

play



BloodRayne 2

Meet the new first lady of gaming...
before she tears your head off



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Feature

The Red Star

Enter the comic zone with the team behind 'D4's action surprise



Interview

Second Sight

Free Radical's psyche de force completely analyzed



Scene stealer

Sly 2

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Iga and Kojima speak Super Milk Chan Secrets of Kingdom Under Fire Street Fighter double-dose

INSIDE

HOT SHOTS TIPS

1 PuttCrusher04 on the Short Game

There are two places I like to blow off steam. One is the wrestling ring, where I see how high I can throw other wrestlers. The other is the putting green. A good putt depends on a proper grip. I grip the putter firmly, but just loose enough so I don't shatter it with my bare hands.

419, 420...



When it comes to putting, mental preparation is key. For me, bench-pressing a golf cart and a couple hundred push-ups usually do the trick.



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2

BunkerBreaker007 on Getting Out of the Sand

People always ask how I learned to conquer these mighty sand traps. I don't know. That's like asking how gale-force winds learn to blow just as a dude's ready to tee off. All I do know is that ever since I was a kid, I liked surfing near sand, sitting on sand, even eating sand. But that was on a dare.




Before attempting to get that ball out, thoroughly wax your wedge. Better too much than not enough.

Swing under the ball and lift it out of the sand. Then do a thorough toe check for any signs of sand jam.



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Letter from the Editor

33

Let's get ready to grumble

Does anybody remember flicker? Those 8-bit boss battles over black backgrounds where actual hunks of your hero or the boss might actually think in plain at any given moment? It wasn't all that long ago. Flicker was console gaming's first Achilles' heel, followed by slowdown for the dreaded slowdown and flicker) and then, with the advent of 16-bit, scaling, or a lack thereof, as chunks of pseudo 3D backgrounds abruptly stuttered into view. Soon enough, however, the advent of actual 3D beyond the smooth stylings of Mode 7, a technique operating well within its limitations but devoid of architecture) via polygons took hold, courtesy of Nintendo's FX chip, and we were so enamored with anything even remotely smooth (Star Fox or Stunt Race FX anyone?) that we don't still love those games) that things like detail and frame rates never even crossed our minds. It wasn't until the introduction of the Saturn and PlayStation that we began to squirm. With the splendor of 2D melting away, a marked drop in detail exposed a myriad of crude 3D by-products. Seams, club hands, clipping and/or fogging... We were promised "arcade quality." So then why did Daytona pop into existence as we headed down the backstreet? We wanted fingers...then round fingers...and then detailed fingers. And no seams; get rid of those too. Square and Capcom responded by spending polys on making better characters and placing them in pre-rendered backgrounds, and we've been closing the gap ever since. These days, we're down to gripping over realistic hair, facial expression, animation routines for inclines and stairs, independently moving eyes, actual layered clothing, texture depth and so on. But why are we so nitpicky amidst all of this amazing 3D? As we close in on yet another year, we're looking for things that will be hands-on with new hardware inside a year, what horrors

"As fantasy gives way to reality, I'm noticing technology more than ever..."

will tomorrow's consoles bring? Will games finally be perfect, or appear more flawed than ever? Any designer or modeler will tell you, fantasy is one thing, but reality is quite another.

Thinking back to how completely blown away I was by my Neo Geo, or how I went days without sleep playing the original Zelda, I almost feel guilty poking holes in today's games, but the strange thing is that the more real games become, the more I find myself bothered by what should be inconsequential elements. As fantasy gives way to reality, I'm noticing technology more than ever, since so many realistic games have become less about prowess and skill and more about the epic or cinematic experience. Games of the fantastical variety get off easy, but as technology gets better, realistic ones—which often appear more contorted and fake than ever—face daunting challenges. When the new consoles arrive, if publishers expect the same development times as today (which they will), what about the guy trying to model the perfect human ear?

With the next wave of consoles, I'm thinking about real fur for all my critter games, or a Voodoo Vince made of real burflap...better trees, grass, skies and architecture...acety dragons, real horses, slimy orcs with individually rotted teeth, tilanic, festering bosses...but what about the NPC on the street? These days we accept that ancillary characters resemble rejected mannequins, and furniture, phones, computers and appliances look like the stuff our moms used to stick on the fridge, but when people begin looking like people and stuff like stuff (if indeed that's next), I'll be looking for touchies like power cords, buttons, AV inputs and actual continuity in game models. I mean, let's face it—no one could live in any of the apartments in Max Payne, but soon it will need to look like you actually could. So the answer for me is clear: I know what I'll be grumbling about in the future. But what about you? I play games roughly 60 hours a week. Do you notice fake sinking into stairs, unnatural movement and frigid Weebles? And if so, do you care, or are you too busy playing to it to matter? What's in your complaint box?

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"Absolutely stunning...boasting dazzlingly evocative sequences. Oshii's vision is certainly impressive enough for this viewer to want to go back for more."

MIDNIGHT EYE - JASPER SHARP

"From the first scene, it's evident that this is another glorious product of director Mamoru Oshii."

AIN'T IT COOL NEWS - MORIARTY

*When
machines
learn to feel,
who decides
what is
human...*

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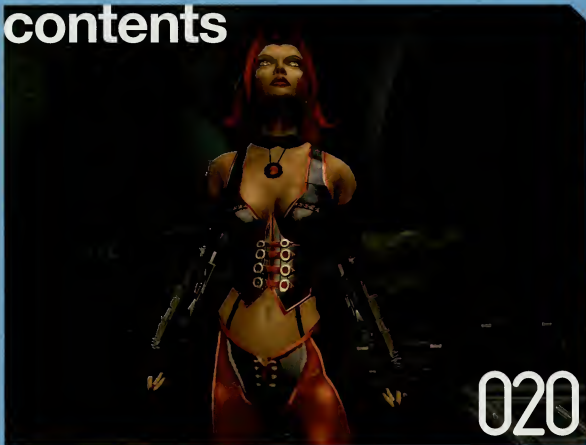
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EXCLUSIVELY IN THEATRES SEPTEMBER 17

contents



074

World of Warcraft



092

Milk Chan



104

Street Fighter: The Comic

008

playback

Sounds like a vote to embargo embargoes

012

ink

Official DG update, Ty Tiger goes multimedia

020

cover story

BloodRayne 2

The sultry she-vampire is back—not just in BloodRayne 2, but in comics, movies, MTV and more!

028

previews

Second Sight 028, The Red Star 032, Dead or Alive: Ultimate 036, Sly 2: Band of Thieves 040, Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater 044, Nano Breaker 046, X-Men Legends 048, Shadow of Rome 050, Johnny Whitefever 051, Tek 2: Staff of Dreams 052, Viewtiful Joe 2 053

054

preview gallery

Including Devil May Cry 3, TMNT 2, Final Fantasy XII, Full Metal Alchemist, Oddworld Stranger and more

058

reviews

Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders 058, Asterix & Obelix XXL 062, Spy Fiction 064, Headhunter: Redemption 065, Star Ocean: Till the End of Time 066, Sudoku 067, Astro Boy 068, Silent Hill 4: The Room 069, Ghosthunter 070

071

play mobile

Featuring Mario Pinball Land, Mario Party Advance, TRON 2.0: Killer App and Mega Man Anniversary Collection

072

review gallery

Featuring Gradus X, Catwoman, Amazing Island, Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow (GC) and Viewtiful Joe (PS2)

074

play pc

Delve deep behind the scenes of World of Warcraft, then go deep underground in Armies of Exigo. Also: Rome: Total War and more

083

play sports

The summer Olympics have arrived, and with them, Athens 2004 for PS2. Plus: ESPN NFL 2K5, in-ring action with Rumble Roses and WWE SmackDown vs. Raw and more

086

play anime

You want weird? We got weird. Witness Dokkoids, Birth and behind the scenes of Milk Chan. Very cool, but still very weird.

099

play media

It's multimedia overload in our four-page Comic-Con blow-out! Also: the Street Fighter comic, plus movies and music

108

gear

The latest and greatest in cell phones, car stereos and portable audio/video devices

110

toys

Witness one of 2004's most anticipated toy lines in the making: SOTA Toys' Street Fighter Round 2

"High adventure from the creator of Lara Croft™; Galleon is a triumph!"

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Wonder!

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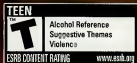
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Action!

Daredevil heroics, superhuman fighting skills and jaw-dropping athletics are delivered through groundbreaking and effortless controls.

Romance!

Female company for Rhama includes Faith, redheaded mystic healer and M'khoko, martial arts master.



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Doh!

You were looking for a group of people that got together for play Zelds: Four Swords Adventures... well, there are seven of us. Seven that have been willing to set aside a Friday and Saturday night, planned a week in advance just for this game. The surplus three even made for some uncomfortable conversations: "You guys are playing Four Swords tonight? How many guys you got? Oh, four more?... well, OK. Call me if someone bails?" Moreover, our group has been competing with another for the big-screen in our dorm common room. They were playing too—and we don't know each other. Single player was OK, but you've missed out on the best aspect of this game. From friendly cooperation in the early evening to strained teasing and finally to a degenerative, cruel, free-for-all competition around 4:00 A.M. that has you laughing so hard you can't see the screen for the tears in your eyes. For having a monopoly on force games because you put your teammates in harm's way to harvest the dropped gems every time they die. For always giving the "nice guy" vote to the guy who's playing the purple Link just for putting up with all the guy jokes. How could Play, of all game mags, harp on the 2D graphics of the Four Swords? I thought you guys were above that sort of thing. All the sprites/animations are richly done, the clouds overhead cast shadows, you can see the Links' breath in the cold, they leave tracks in the snow, all the fire gives off heat distortion—this is a good-looking game! I really enjoy being able to move instantly and seamlessly from the TV to the GBA without ever getting tripped up on graphics or perspective or controls. Nintendo did everything right with this game, and I'll be first in line to buy however much more of this they care to dish out. Co-op will be the next big thing for games. And 2D or 3D? Who cares! Either way it's going to look great on these latest generation.

-Harrigan

You've got me all wrong, I swear... Well, at least halfway. I was referring to the odd lone ancillary Weeble-like character. (Plus, you haven't seen my old Trapper Keeper; it was pretty cool.) I love, love, love the dressed-up 2D in Four Swords. I'm merely commenting that I want more of this type of gameplay down the road as technology continues to evolve. Imagine a fully rendered top-down traditional Zelda! Just look at Crystal Chronicles. 3D can be Nintendo magic... I hope hand drawn 2D lasts forever; I just prefer traditional side-scrolling 2D as opposed to overhead stuff, but I deeply respect both. As for "the seven," I appreciate the criticism. I may indeed be missing something... but I doubt it. Single-player games have made me anti-social.

Next street

I've been reading your columns since way back when you

were with GameFan and have a few questions for you. If NextBox comes out next year, do you think it'll be better for Microsoft or do you think it'll hinder them because Sony and Nintendo might be able to use the extra time to make their next consoles more powerful? I've also heard that Rare will be making Killer Instinct 3 as a launch title for NextBox...true? Lastly, why does it seem that Capcom has been ignoring the Xbox as far as 2D fighters? Yeah Xbox has Street Fighter Anniversary Collection coming out, but that's it? Everyone else can come out with a part 4 to their fighters, but Capcom seems to be casting aside SF. I know that part 4 could be awesome if they brought in some relatives and made Sheng Long a real boss, maybe a couple of new bosses...? Anyway, Play is the magazine and your advice is always great. Take it easy.

-Leo

Since the technology is pretty much in play for the next round, it's looking like, for the first time, that the first to market may not actually be screwed later on. Plus, given what we're about to be blessed with, the focus should once again land solely on content as technology will have reached an important plateau. As for SF, we couldn't

"Honestly, nothing pisses me off more than having to buy a magazine I don't like or otherwise wouldn't buy because some pencil-pusher needed a raise."

agree more, Leo; in fact, a Capcom representative pulled me aside at E3 and asked if I thought a brand-new Street Fighter should be 2D or 3D...so you never know. I said 2D, of course... as for Killer Instinct 3, the official word from Rare is that there is no official word from Rare, which means it's probably in the works, otherwise they'd have just said "Er, no," like they do every time I beg for more Battletoads.

Abe escape

I have a bone to pick with the folks at Microsoft after a certain Oddworlder they cut from their up coming lineup. I have loved the Oddworld games from the very beginning. Abe and Munch are a big reason I bought my magic black box...witty, really good stories...nice cinematics. And Munch's Odyssey was no exception; if you don't have this game get it. In fact, Munch became a platinum hit, so how is it feasible to cut the new game? (Maybe they can take the money and publish more crummy war games, wheeeeee...) Which is a whole other subject.

I am sick of 50 million war games. I was really looking forward to popping open a few beverages from Vendo's, flatulating at wild Muddokons, blasting a few slugs and slogs and chanting up a storm.

-Mike W.

Well Mike, good news and bad news. The good news is that the new game, Oddworld Stranger, is coming courtesy of EA, but the bad news is that it doesn't look like you'll be blasting slugs or hitting the Vendo's. Check out our preview in this issue. Hey—change is good. These guys are still on another planet.

Feedback!

Way to go on "Embrango this." Honestly, nothing pisses me off more than having to buy a magazine I don't like or otherwise wouldn't buy because some pencil-pusher needed a raise. And half the time they're poly-bagged and really shitty first looks at that. What a waste. These so-called exclusives have the reverse effect they're intended to. Do these companies think we're stupid? One smelly rat, my friend.

-Slug Jet

Exclusives almost always suck anyway. Once all of you buy the real game, Xbox or sometimes OXM get a game, that's when readers can really gauge it anyway. I look at the exclusives at the newsstand and then throw them back.

-Osho

I notice that you guys usually put good or interesting games on your covers instead of "big" games. Is this why? For this reason, I hope things stay the same. Sorry, but the day I see a GTA "exclusive first look" cover on Play is the day I stop reading magazines. Covers like Panzer Dragoon, Castlevania, Primal, Viewtiful Joe and Advent Fingzer are part of the reason I actually pay for a magazine. I bought all those games and love them all.

-Bill B.

...Almost as worthless as all these stupid discs. Nine bucks for internet movies and some skinny magazine written by angry people. I have G4, man, I don't need pumped up self-promotion. "Only in so and so" Ooh, like I'm not on the internet. I get a lot of Japanese magazines and sometimes they'll all have the same cover story and just cover the game their own way. Now that's cool. I can't even read them and I pay 10 bucks.

-V. Triplik

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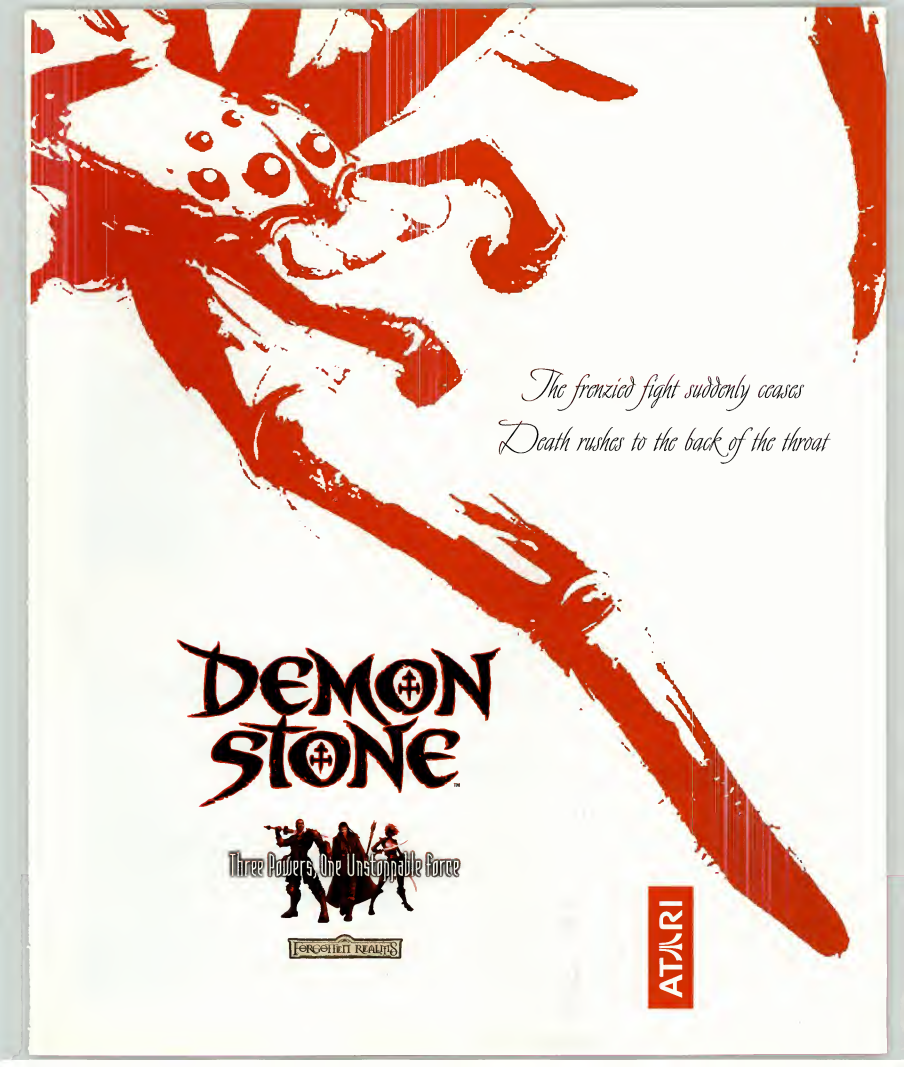
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*The frenzied fight suddenly ceases
Death rushes to the back of the throat*

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FORGOTTEN REALMS

ATARI

Final DS hardware revealed

For Nintendo's new portable, change is very, very good

No matter what the opinion of its potential capabilities, the Nintendo DS was already stalled right out of the gate with its inelegant, questionable design choices. Nintendo stated that tweaks would be made, so it comes as no surprise that a final, immediately more appealing design has just been unveiled. Outside the obvious aesthetic touches, the basic functions have remained the same, with a few subtle button changes and slightly larger layout. The addition of stereo audio is obviously a big plus. As for the tangible effects the redesign will have on the system when it comes to extended gameplay, real scrutiny has to wait until Nintendo

gets the system—now officially called Nintendo DS—100 percent locked down and in our hands. When it hits yours is still up in the air, as is how much this inventive handheld will drain your pocketbook. Nintendo's certainly confident the wait's gonna be worth it. "The Nintendo DS will change the future of hand-held gaming," says Satoru Iwata, president of Nintendo Co., Ltd. "Dual screens, chat functions, a touch screen, wireless capabilities, voice recognition—these abilities surpass anything attempted before, and consumers will benefit from the creativity and innovation the new features bring to the world of video games."

Not only does the DS look far sleeker than preliminary versions, but it also has stereo sound.



A new fantasy for Sakaguchi

FF creator founds studio



For years, Hironobu Sakaguchi has been revered as the father of the Final Fantasy franchise, but now it appears that the legendary designer is stepping out from the shadow of his monolithic creation with the formation of a new Japanese game studio. Called Mist Walker, Sakaguchi's new company intends to focus purely on game development, leaving the publishing duties to others, and, not surprisingly, RPGs seem to be at the top of the studio's to-do list. How this factors in to Sakaguchi's relationship with Square Enix (which became extremely strained following the failure of the *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* film) is unknown at this time.

Ty! Krome's kifty roams

Good on ya!



With the high-profile sequel to the million-selling *Ty Tiger* almost here, Krome Studios is about to see their colorful cast of toon-inspired characters reach even more imaginations as they make the jump to television and DVD. Handling the small-screen animation honors will be DPS Film Roman, which is known for its work on *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill*. "This is an incredible opportunity for the *Ty the Tasmanian Tiger* franchise," said Robert Walsh, chief executive officer of Krome Studios.

"The light-hearted humor and mad-cap adventures of the games will be brought to a new medium and wider audience. With DPS Film Roman's experience breathing life into animated stars such as *Hulk*, *Hill* to *Homer Simpson*, our boomerang-wielding *Tasmanian tiger* has prestigious company."

"We are always looking to work with unique characters with global appeal, and the characters from *Ty the Tasmanian Tiger* are superstars," added DPS Film Roman Chief Executive Officer John Hyde. "It is rare to have videogame characters developed for the pre-teen market that are suitable for the crossover, but when they do, it can be a phenomenon. We see this as an opportunity to grow an established character beyond its gaming fan base."

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and
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UNDER 13
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AND SOME MILD LANGUAGE

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Bizarre revelations from the 2D zone...

Alien Hominid invades console

We were wondering who that yellow freak at Comic-Con was... The first web game to make the jump from the internet to home console is a hyper-charged 2D throwback! Break out the Pearl-Jam! But fear not, fans of the Hominid (the original prototype has been downloaded over six million times)—this ain't the web game you know and love. Alien Hominid has been juiced to the max for its console debut, completely re-drawn and re-coded from scratch. The sprites are larger, the frame-rate is faster, the thing oozes parallax, the bosses are so huge they had to zoom the camera to impart the meatiness and the explosions are out of control, said to rival those of Gunstar Heroes. Behemoth, a small group of veteran developers who serves no man, are keeping it as real as any 2D hound could possibly ever hope for. 2D lives! Mwahahaha!



Damn, that's a big boss. What's a web-born alien to do?

Gaming's new evildoers

Former employees of Blizzard and Neversoft are planning to conquer the video game world with the formation of development house Supervillain Studios. Founded by game designer Tim Campbell (most recently working in an ancillary role on World of Warcraft and StarCraft: Ghost), Steve Ganem (multiplayer programmer from the Tony Hawk series) and game designer Chris Rauch (also a Tony Hawk vet), the group came together earlier this year, though they only recently announced their master plan to develop software for the PlayStation 2, PSP and Xbox. Ironically, their first project as a self-contained evil entity is to lend support to the creation of Activision's upcoming Tony Hawk's Underground 2, but they also have a "secret weapon," dubbed the Automaton Engine, to be used as a catalyst in PSP software creation. Of course, according to the company's recent press release, they've also got a Death Ray in the works if the game thing doesn't pan out.

Fight in style

Street Fighter controllers from NubyTech

When we reviewed Capcom's Street Fighter Anniversary Collection last issue, one of the few flaws we could find with the game was that it just doesn't play as well with the PlayStation 2 controller, given that it only has four face buttons instead of six. Well, NubyTech seems to have just the thing to correct that—Capcom-licensed six-button Street Fighter pads. Four titles of the post-1991 era performed with different colors and layouts: UDON artwork will be available to let you show where your Street Fighter loyalties lie, be it with Ryu, Ken, Chun Li or Akuma. Previously, NubyTech has released licensed controllers featuring characters from King of Fighters, Ninja Gaiden and Onimusha 3, among others. The Akuma Street Fighter pad should be available by the time this issue hits newsstands, with the other pads following shortly after.



News Bits & Rumors

Activision has announced that Tony Hawk developer Neversoft is working on an amazing new original property; too bad they didn't say what it is or divulge any details, except that it's not a sports game and it's coming in 2006... Capcom has changed the name of their upcoming 2D fighter from Capcom Fighting Jam to Capcom Fighting Evolution. They've also announced five new characters: Zangief (SF2), Karin (SFA3), Urien (SF3), Aneka (Darkstalkers) and Nool (Warzards)... Another Final Fantasy VII? In addition to the Advent Children movie and Bafora Crisis mobile game, another FFVII title is rumored to be in development... Nintendo is "primed" to release a new GameCube bundle; this fall packed with Metroid Prime, a Metroid Prime 2: Echoes playable demo and possibly the original Metroid on a GC disc... Speaking of Nintendo, it looks like Wario Ware 2 is becoming a reality on GBA... Still no official release date/pricing info for the DS, but rumors point to it hitting before Thanksgiving at \$180... Mario Party 6 will have microphone functionality, but it's yet unknown how much it will factor into gameplay. The microphone will likely be packed with the game... Namco has announced that they will bring the bizarre Japanese PS2 hit Katamari Damacy to the U.S. this fall. You play an alien who must roll up sticky clumps of objects to save the universe... Film composer Danny Elfman, whose most recent work can be heard in Spike-Mon 2, has provided the theme music for Microsoft's Fable... Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer commented that the next Xbox will not be out "in the next year." Lots of ways to read into that one.

Hand exercises for gamers that won't make you go blind

Learn to handle your stick

Just in case adolescent male gamers aren't getting enough "hand exercises" already, the American Society of Hand Therapists has issued a list of numerous exercises and helpful hints to ward off any potential injuries that could be associated with video games. These hand-health pros have issued a "national education alert" about video games, since, according to their recent study, extended play can cause damage to your hands and upper extremities. Here's an example of what the organization suggests to ward off "Nintendo Thumbs" and other devastating ailments: "Extend an arm in front of you, making sure the elbow is completely straight. With your palm down, take the opposite hand and bend the hand down toward the floor. Then turn the palm up, and stretch the hand up toward your body. This stretches the forearm and wrist muscles. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times." Or you could try: "Open up hands and spread the fingers as far as possible. Hold for 10 seconds and repeat eight times." Additional tips were provided, such as: "Tell your child to use a neutral grip when holding the controller. A neutral grip is when the wrist is straight, not bent in either direction (not strong or weak). It will allow for wrist motion in a plane where more motion is available in the wrist." Like teenage boys need new ways to exercise their hands. Should you like to know more, you can visit <http://www.asht.org>.



The game controlling you?

You might be playing too much Final Fantasy XI Online when you need one of these—it's the official FFXI Vana'diel clock, and it's coming this fall to drag players even further into Square Enix's virtual world. Aside from providing the day, date and time here on Earth, it also keeps track of the lunar cycle within FFXI's world of Vana'diel. Featuring four tones based upon the environments of The Kingdom of San d'Oria, The Grand Duchy of Jueno, The Republic of Bastok and The Federation of Windurst, as well as four alarm settings to keep track of events within the game, such as guild shop hours, the clock ensures that you'll be thinking of FFXI even if you're not playing it. The clock will sell for \$45.

Famicom Mini...round 3



As with the previous Famicom Mini games, series 3 will feature the super-cool and super-cute miniature versions of the original packaging.

While American gamers are still waiting for an announcement about a second series of Classic NES Game Boy Advance titles (we hear it's only a matter of time), Japan has already unveiled its third round of Famicom Mini games. This time, all the games are re-releases of games that originally appeared on the Famicom Disk Drive, including such favorites as Metroid, Kid Icarus, Zelda II: The Adventure of Link and Castlevania. Rounding out the list are Super Mario Bros. 2 (the Japanese version, which only made it to the U.S. as Super Mario Bros.: The Lost Levels in Super Mario All-Stars) and five Japan-only titles: Famicom Mukashi Banashi Shin Onigashima, Famicom Tantei Club, Famicom Tantei Club Part II, Nazo no Murasame-jo and SD Gundam World Gachapon Senshi Scramble Wars. Look for them from your favorite game importer this summer.



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A dramatic illustration of a bearded man with long, flowing grey hair and a full beard. His eyes are glowing with a menacing red light. He is holding a sword with a dark, textured hilt. The background is a dark blue sky with stars. The overall mood is dark and intense.

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	ESPN NFL 2K5	sega / ps2, xb, gc
02	Madden NFL 2005	ea / ps2, xb, gc
03	Spider-Man 2	activision / ps2, xb, gc
04	Red Dead Revolver	rockstar / ps2, xb
05	Sudeki	microsoft / xb
06	Fable	microsoft / xb
07	Doom 3	activision / pc
08	NCAA Football 2005	ea / ps2, xb, gc
09	The Guy Game	take 2 interactive / ps2, xb
10	Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay	vu games / xb



NPD/TRSTS Top Ten June Game Sales

01	Spider-Man 2	activision / ps2
02	Full Spectrum Warrior	thq / xb
03	Zelda: Four Swords Adventures	nintendo / gc
04	Driver	stan / ps2
05	Spider-Man 2	activision / xb
06	Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay	vu games / xbox
07	Shrek 3	activision / ps2
08	Harry Potter: Prisoner of Azkaban	ea / ps2
09	Super Mario Bros. NES Classic	nintendo / gba
10	Mario vs. Donkey Kong	nintendo / gba



Your Megastore Beckons!



ESPN NFL 2K5
sega / ps2, xb, gc

The best thing in life under 20 bucks? 2K5 not only rivals Madden, but it's full of trademark features that set it apart.



Madden NFL 2005
ea / ps2, xb, gc

What many consider the king of the playstations, Madden for 2005 is everything you'd expect from the ruler of sports gaming.



Fable
microsoft / xb

Choose your fate in the first game with real-time karma. Be as bad or as good as you desire and reap your just rewards...

Staff and reader selections

vote for your most wanted games! database@playmagazine.com

Readers' Most Wanted

database@virginmega.com

01	Halo 2	microsoft / xb
02	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater	konami / ps2
03	Fable	microsoft / xb
01	Jak 3	sony / ps2
05	Kameo: Elements of Power	microsoft / xb



Chris Hoffman

some@editor

01	Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater	konami / ps2
02	Viewtiful Joe	capcom / ps2
03	Spy Fiction	simmy / ps2
04	Gradius V	konami / ps2
05	Rumble Roses	konami / ps2

Dave Halverson

editor@writer

01	Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders	mgsi / xb
02	The Red Star	activision / xb
03	Sly 2: Band of Thieves	sony / ps2
01	Ty 2	ea / xb
05	Blinx 2: Master of Time & Space	microsoft / xb



Michael Hobbs

art@director

01	Gradius V	konami / ps2
02	Zelda: Four Swords Adventures	nintendo / gc
03	Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes	konami / ps2
04	Onimusha 3: Demon Siege	capcom / ps2
05	Shadow of Rome	capcom / ps2

Brady Flechter

executive@editor

01	Ghosthunter	namco / ps2
02	Silent Hill 4: The Room	konami / ps2
03	Second Sight	codemasters / ps2
01	Shadow of Rome	capcom / ps2
05	Gradius V	konami / ps2



Nelson Lui

associate@art

01	Doom 3	activision / pc
02	ESPN NFL 2K5	sega / xb
03	Gradius V	konami / ps2
04	Tales of Symphonia	namco / gc
05	Mario vs. Donkey Kong	nintendo / gba

Art: Blizzard's World of Warcraft




play games



BloodRayne

Majesco's leading lady creeps ever closer to gaming supremacy



Not so long ago, the brain trust at Bungie and Microsoft got together with developer Terminal Reality to concoct an M-rated empire they could call their own, and emerged with a half-human-half-venomous "Changriol" world of mutant creatures, glowing green eyes, skull-bats, painted-on black-and-red leather pants and a barely-there bralette, and christened her Bloodfayne...

Coming off years of laboring over the formidable 4x4 Evolution off-road racing franchise for GOD games and with a limited budget and timeframe, TR got to work and hammered out a flawed but respectable game, injected with a few hooks that made the rough spots surprisingly palatable. Along with the action-adventure basics, they endowed Rayne with a harpoon for reeling in and straddling her prey, draining them like fleshy cocktails, as well as supernatural senses to perform various vampiric tasks like slowing down time and peering through solid matter, and then dropped her into a Nazi meat grinder where she commenced slicing and sucking her way through Eastern Europe in her bid to become gaming's new leading lady, hoping to plant her lily-white butt in Lady Croft's temporarily vacant throne. A ruthless bloodsucker with a penchant for dismemberment that you still want to sleep with—I say she's got a fighting chance. The world answered back with sales well beyond the half-million mark (not counting the upcoming Japanese release) and a franchise was born. There was work to be done, but they knew, unequivocally, that people liked BloodRayne. Not bad for a game with shoddy collision and a jump only a blind mother could love.

Enter BloodRayne 2. 1935 is now ancient history as we join Rayne amidst her most personal mission yet. Having been deprived of killing her Nazi-collaborating father,

Kagan, Rayne has spent the last 60 years flushing out and killing his offspring—her siblings—who have formed The Cult of Kagan, a vampire nation bent on honoring his legacy by bringing about vampire rule through a device they call "The Shroud," which renders the sun's lethal rays harmless to vampires, while it twists reality into nightmarish perversions. If they succeed, humankind will be reduced to cattle, so humanity hangs in the balance. Hey, sounds like a great movie.

So what's new? Well, lots...in fact, pretty much everything. New models (Rayne and the new ancillary models destroy the first game's), new vision modes like Ghost and Super Feed, an array of fatalities, kill puzzles and impalements that make Mortal Kombat look like Sesame Street, new melee attacks and ground strikes, a target lock, rail sliding, evasive maneuvers, harpoon functions like tugging hunks of environment onto unassuming soon-to-be-flat people or to use as conveyances, living weapons that feed and evolve just like Rayne, and more pole positions than you can shake a dead stripper at. And it's all supported by ragdoll physics, a robust engine, some seriously cool level design and a much meatier cast. This is BloodRayne incarnate; now that she's gotten her fangs wet, consider this her real coming-out party.

Although our pre-beta playable was a mere three levels

"The give and take of BloodRayne 2's battles and gunplay adds an entirely new and infinitely cool dimension to the game..."

Rail-sliding is a cool dynamic, not to mention a fine way to prepare bad-guy sushi.





BloodRayne redefined:
half human, half
vampire, all woman.

long, a few highly enjoyable aspects of the game have already come bubbling to the surface, namely the reworked AI, kill puzzles and various forms of dismemberment and impaling (which are accompanied by the best arterial spray and graphic innards perhaps ever). The enemies in BR2 (and they're so *Hellraiser* now... later, Nazis) are nothing like the first game's walking blood bags, and each is equipped with its own distinct way of countering her advances. Simply attacking Rayne to her victims no longer works. Not only will they throw her off, but follow suit by beating her when she's down. In fact, feeding is now actually difficult. By the time you kick the weapon out of an enemy's grasp, it may have lost too much blood, and when under multiple attacks, there's a propensity to use the quick and efficient vertical blade attack (thus splitting them in two) or guns, making quick work of lesser enemies but completely expelling any blood. Firing at will is no longer an option. Rayne's guns, all six of which can be upgraded, also crave and consume blood, and, when drained, require feeding to avert using Rayne's blood supply, as firing drained weapons depletes her reserves. So there are now two ways to feed, one of which, for the guns, has Rayne impaling and lifting enemies overhead like human IV drips, only to toss them aside like so much limp, dead garbage. The give and take of BloodRayne 2's battles and gunplay adds an entirely new and infinitely cool dimension to the game—and that's without taking into account the new vision modes, which will surely add further variables to the mix. I'm also assured

the bosses are not to be missed.

Elsewhere, the name of the game is platforming—a la some very clever hook-and-release harpoon play along the lines of *Prince of Persia* and now *Catwoman*—among levels that make '02's game look like old *PlayStation* by comparison. So far, while passable, it's here the game needs the most work. For the adventuring and platforming to match the gameplay, music, ambience, story-telling and environments (all of which appear first rate), Rayne is going to need to better connect to the environments. Currently, while the motion-captured animation that's here looks incredible, there's too little of it. Rayne (aside from feeling a tad light) has but two modes outside of her attacks—run and walk—with no variation for stairs, turning or slopes (she comes to rest flat on inclines again), no animation for turning on an axis, and her jump feels tethered to the ground. All things easily remedied, provided they want to take their vixen from B to A status. Here's to hoping, if not praying, they do. To let this sequel out the door, given how much work they've done elsewhere, with Rayne in a state of disconnect, would be almost criminal...and we all know what Rayne does to criminals. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC
Developer: Terminal Reality
Publisher: Majesco
Available: October



More BloodRayne >>



Q&A Key members of the *BloodRayne 2* team offer their insight on the new dawn for their Dhampir queen...

Q • What have you done specifically to make *BloodRayne 2* a better game, and what, if anything, do you still believe needs refining in your particular area of expertise?

Raymond Holmes, Producer

A. When we started BR2, we made sure to first read all the reviews on BR1 and consider all the player feedback. We made it our goal to fix the majority of the big problems players and reviewers had with the game. Players believed they didn't have a lot of control over Rayne's attacks, so we added a fully fleshed out combat system that provides control over blades, kicks, locking on to enemies, blocking

and evading. Players also thought they were hitting air a lot with her blades, so we made them more deadly, but gave the enemies blocking weapons to keep them from being easy kills. Rayne has incredible strength and agility, but in BR1 we only show this in a few moves, so we added a lot of different acrobatic abilities to her repertoire in BR2. There are so many things we added to take BR2 to the next level... From now until we ship, the main focus will be to make sure the gameplay stays fun, and that the game is challenging yet balanced.



"Rayne has incredible strength and agility, but in BR we only show this in a few moves, so we added a lot of different acrobatic abilities to her repertoire in BR2."

Drew Haworth, Dialogue Writer

A. We're really pleased with the *BloodRayne 2* story that the amazing John Shirley helped out with. John wrote *The Crow* and is credited by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling as the "father of cyberpunk." He helped us with structure and a number of characters and scenarios, and we took it from there. The final script is the result of a real team effort.

Our story goals were these: update Rayne to the present and evolve her character; create a cast of characters intriguing enough to match her; create a world that seems much larger and alive than strictly what we can show; and offer a number of surprises.



"The superb Laura Bailey returns to voice Rayne. Considering that Rayne is 60-some years older now, we worked on evolving her voice and mannerisms."

For dialogue, we've gone pro this time, bringing on voice director extraordinaire Christopher Sabat (of *Dragon Ball Z* fame). His expertise has lent remarkable organization, spirit and nuance to the voice performances. Chris can really finesse voice performances out of actors. He and Kyle Richards (Terminal Reality's sound and music director) work together like left and right hands, and have created a really brilliant rendition of our script.

The superb Laura Bailey returns to voice Rayne. Considering that Rayne is 60-some years older now, we worked on evolving her voice and mannerisms. To evoke a character that's lived through and been influenced by a number of cultural events and fads, her speech is peppered with both modern and semi-archaic expressions. As a

MTV Raynes

Oh, the virtues of being an over-sexed Dhampir... even MTV wants in on the action. Majesco is currently working with MTV on a music video for *Evenscence* that will turn the band members into the characters from the game; in other words, you'll hear *Evenscence* but see *BloodRayne* and company. PR vixen Laura Heeb explains:



play: Is this a video that's already been released?
Laura Heeb: Nope. It airs for the first time in August on a show called *Video Mode*.

Was the band mo-capped, or did they have to do anything different to enable the BR2 video to be made?
Nope. But motion capture was done for the BR2 video.

Ah-hai! Fakers!



character, Rayne is more evidently motivated this time out, and undergoes some changes throughout the game.

Some of our favorite voice talents have returned to bolster the cast: Dameon Clarke, Mark O'Neil and Josh Martin (among many), and we've secured some excellent new members, notably Troy Baker, Scarlett McAlister, Liza Gonzales and R. Bruce Elliott.

We've partnered Rayne with the enigmatic Brimstone agent, Severin. Though Rayne is no longer a Brimstone agent, she and Severin share some history hunting down the surviving children of Rayne's prodigious father, the vampire overlord Kagan. Severin provides a great device that lets us move away from a constantly running internal dialogue from Rayne. Now, Rayne and Severin converse during gameplay, which allows the gameplay to progress without an overabundance of cinematics. Not to say that there aren't cinematics—Blur Studios and Animation Farm helped us out there—just that they're sleek and streamlined in order to propel the story without hampering action.

BloodRayne: The Comic Book

Echo 3 Worldwide has received the proverbial nod for a line of BloodRayne comics and will be launching the first book this October in line with the launch of BloodRayne 2. Tentatively titled *BloodRayne: Skies Afire*, the series will feature penciling by Romano Molenaar (Punisher), Lady Death, The Darkness and Witchblade), inking by Marco Galli (Aphrodite IX, Ripclaw, Witchblade, Captain America and Fantastic Four) and writing by Steven O'Connell (Tiger Wrath and The Nest), who is also a professional letterer. The concept cover art shown isn't final, but certainly gives the impression Rayne is in capable hands. Hey, no squeezing!



Jesse Sosa, Character Artist

A. In *BloodRayne 2*, we took a look at what improvements we've made to the engine, and applied that knowledge to our character designs. We made sure to include many dynamic elements like our cloth and hair sims. In *BloodRayne 1*, you mostly were up against uniformed



"Rayne is pretty powerful to begin with, and it was our job to make you, as a player, feel small and meek compared to her vampire brethren."

Scott Wetterschneider, Lead Artist

A. The environmental artists took two important steps to create a rich and convincing world for Rayne to destroy. First, we established a vocabulary of style specific to the *BloodRayne* universe, split into major and minor themes. Every level is a blend of major themes such as "Gothic Architecture" or "Industrial Blight," and minor themes



"Our intention was to make sure that the viewer could tell, by seeing just a single frame of the game, they were looking at *BloodRayne 2*."

Fletcher Dunn, Principal Programmer

A. We have integrated the Open Dynamics engine for physics, and we actually have the thing running well on the PS2, something that not many engines can boast. We've got the standard array of objects like boxes, pipes, etc. in the world that the player can interact with or use for combat purposes. We also have a soft body simulation, which is par for the course. *BloodRayne* has a lot of dead bodies in it, and in *BloodRayne 2*, you throw and kick people around, so it is really put to good use. There's also a lot of dismemberment in *BloodRayne 2*, and this is where we're taking it to the next level: the individual body parts will simulate using soft body simulation. If you chop off an entire leg, for example, the leg doesn't come off as a single "piece" and simulate as a box—the knee joint will continue to be simulated, so the leg will flop around and separate from the main body. Our lead technologist spent several weeks making the "severed limb



"*BloodRayne* has a lot of dead bodies in it, and in *BloodRayne 2*, you throw and kick people around, so it is really put to good use."

simulation" feel just right.

We've overhauled our skeletal animation system. Our compression algorithm has been adjusted and we're now able to store more animation in less space. *BloodRayne* and her enemies have many, many more moves than they did in the first game. We have a new particle system that allows artists to create effects much faster than before. Expect to see many more cool effects in *BloodRayne 2* than *BloodRayne 1*.

Our entire content creation process was overhauled. The changes are many, and are not used at run-time; they won't appear on the box cover and they don't have cool buzzwords. However, they're the most important changes we've made. The increase in efficiency and drastic reductions in turnaround time definitely show in the quality of the game.

I wish we had more more time to make better use of the physics engine. *BloodRayne* interacts with the world in such a physical manner, that if we had more time, we'd find more cool ways to show it off.



Only after
The only thing stopping The Guilt of Kagan from turning humanity into one big drive-thru window is *BloodRayne*.

Rayne on film

Even though the infamous Uwe Boll (*House of the Dead*, *Alone in the Dark*) is directing the *BloodRayne* film, he's operating on his largest budget yet by far—in excess of \$30 mil, with \$10 million earmarked for CGI—with a script penned by Guin Turner, who also wrote the *American Psycho* movie. Shooting commences in Transylvania soon, while casting Rayne is ongoing. Unfortunately, first choice Rebecca Romijn-Stamos had scheduling conflicts. In the meantime, for a good time dial up bloodrayne.com and check out some audition reels...

ILLUSTRATION
 FILM BY UWE BOLL
 / SCREENPLAY BY GUIN TURNER
 / DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
 / MUSIC BY DAVID JULYAN
 / EDITOR CHRIS SCOTT



No cover story would be complete without a hot boss reveal. Say hello to Suzz. www.bloodrayne.com



More Rayne in the forecast...

Following her exposé in an upcoming issue of *Playboy* magazine where she'll make history as the first game heroine to expose her naughty bits, there's also talk of an animated series with a very prominent network and a line of *BloodRayne* collectibles... No word yet on a *BloodRayne* body pillow, but we'll keep you posted.



Bunny Head Logo™. Playboy Enterprises International, Inc.



Rayne in Japan:
The pack shot for the
import version—from
Asia with love.

Free Radical drops the FPS for compelling action-adventure

Second Sight



Poor John. He wakes up in this antiseptic medical facility, his memories completely wiped clean. A little search-and-destroy here, a little sneaking and puzzle solving there, and he ends up discovering cool powers like telekinesis and self-healing. As he moves forward, uncovering the clues to his existence, he begins to find that his mental powers are perfect for teasing around objects and humans—humans who are trying awfully hard to end his role here on Earth for good. As the story flashes back to before John received his mysterious affliction, the proceedings get even more confusing. John sees images of his past and future selves, fired out things about himself he has no idea how to face. Long story short: John Vattic stars in what has turned out to be one of the most absorbing, skillfully crafted, intensely staged action-adventures you've probably never heard of—Second Sight. Credit goes to the ex-GoldenEye and current Time Splitters first-person-shooter talents of Free Radical, whom I spoke with after getting a brief taste of the game at E3. Unfortunately, I received a much deeper build of Second Sight—one that left me with a new addition to the most-wanted list as the fall powerhouse approaches—right after the interview. For an idea of what this game's all about, director David Doak's description follows... **Brady Fletcher**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Free Radical
Publisher: Codemasters
Available: September

Interview David Doak, director, Free Radical

play. You guys have been making first-person shooters for several years now. What prompted you to change gears and make Second Sight? Doak: Well, one thing is that we didn't want Free Radical to just be known as an FPS company! Making Second Sight as a third-person action-adventure game certainly wasn't an easy choice, though—all of our in-house technology was based around first-person games. This was a very different prospect.

The obvious benefit is that you can always see your character on screen—I think this helps considerably with the immersion and storytelling—particularly for Second Sight where we have two timeframes—"before" and "after"—which feature different versions of John Vattic.

What are some of the biggest influences you've

brought over to this new project from working in the FPS genre?

We like shooting in games. FPS shooting, where the player is literally looking down the barrel of the gun, is probably the most immediate realization of the [virtual] shooting experience. Third-person shooting is often handled very badly in games, and we really wanted to demonstrate that it could be done well.

I've only gotten a little taste of the game from the demo, but I was really intrigued by toying around with the psionic powers. Is this a really big aspect of the gameplay? Very cool stuff.

Yep, it's a major element in both the story and the gameplay. The psi powers really add to the player's interaction with the world and also with the AI. There's

also a depth and variety to that interaction. For example, with telekinesis you can scare enemies by spookily manipulating objects, or you can throw the objects at them, or even go all the way and pick the enemy up and throw them out of the window. The charm psychic ability is a kind of mind trick which John Vattic uses to distract enemies so that they look right through him—this allows for a kind of hyperstealth where the player can sneak through impossible situations—non-confrontational use of the psi powers is often very rewarding, as the experience is one of frustrating your control and skill over the enemies.

There seems to be a big mixture of genres and gameplay styles going on. Can you detail what you're going for?

The game began with the storytelling, and then we built the gameplay to accommodate it. The diversity of the experience comes from that approach—for instance, I think the computer interaction in the game began as one simple remote door lock puzzle and grew to encompass CCTVs, searching hard drives, hacking emails and minigames. I guess we're trying to build a believable world, and that has meant letting the player "do" things.

I love your control scheme. You seem to be going for a nice, efficient ease of play while keeping a lot of complexity in the way the character interacts with the environment.

The controls were a fun and scary project for us—having previously spent many years working with FPS controls where there is a consensus and established way of doing things, it was very fresh but challenging to look at third-person controls. There's a lot to look after in a third-person game: player movement, camera management, object interaction, etc. As you say, we wanted to keep the possibility for relatively complex interaction but not compromise the fluidity or scare people off. Basically, it

came down to lots of experimentation and revision.

There was a lot of swearing and frustration along the way, but we're very happy with the results, and I think we've done some very original work on the third-person control interface. Obviously we come from a first-person shooting background and we were always concerned about maintaining gunplayability™ in the transition to third-person. For instance, in *Second Sight*, the targeting lock-on is augmented by a tweakable analog aim, which allows the skillful player to go for headshots.

We're particularly pleased with the sniper rifle, which works by having a second viewpoint on screen representing the targeting reticule. This picture-in-picture system allows for very playable and cinematic sniping.

Free Radical games are starting to carry a very distinct look. Especially those character designs. Are you guys consciously trying to carry a signature style throughout your games, no matter what genre you tackle?

In *Second Sight*, we've gone for a look that is realistic but with strong character. The story of *Second Sight* takes place in a much more serious and familiar world than the *Time Splitters* series. However, our interpretation of that world is through an identifiable Free Radical art style.

With the backgrounds, that means that even industrial or military locations have been somewhat stylized in order that they are more pleasing on-screen—I don't think it's anything different from what happens with film locations—but it's nice that people identify it in Free Radical games.

For the characters, we have deliberately kept an element of caricature in the modeling—this gives a foundation for conveying emotion and characterization in the game. We felt that it was very important not to have bland mannequins—in video game worlds, realistic can too easily become boring.



"I guess we're trying to build a believable world, and that has meant letting the player 'do' things."

—David Dobby, director, *Free Radical*



I love—yes, love—Free Radical's art style and approach to exaggerated characters.

And I like that you're maintaining your lean on a more fantasy-based aesthetic.

The idea with *Second Sight* was to take a contemporary, realistic world and allow ourselves the indulgence of one fantastic element—psychic powers. I'm not sure that necessarily makes us fantasy/sci-fi junkies, but it certainly allowed us to shape an interesting story. The existence and discovery of psychic powers drives the whole game.

This seems to be a substantially more ambitious project than what we've seen with *Time Splitters*.

The amount of assets (art, animation, sound) required for a high production value, narrative-based game is frightening. I remember thinking that with *Second Sight* we had broken the back of the dialogue scripting when we finished the first draft of the end-level cutscenes. No way! That was just the beginning; all of the in-game dialogue and cinematics and signposting and obscure conversations hadn't even been looked at! It really is an enormous task, and then all it has to be animated and managed and controlled in the game code.

What pushed you to concentrate on a more story-driven, single-player adventure?

The story and concept which became *Second Sight* originated back in 1999 when *Free Radical* had just started and we planned to make the game as our first project. Having previously worked on *GoldenEye 007* and *Perfect Dark*, the founders were keen to make another story-based game, but also to innovate in the way the story was presented. However, after a sanity check on what the company might realistically accomplish with its first title, we decided to hold back on the idea until we had the resources and experience to do it justice.

Some very interesting physics going on here...

The physics are a good example of something that we didn't anticipate at the start—once we began to implement the telekinesis, it became clear that in order to have consistency and believability, we would have to seriously tackle the issue of in-game physics. Major work.



How does the dual storyline work? You play as the same character through different points of time, correct?

The game begins with Vattic in the "after" narrative—he awakens in an isolation cell in a U.S. medical facility, bruised, battered and has clearly been experimented on. As he escapes from this medical facility, he realizes he has psychic powers but no memory of who he is or how he got there. At key moments, Vattic has flashbacks to a time six months before when he was a reluctant participant in a military operation (WinterICE) in Siberia, which was attempting to locate a discredited Nazi scientist who claimed to have amazing results in psychic research. The "before" Vattic has no psychic ability and is, in fact, very cynical about the possibility that psychic phenomena exist at all.

How do your actions affect the progression of the story in this past-present duality?

The "before" flashbacks are fully playable levels—not only do they fill in back-story information for Vattic and the player, they also allow the player to change events and influence the "after" narrative. As the game progresses, the



player will gradually uncover the full implications of what actually happened on the WinterICE mission.

It's not a free-form interaction where anything goes; ultimately there is a route through the narrative that we are guiding the player toward, but I think that the way this is done allows the player to explore consequences and possible endings in a very original way.

Do you want the player to play with a specific style, or is it up to me to decide if I want to go for more brute force over the meticulous stealthy progression?

We always wanted the gameplay to feel fairly organic—you can shoot if you want or sneak if that's your bag. The accomplished way to play the game is a bit of both, and really it's a lot cooler to leave the guys alive and scratching their heads long after you've gone. We also have end-of-level stats that let you check up on your gameplay versus compassion.

I'm very impressed by the level design. What do you feel is the key to making a game like this engaging without being tedious? Every stealth game really is quite different in the end. There's an interesting balance issue at work, it would seem.

The key to the stealth in *Second Sight* is that it is enhanced by the Charm ability, which opens up the possibility of "stealth anywhere." You don't have to sit and watch for ages to plan a stealth route—you can improvise dynamically even when people are chasing you. All of the fun of sneaking without the tiresome bits.

I really like the way you've handled the camera. Must be tough to get a complex system like this right, especially after working within the FPS realm.

We spent a considerable amount of time playing around with camera systems—we have a whole bin-load of them... Presentation (through the camera) can actually have a considerable subliminal impact on the player's gameplay style. For *Second Sight*, we've gone for a fairly loose dynamic camera, which facilitates both action and stealth.

And what is your general design philosophy? Is it important to give players many choices in their game? Try to make a game that you yourself like playing. If an implementation is wrong, try to fix it—don't just follow a spec mindlessly. Choices can be good, but if you're telling a story, don't compromise it with dilution just for the sake of it.

Second Sight really grabbed me right away. So don't be modest—tell me what it is about the game you think are some of the high accomplishments.

For me personally, it is realizing the flashback storyline in the game and aspiring to have characters and situations that you care about. *Second Sight* begins with John Vattic in a pretty messed-up state, and then you find out that you, the player, can piece things back together and make it better. I want players to complete the game and feel that they were really involved in the story; play





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The Red Star

Let freedom ring

If action-shooters like *Contra* and *Gunstar Heroes* make your trigger finger quiver, then your next fix is assured, courtesy of none other than Acclaim. The Red Star has all of the rich old-school-melee action we've come to know and love from the likes of Treasure and Sega, along with shooting in line with Japan's best: drop-dead gorgeous visuals and way more than a few surprises. Get a comic book property as striking as *The Red Star*

together with a team made up of ex-Turok and Vexx members, and the end result is no less than a titanic shot in the arm to the category. We pulled aside project manager Kristy Tipton and level designer Stephen Dupree to get a closer look. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Acclaim Studios Austin
Publisher: Acclaim
Available: Fall

Interview

Kristy Tipton, project manager, and Stephen Dupree, lead designer

play: Who makes up the Red Star team? Have you been together long? What was your last project?

Kristy: The Red Star team is a mix of Austin studio folks from Turok and Vexx. We have a few great new additions as well. We've been working together as the Red Star team for the last 18 months; I've been working with some of the team for the last five years. Overall, it's a good team and I'm proud of the work they have accomplished.

How did The Red Star game come about? Did Archangel Studios approach Acclaim or did Acclaim go hunting for them?

Kristy: At the end of our last projects, we started talking about what kind of game we wanted to make. The team was being assembled and we wanted to leverage the talents and abilities of the team. While we were tossing around ideas, one of our brand managers in the UK began to investigate the possibility of making a game from the comic *The Red Star*. Our team was asked to check the comic out and we thought the universe would translate well into an action game. We met later that year with the writer and the creator of the comic series, Christian Gossett. He liked our ideas for the game and preproduction started in April '03.

It's certainly a brilliant graphic novel and comic. What led to you making it into

a genre-busting action-shooter over a more conventional 3D action game?

Stephen: First and foremost, we wanted the Red Star video game to be something that we ourselves would want to play. We felt that there is an abundance of miscellaneous third-person action-adventure games available for those who want that kind of thing. Unfortunately, when it comes to gameplay, many of these titles in that category are really struggling for an identity. There is a general misconception within our industry that it is not the interactive content that attracts people to a title, but a concept sold through some arbitrary marketing campaign. This may be true when selling bars of soap, but not video games. Ultimately, we wanted the Red Star game to be an alternative to these types of titles. Our choice to fuse classic beat-'em-up and shooter-style gameplay, but with a modern look and feel, was a step we took in that direction.

As fabulous as the *Contras* of the world are, the genre has never really evolved. The games are frenetic, beautiful and tough yet addictive, but the Achilles heel has always been that we know we're only going to get five or six levels. So the crazy difficulty (along with the inability to save) is there to drive length. We keep playing until we crack 'em because we love the rush. With *The Red Star*, you hit with hard (but not crazy



hard) difficulty and all of the beauty and awe we love about the genre, yet the game is huge and has a save feature. So it's the rush, only with depth and length. Did you go into this looking to finally move action-shooters to the future?

Stephen: To be perfectly honest, we just wanted to make a good game. There are aspects of *The Red Star* that could be compared to other titles and at the same time there exist qualities not typically associated with action games. Our intentions were not so lofty as to revolutionize a genre. We simply wanted to make an enjoyable, addictive action game that possessed characteristics that would make our game unique and not easily stereotyped. If the creative decisions we have made during development result in drawing more people to appreciate what is today perceived as a niche market, then that's a good thing.

In other words, genre-busting...

Regarding the difficulty, I also really like that playing well rewards the player with more credits to purchase upgrades that, later in the game, become key in clearing levels without having to endure chipping away with sub-par weapons. Not only does this add to the replayability, but it forces players to explore the many nuances you've blessed these characters with. Makita especially reminds me of a Treasure character, with her many melee attacks and crazy juggles. Tell us about her, *Kyuzo* and *Maya*; what can they aspire to gameplay-wise, and how does each differ in the mix?

Stephen: Each character has a play style unique to that character's individual likeness and personality. Not only is the weaponry specific per character, their move set and combo strings are

also unique. This doesn't simply mean that their melee attacks look different. Fundamentally, each character's moves possess inherent properties that can be strategically employed to maximize benefit in any given situation. Likewise, their combo strings are not just a series of fancy animations but are fundamentally different in the semantics of general execution. Peter Ong, the designer primarily responsible for overseeing the production of the melee system, has done a fantastic job ensuring that the playable characters in *The Red Star* are not cookie-cutter regurgitations of a typical hack-n-slash clone.

Yeah, we met Peter at E3—very driven. You've certainly done your homework: the amalgam of melee attacks, shooting, enemy AI and music creates a rarely achieved cadence where you get into a zone and really sink into the game. What are some of the gaming experiences that lead you down this path?

Stephen: To isolate our influences to just a handful of titles would be difficult. If I

had to name a few, I'd say my favorite fighting game is *Samurai Shodown IV*, while Peter is most partial to *Street Fighter*. Ars Shirian, who oversees production of our bulletplay challenges, cites *Psywar* as one of his favorite shooters. A complete list of games that we have enjoyed and analyzed would be extensive. While we have learned much from the games that we have studied, the root of our inspiration largely resulted from the realization that a hole existed in the action genre. We wanted to take what we perceived to be the best attributes of fighting games and shooters and mix these elements together into one cohesive experience. I feel that it is the blending of these genres that makes *The Red Star* video game stand out.

Music is, of course, a huge part of the equation, and this is an empowering mix. I love the ominous chanting layered over the orchestral/electronic mix. *Vexx* had insanely awesome music too...any relation?

Kristy: Yes, there is a connection. Nelson Everhart composed music for both *Vexx* and *The Red Star*. He is an extremely

“Our intentions were not so lofty as to revolutionize a genre. We simply wanted to make an enjoyable, addictive action game...”

Stephen Clarke, lead designer, The Red Star

versatile and very talented composer. We were glad that he could work with us again.

You go nuts with variation: alternate camera angles, Smash TV-inspired arenas, a shooting stage ala *Gradius* and *Thunder Force*, and more pebble-spewing armadas per level than I've ever seen in a ground-based assault. Did you envision this grand action-shooter from day one or was the project kind of taken on a life of its own? It must be challenging making sure that each facet of the gameplay matches the core style.

Stephen: This diversity is at the core of the experience. We wanted this game to be difficult to categorize. Really, we did whatever we felt like, proving that our inclinations did not contradict our primary gameplay goals. Our hope was to provide action fans with a unique game that they would enjoy, and to potentially attract the interest of more mainstream gamers who are not particularly acquainted with these kinds of games.

Personally, I love the pseudo-2D bits playing as Makita close in. She is one of the most beautifully designed, modeled and animated characters I've seen in a very long time. How are you able to apply so much detail to such a small, nimble presence on screen? She almost seems 2D. Is she as detailed when the camera is above her and zoomed back? Stephen: Joe Ries and Jorma Auburn are the artists responsible for bringing Makita to life. Their attention to detail

was made possible by the focused nature of the gameplay. By utilizing controlled perspectives, we were able to really concentrate our resources on a per-scene basis. There are optimizations in place that help us maximize our frame rate, but LOD [level of detail] player characters were never really necessary. You can actually unlock an option later in the game that will allow you to play through *The Red Star* in wire frame...

That must look insane. When I hit Central City, I was floored by the landscape. This is truly a beautiful game—as much a work of art as it is a work of inspired shooting action. The background diffusing, reflections and weather effects are all outstanding. Did Archangel have a hand in the overall look? Have they been a part of the game's development, or is this all you guys?

Kristy: Thank! We had great source material to base the look of the game on. Several environments really inspired us from the comics. The war-torn city from the game is Bahamut Nolgorka, the city where Makita is from. All four main environments in the game have pieces of the levels that were taken directly from the comic series, but we also had some freedom to expand on the universe and the characters in it. In the beginning of development, during the conceptual phase, we worked closely with Christian Gossett (the creator of the comic series) to understand his influences as well as aspects of *The Red Star* universe that were not shown in the comics. With that information, the concept and environment



Highly evolved, polished action 2nd shooting...and tons of that's *The Red Star*.





“Really, we did whatever we felt like, providing that our inclinations did not contradict our primary gameplay goals.”

—Stephen Klassen, lead designer, *The Red Star*

team started building the foundation for the environments. We've tried to remain respectful to the comic and hope the game can introduce more people to the comic series. The foundation of the game design, however, was something that was being worked on prior to signing the license. The design team had some really strong conceptual ideas that we were able to use and expand on by combining it with The Red Star license.

What are you most proud of about the game? What are you hoping gamers take with them from their Red Star experience?

Stephen: I feel that this title is truly more

than the sum of its parts, so to pick out any particular aspect and say “we really nailed that” doesn't make sense. Typically, if something in the game reaches a level of quality that warrants commendation, we have a tendency to simply refocus our attention on the areas that need improvement. So I guess if I take pride in anything game-related, it is the diligent and meticulous contributions of the people who participated in the game's creation. It would not be what it is without their efforts. As to what players take with them from playing *The Red Star*, I'd prefer to leave that open for them to decide.

Fair enough. Well, it's a fantastic effort. And thankfully it seems like it is not

being messed with the way Activision's other potentially great franchise (Vexx) was. I still believe that had Vexx been Xbox- and GC-exclusive and stuck to the original plan, it would have launched a brand. If *The Red Star* hits, think we might see the little devil again, or are there plans for a *Red Star* sequel?

Kristy: You never know! Both of those would be great projects to work on, but there might be something else equally as cool on the horizon... I'll just leave it at that!

We're officially green flagging either of the two. Thanks!

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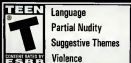
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PlayStation 2



Dead or Alive ULTIMATE

It's online, it's DOA, it's more everything.
Sound like the ultimate to you?



Tomonobu Itagaki, aided by the stoic cool of his signature sunglasses, never has a problem with speaking his mind. When you're the leader of Team Ninja, creator of the fiery fan-favorites *Ninja Gaiden* and *Dead or Alive*, you're allowed to express your views with a little authority. In October, DOA fans will have the chance to talk a little smack of their own...online. In this first fully functional 3D fighter to go Live, *Dead or Alive: Ultimate* gravitates towards the signature DOA gameplay while refining and enhancing everything you either love, or hate, about series. And damn if it isn't all one gorgeous, sexy package.

I had a chance to finally play the game for a few rounds, going toe-to-toe with Itagaki as he taught me how to be a humble loser. Reversals are the foundation of play, and...well, as Itagaki always leaves it, there's not a whole lot of detail to glean from the game until the review copy is ready to go. Just know that it feels and plays better than ever and offers tons of new stages and modes. In the meantime, check out what Itagaki has to say about game design and his newest powerhouse, *Dead or Alive: Ultimate*. **Brady Fletcher**

System: Xbox
Developer: Team Ninja
Publisher: Tecmo
Available: October

Interview

Tomonobu Itagaki, director, Team Ninja

play: We were chatting about the flow of a good game—the energy behind it. Talk about those broad, elusive strokes of good game design.

Itagaki: So, all the veterans of game development should know what's truly important: the idea of accumulating, of compression and explosion [and that] kind of thing, where there's the constant process of explosive energy—of ignition and compression and explosion. That cycle is what makes the game flow. This philosophy applies when you are making the game, and it applies when the people are playing the game, that they experience this throughout.

Of course, that is more of a generic philosophy. I just love my characters. And if you don't love your characters, you can't make something great, something like this.

[We watch the DOA: Ultimate opening movie.] Typically, in most companies, developers are told not to make something like this [opening cinema]; it's too expensive to put together. But I say, "If I don't do this, I'm not going to make this game." And then they have to [laughs].

The story, as you seem to have picked up, is serious. One of the children was born by this woman against her will. And the other one was not. You have these two conflicting situations. Most of the other characters' backgrounds aren't quite as sad and serious. But having said that, this describes why Kasumi and Ayane react with



each other the way they do. The feeling I got watching *The Last Samurai*—the woman in the story—this is similar to what I'm going for here.

You say you love your characters, so there's at least one thing you love about your job. What do you hate about it?

The thing I hate the most is someone disturbing my pattern or my cycle of work. Making a video game is like preparing for a rocket launch. Beforehand, you have thousands and thousands of checklists, going through your pre-launch routine for that final blastoff. I hate when people disrupt my process. When I drink, I love to just let it go. But at the same time, when I go into the office, depending on the title, I have to make myself be that project, be whatever it is I'm working on. I have to focus the energy to center myself to that. Let's say I'm getting ready to work on *Ninja Gaiden*, I'm mentally preparing for however many weeks or days I need, and just when I'm ready to take the first step, someone comes to me and talks about a completely different subject. When that happens, I feel like killing that person right on the spot [laughs].

You know, it's like we were talking about before, that flow of energy that goes into games. That balance of extremes. Do you find your design philosophy changing as you better learn that balance, as technology and experience improve?

My inner philosophy doesn't change, you know. But of course there are some external factors. I like girls and a display of nudity. But the business people from the company tell me not to do it. Some of these external factors will keep me from change. But also, as technology and experience move forward, the girls are going to look more beautiful.

One of the criticisms that could perhaps be leveled against the industry is that the design philosophy does change too radically for some developers as they feel they have to go with the flow. The idea of a good game is eternal. You seem to stick to your guns and make

what you want to make without questioning your vision. Well, I do listen to the voice of my fans. I make my game the way I think it should be done. What people like about it, don't like about it, I know what they're saying. But I also know exactly how I wanted to make the game. When I approach the next project, I don't simply go with what others are telling me to do, yet I am absorbing and listening to valid observations. I actually separate gamers into two groups: my fans and other gamers. I don't care what other gamers have to say; I only listen to my fans.

And how are your fans going to respond to DOA: Ultimate?

Well, I think it's going to be the same response as previous versions. Fans will always want more. They will always want more and more. I expect that.

"I actually separate gamers into two groups: my fans and other gamers. I don't care what other gamers have to say; I only listen to my fans."

-Tomonobu Itagaki, producer, Team Ninja



Are the online aspects the most important additions you've made to the series?

No, the online is not the most important thing. I don't see things 100 percent as being complete. I see things as 300 percent, and 100 percent of that is online. The other 100 is the characters, and the other 100 percent is the showcase of the technology. That's the entire picture of DOA: Ultimate. So with the online feature, I feel like I could finally prove to people how good of a fighting system this really is, even without the beautiful graphics. People tend to focus too much on the graphics and not realize how good of a fighting system this game has. And, of course, amongst the three franchises—DOA and Tekken and Virtua Fighter—we fight, we compete. I search for the flaws in those games and make my criticism. On the other hand, the developers from those two other fighters, when they criticize my game, DOA, they pick on the merit of the game like beautiful graphics. They say, "Your game only has good graphics, that's it." What that tells me is that maybe my game has fewer flaws than theirs.

Is the emphasis on beautiful graphics going to become more of a problem as the new systems come?

The video game uses TV as its medium. That is the main instrument for the experience. That means the individual instrument of graphics is very important. So I know that there are many developers who have said we've gone too far; the graphics are good enough, so let's focus on the game concepts and this and that. Those who make that focus are the ones who really understand? I don't think so. Because it's a video game, because it's a visual medium, when the visual part of it evolves and becomes better, of course people want to talk about it and focus on it, because that is a key element. The people who say we've already gone high enough—let's stop that advancement and focus on certain game concepts—should leave the industry.

Oh, I so agree. Of course, you never abandon solid gameplay, but once that's in place, I'm ultimately looking for the most attractive game to complete the world, to ultimately nail that supreme level of cinematic immersion,

whatever you want to call it. I want my imagination dazzled. Would Ninja Gaiden, with its core gameplay intact, be that much better with twice the visual impact on a new system? To me, absolutely.

Yeah, it's a given that the design has to be good. That's not an option. Graphics just add so much.

You know, you can go back to even the opening movie as an example. How you might have to fight to have that \$2 million put there. Having that impact of visual stimulus, you're immediately excited about getting into the game, about the world and the characters. And then when you play it, your adrenaline is already going. That makes the game experience as a whole just that much better. What people don't seem to get is that when it's done poorly, you're bored and complain that there's too much talking, too much story, too much cinema, whatever. The criticism is misplaced. It goes so much deeper than just throwing up stretches of pretty images.

I totally agree. Thank you for understanding the concept. One of the reasons I always show the intro of Team Ninja, with the camera flying over the stormy ocean, [is that] I want people to react to that. They can expect something really exciting to happen. And from that introduction, you're going to have a very emotional experience, whether you laugh like crazy, get angry or excited or something. I call it VI, visual identity.

Are there any games or developers you particularly admire?

Of course, there are other games I like to play, but I would not say I could not do a better job. Because I know I could do a better job of making any game that is out there. Personally, I like Pikmin 2. Again, if I were asked to do Pikmin 3, I could do a better job than Nintendo. But then if I do that, I can't just play for my personal enjoyment anymore. I want to have enough games outside of my own that I can enjoy playing without any distractions.

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PlayStation 2

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SLY 2 BAND OF THIEVES

A Raccoonus of a different kind

As a huge fan of the Thievius Raccoonus, I was somewhat sucker punched by Sly 2 as I traversed the game's maiden levels, due to an abundance of direction where Sly's shell-mate Bentley would first detail the plan, then mark it in the environment, and then chime in whenever there was the slightest question as to what to do. Not being a huge proponent of in-game assistance, early impressions were that Sly 2 was either being focus-grouped to death or was just too damn easy. Twenty or so percent into the game, however, it became obvious why Sucker Punch

was so clearly defying each area's goals. With an open-world adventure (like Jak II, Sly 2 as a MSPAOG or Massive Single-Player Offline Action Game), they've managed to pack in so much gameplay that traditional exploration (also known as being lost) isn't needed. As the environments become more and more layered and populated, reaching each pocket of gameplay (mini-adventures unto themselves) becomes so involved that any form of artificial length is unnecessary. Save it to say, Bentley was justified in his tutorial capacity. The conclusion?

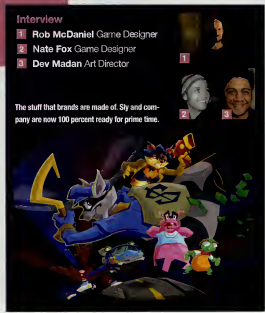
Sly 2 is not only big, but packed end to end with so much gameplay that knowing what to do, thanks to Bentley, is warranted. Here with even more insight are game designers Rob McDaniel, game designer Nate Fox and art director Dev Madan. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sucker Punch
Publisher: Sony
Available: September

Interview

- 1 Rob McDaniel, Game Designer
- 2 Nate Fox, Game Designer
- 3 Dev Madan, Art Director

The stuff that brands are made of. Sly and company are now 100 percent ready for prime time.



play: First off, nice homage to Rocket in the museum; I sure miss him. Did you retain the rights to Rocket or is he gone for good?

Rob: Sucker Punch still has all the rights to Rocket, Whoopie World and that dastardly Jojo. It's a part of our corporate history, and those of us who were around back then certainly look back on it fondly. However, we're probably going to remove this for final ship—just part of the fun of building stuff.

I'll be holding onto this ROM then... Taking into account the size of your environments and all of the little pockets of not only AI, but platforming and sneaking hot spots (etc., etc.), Sly 2: Band of Thieves is a very ambitious endeavor. You've managed to incorporate platforming, photography, stealth, bombing/flying, pick-pocketing, vector-graphics shooting, turret-firing, three very distinct fighting styles, dancing, puzzle solving and thieving within the first 40 percent of the game...not to mention three characters, all with different traits, that carry out distinct missions in each. Does your design doc look like a set of encyclopedias? What led to this very new direction for Sly and company?

Rob: I'm not sure what this "design doc" is that you're asking about... [Heh, very funny.—Ed.] Seriously, we do things a little different here at Sucker Punch. Very early in the project

we created documents explaining the macro level design of the game: three playable characters, larger, more open environments, deeper combat experience, pick-pocketing, thief economy, etc. But the bulk of the real game is made without too much documentation. We're a small enough team that we've found the fastest way to get things done is to just talk things through. Once something is in the game, we play around with it and make changes until it's really fun. The proof of something working or not is when it's on the screen, running on the PS2. The game design changes for Sly 2: Band of Thieves really came out of keeping the heart of the first game and adding depth and choice. In Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus, we dictated exactly how you were going to get through an environment. An NPC here, climb a pipe, jump, run on rail, etc. We enjoyed playing through those sequences but there was no choice to it—you were going to play the design jump for jump. Now take that pipe of gameplay and widen it so you can sneak around the guard, you can hide under a table as he walks by, you can climb a lamppost to get on the roof and go over him. So we created this jungle gym of an exterior. Then the enemies were changed to be smarter and tougher so they were not just "acop bubbles"—one hit and they pop. So the combat became more involved, because if you run by an enemy, he would chase after you even when you jumped up on the

"...the desire was to create a game where the player felt as if they were interacting with a cartoon."

art director, *Sly 2: Band of Thieves*

rooftop, he could jump up there too! The NPCs have about five times as many animations in *Sly 2: Band of Thieves* than they did in the first game. Once we have an environment that is just fun to work your way through and deal with enemies, then we layer on all the various jobs with their special mechanics and minigames.

Obviously this is either a new or substantially mossier engine. Did you create it in-house?

Rob: Chris Zimmerman, our lead programmer, was the primary person responsible for coding the new engine. We did early prototyping of *Sly 2: Band of Thieves* using a modified version of the original game's engine, while he started largely from scratch. From the start, we wanted to have bigger environments with more enemies using interesting behaviors and lots of cool animations, so he created the engine optimizing for all of these things. Even after the engine was running solid for six months, he was still adding major features to it like the dynamic shadows for all the characters.

Initially I was puzzled by your decision to make Bentley and Murray key playable characters in the game, but now I can't imagine it without them, especially Bentley. You've managed to make playing as a brainiac turtle and pumped-up purple hippo really cool. How tough was it honing their personalities to a happy place where everyone felt comfy? Were you at all concerned having Sly share so much of the spotlight?

Rob: We felt like we needed to massage their personalities a bit when they went from comic sidekicks to playable characters. For example, in *Sly Cooper* and the Thievius Raccoonus, Murray was this big, kind of cowardly spaz. However, we knew the users playing him were not going

to act cowardly. They were going to run around like crazy trying to punch and smash things, so we had Murray develop this kind of strong-guy wrestling persona to help him deal with being out in the field with all these enemies. He's still very much "The Murray," but he's someone you get to enjoy running around, fighting and picking up guys and throwing them around. We thought that was a lot more fun than getting to control Murray for the first time and having a whimper button and a cowering ability. For both of these guys, it was about taking an established part of their character big and strong for Murray and brains for Bentley) and actually going into the most fun way to play them (powerful street fighting and clever tactics). As for Sly, he definitely still does the lion's share of the action in this *Band of Thieves*. Though, some of my favorite parts of *Sly 2: Band of Thieves* are when you get to work together with one of the other guys. Trying to create a feeling of working as a team was as important this time around as feeling thievy was in *Sly Cooper* and the Thievius Raccoonus.

The way you integrate RC-style chopper runs, turret play and that cool vector graphics hacking game is to be commended. I felt the first game had too many distractions, but this game has more, and I love it all. Is it just shorter bursts in a larger overall package that makes it so? Was there much back and forth about how many minigames to include and how long they'd be? What's on your cutting room floor?

Rob: We look for opportunities to integrate new game mechanics wherever possible. One of the advantages of the core concept of *Sly 2: Band of Thieves*, that the gang works together to pull off a series of elaborate heists, is that it gives us a lot of flexibility to have these minigames make sense with the story. Bentley is always coming up with some crazy plan, but in order to succeed during the heist, you have to make sure everything is in place and ready. In general, the length of the minigames was dictated by how many times you play with that mechanic in a mission. If you have several computers in an area that you have to hack, we let those

sequences be pretty quick pockets of action. If the whole mission is about manning a helicopter turret and using it to break open a dam, then that is going to be a lot more involved.

The diversity of scenarios is extraordinary. *Sly 2: Band of Thieves* is full of brilliantly orchestrated pockets of gameplay (and such plot twists) that seem impeccably planned. Were the more subtle/imbedded aspects of the game, like the ability to soar from the pinnacle of the reeducation tower all the way to NewJa's HQ, actually planned, or are they just lucky byproducts of the overall design?

Rob: Well, I can honestly say the example you give is a "happy accident." The initial layout for that level was done by Nate before the parasite power was even working in the game. But when we are designing levels, we spend a lot of time devising that jungle-gym fest where you have a couple options around every corner for dealing with your current situation. As a designer, it's one of the most enjoyable parts of the job.

Once again, you're crazy in your details as well, from adding depth to simple accoutrements to dust and fluff puffing out of sofa cushions. Do you make many passes over each area, fine-tuning at every turn?

Rob: Yes, there are certainly parts of the game that have been reworked several times to get it just right. As usual, the oldest parts of the game have had the most attention and have changed the most since their original creation. Some of that attention is large-scale, like taking two rooms that were interconnected and turning them into two separate interiors. Other times, it is small-scale, like placing the right amount of wispy cobwebs in the cellar to give it that creepy look. Plus, in this order around we've had an artist working full-time on all the special effects in the game, from the killer smoke and fire effects of an exploding disco ball to the gentle falling of dust from a great spice grinder. It's been great having someone dedicated to those details.

Sly goes in for the kill, catch goats off-guard and they're quick work... otherwise, prepare for a fight.





"The game design changes for Sly 2: Band of Thieves really came out of keeping the heart of the first game and adding depth and choice."

—Rob McDaniell, game designer, Sly 2: Band of Thieves



The Sly universe is a natural for the open-world treatment.

The music is almost eerily synonymous with the action. I take it all of the sound design is in-house too...

Rob: Well, all of the environmental and in-game sound effects were done in-house, but the music was done outside of the studio by Peter McDaniell. For each episode of the game, he created three tracks that we can fade between based on what's going on in the game. So it sounds sneaky when you're near enemies and they don't know you're there, but if one sees you and attacks, it smoothly transitions into the exciting action music.

How much bigger is Sly 2: Band of Thieves? I'd guess it's at least a 20-hour game.

Rob: The game is easily twice as big as Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus. We have actually surprised ourselves by the size of the game we've built. After the first game, we got a lot of customer feedback that they just loved the game but they really wanted more of it. So this time around we were determined to give them a larger experience.

I love the old Batman "Thwack!" and so forth added to the fighting. Is this an homage to that or just in line with the whole caper vibe?

Rob: It's mostly trying to have the game come across as playing in this active cartoon world. It helps put it over the top and gives it a nice punch to let you know you've succeeded in beating your enemy.

You've introduced purchasing gadgets via TheiefNet. How much does this factor into the scheme of things overall?

Rob: Well, there are a few things that you can purchase through TheiefNet that are required to pull off certain jobs in the game. Other gadgets and abilities can help you in combat, sneaking around or are just fun to play around with. One thing I can say is that the moves you purchase are more meaningful to the gameplay than the power-ups you got in Sly Cooper and the Thievius Raccoonus. There is a real functionality to them. Plus, Bentley and Murray can buy their own stuff, so everyone gets to improve on themselves.

You've also introduced a huge cast and fleshed out the universe in a big way. It's as if Sly is being primed for a cartoon series or film treatment.

Dev: From the beginning, the desire was to create a game where the player felt as if they were interacting with a cartoon. So, just like an animated series, the main characters needed a back-story and personalities that could be translated to the viewer, or player in our case. Whenever possible, all of us try to reinforce the characters as much as possible through the process—either through gameplay, cutscene...even user interface.

Sly's quite the ladies' Raccoonus in Band of Thieves. What sort of critter is Neyla?

Dev: A white tigress. Originally designed as a daughter to Rajan, her role changed as the game's storyline needed to be simplified.

Your cinemas are still second to none. How much cool drama-type segue action are we in store for? What is this technique called anyway? It's like a digital South Park sort of thing. Would a cartoon adhere to this style? One would sure hope so.

Dev: There are twice the animations of the previous game—the look went through a minor adjustment, moving away from the more stylized look of the first game to a slicker ink line work. I could only assume that a cartoon would adhere to the style, as we've got about 35 minutes worth of animated cutscenes in the game!

You must have had a great time in the voice-recording sessions. Everyone back from the original? Did the actors work together or come in separately?

Nate: To build a sense of rapport between the characters, we always try to get them in the booth at the same time. The guys recording for Sly, Bentley and Murray are all accomplished improvisational actors, and when put together, they bring a lot of spontaneous energy to the dialog. Bentley in particular never reads the same way twice. Really, the hardest part of

the job is trying not to laugh during his lines so that you can hear which one is best.

And finally, a big thank you for not making any facet of this game online. There are enough online games in the mix as it is. Games like Sly need to stay pure and personal experiences. Now you're probably going to tell me how your next game will be online...

Rob: I don't think there's anything fundamentally wrong with having an online component in games that are primarily a single-player experience. It did not fit in with what we are trying to do with Sly 2: Band of Thieves, so we did not incorporate it, but I can imagine having a great online experience in the Sly Cooper universe.

I knew it.



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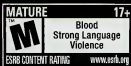


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PlayStation 2



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Metal Gear Solid 3

Snake Eater

Straight from the snake's mouth

In just a few months, the snake will enter the jungle. But this is not the snake we know. This is a different snake—code-named Naked Snake—on a highly classified stealth mission that takes place during a new era (the '60s), in a new environment (the jungle), with new techniques (like applying camo and tracking prey for survival). Even the traditional radar is gone—though you can now pan with the camera in third-person mode—making the game far more challenging than previous missions.

A lot has changed since Metal Gear Solid 2, but one thing that hasn't changed is the series' amazing attention to detail. The environments are nearly alive with subtleties—frogs and snakes roam beneath the dense foliage, waiting to unwittingly become food for the hero. Even rats hiding under foundations of abandoned encampments can become a snake. By applying different types of camouflage, Snake can blend in with his

surroundings, be it tree bark, dead leaves or the black-and-red patterns of brick walls, then step out of hiding to take out enemies with his new close-quarters combat (CQC) maneuvers. With amazing fluidity, Snake can use his hapless adversary as a shield, allowing the player to switch to first-person mode and gun down other foes, then brutally slit the enemy's throat amidst a spray of blood, his purpose having been served. The detail extends even further, such as to a rickety bridge that spans a gaping river-cut gorge. Precision shots can snap the bridge's ropes, causing soldiers to slip and plummet into the realistic-looking rapids below, complete with splash and ripple effects.

And Metal Gear just wouldn't be Metal Gear without a healthy supply of equipment to help Snake on his way. In addition to pistols, sniper rifles, semi-automatic weapons and his CQC knives, Snake can also use environmental

features to his advantage, such as explosive barrels that can be pushed down hills or gun emplacements for annihilating more challenging foes. Nor would Metal Gear be complete without an intriguing cast of characters, such as the Boss (Naked Snake's female mentor), the Colonel (the seemingly super-powered villain) and, most curious of all, a younger, more vicious Revolver Ocelot.

Unlike the months leading up to MGS2's release, creator Hideo Kojima is not submerging his time. Instead, he's breaking radio silence to reveal to the gaming community—at least a little—what to expect from the hotly anticipated and fiercely explosive Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater, as well as what else he may have hidden up his forest-green sleeve. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Kojima Japan
Publisher: Konami
Available: November

Hideo Kojima, director/producer, Metal Gear Solid 3



play: Having seen the latest trailer and played the demo, I have to say, MGS3 is looking incredible so far. How far along in development is it?

Hideo Kojima: We've finished putting together the jungle; we've completed our experiments on the CQC and food capturing. Things like that. Now we actually have to, you know, put together the game along the storyline. I guess there really is no more thinking in terms of trying to come up with ideas. We're done with that. Now it's just creating everything.

What are you doing in MGS3 that you, as a creator, especially enjoy?

Kojima: Our military advisor has taken us on a one-night excursion that was like a training trip on how people hide in the wilderness, like camouflage and all that. And I think we were able to implement all that, our experience with him, in the game, and I think the survival you experience in the game you cannot experience anywhere else.

At a recent press conference, you said that the theme of the game is "to live." Can you elaborate on that means?

Kojima: Our focus is to make the player feel like he is that person, that character in the game—that you are one, one being together. And it's surviving in the jungle; you know, you get hungry, you get tired, you get sick, and you heal yourself. You eat to survive. And all this together... I think that you really feel like you're that character trying to live. And it's a stoical experience of actually living, surviving. It takes 20 to 30 minutes to complete the playable demo, and by the time you complete it—Snake in the game, his stamina's down, he's probably hungry, and I'm sure the person playing, the person controlling Snake, would be hungry in like half an hour, so you feel like you're one.



Explosive barrels are but one way Snake can use the environment to his advantage.

Why change the Metal Gear Solid formula? It was already great, so why add things like eating and camouflage and take out things like the standard radar and sight cones?

Kojima: An ordinary and easiest and cheapest sequel is you basically take the same game system, gameplay, and just change the story. That's no fun. You have to change it; you have to keep on improving it even if it's in the same series. That's why we add things. We change the gameplay; we try to make it new.

Are any of these changes risky? You added Raiden in MGS2, and some players didn't like that.

Kojima: You know, we make these changes, and try to make sure that people like the game, so we try not to go in the negative direction. We try to make these changes so that people enjoy the game.

About the CQC... does it replace the punch-punch-kick fighting of previous MGS games, or is it in addition to the old type of fighting?

The conventional punch-punch-kick is still in there. Last time it was a punch-punch-Sawtooth-kick; this time it's a punch-punch-law-kick. In addition to the punch-punch-kick combo, there's the COC. With the punch-punch-kick, you can't really knock out an enemy; you'll hurt the enemy but they won't go unconscious. With the COC, you can knock them out at once. People who like the punch-punch-kick can keep on using it. But with the COC, it's a different button. Once you do the COC move, you know, you restrain him, then you can throw him to the floor or use him as a shield, or you can just kill him there. There are many things you can do.

Why go into the past? Why not forward into the timeline?

Metal Gear Solid, as you know, is an infiltration game, an espionage game, and I actually want the main character to be a secret agent, but I guess a secret agent just does not work nowadays. That's why it's better to have... a special-ops guy do it; that's what Solid Snake is. If I were to use, you know, a secret agent or, I guess, enhance that infiltration and espionage element, it's better to take it back to the '60s during the Cold War when the United States and the Russians, the Soviets, used spies against each other. It was the age of the spies; that's when the spies were the greatest at doing their information-espionage warfare. That's why I decided to take it back to that time. Another reason why is that...Snake and the whole thing has this hard-boiled atmosphere, and when you place the game in the near future, it becomes more technology-dependent. We'd come up with these crazy weapons and all that, and I wanted to stay away from that. I wanted this guy, Snake, to do his job using his own physical body, and that's why it's better to take him back to the '60s.

Could you tell me more about some of the characters from the trailer? The villain, called the Colonel, I believe, and the two female characters?

We still have months until the release of the game, and we think it's a little too early to talk specifically about the characters, so we're not really giving away any information on them. But the villain, who looks like a villain, is a villain.

The Colonel?

Yes, that's the Colonel.

And one of the women was named Eve?

These are just code-names, but yeah...

I was wondering about those personal flying craft the enemies were on in the trailer. You mentioned not wanting to be driven by technology, but those seemed kind of futuristic. What's the story behind those?

That vehicle was actually a... the Americans were doing research on those in the '60s and '70s, so we sort of took that, the idea that they'd been developed back then, and we just sort of realized them. I personally like the idea of those flying craft, but I guess they were never realized. They never happened, but the Americans were studying those back then. In the '60s and '70s, during the Cold War, the Americans and the Russians, they were developing a lot of things. They came up with some crazy gadgets and weapons, like over-the-top stuff, and things that were never mass-produced but exist in idea or on paper or maybe as a prototype. We actually threw a lot of these into the game.

I don't suppose you're ready to comment on whether or not the main character really is Big Boss? It's pretty much as you see it.

Could you talk about the level design? I recall that in the older Metal Gear games you used Lego blocks to create the levels. What did you do to design the jungle environments in MGS3?

We cannot use Lego anymore. It's just become too complicated. We have CG, we have a tool, and once we design it on the tool, then we give it to the artists. The Lego blocks I used? Now the Boktai team uses them for their levels.

You mentioned recently you never get sick of creating games. Why is that?

First of all, it's a very technology-dependent medium, and you know, I basically develop a game for a new console each time, most of the time, so that it's always a different experience.

Do you ever feel creatively stifled, like you're being forced to create spaces instead of doing something else?

I always think about totally different games. I'd like to work on something totally different.

Are there any ideas you've wanted to use in any game— not just MGS3—that you weren't able to use because you didn't think players would accept them?

There are actually many. Maybe not necessarily because people or fans wouldn't accept it, it's more like the people

in my team do not like my ideas. They say, "Please do not include this in my game." But one thing that made me through such criticism was the throwing up by Snake if you spin him around after eating. The guys on my team do not like that.

How do Western tastes in games influence your design?

I guess most Western games right now are not really pursuing new gameplay or innovative gameplay. They go more for, like, a new plot, like a better storyline. The gameplay, the whole game, is built around that new story. It's like, you know, coming up with a new movie, like a movie that has a different story. You really don't see innovation.

And also, how is the world's current political environment affecting the creation of MGS3?

Not necessarily do I include in MGS3 what I see in the news nowadays, but I've always been doing that throughout my games. That's why my games are not simple war games or combat games. For example, if you look at MGS3, it's about the Cold War and back then 40 years ago, it was the United States versus USSR. And no one back then knew that that was going to end and that the two countries would be sort of allies and that the Americans would be fighting Middle Easterners. No one knew back then, so now is a good time to go back in history and see how it was and sort of think about what's going on right now based on what happened 40 years ago.

How would MGS3 be different if you weren't constrained by time or budget at all?

I don't think the game would be that different, but I guess it would be more enjoyable to work on. I could just focus on that and I could forget about running my company.

Could you tell me more about Metal Gear Acid, the PSP game?

It's a stylish Metal Gear Solid game that you can play on the PSP. It's more like, you know, it's a Metal Gear game built for the PSP—something that works best on a portable system. And its name is Metal Gear Acid, but we like people to refer to it as Acid Metal for short.

Finally, if Metal Gear Solid is the last game in the trilogy, as you've alluded to, do you have anything that might give hope to players who want to know more about the older Revolver Ocelot or Meryl or, um, Liquid Snake's hand?

You know, it's not that there will be no MGS4. There probably will be an MGS4. And when that happens, I will be the producer. And if I'm the producer, I will not be working on the game design, I will not write the script, and I will not be directing it. I will have someone else do that. And with all that time saved, I probably will work on something totally different. play

"An ordinary and easiest and cheapest sequel is you basically take the same game system, gameplay, and just change the story.

That's no fun. You have to change it..."

—Hideo Kojima, director/producer, Metal Gear Solid 3



Nano Breaker

The mastermind behind *Castlemania* looks toward the future

With overwhelming force, a massive sickle is swung through the air. It reaches its target, cleaving it right in half; the walls and floor are coated in oozing, crimson puddles. For the next spectacle, an enormous hammer crashes down, reducing whatever stands in its way into a messy, splattered pulp. This isn't the latest *Friday* (13th) flick; this is *Nano Breaker*. And these aren't people being pulverized, but deadly mechs, controlled by nanotechnology gone bad, exploding into pools of viscous red oil, not blood, courtesy of cyborg soldier Jake Warren and his transforming Plasma Blade. The action is fast, the controls silky smooth. We recently had a chance to sit down with producer Koji Igarashi (also the producer of the famed *Castlemania* series) and director Kenichiro Kato to learn about the development of this action masterpiece in the making. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2 **Developer:** KCE Tokyo **Publisher:** Konami **Available:** Q1 2005



Director Kenichiro Kato (left) and producer Koji Igarashi.

Kato: How the weapon morphs, or how it branches out in levels. That's not in there [yells]. [Starts playing demo.] The weapon can change into a spear. That's actually one of the easy moves to pull off with the spear. Three-hit combo there. Now here's the difficult version of that. With that sort of string it's much stronger. With each weapon variation, it probably has three types, three levels. So the big longsword...horizontal one...and then the vertical one. With each weapon variation, there's about three different levels of it, of strength. And there will be, end up being finally about six weapon types. You've seen a few of them. You've seen the sword, you've seen the spear, the sickle, axe and hammer, so we've got something else hidden.

How will you learn new moves in the final game?

Kato: How it is set up is as a branching system. ...During the course of the game, you're going to pick up computer chips that can implement to plug into the Plasma Blade. And what will happen is when you put a computer chip into the Plasma Blade into a certain location, it unlocks a certain move. So the more chips you have, the more moves you are going to have. You unlock the moves that you want...you can find them, or you can move the chips around to transfer different weapon configurations.

interview

Kenichiro Kato, director, and Koji Igarashi, producer, *Nano Breaker*

play: Let's start with the story. How did this story concept, about renegade nanomachines, come about?

Kato: In this case, it started with creating the concept of what sort of game we wanted to make. The world itself, and then the story was added on top of that to flesh out the world. As you saw from the action scenes, there's a lot of things being cut up, you're gonna see parts flying and whatnot. And we didn't think it would be too great an idea if we were just doing this to normal humans! And if we just picked normal monsters, it's just like that's *Castlemania*. So then how about we do something with mechs and go near-future? So, with that sort of having established what sort of conflict to go with, then we can say, "OK, so how do we attach a story and how do we make these mechs up?" And that's how we came about with the nanotechnology idea and using the nanomachines as the building blocks for the cells for these creatures, or mechs, OrgaMechs. The long version of it is *Organized Mechanicals*, or *OrgaMechs*. Igarashi: The hero himself is a cyborg. The story is also going to have drama between the main character, who he's a cyborg and a military weapon, but also how he's human. In some ways, in his mind, he's like, "I'm fighting other mechs."

Is that going to be a big part of the game— intrapersonal conflict in the story?

Igarashi: Certainly. That conflict is going to be one of the themes going through it.

Going back to the violence issue, saying how it couldn't be real people being sliced up, is that more a concern for the North American or Japanese audience?

Igarashi: Actually, it's more probably an overall thing within Konami itself. We've got to figure out what the morals of our own company are and not go over them. So it starts with that part of it. Certainly, there's people in Japan that like it, but we feel it's something that's more appealing to Americans. It's like, geez, if it goes to a point where it couldn't be published in America, that would be a problem!

And so that's why it's oil and not blood. Igarashi: Very much so.

What inspired the idea of the morphing weapons?

Igarashi: Actually, that came from...there's lots of games with different weapons, but you have to go into a menu and change weapons, and we didn't want to do that. We started looking at, "For this enemy, this weapon's probably better, and this enemy, this weapon's better." So is there a way we could do that without having to go into a menu and change weapons? And that's how the combo and morphing came into play.

I have to admit, there's one thing I'm a bit disappointed about: I haven't been able to play enough of the game yet! Mostly I've just played the Splatter Mode time trial demo.

Igarashi: Actually, there's a couple reasons for that. One of them was that...we knew that we didn't have that much space, so we wanted to still have something we could have a lot of people play and compete against it. So what we did was, by doing the Splatter Mode, it's just like, the more oil you can have come out, the top three players would get their names in the credits, so we're hoping people would enjoy that aspect. What we found once we created it and were playing it within the team ourselves is that—hey, this is fun!

So are you going to keep Splatter Mode in the final game then?

Igarashi: Yes. Kato: One of the things we realized that we should have thought about a little bit more was the actual moves that we put in the game [demo]. They're too difficult! I thought that we should have put easier ones, because we wanted to show off all the fancy-looking moves, but the fancy-looking ones are the ones that are more difficult to perform. In reality, there's an easier way to do the hammer move, and do some of the other moves, except it's as strong.

Igarashi: So, we only had 10 minutes to show, but the politically correct way of doing it from the Konami point of view was that we didn't want anyone to play our game too long, because there were lots of other Konami titles to check out!

What other aspects are there to the game? What is there I haven't experienced yet?



"...you're gonna see parts flying and whatnot. And we didn't think it would be too great an idea if we were just doing this to normal humans!"

—Kentaro Kato, director, *Nano Breaker*

Igarashi: For the demo, we put in some really difficult moves, but in reality, what would end up happening is that it's a build-up process so you get your first-rank skills, then you get your second-rank skills then the third-rank skills. You won't have them right at the very beginning. You'll have to build up to it. So by then, the player should have gotten enough experience with the commands and how to push buttons.

Is there any other type of character growth, to increase your health or your strength or anything like that?

Kato: Certainly. Your hit points will certainly [increase] by picking up items [to] make it longer. But you'll also notice underneath your health, there's a blue bar.

Yeah. For special moves, I'll bet.

Kato: That's correct. In the blue bar, you can see there's actually two—right in the middle there's a vertical line, right? So what that means is that you can use special power-up ability twice. So when you have one like that, it just goes into the blue bar plasma ball...so the red pellets are coming from the oil after you defeat these enemies.



So many ways to deconstruct the enemy...so little time.



advanced cyber-soldier. Jake is actually the first cyber-soldier they created: the prototype, the oldest one. Michelle is a scientist. She is a scientist that has been sent by the military to try to stop the nanomachines. The main computer, it has cut off all access from the outside so somebody's got to go in and try to fix it manually. Now we've got a very strong-willed, strong spirited girl here, so she goes, "I don't need any protection," and she went in herself. Jake...he's supposed to be Michelle's protector. So that explains those three characters.

Is Jake the only playable character?

Igarashi: You'll find out when you play the game.

Changing subjects, what are your thoughts on the PSP and the DS?

Igarashi: ...The PSP...I got the impression that it's really high quality. They might as well have made it, like, a laptop! My biggest concern with the system was always, isn't this going to be really expensive? If it's going to be a machine you can really play games on, that it's not just going to be a movie machine, then sure, yeah, I would love to try something out on it. In regards to DS, on the specs side, there's certainly a lot of information now, but I want to get my hands on it and really try it for myself.

And no Igarashi interview would be complete without asking if you've given any thought to the next Castlevania game.

Igarashi: I am the Castlevania producer, so we are working on a concept. ...What we've learned on Castlevania, that knowledge goes toward Nano Breaker. What we learn on Nano Breaker is going back to Castlevania. It goes back and forth. That's what I'm thinking anyway! play

Now that you've got it again, so you've got it twice. So if you use it twice immediately—a much more powerful attack. Eventually, your bar is going to grow long enough so that you can have three. So you can use it—bang-bang-bang—three times quickly.

Can you tell me more about the characters? Who are Michelle and Keith and how do they fit into the story?

Igarashi: Jake [the main character] used to be the leader of the elite cyborg unit. However, he killed a lot of people, including women and children. He was supposed to be disposed of. However, he was just put into cold sleep. After that, Keith, who was number two in the unit, became the leader of the unit. What ends up happening is seven years have past; the cyborg unit is sent in to do whatever they can and communication is lost with them. Now that you've seen Keith, it's obvious that he's going to play a part in the story, so he's managed to stay alive somehow. And they were fighting each other so... On top of that, Jake is a model from seven years ago, and Keith has been on the outside, so he's gotten all the new enhancements within those seven years, so theoretically, he is a more



The X-Men are mutating again. With optic blasts firing and adamantium claws slashing, Marvel's legendary mutant heroes are smashing through the straight-up action and one-on-one fighting precepts established by previous X-Men games. Now seemingly spliced with Baldur's Gate DNA, the X-Men are evolving into a form rarely seen by comic book heroes—that of an action-RPG.

Grounded in the Ultimate X-Men alternate continuity, X-Men Legends combines top-down real-time combat with NPC interaction and extensive character growth. Four X-Men are at the player's command at any time, taken from a continuously expanding roster of 15 of Xavier's finest, including Cyclops, Storm, Beast, Jean Grey, Nightcrawler, Rogue, Gambit, Iceman, Colossus and Wolverine. In single-player mode, the player controls one mutant while adept AI handles the other three, but you can switch between them with a touch of the D-pad to tackle whatever challenge is at hand—very useful for environmental puzzles, like when Storm needs to conjure up a tempest to extinguish flames or Iceman is required to create an ice bridge. In multiplayer games, all four characters can be player-controlled to maximize the fun.



As is typical for the genre, and what really separates Legends from previous X-Men games, is that the players get to control how their X-Men will evolve. Defeated enemies yield experience that increases levels and lets you distribute points to four categories of attributes—strike, agility, body and focus—as well as to mutant powers, making them stronger and sometimes upgrading them. Power-up Nightcrawler's Teleport Leap several times, for example, and you'll unlock the Teleport Strike, level-

There are no mutant ships hidden in these sewers, just mutant Morlocks.



up Wolverine's Brutal Slash and it becomes the more descriptive Eviscerate. Attribute and ability points are stocked separately, so you'll never have to decide whether to increase your striking ability in lieu of enhancing your Charged Card attack, but many boosts to mutant powers can't be made until your character reaches a specific level.

In addition to building up your "gifts" and taking out assorted freaks like Toad, Blob and the Sentinels, you'll also get to explore the X-Mansion, which acts as the central hub, where you can talk with Professor X and learn more about the extensive story (revolving around Alison Crestmere, aka Magma, originally of The New Mutants), brought to life by an impressive list of voice talent that includes Patrick Stewart (now synonymous with Professor X), Ed Asner and Amin Shimerman. Players can also head to the Danger Room for some hands-on training, or even unlock hidden classic missions based on the original X-Men continuity, such as a bout pitting Cyclops, Jean Grey, Iceman and Beast (burly, human-looking, non-blue Beast, that is) against the mighty Juggernaut.

Whatever your tastes—whether you prefer the new X-Men or old, regular continuity or alternate, action or role-playing—Activision seems to be tailoring X-Men Legends to appeal to mutant-lovers everywhere. This should be the X-Men's deepest video game yet. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Raven Software

Publisher: Activision

Available: September

"...the X-Men are evolving into a form rarely seen by comic book heroes—that of an action-RPG."

All the X-Men's powers are fully represented, such as Storm's powerful lightning strike.



Shadow of Rome

Let the slaughtering begin



"The one thing that audiences never tire of is any act of extreme cruelty. Limbs hacked off, torso split in half, blood... What they really want is a true visual spectacle." —Roman Soldier

Indeed we do, and with *Shadow of Rome*, we're first introduced to the soldier Agrippa, who learns that his father, Uesnius, has been accused of murdering the great Julius Caesar. In an effort to exonerate his father and save him from public execution, Agrippa's forced to do a little executing himself, working towards a murderous dominance in the gladiator arena.

Let the games begin. Actually, let the slaughtering begin, starting with your bare hands, if you like. In the arena, there are no rules. You win when the other guy is dead. Kill one and five more come. As the game opens, we are first introduced to the soldier Agrippa, who learns that his father, Uesnius, has been accused of murdering the great Julius Caesar. In an effort to exonerate his father and save him from public execution, Agrippa's forced to do a little executing himself, working towards a murderous dominance in the gladiator arena.

The only path to survival is one dominated by dense combo attacks, which the game's creators liken more to a *Street Fighter* brawl than your typical action affair. When confronting an opponent, you have to be aware of many factors, including the wear of the weapon and the agility it provides. You'll often lose grip or find that you lust for your opponent's club, preparing for a charge attack to steal it away. Incite the crowd, and you'll be rewarded with even better items and invaluable food for healing.

However complex the game becomes, one thing is absolute: producing a bloodbath of flying body parts with these many awesome weapons is thrilling. But *Shadow of Rome* is far from a cheap, visceral gore-fest. And it's much more than a straight march through the fighting arena. Unwittingly entering the story are Agrippa's dear friend Octavius and a rescued female gladiator named Claudia who further broadens the gameplay with chariot races.

As the dominant figure, Agrippa takes his brutal combat across a number of rich locations throughout the city—confining the game's description to "arenas" shortchanges it—but it's Octavius who quiets the game with more problem-solving and stealth. You encounter a variety of obstacles and must use the environment to your advantage, finding your own unique solution to a specific goal.

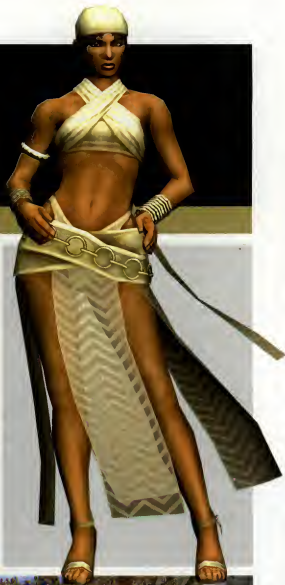
Shadow of Rome is being directed by Keiji Inafune, whose own extraordinary Oriamus 3 engine powers the visuals. The look here is immediately striking, relying on an extraordinary presence of atmosphere and setting. When I say it looks like a game, I play it the highest compliment; the use of color and lighting brings a tone of exceptional fantasy. For nothing more than anticipation of what's to come, *Shadow of Rome* strikes me as Capcom at the top of its distinct game. **Brady Fletcher**

System: PlayStation 2

Developer: Capcom

Publisher: Capcom

Available: November



Limbs fly, blood splats, bodies get torn apart at the waist...



"...one thing is absolute: producing a bloodbath of flying body parts with these many awesome weapons is thrilling."

Johnny Whatever

Metal maniac or future poser?



The Iron Royals have enslaved the people of Lower London, rock n' roll has been outlawed and the Queen has been imprisoned in a vat of mustard. With Robo-Bobbies (Robo-Bobbies?) terrorizing the populace and London in a state of total disarray, who will save the day? Maybe a better question would be who will Johnny jam with now that his band mates, The Hooligans, have been apprehended by the Iron Lady's goons?

If you've ever dreamt of being an awe-inspiring headbanger tearing it up in a video game but Johnny Bazookatone just didn't get it done (gully), then maybe, just maybe, there's a light at the end of the tunnel. Say hello to Johnny Whatever: not quite what I had in mind (he's a bit more punk than I'd like), but hey, you take what you can get in an industry where music games resemble things you might find in Hilary Duff's closet. As you've likely guessed by now, Johnny uses his axe, Nancy, as a WMD. Equipped with a Positronic Wave Amplifier, he's able to roam the streets, stringing together power chords and "Quick Riffs" to blast his enemies with decibels of destruction.

Maybe he'll do us all a favor and drop in on the Spice Girls before they plan a reunion.

Warthog's also promising that whilst playing the game, players will easily learn to play their favorite rock tunes using a standard controller, and therein lies the frightening variable... Are we talking Sex Pistols and Black Flag-type stuff, or fruity Euro dung? The phrase "favorite rock tunes" coupled with Johnny's look (and "The Hooligans," pun-lease; is that, like, gayer than "The News" or what?) scares me to no end. Throw in some new—POD, Velvet Revolver, Tantric, White Stripes—and some old—maybe some Scorpions, Judas Priest, Sabbath and the like—and maybe we can talk. Otherwise, put a big, fat sock in it, Johnny! (I kid, I kid.) Somewhere, Sid Vicious and Johnny Rotten are smiling. It's a decayed, yellow smile, but ear to ear nevertheless. **Dave Halverson**

System: TBA
Developer: Warner Bros.
Publisher: Warner
Available: Q4 2006

"...he's able to roam the streets, stringing together power chords and 'Quick Riffs' to blast his enemies with decibels of destruction."



Rock isn't dead; it's killing goons! Hope it sounds as good as it looks...



Tak 2

The Staff of Dreams

A leaner, meaner Tak takes Juju matters into his own hands

For a game that, for the most part, flew by under the radar, Tak and the Power of Juju didn't do too bad, selling in the neighborhood of a million copies. While theoretical 800-lb. gorillas struggled to reach a fraction of that elsewhere, the little cave boy who could rode by on his rhino and blew a little courtesy fart all the way to the bank. The reason Tak did so well? The Nick tie-in...yeah; our gleaming coverage... unquestionably! (He are the last bastion for platforming-kind, you know.) But mostly it's due to a group out of Utah that goes by the name of Avalanche, who just might be the best-kept secret in the industry. Unbeknownst to the ravenous mainstream top-feeders, able to mount tall bandwagons with a single bound, Avalanche managed to create one of the most spectacular-looking platformers ever created—rivaled only by Rare (whom they just may give a run for their money with Tak 2)—almost incognito, sell a ton of 'em and just go about their business. Same thing happened to another Play-only-hyped platformer: Krome's Ty Tiger, which coincidentally also sold over a million copies. Maybe someday THQ and EA will connect these dots.

The Tak formula, cut from the epic hub-based platforming-adventure mold, was quite brilliant, if not a tad confusing and marred by some truly annoying retorts, both of which have been rectified in the sequel and piled onto a heap of other refinements that promise to deliver no less than platforming nirvana. Tak 2 is like climbing into a Roger Dean painting and taking up residence. In fact, this may very well be the toon-based action game to beat in 2004, along with (God, I love my job) Ty 2. Anyone lucky (smart, cool, perceptive) enough to have "Cubed out on the first game surely remembers Jibolba, in all of his big-nosed glory, waiting back at the hub to send Tak on his very non-linear way. Well, these days his royal Shaman-ness is actually traveling with Tak, albeit in a diminutive interactive state, guiding him on a more linear route between the real and spirit worlds where Tak will meet the Dream Juju (one of many new Jujus) en route to two big twists, one of which forces him to choose his Spirit Animal, which we'll flesh out, among other things, just as soon as we can get our butts to Utah. atop the mountain of new gameplay innovations, Tak 2 has another very special, very long-overdue trick up its sleeve, which we'd be dung butter to divulge, but when you experience it, you'll know, and be very, very happy. Developers the world over may be a bit steamed, but hey, someone had to raise the bar. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Avalanche Software

Publisher: THQ

Available: October

A near jump through *C* and a bonus of *Juju* too.



"In fact, this may very well be the toon-based action game to beat in 2004..."





"Capcom is doing one of the things they do best with Viewtiful Joe 2: taking a great idea and improving it..."



If the first Viewtiful Joe hit the bull's-eye for groundbreaking gameplay, then the sequel just might be aiming for perfection. Capcom is doing one of the things they do best with Viewtiful Joe 2: taking a great idea and improving it, refining it, and making it even better than before.

Gameplay in Viewtiful Joe 2 is essentially the same as it was in the original—pattern-based 2D action in a multilayered 3D diorama world, boasting trippy, cel-shaded graphics and an emphasis on brains as well as brawn, creating a look and feel unlike any other game series out there. Enhancements abound, of course, and the list begins with Joe's girlfriend Silvia as an immediately selectable second playable character. With long hair trailing in her wake and pom-poms at the ready, Silvia has been upgraded remarkably over her unlockable form from Joe 1. Not only have her defenses been considerably improved (she now seems just as resilient as Joe), but she also

Viewtiful Joe 2

comes equipped with a projectile weapon, giving her the edge when it comes to range. On the downside, Silvia isn't as fast as she was previously either, but overall a far more balanced character.

Another new caveat is the addition of the Replay VFX power. Though the full potential of this new ability hasn't been revealed yet, Replay allows Joe or Silvia to record an action and then immediately play it back. In the Joe 2 preview build, the power was really only useful for activating a switch that needed to be hit three times in instant succession, but Capcom promises that it can also be used to triple the potency of health items or, if you misuse the power, receive triple damage. Slow-Mo and Fast Forward are back from the last game, once again granting the ability to manipulate the laws of time and physics to overcome numerous obstacles. The Zoom ability, however, was nowhere to be found in the Joe 2 preview copy, but Capcom assures us it's in there.

Other changes include new uses for the Six Machine, which will now be able to transform into a drill, car, cannon, robotic exo-suit and more, as well as, naturally, all-new environments such as a dinosaur theme park, ancient Japan, underground ruins and the depths of space.

Although the demo of Viewtiful Joe 2 was brutally brief, the game so far looks great, plays great and seems set to deliver more of what made the first game such a hot. Yo Joe! **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: Clover Studio
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Winter

Even though this is an early boss, you'll need adept timing and use of your VFX powers to beat him.



Devil May Cry 3



For ultra-cool half-human demon hunter Dante, life probably can't get much better. He's guest starring in the PS2 version of Viewtiful Joe, his comic book is selling out at stores across North America, and, most importantly, he's returning for another Gothic action-adventure in Devil May Cry 3. Pure, stylish demon-crushing action will again be the focus in this prequel, only now with more weapons (including tricked-out guitars), more combos, customizable combat styles and a renewed emphasis on close-quarters fighting. The environments are stunning and the bosses monstrous. **CH**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom Production Studio 1
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Winter



The Bard's Tale



The original Bard's Tale series garnered a crazy cult following in the '80s. It's a bit surprising the game hasn't spawned a modern update sooner. Even more surprising is that this belated sequel is being brought to life by the original creator and Interplay founder, Brian Fargo. Running off the highly capable Norrath engine, the game takes a similar RPG approach to its action and presentation. But in the tradition of the original, the real mention here has to go to the facetious humor, with Cary Elwes (*The Princess Bride*) flavoring the Bard's dialogue. **BF**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: inXile Entertainment
Publisher: VU Games
Available: October

Colin McRae Rally 2005



Every time I play a McRae, I find myself wondering where they could possibly improve, yet they always do. This time out, they've taken every facet of detail to near-mad-scientist levels, covering the hills with waves of grain and going where no tread marks and tire spray have gone before. Viewing the replays, you may as well be watching ESPN. And, of course, it plays like a dream, behind the cleanest, most functional interface in the racing genre, from the fully functional garage to the staging area. You practically feel the terrain, which is more treacherous and realistic than ever. A humbling experience. **DM**

System: Xbox
Developer: Codemasters
Publisher: Codemasters
Available: October





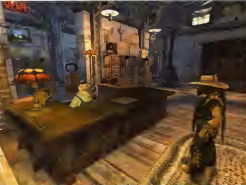
GoldenEye: Rogue Agent



I've finally had a chance to play through a fairly polished level of GoldenEye: Rogue Agent, coming away far more interested in the game than I was at E3. From what I experienced—and confirmed via the design team—the game is absolutely not an open-fire run-and-gun first-person shooter. In the striking office setting I played, cover fire was a must, and you had to get your hands on the right weapon—here, a sniper rifle—to even dream of getting out alive. The targeting system is quite interesting. **BF**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EALA
Publisher: EA
Available: November

Oddworld Stranger



Question to Microsoft: why'd you give up what is now one of my most-wanted games? Forget what you played in the confused Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee on Xbox. The only relation this newest game has to the series is the setting, in name more than anything, of the Oddworld universe. The theme is now a quirky Old West, where strange creatures roam and alien varmints piss off the inhabitants. The hero is a ragged wanderer of wonderful design, who uses live ammo in his crossbow to secure bounty. Absolutely beautiful. **BF**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox,
Developer: Oddworld Inhabitants
Publisher: EA
Available: Spring 2005



T3 Redemption



T3 Redemption is the Terminator game you've waited your whole life for, provided you don't mind that it's a hybrid action/driving/shooter, of which it does all three extremely well. With an emphasis on mimicking the film, this is the movie almost frame for frame (chopper runs, Harley and hearse chases, etc.), and it's packed with more Arnold-isms than you can shake a girth man at. All the hits are here, including "Talk to the hand," "Exceptional," "Don't lose your head," "Piece of cake," "Outstanding," and many, many more. The naked TX at the onset is pretty nice too. Too bad she's so clingy. **DH**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Paradigm
Publisher: Atari
Available: September



Full Metal Alchemist



Edward Elrich lost his leg, and his brother Al, his life trying to resurrect their dead mother, so now they're off to Central City in search of the Philosopher's Stone, the only thing that can return them to their former selves. With over 50 types of transmutable objects (now there's a pirate you don't hear every day), alchemy is alive and well, and making the jump from dingy laboratories to games and anime. Basically, if it's in the environment, Edward can turn it into a weapon to use along with his "Rockblockers" (stone walls), swords, lances, cannons and crossbows. Magic and mayhem is in the air. **DH**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Racjin Co.
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: Fall/Winter 2004

Final Fantasy XII



With over 60 million served and going strong, Square Enix continues to set the RPG standard. In XII, a rebellious street urchin, Van, decides to do a little Arachian Palace recon (okay...stealing) and stumbles onto a rebellion in progress. Swept up in the resistance, he'll embark on an adventure against the evil empire that cost him his brother, fighting alongside a princess thought dead, his friend Penelo, partner Fran and a sky pirate named Balthier. Once again, the hub is a massive atslip, and once again, battles will be taken to new heights, via the Active Dimension battle system. **BH**

System: PlayStation 2

Developer: Square Enix

Publisher: Square Enix

Available: 2005



Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2



On the plus side, TMNT 2's emphasis on four-player simultaneous co-op best-'em-up action is very cool—and long overdue on console. The added platforming bits and variety of environments are also nice. On the other hand, things are looking pretty rough at this point in development. Currently, the game plays slow, the animation is meager, the somber music seems completely out of place and the vehicle stage handles like a slug in molasses. Fortunately, Konami says all these issues are being addressed. Even if they aren't, the unlockable classic original TMNT arcade game should still rock. **CH**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: KCE Studios

Publisher: Konami

Available: October

Time Splitters: Future Perfect



Free Radical has been flirting with making a killer first-person shooter since they left Rare to code the Time Splitters series, and it looks like they're finally going all the way with their third attempt. Time Splitters: Future Perfect shows much more ambition, an obviously much bigger budget and a depth and sophistication beyond what they've dabbled with before. If you've enjoyed the TS games so far, prepare for the next level—online play is the inevitable big push this time out. **BF**

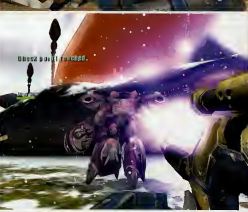
System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube

Developer: Free Radical

Publisher: EA

Available: January

Robotech: Invasion



My extended session with a pre-beta Robotech revealed good mission structure and flow (provided the voice acting was placeholder), but the suits move too slowly (boosts are too short too) compared to the Invld. The bike transformation is also in need of tweaking: there's no low-end torque or RPM to speak of, causing a real disconnect, and the collision is off since you're forced to ride them in mostly confined areas. The game also needs a lock-on for turret firing. With slightly dated graphics the gameplay needs to excel here, so the team has their work cut out for them. Luckily, they have a solid base to work with. **BH**

System: Xbox

Developer: Vicious Cycle

Publisher: Take 2 Interactive

Available: October





SVC Chaos: SNK Vs. Capcom



Late last year, SNK proved that the old Neo Geo hardware still had some life left in it with SVC Chaos, the latest crossover game from two of the biggest names in 2D. Now, this classically styled one-on-one fighting game is coming to the Xbox, once again letting players duke it out with dream bouts like Ryu vs. Kyo, Mai vs. Chun Li or Ken vs. Terry Bogard. And aside from the usual suspects, characters like SFS's Hugo and Samurai Showdown's Earthquake have been added to the mix; when you see those massive sprites, you'll be amazed that this is based on such aged hardware. **C**

System: Xbox
Developer: SNK Playmore
Publisher: SNK
Available: September

Scrapland



Ving wai. The job is done. Look for us the next time you need to bust on someone.



With a nicely distinct, tastefully garish art style and sprawling cityscape, Scrapland is instantly eye-grabbing. The story involves a distant future planet where all life is robotic. In a storm of growing murders with few clues about those responsible, a robot reporter named D-Tritus sets off to uncover the answers. Our hero can jack in to virtually everyone he sees, including their vehicles, receiving their individual powers to solve mission-based tasks as you deem most fit. There's direct resolution to the story, but the gameplay is open-ended. **B+**

System: Xbox, PC
Developer: Mercury Steam
Publisher: Enlight Software
Available: December



TRON 2.0: Killer App



One of the best first-person action-adventure games in recent memory, 2.0 has received a nice overhaul for its Xbox debut. Ported with care by Climax's LA studio, the new Killer App includes Live multiplayer combat that allows up to 16 players to battle in 10 all-new maps and various game modes, including traditional deathmatch and "overRIDE," which lets players instantly switch from first-person combat to light cycle and back, essentially using them as both a method of transportation and as a weapon. All this plus a polished port of the one-player campaign equals one more notch in the Xbox-exclusive gun belt. **B+**

System: Xbox
Developer: Monolith/Climax
Publisher: Disney Interactive
Available: October



Outlaw Golf 2



Outlaw Golf 2 is preloaded with some of the most spastic retorts, as each hole gets underway, that I have ever heard. The humor elsewhere, all associated with the dysfunctional characters that play the game, is pretty okay though, so I'm not sure if it's supposed to be this bad or if it's just really bad. Elsewhere, this is a solid game of golf, from the weirdness of Vegas to the more serious courses... like New Jersey. Boobs jiggle, Hicks giggle, and they even bring out the gimp. With online play, new courses, miniature golf, kart racing and beatings, I'm sure the PGA is thrilled. **B+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Hypnotix
Publisher: Take 2
Available: October

Kingdom Under Fire

The Crusaders

Let the fray begin

Many a developer has thrown hordes of warriors on screen to methodically mow through, but no one has ever captured the visceral beauty and brutality of medieval war like Phantagram has in *Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders*. What would it be like clashing with a dense, green, 4-foot-tall, 500 lb., stobbering Orc, or massive winged Storm Rider...or commanding infantry, spearmen, paladins, sappers, cavalry and archers all in your midst—in real time? Not setting up battle and watching it roll, but actually living on the field of battle, watching your minions die by the hundreds when your decisions are wrong, or praising your cunning when the enemy is dealt a quick death. Charging into each battle as the hero, fighting luxuriant battles—doing your all to kill the leader to spare lives—defending strongholds, charging through rivers and forests, and calling on your officers when the odds are against you...if ever there was a living action-RPG, this is it.

It's hard to describe the sensation of sitting on horseback surrounded by quibbling dark elves healing in the forest, all awaiting your decree. You're in the story, as the morning cold frosts your horse's breath; it's like waking up in one of those medieval fantasy novels you read as a kid—truly an experience not to be missed. This is why you buy an Xbox, right here. And *KUFTC* comes unmarred by the rigors of management or interface interruptions during battle, yet provides ample depth back at the barracks, where you can strengthen your leader's and officers' skills, equipment and abilities, as well as fortify troops' job classes, resistance and equipment. You can even drop into the pub and hire your pick of mercenaries. *KUFTC* is also one of the most replayable games you'll ever own. This is one you buy. After you've conquered all four sides of the war—commanding Gerald, Captain of the Hironelden Army; Lucretia, the delectable dark elf commander of the Vellond Troop; Kendal, General of the Second Division Eccleclan Holy Knights; and Regnier, brutal Lord of Hexter—you can jump on Live for some one-on-one or two-on-two matches, or download new maps and missions. I can honestly see playing this game on and off for many years, or at least until this team delivers their next soaring opus. **Dave Halverson A**

System: Xbox

Developer: Phantagram

Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios

Available: August



I've imagined battles like this since I picked up a controller.

Interview

Dee Lee, producer, *Kingdom Under Fire*

play: *Kingdom Under Fire* plays unlike any of the games that it will ultimately be compared to.

Everything happens on the field of battle, separating it from the tired strategy/RTS mold. How long did it take to realize your vision, and how difficult was this to pull off?

Lee: Our ultimate goal with *Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders* was to depict the massive scale of medieval war and deliver an unprecedented experience to gamers that simulates how they would feel when placed right in the core of a crucial battlefield filled with heaps of corpses and enemies ready to bring death at any second. To make this come true, we had to do careful study and research on everything associated with fantasy and the history of war (many thanks to Tolkien). Honestly, putting resources and concepts together after realizing what we wanted this game to be wasn't difficult at all since we've enjoyed every bit of boldly exploring (in mind) places where no one has gone before. But visualizing the ideas on a squared screen wasn't as easy as it sounds. From day one, we had to wrestle with the Xbox to test its performance by throwing up thousands of dummy NPCs to calculate texture counts and memory limits, pushing the system's maximum levels. The game design came second because the capability of the Xbox was the only thing that could draw the line between how far we could push our ideas and what portion of them could be actually pulled off. The result? We really wanted to send a bunch of roses to Bill Gates, but couldn't find his address listed anywhere in the Yellow Pages.

I'm also floored by the cinematography in the game. The way you set the stage and tell the story before and within the game is extraordinary. Were you influenced by anything in particular?

Not really. We just wanted players to be able to read through the storyline while playing each mission without having too many interferences or cut-in cinematics to back up the storytelling. So, ideally, players can get the same level of sensation and reach the climax as if they were reading a well-written novel—feel as though there's always a surprise waiting when flipping to the next page. And in the aspect of the display, yes, we tried to implement film techniques and special effects like a shaking camera and raindrops dripping down on screen as if there were a third cameraman chasing the scene and broadcasting it live. In the end, these really helped to increase the intensity and realism of the combat.

Another part of what makes the game feel so visceral is the way you've managed your collision in the battles, giving a real sense of bone-crunching metal on metal. Given the number of characters on the field, this must have been an arduous process.

We spent a whole year in building up concepts, designing characters and programming them to move in

“...Ideally, players can get the same level of sensation and reach the climax as if they were reading a well-written novel...”

—Dee Lee, producer, *Kingdom Under Fire*



unexpected ways, and another year was spent re-polishing animations and special visual/sound effects to emphasize the collision of characters. Rather than working on units as a group, we carefully and delicately gave characteristic movements and effects to each and every character appearing in the game, no matter how big or small their role was. So even though a large number of units get tangled up in battle, players can still witness each character getting bounced off or sometimes flying away depending on the type of hits or damage they receive.

Onto character design....It's simply stunning. You've managed to wipe your butt with 90 percent of what's out there today. How do you put so much on the field and make it look so amazing? We know the Xbox is powerful, but again, you're shredding all comers. From where did your artist (or artists) conjure this extravagantly carnal vision?

Most of the artists, and especially the lead character designer of this game, are actually from the staff that worked on the original *Kingdom Under Fire* series released worldwide about four years ago for the PC platform. So for almost half a decade, they've been drawing and designing elves and Orcs while others have been following today's trend and focusing more on the Japanese animation style.

Depending on the character players choose, I imagine the paths are quite different. How long approximately is each character's campaign? Are some longer than others?

There are four different campaigns and four different main heroes for each, representing the four different races in the game. (We call this the "4x4" system.) In mission-count, each campaign has about 20 to 25 stages, but the playing time can be varied depending on the playing style of gamers. If they choose to fight in me-against-the-world style, only utilizing the power of the main hero, they could massacre thousands of enemies, but it won't be easy to win a war single-handedly. The best and most efficient way to take down the enemy is to take full advantage of other troops assigned, which all have different attacking range and special abilities. And that's the way that the game-flow of KUFTC is set up. The first two campaigns would be relatively easy and all about action since players get to mainly use a main hero with only a few troops attached. However, the later two campaigns are much more difficult and complicated because there will be as many as six other troops, including two different types of aerial units, that require control aside from the main character.

Did you toy with fleshing out the forges and strongholds in 3D? Would this perhaps be something we might see in a sequel?

We've put so much effort and energy into finishing this project that we literally had no time to think about what's to come ahead. But if there is ever going to be a sequel to KUFTC, I can ensure that it would be as fresh and unique as what KUFTC is now (when) compared to other games in the same genre. We're planning to adopt feedback from gamers and have them reflected in upcoming downloadable content or a new project, so please let me be heard.

And that music! Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I can't tell you how wonderful it feels to hear a real soundtrack again. Are you influenced at all by classic metal or just really in tune with what you want?

With all the 5.1 channel speakers and killer amplifiers that gamers hook up to their console hardware these days, I wanted to make sure whoever plays KUFTC can raise the game volume and feel the intensity of beats not just by how it looks but by how it sounds. Then I went through my CD



"We really wanted to send a bunch of roses to Bill Gates, but couldn't find his address listed anywhere in the Yellow Pages."

—Dee Lee, producer, *Kingdom Under Fire*

collection to get inspiration and the first one that caught my eyes was my all-time favorite band, Metallica. After that, I immediately called my long-time friend, Chuck Mitchell from "Voice of the Arts," who helped me on several occasions in crossing soundtracks for my previous games, and I told him, "I want Metallica!"

See, we'd never get that soundtrack in the current over-focus-grouped scheme of things in the U.S. In fact, this game echoes a team free of any outside influence.

There's nothing U.S., UK, or Japanese like it. Are you able to just focus? Is that why KUFTC feels so pure?

Not sure this answers your question, but one of the reasons KUFTC is nothing like games in the U.S., UK or Japan could be the fact that our development staff is from Korea! Truthfully, KUFTC is a fruit grown with a mix of all three different cultures you mentioned. I guess when you blend several different elements really well, it gives a birth to something new.

What aspect of the game are you most proud of?

Anything you're not happy with?

Massiveness to both questions. I'm pleased with the result that KUFTC can hold as many as 1,000 units on the stage and display 100 of them at any one screen, but that same massiveness became a barrier for what an individual character can perform in terms of action.

And lastly, because it looks similarly gorgeous, where is Strident? Is it being developed by the same team? Even if it must remain off the record, I just need to know that someday I'll play it.

Strident is alive. That's all I can say for now. But I guarantee that more information on this project will be revealed in the near future.

You've developed a game that deserved massive long-term hype but in the end will need strong word of mouth to reach its potential. Here's to hoping it spreads like wildfire under the MGS label...so you can make me another.

Thank you very much, play



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Asterix & Obelix **XXL**

Rome if you want to...Europe's dynamic duo have returned!

Asterix got his start way back in 1959 in the weekly French humor magazine "Pilote," where he and Obelix have been butting heads with the scourge of Rome ever since. There's a rich history here with all of the trimmings, from droves of assorted knock-knacks, foiled live-action films and piles of comics to, of course, video games, of which there have been a whopping 16 since '84's Asterix from none other than Atari. To date, however, only two ('91's beautiful side-scrolling Konami arcade game and the 1996 Asterix and the Power of the Gods for Mega Drive) have been worthy of their toon-style Norse antics...until now. Released in the UK in November (where it proceeded to sell double the likes of Nemo and Potter, and stay well ahead of Jak II), it was the top seller in the category, and now we have the good fortune of finding out why, thanks to Atari, once again, via their longstanding international ties.

In this episode, we find Asterix, the smallish and wiry Gallic hero, Obelix, a man of great girth and ass, and their dog Dogmatix once again chasing down Caesar after his troops invade their village (taking advantage of the momentary absence of their two greatest warriors), stealing a cauldron of magic potion that could spell big trouble in his evil-doer hands and locking the village elders away in various locations. This equates to your classic crate-bashing action-platforming epic, only filled with trappings only a Viking mother could love, like manic fisticuffs with up to 70 soldiers at once, buddy-play (alternating their talents in tune with each scenario), action puzzles from the gods and, of course, lots and lots of wonderful double-jumping. As you traverse Greece, Helvetia, Egypt, Rome and the land of the Vikings, Caesar's troops attack in hordes, putting the game's hyper-exaggerated fighting system to the test, in which Asterix and Obelix can swoosh characters out of the pack and pummel them in a tirade of rubbery animation—grab and spin them like wet rags, utilize purchased combos key against certain formations (gained by cashing in Roman helmets) or gobble the odd power-up and go completely medieval. Trust me when I say the pummeling action is simply not to be missed; there's really nothing quite like it. Elsewhere, in between and all around, XXL is pretty much a platformer's paradise. There's really no other way to put it, although this is platforming with a very



"Trust me when I say the pummeling action is simply not to be missed; there's really nothing quite like it."

distinct UK feel—visually striking, clean and ultra crisp, and detailed, but in a different manner than we're used to. All of the characters appear as seamless 3D cartoons, and the environments flaunt emphasis on texture quality and vibrancy over complexity. Details abound, like dust pods under feet, mood-inducing foggy beaches and hillsides, assorted wildlife going about their business (of which the wild boars can be pounded for a nice pork surprise) and extra-fluid animation, along with top-notch physics on the game's many wicked cool conveyances. There's a treasure trove of fresh play mechanics to be had too, along with a sense of journey and adventure that makes the hours pass like minutes: Vast outer sprawls,

kingdoms, caverns, sky-high towers, mountain passes, watery channels...it's all very heroic, and accompanied by a soundtrack you simply can't get enough of.

Asterix & Obelix is that rare surprise amid a sea of predictability, neither anticipated nor hyped yet ready to go and special to the core. This is a gift to your PS2 that simply has fun written all over it. At \$19.99, buy two and tell a friend. **Dave Halverson** **B+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Atari
Publisher: Atari
Available: September



Ashley, Oshin and Dogmatic get busy on Caesar's galleys by land and by sea.



SPY FICTION

Stealthy action with some innovative twists

You find yourself in the middle of a primitive prison cell, stripped of your weapons and accumulated spy gear. Fortunately, these South American mercenaries didn't take your stealth suit, which means escaping is a breeze—just blend in to the wall and escape when the guards come to look for you. Along the escape route, another guard stands in the path. He makes the mistake of turning his back—a quick crotch-kick puts him out. He'll come to, but not for a while, and fortunately he's not bright enough to sound an alarm afterwards. The laser tripwires present more of a problem, but by sidling against the wall and using precise timing, you can make it by unscathed. At last—your mission gear is found, and you put it to good use. Your stun gun, disguised as an electric razor, sends one soldier into unconsciousness, while a well-placed bomb—in the guise of a bandage, no less—sends another straight to hell. Further down the route, security is tighter, so it's time to equip the 3DA camera. The technology is uncanny—one guard photo and one hiding spot later, and you've assumed the exact likeness of one of the mercs, allowing you to walk right by. Just when you think you've made it, you get too close to a guard, then make the mistake of running when he tries to search you; the alarm is sounded. You throw off the disguise, then whip out your pistol, killing every enemy operative in the area. No one ever said being a Phantom operative would be pretty...and the mission's still got a long way to go.

Such is the world of *Spy Fiction*, a game that doesn't break a lot of new ground in the action-stealth genre, but does manage to take the gameplay style established by *Metal Gear Solid* (complete with optic camo, a punch-punch-kick combo and Revolver Ocelot's angry American twirl) and infuse it with generous doses of James Bond and *Mission: Impossible*, creating its own brand of stealthy fun. Two playable characters, with distinct attributes and occasionally divergent missions, keep the replay and enjoyment high, as do multiple routes through levels and multiple solutions to problems. Donning a disguise and sneaking through the mission right in plain sight is a very cool play dynamic, but if you want to go in guns blazing, that option exists too. The inclusion of platforming-style action is much appreciated as well.

But while other games in this genre have been smash hits through their attention to detail, *Spy Fiction* stumbles

slightly for lack of the same. The voice acting is a bit silly, the camera can get wonky in close quarters (sometimes I'd come out of hiding to attack a guard, only to discover that neither of us could be seen on-screen) and the story trips all over itself with the tangled web of intrigue it tries to create at the end of the eighth mission. *Spy Fiction* is meant to be fun rather than realistic, but there's a line between playful and head-scratchingly ridiculous. On well—at least the flashback aspect of the story works.

For that matter, most parts of *Spy Fiction* work, and very well at that. I'm afraid that a lot of the gaming public will ignore *Spy Fiction* since it's not an established franchise and the title—let's face it—sounds more like a section of the library instead of a stealth-action game. If you dig the genre, however, don't let it sneak by undetected: *Spy Fiction* has sleeper hit written all over it. **Chris Hoffman**

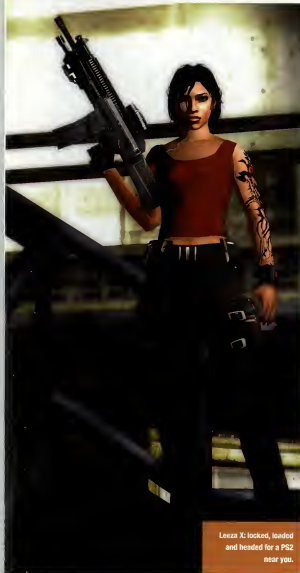
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Access Games
Publisher: Sammy Studios
Available: September

“Donning a disguise and sneaking through the mission right in plain sight is a very cool play dynamic...”



Headhunter Redemption

A promising setup that runs out of steam



Leeza X looked good and headed for a PS2 near you.

As the sequel to a solid Dreamcast game that was relegated to a weak PS2 port for its only U.S. appearance, *Headhunter: Redemption* trades in the first game's lean on stealth for action dominance. Fans of the original might be a little off put by its new direction, but mostly the fault lies in what is eventually such a prosaic affair.

The setting is divided into the Above and the Below, a place where the deadly Bloody Mary Virus has left a ruinous order of class separation and widespread corruption. Already skating on a hackneyed surface, this setup gets pulled to its doom with pointless story descriptors and zero emotional lift. The two playable heroes—Jack Wade, a veteran crime-fighter, and Leeza X, his newly found protégé—have a penchant for dialogue that's dead on arrival. "Wasn't that overkill?" asks Leeza. "No, it's just enough kill," replies the amusingly banal, gravelly voiced Jack.

Targeting the enemy requires a very patient, steady hand. I tend to prefer the more visceral immediacy of a free-aiming system over the more calculated approach of a lock-on like you get here. But *Headhunter: Redemption* does handle the combat well, requiring early on a unique focus on steadying the floating target as it tracks the enemy. It's a blast at first, but as the game progresses, you really feel like you're just

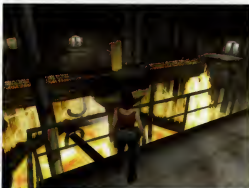
going through the motions, hiding behind the wall, jumping out at the same dumb enemies who blurt out the same dumb lines. Moments of impressive intensity, helped by some good level design and engaging setups, pull you back in, but the inevitable brain freeze does start to set in.

When the action settles, it's puzzle-solving time. Other than the use of what is called the IRIS—it's a visor that relay's fairly generic information about the environment—there's nothing here you haven't come across before. You'd think an enemy bent on dominating the world would be smart enough not to leave its spinning keys and batteries in the corner of the adjacent room.

I really like the look of *Headhunter: Redemption*, which helped in tolerating what could be perceived as some pretty fatal flaws. The game sits right on the edge of solid entertainment. But when the credits roll, you just feel like you've played a game where the designers set themselves on autopilot. **Brady Fletcher C+**

System: PlayStation 2
Publisher: Amaze
Available: August

"It's a blast at first, but as the game progresses, you really feel like you're just going through the motions..."



Star Ocean

Till the End of Time

As deep as the ocean

Star Ocean: Till the End of Time, the two-and-a-half-year-old RPG that's finally dropped in the U.S., is anchored on components vastly important to any RPG, like a great story, characters you come to know and care about, and a wonderful score—all givens in the upper echelons of traditional turn-based Japanese RPGs. Speaking of which, this is probably among the last of its kind, tied to a gameplay device that hasn't changed in almost 20 years. Events transpire the old-fashioned way: it's the old "talk to everyone and then do it again" system all over again...no quest log or mission structure, just hush, unclearly marked villages and centers littered with random dwellings and characters, one or so of which will trigger a change somewhere you've likely already been. It's a crude, exploration-heavy design (with turning via the shoulder triggers; argh) reversed back when RPGs were few and far between but mostly shunned now that they have evolved to a more cinematic place. And in Star Ocean, merely getting near any door (or area barrier for that matter) triggers you to enter, followed by a few seconds of black screen going in, and then coming out.



Star Ocean is also laden with tomes of lore—daunting volumes of political bodies, terminology, races and people—that require careful reading and study to fully grasp, on top of a real-time battle system that endeavors to drive you mad before you come to terms with its finicky rules. It's like a battered, old Italian sports car: You have to fiddle to no end to get it running, then get used to driving it in order to fall in love with it. The catch is whether or not you have the propensity to do so, which ends up the only variable as to whether or not you should buy this game. Never mind the visuals, which don't show their age; if you like the kind, Star Ocean is a beacon of quality. Character and world design, story progression, CG, writing, voice acting...it's all exactly what you'd expect from a traditional Square Enix RPG. If, on the other hand, you'd rather slip into your keyless ignition and fire up the navigation, you're much better off with a game like KOTOR or Sudeki or, if you're without an Xbox, FF X-2...or just hold out for LOTR: The Third Age.

Personally, I found the game laborious by design but so engaging of character that I couldn't put it down, although admittedly, I'm not absorbing the half of it. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Tri-Ace
Publisher: Square Enix
Available: August

Not bad for a two-and-a-half-year-old RPG.

"Events transpire the old-fashioned way: it's the old 'talk to everyone and then do it again' system all over again..."

Sudeki

Fire up the sequel machine



"There's just no getting around the awe of your surroundings; Sudeki is, without a doubt, one of the prettiest games I've ever played."

With easy faith, the role-playing elements in Sudeki will excite the integrity of the battle system and visuals.

I caught the Sudeki bug back in 2002 when it was no more than a single village and battle demo, for its absolutely breathtaking visuals and the promise of an epic action-RPG franchise on Xbox. Since, I've had two chances to play pieces of the game, each an hour or so long in duration and sans any final tuning, so I've had to take a lot of faith waiting for one of my most-wanted games for two years running. As the dust settles, if indeed it has in illumina, I'm pleased that the team got enough right to warrant my enthusiasm (more than enough to warrant a purchase and a sequel), but it's a bittersweet victory, because what they've missed they've missed by a mile.

The most crucial aspect of the game (having whetted our appetites with a sea of mind-boggling screens), those luscious Sudeki visuals, they've nailed—miraculously arriving at mostly smooth frame rates—along with the score, composed with great touch by Tom Colvin; but we knew Sudeki would shine in these areas, or at least, had a good idea. The variables would be the glue that binds any RPG: the storytelling, voice acting, battles and continuity, or which the end result here is a disproportionately mixed bag. The real-time battles definitely shine, as does the system of enchanting weapons and armor, the character building, and the commerce system: collecting and trading furs and gems rather than simply picking up loose change dropped by defeated monsters.

But elsewhere, Climax's limited experience with RPGs is prevalent, especially when it comes to voice acting, which reaches best and falls into grating almost immediately. Ancillary characters' (blacksmiths, townsfolk, indigenous races, etc.) vernaculars are all over the map, from Southern to New York to English to just plain imbecilic, and are painfully misdirected on top of that. They'd have been so much better off taking a cue from that other Climax (Landstalker, Shining Force) and just going with a pitched sound effect. It's as if they ran out of time and just piled into the booth... How they could come this far and let this slip through puzzles me to no end, especially for a UK developer. Karno, the game's resident shopkeeper (and

possibly worst offender), is easily the most idiotic and non-conductive character I have ever witnessed.

But just as Sudeki's rough-around-the-RPG-edges, somewhat heavy-handed nature smoothes an otherwise promising story (the game holds little in the way of finesse, storytelling or drama), I still found myself spellbound for the short haul. I finished in my usual stop-and-soak-it-in mode in around 17 hours. There's just no getting around the awe of your surroundings; Sudeki is, without a doubt, one of the prettiest games I've ever played. Coupled with the highly satisfying battles (of which bosses and key skirmishes can last up to 10 minutes), the ever-changing cast and the journey itself—a visual cornucopia of polygonal achievement that borders on miraculous—it really could be seeking Yafki and I'd still have seen it through. Even the most rudimentary puzzles (and there are more than a few) are made captivating by the scenery. If you've never played a game for its graphics alone, make this the one. Not that the game hasn't value elsewhere. It's just that spectacular.

At the end of the day, while Sudeki wasn't everything I'd hoped for, I'm overjoyed with it as a first effort. I really like Allison, Bubi, Tai and Ecco, and look forward to meeting them again when they learn how to speak, especially now that they've "merged." For a company that specializes in RPGs, a few mistakes in a sea of variables might be unforgivable, but for a first effort, Sudeki proves that Climax is just a couple of key team members (and an ADR director) away from cultivating a truly epic series of action-RPGs—something that industry desperately needs. For a first effort, it's astonishingly good. Now that the hard work is done, and they've seen the error of their ways, a sequel would likely be perfection. But for now, I'll take Sudeki in all its flawed glory. It's simply too beautiful to resist.

Dave Halverson ✪

System: Xbox
Developer: Climax
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: July



ASTRO Boy

Stronger than all the rest? Will this mighty robot pass the test?

Japan's Osamu Tezuka shares a lot of commonality with our own Walt Disney, but he might hope through animation to millions of Japanese amid the devastation of WWII. About the same time Mickey Mouse was flying our flag, Astro Boy brought Japan a true-blue hero they could believe in, a beacon of equality in the worst of times. You'd think that a character so esteemed in a country that turns everything from mutilated man-fish to rodents into video games would have met its virtual match long ago, but it's been a long flight to modern console for Astro—all the more reason he deserves his long overdue dues.

Astro Boy for the GBA is a fantastic game. Masterfully programmed by Treasure, it's easily one of the best handheld games ever made, but on PS2, things aren't nearly as bright. For starters, the game is exclusive to the PS2, which makes little sense seeing as how the GameCube has the younger demographic and is Sonic Team's choice platform to develop on. The fact that Sonic Team hasn't made strides in architecture, textures, lighting, particle effects and especially models since Sonic Adventure is painfully evident here, depicted in even the most rudimentary models appearing antiquated. Astro's arms crinkle at the elbows as they bend and he's not nearly as snooty as he should be, given his simple design, and the ancillary models are decidedly wooden with static painted-on features and suspiciously primitive construction. Where are they spending the polygons in this game? The buildings are 64-bit era and the game loads even the smallest new area or room. Still, this wouldn't be so bad given the game's intuitive controls, overdose of charm, exceptional boss battles and outstanding sound design...if only it wasn't a mere four hours long. Four hours

"Hopefully this is just the beginning for Astro—a killer brand that Sega should be careful not to squander."

of character building, that is. Four hours of straight arcade-style action would be one thing, but here you essentially visit five areas, fight five battles to realize Astro's abilities, and then it's off to the final encounter. I'm like, hey, wait a second! I just got my One Million Horsepower strength, let me use it! I thought the five areas (which were all painfully small cakewalks) were primer for the real game...but they were the game! Just as I was beginning to think, "Wow, this could really turn into something," it ended. There are plenty of side quests to tinkler with and trading cards to find, but who's got the time once the credits have rolled? I figured Naka and company would give us the NIGHTS sequel we never had, but instead we get an obviously rushed flying boss-fighter. Talk about a squandered opportunity. Astro would have plugged into the NIGHTS mold extremely well.

On the positive side (which, given the game's size, is more of a tease), where Superman games have always suffered, Sonic Team has successfully merged a huge metropolis and a flying hero, making things gel as well on the ground as in the air. It's just too bad they don't take it anywhere. The game's best bit is in the very first area, where Astro takes on a huge, tentacle robot, grabbing and stretching his limbs a la Mario Sunshine. Beyond three similar arena fights, all of which are very cool, there are but two actual "levels" which are so basic it's almost hard to believe Sonic Team made them. We're talking straight canyon walls with two turns and two to four enemies in each, linked by same-same hubs and then more canyon walls. Not good. In an era when Spiderman can web swing from one end of NYC to another, content like this isn't going to fly. Hopefully this is just the beginning for Astro—a killer brand that Sega should be careful not to squander. I say give Treasure the green light on a console version and make the world a better place, once again. **Dave Halverson C+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Sonic Team
Publisher: Sega
Available: August



Fierce battles like the one below are the high points in Astro's PS2 debut.

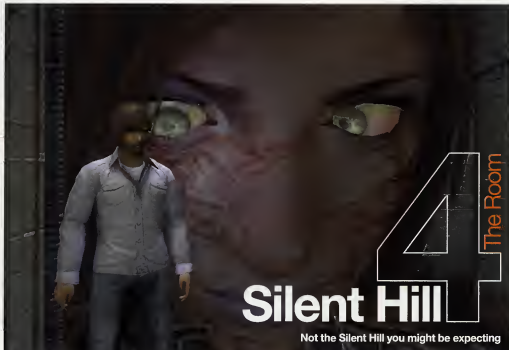




"Not since the original Silent Hill have I been this chilled by a game."



With Silent Hill 4, Konami continues to intelligently push the envelope.



Silent Hill 4

The Room

Not the Silent Hill you might be expecting

If humorless dread is what you desire to ignite your survival-horror thrills, *Silent Hill 4: The Room* is where you need to make your home. Its creepy visions will leave you praying to shake their hold. Not since the original *Silent Hill* have I been this chilled by a game.

Others may attempt to tap into the power of the macabre, but director Akira Yamaoka (he makes the transition from the series' original composer) and his remarkable artists cast a grotesque touch that is unmatched. The presence of knowing detail is remarkable; the resulting mood is crushing. And while the same bag of tricks remains, the skillful use of audio adds to the weight.

In a game about the damaging results of abandonment, the developers work off unusual metaphor and introspection. It's rare for a game to offer such substance for the psyche. Too bad the mechanics fail to join the phenomenal visual and atmospheric accomplishments. There is much more action here than is necessary, and fulfilling the demands to confront every overly stuffed spook can be a strain. An evasion move helps, but beyond a leaden control scheme, the action has a mechanical edge to it that we've never seen so burdened with in this series. Where before we could enjoy the rush of adrenaline from avoiding the twisted inhabitants of *Silent Hill*,

grabbed by their thoughtfully placed presence alone, now the miscalculated confrontations dull the mood and threaten the enjoyment of progression.

But progress we will, because *Silent Hill 4* fills us with a tension and morbid curiosity to fulfill our mission and further uncover the implications of an intriguing, if forcefully elliptical, narrative. Familiarity hangs over this latest journey; the random nastiness and weird tangents are disturbing but expected. Yet everything works together to cast a compelling net of infectious unease.

The failings in *Silent Hill 4* disappoint more than frustrate: darkly obscure riddles have been replaced with mostly item-collection puzzles. Areas and ideas become recycled later on. The story is more concerned with tossing around random threads than ultimately challenging us with rich payoff. *Silent Hill 4: The Room* wants to take us to the edge of the abyss, yet it only succeeds in hitting at the indelible horrors that could live there. **Brady Fletcher** **B**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: August





Ghosthunter

A surreal adventure we get precious little of these days

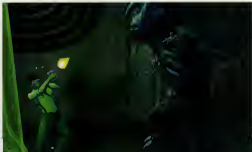
Ghosthunter is not a great game as much as it is an absorbing patchwork of great ideas. It's wonderfully adventurous and a real treat for the eyes, exceptionally presented and full of imaginative spirit. When it stumbles, it does so in curious ways, making us question how such obvious talents would allow these easily avoidable potholes to creep onto a highway of gold. Despite the slighter moments, there's always some fantastic surprise waiting to excite our sense of wonder.

I haven't been this entrenched in the world aspect of a game in far too long. While far removed in theme and execution, games like ICO and Tomb Raider offer similar holds on our senses. And in a most modern and refreshingly competent way, much credit must be given to the snappy dialogue and entertaining story arc. We're still saddled to a lot of fluff and the typically random, abrupt threads that tend to weave game stories, but Ghosthunter instinctively plants its fiction around the core of the adventure, allowing it to expand the experience where nearly every title today becomes stilled.

As Lazarus, a cop-turned-neophyte-ghost hunter forced into action after investigating mass murders in a school, our frantic search for answers to the crime turns up one delightful freak after another. The game isn't really scary at all, but more of an atmospheric funhouse of fascinating spooks who come alive with movement and artistry.

One of the aspects Ghosthunter lacks is an overriding tension, held back by slow locomotion and an absence of difficulty or need for direct strategy: the enemy has entertaining bark and little bite, but it's just so much fun to wear them down and suck them in with the inventive grenade trap. It's the thrill of the creative process that counts, and most situations rely on using a manipulation of your surroundings for the satisfying kill.

By your side, growing with abilities as she draws from the power of the ghosts, is the



One of the game's strengths is in the immense variety of settings.



etheral Astral. At various stoppage points, Astral must be evoked to float off to open a gate, smash a barrier, pull a lever, solve some general puzzle. Her implementation within the world is awfully rote—those call points just happen to be exactly where they need to be when Lazarus can't proceed, and there are times when her help is so shallow you question the whole point of her existence—but for the most part, it still grabs you within the full scope of the game.

Cambridge Studios has a supreme knack for building compelling places, setting up inventive scenarios with powerful atmosphere and sense of surreal belonging. Their primary distraction here is a lack of complete gameplay cohesion, a need for a tighter structure that takes their amazing ideas all the way. Most of the way turns out to be better than most of the competition. **Brady Flechter B+**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Cambridge Studios
Publisher: Namco
Available: August

"...an atmospheric funhouse of fascinating spooks who come alive with movement and artistry."

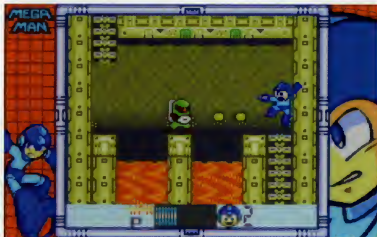
Mega Man Anniversary Collection

Preview

Having had some lengthy hands-on time with the GBA version of Mega Man Anniversary Collection (formerly known as Mega Man Mania), I found two things readily apparent: these five classic Mega Man titles are still some of the most enjoyable handheld games ever devised, and the addition of color really does make a significant impact, making them seem more like lost classics from 8-bit's heyday rather than mere ports of Game Boy games—although some games benefit more than others. The latest preview build also features a few changes when compared to the original games, such as more aggressive enemies in Mega Man V and new animations for weapons in Mega Man: Dr. Wily's Revenge. Hopefully the final version will boast perfect ports. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Konami/Asia/Capcom

Publisher: Capcom
Available: September



Mario Pinball Land

Preview

Leave it to Nintendo to create a pinball game that's more than just pinball. Sure, there's a ball bouncing around the screen, and yeah, you use the flippers to prevent it from going down the hole, but within each screen is a pinball puzzle to be assembled, a very specific challenge to overcome. Sometimes this means taking out all the Goombas within a set amount of time; another time this could mean hitting Sphinx statues to make a pyramid rise out of the ground and reveal a secret passageway that leads to the next chamber. Still other rooms contain tough boss battles. The goal in all this is to overcome these obstacles, thus earning stars, which permit access to new boards and even greater challenges. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Fuse Games

Publisher: Nintendo
Available: October



Mario Party Advance

Preview

Mario Party is the one series that Nintendo seems to consistently support year after year, with no sign of slowing down anytime soon, so it's only natural that the franchise is now headed to the GBA. This portable Party not only delivers the expected new minigames to the famous Mario cast, but also introduces purchasable items called Gaddgets—bizarre creations like the Finger X-Ray, the Lip Disguise-o-matic and various compatibility meters. Additionally, Nintendo promises extra emphasis on making the single-player Adventure mode more enjoyable—definitely a plus, since that's the key to unlocking new maps and new minigames. Unfortunately, the game currently only supports two-player competition, making Mario Party Advance more of a get-together than a party. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Hudson

Publisher: Nintendo
Available: December



TRON 2.0: Killer App

Preview

Following in the footsteps of its big PC brother (and upcoming Xbox port), TRON 2.0 delivers a sequel to the cult-classic film in interactive form. Although most of the game takes place in brightly colored 2D isometric environments, TRON 2.0 isn't eschewing all of its PC heritage—tank and recognizer areas are actually rendered in full (albeit choppy at this point) 3D from a first-person perspective, and extensive digitized voice-overs from stars Rebecca Romijn-Stamos (X-Men) and Bruce Boxleitner (Babylon 5) spin the story around the action. As far as depth of gameplay goes, top-down light-cycle racing adds variety, while numerous upgrade chips allow you to constantly enhance and customize your character and even unlock bonus features, such as the classic TRON arcade games. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Digital Eclipse

Publisher: Buena Vista Interactive
Available: October



Reviews

Rating Scale

- Excellent **A**
- Very Good **B**
- Average **C**
- Poor **D**
- Worthless **F**



Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders

...the most enjoyable games we've ever paid. This is one you buy

Also notice...



Spy Fiction

p 054

With identity-stealing gameplay, Spy Fiction adds a whole new dimension to the stealth genre. Don't let it sneak by undetected.



Ghosthunter

p 070

SCEE's Cambridge Studio waves their magic wand and create yet another stunning original IP. Savor it; these are a dying breed.

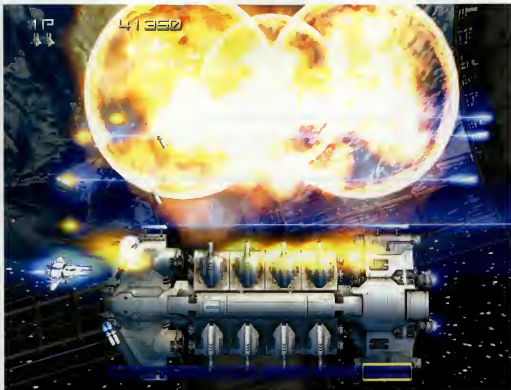


Gradius V

Is this the greatest Gradius game ever made? I'm not going to touch that one, but I can honestly say that this is one of the best, and is yet another example of Treasure finding ways to innovate in a genre nearly as old as gaming itself. Sure, Gradius purists may scoff at the idea of keeping your Option power-ups (now called Multiples) after you die, but they'll be missing out on one of the great shooter experiences this year. The graphics are stunning and the enemy and boss patterns will have you laughing with delight at their ingenuity and hand-eye stimulation. And as I mentioned last month, the new user-controllable Multiples add hugely to the gameplay. This one's not to be missed.

Michael Hobbs B+

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Treasure/KCE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: September



You can keep your Multiples pillboxed anywhere around your ship in Gradius V, enhancing the gameplay greatly.





Amazing Island

I don't really know what to make of Amazing Island. I'm not sure the developers did either. Is it a creativity program or a party game for kids? Amazing Island's most endearing feature is the ability to create your own 3D creature from scratch, rendering it any way you like, even choosing the accessories to equip it with. The catch is that you have to play through numerous forgettable minigames to get the full functionality out of the monster-designing program. And unfortunately, beyond some GBA connectivity, that's all there is to Amazing Island. I kept waiting for a real adventure to unfold, but it never materialized. If only Ancient had focused instead on a sequel to Legend of Oasis—now that would be a satisfying. **Chris Hoffman C-**

System: GameCube
Developer: Ancient
Publisher: Sega
Available: August



Viewtiful Joe

Curse you, Capcom! Curse you for taking one of last year's best games—bursting at the seams with technique, originality, graphical brilliance and 2D/3D hybrid gameplay—and making it even better on the PlayStation 2. This is the definitive version of Viewtiful Joe. The addition of Dante isn't just cool; the gun techniques integrated into his arsenal make the game play a bit differently. Aside from a new easy difficulty (borrowed from the Japan-exclusive Viewtiful Joe Revival GC re-release), however, little else has changed since the GC version, so it might not be worth a purchase if you already own the original game. But if you don't, there's no excuse to pass this up. Viewtiful Joe is something special. **Chris Hoffman A-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Clover Studio
Publisher: Capcom
Available: August



Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow is regarded as the pinnacle of stealth gaming—for good reason. Technologically, it raises the bar on each platform; the voice acting (Michael Ironside is perfection in the lead role) is superb; and the story, which unfolds in real-time, submerges the player in each campaign with chilling resolve. GameCube owners had to wait a good, long time for their Cell, but Ubisoft has made it worth their while by adding GBA connectivity to unlock eight new GBA missions, control in-game devices and get visual layouts of your surroundings. Added to the PS2 extras, like the added Indonesian Jungle level, alternate pathways and mission reports, this is the quintessential version of the game. **Dave Halverson A-**

System: GameCube
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal/Shanghai
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: July



Catwoman

Catwoman is getting a bad rap. It's as if no one has ever played a game with fixed environments before. So the film was crap; get over it. I've been a fan of hook-and-swing play mechanics since Bionic Commando, and this is a thoroughbred effort, combining well-devised set pieces, passable combat (although the enemy's retorts are the worst ever...ever), good level design and some clever puzzles, all served up with an emphasis on body language and more soft light than a Barbara Walters special. It's also, surprisingly, designed for experienced gamers. Perhaps more than any previous movie game, Catwoman is actually challenging on a platforming level—sort of like Prince of Persia without the rewind. If you like a challenging platformer give Patience a chance. **Dave Halverson B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, PC
Developer: EA/Argonaut
Publisher: EA
Available: July



Means mixed: The action's just okay, but the platforming's near pure-fiction.



World of Warcraft

The beloved franchise enters the online arena

Preview

Recommended system specs

OS: Windows 9x/2K/XP	Video: 64 MB GeForce 2/Ti400
Processor: 1 GHz+ CPU	Sound: DX9 compatible
Memory: 256 MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

After a plague of high-profile MMORPG cancellations this year—True Fantasy Online, Mythica, Warhammer Online and Ultima Odyssey—it should be admirably clear to publishers that online RPGs are a big developmental risk. Very few entities in the industry can assemble and support a game in this genre, but Blizzard Entertainment aims to join the elite few when they launch

World of Warcraft later this year. Mark Kern, producer on the WoW project, took some time out of Beta to provide us with background information and future plans for the successor of the multi-million selling franchise. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Blizzard Entertainment
Publisher: Blizzard Entertainment
Available: December

Interview

Mark Kern, producer, Blizzard Entertainment

play: How large is the core staff on World of Warcraft, and how long has the game been in active development?

Mark Kern: The entire staff is huge, as you can imagine. Many people from throughout the company are helping in what is our largest game to date, spanning over four solid years of active development. The core dev team itself is around 65 people, but that doesn't include sound, QA, cinematics, network operations, etc. These types of games require just huge amounts of resources.

WoW spans a remarkable, seamless

Azeroth. This must involve some pretty advanced streaming technology. How will you ensure it's ready for "prime time" player population?

Actually, streaming and seamless zones are one of our most stable technologies. We've had it up and running for nearly the entire length of development, and we've been tuning and improving it all along. It involved a lot of hard work on the part of the server and graphics programmers, but we felt it was essential to make the game immersive. The hardest part was getting all the zones to look completely different, while still being able to transition between them



This campfire isn't just eye candy—it's also a way to replenish your health.



smoothly.

The game's art design and engine look unlike anything else in the genre. Given its long development cycle, how easy will it be to adapt WoW's underlying graphical technology to take advantage of features in future hardware? It's an interesting thing, the art style. Because of its non-photorealistic nature, certain advanced graphic effects don't buy you as much as you would think. Still, we plan on improving the engine throughout the life of the game. We've already upped the poly counts on the characters, and we will be working on DirectX-only technologies in the future. Of course, we will still provide an engine path for non-DirectX cards. We always try to ensure that our games will run on the majority of hardware out there, and will run well on it. Keep in mind that when you get to massive PvP encounters, you need all the framerate you can get, and this has always been in the back of our minds.

The massive world is flanked by water, from land bridges to islands, lakes and rivers. The current water texture looks great, but are there plans to add different conditions to water? Yes, we are still in the process of tweaking water. At the top of the list is to make a way for you to see enemies far below the surface. We've also had moving waves

and deformation in the past, as part of our high-end water, but we want to make sure it doesn't interfere with gameplay features like swimming and combat.

How will WoW's weather system function? Will it be timed or regional, and what sort of effects can we expect? Each zone will have its own weather conditions that vary over time. We are working towards creating rain and snow in normal environments and sandstorm effects for the desert areas. Weather is nice visually, but we would like to integrate it with gameplay elements and that may take more time.

Will it be possible for all classes to solo to the highest character level, and what grouping bonuses are in place?

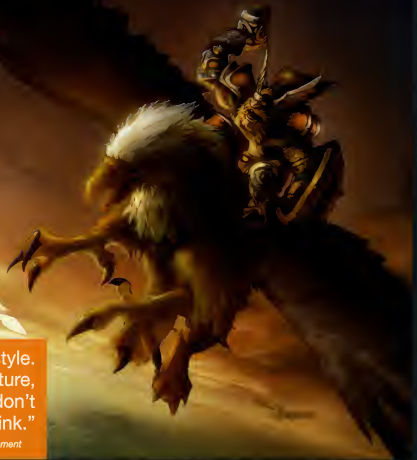
Yes, all classes will be able to solo to the highest level. However, that doesn't mean that you will be able to do every quest and dungeon, as we reserve several of those for group and raid encounters. The extremely hardcore groups that take on these encounters will have something to show for their additional dedication in the way of getting difficult-to-obtain items, PvP and other areas, but soloing to max level is something everyone should be able to do. That said, I would really encourage people to group, as you will have more fun making friends and sharing adventures together.



The Alliance gathers at the steps of the Scarlet Monastery.

"It's an interesting thing, the art style. Because of its non-photorealistic nature, certain advanced graphic effects don't buy you as much as you would think."

Mark Kern, producer, Blizzard Entertainment



After all, that's kind of the point of an MMORPG experience.

What is the goal of the talent system, and is it flexible enough to grow over time?

The primary goal of the talent system is to allow players a very high degree of character customization without overspecializing them. It is designed to grow beyond the current level cap. Using the talent system, players can choose from a large pool of options to enhance existing abilities and get a few completely new abilities. Since players can't have all the talents that are available, it allows characters of a given class to experience different gameplay options without fundamentally changing the roles or behaviors of that class. In addition, the talent system adds to the replayability of World of Warcraft as a whole, as it becomes possible to make multiple but different versions of a character class.

How deep is WoW's questing system?

The quest system is the heart of World of Warcraft. We use a system that is very easy for designers to add quests without the assistance of a programmer. That has allowed us to create thousands of quests very quickly for the game. While the quest system is very flexible, we can trigger animations, events, camera movements and much more. Of course, all this takes time, and we've reserved the more elaborate quests for higher-level quests and dungeon content. We also have to make sure our quests are compatible with a multiplayer environment that never stops running. This makes it challenging to do things like special events out in the "open" world. We tend to put these highly scripted sequences in our "instances," which are private areas of the dungeon, exclusive to a party. That way, other players can't interfere with what's going on in a cool quest or boss fight.



Players can own personal mounts, like horses, panthers, wolves and raptors.





"We really wanted a lot of content in our game and I think we managed to achieve that. The world is packed with interesting places..."

Mark Kern, producer, Blizzard Entertainment

We asked some hardcore online RPG players what they'd like to know about WoW. The most popular question was this: after reaching the level cap, will there be large-scale challenges for guilds to take on together?

Yes! There will be many large-scale raid encounters that will require a lot of players to overcome. You'll be able to chain parties together into large groups that can share the XP and rewards. There is an entire game structure planned for these types of raids.

Will you be launching with a main story arc, and will Blizzard be hosting dynamic events to help foster this progressive storyline?

Yes, the story will continue to evolve. Chris Metzen, our creative director, really wanted to tie the RTS series together with World of Warcraft. The end of Warcraft III expansion The Frozen Throne really sets the stage for the world state in Azeroth, and you'll continue to see events in World of Warcraft that further the storyline.

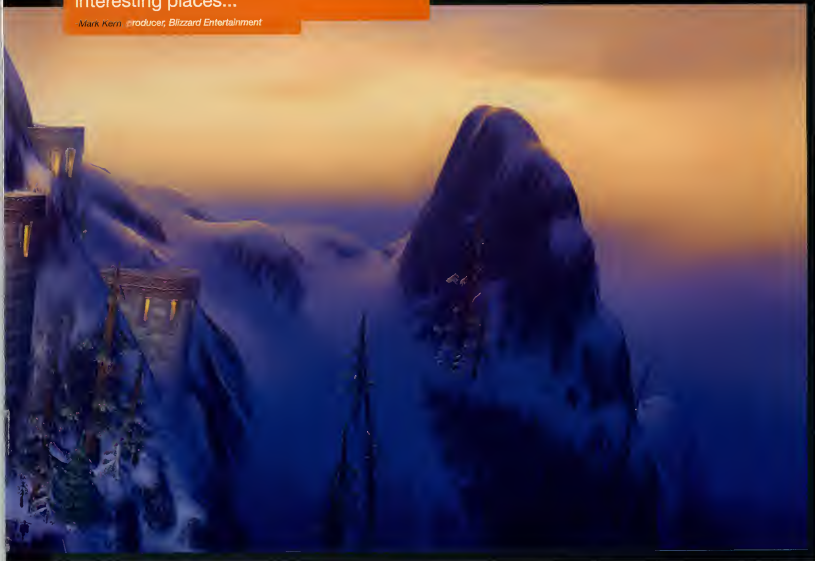
MMORPG development is a huge endeavor. As you approach release this

writer, what challenges are the team most proud of surmounting, and what's the biggest feature left to test?

I think the team can be proud of the fact that many testers say rivals already-shipped products. We really wanted a lot of content in our game and I think we managed to achieve that. The world is packed with interesting places, NPCs and things to look at. The real test is finishing the last 10 percent of the game, including our PvP battlefields, and getting it into the hands of the gamers in time for Christmas. So far, it's looking good!

Though World of Warcraft is still early, the game is already extremely polished in Beta form. The geography and seamless terrain engine are especially impressive; truly, this landscape does feel like the "world" it claims to be.

There's also a consistency to the art design that no previous fantasy MMO has enjoyed, and the writing is very strong. It all bodes well for the future of Blizzard's indomitable series.



Armies of Exigo

Rally your minions on multi-level battlefields

Preview

Recommended system specs

OS: Windows XP	Video: GeForce FX 5700
Processor: 2.4 GHz	Sound: SD19 compatible
Memory: 512 MB	Internet: LAN/Broadband

Not many new developers can claim to have the creative backing of a true Hollywood veteran. Black Hole Entertainment, the creators of EA's forthcoming *Armies of Exigo*, is the brainchild of esteemed studio producer Andrew G. Vajna. This longtime film exec was the co-founder of Carolco Pictures, the legendary 1980s' studio that released action classics like the *Rambo* trilogy and *Total Recall*. He later established Cinerji,

which brought us Jacob's *Ladder*, *Die Hard With a Vengeance*, *The 13th Warrior* and *Terminator 3*. Based in Budapest, Andrew and his Black Hole team are set to capitalize on this cinematic experience in a somewhat unexpected first-time effort: a hardcore fantasy RTS. In a year that will see the release of real-time strategy epics such as *Rome: Total War* and EA's own *Battle for Middle-Earth*, a newcomer to the genre must bring a truly unique feature set



Epic real-time high-fantasy warfare...
...with an alien invasion twist.



if it hopes to stand on its own, regardless of star power.

Armies of Exigo will chronicle the campaigns of three conflicting factions: the Humans, the Beast horde, and The Fallen. The Human force, also consisting of allied elves, dwarves and gnomes, has been locked in a bitter war with the Beast horde, a legion of trolls, lizardmen and goblins, for years. The Fallen are sinister otherworldly beings that have enlisted dark elves, undead warriors and other shadowy creatures to strengthen their subterranean army. Each campaign will take place over 12 mission scenarios, and plotlines between each faction will often cross over. As the RPG-influenced trend continues in the genre, distinct named "heroes" will emerge from each faction, leading their forces from one mission to the next. Eventually, the threat of the invading Fallen army will become too great for the Human and Beast forces to contend with alone, and they will be forced to unite.

In its favor, *Armies of Exigo* will offer loads of storylines and content in the single-player campaign, including extensive dialog, resource building and unit development—firmly targeting the RTS faithful. The game will also ship with several competitive multiplayer modes, from King of the Hill to Capture the Flag, and allows each team to field 200 units. It

has a solid engine with great touches like real-time wind and shadows, and gorgeous CG cinematics. All the requisites of a fine real-time strategy game are accounted for, but Black Hole has given *Exigo* its own defining feature: interactive dual-layered environments. Armies can march through dungeon passages and catacombs while the battlefield explodes over land, using miners or (in the case of The Fallen) giant burrowing worms to proceed. Wizards will be able to cast booming earthquake spells directly overhead, knocking foes to the ground and causing crushing caves below, while other effects—such as lava eruptions and avalanches—can be used to burn and seal encroaching mobs. The potential tactical implications of this dual-layered battlefield are understandably huge, and should present a feast of dynamic options in multiplayer skirmishes.

Against a barrage of sequels and well-known franchises, *Armies of Exigo* may face a steep challenge at retail this fall. On the other hand, given its huge campaign mode, high production values, unique dual-layered battlefields and strong multiplayer game, it might be exactly the original RTS title that genre fans are craving. **MIKE GIFFIN**

Developer: Black Hole Entertainment
Publisher: EA Games
Available: September

"...Black Hole has given *Exigo* its own defining feature: interactive dual-layered environments."

Rome: Total War

Ancient conflict on bleeding-edge frontlines

Preview

Recommended system specs (TENTATIVE)

OS: Windows XP	Video: Dx9 compliant
Processor: 2.4 GHz	Sound: Dx compliant
Memory: 512 MB	Internet: Broadband

Following the enduring popularity of the Shogun and Medieval iterations of the Total War series, The Creative Assembly and Activision will be raising the historical strategy stakes this fall with Rome: Total War. Showcasing ancient generals and a huge engine overhaul, Rome: TW aims to reel in gamers who typically avoid real-time strategy, but simply cannot resist the game's theme and visuals. In fact, the large-scale combat is so riveting, it can be seen

on TV throughout the summer in the new History Channel series *Decisive Battles*. We spoke with Rome: Total War co-designer and writer Mike Brunton regarding the game's rich presentation, remarkable troop behavior and surprising accessibility.

Mike Griffin

Developer: The Creative Assembly

Publisher: Activision

Available: September

Interview

Mike Brunton, co-designer and writer, *The Creative Assembly*

play: There's obviously been a major engine revision between your last game and Rome: Total War. How did you achieve such a massive technological leap?

Mike Brunton: A great deal of hard work over a period of years by a team of very good programmers! We've had the luxury of being allowed to develop something until it is right, not until it has to be shipped. The end result is a game that has a "wow" factor, even for the people working on it.

Given the proposed scale of field encounters, how dynamic is the environment in terms of troop movement and city construction?

The battlefield environment has the effects you'd expect in real life. March heavily armored men across a desert and they'll tire quickly. Try to use archers in the middle of a snowstorm and it won't be very effective. You'll need to tailor your tactics to the kind of battlefield you're fighting across. It's possible for an army to build a fort on the overhead campaign map, and if they fight a battle, the fort will be there on the battlefield. And with sieges, for example, you'll see everything on the battlefield that's been built in a city. You can see important buildings take damage

if the assault takes too long. Stuff that you do in the campaign is seamlessly reflected on the battlefield.

With thousands of 3D troops, there is the risk of generic behavior. How have you given personality, added a human feel, to the generals and soldiers?

In *Medieval: Total War* we introduced the idea of vices and virtues for characters. These were little personality quirks that they picked up during play, such as being a great commander (great oratory skills) or a drunkard. In *Rome: Total War*, we've taken this basic idea and really gone to town. There are around 700 vices and virtues that a character can pick up, depending on what happens. The effects range from making someone a better politician (great oratory skills) to making someone a bit of a fool with the vice of "hooning." Even lesser characters like diplomats and spies can have vices and virtues of their own. Added to this is a system for ancillary characters to the game: the hangers-on that form a retinue for all great men. A general who nearly dies in combat might well gain the services of a veteran centurion, for example, who spends his time watching his general's back.



"...we reckon you'll have a few hundred hours of gameplay to complete the game as every single nation."

—Mike Brunton, co-designer and writer

Historically, the warring factions of this time period often used vastly different tactics and formations. How have you represented this strategic diversity? All factions have some units that only they can use. We've tried to make sure that each army has a different feel to it and offers a different playing experience. Roman Legionaries can use the testudo formation where they hide beneath their shields as protection from arrows. The Germans have a "Screaming Women" unit that puts backbone into their men. The Romans were really scandalized by barbarian women's behavior in battle. The Britons get chariot-mounted fighters instead of cavalry, and they can be surprisingly deadly if you don't know how to counter them. The Greek factions have hoplites, of course, as massed formations of spearmen and pikemen. The Eastern factions are strong on cavalry. Some horse archer units can perform the cantabrian circle maneuver, where they gallop a circle near an enemy and alternate taking pot shots.

In terms of sound design, what kind of score can we expect, and how challenging was it to manage the combination of such epic battles? The music is again the work of Jeff van Dyck, who won a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts award) for his previous efforts. He's produced a set of themes that really do add to the flavor of the game without becoming a sword-and-sandals cliché. Again, though, making sure the noise of battle sounds great is part of having the luxury of time to do things properly. We've also tried to add interest before the battles start by having the general give a speech to his troops—he'll insult the enemy, fire up his men, give tactical hints and basically get everyone ready to die like men!

Many strategy game neophytes are taking a serious look at Rome: TW, mesmerized by the intensity. How friendly will the game be for the relative



beginner?

We're making it as friendly as we can. There's a walkthrough Prologue that introduces you to the game mechanics, the politics of Rome and how to fight a battle in a very painless way. We've also put together an advisor system that watches you play the game and pops up helpful hints. "Victoria" (named after the Roman goddess of victory) can tell you exactly how to get the most from the campaign game. She'll even offer suggestions about units to train and buildings to construct in your cities. On the battlefield, "Marcus" is an altogether practical assistant division commander. He'll offer hints about the enemy and try to warn you if you're about to do something really dumb, like charge straight into a forest of spear points.

How many campaigns and factions are shipping with the game?

The Prologue is one campaign in which you'll always play as the Romans. The Imperial campaign is actually two games, so that you can choose your own victory

Above: Specific battle formations unique to each nation give Rome: Total War that extra touch of authenticity.



conditions. When this is combined with the 11 playable factions, we reckon you'll have a few hundred hours of gameplay to complete the game as every single nation. And that doesn't count the historical battles we'll be shipping with the game, including some multiplayer historical conflicts.

How did the deal with the History Channel come about, and who generates the battle scripts that they use on TV?

The History Channel program came about thanks to early previews of Rome: Total War. The battle scripts are worked on by us and by the TV production company. They know the footage they need, we know how to get the battles to fight well and look great. It's a joint effort.

What does The Creative Assembly have in mind for the future of the Total War

series?

Future plans for the Total War series are so deadly secret that I could tell you, but you would immediately have to be exiled to a tiny little island until you died or the Emperor decided to send the Praetorian Guard to murder you. Either way, this outcome would be bad. Let's just say that there are ideas knocking about for a Rome expansion, and for at least one new game in the Total War series. Before we get to the point of deciding, some of us want to go to the pub for a pint to celebrate finishing Rome.

And celebrate they should, as Rome: Total War looks to be an impressive achievement. Between Rome and EA's Battle for Middle-Earth, the RTS genre has rarely been this accessible or sophisticated, and gamers will certainly reap the benefits.



Postscript

The Battle for Middle-Earth marches forward



EA Games' highly anticipated Lord of the Rings-inspired RTS, *The Battle for Middle-Earth*, continues to build momentum as it approaches a fall release. Fans are absolutely salivating over the prospect of leading their troops into the ferocious war of Tolkien's epic, from the Siege of Helm's Deep to the Battle of Isengard, represented in stunning polygonal complexity. You'll have an opportunity to command one of four unique armies: Gondor, Mordor, Isengard or Rohan. Expect deadly cavalry strikes from the riders of Rohan; Mordor can produce seemingly endless waves of grunts and foot soldiers; Isengard's powerful Uruk Hai attack fearlessly; and Gondor will exhibit its masterful defensive abilities. For hardcore fans, *The Battle for Middle-Earth's* executive producer Mark Skaggs delivered some fantastic news: the game will indeed be shipping with a full map editor, and it's the same powerful editor the developers used in the creation of the game.

Personal changes for the Tabula Rasa team



Staff on Richard "Lord British" Garriott's first massively multiplayer role-playing game with NCsoft has undergone a slight shuffling. *Tabula Rasa* recently lost two prolific, long-standing team members: lead designer, Corey Stawthin and lead programmer Bill Randolph. While there was no obvious indication of an acrimonious departure, in development terms these are two very important positions, leading to speculation about design conflicts. At any rate, the project is still proceeding with NCsoft's full commitment, and Garriott will personally take over as lead designer, while Starr Long remains on as the game's producer.

Crytek and EA enter into strategic partnership



Ubisoft has the Far Cry license, but are they keeping? After squandering an opportunity to extend a development deal with Crytek, Ubisoft has now lost their Far Cry developer to EA. While this doesn't affect the status of Far Cry Instincts, currently in development for consoles by Ubisoft's Montreal (read: Splinter Cell) division, it slams the door on a Crytek-developed PC Far Cry sequel. For gamers, however, the pain of that tragic loss may be mitigated somewhat by the potential of the Crytek-EA deal, as the first order of business will be an all-new intellectual property. EA's massive production support and marketing muscle combined with Crytek's design and technological expertise may yield a spectacular game.

Sega Saturn on your PC

A controversy is brewing in the PC emulation scene as a new Sega Saturn emulator, Cassini, recently became available for download. It's an impressive application, running games such as *Guardian Heroes* right off the original disc, and at good speeds. However, several parties question the legality of the emulator, which is simply a reverse-engineered Windows XP version of the *SiN* Saturn emulator, an abandoned emulation project once sanctioned by Sega. Although Cassini project leads claim to have modified up to 40 percent of the code, this too might land them in hot water. To their credit, they have contacted Sega of Japan to pursue the acquisition of copyrights. Coincidentally (or perhaps ironically), Sega of Japan is currently releasing exact replicas of the original Saturn controllers in USB format for PC. After brisk sales of the pearl white edition, Sega announced another "Saturn-authentic" USB pad, this time the original grey version. Many consider the Japanese Saturn pad to be the finest console controller of all time for 2D games.



NPD Top PC Games

Sales figures 7/11/04 to 7/17/04

01	The Sims: Superstar EA
02	Age of Mythology Microsoft
03	Rise of Nations Microsoft
04	The Sims Deluxe EA
05	The Sims Mega Deluxe EA
06	Far Cry Ubisoft
07	Zoo Tycoon: Complete Collection Microsoft
08	City of Heroes NCsoft
09	Flight Simulator 2004: A Century of Flight Microsoft
10	Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising Navologic

EverQuest II primed for Asian crossover

Entering what's considered a tough market to break into by most Western publishers, Sony Online Entertainment has announced a major partnership deal with Taiwan-based Gamania. Under the terms of the joint venture, *EverQuest II* will be "culturalized" for Asian audiences in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia. According to Sony's research, there are more than 14 million online gamers in China alone, making this the largest partnership in the history of online gaming. Some expected changes to *EQ II*, designed to appeal to these markets, include a predictable re-recording of the game's extensive voice-over, new character models and possible tweaks to the controls and interface. Gamania and SOE will benefit from this collaboration in other ways as well: Gamania receives a significant core technologies transfer (including portions of *EQ II*'s engine) to apply to future game development, and in turn Sony will have the right of first choice to obtain a global license on any of these future products. Regardless of format or word region, Sony seems to have the golden touch in this industry.



Athens 2004

Thrill of victory or agony of the fingers?

preview

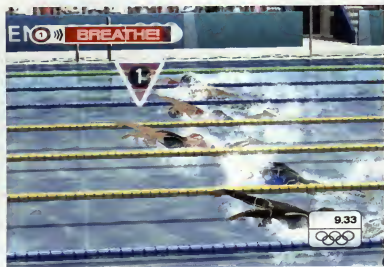
With the Olympics well underway, it was only natural for a video game based on the summer games to come out. Taking a nod from Konami's classic *Track & Field* is *Athens 2004*. Sure the graphics aren't the greatest, and your fingers will hurt after playing it, but for what it's worth, this has party game written all over it.

At its heart, *Athens 2004* is basically a collection of 25 minigames, with each minigame being a specific Olympic event. I have to hand it to the developers for putting out a game that has such a broad range of sporting events. Everything from skeet shooting to weightlifting to floor exercises is covered here. Whatever event you choose, each shares a common play mechanic—basically pushing a series of buttons (usually X and O) as fast as you can. Although there is some skill involved when you have to hit a button to adjust for angles and lead off points, for the most part, *Athens 2004* is all about button mashing.

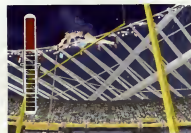
The best way to enjoy *Athens 2004* is with a group of your friends. Supporting up to four players (sorry, no online play), Party Mode has you competing in more than 10 events going for the gold medal. *Athens 2004* even supports the dance mat for events like the floor exercise. Sure it's cheesy, but fun nonetheless.

Even though the athletes are nicely animated and the events show off some nice detail, I feel the developers could've done more with the overall look and feel of the game. Expressionless faces, pale skin and similar body types—all of the athletes in the game have a very generic look about them. A little more detail would've made the game that much better. **Tom Ham B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Eurocom Entertainment
Publisher: SCEA
Available: July



"...your fingers will hurt after playing it, but for what it's worth, this has party game written all over it."



Olympic Training Facility Visit



To help launch *Athens 2004*, Sony held a media day at the official U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Hundreds of top athletes from across the country train here before heading off to the Olympic games. After taking a tour of the facilities, we were taken to the Olympic Shooting Center, where we were instructed in the 10-meter rifle and pistol event by U.S. Olympic Team members Sarah Blakeslee and Emily Caruso. After being humbled by the athletes (they each got a bullseye on their first shot), we proceeded to play *Athens 2004* with other members of the Olympic Shooting Team.

We were honored to have been able to meet the athletes at the Training Center and we wish them luck during these Olympic games.



ESPN NFL 2K5

Madden better watch its back—Sega has come to play **review**

For a mere \$20, Sega's game is every bit as deep, feature-rich and addictive as EA's Madden. I'm not saying that 2K5 is better than Madden...but it's just as good—no joke. In terms of features, 2K5 has the brilliant VIP System or Virtual Identity Profile. Taking the typical player profile to the next level, the VIP System tracks everything about how you play the game—what kind of plays you like to run, if you like to run on 3rd and long, how many times you fake punt—and then it saves it. Later you can play against yourself (to see how you play)

or, better yet, download a top player's VIP info and play against them. The replayability alone is endless. The excellent Crib is back, along with First Person Football, and 2K5 introduces League play online. Combine all this with visuals rivaling Madden, and you have a football game that, for \$20, everyone should own. **Tom Ham A**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox,
Developer: Visual Concepts
Publisher: Sega/Take 2 Interactive
Available: August



FIFA Soccer 2005

Could this game put FIFA back on top? **preview**

With this year's FIFA, EA went back to their roots and developed a game that not only concentrated on the basic fundamentals of soccer but also added some compelling new features that could put the series back on top. New this year is "First Touch." Everyone who plays soccer knows that whoever handles the ball first has the advantage. The developers have translated this simple dynamic and incorporated it seamlessly into gameplay. Utilizing a fluid player kinetic system, the response time is instant so players can react and respond accordingly. Adding

to the realism is new Off the Ball Control. For the first time, the ball isn't "magically" attached to the player's foot. The ball has its own set of physics—so it's going to take more skill to control it. By using the right analog stick, players are able to quickly redirect passes, change defenses and call in tackles. **Tom Ham**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: EA Sports
Available: October



NHL 2005

Open Ice Control changes everything **review**

For 2005, EA Sports is putting ultimate control in your hands with Open Ice Control, a massive leap forward for hockey games. Imagine controlling two players at once—you can execute seamless Give-and-Goes, perform perfect breakaway passes and even set up complex defenses—all on the fly. Just being able to call for the puck and make a one-liner is too cool for words. The lax AI from last year's game has been stepped up. Not only will the game pick up on your habits, but it will anticipate your moves and try to be more aggressive. Making NHL 2005 more realistic, the players

in the game are going to play like their real-life counterparts. Players like Fedorov will be able to maneuver around other players with the greatest of ease. An improved Dynasty mode and the inclusion of the World Cup of Hockey round out this great hockey title. **Tom Ham B+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: August



Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005

Best of the best? Seems likely. **preview**

Being a huge fan of Tiger's game last year, I was skeptical as to what EA Sports could add to this year's game to surpass it. Sure the whole Game Face was cool and the deep career mode was nice, but it left me wanting more. For 2005, the developers are introducing "Tiger-Proofing." What is it? Basically tweaking a course to make it more challenging for a top player, like Tiger. Tee boxes get pushed back, Fairways are made narrower. Traps are made bigger. Players now will be able to Tiger-Proof the courses in the game to their liking. Using a revolutionary course-altering

system, players can modify any course in the game—all in real time. Other features include Game Face II, which incorporates 33 percent more customizations options, including acne, age spots, wrinkles and 15 PGA players and, of course, online gameplay. **Tom Ham**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: EA
Publisher: EA Sports
Available: September



Rumble Roses

We ass-ume we've got your attention...

preview



Yes, Rumble Roses is gratuitous...damn gratuitous. But it's also one of the best wrestling games around, from Exhibition to exhibitionism, down to the meaty Story Mode. Moves come off like they're supposed to, without laboring, and the ultra-cool "Humiliations" make for some of the best girl-on-girl fun this side of an internet connection. Eleven combats, each with their own back-story and complexities (face and heel) means

incredible depth and, as you can see, it's more than a little easy on the eyes. RR also promises spectacular entrances and signature music, of which we've seen (and heard) a few that looked just that. I believe I'm ready to rumble. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Yuke's/SUCKE Tokyo
Publisher: Konami
Available: November



"...Ultra-cool 'Humiliations' make for some of the best girl-on-girl fun this side of an internet connection."

DOA flashback: the same modelers, Polygon Magic, scripted the Roses.



WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw

Ying for complete dominance of the squared circle

preview

If it's on WWE programming, then it's probably in WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw. The latest SmackDown! features a ton of enhancements, including new grapples, counters, submission mechanics and ways to break holds. You can yell at the ref after a failed pin attempt, or you can have your manager distract him to help get the upper hand. Players can now choose whether their wrestler of choice will be a face or a heel outside of season mode, and then use unique abilities associated with

each—like dirty tactics if you're a heel. Full commentary and wrestler voice-over are included, and the models, as if they weren't good enough last year, now feature 25 percent more polygons. And this is just the tip of the iceberg. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Yuke's
Publisher: THQ
Available: November



"...the models, as if they weren't good enough last year, now feature 25 percent more polygons."





play anime

TIME IS NOT
ON YOUR SIDE

WIPPIE

THE THIRD REICH



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Dokkoida!?

Diaper genie

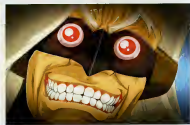


If Ultra Man was blue...small, maybe a little gay...and wore a metal diaper, he might look something like Dokkoida, Japan's most hapless superhero, fighting crime in a prefecture near you for the good of humanity...and rent money. Nineteen-year-old loser extraordinaire Suzuo needed a job, and Tampopo, a tiny alien masquerading as a little girl, representing the Toys of the World Corp., needed someone who fit the suit. So they meet, he gets busy and crime fighting follows, right? ...Uh, no. You see, the Emerald Company also has a hero suit, and has recruited a high school hotty, Asaka Nogiku, aka Neruloid Girl, to represent their interests, so when space raiders attack, it's a duel to the finish. But wait, there's more. Not only are the space villains they're fighting being deposited on Earth by the chief of police from a prison colony in deep space, but he's created both heroes' hero suits. See, his butt's in a sing over rampant crime in Tokyo, so he's initiated the Power Suit! Program, wherein he creates the disturbance, fols it (well, that's the plan) and then takes credit for whichever super hero turns out to be the ultimate crime buster. But...there's still more. In a move only a butt-kissing personal assistant could endure, he's managed to house the two heroes, their alien cohorts and the criminals (all in their human forms, of course) in the same tiny apartment building, which none of them are supposed to know...but they all do, but they can't say. Don't bother looking for a better setup than this one. *Dokkoida!?* is a little bit *Starship Troopers* (totally totalitarian), a little *MIB* and maybe a little *Police Academy*. It's also a whole lotta fun and extremely well made. This is one great-looking show and it's 100 percent grade-A traditional. Pass the Pampers. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: Gonzo Entertainment
 Rating: 13 & Up
 Running Time: 100 Minutes
 Volume: 1 - "Ultra Diaper Man"

"...Japan's most hapless superhero, fighting crime in a prefecture near you for the good of humanity...and rent money."

Neruloid Girl having a word with her employer...the talking rabbit.





When Hellcat meets Hellfire...
The whole country's going straight
to the Devil!!

CHRONO CRUSADE

The gates of hell have been opened, and now someone's got to put the devils back! Enter Sister Rosette Christopher, elite Exorcist in the Order of Magdalene, and her partner, the devil Chrono. Armed with sacred ammo, they're ready to defend our nation from the demon world...but when you make a bargain with a devil, there's going to be a hell of a price to pay. From the hit ADV Manga comes the hottest anime of the year, Chrono Crusade!

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Birth

You may need to take both pills.



We come to realize that we are living in an age of funky anime—the weirder the better. Back in 1986, when *Birth* was originally made, people were probably like, “er, okay...” but in an era where *Dead Leaves*, *Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi* and *Excel Saga* are some of animation’s tastiest treats, *Birth* slides up to the table in jeans and a t-shirt. A genesis of sorts, *Birth* plays out on a planet, Aqualoid, ravaged by an invading army of mechanical mistfs, many of which are monolithic to say the least. These “Inorganicis”—self-injected into the embryonic universe as some type of anti-master plan—will determine the eventual fate of Aqualoid, and the whole of existence, which now rides on the shoulders of Rasa, a shapely teenage girl who scoots around like a maniac on a sand cycle accompanied by a yellow blob named Mongo and her pal, Nam, who stumbles upon the key to the universe (that from which all things began and just might end) as things get underway. With the aid of the kookiest space

pirate this side of Photon’s Papacharino (and if you don’t know, don’t ask), who also happens to be snuggling up with Rasa, which is weird since he’s old enough to be her father, they sail into, across and beneath the surface, doing battle with an enemy force that defies description. It may have been made in 1986, but this shockingly cool one-shot feels brand-new and warrants multiple viewings. Mixing the philosophical with the hyper-comedic, amidst the sun-drenched look of *Pitch Black* and a truly magnetic English script, *Birth* most definitely beckons. If the late, great Stanley Kubrick made a cartoon, it would probably go something like this, plus, I’m pretty sure this is the only place you’ll ever see a rotund robot fire off attacks named after fruits and vegetables. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 13 & Up
Running Time: 85 Minutes



“If the late, great Stanley Kubrick made a cartoon, it would probably go something like this...”



The view to a rll, among other things.



《DEAD LEAVES》

"THEY HAVEN'T INVENTED A WORD YET FOR HOW COOL DEAD LEAVES' IS!" PLAY Magazine

"DEAD LEAVES LITERALLY RESEMBLES AN ABSTRACT, FULL-THROTTLE ACTION COMIC LEAPING TO LIFE RIGHT OFF THE PAGE" NEWTTYPE Magazine



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(KILL BILL / GHOST IN THE SHELL / BLOOD: THE LAST VAMPIRE)



The Super Milk Chan Show

She does a body good!

About five minutes into *The Super Milk Chan Show*, my mission was clear. I had to forgo a traditional review and call for the aid of my pals at ADV (special thanks once again to Mr. Rod Peters) to shine an extra-special light on these most abnormal exploits. When a drunk slug, a robotic dog with a weak bladder and the robot from *Lost in Space*'s blind date are the most normal things in the vicinity, it's time to call in the experts. So without further ado, give it up for the bravest man in ADR, Steven Foster! **Dave Halverson**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 17 & Up
Running Time: 135 Minutes



Interview

Steven Foster, producer, ADV Films

Did you draw the short straw or actually volunteer for madness?

A little bit of both. I knew [producing *Milk!*] would mean doing twice the amount of usual work, entering into some office politics—which I hate—and making something that had never been done in the anime world before, really. And something new is always risky. But [company founder and CEO] John Ledford and so many other people loved this show. So, sometimes, you just have to get up, take the tough assignments, and try to do the job as best you can.

First things first...where'd you get that cool Gamera on the ADV reception station?

We get so many people saying how cool it was to get a peek into ADV's studios. This funny thing is, we really had to dress the sets—a lot. Our offices aren't glam by any stretch of the imagination. So our set decorator did some shopping and "borrowing" from offices. I think Gamera came from the guys in our video edit suites. It's a nice touch.

Having listened to both tracks, I have to say you nailed your version. It wipes the floor with the original dialogue. Americans know crude, baby! Mexican: That Creole fusion...Olson twins' money...Punisher missiles...fish therapy...a Viagra-popping president...and Lel' Garret?! I love it! Did you adapt this on your own or did other lunatics assist you?

Thanks, that's really nice of you to say. As far as the script, I wish we had something like a writers' room where six or seven scribes are just kicking out jokes. But we're not that big a studio. Y'know, I got some input from the cast, especially the comics, but it was pretty much all me.

Seek help. Okay, so Milk is a 5-year-old infinitely snoot-nosed potty-mouthed superhero (with no super powers) who has money but doesn't pay her bills, massacres innocent bugs and saves the world by selling waffles. No wonder it took three years to nail. Did you look at it and just go, "Oh shit, what the...?" That's exactly what I did. Everyone looks at Milk on the surface and you think, "Awesome. Perfect. How could it fail?" But then you try to translate it and it...just...dies. Flat as hell. I knew we had to do something.

So you ended up tweaking the script (a lot) and adding a conclusive ADV behind-the-scenes in place of the hyper-weird Japanese, er, whatever those were...those Hallmark-on-crack things. Yeah, the halikus are kinda whack.

So how life at ADV really is? Do the actors often record on the same day and taunt one another? The way ADR works, we really don't all get together that much. But when the actors see each other in the lobby, yeah, they go to it. Like today, Mike MacRae [The

President) was in for *Chrono Crusade*, Luci Christian was here to lay down tracks for Mezzo and Hilary Haag (Milk) was here to do her last volume of *Milk*. She just got back from a week in Italy, and she brought me this pornographic calendar from Pompeii, so we were all freakin' out about that. Mike just filmed a TV pilot. We were harassing Luci about her date life. Yeah, we can throw the shit around.

Nice Otaku representation too; bet they'll love that... although, I think I saw those same three sitting in the aisle at Suncoast reading DVD cases...

Some people were nervous about that. But nothing is sacred in *Milk*; no one is safe. We make fun of Washington, Hollywood, guys, director egos, our own actors. Everybody's a target in the anime and the live action. The next joke is that, two of the Otakus are, like, the biggest anime actors in the world, Chris Patton and Greg Ayres.

I knew that, "cough" Did the cast enjoy cross-dressing, playing antiquated pinball and causing a general nuisance for the camera?

We shoot those things and the days are loooooong—16 hour days—and I feel really bad about that. That's a lot to ask of your cast. But they're so gracious and so dedicated. Shelley Black said it best when she told me, "You know, you're just really lucky we all actually like each other." But to answer your question, yeah, they enjoy it. They get to play themselves, in a way, and then tweak that perception and persona. I'd talk to them one-on-one and then things they would tell me would turn into script ideas, concepts. Mike says he and the others are just my little puppets that I play with. I don't know about that, but I do know that the strings they're attached to are all their own stuff. I just ratchet up the tension a little.

"The engineer and I are just in tears sometimes because they're so damn funny."

—Steven Foster, producer, ADV Films

And what about Taylor? Was she a ringer or is that the sexiest voice actress ever?

Isn't she something? She was a little bit of a ringer, yeah. Because the girls are queens, absolute queens, and they know it. Hilary, Shelley, Monica (Rial), Luci and Christine (Auter). These girls are just worshipped by fans—and by the guys in the show. I wanted to goose 'em a little. So I called an agent friend of mine and she sent me some girls and I met with them but when Taylor walked in, it was—BAM—I mean, she had it, magic. And everybody in the cast knows it. So it was fun to play with that. She and Hilary have some really neat scenes going on in volumes 3 and 4. Great, wicked stuff.

God, I'm good. When the Pres busted out the karaoke I almost pased myself. How on Earth did you keep a straight face during all this?

It ain't easy. The engineer and I are just in tears sometimes because they're so damn funny. When the other actors come in for their sessions, we have to turn the other track off because they start laughing at everyone else's delivery. Mike cracks up Hilary; David Matranga makes Shelley lose it. Marcy Bannor is so hysterical [thru] Tommy Drake (Dr. Eyepatch) can't get through a line if she hears her Tetsuko stuff. It makes for a fun day at work. Believe me, their deliveries have saved some really lame jokes.

What makes Tetsuko's gas attack so rank? And why is her head filled with liquid? These are the answers the public demands!

That's not the only Tetsuko question the public is demanding. Why Marcy? Why Monica? Why so different? We should do a commentary for the last volume and tell all the secrets and the dirt about the show. Come clean, you

know what I mean?

And what about those, er, swimmers hanging out with Dr. Eyepatch...are those what I think they are?

Oh my god, dude, I never got that. You could be right! That's what I love about anime. You can watch something a billion times, but then you notice something you didn't on the billionth and first. When we were recording the last volume, Tommy saw that Eyepatch's missing tooth was in the same place as the President's only tooth. That really freaked me out. I never saw that, either.

I love Robo Dog 1000 too. I say ditch the cheesy plush toys and market those!

I know, right? And David Matranga does such a great job with that show. It's hell for him to get that high, but he does it somehow. He's the art baby too. I love David. He's incredible.

So why "Milk Chan"? Is she honored in milk circles (they, a dairy queen)? She doesn't seem to care much about milk.

We keep joking for a tie-in with the milk board, but Milk's got a mouth on her. I don't think they'll bite.

What types of Milk Chan merchandise are available in Japan? Will ADV be bringing any stuff our way?

I know we have a plush Milk being developed. I wanna get my hands on those little figurines from Japan. Those things kick ass. Our CFO has a box in his office. One day, after a few drinks, I might just go over there and...

Will we get more Milk? And if so, will the ADV saga continue? You should get Jessica Boone into the act! There are four volumes total. The second one comes out late August. That's when the show really hits its stride. It's hysterical. Three comes out in October and then the epic, the fourth, comes in December. The cast goes on a road trip to a convention. It's insane. And, yeah, I love Jessica. I can't wait to work with her.

As usual, you're the man Steve! What's up next? No more 20-hour days writing, recording, filming and editing, that's for sure. I'm best. Happy, but beat. I might do a theatrical anime. There's a psychic thriller they're telling me is coming my way. One of the studio heads showed me this twisted Japanese mannequin comedy, trying to tempt me with it, but I was [like], "No way, man, no more comedies for a while. I need a break." play



Getting into the act: Think voice actors should be heard and not seen? Think again.



watch this



JUSTICE IS SERVED!

Miami Guns

Studio: All Entertainment
New Playing! Volume 2

Yao and Lu continue to lay the smack down on crime with the best of them. We deem *MG* the perfect summer fun-line anime.

listen to this



Guingraves OST into "righthead"

Publisher: Square Anime Music

Dripping with as much style as the series itself, *Righthead*'s Grave compilation is the perfect companion for *dirigible*.



T.M. Revolution
Seventh Heaven

Publisher: Epic

An almost relentless barrage of techno, anime-metal, and J-Pop, renowned singer T.M. Revolution fits the Starback of the music world. Catch your breath during tracks like "Zips."

RAHXEPHON

THE MOTION PICTURE



RaXephon: The Motion Picture

Studio: ADV Films

Because who could ever get enough of *RaXephon*? And with production values beyond the TV series...*fan* or not, you need to get into it.



THE Devil Lady

The Complete Collection

The Devil Lady Complete Collection

Studio: ADV Films

Twenty-six episodes of the best Go Nagai since the original *Devil Boy*. A super-model with super-demon powers? What's not to love?

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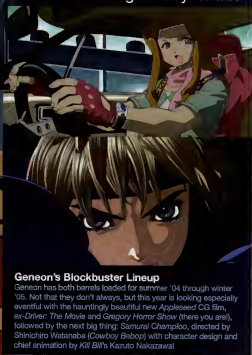
Spt. Frog

Publisher: Tokyopop

New Reading! Vol. 3

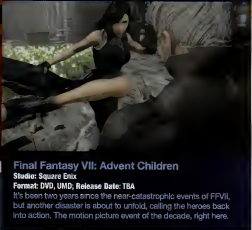
You're into Spt. Frog, right? You may as well get used to the little alien freak, because you'll be seeing a lot more of him in the future.

get ready for this



Geneon's Blockbuster Lineup

Geneon has both barrels loaded for summer '04 through winner '05, but that they can't always, but this year is looking especially eventful with the hauntingly beautiful new *Applesauce* CG film, six *Craver: The Movie* and *Gregory Horror Show* (there you are), followed by the next big thing: *Samurai Champloo*, directed by Shinichiro Watanabe (Cowboy Bebop) with character design and chief animation by Koji Inai's Kazuo Nakazawa!



Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children

Studio: Square Enix

Format: DVD, UMCD, Release Date: TBA

It's been two years since the most catastrophic events of *FFVII*, but another disaster is about to unfold, calling the heroes back into action. The motion picture event of the decade, right here.

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animedatabase

Virgin Megastore Top Ten

- 01 Ghost in the Shell: SAC manga/bandai
- 02 Gunggrave geneon entertainment
- 03 Saikano viz ilc
- 04 Tokyo Godfathers columbia tri-star
- 05 Cowboy Bebop bandai entertainment
- 06 Last Exile geneon entertainment
- 07 Ninja Scroll TV viz ilc
- 08 Van Helsing: The London Assignment universal
- 09 Chronicles of Riddick: Dark Fury universal
- 10 Inuyasha viz ilc



Play Magazine Top Ten

- 01 Dead Leaves manga entertainment
- 02 Lady Death geneon entertainment
- 03 Gungrave geneon entertainment
- 04 R.O.D. TV geneon entertainment
- 05 Kiddy Grade funimation productions
- 06 RahXephon adv films
- 07 The Super Milk Chan Show adv films
- 08 Ghost in the Shell: SAC manga/bandai
- 09 Gundam SEED bandai entertainment
- 10 Gad Guard geneon entertainment



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Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex manga/bandai

Completely new for TV, the latest chapter in Motomasa Shirogami's future epic is something special, as expected.



Tokyo Godfathers columbia tri-star

Funny, somber and thoroughly beautiful, no one should miss this genre-defining drama for a new generation of animation fans.

Dave Halverson

- 01 Dead Leaves manga entertainment
- 02 Lady Death adv films
- 03 Gunggrave geneon entertainment
- 04 Kiddy Grade funimation productions
- 05 Gad Guard geneon entertainment



Zach "PR" Korwin

- 01 Gunggrave geneon entertainment
- 02 TEXHNOLYZE geneon entertainment
- 03 Gravion adv films
- 04 Final Fantasy Unlimited adv films
- 05 Megazone 23 adv films



Nelson Lui

- 01 Stratos 4 bandai entertainment
- 02 Figure 17 media blasters
- 03 Azumanga Daioh adv films
- 04 Kiddy Grade funimation productions
- 05 Ai Yori Aoshi Enishi geneon entertainment



Reader's Anime Top Five

- 01 Gungrave geneon entertainment
- 02 Gundam SEED bandai entertainment
- 03 .hack//Legend of the Twilight bandai entertainment
- 04 Robotech Remastered adv films
- 05 TEXHNOLYZE geneon entertainment

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

- 01 Les Bijoux tokycopop manga
- 02 The Demon Ororon tokycopop manga
- 03 Psychic Academy tokycopop manga
- 04 Sgt. Frog tokycopop manga
- 05 Princess Ai tokycopop manga

Play Magazine Music Top Five

- 01 Anime X-Plosion adv music
- 02 Music Only Music But Music geneon anime music
- 03 Stelvia OST geneon anime music
- 04 R.O.D. OST geneon anime music
- 05 Ai Yori Aoshi: Pine OST geneon anime music

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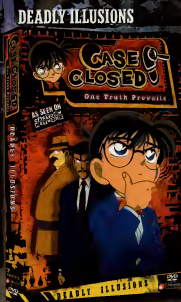
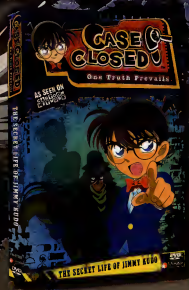
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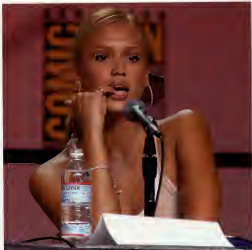

 A woman with blonde hair, wearing a silver sequined bikini, is sitting on a blue chair inside a glass display case. She is looking towards the camera. The background shows a convention hall with other people and lights.
 Show Report
San Diego Comic-Con International

2004

The show by the bay, Comic-Con International, has come into its own. With games, anime, manga, TV, toys, film and comics converging like never before, it's become the Mecca for all things entertainment a-d... just plain freaky. One minute you're standing amidst a shiny media monolith and the next you're accosted by any number of Konami-made creations, which continue to climb the quality scale. We're also pretty sure that this is the only place you'll find a perfect woman entombed in a glass case... at eye level... swirling next to nothing... for four days. Let's see David Blaine pull that off.

Photos Michael Tran

For *Species II*, this brave young lady, whose name will remain anonymous, spent four days locked inside of a glass case, more than half naked, for all to see and oggle (and it was four days the entire show) and hopefully one fat check. There she sat when nobody shopping for a new android looks just like this.



The Movies

The stars were out in full force promoting their latest projects, and not just honoring contracts; there was a genuine sense of embracing Comic-Con this year. Dark Horse and Dimension Films brought out director Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez to talk about the movie *Sin City*, based on Miller's popular comic series. Joining the duo were some of the stars of the film, including Rosario Dawson, Jamie King and Jessica Alba. Alba pulled double duty at the show, as she also joined co-stars Ioan Gruffudd and Michael Chiklis to promote the upcoming *Fantastic Four* motion picture. *Sin City*'s Gullone made an appearance to talk about playing DJ Valentine in *Resident Evil: Apocalypse*, Jude Law was on hand to answer questions about his role in *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Other celebrities at the show included: Lance



✦ The stars come out

The celebrities come out in full force for Comic-Con 2004. In the wake of franchises like X-Men, Hellboy and Spider-Man, it's now not only cool, but rewarding, to be a part of comic-inspired cinema. With names like Rodriguez, Moore and Del Toro gaining the heads of director's chairs, Comic-Con has become a Mecca of both the tools and the talent.





★ General Mayhem

There's nothing quite like Comic-Con when it comes to letting it all hang out. A place where people love all walks of life can wear their passion on their sleeves, and everyone else on their lips, with no one being the wiser... unless of course, they get caught on camera. Regalistas anyone?



Herrickson (*Aliens vs. Predator*), Sarah Michelle Gellar (*The Grudge*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*), Elza Dushku (*The Calling*), Trey Parker and Matt Stone (*South Park*), Val Kilmer (*Alexander*), Ron Perlman (*Hellboy*), those nutty Wayne (*White Chicks*) and we're sure others who chose not to leave their hotel rooms.

was busy receiving accolades (and offers) for their latest judgement, the unstoppable *Dead Leaves*...

The Anime

Time has become a key constituent in the Comic-Con experience, and this year was no exception. Bandai was flaunting everything from *Gundam: Seed to Twilight* to their Manga joint *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex*; however, the big news is their new property, *DNA Integrated Cybernetic Enterprise*, aka *DICE*, which you'll be hearing more about in the months to come. ADV Films unveiled their stunning new original *Lady Death* movie to a packed house, while Geneon Entertainment let the rest of the world in (literally) on their stunning new *Gungnir* series. *Lupin* was also slinking around, checking out the ladies. Elsewhere, Manga Entertainment

The Games

This year's Comic-Con featured a surprisingly large showing from the video game industry. You couldn't turn around without bumping into a game of some kind or some tool in a costume playing one. Nintendo opened up Mr. Microphone to the producers of *City of Heroes* (announcing details for the game's next major update) and *Lineage II*; Activision shared a spot with Marvel Comics because *Spider-Man 2* and *X-Men* need more exposure; and Atari let fans fondle *Demon Stone*, *D&D: Dragonshard Wars* and their superb new *Godzilla* game, *Save the Earth*; THQ let their comic flag fly with *Warhammer 40K: Dawn of War*, *The Punisher* and *The Incredibles*; and LucasArts had something called *Star Wars* happening. Capcom, Square Enix, Take Two, Nintendo, Eidos... We had an E3 flashback and had to sit down. The star of the show (sorry, Pikachu) was

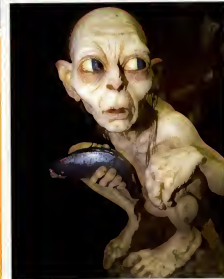
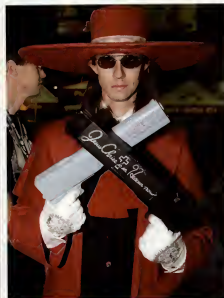


Konami, who spent days one and two putting on the Y&G-On tournament and then snags-shifted their display into a full-blown Konami rig, blessing Silent Hill 4, Sukodan IV, King Arthur, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles 2, Rumble Roses, Gradius V, Neo Contra and, of course, MGS3: Snake Eater.

The Comics

It wouldn't be Comic-Con without the comics, which now appear in a hazy end of the hall where no normal humans dare venture...unless you want to buy. The shiny new comic world, meanwhile, was in full effect. Recent blockbusters and acquisitions have led to a resurgence that looks to celebrate the artists from the drawing board and beyond. Comics and their creators have become more a part of Americana than ever before, and San Diego was ground zero for it (are it, sure

cool than you see mentally process, even if you were there. There were hundreds of new projects announced all over the show. Earthworm Jim creator Doug TenNapel was promoting his new graphic novel, Tommysaurus Rex, the movie rights to which were recently picked up for a cool \$1 million. In other game-related comic news, Dreamwave Productions celebrated the impending launch of their new title based on Sony's highly anticipated first-person shooter, Killzone, by Pat Lee. Comic professional Ted Naifeh was showing off artwork for the new Death Jr. mini-series, the story of which will lead straight into the upcoming PSP launch title. And big news for Halo fans: It's currently being developed into a comic series by DC Comics. There was plenty of manga going around too, as Industry giant TokyoPop announced their acquisition of Wizardart, to be penned by best-selling fantasy author Richard Knaak and illustrated by Hwan Kim of fan-fave King of Hell fame.



Street Fighter: *Comic Book Edition*

When UDON Entertainment's Street Fighter comic book debuted approximately a year ago, fans the world over let out a tremendous roar of approval. Adaptations of Capcom's beloved franchise have been notoriously hit-or-miss over the years, so to be treated to a comic book that was not only good but absolutely great was an event to make Street Fighter devotees scream "Tatsumaki! Kenpaku! Ryu!" like it was 1991 all over again. As exciting as its success was, it shouldn't have been particularly surprising, considering that the creators at UDON love the source material and produce some of the best art around, having worked on titles such as X-Men, Fantastic Four and other high-profile series. After an initial six-issue run (plus a hard-to-find issue #0) at Image Comics, the series found a new home at Devil's Due Publishing this past spring, where it continues to be a steady seller, adding further depth to the legacies of characters like Ryu, Chun Li, M. Bison and Akuma. We checked in with series writer Ken Siu-Chong to learn more about the creative process of the Street Fighter comic, where it's been and what to expect in the future. *Chris Helfman*

Interview

Ken Siu-Chong, writer, Street Fighter

play: How big a Street Fighter fan are you? When did you first fall in love with the game series?

Ken Siu-Chong: I've been a huge fan ever since high school when SFII first came out [I wasted wayaaaay too many quarters in arcades back in the day]. Sometimes I still can't believe I'm working on a comic based on such a legendary series. It really is a dream come true.

What's your personal favorite Street Fighter game?

Who's your character? While I love all of the games and characters from the various series, I'd have to say Third Strike is my personal favorite. It had really great, old-school play mechanics that weren't too Super Combo reliant and gave things a nice graphics upgrade. The Alpha and Vs. games were great, but in the gameplay department, Third Strike reigns supreme! As for my character, this'll sound really boring, but I'm a Ken player. The first time I ever played SF, I was at the character select screen, choosing a character, when—BAM!—I saw a character had the same name as me, so I chose him. Ken's been my favorite ever since.

On to the comic now, how do you determine what characters you're going to feature?

Well, when we choose the characters, they have to fit into the storyline that we're trying to tell. Obviously, we want to try to give every character some page-time since every character has their own fanbase, but you'll never see as much of, say, Rainbow Mika as Ryu.

How far in advance do you plan out your story arcs? Do you have it all figured out, where the story's going?

We work months in advance and we actually do have a rough plan of where everything's going. While there's always wiggle room (sometimes one story element isn't working as well as we'd like, or we'd really like to expand or add something else), there are major points in the plot that we've mapped out for the long-term storyline.

How closely are you trying to stay to Capcom's loose continuity that's been established throughout the games? Is it difficult to manage all the conflicting threads (say, with Charlie, for example)?

That's always been a challenge. We've tried to remain as close to the continuity of the games as possible, but in some cases where there are conflicts, or an element that doesn't work well in the comic book medium, we just try

to remain as true to the spirit of SF and the characters as possible. I think that for the most part, fans understand that it would be impossible to make a comic 100 percent in line with the games, and as long as we don't have anyone acting ridiculously out of character, they're cool with the story. All the UDON guys are also SF fans, so we understand how much other SF fans don't want the comic to mess things up!

How has creating the comic changed, comparing when you first started the series and now?

Honestly, it's kind of a blur... I've been so engrossed in writing the comics for so long, if there were any changes, I think they were too gradual to notice!

Thanks for showing the characters outside of typical fighting situations. How do you balance the core



fighting action with the character-driven nature of comic books?

Again, that's always a fine line we have to walk. Some fans have complained that there's not enough fighting in the series, while others say that there's too much focus on fighting and that we should slow things down. We're always trying our best to balance these two elements that are always pulling for page-time. Personally I love showing the origins, motivations and the non-violent interaction of these classic characters, but I also know that you don't want to pick up a Street Fighter book and read a comic full of talking heads.

Very interesting twist, having Sakura accompany Ryu on his journey. What was the creative reason for that? I thought that Ryu needed someone with him to interact with to bring more out of his character. Ryu's serious and single-minded in his quest for perfection and I think having Sakura with him balances his somewhat stoic nature. It helps contrast their similar, but contrasting personalities. Plus, Sakura adds a little much-needed comic relief to the journey of Ryu (who, even die-hard Ryu fans must admit, is a bit of a stick in the mud). I'm sure I'll get lots of hate mail for that comment...

It's also interesting that you turned Cammy good so quickly. She's one of our favorite characters. I'm definitely not complaining, but how come you turned her already instead of keeping her with Bison for a while?

A lot of Cammy's history with Shadaloo will actually be the focus of the current story arc when she tries to search for her past with Delta Red. The comic integrates elements

from both the Alpha and SF2 series and we thought this would be the best way to tackle Cammy's story...by basically building up her story in reverse.

Can you tell me about how you chose to work special moves into the comic and why you did it that way? In keeping with being as faithful to the games as we can, how could we not include our favorite characters' signature moves?! I wanted to see a cool flaming Shinyuken as much as anyone! But of course, we try to keep everything in the framework of the story. You won't see Guile using a Sonic Boom to open a can of beans or something!

How are you going to deal with the less-mainstream characters? Throughout SF history, there's been a lot written about, say, Ryu and Chun Li, but not so much about Zangief, Blanka, Balrog, etc., as far as deep, informative storylines go. Fear not, we'll try to make sure everyone makes an appearance and has their character fleshed out. It may take us a while, but we're trying to tackle every character, whether it's in the main storyline, or in a backup story. I know Arnold Tsang loves drawing the quirkier characters.

Any chance we'll go to Metro City? I'd love to see something done with Guy, Cody, Sodom, Rolento... maybe see how Hugo fits into that mix. That's an idea we've been bouncing around for a while. We'd love to do a one-shot or mini-series featuring the Metro City cast, but it's a matter of economics. If enough fans want it, we'd love to make it!

For that matter, do you anticipate going into Street

Fighter III territory anytime soon?

Good news and bad news. Good news: we're all looking forward to getting into the SFIII storyline as soon as the SFII arc has come to an end! Bad news: you'll have to wait until the SFII arc has come to an end! Patience is a virtue.

I'm sure you're familiar with previous Street Fighter comics, the anime movie, the SF V series...did you learn anything from these, maybe get hints of things you wanted to do or things you wanted to avoid? We wanted to avoid the Mallibu Street Fighter comic series and the Street Fighter live action movie as much as possible!

Is there anything you've wanted to do with the comic but haven't been able to?

Actually, you predicted it. I really want to do a Metro City story...time will tell.

What can you tell us about the comic's future? What roads are you taking us down...what characters will we meet?

Hmmm...I don't want to give anything away! But off the top of my head, coming up you'll see Adon, Balrog, a number of the Shadaloo Doll Agents, Dhalim, Blanka, and many returning faces. Also, be prepared to finally see the origin of Bison! Fans can also [obtain the] Capcom Summer Special that UDON [is] selling at the San Diego Comic-Con, Wizard World Chicago and the Toronto Comic Expo. It features an all-new story starring Chun Li and two other prequel stories that will kick off the new Darkstalkers and Rival Schools comics UDON has slated for late this year! play

"Sometimes I still can't believe I'm working on a comic based on such a legendary series. It really is a dream come true."

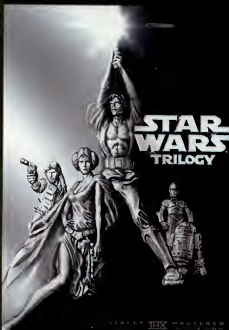
-Ken Sul-Chong, writer, Street Fighter



Preview

Star Wars Trilogy

The DVD set fans have waited for is almost here



Maybe it's best you don't review *Star Wars* Trilogy, pointing out exactly why *The Empire Strikes Back* is clearly and indignantly the best in the series, with the original—the one that altered cinema forever back on Wednesday, May 25, 1977—trailing closely behind, and the third, while still good, not quite as triumphant as what came before. That's like reviewing the Bible and proclaiming the New Testament an Old Testament killer.

You all know what you want, what you like, what you need and might worship with a fetishistic passion, and it's *Star Wars* Trilogy. Debate among yourselves the value of each. Scream about how Lucas cracked the perfection of the trilogy by adding a coat of CG touchups. Question the value of the newest Trilogy as you watch these original classics over and over again. That's what makes *Star Wars* so special, that amazing sense of nostalgia, that epochal gift to science fiction, the way so many faithful still cite it as practically a cornerstone to their pop-culture existence. There's never been and probably never will be another series of films that commands such a hold on its fans. Even something as special and monumental as *Lord of the Rings*—Oscar dominance is one thing, culture manipulation is another—just isn't the same thing. "Going to *Star Wars* was one of the most exciting experiences I ever had in my life—and not just movies," said *Lord of the Rings* director Peter Jackson. "*Star Wars* smashed open the possibilities of what film could actually do. It was like a seismic shift in how people perceived the cinema-going experience... *LoTR* has an ethos that is very much based on *Star Wars*. It was the perfect film to inspire a sense of wonder."

Made for around \$10 million (Episode II cost \$120

million) and shot in England for 14 1/2 weeks after almost five months of principal photography, the first *Star Wars* became such a drawn-out production that a perturbed Fox threatened to cancel the whole ordeal if Lucas didn't deliver on their demands. When it came time to strike in the visual effects, Lucas actually found the Hollywood system so incapable of meeting his standards that he set up his own studio, ILM—which even then ended up delivering well below his expectations. "It was a disaster, to say the least," said Lucas. "I really felt that I'd gotten myself into a real mess and I didn't know whether I was going to get out."

But work—no, triumph—it did. After opening in a scant 32 theaters, *Star Wars* caught fire, and now, 27 years later, it's coming to DVD. On September 21, all three movies in the original trilogy will be packaged in a four-disc set that includes a disc of extras. The big deal here is the extensive footage from the creation of the three films, which is the first time it's ever been shown. A feature-length documentary is also included. Maybe you already know bears, dogs, walrus, and a variety of other animals were used to feed Chewbacca's grunts, and that Darth Vader's breathing came from the sounds of a microphone being submerged in a souba tank and recorded off the voice of sound designer Ben Burtt. Revisit it all and behold: *Star Wars* Trilogy.

Starring: Mark Hamill, Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, James Earl Jones, Peter Mayhew, Anthony Daniels, Kenny Baker
Director: George Lucas, Irvin Kershner, Richard Marquand
Released by: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG
Available: \$121



CLASSIC IMAGES
You've already witnessed these scenes numerous times, but soon you'll be able to see them on DVD.



Kill Bill Vol. 2

Starring: Uma Thurman, David Carradine, Michael Madsen, Daryl Hannah
Director: Quentin Tarantino
Released by: Miramax
Rated: R

Kill Bill Vol. 2 is a revenge story. The Bride is pissed, and she's out to kill Bill. Her journey is such an exercise in glorious style and exuberant filmmaking that you can't help but walk away in pure delight. I haven't enjoyed a film so much simply out of its raw ability to entertain in far too long. Tarantino makes no apologies for letting his tasty dialogue run free; the film is not about depth of story, even as it drops the incessant action for more resolution of the characters and their colorful positions as pawns in Bill's nasty title game. Vol. 2 doesn't pack the visceral punch of the first movie, but it leaves you more satisfied in the end as Tarantino drops scenes of wildly original geek-banter and moments of humorous homage that any good

fan of classic kung-fu will clap for in approval. The film is clever and deceptively rich as much as it is violent and certainly self-indulgent: how can you deny the joy from the conversation-inciting newfound perspective offered on the great Superfury? No matter the annoyances, we'll accept that misplaced thematic stretch when the Bride shoots from her coffin prison in exchange for the suffocating claustrophobia that masterfully sets it up. Tarantino knows exactly how to shoot a scene for uniquely honed effect. And he knows exactly who he needs to electrify his characters. Samurai-sword-wielding Michael Madsen's smarmy trailer-home dweller truly deserved the bite of the black mamba. And who knew David Carradine could play displaceable with a likable spirit? Who knew dicing a sandwich could be so captivating? Who knew *Kill Bill* Vol. 2 would turn out to be one of the best films of the year? Extras: A minimal making-of and a few deleted scenes will have to do until the inevitable special edition. **Brady Flechter**
Movie: A Extras: C

"...these were some of the best players in the world—we're talking John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith film score veterans."

Richard Jacques was a fan-favorite during the halcyon days of the Saturn and Dreamcast, as he provided soundtracks to some of the era's biggest games. Assigned to *Sonic R* by Yuji Naka himself, Richard's all-star tenure at Sega Europe led him to *Metropolis Street Racer's* eclectic score, contributions to *Jet Set Radio* and finally on to the orchestral onslaught of *Headhunter* and its imminent sequel. We spoke with Richard from his London studio about the intense construction of the *Headhunter* soundtracks. **Mike Britin**

play: How did you initially become involved with the *Headhunter* project?

Richard Jacques: *Headhunter* was on the drawing board for quite some time. My boss back then told me that Sega was going to sign it with a developer over in Sweden called Amuze. I hit it off with the director of Amuze, a really creative guy who was also the lead designer of the game, John Kroknes. His vision for the game was totally cinematic, and he wanted an orchestral soundtrack. I had been interested in doing a full orchestral soundtrack for a while, but obviously you have to wait for the right title to come along [laughs]. You can't put that in a Sonic game!

Did Amuze have a certain concept in mind for the soundtrack?

Once I got a handle on what the game was going to be like, that it was slightly futuristic, with some Paul Verhoeven influences, we decided to go with a contemporary orchestral soundtrack. We wanted to keep it up to date: some electronic programming, percussion, drum loops, stuff like that—especially for highlighting characters and the key action sequences.

There must be a massive time sink involved with an orchestral score production...
Yup, it's huge. I spent about eight months on it when all was said and done. At that time, I did pretty much everything single-handedly, which makes it easy to justify the holiday afterwards. There was another guy who printed all the music for the orchestration, then we went out to the studio with about 70 players and engineers and conductors [laughs]. Yeah—the whole troupe, at Abbey Road Studios in London. We spent three days recording the original soundtrack, producing about 70 minutes of music.

That sounds pretty complex, and clearly there's some serious cash on the line. Are you under pressure to work through the material quickly?
It's very intense. You have a lot to get through, and it's also very costly with the live musicians and studio. You can easily spend 10, 20 thousand—without blinking. It probably totaled at nearly \$200 thousand U.S. But these were some of the best players in the world—we're talking John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith film score veterans.

I presume you didn't attempt to repeat this huge task for the sequel?

The *Headhunter: Redemption* soundtrack is not actually recorded live for a number of reasons, cost obviously being one of them. The two scores are also fairly different in their approach. When I looked at the conceptual art, I definitely wanted to take it in a slightly different direction. It's a lot more textural, thinner, instead of many big sounds at once, and it's darker, more atmospheric.

There's a big rift between the underground and upper-level societies in *Redemption*. How did you treat this difference?

Even though not much of the game takes place above ground, it's like the two different worlds, and we used different sounds in each. The above-ground stuff is a clean, futuristic type of sound, whereas below it's shadowy, gritty, and maybe even mechanical in some ways. There are thematic moments too. In general, there's close to three hours of music in the second game.

Did you have a lot more cutscenes to score in the sequel?

Yeah, there are quite a lot of cutscenes in this one, which took a while to score. It's a heavily narrative-based

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Richard Jacques

Game music composer

Headhunter / *Headhunter: Redemption*
2-CD release
La-La-Land Records
Available August

Hunt for this

An accomplished artist and experienced gamer, Richard is one of the few truly distinct game music composers in the industry today. The two-CD soundtrack set of his complete *Headhunter* and *Headhunter: Redemption* scores is now available from La-La-Land Records.



game with a superb story, and the outscenes also set up characters and gameplay moments. We did a lot of surround mixing and the cutscenes sound very good. I think Dolby is actually going to use some of the scenes on their demo tours.

Were there any special considerations while scoring *Headhunter: Redemption*?

The environments are a lot bigger than the first game. *Headhunter* was set in a city, but this one has some really huge locations and a lot of stuff that people haven't seen before in this style. So I really didn't want to let the music get in the way of the exploring sections. There's a lot of atmosphere filling the space, but you'll feel the intensity of all the action and set pieces too. **play**

Multimedia cellular phone

Motorola R630

www.motorola.com

Price: \$289.99 (subject to carrier)

Leave it to Motorola to come up with cell phone that is not only sexy but functional as well. At first glance, the A630 looks like your typical candy bar-shaped phone. But if you flip it open, inside lies a full QWERTY keyboard and an additional color landscape display. The 176x220 pixel screen (65,000 colors) is the perfect size for instant messaging, reading emails and sending SMS messages. In addition to the cool keyboard, the A630 also houses a 4x digital zoom camera. Coupled with the messaging capability of the phone, users are able to send multimedia messages (MMS) with a simple press of a button. Another key feature of the A630 is its Bluetooth functionality. Whether you're using a Bluetooth headset or connecting to other compatible devices, the A630 has you covered.



Digital video/audio device

Samsung YH-999 Portable Media Center

www.samsung.com

Price: \$549.99



You can throw away your iPod; the next generation of portable entertainment has arrived. Weighing a mere 1/2 lb. and measuring 3.82" x 4.21" x .63", the YH-999 allows you to view and play every possible media format on its 3.5-inch LCD screen. Imagine watching an episode of the Simpsons on the plane or flipping through vacation pictures while listening to MP3s—it's all possible with the YH-999. What does the YH-999 support? Since it's built on a Microsoft platform, it can handle WMVs, WMAs, MP3s and JPGs. It is also compatible with MPEG, MPEG-2, MS-DVR (Media Center TV files), ASF, AVI, WAV and MIDI files. The YH-999 syncs up with PC via USB 2.0 where you can create custom playlists, sync up music libraries, and transfer recorded TV, video and pictures. And with 20GB of storage, you're not limited to just one episode of a show or a couple of albums—it's more like complete seasons and anthologies.

Next-generation car audio

Pioneer Premier DEH-P8MP

www.pioneerelectronics.com

Price: \$500



Sporting a slick face and an organic blue electroluminescent (QEL) display is Pioneer's latest car stereo wonder. The DEH-P8MP is not only XM-ready, it also can play WMA files, MP3s, WAVs and CDs. What we liked most about the unit was the seven-way Rotary Commander that sits nicely in front of the unit. Whether you're adjusting levels, tuning in to your favorite station or weeding through thousands of MP3 files, the Commander does it all in a snap. Song titles, CD information and other relevant data are shown on the unit's large 152x32 pixel screen. Users can even customize the screen with their own backgrounds, digital pictures and home movies. Sound quality was excellent and for a head unit—it packs a major punch (60W x 4 power). If you're looking to upgrade your car stereo at a very reasonable price point, you may want to check out the Premier DEH-P8MP.

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From concept to collectible

Street Fighter Round 2

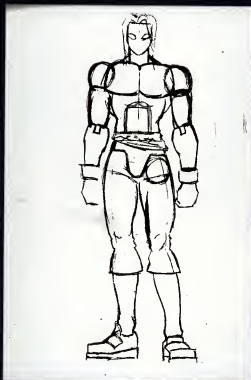


Following the success of their first series of Street Fighter figures—headed to retail as this issue goes to press, but already pre-sold out on the distribution level—SOTA Toys has officially announced Street Fighter Round 2, consisting of Ken, Cammy, T. Hawk, Blanka and Vega, rendering the word-renowned characters for the first time in fully articulated 6-inch form. For hardcore Street Fighter fans, the wait until these detailed toys arrive in stores will be an arduous one, but that's the easy part; it's only the final step in a lengthy process to bring these latest—and potentially greatest—Street Fighter collectibles onto shelves and desktops around the world.

The process of turning a video game into action figure form starts with securing the license. In the case of SOTA and Street Fighter, this union seemed to be guided by fate. Originally, Palisades Toys held the Street Fighter license, and the company enlisted SOTA to handle the sculpting process in the fall of 2002. However, Palisades soon abandoned their plans for the line, leaving Capcom to approach SOTA president Jerry Macaluso at E3 in May 2003 about producing the figures themselves.

It didn't take long for SOTA to become interested. "Just about everyone at SOTA is the right age to have a fondness for Street Fighter," states Macaluso, "plus we knew it had a good-size fanbase and would show us to show off our abilities. It was the perfect line for a new company to make a mark with—a 'no lose' really."

After five months of negotiations, the deal was sealed, and a philosophy behind the line—to create abundantly articulated figures at a 6-inch scale—was established. The next step—and, to the fans, perhaps the most important part—was to choose the characters to include. For Round 2, SOTA selected Ken as one of the five characters, while the other four were determined by an online vote with specific, albeit unrevealed, criteria for the



Above: Rough sketches of Vega and Blanka by SOTA president Jerry Macaluso.



characters in each category.

"There is a formula to picking the lineup, though I'm going to keep it a secret," teases Macaluso. "The reason we are doing it the way we are is so we don't end up with an entire line of lesser-known characters by wave 4. A lot of people can't figure out why we put Sodom or T. Hawk before Akuma or Guile, but there's a method to the madness."

Of course, even after the characters are chosen, there are still variations on each to be trifled over. "Everyone has their favorite look for each character, including us," Macaluso acknowledges. "[For] example, I wanted to do Alpha Cammy, but I could tell by the postings on the Internet that the majority of fans wanted regular Cammy first. But trust me—I will make my Alpha Cammy at some point!"



Left: Round 2 supervisor Will Herbolthe roughs out Cammy. It's not as kinky as it sounds.



Before the actual designing of the figures begins, Macaluso and his team engage in some intense research activities. "I bought a Super Street Fighter II [arcade machine] and an Alpha 3 [machine] a while back, and I usually go and play the characters for a day to get the 'feel' back. I see if there's stuff I have forgotten about them... I also ask Capcom if they have anything particular they want to see in the characters."

Combining this knowledge with the vast accumulation of official Street Fighter artwork that's been created over the years, including material from the UDON comic series, the SOTA staff then begins sketching out what the action figures will look like, right down to points of articulation. SOTA's sculptors, including Macaluso and supervisor Will Harbottle, then translate the rough 2D sketches into 3D by way of an articulated endoskeleton made of styrene plastic at 150 percent scale, with the actual sculpting done on top of the skeleton with Castlene modeling compound. Some pieces, such as heads, are often molded out of wax or Sculpey.

The initial sculpting process takes about a week and a half to two weeks, after which the designers make a mold of the figure, cast it in resin, paint it and, once the team feels it's at least 75 percent complete, display it online to gauge fan reaction. "The fans have had as much input on this line as I have," remarks Macaluso. "It's really amazing how many fans email suggestions that are really well thought out and very helpful to us. The line would not have been half as good without the fan support."

Once changes have been implemented and Capcom has approved the prototype sculpt, the model is sent to the production factory in China, which laser-scans the prototype, allowing them to create actual-size resin molds (called PU samples).

"Once we approve those, they take about 45 days to make steel molds and get us actual plastic samples," Macaluso explains. "At this point we can tweak certain things, but the figure is basically done and we then only need to work on the painting." Package design also usually commences around this time.

From there, all that's left is the actual production, shipping and distribution before the toys finally arrive in stores, allowing both the fans and the creators to enjoy the fruits of their labor, as well as to ponder what comes next. Fortunately, SOTA already has some ideas.

"I know at least one character for Round 3," says Macaluso. "The rest we'll probably do a vote on. I really hope the fans keep supporting the line so we can make all of the characters. I want to see an Oro and a Gen. I think Hugo will be a trip when we make him. It's such a great universe to play in." **Chris Heffman**

"I really hope the fans keep supporting the line so we can make all of the characters... It's such a great universe to play in."

John Macaluso, president, SOTA Toys



Below: Even Brazilian jungle mutants get their nails done, in this case courtesy of lead painter Kai Sapon.



Final painted sculpts from Street Fighter Round 2. Look for them this November with a suggested price of \$12.99 each. Each figure will include two sets of hands (open and closed) and alternate heads (normal and battle enraged).

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