lacks the innovation and personality that characterised earlier games in the series. It's a solid action title, but it never reaches the awe-inspiring heights of its predecessors.

PLUS
Polished combat / Superb visuals / Unrelenting action

MINUS
Uninspiring storyline / Lack of multiplayer depth

MUST PLAY

PLATFORMS
360

REVIEWED ON
360

GENRE
Third-person shooter

AGE RESTRICTION
18

MULTIPLAYER

Local
2 players

Online
10 players

DEVELOPER
People Can Fly / Epic Games

WEBSITE
www.gearsofwar.xbox.com

PUBLISHER
Microsoft Game Studios

DISTRIBUTOR
Prima Interactive

Reviewed

Gears of War: Judgment

Free Baird

Before Delta Squad saved the world, before Queen Myrrah and her supercharged beetle-beast vomited molten lava all over Azura's barbeque deck, before the Lambent Brumak exploded beneath Jacinto and turned the entire plateau into the world's worst beachfront resort, before Mariaaaaaaaaaaaa, before Marcus Fenix and Dom Santiago took an express train to General RAAM's house and dropped off a bomb, there were all those other things that happened. But what other things? Well, like that time Baird, Cole, and the rest of Kilo Squad stole a top secret missile and got in heaps of trouble for it.

Yes kids, with the original *Gears of War* trilogy concluded, the inevitable prequel has turned up to fill in those narrative gaps you probably didn't know about in the first place while the concept team at Epic Games works on a credible pretext for another proper sequel. The marketing stuff made grand promises about revealing Baird's troubled career in the Coalition of Ordered Governments' armed forces and something about a "terrifying" new Locust threat, but the story isn't much more than context support for a sequence of flashbacks and flashpoints and the game's bad guy, Karn, barely even makes it in, and then only at the end. It's not

1 There are over 4,000 Corpsers in this picture. The important thing about Corpsers, of course, is that you don't know they're even there until it's too late. Much too late.

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

Arguably, the real game's in the multiplayer, and that's where *Judgment* will be, you know, judged. Let's get the condemnation out of the way first then – on disc, there are only eight multiplayer maps in total, with four allocated to the new OverRun and Survival modes, and the other four over on the versus mode rotation. Since launch, a fifth versus map has been released for free, with additional maps lined up as premium DLC. For a game with such a huge multiplayer community, this is a rather egregious deficit and a shamelessly blatant cash-grab.

Compared with *Gears of War 3*, there aren't very many multiplayer characters to choose from, and for some reason the Locust team has been entirely removed from versus multiplayer and replaced with a second team of COG Gears units. Which just feels all sorts of *wrong*.

And Horde mode is gone. A moment of silence for Horde mode.

Fortunately enough, the very excellent OverRun mode makes up for this. It's a bit of Horde mode, a bit of *Gears of War 3*'s Beast mode, and a bit of *Battlefield*'s Rush mode mashed up into one class-based 5-vs-5 mega-mode that might be the best thing in the whole series, and not just because of the Corpsers. Okay, mostly because of the Corpsers. ALL HAIL THE MIGHTY CORPSERS.

Pangs of treachery notwithstanding, the new free-for-all versus mode is also a very welcome addition to the multiplayer playlist, and while team deathmatch still dominates matchmaking, this is my go-to mode for private games so nobody can blame me when I, umm, accidentally drop a grenade next to a friendly. Again.
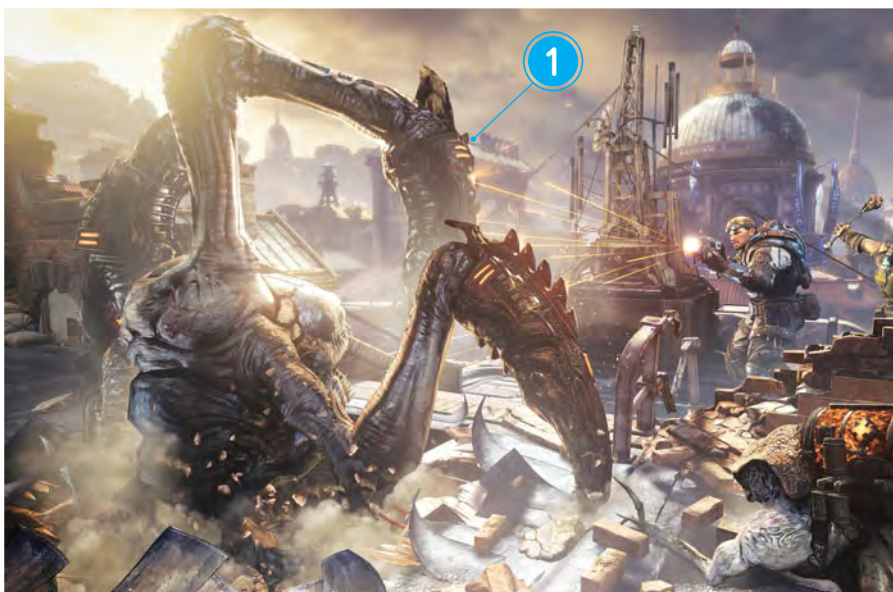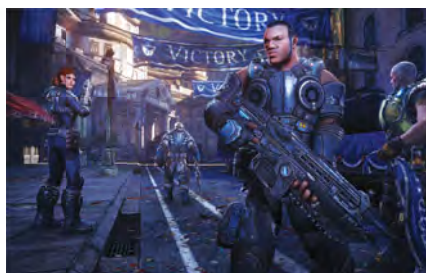
② The shocking twist at the end is that Damon Baird is really a Corpser. Technically I made that up, but it would have been awesome.
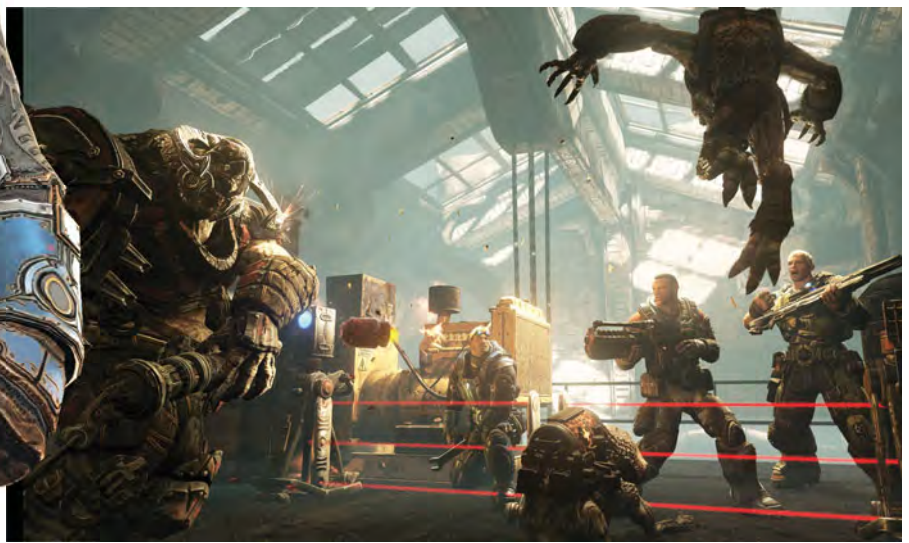
terrible by any means, but previous games in the series have offered a somewhat more compelling, or at least more memorable story each time around so that's a bit disappointing, perhaps.

The campaign is presented as four consecutive testimonies, with each member of Kilo Squad taking his or her turn to tell a COG court-martial what happened that day in Halvo Bay. In a major departure from previous games, the chapters are divvied up into multiple short sections, usually comprising only one or two major engagements, plus an optional, unique version of events that mixes in an additional modifier for the remaining duration of that section. Early on, for example, choosing the "declassify" option reduces visibility with dust for most of the level, while later on you are restricted to using only Gnashers and Boomshields or subject to a strict time limit to complete the stage. These increase the already rather increased difficulty substantially at times, but also introduce some overdue unpredictability in an otherwise generic SHOOT ALL THE THINGS, REPEAT format. How have they only thought of this now?

Another significant innovation in *Gears of War: Judgment* is a new, dynamic enemy spawning system that changes every time you reload a section or checkpoint - a

skirmish with cleaver-wielding Theron Guards might be a stampede of Bloodmounts or a scuttling mob of Wretches and Tickers the next time you play it. Between this and the short sections, the campaign features unprecedented incentive to replay the game for XP, ribbons, stars, medals, achievements, and other meaningfully meaningless (or is that meaninglessly meaningful?) ego-boosters (whatever, yay!). There's plenty to keep you busy for a long, long time. **NAG**
- Azimuth

82

If *Gears of War* was a papier-mâché Locust dummy blasted with a sawed-off shotty at close-range, and then put back together with super glue and bits of sticky tape, this would be the result. It looks and feels about right, but a bunch of chunks are still lying on the floor somewhere.

PLUS
OverRun mode is fantastic / New campaign format

MINUS
Only eight multiplayer maps, seriously? / No Horde mode ;__;

Reviewed

Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2

Craving the pink mist

Sniping is a part of virtually every first-person shooter these days. Whether it's the "realistic" battles in *Call of Duty* or the sci-fi fantasy of the sublime *BioShock Infinite*. Chances are the sniper rifle will make up part of your in-game arsenal for at least a part of any modern FPS. But in the *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* series from City Interactive, the sniper rifle is your only weapon of significance, as the name would imply.

Games based on sniping have been a bit of a mixed bag over the years, with the original *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* making some very serious mistakes. The good news is that the sequel, unimaginatively titled *Sniper: Ghost Warrior 2*, manages to right most of these wrongs.

The game puts the player in the role of a sniper who pretty much travels the globe and turns many an enemy head into pink mist. To this end, the player will visit exotic locations that span the globe, and will even do a little "time travelling" as the plot unfolds. These environments are rendered using CryEngine 3, with somewhat mixed results. Overall, the game looks pretty good, and the areas the player explores are rich, but the whole thing falls apart when you start paying too much attention to the little details. Thankfully, only

game reviewers really get that pedantic when it comes to looks, and most gamers will be suitably impressed by the overall effect.

Another massive improvement stemming from the use of this particular engine is the enemy AI. In the previous game, the enemies were quite thick, leading to missions that saw the player almost literally sniping at stationary or confused targets. While shooting at fish in a barrel can be fun for a while, the new AI means that the enemies are much more challenging, and demand a lot more from the player. A misstep or poorly executed shot — like where one enemy can see another getting his innards evicted by a high calibre round — will get a reaction, and a rather effective one at that. Enemies will seek cover, and return fire. In sufficient numbers, they will even storm the player's position, provided they can get to it.

This means that the player needs to be a lot more careful and sensible this time around. That may also exclude a number of players who prefer their action "run-and-gun" over "sneaky-sneaky", though. Stealth is a big thing in this particular title, and thankfully this has also been well addressed for the sequel. Sneaking is simpler, because the player can now actually gauge whether they are hidden

"Hold still, Jose... I am doing wind calculations..."
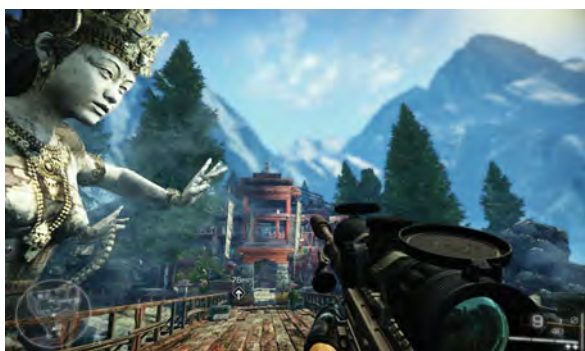
Looks great, from a distance.
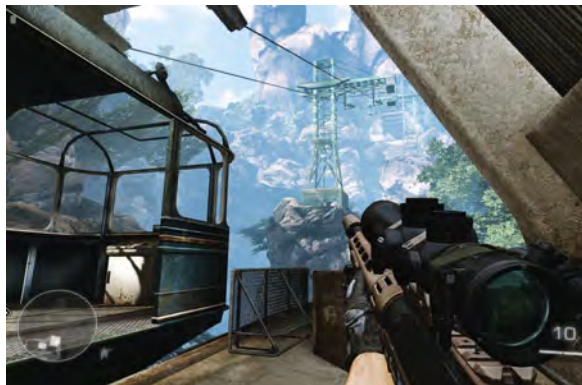
> "The game puts the player in the role of a sniper who pretty much travels the globe and turns many an enemy head into pink mist. "
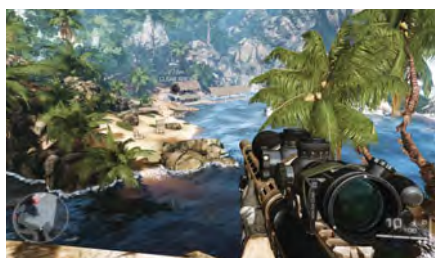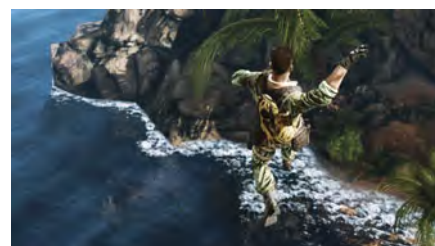
or not far more effectively.

Another massive improvement is the ballistic mechanics the game uses. In the previous title, actually hitting a target was often rather difficult. Bullets dropped far too quickly, and even a mild breeze caused a massive deviation. This time around, these elements are far more sensible, allowing for longer, more accurate shots. The effect of an elevated heart-rate making the sniper scope bob [*Sponge Bob, is that you? Ed*] around is still there, but it is much more manageable in this instalment.

So, overall, lots of improvements. But there are still areas that need work – even within the parts that were improved. The first of these is the overall linearity of the game. There is very little player freedom in *Ghost Warrior 2*, even in movement and stealth areas. That means the player will be more guided through the experience than is necessarily desirable these days, which is rather sad. At times, the targets will even be called out, meaning that the player often feels like they are playing through a tutorial, rather than a challenging combat simulation. This may prove rather frustrating, particularly to those that want their games equipped with a long leash.

Another problem arises from the fact that checkpoints within the levels are few and very far between. And the nature of this game dictates that the player needs to be close to perfect in performing actions. Sure, if they get spotted or take out a target poorly, it isn't game over; enemies will respond but the player gets the opportunity to apply a fire-fight Band-Aid to the situation. But the arsenal that the player carries is limited to a slow sniper rifle and a weak side arm, meaning that engaging in all-out combat definitely isn't the best idea. The result is a number of deaths that could be called cheap, and the player will (thanks to those widely spaced check points) have to redo a whole lot of stuff before redoing a challenge that may have laid them low.

The single player campaign will keep you busy for a few hours but, sadly, the same cannot be said for the multiplayer. It offers only a team deathmatch option, and two maps to play on. It generally turns into a camp-fest, which is hardly surprising.

The *Sniper: Ghost Warrior* franchise still has a way to go, despite the improvements in this sequel. However, the improvements are quite significant, and a definite step in the right direction. The next game will likely be a lot closer to what makes a game great. Still, there is enjoyment to be drawn from *Ghost Warrior 2*, if you're willing to look past its oddities and missteps. The improvements are heartening, and a slightly forgiving approach will certainly make this particular experience more rewarding than the last outing was. **NAG**
- Shryke

69

It has a way to go before the franchise becomes the definitive sniping game, but the improvements in this sequel show that the developers are heading in the right direction.

PLUS
Better physics / Smarter enemies

MINUS
Quite linear / Multiplayer fail

MUST PLAY · MUST PLAY · MUST PLAY · MUST PLAY

Reviewed

LEGO City: Undercover
Freedom of the City

LEGO games have become something of an institution, and fans of this particular (and peculiar) franchise look forward to seeing which new properties the developers will lampoon in their latest offerings. We have seen them take digs at *Indiana Jones, Star Wars*, and *Pirates of the Caribbean, Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*, all with varying degrees of success. It is part of their formula, and even though they have made changes of late – introducing voices and expanding player exploration possibilities, for example – they have stuck to this main principle like glue.

That's one of the stand-out differences with *LEGO City: Undercover*. It doesn't look at a single property and poke fun at it. Rather, it tackles an entire concept – the idea of the Hollywood cop.

In this title, the player takes on the role of Chase McCain, a cop who has returned to LEGO City after a three year absence. Soon after he sets foot off of the boat, he finds out that his arch nemesis, Rex Fury, is out of jail and wreaking havoc. So Chase has to re-establish himself as LEGO City's leading crime fighter by taking down this bad guy and his gang.

It's a very simple premise, and the plot never really rises above that kind of simplicity. Sure, it starts out like a cop show and ends up feeling like a spy thriller, but the truth is that there is never a point when the story isn't clear and direct. This, in addition to the use of character stereotypes like the grumpy police chief, the bumbling side-kick and the reticent love-interest, not only go further to poke fun at the TV cop genre, but they also show that the game is aimed at a younger market.

That is until the lampoon and film references come in. Within the first few hours, *Undercover* pokes fun at films like *Titanic, The Shawshank Redemption, The Matrix, Dirty Harry, Starsky and Hutch, Columbo, Dirty Harry* and *Goodfellas*, to name a few. These jokes are often beyond the experience of younger players – they're most certainly aimed at an older market.

The end result is that *LEGO City: Undercover* has a bit of appeal for a rather wide range of gamers. The bright, cheerful graphics and rather simple game dynamics will thrill kids, while the humour will grab older folks. It's a clever approach, in the

> *"Like other LEGO games, the player gets to collect studs and smash LEGO objects (and sometimes rebuild them into useful things)."*

Movie references and lampoons can be found all over the place

end, and one that will keep people coming back for more.

If the game needs to be summarised, it would work out like this: *LEGO City: Undercover* is the game that would come out if *Grand Theft Auto* had an illicit affair with a bunch of brightly coloured building blocks. It is so reminiscent of that particular franchise that the influence *GTA* had on this title is undeniable. The player is given a massive playground to roam around in, in the form of LEGO City. Aside from a number of story-missions, which drive the plot along, the player will find a huge amount of stuff to do. Like in *GTA*, you can spend absolute hours goofing off in LEGO City, without making any significant progress towards furthering the plot. And that's just fine, because that's what was intended here.

Like other *LEGO* games, the player gets to collect studs and smash LEGO objects (and sometimes rebuild them into useful things). This can be done virtually all over LEGO City. Simply driving down one of the game's many roads can yield a massive harvest of studs, in addition to a new in-game currency: blocks. The player will collect blocks when

It's LEGO, only much bigger

they destroy LEGO objects, which can later be used to create "super-builds". These range from car-request points through to items that are essential for completing story missions. In that way, the developers have ensured that people won't just try race through the story, but will also engage in the more arbitrary activities that add so much charm to the title.

Yes, you read that right, by the way. Cars. There are a large number of vehicles that can be unlocked in *LEGO City,* ranging from compact cars to aircraft. And all of them are made out of LEGO blocks. The driving is, for the most part, clunky as hell. But rather than removing from the experience, this actually enhances it to a degree. Seeing a LEGO block car fall apart piece by piece as it gets slammed into walls and other vehicles is actually highly amusing. In fact, this game has an awesome damage model, if you consider the paradigm.

And it will keep you busy for ages. As new abilities are unlocked, players can freely revisit areas and replay completed missions to try and access areas that weren't available before.

As a Wii U exclusive, it also makes decent use of the Game Pad. This becomes an investigative tool and map for the player, in addition to being the standard control method. But it also leads to the title's biggest

misstep: there is no multiplayer here. *Undercover* would have greatly benefitted from some co-op play. Luckily the omission isn't ruinous, though.

LEGO City: Undercover is one of the better LEGO titles ever made, certainly in the last few years. It provides the player with all the elements they expect from a LEGO title, and then gives them an almost complete free rein to do as they please. The idea works very well, and should keep fans (young and old) busy for absolute ages. **NAG**

- Shryke

82 This Wii U exclusive is not only one of the best *LEGO* games to date, but it also stands out as a top notch title for the new Nintendo console.

PLUS
Tons to do / Lots of movie references / Massive setting

MINUS
No multiplayer / Occasional frame rate drops

Reviewed

Dynasty Warriors 7 Empires

Plan before you mash

PLATFORMS
PS3
REVIEWED ON
PS3
GENRE
Third-person action
AGE RESTRICTION
16
MULTIPLAYER
Local
None
Online
None
DEVELOPER
Omega Force
WEBSITE
www.dynastywarriors7.eu/empires/
PUBLISHER
TECMO KOEI
DISTRIBUTOR
Silver Screen Trading

There have been seven million games in the *Dynasty Warriors* series. Okay, perhaps that's a slight exaggeration but let's face it, few franchises are quite as prolific as *Dynasty Warriors*. And if you include the spin-offs, like *Gundam* and *Empires*, the number grows significantly. *Dynasty Warriors 7 Empires* does what every "Empires" spin-off attempts to do – inject a modicum of strategy into the franchise, turning the thumb-numbing third-person action games we are used to into something deeper. And depending on who you ask, they succeed in various degrees.

Personally, I like my strategy to be deep and rich, and that's something that this particular title does not deliver. Sure, there is a level of complexity here, but it is not enough to detract from the fact that you will be spending most of your time mashing buttons as you face off against oodles of copy-and-paste enemies.

On the strategy side there are some decisions that can affect your Empire, and various roles for the player to choose from. But, for the most part, the strategy is in broad strokes, and it fails to become even close to Machiavellian – which all good strategy titles should.

So, realistically, it really is just the same thing as the other *Dynasty Warrior* games, albeit with a cheap strategy disguise. Fans may appreciate that, but strategy gamers won't. **NAG**
- Shryke
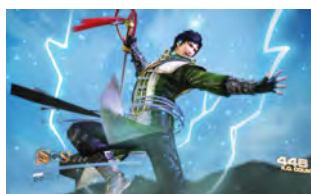
60 Adding a strategy element to a beat-'em-up only works if the strategy element is significant. It isn't really, here...

PLUS
A bit different / Good graphics

MINUS
No real depth / Still a beat-'em-up at heart

Reviewed

Fist of the North Star: Ken's Rage 2

Killing crash test dummies

PLATFORMS
360 / PS3 / WII U
REVIEWED ON
360
GENRE
Third-person action
AGE RESTRICTION
18
MULTIPLAYER
Local
2 players
Online
8 players
DEVELOPER
TECMO
WEBSITE
www.kensrage.com/2
PUBLISHER
TECMO KOEI
DISTRIBUTOR
Silver Screen Trading

Fist of the North Star has been around for thirty years, first as a manga, then as anime, and now as video games. Production on the former two ended ages ago, though, leaving the video games as the last bastion for fans of this post-apocalyptic tale. The main problem is that they keep basing the games on the same stories – over and over and over again.

In short, if you have played any of these games in the past, it's likely you'll recognise sections of the plot in *Fist of the North Star: Ken's Rage 2*. You won't spend long on them, though, because the developers have crammed so much story in here that everything feels like an abridged version.

The missions involve Ken (or one of the other twenty-plus playable characters) generally helping out arbitrary people in the wasteland by beating up hordes of enemies. And I mean hordes; your controller will hate you for the sheer volume of button mashing this game delivers.

There is a nod at character development, although the player has little control over it. There are enhancements that can be applied, but their effects are almost negligible. In the end, it's all about beating up bad guys who are too dumb to fight back effectively. This one is definitely for the fans only... and they might also find it a little lacking. **NAG**
- Shryke

40 Even franchise fans may find the repetitive game dynamic, stupid enemies and abridged plot disappointing.

PLUS
Lots of playable characters / Like, the whole story, dude...

MINUS
Repetitive / Enemies dumber than a bag of hammers

PLATFORMS	PC
REVIEWED ON	PC
GENRE	Simulation
AGE RESTRICTION	7
MULTIPLAYER	
Local	None
Online	None
DEVELOPER	The Sims Studio
WEBSITE	www.thesims.com
PUBLISHER	Electronic Arts
DISTRIBUTOR	Electronic Arts South Africa

Reviewed

The Sims 3: University Life

Party time! Studying optional...

The Sims 3 is still getting a flood of new content, and with the release of *University Life*, EA has hit a two-for-two on decent expansions. Like *Seasons*, which came out late last year, *University Life* manages to be a solid and useful expansion to everyone's favourite life simulator. The only life simulator, actually, but who's counting?

University Life fills that gap that has always existed in *The Sims 3*, between completing high school and slamming into the brick wall of the job market. This expansion allows the player to get their sims extra-educated, which equates to a faster running start at said brick wall.

Getting an education isn't always easy, though, particularly when the player will need to balance their studies with the new social activities included in this expansion. But that's part of the fun, and the entire exercise can prove rewarding for any sim aged young adult and above who passes the in-game entry exam.

The player will need to deal with spending a fair amount of time away from their sim's home with this expansion, but degrees in one of six different courses really do have a great impact on that sims future.

In short, this is one of the better expansions for *The Sims 3* – unlike the lamentable *Supernatural,* this one actually adds value to the franchise.　**NAG**

- Shryke
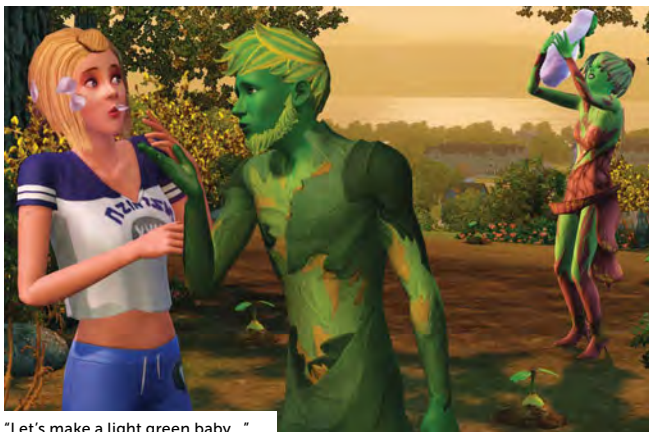
"Let's make a light green baby..."

80 This is one of the better expansion packs for *The Sims 3*, thanks to the fact that it actually enhances the game and has impact on the lives of the player's Sims.

PLUS
Adds a lot to do / Enhances the overall game

MINUS
Lots of time spent away from the main area

PLATFORMS	3DS
REVIEWED ON	3DS
GENRE	Action-adventure
AGE RESTRICTION	16
MULTIPLAYER	
Local	None
Online	None
DEVELOPER	MercurySteam
WEBSITE	www.konami-castlevania.com/mof/
PUBLISHER	Konami
DISTRIBUTOR	Core Gaming Group

Reviewed

Castlevania: Lords of Shadow - Mirror of Fate

Dracula | alucarD - draculA | Alucard

Compared to previous entries on the portable side of the *Castlevania* franchise, *Mirror of Fate* may be a little simplistic. There is no inventory system, and items/weapons you find are directly tied to progress through the story. It's a "Metroidvania" still, with mild backtracking triggered by finally getting that *thing* you needed to cross that gap you saw earlier, but exploration and discovery are clearly not the main focus here.

So what *Mirror of Fate* may lack, if you're the type who prays each night to an original PlayStation copy of *Symphony of the Night*, it attempts to make up for by having ridiculous amounts of production value. Each new area you enter has a unique theme, accompanied by some of the highest-resolution textures yet seen on the 3DS. While one could applaud MercurySteam for not wanting to compromise on visual fidelity, the frame rate does suffer some as a result, but nothing game-breaking.

The yarn spun by *Mirror of Fate*, at the very least, is no better or worse than any previous *Castlevania*. It's a story of ironic revenge, as several Belmont in turn, marching up to Dracula's castle, discover the tragic fate of those they set out to avenge. It's hard to explain without spoilers, but in the end it all comes together in a totally-not-bad kind of way. Much of the plot is saved thanks to elaborate real-time cut-scenes that, while they lack lip-syncing for the voiced dialogue, have plenty of other little touches that round them off.

This may also be the easiest *Castlevania* ever made. Even on the highest difficulty, where enemies do insane amounts of damage, the generous checkpoints and the powerful-to-the-point-of-overkill attacks you can do makes reaching the end not much trouble. The caveat: if you want the "true" ending, you'll need to explore 100% and find all the hidden secrets, which is a little more difficult. Thankfully, if you finish the game and restart, you keep all the attack moves and health/magic upgrades you've unlocked thus far, which makes exploring the full extent of the castle effortless.

So while *Mirror of Fate* might not surpass the previous keystone *Castlevania* titles, it does well enough. A dollop of puzzles break up the action, certain set pieces are a marvel to behold, while the rich orchestral music make playing with earphones a must. **NAG**
- Miktar
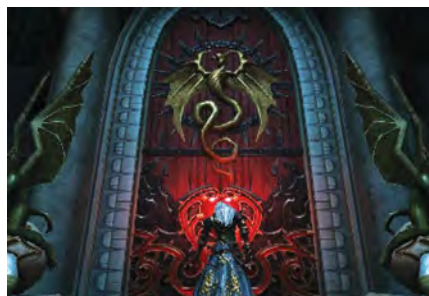
SPOT THE SCOTT(ISH)
Robert Carlyle (*Trainspotting, Stargate Universe*) reprises his role as the voice of Gabriel/Dracula, joined by fellow countrymen Alec Newman (*Dune*) as the voice of Simon Belmont and Richard Madden (*Game of Thrones*) as the voice of Trevor Belmont. Having full voice acting greatly assists *Mirror of Fate* in feeling like a big-boy console game, instead of a watered-down portable castoff.

85

While franchise puritans might find much to dislike about *Mirror of Fate*, that doesn't change the fact that it's a competent action-adventure with surprisingly detailed visuals, a not-too-bad story that fills in the gap until *Lords of Shadow 2*, and one of the better 3DS titles released thus far.

PLUS
Impressive visuals / Competent combat system / Epic and sweeping music

MINUS
The mapping system is ambiguous / Frame rate could be better

Reviewed

The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct

Emphasis on the word "stinked"

PLATFORMS
360 / PS3 / PC / Wii U
REVIEWED ON
360
GENRE
First-person shooter
AGE RESTRICTION
18
MULTIPLAYER
Local
None
Online
None
DEVELOPER
Terminal Reality
WEBSITE
www.thewalkingdead
survivalinstinct.com
PUBLISHER
Activision
DISTRIBUTOR
Megarom

Do you remember when licence games used to suck? Oh, wait, that's right now – that's still happening. We forgot for a moment that this is a thing because Telltale's *The Walking Dead* adventure game (or "interactive film" for the real cynics) was so damn good. You might at this juncture find yourself asking why on Earth there'd be a need for another game based on the franchise, and we suppose it all sounded rather like a good idea in Activision's board room on a particularly sunny day. In execution, however, *Survival Instinct* is nothing but a shameless, low-quality cash-in.

You'll play as Daryl Dixon – everyone's favourite crossbow-wielding redneck – as he and his brother drive down the road in the early stages of a zombie apocalypse. On your drive, you'll pass through boring and isolated locations like towns, camp sites and the occasional foresty bit. Sometimes it's light out; usually it's dark, and you can either crawl through the bare environments, listening for zombie noises, or just flat-out run to your next objective clearly marked by your psychic compass. Don't worry about getting lost because there are invisible polygons to keep you moving forward. You'll stab lots of awfully animated zombies in the face until they die. You get a few guns but using them is largely pointless because they attract the nearby undead to your location. The zombies initially seem pretty tough to bring down, but once you've perfected the simple pattern of "push, stab, stab, long stab", they become nothing more than an irritation that needs to be managed. You can QTE yourself out of practically all situations. **NAG**

- GeometriX

> Even the survival elements are so under-utilised and frankly unchallenging that they should never have been on the design document in the first place. They certainly don't belong in the subtitle.

36

One of the lowest-quality licensed titles I've played in a long time. Between Telltale's adventure game and *Dead Island*, there is literally no point in playing this ridiculous attempt to jump on the zombie bandwagon.

PLUS
A bit spooky at first / Thankfully short

MINUS
Terrible visuals / Laughable animations / Zero survival elements / Dreary combat

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Reviewed

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14

A golfing gap year

PLATFORMS
360 / PS3
REVIEWED ON
360
GENRE
Sports
AGE RESTRICTION
3
MULTIPLAYER
Local
4 players
Online
4 players
DEVELOPER
EA Tiburon
WEBSITE
www.easports.
com/golf
PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts
DISTRIBUTOR
Electronic Arts
South Africa

As a franchise, *Tiger Woods PGA Tour*, every now and then, has a "gap year". While they are rarer than those of *FIFA*, for example, these years see releases that aren't revolutionary. Rather, they tweak what came before to try and improve on existing elements, rather than bring in a ton of new ones. This year's release, *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14*, falls into that category. It takes some of the better ideas that last year's release brought up, and improves on them.

Things like shot shaping have been tweaked to be better, while the inclusion of the historic Legends of the Masters mode will allow golf "pros" to play against some of the all-time greats of the game – including, I am pleased to report, South Africa's Gary Player.

The online multiplayer modes have been improved as well, with in-game chat, real-time tournaments and larger country clubs all contributing to a much improved experience. There's still that niggling nasty micro-transaction thing of having to purchase golf courses that major events take place on (or changing to some of the courses actually included in the game) but that seems to be the nature of the beast going forward, so we should just get used to it.

On the whole, it's a good next iteration, and fans of the franchise should be pleased with almost all of its tweaked and new features. **NAG**

- Shryke

> Playing against legends has its own charm

Woods gets distracted by a hole.

82

Fans of the franchise won't notice too many overt changes this year; EA Tiburon concentrated on tweaks under the hood for *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 14*.

PLUS
Solid tweaks / Online improvements

MINUS
Micro-transactions / Not as beginner friendly

PLATFORMS
3DS / Wii U
REVIEWED ON
3DS
GENRE
Action role-playing game
AGE RESTRICTION
12
MULTIPLAYER
Local
None
Online
4 players
DEVELOPER
Capcom
WEBSITE
www.capcom-unity.com/monster_hunter
PUBLISHER
Capcom
DISTRIBUTOR
Ster Kinekor Entertainment

Reviewed

Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate

The only true (monster) murder simulator...

An expanded *Monster Hunter 3* (2009), contents are as labelled, making it one of the most honest and unambiguous games out there. *Monster Hunter* is all about hunting giant monsters, using a remarkably straightforward game loop. You hunt or capture the beasts, then use their skin, bones and other organs to craft new armour and weapons with which to hunt increasingly larger quarry. It's a role-playing game, but you don't level up: your strength is determined entirely by the armour you equip, the weapon type you wield, how prepared you are for the fight, and your own knowledge of what it is you're fighting.

For a series that began in 2004 on the PlayStation 2, *Monster Hunter* hasn't managed much traction in the West. This could partly be attributed to how strange the experience may seem, especially to those more accustomed to straightforward action games. While *Monster Hunter* does look the part of a standard hack-and-slash action game, one could argue it's more closely related to a fighting game. The weapon type you pick, from giant sword to bow gun to lance-and-shield (there are 12 in total), completely changes how your character plays. Your opponents, incredibly articulated and life-like wyverns and such, are each

unique in how you must approach them. Discovering how a monster fights, which parts are too thick to hit (your weapon will bounce right off), and learning their "tells" so you know when to dodge, is what *Monster Hunter* is all about. When you take down a dragon the size of a bus, you've *earned* it.

Your support structure in the game comes from various activities that generate resources, like a farm that grows mushrooms, honey and insects for you, or the fishing fleet that brings back treasure, fish and other curios. You gain two A.I. allies during the campaign, so you're not utterly alone in what is really a co-op experience at heart. This isn't a game you buy just to play once and put down, it's a hobby you commit to, Hunter. **NAG**
- Miktar

MULTIPLAYER

Depending on if you're playing the Wii U or the 3DS version of *MH3U*, you've got different multiplayer options. The 3DS version cannot play online (something *MH4* remedies), but if you own a Wii U there is a tunnelling app you can download for free that lets you join an online lobby with your 3DS (the Wii U becomes a fancy router). Only one 3DS per Wii U, unfortunately. If you have the Wii U version of *MH3U*, a 3DS player can join you, or you can go online to play with up to three other hunters (but you cannot go online if you're partied up with a 3DS player). The 3DS version supports up to four people for local play.
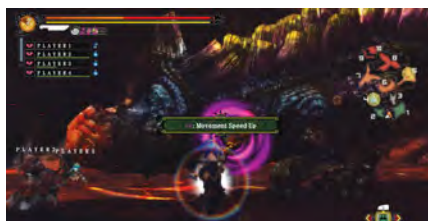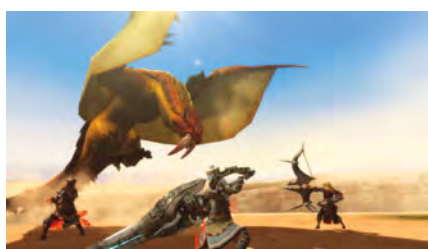
86 Even a nice high-definition version can't hide *Monster Hunter 3*'s age, but if you look past the flaws there is an incredible, one-of-a-kind experience here that is as rewarding as it is difficult. Even just reaching the new G-Rank missions is a true accomplishment and worthy of bragging rights.

PLUS

The definitive version with all content / Unique experience / Good training for *Monster Hunter 4*

MINUS

3DS online play requires Wii U app / Steep learning curve / Some texture-work hasn't aged well

Reviewed

Army of Two: The Devils Cartel

Mash button to plant C4

The development team on this project know how to make a game. What they don't know how to do is make it fun or entertaining or exciting or challenging or interesting. This experience is exactly the same as channel hopping at night until you see a few army guys with guns and you stay a while for some mindless staring at the screen. They've also lost touch with what made the first two games in the franchise bearable — not taking themselves seriously.

The Devil's Cartel is a co-op game that can be played solo. It's more fun with a buddy of course but thankfully the friendly AI is smart enough for you to enjoy it alone. The "co-op" involves door breaching and helping each other over walls as well as the odd resuscitation if you take too many hits. However, even while playing co-op you're always doing your own thing anyway — it doesn't really matter what your buddy is doing at any point in the game.

Anyway, as far as the story goes, you must rescue a political hostage from a Mexican drug cartel. To do this you play either Alpha or Bravo. That's right, you don't even get a name, and in fact the bad guys (who hardly speak) have more personality than the lame-joke cracking main characters. This cartel consists of an infinite number of faceless goons you must wade through to get to the end. Playing is a tiresome experience as you face wave after wave of cut and paste situations and enemies that all do exactly the same thing every time. The maps are varied and include churches, graveyards, hotels and urban environments but this variation is only cosmetic. Each area is really just bits of scenery for you and the bad guys to hide behind. From here it's a pop-up shooting gallery that is less challenging than *Duck Hunt* on the NES. This dynamic wouldn't be so terrible if moving into and out of and then to new cover wasn't so unpredictable and random. It's a chore. Once you are out of the line of fire the game devolves into popping up and pressing the fire button as the game automatically locks your aim onto the next bad guy. It requires no skill or thought or effort and the overall result of this is sadness and boredom. Occasionally the dynamic is changed up and you get to do a little sniping, shooting from vehicles and poking around in the dark with a flashlight. These breaks from the cover pop-up shooting gallery are too infrequent to make the whole a better experience.

It's all a pity because there is a decent game in here somewhere, the graphics aren't too bad and the destructible cover works well. There is an overkill bar that fills up and when unleashed grants both players invulnerability as well as more weapon damage, it's plenty of fun when it kicks in but far too short to really enjoy — especially when you're stuck behind cover thanks to the iffy cover system. End of the day what we have here is a functional but extremely dull game that does absolutely nothing interesting or fun and feels very out of place in 2013. **NAG**

- RedTide
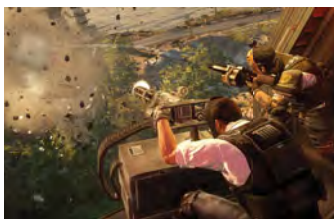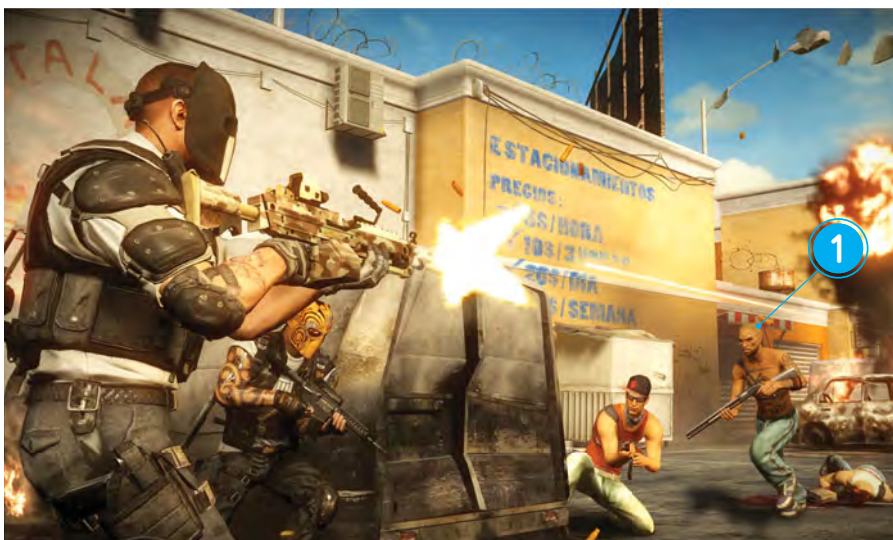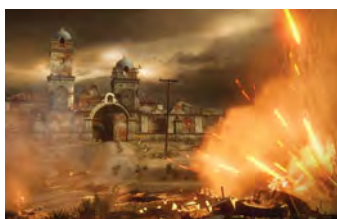
① Wait, bro! Dude, *déjà vu*! I swear we've just killed all these guys like five minute ago?
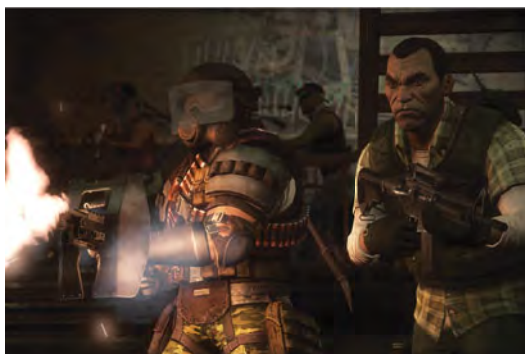
49

All the boxes are ticked for the things a game like this is supposed to have; bad guys to shoot, an enemy organisation to defeat, guns to use and cover to hide behind. Beyond that there is nothing, no energy, no soul and no fun. A break even game, and if this is the direction it's headed, hopefully the end of a franchise.

PLUS
Overkill mode is fun / Friendly AI is smart / Some task variety

MINUS
Cut and paste enemies / Dull play dynamic / Brainless

Well, almost everything.

EVERYTHING ELSE

Bits and bobs that can all be filed under gaming lifestyle

X-MEN: MAGNETO ACTION STATUE

"You know it's a good present when it's heavy" is the old saying. You also know that when you pay north of four grand for a statuette (can't call this one a doll) you're going to get really good quality (unless it's a brick in a fake box). The bitter stench of fear pervaded the air when we opened this box and assembled Magneto for his photo shoot. Nobody wanted to be responsible for turning this single, very valuable R4,435 item into 887 worthless R5 ones. The action pose is impressive too as we see Magneto commanding metal from the dead hand of a Sentinel. It's also a limited edition and the one we unboxed was number 996 out of a possible 1100 — so if you end up with this one just know that it was fiddled with by the hand of *NAG*. Technical stuff reads like this: it's over 19" tall and digitally sculpted by Jason Smith (a respected video game artist who was also lead character artist on Sony's DC Universe Online). The figurine is by Bowen Designs (**www.bowendesigns.com**) who have an impeccable reputation for this kind of thing. If you've got cash to burn or some evil plot to rule the world that requires really expensive X-Men figurines then this is for you.

Supplier: AWX
Website: www.awx.co.za
RRP: R4,435.00

Please note that the trade paperback *Rebirth*, which we featured in last month's Everything Else, was incorrectly priced. The correct price is R325.

DARKER THAN BLACK SEASON 1

The problem with growing up is that your tolerance for silly things becomes greatly diminished. At least, that's the issue we have at *NAG*, which makes watching the vast majority of anime a difficult process. Well, if this is a problem you face, then *Darker than Black* is sure to remedy that. It's sombre as hell, calm and quite peaceful, but hits you in the face with its action sequences. The voice acting tends towards the hammy side, but the sophisticated animation more than balances it, making for an overall very watchable, mature anime series.

Supplier: AWX
Website: www.awx.co.za
RRP: R600

JOURNEY TO AGARTHA COLLECTOR'S EDITION BLU-RAY/DVD BUNDLE

Journey to Agartha is a story about a child who discovers a magical world – it's pretty standard stuff, but this film more than makes up for it with its high-quality animation and professional voice acting. This is one that's sure to please Westerners who prefer the Studio Ghibli kind of anime, but the tropes are present to ensure even hardened fans of the medium will enjoy this film's solid mix of scenes both powerful and tranquil.

Supplier: AWX
Website: www.awx.co.za
RRP: R410

ADVENTURE TIME: FINN 'THAT'S SO MATH' PX BLUE T-SHIRT

Adventure Time started as a viral hit on the Internet and ended up as a series for Cartoon Network. Now in its fifth season, the show is cult followed by around 2-3 million viewers per week. However, like velvet underpants and marmalade – it's not for everyone. If you are a huge fan and want other people to know it then you can buy this blue T-shirt from the series. If you don't get it then try watching a few episodes *before* you buy the box set.

Supplier: AWX
Website: www.awx.co.za
RRP: R265

BATMAN/DEATHBLOW: AFTER THE FIRE DELUXE EDITION

Every few years a graphic novel comes along that anyone – even someone unfamiliar with comics – would call a masterpiece. This is one of those books, and now over a decade later has been reprinted. Every frame in *Batman/ Deathblow* is a work of art – carefully composed and magnificently drawn, inked and painted. Careful use of colour, texture and silhouette meets solid writing, although the plot could use a little work. If you appreciate good comic art, you'd be crazy not to buy this.

Supplier: AWX
Website: www.awx.co.za
RRP: R270

HOAX HUNTERS BOOK ONE

In a world where all those creepy stories you hear about are actually real, the Hoax Hunters are the team sent out to deal with them. They also run a TV show on the side, which acts as a convenient cover for this rag-tag bunch of not-quite-ordinary humans. Story-wise, *Hoax Hunters* is interesting and devilishly fast of pace, but the writing is a little cheesy and the first issue (technically, issue #0) in this collection features an artist still very raw and untrained. Later issues feature different artists and tighten up the writing a tad, and over the course of this trade you'll be ready for the next one.
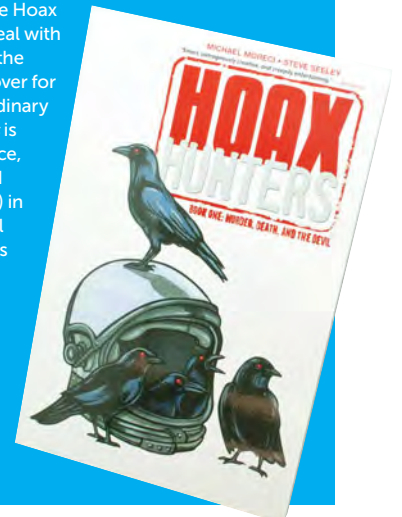
Supplier: AWX
Website: www.awx.co.za
RRP: R175

TECH NEWS

KNOW YOUR TECHNOLOGY

TEXTURE COMPRESSION

A specialized form of image compression designed for storing texture maps in a 3D graphics rendering system. In contrast to image compression algorithms, texture compression algorithms are optimized for random and not progressive/sequential access. In such systems, lossy compression at the benefit of speed is more tolerable as compression artefacts are harder to detect in motion than on still images.

DXTN/S3TC

A group of lossy texture compression algorithms originally developed by S3 Graphics for use with their Savage3D graphics processors. S3TC fixed-rate data compression rate made it suitable for 3D hardware accelerators of the time and hence gained popularity. It was later included into DirectX 6 and OpenGL 1.3 so all supporting vendor processors could make use of it (as DXTn).

GEOMETRY SHADER

Shaders introduced with OpenGL 2.0+ and Direct3D 10. Executed after vertex shaders along the rendering pipeline, these take input primitives and related vertex data and manipulate it for tessellation, shadow volume extrusion and point sprite generation for example. Geometry shaders are tightly related to tessellation as they deal with mesh complexity modification at primitive or line level before that data is then fed to the fragment/pixel shader.

PARALLAX MAPPING

Simply put, parallax mapping adds the appearance of geometric detail to textures, by displacing the texture coordinates at a point on a rendered polygon. This is a mathematical function governed by a function of the view angle relative to the surface normal and the value of a predefined height map at that point. At very steep view angles the texture coordinates are displaced even more giving the illusion of depth. Parallax mapping is sometimes used in games as a means of creating the illusion of detailed geometric silhouettes without the rendering power costs of real geometric detail or tessellation.

DID YOU KNOW?

Ethernet is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. The IEEE 802.3 Ethernet Bandwidth Assessment report, which was released late last year, forecasts that networks would need to support capacity requirements of 1 terabit per second in 2015 and 10 terabits per second by 2020 if current trends continue. "Traffic is growing everywhere; more Internet users, more ways to access the Internet more quickly, higher-bandwidth content, new applications enabled, etc. and it's critical that we move now to create a plan for the Ethernet ecosystem to evolve beyond today's capabilities, in order to accommodate the burgeoning bandwidth tsunami," said John D'Ambrosia, chair of the new IEEE 802.3 400Gb/s Ethernet Study Group and chief Ethernet evangelist, CTO office, Dell.

#4.1.0

BY THE NUMBERS

The latest update to EVGA Precision X overclocking software, Precision X 4.1.0 allows you to fine tune your graphics card, including GPU clock speed, memory clock speed, fan speed, and voltage. Download the latest version 4.1.0 for free at **http://eu.evga.com/precision/**

Mosh Pit

STEELSERIES FREE MOBILE WIRELESS CONTROLLER

Touch screen gaming might be revolutionary, but there's nothing quite like physical buttons, especially when you're playing games like *GTA* or *Shadowgun*. That's where this little guy comes in handy, with its dual analogue sticks and a pair of shoulder buttons, it's as close to console gaming as you can get on your mobile phone, tablet or any Bluetooth-enabled PC.
www.megarom.co.za | R849

FLD LAPTOP BAG

Available in three handy sizes for 11", 13" and 15" laptops, the FLD water-resistant nylon bags have lined pockets inside as well as a removable strap. The trimmings come in four colours – blue, red, pink and yellow.
www.fldproducts.co.za | R699

WD SENTINEL DX4000

Ideal for a small office environment, the DX400 is an all-in-one storage solution that comes with automatic server-based backup and restore for up to 25 devices on a network. Other features include remote web access and a built in DLNA media server. It is available in 4TB, 6TB, 8TB and 12TB capacities.
www.drivecon.net | R10,999

> "Sorry, I don't get the drama around having an 'always on' console. Every device now is 'always on.' That's the world we live in. #dealwithit"
> *Adam Orth, former creative director at Microsoft's video game division.*

Orth's comment caught the attention of BioWare's Manveer Heir, who tweeted back, **"Did you learn nothing from** *Diablo III* **or** *SimCity*? **You know some people's internet goes out right? Deal with it is a shitty reason."** Orth responded, **"Electricity goes out too."**

DREAMMACHINE

This issue we've changed three items in the Dream Machine. The ASUS Xonar Essence STX has been displaced by the Sound Blaster ZxR. With sound cards of this price and quality, it's pretty hard to decide which one is best, but the Sound Blaster ZxR manages to edge out the Essence STX, if only because it has more recent API support including EAX 5.0 Advanced HD. We replace the graphics card with not one but two GIGABYTE GTX TITAN (SLI) cards for the fastest graphics configuration money can buy. These cards will drive any number of 3D stereoscopic displays such as the ASUS VG248QE. A 24" model yes, but one that is better than our current VG278H in almost all respects. With a 144Hz scan rate, 3D Vision 2 support, a significantly better contrast ratio and 1ms response time, it is clearly the better monitor. The price of the machines is higher, but the experience that much better.

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

GRAPHICS
Gigabyte GV-NTITAN-6GD SLI
R14,899 each / www.gigabyte.com

New!

OS DRIVE
OCZ Vector 256GB SSD
R3,000 / www.ocz.com

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

CHASSIS
Corsair Obsidian 900D
R4,299 / www.corsair.com

DISPLAY
ASUS VG248QE
R5,200 / za.asus.com

New!

KEYBOARD
GIGABYTE Aivia Osmium
Mechanical Gaming Keyboard
R1,299 / www.rectron.co.za

COOLER
Corsair Hydro Series H100i
R1,499 / www.corsair.com

MOUSE
Razer Ouroboros mouse
R1,399 / www.corex.co.za
Razer Ironclad mouse mat
R599 / www.corex.co.za

SOUND
Creative Sound Blaster ZxR
R2,799 / www.corex.co.za

New!

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

HEADPHONES
Creative Labs Sound
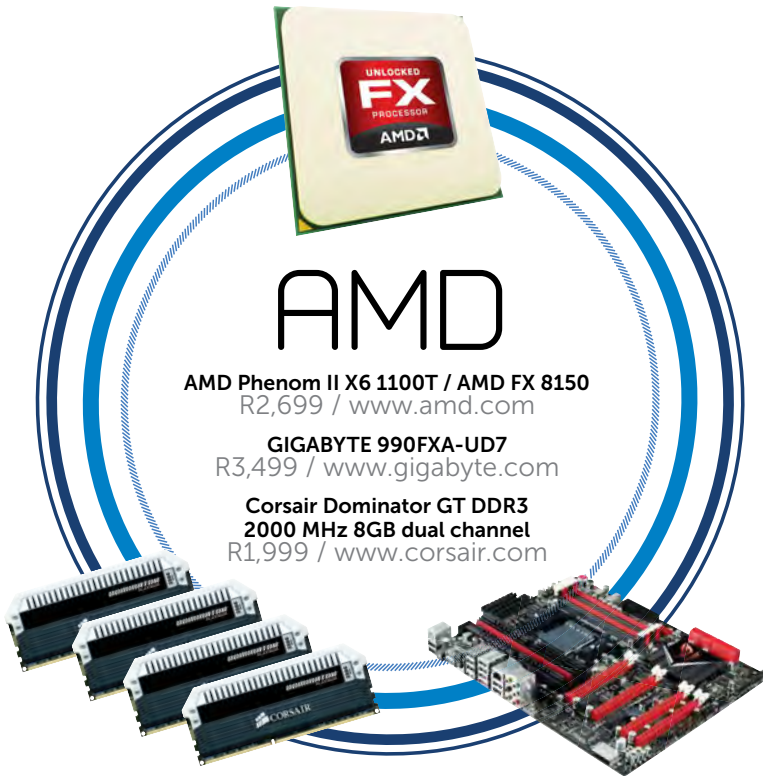Blaster Recon3D Omega
R2,995 / www.corex.co.za
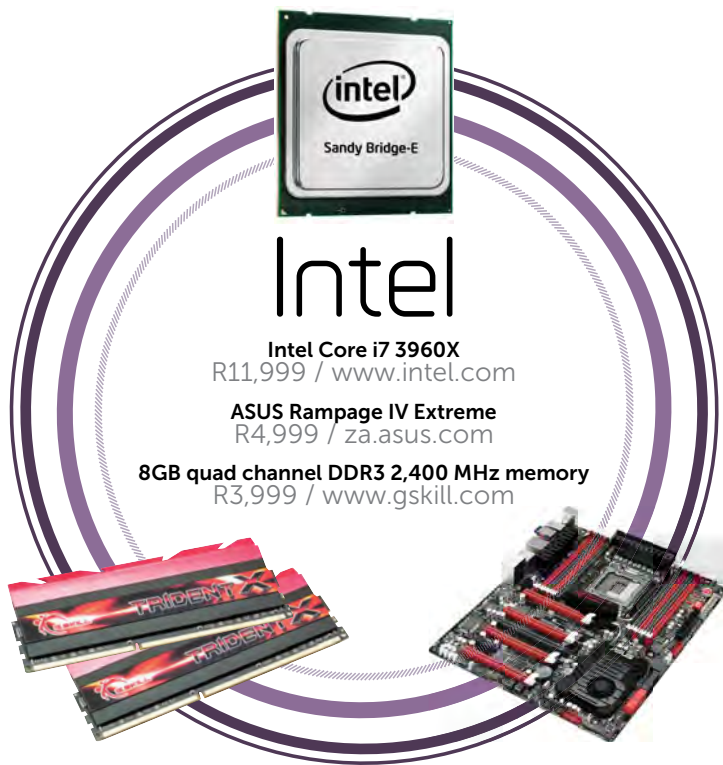
Intel

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

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

8GB quad channel DDR3 2,400 MHz memory
R3,999 / www.gskill.com

Intel Dream Machine:
R82,682

AMD

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

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

**Corsair Dominator GT DDR3
2000 MHz 8GB dual channel**
R1,999 / www.corsair.com

AMD Dream Machine:
R69,882

HARDWIRED
CONSOLE PANTS

Over the last three months I've had more discussions about consoles than ever before in my life. On every forum I visit or over instant messenger, I bump into the same misconceptions or rather misgivings about the PS4 and the next Xbox. It's mind boggling to think that most of these discussions are supposedly with people in the know. The negativity surrounding the APUs is unfounded.

How effective any piece of hardware is, is directly related to how irrelevant it makes itself and how it empowers the software tied to it. By that I mean, it would be nice if we would stop talking the differences in hardware on any platform but rather spoke purely of what we could do with the software on such a platform.

> "in comparison to what the PS3 and Xbox 360 currently offer, the next generation consoles are effectively without limits."

This is important in relation to the upcoming console launches, purely because they have made the logical step of adopting general x86 computing hardware. In as much as specialized silicon was sensible in days gone by, that just isn't the case anymore. For every development kit, API, profiler and other tools you may have for any console, there are many times more for the open x86 box. That alone has nothing to do with hardware but software. How much power any processor has is not as important as how much of it you can use for your desired purposes. The comparisons made purely from an academic point of view (measuring SP/DP processing, MIPS, FLOPS etc.) are only relevant when you're comparing like with like. The "power" available on the Cell processor that powered the PS3 was largely meaningless. There was nothing to compare it with that anybody else was working on. Where there was some kind of parity between what was in the PS3 and other platforms was in the GPU. That is where it succeeded or failed depending on how you look at it. It is there where we could make meaningful comparisons based on code that all platforms could execute.

So to speak poorly of the Jaguar APU found in the PS4 and the next Xbox is to miss the point entirely. It is a known fact that on an open platform such as on our gaming PCs, there are hundreds if not thousands of cycles at runtime that are wasted between the OS, drivers, API, BIOS etc. Yet despite all this, we are still able to run our games at the highest possibly settings and visual fidelity. The massive inefficiencies of the ecosystem are outweighed by the sheer amount of accessible power in the very same system. With enough processing power you can compensate for the far less than ideal latencies and layers present on the PC.

With the upcoming consoles, what we have is masses of more processing power than before, it's more accessible, but with almost none of the inefficiencies of an open platform. It's a marriage of both worlds essentially. This is why the chosen hardware for both consoles is not only very similar but makes a lot of sense. As a result of the immense flexibility of the underlying hardware, the creativity in the software is what will make the biggest difference between developers. Hardware limitations are still with us and will continue to be for many years, but in comparison to what the PS3 and Xbox 360 currently offer, the next generation consoles are effectively without limits.
- Neo Sibeko

GTX680

Price R5,500 – R7,500

BUNDLED SOFTWARE
NVIDIA is promising up to $150 of in-game credit in the following free-to-play games: *World of Tanks, PlanetSide 2* and *Hawken*. This deal however does not apply to the South African market.

PERFORMANCE
The GTX 680 is easily faster than the previous generation GTX 580 and is also faster than the regular HD 7970. Drivers further improve compatibility and performance with each release, making the GTX 680 one of the finest gaming cards to ever come from NVIDIA. Compute performance however is lacking, since those parts of the silicon were removed in order to make for an easier to manufacture and cheaper GPU.

POWER
195W TDP makes the GTX 680 less power hungry than the GTX 580 it replaces (by a total of 49W), it also runs cooler and needs a less powerful PSU to operate. (550W versus 600W for the GTX 580) This shouldn't be too surprising as it's built on a 3.5 billion gate core on TSMC's 28nm high performance node.

FEATURES
NVIDIA surround display technology allows up to three screens to be spanned as a single desktop via the three digital interfaces on the card. A single card may make use of NVIDIA's active stereoscopic technology via 3D Vision or 3D Vision Surround with the addition of another card. Through the HDMI 1.4a and the DisplayPort the GTX680 can output 2160p (4096x2160) resolutions to a single monitor.

NVIDIA GTX 680
VS
AMD HD 7970 GE

HD 7970 GHZ

GTX 680

In this month's Versus we take a look at the two most powerful, mainstream single-GPU cards from AMD and NVIDIA. We excluded the GTX TITAN and the dual GPU solutions because those are only accessible to very few people. With that said below is a direct comparison between the two. Once again, whichever one you decide on, you'll have a great gaming experience enabling you to push maximum graphics fidelity in virtually all games available today.

HD 7970 GHZ EDITION

Price R5,500 – R7,500

BUNDLED SOFTWARE

This is courtesy of AMD, but with any purchase of the Radeon HD 7970 (provided the promotion is still on-going) you'll receive copies of *Crysis 3*, *BioShock Infinite* and *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*.

PERFORMANCE

AMD updated the original HD 7970 when the GTX 680 was released. AMD named it the GHz edition, and together with a new driver framework boosted performance above the original HD 7970 and the GTX 680, making the HD 7970 GHz Edition the fastest graphics card around (prior to the GTX TITAN). With some very aggressive driver updates, tuning and optimizations, AMD has improved the HD 7970 GE with every release, further cementing its lead against the GTX 680.

POWER

AMD has some impressive power gating technology with the 7000 series of graphics cards which have allowed the GPU to draw less power than the previous HD 6970. Even with all these advancements however at over four billion gates and a 1GHz core clock the TDP is at around 250W, a good bit above what the competing GTX 680 draws.

FEATURES

AMD has always been keen on their Eyefinity technology and with the 7000 series it was made even easier to get up and running. You can connect up to six displays for a maximum spanned resolution of 16384x16384 or a maximum single display resolution of 2160p. Certainly more display flexibility than what NVIDIA offers. HD3D however isn't a match for NVIDIA's 3D Vision though and as it stands there's no stereoscopic multi display technology from AMD that can match the support and compatibility of what NVIDIA offers with 3D Vision. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

The Lazy Gamer's Guide
Strategy Guides

Website www.animeworx.co.za   **RRP** R315 (StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm Collector's Edition Strategy Guide) / R610 (World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria Official Strategy Guide)

Strategy guides made out of books! Do people even still read strategy guides, or books? Do people even still read magazines? They must do, because you're here. Unless nobody's actually there and we're speaking into a void, which would make us feel silly. We're joking of course: scientific studies show that at least three people still read books, and a minimum of fifteen people still read at all. That means there's absolutely still a market for strategy guides that don't live on the Internet. The continuing existence of professional strategy guide-makers BradyGames is proof of that, and here you'll find two of their Blizzard-themed works – one each for the latest expansion packs for *StarCraft II* and *World of Warcraft*. As you'd expect, they're of exceptional quality, filled with eye-catching artwork and design, and brimming with hundreds of pages worth of useful info for those on the hunt for it. Suck on that, Internet.

StarCraft II: Heart of the Swarm Collector's Edition **Strategy Guide**

For the campaign, detailed maps show off points of interest in each mission. Encounters are comprehensively explained, strategies are suggested and any branching options you're given mid-mission will have their resulting consequences spoiled for you. You'll know exactly what to expect from each and every mission, in other words.

There are loads of little tertiary details that pretty up the package – scattered stuff like seemingly random Protoss proverbs, cool screenshots and cinematic artwork. It also comes with five collectible "paperfold" models of the expansion's new units.

On the multiplayer side of things, pretty much everything you need to know is exhaustively broken down. Base layout, the importance of scouting (and how to do it effectively) and knowing when to attack are examples of some of the many aspects of *SC II* multiplayer that are dissected and then offered to you in bite-sized chunks.

The *StarCraft* strategy guide features augmented reality support via Aurasma. Using it supposedly provides the fullest strategy guide experience.

SUMMARY

PROS
- No power requirements
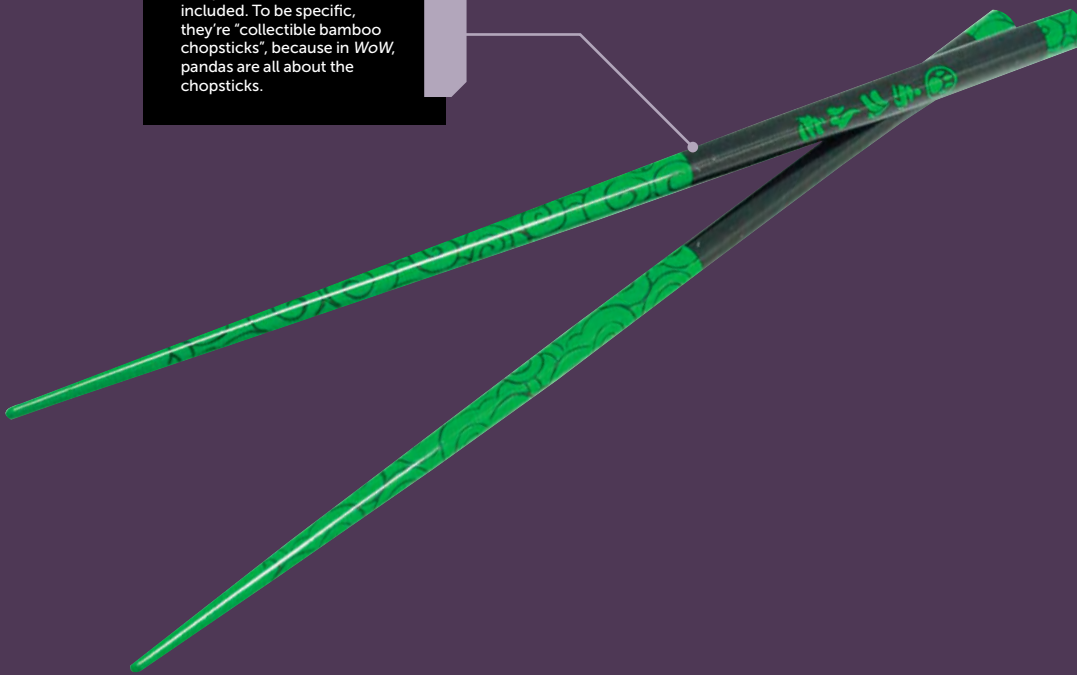- 3D support
- Supports high resolutions

CONS
- No backlighting
- Papercuts

ALTERNATIVES
- The Internet
- Playing until you get better on your own

Chopsticks! There are two included. To be specific, they're "collectible bamboo chopsticks", because in *WoW*, pandas are all about the chopsticks.

World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria Official **Strategy Guide**

As with its *StarCraft* sibling, the *World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria* guide comes with a noob-friendly intro for first time *WoW* players, detailing the basic points everyone should know when starting the game.

There are painstaking guides for practically everything, especially the *Mists of Pandaria*-specific stuff. Crafting, pets, new dungeons and more are put under the microscope.

Exploring the new continent of Pandaria and its many interesting locations will be made much less accidental. All the important bits are pointed out and marked on maps of each area. You'll also find in-depth looks at the playable races and classes in the game.

Creative Sound Blaster ZxR

Supplier Corex   **Website** www.corex.co.za   **RRP** R2,799

For many years, Sound Blasters were the undisputed must-haves in the audio card market. With new technologies like EAX and theatre-grade audio certification, Creative Labs led the pack until on-board audio became the fairly decent thing that it is these days. With competition from motherboards and, more directly, from ASUS's Xonar range of cards, Creative needed to come up with something to keep it in the game.

That something was its sixth-generation Sound Core3D audio processor, first strapped to its 2011 Recon3D card and now, to its latest Z range of devices. The ZxR tops this range at almost double the price of its lower siblings, but for that money you get a fully redesigned main card plus the DBPro daughter board, each sporting a Sound Core3D chip.

The proof of this high-end audio hardware is in the listening, and the ZxR performs magnificently. Its impressive audio, courtesy of the exchangeable, dedicated op-amps matched with TI Burr-Brown DACs, delivers more volume out of your headset or speakers than ever before, at levels that are balanced across

the frequency range and never muddied, distorted, or subject to crosstalk.

For those of you with high-end audio components, you'll be pleased with the selection of in- and outputs available, with RCA and Toslink on the daughter board (useful for hooking up audio recording equipment) and quarter-inch jacks on the main board. The separate Audio Control Module (ACM) can be used to connect your headphones (which are powered by a dedicated op-amp), which means a single card can handle both a stereo headset and 5.1 speaker system. As an added bonus, the ACM includes a built-in microphone array that can be configured to receive anything from a narrow band of audio to a large volume.

All of this fancy hardware would be nothing without the software to drive it, and here is the only place where the Sound Blaster ZxR trips up a touch. Each feature of the Sound Core3D processor is accessible from the Creative control panel and can be configured or disabled as you see fit. The main component – SBX Pro Studio – is there to improve overall sound quality (through Crystalliser and surround sound enhancements) and in particular, increase clarity of conversations through Dialog Plus. The effects are subtle but you'll notice them. What doesn't fare as well is the selection

of microphone enhancements collected within the CrystalVoice suite. While the noise cancellation enhancement is highly accurate, the card's acoustic echo cancellation algorithms clearly need a bit more work, and cause jittery, broken sounds instead of the clear tones we expected. Another feature that doesn't perform quite as well as we had hoped is the volume balancer that manages to pick up distant voices quite effectively (if that's what you want), but whispers come across as metallic, artificial sounds.   **NAG**
- Geoff Burrows

9

There's no doubt that this is *the* gamer-level card to own, and the inclusion of studio-inspired hardware is a nice addition for those who want a few extra options.

PLUS
Incredible audio quality / Plenty of interface options / Highly customisable software and hardware

MINUS
CrystalVoice doesn't perform as well as expected

Razer Abyssus Mirror

Supplier Razer
Website www.razerzone.com
RRP R349

The Razer Abyssus is essentially a return to basics for gaming mice. Sporting only three buttons (left, right and the scroll wheel button), it's almost an anomaly in today's PC gaming world, where you're able to find an MMO-focused mouse with 20 buttons *for your thumb alone.*

Don't let it put you off, however, because if you're looking for a cheap-ish, but perfectly functional ambidextrous gaming mouse, the Abyssus is a worthy contender. DPI and polling rate are hardware-controlled, and on the underside of the mouse you'll find two toggles for switching between presets for two different polling frequencies and three different DPI settings. You're able to tweak the Abyssus' functionality a bit more by downloading and installing drivers for it. It'd be nice if the driver software offered greater customisation options, but it's not a huge issue.

The design of the mouse is comfortable enough, with a raised back that makes it usable via both claw and palm grip. We were given the special "Mirror" edition for review, which features a shiny black surface, but unfortunately attracts grubby fingerprints. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes

SPECS
SENSOR Up to 3,500 DPI Razer Precision 3.5G infrared sensor
BUTTONS Three
ACCELERATION 15g
WEIGHT 72 grams

8

For the gamer on a tight budget, the Abyssus is practically perfect.

PLUS
No need for drivers / Comfortable / Cheap

MINUS
Basic feature list relative to other gaming mice

SteelSeries Apex [RAW]

Supplier Megarom
Website www.steelseries.com
RRP R999

As a trimmed-down version of SteelSeries' Apex, the Apex [RAW] drops a few of its more expensive twin's features – but is no less of a worthwhile choice of gaming keyboard. It's a large, bulky beast, packed with programmable macro keys and an abnormally large spacebar that I'm sure will appeal to somebody.

The typing experience is pleasant - its soft, non-mechanical key presses a nice change in amongst all the mechanical clacking we've been subjected to of late. The keys are backlit by bright white illumination for use in darker environs, and you'll find media keys at hand via SteelSeries' proprietary modifier key. It boasts nice, but ultimately superfluous features like interchangeable rubber feet that let you customise the keyboard's resting angle, and two extra arrow keys that let you move diagonally – but only if you plan to move diagonally upwards, because moving diagonally downwards is apparently lame.

Beyond that, it's a fairly standard, but ultimately very well-designed and sturdy gaming keyboard – although the layout and spacing of its keys will likely take some getting used to. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes

SPECS
MACRO KEYS 17
BACKLIGHTING Yes, adjustable intensity
WINDOWS KEY LOCK Yes
ANTI-GHOSTING Up to 20 key presses

8

The Apex [RAW] is a well-designed gaming keyboard with a solid feature list.

PLUS
Comfortable typing experience / All the spacebar you'll ever need

MINUS
Key layout takes a bit of getting used to / Expensive

Razer BlackShark

Supplier Razer
Website www.razerzone.com
RRP R1,399

The Razer BlackShark is immediately eye-catching thanks to its metal-infused design that's meant to mimic the look and feel of a military chopper pilot's headset. Look beyond that and you'll find a fantastic gaming headset – although its relatively scant feature set might make it a bit of a tough sell compared to similarly priced offerings.

In the box, you'll find only the BlackShark and a splitter cable. It's connected via two 3.5mm audio jacks for its stereo sound and detachable microphone. There's no built-in volume control of any sort, which might prove to be an irritation – but it's not too much of a niggle if, say, you've got a keyboard with media controls that give you an alternate way to adjust the volume.

Sound production is fantastic, offering particularly punchy bass for people who want that sort of thing. The noise isolation provided by the padded cups is noteworthy, because they do a good job of blocking out ambient noise. For gaming, music or movies, it's worth considering – but the price and aesthetic may prove too much for certain gamers. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes

SPECS
FREQUENCY RESPONSE 20HZ – 20KHZ
IMPEDANCE 29 OHMS
DRIVER UNITS 40mm neodymium magnets with copper-clad aluminium voice coil

9

Razer's BlackShark is a highly capable all-round headset with a unique aesthetic.

PLUS
Outstanding audio quality / Noise isolation

MINUS
Aesthetic might not appeal to everyone / No volume control / Expensive

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Thermaltake Evo Blue 2.0 750W

Supplier Corex
Website www.thermaltake.com
RRP R1,899

I wasn't a fan of the original Evo Blue. I thought it looked a little odd with the multiple grilles and multi-colour LED fan that could look like Christmas lights. At $140 back in 2009 with an efficiency rating of 78%, it also wasn't as attractive as the Bronze and Silver-rated power supplies popping up everywhere. While many other Thermaltake products were hitting the right notes, the Evo Blue felt a little out of place, despite its good performance. The new Evo Blue 2.0 looks set to raise the bar much higher.

80-Plus Gold certification? Check. Modular cables? Check. High wattage? 750W is enough for most systems and I doubt many people would be able to make it squeal. Does it look good? Absolutely, especially in black. The military green version is perfect for Corsair's C70 Vengeance, which looks much better with the same colour PSU inside. There's enough cabling and connectors for two GTX TITANs in SLI and up to twelve SATA devices.

There's a switch at the back, just like in the original Evo Blue, to push the fan to full speed and "overclock" the PSU, giving you another 100W of headroom. The switch also controls the LEDs on the fan and you can turn them off. Ripple is tightly maintained and I had no issues overclocking my system far higher than I normally would on my old PSU. The 140mm fan even lowered my system temperatures, which was a welcome bonus. The only issues, really, are the odd spacing of the SATA power cables, as well as the rather stiff plastic cable sleeving. I had quite some trouble fitting all the cables neatly in my chassis and I think a larger case would have made this easier. Don't stuff this into an ATX chassis without good cable management. **NAG**

— **Wesley Fick**

SPECS

DIMENSIONS 150mm(W) x 86mm(H) x 160mm(L)
CERTIFICATION 80 PLUS Gold
RATED EFFICIENCY 87-92%
COOLING 140mm LED fan

9

A good choice for the gamer or enthusiast. Stiff cabling makes management a chore, but the Gold rating is great.

PLUS
80 Plus Gold rating / Competitive price / Quiet fan

MINUS
Stiff plastic cabling / Needs a fairly big case

Sound Blaster Tactic3D Rage USB

Supplier Corex
Website www.soundblaster.com
RRP R899

Many years ago, Creative held the position of champions of PC audio equipment, but over the years we've seen a number of peripheral manufacturers rise up and take turns wearing the crown they once toted boldly. This is not the product to snatch back the royal headwear, but it is an excellent attempt to move into the mid-range with a high-quality offering that won't wreck your wallet.

For your modest amount of money, the Tactic3D delivers a very good audio experience that falls just short of "excellent" with its slightly overbearing bass that tends to drown out the finer things if not roped in by the EQ. Thankfully, this is manageable from the Creative software (which you have to download), but one thing that you won't be able to tweak is the ergonomics. Now, since we all have different heads and ears this is entirely subjective, but spending anything longer than a brief period of time with these cans on my head became quite uncomfortable. Pressure came from both inside the ear cups (caused by a very bulbous, convex design) and from the initially seemingly comfortable headband. Your results may vary. Another, not subjective but certainly minor issue is that of cable length: it's too short. There's no possible orientation I found that allowed me to not have a cable draped either across my body, keyboard or mouse mat.

After some time with this set, the discomfort does lessen somewhat (probably thanks to my now crushed nerve endings) and it's easy to appreciate just how well the Tactic3D performs, especially given its price point. Just ignore the "3D" thing – and the vague blurb about 7.1 on the front of the box – this is a straight-up stereo set that shouldn't pretend to be anything else. **NAG**

- **Geoff Burrows**

DRIVER UNITS
50mm
FREQUENCY RESPONSE
20Hz ~ 20kHz
IMPEDANCE
32 ohms
SENSITIVITY
102dB/mW
MICROPHONE FREQUENCY RESPONSE
100Hz ~ 6.5kHz

SPECS

7

A mid-range headset that performs surprisingly well, if you manage to have the tiny ears required to avoid discomfort.

PLUS
Good audio performance / Bright, flashy lights! / Plenty of bass...

MINUS
... or too much bass / Uncomfortable fit / Cable is too short

Antec A.M.P SP1

Supplier Corex
Website www.antecmobileproducts.com
RRP R999

There are more portable speakers on the market than one can shake a stick at and Antec has thrown its offering into the fray with the SP1. The SP1 actually feels great to hold. The weight and rubber enclosure cover make for a unit that not only feels solid, but rather expensive. The buttons are the only let down about the SP1, because while they perform their function as expected, they do tend to feel cheap, especially the on/off switch on the side of the unit. Other than that, this is a solid portable speaker that sounds good.

It delivers impressive bass and clear mid-range without distorting even at the highest volume setting. The stereo imaging works particularly well delivering a sound that is capable of filling a small room without giving away just how small the drivers are. Overall, the acoustic qualities of the SP1 are second to none in this class of speakers.

The SP1 is one of the best units you can buy for the purposes of having a portable Bluetooth speaker. We have a few minor niggles about the irritating low battery signal noise and the power on/off sound. Other than that, we like the SP1 and would not mind recommending it. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

SPECS

DIMENSIONS 158x41x62 mm
WEIGHT 380g
INTERFACE Bluetooth 2.1+EDR, 3.5mm stereo mini-jack

8

The SP1 is probably one of the better portable Bluetooth and speakerphone products around. It sounds good and has a decent battery life.

PLUS
Looks good / Sounds relatively good over Bluetooth / Good battery life

MINUS
Annoying on/off/power sound / Subject to interference

Intel 335 240GB SSD

Distributor Intel
Website www.intel.com
RRP TBA

The Intel 335 brings in a few changes from the previous drive, but for the most part is identical to what we have had before. It is worth noting that this drive is 9mm in height and that means it may not fit in some of the newer Ultra Books and notebooks, as these require 7mm drives.

Inside the casing Intel has placed eight 16GB NAND modules on each side of the PCB. Absent from the PCB is any cache memory, as with all SandForce-based drives. In total the capacity is 256GB but the formatted space is smaller at 223.57GB. Some of this space taken by the conversion to binary megabytes and some for write amplification and maintenance.

Where performance is concerned, the drive delivers very respectable read performance. In fact, we were able to record sequential read numbers higher than those delivered by the Corsair Neutron drives at 486.9Mb/s. The rest of the numbers are significantly lower than what the Neutron drives offer. The 4K write performance in particular is rather worrying at only 97.82MB/s. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

SPECS

CONTROLLER LSI Sandforce 2281
NAND TYPE 20nm IMFT MLC NAND
CACHE None
FORM FACTOR 2.5" (9mm)

7

Intel has produced a worthwhile follow-up to the original 330 drives that delivers where it counts.

PLUS
An upgrade from the Intel 330 / Very high sequential read performance

MINUS
9mm height limits its uses

OCZ Vertex 3.20 20nm 240GB SSD

Supplier OCZ Technology
Website www.ocztechnology.com
RRP R3,199

OCZ, much like Intel and several other vendors, have updated their entry to mid-range SSD offerings with 20nm NAND alternatives. 20nm is cheaper to manufacture but sadly also offers reduced write life expectancy. That shouldn't be an issue however because SSD NAND write levelling has advanced greatly since the first SSDs were rolled. You're unlikely to have to worry about data loss for many years more than the standard three year warranty OCZ is offering on these drives.

The cheaper 20nm saving is sadly not passed on to end users; these are strictly for the vendors and as it stands the 3.20 Vertex 3 isn't that much cheaper than the regular drive. Understandable though since you'll still get the same high 75,000 IOPS 4K random write performance of the 25nm and larger NAND drives. So there's no performance loss and with SSDs that's primarily what is being sold.

Where performance goes, OCZ has tweaked the Vertex 3 a little to deliver marginally better performance, but other than that, it's just a revision update. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

SPECS

CONTROLLER SandForce 2281
NAND TYPE 20nm IMFT MLC NAND
CACHE None
FORM FACTOR 2.5"

7

A minor update to an already great drive, but 20nm NAND doesn't do anything for performance.

PLUS
Relatively cheap / Good performance

MINUS
Three year warranty

SPECS

NATIVE RESOLUTION
1920x1080
REFRESH RATE
144Hz (1ms)
INPUTS
Dual Link DVI, HDMI (1.4a),
DisplayPort
BACKLIGHT TECHNOLOGY
White LED

Dream Machine

ASUS VG248QE

Supplier ASUS   **Website** www.asus.com   **ERP** R5,200

Just over a year ago we reviewed the ASUS VG278H, a fantastic 3D Vision 2 monitor with Light Boost technology. Since then, a lot has changed in the stereoscopic gaming world. Most notably, it's harder now to find a 3D Vision monitor without light boost, which should simplify the buying process for any prospective owners.

More importantly though, LCD technology has advanced to the point where, as we have here, vendors are able to make some very high scan rate monitors. The VG248QE is one such monitor with a staggering 144HZ refresh rate, a good 22Hz higher than the already 120Hz of the VG278H. Before you get too excited about 72Hz per eye stereoscopic gaming, you should know that it's not possible currently. We could not find a proper answer when we searched, but it points to a limitation in the graphics hardware and not necessarily the monitor. So when you use this monitor with 3D Vision titles, you'll have to game at the normal 120Hz (60Hz per field) of the older monitor.

That however shouldn't put you off what is most certainly a better monitor than the VG278H. This model is actually part of ASUS's ROG family, even though you'll not be able to find it on the site. Unlike the VG278H, it features small speaker drivers (2W as opposed to 3W), has no built-in stereoscopic 3D Vision emitter and does not come with a 3D Vision kit either. You may then be thinking this is an inferior product but it's not, in fact for all intents and purposes it's a better monitor.

Not only is the image quality clearer, sharper and with more vibrant colours, but because of the size, the pixel density is better, lending itself to a more comfortable image than with the bigger 27" model. The contrast and brightness is also increased, which makes for an even more vivid image whether you're watching movies or playing games in both normal and stereoscopic mode. Add the addition of a DisplayPort and you have a monitor that can handle virtually all 3D input methods around.

The big draw for this monitor may be the 3D Vision 2 compliance, but its real value lies in just how much better it makes traditional 2D gaming. As a result of the scan rate, you can play all your games with vsync enabled and have liquid smooth gaming with no tears or inconsistent frame rates. With the purchase of this monitor alone, you eliminate the need for triple buffering, dynamic vsync and all other problems associated with display timings. It just makes for a better gaming experience, one that is arguably much better than stereoscopic imaging can deliver.

Let's not forget the compatibility with Xbox and PS3 3D games and butter-smooth Blu-ray playback. Sure, this doesn't produce the colour accuracy and have the precision of IPS panels. It isn't RGB LED backlit, but as far as TN LCD monitors are concerned, there aren't many that can arguably claim to be better than what the VG248QE has.

The only downside to this monitor, if you would even call it that, is that it's a 1080p unit. This is simply a waste we believe, as 1440p is steadily gaining popularity in the very high-end monitor space. Had this unit come in with that resolution, it would easily be the ultimate monitor for gamers and power users alike. As it stands though, this becomes our new Dream Machine monitor. It may seem odd to go from a 27" to 24" model, but the display quality is just better and once you use this monitor it'll be hard to use anything else really.   **NAG**
- Neo Sibeko

9

One of the best, if not the best gaming monitor money can buy currently.

PLUS
3D Vision Support / Superb image quality / 144Hz Scan Rate

MINUS
Would be even better at 1440p / No built in emitter

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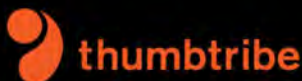
thumbtribe

Samsung Apps

1 You can link together up to four of these graphics cards, but two is the sweet spot for performance, compatibility and power draw.

BENCHMARKS

BASELINE: EVGA GTX TITAN

3DMARK - Fire-Strike	13,930 **9,116**
CATZILLA - Tiger	23,204 **13,483**
HITMAN - Absolution	(DX11 ultra detail) 4xAA: 80.63 fps **(DX11 ultra detail) 4xAA: 68.97 fps**

SPECS

CORE GK110 (28nm)
PROCESSORS 2,688
RENDER OUTPUTS 48
MEMORY 6,144MB GDDR5 6.0GHz (288.38GB/sec)
API DirectX 11 / OpenGL 4.3 / OpenCL 1.x / PhysX

Dream Machine

Gigabyte GV-NTITAN-6GD SLI

Supplier Rectron   **Website** www.gigabyte.com   **RRP** R14,899 each

Last month we looked at a single NVIDIA GTX TITAN graphics card. This issue we bring you not one but two of these cards in SLI. This kind of performance isn't cheap. With the weak rand and limited availability you're looking at around R30,000 for two of these. You could buy two HD 7990 graphics cards with the same price or two GTX 690s. That would give you four GPUs instead of two, but believe us when we tell you that those are actually not faster than this GTX TITAN SLI configuration.

Any and all multi-GPU technologies have their issues. Things continue to get better, but for the smoothest gaming experience you want to keep it to one card and one GPU. Fortunately, running two cards in tandem tends to fare better than the dual GPU single PCB solutions such as the GTX 690 and the HD 7990. Not only do two discrete cards produce better performance, they allow you the flexibility of splitting up your graphics cards into two separate machines as and when you need to. Something that isn't possible with the GTX 690 or HD 7990. That aside, drivers have come a long way since the rise of SLI and unlike with AMD graphics cards right now, there are no frame latency issues with NVIDIA SLI technology.

Out the box, the Gigabyte cards are identical to the EVGA card we tested last issue. The only difference is in the overclocking software that Gigabyte provides which is fairly intuitive, but doesn't really offer anything you can't get with MSI's Afterburner or EVGA's PrecisionX, both of which are based off RiverTuner. During our testing, we did something a little different and loaded up both cards with a yet (at the time of writing) unreleased BIOS for the GTX TITAN which loosened up the factory limits in as far as allowing higher power draw for the cards.

Usually the GTX TITAN is locked to a maximum of 106% power draw, but with this firmware update we could raise the limit to around 300%. This is essentially the extreme overclocking BIOS which competitive overclockers will use for record breaking attempts. We do warn you though, that not only is this BIOS not meant for the general public, but it could potentially damage your supremely expensive graphics card and it will not be covered under your warranty. Also, setting anything higher than 150% will almost certainly destroy the PWM on the card, so you have been warned.

However, for the sake of delivering the best gaming performance possible we tested with the unlocked BIOS and recorded the most impressive graphics scores we've ever come across. The GTX TITAN in SLI simply obliterated every GPU configuration we've tried before, delivering as high as 5,500 points in the new Unigine Valley benchmark at the Extreme HD setting. To put that into perspective, two MSI NGTX 680 Lightning cards in SLI achieve about 3,400 points and even in three-way SLI score just above 5,000 points. This just goes to show how powerful these GPUs are. For those who are interested in 3D Vision Surround, you will definitely need to consider this configuration as its not only faster than using a dual GTX 690 setup, but it is easier to configure and may actually deliver better performance in games.

For the competitive overclockers and power users, these cards are worth owning simply because there's nothing that will give you higher scores. They may be very expensive, but no driver update or clock boost update from AMD's HD 7970 will enable them to match this configuration. If ultimate performance as what you need, you have little to no choice but to buy these cards.   **NAG**
- Neo Sibeko

8

One GTX TITAN is powerful but two is monstrous. The fastest desktop gaming (and compute) solution money can buy.

PLUS
Unparalleled performance / Enough to power 3D Vision Surround / Massive GPU compute power

MINUS
Astronomical pricing / Reference NVIDIA cooling / Reference BIOS is limiting

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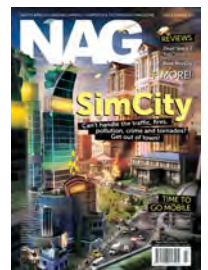
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Somehow, between bills, a new kitten, more bills because of the new kitten, expensive hair products, coffee, enormous quantities of chocolate-covered chocolate with chocolate and chocolate plus chocolate, those plastic things that hang in the toilet and dispense blue soap bubbles for approximately eight seconds before requiring immediate replacement or the entire bowl is heaving with grotesquely mutated millipedes, the very important household beer and whiskey budget, and all the other necessary stuff I have to spend cash on every month because I'm a proper grown-up[1] now, I haven't yet bought *BioShock Infinite*. More significantly, perhaps, I haven't yet played *BioShock Infinite*, but it's like every time I click through to a link anywhere on the Internet, everybody else is going on and on and on about the ending somewhere on the page.

I've managed, by some superhuman effort of will (and keeping my eyes tightly shut and my fingers plugged into my ears while reciting "fear is the mind-killer"), to avoid any big spoilers for the moment, but I know I can't hold out forever and sooner or later – but definitely sooner – I'm going to accidentally find out that Elizabeth is really a time-travelling Ayn Rand and skyhooks are a subtle metaphor for

society's excessive over-reliance on a self-interested and fundamentally broken perception of politicised subjective reality, or something like that [*nailed it, Ed*].

So it got me thinking about gaming culture and how quickly you'll get left behind if you can't keep up with it, and occasionally even when you are keeping up with it, and sometimes even when you're way ahead of it – like this one time I was playing a pre-release review copy of *Halo 4* and some random person sent me a message on Xbox LIVE telling me what happens at the end of the game.

It didn't used to be like this, you know – I remember when a new game launched once every year or so and even then, there weren't eight zillion people on the Internet doing their best to blow the ending for you. There wasn't the Internet either, which probably helped, although ironically it also meant that I was never able to complete the original *King's Quest* because the command "dive" didn't ever occur to me and Game FAQs hadn't been invented.

Mind you, I suppose it's not just gaming culture that's hurtling at high speed. It's basically everything about life in the 21st century, or maybe just life as one of those proper grown-ups

1 Or a pretty convincing imitation of one, at the very least. I do actually quite like gardening, though.

2 I know because I saw it in a film this one other time. Next up, asteroid collision and total planetary destruction, interstellar colonisation, and a new *Call of Duty* game.

I was talking about before, or a bit of both. This is the part where I brandish my cane and exhort those noisy, miniaturised versions of adults to remove themselves from my cultivated plot of land, because at the rate things are going, I won't even have one of those for much longer before we're all bar-coded, shaved, and relocated to cramped, tiered masses of shipping container ghetto housing just in time for the inevitable dystopian future to get here[2].

In the meantime, though, I'm just going to be over here enjoying my kitten while he's still a kitten and saving up for a copy of *BioShock Infinite*. **NAG**
- Tarryn van der Byl

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Extra Life

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