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Written, edited and designed in and around the lovely city of Portland, Oregon.



# THE FIRST YEAR OR SO

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## How to use this book

*Silicon Sasquatch: The First Year or So* was designed to be accessible to as many people as possible. Even though it's a book about a blog that is, in turn, about games, we want non-gamers and non-writers alike to take something meaningful away about the creative process. Or you can just admire our campy Photoshop work.

In any case, here's how we recommend approaching this book:

- **If you're into videogames:** We've hand-picked our best and most significant articles from Silicon Sasquatch and transplanted them into this book. Although they come from a limited, specific time period, they are all relevant today for the most part. You'll probably also enjoy the commentaries we've included with each article.
- **If you're a writer or creative professional:** So videogames aren't your thing. That's fine with us! We look forward to working for you some day. We tried to select a range of articles that showcase us both at our best and our worst in order to demonstrate our growth over the past couple years. Our hope is that you can relate to our creative journey regardless of whether you share our interest in games by following us through our struggles, our successes and our failures on the road to becoming creative professionals — a common thread that authors, editors, designers, artists, and anyone who has ever struggled to make a name for themselves ought to be able to relate to. In the meantime, we recommend that you focus on the commentary pieces that accompany each article. Although not every article is probably going to hold your interest, the commentaries and essays were written with a broad audience in mind. They describe what we learned each step of the way, and those lessons will ideally be applicable to you as well.
- **For everyone else:** You probably won't end up reading everything word-for-word, and that's totally fine with us. We hope you'll still flip through the book, and we bet you'll probably find a few articles that pique your interest. Whether you don't know who we are or if you've been with us from square one, we're deeply grateful for the support you've given us and the time you've taken to check out our work and cheer us on.





***Aaron would like to dedicate this book to:***

My mom and dad. When I was a wee lad I would read gaming magazines from front to back, over and over again. I would tell them incessantly how much I wanted to write about videogames someday. They've encouraged me more than I can ever put into words.

My friends, many of whom support Silicon Sasquatch by reading it and telling me (rather frankly) what they like and don't like. Your honesty has helped me to believe in myself.

My journalism professors at the University of Oregon.

My fellow editors/co-bloggers/amigos, Nick and Doug. I wouldn't need to dedicate a book to anyone if it wasn't for your guys' tireless work ethic and unflinching dedication to what we all believe in when it comes to our blog.

***Doug would like to dedicate this book to:***

Mom and dad, my sister, and my family and friends, for building a world I appreciate more every day;

To the teachers who help hone my skills and curiosity into something productive;

And to the artists who inspire me to create something wonderful.

***Nick would like to dedicate this book to:***

Mom and Dad, for introducing me to the two most pivotal experiences in my life: reading and, of course, the Nintendo Entertainment System;

my brother, Connor, for bearing the unique burden of having had to deal with me for his entire conscious life;

everyone who liked Silicon Sasquatch enough to tell a friend about it;

every teacher who ever pushed me to develop as a writer;

and Melissa Marshall, for sitting through countless hours of inane blog-related chatter on Skype.

## INTRODUCTION

So, a funny thing happened on the way to starting our careers: absolutely nothing.

While we were smiling and shaking hands in McArthur Court at the University of Oregon in June of 2008, graduating with our bachelor's degrees in magazine journalism, we felt optimistic about landing a job – any job – in the field. But as the months crawled by, our piles of applications went unnoticed. In spite of our best efforts, and whether or not it was the fault of a crippled economy or our youthful naiveté, we spent the achingly long months after graduation confronting rejection after rejection.

But misery loves company, and we happen to love videogames. In retaliation to the job market, we spent our evenings commiserating together over a few rounds of games like *Call of Duty*, *Rock Band* and *World of Warcraft*. And it was during those late-night gaming sessions that we began to discuss our own journalistic aspirations to pass the time. It's humorous to think about it now, two years later, but we owe some of our current position to the many days and nights spent aimlessly leveling characters in *World of Warcraft* – a convenient escape for the unemployed, and a virtual meeting room where our ideas coalesced. Sure, we're huge dorks, albeit with enough social graces to make a good impression when needed, but what has always driven Silicon Sasquatch is a shared passion for writing and videogames.

So one fateful day, between more fruitless job applications and the boredom-filled hours in Azeroth, it happened: We realized waiting for our shot was foolish. Instead, we would take what we wanted and we'd do it on our own terms. We went where so many angst-ridden teenage poets and unpublishable fantasy writers had gone before.

We started a blog.

With no other options or commitments at that point, there was nothing to hold us back. But that's not to say we didn't doubt ourselves. After all, we'd both tried and failed to launch our own publications in college. But over the next few months we tossed around

story ideas and discussed formatting and style decisions. We even spent hours debating at length over what to name the site. However, if you're hoping this introduction will tell you just what a Silicon Sasquatch actually is, you're going to be disappointed. The name is simply the closest thing we could agree upon that combined our Pacific Northwest heritage with our interest in technology. It also wasn't copyrighted, and that was good enough for us.

With a ridiculous brand in place for our brainchild, we launched Silicon Sasquatch with our first post in December of 2008. We were thrilled to finally act as journalists, writers and media creators – the things we always wanted to do, the things we worked hard in college to become, and the things we weren't able to achieve in our chosen field.

If that sounds bleak, whiny and depressing, that's because it is. But we write in earnest to show all of you reading this book where our minds were two years ago. Being at the end of your rope, feeling like wasted talent and not even getting to taste a drop of what you want most in life are powerful motivators. Though proud as we are of our website today, we started with nothing and, sometimes, felt like nothing. That's reality, and that's what some of us "artistic" types are prone to thinking.

Our deepest internal dilemmas have been with us since day one, and they are a factor in why we've almost quit the site entirely more than a couple times now. It took the support of one another to make it through those rock-bottom moments, and because we pressed on each and every time we hit a wall we're finally publishing the best work we've ever done. And thanks to you, we have an audience who reads it.

Throughout the last two years, you've been there with us through thick and thin. We've experienced the highs and lows of building something out of nothing -- the successes and failures, the achievements and the disappointments. We owe it to the friends, family and anonymous readers who have tolerated our flagrant self-promotion and incessant need for criticism.

That's why this book deserved to be made. We wanted to share our experiences of working toward something we had always aspired to do.

We would like to end this introduction by dedicating Silicon Sasquatch: The First Year or So to the comforting voices who told us to keep our idea alive, even when we forgot to believe in it. Writers are, by nature, self-deprecating people in need of approval (yes, we admit it!) and without your support we wouldn't have made it this far, and our egos would have remained unassuaged.

What you're holding in your hands is the culmination of our last two years spent working on a blog about videogames. You will find

the best stories we've written in the book, with honest, insightful annotations for every article. It's all here: our earnest, sometimes embarrassing chronological transition from budding bloggers to experienced authors who know at least a thing or two about how to write an introduction. Assuming you've made it this far, anyway.

This book is for all of you. We hope it'll shed some light on why we've toiled away on this website for the last two years as a labor of love.

Thank you.

In need of rent money,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Aaron Thayer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'A'.A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nick Cummings". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'N'.

Aaron Thayer and Nick Cummings  
November 2010

**PART ONE:**  
The First Year or So

December 20th, 2008

# This Week in Music Gaming

Rock Band proves it's a little bit country, and Guitar Hero resuscitates a classic rock legend. *By Nick Cummings*

## Rock Band/Rock Band 2

Purists be damned! Rock Band's serving up a five pack of country tunes that might just blow your mind. The songs come from country mainstays like Dierks Bentley, the Dixie Chicks and Brooks and Dunn. For a game that's ostensibly about Rock Music, this five-pack should be a widely appealing deviation from the norm:

- Brad Paisley / "Mud on the Tires"
- Brooks and Dunn / "Hillbilly Deluxe"
- Dierks Bentley / "Free and Easy (Down the Road I Go)"
- Dixie Chicks / "Sin Wagon"
- Miranda Lambert / "Gunpowder & Lead"

Songs are available individually for 160 Microsoft Points or \$1.99 on the PSN Store, or 680 Microsoft Points or \$8.49 for the entire

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*So here it is: the very first thing published on Silicon Sasquatch. At the outset, Aaron and I were racking our brains to determine a good formula for publishing five days per week, and so we started tossing around some ideas for regular features. Being the music gaming aficionado that I was (and still am), I decided to take a stab at writing a blurb about upcoming downloadable music releases for both the Rock Band and Guitar Hero series.*

*This article wouldn't have been written if the worst snow storm in recent memory hadn't crept into Eugene overnight and extended my stay with my girlfriend by a few days. Her job as a tutor meant that she was responsible for showing up at her students' homes, rain or shine. Since I was the one with the safer car, I offered to drive her - despite never having driven on iced-over roads before. We arrived without incident, but I figured I'd already pushed my luck far enough - there was no way I was driving any more than I had to.*

*I wandered in to a massive new apartment complex that was built in the fashion of a planned*

five-pack.

If this slew of country songs has shaken you grunge fans to the core after the weeks of Nirvana and Soundgarden, there's some good news: Pearl Jam's debut album *Ten* was announced for release on March 24, 2009. The album features hits like "Jeremy" and "Alive" (which is on the *Rock Band 2* disc) and "Even Flow," meaning I can finally set fire to my copy of *Guitar Hero III*.

## Guitar Hero World Tour

This Thursday marks the ninth straight week of *Guitar Hero World Tour* DLC since the game's launch, proving the Neversoft team is committed to keeping the same consistency in content delivery that has made *Harmonix* a DLC juggernaut. This week, Neversoft is calling on one of its valuable assets: Rock and Roll Hall of Famers The Eagles.

Signed to exclusivity with *Guitar Hero World Tour*, The Eagles are a classic 1970s rock fixture best known for the much-loved (and somewhat maligned) "Hotel California," which features on the *World Tour* disc. Despite its infamy, "Hotel California" is a song that, in gameplay terms, sacrifices quality for quantity. Weighing in at about seven minutes, the song plods along at a belabored pace, and despite the haunting vocals that give way to a climactic guitar solo, the song is marred by repetitive and dull note charts that prevent it from being a wholly satisfying song in either a solo or group setting.

This week's DLC three-pack aims to pump some new life into the game's Eagles offering with the upbeat single "Life in the Fast Lane" as well as "One of These Nights" and "Frail Grasp on the Big Picture" from the band's 2007 release *Long Road Out of Eden*. Eagles fans will want to grab these songs, as it's highly unlikely they'll be available anywhere else in the near future. The songs are available as a bundle for 440 Microsoft Points or \$5.49 on the PSN store, or they can be purchased individually for 160 Microsoft Points or \$1.99 on the PSN Store. ■

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*community, with restaurants lining the ground floor of the buildings. I stumbled upon a place called Mezza Luna – a pizzeria – and decided to wait out the frigid cold with a slice of pizza and my laptop. After about an hour, I published this article to the site.*

*I'm sure that, even if I'd never written this article, something else would have surfaced on the site before too long. But I can't help but laugh at my first attempt at serious video games writing, which amounted to little more than a couple of rehashed press releases. It was an early lesson for me about what a couple of writers are capable of doing in their spare time, or – more specifically – what they should avoid doing.*

*I'm mentioning all of this because someday, when we're all famous and you're lining up at the door for autographs, you'll want to see where the magic happened. You'll want to feel the latent energy of that mediocre pizza place. — Nick Cummings*

January 6th, 2009

# EGM Is Dead.

| We reflect on the sobering announcement that *Electronic Gaming Monthly* is closing its doors. *By Nick Cummings*

*Electronic Gaming Monthly*, a decades-old mainstay in the gaming world and the head of the pack in quality research, writing and presentation, died today. Some of the best writers, editors, and producers the industry has seen are now out of a job. I suppose when you look at it like that, my reaction isn't worth much. But today, the magazine I admired most was canned, and all those childhood dreams that I and my friends had held onto were similarly thrown in the dumpster.

From my earliest years, I learned to read primarily by poring over whatever copies of *Nintendo Power* I could get my hands on. As I grew older, the gaming industry and my tastes broadened, and I turned to *EGM* for coverage. As my passion for writing grew, so did my admiration of a gaming magazine that didn't just dole out scores and cheat codes. *EGM* sought to mature with the industry — and maybe even gave it a few kicks in the ass to make sure it caught up. The magazine has been heralded (sometimes with good reason; sometimes not) as “the *New Yorker* of video games.” And that's the biggest shame of this: that a publication that did so much for fans and members of the games industry came so damn close to true greatness.

*EGM* and *IUP* staffers who have been let go: I wish you the best success with your future work. ■

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*Death! There's some high drama for you. I'm not sure it makes sense to talk about a publication closing shop as though an individual entity has died, but I grew up reading the occasional EGM (Nintendo Power and Computer Gaming World were my childhood mainstays) and I recognized its symbolic significance as the first major mainstream video game magazine.*

*I had graduated from college with a degree in magazine journalism a few months before the news broke about EGM's demise, which was at a time where countless magazines were closing up shop. I felt hopeless about the prospects for aspiring writers like myself. As of this writing, I'm still pretty unsure I'll ever be paid to do what I love.*

*In retrospect, writing a paean for EGM actually motivated me to step up my efforts on my own blog. It shows in the dramatic, brash language and flowery prose in this short article. It's amateurish, and I'm still a little embarrassed I wrote something so pathetic, but it felt good to show a little feeling. — Nick Cummings*



January 6th, 2009

# Our 2008 Gaming Moments: Part One

The year that was 2008 is over: Its happenings are currently being carved into archaic stone tablets by underpaid librarians to be placed on the great Metal Shelving of the Endtime. So, anything good happen? Read our in-no-specific-order list of what we thought were some of Gamedom's most memorable moments over the last year. *By Aaron Thayer*



*The Rez experience*

## Rez HD: The first playthrough

Somehow, I managed to skip the PlayStation 2 release of Rez. Color me embarrassed. But I had no excuse to ignore the game once the high-def remake came out on LIVE last January. I may have been out of the loop for seven years, but Rez HD managed to hook me right from the start. Having heard about the interactivity of the music, I figured I already knew what was coming. Instead, linking to-

gether low-poly wireframe models into aural-enhancing chains was so intuitive and still genius by today's standards that the gameplay easily burned a hole of "Awesome" through my cranium. Thus, *Rez HD* takes a spot in our 2008 list, even though it would be more at home on a "Moments" compilation from 2002.



*Officer Niko on patrol*

## **GTA IV: Drunk driving**

The fourth *Grand Theft Auto* did a lot of things right (relationships, i.e. having them), and it did a few things wrong (relationships, i.e. maintaining them). But the game truly shined in one of its more controversial moments: driving piss drunk through Liberty City. The first time you grab some rounds with your favorite friend, flame or family member and stumble to your car, stepping from the curb and tumbling over, you begin to see exactly what *GTA IV* is about: reality caramel-coated with hilarity. Sure, that could sum up every *GTA* to date, but number four chose to tone down the jetpacks and weight gain to provide players with “reserved” chaos. For instance: While driving drunk, a police car notices and speeds off in pursuit of you and your horrified passenger. Suddenly, a pedestrian flips over the hood of your car in a fantastic display of pseudo-physics. You then

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*My desire to write a unique year's end compilation article was fairly strong throughout December of 2008, but an idea didn't coalesce until January. We had just started *Silicon Sasquatch* not a month before, and at the time were obsessed (at least I was; Nick can speak for himself) with distancing ourselves from other gaming blogs and media outlets. We didn't want to do another tired *Game of the Year* list – though 11 months later we ended up doing one anyway – and the only thing that we felt could truly separate our blog from other consumer-focused “buy it/don't buy it” websites was our ability to write well, and write elaborately.*

knock over a fire hydrant and hit the adjacent wall, causing your body to launch from the windshield while your car, still running, is lifted into the air by the extreme amount of water pressure from the tipped hydrant. Truly, Rockstar didn't take away the over-the-top experiences of San Andreas, it redefined them through a lens of feasibility.

## **Fable II: A dog and his ball**

Fable has always been the little-franchise-that-could. Stepping back from the shadow of negative internet press over Molyneux's boasts and the constant bellowing about undelivered gameplay promises, Fable and Fable II have ended up being extremely fun and unique titles at their respective cores. With the second game, Lionhead delivered 2008's DogTech 2.0 (working title of my own invention); the sheer joy of playing with ol' rendered rover was miles above shooting your billionth bullet in FPS Sequel 13. Stepping out from the gates of your adopted Gypsy home into the rays of sunshine reflecting off of Bowerstone Lake was impressive enough. But watching your dog realistically play fetch and adore you in the way pets do put the game over the top. The plot moments and combat tweaks in Fable II kept it exciting. However, the dog caused the title to rise to the developer's promises of true choice and emotion in a videogame, making Fable II truly memorable.

## **Metal Gear Solid 4: The ship-top Street Fighter battle with Solid Snake and Liquid Ocelot**

Nick picked the microwave tunnel part of Metal Gear Solid 4. He has a thing with Hot Pockets. Now I agree that it was memorable, but having been a fair-weather MGS fan after number two (it wasn't because of Raiden), I tend to look past those cinematic and "deep" elements of the series and focus on what made me the most amused and satisfied in the end. For me, the final battle between Solid and Liquid could be called epic, and it totally deserves that worn-out word. The old school fighter presentation was great. Seeing both hero and villain slow down and struggle to fight back was a nice touch as well; it illustrated the vulnerability of Solid Snake's rapid aging syndrome better than having him cough every five seconds and saying "damn!" ■

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*Hence a list of our gaming moments – things that impressed us or reminded us why playing games can be a fulfilling pastime.*

*Moments that stay with you over the course of several or even hundreds of hours of a single game are very special, even meaningful. Video games, by their design, are constantly creating new and interesting things to interact with, so something that sticks out over an entire year must be quite rewarding to be remembered. — Aaron Thayer*

January 11th, 2009

# Our 2008 Gaming Moments: Part Two

Earlier this week, we brought you the first half of our best moments in gaming from 2008. Today, the remaining titles are dissected, labeled and turned in late for half-credit to our teacher. *By Nick Cummings*

## **Castle Crashers – Wearing your thumbs down to stumps; absent-mindedly fishing for quarters in your pockets**

At the 2006 Penny Arcade Expo, Newgrounds founder Tom Fulp was more than eager to show off the latest game from The Behemoth, the game company that he and artist Dan Paladin founded to bring Alien Hominid to consoles and the Xbox Live Arcade. I was lucky enough to walk by when one of the four controllers was available, and from that moment began an arduous, two-year-long wait for the final retail release.

If you've ever played Gauntlet, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, The Simpsons arcade game, or Diablo, you're intimately acquainted with the simple joy of the beat-'em-up genre. Hack away at enemies, eat food, work with your teammates to beat the bosses and then backstab them for the highest score and bragging rights. In 2006, Castle Crashers had all of these elements (plus an abundance of Paladin's trademark scatological humor) in great shape; two years later, the experience was humming along with an unparalleled level of refinement and polish. At \$15, it's the best bang for your buck on Xbox Live Arcade.

## **Left 4 Dead – Surviving**

Initially, I would have considered it lunacy to put Left 4 Dead anywhere near the top of this list. I had been frustrated with how streamlined it was in single player, and online games were full of the

prescription amount of brain-dead Xbox Live users.

Then I bought the PC version — where all my friends were playing — and everything changed. In a year where co-op play was ubiquitous across platforms and genres, *Left 4 Dead* streamlined and re-invented the concept to the point where the game revolves entirely around how well you and your teammates work together. Where *Castle Crashers* perfected the time-honored beat-em-up genre for you and three buddies, *Left 4 Dead* successfully birthed the first true next-generation co-op experience. The endless variety in dialogue, enemy encounters and subsequent tactics are brought to a fever pitch by the game's relentless pacing and high-adrenaline combat. You'll laugh, you'll scream, you'll curse the mother of every Boomer who vomits on you, and — most importantly — you'll keep coming back for more.

### **Braid – Rescuing the princess**

The first five hours of *Braid* were an intellectual delight. Rich, warm melodies played atop beautifully realized hand-painted landscapes while the player solves a series of mind-bending, time-traveling puzzles. This is all framed by a concise, poignant narrative that keeps the player directed towards the end goal: saving the princess.

In the last fifteen minutes, everything you know about *Braid* is irrevocably altered. I was so dumbfounded by the game's denouement that I stared, mouth agape, for a good few minutes at the screen.

That a game can take convention and make something incredible out of it is praise-worthy. But for a game to whisk away that curtain and display an even higher genius with such dexterity that even the most hardened gamer is left reeling? That's incredible. That's why you need to play *Braid*.

### **World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King – Confronting Arthas at the Wrathgate**

I've played *World of Warcraft* off and on since its launch in late 2004, but for many reasons — the time commitment, friends quitting/outleveling me, etc. — I never made the push to the level cap. That all changed in the summer of 2008, when Blizzard released a patch that curbed the leveling difficulty for the majority of the game. With the help of a couple friends, I had a good enough time questing all the way up to level 70, just in time for the release of *WoW*'s second expansion, *Wrath of the Lich King*.

I had no idea what I was in for. Everything that had disappointed me about *WoW* and its first expansion, *The Burning Crusade*, was addressed. Each class was given abilities to make them more potent in combat, particularly in managing groups of enemies, which made



the last dozen levels or so a joy to play. Each of the regions in the new continent of Northrend was given much more distinction in design than any previous area in WoW, ranging from the towering redwoods and bubbling streams of Grizzly Hills to the frigid heights and baffling architecture of Storm Peaks. The graphical upgrade was complemented by a beautiful, haunting, memorable soundtrack. Dragonblight is characterized by a mournful piano part that goes from somber to schizophrenic; Icecrown's music features richer instrumentation and music that builds a feeling of restlessness and impending conflict; and Grizzly Hills features string instruments on a score that is majestic and understated, making the environment all the more rich and compelling.

But despite Wrath's landmark achievements, the most crucial improvement lies in the game's storytelling ability. Quests are written with greater tact and panache, granting quest-givers greater depth of character and imbuing environments with a greater sense of purpose. Rarely are you just hunting a couple dozen boars because some blank-faced man demands it of you; now, many quests are designed to give a deeper sense of purpose to your character's actions. And all these dramatic improvements are demonstrated in full force when the player arrives at the Wrathgate, the precipice of the Lich King's stronghold of Icecrown. My preconceptions of what an MMORPG can be were shattered as the game environment gave way to the first-ever in-game cutscene in World of Warcraft's history.

---

*Aaron and I wanted to do a "Best of 2008" sort of feature, but we didn't want to resort to a plain old top-ten list. Instead, we opted to focus only on the most significant moments we experienced while playing games throughout the year.*

*This was the first article that Aaron and I collaborated on. We had a lot of overlap in the games that stood out to us, which is understandable, but we each managed to distill some distinctive concepts from the games that mattered most to us. I think those moments, such as Aaron's thoughts on Fable II's iconic dog and my account of the climactic tunnel scene in Metal*

It was then that I realized that the first half of Northrend was merely building up to one massive final mission to confront Arthas and end the conflict that began seven years ago in Warcraft III. Blizzard demonstrated it has confidence in the MMO genre as a vehicle for truly groundbreaking storytelling, and I'm more eager than ever to stick around until the end.

## Metal Gear Solid 4: The Microwave Tunnel scene

Solid Snake, the protagonist of Hideo Kojima's Metal Gear series, has been referred to as a "legend" within the games for decades. It's a title that's tossed around frequently in gaming; Zelda's got more than a dozen legends that refer to her, after all. But you don't become a legend without enduring incredible trials and untold suffering.

Metal Gear Solid 4 was the first game to evoke real feelings of anguish in players for the character they were controlling. No matter how stealthy you are, no matter how deft you are with a handgun, you're unable to save Snake from his fate. Snake pushes on, fighting his rapidly aging body and enduring incredible pain that's conveyed through top-level motion captured movement, subtle vibrations in the controller, and David Hayter's most inspired performance as Snake ever.

But nothing could have prepared me for the scene in the final act of the game where Snake, faced with no alternative, has to travel through a tunnel irradiated with microwaves in order to stop the world from falling under militaristic rule. And this is the game's most stunning and brilliant moment: You enter the tunnel as Snake, and you have to help him push through to the end, while on the top half of the screen a cutscene plays out showing his allies being skewered, shot, and killed. This is where Kojima presents Snake's character with total clarity. On the bottom half of the screen, Snake is shown in a close-up view, his face contorting with pain as he is slowly incinerated. His legs begin to give out, and his steps become weaker until all he can do is crawl. Otakon pleads in his ear for him to keep fighting. And all the player can do is press one button as fast as you can while everything in the game falls to pieces.

It's an experience unlike any other, and it's my pick for the best moment of 2008. ■

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*Gear Solid 4, still stand up.*

*At this point, neither of us was overly concerned with proofreading, let alone adhering to a consistent style or format. Since then, upholding high standards for the revision process on our articles and struggling to agree upon and employ a consistent style have come to be two of the things I'm most proud of. But there's no question that our high standards were also the single biggest problem facing the blog, and they damn near put us out of commission more than once. — Nick Cummings*

February 16th, 2009

# Here Comes a New Challenger!

An essay about rising up for the thrill of the fight, decade after decade. *By Nick Cummings*

It began, as is the case with all great legends, with a challenge.

It's 1992. Two first-graders rush over to the Super Nintendo, charged with Friday afternoon enthusiasm and armed to the teeth with fruit snacks and chocolate milk. My friend's older brother bought a new game where you can beat up on your friend. It's called Street Fighter II, and it's sooo awesome.

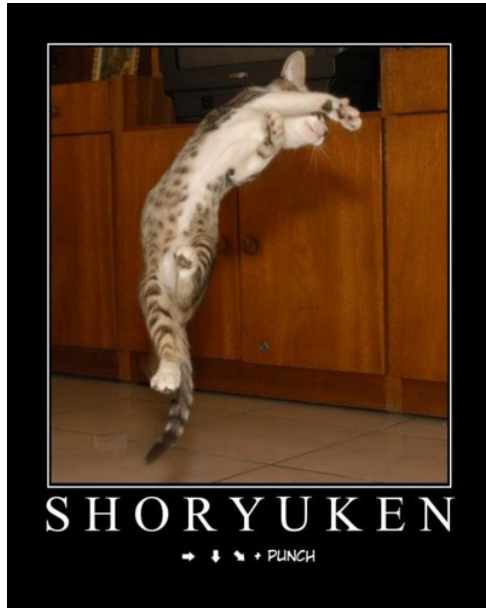
Neither of us cares about the characters or story; the fat guy slaps people, the Indian guy stretches his limbs, the Russian guy is hairy (and totally cheap), and that was enough. Dozens of hours were whiled away as hundreds of matches and rematches were waged in the first competitive gaming experience of my life. A genre was born and new fighters emerged, but Street Fighter II remains the true stage of history.

Now it's 2009 — seventeen years later. I'm an avid gamer as ever, but I've never owned Street Fighter II or any of its ports or iterations. Yet I never forgot the halcyon days of Street Fighter: the rush of adrenaline, the stream of quarters into the arcade cabinet, the improbable victories (admittedly, few of them belonging to me) and the cheering spectators. It's one of a kind.

I was trawling the Xbox Live Marketplace one day for something new to play through when my buddy Doug suggested I download Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix: It's the definitive version of the classic fighter with fancy redrawn graphics and remixed music, it's powered by gamer-tested bulletproof netcode, and it's only \$15. I bit, but I had my doubts; could a game this old work well in an online age?

Well, that was stupid of me. Of course it works! It works brilliant-





ly. I went from a button-mashing neanderthal to a rapid-fire Hadoken spammer in just a few weeks, thanks to the ridiculously challenging crowd of players populating the ranked matches online. But getting my ass handed to me by a series of faceless opponents in quick succession pales in comparison to the joy of grabbing a few good friends and duking it out in a winner-stays-on battle royale. Spectators can cheer and heckle as they watch the two current players battle it out. And that's where HD Remix does the impossible: It revives the legendary game for a modern era, and it leaves the thrill of the social arcade scene perfectly intact.

Incidentally, Street Fighter IV is out tomorrow, and the initial impressions are nothing short of stellar. I'm picking it up as soon as I can this week; anyone else planning on doing the same? ■

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*Instead of focusing on the questionable language I went with in this article (halcyon? Really, guy?) I wanted to point out that the final paragraph contains a question directed at the reader. Getting our readers to respond to our articles has been a challenge, if only because we don't have a good grasp on how many people actually read the site. On the other hand, most of our posts don't attempt to directly engage readers to respond with their thoughts.*

*I'm a fan of the personal essay approach when it feels right for the topic at hand. Although this story now reads to me as trite and poorly paced, I'm glad I took this approach instead of writing a traditional review of Super Street Fighter II HD Remix.*

*Finally, this post was our first – and last – to feature a lolcat as its principal graphic. I am so sorry. — Nick Cummings*

February 17th, 2009

# Review: World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King

Our first-ever game review explores the vast, beautiful expanses of Azeroth's northern reaches. *By Aaron Thayer*

At this point in the game's lifespan, a betting man would be wise to wager that you the gamer have played, or at least trialed, World of Warcraft. It's also safe to assume that even if you've avoided the cyberscapes of Azeroth, you know at least one person suckling the Warcraft teat. Blizzard's flagship title with its 11.5 million players is a testament to the staying power of this particular MMO, and the new expansion, Wrath of the Lich King, is an all-out effort on Blizzard's part to keep it at the top.

"But Aaron," some may inevitably ask, "why would I play the same game after it's already been stomping on its competitors for the past four years? It's not going to change that much." That's a reasonable question, for sure. They may also assume World of Warcraft is like any other MMO, with a never-ending series of expansion packs aimed primarily at the hardcore, top-tier players with enough time on their hands to complete the numerous, escalating challenges presented. This was what happened with the previous expansion, The Burning Crusade. Fortunately, Wrath is more new than it is old, and while being true to the golden formula of [1 engaging quest system + rapid combat \* (mountains of loot)<sup>2</sup>] that Blizzard created with vanilla WoW and BC before it, the bot-

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*"You know at least one person suckling the Warcraft teat." And so begins my tenure of reviewing videogames for Silicon Sasquatch; obviously it wasn't a smooth start. A wave of panic washed over me when I decided to post the site's first review because I hadn't written one since high school. My write-up of Wrath of the Lich King reeks of inexperience, being long-winded as well as inconsistent. Yet I can tell what I was trying to say underneath the clutter, a skill that would evade me for the first months of working on the website. My opinions are blatant, and I'm proud of that. Our goal in reviewing is to be honest and opinionated, and I think I started*



*The Discovery Channel-esque views of Grizzly Hills*

tom line is, simply, Wrath is the most fun I've had playing an MMO in many, many years.

Current subscribers to the world of Azeroth fall into two separate categories outside of the typical labels of hardcore, roleplayer or casual (the mileage of each definition varies with the individual, of course). Specifically, if you're a hardcore player, you still either care a lot about the Warcraft mythology and how the MMO advances the storyline from the original RTSes, or you would rather ditch the writing and focus on what loot can be obtained through the massively multiplayer experience. Both mindsets have room to coexist within the game, but consider which team you'd want to bat for before going into the new content, as your outlook truly matters and can maximize or minimize the integrity of the entire expansion. When I say Wrath is fun, I'm saying that it hits upon what I feel is missing from most MMOs: a well-written storyline finely chiseled through a series of enjoyable quests.

Wrath of the Lich King rewards Warcraft story devotees while simultaneously providing a more solid, tuned and enjoyable MMO experience. What isn't there to like about the new system in place? Leveling to the new cap of 80 is, first and foremost, easy. Yes, it is, and I wouldn't have it any other way. While the short skip and hop to the new level cap takes away a certain feeling of accomplishment that was obtained when you

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*the trend admirably enough.*

*Most important to this review is the introduction of our "Recommended/Not Recommended" method of aggregating reviewers' opinions. Nick and I agreed on the idea because it allows us to add pros and cons at the end to wrap up the whole package while simultaneously refraining from adding a formal score in stars, numbers or letters – something we don't believe works for our type of reviews. It's a feature that's still with us today, and I think it's one of our best initial successes, Metacritic be damned. — Aaron Thayer*



Unfortunately, "Penguin Party" isn't an achievement



Frostmournne hungers...



A random dancing pirate!

first hit level 60 and later 70, Wrath isn't trying to keep its player base tied-up in leveling woes for three months. Sure, it was easy for some day-one douches to literally hit 80 at launch, but the overall effect of letting the less-devoted players see new content so soon was a great idea on Blizzard's part.

You'll level up a main character, which can be done almost entirely solo even if you aren't an independent class like a hunter, hybrid-healer or caster, and then immediately get to work preparing for heroic difficulty dungeons, epic raids, new player versus player battlegrounds or leveling your poor, neglected alternate characters. At times this expansion can be overwhelming because of the amount of freedom you have, whereas before you would almost feel chained to one character for the next 10 levels of content. The additions to talents and spellbooks are, as always, debatable and constantly changing. Class balance is a dynamic beast, and one that I won't go into. At the very least, I enjoyed my Shaman's new skills on the speedy road to 80.

But just because leveling from 70 to 80 (and even levels 1 to 70 due to lowered experience requirements) is fast doesn't automatically mean it's wonderful. No, the true joy of leveling in Wrath comes from the highly entertaining quests and the perfectly executed cinematic elements Blizzard found a way to implement into a cartoony, four-year-old game. This is where your interest in Warcraft's history becomes very important.

As the title might suggest, Wrath of the Lich King ratchets up the presence of one Arthas Menethil, otherwise known as the Lich King to the unaware (I sincerely hope that wasn't a spoiler for someone), who was once a noble human paladin as well as a prince. Anyone who played through Warcraft III and its expansion, The Frozen Throne, saw the downfall of Arthas at the hands of both his insatiable rage and the sword called Frostmourne. For the last five years (when Frozen Throne was released), those eager to learn what really happened after Arthas assumed the title and throne of the Lich King have waited for Blizzard to throw out some scraps. Bits and pieces of his existence were sprinkled around in the original WoW and BC, but until this expansion nothing has come close to the surprisingly intimate and frequent encounters with Wrath's titular character. Outside of Death Knights, being the former BFFs of Arthas, the familiar classes of WoW see a lot of the Lich King. Hopefully you like the guy, or as much as you can like a mass-murdering, patricidal, undead maniac.

Truly though, the storylines and quests involving Arthas are some of the best ever crafted for the WoW universe. The writing has been much more focused, clear and logical. Players are taken to events that correlate back to the Warcraft strategy games, which is a treat for longtime fans. You get to see Arthas and his dwarven pal Muradin find Frostmourne and witness the prince's downfall, in-game, and not with a limited view-point like in Warcraft III. For non-lore nerds this will mean little, but like

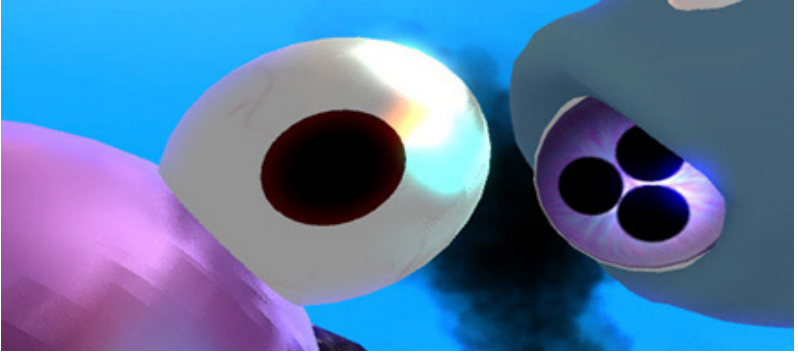
I said before if you care about the stories and the mythology, you begin to realize that Wrath is more of a fan service expansion than anything else the company has done in recent years. So far, Arthas has shown up in most of the eight quest zones (Wintergrasp, the outdoor PvP section, doesn't count). The in-game cutscenes with Arthas are fully voice-acted and incredibly cinematic. His raspy, deathly cold voice adds a lot to the experience. For the first time I felt like I was participating in a piece of the Warcraft universe, witnessing some integral event unfolding before my character. For example: You get to touch the Lich King's former heart, his last aspect of humanity, which is floating hundreds of feet beneath his Icecrown Citadel. Classic.

Obviously I've gushed the most over Wrath's superb execution of the typically weak story development seen in older World of Warcraft efforts. Outside of story, it has to be mentioned that the art and audio direction in this game almost make me wish I had purchased the Collector's Edition. Blizzard's portfolio has, for me, been a source of many childhood drawings, tracings and other artistic musings. I remember when I brought the Diablo instruction booklet to school with me multiple times, reading the background of the world and characters over and over whenever I had the chance. So it means a lot to me when I say that the art in this game is the best they've ever done. The soundtrack is equally fantastic, and I have not once turned the music off while playing the game, even months after release.

It's actually humorous to think of doing a review, especially this far into the post-release period, of an MMO's expansion. Regardless of the game, committed players are going to purchase the new content because it's practically required to do anything of merit. But this review isn't to persuade those who haven't made the plunge. Instead, it's written to highlight what has been an evolution in the MMO spectrum. Say what you will about WoW addictions, time wasting and so on, but I'm hard-pressed to find any true flaws in Wrath. A gaming experience, when done correctly as it is here, is important regardless of genre. Yet, you either like MMOs or you don't — that's really what it boils down to. But for me, playing through a new chapter in the Warcraft story has been worth the time and monetary investment, and I'm sure some of those 11.5 million players feel the same way. ■

### **Recommended for:**

- MMO players feeling dismayed by thinly sliced storylines seen in other games and previous World of Warcraft titles; a redemption of immersive storylines.
- Tastes that lean toward the appreciation of the Warcraft lore and its continuation.
- Gamers interested in seeing what an MMO can do “right.”



February 17th, 2009

# Review: The Maw

Twisted Pixel's charming, comical adventure demonstrates that a little imagination goes a long way. *By Aaron Thayer*

“Eat things.”

That tagline, found on the website of The Maw developers Twisted Pixel Games, paraphrases the entire motif this downloadable action/adventure title was created on: You eat, a lot. In fact, you eat so much that by the end of the game your purple blob companion, known appropriately as Maw, has become its own planet. A heaping of charm is automatically added to a game when I don't remember the last time a videogame protagonist ate himself to planetoid proportions.

And charm is exactly what The Maw does best. To me, it feels like playing through a lost chapter of some Pixar film that was never produced. The charisma oozes from this unassuming Live Arcade title that, honestly, I might have passed up. Its PAX 10 audience award and 2009 Independent Games Festival finalist designation illustrate that critically the game is given its fair share, but that, as always, doesn't mean it will get noticed commercially. I hope it does and prospers, because The Maw is a more engaging title than a majority of the mainstream retail games churned out week by week.

I'm hard-pressed to find a \$10/800-Microsoft-Point experience



*Frank hesitates while Maw salivates*

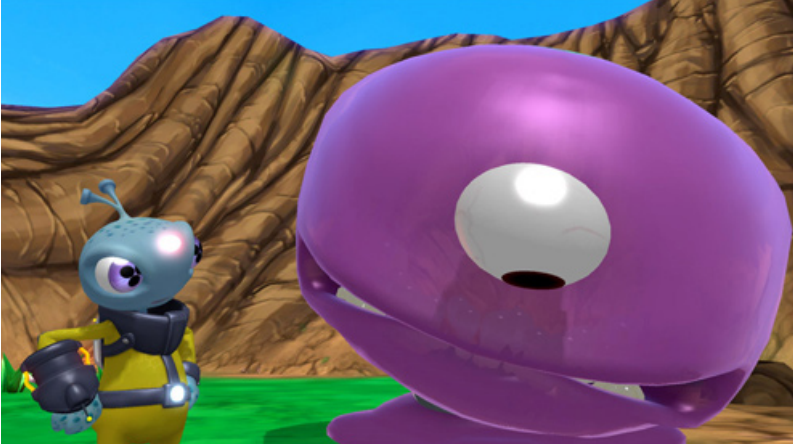
as polished, impressive and enjoyable as *The Maw*. The developers managed to make an affordable 3D adventure that controls, looks and sounds incredibly well. Moving around as Frank, your alien avatar who becomes Maw's pal after both are released from their spaceship prisons following a crash, is effortless. The control scheme is simple and on the Xbox 360's control pad each face button provides a consistent action that makes the game accessible. A is jump, B is grab, Y is throw and X is a varying attack depending on what abilities the Maw has absorbed through gorging. Each attack is coupled with a visual transformation of Maw, who can take on the powers of a flaming lizard-like creature (Gastro) to a laser-eyed peacock (Loofer). There aren't any complex combos to master because those would go against the feeling of the game, which is meant to be enjoyed without second-guessing and asking, "Am I playing this right?" What I love about *The Maw* is it's a better "kid game" than most of those marketed directly at children, à la THQ's *Ratatouille*. Instead of being overly complex and frustrating, *The Maw* is simple and funny. But let's be clear that *The Maw* isn't just for one audience or the other: It's for everyone.

Graphically *The Maw* is an achievement compared to other Arcade titles. It's not to say that every future Arcade game needs to be in 3D and as polished as *The Maw*, but I hope that this game sets a trend in what we as gamers should expect from even a \$10 experience. There

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*Writing about The Maw was an effortless process. That's because the game was pure enjoyment. The paragraph structure exhibits this, and it's a more deliberate attempt at critiquing software than my Wrath of the Lich King review was. Following the introduction I separated the controls, the graphics, the audio and the overall length into individual paragraphs. It's a methodology I learned writing for a Nintendo fan site when I was 15, and a style I thankfully started to shed as 2009 went on.*





Top: An Intervention special: Overeating

Bottom: NOT a Beetleborg

are some low-resolution textures, and the game does look more like a high-def update of an original Xbox title, but Arcade games aren't held to the same standards as general disc titles, and they don't need to be; You're paying for an easily digestible piece of content, not a 30-hour commitment. The characters and world fit an art direction aimed toward pseudo-science fiction infused with classic platformer color schemes. Bright green, yellow and, of course, purple not only

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*The best aspect of this article is right after the nut graf (journalism-speak for informational paragraph), when I imply that The Maw stands alone in its price range. While our reviews try to shy away from acting as consumer journalism (hence our lack of scores), it's sometimes important to promulgate those smaller titles for unaware gamers – as long as the experience matters, that is. — Aaron Thayer*

make this game colorful, but comfortable as well. I felt at home while playing through the vistas of the world of *The Maw*, which I can attribute to my gaming roots loving Mario, Sonic, Crash Bandicoot and a myriad of other similar games.

The audio direction in the game is endearing. Each level has its own tune, and the overall package sounds mischievous and cartoony in that old Looney Tunes way. It adds a lot to the formula and makes *The Maw* even more amusing than it already is.

Throughout the game's eight levels you'll laugh, and laugh some more. At least I, being the weird kind of person I am, found repeated enjoyment in watching this purple planet eater devour helpless pink ball after helpless pink ball, which are predictably named Yums. *The Maw* as a game has no issue with being silly and weird, and that's what kept me playing all the way through to the end. And while it is relatively short, being beaten in around four to five hours depending on how much you accomplish in each level, it maintains cohesion throughout. The motive is clear: eat more and destroy the humanoid Galactic Bounty Hunters who imprisoned you in the first place. A complex story is not needed in every game that's released, because the simple joy of watching the expressive "face" of a blob called Maw when it's scared, hurt, curious or sad is fulfilling enough.

*The Maw* is definitely one of the better Arcade titles I've played, period. ■

### **Recommended for:**

- Those with a strange sense of humor and empathy for a lovable cyclopien eating machine.
- Anyone wanting to experience a well-produced (and cheap!) 3D Arcade title.
- You felt a spiritual bond with the Purple People Eater in your grade school's play.

February 23rd, 2009

# Editorial: Dude, Where's My Xbox?

What can you do when your gaming gear is stolen? As it turns out, you're pretty much on your own. *By Aaron Thayer*

I've been using my checkbook as a wallet for the past two months. The plastic cards tend to fall out once in awhile, but it hasn't persuaded me to buy a real wallet for whatever reason. I don't have my college ID anymore, which helped lower the cost of matinee movie tickets. And my replacement driver's license, well, that was lost in the mail for three weeks.

Getting robbed sucks.

On the 17th of December I woke up to go sit on the pseudo-suede futon in my girlfriend Elena and I's tiny living room. I had hoped to be lazy like usual that morning. But instead of seeing what was on TV, I only saw television and game console-shaped outlines of dust where all of my electronics were the night before. My Wii, DS, LCD TV, Xbox 360, wallet, camera and Elena's laptop were taken. I flipped out, yelling to her, "Everything's gone!" Our front door was barely closed, the robbers having entered through a kitchen window they pried open. I laughed about it later, that they had enough common courtesy to try and close the door as they sped away in the snow.

Robberies happen all the time—we're not a special case. I realize we got off a lot better than some people in that neither of us was injured or worse. But what's it like to be robbed as a gamer? What rights do you have when your consoles are taken away? After talking to Microsoft customer service, I'd argue your rights are almost non-existent.

The day after the robbery I called Microsoft's support line to ask what happens if the robber logs on to my Live account with my stolen Xbox. The first representative I spoke with said having my "LIVE account hijacked is a serious issue," but offered no options other than changing my Microsoft passwords and security questions, which I did. Because I had other things to worry about I left the conversation at that and hung up.

I called again a few days later, provided my customer service number



*One of those was mine!*

from the first call and talked to a new representative named Mike. I asked directly this time if it's possible to track the IP of the robber who, since my previous call, had logged onto my Live account a few times according to my friends. Friends who left some explicit and hilarious messages for the thief to read, such as "Give my friend his shit back you fucker!" I assume the thief tested the Xbox to see if it still worked, which it did, before he could sell it and the copy of Halo 3 that was still in the disc tray. Mike told me, simply, "No, no we can't [give out IPs]." I was transferred to Mike's manager, who told me the best they could do was suspend my Live access so no one can log on until I restored my account on another Xbox. As that was the best option to protect my remaining Microsoft points and account info, I agreed and dropped the issue there.

Over the next few days I kept thinking about Microsoft's lackadaisical stance against physical console thievery, though they were very worried about Xbox Live account hijacking. Admittedly, it's possible that someone stealing a Live account could have access to private and vital information and efforts should be made to stop that type of theft. However, Microsoft should also try to protect its customers who are victims of traditional theft. That said, I realize it would be a legal and financial minefield for Microsoft to swoop down, trumpets blaring, and save every person reporting their console as stolen. But what about documented robberies?

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*This is my first editorial for the site, and as a narrative it turned out well – despite the awful title. Did anyone need to be reminded of a Seann William Scott and Ashton Kutcher stoner comedy in 2009? No.*

*Here I achieved a delicate balance between showing and telling readers what had happened, and used the stage I set to present my argument against Microsoft's policies regarding theft. I even sourced quotes from real people I talked to from the Xbox support line. (What a concept!) To my knowledge, Microsoft hasn't changed its reactions to console theft, which continues to be*

While local law enforcement are by no means obligated to track down every stolen game console lead they get (because really, they have so many other important things to do), if a customer like myself can provide a valid police case number and detailed, verifiable information to Microsoft, the company should turn around and cooperate with legitimate robbery cases without requiring a subpoena. The stolen console's serial

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“A diplomatic approach would be to send the flagged Xbox a pop-up, full screen message saying the console has been reported as stolen. It's better than telling the owner, ‘Sorry, you're on you own.’”

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number would then be flagged by Microsoft so if someone logs onto Live while it's flagged, the company can deal with the situation in a variety of ways. If modded and hacked consoles can be locked down via a console update, it seems fairly possible to do the same to stolen property.

A diplomatic and corporate approach would be to send the flagged Xbox a pop-up, full screen message saying the console has been reported as stolen. Even if the Xbox was pawned off and purchased by an unwitting consumer, this message would tell them they have stolen property so they could then pass on the information to Microsoft and the authorities. The pop-up could be removed by contacting Microsoft customer service and providing account information, the police case number, etc. Though this method would rely on the stolen Xbox being online at least once, it's better than telling the owner, “Sorry, you're on you own.” At the very least this would make it hard to sell a stolen console: The message would remain on the screen even when offline and over the console's viewable screen area, making gaming impossible. In a perfect world, this notification would last through a data wipe, but to do that would mean it would have to be a built-in feature on new 360s, as a downloadable update enabling this security measure for current Xbox consoles could still be erased along with the hard drive.

Unfortunately, this “solution” is likely impossible. Microsoft would have to expand its customer service operations while creating a specialized console theft department as well. Tracking down leads, flagging consoles, obtaining court orders for IP addresses, dealing with police paper-

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*a major oversight for the company.*

*It's a typical opinion-editorial piece, wherein an argument is presented and solutions for the writer's stance are provided, along with the positives and negatives of the writer's suggestions. What interests me in looking back is how I added scene-setting and anecdotal humor to my editorializing. That magazine style of writing from college was apparently hard to avoid. As a whole the style works, and it's something I should revisit in the future for Silicon Sasquatch... hopefully not because I get robbed again. — Aaron Thayer*

work and working with victimized customers sounds like an incredibly expensive, painful and imaginary endeavor for the company to attempt. Especially in the current economic climate, with Microsoft already laying off 5,000 employees over the next year and a half, this idea seems even less feasible than ever.

And I, to be clear, don't claim to have solved the problem of tracking down stolen gaming property. If Microsoft could have done something like this without legal repercussions and muddling their Terms of Service by giving out personal information, they would have. Police have subpoenaed Microsoft for IP addresses before, the fact that the court is involved adds extra time and effort on already stressed law enforcement to make it a very rare scenario.

On the other hand, it's fantastic that Microsoft keeps your profile information server-side, which protects your licensed content, achievements, friends list and a multitude of other things. At the very least, not all is lost in the event of a robbery. Though this is more of a feature and not necessarily an intended measure against thievery, I can only imagine the frustration of losing profile information in conjunction with game save data when a thief wipes the console to sell it.

A few weeks after the robbery I was informed by a detective working our case that they recovered the majority of my property, with only the Wii, DS and laptop unaccounted for. I was extremely lucky and am well aware of that. And though my HDD was wiped and the game saves were lost, it's a fantastic feeling to know my personal profile and already purchased content are safe and easily restored to my once-stolen-but-now-returned console.

Which is a relief, because I didn't want to pull out my replacement credit card from the makeshift checkbook wallet, so obviously visible in the pocket of my jeans, and pay for a brand new Xbox 360. ■

March 9th, 2009

# A Beginner's Guide to Street Fighter IV

Struggling to get a grip in Capcom's fiercely competitive fighter? Welcome to the club. *By Nick Cummings*

There's just no place for a street fighting man.

Well, that may have been true in 1968, but anyone who's old enough to remember the Clinton era remembers Street Fighter II. Its unprecedented console game sales numbers, the lines of wannabe world warriors amassing at the local arcade machine, the combos, chains and cancels — they put Capcom on the map and gave birth to a brilliant new game genre, but the phenomenon faded with time. An obscure series of sequels and offshoots largely served to refine the game's brilliant core mechanics, but did so at the cost of accessibility.

Fortunately, that ends with Street Fighter IV. The game's back with the entire original cast of fighters from Super Street Fighter II Turbo (minus T. Hawk and Dee Jay, but nobody misses them) along with some fresh and inspired new faces. It's endlessly replayable, packed to the brim with style and tempered with disciplined balance — a hallmark of the series and the result of months of in-depth public testing with the arcade version. But if you're like me, you can barely remember how to throw a Hadoken or block Sagat's knee attack. That's where this guide comes in! I've taken my thirty hours' experience of getting my ass handed to me by tweens named xXDeathstrykeXx and yourgonnalose (sic) on Xbox Live and coupled it with the best advice I've found for learning the ropes in Street Fighter in the hopes that new players can get the hang of a game whose only real flaw is the lack of a beginner's mode. So dust off your gloves, dry-clean your most fashionable gi and get ready to throw hands with the best of 'em.

## 1. Play Online

This is the single most important piece of advice I can provide. One thing to bear in mind: You're going to get your ass kicked — a lot. But

it's a fighting game, so any different sort of preconceived notions you might've had should be thrown out the door.

Street Fighter's enduring value has always come from its player-versus-player component, and thanks to Xbox Live/PSN and some pretty impressive netcode, thousands of players are waiting at the floodgates to duke it out with you. I've fought around 150 online battles, and only a half dozen were plagued by any noticeable lag; fortunately, no games ended in a total disconnection. Players from around the world ranging from fragile beginners to arcade-hardened masters contend in the online arena, so it's a bit of a grab bag to say the least. But the quickest way to learn is to fight real people who are making real risk-versus-reward decisions at the same time as you.

## 2. Listen to Capcom

Straight from the horse's mouth comes a bevy of information that helps shed some light on the intricacies of SFIV. Capcom's Unity blog features tips on unlocking characters, insights into the game's design choices, and all sorts of useful information and snippets of trivia. Seth Killian, in particular, has been the voice of wisdom when it comes to Street Fighter IV — and it doesn't hurt that he's the namesake for SFIV's bald, blue, glowing final boss, Dr. Manhattan Seth. Check out the latest Kotaku podcast, which features Killian, here.

## 3. Try Every Character

We've all been there: a character selection screen full of bizarre fighters, each with dozens of moves to memorize. It's overwhelming, isn't it?

Actually, not really. While each character plays slightly different from any other one, many share the same basic framework. Characters usually depend on rotational movements on the directional buttons or analog stick followed by a button push or two, e.g. Ryu's fireball, Zangief's piledriver, Ken's shoryuken. Other characters are called charge characters because they require the player to hold one direction, then quickly move to the opposite direction while pushing a button. Super moves are (almost) all the same as basic special moves except you input the movement twice before pushing an attack button, and Ultra moves are just super moves with all three punch or kick buttons at the same

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*I remember writing this guide shortly after I'd earned some of the most difficult competitive achievements in the game, including the coveted "win ten ranked matches in a row" one. Frankly, I thought I was pretty good — maybe even good enough to compete!*

*I was totally out of my mind. I should have recognized the staggering depth of a fighting game like Street Fighter and the intense competitive culture that goes hand-in-hand with it — something that made itself abundantly clear to me the first time I went to my friend's place for his weekly Street Fighter night. Here were people with custom-built fighting sticks, made from the*



time.

It probably still sounds daunting, but trust me: with a few hours under your belt, you'll start to pick up on the similarities. You'll find that Ken is like Ryu but with a stronger uppercut; E. Honda is a slower but stronger Blanka; Guile is a less frenzied M. Bison. Admittedly, those are all generalizations, but the concept works. Before long, you'll find that you're more than competent with any character after just a few minutes of practice.

#### 4. Play Trial Mode

The trial mode is not for everyone, but players who invest the time to learn each character's intricacies will find themselves with a significant advantage over almost every opponent they encounter online. Trial mode consists of several rounds of training for each character. While the first round is a relatively simplistic walkthrough of each character's unique maneuvers and throws, the difficulty quickly ramps up by forcing the player to learn which special moves cancel into others. It's challenging and often frustrating, but the sense of satisfaction attained by laying into Dan with a devastating combo is immeasurable.

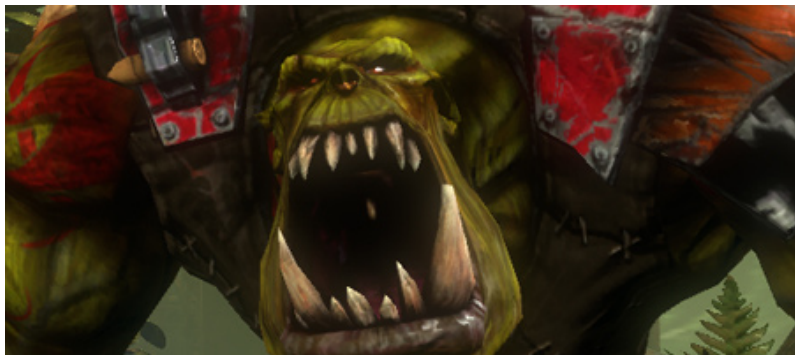
#### 5. Stay Focused

Make no mistake: Street Fighter is **not** a button-masher. It's an immensely strategic game about controlling space, pure and simple. Through a combination of pressing the offensive and defending when necessary, you and your opponent each try to deal the most damage to the opponent and be the last fighter standing. It's easy to get frustrated when an opponent locks you into a corner and tears you apart in seconds, but almost every dire situation can be transformed into you gaining the upper hand. Be patient, be persistent, and be alert — an eleventh-hour victory, and an opponent's subsequent angry tirade, is a reward unto itself. ■

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*finest imported arcade parts. These are people who will spend an extra fifty bucks to make sure their double quarter-circle forward attacks are 25% more consistent. If that last sentence didn't make a shred of sense to you, well, join the club.*

*But looking back, even after the release of Super Street Fighter IV, I think this guide holds water. Even if game mechanics change, the core message is the same: Stick it out through the school of hard knocks and you're in for a deeply rewarding gameplay experience. And after all, isn't that exactly the sort of thing we're trying to share with our readers? — Nick Cummings*



*March 17th, 2009*

# Review: Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II

Relic takes the Dawn of War series in a bold new direction.

*By Aaron Thayer*

A primer: I never played the first Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War, and I know as much about the Warhammer universe, 40K or otherwise, as I do nuclear fission. Therefore, it's probably impossible for me to be any more objective about Relic Entertainment's sequel to its beloved original. And actually, I'm quite glad about that.

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II (DoW2) is a fast-paced action-RPG with vestigial strategy parts. Players and fans of the first Dawn of War may expect the common real-time strategy themes of

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*Sometimes it's hard to go back and read my old work. While I think this review is fantastic as an all-encompassing overview of the complex mechanics of a hybridized real time strategy title, a seasoned writer would look over this and notice I tried far too hard to be multiple authors at once.*

*In exactly 399 words I do the following: tell readers I'm objective by using the word "objective"; try to be self-effacing by admitting I really don't know anything about nuclear fission; reference a 2009 romantic comedy that I've never seen; use cliched phrases like "for my two cents";*

resource management, base-building and upgrade trees, but DoW2 throws most of that rubbish out of the spaceship vacuum tube in favor of an in-your-face approach to the genre. In other words, you might think Dawn of War II's all that and really loves your "traditional" gameplay, but he's just not that into you...r RTS desires.

Awful reference aside, because Relic ditches ancestral RTS clichés the game lives up to it's back-of-the-box claim of being the "next generation" of the strategy genre. Whether or not that's a good thing is up to the individual, but for my two cents, DoW2 has taken the best parts of strategy titles and bolted them to an action-RPG chassis.

The game's single-player, Space Marine-only Campaign mode is a robust romp of color-coded loot collection (you want blue), tactical cover and exploding alien guts segmented into deployment days. Each "day" in the game is over when you've used up your available deployments, or literally how many missions you can do at a time. The around 20 hours and 26 in-game days it took to complete the game, which will vary depending on your obsessive compulsiveness in accepting optional defense and attack missions, are addictive and compelling. Where DoW2 does things right is in giving players intimate control of their units, outside of pointing and clicking. There are six unique characters in the game with three available slots to fill, the Dance Force Commander being your main character who can't be rotated out. The remaining cast is filled with a pretty typical selection of scouts, heavy gunners and, well, a giant robot man. It's entirely the player's choice who they take along each mission, though those left behind won't acquire nearly as much experience as those going on multiple outings. The variety is appreciated, but you'll likely find yourself using the same units over and over.

In the past, RTS titles could usually be conquered by the repeated throwing of digital corpses at a problem until something blows up—victory achieved. Strategy hasn't always been the key word in an RTS game, ironically. But in DoW2, the experience points accumulated from completing missions and killing Orks, Eldar and Tyranids translate into unit levels and attribute points that can be placed strategically in four categories: Stamina for a larger health pool and faster regeneration, Ranged for better bullet blasting, Strength to increase melee damage and Will to allow more frequent use of your units' unique abilities. Now, this all sounds familiar. Warcraft III had

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*and make a strikethrough formatting reference to an Electric Six song. This type of authorial balancing act must be as difficult to read as it was exhausting to write.*

*Here's a bit of introspection and insight into the mind of a writer for you: Most of us are babies – big, whiny babies. While the best of us can control our paranoid delusions of the world judging every grammatical mistake we make, for the rest of us it's usually all too much.*

*At the beginning of the Silicon Sasquatch project I didn't really think about how I wanted to grow as a writer, and the result was at least a year of numerous articles like my Dawn of*



Boom

Heroes with levels, sure, and even Relic has done the tactical cover mechanic with *Company of Heroes* (CoH). So while DoW2 isn't the first RTS to go native and adopt action and RPG elements, it's one of the best to do it. The game plays like an RPG because it lets you decide if your scout should be better at ranged sniping or have more energy to cloak for longer periods, and it's action-oriented because you rarely stop fighting, always moving from cover to cover.

In many ways, DoW2 plays a lot like Raven Software's *Marvel: Ultimate Alliance* and *X-Men: Legends* games. You control a small squad of four unique characters with traits that can range from straight-up tanking and beating things to a pulp to more finessed ranged attacks. The Internet, being the mouthpiece it is, has expressed a general concern with this design philosophy. Fans of DoW1 claim this is the dumbing-down of the series and that it's a "console game masquerading as a PC game" (excerpt from 1up.com's comment board). Here's where my unfamiliarity with the series comes in: It's not a "dumb" title trying to appease the console fanboys. If any RTS title is geared toward a console format, that would obviously be *Halo Wars*, which isn't a bad thing in the slightest. The travesty would have been Relic essentially redoing *Dawn of War* but with better graphics.

Though seemingly controversial, DoW2 is still a Relic title. The game feels a lot like their last RTS, *Company of Heroes*. That's a

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*War II* review. Although on occasion I can muster a latent Jedi-like power to produce amazing written content, a year ago I didn't have the experience to make that a constant reality. Perhaps the best thing I ever did as a writer was to start this blog. Observing my progress after two years of typing and stressing over the unimportant details like funny jokes, intelligent references and clever language, I can finally see my style has begun to evolve into one that prioritizes narrative, cohesion and conciseness above all else.

compliment if anything else, as CoH was one of the best games in the last few years. But the DoW2 design team has stripped away even the minimized micromanagement found in CoH and instead gives players a Galactic Map to organize their campaign progress. The game takes players to three different planets within sub-sector Aurelia, each with a multitude of missions available (some popping up only when you're on another planet all together).

You keep track of what missions are available through distress calls, which become incessant after hours of playing the game. You never truly "complete"

a planet, even when the final mission opens up. This allows players still out to collect the best equipment and max each character's level to do so, but the concept falls around itself by the end of the game because of the defense missions.

Players will capture three different types of strategic assets over the course of their games, which apparently do something to help you but, unless I missed the boat, they offer no real benefit to your campaign progress. The structures are supposed to provide passive assistance but they instead become beacons for enemy attacks, opening the defense missions. Now, all of these defense missions are optional of course, but if you don't complete them the asset will be destroyed. If these points are integral in some manner, why would Relic constantly pull you away from other missions to defend every asset you can before the day timer runs out? And if they really don't do anything for your progress, why include them at all? The defense missions aren't overly difficult, which can be said about the entire game, but they become annoying and tired, like DoW2's story.

The narrative is nothing special, though it serves its purpose as a vessel for the why of "Now why again am I blowing the holy F out of every non-human (a.k.a. Xenos) I see?" Answer: It's fun. I can tell there are more nuanced elements to the overall Warhammer 40,000 storyline in play, but those are lost on an outsider like me. The general motivations and plot are pretty average: We're humans, we rule all, so stop invading our planets, dudes. That said, the presentation

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"The general motivations and plot are pretty average: We're humans, we rule all, so stop invading our planets, dudes."

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*It's hard to admit when your written work isn't all that great, but articles like this one serve their purpose. I wouldn't be developing now if I didn't stumble then.*

*Lastly, I promise to never reference another romantic comedy ever again. That is, until the cosmos decide my first professional writing gig is as the associate film editor for a trashy super-market magazine. — Aaron Thayer*

*Outfitting the troops*

and atmosphere of DoW2 are superb. Everything from the menus to the sound of a giant Tyrannid Carnifex roaring off in the distance are impressive and well-designed. The voice actors did a great job and the characters' dialogues about duty and honor added to the authenticity of the setting.

As far as technical aspects go, it's a breeze to jump into your campaign save file, go online or invite a pal for some co-op action. It's great to see co-op in more RTS titles like DoW 2 along with Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3 and Halo Wars. The art style is clean and fits the space aesthetic, as seen in the gorgeous pre-rendered overworld maps of each planet. The Games For Windows Live service included was a welcome addition as well. Honestly, the controversy over the program should have died out by now, because the current version of Live in DoW2 is unobtrusive and easy to use (and free). I for one enjoyed seeing who was on Live and chatting with friends at my leisure. Plus, who doesn't like more achievements?

Graphically, the texture work, lighting, animations and effects are fantastic. Relic has done great work here with their Essence Engine 2.0, and after CoH I really am not surprised to see the updated engine tech carried over as it worked very well in 2006. You'll be quite pleased if your machine can run this game on Ultra.

Multiplayer might satisfy those upset over not having a base to churn out units and no resources to accumulate in the campaign. Admittedly, I only played one match of multiplayer against a human opponent, but I did give it to the CPU on multiple occasions. There's not much to say other than multiplayer keeps the unit functions and feel of campaign mode while adding the traditional RTS spices back into the mix. It was fun, but felt so typical that I probably won't go back online anytime soon. Plus, the replayability of the online component is somewhat diminished with so few skirmish maps available

right now. It's a good thing this wasn't the format of the single-player game.

Being ignorant of the first Dawn of War and its traditional aspects has allowed me to look at the sequel only for what it is, and not to weigh it against the original; blasphemy to some, assuredly. Though reviews of sequels tend to point out what's better or worse between the progenitor and its offspring, hoping that the sophomore effort is "at least as good" as the original, I enjoyed DoW2 for not being a typical RTS—a case of success through thinking outside of the drag-to-select box. Relic has, in ironic defiance of their company name, rebelled against the machinations of past strategy games and created a new vision of RTS titles that, with an industry now devoid of the familiar Ensemble name, might just be the future of the genre. ■

**Recommended for:**

- Collection-obsessed gamers who like their loot in multiple colors
- Strategy enthusiasts looking for a much more action-packed take on the genre
- Gamers normally hesitant about RTS conventions like micro-managing

**Not Recommended for:**

- You're a hardcore, "pure" RTS fan who only accepts multi-layered complexity in his games
- Multiplayer is a major reason for buying strategy titles



*March 31st, 2009*

## Review: Flower

The most compelling argument in favor of buying a PlayStation 3 has to be felt to be understood. *By Nick Cummings*

Just a heads-up: this is going to be brief. The less I say about Flower, the better.

I don't mean to imply that Flower's a terrible game; that couldn't be farther from the truth. It's an undeniably wonderful experience — one rarely experienced in gaming — and perhaps the best case on the market for the PS3's powerful (and pricy) hardware. But Flower is a game about discovery. It's a game of unearthing secrets, discovering new freedoms and overcoming obstacles, and relishing the simple, seamless joy of flight.

Like all great games, Flower doesn't relinquish all its nuances and secrets from the beginning. Without a single word in narration or dialog, the game gracefully communicates through brilliant images and living, breathing landscapes. It eschews ideas and concepts in favor of emotions and moods. The game's developer, thatgamecompany, famously described Flower as a poem in videogame form. I would argue



Flower is more like a series of oil paintings: beautiful from a distance, and impressive when examined up-close.

For those of you who like a brief, to-the-point evaluation: I love Flower. It earns my absolute highest recommendation. It's a 10 out of 10, an A, an exploding GamePro-guy-head — whatever metrics you want to apply to it are irrelevant. It's as simple as this: Flower is an essential experience, and an endangered species in game design. It's worth your time and money. But most importantly — and I'm saying this from personal experience — Flower will linger in your thoughts for a very long time. ■

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*I had my doubts at the time, but I'm now convinced that this was the best way I could have approached a review of Flower. The last couple years have shown me just how rare experiences like Flower are. It's one of only a handful of games that I'd argue possesses an intrinsic beauty, so what business would I have trying to break down the technical aspects of its control scheme or arguing whether its trophies are easy to obtain?*

*Maybe that's why I consider this to be my first major success as a game reviewer: I recognized that our review conventions weren't going to fly with a game like Flower, and instead I wrote exactly what I thought needed to be said and nothing else. True, it might have been a bit presumptuous of me to suggest that a game could be perfect or to imply that there was no sense in breaking down the game with our "Recommended/Not Recommended" dichotomy. But what can I say? Flower delivered a consistently surprising, engaging, and thought-provoking experience without a single hitch or interruption. At this point, I'm not sure I can remember the last game I played that lacked any discernible faults.*

*It's a challenge to review a game that one perceives as perfect because of the assumption that readers want a critic to criticize, but in the case of Flower, I think this is the one and only game I've written about that deserves nothing but praise.*

*I hope every skeptic who thinks games are incapable of providing meaningful experiences has a chance to play through Flower. I'm not concerned whether it's an "art game," whatever that means; I just think it's the one game on the mass market that's concerned with creating something beautiful above all else, and that makes it invaluable. — Nick Cummings*



*April 7th, 2009*

## Review: The Path

Tale of Tales crafts a dark and unsettling spin on the classic children's fable – but it's not for everyone. *By Aaron Thayer*

The Path isn't quite art, but it aspires to be. Belgian-based developer Tale of Tales' latest title is, like *The Graveyard* before it, another serious attempt at forcing the gaming populace to think in challenging ways. In that sense it's more like a thesis paper than a gallery showing. Except in this case you have to pay \$10 on Steam to experience the message.

Part adventure, part horror and all patience, *The Path* asks a lot of its players while giving some of the effort back—if they play long enough to figure that out.

Adventures start after the same cut-scene of what sounds like a bus heading out of the city (visible only in the background haze) to deposit the chosen character at the end of a paved road and the beginning of the path proper.

Both cheerily bright and overbearingly dark, the world of *The Path* is an exercise in color theory and atmosphere instead of highly polished graphics. Your female avatar first stands in the bright, warm

sunlight of the woods, flora and fauna flanking her and enticing her to take a nice stroll along the titular direction. It all looks so nice that you're inclined to believe the game and innocently follow the dirt road.

Handwritten text explains how to move the girls and your overall objective: Head to grandma's. The game also makes it perfectly clear to players that they must stay on the path and not veer off into the darkness of the forest. In reality, *The Path* punishes its players for following the sole directive given to them.

If the girl is taken straight to grandma's, the only reward is seeing ol' gam-gam asleep in her bed. Fade to black. Game over. The game's end tally of stats will tell players they fail, and it's only then one realizes *The Path* isn't meant to be played in a traditional sense.

Yet, the general gaming populace wouldn't know that by defiantly checking out the woods. When players do so they're greeted with the tense plucking of violins, spastic piano notes and screen overlays of bear, bird and wolf paws. The sounds alone cause immediate tension. Paint and blood spatters flash here and there and the palette become desaturated, everything looking much more terrifying than the brightness of the path and making players wish for the calm of the path and grandma's house.



*Ruby has a smoke with a "wolfish" man*

The game is very rarely forgiving, but that's what makes it fun: experimenting and testing the rules to see what works and what doesn't. The effort put into *The Path* is equal to the enjoyment received. Look at the game like a difficult piece of literature that needs to be sampled over and over again. This isn't John Grisham, it's Leo Tolstoy.

*The Path* should be played for what it tries to do for the videogame industry, namely its sly criticisms of accepted gaming cultural morays.



Probably not the best place for your child



The Woodsman's hangout

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*This review put us on the map, although that map was (and still is) rather small. Tale of Tales, the developer of The Path, chose to link to my review in a news post on its website, and even included a quote from the article. It seems my comparison of the game to Leo Tolstoy struck a chord.*

*Nick called me on my birthday to tell me the good news, and at that moment I thought that this whole thing, this entire blog, had a shot. Maybe it's a foolish dream to think that one developer noticing your work is the first step to success, but back then I needed it. Really, I did. Any writer, especially a journalist, who tells you they don't write for some form of notoriety or praise -- be it congratulations from friends or a beer from a colleague -- is a liar. Poets might suffer in*

Maybe it's pretentious and maybe it's just too unapproachable, but that's up to individual tastes.

Gamers who don't like to think too hard during lengthy and uneven gameplay: Stay far away from *The Path*. Only the strong-willed out there who can get over the initial frustration, deceit and confusion will find a deep and dark twist on an old classic. And, if persistent, they will assuredly enjoy themselves in the long run on a not-so-short path. ■

### **Recommended for:**

- The extremely unique take on what a videogame is supposed to be
- An experience that's better played than explained
- Making you feel more disturbed and scared than games like *Dead Space* and *Resident Evil 5*

### **Not Recommended for:**

- Extremely unintuitive, though on purpose
- A very exclusive experience in its "artsy" attempts at dissecting the videogame culture
- Frustrating at first and dishonest. Though interesting qualities will assuredly anger many typical gamers
- It requires an enormous investment of time and patience, which is a lot to ask even for \$10

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*silence, but journalists need an audience. And as a writer, The Path inspired me.*

*While I played I questioned videogames as a whole, from what stories they are allowed to tell to how their plots should develop. Because The Path was such an unusual game I took an unusual approach to my then-typical reviewing style. What's noticeable in this article is its short and punchy voice, a mode of communication I still struggle to be consistent with.*

*It's a solid review because there's a combination of my experiences and opinions with the success and failures of The Path as a piece of interactive software. I explained to readers the potential pitfalls of playing The Path. It was important to do so for such a unique title, and as a result I wrote what is still one of my better reviews. — Aaron Thayer*

April 8th, 2009

# The Ballad of the Achievement

Doug makes his debut by explaining why he hasn't fallen victim to the siren song of the achievement. *By Doug Bonham*

Hi, my name is Doug, and I have a small...gamerscore.



ACHIEVEMENT UNLOCKED  
Wrote first Silicon Sasquatch article

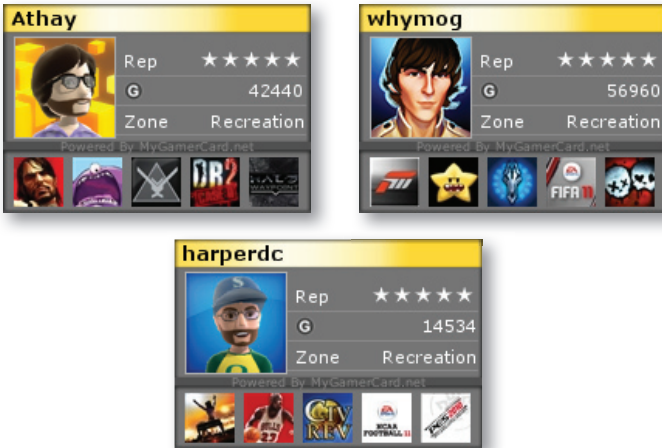
Let me explain. As many of you reading this probably know, Microsoft's Xbox 360 and the Live service track "achievements" earned in games – milestones that the developers set, everything from "press start" to "you just beat the game!" with uncountable permutations in between.

When first announced, some people scoffed; others thought it a novelty. But now, it's just another way to show off your swagger online. After initially passing on launching a similar feature, PlayStation 3 users now have "trophies" – and many Valve games now have achievements, too (see The Orange Box). Like how forum post counts were once obsessed over, or friends on MySpace or Facebook accumulated in some sort of Cold War-esque arms race, your gamerscore is, in certain circles, an indicator of your worth.

If it were a true indicator, then I wouldn't be worth too much. While my own score – 8,215 as of right now – seems decent enough,

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*Achievements are still something of a sore spot for me — if you look at the images in this book, they're taken from October 2010, and my gamerscore on Xbox Live is still a lot lower than my colleagues' scores. I play a ton of games, but I guess the ones I play and how I play them isn't terribly conducive to going 1000/1000. I'm not worried, though; I just play games and let that sort itself out. I think this article is a little rough, but it's from almost two years ago, and I've since found my feet well on our site.*



*One of these things is not like the other one...*

in comparison with site editors Aaron Thayer and Nick Cummings, it's piddling. Aaron's score is over 20,000, and Nick's is a staggering 28,972 right now – more than three times my score.

Considering each game can typically award up to 1,000 points, my return of just 8,000+ from 42 games is quite low. Aaron has more than double the score from just a few more games.

We all game – a lot. We all are probably equally “hardcore.” We are all good at games. The difference is, without passing judgment on my friends' gaming styles, I don't actively seek out the achievements or let them guide all of my gaming experiences.

With single-player, story-driven titles, it's one issue – following along the path laid out by the narrative, a player will likely scoop many of the points on a play-through or two. I don't fare too badly in those kinds of games. However, playing lots of open-ended sports and racing games, where the points are awarded a bit more arbitrarily, one has to go hunting for the achievements – they aren't awarded for passing points along a linear storyline, but instead are goals to be reached or events to be triggered.

Getting from Chapter 2 of a game to Chapter 3 and collecting another achievement is different from, say, trying to pull off one of the more miraculous NCAA Football 09 achievements: Returning a

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*Beyond being my first actual article for Silicon Sasquatch, I feel this is a great way to show how I wanted to continue on the site. My desire has been to write in an introspective, editorial manner about video games. Discussing my relatively low gamerscore — and the impact of achievements on this generation of gaming — was a great topic for that style.*  
— Doug Bonham

missed field goal for a touchdown.

I bet you didn't even know you could do that. But it's possible, both in real football and the game. And it's demonstrably hard to do in "regular" play – so unlocking the achievement becomes a meta-game, perhaps something to do when messing around with friends in an online game.

I play too much NCAA 09 – another post for another time – with probably over 100 hours sunk into it by now since the game's July launch. But I don't have all the achievements.

And I'm fine with that. Is it slightly embarrassing that friends (including one who derided achievements but is now addicted to collecting more and more) who purchased 360s months or years after me have zoomed past my points haul? Sure. Are there points I could go get easily right now? Of course; if I beat one more song in Rock Band, I'd unlock 150 points instantly.

But I play games to my own set mood, and only rarely feel like going out to jump through hoops. It feels disingenuous to go and mine for achievements, yet it also kind of sucks to have a lower score than everyone else. It's a feeling that goes right back to being the puny kid on the schoolyard, metaphorically speaking.

This particular rock and hard place is not unlike setting high scores in older (and also current) games, but is unique in shaping goals and how people actually play games. Former Electronic Gaming Monthly editor-in-chief Dan Hsu is notoriously an "achievement whore"; playing crappy games for the low-hanging achievement fruit is an understatement of what he and others do. And it's not to deride that, but just acknowledge that there are gamers who hunt for achievements.

That Valve included achievements in the popular Team Fortress 2 from the start, and added in unlockable items attached to achievements later, is a nod to how gamers now view achievements (including satire). However, almost immediately after unlockable weapons were added in on the PC version, dedicated groups constructed custom levels that were designed solely to ferry players through achievement requirements. It shows the lengths that people will go to in order to unlock achievements.

I don't play that game. Or, I guess, I don't play games that way. While I may have a relatively small gamerscore, I'll rest easily knowing I earned it in my own way. ■



April 11th, 2009

# The Backlog, Vol. 1 – Blogger’s Manifesto edition

See where our casual, weekly feature on the games we’ve been playing got its start. *By Nick Cummings*

Dear Friend of the Sasquatch:

The editorial staff at Silicon Sasquatch is dedicated to bringing you news, reviews, opinion and analysis with journalistic professionalism and engaging prose. We’re just a few poor guys with BAs in magazine journalism, but we do what we can.

However, we would never describe a gaming blog as pure journalism. Most of the content we’ve posted to this date could better be described as criticism: In-depth, analytical opinions on games and news in the videogame world, but opinions nonetheless. Journalism implies digging into each story, double- and triple-checking facts, getting in touch with contacts and divining the important news values behind every published story.

We aspire to go beyond the status quo as established by the snark-over-substance mainstays of the major gaming blogs. They serve an audience and function as a business, and that’s good, but we’d rather leverage the harsh reality of this blog probably never being profitable in order to give you an honest and well-thought-out story with every post. We don’t have a publisher or advertising clients to please, so we might as well be on the level with you.

Over the last week we’ve been posting weekly updates to major (and minor) news stories, along with brief analysis. Today marks the start of another weekly feature, The Backlog. Essentially, it gives the editorial staff a chance to reflect on the games they’ve been playing and give some impressions and reflections on those experiences.

Again, it's not journalistic, but we hope it's helpful to our readers; at the very least, we hope it makes for an interesting read and a starting point for good discussion.

In the coming weeks, you'll begin to see some meatier features where we dig a little deeper and produce some original research and content. We're all intimately familiar with the vice-grip of the journalism bug, and we're not ready to abandon the profession we studied for years. Just bear in mind that such features take time, energy, clout and resources — things we're all in short supply of. In the meantime, we want to extend our sincere thanks for your continued reading and hope you'll stick with us in the coming weeks.

Now, click the link and read all about the games we've been slogging away at!

### Aaron:

This weekend I'll be graced with a new DSi as a birthday present to replace my stolen DS Lite and to fulfill my childhood dreams of a blueish/turquoise handheld.

I won't be gaming at all until I return from the annual excursion, but over the past week it's been a steady diet of *Mass Effect*, *Call of Duty: World at War*, *Resident Evil 5* and *Penny Arcade Adventures: Episode 1*.

*Mass Effect* continues to be one of the best gaming investments I've ever made, and though my current playtime motives are dubious (read: achievement-related) I'm still having so much fun and would note it still holds up well after a couple of years.

WaW is frustrating, annoying and...addictive. I honestly don't know why I put myself through it, just like in *CoD4*, but the multiplayer advancement makes me come back for more. Of course, it wouldn't be worth it without four friends to play with. And *Nazi Zombies* is pretty entertaining, though give me *L4D* or give me undeath.

RE5 has maintained its enjoyment levels of "over 11." That's on a 10-point scale by the way. Co-op has really been refined to perfection with this game and I hope future co-op experiences are even half as polished. Though I will admit the intrigue is kinda

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*I think it's a little funny how the very first Backlog began as an apology to our readers for failing to act like real, honest, salt-of-the-earth journalists. It's ridiculous! In reality, we were just apologizing to ourselves; our readers didn't care whether we were out breaking stories.*

*We had no way of knowing at the time that the Backlog would eventually become the backbone of Silicon Sasquatch, the very thing that kept us together through the months of stagnation. Even when none of us could find the inspiration to write an op-ed or review a game we'd been playing, we still (usually) managed to get together to contribute our weekly update on the games we'd been playing. Because we didn't have any expectation of formalities, we allowed*

lost when you finally buy infinite ammo for the time-honored and series mainstay: the ginormous magnum.

PAA: EP1 is probably one of the best Live Arcade titles I've purchased, and I feel guilty for holding out until it was 50% off. So much humor, so much fun.

### Nick:

This week has been especially busy for me. On top of working full-time, I've been writing the weekly updates for the Sasquatch, which isn't as easy as I thought it'd be. However, I've still found the time to play a little Team Fortress 2 and Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars, as well as my old mainstay, Rock Band 2.

There's not much I can really say about Team Fortress 2, other than it's shocking how fresh the game feels a year and a half after its release. The continuous flow of new content packs and the intricate level of strategy that emerges in each class is staggering. If you're on Steam, look me up!

I love Grand Theft Auto, but I'm not sure how I feel about Chinatown Wars. While a technological marvel and an impressively immersive game on the DS, it straddles an awkward line between the rich narrative experience of GTA IV and the reckless, devil-may-care fun of earlier games in the series (and more recently exemplified by the awesome Saints Row series.) I'm struggling to stay engaged with the story and the gameplay, but both seem a little short-changed and loosely connected. I'll have a full review next week.

FACT: Rock Band 2 is the best game ever. It's my desert island game. It's the greatest damn thing short of playing in a real band. While I shudder to think how much of my money has been siphoned away by Harmonix's impeccable, far-reaching music tastes, I find myself booting up the 360 and plowing through a few songs every day. If there's any triple-A game that deserves even more credit than it already has, it's this one. Some of the latest and greatest songs I've been enjoying are "New Slang" by The Shins and the hilariously terrible but shred-tastic "Warriors of Time" by Black Tide.

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*ourselves some freedom to be opinionated, brash and candid in the Backlog – exactly the qualities we fought so hard to avoid in our other content.*

*In that sense, the Backlog has taught me an invaluable lesson about writing. Striving to be the best at what you do and working diligently to maintain standards of courtesy and professionalism are invaluable practices for a semi-professional writer, but if you don't make time to just write for writing's sake, it can be easy to forget why you wanted to write in the first place. — Nick Cummings*

## Doug:

I've been slogging away at a bunch of games this week, mostly stuff for review and consideration for the Sasquatch, but with a smattering of stuff for my own personal entertainment as well.

Retro Game Challenge was, of course, for review – and I'm glad to have spent all the time with my DS Lite and that game. I will eventually let at least Nick borrow the game to give it a shot in his own free time, too, but I'm definitely hanging onto the game long-term – because the games it has within are great time killers, *Star Prince* and *Rally King* especially.

No week would be complete without me playing a bit of NCAA Football 09 on my 360. I've been heavily involved with the game since it's release last July – specifically, I threw myself into some organized online dynasties. I've been playing, recruiting, and talking smack with other members of a forum for...ages, now, it seems, but things are slowing down a bit. I'm only in two dynasties – a Pac-10 conference one with Oregon, and a Big 12 one with Colorado – and only played a bit for both.

The other sports game I've been playing is FIFA 09, specifically its "Be A Pro" mode. For a sports game and soccer game junkie like me, this is the ultimate – create a player, take them through the lower levels, build them up from a scrub to a superstar, and then start to dominate. It's far too much fun. I haven't even played a game with a full team in ages.

I've been putting little bits of time into a couple other games – *Fallout 3* (which I'm finally playing), *Rock Band 2* (specifically *Rock Band Tuesday*) – but, with no game to plug through and review this week, I hope I can spend some time with other things...like *Diablo II*. ■



April 14th, 2009

# Our Most Anticipated Games of 2009

The Sasquatch crew looks ahead at the year's biggest upcoming releases. *By the Silicon Sasquatch staff*

With E3 2009 just around the corner, it seems like an appropriate time to outline the known games we're excited to see released over the rest of the year. Though our staff hasn't had access to these games in a professional, hands-on manner, our comments are based on scouring sources for factual elements with pieces of speculation and analysis tossed in. Enjoy.

## The Sasquatch Trinity:

The three most wickedly awesomest games to watch this year

**Brutal Legend:** [Double Fine Productions, Electronic Arts, Q3 2009]

Another Tim Schafer game, another memorable experience.

Double Fine's latest has EA's publishing power to hopefully encourage sales success instead of repeating Psychonauts' commercial stagnation under Majesco. The ridiculous concept of the world's



greatest roadie, Eddie Riggs (brought to life by Jack Black), being transported to a heavy metal fantasy land by his belt buckle works because Schafer and his team have created a world that thrives on that very ridiculousness. But this metal homage wouldn't work without legitimacy: Lemmy Kilmister from Motörhead and Rob Halford from Judas Priest are playing major roles in both the game's creative development and in voicing major characters. However, the undisclosed soundtrack is keeping legions of metalheads with perfect set lists swirling around their cerebrums waiting with bated breath. Will Double Fine's licensing pull through?

While the gameplay at this stage sounds typical (think third-person portions similar to 3D Zelda titles, Crackdown and GTA), the polish visible in screenshots and trailers is already cranking this game up to "11" in the wit department. Brutal Legend also expands on Psychonauts' third-person action-adventure formula with a reported 64 square-kilometer open world littered with metal album cover imagery and over-the-top characters.

Most of all, it looks *fun*.

**Assassin's Creed 2:** [Ubisoft Montreal, Ubisoft, Q4 2009]

We here at the Silicon Sasquatch enjoyed the first Assassin's Creed. It was a slow-burn title that offered more than the nagging comments

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*What's an adult gamer if not a calloused outer shell filled with the idealistic insides of an excitable child? So goes the concept behind our first "most-anticipated" article, a series of projects I've spearheaded a few times since the website began.*

*To be honest, the allure of these articles is that they are easy to produce. While I believe they can serve their purpose as informative previews of games that might be ignored under a dearth of larger releases, it's easy to wonder why anyone would care about others' opinions on upcoming releases. I myself think that from time to time, as Silicon Sasquatch does not have the celebrity level of an IGN or Kotaku, where editors' opinions hold more weight than ours. That's not to say we care – I'm just being transparent.*

of the Internet claimed it did thanks to its wonderful setting and interesting, if not average, plot. In fact, in the coming weeks we'll post a Retrospective of the title with our team's compiled commentary.

Generally, the investigation portions suffered the most flack from various reviews and message boards. Which brings us to Assassin's Creed 2, the recently revealed, Renaissance-era sequel. Desmond's next assassin ancestor probed by the Animus is one Ezio Auditore de Firenze, an (obviously) Italian nobleman. Details from the next Game Informer posted on a since-removed Ubisoft forum page mention that AC2 will do away with the more disliked investigation options (pickpocketing and eavesdropping) while adding variety to the mission mix. Taking place in Europe will be a great change of pace as well, though it's worrisome to hear of "flying machine" elements and an apparent emphasis on more action—two hidden blades are, apparently, better than one.

Let's just hope Desmond does something proactive this time around.

### **The Beatles: Rock Band:** [Harmonix, Electronic Arts/MTV Games]

It's The Beatles. It's Rock Band. Despite the currently scant details, we can definitively say this will be the game for music fans. Still, many questions need to be answered before the game's September release. Will the graphical style be more realistic? Do players only take on the personas of the world's most acclaimed band? If true, does that mean no one will pass up the bass anymore? E3 is only a couple of months away.



The title, which has been worked on by the music game masters at Harmonix for over a year, benefits from the creative input of the two living Beatles, Sir Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr. Even Yoko Ono and George Harrison's family are lending their support to make the game as authentic as possible. Considering this experience focuses on

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*The value of including this article in the book, then, is to laugh at how wrong we were in the first third of 2009. Let me just apologize for putting Champions Online on this list. Looking back, 2009 was a tumultuous year for the diverse tastes of the Silicon Sasquatch crew. Contrary to our list, Brütal Legend flopped, Dragon Age: Origins kicked ass, Mafia II was pushed into 2010 and Assassin's Creed II never received a spot in our 2009 Game of the Year top 10 (a wound Nick refuses to let heal).*

*If you needed more proof that nothing is ever as it seems, go ahead and read this article another time. If you're into videogames, you'll be laughing right along with us. — Aaron Thayer*

celebrating the entire career of The Beatles and isn't a one-shot Guitar Hero: Insert Band title, The Beatles: Rock Band can't afford to slack off in the "feel" department at all.

In addition, George Harrison's son, Dhani Harrison, has confirmed that unreleased Beatles audio content will make it into the game, almost making this Rock Band offshoot another Beatles Anthology project. This ties into the announcement that 14 of The Beatles' albums, completely remastered in stereo and with other goodies, are dropping the same date as The Beatles: Rock Band. Will these new master tracks make it into the game? Without a doubt.

Fun fact: Two of our writers are confessed rhythm game fanatics and Rock Band addicts, while the other just wants to play "Revolution" on his plastic guitar.

## Individual Picks

Aaron Thayer

**Champions Online:** [Cryptic Studios, Atari, Q3 2009]

Based on details alone, Champions Online could be the redemption of the superhero MMO concept. Cryptic's team seems to have learned from their mistakes in City of Heroes by providing character itemization (costume pieces = loot!), more robust hero and villain customization and realtime, cooldown-free fighting.



**Mafia II:** [2K Czech, Take-Two Interactive, Q4 2009]

The first Mafia in 2002 was the original open-world attempt at a realistic setting long before Niko Bellic came around. Mafia II changes the time period to the classic mobster era of the 1940s and 50s, but looks to keep the in-depth plot and cast while giving



players a plethora of gameplay additions like faster cars with working trunks to store bodies and boomsticks. Nice.



## Nick Cummings

### **Modern Warfare 2:** [Infinity Ward, Activision, Fall 2009]

It might be a bit audacious to put this at the top of my list. There hasn't been any concrete information released about the game, unless poring over cryptic trailers is your thing, but as the company's last game was the genre-revitalizing *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, I'm expecting nothing but brilliance. Infinity Ward is going to great lengths to make this the definitive sequel fans have been waiting for (although *Call of Duty: World at War* was nothing to scoff at) by asking fans to submit suggestions for MW2 via a special Twitter site and hash tag.

### **Uncharted 2: Among Thieves:** [Naughty Dog, Sony Computer Entertainment, Fall 2009]

I bought a PlayStation 3 for *Metal Gear Solid 4*, but I didn't fall in love with the platform until I played *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*. I'd had reservations after playing a pre-release demo at the Penny Arcade Expo in 2007 — the controls felt too loose, the environments too constricting — but just a few minutes with the retail release quelled all my fears. *Uncharted* was a beautiful, rich game of high adventure and sarcasm with just a dash of cheesiness. It was everything the new *Indiana Jones* film should have been, and the sequel, *Among Thieves*, aims to improve upon its predecessor in just about every way. It's a tall order, but Naughty Dog is dead-set on delivering.



## Doug Bonham

### **Every EA Sports Title Released This Year:** [EA Sports, Electronic Arts, various releases]

Being a sports game fan, there's always a new season's worth of games to look forward to each year. This is of course true for the lineup from sports-gaming juggernaut EA Sports. Titles worth looking forward to include *Tiger Woods 10* in June, *NCAA Football 10* in July, and *NHL 10* and *FIFA 10* in the fall. Of course, seeing how *Madden 10* turns out when that launches in August is a necessity as well.

**The Bigs 2:** [Blue Castle Games, 2K Sports, July 2009]

Of particular note for sports games this year is 2K Sports' The Bigs 2. The first one two years ago was a great piece of arcade sports gaming, right in the same genre as NBA Street as part of the second wave of arcade-style sports games. The sequel promises to pitch up more wicked yakkers when it launches in June, and is probably an Xbox 360 gamer's best bet for baseball this year.

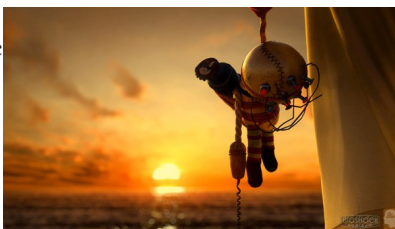
## **The Most Worrisome Games of 2009** Not all games are made equal

**Dragon Age: Origins:** [BioWare, Electronic Arts, Late 2009]

BioWare's announcement of Dragon Age: Origins heralded a return to its roots of high-fantasy roleplaying games like Baldur's Gate. It's cause for celebration for any hardcore RPG fan...on paper, at least. Sticking to strict old-school mechanics, like playing a mute protagonist, gives the impression that BioWare is developing a game around the rigid Advanced Dungeons & Dragons ruleset without even possessing the license anymore. After 2007's stellar Mass Effect became a critical and commercial hit, it's a little worrisome that BioWare seems to be throwing that game's innovations out the window.

**BioShock 2:** [2K Marin, 2k Games, Late 2009]

One man does not a classic make, but there's no dismissing the invaluable role Ken Levine played in the development of cult horror classic System Shock 2 and its spiritual successor, BioShock. His lack of involvement in BioShock 2 is a little disconcerting, but even



more troubling is how uninspired the sequel looks in comparison to the stunning impression the first game had on all who played it. A return to Rapture isn't necessarily a bad idea, but when the interface, enemies, Plasmids and weapons look nearly identical to the first game, why even bother making a sequel? ■

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*The funniest thing about this list is, like Aaron said, just how wrong we were on so many counts. I suppose that's to be expected to a degree, particularly in an industry where there are so many variables (pun not intended). But all the same, I wonder if there's a lesson to be learned from this. Were we just being hype-driven enthusiasts, or were we actually being objective and scrutinizing these games? Probably more the former than the latter. — Nick Cummings*



April 15th, 2009

## Review: World of Goo

2D Boy's inspired puzzle-game debut drips with gooey charm and genuine cleverness. Unfortunately, the same can't be said for this review. *By Nick Cummings*

I hope you don't finish reading this review.

Go ahead and leave! Really, I won't mind. I'd rather you not waste any more time before you close your web browser and download a copy of World of Goo. But hey, I'm not here to tell you what to do — I'm just a lowly blogger who's here to state my case, and let you make the decision.

But come on. Let's be honest — you and I both know you're gonna get this game, and you're gonna love it to death, and you'll think back on it fondly for years to come. Sound good? Great. Not convinced? Read on.

What is World of Goo? It's a game about building bridges and overcoming obstacles with ingenuity and persistence. It's an indie darling that was developed primarily by the two folks who comprise 2D Boy — two guys who fine-tuned and polished their game to a mirror



sheen, putting just about every other studio to shame. It is, without a doubt, the easiest game to recommend to anyone: the old, the young, the hardcore and the casual, the structural engineers and the chemical manufacturers, the cosmetics gurus and environmentalists... anyone and everyone will find a reason to love this game.

The premise is simple enough: The goo balls need your help on their journey to reach their destination: the World of Goo Factory. There, at the goo-ball Mecca, they're sticking together and building a tower into the sky. Why do they want to stack up so high? What are they searching for? What makes a ball of gelatinous goo tick?

The answers are there, and they're certainly clever enough in their own right. But the real beauty of the game is in its flawless marriage of art and design. Colorful environments, bizarre but affable monsters and hilariously rendered stick-figure people populate the game world, and it's all held together by the narrative wit of the omnipresent Sign Painter. Speaking to the player through various advice-giving signs in each level, the Sign Painter's writings guide the game's narrative through its transformation from a basic premise for a puzzle game to an experience that's far more memorable. It's executed with perfection.

At \$20 on Steam and \$15 on WiiWare, *World of Goo* is an abso-

*I've always struggled to balance my desire to write with a strong, distinct voice with the necessity to write concisely and effectively. That battle is abundantly clear in my review of *World of Goo*, a game I absolutely adored to the point where I felt it was my duty to play the part of the wild-eyed evangelist, shouting its merits to the unwashed masses from my perch atop a sagging cardboard box.*

*That wasn't the right approach.*

**World of Goo* is, without a doubt, a great game, but this review failed to communicate what makes it extraordinary. Here's why:*

*First, it's never a good idea to tell your reader to stop reading. That's their own call to make, but encouraging them to turn the metaphorical page is equivalent to admitting that what you've written isn't worth the reader's time.*

lute bargain. You'll get just as much time and enjoyment out of it as you would from the average triple-A action blockbuster, but you'll be left with a unique set of unforgettable experiences. Simply put, World of Goo is one of the most universally appealing games on the market and an absolutely essential experience for any gamer. ■

### Recommended for:

- People who like games
- People who like a few games
- People who don't really like most games but Tetris is okay and sometimes they play FreeCell when they've got some downtime at the office
- Everyone, really

### Not Recommended for:

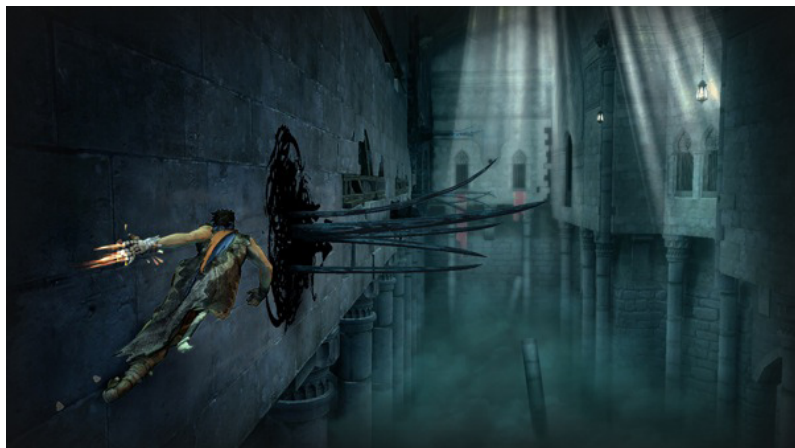
- Jerks

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*Second, it's absurd to write about a puzzle game with a novel play style and to not include a single screenshot of the game being played. Pointing out the distinct art style is important, sure, but this is a game where it's essential to clarify how the play experience looks and feels.*

*And finally, it's a terrible idea to make light of your influence as a reviewer in recommending a purchasing decision. Even though it's difficult to imagine someone not being won over by World of Goo's charm, it's actually not that hard to see that not everybody has twenty bucks to spend on a quaint – but brief – puzzle game.*

*These are lessons I wish I'd learned sooner, but considering that we were already struggling to make Silicon Sasquatch a project we enjoyed working on instead of a self-imposed chore, I think missteps like this one were inevitable. — Nick Cummings*



*April 21st, 2009*

# Review: Prince of Persia Epilogue

| Lesson learned: You just can't please everyone all of the time.  
| *By Nick Cummings*

Last year's Prince of Persia was a wolf in sheep's clothing. Fans of the series' earlier games often dismissed it out of hand as an oversimplified, brain-dead rehash of a platforming game, and a pale shadow of the franchise's former glory.

Frankly, they don't know what they're missing. Prince of Persia was designed to be an enjoyable experience from start to finish, and for my money, it delivered almost flawlessly. What it lacked in precision platforming and twitch-reflex combat it more than made up for with simple (but not oversimplified) controls and a rhythmic balance between tense combat and laid-back, serene exploration sequences. It may not have appealed to everyone, but it was precisely what I had hoped for.

And that's what makes the epilogue so baffling. It tries to appeal to both the game's fans and its harshest critics, and what resulted is... well, a bit of a mystery.

We haven't posted a review on last year's *Prince of Persia*, so here's a brief synopsis: It marked the first entry in a new *Prince of Persia* series, the first since the *Sands of Time* trilogy. Although it garnered mixed reviews from game critics, I was enthralled with the new art direction, the intuitive controls and the dizzying, sensational acrobatics. I embraced the distinctive pacing, which alternated between segments of intense action and suspense and relaxing, exploratory sequences. And yeah, I was grateful for the game's infamous "easy" difficulty level because it made for a fluid, enjoyable experience with almost no frustration.

I'm not the only one, either. For a great op-ed on *Prince of Persia*, read Ludwig Kietzmann's analysis. But the real crux of his argument is that *Prince of Persia* was designed to value your time. It doesn't needlessly punish you for your mistakes, and it's a better game as a result:

"A stockpile of lives is no longer accepted as currency in today's games and second chances (not to mention third, fourth and fifth chances) have ceased being a limited resource. Having your avatar squashed, mashed, mushed or mutilated is largely inconsequential when the game instantly resurrects it and offers you another go. If you've ever had to repeat a devious segment numerous times, you'll agree that "another go" brings with it the real punishment for failure: your character's life may be infinitely expendable, but your time is not."

*Ludwig Kietzmann,  
"Branching Dialogue: R.I.P. Death"*<sup>1</sup>

This is the biggest distinction between the *Prince of Persia* of last year and the *Epilogue* of this year: this expansion punishes you for your mistakes. And you'll be making a lot of them, thanks in no small part to the overabundance of enemies and repetitive boss fights. Expect to fall to your near-death dozens of times while attempting the epilogue's extended and less-than-intuitive acrobatic sequences — something the retail game did a markedly better job of. It's good that the developers want to address the problems that a significant number

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1. Kietzmann, Ludwig. "Branching Dialogue: R.I.P. Death." *Joystiq*, 23 December 2008. Accessed 29 October 2010. <http://www.joystiq.com/2008/12/23/branching-dialogue-r-i-p-death/>. *Thank you, MLA Handbook*.

of gamers had with *Prince of Persia*, but doing so would require a major overhaul of the rather tightly-focused design and rules that define the game. The added challenges call for precision that doesn't really exist in the game's control scheme, where timing is unimportant and button presses don't yield immediate results.

Ultimately, the epilogue stuttered too often in its pacing for my tastes, and while I did finish it (in less than two hours, even) I was left with an unpleasant feeling about it. I had gone in hoping for the same joy I got from conquering

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“The added challenges call for precision that doesn't really exist in the game's control scheme, where timing is unimportant and button presses don't yield immediate results.”

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an environmental puzzle and reveling in the resulting vertical playground, and what I got felt incomplete — all the struggle and none of the payoff. Still, there is some clever level design to be seen, and the added character development between *The Prince* and *Elika* (two characters I grew to really like throughout the retail game, despite my better inclinations) was thoroughly enjoyable.

Any fans of *Prince of Persia* will probably enjoy the experience, provided the price and sometimes-frustrating level design don't drive them away. If approached with adequate expectations and an understanding of what's being offered, the epilogue has some unarguably great moments to be enjoyed — just be ready for a bumpy ride. ■

*This review was written based on the Xbox Live version of the DLC, priced at 800 Microsoft Points. Also available on PlayStation Network for \$9.99. The epilogue was played to completion directly after a second play-through of Prince of Persia.*

### **Recommended for:**

- Players who enjoyed the back-and-forth banter of *The Prince* and *Elika* in the retail game and are eager to see their relationship develop further
- Fans of the original game's jumping, climbing and swinging who are craving a bit more of a challenge

### **Not Recommended for:**

- Critics dissatisfied with the difficulty level in the original game; despite the cranked-up challenge, the game wasn't built for it and



flounders

- Anyone expecting more of the same lush, verdant landscapes and rich, picturesque environments — you're looking at a two-hour dungeon run with only a glimpse of the outside world
- Those who were frustrated with Nolan North's voice acting — the "Prince of San Diego" is back and smarmy as ever (but for the record, I like how he plays the role!)

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*I was hesitant to include this review in the book, because in my mind it was kind of a half-baked thing that never really seemed to work. But the rest of the guys argued in its favor, and I gave it another look. As it turns out, it was a pretty decent review — it was just the subject matter that was awkward to deal with.*

*At the time, we weren't sure how to handle reviews of downloadable add-ons when we hadn't already reviewed the original game. To compensate, I gave Prince of Persia a haphazard, one-paragraph review for context before plunging into the Epilogue itself.*

*Citing Ludwig Kietzmann's editorial on death in games and its absence in Prince of Persia seemed like a great idea at the time, and I'm pleased to see that it still holds up. Critics in other media will often cite other critics or historians in addition to citing other works in the media, and I'd love to see a lot more of that happening in game criticism. It builds a stronger platform for an academic approach to discussion games, which I believe is long overdue. — Nick Cummings*



April 23rd, 2009

# Overview: Nintendo DSi

| An in-depth examination of Nintendo's latest portable entertainment device. *By Aaron Thayer*

Progress is as progress does, and three years after the launch of the Nintendo DS Lite the gaming world welcomes its newest addition: the Nintendo DSi – an even thinner, sexier and more advanced handheld console than the last iteration.

Welcome to dual screen gaming, 3.0.

Not even a month into its release and the DSi has already smashed the DS Lite's initial sales figures twice-over. Obviously there are enough

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*Writing a technical overview of the Nintendo DSi was a one-off experiment. I recall dreading another review, and I wanted to turn my birthday gift into some sort of post-worthy article.*

*I never expected, or wanted, this overview to be a definitive look at fresh technology, simply because I couldn't offer that level of detail. Many dedicated websites do wonderful work in disassembling new hardware and releasing the number-to-number differences and improvements. Unable to do that myself, I opted to write from a much less technical viewpoint.*

*What I did was imagine myself as a gamer who had a DS Lite already, and wasn't sure what to make of another version of the DS concept. The feel of the system and the usefulness*

curious consumers out there eager to experience a DS for the first time, or diehards simply willing to upgrade their old systems for the next big thing. But for the uninformed, what's the DSi really all about? Read on for a breakdown of Nintendo's latest portable powerhouse.

## Taken to the Matte: The Look and Feel of the DSi

With the DSi, Nintendo finally chose to step back from the shiny, Apple-like design philosophy that was present throughout the DS Lite years. It was a wise choice.

Though some may prefer the glossy look of the Lite's clear outer shell, the new matte finish of the DSi goes a long way to prevent unsightly fingerprint smudges and create a more solid-feeling product. As far as scratching is concerned, the matte body seems to hold up well against everyday use: The DSi used for this overview has no visible scratching even after a run-in with a hardwood floor and some kitchen utensils (don't ask).

Holding the DSi for an extended period of time is generally quite comfortable due to the solid grip provided by the new texture. It wasn't uncommon for the Lite to slip and slide out of even slightly oily fingers. However, and this may be just one individual's curious finding, extremely dry hands and fingers can forget about finding a comfortable hold on the DSi. If you work with your hands a lot and don't take care of them, you might find the console to be an ordeal to use.

Proper moisturizing aside, the DSi is an attractive piece of technology. Even the WiFi, charging and power lights are flashy to the point of being cool. Aside from the visible external camera, this looks even less like a gaming console than the DS Lite — that is, if you buy the black version of the DSi. No one will be fooled by the (fantastic) robin's egg blue color.

Minor aesthetic changes here and there revolve around button placement. The old sliding power switch has been moved to the interior, replaced with a simple button. One benefit to this change is that when pressed once, the power button will automatically return the user to the DSi menu — very handy. The volume slider has been minimized and moved to the left side of the DSi, and is now essentially an up and down button.

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*of its cameras would be important to this curious Lite owner, and I think my attempts at that perspective came across well enough. I'm impressed that the parts about processor speeds and internal memory don't read in a more confusing manner.*

*I don't envision another system overview on Silicon Sasquatch in the future because the necessity of these articles is fairly low. Any savvy consumer can find out about a new product without having to be told by an author. However, I'd be pretty excited if someone were to give me an iPhone so I could tear it apart and write an insanity-laden article about the process. — Aaron Thayer*

Personally I find the change unfortunate, as the volume is now less efficient to press during gameplay than the sliding version found on the Lite; however, the updated volume control handily changes the screen's brightness at anytime if you're simultaneously holding the select button.

As far as the d-pad, shoulder buttons and face buttons are concerned, the DSi's mantra seems to be "clickiness is best." Every gameplay-intensive button has a distinct resistance to it coupled with the faint sound of clicking. Assuredly the tight controls are a welcome change for some gamers out there, but the new buttons feel far too resistant and uncooperative. For instance, driving around in *Grand Theft Auto: Chinatown Wars* felt like more of a chore than it already was due to the stiff, concave d-pad.

The shoulder buttons are even more problematic: On the DS Lite, they were larger, softer and thus more pliable to presses — with the DSi, the L and R buttons are as clicky as they are small. Though the design of the DSi warrants squarer shoulder buttons more parallel to the system's angles, it results in slightly annoying-to-use buttons that shouldn't be that way considering they're integral to most games.

One of the more talked-about additions to the DSi are its brighter, bigger, 3.5-inch screens. The extra 1/4" of screen isn't entirely noticeable without a Lite nearby to compare, but the amplified illumination is plain to see. The downside to this is a shorter battery life: about two-to-four hours less than the DS Lite, depending on the brightness setting.

Is having one extra brightness setting worth the lessened portability life? That will depend on each person's gaming habits, though it's safe to say most people encounter an AC outlet or two every five-odd hours, so charging shouldn't be a concern.

## **Who Killed the Game Boy Advance Cartridge? The Features of the DSi**

The DSi's most controversial change from the core DS design is its omission of a Game Boy Advance cartridge slot. But in exchange, the console is now thinner, has a faster processor and contains an SD card slot in addition to its on-board, 256 MB of storage. The trade-off is up to the consumer here, though I don't see the extinction of the GBA as exactly heartbreaking. Think of it this way: DS Lite gamers interested in the older GBA titles don't have to upgrade to a DSi, and new consumers are unlikely to care about a defunct system's titles. The replacement for GBA support is instead found in the DSi's two best — and exclusive — additions, the DSi Shop and DSiWare titles.

Think of the DSi Shop as an exact copy of the Wii's online store, because it is — yes, even the muzak shopping tune is there, too. Nintendo was smart to keep a sense of uniformity between its respective digital

malls; hopefully the similar store themes hint at more inter-console capabilities in the future. Browsing is a breeze and the point system is just like the Wii's, though here they're called DSi points. It's ironic (and unfortunate) that in the face of similar storefronts, Nintendo decided to segregate its purchasing options instead of using an all-encompassing credit system of Nintendo points.

The DSiWare concept revolves around small, downloadable titles that can be stored directly on your DSi or SD card. The offerings as of this writing are sparse, but Nintendo's free 1000 points (equivalent to \$10) included with the system do allow for more than one title to be purchased, as currently the most expensive title of the nine available is only 800 DSi Points. It'll be interesting to see what's released on the service in the future.

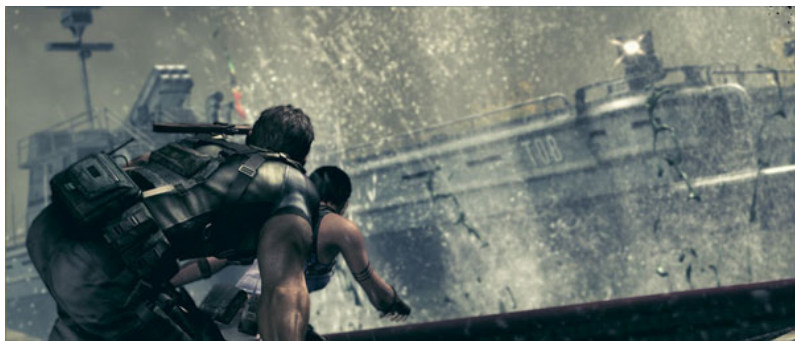
In terms of technical additions, the DSi's most obvious feature is its two 0.3 megapixel cameras. Unfortunately, the very low-resolution cameras are more of a novelty than anything groundbreaking. Frankly, the editing options felt little more advanced than what was offered in the Game Boy Camera 11 years ago. The cameras do open up future gameplay avenues, but the limiting resolution and inability to transfer photos to an SD card or distribute them online are quite archaic.

One of the more welcome inclusions to the new system is its menu layout, which is quite similar to the Wii's channel-based version. Programs and games are placed on a draggable line of blocks complete with animated iconography for most. It's definitely more intuitive to use and robust than the DS Lite's menu.

Another novelty for the system is its full-featured sound editor. The editor allows users to have fun with music from their SD cards, or alternatively record sound clips to then speed up, slow down, play in reverse and so on. Again, this is more of a novelty than anything vital to the DSi, but it's a nice addition to the package anyway. ■

### **Closing Notes:**

- Matte finish is comfortable, fingerprint-proof and sturdy...unless you have the extremely chapped hands of a hardworking, salt of the earth fellow like myself
- New buttons are an acquired taste; they're very rigid and click when pressed
- Big screens, while nice, mean a (somewhat) shorter battery life
- No GBA cartridge slot, but...
- The alternative is the intuitive and soon-to-grow DSi Shop and DSiWare
- Cameras aren't anything to write home about; could be later on if developers take advantage of them
- System menu and sound editor are welcome additions



April 28th, 2009

## Co-op Review: Resident Evil 5

Nick and Aaron team up for a review of a sequel defined by its co-op action. *By Nick Cummings and Aaron Thayer*

*Editor's Note: We're trying out a new approach to major game reviews here at Silicon Sasquatch: The Co-op Review. Because Resident Evil 5 was designed to be played cooperatively (and because Nick and Aaron played through the game several times over Xbox Live) it serves as a great opportunity to give this collaborative review style a test-drive. Let us know what you think in the comments section!*

It's gotta be tough to work at Capcom these days. After all, it's a nigh-insurmountable task to create the latest and greatest blockbuster action game in a market flooded with big names like Halo, Gears of War, Resistance and Call of Duty. But when you're the developers responsible for the one game that arguably gave rise to the latest generation of action gaming — Resident Evil 4 — you've got to feel that burden more than anyone else.

But the day of judgment is finally here: Resident Evil 5 (RE5) has hit store shelves all over the world. But skepticism is not unexpected,

as every fan must be asking the same question of him/herself: “What are you buyin’?”

Well, here’s the good news: Resident Evil 5 has a robust selection of things on sale, stranger! Aside from a couple of quirks and the inexcusable omission of a certain creepy trenchcoat-wearing arms dealer, this is the sequel almost every Resident Evil fan has been hoping for.



### You can't keep a good zombie down

**Nick:** In an age where sequels run rampant, original games are endangered species in the retail space. Gamers who hold out for a fresh, new experience are often left ignored in the annual deluge of sports games, first-person shooters and movie tie-ins. But an even more elusive beast than the brand-new blockbuster franchise is the time-honored series that manages to completely reinvent itself and rise far above its laudable roots. And there’s no better example of taking a groundbreaking formula and transforming it into something infinitely better than 2005’s Resident Evil 4.

Talk about a game that defied all convention and pretense. Capcom had the audacity to tether the Resident Evil franchise exclusively to the Nintendo GameCube, a platform filled to the brim with youth-conscious titles and a coat of purple paint to match.

When Capcom announced it was developing the direct sequel to Resident Evil 3 — the first new entry in the series for more than five years — for Nintendo’s console, it was anyone’s guess what the result would be. (After all, Devil May Cry resulted from an earlier attempt at creating a fourth Resident Evil!) But what emerged was arguably the platform’s crowning achievement: A lengthy, painstakingly designed action/adventure romp through parts of Spain you won’t see in any travel brochure, filled to the brim with unlockables and

pitch-perfect B-movie voice acting. It marked not only the rebirth of a groundbreaking franchise, but the *raison d'être* for a surprisingly capable gaming machine that was often dismissed by the so-called “hardcore.”

How could *Resident Evil 5* improve upon a game that still stands among the greatest yet released? Capcom's answer is a relatively conservative one — more guns, bigger explosions, nastier enemies, cheesier voices — essentially the patented Cliff Bleszinski, “bigger, better, more badass,” approach. There is a key distinction, however: *Resident Evil 5* was built from the ground up to play as a co-operative game, whether online or off.



## **Dr. Gameplay or: How we learned to stop complaining and love the controls**

**Aaron:** *Resident Evil 5* is a gracious thank-you to the franchise faithfuls, a title that closes the book on the plot of rivalry, revenge and roid-rage between Chris Redfield and Albert Wesker. Capcom wisely chose to continue the series' proud tradition of zombie-filled romps with a cheesy, drive-in movie feel.

Playing RE5 is a lot like grabbing lunch with an old friend who hasn't changed much over the past few years, and that's a good thing.

Familiar stand-bys of the series — grid-based inventory management, color-tiered health system and limited analog movement — are all there. And yet, it's that sameness that endears *Resident Evil* to so many gamers but bothers the rest.

This was the case with *Resident Evil 4*: At release, gamers saw numerous changes to the *Resident Evil* formula, but controls that were still disjointed, awkward and “old.” The proverbial pitchforks were equipped and the torches lit forums aflame.



The harping upon is understandable amidst today's videogame market. The controls, in comparison with modern third-person titles like *Gears of War 2*, *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Metal Gear Solid 4* with their free range of motion, are archaic and remnants of a console generation long past. But without them, RE5 wouldn't be the series bookend it's meant to be.

In the first *Resident Evil* titles, the stiff walking of the characters with their cross-shaped movement patterns was as much based on gamepad limitations

as it was a tool for suspense. It's an assured freak-out moment when being rushed by an eight-foot-tall Tyrant in *Resident Evil 2* and Leon moves like C-3P0; panic ensues, Capcom succeeds. The controls weren't broken — they were intentional.

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“Playing RE5 is a lot like grabbing lunch with an old friend who hasn't changed much over the past few years, and that's a good thing. And yet, it's that sameness that endears *Resident Evil* to so many gamers but bothers the rest.”

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However, *Resident Evil 5* de-emphasizes the importance of suspenseful control schemes. Instead, the development team's motivation for keeping the d-pad-like movement is because of consistency; certainly, to link all of the Raccoon City-related characters' stories together. If gamers burst into the fictional Kijuju, Africa with a cover-emphasized mechanic and full, 360° directional movement, the game suddenly doesn't make sense under the auspices of its digital forebears. An injured Chris even holds his stomach the same way he does in *Resident Evil 1*.

Unfortunate as it is for some players, the controls make RE5 gel with its predecessors, and despite their retrospective leanings the controls aren't at all awful. After 30 minutes of the game's superb gun play and cooperative pathfinding, most won't give those dusty old controls a second thought.

The only thing gamers should be concerned with in *Resident Evil 5* is shooting the parasite-infected population (Majini) in their faces. Luckily, Chris and fellow B.S.A.A. agent Sheva Alomar handle effortlessly. Aiming is a breeze, thanks of course to the familiar red laser sight. Occasionally the bullet damage won't make sense (shooting a Majini in the stomach probably shouldn't cause his head to explode), but the gun selection delivers anyway with an array of handguns, shotguns, rifles, sub-machine guns and super-weapons. It wouldn't be *Resident Evil* without a rocket launcher or a gigantic magnum, after all.

In a series first, players now have combat alternatives to firearms through Chris and Sheva's tandem melee combos. Unfortunately they aren't as useful as they could be, especially toward the end of the game. It's unlikely by that point to be close enough to the Majini to need to somersault kick them. If anything, the combos are visually impressive at first but occasional afterthoughts later on. Sheva herself, though, is certainly not an afterthought.

For once players can expect to die because of their own mistakes, not their computer-controlled teammate's. Even splitting up — a nefarious cliché of dual protagonist games — proves manageable; Chris and Sheva are rarely out of each others' sight, and both can hold their own in separate battles.

The emphasis on partnership is the strongest element of RE5, and not in terms of plot. Even playing solo in a game billed as a complete co-op experience works because of the top-notch partner A.I.

Sheva's a little trigger happy with the ammo cache, sure, but she definitely has Chris' back. It's certainly refreshing to not have to babysit an NPC at every turn.



### **The master of (weapon) unlocking**

**Aaron:** Perhaps the most surprising element of RE5 is its high level of replayability.

Throughout the campaign, players will constantly upgrade their favorite guns by collecting and selling various treasures that could be found in a Kay Jewelers ad. It's a similar experience to Resident Evil 4, but Capcom streamlined the pseudo-RPG elements by doing away with the store-based format of the last game. Now, guns can be improved wherever and whenever one sees fit.

It's hard to find any complaints with the change, because the con-

stant upgrades to a growing stock of firearms are both addicting and satisfying, particularly during later playthroughs on harder difficulties — it's like Pokémon with gunpowder.

Subsequent runs of the game on Veteran and Professional mode are eased if the right weapons have been upgraded with infinite ammo. Veteran is slightly more trying than Normal, while Professional requires extreme patience, skill and unlimited bullets. Most players won't feel the need to test their mettle in a mode where one-hit kills are commonplace. That's only for the achievement hunters, who already have a lot to like about RE5.

Though the merits of achievements vary from gamer to gamer, those who enjoy the feature will stay busy in the savage lands of Kijuju.

Capcom successfully balanced the list among mission complete, collect-a-thon and skill-based achievements, such as deflecting an arrow with the machete. Achievements here do their job to promote investment in the game; the extra playtime spent scrounging for points translates well to the weapon-upgrading minigame. Nothing palpable is awarded for unlocking an achievement, sure, but because of them players might learn such things as flash grenades devastate the annoying spider enemies much easier than bullets do.



### A blood-soaked table for two

**Aaron:** Above all else, Resident Evil 5 is a not-to-be-missed co-op experience. Many other console titles have their own versions of a co-op campaign, but RE5 is arguably the most all-inclusive example in stores today.

Bringing a friend into the world of RE5 isn't limited to finishing all six chapters' worth of missions: Players can truly help one an-

other out by trading ammunition, health items, treasures and even the weapons themselves. This is a distinctive element of the game, as offering such free-form gameplay in single-player but not in co-op would have ruined the game.

Friends likely don't want to be given a rotten egg, but the fact that it's possible goes a long way to vindicating Capcom's interpretation of what videogame cooperation truly means.

It's extremely impressive that a Japanese developer has one-upped western developers, who have so far kept co-op relatively tame and predictable.

### **Aaron's Take:**

As enjoyable as it is to rack up subsequent playthroughs of RE5's story with a friend, the mode with the most longevity has to be Mercenaries. This mode, unlocked after finishing the game, is essentially Capcom's answer to the currently popular "horde" modes found in games like Gears of War 2, Call of Duty: World at War and now Left 4 Dead.

Mercenaries relies on time-based survival, where the weapons are limited to the character you choose but the waves of infected villagers never stop coming. The time allotted increases by smashing the scarce hourglass icons found around the various mission maps, and extra ammo and herbs can be picked up from defeated enemies.

While fun, the mode works best with a seasoned pair of players. That's because the main problem with Mercenaries is its ranking progression. It's quite unfair to players, even those who've managed to complete the game, to only unlock new maps if their alphabetical score is high enough.

The mode is difficult, and while points are earned regardless of success or failure, completing the current map in any fashion should unlock the next. It's a small but important gripe to those who'll be interested in Mercenaries.

*This is a good example of a good idea that we weren't really sure how to execute upon. It seems natural that two people playing the same game cooperatively – two people who, ostensibly, are also writers – ought to be able to come together and produce something meaningful as a team about their experience, right?*

*Even if this review doesn't really capitalize on the collaborative nature of what we were trying to write, it still did a pretty decent job of assessing Resident Evil 5's strengths and weaknesses. And the format was fun to work within, even if it mostly just amounted to us dividing up responsibilities for who was writing about what.*

*As you'll see later on in the book, we've since revisited the co-op review formula with games like Borderlands, and those later examples tend to give credence to the idea of a collaborative review for cooperative games. Still, it's interesting to look back on our first attempt at breaking ground on a new format. — Nick Cummings*

Otherwise, RE5 has stayed fresh throughout five separate playthroughs with three different friends. I can't remember the last console co-op experience where the same sentiments apply.

### Nick's Take:

I can't speak for the other members of our editorial staff, but I think Mercenaries is the perfect addition for the hardcore player. I'm not the type to shy away from a challenge, and Mercenaries returns to the do-or-die structure of classic arcade games — you either survive long enough to set a high score, or you learn from your mistakes and do better the next time. It's not the most accessible mode, but it's a hard-hitting testament to the enduring quality of Resident Evil 5's combat. In essence, Mercenaries is almost a Pac-Man clone where you're hurrying from

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“It's important that the virtues of the single-player experience aren't completely ignored. I relished the opportunity to poke around and discover the game's secrets without having to worry whether I was keeping pace with my partner.”

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power-up to power-up in order to make your stand against swarms of enemies as the odds of survival grow increasingly slim — the only difference is that you're more likely to have your head sawn off by a guy with a bag over his head in Resident Evil.

While I won't deny that I've had a blast playing through Resident Evil 5 cooperatively several times, I think it's important that the virtues of the single-player experience aren't completely ignored. While I don't share the same blind enthusiasm of former MTV Multiplayer blogger Stephen Totilo, I relished the opportunity to poke around and discover the game's secrets without having to worry whether I

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*Co-op reviews are one of my favorite additions to the website. The idea came up during discussions between Nick, Doug and myself, and it's a format that lends itself well to cooperative games like Resident Evil 5.*

*Nick and I thought that if a game is meant to be played by two people simultaneously it could also be covered by two authors at once. What works about this review is how our opinions stand out from one another. Although we each said largely positive things about Resident Evil 5, our individual criticisms and complaints were given their respective space.*

*Multiplayer co-op remains a popular topic in the industry, and it's one that will likely never dissipate. We figured that, reflecting the current trend, Silicon Sasquatch might as well try to write together, too. As a result we put together a long, yet still comprehensive, article which is both readable and informative. It's not a perfect piece of writing, but it was a fun opportunity to watch another writer's process develop in real time. — Aaron Thayer*

was keeping pace with my partner. I could pore over every cheesy document, discover new ways to deviously slaughter waves of Majini — hell, I was even able to squander the fifteen-or-so minutes it took to nab the “Be the Knife” achievement. There’s a quiet satisfaction in completing the game on your own, but don’t let yourself become a recluse. The real fun begins when you jump online and blast through the game with a buddy. ■

*Resident Evil 5 is available for a suggested \$59.99 on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Both reviewers played the game to completion multiple times on multiple difficulty levels.*

**Recommended for:**

- Anybody who’s a fan of any one of the following things: Zombies; action; suspense; shooting zombies; stabbing zombies; stabbing and shooting zombies simultaneously with a friend
- Budget-conscious gamers who look for serious mileage out of a full-price release

**Not Recommended for:**

- Anyone hoping for the series to return to strict survival-horror gameplay. Sorry, folks: It looks like action-suspense is here to stay

May 7th, 2009

# Sasquatch PSA: Fallout 3 DLC Weekend

Aaron introduces the scheme behind his audacious five-part, back-to-back review series. *By Aaron Thayer*

This weekend we'll be running a three-part Fallout 3 DLC review feature in honor of the newly released Broken Steel, the third and supposedly final exclusive pack for the Xbox 360 and PC.

All three reviews will be self-contained and cover a specific add-on, but we'll also determine whether or not Broken Steel's increased level cap of 30 impacts the relevance of the other two expansions' content.

Look for our first two reviews to hit this Saturday and Sunday, with the final one dropping on Monday.

And yes, what Ron Perlman says about war never changing applies to our dates as well.



**Saturday, May 9th:** Operation: Anchorage — Are the FPS-leaning and winterized weaponry worth the rather short playtime? Take a break from your hangover woes this Saturday to read our answer.



**Sunday, May 10th:** The Pitt — A vicious ax that's part chainsaw, all murder? Check. One pointless collect-a-thon for an achievement? Check. Some bang for your Microsoft space buck? Visit the site on Sunday to find out.



**Monday, May 11th:** Broken Steel — Liberty Prime, everyone's favorite Commie-hating robot, is back for an appearance, and Dogmeat can't really die anymore. This is supposed to be the biggest and best Fallout 3 add-on yet, but that's our job to decide come Monday. ■

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*The purpose behind my, and Silicon Sasquatch's first, public service announcement was to make our readers excited for a series of upcoming reviews that were packaged into a special weekend-only format. While our readers' true level of excitement was debatable, the cold numbers told us that a lot of the site's traffic was direct, meaning a fair portion of them would browse our front page on a regular basis. Our viewers would have to be told ahead of time to come back to our blog, and have a reason to as well. At the time we weren't utilizing Facebook or Twitter to the extent we are today, so a PSA fit our needs.*

*I'd be neglecting the truth if I didn't use this article for encouragement while also using it as a marketing tool. Writing three reviews back-to-back was, at the time, a monumental task, and I told myself that making a public promise would force me to get things done. Happily enough I did maintain my deadlines, and each review turned out just fine. — Aaron Thayer*



May 12th, 2009

# Interview: Dan Teasdale and Heather Wilson of Harmonix Music Systems

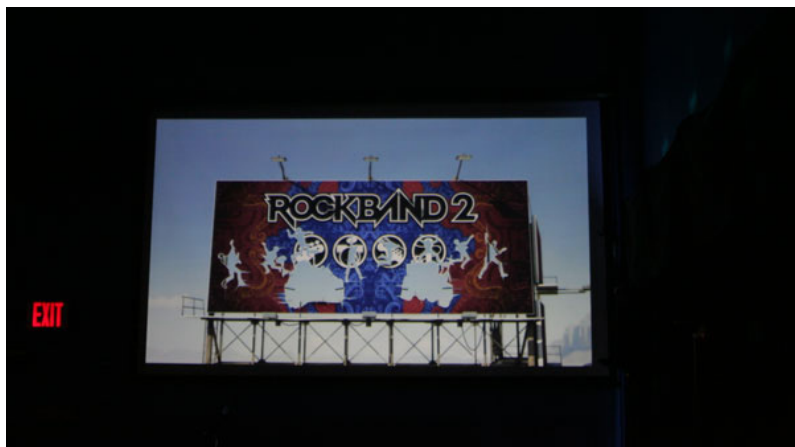
We interview the lead designer and audio producer of Rock Band 2 at a Portland gaming landmark. *By Doug Bonham*

*Editor's Note: This interview was originally conducted at Ground Kontrol Classic Arcade in Portland, Ore. on Tuesday, September 2, 2008. Rock Band 2 lead designer Dan Teasdale and audio producer Heather Wilson brought Rock Band 2 to Ground Kontrol's Rock Band Tuesdays for one of the game's first public play sessions.*

*Sasquatch writer Doug Bonham conducted an in-depth interview with Teasdale and Wilson that sheds light on the creative process at Harmonix, from catering to fans to picking the perfect songs to release as weekly downloadable content. Although originally published on Doug's blog, he's graciously offered to repost it here. Despite taking place months ago, there's still plenty of insight to be found from two of the people responsible for one of the top music game franchises on the market. Enjoy!*

Rock Band 2 is almost upon us. The game's developers, Harmonix, had a large presence on the show floor of the Penny Arcade Expo – the line to play the game was usually at least a half hour. While fans got their hands on the game for the first time at PAX, a lucky group of gamers in Portland, Ore., got a special treat when the sequel was demoed Tuesday, September 2. Ground Kontrol (511 NW Couch St., Portland, Ore.) played host during the regular Rock Band Tuesdays to Harmonix's Dan Teasdale, lead designer of Rock Band 2, and Heather Wilson, audio producer for the company.

Teasdale and Wilson were kind enough to agree to an interview with myself, Nick Cummings, and one of the lead volunteers in running Rock Band Tuesday, John Leslie.



*Let there be rock – RB2 fires up for the first time at Ground Control.*

**How many places have you found that do a Rock Band night on a regular basis?**

DT – I think we've lost count at how many places have done it. Originally in the earlier days with some of the earlier games, River Gods down the street was the place that did it, and was the place we knew of, and in the three or four years since then it's just exploded. No Fail is coming out of our experience of going to River Gods every week and seeing people fail out. Even though it doesn't really fit with a campaign mode where you want people to fail out and progress better, in a live situation, nobody wants to fail out.

HW – It also came out of people at work bringing the game home to their families and their families totally failing out but still wanting to play.

**With regards to announcements and information containment, how hard is it to prevent a leak or two?**

DT – It's tough, it's not like we're releasing one game a year. We're releasing 52 content packs a year, plus a game, plus however many

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*This was both an easy and difficult article. Easy because all I had to do was transcribe the interview — all we had to do was ask some good questions and have willing interview subjects. However, it was difficult because, as a young journalist, it can be easy to get stars in your eyes when you talk with important people. For as big a gaming fan and Rock Band fan as I am, interviewing two of the development leads was an amazing opportunity.*

*Given how Rock Band has developed as a platform, it's interesting to see what Dan and*

SKUs of it. It's much harder than any other sort of game or company I've worked on. Considering how much stuff we've done it's been pretty good.

HW – That leak (about the PAX Pack) came directly out of the fact that we had technical difficulties the week before. Just getting the information out to everyone who needed to have it, it just didn't make it down the chain like it was supposed to, is hard. It was a leak but at the same time, people were doing what they were supposed to.

**Compared to the earlier days at Harmonix, how is the song licensing process?**

HW – It's a lot easier to license stuff now. Because people have heard of us, they want to give us content, which is awesome. With bigger bands it's the same as it always was, there's convincing there, you want them to want to be in your game, and sometimes there's a barrier of entry because they may not have heard of it, may not have played it, but it's generally a lot easier.

**Nick – Back after Rock Band 1, Dan, you said your most-wanted band was AC/DC. Was that your own personal push?**

DT – I think it's everybody at Harmonix's personal push (laughs). Everyone is fans of AC/DC. One of our first prototype songs was a cover test of AC/DC, and I think they're such an iconic rock band.

**Are bands more willing to work with you when they have new material to promote?**

DT – A lot of bands are more open to giving us their stuff when they're releasing new content.

HW – A lot of people, like Weezer for example, want to give us new content but they also want to give us old stuff too. With some bands, we'll say "hey, we'll put out your new stuff, can we also have this old stuff too?" and it works out really well.

**How was demo-ing RB2 to bands like AC/DC?**

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*Heather had to say. Reading through this article again, it's funny to see our viewpoint on the game and platform at Rock Band 2's launch. At that point, Rock Band as a platform was a pipe dream — nobody could imagine the game would garner more than 2,000 songs by more than 250 artists and encompass so many genres and periods of music. Well, I guess nobody could except Harmonix. — Doug Bonham*

DT – We personally weren't close to that, it was a much higher level, but from what we understood AC/DC really loved the game and that's one of the reasons why they wanted to be in the game.

**Nick – At the panel at PAX, you said Nine Inch Nails was one of the first major acts to contribute a song voluntarily. When was that in the process?**

DT – It was earlier on, before we had any songs in Rock Band. He kind of knew what we were doing because he's on the ball with this sort of stuff, and he wanted to contribute, which was amazing because it wasn't even like us chasing him.

HW – And Izzy, one of our audio guys, loves Nine Inch Nails and was super excited to be able to work on those tracks.

**John – Speaking of NIN, it shows the song choice present in the game – not just singles like “The Hand That Feeds” but deeper cuts get into the game...**

HW – We really like to go after stuff that's we think is going to be tactful. We want stuff that's going to play well, but is also going to be meaningful.

**Will we see longer albums, more instrumentals, or even double albums released as DLC?**

HW – You know, it really depends. I wouldn't rule that out as a possibility, and with the instrumental stuff, it's going to make it easier to release certain albums. We probably won't go too instrumental-heavy because it is a game for four players and we want to make sure that everybody can play everything, but at the same time it's going to make it easier to put some stuff out.

**But with the amount of content in the game already and due out this year and next, it's different than if the first DLC album released was instrumental, right?**

*The mic ran out of batteries at this point – CRAP! – but Dan talked about the content and confirmed they would consider things like that. Dan then was asked about the accessories to the game, and while things like the wooden instruments, the Ion drum kit, Mad Katz's stuff, and others are outside of Harmonix, they are coming and go through the company. Unfortunately they don't control the release dates, etc. I do remember*



*Harmonix audio producer Heather Wilson and Rock Band 2 lead designer Dan Teasdale up on stage receiving applause from the crowd before rocking out to Squeeze's "Cool for Cats."*

*Heather saying she wished the 3rd-party microphone with the D-pad and buttons built in was at their office!*

### **On the accessory note...what led to the stage kit?**

DT – I remember when we first got pitched the stage kit, it was like “Okay, we’ve got this hardware (that they were also pitching), and also we’d like to maybe make a stage kit,” and it was like “Wow, that is awesome.” The kit is actually labeled a controller, so on the Rock Band 1 disc songs and all the DLC so far we’ve actually authored a fog track and a lights track. So all it does is send fog and lights out to the kit. It’s an Xbox controller essentially, because that’s the only way we can get the data out, so I’m sure you can hack it to get multiple machines.

### **Will there ever be add-on DLC costumes, instruments or venues for the game?**

DT – I think if we do stages and new guitars and stuff it’s far in the future, right now we’re focusing on the content every week and it takes a lot of our time. Never say never when it comes to Rock Band stuff.

**John – When playing through BWT, I thought about how cool it would be to work through, say, all of the venues in Seattle, playing Seattle band songs, until you get up to, say, Key Arena. Have you ever thought of doing, using real venues?**

DT – (Not using real venues) gives us more range to craft that sort of story. It's the same reason we don't have real rock stars in our game, it's because this whole thing is about you traveling on this journey. A lot of our venues are crafted to that as well.

HW – One thing we did when we were making up the venues was we tried to craft the location we were putting it in, in terms of art style and in naming and location. We tried to place them as realistically as possible while still giving you the fantasy.

DT – I don't think (licensed venues) really fits the direction we're going. We're trying to go more authentic than a carbon copy.

**Nick had a question about the writing in the game; Heather did most of it, including for the loading screens, rock shop, etc. Dan confirms that the text during loading screens will return for RB2...but adding more to the game along with DLC songs?**

DT – That was something we talked about. There's a couple of technical things we'd have to get around.

### **How is working with MTV versus working independently?**

HW – We kind of have a lot more freedom artistically, now we're working on our own IP and can do what we want with it, which is awesome. I was there before MTV purchased us, and there's been a real effort to keep the company culturally the same. There's stuff now where we have to fit into their corporate mold, but it's still really low key and doesn't affect a lot of people.

DT – I think the big thing that helps us is it gives us this huge power to be both publisher and developer at the same time. Heather, as our audio producer, she is in-house handling all our DLC submissions and all the stuff that would be handled by a third-party publisher. Like this week, we had a technical issue, but because all our stuff was in-house, we can get content out this week. If we had somebody over in LA we had to talk to, it would be impossible for us to get it out.

**John – How do you feel about MTV using Rock Band as a promotional tool?**

HW – There's room. We've got all kinds of content, and it's good, because it reaches the mass market and it reaches more people than

we could reach, which is kind of awesome.

DT – At the same time, it's not a one-way street, we have control over what songs go in the game. If we don't like the song they're proposing, we say "no," and if we do, then we say "yeah."

**John – What did MTV think about Boston? I'd think they'd be pushing bands like the Jonas Brothers or something.**

HW – They do want to put a lot of new stuff out but they also have the same vision of what we do, and have a clear idea of what Rock Band is as a brand. I work directly with a lot of people at MTV and they're incredibly awesome to work with and they really want the same thing we want, which is great.

**How would you submit music if you wanted to get your independent band into the game?**

DT – If you go to Jobs (on the Harmonix website), it pops up with a little Google Maps box, if you click on the pin it has our address.

HW – Just send it to my attention, to the attention of Heather.

**John – Is there any chance that music previously rumored to be released can still come out? (A couple examples are named, including "Received Your Letter.")**

HW – Well, with "Received Your Letter," there were licensing hurdles we couldn't get over, and we really like that song and really wanted to put it in Rock Band. Occasionally we may want to revisit stuff, especially if it's stuff we already have authored. It's like, it's there, why not.

As far as the PAX Pack goes, those were my personal choices, actually. I love MC Frontalot, I love Jonathan Coulton, and I love Darkest of the Hillside Thickets. So, the fact that all three of them were playing at once and we could put the pack together was awesome. The Penny Arcade guys made those suggestions, and it was a total match. The Darkest track, "Shhh...", was unreleased and they recorded it at the same time they recorded the rest of the album, "The Shadow Out of Tim," and they gave us that track, and I was super-excited about it.

**There was an announcement about the Japanese version...any updated news?**

DT – Not really, no, that’s just the announcement – that we’re working with Q (Entertainment) on Rock Band Japan, those guys are incredibly awesome, incredibly talented, a great match. They know music. I can’t wait to see what comes out of there.

**The big question you must get all the time, Dan, about Australia: What problems have there been?**

DT – Anything you can imagine, actually (laughs). We’ve been working really hard for a very long time to get it out in Australia, we’re going to have some announcements soon about dates, pricing. Again, it’s getting licenses for all their songs, making sure artists get paid, we want to make sure we do it properly. We’ll announce it soon – very soon.

**Any word on the future for the platform, and how the support for it will evolve or continue?**

DT – (No comment on specifics, but...) At the same time, RB is a platform, we’re going to be supporting it for the foreseeable future. As long as we can see, yeah.

HW – Our schedule, we’re scheduled out to mid-spring. We schedule really far in advance. It shifts, certain weeks might not stay what we have them on the schedule now, but at the same time we have content lined up.

**John – Any plans to go into different genres of music with the DLC in the future?**

DT – I think we definitely want to go broader and wider on the platform. More regional content, more deep content for specific artists, more regional inside the U.S. content as well. I know we’ve hinted at indie stuff a bit, and we’ll have more announcements soon. I’ve been pushing for an Aus music pack for a long time (laughs).

HW – I don’t think it’s straining too far, we want to make it a platform. There are a lot of country fans in-house. I tested CMT Presents Karaoke Revolution: Country, and honestly, it’s a super-fun game. Singing country songs is fun. I’d like to do some of that content.

**Will that content stay region free?**

DT – I can’t promise it, but we’re going to do our best to make



sure that everyone can play the songs.

**What is the feeling at Harmonix developing what you can now as opposed to pop music games like some of the Karaoke Revolution ones?**

DT – I think bands of all walks, but a lot of us play rock in our bands.

HW – There are people at Harmonix who love all genres of music. We've got opera fans. It's a really broad base.

**So the long and short of it, Rock Band isn't going away?**

HW – Nope (laughs). DT – It's here to stay.

*Big thanks again to Dan and Heather for demoing Rock Band 2 at Ground Kontrol, agreeing to an interview, and special thanks to Anthony and the crew at GK for throwing such a good event week-in, week-out. For more details on Rock Band Tuesday and GK, see [groundkontrol.com](http://groundkontrol.com). For more on Rock Band 2, see [rockband2.com](http://rockband2.com) and [harmonixmusic.com](http://harmonixmusic.com). ■*

May 26th, 2009

# Retrospective: Assassin's Creed

Just a few months before its sequel would be released, we took a look back at its divisive origins. *By Doug Bonham*

*Editor's note: We here at Silicon Sasquatch don't think new games deserve all the attention. To illustrate that point we're introducing our new Retrospective features: articles that focus an analytical eye on older releases in a non-review format. Our inaugural Retrospective takes a fresh look at Ubisoft Entertainment's 2007 action-adventure game, Assassin's Creed. This particular title made games press headlines at release — for reasons both good and bad. Scant details about Assassin's Creed II have trickled out over the last month, and considering the goodly amount of time since the original was released, it seems like a perfect opportunity to look over Altair's adventures with 20/20 hindsight. Enjoy.*

Assassin's Creed is confusing.

Developer Ubisoft Montreal manages to simultaneously offer a graphically beautiful game with very good, fluid controls while presenting an experience with enough frustrating pacing and banal mission structures to mire the player's enjoyment in the muck.

I had never played the game until a few weeks ago, but being an astute follower of the gaming press and culture I know that the game's reputation precedes it. From the barely hidden initial plot twist (SPOILER: It's about two storylines, one modern and one during the Third Crusade) to the innovative free running exploration style and

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*I think I get to raise my hand and claim ownership of the idea of the retrospective article. Of course we want to look forward, but looking back at a game or series — whether it came out a year ago or ten years ago — and analyze it with a bit of perspective. We initially thought of Retrospective articles as a way to play a game without its launch-period hype and to see how the game aged and compared with the initial buzz. Since then, we've also added retrospectives on older games and systems.*



*The game shines when the player must stay in the shadows — stealth kills are a rush, rewarding the player's patience*

the controversy surrounding the game's review scores — yes, I know about Assassin's Creed.

Even so I'm surprised by how much I enjoy the game. The controls seem daunting at first, but fall into place quickly for experienced gamers. Further, the usage of the controls — holding down a button to switch between “high-visibility” activities like fighting and “low-visibility” ones like blending into the crowd — meshes well with the assassin, Altaïr, and his need slither about undetected while being ready to strike at a moment's notice.

The problem I have with the game, though, is that it takes one fun idea and rubber-stamps it into a 12-plus-hour experience. You climb towers to fill out your map and ascertain your next investigation; from there you pickpocket, eavesdrop, intimidate or help out a fellow assassin to get the info you need. Gather enough information and you can attempt an assassination on the area's boss. It sounds fine, but repeat the process nine times and it all becomes very...average. These activities in and of themselves are fun, but no remodeling of the established pattern causes the eyelids to droop — something that happens during the course of Assassin's Creed's plot, too.

The protagonist slot is shared between Altaïr, the Crusades-era assassin cover boy, and his 21st-century descendant Desmond, a lab-rat

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*A component you can see in this article is comparing how the game scored in reviews at launch with how it's aged. Playing Assassin's Creed five months after it came out certainly fits this model. We should revisit this format more often. One thing I'd change in this article, though, is the tone — I can hear my voice in there, but it's stuffed in a suit-and-tie. We've evolved to allow ourselves greater comfort and a more casual tone, and I think the site is all the better for that. — Doug Bonham*

for a shadowy pharmaceutical company called Abstergo Industries. Both Altair and Desmond are tasked with completing their missions without knowing any of the background information or, really a reason why. Only as they untangle the mysteries do they begin to feel manipulated.

But as a whole it all feels a bit flat, and the motivations for both characters aren't believable enough to prove too interesting. However, the way the distant relatives intertwine and mirror one another over the course of the game is very impressive.

I kept playing, though mostly because of my in-game wanderlust. Exploring the ancient cities of Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus is quite visually enjoyable. The graphics and game engine for Assassin's Creed

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“As a whole it all feels a bit flat, and the motivations for both characters aren't believable enough to prove too interesting. I kept playing, though mostly because of my in-game wanderlust.”

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have aged well — the game looks gorgeous, there's still a great rush from climbing a city's high tower and taking a Leap of Faith swan dive. Even the combat engine is reliable. Fighting is hardly a highlight, though — the swordplay is a little stiff, and ranges wildly

from making the player feel like a badass to feeling cornered and hopeless.

But taking a look back at Assassin's Creed means looking at its spotty critical reception as well. The now-defunct Electronic Gaming Monthly famously panned the game with a three score-average rating of a 5 out of 10. Just above mediocre. IGN gave the game a 77 out of 100, which, when run through the IGN score filter, is also patently average. Edge gave the game a 7 out of 10.

One of the harshest critiques came from Destructoid, which gave it a 55/100 and called it “a disappointing, repetitive game.” However the review goes on to add, “Once you get past all that...there's absolutely no reason why you shouldn't be able to have a hell of a fun time with it.”

Accusations at the time were whispers that claimed reviews which scored the game over a certain mark let the accompanying websites break the non-disclosure agreement's review street date. It sounds good for Ubisoft in theory — if all the pre-launch impressions of your game are positive, strong sales will likely follow. But it's bad ethics in terms of principle, and the supposed pressure for “good” reviews backfired as other sites ran their own less-than-glowing reviews. Ubisoft was pushed into a corner: Would they admit they allowed



*The animations used to bring Altair's climbing antics to life are impressive without relying on demanding control schemes*

positive reviews out first, or alternatively stay quiet and allow their NDA to be thoroughly abused?

In all honesty, the scores of 7s and the like seem about right. For all that Assassin's Creed does right in terms of its gameplay, engine, graphics and design, it comes up short in a lot of other areas. Sometimes it tries too hard (the story), and sometimes it's just uninspired (the lack of mission variety). The glowing reviews clearly came from individuals captivated by the scenery, while the negative reviews seem, to me at least, to strike a sort of middle ground.

Assassin's Creed is neither groundbreaking nor a once-in-a-lifetime gaming experience. It's certainly not a Game of the Year contender. Truly, it's more akin to a movie like last summer's Iron Man: A popcorn flick with artistic credentials that happens to do a damn good job of setting up the sequel.

If Assassin's Creed II mends the shortcomings of the first game while keeping its solid fundamentals, Ubisoft may put out a title that won't need manufactured positive press — it'll make its own. ■

June 23rd, 2009

# The Beginner's Guide to Sports Games

Are you, like many gamers, unable or unwilling to play sports games? Relax – Doug's here to help. *By Doug Bonham*

Sports games: They come out yearly, they're some of the top selling video games on a yearly basis (the Madden NFL and FIFA soccer series each sold more than five million copies worldwide last year), yet they're almost entirely shunned by most "hardcore" gamers. As somebody who has gone to the Penny Arcade Expo three times, I can tell you with certainty that you're far more likely to find an obscure Japanese fighting game or pen-and-paper RPG than a copy of Madden.

Which is a bit of a shame, because from a pure gaming experience standpoint, non-sports gamers may well stand to gain a bit from trying out one of the many sports games out on the market today. Besides being one of the last bastions of single-console multiplayer out there, sports games – much like fighting games – allow for creativity in how you manage to play a game. While the great stereotype is that nerds and jocks don't get along, truthfully it



*The Penny Arcade Expo, the show by and for hardcore gamers, loves games of all kinds...except sports games. The "hardcore" seem to shy away from licensed sports sims, but should they reconsider?*

doesn't matter when it comes to playing games — you don't need to be athletically gifted behind the joystick.

Rooted in desires shown by my Silicon Sasquatch comrades to give these games a try, here's an introductory guide to unlocking the joy to be found playing sports games.

### **1. If you have a favorite sport/team/athlete, feel free to pick that game up.**

If you're not much of a sports fan but happen to randomly LOVE, say, baseball, then feel free to give that a shot. Same goes for most any sports out there right now — however, in all honesty, there's one exclusion to make...

### **2. For the love of all that's holy, don't start out with an American football game.**

When it comes to either EA Sports' Madden NFL or NCAA Football games, unless you're opting for a Nintendo Wii version, do NOT start out with one of these games. Not only do football games require you to play the game, but the tactics-heavy nature of football requires you to know what plays to call on both offense and defense.

In layman's terms, it'd be like taking somebody interested in getting started with RTS games and throwing them onto a Starcraft server full of hungry South Koreans, or taking a fighting game newbie to a top Virtua Fighter arcade in Tokyo. Football is a complex sport, and football video games have incredibly complex control schemes — simply, they provide an incredibly tough learning curve to climb. Believe me, a good game of Madden is as satisfying as a tough game of chess, but it's not for the faint of heart. The Nintendo Wii versions of NCAA Football and Madden both offer an easier play style, but if you don't have a Wii, you're out of luck.

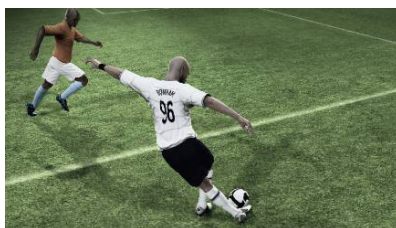
### **3. Starting out with soccer or hockey is the best idea.**

Don't know much about sports? That's perfectly fine; most people in the U.S. don't know a ton about either soccer or hockey either. However, luckily for you, EA Sports' NHL 09 and FIFA 09 are two of the finest games of 2008, period, never mind within the sports genre alone.

Much of the recommendation comes because both games have incredibly good, easy to pick up control schemes. The EA Sports NHL series reinvented itself for its 08 iteration based around a new set of simple controls, and the 09 version even includes simple three-button controls that harken back to the classic 16-bit NHL games. FIFA underwent a similar re-invigoration in the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3

generation, with 09 packing lots of features in with a game that can be picked up and learned very quickly.

Plus, most importantly, both games are fast and easy to learn. Hockey might have some penalties to learn and soccer may be a bit foreign, but both are fast and active sports that keep you engaged. You don't have to learn a playbook like with football, or grapple with the tougher control schemes that basketball games can have, or memorize the intricacies of baseball. Just knocking the ball or puck around and playing a fluid game — it's a great way to learn.



*FIFA 09 and NHL 09 by EA Sports have great Be A Pro modes that are engaging and allow you to do crazy things like this (yes, that's very hard to do in real life soccer, believe me).*

#### **4. Don't be afraid to play on easy mode.**

Seriously — if you're new to sports games, learning the sport and the controls at the same time can be overwhelming. Feel free to knock it down and take it a bit easy when you're learning the game. If you were to, say, start a franchise mode in a game, you can always turn the difficulty up as you go without re-starting — unlike some story-driven games (and the hunt for their achievements or trophies), there's no penalty in increasing the difficulty as you go.

#### **5. Don't play online with pubbies!**

It's a terrible way to learn how to play the game. Much like with other video game genres, public sports game servers have done that one thing the Internet is great at: destruction. People often play sports games with only the best teams and have found the most game-y ways to play the game imaginable. The recently-released Tiger Woods 10 has good players currently sandbagging to dominate more newbie-centric online tournaments; I also found out about a bug people are using in FIFA 09 to create godly teams in quickplay modes.

If you are a forum member or otherwise have a group of friends to play these games online with, though, by all means go ahead. One of my

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*Being both a jock and a nerd can be difficult; neither seems to be embraced much by the opposite party. As mentioned in the lede of the article, the only types of games you don't see at the Penny Arcade Expo are ones with licensed athletes, and I still struggle to see why. One of the suggestions I've made to my friends repeatedly is to give sports games a try; creativity, depth, and re-playability are hallmarks of the best sports sims. They just happen to also have the likenesses of professional athletes.*





When this happens to you in an NCAA 09 online dynasty, do you: A. Swear loudly? B. Mute the mic and swear quietly? C. Hurl the controller to the wall? or D. All of the above?

favorite gaming experiences was playing online leagues in NCAA Football 09, and that was organized through an Internet forum. But avoid public games, unless you want the sports game equivalent of a Zerg rush.

## 6. Do play with friends in person.

That old gaming standby of sitting down on a couch and burning hours playing a video game is now as archaic a notion as 8-bit systems, or Sega being a console manufacturer. Most every game has an online play mode, and very few games are geared towards a local multiplayer experience anymore. Hell, some games have multiplayer as online only.

However, this is where sports games shine. Much like fighting games, the trash talking, competitive nature of playing a sport against a friend just works so much better when you're in person with your opponent. Even with beginners or new players, the in-person experience is great. Also, it provides a great drinking game!

So that's where it's at. Sports games aren't just for jocks looking to recreate their favorite sports fantasies — give some Xbox Live or PlayStation Network demos a try, and take a dive into the world of sports. ■

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*That was the genesis of this article — compiling my advice about jumping into sports games in one area. I'm also decently proud of the photos for the article that I was able to source, too — both the PAX image and the ones from sports games. I still hold the belief that more gamers should give these games a try, and I'm always trying to convince Nick and Aaron to give different titles a shot. Sadly, it rarely works. — Doug Bonham*



Anyone who owns the rights to a song and has the master recordings in their possession can put a song up for sale in Rock Band.

July 19th, 2009

# Rock Band Network: You say you want a revolution...

Harmonix opens the doors to Rock Band song creation to musicians all over the world. *By Nick Cummings*

Starting this year, musicians will be able to chart their own songs in Rock Band and sell them to other players. (Read Harmonix's press release here.)

I'll give you a second to process that.

In my opinion, this is the biggest gaming news story of the year.

There's not much else that needs to be said, really, but I wanted to weigh in with this: With Rock Band Network, Rock Band has become the most significant gaming platform for user-generated creative content.

This glowing post might seem a little ironic, seeing as it follows my earlier (and final) pep talk I could muster for the Guitar Hero franchise. After all, GHTunes amounted to little more than a distraction with its frustrating sequencing mechanics and limited MIDI

instrumentation.

What Harmonix is on the brink of creating is something as significant as Napster or iTunes were to music — and to the music industry. With tools available to anyone with a hundred bucks to cover the XNA Creators Club fee and the ability to chart notes in a MIDI application, Rock Band Network is truly an open marketplace. And thanks to the buffer of a required peer-review process before songs are greenlit, bands of all genres and sizes can stand to benefit from intimate exposure thanks to the engaging, hands-on nature of Rock Band.

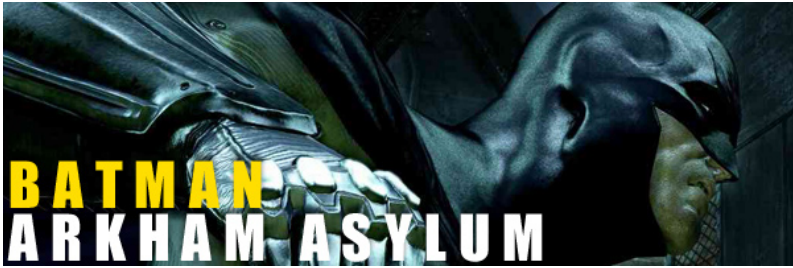
With this step, Rock Band truly has come into its own as a legitimate platform — just as it aspired to be from the beginning — and not just a game with a mere six hundred downloadable songs. ■

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*It was a great topic for a story, and I was the right person to offer an educated opinion on it. But looking back, it stands out as one of my biggest missed opportunities in the history of the blog.*

*Rock Band Network was a huge deal when it was announced, and now that it has grown into the success I anticipated it would be, I wonder why I didn't give this opinion piece the extra few hours it deserved to write up a detailed explanation of how I thought it would take off and why. As someone who has cultivated a library of hundreds of Rock Band songs (please don't ask me to count), I was in a great position to explain what makes a Rock Band fan tick. And with a little research, I could have dug up some statements confirming that Harmonix and MTV Networks generate a very significant portion of revenue from downloadable content.*

*Back when I wrote this, I recognized that it's smart to write about what makes me passionate, but it took me a lot longer to realize the value in taking the time to do something the right way. — Nick Cummings*



September 17th, 2009

# Review: Batman: Arkham Asylum

The finest superhero videogame in history gets a review to match. *By Aaron Thayer*

It's hard to believe that, at one time, Adam West in his campy 1960s Batman television show was the best portraiture of Batman creative minds had to offer.

Even then, when “Biff! Pow! Zing!” became a clever way to spice up awkwardly choreographed fight scenes, the tragedy of Bruce Wayne was a much darker affair than fluorescent purple and cheeseball dialogue. A boy witnessed his parents’ cold-blooded murder and, once grown, pledged to annihilate the evil in his city. The Batman rose from the ashes of a once-spoiled life to be the protector of a seedy metropolis called Gotham.

Spandex doesn't sound like a good idea under those circumstances. Yet over the last few years the concept of what and who Batman

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*I've been told by my co-bloggers and friends that, as far as reviews go, this is my masterwork, my ninth symphony, my Mona Lisa, etc.*

*Now let me be the first to take the praise down a hundred notches or more. I would prefer it if the words and sentences spoke for themselves, blemishes and all. Maybe that's because I have a hard time accepting others' compliments on my written work and am quick to dismiss what I've done well.*



*The old bat-gadget standby, the batarang, gets the star treatment in Arkham Asylum — it's always a satisfying tool to use*

is to a mainstream audience has experienced a revolution in reassessment thanks mostly to director Christopher Nolan's two movies, 2005's *Batman Begins* and 2008's *The Dark Knight*. Both films washed away a decade of popular culture nay-saying after the franchise hit a lull in the mid-1990s because of two awful movies by Joel Schumacher et al. Thanks to Nolan, Batman's been given a clean slate for a new generation of consumers.

Unfortunately, the Caped Crusader's forays into videogames haven't assisted in improving his image. A plethora of developers and publishers have been handed the property over the last few decades to produce titles vacillating from mediocre to awful. It's easy to think there would never be a quality Batman game available, especially after seeing the most recent films and realizing how great a Batman project can turn out.

Well gamers can officially chill and count their blessings in batarangs, as Rocksteady Studios' *Batman: Arkham Asylum* is not just the unequivocally best Batman videogame to ever sit on store shelves — it's also one of the most engaging titles released in a very long time, let alone 2009. *Arkham Asylum* treats its source material with the utmost respect, and successfully blends the comics with a cinematic atmosphere to create an exciting and near-perfect interactive

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*All I can attribute this article's success to is one unglamorous process: outlining. I'm serious. A useful tip for any aspiring journalist, writer or blogger who's feeling defeated by any project is to draft out exactly what you want to say, in sections, and add the transitions and flowery prose later. Yeah, it's lame. And no, it doesn't solve every issue with the material. Still, this review went through no fewer than four revisions by my hand alone.*

*For a critique of an important game like *Arkham Asylum* — which was one of the most in-*

experience.

Being Batman is one of those requisite fantasies most kids (and still some adults) have growing up. Even if your favorite hero was Spider-Man or Superman, Batman represents what it is to be human and what one normal person can do — without superpowers — through determination and iron will alone. Oh, and that rad car made quite the impression as well.

Arkham Asylum empowers fans to, for the first time, feel like they're inhabiting the mind and suit of Bruce Wayne instead of simply performing a pantomime with a 3D model of the Dark Knight. It's an entirely wish-fulfilling experience with bursts of developmental genius spattered throughout, and one that's quite addictive.

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“Being Batman is one of those requisite fantasies most kids (and still some adults) have growing up, and Arkham Asylum empowers fans to, for the first time, feel like they're inhabiting the mind and suit of Bruce Wayne.”

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Even though you'll never drive the Batmobile in the game, the

gorgeously fluid martial arts combat, instantly familiar gadgets and surprisingly clever Detective Mode more than make up for the missing aspects of Batman's superhero lifestyle.

One of the most impressive things about Arkham Asylum is even if the Batman mythos was stripped away from the game, what remained would still be a solid action title that plays well, sounds good and certainly looks fantastic. Rocksteady deserves an astounding amount of praise for its capability to construct an impressive framework that could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the larger-than-life character on the box. This dichotomy extends to the combat in Arkham Asylum; it's gameplay that feels and looks like Batman, but is good enough to stand on its own.

Batman is a martial arts master, proficient in multiple forms of melee combat. Rocksteady has accordingly created and coined the FreeFlow combat system to keep up with Bruce Wayne. On first glance it seems like a basic series of punches, kicks and blocks with some numerical combo tracking thrown in. Fortunately, combat

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*novative and refreshing titles in years and one that struck a chord with everyone on the staff — excessive planning and numerous drafts are required.*

*In writing this article I learned to stop being afraid of stripping away entire paragraphs or 300-word sections, and instead I relied on things lost in the original draft. These were concepts or points that are commonly among the first ideas I will type into a document but later neglect*



Combat can quickly turn into a giant mutant slugfest, which is a good thing evolves into an exceedingly deep experience as the game progresses.

Those seemingly simple kicks and punches are thrown via the X button (on Xbox 360), a stun attack using Batman's cape is performed with B, the life-saving counter moves are tied to Y and quick lunging dodges are executed with A. It all sounds commonplace; boring even. And that's kind of a theme with *Arkham Asylum*: Because of the spotty history of Batman videogames, one would expect this title to be average and unimaginative. Not the case with this Batman game — low expectations foster big surprises, time after time.

As far as combat is concerned, the simple button commands work in tandem with a sophisticated animation system. Clearly a lot of physics work went into making Batman move like he does in the comics, and it pays off. There's a true sense of weight behind each kick, elbow and somersault. This isn't a stiff character model rehashing the same type of punch each time X is pressed; it's dynamic, varied and extremely satisfying.



*You'll be doing this a lot, but thankfully it's amusing each and every time*

The rush of a brawl — Batman tumbling from enemy to enemy, countering both a knife stab and behind-the-back kick to toss a bat-

*when I try to write for everyone else but myself.*

*Writing, even if it's about videogames, is a truly vicious cycle of denial, frustration, acceptance and self-discovery from concept all the way to print. The benefit of this struggle is that sometimes you scribble down something you're a little bit proud of. — Aaron Thayer*



*The Joker is the lead architect of Arkham Asylum's night of mayhem — Mark Hamill portrays the character perfectly*

arang at an unsuspecting thug to finish by flipping onto another one's chest, knees first, to incapacitate him — feels exhilarating every time. Later in the game, combat upgrades can be purchased to help deal out more damage and increase the game's combat multiplier, which, if high enough, speeds up fighting into a flurry of punches, kicks and rolls.

Arkham Asylum's combat is, sans hyperbole, the best part of the game, and unlike a lot of action titles the enjoyment never wears thin over time.

Besides being a nimble adversary in combat, Batman's known for one of the most varied and sometimes weird collections of technology, tools and gadgets in all of comicdom. Thankfully, Arkham Asylum has thrown out the obscure equipment for the most logical old favorites and a few new variations. Adam West may have had bat shark repellent, but Rocksteady has a sonically pulsating, explosive batarang.

Gadgets essential to progression are acquired during the game's story, while luxurious, non-essential upgrades are unlocked via Arkham Asylum's RPG-like experience system. After each fight or investigation of clues Batman will receive experience points. Fill up the gauge and earn a point to spend in the game's upgrade menu: reinforce the Dark Knight's armor, add new combo moves to his combat repertoire or go for broke and unlock three batarangs to throw at once. Though rather limited in its scope, the experience system encourages some form of customization. Still, players will more than likely obtain every available upgrade by the end of the game, so there's no risk in experimenting with whatever sounds fun.



It'd be cruel to spoil the fun in uncovering all of the new gadgets, but each one truly serves a distinct purpose — their individual usefulness will depend on your playstyle. One player may prefer to incapacitate Joker's henchmen with explosive gel placed on weak walls; another might enjoy luring Joker's henchmen away with sonic batarangs to take them out one at a time with glide kicks or hanging takedowns from the game's many gargoyle statues. Any way you slice it, it all feels like something Batman would feasibly do himself.

Detective work is an integral part of Batman's identity. After all, he was introduced in the Detective Comics series, which is still published today. He's quite the dogged gumshoe, and some of the best moments in Batman's career involve him hunting down crooks with the tiniest bit of evidence. Batman made forensics cool long before CSI and Gil Grissom's beard made CBS relevant again. Rocksteady has such a grasp on who Batman is that they implemented the Detective Mode to help him live up to the title of World's Greatest Detective.

Technically speaking, the mode isn't much more than what feral sense in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* was — a clever way of moving the game forward without relying on too many obvious visual clues or an omnipresent mini map. But in *Arkham Asylum*, how Detective Mode is used makes all the difference. Batman will track down clues to lead him to the next section in lieu of pulsating directional arrows flooding the screen, which is thankfully a very clean and minimalistic space.

Detective Mode can be activated anytime with the left bumper, and it allows Batman to see x-ray of enemies' skeletons (those with firearms are colored red) and interactive objects (colored a bright orange). It all seems

typical; then players start tracking a kidnapped Commissioner Gordon via his tobacco droppings in such an intrinsically Batman experience that it feels in-

novative. Visually the mode is fantastic with its own distinct aesthetic: blue and purplish film grain brighten the darkness of Arkham's halls.

To make up for characters not included in the main game's plot (sorry, no Mr. Freeze to be seen...physically), the developers have filled the disc with audio files and character profiles to be found through the Riddler Challenges — *Arkham Asylum's* variation on hidden collectibles.

What are generally tedious collect-a-thons in other games turn out to be enjoyable deviations from the main plot. Sure, some challenges

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“Batman made forensics cool long before *CSI* and Gil Grissom's beard made CBS relevant again.”

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are frustrating (Sasquatch tip: if you're stumped on a riddle, try looking around in Detective Mode for a question mark painted onto a surface — find the separate period and align the two images to form a full "?", and scan away), but the reward is admiring fantastic concept art, collecting 3D model trophies and listening to asylum doctors interview Batman's most famous foes. Players can't help but feel deeply ingrained in the world of Batman after hunting down every last riddle.

Once in awhile a videogame comes along that is a success because of its strong story; this is certainly one of those titles. The plot is a great one-off story that incorporates many elements from the comics while being wholly original. Batman trapped in Arkham for the night with some of his greatest foes? It works, and works well.

And while it may seem lazy to leave out specific details which can't be learned by reading the back of the box, it's because Rocksteady's

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“Batman seems more human in this game than in films where a living person portrays the character.”

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work deserves to be played spoiler-free. Sure, there aren't any reveals of a caliber like Revan's identity in *Knights of the Old Republic*, but this is a game certainly worth

making your own way through. We all know Batman wins in the end; you've rightfully guessed he defeats the Joker once the curtain falls, but how it all transpires makes for quite the treat.

The tiniest details reverberate the most to make *Arkham Asylum* a memorable game. Batman takes a lot of beatings throughout his hectic night in the asylum, and Rocksteady changes his model on more than one occasion to reflect that. In one night, Batman's iconic costume rips — the well-modeled cape perforated with holes and his chest logo deeply scratched — and stubble starts appearing on a face mottled with flecks of blood and bruising.

As a result, Batman seems more human in this game than in films where a living person portrays the character. That's because, thanks to one luxury of the videogame medium, players are permitted see Batman, second by second, experiencing the evil of his enemies over several hours of fierce encounters. There aren't flashy, cutaway film scenes to move the plot ahead a day, and there aren't comic book panels condensing a full range of movements during a brawl — in this videogame, the player does everything Batman does and truly sees who this person is. Fans have never seen a more accurate representation of Batman outside of the comics; it has never felt so real, and — to be blunt — it's extremely cool.

What else is there to say about such a great game? Small nitpicks

like the occasionally frustrating camera and the questionable end boss battle only serve to make this review sound less biased, but in truth Arkham Asylum stands tall above even the most minor of issues and remains a proper example of how to treat a licensed property.

Gamers have rallied around 2004's Spider-Man 2 as an example of a superhero videogame that embodies both the comic and filmic spirit of the titular character. While that assessment still holds true, I think it's about time we're given a superhero game that does more than exceed such a precedent. How does playing one of the most polished and fun action titles to come out in years sound? Good?

Then I have one thing to say to you: Holy-go-out-and-buy-Batman: Arkham-Asylum, Batman!

Apologies to Burt Ward, and our readers. ■

### **Recommended for:**

- Comic fans, and even the non-Batman inclined — after playing Arkham Asylum you'll wish more superhero titles could be so generous
- The polished, addictive and wholly original experience
- Those who've never played a competent superhero title — this game will blow you away
- Action title fans who love a solid combat system
- Basically everyone: nerds (like myself) and non-nerds alike can take something away from this experience
- Voice acting: Kevin Conroy (of Batman: The Animated Series fame) and Mark Hamill (also Batman: TAS; oh, and he's Luke Skywalker) are phenomenal as Batman and the Joker

### **Not Recommended for:**

- Unless you truly despise Batman and/or action games, there's not a single person interested in videogames I wouldn't recommend Arkham Asylum to



*October 5th, 2009*

# Regarding Too Human

In order to truly come to hate something, you have to love it in the first place. *By Nick Cummings*

When I originally set out to tackle *Too Human*, I figured I'd discuss the game within the framework of a traditional review. But it didn't take long before I realized there wasn't a whole lot that could be said in *Too Human's* defense; instead, I ended up with a litany of grievances<sup>1</sup> that painted the game as a catastrophe.

But that's not how I think of *Too Human*. After all, would a game so ostensibly terrible be fun enough to warrant a subsequent replay immediately after I reached the end?

So I began to piece together what it was that made the game so compelling to me. Was it the frantic combat? The uninspired weapon customization and almost fetishistic loot-acquiring? The broken, haphazard script with half-baked characters? No. Everything *Too Human* tried to accomplish had been done much better by many games

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1. See page 118.

before it.

But I couldn't ignore the fact that I loved suspending my disbelief way up in the rafters, pretending I was some fugly man-god and mowing down thousands of enemies in a display of raw destruction. That simplistic joy shines through the mess to make *Too Human* an essential case study in gaming and — somewhat ironically — a perfect example of why games have value as a medium.



*Bland, uninspired enemies populate the Too Human universe.*

It's stunning proof that, even when absolutely nothing comes together right, games can still be a joy to experience.

Of course, I'm not exactly representative of the majority of gamers here. Upon its release, *Too Human* received tepid reviews and sold only marginally well for a game that had been in development for so long. In chatting with some friends, I found their reactions ranged from lukewarm to unbridled hatred.

My perspective isn't typical. I bought the game on a whim from GameFly for a whopping \$9.99 — with free shipping to boot — and began playing more than a year after the game was released. Similarly, my expectations were low: I didn't expect a high-quality game, and as a result I was better prepared for the game.

And frankly, it's not that bad of a game. Sure, it reeks of inconsistent design choices, practically crying out for another year of focused development, and the script is terrible, even by gaming standards, but that doesn't change the fact that the absolute core of the game — fighting off hordes of enemies to grow more powerful — is actually pulled off admirably. Essentially, Silicon Knights melded the *Diablo* “kill-loot-upgrade” tradition with the control scheme of a twin-stick shooter like *Geometry Wars*, and it works really well.

Upgrading equipment is relatively painless and gratifying, just as it should be in a light role-playing experience, which lets the frantic combat take center stage. Although it at first looks more similar to a *Dynasty Warriors* game, *Too Human* has the unmistakable feel of a dual-stick shooter. The left stick moves and the right stick attacks; it's simple, but that's why it works. Once the small packs of enemies become tidal waves of machinery, your hero's survival hinges on quick reactions and choosing intelligent paths through crowds. And thanks to the added challenge of replayable levels, the combat only becomes more enjoyable as the player progresses through the game.

It's not perfect, and its presentation does a whole lot more harm than good for the game, but *Too Human* was an inspiring experience

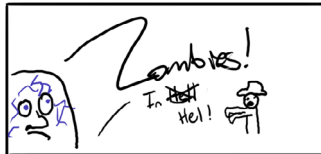


I knew something was wrong from the moment I entered the character creation screen:

~ CHOOSE A GOD ~



~ 6,971 robots later ~



~ 2,321 Zombies and one gross robot lady later ~



Recommended for:  
 - Anyone eager to learn what not to do in making a game

Not Recommended for:  
 - People seeking a good cooperative action-RPG  
 - People who value their time & money

I can't believe I gave up that budding, lucrative career in professional illustration to become a writer. Sorry to disappoint.

for me. It reaffirmed just how valuable and enjoyable games can be, even when the odds are stacked against them. More than anything, it proves just how far a good, simple gameplay concept can carry even the most terrible of narratives. ■

We chose to include this because of that horrible comic I drew in Photoshop. Originally, that was going to be the entire post, but eventually I realized that wouldn't be fair. Although I had a great time poking fun at what a mess this game was, I also had a lot of fun actually playing it — enough to start a second playthrough immediately after finishing it.

There's something strange and wonderful about a genuinely shitty game that still manages to be engaging, entertaining and genuinely fun at times, despite all its glaring faults. It's a phenomenon of sorts; I wonder if there's something more profound going on there than I initially thought. — Nick Cummings

October 7th, 2009

# The Advancement of the Art of Storytelling in Video Games

Just as games grow in technology and ambition, narrative sophistication is evolving in its own way. *By Doug Bonham*



Even before Mario trekked through the Mushroom Kingdom to rescue the Princess and Pac-Man was pursued by a quartet of ghosts, video games have been a storytelling medium. As games matured from simple sprites to a multi-billion dollar industry, so the scope of video games increased—in terms of graphical fidelity, size and scope of game worlds, and the potential for storytelling.

The problem, though, is that only two of those three aspects have seen real growth to this point. While our favored medium is still maturing, it's

encountered some growing pains in finding the right way to tell a story — and the right kind of stories to tell.

While storytelling techniques from books, comics, TV and movies may be applicable to games, the nature of the video game medium means not all of these techniques make best use of the gaming experience. A major difference is that video games are an experiential medium: gamers expect to learn new tricks or techniques, or gain

access to new worlds throughout the course of a game. While this may not be as true in sports or racing games, for example, players of single-player-focused games of all genres expect a sort of ramp — both in terms of what skills your character has as well as in difficulty.

A game like *Ninja Gaiden* or *God of War* would feel stale if your character started the game with the abilities, weapons and skills he or she ended with. In order to increase the difficulty of the game (generally from simple to complex as the game nears its close), those skills are needed to introduce new challenges.

Movies and books do not expect you to make such strides throughout the story— however, the convention of unlocking more and more powerful weapons or abilities throughout a single-player role playing game or action game is a video game standby. An issue games have, then, is telling a powerful story within a framework that also makes sense from a gameplay perspective. Done in a banal or uninspired way, a game feels cliché or trite; but when executed well, games marry storytelling and advancement in a flowing, natural way.

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“Done in a banal or uninspired way, a game feels cliché or trite; but when executed well, games marry storytelling and advancement in a flowing, natural way.”

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*Many aspects of Gears of War and Gears of War 2's storyline rotate around the game's level design, crafting the story around what the designers want the gamer to experience. The chainsaw duel, however, is just badass.*

A great example is the post-GTA III *Grand Theft Auto* games. The game world in Rockstar's flagship series opens up as missions unlock; the key is that it feels natural. An attempt on the life of GTA IV protagonist Nico Bellic and his

cousin early in the game forces them from the first opening area of the game to the next one; while it's still shepherding the player from one area to another, it makes sense in the context of both gameplay

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*I've written many articles where my idea and initial concept doesn't completely translate into the finished product. What is projected doesn't necessarily work. For a long while, I've thought this was one of those articles. On retrospect, though, it turned out better than I remember — which is fantastic!*

*One of my inspirations for this article was reading through the graphic novel *Watchmen*, and thinking about its translation to a movie. That book is a touchstone of its medium — it makes use of everything that makes comics special, and uses every storytelling trick a comic can. Just*





*Fallout 3's Broken Steel downloadable content retroactively changes the ending to the game from a hard, final conclusion, to a jumping-off point for more end-game content.*

(moving from one level to another) and storytelling.

Another challenge to story is in level structure for many games. While movies and novels go through crests and valleys of action and story progression, games take it to another level and build levels around specific action scenes as well as new mechanics. Take a game like *Gears of War 2* as an example. Most every level in the two *Gears of War* games introduces a new technique or experience — whether that's riding on a giant excavator and firing from mounted turrets, or working your way through a giant worm, the story is oftentimes molded in such a way as to naturally introduce new scenarios for gamers.

The problem that arises from this is that parts of the story can be cut due to difficulty with getting a level functioning properly. If the game's engine just flat-out can't handle a level, or the developers lack the time to finish a scene to their desired quality, it gets cut. Compare this to movies, novels and TV shows, where content is cut in the interest of brevity or relevance — scenes are deleted or pages are cut because they're excess, not because the director or writer doesn't know how to shoot them or put them into words.

It's not the case with games because many story-focused games

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*because it's good in graphic novel form, though, doesn't mean the same story can work well as a motion picture and, as it turns out, the *Watchmen* movie was kind of a let-down. But this inspired thought about what storytelling techniques work and don't work in video games, and from there sprang this article.*

*That basic conceit still holds water, but I wonder if I could have written this better. I still wish I could explain some aspects of the story in a simpler way. But, part of the growing process includes managing expectations and improvement. — Doug Bonham*

hone in on gameplay first, with the story built to fit. The Gears of War series is guilty of this, with story built to explain away gameplay concepts, but it's certainly not the only one out there.

Regardless, the medium is still blossoming in terms of finding new and inventive ways to tell stories. There have been advances in taking the best of post-modern storytelling and combining that with the interactivity of gaming to create something that can only be told through the medium of the video game.

A game like BioShock is a step in this right direction. It takes a rather ordinary story idea, with a relatively simple plot progression throughout, but throws the player for a loop by manipulating the story within the context of gaming. Bioshock doesn't succeed because its dystopian, Ayn Rand-inspired story is groundbreaking, but because it takes certain video game tropes — that gamers have a choice, have control, and that

a person giving them instructions can be trusted — and uses them to bring meaning to the player. It takes the idea that the narrator and guiding voice in a game can be taken for gospel and stands

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“BioShock is a step in the right direction. You think you have the game figured out, then it turns out you've been a pawn all along.”

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it on its head. While it's a simple concept (and one explored in books like *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Catch-22*), it's one that has not been explored in detail in videogames.

You think you have the game figured out, then it turns out you've been a pawn all along. *Metal Gear Solid* did this, too — along with other mind-tricks that took advantage of the medium. This is best exemplified in the battle with Psycho Mantis, a specially trained supersoldier who could read the protagonist's — and the player's — mind. How was that achieved? Psycho Mantis could “read your mind” and counter all of your actions if you left the PlayStation controller in the first control port; this boss also read the PlayStation memory cards to see if there was any save data for other games by *Metal Gear Solid*'s publisher, Konami. Players had to learn to either adapt to the fight... or just move the controller to the second port.

Fortunately, more games are playing with the structure of the narrative for dramatic effect. PlayStation 2 classic *Shadow of the Colossus* uses bare minimalism to create an emotionally meaningful experience. It's gaming structure at its simplest — the protagonist must go defeat a series of bosses to save his beloved princess — but the sparseness of the world that the player rides and hunts in creates a stillness, a narrative white space that contrasts with the brutal climb-

ing and killing of the gentle yet gigantic colossi the player must slay. It's powerful and moving in ways few other games are.

Bioware's RPGs, including the Baldur's Gate series, Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, Jade Empire, and Mass Effect, all seek to evoke emotion through a different method: choice. Knights of the Old Republic popularized a trend towards good/evil choice in games — actions and dialogue in KOTOR affected your character's development and standing within the game's community, as well as storyline options that were available. Some characters' quests were only available if you were good or evil enough, and the theory was that gamers would go for one path or another but must live with their decisions.

Other games, like the Fallout series and the Fable series, have highlighted this as well, but the concept of choice and decisions making last affects on characters hasn't been executed as well as possible. Why? Gamers right now do not want these choices to be permanent. Downloadable content for Fable II allowed gamers the opportunity to shortcut around the game's end-of-storyline decisions; everything from weight (gained or lost by diet) to the story's final impossible choice are reversible now, albeit for a price. A similar effect is achieved in Fallout 3's Broken Steel downloadable content, which ret-cons the game's ending, adds new storyline content, and allows the player to continue playing with their character. In Fallout 3, enough good (or evil) karma will balance the other side out; some choices are permanent, but many aren't. The emotional impact choice and living with decisions can have is washed a bit when it lacks permanence.

One of the highest achievements for all art — including television, music, movies, and, yes, video games — is to convey a strong emotion. Whether that's happiness, sadness, fear, joy, or whatever the case may be, if a song moves you to tears or a movie makes you laugh for days, that piece of art has succeeded. With gaming, there is a unique opportunity to provide an even stronger emotional connection with a medium because of the interactive nature of video games. While games have not had that watershed storytelling event — there hasn't been “a Citizen Kane of gaming” as of yet — watch how developers continue to find new ways to tell powerful stories that utilize interactivity and personal choice. ■

October 12th, 2009

# About an Adult Swim Flash Game: Meowcenaries

How can one be expected to write a serious, formal review of a game about a bunch of meme-ified LOLcats? Aaron, in his wisdom, doesn't even try. *By Aaron Thayer*

Cartoon Network's Adult Swim is one of those rare media brands that absolutely understands its demographic.

From the nightly bump cards to the merchandise and the numerous concert series and beyond, Adult Swim has succeeded in making money by airing deranged



programming to a young population of insomniacs who were tired of the same old talk shows and infomercials after midnight.

While I've been a devotee of the late-night programming block for years, I've never played one of Adult Swim's growing cadre of free Flash titles. The games portal opened on the official website a few years ago, and each title generally boils down to an example of extremely violent behavior under the guise of sick humor — well-tuned to the network's signature style.

After watching *Metalocalypse*, *Superjail!* or *Aqua Teen Hunger*

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*"About an Adult Swim Flash Game" is a silly pet project of mine, an idea I brought to the team last year and ran with. While I've only published two of these articles as of this writing, these quasi-reviews are sanity-preserving experiments in grammar, narrative and humor.*

*Anyone who knows me well knows I have a unique sense of what's funny. I'll laugh at toilet humor in the same conversation that I'll laugh at 19th century German political one-liners — not that I know any. What drew me to the Adult Swim flash games was their juxtaposition*



And this is when Bob Barker's call for spaying and neutering went too far

Force, is it that shocking to stumble upon a game where cats wearing bandannas fire at each other with Uzis and rocket launchers?

I vacillated between a few different titles, trying to decide which would be my first foray into the world of Adult Swim-sponsored Flash games. Browsing the list of digital diversions is amusing considering all of the games have fairly low ratings. Amateur Surgeon, the most-played title available, scores the

highest with a 7.9/10 average rating, while the rest hover in the 5-7 range of scores.

I assumed that because these are free games requiring no other software outside of Flash to run, those interested would be more forgiving; maybe throw a few “ROFL, funny!” posts in the comment section and score it a 10/10. However, it seems the voracious teen-and-twenty-something appetite for free media is in fact a discerning one.

So again, where to begin?

Meowcenaries, from British developer Mediatonic, looked like the safest bet. This is a top-down, 2D shooter where you and your team of “kitteh” commandos travel to various locations, via an overworld map, to brutally explode the furry bodies of your “badkat” enemies. I’d be an idiot to not waste my free time playing a title that combines my least-favorite Internet fad (lolcats) with the intensity of a classic action movie like First Blood.

I asked Meowcenaries, with tender sincerity, to sweep me into a world housing the diabolical Evilcat, cheezburgr health packs and intentionally misspelled lolcat lingo like “Misshun Selekt” — how adorable and easy to understand as a hip young person with a knowledge of Internet memes!

But despite the free price tag, does the game have any redeeming qualities to warrant an investment of your time? Surprisingly, yes. Playing an hour’s worth of Meowcenaries left me astounded by its

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*between excessive violence and addictive gameplay. Meowcenaries was brand new at the time, and it looked like the most ridiculous game ever. Clearly it was the perfect fit for a fresh feature that was meant to be completely off-topic and weird.*

*The result is this well-argued, and dare I say funny, review that doesn't take itself too seriously, which is the whole point of these Adult Swim articles. — Aaron Thayer*

unexpected competence as a shooter. Sure, it's not an Unreal Engine-licensed project, but it does what you would imagine it to: provide many, many enemies to pump full of animated lead.

To be realistic, these Flash games are meant for procrastinating students or bored businesspeople with time, and badkatz, to kill. It'd be futile to criticize Meowcenaries like it was a blockbuster release from a traditional publisher. But with so many free titles floating around the Internet today, it's fascinating to watch this specific genre grow in complexity from stick figures to murderous cats with objectives, an overworld map and a score grading system.

Expect a lot of cheese-rock guitar tracks, intended to bolster the '80s action flick vibe, along with a hefty serving of lolcat stupidity. "LOL" and "OMG" text bubbles appear when your kittehs have dispatched a badkat, a scene painted with blood, guts and pieces of cat skull. Meowcenaries, like most of Adult Swim's Flash games, is gory — but that's the point.

Meowcenaries also has a star-based ranking system for your squadron of four cat commandos, which is similar to unit progression systems found in RTS titles like *Company of Heroes* and *Halo Wars*. If, say, you take "Lemon" on a mission and he survives the level, he'll gain a star and his accuracy, fire rate and distance of fire will increase. Achieve three stars and you move up a medal level, from bronze to silver and finally gold. Maybe I'm easily amused, but it's hilarious when a free game has more stat growth for your squad mates than a similar title (in terms of shooting-based gameplay with a minimalistic squad mechanic) like *Gears of War*.

More than an hour into Meowcenaries and I'd only reached the second zone; a sprawling desert aesthetic copied from *Super Mario Bros. 3*. There are four different zones to travel to, including other videogame staples like snow and lava worlds.

There's a distinct NES-era feel to the action, and it surprised me considering how absolutely dumb the concept looks based on the title screen. That may be a harsh assessment, but when it gets down to it, Meowcenaries is one of the better titles to squander hours away on, as opposed to writing TPS reports.

Adult Swim has a clear vision of how to market their online presence. Easy-to-play Flash games available for all, with no installations, is certainly an attractive aspect. The fact that, at least based on one title, the games have depth to them explains why Adult Swim's Flash portal continues to expand, adding more and more games all the time.

Then again, if you absolutely hate Meowcenaries you're more than welcome to submit a better idea to Adult Swim. Just no more memes, please. ■



October 14th, 2009

# Review: Canabalt

| Sometimes big experiences come in small downloads.  
| *By Nick Cummings*

How can a story be told in a game?

I've heard the question come up more often in the last few months than I have in the previous decade. This year in particular has seen more narrative-driven blockbusters with a sophisticated approach to storytelling than ever before. *Batman: Arkham Asylum* and *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* have both been lauded for their intricate (and wildly different) approaches to developing a narrative in tandem with a long-term experience.

The debate even manifested recently in the comments section of Doug Bonham's recent editorial on storytelling in games. Does a story always improve a game? Does it ever improve a game?

I think the question is best answered by asking how we define storytelling. Is it the preliminary text explaining the player's motivations and mission? Is it the thousands of lines of melodrama that fill each installment in the *Metal Gear Solid* saga to the brim? Is it as insignificant as being told the president has been kidnapped by ninjas, followed with a simple query: Are you a bad enough dude to rescue

the president?

I sought to find a good example of how even the most minimal amount of overt storytelling can have a profound effect on how a player experiences a game. And I found it in *Canabalt*.

What sets *Canabalt* apart from the myriad run-and-jump platformers is its subtle anticipation of the player's psychology. It expects



that initially the player will only focus on the path and hazards immediately awaiting your runner, but with each successive attempt new details will stick in one's mind. You'll sense the energy in the pumping electronic soundtrack, and the beautifully simplistic scrolling backgrounds — and then it'll dawn on you that the music is not so much energizing as it is harrowing, and the backgrounds tell a story all their own. Then you'll understand why you can't stop running.

It sounds simple, and maybe even not that significant. But from a design standpoint, it's almost a perfect example of merging a game's mechanics with its premise.

The details begin to stand out more with each successive attempt at escape. The protagonist is surprisingly expressive in his animations, leaping wildly and landing with a quick tumble before picking up the pace. When he encounters an obstacle, he stumbles and loses his momentum, threatening to make the next leap his last.

The pace quickens, the music pounds, the leaps grow wider and

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*If you've been reading Silicon Sasquatch for a while, you've probably picked up on my fascination with narrative devices in games. Maybe it's because I grew up engrossed in the point-and-click adventures from Gilbert, Schafer and Grossman, or maybe it's because my only marketable skills directly involve writing words; either way, I think storytelling in games is indispensable and an area in which we'll see a lot of experimentation and development in years to come.*

*Canabalt is the rare game that tells a relatively simple narrative but manages to elicit a powerful emotional response in the player. The fact that it's told purely in a diegetic fashion*



less probable — and the sensation is palpable. Who ever imagined such an unassuming game would be capable of evoking an actual sense of exhilaration?

And that's why Canabalt is such a significant case study. If almost any detail was changed — if the background was given color or the music was removed — the game would have an entirely different tone. It'd fall apart. It would be just another platformer with nothing to say.

Because of the App Store's alluring nature — and because any app is a mere click away from ownership — I purchased the iPhone version before I did some basic research and learned that Canabalt originated as a free Flash game playable at Kongregate. Price-conscious players should grab the nearest pair of headphones and give the web version a try as it's the exact same game, only with more social networking features (the iPhone version only enables score-sharing through Twitter).

Once you've given it a whirl, consider whether the \$2.99 price tag is worth it to you on a platform with countless cheaper alternatives that are just as addictive. But if you carry a pair of ear buds with you and you're willing to part with a few minutes of your time, Canabalt is more than willing to demonstrate how even a one-button game can have something substantial to say. ■

*Canabalt was developed by Semi Secret Software and is currently available on the iPhone/iPod Touch App Store for \$2.99. Review copy was purchased for \$2.99 and played for a couple hours.*

### **Recommended for:**

- Those with a pair of headphones and an appreciation for having one's expectations denied
- Gamers who will pay a premium for style with substance

### **Not Recommended for:**

- Budget-conscious gamers who will be content to stick with the free web version — it's absolutely worth playing either way

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*makes it significant, and when you consider that this is a cheap, three-dollar iPhone game, it's really something special.*

*When we got together to discuss what to include in this book, I remember pausing over Canabalt and reflecting that this is the kind of game we ought to be covering: It's not well-known, it's distinct in many ways, and it does something really cool and unprecedented. Those games are rare, and it's important that we make an effort to give them the attention they demand.*  
— Nick Cummings

November 14th, 2009

# Sasquatch Soapbox: Gamers Need to Take a Firmer Stand

Those sixty dollars in your wallet won't just buy a new game – they can also send a message. *By Doug Bonham*

Core gamers have taken up a new pastime as of late: Whining. Early and often.

Starcraft II won't allow LAN play? Lord almighty! Modern Warfare 2 on PC moves away from dedicated servers and costs \$10 more as well? Goodness gracious! Left 4 Dead 2 is coming out sooner than Valve fans want it to? Heavens no! Forza Motorsport 3 has content locked away behind a VIP-only velvet curtain? Oh, the humanity!

These complaints are rather justified. Game publishers and developers are making moves motivated by the bottom line, and as a result they begin to strip content and features away from gamers grown accustomed to these luxuries. Getting consumers to pay more for less is smart business, but bad for public relations. The complaints are fully warranted.



*Fight the power.*

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*I channeled my inner columnist for this article. Whereas other articles feature the construction of an argument piece by piece and with careful language, for this one, I wandered in with a double-barrelled shotgun and a bad mood. But, sometimes that approach is necessary!*

*I think what's discussed here is still true — that gamers are great at being a vocal minority, but terrible at actually having a backbone and taking a stand. So many people are willing to sign a petition, but when it comes to principle and actually boycotting a game or a business, they're weak-willed, especially if the game reviews well and becomes the flavor of the month.*

But the problem I see is that it is nothing *but* complaints as of right now.

The nerd rage is limited to online petitions and napalming messageboards, but nothing more. The Starcraft fans who complained loudly when it was announced (rather murkily) that all multiplayer is going to be routed through Battle.net are still likely going to be the people standing in line or pre-ordering online and playing the game at launch. Exhibit A? See the image at the top of this article (sourced via Rock, Paper, Shotgun) showing many members of a “BOYCOTT MODERN WARFARE 2” Steam group...playing Modern Warfare 2. The indignation spilt out on all corners of the Internet now will likely be forgotten — or, perhaps, just ignored — in favor of actually playing the damn game at release.

This is terrible because that is not how to get through to a business. If you have a

problem with the moves these game publishers are making, sack up and take a stand — and vote with your wallet.

“B-b-b-b-b-but I’ve been looking forward to—“ Stop. It is achingly hypocritical to take such a stance and then cave once the retail copy of the game is waved in front of your face. Gamers — especially the core audience — have an insanely weak will in that regard.

What message does it send to Blizzard regarding LAN play in Starcraft II if they see record Day 1 sales numbers? Does it harm Infinity Ward and Activision to see an uproar on NeoGAF and Kotaku a month ahead of MW2’s release, but then break sales records once the game is out? If these companies succeed in light of feature-stripping, what does it say about gamers?

That we will buy anything, anyway. *This is not a good thing.* If you want to effect real change, you cannot cave in.

If you are perfectly fine with what these companies do, shine on, you crazy diamond. I do not blame you; my desire for Forza 3 exceed-

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“What message does it send to Blizzard regarding LAN play in Starcraft II if they see record Day 1 sales numbers? If these companies succeed in light of feature-stripping, what does it say about gamers?”

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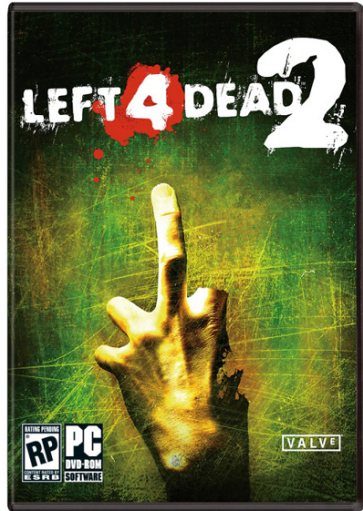
*That image of CoD:MW2 gamers boycotting the title on Steam but showing up as actually playing that game still cracks me up.*

*I’ve mostly used the Sasquatch Soapbox tag for thoughtful editorials, but sometimes a two-barreled blast of pure opinion is needed. I need to find more things that make me angry, because sometimes you do just need to write angry. It’s amazing how that lack of LAN play in Starcraft II hasn’t been mentioned since the game’s July release, too... — Doug Bonham*

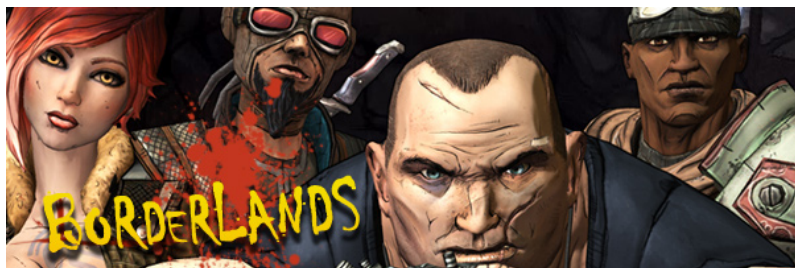
ed my own personal thoughts about changes to multiplayer and, specifically, the VIP program. There is a real danger that Turn 10 will start splitting the fanbase by releasing essential content to only a portion of its fans. Regarding multiplayer, Turn 10 took away the ability to create custom public lobbies, changing Forza 3 to a solely Halo-style hopper system — if you want to do a custom race, you have to find friends yourself. However, despite these changes, I like Turn 10's games and quite like being inside that walled garden in Forza (it's already netted me a few free cars in the game), so I paid the extra price.

I know people who will legitimately boycott Starcraft II — because they value LAN play and think Blizzard is overly greedy right now. I respect that. But that list of people “boycotting” Modern Warfare 2 and showing up on Steam as actually playing it? They are not helping — they are hurting the cause.

I don't think anybody outside of Activision likes that company's profit-centric business strategy right now, but the only way to affect it is to hurt their bottom line. Whining online (even this article!) is not going to change anything unless it is backed up by a firm stance. ■



*Left 4 Dead fans display their opinion of Valve coming out with an improved sequel of their chosen game*



November 16th, 2009

# Co-op Review: Borderlands

| A chronicle of our joint vacation to that other planet called Pandora. *By Aaron Thayer and Nick Cummings*

*Editor's note: Just like in our last Co-op Review, our goal here is to offer two viewpoints on one title; a title that's explicitly meant to be played with friends. Borderlands is a fast-paced co-op lovers' dream, and as such Aaron and Nick worked through the game multiple different times with varying numbers of participants. Enjoy, and let us know in the comments what you think about this review.*

## **Aaron:**

Let's get the praise out of the way: Borderlands is a monumental success, a title overflowing with charm, style, solid combat and addictive gameplay.

And now, the condemnation: Despite its quality, Borderlands' longevity is questionable upon subsequent playthroughs. What was so impressive at first becomes a chore later on. If I were an economist I might call this a case of diminishing returns; however, numbers scare me.

It seems desperate to scan for criticisms after spending over 35 hours on one game. But in the end, Gearbox's accomplishment in



*Shootin' at the dock of the bay*

creating a polished loot-fest for consoles is a fleeting bit of impressive technical fancy.

That's not to say *Borderlands* isn't worth purchasing. You'll enjoy it, and your money will have been well spent. Day after day, you'll keep coming back to look for the next elusive upgrade. Maybe that Badass Brawler will drop a revolver with a 2.2x magnification scope that can rapid fire corrosive bullets in a fraction of the time your last gun took. Or you might pick up some chump change and a health pack. Don't be alarmed by the game's subtle insistence on gambling your time away: You'll find yourself playing "just a little more" to find the next big cache. That's the point.

*Borderlands* is unequivocal gun pornography — a sensory overload of randomized statistics packed into each computationally different piece of ballistic hardware. That's what made *Diablo* so successful. That's why, to this day, the press and the fans refer to any game containing random treasures and frantic mouse-click combat (or controller trigger depressions in the case of *Borderlands*) as being *Diablo*-like. Gearbox even added a reference to Blizzard's franchise with an enemy named Rakkinishu, a fully modeled pun of a classic *Diablo II* enemy. Its loot: a cracked sash. If you don't get the joke, *Borderlands* might be the most original game of the past 10 years for you. Just remember that PC gamers have been slaughtering hordes and filling relic coffers since 1996.

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*Our second co-op review is also our best. Though Nick and I both go off on tangents regarding *Borderlands*' resemblance to *Diablo*, we also manage to be honest about the game without reducing it to a discussion on graphics, sound design and achievements. I can tell in this review that, almost a year after starting the blog, we had finally begun to grasp what works best when writing about videogames. — Aaron Thayer*



Skills = kills

Yet the Diablo parallels aren't a negative trait. That pedigree, one valuing the pursuit of loot above all else (and the belief that all classes are created equal until skill points are allocated), is the strongest aspect of *Borderlands*. This game is a nod to the tradition of obsessive item collecting coupled with deep action-RPG elements. It works because the concept has always worked iteration after iteration, and it's somehow fun every single time. Though to be fair, I can't think of another FPS title that so perfectly incorporates the isometric stylings of the *Diablo* franchise into a shooter's ground-level perspective.

How else can we dissect a title so obvious in its goals? If you can't find joy in the slaughter of thousands of enemies and the endless hunt for better gear with a few friends, *Borderlands* isn't for you.

### Nick:

Never underestimate the importance of a good ending. No matter the faults a game may have in structure or design, a great narrative escalation leading up to a satisfying conclusion can accommodate for any number of hiccups along the way.

Unfortunately, when an excellent game is tethered to a half-hearted final sequence with not even the slightest hint of closure — not to mention no sign of what's to come in a sequel — the player is left with such a sour feeling that there's no way in hell they're returning to that same game environment.

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*I have to agree with Aaron here: This is a much better attempt at a collaborative review. I think it's fair to say that it's also an example of each of us writing at our best. That we both compared *Borderlands* to *Diablo* is not only appropriate but essential for proper criticism. And one year after the fact, I still get angry thinking about that ending.* — Nick Cummings

Borderlands falls squarely in the second category. Despite its brilliantly calculated pacing, engaging variety of firearms and intense-but-rarely-unfair combat, the thirty or so hours it took me to arrive at the vault on Pandora felt entirely negated by the abortive conclusion. It'll ruin nobody's enjoyment of the game to explain that the final boss is located at the vault; you kill it, it drops some inconspicuous loot, and...that's it. The mysterious windswept lady says you can go sell the vault key for some money and it'll be openable again two hundred years down the line. There you go. Time to start a second playthrough, right?



*They may look like great hosts, but bandits really aren't your friends*

Wrong. For such a brilliant Diablo-like game, Borderlands missed one crucial component: A gripping conclusion. It's the part that tugs not just at your brain's obsessive impulses but at its emotional receptors as well. Why did anyone go back and play through Diablo 1 on Nightmare or Hell after killing the prime evil himself? Because in order to truly defeat him, the hero had to take on his curse — and we all know that can't last forever. It makes the prospect of a repeat playthrough exciting because a sequel is inevitable, and the ending (admittedly poor as it was in the first game) was enough compulsion to add purpose to a second venture into the abyss.

Diablo II did an even better job with the betrayal of Marius at the hands of Baal. Even though Diablo was once again killed, his soulstone remained — allowing Baal to deceive Marius, murder him in cold blood, and begin his march toward Mount Arreat and the ominous Worldstone. With an expansion imminent, Diablo II offered plenty of reason to keep venturing back throughout the world of Sanctuary in search of better loot, more robust skills and more challenging duels. And it's probably safe to say that its expansion, Lord of Destruction, wouldn't still have the massive fanbase it holds today without a similarly compelling conclusion: Tyrael's destruction of the World Stone and the unpredictable, dramatic future that would follow. While Diablo is undoubtedly the genre-defining series for hack 'n slash RPGs, it very likely would have lost its place at the top to other admirable contenders (Titan Quest, Sacred, Torchlight) without having developed a solid purpose and alluring narrative within the world of Sanctuary.

The thirty-odd hours I spent with Borderlands were an absolute blast. Whether going it solo or with a group of friends, the game scaled intelligently and always provided something fun to do or



exciting to kill. But I realize now that I was only enjoying the raw design of the game, and not the *Borderlands* mythology itself. Even the world itself is devoid of character; while its sarcasm is deeply entrenched in the characters and missions themselves, and it certainly benefits the game, it's no substitute for a real soul or purpose.

Gearbox demonstrated a first-class understanding of what makes gamers tick, and what makes playing a game with friends fun. They nailed the science — and the next time around, with any luck, they'll discover the soul as well. ■

*Borderlands is available for a suggested retail price of \$59.99 on the Xbox 360 and PS3, and for \$49.99 on the PC. The reviewers completed the story mode, and each began a second playthrough that adds different enemies and more difficult encounters. The multiplayer was tested throughout much of the game in varying numbers of two to four participants.*

#### **Recommended for:**

- White-knuckle, trigger-depressing action
- The lack of shame in being a total loot fest
- An initial sense of style and humor that separates *Borderlands* from other titles
- A drop-in/drop-out multiplayer mechanic that makes the concept look easy
- Those with a lot of friends

#### **Not Recommended for:**

- A lack of longevity — it's great while it lasts, but who cares about getting to level 50? (Aside from me. — Aaron)
- The ending: a complete letdown that nearly ruins the earlier fun of getting there
- It's almost there, but not quite — Gearbox showed a lot of potential here, but missteps in the tone and pacing of the game after a wonderful honeymoon period make for a bit of head-scratching



December 1st, 2009

# Review: Forza Motorsport 3

Finally, a game built specifically for aspiring car pornographers. *By Doug Bonham*

Forza Motorsport 3 is just about everything you would want from a sequel. While it doesn't bring any revolutionary changes to the formula established by Turn 10 Studios with Forza 1 and 2, the game adds plenty of new features and improves on almost every feature from Forza 2.

At the heart of the Forza 3 racing experience is a very good physics engine. While there may be more accurate and realistic racing simulators out there on PC, no other console game blends authenticity with fun like Forza...and this includes, yes, Gran Turismo (GT4 is notorious for ignoring the existence of brakes that could lock up completely, and of oversteer.) It's accurate enough to reward realistic driving, but

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*"Show, don't tell" is a mantra of journalists everywhere; I'm always thinking of how to do that better. The idea is a writer shows concrete examples about a subject instead of writing 1,000 words talking about how good it is. I still love Forza 3, and while this is a decent review of the game, I want to re-write parts of it to better show the game's quality. I feel this is a more rote review than I should have written — showing how the reverse option erases the previous game's pain would have been a nice addition to the review, just to name one aspect.*

*That said, I am happy that all of the images used in the review came from my Forza 3 adven-*

not as demanding as games like iRacing, rFactor, or the classic Grand Prix Legends. More importantly, the game engine is flexible with layers of assists like ABS, traction control, racing line assist and (new for Forza 3) a brake assist that allows just about anybody to pick up the controller and race.

The improvements to accessibility are not limited to the in-game racing in Forza 3, though. A common complaint with the previous Forza games and the Gran Turismo series is that the single-player career mode is not a guided enough experience; while it's nice to pick and choose the races you want to compete in, it's almost too much choice. While Forza 3 does not move to a strictly on-rails, guided experience, it does have “seasons” that are built around a marquee racing series, with shorter ones filling in the gap. The game suggests which of these elective series you should do based on three conditions: using your current car, trying a new car, or going to new race tracks. Every time you complete a series, the game prompts you to choose again, and the cycle continues. A traditional event matrix is also available, but playing within the season framework provides a fun, different experience compared to past racing sims.

That change to the single player structure is a good example of the evolutionary changes Turn 10 implemented in Forza 3. Another one of those is the rewind, which brings Prince of Persia-style time manipulation to a racing sim. Pressing the “back” button rewinds the action a few seconds, allowing you to erase a bad racing mistake with almost no cost. Compared to previous games, where a mistake (or, more likely, a moment of AI madness) meant re-starting the race, the rewind button is a heaven-sent instrument of frustration reduction.

A tradition of the console sim-racing genre — customizing cars with different performance parts — continues in Forza 3 and, as in the previous Forza games, so does customizing paint schemes. It's even better in Forza 3; Forza 2 ushered in an online storefront in the



*The physics engine in Forza Motorsport 3 makes driving most any car a treat, but turn certain cars – like this Ferrari Challenge Stradale – really shine. (Note: All of the photos in this review were captured in-game by the reviewer.)*

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*tures both online and off; seeing the header image still makes me smile, because it was one of the first LMP-class races I did online with my group of friends. What you don't see is three people spinning into catastrophe right after this image was taken, and what you don't hear is the Xbox Live chatter and swearing. I can grin because I sped off into the sunset. As an aside, games allowing players to upload in-game photos to web sites has to be one of the best innovations of this generation — especially for bloggers like yours truly tired of stealing photos and wanting to show off their own experience. — Doug Bonham*



*Damn right that's an Oregon license plate — one of many interesting, amusing or just-plain real “vinyls” you will find on the Forza 3 storefront. Don't worry: the storefront is driven by in-game credits, not Microsoft Points.*

game in the form of an auction house for buying and selling cars, and that has moved into the paint scheme realm for the new game. Between individual vinyl groups (think stickers) and full designs for cars, there are plenty of options to customize how your ride looks. Best part? It all is available for in-game credits, so you have another option to spend your hard-earned race winnings on. As a real-life auto racing geek, I've seen a lot of accurately recreated racing paint schemes in the game, and that's just within a month of release. The opportunities are almost limitless.

That feeds directly into the online experience, which is rich, flexible, and will provide gamers with a four-wheel playground for a long time to come. In custom games, hosts can fine-tune almost everything — from given options like lap totals and number of players, to car classes and other more in-depth parameters.

However, you had better have friends to race with, because the public racing setup changed from Forza 2 to Forza 3. Forza 3 now makes use of public lobbies that act as Halo 3-style hoppers, where players join races by class or game type...and that's it. Custom public lobbies have been taken away since Forza 2, and while the hopper system could be solid, this depends on Turn 10 making routine changes. They've promised it will happen, but that remains to be seen. Additionally, the public racing option requires you to race with the unwashed masses of Xbox Live, which can be a similar experience to games like Halo or Call of Duty. So much for getting a good, clean race in when pubbies decide to cause massive pile-ups in the first corner. Your humble reviewer is a member of two different communities where online games can and will be organized on forums, but unless

you're already a part of one of these (or willing to join one), the online play can be a bit limited. It appears that the Turn 10 Forzamotorsport.net forums are becoming a solid community of racers, though, so that's at least an option.

The end result is one of the best console racing games in a long time, and easily the best simulation-style racer of this console generation. It's more of the same, but refined in ways that fans actively clamored for — like the graphics, online customization, more cars, etc. — and also in ways they didn't know they wanted and needed, like with the rewind button. If Turn 10 supports Forza 3 with DLC, it could be an excellent slow-burn game that provides tons of fun for diehards and newcomers alike — you just better find some friends to play with online to get the most out of the experience. ■

*Forza Motorsport 3 is available for \$59.99 for Xbox 360.*

### **Recommended for:**

- Fans of Forza Motorsport 2 or other simulation console racers like Gran Turismo
- Gamers who only have access to an Xbox 360
- Lovers of good graphics — Forza 3 is a very, very pretty game, locked in at 60 FPS and stunning in the replay and photo modes
- Racers part of an online community who can take to the forums to organize racing nights with friends
- Anybody interested in learning about and racing cars — the layers of accessibility can peel away with experience

### **Not Recommended for:**

- Gamers whose idea of racing games begins and ends with Burn-out: Paradise and see the “brake” button as just a suggestion
- Fans not looking to get into a ton of online racing — there's a lot of single-player content here, but it feels like only half a game
- Sony and Polyphony Digital fanboys — there's not enough here to convince them to add an Xbox 360 to their gaming setup.

December 12th, 2009

# Why I Canceled My GameFly Membership

O GameFly, how do you underwhelm? Let me count the ways. *By Nick Cummings*

It's happened to the best of us. Even the most cautious consumer has acted in a moment of passion and purchased a game that wasn't a sure-fire hit. Oh sure, it boasts of a lengthy single-player campaign and robust online features, but who can say for sure? Emboldened by an opportunity to discover a potential diamond in the rough, you purchase the game and head home without a shadow of a doubt that you're in for anything but a great time.

But just ten minutes after tearing off the shrinkwrap and unceremoniously tossing the manual aside ("seriously, who reads things?"), it dawns on you: This single-player campaign certainly is lengthy, but only in the why-won't-this-horrible-game-just-be-over sense of the word. Those robust online features amount to a half-dozen variations on deathmatch that, between the crippling lag issues and a total dearth of players with whom to compete, add up to zero enjoyment.

Sixty hard-earned American dollars, gone in the blink of an eye. Poof. And all you've got to show for it is your shiny new copy of Bionic Commando and a room stacked to the ceiling with your meta-

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*When I was a little kid, I used to look forward to the occasional weekend when I got to go out to Hollywood Video and pick out a game to rent – usually for something like \$3. My friends and I were pretty young up through the 32-bit era, and we didn't start getting jobs and making enough money to buy our own games until we were approaching college age, so there's no question that we'd never have had the chance to play through the wide variety of games out there if it weren't for affordable and widespread game rental stores.*

*Today, the one Blockbuster still open within ten miles of me stocks new games usually at least a week after they're out and charges about \$10 for a five-day rental. Gone is the friendly, youthful staff that was happy to make recommendations; instead, you've just got a couple of*

physical shame.

But what else could you do? While it's dying a slow death at the blood-red hands of Netflix, Blockbuster is only stocking a few of the biggest new releases — meaning sleeper hits and lesser-known titles are impossible to try before buying. Hollywood Video is closing its doors in rapid succession. The last option is GameFly, a Netflix-like subscription service for renting games.

I spent six months with GameFly across a variety of plans, and I ultimately ended up canceling the service with no intention of ever restarting my account. While it may be a fantastic concept on paper, its execution leaves plenty to be desired.

**1. It's slow.** GameFly currently has four distribution centers across the United States, with only one on the west coast. Comparatively, Netflix ships from more than fifty locations throughout the country. What this means is that the two-day turnaround you've come to expect from a service like Netflix is conspicuously absent; expect a week between games with GameFly. And with limited availability, many games often have to ship from a distant location, resulting in even more downtime. In my experience, a game sent back on a Monday probably won't be received until Thursday, unless the US Postal Service scans a barcode on the shipping label and notifies GameFly through its "Fast Return" service. Of the dozens of games I shipped, this only happened three or four times. And once it's received, the next game usually won't ship until the next day — Friday, in this example — meaning it won't arrive until the following Monday.

**2. It's expensive.** This means a single-disc subscription is almost worthless. Assuming you keep a game for a week at a time, that's 50% of your \$15.95 per month going to time spent without a game. I stuck with this plan for the first two months before opting to upgrade to two games at a time for \$22.95 — steep, but still less than half the price of a new game at retail. This allowed me to alternate with a game at home each week, which would have worked out pretty well, except...

**3. It's unreliable.** Like Netflix, GameFly ships games to you based on what you have in your queue; simply make an ordered list of games you'd like to play and GameFly attempts to ship them to you

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*disgruntled, middle-aged employees dealing with the unfortunate truth that their jobs are anything but permanent.*

*What I'm trying to say is that this is a crappy situation for everyone: young gamers, old gamers, parents, and kids looking for a great entry-level job in high school or beyond. I had high hopes for GameFly rekindling some of the fun and excitement of renting games, but it was just too inconsistent and too expensive to bother with. Maybe they'll get it right in the future, but I'm willing to bet another company's going to rise up and take its place. With services like On-Live offering instantly streaming game rentals, the marketplace is certainly ready for a major paradigm shift. — Nick Cummings*

in your desired order, based on availability. This sounds fair, except GameFly's limited resources simply can't compete with what people expect in terms of selection from a service like Netflix. In practice, it's exceedingly unlikely you'll receive a new or popular game within the first couple months of its release. Instead, GameFly will dip into the depths of your list and pull out something shameful that you never expected you'd end up playing — *Eat Lead: The Return of Matt Hazard* comes to mind.

**4. It's a waste of time.** Because it's such a scattershot method for playing games you're genuinely interested in, GameFly tempts you to add a wide variety of games to your queue to ensure games are shipped out regularly. This means you'll probably end up with a whole lot of games you'd never consider buying but may have considered playing on the cheap — in other words, games that probably aren't worth your time. And although subscribers are rewarded with increasing discounts on purchasing used games (5/10/15% over three/six/twelve months), the discounts are rarely as steep as the occasional sale at Fry's or Best Buy. When you consider the high annual cost required to qualify for these discounts, it doesn't stand out as quite as generous an offer as it might initially appear to be.

**My recommendation:** Be a clever and conscious consumer. Bargain shop with the help of sites like the unfortunately named Cheap Ass Gamer and check major retailers like Amazon for regular sales. Clearly GameFly's massive selection of games (more than 7,000, according to the site) can be alluring to any avid gamer — it certainly drew me in — but consider just how many of them are really worth your time. We all have lives, right? We do more than play games. Don't feel like you need to go overboard.

**Bonus point:** Its advertising is ludicrously bad/offensive/sexist. ■



*I don't think I need to elaborate.*





December 16th, 2009

# Review: Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

| Does the mohawk make the man? More importantly, does the multiplayer mode make the shooter? *By Aaron Thayer*

What more can be said about the so-called largest entertainment launch in the history of mankind?

It's tempting to boil down Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 to a vaporous obligation, an experience that divides gamers into the haves and have-nots. But that's putting blind faith in a product based on its advertising blitzkrieg. Aren't we supposed to be discerning consumers?

The climate around Modern Warfare 2 is now adequate, a month after release, for a steady-handed dissection of gaming's latest chart-topping champion — far removed from the pre-release hype. This critique won't convert the detractors or embolden the fanatics, but it will hopefully read as an alternative education on the latest Call of Duty, a game that flirts with failure as much as it tastes success.

## **War. War never changes.**

We're now at the sixth main entry in the Call of Duty franchise and the second Modern Warfare title. The games have upped the adrenaline in each release (including CoD substitute developer Treyarch's Call of Duty 3 and CoD: World at War), and at this point



*Infinity Ward's next project: a realistic remake of Ice Climbers.*

the franchise can almost out-Michael Bay the actual Michael Bay. But is this what we want? Yes, according to the numbers and charts. *Modern Warfare 2* is exactly what gamers want, and want more of. And that's precisely what we'll be getting. Case in point: Electronic Arts has jumped back into the big budget FPS arena, and they're out for blood with a "me too!" modernized *Medal of Honor* title set for release in 2010.

To be fair, I've never wanted the *Call of Duty* series to be anything but a set of flawlessly produced cinematic action games. Infinity Ward was founded under that mindset when key members of 2015, Inc., the studio behind *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault*, split from Electronic Arts to make games their way. From the beginning, Infinity Ward wanted to outdo *Medal of Honor*, the most movie-like shooter series in the early 2000s.

There's no doubt that *Modern Warfare 2*'s filmic set pieces will stick with me. From outer space to suburban Virginia, to Pacific Ocean oil platforms and the Middle East, this is quite the Carmen Sandiego (or Matt Lauer) treatment. I applaud Infinity Ward and *Modern Warfare 1* and *2* writer Jesse Stern for taking such a risk by juggling multiple locales in a brief, six-hour campaign. However, the spastic story makes for forgettable personal interactions amongst the more memorable explosions. I don't exactly care that Soap is back.

*This was one of my longest reviews at the time. Not until Mass Effect 2 did I have so much to say about a huge and divisive title.*

*The goal in reviewing Modern Warfare 2 was to praise its strengths but condemn its numerous faults, which I took seriously. As I wrote in the article, Modern Warfare 2 didn't try hard enough. Instead of improving on the first Modern Warfare, the developers cranked up the details without remembering that the story also needed attention, which shouldn't have come down to flashier and bigger set pieces.*



Spring Break 2009: Overdressed at Lake Havasu!

I wasn't floored by the surprise return of a main character from Call of Duty 4. New characters like Ghost are cookie-cutter archetypes seen too many times before. And I certainly can't forgive recycling the "Let's shoot this player character in the face to kill him off" plot mechanic. The twists in Modern Warfare 1 worked because of their initial shock value. No one expected the nuke to actually go off and kill Sgt. Paul Jackson. But thanks to Call of Duty 4, the expectation of death appearing at any moment during Modern Warfare 2 dissolves what was once a clever tool. Stern and the other writers might find this life-and-death uncertainty to be "emotionally charged," but it instead comes off as simplistic and tired.

While I don't expect deep, philosophical pondering from Call of Duty, I do expect the series to show me things I've never seen in a videogame before. And in that regard Modern Warfare 2 more than succeeded. I'd never felt so uneasy playing a game as I did when firing on civilians in "No Russian." I've never dodged a land mine in slow motion before. I also can't say I've pushed through a crowd of enemies with a riot shield. And I certainly haven't breached and cleared, in slow motion, a room filled with explosive barrels and terrorists guarding hostages. Modern Warfare 2 is simply bursting with numerous classic moments like these.

Then why am I so frustrated at the single player story? Because

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*But my level of criticism and outright disappointment present throughout this review is why I think it's one of my favorite articles on our entire blog. It's not because I wrote it (my ego's too small for that), but because if I read it as an impartial viewer I get the sense that the author managed to deftly pull apart every aspect of this gigantic game and intelligently reason his opinions over the course of a few thousand words. I look at this review and have a difficult time finding another Modern Warfare 2 review as opinionated and absolute. That's why I'm glad mine is in the Silicon Sasquatch archives. — Aaron Thayer*

this is the industry's future. This is what we encourage; because we're addicted. We think that as long as the gameplay is tight it doesn't matter if the story is weak. Infinity Ward can't be faulted for being good at what they do, and this review is no place to sit in my tower of perceived superiority, but gamers aren't advancing the medium forward — they're hindering it. Astronomical sales beget more games like *Modern Warfare 2*, which sounds absolutely fine in the short term. But when you consider the uneven plot of *Modern Warfare 2*, and realize this was just a giant action flick, the potential for more of it makes my enthusiasm slip into apathy.

Still, *Modern Warfare 2* was fun. Pure can't-put-it-down-even-though-it's-3 a.m. fun. I finished the campaign twice, once on Veteran even, and marveled at the visceral gameplay both times.

Infinity Ward is at the top of its game with the latest in the franchise.

But is this all we want from our sequels? Just because something was "badass" doesn't mean it's worthwhile. Games like *Modern Warfare 2* — all flash and polish — are brittle, fleeting even. These games do

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"Modern Warfare 2 was fun. Pure can't-put-it-down-even-though-it's-3 a.m. fun. But is this all we want from our sequels? Just because something was 'badass' doesn't mean it's worthwhile."

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well until the sequel comes along. Because think about it: Will *Modern Warfare 2* be a replayable game 10 years from now, a game that will defy age and achieve a Tetris-like status? The recent *Call of Duty 1* re-release on Xbox LIVE and PlayStation Network has brought up this question, as reviewers tend to comment that the game, while an impressive feat of development during its time, hasn't aged well. The original title is still playable, but its impact today is in showing us how far gaming has come in six years. So I'm sure *Modern Warfare 2* will play well years from now. But who's going to care when we're pre-ordering *Call of Duty: Future Warfare 5*?

Some gamers might fail to see my point in criticizing *Modern Warfare 2*, and will likely say I'm overreacting or being hypocritical. I'm aware sequels are what drive the industry, and more of a high-quality series is generally a joyous thing. But that's why I feel a few jabs at *Modern Warfare 2* are warranted: We need to expect more from these \$60 blockbusters, so why not start with the current king? Asking little of talented people is ruining a portion of the film industry, where cheap remakes and bare-minimum sequels are encouraged by ignorant audiences.

Then again, a lot of *Call of Duty* players don't care what either



*Soap: fully armed and running late to a Mr. T cosplay convention.*

Infinity Ward or Treyarch do with their stories. It fascinates me that many of Modern Warfare 2's multiplayer gamers haven't finished the campaign. Try checking random players' Modern Warfare 2 achievements: some haven't even progressed past "The Pit."

Plot is only a back-of-the-box feature to these types, something read but never experienced. They just want the multiplayer.

### **Back in the saddle (on a slightly different horse).**

If you loved Call of Duty 4's genius multiplayer, be thankful: Modern Warfare 2 adds enough to the same experience to feel new again. The riot shield, third-person perspective matches, death streak rewards and customized killstreaks are the most impressive additions, and each helps you feel even more in control of your online soldier.

And despite a recent crop of frustratingly abundant bugs, multiplayer remains a major reason to purchase the game. You still gain experience, you still make your own classes and you still unlock new weapons and perks on your way to the increased level cap of 70. Infinity Ward took a risk and failed with its handling of the single player plot; however, they built upon the strengths of Call of Duty 4's online portion to improve the original concept.

The pull of Modern Warfare 2 multiplayer is strong at first. Playing with friends every day can encourage an extreme investment in the process of ranking up to keep up; unlocking gear, tweaking perks, testing attachments and completing challenges can melt the hours away. It's so fast-paced that there's rarely time to realize you're trudging through frustration and anger for a small bit of satisfaction via the occasional killstreak or "Oh man, did you see that?" moment.

I only start losing interest once I've played the same maps, killed

the same classes and defeated the same tactics hundreds of times. So I'd be ignorant if I didn't recognize how much value Modern Warfare 2's multiplayer mode has when I've played it for nearly three days total. It's expected that the well will run dry after so many return trips.

But Call of Duty multiplayer is frustratingly ironic in its insistence on rewarding the lone wolf player. The gameplay is too fast — too hectic — to provide the sense of camaraderie Infinity Ward wants in its single player campaigns; originally in opposition to Medal of Honor and its invincible soldier defeating battalions of enemies alone. Online players with the most kills in the first two Call of Duty games were those who didn't work with their teammates — opting instead to hide, camp and snipe. The same mentality applied to Call of Duty 4, and continues to apply to its sequel. While I do believe an organized clan can dominate any battlefield situation online, Call of Duty team games have never felt truly organized.

So to fill the co-op gap in their own Call of Duty titles, Infinity Ward took cues from Treyarch's Nazi Zombies to create the new Special Ops mode. The result is my absolute favorite part of Modern Warfare 2.

### **Table for two.**

Special Ops is a one to two player co-op mode containing 23 missions split into military alphabet categories, ascending in difficulty from Alpha through Echo. The goal is to collect all 69 stars (I hope someone at Infinity Ward is proud of that), which are rewarded based on the difficulty each mission is completed on — one for Regular, two for Hardened, three for Veteran. Missions pull from locales seen in the single player campaign, meaning there are snowmobile races, stealth missions, blow-up-everything challenges and extremely difficult breach and clear tasks to name a few.

I have a hunch this is the future of Call of Duty, or at least a very important part of its growth. In a way, Special Ops feels like a series of tiny user-created mods for a PC title like Operation Flashpoint or ArmA II. You and your partner actually rely on each other to beat these challenges, and it's imperative to keep an open line of communication and plan your tactics in advance. All of the current missions are substantial enough to take a week or two to complete at Veteran difficulty.

Cooperative gameplay is extremely popular right now, but Special Ops manages to cement its own place amongst a slew of similar experiences. It isn't Left 4 Dead, it isn't horde mode and it certainly isn't Nazi Zombies. Those examples encourage a sort of long form experience; horde mode and Nazi Zombies have checkpoints within a persistent gameplay session, and the Left 4 Dead games are about

working toward an end goal across multiple chapters. As an alternative, Special Ops missions can be finished in anywhere from two to 15 minutes depending on the specific task and your pacing. Each mission is independent from the others within its difficulty class (i.e., don't expect to see two snowmobile races on Bravo's list). It's such a fast mode that I can see doing one or two of these with your pal during a lunch break from work — assuming you work near your home, or have an amazing boss who lets you play your console at work.

Infinity Ward's unique take on co-op gaming is a welcome surprise considering the studio's pedigree of making gigantic scenarios to showcase their development skills. Say hello to "micro-op" gameplay.

All things considered, *Modern Warfare 2* is a behemoth of a game. And while I do believe it will easily be replaced by its eventual sequel, I can't pretend like it didn't provide hours of entertainment. Be it my fleeting addiction to the multiplayer or the clever co-op of Special Ops, there's a lot to like about the latest *Call of Duty*. Let's just hope *Modern Warfare 3* finds Infinity Ward able to write a story just as impressive as the graphics engine will be. ■

*Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2 is available for a suggested retail price of \$59.99 on the Xbox 360, PC and PS3. The reviewer reached 100% completion on both the campaign and Special Ops modes, and registered nearly three days worth of time played in multiplayer. He feels slightly embarrassed by that fact. A copy was given to the reviewer as a gift by an independent party.*

### **Recommended for:**

- Call of Duty diehards, of course
- Shooter fans
- Multiplayer enthusiasts who like RPG elements
- Activision would want me to say "everyone," right? Well, practically everyone bought it already.
- Special Ops

### **Not Recommended for:**

- Those who appreciate good writing
- Gamers tired of another batch of bombs, bullets and buddies fighting the good fight
- Anyone who hasn't cared about *Call of Duty* up to this point — *MW2* isn't enough to convince you to join the masses

December 16th, 2009

# Double Take: another look at Modern Warfare 2

Contributor and friend of the site Spencer Tordoff offers a counterpoint to Aaron's review. *By Spencer Tordoff*

I'd like to preface this by saying I have no interest in Modern Warfare 2's multiplayer component. The betrayals of Activision and Infinity Ward have come and gone; the damage is done, and for once I feel like I have nothing to say on the topic.

However, the single player portion continued to intrigue me. I loved the campaign in Call of Duty 4, as well as the previous Infinity Ward-crafted stories of Call of Duty 1 and 2. Procuring a copy of the latest game to continue the Modern Warfare storyline felt like a good idea, like an olive branch offered to a quarrelsome friend.

To the studio's credit, the single player was certainly an exciting experience. Indeed, it never stopped the excitement. Even when I hoped the game would slow down a bit and let me get my bearings, there was non-stop, full-on action. Too much perhaps, and out of some necessity.

As it turns out, Modern Warfare 2 is a hideous patchwork beast assembled from the successes of its predecessor — stitched together with threads of blasting sound, unrelenting fury and boring cliché. Only a few moments weren't copies of some pulse-pounding Call of Duty 4 scene. Did you enjoy Modern Warfare's sniper segment? Now there are two. What about a stunning mid-air leap to a helicopter? Check. Vehicle escapes? Three. First-person reception of an execution-style pistol round? Two. Spectacular character death scenes? One (and a half). Every little facet that made Call of Duty 4 special was copied and plastered all over Modern Warfare 2's campaign, and unconvincingly so.



Spots that Infinity Ward couldn't properly put a primer coat over were painted in thick shades of camp. *Modern Warfare 2* runs the gauntlet from the popular good-guy-turns-bad betrayal to the Cold War-era Soviet invasion of the United States fantasy, à la *Red Dawn*, *Red Alert 2* and *World in Conflict*. The only moments where this abomination is remotely reminiscent of classic *Call of Duty* were the sections from the perspective of the U.S. Army Ranger, which fell victim to the already-mentioned Russian invasion absurdity. Even old videogame clichés were pursued, including the obligatory character voiced by Keith David, and the vaguely-justified motion sensor. No ironic stones, it seems, were left unturned.

I dubbed *Call of Duty 4*, without hesitation, both my favorite game and the best action movie of 2007. Tragically, *Modern Warfare 2* was for me the worst action film of 2009, a year that saw *Transformers 2* in theaters. When the dust settled from my straight-through six-hour campaign session, I knew why the pacing had been kept so frantic: Such haste temporarily distracted me from all the sameness; it shifted my attention from the growing feeling that I had experienced all of this content before in previous games and films.

Once the credits stopped rolling, *Modern Warfare 2* laid threadbare at my feet. The challenges were somewhat amusing, but easily abandoned, and the graphics hadn't improved in two years. In all, well... it felt like a Treyarch game.

Thankfully for Treyarch, *Modern Warfare 2* has set the bar nice and low. Perhaps the *World at War* developer can take the crown from Infinity Ward; it seems the old guard has forgotten how to wear it. ■

*Where to begin? A lot has happened since I wrote this article, almost to the extent of making it prophetic (but I won't get narcissistic about that). Infinity Ward is now effectively deceased, and Treyarch has made some minor concessions to the PC crowd in the hopes of being the new fan favorite. Meanwhile, Activision keeps running existing franchises right into the ground (Guitar Hero: Warriors of Rock, anyone?).*

*This is not to say that Modern Warfare 2 was insignificant: Indeed, the impact of the game is still being felt in new titles (see Halo: Noble Six Gets Knocked Down A Lot Edition). If nothing else, MW2 was well-constructed, and it will doubtlessly endure - we'll see precisely how enduring when the new Sledgehammer-developed Call of Duty titles take shape, but that's just not the take-away point.*

*The really strange thing to consider, in retrospect, is that this "patchwork beast" was ultimately Infinity Ward's swan song; a bitter, hollow concluding note for one of the most loved and respected development teams the industry has seen (akin, I think, to BioWare, Harmonix, and Blizzard). While those refugees may (and probably will) go on to better and brighter things, my attention has turned to the publisher.*

*Activision won't be hurting for money, certainly (they do still own the golden-egg-laying goose), but with the way they treat subsidiary studios, I find myself wondering if they'll end up hurting for new intellectual property - and more importantly, if they've permanently scared off developers of Infinity Ward's caliber. — Spencer Tordoff*

December 21st, 2009

# Silicon Sasquatch: Year One Complete!

We take a little time out of our busy holiday schedule to offer thanks where it's due. *By Aaron Thayer*

It hardly feels like a year has passed since Nick and I made the audacious decision to produce our very own videogame blog. The seedling concept that would eventually become Silicon Sasquatch gestated for a long time over many nights of World of Warcraft (and post-college pity parties), to no immediate avail. But in December of last year we finally put our talents to the test, and gave it go. So here we are now: I'm extremely happy to report that the past year has been quite successful for our corner of the Internet.



*Our seasonal/anniversary gift to you:  
a very tacky card.*

The year that was 2009 saw Silicon Sasquatch reach numerous important milestones. From upgrading to a .com URL to creating a presence on Steam, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, we've been quite

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*I couldn't help feeling accomplished at the end of 2009. When we started Silicon Sasquatch on a Wordpress URL and without our current .com, I couldn't imagine that we would have done so much in just under a year. To others it might not seem very impressive, our various milestones mentioned in this article, but for all of us working hard on a sometimes indefinable project for absolutely no profit, every incremental step up the imaginary ladder is an*

busy. I'm also proud of our numerous experiments with content; be it writing about demos, disseminating news, pondering in retrospectives or tackling cooperative reviews, we certainly tried to be diverse. We even began our own podcast in July, which might be our most significant achievement this year. (New episodes soon, we promise!)

I'd like to note how grateful we have been for the fantastic variety of comments coming from our ever-increasing readership. As egotistical as it might sound, writers sometimes need to know they're actually engaging their audience. The same can be said about being noticed by the industry itself: Meowcenaries developer Mediatonic and The Path developer Tale of Tales each picked up on our work, and we also received a review copy of an Electronic Arts title. These events were simply radical, and became quite the morale boosters for us.

Silicon Sasquatch may still be very tiny in the grand scheme of things, but we know we have potential. I'm definitely excited for the future, and I thank every single one of you who still reads our work and tells your friends about us. So, please do us a favor by continuing to read and comment. Love us, hate us or "meh" us, any feedback is welcomed and encouraged. We will reward you with e-cupcakes, as soon as we figure out the programming languages necessary to make that happen.

Looking forward, 2010 will see us push out a better-looking website and more original articles. Don't quote me on this, but you might also see video content. You know, those moving picture things? And, as always, you can expect more well-written reviews and opinion pieces — Google Analytics tells us you like those.

I'd also like to thank the rest of the Sasquatch team: Doug, Tyler and Spencer. Doug has been with us from the start, and he's been a fantastic (and continuous) source of opinion, support, criticism, debate and original content. He's our senior contributor for a very good reason. Tyler and Spencer have been the best podcast guests we could have hoped for, and it's been a pleasure to work with them. They make sure to tell us like it is, and we need people to keep us on our toes from time to time — Nick and I just need to get them to write more. Thank you again chaps: We wouldn't have made it this far without your numerous efforts and dedication.

Now go have a fantastic holiday. But don't forget to look for our "Top 10 Games of 2009" series — along with the crew's individual "Honorable Mentions" pieces — starting next Monday! ■

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*important one.*

*I look forward to being able to write one of these optimistic wrap-up posts every year. With the continued dedication of everyone involved in Silicon Sasquatch, and also a bit of luck, I predict that subsequent yearly posts will have grander and grander things to congratulate ourselves, and our readers, for. — Aaron Thayer*



*December 28th-31st, 2009*

# 2009 Silicon Sasquatch Game of the Year Awards

You know the joke about how long it takes a bunch of writers to count to ten? It's definitely not a joke.

*By the Silicon Sasquatch Staff and Contributors*

*We're proud to present you with our first-ever Game of the Year awards! Our list of the top ten games of 2009 was derived after hours of debate between all the blog's contributors. It wasn't an easy process, but we are confident that the list we arrived at is the most comprehensive and fair one we could produce.*

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*Probably the best thing I can say about our Game of the Year feature for 2009 is that I've been looking forward to doing it all over again ever since about April of this year. Everything came together so well on this project. Doug, Aaron and I spent a long time working on the structure behind the feature, which I still think was great. And we had the entire crew, including our contributors, participating in the hours-long debate where we decided on our top*

## #10. Left 4 Dead 2

November — Windows, Xbox 360

Left 4 Dead 2 was a paradox in 2009, a simultaneously welcomed and loathed sequel. Who would have thought that a new iteration of one 2008's best titles would spawn online petitions and gallons of spittle from the foaming mouths of psychotic forum-goers? (But let's be honest: those types always complain.) Valve's secret-keeping mentality after the E3 2009 announcement only helped fuel the indignation of petition leaders, who claimed Left 4 Dead 2 was exploiting the original's community. I was a bit skeptical myself. Left 4 Dead was still quite new at the time of its sequel's unveiling — and with the release of the software development kit (SDK) in May, the community had just started warming up. I asked myself, "Do I really want a second helping already? I'm still working on my first course of delicious, zombified meat." Well, I did want more. I just didn't know it yet — not until the demo converted me.



Sorry detractors: Valve knows exactly what it's doing.

Left 4 Dead 2 is a more sophisticated game than Left 4 Dead. It might not be revolutionary by any stretch of the word, but it's evolutionary within the confines of Left 4 Dead's genetic makeup. There's a deeper story, more clever humor and arguably better survivors (in particular: Ellis, the hilarious and lovable grease monkey) piled on top of superior weaponry, longer campaign chapters and bigger finales. In the past, a sequel merely evolving from its predecessor was bad. Gamers expected revolutionary changes between games in a series. But Valve proves with Left 4 Dead 2 that the wheel doesn't need to be reinvented; it just has to be rolled in different ways.

Did you think the first game's look was too dark, drab or uninteresting? Now you can bask in the Cajun sun while bathed in blood. The daylight maps, set in the southern United States, are gorgeous. Trees now look like trees, and the new infected skin textures are eerily cool. According to the developer commentary track, the art team used image maps of potato skins to make zombies look even less human —

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ten games.

*I was particularly thrilled when we all arrived at the same choice for #1 last year. Will that happen again in 2010? Probably not; my tastes in games have veered so far off the charts that I'm probably going to end up playing the wild card this year and meaning it. I guess we'll just have to wait and see; 2011's right around the corner, after all. — Nick Cummings*

how awesome is that? From nature: zombification.

The greatest asset of *Left 4 Dead 2* is its strategic depth. New special infected, including the Spitter, the Jockey and the Charger, counter the majority of team strategies developed in *Left 4 Dead* — no more corner camping, pals. And the inclusion of uncommon common infected, like the riot gear-armored CEDA agent, add much-needed tactical variety. Armored zombies and their friends (CEDA Hazmat suit infected and swamp-dwelling mudmen infected) demand alterations to your team's tactics mid-firefight; spinning the CEDA agent around with a melee hit to blast his spinal cord is a tiny and hectic diversion. And speaking of melee combat: it will now forever be a staple of the *Left 4 Dead* franchise. The variety of weapons — axes, katanas, electric guitars, clubs, bats and chainsaws among others — dramatically enhance the campaign experience for you and your friends. How can you not laugh when your teammate charges into a horde of enemies with a chainsaw, ripping each one limb from limb thanks to the advanced dismemberment physics?

Hands-down, this is one of the best videogame sequels of any year, past or present. While I've previously complained about getting "more of the same" from games, Valve's talent knows how to keep a solid core concept alive (or is that undead?) while creating an overall worthier title...in the space of a single year. Valve's now making me look paradoxical. — *Aaron Thayer*

## #9. Flower

*February — PlayStation Network*

In some ways, I'd be tempted to proclaim *Flower* the game of the decade because it is such a pure experience.

While first-person shooters, violent role-playing games and action-adventure series continue to dominate the sales charts, *Flower* is stalwart in its defiance of consumer expectations. Here is a game devoid of words and delineated objectives, lacking in familiar archetypes and control




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*A massive amount of work was put into our first Game of the Year series, and that's why I consider it to be the finest thing we've ever done for the blog.*

*Never have I had a more enjoyable writing experience than the hours of group work it took to put this idea together, from the graphics (which I did a mighty fine job on if I do say so myself) to the friendly debates necessary for ranking our Top 10 titles. It wasn't an easy process, but it all paid off. This is perhaps the closest I've gotten to doing a "real" videogame publication piece, and I can't wait to do it again for 2010 and beyond.* — *Aaron Thayer*

schemes — and yet it speaks louder and more clearly to its audience than just about any other game on the market. Vibrant colors, picturesque landscapes and lush, dynamic music work collaboratively to express a story through emotions and impressions. But high-quality artwork and music are no strangers to the indie gaming scene, as last year's *Braid* demonstrated, and *Flower* would not have been nearly as significant as it is had it not captured the breathtaking sensation of flight so perfectly.

By simply tilting the controller and pressing a single button, the player can guide a stream of flower petals to soar through the air effortlessly. It's a surprisingly intuitive process, and the sensation of flight is almost tactile. Many people are no stranger to flying an F-16 or an X-Wing in a videogame, but those experiences detach the player from the sensation of movement. *Flower* sucks you in with a masterful grace, and before long you'll be soaring above fields and canyons just to savor the feeling of flying.

*Flower* could be considered many things: a passionate defense of environmentalism; a testament to the power and scope of downloadable games; or even just a proof-of-concept for Sony's maligned Sixaxis motion controller. But it is without question a beautiful, stirring work of art, and it handily demonstrates just how powerful the videogame medium can be. — *Nick Cummings*

## #8. Forza Motorsport 3

*October — Xbox 360*

*Forza Motorsport 3* is a game that succeeds in numerous ways. It's a graphical tour-de-force, especially in the cinematic replay mode, and it continues to impress when driving from the cockpit view of any of the game's massive variety of cars.

*Forza 3* also has a wonderful suite of driver assists that make the game palatable to racing simulator newcomers, while retaining the series' complex vehicle physics for the purists. Simply put, there have never been this many ways to personalize your car collection in a console racer.

As was mentioned in our review of the game, other console driving simulators can't reach *Forza 3*'s level of accessibility. From the single-player career structure to running a private and customized online race, *Forza 3* benefits from the lessons *Turn 10* learned over the course of its first two games. Add to that a healthy storefront offering a wide variety of designs, custom logos, photos and replays created by



the Forza community, and there's plenty available for gamers besides turning in laps.

But it'd all be worthless if the gameplay was sub-par. However, with a rock-solid framerate and physics engine that, yes, puts *Gran Turismo* to shame, there's plenty to love about the art of driving in *Forza 3*. — *Doug Bonham*

## #7. **New Super Mario Bros. Wii**

*November — Wii*

Some might say it was a long time coming; others may denounce it as heresy. But for the first time since 1983, you and your friends can gather 'round to play a Mario game cooperatively.

Twenty-six years is a long time for a series to go between cooperative installments, particularly for what may as well be considered the most famous videogame franchise in history. But once you sit down with a couple of friends and a copy of *New Super Mario Bros. Wii*, you'll quickly understand why Nintendo waited so long. Featuring rich, colorful sprites, expressive characters and cheerful, uptempo music, *New Super Mario Bros. Wii* looks and plays just like the classics. Any longtime Mario fan will delight at the series' trademark clever and varied level design.

But the game really shines when you throw some friends into the mix and you let the game's unique "co-operative/competitive" multiplayer experience take hold. Is your friend having trouble crossing a series of chasms? Pick her up and carry her across. Conversely, let's say your boyfriend is a jerk who runs off and grabs all the 1ups before anyone else can get to them. Why not just pick him up and throw him into the nearest chasm and grab it for yourself? Alliances




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*This project took so much time and debate to bring it all together. I don't remember how long our Skype-powered discussion about the top 10 ended up, but I do remember it taking a very long time. While there was a decent amount of time spent discussing the games for the list, there was almost as much — if not more — time spent deciding the order of that top 10. I feel we wanted to be representative of the year in gaming, as well as our tastes and what we as a group value in gaming. Moreover, the time spent organizing, writing and designing graphics for the features brought us together as a group and saw us firing on all cylinders. A brilliant time.*

*As for our choice of #1, in the form of *Batman: Arkham Asylum*: what an amazing game. It was pretty much the unanimous choice of the crew and a great example of a game coming out of left field and surprising with its quality, design, and polish. As we write this book in October 2010, we're having a hard time finding such a clarion bell of a game for this year's list. — *Doug Bonham**



can develop just as quickly as they disintegrate, just like a game of Munchkin, and the experience — provided your friendship/relationship/marriage can survive it — is an absolute blast.

The game's detractors bemoaned the lack of an online multiplayer mode, but I see its absence as a blessing. Who wants to play a Mario game with four faceless, voiceless players? People like me grew up playing Mario games with friends and family, and that's still the series' greatest strength. The only difference is that this time around, Nintendo was able to let four people get in on the fun at one time. So dust off that Wii, invite some friends over (remember how you used to do that before Xbox Live came along?) and have a blast rediscovering why Mario's still the best at what he does. Just beware that when that struggle for a power-up goes sour, what he does isn't always very nice. — *Nick Cummings*

## #6. Grand Theft Auto: Episodes From Liberty City

*October — Xbox 360*

If I had to pick a trend that truly defined gaming in 2009, it'd be that this year developers finally learned how to do console DLC right. The *Lost & Damned* and *The Ballad of Gay Tony* are the best examples of how to create a quality content distribution model gamers can get behind.

So it's bittersweet then that both episodes are Xbox 360 exclusives, and the DLC packs haven't met Take-Two's sales expectations for the Grand Theft Auto franchise.

Business aside, the episodes succeed because they encapsulate what Rockstar set out to do with *Grand Theft Auto IV* in the first place. The *Lost & Damned* and *The Ballad of Gay Tony* are rich with interesting characters who are much more empathetic and believable than *GTA IV*'s parade of stereotypes. By focusing on specific regions of Liberty City — Alderney in *TLaD* and Algonquin in *TBoGT* — Rockstar can support a more interesting and intimate atmosphere than the base game was capable of offering.

It's Rockstar's newfound insistence on developing the narrative without resorting to a slew of cutscenes to do the dirty work that make these two titles stand out. Characterization occurs in real time throughout the episodes, compared to the slow-paced plot direction of *GTA IV*. Johnny Klebitz and Luis Lopez are adequate enough avatars, but it's these protagonists' relationships with Liberty City's denizens that polish their individual stories to a glossy shine. Specifically:



the quasi-father/son relationship between Luis and his employer, the titular “Gay Tony” Prince, is possibly one of the most realistic and compelling relationships I’ve ever witnessed in a game. Be it Tony’s neurosis or Luis’ unwavering dedication to a friend that he loves, it all comes off as plausible.

Even the mission structure finally began to work in conjunction with the story development in each episode, resulting in a lot less plot filler. And although the episodes do things different, each expansion maintains the classic Grand Theft Auto element of freedom by providing excellent side-missions — turf defending, drug running and triathlon racing (i.e., parachute to a boat then drive to shore, and then race a car to the finish) are great distractions.

The chief complaint leveled against GTA IV was its abandonment of Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas’ ridiculous nature. Luckily the episodes backpedal a bit toward the fun side of living a delinquent lifestyle in a fictitious parallel of New York City, especially TBoGT. GTA is not as serious as *The Wire*, nor should it try to be. I’m thrilled to fly a solid gold helicopter to steal diamonds for my boss, and I accept that it makes sense in the context of the over-the-top storyline.

Collectively, Episodes from Liberty City restored my lost faith in the Grand Theft Auto franchise after GTA IV. I can only hope Rockstar won’t forget the advances the team made in the DLC for its future releases. Now please excuse me while I make Luis go dance the “Bus Stop” once more. — *Tyler Martin*

## #5. Plants vs. Zombies

May — *Windows, Mac, iPhone*

Leave it to PopCap to take an established gaming archetype, rebuild it from scratch, pack it to the brim with charm and personality and put the rest of its competition to shame. *Plants vs. Zombies* is PopCap’s most ambitious game to date because it takes the company into uncharted territory: the realm of the hardcore gamer.



The tower defense genre has seen countless iterations on virtually every platform imaginable — including some real stand-outs like *Defense Grid: The Awakening* and *Fieldrunners* — but the majority of these games are directed at the sort of person who’s spent plenty of time with games that require deep, intense strategy and management of resources and statistics.

There was never any doubt that PopCap, based on pedigree alone, could succeed in translating tower defense to a more casual audience.

But what makes *Plants vs. Zombies* remarkable is how it appeals to even the most dedicated (dare I say obsessive?) gamer. For \$20 (or \$10 on Steam), *Plants vs. Zombies* provides a lengthy adventure mode that is designed to bring anybody up to speed on the basics of tower defense: what to build, when to build it, and how to control resources. But the real meat of the game lies in its dozens of minigames, challenges and survival modes, which all add up to dozens of hours of entertainment. (Want proof? Check my Steam profile. Just...please don't judge me.)

Aside from its rock-solid design, *Plants vs. Zombies* is bursting at the seams with inspiration. Each member of the full zombie menagerie is endearingly drawn and animated; likewise, your army of plants is cute and charming, even when mowing down hundreds of the encroaching undead. And it would be a shame to ignore the *Suburban Almanac* — your guide to surviving the trials of a zombified neighborhood — which is an impeccably written series of anecdotes, each with a razor-sharp wit.

*Plants vs. Zombies* has everything you could want in a downloadable game: accessible gameplay for newcomers, a significant challenge for veteran tower defenders, and a downright endearing music video to cap things off. Don't miss it. — *Nick Cummings*

#### #4. *Dragon Age: Origins*

*November — Windows, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3*

*Dragon Age: Origins* is an achievement in storytelling, characterization and scene-setting. You could invest hundreds of hours in the war-torn land of Ferelden and it's still doubtful you'll see everything by the time the credits roll.



The game's staggering depth hides beneath a simple facade crafted by a lackluster advertising campaign. To most, *Dragon Age* looks just like another fantasy role playing game with gushing blood and exaggerated breasts. But with a bit of patience on the player's part, it doesn't take long to realize the tacky image splashed across magazine pages and Internet banner ads is merely a trick employed by BioWare to appeal to a wider audience, an audience that has never played "one of them Final Quest 7 RPG things" (an actual quote from a gamer friend of mine). Veterans of the genre as well as past BioWare titles (specifically *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*; *Dragon Age* pays great homage to both) will delight in the overwhelming number of activities to engage in, but I

have to wonder if BioWare's new intellectual property will be appreciated by that elusive wider audience.

Dragon Age is one of the best games of 2009 because its entire package, from the most complicated twist to the tiniest minutiae, is enthralling. Every aspect works in concert to make the player feel fulfilled by his or her decisions; be it the characters with their perfectly voiced lines of dialogue or the rich, well-crafted history of Ferelden, the presentation is amazing.

And yes, the good vs. evil world of Elves and Dwarves is just another realization of the Tolkien fantasy formula – and Dragon Age does border on cliché at times – but the overall project is an example of how to effectively use the videogame medium to provide complex and individualized experiences for the user. As much as games are becoming more and more cinematic, movies are incapable of Dragon Age's level of diversity. My ending will not be the same as yours, or your friend's, or anyone's. Tiny aspects, such as helping an Elf with his lovesick heart, matter just as much as bigger ones, like saving the imprisoned foreigner accused of murder. Each action can splinter into multiple different outcomes. When I ask friends about their Dragon Age experiences, they continue to inform me of fairly large events that I never saw, and I played the game for more than 50 hours!

BioWare built its reputation on top-tier role-playing games, and Dragon Age: Origins – its latest in-house franchise — lifts the developer to dizzying new heights. — *Aaron Thayer*

### #3. The Beatles: Rock Band

*September — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii*

For me, Rock Band is like the music appreciation course I never took in college. Since the platform debuted two years ago, I've played countless songs by hundreds of artists that I would have never thought to pay any attention to in the first place.

And thanks to the series' sleek visuals, strong design principles and reverence for the music it provides, Rock Band has always been held in high regard.

So when we say that The Beatles: Rock Band easily surpasses any other music game in its quality of presentation and dedication to its source material, that's no small feat. After all, this is the first time The Beatles' music has ever been licensed for a digital platform — a miracle in itself, considering how mired iTunes' talks have been.

No doubt recognizing the weight of having such an important



license on its hands, Harmonix pulled out all the stops in *The Beatles: Rock Band*. A stunning series of hand-drawn and computer-animated cutscenes pepper the duration of the experience, including an unforgettable conclusion. Who'd have imagined one of the best endings in a game this year would be in a music game?

Featuring a soundtrack by one of the best acts in musical history and tried-and-true mechanics that your little brother and grandmother can both pick up on, *The Beatles: Rock Band* is perhaps the easiest game of 2009 to recommend to anybody. And even if you don't count yourself among the legions of Beatles fans, you're guaranteed to at least develop an appreciation for the immeasurable contribution the Fab Four made to modern music. — *Nick Cummings*

## #2. *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*

*October — PlayStation 3*

*Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* might have earned a spot on our list just for being the most visually stunning game of the year. It also deserves high praise for being one of the most improved sequels of this console generation. Or we could have recognized it for its excellent competitive and cooperative online components that rival the biggest games on the market.



Those are all major reasons for why we chose *Uncharted 2* as the second-best game of the 2009, but it wouldn't have cemented itself so near the top of our list without its ineffable charm. Spend just a few minutes with treasure hunter Nathan Drake and his ragtag ensemble and you'll realize just how likable videogame characters can be.

*Uncharted 2* is the videogame equivalent of a Hollywood blockbuster that does everything right: huge explosions, breathtaking scenery, expert pacing, a haunting score and a motley crew of antiheroes that you're all but guaranteed to love. It all adds up to a memorable, exhilarating adventure that's without a doubt one of the best experiences to be had in gaming. — *Nick Cummings*

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*We now present to you, as determined by unanimous vote,  
the best game of 2009.*

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## #1. **Batman: Arkham Asylum**

*August — Windows, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3*

There has never been a better superhero game than *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. Agreed? Great. Let's go a step further now: *Arkham Asylum* was the single greatest game released in 2009.

Surprised? We were too.

Out of the pitch-black abyss known as videogame development comes a blazing inferno of genius from Rocksteady Studios, an unknown developer with some kind of hidden power (like a Pokémon, or a Dragon Ball character) to shame the accomplishments of more established developers' games featuring spandex-wearing protagonists. *Arkham Asylum* succeeds where so many other similar games failed, and we don't just mean other Batman titles (of which there are many, many bad ones).

It would be easy to toss Rocksteady's title the trophy for Game of the Year just because it's the greatest Batman game ever, but that's being short-sighted. *Arkham Asylum* instead deserves the honor because it feverishly respects its source material while openly embracing the strengths of the other forms of media Batman has been in during the franchise's 70-plus years of pop culture history.

*Batman: Arkham Asylum* is fantastic on so many levels that it's a difficult assignment to condense its strengths into a limited framework. I say that not to entice pity, but to be entirely truthful in my desire to write another 2,300-word review about the Batman experience. It's that good.

Could it be the graphics that make it work? Those help, sure, but that's not where the heart of the game is. The core of the *Arkham Asylum* experience comes to life via the mechanisms required to control Batman as a stealthy martial artist in complete control of his

environment. Detective Mode is pure Batman, and it influences the decisions of the player both in and out of combat. Batman's gadgets are another well-implemented aspect of the character, and each is utilized wonderfully during the game.

Never before has inhabiting the world of a superhero translated so flawlessly from the screen to the player. Combat is absolutely mind-blowing. Who knew that the clumsy button-mashing mechanic favored in other action titles could be refined into a fulfilling gameplay feature? Fighting as Batman is both fluid and logical: any mistakes aren't the game's fault — they're the player's, and it's easy to learn from those errors. I've always struggled with other action titles, specifically *God of War*, because I felt obligated to perform perfect combos to be more like Kratos — unfortunately I used the same few attacks in excess because the game never rewarded me for doing otherwise. Conversely, *Arkham Asylum* is revolutionary for its dismantling of the digital platitudes of action game combat. Rocksteady chose to make combat an event that can be adapted to as newer, more dangerous problems arise. So instead of relying on reflexes and twitch gameplay to provide an exciting fighting sequence, *Arkham Asylum* educates its players about prioritized incapacitation. Each time I fought one of the Joker's goons, I believed I was controlling a seasoned martial artist who thinks on his feet as a battle situation changes.

In regards to the presentation, Rocksteady's translation of Batman to a videogame looks painfully easy. *Arkham Asylum* just can't help but impress with its loving attention to detail. This is the Dark Knight alive in a way that putting a living human in a rubber suit can't fully accomplish. Seeing and feeling the weight of Bruce Wayne in his suit as he glides through the air was remarkable — the first time I saw it in motion it brought a smile to my face. Smaller details like the tearing of Batman's suit during his night in *Arkham* bring a real-time feel to the experiences of Batman. Think of how the character has been portrayed before — as a disjointed assembly of specific moments and actions. In the films Batman is only shown during the most important elements of the plot, sometimes months after the last major event (i.e., Bruce Wayne's training with Ra's al Ghul then his arrival in Gotham in *Batman Begins*). In the comics, narratives are moved along with "Meanwhile..." types of editorial devices to utilize page space economically. But in *Arkham Asylum*, everything is happening to Batman as the player sees it — like when I watched Batman's cape rip in real time. For the first time the character seems both plausible and, more importantly, human.

This game is the future of the superhero software genre, and other developers can learn a lot from it. *Arkham Asylum* tells us that comic fans don't just want 3D models of their 2D favorites: they want to

feel the world of the characters, to understand in some way what it's like to be those heroes. No one watching the movies or reading the comics will feel like they're Batman, but playing Arkham Asylum actually enables the player to become the Dark Knight...if it wasn't for their lack of billions of dollars and a loving British butler.

In the year 2009 there were almost too many good titles released, and many that could sit comfortably at the top of our list. That being said, our hats go off to Rocksteady for believing in its work and the medium, and releasing a title that doesn't settle for less than perfection.

Batman: Arkham Asylum is our 2009 Game of the Year because it's fun, intelligent and groundbreaking in a way that surprised all of us here at Silicon Sasquatch. Who would have thought that a superhero title could do so well for itself?

In this case, we're thrilled to have our skepticism batarang-ed into optimism. — *Aaron Thayer* ■





December 28th-31st, 2009

# Silicon Sasquatch's Honorable Mentions of 2009

In which we each take a stand for our weird and unloved personal favorites that couldn't garner a consensus.

*By the Silicon Sasquatch Staff and Contributors*

*While our Top 10 Games of 2009 deserve attention for their overall excellence, we can't neglect this year's remaining deluge of fantastic games — titles that just missed the final cut. Be it their charm, gameplay or presentation, our Honorable Mentions were simply hard to forget.*

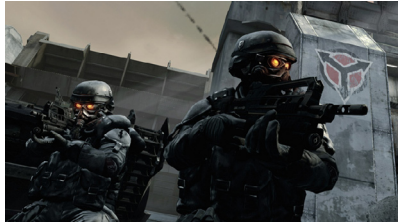
*We now present our series of Honorable Mentions articles, one from each member of the Silicon Sasquatch staff.*

## Tyler's picks

### Killzone 2

*February — PlayStation 3*

First-quarter releases — even high-quality ones — often end up forgotten when it comes time for game-of-the-year discussions. While *Killzone 2* wasn't necessarily the best first-person shooter released in 2009, it did a lot to make up for the disappointments of *Killzone 1*. It also proved to the games industry that Guerrilla Games is the powerhouse developer it had long been claimed to be.



The Dutch studio had a lot to live up to from the time when the stunning *Killzone 2* target video was premiered at E3 in 2005, and the amazing feat is that they by-and-large did it. If 2009 is remembered as the true “Year of the PS3,” *Killzone 2* will be recognized as the title that kicked it off with a bang.

### Half-Minute Hero

*October — PlayStation Portable*

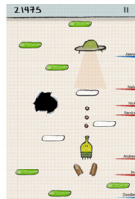
PlayStation 3 wasn't the only Sony platform with a dramatically improved catalog in 2009 — the PlayStation Portable also saw a resurgence of quality titles. *Half-Minute Hero* understands the limitations of being a portable title by offering bite-sized, addictive chunks of entertainment while turning the Japanese role-playing game genre on its head. Fast yet entertaining design and well written, humorous dialogue are what make this the must-have portable experience of 2009...



### Doodle Jump & Drop7

*iPhone & iPod Touch*

...unless you count the App Store. Apple was dragged into the gaming space kicking and screaming, but it didn't take long for the iTunes App Store to become flooded with games for the iPhone & iPod Touch. However, 2009 saw



the emergence of a new style of games that perfectly understood the limitations of the platform.

Doodle Jump and Drop7, my two most played iPhone games of 2009, represent my favorite style of games for the platform: They're easy to learn yet highly enjoyable games that can be played whenever you've got a few minutes to spare. Nothing makes waiting in line more bearable like trying to beat your friend's high score on Doodle Jump — and tweeting about it when you do.

### **Assassin's Creed II**

*November — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3*

I finished the latest branch in Desmond's family tree relatively recently but it made a big impact on me. Easily one of the most dramatically improved sequels of the year (and that's coming from a fan of *Altair*), *Assassin's Creed II* packed in excellent missions, more freedom for the player and an overall increase in content.



The title also boasted some of the best voice acting of the year and one of the most memorable open world environments ever seen in games with its brilliant realization of 15th Century Venice. Despite how well put together the campaign was, what I find myself thinking about the most is the absolute trip of an ending that trumps its predecessor's conclusion in nearly every possible way. The third chapter of Ubisoft's war of assassins & templars has leapt to the top of my list of most anticipated unannounced (yet inevitable) sequels. A presto, Ezio. — *Tyler Martin*

### **Spencer's picks**

Though our top ten is a sturdy list of the year's finest titles, we each had some favorites fall through the cracks. Here, then, are my preferred runners-up.

#### **Red Faction: Guerrilla and Brütal Legend**

*June — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Windows | Rocktober — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3*

*Brütal Legend* and *Red Faction: Guerrilla* are shoo-ins, the former being a flawed but ulti-



*Alec Mason (left) wields an ostrich as a sledgehammer while Eddie Riggs holds his beloved guitar, Clementine*

mately fun strategy/adventure title, the latter a shallow but supremely enjoyable shooter with great physics and solid multiplayer. Both are worth playing, especially considering they'll probably hit the \$20-30 price range soon.

### **Gratuitous Space Battles**

*November — Windows*

Gratuitous Space Battles merits a nod from me; part tower defense, part Masters of Orion, it's a great ship-building hands-off strategy title, though people new to the genre might find it a bit daunting. I recommend it, if only for the type of nerd who loves to individually name each of his ships and watch gratuitous lasers and explosions slowly consume the screen. (This may or may not include me.)



*The name really does say it all.*

### **Sins of a Solar Empire: Entrenchment**

*February — Windows*

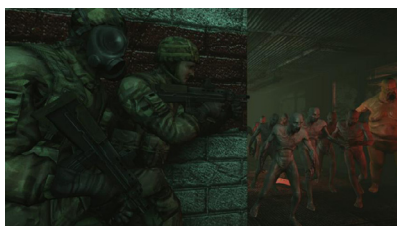
In the vein of games for huge nerds, I can't speak highly enough of the first micro-expansion to Sins of a Solar Empire; Entrenchment. Ironclad's latest added defensive mechanics and tech trees to the already solid RTS/4x hybrid – not necessary, per se, but welcome additions nevertheless. The second micro-expansion, Diplomacy, is due out this year, but the original and Entrenchment are very worth picking up in the interim for the strategy nuts in the crowd.



### **Killing Floor**

*May — Windows*

While Left 4 Dead and its sequel were setting the standard for zombie apocalypse simulations, Tripwire was busy ignoring them both while releasing Killing Floor. Where the former titles are teamwork-oriented and story-driven in their portrayal of the infection, the latter is a gore-



filled zombstomp – less about getting from point A to point B and more about taking down as many zeds as possible in post-apocalypse Britain. Freaky English voodoo-thrash-electronica accompanies the action flawlessly.

### **Team Fortress 2**

*October 2007 — Windows (also available on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 as part of The Orange Box — but unfortunately without the Windows version's updates)*

Team Fortress 2 nets my final spot; yes, I'm quite aware it came out two years ago, but Valve's regular updates are packed full with something for everyone; maps, hats, weapons, and even achievements for the recovering gamerscore-junkie. Valve's commitment to TF2 makes it the best team multiplayer experience on the PC, as it has been for two years running. — *Spencer Tordoff*

## **Doug's picks**

### **Retro Game Challenge**

*February — Nintendo DS*

Retro Game Challenge, which I reviewed for the site back in the spring, is a wonderful, nostalgic trip that brings back old-school furnishings and game design with eight complete games in one package. Want a Japanese RPG featuring the familiar and painful difficulty of the 8-bit classics? You got it. Desire a classic shooter with 64-plus levels? Oh, you can have it — frustrating trappings and all. The title's presentation stands out with its inclusion of a number of issues from a fictional video game magazine that chronicle the development and releases of the included games, as well as providing cheats and tips (some of which are absolutely essential). It's pure fan service for hardcore Electronic Gaming Monthly enthusiasts of old.

### **NCAA Football 10 and Madden NFL 10**

*July — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3 | August — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3*

The EA Sports football twins, Madden NFL 10 and NCAA Football 10, play well, look great and have all the yearly updates that football gaming fans want, including features like the debut of an online franchise for Madden and the incredibly deep Team Builder for NCAA. But that's about it. While there are game engine improvements to strengthen the on-field action — especially in regards to playbooks — there's nothing groundbreaking here, folks. However, it's still my preferred kind of gaming candy.

## **Peggle and Flight Control**

*May — iPhone | April — iPhone*

Peggle and Flight Control for the iPhone have saved me from boredom countless times, and both are brilliant examples of how to do gaming on the iPhone.

I look forward to heeding Nick's (and others') advice by hunting the App Store for more bite-sized games during the course of 2010.



## **Brütal Legend**

*Rocktober — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3*

The last of my honorable mentions is a game best described as a beautiful catastrophe. Brütal Legend has probably the best intro video I've seen in a game, in addition to one of the best main menus, and the brilliant metal aesthetic keeps



delivering throughout the whole experience. With great atmosphere, a well-designed world, a funny script, strong voice acting, an amazing soundtrack and awesome rock-tacular cameos...the game that Tim Schafer built seems to have it all. Unfortunately, Brütal Legend falls on its face when it relies on just one gameplay wrinkle way too much. The on-the-ground gameplay is fine, as are the driving and open-world exploration aspects, but the stage battles try to foster an RTS element that simply doesn't work well enough as-is. The game is unique and ambitious, but it flew just a little too close to the sun. — *Doug Bonham*

## **Aaron's picks**

### **The Maw**

*January — Xbox Live Arcade, Windows*

Twisted Pixel Games knows how to have fun with its projects. Instead of filling a crowded gaming market with more of the same, Twisted Pixel created The Maw — a wonderfully original title that made me laugh without needing a single complete sentence of dialog. The Pixar-like scenario of an alien (Frank) teaming up and becoming friends with an insatiably hungry purple blob (Maw) made for a

refreshingly heartfelt downloadable game. Little things like watching Maw express emotions — panic when it was burned, pain when it ate a bad creature and fear when it hid behind Frank — were fantastic visual treats, and demonstrated the development team's knack for working in a cartoon style. While the game's controls and light platforming segments were average, watching Maw grow to the size of a planet by the end made up for the less-impressive aspects. Charm makes all the difference in an industry that has resorted to provoking reactions through gore and realistic graphics.

### **Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II**

*February — Windows*

If it's a real time strategy game, I've more than likely played it. At one time I enjoyed only RTS titles; incessant in my collection of resources and conscription of soldiers, I would double click and hotkey my adolescent nights away. So



I might be a habitual RTS player, but I'm ready to break tradition and openly thank Relic Entertainment for its innovative and decidedly non-traditional Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War II. Instead of micromanaging a base, the game granted intimate control over a squad of four unique (and upgradeable) characters. Dawn of War II is still a strategy-intensive game played in real time, but it feels more like a merger of Relic's light squad mechanics from Company of Heroes with the intensity of a cover shooter like Gears of War. The RTS die-hards and Dawn of War I fans were somewhat upset by the big changes to a tried-and-true genre, but I'll take innovation over stagnation any day.

### **The Secret of Monkey Island: Special Edition**

*July — Xbox Live Arcade, Windows*

It's a good thing I first experienced the Secret of Monkey Island in its Special Edition form. While I'm confident the original would still have captivated me with its self-referential humor and sharp wit, it was simply brilliant to discover such a timeless story intact underneath the drastic makeover. I might not have grown



up playing any of the classic LucasArts adventure titles, but I'm happy the genre is experiencing a period of revival thanks in part to Telltale Games' work on the Sam and Max and Tales of Monkey Island episodes. The Special Edition's updated art was gorgeous, and fit with the series' style in the opinion of a Monkey Island newcomer like me. The numerous jokes, gags and one-liners are relevant 19 years later, and the characters are memorable enough that I hope Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge gets the same fresh coat of paint that Secret did.

## **Battlefield 1943**

*July — Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network*

DICE won't win any awards for shrinking the Battlefield formula into a petite downloadable package, but that doesn't mean 1943 was anything less than a solid summer distraction. The concept of ground, sea and air forces clashing over control



points to keep decreasing the enemy's reinforcements is still the best option for multiplayer chaos. Other games' online deathmatch modes have their limits, so I gladly accepted Battlefield 1943's break from the monotony to laugh maniacally while I flew numerous Japanese Zeros into hapless Sherman tanks. And sure, the game had a meager selection of four maps (which as of this writing are still the only available maps), but at the end of the day I felt my money was well spent. DICE might be guilty of milking its franchises a bit, but it says something about the team's capabilities and the strength of the core Battlefield product that I can continue to purchase the same game indefinitely and have an absolute blast, each and every time.

## **Torchlight**

*October — Windows*

Is it unethical that I decided Torchlight would be one of my honorable mentions long before I even played the full game? Sometimes a demo is all you need, and Torchlight dug itself



into my brain the moment I loaded its trial-sized world. Now that I own the full Torchlight experience, I feel much better about giving it a spot on my list. Call Torchlight Diablo Lite, but don't say it isn't addictive and well-designed. The art direction alone is worth the price



of admission. Diablo may still be the boss in the world of isometric action RPGs, but Torchlight deserves recognition for its lighthearted attempt at being different in a sea of familiarity — and because it proves that, as far as gameplay is concerned, an expanded color palette won't ruin Diablo III. — *Aaron Thayer*

## Nick's picks

There's been an ongoing joke about how I was the only person here who played every single game on our top ten list. While it's a testament to my superhuman persuasive abilities, it also raises some questions about how I spend my time and money. In my defense, this was probably the single best year ever for high-quality games in both the mainstream and the independent scenes.

Below is a list of the few games that couldn't make the list, either because nobody else at Silicon Sasquatch had played them — or because the poor fools didn't know what they were missing.

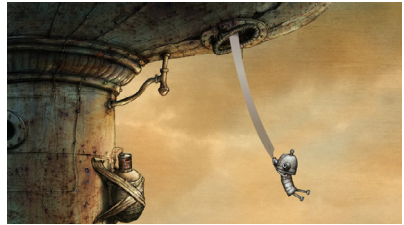
### **Machinarium**

*October — Windows, Mac*

2009 was the best year for adventure games in a very long time. With Telltale dishing out five episodes of a brand-new Monkey Island series and LucasArts providing a lovingly crafted remake of the classic *Secret of Monkey Island*, those of us who dream in dialog trees were pleased as punch with the selection on offer this year. The only downside was that most of the games were mere iterations on old franchises and design principles.

Except for *Machinarium*.

The first full-length game from Czech developer Amanita Design, *Machinarium* is the story of a little robot and his journey to be reunited with his metallic sweetheart. The game stands out from its peers for a number of reasons — such as the beautiful, stylish artwork and great soundtrack — but what's most notable is that it manages to tell a story without a single word. Characters communicate with wild gesticulation and cartoon thought bubbles, adding an immense amount of personality to an already charming world. It's the best adventure game released this year, and it comes with my highest recommendation.



## Street Fighter IV

February — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Windows

I'm what you might call a casual fighting game fan. I know and love the classics like *Street Fighter II Turbo*, *Soul Calibur* and *Marvel vs. Capcom 2*, but I've never invested in the time or hardware to rise to a true competitive level. The amount of manual dexterity, patience and practice required to learn how to use a character's moves wisely is part of a fighting game's enduring value, but for whatever reason it never clicked with me as a fun way to spend my time.



*Street Fighter IV* converted me to the world of the hardcore fighter with its fine-tuned roster of exaggerated personalities and remarkably well-paced learning curve. I started out just playing a few versus rounds with friends and playing a few games against the computer, but over time I began to see hints of just how deeply strategic the game could be. Before I knew it, I was spending hours grinding out the challenge modes to master a few of my favorite fighters. As of this writing, I've played more than 200 online matches and logged a grand total of 43 hours — and that's in a game where a round takes just a few seconds!

## DJ Hero

October — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, PlayStation 2

I'm a pretty fierce critic of *Guitar Hero*, and with good reason: Ever since Harmonix and RedOctane/Activision split ways after *Guitar Hero 2*, the series has failed to even come within reach of its former quality. Iteration after iteration and band-specific spinoff after spinoff, *Guitar Hero* has all but rendered itself irrelevant.



So you can imagine my surprise when a brand-new Hero game showed up this October and it wound up being excellent. FreeStyleGames managed to launch a new music franchise with all the right ingredients: an excellent soundtrack, a solid and rewarding learning curve and a sturdy, enjoyable turntable controller. The only thing lacking was a more robust interface to help organize gigs and add

some weight to the single-player experience. But with a sequel almost certainly on the way, I'm certain FreeStyleGames has great things in the works.

The only downside? Having "Poison" by Bell Biv DeVoe permanently lodged in my brain. Actually, maybe that's not such a bad thing.

## **Assassin's Creed 2**

*November — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3*

It's a shame we couldn't squeeze Assassin's Creed II into our top ten list. Although I was a huge fan of the original Assassin's Creed, its repetitive mechanics and somewhat stunted narrative didn't appeal to everyone. Fortunately, Ubisoft Montreal did the impossible by addressing just about every complaint that was leveled against its predecessor and producing a sequel that appealed both to fans and detractors of the original game.



I rarely take the time to complete 100% of the tasks available in a game anymore, but with its breathtaking, living cities and excellent pacing — a rarity in games with open worlds — I was compelled to find every last feather and treasure box within Renaissance Italy. Fortunately, with more downloadable content on the way, I won't have to hang up my white cloak and daggers just yet.

## **Rock Band 2**

*September...of 2008 — Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, PlayStation 2*

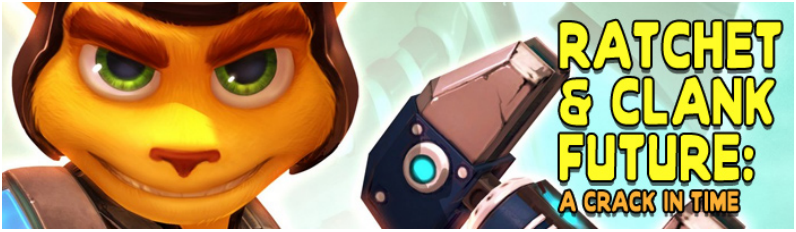
Just so we're clear: Rock Band 2 came out in September of 2008. As in, it's not a game from this year, and it technically has no business being on this list. But thanks to exceptional downloadable song support throughout the year and a patch that offered a number of significant improvements to the core experience, Rock Band 2 was the rare game that only got better with age. And with Rock Band Network launching in just a few weeks, the floodgates show no signs of closing. Based on my experiences participating in the closed Rock Band Network beta, there are a lot of interesting songs in the pipeline that are being peer reviewed and polished to the point where most are indistinguishable in quality from the weekly releases Harmonix has been putting out. It was easily my most-played game of 2009, and it's all but guaranteed to dominate my living room in 2010.

And to round out the list, I've included a few games that may not have much enduring value but stand out for providing some truly exceptional moments:

**Widosill** — discovering just how much fun a game can be when the player is encouraged to stop and smell the roses

**Bejeweled Blitz** — competing in weekly tournaments against friends in sixty-second bursts makes it easily the most addictive experience of the year

**Red Faction: Guerrilla** — demolishing an entire military-industrial institution with a single sledgehammer — *Nick Cummings* ■



February 10th, 2010

# Guest Review: Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time

Tyler's first review contribution covers the last chapter in Insomniac's cult favorite series. *By Tyler Martin*

Sony came back in a big way in 2009. The PlayStation 3 had an unmatched first-party line up of titles that included Killzone 2, Infamous and Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time. While the console's most successful title was Game of the Year award winner Uncharted 2: Among Thieves, the latest Ratchet & Clank was no slouch. If it wasn't for Nathan Drake's amazing sophomore adventure, A Crack in Time would have been the exclusive selling point for the platform last year.

Insomniac Games' sixth Ratchet & Clank title, and third on the PS3, is a rarity. Platformers are an endangered species in this genera-

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*This was not a difficult review for me to write. I've been a fan of Insomniac since the original Spyro the Dragon and have played (and enjoyed) each of their games since, granted to varying degrees. I still to this day haven't found a copy of the early PS1 title Disruptor to try but to be fair, I haven't been trying very hard. I'll make no excuses: I'm a fanboy for the developer. The amount of quality titles they've put out in the span of time they've released them in is almost unheard of in the games industry, let alone from a single developer.*

*The guys here at Silicon Sasquatch may have known I was playing 'A Crack in Time'. I'd picked it up at launch and had been having a blast but they never asked me to write a review.*



*The Galaxy's worst superhero, Captain Qwark, returns as the primary source of comic relief*

tion of consoles, and high-quality ones are even more difficult to find — especially in HD. In an age where *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* was the best-selling game of 2009 and made \$1 billion dollars as a result, it's a relief to see a high-budget title that you won't have to turn off when the kids are around. The sci-fi epic is notable for being one of the most humorous and quality family friendly titles in some time. Good writing and voice acting have only recently been prioritized in major titles, and the writers and voice actors in *A Crack in Time* do a great job of being engaging and witty without ever talking down to the audience or going over anyone's head. And fortunately, the story is never sacrificed for humor.

Similar to the recently released *Mass Effect 2*, *A Crack in Time* has plot callbacks that are recognizable to fans but not distracting to newcomers; typically they are brief yet humorous mentions of previous *Ratchet* co-stars and their current whereabouts in the R&C universe. We also get a few peeks at the backstage antics of the series' comic relief character, Captain Qwark. One of the game's highlights is the weaponized bodyguard Mr. Zurkon, who utters lines of typical action movie bravado. After picking up health, the hovering robot will exclaim, "Ha! Mr. Zurkon requires no nanotech to survive! Mr. Zurkon lives on fear!"

*A Crack in Time's* story doesn't punish those new to the franchise

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*Once I had finished the game the only thing I could think about was going back to pick up whatever trophies I had remaining. I'm not completely sure but this may have my first Platinum Trophy on PSN (the Sony equivalent of Xbox's S-ranking in cheevo-speak). Once I 100%ed the game, the only think I could think of was heading to the mountaintop and letting the people know.*



Site editor Aaron Thayer attempts to restrain Tyler after edits to his first draft

thanks to a brief prologue that acts as a story recap, narrated by the aforementioned Captain Qwark. The plot is surprisingly deep for the franchise, dealing with time travel in ways I'd sooner expect from an episode of *Lost*. However, the more complex story is unnecessary: Unlike other games that sacrifice their design for some semblance of realism, *A Crack in Time* doesn't need to rationalize its experience with a better storyline because such things aren't crucial to the game's earnest, simple fun. There's no sense to be applied to the level design, no explanation for why there are ammo crates strewn about, no reason why platforms are hovering where they are and no cause for a quest-giver to choose that one quest's location. The only explanation for these design choices is because they make the game more fun, and thus won't distract from the player's enjoyment. *A Crack in Time*'s level design is so highly polished that it's difficult to think twice as to the whys of what you're doing, because the whats are so much fun.

Ratchet & Clank's gameplay has always hinged on its arsenal, and *A Crack in Time* is no exception. New to the series are three "Constructo-Mod" weapons that can be altered significantly with mods found in the environment. Unfortunately most of the weapons aren't exactly original, consisting of variations on series staples such as the Groovitron (a disco ball that inspires your enemies to dance instead of fight). Though to Insomniac's credit, the weapon roster is extremely balanced. The amount of experience gained from combat has been perfected in

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*Reading the review now, I seem positively glowing about the game, but I don't think I was overly enamored. Thinking about the game now, I only wish there was more content – something else for me to go back to. I have nothing but fond memories of playing the game and wish everyone with a PS3 would give it a shot. Now if only Nick would stop asking me if he should get it now that it's a \$29.99 'Greatest Hit' and just play the game! — Tyler Martin*



*Clank uses recordings of previous actions to solve A Crack in Time's new, and complex, puzzles*

A Crack in Time, and you'll likely finish leveling your last weapon during the final battle.

In another addition to the series, Clank has been given his own time-based puzzle segments à la a three-dimensional Braid. Clank's puzzles are the most original aspects of A Crack in Time, and the most enjoyable. Some of the later challenge rooms are the best time I've had solving puzzles in a current-gen game since Portal. They force you to constantly keep track of which actions your Clank doppelgängers are carrying out. Clank's sections are exceptional because they test a player's abilities beyond combat and navigation, and I hope to see more of Clank's challenge rooms if Insomniac puts out any DLC for the game.

What's most remarkable about A Crack in Time is how so many different pieces manage to fit together without any of them feeling out of place. The classic Ratchet gameplay is streamlined so well that it'll be difficult for Insomniac to develop another title without some sort of reinvention of the franchise to avoid feeling derivative, if another game is even made. There's been speculation this may be Insomniac's last venture into the Ratchet & Clank universe. If A Crack in Time truly is the swan song for the Lombax and his robot companion, the pair are definitely going out on a high note.

Fifteen years ago, Pixar's Toy Story lead the way in computer-generated animation, and the question on many gamers' minds afterward was: "When will games look as good as this?" A Crack in Time is undoubtedly the closest videogame yet to meeting that lofty goal. The gameplay animation is stunningly smooth, running at a constant 60 frames per second. The cutscenes are also some of the best I've ever



seen, and are completely devoid of the compression issues common in other games this generation (likely thanks to the additional storage of a Blu-ray disc). The opening scene alone, which shows off The Great Clock environment, is amazing. And while the animated 3D smoothness of *A Crack in Time* is impressive, my favorite cutscenes were, ironically, the 2D GrummelNet intro videos for each of the weapons you acquire. If you've never played a *Ratchet & Clank* title, there isn't a better place to start than *A Crack in Time*; It's the apex of the series' art design, storytelling and gameplay.

Gamers have been looking forward to Sony's comeback since the launch of the PlayStation 3 and the rocky road that followed. Last year was a return to form for the company's PlayStation line, driven by the streamlined PS3 Slim, and a robust software library. In particular, *Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time* stands out for maintaining the best elements of a dated genre while innovating in ways few could have expected, or even paid attention to. ■

*Ratchet & Clank Future: A Crack in Time was developed by Insomniac Games and published by Sony Computer Entertainment of America. The game is available for a suggested retail price of \$59.99 exclusively on the PlayStation 3. The reviewer purchased the game himself, and played the campaign to completion twice before writing this review.*

### **Recommended for:**

- Gamers starved for solid platformers
- Anyone looking for a deep, family-friendly title
- Those who need to justify their PS3 ownership beyond *Uncharted 2* and Blu-rays
- You liked the idea of *Blinx: The Time Sweeper*...just not how it played

### **Not Recommended for:**

- You just can't get enough of those bald space marines
- Anyone looking for significantly new weapons to the R&C series
- People interested in online multiplayer
- You actually enjoyed the gameplay of *Blinx: The Time Sweeper*



*February 13th, 2010*

# About an Adult Swim Flash Game: Robot Unicorn Attack

Good luck making it through this article without getting that song stuck in your head. *By Aaron Thayer*

What is a “game” but an alchemist’s mixture of disparate concepts that by themselves don’t mean much, yet somehow make sense as a whole when paired accordingly?

Gears of War’s cover mechanic has no use in a two-dimensional fighter. A licensed Barbie title (maybe) doesn’t need Castlevania’s map system. And – obviously – Guitar Hero’s flurry of scrolling musical notes and reliance on plastic peripherals would never make sense as a musical zombie shooter starring, let’s say, Neil Patrick Harris and Felicia Day.

So where does that leave Adult Swim’s latest attempt at destroying

workplace productivity? Robot Unicorn Attack, developed by Flash game creator and the one-man band at developer Spiritonin, Scott Stoddard, takes two seemingly opposite concepts — a looping ethereal audio track and the get-as-far-as-you-can gameplay of Canabalt — and mashes them into a fabulous union. The title implies certain gameplay elements, among other things (like some unicorns are, in actuality, robots), but I doubt you expected it to feature licensed music. Oh, it does. And it's offensively wonderful.

The song: "Always," from the still-active Euro synthpop group Erasure. The music video for the electronic ballad deals with the troubling theme of loss set amongst a backdrop of hypothermic kabuki demons, elements that unfortunately aren't replicated in the Flash game. Here are the lyrics:

<i>Open your eyes I see</i>	<i>And live in harmony, har-</i>
<i>Your eyes are open</i>	<i>mony oh love</i>
<i>Wear no disguise for me</i>	
<i>Come into the open</i>	<i>Melting the ice for me</i>
	<i>Jump into the ocean</i>
<i>When it's cold outside</i>	<i>Hold back the tide I see</i>
<i>Am I here in vain?</i>	<i>Your love in motion</i>
<i>Hold on to the night</i>	
<i>There will be no shame</i>	<i>When it's cold outside</i>
	<i>Am I here in vain?</i>
<i>Always, I wanna be with you</i>	<i>Hold on to the night</i>
<i>And make believe with you</i>	<i>There will be no shame</i>

The game: Robot Unicorn Attack. It's the flamboyantly energetic cousin of Canabalt, and its gifts to the world are a basket of rainbows, handfuls of sparkles and metallic unicorns.

After playing three minutes of the game, it's easy to dismiss the concept based on its potentially uncomfortable choice of decor. It's not that rainbows bother me, it's that using a song from a band known for its openly gay member (and icon), Andy Bell, as the soundtrack for a robot unicorn's adventure seems to poke fun at LGBT culture in a negative form of satire. I can only imagine what some 13-year-old kid is thinking when he plays this: "Ha, so gay."

Then again, who cares what Halo teens think; I'm probably reading too much into the matter. The rainbow is a flag-waving symbol of gay pride, diversity, equality and strength, after all. And if Erasure signed the licensing agreement, they must enjoy the game. This wouldn't be the first time I've been a stick in the mud, and missed the joke as a result.

Unfounded controversy aside, Robot Unicorn Attack plays fantas-



*Advanced cybernetics have given Mr. Cinnamon a second chance of fulfilling his track-and-field dreams*

tically. The Canabalt comparison is apt, and a compliment. Players navigate a series of purple and pink hills of varying shape and size (and placement), trying to double jump, using the Z key, between the hovering landmasses to avoid certain death, and to make it farther than your previous distance for a higher score. However, Adult Swim's take on the concept introduces a revolutionary second button, mapped to the X key, which causes the unicorn protagonist to vault forward at light speed in a blinding flash of the visible color spec-

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*Nick and I will very rarely argue about anything related to Silicon Sasquatch. From the beginning we've seen eye-to-eye, and we have a healthy respect for one another thanks to a friendship that began in our college journalism classes. But sometimes one of us will speak out and challenge the other person's ideas or work, which can result in a proclamation along the lines of: "Well, I don't like it at all."*

*This was the case with my second "About an Adult Swim Flash Game" article, a piece I felt mirrored the tone of the previous one yet largely improved upon the wacky aspects of writing about games with ludicrous concepts. Nick didn't feel the same way. I distinctly remember after reading his edits of my initial draft, where he proceeded to tear apart the majority of what I wrote until it barely resembled anything I would have written myself. I was a bit miffed, but that's what editors are for. And please believe that I've never taken the editing process to heart — it's all in the pursuit of producing the strongest work possible. We use a peer editing system for the blog, and there have been numerous occasions when each one of us has shredded another author's work because it frankly wasn't that good.*

*Yet I wouldn't budge, not this time. I was vehement in defending my approach to discussing Robot Unicorn Attack. In fact, after Nick had edited the draft I went back and restored my*

trum — otherwise known as a “rainbow attack.” This is so our horned friend can smash through the giant crystalline stars that randomly appear, and avoid exploding into a bodiless heap of scrap.

The gameplay is simple, and slightly less fresh than *Canabalt* due to its blatant copy-and-paste mentality. It’s still an adequate timesink, and fits right in with the attitude Adult Swim has toward its flash games, which I described in a previous article: be a little offensive, but make sure it’s fun. It helps that the animation and character sprites are expertly crafted as well. I’d believe it if someone told me this was a tie-in game for the Hollywood revival of an obscure 1980’s cartoon.

The greatest aspect of *Robot Unicorn Attack* is how it induces feelings of happiness via its ridiculousness. That’s the entire point, and you don’t have to be good at the game for the game to be good for you. So while I might be misinterpreting the elements of gay culture in the game, I can’t find fault in how well the gameplay and the music go together. Leaping from knoll to knoll, collecting rainbow wing-tipped fairies to the repeating tune of synthesized love and heartfelt emotion, is a guilty pleasure. It’s obvious that the game is a clever Valentine’s present for Adult Swim’s virtual horde of hipster kids, and those Tim and Eric *Awesome Show, Great Job!* freaks. (Freaks like me. And that link is semi-relevant.)

So go play the game, and let yourself enjoy it. There will be no shame. ■

*Note: Final play count of the “Always 2009 Remix” audio loop during the writing of this article: 39.*

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*original work, sneakily posting it thereafter. I still stand by this article today, and I’m happy it’s being included in the book, if only because it lets me write a commentary about the occasionally combative editing process. Clearly it’s not a serious attempt at journalism, but it’s entertaining all the same.*

*The present value in my *Robot Unicorn Attack* article is it reminds us of a major turning point for *Silicon Sasquatch*. At the beginning of 2010 we were slowly reducing the number of attempts to be obsessively serious with our coverage. Throughout the year our staff learned that it’s fine to write in our natural styles and to treat videogames in a less profound manner than before. In trying to be the antithesis to the mainstream gaming press we were alienating readers, and even ourselves. It became tiresome to worry about the “best” way to argue the finer points of games all the time.*

*While we still do what we can to bring smart, professional-level writing from trained journalists to the topic of videogames, each one of us has had to cope with the fact that we aren’t a fully staffed media outlet with a budget and industry clout.*

*That very realistic epiphany has done our egos just as much good over the past two years as our daily writing experiments have mitigated our penchants for verbosity. — Aaron Thayer*



*May 3rd, 2010*

# Review: Bayonetta

| This weird character-action debut is visually striking – and possibly offensive – but it’s a joy to play. *By Nick Cummings*

What, exactly, is going on in Bayonetta?

That question has weighed heavily on me throughout the last few months, from the moment I launched the game to the present day, where I find myself in the middle of my third playthrough. And, frankly, that question is a big part of why this review has taken weeks to write.

While I’m still not convinced I’ve distilled the core theme or purpose of Bayonetta, I am confident it can be defined in just a few ways:

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*There’s a reason this review took three months to write, and it’s not just because I’m a notorious procrastinator. As a game, Bayonetta is a sheer joy from start to finish, and I’ll be damned if it doesn’t warrant recognition as one of the very best games of the year.*

*But I’d also never played a game with such flagrantly sexist and objectified imagery, and it was difficult for me to figure out how to discuss it publicly. I’m always very self-conscious when I’m talking about issues of discrimination particularly because I worry I’ll end up unintention-*

- Bayonetta is a stylish, fast-paced action game
- Bayonetta is a dynamic, fluid and intricate combat game
- Bayonetta is a hypersexualized and exploitative commentary on the role of women in games

If you're considering buying a copy, it's my firm belief that almost anybody is guaranteed dozens of hours of great entertainment with Bayonetta. Although it might simply look like a prettied-up rehash of a modern character-action game like Devil May Cry or God of War, a few minutes with a controller in hand will prove otherwise. Like Guitar Hero and Wii Sports, it's the sort of experience where the main appeal rests in the actual, tactile feeling the game evokes; it's one of those things that can't be described, but you know it when you experience it. In this case, the player is treated to a surprisingly natural and empowering sense of control over the protagonist that steadily grows in complexity and escalates in lunacy throughout the game's dozen-plus levels. It's a wild ride that's simultaneously brilliant and befuddling, and it's required literature for anyone with a taste for adrenaline.

It requires the hard work of a lot of people to make a fully fledged, sixty-dollar videogame like Bayonetta. And while it's not my intention to sideline the creative input and effort of the entire team at Platinum Games and publisher Sega, Bayonetta bears the unmistakable mark of its director, Hideki Kamiya.

Even among the enthusiast gaming crowd, Kamiya might not be a household name like Miyamoto or Kojima. But if you've played some of the top-rated games of the past decade or so, chances are you've played a few of the games he's had a hand in from Capcom and the now-defunct Clover studio. His directorial credits, including Resident Evil 2, Viewtiful Joe, Devil May Cry and Okami, run the gamut of game design between high-tension survival horror, engrossing action-adventures and fast-paced stylized action-fighting hybrids. Although Kamiya's games have been both blockbusters and commercial flops, they all received glowing reviews from nearly every game critic upon release.

After Clover was dissolved by Capcom in early 2007, Kamiya went on to join Platinum Games. And now, almost three years later, Kamiya has reemerged with his first new title under the Platinum label: Bayonetta.

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*ally sounding like I'm pandering or patronizing by trying to voice an opinion.*

*All that being said, I think this review turned out great. I love the pacing and word choice being used here – it's some of the best writing I think I've done in a long time, actually. And I feel pretty confident that I explained what's going on in the game well enough to give the reader a good idea of what they're in for with Bayonetta and why I think it's a must-play game. — Nick Cummings*

Bayonetta doesn't bring any major revelations to the character-action genre. Instead, it focuses on refining the elements that worked best in its predecessors and removing the half-baked ideas that held them back from perfection. The result is a straightforward, mostly linear journey through a number of distinct levels (with a small amount of requisite backtracking thrown in for good measure) punctuated with a steady series of distinct confrontations.

Fortunately, Platinum's decision to stick close to the feel and structure of the *Devil May Cry*, *Ninja Gaiden* and *God of War* series doesn't leave the game feeling stale. In fact, it makes it easier for genre veterans to slide right in and get down to discovering what makes Bayonetta distinctive: its style and fine-tuned game design.

Each level is a guided journey through beautiful set pieces punctuated by a dozen or so distinct confrontations. These fights, despite only being composed of a couple dozen enemy types, never feel repetitive, thanks in large part to the careful balancing of each encounter. A battle can last as long as ten seconds and no longer than a couple minutes, which helps keep the tempo at a fast pace.

Fights are fast, involved, and almost overwhelmingly flashy. With the game's bold use of color and rhythm, it calls to mind the sort of imagery and physical sensation that often comes with games like *Treasure's* twitchy and unparalleled *Gunstar Heroes* and *Sin and Punishment*. And while fluid animations and flashy effects are vital to any modern character-action game, they're merely par for the course; any game from *Devil May Cry* to *Dante's Inferno* is filled to the brim with these components. But what the competition lacks is something that can't be seen — it has to be felt.

Simply put, controlling Bayonetta is a joy. She moves with an exaggerated grace and ease, transitioning from move to move with a surprising fluidity that creates the illusion that she's anticipating the moves you're performing. Her body language evokes a sense of glee at violently dispatching her creepy, inhuman adversaries, and it fosters a delightfully politically incorrect overtone throughout the game: you're not working for the forces of good, but you're sure as hell not the bad guy.

At the conclusion of each encounter, the player is scored on how well they performed. Ratings on time, style and damage provide the player with a heads-up on what their strengths and weaknesses were without lending a sense of punishment for not doing well. Winning the fight is still winning the fight, and the game doesn't dwell on any individual encounter longer than a few seconds after the fact before you're running headlong into the next. It's a rare instance where scoring is a uniformly positive experience for the player as opposed to something like *Grand Theft Auto's* *The Ballad of Gay Tony*, where the parameters for scoring well are withheld until the end of the mission



and scores are often significantly lower than the player anticipates.

Bayonetta bears the mark of a well-polished game thanks to a number of small but significant features that are so obvious in retrospect that it's puzzling why nobody thought to include them before. Loading screens are fully interactive and display a move list at all times, allowing the player to practice a handful of moves and to warm up for the next major fight. The game's level selection feature allows the player to return to any level on any difficulty at any time, meaning there's no penalty for going back to revisit a particular sequence or to stock up on halos, the game's currency. Besides being a less-than-subtle nod to Sega's Sonic the Hedgehog series, these halos also function as a currency that can be spent at the Gates of Hell, a bar operated by a sunglasses-wearing, sinister merchant named Rodin. Halos can be spent to learn new moves, acquire new equipment and stock up on resources, a process that requires multiple playthroughs to complete but yields rewards ranging from near-vital combat abilities to bizarre costumes for Bayonetta to wear.

An integral part of Bayonetta's appeal is its tongue-in-cheek, self-referential humor. A number of acknowledgments to Kamiya's past games are slipped in as clever asides; for instance, at one point early in the game, Bayonetta spouts a one-liner that's nearly identical to Viewtiful Joe's catchphrase ("Henshin a-go-go, baby!"). At times, Bayonetta seems acutely aware of the fact that she is starring in a game and flirts with breaking the fourth wall on a few occasions by commenting on her present situation as though speaking directly to the player. Rodin also does this whenever you stop in at the Gates of Hell for some upgrades: "Hey, check this out: 'What are ya buyin'?' Heh heh. Heard that in a game once."

Bayonetta's story involves two warring clans, the Lumen Sages and Umbra Witches, who maintained balance for thousands of years until they went to war and the Lumen Sages influenced humans to instigate witch hunts. You're the last of the witches and you're out to understand what happened and kill anything that crosses your path. As a narrative, it amounts to nothing more than your typical black-and-white, good-versus-evil dichotomy, but the game clearly isn't concerned with sending a strong message about the importance of balance or anything heavy-handed like that. It's simply a premise that attempts to justify the over-the-top action and violence that define Bayonetta, and while it usually ends up feeling utterly ridiculous with its pervasive sexual themes, it did more to keep me interested than to deter me from finishing the game.

Of course, that same imagery of a woman who flaunts her exaggerated curves and strips naked every few moments with reckless abandon inevitably leads to some tough questions about gender stereotypes and exploitation. Perhaps the most pertinent question is:

### Is Bayonetta misogynistic?

That question isn't one I can answer on a universal scale, but it is undeniable that Bayonetta is filled with provocative imagery and classic examples of male and female gender role stereotypes. What I can do is assess what I've observed in playing the game several times and explain how I came to my own conclusion.

The best place to start is with the character of Bayonetta herself. She doesn't look like a realistic human being: she's impossibly tall, her feminine features are intensely exaggerated, and she's usually half-naked. Her hair is the focal point of much of her power, which — aside from being symbolically significant — also acts as her sole source of clothing. In the heat of battle, Bayonetta's hair is flying in all directions, meaning the vast majority of her body is exposed. As the player — and as



a heterosexual male — I found this discomforting. There's a concept in gender studies (which I'll admit I only have a cursory understanding of) that relates to the idea of the male gaze, a common theme in all kinds of literature where women are placed in situations where they are exposed and ignorant of what's around them while a male character observes in secrecy. The most famous example of this in film is *Psycho*, where Norman Bates watches as a woman undresses and is then murdered in the shower.

Bayonetta's nudity isn't confined to combat, either. The opening scene depicts her shedding her clothing on highly suggestive regions while moaning at an increasingly high pitch. Really, how many ways that can be interpreted? It's utterly ridiculous. If anyone else had been in the room, I'd have been mortified to be seen playing the game.

So yes, Bayonetta is absolutely a hypersexualized experience. But is it misogynistic?

I think anyone with a conscience would be entitled to say so; there's certainly enough evidence indicating as such. But personally, I don't think it's misogynistic at all. I think Bayonetta is empowering to women if only because she seems so acutely aware of constantly being the object of observation by male characters — and how she uses that advantage to deliver a swift and brutal death to anyone who stands in her way. Whenever a male character, such as Luka, makes a comment objectifying her, he's always immediately punished for it or made to

look the fool by her. She is in control of every situation, and the only instance in which control is taken away from her is when her friend — another witch — comes to save her.

Bayonetta is fully aware that she's a sexual stereotype, and she uses that knowledge playfully as a weapon before brutally murdering her enemies. But it's also undeniable that these overtly sexist images have weight to them, and as a result not everyone will have the same interpretation I do. I believe you're entitled to interpret the game however you like, and it's important that you're aware of what's involved in Bayonetta before you purchase it. Fortunately, there's a demo available for just that purpose. But I do hope everybody reading this will give the game a shot and draw their own conclusions. After all, no matter what else you call it, Bayonetta is simply the best game of its kind. It delivers a much-needed shot of adrenaline to the character action genre, and it's absolutely one of the finest games of the year.

Bayonetta does more than preserve Hideki Kamiya's reputation for crafting the greatest games the action/adventure genre has to offer: It elevates him and the team at Platinum Games to the absolute highest echelon of game development. ■

*Bayonetta was developed by Platinum Games and published by Sega. It retails for a suggested \$59.99 on Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The reviewer completed two full playthroughs and part of a third on the Xbox 360 version of the game and unlocked 41 of 50 achievements.*

### **Recommended for:**

- Fans of fast-paced fighting and action games who seek a genuine visceral thrill in a game
- Hideki Kamiya devotees who appreciate his trademark bizarre style and high standard of polish
- Devil May Cry, Ninja Gaiden and God of War fans looking for a fresh take on a tired genre
- Anyone doubting the creativity and craftsmanship of the Japanese games industry in recent years — Bayonetta proves there's at least one studio out there with serious chops

### **Not Recommended for:**

- Anyone offended by the ostensibly sexist imagery and rampant violence that characterize the game's image; my theory is the game is consciously using an exploitative style to convey a positive message about female heroes in videogames, but your interpretation may vary

May 4th, 2010

# Readership Survey – Please respond!

Sometimes it helps to have someone else point out precisely what sucks. *By Nick Cummings*

Hi everyone,

As Aaron and I have been brainstorming ways to keep improving the Silicon Sasquatch experience, we thought it would be useful to have our readers weigh in and give us a fair assessment of how things are going, what's working well and what needs to be improved. To that end, I put together a brief, five-minute survey to measure where we're at.

All answers are anonymous, so please be honest. The more truthful your responses, the better we'll be able to adapt to your interests.

Thanks for your help! We look forward to hearing from you. And if there's anything you'd like to add that you didn't mention in the survey, please leave a comment below. We always love hearing from our readers, even if they're just writing in to remind us that we're the scum of the earth and they're totally taking our sisters to prom.

All the best,

— Nick ■

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*We were doing a bit of soul-searching at this point, having just come off of a dry streak content-wise. Aaron and I were concerned that we didn't have an accurate snapshot of what our readers were interested in, so we decided to put a survey together and get some input.*

*The results, which are included later in this book, helped inform us when we decided to gear up and redouble our efforts on Silicon Sasquatch. They're also why you don't see any more podcasts; despite the hours I spent producing them, they frankly just weren't very good in their current state. I've made my peace with that. Let's just move on and forget they ever existed, okay? Thanks. — Nick Cummings*



May 6th, 2010

# Our Impressions of the Halo: Reach Beta

We take the ol' Warthog for a spin around the block with Bungie's latest. *By Aaron Thayer and Nick Cummings*

With the Halo: Reach beta well underway, Nick and Aaron decided to dust off their copies of Halo 3: ODST to decode the Internet hubbub surrounding the latest entry in the franchise. While their experiences were both positive and negative, one thing is clear: It's definitely Halo.

## Aaron

After five minutes of a capture-the-flag match in the Halo: Reach beta, I thought to myself: "I know what this is. This is Halo 2 — and 3. Ugh." Yes, I really did "ugh" in my mind.

Halo multiplayer is meant for split-screen or system link parties held among banter-prone friends who throw out a mixture of taunts

and encouragement. The online version of Halo doesn't appeal to me — it wasn't made for my tastes. But as I was downloading the latest Halo beta I told myself I must like Reach's online component. For once I wanted to understand the zealous admiration Halo fans have for the series' online portion. I also wanted to know why some people won't let Halo 2 die.

My plan was to approach Reach without any negative preconceptions. I thought it would be easy thanks to excellent video documentaries like "Once More Unto the Breach," which demonstrate Bungie's passion for the numerous changes, tweaks and upgrades to the core single-player experience. I was quick to assume that those changes would carry over to the multiplayer. Unfortunately they don't, and nothing much has changed as a result. For an overwhelming majority of gamers both part-time and hardcore that's fantastic news. For me it's disappointing.

However, the Reach beta does have two things going for it. The class powers add a layer of fun to the experience that the bubble shield and other Halo 3 equipment never fully achieved. Secondly, Bungie's social filter options are genius. A player can choose different match tags to find "chatty" or "polite" players, and the browser will find games with your similar preferences. I could even search for others at my same skill level. Options like this are brilliant, and they need to become the status quo for other blockbuster console titles.

So maybe I'll ease up on my hype for awhile. I'll still browse the news sites and click on the links with "Reach" in the headline, but I'll be apprehensive. I'll bide my time until the game is out, and the consensus is clear for the more important parts: the single-player and co-op campaigns.

## Nick

I'm a weekender when it comes to Halo. Although I was participating in 16-player fragfests on a weekly basis nearly a decade ago,

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*A short and clever article that really shows our new approach to talking about games. When we ignore the compulsion to be academic about videogames, our voices really come through.*

*This was another enjoyable collaboration between Nick and myself, and even though we're extremely hard on older Halo titles to the point of forgetting that we're supposed to be discussing Halo: Reach, we managed to be funny as well as illuminating.*

*The best parts of this are, by far, the images I created specifically for a piece about Halo. I think they poked just enough fun at the stereotypical Halo mentality to be relevant to the entire discussion. — Aaron Thayer*

*One of the things I always loved about Electronic Gaming Monthly was that most of the major games each month were reviewed and scored by several people. As the magazine developed over time, readers began to understand each writer's personality and specific tastes, and*



my love for Halo waned once college — and Halo 2's online-focused multiplayer — arrived. Like Smash Bros. and Goldeneye before it, I always associated Halo with getting a group of friends crammed together on a couch, blowing each other to pieces and having a grand old time.

But then Xbox Live was born, and Microsoft saw an opportunity for its flagship franchise to lay the foundation for the first significant console-based gaming network. Maybe it had just as much to do with all my friends heading off in different directions at that point in life, but the massive LANs at friends' houses had long since come to an end and the only way to play Halo together was over a 10Mbps connection with the aid of a wonky, uncomfortable headset. Finally: All the thrills of the Halo experience coupled with the creature comforts of working in a call center.

So yeah, I approached Halo: Reach expecting to be disappointed. And it wasn't until I had been needled, stuck with a sticky grenade, circle-strafed and bashed with a flag — which only took about two minutes, given my skill level — that the old, familiar Halo rage began

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*it made each of their reviews more meaningful. It's still one of the greatest strengths that the IUP Network has going today: for example, I know exactly what sorts of games make a Jeremy Parish or Thierry Nguyen tick.*

*Looking back on this article gives me a great deal of hope that Aaron and I have started to come into our own as critics with distinct personalities. We're pretty good at articulating our distinct points of view in our own language, and I think that we'd be fools not to approach more games like this. Reviews are great, as are one-off opinion pieces, but our readership has come to know each of us pretty well through our writing by now and I think the time is right to really build off of that general knowledge the average reader probably has about what makes us tick.*

*One last thing: I still love the images Aaron put together for this article. They're so stupid and goofy that I can't help but grin every time I see them. I'm a sucker for a brain-dead LOL, I guess. — Nick Cummings*

to percolate within me. I avoid online shooters on Xbox Live because I don't want to be forced to share any space, real or virtual, with someone who identifies as XxJUGGALOLZxX.

But at the same time, I felt a tingle of nostalgia coming on. I remembered all the fun I used to have with Halo. And then it dawned on me: the game hadn't changed — I had.

Fortunately, like Aaron mentioned, Bungie has taken some intelligent steps toward shaping your online play experience to suit your interests. Want to play Oddball with casual, polite, quiet folks who might be just as willing to sit down with a cup of coffee and discuss Proust? Knock yourself out, man.

But ultimately, the only thing you need to know is that Halo: Reach is Halo. It's Halo 1, 2, 3 and ODST, minus a few significant tweaks in the matchmaking formula and some interesting new game modes thrown into the mix. If you love Halo multiplayer, and your friends love Halo multiplayer, I have no doubt you're gonna have a blast with Reach. But as a game critic, I'm disappointed that the beta doesn't indicate a greater willingness on Bungie's part to develop the Halo formula and to push it forward. ■





May 10th, 2010

# Adventures in Akihabara: Silicon Sasquatch Tackles Japan

Doug investigates the infamous video-game Mecca of Japan and lives to tell the tale. *By Doug Bonham*

*In March, Silicon Sasquatch senior contributor Doug Bonham spent four weeks traveling through Asia. Here is a first-hand report after seeing Japanese gaming culture, specifically in Tokyo, up close and personal. All photos by Doug Bonham, 2010.*

Japan has had an undeniable influence on the video game industry. One of the main reasons why I began studying the Japanese language, why I continued studying that through to an undergraduate major, and why I am now in a graduate program with a focus on east Asia is

because of my love of video games, and this historic influence. I can't deny my nerdy roots. That curiosity has turned into a respect and academic desire to study other cultures, but I'd be lying if I didn't say gaming sparked some of that. That is how I found myself spending a month in Asia in March, traveling through Japan, South Korea, and China, visiting factories and hearing business lectures.

From the early 1980s arcade era to now, Japanese hardware and software developers have been leaders and innovators in this medium. Whether it's Nintendo, Sony, Sega, Square-Enix, Capcom, Konami, or any of the other developers down the line, these companies established a worldwide legacy. I've played games for my entire life, studied Japanese through high school and college, and sat through the grueling trans-Pacific flight — I could hardly wait to touch down in Tokyo and see Japan for myself.

On my first full day in Tokyo, I took an afternoon trip out to Akihabara — the heart of Tokyo's nerd and otaku culture. Electronic shops large and small line “Den-Den Town,” the nickname for the area near Akihabara Station where the district focus is sharpest. Want to see advertisements for PC components from Asus and Intel up the side of a building? Or multiple large arcades right on the main boulevard? You've come to the right spot. You're also in the right spot if you want to delve into the depths of Japanese — ahem — taste; right across the street from the Akihabara Station exit is a five-story sex toy and pornography store, where the floors go from tame to what-the-hell as you head up. Tiny Japanese girls dressed in costumes passing out flyers for maid cafes while standing on the street sidewalks.

Off the main streets are, just as in most every section of Tokyo, a series of narrow side-streets that offer up a menagerie of storefronts — maid cafes, anime and manga stores, pachinko parlors, small hole-in-the-wall stores, hobby shops, electronics stores of all varieties... everything you can imagine. I wandered down one such alley and ran smack into a hobby shop that specialized in die-cast model cars; next door, their sister store had tons of plastic Gundam models. That is Akihabara in a nutshell — a haven for nerds.

Every one of the major chain stores — whether a Yodobashi Camera, Bic Camera, or Sofmap — provides a vertical experience. Floor space is at a premium in Japan, so stores tend to be multi-floor affairs;

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*My graduate business program had an extra focus on business in Asia, and as part of it, we traveled for three weeks through Tokyo and other major cities. From the moment I heard the itinerary, I knew there would be an opportunity to write about gaming in Asia for the site. It turns out that my extra week spent traveling around Tokyo became the basis for one of the better long articles I've written.*

*As mentioned in the article, video games played into my choice of language and culture to study. I've been a student of Japanese language and culture for almost 10 years now, and I feel my experience allows me a unique opportunity to bridge west and east. Japan has played such*

point-and-shoot cameras here, SLRs on the next floor up, audio on the third floor, gaming on the fourth. In a way, it's very similar to a Best Buy or Fry's in the United States; I'd argue it's better because, certainly for camera lenses and accessories, a Bic or Sofmap was much better stocked than any consumer electronics store I've been to here in the U.S. That said, the other thing I notice about the new game sections is how much shelf-space is dedicated to each different console; the Nintendo DS was far and away the leader, with the PS2 and PSP following, PS3 and Wii showing decently, and Xbox 360 there, but without a large presence. The Xbox 360 displays were often nice and similar to kiosks at stores in the U.S., but were probably there through contractual agreements as opposed to real demand. If there were any PC games in Japan at stores, I certainly didn't see them at all.

Yes — handheld gaming appears to rule to roost in Japan right now. Riding the Yamanote Line around central Tokyo, I would often see people sat down with their noses buried in their cell phone, DS Lite, or PSP. And, judging from the shelf space each took up in stores, the handhelds have become most popular in terms of mindshare amongst gamers.

Whereas the only people you'd expect to pull out a DS on a train in the United States are grade-A dorks, it seemed like all walks of life had one in Japan; young women, young men, even businessmen had gaming consoles out and about. For all the worship of how common gaming is in Japan from obsessed otaku in the United States, it comes



Many districts within Tokyo have narrow side streets jam-packed with interesting stores; Akihabara is no exception.

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*an integral part in video game culture, and it felt wonderfully nerdy to walk through these shops where so many old classics were on display.*

*I hope that won't be the only time I make it to Akihabara in my life, but many others won't ever touch down in Tokyo, so I really hope that this article (and my accompanying photos) can provide a glimpse into how Japanese gaming culture operates. I still lament not spending tons of money on game stuff, too — I almost bought a suitcase and cleared out Book-Off, despite having to deal with a second carry-on bag on my trip back home. Ah well, there's always next time. — Doug Bonham*



*Japanese copy of Final Fantasy 3 for approximately \$5? Collectors, time to go wild.*

off as exactly that — common, ordinary.

Yes, there are Nintendo ads on the trains; it's not an earth-shaking event, it's just a part of everyday Japanese life. Nintendo is as common in Japan as Disney in the United States. Imagine how you'd act if Asians came to the United States and were stunned at how common Disney franchises were. Actually, it's a decent comparison; while Disney characters and properties are viewed as being for children in the U.S., plenty of my friends from Asia (especially the girls) have Disney products, and they are in their 20s. It's not too far a stretch to stereotypically view gamers in a similar light in the U.S. Gaming culture has dissipated into many more areas of Japanese life than American, but it's not as deified as some American nerds would like to believe.

That said, if you are an American nerd with a love for Japanese games and gaming culture, then traveling around shopping districts in Tokyo is like going through a candy store. My experience at Book-Off, a chain of Japanese used book, CD and game stores, tells this story incredibly well.

Analogous to walking past a Barnes and Noble or Borders in an outdoor mall in the U.S., the Book-Off branch I went to in the district of Ikebukuro in Tokyo looked just like a book store. Little did I know what I would find inside: aisles of games, both new and used. It was only after walking halfway down an aisle and running into old Nintendo Famicom cartridges that noticed it was a wonderful treasure trove.

From Famicom to Dreamcast, a large section was dedicated to older used games...almost all of which were listed at only ¥500, or roughly \$5. I would have bought a Japanese copy of Chrono Trigger had I known it would work on my SNES. The variety and quality of the games was stunning; few looked truly ragged, most of the newer titles were boxed with instructions, and the selection was wide-ranging. The PlayStation 2 section was half an aisle unto itself; I picked up a Japanese-market-only Winning Eleven title for ¥500, while import copies go for nearly \$70 in the U.S. There was also a selection of systems and used accessories; the first-party Dreamcast arcade stick that goes for \$60 or more in the U.S. was sitting in a bin for ¥200, right next to a \$25 Super Famicom and a ¥100 used Saturn.

I looked around Akihabara for the famous used game store Super Potato, but despite wanting to see a legendary retail location, I found almost everything I would have wanted to buy and bring home at that Book-Off. It speaks to the ubiquity of gaming that so many generations of games — literally every generation of Nintendo software and hardware was represented, from Famicom up to Wii and DS XL — can still be found in Japan. I wanted to buy another suitcase only for Book-Off purchases, but discretion was a better plan. I will return, though.

While there may be some misnomers about the Japanese market, and there is worry that consoles are waning in Japan, there is little doubt that gaming is still important. What form it continues in may be up for debate, and the audience for gaming may shift as demographics skew older, but games have cemented a place in Japanese popular culture. ■



*Welcome to paradise.*



*May 12th, 2010*

# How EA Sports' Online Pass Will Change the Used Game Marketplace

Wanna take your sports online? Well, as EA demonstrates, there are two ways to play that game. *By Doug Bonham*

Once the millions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of labor hours have resulted in a finished, big-name console video game, how do publishers and developers earn their money back? From gamers like us buying titles at a store.

However, not all purchases are created equal. This is why Electronic Arts announced on Monday the continuation of its value-added online program, now called the EA Sports Online Pass. It appears to be much like programs in *Mass Effect 2*, *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*. *Mass Effect 2*'s Cerberus Network, for instance, grants access to free add-on downloads, including weapons, armor, and short mis-

sions. This is a project that is reportedly referred to within EA as Project Ten Dollar. Gamers who purchase one of EA Sports' catalog of games this summer receive a code in the package which, after being inputted into the game, allows you access to bonus features. Since the code is only good for one use (and one PSN or Xbox Live account), if you don't buy the game new, you have to pay \$10 for a pass of your own.

Or, at least, that's what it looks like on paper. While the Cerberus Network in Mass Effect 2 really does provide extra content on top of what you pay \$60 for, the catch to the EA Sports Online Pass is in the fine print: "bonus features" that your code unlocks in EA Sports' 2010 games include basic online and online dynasty modes previously available for free in all EA Sports games. For NCAA Football 11, for example, your Online Pass helps unlock "Online Multiplayer Modes such as Online Play Now, Head-to-Head, Online Dynasty, and More." The same goes for EA Sports' Madden, NHL, NBA Live, and Tiger Woods franchises; other games still have details to be announced.

Keep in mind that this is, for Xbox 360 owners, on top of the yearly Xbox Live Gold account fees that you would need to be able to play online in the first place.

This is a continuation of a policy from last year where codes packed in with new copies of games provided access to advanced online multiplayer modes; for NCAA Football and Madden, for example, these were the online dynasty modes. If you didn't buy your copy new, you had to stump up \$10 for a code.

Electronic Arts is, essentially, adding a major incentive to buying a game brand new for \$60. Don't buy it brand new? You can't play online. You need to either pay \$10 for a pass, or make use of a single 7-day free trial available for your Xbox Live or PSN account for each title.

Why does this matter? If you're reading Silicon Sasquatch, I'd imagine you may care far less about sports games than your humble author does. You might have never purchased or played an EA Sports title before in your life. But you do care about rising costs in games and, I would imagine, how to prevent them. Madden has traditionally been one of the top-selling games in the United States, and the FIFA Soccer franchise is




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*Monetizing games, minimizing the impact of GameStop's "\$55 used" games, and expectations of what features gamers feel entitled to...I don't think the Online Pass has impacted sales too much this year, despite some gamers' gripes, and I think this is still just the beginning. As well, this is one of the better examples of us responding to a news story quickly with great analysis; I wrote this article two days after the news broke. — Doug Bonham*

one of the best-selling games throughout the rest of the world, especially in Europe.

The major reason EA is looking at this as an alternative way to make money? For the quarter ending December 31, 2009, EA lost \$110 million on total net sales of \$1.24 billion. They sold more than a billion dollars worth of games, but still lost over one hundred million dollars. That's in just one quarter last year.

Though EA would never come straight out and say it, a leading reason why they're doing this is GameStop. While EA lost \$110 million in one quarter last year, GameStop made just over \$9 billion in sales for their whole year. While this doesn't take into account things like paying employees, taxes, or other liabilities, that's still a lot of video game sales. Dig into the numbers a bit more, and you'll find that, despite used video game sales being only 26% of the total for GameStop, they represented almost half of GameStop's profits — \$1.12 billion.

That's a lot of money made by selling used games. Those "used" games sitting right next to newly-released titles, but priced roughly \$5 less, represent a huge area of profit for GameStop, but just as large a drain on publishers like Electronic Arts. While new games made up the largest amount of GameStop's revenue, the money they kept on those sales was only 20% — roughly half — what they keep on used-game sales.

I am at kind of a loss as to how to react to this move by EA. As a gamer, it's a little upsetting: EA is essentially holding a key feature of their games for ransom, and while it may not effect my buying habits (as I tend to buy EA Sports titles brand new), it will definitely affect others I know. I sense that a lot of people may not know enough about the fine print to realize they're getting a raw deal if they do go into GameStop and buy the cheaper used version for \$5 less. For gamers who buy new copies of EA Sports titles, whether from Best Buy, Amazon, Wal-Mart, or GameStop, all that changes is having to input another code; however, it's a potential deal-breaker for more casual gamers looking for a good deal.

However, as a business student, I understand EA's dilemma. They're hemorrhaging money, despite good sales and high-profile titles, and they need to find a new way to make sure they don't continually lose money. This is a way to receive at least a small kick-back from used-game sales, and encourage \$60 new-title sales. It's also a shot across the bow of GameStop, who have to know the jig is up when it comes to their high-profit-margin used game market.

If EA sees this program as successful this year — and I would define "success" as anything but a sharp reduction in sales — then expect to see other publishers, namely Ubisoft and Activision, start to try and implement similar plans into their own games. And that could spread a problem that may haunt more than just sports gamers. ■





May 18th, 2010

# Why I can't wait for Red Dead Redemption

Why Aaron's getting all riled up to saunter on into the lonesome crowded west. *By Aaron Thayer*

Hype is a strange thing. It causes all sorts of people to vehemently defend a product they've never even touched. And despite my best efforts to remain neutral about the release of certain new videogames — in a laughable effort to sustain my school-bred journalistic ethics

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*Looking back, I can hardly believe this made it to publication. It's not because the article is horrible, it's because this is one of the most subjective, rabid things I've ever written. And although I made my argument for such a level of anticipation, the entire article looks like a sly marketing tool for Rockstar, the game's developer and publisher — which it most certainly wasn't.*

*At least Red Dead Redemption was a fantastic game overall, so I saved myself any embarrassment in potentially retracting these boisterous comments. — Aaron Thayer*



*Not so much riding into the sunset as riding beside it*

— I'm as susceptible to flashy advertisements and smart marketing as any modern consumer.

Red Dead Redemption, which is out today, coerced me to put my money down based on its trailers and previews alone. My fistful of (60) dollars is purchasing an untested game that I've barely seen or read about, and no matter how capable Rockstar is as a developer, every company makes mistakes (i.e., Capcom's unsuccessful attempts at building western-focused franchises). This horse-riding, cattle-rustling and outlaw-shooting game could be a flop, but for more than a few reasons I don't believe that's the truth.

Instead, I'm going to tell you exactly why I've saddled up to ride into the hype-laden sunset.

## The Details

Two words: horse physics.

Rockstar San Diego has taken the NaturalMotion Euphoria physics engine used in Grand Theft Auto IV and significantly tweaked its capabilities, which are best seen in the first introductory gameplay trailer. What looked exaggerated and comical in GTA — the stupor of walking around Liberty City drunk, for example — now looks more natural in Red Dead Redemption. Watching the horses run in slow-motion reminds me of Eadweard J. Muybridge's experiments with photography and animal physiology, which proved that the hooves of a horse leave the ground during its stride. Sure, Red Dead is primarily concerned with shooting banditos in the head, but the level of care taken by the development team to make its world look as alive as possible is greatly appreciated. Every little bit helps the player's suspension of disbelief.



What a drag. LOL!!1

## The Developer

If there's one thing Rockstar Games' studios are good at, it's their capability to make nefarious activities enjoyable. From *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*' drug running to *Bully*'s truancy, Rockstar titles drip a thick glaze of style and atmosphere onto the worlds in which they take place. I, for one, laughed at the idea of going to school as a focus of the gameplay in *Bully*, but later discovered how original and solid the concept was.

*Red Dead Redemption* is a modern take on the classic pulp fiction of the Wild West, although it seems closer to Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* than Sergio Leone's *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. On the surface, this is a clichéd tale of revenge, in which protagonist John Marston is on a manhunt for the remaining members of his traitorous, disbanded gang. He's out for blood, and he'll get it. The plot may not be original, but the approach is. Where *Red Dead Revolver* fell a bit flat in 2004, its sequel will likely succeed by the virtue of its gritty realism, historical accuracy and adrenaline-fueled action. I don't expect this to be a Western simulator, but I do expect it to carry on a Rockstar tradition of weaving complex virtual tapestries of drama, violence, cinematic flair and innovation. Some might berate the developers for creating one more open-world sandbox title, but when did a more appropriate period of history exist to set a free-roaming videogame than the Wild West?

By using a professional narrator and structuring the trailers in a documentary format, Rockstar's latest game comes off as a more impressive — and legitimate — idea. Very rarely do advertisement campaigns take the time to establish historical accuracy for the period they're set in. So it's refreshing then to discover that *Red Dead* looks



*If only this was a screenshot for Back to the Future: The Game*

more like an homage to the West than a parody of it. I'm not as familiar with the true history of the West as I am the evolution of urban life at the turn of the 20th century; even so, the trailers' words about the encroaching effects of a technologically advanced United States on the lawless deserts and canyons of the Wild West are accurate and fascinating. Whether or not the game will make a point of highlighting this dynamic change in American society and culture remains to be seen, but it's good that Rockstar San Diego appears to have wrote in at least one additional narrative theme outside of the core focus on revenge. I still expect there to be numerous other subplots and themes that intertwine with the main story, as is customary in other Rockstar games.

## The Exploration

In Red Dead Redemption I will ride to the highest cliff to gaze at a breaking sunrise, while tumbleweeds roll hundreds of feet below, buzzards screech in the sky above and a camp fire smolders into the ashy ground behind me. I will hunt wildlife, and sell the grizzly pelts I've skinned to the general store so I can buy a rare six-shooter. I will use that gun to take back a gold mine from the bandits who have overrun it. I will then use that gun and a horse I took from the dead bandits to hijack a train. And in all of this, I will be playing one game the way I want to without feeling pressured to continue its plot.

Some gamers prefer linear stories. They want to be told what to do, but also hope to have a shred of leeway to do things as they see fit. Instead of limiting ingenuity and creativity within the game's environment, Red Dead Redemption provides its players with three spacious regions to find hidden treasures, landmarks and random NPC en-

counters. There are also over 30 individual species of wildlife to hunt. Hunting requires players to bring bait, binoculars and a skinning knife; animals can be tracked, and they will fight back. Now I'm not a hunter by any stretch of the imagination, but games can help us enact fantasies about activities we'd never do ourselves. The hunting minigame, which appears to blend itself into the exploration element by introducing animals at random intervals, has kindled my imagination. Perhaps it's the fact that hunting is more realistic than finding hidden packages or shooting pigeons.

## The Multiplayer

Free-roam multiplayer is where, in my semi-educated opinion, the bulk of the online action will be. Here's another great trailer all about it. Go on and watch it, I'll wait.

The game's free-roam mode injects all of the goal-oriented tasks, like team deathmatch and hunting, into the expansive single-player world. Instead of having to select these modes from a menu separately, my friends and I can accomplish our goals when and how we want to. Poses can be formed with up to eight players in an MMO-like fashion. Too many games tread the line between MMO and single-mode repetition, and they usually get it wrong (read: *Borderlands*). But maybe this time, one game will get it right.

Red Dead's multiplayer has me eager to ride alongside my friends while we level up and unlock new avatars and horses. This particular free-roam idea was last seen in *GTA IV*, where it was a novel, albeit a boring, idea. Liberty City was sizable, but it still wasn't "big" enough to hold my interest online. Ironically, a less-populated outdoor playground seems like it will have more to do than *GTA's* urban metropolis.

## The Conclusion

So now I wait here at my desk, watching the clock tick by in an unusually indolent fashion. I'm anticipating *Red Dead Redemption*, a game I have a lot of reasons to like, but I'm without any solid evidence to trust my feelings. I could look at Metacritic, but a 94 or a 74 won't change my mind either way: I'm ready for something new, and a cowboy game is new enough to me.

Amazon says my package was "out for delivery" in Portland, Oregon at 6:12 am. Only a few hours to go, then. I'll let you know how it turns out.

And if you need to join a posse, just look me up on Xbox Live. You can call me by my cowboy name: Theodore "Doc Dynamite" Perkins. ■

May 19th, 2010

# Revitalizing World Tour in Rock Band

How one know-it-all proposes to reinvigorate the game he loves with an unnervingly specific manifesto. *By Nick Cummings*

It's no secret that I'm a die-hard Rock Band fan. Ever since Frequency came out nearly a decade ago, I've avidly followed Harmonix's rise from a small studio building relatively niche rhythm games into what is now the undisputed leader in high-quality music gaming. From the time Rock Band first arrived in 2007, I don't think a week has gone by where I haven't picked up a guitar or banged on the drums for at least a few minutes. It doesn't hurt that I've amassed a pretty substantial collection of songs, either.

But years have passed, achievements have been earned, and world tours have been demolished. With more than a year and a half having passed between Rock Band 2's release and now, it's highly unlikely that many players are still regularly hitting up the World Tour mode; instead, most people are probably opting for the pick-up-and-play simplicity of quickplay. That's not a bad thing, necessarily, but what if World Tour could be reworked to be more robust, more engaging, and more enduring?

I've done my best to compile all my thoughts and suggestions into a relatively ordered list below. While it looks like we'll be getting some new insight directly from the Harmonix design team based on this short article Lead Designer Dan Teasdale posted today, I figured I'd post my own impressions of what the series' strengths and weaknesses

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*I wrote this just weeks after I had left my job as a legal assistant to set out into the brave new world of independent game design. I spent my days studying Flash and poring over books like Jesse Schell's The Art of Game Design (which I'd recommend without reservation to anyone interested in how games are made, conceptually) and so game systems were pretty much all I was thinking about.*

*I have no idea if anyone else found this useful; looking back, I certainly could have shortened*

are, and what can be done to specifically improve the World Tour experience in Rock Band 3.

Just bear in mind that this is only speculation from a guy who maybe loves his music games a little too much, and as a result it's best if it's not taken too seriously.

The Band World Tour mode is the heart of Rock Band. It embodies everything that the game stands for — cooperative play, creating and developing a band identity, and living the rags-to-riches rockstar dream — and it has been a staple in both Rock Band games. Most importantly, it has served to both foster a sense of unity among multiple players in a band and to solve the problem of bland, linear progression down a setlist that was previously the norm for instrument games.

However, there are several significant shortcomings with World Tour as it is currently designed:

**1. It is more constrained than it initially appears to be** — While assembling and customizing a band of virtual rockstars is fun, the thrill of independent, nonlinear progression and accumulation of money and fans quickly tapers off when it becomes clear to the player just how artificial the rewards for those statistics are. Fans are simply the equivalent of experience points for unlocking new challenges, and money is just used to buy new accessories and gear for your band that don't affect the game in any tangible way. These are both valuable rewards to the player in that they allow for deeper involvement on a customization level and for making sure each World Tour progresses at a reasonable pace, but they also do very little to foster or preserve a sense of involvement in the fiction of the game. Ultimately, it only succeeds in taking the one-dimensional setlist approach and adding a little variability into the mix, but not in any way that's particularly memorable or significant to a band's identity or progression.

**2. Its value to the player diminishes over time** — Aside from its intrinsic value as a band simulation, Band World Tour serves a number of overt, practical functions for the player: It's one of the most enjoyable ways to unlock songs on the disc, it provides a showcase of the game's many venues, and it's one of the best ways to unlock and try out additional gear for your band members. However, once a player has unlocked all the songs and played all the venues, the World Tour mode ceases to be as valuable an option for play. If a player or group of players wants to play together, it takes far less time to put

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*it significantly and stuck to a few more generalized ideas. But Rock Band is a series I've always loved, and I felt like I was really on to something here. It's worth pointing out that a few of these ideas showed up in Rock Band 3, but they're not exactly revelatory; anyone who's played Rock Band for a few hours probably thought the same thing. Still, I'm glad I tried to do a more analytical piece like this, even if it turned into a long, meandering, overly specific article.*

*What can I say? Sometime I just love too much. — Nick Cummings*

together an open-ended quickplay session where flexible playlists can be built and enjoyed with less downtime. Likewise, a solo player who has finished the tour mode will find solo quickplay to be far more enjoyable either from a casual point of view, because of its ease of access, or from a hardcore fan's perspective, where high scores and star-count tracking matter.

**3. It's cumbersome to play** — Although online play has made the Band World Tour mode far more accessible to players without friends nearby, it still requires a great deal more effort to set up and play. There are more menus to navigate, more instruments to set up, more space required and more schedules to collaborate on. While a lot of those problems are true of any activity that involves multiple people, the actual Rock Band interface doesn't do very much to help streamline players into a band setting. Whether drop-in/drop-out multiplayer would fix this problem without diminishing the group play experience is debatable, but as it stands it's a universally difficult task to coordinate on full-band play sessions.

**4. It doesn't mesh with Rock Band's innate longevity** — Many Rock Band owners continue to play the hell out of Rock Band 2 nearly two years after its release. This is thanks to its extensive, varied and consistently updated DLC library as well as a few significant patches and other consistent support for the game from Harmonix, including the message of the day, Battle of the Bands events and the company's social media presence (podcasts, Twitter, Facebook, etc.). World Tour loses its luster quickly after completion, and people's bands are left untouched while solo and quickplay options become the preferred means of playing.

**5. The game's fiction is underdeveloped** — Creating unique rockers and plotting your own course to superstardom is what Rock Band's World Tour is all about. But these characters never amount to much in terms of player investment, and there's no sense of community. For instance, when playing online with other people, everyone can bring their own rockers into the play session, but they're just puppets; they add nothing to your own game's fiction, or in other words, your interpretation of the story of your rocker. What if joining play sessions with bigger-name bands meant a chance at a big break for your player? What if leaving your band because of fundamental differences meant the launch of a solo act? What if these events were all capable of unfolding in a similarly nonlinear fashion as how World Tour currently functions but with the potential to actually craft a story that will stick with players years after they stop playing Rock Band, just like their favorite Fallout or Baldur's Gate characters do?

**So, the fundamental question is: How can World Tour continue to appeal to players for months and years after the game's launch?**

While it might sound improbable or impractical given the aver-



age 6-to-12 month span between new major releases in the music game genre, keeping players invested in the fiction of Rock Band will almost certainly significantly improve brand loyalty and awareness. Imagine if players felt as strongly about their Rock Band musicians or bands as they did about their heroes in Mass Effect or Dragon Age: If they invested the same kind of time and energy in crafting those characters just how they wanted, wouldn't they feel encouraged to check in on them from time to time? Wouldn't they want to keep helping that character grow, to see where their stories take them? And wouldn't they eagerly anticipate where they'd be able to take them in subsequent Rock Band games?

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“If players felt as strongly about their Rock Band musicians or bands as they did about their heroes in Mass Effect or Dragon Age, wouldn't they want to keep helping that character grow, to see where their stories take them?”

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So...What could Rock Band 3 do to improve the World Tour mode?

There are a few fundamental concepts in an improved World Tour: **connectedness**, **persistent growth and development**, and **flexibility**.

### **Connectedness:**

Being in a real-life band is all about communication. Members collaborate, plan gigs, weigh in on major decisions and all contribute in their own way. This group unity is not felt anywhere in the World Tour mode outside of actually playing songs. Band members only share one group metric — fans — and they split earnings equally into their own personal cash reserves for buying new accessories. The introduction of a joint band bank account would create an interesting dynamic where all players are responsible for managing funds. For example, what if earning a van actually cost in-game money? What if that van could break down, making it temporarily impossible for you to leave the city you're in, and it'd cost money to repair? What if licensing deals affected your band's reputation, and what if bands could break up? What if broken up bands could reunite on a reunion tour and rack up tons of money from their now-aged fans by playing big-venue shows? These are all just ideas, but persistent and distinctive avatars and bands are essential for fostering this sense of depth within the game's fiction.

*Better Battle of the Bands integration* — Rather than just having Battle of the Bands events from quickplay show up in various venues

around the world, these events should be pertinent to the player's band. Why not have a hometown reunion show pop up for the week of the band's one-year anniversary? Why not have summer music festivals (real or otherwise, in keeping with the game's wise precedent of avoiding real-world locations and events) that your band can play at to score legions of additional fans? And why not have a system in place to remind band members about these events? There could be a news ticker on the main screen, email or Facebook alerts, for example. Of course, I'm not sure what the Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo regulations are on that kind of external connectivity, but it seems like Facebook and Twitter connectivity is popping up in all kinds of games lately.

### **Persistent growth and development:**

I can't say for sure, but the impression I get from my experience playing the game is that the guiding philosophy behind World Tour has been to make playing Rock Band as an individual or a group more engrossing and more varied than a standard, down-the-list playthrough of a typical music game. At the same time, perhaps out of fear that the mode would be unappealing to all but the most hardcore of fans, the World Tour mode was a largely surface-level feature that didn't leave room for strategy or depth. In other words, it gave a pretty good illusion of building up a band from small-time to stardom, but how you got there was almost as linear a process as in a traditional music game.

While it's certainly a creative risk to add more complexity to a game whose success is largely due to its accessibility, I would argue that World Tour isn't the mode that most families and nontraditional gamers are going to flock to in the long term anyway. Quickplay is far easier to get into, it's more flexible to use, and there's no risk involved with negative reinforcement (losing fans, failing to win an optional event, etc.) In other words, World Tour is the perfect opportunity to build something much more enduring that will appeal to Harmonix's more devoted fans while also paving the way for plenty of newcomers to get sucked into the heretofore mostly untapped simulation and role-playing aspects of the game.

*Band management* — While the existing concept of earning new vehicles and playing at venues around the world for increasing numbers of fans and amounts of money is solid, there is room for a lot more nuance and, ideally, unique events that help shape a band's legacy, which could result in players having more of a narrative to identify with. If band members were able to schedule their own tours, debate over playing a benefit show vs. a sponsored show (with each choice actually having consequences), players would feel more attached to their bands. They'd feel like they had more of a stake in how the game

unfolded, and there would probably be a greater commitment in the long-term to the game as a result.

*Persistent character and band growth* – Experience points aren't just the currency of dice-toting role-playing gamers anymore. Everything from Forza Motorsport to Call of Duty uses a numerical progression system to lend their experiences a sort of continuity and to help players identify with what makes their experience with the game distinct from their friends'. Why not bring that sort of experience tracking to Rock Band? What if musicians and bands could both gain experience from playing shows, and what if leveling up unlocked specific talents or skills for each musician? And furthermore, what if a musician gained better skills the more they play a certain instrument? That could encourage players to play more songs while also trying out different instruments, which could help push players outside of their comfort zones — but in a good way. So many of my friends are too embarrassed to sing in Rock Band, but with a little persuasion from the game, that might be a different story.

### **Flexibility:**

Practically speaking, the times when all four band members can get together are probably few and far between. Some potential solutions that would preserve the value of the core band and the persistence of its members while allowing for flexibility of play include:

*Ability for members of other bands to sub in* — Members of other bands can freely join other bands to play for a session. This needs to be done efficiently, which means porting a profile to the console in use is impractical. Since Rock Band will continue to be a part of the EA Partners program thanks to a renewed publishing deal, couldn't logging into an EA account allow for a quick download of a character onto another console? And couldn't that infrastructure track which players are doing what at any given time, and store those statistics centrally?

*Make band-level decisions while away from the game console* — With online integration through a web interface or Facebook or some other networking tool, band members could vote on major decisions, book gigs where all four members are playing together, create setlists for upcoming shows, discuss logo designs, and so forth. There's so much potential for people to collaborate and build these fascinating band identities that can be shared with other players and the Rock Band community at large, and when those images and identities can be exported, it stands to reason that people will want to share that information with friends. And what better way to promote a product than to have users who actively want to share their experiences with friends and family?

### **What should stay the same?**

*Failing* — Progression should hinge on being able to successfully pass songs as a group. While no-fail mode being constantly activated is a great idea on easy as in *The Beatles: Rock Band*, on higher difficulties, or perhaps once the band has passed a major milestone, no-fail should be disabled for progression.

*Relative flexibility with band members* — So let's say your drummer thinks her avatar sucks. Fine — she can change whatever she wants about the avatar while keeping persistent accomplishments/stats/etc. Some of the most famous rock stars are constantly reinventing themselves, after all.

### **Conclusion**

With two years between iterations, *Rock Band 3* has the potential for benefiting from a longer development cycle and from the lessons learned in Harmonix's band-specific games. While I'm certain just about anybody will find something they disagree with above, I feel like I've spent enough time with the game — and I feel passionately enough about the series — to be able to draw up some conjectures about what direction the *Rock Band* games should take next. ■



June 1st, 2010

# Guest Review: Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands

Matt, a good friend of the blog, offers his viewpoint with his first guest review. *By Matt Damiano*

*Editor's note: We at Silicon Sasquatch have a problem. We don't get to play every game that comes out simply because we aren't sent review copies by publishers. However, we have friends who, like us, buy their own games, and these same friends also happen to be competent writers. Mr. Matt Damiano is one of those people, and we'd like to congratulate him on being our first guest reviewer. Let him know what you think of his review in the comments!*

Prince of Persia: The Forgotten Sands is the follow-up to the 2008 series reboot, Prince of Persia, which didn't make much of an initial commercial impression despite its generally positive reviews (and my personal favor). Consequently, Ubisoft Montreal opted to return to the original mythos of the Sands of Time games and explore the seven-year gap between Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time and Prince of Persia: Warrior Within. Given the studio's lengthy track record with the Prince, how does Forgotten Sands hold up?

In Forgotten Sands, the always affable and snarky Prince is travel-

ing to visit his brother Malik, who guards King Solomon's castle. Invaders seize the castle upon the Prince's arrival, and in an attempt to fend-off the attack Malik unleashes an ancient, evil army made of (wait for it...) sand. It's then up to the Prince to get the situation under control in a plot reminiscent of Sands of Time. The story is simple and episodic, which lends well to the Arabian Nights feel, but the content never really soars to the heights of Sands of Time. At least the Prince's one-liners are well-timed nuggets of hilarity.

The series' signature platforming is once again the star, and in that respect *Forgotten Sands* marks a new high point for *Prince of Persia*. The Prince regains the power to reverse time, but more impressive is his control over water and other elements. At the press of a button the Prince can freeze cascading water into place to perform sweet parkour maneuvers. The new twist on acrobatics adds a surprising amount of depth to game, especially because it could have been pure rehash. It also looks completely awesome.

Ever since *Sands of Time*, which had a fighting system I loved, Ubisoft has reinvented the combat mechanics with each new iteration of the series. *Forgotten Sands* is no exception. In sharp contrast to the last *Prince of Persia*'s one-on-one duels, *Forgotten Sands* introduces combat with anywhere from 10 to 100 enemies at once. The mechanics aren't bad, as is the case with the other *Prince* games, but the combat is pretty simplistic even when compared with *Sands of Time*. I will say that *Forgotten Sands* does a fantastic job of integrating its melee component into the game: Combat is less frequent than in previous entries, and the transition between it and the platforming is seamless. Players can even jump from one enemy to the next a la *Dead Rising*. So while fighting is a fun diversion, *Prince of Persia* fans aren't expected to buy these games for the combat alone.

Furthermore, while I have a deep respect for the folks at Ubisoft Montreal because their sequels often address the predecessor's issues, sometimes the studio overdoes it. Overhauling combat for the umpteenth time was unnecessary, and I can't help but feel like Ubisoft lost its nerve and gave-in to the incessant demands for a new *Sands of Time* game. And while *Forgotten Sands* is an enjoyable throwback to its predecessors, the ending practically screams sequel, whereas I want to see the series move in a new direction.

*First, allow me to clarify that I don't think this review was my magnum opus as a writer. To the contrary, it was the most self-absorbed, hedonistic word vomit I had written in years.*

*Even so, many people who have played videogames as children or adolescents have at some point thought of entering the profession of videogame journalism. This is foolish, as many childhood fantasies are, because the grim reality is that most people lack the nerve to turn their hobby/passion into their job and, more importantly, lack the ability to articulate using the mighty written word.*

*I'm a realist at heart. I know the cold truth: I'm too dedicated to recreational gaming and*



Despite the advice of '90s pop group TLC, the Prince went and chased the waterfalls anyway

Forgotten Sands doesn't feel like a cheap cash-in that coincides with the release of the movie. And though my experience with the game has been positive, it does feel like a substantial concession to a fan base that wanted more of the same. Thankfully the gameplay is made fresh by the new elemental powers and clever level design, which is ultimately what I — and presumably most of the fans — were hoping for anyway. If you like Prince of Persia, you owe it to yourself to check out Forgotten Sands. ■

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*the pursuit of my education and teaching backgrounds to make the time to be a good games journalist. But every once in a while I do indulge myself and write about the games I play. Just like a game can be an alluring escape, so to can my imagining that I'm a professional writer for a prestigious gaming magazine or website.*

*So as you find yourself perusing this haphazard attempt to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with my friends at Silicon Sasquatch, remember this: It's fun to pretend. That's why we started playing games in the first place. — Matt Damiano*

June 23rd, 2010

# Survey Results

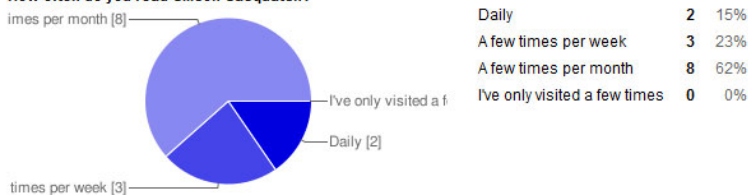
Join us as we judge ourselves as writers (and human beings) with the help of some Google-powered statistics. *By Nick Cummings*

Astute readers might remember that we asked for your input a while ago in the form of a general readership survey. We think we're pretty good at establishing our strengths and faults (particularly the latter), but we wanted to get some insight from you guys to see where you'd like to see us go from here.

Thirteen of our readers sounded off, and so I wanted to take some time to share what those responses were (don't worry — all the data we got was anonymous) and how we're interpreting them to make this blog even better.

Read on for the results.

How often do you read Silicon Sasquatch?



## 1. How often do you read Silicon Sasquatch?

I'll admit that, at first, I was a little offended by these numbers. More than half of you guys only visit a couple times per month? But then I looked at our posting schedule and how infrequently the site has been updated lately and I recognized that we're not giving anybody much reason to check in too often. I'm a big believer in quality

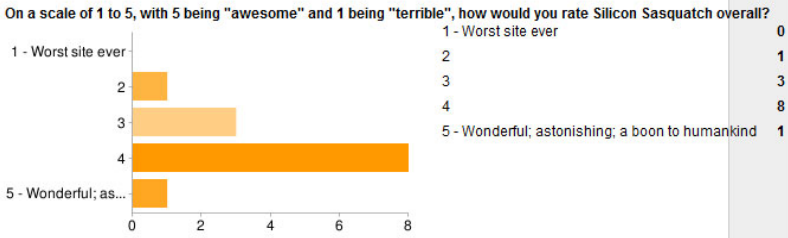
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*I had no idea how this survey would go primarily because we didn't (and still don't) have an accurate gauge of just how many people actually read our blog. Thirteen responses is either a drop in the bucket or quite a few for a small-time website; either way, the feedback was invaluable.*



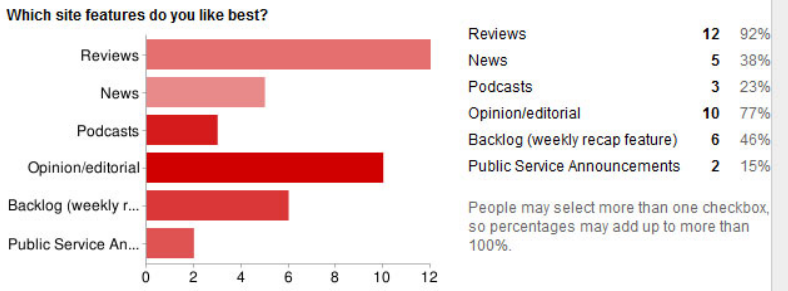
over quantity, but I really have to ask myself: what's the point of running a site if you're not gonna post anything to it?

We aspire to post more frequently, even if the trade-off is shorter articles and less thorough editing. This might take a little experimentation, so bear with us.



## 2. How would you rate the site overall?

On average, it looks like people would rate us at about a 3.69 out of 5. That's not too bad from my point of view. And fortunately, the rest of the responses helped give us a pretty good idea of how to improve people's impression of the blog.



## 3. Favorite features

No surprises here, for the most part. Our PSAs are few and far between, and chances are that if you're reading other gaming blogs, you'll more than likely hear about the things we talk about in our PSAs (sales on Steam, etc.) through them. We aspire to provide something that you can't find at the major gaming publications — like smart insights and an adult tone — and PSAs don't really too well within that philosophy.

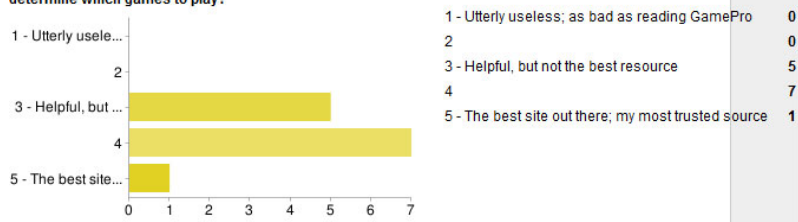
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*We decided to include this in the book because we thought it presented a clear snapshot of what our concerns were at this point in the site's lifespan as well as what our readers thought of what we were doing. Yeah, it's mostly just a lot of numbers and graphs, but it's a pretty interesting cross-section of what resonated with readers and what didn't. — Nick Cummings*

I'm a little disappointed to see how few people enjoy the podcasts, but I'm not surprised. As the one person who has edited and produced all eight episodes of the Squatchcast, I can understand why they're unappealing to many of you. Our audio quality isn't great and, ultimately, it's just a bunch of guys sitting around and talking about video games. I'd love to do something more distinctive and memorable with the podcast format. As always, I'd love to hear any suggestions you folks might have in mind.

My gut instinct was that our reviews and editorials were the strongest aspects of the site, and I'm glad that seems to be the consensus among our readers.

On a scale from 1 to 5, 1 being "not at all" and 5 being "very", how useful a resource is Silicon Sasquatch in helping you determine which games to play?

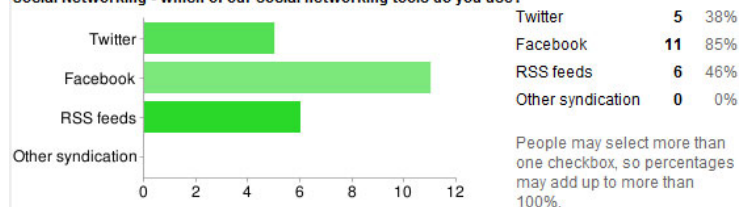


#### 4. Usefulness as a consumer guide

This is good news to me. While my top priority in reviewing a game is to discuss how effective it is in delivering on its premise and not to tell you which games are worth sixty bucks, I'm glad that our opinions on the games we play are useful. I'd estimate the average review requires about eight to twelve hours of work between the author and editor(s), so please bear in mind that we don't take these things lightly.

If you have any specific feedback on our reviews, such as features you like and dislike and suggestions for future reviews, please let us know in the comments or feel free to shoot me an email (nick at this website.com).

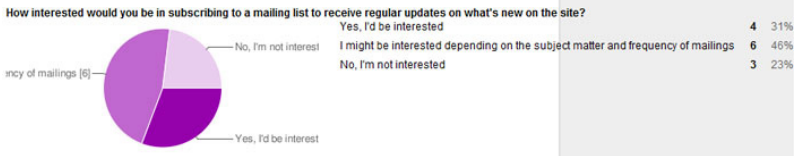
Social Networking - which of our social networking tools do you use?



## 5. Social networking and syndication

It looks like Facebook is almost ubiquitous among our readership. That's not surprising. But what that tells me is that we could really be doing a lot more to engage with everybody through Facebook even when we don't have new blog posts to talk about. I would love nothing more than to talk about games with our readers day in and day out, so please feel free to drop us a note on there anytime or start up a discussion about whatever gaming-related topic comes to mind.

I'm surprised how few of you subscribe to RSS feeds, but maybe that's just a sign of my addiction to Google Reader. If you're not familiar with RSS, it's a very simple and highly customizable means of reading updates on most blogs and websites. I highly recommend checking it out. Our RSS feed is customized so you can read entire stories from your feed reader, meaning you never have to actually visit the website proper to read our stuff. That means no ad revenue for us (if we ever chose to advertise), but it also means a much better reading experience for you.



## 6. Mailing list

This got a mixed reaction. Again, my reasoning in asking this question was to see how interested our readers are in communicating outside of actual blog posts (either one-way communication, like a newsletter, or two-way interaction on Facebook). My initial thoughts on doing a mailing list would be to summarize in brief the latest articles, talk about goings-on on the site and to talk about a few of the projects we're currently working on.

If you've read this far in this post, chances are you're genuinely interested in what we're doing with the blog. I'm not ready to talk about any specifics yet, but I think it's safe to say that we're not planning on shutting things down anytime soon — if anything, we're gearing up to start writing more frequently than ever. And I've got a special project in the works that I can't wait to talk about. I just need to make sure it's a done deal before I say anything specific.

## 7. The best features

We asked: What is the best aspect of Silicon Sasquatch? Here are

your responses:

- The opinion pieces are very well written and fantastically in depth. They are great reads and fun conversation, wish you would do more!
- Anything featuring Tyler Martin.
- Independent; obvious game enthusiasm from staff.
- sexy men!! I do really like the reviews.
- The news related articles.
- just seeing what is out there people are talking about video games
- I enjoy the in-depth game analysis offered by silicon sasquatch. It's something not found elsewhere.
- witty banter genetically spliced with in depth while still relatively down to earth reviews makes me happy

Besides confirming Tyler's Narcissus complex, these responses were very exciting for me. I care a lot about providing in-depth analysis and discussion without resorting to the adolescent B.S. and half-assed reporting that, in my opinion, defines major gaming blogs like Destructoid and Kotaku. I'm glad our emphasis on those aspects of the site has paid off.

## **8. The worst features**

What is the worst aspect of Silicon Sasquatch?

- Some weeks, the backlog is all you post. It's not that helpful when it comes to gaming news or opinions and is generally too vague to gain any interest on which aspects of games you're playing are good or bad. Too much filler.
- The parts that don't feature Tyler Martin.
- Not updated often enough.
- everything is too hot to handle!!!
- Many of the reviews, in my opinion, are very flowery (ie. they are far less critical of the games they are reviewing than they could be). It also seems that a vast majority of the games being reviewed are already popular titles that have been pumped up at nauseum by other sites. I really enjoy those sneaker games that not many people know of, or that have been poorly publicized.
- all xbox games and i only have a playstation 3 and a wii
- Lack of updates. Seems a tad bit sparse at times.
- hmmm, if I have to come up with something, I suppose posts can be a tad lengthy. But that's probably due to my infrequent readership which requires me to power through 8-10 posts in a session.

It looks to me like, based on your responses, the two most significant problems are:

Infrequent or insubstantial updates (relying on Backlog instead of providing a full review or an opinion piece)

An imbalance in our game reviews (too little diversity in platforms, i.e. too many Xbox 360 reviews, and not critical enough)

I wholeheartedly agree with the first problem, and I know the rest of the Silicon Sasquatch team agrees too. We're victims of our own need to be perfectionists — we meet to discuss story ideas pretty regularly but rarely complete a story. 800-word reviews turn into 2,500 ruminations on the nature of a game's every aspect. It's something I'm personally guilty of, and it always leaves me feeling ridiculous. If you're looking for an exhaustive breakdown of every technical aspect of a game, you'll turn to IGN or GameTrailers. It's my personal belief and, based on your responses, your preference that we write about more games on more systems more frequently and in less exhaustive detail. I think that's the right direction to take this site in, and hopefully that's where we'll end up soon.

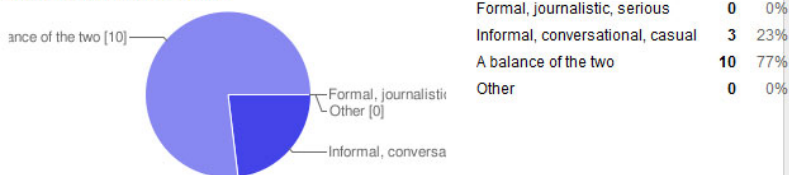
The second problem is a little more complicated. Out of the three of us who do the most regular work on the site (Aaron, Doug and myself), I'm the only one with a PlayStation 3 or a PlayStation Portable. While Aaron has a gaming-capable PC, a Wii and a DSi, and Doug has an iPhone, the only system we all share in common is an Xbox 360. It's also where we all do the majority of our gaming, so the odds are that when a major title is coming out, we're going to play and review it on Xbox 360.

Because none of us is rolling in cash and we generate no income from the site, everything we play and write about is paid for out-of-pocket. This is partially why so many of our reviews are positive: we buy games we think we'll like, and we try to enjoy them. Criticism is absolutely essential in a proper review, and it's something we're probably not as consistent with as we should be, but it's difficult when we're mixing our (admittedly expensive) hobby with a semi-professional blog.

Ultimately, our reviews need to earn our readers' trust, and I believe we can be more critical in our reviews without compromising the experience of playing the games we buy.

And as for focusing on lesser-known and independent games: I think it's a brilliant idea. Mainstream outlets cover all the major games extensively, so picking up on those ones that slip through the cracks would be an excellent fit for our site. Our Google Analytics reports always show a strong stream of traffic from searches related to lesser-known games like *Robot Unicorn Attack*, *The Path* and *Machinarium*, so those are clearly great ways to attract new readers as well.

When it comes to videogame discussion, do you prefer a more serious, journalistic tone or a more conversational, informal tone?



## 9. Tone

I agree: a balance seems most appropriate. After all, we're talking about video games. We love video games. We can certainly critique them and discuss them from a formal or academic standpoint all day, but when the ultimate purpose of gaming is to have fun, it doesn't make any sense to treat everything from a dry, scholarly point of view. On the other hand, informal and casual tone on its own results in inconsistent and less-than-credible content, and our integrity is very important to us. But if you three ever feel like we're too stuffy in our writing, feel free to speak up and let us know. We always love hearing from you guys, even if it's just to tell us to dislodge our heads from wherever they might be stuck.

## 10. Favorite articles

Is there one article that stands out as your favorite? If so, please list it below and describe what you liked about it.

- That one written by Tyler Martin. I imagine his smooth, sulky voice in my head when I read it.
- nope
- The Modern Warfare 2 review.
- Wish I could remember a specific one, although I loved your guys' best of 2009 posts.

Well, I'm glad to hear the Best of 2009 feature was appealing to at least one of you guys. I'm very proud of how that all turned out.

## 11. Additional comments

Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

- You guys rock! <3
- This is Tyler Martin.

- I've been staring at that "favorite game of all time" question for ten minutes now....
- I would love to see more articles pertaining to news and future releases of titles. Maybe a seasonal game update? Whats new for the summer? possibly some coverage of gaming conventions or interviews with companies or designers? I know that you all have jobs to do outside of this blog though. I am a daily reader and it would be nice to have something new everyday, if only something small like what to expect later this week or links to other great articles pertaining to whats new in the gaming world. I think it would also be interesting to see some of your writers critique some articles done by other famous gaming bloggers/sites.
- Butt fart poop.
- I really enjoy blog interaction. Including polls that readers can see results of would be sweet. And seeing some more specific questions for us readers designed to inspire discussion in the comments could be fun.

There are some real fantastic suggestions in that fourth comment. I like the idea of posting something daily, even if it's just essentially a tease of what's coming soon. Critiquing other writers could be a good idea, but it's also worth bearing in mind that the number of people actually writing about games on a daily basis probably only numbers in the hundreds. It's a small community, so we'd definitely want to make sure we don't burn any bridges.

And as far as blog interaction: I'm all for it. I'll look into what it takes to do polls in WordPress, and I'd like to see more of our future articles directly encourage discussion in the comments section. Of course, that means that you guys have to be willing to leave a comment or two from time to time.

## 12. The most important question

What's your favorite game of all time?

- Duck Hunt
- New Super Mario Bros. Wii!
- The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past
- Yoshi's Island?
- Any game with 50 Cent.
- tied for Starcraft (all incarnations up to SC2) and Diablo 2 (+LoD),
- Counter Strike
- Silent Hill 2
- MGS1

- Super Metroid
- FF7/Arkham Asylum/resident evils

At least nobody wrote “Custer’s Revenge.”

In all seriousness, I love that nobody had the same response.

Games are a fantastic thing because they appeal to so many people in so many different ways. Compared to my current top 5 (Rock Band 2, Diablo II, Plants vs. Zombies, Chrono Trigger and Grim Fandango), I’m seeing a whole lot of diversity out there — and I love it.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you so much for your responses! I recognize this is just a small-time blog run by a few guys who care about games, but it’s been a blast to have a public forum to improve our writing and discuss these things in detail. And although we don’t have a massive readership, we couldn’t ask for a more dedicated and awesome bunch than you guys. Thanks for sticking it out with us for so long; I hope we’ll be hearing from you soon! ■



July 21st, 2010

# Book Review: Masters of Doom: How Two Guys Created an Empire and Transformed Pop Culture

We take on our first-ever book review with this history of the rise and fall of the two Johns. *By Nick Cummings*

*Editor's note: Sometimes — purely by accident — we end up spending our free time on things that aren't games. In an effort to make the site more useful and to encourage us to write more, I've decided to take a stab at a good, old-fashioned book review. In case you're drawing a blank: books are those things that look kind of like a Kindle but they don't need to be charged.*

John Romero and John Carmack. The rock star and the closeted engineer. The master designer and the virtuoso coder. The gamer and the programmer.

If you're a human being in the Western world, you've heard of Doom, even if you haven't played it. And if you're reading this site, you probably know about John Romero and John Carmack, two of the founding members of id Software. But if you're like me, you only

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*This is the first of, I hope, many more book reviews to come. While there are a lot of books based on games, there aren't a whole lot that are well-written and exhaustively researched. Masters of Doom is one of the rare exceptions.*

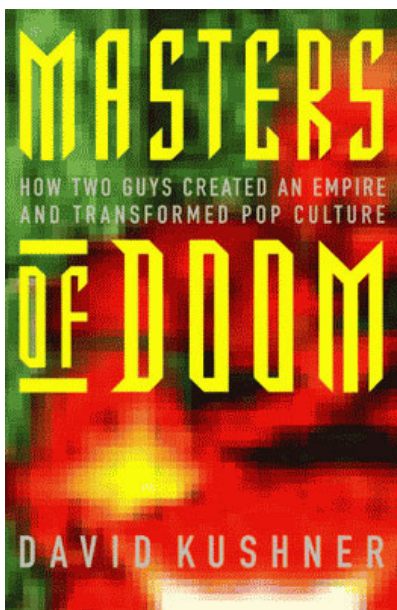
*In hindsight, I wish I'd gone into a little more detail on the story behind the book and specific techniques the author applied in its writing. Still, it was my first attempt at a book review in a very long time, and if this book has taught me anything, it's that nothing's ever perfect on the first try. — Nick Cummings*

knew the cursory details: the two Johns' rise to fame, their infamous split after Quake was released and Romero's failed magnum opus, Daikatana.

David Kushner's book *Masters of Doom* does an admirable job of detailing the chronology of each of the two Johns' rise to fame and fortune from an inauspicious childhood. The entire story is told in a mere 300 pages, which I found myself flying through in just two days. However, the book was researched and written over six years, and features more than 500 interviews with all sorts of industry luminaries and, of course, the original id Software team.

While a narrative about a bunch of awkward game programmers huddled around their desks for months on end might not sound like riveting material, there's more than enough eccentricity in the characters and drama in the plot to keep the story flowing: Ferraris are bought, rockets are launched, marriages are broken, friendships are severed and money is squandered. But what else would you expect from the guys who turned the industry on its head and got rich on their own terms, all while provoking a national controversy on the role of violence in video games?

I've only read a few books about the history of video games, but *Masters of Doom* stands out as one of the most engaging, compelling, and worthwhile. Even a casual gamer will find something resonant about the story of these two awkward, ambitious guys who defied their families' expectations and forever changed the course of gaming. ■



### Recommended for:

- Anyone curious about the rise of one of gaming's most infamous studios
- Gaming history buffs who appreciate a thorough, well-documented book
- People who remember the phrase "Doom clone"



July 22nd, 2010

# Review: Limbo

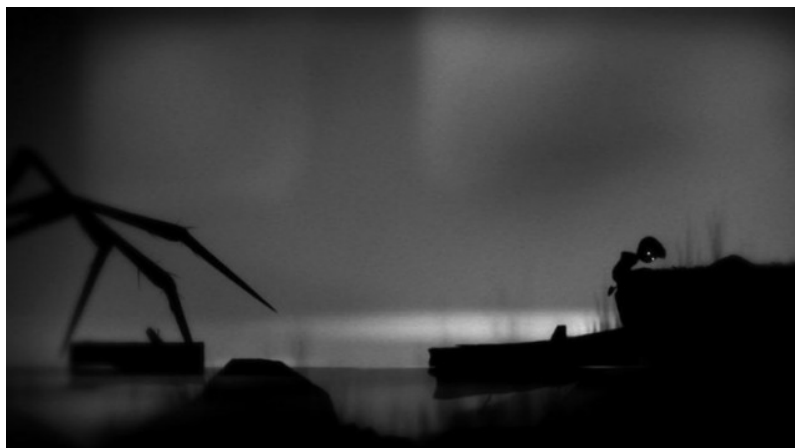
Playdead's debut title channels brooding horror and beautiful bleakness in this brilliant game. *By Nick Cummings*

I've tried to keep some distance from the debate over whether games can be — or currently are — art. It's my belief that art is in the eye of the beholder, so who cares if a few critics (including some critics of another medium entirely) disagree? I've had experiences with games that have been as thought-provoking and moving as some of the best movies, books, paintings, songs, and so on.

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*What a beautiful game. I watched a friend of mine play through it recently and there's something so satisfying about watching someone react to the moments of horror, frustration and grim comedy the same way I did. It's something that's unique to games.*

*I remember writing this review a few days before I moved away from Eugene. It was a beautiful summer day, and I was sitting outside at a relatively new cafe called Vero. I wrote this entire review in about twenty minutes. It was one of those rare instances where everything just came to me at once. Sometimes, writing is just sheer bliss. I think that, above all else, is why we never gave up as writers; there's something intangible and wonderful about the craft that you just can't find anywhere else. — Nick Cummings*



But if you're not content to sit by the sidelines and just let Roger Ebert trash-talk games, you'll find some strong ammunition for your viewpoint in *Limbo*, Playdead's debut Xbox Live Arcade title and the first game out the door in this year's Summer of Arcade series. With its bold, almost suffocating art style, excellent use of sound and subtle yet significant method of storytelling, *Limbo* is a thoroughly inspired concept that couldn't be realized in any other medium.

From the moment I began playing *Limbo*, all my notions that I'd cobbled together from a few screenshots and brief descriptions about what the game might be were dismissed outright. There isn't any text telling a story here; this is visually driven narration, and it's striking just how powerful it is.

Utilizing a monochromatic color palette and a fuzzy, limited depth of field, *Limbo*'s world manages to come alive in some unexpected ways. Animations are fluid and expressive, particularly in the case of the silhouetted boy, your protagonist, which is surprising when you consider that his expression is limited to the fluid swinging of his limbs as he runs and the constant stare of his two glowing, blank eyes.

The environment is brought to life through a strong combination of small but significant ambient animations, such as kicking up dust in your wake or small clumps of dirt falling as you scale a cliff, and the minimalist sound work. The result is a world that gives the illusion of just barely concealing untold horrors at the corners of your eyes. It's a harrowing, unsettling feeling, and it's executed flawlessly.

While *Limbo* does have a premise, it's intentionally succinct: your sister has gone missing and you have entered *Limbo* to save her. I wouldn't have expected a straightforward platformer without a single written or spoken word of exposition to have a plot, but I was impressed to see that there absolutely is one. Things will happen to the player, and things will happen around the player, and the way that

Limbo uses these events to both add variety and depth to the play experience and to shape the narrative in some bold and poignant ways in the player's mind is admirable.

I think it's only fair to say that Limbo is a beautiful, artistic experience. But Limbo is a game, too, and while its design and execution are consistently good, the puzzle-based platforming gameplay doesn't remain as fresh or inspired from start to finish as the world the game is bringing to life. This becomes particularly noticeable at around the halfway point, where the concepts that made the first portion of the game fresh and exciting are reintroduced without perhaps as much variation or innovation as they might have demanded. As a result, by the time the credits roll, you'll probably find that your eagerness to see the conclusion is much stronger than your desire to complete yet another physics-based box puzzle.

If you're like me, a game with ambitious ideas and strong presentation means a lot more than a fully-developed, highly polished core game. In that case, you're going to really enjoy Limbo. But puzzle-platformer enthusiasts who were hoping for a game with the escalating difficulty and depth of Braid might find themselves disappointed with the relatively short adventure and flat challenge of Limbo. But if you're on the fence, you might as well take the leap; you never know what you'll find on the other side. ■

*Limbo was developed by Playdead and is available on Xbox Live Arcade for 1200 Microsoft Points (\$15). Game was played to completion over approximately four hours, and another two hours were spent going back to find the secret locations, resulting in a final completion rating of 99%.*

### **Recommended for**

- Aesthetes with an eye for artistic games
- Anyone who appreciates rich, moody, beautiful environments
- Video game enthusiasts who value games that tap into a player's thoughts and emotions

### **Not Recommended for**

- Budget-conscious consumers concerned with getting the most playtime for their money; Limbo will probably only take the average player about four hours to finish
- Anyone who thinks the sort of people in the "Recommended" section sound like a bunch of pretentious jerks

August 30th, 2010

# Retrospective: NBA Jam

Doug hearkens back to the glory days of mid-'90s arcade action with the inimitable NBA Jam. *By Doug Bonham*

*Here at Silicon Sasquatch, we feel that old games deserve some love too. From time to time, we want to look back at games that have made a big impact — especially when a new version of an old favorite is scheduled to be released. It is in that context that we present to you another Retrospective article, this time on arcade and 16-bit classic NBA Jam.*

It's no secret that I am a sports guy. Many times, though, sports games are commodities: The franchises develop a lineage (à la Madden NFL) while the details on individual entries from each year are often forgotten.

NBA Jam is different. It may not be the first arcade sports game, or even the first arcade basketball game, but it was one of the first blockbuster arcade games, and it's one that still resounds in the gaming community to



*PIPPEN!* Bulls and Blazers great Scottie Pippen was a god in NBA Jam

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*HE'S ON FIRE! Sorry, I had to. In late summer, the NBA Jam remake began to heat up and I thought of doing a series of three articles for the site revolving around the franchise. The first was this retrospective, the second was going to be on why this was a good time in the NBA in terms of star-power for a new Jam game, and the last discussing Jam and the rebirth of 2D games. In the end, those latter two ideas merged into a second article, and it turned out well, too.*

*Compared to the earlier Retrospective on Assassin's Creed, I really enjoy this structure of article, combining history with impacts still felt. This may be the standard Retrospective style*

this day. It's also one of the few sports games that holds just as much nostalgia for nerds as it does for jocks. Most importantly, it's still fun — and a new one is on the way.

Developed by Midway, the original NBA Jam was a skunkworks project that eventually earned more than \$1 billion in revenue in the arcades. Home ports for the Super NES and Genesis followed, as did sequels, spin-offs (like NBA Hangtime and NBA Showtime) and games inspired by the series (EA's last-gen NBA Street titles, for one).

The version of NBA Jam on home consoles is what I'm most familiar with. My childhood best friends had copies of the Sega Genesis version of the game, and many an afternoon was whiled away throwing down dunks and trying to get on fire. The game's simplified interpretation of NBA rules, pared-down 2 on 2 gameplay, and flashy emphasis on big slam dunks and close games were really attractive and addictive, even to elementary school kids.

One of the real highlights of that time was trying to find all the cheat codes and secret characters in the game. Remember, this was a time before the Internet — and video game magazines were not something your average 3rd or 4th grader read on a regular basis. Codes passed like rumors through the schoolyard, and it's only now that I realize who that P-Funk guy was they put into the game. Of course, the tag team of Bill Clinton and Al Gore was also something special.

The amazing thing is that, even now, the game holds up. Fellow Sasquatch editor Nick and I have put some time into the NBA Jam cabinet at Ground Kontrol, and playing a full 4-player matchup is still great fun. It's simple enough to learn and strategize that within one quarter of a game I was able to help Nick drop 3-pointers and dunk on fools. We've even discussed heading down there just for NBA Jam.

That's part of the reason why I'm so excited for EA Sports' renewal of NBA Jam due out this fall: the gameplay still holds up. As much as I love the old sprites and using the classic lineups from 1993, I believe that an update featuring better graphics and today's stars will help capture a younger generation. Regardless, the old version will live on in arcades and emulators, so if EA royally screws it up, we'll always have Midway's classic. ■

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*going forward. Of course, it helps that NBA Jam is such a good game and takes a snapshot of a great time in NBA history — good articles come from great sources of inspiration. Digging into the cultural impact of video games and how they've influenced contemporary titles is really fascinating to me; this article is quick, sweet, and well-written. It's a bit shorter than some of my other features, but it's just as long as it needs to be.*

*I think with this NBA Jam retrospective, you can really see an improvement compared to my earlier writing in this book. — Doug Bonham*

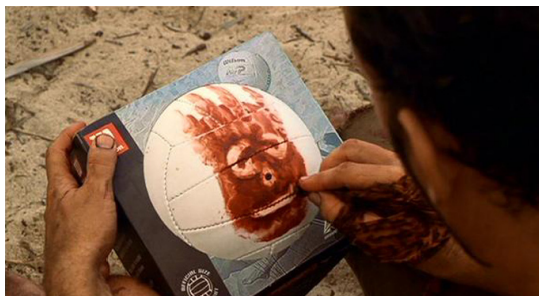
September 3rd, 2010

# On the Disappointment of Crackdown 2 (or how technological isolation will lead to poor monetary decisions)

Being stuck in the woods for months on end can drive a guy to some strange choices. *By Aaron Thayer*

More than likely, you've been asked by a friend or acquaintance the following get-to-know-you question: "What would you bring if you were stranded on a deserted island?"

Be it books, films or music, people will predictably take their favorite forms of media with them to solitary sands. That's obvious, because no one is going to voluntarily listen to Marky Mark and the Funky Bunch on cassette for 10 years while waiting for a Carnival cruise ship to pass by. Have we already forgotten what technological isolation did to Tom Hanks?



*This is what happens when you can't play Doodle  
Jump on your iPhone*



So picture, if you would, a particular sort of desert island scenario, one without sand and crystal clear water but pine trees and an algae-plagued lake. There's also dust. Lots of dust.

I worked a summer job at Camp Pioneer for two months, a Boy Scouts of America summer camp located in central Oregon, where the air was pure and the Internet was slow to non-existent. I brought my Xbox 360 hard drive and a few of my favorite games; With no access to Xbox Live and its myriad

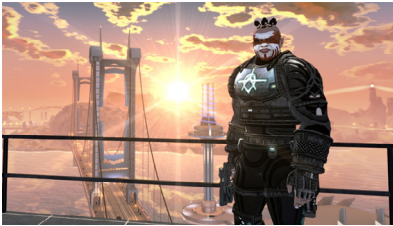


*Hey, only 499 left to go!*

of wonderful releases this season (Limbo, Monkey Island 2: Special Edition and Scott Pilgrim vs. The World: The Game to name a few), I knew I'd be spending the little free time I had with the older hits.

Yet in late June I remembered Crackdown 2 was nearing its release.

To some gamers, the first Crackdown was not much more than a DVD with a link to the Halo 3 beta. However, I gave Crackdown a chance to prove itself. Its faults were readily apparent – from slow-down and glitches to awkward shooting mechanics and a corny plot – yet in spite of the problems it made an amicable impression on me. There weren't many other games out there that could turn city rooftops into a super-powered pedestrian highway.



*Bet you can't guess which Crackdown this image is from! Here's a hint: In this Crackdown you collect orbs.*

Crackdown 2 had been in stores for two weeks by my next trip into town. After a stressful first month of camp, I needed to channel my frustrations into something both constructive and destructive. I thought I needed a new game – any game. A person can only read so many books at once in a poorly patched, canvas-roofed sleeping shack. So

it was with eager anticipation that I spent \$59.99 on Crackdown 2 during an arid Wednesday afternoon in July.

It was a total waste of money.

Crackdown 2 is the premiere release from Ruffian Games, a developer that houses some migrated talent from Realtime Worlds, the original creators of Crackdown. Even so, Ruffian's interpretation of the series could only have been impressive if the first Crackdown didn't already exist.

Crackdown 2 is a complete rehash of an over three year old game. And with the return of the series' repetitive elements of collecting and



*The best part of Crackdown 2: The Wing Suit. Also, take note of the tiny hat.*

killing everything that beeps or bellows, a deep sameness pervades the entire experience of the sequel, which ruins the finished product. Imagine if a painter painted the same portrait twice, but he brushed a very tiny hat onto the second one and then labeled each portrait separately, as if there was a legitimate distinction between the two. Crackdown 2 is Crackdown 1 wearing a very tiny hat.

But I, lost in the technologically desolate forests beneath Mt. Jefferson, simply couldn't get enough of the game. Between breaks and after work, you'd find me in the hidden gaming nook inside the medic's lodge trying to power up some kind of energy beam that did something I can hardly remember. The plot was another throwaway attempt at a cohesive narrative.

Crackdown 2 was a momentary addiction, and I only figured out why that was after I had packed up and left. What it came down to was a very basic case of supply and demand. I demanded something new to enhance my downtime, and Crackdown 2 was the best supplier I could think of. And no, StarCraft II never even crossed my mind.

It's not that Crackdown 2 is a terrible game, it just lacks in ingenuity. What could have been a lavish sequel turned out to be an unimaginative trip down memory lane. Thrust once again into Pacific City – but wait, it's 10 years later and there are mutants! – to level

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*I hope my summertime desperation comes through in this half editorial, half review.*

*This was such an absurd article to write, and it was the first thing I posted after almost three months away from Silicon Sasquatch. Nick and Doug both laughed at the premise, and I myself chuckled mentally a few times during the course of writing out all of my strained thoughts and frustrations on a disappointing product.*

*All of us needed this sort of satirical and humorous article to turn out well, if I may so boldly presume the thoughts and feelings of my colleagues. There were many periods during the sum-*

up the same five skills and listen to the same, grating douche of an announcer throw out compliments and biting condemnation...it's painfully vapid.

Perspective affects personal taste quite heavily, and it's easy to forget that. There's no question that had I been in my typical, interconnected-to-nerdy-things environment I would have passed on Crackdown 2. But for two months I was missing out on new videogames, and my desire to buy something – anything – got in the way of my usual buyer-beware nature. My decision to purchase Crackdown 2 is regrettable because it's a barely improved version of an experience that was enjoyable in 2007, but not so enjoyable that it deserved to be shamelessly replicated a second time.

Let's just say that Crackdown 2 won't be the one videogame I pack in my desert island survival kit. ■

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*mer of 2010 that we thought it would be the end of our blog. But in conjunction with successful meetings, discussions and plans after I returned to civilization, this article stood as an example of the direction we could take our writing, and to remember the joy of the written word; really, to not be afraid of the unusual and to post something, anything, every week.*

*Additionally this article gave rise to a new metaphor involving painting and tiny hats. I need to trademark it so I can collect my well-deserved royalties. — Aaron Thayer*

September 9th, 2010

# PAX 2010 Debriefed: No, that's not a Duke Nukem joke

| A Penny Arcade Expo veteran offers some constructive criticism for the best public video game show. *By Nick Cummings*

There were only a few thousand dedicated folks who made the trip to Bellevue, Washington for the first-ever Penny Arcade Expo back in 2004. Maybe it's because it was the first time I ever took a road trip with some friends since coming of age, or maybe it's because we planned to go about ten hours before the expo began, but something about that trip was life-changing.

Here were a bunch of gamers congregating in a public space to play some Tetris, take in the handful of new games on display, debate menial details like which Final Fantasy game is best (trust me, they still get off on that argument), listen to some nerdy music and hang out at one crazy, 24-hour party. I think it's safe to say that there had never been anything like it in the history of time, and so yeah – I take a little pride in knowing I was one of a few thousand people who were there when it all started.

In fact, I'm one of what has to be a pretty small number of people who have attended all seven PAXes in Seattle. I keep coming back because, simply, I think it's a fantastic event. I love what it stands for, I love how it brings together new and old friends, and I especially love having the opportunity to hang out with people who create, write about, produce, promote, and just generally love games.

But something was wrong this year. Despite its strongest turnout yet, I felt there were some significant problems that surfaced at this year's PAX.

First, **it's a victim of its size**. When the folks at Penny Arcade saw the 60,000-plus attendees at the 2009 show, they knew they had to

adjust for an even larger crowd for this year's show. As a result, the entire Washington State Convention and Trade Center was opened up as well as the newly remodeled annex across the street. And to top it all off, the entire Benaroya Hall theater at 3rd and Union was relegated to major game demonstrations, panels with the Penny Arcade guys and – unfortunately – the concerts. With a fixed number of seats and no standing room (a major problem when you're listening to any sort of up-tempo live music), concert-goers were forced to commit to long lines and a comparatively subdued atmosphere for the traditionally high-energy live shows.

And with a more than 10% increase in attendance comes a greater problem: **massive lines in the exhibition hall**. Arguably the main attraction for the majority of PAX attendees, the exhibition hall was expanded from even last year's labyrinthine sprawl, incorporating part of another floor in addition to the majority of the fourth level. And it's no wonder why: the number of attendees, ranging from publishing giants like Electronic Arts and Nintendo to smaller names like The Behemoth and Halfbrick, is staggering. It's a testament to the importance of a community-driven event in the games industry that so many publishers and developers took the time to spend an entire weekend showing off their latest and upcoming games and discussing them with their fans and peers.

At least, that's what they were trying to do. But with so many big-name games on the floor – including elephant-in-the-room Duke Nukem Forever in playable form – the wait to get some hands-on time with many of these games was, frankly, too damn long. I waited two hours and fifteen minutes to step inside the Dragon Age 2 booth for a presentation that amounted to a five-minute speech on Bioware's goals for building a sequel to Dragon Age and about ten minutes of hands-on time with a relatively limited combat-focused demo. And while the Portal 2 line only took about an hour, the payoff – a fifteen-minute live demonstration of the co-operative mode – felt similarly thin. But a three-hour wait to check out a game for a few minutes? Even if that game is the industry's longest-awaited game, Duke Nukem Forever? That's just unreasonable.

But the greatest problem became apparent after I waited in line to play Epic Mickey for a good twenty minutes before being cut off by



*Sex Bob-Omb (with special guest Roxanne Richter) performing on-stage in Rock Band 3 at PAX 2010. And if that wasn't cool enough, The Clash at Demonhead took the stage immediately afterward.*

an editor from a major gaming blog, who was promptly escorted to the front of the line for a lengthy, hands-on demo of the game. It dawned on me: **PAX is losing its focus as a fan-oriented event.** Sure enough, members of the gaming media were being given preferential treatment for all sorts of games on the show floor. I saw several booths where playable games were cordoned off with a “RESERVED FOR PRESS” sign. To add insult to injury, some games – including *Civilization V* – were present on the show floor but relegated to sealed rooms, available “by appointment only.”

By appointment only? The only kind of person who makes an appointment to see a game is a game critic. And really, that’s what made this year so troubling – PAX is turning into yet another video game expo where publishers are going out of their way to cater to the professional blogging crowd. Simply put, that’s not what PAX is supposed to be.

If everything works out like we hope it will, next year will be the first time that all three Silicon Sasquatch editors attend the Penny Arcade Expo as media members. Although I’m really excited to add a little legitimacy and recognition to our blog, I’m also a little hesitant: Are we going to make the PAX experience worse for the average attendee? ■



*Anyone can cosplay Frank West, but it takes a real fan to dress up like the Frank West we all actually played as.*

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*Out of everything I've written, I think this article got the strongest response. Hundreds of people read the article, which led to comments from some people who had never commented before. I felt like I had finally written something that connected profoundly with the gaming community at large, which is something I'd always aspired to do.*

*This article wouldn't have been a success if it weren't for Twitter. We always post a tweet on the official Silicon Sasquatch Twitter account (@sasquatchgaming), but I made sure to include the #PAX hash tag in that tweet as well. That way, anybody who's following PAX discussion on Twitter would see the message pop up. The article was retweeted quite a few times and the page views began to pour in. It felt good. I hope I can be lucky enough to tap the collective gamer zeitgeist again in the future. — Nick Cummings*



September 10th, 2010

# Review: Dead Rising 2: Case Zero

The same unique, strange zombie game you know and love, now served as an appetizer. *By Aaron Thayer*

Developers have come a long way since the abysmal, early dark ages of downloadable content. What started with overpriced horse armor has evolved into a product that can defy typical classification.

Is Case Zero a demo for Dead Rising 2? Yes. Is it a prelude DLC package that adds to the full game with character development and carry-over bonuses for the final retail product? Certainly. To the great chagrin of forum-goers and blog posters, Dead Rising 2: Case Zero is but the tip of the iceberg for the industry, and I couldn't be more pleased with the idea.

Welcome to the future of videogame demos. I hope the critics have developed adequate coping mechanisms.

Let me slow the hype train down a little bit now that you're paying attention. Case Zero was a significant risk for Capcom and Blue Castle Games, the developer of Dead Rising 2. Gamers can act like an entitled bunch, and time after time the community's bratty attitude coalesces when companies test the waters for the sake of higher profits. Even I was skeptical after the news broke that Dead Rising 2 wasn't receiving a traditional demo; instead, the Xbox Live marketplace was going to play host to an exclusive campaign prior to the



From the looks of it, Chuck doesn't slow his truck down in school zones events of *Dead Rising 2*, and it would cost 400 Microsoft Points (\$5).

It had finally happened: Some suit in a boardroom mustered the gall to charge console owners for a demo of an unproven product. I sympathized with the initial disdain, and it wouldn't be until I played the trial of a so-called demo that my mind was changed.

Case Zero manages to succeed under an enormous amount of scrutiny. Every second the game is working to prove Capcom's experiment on several levels: it persuades gamers to buy *Dead Rising 2*; it demonstrates that \$5 is a legitimate price for downloadable content that many will consider superfluous; and it serves as a well-funded study that developers can analyze to decide if paid demos might become a viable business strategy. Despite its limited scope, Case Zero does an admirable job of converting skepticism into belief.

The three-hour plot is extremely basic. A stripped-down small town on the outskirts of Las Vegas serves as the focal point for players' introduction to Chuck Greene, a badass motocross racer with an infected daughter and little patience for the undead. The game is still *Dead Rising*, but it plays better than before. Melee hits connect the way you expect them to, and firing guns isn't something to avoid in the sequel — it's actually fun.

I was surprised to find that I don't miss the original game's photography element. Frank West, as fantastic as he was, won't be missed (although he has covered wars [y'know]). Combining weapons in

*This review of *Dead Rising 2: Case Zero* works because I ignored the most banal elements of the reviewing process: the graphics, the sound, the controls, the gameplay and the plot were not engrossing material for an overview of Case Zero. Instead, I argued that the most significant aspect of this game was its experimental classification.*

*Few people would have expected a studio to replace its traditional free demo with a separate, downloadable story parallel to the main retail release, and not to mention one that cost money.*





*How progressive of you, Capcom!*

ways that would make Tim “The Tool-Man” Taylor blush is a better gimmick for the series than picture-taking. A handful of combo cards — playing card parodies that show which items are required to make a weapon — are available to collect, and the amount of demented weaponry in Case Zero alone makes me eager to see the full game’s arsenal.

However, there are still survivors to rescue and countdown timers to obsess over. I hoped the developers would alter or remove these aspects from the sequel, but it doesn’t appear that way. At least the survivors display a modicum of intelligence this time: during three playthroughs of the game, I rarely had a survivor get stopped and chewed on by a zombie — they will actually weave in-and-out of crowds and kill with their weapons.

Everything people love or hate about the Dead Rising series is present in Case Zero; the zombie bees, the bowling ball kills, the day-to-day survival, the painful dialogue, the leveling system and the lack of a run button. Once again this is a game that will be as fun as people make it, an interesting concept that encourages players to craft a unique experience from numerous separate ingredients. I won’t say that Case Zero signifies a drastic change to the series that some will have wanted, but for me it proves Blue Castle Games has done an acceptable job of maintaining the spirit of Dead Rising while gussying up a few of its most glaring blemishes.

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*It was a gamble for Capcom, and thus more relevant to discuss the success of this business idea than an analysis of the clothing textures of zombies.*

*Since Case Zero, we’ve asked that any future reviews dismiss established critiquing tropes and alternatively focus on the elements that impress or frustrate the author, whose opinions are vital to a review’s success.*

*I think the approach suits us quite well. — Aaron Thayer*

But I'm not really reviewing the game, am I? I'm reviewing the concept Case Zero is trailblazing.

So, this is my case for *Dead Rising 2: Case Zero*. Buy it. We gamers should encourage these types of projects, even if we have to pay for them. Where's the harm in funding the development community to craft worthwhile demonstrations of upcoming games? I'd rather fork over \$5 than waste \$60. ■

**Recommended for:**

- Hesitant gamers not sure what to make of *Dead Rising 2*
- Series fans salivating for more wacky zombie mayhem
- Anyone with 400 Microsoft Points stagnating in their account: Even if you don't want to get *Dead Rising 2*, Case Zero will provide hours of cheap entertainment

**Not Recommended for:**

- *Dead Rising* nay-sayers
- Those who prefer their action titles to have fluid controls — Case Zero is reminiscent of early *Resident Evil* titles' blocky movements
- If micromanaging survivors, medicine for your daughter, weapon crafting, door-unlocking and item hunting in a limited time frame makes you anxious

*Dead Rising 2: Case Zero is available for a suggested retail price of 400 Microsoft Points (\$5) exclusively in the Xbox Live Arcade marketplace. The reviewer purchased the game himself and beat its story mode thrice before writing this review. He never put Chuck in a dress, if it matters.*



September 16th, 2010

# Our Most Anticipated Games for the Rest of 2010

We prepare for the infamous fourth quarter barrage of high-quality games. *By the Silicon Sasquatch staff*

Another year is nearing its inevitable end, and we couldn't be any happier about it. Although 2010 has already played host to a plethora of amazing and potentially award-winning video games, it's not quite time to start hedging bets for the game of the year. Read on for our staff's own list of noteworthy releases that you should be excited for.

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*What a difference a year makes. With a simplified structure, tighter writing and a broader assortment of games, this "most anticipated" list easily trumps last year's in my mind. It'll be interesting to see how these games compare to our top ten list at the end of the year. — Nick Cummings*

## **Sid Meier's Civilization V**

*September 21st — Windows*

I'm a late bloomer when it comes to strategy games, and it pains me that it took me so long to understand what makes the Civilization series one of the



most cherished in the history of video games. Even though I've had a variety of friends bursting to tell me all about their fantastic strategies and the hilarious anachronisms that have arisen in the matches they've played across the entire series, it took an iPhone port of Civilization Revolution to offer me a gentle enough learning curve to work up the confidence to take on the "real" series. A couple dozen hours later, and I think it's safe to say that I'm a Civ 4 devotee.

But with some clever gameplay tweaks and some borrowed lessons from both Civ 4 and Revolution, Civ 5 looks like it'll offer the best of both worlds: the depth and scale of classic Civ with the accessibility and streamlining of Revolution. Add in full Steam support and you've got a veritable crisis waiting to happen for law students, newlyweds, and anybody with the faintest hope of maintaining a regular sleep schedule. — *Nick Cummings*

## **Formula 1 2010**

*September 22nd — 360/PS3/Windows*

This is a game that will probably not receive much hype in the United States. Developed by Codemasters and built on the engine that powers its other racing franchise, Dirt, this is the first Formula 1 game for Xbox 360 and the first for PS3 since



2007. Videos and preview coverage from Gamescom in Germany lead me to believe this will be a fast, fun and gorgeous title.

More importantly for fans of racing games it promises to do something more interesting with its career structure. The off-track politics, rumor mills and movements in real Formula 1 are almost as interesting as the on-track racing; Codemasters has tried to reproduce

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*Our most-anticipated games list varies from Little Big Planet 2 to Civilization to sports games; I think that shows how wide the pantheon of expected AAA titles is in gaming, and how varied our tastes in games are, too. Though not all of the games have been released yet, it looks like a few of the games are going to be game of the year contenders, a few are disap-*

that for F1 2010. You start at a lower team, trying to meet low team standards — you're not expected to win with the worst car on the grid — and advance from there. If you make it into a top team, you'll then be expected to challenge for race wins and the championship. If the handling engine lives up to the promise, this could be the best racer since Forza 3. — *Doug Bonham*

## **NBA Elite 11**

*October 5th — 360/PS3*

The sarcastic answer to the question of “Why NBA Elite 11, Doug?” would be, “Because it's how I can play NBA Jam on next-gen consoles.” And that's partially true — NBA Jam promises to be an excellent remake of one of my favorite sports games of all time, with nice graphical and roster updates. I'm sure it will become a multiplayer favorite soon enough.



However, that doesn't take away from what Elite can become. This is the third EA Sports franchise to undergo a hard reboot in recent years, and the other two (NHL and FIFA) have become the high-water mark for their respective sports. Elite also happens to be developed by EA Vancouver, who is responsible for those other two series, and also features the producer who led the NHL revamp. I know that I play the hell out of sports games with franchise modes, and in a fall heavy on games but light on budget, if NBA Elite turns out well, I'll get my money's value — even before Jam is factored in. — *Doug Bonham*

## **Comic Jumper: The Adventures of Captain Smiley**

*October 6th — Xbox Live Arcade*

Having made a name for itself with popular downloadable games like The Maw and 'Splosion Man, Twisted Pixel is set to release its third original game — “original” being the key word in that phrase. Perhaps better than any other small developer, Twisted Pixel has infused more character and humor into its ten-dollar downloadable games than can be found in most big blockbuster titles. With Comic Jumper, Twisted Pixel seems determined to raise its bar for absurd

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*pointing, and a few are lying in between. Hindsight is great; looking back at our past lists, it's very fun to see how right and wrong we were, and how excited we were for the wrong sorts of titles. — Doug Bonham*

hilarity to dizzying new heights.

The game stars Captain Smiley and his sidekick, a star-shaped thing embedded in his chest (who happens to be named Star). They're tasked with battling the good captain's arch-nemesis, Brad, across several iconic comic book styles, including the Silver Age, manga, fantasy and modern. Based on the short time I had with it at PAX, it seems like the Twisted Pixel folks are still thoroughly out of their minds — and that can only mean good things for their games.

— *Nick Cummings*

## **Fallout: New Vegas**

*October 19th — 360/PS3/Windows*

Fallout 3 was a revelation. Bethesda absolutely nailed the classic series' transition from isometric 2D to awe-inspiring 3D. A game I spent a combined 150 hours playing across multiple characters says something of the quality of development. New Vegas may have been handed over to



Obsidian, a studio with a spotty track record of delivering stable and worthwhile software, but it has Bethesda peering over its shoulder to (hopefully) keep the best parts of Fallout 3 alive in this full-fledged follow up. Don't get me wrong: I thought Obsidian's work on Knights of the Old Republic II was fantastic — the arguably better storyline made its mark and showed the team's writing chops — and I can't deny the positive critical reception of Neverwinter Nights 2 and its bevy of expansions. I'm only worried for the next installment of one of the best titles to come out this generation.

However, New Vegas has a lot going for it; be it the vivid neon Nevada landscape, the improved companion AI and significant gameplay additions like iron sight aiming and political affiliations with three different area factions. Considering I would have kept opening my wallet for extra Fallout 3 DLC until Fallout 4, I'll go ahead and place my bets and take a chance on Fallout: New Vegas.

Now say it with me: Big money, no whammies. — *Aaron Thayer*

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*By the time we wrote this, our third piece in which we talk about games we're looking forward to, we were better writers than before -- much, much better.*

*I enjoyed putting this article together because it allowed each of us to contribute, and it's simply fun to make a graphic-heavy post sprinkled with short, succinct blocks of text that do a wonderful job of outlining the perceived strengths of a game that we haven't even played. And while the amount of journalistic integrity in championing games we haven't seen hands-on*

## Fable III

October 26th — 360/Windows

Peter Molyneux, the head of Lionhead Studios and the lead designer for the Fable series, is nothing if not enthusiastic about his games. While many gamers had reason to chide Molyneux's over-optimism after the first Fable, 2008's Fable II was a different story. It might not have been perfect, but Fable II had a solid story and combat, and provided players with many ways to engage the game's world.



Most importantly, though, it was incredibly fun and had very well-designed emotional moments. Fable III's concept of rising to power, overthrowing the government and then having to deliver on promises is incredibly novel, and it also looks to provide more of the challenging aspects that made Fable II memorable. It may not provide the emotional impact that Molyneux is promising, but I'm looking forward to seeing how close the final game is to Molyneux's pie-in-the-sky vision. — *Doug Bonham*

I don't understand why a vocal minority of gamers has been allowed to cast such a dark pall over the entire Fable series. Some people are just incapable of looking past Molyneux's boasts to accept the core product for what it has always been: inventive, imaginative and interactive. Countless designers make overblown claims about their projects, but sitting at the top of this entitled-gamer negativity pile is the work of Peter Molyneux. Oh well: I don't buy into it. Unfounded criticism won't, for me at least, detract from the great likelihood that the third Fable title will be a substantial improvement over the last one — and you can quote me on that.

If the Lionhead team was capable of making me care about a virtual canine in 2008, I can only salivate at what they will do in 2010 with an entire royal hierarchy and political undercurrent at my fingertips. With additional polish seen in the improved graphics, tweaked combat, an upgraded dog companion and a less-cluttered menu interface, a throng of issues keeping Fable from becoming an

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*is questionable, it's a reality of games journalism that sometimes you need to make a list of things. People love lists.*

*Perhaps I'm most proud of our more reasonable picks for games at the end of 2010. Because aside from NBA Elite 11 being cancelled entirely and LittleBigPlanet 2 missing its 2010 release for an early 2011 one, we've all played and liked the games we wrote about.*

*Maybe we know what we're doing after all. — Aaron Thayer*

even more exciting experience have been handled. Honestly, I'm so eager that common economic sense has failed; *Fable III* might just be the one special edition package I purchase this year. — *Aaron Thayer*

### **Rock Band 3 & Dance Central**

*October 26th (RB3), November 4th (Dance Central) — 360/DS/PS3/Wii (RB3), 360 with Kinect (Dance Central)*

Harmonix is serving up a double-header of games this fall, beginning with what might be the closest a game can get to simulating a real-life band experience. *Rock Band 3* is bringing a bajillion small tweaks to the formula I'm so intimately familiar with, but the biggest



changes have to do with the new instrument lineup. For the first time, keyboards will be playable thanks to a new keytar-like peripheral. But that wouldn't be exciting if it weren't for the addition of the game's pro modes. Essentially, the pro modes attempt to bring the game as close as possible to playing real instruments by differentiating between tom and cymbal hits on the drums, mapping out a full two octaves of playable notes on the keyboard, and even integrating support for a real Squier guitar as a controller. And with the option to plug in any MIDI-compatible instruments you might have on hand, the lines between game and actual music practice really begin to blur.

But as much as *Rock Band 3* is about refining an established concept, *Dance Central* appears to be all about introducing a brand-new one. By accurately tracking a player's movements and limb positions, *Dance Central* is designed to get anybody dancing — provided they have the guts to step up and give it a shot. A highly intuitive interface helps the player to visualize dance moves quickly, and by highlighting body parts that aren't matching the current step, it also allows for fast and easy self-correction in my experience. It seems like a surefire hit for parties, but whether it'll be enough to sell Kinect to the skeptics remains to be seen. — *Nick Cummings*

### **LittleBigPlanet 2**

*November 16th — PS3*

To be honest, the first *LittleBigPlanet* bored me. I didn't have a great time because I was thrown into the hectic four-person multiplayer with no previous training, and I had to cope with what I still feel is an awkward use of physics-based jumping. A platformer that



can't jump well isn't much of a platformer at all.

But I'm no curmudgeon: Charm exudes from Media Molecule's brainchild — it's cute and cuddly, but it also encourages cunning and cutthroat cooperative play. This is what I'd call a "smart" game. If players

use their brains and imagination, an entirely new world will open up to them. The "Play, Create, Share" tagline is a marketing tool, sure, but it's also a real concept, and *LittleBigPlanet 2* is evolving the already impressive design tools present in the first to embolden the control available to creative types.

As a new PlayStation 3 owner, it behooves me to support exclusive titles that go beyond the requisite elements of more blood, more violence and more banality. Looks like I'll have to shell-out some cash for more controllers. — *Aaron Thayer* ■



September 21st, 2010

# Rising Sun Rising: The Reinvigoration of Japanese Developers

Japan used to be the king of video games, but its ruling position has been contested. Now the Land of the Rising Sun is working to get its groove back. *By Doug Bonham*

If you're a big fan of video games, there's a very good likelihood you have played and enjoyed the fruits of Japanese video game developers' innovation. From Super Mario Bros. to Final Fantasy VII to Street Fighter II and back again, many of the highlights of gaming have come from the land of the rising sun.

However, it wouldn't be controversial to say that, for the last console generation, the games that have set the standard worldwide have come from Western developers — both American and European. One of Japanese gaming's most prominent developers, Resident Evil creator Keiji Inafune, even said as much to the New York Times: "I look around Tokyo Games Show, and everyone's making awful games; Japan is at least five years behind," he said. The same article estimated that Japanese developers, publishers and manufacturers owned as much as 50 percent of the gaming market in 2002; this has fallen to just 10 percent. While this lull is due to many reasons — including a dearth of creativity and the shifting Japanese market — what was shown last week at the Tokyo Game Show may be indicative of a real revival.

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*Well-researched, well-written, tying together multiple thoughts into one article...I'm still very pleased with how this one turned out. When the news from Tokyo Game Show 2010 crossed back over the Pacific, there was an overwhelming feeling that "Lord, the Japanese developers may have made the most interesting titles we've seen on Kinect." From that simple thought came a dive into the rise and fall of Japanese developers, and I'm happy with the ebb and flow in this article.*

After the United States video game market crashed in 1983, it wasn't American companies like Atari or Activision that led the market revival here in the U.S. — it was Nintendo's NES. We at Silicon Sasquatch grew up on Nintendo's 8-bit grey box, and by the time the Nintendo 64 launched in September 1996 in the U.S., "Nintendo" was synonymous with video games in the same way Kleenex is with facial tissues and Xerox is with copy machines. Though the generation weaned on Mario, Zelda and company hardly knew it, they were enjoying games made in Japan.



*The 2010 Tokyo Game Show, which concluded last week, may have showcased the re-awakening of Japanese gaming innovation*

Through the 16- and 32-bit eras, Japanese developers enjoyed a golden period of innovation in game design. Games like Super Mario World, Super Metroid, Chrono Trigger, Metal Gear Solid, Gran Turismo and Final Fantasy VII were all well received worldwide and helped usher in a more mature era of gaming in all regions. According to numbers on the ever-accurate Wikipedia, eight of the top-10 best-selling Super NES games were Japanese developed, and six of the top-10 PlayStation games were as well.

As pointed out by that well-timed New York Times article, Japan is playing catch-up in this current generation. Where characters like Mario, Sonic and Solid Snake once set the tastes internationally, that mantle has passed to Master Chief, Nico Bellic and the soldiers of Modern Warfare. Not just in sales, either, but in terms of importance to how video games have developed; the open-world gameplay of the Grand Theft Auto games is a huge inspiration to game developers around the world, and Halo and Modern Warfare established the gold standard for how online gaming should be handled. Rather than just following the lead of the Nintendos, Sonys and Capcoms of the world, American and European developers have taken the lead as innovators in modern game design.

So what's gone wrong, then? Take a look at sales numbers: Again according to stats from Sony, there have been 38.1 million PlaySta-

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*I've focused on this type of semi-feature, semi-editorial article for Silicon Sasquatch, and I feel that my articles have improved by leaps and bounds in the last two years. Story ideas are better, my writing for the resulting stories is better, and the pacing of writing clips along at a much better pace. I tend to be wordy when given a leash, but brevity is great; there's little need for something to be longer than necessary. — Doug Bonham*

tion 3 consoles sold; more than 5 million have been sold in Japan. Meanwhile, out of the PlayStation 2's approximately 145 million units sold, more than 21 million were sold in Japan. While those figures are similar in their percentages — both over 13 percent of total sales — the sales

volumes have some serious discrepancies. Moreover, despite Microsoft's push to gain market share in Japan, only 1.2 million Xbox 360s have been sold in Japan — roughly 3 percent of global sales. The one sales success of this era has been the Wii, which surpassed 10 million consoles sold in

Japan in March; however, that achievement took almost a year longer to reach than it did for the PlayStation 2. The PS2 took 131 weeks, roughly two and a half years, to reach 10 million in sales; the PS3 has been on shelves for almost four years.

It seems as though the maturation of the Japanese market visible in the 16- and 32-bit eras, which reached an apex with the PlayStation 2 and GameCube, has given way to a cultural change where gamers just aren't interested in home consoles. The Nintendo DS is the best-selling system ever in Japan, having sold more than 25 million units; the DS is, as my travels in Japan this spring proved, absolutely ubiquitous. It seems that where the current console generation is left out, handheld systems have gained, and that includes creativity in game design. As handhelds are the rage, that is where development has gone.

But what of the consoles? Perhaps another reason is the lack of relevance of arcades. Japanese developers like Namco, Konami, Sega and Capcom thrived in arcades, and many of their best games came as home console ports. Though shorter games are seeing a revival on PlayStation Network and Xbox Live Arcade, it's hardly enough to sustain the sorts of development teams that these former arcade giants enlisted, and today's \$60, big-budget titles have moved beyond the shallow replayability offered by many of the arcade ports that were successful even on sophisticated platforms like the Sega Dreamcast.

Last week's Tokyo Game Show brought a revelatory thunderbolt: Microsoft's Kinect was going to get support from some very, very big developers who were promising to bring more creativity than just rehashing Wii Sports. The 360-powered Kinect has drawn some

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“It seems as though the maturation of the Japanese market visible in the 16- and 32-bit eras has given way to a cultural change where gamers just aren't interested in home consoles. As handhelds are the rage, that is where development has gone. But what of the consoles?”

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particularly big names — seven new titles, five for Kinect alone, all from Japanese development teams. The headline grabber has been the revival of *Steel Battalion*; the Xbox cult favorite was renowned for its 40-button hyper-realistic joystick, and now it's coming to Kinect. Games also announced included Goichi Suda and Grasshopper Manufacture's *Codename D* and *Project Draco*, which appears to be a new *Panzer Dragoon*-inspired game from ex-Sega developers.

What made the Kinect-centric TGS announcements so much of a shock was the stark contrast they presented to what Western developers showcased at E3 2010 in June. Combining what was shown last week in Tokyo along with Q Entertainment's spiritual successor to *Rez*, *Child of Eden*, and it turns out that the vast majority of Kinect games that are aimed at hardcore gamers are coming out of Japan. It was said in the games press (including on the podcasts I listen to: the *Giant Bombcast*, *Weekend Confirmed*, *Rebel FM*, and *1up's In This Thread*) that the key phrase of E3 this year is "it's not for you," in that the motion-control games for Kinect and PlayStation Move were not geared toward the hardcore. Sure, Harmonix's *Dance Central* has a *Rock Band*-like crossover appeal, but most everything else looked to ape the Wii's successes and appeal to broader audiences while leaving the *Halo* and *GTA* crowd out in the rain.

These development announcements aren't surefire signs that Japan will come roaring back immediately. It's been rumored that Microsoft is helping development costs for these games as a loss-leader for Kinect. Business thought would be that Microsoft helps pay for some marquee games so that the hardware sells well, providing a market for developers down the line. More power to the Japanese developers for taking on this challenge, then, especially as these projects look so promising. Moreover, this is what may help revive the Japanese gaming market — perhaps gamers no longer want iterations of what's come before? Perhaps the more experiential gameplay brought by motion controllers will help move PS3s and 360s; the Wii has been successful in Japan, so the market may be there for something different. It's certainly proof that what's come before hasn't worked this generation, and that change is needed.

Inafune-san may be right — Japan may be five years behind American developers. But the Japanese market and Japanese publishers and developers are too important to gaming for them to fade away meekly. I don't know whether motion games will be the death knell or the phoenix rising, but I do know it will be more interesting for all gamers worldwide than if the Japanese developers quietly wound down their streams of games. ■



**PART TWO:**  
A Few Essays

## **Everybody Wants to Rule the World:** How to manage expectations once you realize you're not going to change everything in one day

*by Doug Bonham*

There is nothing like the naiveté, innocence and romance of youth. When you are young, everything is possible: No matter the goal, with just a little hard work and skill, it can be achieved. Somebody out there has tried to run through a wall simply because they are 22 years old and don't know how hard it hurts when you bounce off brick and mortar. Amplify this youthful starry-eyed state with the optimism instilled by college professors and it is easy to see how three University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communications graduates thought they could change the world of online gaming journalism.

For those not following along, welcome to the original mission of *Silicon Sasquatch*: to publish articles about the gaming industry with a greater sense of gravitas, thoughtfulness and editing than some of the immature material that passes as “videogames journalism.” We want a world with reasoned, insightful discussions of genre and place, not more lolcats and other terrible Internet memes.

The problem with this unbound optimism, though, is that it is like the fable of Icarus — you are given the wings made of wax but not a parachute for when they inevitably melt. One of the hardest lessons the three of us have learned is how to manage our expectations for ourselves and, most importantly, what to do when we inevitably come up short of lofty goals. After all, it's one thing to have the wings melt, but it's another to stay calm and deal with the situation. From the beginning of *Silicon Sasquatch*, Nick, Aaron and I have held very high standards for our writing. As we have found out, it's one thing to put forth certain ideals — coming up with great story ideas, posting articles on a regular basis, peer editing each article for content and grammar thoroughly before posting — and another to actually execute on



them. Somewhere in the middle lies reality.

Throughout the lifespan of Silicon Sasquatch, there have been a few periods where the stream of stories has gone dry. Right now, we are in the routine of posting three or four articles per week; in the past, we have had months with as few as three or four stories posted in total. While there have been different reasons for these dry spells, an underlying factor has been frustration. One thing we've learned is that good expectations are achievable ones; while having an article published every day is a nice idea, it's unattainable for us at this moment. It might be possible in the future, but until this becomes a full-time job, it is not realistic. At any given moment, one of us might be out of town, the other may be spending time with friends or working and unable to edit an article, and any one of us may be short on story ideas because work, school or other commitments get in the way of gaming or thinking of something great to post. While we consider the editing process essential (and something we do continue to do with every post), a detailed, thorough line edit of an article — passed back and forth between its author and an editor — proved to be needless, wasteful, and an overwrought process.

We set our goals too high in the beginning and felt that lowering them would breach our standards; never mind that the publishing schedule and editing routine was never attainable in the first place. I know we've all felt the pressure to release a story only once it's perfect or to publish something fresh every single day or to only post an article after multiple rounds of polishing. But it adds a hell of a lot of time. First, each of us would write the draft of the article, make sure it's a decent draft, and get it into Wordpress or send out a Word file; then we'd have to find time to edit and go through the article with a fine-tooth comb. Then, maybe, the article undergoes a second full round of revisions before putting the final product on the web site and publishing.

I think each of us would love to do that with every story. After all, it's the kind of thorough journalistic work we trained for in college. But you can see how it's a time-consuming process, and too much for the three of us to handle every day.

Those ideals became restrictions and dampened our group confidence. We grew frustrated that we were not reaching these high goals, and that became a distraction when it came time to start articles. Frustration then bubbled over into a lack of communication, and that helps continue the downward spiral. Add

in real life commitments, and it's easy to see how we ran off the rails. In the months leading up to our summer 2010 nadir, pushing out text for a Backlog became a weekly chore and not the fun, energizing hobby and project it was intended to be.

In short, we were our own worst enemy.

I don't by any stretch want to claim that I saved Silicon Sasquatch, but perhaps one of my graduate school classes did. I needed to conduct a negotiation for class this past summer, and that led me to reach out to Nick and Aaron so we could sit down to discuss the web site and what we wanted to do in the future. The task was to conduct a negotiation around a tangible, important problem in my life; Silicon Sasquatch potentially dying on the vine was the first issue that sprung to mind. The three of us hadn't met on Skype for months (partially because Aaron was working at a summer camp), let alone in person, and after a short spike of posting mid-summer, Nick and I were right back on the sidelines, unenthusiastic as we'd ever been.

We needed to clear the air and get back to square one, and over a long cup of coffee and breakfast on a Sunday morning in late August, that's precisely what happened. We realized we wanted to revive the site and that we needed to make writing for and operating the site fun again. Passion remained to make Silicon Sasquatch a great project.

Over the last few months, my personal catch phrase has been "managed expectations." I felt that we needed to walk before we could run, and so I proposed publishing at minimum twice a week. Many of our problems were related to confidence; instead of having a goal of posting articles every day, which we could never meet, we have since adopted the rule to publish at least twice a week and beat that goal every week. It's not much, but makes all the difference in keeping confidence high. There is nothing wrong with posting even just three times a week; the guys behind the renowned webcomic Penny Arcade have built an empire off it. The key is to be consistent, and the goal is to publish consistently. I've found that it's working: Because we're not worried about reaching that target but instead about what we're working on, it has helped bolster our confidence.

What we've also found is that communication is an underrated factor. I knew we had the capability to make Silicon Sasquatch a great, fun project, because in the time we've worked together on the web site, the months when we had the most posts also had the most e-mails flying hither and yon between us. During both the Game of the Year 2009 articles and the brief

mid-summer resurgence, the three of us were in near-constant daily contact. When things are going well, discussion is open; when things go poorly, there are fewer responses. With a more open platform on which to operate, there is a feeling that more difficult subjects can be discussed instead of ignored and allowed to fester.

A big tip for anybody running an organization: If everyone dreads your weekly meetings, try keeping them to strict time limits. We had previously held meetings over Skype, but because they became long, drawn-out affairs, there was little desire to

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“Managing group confidence is a vital skill, but it’s only gained through experience and by taking failures in stride. But by removing the pressure to be perfect, we have actually been more successful than ever.”

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repeat that process unless necessary. Enforcing a time limit keeps people on-task, and it ensures that topics are covered. We still go over our allotted half hour in our meetings from time to time, but it’s almost always because another pertinent

topic has cropped up. It is amazing what a solid, 30- to 45-minute meeting every week can do to improve organization and communication in a group.

It is surprising how fragile confidence can be in a group dynamic and, accordingly, what even a few small steps can do to improve confidence. Managing group confidence is a vital skill, but it’s only gained through experience and by taking failures in stride. Without a doubt, we learned the hard way. However, by removing the pressure to be perfect, we have actually been more successful than ever.

Another cliché I’ve drawn upon recently is to think of our work in terms of climbing a mountain. Instead of focusing on the short stretch to the top we have left (in this case, those unattainable goals), we need to take confidence from the heights we have already reached (publishing 200+ stories on our own web site, editing regularly, improving as writers, and publishing very interesting and well-thought-out articles). There is still room to improve, but it’s not a weight on our shoulders, and that makes all the difference. ■



## **A Face Made for Radio:** The story behind the Silicon Sasquatch Podcast *by Nick Cummings*

When we sat down to plan this book, we agreed that we'd use it as a vehicle not just to celebrate our better days, but also to highlight the biggest mistakes we've stumbled over. So, in that spirit of airing out our dirty laundry, I suppose now is the time to finally talk publicly about the disaster that was the Silicon Sasquatch Podcast – or, if you prefer our cringe-inducing pet name, the Squatchcast.

My goal with the podcast was to break the mold of the average gaming podcast. Rather than just gather a few colleagues into a room to drink a beer and nerd out about games for a couple hours, I wanted to tackle specific big-ticket issues in a round-table setting. I wanted well-researched opinions and strong rapport, and I wanted it to be timeless — a rarity in podcasts.

Originally intended to be produced at regular intervals, the Squatchcast existed for a grand total of eight episodes before

being unceremoniously canned. (We didn't even outlast *Firefly*!) Why did it fail? The same reason so many of my other projects have fallen apart: too much ambition, and not enough time, energy, and skill to make good on it.

## Background

I fell in love with the podcast format a few years back, when I was taking a Writing for Multimedia course at the University of Oregon. The class was largely focused around blogging, which was the first time I'd ever seen web-based writing embraced by academia. As part of our final project, we were tasked with producing an original podcast that we would produce, edit, and upload for distribution; this would coincide with the blogs we'd been maintaining as part of the class.<sup>1</sup> So I gathered a couple of friends into my room (including Doug) and conducted a few interviews, and that was that.

As hokey as the whole experience was for everyone else, I found it fascinating. I got the same thrill that I'd learned to seek in the journalism school when I was working on a big story or developing a large project — anyone who's ever done some reporting knows what I'm talking about. I felt like I was creating something that would resonate with an audience, even if it was a very limited one.

I didn't attempt another podcast until 2009, but every few months some new ideas would begin to percolate. As time passed, I found myself increasingly more eager to fire up the Rock Band microphones and to produce an original program. And so, once Silicon Sasquatch was alive and kicking, I decided to give podcasting another shot.

## The Concept

There's an unwritten agreement between videogame writers — let's just call it Garnett's Law — that every game-related publication is required to produce its own podcast. These podcasts, typically running between one and three hours long

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1. As you might've guessed, my blog was about videogames and the media. The name, "Will Write for GP" was bafflingly stupid and understood by exactly one other person in the class. But time heals all wounds, and the blog has since become something else entirely. If you'd like to see the very first gaming-related blog writing I've done, you can head over to [nickcummins.com](http://nickcummins.com) and go back to the first thirty-odd posts. Just be warned: It's not pretty.

on a weekly basis, almost invariably adhere to the exact same structure:

- *Introduction*: What's everybody been playing?
- *News*: What are the big game-related headlines this week?
- *Upcoming releases*: What's on the horizon? What should people look forward to?

There's nothing wrong with that formula. After all, I've been an avid fan of podcasts that follow that routine for years, particularly 1UP Yours (R.I.P.) and the Giant Bombcast. But at the time, I thought we were in a position to do something more, well, intellectual. I mean, c'mon! We all went to *college*, so of course we're all automatically better at journalism.

I was proud and naïve.

## What Went Wrong?

Everything that possibly could have. Editing programs were unreliable, audio stems disappeared, microphones were inconsistent and schedules were impossible to coordinate. But the biggest problem was that recording a single episode just took too long. From the moment we hopped onto Skype and spent time figuring out how we were going to direct the conversation to the end of the recording process, we were looking at a minimum of four hours for what was supposed to be a 30- or 60-minute show. That's not counting the hours of editing several audio tracks simultaneously, converting to mp3 format, uploading and advertising that went along with each episode.

It was daunting, but we weren't ready to give up on the podcast just yet. So we cut corners, particularly in terms of pre-show preparation and post-production work. But the result was an even worse product, with rougher audio quality, less-focused discussions and more generic topics for each episode.

It wasn't just us who were unhappy with the direction of the podcasts. When I conducted the readership survey earlier this year, it came to light that our podcasts were almost universally ignored, if not outright disliked.

## Conclusion

I think I'm largely to blame for how things turned out. I was overly ambitious and didn't take the time to pause and consider

what, exactly, we were creating. But I still think the philosophy of what we were trying to make is a good one. For example, topics like our debate over Orson Scott Card's role in *Shadow Complex* and what it means to support a person's agenda when you buy a game are very important discussions to have. They're often glossed over by the bigger media and very rarely treated to a well-researched presentation.

My hope is that, if the stars align, we'll resurrect the podcast with a few significant changes. For one thing, I'm done with this Skype-only business; it makes for awkward and disjointed conversation and — most importantly — it's just not fun. And we'll take the time to make sure shows are succinct, well-prepared and designed to have a long shelf life.

But if it still sucks? Well, okay, then I'll know it's time to throw in the towel and be content to just sit down, open a beer and shoot the breeze about games — but this time, we'll leave the microphones off. ■

## **Is There Anybody Out There?**

**Why writers stop writing**

*by Aaron Thayer*

Doesn't it seem easy to be a blogger? They sit around the house most days, and any vague idea that comes to them while waiting for their microwavable meat-stuffed dough pocket to cook quickly becomes the rough draft of an article. If a new episode of their favorite reality show isn't on, they might feel generous enough with their time to copy and paste an image or two into their draft to make it aesthetically pleasing.

But all bloggers really have to do is hit the big "Publish" button to post some vague assemblage of words and sentences they've shoved into a text box on their blogging website of choice. At a click of the mouse they've suddenly become accomplished writers. Congratulations! It's that easy, and that rewarding.

In reality, blogging is more complex than people believe, and I've personally been humbled on several occasions after two years of running my own website. While having a blog can be a boon to your professional career, it will only become more natural with time, patience and practice.

Unfortunately for me and the other two-thirds of Silicon Sasquatch, writing is the opposite of simple. Most of the time it's very, very hard. That's because the program that taught us how to write was also the one that opened our eyes to the crushingly obsessive-compulsive nature inherent to developing authors.

The narrow corridors of Allen Hall exposed us to journalistic ethics and tenets to ensure our future success in the field. We were taught to be diligent reporters and fact-checkers. My journalism professors instilled in me the most essential basics required of a writer working in any era. Checking facts and interviewing sources are definitely more critical aspects of working as a journalist, but the truth is that your stories will never be published if they don't sound like the newspaper, magazine or



blog you're on spec for.<sup>1</sup>

Knowing who reads your work, including their age, average income, gender, political affiliations and even their intelligence level, is absolutely vital to the professional writing process. Marketing keeps journalism alive through focus groups, surveys and questionnaires, which tell the publishers and top editors who's reading now, and more importantly, what they want to read next.

That's all fine and dandy for giant publications under the arm of a conglomerated media corporation with a budget to pay for market research. But Silicon Sasquatch doesn't have a budget. We don't even make a penny from what we do. How were we supposed to develop an audience?

Well, we didn't. In many ways we still haven't. My writing style has changed drastically over the past two years, and each time I tried to attract what I thought was our "ideal reader." It began by writing for the smart, educated 20-something hardcore gamer, who was more interested in a dissection of videogames as art than a re-post of the latest patch notes for a PC game. Now I'm writing for the casual-but-still-smart gamer, someone who knows a decent amount about videogames but would rather be entertained than read an academic white paper about Mario.

The shift in editorial voice has been an id-driven process. Silicon Sasquatch's current style is an amalgamation of periods of creative despair and our confronting the realities of working on what has become a non-profit hobby. We didn't get to where we are now without almost giving up, and that was never a more real possibility than when we failed to post much of anything from June to July 2009.

At the time we all were in a state of transition. Nick was working full-time, Doug had started graduate school, and I was about to move back home to my parents' house, hoping I could find a job in Portland rather than Eugene. It had been less than a year since we started our blog, but I know we each had thought of the project as temporary. Our pipe dreams were lofty, and we probably assumed we would have moved on to bigger things – or at least have used Silicon Sasquatch as a stepping-stone for a real job. That's when we confronted reality. We were disillusioned with the writing process because we

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1. "On spec" is a standard industry practice for newbies where a writer is handed an assignment and told to do the work without the promise of payment or that the piece will even be published upon its completion.

were tired of writing to people who didn't seem to acknowledge us. It's perhaps a little pathetic to say we would have been more consistent had more people commented on our work, but it's also quite true.

Blogs are community-driven and highly personal things. As a variation on the journalistic process they used to be seen as self-indulgent. Now they

are mostly seen as a bleeding-edge investigative tool for up-to-the-minute coverage – that is, when they aren't also used as image dumps for adorable kittens and puppies by the Internet at large. Silicon

Sasquatch was trying

hard to be a journalist's blog, and without an active community we felt like we were holding a conversation with ourselves in a cold, empty room.

So during the summer of 2009 we talked about the situation. Each one of us agreed that we didn't really want to quit the website. After stepping off of the ledge, so to speak, we made a plan to appeal to the few readers we knew of and started asking them to pass on word of who we were and what we did. Silicon Sasquatch needed a community, so we made one. Nick went on the warpath and made Twitter, Facebook and Steam accounts for our brand. We used these networking tools to interact with readers and developers directly and distribute our fresh content via RSS. Steam was meant to start a gaming group so all of us and our friends could play together. While that still hasn't really taken off, the idea was important: get people involved and keep them engaged.

Slowly but surely, people began commenting. Most of them we knew, but some of them we didn't. Even having two comments on a post made us feel acknowledged. We realized that when we faltered in writing for the blog it was because we didn't think anyone cared. Well, that wasn't true – our audience was out there, and it just needed to be woken up and asked to come say “hey” every once in a while.

What I've taken away from engaging with and learning from our audience during this whole Silicon Sasquatch project is that

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“We were tired of writing to people who didn't seem to acknowledge us. It's perhaps a little pathetic to say we would have been more consistent had more people commented on our work, but it's also true.”

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writers don't need to be afraid of reaching out. As journalistic as I may have been trained to be, I'm still shy and nervous when it comes to my own personal writing. To go out and request that people keep reading us and to encourage word-of-mouth promotion was daunting and a bit frightening. But as of this writing we're seeing new people post insightful comments almost every day.

We finally know who's out there, and that's you. ■

## **Leaving Allen Hall:** Learning to let go of journalism

*by Nick Cummings*

It has been about two years since I last practiced journalism. Actually, since graduating from college in 2008, most of the work I've done has been totally unrelated to my degree, as is the case for all but the luckiest of liberal arts graduates in a recession. Instead, I've tried to be pragmatic, focusing on paying the bills and staying busy as best as I can.

But it hasn't been easy. Once you've been bitten by the journalism bug — that drive to get out in the world, unearth stories and distill the truth — it never goes away. It's something Doug and Aaron have struggled with as well. We were all in the same classes, after all, and although Doug worked as a sports journalist at a newspaper briefly, we've all since moved onto other things.

I think that's why Silicon Sasquatch was born. We all needed a place to write, and we needed an audience to read it. However, there was a catch: We weren't being journalists any longer. That much was clear, but we struggled to understand whether that was a good or bad thing.

But there's a key distinction between being journalistic and simply being ethical. Just because we're not out on a proverbial beat doesn't mean we're not adhering to the principles that we feel are essential for building a good reputation. To me, being ethical is simple: Just stick to the facts, admit when you're wrong, and do the best work you can.

With that in mind, we've made an effort from the beginning to be honest with our readers above all else. We play the hell out of games before we review them, and we disclose who paid for the game and how it was obtained. We link to sources, verify quotes and numbers, and treat other publications with respect. We never write a story specifically to boost our page views or to gouge another site's traffic. In other words, we just try not to be

jackasses.

In our defense, Silicon Sasquatch has never been completely “journalistic” if only because it’s not practical for us to do so. We’re a small-time publication with only a handful of readers, we don’t have lists of media contacts, we aren’t invited to press events, and — aside from the occasional game we receive for review — we go largely unnoticed. As a result, we’re not in a position to do any real reporting that a publication with clout would be capable of. (Of course, that almost never happens regardless, but that’s an editorial for another time.)

I didn’t become a journalism major because I’d always dreamed of being a journalist; that couldn’t be farther from the truth. I was actually a painfully awkward and anxious teenager, and the thought of going out and interviewing people scared the living hell out of me. But I opted to take the journalism path for a few very specific reasons:

- I wanted to work across a number of media in a fast-paced environment;
- I liked working with teams of talented people;

and more than anything else in the world,

- I wanted to write.

It’s that last point that has guided just about every major decision I’ve made in my adult life. Or, in other words, if you’ll allow me a moment of earnestness: Writing is the only thing I’ve ever had that always gives me meaning. And I think that, above all else, is what allowed me to give myself permission to while away my free time on Silicon Sasquatch. Even if it doesn’t pay and only a handful of people ever derive anything meaningful from it, it gives me a greater sense of purpose. Really, what more could you ever hope for in life?

And that brings me to you, whoever you are. If you’re still reading this, it shows that you empathize on some level. Maybe you’ve even read (or at least skimmed) the rest of the stuff in the preceding pages. But the fact that you’ve decided that this book was worth your time and money is the highest compliment I could ever hope to receive, both as a writer and as a person. Making a book is probably the most self-indulgent thing a person can do, but as long as someone draws inspiration from the trials we’ve endured and the lessons we’ve learned, I’ll feel

like everything I've done for Silicon Sasquatch was worth the thousands of hours of writing, editing, and doubt.

And hey — even if the book sucks, it's still Step One. It's a real thing we can point to and claim as our own.

The only way to go from here is up. ■

Nick Cummings is a writer, designer, and sometimes-musician. He has written for a number of publications, but probably nothing you've ever heard of. His favorite game of all time is Grim Fandango. He currently resides in Portland, Oregon.

Aaron Thayer wears glasses. He is also a writer, drummer and designer living in Portland, Oregon. Aaron hasn't made an income doing any of those things, but that hasn't stopped him thus far. Super Mario RPG is the game he likes most.

Doug Bonham is a writer, editor, photographer and business planner for Silicon Sasquatch. Having spent the past year working on a master's degree, Doug is trying to start his career to go along with continuing working on Silicon Sasquatch. Currently residing in Portland, Oregon, he remains a Sega Dreamcast fanboy.

