HARDCORE

GAMER

MAGAZINE

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HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE

Biographical Data

DJPubba_Tim Lindquist
After almost two years of publishing, we finally have individual blogs for our editors on the internets. To celebrate, I bought a domain name: www.hgmblog.com. I think this means we are now winning the magazine making wars. 😁

Now Playing: *Castlevania: SotN (XBL), Saint's Row, Paper Mario Adventure, Crackdown, Marble Mania*

Wanderer_Thomas Wilde
I remain mostly on the road, traveling constantly hither and yon. My last stop was the GDC in San Francisco, which was interesting. If the rumors pan out and the GDC becomes the "next E3," it'll be an absolute waste of a convention. The last thing the GDC needs is EA and its Speakers of Doom drowning out all reasonable discussion.
Now Playing: *Shadowgrounds, Titan Quest: Immortal Throne, Fire Emblem, World of Warcraft*

Lynxara_Alicia Ashby
With Shoegazer and Sardius out of action, putting this issue together was a real pain the butt. I can forgive it, 'cause I got to play some pretty kickass games this month. Best of all, by the time you read this, I'll be married! Woohoo!

Now Playing: *Atelier Iris 3: Grand Phantasm, Kororinpa: Marble Mania, Earth Defense Force 2017, Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker*

Racewing_Geson Hatchett
After a horribly disappointing Q4, it's good to see spring faring so much better. Sonic for the Wii is a stellar game (don't let anyone tell you otherwise), and, man, if Kratos had been around, maybe Greece wouldn't have *needed* 300 Spartans. I'm just saying, is all.

Now Playing: *Sonic and the Secret Rings, God of War II, Catching Up On Fanservice (check back next month)*

Shoegazer_Dave Hulegaard
A trip to Arizona this month eliminated me almost completely from the issue, but it was for a good cause. Ever wonder what lengths game publishers will go to in order to compete with *Halo 3* and *GTA IV* for your attention later this year? I'll give you a hint: Gamers win.

Now Playing: *God of War II, MLB 2K7, Crackdown*

KouAidou_Elizabeth Ellis
I was good about my spending last month, which means it's time for a ridiculous splurge! $100 on Russian rock CDs?? Sounds good to me!!

Now Playing: Земляне - Трава у дома, Машина Времени - Поворот -- wait, huh? Games? ...isn't this LiveJournal?

Roger Danish_Greg Off
I believe I am the King Of Late Bios, which is not necessarily a good title to have, but, I'll take what I can get, so I'm owning it. As king, I have decided to decree that my bio will be of "such lateness" that a period forever known as the "Great Waiting" will take place until further notice. Let the procrastinating commence.
Now Playing: *Warhawk, Motorstorm, Castlevania: Symphony of the Night XBL, F.E.A.R., Paper Mario*

4thletter_David Brothers
I am busier than ever (you have no idea), but I still make time for good comics. Kevin Grevioux's *New Warriors* sounds wonderfully subversive and Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* is must-reading. I finally completed my set of David Mack's *Kabuki* a few weeks ago, too. On the hit list: the rest of David Lapham's *Stray Bullets* and Matt Fraction's *Casanova*.

Now Reading: *The Annotated Lolita*

James_James Cunningham
Every once in a while a week pops up that makes gaming significantly less relevant. This has been that week, but hopefully by the time you read this it will all be over. Gaming is a great distraction from the real world, but sometimes it's just not possible to enjoy being sidetracked like that. I resent this deeply, and look forward to things getting back to normal.
Now Playing: *Gurumin, Tiger Woods '07* (Wii), and I wish I was playing a working *Burnout Dominator*

HonestGamer_Jason Venter
I'm mad at the people who design the packaging for old television shows on DVD. They know going in that there will be multiple volumes, yet often they don't stick with one size or design. It's infuriating. This nonsense needs to stop before someone gets hurt.

Now Playing: *Europa Universalis III*

Hitoshura_Iaian Ross
I haven't had a "perfect" save file for a game in a really long time. I think I might be able to achieve that with *Rogue Galaxy*, as I've almost completed every Frog Log recipe. Unfortunately, it seems I might not be able to push myself through the tedium for much longer.

Now Playing: *Rogue Galaxy*

Sardius_Danny Cowan
I didn't write anything for HGM this month, so feel free to skip this issue if you'd like. Oh but I kid! There's good stuff in the pages ahead, and I'm sorry I wasn't able to contribute to it. I greatly look forward to reviewing *Drake and the 99 Escort Missions* and *World War II: The Video Game* next month as punishment for my absence.
Now Playing: *Cave Story, GF/DM Masterpiece Gold, Tempest X3*

Blooper Chicken_Cluck Fu
Cluck, clucker, squawk. Peck, peck, peck. Cluuuck, b'gawk!

Now Playing: *Super Road †, Dough Pecker 2K7, Clucking Mama: Choke Off*

Wolfie_Terry Wolfinger
Finally finished up reading Marvel's *Civil War*. It started strong, peaked somewhere in the middle, then kinda ended with an ironic fizzle... yeah, no shizzle. Super heroes fighting super heroes! Oh the horror. It was nice to see Tony Stark get his face smashed in though.

Now Playing: *World of WOWcraft*

Metalbolt_Anthony Mertz
I'm currently drooling over a Calico M105 that's chambered for 22LR. Who wants to buy it for me? Seriously, it's only five hundred ninety-nine dollars. That's cheap compared to the other firearms I have my eyes on!

Now Playing: *Battletroy 2 (PC), Titan Quest, Carmageddon TDR 2000 (+ nose bleed), Deus Ex: Invisible War (PC)*

Arlieth_Thomas Shin
So, apparently I've been playing that pesky game Melty Blood so much that I started a site called MeltyBread.com. If you understand the meaning behind it, you really are a nerd. Meanwhile, Evolution and Super Battle Opera qualifiers are currently underway, so you'd better be practicing!

Mishura_Brady Hartel
[...] avatar is in color now, thanks to TEH JULIES. Thank you, [...]H JULIES. <3

[...]w Playing: *Sonic and the Secret Rings* and *Metal Gear [...]line* (for the very last time.)

Jeremy_Jeremy Peeples
By the time you read this, the incredible third season of "The Office" will be over and I will be quite sad. Fortunately, *Forza Motorsport 2* will be out by then, and the fourth season of "Kim Possible" will still be going on, so I won't be too bummed.

Now Playing: *Meteos: Disney Magic, Burnout: Dominator (PS2), WWF No Mercy, Tetris DS*

Mads_Amadeo Garcia III
Did you know that gamers, with all their electricty needs, account for 20% of the cause of global warming? I dunno, I just made that up. Being from a tropical clime myself, I'm not as scared of the heat as the rest of you lightweights. I can swim pretty good too. SO GAME ON, GAME ON!
Now Playing: *The Battle for Middle-Earth: Rise of the Witch King, Counterstrike: Condition Zero, Cooking Mama*

Daniel Kayser_Daniel Kayser
Hello, I'm Daniel and this is my first bio. Man... it's really tough to write anything cool in less than fifty words, so maybe I should just fill it up with extraneous words that really aren't about anything at all. I think that could work. Do you think that could work? Well, ya never know unless you try, right, so here it goes...
Now Playing: *GRAW 2, RS6: Vegas, Genesis Collection (PSP), MLB2K7, The Harpsichord*

HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE

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Previews

It's a preview party at our place and you're invited. Special guests include *Blue Dragon*, *Shadowrun*, *Fable 2*, *Super Mario Galaxy*, *Atelier Iris 3* and *Conan*, to name a few. BYOB.

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Feature

We start off gently with a little GDC junket journal action starring Daniel Kayser of GameTrailers.com (p34) and work our way into a frothy, sweaty fervor, with Ashura and Lynxara screaming out instructions about how to install Linux on your PS3 with a little dollop of M.A.M.E. on top. It's *fsck-ing hot*. (p48).

GDC 2007: p34

Linux on PS3? ...

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On the cover

SPIDER-MAN 3

Spider-man 3. Nuff said.

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MOVERS & SHAKERS

• EA will publish Harmonix's next title in cooperation with MTV. Known for the *Guitar Hero* and *Karaoke Revolution* franchises, Harmonix revealed no details, aside from promising that its next title will take all that they've learned to the next level.

• Former EA and Codemasters designer/producer Anthony Castoro and entrepreneur Donn Clendenon have teamed up to form a new development studio, Heatwave Interactive, which will focus on MMOs.

• Microsoft and Bungie not only revealed that *Halo 3* will come in three flavors (Standard, Limited and Legendary, ranging from $59.99 to $129.99) but also narrowed down the possible launch date to fall 2007.

• Rebellion acquired Ignition's Banbury development studio. Formerly known as Awesome Developments, the studio was known for its PSP work, particularly *Archer Maclean's Mercury* and its sequels.

• Marc Ecko Entertainment had signed a development deal with Human Head Studios, best known for last year's *Prey*, to work on "crafting a title that is conceptually different than any game ever made."

HEY! GAMERS CAN READ TOO!

Pocket Books announced it has acquired world rights to publish the novelization of Ubisoft's upcoming action/adventure game *Assassin's Creed*, from the makers of the *Prince of Persia*. Set in the year 1191, you play the role of Altair, who fights to save the Holy Land from war and corruption. Written by New York Times bestselling author Steven Barnes, the first novel in the trilogy will be a prequel to the game and is expected as early as October 2007.

At the New York Comic Con, Marvel made the announcement that it will be publishing an ongoing monthly *Halo* comic. It's scheduled to debut later this year, possibly to coincide with, or ramp up to, the *Halo 3* launch. In charge of the writing and art are Eisner award-winning creators Brian Michael Bendis and Alex Maleev.

OF COURSE IT'S NUMBERS GAM

A dispute between Microsoft and Alcatel-Lucent over an MP3 audio technology patent issue relating to Windows has turned ugly. A federal jury in San Diego ordered Microsoft to pay $1.5 billion to Alcatel-Lucent, which may be emboldened by the outcome and file additional claims against other companies. Microsoft, who claims it rightfully licensed the technology from Fraunhofer, will seek relief or appeal.

Behavioral research consultancy Bunnyfoot took a closer look at studies measuring the usefulness of in-game advertising and uncovered its effectiveness is far less than initially reported. Most studies use participants that know the objective and subject matter, and thus score fairly high (87%). Tests run with an unsuspecting audience scored far lower (15%).

Immersion and Sony Computer Entertainment have agreed to conclude their patent litigation regarding the joypad vibration capability at the U.S. Court of Appeals. They've entered into a new business agreement to explore the inclusion of Immersion technology in PlayStation products. Rumors are suggesting the settlement cost Sony $150 million, and a new SIXAXIS controller featuring Immersion's rumble technology is already rumored to be in the works, possibly to accompany the release of *God of War III*.

A Nielsen survey revealed that the number of video game consoles in U.S. television households has expanded by 18.5% since late 2004. By late 2006, there were 45.7 million homes with video game consoles, representing 41.1% of all TV households.

WHEREIN WE SAY "YES!" TO NIS!

After teasing us for months, NISA busts with their new summer lineup and they've come out and said for reals: *Disgaea* coming to the PSP in the USA. If you import feature from last issue, you'll note that we went a little gaga over the title. It gets even better: the US version will have even *more* goodies than the Japanese version did. NISA also announced three new titles for American release this summer: *Dragoneer's Aria*, *Soul Nomad*, and *Grim Grimoire*. *Soul Nomad* is the first NIS-developed title since *Disgaea 2*.

BLUE DRAGON

ブルードラゴン

Preview by Wanderer

publisher: microsoft • developer: mistwalker • release date: 8/2007
genre(s): rpg • category: double-deuce at squeenix • # of players: 1

Akira Toriyama fans, you're in luck, because his artistic stamp is all over *Blue Dragon*. There is no way to ignore his contributions, either to the characters or to the world they inhabit; the game is set in the same high-energy, explosion-happy, world-destroying martial-arts continuum that is Toriyama's unique domain.

For example, it is important at this juncture to inform you that one of the bosses, an otherwise unremarkable dragon, can occasionally opt to summon backup in the form of an enormous pink pile of crap, referred to in-game as a "Jumbo Poo."

Yes. *Blue Dragon* is a game where you kick the crap out of something... **and the crap kicks you right back.**

A deeply jet-lagged Hironobu Sakaguchi was showing off his game in San Francisco just before the GDC, and it's mostly interesting because of what it isn't. With Square-Enix and Level-5 both embracing the grind-happy MMO mechanic for their recent singleplayer CRPGs, *Blue Dragon* is a traditional turn-based RPG. Your party of five characters summons mystical and powerful avatars (the protagonist Shu's is a blue dragon, and there you have your title) and faces off against monsters in a Toriyama-influenced brawl, complete with lengthy attack animations that look like **they should crack the world in half.**

In the game's overworld, you can see mobs coming, much like in *Chrono Trigger* or *Grandia*, and use certain skills to impede, destroy, or evade them. For example, you can slap a force field on Shu and mow a mob down, backstab it, or hit it with a grenade. If you screw up, it's combat time, complete with **zooming camera angles.**

Blue Dragon is a forty-hour journey to save the world from evil, and the first salvo from Mistwalker. Will it save the 360 in Japan? Will it be any damn good whatsoever? I plan to sic Lynxara on **it in a few months and find out!**

SHADOWRUN

Preview by Wanderer

Publisher: **Microsoft**
Developer: **FASA Studio**
Release Date: **6/1/2007**

Genre(s): **First-Person Shooter**
Category: **Razorguys and Samurais, Chummer**
# of Players: **1-16**

Tabletop gamers know *Shadowrun* as an unnecessarily complex game that fuses cyberpunk and fantasy into a bizarre, cohesive whole. Video gamers know *Shadowrun* from the cult favorite RPGs on the SNES and Genesis.

Naturally, the upcoming *Shadowrun* is a *Counter-Strike*-style multiplayer FPS, by the same devs that gave us *Mechassault* and *Crimson Skies*. It makes no sense, but it plays well.

Shadowrun 2007 is set a few decades before the "modern day" in the tabletop game; thus, it's prior to the development of the cyberpunk culture that informs the tabletop game. As a member of the RNA Corporation, you wish to leverage the reawakened forces of magic for your own gain. As a member of the secret society called the Lineage, you want to protect that magic.

Thus, it's cultists vs. mercenaries in a brawl for it all, using automatic weapons, cyberware, and spells. Mages can glide long distances, randomly teleport, sprout a tree of life to heal their team, resurrect allies, and summon elementals. At the same time, though, they can't use much in the way of cyberware, which means one cybered-up gunman or swordsman could feed them their lunch. The mages add a large element of strategy to what could otherwise be Yet Another Multiplayer FPS.

Shadowrun is multiplayer only, with its singleplayer mode limited to competition against bots. It'll also be the first game to support Microsoft's Live Anywhere, with Live subscribers on the PC able to go head-to-head against 360 gamers. At the time of this writing, Microsoft had yet to finalize what Gold members get that Silver users don't.

The worst thing about *Shadowrun*, honestly, is its not being an RPG. After going hands-on with it, it's a solid and surprisingly strategic FPS, and should greatly appeal to those who're unfamiliar with the license. If you *are* familiar with the license, rein in the nerd rage.

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TABULA RASA™

Talking to Richard Garriott about MMOs is weirdly like discussing them on a message board. He doesn't sound like he actually likes them that much. Garriott describes typical MMO combat as "whack-a-mole," and at this year's GDC, talked at length about how MMOs represent a step backwards for interactive storytelling. (Witness, for example, players queuing up and waiting for a particular boss to respawn.)

Unlike your favorite forum's legion of trolls, though, Garriott is Lord British, and as such, he's in a position to solve the problems he sees. *Tabula Rasa* is what happens when his team deliberately tries to reinvent the MMO wheel.

Players in *Tabula Rasa* are Recruits in the Allied Free Sentients, a patchwork army of those who've survived attacks by the planet-destroying alien species known as the Bane. As you level up, you can progress along a class tree at certain points, shaping your character as you go. Should you want to explore a new character track, you can save your character at earlier points in his development, thus going back and changing his class or even his gender.

Tabula Rasa is action-heavy. It's difficult to remember it's an MMO while you're watching the combat, which looks like *Saving Private Ryan* with laser rifles. It's also focused around instances. Instead of feeling like you're one player among many in a world that won't ever really change, the game is designed to perpetuate the illusion that you and your friends are playing out a unique, epic storyline.

Whether or not you agree with Garriott, his team is deliberately trying to innovate... or rather, they're trying to move MMOs forward to the higher standards of interactive storytelling that singleplayer games have achieved. It'll be interesting to see if and to what extent he succeeds.

Preview by **Wanderer**

Publisher: NCSoft
Developer: NCSoft
Release Date: Q3 2007
Genre: MMORPG
Category: Kill Aliens, Win Fabulous Prizes
# of Players: Quite A Damn Few

PIRATES of the Burning Sea

Preview by **Wanderer**

Publisher: **Flying Labs Software**
Developer: **Flying Labs Software**
Release Date: **June 2007**
Genre(s): **MMORPG**
Category: **Insert Pirate Slang Here**
# of Players: **Many**

The year is 1720. You find yourself with a dead captain, a new rank, your own vessel, and a mysterious treasure map to decode. Welcome, as it were, to the Burning Sea.

Pirates of the Burning Sea is the *other* pirate-themed MMO coming out soon, and it's being self-published by the Seattle-area developer Flying Labs Software. It's a very different game than *Pirates of the Caribbean Online*, though; the latter is a cartoony, all-ages MMO that's being designed to run on anything short of a toaster oven taped to a TV. *Burning Sea*, which has been in development since 2003 (when Flying Labs put *Delta Green* on hold to focus on it) is aimed at an older, more MMO-savvy audience.

Each player is the captain of their own ship in *Burning Sea*, with a thousand missions to choose from. The game is set in a pseudo-realistic Caribbean Sea, with players taking the part of English, French, Spanish, and free pirate captains vying for supremacy.

Players can work with their nations to control contested islands, while others can sit the conflict out entirely and work within the player-run economy. If you want new guns, sails, or hulls, you'll need to talk to other players for them.

There are a thousand missions to choose from in *Burning Sea*, a hundred of which have to do with the main plot. You can even sail out to investigate what will be known as the Bermuda Triangle, and battle the supernatural. My favorite part is that as you fight, you'll "unlock" various disfigurations, such as eyepatches and hooks.

Pirates of the Burning Sea is basically the result of a bunch of MMO fans sitting down and making the game that they want to play, which is something you always have to respect. It'll be interesting to see how the fans react to it.

FABLE 2

PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT • DEVELOPER: LIONHEAD • RELEASE DATE: 2008
GENRE: SANDBOX ADVENTURE • CATEGORIES: A BOY AND HIS DOG • # OF PLAYERS: 1

We are currently in the most exciting stage of the build-up to a new Lionhead Studios game, where Peter Molyneux begins promising the moon. As I write this, it's the day before GDC 2007 starts and Molyneux is in the Chapman Hotel in San Francisco, saying more than he probably should about his brand-new game.

Fable 2 is once again set in Albion, five hundred years after the events of the first game. You begin as a boy or girl this time, and play out the events of your adventurer's life from start to finish. You'll be able to once again meet, woo, and marry both men and women, and perhaps even have a child with them. This presents you with the infrequently-seen option to play the game as a pregnant hero, complete with a gradually swelling belly.

Molyneux's big innovation with *Fable 2*, and thus where a lot of the fannish disbelief is coming from, is an attempt to make the game inspire emotional reactions based on love. For one thing, you can now come home after a long day's adventuring and watch your character's child run out the door to greet you. That child will reflect your current ethical approach to the game; if you're good, the kid's an angel, and if you're bad, he's a bully.

For another, your character will get a puppy early on, which will develop into a dog. That dog represents a major gameplay mechanic, as an early warning system, a guide, an additional attacker, and more, although you don't give it orders. Lionhead has actually employed psychologists to make good and damn sure that you learn to love and take care of your character's dog.

There's still a lot that Molyneux is making sure not to say, so there's a lot more information left to track down and report on *Fable 2*. Future bulletins, then, as events warrant.

Preview by Wanderer

ZENDOKU

Publisher: Eidos Interactive
Developer: Zoonami
Release Date: Spring 2007
Genre(s): Puzzle
Category: Sudoku
# of Players: 1-4

Preview by Honestgamer

Sudoku is the popular numbers game sweeping bookstores and newspapers throughout the world. It plays like this: digits are arranged on a 3-by-3 grid, which itself makes up one ninth of a larger grid. A puzzle begins with several numbers inked in. Your job is to then arrange the rest so that no horizontal or vertical row of nine numbers contains the same digit. Depending on where the initial few characters are placed, this can be either reasonably simple or extremely difficult. It's also rather addictive.

Though handhelds already play home to their fair share of Sudoku titles, Eidos will soon release another entry into the crowded genre: *Zendoku*. The bizarre title hopes to turn Sudoku on its mathematical head and bring the phenomenon to a wider audience, one made up of more traditional puzzle game fans. From what we've played, success seems probable.

Zendoku differs from its peers by offering an action-oriented version of the popular pastime. Numbers are replaced by colorful symbols and you're asked to compete against a computer opponent. When you finish rows or boxes or you place all nine of a given tile, your rival is interrupted by a distracting mini-game. It works the other way around, too. For example, in the DS version you'll go from placing tiles to blowing on the microphone, or tapping the screen quickly to block projectiles or smash tiles. You'll even spin it in circles to open doors.

If you're not into time limits and stress, you can also mellow out with Sudoku in its standard form, presented here with a simple design that makes it easy to play. You can also choose from five skill levels, ensuring that anyone can go from "Su-do-what?" to Sudoku addict in a matter of minutes. Kickstart your addiction soon.

KANE & LYNCH
DEAD MEN

He's a former family man who's plunged into a morass of corruption, crime, violence, and betrayal! He's a schizophrenic convicted murderer who sometimes forgets to take his medication! Put them together... and wackiness ensues!

Kane & Lynch is the latest project from Io Interactive, the studio that developed the *Hitman* series. As Adam Kane, you owe a crime cartel a great deal of money. If Kane brings them that money, they'll let his ex-wife and daughter live, but whatever he does, they'll still kill him. Accompanied at all times by Lynch, who the player can direct but not control, Kane must perform a series of highly dangerous criminal acts across the globe.

Hitman is notable for having an excellent system for cinematic combat that then punishes you for getting into gunfights at all; *Kane & Lynch*, however, does not have that problem. You can and will engage small armies of well-armed individuals in destructible environments, in an extraordinarily well-rendered game world. The guys at Io are bringing their knack for morally ambiguous storytelling out in full force, accompanied by a truly next-gen graphics engine.

Preview by Wanderer

Unreal TOURNAMENT III

Midway's big *Unreal* announcement from earlier this year was that the game's name was being changed to, simply, *Unreal Tournament III*, and that the game will make its way to the PS3 and Xbox 360.

Epic, flushed from the success of *Gears of War*, has included a brand-new singleplayer campaign with *UTIII*. As one of the competitors in the Unreal Tournament, you find yourself on a mission of vengeance when the alien Necris slaughters your clan. You promptly head to the front lines of the war to get your revenge.

Of course, that's probably somewhere around the bottom of the list of reasons to pick up *UT3*, just above the nutritional content of the box it comes in. The graphics have been enhanced, the weapons have been upgraded, the PC version comes with the Unreal Engine 3 Toolset, and now every character comes factory-standard with a nifty hoverboard, allowing you to progress quickly over both land and water. One of the fastest, goriest, most popular FPSes out there has just become moreso.

Preview by Wanderer

WARHAWK

Preview by JPeeples

Publisher: SCEA
Developer: Incog Inc.
Release Date: 6/1/2007

Genre(s): Aeronautic Combat
Category: ...with a sandbox twist
# of Players: 1-32 (online)

Absent from the gaming scene for nearly 12 years, *Warhawk* is set to be reborn on the PS3 this spring with a dramatic shift in gameplay. Instead of just engaging in aerial combat, you'll be able to descend from the skies and take control of vehicles found on the streets, or get out and fight with hand to hand combat and gunplay, like you would in any *GTA*-style sandbox game.

The SIXAXIS's motion sensitivity will allow you to gracefully control your aircraft through the skies, navigate terrain in a land vehicle, or get out and destroy your rivals with gunplay. If you'd prefer, you can also use a more traditional button/stick controller setup for all parts of the game.

In a surprising move, *Warhawk* will only be released as a PlayStation Network download, and not a retail game as originally expected. It will also lack a single-player campaign mode at launch, although one might be added later. The initial version of *Warhawk* instead will focus exclusively on multiplayer action. You'll be able to take part in deathmatches, team deathmatches, king of the hill, and territory-capturing combat. Over 2,500 stats will be kept for each game you play.

Other new additions include the ability to customize the appearance of your characters and vehicles with different outfits and paintjobs, respectively. Players will also be able to earn awards, ribbons, medals, and raise ranks for either yourself or your team.

This could be fun.

SUPER MARIO GALAXY

Preview by Jeremy

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO ☆ DEVELOPER: NINTENDO ☆ GENRE: ADVENTURE
CATEGORY: PLANETARY! ☆ RELEASE DATE: 2007 ☆ # OF PLAYERS: 1-2

Ever since it was first shown at the '06 E3, *Super Mario Galaxy* has been viewed as Wii's first original killer-app. So far, this space-based adventure looks like it could provide the most diverse Mario experience yet. Nintendo has teased footage of Mario climbing and battling a massive robot rival, traversing and traveling between small planets, and even crawling over odd locales like apples and fiery suns in his quest to once again save Princess Peach.

Nintendo's also shown off traditional side-scrolling platforming sections, and segments that use a fixed camera to allow precise navigation. Other portions of the game use a free-roaming, mostly automatic camera players can position using the C button and D-pad. Multiplayer support has been confirmed, with co-op play being the most likely mode.

Galaxy's controls are set to include many features that are new to the *Mario* series, thanks to the Nintendo Wii remote and nunchuk attachment. You'll shake either the remote or nunchuk to make Mario spin, use A to jump, Z to crouch, and the B to pick up objects or reflect an incoming enemy attack right back at them.

Based on the incredibly fun-looking segments shown off so far, *Galaxy* looks like it could be just the game Nintendo needs to redeem the console *Mario* experience after *Sunshine*'s lukewarm reception. The lucky few who have played *Galaxy* give it rave reviews, and the graphics prove that the Wii's light hardware can still pack a beautiful punch. After stumbling a bit with *Sunshine*, Nintendo appears to be ready to deliver a game with the same kind of simple but addictive gameplay that made the *Mario* series classic to begin with.

A few years from now, the world is running out of fuel. The economy begins to grind to a halt, the ecosystem is on the verge of collapse, and the Western Coalition is willing to go to war with the Red Star Alliance to take control of what oil supplies the world has left.

The result is a hard-fought urban war, set in the soon-to-be ruins of civilization. Fortunately, there's just enough oil left in the world to fuel a few impressive explosions, and to keep the tanks, helicopters, and armored humvees running.

Frontlines: Fuel of War is a new military FPS from the team that brought the world *Battlefield 2*, and as expected, it provides large-scale online firefights.

The weapons and equipment aren't strictly modern, but are inspired by upcoming military designs. Each player can select one of five classes and four secondary specialties, allowing you to attack your opponents with everything from high-tech rifles to a remote-controlled helicopter. At the same time, *Frontlines* abandons the "health bar" approach to player damage in favor of the slow regeneration seen in games like *Gears of War*. If you're about to die, hunt for cover until you can jump back into the game.

With up to sixty-four possible players in a match (or thirty-two on the 360), *Frontlines* looks like another LAN-party champion from a team that knows how to make them.

Preview by Wanderer

PUBLISHER: THQ
DEVELOPER: KAOS STUDIOS
GENRE: ACTION
CATEGORY: BLOOD FOR OIL
RELEASE DATE: SPRING 2007
 # OF PLAYERS: 1-64

FRONTLINES
FUEL OF WAR

Total Damage 639 Pyre Bunker 5 Hit Chain
Critical!
Critical!
エッジ 112/156 イリス 112/114
BURST

A few issues back, Wanderer declared *Final Fantasy XII* and *Rogue Galaxy* "the return of the grind." I doubt he had any idea just how right he was going to be. Guess what the guys over at Gust must've been playing before they sat down to make *Atelier Iris 3: Grand Fantasm*?

The result is easily the best thing Gust's made in *years*. While all the good stuff about the Gust approach is back, the shallow gameplay is mercifully gone in favor of the Raider's Guild. Protagonists Edge and Iris can take Quests in whatever order they please from the Guild, acquiring points and ph4t l3wtz to improve their standing as adventurers. Quests can range from simple monster hunting to weird minigames or completing new alchemy recipes. Some progress the story, but most are wholly optional and just unlock more Quests to explore.

Dungeon exploration in *Atelier Iris 3* is timed. The timer starts when you step into the dungeon, and no matter what you're doing, you're ejected when it runs out. So you need to manage time carefully inside dungeons, making sure to achieve your goals and wasting as little time as possible in combat. Monsters need to die quickly, either in full encounters or on the field. Inside dungeons are tons of items to harvest, Quest goals to complete, and weird minigames to play. Every new secret found or goal achieved improves your dungeon score, entitling you to fabulous prizes and mighty gamer peen.

The Gust games were always sweet candy to gamers with an all-consuming desire to find uncollected things in a game and collect them. *Atelier Iris 3* adds much-needed gameplay substance that makes the formula more addictive than ever before. Now there's so much stuff to do that *Atelier Iris 3* quickly becomes an obsession in a way that no previous game in the series ever could.

ATELIER IRIS 3
GRAND PHANTASM

Preview by Lynxara

Publisher: Namco Bandai
Developer: CyberConnect2
Release Date: May 2007
Genre(s): RPG
Category: Still Not Really Online
# of Players: 1

You can experience *.hack//G.U. Vol. 2: Reminisce* without playing its immediate predecessor, but it's not recommended. The newest game continues where the first one left off and even lets you load your existing save file. You're expected to hit the ground running.

Even returning veterans are in for a few surprises, though. The first is the Crimson VS card game, which is now available and playable (you may remember forum posts about it being down in vol. 1). Early on, you'll receive a few cards to start your virtual deck. While you're busy exploring worlds and fighting monsters, the computer automatically generates matches and results. If you created your deck well, you'll check in to find that your rank has climbed and your card collection has grown. If you lose a lot, well, better luck next time.

Another noteworthy addition is the ability to gather parts for the motorbike you ride through level hubs and dungeons. You'll be able to pick up all sorts of parts and create the vehicle of your dreams. This hobby doesn't have much to do with the game's plot, but at least it adds variety and makes it easier to tolerate the fact that the dungeon designs haven't evolved.

It shouldn't come as a surprise that *.hack//G.U. Vol. 2: Reminisce* is still about plot and dungeon crawling. Chim collection is now easier (your comrades can help kick the little scamps, finally) and there are a few other minor upgrades throughout, but for the most part this is just the second chapter of a game you've already played. If you're hooked on the plot, that should suit you just fine when *Reminisce* ships later this year.

Push @ bu
Meggido
HP

Preview by honestgamer

.hack//G.U.
Vol.2 // Reminisce

CONAN

Preview by Wanderer

Publisher: THQ
Developer: Nihilistic
Release Date: 2008

Genre(s): Action
Category: I Make Stabby
# of Players: 1

The original half-dressed, iron-thewed, princess-rescuing, horde-slaying barbarian hero is suddenly kind of a big deal. On top of the forthcoming *Age of Conan* MMO, we have *Conan*, the heartwarming adventures of a man, his swords, and the balletic art of competitive homicide.

Conan puts you in the role of Robert E. Howard's barbarian hero, in an action-adventure based strictly on Howard's novels; hence, there may very well be Serpent People, but Red Sonja will not be making an appearance.

Conan will always be armed with a single sword, but Nihilistic is using next-gen systems' extra horsepower to make sure whatever drops on the battlefield stays there. Blood, bodies, and severed limbs will remain where they lie, as will your opponents' weapons. When combined with Conan's brute strength, this allows you to use a large variety of weapons, from swords and axes to giant rocks and torches. You can also earn and spend experience points to progress along several different skill trees, allowing different combos and special kills with different weapon setups.

Conan is a year from release as of this writing, and parts of it still need some serious polish. Nihilistic is a great studio, though, and the combat alone makes this game worth watching.

REVIEW

METEOS™ ASTRO BLOCKS

Meteos: Astro Blocks is the mobile adaptation of the Nintendo DS puzzle hit. It's about an evil planet that threatens the galaxy, and only quick reflexes and block-moving skills can stop it. Gameplay involves a series of falling, differently colored blocks. You must match three of the same color, horizontally or vertically, to have them rocket back up out of the screen. There are also special blocks which, when matched, will destroy all blocks of one color, or destroy all blocks in a line and column around it.

Meteos: Astro Blocks has a number of different modes available. The main Star Quest mode takes you through each of the galaxy's planets facing three challenges each. A survival mode pits you against an endless supply of meteors, and a puzzle mode throws you a preset pattern of blocks which you must solve within a number of moves.

Every planet in Star Quest mode begins with the task of firing a set number of blocks off screen to complete. That is then followed with a challenge to fire a set number of blocks within a strict time frame. The final challenge alternates between solving a puzzle and fighting a boss. The boss will hover around the top of the screen, and hitting it with the rocketing meteors will drain its life and destroy it. This makes timing critical.

For those that have played the DS version there are a number of changes. First and most prominent is the ability to move meteors horizontally as well as vertically. This helps balance out the lack of a touch screen and the speed it provides. In the DS version you could move blocks vertically even if they did not match, but in the mobile version you can only move blocks if they form a match. After beating Star Quest mode you will unlock a Classic mode which institutes all the DS rules, but on a mobile handset these rules really ramp up the difficulty.

Despite the lack of a touch screen, *Meteos: Astro Blocks* delivers the same great fast-paced experience as the original DS version. The mobile gameplay tweaks do a great job of adjusting the gameplay for the new hardware, and making sure the experience isn't unfairly difficult. While *Meteos* might not be flashy, its visuals still remain very colorful and interesting. Those looking for a great puzzler on their phone shouldn't hesitate in picking this one up.

Publisher: Gameloft
Developer: Gameloft
Release Date: 3/30/2006

Genre: Puzzle
Category: Blocks
# of Players: 1-4

FINAL SCORE : 4.5 of 5

ASPHALT 3
Street Rules

After a long hiatus, *Asphalt* returns with a third installment subtitled *Street Rules*. Like previous versions, it drops players into a variety of racing events built for speed that offer cash prizes. The game features exotic cars and locales, so the Street Rules moniker seems a bit out of place. There's nothing wrong with including high-end vehicles, since you can still bling out included cars like the Pagani Zonda F or the Lamborghini Gallardo Spyder. Still, when you think "street," you're probably thinking more along the lines of Honda, Nissan and Scion.

There are twelve vehicles available, including three motorcycles, and a total of 28 races. There are five race types: Race, Beat'em All, Duel, Cop Chase and Cash Attack. In Race, the objective is to come in first, always starting from the very back of the pack in 8th place. In Beat'em All, you must destroy as many opponents as possible, including cops, before the race is over. Duel is a one-on-one battle and Cop Chase has you hunting down one specific vehicle to destroy. Finally, in Cash Attack, you race to get boatloads of money by smashing cars and barriers, jumping and drifting.

As in the first two titles, the racing is mainly done in "catch up" mode where you must drive fast, steer quickly and overcome all of your competitors, not to mention avoid police in hot pursuit. Winning the race, performing drifts and other risky maneuvers adds up money so that you can unlock new cars, tracks and mod kits. This time around you can also unlock one of three girlfriends. By selecting one of them as your good luck charm, they affect the races differently. One adds more nitro, another minimizes police pursuits, and the third adds bonus cash if you wind up on the local TV newscast.

In the garage, you can tune your car of choice in sixteen different categories. These run the gamut from paint, decals, and wheels, to turbo boosts and weight. You name it, and it can probably be tuned. There are a number of upgrades in each of these categories and they all affect different cars in different ways, so what might work on one car won't work on another. While the tuning option seems quite extensive, it hardly affects performance when you're flying down the tracks.

Aside from adding more cars, mod kits, tracks, and the dubious unlockable girlfriends, the racing in *Asphalt 3: Street Rules* doesn't really feel very different from *Asphalt 2*. It's more of an upgrade instead of something entirely new, and in some ways isn't as enjoyable as its predecessor. You'll still have fun with it if it's your first time taking the franchise out for a spin, but nonetheless, the *Asphalt* series is beginning to feel a bit dated.

Publisher: Gameloft
Developer: Gameloft
Release Date: 10/13/2006

Genre: Racing
Category: Action
# of Players: 1

FINAL SCORE :
3 of 5

WHAT DEVELOPED AT GDC 2007

A JUNKET JOURNAL BY: DANIEL KAYSER OF GAMETRAILERS.COM

Heading into the 2007 Game Developer's Conference in San Francisco, there were plenty of important questions on the minds of gamers throughout the world. Will Sony step up to the plate and *finally* unveil its plans for a direct competitor to Xbox Live? Will Microsoft steal the show with a huge announcement or flood the press with the first glimpses of *Halo 3* in-game footage? Will Nintendo have any surprises up its sleeve?

Fortunately, all of these questions got answered, and yours truly was on hand to watch it all unfold. Since the week of GDC 2007 was certainly a busy one, I thought I'd chronicle the events of one of the busiest days as it unfolded with an hour by hour look at what went down. You're always saying you want to have a job in the game industry, right? Well, here's a taste of what it's like to cover a huge event like GDC.

Tuesday — 3/6/07 — San Francisco, California

8:00 AM — Fresh off a late-night flight and three-hour time change, I headed down to the lobby of our hotel to meet up with the GameTrailers.com team and head out to our first shoot: Microsoft's press event at a nearby location in San Fran. We checked in, gathered our crew and headed up to a mezzanine level where we had been told to sit tight until the event started. Well, apparently, about fifty or sixty other journalists had been told the same thing, and we all began to slowly crowd into a hallway not nearly big enough for the lot of us.

10:00 AM — After about 25 minutes of playing elbow smash with my industry friends, we got word to head upstairs for the first presentation of the day: Bioware's *Mass Effect*. Now, I have been excited about this game for a long, long time, so heading into the presentation I had pretty high expectations, and Bioware delivered in spades. (see hightlights page for more information)

11:00 AM — After the Bioware presentation, it was time to check out the cross-platform pioneer *Shadowrun*. We got a demo of the game running simultaneously on both the Xbox 360 and PC, and I can honestly say that it has come a long way since I last saw it a month or so ago at CES. The most impressive thing about this game (and its key selling point) is the seamless cross-platform functionality that will soon become a staple of Microsoft's online gaming initiative.

12:45 PM — Once we took a brief lunch break, it was time to head back for a presentation of *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey* by gaming guru **Hironobu Sakaguchi** (*Final Fantasy* series). Honestly, the presentation was a little awkward due to Sakaguchi-san's limited English, but it was still a great chance to see the games in action. Overall, *Lost Odyssey* had a much more mature look and feel to it than *Blue Dragon*; you can check out Wanderer's preview of the latter on page 12.

1:45 PM — We took a break from all the RPG love to check out what Microsoft has coming up in the Xbox Live Arcade/Casual Gaming department. Microsoft's **Chris Early** walked us through a presentation of several new Xbox Live Arcade titles that showcased the breadth and scope of the service as a whole. Topping the list was *Boom Boom Rocket* (EA/Bizarre Creations) which is a rhythm-based puzzle game that felt like doing DDR with your fingertips instead of your entire body.

SHADOWRUN

BLUE DRAGON

CRITICAL

Early expressed how Microsoft initially underestimated the potential of XBLA and thusly have been understaffed since launch. They are adding more people, more games and really fleshing out the Arcade portion of the Xbox Live experience in the coming months. Microsoft also announced that the size limit for Xbox Live Arcade titles will go from 50MB to 150MB, allowing developers to include much more material and enhance the quality of games on the service overall.

2:45 PM — Now came the moment I had really been waiting for. I stepped through the crowded corridor and greeted Lionhead's **Peter Molyneux**, who was preparing to deliver a presentation on *Fable 2* for the Xbox 360. The crowd of journalists settled in and Molyneux began to express his overall goal with the title, which is rather ambitious to say the least. (Check out our preview on page 18!)

3:45 PM — Wow... what a day... I'm still going and in need of a boost to keep me up. Luckily, Microsoft set up an amazing racing simulator utilizing five Xbox 360 consoles and five monitors to show off *Forza Motorsport 2*. **Dan Greenwalt**, the game's producer, said that his goal was to not only appeal to hardcore gearheads, but to also make the game approachable to guys like me who don't know the nuances of the sport. This is accomplished in a myriad of ways, not the least of which is an extensive customization feature to guide you though the personalization of your car.

4:30 PM — The last activity on the schedule during the Microsoft Press event was an RPG roundtable discussing innovation within the genre. Hosted by **Geoff Keighly** of Spike TV's Game Head and featuring Lionhead's **Peter Molyneux**, Bioware's **Ray Muzyka**, and Mistwalker Studio's **Hironobu Sakaguchi**, the discussion covered important topics like the influence of online in the RPG genre, defining what a true role-playing experience should be, and evaluating how game creators can further immerse players with the latest technologies.

6:00 PM — After leaving the Microsoft Press Event, it was time to head to a local gallery for the pre-presentation of Sony's keynote. While the official keynote (given by the World Wide Studios President for Sony Computer Entertainment **Phil Harrison**) would take place in front of a crowd of thousands early the next morning, this was **Phil Harrison's** and Sony's chance to talk intimately with the gaming press and get the big announcements out into the open.

PLAYSTATION "HOME"

PLAYSTATION "HOME"

As I mentioned in the opening of this article, Sony had some big questions to answer heading into GDC. When Harrison came front and center to announce the PlayStation *"Home"* network, the future for Sony became a lot clearer. By now, you have more than likely seen a demonstration of the *Home* network (see hightlights page), but to summarize, it is Sony's answer to both Microsoft's Xbox Live online gaming community and Nintendo's customizable Mii feature

on the Wii. Achievements mixed with friends, mixed with customization, mixed with online play and a lot of advertising... it's kind of crazy, honestly, and perhaps way too complex of a design, but it's the positive type of announcement Sony has needed in the wake of lackluster PS3 sales.

After the *Home* announcement, Harrison brought up the team from **Media Molecule**, makers of *Little Big Planet*, a new "killer app" for the PlayStation 3 whose cute approach and impressive showcase of the system's capabilities proved to be the talk of the show in most circles. The demonstration (which can be seen on GameTrailers.com) brought to life a beautiful playground type environment in which the four playable characters create and explore platform gaming-like scenarios.

9:30 PM — The last stop on the day's Crazy Train of GDC Event Coverage was EA's Wii event at the Swig in San Francisco. Mainly, this was a chance to get some hands-on time with several of EA's upcoming Wii games and wind down after a rather long day.

On display were several titles including *SSX: Blur, Tiger Woods PGA Tour '07, The Godfather: Black Hand Edition,* and *Medal of Honor: Vanguard*. They all played pretty well, but aside from *Tiger*, I didn't feel that using the Wiimote within these already established franchises added anything terribly fantastic to the gameplay. Different, yes; amazing, no.

12 Midnight — So there you have it: an hour-by-hour breakdown of a whirlwind day that can only be summed up as exciting, entertaining, and exhausting. I was happy to see so many questions answered right before my eyes, and looked forward to what Nintendo would bring to the table later in the week. GDC is continuing to grow in relevance as one of the best places for the world's biggest companies to showcase make-or-break material for the world's biggest gaming companies. I can only imagine what it will be like next year.
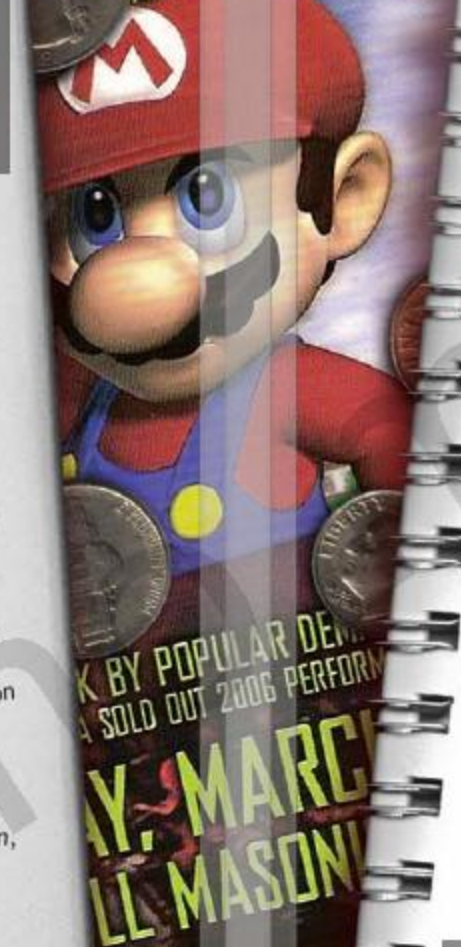
# THE HIGHLIGHTS OF GDC 2007

NINTENDO

While Sony used GDC as a platform to make a major announcement, and Microsoft used it to generate buzz for its upcoming titles, Nintendo's presence at GDC focused more on what it's become known for over the past several years: innovation and fun.

Shigeru Miyamoto's keynote on Thursday morning was, for many, an exclusive opportunity to see perhaps the biggest legend in the industry take the stage. Miyamoto talked about his creative vision, how it has impacted his projects in the past, and how it is important for game developers to be persistent in their pursuit of great ideas. He pointed out that the violent nature of the most recent popular games has transformed popular perception of gamers from adventurous, fun-loving children to angry, zombie-like teens. To counteract this trend, Miyamoto said he has adopted a new barometer to gauge his success: the reaction of a completely new demographic of gamer, embodied by his wife.

He spoke about gaming's ability to reach and engage new users, how innovative new ideas and gameplay mechanics would help break down the barriers to entry for those users, and how broadening the landscape of gaming was a good scenario for all involved. He stated that his wife had never been interested in gaming until she began to watch their daughter play *Animal Crossing* on the Nintendo GameCube. That was when Miyamoto realized that

traditional non-gamers could learn to enjoy the medium if they were approached correctly.

Because of their shared love for the furriest member of the Miyamoto household, the concept of *Nintendogs* was born. The universally appealing concept, combined with the unique functionality of the DS, gave Miyamoto a new avenue in which to pursue the transformation of his wife from non-gamer to gamer. The approach led to one of the most successful titles in recent memory and not only transformed his wife, but also made gaming accessible to a large number of people who had never touched a controller before.
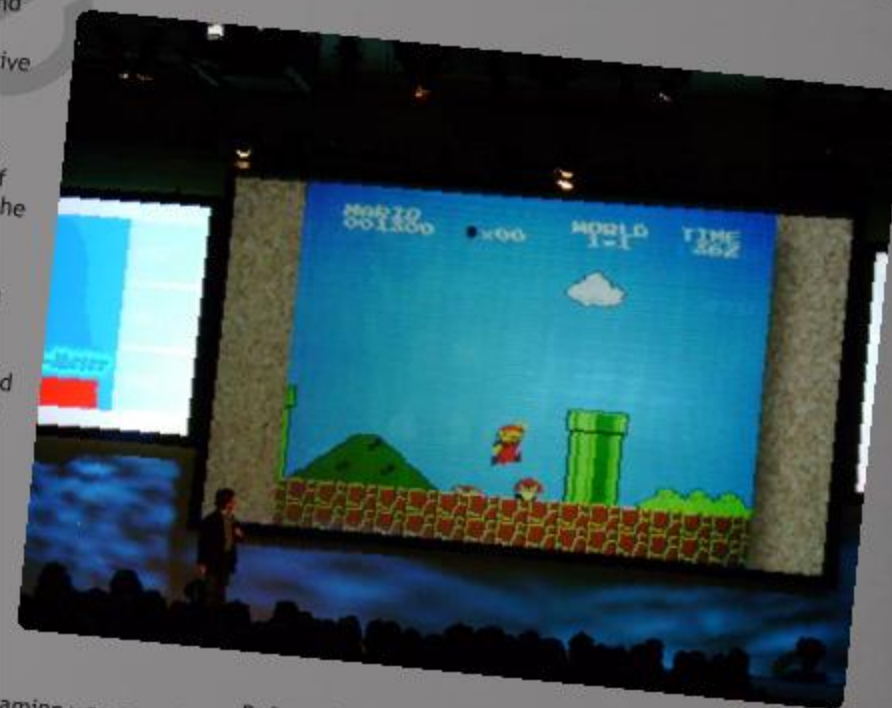
Before the curtain closed on the keynote, Nintendo treated its fans to some never-before-seen footage of *Super Mario Galaxy*, the highly anticipated Wii title due out later this year. You've probably seen the trailer yourself by now, but the receptive nature of the audience at GDC helped solidify the hype for this game. You can check more about *Super Mario Galaxy* on page 23.

As for Nintendo's presence on the show floor, the big win for many was a playable version of *Super Paper Mario* on the Nintendo Wii. Mario's amazing abilities now include switching between 2D and 3D viewpoints, and its usage of the Wii remote felt anyhthing but forced. More importantly, the game was fun, and crowds of people swarmed the Nintendo booth waiting for their chance to get some quality hands-on time.

While Nintendo didn't blow the doors off of GDC, it certainly left its mark. There were no real showstoppers to write home about, but rather, it was a solidification of the vibe that Nintendo is, if nothing more, the most *fun* game company in the business today.

SONY HIGHLIGHTS AT GDC '07
The PlayStation "Home" Network

What would happen if you combined the online gaming capabilities and achievement system of Xbox Live, the unique customization of the Miis on the Nintendo Wii, and the community-based aspects of MySpace.com, and wrapped it all into a virtual online space? Well, you would have Sony's vision for the future of the PlayStation 3: an online, persistent, networked, 3D avatar-based community Sony calls Home.

"The most impressive feature in Home is the variety of ways in which multiple consumers, as well as our third-party partners, can experience the next generation of communication by interacting and sharing among each other." said Kawanishi. "I feel strongly that this unique blend of community, user-generated content, collaboration and commerce will expand the future of computer entertainment."

Home, which goes into closed beta testing this spring with a full launch targeted for fall of 2007, will be available as a free download from the PlayStation Store and will be accessible to users as a free standing app directly from the PlayStation 3 Cross Media Bar.

Little Big Planet

Little Big Planet certainly has the potential to be the next big thing. Why? Well, it looks freakin' fun, that's why! Introduced during Sony's press conference, the virtual playground platformer developed by Media Molecule (founded in part by Rag Doll Kung Fu creator Mark Healy) allows players to manipulate the environment to individually, collaboratively, or competitively create and share their own custom-built spaces.

PLAYSTATION "HOME"

The announcement of the Home network came as little surprise to most journalists in attendance at GDC due to a widely publicized leak a few days prior, but the impact of the now officially announced new social network has sent waves throughout the industry.

As a part of the overall strategy called "Game 3.0," Home offers a real-time online world where users can interact, shop, communicate, play online games, and even deck out their own personal spaces like apartments. All the customization you can expect will be included, and the whole thing ends up looking and feeling like a cross between The Sims and Second Life.

Sony is touting the Home network as a "next-generation" way for consumers to communicate and share, made evident by features like the "Hall of Fame," where users can display 3D trophies unlocked through in-game achievements, and real-time score rankings in PS3 games. SCEI's Corporate Executive Izumi Kawanishi stated that the functionality of the Home network as a whole is ultimately what will help differentiate the service.

LITTLE BIG PLANET

Utilizing a wide array of tools, items, objects, obstacles, and more, Little Big Planet takes full advantage of the PlayStation 3's CELL Processor to perform amazing physics rendering in real time. Fancy-pants features like dynamically editing, morphing, rotating and otherwise interacting with objects on the fly go a long way towards showing off what the system is apable of.

LITTLE BIG PLANET

In Little Big Planet, you assume the role of the ungodly cute Sack Boy (which can also be customized to your liking), and perform rudimentary platforming tasks such as grabbing, jumping, pushing, and running as you interact with the environment and other players. There are no enemies in the game (at least from what we've seen so far), and the main challenge simply lies in getting from the starting point to the finishing point by overcoming the environmental puzzles. The game is built with multiplayer in mind, so a lot of the tasks you'll be completing will require some good old-fashioned team work.

Little Big Planet's community aspect is also looking to be a highlight of the title. The integrated content-creation tools and easily accessible community features mean that new LBP levels should be surfacing all the time, and Sony expects nothing less than a vibrant, interactive community of users to be on board. A demo version of the game is shipping on the PlayStation Network during the fall of 2007, and a full version of the game is expected to hit sometime in 2008.

MICROSOFT HIGHLIGHTS AT GDC '07
Mass Effect

One of the biggest games on the horizon for Microsoft's Xbox 360 console is Bioware's Mass Effect. The next-gen RPG from the makers of amazing titles such as Baldur's Gate, Neverwinter Nights, Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, and Jade Empire has certainly been turning heads and grabbing headlines as of late.

During Microsoft's press event at GDC, journalists got the chance to get an inside look at the game as demonstrated by Bioware's Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk. The most amazing thing about the

demonstration was the sheer scope of the game and the feeling that your character is really playing a small part in a greater galactic battle. In fact, Bioware has been fond of comparing your in-game exploits as Commander Shepard (the default lead character) to something like "Jack Bauer in Space."

The story in Mass Effect (machines heading to the galaxy to harvest organic life after a 50,000 year hiatus) is certainly one of the game's key strengths, and as any veteran of previous Bioware titles knows, there will be plenty of meat on the bone in terms of plot. What's great about the story, though, is your ability to interact with it. The dialogue tree from previous Bioware games has been given a next-gen face lift, and with the game's amazingly lifelike "digital actors," it truly looks and feels as though you're playing a movie.

Of course, the greatest, most interactive story in the world wouldn't be worth experiencing if the gameplay itself wasn't any fun. Fortunately, Bioware has learned from its failures and successes of the past to provide a gameplay experience that can be customized to the liking of each individual player. Want to have direct control over your aim when firing the advanced weaponry of the Mass Effect universe? Need to slow down the battle and strategically place the members of your party? Want to customize your character to be more effective in specific attributes and abilities? It's all here, and from what I saw, it was all well thought out and easy to implement.

There's so much to talk about with this game that it's hard to summarize in a few short paragraphs. The hype behind Mass Effect is, well, rather massive, so we'll look forward to following its progress and reporting back on an updated build of the game once we get some hands-on time.

MASS EFFECT

As per the rules of Games Writing Union #514, I am obliged to mention this now: games based on movies, particularly big overmarketed summer blockbusters, tend to suck out loud. This is unvarnished truth, and has been since the early days of video games.

Games based on comic book characters don't have a great track record either. Marvel looks a great deal better in this respect than DC, naturally, with only occasional misfires like the PSOne *Fantastic Four*. It's still rare that a comic-based game rises above the level of "okay," though.

Thus, if past expectations are anything to go by, a game based on a comic book character who is starring in a big overmarketed summer blockbuster should be mediocre at best.

In 2004, though, *Spider-Man 2* — while not flawless by any measure of the imagination — defied these admittedly low expectations.

It did so by creating a persistent world out of Manhattan Island and giving it to you to play in, complete with random crimes to solve, super-villains to thrash, and a rough outline of the movie's plot to follow.

The random crimes were incredibly repetitive; the graphics were primitive; and several of the plot-sensitive missions were insanely difficult, but *Spider-Man 2* succeeded mostly because it was actually a comic-book game.

It wasn't, in associate producer Will Townsend's phrase, "dressing up in Spider-Man pajamas;" you weren't a generic Punchy Hero wearing red and blue, with a few poorly-thought-out web-based moves that were harder to use than they needed to be, fighting a blob of pixels that was supposed to be a classic villain.

You actually *were* Spider-Man, and the city was your playground. Somebody had finally gotten at least part of it right.

Now, somebody's finally gotten the *rest* of it right.

Story by Wanderer

SPIDER-MAN 3 ™

PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION
DEVELOPER: TREYARCH (PS3, 360, PS2, WII, PSP), VICARIOUS VISIONS (DS, GBA)

GENRE: ADVENTURE   CATEGORY: DOES WHATEVER A SPIDER CAN
RELEASE DATE: 5/4/2007   ESRB RATING: TEEN

THE SECOND VERSE

A year after the release of *Spider-Man 2*, Activision released *Ultimate Spider-Man*, which was set up like a "lost issue" of the comic book of the same name. It co-starred the Ultimate version of Spider-Man's antagonist Venom, and allowed the player to alternate between the two. Spider-Man, while he'd lost the slow-motion Spider Reflexes from the last game, played much as he always had, while Venom was a muscle-bound brawler who cracked pavement, clawed his way up walls, and devoured bystanders alive when he needed health.

The cel-shaded graphics on *Ultimate Spider-Man* were an immense improvement over those of *Spider-Man 2*, but Spidey had lost so many moves in the transfer between games that it felt dumbed-down.

It also didn't help that roughly half of the story missions were either gimmicky boss fights where most of the moves you *did* have were worthless, or chase missions where Spidey or Venom were forced to pursue a faster and vastly more maneuverable target.

Just like its predecessor, *Ultimate Spider-Man* was an excellent simulation of a superhero patrolling New York, but fell flat on its face the moment you attempted to pursue the plot. It did one thing very, very well, but not well enough to make up for the rest of the game.

LET'S TRY THIS ONE AGAIN

Naturally, then, I was skeptical about *Spider-Man 3*, and went into this story asking several very pointed questions: would it be insanely difficult to finish the story mode? Would the same five random street crimes be repeated over and over again? Would I have to catch that little kid's balloon? Would every other mission be a chase scene?

The answers were promising, and going hands-on with the game was moreso. *Spider-Man 3* is a dramatic improvement on its predecessors, and as a fan of the character, I'm happy to say I can actually recommend the game without qualifications.

THE BASICS OF THE PLOT

In the *Spider-Man* movieverse, Flint Marko (Thomas Haden Church) is the burglar who killed Peter Parker's uncle Ben. An unspecified accident transforms him into the Sandman, with the ability to transform his body into a mass of silicon particles. Thus, he can slip through cracks, become as hard as stone, change his shape, and more.

At the same time, Spider-Man must contend with a bizarre new set of powers that he's acquired from a mysterious symbiote, as well as Harry Osborn, who's taken up his dead father's weaponry in an attempt to avenge him.

The symbiote takes the form of a dark, black-and-purple version of Spider-Man's usual uniform. It makes him faster, stronger, and more powerful, but it also makes him angrier and more brutal. He's got some extra powers when he needs them most, but what's it going to cost him?

THE HITCH IS VENOM COMES NEXT

Because *Spider-Man 3* is being published by Activision, it's coming out on every major console except for the Xbox ('cause it's dead) and the GameCube ('cause it's just about dead).

At the same time, because it's Activision, there are major differences between the various versions. While they all follow the same basic plot, and incorporate many of the same bonus fights against well-known villains from Spidey's rogues gallery, there are definite differences between many of the versions of the game.

One of the biggest problems with any version of the past open-world *Spider-Man* games was that their boss fights were bizarre. Most bosses in either game would be immune to most of the moves in your arsenal, including the use of Spidey's webbing. Thus, you'd either have to keep after them until they inexplicably forgot to block, or use some stage feature to stun them momentarily.

Instead of this, many of the major boss fights in any version of *Spider-Man 3* have been replaced with a series of quick-time events. At certain predetermined times, you'll have to press buttons rapidly as they flash onscreen to determine whether Spidey's current course of action will succeed or fail.

The result is that many of *Spider-Man 3*'s boss fights are wholly or in part interactive cutscenes, allowing for some of the same incredible fight choreography that characterizes the film. You'll

dodge through a hail of thrown cars in slow motion, use Spider-Man's webbing to deliver amazing combat maneuvers, and dispatch bosses with spur-of-the-moment tactics like slamming them through a water filtration device.

The game, like *Spider-Man 2*, doesn't limit itself to the movie's villains. Every version of the game has a sort of interconnected storyline, weaving new villains and threats together with the plot from the film.

These new villains include the Lizard, the monstrous result of Peter's professor Curt Connors's experiments with reptiles, and Mac Gargan, the cybernetically enhanced Scorpion. Both are classic Spidey villains from way back, and both have been dramatically redesigned for their appearances in the game. The Scorpion is now the unwitting pawn of an unknown third party, while the Lizard has back-up in the form of a small army of similarly mutated lizardmen like himself.

Spider-Man will also have to contend with outbreaks of gang violence throughout New York City. As you begin the game, each district of the city will appear red on your city map, indicating that it has a high level of street crime.

As he fights through the various thugs that are responsible for the gang violence, which range from gaudy punks to high-tech criminals to young teenage Goth girls (you and I both knew they were up to something), you can earn better moves, gradually lower the crime rate within each district, and come into conflict with another classic Spidey villain, whose identity Activision would prefer to remain secret at this point.

Finally, in many versions of the game, Peter Parker's day job as a photographer will come into play. You'll be asked to take various pictures throughout the city for points and, on the 360 version,

Achievements, in a minigame that Activision's publicist compares to the photography in *Dead Rising*.

This is also a part that I'm a little wary of, actually, as the photography mission that Activision showed me involved sneaking past a few mobsters in order to get into position for the shot. *Spider-Man 3* has a pretty solid and versatile engine, but it's not set up for stealth at all, and it showed. Hopefully, these missions aren't critical to the game's main story.

The 360 and PS3 versions of *Spider-Man 3*, maybe predictably, look amazing. All the characters look and move almost exactly like their real-life counterparts, making the notion that you're playing through the movie almost feasible.

The entire city of Manhattan Island returns as the backdrop for the game, completely recreated just as it was before. The city's sewer and subway systems have been added to the map, and can be explored at your leisure.

The fight choreography has also been augmented. The Spider Reflexes from *Spider-Man 2* have been put back into the game, allowing the player to briefly slow the action down by pressing a button. While Spider Reflexes are active, it's easy to dodge and instantly counter enemy attacks, whether they're coming from thugs or from bosses like the Scorpion.

As you progress through the game and win fights, you'll gradually unlock more and better moves for Spidey; the "Spidey Store" from *Spider-Man 2* has been abandoned in favor of a more organic approach. By reaching certain events, you'll also be able to use his webs in new ways, to catch falling people, barricade doors, fix broken objects like train rails, and slingshot off of buildings.

You'll want to chase down side missions and random street crimes in order to gain these new techniques, which are generally easier to do than they were before. I was pulling off nearly effortless twelve-hit aerial combos within seconds of picking up the game. You can lay into a thug with a few quick punches, then knock them into the air, punch them back down to earth, snag them with a webline and yank them back up for more punishment, blast them with a barrage of web balls, or keep them airborne with a rapid series of kicks. There are a *lot* of moves in Spidey's arsenal.

You can also activate Spidey's spider-sense for short periods of time, which works sort of like other games' additional vision modes, such as the electrovision in the last couple of *Splinter Cells*. While your spider-sense is active, both enemies and plot-critical objects will glow brightly, and will even be visible through walls.

The most notable change, though, is the addition of the black suit. At certain points throughout the game, Spidey will change into his new costume, and gain the powers that go with it. When he does so, his entire movelist changes. He gains a great deal of power, with an assortment of combat moves that he not only *couldn't* use before, but he *wouldn't*.

Ordinarily, Spidey's moveslist is high on acrobatics, low on impact. He knocks thugs out with relatively little fanfare, and while what he does may look cool, it doesn't often look painful. When he's wearing the black suit, all bets are off. Suddenly, he'll jump on a grounded opponent and deliver a painful series of shots to the face. He'll ensnare an entire group of half a dozen thugs in an enormous spray of webbing, then slam the lot of them into the street. During a boss battle with the Sandman, he'll grab the Sandman and slam him facefirst into the side of a passing subway car, holding him there as the speeding car grinds away at the Sandman's head. Spidey's much more powerful, but he's also nowhere near the same hero that he was before.

CURRENT-GEN

Spider-Man 3 isn't as pretty on the PS2 and PSP, naturally, but it's got a few improvements that are all its own. It retains the interactive cutscenes and much of the game's plot, and is set within an open-world city that's roughly two and a half times the size of the city in *Spider-Man 2*.

These versions of the game also contain two bonus storylines featuring the relatively obscure villains Shriek and Morbius (one's a troubled woman with sonic powers who hasn't appeared since the '90s, and the other's a vaguely ridiculous pseudo-vampire; both are crying out for a movie-style redesign), which'll both be made to work within the larger plot.

In this version of the game, when you first gain the black suit, you'll be able to switch between it and the red and blue suit at will. Naturally, this means you'll be able to use the black suit's powers as often as you want, but they come with a cost. The more you use the black suit, the more you'll unwittingly endanger the city by amping up the crime rate within the city's districts. Activision is also broadly hinting that too much use of the black suit will make Spider-Man "unintentionally do things he's not aware of."

THE WII

The Wii version isn't wildly dissimilar to the PS2 and PSP versions, and features similar mechanics. This includes the extra storylines, and the ability to switch to the black suit at any given time, as well as the attendant cost.

Where this version gets interesting is in how it uses the Wii's controls. You'll use simple hand gestures to trigger the interactive cutscenes, naturally, but the really interesting part comes from the webslinging.

You'll sling webs using, alternatingly, the nunchuck and remote. Essentially, the Wii's controls *are* your webshooters.

It is a dork moment the likes of which has never been seen.

THE DS

The Nintendo DS version of *Spider-Man 3* is a wholly unique project. Instead of a 3D open-world game, it's a nonlinear 2.5D sidescroller; that is, it's a 2D game with 3D graphics.

You can explore each district of New York City as you see fit, using Spider-Man's webslinging and wallcrawling to reach the tops of taller buildings. Here, you can find various power-ups or civilians that may need your help. Down at street level, though, you can find the entrances to various optional missions, which you can access by drawing a vertical line on the touchscreen. These range from simple races to battles against supervillains or common criminals.

Each mission is generally set within the same district that it was found in, and will often involve a certain degree of crowd-pleasing violence. To attack an enemy, you simply draw toward him on the touchscreen. Spidey will react by delivering a punch.

Repeating lines on the touchscreen will result in longer combos, and various other drawn shapes will give you web tosses, uppercuts, and more. It's a little like playing Eddy Gordo in *Tekken*; you can get by if you just scribble crazily on the touchscreen, but once you get a feel for the system and start to get some control, you can pull off some really sick moves.

As you deliver and take damage, your Rage meter will gradually fill up. When it's full, Spidey will suddenly put on the black suit, gaining both speed and power for a limited amount of time.

By exploring each area and winning battles, you can earn cash which can then be spent in the Spidey Store. Here, you can unlock new moves and new backgrounds for the DS's touchscreen, including the new Spider-emblem for the black suit.

WHATEVER A SPIDER CAN

In the spirit of full disclosure, I do have my fanboy goggles on. I want to believe that *Spider-Man 3* will recapture the awesome feeling of *being* Spidey that previous games have had, without making me want to yank out my hair with frustration the way those same previous games did.

After an afternoon of playing *Spider-Man 3*, though, I've got some optimism back. The webslinging feels as solid as it ever did, and the interactive cutscenes have gone a long way towards fixing the problems that the series has always had with counterintuitive boss fights and infuriating story missions. This is just about everything a superhero game should be.

WHY LINUX ON YOUR PS3?

So let's say you're one of the happy campers who got a PS3 on launch day. Maybe you got a copy of *Resistance* and beat the crap out of it. Now, chances are, your PS3 sits gathering dust while you wait for *Lair* or something worth playing to come out.

Why not do something interesting with it in the mean time? Sony freely offers tools for installing Linux on your PS3 while allowing your system to retain all of its original functions. There are lots of things you can do with Linux on a PS3, but for a hardcore gamer, the most persuasive argument for it might be, well... more games — emulators, specifically. With Linux, you can turn your PS3 into a relatively inexpensive system capable of doing many of the same things any Linux-based home computer can do: play games using emulators, surf the web, check email, and collect pr0n (Phil Harrison will love you). This how-to guide will show you exactly how to get Linux installed on your PS3, and then how to get a little old homebrew emulator, called MAME, running on it. From there, you should have a pretty good idea about how to do the rest.

STEP-BY-STEP

First, you need to have access to all of the following things:

- A PS3. Duh.
- Ability to burn .iso files to blank DVD media.
- A flash drive and a flash memory stick that the PS3 supports. Your options here are really open, since the PS3 supports many kinds of flash memory. You can even use the PSP as a flash drive if need be.
- A USB keyboard and mouse.
- A monitor or television to view your PS3's video output on. We suggest HDMI output, and below that, component at an HD Resolution. Anything less leaves you stuck at the sucktastical resolution of 576x384, and that's just impractical for even casual computing. Check out the sidebar on page 50 for more instructions about configuring video once you've installed Linux.

This guide assumes you're using HDMI, or have it converted out to DVI. Your HDMI or DVI monitor needs to support HDCP. What is HDCP? It's a content protection protocol that the PS3 and a lot of other devices use that says STFU to any display devices that do not have it, so people can't pirate TV broadcasts or other entertainment media.

Next, you need to download these files:

- The Yellow Dog Linux distro for PS3. There are other distros available now, but only Yellow Dog is optimized for the PS3's memory as of this writing. Go to http://www.terrasoftsolutions.com/resources/ftp_mirrors.shtml and pick a Yellow Dog mirror for your region. Once there, head to the /iso directory, then grab the .iso with "PS3" in the filename.

- otheros.self. This file is what lets you install Linux on your PS3 without completely trashing its ability to play games. Get it from http://www.playstation.com/ps3-openplatform/terms.html.

- otheros.bld. This is Yellow Dog's "bootloader" file. It lets otheros.self install the Yellow Dog Linux distro properly. Get it from http://www.terrasoftsolutions.com/support/install/ps3/otheros.bld.

DIRECTIONS

1.) Boot up your PS3. If it's new, go through the basic set-up procedures.

2.) Update your PS3's firmware. Go to Settings -> System Update, and make sure you have the most up-to-date PS3 Firmware possible.

3.) Back up your data, then format your PS3 HD. Go to System Settings -> Format Utility -> Format Hard Disk -> Yes -> Custom. Choose either "Allot 10GB to Other OS" or "Allot 10GB to the PS3 System." Your decision here determines how much of the hard drive Linux is able to access. Whatever Linux can access, your PS3 operating system can't. Effectively, you're convincing the hardware that your hard drive is actually two different, smaller hard drives.

4.) Burn the Yellow Dog .iso to a DVD. In the root directory of your flash drive, create a directory called 'PS3.' In it, create another directory called 'otheros.' Drop both otheros.self and otheros.bld into the otheros directory.

5.) Insert your flash memory into the PS3's breadbox-like memory stick inserting area. Attach your USB keyboard and mouse to the PS3. Insert the Yellow Dog DVD you just burned.

6.) Go to Settings -> System Settings -> Install Other OS. Confirm the otheros.self installer. Hit START to begin the installation. This one goes quickly, because you're not actually installing Linux yet. You're installing a program called kboot that lets your PS3 switch freely between Sony's OS and Linux. After the install is finished, press Circle and the system should reboot.

7.) Now, go to Settings -> System Settings -> Default System, and change the Default System from PS3 to Other OS. Reboot.

8.) After a moment of blank screen, you should see a flood of text indicating that otheros is booting. Then, you'll see the kboot prompt. Since we did this through HDMI, it automatically went into graphical mode after pausing to see if we had any commands to enter at

9.) If you are using composite cables, you need to type 'ydltext' at the kboot prompt.

After a moment, text indicating that otheros is starting should flood the screen. Then you'll see more white text on black, some yellow text on blue, and finally the Yellow Dog Linux screen.

10.) At this point, you should see a pointer on your screen. Use your mouse to select the 'NEXT' option. Make the appropriate selections for language and such. Next, the system will say that it needs to format the partition. Do this.

11.) One last thing before Linux begins installing: if all goes correctly, it'll ask you to set the root password. Make sure to write down your root password, or pick something you'll never forget. 'root' is the user that acts as the administrator of a Linux system, and has power over all of the other user profiles. You won't log in to root for regular use, but need access to root for administrative tasks.

12.) Now that you've set up a root password, hit 'NEXT.' After about five minutes the system will inform you that by clicking NEXT again, you'll start installing Linux. So get started already! The installation should take about an hour.

13.) When the install is complete, the PS3 should automatically eject the Yellow Dog DVD. Take it out and set it aside. Reboot.

14.) If you're outputting standard definition, you need to type in 'ydl480i' at the kboot prompt when it comes up. Otherwise, leaving it alone will boot into the default 720p mode. If you want 1080i, type 'ydl1080i' at kboot. If you want to boot to the command prompt only and not the GUI (which is required to change your output resolution), you need to type 'ydltext'.

15.) After a few more screens, you'll get to the Yellow Dog Linux basic configuration screen. Just follow the onscreen directions and prompts. After you set up your first system user profile and password, make sure you write down the log/pass combination. You want to log in as a user most of the time when using Linux.

16.) After basic configuration, the system will ask you to log in. Voila! You'll find yourself in Yellow Dog Linux's default Graphical User Interface, Enlightenment. Using Enlightenment is much like using Windows or OS X, just point and click at the icons for programs you want to run. One of the most important icons, shaped like a little monitor, opens command line terminals. Remember this one, you'll need it shortly.

PROFIT! ENJOY LINUX!

When you're ready to go back to Sony's OS, open a terminal and type in the command 'boot-game-os.' This not only gets you out of Linux, but sets the system to boot to the game OS next time you startup. If you want the system to boot Linux at startup, go to Settings -> System Settings -> Default System. Change the Default System from PS3 to Other OS.

If for some reason Linux is fubar and won't recognize 'boot-game-os,' then you can get back to the PS3 OS by holding the power button for 5 seconds. This turns the system off. The next time you turn the hardware on, it should boot into the PS3 OS.

BUT... MAME!

The best way to install MAME and most other programs on your PS3 Linux system is YUM, the Yellow Dog Update Manager. It keeps installed programs and their components up-to-date, similar to the

Windows Update Manager. There's a great guide explaining how to make sure your copy of YUM is up to date at http://tictech2. blogspot.com/. Do that before attempting the MAME install. Once YUM is operational, enable all of the repositories. Now it's time for MAME. First, use Google and the copy of Firefox that's bundled into Yellow Dog Linux to download two file packages: xMAME-0.106-1.fc5. ppc.rpm and xMAME-SDL-0.79.1-1.fr.ppc.rpm. Newer versions may also work. Be sure to save the file packages to your PS3 hard drive, and remember exactly where you put them.

To install, open up the terminal prompt, and change into that directory using the cd (change directory) command. Firefox usually defaults to usr/tmp, so at the terminal type 'cd ..' to go up a directory, and then type 'cd tmp' to go to the tmp directory. If you need to see a list of directories and files, just type 'ls -l' to see what's there. Finally, use YUM to install those packages by typing: 'yum install <packagename>' and pressing enter. Install xMAME first, then the SDL version. Be sure to type the exact names of the file packages you downloaded. If for some reason you install the wrong package, you can remove it using 'yum remove <packagename>.'

This is a basic MAME install that you use via command line terminal. You can use the command 'xmame.SDL <gamename>' to run your games, after dumping them into the /usr/share/xmame/roms directory. MAME from the command line is unwieldy, so you'll want to install GXMame next. GXMame is a graphical frontend that makes using MAME more convenient. It looks a bit like MAME32 for Windows. Download this exact package: gxmame-0.34b-1.fr.ppc.rpm. Newer versions won't run on PS3 Linux as of this writing. Install GXMame the same way as you installed MAME above. The command 'gxmame' makes it run.

Now, to set up GXMame, click 'Options' and then 'Directories.' Under MAME Executables, you want delete whatever is there and instead put '/usr/bin/xmame.SDL' into the field. Click the XMAME basics paths tab, and set '/usr/share/xmame/roms' as your rom directory. To set up your gamepad, click on 'Options,' 'Default Options,' and then the 'Controllers' tab. Under Joystick type, switch to 'i386 style.' 'Joystick device prefix' should automatically change to '/dev/js,' and this is what you want so it will recognize your PS3 controllers. On the display tab, change Effects to 'None' for faster performance. Then set resolution to a Height and Widthscale that suits your TV. At 720p, 3 is usually the best setting.

Now you're ready to play your games by double clicking on their names in the rom list. Once your game is started, we suggest you press 'TAB' and set up your buttons under 'Input (this game).' Once that's finished, you can insert some virtual credits and start gaming.

MAME is just the beginning. There are infinite possibilities for open platform development on the PS3, since you can run virtually any PPC Linux app on it. Have you ever wanted to develop your own software? Now is a good time to start.

HELPFUL HINTS AP-PROACH FROM THE HEAVENS TO HELP YOU OUT IN YOUR TIME OF NEED !

CHECK THE BLOGS

For links to everything mentioned in this guide, check out Ashura's blog at http://www. hgmblogs.com. It will provide links to almost everything you need if you're having problems finding thngs, especially the MAME builds.

SWITCHING VIDEO FORMATS

To switch between video formats you have to boot Linux into the command prompt text-only mode. To do this, enter 'ydltext' at the kboot prompt. Once you get to the Linux command prompt after logging in, use the command 'ps3videomode -v #' to change your resolution. The numbers work as follows- 2: 480p, 3: 720p, 4: 1080i, 5 1080p. There are more resolutions to choose from, and to see those, type 'ps3videomode -h.' If you have a large overscan (black borders) and don't want that, then use the -f option to go full screen. So, for example, if you want to run Linux at 1080i and full screen, you would type 'ps3videomode -v 4 -f' and press enter. Once it switches modes, type 'startx' and YDL will boot to Enlightenment.

CO-OPERATION
MAKES IT HAPPEN

This wouldn't be a *Ghost Recon* without some hot, hot co-op action. *GRAW 2* delivers a co-op mode that parallels the single player campaign with a decent number of maps that are built for team-based play. This is one of the best ways to learn to play *GRAW 2*, since you're going to have to learn to both depend on and support your buddy. Charging in willy-nilly is foolish at best, and fatal at worst. Having backup to watch your back and provide covering fire is the way to do it.

This also prepares you for the multiplayer modes, which require even more teamwork. If you've played and trained to the point where you can trust that someone has your back even as you're covering them, you're going to be good. It's a cliche, but there really isn't an I in team. If you try to play Lone Gunman, you're going to get cut down.

Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter was, at least before *Gears of War*, the closest you could get to *Halo* without hanging out with Master Chief. It took the high-tech and realistic near-future Tom Clancy universe and grafted an engaging and extremely competitive class-based twist onto it for multiplayer, and dropped you deep into the middle of a chaotic and violent Mexico City for the single player mode. Its graphics were, and are, some of the best to hit the Xbox 360. Now, roughly a year later, *GRAW 2* is out. Does it deliver or is it more of the same?

Well, it's more of the same and it absolutely delivers. The Cross-Com system is back and much more flexible than before. Now, instead of just directing your squad, you can look through their eyes and get a new angle on the action. Say, for instance, that you're approaching a group of hostiles from one side, but you think you see a side path that you may be able to use. You can park your team behind some cover, take that path, get behind some cover yourself, and then survey the area from your team's point of view. From there, you can tell your team to advance to a new vantage point. If it's all clear, you can give the attack order and switch back to your view and join the battle.

The spycam has also gotten revamped. It's much easier to control now, with the addition of on-the-fly adjustment, which means that it's less likely to get shot down. It is still an absolutely invaluable tool. Planning your attacks with it can give you an edge that can turn a blistering and dangerous firefight into a series of quiet, but deadly, headshots.

Another big addition is the Medic. He's your go-to guy for healing your team. If you notice someone's health meter is down below where it should be, order the medic to patch him up. If you're not feeling quite so spry, look at the medic and ask for a bit of assistance.

The *GRAW* gameplay remains intact, however. A handful of well-placed shots will down you with a quickness, so moving from cover to cover is just as important as it has always been. The Ghosts' AI still isn't quite perfect, as giving an order to attack will sometimes make them run right out in front of your crosshairs, but it is better than last time. They will call out cover locations and danger zones. It adds an interesting dynamic to the gameplay, as listening to your squad outside of briefing areas actually has a point. If you're in heavy retreat and they shout something, following their advice may just end up saving your life.

The graphics are once again extremely realistic. The characters avoid the shininess that plagues a lot of next-gen games, instead going for a more gritty look. Gritty is a good way to describe the new locations in the game, too. However, *GRAW 2* isn't the great leap forward that the original game was. *GRAW* had the benefit of being one of the first games to make people go "Wow!" on the 360. This is a sequel, and it builds upon that foundation. It looks better and completely great, of course, but it is very much *GRAW 2.0*.

As usual, Ubisoft has delivered a fun tactical shooter. It may not be particularly original, but the gameplay has a couple new features that build upon older ones. You may get a sense of deja vu as you play, but *GRAW 2* is still a game that's worth having in your library.

Rating: 4 of 5

GENRE : 3PS • CATEGORY : NOT-SO-FRIENDLY GHOSTS • RELEASE DATE : 3/8/2007 • # OF PLAYERS: 1-16

Review by 4thletter

2ND OPINION

2nd opinion by dack • Alternate Rating : 4.5 of 5

GRAW2 does everything the first *GRAW* did right, then enhances it. Whether it's controlling a camera drone, or just shooting the enemy, it's a blasting good time. A few frame rate and slowdown issues knock off a half a point, but there is only one word to describe *GRAW2*: GRAWesome.

FINAL SCORE :
4.25 of 5

Tom Clancy's
GHOST RECON
ADVANCED WARFIGHTER 2

MERCURY MELTDOWN REVOLUTION

Review by KouAidou

Publisher : Ignition Entertainment
Developer : Ignition Entertainment
Release Date : Spring 2007
Rating : Everyone
Genre(s) : Action/Puzzle
Category : Mercury Madness
# of players : 1

The *Mercury* series was a big deal on the PSP because it brought innovative puzzle games to a system that desperately needed them. It should be a big deal on the Wii, too, and not because of any particular lack of puzzlers for that system, but simply because it's a well-made, challenging, and highly enjoyable puzzle game.

In *Mercury Meltdown Revolution*, you'll lead a tiny blob of mercury through a laboratory by tilting the Wii remote from side to side and letting gravity take its course. The stages, though fairly two-dimensional, are mazes of doors, traps, and scientific oddities that will alter the properties of your mercury blob. They may change its color, its consistency, or blow it to bits. You'll need to split your mercury up into multiple blobs, utilize the contraptions at your disposal, and avoid hazards to make it through the course as quickly and with as much of your blob intact as possible.

Unlike many games on the Wii, this one cannot be picked up easily by adults and children of all ages (and an utterly useless tutorial doesn't help matters much). There's a lot to remember in terms of what devices do what, and even once you've figured out your path, manipulating your blob successfully without falling off an edge or getting fried by a tesla coil is no easy matter. It does, however, make a delightfully hair-raising experience for the slightly masochistic puzzle gamer. With over a hundred twenty levels to clear, it's not an undertaking for the faint of heart.

If you do choose to commit to this diabolical slice of puzzle hell, the biggest challenge you'll face is the camera. Controlling it can be a pain in any kind of sticky situation where you'd actually need it. When you divide your blobs, the camera sometimes automatically zooms out to keep track of them all. Depending on the size of the course, this can actually hinder you a lot more than it helps you.

Fortunately, courses do not have to be completed sequentially; instead, courses are unlocked based on a gauge that increases as you get higher scores. Completing courses quickly, with more mercury remaining, and collecting special bonus crystals on the way increases your score gauge. A handy graphical display on the course select menu makes it easy to identify at a glance which courses are good candidates for improvement. Higher scores also allow you to unlock a collection of "party games" (like a racing game and a tetris clone), which are fun but not really the game's main draw.

On the presentation level, *Revolution*'s blindingly colorful cel-shaded graphics are functional if ugly (particularly the thick black line that surrounds your blob). There's still a silliness to the game that somehow makes blobs of toxic metal seem charming. Much more critical (especially to everlasting puzzle games of this type) is its diverse soundtrack, ranging from catchy jazz-themes to hard rock riffs, which never grows tiresome.

While this latest *Mercury* may not be as essential to the Wii's library as it was to the PSP's, it *is* essential to anyone who misses the glory days of endless puzzle platformers, or is serious about getting more game for their buck.

Rating : 4 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Lynxara • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

Unexpectedly, the Wii version of this game is much less fun than the PSP version. The Wiimote is so much lighter and easier to flip than the PSP that it's really easy to move your mercury blob in ways that glitch the game.

BURNOUT DOMINATOR

Review by James

Publisher : Electronic Arts
Developer : Criterion Games
Release Date : 3/7/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+
Genre(s) : Racing
Category : Arcade
# of players : 1-4

It's amazing how one stupid design mistake can kill an otherwise good game. *Burnout Dominator* wasn't going to be the best in the series, but it had a lot of promise. All it took was one total screw-up to send it to the bottom of the pile.

Burnout is a series about insane speed and aggressive racing. Driving like a lunatic earns boost, as does running fellow racers off the road or into traffic. Lots of boost lets you do the same things at eye-melting speeds. It's the best arcade racing around when the formula works, and with *Dominator*'s renewed focus on driving skills over *Revenge*'s mindless carnage, everything seemed in place for some amazing racing action.

Dominator mostly delivers on that promise, too. Racing and battling is a joy when the controls work, and the new points-oriented races are a great test of pure driving skill. The classic race mode is joined by Eliminator, where the last racer is knocked out when the clock counts down, and the always-excellent Road Rage, where the object is to take out as many opponents as possible. Finally, there are solo Maniac challenges where the player must get as high a score as possible while chaining burnouts together. Earn boost, fill up the burnout meter until it turns blue, hammer on the boost button, and keep driving insane so that, when the meter is drained, it automatically refills. Not only does this keep the speed up and offer one hell of a white-knuckle ride, but every additional boost adds to your score multiplier. Burnout chaining would be an utter blast if it wasn't broken.

While there are a few problems with the presentation, such as weak graphics and long save times after every race, what ultimately kills *Burnout Dominator* is the failure of the burnout chaining. Unless you hold the R1 button down with tremendous force, the blue-flame burnout necessary to keep the score multiplier alive will stop and switch to the red-flame normal boost. Adding insult to injury, dropping out of burnout also kills that free refill you'd earned, effectively turning the 1.25 tanks of boost (plus future earnings potential) into a measly quarter-tank. Whether aiming for score in Maniac mode or just trying to keep the speed up in a standard race, there's never a reason to drop from full combo boosting to normal turbo, and every time it happens it's like a gift-wrapped knife in the back.

Burnout Dominator should have been great. A few tweaks to the menus, maybe a few more races, fewer Maniac challenges, and a better soundtrack would have helped, but the basics are all there for some kick-ass fun racing. It doesn't matter how good the rest of a game is, though, if the controls betray you just when you need them most.

Rating : 2 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 2.25 of 5

2nd opinion by Jeremy • Alternate Rating : 2.5 of 5

The fear of traffic has been brought back, but far too many other things either been removed or executed poorly to recommend a purchase to even the most devoted *Burnout* fans.

Virtua Tennis 3

Review by 4thletter

Publisher : Sega
Developer : Sega
Release Date : 3/20/2007
Rating : Everyone

Genre(s) : Tennis
Category : Arcade
# of players : 1-4

Virtua Tennis 3's got some stiff, and somewhat unexpected, competition. *Rockstar Table Tennis* is inexplicably one of the most fun tennis games out. *VT3* has the benefit of having brand name recognition, in addition to a few other exclusive features.

Virtua Tennis 3 is simple, and that counts for a lot. You only have to worry a handful of buttons, and positioning yourself on the court. That, as they say, is the tricky part, but it is also where the fun lies. Hitting the ball isn't necessarily the important part. You're going to want to position yourself so that your return lands the ball out of the reach of the other person.

If you're one of those who laughs when other people lean into turns or when doing moves in video games, don't be too surprised when you find yourself doing the same thing. This is especially true on the PS3, with the motion-sensing control scheme. You pull off better and more accurate shots if you hit the ball with your feet planted. If your opponent has you dashing back and forth across the court, constantly off-balance, you're going to be at a disadvantage. You've got to hunker down and play smart.

The graphics are very nice. The courts and crowds are intricately rendered, and look good enough to be mistaken for a real tennis match. The characters are realistically animated, but they still have that odd next-gen shine. The clothes and wristbands all look good, and the textures are all quality, but the lighting still gives the characters an odd and unnatural sheen. It makes them a little creepy to look at, but still pretty impressive. *VT3* also features a deep selection of both male and female players

who at least resemble their real-life counterparts, along with the option to create your own superstar.

All in all, *Virtua Tennis 3* is an easy to play and visually attractive title. As a bonus, it comes with a number of minigames, some of which boost your created characters' stats. Others require precision aiming or movement skills. It helps to nicely round out the game and prevents it from being a one-note sports title. It's an okay single player title, but great for multiplayer.

Rating: 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3.75 of 5

2nd opinion by Lynxara • **Alternate Rating :** 4 of 5

Virtua Tennis 3 is a traditional tennis game writ large. That means impressive graphics, responsive controls, and surprising depth. You may find yourself liking this as a party game even if you aren't much of a tennis fan.

TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR 07

Review by James

Publisher : Koei
Developer : Koei
Release Date : 2/7/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+

Genre(s) : Strategy
Category : Historical/Turn-Based
# of players : 1-8 (Pass the Controller)

Tiger Woods PGA Tour has reinvented itself several times over the years. It's swapped out the swing meter for an analog stick, retired most of the attempts at making golf "cool", and moved a little closer every year to the standard set by *Links 2004*. While it's still got a ways to go to reach those heights, the Wii version of *Tiger Woods 07* is a good step in the right direction as well as a fun evolution in *Tiger Woods*'s gameplay.

It's the same game as the PS2 version, but *Tiger '07* replaces the analog stick with motion control. It's still possible to play *Tiger '07* in the usual way, using the nunchuk's analog stick for the swing, but that's missing the whole point. Clear out some space, watch out for people behind you and any low ceiling lights, and let rip with the remote to send the ball flying down the fairway. While it's not a true 1-to-1 swing conversion, but rather more of a timing game where you line up your swing with the actions of your on-screen avatar, it's still immensely satisfying to nail the perfect shot. A smooth, straight swing yields a long drive down the fairway, while twisting the remote towards or away from yourself sends the ball curving in the appropriate direction. Pressing the plus pad in any direction with a whole lot of remote waggling while the ball is in the air produces spin, and combining that with draw and fade will dump the ball just about anywhere you'd like. With lots and lots of practice, of course.

One of the problems with a new control scheme is that, to get it right, it's going to take a pile of experience. *Tiger Woods* has always been weak in the tutorials, and the four available are bare bones, to say the least. While learning the standard swing is a straightforward affair, the more rewarding advanced swing is blocked off to all but the most patient players. It doesn't do much good to set up a practice round if the game never tells you why two seemingly identical swings got wildly different results.

Still, for those willing to stick with the standard swing, there's a huge load of content to play through. Creating a golfer and watching their stats rocket up is always fun, although allocating experience is amazingly inconvenient. For everything *Tiger '07* gets right, it screws up something in the menus, their layout, and even occasional bug. Fortunately, the inconvenience isn't enough to become truly aggravating, and the fun, satisfying gameplay makes it easy to ignore some poorly planned front-end issues. *Tiger Woods 07* is the best golf game yet on the Wii, but hopefully next year's edition will have the rough edges hammered out.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3.75 of 5

2nd opinion by Lynxara • **Alternate Rating :** 4 of 5

Tiger fans and golf enthusiasts are really going to love this, menu flaws aside. The game feels suitably deeper and more complex than *Wii Golf* without ever becoming unapproachable.

KORORINPA MARBLE MANIA

Review by KouAidou

Publisher : Konami
Developer : Hudson Entertainment Inc.
Release Date : 3/20/2007
Rating : Everyone

Genre(s) : Action
Category : Marble Madness
# of players : 1-2

Kororinpa is one of those quintessential Wii games. It's clever and simple. Anyone can become comfortable with the controls in about 30 seconds, and its intuitive use of the Wiimote makes it a game that could not be duplicated on any other system.

Without any attempt at story-based explanation, you're given a marble at the start of a three dimensional maze. You simply move the marble by tilting the maze itself, whose position is mapped to the position of your own remote.

There is no limit to how far you can tilt the maze, and the game fully exploits this with devilish Escherian landscapes that can't be navigated without flipping the maze upside down multiple times.

Your job is a simple one: get the marble to the goal as quickly as possible, collecting red crystals along the way. If you reach the goal without collecting all the crystals, or fall out of the maze, you're sent back to start with the clock still running. These automatic restarts are a breath of fresh air. While they seriously hurt your eventual finishing time, it's really nice not to have to click through a retry menu repeatedly when all you want to do is figure out the lay of the land.

Crafty game design means there's a surprising variety of challenges in the stages. Sometimes there's a clear but tricky path to the goal. Sometimes the goal is apparent, but you'll navigate a maze to locate all the red crystals first. You can also create your own challenges by unlocking different kinds of marbles, which have their own properties. Some roll slow, while others roll faster but have a little bounce that makes them harder to control.

All of this is set to a host of whimsical backdrops, from a delicious-looking candy land to an upside down toy shop. While the foregrounds are well-rendered and attractive enough, the cel-shaded backgrounds (particularly on the cityscape stage) are rather drab and don't change from level to level. Though you usually only see the background as a distant backdrop, it would've been nice to see more variety in a game that's otherwise about simple, pleasing presentation.

Kororinpa feels like a sound beginning to what could become a beloved franchise. It's highly accessible, and the Wiimote controls are precise and flawless. The extras are disappointing, and the multi-player functionality is limited to a fairly weak two player split-screen mode. So unless you just really have a passion for marble rolling, there's not a lot of impetus to keep playing once everything's been unlocked. Still, *Kororinpa*'s innovation makes it a must-have for Wii owners.

Rating : 4 of 5

2nd opinion by Lynxara • **Alternate Rating :** 5 of 5

This is the most mind-blowingly awesome thing I've played since *Katamari Damacy*. Put down this magazine and go start playing *Kororinpa* right now. *Your life is incomplete until you have.*

4.5 of 5

RAW DANGER!

Review by Racewing

Publisher : Agetec
Developer : Irem
Release Date : Summer 2007
Rating : Mature (Blood, Mild Language, Sexual Themes, Violence)

Genre(s) : Adventure
Category : ...And Not A Drop To Drink
# of players : 1

If you subscribe to *HGM* (and you should), dig up our last issue. Turn to page 60. See Wanderer's review for *Disaster Report*? Read it, and you've pretty much read this one. Honestly, it's very hard not to dub this sequel, *Raw Danger*, as "*Disaster Report: Under The Sea.*" This is both a good and bad thing.

Raw Danger uses the same graphics engine that *Disaster Report* does, meaning that it's impressive for a game made four or so years ago. The scant exceptions are when cityscape and buildings break down due to floods; given the limited engine, these are actually done quite well and are able to elicit feelings of fight-or-flight that are rarely accomplished in a game that doesn't involve zombies and low lightning. When a building that you're inside of suddenly collapses without warning, and Niagara Falls pours down on top of your head just afterward, you *will* be scared. I don't care who you are.

Raw Danger also employs gameplay design straight out of *Disaster Report*'s time period. Prepare to navigate slowly loading menus, archaic map screens, and make menu choices for every single action save for basic movement. Said basic movement involves slow, clunky animations, and just as in the original *Disaster Report*, the localization and voice acting are amusing as all heck. The icing on the cake is the "yell" button; this allows you to get the attention of people across distances (and is upgradeable with items such as a bullhorn), but it's just amusing to go "HEY!" in a crowded (or deserted!) room when there's no reason to.

Still, even given its dated aesthetics and gameplay, *Raw Danger* still manages to hook you in as a player. The first half-hour of the game sets up the story, and goes very slowly. Once the flooding actually starts, though, you'll definitely want to see what happens next. The puzzles, pacing and survival systems that the game employs are just enough so that you won't fall asleep while managing them and keeping yourself alive. Few moments in *Raw Danger* are set up for instant death, but you'll find yourself scrambling to keep your body temperature up, all the while trying to figure out just how to get past the rapidly flooding area that's causing your slow hypothermic death in the first place. On top of this, you must maintain your item weight (which affects what you can carry) and keep survivors alive with you. *Raw Danger* keeps you on its toes by staying true to its title, and this is where its fun comes from.

Raw Danger is a decent, if somewhat slow-paced, adventure, and its "real-world danger" aspect makes for some truly fearful moments. It accomplishes what it set out to do, with no small amount of camp, but never goes any further than that. One can't help but wonder what these designers could do with a larger game budget for their next title. They've still got fires and tornadoes left to cover, after all.

Rating : 3.5 of 5
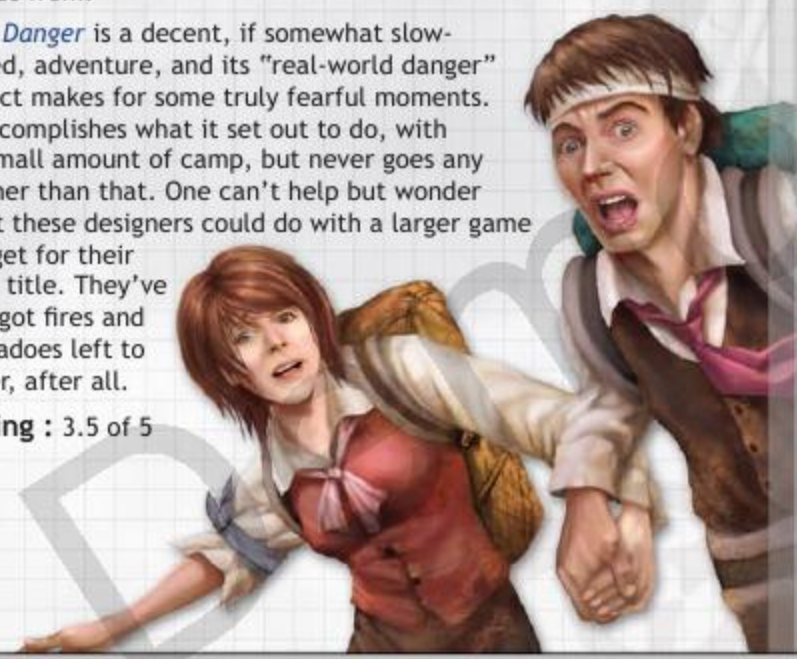
FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by honestgamer • **Alternate Rating :** 2.5 of 5

Raw Danger can be compelling in places, but you have to wade through too many irritating game mechanics to get there.

EARTH DEFENCE FORCE 2017 地球防衛軍

Review by Lynxara

Publisher : D3 Publisher of America, Inc.
Developer : Sandlot
Release Date : 3/20/2007
Rating : Teen (Animated Blood, Mild Language, Violence)

Genre(s) : 3PS
Category : Arcade
# of players : 1-2

Earth Defense Force 2017 is a game that has no right to be very entertaining at all. It's the sequel to a PS2 budget title called *Chikyuu Boueigun 2*, and runs off of Sandlot's horrifically dated *Robot Alchemic Drive* engine. This leads to gameplay oddities like having physics in place for destroying buildings, but not for destroying smaller objects like cars, fences, or trees. *Earth Defense Force 2017* is essentially Sandlot swapping out the giant robot carnage for carnage generated by a little army guy. Your enemies are giant robots, huge mutant insects, UFOs, and a host of other B-movie refugees. An overblown, booming brass soundtrack and a clever localization helps play up the cheesy B-movie feel.

There are plenty of odd graphics faux pas to go along with *EDF2017*'s strange sense of physics, too. Maybe Sandlot wanted to take the B-movie thing literally? Your main character's model, for instance, is clearly animated in two different sections. Run in one direction while shooting in another, and his torso twists like an action figure's. Shoot down one of the game's enormous enemy carriers and watch it... sink beneath the ground, never to be seen again. There are even periodic screen freeze-ups. Fortunately, *EDF2017*'s simple gameplay isn't hurt by its many, many graphics problems.

The maps you fight enemies in are sparsely detailed, but incredibly large and open. You're allowed to explore them freely and exploit terrain to gain tactical advantages. Many maps are re-used extensively during the course of the game's fifty-three missions, but it takes awhile to realize this because the individual maps are so large. Most maps are strewn with vehicles you can use to take out the enemy, but there's no real point in doing so. The vehicle controls are uniformly awkward, and they don't perform nearly as well as the arsenal of weapons you acquire during gameplay.

EDF2017's controls are responsive, standard 3PS controls, although sometimes it's a little harder to jump than it should be. Your kills are rewarded with random drops of weapons and armor, which you can then keep and use for the rest of the game. You can acquire a tremendous variety of weapons this way, and can only get everything by completing the game once on each difficulty level. Although in concept the mission-based gameplay is very repetitive, it doesn't feel at all tiresome in execution. The missions are designed quite cleverly, so you never repeat similar goals, terrains, or enemy types for too long. This variety also demands that you keep trying out new tactics and weapon combinations.

Earth Defense Force 2017 is the action game equivalent of potato chips: no nutritional value, but tasty nonetheless. Playing it delivers a big adrenaline rush despite the very light gameplay. The offline co-op is particularly fun for party game style play, although it's not as serious or deep as, say, *Crackdown*'s co-op play. For its $40 MSRP, *EDF2017* isn't a bad game at all. It's not a *good* game, either, but it's fun enough if you want to pass some time by watching giant flaming ant corpses fly across the screen.

Rating: 3 of 5

2nd opinion by Shoegazer • **Alternate Rating :** 1.5 of 5

I really wanted to like this, but my love has its limits. "Repetitive," "ugly," and "overly simplistic" are all accurate descriptions, but "unremarkable" seems the most appropriate.

FINAL SCORE : 2.25 of 5

SPECTROBES
化石超進化

Review by JPeeples

X ATTACK
Y SPC001   A GUARD
B SPC002

0083

Spectrobes is a monster training RPG, and while it might sound like a *Pokemon* ripoff, its execution of the concept is far different. Mineral and fossil excavation plays a large role in the adventure, and it's much deeper and more enjoyable than might be expected. It also requires a careful touch to make sure your findings aren't destroyed.

Some of those findings, like fossils, can become Spectrobe creatures that you can either use to search for more fossils and minerals, or raise and bring into battle with you. Excavation makes use of the touch screen and mic to let you clear off the finding with one of two drills and then dust it off with either a blower tool using the stylus or by blowing into the mic. Precise drilling is key, as sloppy drilling can easily damage your findings. The excavation system's nuances take about an hour to get used to, but after that, you'll be excavating with ease. Your newly unearthed goods evolve into young Spectrobes, so they may aid you on your quest to rid the solar system of the world-conquering Krawl. Excavation is the most enjoyable part of the game, as it is quite challenging and very rewarding when you succeed.

Despite its RPG roots, the story is one of the game's weakest points. It's a fairly simple "save the world from evil group" story that doesn't hold up well over the course of the game, since much of it is told in thought balloons by generic characters. Their lifeless text results in a story that isn't compelling, and characters that don't give you much reason to care about them. The Spectrobes end up being far more compelling since the player has raised them and is completely responsible for their growth. After birthing them with your voice, then nurturing and training them in an incubator, I guess it's only natural that you'd care more about them.

Battles are another sore issue in the game, as they're incredibly

slow-paced for an action RPG and end up feeling monotonous. You can attack at any time, but movement is very slow, and aiming punches and blaster shots becomes a chore due to the imprecise D-pad controls. Characters on the battlefield are small, which makes it hard to see where your character is facing and where his attacks will end up landing. A more traditional turn-based system for battles probably would have resolved those issues. Still, one thing *Spectrobes*'s battle system has going for it is that overworld battles can be completely avoided, eliminating the always-annoying random battles that plague many other RPGs.

While it's hampered by a faulty battle system and generic characters, *Spectrobes* is at least visually appealing. Animation is fluid, and the worlds are incredibly detailed. 3D graphics fill both screens while you explore the planets. The biggest problem with the graphics is that the character models don't appear to be very detailed from afar, which leads to a drab look during battles.

Aside from a few major faults, *Spectrobes* is a game with a lot to offer. It delivers a unique premise in an enjoyable way, and ended up being far better than expected given BVG's history of releasing lackluster games. Anyone looking for a unique RPG experience that takes full advantage of the DS hardware should give it a shot.

Rating : 3 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
3 of 5

2nd opinion by Honestgamer • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

While the menus are typically several levels deep and frustrating to navigate, the game as a whole fares better.

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cooking mama COOK OFF

Review by KouAidou

Garnish

Mix   Low

There's been a lot of excitement about *Cooking Mama* coming to the Wii, and perhaps with good reason: cooking and geek chic go hand and hand nowadays. What could be better than a video game that teaches you how to cook?

The premise seems intuitive: a series of Wiimote minigames that allow you to emulate the experience of cooking the different steps of a real recipe. The game's cute characters and colorful graphics are quite charming at first. Unfortunately, after about an hour of cooking with *Mama*, it quickly becomes clear that premise can only carry a game so far. *Cooking Mama*'s game design just doesn't carry its weight; it can't seem to decide if it wants to be a cooking sim for grown-up food geeks or a party game for kids, and the result is an excersize in frustration for both groups.

Many of the minigames you'll face here are the standard Wiimote sort: you'll shake the Wiimote like a frying pan, trail it across the screen to slice up a tuna, or tap it firmly to break an egg. So far, so good. Other minigames are based on timing or memorization in ways that might be fun for kids (despite having little to do with the actual challenges of food preparation), which would be fine if still other games didn't clearly require adult precision and real cooking experience. While the menu provided is vast and educational on a basic level, encompassing over fifty real

recipes from a dozen different countries, it would've been nice if *Cooking Mama* offered more concrete information about the real-life processes and recipes you're emulating.

There are also some odd discrepancies in the learning curve from game to game. You get unlimited tries to break an egg correctly, but a single mistake in the egg-separating game equals game over. Preparing a successful stir-fry is worth the same amount of points as chopping a single scallop in half. Then there's the serving minigame, which not only has godawful pointer recognition, but gives the same completion score regardless of how much time you took to finish it. While some frustration is circumvented by a practice mode that lets you try out a recipe's steps independently before you try to make the dish, it doesn't make the unevenness of the challenges any more enjoyable.

Graphically speaking, the photorealistic depictions of the food look nice, but clash with the cartoony backdrops and characters. Mama's Engrishy voice clips, that seem so cute and helpful when you first start up the game, become repetitive after their tenth iteration and entirely torturous by their thirty-thousandth.

None of this is to say that *Cooking Mama* is completely without merit. There are a lot of highly enjoyable minigames among the stinkers. The cookoff modes, which you can play either against a friend or an adorable CPU stereotype, are really a lot of fun. There's no question that you can find enjoyment in *Cooking Mama* if you try. If you do, though, it will be in spite of the game design, not because of it.
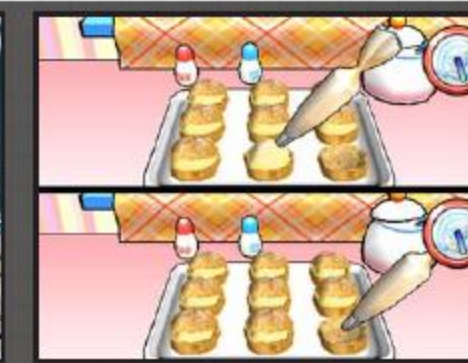
Rating : 2.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Cena (a young gamer) • Alternate Rating : 4.5 of 5

I think this game is really unique in all of the three following categories: cooking, ingredients and controls. I think it appeals to all ages and I had fun playing it.

FINAL SCORE :
3.5 of 5

Aedis EclipsE
GENERATION OF CHAOS™

Review by Lynxara

Publisher : NIS America
Developer : Idea Factory
Release Date : 5/25/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Strategy
Category : Real-Time Hybrid... Thingy
# of players : 1

Aedis Eclipse, looked at feature-for-feature, is a much better game than its predecessor. It contains, among other things, proper tutorial levels that clearly explain how the game works, and a proper storyline to help guide your army from battle to battle. The maps start small and grow larger as you progress into battles later in the game. The graphics are improved, with lots of new sprites for both unique and generic characters, and better 3D maps. You can customize your characters more completely, complete with up to two different kinds of troops in their army. The restrictive, meter-driven Super system is gone, replaced with an expanded Skill system. The variety of orders you can give your armies is greatly increased, allowing (in theory) for more complex maneuvers on the battlefield. Probably the best thing about the game is the localization, and all told, there are certainly far worse games you can spend your money on for the PSP.

The problem with *Aedis Eclipse* is that while it should be a much better game than its predecessor, it ends up being a title with more problems. Despite all the new commands added into the game engine, one critical one was removed: the ability to order your troops to focus attacks on the enemy commander. Likewise, even when giving your troops other orders, sometimes they will refuse to attack the enemy commander until they've eliminated every single one of his or her soldiers. This is probably an attempt to force you to use the new variety of commands, since in the previous game, there was little point in attacking anything but the army's commander. Unfortunately, the game's combat style hasn't changed enough to make targets other than the enemy commander valuable. This makes the thirty-on-thirty unit battles become something of a chore instead of any kind of enjoyable spectacle, even if you hold a clear advantage. More enemies simply means the battles are longer, not more interesting.

Even more of a problem are the game's bonus characters, who tend to be twice as strong as anyone else you can recruit into your army. In *Aedis Eclipse*, you can start recruiting them extremely early in the game, and the recruitment process is a simple matter of searching the correct base on a map. Since the game tells you to always search every base on every map so you can find hidden loot, it's obvious that the designers intend for most players to recruit most of the bonus characters. Even with one or two, the game becomes effectively impossible to lose, because their stats and gear are so overpowered. New ones show up every five to ten levels or so, and they get progressively more broken.

If you like strategy games at all, let alone grand strategy variants like *Generation of Chaos*, then the last thing you want to be playing is a game that simply hands you victory. Why Idea Factory chose to make such a strange and awful game design choice is hard to fathom, as is the decision to force players to mow through entire enemy forces instead of simply letting them attack commanders. If these two game elements were different, *Aedis Eclipse: Generation of Chaos* would have been a very good game. Instead, it's just tedious and forgettable.

Rating : 2.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE :
2.75 of 5

2nd opinion by James • **Alternate Rating :** 3 of 5

Aedis Eclipse is an interesting experiment in merging RTS with RPG, with a hint of board game for good measure. It's let down by weak pathfinding and AI in battle, though, plus it's just too easy.

ALIENS
EXTERMINATION

Review by Shaggy

Is there a sci-fi/horror movie better than *Aliens*? Rhetorical questions aside, it's difficult to underestimate the influence that movie has had in video game culture over the years, from games based directly on the movie to offshoots like the wonderful *Aliens vs. Predator*. Now we have *Aliens: Extermination* from GlobalVR, which takes place on the same planet as the events of the movie did. Marines have been sent in by the Company to clean up what is left behind after Ripley supposedly finished everything off with a nuclear bang.

Your mission in *Aliens: Extermination* is to mow down all the aliens that get in your way as you travel along a set path through four levels of alien splattering mayhem. The action is frantic right from the start. Aliens will get in your face and use their claws, jaws or tails to take your health down. Facehuggers are a constant threat. You also must face haywire androids, squirming alien leeches and bosses at the end of each level.

Simply use all of your firepower, which includes the pulse rifle, napalm, grenades, rockets and a pistol to ward off as many enemies as possible. You do have a health bar which you need to watch. Once it hits zero you die and need to put in another quarter/token to continue. Power-ups show up frequently, including health, ammo reloads and gun power-ups. You can see the number of shots remaining you have on-screen, as well as a display on the back of your gun.

Even though there are only four levels, they are all fairly long as well as moderately difficult. The downside of the game is that there are no multiple paths to choose from, but at the same time that does make it easier to memorize certain events so players can eventually play through the game without using too many tokens.

Graphically, *Aliens* looks great thanks to the HD resolution and textures. The character models for the aliens themselves are the best I have seen yet in any *Aliens* game. The models for marines and a few other characters seem to be lacking the same level of detail. The frame rate is solid and it is all complimented by partially destructible environments and some nice special effects.

There are two cabinets available for *Aliens: Extermination*: Standard and Deluxe. The only difference between the two is the size and quality of the monitor screen. The light guns are a nice touch, molded in a similar design to the pulse rifles from the movie. They are attached to the cabinet and feature an ammo meter on the back, along with two special buttons towards the front of each gun. One is for grenades and the other is for special weapons like napalm or rockets.

This is a stellar entry in the long line of games based on the *Aliens* universe, with plenty of replay value. It's just darned good fun to to splatter endless hordes of aliens. If an arcade near you does not carry it, bug them until they do. *Extermination* isn't slated for release on any home console, but it's certainly worth the price of admission.

Publisher: GlobalVR
Developer: PlayMechanix
ESRB: Teen
Genre: Action
Category: Light Gun
Players: 1-2

FINAL SCORE :
4.5 of 5

NINTENDO GAMECUBE

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Discounted by Racewing

BILLY HATCHER AND THE GIANT EGG

Quick! Pretend you're Yuji Naka circa 2003, leader of the once-illustrious Sonic Team. You've produced some of the greatest and most popular games of all time. Sonic the Hedgehog is so much of an icon that you can show off a picture of your sportscar with his likeness on the side, and people think it's *awesome*. *NiGHTS* showed the world what the Saturn could really do, such that there's a rumor about a sequel every console generation that gets people weak in the knees no matter how little truth there may be to it. *Burning Rangers* is original enough that people look past its flaws, and the *Phantasy Star Online* has destroyed more than its share of romantic relationships.

What do these games have in common? All of them were compelling, and had attitude and coolness factor off the charts. So, pop quiz, hotshot: how do you follow up on that legacy of coolness and fun? Go ahead, think of something.

Got that idea in your head? Good.

Now *forget it*—because *you*, Mr. Naka, are going to create a game about a guy in a *Legendary Chicken Suit* instead. Said Legendary Chicken Suit Guy will follow orders from the Chicken Lords on high to save "the morning" (and a bunch of "Chicken Elders") from crows who have engulfed their land in eternal darkness. Yes, folks, it's *Rock-A-Doodle: The Movie: the Game*, only with far more embarrassing music.

It's also the last game Sonic Team made before their downhill slide, and it shows more often than not.

Don't count Billy out just because of his looks, lack of backbone, or scary taste in music. He's actually pretty good with what powers he has. His main weapons, as the title suggests, are giant eggs that he finds all over the landscape. Billy can roll these eggs to bowl over enemies. He can also boomerang and bounce the eggs for to attack or to gain massive air. In short, he's able to cause all sorts of havoc while wielding what's akin to an oblong wrecking ball. Imagine carrying Sonic the Hedgehog himself in your *hands*, and you get the idea.

All of this violence leaves behind pieces of fruit with which to "feed" the eggs and turn them into various power-ups, allies, or in some cases, people trapped inside that you must rescue. Aside from all of these egg shenanigans, you'll be doing some pretty solid platforming, and fighting bosses that force you to become a ninja with your eggs; running with, bouncing and rebounding them like nobody's business.

Billy Hatcher can be found most anywhere for $20 or less, and it's not a bad game all told. It'll take you back to the PSX/Dreamcast days, when apparently, all that was needed to make a fun game was an original premise, an *ostensibly* cutesy-Japanese theme and soundtrack, and a barely serviceable 3D camera. Fire it up at your next *Halo* System Link Party and watch as you become a hero to all!

ON THE DOWNLOAD

ALIEN HOMINID HD

Developer: The Behemoth • Platform: Xbox 360
Genre: Run & Gun • Category: Esplodey • # of Players: 1-4
Price: 800 points ($10) • Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

Wanna know what happens when a psychotic little yellow bundle of hyperkinetic energy is shot down by the FBI? *Alien Hominid HD* happens, as it turns out, and the transition from its console roots to XBLA has been kind. The hominid's ship has been taken by the feds, and if he can only get it back without being shot down by the US or the Russkies he might just be able to leave this

mudball behind. It's never that easy, though, and a gloriously 2D side-scrolling run & gun action game ensues, complete with head chomping for good measure.

While the cartoon art of Dan Paladin is instantly likable, it also brings about *Hominid*'s biggest weakness: cheap deaths from bullets that blend right into the background. *Alien Hominid* is a very fast-paced game, requiring quick reflexes and an itchy trigger-finger, but it's hard to dodge what you can't see. The supply of lives and continues is generous, and once a level is reached it will be available at the level select screen, but the first few rounds are going to yield lots of cheap deaths. Even so, *Hominid*'s crazed charm shines through and makes it all worthwhile, and if it doesn't there are always several minigames to play with. The ridiculously addictive PDA Games, a single-screen puzzle platformer, is worth the price of admission all by itself.

SCORE: 3.5 of 5

WORMS

Developer: Team 17 • Platform: Xbox 360
Genre: Turn-Based • Category: Annelid Death
# of Players: 1-4 • Price: 800 points ($10)
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

The *Worms* series has been around for years, but it's finally found the perfect home on Live Arcade. *Worms* has always been a multiplayer game, designed around blasting friends into smithereens, with a single-player mode that's best ignored. A troop of four worms, armed with weapons ranging from bazookas to exploding sheep, wage war on a destructible, randomly generated 2D background against an opposing team. The only defense is to take out your opponents before they do the same to you. Calculating weapon trajectory is *Worms*'s biggest strategy, as projectiles are affected by wind, gravity, and force of launch. While

this version is noticeably stripped down from previous efforts, with fewer weapons, worm voices, and only three backgrounds, it's still as ridiculously fun as it's ever been to commit wormy mayhem.

SCORE: 3.5 of 5

BLOCKSUM

Developer: Circle Infotech • Platform: PC
Genre: Puzzle • Category: Math Attack!
# of Players: 1 • Price: Free
Get it at: http://infotech.rim.zenno.info/

You'd think there'd be a limit to the ways blocks can be arranged in a well, but *Blocksum* comes up with an entirely new method of clearing them out. Every square has a number on it,
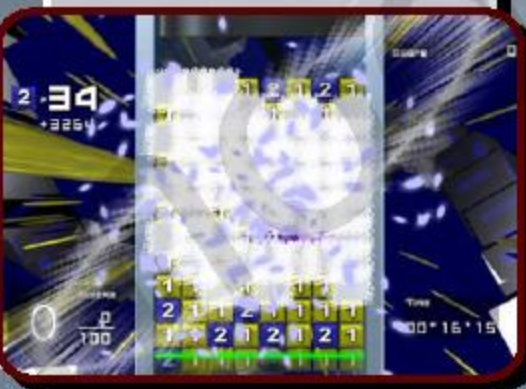
and they can be fused together with the touch of a button. Two 1-squares fused together make a rectangular 2, and when two 2s are side by side the pile stops rising from the bottom long enough to fuse a few more 2 blocks together in a combo. While it only takes two 2s to clear themselves out, 5s need a cluster of five, 6s take six, and god help you if you accidentally create an 11. *Blocksum* is high-pressure, simple math puzzling at its finest. Admittedly, that's hardly a crowded genre.

SCORE: 4 of 5

PEGGLE

Developer: PopCap Games • Platform: PC
Genre: Pachinko • Category: Bouncey
# of Players: 1-2 • Price: $19.95
Get it at: http://www.popcap.com/

Peggle is basically pachinko with cartoon animals. A ball is shot from a cannon at the top center of the screen, going exactly where the pointer tells it, and bounces amidst a field of pegs and blocks. Once a peg or block is hit it lights up, and when the ball falls off the bottom of the screen everything activated that turn disappears. Setting up long series of ricochets is the key to scoring, as is proper use of the special powers granted by the green pegs. Clearing off all the orange pegs completes the level. *Peggle* is fun and even addictive, but leaves you wishing for just a bit more control over the ball's trajectory during a long series of bounces.

SCORE: 3.5 of 5

FLOW

Developer: SCEA • Platform: PS3
Genre: Casual • Category: Biology Class
# of Players: 1-2 • Price: $7.99
Get it at: PlayStation Store

flOw is interesting on a number of levels. It's simple and beautiful, and fosters a "make your own pace" style of gameplay that's refreshing. You play what's essentially a microorganism under a microscope. How you tilt your controller decides how the organism moves and the face buttons provide a special move, be it a spin or a boost. As you eat other organisms, you grow and evolve into new shapes and forms. When other organisms attack you, you lose bits of yourself. The controls are great, the game not so much. Getting new forms is pretty cool, the controls are really intuitive, and the casual focus is nice, but having to start over every single time you turn on the game is no fun. There's no chance of dying, either, as you're just moved back to a previous level when you're hit, which gives you the chance to replenish your health. As-is, it's a very, very pretty demo of what the SIXAXIS can do.

SCORE: 2 of 5

DQM
DRAGON QUEST MONSTERS: Joker

Review by Lynxara

Even with sales hampered by a cartridge shortage in Japan, *Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker* moved over one million units in the three months since its initial release. By the time you read these words, it may have reached or exceeded the 1.5 million mark. Its popularity should come as no surprise: *Joker* is a solid game that seamlessly combines Japan's twin infatuations with monster training RPGs and *Dragon Quest*.

Veterans of any sort of monster trainer RPG, from *Pokemon* to *Shin Megami Tensei*, will find *Joker's* gameplay extremely familiar. You begin the game as a nameless protagonist who wants to enter the GP Battle tournament. You can't enter the tournament just by showing up; you need to prove yourself first by collecting ten pieces of "Majewelite", which are hidden on the game's various islands. While investigating the islands, you can get started on capturing and breeding the game's two hundred ten classic *Dragon Quest* monsters. The combat system is essentially identical to traditional *Dragon Quest* combat, so expect lots of grinding and status ailments. The battles are turn-based, but you can opt to have your monsters use AI to make their own decisions in combat. The AI settings are extremely well-implemented, and using them makes the game a lot more fun.

Joker strives to resemble *Dragon Quest VIII* as much as possible, and the results are interesting. Despite being a DS title, *Joker* uses simple 3D graphics that are absolutely fantastic given the hardware. You can freely explore the 3D world around you, controlling the camera with the R and L buttons. The monsters you hunt roam the landscape around you, making the islands feel truly alive. Strong enemies rush in to attack, while weak ones run away. Monster selection varies according to time of day and location, with rare monsters often only spawning in a certain location at a certain time. When you're ready to hunt particular monsters, it's very easy to find what you want quickly and avoid time-wasting encounters. As you hunt, there are plenty of story events, optional quests, and hidden dungeons to bring some much-needed variety to the basic gameplay.

Dragon Quest Monsters: Joker is marred by only one significant flaw: once you get all the Majewelite and enter the tournament, the game becomes a lot less interesting. This is more a testament to how good the exploring is than any defect with the combat, which if anything is just a little too simple for its own good. *Joker* is otherwise an amazing example of just how powerful the DS hardware can be, and a top-notch iteration of the monster trainer RPG formula. It's not something to play if you're looking for wild originality, but *Dragon Quest* rarely is.

WORTH IMPORTING?

A few days before this issue went to press, *HGM* found out that *Joker* was officially on Square-Enix's North American release schedule for Q3 2007. Why bother importing such a text-heavy game when you can wait until this fall and play it in English instead? Kudos to Square-Enix for not passing this *Dragon Quest* spinoff over.

SCORE: 4 OF 5

PUBLISHER: SQUARE-ENIX
DEVELOPER: SQUARE-ENIX
RELEASE DATE: 12/28/2006
GENRE(S): RPG
CATEGORY: MONSTER TRAINING
OF PLAYERS: 1

Trigger Heart Exelica features a pair of playable anthropomorphic fighter craft named Exelica (wide shot) and Crueltear (focused shot), who must put a stop to the evil Faintear. To aid them, each Trigger Heart employs a special grapple pod that can ensnare enemies and use them as shields or projectiles.

Exelica uses a standard three button format. A: Shot, B: Anchor Shoot and C: Bomb. After snagging an enemy with the anchor pod, it will be held until it is either damaged or thrown. Holding down Shot with an anchored enemy allows the Trigger Heart to spin. The faster the spin, the greater the momentum the released enemy will have. Like all bullet-hell shmups, *Exelica* features a complicated scoring system. Destroying enemies releases gold items that increase in size and value as they fall toward the bottom of the screen. Releasing the shot button causes all on-screen bonuses to be collected instantly. Picking these up increases both the gold counter and score multiplier. Tossing enemies into each other cashes in on the current multiplier value but causes it to drop. Also, every blocked bullet from a captured enemy will turn into gold. Finally, bombing will cause the gold counter to drop slightly, while dying causes it to drop considerably.

Complimenting the score system, *Exelica* uses a form of rank called "VBAS" or "Variable Boss Attack System". The higher the gold counter total, the more sequential boss forms the player has to encounter, culminating in a potential battle against Faintear herself.

Exelica offers four different game modes: Arcade, Story, Training and Arrange. Arcade Mode is an almost 1:1 translation of the NAOMI original. Story Mode is Arcade with loads of intrusive cut-scenes and dialogue. Training Mode is the standard stage-by-stage practice mode. Arrange Mode is Arcade with the following changes: no multiplier (gold counter only), palette swaps on stages, an arranged sountrack, bullet-count multiplied by 10... and slowdown pushed straight into dropped-frames territory! Graphically, *Exelica* is low-key, with low polygon models and few special effects (which is why there's really no excuse for dropped frames in Arrange Mode). At best, it's a step up from *Trizeal*. THE's soundtrack is heavy late-16-bit, comprised mainly of wall-to-wall electronica with plenty of bass. Sound effects are run-of-the-mill, but they're spruced up a bit by the quality voice acting.

Despite the nifty play mechanics, *Exelica's* scoring system is frustrating. Hurling enemies into each other is satisfying, but this isn't how the designers intended the game to be played. Captured enemies are supposed to be used mostly for defense, since being aggressive with them lowers the score bonus multiplier. It makes no sense to slap the player's wrist when they try to use one of the main game mechanics, especially when most other shooters are designed to reward ample use of their unique systems (for instance, *ESPGaluda's* Kakusei Mode).

worth importing?

Given that the vast majority of the game is in English, and that it employs an intriguing twist on a seldom-seen mechanic, I would recommend this to fans of the genre who are looking for something outside of the standard curtain-fire efforts.

score: 3 of 5

Review by Kiken

トリガーハート エグゼリカ
TRIGGER HEART EXELICA
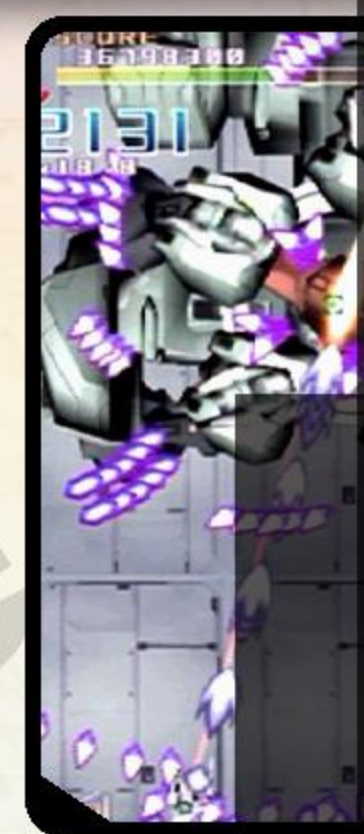
publisher: warashi ■ developer: warashi ■ genre: shmup
category: bullet hell ■ release date: 2/22/2007 ■ # of players: 1

JAPAN ハードコア日本

Dreamcast

IMPORTS SUPPLIED BY PLAY-ASIA.COM

IMPORTS SUPPLIED BY PLAY-ASIA.COM

Nintendo DS

HARDCORE JAPAN 日本

WORTH IMPORTING?

All of the important options in the game are in English, apart from the Mode Select screen. Easy-Normal-Hard shouldn't be too difficult to figure out, though. Given the game's design, anyone who enjoyed *Radirgy* should enjoy *Karous*. Just have some paper and a pencil handy for writing down your high scores.

SCORE: 4 of 5

Karous
カラィ

1000 CLOUDS...

Publisher: Milestone • Developer: Milestone • Genre: Shmup • Category: Divine Blood Curtain Fire • Date: 3/8/2007 • # Players: 1

In an alternate world where gloomy cities loom atop floating islands, war has broken out. To end this conflict, one young girl — half human, half angel — has been entrusted with a single task: seek the divine blood. Her name is *Karous*.

Now, just as the US is getting set to receive *Radirgy* on GC, MileStone has released its third arcade game for the Dreamcast. The title is a really bizarre attempt to bridge the gap between the Japanese word *karasu* and the English word *crows*, hence *Karous*.

It's difficult to talk about this game without mentioning *Radirgy*, since it's basically *Radirgy* v1.5. At a glance, the play mechanics are almost identical. Controls consist of Shot, Sword and DFS (an invincibility barrier system akin to *Radirgy*'s ABS). Powering up weapons works quite differently. Much like in *Radiant Silvergun*, every individual weapon has its own experience level. Destroying enemies and absorbing bullets while using a specific attack powers up that attack's level, and only that attack's level. Using two weapons simultaneously splits the experience between them. This really shifts the focus of play to more strategic use of the weapons. In a nod to *Ikaruga*, *Karous* features three different game modes: Easy, Normal and Hard. Easy is aptly named, it only features 3 stages and has a very low bullet count. Normal features all five stages and a much denser bullet count. Hard features all five stages, a True Last Boss, and considerably denser and larger bullet formations.

Visually, *Karous* offers a gothic world devoid of rich color. Most stages have dull-grey backgrounds, and the enemies themselves are normally monochromatic. Although monochrome is a bit odd for cel-shading, it supports the game's mood, and the lack of color does serve a practical purpose. Many enemies are weak against a specific weapon, while others can only be killed with the right weapon. When attacked, they will flash a specific color that corresponds to the appropriate weapon. On the music front, once again Daisuke Nagata and Kou Hayashi deliver an awesome trance/techno soundtrack. MileStone needs to hurry up and release this on CD! Most of the sound effects are simply recycled from *Radirgy*, with bassy explosions and low-rubbling weapon noises.

Perhaps it's the refinement in the weapon system or the darker motif, but *Karous* is absorbing. I spent three straight days playing nothing but this game when it was first released, and I keep coming back to it each day. My equally new copy of *Monster World Complete Collection* has received almost no love as a result. There's just something very methodic and compelling about *Karous*. One word of warning: the game saves general configuration data *only*. This is a really annoying oversight on MileStone's part, as *Radirgy* saved high scores. It's almost a step backwards.

Review by Kiken

ピクロスDS
PICROSS DS

PUBLISHER: NINTENDO ■ DEVELOPER: JUPITER ■ GENRE: PUZZLE ■ CATEGORY: PICROSS ■ RELEASE DATE: 1/25/2007 ■ # OF PLAYERS: 1-5

If you've never played a Picross puzzle (or "Paint by Numbers" as *Games* magazine calls them), here's how it's done: you have a grid with numbers assigned to each row and column. The numbers tell you how many black squares are in each row, and from there it's a matter of using logic and deduction to fill in the grid. When you're done, the arrangement of the black squares creates an image. It's meditative, challenging, and rewarding in the end.

If you love Picross puzzles, like I do, you lament how difficult they are to get ahold of, while their colder, more logical brother Sudoku takes up 50 shelves at the local Books-a-Million. For people like me, *Picross DS* is a bit of a godsend. It's also a bit of a shame, since the game doesn't quite seem to have its head on straight as to what makes Picross so fun.

Rather than letting you work on puzzles at your leisure, *Picross DS* puts you on a timer, which means that you're supposed to complete the puzzles as quickly as possible. This is a strange priority for the game to have, since it's not like filling in black squares requires a lot of manual dexterity. Once you've finished the puzzle once, you know the solution, and from there, plugging it back in as quickly as possible isn't much of a challenge.

Things get even more focused on time (and less on puzzle-solving) by the fact that, if you happen to fill in a square incorrectly, the game automatically fixes the mistake and slaps you with a time penalty for your trouble. Given that some of the harder Picross puzzles rely on some "what if..." speculation to solve, this is rather counter-intuitive. While there's a free-play set of puzzles that don't affix you with this rule, it would've been a lot less irritating if the auto-correcting could've been a "mode" that you could turn on or off.

Granted, this is still worth putting up with to some degree, just because the actual puzzles included in the build are great. There are easy puzzles to get beginners started, and a wide variety of medium-to-hard puzzles at just the right level of difficulty for veterans. Each category of puzzles has a cute, theme-appropriate skin assigned to it as you solve, but you can always set it back to the basic, more eye-friendly skin if you prefer. Once you solve a puzzle, the image you've created will color itself in and animate.

Though the touch-screen functionality in *Picross DS* is rather pointless (using the d-pad and buttons is just a lot more convenient), the biggest draw here is the wireless functionality, which lets you make your own puzzles, then trade them or play them against other users, either through a network or wi-fi.
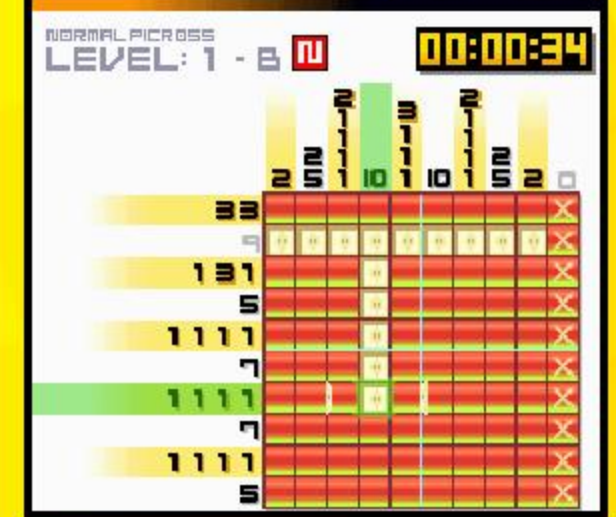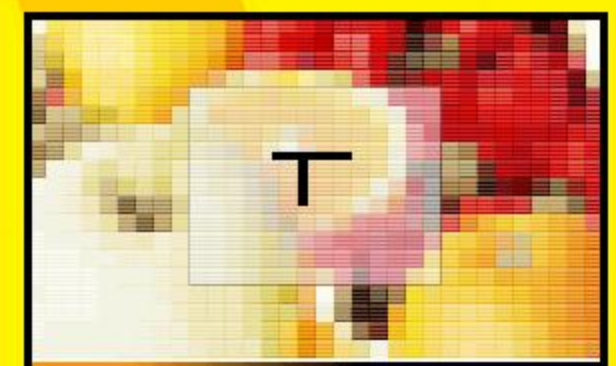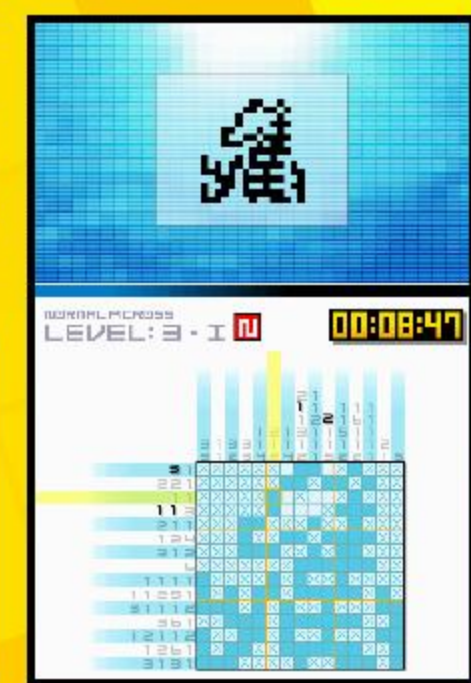
Review by KouAidou

Worth Importing?

The lack of customizable free-play mode makes the game a bit lamentable for purists, and importing renders some of the multiplayer aspects rather moot. Still, if you're pining for Paint by Numbers or just looking for a new spin on the classic Japanese number logic game, *Picross DS* is a good place to start.

Score: 3.5 of 5

R.I.P.

PANIC!™

In an industry that thinks plumbers hang with princesses in the Mushroom Kingdom, hedgehogs are the fastest animal known, and Hell can be cleared out by a single marine with a shotgun, *Panic!* stands out as a weird game. A computer virus has corrupted all the machines in the world, and only a boy (named Slap) and his dog (Stick) can untangle the mess. This is done by pressing every button on every machine in the world, causing some of the most bizarre reactions ever seen in a game.

The world of *Panic!* is made up of dozens and dozens of scenes, some big and ornate and others with only a single device on a single-color background. Slap teleports in and is presented with a control panel, and the only thing to do is hit a button and see what happens. To alleviate the danger of leaving the scene without seeing anything happen, the upper-left button is guaranteed to do something weird, but the rest could be anything.

There are four possible effects from hitting a button. The most common is seeing the machine do

SLAP, OR... STEWIE?

ECHO!! PLEASE, CAN WE PLAY YOUR GAME?

Calling *Panic!* a game is pushing it, honestly. What counts as "gameplay" here is pressing a button and watching stuff happen, and that's it. It's just that the stuff is so bizarre, warped, twisted, scatological, gross, random, beautiful, and almost always funny that hitting the right button to teleport to the next scene is almost disappointing. There's no way to know what a button will do until it's pressed, so experimentation and memorization are the only ways to get through to the mother computer and reset the world's machines.

Platform: Sega CD
Publisher: Data East
Developer: Sega
Release Date: 1994
Genre: Button-pressing
Category: Sheer damn crazy
# of Players: 1

Exhumed by James

THIS GAME REVEALS THE MEANING OF LIFE.

WHRRRRRR?

THAT DOESN'T MAKE IT ANY BETTER. GB2/B!

something weird and funny, accompanied by sound effects created by a very talented guy making mouth noises. In second place is the teleport, followed in third by a cutscene depicting one *Panic!*'s dozens of insane characters saying something that could have been funny with better writing. The least

BUT THE WALL LOOKS SO *HAPPY*.

common effect is the booby-trapped switch, which causes a monument somewhere on the planet to be destroyed. Most are fairly epic, such as Manhattan getting leveled by a nuke, but these are brilliantly counterpointed by a few smaller-scale ones, such as a random hut on a Pacific island, that *Panic!* treats just as seriously. As seriously as it treats anything, that is.

(As an aside, *Panic!*'s crowning gag is entirely unintentional. Back in 1994 the ESRB gave *Panic!* a T rating, and while there are several boob jokes scattered through the game, they're entirely comedic and non-

BOW CHICKA BOW WOW.

sexual. Still, they are breasts and uncovered, and there's no way this would escape an M today, thirteen years later. The pansification of America continues unabated.)

What makes *Panic!* work is that everything is fair game for a gag. Classic art, pop culture, machines both weird and normal, and on and on and on. The list is almost endless, from hairdryers and lawnmowers to the Mona Lisa, or freakish devices that would make H.R. Geiger do a double-take. Despite its light gameplay, *Panic!* is wonderfully bizarre and funny as hell, an experiment in combining games

WE'D LIKE TO THINK THIS SAYS IT ALL.

Nyko
Classic Controller Grip
• Ergonomic Grip • Price: $14.99

There is a pretty good chance that a lot of gamers nowadays haven't played anything older than a PSX. The Wii's Classic Controller is a must-have for the Virtual Console games, but it's a little awkward. It's lacking the handles that we're used to on controllers (kids these days!) and a place to keep the necessary Wii remote. How do you kill two birds with one stone? Catch it on the rebound.

Enter Nyko's Classic Controller Grip. It provides a pair of ergonomic handles to make the controller easier to hold *and* features a cradle area for the Wii remote. This keeps the remote out of your way while you play, though it does add to the weight of the controller, obviously. The whole setup is going to be a little more awkward than using just the Classic Controller, but it's nice to be able to use the pointer without having to switch controllers. It's even better to be able to play games without worrying if your Wii remote is going to fall out of your lap and onto the floor. This isn't an essential gadget for your Wii, but it's a good little thing to have if you're serious about the Virtual Console.

Features
Cradle for Wii Remote
Tangle-free Cord Storage

Reviews by 4thletter

Microsoft
Xbox 360 512mb Memory Unit
• Memory Card • Price: $49.99

Raise your hand if you're using a 64mb memory unit with your Xbox 360. No, seriously, why not get a hard drive? How much stuff can you store on that tiny thing? A game or two? Part of the fun of having an Xbox 360 is taking advantage of the killer hi-def and downloadable content.

Here's some good news for you: Microsoft is releasing a 512mb unit. That's the piddly 64mb card times *eight*. With the release of *Symphony of the Night* a few weeks ago, it's clear that Microsoft has big plans in store for its Xbox Live Arcade service, and those big plans require a lot of space. An expanded unit is a good idea and a more reasonable middle ground between a hard drive that costs $100 and a 64mb memory unit that costs $40. You can actually store music and things on this one, though game demos downloaded off Xbox Live Marketplace are still too large.

This is a step in the right direction, and the price point works. It isn't as cheap as, say, SD cards or thumb drives, but it'll have to do for now. The 64mb unit's price will drop to $29.99, as well. This'll definitely come in handy now that more and more games are coming out with downloadable content patches. The next big *Elder Scrolls* release, *Shivering Isles*, is going to be available only via Xbox Live Marketplace. *Marvel Ultimate Alliance* has a character expansion coming out pretty soon, and *Gears of War* or *Ghost Recon 2* are almost certainly going to have map packs released over the next year. If you're bent on not getting a hard drive and want to enjoy the new stuff, the 512mb unit is really your only choice.

Features
512MB of storage space
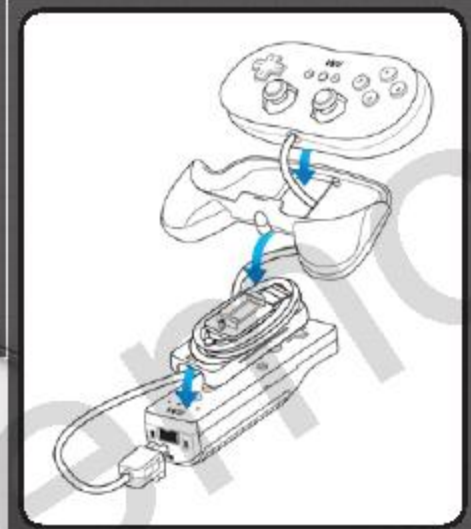
ToToTEK Multimedia / EverMind
Mega Cart V1.X
• Multi-Bios for Sega/Mega CD • Price: $70.00
• http://products.genny4ever.net/

Review by Ashura

Features
CD Game Region Switching
CD Save RAM Backup and Restoration
Dump and Homebrew Execution

Have you ever wanted to play *Mega CD Sonic* on your US Sega CD? Have you ever wanted to play *Snatcher* on your Japanese Mega CD? If your answer is yes, then Mega Cart is for you! Mega Cart is essentially a plug-and-play multi-bios for your Mega Drive/Genesis and Mega/Sega CD combo, and surprisingly enough, came out just last year. It works just like any other cart: you pop it in, the 'Produced Under Licenses of Sega blah blah blah ham-sandwich' screen comes up (it lies!), and then the cart does its thing.

If you hold either A, B, or C on startup, your CD system boots up in Japanese, North American, or European modes respectively, and will act exactly as a system of that region would until you restart it. If you do not hold a button on startup, then the cart will boot up into its menuing system, allowing you to do many more fun things!

For instance, Mega Cart allows you to back up everything on your CD system's RAM to the cart's less volatile flash-based memory. Unfortunately, this is more of a one-to-one copy. It doesn't really allow the sorting of the files on your cart or anything other than backing it up. On the plus side, the cart has many slots and allows for a lot of backups to be done, and restoring your backup is very easy.

Not only that, but the cart can also be flashed and used to play homebrew and games you dump. Have you ever wanted to try out Stealth Knuckles in Sonic the Hedgehog 1 hack on hardware? Well, Mega Cart will let you do just that! Whoever thought you'd be able to see Knuckles running around the Green Hills on your actual Genesis? Unfortunately, the cart only holds up to 24MEG. That's the old 16-bit standard 'MEG,' not 'Megabytes,' so it's really not recommended you purchase Mega Cart if you're some sort of dirty rom whore. There's other, less legal devices for you scurvy rapscallions of the high seas anyway. In addition, the cart doesn't have any saveram for Genesis games, so you can't save your progress in any games that support it anyway.

Just remember; flashing games and other stuff to the cart is just a fun bonus, not the main feature. Mega Cart is intended to play games of alternate regions on your domestic CD system, and in that area it delivers in spades. Of the 20 games we here at HGM tried, none complained. We used a JVC X'EYE system to test it out, and despite needing a fix .bin flashed onto the cart, it performed flawlessly even on the strangest of hardware. We were not able to try any PAL -> NTSC or NTSC -> PAL, however, so please be aware that there may be some timing issues due to the 50/60 hz shift inherent in such conversions.

One minor caveat with Mega Cart is the fact that the documentation is lacking. There's a single sheet included which really doesn't explain half of the extra stuff which the cart can do, and thus you are somewhat left to figuring that out yourself. Despite this, it's perfect for people who just want to play import games on their domestic system. Just drop in a game, hold A, B, or C, and off you go!

FANART

HGM PICK!

Fan art is all about giving exposure to aspiring artists who might not otherwise have a way to get their artsie parts seen. If you are one such artist, point your web browser toward www.hardcoregamer.com and check out the Fan Art section of our message boards. That is where you can post your arts to get them considered for this section. If your entry is picked to print in the magazine, we'll give you an extra 100 points to spend on swag in our online store. If your entry is the pick of the issue, we'll give you an extra 500! You may also email submissions to fart@hardcoregamer.com.

A few things to keep in mind: There is no deadline for submissions because we'll be doing this every issue. Keep it video game related, please. Only post drawings which you drewed yourownself. Don't expect drawings of nekkid people or any adults-only type stuff to make the cut. Keep it rated "Teen" or below. You are the copyright owner of your artwork as soon as you draw it whether you make note of that fact or not. However, in submitting your artwork to us, you give us permission to reprint your art and make fun of it if necessary.

Title : Holy Order Sol Badguy
Artist : Azsura
Age : 23
Location : Wa

Title : Untitled
Artist : Adam Golden Gripp
Age : Undisclosed
L
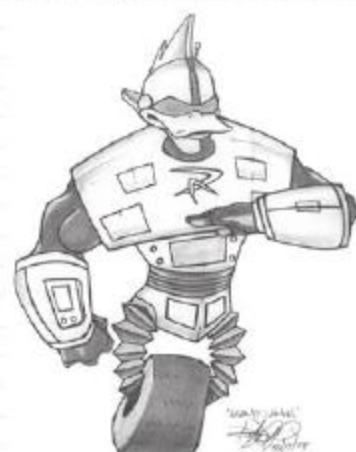
Title : Gizmo Duck
Artist : Douglas De Guzman
Age : 24
Location : Las Vegas, NV

Tetris Man

Artist : Javier Bravo
Age : 21
Location : Fontana, CA
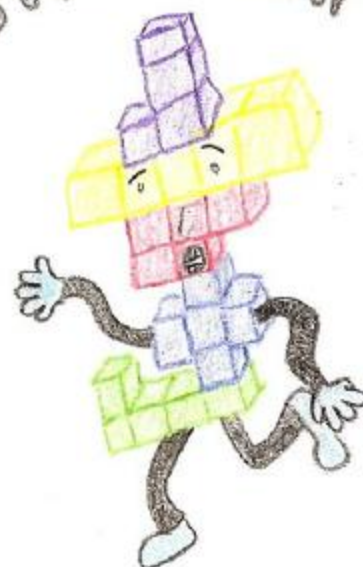
Title : Tetris Man
Artist : Jonathan Goode
Age : Undisclosed
Location : Connelly Springs, NC

Title : Untitled
Artist : Janet Jennings
Age : 22
Location : Des Moines, IA

CREATIONS

by Metalbolt

Why do we have Otakon pictures from last year, when this year's con is only a few months away? Because they rock, and that's all the reason we need!

Must... resist... nipple joke...

Devil Jin: Tekken 5

He's never heard of "overkill."

Cloud Strife: Final Fantasy Advent Children

Not many of those, really.

Captain Olimar would be proud.

Red, Yellow and Purple Pikmin: Pikmin 2

Jak: Jak II

Manly Dave will save us!

I've got the key to your heart! 'STAB'

Send him to the Iron Maiden!

Lord Raptor: Darkstalker series

Bowser: Mario series

He thinks Mario is da Bob-omb!

Roxas: Kingdom Hearts II

Green and Purple Tentacle: Day of the Tentacle

Photo credits:
Andy Lee of
www.asianschoolboy.com