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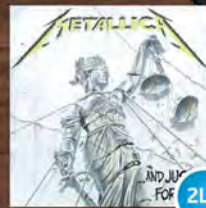
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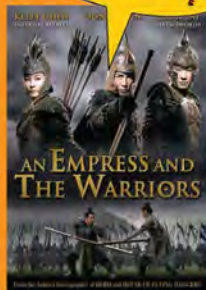
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FEATURES

30 THE OTHER GUYS

The good, the bad and the WTF did I just play?: PlanetSide 2

It's kinda like video game rehab! After spending years addicted to *StarCraft II*, we've decided that enough is enough. Sort of. We're not about to just stop playing our staple game altogether. But we're trying new things! Isn't that exciting? First up, *PlanetSide 2*. We'll tell you how that went.

34 A history of Star Wars games in less than 12 parsecs

If you still occasionally find yourself tearing up at the thought of *Star Wars 1313's* unfortunate cancellation, perhaps we can offer a bit of consolation with this list of games from yesteryear full of lightsabers and Imperial blasters. Some of them were actually good! Many of them were flaming turds. All of them are cherished, just for existing at all.

44 Watch Dogs

Hack the planet! But mostly digital Chicago. Ubisoft's taking a slight detour from assassins of the past, instead choosing to go the route of futuristic cyber-tomfoolery. Using a combination of bent drawing pins and chewing gum we found stuck to an old motherboard, we infiltrated their top-secret weat-bix network to discover the truth behind Aiden Pearce's quest for vengeance.

▶ DEMOS

Drox Operative / Galactic Command Echo Squad SE / Last Dream / Line of Defense Tactics – Tactical Advantage / Shadow Warrior

▶ DRIVERS

None this issue

▶ EXTRAS

Cheatbook Database + updates
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▶ VIDEOS

104 game trailers / 1 Pop Fiction



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The Wheel of Time turns

Before I began reading *NAG* all those years ago (issue #2 – I missed the first one because I thought the name was a bit hippy-dippy), I would buy, read and love *PC Format* every month. As it so happened, *NAG* appealed more to my personality, and eventually I stopped buying *PCF* entirely. Fast-forward a decade or so and I'm writing for *NAG*; I discover that there's a "rivalry" between us and *PCF*. The truth is that while we were certainly competitors from a commercial point of view, we've always had common goals and mutual respect for one-another, so when it was announced that *PC Format* would cease production, we were hit pretty hard. Yes, the commercial aspects of this could possibly benefit us, but the people behind the magazine were part of our industry – we'd see them at press events, bump into them at Gamescom or E3, and generally get along very well because we have similar interests. It's sad to lose anyone you respect – rivals, friends or colleagues.

It's important to address the *PCF* closure because, as you almost certainly noticed, we made two pretty significant changes to our own magazine last month: a price increase and a decrease in paper quality. The price increase is something we do every few years on our birthday issue – yes it sucks but we simply cannot afford to not increase the price every now and then; blame inflation if you want. The paper quality is perhaps the biggest game-changer, though, and it comes down to one important point: printing is becoming increasingly expensive. Paper prices have jumped up by as much as 38% recently, with more price bumps on the way. To curb the long-term damage this would inflict

on us, we lowered the paper quality from 80gsm to 56gsm (that's the weight, or thickness, of the paper). As well as allowing us to continue producing this wonderful magazine every month, this change has the side-effect of reducing our impact on the planet: lighter paper requires fewer resources to ship (most paper in South Africa is imported, oddly enough), requires less tree mutilation and is easier to recycle.

Everything we do in this magazine is for you, our readers. We work tirelessly to deliver the best quality product that we can every month and we're pretty sure that you'd rather have a magazine with thinner paper than nothing at all. We certainly would. As a little something to say "thank you", we've increased our page count to 100 this month. Hopefully we can continue to do this moving forward.

WATCH THOSE DOGS

Gosh, I've barely even mentioned what's in this issue! We sent Miklós to Paris for a few days to get some hands-on time with Ubisoft's upcoming *Watch Dogs*, and he wrote a whole lot about the game. He seems really excited about it, and that makes me happy because everyone's been pretty quiet about this game since its release date was delayed.

There's so much other content in this issue that I'd love to talk about, but I start getting funny looks from *SAVAGE* if my word count gets too out of hand. I'm sure you'll have a fun time exploring these pages, though, and as always, feel free to drop us a mail (letters@nag.co.za) with any feedback you may have.

Have an excellent May, everyone! **NAG**
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***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.

letters@nag.co.za

Letter of the Month May 2014

From: Niel-Robert Burger
Subject: Gaming is like a Roller Coaster...

Good day Nag employees and Ed. There's a topic that has baffled my mind since the day I started playing first person shooters online. So here's my story. My first online game i have ever played was Battlefield 1942. Rather dissapointed I was, hackers too many of there was....plus the guns in that game suck quite badly. My second game I decided to dive into, was Bad Company 2. Boy was that an experience i would never forget. I remember the first match I played. [snip... cue reminiscing, it was all quite lovely but far too long a tale. Ed]

And that brings me to the topic that has baffled my mind since the day i started: Why In The World Do I do really really well for like say 4 matches and then magically suck in other. I do believe that the circumstances are never the same, but surely they have similarities in them like guns used. Its like one day the 'game' has sympathy for you and lets you do well and then after it has decided that you have done well enough it sits back and watches you suffer and then after a while develops sympathy all over again. Wonder if i'm the only one with this 'way of experiance'..... hope not.

You're definitely not the only one. It's a combination of factors: your brain, your machine, the weather, how many

pancakes you had for breakfast... I think that's why there's a whole "sports science" degree you can do at university. I've noticed that I give in to anxiety too easily: as soon as I see that I'm doing well, the pressure is on. I'm pretty competitive at times. Then I start missing those shots, walking into grenades and switching classes like that's going to help anything.

And a slightly odd note: back in the day I was a PC technician and I came across an uncanny number of situations in which a very oddly misbehaving PC was remedied by me simply opening up the case, vaguely poking around, and closing it again. We all need to feel loved sometimes, and I think computers are the same. Just don't love your machine too much, if you know what I mean.

Enjoy the free games for your insightful letter! Just try not to suck at them too much. Ed.



THIS MONTH'S PRIZE

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



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From: Robert Brink
Subject: Competitive gaming

I noticed awhile back you had a gaming league called the NGL and you had the standings and all that stuff in nag back in the day. Well now Competitive call of duty is at probably its highest right now in South Africa with multiple teams playing in the DGL(do gaming league). why don't you guys do a eSports update in the nag to keep people updated with what's going on, like for instance there's a South African team attending a tournament in LA for a million US dollars called CoD champs and probably half the gamers in SA didn't know about it

We still run the NAG Gaming League, and featuring regular eSports updates in the magazine is definitely something that we'd love to do. The reason why we don't do it currently is simple: finding someone who's connected to the local competitive gaming scene but just so happens to be able to write well is surprisingly difficult. If you know someone, tell them to send us a mail.

We're always keen to expand our coverage of all things local! Ed.

From: Calvin Duckitt
Subject: Fan opinion

NAG a magazine I have been buying since I could buy things has turned into I don't know what.

I get that it is the whole birthday thing and all but why change something that does not need changing and change it for the worst might I add.

I'm not speaking for everyone, but when I buy the NAG each and every last Thursday of the month, I expect to open the wrapper alright maybe tear it and hold awesomeness in my hands and flip through the beautiful non newspaper* like pages.

April edition I basically had to go back and take a look at the front cover again, just to see if it was the NAG that I purchased for R 49-00**.

There was that something special about the mag, I hope it was just a trial, that has for sure found an error and does not reappear in the coming months.

Just sayin

*why change the pages

**Increase for a decrease

We had a few mails along these lines and I have (hopefully) addressed everyone's concerns in the Ed's Note. I did, however, want to highlight this here again just so nobody thinks we're trying to dodge the issue. Yes, the paper quality reduction sucks, and yes, nobody likes things to cost more money. Both are unfortunate effects of operating in this industry and please trust me when I say that the decision to make both changes was not taken lightly. We endeavour to provide you, our readers, with the best quality magazine we can, but sometimes the external forces are a little too strong to ignore. Hopefully you're still enjoying the written content and beautiful artwork just as much, though. Ed

From: Juan-Pierre Nel
Subject: Future Multiplaying in South-Africa

Loved the feature on Wolfenstein New Order and will i fell into self pity over the news of TitanFall being pulled from South-Africa (Then you guys rub salt in the wound by adding those vids) it got me thinking . What future does Multiplaying games have in SA? I can just imagine that if an epic game like TitanFall can't be played here how

ON THE FORUMS

Young or old, joyous or crotchety – we love and embrace with open arms anyone who cares to join us. Just mind your grammar. www.nag.co.za/forums

QUESTION / What cross-game content/thing/concept would you love to see?

The dildo bat from Saints Row in Doom. Come here
Cyber demon. It's ok. This is perfectly natural.

- ToshZA

Snarks from Half-Life 1. In everything else. Really, they should be in Goat Simulator if the devs have any decency.

- Squirly



DotA 2 x Pokemon. Add a few heroes
and you'll have 151

- Acinixys

Evil Genius: Theme Park Edition

- CrashHelmut

many more multiplayer games that are coming up will fall into the same bracket. Will we be stuck playing Campaign only orientated games in single player or can we hope that in the future that our internet connection in proves and we are not load shedding that cut our gaming time in half.

Well we've managed to survive this long with crappy latency to European (or further) servers; the Titanfall issue was hopefully an isolated one and I personally know many people who have bought digital versions that are running pretty well, despite having pings that are considered less than ideal by many. I guess some folks just like to complain, and that's cool – it's their prerogative – but the local multiplayer scene is far from dead, or even dying. Ed.

From: Simone Odendaal
Subject: OBJECTION! Zombie-Ruled!

Well, it should be going like, praise for the great new mag (I do love the new layout. It looks modern), followed by the reason for the letter which usually involves gaming to a great extent, ended with something like "keep up

the good work", but I am changing this up. My praise is given in brackets, but my reason for writing is not regarding gaming as such.

Please, enlighten me on when NAG became a fashion/hygiene/gaming magazine?

Page 19 and 20 in the April edition... AXE body spray? What does that have to do with gaming? Don't get me wrong, I am all for being clean and smelling good, but NAG should be dedicated to all things gaming related. From what branch of what alien tree did this stuff fall from? Did you think the magazine stinks? Honestly, it is the best smelling paper ever...I almost get high on it every month as I sniff the paper for that glorious smell before I read. Now, adding the whole "peel off and smell" thing...*sniffs*...nice one. I don't *sniffs* take kindly to *sniffs* you shaking up the mag so much *sniffs* again*. Needless to say, I peeled it off and smelled it. I guess it is ok seeing as it is not littered all over the magazine, but how about NO? *Chuckles at the thought of grumpy cat*.

It's always good to get feedback on the advertising that we have in the magazine, but I really need to stress



Armand Gouws, "I made this pic to show off how cool the NAG is "nano NAG" enjoy.."

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.

Send through your submissions to letters@nag.co.za.



This month's prize courtesy of Prima Interactive is an **Xbox360 Gold Chrome Controller + Kinect Star Wars** valued at R950.



that this is an advertisement, and personally, I think it's pretty fitting. Gamers are people too, and sometimes people smell bad. Sometimes they don't smell bad, but they just want to smell a little nicer, and body spray does both. I'm glad that you thought the peel-off thing smelled nice though, so this wasn't an entirely negative experience. If anything we've opened your mind a little. Ed.

From: Iwan du Preez
Subject: The right man in the wrong place can make all the difference

I'll get right to the point and start by saying that I've been paying attention to your website and noticed there is a lack of local video content, something that's unique to NAG that features the wittiness and sarcasm (like the articles) except for its in video form. For instance, Gamespot has "The Point" and IGN has "Up at noon" and so forth. Have you considered perhaps trying to take a swing at it like for example have Chris Kemp do a short 2 - 3 minute video featuring his "Best of"? It doesn't have to necessarily be that but something along the lines of.

If the idea tickles the teams fancy and you are interested in moving towards this direction in the near future I would be more than happy to contribute. I am a video editor and have my own gear who's services are there to be used and abused.

You'd be shocked to learn not only how much thought we've given this, but that we've actually made a few (rather miserable) attempts at doing official video content. And no, you can't see

them. Although Miklós has done a video or two that were pretty rad. He's a natural in front of the camera. It's all part of us embracing new-fangled technologies and these things are taking some time, and we've got plans to eventually do all the fun activities that the rest of the cool Internet kids are doing. Really I think we should put all of our energy into building a NAG theme park, but I don't see that happening any time soon. Ed.

From: Balulekile Simani
Subject: Thank u guys for keeping us updated with all games

I still remember the first game I owned was a tv game and I had a lot of cartridge's but I only play one game and Battle City every day and ps1 come in and I was not a fan but one of my boy introduce one game to me and Tom Clancy Splinter Cell and ps2, Xbox360 come and I switch to xbox and I'm still on xbox .

And now something I always wished for was to see a Rambo game and my dreams just come true so when will tell something about Rambo game pls Thank u guys

I'm going to ruin your day right now: the Rambo game looks pretty bad. Maybe it'll follow the likes of the great film The Room and transcend the boundaries of the terrible, flip right round and become a cult hit, but I kind of doubt that. At least John Rambo looks very, very shiny in the game, so it's got that going for it. You know, if you're into shiny people. I'm clutching at straws here, sorry. It'll probably suck. Ed

THE SHORTS
[extracts of LOL from the NAG audience]

"the mini review of Surgeon Simulator 2013. WHO THE F- WROTE IT AND WHAT COMBINATION OF DRUGS WERE THEY TAKING?"
– Marc Pelteret

"Nag is the truth. Happy birthday nag"
– Astaroth

"just wanna say, best mag ever, didn't know you guys could describe my life in magazine shape"
– Jodien Munnik

ON FACEBOOK
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Erik Coetsee
Best NAG and its Super Amazing Team, Congratulations! 16 years Young! May there be Many more successful years so we can see you turn an even awesome-er 25! (that's quarter of a century of NAG. :D) (peace)

Alexander van Hemert
Just Realised that Nag is The same age as me. Best. Day. Ever.

Jason Morris
Already Saving up for my new pc and rAge funds stoked as hell!!!!

Ahmad El Dragón Rahim
Hapi bday. I remember buying the December 2003 issue. Bought it cos it had more gaming stuff than pc format. Never regretted it since.

Jp Craucamp
Happy happy. Remember picking up the very first issue of NAG in the basement floor of the CNA in Hillbrow. The CNA got robbed, I waited until they were done, casually asked if I could pay for my NAG, paid it and went home and have never looked back. Great Mag, Awesome 16.

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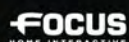
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I, GAMER

by Miklós Szecsei

Yo dawg, we just put FACEBOOK on your FACE!



I've been playing video games across a bunch of platforms and genres for about 28 years now. You'd think it'd be hard to pinpoint the best moment in my gaming life, but it really isn't: it happened at last year's E3 when I put on an Oculus Rift. I know that perhaps sounds a little melodramatic, but it's the truth. My 15 minutes with the very first dev kit version of the Oculus Rift was the best gaming experience I've ever had, and that experience stemmed from a prototype device playing a proof of concept game. There isn't another single thing on the gaming horizon that I'm more excited about.

And then Facebook came along and purchased Oculus VR for a cool \$2 billion in cash and company stock. I think millions of people would agree with me when I say that I did not see that coming at all.

As with every big shift in gears in the gaming industry, reactions were split. A lot of people were very, very upset by the news and pointed towards Facebook's chequered past when it comes to games and, well, not sucking. Many of Oculus VR's initial Kickstarter backers were also upset because they saw the acquisition as this small, spunky company selling out to big old corporate Facebook. Many cried foul as investors, but the thing is they're not investors – they're backers who aren't entitled to anything beyond the pledge rewards stipulated. Still, that didn't stop death threats being issued to Oculus VR founder Palmer Luckey and the rest of his team. Got to love that gaming industry, no?

Amidst this entire chaotic first wave of knee-jerking, I sat trying to figure out how I felt about the whole thing. It took

some time, but I can now say with absolute conviction that Facebook's purchasing of Oculus VR was the best damn thing to happen since Luckey and his team shattered their original (now rather quaint) \$250,000 Kickstarter goal.

Facebook sees virtual reality as the next big thing. They're not alone in their sentiments as many analysts and industry personalities have hailed the VR Renaissance as something that will fundamentally alter gaming. Epic Games founder and CEO Tim Sweeney said that the VR *platform* will be bigger than smart phones. Because essentially, that's what's happening: virtual reality is the next platform on which humanity will interact. Facebook knows this as well, and their acquisition of Oculus VR is more than them simply hedging their bets – it's them preparing Facebook for the future. The fact that they can do that and allow Luckey and his team to remain autonomous in their own pursuit of VR as a gaming device, is simply the cherry on top.

But while many point towards the Oculus Rift and virtual reality as the beginning of a new platform, Michael Abrash believes it's more. Abrash was Valve's head of VR, but he left to join Oculus shortly after the Facebook acquisition. For Abrash, virtual reality isn't the next big platform but is rather "The Final Platform – the platform to end all platforms". It wouldn't be, however, without significant investment and a public penetration commensurate to cell phones. Facebook offers both of those.

The most exciting thing about this acquisition is how it catapulted the Oculus Rift into the limelight. It's very rare for our niche interest (gaming) to make everyday news – unless of course it's about a high school massacre in the USA. This acquisition did just that: it's making the world sit up and take notice of Oculus and virtual reality. News channels were getting in experts to answer the question on every non-gamer's mind: what is an Oculus Rift? Overnight, Oculus became a general household name, and not just a gaming household name.

I'll admit that at first I was sceptical about the Facebook acquisition. For me, gaming has always been about escapism, and about shutting off from the outside world and all of its intrusive people, even if just for a couple of hours. The Oculus Rift is able to amplify that escapism by immeasurable quantities, so the thought of a company that is *built* on social interaction taking control of the Rift, was at odds with my desire to *shut other people out*. But let's face facts: virtual reality as a platform was destined to be a niche peripheral device for the hardcore gaming masses. With Facebook's cash, numbers and public influence, we're no longer looking at a gaming peripheral – we're looking at a game changing platform. **NAG**

Living in Pietermaritzburg with no future prospects drove him to the gaming life, Miklós accidentally got a job here and never left. He's pretty good at everything.



Image credit Eran Fowler

Down the rabbit hole

Sony shows off its Oculus Rift competitor

Almost from the day the Oculus Rift was announced, rumours abounded that Sony was working on its own VR headset; at GDC this year, they finally confirmed those rumours.

It's called Morpheus, and many impressions from those who attended the conference seem positive, although it appears that Sony still has some catching up to do if it intends to take on Oculus in this narrow market.

The headset in its current iteration is still a prototype – we're quite a way from consumer-ready here – but the specs at present almost align Morpheus with the new Rift Development Kit 2, leading us to believe that Sony has been tinkering away behind closed doors for some time. Morpheus sports a 1080p LED display (1080x960 pixels per eye), a 1,000Hz polling rate, 90° field-of-view, and includes a built-in accelerometer and gyroscope. There's also support for PlayStation Eye head tracking in much the same way as the Move or standard PS4 controllers. The demo model made



use of a cable, but Sony says that they're aiming for a wireless version.

Morpheus' field-of-view falls 10° short of the Rift's 100°, but that could well change in time. Another interesting deviation from the Rift is that the lower part of the headset doesn't sit flush against the user's face, allowing players to see their own bodies if they look straight down. When questioned on this, a Sony rep explained that this is deliberate, to accommodate those players who don't want to be fully immersed in their virtual reality – this could well mean that Morpheus manages to get the casual market in on the VR craze, but like everything even this could change by the time the product hits store shelves.

There's currently no word on release date or price, but with the hardware being this far along already, we'd guess that it could be released in as soon as a year's time. At the very least, we expect it'll launch whenever the final Rift hits the shelves, as Sony clearly intends to be competitive.

Games Workshop's classic table-top Mordheim being turned into a game

Good news, miniatures geeks: 1999 table-top strategy game Mordheim is being turned into a turn-based strategy RPG by French publisher Focus Home Interactive and developer Rogue Factor. In *Mordheim: City of the Damned*, you'll be in charge of a warband vying for control of the various districts found in the shattered imperial city of Mordheim. The game promises "fast-paced tactical combat", heavily customisable units and

permadeath for your troops. Playable factions revealed so far include Skaven, Possessed, Mercenaries of the Empire and Sisters of Sigma. Both single and multiplayer is confirmed as is a release date of this year; no platforms have been mentioned as yet.



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This former TV personality, current writer, editor and mom based in JHB has no real idea what her true destiny is, only that it involves eight off-white sheep.

THE GAME STALKER

by Pippa Tshabalala

I don't have a problem

We all have that favourite game. The one that is so idealised in our memories that nothing, but *nothing* can taint it in any way. We know it's not perfect, we know in our hearts that it might (possibly) be flawed in some way, but that doesn't matter, it's the game that speaks to us, that we fall in love with so desperately that we just will not hear a bad word against it. The game against which all similar games will forever be measured.

Bearing that in mind, I don't really know why, but I'm occasionally surprised by how fanatical gamers become over their favourite game. I'm certainly not exempt from this fanaticism either; I became completely obsessed with games like *Skyrim* and *The Witcher*, to the exclusion of pretty much everything else. I'll become absorbed in every aspect of the game, from DLC to fan fiction spinoffs, user generated mods, comic books, you name it, if it has to do with *The Witcher*, I've played/read it. Anything to wring every last bit of enjoyment out of the game that is currently my obsession.

Let me give you an example. *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* came out while I was on maternity leave, and although of course I had my son to look after (no I didn't shirk that duty, don't worry), when he was asleep I would spend the time in front of the computer (not sleeping like everyone tells you to when you've had a baby) immersed completely in Geralt of Rivia's world. Yeah perhaps not the most practical use of my time, but you might as well work it when you can.

But think about it – how many gamers do you know who become fanatically obsessed with a particular game, to the point where they will hear nothing against it? And I do mean nothing. I've heard arguments between friends about the merits of *Call of Duty*, to the extent that they won't hear anything against it even when the criticism is completely valid.

In their heart of hearts they know that there are (minor of course) problems with the game they won't hear anything against, but it's the principle of the matter. If you admit that your favourite game is not perfect then you might just open yourself up to disappointment.

Oh, *Battlefield 4* is cool, but the multiplayer is pretty much what you expected and a bit buggy? Sacrilege! "How dare you!? You obviously just suck at life! The *Battlefield* series is the greatest FPS franchise ever created!"

Call of Duty: Ghosts doesn't really reinvent much in the franchise? What! "You must be a *BF* fanboy! The *Call of Duty* series is the greatest FPS franchise ever created!"

Sound familiar? Have you ever heard those words come out of your mouth? If so you may be suffering from game fanaticism.

Yes, we all have our blind spots. Mine happens to be *The Witcher*. It's a great game and I won't hear anything against it ok? OK!?

Herd you like sequels

Rumour has it *Far Cry 4* is set in the Himalayas

And we'll be able to ride elephants. Ride. Elephants. We're so there it's frightening.

This is according to website Eurogamer, which is citing sources close to the project. At time of going to print, Ubisoft had not issued any statement regarding the apparent leak. According to Eurogamer's sources, *Far Cry 4* will be switching sunny beaches for mountain ranges and foothills. It's likely that the map will introduce a mixture of green forests and snowy mountains.

According to different sources, the gameplay will remain largely intact, with a huge open-world to explore. Hunting wildlife has been hinted at, as has the mechanic of having to liberate outposts to access further facilities in particular parts of the map.

Furthermore, Internet super-sleuths have been reporting on rumours that some fictional animals might be making an appearance, but that these will likely be extremely rare. Having to find them and hunt them down could create a rather fun distraction from story missions. We're holding thumbs for a yeti.

Rumour has it we'll see the game at some point in 2015, and with a release date that far away it's anyone's guess as to whether or not the game will appear on last-gen consoles; banking on PC, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One is probably a safer bet. We can likely look forward to an actual reveal at Ubisoft's pre-E3 press conference in June. Aside from those sparse few details, there's not much else to go on at present.

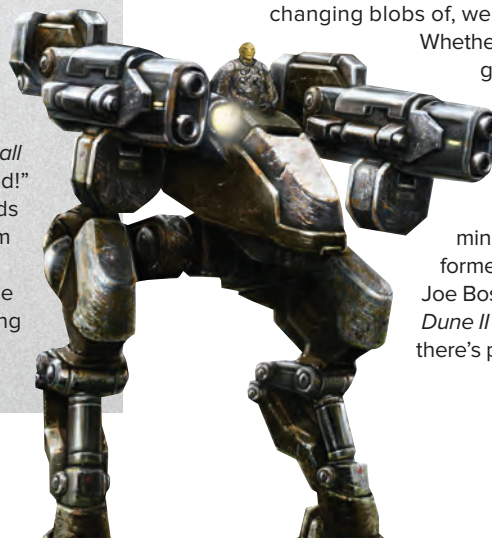
Dial S for strategy

There's a distinct lack of strategy in modern real-time strategy games, at least according to Petroglyph Games. To put an end to this, Petroglyph is currently developing *Grey Goo*, a science-fiction RTS that aims to bring true balance between macro and micro-management in strategy games.

Grey Goo will attempt to accomplish this lofty goal by forcing players to balance base management, resource management and strategic combat in equal measure, and it's set quite the challenge for itself by including three wildly different playable factions.

Humans focus on their ever-sprawling bases and use advanced teleportation to manage their buildings and units; Betas are a balanced race, making use of multiple production facilities and scattering their facilities across the maps; the titular *Grey Goo* are the strangest of the lot, and act as a massive horde of small nano-creatures that build, gather, reproduce and fight in ever-changing blobs of, well, goo.

Whether or not Petroglyph can create a game that's unique while remaining balanced remains to be seen, as this is far from the first time we've seen a studio claim they aim to create the next big thing in strategy gaming. Bear in mind that Petroglyph was founded by former Westwood employees, including Joe Bostic, one of the key people on *Dune II* and *Command & Conquer*, so there's potential here.



Where's there's smoke...



Amazon's long-rumoured entry into the home console market has finally come to light as the Amazon Fire TV. As expected, the Fire TV runs tablet-like internals in the form of a quad-core Qualcomm Krait 300 1.7GHz processor, Adreno 320 GPU and 2GB of RAM, putting it on the high end of mobile hardware. It sports version 3.0 of Amazon's Fire OS, dubbed Mojito, which is compatible with Android 4.4.2. Amazon explains that the porting process from regular Android systems will be a cinch.

Fire TV comes into an interesting segment of the alternative home console market, competing directly with the likes of Apple TV with its extensive content-delivery systems,

as well as Ouya. As you may be aware, the company has been making strides in the gaming industry by forming its own internal development studio, and is rabidly pursuing game publishers and indie developers to get their content onto Fire TV. The likes of Mojang, EA, Ubisoft, Gameloft and 2K are already on board, and Amazon's own tower defence/shooter *Sev Zero* will be exclusive to the platform.

Pricing is particularly interesting: the standard Fire TV ships for \$99 (R1,050) with a regular TV-style remote control; if you intend to play games on the device, you need to cough up \$139 (R1,470) for the unit plus gamepad.

We need a: Not a Hero announced

Roll7 – the London-based indie outfit who created smash hit 2D skateboarding sim *OlliOlli* – has announced their next project, *Not a Hero*. It's a side-scrolling cover shooter, and the plot synopsis alone has us hooked: "When an anthropomorphic rabbit/mayoral candidate from the future named BunnyLord needs a murderous loner to clean up the city during the election, Steve heroically offers up his dubious skills with a gun and lack of self-preservation instinct to this mysterious stranger from beyond."

There will be a variety of

heroes to play, each with their own specialties: one is able to quickly dash and dispose of enemies with a katana, for example. You're able to snap to the game's 2D cover and carefully time your attacks to coincide with enemies expending their clips and having to reload. They can do the same though, and if an enemy hears you reloading they'll rush your position to put an end to you. Missions will often see dynamic events that'll alter their course, like SWAT teams that bust in on the action. It looks to be incredibly stylish, like a side-on *Hotline Miami*.



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Stationed in the USA, this true gaming journalist is our go-to-guy when it's too late to get a visa to the USA, like just the other day in fact.

MIKTAR'S MEANDERINGS

by Miktar Dracon

What's next? Nobody knows!

Nobody knows what's important in gaming right now. Marketing people will tell you their stuff is important, the most important. We forgive them because marketing is a valid lifestyle choice and who am I to judge? Gamers will tell you that the thing they're totally interested in right now is most important. Gamers. Fickle, whimsical, transient gamers with their baggy pants and rap music.

Your parents will tell you it's more important to study than to worry about what's the most important thing in gaming right now. Your parents are probably right. Unless they're like Rami Ismail's mom. His mom used to shout at him for too much "computing". Then one day Ismail released *Ridiculous Fishing* on mobile and became an overnight millionaire. And he'd done it with a game about shooting fish with a machine gun. Imagine if he'd listened to his mom and stopped all the "computing". He wouldn't be a millionaire.

What's important seems to be that nobody knows what's important. The gaming industry and culture, as a whole, is in an interesting situation one rarely sees. One of total instability, simply because all the movers and shakers don't know what's going to be the Next Big Thing. All the tidy graphs conjured up through the Dark Arts of Market Research and Focus Group Testing are meaningless and cannot be trusted.

It's unclear what the future of consoles holds. Now that they're just an incremental bump in graphics and not a total technological leap, will the average console gamer remain satisfied with that? Sony isn't trying to make the Next Big Thing happen, they're still desperately trying to fix their mistakes made with the PlayStation 3 and keep the rest of their business out of the red. Nintendo gambled on a concept and lost, so they've refocused on making their future products a more cohesive ecosystem, not unlike Android, where if you buy something on one system it'll work on another. Microsoft tried to force the market into going where it didn't want to, and now they're paying the price so hard that major shareholders have even suggested getting out of the console business entirely. So from all three big console makers, no clue what happens next.

The free-to-play boom is hitting a wall in terms of growth. All the major players have cornered their respective markets, so is there a new gimmick left to try and bring in that infinite growth their shareholders demand, or is the bubble about to pop? Mobile gaming's salad days seem to be entering their twilight, regulation is coming in hard and fast to clamp down on the outright scumbag practices that many "free" mobile games have been using to scam children and parents alike.

And like a doomsday cult that only appears when there's chaos, the virtual reality people are back to claim that "VR is the future", again, while handing out 3D glasses and talking about how total immersion will, once more, become the standard. Though if this leads to a next-gen *Dactyl Nightmare*, I'm all for it. **NAG**

Core meltdown

Square Enix: we're going back to our roots for AAA releases



Yosuke Matsuda, president of Square Enix, has pledged that Square will focus its efforts on pleasing core audiences with all future AAA releases. In an interview with Nikkei Trendy (as translated by Siliconera), Matsuda was very candid in saying that in their pursuit of pleasing a global audience, Square Enix lost sight of what their most dedicated fans find appealing in their titles. He made specific reference to *Hitman: Absolution*, which he feels lost players by seeking mass appeal. And he says the same can be said for all their 2013 titles.

"If you focus too much on the global aspect, you might lose sight of who you're actually making the game for," lamented Matsuda. "The development team for *Hitman: Absolution* really struggled in this regard. They implemented a vast amount of 'elements for the mass' instead of for the core fans, as a way to try getting as many new players possible. It was a strategy to gain mass appeal. However, what makes the *Hitman* series good is its appeal to core gamers, and many fans felt the lack of focus in that regard, which ended up making it struggle in sales."

Matsuda points to *Bravely Default* on the 3DS as a massive success story in how it was developed for a very niche Japanese audience, but went on to sell well in many countries around the world. It's this sort of focused attempt to engage a core audience that will inform Square Enix's future strategy.

"For the new games we'll be developing from this point on, while this may sound a bit extreme, we've been talking about making them as heavy JRPGs. I believe that way, we can better focus on our target, which will also bring better results."

Now if only someone at Square would give someone at Capcom a call and remind them to never, ever make anything like *Resident Evil 6* ever again.

The great divide

Social giant Facebook buys VR start-up Oculus

It's a move that has stunned everyone in the gaming industry: Facebook has acquired Oculus. That means the Rift, the current leader in virtual reality gaming, is under the thumb of the largest social networking company in the world. Let's break that down for you...

The deal cost Facebook \$2 billion – not quite as much as what the company recently spent on picking up WhatsApp, but certainly a pretty penny. That money goes to Oculus and its shareholders in the form of cash, stock and incentives, which means people like John Carmack (the current chief technology officer of Oculus) and the team he leads have all the resources they need to make Rift everything they ever wanted it to be.

But others in the industry have raised some concerns, especially from a pure gaming point of view. Markus "Notch" Persson, creator of *Minecraft*, has severed all ties with Oculus. His VR-based *Minecraft* port has been canned. He calls Facebook a company with unclear motives, he distrusts them. On the other hand, Chris Roberts, lead designer of the upcoming space shooter

MMO *Star Citizen*, has backed the decision, claiming that this was a natural progression for a startup company that was used to dealing with millions of dollars instead of the billions it needs. As he puts it, Rift "really needed a lot more funding than it has raised from its past two VC rounds".

Whichever way you see it, this move will certainly aid in getting Rift to market sooner than it could have otherwise, and it'll likely be a better product from a technical standpoint. For now, all we can do is ask a few big questions that won't have answers for a while: what will Facebook do with this technology, what will this mean for open-source Rift development, and how much can Facebook be trusted to allow Oculus to maintain its current track?



An age reborn

Age of Mythology is making a return! Sorry, not in the form of a sequel, but rather a retouch and re-release. It's called *Age of Mythology: Extended Edition*, and it's set to include a number of visual updates including dynamic lighting with day/night cycles, improved water, shadows, bump/specular maps, global lighting, anti-aliasing, and ambient occlusion. The game will bundle the *Titans* expansion pack as well as the extra campaign *The Golden Rift*, and there's Steamworks mod support for

practically infinite extensibility.

AoM: EE will be available on the 8th of May through Steam at a price of \$30 (R320).



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United we stand

Two new *Assassin's Creeds* for 2014; one confirmed, the other not yet



It seems as if Ubisoft is upping their dedication to this whole annualised release approach to the *Assassin's Creed* series. The company has confirmed that the next entry into the franchise is called *Assassin's Creed Unity*, and that this new game will be set in the late 18th century – slap bang in the middle of the French Revolution.

At time of writing, not much else is known about *Unity* other than the fact that it stars a new assassin and will continue to tell the story of the Templar-Assassin war, only this time against the backdrop of the French Revolution. Interestingly, the game is only coming to next-gen platforms, which means there won't be a version for PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360. Therefore, Ubisoft will be able to make this the first truly "next-gen" *Assassin's Creed* as they'll be developing for PC, PlayStation 4 and Xbox One only.

However, Ubisoft doesn't intend to

keep the previous generation of consoles out in the cold this festive season. At time of writing the publisher has yet to confirm this, but sources close to Ubisoft have revealed that a second *Assassin's Creed* will be released alongside *Unity*. This second game is believed to be codenamed *Comet*, and it will take place during 1758 along the North American Atlantic coast line. That means ship battles and trips to 18th century New York. Evidently, *Comet* will focus on a Templar player character called Shay, who is tied up in the Kenway legacy (Haytham Kenway from *Assassin's Creed III* and Edward Kenway from *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*) and consequently *Comet* will wrap-up the Kenway story arc.

For now, *Unity* is a definite thing, but the jury is still out as to whether or not *Comet* is a legitimate *Assassin's Creed* to get excited about.

Who wants to ride the Pukinator?

Aside from a brief stop on the 3DS, it's been ten years since we've seen a core game from the *Rollercoaster Tycoon* series, but Atari recently confirmed that the dry spell will shortly be over.

Soon you'll be able to build your dream park, fill it with overpriced hotdogs and understaffed maintenance teams, and design that perfect coaster that may or may not cause blackouts, dismemberments and fatalities for those who ride it. *Rollercoaster Tycoon 4* will come in two versions: a mobile game and (mercifully) a PC title. The announcements came separately, with a nice little trailer for the micro-transaction-fuelled mobile title, followed by angry Internet protest, followed by a Tweet from Atari that confirmed "there is a PC experience in production now for release this year". Hopefully "PC experience" means "proper game that you pay money for and have in its entirety", and not just a Facebook version of the mobile game.

Rollercoaster Tycoon 4 will be a major part of Atari's bankruptcy rehabilitation program: the company has been given three years to sort itself out, so let's hope (for everyone's sake) that this game turns out how we want it.



Morbid curiosity: Boon Hill is a game about graveyards



No, you didn't read that headline wrong. *Boon Hill* is a graveyard simulator, one that promises to afford you "all the adventure of exploring a real graveyard without looking like a creeper". The entire point of the game is to allow you to wander a 16-bit graveyard, reading the epitaphs of the very many graves (1,000 of them, says creator Matthew Ritter) within. There will be NPCs in the game, but they serve no real purpose. There's no goal and no urgency. But that doesn't mean it won't be a special experience. "I don't want to imply the game is

aimless," explains Ritter. "*Boon Hill* is about inferred stories, about the connections people have that continue even after they die. The graveyard tells many tales woven by those who've long since passed on: stories of love, life, sorrow, and joy, told over generations."

It's thematically very sombre for a video game, sure, but there's an undeniable sense of powerful meaning to be gleaned from reading a beautiful epitaph. And we absolutely love that such melancholy themes can be tackled by our favourite pastime.

Ready? Fight!

3D Realms prepares to go head-to-head with Gearbox



In case this is the first you're hearing of this, here's the situation: *Duke Nukem* creators 3D Realms sold the rights to *Duke Nukem* to Gearbox Software years ago. That's the only reason *Duke Nukem Forever* ever saw the light of day. Recently, out of nowhere, 3D Realms suddenly announced a new *Duke Nukem* game (subtitled *Mass Destruction*), in development at *Rise of the Triad* remake developer Interceptor Entertainment. As you'd expect, Gearbox did not like this at all and quickly announced that they'd be suing 3D Realms.

Since then it's been an incredibly confusing affair, chock-full of contradiction and legal wrangling, with 3D Realms effectively saying that they know what they're doing is wrong but they'll continue to do it anyway. 3D Realms plans to fight Gearbox for the right to release *Duke Nukem: Mass Destruction* on the grounds that 3D Realms was granted the rights to continue development

of a tentatively titled game called *Duke Nukem Survivor* (which 3D Realms argues was the working title for *Mass Destruction*) when the rights to *Duke* were sold to Gearbox, and therefore the purchase agreement allows them to legally continue with the development of the game.

See what we mean by confusing? It goes even further than that though, with 3D Realms also claiming that Gearbox doesn't own the rights to the Duke trademark at all, and that they remain the "sole property of 3DR". They go on to state that Gearbox "sought to force former owners, Scott Miller and George Broussard, to improperly surrender what rightfully belonged to 3DR". Does your brain hurt? Ours does. Anyway, what we do understand is that *Duke Nukem: Mass Destruction* will supposedly be a top-down action RPG. You know, assuming it ever actually gets released once this legal war has run its course.

"When EA bought Bullfrog, they just wanted to make it nicer. They moved us to a nice office, where we couldn't shoot each other [with BB guns] in the corridors. We had an HR department because that was a nice proper professional thing to do. And that changes the flavour of the company."

— Peter Molyneux, founder of Bullfrog Productions



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Start your engines!

It's the battle of the next-gen engines. Two massive announcements recently took place nearly back-to-back: Crytek has moved CRYEngine development to a monthly subscription service... and Epic has done the same with Unreal Engine 4! These are a couple of game-changers, and it's obviously become clear to both companies that fighting piracy while promoting low-cost indie and mobile game development is the way forward for the industry.

Crytek's offering is \$9.90 a month (royalty free) and gives users access to all the neat new toys you wouldn't get in the free version (which is limited to educational or non-commercial use) like physically-based

shading, geometry cache and image-based lighting. On the other side of the pond, Epic now offers the full Unreal Engine 4 for commercial use at a rate of \$19.99 a month, and subjects users to a 5% royalty fee, although you get access to the engine source code as well.

Crytek's offering is no-doubt the cheaper one, but Epic's stranglehold on the industry is nothing to be scoffed at. UE development also has a huge support system from both Epic and its users. Of course, this new generation of engines means we could have a whole new set of rules: perhaps it's Crytek's time at the top.

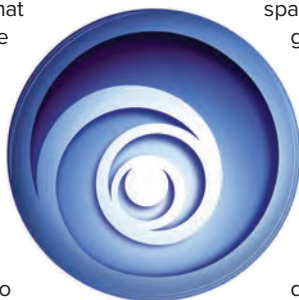


Ubisoft pledges continued support for last-gen consoles

The good news for those who haven't yet taken the financial plunge into new console hardware is that

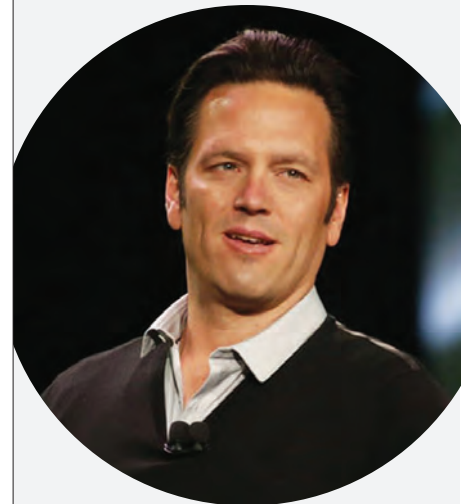
Ubisoft is planning to support the PlayStation 4 and Xbox 360 for the foreseeable future. This is according to Ubisoft's vice president creative Lionel Raynaud, who said: "We will have games for PS3 and 360 for this year and probably the years after. We want to be able to provide games to people who are playing on these consoles.

Black Flag was the first *Assassin's Creed* game of this new generation but it was designed with that in mind."



Ubisoft's upcoming *Watch Dogs* will continue this trend of new games spanning multiple console generations, but Raynaud doesn't believe that this cross-generational support is impeding Ubisoft's development teams. "It's a choice – even when you do a game that has old-gen and new-gen versions, we decide which one is lead. So if you decide that new gen is lead for all of your games, then you have no restrictions at all – you're just saying that the other generation will maybe not be able to have everything."

Phil Spencer is now Microsoft's head of Xbox



That's his official title too: head of Xbox. Sounds pretty important, doesn't it? Spencer has been with Microsoft for 25 years now and has worked on projects such as the Encarta encyclopaedia range and Microsoft Money. In 2008 he became the general manager for Microsoft Studios Europe, Middle East and Africa. Under his tenure, Microsoft Studios built up some of the company's strongest IPs, such as *Halo*, *Fable*, *Gears of War* and *Forza Motorsport*.

Spencer is in charge of pretty much every entertainment aspect of the Xbox brand. This includes overseeing Xbox LIVE, Xbox Video and Xbox Music. Judging by his past experience with Microsoft, it looks as if the Xbox brand is in very safe and very capable hands.

This news came a few weeks after Microsoft revealed that Xbox chief product officer Marc Whitten had resigned from the company to join an electronics company called Sonos. A large portion of Whitten's portfolio is now in the hands of Spencer.

Spencer will report to Terry Myerson, who is the executive vice president of Microsoft's Operating Systems Group, and who filled a leadership gap after Marc Whitten left in March 2014.



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The Last of Us is heading to PS4

File this one under "R" for rumour for now; unless of course Sony Computer Entertainment has confirmed this information since we went to print. In which case, file this under "S" for squee.

During a video interview with PlayStation's Eurasian Software Market Manager Sercan Sulun, Turkish website Multiplayer learnt that Naughty Dog's wonderful *The Last of Us* will be making the jump to PlayStation 4. During the interview, Sulun was asked about the likelihood of a sequel to *The Last of Us*. While he said there was "no information" about a sequel, he could reveal that *The Last of Us* will be ported to PlayStation 4 as both a physical and digital game. Apparently this will happen in the next few months, and the PlayStation 4 version will include the recently released single-player DLC *Left Behind*.

This lends credence to another rumour that Sony is planning to unveil PlayStation 4 backwards compatibility for PlayStation 3 titles in the near future. According to that rumour, the PS4 should get emulated backwards compatibility around the time the PlayStation Now streaming service launches.



Team17 spill first details on Flockers

In last month's issue of NAG, you might have noticed a neat little news Byte that made mention of the fact that Team17 (*Worms*, *Lemmings*) are busy making a new game that *isn't* a new *Worms* game. That game is *Flockers* and it's been debuted at the recent EGX Rezzed expo in London.

Flockers is basically *Lemmings* meets the *Worms* IP. You guide flocks of sheep out of captivity by helping them navigate a series of levels festooned with deadly traps. The sheep are the same sheep that the worms from *Worms* use as weapons. That pushes the nostalgia button marked "*Lemmings*".



Metro series is making the jump to new console hardware



Publisher Deep Silver has confirmed that 4A Games' *Metro* series will be coming to PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. This confirmation was in response to a leaked internal fact sheet that detailed box art for a PlayStation 4 and Xbox One bundle release of *Metro 2033 Redux* and *Metro Last Light*. However, Deep Silver noted that while *Metro*

is definitely coming to current-gen consoles, the leaked fact sheet was in fact outdated and contained a lot of place-holder information. Obviously, speculation is rife as to whether or not this next-gen *Metro* will be a port of previous titles, or a whole new game. Deep Silver has promised a reveal prior to this year's E3.

Anti-violent-game senator arrested for gun trafficking

Californian State Senator Leland Yee has been very vocal in his push to implement stricter controls on violent video games. He's just been arrested by the FBI on charges of arms trafficking and dealings with the both the Chinese and Italian mafia. Honestly, it's like something out of *Grand Theft Auto*, complete with undercover FBI agents posing as potential buyers of rifles and bazookas in order to get Yee to admit his ability to illegally acquire said military hardware. Smell that? That's *irony*!

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Candy Crush devs experience disastrous first day of trading

King, the development team behind *Candy Crush Saga*, made headlines at the beginning of the year when they tried to trademark the words “saga” and “candy”. That fell through, proving there is at least a shred of sanity left on Earth. The trademark failure didn’t stop King from going public, however, and the company began trading their stock on the New York Stock Exchange on 26 March. Their first day of trading was not good at all: the initial value per stock unit was \$22.50 and by the close of trade on their first day, the value had dropped 15.5% to around \$19 per share. That

underperformance meant that King has the dubious honour of having the worst stock exchange debut of 2014 so far.

Analysts attributed King’s poor NYSE debut to the company’s over-reliance on *Candy Crush Saga*. Despite the fact that the mobile developer has a rather extensive catalogue of games, more than 70% of their turnover is generated by *Candy Crush*. With that many eggs in one basket, it’s not surprising buyers thought twice before picking up King stock. It’s also likely that Zynga’s disastrous stock demise is still ringing in the ears of many investors.

Pint-sized Civilization

Hero Generations is built on the sort of idea that you’ll be surprised wasn’t thought up ages ago. It’s been nicknamed “the 5-minute *Civilization*”, and it’s easy to see why. It plays out in turn-based fashion, with the look of a typical 4X strategy game, except that instead of controlling an entire empire, you control a single hero.

Your cartoonish avatar ages one year with each turn you take in the game – which means that as you explore the grid-based, procedurally generated environment, you slowly creep towards an expiration date. As you search for fame and fortune, you’ll also have to find yourself a spouse and spawn yourself some useful offspring – because when you inevitably die, your child will continue your legacy. The adventurous choices you make along the way will determine your successor’s traits, which will make them more or less fit to take on the world’s challenges.

If you don’t establish a lasting lineage,



death is permanent. In addition to exploration, you’ll be able to build towns and upgrade technology. You’ll be competing with other families as you go, and heroes are judged by how famous they become within their lifetime.

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 *Bound by flame* from Apex Interactive. Send your captions to letters@nag.co.za with the subject line “**May caption**”.



NAG’S LAME ATTEMPT AT HUMOUR

Tom’s Reiki classes were going far better than he ever expected.



LAST MONTH’S WINNER

“Do you want to know how I got this scar? I peeped through the wrong hole at a dagger throwing contest”

- Zsa-Zsa van Zyl



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SUPPORT LINES

Got a legal boxed game and need some technical help? Before you call please do the following. Update your system software, drivers and have a look online for a game patch. Just these simple tasks eliminate 93% of all problems – it's a made up statistic but probably close enough.

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Telephone / 0800 991 550

PUBLISHERS / Electronic Arts
e-mail / zasupport@ea.com
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Roxy hunt

Every month we hide Roxy somewhere in the magazine. Send your sighting to letters@nag.co.za with the subject line "May Roxy" and you could win a prize. Feeling lucky punk?



April winner

Imaan Mahomet, page 35

This month's prize

Marvel Dice Masters valued at R250. Sponsored by Skycastle.



BL GAMES RELEASE LIST

Dates subject to change without notice

MAY WEEK 1

The Amazing Spider-Man 2	360 / 3DS / PC / PS3 / PS4
Mario Golf: World Tour	3DS

MAY WEEK 2

God of War Collection	PSV
Bound By Flame	360 / PC / PS3 / PS4

MAY WEEK 3

Kirby: Triple Deluxe	3DS
The Smurfs 1 & 2	DS / Wii
2DS console pink and white	N/A

MAY WEEK 4

Wolfenstein: The New Order	360 / PC / PS3 / PS4
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MAY WEEK 5

Watch_Dogs	360 / PC / PS3 / PS4
Mario Kart 8	Wii U

MAY UNCONFIRMED

Metro: Last Light Complete Edition	PC / PS3
MGXP: The Official Motocross Videogame	360 / PC / PS3 / PSV

"In the past, when we developed console games with a worldwide premise, we lost our focus, and not only did they end up being games that weren't for the Japanese, but they ended up being incomplete titles that weren't even fit for a global audience. On the other hand, there are games like the JRPG we made for the Japanese audience with the proper elements, Bravely Default, which ended up selling well all around the world."

– Yosuke Matsuda, president of Square Enix

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EXPOSURE FOR SOUTH AFRICAN INDIE DEVELOPERS

by Rodain Joubert

He makes games for a living thereby qualifying him to be part of NAG. We once tried to give his one game a rating now he won't talk to us anymore.

THE DEVELOPER'S GOAL

While *Dead Run* was inspired by the success and simplicity of recent mobile sensation *Flappy Bird*, the devs aren't looking to rake in cash or fame for their efforts. Rather, *Dead Run* is an experiment in the deployment, marketing and monetisation process of game development, being a part-time project built by a crew whose primary careers lie in different fields.

Breaking past the mental barriers and administrative processes of professional development is a surprisingly popular theme for early game projects and even some development competitions. Focusing on just "getting something out there" allows devs to tackle these challenges on their own with a low-investment project (where financial failure is not an issue), building the foundations for a follow-up which involves more time, effort and risk-taking.

Dead Run: Setting the pace for mobile

Some of you may think that runner games are common enough – that the addition of one more is not worth the time and attention of your average player, let alone another thousand words in a magazine. *Dead Run*, created by local development studio Twoplus Games, cracks a nod for two reasons. Firstly, this game is far from being the half-arsed reskinning or uninspired shovelware that plagues mobile devices. Its original brief promised a development time of about three weeks, but early builds of *Dead Run* quickly became an exercise in visual polish, fine-tuned gameplay and genuine love that has kept it in the creation loop for several months.

Secondly, while the local community continues to make some astounding, massively-scoped and groundbreaking projects in many areas of gaming, *Dead Run* is one of the more interesting stories of South

African development due to its accessibility, detailed rationales and abundance of silhouetted zombie guts. It's also a perfect case study for anyone interested in learning how to make their first "real" mobile game.

On the surface, there isn't much to say about the gameplay. Players run through a zombie-infested landscape, occasionally tapping the screen to smack enemies with a baseball bat and thus remind them that they are, in fact, dead. The interesting bits are in the details. While timing your swing is an important concept (rhythm being a skill component of many runner games), the stylised, pitch-black entities you come across are sometimes humans who need to be rescued instead of skull-cracked. The game's fast-scrolling nature means that it produces challenges of pattern recognition and restraint, enhanced by the use of simple black shapes for characters.

Smack the wrong target, and you'll be met with a game over screen that helpfully informs you of the manslaughter you've just committed (that poor, innocent soul). Hesitate at the wrong moment and you'll find yourself eaten by an entirely less innocent zombie.

Twoplus kept the core design simple, focusing on juicy graphical effects and small gameplay wrinkles to flesh out the experience. Different types of zombies occasionally show up for variety and the ever-reliable shotgun makes an appearance as a super-weapon, but



BREAKING INTO GAME DESIGN AS AN ARTIST

Twoplus Games currently has three developers: Steven Tu, Loet Jansen van Rensburg and Tim Harbour. Of particular interest here is Tu's role in the company – doubling as its founder (with van Rensburg's help) and the studio's sole artist, his story serves as a great example of how to break into game development and spearhead projects without knowing a single line of code.

In an ideal world, anyone should be able to spearhead a game's development. But reality often gets in the way – long before starting any commercial projects,

most game designers spend a lot of time working solo, mocking up game prototypes, experimenting with new ideas and making themselves a name in the community. For coders, this is relatively easy to do: having access to the brick and mortar of game design means they can build and test ideas without relying on anyone else's skills. Their prototypes may look and sound horrible, but they will *exist*.

For artists such as Tu (who segued to game development from a career in advertisement), this is somewhat more

challenging, as their typical skillset only permits them to go as far as mockup animations and concepts before they're forced to ask for a coder's assistance. This lack of independence can cripple a new designer, as it is very difficult to convince someone to work on a project before they've seen it in action.

Tu took the initiative to learn the basics of a few easy-to-use tools like *Game Maker*, producing raw prototypes and entering small competitions to build up a meaningful portfolio to demonstrate his vision and capability. *Dead Run* is by no

means his first project, nor is it the game that established his presence in the local community. He spent a lot of time building up good faith and respectable work by the time he teamed up with van Rensburg (who has joined him for other prototypes, such as *Rocketto* and *Bear Chuck*).

Tu's work on this game is just the visible part of a massive iceberg, and any artist who wants to prominently engage with the core design of a game – and even start up their own company – would do well to learn from his approach.



ATTENTION PROGRAMMERS

Entelect will once again run their R100K challenge this year, in search of the ultimate AI. This year, entrants will be required to design a *Pac-Man* AI, and Entelect is structuring the competition to be more accessible to both mid- and high-level programmers. If you think you've got what it takes, head over to challenge.entelect.co.za for more details. Oh, and there's a small matter of the grand prize of R100,000 should you win the finals which will be held at rAge – so get cracking!

the game really shines with cinematic effects such as slowdowns and camera shakes, bloody and/or hilarious negotiations between zombie faces and the hero's hurty-stick (often ending with various body parts bouncing around the landscape) and a really satisfying level of attention to character animation, overall visual style and bonus touches such as a day/night cycle.

The result is a game with a conservative scope that focuses on doing just a few things beautifully. Although the temptation to feature creep is ever-present and occasionally indulged, Twoplus has taken care to honour the mantra that simplicity is king, discarding many of the ideas that they have for expansion and complexity so that players remain focused on a fun and worthwhile core.

At the time of writing, this game is still in development and promises to release "when it's done", though the project has reached a high level of polish and – given the aim for simplicity – may well be available by the time you read this. In the meantime, check out www.deadrunapp.com to play the open beta build, or visit www.twoplusgames.com for more information on *Dead Run* and the studio's other playable project, *Bear Chuck*. **NAG**

PlanetSide 2

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE WTF DID I JUST PLAY?

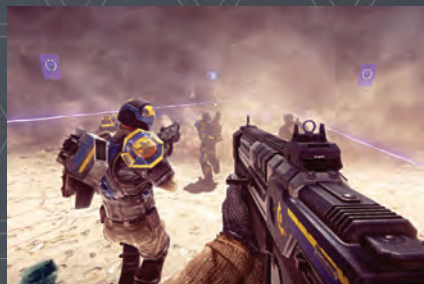
We play an awful lot of competitive *StarCraft II* at NAG. Like, a lot. We recently brought in a team of highly trained psychologists to observe us from a distance, and after a week of frantically scribbling notes in their psycho-pads, they all arrived at the same worrying conclusion: the amount of time we spend playing *StarCraft* is unhealthy, like attempting to survive on a diet of nothing but used tea leaves. Something had to be done. Something had to change. And so this feature was born.

Its purpose is to force us to try new things. Like reverse skydiving! And running with sharks! And wrestling anteaters! And riding rollercoasters completely naked! Except we'll be doing none of those things (nor anything remotely related to them) because we're giant nerds and anteaters are scary. Instead, we'll be doing something a little more in our league: trying our hand at a wide variety of multiplayer games we've either not played before or haven't spent much time playing in pursuit of perhaps finding a new semi-staple game to keep us blissfully occupied while *StarCraft* watches us from the sidelines, visibly fuming with jealousy.

Obviously, we'll still be playing tons of *StarCraft*, because come on, we're not completely insane. But in between that, we'll dabble in the unknown (when we're not playing *Quake III* instead). Last month, we attempted to play *League of Legends* because it's one of the most popular games in the world and yet we've never been in the same room with it. That did not go well, because two people who will not be named* are completely against having to learn how to be good at games and so the whole idea crumbled into a smoky pile of burnt dreams, which meant the feature had to be unceremoniously scrapped. But this month was different. We decided to try something easier to learn, something in which the activity is – on the surface at least – as basic as pointing your crosshair at things and clicking mouse buttons until they die. That something was Sony's free-to-play MMOFPS *PlanetSide 2*. Naturally, they still whined. But not enough to kill this feature forever.

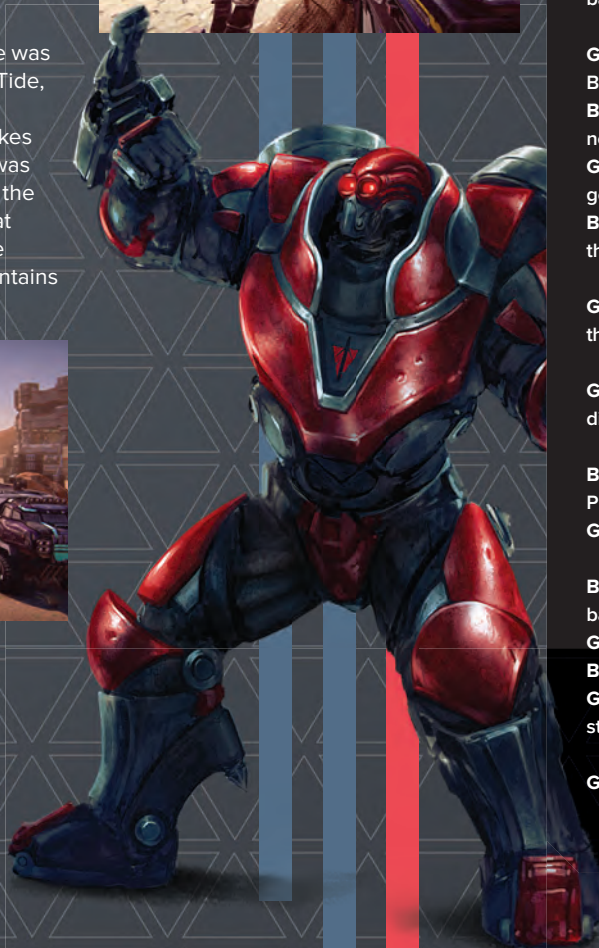
PlanetSide 2 has been around since 2012. This means that there are people charging around its trio of battle-torn continents who are much, much more experienced (i.e. better) at the game than we are. They've also unlocked tons and tons of better equipment, whether it's by grinding for certification points (the game's basic, freely-earned currency





which you slowly accrue by doing important stuff like shooting things and capturing territories and not dying) or by spending real-world cash – because this is a free-to-play game after all. When we joined our first battle, we were completely overwhelmed. We happened to join some kind of super-conflict in which dozens of our faction's members (we chose the Vanu Sovereignty, mostly because we're all strangely drawn to the colour purple) had gathered to assault what at the time seemed to be the most important mega-lab in the galaxy. There were jump pads and great big bullets and men in mechanised suits called MAXes who it turns out you shouldn't really ever be in the same room with unless you like lots of pain and also why can't I walk through these forcefields and is that a tank OH NO I'M DEAD AGAIN.

Anyway, the important thing is that we persisted. And we had a few grand adventures along the way. Again, there was also lots of whinging (mostly from RedTide, because he plays games inverted and everyone knows this automatically makes you the worst person ever), but there was enough laughter and silliness to offset the sound of his continued failure to click at things until they stopped twitching. We trekked up the side of impossible mountains



DAY 1, HOUR 1

Here are some extracts of LOL between GeometriX, RedTide and Barkskin during their first hour with *PlanetSide 2*. This ride's about to get a little bumpy.

GeometriX: What is happening?
What is going on?

Barkskin: How do I leave a squad?

RedTide: I don't know where I am. What are these red things?

Barkskin: RedTide, join our squad. What's your name so I can add you?

GeometriX: Is it HoneyPieButterBuns?

Barkskin: Um... Okay you add me rather.

Barkskin: You can't spawn on each other if you're in a squad. That's not like *Battlefield* which is a bit gay.

Barkskin: There are such big bullets being fired here.

RedTide: Is it always this dark?

Barkskin: Woohoo shot someone in the face.

Barkskin: Man I just went full awesome and jetpacked and shot someone and didn't get shot.

RedTide: Is it normal that your bullets have no effect on bad guys?

GeometriX: I just died, so there's that.

Barkskin: We've just captured something. I dunno what we've done but it looks f***ing sexy.

Barkskin: I'm very excited to get one kill in this battle.

GeometriX: I see where you're camping Barkskin.

Barkskin: It's crazy man, it's the only way I'm not getting shot in the face

GeometriX: I don't see how we're ever gonna get in there.

Barkskin: Oh shit I just got launched up to the top.

GeometriX: Do you need ammo... Oh wait is that an ammo box?

GeometriX: No come bro don't stand directly...

Barkskin: Is that Jennifer Lawrence playing PlanetSide? That is crazy.

GeometriX: Yeah she's just one of us.

Barkskin: Oh no everyone's dead. This was a bad idea. This was a terrible idea.

GeometriX: Did I just kill you?

Barkskin: Yes. Whoops.

GeometriX: Oh, so you were the hero just strafing in the front there?

GeometriX: I didn't sign up for a three-way.

A (FEW) WORD(S) FROM OUR REDTIDE

This feature was supposed to start last month, but playing *League of Legends* was such a chore for me and SAVAGE that the project was shelved by Barkskin until this issue. After listening to all the bitching and moaning (from me and SAVAGE), he decided the best way to start this new series was with something us jaded cynics would be familiar with – a shooter. Not a bad plan and it almost worked.

I'm getting tired of having to fill in my details each time I want to try something different, I miss the days when a 20c piece and a few minutes while mom was buying milk was all you needed to try a new game. This Internet thing is a bit of curse really. So after creating an account and validating it and then entering it all again I was ready to play. The game looks like what you'd expect from a free-to-play shooter. There's no crumbling scenery or the kind of polish *Battlefield 4* has on display.

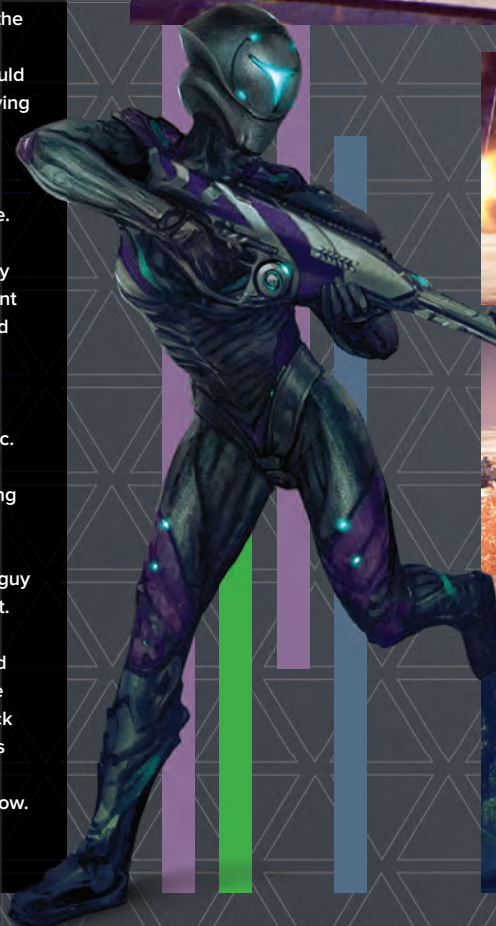
After a quick tutorial it was time to join GeometriX and Barkskin who were loudly enjoying the little firefight they were in at the time. I suspect they were overly vocal in their enjoyment just to get me and SAVAGE interested enough to give it a fair shake. They do try, these guys. After navigating the myriad menus and tabs and buttons and regretting giving myself a silly name that I then had to announce loudly in the office (HoneyPieButterBuns FYI), I was invited to a squad and deployed in the middle of a fight. My initial experience was not good. I killed three teammates before figuring out what the enemies looked like. After that I died about six times because my soldier was issued with rubber bullets. It was night-time in the game world so not being able to see and not being able to kill anything actually saw me quitting so I could reply to mails. Yes, I'd rather do work instead of playing *PlanetSide 2*.

The next time I played, our location was being overrun by bad guys and the usual vehicle campers on the hills were spamming tank shells into the base. It wasn't fun and mercifully I had a meeting to go to. Spawning in vehicles was some light relief but highly ranked enemy players killed that joy in no time. I want to say the game favours those who play a credit card but if I do Barkskin will get cross.

The final try was a little more pleasant and the boys and I had some fun taking over bases with no resistance at all – it's a weird type of game mechanic. The problem here was me not knowing where to go or what to do so I did a lot of running around shooting walls and the ground. Eventually we met some resistance and again I battled to have any kind of impact no matter what weapon I used. I did kill one guy with a rocket launcher as he spawned, so I have that.

It's not a terrible game technically but it doesn't favour new players unless you punch in a credit card number. Then you can have more fun and get all the cool stuff without grinding for hours against the brick wall of "free" incremental progress. It's a poor man's alternative to *Battlefield 4*. I'd say give it a try if you have plenty bandwidth to spare but I'm deleting it now.

-RedTide





A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

There's something immensely satisfying about holding a capture point, raining flaming death from the skies, or sneaking your way into an enemy stronghold unnoticed. I know that these things are satisfying because I could practically feel the chimp-like grins of hundreds of other people every time they did one of those things to me. *PlanetSide 2* is very difficult at first. It lulls you in with its nice little tutorial but then literally drops you (like, *orbital drops* you) into the middle of a combat zone as soon as you're done. There's little explanation of the MMO elements or the meta-game – the stuff you really, really need to know and understand to make the most of this game. But once you figure out all that (I'm a sucker for a good wiki), you might find that this really is a shining beacon of light among the endless darkness that is the free-to-play market.

PlanetSide 2's purchase model is lauded as one of the best out there, and I have to say that I agree. It's not perfect freeloader heaven – you really should spend a few dollars to get the most out of this game – but unlocking that first 30% or so of passive boosts to help level the playing field is pretty easy.

Highly recommended. Get it right now if you're a budget gamer with a decent Internet connection.

-GeometriX



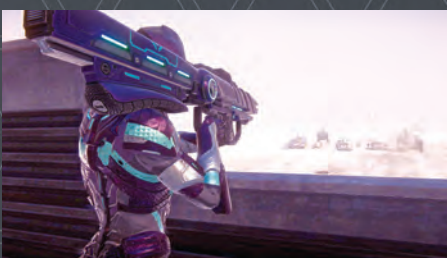
up which we should have never been able to trek – especially SAVAGE, because at that time he was a ten-foot-tall hunk of clumsy bipedal machinery trying to scale an almost vertical mountainside, which is a bit like watching a drunk, armless baby try to climb a flight of stairs. GeometriX and I spent at least an hour (unsuccessfully) attempting to assault one seemingly impenetrable base guarded by one seemingly invincible human, only to finally give up once the embarrassment had become too much when Geo was run over by Superdouche's Quad Bike of Doom. We also accidentally rallied our own rolling army of unstoppable optimism, until we were inevitably stopped and had all our optimism surgically removed by sneaky people.

Aside from all that out-of-context occasional heroism and consistent disappointment, there's a lot to like about *PlanetSide 2*. It's a highly impressive game, best described as *Battlefield* on an attractively immense scale. Rather than staging matches with a limited lifespan confined to a single map, here the fight never actually ends, with armies organically roaming the persistent game world to respond to new threats. When large battles do dynamically erupt between 100+ players (and that's only when two of the

three factions are involved – add in the third and it becomes a wholly different beast), it's a beautiful thing to find yourself wrapped up in as infantry forces stream forth in an endless swarm, backed up by an imposing array of ground and air vehicles. Even as a tight-knit squad of just four players, there's plenty of fun to be had in quietly capping territories for your faction while the larger forces duke it out elsewhere on the three massive continents.

There's a good amount of depth to be found in its character and vehicle customisation, and in the battles themselves. Each of the character classes is highly specialised, designed to be strictly effective in very specific aspects of combat. Cloaked infiltrators can hack enemy gun placements and slip into bases unnoticed. Light assault troops can use their jump jets to scale buildings and lay siege from within. Engineers provide a powerful rolling defence and will keep your vehicles and MAXes in the fight for longer. Not only is it a lot of fun, but it's also an excellent example of free-to-play gaming done right. It boasts all the polish of a big-budget release, and allows you to spend cash to explore its spoils if you so choose, but still lets you earn all its coolest toys by spending nothing more than time. **NAG**

-Barkskin





XII

A HISTORY OF STAR WARS

GAMES IN LESS THAN 12 PARSECS

Hey, it's Star Wars month! You know, because **May the 4th be with you...** Oh, you've heard that one before. That's cool, we think it's still funny anyway. But we bet you wouldn't mind expanding your brain mass with this hot list of some of the best (and less than the best) **Star Wars** games from throughout time and space. Or really just time, and really just from the '70s.



STAR WARS GAME (1978)

Not just the first *Star Wars* game, but also the first unlicensed *Star Wars* game. Released by Apple Computer for the Apple II, the game cast players as a "space pilot trainee" tasked with blowing up enemy TIE Fighters in a "combat spaceship". Except everybody knows *real* "space pilot trainees" shoot womp rats in a T-16, so Apple obviously made a huge mistake not consulting with Lucasfilm on this one.



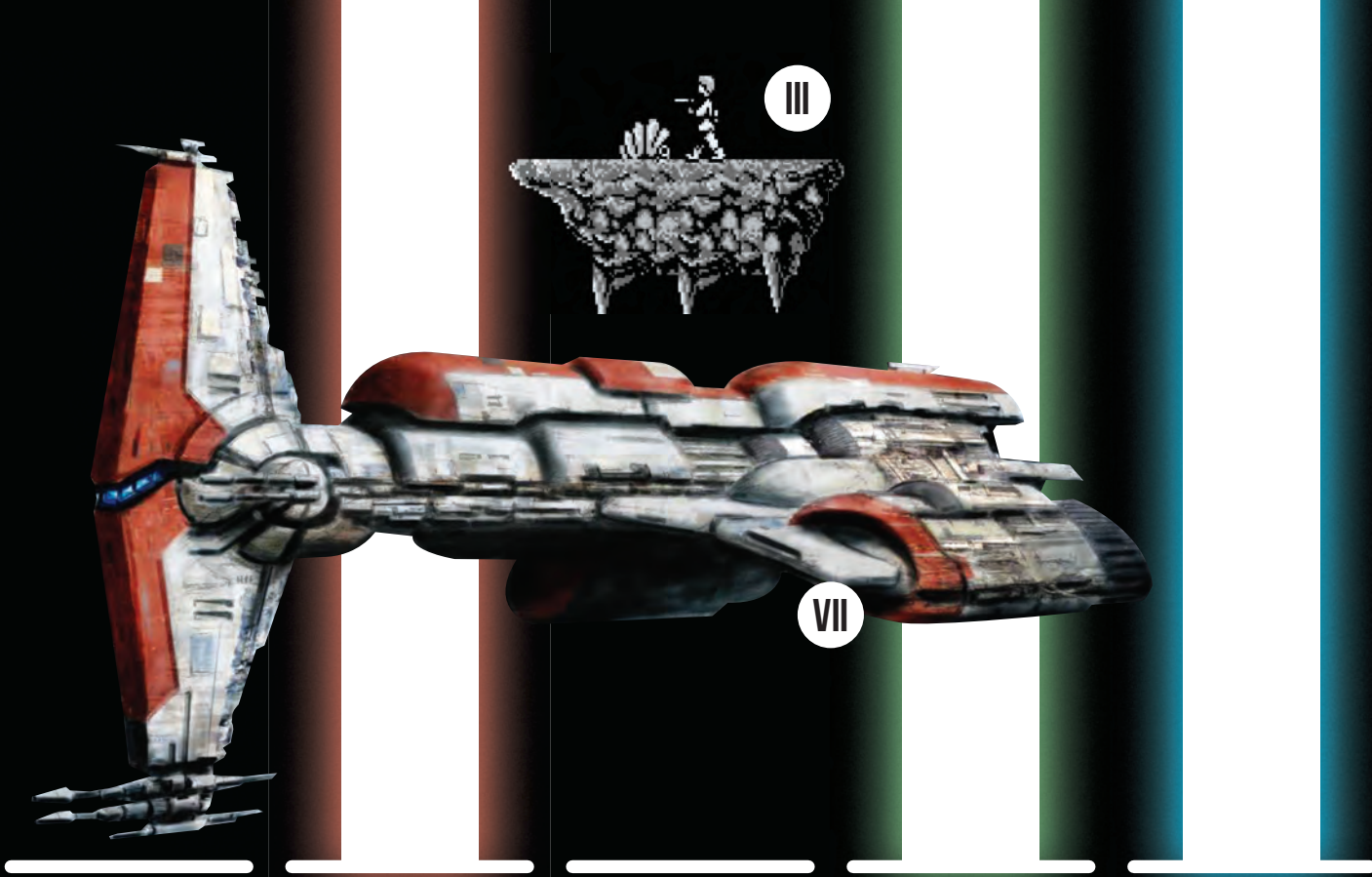
THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK (1982)

In the opening scene of *The Empire Strikes Back* movie, the Imperial Fleet launches an attack on the Rebel Alliance Echo Base on Hoth using AT-AT Walkers – one of which is taken down single-handedly by Luke Skywalker in a snowspeeder. In the game, it's technically more or less the same thing, but with less colour and more pixels.



STAR WARS (1991)

Set around the events of *A New Hope*, this side-scrolling platformer featured multiple playable characters including Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, and Princess Leia. Every character except Luke has only one life, though, because... The Force. Or something.



IV

**REBEL ASSAULT
(1993)**

Taking advantage of the so-called "multimedia explosion" of the early '90s, *Rebel Assault* was one of the first games to use full motion video, and swapped 2D graphics for pre-rendered 3D that was light years ahead of contemporary real-time tech.

V

**STAR WARS:
ROGUE
SQUADRON
(1998)**

Maintaining a close orbit to the cutting edge, *Rogue Squadron's* N64 version was also one of the first to take advantage of the console's Expansion Pak-enabled 4MB RAM boost to increase the game's resolution from 320x240 to 640x480. Less than 20 years later, gamers would start their own wars over the difference between 1280x720 and 1920x1080. If there's a bright centre to the universe, we're on the planet that it's farthest from.

VI

**STAR WARS
EPISODE I:
RACER (1999)**

This game almost didn't make the list because we had to cut it down from 18 candidates to 13, but decided to dump something else probably more significant to the brand instead because *Racer* was awesome. And let's be totally honest – *Dark Forces* was cool in 1995 but being able to look up and down with a mouse is not exactly that exciting in 2014.

VII

**STAR WARS:
KNIGHTS OF THE
OLD REPUBLIC
(2003)**

Based on Wizards of the Coast's pen-and-paper *Star Wars Roleplaying Game* system (based, in turn, on *Dungeons & Dragons Third Edition*), BioWare's RPG remains one of the most critically acclaimed *Star Wars* games even more than 10 years later. Set some 4000 years before the rise of the Galactic Empire, the player must become a Jedi knight and save the universe from Sith Dark Lord, Darth Malak. Or take his place. Player choices and consequences were a major marketing feature of the game, although somewhat inexplicably, simply going to Tosche Station to pick up some power converters because saving the universe sounded like *such* a chore wasn't an option.

VIII

**STAR WARS
GALAXIES: AN
EMPIRE DIVIDED
(2003)**

Developed by Sony Online Entertainment's *Everquest* team, *Galaxies* was the first *Star Wars* MMO, but more importantly also the first *Star Wars* RPG where you could *finally* choose to play as a bounty hunter or smuggler instead of one of those do-goody Jedis. But not Boba Fett or Han Solo, because they were already characters in the game. *Oh. ;_;*



VIII

**STAR WARS:
REPUBLIC
COMMANDO
(2005)**

This Unreal Engine-powered tactical FPS put the player in the mass-produced, Made in Kamino™ boots of “Boss”, a Grand Army of the Republic Clone commando in command of Delta Squad, a bunch of other elite Clone commandos. It’s not explained why Boss gets to be in charge when they all share identical DNA and have no discernible ranks, but there’s probably an entire website dedicated to this somewhere on the Internet.

X

**LEGO STAR
WARS: THE
VIDEO GAME
(2005)**

LEGO games have been created for just about everything now, but it started a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away with *LEGO Star Wars*. If England counts as “a galaxy far, far away”, anyway, but it might as well be when you’ve got a sudden, insatiable craving for Scotch eggs. The game was an adaptation of the prequel trilogy movies, including *Revenge of the Sith*, but launched two months ahead the third film’s release. The spoilers were strong with this one.

XI

**STAR WARS:
EMPIRE AT WAR
(2006)**

Despite seeming a perfect match in theory, *Star Wars* and RTS games don’t have the most... stellar relationship history, but with a Metacritic score of 79, *Empire at War* eventually got it right. The game included both Rebel and Imperial campaigns, and built up to the plot of *A New Hope*. So you can think of the other, more rubbish games preceding it like the prequel trilogy movies. It’s almost like George Lucas had planned it the whole time.

XII

**STAR WARS:
THE FORCE
UNLEASHED
(2008)**

Between the events of *Revenge of the Sith* and *A New Hope*, a lot of things happened – including this one time that Emperor Palpatine sent Darth Vader to kill a Jedi who’d survived the purge, so Vader killed him but decided to raise his son as his own apprentice, but then Palpatine found out about it and got super mad so he sent Vader to kill him too, except Vader only pretended to do it, and you really have to wonder how the two of them are still talking to each other by the next movie.

XIII

**STAR WARS: THE
OLD REPUBLIC
(2011)**

With an estimated development budget of between \$150 and 200 million, BioWare’s MMO was the most expensive game ever made when it launched, but it still didn’t include Boba Fett or Han Solo as playable characters. Quite in spite of this obvious defect, however, the game has been tremendously successful and is ranked in the world’s top ten biggest money-makers. That’s no moon, it’s BioWare’s huge pile of cash.

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RELEASE DATE / 2014

PLATFORMS / PC / PS4 / XBO

GENRE / Action adventure

DEVELOPER / Rocksteady Studios

PUBLISHER / Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

WEBSITE / www.batmanarkhamknight.com

Batman: Arkham Knight

And the bat-car completes the bat-package!

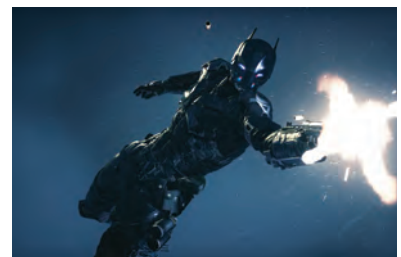
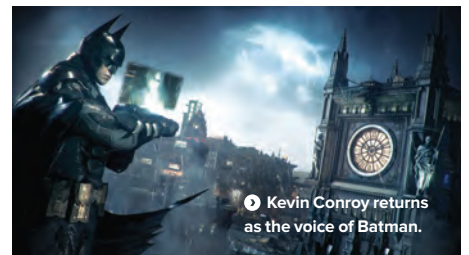
Rocksteady's epic revival of the *Batman* game franchise has been nothing short of astounding, especially their fluency with the Unreal Engine. While the first game, *Arkham Asylum*, had its kinks and took part in a very confined part of Gotham, there's no denying it laid a solid foundation for the series moving forward. With *Arkham City*, the action expanded outward and upward, letting you soar between buildings like a man improbably dressed as a bat, the setting and its characters solidified into what is now for many the definitive Batman universe.

“Bulletproof and able to be summoned at any time, the Batmobile gives Batman an entirely new set of actions.”

But all good things must come to an end. At least, until Warner Bros. writes down a number so large even Rocksteady can't resist. In the meantime, other developers will likely continue to add yearly additions that act more like side-stories (like Warner Bros. Montréal's *Arkham: Origins*), but *Knight* remains the official finale of Rocksteady's trilogy. Set one year after the events in *Arkham City*, Batman has never been better at being Batman. He's at peak physical condition, while crime is at an all-time low in Gotham due to the death of the Joker. But paradoxically, Batman is struggling

to cope with the lack of the Joker's antics. On Halloween, the Scarecrow suddenly appears and the threat of his fear gas forces the entire city of Gotham to evacuate. Only criminals remain, along with those Scarecrow has brought together to finally kill the Batman.

Rocksteady claims that the explorable size of Gotham is five



▶ Nick Arundel will compose the music again, having worked on *Arkham Asylum* and *Arkham City*.

times the scale of the *Arkham City* prison of the previous game, with the city divided into three distinct districts like Chinatown and the industrial shipping yard. Their spruced-up Unreal Engine 3 can handle five times the number of on-screen enemies, and all cut-scenes are being rendered in real-time by the game engine. And of course, Batman's cape has a spiffy new physics engine. Gotham City remains a gloomy, gothic place but with more implied life than before. Neon lights, billboard advertising and cars fill the streets. The city had to be redesigned with wider streets to accommodate the Batmobile.

Bulletproof and able to be summoned at any time, the Batmobile gives Batman an entirely new set of actions. You can glide into it as it drives in under you, eject from it to begin flying immediately. It can jump, speed boost, rotate on the spot, break through barricades, fire missiles and even electrocute enemies that try to get too close. There's a slew of other gameplay improvements: combined attacks on prone enemies, counter-throws, Fear Takedowns that subdue three enemies at once as long as you've not been seen, and the ability to roll into a grate from far away. We hope you're bat-ready. **NAG**

-Miktar

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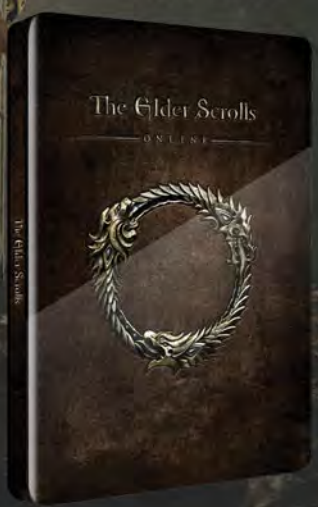
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imperial edition



*lanyard
(not pictured)*

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RELEASE DATE / 2014

PLATFORM / PC

GENRE / City building / strategy

DEVELOPER / Gaslamp Games

PUBLISHER / Gaslamp Games

WEBSITE / clockworkempires.com

Clockwork Empires

Building a better tomorrow if you survive the fish people

Colony builders are in season once more, perhaps spurred on by the less-than-stellar return of *SimCity*. Thanks to the existence of niche yet undeniably impactful games like *Dwarf Fortress*, the colony builder's shape has changed dramatically, maybe for the better. More and more, the genre is moving back towards being less goal-oriented, and emphasizing the sandbox, experiment-and-play-around spirit of the genre's predecessors like *SimAnt* and *Sid Meier's Colonization*. And what better place to experiment than a steampunk dystopia where

"If your citizens use too many opiates to escape from the burdens of frontier life, you might end up with cultists that summon things from another plane of existence."

starvation is as much a threat as marauding fish people or Cthulian elder gods.

Clockwork Empires sets you up as a Junior Bureaucrat tasked by the Empire to colonise the untamed and unknowable Frontier. You must build a colony, manage its citizens and their moods, and handle the variety of strange and random things that might happen. The citizens have Sims-like emotions and individual personalities. One might develop a favourite food, while another might gain an unhealthy fascination with badgers. The foppish aristocrats will demand better living

conditions, the middle-class artisans produce your exports, while lower-class labour toils to keep it all afloat.

"The player is essentially an architect of a society that's gone

▶ *Clockwork Empires* will have full modding support so players can add their own scenarios, models and more.



a bit off the rails in an industrial revolution," says Daniel Jacobsen, lead producer and CEO of Gaslamp Games. "The uniqueness of building this world inside the Empire is the ability of the player to do what they want, including the freedom to fail: we've given characters an incredibly intricate set of tools allowing them to construct a world and unleash cosmic horrors in vast, complex ways."

Clockwork Empires is free-form. Sometimes things will go well, other times not. If your citizens use too many opiates to escape from the burdens of frontier life, you might end up with cultists that summon things from another plane of existence. Digging down into the rock might reveal a temple best left unexplored. The Empire itself will have demands, like wanting a large quantity of a certain food, or demanding that you build certain structures. The player can opt to ignore these requests, but there are ramifications.

"Failure is fun", as the popular *Dwarf Fortress* saying goes. The game keeps adding plates for you to spin, and eventually something will lose balance and bring the whole structure down. And when it does, it's something you'll want to stay and watch, like a train wreck you can't look away from. Depending on the exact nature of how things went wrong, your next settlement may gain an unexpected benefit from it, like a detachment of Steam Troopers to help with pesky threats. Gaslamp Games aims to have four player online multiplayer, and a turn-based round-robin save-file sharing mode. **NAG**

-Miktar



▶ Gaslamp Games' first game, *Dungeons of Dredmor*, is a decent *Rogue*-inspired dungeon crawler.



WizFight

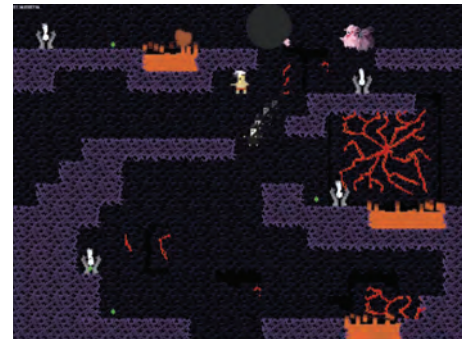
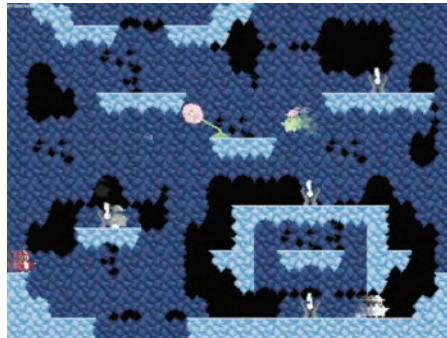


RELEASE DATE / 2014
PLATFORM / PC
GENRE / Platformer
DEVELOPER / Another Day, Another Game
PUBLISHER / Another Day, Another Game
WEBSITE / anotherdayanothergame.me/wizfight

Wizards fighting wizards

In the spirit of games like *Joust* and *Balloon Fight*, *WizFight* is a local multiplayer competitive experience you don't see much of anymore. More modern interpretations of this very narrow subset of the genre have pretty much taken the lead and nobody seems to have given much thought to the question of, what about people who *want* the older types of games of this nature? Do such people still exist? The success of the inexplicable *Nidhogg* and its Commodore 64 inspired one-on-one swordfighting does lend some credence to the idea.

WizFight is still very early in development. So early that one might consider it more a prototype, an idea trying to find form. The core concept is sound: high-speed deathmatch among a variety of wizards, each with their own special powers, fought in wrap-around arenas that provide their own obstacles. Our hands-on time with the alpha gave us a few good laughs, the action is intense and easily



sets up ridiculous situations. But there remains a lot of work to be done, or perhaps even starting over from scratch. The developer plans for more wizards, game types, arenas, a single-player mode of sorts and an integrated level editor. But for now, it's still just an idea: one perhaps worth exploring if only because nobody else seems to be doing so. **NAG**

- Miktar



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WATCH DOGS

RELEASE DATE / 27 May 2014

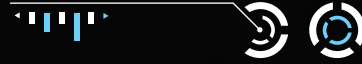
PLATFORMS / 360 / PC / PS3 / PS4 / Wii U (TBC) / XBO

GENRE / Action adventure

DEVELOPER / Ubisoft Montreal

PUBLISHER / Ubisoft

WEBSITE / www.watchdogs.ubi.com



POLICE CCTV



HOTSPOT WIFI



ELECTROMAGNETIC FIELD

2.33 V/m Overall Level of Exposure

14 April 2013

48.872730
2.267811

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FROM ASSASSINS TO HACKERS: HANDS-ON WITH UBISOFT'S NEWEST FRANCHISE

“I wasn't expecting to feel any sort of connection to these characters,” I admitted to Kevin Shortt, the lead story designer on *Watch Dogs*. “I also wasn't expecting such heavy themes within the first few minutes.” Shortt laughed at me, probably in response to my astonished expression. Moments earlier I had played through the opening sequences of *Watch Dogs*. Protagonist Aiden Pearce had just been involved in a botched funds hacking job in a fancy Chicago hotel. His partner's over ambition had been their undoing, and the result was Aiden getting the attention of some very powerful and very unsavoury characters. A few days later, Aiden and his six year old niece Lena would be involved in a car accident caused by a hired thug called Maurice Vega.

Eleven months later and Aiden is found in

the change rooms of the Chicago baseball team. Somewhere in the stadium above him are tens of thousands of people cheering on the team; in front of him lies a battered Maurice Vega, who is stubbornly refusing to reveal who had ordered the hit on Aiden that had left him and his family broken. As the game prompted me to aim my gun at Maurice and pull the trigger, it became clear to me that Aiden is very much a flawed and broken character.

Watch Dogs had successfully surprised me within the first 10 minutes. Of course, it was the game that Ubisoft had been carefully revealing more of over the last few years, but it was that game with added believable characters in situations that were able to illicit an emotional response from me. There have been open-world games in the past



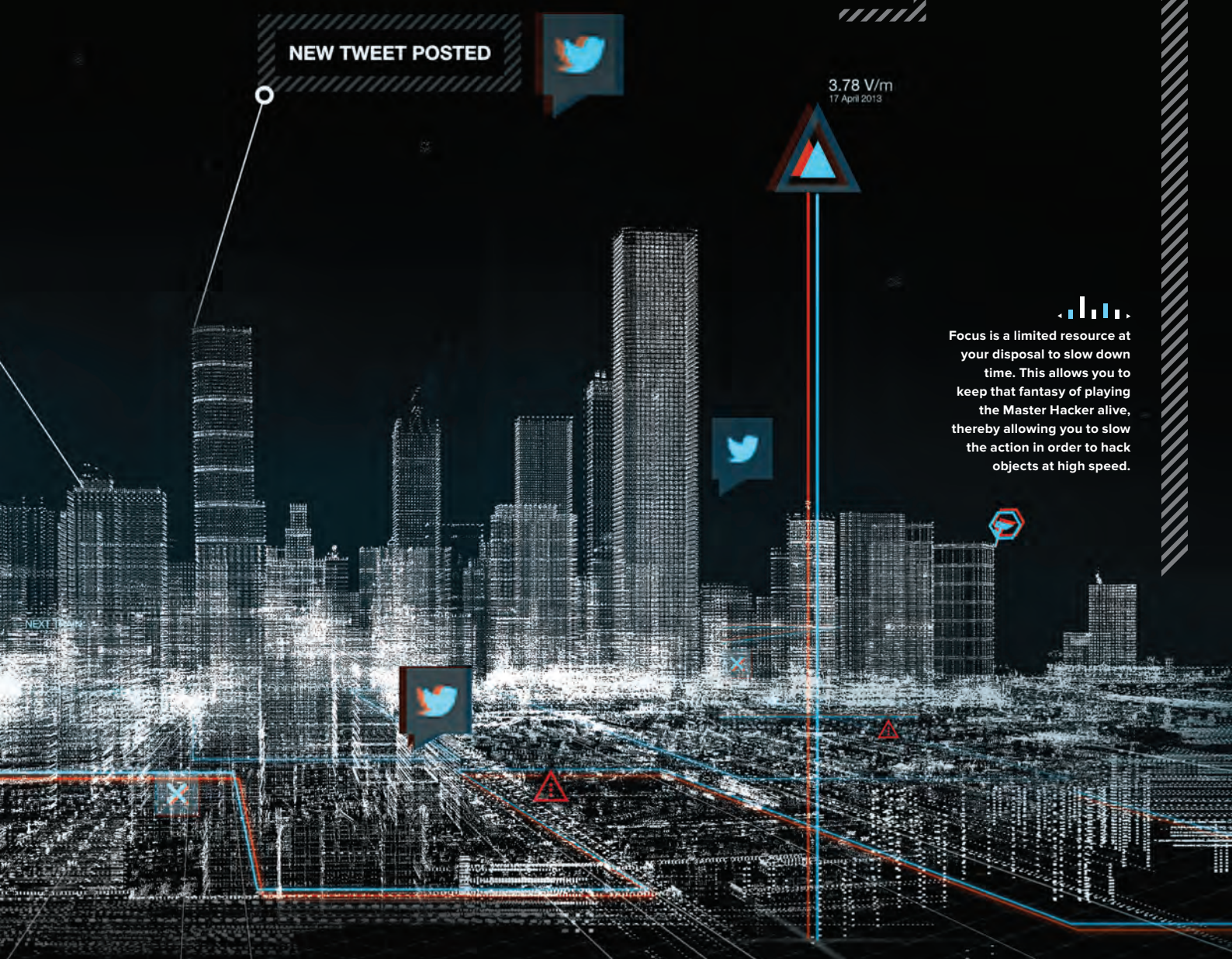
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3.78 V/m
17 April 2013



Focus is a limited resource at your disposal to slow down time. This allows you to keep that fantasy of playing the Master Hacker alive, thereby allowing you to slow the action in order to hack objects at high speed.



with convincing characters (see *GTA V*) but I can't recall one that made me feel any sort of connection or emotional response to those characters.

"It was challenging, but I particularly love that scene with the family there at the house," Shortt says to me during our discussion. The scene in question plays out during the game's second story mission and sees Aiden attending his nephew Jackson's tenth birthday party. Aiden hasn't seen his surviving family members for months. "Aiden goes there with good intentions, but it ends really badly because he just can't stop being the guy he is," Shortt explains, becoming visibly more excited about the fact that his work has been noticed and singled out as a feather in the game's cap. "His whole thing is that he blames himself for what happened to his niece, so protecting his sister and nephew right now is key to him. He's obsessed by it, to the point where his sister is like, 'just back the fuck off'. And I think that's something that they're both going to have to come to terms with."

While Aiden is certainly interesting and dynamic, there are myriad other characters populating this game. "We tried very hard to make sure that these secondary characters are not just there in service to Aiden," Shortt says, "they're there with their own objectives, their own goals, and they quite often collide with Aiden's goals. And that make for interesting moments between characters."

WELCOME TO CHICAGO

It's been said dozens of times before: an open world game is only as interesting as its open world. After previewing *Watch Dogs*, I felt as if I'd hardly scratched the surface of its intricately modelled Chicago playground. I was playing a final build of the game running on PlayStation 4. The most important thing to come to terms with is that the game doesn't look as sharp as that initial E3 reveal, which catapulted *Watch Dogs* into the limelight. What's equally important to realise is that doesn't matter – unless you feel uppity about Ubisoft "lying" to you. The city on display is still very pretty, with neon billboards reflecting off wet city streets, and leaves blowing around in the dynamic wind. If you can see past the occasional jagged edging and texture pop-ins, you'll find a game that has forsaken some graphical fidelity in favour of detail and unscripted dynamic scenarios. And just as the characters are believable, so too is the world they populate. The Chicago of *Watch*

Dogs feels alive, but it also feels as if it exists irrespective of Aiden Pearce's story.

Within four hours of playing, I'd accumulated dozens of "water cooler moments": from tiny details like Aiden's coat becoming wet from the rain, to the way it begins to flap in the wind as storms intensify; or how you'll come across NPCs interacting on the streets, asking for directions or arguing about politics. During one of the game's "Crime Detection" side missions, I was chasing a particularly illusive criminal through the crowded streets. We ran through shops, across busy intersections, and leapt over fences. Eventually I saw him vault a railing and rush through an outside restaurant's seating area; patrons were startled and leapt up, knocking chairs over and bumping tables. My target stumbled so I thought I'd seize the moment and activate the Focus ability; time instantly slowed and I aimed my gun from across the street. I fired a shot at him, but





“WATCH DOGS HAD SUCCESSFULLY SURPRISED ME WITHIN THE FIRST 10 MINUTES.”

at that moment a woman in the restaurant stood up and got caught in my crossfire. The restaurant patrons’ startle turned into absolute panic and everyone scattered screaming. Spurred on by my ineptitude I ran across the street and was nearly run over by a speeding driver that was trying to flee the violent scene I’d created. Aiden instinctively turned and held his hands out towards the car’s bonnet as the vehicle screeched to a halt. The driver swore at me as I turned to continue the chase. All of this happened dynamically; nothing was scripted, and it made for an exhilarating piece of gameplay.

There is plenty to keep you side-tracked in *Watch Dogs*. There are subsets of side missions that follow miniature plots involving organised hacking groups or human trafficking rings. Then there are more casual distractions like drinking or playing poker. Collectibles are there if that’s your thing, but you’re not collecting for mere completionist tendencies, as every side mission or distraction leads towards a specific skill unlock. Want to unlock the top-most skill for automatic weapons use? Then you’ll need to make that top tier available by completing a required side mission or activity.

There are hideouts in each district to find and unlock; doing so grants you an area to save your game, change your outfit, and fast travel between other unlocked hideouts. You

can also sleep in a hideout, which allows you to push time forward, reset your wanted level, and recharge your Focus meter. Each district also has a ctOS Control Centre to hack and take over. Doing so grants you access to that specific district’s network, which in turn allows you to hack the infrastructure and civilian phones of that area. You’re basically blind in a new district until you’ve hacked your way into the ctOS network, so for many this will be the first port of call when entering a new area.

THE GHOST HACKER

Central to *Watch Dogs* is the theme of playing a master hacker. Aiden Pearce has the skills to bring the city of Chicago to its knees, or to use it to his advantage. All of your hacking is done via your smart phone. In fact, a lot of the game’s mechanics are accessed via the phone, including the ability to call in car drops via the Car-On-Demand app, or to create a customised playlist of music for your game. Yes, *Watch Dogs* features an extensive collection of licensed music spanning genres like hip hop, punk rock and jazz. Artists like Vampire Weekend, Smashing Pumpkins, Kid Cudi, Alice Cooper and 2 Chainz are featured. There are also a further 23 tracks to unlock via hacking NPCs’ “SongSneak” accounts.

Primarily, however, your phone is your

hacking tool. By pressing the square button on the controller, Aiden activates his "Profiler" app, which overlays the screen with hackable objects and NPC information. By doing this, you can hack individual's phones to maybe siphon funds from their bank account or eavesdrop on their phone conversations. Sometimes you even intrude on text message exchanges between two NPCs, and this is a good example of where Ubisoft has allowed a bit of humour to creep into their game. One text message exchange saw an NPC state to his friend that he could really go for a nice beaver. His phone had autocorrected "beverage" to "beaver", and the double entendre didn't go unnoticed by the other NPC in the conversation. "We drew a lot from our own experiences with texting and how you misspell things and autocorrect," Shortt tells me. "It's funny, we even had a conversation where we were all, 'what about spelling mistakes? Should we be writing in spelling mistakes?'"

Cleverly, once you see a particular text exchange, or you hear a particular phone conversation, then it gets removed from your game never to be seen or heard again. "If you saw the same text again, it'd immediately kill the moment for you. So once it plays, it's dead, it's out of the game. You should be able to play the whole game and see and hear phone conversations that are new."

Throughout Chicago there are objects that can be hacked and put to use. Steam pipes can be hacked to explode on command; very useful when you're being chased by city cops, and the resulting slow motion car flips are very satisfying. You can cause bridges to raise or lower, traffic lights to change green for all sides, causing dramatic, unscripted accidents that can hinder your pursuers. Then there's



the more mundane but altogether fun objects to hack, like electronic billboards on the sides of freeways, which can be hacked to display familiar Internet memes like "not sure if serious...".

Blackouts are one of the more severe hacks that Aiden can employ. If you need to disappear quickly and quietly, and you have the necessary access to do so, you can hack the city grids and plunge entire blocks into darkness.

Of course, this much power has to be limited, otherwise the game would be too easy. Consequently you can only perform a limited number of high-level hacks before your cell phone battery dies and you need to wait for it to recharge. This limit can be increased by gaining XP and levelling up Aiden's skills.



" WITHIN FOUR HOURS OF PLAYING, I'D ACCUMULATED DOZENS OF "WATER COOLER MOMENTS" "





The story of *Watch Dogs* will play out over five different acts, with each act being made up of a number of story missions that can be advanced at your own pace.



TRICKS OF THE TRADE

There is an extensive skill tree to be found in *Watch Dogs*. Accumulated XP grants you skill points to unlock new abilities, but certain abilities remain gated behind side quest and main mission requirements.

There are four different categories: Hacking, Driving, Combat, and Crafted Items. The Hacking skill tree obviously offers the most, with skills like advanced ATM hacking, raising bridges, raising road bollards and spike strips, and knocking out police search helicopters forming the backbone of Aiden's offensive hacking skills. The Driving skill tree offers perks like being able to hide in your vehicle to avoid police detection, being able to break into cars without their alarms triggering, or being able to become a more "offensive driver" thereby granting greater vehicle damage when ramming enemies. The Combat skill tree offers the usual content of weapon variety specialisations, sniper rifle sway reduction, demolition expert skills, and bullet resistance. However, Combat is also where you can increase your Focus meter, which has three tiers to unlock. Finally, the Crafted Items skillset allows you to create grenades, IEDs, electronic Lures to attract enemies to certain locations, and Focus Boost Pills, which instantly recharge your Focus meter. In order to craft each item you need to have the required materials. A Lure, for example, requires electrical components.

TAKING THE RED PILL

And now for something completely different: the biggest surprise during the *Watch a Dogs* preview event was the reveal of augmented reality games and these in-game experiences called "Digital Trips".

Accessible via Aiden's smart phone, *Watch Dogs* includes augmented reality games that Aiden can play whenever he wants to. One game, called *NVZN* (pronounced "invasion") sees brightly coloured, pixelated aliens invading Chicago. Aiden gets a laser pistol and you get to blast these invading aliens wherever Aiden happens to be when he activated the game. It creates this really entertaining juxtaposition: I was running around an alley, blasting hot pink aliens while NPC civilians carried on as if nothing was there. It's wildly entertaining and provides a unique and utterly refreshing take on the open world side activity. A second augmented reality game is called *Coin Rush*, but this game is only accessible in specific areas of Chicago. It overlays the game world with barriers to avoid in order to collect gold coins, which play the familiar *Mario Bros.* coin effect when collected. Playing these games is not only fun, but it also allows unlocks of high level skills for Aiden.

If the augmented reality games were cool, then the Digital Trips are military-grade cool. These are basically entirely separate games within *Watch Dogs*. They're also insane, and offer the sort of tonal shift that *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* provided. These Digital Trips are accessed via Aiden's smart phone or by finding specific NPCs in the world. Once activated, they pull you out of the *Watch Dogs* world and into an alternate reality game set in Chicago. One of these Digital Trips is called *Spider-Tank*, and it sees you piloting a massive mechanical spider through the streets of Chicago, just causing chaos and blowing up everything that moves. It's that simple, but good grief is it a lot of fun. There is also an entire set of skill trees to unlock within these Digital Trips, as well as online leaderboards.

You can read more about Digital Trips in our interview with Danny.



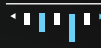
WHO WATCHES THE WATCH DOGS?

You should. I went into the hands-on just looking forward to getting some time with the game. Within minutes of starting, the visuals (which are still very good) were swept away by the characters and vibrancy of Chicago. I have little doubt that *Watch Dogs* is going to do well, and it has all the makings of another big franchise in the Ubisoft stable.

- Mikit0707



INTERVIEW



WITH **DANNY BELANGER**, LEAD GAME DESIGNER

NAG: Let's talk about these "Digital Trips".

Danny Belanger: The goal was to bring something light. We had a serious game, we had a narrative that can affect people in a serious way, and we didn't want this game to be always about serious topics. We wanted something light, you know, a break of pace and something different for you to experience. So we created something a bit wild with these D-Trips, just to change and create a different experience. We also wanted to bring some emotions of the character [Aiden], so you'll notice there's some aspects of his personality that come through in the D-Trips, and we'll let the player analyse them and feel them, but there's something deep in the character that we wanted to bring out.

NAG: Were these always planned from the very beginning of the game, because there's been no press coverage of this addition at all?

Danny: Yeah, there was a lot of work put into them. We just haven't shown them yet.

NAG: So you can access these via the phone, but then we noticed there are also NPCs in the world that offer them.

Danny: There are D-Trip sellers, and we've put icons on the map to help you find them. Some of them will spawn dynamically as you walk. There are going to be many, but for now we're showing only two to you guys today.

NAG: You guys announced a delay back in November to allow for polish. Did you add extra content as well?

Danny: Yes, in the sense that while you're finishing some systems, you'll add some data and content. I think the simplest way to explain [the delay] is the game wasn't finished, and there were some things that we were going to have to cut and remove. We didn't want that. One area that definitely had a lot of love post delay was the variety in the hacking AI. The "invisible hacker" gameplay; you can hack camera to camera and all sorts of other things, and it's quite complicated. We needed to put some love there, because we didn't feel that it quite delivered the fantasy of being a master hacker just yet. Obviously there were

other things that we changed and tuned, but [the delay] allowed us to really finish it without having to remove some things.

NAG: There are a lot of vehicles in this game; I was quite surprised.

Danny: Yes, but they're not all available from the start. Depending on where you go in the world, types of vehicles will change. We also have the Car-On-Demand, which, the way I see it as a designer, allows you as a player to customize your driving experience. If you're in an open world and you want a certain car, it kind of sucks to be stuck with what's around. You might like this car or that car, because all our vehicles drive a bit differently, it allows you as a player to live your own narrative: "I like my character with this car, so I just take this car and play with it." But it can also be: "I like this style of gameplay, or I have this mission where I need to take down this target so I'll bring this truck," so Car-On-Demand allows you to be more efficient in customising your driving. As we said, they don't all unlock from the start; you need to either sit in one and drive it, or hack someone's information and unlock the car that way. Then you pay a certain fee to the chop shop, and you can have that car as much as you want.

NAG: You guys released that story trailer a few weeks back that caused a lot of hysteria online with people arguing about downgraded visuals. From a lead designer point of view, what does that feel like?

Danny: I like it, to be honest. I mean, you wouldn't find that in music or in movies you know? People kind of analysing frame by frame to see... But the real answer is just to play the game. I think the way people were comparing, by taking a sunny shot and then taking a rainy scene and comparing the two, it doesn't really work like that. The challenge is that we have a fully dynamic game; it can have mid-morning rain, then suddenly windy, and obviously with all of these changes in setting, some people will enjoy one setting more than others, but to take one individual frame of one setting and compare it with another doesn't really work. **NAG**

Reviews *Intro*

For every great game reviewer there are a dozen bad ones. We're not sure where we land on that scale, but if you throw enough spaghetti against the ceiling, something has to stick eventually... **Meet your reviewers.**

Question / **What cross-game content/concept/thing would you love to see?**



CHRIS "SAVAGE" SAVIDES
Unlocking quad damage on a danger close grenade launcher in *CoD*, you know, for shits and giggles.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
StarCraft II (when I'm not banned), *Diablo III: Reaper of Souls*



DANE "BARKSKIN" REMENDES
I'd love to see the Redeemer from *Unreal Tournament* in all our favourite classic point-and-click adventure games. Because who needs a rubber chicken with a pulley in the middle when you've got a guided mini-nuke?

CURRENTLY PLAYING
South Park: The Stick of Truth



DELANO "DELANO" CUZZUCOLI
I'd love to see *Thomas Was Alone* character models and skins as unlockables in the various *Call of Duty* games. What better way to pwn n00bz than as a big red rectangle of death with a British accent?

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Killing Floor



GEOFF "GEOMETRIX" BURROWS
The ability to just go on a rampage – *Postal 2* style – in every game. Sports games, role-playing games, educational games: I want to know that I can, at any time, destroy everything.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Diablo III: Reaper of Souls, *PlanetSide 2*



MATT "SAND_STORM" FICK
Unreal Tournament announcers in every game, roaring your every accomplishment at you. *Pokémon*? SUPER EFFECTIVE. Chess? CHECKMATE. *Splinter Cell*? STEALTH.

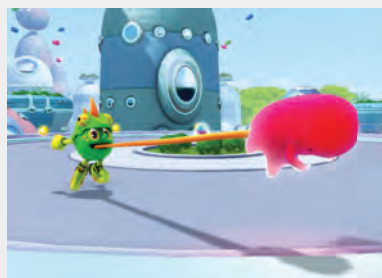
CURRENTLY PLAYING
A Pokémon Heart Gold Nuzlocke challenge

▶ mini review

Pac-Man and the Ghostly Adventures

this multiplatform (3DS, PS3, Wii U and 360) err, platformer romp is based on an animated television series that first appeared on Disney XD in 2013. It appears Namco is seeking to pump some fresh life into this 34 year old concept (again). TV or movie to game conversions don't hold together well under the reviewing process and when one breaks free and isn't terrible, it's worth talking about.

Pac-Man and the Ghostly Adventures is a rather decent platform adventure that, while borrowing many ideas from all over platformer land, does it with a bold style that's hard not to like. There's plenty to collect and unlock as you bound around the colourful levels gobbling up ghosts. Players will get upgrades, new modes of getting around and even the odd boss battle. It's not flawless however, the camera misbehaves and some of the deaths



are a little cheap which might annoy the younger audience this is aimed at. The multiplayer is a version of the original game but feels very last minute and doesn't seem to belong in the mix, although does offer an interesting way of looking at Pac-Man.

- **RedTide**



68

This is one of those that granny might randomly buy for the kids at Christmas time that they actually enjoy playing. Nice job Namco.

HEARD AT THE OFFICE...

“YOU OWE ME”

-Tarryn, via Gtalk



MICHAEL “RETTIDE” JAMES
Legendary drops compete with the same sound and orange beam of light from *Diablo III*. In *COD* you could get a sniper machine gun with unlimited ammunition, or in... you get the idea.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Battlefield 4, *StarCraft II*,
Diablo III: Reaper of Souls



MIKLOS “MIKIT0707” SZECSEI
The Smart Pistol from *Titanfall* in pretty much every online FPS, because it helps me NOT suck as much as I ordinarily do.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Titanfall, in *FAMOUS: Second Son*, *Diablo III: Reaper of Souls*, and *The Elder Scrolls Online*



MIKTAR “MIKTAR” DRACON
I'd like to see *Dark Souls'* complete multiplayer system in everything, especially survival horror games or anything with lots of exploration like *Skyrim*.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Dark Souls II, *Rusty's Real Deal Baseball*, *Guild Wars 2*,
Goat Simulator



NEO “SHOCKG” SIBEKO
The number you have dialled is not available. Please hang up and try again later.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Email Ignoring Simulator 2014



TARRYN “AZIMUTH” VAN DER BYL
Halo soldiers in *Titanfall* because I have this huge crush on the ODS armor. What? It's totally cool to crush on gear, okay.

CURRENTLY PLAYING
Halo, *Titanfall*

▶ mini review

Professor Layton vs Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

in a move that's sure to make Nintendo fans squeal with joy, Professor Layton and Phoenix Wright have finally teamed up in a video game.

Even if you've never played previous games in the series, puzzle fans will enjoy what's on offer here. The gameplay is split between the titular characters and their sidekicks, and both solve very different sorts of puzzles. Layton's gameplay is broken up into several puzzles, each worth a certain amount of points. Completing these mindbenders is enjoyable, and can be quite relaxing if done leisurely. Phoenix's gameplay is more exhilarating and places you in the middle of courtroom trials, cross-examining witnesses for holes in their testimonies. These puzzles may be a little tamer and less involved than those in the previous games, but they're well woven into this cross-over

and make you feel like a genius when you get them right.

One criticism with the title is, in the opening few hours, newcomers will be lost without the backstory and veterans will be irritated by the long tutorials covering what they already know. Another complaint is the lack of familiar faces. See, after the prologue, the main characters are whisked off to a new world. This helps newcomers not be too lost, but you'll want to look elsewhere for the antics of your favourite supporting characters. But the game has a lot going for it with a well-written story, engaging gameplay and excellent visuals.

- Sand_Storm



82

The puzzles are engaging, the visuals are great, and the story is very well crafted. It's not the best Professor Layton, or the best Phoenix Wright, but it is highly recommended for fans and newcomers.

PLATFORMS / PC	REVIEWED ON / PC	GENRE / Action role-playing game	DEVELOPER / Blizzard Entertainment
AGE RATING / 16	MULTIPLAYER / Local > None	Online > 4 players	PUBLISHER / Blizzard Entertainment
WEBSITE / eu.battle.net			DISTRIBUTOR / Megarom



Diablo III: Reaper of Souls

It's amazing what a patch and expansion pack can do

a month before the launch of *Reaper of Souls*, a big game-changing patch came out for *Diablo III*. This "2.0" patch dramatically changed the "itemisation" of the game. Items now appear that are (usually) much more useful, make you more powerful, and might have special effects on them that make you reconsider how you play your class.

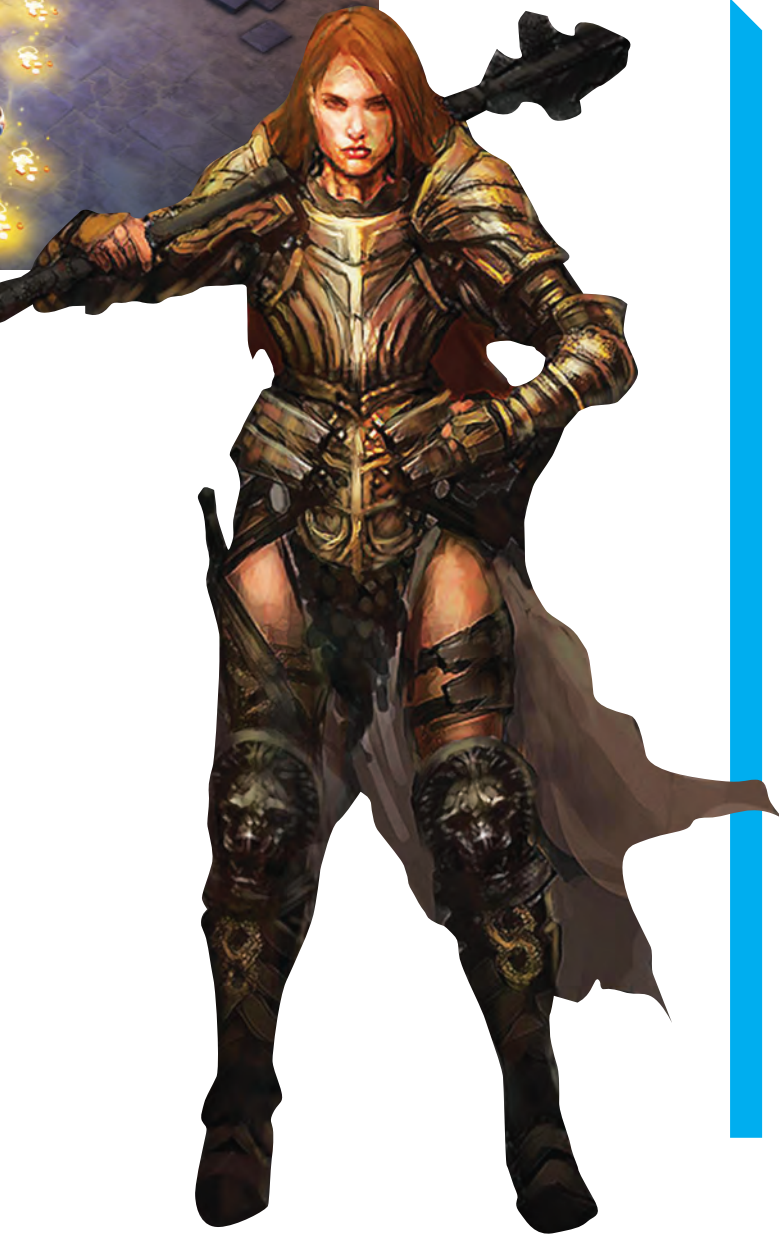
For example, you might be playing a Witch Doctor that specialises in Bats and Bears. Suddenly a Legendary Item drops that, when combined with the rest of its set, makes it so the Fetish Army pygmies last indefinitely (they usually only last a few seconds). Do you stay with Bats and Bears, or do you change your build to match the item's benefits? You might find some gloves that, when you clear a big group of enemies in one shot, makes gold rain from the sky.

There's an amulet that makes you immune to lightning, turning electrical damage into healing. These are just a few examples of many, many types of "gameplay altering" items that can now appear. The way difficulty works in *Diablo III* was also changed (no more Normal/Hell/Nightmare): enemies level up with you. And you don't even need to have the expansion for all these changes, and more.

Because the 2.0 patch had such a huge impact on the game, it can be difficult to separate the benefits of the patch from the content added through the expansion. The most obvious benefit to the expansion is the addition of a new class, the Crusader. Channelling the spirit of *Diablo II*'s Paladin, the Crusader is a hard-hitting ball of righteousness that can ride into battle on an exploding steed



Act V has many environmental traps that can make your life difficult, or help you against the hordes.



SECOND OPINION

Like many gamers, I sort-of gave up on the PC version of *Diablo III*. It wasn't a conscious decision, it just... happened. While *Diablo III*'s combat always felt fantastic, the supporting mechanisms didn't match up. It was a wonky experience, ultimately, and the longer I played it, the more it felt like it took more effort to play than what it gave back. I stopped playing quite a while ago: I did a couple of runs through the game, got my Monk up to level 55 and then found better things to do with my life. As a result, I'm bundling the "2.0" patch in with *Reaper of Souls* for the purpose of this little review. Heck, I'm bundling in everything they added to the game past about six months from its launch.

The differences between vanilla *Diablo III* and *Reaper of Souls* is astounding. Lots has changed, but much of that comes down to the increased difficulty options and improved loot. *Diablo* has always been a challenging series, but with greater challenge came greater reward, and now, finally, *Diablo III* can make that same claim. Once you've splashed around in the Normal pool, move up to Hard as soon as possible. Then go to Expert, and from there see how you feel about Torment and upwards. There's plenty of room for people who enjoy being forced to fine-tune their builds for every big encounter, but you're welcome to enjoy the easy road

if that's more your cup of tea. There's something for everyone here.

For my initial playthrough I decided to spend more time with the new Crusader class than dredging my old Monk through Act V. What little time I spent with the Monk was quite entertaining, though: the game went out of its way to pump me full of newly balanced items that saw my damage tripled within an hour or so. In terms of the Crusader, while she initially felt far more familiar than I would have liked (she's a Monk with a shield, really), her later abilities turn her into a cross between the Wizard and Monk: tough yet capable of dealing out plenty of ranged damage. She also has a surprising number of fire-and-forget spells, most of which rely on a cooldown rather than consuming her Wrath resource, which makes for a hell of a flexible character class should you enjoy burst damage, damage over time, support, or straight-forward tanking.

Diablo III is finally the game that it always should have been. Everything about it has been given the *Reaper* treatment and everything about that treatment is beneficial. If you've had your copy of the game shelved since its launch, dust it off, install *Reaper of Souls* and get ready to lose yourself for days at a time.

90

- GeometriX

THIRD OPINION

Today I picked up something called a Boj Anglers, and yesterday a Trance Redemption, a Killing Spray, a Nutcracker and The Oculus. Someone with a wild imagination was obviously tasked with naming all the weapons and armour. Over the last week I've also picked up over 100 belts for a Barbarian. Go figure. A quick stocktake of my stash tabs looks something like this: 49 Legendaries; 217 Marquise gems; 5 Angelic wings (that don't stack >-); and lots of dyes 'coz a girl always has to look good.

It's safe to say that I like picking up stuff. The more lines of stats it has the better. And for that reason alone *Diablo III: Reaper of Souls* keeps me coming back for more. Every. Single. Day. Oh, and it needs to be said that my obsession with finding Treasure Goblins might be a little on the extreme side. Mad frantic clicking and cursing is often followed by a sad "Aaaaaah!" as he escapes into his portal and all I'm left with is small piles of gold. If I'm not chasing after Treasure Goblins, transmogrifying every item I equip or arranging all my legendary items in level and class order, you'll find me in a Rift somewhere trying to level up my Paragon. Someone on my friends list is on Paragon 223 (yes STALKER I'm looking at you). How even?!

Hah! I've just realised that this game, for me, is all about the numbers. My maths teacher would be so proud.
- **Guard3n**

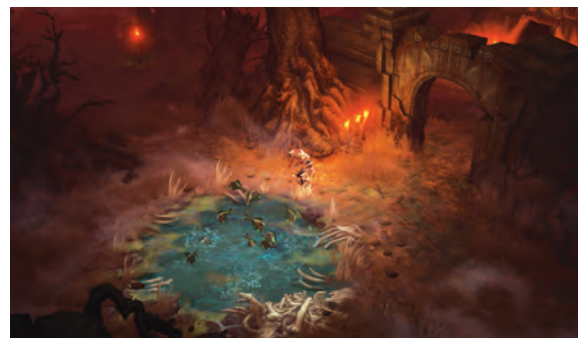
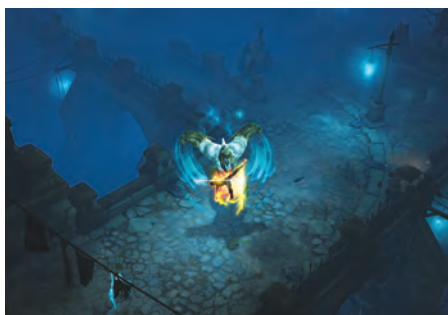
86



LEFT / Upon completing a full set of five Bounties in an act, you're given a Horadric Cache that contains much loot.

BELOW / Heard last night in the Nephalem Rift: "what in the seven hells are these ponies doing here?"





FOURTH(!) “LEADING” OPINION, OR HOW I TAUGHT MONSTERS TO SUCK ON MY FROZEN ORB

CHARACTER PLAYED: Wizard level 70
PARAGON LEVEL: 66

I haven't played as the Crusader class yet as I wanted to level my Wizard (she's called Honey) to 70 before starting anything new – I think I might be in love a little. Geoff somewhere else in these pages will probably talk about his experience with the Crusader. All I can say, based on watching him play for a bit, is that he/she has some sweet abilities that look gorgeous while still slapping the tar and soot out of these pesky foul demons.

From my perspective, an easy to please fan of the game, the new act is very good and puts together enough dark brooding environments along with their haunting monsters to make the trip (and repeated trips) well worth the time. There are some nasty bosses and new inventive enemies like that big bat thing that shoots sound waves at you. In Westmarch, the new burgeoning city-styled environment, there are many unique events and places to explore making this feel pretty random on repeated plays. Overall the new content is well worth bashing through a few times and makes the overall game world bigger and darker and better.

Besides all the other new things that I'm sure will be laundry listed in the review, I was most excited about Adventure Mode: it's a little like what you get if you keep mixing together different colours of play dough. The colours eventually fade and you're left with a big grey lump, but a lump that can now be anything and there's just more of it – I hope you're still following this metaphor. The bounties in Adventure Mode are fun and can take anything from five to twenty minutes each to complete and with practice and knowing the maps you can do them faster. Once you've cleared the bounties you can hit a Nephalem Rift (this is the grey putty part); the Rifts are a treat and

give players an endless supply of enemies in unfamiliar environments or the other way around. Imagine the horror/stress/fun of running into 30+ Treasure Goblins and setting them all off while you're still battling a blue tough Jailer, a yellow, and his friends. For the record it was madness and they all (the goblins) managed to escape while I was getting nowhere fast against the elites (ponies from Whimsyshire), and all this happened on a twisted version of the Desolate Sands map – pure magic. The other interesting touch in the Rifts is that they all seem to take place at night, darkening the mood considerably. This is especially lovely to look at on any map featuring snow covered ground – eerily haunting and reminiscent of the original *Diablo* games somehow. Rifts are great because you never know what you're going to face and in what quantities; it gives the game variety and life for those loot grinders searching for the perfect item. Think of Rifts like tales to tell your fellow adventurers, something a hero might tell to a group on drunken bards at a lost inn somewhere far off in adventure land.

This expansion is for people who wanted a better experience built on the vanilla *Diablo III*. The itemisation means you won't get loot you can't use anymore; there is a decent end game in there now with the Adventure Mode, especially coupled with the new difficulty levels. Some still say the game is broken but they appear to be the vocal minority and haven't really changed their tune no matter what Blizzard did, does or will do. For the rest of us, Blizzard has put together an excellent expansion that addresses a multitude of issues people weren't happy with. In this age of forums and the trolls and whiners and fans that go along with them, Blizzard has managed to give most of the people most of what they want and it is good.
- RedTide

93

made of pure piety. The Crusader is integrated fully into the existing content, with new dialogue for everything, like interactions with your followers. The other obvious addition is Act V, which acts as both a conclusion to *Diablo III* and a kind of small side-story involving the Angel of Death, Malthael. The artisan and follower stories are also mostly concluded, some even with their own little missions you play through.

The final addition the expansion brings, and perhaps the most important, is Adventure Mode. Acting like an “end game”, it's unlocked after finishing Act V and is a mechanic for “session play”. A session goes like this: you complete five randomly-picked “bounty” missions (go here, do this), which rewards you with Rift Keys and Blood Shards. Using Rift Keys you open loot runs into truly randomly generated dungeons, which gets you more Blood Shards. Then you gamble the Blood Shards at a chance for new items. This system adds a self-contained structure apart from playing through the story repeatedly, which the game sorely needed. **NAG**

- Miktar

81 Even before the release of the expansion, *Diablo III* underwent radical changes that improved the base experience dramatically. The expansion neatly completes the package by finishing up the story better and bringing in a much-needed “end game”, along with an entirely new class to play.

PLUS / Crusader class / Adventure Mode / Better plot conclusion

MINUS / Only one new class / Older content unchanged / Story still silly

PLATFORMS / 360 / PC / PS3

REVIEWED ON / PC

GENRE / Role-playing game

DISTRIBUTOR / Megarom

AGE RATING / 18

MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None

PUBLISHER / Ubisoft

WEBSITE / southpark.ubi.com

DEVELOPER / Obsidian Entertainment / South Park Digital Studios



South Park: The Stick of Truth

Super cereal fourth-grader simulator

I love *South Park*. I think it's hilarious. 17 seasons have come and gone, and yet it shows no signs of slowing, consistently delivering its iconic brand of irreverent social commentary with each new episode. Of course, I imagine there are very many people out there whose feelings towards the show are the polar opposite of mine. People who hate *South Park* and its insistence on poking at the bloated corpse of real-world issues with its cartoon comedy stick. And that's fine. I just hope that, in between organising anti-democracy rallies and hosting Nazi-themed dinner parties, those people don't waste their time playing this game. Because it's not made for them. It's made for you, and for me, and for anyone who adores the crudely-animated trappings of the town of South Park.

With all that said, as a fan of the creation of Parker and Stone, I think *South Park: The Stick of Truth* is the tits. I've never actually been sure what "the tits" means, but this review seems like a blatantly appropriate place to say it. So I did. I'm only partially sorry. Chances are you already know the premise of the game, but here it is again, just to be sure. You're the new



The town's pretty big, so there's a fast-travel system in place at key locations. It's managed by Timmy, which strangely makes total sense.



kid in South Park, a fresh arrival ready to be absorbed by the town's many dysfunctions, and there's a character creation process to supplement this. It's great that you're cast as a new character, because I feel a lot of the spirit of the game would've been lost were it not so. It's like you're the guest star on a wonderfully familiar stage, surrounded by all your favourite characters and watching them go about their business exactly as you'd expect them to – with the added benefit of your ability to interact with them and the sets they inhabit.

The story goes that the kids of the town are ensconced in a game of fantasy make-believe (as has often happened in the TV series), and you're quickly swept up in their hysterical shenanigans. Importantly, everything feels and looks and sounds like *South Park*. This is effectively an extended episode of the show, one that references a great many past events from its history, and as such you've got to at least know a little bit about *South Park* to squeeze the most joy from the experience. You're able to wander the snow-blanketed

town, meeting all the characters you'd expect to meet, and visiting all the locations you'd want to visit. I'd love to give more details and examples, but really, you'll want to discover it all for yourself.

Beneath the outward allure of side-scrolling your way through these recognisable surroundings, *The Stick of Truth* is designed as an RPG. There's everything you'd want: quests to be pursued, side-quests to be side-pursued, experience points to be gathered, levelling up to be done, abilities to unlock and new gear to collect and equip. There's also a turn-based combat system in play, and you're aided by a buddy character of your choosing during combat. Incidentally, your buddies also follow you around when you're outside of combat, exuding their respective personalities every step of the way. As with all RPGs, some quests are more entertaining and varied than others, but even the weakest ones here are uplifted by the hilarity of it all and the novelty of being a cog in South Park's twisted machine.



There's a ton of ridiculous junk to be collected by rummaging through containers in the game. Here we have a fine selection of dildos to suit every taste.



SECOND OPINION

Near the start of the game, while, uh, investigating a neighbour's house for clues and totally not stealing absolutely everything I could find (pinky swear), I discovered I could take a dump in the toilet. And then put the turd in my pocket. And then, later on, fling it at an enemy. That's when I had to completely rethink my previously somewhat indifferent position on the "games as art" debate, and it was *before* I even learned the game's fart-powered magic system. Seriously, everybody else should just stop making games now because we've got a winner.

Okay, so maybe I just really love potty jokes, but that's also an important point – this is a game made for people who love the gross-out humour and absurdly irreverent tone of *South Park*, and nobody else. It's pretty much impossible to talk much about the game itself without dropping some huge deuces spoilers, but it's a *South Park* game for *South Park* fans made by the creators of *South Park*, with a special guest appearance by Jesus (obviously). It's fan service at its most excrement. I mean excellent. And excrement. Giggles.
- **Azimuth**

88

Combat is fun, right up until it isn't anymore. It starts feeling like a bit of a repetitive chore towards the later stages, but that's fairly common in games of this nature. And again, the *South Park*-ness of it all always keeps things fresh. It's not especially deep, nor is it particularly tactical, but it's definitely interesting enough to be rewarding – and your abilities and attacks pack so much power (both in terms of actual usefulness and their comedic value) that combat is plenty satisfying. Each of the game's four character classes has a small selection of abilities, as do your buddies. Enemies come in a number of flavours that provide a variety of challenges, and knowing what approach to take with different enemies is part of what maintains the excitement. I do feel like combat would definitely benefit from being more challenging, though. Even on the higher difficulties, there are too many ways to completely overpower enemies with careful gear selection and ability upgrades, which sometimes makes combat feel like a meaningless interruption rather than something to look forward to. Still, I'm happy with the way combat is handled. Overall, it works well.

This has been a weirdly difficult review to write, because I feel like so much of the game and its mechanics are giant spoilers. It's an adventure best left for you to cram your face

into on your own, because I guarantee you'll constantly find yourself laughing out loud when you do. Despite how positive these words have been, bear in mind that the game does have its share of problems. As much as I adore *The Stick of Truth*, if it didn't have the *South Park* name attached to it there's no way I'd have enjoyed it as much as I do. It's not that good of a game. But! The name is there, and therefore it is that good of a game. So suck it, logic. **NAG**

- **Barkskin**

85 **The Stick of Truth is an excellent example of a licenced game done right. It's a genuinely funny journey through an imaginary setting we've come to know so well, one that perfectly captures the spirit and aesthetic of the show. If you love South Park, I guarantee that you'll love every moment of it.**

PLUS / Funny, maaaaan. Funny. / It's so *South Park*! / Poop jokes

MINUS / Uneven challenge / A bit buggy

PLATFORMS / PC / PS3 / 360

REVIEWED ON / PS3

GENRE / Action role-playing game

DEVELOPER / From Software

AGE RATING / 16

MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None

PUBLISHER / Bandai Namco Games

WEBSITE / www.darksoulsii.com

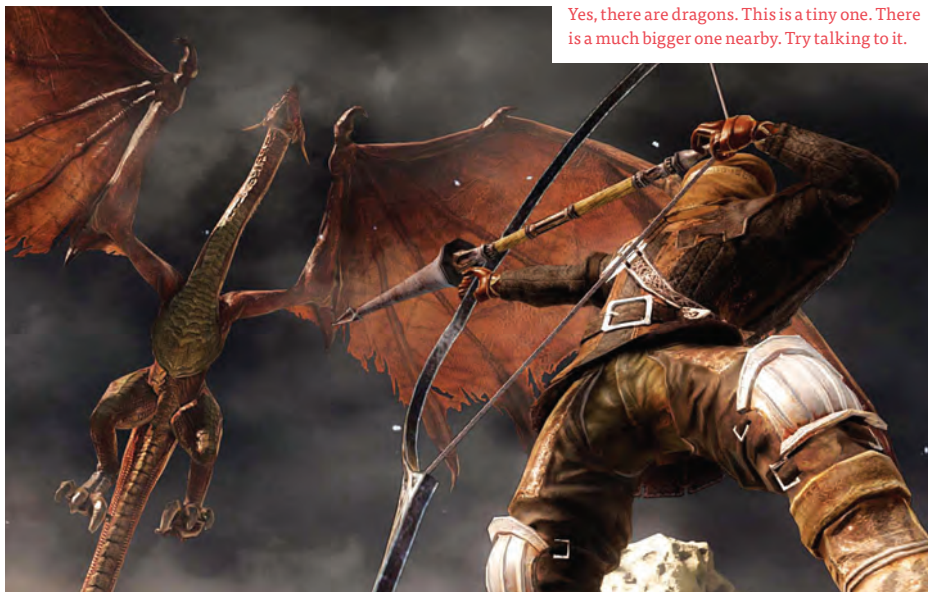
DISTRIBUTOR / Megarom

Dark Souls II

Praise the fun!

I like its predecessor, *Dark Souls II* adds meaning to its experience by having strict consequences. You cannot take enemies lightly. Even the easiest monster in the game remains a threat throughout. A dark corridor may bring swift death if you run in screaming “YOLO”. And yet in spite of seeming so rigid and punishing, *Dark Souls II* is fun.

At the start, you create a character from a selection of archetypes. You can be a spellcaster, a swashbuckler, or someone that likes to hold giant swords in each hand. You could even go weaponless: there is much power in pugilism. You start off weak, with low values that represent the many aspects of your character, like how much health you have, how fast you are, how much equipment you can carry, and so on. As you explore and kill monsters, you’ll gain souls: a precious commodity that is used to improve the stats of your choosing. But until you spend these souls at a specific place, they’re at risk. If you get killed, you’ll respawn at the last bonfire you touched, but the souls you’ve collected have dropped where you died. You’ll need to go fetch them without dying, or risk losing them. It sounds harsh, but it adds excitement. Do you



Yes, there are dragons. This is a tiny one. There is a much bigger one nearby. Try talking to it.



press on, or play it safe and go back?

You’re not alone in *Dark Souls II*. If connected to the Internet, you can occasionally see the ghosts of other players around you. Players can leave each other messages in the ground, helpful tips, inspiration, or deception. By placing special Summon Signs, you can be asked to assist another player in their copy of the world, or bring players to yours. You might even get invaded by another player whose only goal is to kill you. There are a lot of complex systems at work governing this “ambient multiplayer”. Players can even join special Covenants that are worked into this system tightly. If you join the Blue Sentinels, you’ll be automatically summoned to aid a player who’s been invaded. Players looking to help others fight bosses can join Heirs of the Sun. More eclectic Covenants include the Bell Keepers, who exist only to hinder other players from ringing a bell

SECOND OPINION

The first trophy I got in *Dark Souls II* was for dying. The name of the achievement was: “This is *Dark Souls*”.

The trophy name shows a degree of self-awareness. It shows that the developers know their audience and how to give them what they want. There are numerous tweaks to the formula, like being able to manually aim crossbows, that all contribute to making this game play better than before. The game also welcomes newcomers with a reworked tutorial. At the same time, some aspects of *Demon’s Souls* have been added to push up the difficulty.

In the end, it combines new refinements with some older gameplay styles to create a great mix of the two. If you liked the other games, play this.

90 you want an RPG that will challenge you, play this.
- Sand_Storm

in a specific area. Or the Rat King Covenant whose members guard a crypt full of traps.

If you've heard about the series' alleged difficulty, it might sound strange to refer to it as "fun". Often, those who tried the previous games and found them too hard accuse those who do like them of being masochists. But that's a shallow viewpoint. The *Souls* series became popular not only by being good, well-designed games. It's just that, with much of the modern hand-holding in games, many have forgotten (or have yet to realize) that failing, challenge, and figuring things out is fun. *Dark Souls II* isn't even *that* hard by classic game standards. There are some big franchises from the *PlayStation 2* era that can make a grown man cry. *Dark Souls II*, and its brethren, were made *in spite* of today's push in gaming to make sure the player is having fun, long before giving them any challenge. While this tactic does work, especially with the easily amused,

it devalues the experience somewhat. By contrast, *Dark Souls II* does not talk down to the player. It expects them to be intelligent, patient creatures that are interested yet cautious. There is an incredible thrill in exploring the unknown, of being afraid of what might lurk around the corner. But you need to experience that for yourself to feel it. You can be told what skydiving is like, but that will never be the same as actually jumping out of a plane. The only real barrier to having fun in *Dark Souls II* is impatience.

Even though it is conceptually more refined than the first game, *Dark Souls II* was released too soon it seems. It needed more time to cook in the oven. There are technical inconsistencies, like framerate issues, though nothing as bad as Blighttown from *Dark Souls*. There were cutbacks to the new game engine, specifically, the much-touted lighting system. The lore is also more fragmented in its presentation. The first game had a carefully



constructed silent narrative that led the player through it, where the environment worked in concert with precious descriptions found in talking to NPCs and on items. *Dark Souls II* has all of this, but it just isn't as cohesive. You can make a story of it all, eventually, but it will forever remain open to interpretation.

In spite of all this, it does improve on many of *Dark Souls*' biggest flaws. The biggest single improvement being the "end game" of *Dark Souls*, which was rushed. The sequel has a better build up to its climax, with far more content after the first time the credits roll. This might be a bit of a spoiler, but it's worth knowing. In the original, "New Game Plus" just upped the difficulty, but in *Dark Souls II* each successive New Game Plus remixes the game. It adds in new enemy placement, enemy types, and unlocks new weapons, gear and items to find. Combined with the Covenants being more in-depth and designed for long-term play, *Dark Souls II* has everything that matters where it counts. Even if the execution isn't as good as it could have been. **NAG**

- Miktar



Even the dumbest enemy in the game, if it catches you off-guard, can quickly empty your health bar.



85

The best part of adventuring is discovering new things, and treasure you attain without working for it isn't treasure at all. *Dark Souls II* is a role-playing game that values the exhilaration of discovery, and combines it with the thrill of making it dangerous to explore. Where it stumbles somewhat in comparison to the first game, it makes up for with vast improvements all around.

PLUS / Huge world / Improved combat systems / Replayability

MINUS / Some framerate issues / Requires patience

PLATFORMS / PS4

REVIEWED ON / PS4

GENRE / Action adventure

DEVELOPER / Sucker Punch Productions

AGE RATING / 16

MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None

PUBLISHER / Sony Computer Entertainment

WEBSITE / www.suckerpunch.com

DISTRIBUTOR / Ster Kinekor Entertainment

Infamous Second Son

Third time's the charm

The phrase "next-gen" has come to mean many different things depending on who you ask. For a while now, *Second Son* has been heralded as the true start of this new "next generation" of video games. It certainly does represent a marked jump in graphical fidelity, especially on consoles. But it also serves as a stark reminder that next-gen isn't just about graphics, but about ideas, content, and gameplay. *Second Son* is graphically a step up, but it's still the exact same kind of game we've been playing for nearly a decade. It just looks better than previous entries in the genre.

Taking place several years after the events in *Infamous 2*, you play Delsin Rowe, a self-styled counter-culture rebel. Delsin's skinny jeans and beanie cap may be a bit on the nose for a "hip" character design, but at least he's not some 30-something half-tuck hero. Taking a break from the Caucasian parade of

protagonists, Delsin is Native American. Not exactly the biggest step off the white wall, but it does bring some sorely-missed cultural variety. After an event involving escaped convicts with superpowers (Conduits) and a rather nasty lady who's in charge of keeping the Conduits under control, Delsin ends up with superpowers of his own. Specifically, the ability to take someone else's powers. He and his brother Reggie (a cop) set off for Seattle to showdown with the Nasty Lady and pick up some new powers along the way. The interaction between the brothers is natural and entertaining. Overall, the game's writing is a massive improvement for the series. Sadly, the cliché black and white morality system clashes somewhat with the story, especially Delsin's "evil" path.

Sucker Punch gets credit for using uncommon themes for Delsin's powers: smoke, neon, and two more I don't want to spoil. You upgrade the powers using "Shards" you find in the city; certain upgrades are locked to the good or evil paths. The only downside to the power system is switching between them is cumbersome and lengthy, so instead of having fluid access to a big toolbox, you're trapped in one mode for most of the fight. As a result, the powers are homogenized to all have the same basic tools: a shot, a missile,



Second Son takes place in a version of Seattle that's both inspired by the real city and a slightly true-to-life recreation.



Depending on your place in the story, the time of day in the game changes to match the mood and show off the powers.



a utility of some sort, and a screen-clearing megabomb (that looks amazing).

You can play *Second Son* on the Vita using Remote Play (where it streams the game from the PS4 to the Vita), but since the Vita lacks the second set of triggers (L2 and R2), those buttons are mapped to the bottom left/right corners of the Vita's screen. So during combat, you'll need to tap the screen often, which is less than ideal. **NAG**

- Miktar

78 Like its lead character, *Second Son* is very handsome (if you're into that kind of thing), can be quite funny at times, and has that whole interesting grunge thing going for it. As long as you don't mind that it's shallow as a puddle, you're good.

PLUS / Looks amazing / Decent plot / Interesting powers

MINUS / Some technical issues / Bland combat



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OPINIONS, FEATURES, PREVIEWS

PLATFORMS / PC	REVIEWED ON / PC	GENRE / City building / strategy	DEVELOPER / Shining Rock Software
AGE RATING / 3	MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None	PUBLISHER / Shining Rock Software	
WEBSITE / www.shiningrocksoftware.com			DISTRIBUTOR / Digital (Steam)

Banished

Fun with famine!

You start with just a handful of settlers, banished from their homeland. And perhaps a cow or two, depending on difficulty settings. Winter is approaching fast. Clear an area, build some houses, get some food production going in the form of a farm or fishery. Will you have enough lumber for firewood during the harsh cold of winter? Will your food stores last long enough until the next harvest? Or will a sudden disease, fire, or natural disaster wipe out your colony?

Banished is a pure sandbox colony builder. The only goal, aside from chasing a few achievements which can act as "missions" if you interpret them so, is to see how far you can get. Expand your colony too fast, and you might not have the food production to meet demand. This leads to starvation and a huge chunk of your population dying off. If your birth rate is too low (limited by population mood and available housing), there may not be enough

future labourers to take the place of those that die of old age. A sudden cold snap when you don't have enough warm clothing to go around causes people to freeze to death in their homes.

There is so much that could go wrong at any time in the randomly-generated wilderness, that simple survival has its own Zen-like reward. When all the plates are spinning nice and balanced, somehow, and everything seems to be going well, the colony acts like a well-oiled machine – one you built yourself through trial and error. It takes a bit of time to learn how things work, like the interplay between the various types of resource generating buildings you can make, how close or far apart you should place things, when you should expand, and so on. But each catastrophic failure becomes an important lesson learned to apply to your next attempt. The way *Banished* works, how its colony

You can easily check how far a labourer has to walk to get home from work – great for optimization.



Originally the game was meant to be a zombie shooter until the developer came to their senses.

ecology functions, is very clear visually. Unlike, for example, *SimCity* where much happens in "abstraction" as numbers and the movements of the city's inhabitants are visual fakery, *Banished* leans closer towards the likes of *Theme Park* or *Theme Hospital*. Every colonist matters. You can follow an individual, track their mood and thoughts, and watch them from birth until death.

There is so much quality in both the design and execution of *Banished*. The user interface in particular stands out as clear, functional and powerful without being overwhelming. It's hard to believe it was all made by just one person. All the software development, artwork and audio is the result of one Luke Hodorowicz, whose debut effort outshines most of the recent city planning simulators by far bigger studios. **NAG**

- Miktar

80 While larger studios are struggling to put out decent city builder games, along comes a game made by just one person that shows them all how it's done. *Banished* is straightforward, well designed, and a joy to play.

PLUS / Crisp functional visuals / DirectX 9 and 11 support / Well designed simulation

MINUS / Limited music / Tricky to figure out / Low-detail people models



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PLATFORMS / 3DS	REVIEWED ON / 3DS	GENRE / Platformer	DEVELOPER / Arzest
AGE RATING / 3	MULTIPLAYER / Local > 2 Online > None	PUBLISHER / Nintendo	
WEBSITE / yoshisnewisland.nintendo.com			DISTRIBUTOR / Core Gaming

Yoshi's New Island



The plural is “Yoshi”, who knew?

Since its release on the SNES, *Yoshi's Island* has always stood out from the other games in the Mario family. In a series well known for sticking with what works, *Yoshi's Island* managed to combine new gameplay and innovation with familiarity. The end result was something unique and appealing, even to non-Mario fans. With *Yoshi's New Island*, Nintendo tries to recapture that magic. The only question is if they can with this sort of sequel, sort-of remake.

Yoshi's New Island begins similarly to its SNES counterpart: a stork delivering the baby Mario Bros. is intercepted by an evil wizard, and the infants are separated. Baby Mario lands in the reptilian claws of a tribe of Yoshi, and the lovable creatures decide to carry the baby to safety. Overall, the story is mostly forgettable and the childlike simplicity might put off older gamers.

Gameplay consists of 2D platforming with a few mini-games thrown in, but is quite different compared to the *Mario* series. The Yoshi's main ability is to eat enemies, then lay them as eggs. It's really gross when you think

about it, but the eggs are used as projectiles and can be manually aimed, which is great for shooting down collectables and enemies. The levels are long enough to be interesting, but short enough to be finished quickly, great for commutes or coffee breaks. Replayability comes from hunting collectables, exploring the green pipes and firing eggs randomly to see if they hit an invisible object. There's also multiplayer, but it feels tacked-on and unnecessary.

Another change from the norm is that instead of rescuing a princess, you're carrying a squalling baby. If you take a hit, Mario goes flying and starts crying until you save him. Thinking in terms of your cargo, and not your health bar, makes a nice change from other platformers.

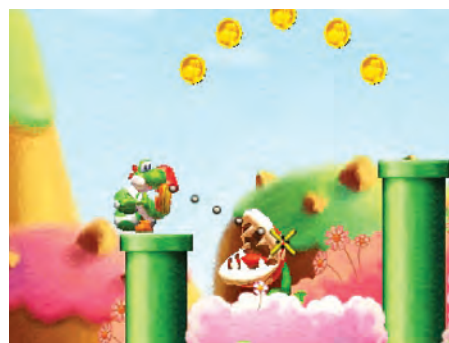
Graphically, the game is bright and vibrant. The characters are detailed and the backgrounds look pretty. The original introduced a chalk-drawing style that looked great and gave the game an air of whimsy. This version nearly replicates those visuals, but the lack of sufficient borders means you'll



often lose your Yoshi in the background. It still looks great, just a little unfocused. Furthermore, it doesn't take advantage of the system's 3D capabilities and the visuals lack depth. Musically it's a mixed bag, literally: it sounds like all the instruments were chosen at random from a big bag. You could call the music cheerful, or annoying, but it mostly consists of high-pitched noises and a lack of atmosphere. The music still suits the visuals, but it never really has character.

If you're looking for a fun platformer that goes against the *Mario* grain, this is a good choice.

- Sand_Storm



Characters easily blend into the backgrounds.



More charm than a barrel of kittens.

78 *Yoshi's New Island* tries something different, so both fans and non-fans of Mario will enjoy it. It's a great remake, but the annoying music and unfocused art style leave it upstaged by the original SNES game.

PLUS / Cute characters / Tries to be innovative / Harmless and fun

MINUS / Annoying music / Tacked on multiplayer / Original was better

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review

PLATFORMS / 360 / PC / PS3 REVIEWED ON / PS3

AGE RATING / 12

GENRE / Fighting

MULTIPLAYER / Local > 2 players Online > 8 players

WEBSITE / naruto-fullburst.com

PUBLISHER / Bandai Namco Games

DEVELOPER / CyberConnect2

DISTRIBUTOR / Megarom

Naruto Shippuden: Ultimate Ninja Storm 3 Full Burst

Because someone needs to make giant frogs fight demon foxes

i really have to take my hat off to CyberConnect2, who consistently release high quality game adaptations of anime. And the same is equally true for their latest title in the *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja* franchise.

Gameplay is a revised version of previous instalments. Players square off in a 1v1 arena where they can freely run and evade, given options for ranged battles. Fighting is easy to learn, and each of the 84 characters feel unique. Combat becomes intense in advanced play, with the use of tools, counters, *jutsu*-techniques and support characters entering the fray and upping the crazy (which has a nasty habit of tanking the frame rate).

The presentation favours style over substance, and you can expect frequent conversations and epic cut-scenes in single-player. The gorgeous visuals, animations and music combine to create battles that are true to the show, and single-player fights often include epic boss battles. Single-player features story mode with a dull overworld, tournaments and challenge modes. And being the *Full Burst* version adds value with a new character, gameplay chapter, and 38 costumes (many of which are awful).

The game is excellent fan-service and highly recommended for those familiar with the series, or who don't like their fighters too serious. Despite the overly-stylistic approach or non-canon ending, there is a lot to enjoy here. **NAG**

- Sand Storm



79

It may value style a bit too much but if you're a Naruto fan then this is the game for you. Get it, gather some anime-nerd buddies and settle "Who is the Ultimate Ninja?"

PLUS / Gorgeous presentation / Excellent fan service / Refined combat / Epic boss battles

MINUS / Newcomers will be lost / Frame rate issues / Boring overworld

PLATFORMS / PC

REVIEWED ON / PC

AGE RATING / 7

GENRE / Action strategy

MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None

WEBSITE / www.infestedplanet.com

DEVELOPER / Rocket Bear Games

PUBLISHER / Rocket Bear Games

DISTRIBUTOR / Digital (Steam)

Infested Planet

The battle against a billion aliens

Channelling a little *Starship Troopers* with a sprinkle of *Cannon Fodder*, *Infested Planet* is a specialised kind of real-time strategy game. What it lacks in production values it makes up for with inventive gameplay that centres around “stemming the tide”. As you progress through the silly B-grade plot of the campaign – which harkens back to ‘90s video game storytelling – you face off against alien hives that spawn infinite enemies. Hundreds of alien grubs are constantly flowing towards your bases and marines. It’s a bit like a puzzle game, figuring out which marines to use for defence, where to place turrets, and which hives to take out first.

When you destroy a hive, it becomes an additional base for your side and you gain “BP” – points added to a pool you draw from when building facilities, calling in more marines, or changing marines into different classes like Flamethrower or Sniper. You can undo your choices at any time to get the points back, and fluidly adapting to the situation becomes required. When you take a hive, the remaining hives on the map get a random mutation that can drastically alter the situation. Even if you fail a mission, you earn some money which can be used to unlock permanent upgrades or temporary boosts for the next mission. **NAG**

- Miktar



Missions can vary in type, which forces you to adopt entirely new strategies.

70

It may not look impressive from a distance, but *Infested Planet* has a fun and dynamic interplay between the sheer numbers you face and the ever-changing battle situation due to random alien mutations. If the heyday

PopCap had ever made an RTS, it might have looked something like this. Small and focused, with short play sessions.

PLUS / Incredible life-or-death struggles / Mission variety / Daily & weekly challenges

MINUS / Short campaign / Difficult missions / Bland visuals

Where do you want to game today?



PLATFORMS / PSV	REVIEWED ON / PSV
AGE RATING / 3	GENRE / Shoot-'em-up
MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None	
WEBSITE / minotaurproject.co.uk	
DEVELOPER / Llamasoft	PUBLISHER / Llamasoft
DISTRIBUTOR / Sony Entertainment Network Store	



TxK

Feel cosmic all the time

The visuals in *TxK* thrive on the Vita's glorious OLED screen. In a perfect world, the game would come bundled with every OLED screen made, because nothing glows quite like *TxK*'s neon gridsapes. And while the crisp clean lines pulse in time to the music, the game's pretty face hides a cunning intelligence. The fundamentals of *TxK* are simple: enemies approach from the "bottom", riding up along the lines of a stage's shape, and you need to shoot them before they touch you. You can only move left or right along the top ridge of the stage, or jump once you've gained that power-up. But anything you shoot while jumping is worth no points.

Stages don't remain static. Their shapes will twist and contort into Mobius strips, making "left" and "right" very relative. Each new stage brings with it a new mechanic to learn. Like an enemy type whose very existence changes how you must play that stage. You can play just a single level to improve its score (which is reflected in your total), or start from the beginning each time to try and "roll over" better scores. *TxK* is very "oldschool" in spirit, but modern in appearance and design. It's like having the perfect *Tempest 2000* arcade experience in your pocket. **NAG**

- Miktar



90 The very pinnacle of trippy psychedelic arcade-style shooters, finally surpassing the flawed yet extolled *Space Giraffe*. By its very design, *TxK* tries to pull you into the "zone" where it's possible to rack up high scores and dodge bullets with an almost precognitive Zen-like state. It's a game that's greater than the sum of its parts.

PLUS / Crisp visuals / Immersive music / Challenging

MINUS / Can get overwhelming

PLATFORMS / PC	REVIEWED ON / PC
GENRE / Action platformer	AGE RATING / 7
MULTIPLAYER / Local > 4 players Online > 4 players	
WEBSITE / riskofraingame.com	
DEVELOPER / Hopoo Games	PUBLISHER / Chucklefish
DISTRIBUTOR / Steam	

Risk of Rain

Let yourself get absolutely soaking wet

With so many indie developers of late, it's getting easier to find fun boutique experiences like *Risk of Rain*. By this point, if one wanted to be academic about it, perhaps we should start referring to the indie scene as the "alternative" scene. At the core, *Risk of Rain* is a side-scrolling action platformer with a heavy emphasis on unlockables, randomisation and getting just a little bit further each time. As you progress, you unlock items that might spawn the next time you play, not unlike *Binding of Isaac*. This ensures that even if things don't go well, you usually walk away with something worthwhile.

As you play, a bar starts filling up based on time – the more the bar fills, the tougher the enemies that appear. It's a balancing act between killing enemies for money with which to purchase items you find in the level, and heading for the exit because things are getting serious. Each character you unlock plays very differently, some easier than others. Multiplayer is a riot, things can get really crazy with four players on screen. If you kill enough monsters of the same type, you unlock a charming little bestiary entry for it. There isn't a whole lot going on in *Risk of Rain*, it's a very focused experience. But it does it well. **NAG**

- Miktar



76 Like *Spelunky*, *Risk of Rain* is all about "the run". You always start from the beginning, the map shape is randomly defined, and then it all boils down to skill and a little bit of luck. Sometimes things go incredibly well, other times fate stacks the deck against you. It's even better with friends.

PLUS / Catchy music / Challenging / Lots of unlocks

MINUS / Poor online implementation / Uneven difficulty

PLATFORMS / 360 / PC / PS3 / PS4 / XBO

REVIEWED ON / PS4

GENRE / Action platformer

DEVELOPER / Double Helix Games

AGE RATING / 12

MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None

PUBLISHER / Capcom

WEBSITE / www.capcom-unity.com/strider

DISTRIBUTOR / Digital

Strider

A classic reborn

This new incarnation of *Strider* may be inspired by *Shadow Complex*, but it's not quite the same type of game. A combination of the original arcade game and its non-linear 8-bit brother, the way this retelling plays has more in common with a fighting game. The difficulty is well balanced and it's very skilled-based. It starts with narrow exploration but opens up quickly. It may seem visually repetitive on the surface, but there's a surprising amount of detail and style present in the industrial city the game plays out in.

Its production values are a bit strained to fit within its inexpensive downloadable price. The edges are a tad threadbare, and its extra gameplay modes outside of the campaign are a bit one-dimensional. The music is eclectic, low-key electronic remixes of music from nearly every game to bear the *Strider* name. The enemy design is varied and strategic, each requires special consideration when taking them on. The order in which abilities are



Hiryu is incredibly fast and mobile, able to climb up most walls, claw along the ceiling and dash under objects.



78 As straightforward a game as it gets. Exploration plays a big part in this action-centric platformer, but the core of the experience is that of slashing enemies, fighting tricky bosses and gaining new abilities.

PLUS / Interesting soundtrack / Good encounter design / Challenging

MINUS / Can get difficult / Feels a touch low-budget

granted teaches you to play the game well.

The story is practically non-existent, though that's part of the theme of *Strider* as an anonymous assassin who appears without warning. If you have a Vita, I can confirm that *Strider* works great via Remote Play. The game is worthy of the *Strider* name, and there are few games like it. **NAG**

- Miktar

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PLATFORMS / Android/ iOS	REVIEWED ON / Android
AGE RATING / N/A	GENRE / Endless runner
MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None	
WEBSITE / game.alpersarikaya.com	
DEVELOPER / 099 Game Studio	PUBLISHER / 099 Game Studio
DISTRIBUTOR / Google Play Store / Apple App Store	

Gravity Project

Another endless runner? Yes, but with a twist. A 90-degree twist

Endless runners have become the bane of mobile gamers: there are so many of them, they're generally very low quality and they're almost always riddled with ads and silly in-game purchases. *Gravity Project*, on the other hand, might just be the thing to breathe some new life into this tired-yet-promising genre.

Gravity Project has a grungy *Dead Space* aesthetic going for it, but simpler, cleaner and definitely lower-budget. The standard runner gimmicks are present and accounted for: swiping up to jump and swiping down to slide. What sets this game apart, however, is the ability to switch the gravity, which amounts to flipping the playing area 90-degrees in three directions. Giving the player the choice to dodge an obstacle by either jumping/ducking or manipulating the gravity is a refreshing change.

Though the idea is interesting, the title is plagued by control problems which seem especially prominent on later levels. Swipes simply don't register correctly and you'll find your character running smack into a wall, all while you promptly RAGEQUIT and ponder why life is so unfair.

The lack of in-game purchases and the application of a simple mechanic make *Gravity Project* a game to stand out, and if only the controls would be fixed, it could easily be classified as a "must-play". Right now, it just stands as a good idea with poor execution. **NAG**

- Delano



69

Control issues wreck an otherwise fine attempt at a different endless runner.

PLUS / Flipping the game screen is an original touch / Clean, purchase-free interface

MINUS / Swipes don't always register / Graphics are boring in places

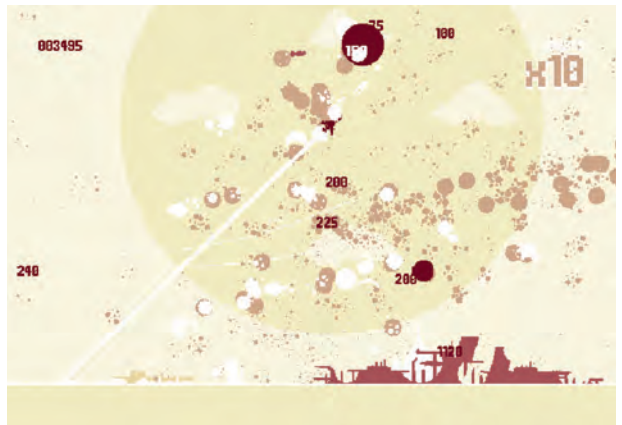
PLATFORMS / PS3 / PSV / PC	REVIEWED ON / PSV
GENRE / Arcade shooter	AGE RATING / 7
MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None	
WEBSITE / www.luftrausers.com	
DEVELOPER / Vlambeer	PUBLISHER / Devolver Digital
DISTRIBUTOR / PlayStation Store / Steam / Humble Bundle	

Luftrausers

Quick awesome fun is better than long medium fun

As a sequel to *Luftrauser* (which you can play on their website), *Luftrausers* takes the original further by adding upgrades you can unlock by achieving specific tasks. Upgrades range from better weapons to an engine that shoots bullets out the back, but each comes with a catch. The game itself is very easy to pick up and play – ridiculously easy in fact. You simply launch from a carrier out at sea and must kill enemy ships and planes and not die – think *Time Pilot* over the ocean. Your damage is represented by a circle that shrinks the more damage you take – you die when it disappears and it expands when you're not taking hits or shooting. Dying doesn't really matter because you can just jump straight back in from the beginning again. You can fly left and right endlessly but going too high or dipping into the water for too long drains health. Another unique spin is the sepia paint job: everything is just tones of the same colour forcing you to focus on the shooting – it's a bit jarring initially but works in the long run. The game comes with challengers such as taking out enemies without firing and these short missions teach you alternative ways to play the game. *Luftrausers* is as good as you get for something that essentially only does one job. **NAG**

- RedTide



78

If this game was a little cheaper it could easily get well into the nineties. It does everything with style and finesse and manages to give players an effective full gaming experience they can hit for a few fun minutes at a time.

PLUS / Simple to pick up and play / Great music / Fun in small hits

MINUS / Zero longevity / Too pricy for what it is

PLATFORMS / 360 / PC / PS3

REVIEWED ON / PC

AGE RATING / 18

GENRE / First-person shooter, stealth

MULTIPLAYER / Local > None Online > None

WEBSITE / www.bioshockinfinite.com

DEVELOPER / Irrational Games

PUBLISHER / 2K Games, Aspyr

DISTRIBUTOR / Steam

BioShock Infinite: Burial at Sea Episode 2



Third time's a charm in *BioShock Infinite's* closing act

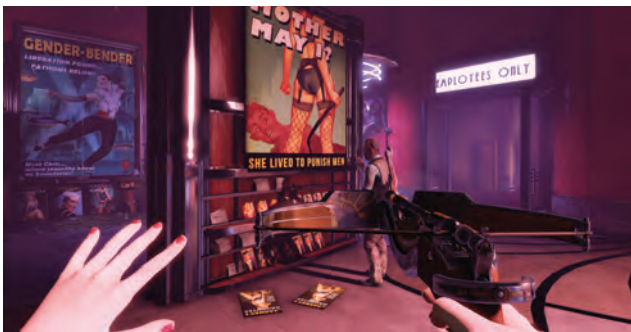
Despite being one of the best games of 2013, *BioShock Infinite's* DLC packages have so far been a tad disappointing. Luckily, the series has once more redeemed itself with this grand finale.

This time, players take on the role of Elizabeth as she continues to search for the elusive Sally; that special Little Sister who served as *Episode 1's* MacGuffin. The problem is, by returning to Rapture, Elizabeth has lost her powers to open tears as well her seeming omniscience. Having been reduced to a vulnerable "regular" person with limited shooting skills, she has to resort to stealthy tactics to make her way past the assorted Plasmid junkies.

One of the biggest gripes about the original *BioShock Infinite* is the lacklustre combat, so reworking the gameplay into a stealthy affair is a much welcomed addition that is superbly executed. Guns and ammo are in limited supply, so players are forced to make the best of what's available to them. There's also a new Plasmid which allows Elizabeth to see through walls and even turn invisible momentarily, giving the player some excellent tactical advantages.

The short length is a tad annoying, as is seeing the same animations repeatedly during load times, but *Burial At Sea Episode 2* does a superb job of wrapping up the various plotlines and providing a few hours of excellent stealth gameplay. Get Raptured immediately. **NAG**

- Delano



88

BioShock Infinite's stealthy final act brings the series to a satisfying conclusion.

PLUS / Loading screen animations get tiresome / Far too short

MINUS / Great stealth gameplay / Wraps up the various storylines rather neatly

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2014 has thus far been quiet in the PC DIY industry. That is all about to change though going into the second half of the year. There are several technologies and evolutions that are likely to be announced at Computex in June all the way towards the end of the year.

Just to mention a few we have the brand new Z97 chipset from Intel. This chipset, while no different fundamentally from Z87, will support three generations of CPUs. That is the current 1st generation Haswell CPUs, the updated Devil's Canyon CPUs and the upcoming socketed Broadwell family of CPUs. Broadwell has effectively moved to Q1 2015, so it does give Haswell and Devil's Canyon some breathing room and time on the market. In a direct nod to the overclockers, Intel has taken a direct approach to the desktop enthusiast market and tailor made its Haswell refresh specifically for competitive overclockers by way of a better thermal interface, updated package materials and obviously Z97 chipset support. What an updated packaging material means exactly, we will just have to wait to see. Suffice to say, that there will be several new SKUs and the high-end K SKU CPUs will not show up until a few months after the chipset is launched.

That means, or at least suggests that there is actually a silicon re-spin and one that at the very least will maintain the overclocking headroom as experienced on current CPUs but will more than likely improve it, perhaps even significantly. Does that mean we may go back to the Sandy-Bridge days of CPUs reaching 5.5GHz and higher using air coolers? Unlikely, simply because the FIVR has a thermal consequence and that is not likely negated by a silicon re spin and solder between the core and the IHS. You will get the full breakdown and comparisons in the coming issues of the magazine. Furthermore, Intel will bring back the Pentium unlocked SKU in the form of a budget sub \$100 dual core CPU. This CPU will obviously be based on the Haswell architecture as well, but be stripped of several features and obviously smaller in die area than the regular CPUs. It should be an incredibly good overclocking chip and allow those who are traditionally left out of the fun due to the often prohibitive cost of overclocking, some way to get in on the action as well. It will be 22 years since the Pentium brand came into being and we can't think of a more appropriate way to celebrate that than with such CPUs.

As if all this is not enough, Haswell-E makes an appearance this year at the very high-end and

enthusiast segment. Courtesy of the X99 chipset, Haswell-E amongst many other changes will be using a point to point link DDR4 scheme (like all DDR4 based platforms should in future). So no longer are we going to get kits of 8 sticks of memory, as four will be the maximum. Good news for memory vendors because DDR4 will come at a premium, especially for 32 and 64GB kits. More to the point however, this will be DDR4's first showing despite the fact that initial speeds are low at 1,866MHz. The signaling, power gating and a host of other features mean that bandwidth efficiency for the given frequency should go up dramatically, further boosting the already impressive performance of the Haswell-E CPUs. Simultaneously with that, there will be more SKUs for enthusiasts to pick from, including the first 8-core, 16-thread desktop CPU for the truly demanding users. This CPU will house no less than 20MB of L3 cache and retail for an unprecedented \$1,500USD or possibly higher in quantities of 1,000. This will not replace the more regular 6-core and 12-thread offerings either. Best of all it seems all CPUs for the X99 platform will be unlocked by default.

The X99 platform should be with us for a while given that it has native support for SAS, USB3.0, official PCIe 3.0 and has all SATA ports (excluding the SAS ports obviously) operating natively at 6GBps. All these changes put together make for a worthwhile improvement over the outgoing X79 chipset.

On the graphics side, NVIDIA updated its product roadmap in late March with revelation of the Pascal architecture slated to succeed this year's Maxwell GPUs. Not only will this family feature the unified memory architecture as pioneered by Maxwell in discrete GPUs, it will be the first GPU to feature a stacked DRAM design amongst other technologies. The short of it is that memory bandwidth will increase dramatically and latency will be reduced simultaneously.

We will have to wait until the second half of the year to see these technologies and products on store shelves. If 2013 was underwhelming, 2014 is more than making up for this as its shaping up to be the year of some serious performance gains on the desktop platform. **NAG**

Running his own independent online publication, Neo is plugged directly into the hardware scene in Taiwan. He's our hardware guru.

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GRAPHICS

GIGABYTE GV-N78TGHZ-3GD
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R3,799 / www.ocz.com



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R1,399 / www.razerzone.com



MOUSE MAT

Razer Ironclad
R599 / www.razerzone.com



SOUND

Creative Sound Blaster ZxR
R3,499 / www.soundblaster.com



HEADPHONES

Plantronics GameCom Commander
R4,569 / www.plantronics.com



INTEL

INTEL CORE I7 4960X
R14,103 / www.intel.com

ASUS RAMPAGE IV EXTREME BLACK EDITION
R7,999 / www.asus.com

CORSAIR DOMINATOR PLATINUM 2,666MHZ C10 16GB KIT
R6,999 / www.corsair.com

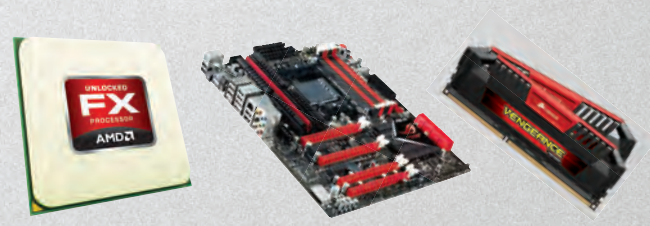


AMD

AMD FX 8350
R3,099 / www.amd.com

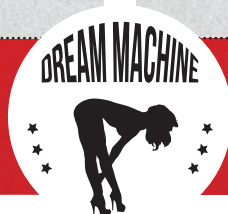
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INTEL DREAM MACHINE

R75,360



AMD DREAM MACHINE

R58,356

Intel 730 SSD

VERSUS

OCZ Vertex 460

There was a time when every vendor you could think of was selling SSDs. The market was ready for them and the components were all but commoditised with just firmware tuning to distinguish between them. A few short years later, many vendors have ceased selling them because of the NAND price bottoming out, and as such we now have a market with fewer players but better drives. Drives without TRIM, SATA 6Gbps, encryption and data levelling technology are all but unheard of today. Performance is much better and for the most part, the average drive today is faster than the fastest SSD you could find in 2012. That is how fast these drives have become. More than that, the price per gigabyte has improved to the point where there's really no reason why anybody should be using a mechanical drive for their primary storage. For mobiles this is a great time as well because SSDs are not only cheaper and faster than both magnetic and mSATA drives, the newer 7mm profile drives fit in just about every portable computer. Whether you are in need of a high performance drive for your notebook or desktop, these are two of the latest drives that will more than likely deliver what you need.

INTEL 730 480GB



TECHNOLOGY

For the 700 series drives, Intel has not used a SandForce or in-house controller but contracted LSI to develop a custom controller for the purposes of this drive. Where the NAND is concerned Intel has obviously gone with their in-house 20nm MLC memory. The vast majority of the technology employed on this drive is actually concerned with data reliability more than it is performance. At the very least the performance aspect is tailored to predictable and linear scaling. This is important for data centers and such environments, but Intel has brought that to the desktop and in IOMETER for example, it shows. There is no lower power state support but you will get power loss data protection. This drive also includes an advanced NAND redundancy scheme which will guard against the system writing data to bad or failing cells. As a desktop variation of an enterprise drive, various sub-systems and busses have been clocked higher to increase bandwidth and performance. This is part of the reason why the drive is so fast, but it also makes for a hot and expensive drive.

PERFORMANCE

With the 730 drives Intel is once again catering to the enthusiast and power user market exclusively. What Intel has done is deliver the fastest performance they've had on a storage device since the X25-M. This drive doesn't stand above the competition like that one did but it does deliver heaps of performance, in 4K reads, IOPS and other data access patterns typically associated with multi-use environments. The sequential data rates aren't as high as what you will find on several other drives, but they are linear and that equates to predictable performance with virtually no degradation regardless of how full the drive is. That is not to say that this drive doesn't deliver in the average read and write tests, in fact its read performance across the entire drive is just under 500MB/s at 496.8MB/s. There will be no perceived or real world performance between this drive and one that offers anything up to 50MB/s more, so where it counts the 730 delivers. In the entire range of desktop drives from Intel this remains the fastest one, eclipsing everything in the 300 and 500 series drives.

VALUE

With all the technology that Intel has crammed into this drive and its rigorous testing and validation process, it's no wonder that this drive is very expensive. What you are paying for here is enterprise class technology and some features which rarely see the light of day on desktop drives. The five year warranty speaks volumes here but more than that realize that Intel is stipulating an endurance level of 70GB/day with an MTBF of over two million hours which is remarkable. To guarantee this kind of dependency is likely a massive contributor to the very high price tag when this drive eventually lands on our shores. For the uncompromising power user this drive doesn't have many challengers on the market. For all other people, it may be a little overkill.

OCZ
VERTEX
460 480GB



TECHNOLOGY

Since Toshiba acquired most of what we would consider OCZ, the SSD company has access to some of the best and cutting edge NAND on the market. The Vertex 460 is outfitted with 19nm Toshiba Toggle MLC NAND which has been previously shown to deliver incredible performance with second to none durability. The controller is courtesy of the INDILIX Barefoot 3 chip, developed in house by OCZ and tailor made to deliver consistently better performance than all current generation SandForce controller drives. Warranty is the usual three years which is expected for a normal consumer SSD.

PERFORMANCE

IOPS performance of the Vertex 460 is actually higher on paper than on the Intel drive. However, in practice, especially when using IOMETER it is a different story. For the most part however, for the chosen market the Vertex 460 offers a user experience that will be indistinguishable from drives that cost significantly more. The Vertex 460 is faster than the original Vertex 450 and approaches Vector SSD performance. Sequential write and read speeds are higher and encroach on the useable data rate offered by SATA 6Gbps at 514MB/s and 517MB/s respectively. Write IOPS and maximum latency numbers were particularly impressive only second once again to what the Vector drive offers. The Vertex 460 is easily one of the fastest consumer SSD drives on the market.

VALUE

At the time of writing there was no local pricing but suffice to say this drive is more than R1,000 cheaper than the Intel drive but offers similar performance and sometimes better. You'll not get the same warranty and other such reliability assurances but after all this is the performance line of OCZ storage solution drives. If you want the reliability of enterprise drives and the like then look to the Vector 150 which offers even better performance but with that carries a hefty price tag. Overall, the value proposition for the Vertex 460 is very high. For gamers, power users and just about everyone but the most extreme demographic, this drive is more than fast enough and definitely gets a thumbs up from us.

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GIGABYTE Brix Pro BXi7-4770R

Website / www.gigabyte.com

ERP / TBA

Supplier / GIGABYTE

SPECS

CPU	Intel Core i7 4770R
GPU	Intel Iris Pro Graphics 5200
MEMORY	16GB DDR3 2.133MHz
STORAGE	240GB mSATA SSD
OPTICAL DRIVE	None

Some time ago at CES 2014, Gabe Newell, Valve head honcho, had some positive things to say about the GIGABYTE Brix Pro, mostly concerning its form factor rather than performance. With Steam Boxes looking to make a big impact in the gaming landscape, such machines are going to get a lot more common. Perhaps not as small as the GIGABYTE Brix Pro, the idea behind Steam Boxes is sound and should inspire many vendors who have the foresight to get in on this ecosystem.

Believe it or not, the GIGABYTE Brix Pro we have was actually sent to us by Intel and not GIGABYTE. You may be wondering why Intel would do such a thing, but it's rather simple. The platform on which the Brix Pro is loosely based is the Intel NUC. The NUC may not have sparked the excitement it should have when initially unveiled, but with a system such as the Brix Pro, it is a second chance to prove just how versatile and obviously powerful a form factor like this could be, especially one that is based on Intel's 4th generation Haswell technology.

Before we get into what makes this a great little system, it is worth getting through all the downsides. As a first showing it isn't perfect, but with upcoming revisions things are likely to get much better. In fact, with the firmware revisions on this very model, things have improved from its first outing.

For starters and most importantly, GIGABYTE has chosen to outfit this model with the 4770R. There is the option of the cheaper 4570R which is probably the model you will want to go with. We do appreciate great CPU performance, but for such a machine, outright CPU performance is secondary if not tertiary to operational noise and GPU performance. With a fixed TDP budget, we would rather have the bulk of that budget go to the iGPU rather than the CPU. Not only would this improve



graphics performance significantly, but it would help the system keep a restively low noise profile.

The above mentioned issue is actually what causes the Brix Pro to be loud sometimes because the cooling system is unable to keep the system running at peak levels which robs you of performance. Thus the high clocking

4770R CPU is wasted because under intense loads it throttles right down to 3GHz or so, making the high base speed useless for the most part. This throttling also affects the iGPU as its clock will also fluctuate based on the power draw and thermal conditions.

Another issue we had with the Brix Pro is the layout of the USB ports. They

"As a first showing it isn't perfect, but with upcoming revisions things are likely to get much better."

BENCHMARK RESULTS

Performance Mode (Turbo)
PC Mark8 Creative Suite (OpenCL Accelerated): **3,993 (4,195)**
Resident Evil 6 DX9 720p: **3,521 (4,023)**
3DMark FireStrike: **1,335 (1,482)**
Catzilla 1080p: **10,466 (11,253)**



Should you buy this from your local retailer or import it, you'll have to add your own 1.35V low voltage SO-DIMMs, your own mSATA drive or if you prefer, a traditional 2.5" mechanical drive or SSD. Despite its diminutive size, the Brix Pro can house a regular 2.5" drive in addition to your mSATA drive. To save on costs we would probably forgo the mSATA completely as they are costly. Rather, just outfit the unit with a 240GB or larger capacity SSD which can serve as both primary and secondary storage.

You may then be wondering how this system plays games and if it is capable of running any games at all. A valid question because up until recently Intel had a terrible reputation when it came to integrated graphics performance and was considered by many the worst in the business. This was warranted a long time ago, but ever since the 4th generation Core CPUs were introduced things have changed significantly. The GT2 iGPU on desktop Haswell parts are a massive jump in performance from Intel's previous efforts. The mobile parts however have an even more powerful GPU courtesy of the Iris Pro 5200 (GT3e), which has doubled the execution units (40 as opposed to 20) and the texture sampling units. More importantly the Iris Pro 5200 or the 4770R as a whole receives a fourth level 128MB cache or eDRAM if you prefer. This memory works like a fourth level cache for CPU tasks but mostly a graphics sub system cache for the 5200 iGPU, making it less reliant on the systems main memory which is several times slower.

Still, if you want to maximise performance on the Brix Pro, it is best to go with DDR3 2133MHz memory. You'll have to use low voltage 1.35V DIMMS however, but these are easily available from Corsair for example. If 2,133MHz is a stretch for you, most 1,600MHz sets will run at 1,866MHz with no tuning whatsoever. The performance impact is there for sure, but because of the L4 cache, the system isn't heavily impacted by main memory speed like the AMD APUs.

In short, gaming is possible on the Brix Pro and in fact, performance is surprisingly good, despite the Iris Pro 5200 only featuring two ROPs. Games are playable at 720p on low to medium detail levels. Obviously AA is out of the question but it's remarkable to see the Brix Pro and its iGPU beat out AMD's latest effort with the A10 7850K which we have also reviewed in this issue. Games such as *Tomb Raider*, *Grid 2*, and a host of others play just fine on the Brix Pro and hooked up to your TV, this makes for a great Steam Box of sorts. Should you need even more performance you can actually tweak this system via Intel's XTU. It's not officially supported but it does work especially when it comes to overclocking the iGPU which can yield some benefits to game performance.

A few months from now, GIGABYTE has stated that it will be following up the Brix Pro with a version that includes a discrete graphics card (via an MXM unit within the chassis) which will bolster performance to new levels, possibly making 1080p gaming viable.

If you can't wait until then, the current model makes for a fantastic machine and even better is possibly the 4570R version. Hopefully we get to see these models on our shores sooner rather than later. With the Brix series of computers, GIGABYTE has a winner on their hands.

- Neo Sibeko

are stacked one on top of the other on both the front and back of the system. The spacing is standard affair but that means those bigger USB drives make it impossible to use the other USB port below or above. A side by side configuration with better spacing would solve this problem.

Those however are the only complaints we may have about the Brix Pro.

Features wise you'll get built-in Bluetooth 4.0, Wi-Fi, gigabit LAN, USB 3.0, HDMI and DisplayPort outputs. Our particular unit had Windows 8.1 loaded on it, which works very well on the system.



The Brix Pro is a great little system that promises to get better with future revisions. As a pseudo

Steam Box, this one works well enough to make it game capable.

PLUS / Iris Pro 5200 graphics is showing promise
Small and looks great / Quiet

MINUS / May never be available locally / 4770R is unnecessarily fast / Pricing may be an issue

MSI GT70 Dominator Pro Gaming Notebook



Website / www.msi.com

ERP / R54,995

Supplier / Corex

SPECS	CPU	Intel Core i7 4930MX
	GPU	NVIDIA GTX 880M 8GB
	MEMORY	32GB DDR3
	STORAGE	384GB SSD (RAID 0) + 1TB storage drive
	OPTICAL DRIVE	Blu-ray writer

More than any other division of MSI, the notebooks that this vendor makes have a valid claim to being the best in the business. Or at the very least can claim to be competing on equal footing with the best. Notebooks such as the GT70 Dominator Pro prove this time and time again.

Their latest model, successor to the previous GT70, features the GTX 880M and once again propels performance to new heights. For technical specifications alone, the GT70 is pretty much as good as you're going to get as it has the best components around. We cannot fault it with what's under the hood and it shows, delivering blistering performance in all our tests.

Over and above the specifications however, there are plenty of value added features that cannot be appreciated via benchmarks alone. It is in these areas where MSI has the jump on the competition as this notebook is jam packed with all kinds of functionality. The keyboard is made by SteelSeries, featuring great actuation and tactile feedback, making it ideal for typing but even better for gaming. It is obviously back-lit with configurable colours, has virtually no ghosting and supports the SteelSeries Engine for customizing keys and the like. It is truly a fully programmable keyboard, impressive to see on a notebook for sure.

The GT70 is one of the first systems as well where the software package is actually worth caring about. There's plenty of functionality that can be accessed via the pre-loaded programs that allow a variety of features from increased or boosted gaming performance to live stream broadcasting. Everything is centred on gaming and you get the sense that this notebook was designed to be a gaming machine above everything else.

A great feature on the GT70 that some may appreciate as well is the ability



BENCHMARK RESULTS

PC Mark8 Creative Suite
(OpenCL Accelerated): **5,184**
Battery time: **1h, 37m, 35s**
3DMark Fire Strike: **5,503**
Catzilla 1080p: **7,497**

to output to a display using all of the notebook's ports. You can use DisplayPort, HDMI and VGA output simultaneously. We can't really think of too many usage scenarios where this would be useful, but being able to do it will surely come in handy for some individuals.

Once again, this notebook is just packed with features and one wonders what MSI could have possibly done to add more. Perhaps then, this is where MSI should not have added more, but done a little better with what they have. It has the most powerful hardware money can buy, but in our opinion it is not balanced 100% correctly and perhaps this is what has made the price prohibitive, ultimately making it miss the mark, even if it's only slightly. This is a notebook for those who want only the biggest and best there

is on the market, at least on paper. The GT70 delivers the goods alright and the performance is spectacular. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

8 *The GT70 Dominator Pro is easily the most powerful gaming notebook MSI has ever made and certainly the fastest we have ever tested.*

PLUS / Very good performance / Will last many years without needing an upgrade

MINUS / Pricing could be an issue / Could be even better for less

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AMD A10 7850K APU

Website / www.amd.com

ERP / R2,777

Manufacturer / AMD

SPECS

CORE	28nm Kaveri (2 modules, 4 threads)
FREQUENCY	3,700MHz (4GHz Turbo)
CACHE	4.25MB total (4MB L3)
TDP	95W
PLATFORM	FM2+ (A8X)

AMD has in the last few years made somewhat of a comeback with their APUs. Where their main CPUs were failing to capture the performance crowd or even live up to their predecessors, the APUs found more success as a value proposition.

As AMD had been saying for several years, integrated graphics would continue to be more important than outright CPU performance. At the time these statements were made, they seemed very convenient as AMD had effectively given up on the CPU race with their arch rival in favour of leveraging the in-house expertise of their rich GPU IP and expertise. Despite Intel's significantly deeper pockets and resources that are orders of magnitude greater than what AMD has, the latter still has a better graphics portfolio and ecosystem than Intel.

As such, AMD with the APU was not only hoping to usher in a computing environment where they could be stronger than Intel (an ecosystem that is more concerned with graphics rather than traditional compute models) but also change the way we interact with our computing devices and make all forms of this more visual. Philosophically sound but in practice AMD was just moving the goal posts. Several missteps cost the company tremendously in both market share and resources. An attempt to shift the focus to graphics or change the conversation from CPU performance to overall user experience hasn't worked out as it should have. This is largely because of the back foot that the CPU architecture finds itself on.

Let's be clear about one thing. AMD is great at making graphics processors; in fact many of the mobile devices using pervasive SOCs such as those featuring Adreno GPUs are based off AMD (at the time ATI) IP. Technically AMD products graphically remain the marvel they always were. As a simple example the AMD A10 7850K's R7 GPU, even though based on architecture from 2011, is hardware compliant with the DirectX 11.2 specification and possibly DirectX 12 as well.



BENCHMARK RESULTS

PCMark8 Creativity Suite: **3,770**
 Resident Evil 6 DX9 720p: **4,053**
 Catzilla 1.3 720p: **2,581**
 3DMark Fire Strike: **1,575**

From Trinity, to Richland and finally to Kaveri, AMD has continued to improve its APUs, making minor tweaks here and there in an attempt to bring in better power efficiency, better integration between the CPU and GPU and of course increasing performance. For the most part this has been an upward trend and it remains so today with the A10 7850K, which features the most powerful GPU ASIC on any integrated platform we have seen to date.

Kaveri is not only based on the newer Steamroller architecture (newer and more efficient to what is on the AM3, desktop models) it also boasts Radeon 7000 series graphics or if you prefer, a GCN based GPU. To be exact, the R7 GPU houses 512 Shader units, 32 texture samplers and 8 render outputs. For all intents and purposes it is vastly superior to anything Intel can offer at present on any platform, especially when compared against the Intel IRIS Pro 5200.

Unfortunately though, because of the inefficiencies that AMD suffers from CPU side, the R7 in the APU never really gets off the ground. It is marginally faster than the outgoing 6000 series based Richland 6800K even though it's considerably bigger

in gate count. The more capable the GPU on AMD's parts, the more apparent the lack of CPU performance is becoming and this lopsided symbiosis is suffering as a result.

Part of the issue with the new APUs is that despite offering DDR3 2400MHz support, AMD's memory controller is woefully inefficient and in part this is due to very low IPC by the CPU. The frequencies are high but the latencies are equally high and as a result, the 128-bit combined memory bus in theory has a higher transaction rate. In reality however it rarely sees numbers above 55% efficiency. Even if the IMC was extraordinary (latencies in main memory for graphics processing are not as much of an issue as they are for single threaded, serial CPU code) and could saturate the available system bandwidth. The 38.4GB/s is still very slow compared to the L4 cache eDRAM on the IrisPro 5200 which delivers upwards of 100GB/s to the IGP.

As a result of this, you'll notice that the A10 is actually slower in graphics tasks than Intel's Iris Pro 5200. Bandwidth alone is not the only reason for this, there are other factors as well and as mentioned earlier,

the very low IPC of the Steamroller cores doesn't help the situation in the least.

Built on the ageing 28nm process, the 7850K has a total TDP of 95W which is fixed for the most part, even on the desktop where cooling systems can handle significantly more. That means, overclocking the CPU or the GPU will adversely affect this power budget. If you're going to do any overclocking you'll have to strike the right balance between iGPU clocks and the host processor clocks as they are on the same die.

The push on AMD's side for general purpose computing on GPUs has paid off in many ways and has picked up in software support tremendously. This is especially true in productivity suites and encoding which makes the A10 7850K out class the Intel 4770K in some tests and benchmarks. Moreover, in gaming, the A10 7850K is still faster than the 4770K where each one is using the iGPU.

Going back to the Iris Pro 5200, we do see however that this iGPU on the 4570R and 4770R for instance does outperform AMD's R7. With Broadwell bringing the IRIS Pro 5200 GPU to desktops, it will be very hard for AMD to claim any advantage over any Intel part regardless of pricing. So this is something that perhaps AMD needs to address sooner rather than later as the advantage enjoyed with Richland when Intel was only in its 3rd generation Ivy-Bridge CPUs is essentially gone.

On to the value proposition of the A10 7850K, we found out that not all regions, perhaps even most regions will not be enjoying the free *Battlefield 4* coupon with their purchase of the A10 7850K. While AMD had made it seem as if this was worldwide, it turns out that there are fewer regions that actually have this offer and even where it is available it depends on the retail outlet. So should you decide to build a system around the 7850K be aware of the fact that you'll not get any game coupon as we were initially informed and reported in our Versus from last month.

Overall, while there are some improvements in what AMD is offering with the 7850K over the 6800K, their improvements are very little in the real world. On paper the APU looks great and should have been a huge step forward, however this is not the case and it's more of a slight improvement here and there. The price difference between the two would suggest a more tangible performance gain but this is not so. Still, if you were to build an APU based system right now, you would be better off with the A10 7850K than anything else on the market. Since there are not Intel desktop CPUs with Iris Pro 5200 graphics, the best integrated graphics solution you can readily buy is in the form of the AMD A10 7850K. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko

6 *AMD's Steamroller based APU has improved internals on paper, but in practice fails to live up to its promises. For the right price however, it is a worthwhile CPU.*

PLUS / R7 graphics / Official support for DDR3 2,400MHz / Better HSA integration

MINUS / Expensive / IPC is low / GPU performance should have been better

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GIGABYTE G1.Sniper A88X

Website / www.gigabyte.com

ERP / R2,199

Supplier / Rectron

SPECS

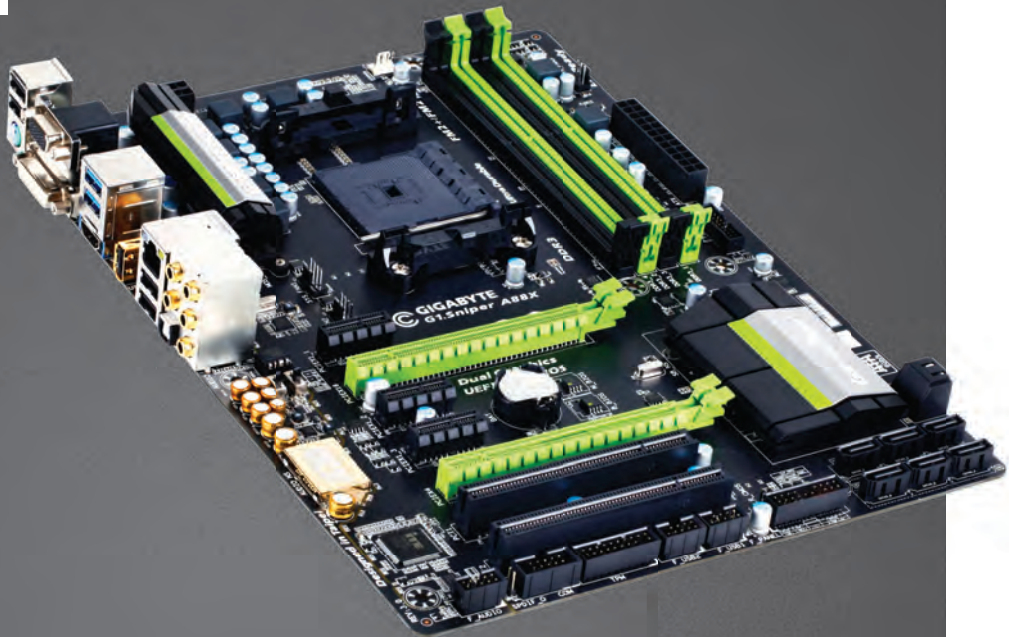
CHIPSET	AMD A88
MEMORY	4x 240-pin DDR3
CPU SUPPORT	FM2+
EXPANSION	3x PCIe 16X, 3x PCIe 1x, 1x PCI
SIZE	ATX

No matter how motherboard vendors try, the FM2+ socket (and the AM3 socket for that matter) are very limiting to their product offerings. Last month we looked at the A88X-GD45 GAMING and found it to be a great product, with many features unexpected for what is effectively a low-end platform.

This month we look at the competing G1.Sniper A88X. Before you make a direct comparison between the two, we will save you the trouble and let you know that this is a more expensive board. It doesn't have any on-board buttons for power, reset, ClrCmos and no POST LED to speak of. In this regard the Sniper A88X is the weakest in the range as these things should be on any board that adorns the G1 name. If we were to ever take away points for anything it would be the absence of these basic features which we have become accustomed to from the top three vendors, especially at this price.

With that said, there is some redemption to be found and perhaps justification as to why these features were left out. In typical GIGABYTE fashion with the G1 series, the Sniper A88X features some impressive audio circuitry. Once again the A88X is peerless in all A88X based motherboards as it delivers the cleanest and most acoustically pristine audio experience you can buy at this price. It isn't as advanced as what you may find on the Sniper Z87 but that is primarily because it uses a cheaper controller that doesn't have hardware acceleration or at least not to the same degree. This one instead relies on a Realtek controller, cheaper caps and overall just a more budget orientated bill of parts.

With that however you still get a headphone amp with adjustable gain levels appropriate for speakers and headphones. Most of the budget probably went into the audio solution as there is no Killer NIC on this board either. It's a gaming board purely because of its colour scheme and its audio hardware. Other than that there isn't much to it physically. What is interesting though is that the more mainstream A88X UP4 GIGABYTE happens to have all the features



we noted as missing from this motherboard. For all intents and purposes that SKU is at a more premium level, so it's not that there isn't an incentive to have such features on an FM2+ motherboard, they just happen to be missing on this board.

Performance wise, this is where the Sniper A88X was surprising. With other A88X motherboards we were unable to get a 2,600MHz DRAM frequency to post let alone boot into Windows. With this motherboard not only was this possible using the base clock frequency but we could boot into Windows. We had no stability at this speed but that was a matter of needing to adjust the NB core voltage and tweaking some memory timings on the DIMMS. The particular set we used was built for the Intel Z77/Z87 platform and thus the timings are not favourable to AMD's IMC for the most part. That aside, when we reduced the speed to around 2,500MHz we saw further gains in GPU performance. Once again highlighting just how important memory performance is on this platform, at least for the iGPU.

We would have preferred to see the

Sniper A88X in a mini-ITX form factor as with all A88X based motherboards, however in its ATX form it still makes sense for those building a mid- to high-end FM2+ platform. The superior audio solution does mean that you'll not have to pay for a discrete card and in some ways it offsets the seemingly high price. That aside, the Sniper A88X is a good motherboard that will serve you well should you decide that this is the platform for you.

NAG

- Neo Sibeko

8 The Sniper A88X mid- to high-end FM2+ motherboard offers solid performance and a superior audio solution that outclasses the competition.

PLUS / Looks great / Good audio for the price / Overclocks well

MINUS / Relatively expensive / No POST-LED and power/reset buttons

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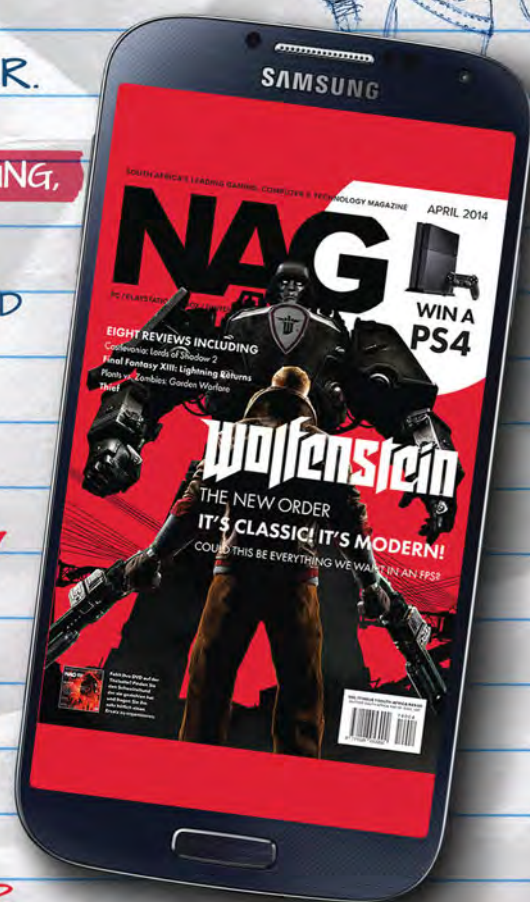


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EVGA GTX 760 Dual Superclocked

Website / www.kairaglobal.co.za ERP / R3,999 Supplier / Kaira Global

SPECS

CORE	1,072MHz
CUDA CORES	1,152
RENDER OUTPUTS / TEXTURE UNITS	32 / 96
MEMORY	2,048MB GDDR5 6GHz (192.2GB/sec)
API	DirectX 11.2 / OpenGL 4.3 / CUDA



BENCHMARK RESULTS

3DMark Fire Strike: **5,875**
 Catzilla 1080p: **8,649**
 Hitman: Absolution (DX11 ultra detail)
 4xAA: **66 fps**

In the highly-contested mid-range video card market, the GTX 760 sits quite comfortably. It's not untouchable by any means, but you're certainly assured of a level of quality for your money, and that goes a long way.

EVGA builds on that solid foundation with this SC (Superclocked) version, which includes the now staple dual fan system; EVGA's own arrangement goes by the name of Active Cooling Xtreme, and certainly does a good job of keeping things under wraps even during intense gaming sessions.

As this is a factory-overclocked version of the GTX 760, core speeds come in a little nipper than standard 980MHz, measuring 1,072 (boosted to 1,137 at peak load), although all GTX 760s across EVGA's range run the standard memory speed of 1,502 MHz (6,008 effective). Thankfully, with this powerful yet impressively quiet cooling system you get plenty of room to stretch your

overclocking legs. On our test unit, we managed to push the core clock speed up to 1,222MHz (boost 1,287) and the memory speed nudged along another 170MHz to a total of 1,672 (6,688 effective). All-in-all this proved to boost performance by a decent margin, pulling in an additional five frames-per-second in *Hitman* while GPU core temperature peaked at a respectable 78°C.

EVGA's range of GTX 760s is quite vast, and this particular offering sits right in the middle with its 2GB of RAM and decent out-of-the-box overclock. That also has the effect of placing this card in an interesting price bracket, which I believe positions it as the best value-for-money in this range. For an extra R800 or so you could jump up to the 4GB version, but then you're playing in 2GB GTX 770 range which would be a no-brainer purchase at that price. As a result, this 2GB card is the one to get.

NAG

- Geoff Burrows

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

Included in the package is an EVGA-branded backplate for the GTX 760. Why it isn't fixed to the card to begin with is anyone's guess, but it looks rather nice and provides passive cooling for the rear-mounted Hynix RAM chips.

8

A solid card only held back by its lack of 4GB of VRAM, but for the price this is the top NVIDIA card you can buy.

PLUS / Good performance / Temperatures stay low / Decent bit of overclocking headroom

MINUS / Limited VRAM / Tough competition from AMD at this price point

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Corsair Obsidian 250D

- Website / www.corsair.com
- ERP / TBA
- Supplier / Rectron

SPECS	MATERIAL	Brushed aluminium
	COLOUR	Black
	SUPPORTED MOTHERBOARD TYPE	Mini-ITX
	FRONT PANEL	2x USB3.0

With the Obsidian 250D, you have a direct competitor to the Bit-Fenix Prodigy we reviewed many moons ago. Much like that case, the 250D can house a full length, dual slot graphics card along with a full size PSU and 240mm radiator. You'll find an aluminium front fascia while the rest of the case is made from steel which does mean it's heavier than one would imagine but it is a very robust design. Air flow is great with support for two 80mm fans, two 120mm fans on the side and two 120mm mountings at the top of the case where you'd place a 240mm radiator for example. There's unlikely to be any thermal issues with the 250D and it performs remarkably better than the Prodigy here. Where it may not be to everyone's tastes is in aesthetics. Much like several of Corsair's cases, it is devoid of creativity and is essentially just a steel cube that houses computer components. For those looking to build powerful mini-ITX gaming machines, the 250D is a great place to start looking. **NAG**

- Neo Sibeko



7 A solidly designed and quality case that has plenty of room for mini-ITX systems.

PLUS / Cooling capabilities / Fits several full sized components

MINUS / Need to remove PSU to mount motherboard / Looks boring / Too big for a mini-ITX case

Mad Catz F.R.E.Q.3

- Website / www.titan-ice.co.za
- ERP / R1,099
- Supplier / Titan Ice Computers

SPECS	SPEAKER DIAMETER	50mm
	FREQUENCY RESPONSE	20Hz-20kHz
	SIGNAL-TO-NOISE RATIO	60 dB/V
	RESISTANCE	32 ohms

The F.R.E.Q.3 kicks off the lower end of Mad Catz's new headphone range, but is by no means a "cheap" headset. It offers solid but not exceptional performance for its price, but at this point you can't have it all. Performance in-game is admirable, with the F.R.E.Q.3 picking up nuances across the range to deliver a vivid experience, but when it comes to music and movie watching it falls flat, delivering weak bass and an overall muddled sound. Total volume levels are also poor. In terms of build quality, the F.R.E.Q.3 does well to block out external noises while feeling light on the ear. However, due to off-centre pivoting design of the ear cups, cushion pressure around your ears is not uniform, with almost no pressure at the front and all of it at the rear. This feels quite strange at first, as though the headset could fly off at any minute, but testing proved otherwise. Still, a slightly more solid fit would go a long way to counter the unit's cheap-feeling plastics and light weight. At least that weight aids comfort in long play sessions, so the balance between all of these factors swings in favour of the F.R.E.Q.3. **NAG**

- Geoff Burrows



7 The F.R.E.Q.3 cuts just enough corners to fit into a respectable budget without sacrificing too much in the way of performance.

PLUS / Excellent in-game performance / Good noise isolation / Lightweight

MINUS / Lacks total volume / Unbalanced fit / Cheap-feeling plastic / Poor music performance

Razer BlackWidow Ultimate

- Website / www.razerzone.com
- ERP / R1,700
- Supplier / Razer

SPECS	KEYS	Razer Mechanical Switches
	ANTI-GHOSTING	Up to ten simultaneous key presses
	INPUTS	1x USB / audio-out and mic-in jacks
	MACRO KEYS	Five

There's nothing quite like the piercing click-clack of a mechanical keyboard, is there? If nothing else, they're perfect for getting a rise out of family and co-workers. If the allure of mechanical key switches has become too great for you to resist any longer, Razer's BlackWidow Ultimate is an excellent choice. On the left side of the keyboard you'll find five programmable macro keys that allow for on-the-fly macro recording. Gaming mode is obviously there, which when toggled will disable the Windows key and global shortcuts. The F keys double as media controls thanks to a separate modifier key. The keys (built on Razer Mechanical Switches) are individually backlit in Razer-appropriate green, and the BlackWidow Ultimate offers a fantastic typing experience once you get used to its compacted layout. A nice added touch is the 3.5mm pass-through jacks for both audio and microphone, which are useful for quickly plugging in a headset without fiddling around at the back of your PC. The BlackWidow Ultimate oozes quality, with its stylish design complemented by robust components. **NAG**

- Dane Remendes



9 The BlackWidow Ultimate is one of the best mechanical keyboards out there.

PLUS / Slick, sturdy design / Typing experience is great

MINUS / Nothing

CM Storm Mizar Gaming Mouse

Website / www.cmstorm.com

RRP / R679 Supplier / Cooler Master

SPECS	BUTTONS	7
	SENSITIVITY	8,200dpi / 1,000Hz polling
	SENSOR	Laser

CM Storm has produced a great many gaming peripherals in the past, and the Mizar is one of the best if not the best mouse to date from them.

The only downside here is that in the world of gaming mice, this has to be one of the blandest options around. It is not unsightly but there is nothing about it that suggests it's good at all and some better design decisions would have gone a long way into making this look as competitive as offerings from ROCCAT, Razer and TT eSports. That aside, this is a truly magnificent mouse.

It looks bigger than it really is, but it does however fit perfectly into the hand especially if you use a claw grip. There's no drag at all and it's fairly light without feeling weightless. There's no need for weights on this mouse as it moves very smoothly across surfaces with no drag, and it works particularly well with the more advanced gaming mouse mats (Ravio for example). As far as ultra-high end performance mice go, there are many that feature many more buttons (but perhaps not functionality) but very few can claim to have better tracking and precision than the Mizar. The specs list reads as it should with Omron switches for the buttons and an Avago 9800 laser sensor. In the world of high-end mice it doesn't seem to get better than this, and this is exactly what you get with the Mizar.

It's essentially a no frills performance mouse, that delivers pixel perfect movement and tracking. It's highly comfortable thanks to the very specific right handed design and rubber sides. You can easily configure all the buttons like most mice these days, but it is in the ease in which you can do this where the Mizar shines. Even if you've never used a gaming mouse of this grade before, it's intuitive and will allow you to customise your key bindings for several games fairly quickly. This mouse is fantastic and definitely worth the investment.

- Neo Sibeko



9 CM Storm has produced several mice in the past, but this one is undoubtedly their most focused effort yet, a great mouse in all respects.

PLUS / Ultra-sensitive / Great weight distribution / Configuration software

MINUS / Looks bland

ROCCAT Pure Kone Optical

Website / www.roccat.org

RRP / TBA Supplier / ROCCAT

SPECS	BUTTONS	7 (+2)
	SENSITIVITY	4,000dpi / 1,000Hz polling
	SENSOR	Optical

ROCCAT has been doing phenomenally as a gaming peripheral manufacturer. Even in such a competitive environment, the company has continued to deliver what gamers want in their products. For the most part, this is the build quality of their products which is second to none. Secondly, it is the feature laden software that allows ROCCAT to pack more into their peripherals than many competing vendors.

The ROCCAT Kone has been with us for years, but this is the first optical version of the Kone which have always come to us as laser mice. As great as laser sensors are, they are not suitable for every surface and for most people they do represent limited surface use. As a result of this, ROCCAT has produced this mouse which may seem identical to the laser variants at first, but differs in two ways primarily. The sensor as pointed out, and secondly the size of the mouse. It is overall about 9% smaller, which is great for those who found the Kone to be a little too big.

If you were one of those who thought that size was perfect, then this version will obviously be a little small which may cause the base of your hand to drag on the mouse mat. Given that the maximum sensitivity is 4,000 DPI, this could cause some mouse movement problems for some. However those cases should be especially rare, because the Kone Optical is very sensitive, thanks in addition to the 1,000Hz polling rate. For all intents and purposes, you'll be hard pressed to tell the difference in accuracy between this mouse and the laser versions.

In keeping with the superior design and build quality of the brand, ROCCAT once again takes to the Omron switches for the buttons. These deliver pronounced feedback and double or even triple tapping buttons works incredibly well.

Overall, this is another great mouse from ROCCAT. If you're looking for a high-end optical mouse, you'll not likely find a better one than this one.

- Neo Sibeko



8 A solid gaming mouse built to the highest quality standards. Optical sensor means it's more surface friendly than many laser mice.

PLUS / Comfortable / Build quality

MINUS / Could be a tad small for some hands

MOSH *pit*

This month's hot list of cool stuff and everything else you simply must have. Well, almost everything.



► AUDIOMOTION L-2015 WIRELESS LIGHTBULB SPEAKER

- **Supplier** / Eurobyte Technology
- **Website** / www.euroshoponline.co.za
- **RRP** / R3,329

Lightbulbs that are also speakers! This must be the future. Inside the AudioMotion L-2015 box you'll find two speakers outfitted with LED bulbs. These can be plugged into practically any lightbulb socket (bayonet or screw), and in addition to serving as a powerful light source, can be used to play audio streamed wirelessly from the included central docking station. You can plug your iPhone or iPod directly into the docking station, or you can alternatively use any other device with a 3.5mm audio jack.

These speakers are great for providing a discreet audio solution that's still beefy enough to fill an entire room with surprisingly impressive sound. You can connect up to eight lightbulb speakers to a single docking station, but be warned that additional bulbs/speakers are incredibly pricy, and given that the base set already carries a hefty price tag, expanding upon it can prove prohibitively expensive. Still, if you find yourself in a unique situation where you'd rather your speakers were effectively invisible, this is a great choice.



► EYE VOODOO CONTACT LENSES

- **Supplier** / Eye VooDoo
- **Website** / bit.ly/EyeVooDoo
- **RRP** / R150 per set (lens case included)

If eyes are the gateway to the soul, then cosmetic contact lenses are the flamboyant bouncers that stand outside a gay club pretending to act tough. Or something. The point is that if you're serious about cosplay or any sort of costume wearing, then you need to dress up your eyes as much as your body, and the huge selection of cosmetic lenses from Eye VooDoo is a great place to start. They also have a selection of anime-specific lenses, such as Kakashi Hatake and Mangekyō Sharingan from *Naruto*, but really their range is big enough for you to find anything crazy or interesting to spice up your next outfit.

▶ LOGITECH POWERSHELL

- ▶ Supplier / Logitech
- ▶ Website / gaming.logitech.com
- ▶ RRP / R1,699

Designed for use with iPhone 5, iPhone 5s and iPod Touch, Logitech's PowerShell is designed for people who take mobile gaming very seriously. Once you've clipped in your device, you're effectively holding a portable controller in your hands, complete with four face buttons, a d-pad and dual shoulder triggers.

It's also equipped with a 1,500 mAh battery to bolster battery life and keep you gaming for longer. If you manage to chew through all of that battery, you're able to recharge both the PowerShell and your device while you play using the supplied cable. The PowerShell is cleverly designed to allow easy access to features like the camera and volume buttons as well. There's also a built-in 3.5mm headphone jack for audio and hands-free calls.

For supported mobile games with more intensive control schemes (like the mobile ports of *Grand Theft Auto* or *Terraria*), the PowerShell is a blessing, and its construction is of impressively high quality. Assuming the list of supported games keeps growing, the PowerShell could prove a worthwhile investment – although the price for entry seems incredibly high.



▶ AUDIOMOTION A-200SW WIRELESS SUBWOOFER

- ▶ Supplier / Eurobyte Technology
- ▶ Website / www.euroshoonline.co.za
- ▶ RRP / R1,649

The AudioMotion A-200SW wireless subwoofer is designed to complement the L-2015 lightbulb speakers that you'll see featured on the opposite page. As with the lightbulb speakers, this subwoofer connects to a central docking station via a 2.4GHz wireless frequency, allowing you to stream audio from an iPhone, iPod, or other music-playing device without the need for pesky cabling. If you find that the bass produced by the lightbulb speakers isn't punchy enough for your liking, the A-200SW will curb that issue – although, as with the bulbs/speakers, it's incredibly costly.





► PREDATOR 25TH ANNIVERSARY THERMAL VISION DUTCH

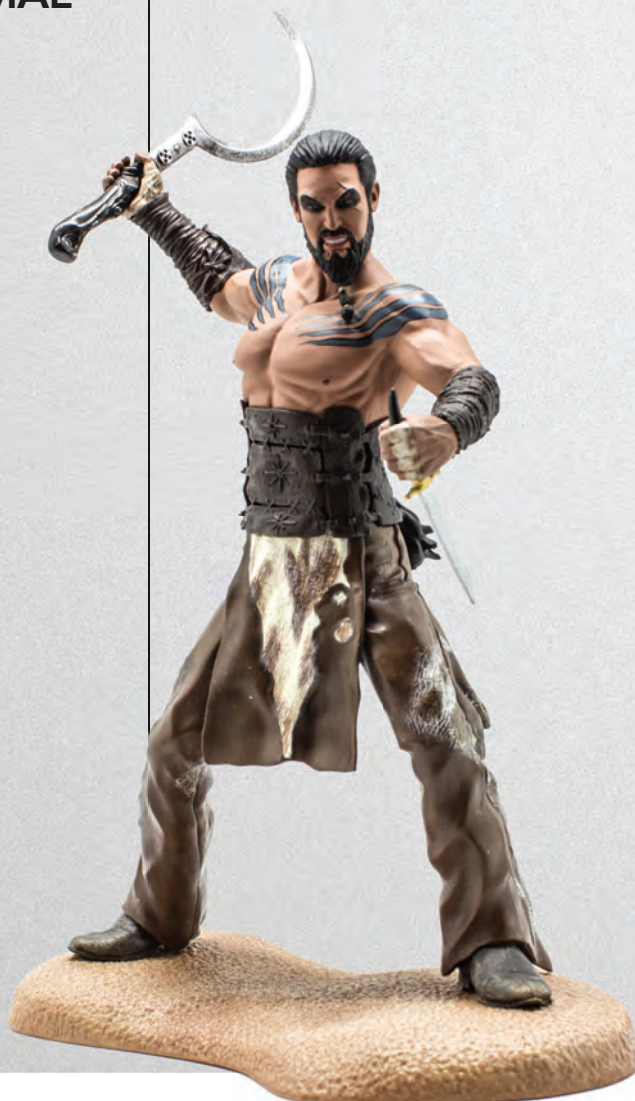
- Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- RRP / R350

Thermal imagery or infrared imagery (snake-o-vision) is how the Predator can spot warm-blooded creatures in the dense jungles of Central America. There is a whole lot of science and bananas about how it all works, but it's not light reading, and not what you came here for. Bottom line – this figurine is supposed to represent what Major Alan "Dutch" Schaefer (Arnold Schwarzenegger) looked like under the Predator's IR image filter (before the cold mud bath). We checked the packaging and were disappointed to not find a little sachet of sand for making your own mud. This 17.5 cm tall figurine isn't how you celebrate a 25th anniversary; it's cheaply made and the supplied gun and knife don't fit well in the hand poses. The final slap in the face – there's no "heat" painted on the back of the figure implying that all Arnold would need to do is turn around to defeat the Predator. The thinking here is uniquely sound, trying to represent this vision mode in a figurine. Perhaps if they had of used a different technique or something else this might have worked out better. It's somewhat pricey and is something only clinically insane collectors would want or those into it for the novelty factor.

► GAME OF THRONES KHAL DROGO FIGURE

- Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- RRP / R450

For many this guy represents the first time they realised that the amazing TV series *Game of Thrones* wasn't going to be pulling any punches. He's a good man, a strong warrior, loves his gorgeous wife Daenerys Targaryen, treats his people well and then is killed like it's nothing. Some people are still sad. [Clearly you're one of them. Ed] This two piece Dark Horse figure stands at around 30cm (with sickle in hand) and is permanently attached to a sand coloured base. It's well detailed and features a flappable lion cloth and swishy ponytail. You want this: Drogo got a bum deal in the series so let him live on in your weird imaginary world; make him a worthwhile offering like a Barbie doll and Penelope dragon to play with in your geek den. He deserves only the best.



➤ MINECRAFT CREEPER

- ➊ Supplier / Dark Carnival
- ➋ Website / www.darkcarnival.co.za
- ➌ RRP / R350

Like this company needs any more money. They (Mojang) could probably afford to give one of these to each child on the planet and not even notice it. That aside, if you're a fan of the game, any merchandise is an automatic must-have. It's just not possible to walk past a foam rubber pickaxe without handing over your cash. This Creeper is made from that type of plastic you find surrounding novelty night lights: it's tough and has a translucent quality about it. The head turns and the whole kit comes with a single diamond block. TNT is probably more suitable in the case of the creeper, but we'll take diamonds any day. He/she/it stands 15cm tall and puts a little fun spin on the most dangerous enemy in the game. Just remember not to put him too close to anything you like.



➤ HOTWHEELS ELITE THE DARK KNIGHT TRILOGY BATMOBILE

- ➊ Supplier / AWX
- ➋ Website / www.awx.co.za
- ➌ RRP / R3,290

It's a highly detailed 1:18 model of the Tumbler from the Christopher Nolan movies. We realise that many of you would rather have a 1:1 model of the lovely Anne Hathaway but that kind of technology isn't available yet. The big catch with this model is that it features a metal plinth with a sample of the material used for the Batman cape in the movies. It's not actually from the movies, but it is cut from the same cloth as those from the movies. The "limited edition" part means that if you buy one of these you'll be joining an army of 5,000 other *Batman* fans with the same car (they're not individually numbered either so keep that in mind). For the movie, four of these cars (for different purposes) were actually built and cost around \$250,000 in total to put together. The model is an epically detailed die-cast replica from the movies and for collectors is something really special – the cape material makes for an excellent talking point.

This is a rather stunning tribute to an unforgettable trilogy of movies.





► INDIANA JONES ON HORSE LIMITED EDITION STATUE

- Supplier / Dark Carnival
- Website / www.darkcarnival.co.za
- RRP / R2,300

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade was a great movie, it had all the right kinds of things in it, religious artefacts, Nazis causing trouble and of course Sean Connery. The new one had Russians, aliens and the monkeying Shia LaBeouf, and while it did a fun job bringing Indy back, it didn't quite hit the mark like we all wanted it to. As for the statue, Indiana rides 28cm tall and can be seen galloping on his horse while shooting his sidearm at imaginary bad guys. The base has a nice dust kicking up effect and the weighty statue looks like a still frame cut out of a classic Indy high speed chase. There is plenty of detail from the horse's face to Indy's trademark outfit – bullwhip included. The detail on his face could be a little more realistic but matches the overall feel of the statue. Indiana can be separated from his horse but the way he is posed only really works on the horse. Or, if you're the risk taking type perhaps attached to your cat. This is an epic limited edition statue (1,750 in total) that would look proud in any display cabinet.

► SUPER MARIO CHESS COLLECTOR'S EDITION

- Supplier / Dark Carnival
- Website / www.darkcarnival.co.za
- RRP / R750

Here we have a great blending of ancient gaming concepts. Mario's Heroes face off against Bowser's Troops on the old checkerboard battlefield. We've seen many special edition chess sets come and go in our time – *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* are good examples. Of course everyone played and loved the various versions of *Battle Chess* over the years, but we're not here to talk about that. These sets bring your fantasy heroes to life and show you what they might look like as rooks, knights and bishops locked in a deadly but very strategic battle. This set is a full and proper chess set with all 32 pieces present and accounted for – the king is Bowser and Peach is a bishop on the other side as an example. The figures are well made and feel solid, but the board is folded up and feels like a little more could have been done with it (but then it wouldn't fit in the tin). As a novelty item this is great, just don't bring it to a proper tournament where they expect you to be serious.



▶ REVIVAL Volume Three

- 1 Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- 2 Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- 3 RRP / R209

When we first picked up *Revival Volume One*, it struck us as a special comic – one that’s “going places”, as it were, and now by this third volume we can clearly see that it certainly is. Sure, some of the spark has gone – you can only shock your readers so many times before it becomes boring, but *Revival* is developing into an intense and highly character-driven story that manages to create more depth in the small backwater town in which it takes place than most books do with a whole universe. Maybe that’s the trick...

It certainly won’t be for everyone, though. *Revival* calls itself a “rural noir”, and we suppose in this case noir means it’s okay for the narrative to flit about madly between characters and situations. It makes for decidedly heavy reading for a graphic novel, but if you’re on the lookout for a mature comic that’s still has room for growth, then this is definitely one to go for.



▶ CHEW Volume Eight

- 1 Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- 2 Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- 3 RRP / R199

Chew is weird. Like, really weird. But gosh it’s funny. And how could it be anything else when it centres around an already dysfunctional family whose members have the ability to see through time when they consume something? Seeing the future of anything that you eat (people included – there’s plenty of casual cannibalism in the series by this stage) or the memories of anyone who’s eating the same meal as you at the same time make for a strange tale, and *Chew* holds nothing back. This oddball story is accompanied by delightfully bright and expressive art from Rob Guillory. *Chew* is Guillory’s first and only big-time graphic novel series and he’s already won a couple of awards for his efforts; we expect he’ll go very far in the future (and we don’t even need to bite off his big toe to see that).



▶ SAGA Volume Three

- 1 Supplier / Cosmic Comics
- 2 Website / www.cosmiccomics.co.za
- 3 RRP / R219

Smart, sassy dialogue and bizarrely mundane characterisation is a mix that you might not expect to make sense, but this third volume of *Saga* proves that the formula is still going strong. This epic tale of people with wings and horns and more attitude than a bus full of high schoolers will appeal to anyone with an open mind and high tolerance for curse words. It’s beautifully illustrated, too: Fiona Staples handles all of the artwork and it’s because of this that there is such synergy between the painterly backgrounds and slick, well-rendered characters.

▶ DIRECTORY

WHERE TO FIND ALL THE STUFF FEATURED IN THIS ISSUE

Apex Interactive	011 796 5040
AWX	011 789 8215
Corex	011 700 7188
Cosmic Comics	011 782 0819
Dark Carnival	011 025 5178
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GG

by Tarryn van der Byl

[CENSORED]

Where to start, or rather, how to end? This gaming diva lives in Cape Town and now also runs a lot of IGN Africa. Fear her. The end.



You've probably read Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but just in case you were tragically neglected as a child, it's a book about a girl who falls into a rabbit hole and discovers a place full of psychotropic drugs, subversive tea parties, and at least one serial killer queen with a peculiar penchant for posh ball sports and some serious obsessive-compulsive issues with garden maintenance. Whether the other two of these things were the inevitable consequence of the first one is (mostly) irrelevant¹, but the real problem with the story, according to Chinese governor Ho Chien, was the talking animals. Claiming that the anthropomorphic characters were an insult to proper human beings, and fearing the potentially "disastrous" repercussions of teaching kids to regard people and animals as equal, he banned the book in Hunan province in 1931. The ban was later rescinded, but they still eat cats over there so I suppose Ho Chien wins this round for the Ministry of Truth, and I win this round for "Most Historically Informative Gaming Column".

And they say games can't teach you anything².

So, just ahead of the game's launch in March, Ubisoft announced that European – and, by necessary regional extension, South African – versions of *South Park: The Stick of Truth* on Xbox 360 and PS3 would be censored. The only explanation was a random and inscrutably vague "marketing decision made by Ubisoft", and it later turned out that the game had been submitted and approved for launch with the censored parts still in it.

Six sequences, comprising approximately 40 seconds of interactive gameplay that included anal probes and abortion, were removed from these versions of the game and replaced with a static image of Henri Vidal's facepalming Parisian sculpture of Cain, and a somewhat sanitised text description instead. Thanks for saving me from myself, Ubisoft, although I'm still not entirely sure why PC gamers and the Americans got a free pass. Maybe they're already going to Hell for some other reason, but this one time, I ate a Chomp I'd bought for my boyfriend and hid the wrapper so he'd never even know about it, so I'm probably doomed to an

1 But I'll have what she's having.

2 Reading about games counts too, obviously. You can tell your mom and dad to buy you NAG because it's for school.

eternity of torment anyway, so whatever.

It's not that I'm completely opposed to censorship – I mean, it's hard (and, I daresay, morally untenable for any decent person) to argue against bans on things like child porn, for example, or mullets. But I'd prefer to make my own decisions about otherwise inconsequential stuff like bums and dead babies in a game based on a show that's pretty much defined by its outrageously offensive content, already rated 18+ FOR GROWN-UP ADULT PEOPLE ONLY MMMKAY, and features "Jew" as a playable character class. It's not like anybody was thinking, "Okay, the ginger pubes gross damage modifier is cool but the bums and dead babies are a bit much." There are a lot of reasons most people don't move to North Korea, and that kind of personal freedom of choice is one of them. And, you know, everything else, but the point is, what sort of "marketing decision" doesn't actually apply to the market? A bad one, that's what, and it only takes a few bad "marketing decisions" before we're all eating cats. **NAG**

EXTRA LIFE

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