

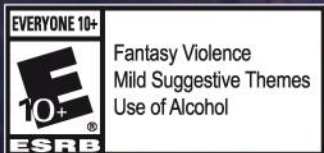
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**SWITCH
& PLAY**



Is It Time For A Switch?



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

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

Nintendo has always done things its own way, and the Switch is no different. With one foot firmly in the home console space and the other in the handheld space, the Switch offers a unique experience that lets you play where you want without much hassle.

For me, this makes it the most interesting Nintendo console in a decade. Yes, there are some gimmicky games and a slew of controller adaptors and configurations, but at its core, I like what the Switch is selling. Nintendo's handheld offerings have delivered consistently all these years, but the home market has struggled from various ailments including lack of software, especially from third-party partners.

If the Switch closes this gap and lets me enjoy Nintendo's hallmark first-party titles on a single platform filled with handheld and home console games, along with Nintendo's vast virtual library of old titles, I quickly find myself forgiving the gimmicks and getting excited about the possibilities.

Nintendo Switch comes out this March, and this issue is filled with everything you need to know. Our cover story on *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* features a ton of exclusive info you won't find anywhere else, and there are pages upon pages on all the other games coming out this spring.

I'm excited for the Switch, and I haven't said that about a Nintendo home console launch in a long time. I'd love to see Nintendo come back in a big way, and the Switch just might be the console to do it!

Enjoy the issue.

Cheers,



30 Nintendo Switch And The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild

Nintendo recently unveiled its new console in detail, and we tried out the hardware and launch software to offer our impressions. We also went hands-on with *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, spending more time with the game than anyone outside of Nintendo. We explored the open world at length, completed a dungeon, and took on one of the game's most mysterious and powerful opponents: The Guardians. *by Kyle Hilliard*



12 Your Guide To Becoming A Professional Gamer
The world of eSports is expanding in a big way, and we examine how you can get involved in the competitive world.



18 Afterwords: Final Fantasy XV
We spoke with Final Fantasy XV's creative director about its development and reception.



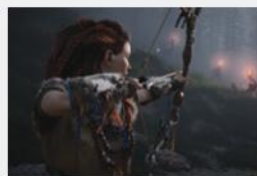
26 Gear: The Best Of CES 2017
This is the best of what's next for technology from the Consumer Electronics Show.



56 A Return To Morrowind
The MMO is returning to one of Elder Scrolls' most popular locations, and we find out why you should be excited – even if you're playing alone.



62 The Most Anticipated Games Of 2017
With 2016 behind us, we look forward to the new year by ranking the games we're most excited about playing in the coming months.



72 Horizon Zero Dawn
Guerrilla Games' open-world robot apocalypse continues to impress.



76 Ghost Recon Wildlands
We spent time with Ubisoft's grand vision for the next evolution of the Ghost Recon series.

- 06 Feedback
- 20 Impulse
- 22 Top Ten: Hearts
- 24 The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly
- 28 Timeline
- 72 Previews
- 86 Reviews
- 94 Classic: Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link
- 96 Game Over



88 Resident Evil 7 Biohazard
Resident Evil goes in a surprising new direction with its latest entry – and we like it.



90 Yakuza 0
This might be the Yakuza entry that finally gets a global audience to pay attention to the popular Japanese series.

1-2-Switch	52
Arms	51
Below	64
Bulletstorm: Full Clip Edition	78
Conan Exiles	84
Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy	81
Cuphead	64
Destiny 2	70
Divinity: Original Sin 2	65
Double Dragon IV	92
Elder Scrolls Online: Morrowind, The	56
Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, The	55
Final Fantasy XV	18
Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows of Valentia	83
Fire Emblem Warriors	53
For Honor	67
Ghost Recon Wildlands	68,76
Gravity Rush 2	91
Gran Turismo Sport	80
Has-Been Heroes	52
Horizon Zero Dawn	69,72
Injustice 2	66
Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, The	36,70
Mario Kart 8 Deluxe	54
Marvel Vs. Capcom: Infinite	66
Mass Effect Andromeda	70
Minion Masters	82
Nier: Automata	65
Night in the Woods	64
Nioh	65
Persona 5	69
Pit People	20
Prey	68
Project Octopath Traveler	55
Puyo Puyo Tetris	53
Red Dead Redemption 2	71
Resident Evil 7 Biohazard	88
Rime	74
Rise & Shine	92
Shantae: Half-Genie Hero	92
Smite Rivals	85
Snipperclips: Cut It Out, Together!	53
South Park: The Fractured But Whole	67
Splatoon 2	54,65
Star Wars Battlefront 2	66
State of Decay 2	67
Strafe	79
Super Bomberman R	52
Super Mario Odyssey	50,69
Tacoma	64
Tales of Berseria	89
Torment: Tides of Numenera	66
Ultra Street Fighter II: The Final Challengers	55
Uncharted: The Lost Legacy	68
Xenoblade Chronicles 2	51
Yakuza 0	90
Zelda II: The Adventure of Link	94

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HD remasters were a hot topic this month, while others ponder VR purchases, criticize the ESRB, and dare to disagree with our hypothetical showdown verdicts. Unbelievable!

Read Prey Love

I've been reading *Game Informer* since 2011, and I have to say that the Prey issue (285) is easily my favorite of all the issues I've read to date (I was even lucky enough to get the version with the female protagonist on the cover). From the Prey coverage itself (now my most anticipated game) to the articles on wordless storytelling and 2016's shooters, the issue felt like a greatest hits of features and previews. Keep up the great work!

**Hayden Rogers
Corbett, OR**

I really enjoyed your cover story on Prey. It seems to be taking a lot of inspiration from *Alien: Isolation* as well as Arkane's own *Dishonored* series. However, perhaps the biggest takeaway for me is that the game will be a complete reboot of the property. As an avid fan of the original Prey, I can't help but feel apprehensive about this change to the series.

**Bill Cage
via email**

A number of confused Prey fans wrote in this month to inquire what Arkane's vision has to do with the 2006 original from Human Head Studios. In a word: nothing.

Bethesda was simply no longer using the license, and felt it fit thematically with Arkane's new game. Even though both games feature sci-fi environments and aliens, it's best to think of them as two separate properties. Thankfully, Arkane's Prey looks awesome on its own merits. Learn more about the game by visiting our hub at gameinformer.com/prey.

Worth A Divorce?

I've been reading your coverage of PlayStation VR with a tinge of excitement. But before I endanger my marriage with yet another sudden impact to my kid's college fund, I wonder: Do you think VR will just go the way of other peripherals? I thought the Move was a success...for a while. Though

I've never used the Kinect, I've watched my friends quickly go back to good old controller-based gaming. Is this going to be another project that starts huge and promising but still gives in to traditional gaming?

**Doug
via email**

The hoopla over VR gaming has already died down considerably since the Vive, Oculus, and PSVR released last year, and without bigger install bases, we're not expecting a huge surge of VR titles to hit anytime soon. For the sake of your marriage, we suggest holding off for the time being – though you can still get a few vicarious kicks by reading our review of *Resident Evil 7* on page 88.



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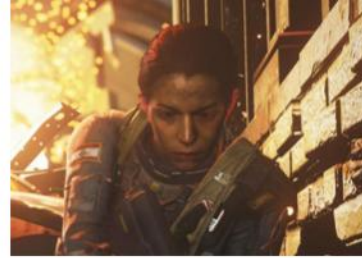


Is Sega Slipping?

I've always been a fan of Sega. Instead of Nintendo's systems, my room always had a Sega system in it. The Saturn was ahead of its time and the Dreamcast was incredible! Part of the reason those systems were amazing was because of Sega's first-party games. I believe Sega has lost its way; they have unbelievable first-party IPs and all they do, year after year, is shove terrible Sonic games down our throats. This is the age of HD remakes, so why can't we at least get some of those, if not whole new games? Sega Rally, Panzer Dragoon, Daytona USA, Sega GT, Jet Set Radio, all the Virtua series – even Burning Rangers! Many Sega games are hard to come by these days. HD remakes would at least solve this problem, while putting some pennies back in Sega's pocket.

Eric Lugo
Williamstown, NJ

Sega's focus on PC and mobile games in recent years has certainly put a dent in its development efforts, and while the company has stated it is "investigating" the possibility of creating Shenmue HD ports, other remasters have been few and far between. That said, Sega's Yakuza series continues to get bigger and better; you can read our review for the latest entry on page 90.



Who Watches The Watchmen?

Why isn't the ESRB more heavily enforced? If it isn't going to be enforced, just dissolve it. My tax money is wasted on a censorship group that is toothless and lawless. As an example, I was in the break room at work when a coworker asked my opinion of the Xbox One. After we debated the pros and cons, she revealed that a store employee helped her pick the best system to get her preteen grandsons the new Call of Duty. I naturally told her how graphic the violence and language is in that series. Her response was she knew and didn't care. I wonder what the point of our parents having a tantrum over Mortal Kombat was. Am I the only one who is both annoyed and dismayed by this?

Ben Abernathy
via email

We're not sure what you think the ESRB is supposed to be doing, Ben, but your tax money is safe. The ESRB is a non-profit organization, not a government agency, and is funded by the companies that submit their games for certification, not taxpayers. Furthermore, the ESRB only rates games – they don't censor them, nor do they have the power to prevent anyone from buying or playing them. The entire ratings process is voluntary, from the developers who submit their games for rating to the retailers that choose to not sell games to underage kids. ESRB ratings are only meant to educate consumers; what people choose to do after that is up to them.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Will the new Spider-Man game come to Xbox One and not just PlayStation 4?"

Nope.

"Will Capcom ever do an HD remastered collection of the Resident Evil: Dead Aim series?"

We hope not.

"What happened to Mega Man?"

He's probably dead by now.

Best News Tip Of The Month :

"love is in the air"

Question Of The Month:

Do you plan on buying a Nintendo Switch? Why or why not?

gi spy

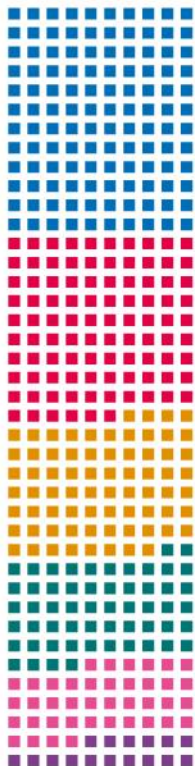


(Left) Apparently Kyle is too cool to snap along with Nintendo's Shigeru Miyamoto and Eiji Aonuma, who gave us the full scoop on the Switch and Breath of the Wild. C'mon, Kyle!

(Right) During this month's Nintendo's Switch event, Ben Reeves ran into Sega's Aaron Webber and Atlus' John Hardin. Literally.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



- 2016's Best Shooters
- End of Year Nostalgia
- Remaster Requests
- Prey Praise
- Nintendo Switch Questions
- Top 10 Fighter Gripes



Shooting For Greatness

In issue 285, we asked readers to name their favorite shooter of 2016. Contrary to our Reader's Choice results from last month, *Doom* was the most popular response, followed by *Overwatch* and *Titanfall 2*. Here are some of the responses.

Doom by far! Id Software did such a fantastic job of "modernizing" the franchise without losing its old-school appeal. The demons, environments, secret areas, weapon upgrades, the ultra-fast pace, Doomguy's sassiness, and that deliciously evil metal soundtrack...I have not felt such love for an FPS since playing the original DOS *Doom* as a frightened-but-fascinated little girl.

Rosie Scott

I think the best shooter of 2016, by far, is *Overwatch*. The huge roster of heroes, the large selection of maps/game modes, the unique abilities and fantastic skins are only a few of the things that made it my favorite game, not just shooter, of 2016. Oh, and it's also fun to interrupt ultimates with a flash bang.

Lucas Kruger

My favorite shooter from 2016 was the superb *Titanfall 2* – no contest. Not only is the character maneuverability better than any other game this year, the added Titan battles and level design make for a truly unique and memorable campaign. In a year where the bar was raised for level design, *Titanfall 2*'s factory and time-switch levels were excellent.

Russ Noble

For The Win

In your Who Would Win article (*Game Over*, issue 285), your panel of experts concluded that Tracer would beat Sonic in a foot race. I'm not sure how this could be possible as Tracer's base speed is 6m/s. Her Blink, which teleports her an additional 7m, has a three-second cooldown, meaning she would run the 100m dash in about 9 seconds. On the other hand, Sonic's slowest speed according to canon is 343m/s, meaning he would run the 100m in a fraction of a second. In order for Tracer to win she would have to consistently use Blink with no cooldown, but even then may not be able to beat faster versions of Sonic, as *Sonic Adventure XD* lists his speed in excess of 1,118m/s.

Dane
via email

Actually, we predicted Tracer as the victor because she would shoot Sonic with her dual pulse pistols at the start of the race. Even the speediest hedgehog can't win when he's dead, Dane!



(Left) Meanwhile, *Street Fighter* producer Yoshinori Ono yelled at Blanka. Or Kyle. We're not sure which.
(Right) During Sony's recent PlayStation Experience event, Surriel caught up with former G.I. editor turned Capcom hugger, Tim Turi.



(continued on page 10)

SO SWEET
YOU CAN'T
HELP BUT CHEW



and
chew
& chew...



1

WINNER

1 Tovia Rogers

Now that's a Super Mario game we'd love to play!

2 Kayla Crane

Don't worry, Pikachu, you'll grow into it.

3 Samantha Ronacher

Here's hoping the next installment of Super Smash Brothers has 50-player battles.

4 Taryn Platt

They grow up so fast...unless they get eaten by zombies, of course.



2



4



3

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(Left) GSTV's Andrea Rene and PR maestro Tara Bruno were also pretty huggy.

(Right) This month we also tried out Elder Scrolls Online's new expansion, courtesy of Bethesda's Matt Frary and Zenimax Online Studios' Matt Firor and Rich Lambert.





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- 22 top ten hearts
- 24 the good, the bad,
and the ugly
- 26 gear: the best
of ces 2017

Your Guide To Becoming A Professional Gamer

The eSports industry continues to grow at an astonishing rate, garnering legions of new fans, teams, and sponsors every year. But how do you make your way to the big leagues?

by Suriel Vazquez

eSports may not captivate the world the way traditional sports do, but they're getting there. According to games and interactive media research firm SuperData, the eSports industry generated \$892.4 million of revenue in 2016. Last year's competitive season was littered with multi-million dollar prize pools for Halo 5: Guardians, League of Legends, and Dota 2 tournaments, with the latter's The International tournament pool reaching an astonishing \$20.7 million.

High-profile players of these games can earn thousands (possibly millions) from a single tournament, join a sponsored team that can make the profession a lucrative six-figure job (on the high end), and land endorsement deals that can ensure they're financially set for years to come. Getting to that point, however, can take a lifetime of dedication, the right social and financial management skills, and just a bit of luck. And even then, the average person probably won't make it. Though many players of competitive games dream of going pro, few people will ever make it to the point where their skills will even pay for their itinerary.

But if you're dedicated, we're here to help. In order to make the path easier (and manage your expectations), we spoke to players, coaches, managers, teams, sponsors, and lawyers to give you a good idea of what it takes to earn a living as a professional eSports athlete.



STEP 1: FIND YOUR COMPETITION

Finding the right game to dedicate yourself to for as long as it takes to become a pro can be as much about your surroundings as it is the game itself.

Professional Street Fighter player Darryl "Snake Eyez" Lewis' drive to get better came from a typical place: trying to beat his brother. "We played Street Fighter II: Hyper Fighting and I had no idea how to do any special attacks or combos," Lewis says. "I would press whatever button I could and I had no fundamentals or strategies."

It wasn't until years later that Lewis began on the path to becoming a professional Street Fighter player. He met a friend of his older brother, Dave, who would trounce him in any game the two played. Lewis wasn't having it. "I actually sat down to learn how to play Street Fighter to beat him." Dave would

regularly pick the character Zangief against him, so Lewis followed suit. "After playing with him for a while, I learned how to play the game, how to be patient, how to learn your opponent's habits, etc. That's when it all started." After long sessions of practicing Super Street Fighter II Turbo HD Remix against online opponents, Lewis finally defeated Dave.

For Ryan Towey, who currently coaches Evil Geniuses' Halo team, the drive to compete came in part from the people around him. A friend of his convinced him to get an Xbox about a month after the release of Halo 2 in November 2004. Although he played the game recreationally for about six months, it didn't take long before he learned about its competitive scene and began taking the game more seriously with his friends.

Halo 2's online infrastructure offered him the avenue to improve, and featured "Team Hardcore," a stripped-down match type for more serious players. Towey's crew "would try to match against top players and post on the forums and watch tournaments to see who the best players were."

Towey also met players who inspired him through Halo 2. The game's clan system allowed groups of like-minded players to band together, and by chance, the clan Towey's friend invited him to join featured professional players such as Cameron "Victory X" Thorlakson and Kyle "Elamite" Elam. From there, he began honing his skills with higher-ranked players and preparing for tournaments.



STEP 2: ENTER THE RING

Once you've found the right environment in which to improve, it's time to start grinding out your first tournaments. This is where you find out for sure whether you have what it takes to compete.

Tournaments can be eye-opening, introducing you to the community and showing you what you're really up against. It wasn't until Lewis attended his first Evolution Championship Series (Evo for short) tournament in 2009 that he got serious about playing competitively. "I wasn't aware of the larger fighting game community until I went to my first Evo," Lewis says. From there, he practiced at tournaments and got more involved with the fighting game community, all while working as a barista to support himself. It all paid off – the following year, he won the Evo tournament for HD Remix as Zangief.

Meanwhile, Towey was inundated with work pulling him in various directions. By 2009, he had started a company, iP Tournays, which sold lessons from professional players to newer ones, then joined Gaming Lessons, a much larger company doing the same thing. He was also still in school, involved in a work study program at his local university, and regularly practicing and competing in tournaments, which was his true passion. "At the time, it was just, 'do whatever it takes to afford



Ryan Towey

to get to the next tournament."

These various tasks took their toll on him. "I wasn't the best employee, if I'm being honest with you," Towey says. "I spent most of my time watching Halo, in addition to playing Halo." The stress was worth it, however; after graduating from college and a few tempting positions playing on professional teams, Towey was on the Halo scene full-time as a coach.

If you want to make a name for yourself and bring home accolades, you need to work at it and stay disciplined. On top of pouring hours into playing online, Lewis also attends local tournaments regularly to practice against other players, watches videos of newly

discovered techniques for Zangief, experiments with any he might find useful, then implements them into his play. Lewis also exercises his entire body regularly to stay in shape and prevent wrist or hand injuries.

As with any competitive sport, there are on and off-seasons. In recent years, Capcom has increased its support of competitive Street Fighter with the Capcom Pro Tour, which last year offered a \$230,000 first-place prize. During the Pro Tour, Lewis doesn't have many off-days; there's usually a qualifying tournament every weekend. Lewis attends as many North American tournaments as he can, and even fits in a few international ones.



EG's Halo team in action

The Xfinity-sponsored EG house



STEP 3: FIND THE RIGHT TEAM

In just about every competitive gaming scene, the highest-level players tend to play for pro gaming outfits like Evil Geniuses, Team Liquid, Cloud9, and in Lewis' case, Red Bull. Some teams only dabble in particular games, while the largest teams field players in just about every game imaginable; Evil Geniuses has players in Street Fighter, Super Smash Bros. Halo, Dota 2, and Call of Duty.

Once players like Lewis have made a name for themselves in a game, both sponsors and teams (the line is often blurry) will eventually begin reaching out, but signing a contract is not always a quick process; Lewis rejected several offers before settling on Red Bull. "I wanted a sponsor that would fit who I am and what my goals and aspirations were," he says. Representatives from Red Bull and Lewis hung out on a few occasions, discussing Lewis' ambitions as a player. Eventually, the two agreed they were a good fit for each other, and Lewis signed.

When signing with a team, it's important to remember your value as a player and know when you're getting a raw deal. Some teams take a portion of their team's tournament winnings, but these portions are rather small and can depend on the game. "In Call of Duty we don't take any percent of the earnings because of the way that vertical is structured," says Hector "h3cz" Rodriguez, who manages the shooter-oriented team OpTic Gaming. When it comes to other games OpTic has teams for, such as Halo or Gears of War, however, "there's some revenue share on winnings."

In previous years, teams took a larger cut from players' winnings, and often exploited the likeness rights that came with being part of a team. "When I started in 2011, the first contract that I worked on was not very good," says David Philip Graham, an attorney who negotiates contracts for players, teams, and corporate sponsors. "Though the contract was in line with what many players were receiving at the time, there wasn't that much money involved,

As coach, Towey helps lead EG's halo team to victory



there was no salary, a lot of rights were given up on the player's side." During that time, players would often sign away their likeness and image rights for teams to use even after that player left the team. "At the time, it seemed like players couldn't get a better deal than that. Now, that's mostly gone away."

These days, most teams across every genre are letting players keep all or most of their winnings, in part because teams have started to diversify their income sources. Additionally, letting players keep more of the money they win from tournaments is a competitive advantage when trying to recruit and retain key players; if a player is doing well on a team and learns they can keep a larger portion of their winnings by jumping ship, they may choose to leave.

Even for smaller teams, taking a larger cut of a player's winnings is not a good long-term strategy, according to EG's former director of talent Kelby May, who now handles eSports sponsorships at Twitch. "If you're a small organization, your key to success and growth moving forward is not through short-term monetary gain." Instead, May says, smaller teams do well by holding onto their best players as long as they can, building a reputation over the long term. "So you have to be competitive and not take away winnings to do that."

It also helps to have a good idea of how your scene is doing when selecting a team to play for. Lewis, for example, is one of the few people in the fighting game scene who can afford to play Street Fighter for a living. Graham estimates there may only be somewhere between 10 and 15 players who make fighting games their fulltime job. "The highest that I know of is somebody who gets a salary of \$3,000 a month," Graham says. "Travel expenses are paid for, but that's not terribly much. It's hard to survive, especially in the area where that person lives, on that kind of salary."

In other scenes, such as those for Dota 2 and League of Legends, players can make more comfortable livings from playing at high-level tournaments. "Some of them are making six figures," Graham says. "Not many, but there are some."

This also means that if a scene suddenly becomes more popular, players may have grounds for a pay raise, should a player and their team decide to stay on with each other after a contract expires. "I would say the biggest [salary bump] was in League of Legends, for a team I represented," Graham says. "[They] started out with minimum salary which I think was \$26,500 per year which was not great, and then the year after that the player was getting like \$70,000."



Darryl Lewis is a dedicated Zangief player, mastering him in HD Remix, Street Fighter IV, and Street Fighter V

STEP 4: EARN YOUR KEEP

Because eSports is ultimately a competition, many people assume players must perform at a certain level in order to maintain their position. The truth is that while players have to achieve some level of skill to play on a team, the specifics about performance are less clear-cut than you might think. It also means that anyone looking to be a professional player in the long term needs to be hone their skills in other areas.

“You can’t expect to win absolutely everything,” Lewis says. “Especially with all the talented players and diversity of games like Street Fighter.” While skill is one of the most important factors

in signing a player to a team, it’s not the only one, according to Rodriguez. Though OpTic’s players first present Rodriguez with potential new teammates, Rodriguez has other factors to consider. “I look at the extra stuff – how they behave on social media, what sort of history they have in the community, whether they’ve cleaned up their act or not.” If a player doesn’t look like a valuable asset beyond their ability to play well, he can reject them.

“Really, a player’s value to the organization is in the two areas: performance and popularity,” says May. If a player has a tendency to attract more fans, viewers, or merchandise sales, they can be as valuable as a player who consistently performs well. Before working with EG, May was the general manager for Counter Logic Gaming, where he saw Yiliang “Doublelift” Peng underperform on the team’s League of Legends squad. Although he was struggling as a player, at the time Peng was one of the most valuable assets on the team due to his high popularity and the caliber of sponsors he attracted. Though Peng is no longer playing on CLG’s tournament team, he still plays for them as a streamer on Twitch.

Not all kinds of popularity are equal, however. If a player is popular because of their tendency to start fights online or for acting in unprofessional ways, they offer little to teams. “Regardless of how popular a player is, if they have a negative [reputation] and sponsors don’t want their brand to be associated with them, they aren’t valuable to you [as a team] because you’re not going to get any budget to support them,” May says.

And increasingly, it pays to keep it clean on social media. Towey currently handles contract negotiation and fulfillment for EG’s players and confirms that while many contracts don’t have strict stipulations about what team members can post on social media, there are unspoken rules. “If there’s something out of line, the manager will post a link to it in [our] group chat and ask why we did something so stupid,” Towey says.

Rodriguez recommends using common sense. “Obviously don’t swear, especially not on paper, or tweets, because that can be taken out of context. If you’re speaking into a microphone, they can see your demeanor, they can see whether you’re joking.”

Aging Out

As in traditional sports, one of the issues players must deal with is getting too old to play. Though there’s no hard age at which teams will kick players out, most tend to field players in their late teens and early twenties. However, as eSports continues to develop as a scene, some players are peaking at older ages and proving they can keep up even in their 30s.



Lewis often travels internationally to play Street Fighter

STEP 5: LEARN TO WORK WITH SPONSORS

Instead of making money through their players' tournament winnings, most teams rely on their reputation to bring in sponsors. EG, for example, earns about 80 percent of their income through sponsorships, according to May.

So what do sponsors get out of these deals? "The value that [EG] brings to the sponsor is that they have a community of people who are passionate about them," says Comcast executive director of sports marketing Matt Lederer. In September of last year, Comcast internet and telephone brand Xfinity equipped two of EG's gaming houses in Alameda, California and Bloomington, Illinois (where EG's Halo team practices) with fiber internet.

Lederer helps make sponsorship deals with all kinds of talent and events, including Taylor Swift and The Oscars. Lederer sees teams like EG as a conduit to the passionate group of fans who follow the teams wherever they go. When a team connects with a sponsor, "they become an authentic and credible voice for that community."

While having the right sponsor can be a boon for players and teams, players usually have a say in the kinds of sponsorship deals their team accepts. When it comes to the headsets, mice, and keyboards many sponsors sell, Rodriguez always makes sure he consults his players before signing off on a deal. "It's very easy to take money from any company, but you don't want to risk your competitive integrity just for the business' sake."

In the case of Lewis, though the core of his job is playing a game he loves for hours on end, it also includes many practical hurdles, like traveling for work, figuring out hotel arrangements, and making sure he's on time for interviews with other companies and press.

Though he doesn't have a concrete schedule, all told he spends "about four days a week, six to twelve hours a day playing Street Fighter." On his few free weekends, he may spend time filming promotional material for Red Bull or other companies instead.

Lewis' manager, Denise Tan, helps him work through these issues, and it's one of the biggest benefits of being part of a team. While Tan takes care of the details of when and where he should appear, "Darryl is in full control of what he wants and doesn't want to do," Tan says. "Fortunately, he's very willing to take any opportunity that comes his way." Currently, one of Lewis' biggest opportunities came when Red Bull developed a web documentary series about him, called *Cultivation: House of Snake Eyez*.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

According to Graham, more sponsors enter the scene than leave it every year. However, he notes that the current influx could be due to a current gold rush of sponsors seeing potential in the scene. "I don't know how well that's paying off right now, but what I think that all of them are thinking is, 'we have

to get in on it right now because if not, we're going to be too late.'"

But if current trends are anything to go by, sponsoring teams and players should be a good investment for companies going forward. According to SuperData's latest research, 214 million people watched eSports events last year, and the number is likely to grow in the coming years.

As that number climbs, more money will continue to flow to teams, who can then venture into more games, growing scenes and allowing for better competition. And for Lewis, that money means he can continue making a living doing what he loves: turning his competitive drive to defeat his brother (and Dave) into a meaningful career for years to come. ♦

For a deep dive on aging out of eSports, interviews with commentators, and more, visit gameinformer.com/esports2017





FINAL FANTASY XV

After years of waiting, RPG fans are finally playing Final Fantasy XV. What they are finding is a game that departs drastically from the established traditions of the series – but that willingness to experiment might be its greatest strength. We talked to creative director Hajime Tabata about the how and why behind the team’s unconventional decisions. *by Joe Juba*

Now that the game is in players’ hands, what about the response has been most surprising?

What was most surprising was the opinion on the game being split depending on how the player played through the game. The players’ satisfaction was drastically different between those who enjoyed journeying with their party for a long time, versus those who only played through the main storyline and finished the game. I had anticipated this to happen to a degree, but the actual feedback being split among the players was greater than what I had imagined.

Did you need to decrease the roles of side characters (like Cor and Aranea) to keep the focus on the four main characters?

It’s not that we decreased the roles of the side characters, but rather increased the proportion in which the four main characters are depicted. Focusing on many characters in the game means that the allocation given to the main characters will decrease. Instead of creating a comprehensive and perfectly balanced story, we placed greater importance and focus on the four main characters and strived to depict a world seen from their perspective.

How did the team approach creating all those images of delicious-looking food?

What I had committed to was to be consistent in creating dishes that can actually be made while camping. Each dish was thoroughly researched, tested, and decided to be included into the game by what we call the “food team.” I believe that each member of the food team had visited different types of restaurants on their own. I also brought my own experiences of dishes that I’ve

had the chance to eat at different locations around the world, and had them use that as reference as well.

The ending uses the pictures Prompto takes in clever ways. When the photography element of the game was first conceived, did you know that’s how you wanted to use the pictures?

From the initial stages of developing the game as Final Fantasy XV, I had already decided that I want to show a record of the player’s own journey during the ending. I concluded that I wanted to take the photos for it during the game, and decided for Prompto to take on that role. This idea came right after we released Episode Duscae, when I was polishing the characters’ personalities and was creating a close relationship between the gameplay and each of the character’s personality.

The later chapters restrict players’ ability to explore. Were areas like Tenebrae and Gralea ever intended to be open-world also?

Based on calculations that the development time and cost would double if the latter half of the game was to be an open-world environment as well, we had already planned to make the latter half more of a journey by vehicle. The structure of this title – to create memories while traveling in the open-world environment during the first half of the game, then have the story move forward linearly using the train in the latter half of the game – was designed and intended to be that way.

Several important events happen off-screen. What is the advantage of letting players imagine rather than witness some moments?

It was for the players to experience the

story through Noctis’ eyes. The world and the events that Noctis sees are merely things that are seen through his eyes. We didn’t want to create a comprehensive and perfectly balanced story in this game. Instead, we placed importance on the main characters and for the player and Noctis to share the same experience when we tell the story.

How would the game have been different if it had released on the original September 30 release date?

By extending the release date, we had brushed up the game as a whole. We especially improved the usability of the game, so I believe we would have had usability issues left in there if we didn’t have that extension. We also would not have been able to tackle bugs as much, and so the game would’ve had more issues that would inhibit players to move on. We also took another look at the loading mechanics during the extra days we had acquired, and strengthened the fast-travel mechanics. I believe that the play time for players would’ve increased dramatically if we hadn’t changed the release date, but traveling while enjoying side quests wouldn’t have been pleasant either. I also believe that the optimization of the overall game wouldn’t have been sufficient as well.

The game is out, but you’re already talking about some ambitious additions and content for the future. How long are you planning to continue work on Final Fantasy XV?

I want to continue as much as possible, but I have set a goal of one year for now. In a sense, a game belongs to the developers until it releases, so we as developers prioritize our intentions as we develop the game. However, once the game releases, I believe that the game belongs to the players. That is why I feel it would be best if the development team and the players work together to make the game grow from now. Because of that, we are hoping to develop game content that actively incorporates voices from the players as part of a post-launch plan. ❖



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The Creators Of BattleBlock Theater And Castle Crashers Return

Over the years that indie gaming has grown to prominence, The Behemoth has remained one of the most consistent developers in the industry, both in terms of quality releases and identifiable aesthetics. There's no mistaking a game from this team, filled as it is with weird characters, absurd storytelling, and stylish art. That reputation is intact for the team's latest project, **Pit People**, in which The Behemoth once again jumps genres to explore the hex-based tactics field.

by Matt Miller

Pit People wastes no time throwing players into combat. After a brief intro narrated by the story's over-the-top villain, I am in the midst of a battle, controlling my first mustachioed hero as he defends his home from marauders. Battle unfolds on a hex grid, and the initial impression is one of oversimplification; the bulk of the game is about choosing where to move each character I control. Once the colorful character arrives in place, he or she autonomously chooses a target based on available options. Because of that, action moves much faster than most turn-based tactical affairs, and it's easy to flow seamlessly from one battle into the next.

The simple interaction model introduces complexity over time. How do I position this character so that they're forced to attack the target I wish to eliminate? What's the range on my grenades? How tightly grouped can I afford to be when that enemy unicorn is about to shoot rainbow-colored bombs in my direction? Pit People eschews overt explanation in favor of experimentation and discovery, leaving

players to learn the best ways to face a challenging fight, and even wonder over the distinctions between different types of wearable equipment.

The storytelling is flat-out ludicrous. A moon-sized bear has smashed into the planet, fracturing time into turns and creating rainfalls of green, acidic bear blood. Human-sized cupcakes wander the world, selflessly healing friends by sacrificing their own icing. Spanish conquistadors smash into shorelines in the name of the Empress, even as petulant penguins lead lava men into war. Pit People's world is large and loony, and it's fun to wander its impressive sprawl between battles, picking up treasure and engaging in random fights.

Story questlines send players to particular locales around the world, lending an RPG element to the experience, which is further reinforced by the character leveling and party building. Recruitment is enabled through a fun capture mechanic that can be used on many of the foes you face. In between fights, your misfit party heads back to a bustling town to buy

new gear, hire more soldiers, and flip between over 1,300 collectible helmets, weapons, and other unlockable items. My favorites include a chili-pepper sword, an unwieldy toothbrush club, and a towering flowered headdress seemingly plucked from the streets of the Rio Carnival.

The Pit People campaign can also be played cooperatively with a friend in both local and online play, breaking your characters down into smaller teams that range out across the world together. I love the idea of a tactics game that can be played with a buddy, and the brisk pace of gameplay keeps such a concept from tedium.

In addition to a full campaign, battles also unfold within the Pit, an ever-changing gladiatorial tournament ring that can be tackled against both A.I. and up to four human opponents, both locally and online. The Pit battles are some of the most potent challenges I encountered during my hours exploring, and delivered some of the beefiest rewards.

The Behemoth isn't committing to a final release date quite yet, but everything I played was polished, leading to some confidence in a possible 2017 launch. The Early Access build I played should be available to the public by the time you read this, on both Xbox One and PC, and the multiple hours of content make it a tempting option in what otherwise might be slower gaming months. I came away smiling after my time with Pit People, but only because I was willing to leave any pretension at the door and embrace the insanity. ✨

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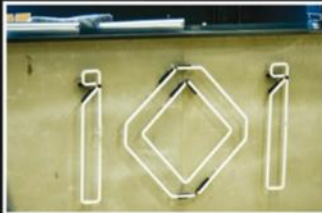
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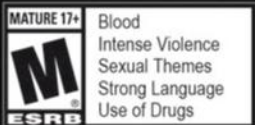


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Hearts

by Elise Favis



Recovery Hearts

The Legend of Zelda series

Plenty of games use hearts to represent life, but none are more iconic than The Legend of Zelda. With the series' emphasis on exploration, searching carefully for Pieces of Heart in secret areas is part of the fun, and Heart Containers make you stronger as you defeat one boss to the next.



Heart Mythology

Kingdom Hearts

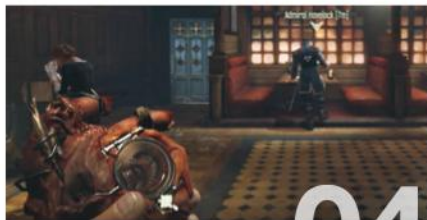
Hearts play a big role in Kingdom Hearts, symbolizing wisdom and power. Kingdom Hearts is the most powerful of all, accessible with a Keyblade. Many of the world's villains search it out for their own gain. The series is deeply rooted in this mythology, making it an intriguing universe.



Kano's Heart-Ripping Fatality

Mortal Kombat

This cyborg from Mortal Kombat's original roster performs one of the most gruesome fatalities. In the original, he reaches into an enemy's chest and rips out their still-beating heart. In Mortal Kombat 9, he performs the same move then decapitates his foes.



The Heart

Dishonored

Given by the Outsider during a vision, The Heart guides you toward bone charms and runes. When one is close by, it beats unsettlingly and glows. Its most interesting function is whispering secrets as you squeeze it while pointing it at specific characters.



Eating Enemies' Hearts

The Darkness

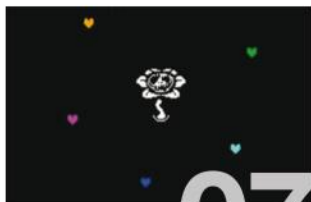
Playing as a hitman possessed by an ancient demon, you hunt down mobsters while avoiding well-lit areas. One of the main mechanics is eating the hearts of your opponents to increase your Darkness level and powers. It's a neat mechanic, accompanied by a brutal animation.



Hearts As Ammo

Castlevania

While most games use hearts as a representation of health, Castlevania takes a refreshingly different turn. In the series, hearts are often used as ammunition or energy for sub-weapons. You can find hearts by killing enemies or even destroying lanterns.



Colored Hearts

Undertale

In Undertale, different colored hearts in battle represent the souls of past humans that came to the world. Each symbolizes a trait, such as the protagonist's red heart representing determination. The hearts have their own play styles, such as yellow shooting out bullets.



The Heart Of Liberty City

Grand Theft Auto IV

By entering Liberty City's version of the Statue of Liberty, you come across a strange sight: a gigantic, beating heart is chained to the walls. Outside, you find a plaque on the statue that reads "no hidden content here," poking fun at the concept of Easter eggs.



Hearts

The Binding of Isaac

In this roguelike, hearts can regenerate health or have varying effects. Soul Hearts act as armor, Gold Hearts grant Isaac money when his final heart is lost, and Black Hearts can damage all nearby enemies. These hearts bring variety, and can shake things up when used strategically.



Heart Transplant

Crypt of the Necrodancer

In this top-down roguelike, following the beat is a careful dance for survival. By using the Heart Transplant special item, you can momentarily walk freely without having to stay in rhythm with the music. ♡

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The Good



NINTENDO is committing to a slate of Fire Emblem titles beyond the already announced Dynasty Warriors-esque Fire Emblem Warriors for the Switch (shown) (see p. 53 for more). Not only is Fire Emblem Warriors also coming to the 3DS in the fall along with the Switch version, but Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows of Valentia (a remake of 1992's Fire Emblem: Gaiden) hits 3DS on May 19 (see p. 83 for more), Fire Emblem Heroes is a tactical RPG with a new storyline for mobile devices (out now), and another new title in the franchise is planned for the Switch in 2018.

Quotable

“Yes, there is definitely a possibility.”



– The Legend of Zelda series producer **Eiji Aonuma** when asked if the 3DS Zelda development team would make 2D Zeldas on Switch in the future.

The Bad



SCALEBOUND

(the Xbox One exclusive from Platinum Games) has been canceled by Microsoft. Specifics regarding the decision weren't given by the publisher, but Scalebound never seemed to gain a lot of traction since debuting in 2014.

The Ugly



SONY has closed the Guerrilla Cambridge studio recently responsible for the PSVR title RIGS: Mechanized Combat League due to changes in Sony's European structure. Before it became a subsidiary for Horizon Zero Dawn developer Guerrilla Games, the studio was known as Cambridge Studio and had created the MediEvil series first on Playstation, and later worked on the PS2 title Primal. ♦

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GameStop

THE BEST OF CES 2017

by Ben Reeves



1 LG W7 Ultrathin OLED TV

Televisions keep getting thinner, but it's hard to get much thinner than LG's newest OLED set – a 77-inch TV so slender you can stick it on your wall like a poster. The W7 is only 2.57mm thick, making it thinner than most smartphones. Thankfully, the width doesn't diminish the screen's overall quality. Each pixel creates its own light and switches off independently, which produces impressive black levels with less color bleed than most televisions. The TV itself is connected via ribbon to a surround-sound speaker bar, which houses all the necessary connections you usually find on a TV. If you still haven't upgraded to 4K, LG's W7 will make a tempting, albeit expensive option when it releases in early April.

STBA | lg.com/us

2 Razer Project Ariana

Few things are more important for creating the right atmosphere for gaming than a room's lighting. Using a pair of 3D cameras, Razer's experimental Project Ariana projector automatically adapts to the dimensions of any room before producing an array of breathtaking light shows. In addition to a variety of visual effects, Razer hopes Project Ariana will shatter the barrier between screen and player by extending a game's peripheral view onto the walls of your living room. No word on when this could release, but hopefully we'll learn more before the end of the year.

\$TBA | razerzone.com



3 Razer Project Valerie

Desktop PC players often set up multiple monitors, but gamers on the go are limited to one screen. Razer fixed this "problem" by creating the Cerberus of laptops. Project Valerie is only about twice as thick as Razer's flagship Blade series, but it features three 4K displays when fully unfolded. The laptop's specs are still under wraps, but Razer says the system can run games at full resolution even across all three screens. Project Valerie is still in the prototype phase, so we don't know if or when Razer will mass-produce the system, but we'd love to see something this ambitious come to market.

\$TBA | razerzone.com



4

4 Samsung Odyssey Gaming Laptop

Samsung is no stranger to the laptop market, but the Odyssey marks the company's first foray into gaming laptops. A new "hexaflow vent" design reportedly helps keep the system cooler while playing taxing PC games like *The Witcher 3* or *Battlefield 1*. Samsung is still experimenting with graphics cards, but at CES the company showcased a unit housing a Nvidia GeForce GTX 1050, a solid graphics chip that should run most games at high detail settings, but probably won't allow for VR gaming. Samsung didn't announce a release date, but we'd expect to see the Odyssey on store shelves before the end of the year.

Starting at \$1,199 | samsung.com/us



5

5 Sevenhugs Smart Remote

We didn't think you could do anything new with a universal remote, but Sevenhugs' inventive Smart Remote showed us a few new tricks. Using a proprietary indoor-positioning system, this remote knows its location in your home as well as the location of up to 25,000 different connected devices, so you can just point the Smart Remote at any of your electronics and it automatically adjusts its interface to match. The Sevenhugs Smart Remote is estimated to release in August. ♦

\$299 | remote.sevenhugs.com



ROGUE ONE: THE ULTIMATE VISUAL GUIDE BY PABLO HIDALGO

Rogue One helped prove that *The Force Awakens* wasn't a fluke. This comprehensive guide to Star War's first standalone film features background details on its worlds, in-depth character profiles, and fully annotated vehicle and location cross-sections.

\$30.00
dk.com

SHERLOCK: SERIES FOUR

The BBC's modernized take on Sir Conan Doyle's classic characters is wickedly smart and endlessly entertaining. In this final season, Sherlock Holmes solves a series of murders across London as he prepares to face off against his archrival Moriarty one last time.

\$29.99
bbc.co.uk

VISION VOL. 2: LITTLE BETTER THAN A BEAST BY TOM KING & MICHAEL WALSH

The Vision is an android who wants to be human, so he creates an artificial family and moves into a house with a white picket fence. But after a series of disasters, Vision's wife begins to go insane, and this android learns that his family might not be capable of ordinary.

\$17.99
marvel.com



03.2 The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild



07 Ghost Recon Wildlands



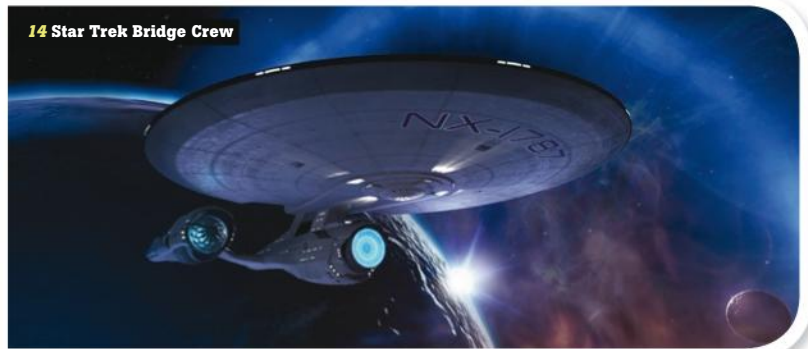
07 Nier: Automata



08



10.2



14 Star Trek Bridge Crew



21 Mass Effect Andromeda

2017

March

03.1 Nintendo Switch

The next-generation of Nintendo console and handheld gaming arrive together with the Nintendo Switch. Get to your stores early today if you hope to get one. See page 30 for a full rundown of Switch's features.

03.2 New Releases

- › 1-2-Switch (Switch)
- › Human Resource Machine (Switch)
- › I Am Setsuna (Switch)
- › Just Dance 2017 (Switch)
- › The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild (Switch, Wii U)
- › Little Inferno (Switch)
- › Skylanders Imaginators (Switch)
- › Super Bomberman R (Switch)
- › World of Goo (Switch)

03.3 Logan

Hugh Jackman's final Wolverine film, *Logan*, opens in theaters today, and takes place in a future where most of the mutants are gone. Wolverine is tasked to protect a female clone of himself from a new organization run by Nathaniel Essex.

07 New Releases

- › Birthdays The Beginning (PS4, PC)
- › Ghost Recon Wildlands (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Nier: Automata (PS4)

08 America

Marvel is finally giving America Chavez a new standalone series. She's the head of the Ultimates and now we'll see what she does away from her team. The first

issue of *America* launches today with three different covers.

10.1 SXSW Interactive Festival 2017

Held in Austin, Texas, this 10-day festival explores the latest achievements and developments in games, film, and music. This year's show offers over 750 sessions, including three days dedicated to gaming (March 16-18). Several eSports tournaments, new game demos, and open play areas are a part of the mix.

10.2 Kong: Skull Island

Rather than bringing King Kong to New York again, the latest film to star the gigantic gorilla takes place entirely on his turf. *Kong: Skull Island* hits theaters today, and looks to be more of a monster-fest than previous iterations in the series.

14 New Releases

- › Danganronpa 1-2 Reload (PS4)
- › Star Trek Bridge Crew (PSVR, Rift, Vive)
- › Styx: Shards of Darkness (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

21 New Releases

- › Mass Effect Andromeda (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Troll and I (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

24.1 New Releases

- › Dreamfall Chapters (PS4, Xbox One)

24.2 Power Rangers

No one's childhood truly dies. Movie and toy companies keep making our memories new again. Today's theatrical blast from the past is *Power Rangers*, a new origin story starring Bryan Cranston, Elizabeth Banks, and Bill Hader. It looks to be a more serious take on the old television show.

28 New Releases

- › Has-Been Heroes (Switch, PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- › Kingdom Hearts HD 1.5 + 2.5 Remix (PS4)
- › MLB The Show 17 (PS4) ⚡

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32

HANDS-ON WITH
THE NINTENDO SWITCH



36

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA:
BREATH OF THE WILD



48

BREAKING DOWN
THE NINTENDO SWITCH
GAME LIBRARY



CHANGING THE FORMULA

HOW NINTENDO IS RETHINKING
CONSOLES AND REDEFINING ZELDA

T

his past October, Nintendo lifted the curtain on the platform formerly known as NX with a short trailer. It revealed its official name (Switch) and its ability to take and play a home console on the go. Three months later, Nintendo aired a livestream announcing the console's \$299 price point and a March 3 release date, showcasing its early game library, and confirming that *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* is a launch title for the new console.

We attended the New York City event that gave media its first hands-on experience with the Switch, allowing us to spend ample time with the hardware and software. Now we're ready to offer impressions of Nintendo's grand plan to merge home and mobile gaming.

Additionally, we spent an extended period of time with the latest entry of *The Legend of Zelda* series on Nintendo's new platform. We explored its open-world for hours, entered our first dungeon, fought a Guardian, and spoke extensively with long-time *Zelda* producer Eiji Aonuma about how *Breath of the Wild* charts a substantial path of change from the series' core conventions.

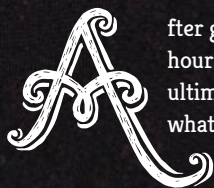


NINTENDO
SWITCH.



A SWITCH IN THE SYSTEM

OUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF NINTENDO'S
TRANSFORMING CONSOLE



fter going hands-on with Nintendo's new console for nearly seven hours, we spoke with the company about its new direction, and ultimately walked away with a notebook full of impressions. Here is what you need to know about playing the Switch.

by Ben Reeves



For more than 30 years, Nintendo has had two hardware tent poles. One was the home console market, featuring a lineup of some of the most culturally significant video game machines to ever hit the market. The NES single-handedly brought the industry back from the brink of obsolescence, and the Wii phenomenon shattered traditional boundaries with its motion-control interface that brought many new consumers into gaming for the first time. Nintendo's second focus has been handhelds – a market it helped pioneer with technology like the Game & Watch and the Game Boy, a system so popular that it became virtually synonymous with portable gaming.

Like most of Nintendo's hardware, its latest platform, the Switch, is a shift from the norm. But the Switch represents something bigger for Nintendo; it bridges the gap between the company's two worlds. The Switch offers the flexibility of a handheld while providing the comfort of a living room console, so Pokémon fans finally get to collect 'em all on their home television just as Zelda fans can play Link's next big 3D adventure on a plane.

"Although people have been able to take their games on the go since the Game Boy, I think everyone would love to be able to take their console-type systems with them as well," says deputy general manager of Nintendo's Entertainment Planning & Development division Yoshiaki Koizumi. "We were never able to do that before, due to a number of reasons. We have been able to take a step forward in that area, so the Nintendo Switch is a type of evolution."

GAME AND GO

With the Switch, Nintendo envisions that players will be able to play any of the console's games via three different modes. A traditional console mode sees the Switch hooked up to a television. A handheld mode allows players to hold the system like a tablet. And a tabletop mode lets players hold two halves of the controller (called Joy-Cons) in separate hands and prop the tablet up on a table using a built-in kickstand.

The dual hearts of Nintendo's new machine are those Joy-Con controllers, which allow players to easily swap between these three modes. The Joy-Cons produce a satisfying click when docked into either the tablet or the Joy-Con grip holder, which transforms these



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Nintendo Switch console
- Left and right Joy-Con controllers
- Joy-Con wrist straps
- Joy-Con grip
- Docking station
- HDMI cable
- A/C adaptor

yin and yang halves into a more balanced controller shape. A button on the back of each Joy-Con makes it easy to slide each half in and out of its dock.

Nintendo wanted to make sure players didn't need to turn off their console, or even pause their game, when switching between these TV and portable modes. We tested this transfer several times while playing Mario Kart 8 Deluxe and noticed that the game appeared on the Switch's tablet screen nearly instantaneously when pulled from its dock. The system takes a few extra seconds to transfer its display back to the TV when returned to the dock, but Nintendo says this is because of the delay most televisions normally experience when receiving a new HDMI signal.

The Switch's screen itself is clean and crisp. Even though most Switch games run at a lower resolution on the tablet, it's hard to see the difference with the naked eye. Unlike the Wii U's slightly muddy display, we don't think we'll mind playing games in the Switch's tablet form. Most of the Switch's lineup doesn't make use of the touchscreen, but the screen is very responsive and feels much more like the PlayStation Vita's touch screen than the Wii U's finicky display.

QUICK STATS

RELEASE DATE: March 3

PRICE: \$299, extra Joy-Con Controllers - \$80 per set

PROCESSOR: Nvidia Tegra

BATTERY LIFE: 2.5 to 6 hours

SCREEN: 6.2-inch, 1280x720 resolution multi-touch capacitive touchscreen

STORAGE: 32GB internal built-in memory (expanded to up to 2TB via MicroSDXC slot)

BACKWARD COMPATIBILITY: Wii U games will not work on the Switch, and Nintendo hasn't detailed if previously purchased virtual console games will transfer.

GAME PRICES: The \$60 price of each individual game is more in line with Wii U games than 3DS games.



“We always have to go through a number of iterations for every product, and we did go through a lot of trial and error this time,” Koizumi says. “The process of development was much different from that of the Wii Remote, although with the same focus on fun. We want to provide a different entertainment experience than what’s out there.”

Our experience with the Switch’s pack-in controller was mostly positive. The analog sticks on each Joy-Con feel solidly made and highly responsive. The face buttons are a tad small, but are soft to the touch and feel sturdy. Unfortunately, the shoulder buttons are especially small and have a short throw, and we missed the analog triggers found on traditional gamepads. Gamers who want to do a lot of traditional gaming from their couch might want to upgrade to a Switch Pro Controller (\$70), which feels comparable to Sony and Microsoft’s offerings.

While the Joy-Con controllers function admirably when combined

into a single controller, they are far more interesting when separated. Players can hold a single Joy-Con in each hand and still have the freedom to rest their arms at their sides, similar to how players hold the Wii’s remote/nunchuck combination.

The added bonus of separating the Joy-Cons is that each half can be used as an independent controller, which is ideal for couch co-op games. This means that each Switch effectively comes bundled with two mini-controllers. There are two color variants of the controller, a version where both Joy-Cons are gray and another version where the left Joy-Con is blue and the right Joy-Con is red.

“The theme of Nintendo Switch is the ability to be able to take it with you and play with someone else, so we wanted to differentiate the colors when playing with two people,” Koizumi says. “As for the specific colors chosen, everyone had various feelings and there were many discussions, including wanting to have the red Joy-Con be the right controller – because they both start with ‘R.’”

BREAKING DOWN THE CONTROLLER

1. AUDIO SPEAKERS: The Switch tablet produces adequate audio for tabletop mode, but for ideal audio on the go we recommend using a headset.

2. 3.5MM HEADPHONE JACK

3. GAME CARDS: Switch games ship on game cards that are roughly 1.4 inches by 1.3 inches. A single card can hold about 16 GB (twice that of a 3DS card).

4. L, ZL, R, AND ZR BUTTONS: The ZL and ZR buttons are not triggers and have a shorter throw than most traditional controller triggers.

5. DIRECTIONAL BUTTONS: These directional buttons function as the controllers D-pad, but can double as the X, B, A, and Y buttons when using the left Joy-Con as a controller for multiplayer offerings.

6. X, B, A, AND Y BUTTONS: The Switch’s face buttons are smaller than normal and feel similar to the buttons on a 3DS, which might annoy gamers with big hands.

7. PLAYER LED: These LEDs tell players which player number has been assigned to each Joy-Con.

8. SYNC BUTTON

9. SL AND SR BUTTONS: These buttons function as the Joy-Con’s shoulder buttons since the L, ZL, R, and ZR buttons aren’t in use when the Joy-Cons are in solo mode. A Joy-Con wrist strap gives the controller an extra bit of width, making it more comfortable while raising the shoulder buttons so they are easier to hit.

10. CAPTURE BUTTON: The left Joy-Con has exclusive access to this button, which allows you to take photos of whatever game you’re playing and share it with your friends.

11. HOME BUTTON

12. IR MOTION CAMERA: The right Joy-Con features built-in motion sensors and an infrared sensor for recognizing shapes. None of the Switch’s early lineup seems to make use of this feature, but theoretically the right Joy-Con could be used to point at objects on your TV screen in a similar fashion to the original Wii controller.

13. HD RUMBLE: Nintendo says that its high definition rumble is so sensitive that it can simulate the feel of ice cubes in a glass and emulate the sensation of six marbles rolling around inside a tiny box.

14. BUILT-IN NFC READER: For Amiibo support

15. BUILT-IN ACCELEROMETERS: Allows for Wii-like motion gaming.



The Joy-Cons are smaller than the original NES controllers, which makes them less ergonomic than a modern joypad, but we didn't find them uncomfortable while playing multiplayer games like Super Bomberman Z, Snipperclips, and Ultra Street Fighter II. We'll have to wait and see if our hands begin to cramp up after extended sessions using the Switch's tiny controller halves.

One idiosyncrasy of the Joy-Cons is that each one is a little different. The analog stick for the right Joy-Con is placed very close to the middle of the controller, while the buttons on the left Joy-Con are shifted center. This means that each controller is slightly imbalanced. However, the controllers are so small that their sides never got in our way, and we mostly forgot about this oddity after a few minutes. The bigger issue is the size of the controllers themselves. The Joy-Cons are only about as long as a Twix bar, so you have to hold your hands very close together while playing, and some gamers might grow tired of this after extended play sessions.

Nintendo says that the batteries for each Joy-Con will last roughly 20 hours, and that they will only take around three hours to fully charge. However, players will have to slide the Joy-Cons back into the tablet to charge them since they can't be charged separately or while connected to the Joy-Con Grip (unless you buy the Charging Grip, which is sold separately for \$30). We wish Nintendo had included more charging solutions in the original bundle, since a dead Joy-Con battery could seriously disrupt a long play session.

NINTENDO POWER

Nintendo hasn't shared specifics about the Switch's processing capabilities, but confirmed that it houses a custom Nvidia Tegra chip. Early rumors reported that the Switch would use a Tegra X1 running at around 768MHz, which would make the system marginally more powerful than the Wii U, but significantly less powerful than the PS4 and Xbox One. The Switch is powerful enough to display games at 1080p while in docked mode, but in an effort to conserve battery power while in handheld mode, it underclocks the processor and renders games at a lower 720p resolution.

"For Nintendo, the axis of improvement for each new generation is the system concept," Koizumi says. "To make it possible to play a game system at home or on the go seamlessly, we had to take a different perspective and consider factors such as the battery usage of the 'system on a chip.' This is a different axis than simply improving processing power, so we selected design elements that fit the type of product we wanted to produce."

While we likely won't know more specifics about the Switch's guts until someone cracks one open after launch, our experience playing the Switch's launch titles seemed to line up with those early rumors. Games like Mario Kart 8 Deluxe, which previously appeared on the Wii U, run on the Switch without a hitch. Meanwhile, the Switch version of The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild looks nearly identical to the Wii U version.

We only noticed a subtle change in the performance of Switch games when moving from docked to handheld mode. For example, Breath of the Wild's draw distance seemed slightly reduced when removed from the dock, but it was hard to notice the resolution dip with the naked eye. On the other hand, games like Mario Kart 8 Deluxe and Ultra Street Fighter II looked largely unchanged between modes.

RETHINKING ONLINE

Nintendo's online service has long been a joke among the gaming community, but for the first time, Nintendo will soon charge users for online play. The company didn't detail pricing, but this monthly fee will presumably help Nintendo build a more robust online service featuring online friends lists and other components similar to Xbox Live and PlayStation Plus.

Nintendo's online service plans have already come under criticism since the publisher announced it is offloading voice chat support onto a phone app, meaning players won't be able to talk to their online friends through the console itself.

Microsoft's and Sony's services both offer a suite of free rotating monthly games, and Nintendo plans to offer something similar, giving subscribers access to a free classic virtual console each month. However, Nintendo's free game comes with another caveat: These games will only be free to play for a single month. Even subscribers will have to pay to access to these titles when that month is over.

We don't expect to learn more details about Nintendo's online plans until after the Switch launch, as Nintendo is still working to build this service, and won't even start charging for its online infrastructure until the fall. Considering Nintendo's hands-off approach to online gaming in the past, this seems like a step in the right direction, but the company might also have a few things to learn as it builds out its new service.

SWITCH WAY TO GO

As promising as Nintendo's break from tradition sounds, the company has a few hills to climb before the Switch proves successful. Are the Switch's unique features enough to overcome the fact that it will be the most underpowered console on the market the day it launches? Will gamers embrace the Switch as a handheld when its battery life is only a few hours long and it is too big to fit in your back pocket? Can Nintendo foster the kind of robust third-party support that will help build a hearty software library?

Given Nintendo's past, the answer to that last question is probably, "Not likely." However, for many, it is a moot point, because the strongest case Nintendo can make for the Switch is its own first-party offerings – games like The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Super Mario Odyssey, and Splatoon 2. Nintendo remains one of the premier video game developers in the world, and if players want to get their hands on Nintendo's iconic games, then they're going to have to make this switch. ❖

SHORT MEMORY

The Switch's 32GB of onboard memory is paltry even by last generation's standards, and most players are going to need to purchase an additional MicroSDXC memory card. Nintendo says that the Switch will support cards of up to 2 TB in size, but as of this writing the largest MicroSDXC on the market are 512 GB (and will set you back a few hundred dollars). Many worry the Switch's limited storage will quickly become a problem for gamers who like to download a lot of games. For comparison, last year's Doom reboot clocked in at over 45GB; games of that size wouldn't fit on the Switch without additional memory. Nintendo's own The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild requires 13.4 GB of storage, taking up over 40 percent of the console's internal storage.

On the other hand, we assume Nintendo is banking on the fact that the art in its first-party games tend to have a lower resolution than many of the big budget games on Xbox One and PS4. Nintendo's titles usually have smaller file sizes than its competitors' titles. For example, Mario Kart 8 for the Wii U was less than 5 GB.

Even so, the Switch's limited memory raises question about post-release support. Game patches, DLC, and other updates are now an important part of the industry, and they often take up a lot of space (sometimes more than the original game). Even if Nintendo manages to make petite games, the Switch's memory shortage is one of the system's biggest flaws and this could discourage third parties from coming to Switch, since many see continual services, patches, and DLC as status quo.





» **PLATFORM**
Switch • Wii U

» **STYLE**
1-Player Action

» **PUBLISHER**
Nintendo

» **DEVELOPER**
Nintendo

» **RELEASE**
March 3





THE NEW TAKE ON AN OLD LEGEND

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA REINVENTS ITSELF
FOR BREATH OF THE WILD



Link has been asleep for a century. While he rests, the land of Hyrule is collapsing around him. Locked away in Hyrule Castle, the ethereal evil known as Calamity Ganon continues to grow in power. If it reaches its apex, the world's destruction is inevitable. Why Link lies dormant in the lead-up to this critical moment in Hyrule's history remains a mystery, but suddenly Zelda's voice, heard for the first time in the series' history, says "open your eyes."

Hearing her call, Link awakens inside a contraption that appears both magical and robotic. With nothing more than an old shirt and a pair of well-worn trousers, he sets out in a familiar world, but one unencumbered by boundaries common to other Zelda adventures.

by Kyle Hilliard



I

In 2014, longtime Zelda producer Eiji Aonuma showcased the first footage of *Breath of the Wild*. Since then, Nintendo has slowly revealed a Zelda game unlike any other, one unafraid to re-examine the series' core conventions. "In the recent years, Zelda games have become like a development order and workflow that we followed," Aonuma says. "We wanted to create something that wasn't that. We wanted to go off the rails a little bit."

Breath of the Wild missed its initial 2015 release window, then its 2016 window, and finally slipped into 2017 when Nintendo announced its plans for the Switch. One of the main reasons it took so long to develop? Aonuma's insistence on getting out of Zelda's comfort zone and into an open world. "We had to redefine how we develop games," Aonuma says "In the past we took an approach where we would create small areas and patch them together, but then we realized that we couldn't do that with this huge world. When we created this huge world, we first had to figure out what we needed to place on the map. So we figured that out, and then we would play the game every day and revisit it, and figure out if those elements we placed would actually work in those areas."

In the past, the director of a Zelda project would define everyone's role, and the team would branch off to create. But given the challenges inherent to building open-world games, with *Breath of the Wild*'s more than 300 staff members split off into groups and took ownership of specific sections of the massive world. "We would have them play the game over and over repeatedly and really have them take the time to understand what they were creating, as well as understanding the whole entire world as we were creating this game together," Aonuma says.

The challenge resulted in several delays, but the release is finally near. After exploring its open world for nearly three hours, completing a dungeon, and seeing more of the game than anyone outside of Nintendo, we're confident *Breath of the Wild* is ready to transform our expectations for Zelda games.





THE OPEN HYRULE

Nintendo adopted *Breath of the Wild's* open-world approach in part from critical reactions to *Skyward Sword*, which featured a number of large, disconnected areas. "We received feedback where each of the areas are super fun, but at the same time [fans] really want to know what's happening between those areas," Aonuma says. "We created a rather huge area where people can explore, but we soon realized that when you restrict these areas and create a boundary, then people always want to go outside of it and wonder, 'What is out there? What is on the other side of the boundary?'" I realized that I had to take out the boundaries and create this area where players will be able to freely roam around."

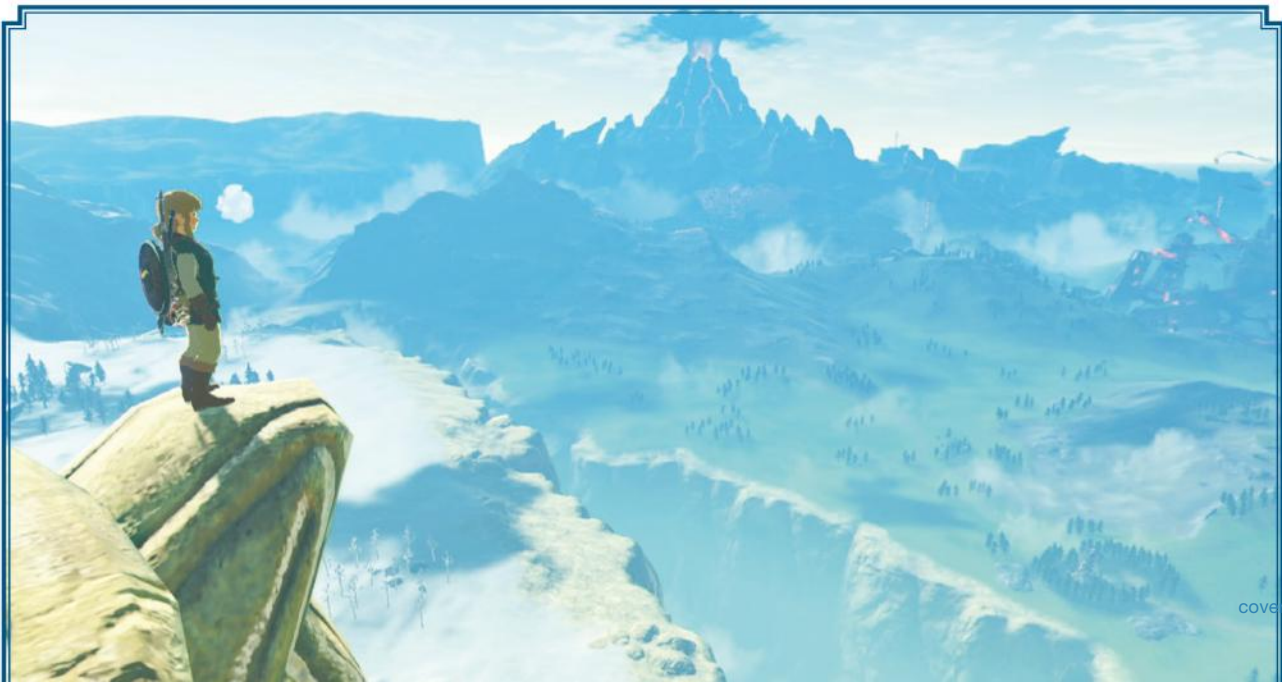
We first got our hands on *Breath of the Wild* during E3 2016, but we only had 20 minutes to explore the opening area. Our second visit to Hyrule comes without borders, taking us much further north. I begin with Link near Serenne Stable, a resting point run by a character named Yammo that offers a comfortable bed for Link to restore his health, a place to store his horses, and the opportunity to meet with merchants and other non-player characters. Stables are littered throughout the world, and each one is run by a distinct, named character.

I spend extra rupees to stay overnight in a more expensive bed,

which awards me an extra heart the next morning. These hearts are colored yellow and you can't get them back if you lose them during combat. You can also spend the night by fires in the open world, but those only pass the time; they do not restore your hearts.

Before I begin my journey, I talk to Yammo, who fetches a horse, which has been named Kyle prior to my play session. As I set out to explore a nearby shrine, a rainstorm breaks out. *Breath of the Wild's* dynamic weather system constantly shifts, and the world reacts accordingly. NPCs standing outside of the stable hastily make their way inside, and I notice a familiar face with a gigantic backpack awkwardly covering his head from the rain as he makes his way to the stable. The traveling merchant Beedle, who first appeared in *Wind Waker*, returns to sell you assorted goods while you wander the open world.

The rainstorm evolves into a thunderstorm, and suddenly I see electricity sparking on my back. The metal sword I have equipped is attracting lightning. I see it crash down next to me in an impressive, violent explosion. Players can unequip their metal weapons and shields to stay safe, or throw them near an enemy to put them in danger. I let my curiosity get the best of me and Link gets struck by lightning, instantly killing him. This is a far more dangerous world than the *Zelda* games of recent memory.



"I wanted to create a game where users could have fun dying," Aonuma says. "If you wanted to, you can go fight the final boss from the get-go. When you try and go for the final boss from the get-go, you don't have enough power or stats, so you can't defeat the boss. But through trial and error, we want the user to figure out when they may be ready to battle the final boss and know when that time is, which they can decide on their own."

The difficulty now dips and spikes depending on where you are, which works in tandem with the game's open nature. "If there is a little spike of difficulty, you can always go around it and avoid it until you are stronger or you are ready to fight it," Aonuma says. "You can always revisit that difficult area you may have encountered."

After respawning, I continue north toward my original destination: a shrine. Hyrule has more than 100 shrines littered across its world, and eventually players can find an item that identifies them. Shrines serve multiple purposes. Discovering one and opening its door creates a new fast-travel spot on the map. Solving its puzzle awards a Spirit Orb, which is a valuable item that can be traded for unknown items.

As I make my way to the shrine, I ride alongside a cliff that reminds me of Twilight Princess. I initially assume it's a natural border for the world – one that would kill me if I jumped down. I'm shocked to learn that if I leap into the deep ravine and float using my paraglider, I can reach the bottom and explore.

As I continue north, the weather shifts again to snow. This is the cold region of Hyrule, and Link shivers as bears, wolves, and deer quietly move through the snow nearby. A dedicated team built the animal A.I. for *Breath of the Wild*, and it shows. The animals move naturally and with purpose. These particular creatures have no interest in me, but I can engage them if I want. Other creatures, however, do not let me pass so easily. Ice lizalfos, a familiar *Zelda* enemy, are camouflaged by the snow and waiting for a chance to spring a surprise attack.

Before going any further, I change into a warmer shirt and eat a



pepper-infused steak I prepared earlier. In the cold, Link noticeably shivers, and loses health over time. Eating spicy food ends Link's shivering and I now feel prepared to attack the enemies hiding in the snow. I pounce on one and begin the fight. Dodging an oncoming attack slows time and allows me to pull off a multi-hit flurry attack. This doesn't kill the lizalfos, but I now have the upper hand. Suddenly, a second lizalfos I did not see before enters the fray, taking off six hearts in one attack and killing me.

My years of playing previous *Zelda* games did not prepare me for enemies this deadly – they made me soft. The lizalfos' brazenness also surprised me. Past 3D *Zelda* games required enemies to take Link on one at a time. That is not the case in *Breath of the Wild*. You can get overwhelmed quickly, and no one is going to wait their turn.

My checkpoint isn't too far from where I died, which is now marked with a red "X" on the map. I didn't leave anything behind when I died, but now I know where to be careful. When the ice lizalfos pounce again, I am ready. Elemental abilities can turn the tide of battle, so I equip fire arrows to take out the ice enemies, which clears my last obstacle to the shrine.

EQUINE DETAILS

Link's trusty steed Epona does not join him in *Breath of the Wild*. Instead, you must find and tame horses. The stronger the horse, the more difficult it is to tame. Nintendo walked me through the process during its Switch reveal event.

First Link crafts a sneaking elixir using the campfire of a recently cleared bokoblin camp. He uses it to quiet his footsteps after coming across a group of wild horses. If it were raining, Link probably would hold off on using this elixir, as it is easier to be stealthy since a downpour masks the noise.

Leaping from a hill, Link lands on a horse and begins soothing it. Once he is in control, he rides toward the nearest stable. Here you can name it whatever you want, and see its stats. Link can keep multiple horses at a time and switch them out based on his immediate goals. He might need a horse with lots of stamina for a long trip, but a stronger horse can do more damage to enemies with its hooves.

Affection and loyalty are also important when it comes to breaking in your horses. Feeding and taking care of your horses raises these stats. The most loyal horses will follow Hyrule's many paths automatically with little need from the player to apply direction. You can also call your horse to you, but it needs to be within a certain proximity; you won't be able to call a horse from across the map.



SOLVING THE SMALLER PUZZLES

Shrines function like miniature dungeons. Each has a core puzzle, and most have an additional, more difficult puzzle. This shrine requires me to block off a series of air vents to push a ball toward a switch. Activating the switch raises a platform, which clears a path to the end. Using magnesis, a new item that functions like a gigantic magnet, I move blocks in front of the air vents I want blocked and stand on the platform so I can watch the ball roll over to the switch. The shrine is complete, but a chest just out of reach distracts me.

I have technically completed the shrine, but I make a flying leap toward the chest with my paraglider hoping I can reach it, but fall short. My failure puts me at the bottom of the shrine again. Rather than redoing the puzzle, I head back to the open world, and that's okay. The shrine is marked as incomplete on the map for me to come back to later. I jump on my horse and head toward another shrine I see in the distance.

During my ride, a pair of enemies on horseback ambush me. I have a pitchfork, which doesn't do a lot of damage, but has great reach – perfect for horseback combat. I knock the enemies off their steeds and get on foot, fast-swapping to a stronger sword now that I don't need the extra reach. I switch between sword combat and my explosive arrows during the flurry, but then disaster strikes – Kyle the horse gets caught in the fray and is killed. I take my revenge on the bokoblins, but there is no bringing Kyle back to life. I could walk or fast-travel back to the stable, but I have made it this far. As I mourn the loss of my steed, I soldier on toward the glow on the shrine in the snowy distance.

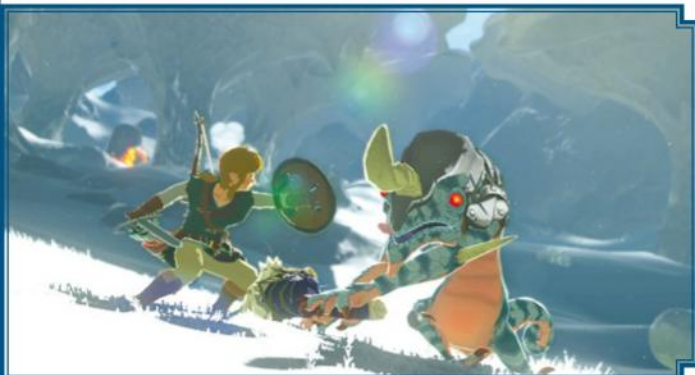
Past Zelda games have featured a speaking companion that offers Link hints and gives direction, but that's not the case for *Breath of the Wild*. It can be an isolating feeling, which I experience first-hand after losing my horse. “[Link] is kind of a lone wolf in this game,” Aonuma says. “I wanted to create that feeling so that whenever he encounters somebody, he has that element of, ‘Oh, I just saw somebody!’ and the warmth that you would feel. Companion characters in the past have always navigated and showed the path, and because we wanted players to choose their own path, we didn't want the companion element there to distract the players.”

Giant snowballs cascade down a nearby hill, and I pause to watch animals and enemies get trampled in their path. I consider salvaging a dropped weapon from a downed lizalfos, but I don't know if I will be able to dodge the giant snowballs without suffering the same fate, and the shrine is just a short distance away.

My climb to the shrine uses up nearly all my stamina, but I make it to the top. Sprinting, paragliding, and climbing are all tied to the same stamina meter, which can be upgraded. Nintendo did not share how it's done, but it will likely be a key upgrade for intrepid explorers.

This shrine features miniature versions of the multi-legged guardian enemies seen in the game's initial reveal. I knock over a torch near a pile of dry leaves, which burns open a passageway into the next room. The miniature guardian I fight here drops a strange staff with a glowing blue electrical blade.

A series of barricades block my passage in this room. Through the bars I spy a pair of barrels with something underneath them. I equip my fire arrows and shoot through the bars to light the barrels on fire, which unblocks a switch allowing me to pass through. This is not the only way to get past this barricade, which is the case for most of the shrines; many puzzles have multiple solutions. This leads me to the end of the shrine, and I head back outside to explore without a specific destination in mind.





These large skeletons appear at night. If you don't destroy their heads, they will keep coming back to life

FREE TIME EXPLORATION

I use my shield as a snowboard to descend from the shrine. Different shields offer different speeds and levels of control, and you can use shields to slide down grassy hills as well as snowy hills. I then jump from a tall tower using my paraglider to float to the ground, putting it away and taking it out during freefall to conserve stamina.

After I land, I kill a nearby wolf, who drops meat as most animals do. Since I am in the icy north, the meat flash freezes immediately – perfect for storage until I can heat it up later. I see a conspicuous rock in the distance and use a hammer to hit it, revealing minerals. These minerals can be sold for rupees, or used for crafting – an element of the game we didn't get to spend time with.

Heading back to the stable, I stop to climb a tree nearby. Jumping down, I decide to cut it down. Once the log collapses to the ground, I push it around with no specific purpose in mind, but am enamored

by merely having the option to do it. Players can use lumber to create bridges for crossing chasms, or cut it up for firewood.

Night sets in and giant skeletons appear. My attacks cause them to fall apart, but you must make sure to destroy their heads so they can't pull themselves back together. As the skeleton struggles to collect itself, I grab its arm and use it as a weapon against itself.

Breath of the Wild's Hyrule is dense, but it's up to the player to highlight their pursuits. While looking at the map, players can place specific stamps to mark areas of interest. The available symbols include a sword, shield, bow and arrow, pot, star, chest, skull, leaf, and diamond. Players can place up to 100 of these symbols on the map at one time.

The map starts sparsely detailed, but fills in as Link activates Sheikah Towers. When you find these towers on the ground and use your Sheikah Slate to activate them, they shoot into the sky with Link along for the ride. Raising them fills in the map with detail of the area nearby. These towers also offer an impressive view and serve as excellent jumping off points for paragliding.

After exploring Hyrule's open world for a while longer, it's time to enter a Breath of the Wild dungeon.



AONUMA'S OPEN-WORLD RESEARCH

For better and worse, Nintendo has been known to stay in its own bubble. The company often looks for its own solutions, but Aonuma has changed that in recent years. "In the past I didn't play many video games," he admits. "But then I realized, this isn't right. I have to. So nowadays, I actually play a lot of overseas titles. I played Skyrim. Grand Theft Auto? I am not really into violence that much, so I don't play it. I also played Witcher and Far Cry. While playing those games, I do find some ideas, but it's not that it connects directly to Zelda to where I would take something and use it in Zelda. It's more of something I keep in the back of my head while developing the game."

BEWARE THE GUARDIANS

The very first Breath of the Wild trailer showed a guardian ripping through Hyrule's serene world, blasting lasers from its eyes and chasing Link. These robotic, spider-like mechanical creatures with mysterious histories play such a big role in the game that Nintendo is giving them their own amiibo statue.

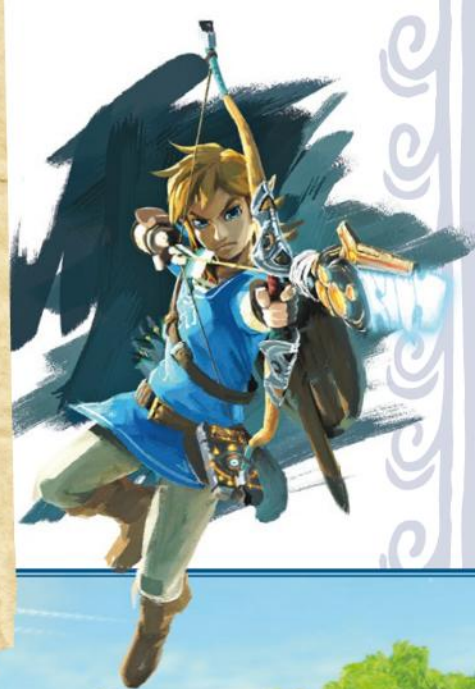
I encountered small guardians that didn't offer much challenge while exploring Hyrule's shrines, but my last task before handing the controller back to Nintendo during our extended play session involved taking on one of these formidable foes.

A number of guardians are strewn across Hyrule, and each seems to be protecting something valuable. Some are derelict and non-functional, having succumbed to time, but still hide items for Link to discover. Others are partially functional, immobile with broken legs, but still capable of firing off devastating laser beams.

The guardian I encounter is fully functional and angry. I see it before it sees me, and pause to equip my bomb arrows. I ride close to the guardian and vault off my horse. Pulling back my bowstring in mid-air causes everything to enter slow-motion. I line up my shot, aiming for its mechanical eye as it prepares to fire the laser, and let loose. The laser charge is interrupted and I land on the ground, but my confidence shatters when I notice I only removed a small fraction of the guardian's health.

I make multiple follow-up attempts, quickly dying each time. I finally change my approach to hiding in the nearby ruins, taking shots as the opportunities present themselves. I fire off a few bomb arrows, but the guardian eventually blasts through my cover, making short work of me.

The guardians were the biggest challenge I faced during my three hours with the game, and their role in the story is an enticing mystery. I am eager to learn more about them and figure out a winning strategy when Breath of the Wild releases.



The guardians are brutal, and their role in the larger Breath of the Wild story is still a mystery.



ZELDA'S CREATOR ON BREATH OF THE WILD

Shigeru Miyamoto is the creator of The Legend of Zelda, and though he is not involved in the day-to-day development of Breath of the Wild, he works closely with Aonuma and his team, consulting and offering feedback. "I really love all the animals in the world," Miyamoto says. "Even with the horses, you really get to know the horse and raise them and ride them, and even with the other animals, you can just view them, or if you get hungry you might have to hunt them. You have that choice. And even when you look up at the sky, you see birds on their way somewhere and it's fun to think, 'Where are they going to end up? Where are they going?'"



The Sheikah Slate is an important tool and appears to be connected to the Lens of Truth from past Zelda games

THE DUNGEON OF THE WILD

Rather than let me find one, Nintendo took me directly to a dungeon, offering no clues about where it was or how Link got to it. Our Breath of the Wild tour guide, senior director of localization Nate Bihldorff, offered only one mysterious hint. "The 'dungeon' is constantly moving," he says. "To solve its many physics-based traps and puzzles, Link must manipulate the entire enormous mechanism through his own ingenuity." Unlike most Zelda games, the dungeon can't be defined in terms of where it takes place in the game's progression, because the dungeons can be tackled in any order. Confident players can even skip them and go straight to Calamity Ganon before seeing all the game has to offer.

This dungeon is covered by scatterings of a substance called malice. It hurts Link to touch, but can be destroyed by finding and attacking each pocket of malice's eyeball. One particularly dangerous pool of

malice has a mouth spitting out bombs. I explore carefully, finding blocked doors and a number of air vents. I eventually find a place where Link can place his Sheikah Slate. This device, which Link carries from the game's opening moments, serves as his map, binoculars, and a number of

other functions we won't discover until Breath of the Wild launches.

Inserting my Sheikah Slate into the slot (both of which feature a symbol reminiscent of the Lens of Truth from previous Zelda games) awards me a map and deposits data on to my Sheikah Slate via a strange glowing blue liquid. The map is a 3D model, and players have the option to tilt the entire dungeon from here. Doing so slides blocks into place and opens up angles you can use to paraglide to new locations.

A friendly voice tells me I need to access a series of terminals using my Sheikah Slate across the dungeon. Who he is or why he is invested in my success is unclear. The locations are marked on the 3D map, and I make my way to each while solving puzzles along the way. One involves standing on a block and tilting the dungeon so I can grab a ladder as the block slides by. Another involves placing a bomb in a room Link can't access himself and tilting the dungeon so



The dungeon must be tilted at a certain angle so Link can glide through the opening



the bomb rolls toward a destructible wall. Using a switch to open up an air vent finishes the bomb's roll toward its goal. In *Breath of the Wild*, all bombs are remote and do not blow up on a timer, meaning you never need to time an explosion.

Nintendo took a simpler approach to dungeons for *Breath of the Wild*. The dungeon I played through was smaller and less confusing overall. "Way back in the day, dungeons weren't all that big. They were rather small. But around *Twilight Princess*, they started getting bigger," Aonuma says. "We tried to cram in a lot of surprises for the player, or a lot of emotions, meeting other characters, or injecting story elements into it. But then we kind of realized, do dungeons really need to be that big? Do we have to cram that much stuff into it? We quickly realized that a lot of the fun was actually in getting to the dungeon, and so we focused on getting to the dungeon in this game. We wanted to create an environment where it is fun to find the dungeon in this large world."

I find a few chests in the dungeon that offer items and ammunition, like ice arrows. None of the chests have the familiar chest opening animation and signature musical flourish. I also never find a signature *Zelda* item or a compass. "Dungeons have always been like mazes, so we needed that compass to let the user know where the bosses were placed," Aonuma says, "But then, as you probably saw, you can kind of see the goal right away. You won't get lost – you just have to figure out how to get there."

After hitting all the terminals, I paraglide through an air vent to the top of the dungeon for a boss fight. Wind Blight Ganon waits here to greet me. Calamity Ganon is the ultimate formless evil that Link must defeat, but other bosses and enemies in the game represent the manifestations of Calamity Ganon's evil. Wind Blight Ganon is



The new magnetism item lets Link pick up and move certain objects

a massive monster with no face and a gun-like arm. The mysterious but friendly voice cautions, "It's one of Ganon's own. It plays dirty."

Since I never found a new item to use against the boss, all I have is Link's normal combat skills. A life meter appears on top of the screen for the boss, a rarity for *Zelda*. I start the fight firing ice arrows, which brings him out of the sky and to the ground. This gives me a window to use my sword to do more damage.

My sword attacks make Wind Blight Ganon angry, and he starts creating tornadoes and firing large spikes at me. I am running low on arrows, so I throw bombs into the tornadoes with the goal of manually detonating them when he moves nearby. As he builds spikes to fire at me, he comes to the ground. I leave my cover behind a pillar (which wasn't going to be present for much longer at the rate Wind Blight Ganon was destroying everything) and approach for a final attack, confident I can win. I am successful, and watch triumphantly as Wind Blight Ganon collapses.

A NEW APPROACH TO WEAPONRY

In past *Zelda* games, Link typically finds new weapons or items in dungeons and keeps them for the rest of the game. *Breath of the Wild* takes a different approach that aligns more closely to modern role-playing games. Nearly every enemy drops their weapon, and Link can pick them up and use them as he wishes. He can also come across them in the world.

"I heard that American users are more eager to figure things out on their own rather than having to go and find certain items in certain places," Aonuma says. "I am actually the same way. I wanted to add that element to *Breath of the Wild*."

I experimented with a number of hammers, swords, clubs, and even a mop during my playthrough. Every style of weapon has a unique set of animations and feels different. Some swing faster, some deteriorate faster, but the only stat the player sees is power. Weapons are also susceptible to the elements. Metal weapons attract lightning during thunderstorms, and wood weapons burn. It's unclear if crafting plays a role in acquiring new weapons, but I picked up many objects that certainly looked like they could be fashioned into a weapon.

Dropping and switching between weapons can be done using the d-pad instead of entering the pause menu. When a weapon is rapidly deteriorating, I recommend throwing it at an enemy rather than dropping it, as these attacks do double damage.

Nintendo says there are no invincible weapons in the game, which leads one to ponder the fate of The Master Sword.



THE LEGEND OF THE BREATH OF THE WILD

Outside of *Breath of the Wild*'s open-world setup, little is known about its wider story and how it connects into the larger *Zelda* universe. "Because we wanted to redefine the whole process, I didn't want to be chained up by the idea that we had to think about the past titles," Aonuma says. "But then again, I know there are a lot of fans who are interested, and who are knowledgeable in the *Zelda* franchise and the history. So by adding little elements here and there, we wanted to give the fans the opportunity to say, 'Oh, I saw this. Maybe this is how it expands the story,' or give little hints here and there." Link can find a dilapidated Temple of Time in the game's opening

moments, and Aonuma confirms the game takes place after *Ocarina of Time*. Additional direct ties are difficult to identify.

The trailer shown during the Switch reveal shows myriad characters, hints at a talking tree, and spends plenty of time highlighting *Zelda*, who erupts into tears in one scene. "I don't want to get too deep into it, but I do want you to know that *Zelda* does have a lot of emotions and expressions, and for the trailer we chose one that was very extreme," Aonuma says. "Once you start playing *Breath of the Wild*, I want you to explore and see these different sides of *Zelda*, different emotions that she evokes. This is a little bit of a secret, but *Zelda* will actually get mad at you in *Breath of the Wild*. She will scold you."

Blight Ganon is an imposing force that can create tornadoes and fire projectiles

WII U VERSUS SWITCH

The Switch version of *Breath of the Wild* is the superior version of the game with a higher resolution (in TV mode), faster loading, and improved audio. But Aonuma doesn't want to call the Wii U version a downgrade. "I definitely don't want to do that, but there is a difference in specs between the two games," Aonuma says. "Loading speed is a little different, the resolution is different, and the sound quality is a little bit different when it is played on TV mode on Nintendo Switch. The game experience, however, is identical and the framerate is the same." The Wii U version of the game also requires an install, as it is played off a disc, where the Switch version of the game does not, since it is played off a cartridge.

Despite the improvement the Switch offers, Aonuma never considered canceling the Wii U version of the game. In fact, moving to Switch allowed the team to tweak the game in important ways on both platforms. "Asking the staff to change it was difficult for me," Aonuma says. "I actually went back and created a proposal for my staff that said, 'Hey if you do this, then maybe you can fix this area,' and I had to make that proposal to the staff and beg them to do it." Those changes are gameplay related, so they are reflected on both platforms.

When asked if Zelda will scold every player, Aonuma says the open nature of the world extends to the narrative, and it is possible for players to see the ending without seeing all the story has to offer. "I can't guarantee every player will see it," he says. "Especially if they are heading toward the goal a little too quickly, then they may miss these things – like Zelda getting mad at you. But if you walk around in the world and if you encounter different environments and elements, then these are things you will probably experience."

Crafting a story in this style created a new challenge for Aonuma, but he offered an interesting tease for how he sees it playing out. "In order to create more of a cohesive storyline, we added this element

in there that will make it a little bit more streamlined for every player. This is something I can't reveal right now, but when you play you will find out," he says. "This idea that I am talking about is actually something I came up with when I first started developing the games. I have been harvesting this idea for 20-plus years."

THE BREADTH OF THE WILD

The Legend of Zelda: The Breath of the Wild is a massive game. Under development for more than four years, Aonuma says it's also been the most difficult of all the Zelda games to make. The scope of this adventure is so big that even Aonuma is still finding new things in the world.

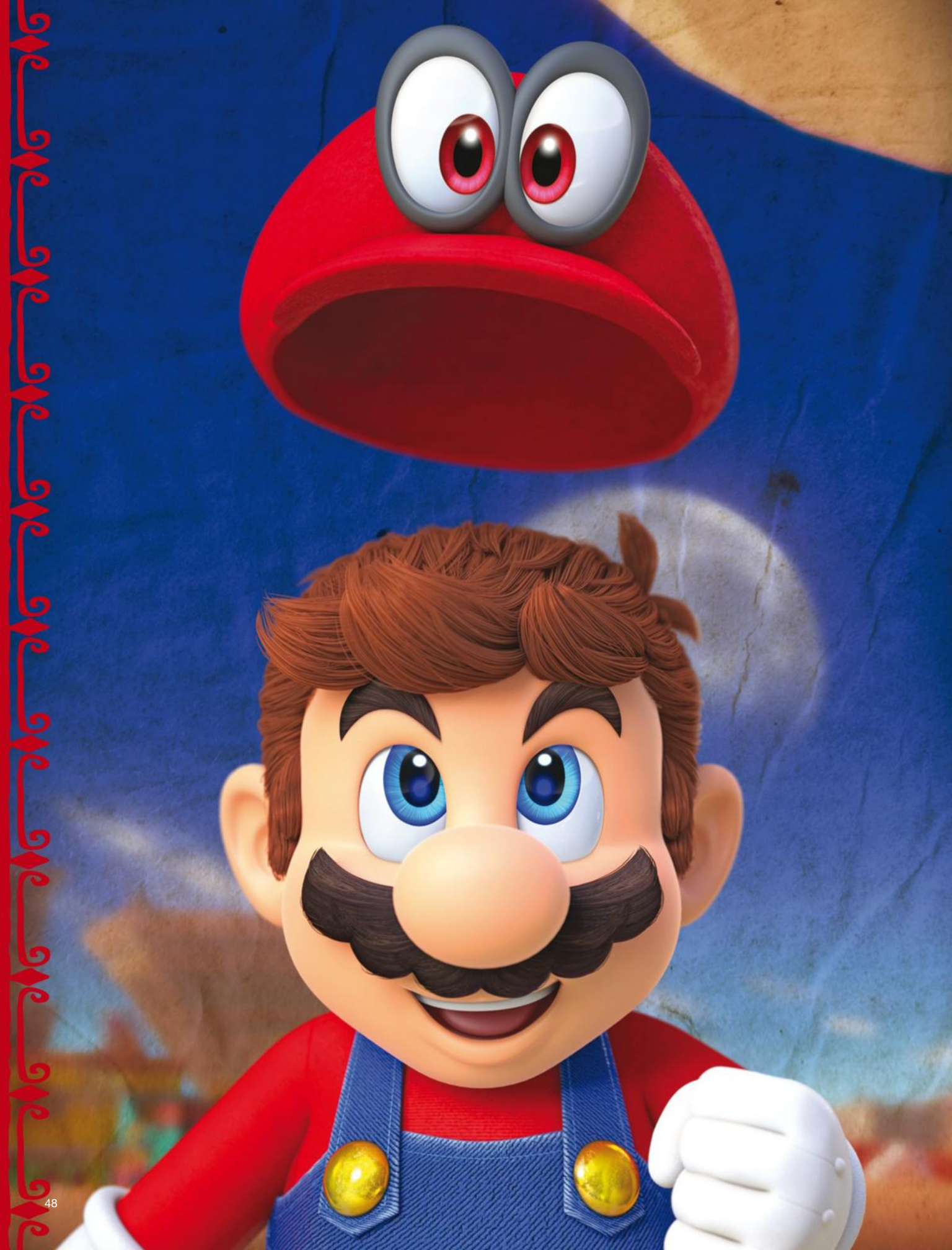
"Right before we completed the game, I actually started from scratch with a new game," Aonuma says. "I was trying to explore areas I remembered from my memory, but I kept finding these new elements, and I realized how huge a world I had actually created. That was right before we had finished the game, so you could tell I was surprised."

Despite playing for nearly three hours, our time with the game felt far too brief. Breath of the Wild is undeniably a Zelda game, but it represents a surprising willingness for Link's creators to re-examine the series' hugely successful structure and mechanics and rethink them in radical ways.

We've explored interactive open worlds before, but our time with Breath of the Wild showcased a Zelda that feels new, and an experience that is polished in a way few outside of Nintendo are able to achieve. ♦

For more on Breath of the Wild, including video interviews with Aonuma and Miyamoto, visit gameinformer.com/zeldabotw





SWITCHED ON

TAKE A LOOK AT THE BIGGEST GAMES
COMING TO NINTENDO'S NEW CONSOLE

The Nintendo Switch's day-one launch line-up is admittedly light, buoyed mainly by our highly anticipated cover game, *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. The rest of 2017, however, looks stronger thanks to an impressive new Mario title, an unexpected *Splatoon* sequel, a few smaller games that caught our attention at the Switch event, and the return of a few classics.

Nintendo's eternal problem has been courting third-parties, and this remains an issue for Switch, but some important publishers have committed to the new platform. Ubisoft and Atlus will release games on Switch, EA appeared on stage and promised FIFA, and 2K announced *NBA 2K18* for Nintendo's new console. And of course, no system would be complete without a port of *Minecraft*.

The lack of a robust third-party lineup indicates publishers are approaching the platform with caution, but Nintendo's year-one slate should still excite longtime fans. Here's a look at some of the more notable Switch titles coming down the pipe.

by Kyle Hilliard & Ben Reeves



SUPER MARIO ODYSSEY

Style: 1-Player Platforming • *Publisher:* Nintendo • *Developer:* Nintendo • *Release:* Holiday

For over three decades Mario has butt-stomped his way through ice castles, dinosaur islands, and tiny egg-shaped planets, but we've never seen him explore a modern cityscape...until now. During the Switch press conference, Nintendo officially revealed Mario's next big adventure: Super Mario Odyssey. The game wasn't what we expected, but it looks like everything we want out of the next big Mario title.

The trailer opens with Mario parkouring through a skyscraper-filled cityscape called New Donk City. The city's name implies a connection to Mario's roots in the Donkey Kong series. One billboard advertises Diddy's Market, while a nearby road is labeled Dixie Street, leaving us to wonder if the big Donk himself will appear at some point in the game.

Nintendo calls Super Mario Odyssey a return to the "sandbox-style" Mario platforming we first saw in Super Mario 64, meaning players are free to explore open hub areas like New Donk City and discover various portals

to new areas and mission-based levels. Some of the new worlds Mario can explore include a Day of the Dead-inspired town, an Egyptian desert featuring an upside-down pyramid, and a garden filled with giant vegetables. Some areas feature unique art styles, creating a diverse array of world-spanning locations for Mario to explore.

In addition to a variety of platforming challenges, Mario's adventure includes an assortment of oddball tasks. We watched Nintendo's plumber dance wildly to a beatbox in the middle of a robot-filled forest, ride a golden lion over sand dunes, and play jump rope with a couple of business women in a city park.

Mario's hat has been one of his most iconic features since his inception, but that red cap becomes even more important in Odyssey. Mario can now give his hat a boomerang throw, which knocks out enemies before returning to his head. Mario can also use his hat as a makeshift platform, allowing him to

cross large gaps or reach high areas. At one point in the trailer, Mario's hat even sprouts eyes, leading us to believe it might have a personality, maybe offering Mario advice or otherwise directing players where to go next.

Mario's iconic red hat might not be the only thing topping his head this time around. At one point in the trailer, Mario enters a hat shop called the Crazy Cap, which led many to speculate Mario might acquire new hats that grant him wild new abilities. Like a great magician, Mario might have a few tricks buried in his hat.

Gamers have never had trouble finding Mario's mustachioed mug on store shelves, but Nintendo hasn't released a single-player focused 3D platformer since Super Mario Galaxy 2 hit the Wii back in 2010. Even as Mario returns to the sandbox-style formula he first explored on the N64, this adventure somehow also feels like uncharted territory, and we can't wait for it to release this holiday season.



XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 2

Style: 1-Player Role-Playing
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Monolith Soft
Release: 2017

Nintendo had not planned for a North American release of Xenoblade Chronicles, but fans were adamant and convinced Nintendo to bring it stateside. It was so well-received that Nintendo ported it to New 3DS and gave its spiritual successor, Xenoblade Chronicles X, a spotlight for its Wii U release. Both of those games are massive in scope, which makes the announcement that Xenoblade Chronicles 2 is coming to the Switch in 2017 an impressive feat.

Whether Chronicles 2 is a direct sequel to the first, or if the series is going the Final Fantasy route with thematic connections, is unclear. Elements of the first Xenoblade Chronicles are clear though, like large open areas and huge creatures seen through the clouds in the distance.

Xenoblade and Monolith Soft have become a secret weapon of sorts for Nintendo, and we're excited to see the JRPG franchise continue on Switch.

ARMS

Style: 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Release: Spring

Arms is a bizarre mix of hand-to-hand brawling and long-distance action. Everyone in this fighting game plays a character similar to Dhalsim from the Street Fighter series in that they all have spring-like arms with incredible reach.

When the action starts, players hold both Joy-Cons in separate hands with their thumbs pointed up and use motion-based actions to control their fighter. Quick jabs produce a flurry of straight punches, but if you rotate your thumb left or right after throwing a punch your hero throws a springy haymaker. However, Arms also supports a button-based control scheme if you don't feel like shaking your fists.

In addition to a roster of fighters that all have their own abilities, Arms' arenas are packed with unique obstacles. For example, a spooky laboratory arena features liquid-filled columns players can punch through to hit their opponent. You can get your hands on Arms sometime this spring.



HAS-BEEN HEROES

Style: 1-Player Strategy
Publisher: GameTrust Games
Developer: Frozenbyte
Release: March 28

After the world gets overrun by monsters, the king tasks a couple of retired heroes and a rogue “who just happened to be standing nearby” to escort his daughters to Princess Academy. This offbeat fantasy adventure from the creators of the Trine series combines real-time strategy with roguelike elements to create a fairly unique experience.

Players must manage their heroes, who are spread across three lanes, as a horde of monsters and other vagabonds run toward them from the other side of the screen. Players can pause the action at any time to have their heroes swap lanes, join in combo attacks, and unleash a series of powerful spells. Each character has his or her own special abilities and powers, and players acquire new powers and skills randomly as they explore the world. Unfortunately, thanks to permadeath, one wrong encounter could spell the end for these heroes. Has-Been Heroes could be one of the Switch's early indie hits.



SUPER BOMBERMAN R

Style: 1 to 8-Player Action (8-Player Online)
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Konami
Release: March 3

Bomberman is a highly regarded classic, but the little bomber has been lying low over the past decade. All he has to show for the last few years is downloadable re-releases and a few underwhelming mobile titles, but Super Bomberman R marks his triumphant return to home consoles and shows that Konami still sees value in releasing console games.

This release evokes the classic Bomberman gameplay, but with a few new modern wrinkles. The game offers online multiplayer, as well as local single- and multi-screen multiplayer for up to eight players. The two Joy-Cons can be used to play the game's multiplayer locally, which is the way we imagine most will play. The game features 50 stages, an assortment of new and classic modes, familiar characters, a story mode (which can be played cooperatively with two players), and a mysterious cast of "all-star voice actors."

1-2-SWITCH

Style: 1 or 2-Player Party
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Release: March 3

The questionably titled 1-2-Switch is a launch title that has the potential to serve a role similar to the one Wii Sports played for the Wii, even though it is not a pack-in title. Wii Sports served as an engaging demo for how the Wii Remote technology could be applied to multiple game types, and 1-2-Switch seeks to do the same in a party-game setting.

The two-player games we played used the on-screen visuals sparingly. With each player using one of the Joy-Cons, we simulated milking a cow, playing table tennis, and having an old-west style shoot out. The more complicated games involved using the HD rumble feature of the Joy-Cons to guess how many simulated balls were rolling around inside, and trying to catch a sword being swung at your face. Reminiscent of WarioWare, the fast-paced games are designed to make you look, and feel, a little goofy.



PUYO PUYO TETRIS

Style: 1 to 4-Player Puzzle
Publisher: Sega
Developer: Sega
Release: TBD

Tetris is a popular puzzle game in North America, and though Puyo Puyo has seen a few releases in North America, it is not nearly as well-known. However, Puyo Puyo is very popular outside of North America, and when the two puzzle franchises teamed up for the first time three years ago in Japan, it was a critical and commercial hit.

You're likely familiar with Tetris, but Puyo Puyo tasks players with combining four or more like-colored globs as they fall down a well in pairs. Puyo Puyo Tetris on Switch features a number of modes mashing up the two puzzle types, sometimes combining them, sometimes forcing players to switch back and forth, or tasking players to each stick to a type. Along with an assortment of battle modes, both local and online, an adventure mode featuring myriad characters is also available.



FIRE EMBLEM WARRIORS

Style: 1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBD)
Publisher: Koei Tecmo
Developer: Omega Force
Release: TBD

Omega Force has been busy the last few years adapting its Dynasty Warriors gameplay to a number of different franchises. Games like Hyrule Warriors and Dragon Quest Heroes have proven successful for the developer, and the next franchise to get this treatment is Fire Emblem.

The core Fire Emblem games are thoughtful strategy games that require players to consider their every move. This stands in diametric opposition to the flashy action of a Dynasty Warriors-style game. That said, it could still be a good fit, as both styles feature sword-wielding heroes where placement on the battlefield is important. The action shown in the brief trailer lines up with what you would expect, showing Awakening's Chrom handily taking on a huge group of soldiers with an over-the-top sword combo. It's not a Switch launch title, but Fire Emblem Warriors should be available early in the Switch's life-cycle.

SNIPPERCLIPS: CUT IT OUT, TOGETHER!

Style: 1 to 4-Player Puzzle
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Release: March

Snipperclips might not look like much, but we had more fun playing this creative puzzle game than we did with most of the Switch's launch library. Each level looks like a craft box come to life as up to four players control a couple of paper creatures and try to solve unusual environmental puzzles.

In one scenario, we had to dunk a basketball through a hoop, while another level asked us to move a pencil from one end of the level to the other and insert it into a pencil sharpener. Thankfully, these papercraft creatures can cut off parts of their bodies to transform into new shapes that help them solve each challenge. Snipperclips releases alongside the Switch, and since two players can control each paper creature using a single Joy-Con, this might be the go-to title for anyone looking for co-op fun on Nintendo's new console.





SPLATOON 2

Style: 1 to 4-Player Shooter (8-Player Online)
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Release: Summer

When Nintendo first revealed the Switch, Splatoon was used as an example of the console's potential. For this reason, many assumed the Switch would receive a port of the first game, maybe with a few added bonuses. This made it a surprise when Nintendo announced that Splatoon's debut on Switch is a sequel. Much of what makes it a sequel is unclear, but a few small details were revealed.

We used the new dual-wielding weapon, the Splat Dualies. They function like two paint SMGs, let the player perform a combat roll, and offer a special ability to fly around with a paint-splewing jetpack while tossing globs of paint on the ground.

The character fashions and clothing are also updated to reflect the two years that have passed since the original's release. Splatoon 2 offers online multiplayer, as well as local multiplayer for multiple Switches without the aid of Wi-Fi.

MARIO KART 8 DELUXE

Style: 1 to 4-Player Racing (12-Player Online)
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Release: April 28

In addition to the Wii U version's DLC, Mario Kart 8 Deluxe comes packaged with a few added bonuses. The Inklings from Splatoon, King Boo, Dry Bones, and Bowser Jr. are now all playable racers who can speed along with the original cast in a couple new Splatoon-themed karts. Meanwhile, the Boo power-up that steals other items and the feather, which allows for big jumps, are returning to the series.

The biggest change for the game is players can now hold two different items at a time. You can't switch between these items, as you could in the GameCube classic Double Dash, but the added firepower allows for more chaotic races. Finally, players looking for a pit stop from racing can check out Mario Kart 8 Deluxe's reinvented Battle Mode, which has players facing off in Deathmatch-style combat to pop their opponents' balloons. It looks like the Switch will be getting the premier version of Mario Kart 8 one month after launch.





THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

Style: 1-Player Role-playing

Publisher: Bethesda

Developer: Bethesda

Release: Fall

Originally released in 2011, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim has retained an impressive community of active players over the last six years. The Switch port of Skyrim marks a new relationship between Bethesda and Nintendo, which is exciting beyond the opportunity to play Skyrim on a new platform.

If lots of Switch players revisit Skyrim, or the Nintendo purists play the game for the first time, it could mean more Bethesda games, like Dishonored or Fallout, appear on Nintendo's new console. That's a good thing.

Bethesda and Nintendo have been coy about what is being included in the Switch version of Skyrim, and the brief look offered on-stage during Nintendo's Switch presentation did little in terms of offering hints. Hopefully, the port uses the recently released Special Edition as its base and includes the visual updates and DLC that was included in that package.

ULTRA STREET FIGHTER II: THE FINAL CHALLENGERS

Style: 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)

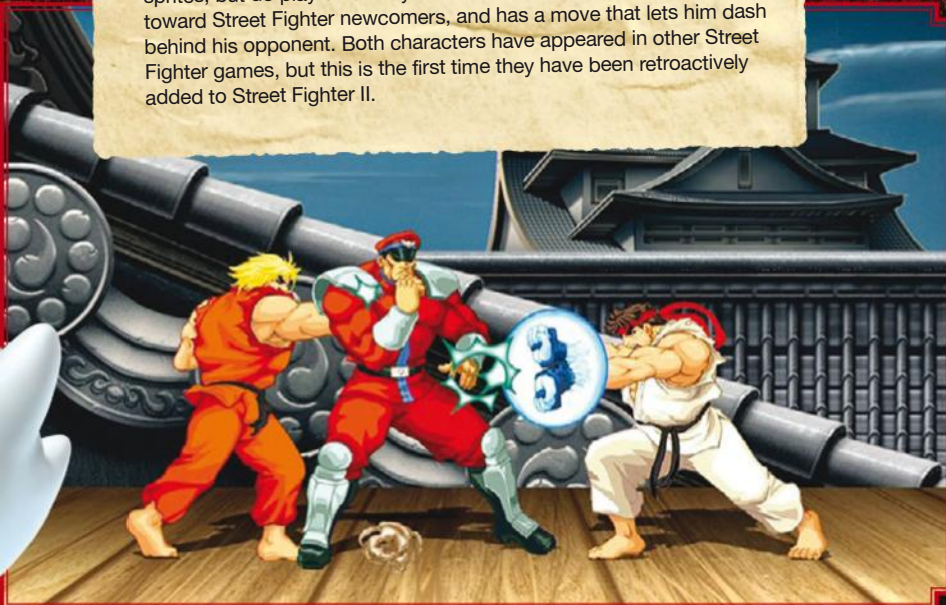
Publisher: Capcom

Developer: Capcom

Release: TBD

Capcom is no stranger to revisiting what many argue is the greatest fighting game of all time, but Ultra includes some surprise additions for the Switch version of the '92 fighting game classic. Updated visuals have been added (though you can switch to the classic 16-bit look) alongside a new cooperative buddy battle mode. The game can also be played two-player with the Joy-Cons.

The biggest change, however, are two (sort of) new characters: Evil Ryu and Violent Ken. The two are discolored versions of the original sprites, but do play differently. Violent Ken, for example, is geared toward Street Fighter newcomers, and has a move that lets him dash behind his opponent. Both characters have appeared in other Street Fighter games, but this is the first time they have been retroactively added to Street Fighter II.



PROJECT OCTOPATH TRAVELER

Style: 1-Player Role-Playing

Publisher: Square Enix

Developer: Silicon Studio

Release: TBD

We know less than we'd like about Project Octopath Traveler, but Square Enix's upcoming retro-inspired RPG immediately caught our attention. The game looks like a tilt-shifted take on classic sprite-based games like Final Fantasy VI or Final Fantasy Tactics. A short trailer released during the Switch event hinted at a vast open world, a branching narrative, and classic turn-based combat.

Tomoya Asano is taking lead on this project. Asano previously worked on titles like the Final Fantasy III and Final Fantasy IV remakes, as well as the Bravely Default series, so fans of Square's recent "retro" RPGs should keep their eye on this one. Hopefully Square doesn't change the name before release. ♡

A RETURN TO

MORR

- » Platform
Xbox One • PS4 • PC • Mac
- » Style
MMORPG
- » Publisher
Bethesda Softworks
- » Developer
Zenimax Online Studios
- » Release
June 6



OWWIND

Elder Scrolls Online looks to the franchise's single-player past to build its MMO future

BY DANIEL TACK



After a lukewarm launch on PC, The Elder Scrolls Online found success on the console stage, an arena which many MMORPGs ignore or struggle to find a foothold. Thanks to a steady stream of improvements since launch such as making the game feel more accurate to its single-player roots, dropping the subscription model, and letting players explore the world unfettered by levels and tossing in all the thievery and civilian slaying you can handle, the game steadily grew its player base. Now the game boasts over 7 million players.

The upcoming Morrowind expansion takes players back to a setting made famous by The Elder Scrolls III and its mysterious house-driven island of Vvardenfell. For many players, The Elder Scrolls III was their first introduction to the runaway RPG franchise, and while the upcoming ESO incarnation breathes new life into the island of Vvardenfell that was only previously rendered with technology that looks archaic today, players can expect to find many of the same sights, sounds, and major characters from the legacy title.

“If there’s one word we want to get across in Morrowind, it’s nostalgia,” says game director Matt Firor. “The places are all there. They might be a little different; they may be a settlement instead of a city, but in general 700 years is not very long in Elder Scrolls lore. It’s still run by the Dunmer. The volcano hasn’t erupted quite as much so there’s a little more life and lush land, but it’s basically as you remember it.”

The Morrowind update also changes the base game in significant ways. It’s not an expansion in the traditional sense, but an entire package that takes center stage on top of the standard game.

Players interested in exploring the secrets of Morrowind and the island of Vvardenfell will find new dungeon delves, a deadly new trial, small scale battlegrounds for multiplayer battles, and for the first time ever, a new class to play.

Whether you’re looking for a single-player experience exploring the lands or a group-centric hardcore raid, Morrowind offers content for players of all types. Prepare to head to (sort of) uncharted shores as you explore Morrowind 700 years prior to the events that take place in Elder Scrolls III.

EXPLORING THE PAST IN THE FUTURE

For Elder Scrolls enthusiasts, the island of Vvardenfell includes many familiar sights, sounds, and environments, from the starting shores to majestic rides on Silt Striders. Nostalgia is woven into everything from encounters with ancestors of characters you may have met in The Elder Scrolls III to inspired quests and foes. This “prequel” trip down memory lane includes tons of meticulously placed characters, buildings, and environments that call back to the original title, so fans will be inundated with lore and Easter eggs.

“The major character in this game is the island,” says Firor. “It’s the actual exploration and feel of Vvardenfell.”

The five houses (and perhaps a sixth house shrouded in secrets) of Vvardenfell each come with their own signature style and intricate culture. The isolationist Telvanni keep to themselves and focus on magic and slavery, the Redoran follow virtues like duty and piety, and the Dres focus on agricultural pursuits. The houses all differ ideologically, and this adds to the intrigue and political dealings of each. Along with plenty of flavor to draw upon with

the houses, Vvardenfell has unique biomes that look nothing like the sights in Tamriel – giant mushroom swamps, alien-looking backdrops, and lava-laden quarries.

Huge Telvanni mushrooms rise up to the sky in a lush area as creative director Rich Lambert walks me through one of the new biomes players traverse on Vvardenfell. “One of the things with the Telvanni, they’re known for these giant mushroom towers,” Lambert says. “You can always tell the age and the power of a Telvanni wizard by how tall their towers are. We’ve explored how their culture works, making sure the town is in the same place as in Elder Scrolls III. The Telvanni are notorious for owning slaves and being jerks, and you get to find out more about how their society works through one of the questlines.”

One of the coolest aspects of building a new world in the past is that players will see things being built that exist later in Elder Scrolls III or see things beginning to take shape for the plots and stories that exist in the future of the lore.

The Dark Elves, or Dunmer, are the primary natives of Morrowind. Fiercely independent, averse to change, and known for keeping to themselves, the various houses and factions of Dunmer make the island an interesting and unique place to visit. From the barbarian Ashlanders to the Morag Tong political assassins that keep checks and balances in place with their “altruistic” killings, the Dark Elves despise outsiders and have a culture all their own.

“All Elder Scrolls games are peeks into worlds bigger than that game, but Morrowind is a much different feel. The Dunmer culture is pretty wacky, in a good way,” Firor says. “It’s not traditional fantasy. It doesn’t feel like Western Europe like a lot of the other provinces. Being in Morrowind gives us a chance to do a whole lot of Dwemer stuff we haven’t done before, as well as Dunmer and Ashlander, three cultures in one essentially because it’s such a diverse landmass.”

There’s more than just Dunmer roving around the island, especially on the shorelines, where pockets of pirates and thieves abound. No Elder Scrolls experience would be complete without expansive Dwemer ruins to stomp around in, or a deceptive Khajiit that strings you along with

IT'S NOT REALLY AN EXPANSION

Normally when we think of an expansion we think of add-on content tacked on to a core game. Elder Scrolls Online: Morrowind isn’t quite packaged that way, as you get everything you need to play, including the core game, by picking it up. If you already own The Elder Scrolls Online, you can upgrade your copy to Morrowind at a reduced price point.

The Morrowind box is expected to retail at \$59.99, with a \$39.99 digital upgrade option for those that already own ESO. A collector’s edition is available that comes with a 300-page art book, Colossus statue, map, steelbook case, and a smattering of in-game perks like a War Bear pet, armored war horse emotes, and other customizations for \$99.99. A digital collector’s edition is also available with just the in-game perks for \$79.99.

Morrowind is welcoming to newcomers, as it includes its own tutorial. You can start a new character and begin in Vvardenfell without ever touching the old zones. Think of it as a new chapter in the Elder Scrolls Universe, the first of a new style of large content blocks that include much more than quarterly DLC content offerings.

“We have a lot of players who play a lot of this game, and 10 hour DLC is awesome, but they want more,” says game director Matt Firor. “They want a bigger story, more characters, and more rewards. We wanted to put a big solid chunk of explorable space down, and to do that, we needed to do something larger. Even though it’s super nostalgic, realistically most people that play this have not played Morrowind. So it’s the perfect combination of nostalgic for some but also awesome, new, and cool looking.”

Because there are no traditional levels in Elder Scrolls Online to speak of, the island is yours to roam freely from your first moments stepping onto the old shores.

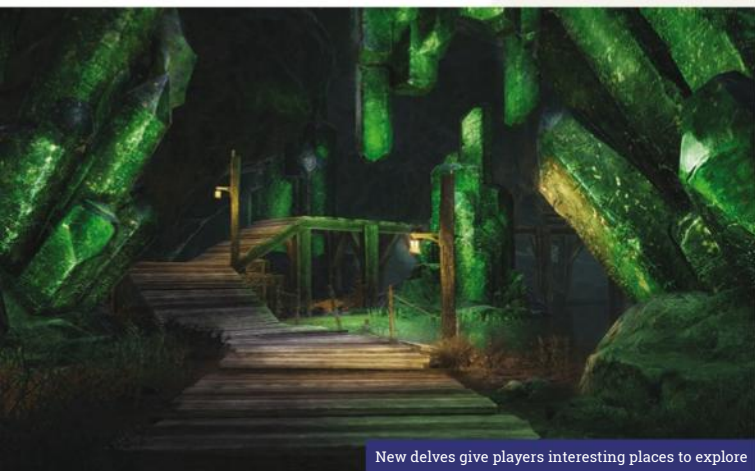
lies on a quest to become a Skooma drug lord.

The main story in this content block revolves around an ailing Vivec, one of the three god-kings of Morrowind. As Vivec gets sicker and sicker, The Red Mountain begins to erupt and the Moonlet that hovers over the capital of Vvardenfell, Vivec City, threatens to crash into the land and destroy it. With the main questline and other side quests, the story content in Morrowind should take players around 30 hours to complete.

While the land is heavily laced with nostalgia, lore, and throwbacks, if this is your first trip to the island, don’t fret, as digging into the past has opened up a new future for Elder Scrolls Online.

“The content team and the writers have painstakingly gone through to try to explain things, the really important bits,” Lambert says. “For a brand new player who hasn’t played Elder Scrolls III or doesn’t understand what it is, we walk you through those things. We walk you through why Vivec is important, we walk you through the tribunal, and we explain why these locations are important.”

The vast majority of the content in Morrowind is fairly serious, dealing with the Dunmer houses and their perilous politics, but there’s always opportunity for some fun as well. For instance, players can snag a superhero-style outfit from completing a Zorro-style vigilante questline.



New delves give players interesting places to explore



New enemies and new biomes flesh out a rich world

KEEPING IT CLASSY

Morrowind isn't all just about recreating a region so many Elder Scrolls fans look back on fondly. The expansion also adds the first new character class since launch, the Warden.

"[The Warden] is much more of the druid/hunter/ranger archetype, but this being Elder Scrolls Online you don't have to do any of the Warden things. It's a new class with three new skill lines," Firor says.

In broad terms, the Warden's three skill lines correspond to archetypes. The Winter's Embrace line comes with ice and water skills, and allows the Warden to protect himself and allies with survivability enhancements. The line has a heal, physical and magic resists, a snare, a shield, and more. A new ability in this line allows you to place a sort of trap on the ground that when triggered will send the enemy directly to you, a perfect way to preemptively protect your supports, healers, and less-tanky teammates in combat situations. Winter's ultimate skill is a massive area-of-effect damage ability that gives all your allies in the area a significant protection buff.

Green Balance is the nature-based healing line, with a healing seed that bursts after time, a healing shield, a way to heal yourself and allies via dealing damage, and a way to quickly teleport yourself to an ally. Multiple area-of-effect healing abilities are available, and a quick reposition can make all the difference in setting yourself up for an ultimate to heal your entire team. "As the seeds start to grow and the plants get bigger it goes into the big

burst," Lambert says. "There's a synergy associated with this, where the person standing in the area can choose when to use the burst. You can use it right away for a smaller burst but if you wait until they're almost fully grown you'll get a larger burst."

Animal Companions is the damage line focused on summoning pets, with a massive permanent bear sidekick as the ultimate ability. In addition to the hulking bear that stays by your side, you have access to a cliff racer that swoops down from the sky, a creature that does frontal cone damage, fetcherflies that swarm

and do damage over time, and a bull net that lets you regenerate resources quickly.

Watching the Warden in action in the single-player arena against a variety of enemies is exhilarating. As a fan of pet-based classes in other MMORPGs, the perma-bear is a big draw to the class for me, and augmenting the ultimate can make it even more powerful or offer quick resurrection in case it ends up dying during a critical battle. Using ice and water abilities to become more resilient and then chaining together a smattering of summons while weaving in standard combat looks like a ton of fun.



TRIAL BY DWEMER

Morrowind introduces one new trial, the 12-person Elder Scrolls Online version of a raid. The journey takes players into the Clockwork City, a sort of "snow globe" style experience that moves players into a Dwemer-inspired underground environment filled with deadly bosses and environmental hazards.

Spinning lightning-infused contraptions set the stage around a boss called The Janitor, requiring serious mobility and adding a higher degree of stress to the encounter. Since these creations are interpretations and not actual Dwemer machinations, there are some differences that are sure to surprise players as they attempt to discover the mysteries within.

"It's basically Dwemer wonderland," says game director Matt Firor.



You may run into some old friends in Morrowind

POWERING UP PLAYER-VS-PLAYER

While a “massive” competitive experience is always available in the constantly warring Cyrodiil zone, Morrowind is bringing structured battleground PVP to The Elder Scrolls Online in a 4v4v4 format. Forget factions – you can group with whoever you want and make a play for leaderboards and rewards. These smaller scale maps feature objectives to fight over and are ideal for quick matches. On launch, Morrowind will feature a minimum of three battleground maps and three game modes, including capture the flag and team deathmatch.

“If you think of the philosophy of this versus Cyrodiil, in these you are fighting and not hiding,” Firor says. “It’s battle tactics, not individual sniping. I think it’s important to note that these look, play, and feel much different than Cyrodiil. These are in addition to, not instead of, opportunities for PVP players. There are still reasons to go take territory in Cyrodiil for your alliance. This is much more for 20-minute jump in, run around, assert your dominance, get on the leaderboard – it’s much more personal.”

These arenas emphasize verticality and offer limited opportunities to take advantage of line-of-sight. The battlegrounds are much less open world, favoring smaller, more structured spaces. Leaderboards focus on game activities, like flag captures and defense of objectives, not kill-death-assist stats (though those are tracked, too). Players unlock weekly rewards, from gear to special housing loot.

You can queue up for different game modes but won’t be able to select the map, and

can search for a match either solo or in a four-person group.

“We’re doing that so we don’t fragment the population that much,” Lambert says. “If everyone queues for one map then that becomes the de facto map, if everyone queues for a game type we’ll have a bunch of different maps.”

BACK TO THE FUTURE

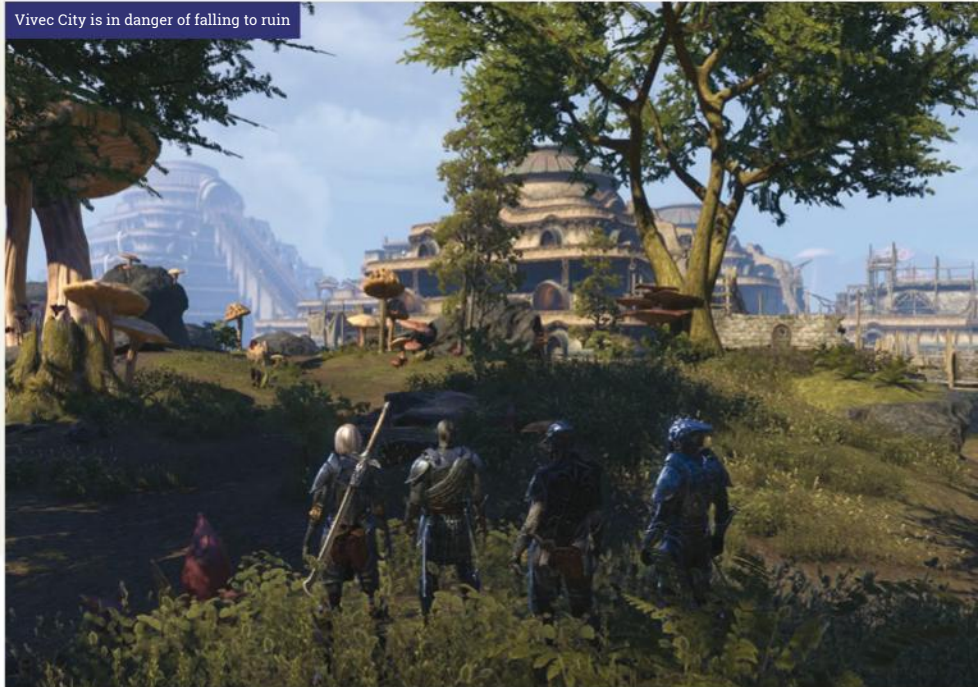
Morrowind’s focus on recapturing the essence of the classic Elder Scrolls III title and catering to

a wide variety of playstyles is a powerful strategy for the continually changing and adapting MMORPG. On June 6, players can experience a massive content chunk unlike any other prior update to the game, one that may set the pace for future content packs while not interfering with the rigorous pace of quarterly DLC offerings.

“We’re not quite sure what the eventual cadence will be,” Firor says. “But we like this content model. Taking some extra time for one of the updates and making it special. It allows us to do much more than just additional content.”



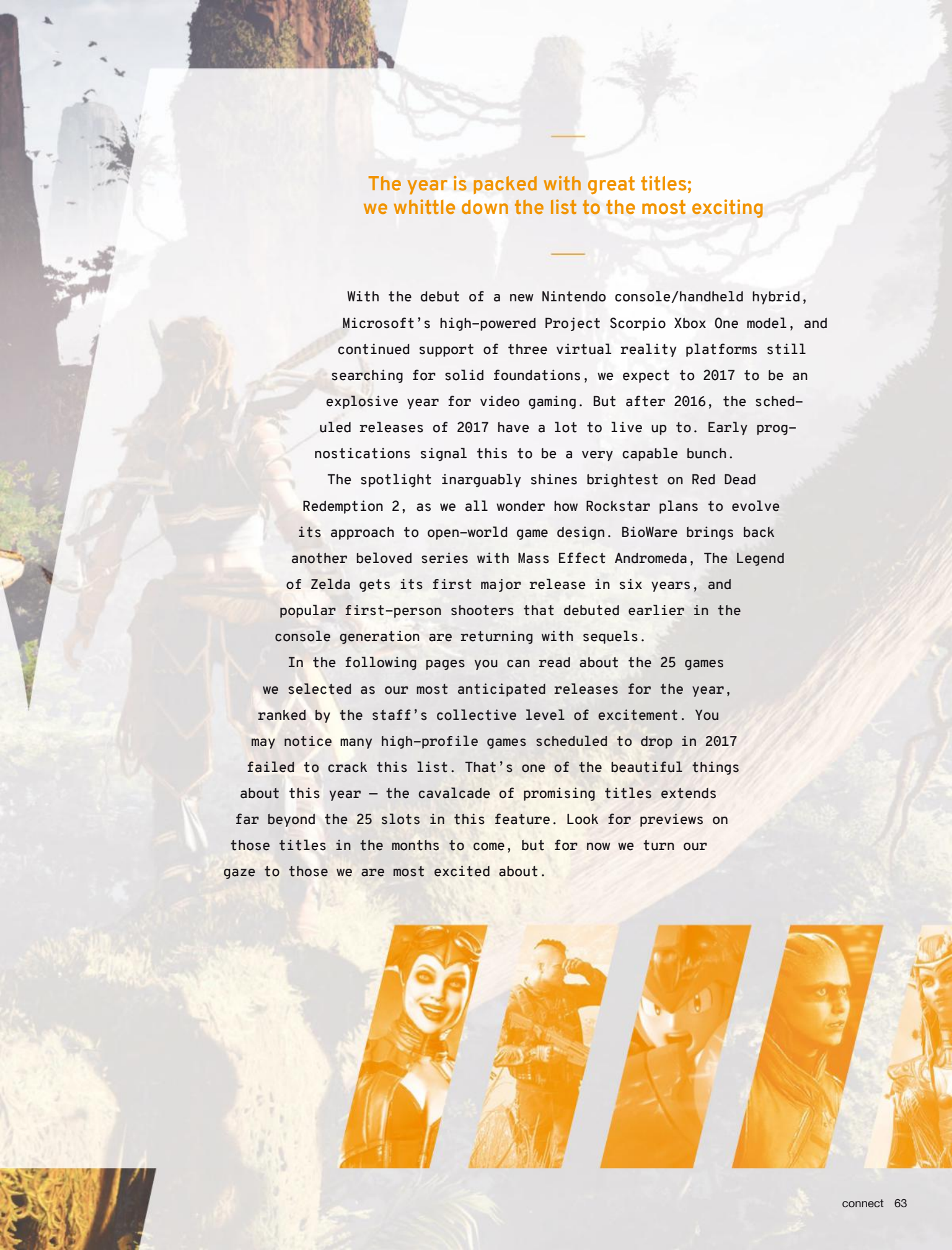
Vivec City is in danger of falling to ruin





THE MOST ANTICIPATED GAMES OF 2017

by Matt Bertz



The year is packed with great titles; we whittle down the list to the most exciting

With the debut of a new Nintendo console/handheld hybrid, Microsoft's high-powered Project Scorpio Xbox One model, and continued support of three virtual reality platforms still searching for solid foundations, we expect to 2017 to be an explosive year for video gaming. But after 2016, the scheduled releases of 2017 have a lot to live up to. Early prognostications signal this to be a very capable bunch.

The spotlight inarguably shines brightest on Red Dead Redemption 2, as we all wonder how Rockstar plans to evolve its approach to open-world game design. BioWare brings back another beloved series with Mass Effect Andromeda, The Legend of Zelda gets its first major release in six years, and popular first-person shooters that debuted earlier in the console generation are returning with sequels.

In the following pages you can read about the 25 games we selected as our most anticipated releases for the year, ranked by the staff's collective level of excitement. You may notice many high-profile games scheduled to drop in 2017 failed to crack this list. That's one of the beautiful things about this year – the cavalcade of promising titles extends far beyond the 25 slots in this feature. Look for previews on those titles in the months to come, but for now we turn our gaze to those we are most excited about.



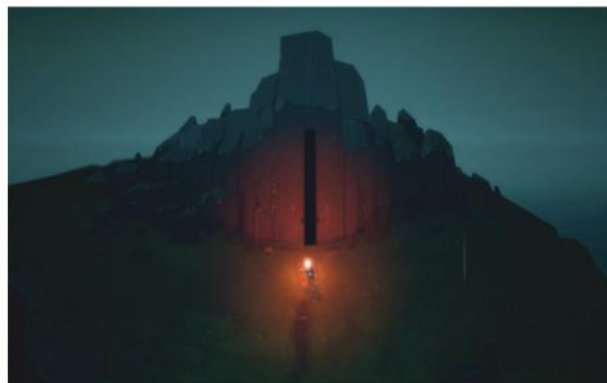
24

Below

Platform: Xbox One • PC

Release: TBA

Another game that has long been on the *Game Informer* radar, Capy's moody follow-up to *Super Time Force* is finally arriving in 2017. Originally scheduled to release last summer, Capy pushed the game back to shore up its perceived weaknesses. This top-down adventure takes many cues from roguelikes, with procedurally generated levels, high difficulty, and permadeath. The atmospheric environments are buttressed by smart use of natural sound effects and sparing use of the dream-like score from singer-songwriter Jim Guthrie. *Below* drips style, and now we just need to get our hands on the substance.



25

Night In The Woods

Platform: PS4 • PC

Release: February 21

This creepy and colorful 2D platforming adventure from Infinite Fall has been on our radar since the Kickstarter debuted in 2013. The cartoon art style and narrative focus immediately captured our imagination. The story follows a cat named Mae blessed (or cursed) with paranormal abilities who returns to her hometown after dropping out of college. Like many mining towns in middle America, Possum Springs is now well beyond its glory days, and its denizens have all changed under the weight of the struggle. As night falls each day, you explore the mysteries of the town and the wilderness around it. Choices you make affect the narrative, and the game sprinkles in minigames (including knife fights!) throughout your journey to keep the gameplay fresh.

23

Tacoma

Platform: Xbox One • PC

Release: Spring

Set in an eponymous lunar transfer space station located 200,000 miles above the Earth's surface, *Tacoma* places players in the role of Amy Ferrier, who arrives on the first day of her job to an abandoned facility. Players must bring the station back online and use their powers of deduction to piece together what happened. As you poke around the technological back-end of the station, you can stumble upon augmented reality messages that teach you more about the crew members who called *Tacoma* home. You also must contend with ODIN, the A.I. responsible for monitoring all the functions of the space station. Is the A.I. dangerous or just unreliable? We won't know until we play for ourselves.



22

Cuphead

Platform: Xbox One • PC

Release: Summer

Yet another indie that first debuted several years ago, *Cuphead* has been delayed several times now. The developers at Studio MDHR have a great excuse, as they've fleshed out the run-and-gun game heavily inspired by 1930s cartoons beyond the series of boss battles that originally comprised the full game. *Cuphead* is still based on the concept of losing a bet with the devil and having to repay it by doing his bidding, but now features platforming gameplay in addition to its boss-rush core. The difficulty scales based on whether you are playing solo or with local co-op, and you can stock up on power-ups before you tackle your next tough foe.



21

Nier: Automata

Platform: PS4 • PC
Release: March 7

Platinum Games' next action romp follows up the underrated original by...scrapping everything? Pretty much, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Automata takes place in the same post-apocalyptic setting as its predecessor, but stars a new protagonist and boasts improved combat thanks to the know-how of the Bayonetta and Vanquish vets. Jumping into a longstanding war as a sword-wielding android with great hair, you must repel the invasion of the machines and save whatever remains of mankind. The game isn't all hacking and slashing; Platinum says it wants to graft its combat expertise onto the role-playing elements from the original.

19

Divinity: Original Sin 2

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release: TBA

The CRPG revival is still going strong thanks to series like Divinity. Original Sin earned widespread critical acclaim for modernizing isometric role-playing games with a unique approach to character building and strong turn-based combat. Original Sin II, which is currently in early access, builds off these successes and doubles down on the cooperative play of the first by allowing four users to join the same party. Sometimes your objectives may diverge or be in direct opposition, creating opportunities for rivalries between companions. New features like skill-crafting, a deeper dialogue system, and a new array of source skills round out what is shaping up to be a standout RPG.



20

Nioh

Platform: PS4
Release: February 9

Many big names from Team Ninja may have departed, but the studio is still laser-focused on making stylish combat games. Its latest feels more closely aligned with Dark Souls than Ninja Gaiden, tasking melee heroes with vanquishing nefarious Yokai (monsters, spirits, and demons) that have invaded 1600s Japan during the real-life Battle of Sekigahara. Some historical figures, such as the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, even make appearances in the game. As a Western samurai both taller and more talented than Tom Cruise, players slash through closed environments, use shrines as checkpoints, and can even call in backup in the form of cooperative multiplayer. If you like the rush of hard-earned victories after repeated failures against tough-to-crack bosses, this is one to keep on your radar.



18

Splatoon 2

Platform: Switch
Release: Summer

Given the small install base of the Wii U, we expected Nintendo to port over well-received games like Splatoon. The Big N decided to do us one better by announcing a sequel to its family-friendly shooter. From our brief hands-on time, it seems like Splatoon 2 builds on the small but solid foundation of its predecessor, with fast-paced action and accessible controls. New weapons like the Splat Dualies (think dual-wielding pistols), fresh arenas just dying for a coat of paint, and both local and online multiplayer support make this the competitive shooter to watch on the Switch. Nintendo also teased a steady stream of post-release content to keep Splatooners coming back for more.

16

Star Wars Battlefront 2

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release: Fall

The feature-light DICE reboot rubbed many *Battlefront* purists the wrong way, but found success anyway, with more than 14 million players joining the intergalactic fray since its launch in 2015. The sequel promises to expand on the paltry offerings of the original with a full single-player campaign built by newly formed Motive Studios in Montreal. We don't have many details yet, but EA CFO Blake Jorgenson confirmed on a recent earnings call that *Battlefront 2* will have content based on the new movies and feature "bigger and better worlds." Since the next *Star Wars* movie doesn't launch until December 15, we expect most of the settings to come from the existing new expanding universe, including *The Force Awakens*.



17

Injustice 2

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One
Release: May 16

Fresh off reinvigorating its beloved *Mortal Kombat* series, Nether-Realm Studios returns to the DC universe with a new fighting game that pits the largest roster of heroes and villains yet against one another in hand-to-superpower combat. Many of the elements that made the first game in this series great return, like the crazy environmental destruction and Hollywood-worthy super abilities. A new gear system rewards players after each bout with loot that grants new cosmetic and skill customization options. Not into players tweaking your favorite DC heroes? You can opt out and fight with the characters in their familiar forms as well.

15

Marvel Vs. Capcom: Infinite

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release: Fall/Winter

DC isn't the only superhero universe getting into the ring this year; the crossover critical darling *Marvel vs. Capcom* is back with its sixth main entry. The tag-team tussles once again pit Marvel heroes like Captain America and Iron Man against 8-bit icons like Mega Man and *Street Fighter* all-star Ryu. Taking a more freeform approach to fisticuffs, you can hot-swap your heroes at the push of a button to string together bombastic combos. Learning the lessons from *Street Fighter V*'s rough launch, *MvC: Infinite* features both a cinematic story mode and competitive multiplayer out the gate.



14

Torment: Tides Of Numenera

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release: February 28

The long-awaited spiritual successor to *Planescape: Torment* (voted one of the Top 200 games of all time by *Game Informer*) is finally approaching release. With *Wasteland 2* developer inXile and *Numenera* tabletop writer Monte Cook on the project, we have faith they understand what made the original dystopian RPG so special. Players assume the role of the Last Castoff, a human host that once served as a vessel to a godlike entity with no memory of what happened to him/her while possessed. Like many games in the CRPG revival, *Torment* focuses largely on player agency through character interactions and branching missions.



13

For Honor

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release: February 14

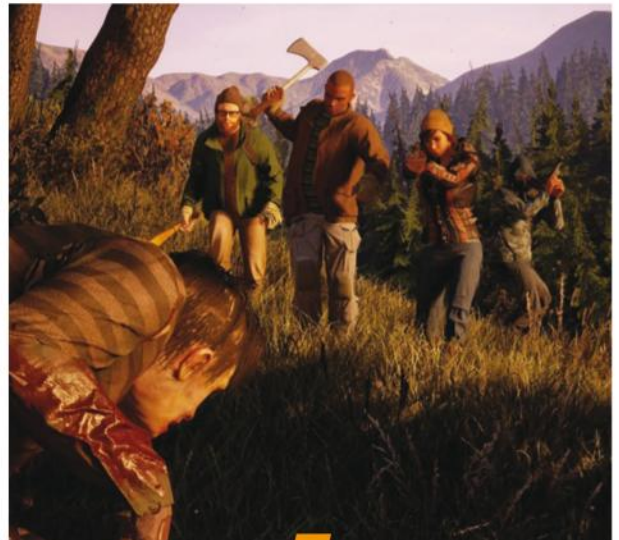
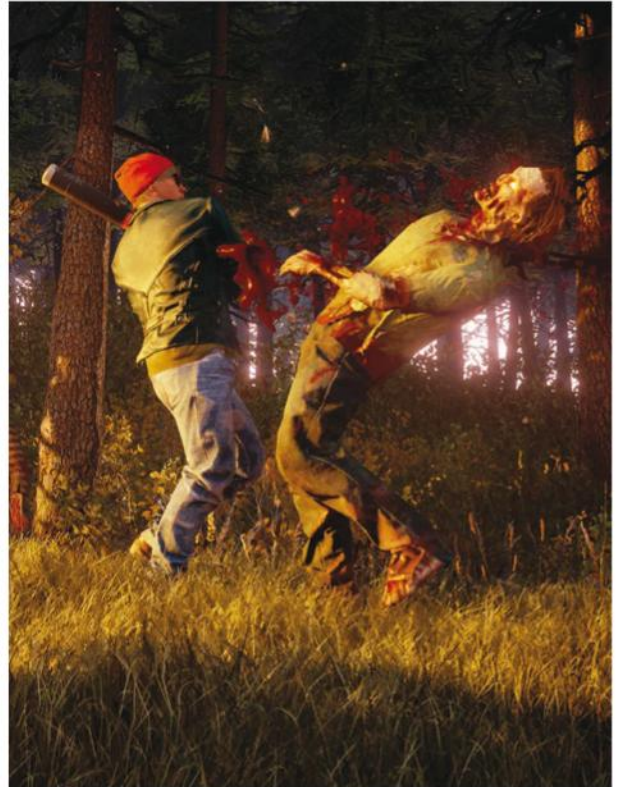
Outside of some head-to-head fighting games like *SoulCalibur*, multiplayer-focused, competitive, melee-combat games are a rarity. *For Honor* tries to assume that neglected throne by throwing up to eight knights, Vikings, and samurai into bloody brawls. A faction-war metagame brings extra meaning to these tactical medieval clashes, and Ubisoft plans to follow in the footsteps of *Rainbow Six Siege* by supporting the game beyond release with free new maps. Those who prefer to take the battlefield solo can dive into the faction-jumping campaign or participate in online duels to the death.

12

South Park: The Fractured But Whole

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release: Spring

After lampooning fantasy tropes with *The Stick of Truth*, *South Park* masterminds Trey Parker and Matt Stone return with another turn-based RPG that puts comic-book franchises in their sights. Cartman and company trade their spells and swords for superhero powers and capes, but a civil war erupts over who gets center stage for the film spin-offs. With friends turned into foes, Professor Chaos seizes the opportunity to advance his nefarious plans for domination. How you use your smarts, ultimate attacks, and flatulence determines whether you emerge victorious or earn the scorn of The Coon.



11

State Of Decay 2

Platform: Xbox One • PC
Release: TBA

The original *State of Decay* suffered from many technical shortcomings, but it hooked us anyway thanks to its unique approach to surviving a zombie outbreak. It constantly tested your leadership skills, and failure to make the right decision could wipe out your fragile enclave at any time. We know little about the sequel outside of comments developer Undead Labs made during the last E3 about the game featuring four-player co-op and a larger open world. If it addresses the shortcomings of the original, Microsoft could have a much-needed first-party hit.

10

Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

Platform: PS4
Release: TBA

Nathan Drake may be retired, but that doesn't mean all treasure-hunting adventures must come to an end. In the standalone expansion *The Lost Legacy*, Naughty Dog tells a spin-off tale featuring *Uncharted 4* mercenary Nadine Ross and fan-favorite Chloe Frazier, who served as one of Drake's love interests in *Uncharted 2*. We don't know how these two cross paths, but their destinies lead them to India, where they seek the lost Tusk of Ganesh. Both ladies are quite comfortable in combat, so expect a healthy dose of *Uncharted's* signature high-octane action.



09

Ghost Recon Wildlands

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release: March 7

After toying with the military technology of the future for several installments, Ubisoft's tactical shooter series is going another direction. The first *Ghost Recon* game to feature an open world, *Wildlands* returns to the freeform tactical combat of the original games. With the Santa Blanca cartel acting with impunity and seizing more power as its cocaine trade grows, the Bolivian national government and international aid groups are at a serious disadvantage. In response, the U.S. sends up to four spec-ops players to map out the cartel's infrastructure and dismantle it by any means necessary.



08

Prey

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release: TBA

With back-to-back games earning widespread critical acclaim, Arkane Studios is on a roll. We expect that success to continue with *Prey*, a series reboot that takes the intelligent, system-based play of the *Dishonored* series and adds a sci-fi setting with a terrifying alien threat lurking in the shadows. As a human trapped aboard a derelict space station, you must use anything at your disposal – including injecting yourself with alien DNA to gain otherworldly powers – to survive against the odds.

07

Persona 5

Platform: PS4 • PS3
Release: April 4

Boasting the first new cast since 2008's Persona 4, the sixth chronological entry veers into the real world more than any of the previous games. By day, players visit otaku havens like the Shibuya and Akihabara districts in Toyko as the cast grapples with high-school drama and heady existential questions. By night, the characters enter a supernatural realm where they must steal malice from people's hearts. The clever blend of social interactions and fantasy role-playing has always been the star of this series, and we are excited to befriend these new faces.

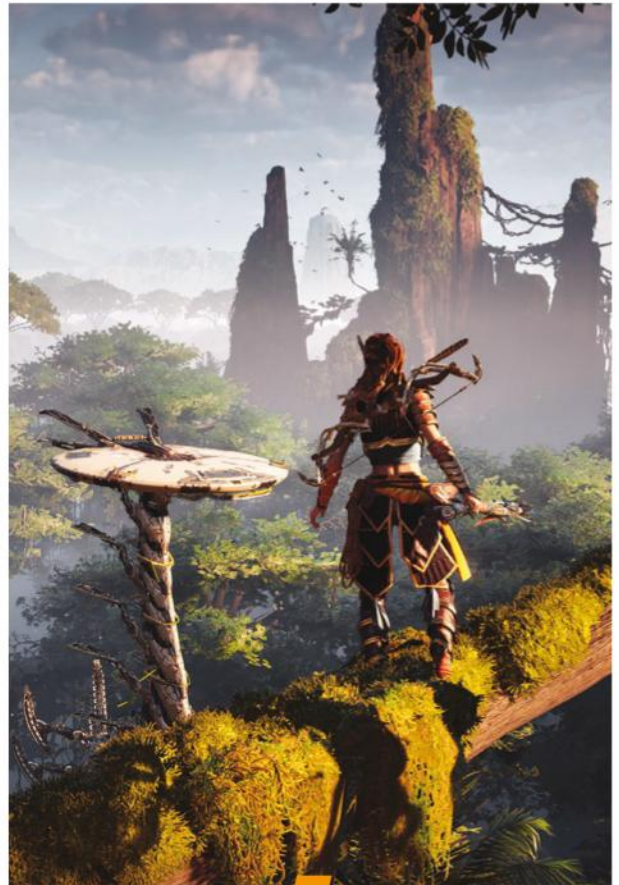


06

Super Mario Odyssey

Platform: Switch
Release: Winter

Nintendo can't make a new platform without having a stand-out Super Mario Bros. game – them's the rules. Many expect Odyssey to meet those expectations for the Switch. We only have a short teaser video to go off, but it showed us enough to be intrigued by Mario's return to 3D platforming. The mustachioed plumber showcases his classic koopa-stomping and star-gathering skills through several colorful environments, but the first glimpse also shows Mario taking a page from Assassin's Creed, climbing up the skyscrapers of New York City facsimile New Donk City before leaping from great heights into the yellow cabs and pedestrians below.



05

Horizon Zero Dawn

Platform: PS4
Release: February 28

Taking a hard right turn from its Killzone series, Guerrilla Games is expanding its scope with this promising open-world action/RPG. Set long after an apocalyptic event that brings humanity back to the stone age, robotic animals are now the highest predator on the food chain. When her tribe is overrun, a fearless hunter named Aloy scavenges for parts to build weapons and traps necessary for surviving in the treacherous world. Along the way, she learns how humanity fell and combats a rival tribe trying to bend the machines to their will. The gorgeous vistas of overrun cities beckon exploration, and we're keen to learn more about the spirited protagonist.

04

The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild

Platform: Switch • Wii U
Release: March 3

Being delayed to coincide with the Switch release hasn't tempered any of our enthusiasm for our 2016 E3 best-in-show winner. Breath of the Wild makes many aggressive moves to modernize this beloved Nintendo series, adding an open world, voice acting, and a physics engine to the experience. Every time we've seen the game, it has excited our passionate Zelda fans even more, showcasing many new elements like vertical building scaling, resource gathering, and snowboarding.

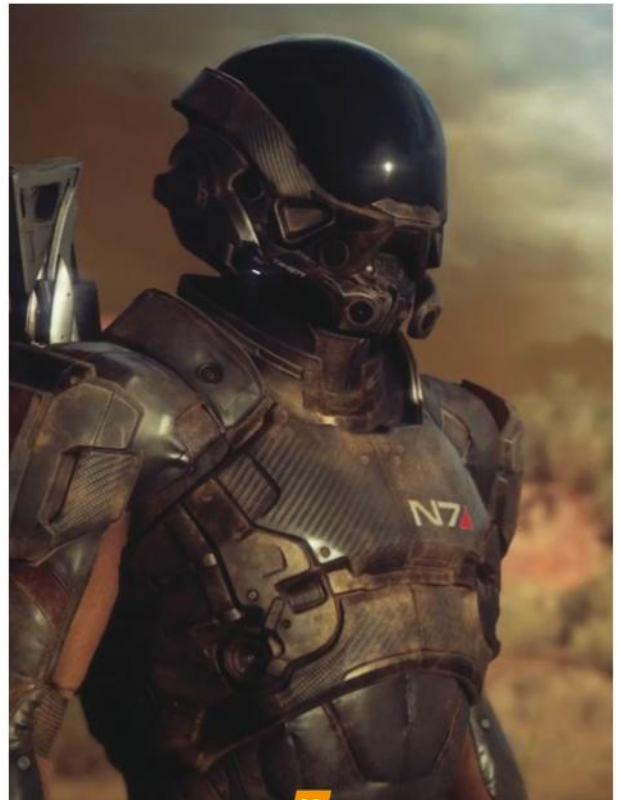
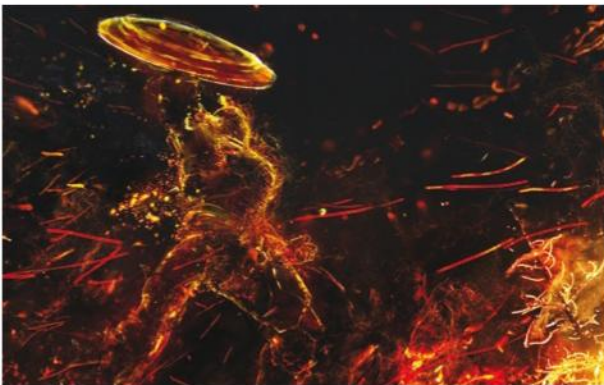


03

Destiny 2

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One
Release: TBA

Outside of a confirmed 2017 launch window, we have very little hard information about the sequel to Bungie's successful shared-world shooter. We know the masterminds behind The Taken King, arguably the best of the Destiny content drops, are leading this project. We also learned that two more development teams – High Moon Studios and Vicarious Visions – are working on the Destiny brand as well. Over the course of our many conversations with Bungie, we know the studio is keenly aware of the original's shortcomings, like poorly implemented storytelling, a need for larger open worlds with more interactive NPCs, and a more consistent flow of post-release content. We hope the sequel shores up those weaknesses, picks up the unresolved narrative threads, and finally makes the leap to PC.



02

Mass Effect Andromeda

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release: March 21

Winners of two of the past five *Game Informer* game of the year awards (Mass Effect 3, Dragon Age: Inquisition), BioWare's track record alone could justify this high ranking. But the prospects of exploring a brand-new galaxy with a new fleet of friends and foes is also intriguing. The first entry in the Mass Effect series after the classic trilogy, Andromeda gives us the nervous excitement you get in anticipation of a first date after getting out of a long relationship. Will we like the new cast of characters? Can the Ryders ever live up to Shepard's legacy? Does the gunplay keep up the arms race with contemporary shooters? Well, maybe not exactly like a first date...



01

Red Dead Redemption 2

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One

Release: Fall

The undisputed kings of open-world games sent the world into a frenzy when it revealed Red Dead Redemption 2 with a somber, reflective teaser showcasing the sweeping American countryside and a promise of a day of reckoning. From rolling fields of grass to dense forests that looked ripped straight out of *The Revenant*, we know one thing: Red Dead Redemption 2 looks gorgeous. Judging by several clues in the trailer, we also assume the game is set before the events of John Marston's reluctant crusade to hunt down his former posse. Now we wait with bated breath for Rockstar's next move, as we know next to nothing about who the protagonist(s) is (are), what's at stake in this adventure, and how the wild success of Grand Theft Auto Online has influenced the studio's thoughts on the future of open-world games. ✦

Horizon Zero Dawn

One last hands-on session before Horizon goes primetime

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Sony Interactive
Entertainment

» **Developer**
Guerrilla Games

» **Release**
February 28

Guerrilla Games, best known for its first-person shooter series *Killzone*, is at the dawn of a new day. Gone are the dark tones of its signature series, replaced by the natural beauty of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, its new open-world action role-playing game.

I recently played the three opening chapters in the game, as well as a main quest further down the line that shows how the game design opens up, leaving the player to explore the world for side quests and other activities.

The game begins with an elder warrior named Rost who brings a small child to a naming ritual. Even though they are both outcasts from the tribe, a tribal matriarch appears to bless the event, which is an early hint that there is more than meets the eye to Aloy, the heroine of *Horizon*.

You play the first few levels as the young Aloy, where the game provides in-game tutorials to introduce Aloy's capabilities and explain her plight in the world. At the heart of the game's lore are the robotic animals roaming

this future representation of Earth. A metal world lies underneath the regrown environment, and we get our first glimpse of this past when a young Aloy falls into a cave that has remnants of the old world.

Here she finds a focus device that gives Aloy powers to bridge the gap between the natural world and the technological innovation that brought upon the robotic animals. She can see the paths the robots take and identify their weak points. The device can also interact with the larger world by allowing Aloy to watch 3D virtual story data points or listen to various audio files she finds. These help her piece together what happened to the old world so she can use those tools to conquer the challenges that lie before her.

The early part of the story culminates in a tribal ritual called the Proving, where Aloy hopes to gain a place back in the tribe. My playthrough doesn't let me partake in this event, but I get to witness the aftermath, which introduces a corruption that affects the

robots roaming the planet and hints of an antagonist who attacks the tribe and sets off a series of events Aloy must investigate.

As she sets out into the world, a number of events dot the map. Hunting missions challenge Aloy to use her bow, wits, and unique weapons to accomplish various goals and illustrate how she can use the robotic creatures' behaviors to her advantage.

Robots called Tallnecks wander the world, and if you find and manage to climb to the top of one of these majestic creatures, you can use Aloy's hacking ability to download data about the nearby area to your map (think eagle towers in *Assassin's Creed*). The world also features ancient ruins to explore, bandit camps where you use your skills against human opponents, creatures you can hunt for precious materials needed for the deep crafting system, and mysterious cauldrons believed to be the birthplace of the robot creatures.

I had a chance to experience all these things in *Horizon Zero Dawn*,



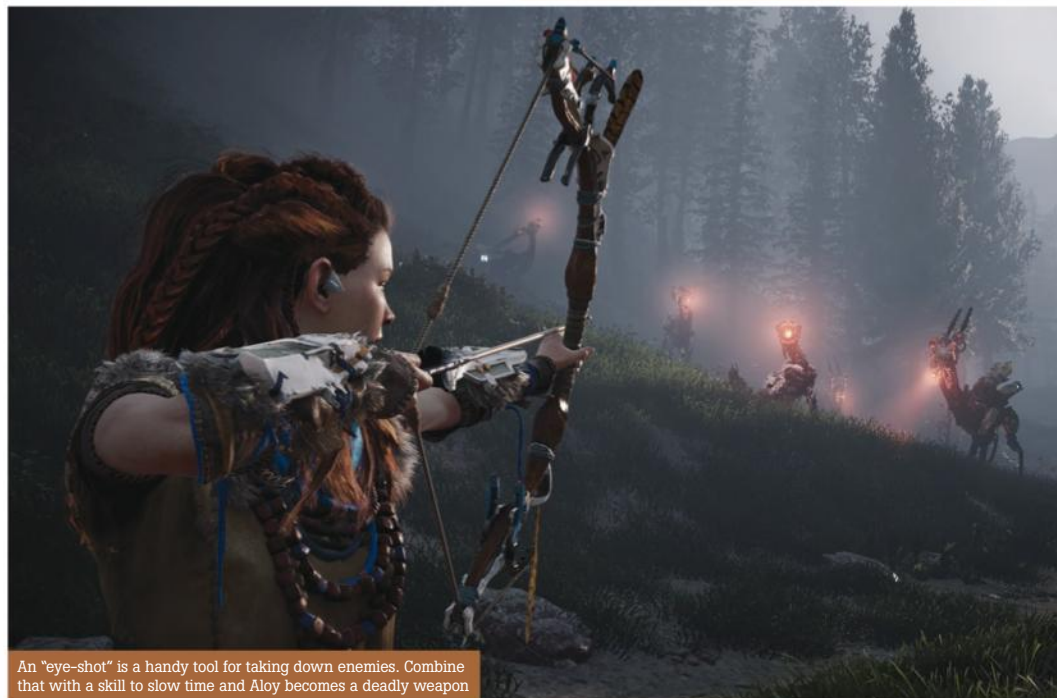
There are settlements around the world that serve as quest hubs



The robotic creatures are majestic to look at, and the sound team did an amazing job making them sound as scary as they look

and form a clear picture of what players can expect from Aloy's unusual world. One big takeaway was the precision and flexibility of controlling the young woman. Whether I was using the brush to sneak up on enemies or using her bow in combat against a herd of robotic creatures, the controls never let me down. The ropecaster, which allows players to attach a rope to a creature then secure it to the ground (letting you immobilize creatures if you use enough tethers), is just one of many tools that help the game feel nuanced and novel.

Whether these quests become repetitive is something our upcoming review will pass judgment on, but this glimpse showed that Horizon Zero Dawn has all the parts in place to aspire to greatness. Finding and taking on the various robot creatures in the world is a joy that unfolds differently every time, and when a game nails its systems so that playing within their bounds is entertainment, it gives me high hopes for the final product. » **Andy McNamara**



An "eye-shot" is a handy tool for taking down enemies. Combine that with a skill to slow time and Aloy becomes a deadly weapon

Rime

Uncovering the island's mysteries

» **Platform**
Switch • PS4
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Puzzle/
Adventure

» **Publisher**
Grey Box,
Six Foot

» **Developer**
Tequila Works

» **Release**
May

When Tequila Works showed Rime's first trailer in 2013 during a Gamescom press conference, it generated excitement among gamers. With Sony publishing, Rime was expected to release exclusively for PlayStation, however this never panned out. After disappearing for a couple years, no one knew whether Rime had a future at all.

Tequila Works reacquired the rights to Rime last year, and this exploration-based puzzle game is finally back on track. Publisher Grey Box recently gave us an extended look at the adventure, which tells the tale of a boy stranded on a mysterious island. After spending several hours with the game, I came away impressed not just by its awe-inspiring, cel-shaded visuals reminiscent of *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, but also by its intuitive, minimalist puzzle design.

In the opening moments, the young protagonist washes up on shore. I explore parts of this lush island freely, where secret collectibles hide in hard-to-reach places that require platforming to obtain. Puzzles are abundant. Rime has a minimalist UI with sparse button prompts, making the world feel that much more immersive. Murals and paintings prod the player in the right direction and give more narrative background. From what I saw, the story remains abstract and vague, but that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Puzzles start off simple – to reach an area guarded by a boar, I fetch fruit from a nearby tree and throw it in a different direction to lure the animal astray. A set of puzzles tasks me with finding my way to different pillars and activating them. Completing this grants me a fox companion, who subtly guides me in the right directions. Your fox acts as a hint system, and Grey Box producer Cody Bradley describes him as your “spirit animal.” While these first puzzles are easy, Rime teaches you different puzzle-solving skills progressively, and then mixes and matches those elements to create more difficult puzzles later on. For example, things get tricky when I have to not just complete a perspective puzzle, but also solve it under a time constraint.

Rime's puzzles are similar to *Playdead's Inside*; with little instruction to guide you, they require intuition and a keen eye. Some of these are perspective puzzles where I move the camera to align pillars in order to open an entryway. Others have me manipulating the day and night cycle. The latter is among my favorites, where I roll a large metal sphere across a circular track, slowly changing the time of day. I then manipulate the direction of shadows to be positioned on the correct pillars.

Rime's island is sectioned off into stages, and you're transported to different areas as you move from one stage to the next after clearing puzzles.



You explore the island and locate hidden areas by platforming and using a keen eye

Between these stages, short, narrative interludes occur. In the one I played, I found myself in a white, dreamlike landscape beside a boat half-sunk in the ground. Our protagonist's red cape flies off and is propelled by gusts of wind. I try to retrieve it until the world suddenly gets darker when an overhead storm begins to brew. According to Grey Box, these short playable sequences are meant to give more narrative context.

The storm also foreshadowed future events. The second stage of Rime is darker and more foreboding than

Playable dreamlike interludes occur in-between stages to give more narrative context





You will encounter a strange, red cloaked figure in the distance often, but he disappears if you chase him



the vacation-esque area of the first. I find myself in a temple, surrounded by creatures that look strikingly like No Face from *Spirited Away*. Nearby statues portray humans covering their faces mournfully, or cowering in pain. Atmospherically, the tone of this new area drastically contrasts with the first section, proving that Rime isn't afraid of variety.

Stepping out of the temple, I fall down from a stone bridge after a hostile, prehistoric-looking bird swoops down, attempting to capture me in its claws. I evade its grasp by seconds, and discover that if I want to survive, I need to use cover during my escape. In this desert area, I hide underneath stone structures, moving from one to the next, as the bird above continues its attempts to grab me.

I see three windmills in the distance, each with its own intricate puzzles that help me cause a thunderstorm to keep the hostile bird at bay. Stepping toward one of the windmills, I move away from the desert landscape and more towards the sea, transitioning into an underwater level filled with schools of fish and mysterious temples to swim through.

During my few hours with Rime, I was intrigued, challenged, and awe-struck by the mysteries of the island. I found myself stopping at murals and attempting to better understand their cryptic meanings. I chased a strange, red-hooded figure that often appeared in the distance, but I could never quite catch him. Much like this enigmatic character, Rime is a mysterious and curious adventure, with minimalistic narrative cues similar to the likes of Journey. I look forward to returning to this bizarre but captivating island when Rime releases in May. » **Elise Favis**



There are no traditional enemies in Rime, but instead hostile beasts that you evade or manipulate

Ghost Recon Wildlands

A massive and action-packed open world



» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Ubisoft

» **Developer**
Ubisoft Paris

» **Release**
March 7

The road around the mountain is covered in mud and ruts, and bounces the jeep as we travel.

I take a sharp turn. In the back, one of my comrades is talking about how he misses his ex-wife and why she left him. Another one cracks: "That's why I'm single!" We pull up to the small house. Cartel members are lounging outside, standing around barrels, chatting loudly. From the car I let loose one of my little drones. It flies up to the window in the house and tags two of the drug runners inside as they sit reclined on a sofa.

I give the command. My squadmates lean out of the jeep and with pinpoint accuracy take down every criminal on the lawn. I get out of the jeep and eliminate the remaining targets with clean pistol shots to the chest as they come down the stairs. We go in, extract the intel, and leave. Mission complete. It was like we were never there.

When it's firing on all cylinders, Ghost Recon Wildlands often plays out like this, a series of spec-ops stories in which you and your squad (controlled either by A.I. or other players) are the stars. The story of Wildlands isn't that complicated. You're part of a secret American task force in Bolivia sent in to dismantle an all-powerful drug cartel, the Santa Blancas, piece by piece. Once those beats are established in the intro, you and your buddies are off to take down the bad guys, one op after another.

I recently had the chance to play the first two hours of the single-player campaign and about two more hours of late-game co-op multiplayer content. For those unfamiliar with the Ghost Recon series itself – and you don't need to be to play Wildlands –

what I played felt like a fantastic combination of Metal Gear Solid V and Splinter Cell: Blacklist, but set in a huge, fantastically detailed world. The single-player portion had me exploring a massive landscape (itself only a small portion of the final game's map, according to Ubisoft) with my squad as we zoomed down country roads in jeeps, soared over mountains in helicopters, and quietly infiltrated villages to rescue inhabitants from the Santa Blanca forces.

Though I sometimes grow weary of hearing games boast about how giant their world is, I was consistently impressed, not just with how big Wildlands is, but how organic it feels and how many tactical options are associated with the landscape you have at your disposal. Though the A.I. is competent and you have enough commands to use with them, Wildlands works best when you're playing cooperatively. While in communication with other players via headset, you can devise a plan to take down a camp by having everyone come at it from a different angle and reporting how the situation changes as you go along.



Melee takedowns are quick but brutal



For example, my group undertook a mission where we had to destroy the enemy's mortar supply. I scouted the camp with a drone, while two others approached the camp from the north, and the last squadmate came in from the south. I tagged as many enemies as I could, allowing my allies to see them as well. Then I quickly took out my suppressed sniper rifle and began to pick off foes one by one. Unfortunately, one of the guards I killed was standing in front of another enemy, hidden out of sight, and they rang the alarm, putting every soldier in the base on alert.

We changed tactics. My squadmates switched over to their loud, more powerful weapons and stormed the camp. An enemy helicopter was sent in to provide reinforcements so I snuck onto an enemy ATV and took it out with a minigun. My squadmates mopped up the inner circle of the camp and extracted our target intel. The whole mission was over in five minutes, but it was so intense that my palms were actually sweaty.

There are also plentiful character customization options at the start of the game. From eyepatches to backpacks, hairstyles, combat vests, and sleeve tattoos, there's enough here to make you feel like this character is your own badass commando. An RPG-lite system lets you customize your abilities, like giving you more health or turning your drone into a bomb.

Gunplay is tight, letting you decide whether or not to default zoom to the iron sights or third-person over the shoulder aiming, and taking down enemies is satisfying because they're not bullet sponges and react realistically to gunfire. If you shoot one in the head, or anywhere above the chest really, they're going down. It's a fine line that Wildlands manages to walk, letting you have the adrenaline-building experience of parachuting off a plane and landing deep in the jungle

before creeping up on your enemies to take them out, while also embracing the tactical realism that games like Rainbow Six and the earliest versions of Ghost Recon embodied.

After four hours of Wildlands, I left my station reluctantly. Outside of some minor glitches, the game just does so much right. It's fun. It uses its scope in genuinely interesting ways that I can't

say the same for when it comes to most open-world games. We're still two months out from Ghost Recon Wildlands, and while I saw a generous portion of the game, I still haven't seen the whole picture. However, what I did see has me excited for what Ubisoft has made, and I'm looking forward to getting my hands on the full game come March. » **Javy Gwaltney**

Sneaking is a viable, and often valuable, option



Plan your moves carefully. When it's time to go loud, there's no going back





Bulletstorm: Full Clip Edition

Duke it out one more time in People Can Fly's explosive shooter

» **Platform**
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Shooter
(4-Player Online)

» **Publisher**
Gearbox Software

» **Developer**
People Can Fly,
Epic Games

» **Release**
April 7

While series like Battlefield and Call of Duty were exploring the terrors of modern warfare last generation, People Can Fly dropped military realism in favor of over-the-top action, killer combos, and a wild sci-fi story. We gave Bulletstorm a 9.25 when it released in 2011, but those who missed this wild ride the first time around can soon killstreak their way through mutant hordes in a 4K-compatible remaster that's bundled with some neat extras.

Players jump into the bloodstained boots of Grayson Hunt, a renegade space pirate on the run from a famous war general named Sarrano. After crash-landing on an abandoned resort planet, Grayson begins an alcohol-fueled revenge quest alongside a cyborg warrior named Ishi Sato. Bulletstorm's humorous, expletive-filled story was written by comic book staple Rick Remender, famous for high-concept science fiction works like *Low* and *Black Science*.

One of the unique elements of Bulletstorm is its skillshot combo system. Grayson comes equipped with an energy leash, a whip-like weapon that he can use to toss enemies around and otherwise interact with the environment to perform often-gory executions. Players are rewarded points for killing opponents in the most creative and destructive ways imaginable, and can then use these points to purchase additional weapons, ammo, and upgrades.

In addition to high-resolution textures and increased polygon counts, Bulletstorm: Full Clip Edition comes packaged with all previously released DLC, six new Echo Maps that allow players to showcase their skills in single-player score challenges, and a new Overkill Campaign mode that lets you start the campaign with the entire arsenal unlocked.

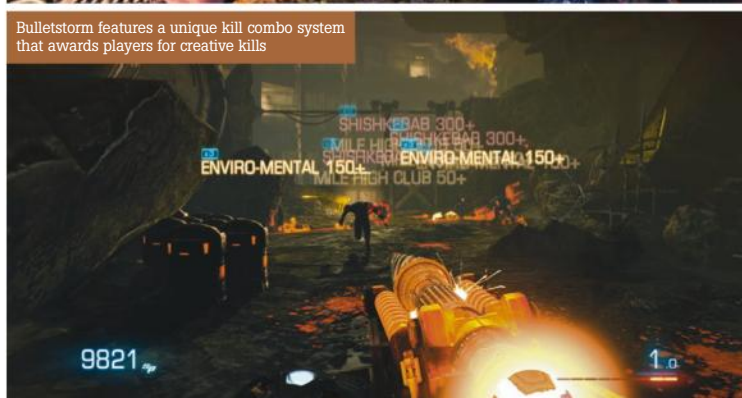
Bulletstorm's non-stop action, colorful characters, and unique combo system helped set People Can Fly's shooter apart from the crowd when it first released. The additional score challenges and improved visuals help make this re-release a more enticing package for shooter fans looking for an action-heavy title that doesn't take itself too seriously. » **Ben Reeves**

Going Nuclear!

Fans who pre-order Bulletstorm: Full Clip Edition unlock the ability to play through the entire game as Duke Nukem. This novelty mode features complete voiceover from Duke Nukem voice actor Jon St. John, who replaces Grayson Hunt during the narrative. Gearbox hasn't confirmed any further details about this Duke Nukem content, but it will likely be available somewhere down the road for a price to those who don't preorder the game.



Bulletstorm features a unique kill combo system that awards players for creative kills



9821

10

Strafe

Gib it up

Strafe is a deceptive game. At first glance, you might believe that it's yet another simplistic, nostalgia-driven shooter that banks on gamers' fond memories of the arcade action in Doom, Quake, and Unreal. From the space-helmet HUD to the simple but stylish polygonal enemies, Strafe is always channeling a '90s vision of madness and gleeful destruction. However, while nostalgia is certainly a component of developer Pixel Titans' game, it also has a surprising amount of variety and ingenuity. And blood. Lots of blood.

The game casts you as a scrapper on a space station, trying to work your way through winding corridors filled to the brim with monsters. The levels are procedurally generated so that room layouts, weapons, power-ups, and enemies change positions every time you die. Expect to die a lot. Strafe is unrelenting in the amount of enemies it throws at you. I was constantly running backward as seemingly endless waves of orangutan-looking monsters bounded toward me. Luckily, a lot of firepower helps you fend for yourself.

The gunplay in the preview build I played is immensely satisfying, whether I'm toting a machine gun,



railgun, or shotgun. Enemies fly apart, bit by bit, and cake the room in gory splatters when I blast them, often turning a hallway from metallic blue to sticky red in seconds. The action is ludicrous, but does a good job tapping into the frenzy of bygone first-person shooters in a way similar to id Software's latest take on Doom. Strafe has a great deal of humor (like accessing secret doors by using decapitated heads to activate retinal scanners) as well as a nice, booming metal soundtrack that helps sell the danger and thrill of every moment.

I spent about three hours playing through Strafe and came away feeling excited about the final version, due out in March for PC and later in the year for PlayStation 4. Not only does the game nail the aesthetic of the wacky first-person shooters, but the procedural elements and the challenging gameplay make this much more than a cash grab banking on nostalgia. If you're remotely interested in any of the fast-paced, classic shooters or are curious to see how a FPS roguelike would play, then Strafe is a game to keep your eye on. » **Javy Gwaltney**

- » **Platform**
PS4 • PC
- » **Style**
1-Player Shooter
- » **Publisher**
Devolver Digital
- » **Developer**
Pixel Titans
- » **Release**
March 28 (PC),
2017 (PS4)



Gran Turismo Sport

A renewed outlook for an old series

- » **Platform**
PS4
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player Racing
(Online TBA)
- » **Publisher**
Sony Interactive
Entertainment
- » **Developer**
Polyphony Digital
- » **Release**
2017

Gran Turismo Sport's non-standard moniker may prompt questions as to whether this game is a radical departure for the series or a Gran Turismo Prologue-style introductory title light on content. It is neither. GT Sport may have a new eSports mode, but it also contains versions of the series' usual features, making developer Polyphony Digital's latest labor of love a familiar sight.

Gran Turismo Sport trails significantly in its number of cars and tracks compared to Gran Turismo 6. Right now GT Sport has around 140 cars at launch, and 15 tracks with almost 30 variations. These numbers may change closer to launch, but all of the cars are new models created from scratch for the title – no more standard and premium designations like in GT 6, and no more inflating the list with old cars imported from previous titles. Gran Turismo 6 players enjoyed rolling updates of free cars, tracks, and features, and it looks like we can expect the same for GT Sport. Creator Kazunori Yamauchi says he expects the game to have about 400 to 500 cars when all is said and done.

As always, Polyphony is dedicated to making this latest GT title look absolutely gorgeous. PS4 Pro owners can enjoy the game running at a 4K resolution at 60 frames per second, and no matter which PS4 you play it on, it has HDR support. This enables stunning lighting and the realistic representation of some cars' colors that previously weren't possible – including the iconic Ferrari red.

The game's sheer beauty can also be enjoyed using the Scapes photo mode, which greatly expands the



series' usual photo mode. Multiple cars from your garage can be placed in over 1,000 locations around the globe for strikingly realistic glamor shots, complete with custom positioning, lighting, and framing options. The new livery editor (finally!) also offers an artistic outlet, along with the ability to share designs with friends.

GT Sports' new eSports-focused mode that gives the game its name is designed to appeal to racers of various skill levels and is broken up into championships based around players' respective nations and car manufacturers. Real-world contests, broadcasts with live commentary, and even the chance to get a real FIA racing license through play in GT Sport are planned.

If online competition isn't your thing,

the series' customary gauntlet of offline events (numbering more than 100) appear throughout the more standard beginning school, circuit experience, mission challenge, and racing etiquette modes. Elsewhere, the Brand Central expands the normal car dealership through its showroom videos direct from the manufacturers, and the museum juxtaposes automotive history with world events via a timeline.

GT Sport sprinkles some new features in with the expected, but its biggest questions reside on the track. How it handles opponent A.I. and damage modeling are important areas where the series needs to keep up with the competition, and may be how it breaks out from its beautiful-but-some-what-sterile reputation. » **Matthew Kato**

The Scapes photo mode includes over 1,000 locations to place and position multiple cars and tinker with various photo effects. Each of the locations around the globe also offers multiple stunning backdrops





Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy

Crashed, warped, and remade

In developing a remake of the first three Crash Bandicoot games, developer Vicarious Visions wants to show how much they love the series. The tricky part in espousing that love is finding the right balance between staying true to the games the studio is remaking and demonstrating why they were fun in their heyday to a new generation of players. After hearing Vicarious discuss how they're approaching every aspect of their task, I'm confident the franchise is in good hands.

To make sure the remakes feel right, Vicarious scoured myriad sources for information, including notes from the game's development, interviews, and online videos breaking down the games' minutiae. Though Crash's hops and spins might look easy to replicate at first glance, the details matter, and Vicarious Visions wants to get them right.

Thankfully, this doesn't add up to blindly keeping things the same. In developing the N. Sane Trilogy, Vicarious Visions took inspiration not just from the games themselves, but from what original developer Naughty Dog learned during their time making the games in the '90s. The controls of the first Crash Bandicoot, for example, have been improved and brought in line with refinements made in the sequels. The original's save system was also unforgiving, and it (along with the sequels) now includes both manual and autosaves.

Another improvement completionists should look forward to: Finding collectibles will be a lot easier now. In the first Crash Bandicoot, dying would

reset progress made on any collectibles players had found, which meant anyone looking to score 100-percent completion had to finish a level unscathed. This is no longer the case in N. Sane Trilogy.

Of course, the remake's biggest draw is its updated visuals, but sprucing up the look of the Crash Bandicoot games means tinkering with other details, too. If Vicarious had simply taken the old models and given them new textures, the game "would feel a bit different," says director Dan Tanguay. Even if all the parts that make up Crash moved the same way, the updated look would make them feel stiff. This means tweaking animations and jump arcs so they feel just right.

Vicarious also had to design much of the game "backwards," according to Tanguay. In most action-oriented games, the jump arcs and mobility of a character come first, and levels are built around them. Because Vicarious is

sticking to the original layouts of every level, it had to modify Crash's jumps and spins to fit the layout and reskinned geometry of the levels instead.

Vicarious is also sprucing up other parts of the game. The control layouts for one-off sequences, such as flying a jetpack, are more intuitive, using the shoulder buttons in some cases. Minor characters like Tawna also have more of a voice now, and everyone is a bit more expressive. Bosses have more extensive intro sequences to make them stand out more, and Vicarious has hidden their own gags and Easter eggs throughout the game.

Despite the many changes, it's clear Vicarious loves Crash Bandicoot, and while the N. Sane Trilogy won't be a carbon copy, it should connect with a new generation of PlayStation fans when it releases sometime this year, assuming the studio can get that elusive "feel" just right. » **Suriel Vazquez**

» **Platform**
PS4

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Activision

» **Developer**
Vicarious Visions

» **Release**
2017



Minion Masters

Quick-strike strategy invades PCs



- » **Platform**
PC
- » **Style**
1 or 2-Player
Online Strategy
- » **Publisher**
BetaDwarf
- » **Developer**
BetaDwarf
- » **Release**
TBA

Minion Masters is another example of the emerging “micro-RTS” genre, real-time strategy experiences that hinge on small gameplay spaces, big units, and lane-based base assaults. Supercell’s Clash Royale set the stage on the mobile scene for games of this nature, drawing upon multiplayer online battle arenas, collectible card games, and traditional RTS as inspirations. Minion Masters does some interesting things with the formula to make it resonate on PC.

The first step is picking a master to play with. These characters are on a weekly rotation and can be purchased with game currency as well, so eventually your options will grow larger over time. Masters are designed to be balanced and unique. Some can only attack in melee range and focus on beefing up units, while others are long-range specialists, can alter the battlefield, or create random cards from the game’s entire card pool. Swapping out masters is easy and fast, and experimenting with different strategies that sync up with each character is a critical part of the game.

Players assemble 10-card decks, then hit the arena in a 1v1 skirmish that takes place in two lanes, with a bridge in the middle of each lane. Capturing and holding bridges for as long as possible is an important strategy; you



Minions and spells fill the battlefield with chaos

can’t just turtle in your own territory and expect to win. Bridges provide an experience trickle that adds a new twist to the formula, as over the course of the game you level up and unlock powerful special abilities unique to your master that can shift the tide of battle. Abilities range from summoning massive additional minions, tombstones that can raise fallen troops, placing deadly fire on both bridges, or even letting your master take the field and lay down some destruction alongside your troops. With the bridge back-and-forth constantly shifting while you try to protect your master and lay siege to the opponent, it makes for a frenetic battle that takes only a few minutes to play.

Crafting new cards, obtaining new

masters, and even picking up cosmetic battlefields to customize your side of the arena create a satisfying loop as you work your way up the season ladder. For those that would rather play against a computer, PVE challenges can also be worked into your activities, but the real focus is on PVP.

Minion Masters will launch as a free-to-play title, but is currently available for purchase in Early Access on Steam (which gives you some paid currency to unlock masters and cards, etc). With an inevitable stream of copycats looking to imitate the success of Clash Royale on the way, Minion Masters stands out as a potential winner that’s already changing the formula up in meaningful ways. » **Daniel Tack**

Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows Of Valentia

The black sheep of the family remastered



Fire Emblem has come a long way since Awakening, which was originally intended to be the series' swan song. Five years later, it's clear that Fire Emblem's combination of hardcore tactical battles, fantasy storytelling, and relationship simulation has inspired a growing audience. A recent Fire Emblem-focused Nintendo Direct proved the publisher is going all in on the series, revealing four new titles to be released between February 2 and the end of 2018.

The earliest of those games, besides the mobile title coming out this month, is Fire Emblem Echoes: Shadows of

Valentia. Echoes is actually a remake of Fire Emblem: Gaiden; considered by many to be the black sheep of the Fire Emblem series, it deviates from the series' trademarks with an open-world map, a relatively small cast of characters, and the units using their hit points to cast magic. The game also never came to America. According to Nintendo, Echoes is intended to be a faithful remake, which means that the relationship simulation aspects of modern Fire Emblem games might not be making a return. Perhaps the biggest adjustment for modern Fire Emblem players

will be Echoes' focus on dungeon-crawling gameplay, channeling something more in line with JRPGs than the series' trademark focus on intense tactical strategy battles, though the modern entries' turn-based battles (and the zoom to 3D character models fighting those battles) are still present.

We'll have to wait until May to find out just how expansive this remake is, but it's interesting to see Nintendo expanding the series outside of the familiar, perhaps a sign of confidence in just how passionate Fire Emblem's growing fanbase is.

» **Javy Gwaltney**

» **Platform**
3DS

» **Style**
1-Player Strategy/
Role-Playing

» **Publisher**
Nintendo

» **Developer**
Intelligent Systems

» **Release**
May 19



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Student work by: John Rogeles & George Stoll





Conan Exiles

The survival fantasy

» **Platform**
Xbox One • PC

» **Style**
Online
Multiplayer Action

» **Publisher**
Funcom

» **Developer**
Funcom

» **Release**
TBA

In my first life, Conan cut me down from the cross where I was sentenced to die, and left me to fend for myself on the open desert. I wandered naked and lost through the sands, scrounging a few branches and stones before succumbing to thirst. In my second life, I hiked to a distant green oasis, where I killed a shell-backed creature for its hide. But larger scavenging monsters found me and my kill, and the makeshift pick I procured for defense broke just before I did. In my third life, I found a winding river to slake my thirst, but the few insects I scavenged weren't enough to prevent starvation. By my fourth life, I gathered enough supplies to build my first

campfire, only to have a crocodile sneak from the nearby water and snap its jaws down as I contemplated my meager inventory. A fifth life finally put me in contact with an encampment of fellow humans; they promptly ganged up and murdered me.

Conan Exiles is a survival game, positioned as a strange crossbreed between the popular and brutal entries in the genre from recent years and the fantasy aesthetic of the original sword-and-sorcery setting. The world of the Hyborian Age is a good fit for the concept, dominated by barbaric warriors and unyielding environments, and my hours exploring impressed me with the attempt to hew close to the roots of that universe.

Upon starting Exiles, players have a plethora of choices to guide their play style. Servers can be PvP or PvE, encourage hardcore play or role-playing, and even offer the opportunity to set up your own game with custom options for either single-player or cooperative experiences, with any number of difficulty and quality-of-life sliders to tweak the experience. You also build your own warrior, tweaking gender, religion, head features, and more, but your hero is always fit and muscle-bound.

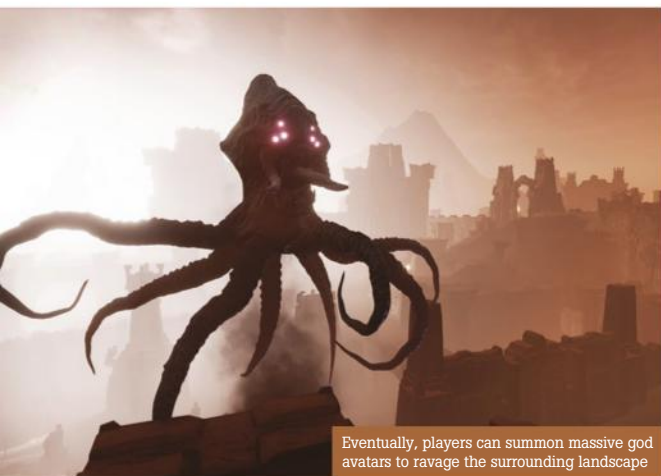
Funcom is making no compromises on the adult-oriented elements of the setting. Servers support optional partial and full nudity. In-game battles are gruesome, including ample blood and

limb decapitation. Captured NPCs can be enslaved and forced into manual labor along the wheel of pain. And enemy bodies can be transported back to your god's altar, where their hearts are torn out and sacrificed. The game's graphic nature and savage morality won't be for everyone.

Gameplay is a mix of resource gathering, crafting, combat, and exploration, and my time with Exiles barely scratched the surface of the many options. The game promises the possibility of building entire cities in the wasteland, as well as the option to attack and decimate the cities of your enemies. While I have yet to see it in-game, Funcom even claims the most faithful players can summon vast avatars of their chosen god to fight in the world.

As it enters early access, Conan Exiles has made some big promises, and I'm heartened by Funcom's ambition. But no one should have any illusions about the rough state of the current purchasable game; technical problems abound, combat feels clumsy, and the early game is a slog. It's too early to pass judgment, but Funcom has a long way to go. For those who've hungered for a more fantastical take on the survival genre, it's worth keeping an eye on whether the developer can find what is best in Conan's world, and hammer that vision into a worthy homage to the fiction.

» **Matt Miller**



Eventually, players can summon massive god avatars to ravage the surrounding landscape



Smite Rivals

Smite goes mobile with a Clash clone

With the characters and style of the MOBA Smite, Smite Rivals is yet another entry to the micro real-time strategy genre, featuring fast-paced battles, streamlined resource acquisition, and card-based units. With the universe and gods of Smite already crafted, Hi-Rez Studios merely has to translate the MOBA to mobile minute-to-minute battles.

Smite Rivals drops the traditional two-lane system in favor of something closer to the core game it draws from,

a three-lane field loaded with towers and defenses that must be overcome. Players have access to many of the familiar faces from Smite, such as Thor, Fenrir, and other ancient gods and goddesses ripped from history. Alongside the available big names, eight-card decks full of minions, structures, and spells play a role in marching across the field to destroy the opposing base.

While the micro-RTS genre is a proven winner on mobile, players can also play Smite Rivals on PC. Accounts

are cross-platform, making it easy to enjoy a few games at home and then take the battle on the go for when you're out and about.

We're sure to see plenty of games in 2017 attempt to replicate the success of Clash Royale, and Smite Rivals is well-positioned to make a play as a recognizable brand with an audience to tap into. We're looking forward to seeing if this micro-mashup can carve a place for itself on mobile platforms and PC. » **Daniel Tack**

» **Platform**
PC • iOS • Android

» **Style**
1 or 2-Player
Online Strategy

» **Publisher**
Hi-Rez Studios

» **Developer**
Hi-Rez Studios

» **Release**
2017



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gameinformer
GAME OF THE MONTH
90 Yakuza 0

The Yakuza series has put its own unique spin on open-world games for years, but Yakuza 0 is a breakthrough release for fans and newcomers. Engaging characters, an intricate storyline, and a staggering amount of diversions and side content are just some of the reasons why it's one of 2017's must-play releases.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

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

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
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Resident Evil 7 Biohazard

A familiar taste of blood

8.5



Style 1-Player Action Publisher Capcom Developer Capcom Release January 24 Rating M

PS4 • Xbox One
PC • PSVR

» Concept

Begins as a radical reinvention for the series with first-person exploration and supernatural themes, but ends up being the same Resident Evil we know and love

» Graphics

Beautifully disturbing. Capcom isn't afraid to show off its picturesque environments and intricately detailed characters

» Sound

A lack of sound is used brilliantly to up the tension. Any creak or thud puts you on alert. Ethan doesn't say much, but his voice work (and the collective cast's) is solid

» Playability

An excellent mixture of exploration puzzles and gunplay

» Entertainment

This game has fascinating secrets to tell, and is continually fun to play

» Replay Value

Moderate

Horror Enhanced By VR

The PlayStation 4 version is equipped with PlayStation VR functionality, allowing players to experience the same game from a more intimate perspective. As much as I enjoyed seeing this world up close and personal, the VR integration is riddled with issues. Unless you play the game from a standing position to manually turn your body, your best option while sitting is to use set angles for turning – meaning your character turns 30 degrees each time the analog stick is tapped. It's a clunky way of moving through the world, but it likely won't make you as sick as the nauseating smooth movement.

Few opening acts scream reinvention more than Resident Evil 7's. Instead of pumping lead into zombies and creatures born of man-made viruses, the player is isolated and hunted by a deadly apparition. The series has always relied on scientific explanation for its grotesqueries, but with objects moving on their own and ghostly beings flashing in and out of reality, the introductory moments are clearly supernatural – or that's what Capcom wants you to believe. The first taste of this adventure doesn't embody Resident Evil; it feels like a new experience designed to feed off of player senses and fears in a different way. The atmosphere is tense, unsettling, overly gory, and makes for a hell of a beginning to a game, especially when you see how it all comes together.

The scares are viewed through the eyes of Ethan Winters, a middle-aged everyman summoned to a run-down estate in Dulvey, Louisiana to search for his missing wife, Mia. The invitation comes in the form of a VHS tape showing Mia, who has been missing for three years, alive but distressed. The game roars out of the gates with a big emotional hook, as well as a high level of ambiguity as to what's happening in Dulvey.

The narrative unravels quickly, however. Ethan fades into the background, doing little to establish a connection to his world. His personality is as transparent as the specters he encounters, and he somehow remains mostly silent in the face of huge, life-altering events. Capcom may have wanted the player to react to these events instead of Ethan, but he's involved enough in the story that it feels like big chunks of dialogue and exposition are missing, especially when he verbally reacts to inconsequential things like a wall covered in millipedes, but doesn't say anything when he or people around him are in danger. The story ends up being more voyeuristic and about the people of the estate than your protagonist's personal stake in it.

Much like any Resident Evil game, the adventure isn't just contained to one location, but the bulk of exploration unfolds in the estate, which belongs to the Baker family, a rowdy mish-mash of personalities that range from a hillbilly father and verbally abusive mother to a comatose grandmother and a son who is as deranged as The Joker. The Bakers take center stage, and are equally important to the story



as they are to re-establishing Resident Evil's traditional conventions and lore. None of these characters will likely be remembered as Resident Evil greats, but they are interesting in their own disturbing ways.

The opening act, while powerful and different, is a smokescreen of sorts that gives way to an experience that draws heavily from the original PlayStation 1 Resident Evil titles. Navigating the estate begins with jump scares, but eventually gives way to one locked door after another. The act of opening doors may not sound like much fun, but the exploration and gameplay that leads to the securing of items is rarely mundane or repetitive. I had fun with most environmental navigation, even if some of it is ludicrous in design.

Part of the fun of the house is getting to know the Bakers from their possessions and hobbies. The weirdest bit of fiction is Capcom insisting the player should know the Bakers love football, not just from references in the house, but by turning bobblehead football players into one of the game's collectibles. It's always jarring to see a vibrant, purple bobblehead toy sitting in a room full of gore.

Ghostly events occur periodically in the second act, which is the bulk of the game, but the focus is more on exploration and combat. I won't spoil exactly what you are doing, but a steady hand with a pistol is a necessity for headshots, as is the wherewithal to know when to bring out more power-

ful firearms like a shotgun or grenade launcher. The enemies are nicely varied, as are the bosses, which require different strategies and are usually spectacular in appearance. Don't expect combat every step of the way; you fire fewer shots in this game than any other Resident Evil. That shouldn't be taken as a complaint, however. The gunplay is nicely polished and fits well into the context of the world.

Capcom fills any lulls in the action with interesting gameplay deviations and scenario designs, such as stealth sequences where you have to avoid a Baker, or enemies populating previously explored areas. You can tell a lot of thought went into balancing this adventure, both to be challenging and fair.

Any concerns I had of Capcom deviating too far from Resident Evil's universe were wiped out by the time the credits rolled. I love how the ghost story is integrated into the series' lore. Yes, this game eventually goes deep with its scientific explanations. It's a slow unveiling of information that sets up the series nicely for future installments.

Capcom has successfully reinvented Resident Evil in the past, the most notable deviation being the brilliant Resident Evil 4. This new vision doesn't reach the same heights of spectacle and gameplay innovation as that breakthrough release, but is a welcome addition to the series (both in terms of gameplay and lore), and a nice entry point for newcomers. » **Andrew Reiner**

Tales Of Berseria

The power of revenge

Style 1 to 4-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Bandai Namco Entertainment **Developer** Bandai Namco Studios **Release** January 24 **Rating** T

7.5

Tales of Berseria is the darkest Tales game, but it's also the most human. It tackles complex themes in relatable ways, like betrayal, revenge, and how pain brings out the worst in us. This makes it shine, and is a step in a right direction. However, Berseria still has its missteps when it comes to pacing and dungeon design. Even so, I liked the shift to a more somber tale that gave me plenty to think about during – and even after – the journey.

Berseria focuses on Velvet, a woman who has seen her share of tragedy. One devastating event sends her over the edge, beginning a deadly quest for revenge. The opening is powerful and grim, illustrating why Velvet turned into the hardened person that she is. She's not your typical Tales protagonist full of good deeds; she just wants vengeance, and most of the time she's downright cruel and cold in the process. I found this refreshing, because even when Velvet is at her worst, I still felt for her due to how well the game set up her backstory. Berseria is a lot of twists that I won't spoil, but Velvet meets other misfits and they uncover corruption as their world is overrun by demons.

While a revenge tale isn't new ground for storytelling, it still works for building up to key moments and making them relatable. Berseria is at its best when it shows the reasoning behind your allies' actions and developing them in interesting ways. For instance, watching one character who didn't have free will slowly turn into his own person is a highlight. You have a lot scenes and dialogue to shift through, and it's a

slow burn, but it's worth it for how it all comes together.

When you're not bonding with your party, you're out on the battlefield. The action-based battle system has a lot of depth, and new wrinkles continue to be introduced well into the journey. Combat is all about exploiting enemy weaknesses and chaining combos. Everything revolves around a soul gauge, which depletes as you attack. I enjoyed strategizing around this because it forced me to make the most out of my every move. If your soul gauge is low, your attacks do less damage, are more easily defended, and leave you open to counterattacks. Spamming the attack button is not in your best interest. You can restore the gauge by idling, or you can steal souls from enemies to refill it by stunning them, inflicting status effects, or defeating them, but beware your enemies can do the same.

This doesn't even factor in special attacks like powerful mystic artes or break souls, which have the power to extend combos and their power even when your gauge is running low. The battle system is all about making the most out of your soul gauge, and rewards you for doing so in how fast you can annihilate foes and in your loot drops.

Dungeons are still a struggle, filled with boring busywork. You flip a lot of switches, break obstacles, and backtrack constantly. The environments themselves leave much to be desired, and sometimes you revisit dungeons and areas, which gets tiresome. The backtracking got on my nerves the

most. You eventually get a hoverboard to quickly traverse areas, but this makes it harder to pick up items vital for crafting. In addition, you can purchase items to fast travel, but they only allow you go to certain points, which doesn't fix the problem.

About halfway through the game, you also get your own headquarters. At first, this seems cool, but Berseria doesn't do many exciting things with it. After every mission, you come back and chat with your party to plan your next move, but it settles into a boring rhythm quickly. The headquarters' layout is awful, making it inconvenient, and you're often required to go from one end to the other. You also have to battle through this area repeatedly.

As for bonus content, you have your own pirate ship, but you don't ever get to sail it yourself; you send your crew on expeditions to collect extra goodies for you like ingredients for cooking. The game also has its share of minigames and things to collect. I most enjoyed the bounty hunts and the side quests involving characters, such as one trying to get her comedy show off the ground.

Tales of Berseria does some interesting things, and is the most captivating Tales storyline in some time. I like the majority of its ideas, but the execution often feels half-realized. It still feels like the franchise isn't making big enough leaps, and is just content to bring its fans more of the same. By now, you probably know if you're okay with that. Nothing ever made me stop playing, but the flaws are impossible to ignore.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

PS4 • PC

» **Concept**

Band together with unlikely heroes to stop a demon blight from consuming humanity, all while confronting corrupt leaders

» **Graphics**

The animated cutscenes are well done, but the rest of the graphics leave much to be desired, especially the dungeons

» **Sound**

Voice actors fit their roles well, but the soundtrack is hit-or-miss

» **Playability**

The fast-paced battle system has a lot of depth, requiring time and patience to learn, but the controls are more intuitive than past entries

» **Entertainment**

Berseria has some flaws and archaic design, but it's one of the most interesting Tales games I've played

» **Replay Value**

Moderate



Yakuza 0

Everlasting mob stopper

9.25



Style 1 or 2-Player Action Publisher Sega Developer Sega Release January 24 Rating M

PS4

» Concept

Help two different heroes navigate Japan's criminal underworld while participating in a staggering amount of side content in this prequel to the long-running series

» Graphics

The cities and most characters look good overall, though occasionally you see a face or model that looks like a last-gen refugee

» Sound

Ambient noise helps build the illusion of being part of a bustling world. The Japanese voice acting is appropriately melodramatic, and the catchy score keeps pace

» Playability

Multiple fighting styles have their own satisfying quirks to learn. Minigames cover a wide variety of genres, but controls are solid whether you're managing a hostess bar or playing a skill-crane game

» Entertainment

Don't be intimidated by the series' long history – this is an accessible starting point that's likely to convert you into being a full-fledged fan

» Replay Value

High

Who would have thought an empty lot would cause so much drama? The unused patch of land is the only thing standing in the way of a massive development project in Tokyo, attracting the attention of Japan's criminal underworld and forever changing the fates of two men. The property in question may be small, but *Yakuza 0* is a massive open-world game that provided me with some of the most fun I've had in years.

Yakuza 0 is a game for fans, but also a good starting-off point for players like me, who may have been curious about the franchise but haven't ever gotten into it for whatever reason. It's a prequel set in 1988 starring series' fixtures Kazuma Kiryu and Goro Majima, showing off their formative years in fictionalized versions of Tokyo and Osaka. Despite moments of clear fan-service, you don't need to have played through previous games to fully enjoy *Yakuza 0*. I was worried that it would be like jumping into *The Sopranos* mid-season, but thankfully that wasn't an issue.

You take control of both characters throughout the campaign, with the perspective shifting every few chapters. I liked experiencing events from both sides, seeing Kiryu navigate around the Tojo crime syndicate while retaining a sense of personal honor, and trying to figure out how many more indignities Majima will suffer before inevitably snapping. There aren't any world-saving stakes here – you're watching thugs in garish suits squabble over piles of cash – but the strong performances made me look forward to the next well-produced cutscene and story turn. It's worth noting that the acting is all in Japanese, so be prepared to read subtitles.



You can defeat your enemies with your fists, feet, or any number of weapons

Unlike most of its open-world contemporaries, you don't drive in *Yakuza 0*. Instead, you roam the streets of Tokyo and Osaka on foot. The campaign plays things appropriately straight, but the side activities are where the tone gets endearingly loopy. I enjoyed exploring the neighborhoods, tracking down secrets and stumbling across the often-bizarre side missions; I impersonated a TV producer, tracked down a pants-stealing bully, and helped a drug company test experimental products. Thanks to the scale, you don't get the sense that you're seeing a lot of copy-and-paste buildings in the world, and an interactive restaurant, shop, or minigame waits on nearly every block.

Your strolls are interrupted by frequent random battles, which highlight the arcade beat-'em-up action. Both characters have several different fighting styles that can be swapped on the fly, and finding what works best for you is a big part of the challenge. Part of it is dependent on your surroundings. Are any signs or other objects handy? You could use a style that lets you pick them up and swing them at your foes. Are your opponents quick? Using an equally fast form is a good idea. My favorite was Majima's slugger style, which incorporates a baseball bat and some brutal combos that would be at home in *Mortal Kombat*. You can get by with button-mashing for a while, but you'll have to become adept if you hope to make it through the final stage or the optional arena combat.

The fighting is a big part of the game, and it's another place where *Yakuza's* focus on depth is evident. You can pour your cash into each style's skill tree, which unlocks new moves and abilities. I was annoyed by how my bat would sometimes careen off walls – a

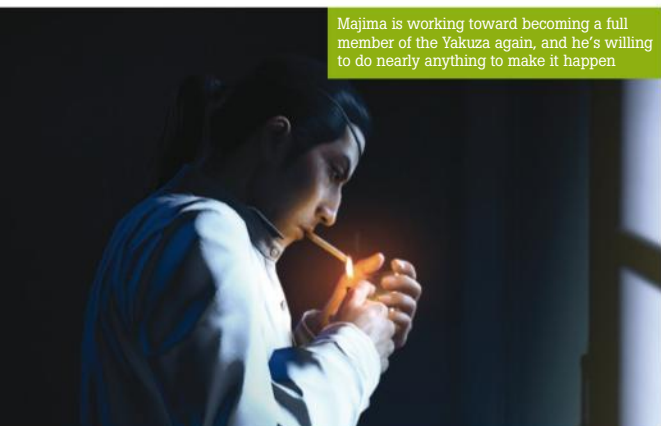
particular problem in alley battles – and how overpowered enemy gunmen were. Then I realized I could unlock abilities that addressed those concerns directly. The whole game is filled with abilities and upgrades that let you tweak the experience. If you grow tired of fighting, you can unlock ways to avoid encounters or diffuse them if you can't walk around your aggressors. I got a kick out of the battles, even though I punched many of the same faces repeatedly, and used the cash I got from the beatdowns to further hone my skills.

I can't recall the last time a game surprised me as much as *Yakuza 0*. Even after several dozen hours, I'd turn a corner and stumble on a new minigame or discover a one-off game mechanic, like an homage to *Virtua Cop*. Not only are these diversions fun, but they also contain unexpected depth. A slot-car racing game looks simple to a fault at first, but it comes complete with a bounty of upgrades and several side missions of its own. Chance encounters with NPCs can unlock assistants that help in your money-making ventures. And I spent hours playing darts and pool, even after discovering all of their associated rewards, because I enjoyed them so much. Participating in many of these events also earns you points to further tweak the game, such as increasing the amount of cash enemies drop or recruiting employees at your hostess bar.

Yakuza 0 tries a ridiculous amount of things, and I'll be damned if it doesn't almost always succeed in its own weird way. The *Yakuza* series has established a cult following in the West, but it hasn't managed to break through to the mainstream. If there's any justice in this world, that's about to change.

» Jeff Cork

Majima is working toward becoming a full member of the Yakuza again, and he's willing to do nearly anything to make it happen



Gravity Rush 2

Stuck in the clouds

Style 1-Player Action **Publisher** Sony Interactive Entertainment **Developer** Japan Studio, Project Siren **Release** January 20 **Rating** T

7.5

PS4

» **Concept**

Take Kat's gravity-defying powers and explore larger, more diverse environments

» **Graphics**

The locales are dense, gorgeous, and allude to real-world locations like São Paulo, London, and upstate New York

» **Sound**

Kohei Tanaka's score captures the feeling of soaring around each city beautifully, using a mix of orchestral instruments, drums, and saxophone

» **Playability**

Most of Kat's powers control well enough, but the camera can have issues keeping up with the speed of combat

» **Entertainment**

Wandering around Gravity Rush 2's enormous cities is a lot of fun, but the mission design feels limiting and dated

» **Replay Value**

Moderately low

The Gravity Rush series' defining idea has a lot of potential. As Kat, a gravity shifter with a mysterious past, you can lift off the ground and fly (fall, technically) across massive floating cities. Though you take on several main and side missions (as in other open-world games), my favorite part of Gravity Rush 2 is falling around and collecting gems that let me upgrade my powers, since it lets me explore the lovingly detailed spaces at my leisure. It's a bittersweet joy, because while Gravity Rush 2 gives you lots of different ways to fall and fight your way through various activities, the mission design hinders the potential of its core concept as often as it embraces it.

The original Gravity Rush had a spectacular freedom of movement, and the sequel builds on that foundation by rounding out a few rough edges and offering larger, more diverse spaces. Estranged from her makeshift home, Kat contends with an entirely new set of people and floating cities, and both make the world of Gravity Rush feel lively (though you need to have played the first game to understand the later parts of the story). The short dialogue sequences do a great job of characterizing Lisa (who takes Kat in) and her band of miners. Similarly, the Jirga Para Lhao marketplace's people, stores, and flying cars make it feel lived in. Visually, these environments are a joy to zip around, and a few missions take you to more abstract, surreal, and colorful locales that seem pulled from the covers of math textbooks.

The freedom of traversal also adapts well to combat, where Kat can use airborne kicks, slide around at high speed, and use a stasis field to lob objects (and people) at her targets. Using the stasis ability as a weapon is more viable than it was in the first game, thanks to a much-needed and generous auto-aiming cursor. Not having to worry about taking precise aim makes

combat less of a hassle, but I still wish I could properly lock the camera onto enemies, since the cursor still requires you to center the camera on them, and fast enemies consistently move out of view.

Gravity Rush 2 adds the ability to swap "styles" about halfway through the main story. The Lunar style makes you lighter and allows you to better fight nimble enemies, while the Jupiter style gives your kicks an oomph that breaks through armor and makes clearing out crowds easier. An encounter may start off with a swarm of flying enemies best taken out in Lunar style, then switch to a group of smaller, grounded foes that make a charged-up Jupiter-style kick ideal. These powers make combat more varied but feel underutilized, since they're introduced about halfway into the game.

The big challenge for the Gravity Rush series has been fitting structured objectives into all the falling and wondrous locales. Gravity Rush 2 gives you plenty to do, but many of the story and side missions make the experience feel dated. Escort, eavesdropping, and stealth missions abound, and they often have you sauntering around on foot instead of flying high, which feels like a waste of your abilities. You also have a number of missions where you need to find a small object or person within a large area by using a photo as reference, as well as missions where you have to talk to people to have them point you in the right direction, which feel arbitrary and frustrating.

These missions are far too frequent and feel like padding. The justifications offered for repeating certain objectives often point out how ludicrous these situations are, which makes them feel even more frustrating. One mission had me using my gravity stasis ability to pick up a dog that had run away from its owner, but never explained why it was only affected by the stasis field at

a particular distance – something the story's plot itself points out. You can read these as attempts at humor, but rather than inspiring laughs, they usually only highlight how tedious these objectives can be.

Some of the other side content fares better, offering good reasons to trek back and forth across each city. Along with challenge missions that make better use of your powers in timed trials, you can explore the depths of otherworldly ore deposits and fight mini-bosses to get rare talismans, which you can equip to offer new bonuses like faster sliding or filling up the meter that governs your gravity powers whenever you hit an enemy. Most of the missions I undertook had me fighting the same enemy, but having to figure out how to use different environments to my advantage made these outings rewarding enough to do a few times.

You can also engage with some online features, like taking on mission challenges from other players or using photographs other players take to find treasures, then leaving your own photo for someone else to use. The photo challenges are among my favorite parts of the game, since they make good use of the large areas and give the game more personality. They don't offer too many gems and offline players won't lose out on key moments or progress, but seeing how other players found a particular chest is a fun bonus for those playing online.

But even with all the new abilities and mission types, too much of Gravity Rush 2 is dedicated to tasks that don't make the best use of your ability to control gravity. Falling around the various locales is a lot of fun, but that doesn't assuage the nagging feeling that with better missions and less frustrating side content, this series could go from a fleeting joy to something truly great. » **Suriel Vazquez**

PLAYSTATION 4		
Abzû	8	Sep-16
Alone with You	7	Oct-16
Batman: The Telltale Series – Episode Two: Children of Arkham	9	Nov-16
Battlefield 1	9.25	Dec-16
Bound	7.75	Oct-16
Brutal	7	Oct-16
Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare	9	Dec-16
Dangerous Golf	8	Aug-16
Destiny: Rise of Iron	8.5	Nov-16
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided	7	Oct-16
Dishonored 2	9.25	Jan-17
Dragon Ball Xenoverse 2	7	Jan-17
Dragon Quest Builders	8	Nov-16
F1 2016	8	Oct-16
FIFA 17	8.75	Nov-16
Final Fantasy XV	8.5	Feb-17
Furi	6	Sep-16
Ghostbusters	4	Sep-16
Grand Kingdom	8	Sep-16

I am Setsuna	7.5	Sep-16
Infinite Air	5.5	Jan-17
Killing Floor 2	7.75	Feb-17
King of Fighters XIV, The King's Quest: Chapter 4 – Snow Place Like Home	7.25	Oct-16
King's Quest: Chapter 5 – The Good Knight	6.5	Dec-16
Kingdom Hearts 2.8	8	Jan-17
Final Chapter Prologue	8.5	Feb-17
Last Guardian, The Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel II, The	8	Nov-16
Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens	8.5	Sep-16
Let it Die	7.75	Feb-17
Madden NFL 17	8.5	Oct-16
Mafia III	6.75	Dec-16
Minecraft: Story Mode – Episode 7: Access Denied	8	Oct-16
NASCAR Heat Evolution	7	Nov-16
NBA 2K17	9.5	Nov-16

NHL 17	7.25	Nov-16
No Man's Sky	7.5	Oct-16
Overcooked	8.25	Nov-16
Pac-Man Championship Edition 2	9.25	Nov-16
Pro Evolution Soccer 2017	9.25	Nov-16
Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter	6.75	Jan-17
Skylanders Imaginators	7	Dec-16
Song of the Deep	7	Sep-16
Steep	8.5	Feb-17
Thumper	5.75	Dec-16
Titanfall 2	9.5	Dec-16
Umbrella Corps	5	Sep-16
Virginia	9.25	Nov-16
Walking Dead: A New Frontier – Ties That Bind, The	8	Feb-17
Watch Dogs 2	7.75	Jan-17
Wheels of Aurelia	7	Dec-16
World of Final Fantasy	8.25	Nov-16
VWWE 2K17	5.75	Dec-16

XBOX ONE	
Battlefield 1	9.25 Dec-16
Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare	9 Dec-16
Dangerous Golf	8 Aug-16
Dead Rising 4	8.75 Feb-17
Destiny: Rise of Iron	8.5 Nov-16
Dishonored 2	9.25 Jan-17
Dragon Ball Xenoverse 2	7 Jan-17
FIFA 17	8.75 Nov-16
Final Fantasy XV	8.5 Feb-17
Gears of War 4	9.25 Dec-16
Ghostbusters	4 Sep-16
Infinite Air	5.5 Jan-17
Inside	9.75 Aug-16
King's Quest: Chapter 4 – Snow Place Like Home	6.5 Dec-16
King's Quest: Chapter 5 – The Good Knight	8 Jan-17
Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens	8.5 Sep-16
Mafia III	6.75 Dec-16



7.75 | Shantae: Half-Genie Hero

Platform PS4, Xbox One, Wii U, Vita, PC Release December 20 Rating T

Shantae's reliance on revisiting levels holds Half-Genie Hero back, but the excellent platforming, myriad transformation abilities, and characters elevate it to an experience worth pursuing. The world of Sequin Land is a fun place to visit and I enjoyed my time there, even if I was forced to keep seeing the same sights.

– Kyle Hilliard

5.5 | Rise & Shine

Platform Xbox One, PC Release January 13 Rating M

The parade of references to popular video games is initially amusing, and the charming visual style and twist on classic run-and-gun action draws players in. With an unconventional mix of shooting, bullet-dodging, and puzzle-solving, the opening stages demonstrate plenty of potential – but the more you progress, the more you see that potential squandered.

– Joe Juba



6 | Double Dragon IV

Platform PS4, PC Release January 29 (PS4) January 30 (PC) Rating T

If you're looking for a title drenched in nostalgia – right down to the retro graphics and mind-numbing platforming challenges – this is one you don't want to miss. But recalling your memories of Double Dragons long past may be more enjoyable than this new experience. – Daniel Tack



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Minecraft: Story Mode – Episode 7: Access Denied	8	Oct-16
NHL 17	7.25	Nov-16
Pac-Man Championship Edition 2	9.25	Nov-16
Pro Evolution Soccer 2017	9.25	Nov-16
ReCore	5.5	Nov-16
Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter	6.75	Jan-17
Skylanders Imaginators	7	Dec-16
Song of the Deep	7	Sep-16
Steep	8.5	Feb-17
Titanfall 2	9.5	Dec-16
Turing Test, The	8.5	Nov-16
Virginia	9.25	Nov-16
Walking Dead: A New Frontier – Ties That Bind, The	8	Feb-17
Watch Dogs 2	7.75	Jan-17
Wheels of Aurelia	7	Dec-16
WWE 2K17	5.75	Dec-16

Wii U		
Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens	8.5	Sep-16
Paper Mario: Color Splash	8.25	Dec-16
Skylanders Imaginators	7	Dec-16
Tokyo Mirage Sessions #FE	8.25	Aug-16

PC		
1979 Revolution: Black Friday	8	Aug-16
AbzÜ	8	Sep-16
Batman: The Telltale Series – Episode Two: Children of Arkham	9	Nov-16
Battlefield 1	9.25	Dec-16
Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare	9	Dec-16
Civilization VI	9.5	Dec-16
Dangerous Golf	8	Aug-16
Dead by Daylight	8.25	Sep-16
Dead Rising 4	8.75	Feb-17
Deus Ex: Mankind Divided	7	Oct-16
Dishonored 2	9.25	Jan-17
Dragon Ball Xenoverse 2	7	Jan-17
F1 2016	8	Oct-16
Forza Horizon 3	9.25	Nov-16
Furi	6	Sep-16

Gears of War 4	9.25	Dec-16
Ghostbusters	4	Sep-16
Headlander	7.5	Sep-16
House of the Dying Sun	7.5	Jan-17
I am Setsuna	7.5	Sep-16
Infinite Air	5.5	Jan-17
Inside	9.75	Aug-16
Killing Floor 2	7.75	Feb-17
King's Quest: Chapter 4 – Snow Place Like Home	6.5	Dec-16
King's Quest: Chapter 5 – The Good Knight	8	Jan-17
Mafia III	6.75	Dec-16
Master of Orion	8.25	Oct-16
Minecraft: Story Mode – Episode 7: Access Denied	8	Oct-16
NASCAR Heat Evolution	7	Nov-16
NBA 2K17	9.5	Nov-16
No Man's Sky	7.5	Oct-16
Obduction	7.25	Nov-16
Orwell	6	Feb-17
Overcooked	8.25	Nov-16
Owlboy	9	Jan-17
Pac-Man Championship Edition 2	9.25	Nov-16
Planet Coaster	8.25	Feb-17
Pro Evolution Soccer 2017	9.25	Nov-16
Quadrilateral Cowboy	9.5	Oct-16
ReCore	5.5	Nov-16
Shadow Warrior 2	6.75	Jan-17
Sherlock Holmes: The Devil's Daughter	6.75	Jan-17
Song of the Deep	7	Sep-16
Starbound	8.5	Oct-16
Steep	8.5	Feb-17
This is the Police	5	Oct-16
Titanfall 2	9.5	Dec-16
Turning Test, The	8.5	Nov-16
Tyranny	8.25	Jan-17
Umbrella Corps	5	Sep-16
VA-11 HALL-A	8	Sep-16
Virginia	9.25	Nov-16
Walking Dead: A New Frontier – Ties That Bind, The	8	Feb-17
Watch Dogs 2	7.75	Jan-17
Wheels of Aurelia	7	Dec-16
WWE 2K17	5.75	Dec-16

Zero Time Dilemma	8.75	Aug-16
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3DS		
Boxboy	8	Sep-16
Dragon Ball Fusions	6.75	Feb-17
Mario Party Star Rush	6.5	Jan-17
Metroid Prime: Federation Force	7	Oct-16
Monster Hunter Generations	8.75	Sep-16
Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Spirit of Justice	8.5	Nov-16
Pokémon Sun & Moon	8.5	Jan-17
Rhythm Heaven Megamix	8.5	Sep-16
Shin Megami Tensei IV: Apocalypse	8.5	Nov-16
Sonic Boom: Fire & Ice	7	Nov-16
Super Mario Maker	7.75	Feb-17
Yo-kai Watch 2	7	Dec-16
Zero Time Dilemma	8.75	Aug-16

VITA		
Alone with You	7	Oct-16
Dragon Quest Builders	8	Nov-16
Grand Kingdom	8	Sep-16
Legend of Heroes: Trails of Cold Steel II, The	8	Nov-16
World of Final Fantasy	8.25	Nov-16
Zero Time Dilemma	8.75	Aug-16

iOS		
Batman: Arkham VR	7.5	Dec-16
Deus Ex GO	7.75	Oct-16
Here They Lie	8	Dec-16
Minecraft: Story Mode – Episode 7: Access Denied	8	Oct-16

PLAYSTATION VR		
RIGS: Mechanized Combat League	7.25	Dec-16
Robinson: The Journey	5	Jan-17
Super Mario Run	7	Feb-17
Thumper	5.75	Dec-16
Until Dawn: Rush of Blood	7	Dec-16
Walking Dead: A New Frontier – Ties That Bind, The	8	Feb-17
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Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link

On its 30th anniversary, we look back on the only Zelda game that isn't legendary



by Kyle Hilliard

The direct sequel to 1986's groundbreaking Legend of Zelda is a divisive entry in the series. *Zelda II: The Adventure of Link* is the only core Zelda game without the words, "The Legend of..." placed before the title, and to this day it still marks the hardest turn from established Zelda mechanics the series has ever seen, even 30 years after its release. But its position as an oddball entry doesn't mean it was devoid of value. It also marked a number of firsts for the Zelda series that went on to become recurring staples, introducing the concept of the magic meter, featuring the first battle against a dark version of Link, expanding the role of NPCs, and offering a story conceit for why Link is always saving a princess named Zelda.

Zelda From A New Angle

Zelda II: The Adventure of Link released in 1987, 11 months after the first *Zelda* in Japan. It set itself apart from the original legend in its opening moments by moving the perspective to a side view of the action. Link still explores an overworld from above, but combat, interacting with NPCs, and explor-

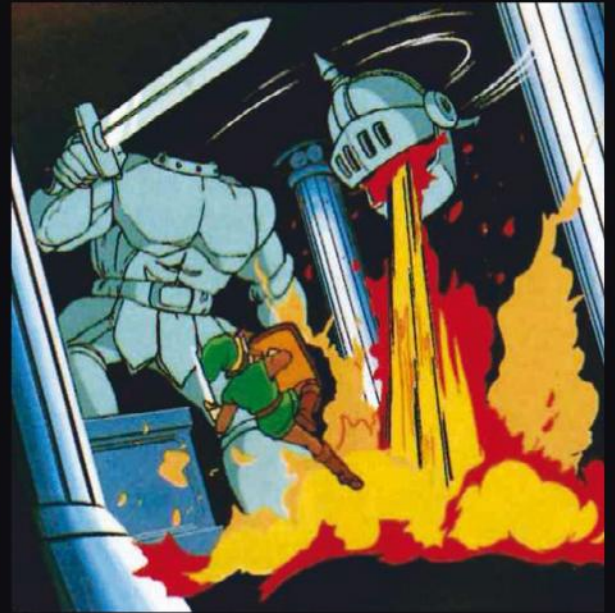
ing dungeons has more in common with side-scrolling action games like *Castlevania*.

Viewed from the side, the action takes into account high and low sword swipes, and demands more accuracy from the player. It also requires the player use the shield effectively by blocking the high and low hits from

opponents. The result is a much harder *Zelda* experience than the prior and follow-up adventures.

Zelda II also employed RPG mechanics, allowing Link to level his attack, magic, and life by fighting monsters, as opposed to finding items in the environment. Hearts could still be discovered in the world, but farming was a perfectly acceptable alternative for expanding the health bar. The RPG elements also afforded the game a New Game+ experience that allowed players to take their leveled-up Link back through the adventure to re-retrieve the items and save the princess without having to start from zero. Link also has a set number of lives. None of these elements appeared in *Zelda* sequels.

Enemy-free safe areas filled with friendly characters also began with *Zelda II*. Alongside dungeons and assorted secrets, Link can find towns in the overworld of Hyrule. Each has homes Link can enter which are filled with characters who make requests, offer items, or restore Link's health and magic meters.



The Adventure of Link serves an important role in the larger Zelda timeline and explains the series' namesake. The story is detailed in the first 10 pages of the included instruction booklet. The Link that appears in *Zelda II* is the same Link from the first game, but the Zelda he is tasked with saving is a different one. In the past, the very first Zelda was entrusted with a piece of the Triforce by her father on his deathbed. Zelda's brother, angry that she won't tell him where to find the Triforce piece, blindly tells a wizard to place her under a sleeping spell. The wizard is successful, but kills himself in the process. In the brother's grief, ashamed that he has placed his sister under an incurable sleeping spell, he seals her in a vault to wait for a hero who can wake her and decrees that all future princesses born into the royal family be named Zelda.

Link discovers he is the hero fated to wake her when a marker representing the Triforce appears on the back of

his hand and begins glowing after he finds the vault. It's the first occasion where Link is marked by a piece of the Triforce, which continues to be a series staple today.

The Development

Shigeru Miyamoto was heavily involved in the game as a producer. He appears in the credits as Miyahon, an alternate translation of his name that was used in the credits of the first two *Zelda* games. Takashi Tezuka, who worked extensively on the first *Zelda* as well as *Super Mario Bros.*, wrote the script. The director, Tadashi Sugiyama, was the graphic designer for *Ice Climbers* and eventual director of *Pilotwings*, *Super Mario Kart*, and *F-Zero X*. He later moved into a production role within Nintendo, which he still holds to this day.

We recently asked Miyamoto about the decisions behind the radical changes. "What we wanted to do with *The Adventure of Link* was really

focus on the action, whereas *Zelda* is a game where the player learns and grows and that's how you complete the game. *The Adventure of Link* is all about the action. Obviously the player can polish their action and become better at it, but we wanted to create a separate game."

Miyamoto sees the game as sort of a middle-ground between the gameplay established by *The Legend of Zelda*, and the action game he and his team were interested in making at the time. "It could be that we might have seen an *Adventure of Link* in a *Donkey Kong Country*-type game, as well," Miyamoto says, considering the game's genre and how it could be applied elsewhere. "It's something we might want to try. Sounds fun."

The Legacy Of *Zelda II*

The divisive nature of the game places it low on most fans' lists of favorite *Zelda* games, but it found instant success when it released in 1987. It sold more than four million copies during its lifetime on that platform, placing it only a few spots behind *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda* on the list of best-selling NES games. It also reviewed well upon release, but fair warning – it's a challenging game. If you want to play it for the first time or revisit the oddball entry in the series, it is readily available on all of Nintendo's Virtual Console platforms.

It may not be a legend, but *The Adventure of Link* stands tall as a bold experiment for *Zelda*. "It's almost like a different series. That's why we named it *The Adventure of Link*. It's a very different game," Miyamoto says. Nintendo is a developer often accused of repeating itself in excess, but *Zelda II* is proof it is more than capable of trying something different. ♦





Link's Bag Of Tricks

You can always count on some elements appearing in every Zelda game – Link will use bombs, a bow, and a sword to overcome evil. Other things, like a pair of glasses that gives you hints, are only required for certain adventures. See if you can match the obscure item with the correct Zelda adventure below. *by Kyle Hilliard*



1. ___ Ocarina of Time
2. ___ Spirit Tracks
3. ___ Oracle of Ages/Seasons
4. ___ Twilight Princess
5. ___ Majora's Mask
6. ___ The Legend of Zelda
7. ___ The Minish Cap
8. ___ Link's Awakening
9. ___ A Link Between Worlds
10. ___ Phantom Hourglass
11. ___ The Adventure of Link
12. ___ A Link to the Past



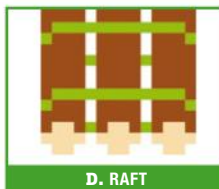
A. SAND WAND



B. ROC'S FEATHER



C. RAZOR SWORD



D. RAFT



E. CANE OF PACCI



F. CORAL EARRING



G. GRAPPLING HOOK



H. HINT GLASSES



I. KEATON MASK



J. KIDNAPPED CHILD



K. MOON PEARL

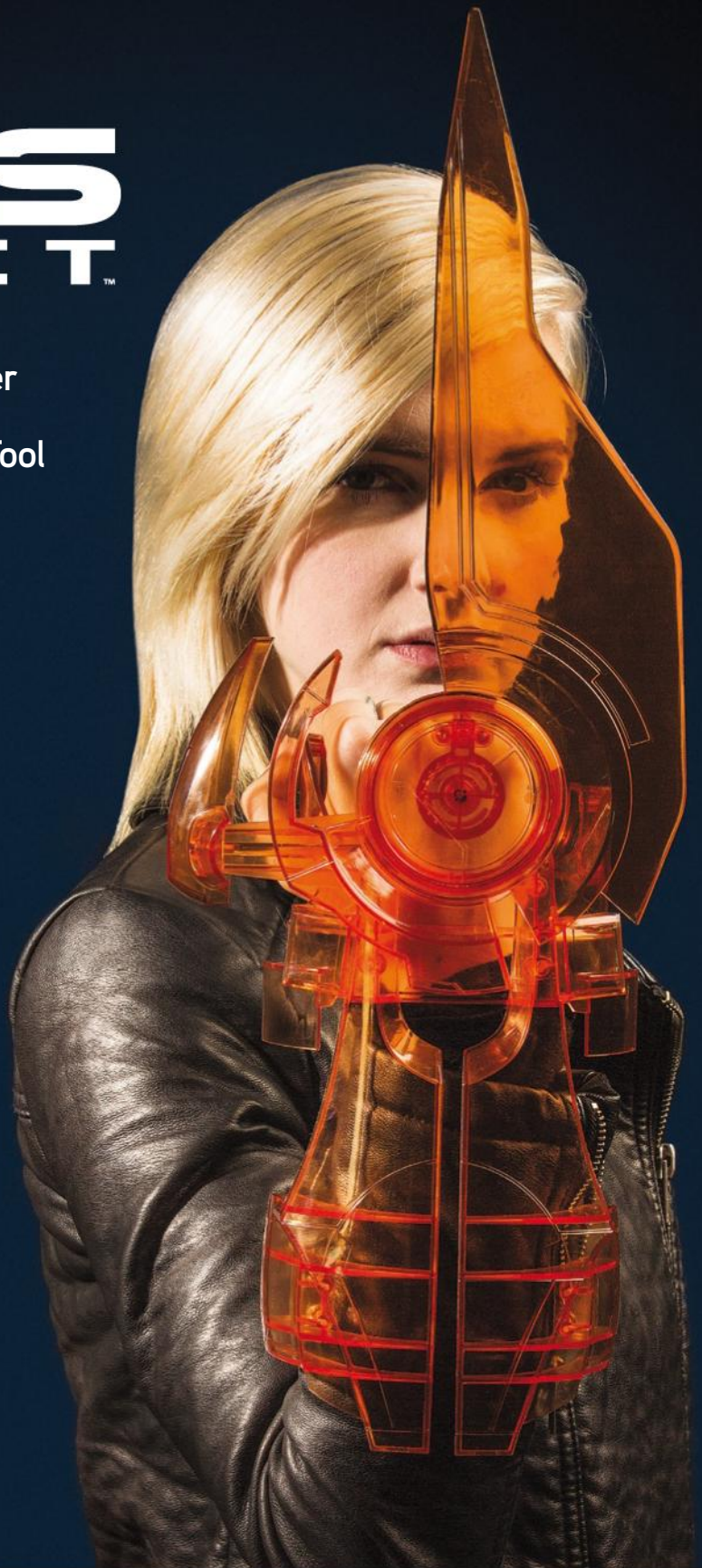


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