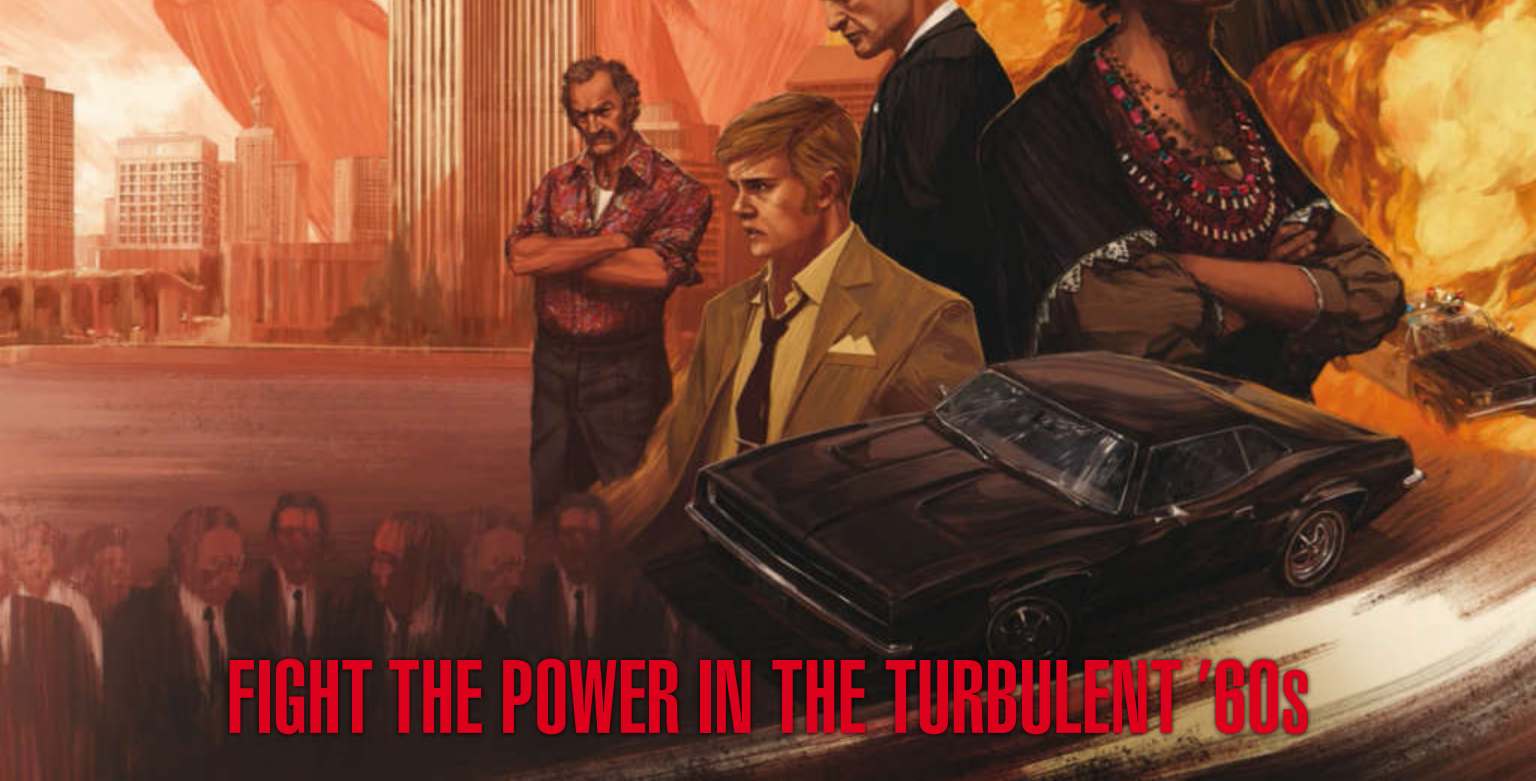# gameinformer ®

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You Know Who You Are

ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
andy@gameinformer.com

Read my column or comment on this letter at gameinformer.com/mag or follow @GI_AndyMc

This month I wrote my first game review in years. I'd be lying if I said it was easy. I hadn't exercised that review muscle in a long time, so the writing required some serious heavy lifting. Playing the game? Oh yeah, I got that. The art of writing game reviews, however, is more difficult than you think – especially when you put the world of video games today in perspective.

I wrote my last review nearly seven years ago, so delving back into the process made me think about who I am as a gamer. Back then, the iPhone had only just released, and the indie gaming phenomenon was just getting started. While there were lots of games out there to choose from, it was nowhere near the sea of games we see today across the gaming spectrum. Today, we have more choices than before, and I think the level of execution in modern games is higher than ever. That makes it easier to find a well-made game, but discovering ones you love is harder than ever in the deluge of titles that come out each and every day.

I'm not sure if it's a result of the volume or quality of today's market, but my tastes have matured. I find myself interested in games that offer – and even require – longer time investments to play and excel. I blame EverQuest for putting me on that path. Lucky for me, I can play these longer games and all the hits as well because, well, it's my job. If I didn't play games professionally, I would likely huddle down and play World of Warcraft and ignore the rest of the world except the few times a year when an RPG (think Skyrim) or shooter (think BioShock) catches my eye. That's who I am as a gamer.

When you write a game review it's important to ask yourself, "Who am I, and what do I like?" You also have to deliver the details and address the questions fans have so that people can get a sense of whether or not a game will connect with them.

While I know some out there will vehemently disagree with my review, that's fine with me. When writing a review you have to be true to yourself. You can only hope that it gets across what makes you love or hate that game, so that others who think alike can find games they love.

Enjoy the issue, and please take the time to read my Destiny: The Taken King review.

Cheers,

115

» 40

Mafia III

Mafia has always been a series heralded for its great storytelling and tight vehicle navigation, and Mafia III looks to carry on that tradition while taking players to a new era: a 1968 version of New Orleans. Check out our in-depth exploration of how 2K has built an entirely new studio, Hangar 13, from the ground up and charged the team with challenging gamer's assumptions about the mafia while telling an intimate tale about racial strife and political change. *by Matt Bertz*

08 Recapping TGS 2015
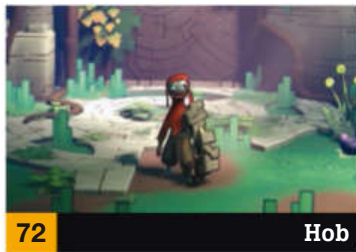

22 Scuffed Up

18 The Toys-To-Life Guide

90

34

64

82 Destiny: The Taken King

52 Super Mario Bros. 30th Anniversary

72 Hob

84

games index

regulars

» 4 Feedback
Readers thank us for all of our Destiny: The Taken King coverage last month. They also complain to us about all of our coverage of Destiny: The Taken King last month. We also received complaints about our review scores. All-in-all, a pretty standard month.

» 8 Connect
We visited Japan for TGS 2015 and have our report of the exciting (but declining) trade show. We also examine the growing toys-to-life genre, look at the video game controllers professionals use, and have a spoiler-filled conversation with Until Dawn's creators.

» 64 Previews
We went hands-on with two big Xbox One exclusives: Halo 5: Guardians and Rise of the Tomb Raider. We also look at a pair of new(ish) Resident Evil games, and an upcoming title from Gears of War creator, Cliff Bleszinski.

» 80 Reviews
We have a review score for Destiny's huge The Taken King expansion, as well as our opinion on the return of Rock Band. We also review the latest entry in the Skylanders series, and the toys-to-life newcomer, Lego Dimensions.

» 96 Game Over
There are a lot of Mario games, and in celebration of the plumber's 30th anniversary, we gathered a whole bunch of them together to craft a Mario-and-friends box-art collage.
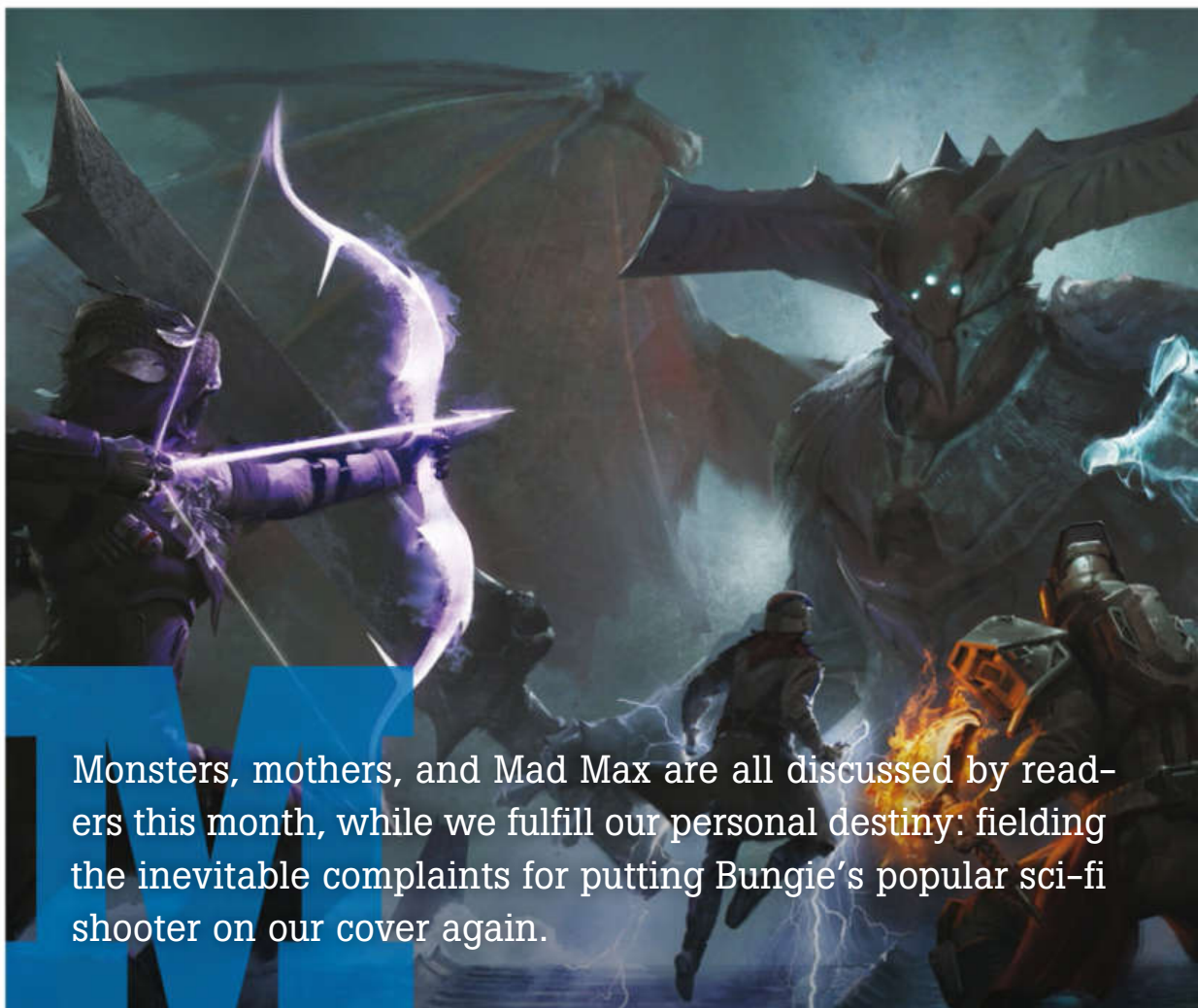
Monsters, mothers, and Mad Max are all discussed by readers this month, while we fulfill our personal destiny: fielding the inevitable complaints for putting Bungie's popular sci-fi shooter on our cover again.

Hail To The King

I'd like to thank you for your cover story on Destiny's The Taken King expansion (issue 269). It sounds like The Taken King could almost be considered a sequel to the vanilla version of Destiny. I know that other MMOs release DLC expansions that add significant amounts of content, but this seems like more of a sequel because of all the fixes and changes that are being introduced with it. Do you consider The Taken King to be a sequel?

Andrew Panek
via email

I just tore all 15 pages of the Destiny article out of my copy of the September issue. In the future, could you please have Game Informer printed on softer, more absorbent paper?

Mike Marunchak
Chicago, IL

As expected, Destiny continues to be highly divisive for gamers – as was our decision to report on The Taken King, apparently. So why did we put it on the cover? While it may come as a shock to the haters, Destiny remains wildly popular with a large and devoted player base, and Bungie shared more than enough new content and changes with us to warrant an in-depth look. That said, we would stop short of calling The Taken King a sequel – we'll have to wait until Destiny 2 to see what Bungie envisions as the next full-fledged step in the series. For now, read our review of The Taken King on page 42.

Kerbal Your Enthusiasm

I've been waiting since 2012 for you to review Kerbal Space Program, and I greatly appreciate it getting the review it deserves. However, I would say it deserves higher than an 8.5 – maybe a 9. I do agree that the graphics and sound aren't the best, and most of all, there are some major glitches. But, it's the glitches that make the game so much fun; 70 percent of the time it's the glitches that make me laugh, when everything goes to crap and there are explosions galore. Again, I appreciate this game finally getting the respect it deserves.

Justin Plantiko
via email

We were patiently waiting for Kerbal Space Program's official release to review the game, and from the sound of it, we had just as much fun blowing up our goofy, green cosmonauts as you did, Justin. The difficult-to-navigate UI and unintuitive controls were the larger issues for us, but we won't mock you for enjoying it a *half point* more than we did – we'll save our sarcasm for the next guy...

4

Gotcha!

I'm calling you out, Game Informer! You bashed Mad Max for its repetitive gameplay and thought no one would notice your deceitful double-standards. Well I did! Your scheming establishment gave Destiny – the most repetitious game in history – an 8.75, not giving a rat's ass about the monotonous game-play. But when Mad Max has a few similar side activities, you jump on its back and give it a 7.5. You aren't report-ers – you're advertisers!

Tyler Keller
via email

Yikes! You've got us, Tyler – if you overlook the fact that Destiny and Mad Max were reviewed by two dif-ferent editors; that Destiny's repeti-tive missions were one of Miller's biggest complaints in his review; and that Mad Max was also featured on G.I.'s cover. But if you disregard those three facts – along with everything else that was written about both games in their respective reviews – then your accusation is airtight.

The Mother Of All Dilemmas

My mother is a gamer and she'll be turn-ing 70 in November. Her current obses-sion is Destiny and she is really looking forward to Fallout 4. She didn't listen to me about getting her preorder in for the Pip-Boy Edition before they were sold out. Now I'm struggling with whether or not to give her my copy as a birthday gift. Really struggling. Anyway, I was hoping you would do a shout out to her in your November issue – she of course is a fan and a subscriber. Her name is Sheila Campbell, but she goes by Shanie.

Bethany Ford
via email

Sorry, Beth, but it sounds like you're out a Pip-Boy; your mom gave birth to you – there's no way you can give her the shaft on her 70th birthday! On the bright side, you'll have our vote for the daughter-of-the-year award. Happy birthday, Shanie!

For The Record

Thank you for your story Into Digital Dust (issue 269). As a graduate student going for my master's in information science with a concentration in archival studies, this story shows how important it is to preserve all video games. Preservationists and archivists alike have unfortunately learned that lesson the hard way by losing old films and audio recordings over the years due to improper care. The same thing can happen to video games if the proper practices are not used to pre-serve them. Thank you for shedding light on a topic that is not well known amongst gamers or even some preservationists today. Video games are more than just a source of entertain-ment; they provide historians with information on today's society much like early films and photographs did a century ago. If we lose them, we lose more than just games, but infor-mation and their cultural significance.

Kyle Downey
Hopatcong, NJ

The article Into Digital Dust was a great read, and it changed my personal perception of video game preservation. I knew that it was an extremely important endeavor, but it never occurred to me that design documents, concept art, etc. were equally important! It did my heart good to learn about the construction of The Video Game History Museum in Texas, as it means that we're taking preservation more seri-ously. Kudos to Ben Reeves for the enlightening article!

Ryan Holm
via email

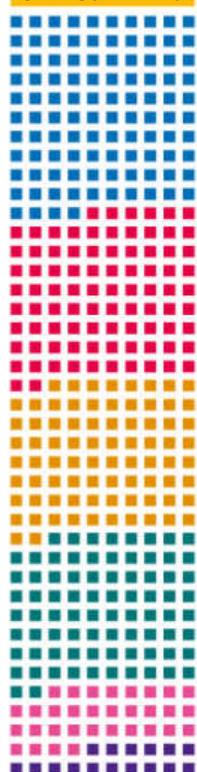**gi spy**

(Left) This month we visited Hangar 13 to learn more about Mafia III from its gang of lead developers. Thankfully, no one from G.I. got whacked **(Right)** Gearbox's Randy Pitchford stopped by Game Informer's booth for a visit during this year's GameStop Expo

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

- ■ "More Destiny? *Hooray!*"
- ■ "More Destiny? *Boo!*"
- ■ Review Score Grumbles
- ■ Favorite Monsters
- ■ Kiddies Lamenting M-Rated Games
- ■ Games Confused Readers Want Us To Make

Monster Mash

In issue 269, we asked readers who the best giant monster in a video game is. We're interpreting the complete lack of consensus as a reminder of how many great big baddies there are in games. Here are some of the responses.

By far the best monster is the first colossus in Shadow of the Colossus. It wasn't the hardest or the most visually stunning, but the first time I stabbed its glowing glyph, I immediately felt regret – like there was something dark and selfish in what I was doing. Only a true monster can hold up the mirror and reveal the monster in all of us.

Michaiah Vosberg

My favorite monster would have to be Demon King Ganon from The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time. He is massive in his demon form, and the character model was excellent for its time. Plus, a huge demon pig is pretty cool.

Zachary Morano

The best giant monster is probably the Great Mighty Poo from Conker's Bad Fur Day. The recent release of Rare Replay reminded me that he is the best character from any RareWare game. Also, I like his song.

Nizar Mohammad

Time For A Stroll

Thank you for the article on "walking simulators" (The First-Person Exploration Boom, issue 269). It seems to me that there are too many vanilla games hitting the shelves; every month, we get at least one new FPS or RPG that tweaks its predecessors in some slight way. It's nice to know that there are developers with original thoughts out there, and that new concepts are still finding their way into the world.

**Ashley Mock
via email**

It was cool to see an article on first-person exploration games. It was nice of you to also highlight upcoming games in the new genre, but what made me all sore was that No Man's Sky was not on the list. First of all, No Man's Sky hasn't got enough attention from the public; I've asked all kinds of players if they have heard about the game, and I still haven't had someone say yes. Secondly, and not to sound antagonistic, but No Man's Sky is the definition of first-person exploration – are 18 quintillion planets not enough to explore? It really deserved a spot.

**Kip Case
via email**

No Man's Sky has been tantalizing gamers with its promise of a massive, open universe to explore, and we can't wait to finally play it. However, since you will also spend the game collecting resources, flying spaceships, and shooting guns at things, we classify it as an action-adventure game, hence making it ineligible for the list.

(Left) GameStop Expo 2015 was home to this Star Wars speeder bike replica, which Reiner and Ben Hanson immediately climbed on top of. You're not supposed to touch the props, guys! **(Right)** Ben Hanson also fortuitously ran into C-3PO actor Anthony Daniels in our hotel. You're also not supposed to touch the Daniels, guys!

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(Left) The "Danventures" continued for Tack this month at PAX. Joining him for a night out on the town were uber-popular streamer Lanai Gara, Twitch's Chase, and GameStop TV's Andrea Renee.
(Right) Tack also had a more subdued and stylish sit-down meeting with Final Fantasy XV directors Tomohiro Hasegawa and Hajime Tabata.

connect

TGS
2015

A show in decline, a culture still embracing gaming

On a surprisingly blustery and rainy Thursday in September, the gaming industry descended on the Makuhari Messe convention center just outside Tokyo. For years, the Tokyo Game Show has offered a glimpse into the Japanese game market, and once showcased the primacy of that vibrant gamer culture. This year, in a continuing trend we've followed for almost a decade, TGS 2015 once again lacked some of the potency and excitement we'd hope to see represented, but the show only tells part of the story about the broader Japanese connection to interactive entertainment. *by Matt Miller*

Tokyo Game Show continues to attract a large number of attendees, especially in the latter days of each year's show, when the doors are flung open for the broader public. The early days, dedicated to business and press, reveal a more modest attendance. Even taking the subdued business day attendance into account, it was hard this year to marshal tremendous enthusiasm for the games on offer, especially with so few titles confirmed for North American release. In contrast to shows like E3, announcements were few and far between, and many demos were repeats from earlier conventions.

Sony's solid lineup was introduced first at a press conference a few days before the show, and then shown off more extensively on the show floor. The hotly anticipated Bloodborne expansion, The Old Hunters, promises to do well on both sides of the Pacific. The Gravity Daze (Gravity Rush in the U.S.) franchise is a clear winner, with the original moving over to PS4 and a sequel announced for 2016. Titles like Street Fighter V and Yakuza 6 showcase the PS4's third-party support from Capcom and Sega, respectively. Japanese Vita and PS4 customization options managed to make North

American attendees jealous, but we can hope that some of the new colors make their way stateside. Finally, Sony put a moniker to the previously mysterious "Project Morpheus" unit. When it hits the market, the headset officially will be called PlayStation VR.

Beyond the aforementioned Street Fighter V, Capcom brought a good selection of titles, including a well-received port of Resident Evil 0 for current systems. Many fans were surprised by the reveal of Umbrella Corps, a new installment in the Resident Evil world that taps the already-crowded competitive-shooter market. By adding

A.I. zombies and some smart innovations like analog cover, Capcom hopes to distinguish its entry in the field from the rest of the crowd.

Square Enix also had a decent show. Good-looking titles like Star Ocean: Integrity and Faithlessness and the announcement of Kingdom Hearts 2.8 Final Chapter Prologue were welcome appearances. While Dragon Quest Builders looked fun, one can't help but see it as a "me too" project that apes several of Minecraft's most successful mechanics.

Bandai Namco showcased Dark Souls III to great fanfare, but few other big-name titles caught our attention. Koei Tecmo surprised everyone with the return of the long-dormant Nioh, now sporting a decidedly Dark Souls feel to combat. Konami showed off the online component of Metal Gear Solid V amid rumors that the company is moving away from triple-A development altogether. Oculus was also on hand to continue declaring its dominance in the upcoming VR wars.

The massive Makuhari Messe complex would be hard for any convention to adequately fill, but it was notable how much empty space existed between many of the main booths. Unsurprisingly, the mostly mobile-focused halls were the most crowded for booth space, including an insane life-size airship display for a Japan-only mobile game called Granblue Fantasy.

Recent years have seen the reduction of "booth babe" culture in American game shows, providing a more business-friendly and professional environment to all attendees. The same sentiment hasn't breached Japanese game companies, many of which

sported bikini-clad Japanese models handing out brochures.

Happily, the growing indie-game scene had a large and open space to show off its potential. Unhappily, that place was set aside in an entirely separate hall where few show visitors might find it – nestled next to the merch booths and food stands. That's too bad, because several of the best games at TGS were on display there, including small but brilliant ideas hailing from all over the globe, from Japan and the U.S. to France and Korea.

Even if Tokyo Game Show continued its long and slow decline, the same can't be said for the broader Japanese game scene. During our visit, the crowded trains were filled with women and men tapping away on a wide array of

the latest mobile games. The recently released Super Mario Maker had advertisements popping up on screens in shops and sidewalks. Teenagers in the heart of the city wore Metal Gear T-shirts. Akihabara's Electric Town shopping district remained as busy as ever, with collectors grabbing the latest games and figures.

Japan clearly remains an enthusiastic hub for gaming. In many ways, the medium continues to be more mainstream and broadly accepted than in the states. It's a thrilling place to interact with gaming culture, and we can only hope that Tokyo Game Show begins to find new ways to reimagine itself, to better capture the joy surrounding games that is evident throughout the broader culture of the country. ◆

FROM THE OCTAGON TO THE RING

by Brian Shea

UFC champ makes jump to Halo series with voice role

2015 will be a year to remember for Fabricio Werdum. After taking over the interim heavyweight championship title in 2014 in the absence of injured champion Cain Velasquez, Werdum welcomed Velasquez back with a third-round guillotine-choke submission to unify the belt and claim the title of undisputed heavyweight champion of the UFC. That's not the only dream Werdum is realizing this year, since 2015 also marks his appearance in one of his favorite franchises: Halo.

Through a small voice role, the multi-disciplined martial arts expert joins the ranks of other celebrities like Conan O'Brien and Andy Richter, who both appeared in Halo 4 as marines who made wise-cracks if you walked past them. Werdum's character, Marcio Alegre, decided he wanted to travel following the Covenant War. He took a job restoring the once flourishing colony of Meridian to its former level of sustainability, which led to his role in Halo 5.

Werdum, a longtime gamer, has a lot of love for Xbox's most popular exclusive franchise. Though he's played it for many years, he's a big fan of what 343 Industries has done for the series, saying that Halo 4 is his favorite entry.

"I'm super excited to see how Halo 5: Guardians is going to turn out," Werdum says. "It's one of my favorite gaming series, and I'm now a part of it!"

The heavyweight champ has his mother to thank for his love of the medium. "I've been hooked on video games since I was very little. When I was younger, my mom would always give me the best games as gifts," he says. "As someone who has always been a big fan of video games, there are tons of pictures of me playing when I was younger. I always try and stay on top of trends and I often tease my wife about the best gaming systems."

Being in a video game is not a completely foreign concept to the fighter, as he appeared on the roster of EA Sports UFC last year. Werdum says he still plays EA Sports UFC and loves when fans bring it up to him. "Taking part in UFC games has been special, and I've always appreciated fans coming and telling me that when they play UFC games they use my character," he says. "It's amazing and it makes me feel really good. Of course, when I play I pick myself, too!"

Interestingly, Werdum says that he benefits as a fighter when he plays EA Sports UFC: "It may sound silly, but when I play the UFC game, I feel as though I pick up certain movements and techniques from that I've actually used in the Octagon."

When he's not taking part in his rigorous training schedule or following busy travel itineraries, Werdum can often be found gaming. "I play to relax and unwind following a long day of training," he says. "I love playing video games so much; I make time to play as much as possible. I take my Xbox and PlayStation with me when I travel and during training camp for a fight, so I can even play in-between workouts!"

Though he often plays to unwind, the fighting spirit can come out when his friends are around. "I've always been a fan of soccer games, like Pro Evolution," he says. "As you can imagine, I'm very competitive and I don't like to lose, so when I play with my friends we make small bets just for fun."

Even when not playing with friends, Werdum sticks with some of the more adrenaline-fueled series, citing Grand Theft Auto V, Call of Duty, and (of course) Halo as his go-to games when left to his own devices.
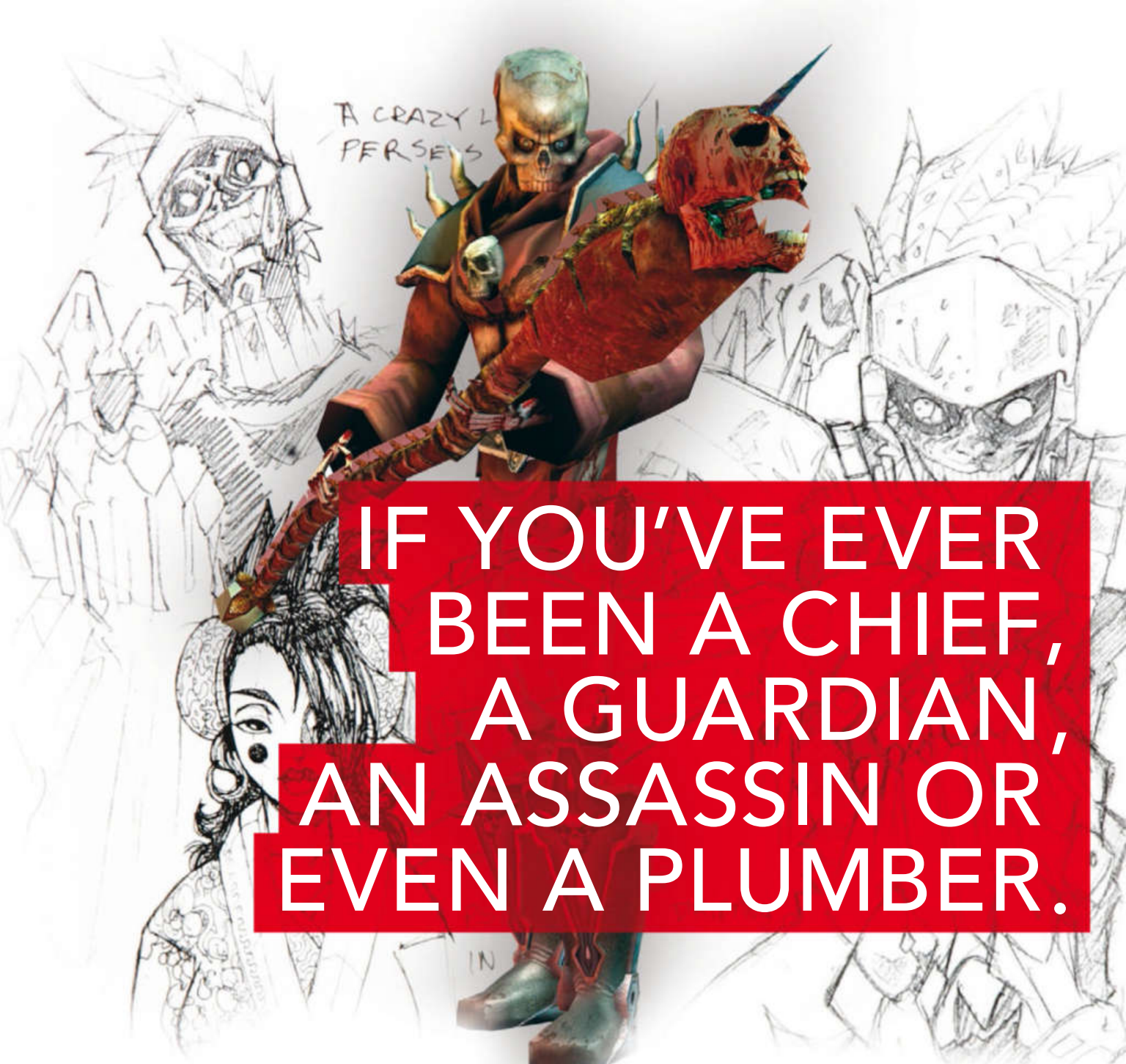
As a lifelong gamer, Werdum is not a fan of many of the stereotypes thrown at the gaming community. "Everyone enjoys different things, like biking, reading, and going out, while others love playing video games," he says. "Playing video games falls into things I do when I want to relax, unwind, and make time for myself. Each person has the right to spend their free time any way they want."

Werdum may find himself with less time to relax in the near future, as it was announced in August that his first title defense will be a rematch against former champ Cain Velasquez. No date or venue has yet been announced, and with the rest of the year's UFC events booked, it's looking like he'll be able to fully enjoy the next entry in one of his favorite series – and his guest role in it. ◈

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UNTIL DAWN

With Until Dawn, Supermassive has abandoned the Move-based gimmickry of its previous work in favor of a teen-horror adventure laden with life-or-death choices. We talked with creative director Will Byles about the game's major development challenges, twist-filled narrative, and what's next for the up-and-coming studio. *by Jeff Marchiafava*

Until Dawn started out as a first-person Move title for the PS3. How far were you into development when you decided to shift the perspective, platform, and control methods?
Originally, the PS Move controller represented the flashlight that you'd be carrying throughout the game. We had already shot everything, white-boxed out the entire game, and got a level to publishable quality that we showed at Gamescom in 2012. Several things then happened in a kind of "perfect storm." Firstly, there was a massive positive response from the PlayStation community, who were overwhelmingly in favor of us making a non-Move version. Secondly, in development we had noticed how great the game looked in a third-person view when we were using the debug cameras. Thirdly, the PlayStation 4 was peeking its head over the horizon, and fourthly, we had a great story.

Given how much changed, what elements remained the same during the transition?
The fundamental story remained the same but we worked very carefully to add in meaningful branching. Conversations became choice-based and consequential, and character development was in large part down to the player. We had to rewrite the entire script with Larry Fessenden and Graham Reznick to make it all a little darker but still keep the charm that they had brought to the original.

Did the actors have to come back and do any reshooting?
We reshot everything after changing to the PS4, bringing some of the original cast back, recasting others, and adding the Analyst. We had to get going with them as early as possible because of the amount of time it takes digitizing them and their performances.

Until Dawn's story is rooted in some classic horror concepts, but halfway through, the narrative takes a major twist. What were your goals for the story?
We were keen to try some story-telling techniques not often used in games. We wanted to use a narrative perspective shift in order to keep the story vital over nine hours. Narrative perspective shift can only be done in a branching storyline if you cannot go back to a previous save, effectively undoing your last decision. We wanted the decisions you make to be based on what you "think" you know, without being duplicitous with the player, as discovering a pertinent fact after the event that completely shifts your perspective has a very powerful effect; it's a bit like the end of *The Usual Suspects* or *The Sixth Sense*. We also wanted to make sure that, like them or hate them, the characters' safety was very fragile and entirely in your hands.

Can you share any ideas or plot twists that didn't make the cut?
At one stage one of the characters was pregnant. I won't say who or with whom, but ultimately it proved too distracting from the main story line.

Emily seems like the only irredeemable character – I tried being supportive of her and she was still horrible. What were you going for with that character?
Ha ha. Emily is my favorite character and has, depending on your choices, the best character arc of them all. She starts off appearing very superficial and irritating, but consider for a moment her position in the group. She was part of the "alpha" couple the year before, but is now rejected by Mike in favor of Jessica; she has some unfinished business with him. So Matt may not be her ideal guy and maybe she's trying to put a strong face onto things. She ends up, despite getting a hard time from everyone – and if she survives – one of the saviors of the night.

What decision most surprised you in terms of how the majority of gamers reacted/selected?
In the testing environment, we were always surprised by people's choices. One that we were often told was a pointless dilemma was the Ashley/Chris choice with the gun. Everyone internally said that players would choose to shoot Chris. But in playthroughs that proved very wrong. It was much closer to 50-50. Don't forget to check out the global stats feature after your first playthrough of the game where you can see a percentage breakdown of choices from the community.

Until Dawn is a huge leap forward in terms of depth and production values compared to Supermassive's previous games. Do you want to continue making this style of adventure game, or is Until Dawn another step towards something bigger?
Thank you. Yes, we've been going all out to make Until Dawn the best of its kind across the board and we are definitely going to develop that theme with our next projects. It was very encouraging to get such a good response from the gamers and the critics and it seems that the space is there for more. I love horror, but there are many other genres on which we think this kind of treatment would work beautifully. ◈

The Good

BETHESDA announced plans to release DLC for its upcoming open-world RPG, Fallout 4. The company hasn't detailed the exact DLC contents, but it will start rolling out in early 2016, and a season pass will be available for $30. Bethesda also confirmed that the PlayStation 4 version of Fallout 4 will have mod support, albeit after the feature is available on Xbox One and PC. The mods will be made on a PC Creation Kit due out early next year. In addition to mods and DLC, the developer is also promising free updates, and plans to ask the community for input on what these updates should add or address.

The Bad

PLAYSTATION VR

(formerly known as Project Morpheus) will cost as much as a console, Sony Computer Entertainment CEO Andrew House told Bloomberg. House didn't give any figures or examples of what consoles, though. While it wouldn't come as a surprise if the unit costs around $399 (the base price of the PS4), such a price point won't do PlayStation VR any favors.

The Ugly

METAL GEAR SOLID V

is creator Hideo Kojima's swan song with the franchise, but as good as the game is, it's incomplete. The bonus Blu-ray disc from the game's Collector's Edition contains footage of partly finished, non-playable cutscenes from an "Episode 51" mission that was cut from the game. The 18-minute sequence features important story information that would have been nice to have in the retail game, considering it wraps up a conspicuously unresolved plot thread. ◆

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The
TOYS-TO-LIFE
Buyer's Guide

R etail shelves are overflowing with dozens of action figures that you can bring to life in your games. Basing your purchase solely on the look of the character or your knowledge of them outside of video games is a bad idea. We played with all of the action figures and play sets for this year's toys-to-life games, and homed in on the best offerings to help you get the most out of each game. We even dreamed up the ultimate gift packs, and let you know how much they cost.

by Andrew Reiner

Disney Infinity 3.0

For the Star Wars fan, Disney Infinity 3.0's core set offers a wealth of fun in the Twilight of the Republic play set, but the real excitement lies in the separately sold Rise Against the Empire set. This play set unlocks the coolest Star Wars vehicles and building blocks for the Toy Box, and comes packaged with Luke Skywalker, a great character capable of devastating close- and long-range attacks.

The best Star Wars figures are Darth Maul, Zeb, Luke, Ahsoka (who comes with the core set), and Darth Vader. Boba Fett is another fantastic addition to the roster, but he's currently only available in the PlayStation 3 and 4 "Saga" bundle, which is a smart purchase, as it comes with the Rise Against the Empire set.

For those of you who have little interest in Star Wars, the separately sold

Toy Box Takeover set is the only set you need to pick up. It offers roughly two hours of nicely designed combat encounters in a wide variety of Disney-themed locations. The best figures for this experience are Sam Flynn (Tron), and both Minnie and Mickey Mouse. These characters are also great for the Toy Box, but you may want to add any Jedi character to take advantage of the double-jump maneuver.

Lego Dimensions

If you can only purchase one toys-to-life game this year, Lego Dimensions is the best of the recent crop (read our review on page 84), offering a wonderful adventure capped off with the fun of building actual Lego sets. The core set, which comes with Gandalf, Batman, and Wyldstyle, is all you need to complete the campaign, but to see all of the content in the game, you need one of each character type (many of which don't go on sale until 2016). The best character purchases at launch are the Scooby Doo Team Pack, the Portal Level Pack, and the Fun Packs for Cyborg, the Wicked Witch, Cragger, Emmet, Benny, and Nya. It's an expensive proposition, but each character adds a wealth of unique gameplay to the mix.

Skylanders SuperChargers

This year, Activision is banking on the love kids have for vehicles with spinning wheels. While the concept doesn't live up to the fun standards this series has established so far (read our review on page 85), it is the cheapest Skylanders investment since Giants. In addition to the core set (which comes with a vehicle and two Skylanders characters), players only need to purchase a submarine and airplane to see most of the game's content.

For the ultimate gift, we recommend picking up Fiesta (the best new character), Stormblade and Smash Hit (two more excellent combatants), the Sea Shadow submarine, and the Sky Slicer jet. This should be enough to get players through the game. The rare Dark Edition starter kit comes packaged with Sea Shadow, but costs $25 more, and its only real perk is the trophy that unlocks Kaos as a racer. That isn't a big enough selling point for the added price. ◈

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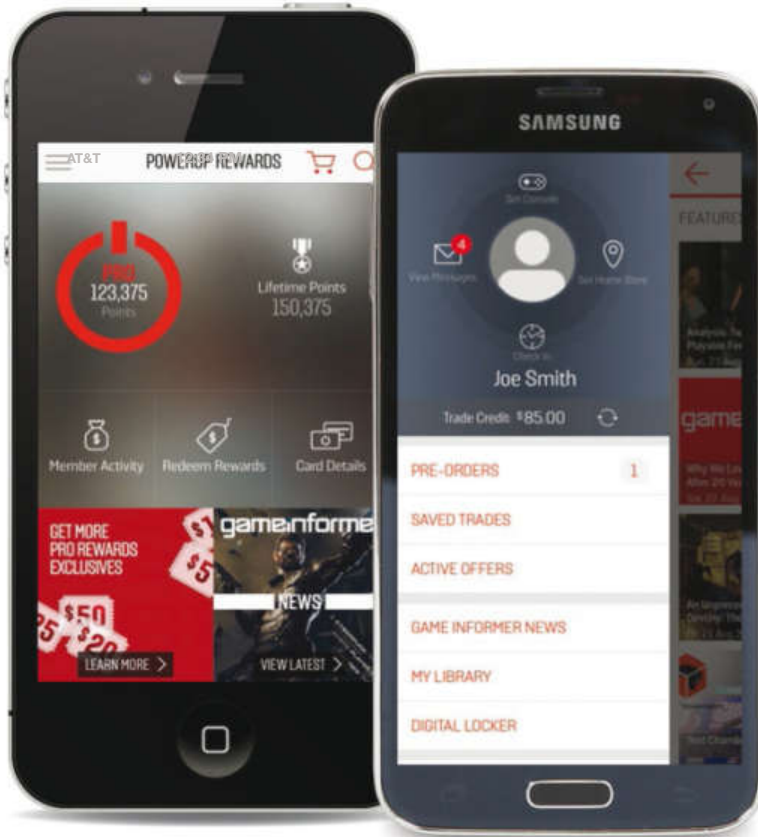
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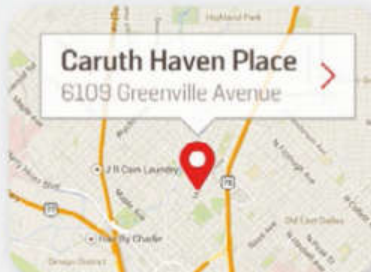
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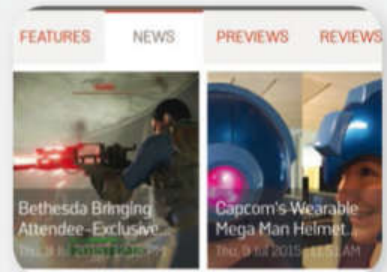
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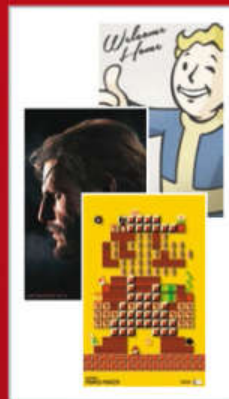
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SCUFFE

How one company is outperforming other controller manufacturers and leveling the playing field for pros

ED UP

W

Within the gaming community, there has always been an understanding that the companies who make video game consoles also make the best video game controllers. The traditional third-party market has been useful for gamers on a budget looking for a cheap co-op controller, but longtime gamers have often turned up their noses at the glow-in-the-dark shells, noisy fans, and chintzy turbo buttons commonly attached to third-party controllers.

Recently, Scuf Gaming has challenged that assumption. Far from the traditional third-party manufacturer, Scuf has spearheaded a series of controller innovations that are more ergonomic, offer a higher level of performance, and are aimed at a slightly more exclusive audience. Less than five years old, the company is already selling more than 100,000 controllers a year and raking in tens of millions in revenue. This is the story of how two European entrepreneurs broke the controller mold and helped even the odds in the professional gaming circuit.

by Ben Reeves

PAIN AND GAME

Simon Burgess never dreamed of co-founding a company. He dreamed of making a living playing video games. A longtime fan of first-person shooters like Halo and Call of Duty, Burgess began entering local European tournaments and MLG's GameBattles in the late 2000s. Unfortunately, Burgess never felt competitive enough with his jump shot; he just couldn't move his thumb off the analog stick to the jump button and back again fast enough.

To gain a competitive edge, many professional gamers had started "playing claw" – moving the index finger up over the top of the controller and positioning it to hit the controller's face buttons, and then using the middle finger to pull the trigger. Pros who had started playing claw had noticed a marked improvement in performance, because they could jump, shoot, and even reload without moving their thumbs off the right analog stick. Unfortunately, claw is such an unnatural way to hold a controller that it is painful for many and can lead to nerve damage or carpal tunnel after an extended period of time.

"A lot of players have a tough time playing claw," says James Eubanks, a professional gamer who plays under the name Clayster. "It hurt my hand, made my hand really sore, but it felt necessary because you were able to aim while you jumped. Other players needed to take that split-second to hit the button and move their thumb back. It was a big advantage in the pro circuit."

Burgess saw this as a problem in need of a solution. Since there weren't a lot of controllers on the market aimed at fixing it, Burgess took it upon himself to build a controller that worked better than claw. Using some of his daughter's hairbands as paddle-like triggers, Simon hooked up two microswitches to the back of one of his Xbox 360 controllers, then reprogrammed them to function like face buttons. Burgess decided to name his new controller after his gaming clan: SCUF, which was short for scuffle.

Burgess immediately noticed an improvement in his Call of Duty performance, and his new paddled controller was such a hit with his clanmates that he started taking orders. It was clear that Burgess had tapped into a burgeoning market. At the time, there were a few others making their own custom controllers, and some of them were even taking orders to make more, but no one was

Scuf lets consumers customize their paint schemes, analog sticks, and programable back paddles, but these modifications come at a cost. A fully decked-out Scuf controller can cost upwards of $200. Consumers can also mail in their old controllers and have them modded for as little as $59.99

making customized controllers on a large scale. Burgess thought that anyone with enough entrepreneurialism could make a lot of money selling modified controllers.

Unfortunately, Burgess didn't know much about business, so he called up an old childhood friend, Duncan Ironmonger, who was living and working in America. Over the course of 15 years, Ironmonger had worked, lived and traveled in over 71 different countries in the technology and telecommunications space.. It was a good career with a six-figure salary, but Ironmonger was hungry for something more, and Burgess' controller idea sounded promising. In 2011, the duo founded Scuf Gaming. They believed they had a great product. They just needed to convince the rest of the world.

BARELY SCUFFING BY

As Burgess was streamlining the production process so Scuf could take on larger orders, Ironmonger established the business side and hit the road hoping to evangelize their product at MLG, EGL, and every other major pro gaming event. Many of the pros were cautious about trying someone else's modded controllers.

"People were hesitant to try the controllers at first," Ironmonger says. "During the first major MLG event I went to in 2011, I met up with a load of gamers and there was definitely a lot of hesitance, because customized controllers had a bad name. People saw them as kind of cheap tricks with rapid fire and macro functions that made it easier to cheat."

But Scuf wasn't interested in helping players cheat; it wasn't interested in anything other than modifying a controller to increase its functionality. Ironmonger saw their product as inevitable – the kind of technological evolution that occurred in most sports. For example, when baseball was first invented in 1800s, bats were hickory slabs that came in all shapes and sizes, but as the sport evolved, bats took on a variety of composite forms and grew into a more ergonomic shape that helped players achieve peak performance. Scuf didn't want to add turbo buttons to its controllers; it just wanted to build a better bat.

"There was a point in time where we were in a lot of debt, and I'm not going to lie, in those early days I was very concerned," Ironmonger says. "But we kept believing and kept working as hard as we could, and by the end of 2012, Scuf was awarded its first U.S. patent for our paddles. That was a really big milestone for us. That was one where I cracked open a bottle of champagne."

Scuf CEO and co-founder Duncan Ironmonger

CLAWING TO THE TOP

In just four years, Scuf has grown into a multi-million-dollar company. The manufacturer has filed for more than 51 patents through its patent subsidiary, Ironburg Inventions, Ltd. Seventeen of them have already been granted. Burgess is no longer involved in the company that he started; he retired in early 2015 (and declined to comment for this story). However, Scuf continues to hire engineers for its research and development department, some of whom have worked on Formula One cars and designed tanks and fighter planes for the military.

Still, there are few shortcuts for making a custom controller, and today's Scuf controllers are made by hand similar to the first controller Simon Burgess cobbled together at home. Scuf orders first-party PlayStation and Xbox controllers in bulk and ships them directly to its 30,000 square foot factory in Atlanta, where they are gutted by a team of assemblers and then reengineered by hand to match each order. A single controller can

take anywhere from one to four hours to complete.

"We developed a military-grade grip that we applied to the back of our controllers so gamers don't lose their grip while playing, because that was a huge problem with standard plastic," Ironmonger says. "We created what we call EMR, which is electromagnetic remapping technology, that allows players to use high-powered magnets on the back of a Scuf controller to activate an internal switch that lets you remap our paddles on the fly."

Much like a Formula One racer, Scuf's controllers are designed to eke out the best from any gamer. Consumers who visit Scuf's website can modify everything from the color of the buttons to the design on the shell itself, but it's the changes under each controller's hood that really excites the pros. Scuf's patented paddles can be programmed to mimic face buttons, the d-pad, or even directions on an analog stick, all of which allow gamers to display more dexterity during twitchy gameplay moments. Meanwhile, various lengths of thumbsticks provide players with a greater degree of aiming accuracy. Scuf's adjustable hair triggers even improve players' firing response time.

"I would say that probably only five percent of pro players actually play claw anymore, because of Scuf," says James "Clayster" Eubanks, who is sponsored by Scuf. Eubanks isn't the lone pro on the sponsorship list – the company backs more than 90 percent of controller-using pros.

"If you don't have Scuf and can't play claw then you're not going to be able to compete with the best," Eubank says. "When people ask me what they need to get to go pro, I say, 'Buy a Scuf, buy a monitor, and buy a headset. In that order.'"

MASTER CONTROLLER

"I'd like to say that Scuf Gaming has been an important part of why the console eSports market has expanded over the last few years," Ironmonger says. "If you were to ask anyone in the industry what brand they think has contributed most to the growth of the industry, I think Scuf would be on a lot of people's lips. We're proud of that."

Ironmonger sounds boastful, but he might be right. Competitive gaming continues to grow year after year, and Scuf's controllers have helped even the playing field for pro players. The last three Call of Duty million-dollar tournaments were all won using Scuf controllers. Scuf even seems to have turned the heads of some of the console makers. Earlier this year at E3, Microsoft announced the development of the Xbox One Elite controller – a gamepad featuring many of the same innovations introduced in Scuf controllers.

Scuf's hefty price tag might prevent some gamers from ever purchasing one of its controllers, but Scuf has had no trouble finding a market among gaming enthusiasts looking for a competitive edge. If nothing else, Scuf has saved many gamers from a life of hand pain. ◈

Should You Buy A Scuf Controller?

Scuf's technology has been engineered for professional gamers who need to improve their twitch responses by mere milliseconds, but does the average gamer who isn't worried about their online K/D ratio have any reason to buy a Scuf controller? We put a Scuf into the hands of half a dozen Game Informer editors and tested them over the course of several months to learn how they performed across a variety of games.

Overall, Scuf's controllers are so customizable that you can easily find a design that matches your style. If an aspect of Sony's or Microsoft's controllers rubs you the wrong way, Scuf's dozens of modifications can probably help you tweak it. We appreciated Scuf's variety of analog sticks, which allowed us to mix-and-match concave or convex thumb sticks. We noticed that longer sticks tightened up our aiming in shooters, while shorter sticks provided quicker movements for action games. In general, Scuf's analog sticks were more durable than the PS4's crumbling batons, and the company's textured grip seemed to make the controller less slippery over long periods of time.

Unfortunately, Scuf's paddles are more of a mixed bag. While we liked how they allowed us to perform extra actions without moving our thumbs off the right analog stick, they took some getting used to and we occasionally hit these paddles unintentionally during tense gameplay sequences. Scuf's short-throw trigger stops also tightened up our fire time, but these triggers are only optimized for Call of Duty, and caused some issues for other games. For example, we weren't able to fire sniper rifles in Battlefield 4 without readjusting the triggers.

In short, Scuf's improvements make a difference in games that require fast reflexes, such as fighting games and shooters, but don't make as big a deal for slower-pace titles that don't require fine analog movements. If you've never had a problem with a first-party controller then you probably won't feel that Scuf controllers are worth their designer price point (controllers start at $119.95 and run to over $200 depending on features and functions), but if you play a lot of competitive titles then Scuf could actually improve your game.

Starting at $119 | *scufgaming.com*

PAX Plays Host To
Top Indies

Both the Game Developer's Conference and Penny Arcade Expo have become venues for indie developers to show off their latest projects. We scoured the show floors and came across a dozen games that captured our attention.

Moon Hunters

Developer Kitfox Games **Platform** PS4, PC, Vita

One innocent summer evening, the moon fails to rise in the night sky and a group of dangerous monsters bursts forth into the world. As an ambitious young monster hunter, you venture into the wilderness, hoping to restore balance. However, the wilds are a dangerous place, and you're bound to die sooner or later. Fortunately, your deeds are not forgotten; your descendants tell the tales of your adventures, which slowly evolve into society's legends. Moon Hunters is a mythology-building action/RPG that lets you form groups of up to four players to explore hand-painted, pixel-art worlds full of randomly generated environments. As you interact with NPCs, craft new tools, and learn new magical abilities, your reputation grows. At the end of your journey, your hero becomes a constellation in the sky, forever cementing their importance in the world. In classic roguelike fashion, Moon Hunters only takes a few hours to play through, but you unlock new character classes, tribes, and environments every time you jump back into the world, which should give you plenty of reasons to see how your early heroes helped shape the legends scattered across the sky. **» Ben Reeves**
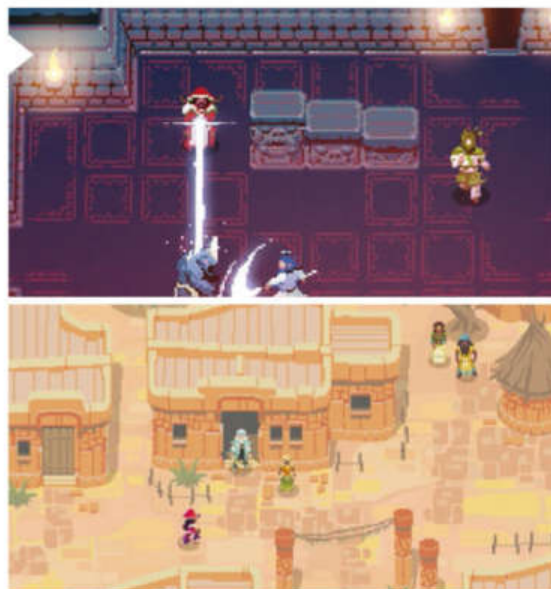
Fast Racing Neo

Developer Shin'en Multimedia **Platform** Wii U

If you think the velocity of modern racing sims needs cranking up, then Fast Racing Neo might be more your speed. Modeled after classic nitro-fueled sci-fi racing games like F-Zero and WipeOut, the souped-up hover cars in Fast Racing Neo leave the starting line at speeds that could peel the paint off a Maserati – and then they go faster. Fast Racing Neo's creative course design has racers bounding over sections of track that swing above river valleys, offering views of giant robots ambling over war-torn cities. Boost pads help speed freaks secure a healthy lead, but can only be activated if players hot swap the color of their cars to match each pad. Fast Racing Neo supports up to four players via single-system split screen, and up to eight players can compete online when the game releases later this year. **» Ben Reeves**

Below

Developer Capybara Games **Platform** Xbox One, PC

Capybara Games' beautiful exploration game (inspired by the likes of Zelda and Dark Souls) has been dangling in front of us for a long time now, but it looks better with each successive glimpse. Thrusting you into a dark, unknown world, Below is light on explanation and often leaves you to your own devices. You figure out how to explore the world, how to fend off enemies, and (most importantly) how to survive. If you take damage, the countdown to death begins – unless you can figure out how to cauterize the wound before you bleed out. If your character passes on to the afterlife, you simply respawn with a new hero at the beginning of the dungeon. While you're able to track down the corpses of your fallen predecessors to salvage their inventory, the dungeon shifts its layout with each new hero, simulating your new character seeing the dungeon for the first time. Though its understated colors and gorgeous backdrops may look soothing, Below is a tense experience that aims to keep you on the edge of your seat. **» Brian Shea**

Skytorn

Developer Noel Berry, Pedro Mederios, Matt Thorson, Amora B., Ben Prunty, Power Up Audio **Platform** PS4, PC

Skytorn is a procedurally generated action/adventure from Noel Berry and the people who worked on titles such as Towerfall Ascension and Night in the Woods. It's loads of weird fun – just as much attention is paid to the player's potential interactions with the environment as is paid to the battles, monsters, and other weird inhabitants in the randomly generated world. Even though it's procedurally created, the game feels intimately crafted from room to room, with lots to discover and explore with your trusty shovel. Using your shovel, you can sort of "break the rules" of the established Metroid-style gameplay by digging your way right through the environment in whatever direction you'd like to explore. You unlock new abilities for your shovel as you progress, which are useful for battling the slew of hostile monsters and providing interesting ways to alter the environment. » **Daniel Tack**

Darkest Dungeon

Developer Red Hook Studios **Platform** PS4, PC, Vita

The Lovecraftian, gothic, roguelike dungeon crawl Darkest Dungeon has been in early access for some time on Steam, with a lacquer of polish and other significant changes rolling out over time. Some additions have included more content and new features, like new classes or the brilliant Cove dungeon. Other changes have been more polarizing in the community, such as the recent addition of corpses that linger on the ground after enemies have been slain – essentially a method of preserving group position for additional time after the enemies' grotesque tank is taken down. The corpses also add effects to existing abilities; the Plague Doctor's bombs have never been more useful, as they can now clean up corpses with a single use. While an official release date still hasn't been uttered, we expect to see Darkest Dungeon in its final form soon – and we're incredibly excited about that fact. Everything we've played thus far indicates that it's a fun, unique foray into some grim gaming. » **Daniel Tack**
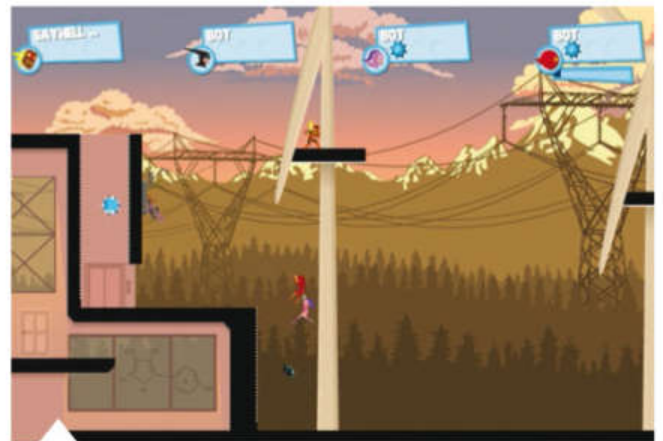
SpeedRunners

Developer DoubleDutch Games, TinyBuild **Platform** Xbox One, PC

Leaving your opponents in the dust has never felt so entertaining. SpeedRunners is a competitive, multiplayer, 2D platforming experience focusing on fast-paced, over-the-top action. Players race as fast as they can through creatively designed levels, and outrunning your opponents is the only thing that matters. If players fall far enough behind that they are no longer in view of the camera, they are eliminated from the race. Once the first character is out, the visible portion of the screen begins shrinking, making it easier for other players to fall behind. Adding another layer of strategy, you're able to sabotage the runs of other players using slide tackles and various power-ups. The race continues until only one character remains in play, meaning that as more players drop out and the screen continues to shrink, the more intense the action gets. With its exciting gameplay and accessible controls, SpeedRunners could become a go-to party game. » **Brian Shea**

Cibele

Developer Star Maid Games **Platform** PC, Mac

On the surface, Cibele may seem like a game about a game, it's a narrative-driven experience chronicling a young woman's time in a fictional MMO called Valtameri. However, the heart of Cibele isn't the virtual world, it's the real-world events that Valtameri sets into motion. Based on an actual experience of creator Nina Freeman (who is also working at Fullbright on Tacoma), Cibele tells the story of an online relationship that culminates in a real-life sexual encounter. Though you do spend time in the world of Valtameri, the true story unfolds with uncertain flirting, selfie trades, and the sometimes-awkward interactions of a young relationship. You also get parts of the story by poking through PC files to uncover poetry, photos, and old blog entries. Cibele puts a personal and authentic spotlight on a potentially uncomfortable subject; I played the first of three chapters, and was struck by its honest and unflinching reflection on a failed relationship. » **Joe Juba**

Kingdom

Developer Noio & Licorice **Platform** PC, Mac, Android, iOS

Kingdom is an interesting pixelated journey where the player starts with nothing in the middle of the woods and embarks on a journey to create a kingdom. The game mixes elements from simulation and survival games; you collect resources, upgrade capabilities, and unlock new vendors – but when night falls, weird things happen outside your kingdom's walls, and attacks on your otherwise peaceful plot threaten to destroy all you've worked for. The unique combination is enchanting, especially since players are left to their own devices, piecing together how things work after a few failed starts. Many mysterious things are waiting to be discovered outside the walls of your ever-expanding kingdom as you set out each day, collecting coins and finding enigmatic objects. Kingdom takes a minimalist approach to gaming, but it succeeds at creating an intriguing journey into the unknown while scratching the building itch. » **Daniel Tack**
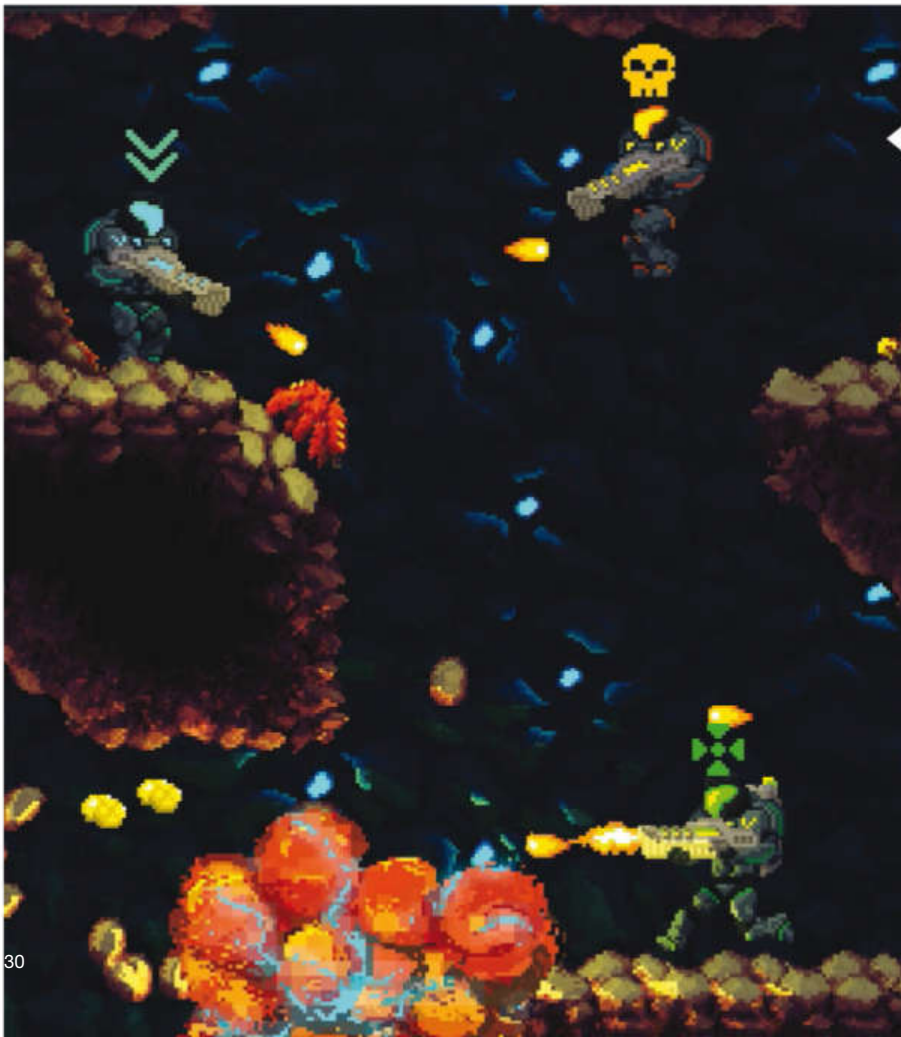
Hive Jump

Developer Graphite Lab, Black Lantern Studios
Platform Wii U, PC

This run-and-gun shooter from Graphite Lab shares many traits with some of the most beloved retro shooters from Nintendo's past. Clearly influenced by Super Metroid and the Contra series, Hive Jump is a perfect fit for Nintendo's initiative to highlight independent games on its platforms. You can dive into Hive Jump's environment with up to three other friends as you blast your way through arachnid antagonists. Gunning down enemies is satisfying enough, but with the bugs dropping currency that can be used to upgrade weapons and other aspects of your character, the drive to take down even more grotesque foes becomes more apparent. Our hands-on demo culminated with a massive boss battle that took the players' combined strengths to conquer. The experience was satisfying, and taking down the giant bug was the perfect endcap to the session. Smooth gameplay, intense firefights, and entertaining four-player co-op make Hive Jump an exciting shooter to look forward to. » **Brian Shea**

Hard West

Developer Creative Forge Games
Platform PC, Mac

Hard West is an XCOM-inspired strategy game set in the Weird West – a land of undead gunslingers and pistols. Players glean advantages by collecting special skill cards that can be critical to the outcome of the turn-based combat. Managing an assortment of grisly pistol-toting zombie-kin, players overcome guarded positions by using cover to their advantage, calculating reload opportunities, and other strategy mainstays. Despite the abundance of XCOM elements, the team at Creative Forge Games throws a few twists into the formula here to keep things from feeling too much like Enemy Unknown. Players manage luck points, special cards, and their adventures around the overworld map (like the Wasteland series) as other factors that can be critical to success and failure. Players can expect a variety of weapons and situations, from standard shootouts to shutting down some cannibalism. » **Daniel Tack**

Just Shapes And Beats

Developer Berzerk Studios **Platform** TBA

You'd be forgiven for thinking that Just Shapes and Beats sounds a lot like the 2012 indie darling Sound Shapes. The premise of controlling a geometric shape in a minimalist, sound-driven world will be familiar to anyone who played the PlayStation-exclusive platformer. However, Just Shapes and Beats takes that premise and applies it to a maddeningly difficult bullet-hell formula where you have no offensive abilities and must simply survive as long as possible. Instead of attacking, your only recourse when faced with trouble is to use the boost button, which is great for getting you out of harm's way thanks to its temporary speed boost and invulnerability. My hands-on time included levels ranging from fairly difficult to seemingly impossible, and even contained a boss battle. The music is the highlight of the experience by far, but the uniqueness of how the gameplay interacts with the music is the selling point. » **Brian Shea**

Anarcute

Developer AnarTeam **Platform** Xbox One, PC, Mac

Anarcute is probably the most adorable way to level a city. What started out as a school project for a group of five students at the French video game school Supinfogame has grown into a delightful outlet for your frustrations with oppressive regimes. Players control a small group of revolutionaries who must avoid obstacles and collect sympathizers in order to evolve into a riotous assembly. As your riot moves through the city, your citizens pick up lawn chairs, picketing signs, and even cars – all of which can be used as weapons against an elite police force that represents the evil corporations ruling the world. Each rioter wears a little animal mask, making them look like elephants, frogs, and other adorable critters. Players need to watch out for ruthless police patrols and rooftop snipers, but if their riot grows big enough, they are able to level skyscrapers and maybe even inspire social change. » **Ben Reeves**

massive

World Of Warships

by Daniel Tack

The third addition to Wargaming's suite of wargames takes the battle to the seas as players embrace torpedoes, artillery barrages, and repair crews scrambling to put out fires and keep flooding down. While Wargaming has already tackled tanks and planes, the best place for some quick fun is on the big blue, with this entry striking an addicting balance and providing multiple interesting ways to play.

Players start out with two unimpressive ships and a dream. From there, you play some co-op missions against bots, acquire currency, unlock new options, and quickly get an idea how the base gameplay works. As you begin leveling up your account, you unlock the ability to add custom elements to your ships, like captains and modules that let you suit the core ships to your playstyle. Progression is quite fast, and after just a few hours I had a respectable fleet at my command. The feedback loop is strong, and you're never out of a game for more than a few seconds. Even if you get blown up at the beginning of a match, simply return to port and grab a new ship while you wait for that battle to complete. You're back on the sea in seconds, and you still get rewards from the match when it finishes. Currently, players can only delve into U.S. and Japanese ships, but a few elite Russian ships are available. Plus, the game is expected to follow the path set by other Wargaming titles, so expect new updates in the future.

Battleships and cruisers both focus on artillery-shell tactics – something that feels like the Battleship board game in some respects. Instead of telling your opponent that you're firing at B5, you've got precise controls at your command to land your shells, turning your boat in the correct direction to have multiple turrets blasting away. You can track your shell shots using the camera function to see where they land, allowing your next salvo to have some science behind it. The satisfaction from landing a long-range shell on an opposing ship's gun battery or engine is great, and this doesn't lose its impact even after dozens of games. Battleships often have high-cooldown, heavy-impact weaponry and truckloads of hit points, whereas cruisers are the jack-of-all trades option and often have anti-aircraft capabilities to shield your team from opposing aircraft carriers.

Destroyers focus on speed, deception, and lethal torpedo assaults. Torpedo barrages are one of the most devastating things in World of Warships, and can level even the heartiest of ships by blowing hulls wide open, causing flooding and many other problems even if the initial burst damage is survived. If you're a rogueish type that loves dishing out a ton of damage quickly and then hiding in a cloud of smoke to get away before heavy artillery or planes can take you out, destroyers are the class for you. The assassins of Warships, they're a ton of fun to play and handle differently than the plodding artillery classes.

And then you have the aircraft carriers. These massive bases are almost defenseless to enemy attacks, so they generally want to stay far away from the action and hang out with other ships that can come to their aid in case of an ambush, but they also wield tremendous power. These play differently than the other classes of ships, offering players the ability to deploy bombers, fighters, and planes to the map similar to a real-time strategy game. If you're looking for a commander's experience where you call the shots without getting your hands dirty (that is, until some destroyer happens upon you and launches a lethal torpedo barrage), the aircraft carrier is an awesome choice.

While it still helps to play smart and not charge in against superior forces, I found the island-hiding and barrage battles in Warships to be far more interesting and entertaining than my experience in World of Tanks, which often ended up in two players both finding a good place to hide and stare at each other, waiting for someone to come out of cover. Warships seems to reward more aggressive play, seeking out opposing aircraft carriers for a juicy takedown and skill-based artillery-shell wars, and this makes for a more engaging experience overall. If you've never tried a Wargaming title and you're wondering what all the fuss is about, this is the one to try first. From the satisfaction of your first test shell landing nowhere near the target to your recalibrated incapacitating hit to the despair of hearing torpedoes are incoming and there's nowhere to go, Warships provides a wide range of fast, fun experiences. ◈

Never stop playing.

Square Enix Opens Up

Square Enix has long been known for its RPG games, but it has undergone something of a resurgence over the past few years. While the Final Fantasy series and other JRPGs remain important cornerstones, the company's portfolio includes Western games as diverse as Hitman, Tomb Raider, and Deus Ex. We spoke with Phil Rogers, CEO of European and American operations, to get his take on Square Enix's philosophy, direction, and more.

How much autonomy do you have at Square Enix? Are you able to help steer the ship, so to speak, or is Japan's hand firmly on the wheel?
I think we have a lot of autonomy here. On a creative level, we run a very defined greenlight process – we run it very strongly around greenlights and milestones and gates. Creative decisions, production decisions, those are definitely decisions that I make. But it's part of a group, so it's got to be in harmony with the rest of the company, and how we get input for those decisions can involve multiple stakeholders, including Japan. The commercial plans that we build up, they roll up into a group budget, and of course they're blessed or they're pushed and challenged. But like any group, that's how it works.

How do you describe Square Enix today? What kind of vision do you see for the company's future?
In some ways, I describe us as a very open company. I think we've got a vision for looking for these unforgettable experiences. It could be in terms of the genres we're going after and are interested in. An example this year would be a game like Life is Strange. You know, it was a real gem for us to get to work with that game and work with that team, and that's an example of how we want to experiment – in this case, experiment with episodic storytelling. How we work as an organization, and how we seek partnerships with studios around the world, is not just to fill gaps and find things that will plug them, but where are those best, most exciting teams that we can work with? Some of our core IP, like Just Cause, is an IP that's built with an outside studio, and it's a great relationship for us.

We're certainly listening and evolving as a business, how we make decisions, how we take feedback. I think it's been really motivating for me and also really motivating for our Japanese creatives and studio leaders to come spend time with the European offices and American offices and talk to European gamers. We've always believed in feedback, and now to see the whole group eliciting feedback and using that feedback to hopefully make better games is great for us. That's been an experimentation for us as well, how we harness the community and those gamers.

What attracts you to any particular outside studio? You mention Life is Strange – what did you find interesting about Dontnod?
A common vision and outlook. It's that overlap in how you see things and what

you want to achieve – it's as simple as that. The way they demo, the types of games they want to build – we're very conscious of how you add value. If you take that axis of an independent developer, they can work with many different people in many different ways, so what help do they need? If you haven't got that common mindset as to how you see the type of experience you want to build and deliver ultimately, it's never going to be successful. First and foremost, we look for that commonality of approach. And that can be in terms of what you're making, and also how you want to make it.

One thing that I, as an individual, really want to promote is active disagreement. We talk about this a lot in the business. There's no point in us all agreeing, we have to have active discussions to find the best thing. Independent studios or dependent studios that want to actively challenge to get that better result is what we want. It's a very tough creative world, and if you haven't got people who are willing to argue and criticize in a constructive way, you're not going to make it. I always beware the people I call the passive aggressors – the people in meetings or greenlights who won't say anything but then afterwards will say, "Oh, that wasn't right, was it? I didn't think that was a very good decision." You want these people to have the confidence to say that in front of people and have that confidence of debate and rigor. If they can see it, other people probably can as well.

Square Enix has a large library of existing IP. How do you determine what games to revisit?
I'd say right now it's fairly organic. We're a business where we have studios and we really want to be an organization that empowers creators. If creators come forward and say, "Here's some concept work I'm thinking of that would use this IP," that's a good starting point. Seldom it's a business person saying, "Hey, this IP, let's dust it down, and push it on creative." It's organic in that respect. We are very focused as an organization, our studios are working on and have responsibility for certain IPs. Really, first and foremost, it's their responsibility to create those ideas and it's our responsibility to work within the organization to give the teams what they need to succeed. But we certainly look at our library of IP and I think we look at the expansion of markets and expansion of devices as opportunities to bring these IPs back to life or create new experiences. That's the great thing about the games industry right now, it's growing because of new devices, new

markets, and new experiences. I think where we can apply that to existing IP, we look to do so.

You have a lot of fans in the West that would like to see more of your games localized. How do you gauge what to bring here?
It's a topic that comes up a lot, and we understand why it does. To a great extent, in a really positive way, we're absolutely humbled that we have this loyal and dedicated fanbase that wants to give us the feedback. We're constantly working with the teams in Tokyo to show them this and to work with them there. The simple truth is that in some ways the development process and the tools, it's not always an easy undertaking to reopen a game and add localization subsequently. But I think as we go forward, with the way the group is working, technically, and the way it's now thinking globally, I'm really hoping that in the next 10 years, localization is seen as pleasing all our fans, because it's truly global and the methods in which we can localize now are vastly improved.

It's obviously not as easy as running text through Google Translate, and there are business risks, too. Have you considered setting up crowdfunding campaigns for fans to help pay for localization in advance?
I think it's a really interesting idea. I would love to try and work with that, to find a way, because ultimately we want to satisfy the demands of the fans. I think also, our fans are very rational. They understand, and if we explain things, they often go, "Oh, I get that now, thanks for explaining." They know it's complex, or it's very expensive, and it's not as simple as you say as using Google Translate. To get that essence of it actually translated requires this amount of resource. To see if fans want to sign up for it and say, "This is the absolute demand for it," and we can set targets and say if we achieve that, then we can do it – I think that's a relationship that seems very natural to build. I'd love to see how we get that to work.

This is one of the smoothest console-generation transitions I can recall. Did the switch to the current-gen systems feel as painless for you?
Maybe it's the smoothness of a swan gliding down the river, but underneath we're kicking and paddling really hard. It's great from a sideline observation. I think this transition has been interesting. In some ways, it's not been such a tough transition as prior generations because of the underlying tech, and perhaps also the development in our business around tools and understanding. It's fun to deliver our pipeline. We're really excited about the lineup we've got. ◆

iPad Pro

by Ben Reeves

Even as the guts inside our computers shrink, the displays we use for them continue to expand. Apple's newest entry in its line of iPads is a great case study. The iPad Pro features a 12.9-inch display that houses 5.6 million pixels for a resolution of 2,732 by 2,048. One might think that this extra size would pack on a lot of extra weight, but Apple's new tablet weighs just 1.57 pounds, which is roughly comparable to the original iPad. A new A9X chip makes this tablet about 1.5 times faster than Apple's previous iPads, and a touch more powerful than many laptops. Four separate speakers help the tablet produce audio that's three times louder than Apple's iPad Air 2.

Consumers looking to upgrade to this larger iPad might also be interested in the company's assortment of new peripherals. An optional cover for the iPad Pro, called the Smart Keyboard, connects to the tablet via magnetic connectors and provides users with a portable, tactile keyboard that doesn't need to be charged separately. Meanwhile, an accessory called the Apple Pencil functions like a stylus, except that it adjusts its inputs based on position and pressure.

Apple's original iPad opened up an entirely new market for people who wanted the functionality of a laptop with the added streamlined portability of a smartphone. We'll be interested to see if the iPad Pro's increased size and horsepower continues to expand this market, and when the lines between a laptop and tablet become too blurry to separate.

Starting at $799 | *apple.com/ipad-pro*

1 Game Drive For Xbox One

Microsoft's newest console is barely two years old, but we're already feeling the hard-drive crunch. If you find yourself constantly deleting games from your hard drive in order to make room for the next big release, then Seagate's external storage device could solve many of your problems. It's a little unsightly to dangle this playing card-sized box off the side of your Xbox One, but the extra 2TB of hard-drive space makes it worth finding a corner to squeeze the Game Drive into. We had no problem plugging in the drive and immediately downloading games and apps onto it. The games on our the Seagate drive felt just as responsive and featured loading times that were virtually indistinguishable from games stored on the Xbox One's internal drive. This is a great supplementary storage option for games, apps, and other media.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□□

$99.99 | *seagate.com*

2 Nyko Type Pad

Few things can curtail your enthusiasm for playing a game faster than pecking out a sentence on a digital keyboard with an analog stick. Nyko's Type Pad mitigates many messaging frustrations by grafting an entire keyboard's worth of buttons onto your controller. Unfortunately, this isn't a simple plug-and-play device. Not only do you have to pair the Type Pad via Bluetooth, you also have to charge its built-in battery separately (however, its charge lasts longer than a PS4 controller's). Once the Type Pad is attached to your controller, it's easy to forget it's there, and dedicated "@" and ".com" buttons make messaging your PSN friends faster than ever.

AVERAGE ■■■■■■■□□□

$34.99 | *nyko.com*

MAD MAX: FURY ROAD

George Miller's return to one of the original post-apocalyptic wastelands might just be a two-hour chase sequence, but it's one of the most visually rich chases in cinema history, and it's full of characters that remain intriguing despite their sparse dialogue.

$44.95
madmaxmovie.com

SAGA VOLUME 5 BY BRIAN K. VAUGHN & FIONA STAPLES

This mind-bending space opera is one of the most consistently entertaining comics today. After escaping an extraterrestrial war, two star-crossed lovers make an uneasy alliance with a robotic prince, hoping to save their child from a strange world full of terrifying creatures.

$14.99
imagecomics.com

MARVEL'S AGENT CARTER: THE COMPLETE FIRST SEASON

Continuing to explore the origins of Marvel's cinematic universe, ABC's post-war drama follows the exploits of Peggy Carter, a double agent who must combat mysterious foreign assassins as well as a society that marginalizes women while tracking down those who framed her friend for international crimes.

$39.99
abc.com

Media Shelf

Star Wars Spaceships In Video Games

by Andrew Reiner
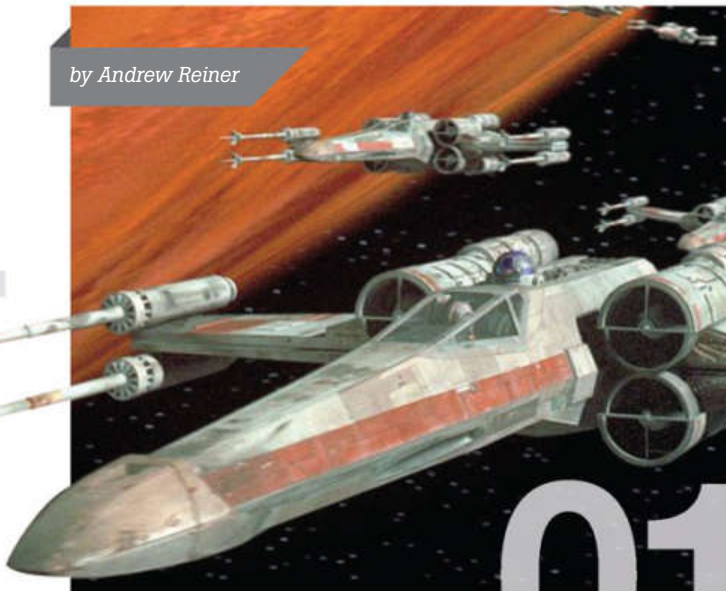
X-Wing

Gamers have piloted the T-65 X-Wing Starfighter more than any other vehicle, and that's nothing to complain about. From Death Star trench runs to aerial dogfights against TIE fighters, the X-Wing has devastated Imperial Forces in classic games like Rogue Squadron and X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter.

Millennium Falcon

The most iconic vehicle in Star Wars history has appeared in numerous video games, but mostly as an unlockable reward. The Falcon's most notable appearance is from Rogue Squadron III.

Ebon Hawk

The Ebon Hawk is the base of operations and primary means of transportation in the Knights of the Old Republic games. It was originally a smuggler ship, and eventually fell into the hands of Revan, Dark Lord of the Sith.

TIE Fighter

These flying hunks of junk are the best fodder a Rebel pilot could ask for. They are the primary menace in almost every Star Wars flight game, and are fun to control in the TIE Fighter PC game, despite the lack of shielding. The Interceptor, Advance, and Defender are popular variations of the TIE's basic design.

Slave I

This ship, which belonged to the Fett family, makes a number of memorable appearances in the Battlefront and Rogue Squadron series. It's often one of the most powerful ships in a game, unloading rapid-fire laser blasts from a heavily shielded hull.

Star Destroyer

The appearance of a Star Destroyer usually spells doom, making it one of the most feared weapons of the Empire. We've taken down many of these enormous vessels in video games, a feat that usually begins with the objective of destroying the dome-shaped long-range sensors.

Y-Wing

If Imperial ground forces need to be eradicated, the Rebel Alliance almost always calls upon the Y-Wing bomber. This vehicle is often seen hugging the ground, dropping high explosives. Most games allow the Y-Wing to switch between bombing and aerial combat.

Executor

Darth Vader didn't just own a specially designed TIE fighter, he also had his own Super Star Destroyer called the Executor. This lengthy flagship appeared in numerous games, including Rebel Strike and The Force Unleashed.

Scimitar

Darth Maul piloted this prototype stealth ship, which is outfitted with six solar ionized cannons, an experimental ion drive, and blood-red interior lighting. This ship is also known as the Sith Infiltrator. Players can unlock it in Star Wars Starfighter and Battle for Naboo.

The Moldy Crow

This oddly named craft belonged to Kyle Katarn, the protagonist in Star Wars: Dark Forces. He later upgraded to the Raven's Claw, but The Moldy Crow wasn't forgotten. It appeared in Empire at War and the Jedi Knight II.

03 **Need for Speed**

04

06.2 **Yo-Kai Watch**

10 **Rise of the Tomb Raider**
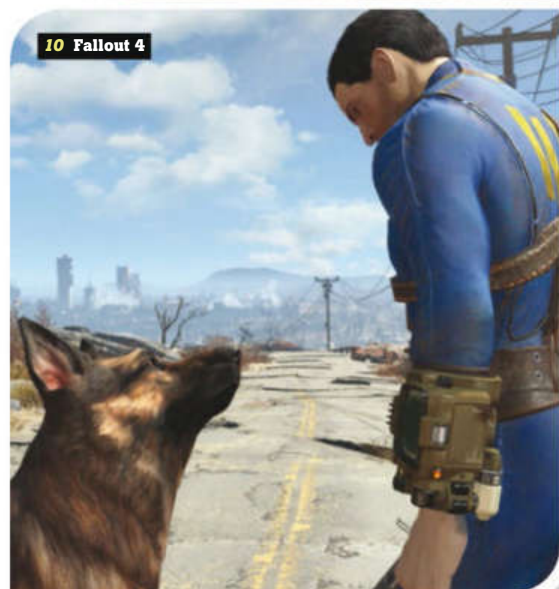
10 **Fallout 4**

17 **Star Wars Battlefront**

25

2015

November

03 **New Releases**
› Anno 2205 *(PC)*
› Need for Speed *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
› Peanuts: Snoopy's Grand Adventure
  *(PS4, Xbox One, PS3, 360,
  Wii U, 3DS)*

04 **Marvel's All-New Universe**
Brace yourselves for change, comic-book fans. Marvel's universe reboots today with a host of surprises, including a different Avengers team, a female Wolverine, a new Hulk, and Devil Dinosaur getting his own book. This summer's *Secret Wars* event shook up the universe, and today we get to see where the pieces fall.

06.1 **BlizzCon 2015**
During this two-day event, we can expect to see new content for the majority of Blizzard's existing franchises, including World of Warcraft, Overwatch, and Hearthstone. Rumors are also swirling about a new Diablo III expansion.

06.2 **New Releases**
› Yo-Kai Watch *(3DS)*

06.3 **Spectre 007**
Daniel Craig squares off against Christoph Waltz in today's highly anticipated theatrical release, *Spectre 007.* Theatergoers are once again getting to know more of the enigmatic James Bond, as this film's plot further explores his past and his unknown connection to the secret Spectre organization.

10 **New Releases**
› Fallout 4 *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*
› Rise of the Tomb Raider
  (Xbox One, 360)
› Rodea the Sky Soldier *(Wii U, 3DS)*

17 **New Releases**
› The Crew: Wild Run Edition
  (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
› Star Wars Battlefront
  (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
› Sword Art Online: Lost Song
  (PS4, Vita)

20.1 **The Hunger Games: Mockingjay — Part 2**
The final film in The Hunger Games saga is here. After all the death and carnage Katniss and her people endured, we can only assume this farewell will be uplifting and fun. Sure, we first must watch the revolution unfold, but that'll likely be the first 10 minutes of the movie. After that, it's just singing and dancing.

20.2 **New Releases**
› Pokémon Super
  Mystery Dungeon *(3DS)*

25 **The Dark Knight III: The Master Race**
Frank Miller joins forces with Brian Azzarello for the final chapter in *The Dark Knight Returns* saga. The Dark Knight III: The Master Race is an eight-issue story that DC Comics calls "the epic ending you never saw coming."

27 **The Good Dinosaur**
Pixar's newest film debuts today. Taking place in an alternate timeline where the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs never hit, *The Good Dinosaur* sees a friendly dinosaur befriending a small caveboy in a relationship that almost certainly won't end in the boy being eaten.

28 **New Releases**
› One Final Breath *(PS4, Xbox One,
  PS3, PC, Linux, Vita)* ◈

THIS THING OF ~~OURS~~ THEIRS

After spending two games climbing the ranks of the Italian mob, Mafia III now asks you to burn it down

by Matt Bertz

Five years removed from Mafia II's 2010 release, fans were left wondering if 2K would ever revisit the story-driven organized-crime series. After all, the second installment met generally favorable reviews and sold in six million copies to retail. Was the series just on the lam, or was it swimming with the fishes?

As it turns out, 2K had more renegade designs than simply pushing out another sequel that mimicked the mob stories we've all seen in movies and on television. Helmed by a new studio built from the ground up to create open-world games, Mafia III charts a bold new course by introducing a new setting and protagonist, infusing social unrest into the narrative, and asking players to attack the Italian Mafia they spent the last two games faithfully serving. Get ready for the new face of organized crime.

Mafia III preserves the physics-based driving engine of its predecessor, but the feel has been tweaked to capture the feeling of late '60s action movies like *Bullitt*

PULLED BACK IN

One year into his job at Kabam, Haden Blackman knew he was ready for change. The triple-A veteran best known for his work on Star Wars: The Force Unleashed and Star Wars Galaxies joined the digital publisher after it acquired his consulting firm, and initially he enjoyed the challenge of learning the nuances of user acquisition and metric-driven development. The title he helped develop, The Hobbit: Armies of the Third Age, was performing well, but as he delved deeper into the hot new free-to-play sector nearly every analyst and prognosticator was deeming the future of the gaming industry, he had an epiphany.

"At the end of the day, life is so short and you only ship so many games," he says. "Finally, I got to the point where I can't work on games that I don't want to play. I'm not going to do

my best work; I'm not going to be passionate."

To rekindle his passion for games, Blackman knew he had to get back into the triple-A development space he had called home for 13 years. When 2K president Christoph Hartmann called to explore the possibility of Blackman spearheading the creation of a new studio at 2K, he jumped at the opportunity.

After several conversations with Hartmann, Blackman officially joined 2K in late 2012 with the goal of creating a studio founded on three governing principles: a desire to make every player experience unique, a dedication to open-world settings, and a commitment to developing proprietary technology. After a few weeks of kicking around concepts for the studio's fledgling project, Hartmann raised the idea of the studio leading the development of the next Mafia game, a strong-selling franchise that had been dormant for a couple years as 2K debated new directions for the series.

"I didn't have Mafia on my radar as a possibility when I started, but when Hartmann presented that to me, it was a total no-brainer for a bunch of reasons," Blackman says. "One, if I put on my business hat, it's a huge opportunity to launch a new studio with an existing franchise that already has a fan base. Two, when I looked at it from a creative standpoint, it really resonated with me. Mafia II in particular is really well known for that immersive sense of time and place and the very strong narrative. When it became clear we could take the franchise in almost any direction – we wanted to reclaim that term mafia to mean more than just the Italian mob – then it was like yeah, this is a total no-brainer."

Blackman then met with 2K Czech technical director Laurent Gorga, the steward of the

Mafia II engine, to discuss his vision for the new technology. Some elements of the engine, like the physics-based driving, were already in good shape. When Gorga and the team of lead engineers agreed to move to the 2K headquarters in Novato, Calif., the studio started to take shape. Hangar 13 was born.

With the first project in place, Blackman started the recruiting process, putting together a "who's who" wishlist of potential candidates to assume critical leadership positions. "It was almost kind of like being able to recruit the dream football team," Blackman says. "We knew we needed a star quarterback, so where do we draw that person from?"

The prospects of working on Mafia III proved appealing, as Blackman ultimately assembled a veteran team with impressive resumes that included prominent roles in high-profile titles like Infamous, Dead Space 2, Splinter Cell: Blacklist, Star Wars: The Force Unleashed, the canceled LucasArts title 1313, and the 2013 Tomb Raider reboot.

"From a recruitment point of view, having a big franchise like [Mafia] when you want to hire top talent is big," says executive producer Andy Wilson. "When you're asking them to trust you with their careers, they're going to be a lot more comfortable when they are working on something that has got ambition and the backing that we get from 2K. If you look at Mafia II, it's a game that a lot of people hold in high regard. It has a huge fan base and sold a lot of copies, so you know you've got that added thing to attract people with. It opened a lot of doors that may have been closed to certain talent."

With the leadership team in place, now Hangar 13 charted the future course of Mafia.

THE NEW FACE OF ORGANIZED CRIME

Before Blackman agreed to take the Mafia mantle, 2K had already done some creative legwork. The publisher knew it wanted to keep the series advancing eras, and had developed a short list of intriguing cities that could serve as settings. Blackman's team entertained the idea of returning to New York facsimile Empire Bay, but ultimately kept coming back to an off-the-beaten-path setting with surprisingly deep ties to *La Cosa Nostra:* New Orleans. Rather than tell another rags-to-riches story about a petty criminal becoming a made man, the team saw this location as a perfect place to expand the scope of the series.

"To us the word 'mafia' doesn't just mean the Italian mafia," says lead writer William Harms. "There's also the black mob, the Irish gangs – a lot of different groups. We decided to expand the definition of mafia to include things outside of the traditional Italian mafia." The diverse cultural base New Orleans provides opened the doors for the studio to explore these other organized crime elements while still having the Italian mob play a key role.

With a fictionalized version of New Orleans (yet to be publicly named) set as the location, the discussion moved to which specific era would work best. What better year to choose as a backdrop than 1968, often cited as the most turbulent year in the country's history? The list of watershed moments in American culture cuts deep – the Vietnam War, civil rights protests, the women's liberation movement, the rise of hippy culture, the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., and more. The late '60s also proved an interesting era for organized crime, as the romanticized notion of the mob was all but stripped away with its bloody foray into drugs, and the RICO laws instrumental in dismantling the national syndicate were still a few years from being put into place. "We wanted to show the fall from grace of the Italian mob and them being exposed for what they actually were, which was brutal criminals, and the rise of the new breed of criminals at the same time," Blackman says.

The deep-south setting and historical era ultimately led Hangar 13 to its bold choice of anti-hero. Rather than play another Italian mafioso, the player assumes the role of Lincoln Clay, a Vietnam vet with a serious vendetta against

A LEADER AND HIS LIEUTENANTS

To bleed mob boss Sal Marcano dry and end his reign, Lincoln Clay needs allies. The loose alliance of like-minded gangsters he assembles have their own motivations, but Lincoln has no choice but to empower them if he wants retribution. Meet each of the key players in Lincoln's makeshift mob.

BURKE

The hot-headed leader of the Irish gang, Burke is a racist, degenerate drunk who has his own troubles with Marcano. He thinks the only way to help his cause is to join forces with Lincoln, despite the racial barrier. "He's quick to fly off the handle, but it's all very calculated," says lead writer William Harms. "He sees it as testing limits, figuring out the parameters of that relationship with that person, and then getting what he wants."

"He would love to run the city," says creative director Haden Blackman. "But if the city burns in the process of taking down Marcano he would be okay with that too." Burdened with a busted knee, Burke doesn't get around very well, but his mechanical prowess comes in handy. He rewards Lincoln with vehicle upgrades the more they work together.

LINCOLN CLAY

The antihero of Mafia III, Lincoln Clay is a mixed-race orphan who grew up with no family and eventually shipped off to fight for his country in Vietnam. Returning as a highly decorated war hero, he finds a sense of place within a small black-mob outfit run by Sammy Washington, who is behind on his payments to city crime boss Sal Marcano. When Marcano wipes out Sammy's crew and leaves Lincoln for dead, Lincoln vows to exact revenge.

CASSANDRA

Cassandra is the leader of a Haitian gang competing for the same spoils as Sammy's outfit. As a black woman, she would never be afforded the opportunity to work tangentially for Sal Marcano like Sammy or Burke do. Not that she would want to anyway – she's after Marcano and all his lackeys because she feels they are bad for race relations and the city overall. "She sees Sammy as bad for the community, too, because he's willing to victimize his own community in order to make a buck," Blackman says. "Cassandra likes to claim that she wouldn't do that."

VITO

The protagonist of Mafia II, Vito was exiled to the Big Easy after the fallout in Empire Bay. The Commission did it for his own good, but he doesn't see it that way. Marcano begrudgingly takes Vito in, giving him one of the less-desirable territories in the city. He eventually meets Lincoln via some mob dealings, and realizes the two have a lot in common despite their vastly different upbringings. "Vito is one of our favorite characters, and we want to make sure his story is continued," Blackman says. "While it won't be the very first thing you learn in the game, we are going to address the one loose end that everyone wants to know. That is part of the story depending on some of the choices you make."

A Vietnam war vet, player character Lincoln Clay knows his way around a skirmish

local crime boss Sal Marcano. After the mob wipes out his adopted family – a small-time black-mob outfit that was behind on its payments to the big boss – Lincoln vows to show Marcano what it feels like to lose everything.

Throughout his quest for revenge, Lincoln is aided and abetted by the only two people he still feels a sense of kinship with. Father James ran the orphanage Lincoln grew up in, and reconnects with his pupil after the war. "He's an Old Testament guy," Harms says. "He understands 'an eye for an eye.' He doesn't disagree that Marcano should die, and he will help, but he worries about how much collateral damage Lincoln could accrue, which could damage himself, the city, and race relations."

On the other side of the equation is John Donovan, who doesn't seem like a natural companion to Lincoln considering his wealthy East Coast upbringing. War has a way of forging lasting friendships regardless of background, and Donovan is a cavalier CIA operative who ran black operations with Lincoln in Vietnam. After seeing the failures of the precision warfare tactics being employed in Southeast Asia, his preferred strategy aligns more with the "kill them all and let God sort it out later" approach used in the Pacific Theater during World War II. This informs his worldview in how Lincoln should go after the mob. "He's a patriot, and everything he does and everything he sees is through that prism," Harms says. "He's going to stay on his path no matter what."

Donovan and James lend support to Lincoln, but their efforts alone aren't enough to end Marcano's regime. That's why Lincoln sets out to recruit other like-minded allies with a stake in systematically dismantling the hierarchy that keeps the old mob boss in power.

DISMANTLING MARCANO

Keeping with the series traditions, Hangar 13 knew it wanted to preserve the heavy narrative focus and crafted set-piece missions for Mafia III, but it also saw an opportunity to grow the series in meaningful ways. The open world was rarely used in the previous games for more than window dressing for scripted sequences, failing to entice players with incentives for exploration or compelling secondary objectives. Given the intense proliferation of amazing open-world experiences in the last five years, the team identified this area as a prime target for remodeling.
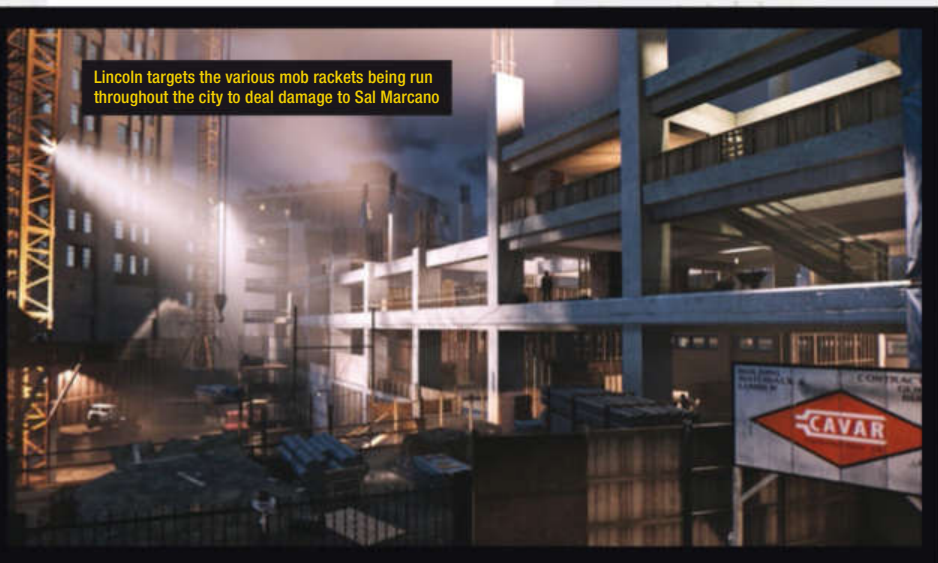
Lincoln targets the various mob rackets being run throughout the city to deal damage to Sal Marcano

Preserving the narrative emphasis while expanding the open-world possibilities is easier said than done; many popular games don't bother entwining story-based missions with side content. You can get absorbed in random activities to the point where you forget what pressing narrative obligation you are ignoring in favor of picking flowers or searching for treasure. For Mafia III, Hangar 13 tries to avoid this pitfall via a unique structure that gives players a sense of narrative progression as they operate freely in the studio's version of New Orleans.

"The act of playing the open world still means advancing the story," says design director Matthias Worch. "It's not divorced, where you're either doing something in the open world or doing something for the story. They're going hand in hand. It makes it feel like what you are doing in the world matters, but you're still getting this traditional open-world compulsion loop where you get to choose what you get to do."

Hangar 13 shows off this new technology in a live demo of the game that takes place shortly after the first act. Lincoln has already assembled his patchwork team of lieutenants and is itching to inflict any damage he can on the Italian mob. Much of his focus is put on targeting the key figures in Marcano's outfit, each of whom runs different rackets in the various city districts.

Lincoln drives to meet Donovan on a downtown city bench across from the Royal Hotel. This lap of luxury is the home of Marcano money man Tony DeRazio, who keeps the books, greases the palms of government officials, and launders dirty money for the mob. He almost never leaves his penthouse domain, so Lincoln must give him reason to exit his high-end loft.

Donovan gives Lincoln intel on two contacts who may have more insight on the operations DeRazio runs in the district. One has knowledge of the bribe racket, and another has information about a perpetually delayed construction job the mob is using to siphon funds from the city.

"By talking to Donovan, you get these dossiers on various operations throughout the city, including contacts that you can then go talk to to learn more information," Blackman says.

With the informants now appearing on the city map, the player can pursue these leads. For the purposes of this demo, only one district is available for targeting, but Blackman says players typically have a few districts available for dismantling at once.

The first contact we visit explains his current circumstances – he's being blackmailed by DeRazio's associate, Jimmy Cavar, who operates a construction outfit in the area. He gives Lincoln the location of some of Cavar's foremen, who should be able to provide some

This is one of Lincoln's fleet of vehicles, which he can customize by performing jobs in the open world

harmful information about the operations if coerced correctly.

Lincoln finds one of these thugs selling city-owned construction materials in the back alley, and after clearing out his muscle, begins the interrogation process. The foreman reveals the vulnerable construction site being used to bilk the city coffers. You can kill or spare the informants after you finish interrogations. If you kill them, you may get an immediate money payout. If you keep them alive, they could provide you with information about the criminal racket and help you earn more money from it after you take over. Lincoln decides to take out the foreman in this instance, which subtracts from a meter showing how much money Cavar's racket makes in the district.

"The real hook to this, and why it all works in a systemic open world, is it's the only way to bring the hideout bosses out," Blackman says. "They only come to check their rackets when you cause enough damage. We contextualize that through money – how much money you are making them lose. Each hideout has a threshold, and once you hit that by doing a variety of things in the open world, then the boss is forced to show up and you can wipe them out."

Players could reach this threshold by slowly taking out every thug in the area, but this piece of information yields a rare opportunity to do some major damage to the operation. The intel you receive from informants essentially works like slot machines, randomizing the value. Sometimes you may only receive a small tip-off, but other times you may hear about a big stash of cash or a high-value target that can deal a crippling blow.

Before hitting the vulnerable construction target, Lincoln visits the other contact, who is holed up in a storefront. Lincoln frees up the intel with a few well-placed punches, and he reveals the locations of the area enforcers. These enforcers protect racket leaders once they emerge from hiding, so taking them out before attacking the hideout can weaken the defenses.

Lincoln drives across the district to take out one of the enforcers, which gives us a glimpse of the third-person combat. Each group of thugs in the game is constructed of different A.I. archetypes. Some move in with blades and shotguns for close-quarters attacks, while others stay in cover and return fire. One archetype hanging with the foreman is a squealer; as soon as the group is under attack, he makes a bee-line for a pay phone to call in reinforcements. Hangar 13 plans to mix and match the several different A.I. archetypes to keep the players on their toes.

"Players get bored when they don't have a lot of interesting things to do or interesting decisions to make, so having groups of enemies that have different archetypes and present you with different challenges keeps you interested," says lead systems designer Adam Bormann.

Combat looks relatively straightforward, and Lincoln moves with the decisiveness you would expect from a seasoned combat veteran. He goes into cover at the push of a button, and seamlessly transitions from ranged attacks to melee combat as the situation dictates. Hangar 13 says the game has snap-to targeting and aim assist measures in place, and the degree to which the game holds your hand in combat depends on which difficulty setting you choose.

Hangar 13's version of New Orleans gives players a glimpse at the high and low lifestyles in the late '60s, from *Mad Men*-style penthouses and the bustling French Ward to impoverished shanty towns and the unforgiving bayou

After taking down the enforcer, Lincoln turns his focus back to the construction area – the site of the future city hall. Our initial contact told Lincoln he should make the attack look like an accident, so a stealth approach is appropriate. While casing the site, Lincoln spots a large crane sitting conveniently next to an explosive tank. Before moving in, he calls up the services menu from a walkie-talkie.

From the services menu, several tactical tools open up as Lincoln earns favors with his three lieutenants. Options include calling in a drive-by, causing a diversion, hiring muscles, killing the lights, positioning snipers to fire at a specific location, bribing cops to stay away from the area, and restocking supplies with a mobile weapons shop (a necessity for the times, since racial minorities weren't allowed to purchase guns during this era thanks to state laws endorsed by the NRA). The better relationship you have with your lieutenants, the cheaper these services become. Freeze one of them out of your criminal empire, however, and you pay more for the services they provide.

Savvy players can use these tools in concert to dictate the pace of battle. For instance, in more combat-centric missions, you could set up C4 traps or whistle to draw the attention of nearby enemies, walking them into the sight-lines of a well-positioned sniper. Since Lincoln is taking a stealth approach for this mission, he simply stocks up on C4.

Snaking around the various construction site guards, Lincoln successfully plants the explosive and escapes the area before detonating the C4. The damage creates significant losses for Cavar, cutting his racket take in half.

Talking to the informant isn't the only way the player could have discovered the location of the crane. Discerning minds may notice suspicious activities in the streets and tail the suspects to uncover rackets as well. "Our living world and our crime ecology interact," says lead narrative designer Aaron Contreras. "If you see somebody walking down the street and they are a junkie, you might see them walk in and grab heroin at a spot. If you haven't talked to an informant there, that's how you discover there's a drug dealer down in that alley." In this instance, the player could have located the construction site by following a Cavar Construction truck to the location.

Once you do enough damage to a racket, the mission for taking out the hideout boss becomes available. You could do this immediately, or continue to pound away at the operation to weaken them further. Lincoln heads back to the informant to tell him that he's going to "talk" to Jimmy Cavar and sort out the blackmail problem.

With his construction site damaged, Cavar has arrived on the scene. Each boss location gives the player three to four ways to infiltrate. We already know the general layout because of the crane mission, but had we spent more time working the streets, we may have found other avenues of approach. The site now has many more hired guns in position, and a big shootout ensues. Lincoln eventually works his way to Cavar, which presents the player with an option. If you know what makes a man like Cavar tick and have something he wants, he'll turn on his boss and join you. This offers a better long-term gain that helps you make more money from the district. Or you can just pull the trigger and collect an immediate payout. Lincoln chooses the quick and dirty route.

The Deep South was the most contentious region in the 1960s for race relations. Amidst national pushes for desegregation, the Voting Rights Act, and the Civil Rights Act, conservative politicians used negrophobic tactics to rally their white bases, further exacerbating the cultural tension prevalent throughout the former Confederacy. This serves as the backdrop for the tale of Lincoln Clay, who experiences the institutional prejudice firsthand.

"Our end goal is to tell an authentic story and put you in a role that maybe you haven't been before," says creative director Haden Blackman. "That's the beauty of games, right? Games can immerse you in these roles and identities that you would never be able to experience in real life in ways that movies and novels can't because you are making decisions and you are that character…Being someone who is viewed as black in 1968 in the South is unique."

Expect Lincoln to come face to face with many of the unfortunate realities of the time period, from overt racial slurs to institutional targeting. One of the primary ways players feel this oppression is through the police. "The police definitely reflect the times," says lead writer William Harms.

The police aren't the minor nuisance you see in a lot of open-world games – they hit hard, so being aware of where they are at all times is critical. This is especially true in socioeconomic areas where the cops think Lincoln doesn't belong. The hollow he calls home may have a minimal police presence, which makes it easier to get away with petty crimes. When Lincoln ventures into the rich white neighborhood, you can expect the size of the force and their response to minor crimes to increase dramatically.

If you commit a crime and a pedestrian reports it, the immediate area around you will become a blue zone, where cops actively try to find you. If you hole up somewhere and keep an eye on the region you may witness the police harassing every person of color in the area.

If the police see you commit a crime or they identify you as the suspect for a reported crime it becomes a red zone, meaning the cops are in full pursuit. "This is 1968 in the Deep South; the cops are going to come down on you like a hammer," says design director Matthias Worch. You need to break line of sight and get out of the region as fast as you can to avoid their swift and forceful response. Get in a car chase and they will target your tires to neutralize your vehicle. If they view you a gravely serious threat, the cops may even try to run you over while you're on foot. Whether you are in handcuffs or in a pine box, it's all the same to some of them.

Regions stay blue for some time after the crime is committed, which may cause you to take different routes on your way to other areas in the city.

"We're not trying to be sensational, but thought-provoking is something that art is," Blackman says. "All good art makes you think and stays with you. If we can be thought-provoking in some way without being overly provocative, then I think we've done our job."

With such attention being paid to the black experience in the Deep South, we asked why Hangar 13 chose to make Lincoln mixed race. Blackman says they have a strong narrative reason. "The big thing for us is we wanted to continue to develop the sense that Lincoln really wrestles with any sense of belonging and doesn't necessarily fit in anywhere," he says. "He's an orphan. We do have a line in the game where he looks black, so for all intents and purposes he's treated black by the majority of the city, but even when he's working with the black mob there's still a little bit of this, 'Do I belong here?' Lincoln is this guy who's a complete outsider."

Before you wildly speculate that Lincoln may be related to someone from the series' past, take heed. Though no one knows for sure who his mother and father are, Father James thinks one of his parents was Dominican, not Italian.

BUILDING YOUR EMPIRE

Once the player takes down an enemy hideout, Lincoln must assign it to one of his three lieutenants. Then the real work starts.

"There's the tearing down, then there's the building up," Blackman says. "Once you take over a hideout, you can assign it to somebody for a reward. You don't have to give the two hideouts in the district to the same lieutenant, you can split them up. But ultimately you do have to assign the district. That might create some tension. If I give the construction site to Burke, the other hideout to Cassandra, and the whole district to Vito, that's going to ruffle some feathers."

Managing these relationships is about more than just keeping your soldiers in line; the long-term decisions you make directly impact the narrative direction. "There will be multiple endings, and those are interesting," Blackman says. "I'm excited about them and I think they all work and make sense. If that's how the movie ended, if it was a movie, you'd go 'That totally makes sense given what Lincoln decided to do.'"

Once you tap a lieutenant to control a hideout, another series of missions opens up that help you squeeze the most revenue out of the racket. In turn, this creates more kick-back money for Lincoln.

To wrap up this district, the player would need to take down the other bribe-related racket before getting a shot at DeRazio. Expect these finales to be much more in line with the traditional Mafia experience.

"We're trying to stay true to the brand, to what people expect from the Mafia franchise, and that includes these big narrative set-piece missions," Blackman says. "The best way to view them is as the big payoff for taking over a district."

As you dismantle portions of Marcano's criminal syndicate, you will see how it affects his bottom line. "We do something that is very uncommon in games, something I actually like and I think is empowering – you see Sal Marcano react," Blackman says. "We have context for why you can see and know this information, but you'll see him react, he's forced to make some hard decisions, and a lot of it goes back to the tactics that Donovan and Lincoln decide to use."

About a quarter of the open world map is the swampy region directly outside of Hangar 13's version of New Orleans

OPENING UP THE WORLD

Hangar 13 knew the Mafia III open world needed remodeling to improve on the deficiencies of its predecessors, and the team targeted several ways to flesh out the experience. One major point of emphasis is on taking the physics-based driving mechanics of Mafia II and evolving them to capture the feeling of late '60s action movies like *Bullitt*.

"I think the biggest thing we wanted to do moving from Mafia II to III is cars go faster, they're cooler, we want to see these really awesome drifts and e-brake turns, and all of the things we see when muscle cars and sports cars start getting faster and more interesting," says lead systems designer Adam Bormann. "One of the other things we've been trying to do is pushing driving as the core mechanic in car combat, because in other games a lot of times you have to spin plates to try and fight from the car and there's a lot of things that pull you out of the experience of driving."

Mafia III's mechanics allow you to focus on the driving experience, manifesting through aiding the targeting of tires, gas tanks, or drivers. The system isn't fully auto-targeting, but it's much more accommodating than free-aiming.

A ramming system allows the player to use the vehicle as a weapon as well. The ingenious rearview mirror in the top center of the screen allows the player to track cars in pursuit and even acts as a highlight reel, zooming in on the action to showcase an impressive takedown.

Lincoln accrues a fleet of at least one car from each class (think muscle car, sports car, off-road vehicle) over the course of the game, and each can become the ultimate version of that class via upgrades. You earn cosmetic alterations by winning the various races throughout the city. Performance upgrades become available by completing passion activities for Burke, your lieutenant who operates out of a junkyard.

Each of the three lieutenants offers passion activities that allow you to delve deeper into their story and earn unique rewards.

Players can earn skill points by completing challenges that allow them to improve Lincoln's various abilities, from lethal takedowns and faster reload speeds to an expanding inventory and increasing health and stamina.

A variety of collectibles are also available to pursue.

BROADENING THE CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE

Though Hangar 13 is taking Mafia III in several new directions, from expanding the open-world activities to having player choice influence the narrative, the studio is confident that longtime fans will still feel like the game is faithful to the core tenets of the series.

"At the end of the day, you're going to feel like this is a true Mafia experience and a true Mafia story," Blackman says. "The people are worried that we are just ignoring Mafia II, and that couldn't be farther from the truth. From a narrative standpoint we are absolutely committed to making sure a lot of your questions about Mafia II are answered in Mafia III."

Should Mafia III succeed, it potentially opens the doors to several other exciting organized-crime possibilities for the series – the Columbian drug trade, Yazuka, Golden Triad, the Russian Mafia, among others. Wherever the future takes Hangar 13 – Mafia-related or not – Blackman is simply happy to be doing what he loves to do most. Every day he wakes up, heads into a studio he built from the ground up, and sits down to play the type of game he loves the most. ◈

For more interviews, videos, and in-depth features on Mafia III, visit gameinformer.com/mafia3

Making Mario
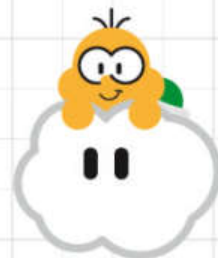
A LOOK BACK AT THE FIRST 30 YEARS OF GAMING'S MOST ICONIC SERIES

Thirty years ago, a small team based in Kyoto, Japan, came together to create a new kind of action game. Drawing inspiration from prior projects, that team released Super Mario Bros. in 1985 – a title that would go on to help console gaming step back from the brink of ruin. Since then, Mario's influence has spread far beyond the games in which he appears. He helped turn Nintendo into an industry leader, and became a cultural icon. Super Mario Bros. started a revolution, and in the process, became one of the most recognizable franchises in the world.
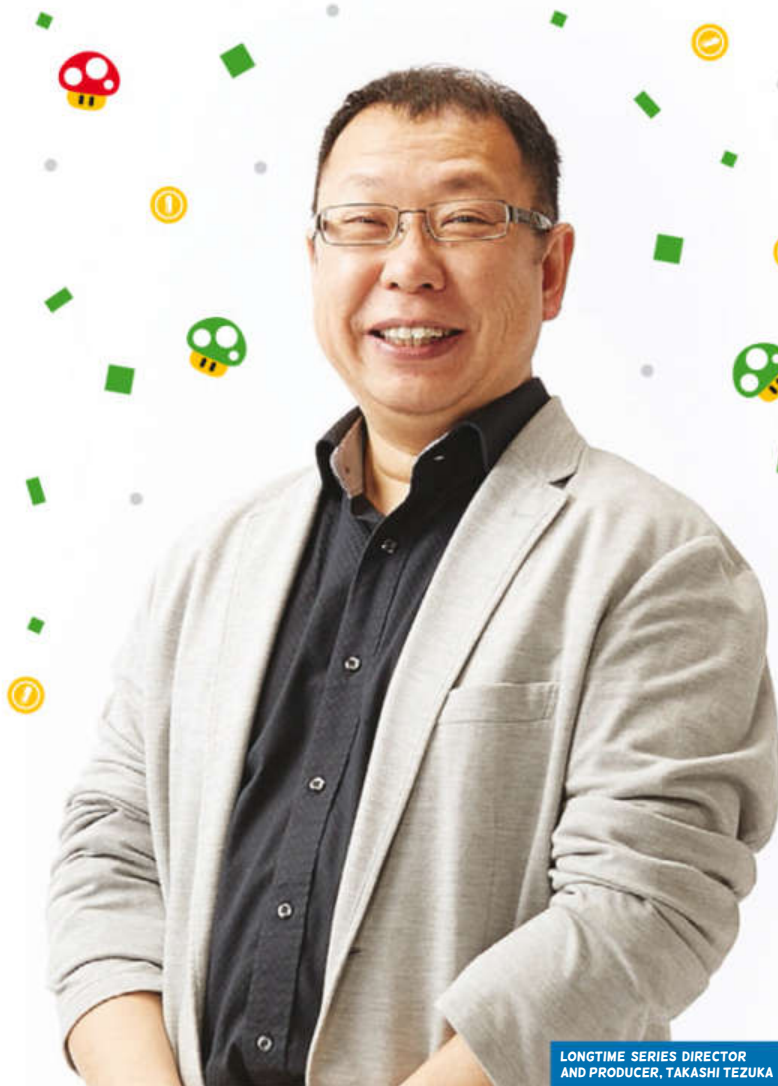
by Brian Shea

HUMBLE ORIGINS

In the early 1980s, the video game industry's push into the home-console market was at a pivotal stage. Turmoil permeated gaming as the North American industry crashed in 1983. Industry-wide sales dropped as low as $100 million in 1985 (down from over $3 billion just three years before), sending many developers and publishers to their demise. Despite this downturn in the industry, Nintendo was able to survive while many of its competitors faltered thanks to the success of its 1983 game console, the Famicom. With the console releasing in Japan at the start of the North American crash, Nintendo was able to navigate through the storm that took down so many of its competitors.

That's not to say that Nintendo was unaffected by the crash. Negotiations with Atari to help bring the Famicom to the United States as the "Nintendo Enhanced Video System" fell apart as Atari took a massive financial hit in the crash, and Nintendo was forced to attempt the jump to the west alone. When the company tried to release it in the U.S., toy stores (the primary sellers of video games at the time) had all but written off the medium as a fad that had ended, and were resistant to stocking games. To overcome this, Nintendo rebranded its video game console as an "entertainment system," and the NES was born.

Thanks to some bold risks by the business side of Nintendo, the NES was set to be sold in North America in 1985, but it still needed killer software to make sure it was the hit that could justify those risks. That justification came in the form of Super Mario Bros., a game developed by a team led by Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka. Revolutionary from its conceptualization, Super Mario Bros. took the ideas found in a 1983 arcade game Mario Bros. and pushed them forward in unprecedented ways.

While Mario Bros. featured small characters on a single, dark screen, Mario's next adventure was much more ambitious. "The idea for Super Mario Bros. was born at a meeting where I presented my desire to create a bigger hero who runs around in a setting with beautiful graphics," Tezuka said in a 2015 Nintendo video promoting Super Mario Maker. "We discussed whether this will appeal to the current market and brainstormed new ideas."

LONGTIME SERIES DIRECTOR AND PRODUCER, TAKASHI TEZUKA

MANY OF THE CHARACTERS HAVE DRASTICALLY CHANGED IN APPEARANCE
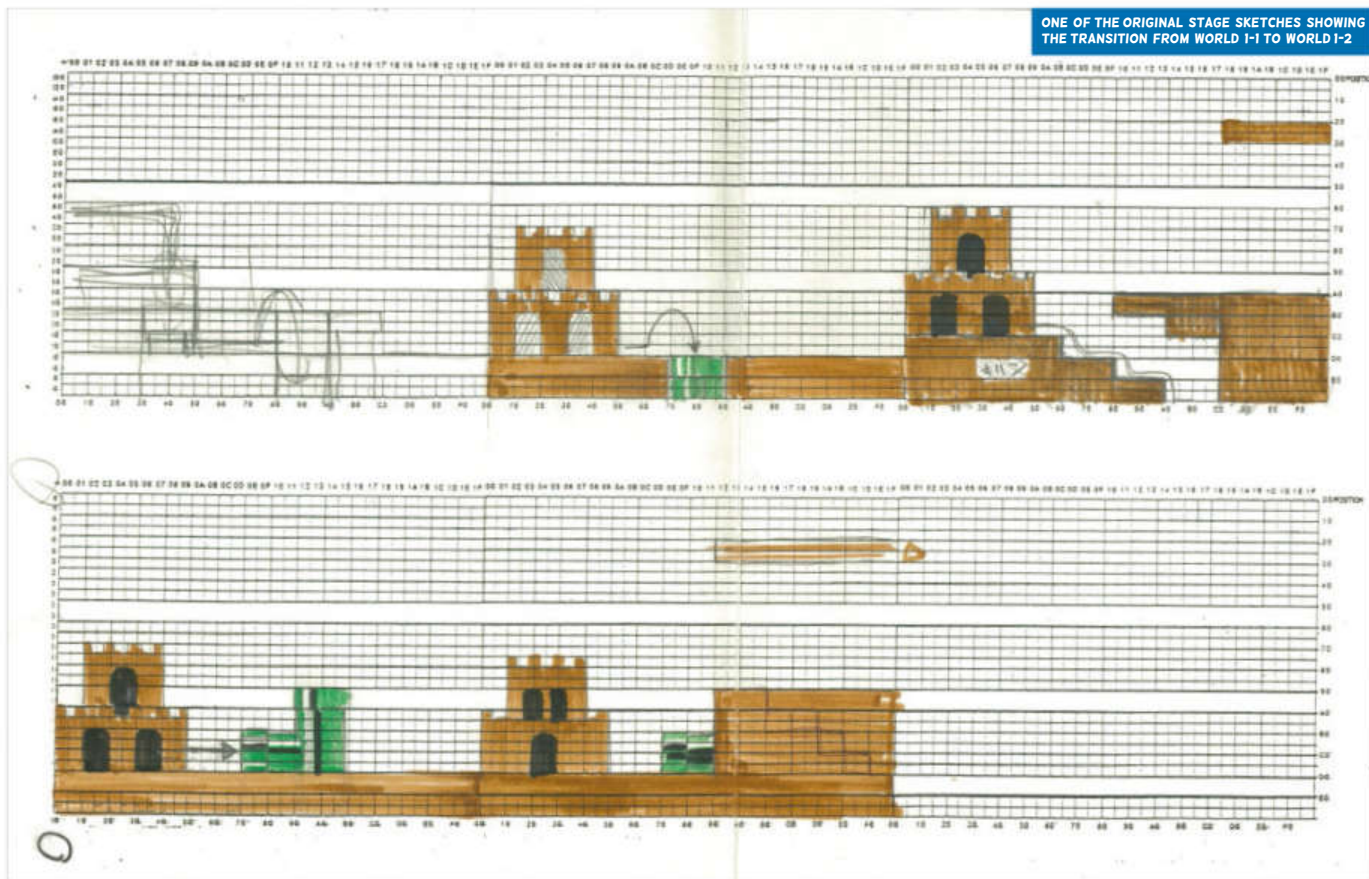
One of those new ideas was to have the level scroll as Mario moved through the environment. "It used to be normal for Famicom games to have stages that didn't scroll," Miyamoto said in the Super Mario Maker promotional video from this year. "There was side-scrolling for some shooting games, but not for any other. We wanted to create a game where large characters are animated in land, sea, and sky settings."

The team hammered out the concepts and began creating the levels that would go on to define the side-scrolling platformer genre.

"At the time, we didn't really use computerized tools," Tezuka said in that same Super Mario Maker video. "Instead, we hand-drew the stages and inputted data based on those drawings. For example, we drew the layout of the stage on graph paper…and then we handed it over to the programmer, who inputted it after converting it to numerical data. We didn't see the finished course until the next day or so. We took this process very seriously. Because programmers put a lot of time inserting this data manually, we couldn't slack off or experiment too much with the program."

Since the process of inputting the data was so labor intensive, Miyamoto says that the programmers would often scold the team if they made too many edits. Given these limitations, planning ahead was a crucial part of the creation process. "We wrote out what kinds of stages we wanted to create on a giant whiteboard, then we created a layout by pasting notes on the board like what the background should be or what would appear," he said in the Super Mario Maker promo video.

Though it would eventually go on to change video games as they were known at the time, Tezuka tells us that he couldn't accurately assess the magnitude of what the team had accomplished thanks to his lack of experience. The team was proud of the finished product, but they had no clue that Super Mario Bros. would go on to spark the beginning of the home console revolution.

What Makes Mario Special?

Mario has proven to be the most enduring video game character ever, but what makes him so special for so many gamers? According to longtime series director and producer Takashi Tezuka, Nintendo's emphasis on keeping a consistent experience over the decades is very important. "It's up to gamers to decide whether something like Mario is special to them, but if that's the case, one reason I can think of is how much importance we placed on the 'play feel' of the games," he says. "Our basic way of thinking about the action gameplay in Mario hasn't changed; instead, we've thought of ways to harness the hardware of the time to add to that experience. We've been lucky to receive consistent support for that kind of gameplay, and that might be why Mario's become such a beloved character."

Slowly, the team began hearing positive feedback. "Not long after its release, I did have a bit of an impression that people were enjoying Super Mario Bros.," Tezuka says. "There wasn't any place like the Internet for people to exchange information, but I could hear feedback from my friends. I didn't think we did anything groundbreaking, but I definitely felt happy to hear that feedback."

Once the game hit U.S. store shelves, however, there was no doubt about its success. Serving as the system's pack-in game, Super Mario Bros. propelled the timidly selling Nintendo Entertainment System to the must-have "toy" of the 1986 holiday season and set the stage for the game's sequel to be a massive hit.

FOR THE U.S. VERSION OF SUPER MARIO BROS. 2, MARIO BATTLED WART RATHER THAN KING KOOPA

Designing Mario

Mario is one of the most recognizable faces across any entertainment medium, but his early design was influenced by the technical limitations of the NES in displaying small details. According to Nintendo's Takashi Tezuka, series creator Shigeru Miyamoto had the idea of designing Mario with a big nose and a mustache to give him more distinct traits. "He thought that'd be the easiest way to create a recognizably human character given the limits in color palettes and resolution in the early days of video games," Tezuka says. "If it wasn't for that idea, I doubt the character would still be around today."
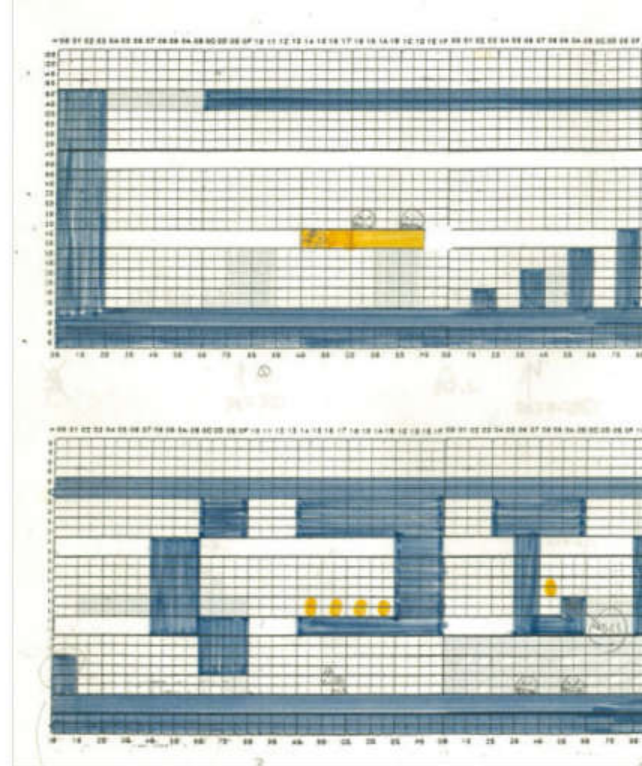
THE DOKI DOKI DECISION

Super Mario Bros. inspired a direct sequel in Japan just a year later. The Japanese version of Super Mario Bros. 2 used many of the same assets and ideas from the original, but that version didn't make it to the United States. Instead, Nintendo released a modified version of a different game – one from the Famicom Disk System, a Japan-only accessory that allowed the original Famicom to play games off floppy disks instead of cartridges. The game, Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic, was rebranded with Mario, Luigi, Toad, and Princess Toadstool as playable characters.

"Doki Doki Panic was created in tandem with an exposition that only ever took place in Japan [Ed. Note – The expo was called Yume Kōjō '87], but the game was really unique and packed with all kinds of fun things," Tezuka says. "We weren't able to release the original Disk System Super Mario Bros. 2 outside of Japan, but I think the idea of putting Mario in Doki Doki Panic and remaking it into Mario 2 overseas so people around the world could enjoy it was a really good one."

Though it was drastically different than the Japanese version, the North American audience embraced Super Mario Bros. 2 when it launched in 1988. The NES sold out across the country yet again, and parents found themselves waiting in long lines trying to grab an NES for their children during the holiday season. A reworked and cleaned-up version of the Japanese Super Mario Bros. 2 eventually released in the United States as The Lost Levels as a part of the Super Mario All-Stars package for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System in 1993.

Despite the United States' Super Mario Bros. 2 not being the original sequel his team developed, Miyamoto speaks very highly of it in discussing his favorite games in the series. In a 2012 interview with IGN, he said that while he has a lot of memories related to the first Super Mario Bros., he might actually favor the U.S. sequel. "Perhaps as a player, I might go for what was, at least in Japan, we referred to it as Super Mario USA, which was a game that just had a very different sort of feel. I think we had such a loose approach to it, we really came up with something interesting."
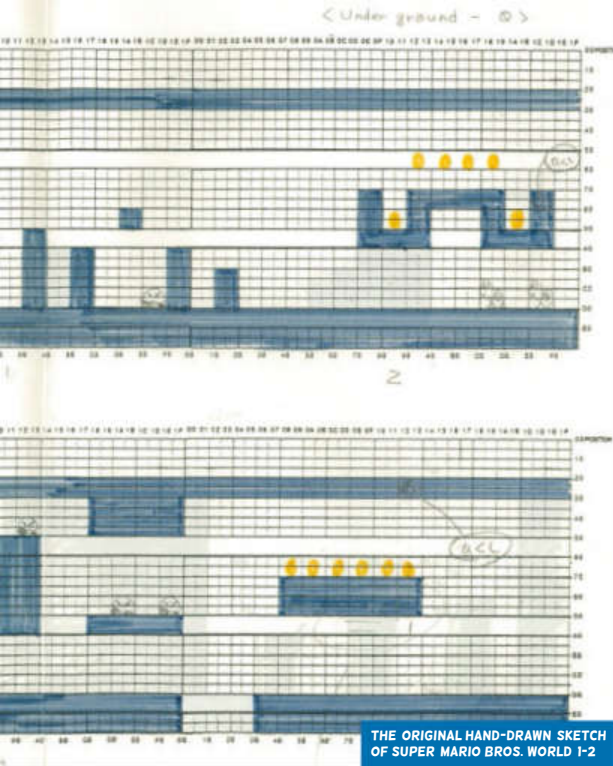
THE ORIGINAL HAND-DRAWN SKETCH OF SUPER MARIO BROS. WORLD 1-2

Head In The Clouds

The team behind the original Super Mario Bros. wanted to feature Mario traveling through land, sea, and sky settings, but there was some initial disagreement about how that would be accomplished. Assistant director of the game Takashi Tezuka originally presented an idea where Mario would float around in a cloud and shoot at coins, but director Shigeru Miyamoto rejected this idea as too technically complicated. With Super Mario Maker, players can now attempt to replicate that experience in the original Super Mario Bros. aesthetic by having Mario hijack the cloud of a fallen Lakitu and giving him a fire flower.

CRAFTING MARIO'S GREATEST ADVENTURE YET

The same year that Super Mario Bros. 2 hit North American stores, a new game, Super Mario Bros. 3, released in Japan. That game, which released in the United States in 1990, included many of the trademark elements from the original Super Mario Bros., but expanded on the formula in myriad ways. Mario could still grab a super mushroom to grow large and a fire flower to gain the ability to blast fireballs at enemies, but those power-ups were joined by a host of new ones. Obtaining the super leaf power-up gave Mario a raccoon tail with the ability to attack enemies and soar into the sky, a frog suit enabled him to swim more effortlessly, a hammer suit gave Mario the power to throw hammers like the menacing Hammer Bros. enemies, and the tanooki suit bestowed all the powers of the raccoon tail plus the ability to turn into an invulnerable statue.

Super Mario Bros. 3 also introduced an overworld map for level selection, a feature that is still common in Mario titles. With that came the ability to dictate what paths you took as you played through the adventure to save Princess Toadstool from Bowser and the newly introduced Koopalings.

"Super Mario Bros. 3 was all about us challenging ourselves to create a completely different play experience from previous Mario games, but it certainly wasn't an easy development process," Tezuka tells us. "After a long period of trial and error, we wound up settling on a game that retained what made the previous games good and added a lot of new elements to it. It was a completely different way of gauging gameplay from what we do today."

Super Mario Bros. 3 gave Nintendo yet another hit, with this latest adventure becoming the best-selling non-bundled game in the history of the NES. Nintendo's franchise was more massive than ever. From fans getting their first glimpse of Super Mario 3 on the big screen in the 1989 film *The Wizard* to an animated television adaptation of the game, Mario had transcended being simply the star of a great video game franchise; the princess-saving plumber was now a household name.

SUPER MARIO BROS. 3 EXPANDED THE SCOPE OF THE CAST, POWER-UPS, AND THE ADVENTURE ITSELF

A BRAVE NEW WORLD

As the Super NES launched, Mario Mania was at a fever pitch. Comic books, plush toys, T-shirts, and a slew of other merchandise flooded the stores that had felt apprehensive about stocking the original NES game just a few years earlier. After the runaway success of the NES, the Super NES looked like a surefire winner in the U.S. market. However, Nintendo took nothing for granted and bundled the fledgling console with the game that is, for many, Mario's greatest adventure.

Rather than completely shaking up the formula of the last game, Super Mario World continued to evolve and refine the recipe from Super Mario Bros. 3. Gone was the plethora of power-ups seen in its predecessor, with the list pared down to just the super mushroom, fire flower, and a new feather that slapped a cape on Mario's back and let him fly in a much more refined manner than in Mario 3. Mario could also take to the sky using the P-Balloon, which puffed him up with air and allowed him to reach previously inaccessible areas.

Super Mario World also introduced players to Yoshi, the now-beloved green dinosaur that Mario rides. Using Yoshi's abilities, Mario could attack and interact with enemies in new ways. With his long tongue, Yoshi could eat Bowser's minions and even hold different colored Koopa Troopa shells in his mouth to absorb temporary new powers. In addition, Yoshi gave Mario the power to absorb an extra hit, causing the green dino to straddle the line between a support character and a power-up.

Super Mario World maintained the overworld map system introduced by Mario 3, but this time, players could save their progress, allowing them more time to explore the game's many secrets. This encouraged players to scour each level to find hidden exits and unlock secret passageways to new stages, adding new depth to an already proven formula.

Super Mario World also featured smoother animations, brighter colors, and higher fidelity music, but to truly show off the added power of the Super NES, Miyamoto and Tezuka added new elements to wow players. "As we build up the series, the almost obsessive idea arises that if we don't add new elements, fans of the previous games won't be satisfied," Miyamoto said in a 2010 *Iwata Asks*. "That's why Tezuka-san, in developing the Super Mario Bros. series from Super Mario Bros. 3 to Super Mario World, started making things like minigames such as roulette. At that time, roulette was the best way to show the Super Famicom's high functionality."

For Super Mario World, the level-design process also evolved from the previous way of doing things. "Up to Super Mario Bros. 3, we drew all of the levels on graph paper, and then starting with Super Mario World, it was a combination of graph paper plus some editing tools on the PC that we had," Miyamoto told *Time* in a 2015 interview.

For Miyamoto, Super Mario World holds a special place in his heart. "Super Mario World is something that included of course all the action you saw in Super Mario Bros. but it also had the map features, so it also had that element of players having to think about where they were going and what they were going to do next," Miyamoto said in a 2010 interview with *USA Today*'s *Game Hunters*. "I also think that it is a game that developed a large number of staff people who became producers and directors."

Super Mario World's acclaim could not have come at a more important time for Nintendo, as it was no longer the only player in town when it came to the home-console market. Sega, with its attitude-infused Sonic the Hedgehog franchise and marketing lingo that used phrases like "blast processing," was beginning to

SERIES CREATOR SHIGERU MIYAMOTO

encroach on Nintendo's turf. The Genesis was more popular than its predecessor, Sega's Master System. If Nintendo hadn't produced a strong follow-up to the NES, the home-console market could have been Sega's for the taking. With the success of the Super NES, however, Nintendo solidified itself as the leader of the market.

As the team began looking at what directions to take the series following the success of Super Mario World, they decided to capitalize on the popularity of the new character Yoshi. Yoshi had become such a beloved inclusion in the Super Mario series that he would receive his own spin-off series, which Nintendo experimented with in its follow-up to Super Mario World. With 1995's Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island, the series' formula was drastically shaken up once more. No longer was Mario the main protagonist. Instead, players controlled Yoshi as he watched over a baby version of Mario in an effort to rescue Baby Luigi from Baby Bowser.

Yoshi's Island did more than serve as a starting point for Yoshi's spin-off series, however. The follow-up to Super Mario World hinted that Nintendo was interested in further exploring what it meant to be a Super Mario game. With much more powerful technology on the horizon, Nintendo was on the precipice of redefining Mario as a character and changing the series forever.

Yoshi's Island's Place In The Series

Because of the emphatic departures from the series' mainstay features, many fans do not consider Yoshi's Island to be a true follow-up to Super Mario World, with some even denying it a place in the Super Mario lineage. The creators of the series are less divided on this matter, however.

"I consider it as part of the Mario series," director of the game Takashi Tezuka told us in an interview from this year. "When that game debuted, I wanted people to understand that Yoshi was part of the Mario world, and that be conveyed whether through title or gameplay. To me, it's part of the Mario series, but today's Yoshi games? They've changed from those origins, so I think it's okay to think of Yoshi living in in his own universe. You can think of it separately from Mario's world."

Series creator Shigeru Miyamoto agrees with Tezuka. "When we first made Yoshi's Island, we considered it part of the Mario series," Miyamoto explained to us in 2012. "After that, the Yoshi series continued on its own. As developers, do we consider it to be part of the core Mario series? The answer is yes."

THE LEAP FORWARD

As the Nintendo 64 launched in 1996, a groundbreaking new experience released with it. Not satisfied with simply further refining the side-scrolling platformer mechanics of Mario, Nintendo pushed forward to deliver yet another revolutionary game.
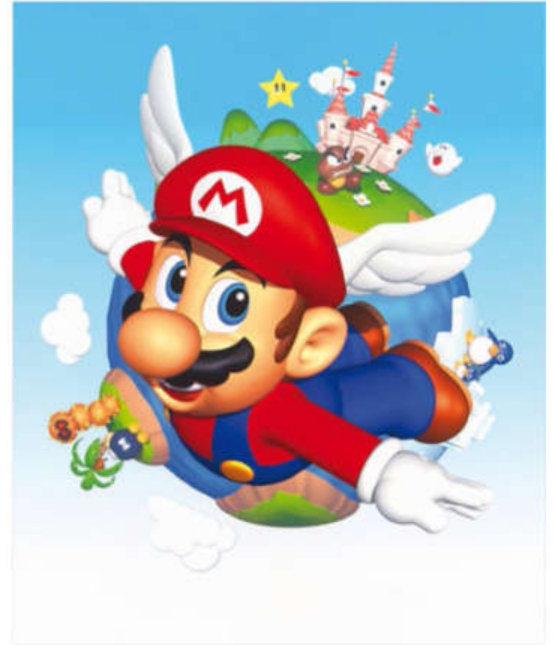
The result was Super Mario 64, a title that changed the core pillars of the series. Doing away with the traditional 2D plane, Super Mario 64 offered players their first glimpse of the beloved character as a 3D render. Mario no longer appeared as a sprite – he felt more alive as players could view and interact with him from all angles.

Nintendo also hit the nail on the head with its first attempt to bring its flagship franchise to 3D gameplay, something so many other developers – including Nintendo's old rival Sega – struggled with. Simple tasks, such as navigating Mario through Princess Peach's castle, or jumping through easy stage sequences were pure fun. Using the Nintendo 64's four C-buttons, Nintendo also demonstrated the earliest example of a well-implemented user-controllabled camera system, which still serves as the foundation for many modern 3D action games' camera controls.

Tezuka credits Super Mario 64's superb design and gameplay to Nintendo's design philosophy. "That game featured a huge number of firsts for us, including our production process, but finding new ideas one after the other to solve the problems we ran into was a lot of fun," he says. "I think it was really great how ideas from the software-development side, like how the guided 3D stick on the controller is designed, were brought into hardware development as well. In a way, I think it shows how Super Mario 64 was the kind of game only Nintendo, developing both hardware and software, could have pulled off."

In addition, Mario now had a voice, provided by Charles Martinet (who still voices the character today). With that, he developed a more defined personality than he had in previous entries. While Super Mario 64 began revealing more about Mario as a character, Tezuka says that Nintendo tends to avoid making any definitive statements about his traits. "We want him to retain a level of freedom, so we try to avoid giving him a fixed backstory derived from the reasons he appears in all the games he does," he says. "I also think that the personality of a video game character isn't really complete until the player actually takes control of that character."

MARIO'S 3D LINEAGE

Super Mario 64 was only Mario's first push into the 3D space, but it set a template for gameplay that Nintendo would iterate on and improve over the next two decades. With 2002's Super Mario Sunshine on GameCube, Mario controlled largely the same way he did in Super Mario 64. Despite that, the game was far from a direct successor to his N64 hit.

Using the F.L.U.D.D. water pack, Mario cleans up Isle Delfino after a case of mistaken identity. This means much of the gameplay borrows from third-person shooting mechanics in addition to the 3D platforming laid out in Super Mario 64. Because of this, Super Mario Sunshine is a divisive entry among players. Strapping a powerful water gun on Mario was too big of a departure from the core mechanics for some fans. Fans of Super Mario 64 wished for a more conventional Mario experience, a wish that would not be answered by Nintendo on the GameCube.

Though Super Mario Sunshine was the only core entry for the series released on GameCube, Nintendo had big plans for its next system, the Wii. The Wii uses motion controls as its primary control scheme, but Nintendo opted to minimize their usage in the core Mario games that appeared on the console.

Following the divisiveness of Super Mario Sunshine,

Mobile Mario

Though Mario will always be best known for his home-console releases, he has also appeared on each of Nintendo's handheld devices. His 1989 debut on the Game Boy, Super Mario Land, was a considerably smaller adventure than either Super Mario Bros. or Super Mario Bros. 2, but it acted as the first opportunity for players to bring Mario's never-ending adventures on the road.

In 1992, Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins released on Game Boy, bringing a more traditional Super Mario experience to handhelds. In addition to using the overworld map stage select seen in Super Mario Bros. 3 and Super Mario World, Super Mario Land 2 also introduced Wario as an antagonist. Wario proved popular and became the main character in the next handheld game, 1994's Super Mario Land 3: Wario Land.

Following the Game Boy's discontinuance, several of the console Super Mario games received ports on the Game Boy Advance, but fans did not receive a new, original handheld entry in the core series until 2006's New Super Mario Bros. on the DS.

The DS received an updated port of Super Mario 64 at launch in 2004, but the first original 3D Mario to appear on handhelds was Super Mario 3D Land in 2011. The game used the glasses-free 3D feature of the 3DS to allow the player to solve puzzles related to depth of vision, while bringing strong level design and several nods to Mario games of the past like Super Mario Bros. 3.

The 3DS also received New Super Mario Bros. 2 the following year. The title vastly improved upon the graphics of the original DS title and implemented a fun side mission of collecting one million coins over the course of multiple playthroughs.

Going forward, it doesn't appear likely that Nintendo will shift focus away from its popular dedicated handheld gaming devices, but with the announcement of Nintendo properties coming to iOS and Android devices, the future of Mario's adventures on the go is very much up in the air.

THE GALAXY SERIES TOOK MARIO'S ADVENTURES TO OUTER SPACE

Nintendo needed another universally loved entry to win back fans that weren't as hot on the GameCube title. That entry came in the form of Super Mario Galaxy, a game that took Mario to outer space and brought with it some of the greatest level design in the series.

The concept of Super Mario Galaxy spawned from a 2000 tech demo for the GameCube called "Mario 128." Upon creating that demo, Super Mario Galaxy director Yoshiaki Koizumi tried to think of a way to turn it into an actual game, but he always thought it would be close to impossible due to technical limitations. "In Mario 128, the platform was built in the shape of a flying saucer, but in order to change the platform into a spherical shape where Mario could freely roam around, it would require a high level of technical expertise," he said in a 2007 *Iwata Asks*. "I also felt that the motivation of the team members had to be very high in order to overcome this obstacle."

Around that time, Nintendo's late president Satoru Iwata was also taking an interest in that concept. "Incidentally, I had heard about the spherical platforms from Miyamoto-san more than five years ago, though at the time, I didn't quite understand why having spherical platforms would be so ground-breaking," he said in that same *Iwata Asks*. "However, as Mario Galaxy began to take shape, I finally started to understand."

The Mario Galaxy games continued refining the excellent gameplay feel of controlling Mario in a 3D space, but with more inventive design that used novel mechanics like gravitational pull to the advantage of both the level design and gameplay. While minimizing the use of motion controls, what implementation it did have was meaningful, reserving the unconventional control scheme for moves like Mario's spin attack or his new ability to sling star bits at enemies to stun them. Despite all of these new elements, the Galaxy series was unafraid to tip its cap to games of the past, often paying homage to them through musical cues or design elements.

According to Miyamoto, the success of the Galaxy series is thanks in large part to the team's design of Super Mario 64. "3D Mario games, started with Super Mario 64, always had a miniature landscape the player could move around within freely," Miyamoto said in a 2010 *Iwata Asks*. "They were structured so you gradually came to understand the landscape. Stars were placed around here and there, and players could tell just by looking which ones would be easy to get and which ones would be difficult."

The finished product of Super Mario Galaxy achieved such universal acclaim that it became the first 3D Super Mario game to receive a direct sequel in 2010's Super Mario Galaxy 2. The follow-up brought Yoshi into the mix and introduced a few new power-ups, but again, the level design was the primary focus; it stands out as one of the best designed 3D platformers of all time.

ANOTHER NEW DIMENSION

Shortly after Super Mario Galaxy 2, Nintendo released Super Mario 3D Land on the 3DS. The 2011 game combined retro elements, such as the super leaf and tanooki suit from Super Mario Bros. 3, as well as the overworld map.

This self-referential game design is more than just Nintendo trying to cash in on nostalgia. During a 2011 *Iwata Asks*, director Koichi Hayashida explained his design philosophy for Super Mario 3D Land. "I analyzed Miyamoto-san's way of making games and tried to make Super Mario 3D Land the way he made 2D games," he said. "I showed everyone the minimum volume, started with what looked possible to make, and then added on."

The game was a success, selling over 10 million copies worldwide. In addition, the game inspired the next 3D console game, 2013's Super Mario 3D World. Though Super Mario 3D World contained many of the elements used in Super Mario 3D Land, Nintendo went bigger with its design, crafting more challenging stages and introducing true cooperative play into the 3D setting for the first time.

Super Mario 3D Land and Super Mario 3D World also signaled a shift in design philosophy. With the inclusion of increasingly inventive and formidable power-ups, the team shifted its design philosophy to be less worried about giving players too much power in the name of preserving difficulty. The only thing that mattered to the team was that it was fun for players to use.

"If you really attempt trying to balance everything out in the name of competition, you start adjusting parameters-editing capabilities by raising this while lowering that. But then, even if the character types are different, you have to make adjustments so their overall abilities are equal," Miyamoto said in a 2013 *Iwata Asks*. "We simply thought about how fun we could make it without any conflicting elements, and about how much we could pack in."

Super Mario 3D World is also considered a success. Even though the Wii U didn't have the same player base as the more popular 3DS, the game still sold over four million units across the globe.

SUPER MARIO 3D LAND AND SUPER MARIO 3D WORLD BROUGHT BACK MANY POPULAR ELEMENTS OF PREVIOUS GAMES AND PRESENTED THEM IN A NEW WAY

Game Informer's Favorite Mario Games

Though Mario has appeared in well over 200 games since his debut in 1981's Donkey Kong, the core series has seen fewer than 20 entries in its first 30 years. Since none of these core games are bad, ranking them can seem like an impossible task, but we compiled a list of our editors' personal favorites.

1. Super Mario World (SNES, 1991)
2. Super Mario Bros. 3 (NES, 1990)
3. Super Mario Galaxy (Wii, 2007)
4. Super Mario Bros. (NES, 1985)
5. Super Mario 64 (Nintendo 64, 1996)
6. Super Mario Galaxy 2 (Wii, 2010)
7. Super Mario Bros. 2 (NES, 1988)
8. New Super Mario Bros. (DS, 2006)
9. Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island (SNES, 1995)
10. New Super Mario Bros. Wii (Wii, 2009)
11. Super Mario Sunshine (GameCube, 2002)
12. Super Mario 3D World (2013, Wii U)
13. Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins (Game Boy, 1992)
14. Super Mario 3D Land (2011, 3DS)
15. Super Mario Land (Game Boy, 1989)
16. Super Mario Bros. 2: The Lost Levels (SNES, 1993)
17. New Super Mario Bros. U (Wii U, 2012)
18. New Super Mario Bros. 2 (3DS, 2012)

A RETURN TO 2D GLORY

At the same time that Mario was exploring exciting 3D worlds, Nintendo was looking to bring the character back to the 2D plane for the first time since 1995's Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island. 2006's New Super Mario Bros. delivered a nostalgic 2D side-scrolling adventure on the DS with new graphics and abilities.

"[Tezuka-san] felt that 2D would be necessary since the gameplay of Mario in 2D was well understood by a large number of people," Super Mario Maker director Yosuke Oshino tells us. "He thought it best to go back to basics and make a side-scrolling Mario that fit modern times. Since we want a lot of people to play Mario, we wanted to add to the variation available as much as possible, so I think going back to the roots like this is a net plus for the series."

"At that time, Mario had advanced to 3D and we would discuss the fact that there were now two different strands to the Mario series: There was the Mario that had developed in step with consoles as they had become more advanced, and there was also the basic Mario that anyone could play," Miyamoto said in a 2009 *Iwata Asks*. "When I talked about this with Tezuka-san, he said: 'Right, if we make another one, it should be a side-scrolling Mario.'"

The return to 2D proved to be a hit with fans, and New Super Mario Bros. spawned direct sequels on Wii, 3DS, and Wii U. Though the games were largely seen as a return to the original style of the Super Mario series, Nintendo had given players a new way to enjoy the side-scrolling design.

New Super Mario Bros. Wii and New Super Mario Bros. U implemented simultaneous cooperative play, an extremely popular new way to experience the classic 2D gameplay. Players no longer needed to wait their turn to get a crack at conquering a level, and the feature let players speed through stages together, or impede each other's progress in entertaining ways.

With the return to Mario's 2D roots, Nintendo released

WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF COOPERATIVE MULTIPLAYER, THE SUPER MARIO SERIES WAS MORE APPROACHABLE THAN EVER

Super Mario Maker, a game that offers players the tools to easily design levels for Super Mario Bros., Super Mario Bros. 3, Super Mario World, and New Super Mario Bros. U.

In an interview earlier this year, Tezuka told us that the inspiration for Super Mario Maker came from Mario Paint on the SNES and the Wii U GamePad. "While I had a Mario Paint kind of gameplay experience in my head, at the same time we have an internal tools team who is working in creating an editing application for creating side-scrolling courses for our developers, so they were prototyping some different versions, and I saw that."

Super Mario Maker released in September to favorable reviews and high praise from fans. Though it's just a passing glimpse of what it takes to design within the constructs of four different Super Mario games, it's enough to give players the opportunity to find themselves in the same mindsets that Miyamoto and Tezuka had when designing the original Super Mario Bros. over three decades ago.

AND 30 MORE!

Over the last 30 years, the Super Mario franchise has taken many different forms, but the fundamental quality of putting the fun first has remained the same. Tezuka thinks that is the key to keeping Mario relevant over the next 30 years. "I think that, no matter what, it comes down to whether we can create fun gameplay experiences for Mario to appear in," he says. "To achieve that, we need to provide technology and services to match the times, working in all kinds of new ideas into the gameplay. I think it's important that we remain flexible as developers."

What made the original Super Mario Bros. so special was that just about anyone could play. That same quality endures in today's Super Mario games, and remains the key to what makes the series so special. As long as it maintains its wide accessibility and near universal appeal, it's not farfetched to think that Mario and his friends could be just as popular 30 years from now as they were 30 years ago. ◈

SUPER MARIO MAKER GIVES PLAYERS THE MEANS TO CREATE THEIR OWN LEVELS AND SHARE THEM WITH THE WORLD

Halo 5: Guardians

343 Industries changes what it means to be Halo

Master Chief fought a lonely war. Despite marines and former foes by his side, he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. His only true companion, the A.I. construct Cortana, perished right in front of him. In Halo 5: Guardians, 343 Industries saves the Chief from the quiet left in her wake. He is not alone.

Halo 5: Guardians feels like the rebirth its immediate predecessor was supposed to be. The Chief's second trilogy began with Halo 4, but begins to come alive here. Based on the two missions we played, it feels like Halo 5 is a shift away from the series' lonelier approach in previous entries.

Developer 343 Industries is telling two interwoven stories. Both feature teams of four Spartans, the UNSC's elite soldiers. Master Chief is rejoined by childhood comrades Frederic, Kelly, and Linda. They go off the reservation, leading to pursuit by the other unit, Fireteam Osiris.

The galaxy-spanning war has two different angles, but both feel vibrant thanks to 343 dialing up the dialogue. The members of these two teams quip with one another, call out dangers on the battlefield, and signal for help should they take too much damage. The latter marks another significant change in the series; instead of dying immediately, teammates can often be revived during a limited window. You can still get splattered by a Ghost for an instant kill, but you spend less time reloading checkpoints.

With four Spartans on the field, 343 had to change the way enemies behave. In the two campaign levels we played, it was immediately noticeable how the Covenant forces have been tuned. The most impressive of these are the Hunters. The hulking worm colonies that always travel in pairs have become less imposing in each entry. They are terrifying once more in Halo 5. Not only are they more difficult to take down, they have become smarter about guarding their backs. They also now swat away incoming grenades, depriving series veterans of one of the tried and true tactics for taking them down.

Whether you're playing with friends or commanding your team with the press of the d-pad, you should set up opportunities to flank. Our first battle with the Hunters felt more intimidating than they have in recent installments, requiring more strategy. The Hunters (and many other enemy types) also make an appearance in Halo 5's most ambitious multiplayer mode, Warzone, which was introduced at E3 this year, blends player-versus-player, player-versus-enemy, capture points, and a collectible card system (with in-app pack purchases available). We had a chance to try out a new map, Raid on Apex 7. While one of the previously revealed battlegrounds, Escape from the A.R.C. is more linear in design, Apex 7 has a free-flow feel to it. There are two smaller warehouses to capture, but the center spire seemed
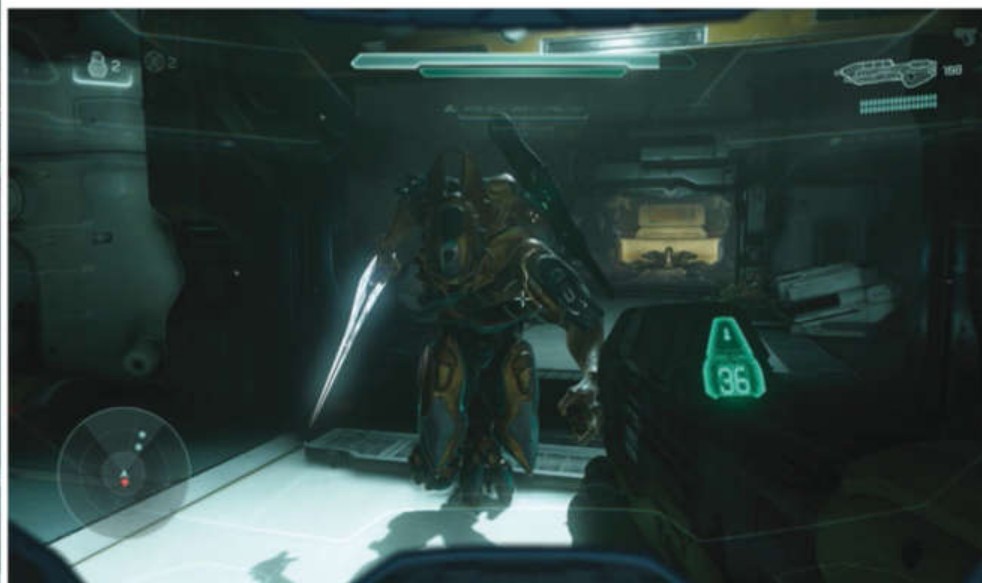
That's called a Kraken, and it dwarfs Covenant Scarabs

to be the locus of activity, changing hands multiple times in a match.

Each Warzone map has its own tough-as-nails A.I. enemy spawns (heralded with countdown timers and audio cues) and different opportunities for vehicle and heavy weapon use. These are all empowered by the requisition system, which is where the collectible cards and microtransactions come into play.

You earn requisition points just by playing, and you spend them by purchasing permanent cards (representing customizations) and consumables (which call in weapons and vehicles, or trigger boosts). Because requisition points come naturally, you can purchase new packs without spending money. Point-earning was enabled during the four games we played so we could see how the system works. We picked up packs as match rewards and earned enough points to buy another. Additionally, 343 says it will never give you the same customization item twice.

In addition to players' profile level (called Spartan Rank), Warzone features a MOBA-style in-match leveling system that resets each time you drop into a new game. The requisition cards are balanced in-game by being tied to the match-specific leveling system, and you can only cash them in when you reach the card's printed level threshold. That means that experienced players won't be starting a match with Scorpion tanks and fuel-rod cannons. While the requisition's weapon cards don't have an impact in the more traditional multiplayer offerings grouped under the Arena heading, your customizations do carry over.

Arena is where you find Slayer, Capture the Flag, and the new Breakout matches. This last type has seen some changes since the December 2014 beta; 343 noticed that players were too often ending rounds in a stalemate. Breakout now includes a flag in the center of the map, creating a new way to score. You can still eliminate the opposing team of four, but carrying the flag into the enemy goal also gives your squad the win.

In the approximately 30 rounds of Breakout we played, only two ended in a flag capture. Even more forced remaining players out of hiding into a confrontation that might have otherwise been entirely avoided until time ran out. The mode is even faster and more brutal now that players have to keep an eye on their goal.

Halo 5: Guardians features enormous changes to the franchise's 14-year history. Multiplayer is expanding to cater more directly to a loyal eSports community without leaving its popular modes behind. Campaign brings back fan-favorite characters and more closely unites this installment to the original Halo trilogy. The team at 343 Industries seems to be finding its rhythm and making the series its own in a way it hasn't been able to before. » **Michael Futter**

Rise Of The Tomb Raider

Lara's latest ramps up the intrigue

» Platform
Xbox One • Xbox 360

» Style
1-Player Action

» Publisher
Square Enix,
Microsoft Studios

» Developer
Crystal Dynamics

» Release
November 10

Lara Croft has certainly changed since she was thrust into danger in 2013, seeking out adventure in Rise of the Tomb Raider rather than becoming a victim of it. Thankfully, the elements that made her last outing a winner seem to be holding steady, with danger and intrigue in plentiful supply.

I had the opportunity to play through the game's first three hours, and the intro makes a bold statement about the focus of this installment. The emphasis on combat from the 2013 reboot isn't gone, but the opening scene is all about setpiece exploration and establishes a much different tone.

The game opens in Siberia. Lara and Jonah are forced to leave the rest of their expeditionary party behind as conditions become treacherous. The two trudge through the snow, leaving tracks in their wake, which are slowly swept away due to high winds. As the powder gets deeper, the pair must slow and lift their legs to progress (a subtle feature that ends up having a larger impact later). This is all in the first 10 minutes, as Crystal Dynamics showcases more natural animations and the illusion of deeper interaction with the environment.

As the pair make their way up a sheer, icy cliff, you're likely to experience your first death as you refresh yourself on the controls. The death animations are gentler at first, but later find a balance between the tame and the gratuitous. During my three hours, I failed Lara in numerous ways, with her head bashed against a pillar
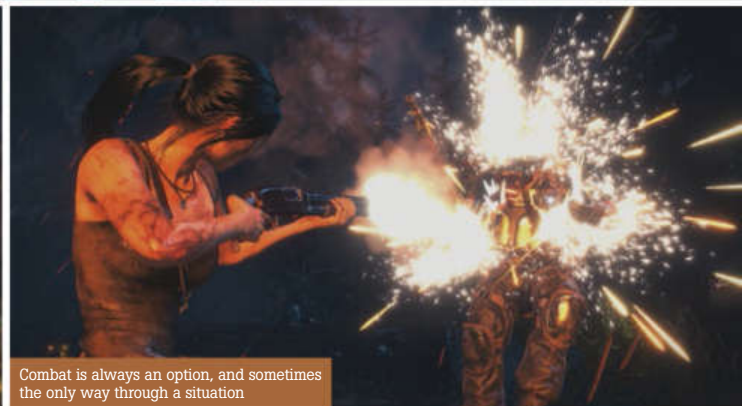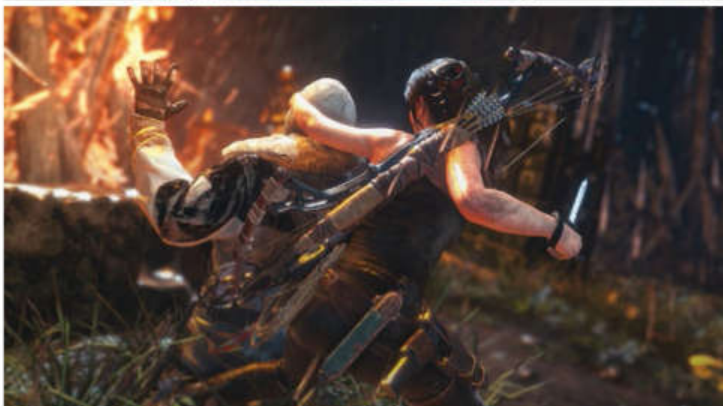
Combat is always an option, and sometimes the only way through a situation

and her corpse mangled by wildlife (twice). The finality of her demise is never pretty.

"On some level, there's a nostalgic element," says creative director Noah Hughes. "In classic Tomb Raider, I would always flinch a little bit when she got hit by spikes. What that did for me was make me not want to fail again. There's a certain amount of understanding of the lethality of the situation that she's in. We want players to be on edge and not take that misstep. Having said that, we always try to present that in a non-gratuitous way. It's there to report the facts of what happened."

Provided you make it through the blizzard, your adventure continues in Syria. It's there that I start seeing more combat-oriented gameplay. Players can choose to engage stealthily, go into all-out combat, or sneak by enemies entirely. Because stealth is a choice and not a mandate, it doesn't have the complexity seen in series like Metal Gear Solid or Hitman. That also means that being seen doesn't automatically mean you're at a disadvantage – just that you need to change your tactics.

The first hub features a single camp, which can be used to learn new skills and upgrade weapons (though you can craft ammunition and health items on the move). This camp is also a good place to become familiar with the language system. Players find items that help Lara refresh herself with Greek, Russian, Mongolian, and other tongues. Raising your level by finding enough lets you read monoliths, which in turn mark valuable ancient coins on your map. These can later be traded to a merchant for guns and upgrades. It's just a standard collectible reskinned, but it feels more flavorful than the average MacGuffin.

As exploration hubs become larger and more open, they have a number of tombs hidden off the beaten path.

The first is introduced in obvious fashion to get players accustomed to how their entrances are hidden, though they feel more naturally woven into the landscape. These still aren't terribly long, but they make for more impressive setpieces than those in the 2013 reboot, and the rewards of unique skills at the end are worthwhile.

Despite some minor changes since the last installment, Rise of the Tomb Raider is unabashedly more of the same (at least in the first few hours). While most of the improvements and polish are what you'd expect from a sequel, the story seems to have been given far more attention. Without spoiling anything, there is an Assassin's Creed vibe that reminds me of that series' early days. Whether that holds for the entire game remains to be seen, but after playing the first three hours, I definitely want to see how Lara's latest story unfolds. » **Michael Futter**

The prophet's tomb is a large traversal puzzle
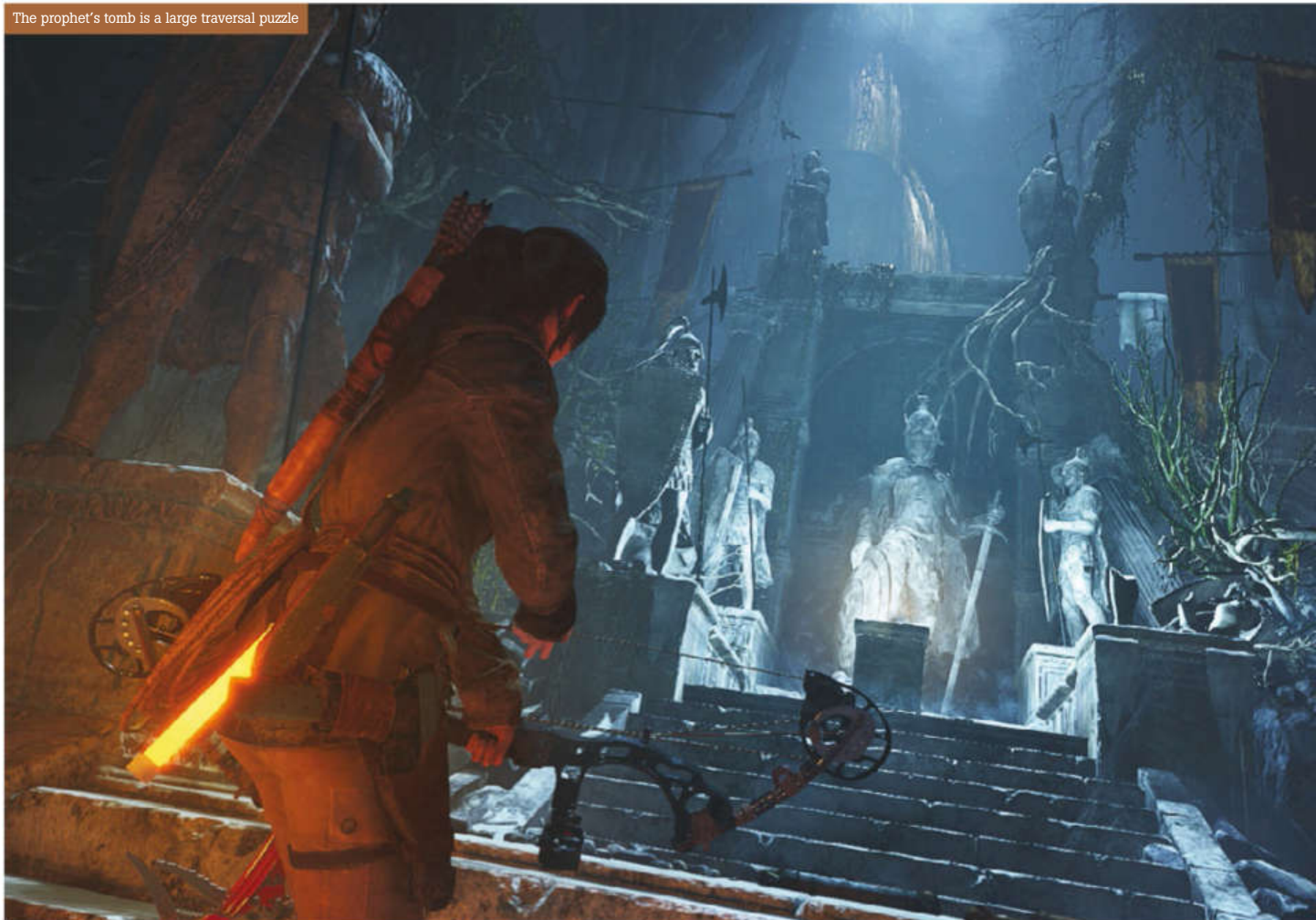
Resident Evil 0

The series' origins remastered to capture a new generation

Capcom has never been shy about remastering and porting past games in its flagship Resident Evil franchise. Back in January, the original Resident Evil got the HD treatment, and now its prequel, Resident Evil 0, is following suit. Dedicated fans know the importance of Resident Evil 0; the game sheds light on plenty of events from the first game, including the mansion incident, RE 1's first zombie, and the backstory of the infamous Albert Wesker.

This iteration of Resident Evil 0 gives fans a chance to re-experience the GameCube game, but it also serves as a way to bring a new audience of gamers into the franchise. Capcom made improvements and options to serve both groups. As expected, the game has gone through a visual overhaul and it shows, especially in the more detailed enemies you face off against.

A new widescreen mode was also added, but Resident Evil 0's system that lets you drops items anywhere made this a bit tricky to implement. "We've tuned every camera angle in the game by hand, so you don't lose the important information and you're able to see where you've put items," says producer Tsukasa Takenaka.

In addition, updates to certain elements like the controls were made. "We've tried to make the game comfortable for modern gamers to play," Takenaka says. "While they love old-school games, certain aspects of old-school games are frustrating for the modern gamer." Takenaka points to the tank controls as something that's been improved. "People are nostalgic for the tank controls," he explains. "But it's not necessarily the best way for everyone to play the game, so we've updated the game with modernized controls." It works both ways though; hardcore fans can also opt for older control schemes if they want. Feedback from the Resident Evil Remaster helped Capcom make the decision to give players a choice in how they want to play.

A recent hands-on session with the game reminded me of the tension of Billy and Rebecca's journey. Sure, you'll have slower moments to solve puzzles, like finding two different statutes to balance out weight requirements to open a door, but the anxiety of what's behind each closed door is always there. Sometimes it's a slew of enemies lunging at you; other times it's seeing meat cleavers and torture chambers, knowing something bad is on the way. Sometimes it's even a race to the clock to save one of your beloved characters from falling to their death while various enemies bombard you.

The time-pressure keeps your adrenaline pumping and also makes you decide whether to run or gun. Although, run is usually the answer – don't mess with the baddies too much. Being able to have this much fun with the game over a decade since its release makes me excited to play it again. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Umbrella Corps

Using zombies to survive a competitive shooter

Most fans were hoping this year's Tokyo Game Show would bring more news about the highly anticipated Resident Evil 2 remake or the next mainline entry in the series. Instead, Capcom announced an unexpected spin-off: a competitive, team-based, third-person shooter titled Umbrella Corps. While this strays far from the series' survival-horror roots, it is set in the Resident Evil universe and uses zombies as a strategic element in battle. After a hands-on session at Tokyo Game Show, I got a better idea of what the game entails.

Capcom still isn't ready to discuss modes or the number of maps, but it confirmed multiple options for each are in the game. The mode I played, One Life Match, is fast paced and simple: get killed by stray zombies or another player and you're out. I played three versus three, but the max player count is five versus five. You can shoot down your opponents or melee kill players with your brainer axe, sticking it straight in their skull. However, where the mode separates itself from other shooters is by making zombies a tactical element.

Zombies roam the world, and while you can kill them for extra points, you can also use them as shields. In addition, every player has a "zombie jammer," which repels zombies when active, meaning the zombies won't target you. This allows you to hide out with them and wait for your foes. If they attack the zombies in order to hit you, the zombies perceive your opponent as a threat, charging at them.

You can also damage players' zombie jammers with a quick shot to turn the tables on your opponent and make enemies swarm them. Zombies keep you on your toes, always giving you something else to keep an eye on during battle besides your opponent. The only other protection you have is the analog-based cover system, where holding down the aim button allows you to lean out of cover.

You still have the basic weaponry that you expect from Resident Evil, such as grenades and specialized gear that you can customize. Capcom would not talk about the progression system, but did say that giving the player incentives to keep playing was high on its list of priorities, and alluded to cosmetic options being a part of this and not a specific leveling system.

During my hands-on time, battles were fast and frantic, but most players resorted straight to their twitch skills and sneak attacks. Not many spent time using the unique zombie features, but I suspect that's something that takes some time to grasp. Still, in short matches where you can't just respawn, there's tension in knowing any wrong step could be your last.

Umbrella Corps has only been in development for a year, and we still don't know much other than the broad strokes, making it hard to gauge how excited anyone should be about it. Also, Capcom unsuccessfully attempted to merge the Resident Evil series and competitive multiplayer in 2012 with Slant Six's clunky Operation Raccoon City. Right now the only things locked in are that it's a digital-only release and will cost $29.99. » **Kimberley Wallace**

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • PC

» **Style**
10-Player
Online Shooter

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
Early 2016

Bloodborne: The Old Hunters

Entering another nightmare

After a long silence regarding the next content piece for Bloodborne, Sony and From Software used this year's Tokyo Game Show to reveal the first big addition since the base game's launch. While a 15-minute demo is hardly enough time to determine the expansion's full quality, I'm excited by the promised breadth of content, as anyone should be who has delved deeply into the atmospheric action game.

As the name implies, this expansion focuses on the fiction around the legendary hunters hinted at throughout Bloodborne. My demo begins in a newly crafted area – a nightmare zone similar to those found in the base game. Blood blankets the ground in streams and small pools, and rising from the crimson liquid are agonized half-dead figures, too weak and slow to do much damage to anything except my psyche.

I try out several of the new weapons on offer; From Software is promising over a dozen in total. The cleaver-style curved blade extends into a long and cumbersome chain that does significant damage when it connects. I also try out the newly introduced bow, which can be a real game-changer when transformed, since it lets players hit enemies hard from a distance.

Early in the demo, I'm approached by a horde of zombie-like creatures, and forced to dodge backward repeatedly to stay out of the way of their attacks. When another fighter joins the attack, several of the small foes break off, and for a moment I think I've found an ally. However, upon finishing up these lesser foes, the warped hunter turns his shotgun on me, and I'm forced to fight for my survival.

Soon after defeating the enemy hunter, I come across a hulking axe-wielder whose face bristles with Cthulhu-esque tentacles. His attacks are hard to dodge, but I take advantage of the new timed grenade bombs to help do some damage, and then venture up close to finish the beast off. Not long after that encounter, I get a brief glimpse at the area boss – a grotesque monstrosity with eyes inside its gaping maw, and a second head soundlessly screaming on one of its arms.

Nothing I played or saw of The Old Hunters implied any fundamental changes to the Bloodborne formula, and that's just fine with me. The accelerated combat pace and Lovecraftian vibe of the original game captured my attention in a way the Dark Souls franchise hadn't. If the new areas, monsters, and gear in The Old Hunters expansion are on par with other From Software expansions, we may see a resurgence of the game's popularity, resulting in a 2015 bookended with Bloodborne enthusiasm. » **Matt Miller**

Paladins

An arena shooter with character

We're in the midst of watching the birth of a new genre. Just as MOBAs sprung from real-time strategy games, a new breed of character-based first-person games is springing up from what came before. At Gamescom, Gearbox's Battleborn and Blizzard's Overwatch were joined by a third entry in this as-yet unnamed category.

Hi-Rez's Paladins (and its compatriots) borrow the character-driven aspect of MOBAs. Instead of classes like those found in Team Fortress 2 though, each hero has his or her own weapons and skills. Like its progenitor genre, Paladins features an in-game leveling curve that starts at one for each match.

Where Paladins innovates is its progression system. Prior to play, you create a deck of collectible cards. These can boost your primary attack, one of your two skills, movement ability, or have a passive benefit.

Each time you fill your experience meter, three cards are drawn from your deck. You can choose one, with the others shuffled back in. Each has five different potencies, depending on when they are added to your "hand." Cards don't level up, so the one you select at level one will remain at the lowest tier. At level two, your next card will be fixed at the next tick up, and so on.

The in-match level cap is nine, which means that starting at level six, your base cards are automatically upgraded from their original potency to maximum strength. Strategy plays a role in choosing your cards. Do you add a powerful card immediately (and at a lower level), or hope that it comes around again later?

Gameplay in Paladins is fast-paced objective capture. During the match, players swarm to the one active point to fill their team's meter and spawn a siege engine. These mammoth vehicles are the only way to take down the enemy's gates and ultimately its base.

The combination of objective points and siege engines grinding their wheels across the terrain keeps players engaged in firefights, even within open maps. Paladins inspires players to back off fights when low on health, just like MOBAs do. Health begins to regenerate once you're out of combat for a short time. Firing resets that timer, so committing to a retreat is important. Should you die, you wait to respawn. When you return your cards are on cooldown. The higher level the card, the longer you have to wait for it to reactivate.

This creates an exciting risk/reward feel to combat. Hi-Rez is building in a catch-up mechanic so that matches stay competitive all the way through. If your team is losing, you respawn and capture objectives points faster. Given that the game is in pre-alpha, this is all still being tuned.

For a game so early in development, Paladins played well. We can't wait to see how Hi-Rez evolves the design and gameplay on the road to public testing some time before the end of 2015.
» **Michael Futter**

Keeping the enemy team away is crucial to getting your siege engine up and running

Hob

Torchlight creators give nods to Zelda

After garnering critical acclaim and widespread fanfare for its Torchlight series, Runic Games is taking a break from the action/RPG genre with its upcoming adventure game Hob. With gorgeous visuals, Zelda-inspired gameplay, and an intriguing take on storytelling, Runic's new game is looking good even at this early stage.

The world is shifting in dangerous and unexpected ways, and nobody knows why. Hob places you in the shoes of a nameless protagonist who must explore a beautiful and dangerous world. You don't know why you're there, but your mission quickly becomes clear: find the mysterious catalyst for the recent changes. The world you navigate holds undeniable beauty, which is expertly displayed by the gorgeous visuals.

Rather than explaining the narrative through cutscenes and conversations, Runic Games is telling the story without any text or dialogue. Players learn about the world's tragic fate through the somber events they witness, as well as the massive changes occurring in the world. As I explore the world of Hob during my demo, chunks of land rise and fall, aggressive enemies appear in an otherwise peaceful world, and a guide character (similar to the fairies in Zelda) highlights points of interest. The story isn't completely clear to me at this early stage, but I was able to get an idea of how the mysteries could unfold as I venture deeper.

From the first moments, Hob feels similar to the Legend of Zelda games. I slash at enemies with a sword and cut tall grass to yield health-restoring items. In combat, I can lock on to enemies or fight them free form. Once I'm engaged, my character attacks, blocks, and roll-dodges. Each roll-dodge or block depletes a stamina bar that recharges over time. Even at this point in development, every sword slash and platform jump feels excellent.

The basic moveset suffices until I stumble upon a larger adversary with a much longer reach than mine. Thankfully, the protagonist also dons a magnet glove, which gives you an upper hand in battles such as this. Using the magnet glove, I target the tall enemy's leg and rip off a piece of armor. This hobbles the mini-boss, and while he's recovering I rush in to get a few slashes on him. I repeat the process for his other leg and soon he meets his demise.

In addition to evening the odds in battle, the magnet glove is immensely helpful in solving the many puzzles in the world. When I ran out of places to explore on the ground, I looked a bit higher and spotted a metallic point I could target, opening up new areas of the map. The glove also enables me to push large blocks around to unlock areas, similar to how Link solves problems in certain dungeons across the various Zelda games.

My demo ends with the main character apprehensively entering a small opening to a much larger cavern. As he peers around the corner, a giant creature reveals itself and the screen cuts to black. I don't have any clue as to what that creature is or what its intentions are, but the tone of the reveal is ominous.

Runic Games certainly has a good track record so far, but Hob is a different experience than the studio has ever released. Leaving many of the elements of its traditional action/RPG formula behind, Runic is venturing out and exploring new development paths. If this early demo is any indication, the risks could pay off. I can't wait to dive back into Hob and uncover the mysteries this world holds. » **Brian Shea**

Though the demo I played was linear, climbing, platforming, and exploration play a large part in Hob
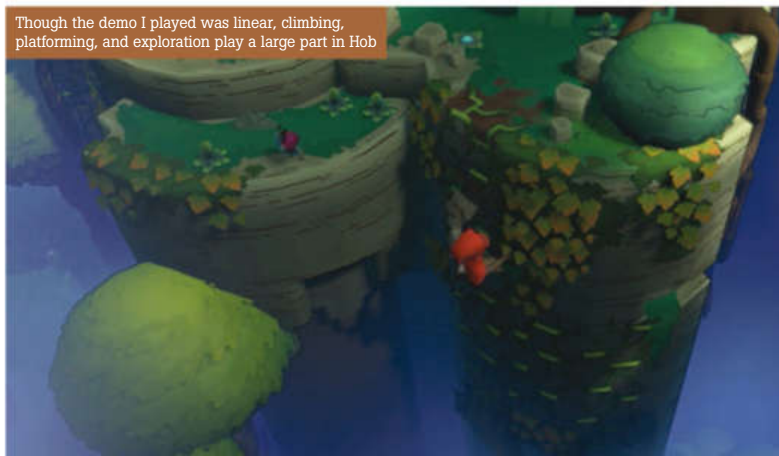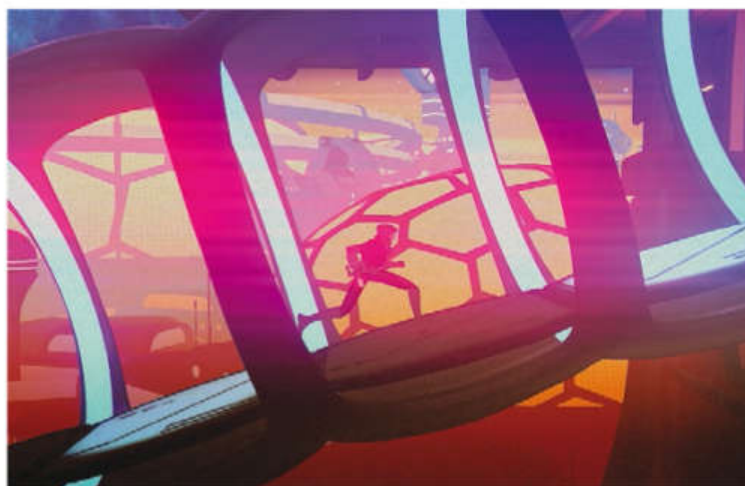
Headlander

Head over heels for '70s sci-fi

Headlander was originally pitched as one of Double Fine's Amnesia Fortnight projects – the studio's in-house game jam. For years, the company has kept this campy ode to '70s sci-fi on the back burner, but when Adult Swim Games came to visit Double Fine, the publisher fell in love with Headlander's oddball antics and immediately offered to help bring the game to market.

Inside a futuristic false utopia where all of humanity's descendants have downloaded their consciousness into android bodies, you control a lone head that is the last remaining biological life form in the galaxy. While you may be merely a head, you have the ability to boost around the environment thanks to a tiny thruster that has replaced your neck. If you manage to knock off another person's head, you can plop down on the abandoned body and take it for a spin.

The main character's animations change depending on the body equipped. For example, jump into the body of a young female disco queen and you don't just walk across a room – you boogie through it. Humanoids aren't the only creatures your head can interact with, either; you can take over a robot dog's body and even dock with a computer station.

Once you have a couple limbs, the action really heats up. Defensive drones come equipped with hand cannons of various types. One might fire off a powerful laser fire stream while another covers a room in a wide spray. Thankfully, it's easy to pop off

one body, fly across the room, and steal another drone's body and use its weapons. In fact, you cannot heal your bodies, which encourages you to continually jump from one neck to the next.

The headlander can also take cover behind certain objects, which is good because laser fire bounces off of walls, creating a laser show that puts Daft Punk's concerts to shame. Thankfully, bouncy lasers also work to your advantage, since you can ricochet your shots around corners and knock the heads off entrenched enemies.

Stealing new bodies is Headlander's main draw, but a few sequences force you to explore vents or other narrow passages as a lone head. During one sequence, the head travels through a narrow set of tubes, dodging lasers

and protecting itself with a directional shield controlled with the second analog stick. This shield also comes in handy when deflecting blaster fire back at enemy attackers. Players need to explore the city's various nooks and crannies to find other power-ups like the shield to make it easier to navigate the world when you're between bodies.

Headlander has been officially announced for PC and Mac, but Double Fine told us that the game is also heading to consoles – though the team won't reveal which ones specifically. Fans of classic '70s pop sci-fi should immediately be drawn towards Headlander, but those raised on modern sci-fi epics might also be charmed by the wild antics and slapstick humor of Double Fine's unique 2D shooter. » **Ben Reeves**
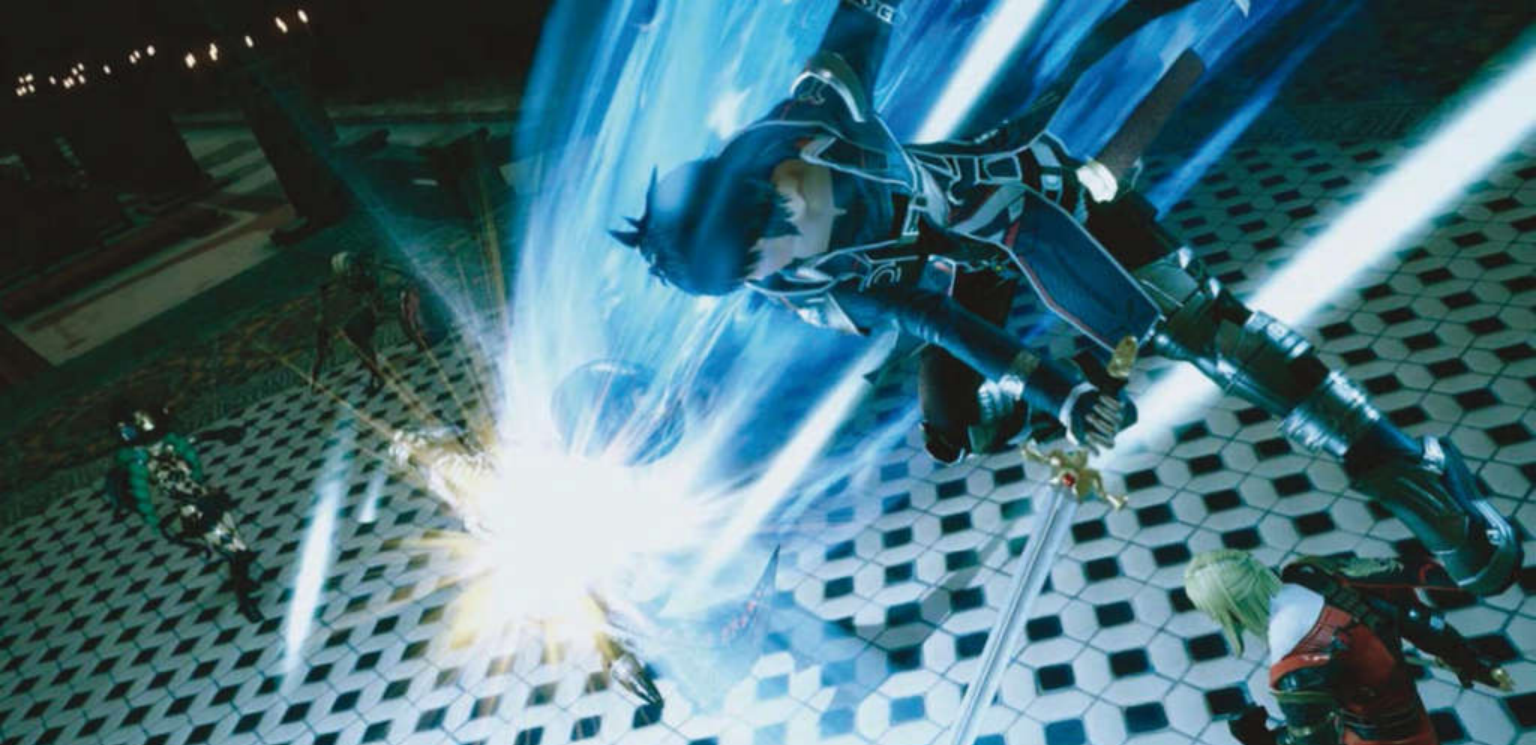
Star Ocean: Integrity And Faithlessness

Making an exciting RPG comeback

Six years after lackluster entry The Last Hope, the Star Ocean series is back again to attempt to return to its former glory. Developer Tri-Ace made a name for itself by creating fun and strategic action battle systems, but the Star Ocean franchise stood out for its copious customization options and eclectic party members. Now Tri-Ace has a new generation of RPG fans to impress alongside fans who were disappointed in its last outing. Going hands-on with Integrity and Faithlessness at this year's Tokyo Game Show, I was filled with plenty of nostalgia for what made me fall in love with the series, but gameplay improvements also showcased the series evolving in exciting ways.

Star Ocean will never have the budget of a Final Fantasy game to impress with its graphics, but Integrity and Faithlessness's visual improvements from prior entries are noticeable thanks to sharper character models, more detailed enemies, and a grander world that's visible in the distance. In addition, separate load screens no longer appear to engage in battle; you fight enemies directly in the environment. Cutscenes also get a similar treatment, seamlessly occurring as you explore.

Battles are still the series' main attraction, and they have never been about just hitting buttons to victory. The action in Integrity and Faithfulness feels smoother than ever, with regular strikes using single button presses and longer holds for special attacks. In addition, you have knockdowns and aerial attacks for extra impact. Strike at the right time and you can cancel or counter an opponent's oncoming attack. The battle system mimics a rock-paper-scissors format. For instance, light attacks beat heavy strikes, while heavy attacks can break through an enemy that's guarding. You control one character, while the A.I. takes the reins of the other characters (party size has now increased to six-member affairs). All these improvements feel for the better; controls are the best they've been, and I loved anticipating an enemy's next move and canceling it out.

When not in battle, you're exploring and chatting with party members about your next move. Dead ends, hidden treasure chests, and secret passages are all around. Square Enix and Tri-Ace have yet to reveal what kind of social system is in place, but it's been a popular mechanic in past games, so I'd be surprised if private actions or relationship-improving events don't return in some form.

One thing that does return is the tense boss battles. After making my way through baddies, such as dragons, spiders, and bats, I finally met my first human adversary and boss – a mysterious guy with a metal mask. The battle started out promising; my screen-filling attacks looked amazing, but then he wiped the floor with my party after a few short minutes. Memories of tough battles from past entries started flashing back to me – how every little thing from your skills to customized armor and weapons could change the tide of battle. I'm still thinking about where I went wrong, and can't wait to get my revenge when the game launches. More importantly, since other RPG series of yore like Suikoden and Shadow Hearts have vanished, it's great to see Star Ocean giving it another go. » **Kimberley Wallace**

LawBreakers

Cliff Bleszinski breaks into the free-to-play market

Formerly known by the codename "Project BlueStreak," the upcoming free-to-play multiplayer shooter from Cliff Bleszinski (Unreal Tournament, Gears of War) finally has an official name: LawBreakers. Set in a world where the moon has shattered and Earth's gravity is completely out of whack, criminal gangs called Breakers duke it out with futuristic law enforcers in epic sci-fi firefights. LawBreakers lets players break the laws of physics, and we talked with Bleszinski to get a better idea of how the concept works. » Ben Reeves

When you first started designing this game, what was your original premise?
When I was child, I used have this nightmare where I'd be sitting on my lawn playing with Optimus Prime and the gravity would flip. I'd be hanging onto the lawn and Optimus Prime would fly up into the stratosphere, and the grass would be slowly ripping out. It was terrifying. It's not quite that drastic in the game, but we took that as a little seed of inspiration. And then we blew up the moon, because it makes a great skybox.

How will players be able to manipulate gravity to their advantage?
There's different environmental gravity across the maps. Some areas have lunar-like gravity, but players can also create zero-gravity zones or even inverted gravity, using it to slam other people around. Basically, I like verticality now. Working on Gears... things were very, "Don't go up too high, because aiming with a console

controller is scary." Now we're like, "F--- it! We're using a keyboard and mouse."

Did you ever think about including a single-player portion in the game?
Single-player is never going to go away. I saw the Naughty Dog demo for Uncharted 4, and I was as blown away as everybody else. They're giving us an Indiana Jones movie, and the team probably killed themselves to make that happen. I don't want to compete with that. They are the best at their game. We're good at shooters, and we've made some pretty good shooters, so we want to do what we're good at, and continue to hone it.

Can you give us a high-level look at each character?
We have the Breacher class. This is kind of the gateway character for

traditional run-and-gun shooter fans. He has a jet pack, which allows him to double jump and have a lot of maneuverability in the air. Kitsune is an assassin who wields electric energy arc blades that can be used as a grappling hook to swing around corners. You can even swing on enemies or swing on friends to catch a ride. Then we have Chronos, who is a titan. He's an ex-prisoner who has the ability to grow huge, which we've codenamed "dude huge" right now. He has a chain-lightning gun and a rocket launcher, which he can use to rocket jump. He's a very slow guy, but he can shoot his rocket launcher backward to boost through low-grav zones. He also has a grenade that increases gravity, which will help him knock down characters who are always in the air. This all combines together into what is essentially a beautiful mess.

Divinity: Original Sin II

Exciting times for the old-school RPG

Divinity: Original Sin took me by surprise last year, a true-to-form return to the glory days of PC RPGs with its own flair. Taking on huge bosses, summoning giant spiders, and combining elemental effects was a slick recipe for Larian on its Kickstarter adventure. Now, Divinity: Original Sin II continues that journey in the turn-based isometric landscape where player freedom is paramount – even as the first title makes its way to console.

Divinity: Original Sin II features multiplayer with up to four people, and even includes PVP and other competitive aspects. In the first game, if you just wanted to troll your friend you could blow up civilians and vendors and blast away at the entire town guard, but now Larian has implemented some structure for taking on your friends if you don't want to play nicely. Players can receive quests and missions that put them at odds with their companions, up to and including potential assassination missions. How much do you trust your friends? If one hands you a potion for that big fight coming up, be careful; that shiny red bottle could contain deadly poison with the potential to seal your doom.

Larian is also enhancing the open-ended narrative, with many different encounters and interactions tied to skills and race. You may not have much success extracting information from the dwarven smithy in town with your elf, but if you have a dwarf on your team, you might get special deals and critical information. This extends to the environment around you, as a statue of a historical figure may evoke a strong emotional response. Perhaps your human sees the figure as a savior and a hero, while your dwarf may find that same figure the downfall of civilization. It's an ambitious, multi-faceted way to look at things.

As always, you use your wits, charm, and brute strength to tackle a multitude of encounters. Divinity: Original Sin II refines the original combat system; it's pretty much the same, but action points are no longer an unwieldy resource to manage. You have fewer action points, and abilities cost only one or two points each, with new powerful skills called source skills functioning as ultimate abilities for your characters.

We won't see Divinity: Original Sin II for awhile, but hopes are extremely high for Larian's second Kickstarter outing, which has already far exceeded its goal. We'll have a chance to zap some elves (and our friends) when it arrives late next year.

» **Daniel Tack**

Huge towns and massive open areas allow players the freedom to make their own choices
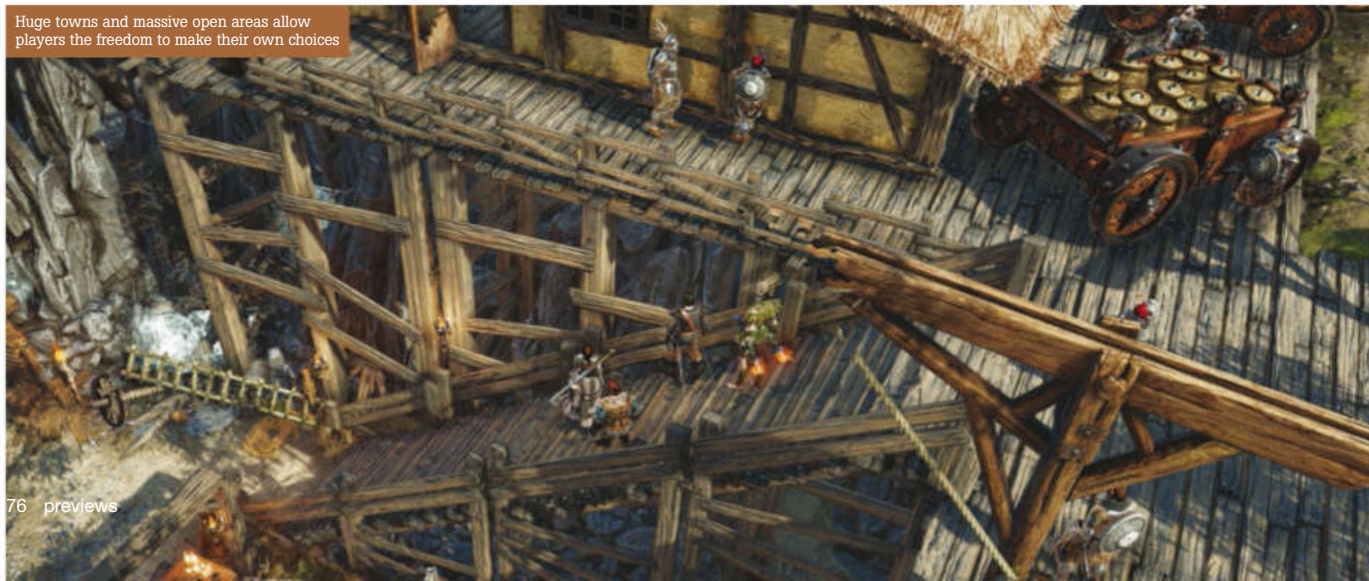
Atlas Reactor

Teams, turns, and tactics

If you take everything that makes XCOM great and mix it with aspects of League of Legends, then add other features that have propelled the multiplayer online battle arena genre to fame, the result is a game like Atlas Reactor. This character-driven multiplayer title uses simultaneous turns instead of the meticulous and sometimes-plodding pace of core strategy titles. Things are fast, fun, and incredibly interesting.

Trion Worlds accomplishes the feat of multiple players taking their turns at the same time through an ability priority system akin to paper-rock-scissors, with most of the big attacks happening last in order. The system divides abilities into three types: prep, dash, and blast. Movement happens after all those phases, which is a significant deviation from other strategy games where movement happens first in a turn. Prep moves contain all manner of buffs, traps, shields, and other things that can mess with your opponent's strategy. Dash happens at a critical moment in the turn order – it's a well-timed escape maneuver to keep you out of harm's way in anticipation of the final turn phase. Blast is the last thing that happens – the big attacks. This delicate balance in turn structure is elegant in its design, allowing for speedy-but-strategic turns that take only 10 to 30 seconds.

You have plenty of cover to hide behind and power-ups littered about the battlefield to plan around, so you have to do some thinking beyond just sizing up your opponents and their abilities. Like fighting games, there's an additional layer of mental trickery going on behind the scenes in trying to determine how your opponent will react, and then countering it with your own plans. A weakened opponent will obviously use a reflective shield to counter incoming damage, right? Or does your opponent know that's what you're expecting and instead decide to go in for the surprise kill?

Like MOBAs, characters have their own archetypes, personalities and movesets including an ultimate ability and taunt moves that add a little more life to the actions of the somewhat impersonal isometric view. The competitive multiplayer is the centerpiece of the experience, but Trion Worlds has hinted that a single-player mode is a possibility.

If nothing else, Atlas Reactor is an intriguing amalgamation of genres and designs. If the concepts sound interesting, you can sign up for the alpha right now and experience the uncommon action for yourself.

» **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC

» **Style**
Online Multiplayer Strategy

» **Publisher**
Trion Worlds

» **Developer**
Trion Worlds

» **Release**
2016

Take cover and collect power-ups on various maps

Fat Princess Adventures

Trimming the fat from Diablo

Fun Bits Interactive was founded by developers who spun off the original Fat Princess team at Titan Studios. After releasing Escape Plan for the PS Vita in 2012, the studio has returned to the Fat Princess universe for another outing. However, even if you didn't love the original multiplayer arena-combat game, you might want to keep Fun Bits' new adventure on your radar. Fat Princess Adventures is a four-player co-op loot fest that was modeled after RPGs like Diablo, but tuned for a more casual audience.

Up to four players can team up (through either couch co-op or online play) for a journey through the colorful world of Great Bitten, where they work together to rescue two fat princesses, and ultimately bring peace back to the world.

The traditional hack-and-slash archetypes, such as barbarian, mage, and archer, are joined by a fourth class, the engineer, who functions as a decent close-range fighter equipped with grenades and the ability to disarm bombs. Players can switch between these four classes at any time by changing their costumes at designated character stations, and their heroes retain all their levels and upgrades between classes. Gear is also shared among your heroes and your co-op partners, so if your friend picks up a particularly impressive sword, it automatically shows up in your inventory.

Heroes who take too much damage can heal themselves with cake, but those who gorge themselves needlessly grow temporarily corpulent, flying into a berserker rage that has them slapping enemies around for massive damage. A second power-up, called Awesome Sauce, also grants your attacks a temporary buff without changing your character's size.

Fat Princess Adventures is a wildly different game from the original. Fans of that title should recognize several Fat Princess touchstones, such as cake, familiar character classes, and chubby royalty. However, Fat Princess Adventures' more casual looting system and princess-saving quests might help the series pull in an entirely new audience. » **Ben Reeves**

Pit People

Deranged turn-based strategy

Pit People opens with a giant space-drifting bear colliding with a planet, which fractures the world and mixes up space and time, creating a kaleidoscope of insanity. A hilarious narrator guides you through the story about a blueberry farmer named Horatio who seeks vengeance for the death of his family. However, as we learned during our demo at PAX, the game doesn't follow a traditional narrative. We soon ran into a group of medieval archers who used a space shuttle as a getaway vehicle, and watched an Uzi-wielding gladiator fly into an arena on a giraffe that was strapped to a bunch of balloons. Pit People is like video game Mad Libs.

While traveling through this senseless world, players collect a motley crew of adventurers to command in battle. Unlike traditional turn-based strategy games, you can't tell your heroes exactly what to do or even who to attack. Instead, you position your heroes around the battlefield, and they automatically attack a random target. This helps Pit People's action move along at a brisk clip, and the strategy comes from how you move your heroes across the battlefield.

Between battles, you explore a giant overworld filled with zombies, mythological Cyclopes, and Spanish conquistadors. Your caravan is free to travel, complete quests, take down roving monsters, and recruit new talent such as living cupcakes (the healer class).

If managing Pit People's troops ever seems like too much work for one commander, you can play the entire game with a friend. During battles, each player commands a smaller subset of heroes, but your entire army attacks in unison after both players' commands have been entered. However, don't call up your friends just yet; Pit People doesn't have a planned release date, and we don't expect to see it hit before next year. » **Ben Reeves**

Street Fighter V

The roster continues to grow

After following the development of Street Fighter V with interest for months, I finally got the opportunity at TGS to dive in and play it for myself. After just a few matches, the newly introduced "variable system" started to make sense; the various new skills do a great job of helping each character feel more distinct through moves that no one else can complete. The Japanese event also provided our first close look at two fighters joining the lineup.

The return of Karin Kanzuki was hotly anticipated, and it's no surprise that Capcom waited until TGS to reveal her presence; she ranked number one in a player's poll for most popular fighter. Her playstyle is well-rounded, with a focus on rapidly approaching her opponent from afar, and a lunging fist that doubles as a way to block projectiles.

Just recently announced, I also got a few matches in with the dramatic Rashid. The Middle Eastern fighter harnesses the wind to create massive tornadoes, which both knocks opponents back and allows Rashid to leap through them for a burst of speed and agility.

The two new fighters join a growing cast of favorites, and Capcom continues to expand Street Fighter V's potential with new announcements like the Capcom Fighters Network, which offers extensive online stat tracking and even heat maps of where people are playing around the world. That system joins the previously announced approach to ongoing DLC content, which will bring balance changes free to all players, and let dedicated fighters earn in-game currency to buy subsequent character releases. It's clear that the publisher wants Street Fighter V to live a long life with its fan community, and it's setting up plenty of systems to keep its players engaged. » Matt Miller

» **Platform**
PlayStation 4 • PC

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player Fighting
(2-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Capcom

» **Developer**
Capcom

» **Release**
2016
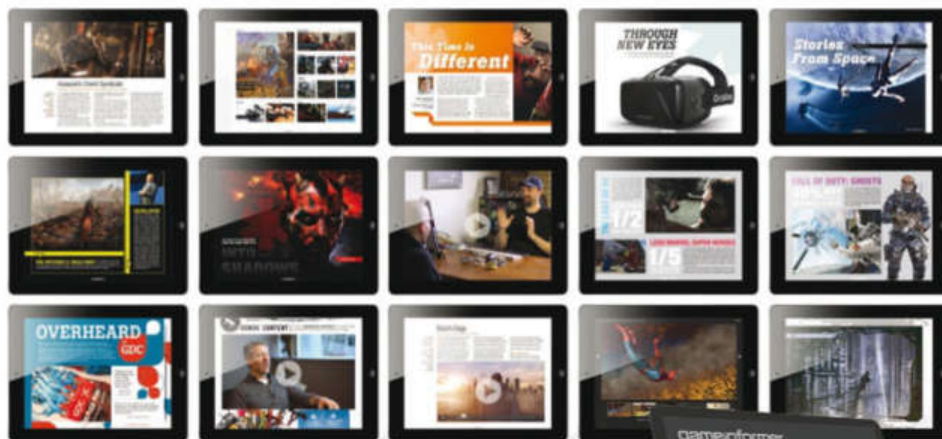
![gameinformer] **GAME OF THE MONTH**

82 Destiny: The Taken King

Destiny found success in its first year, but even its most ardent fans acknowledged that certain elements needed improvement. With The Taken King, Bungie kicks off the game's second year and directly addresses many of the community's criticisms. A coherent story, better loot, and a more intuitive leveling system stand alongside a wealth of new content to help make this sci-fi shooter the game fans had hoped it could become.

THE **SCORING** SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	**5**	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	**4**	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	**3**	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	**2**	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	**1**	The inevitable collapse of civilization after McDonald's begins serving breakfast all day.

AWARDS

gameinformer **PLATINUM**	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer **GOLD**	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer **SILVER**	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer **GAME OF THE MONTH**	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Destiny: The Taken King

Bungie creates magic in year two

9.5

Style Online Multiplayer Shooter **Publisher** Activision
Developer Bungie **Release** September 15 **Rating** T

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
Destiny's second year begins with major overhauls and fantastic new content

» **Graphics**
From the weapons to the environments, Bungie's attention to detail shows at every level

» **Sound**
An amazing score with phenomenal sound effects

» **Playability**
You won't find a console shooter with tighter gunplay. It can make anyone feel like an MLG pro

» **Entertainment**
Streamlined interfaces and new content make this a must-play for Destiny fans

» **Replay Value**
High

Destiny might be one of the most polarizing games of the 21st century. The original product and its follow-up expansions (The Dark Below and House of Wolves) established a base of players who love the game, but naysayers were quick to point out Destiny's many shortcomings. A lack of mission variety, a nonsensical story, a clumsy quest interface, confusing leveling, and a misleading loot system are just a few of the complaints Destiny faced during its first year.

Our review of that original game reflected these problems, but also pointed out what fans of the series love. Destiny features spot-on first-person controls – the best a console has ever seen. It has an amazing arsenal of weapons, a seamless multiplayer world for both co-op and competitive play, and a gorgeous world to explore – all wrapped in the RPG trappings that MMO fans have loved for years.

Year one for Destiny was a story of great success and confusing failures, but it drew millions of gamers into its world despite its shortcomings. Bungie clearly listened to the community's feedback on what needed improvement, because The Taken King tackles the major problems head-on. It marks the beginning of year two, but more importantly, The Taken King is a rebirth for the series and ultimately represents the game that Destiny was trying to be from the start.

The story has been streamlined from beginning to end, including slightly reworking and rerecording parts of the original narrative. The new content may not shed much light on the epic sci-fi world, but it does deliver a fun and coherent romp that finally gives the characters of the world personality. The world is no longer filled with unconnected NPCs; the citizens of the tower finally seem to stand for something, and now when they speak, I actually listen.

The Taken King has a number of quests that continue the adventure past the culmination of the base game's storyline. They feature some of my favorite missions in the game, and are definitely worth playing. These quests also include rewards like elusive pieces of legendary armor, exotics (the ultimate prizes), and the new heavy weapon – a melee sword that I quickly fell in love with.

New strikes join the fray, some old strikes have been reworked, and new competitive game types are available across an array of old and new Crucible maps. Even better, all three classes (Titan, Hunter, and Warlock) have a new subclass. These are all expertly executed, and the new powers and strategies they introduce make the classes feel new again.

The loot system is still based on the the classic uncommon-rare-legendary-exotic scale of quality, but the way they drop and how you upgrade items is much improved. For one, legendary engrams actually drop, and they give legendary items. But so do great blue items, which you can use for a while to increase your light level (which is essentially your item level) to grant access to new content. Eventually you may want to use them or other items of the same type to infuse lower-level items that feature perks you prefer. This system gives all loot more value, which brings a Diablo-like excitement to heading back to the tower to sift through all your rewards.

The Dreadnaught – The Taken King's primary new environment – is Bungie's best public play space. It's full of surprises, including the Court of Oryx – a fun public event that features quick horde-mode rounds against giant bosses, and many other mysteries that require finding keys that unlock rare loot or entire events.

Finally, players get the new raid, King's Fall. The raid is best explored for yourself, but I can say this without spoiling anything: It is a culmination of what Bungie has put into all the other raids. King's Fall is easily the biggest, with all the fan-favorite elements including mazes, jump puzzles, and fantastic encounters that require teamwork and communication to complete.

The Taken King ultimately is what the players – and probably even Bungie – always wanted Destiny to be. The improvements to the user interface and quest system alone make the game so much more playable, but they quickly fade to the background once you dig into the content. The game is not without some minor annoyances, but the good far outweighs the bad. You couldn't pick a better time to try Destiny if you haven't already. The Taken King is a testament to Bungie's craftsmanship and its ability to listen to the feedback from the players who both loved and hated year one. The studio has given us a game that truly is legend. » **Andy McNamara**

Rock Band 4

A return to classic form

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One

Music-game faithful have had a long wait since 2010's Rock Band 3. Harmonix set the high-water mark for the genre with that title – even as it became clear that the flood was slowing down – with more instruments and styles of play, along with a huge number of on-disc songs. Five years later, and on new platforms, even Rock Band 4 can't match its predecessor's grand ambition, dropping online play, pro guitar support, and keyboards. The pared-back experience focuses on what most players embrace and enjoy. Newcomers will feel welcomed, but for veteran bandmates, this feels like coming home after a long time away.

The core gameplay remains unchanged, offering skill-based immersion in great popular music that's ideal for both solo virtuosos and raucous partygoers. Guitar, bass, drums, and up to three singers can hop into the limelight for a performance, though the vocal lines share a single slot in end-of-song scoring. The familiar scrolling note highways have some flashy new visual effects, but otherwise work as they always have, providing increasingly complex rhythm and color matching. While it's largely invisible unless you're watching for it, any given song's note layout is varied and sophisticated, demanding challenging finger placements on the guitar neck,

tough strum patterns, or unpredictable drum fills on the pads all the time.

A few novel tricks are in the mix. Freestyle guitar solos are a new riddle to unravel, and they also infuse a sense of freedom the guitarist role has always lacked. By holding down different buttons and strumming at different speeds, players can approximate the feel of crafting a live solo, complete with distortion effects and frantic finger tapping. These moments are fun and can sound amazing at times, but Harmonix has wisely allowed purist players to tap the d-pad to opt out, restoring the artist's original intended solo. I'm a big fan of the new freestyle vocal options as well, which allow singers on higher difficulties to harmonize within the song's key without any score penalty, just like a real frontman would. Along with improved crowd noise and chanting, this is the best approximation yet of an onstage show.

The 65 on-disc songs may not represent the series' biggest set list, but it's certainly one of its most eclectic and entertaining. Chart-topping sing-alongs like "Uptown Funk" and "Brown Eyed Girl" join indie darlings like The Both's "Milwaukee" and unstoppable locomotives like Heaven's Basement's "I Am Electric." Making your way through the various instrumental parts of each

song is akin to getting a mix tape from a musically savvy friend; the more you listen, the more you come to appreciate not just the tunes, but the way each song fits into the larger whole.

Though the songs are entertaining, the modes offer few surprises. Quickplay options are ideal for get-togethers, with smart organization options and a smooth and simple user interface. The new tour encourages choice, demanding again and again that you decide between big style, big fans, or big money. As a result, you could play two complete tours and visit entirely different cities and shows. A smartly crafted voting system allows the full band to participate in music selection before many songs, and I love that downloaded tracks integrate seamlessly into the tour. New cosmetic items unlock over time, but otherwise the reward loop feels a little sparse.

In this year's music-game scene, Rock Band 4 offers tried-and-true polish, and an impressive opportunity for backward compatibility. Whether you're importing a back catalog or not, the new title stands on its own with smart music selections, and skill-based gameplay refined over years of experimentation. After a few years away, I'd almost forgotten how fun the Rock Band experience can be. » **Matt Miller**

» **Concept**
Another phenomenal set list from Harmonix headlines this return of familiar mechanics

» **Graphics**
New animations and lighting look great, but repetition of movements from the onscreen characters isn't ideal

» **Sound**
Great tunes are accentuated by a clever crowd-response system, helping you to feel the energy of a live show

» **Playability**
Harmonix has spent years mastering a UI that is friendly to newcomers and veterans alike. The polished controls during songs are precise, with an immaculately crafted challenge curve

» **Entertainment**
A slick and engaging way to enjoy interactive music, albeit with fewer bells and whistles than Rock Band 3

» **Replay Value**
High

Added Value

If at all possible, buy Rock Band 4 in the same family of console (Microsoft or Sony) that you played on last generation. Importing previously downloaded songs adds tremendous value and fun to the overall package, and those songs integrate seamlessly into the game. Harmonix is also investigating the ability to carry forward the on-disc songs from previous installments. Your old instruments can carry over as well. In short, players who have previously embraced an investment in the Rock Band franchise are in for a treat.

Lego Dimensions

When brick worlds collide

8.75

Style 1 or 2-Player Action **Publisher** WB Games **Developer** TT Games **Release** September 27 **Rating** E10+

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U
PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
A toys-to-life game that puts just as much emphasis on playing with the toys as playing the game

» **Graphics**
Unlike Disney Infinity, TT Games didn't create a universal art style for all of the brands. Scooby Doo's characters are cel-shaded, whereas *The Lego Movie* characters appear to be animated through stop motion. All of the worlds are beautifully rendered

» **Sound**
Chris Pratt. Christopher Lloyd. Elizabeth Banks. Gary Oldman. Stephen Merchant. Most of the original voice actors from each brand reprise their roles, and the music in each world is also authentic

» **Playability**
Typical TT Games Lego gameplay with the twist of moving characters on a portal to solve puzzles

» **Entertainment**
The best Lego video game in quite some time is also the best toys-to-life game of the year

» **Replay Value**
High

Lego Dimensions is the year's best toys-to-life game, injecting the buildable fun of Lego toys into a hilarious adventure that sees Batman fighting side-by-side with Gandalf, Doctor Who, Homer Simpson, Scooby Doo, Portal's Chell, the Ghostbusters, and dozens of other well-known characters. Developer TT Games has been making great Lego games for a decade, and this is one of the studio's finest adventures yet – but it costs an arm and a leg if you want to see it all.

One of Lego Dimensions' earliest missions asks the player to put the controller down, open up a box of Lego bricks, dump them onto the ground, and follow an onscreen instruction manual to build a play set consisting of more than 250 pieces. This is an odd request for a game to make, since the process takes roughly 10 to 15 minutes to complete, but it represents Lego Dimensions' hallmark feature: a functional toy component that is both fun and an integral part of the experience.

Rival toys-to-life games, Skylanders and Disney Infinity, look great on shelves and are highly collectible, but don't offer much in terms of real-world playability. Lego Dimensions' toys are meant to be played with, and like any Lego set, make the imagination run wild with building possibilities.

Throughout Lego Dimensions' entire adventure, TT Games keeps the toys' appeal in the forefront, pushing players to take a break from pressing buttons to assemble a new Lego contraption, tear apart a vehicle to rebuild it in a different way, or move a minifigure to different places on the portal to trigger something within the game. Players don't have to build anything if they

don't want to (the game only reads the base, not the arrangement of pieces on top), but I thoroughly enjoyed all of the building challenges.

The game itself fits nicely into the lineage of Lego titles created by TT Games. If you've played any Lego game, you know exactly what to expect from Lego Dimensions: plenty of fist-swinging to smash a Lego object into a sea of bricks, followed by holding down a button to rapidly reassemble the pieces into a different form. Puzzle solving is heavily sewn into all levels, and most characters play a different role in how these riddles are completed.

Lego Dimensions' campaign can be completed using the core set's three figures (Wyldstyle, Gandalf, and Batman). This means you don't need to purchase any additional sets. If characters die in a level, you don't need to put another one on the portal. They instantly respawn, with the penalty being a slight loss of studs, just like in any other Lego game. I finished a few levels using only the tiny assortment of core figures, and had an absolute blast using them.

That said, TT Games is constantly reminding the player that additional characters are available for purchase. Unlike other Lego games, new characters are not unlocked through play. If you see a shiny metal object, or anything that looks a little suspicious in the world, you likely need a new character to interact with. You need to purchase a good portion of the characters and sets to be able to secure all 480 of the game's Gold Bricks. For context, after finishing the campaign in roughly eight hours, I had collected just 25 Bricks and just enough studs to upgrade my Batmobile to the next level.

Completionists may feel the need to buy every set and figure, but it isn't necessary to have a good time. However, like any toys-to-life game, having an expanded roster makes Dimensions better. Playing as Chell is a riot, Scooby Doo is ideal for hunting for mandatory hidden objects in levels, and playing as the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz* is a real trip.

If you don't purchase any additional sets, that doesn't mean you won't get your Portal or *Doctor Who* fix. The campaign thoroughly explores every world and mashes them up in goofy ways, where you see *The Lego Movie* intersecting with *The Simpsons*, and find yourself hunting down Riddler trophies in Middle-earth's Minas Tirith. Just seeing how the worlds collide next is part of the fun, and I giggled most of the way through the campaign.

The unique bonus levels that come packaged with the Portal, *Back to the Future*, and *The Simpsons* sets are not as good as the campaign's stages, and each only lasts for an hour or less. The open worlds for each brand don't offer much story content and mostly consist of fetch or escort missions. These worlds are entirely optional, and aren't great for anything other than mindless exploration.

I haven't laughed so much playing a video game in a long time. I couldn't wait to see what would happen next in this game, and my wife even sat in to watch the story unfold in crazy ways. Whether you just purchase the core set or go bonkers purchasing figures, Lego Dimensions delivers big thrills and fun playability both in the game and on your living-room floor.
» **Andrew Reiner**

Skylanders SuperChargers

Racing into trouble

6.5

PS4 • Xbox One • Wii U
PS3 • 360

» **Concept**
The worst entry in the Skylanders series. The vehicle segments sap the fun and personality from the experience, and are usually light on challenge

» **Graphics**
The worst entry also happens to be the best looking. The colorful detail in the environments and creativity in the beast and enemy designs shines through in every level

» **Sound**
One of the best ensemble casts in video games delivers another fine performance. The vehicle sounds and score are also quite good

» **Playability**
When it's the Skylanders of old, it shines. When a vehicle is introduced, it usually falls apart

» **Entertainment**
A major disappointment with a silver lining: We likely only have to wait a year for Activision and Toys for Bob to get the series back on track

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

An annualized video game series runs the risk of players praising it one year and inexplicably abandoning it the next. The reasons range from "It's gone on for too long" (when the experience largely echoes the previous entry's) to "The developer just doesn't understand why we like these games" (when the gameplay changes to give the series a slightly different pulse). Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed series appears to be teetering on the precipice of disaster, shifting direction dramatically with each yearly release. Call of Duty made the risky gamble of moving its player base to the future of war, but it appears fans are pleased with this new direction.

The Skylanders series has largely remained the same year in and year out. New monster designs and the idea of playing as trapped enemies all fit snugly within the series' existing framework. Skylanders SuperChargers is the first disruptive release that gambles with the idea of introducing vehicles into the mix. This isn't a light element shoved off to the side. The vehicles, which offer challenges set on the land, sea, and air, make up roughly 50 percent of the experience. It's a huge gamble that sadly doesn't pay off in the end. The majority of the content surrounding the vehicles lacks excitement, and doesn't really deliver that fun Skylanders vibe.

This is the first legitimate swing and miss for the Skylanders series, but it doesn't mean the brand is running out of gas. Slivers of this adventure are wonderfully creative, and do a better job of showing how the standard Skylanders action figures can be used to deliver new experiences than the vehicles do.

My favorite part of SuperChargers is a side-scrolling platforming level that transports the Skylanders inside a children's storybook, complete with a stylish illustrated look and spoken narration for the story developments. It's a fun change of pace that sadly doesn't last nearly long enough. Another standout stage is Monstrous Isle, a world that transforms the Skylanders into gigantic Kaiju beasts that can destroy sprawling cities and squash enemies under their feet.

By the third level, I would grimace whenever I saw an icon telling me I needed to place a car on the Portal of Power for a vehicle sequence. The cars are the weakest part of the campaign, and most are tied to the critical path.

These tracks are overly wide and are largely free of any challenge. The most excitement comes from turning slightly to hit jumps and nab coins along the way.

The racing component, which is split off from the critical path and isn't mandatory, offers a little bit of fun in that competitive Mario Kart kind of way, but the racing mechanics are sluggish, the auto-use power-ups are uninspired, and the events feel like they drag on. Vicarious Visions' artists deserve praise for creating visually stunning tracks – such as a course set on the back of a giant dragon – but the thrills just aren't there to back up the eye candy. This also puts a damper on Skylanders' online debut, which allows four players to race against each other.

The other vehicle sections in the campaign fair just as poorly or worse than the cars. The side-scrolling submarine sequences, which push the player to squeak by mines and other dangers, are maddeningly boring. The aerial dogfighting and overall flight mechanics are moderately enjoyable, but run into the strange problem of the vessels taking up a little too much real-estate on screen, which often leads to targets being blocked from view.

It pains me to continue picking on the vehicles, but they are also the worst collectible in the series' history. Next to cool-looking dragons and goofy monsters, an ordinary-looking submarine or a car without a driver really isn't that impressive. They go against everything I like about the Skylanders games. I don't want to collect them, they don't make my imagination run wild, and I don't want to play them in the game.

When SuperChargers is at its best, it has nothing to do with driving or flying – it falls back on that core gameplay formula that has remained fun for the last five years. New characters like Fiesta, Stormblade, Spitfire, and Smash Hit are wonderful additions to the team. The new enemies are creative, and pose a great challenge for people who play the game on the Nightmare difficulty. Vicarious Visions also loaded the game with fun things to collect, including interactive legendary treasures, cards for a vastly improved version of Skystones, hats, and hilarious Kaos story records.

When it's true to what came before, SuperChargers can be a great time. When the vehicles show up, the party is over. In the face of stiff toys-to-life competition, Vicarious Visions and Activision took a chance on a different style of play for this annual series, and it didn't pay off. Here's hoping the series gets back to the basics or finds a way to put the characters that we all love to use in ways in which their personalities and talents are front and center and not hidden behind a vehicle's hull.

» **Andrew Reiner**

Pro Evolution Soccer 2016

The venerable franchise finally finds its form

9

game informer GOLD

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

» **Concept**
With improvements in almost every area, this is the Pro Evo the developer has been building toward

» **Graphics**
Although the faces can still be off, it's a great-looking title with plenty of impressive animations

» **Sound**
The commentary is the best of the series – contextual, emotional, and woven well into the game

» **Playability**
The traditional controls are still there, but I found myself using less of them because my A.I. teammates were generally helpful

» **Entertainment**
If you like soccer, football, or whatever you want to call it, you need to get this game

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

The Edge

The PS4 version has a distinct advantage over the Xbox One because it can use option files. These are how you can import real team kits and league/tournament badges. The PES community is very active in making .jpgs of real-life uniforms (with sponsors) that you can now easily apply to your teams with great-looking results that help make up for some of the licenses the series lacks. The Xbox One version also doesn't look as good as the PS4 during gameplay.

Some players rise to the occasion with a great performance just when their teams need it most. That time has come for the Pro Evolution franchise. Pro Evo has spent the last couple of iterations gathering itself while rival FIFA hit the ground running and then some this generation. Now, in what feels like a crucial point in the match, Pro Evo has bagged a striking equalizer.

PES 2016 represents the sport in beautiful fashion. Without the need for the overly complex controls or burdensome, layered-on tactical systems of the past, the ease and fluidity of the controls is in harmony with the actions of your A.I. teammates. The off-the-ball movement to create give-and-gos are generated naturally, players find good spaces in the box and go for runs, and defenders jostle dribblers and cut out passes. I'm using certain controls less this year, but my play is as fluid, imaginative, and fun as ever. From one-on-one encounters to seeing and orchestrating plays three moves in advance, it's all at your fingertips. The buckets of new animations represent the action well, and don't clutter the gameplay like they occasionally did last year.

On the other side of the ball, the A.I. does a better job than last year of passing the ball out of your high press, can be lethal when shooting from the edge of the box, and is quick on the counter by pumping long through balls into the channels. The latter can be offset with quick defensive tactics already mapped to your d-pad. PES 2016 is also a much more physical game, with opposing players nipping at your feet, barging you off the ball, and getting stuck in. Nevertheless, it doesn't needlessly interrupt the flow, produce too many fouls, or feel cheap.

One of my few complaints about the gameplay is that defenders can switch off at times, neglecting to disrupt a close through ball (making through balls over-powered at times) or not making follow-up defensive moves in the box. Also, possession occasionally feels predetermined, like when you go for a shot in the box and your player does a slide tackle instead because the game has determined that the loose ball is already the defender's.

The Master League career mode contributes to this year's success. Better presentation does wonders, and small additions make big contributions. Your scout recommends players for the transfer windows based on your areas of weakness, back-and-forth negotiations for contract renewals occur throughout the season, and team instructions create chemistry among players. My favorite aspect is the team roles. Certain players have or develop them, and they level up as you play. These roles not only offer bonuses for that player and sometimes teammates, but they can contribute to the club's finances. Curiously, however, the mode restricts your contract options at times, a step back from last year.

MyClub also continues to grow into a destination online mode that's more than an Ultimate Team knockoff. Players get better simply by playing time (although you don't direct how they grow), and those on your roster can become trainers and help the club. Given that you're accruing GP for players, agents, etc. while you play and they're awarded for other activities in the mode, I didn't feel like GP is hard to come by. Also, manager contracts are extended for free if you meet certain objectives, which is nice.

Developer PES Productions has talked the last two years about laying the foundation for the future, and this is the succulent fruit of their labor. PES 2016 is about more than just a few additions for the year. It ushers in a new era for the franchise that needs to be experienced. » **Matthew Kato**

FIFA 16

A smart change of tactics

8.75

PS4 • Xbox One
PS3 • 360 • PC

In the English Premier League in particular, it's hard to stay on top for back-to-back championships – as Chelsea is finding out this year, and Manchester City can attest to last season. How do you replicate that success and avoid a letdown? FIFA finds itself in the same situation, now with improved competition from Pro Evolution Soccer. FIFA 16's answer to this problem isn't in a game-changing new feature, but demanding that you do better.

Like playing against a side that parks the bus, FIFA 16 challenges you to orchestrate your attack and execute it with skill. Getting through the midfield is tougher than last year. Although the new driven pass is useful in putting some pace on the ball, it's risk/reward because while your pass can be zipped into tight spaces, your teammate may bobble it. Defenses are smart about surrounding teammates in good areas in the midfield, so you have to carefully (and quickly) assess when you have the chance to effectively use this driven pass. A.I. teams also do well by getting out of your high press better, passing out of the back effectively and switching sides.

On the flip side, playing defense also requires a disciplined mind. The A.I. speeds down the flanks, often kicking and running onto the ball to try and blow by your backs. I had to take better angles and carefully initiate tackles, even small ones, otherwise I'd be left standing. Thankfully, A.I. center-backs often step up, challenge, and cut out passes. When it was crunch time around the edge of the box, my defenders would stick out a leg to deflect balls.

Whether on offense or defense, I had to recalibrate my approach to the game-play, employing new defensive strategies to either avoid pulling myself out of position or to keep my forwards properly pressing defenders and not let them start an easy attack. But it is so satisfying when a disciplined approach leads to positive results. On offense, clear-cut through ball chances are fewer, and I learned to build up the play, win some one-on-ones with the new no-touch feint control (which feels good), and string together some insightful passes to create mismatches. Finishes are often satisfying, and the series continues to produce different kinds of goals and situations around the net.

As much as I feel my team's hard work paid off, I wish the gameplay did better in some areas. The recovery time for a missed tackle or wrong step is too long, the defensive-press command button to call in teammates is not nearly aggressive enough, and jostling can be a little slippery, with your player not really affecting the dribbler. However, jostling is improved from years past, when the command acted like a magnet. The physics also produce fewer weird body flops. Finally, there are some odd moments like when a shot dribbles off your foot or players have trouble detecting and picking up the ball.

The contributions of two of the more heralded additions – the career mode's training component and Ultimate Team's draft mode – are not clear-cut winners. The training is great because you progress your players in the areas of your choice through the season, and it's been a long time coming. However, it becomes a drag because you can't automate which players you want to do what, so it's a chore to set up every week. Thankfully, if you don't use it, your players still progress.

I also think the new draft mode could be improved with less of a barrier to entry. The first try is free, but the next one costs 15,000 coins, which only comes quickly if you sell some good cards on the transfer market. Granted, even if you lose your first match you're going to get some nice FUT packs for your regular squad, but this is a missed opportunity to make FUT Draft easy to enter and keep playing repeatedly like Madden's Draft Champions. Nevertheless, I like FUT Draft's strategy component. It's nerve-wracking trying to get your chemistry right, and I've often had a bench player totally upend my planning, like when Messi came up late in the draft. But, that's the fun challenge of the mode.

I had a lot of fun playing with the women's national teams, but it's limited to a one-off tourney. Regardless, developer EA Canada's creation of new player models pays off in how the players feel and move on the pitch, which helps it feel unique.

FIFA 16 isn't going to blow you away with any single feature. Instead, it falls back on its strong gameplay to provide a fresh experience. » **Matthew Kato**

» **Concept**
Improved A.I. for teammates and opponents adds more challenge and fun

» **Graphics**
Not much has changed, but that still makes this a great-looking title

» **Sound**
The announcers talking about league-wide transfers during your match is a nice touch

» **Playability**
The no-touch dribble feints feel nice, letting you do quick fakes without having to go to the right analog stick

» **Entertainment**
The evolved gameplay keeps you coming back more than any specific new feature

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

NHL 16

A much improved second shift

7.5

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
Pick the franchise up off the ice and improve its overall form after last year's travesty

» **Graphics**
The game lacks far too many facial scans for a sport where mugs are clearly visible, but the authentic arenas are a nice touch

» **Sound**
High octane play-by-play man Doc Emrick sounds more like himself, but color man Eddie Olczyk rarely cuts in

» **Playability**
Better positioning and A.I., along with more diverse play in front of the net, makes NHL 16 a marked improvement over its predecessor

» **Entertainment**
A competent hockey experience still looking for a game-changing feature

» **Replay Value**
High

After a brutal new-gen console debut last year that suffered from underwhelming gameplay, missing modes, and a general lack of creative vision, developer EA Canada needed to come out strong this year to prove it still has what it takes to make a relevant hockey game. With improvements in nearly every area, NHL 16 is a positive stride in the right direction for the franchise, but like a defensive-oriented team adopting trap tactics, the series plays it safe and lacks any game-breaking quality.

The uptick in performance is primarily notable on the ice. The opposition A.I. went to coaching camp this offseason, tightening up its game with decisive puck cycles, better positioning, opportunistic offensive strikes, and quicker sticks that disrupt shooting and passing lanes. Expect to get hemmed in your own end more frequently when playing on All-Star/Hardcore difficulty settings. The same tactics that worked last year generate the most scoring chances, but a greater diversity of deflections and more realistic rebounds creates more put-back opportunities at the goal mouth.

This may be the best-playing NHL title in years, but the franchise still has some flaws. Despite EA touting an improved puck pickup system, I repeatedly saw baffling reactions to passes. Loose puck awareness from A.I. teammates is also frustrating in the offensive zone. The nearest player can fail to realize he's got a great chance to play the puck, resulting in a lost scoring opportunity. Checking could use more fine-tuning as well, and board play in general is lacking. This is especially noticeable when you are guarding the crease with a defenseman in the revamped EASHL.

Back from a one-year hiatus, the popular six-on-six online mode returns much improved thanks to a new player class system that ditches the upgrades and boosts from last year. Instead, before starting a game you choose a player type from a balanced pool of common hockey archetypes like sniper, power forward, and grinder. This eliminates the seven-foot-tall danglers who you could never knock off the puck you constantly saw online and instead places the emphasis on team play. The simplistic progression and badge awards offer some incentive to keep playing, but the mode would benefit greatly from a deeper system that promoted achieving a greater array of career and game accomplishments, the ability to track your team's in-progress game from the waiting lobby, and greater team customization.

The other modes all got better with a year of conditioning, but do nothing to rise above serviceable status. Be A GM boasts a new player morale system that gives you more to think about while managing your team, but it currently lacks the depth and influence of other sports games. In the NBA 2K series, you outline a player's role and anticipated minutes during free agency and at the start of each season. Should you fail to give them this type of role, then players get upset. If matters don't change, they will walk in free agency no matter how much money you throw at them. In NHL 16, the complaints are much more random and inconsequential. A third-line center or aging player may complain about ice time even though there are clearly better players in the team pecking order. Disgruntled players may request a trade, but inexplicably still are willing to sign a new contract with you.

Be A Pro suffers a similar fate. EA Canada revamped this single-player mode that puts you in the role of an up-and-coming NHLer with a new progression system that rewards you more directly for your on-ice accomplishments. If you score a lot of goals, for instance, your shooting accuracy will improve. However, the mode is still hampered by questionable coaching logic that punishes runaway success early in your career. Off the ice, the mode lacks the artifice that would make it feel more like you are a true NHL player. With no player interaction, coach meetings, general manager relationships, or fan interaction, all you are left with is the game-to-game experience.

Like a third-line grinder, NHL 16 does most of the little things right. The improved on-ice play makes this hockey game a viable option for puckheads, but the lack of mode depth and standout features ultimately keep this year's installment from earning more ice time.

» **Matt Bertz**

Soma

Intense underwater horror that makes you think

8.5

PS4 • PC

Five years have passed since Frictional Games reinvigorated the video game horror scene. Terrified players explored Amnesia: The Dark Descent's ominous castle, bracing themselves as the game built toward a grotesque monster reveal. Even worse, you couldn't kill that abomination – you could only run. After handing off an Amnesia sequel to The Chinese Room, Frictional is back with Soma. All the core genre tenets are still in place, wrapped in a tense, underwater setting that tells one of the most intriguing sci-fi stories in recent memory.

You play an average guy who wakes up in a research facility on the ocean floor over a hundred years into the future. The dark corridors are filled with leaky pipes and clunky machinery that looks like a 1970s vision of the future. Soma draws heavily from sci-fi horror classics like *Alien* and *The Abyss*, and nails the sense of complete isolation and authenticity that helps make those films timeless. Murderous, malfunctioning robots wander the facility interiors, while others silently float through the exterior waters when you venture out. Soma may appear to be "underwater Amnesia with robots" on the surface, but the story takes some captivating twists and turns along the way. Soma skillfully tackles the concept of empathy for intelligent machines, and forces players to make difficult choices based on the perceived value of synthetic "life." When are you justified in powering down a sentient machine or flipping off someone's life support? Watching this experience unfold with fresh eyes is a big selling point, so without spoiling anything I'll say Soma

artfully challenges players to rethink their preconceptions about the nature of humanity, morality, and evolution. Soma stayed on my mind for days after the credits rolled, and the final sequence is one of the most intense I've experienced in years.

When you're not soaking up the plot, you're exploring the derelict research facility and avoiding anything that moves. Frictional Games has a reputation to uphold when it comes to Soma's fear factor, and it mostly delivers. The feeling of being trapped on the ocean floor consistently inspires dread, but a few effective jump scares deliver sharper thrills as well. I'd jolt in my chair when the facility's power loudly cut out or I accidentally sent a bucket clattering across the room. Left weaponless, you evade threats using methods familiar to anyone who has played any Amnesia-inspired horror game; eluding enemies is about breaking line of sight, peeking around corners, and slowly crouch-walking through the darkness. Even if you don't hear the clanking of a killer robot, you know one is near by the clever digital artifact effect that distorts the screen.

Crossing paths with a patrolling mechanical murderer is inevitable, and the encounters feel formulaic at this point in the genre's lifespan. At one point I yelped when an enemy unexpectedly wandered up behind me, but overall these homicidal machines' poor vision trivialized a lot of the encounters. Unless you stumble through these encounters like Jar Jar Binks in a banana-peel factory, you shouldn't have much trouble.

The underwater research facilities of Soma may be in disrepair, but they've

still got enough functioning computers and machinery to present some interesting puzzles. My favorite challenges involve deciphering a cryptic or broken computer program to progress, like rerouting power through a robot to access its core chip. However, a few of these roadblocks are clunkers that require too much backtracking. For example, I guessed the solution to one puzzle early on, but was frustratingly sidetracked when I had to hunt around an entire facility for a nondescript box holding the key item. Thankfully, those hang-ups are relatively rare.

Video games have challenged us to unsympathetically blast apart deadly robots since their earliest days. Soma's impressively realized underwater ordeal challenges even the coldest robot slayers to consider a world where making such snap moral decisions is anything but automatic. » **Tim Turi**

This review pertains to the PC version of Soma. The game is also available on PlayStation 4

» Concept
The evasive, non-combat focused gameplay of Amnesia collides with an unnerving and fascinating underwater sci-fi tale

» Graphics
Eerie seascapes and intricate machinery are wonderfully realized, though the infrequent human character models don't look great under direct light

» Sound
The audio is so convincing that playing with a pair of headphones will make you feel like you're stuck in a diving suit beneath the ocean

» Playability
No-frills first-person controls that are simple and reliable. Stealthily evading deadly monsters requires patience

» Entertainment
Playing cat-and-mouse with monsters feels formulaic at this point, but Soma's engrossing subsea environment and intriguing narrative keep the entire experience afloat

» Replay Value
Moderately high

Mysterious growths are taking over the facility. Some of them will refill your health

Mad Max

Desert sessions in repetition

7.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Translate George Miller's dystopian cinematic vision into an open-world action-adventure experience

» **Graphics**
A gorgeous skybox brings color to the otherwise monochromatic desert landscape, but a desert is a desert

» **Sound**
Max doesn't say much, which is a good thing considering the lead voice actor's uneven performance

» **Playability**
The free-flow melee combat system is the centerpiece of the action, but the on-foot traversal struggles with vertical terrain and racing controls are sluggish

» **Entertainment**
Mad Max fans may enjoy cruising through the post-apocalyptic world, but the repetitive side activities start to grind

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

Hot on the heels of a strong cinematic comeback with the blockbuster hit *Fury Road*, Mad Max is hitting the asphalt for his first video game since the long-forgotten 1990 NES title. After years of rumored stops and starts, Warner Bros. tapped Just Cause veterans Avalanche Studios to meld its signature brand of open-world chaos to the beloved sci-fi series.

Like the Spartan source material, the video game adaptation of Mad Max is heavy on caricature and light on plot development; don't expect to find a compelling narrative in this barren wasteland. Cruising toward the Plains of Silence, Max's trek is interrupted by the villainous Scabrous Scrotus, who steals Max's beloved Interceptor, strips him of all his possessions, and leaves him for dead on the side of the road. Soon after, he meets a Gollum-esque hunchback named Chumbucket. This car-worshiping sidekick believes Max to be a saint, and lends his mechanical talents in hopes of Max leading him to salvation. Max has other designs: finishing what he started with Scrotus and getting his car back.

The open world Max navigates is inhospitable and predictably singular in nature. Avalanche Studios has done an admirable job of trying to give each wasteland region a signature quality, from wind-swept sand dunes and rocky vertical spaces to hilly junkyards and crumbling remnants of highways. But even with the gorgeous skybox injecting color into the world and violent sandstorms breaking up the monotony of the environment, you ultimately can't escape the fact that a desert is a desert.

Despite its post-apocalyptic setting, Mad Max's open world is more Far Cry than Fallout. Each region of the map features a hot-air balloon station that, once visited, reveals points of interest in the area (read: Far Cry's radio tower). These include enemy bases waiting to be infiltrated, convoys available for ransacking, desert races, and scavenging locations hiding the various collectibles. As you complete these side missions you weaken Scrotus' power over the region, earning you the praise of the local stronghold leaders and unlocking various upgrades.

Metal scraps are the predominant form of currency in the wasteland, which Max can find in enemy bases or earn by taking out the vehicles of roving marauders. Scraps funnel into the robust upgrade systems for Max and his car. Spending the currency on Max transforms him into a brutal killing machine with improved attack strength, a better shotgun, and new combat moves. Car upgrades also vie for the same pool of scraps, allowing Max to improve its speed, handling, defense, and attack options. Early in the game both systems provide adequate motivation for tackling the various side missions, but as Max becomes more formidable and the side quests begin to feel repetitive, they ultimately lose their allure.

Given the antagonistic nature of wasteland inhabitants, vehicular combat is a constant. Scrotus' legion of War Boys cruise the land spoiling for a fight, and though the sluggish controls can be problematic (especially when it comes to racing or navigating tight passages), these high-speed encounters are fun given the weapons at your disposal. Max can ram into cars to take them out, unleash a "thunderpoon" projectile to remove a threat with one shot, target gas tanks with a shotgun blast, or use the playful harpoon to slowly dismantle an enemy vehicle or even rip a driver from the cockpit. The best of these battles involve the large convoys, but when you reach the top-end of the vehicle upgrades, you can tear through these caravans with little resistance.

Max is equally adept at throwing on the knuckledusters for hand-to-hand combat. Given the lack of large ammo stockpiles, most of your on-foot encounters involve throwing punches. This satisfying, free-flow combat system is reminiscent of the Arkham games, but Max doesn't have the professional restraint of the Caped Crusader. Don't expect much challenge from the enemies even when you are severely outnumbered; the lack of awareness on display from the various wasteland foes is astounding.

Max's adventure inevitably leads to a showdown with Scrotus, but as the story concludes you are left wondering what, if anything, was gained in this pursuit. At the end of the day, Max overtook some bases, ran a couple hundred cars off the road, met some forgettable characters, and buried his fist into the sunburnt skin of the villainous locals. Was it worth the effort? That ultimately depends on how much fun you had in performing these basic, repetitive open-world activities. » **Matt Bertz**

Hearthstone: The Grand Tournament

An inspired addition

9

PC • iOS • Android

Hearthstone: The Grand Tournament is the second expansion set for Blizzard's digital card game, tapping into World of Warcraft's Argent Tournament for inspiration. A colorful collection of characters from murloc knights to King Varian Wrynn (I've affectionately titled that card "Varian Win" due to its ability to terminate the table) join the roster. In addition to offering a varied collection of minions, The Grand Tournament sets the stage for new deck archetypes involving dragons, totems, discards, and other strategies that were just a twinkle in ambitious deck builders' eyes during prior sets.

The big new mechanic, inspire, lets players get additional value out of their hero power by triggering certain minions when the power is used. These additions make that one damage mage pop or hunter arrow much more meaningful as the table gets flooded with multiple instances of minions featuring the mechanic, making one hero power use worth quite a bit more than its core effect.

Inspire is a fun mechanic that adds value to your "always available" hero power, and while we are already seeing a few inspire cards sneak their way into competitive decks, it's also an incredibly cool ability in Hearthstone's limited format, the Arena. Being able to sneak out additional value when you're out of steam can make all the difference when both players are out of cards and just banging on each other with whatever is on the table.

Tiny minions can grow via inspire, and larger legendaries like Confessor Paletress can swing entire matches after triggering the ability. Players can also embrace the joust mechanic, which bestows additional effects to cards if you win a "joust" of minion cards taken randomly from your deck (much like the clash mechanic from Magic: The Gathering).

On the surface, The Grand Tournament has a few issues, like many of the core cards being locked behind higher rarity tiers. For example, you probably won't be able to pull together a dragon deck without two Twilight Guardians, and they're locked behind epic rarity. Want to make a secret paladin deck? Your Mysterious Champions are also locked behind epic rarity. This wasn't as noticeable in Goblins vs Gnomes, as the mech brigade mostly occupied more accessible slots. Thankfully, I haven't seen a standout "must have in almost every deck" legendary like Dr. Boom in this expansion.

In spite of their rarity, these cards shouldn't be hard to acquire for those that have kept up with the game since release, but new players may feel too far behind to catch up. Luckily, Blizzard has implemented some new ways to provide additional cards and rewards. The weekly tavern brawl provides a fun format where players often don't even need to use their own collections and can earn packs and complete daily quests, and The Grand Tournament rolls out a new ranked reward system. Players have been clamoring for a reason to climb the ladder each month apart from cosmetic card backs, and now it's here – Blizzard made an intelligent move by capping the rewards at rank 5, so you won't have to do the grind all the way to the top each month for the maximum rewards.

The Grand Tournament is a much-needed influx of interesting cards and mechanics for Hearthstone. It's loaded with flavorful characters, cool abilities, and new goodies to keep the game fresh and interesting. If you've been waiting to jump into the digital card game craze, now's a great time.

» **Daniel Tack**

» Concept
The Grand Tournament has come to Hearthstone with a collection of motley heroes and new mechanics

» Graphics
No leaps here from the original game, but some of the new cards have appropriately cool animations and effects

» Sound
New cards come with their own iconic sound effects that will soon be as pervasive as the Grim Patron's "Everyone get in here!"

» Playability
New mechanics like inspiration and joust are easy to understand. Rookie players may have more difficulty forging a competitive deck, but new features have been rolled out to assist in that area

» Entertainment
With 132 new cards added to the pool, players have more strategies to experiment with than ever. The new cards are fun and fresh, adding a much-needed boost

» Replay Value
High

Forza Motorsport 6

New additions and familiar problems

7.75

Xbox One

» **Concept**
Beef up some of Forza 5's weaknesses, like the number of cars and tracks

» **Graphics**
The fictional city-based tracks such as Rio look the best, but the overall visual package is amazing

» **Sound**
Racing-celebrity cameos show effort, but the script sometimes devolves into mumbo jumbo

» **Playability**
The effect of rain feels exaggerated, like ice. This can suck the fun out of those races

» **Entertainment**
New tracks and cars give you plenty to play with, but the re-styled career mode still doesn't provide sufficient motivation

» **Replay Value**
High

Forza 6 feels like what Forza 5 could have been, correcting past wrongs by adding more cars, tracks, and night and rain racing. Ample racing and challenges wait around every corner, but this year more than ever, the series feels like it's stuck in that stereotypical sim-racing rut; it has lots of everything, but where's it really going?

The 460 cars and 26 track locations are more than welcome, giving the game a tangible boost over last year. The cars and the credits to buy them flow freely, and the tracks – apart from offering variety through location changes and new track layout challenges – are pleasing to the eye. The intro race at Rio jolts the senses with its brightly colored background and streaming sun.

The joy of so many cars and tracks is tempered by how the player accesses them. The career mode is linear, so players unlock racing series with increasingly powerful cars one at a time. This has a big effect on some of the systems. You win and buy cars as your driver levels up and earns more credits than you know what to do with. However, apart from using them in multiplayer or free ride, you won't be able to race all of them immediately in the career mode because the class of race some of them are rated for (D, C, B, etc.) won't unlock until later. This not only dampens having so many new cars at your disposal, but your access to the tracks as well. I'd rather the game open up its career series based on my driver level and/or how well I've done. That way I could fully utilize my garage and sample different racing series, determining for myself where I want to put my effort and credits – but

that isn't the case here. At least this mode lets you choose which types of cars you want to use in each series (as long as they are of the appropriate class). In this way, Forza 6's career mode is somewhere between those in Forza 5 and Forza 4, but misses out on the prime advantages of both.

The career mode also mutes my enthusiasm for the game's new mods (cards you can apply as per-race challenges, vehicle upgrades, or credit bonuses) because I simply didn't need all the extra credits they provided. What use are credits if they buy cars I can't use immediately? I also wasn't motivated because the only race objective is to get third place, so you don't benefit by pushing yourself. Using mods to wring out that extra upgrade performance doesn't matter, since coming in first place all the time doesn't unlock the career's series any faster. Finally, in another quirk unintentionally watering down mods, too many of them offer the same bonuses or rewards, and even those labeled as rare are easy to get.

Racing during the night and rain is also new. The rain, while featuring visually impressive droplets streaking down your windshield, isn't much fun. It feels like you're sliding on ice; I like that the puddles can make you hydroplane, but otherwise you have to pussyfoot so much around the courses that it's not entertaining. At night your tires are cooler and have less grip, but it's not as much of a killjoy as the rain – just be careful you don't smash your headlights out. The rain and night courses inflate the overall number of tracks, since they are tied to specific courses rather than being variables for all of them.

Apart from the rain, Forza – as ever – is a pleasure to race. From the feeling of different cars' engine locations and even manufacturers, to gaining an understanding of why you are (or aren't) racing at your best, Forza 6 delivers on the track where it counts. The vibration feedback in the Xbox One controller is again a great asset, although I suggest you tinker with the tuning settings to truly get comfortable with your cars.

In a nod to fans' requests, the game has added periphery features such as the ability to sell your cars, pre-race tuning, and the aforementioned rain/night racing, but a lot remains curiously unchanged. Multiplayer still does not let you create dedicated public lobbies for racing with strangers based on myriad game options, instead sticking with private lobbies and the hopper system that automatically matches players according to pre-determined race types. Leagues have been added, but these are merely a device to match you with drivers of the same skill, and are not leagues you can create and play with your friends on your own like in other sports titles.

It's not a contradiction that Forza 6 is as fun as it is disappointing. Its faults and omissions do not make it a bad game or one that veers dramatically from the franchise's path. But what exactly is the series' philosophy? We've seen the career mode change from iteration to iteration, with the developer unable to define where it wants to go and therefore build upon a foundation in successive years. Turn 10 talks about its passion for cars, and that's evident on the track, but players have to feel it elsewhere, too. » **Matthew Kato**

Disgaea 5: Alliance Of Vengeance

Exploding penguins and tactical decisions

8.5

PS4

You're down to a few characters and the Netherworld boss is still standing with a truckload of hit points. With just a few turns left before your inevitable loss, it's time to consider your options. If you hadn't already used your ultimate abilities, they could have done the job. Now, your best chance at victory is a penguin toss; you pick up your adorable penguin Prinny and fling the poor cretin at your foe, resulting in a massive explosion that wins the battle. Sure, it costs your shrieking Prinny its life, but you can bring it back as soon as you get back to town. Disgaea 5 is a ridiculous, over-the-top RPG romp filled with humor and a massive amount of customization.

If this is your first time with the series, have no fear – the opening hours provide a strong foundation as you slowly unlock new vendors and facilities in your hub area while collecting main characters and advancing the story. I enjoyed this method of advancement, since you're thrust directly into gameplay, action, and upgrading. Instead of lengthy cutscenes, you just get in and start min/maxing right away. After every few missions, you obtain access to new features and options in your hub world, like a complex mechanic that lets you pull attributes out of items and attach them to others. This process of unveiling the systems and gradually building on them creates a potent feedback loop that keeps you coming back for more. As always, players can look forward to the post-game for never-ending dips into Item World, where you head inside your gear to access new secrets and ultra-powerful rewards.

The turn-based battles have little gimmicks to take advantage of in the early game, but become more open-ended later depending on how you fill out your crew. The game strikes a delicate balance by providing the player with a roster of incredibly powerful main characters who can pretty much handle all the heavy lifting, but with an advanced class system to help fill in the gaps. Players hoping to unlock the more advanced and powerful classes must prove themselves in a variety of quests. Don't worry too much about getting your new friends up to speed once you have them available, since you can level up these characters immediately for a little coin.

Players balance many things depending on the map, including whacking crystals to gain advantages, and sometimes taking advantage of the "tower" system that allows characters to lift each other up to fling them across obstacles or glean a positional edge (just be careful about throwing Prinnies). Many of these mechanics return from previous games in the series, but there's a new important one as well: revenge. As your characters dish out damage and watch allies fall, they get revved up, enhancing their attributes and allowing them to unleash potent ultimate abilities. For example, Seraphina can charm all the male characters on the battlefield for a turn – a real game-changer. Other characters have similar powers, and you should experiment with them to get the most out of your troops.

Tactical combat is where the Disgaea series shines, but don't expect a thrilling narrative to complement the battles. The story is as clichéd as it gets, and the characters are boisterous archetypes like the silent, brooding protagonist, the seductive princess who always gets her way, the bull-headed brawny berserker, the mysterious puller of strings behind the scenes – you get the idea. While Disgaea 5 definitely doesn't win any points for an immersive or interesting story, the dialogue is often hilarious, and pulls things along nicely as you conquer level after level.

Disgaea 5 serves up a hearty helping of enjoyable tactical RPG combat, and lives up to the expectations established by its forerunners in the series. Games like this always face the danger of repetition as you plod through level after level, but Disgaea 5 manages to keep things interesting despite the grind.

» **Daniel Tack**
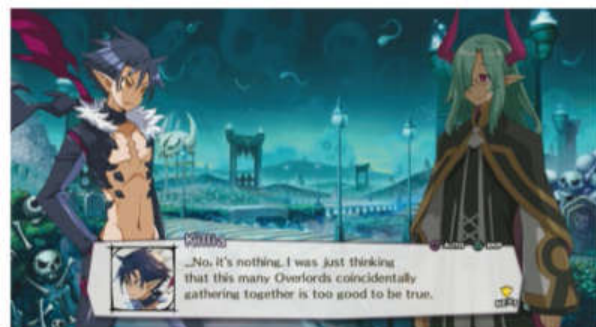
PLAYSTATION 4

Game	Score	Date
Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China	7.25	Jun-15
Batman: Arkham Knight	9.5	Aug-15
Devil May Cry 4: Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
Disney Infinity 3.0	8.5	Oct-15
Everybody's Gone to the Rapture	7	Oct-15
Galak-Z: The Dimensional	8	Oct-15
Game of Thrones Episode 1: Iron from Ice	8.5	Feb-15
Game of Thrones Episode 2: The Lost Lords	8	Apr-15
Game of Thrones Episode 3: The Sword in the Darkness	8.25	Jun-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4: Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
God of War III Remastered	9	Sep-15
King's Quest Chapter 1: A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Life is Strange: Episode 1 – Chrysalis	8.5	Jan-15
Life is Strange: Episode 2 – Out of Time	6.5	Mar15
Life is Strange: Episode 3 – Chaos Theory	7	May-15
Life is Strange: Episode 4 – Dark Room	6.5	July-15
Madden NFL 16	8.75	Oct-15
Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
MLB 15: The Show	8	Jun-15
Mortal Kombat X	9.25	Jun-15
N++	8	Oct-15
Planetside 2	7.75	Sep-15
Project Cars	8.5	Jul-15
Rocket League	9	Sep-15
Rory McIlroy PGA Tour	7	Sep-15
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 1 – Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 2 – Atlas Mugged	6	Jun-15
Tembo the Badass Elephant	7	Oct-15
Titan Souls	8.5	Jun-15
Tower of Guns	7.75	Jun-15
Volume	8.75	Oct-15
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, The	9.75	Jul-15
Wolfenstein: The Old Blood	7.5	Jul-15

XBOX ONE

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Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China	7.25	Jun-15
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Game of Thrones Episode 3: The Sword in the Darkness	8.25	Jun-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4: Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
Gears of War: Ultimate Edition	8	Oct-15
King's Quest Chapter 1: A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Life is Strange: Episode 1 – Chrysalis	8.5	Jan-15
Life is Strange: Episode 2 – Out of Time	6.5	Mar15
Life is Strange: Episode 3 – Chaos Theory	7	May-15
Life is Strange: Episode 4 – Dark Room	6.5	July-15
Madden NFL 16	8.75	Oct-15
Magic Duels	8.75	Sep-15
Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
Mortal Kombat X	9.25	Jun-15
Project Cars	8.5	Jul-15
Rare Replay	8.75	Oct-15
Rory McIlroy PGA Tour	7	Sep-15
State of Decay: Year-One Survival Edition	7.5	Jul-15
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 1 – Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
Tales from the Borderlands: Episode 2 – Atlas Mugged	6	Jun-15
Tembo the Badass Elephant	7	Oct-15
Tower of Guns	7.75	Jun-15
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, The	9.75	Jul-15
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Game of Thrones Episode 4: Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
King's Quest Chapter 1: A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15

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the score

8 | Tearaway Unfolded

Platform PlayStation 4 **Release** September 8 **Rating** E

I'm glad to see the adventure on the big screen, but the console experience feels less personal, and the journey loses a little bit in the transition. That said, Tearaway Unfolded is still a great game for families or anyone else who's looking for an uplifting change of pace. — *Jeff Cork*

8 | Dragon Quest Heroes: The World Tree's Woe And The Blight Below

Platform PlayStation 4 **Release** October 13 **Rating** T

The added RPG layers, crafting, and tactical monster collection all help alleviate a total focus on repetitive combat. These, plus a fantastic art style, gave me plenty of reasons to be excited about jumping into battle. — *Kyle Hilliard*

### 8 | Lovers In A Dangerous Spacetime

Platform Xbox One, PC **Release** September 9 **Rating** E10+

Trading positions, running from gun to gun, manning the shield, and generally moving about the ship to steer through the levels and manage the onslaught of enemies is frantic and exciting. You feel as though you and your partner are genuinely working together to pilot a powerful leviathan through dangerous areas. — *Kyle Hilliard*

7.5 | Persona 4: Dancing All Night

Platform Vita **Release** September 29 **Rating** T

It's fun and lighthearted and sure to make fans smile, but Dancing All Night isn't anything special; it's just an average rhythm game that's begging for a better interface and more song variety. — *Kimberley Wallace*
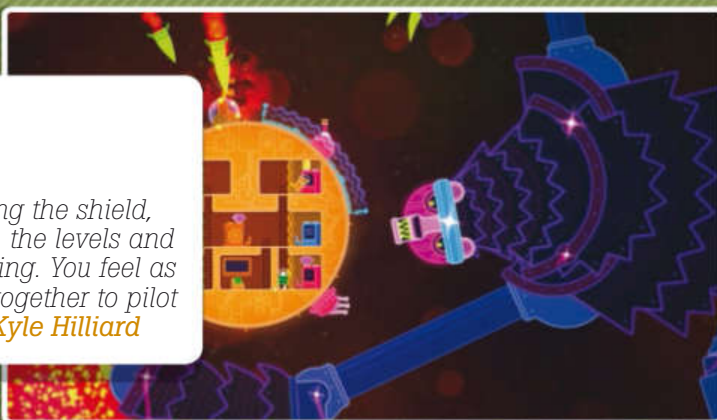
5 | Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer

Platform 3DS **Release** September 25 **Rating** E

You don't send or receive letters, run errands, or even walk around freely in your town. Instead, everything you do funnels into the home-design element. That focus comes at a tremendous cost, in terms of a sense of progression and overall attachment to the world. — *Jeff Cork*

Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 1 – Chrysalis	8.5	Jan-15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 2 – Out of Time	6.5	Mar15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 3 – Chaos Theory	7	May-15
Life is Strange:		
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Madden NFL 16	8.75	Oct-15
Metal Gear Solid V:		
The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
Tales from the Borderlands:		
Episode 1 – Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
Tales from the Borderlands:		
Episode 2 – Atlas Mugged	6	Jun-15

XBOX 360

Disney Infinity 3.0	8.5	Oct-15
Dragon Ball Xenoverse	7.5	May-15
Game of Thrones Episode 1:		
Iron from Ice	8.5	Feb-15
Game of Thrones Episode 2:		
The Lost Lords	8	Apr-15
Game of Thrones Episode 3:		
The Sword in the Darkness	8.25	Jun-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4:		
Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
King's Quest Chapter 1:		
A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 1 – Chrysalis	8.5	Jan-15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 2 – Out of Time	6.5	Mar15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 3 – Chaos Theory	7	May-15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 4 – Dark Room	6.5	July-15
Madden NFL 16	8.75	Oct-15
Metal Gear Solid V:		
The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
Tales from the Borderlands:		
Episode 1 – Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
Tales from the Borderlands:		
Episode 2 – Atlas Mugged	6	Jun-15

Wii U

Affordable		
Space Adventures	8	Jun-15
Disney Infinity 3.0	8.5	Oct-15
Splatoon	7.75	Aug-15
Super Mario Maker	9	Oct-15

PC

Assassin's Creed		
Chronicles: China	7.25	Jun-15
Batman: Arkham Knight	9.5	Aug-15
Broken Age: Act II	9.25	Jun-15
Chroma Squad	7	Jul-15
Convoy	7	Jun-15
Crypt of the Necrodancer	8	Jun-15
Devil May Cry 4:		
Special Edition	8.5	Aug-15
Dungeons 2	8	Jun-15
Galactic Civiliations III	8.75	Jul-15
Game of Thrones Episode 1:		
Iron from Ice	8.5	Feb-15
Game of Thrones Episode 2:		
The Lost Lords	8	Apr-15
Game of Thrones Episode 3:		
The Sword in the Darkness	8.25	Jun-15
Game of Thrones Episode 4:		
Sons of Winter	8	Aug-15
Gears of War: Ultimate Edition	8	Oct-15
Guild of Dungeoneering	7	Oct-15
Hearthstone:		
Blackrock Mountain	9	Jul-15
Her Story	8.5	Sep-15
Heroes of the Storm	9.25	Aug-15
Invisible, Inc.	8	Jul-15
Kerbal Space Program	8.5	Jul-15
King's Quest Chapter 1:		
A Knight to Remember	8	Oct-15
Lego Jurassic World	6	Aug-15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 1 – Chrysalis	8.5	Jan-15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 2 – Out of Time	6.5	Mar15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 3 – Chaos Theory	7	May-15
Life is Strange:		
Episode 4 – Dark Room	6.5	July-15
Magic Duels	8.75	Sep-15
Magicka 2	7.25	Aug-15
Massive Chalice	8	Aug-15
Metal Gear Solid V:		
The Phantom Pain	9.25	Oct-15
Mortal Kombat X	9.25	Jun-15

Path of Exile:		
The Awakening	8.5	Sep-15
Pillars of Eternity	9.25	Jun-15
Project Cars	8.5	Jul-15
Ronin	7.75	Aug-15
Starships	7	May-15
Sunset	5.75	Aug-15
Tales from the Borderlands:		
Episode 1 – Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
Tales from the Borderlands:		
Episode 2 – Atlas Mugged	6	Jun-15
Talos Principle:		
Road to Gehenna, The	8.25	Oct-15
Tembo the Badass Elephant	7	Oct-15
Titan Souls	8.5	Jun-15
Tower of Guns	7.75	Jun-15
Volume	875	Oct-15
Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, The	9.75	Jul-15
Wolfenstein: The Old Blood	7.5	Jul-15
You Must Build A Boat	9	Aug-15

3DS

Boxboy	8.25	Jun-15
Etrian Odyssey 2 Untold:		
The Fafnir Knight	8	Sep-15
Mario vs. Donkey Kong:		
Tipping Stars	8	May-15
Puzzle & Dragons Z + Puzzle & Dragons		
Super Mario Bros. Edition	9	Jul-15
Shin Megami Tensei:		
Devil Survivor 2		
Record Breaker	8	Jun-15

VITA

Danganronpa Another Episode:		
Ultra Despair Girls	5.5	Oct-15
Titan Souls	8.5	Jun-15

iOS

Game of Thrones		
Episode 1 – Iron from Ice	8.5	Feb-15
Hearthstone:		
Blackrock Mountain	9	Jul-15
Her Story	8.5	Sep-15
Tales from the Borderlands:		
Episode 1 – Zero Sum	6.5	Feb-15
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30 Years Of Mario At A Glance

The world's most iconic plumber and his friends have appeared in hundreds of games over the last three decades. From Mario is Missing to Mario & Luigi: Paper Jam, here's a look at a small portion of the Mario crew's colorful library.

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THE ITALIAN MOB MESSED WITH THE WRONG MAN