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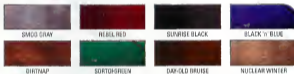
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20 Editorial

We've redesigned the magazine again, and, amazingly, even our bumbling leader noticed.

24 Letters

Readers confront the Cronenberg-like nightmare of Robert Coffey's online cross-dressing. Plus the usual gaggle of love letters, death threats, and desperate pleas for attention.

36 Radar

Yes, Read Me has a new name—try not to go to pieces on us (how many Readme files do you read?). Radar has some of the things you liked before, plus new things like the Nerd Herd. This month we also bring you exclusive first impressions of **Counter-Strike: Condition Zero**.

50 Previews

We've got a fine batch of games coming down the pipe this month. We've got the skinny on the new **Splinter Cell** game's multiplayer, there's lots of new info on Navallogix's upcoming Battlefield-killer **Joint Operations**, and Jordan Mechner checks in with the simply brilliant **Prince of Persia**.



COVER STORY

Doom 3

Darien has the day from hell playing and seeing all there is to see so far for **Doom 3**. Is hell all it's cracked up to be? Find out in this behind-the-scenes tour of Id Software.

66



78

Holiday Gift Guide

Life stinks, and then you die. What's the point of it all? Why try at all when you're just gonna end up a rotting skeleton in the dirt? Well, anyway, it's the holiday season. So we thought we'd get all cheery here and spread some joy around with gift ideas.





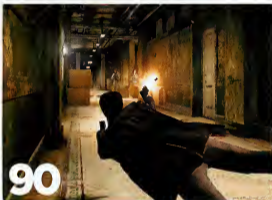
102



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90 REVIEWS

It's the time of year when everyone is pushing their games out the door. Unfortunately, this month a few got pushed out too early, including some big names. We'll fill you in on the bugginess/greatness of titles like **Max Payne 2**, **Temple of Elemental Evil**, **Warlords IV**, **Call of Duty**, and the game we know you've been dying for—**Neighbors From Hell**. Who loves ya, baby?



90

130 Tech

We'll beat the crap out of 12 high-end machines, all in the name of crowning this year's **Ultimate Gaming Machine**. Check out the redesigned Tech section to see what \$5,000 can get you. And of course everyone's favorite column, **Will Power**, is back.

149 Check Out

Check me out, baby—this is the brand-spanking-new buying guide and recommendation section. We've scopped these fine products out, lucked the losers to the curbs, and added the "dimes" to our lists.

160 Tom vs. Bruce

And the two to rule the **Age of Mythology**.

164 Scorched Earth

All Robert wants for Christmas is your two front teeth.

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124 **Temple of Elemental Evil**

126 **No Man's Land**

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| 58 The Hobbit | |





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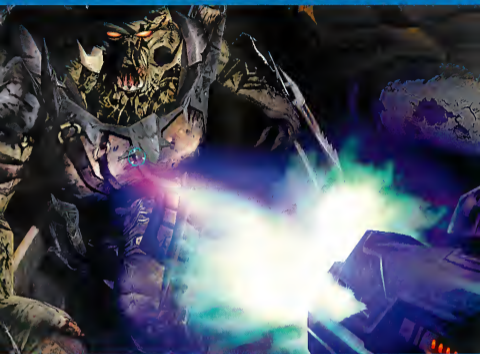
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BEST OF E3 AWARD - IGN

BEST GAMES OF 2003 LIST - COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

TOP GAMES TO WATCH IN 2003 LIST - COMPUTER GAMES MAGAZINE

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Jedi Academy Too easy or too hard?

Where has Mr. J. Green been buying his crack? Do some tough love and get him on OxyContin fast. He reviews *Jedi Academy* and complains 'cause he has so little time to do so [November 2003]. Hello, it's your job, Mr. Green! In the review he says the game is too easy on normal setting. Then play on the HARD setting. Then he says the boss was easy to kill by getting to a ledge it could not reach. Id did that in *Quake*. Mr. Green, jump off that ledge and battle the boss...DUH!

Anonymous



Hi, I just wanted to tell you guys that in your review of *Jedi Academy* you said that the game was too easy. Well I have to disagree with you, THE GAME IS SO HARD!! I read what you said and it seemed like a nice and easy game, but it's not. I played the game and it took me days to finish it. I didn't think there could actually be a game that was harder than *Jedi Outcast*, but now I see there is. You said it would have been fun in the level where you're a prisoner to not have any weapon at all—well, that little blaster pistol was the only thing that helped me survive the level. Anyway, it is a really cool and fun game.

Francisco

And don't do it with George Michael, either

I'm one of those people who spend so much time on the computer at work that I never got into gaming. Plus I'm poor. And married to Stalin. Having said that, I still get a chance to read *CGW* in the men's room stall at work, where one of my more fortunate (single) brethren routinely leaves a copy. Anyway, yesterday I read Robert Coffey's *Scorched Earth* column. Pretty damn funny. Hey Robert, do you write anything else for those of us a few

Advice from Dana's stalker

Last month's decision to have *Gamer's Edge* edited by Dana Jongeward was a mistake. I'll admit I've gazed for hours at her staff photo, wondering just what sweetness lies below that soft neck, but hot activity cannot counterbalance boring writing. I enjoy doing the personality tests from *Cosmopolitan* in my doctor's office more than that cut-and-dried stuff. We read your publication for entertaining commentary and incessant ranting, not the secret to using the in-game cantines. So tell Dana that I love her, then tell her to assign articles to staff writers or do it herself.

Matthew Jones

We couldn't agree with you more, Matthew. Which is why we've killed the *Gamer's Edge* section. In its place, we now have a monthly buyer's guide, which will hopefully be more useful and entertaining. And fans of the Bruce vs. Tom articles—fear not! They'll still appear every month.



rungs down on the social ladder? Or do I have to keep meeting you in the crapper?

Andrew Barber

Just a word of advice, Andrew: Never offer to meet Robert Coffey "in the crapper." Those who do are usually never heard from again.



Thrilled with Bill

Hey, thanks for doing that interview with Bill Roper [Read Me, October 2003]. I had never seen what that guy had looked like until now, and he's one of the biggest names in PC gaming today. I would love to see more interviews with other programmers/developers/big name people in the world of PC gaming in the future, complete with a picture of them. It's nice to know not only who is doing what for PC gaming today, but it's nice to know what

those people look like. These people are more important to me than all the celebrities in movies and on TV, yet nobody knows who these people are because you don't know what they look like. Please do more of these in the future.

Jason Reid

Good grief

Apparently your magazine supports gamers who enjoy causing other gamers grief and headaches. This is the second month in a row that your *Dirty Trick* column has rewarded a *PlanetSide* player for causing his teammates grief. Perhaps you don't understand the definition of a teammate? Or perhaps you yourselves enjoy this kind of treatment or acting in this manner? You must if you reward these tricks from *PlanetSide*. Either way it leaves doubt as to your staff's credibility. You obviously do not realize the power of media and your potential to influence change. No doubt your rewarding these griefters has lead to own more of these immature players plotting better ways to cause grief to their teammates and not the enemy in order to win your column. I'll be sure to post *CGW's* support for griefters in my clan's and outfits' forums. And I'll also be sure to pass it onto all *PlanetSide* players I know.

Shawn D

Mail Bites

Will, don't let those liars who complain about you reviewing non-PC items get you down. They just don't understand and love all technology in the same way that some of us do. —Charles "Hamlet" Ellis

Thanks for the free stamp on my renewal invoice, I used it to send in my selective services draft card. —Branan Roughgarden. D

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How could you REWARD the people who write in with ways to kill YOUR OWN TEAM? Now everyone is going to try to use those strategies to kill their teammates. I love online gaming, but it is people like that that make me want to find those people, break their door down, and proceed to torture them before letting Robert Coffey have them to finish off and do whatever his gruesome heart desires.

David Beaver

While in the short run, these Dirty Tricks made us laugh, the fact is they are not cool. Like it or not, grieving is part of the online experience these days, but that doesn't mean we have to go out of the way to encourage it.

Hype vs. reviews

I really appreciated Jeff Green's candor in his November editorial, in which he described the dilemma of being chosen by LucasArts to be the first to review *Jedi Academy*. Most gaming magazines would be afraid to speak so honestly about their relationship with a major advertiser and game publisher, but you shed light on some of the behind-the-scenes stuff that goes into making a magazine. I hope you set a good example for your competition by breaking what seems to be a vicious cycle of gaming coverage:

- 1) Big publisher announces big game.
- 2) Gaming magazine runs enthusiastic, nonjudgmental coverage of the game in almost every issue leading to its release.
- 3) Game goes gold.
- 4) Excited readers buy it.
- 5) Magazine review arrives in mail. The review pans the game and calls it a big disappointment.
- 6) Magazine laments low sales of other critically acclaimed games.

I think you're taking some steps to break this cycle, but I think you should go further and deconstruct the game magazine biz a bit more for us. We'd appreciate it.

Ben Stein

One of the reasons I've been a subscriber for the past six years is because I trust you guys. If LucasArts gave you a disc full of doo-doo, I have come to expect that you guys would say so. I want to know that when I drop \$50 for a game, I will get enjoyment out of it. I would hope that LucasArts gave you a first look because they know you won't pull any punches and they value your opinions.

Computer Dave from NJ



Tyne Daly, Jack the Ripper, and Robert Coffey

Regarding Robert Coffey's claim that Jack the Ripper did not play computer games [*Scorched Earth*, December 2003]: I have it on good authority that a time traveler from 2143 left Jack in possession of a cool-powered Windows ME machine and a copy of *Zovkatana*. I believe that particular combination would drive even Mahatma Gandhi into a homicidal rage.

Regarding your comments about Tyne Daly: Recently declassified documents from the CIA demonstrate conclusively that Saddam Hussein was attempting to acquire Tyne Daly as a Weapon of Mass Destruction. Just a little more evidence that your assessment is most likely correct.

Catman

He weeps

I am saddened that single-player gaming is dying out, a fact that I had denied until I heard someone comment on the fact that he couldn't get excited about a single-player game anymore. I began to think about it and I realized that all anyone ever cares about is multiplayer. I weep. I weep because, in my humble opinion, a big part of what makes a game good is the story it tells. In this, the golden age of multiplayer, story has been reduced to little more than a backdrop for the game.

Although I find many multiplayer games fascinating due to great gameplay, many people online are retards or jerks. I can't stand retards or jerks. Therefore, the only time I enjoy multiplayer is when I'm around people I know. Le

LAN parties. I only hope that when I go to college next August I will be able to be in a LAN party environment more often—if I'm not, I fear I might lose interest in the gaming industry.

If that happens, I will lose a part of my being. I will have a hole in my soul, a hole that can only be replaced with drugs, hard liquor, sex, or God. I really am not interested in the careers of junkie, alcoholic, prostitute, or priest. I silently shed a tear every time I hear the letters MMO. Recently my eyes haven't stopped leaking.

JP D

Freakin' moron world

You freakin' moron! What's up! I've been a loyal subscriber for awhile now and y'all go all slip-shod on me! WHY IS WILL WRIGHT GETTING INDUCTED TWICE FOR IN YOUR HALL OF FAME? Do you not recall inducting him back four Hall of Fame articles ago (in late '98/early '99) with *Rainbow Six* and *Age of Empires*? Are you going to make me go back and pull out my personal library copy?

Jonathan

No need, You're right. We're freakin' morons. Jeff Green was complaining as he wrote up the Will Wright piece that he felt like he'd written it already—but we just took it as his usual senility.

Lionheart, the good?

Despite the one-and-a-half stars you gave *Lionheart* [November 2003], I thought I'd buy the game anyway. I don't know why you guys didn't give it an extra star or two. I mean, thanks to the guys at Black Isle, I have a life again. After charging through an area, I have so little mana that I can go see a movie, get a tan, talk to girls. The real kind that look good and also smell nice. And when I return, I'm only a couple minutes away from having my mana reserves filled again. I raise my glass to Black Isle for giving me a life.

The not-so-pasty Hrobjigima D



Mail Bites

Your December 2003 issue was the sh**test ever, and that's really saying something.

—Andrzej Walczewski

Is it me, or CGW's December cover is a Schwarzenegger-ized version of Will O'Neal?

—SomeGeekWithNothingToDo

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The crying game?

The November issue's Scorched Earth has to be THE single most disturbing game-related article I've ever read, and I don't say so because of Robert Coffey's involvement in it. Please, for the sake of my sanity, tell me it never happened.

Ibasi Oci (SWG-Ahazi)

After reading Coffey's last article about the dancer class and trusting a girl on an MMORPG, I have ripped out my eyeballs and brain, chewed them up, and spat them into a meat grinder. Thank you.

Slavick 20

OK, this is not what I signed on for when I paid the price of subscription. Coffey as a hoodlum-koochie girl. When I'm reading my favorite magazine, I want the mental pictures of StarCraft locked in mortal combat or the erection of great civilizations. Not the vision of hairy men dressed in gold lamé bikinis (yet another good reason not to play Star Wars Galaxies). What's next, Green as a WAC in *Medal of Honor*? Let's leave our private predilections as just that: PRIVATE.

Brian McGowan

All I can say after reading Robert Coffey's latest Scorched Earth column: Either Robert is simply an over-obsessed Star Wars geek, or he possesses some incredibly repressed homosexual tendencies. Either way, seek therapy, Rob; these are issues that need to be acknowledged.

Rebel in Dresmland

Love to love you

Help me, CGW, please help me. I recently started playing *Magic: The Gathering Online* and I keep getting ripped off. I don't know all the prices of all the cards. Every time I trade I get a lame a-- who tells me "I never give out how many tickets I want for my cards." Why? So he can rip me off. I buy a card and then

someone asks me, "You paid that much?" Furthermore, *Magic: Online* doesn't put a price guide up for any of us to use as a reference. As you can see I have no one to turn to. Please, CGW, I love you, I have always loved you. If you help me, I'll love you even more. Help me please so we can have a lot of love going around. Thanks

The Lover

We love you too, The Lover. But the only tip we can really offer you is to stop playing that game. This is what we call tough love. Love, CGW.

A few of his favorite things

Just a brief note to say how I very much enjoy certain aspects of your rag.

The Bruce Geryk/Tom Chick strategy showdowns are the best thing since...well, since a really good thing that I enjoyed a lot and made me laugh but I can't think of right now. Keep it up!

Robert Coffey's column isn't as warm and fuzzy as *Greenspeak*—Jeff still has something fleshy beating inside of him, whereas Robert clearly does not—but it does remind me of all those psycho-killer bio-pics in which it's revealed that the person who just killed and ate 14 people liked to play computer games when not torturing small animals. Keep it up! (At least until the first lawsuit.)

Sub-od to the artist whose signature I cannot read who supplies the illustration for Robert's column: I cannot tell if your pictures are made more horrific by Robert's scribbles, or the reverse. I have the same problem with Siegfried and Roy. Keep it up!

doollil

Share the Love/Hate Online!

Hey kids, now you don't have to wait a whole month to tell us you love us! Just go to the official CGW message board at boards.tup.com/zd and post right now! That's right, within seconds of reading this, you too can have your opinions on everything from Wil's hair to our latest reviews published online for the entire world, including your mother, to see! So, go now! Post! Big up yours!!! Don't be part of the silent majority! Be part of the amazing, witty minority!

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Just finished your November 2003 issue and I have to say that Tom vs. Bruce is still my favorite new section of the magazine. Keep it going. —Eric Schwartz

Is it just me?
Or is Halo not very good?
—Michael

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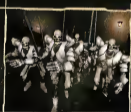
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LOWDOWN

Condition SNAFU

The long, ping-pong path of Counter-Strike: Condition Zero

Eleven months ago we wrote that *Counter-Strike: Condition Zero* "has gone through a rather convoluted development," but now that seems woefully understated. In May 2001, we broke the story of Valve's attempt to create a single-player version of *Counter-Strike*, and since then it's been through five development teams. Ironically, the

game that is scheduled to ship November 18 only took about four months to put together, but that's beside the point. The point is this: Why did it take so many people so long to do a single-player version of a game that a couple of high school kids did in their spare time?

Well, let's ask them

We took our question to Jess Cliffe, who codelveloped *Counter-Strike* with Minh Le

while still in high school. (See our December story, page 107.) Valve subsequently hired them, so Cliffe and Le have been able to follow the development of *Condition Zero* since its inception in 2000 at Rogue Entertainment. Shortly afterward, Valve yanked the project back (resulting in Rogue's demise), worked on it internally for a while, and then showed it off at Gearbox Studios. Several months later, Valve again reclaimed the project,

42 Middle-earth
Vivendi's long-promised Lord of the Rings MMO RPG is finally starting to take shape

45 Rocket Man
D's John Gurnack could be the first civilian to put a manned vehicle into space

46 Half-Life 2
The rowdown on the stolen code and how it might affect Valve—and you.



■ The Condition Zero guys have been waiting three years to see action.



■ Early on the terrorist A.I. is easy, but that changes quickly.



■ Many of the missions involve hostage rescue, bomb defusal or outright bloodbath.

this time moving it to Ritual Entertainment. About a year later, Valve did the whole thing again, this time shifting it to start-up Turtle Rock Studios.

Why the ping-pong treatment? Says Cliffe, "At Valve we're pretty tough on ourselves. If something is 'worth playing' to us, then it's not good enough. We're devoted to producing content that excites our fan base. If that means trying different approaches collaboratively with different companies, we're comfortable with that."

Deleted scenes

Although Ritual's logo still appears on the interface, its contribution to the game has been relegated to a desktop icon called Deleted Scenes. We played a near-final version of Condition Zero for this story, and it was obvious why they were deleted: The 12 levels are so heavily scripted that it's easy to predict enemy

attacks. Armed enemies sometimes charge you without actually shooting. One enemy ran right up to our A.I. squadmate, who shot him point-blank in the face. Dated graphics give these missions the feel of an amateurish mod rather than a campaign befitting the Counter-Strike name. When asked to comment, Ritual's art director hostily declined.

Ritual's campaign might sound like a joke, but that was the heart of the game when Valve shipped it to the European press this summer. The European media, who tend to be forgiving, tore it to shreds. Valve then turned the project over to Turtle Rock Studios.

If you've never heard of Turtle Rock, you're not alone: The tiny group of four ex-EA employees was formed only last year, but it had a crucial feather in its cap: They developed the "official Counter-Strike bot," which was tested in CS 1.6 ear-

lier this year. Bots would be a critical component in a single-player game, so Valve leapt at the chance to incorporate Turtle Rock's bot tech into CZ.

Hot bots

We played the near-final version of Condition Zero that Valve described as "content complete with A.I. still being tweaked." The heart of the game is a series of challenges similar to Tony Hawk's Pro Skater: The player must meet mini-objectives like "shoot five terrorists, slay one terrorist with a sniper rifle," before going to the next of 18 levels. There are no new weapons, the graphics are the same as those in CS 1.6, and most of the maps have been recycled.

Obviously, the real strength of CZ lies in the A.I. Each CPU soldier is graded in four categories (skill, bravery, cooperation, and weapon preference) and from the beginning does an all-too-good job of recreating real-world players. Score one for Turtle Rock for creating the first newbie emulator. We lost track of how many times Morris disobeyed a direct order. Yes, early on it's like trying to wrangle a bunch of noobs, but at least they are intelligent noobs. You issue orders, but they also have minds of their own. They'll also give you a heads up if they've spotted bad guys or objectives. With time and some patience, you'll be able to unlock new ■

Early on it's like trying to wrangle a bunch of noobs, but at least they are intelligent noobs.

levels and more skilled players.

Turtle Rock's lead designer Mike Booth says the bots don't cheat. "A bot only knows what a human player would do in the same situation. This makes communication between bots (and human players) critical.

"In CZ, they actually speak to each other using a new voice chatter system equipped with hundreds of lines of dialogue. This not only lends personality to the bots and adds intensity when you hear them panic, but most importantly this chatter allows human players to keep track of the situation and make tactical choices during the match."

For example, during a match the bots on your team will call out ("I'm camping A" or "They took the hostages"), and they'll report the locations of enemies spotted. Human players can give them orders by using the standard CS radio commands. Says Booth, "The voice chatter allows the bots to work as a team, coming to each other's aid during a firefight, announcing their intentions, and generally communicating much as human players do during a match." Except, they won't say things like "Way to go, dumbass!" or insult your mother when you lose.

Hopefully next month we can bring you a full review, if the code has been finalized



Atmospheric "war-torn" look shatters the idea you're still in your Web browser.



The Deleted Scenes look like budget cuts.

by then. For now, our short take is that Condition Zero is basically Counter-Strike with training wheels. That's not a bad thing, because it's tough turning a multi-player action game into a single-player experience. Just ask the folks at Valve or all the developers of Rogue, Gearbox, Ritual, and Turtle Rock Software. **Ken Brown and Darren Gladstone**

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly

News and views from the Wild West



The Good

Max Payne 2 ships on time

Well whaddya know? A PC game that shipped on time! Just like

Rockstar said it would! At a time when most publishers struggle to get their games out even in the year they originally promised, credit Rockstar and Remedy for delivering *Max Payne 2* precisely on time, and in solid condition, too. Somewhere in some seedy rundown bar, Duke Nukem weeps softly into his beer.



The Bad

Fans forced to make game patches

Okay, so *The Temple of Elemental Evil* is buggy. Nothing new these days, sad

to say. But what really sucks is that Atari was so slow to issue a patch that a group of fans, called the Circle of Eight (www.co8.org), had to take it upon themselves to make their own patch. Is this what it's come to? Companies charge for broken products, and then make the fans fix it themselves? Great! How about we just make the whole game, too!

The Ugly

Ritual's CZ campaign

Imagine having a year's worth of your work relegated to Deleted



Scenes. Ouch! Ritual Entertainment must be smarting to see its Condition Zero campaign receive such ignominious treatment. But after playing a near-final version of it, we could see why Valve chose to dump them. Sloppy scripting, brain-dead AI, and poor graphics quality makes it look more like a mod than a boxed retail release. We asked Ritual to comment, but all they had to say was something that rhymed with "fuck off." Clessy.

Overheard

Quotes from the wacky world of gaming

"Jeff Green is a doody-head. It's true. Just try denying it."

—TRAITOR THIERRY "SCOOTER" NGUYEN

"WE DID A LOT OF THINGS TO MINIMIZE THE 'GRIND,' AND NONE OF IT SEEMS TO HAVE WORKED."

—RAPH KOSTER

"Would you rather eat your own children or have someone eat them for you?"

—MICROSOFT'S ADAM WAALKES

"Will whoever borrowed my battle ax and sword please return them?"

—DANA JONGEWAARD



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Middle-earth Online

Will this be the MMORPG to rule them all?

Five years after Sierra announced Middle-earth Online, we're finally starting to see progress on it. The massively multiplayer game is emerging from vapor at Turbine Software (developers of Asheron's Call) and is tentatively slated for late 2004.

MEO is set after the Fellowship exits the mines of Moria. The game lets you choose from one of four races (Men, Hobbits, Elves, and Dwarves) to bash orcs, explore, craft objects, and own homes in places like Bree, The Shire, or Rivendell.

Three new character classes have been announced: soldiers, sages, and elven scouts. Soldiers are obviously good for fighting. Sages are students of lore and the secrets of Middle-earth. Although weak in melee, their healing spells make them invaluable in a fight.

Elvish scouts patrol elf realms to counter the menace of orcs and other interlopers. Scouts are completely at home in the wild and are able to turn the terrain of the land to their advantage. Stay tuned for more news in coming months. **Ken Brown**

Desert Island Games

You're stranded on an island with only three PC games... which ones?

Double Hall of Fame inductee Will Wright (creator of *The Sims*) almost wishes he was stranded, so he could have the time to play these games.



Go (the boardgame): Here are so many things I can do with a Go board. I can design my own games, or I can play Go. Or I could make chess rules... but then I'd have to play myself, and my opponent is wily.

Battlefield 1942: Assuming I'd have an Internet connection on the island, of course, I cannot get enough of that game. It's the only team-based action game that makes me laugh every time I play it. Every game something memorable and interesting happens.



Sid Meier's Civilization III and Play the World: Because I've never had time to actually play the game, I played the original Civilization a lot, and I played Civilization II a little. But, but if I didn't have anything else to do then I'd actually have time to get way into Civ III.

5, 10, 15 Years Ago In CGW

What we said when you were nursing



5 Years Ago, January 1999

In a bouncy world made of sponge, one woman braves a terrible prehistoric threat with nothing but stackable crates to protect her! That should have been the box copy for *Trapdoor*, quite possibly the Worst PC Game Ever and the recipient of the most scathing review in the issue. Horribly designed and buggy, this game had nothing going for it unless you enjoyed "checking your health" by glancing at the depleting heart tattoo on your character's poutoozled boobies.



10 Years Ago, January 1994

Maybe we were all drunk back then. There's no other way to explain our calling *Video Cube Space*, a PC version of Rubik's Cube only with NASA video, "quite compelling." Maybe our minds were destroyed by *Man Enough*, a "game" that took out a full-page ad in this issue. This Mature CD-ROM featured FMV characters like Blair the Rich Girl, Fawn the Sales Rep, and Quinn the Anchorwoman, each one looking more like Dixie the Big-Haired Chain-Smoking Hardbitten Truck Stop Tart than their alleged character. Geek porn is scary.



15 Years Ago, January 1989

Hey you old-timers, remember Larry Laffer? This issue had hints and tips for *Leisure Suit Larry II: Looking for Love (In all the Wrong Places)*, the sequel to *Land of the Lounge Lizards*. Besides *LSL2* and Infocom's *Battletech*, there weren't many big exciting games back then. We had such a lockbuster line-up that we had an ad scavenger hunt. Basically, we offered prizes for reading the ads in this issue. Ah, the good old days, when we were deep in the advertisers' pocket. Thank goodness no one accuses us of that anymore.

The Return of Leisure Suit Larry

Larry's nephew gets schooled in Magna Cum Laude

In a rare sign that adventure games aren't dead—or that will hasten their demise—Vivendi Universal says a new *Leisure Suit Larry* game is, um, coming in late 2004. Few details have been released, but Vivendi seems eager to distinguish this new iteration from the earlier games in the series, the last of which came out more than six years ago.

The company says *LSL3* will be "inspired by films like *American Pie* and *There's Something About Mary*, and packed full of outrageous humor and raucous gameplay," says Vivendi's Nicholas Longano. Interestingly, series creator Al Lowe is not involved in the project. Lowe posted a message on his website saying "I have

had nothing to do with this game, but, as always, I would still enjoy working on any Larry game. If Sierra feels I have something to contribute, Al, you're making us feel bad for you!

The new Larry is being developed by High Voltage Software (developers of *Ground Control*). Vivendi says *Magna Cum Laude* is the coming-of-age story of Larry Laffer's nephew, Larry Lovage, a community college student who spends most of his time either hanging out in his dorm room or striking out with women. After hearing about a reality TV dating show, he decides to sign up as a contestant. Hyinks presumably ensue, but we'll be the judge of that when we can get our hands on Larry's new friends. **—Ken Brown**





GEEK BEAT

The Counter-Strike Kids

How six guys learned to frag for fame and fortune

They call themselves Team3D, and their job is playing Counter-Strike. For six to eight hours a day, seven days a week, they hone their skills bagging virtual bad guys online. The goal: to be the No. 1 CS team in the world, and to make so much money they don't have to work. So far, it's paying off. The group, aged 19 to 23, have raked up more than \$370,000 in winnings in the three years they've been playing together.

They have top-of-the-line PCs supplied by sponsors CompuSA, Nvidia, Shuttle, and Asus. They make a monthly stipend, and all their expenses are paid when they travel for tournaments. The team has flown around the country as well as

Europe and Asia to compete.

The team members found each other over the internet. For most of them, competing with Team3D is now their main focus. Some are in college, but they all seem happy to be playing games and earning serious cash.

Team leader Dave "Mato" Geffon, 21, says, "I took some flak from my parents, but their attitude changed when we got interviewed on CNN and ABC."

"My parents were skeptical until we started making money," adds Ron "Rambo" Kim, 19. The other members of the ever-more-intimidating team are Kyle Miller, Sean Morgan, Ognian Gueorguiev, and Johnny Quach. **Ken Brown**

"My parents were skeptical until we started making money."

—Ron Kim, 19

Top 5 Downloads

Recreation areas on the info freeway

Spotlight on the 2004 Independent Games Festival www.igf.com

1 **Dungeon Scroll**
www.dungeon-scroll.com
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2 **Mutant Storm**
www.mutantstorm.com
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3 **Oasis**
www.oasis-control.com
 One million puns, riddles, jokes, and traps. Available for free on a puzzle game that leads to a little mystery and a lot of fun. While it's free, you can help a game in progress.



4 **Sea3D**
www.3doo.com/STORY
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5 **Sprinky**
www.sprinky.com
 Sprinky is a CS-inspired, puzzle-solving arena party of events, set on a daily, every 15 minutes.



■ EXTREME TECH

The Rocket Man

John Carmack builds a bigass boomstick

The programming genius behind *Doom* and *Quake* has his sights on a new target—62.5 miles high. Id Software's John Carmack is leading a team known as Armadillo Aerospace that is competing for the \$10 million X Prize. The payoff goes to the first civilian group that can launch three people 100 kilometers from Earth, return them safely, and do it again in two weeks.

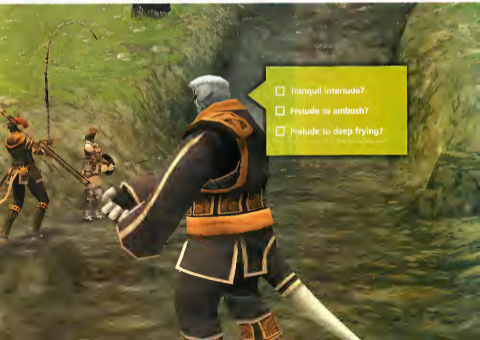
It's a mighty tall order, but Carmack happens to be a mighty smart guy. And he's been a rocket nut for a long time.

"I can trace back my interest in space to the end of the development of *Quake*," he says. "I borrowed a bunch of Robert Heinlein books. A year later, I started reading everything I could about space travel. Now I'm building what amounts to the world's biggest roller coaster. It's exciting, challenging, and things are going well."



■ Armadillo Aerospace group photo with landing vehicle. Carmack is second from right.

We've got the full-sized X Prize vehicle built. We're just waiting to decide which engine to use. The only problems now industrial manufacturers worrying about liabilities. When they hear we're building a rocket ship, they think, "What if it goes out of control and hits a school bus full of nuns?" —Geron Gladstone



Tranquil interlude?

Prelude to ambush?

Prelude to deep frying?

The Nerd Herd

Comments from the geek on the street

What do you think about the Half-Life 2 code theft?



Amy H., 15
 The hacker shouldn't have done it. But putting [the code] on a computer with net access wasn't the smartest move either. The hacker was dumb to get into that much shit, and he ruined it for everyone else.



Ariel Coleste, 29
 [Laughs] Thanking my weekend plans. I understand that hackers have to do their thing to prove they can, but it never makes sense to piss in your own backyard.



Michael Hawash, 30-something
 I should assume especially when you consider how much Valve has endeared itself to the gaming community by supporting third-party mods. Still, think the seriousness of the theft is overstated. Source code is nothing without content.



Marcus Eikenberry, 32
 The fact that Valve the code should be punished. Second, it's a reminder to everyone that you can be hacked and that hacking really can cause damages. The damage to us gamers is the delay of the game's release. That sucks!



Tracy Espeleta, 21
 I'm surprised that the news hasn't reached people outside the gaming community. I would have thought the news would spread since I feel this type of code theft could drastically impact the technology industry as a whole.

NEWS

Valve Gets Hacked

Theft of Half-Life 2 code rocks the gaming world



It's the gaming community's equivalent of the sensational "Dwarf Rapes Nun, Flees in UFO" story. On September 19, a hacker gained access to Valve's development network and made off with PC gaming's biggest prize—the *Half-Life 2* source code.

Valve's Gabe Newell said the team discovered that someone installed keystroke recorders on some of Valve's computers, which could be used to record passwords. Newell also pointed to Microsoft's Outlook Express as being the likely security hole the hacker was able to use to gain access to Valve's network.

The game will undoubtedly be delayed, but no one knows for how long. Initially, a Vivendi Universal executive said the release would slip until April 2004 but later backed off and simply said the publication date would be up to Valve. Valve so

far hasn't offered a new release date. Id Software has also had its share of unauthorized code releases. Id CEO Todd Hollenhead believes that "Valve is essentially wasting time that could be spent making the game better on non-productive things like patching security, assessing damage, PR damage control, trying to shut down unscrupulous websites that host the files, sending their lawyers after people, etc. And that's not even counting the morale factor."

In addition, Valve will probably have to

The theft of Valve's Steam was just as serious.

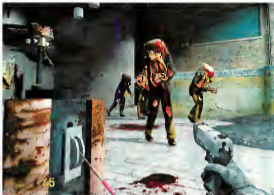
■ sift through the game to make sure the hacker didn't insert malicious code while having access to Valve's network.

Stand by for tech difficulties

The stolen code is playable, according to some who have downloaded it. Freelance writer Jason McMaster pieced the code together and found that "The E3 demo levels are present and mostly bug free. There are a few other levels included that haven't been seen or mentioned that, other than a few missing textures, work as well."

Perhaps just as serious for Valve was the theft of Steam, Valve's new content delivery system. Steam allows Valve to upload new content and executables onto players' computers. Valve's Doug Lombardi said that Steam accounts and credit card information were not compromised: "They're completely separate entities," from the HL2 source code and Valve's network," he said.

The impact of the theft compelled other developers to redouble their security. One developer who asked to remain anonymous admitted, "We spent three days and nights hardening firewalls, patching servers and updating our PCs in desperate fear of being the next target."



■ This could have been you playing HL2 over the winter holidays, but noooooo.

Hallenshead says he sympathizes with the victimized team. "You pour yourself into a creative work. If someone takes that and distributes it in an incomplete state, it's a rape of the artist. I hope that their

efforts at tracking down whoever did this are successful and, just as importantly, that the person lives in a country that isn't beyond the reach of whatever measures might be used to punish him." ■ Mark Asher

What's impending doom?
Getting safe passage?
You must be this tall to ride the chocobo?

**FINAL FANTASY XI OFFERS INFINITE CHOICES,
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The way it's
NVIDIA.
meant to be played

Developed on NVIDIA
To be played with NVIDIA.

THIS MONTH'S TOP 5 PRE-ORDERS



Half-Life 2 *Atmos* Research scientist Gordon Freeman finds himself on an alien-infested Earth being picked to the bone. Its resources depleted, its populace dwindling, he is thrust into the unenviable role of rescuing the world from the wrong he unleashed back at Black Mesa.



Counter-Strike: Condition Zero *Atmos* This new standard game extends the award-winning Counter-Strike multiplayer game with new maps, weapons, and more while simultaneously introducing new technologies, an extensive single-player campaign, and cooperative play.



The Sims 2 *Atmos* *Amo* Your Sims will be more life-like, responsive, and more complex than ever before. You'll be able to control your Sims over their entire lifetimes. And since every Sim will have its own DNA, their appearance and personality will be passed down through the generations.



Doom 3 *Atmos* *Amo* One of the most highly anticipated titles of 2003 and the next revolution in action gaming and technology. Featuring an enhanced storyline, spine-chilling, bloodcurdling, altogether unfriendly environment, and music by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails.



Lords of the Realm 3 *Atmos* A real-time strategy game of historic medieval conquest that spans castle building, siege, politics, religion, and conquest. This game takes into account the powerful clergy and merchant classes of the time which are important factions in the player's quest to become King.

THIS MONTH'S TOP 5 RELEASES



Civilization 3: Conquests Expansion Pack *Atmos* Expansion pack for wildly popular strategy game and includes seven new civilizations, new units, disasters, techs and wonders. Plenty of new abilities and game options to explore for one or more players using LAN or Internet connection.



Myst: The Final Chapters *Amo* The most immersive and ambitious Myst experience ever created. Bigger, better, and more innovative than any of the previous Myst adventures. Players will be part of an ever-expanding world that brings more areas to explore and more mysteries to solve.



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare *Amo* Delivers the gritty realism and cinematic intensity of World War II's epic battle-field moments like never before—through the eyes of citizen soldiers and unsung heroes from an alliance of countries who together helped shape the course of modern history.



Neverwinter Nights: Hordes of the Underdark Expansion Pack *Amo* This expansion will make numerous additions to the original game, including the new epic characters rules that will let players take their characters from the already high character level of 20 all the way up to 40.



Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic *Amo* *Atmos* It is the Golden Age of the Republic. The Galaxy is reeling from a recent conflict with the Dark Lords, and the ensuing battle between the Jedi and the Sith rages on. Your actions will decide the outcome of this war—and your destiny as a Jedi.

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Computer & Video Games store at

amazon.com.

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CGW Top 20

Wasted time well spent

Rank	Game	Rating
1	Grand Theft Auto: Vice City <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
2	WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
3	Madden NFL 2004 <small>(Sports)</small>	★★★★★
4	Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of WWII <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
5	Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
6	Midnight Club II <small>(Racing)</small>	★★★★★
7	Enter the Matrix <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
8	Freedom Fighters <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
9	Rise of Nations <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
10	Star Wars Galaxies <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★



Rank	Game	Rating
11	Age of Mythology: The Titans <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
12	Galactic Civilizations <small>(Strategy)</small>	★★★★★
13	SimCity 4: Rush Hour <small>(Simulation)</small>	★★★★★
14	Tron 2.0 <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
15	HomeWorld 2 <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
16	Delta Force 3: Black Hawk Down <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
17	Day of Defeat <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
18	NHL Hockey 2004 <small>(Sports)</small>	★★★★★
19	PlanetSide <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★
20	Medieval Total War—Viking Invasion <small>(Action)</small>	★★★★★

Score counts of games from the last six months. To vote, go to www.crowdsource.com.

GREAT DEALS ON PC GAMES



Warcraft 3 Battlechest

(Blizzard Entertainment)

The ultimate collection of the bestselling Blizzard strategy games including Warcraft III: The Reign of Chaos and Warcraft III Expansion: The Frozen Throne.

- Features:**
- Contains strategy guides from Brady Games.
 - Perfect for entering the epic war between Azeroth and the demonic Burning Legion.

Regular Price: \$54.99

Sale Price: **\$42.99**



Lords of EverQuest

(Sony Online Entertainment)

Brings the best elements of the real-time strategy world together with the epic storyline and depth of EverQuest.

- Features:**
- Three unique and different perspectives.
 - Three completely different factions, each with their own special units and strategies.
 - Over 75 hours of single player gameplay.

Regular Price: \$60.00

Sale Price: **\$44.99**



Tron 2.0

(Disney Visa Entertainment)

An action-packed story-driven title inspired by TRON, the groundbreaking science-fiction movie picture.

- Features:**
- You are Jet Bradley, son of TRON creator Alan Bradley.
 - Fight digital opponents, find your father and get out of the digital world alive.
 - Intense battles including light cycle races.

Regular Price: \$39.99

Sale Price: **\$34.99**



Dark Age of Camelot: Trials of Atlantis Expansion Pack

(Atari)

The expansion will add the capability for players to explore the primarily underwater lost civilization of Atlantis.

- Features:**
- All new underwater areas, effects, dragons, and exploration capabilities.
 - A new advancement system that teaches your character new abilities, spells, combat styles, and much more.

Regular Price: \$29.99

Sale Price: **\$24.99**

Check Out More Great Deals Online at

amazon.com.



Previews

See 'em now, play 'em soon

■ These are the kinds of odds you'll typically be faced with in *Saviors of Tinnu*.



■ You can view the action from plenty of different angles.



■ *Ferra* occasionally provides some much-needed assistance.



Mythica
So you want to be a Norse god? Microsoft will give you your chance in this monster MMORPG.

54



Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow
The supercool stealth-action game is becoming a cool multiplayer experience, too!

52



Joint Operations
We got the latest scoop on the new modes, vehicles, and some sweet screenshots.

56

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Montreal** GENRE: **Action-adventure** RELEASE DATE: **04/2005**

Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

The game formerly known as Prince (of Persia) is back

In its first attempt to go 3D in '99, the *Prince of Persia* series was overthrown by various tomb raiders. Now, we're happy to report that Ubisoft's latest effort, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, actually does the series justice.

As before, you're a nimble, scimitar-swinging prince on a mission to kick ass and take names. Our swashbuckling hero has evolved considerably since we last saw him, too—he's got an entourage of slick new moves that make his long-jumping, ledge-hanging antics from the early *Prince of Persia* titles look like child's play.

The game often requires you to think spatially in order to solve many of the gravity-defying puzzles.

Your character has plenty of flexibility in how he can move around. He can climb ledges, run up walls, swing around on flaps and other objects, and generally defy the laws of gravity in an impressive variety of ways. The mouse and keyboard controls feel very tight and intuitive, with most of the acrobatics handled by the spacebar and a few mouse clicks.

Heil to the king

Much of the gameplay revolves around clever puzzle elements, requiring you to scrutinize your immediate environment as you deduce the best possible way to move forward. The game also forces you to get pretty creative at times, often requiring you to think spatially in order to solve many of the gravity-defying environmental puzzles you'll come across. Plummets to your death and you can reverse the flow of time with your magic dagger, but do so one time too many and it's lights out for the prince.

Beyond puzzle solving, combat plays a big part in *Sands of Time*. You're armed with your trusty sword and a magic dagger, and there's a basic combo system in effect. With it, you're allowed you to string together sword strokes with a number of cool-looking flips and kicks—the dagger

serves up the coup de grace.

Sands of Time exhibits some serious style in other areas, too. The character design is flashy and eye-catching, a complete overhaul of the stereotypical turban-and-baggy-pants Arabian prince of the original games. The bevy of sweeping environments follows suit, encompassing a wide range of stylish designs. Underground waterways, city landscapes, and towering palace parapets pepper your journey, with each stage bringing something new to the table.

Each stage also brings something new to the story, with the game's narrative

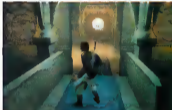
unfolding in several cut-scenes spread throughout the areas. Our intrepid prince is on a quest to right the wrongs perpetrated by a sinister vizier whose dark magic has unleashed all manner of chaos upon the prince's people. The prince is joined on his mission by Farra, a local non-nonsense princess, who is pursuing a similar vendetta against the twisted vizier. This makes for a formidable team, as Farra provides a great deal of backup firepower in many areas.

A zoom with a view

With all the good stuff, there's got to be a trade-off, right? At this point, *Sands of Time*'s biggest flaw seems to be its camera. While by no means unmanageable, it does tend to be rather bothersome when you're too close to a well, in which case you'll have to do quite a bit of fumbling to get the right angle. Hopefully, this nitpick will be addressed in time for the impending retail release.

Camera criticisms aside, *Sands of Time* is shaping up to be a solid piece of work. With any luck, it should be on store shelves by the time you finish reading this. Look for a full review soon. **By Ryan Scott**

The Word ROYALTY



Creepy corridors and gargantuan palaces make up a good part of the game.



Two questions for the Real Prince

Q: What of Jordan Peele is coming next? As the creator of *Kareoke*, the *Police of Persia* series, and the HBO sleeper hit *The Last Express*, he's planned some cool gaming conventions. In he wraps up *The Sands of Time*—and enjoys seeing its documentary, *Prince of Persia: A Los Angeles Story*, fill the big screen—Hezbollah had best be across street quickly.

Q: How did you get involved in this game? As Ubisoft approached me in 2003 with the idea of doing a new *Prince of Persia* AI first, they just asked me to come on as a consultant. But when I got with the team and saw what they wanted to do, I found myself wanting to do more. I didn't want to do a one-off *Prince of Persia* game that was just wrapping the old game into a 3D world, and neither did [Ubisoft Montreal].

Q: The *Sands of Time* has an interesting narrative. Can we comment on the importance of story?

A: The game really should be the story, not forcing you to watch 10 minutes of dialogue. In *The Sands of Time*, every cut-scene is short and leads directly into the game. Games are meant to be interactive, and the second you start watching more than playing, it's no longer fun.



There's more than one way to move along this train.



Two spies are better than one.



Simr's about to pull off the infamous crotch attack.

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Cell today, pandora tomorrow

Splinter Cell bored into us with stealth-based missions grounded in reality, and it got under our skin with chilling lighting and shadows. How do you follow up a game like that?

In a word: multiplayer. Julian Gerigthy, assistant producer of Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow, promises, "The offline will be very good, but the online will be revolutionary."

The new mode pits mercenaries against masked spies in brining (read: generic non-Sam Fishers). These combating classes have different skills and abilities that contrast and reflect one another. The offensive-bent mercenaries have heavy weaponry, while spies must rely on stealthy tactics.

It sounds like a sneaky Counter-Strike, but here's the catch: While spies play in the Splinterish third-person perspective, the mercs play in first person. It may not sound like much, but it adds a lot of tension. While the spies can pan around the environment, looking for good hiding spots, mercs fumble in the dark, but they have onscreen visual cues to help them hone in on peripheral noise.

New stuff

Multiplayer is filled with these checks and balances. To maintain the stealth gameplay, the maximum number of players has been limited to four—otherwise, the game would turn into a traditional deathmatch. The players can be mixed up among the two classes in any combination.

Headsets for audio communication will be fully utilized, transforming the cursory access-

into an essential espionage tool. Talk to teammates, use laser-guided mics to catch enemy conversations, and our favorite—taunt your opponent when you sneak up behind him and hold a gun to his head.

Eavesdropping, radar, and real-life gadgets were thoroughly researched to create new devices for the sequel—and sometimes these spy tools were just too sci-fi for the game. For instance, a sonic device that can put pain on your spleen. Sam Fisher wielding a spleen gun just doesn't seem right.

Besides tools, there will also be more moves better integrated and usable in more situations. The split jump, used minimally in the original, has been expanded to include a half split jump that allows for a ledge grab.

The single-player mode is not forgotten, following the continuing story of Sam Fisher. J.T. Petty, scriptwriter of the original Splinter Cell, returned to plot Pandora Tomorrow: "Approaching this story, I sought out illustrations of real national-security issues—matters that interest me personally."

The same format of mission-

One mission is four times the size of the largest mission in the original.

based gameplay is used, but NPCs will be more integrated and the mission areas are much larger. One mission in Pandora Tomorrow is four times the size of the largest mission in the original.

Pandora Tomorrow aims to create a more free-form experience. A train stage presents the challenge of creating non-linearity out of a distinctly linear map.



Make sure nobody inside the train sees you getting splattered by the 6-40 express.

Instead of simply running straight through the train, Fisher can open a trapdoor and crawl underneath the bottom of the train or hop out through the door and shimmy his way across the outer railings.

The lighting effects in these sequences look amazing, from the thundering

oncoming trains to the fluid realism in Fisher's context-sensitive animations. Pandora Tomorrow looks to again push the edge in the visuals department.

The first Splinter Cell sports industrial themes. Pandora Tomorrow will be much more varied, including a grassy open field in the jungles of Indonesia. The development team is remiss to share all the different stages that will be included.

"We don't put the game together with the mindset that we need a snow stage and then a grass stage. We start from the story," says Gerigthy.

Perry interjects, smiling, "But if the story happens to go somewhere especially exciting, well then, that's convenient." Look for Pandora Tomorrow in the first quarter of 2004. **Johnny Liu**

The Word STEALTHORAMA

Mythica

He's called the Harvester of Foes, but you can just call him That Big Evil Bastard. In 2004, *Mythica* hopes to break out of the MMORPG pack by serving up a heaping helping of real-time gang-bangin'-style combat. No "Fetch the Bucket of Lore" FedEx quests here—players sally forth into private play spaces to beat the infernal stuffing out of monstrous creatures and their henchmen. Since you're striving for Norse godhood, everything in the game is being jazzed up to appropriately daftic levels, with brutal combat animations, thunderous spell effects, booming sound, and titanic enemies like Mr. Happy Face here. Look for more on *Mythica* in an upcoming issue of *Q&W*.





“We want to strike fear into the hearts of enemy players.”

▀ Teambal's built on weapon accuracy. Soldiers aren't as precise while running, but gain bonuses when lying prone or using weapon bipods.



▀ Black Hawk helicopters, Lind Rovers, the Stryker APC, and a whole lot more are under your control.



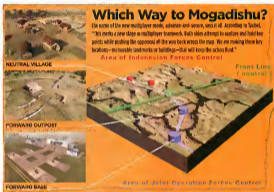
▀ You'll be able to customize your characters with 18 different skins.

Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising

Revamped, reinvigorated, and ready for combat

A few months ago, we saw some potential in NovaLogic's *Battlefield* killer. Then, the PR folks goaded us into coming back, dangling the promise of exclusive info and pictures that would blow our minds. They have. Thanks to an infusion of fresh insight and direction, *Joint Ops* now has blockbuster potential written all over it.

Enter new producer Joel Taubel, whose passion and direction have invigorated the project. "No one can stand alone in this industry," Taubel says while howling—*he* just shot down an Indonesian Super Puma helicopter with a Stinger missile. "It's a team effort all the way." Taubel's impact and the enthusiasm from the development team can be felt. Now, small but important features originally left out of the game—such as stens, voice support, a weapon-accuracy model, and balanced gameplay—are alive and kicking.



One Bad Mofo

You've seen most of these character classes before: *Demolisher*, *sniper*, *heavy gunner*, *medic*, and *engineer*. But there's one bad-acting hero, to ensure *Team Excellence* has his. The *engineer*, for example, can use a variety of explosives or fire a mortar. The vehicles and aircraft that once dominated the *Battlefield* will now have to contend with Stinger missiles and the like. Yes, ground forces now have a chance—especially the *Special Ops* close-quarter battle class—which adds more depth to gameplay. *Special Ops* units lack long-range capabilities, but they can move silently. "Being a close-quarters specialist has impact, it's incredibly fun to have with the style of the *Special Ops* class popping up in front of the enemy and opening up within five feet [of them], but we need to balance vehicles on each map," says Taubel. "We want to make sure we're in the hands of the enemy player. When he sees a small helicopter with four *Special Ops* units on the boards dropping in behind a tree line and [they] watches the bird hit off rapidly, he knows trouble is coming."

Taubel, a former QA tester who worked his way up the NovaLogic ranks, puffs up with pride. "I am just a gamer with one hell of an opportunity to work with a very talented group in an industry I love." So far, it appears the team is going well, but more important, it also has a clear direction. As a tester, Taubel paid attention to what consumers had to say, and as a hardcore gamer, he's been playing a lot of stuff for perspective—games such as *Battlefield 1942*, *Counter-Strike*, *Medal of Honor*, and *Day of Defeat*. "I am writing to place *Joint Ops* in the great game category right beside these titles," he says. Sure, they have some stiff competition from the likes of *Battlefield: Vietnam*, but Taubel doesn't seem fazed. "A game can have some great innovative technology, but if

executed poorly, it will fail. On the other hand, a well-executed but cookie-cutter game can fall into the same trap. What I can tell you is that we will come out swinging and give the competition a run for its money."

Slated for a late Q1 2004 re-release, *Joint Ops* looks primed to deliver. The improvements and added features could launch this game into stardom. **Raphael Liberator**

The Word: LETHAL



PIPELINE

Ship dates and slip dates for games in the channel

Game	Developer	Expected
Adia	Avision	October 2004
Armed & Dangerous	LucasArts	November 2004
Armored Assault	Quantum Leap Network	February 2005
Asgard's Evolution	The Adventure Company	January 2004
The Darkest Tale	Isle Interactive	Q4 2004
Battle Kings: Aquila	LucasArts	Q4 2003
Butterfield Vietnam	EA Games	March 2004
Black & White II	EA Games	March 2004
Blade and Sword	Whipal Interactive	Q4 2003
Blowout	Maxco Games	January 2004
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	Bethesda Softworks	February 2004
City of Heroes	NCsoft	March 2004
CodeName: Paradox	CDV Software	Q1 2004
Contract J.A.C.H.	Vivendi	Q4 2003
Delta Force: Black Hawk Down—Team Sabre	Novologic	February 2004
Dead Ex: Invisible War	Edco Interactive	December 2003
Dean 3	Actional	March 2004
Defier 3	Alan	March 2004
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft	2004
Egyptian Prophecy	The Adventure Company	January 2004
EverQuest II	SOE	March 2004
Evil Geniuses	Vivendi	Q3 2004
Fading Suns: Noble Alliance	Matrix Games	January 2004
Far Cry	Ubisoft	February 2004
Forever Worlds	The Adventure Company	January 2004
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	2004
Ground Control 2: Operation Exodus	NOA Productions	Q2 2004
Gold Wars	NCsoft	2004
Half-Life 2	Vivendi	April 2004
Insidious	Strategy First	Q4 2003
Jack the Ripper	The Adventure Company	January 2004
Kelly Slater's Pro Surfer	Avip	Q4 2003
Millitech	Hot Interactive	February 2004
Ukraine Is the Queen's Chronicle	1Csoft	February 2004
FLOR: The Battle for Middle-earth	EA Games	June 2004
Lords of EverQuest	SOE	December 2003
New Update		

PUBLISHER: Kuma Reality Games **DEVELOPER:** Kuma Reality Games **GENRE:** First-person news
RELEASE DATE: February 2004

Kuma War

News at 10, games at 11

Reality hits the PC, and we're not talking about Joe Millionaire. *Kuma War* is a subscription-based war game that turns current events into cannon fodder. Did you want to be a part of the squad that took down Uday and Qusay? It's now possible, thanks to satellite imagery that creates accurate maps of real-world locations.

It might sound like exploitation, but there's a surprising amount of tact here. "No real names or faces of allied forces are used in the game," says director of game development Dante Anderson. He adds that a council of military advisers ensures realistic scenarios.

The core release includes three missions played in the first or third person, but thanks to a library of textures, weapons, and vehicles, new missions will be avail-



able every week. Anderson says gamers can expect one or two months between an actual skirmish and a game scenario. Graphically, what we've seen looks passable, but the real hook here will be for news junkies. **Johnny Liu**

The Word **NEWSWORTHY**

PUBLISHER: Sierra Ent. **DEVELOPER:** Fitz Peckor **GENRE:** Action-adventure **RELEASE DATE:** Q4 2003

The Hobbit

Bilbo's excellent adventure

The *Lord of the Rings* mania is running wild. With two epic feature films under its belt (and a third looming just over the horizon), the sword-and-sorcery fantasy series is quite the hot property these days. Adding to the inevitable holiday merchandising blitz brought about by the release of the final film, Vivendi Universal asks the question, "Hey, what about the book that started it all? Has anyone exploited the license for *The Hobbit* yet?"

Assuming the unassuming role of Bilbo Baggins, you'll run, jump, climb, and fight your way through the world of Middle-earth. En vogue, this platformer will be packed with action-adventure, stealth, and puzzle-solving elements. Dunning your travels, you'll cross paths with such luminaries



That's quite a jump he's about to make.

as Gandalf the Grey, the dragon Smaug, and everyone's favorite fersl hobbit fostering a severe case of paranoid schizophrenia, Gollum. With a cutesy look and decent gameplay, it might make us forget there won't be a new movie based on this hobbit. **Ryan Scott**

The Word **PRECIOUS**

Show me every bead of
sweat on every brow of the minions
I now rule.

AMD
me.



Introducing the AMD Athlon™ 64 FX processor. Simply the most amazing gaming engine there is. See the bloodshot eyes of your quivering enemy. Get all the burning rubber, flying sparks, and white knuckles you can take. Ramp up from 32- to 64-bit and you get the power to wreak serious havoc. Long may you reign. Get the AMD Athlon 64 FX edge at www.amd.com/athlon64fx

PIPELINE

Game	Developer	Expected
● Lord of the Rings II	EA GAMES	October 2004
● Magic: The Gathering Online 2.0	Wizards of the Coast	December 2003
● The Matrix Online	Ubisoft	2004
● Metal of Honor: Pacific Assault	EA GAMES	January 2004
● Men of Valor: Vietnam	Sierra	February 2004
● Middle-earth Online	Vivendi	2004
● The Movies	Activision	June 2004
● Hydralia	Microsoft	March 2004
● Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	Q4 2004
● RipKicker	DreamCatcher	March 2004
● Football 2: Show the Pain	Wilson Interactive	Q4 2003
● Planet	AC Entertainment	Q4 2003
● Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time	Ubisoft	December 2003
● Psychovics	CDV	Q4 2003
● RC Cars	Global Interactive	Q4 2003
● Red Bull Truckie	Global Star	Q4 2004
● Return Toal War	Activision	Q3 2004
● Sims & How: Presidential Politics	FusionArts	Q2 2004
● South: Wrath of Angels	Comix	2004
● Shera Soccer	Excite	January 2004
● The Sims 2	EA GAMES	February 2004
● Splitter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow	Ubisoft	March 2004
● Stalker: Oblivion Lost	THQ	2004
● Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic	LucasArts	Q4 2003
● SWAT: Urban Justice	Sierra	December 2003
● Syberia 1	Microde	Q2 2004
● Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Sierra	Q4 2004
● The 11	Edon	Q1 2004
● Iron Smeatler 2	Microde	February 2004
● Tiber: Vengeance	Sierra	Q4 2004
● Troika: The Shelter Effect	Activision	April 2004
● Troika Pursuit: Unleashed	Alan	December 2003
● Ultima X: Odyssey	EA GAMES	February 2004
● Unreal Tournament 2004	Alan	December 2003
● Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines	Activision	March 2004
● Vegas Mike II Big	Empire	Q4 2003
● Wen and Wernice: Joan of Arc	Enlight	December 2003
● Worlock: Condemned: Outfit for Europe	Codemasters	Q2 2004
● World of Warcraft	Blizzard	June 2004

● New Update

● PUBLISHER: Wilson Interactive DEVELOPER: Pixel Plumbers GENRE: Action RPG RELEASE DATE: Q4 2003

Blade and Sword

Ancient Chinese secrets, huh?

Kung fu meets Diablo II in this chop-socky take on the action

RPG. A few years ago, Sierra tried to do it in *Throne of Darkness*; today, *Blade and Sword* looks like it's on the right track. Set in ancient China, the story unfolds over 40 levels across three chapters of gameplay.

Blade and Sword steps up the action, giving you control of each individual move and strike. Nearly 50 unique attacks—not to mention three different characters (a stealthy character, a hardened warrior, and something in between), each with its own style—makes for plenty of flashy acrobatics, even allowing you to create your own custom combo strings for maximum ass-kickage. Another fairly impressive feat:



The graphics look decent considering this game is built to work on a "blazing-fast" Pentium II 266MHz system. In addition to the standard single-player experience, you can saddle up with a multiplayer posse for either internet or LAN play. **Ryan Scott**

The Word: **SHARP**

● PUBLISHER: Alion DEVELOPER: Artillect Entertainment GENRE: MMORPG RELEASE DATE: Q4 2003

Horizons: Empire of Istaria

Prepare to explore brave new worlds

A few months ago, we gave you a taste of what lies over the horizon for this ambitious game. Now that we've had a chance to walk through its world, we wanted to report back before the game launches.

Horizons gives players plenty of interesting options not found in many other MMO games—like the ability to play as one of the most unlikely of races, a dragon (there are nine races to choose from). Beyond the ubiquitous monster-hunting experience (sorry, player-versus-player lovers—no dragon hunting here, unfortunately), characters can also take up craft skills, allowing them to forge useful weapons and armor. Cooler still are player-owned cities and housing, which create the potential of a thriving community, something most MMO games sorely lack. And for those who are worried about running out of real estate, the world's zone structure allows for constant revisions and additions,



which means there will always be plenty of new content and areas to explore. *Horizons* looks like it might hold a few interesting twists, although it remains to be seen whether it will stand out in the crowd—something few MMO games seem to be doing these days. **Ryan Scott**

The Word: **MASSIVE**

DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

Games comin' from out of nowhere

DEVELOPER **Nadeo** GENRE **Racing simulation** AVAILABILITY **2004**

Track Mania

Word on the street: Arcade racing isn't a new concept; a title that lets you build your own custom-made courses to compete on is. Wheelmen can collect all 300 blocks in the virtual construction kit's tool set by participating in individual contests (Rally, Speed, Stunt) and then erect desert, countryside, and even theme-park layouts as desired, much like your own Hot Wheels set.

Approximately 50 solo challenges will get you started, while online play compatibility lets both dial-up and broadband users put the pedal to the metal.

Sounds kinda beat: France's Nadeo is renowned for its Virtual Skipper sailing simulation franchise, not automotive offerings. Nor has the developer established any footholds in America. Additionally, a track-builder utility is only as useful as one makes it, and let's face it—not every budding map designer is a Levelord in the making. However, with proper backing from a publisher who can cultivate strong levels of community support, it could speed up charts.



DEVELOPER **Silberline Strategies** GENRE **Turn-based strategy** AVAILABILITY **Q1 2004**

Spartan

Word on the street: The ancient city of Sparta was renowned for its warriors. Taking command of the legions, you'll struggle to unite Greece in an ambitious turn-based strategy game set atop detailed handmade maps. Siege castles, battle at sea, and catapult fire over enemy walls, all in glorious 3D, or down-graded to 2D encounters if you're on a low-end machine. Internet and LAN play, provisions for diplomacy and trade, and over 100 featured nations ensure it's never the same campaign twice.

Sounds kinda beat: Silberline Strategies isn't an unknown name, although you'll wish it were...the British outfit produced such clunkers as *Chariots of War* and *Legion for Strategy First*. Therefore, we're not entirely convinced the product will live up to prelaunch sales hype. Then again, a fresh setting and brand-new start for the company—which has yet to announce a deal with its former publishing partner—could help the firm regain some credibility with a now-skeptical fan base.



DEVELOPER **Elemental Games** GENRE **Strategy** AVAILABILITY **2004**

Space Rangers

Word on the street: From Russia with love comes an ambitious strategic romp through the outer boundanes of the universe. Playing as a volunteer fighter who must defend the Galactic Council from invasion, you'll choose from five races—the maloc, pelings, humans, foeyans, or evil klissans—to buy, trade, and sell goods; engage in ship-to-ship combat, and converse with extraterrestrial NPCs. Gorgeous and teeming with subtle intricacies—plus balls-out action-combat encounters—*Space Rangers* is the heir apparent to *Star Control's* throne.

Sounds kinda beat: A hit in Eastern Europe, the game has made virtually no noise overseas while being retooled for a Western debut, which we find a tad disconcerting. Perhaps it's a cultural thing—after all, Britain's chart-topping *Private Dancer* never received a domestic unveiling—but we fear there's more to the story. Furthermore, creator Elemental Games has previously cut its teeth solely on freeware releases. Still, with a little luck, our friends might yet conquer the galaxy.



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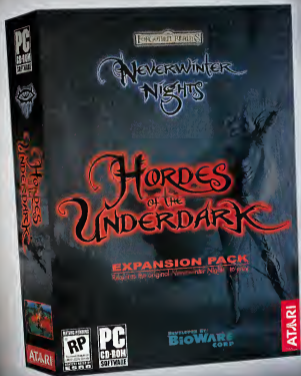
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ATARI

DOOM

id's
tour of
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the game

from

by darren gladstone

hell





Creepy, crawly triles skitter right at you.

ROBERT DUFFY MUST DIE. I'll let him finish working on *Doom 3* first, but his day is coming. The programmer is tap-dancing around my rocket fire...and when I'm just about to get the drop on him, the lights go out. How did I come to be so owned, you ask? After three years of development with minimal press information (and hundreds of stories for every gib-sized morsel of information), Id promised CGW a behind-the-scenes peek at the latest progress on *Doom 3*, no holds barred. In a single day, they'd show everything! All the big questions would be answered, all the weapons would be revealed, and previously unseen levels would be explored. Welcome, gentle readers, to your *Doom*.

Hellfire, Texas

In the same building that houses the office of the mayor of Mesquite, Texas, sits the unassuming headquarters of Id Software. Once inside, it's obvious these offices aren't for selling insurance. There's a 61 THX-certified conference room equipped with a plasma monitor and a Falcon Northwest PC with *Doom 3* emblazoned in neon lights on the side. Our demo driver for today is lead designer Tim Willits. He fires up the single-player game, talking about how he "wants to scare the s--- out of people." Since the only thing scary about the original *Doom* for me was the multi-player competition, I take Willits' warning with a grain of salt.

Do we really need to go into the proprietary physics, shadows, and A.I. being poured into the *Doom 3* engine? It's been praised, it looks good, and everyone has said their two cents. Seeing it firsthand, however, makes me feel like I'm on the set of *Alien*. The slow pacing, claustrophobic environments, and use of shadows all add a great deal to the game's palpable tension.



"Hello? Tim? Where'd you go?"

"The pacing is intentionally slow," says Willits. "After all, we put all this work into [the environments] and we want to give people the opportunity to explore them. Otherwise, what's the point?" He says this while unloading buckshot into a zombie commando. A whiplike tentacle snakes out from its right arm and lashes at the screen. There are plenty of other details in the carnage, including a bloody handprint on the wall and a disemboweled body hunched over a table. Wait. Was that the sound of a cracked pipe hissing...or something else?

Willits opens his in-game PDA for the next mission objective. The PDA contains maps, goals, e-mails retrieved from bodies, and



It's funny at 33 years old being an old man in the [game] industry. I wrote my first game for the Apple II, *Shadowforge*, about 16 years ago. —John Carmack

❑ Stop us if you've heard this one: A revenant, an imp, and a space marine walk into a bar...

so on. It's a cool little window into the world, but if you read some information carefully, you'll find hints to secret areas, inside jokes, and other minutia. For example, at one point you read an e-mail that you've downloaded to your PDA from a supervisor in it, you're asked to fix the loose floor panels in the Alpha Labs before someone falls through and is injured. If you read the e-mail, you'll know where to find the broken floor panels, which lead to a secret underground passage. You can then sneak up behind a number of demons and zombies and kill them before they can ambush you.

Back in the game, a stray shot at a window suddenly breaches

the base's atmosphere. Oxygen is getting sucked out to the Martian surface. You'll die from suffocation if you're not careful, but the developers, unfortunately, had to kill the visual effect of getting sucked out along with the air. "The calculations for the physics of shattering glass are bad enough, but trying to factor in [getting sucked out a window] is just too much," says Willits.

Now, we're walking in the dark and escorting the NPC Ed through some corridors. Lit only by Ed's lantern, imps pop out from the shadows, and I jump back for a second, laughing. These aren't some pixelated little buggers. They are detailed and coming right at you. It feels like a movie. Don't want to know what ❑

how to get past burning man



► Here is Kimbrey's friend "Bambi." Check out this model progression to get an idea of what goes into creating the fiery undead.



► It's a little hard to show out-scenes in a magazine, so hopefully you can make due with some storyboard shots. In this scene, Jim finds out the baby is his.

► This "movie" is about just yet? Skip the next section if you don't want the story line spoiled.

Spoiler alert!

You start the game as a marine walking through a research outpost on Mars. "You don't jump into the action right away. As soon as you want to begin, you report for duty and go out on patrol," Willis says. Before long, a gateway to hell opens, leaving you as one of the few survivors. Ah, but seeing as how you played the original *Doom*, you already knew that. But did you know that there's an ancient civilization buried deep in the heart of Mars? Did you know that this had also happened centuries ago and the

demons were beaten back with some ultimate weapon?

While the folks at Id didn't have any artwork to show of this nifty bit of alien gear, we can give you a hint: The new weapon, called the soul cube, has nothing to do with Heilasser. This contraption, though, was powerful enough to beat back the demonic hordes once. Realizing its power, the hordes grabbed it and brought it back to hell to make sure it couldn't be used again—which means you're going to have to go down into the bowels of the underworld, where this superweapon is being guarded, retrieve it, and stop the inevitable invasion of Earth. OK, end of spoiler.

Hot pockets

Deep in the caverns of Mars, at an excavation site, we start seeing signs of a previous culture. A huge temple with

FUN FACT:

The shotgun from the original *Doom* was actually modeled on a plastic toy gun. It still sits in Id's lobby.

writings on the wall means more secrets for you to uncover. Little pockets of hell are busting through the walls. Normal areas meld with brinstone, and pentagrams appear on the ground. But there's no time to see the sights, as a couple of revenants start launching plasma balls and a demon floats overhead. Next come waves of zombie security guards armed with shotguns. A couple shots connect, sending you reeling.

This is one part of the game that surprised me—the visceral feel of each blow. Whether you get slashed by a zombie or take a shotgun blast to the grill, your "head" snaps away, making it tough to focus and aim properly for a few seconds. And, thanks to the per-poly hit detection, the strength of that shot and the



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Here's the hell-spirt, ready for a night on the town.

FUN FACT:

The face of the space marine you control in the game is that of Kevin Cloud, artist and co-owner of Id Software. Nobody has told him yet.

▣ subsequent blow vanes. Some bits hit your armor, but the stray that actually connect with flesh are going to do more damage...and every projectile is precisely calculated with the physics engine, whether you're taking potshots or just knocking out the glass from a window.

Visions of hell

The art in *Doom 3* looks like an H.R. Giger nightmare. Lead artist Kenneth Scott starts by showing the cast of pre-zombified characters, each with different types of heads and effects. He uses a blending technique to shift a woman from the normal state to a sallow zombie. "Early shots we've sent out only have a couple zombies in them. People are probably thinking they all look alike, but they don't," says Scott. There are lots of gruesome ways to die, and they'll all be on display. Various chunks from a body could be missing, an exposed skull here, no stomach there. Then there are some personal favorites, like the security guards who still wear cracked goggles after their eyeballs have burst. There are effects also being added to some, like "Burmie," for example. This zombie model has flames licking off parts of his body, and you can see the charred flesh underneath.

But this is saying nothing of the bigger, tougher denizens of hell: fearsome hellknights, Thing-inspired trites that make *Half-Life*'s headcrabs look like the catch of the day, and lots of as-yet-unnamed creatures. There's a speedy demon boss that skitters around and has a pouch in the back that looks like it'll spawn little tritlings. Scott's favorite: the sinister hell cherub. "Hey, heaven's got 'em," he says. Not like this though: Twisted baby faces top tiny, disfigured bodies that fly around with insect wings.

A huge monstrosity fills the screen for a split second. "Oops, I don't think I was supposed to show you that!" The unnamed



▣ There have been a few graphic improvements from the first *Doom*: Check out the (in) from then and from now.



▣ This agonized contortion jumped out of the disfigurement and scored the hell out of it.

Jurassic demon is so big it can't be seen in its entirety in one screen. While Scott can't go into detail on what it is, he assures me that this isn't the final boss. Now that's a scary thought.

If you want scary, though, you also need to get a feel for the animation work being put into *Doom 3*. "The trick is to add little sequences in the game engine that don't pull you out of the game," says lead animator Fred Nilsson, who was one of the animators for *Shrek*. So how does creating that movie's gingerbread man torture sequence compare to working on a game like *Doom 3*? "Games are a lot more creative. You've got to do a lot of things, like creating models and setting up the characters and skeletons."

The large number of bones in each character allows for detailed animation. Whether you're observing a marine's face contorted in pain, seeing a mouth form words, or simply noticing sets of eyes darting around the room, it all sells the realism beyond the ▣

weapons that spell doom

While Id had only a few renders available, we learned about all the weapons that will be in the final game. Not pictured here are the flashlight, grenades, the rocket launcher, the infamous BFG, and the soul cube.



▣ Chainsaw



▣ Machine gun



▣ Pistol



▣ Shotgun



▣ Plasma gun

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A cinematic action scene featuring Max Payne, a man in a dark suit and patterned tie, lying on his back. He is holding a handgun in his right hand, which is firing a bullet. The background is filled with bright, intense flames and smoke, suggesting a chaotic and violent environment. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on the character's face and the muzzle flash of the gun.

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carmack on
Carmack

"I'm not nearly as big of a game player as a lot of the guys [at Id]. Part of taking a step back from being a designer to the directorial role is that I may not be the best person to design games. I can code certain aspects, but I'd rather have passionate people that have a vision they want to get in. I'm more the engineer and technician who wants something to work well."

John Carmack

Read more from Carmack at [top.com](#)



■ You'll feel like you're on the set of *Alien*.



■ Meet Fred Nilsson, lead animator and the sister end boss of Id Software.

■ **graphics** And, after a two-day motion capture marathon, it's easy to overlay mannerisms, staggers, and the like.

But the really creative part is being able to place cameras down and edit the scene. Using *Maya*, and the in-game engine, Nilsson briefly yanks the camera out of your control. The next 10 seconds in one scene focus on a pinky demon knocking over a railing, jumping down, and ramming a door. Only then do you get control back. Finally, Nilsson gets to be the director.

Technically, you'll get to be one as well, since the editing software will be available when *Doom 3* ships. This is Rob Duffy's domain, programmer and the keeper of the tools.

"The fact that we include all the tools, source maps, and textures on the disc is big. This is the first time this has been done." You won't get the 3D modeling (*Lightwave*) and animation (*Maya*) tools that we used, but there are light versions and free programs available on the Web. "Because of the things the engine can do, we can expect to see some great things [from the modding community]."

You see, *Doom 3* may be intentionally slow-paced, but that doesn't mean you can't get some serious speed. The physics engine allows for vehicles, if desired. You can also get fast and furious combat, as in the upcoming *Quake 4* (Duffy confirmed that Raven Software is working on *Quake 4* right now as tandem with the Id folks, but other than that, mum's the word.) What's Duffy looking forward to? More single-player mod offerings. "All the mods lately have been multiplayer. If you have a team that wants to break into the business with a commercial venture, a single-player mod is the best way to get noticed."

In order for those coders to get crankin', though, the game has

to come out. "Early ads said that *Doom 3* was coming in 2003," says Id CEO Todd Hollenshead, "but we knew that probably wasn't going to happen." People are getting anxious, though—so anxious enough to distribute the game early. A year ago, the E3 build was leaked to the public, and the recent news of the *Half-Life 2* source code leak brought up some painful memories.

So when will *Doom 3* ship? Hollenshead gives the stock answer on cue: "It'll be done when it's done." Looks like we're going to have to settle this with a deathmatch before I hit the road.

"Let's get ready to GIMMIB"

The single-player game may be intentionally slow, but the pace is kicked up for multiplayer. No adrenaline meters required on the six to eight maps that'll come with the game when it ships. You'll be able to manipulate switches, activate security cameras, move objects, close shutters, and turn off lights. There may only be four people playing at a time, but Hollenshead explains, "We knew we were onto something because we started lining up to play it in the office."

Imagine moving a canister in front of a doorway and turning off the lights. You hide in a corner and—whoosh—the door opens. All you can see is the silhouette of your enemy in the doorway and it's time to open fire. Just pray your target isn't in berserker mode.

Scott describes the berserker mode as the sci-fi drug "red-eye" that was seen in an episode of *Cowboy Bebop*. As you slap the berserker helmet on, the world goes crimson; you run uncontrollably at a full sprint, and you're only able to punch or club someone with your flashlight for ridiculous amounts of damage. And all the while, you're maniacally screaming.

Which catches us up to where we are now. I've already been brained twice with a flashlight by a berserking Marty Stratton, and Duffy once again has me in his sights. Click I forget to reload. His shotgun blast catches part of my armor and sends my "head" reeling. The visceral screen shake, combined with the 6.3 surround sound, makes me feel the impact of every bit of buckshot. It's over. I come in second place with seven kills. The sad part? I know they were going easy on me.

There's always next time—especially since Nilsson waits in the wings like some sinister end boss. Everyone in the office fears his deadly aim, but not me...not yet, at least. I'll be in training until I head back down to see whatever's next from Id. ■

OXM

9.4

EGM

9.5

Game Informer

9.5

GMR

10

IGN

9.5

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HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

Ho, ho, ho!



Oh, never mind. Who are we kidding?

We're writing this in October! We haven't even bought our Gollum masks for Halloween yet, and we're supposed to pretend it's Christmas?

Well, forget it! Not this time! We're no poseurs!

But, still, we do have a great list of, uh, holiday recommendations for you here. That fact hasn't changed. This is indeed our giant annual gift guide to all the best games, hardware, gadgets, and more, for the upcoming holiday season. OK? We hope you like it. 'Tis the season, oh dreidel dreidel, etc., etc.

Just please don't ask us to exude any holiday spirit right this second. Because, frankly, we're not there yet. We'll get there eventually, but not right now. Enjoy our gift guide. Find yourself and your loved ones some good presents. Just dim the lights here and leave us alone. We promise to cheer up by December.

☒ **By the CGW staff**



Simpsons: Hit & Run



IT'S 10 YEARS coming and borrows liberally from *Grand Theft Auto*, but the first great Simpsons game is cause to rejoice: The story line is lovably idiotic, the dialogue is hilarious, and the gameplay offers addictive action with tons to do. Best Simpsons game. Ever.



Galactic Civilization

IN SPACE, no one can hear you scream—and scream you will, at the scum of the universe as they strategize around you. A great design, 36 races, and branching paths equate to stellar strategy.

Armed & Dangerous

"MONTY PYTHON meets *Star Wars*" is a good way to describe this screwy take on an action game. You've got an arsenal of messed-up weapons and you need to unload on something between laughs.



Knights of the Old Republic

THE BEST Xbox game of the year has made the jump to the PC. Bioware has created an instant classic in this ridiculously addictive *Star Wars* game. It's action-packed, full of adventure, stuffed with great character choices, and truer in spirit to the license than George Lucas' last two movies. Maybe these guys should take over?

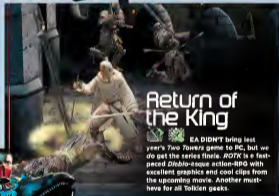


Rise of Nations

THE BRAINCHILD of Alpha Centauri mastering Britain Reynolds, *Rise of Nations* is a clever amalgamation of real-time and turn-based strategy games. Take control of any of 18 different civilizations as you vie for supremacy, waging war against up to seven other players online.

Return of the King

EA DIDN'T bring last year's *Two Towers* game to PC, but we do get the series finale. *ROTK* is a fast-paced *Dieblo*-esque action-RPG with excellent graphics and cool clips from the upcoming movie. Another must-have for all Tolkien geeks.



X2: X-Men United DVD

EVEN BETTER than the first movie, *X2: X-Men United* is one of the best comic-book movies ever, with smarts, humor, a great villain, and a killer opening sequence featuring Nightcrawler Purge the ick of Daredevil with this DVD.



Battlefield 1942 Expansions

BOTH *The Road to Rome* and *Secret Weapons of World War II* are excellent expansions to the best multiplayer shooter of the last few years. These pecks are must-haves for all *BF1942* fans, and a good excuse for newbies to dive in.





Unreal Tournament 2004



THE NEWEST generation of

Unreal Tournament restores the beloved assault mode and also provides some excellent onslaught levels and new vehicles. Get ready to once again brace yourselves as you listen for the unforgettable voice of the announcer yelling, "VEHICULAR MANSLAUGHTER!"



Prince of Persia



THIS GAME is making jaws drop. The graphics, the presentation, and the story all combine to make you want to stay up 1,001 nights to play it. Game god Jordan Mechner lends his ability to tell a story and create a good game to this terrific action-adventure title.



Call of Duty



FROM THE creators of Allied Assault, Call of Duty builds on Medal of Honor-style play with more scripted events, better A.I., and more cinematic battles. The graphics have been improved over the *NOV* series, but the enhanced A.I. alone makes this game worthwhile.

Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004: A Century of Flight



LOADS OF both current and historical aircraft, super-realistic controls, a dynamic weather system, and a wealth of options all contribute to form one of the most excellent aviation simulators ever. Easily one of Microsoft's best efforts in the genre.



Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield



INCORPORATING the Unreal engine into the Rainbow Six series was a smart move. You get amazing-looking visuals, easy-to-master gameplay, and, finally, the ability to see which weapon you're firing.



Raiders of Lost Ark DVD set



IF LONG-OVERDUE boxed sets have a name, it's Indiana Jones. Paramount is putting together the comprehensive DVD set with all the films, plus an extra disc stacked with documentaries and never-before-seen footage from all three films.

Freelancer

SPACE PIRATE, bounty hunter, or old-fashioned interstellar hero? Those are the choices that await you in this sweeping space opera. Sure, there's a story in *Freelancer*, but the real rewards in this game come from exploring the incredibly huge star systems, upgrading your ship, and blowing up bad guys. Available at a galaxy near you.



Tron 2.0

THE BEST licensed computer versus humans game of the year isn't the craptacular *Enter the Matrix*—it's a graphically gorgeous and surprisingly deep shooter based on a 20-year-old Disney movie. Taking a small cue from *System Shock 2*, *Tron 2.0* drapes a very cool RPG factor over witty run-and-gun action to create one of the most memorable gaming experiences of the year.

Age of Mythology: The Titans

THIS expansion to last year's hit RTS game continues the epic battles of the Greek, Norse, and Egyptian pantheons, who now have a fourth faction to contend with—the legendary Atlanteans. Additional units and god powers round out the new features.



Family Guy DVD boxed sets

THIS short-lived series set records for the most random scatological references in a single half-hour episode. These two volumes are fraikin' sweet, containing the entire run of the show, as well as one episode that never made it past the censors.



Grand Theft Auto: Vice City

WHAT'S BETTER than running around town, stealing cars, and beating people up with your trusty baseball bat? Running around town, stealing cars, and beating people up with your trusty baseball bat while listening to Michael Jackson, Run-DMC, and Mr. Mister! This sequel to *CGW's* Game of the Year is even more fun than the original.



Silent Storm

SQUAD-BASED tactical strategy games are pretty few and far between these days, but *Silent Storm* aims to rekindle the magic of classic games like *X-Com*. There's plenty of Axis and Ally goodness for gamers to explore. And who doesn't enjoy some good clean Nazi-exploding fun?

Korsun Pocket

IT ONLY sounds like a cheese-and-chili-stuffed microwavable snack product—in reality, it's pretty much the best hex-based war game ever. *Korsun* brilliantly distills gameplay into a series of strategic decisions, thanks in large part to a slick interface that lets gamers game while the computer does the boring stuff.

IL-2 Sturmovik: Forgotten Battles

THE EXPANSION for *IL-2 Sturmovik*, *Forgotten Battles* brings flight-sim fanatics 45 new planes, such as the German Stuka and American P-47, as well as 30 more missions. Perfect for the arm-chair pilot in your life.

Halo Invades PC



HALO

Join the battle. Live the epic adventure yourself. Unlock the secrets of Halo to save mankind from the ruthless Covenant swarms. Take the fight online in customizable head-to-head multiplayer competitions against up to 15 rival Master Chiefs. Break open a redesigned arsenal complete with the wicked new fuel rod gun. Then go mobile in the redeveloped Rocket Warthog and Banshee. This is Halo evolved.



New with online multiplayer



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www.microsoft.com/Games/Halo





F1 Challenge '99-'02

BOASTING advanced physics and superrealistic detail, *F1 Challenge '99-'02* will have you competing against real drivers, such as Mika Hakkinen and Michael Schumacher, as well as other amateurs over the Internet.

WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne

BLIZZARD'S *WarCraft III* expansion is a solid buy for *WarCraft* fans, with a huge 28-mission campaign, a great new RPG-esque module, and nice multi-player enhancements. A good hefty slab of gaming from Blizzard.



Nomad MuVo NX

CREATIVE LABS adds some much-needed features to its 128MB MuVo MP3 player: insert the MuVo into a USB port and it pops up as a 128MB drive. Drag the MP3s over and you're ready to go. The MuVo NX adds more features, such as recording capabilities and a small LCD.



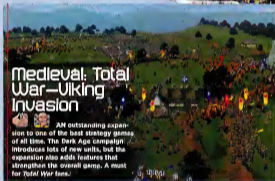
Pioneer DVR-810H DVD Recorder/80 GB TiVo

THIS IS officially the first sign of the end of your social life: an 80-hour TiVo DVR and DVD-recorder built into the same deck. Record shows, burn them onto DVD, or watch whatever movies you brought home. But do you have the 1,300 bones to pay for this beauty? We sure don't, which is why we're being extra good for Santa this year.



PlanetSide

NOTHING can replace that feeling of being in the middle of your first 200-person fire/fight to take a tower. This sci-fi first-person shooter has you picking sides, firing up, and hopping into vehicles.



Medieval: Total War—Viking Invasion

AN outstanding expansion to one of the best strategy games of all time. The *Dark Age* campaign introduces lots of new units, but the expansion also adds features that strengthen the overall game. A must for *Total War* fans.

Max Payne 2

THE MORE we play it, the more it looks like *Max Payne 1.5*, but that doesn't mean it's bad. It's just more of the same great action, with better graphics and sexy stickkick Moss Six.



Lord of the Rings: Two Towers Extended Edition DVD

OUT ON November 18, and owned by every self-respecting geek minnie-late, the extended edition DVD adds a whopping 40 minutes of new footage and, from what we've seen, looks spectacular—including an appearance by Boromir. We want it, my precious...



Need for Speed: Underground

THIS IS not a racing sim. Inspired by the underground street-racing scene, the game lets you get your hands on 20 different import racers, and customize them for some serious night driving. We dig the sweet detailing, and the possibility for online multiplayer bragging rights is a cool hook. Pick up a copy and start challenging your friends today.



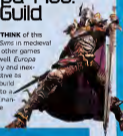
Deus Ex 2: Invisible War

AMBITIOUS sci-fi shooter loaded with wild special effects. Action gamers looking for something deep—especially *System Shock 2* fans—will eat it up.



Europa 1400: The Guild

THINK of this game as *The Sims* in medieval drag—with 15 other games thrown in as well. *Europa 1400* is weirdly and inexplicably addictive as you strive to build your family into a political and financial force in ye olden times.



Dark Fall: The Journal

THIS surprisingly scary adventure game increases tension by forcing you to 90-degree turns as you navigate your way through an abandoned train station to solve the mystery of your brother's disappearance. Great puzzles and fast pacing (transitions, no lengthy cut-scenes or dialogue trees) make this a must-have for all adventure fans.



Madden NFL 2004

WHEN you're the only game in town, it's easy to get complacent. Thankfully, the folks at EA Sports are loath to rest on their laurels and continue to improve on this storied franchise. *Madden 2004* may go down as one of the best *Maddens* ever.



FragBox

TIRED OF lugging that 40-pound tower to LAN parties? Falcon latches on to the small-form-factor PC craze with its \$1,000 *FragBox*, a 14-pound machine with a GeForce FX 5600 graphics card and a 2.6GHz Pentium 4 processor.



The Office DVD boxed set

GOD help you if your office is anything like this. Pilead like a documentary, this show chronicles the day-to-day cringe-inducing events at the office of a paper company. Imagine our entire magazine huddled around a TV set, watching each episode and groaning. Yes, the series is that good.



Freedom Fighters

AMERICA is history. In this grim alternate reality, the United States has been viciously attacked by the Soviets. A band of freedom fighters comes together to fight for Old Glory in this combination of shooting, stealth, and team-leading gameplay.



Rocket Mania

RATHER than putting out your mother's eye setting off those celebratory holiday fireworks, try your hand at these digital explosions. Guaranteed to waste days of your life.

Savage

THIS RTS-shooter hybrid is not perfect and it's not for everyone, but it gets major points for truly bringing something new to online multiplayer gaming. Just make sure you get into a game with good commanders, and don't be too snobby about having to mine rocks now and then.



Senheiser PC-150 headset

FEELING lonesome tonight? Strap on Senheiser's headset and chat away with the guys while playing your favorite games. Sturdy, comfortable, and equipped with a fully functional microphone, this gear can take a beating.

Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic

IT'S A lot easier to endure the demise of the Heroes of Might and Magic series with Shadow Magic in the world. This is the best turn-based fantasy-strategy game in about five years. Every part of this game sparkles: the brusing A.I., the strategic depth, the beautiful artwork, and a random-map generator that guarantees months of all-smashing fun.

Tapwave Zodiac

DON'T dismiss it as a Game Boy wannabe. This Palm OS 5 PDA satisfies all your entertainment cravings. It can not only play a host of slick new titles, but it also supports hundreds of games currently available for Palm—not to mention MP3 and Divx support.

Strangers With Candy: Season One

"WHY DOES your finger smell like his ass?" Lines like these make this two-disc DVD set of the late Comedy Central cult hit a veritable gold mine of catchphrases. Like an *MTV school Special* on incredibly bad acid, each episode is sld-splitting hilarious. "Who wants cake?"



The Hulk

BAD day at work/school/the holding cell? Here's your antidote: a butt-simple action game in which the focus is squarely on smash smash SMASH! Not innovative gameplay, but this game does a great job of putting you in the Hulk's purple trousers so that you can tear a big scar through the game world.



Toontown

THE best-designed MMORPG on the market right now is one for younger kids, made by Disney. Three CGW dads have kids who are hopelessly addicted to Toontown, which does a great job of balancing group dynamics with solo play—in a secure, safe online setting. Very good stuff.

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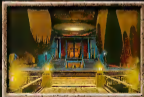
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Reviews

We love games,
we hate games



P PUBLISHER: Eidos **D** DEVELOPER: Remedy **G** GENRE: Shooter **E** ESRB RATING: M **R** REQUIRED: Pentium III 500MHz, 256MB RAM, 1.5GB install, 32MB 3D card
R RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 1.8GHz, 512MB RAM, 1.5GB 3D card



Max Payne 2

Maximum Payne with the minimum changes



C Cuddling up in the corner.



T Tillimber...



S Sure is a lot of grout on those walls.



102

Call of Duty Does it win the Medal of Honor (wink-wink, nudge-nudge) or is it 4F?



NHL 2K4 With Dorothy Hamill leaving the Ice Capades, this may be the greatest show on ice.



124

Temple of Elemental Evil Yet another port to the PC—only this time it's from a pen-and-paper game.

The truth hurts, love stinks, and a little Payne is good...Max Payne, that is. In this sequel to the award-winning original, the kinks have been pistol-whipped until smooth, resulting in a tightly wrapped, short, sweet—and familiar—ballet of death.

At first, I rolled my eyes at the subtitle *A Film Noir Love Story?* Sounds campy in retrospect, the subtitle sums up the entire story quite accurately. It's a stylized murder mystery that draws Max to Mona Sax, the mysterious hot-to-trot killer. It's over-the-top and slightly ridiculous, but the story is consistent and better executed than in the first game.

In the original *Max Payne*, the inclusion of the occult and secret societies stuck out like a sore thumb, as if there were three plotlines lashed together. The narrative is now more focused. Instead of dark hoodoo, the thematic love angle is centralized. Plot-advancing cut-scenes flow smoothly, and there's even some self-aware late innuendo comedy pitched in to contrast against the "I take myself far too seriously" attitude of Max Payne.

Max's personality hasn't changed much—he pretty much shoots anything with a pulse and a bad attitude—but his moves have gotten a slight upgrade. There are now two levels of bullet-time: the standard shoot-dodge, and a higher level slowdown, where all of the colors fade into a beautiful bronze glow. Visually, bullet-time has a gritty uniqueness, but doesn't offer a significant game play change as there just isn't a hard-lined strategy between the two bullet-times.

Payne's other new ability is an ammo-depleting sprawl after a dodge dive. Like the new bullet time, it isn't a dramatic addition, but it adds to the feel of control.

Max's personality hasn't changed much, but his moves have gotten a slight upgrade.

Melee attacks have their own independent hockey but for some reason there's still a crouch move that doesn't add squat to the game. It should have been a dodge modifier or at least implemented some level of stealth to the game play.

Stealth just isn't a part of the "run in, dodge, and shoot" game flow, though I wish the enemies had been given that added edge of reality. Compared to the original, enemies do feel improved, but there's still that search and destroy A.I. rather than a thinking group mentality. Enemies will at least give chase from one room to the next this time around.

Getting physical

Thanks to an injection of physics, the



Backwards trip. But nice shadows.

world feels more alive: barrels can be rolled down the stairs. Boxes can be batted like soccer balls. Most important, Payne's head won't fly through walls as he dashes about and enemies die dramatic deaths that won't be cut in half by walls.

While the physics add to the sense of the world, these adjustments are more aesthetic than useful. Enemies don't react physically to one other. I could shotgun an enemy and watch him fly right through the enemy behind him.

Physics just doesn't affect character-to-character interaction. So close, only to miss the last question in the spelling bee. There are some other lesser issues such as how hands stay in a claw like grip or that the eyes and lip sync are inconsistently expressive. Nonetheless, the texturing

blood-stained, tightrope walks are gone. Hurrah! Dreams get right to the point as storytelling entities and not frustrating time bleeders. Even with the maze elimination, the game clocks in at the same length—on average, about 10 hours.

The game duration will assuredly irk most of us who wanted a longer game this time around. Of course we all want the most bang for our buck, but at the same time, everything fits together better than before. After finishing the game, I still feel like I'd eventually want to play it again on a harder level, plus there's an enemy regenerating time challenge to grapple with.

Bullet-time is like whips and black leather—it's oh-so-exciting at first, but after awhile it becomes routine. Ultimately, *Max Payne 2* is like a new braided whip—less kink with a sharper sting, and fun right up until you don't want any more.

By Johnny Liu

Verdict ★★★★★

Improvement on nearly every facet, but doesn't mess with the formula.

My name is Jeff Green...I spilled salsa on my shirt.



PUBLISHER Eidos **DEVELOPER** Pyro **GENRE** Real-time strategy/puzzle **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Pentium II 700, 256MB RAM, 2GB install, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER** LAN, Internet (2-12 players)

Commandos 3: Destination Berlin

So hard it can make a grown man cry—and that's just the tutorial



Stalingrad, only with a lot more British commandos than you might remember

Commandos 3 reduced me to tears. Not tears of joy or even sorrow, but hot, salty tears of anger and frustration. Now sure, the first two Commandos games, with their legendarily punishing difficulty, came close to breaking my spirit at times. The difference in Commandos 3 is that the molar-grinding began not in some show-stopper of a mission, but in the tutorial as I tried to have my spy distract an enemy guard and discovered there seemed to be no onscreen button, menu, or key combo that would perform this action. "Click on the interface," the manual helpfully noted. The presence of an actual tutorial suggested, for a fleeting moment, that Pyro had relented on the infamous newbie-crushing toughness of the Commandos

series. But when a hardened CGW reviewer and veteran of the first two games is driven, weeping, to seek spoilers from a U.K. website to get through said tutorial (right-click the coat hanger, if you must know), it is an ominous sign.

Mi-2 hard

And sure enough, the actual missions start out at impossible and quickly move up to stuff that would make even Tom Cruise give up with a sob. I must have hit the Quick Load button at least a hundred

times, no exaggeration, during the course of the first Stalingrad level.

Why is it so hard? First off, there's that interface, which could at best be called "cunious," or maybe "baroque." Players of the first two games will be used to this, but they'll also remember that a bevy of hotkeys, once memorized, made the arcane mouse-driven widgetry more or less bearable. But alas, for unknown reasons, the hotkeys have been removed or altered to the point of uselessness. For instance, in Commandos 2, you could

There's a fine line between "challenging" and "I think I'd rather go play Counter-Strike."



Large, random explosions tend to rock the scenery.

press M if you needed to ready a machine gun. In *Commandos 3*, you must use the Q and W buttons to scroll through your entire selection of weapons to find the one you want. Other fun control tweaks include the reversal of the standard mouse action, forcing you to right-click on a soldier to select him and left-click to perform an action. None of these can be remapped or reconfigured.

The control problems are aggravated by the ill-advised decision to focus more heavily on action rather than the traditional sneaking about. But at its heart, *Commandos* is a puzzle game dressed up in war-movie props. It's not *Command & Conquer* and was never meant to be, as you'll discover when you struggle hopelessly to coordinate multiple characters in one of the pitched battle scenarios.

Cluster bomb

Even the missions that are more classically structured have illogical and frustrating obstacles, such as arbitrary time limits, cryptic or ambiguous mission objectives, confusing camera angles, enemies with superhuman aim and range, extremely dark maps with no gamma correction, and so on. All too often, you end up working

around event triggers or the quirks of the enemy AI rather than planning like a "real" commando might to accomplish your goals. And in a blundering throwback to the first game, you once again lose instantly if any of your men die, where *Commandos 2* quite sensibly let a friendly character revive "unconscious" units.

Why? What sadistic designer decided that the world was waiting for a *Commandos* game even more viciously hard than its predecessors? I suppose you have to salute Pyro for bucking the trend of ever-shorter, ever-easier games (hello, *Max Payne 2*) for a title with such monster difficulty, but there's a fine line between "challenging" and "I think I'd rather go play *Counter-Strike*," and *Commandos 3* rolls over that line like a heavy panzer tank crushing a Polish cavalry brigade.

Here and there you see hints of the game that might have been. The game's resolution is locked at a dated 800x600, but it still manages to look sharp. If the 3D interiors are a bit bland, the outdoor environments are lovingly detailed and now feature pretty special effects, such as rain, snow, and aerial bombardments.



Can you survive the tutorial?

Clearly a lot of effort went into making the settings seem realistic and alive...but that just makes the final product all the more frustrating. There's multiplayer, yes—but it features only a lame deathmatch rather than a cooperative mode that might make some of those brutally difficult levels more feasible. There are also rumors on the Internet of users experiencing some fairly dire bugs (unseen by me), up to and including saved games spontaneously deleting themselves.

Disasterpiece theatre

In the end, number three is a big step backward for the *Commandos* franchise. While the game would like to evoke *Saving Private Ryan* and other WWII films, sadly the movie that actually comes to mind while playing a *Groundhog Day*, only with Nazis and a Quick Load button, *Like Dad Murney*, you're tripped in an existential nightmare, cursed to replay the same moments over and over and over again in the forlorn hope of somehow, someday, getting it right. **Jason Kipalko**

Verdict ★★☆☆

Maybe the toughest game ever, and not in a good way.





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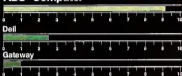


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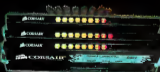
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PUBLISHER: EA Games **DEVELOPER:** EA Games **GENRE:** Real-time strategy **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 400, 128MB RAM, 1.5GB install, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED: 256MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2-8 players)

Command & Conquer: Generals—Zero Hour

Generals gets a promotion

And with the simple click of an option box, the fighting is over: Westwood has finally—and posthumously—lost the War to Do Things Its Own Way, Come Hell or High Water. After eight years, the Zero Hour expansion finally brings to Command & Conquer the option to use the right-click interface that's standard to almost every other RTS. This is just one sign that the series is becoming a mature, sleek, and refined game that tries to please its fans rather than force them to adapt.

Developed internally by Electronic Arts, Zero Hour is one of those expansions that doesn't add new stuff so much as meticulously rework old stuff. In a way, it's what Generals should have been. But in addition to new twists on old tricks, there's a lot of new content—enough that it doesn't play like a mod-in-a-box. After Zero Hour, there's no going back to vanilla Generals.

The three sides are still the only sides: the flexible United States; the devious Arabs, or, GLA; and the muscular Chinese. All of them have new toys,

some subtle (the United States can research chemical suits to counter GLA toxins; the GLAs can build fake buildings) and some dramatic (those GLA motorcycles are hell on wheels, and that Chinese Helix helicopter floats like a butterfly and stings like a friggin' bear).

What's more, each side now has three "sub-sides," if you will, represented by generals. Each general exaggerates a particular advantage, using unique units and bonuses to highlight themes like aircraft, chemical weapons, infantry, or stealth. They do a great job of stretching the gameplay just past the point of fairness and balance, capturing that heady sense of "Who cares if it's even, let's just blow some stuff up!" You might be frustrated when the Chinese infantry general burrushes your USA superweapons general before you can get your particle cannons online. But you can bet that Chinese infantry general is going to be just as frustrated in the next game when your GLA toxin general is spraying down his

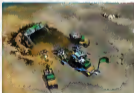


❑ The GLA's new gamma toxin comes in a bright shade of purple.

Who cares if the sides are even—let's just blow some stuff up!



❑ The USA's new laser-targeting Avengers are even better against air units.



❑ The GLA's new sneak-attack tunnels let them pop up where they're least expected.

human wave with the new gamma anthrax. These are perfect for fast and intense games that you might win or lose in the first 15 minutes, but what's really needed is an option for blindsided selection in multiplayer games. Get ready to endure all kinds of new cheese tactics online. Then go forth and do likewise.

There are three heavily scripted mini-campaigns, as well as a challenge mode that's essentially a series of puzzles in which you have to beat each general. But

now the A.J. will use the game's gimmicks and even react to what you're doing, which finally makes Generals a viable skirmish game. Even the friendly A.J. does a much better job of fighting and surviving. There are still some interface problems, but Command & Conquer is better than it's ever been. **Tom Chick**

Verdict ★★★★★

CAC is better than it's ever been.

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PUBLISHER: Gathering **DEVELOPER:** Firaxis Studios **GENRE:** Strategy **2005 RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 650, 64MB RAM, 800MB **INSTALL:** RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 1.2GHz, 128MB RAM **MULTIPLAY:** None

Space Colony

In space, no one can hear you scream at your roommates

Space Colony appropriates some of *The Sims*' basic gameplay, but builds a more traditional game around its core ideas. Still, the similarities between the two titles are strong, and if you've ever wondered what would happen if your Sims were sent to remote planets populated with aggressive creatures, it's a safe bet that *Space Colony* will satisfy your curiosity.

There are two distinct mechanics at work, and they are joined by a clever conceit: Your overall goals vary from planet to planet and scenario to scenario. Sometimes, you'll have simple goals, like harvesting a certain amount of resources; at other times, the tasks are more complex, such as building a golf course on a barren rock or rescuing another colony that is under assault.

To achieve these goals, you simply assign jobs to your employees and they'll get to it. More often than not, the challenge comes not in completing objectives, but rather in making sure your employees are fit to work. Happy employees will work longer shifts, and unhappy employees won't work at all. They need the necessities, like rest and food, and luxuries, like recreational activities. To satisfy their needs, you stock the base with restaurants and beds, and provide for activities like exercising and dancing. You must also expand the colony itself to accommodate the characters' distinct desires. It's a vicious cycle: Keeping your employees happy requires money, but you won't have any money unless the work is getting done, and they won't do any work if they're unhappy. *Space Colony* isn't about micromanagement, it's about middle management.

I'm OK, you're a Jerk

Employees also need friendship, and that's where things get more complicated. Some don't get along with anyone, while others are easy-going and well liked. The relationships are constantly deteriorating, and you must ensure that friends



☞ You need to provide activities to suit a wide range of interests.

Space Colony isn't about micromanagement, it's about middle management.

stay friends and that enemies take some time to work out their differences. In more crowded bases, this becomes problematic, and if you try too hard to make your employees get along, *Space Colony* can seem more like a group therapy simulation than a strategy game.

The characters' personalities are entertaining, and watching and listening to them interact provides most of the enjoyment. The game is at its best in the early, simple scenarios that allow these personalities to come to the forefront. In the later, more complex scenarios, when your colony is massive and your staff more numerous, the atmosphere gets more anonymous and sterile. Interacting with the individual personalities is the game's strongest point, and *Space Colony* suffers greatly if you enjoy the basic concept. It also does a good job of finding new ways to

challenge your ability to manage both your employees and the colony itself. But the novelty wears a little thin as the mission goals become more complex and, as a result, the colonists' personalities fade to the background. **—Ron Dulin**



☞ Some colonists, like Greg here, are generally disliked by everyone.

challenge your ability to manage both your employees and the colony itself. But the novelty wears a little thin as the mission goals become more complex and, as a result, the colonists' personalities fade to the background. **—Ron Dulin**

Verdict ★★★☆☆

A clever combination of real-time strategy and *The Sims* isn't clever enough to hold your interest for long.

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PUBLISHER: EA Games **DEVELOPER:** EA Games **GENRE:** Action **EVRG RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 755MHz, 32MB RAM, 650MB Instalt, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED: 256MB RAM MULTILAYER None

Freedom Fighters

As American as ass whupping

Borscht is beet soup served with a side of sour cream. That description does not remotely tempt my taste buds. Well, imagine if you had to eat borscht from now until eternity. Borscht for breakfast. Borscht for lunch. Borscht for dinner. And chocolate borscht on days when you've been good!

That's life under a Russian dictatorship, which is the premise behind *Freedom Fighters*. In an alternate reality, the Iron Curtain has been drawn tightly over all of Europe, and that Hammer and Sickle is aimed next at the United States. To restore freedom to America, former plumber Christopher Stone must soldier through the invading armies, make his way to the inner stronghold, and replace the Soviet flag with Old Glory.

While the fight for freedom starts off slowly, the game starts to pick up when Stone begins to lead a squad of up to 12 other fighters. Control management is simple, but it's deep enough to lend a sense of strategy.



❑ Snow falling, red posters, soldiers...hey, it's beginning to feel a lot like Christmas.

What can I say? Patriotism works, especially in videogames and movies.

The action of *Freedom Fighters* takes place in third person, but an over-the-shoulder cam can be toggled for more precise aiming. Stone can carry two guns (one small and one large), various bombs, and health packs. The switching interface works well, but the routine for switching back and forth from grenades makes them your least-used weapons.

Since there aren't territories and points that must be held, more often than not, the flow of the leadership alternates

between plowing through enemy forces and searching for strategic points from which to bark orders at your troops.

Enemies work in groups and don't always react predictably, but there are still minor A.I. quibbles. Sometimes enemy soldiers will run right past Stone and stand there without noticing him.

Maps are varied and feel like real-life locations, with often more than one route to get anywhere you need to go. Inside the stage designs are tactical hideaways:

sometimes it's smarter to snipe from a rooftop or head to a warehouse for extra ammo before engaging the enemy.

Freedom Fighters has its share of cheesy dialogue, and the game's ending has that weak "set up a sequel" flavor. Yet the thematic usage of America in point tugs at the heart strings.

What can I say? Patriotism works, especially in videogames and movies.



❑ Yes, I'm listening to your elaborate plan, not staring at...um, the map.

Unfortunately, the PC edition of this game is missing the multiplayer-combat squad matches that the various console versions boast. On the other hand, *Freedom Fighters* on PC is a good 10 dollars less than its console counterparts. In any case, *Freedom Fighters* still raises the proud flag of a full and exciting game well worth its rubles. ❑ **Johnny Liu**

Verdict ★★★★★
Great teamplay tactics, but the PC version drew the short straw.



❑ A moment right as the pie. So romantic. Hold me.



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REVIEWS

PUBLISHER: EA GAMES DEVELOPER: Maxis **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM, 1.6GB INSTAL, 32MB 3D CARD **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER:** None

SimCity 4: Rush Hour

A nifty, new way to view the streets of SimCity



Monorail! (What's it called?) Monorail! That's right. Now, Springfield isn't the only town with an expensive elevated mass-transit system no one uses: Your very own SimCity can have one!

First off, to clear up any confusion: *Rush Hour* is an add-on disc intended for owners of the original *SimCity 4*. *SimCity 4: Deluxe Edition* is just the original *SimCity 4* with *Rush Hour's* content; it has no extra material. So, if you have the original game, you need just the *Rush Hour* disc. Now that we've cleared that up...

As its title suggests, *SimCity 4: Rush Hour's* goal is to give you more control of your city's transportation network. To do this, Maxis has added new tile and transportation types, as well as tools that add immensurably to the *SimCity* experience.

As you'd expect, Maxis has substantially beefed up transportation options. New to the palette are ground-level highways (cheaper than elevated highways), T intersections (enabling a highway to branch off in another direction), double-wide avenues, one-way streets, toll booths, and 40 new bridge types. New mass-transit options include the monorail and the elevated rail, along with a number of new buildings, such as the grand railroad station and public parking garage.

More important to this shift in focus, how-

ever, is the new Route Query option that sits below the standard Query tool. Using Route Query, you can click on any building to find the path that people take to and from it. By clicking Transportation Networks, you can see the volume of traffic and trace routes for all Sims passing through the network. It makes troubleshooting transportation networks so easy that you'll wonder why it wasn't there all along.

Rush Hour does take a strange—and occasionally frustrating—detour into ground-level control with the U-Drive It system. By clicking on one of the optional icons floating about the city, you can elect to take direct control of a variety of cars, ships, and aircraft in specific missions consisting of minor timed objectives. Each mission has a good version (with rewards in Mayor points and the occasional new structure) and an evil version (with cash rewards but a drop in Mayor rating). While the challenge lies in keeping your vehicle on the road (no mean feat), the new perspective offered by actually navigating city streets can be a valuable tool for tweaking a network.

Some elements of *Rush Hour* call to mind Chris Sawyer's great *Transport Tycoon*—it makes you wonder how far Maxis could take the concept by adding consoles and route plans to the *SimCity* world. It's just further proof that, far from being a static concept, *SimCity* remains an ever-evolving game. **B** Thomas L. McDonald



U-Drive It is one of *Rush Hour's* main features, enabling you to control fire trucks, boats, helicopters, and even tanks.

Verdict ★★★★★

The new focus on transportation adds substantially to an already excellent game experience.

tools that cool



fig. 1 - GAME FLO

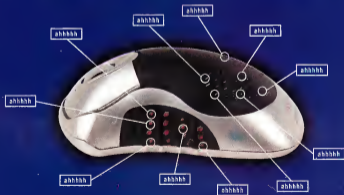


fig. 2 - GAME and WORK FLO

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PUBLISHER: Activision **DEVELOPER:** Infinity Ward **GENRE:** Action **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 5GB install, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 1GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2-32 players)



Call of Duty

"How do you like that, Franz?"



☐ Taking over this fixed gun gives you an advantage over the advancing Germans.

I can think of more than a few adjectives to describe *Call of Duty*: Linear, predictable, and short all come to mind. However, one description, more than any, characterizes the game perfectly: a total blast.

An army of more than one

The main idea behind *Call of Duty* is that World War II wasn't fought by one man from one nation, it was fought by groups of men from many nations. In *Call of Duty* you fight against the Axis from the perspective of American, British and Russian soldiers in 24 missions covering several historical campaigns. You'll parachute behind enemy lines during D-Day, participate in the Battle of Bulge, and fight the

Germans on the Eastern Front during the siege of Stalingrad. Keeping with its "many men" focus, you'll see right away that you're not alone. And the game is designed such that "going it alone" will be nearly impossible in some, if not most, scenarios.

Some gamers are bound to criticize the linearity of its levels. But once the game gets going, you won't really care about linearity because you'll be too busy having fun. This is especially true of the game's

car ride levels, where you ride with some of your squadmates while shooting Germans and blowing stuff up. The first ride takes you through some quaint French countryside that's been rendered "not-so-quaint" by the Germans that are shooting at you. My first thought during the ride was that this is just silly. My second thought was, this is fun in a *Mister Toad's Wild Ride* meets *Vice City* sort of way.

The ride is also given a bit of levity by the comments that your buddies make

The game is designed such that "going it alone" will be nearly impossible in some, if not most, scenarios.



■ An "old-school" drive-by. Think Mister Toad's Wild Ride meets Vice City

■ Before you can disable this aircraft gun, you'll have to deal with the soldiers manning it.



■ While your buddies go assault, back them up with a sniper rifle.

player's name instantly binds you to him. Also, you're often not sure how much help you're going to need so it's in your best interest to have as many "friends" around as possible.

All of the weapons in *Call of Duty* are authentic to both the era as well as the army you're fighting with. During American campaigns you'll have the M1 Garand, the very effective Thompson submachine gun, the punishing Browning automatic rifle, Springfield M1903 sniper rifle, and more. During British campaigns you'll have the Lee-Enfield (similar to the Garand), Sten submachine gun, and Bren LMG machine gun. During the Russian campaign you'll have the PPSH submachine gun, Mosin-Nagant (similar to the Garand), scoped Mosin-Nagant sniper rifle, Luger, and the RGD-33 stick grenade. You'll also be able to pick up German weapons like the MP40 submachine gun, MP44 assault rifle, scoped Kar98k sniper rifle, Luger, and Panzerfausts. You'll find that some countries made better weapons than others. Well, OK, that's a lie, everyone made better weapons than the British. During the British campaigns, I routinely looked for dead Germans from whom I could piller some weapons.

Call of Duty is probably the best shooter I've played all year. The only real knocks against it are that it's a relatively short game (I finished in about 10 hours) and the multiplayer is lackluster. But let's be honest: If you're into playing a World War II game online nothing compares to *Battlefield 1942* or *Day of Defeat*. All in all though, I have no doubt that anyone who plays this game will love it. ■ **William O'Neil**



■ In the Russian campaign you'll participate in some armored battles.

throughout. During the Russian campaign you'll drive a tank around blowing up German Panzers while your Russian commander yells things like, "How do you like that, Franz?" and "You can kill Hitler in hell!" Sure, there's nothing really funny about war, but *Call of Duty* is a game and, well, games are supposed to be fun.

Missions range from sabotage and stealth and all-out assaults to the aforementioned vehicle combat and hostage (prisoner) rescues. Sabotage and assaults make up the lion's share of the missions. While most of the sabotage consists of taking out German installations such as flak cannons and anti-aircraft artillery, you'll also do things like destroy power plants and disable experimental weapons

Few of the sabotage missions involve team play; most of them are lone wolf-style stealth missions. The various missions are mixed together really well. After a particularly harrowing assault-type mission, the more thoughtful stealth missions come as a welcome relief.

Band of brothers

The game's team-based design succeeds so well you'll often find yourself worrying about your NPC buddies, even to the point of taking risks to ensure their survival. *Call of Duty* makes you care about them in two ways. When you look at one of your teammates, his name and rank are appear similar to the way that names appear in multiplayer games. Seeing a

Verdict ★★★★★

Call of Duty is so good and so much fun you'll undoubtedly wish it were longer.

PUBLISHER Microsoft **DEVELOPER** Ensemble **GENRE** Real-time strategy **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Pentium III 450, 32MB RAM, 450MB install
RECOMMENDED Pentium III 600, 354MB RAM, 32MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER** LAN, internet (2-12 players)

Age of Mythology: The Titans

Clash of titans—without the embarrassment of Harry Hamlin

Ensemble should get credit for trying with *Age of Mythology: The Titans*. Unlike many expansions, *Titans* gives a lot of bang for the buck—it's just not a very loud bang, falling short of energizing an aging game.

In *Titans*, the Atlanteans get their own civilization instead of being dependent on the Greeks. The single-player campaign follows Kastor, the son of AOM's primary character. The story is tame, and the 12-mission single-player campaign is too easy and too bland, but who really plays AOM for the campaign anyway?

The new faction is *Titans*' primary draw, bringing new gods, new powers, and plenty of new units. Instead of complicating matters, the Atlanteans are actually easier to play than other races: its peasants don't require drop-off points, work more efficiently, and have more hit points than other peasants. Atlantean combat units only require two structures: a regular barracks and a palace that builds elite counterunits. Favor tracks in automati-

cally, so there isn't a need for monuments or worship. To balance these advantages, Atlanteans are more expensive, and the culture can be very susceptible to raids, early rushes, and attacks against its peasants.

The titans that are the expansion's namesake don't affect the game as much. Nearly unstoppable in combat, these moving wonders can smash anything in their path and will take hundreds of regular units to kill. In order to build one, however, you have to pay an expensive research fee, lay down a construction site, and then build it like a normal wonder. This takes a long time, and in a game that focuses on rushes and speed, titans are rarely useful. If you can spare the resources to build one, you probably have the game won.

For dedicated fans who tire of the same gameplay and sides, *Titans* adds enough to the multiplayer game to make it worth



An Atlantean army on assault.

the expansion-pack price. Casual RTS gamers who just want to beat on the computer with titan units, however, should stay away. **D** Li Luo

Verdict ★★★★★
 More bells, more whistles, same game.

PUBLISHER GSC **DEVELOPER** GSC **GENRE** Real-time strategy **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Pentium III 100, 256MB RAM, 150MB install
RECOMMENDED Pentium III 200, 512MB RAM, 1GB, internet (2-12 players)

American Conquest: Fight Back

Cry uncle and let slip the dogs of bore

If you take the *Cossacks* game engine, add more features and even more micromanagement, and set it in a milieu that allows you to play as the Spanish enslaving South American tribes, you'd have *American Conquest: Fight Back*. We suggest you fight back by

playing something else.

Fight Back does have some nifty new features: The formation capability of the original *Cossacks* engine has been enhanced, it's easier to manage big formations, and you have more flexibility in setting up formations. On the other hand,



Excuse me, but are those Mayan pillars?

developer GSC seems to have taken the "people are our most valuable resource" axiom to heart. In addition to building structures, farming, and mining, peasants are the building block of armies. It's not abstracted in any way: You create a stream of peasants, feed them into a fortress, and train soldiers. The entire process is manual, except you can set peasant creation to

inactive to feed the maw of your empire's army. Upgrading a mine means creating more peasants and manually sending them in, so the whole RTS drill becomes even more wearying.

Combat can be fun, except for the weak AI and the serious imbalance between different races. It may be historically accurate, but it's not a lot of fun to send in musket- and cannon-equipped troops to mow down Indian villages. There are even campaign scenarios where the goal is to enslave, or "capture" locals in order to meet the mission goal. And if you plan on internet play, you'll need a translator—all the registration stuff is in German.

The bottom line: Avoid this if possible. It will offend both your political and gaming sensibilities. **D** Lloyd Case

Verdict ★★★★★
 Fight boredom and micromanagement by avoiding this lame stand-alone expansion.



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PUBLISHER: Omega **DEVELOPER:** Altar Interactive **GENRE:** Strategy **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium II 500, 128MB RAM, 1.2GB install, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2GHz, 256MB RAM, 128MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** None

UFO: Aftermath

When bad things happen to good games



Expect ambushes early and often, especially when exploring the exterior of an alien base.

Let's get this out of the way right off—*UFO: Aftermath* is just shy of being utterly unplayable without the patch. If you don't patch the game, a memory leak that could sink the Titanic twice—with enough left over to put a good scare into the *Andrea Doria*—will pummel game speed so thoroughly that you'll actually be able to go back in time. While this is a fabulous opportunity to ask a girl other than your sister to your high-school prom, it's monumentally detrimental to gaming. Unpatched, *UFO* will drag, stutter, and ultimately die a repeated death while a weird save-game bug devours hard-drive space. It's a profound shame, too, because lurking under the seven layers of ugly is an otherwise very good game.

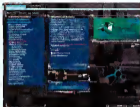
Strange Invaders

If you've ever played *X-Com*, then you've played *UFO: Aftermath* (not a big surprise, since this game was originally being developed by the *X-Com* creators). The only major difference here is the very nice 3D engine. If you haven't played *X-Com*, then you're in for a treat with this big, fat strategy game. Aliens have invaded Earth, reducing its cities to rubble. As the leader of a new global paramilitary force, you combat the alien menace on two basic fronts: on a large scale by managing various bases and conducting crucial research on new tech-

nologies, and on a smaller scale by leading teams of up to seven squad members in punishing tactical combat.

The squad-based combat is where you'll spend most of your time in *UFO*. Unlike the turn-based *X-Com*, the battles play out in pauseable real-time, giving the game a more fluid feel—once you turn off most of the annoying built-in pause events, that is. Instead of *X-Com*'s search-and-destroy mission focus, you'll be tasked with team rescues, demolition sorties, recovery missions, recon assignments, base seizures, and *UFO* infiltrations, as well as search-

Unpatched, *UFO* will drag, stutter, and ultimately die a repeated death.



❑ Much of the story and background in the game come via the several dozen things you'll research. You had no one bothered to organize all this info.



❑ The good news about clearing these aliens out of this bright cityscape? You can blow up those cars and let that kill 'em.

and-destroy. That said, the focus is still on killing as many space critters as you can.

These aliens are tough, not so much because they're brilliant and coordinate their attacks, but because they can dish out enormous amounts of punishment while absorbing even more. Indeed, the game tends to stage ambushes and consistently tries to outmuscle, not outthink you. This effectively reduces your strategy to keeping your entire squad together throughout missions, the better to dish out your own ton of pain.

That's not to imply there's no tactical strategy. It's just different than X-Com: Correct positioning of your forces in the mission environments is key, but even more important is squaddie development. A big slab of RPG gaming runs through UFO, and whether through specialized training or real-world experience, you'll develop every team member in various skills, such as marksmanship, piloting, and weapon proficiencies. Developing a well-rounded core team of specialists is crucial, and you'll find yourself getting quite attached to your biggest guns—making you even more acutely feel the pain of their bloody loss during a base-defense mission.

New world order

Just as important, if less dramatic, is the microgame in which you nurture your alien-busting empire, deciding which bases to devote to research, tech development, alien repulsion, and simple military use. While some might lament the loss of the economic part of this game, I applaud it since it lets you focus on conducting the vital research and tech development that



❑ The primary Character screen lets you track each squaddie's development across several skills, as well as manage their mission-to-mission loadout.

drive the game, and gives you the faintest glimmer of hope at, if not matching, then at least getting close to the firepower of the alien armies. Adding to the tension is an alien infection sweeping the planet—this contagion will take over bases, creating even more tension as you race to develop the tech and weaponry you think will let you finally defeat the aliens.

The combination of the macro- and microgames works well, natcheting up the addiction by dangling the multiple carrots of character advancement, research, new hardware, and key victories. If it bogs down at all, it does so in the same way and at the same time as its predecessor: Once you see the endgame coming, the missions grow somewhat repetitive and seem a hindrance to play.

That this game can be so much fun only compounds the aggravation of those game-stopping crash bugs. Thankfully,

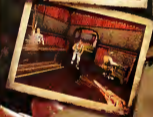
the latest patch fixes that—too bad it doesn't do enough to soften the game's many rough edges. The Character Equipment screen is clunky, requires too many moves to shift equipment around, and sometimes refuses to follow your directives. With so much to research, a simple alphabetical ordering of the techs would be welcome, as would a simple mission filtering or listing in the global view. There's nothing egregiously wrong—it's just that the entire game would benefit from some polish.

And the latest patch. Don't forget that, because this worthwhile game is pretty much garbage without it. ❑ **Robert Colley**

Verdict ★★★

UFO: Aftermath is a good game that should have waited three weeks and one big patch longer to be released.

DEAD MAN'S HAND



You are El Tejón —
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PUBLISHER Encore **DEVELOPER** Jowood **GENRE** First-person shooter **ESRB RATING** M **REQUIRED** Pentium III 600, 150MB install, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED Pentium 4 1GHz system, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER** LAN, Internet (2-128 players—or so they claim)

Chaser

Whatever you do, don't let it catch you

The next time one of your gaming pals complains about an FPS being too linear, slap this game on him and smirk. Sure, you could say it's no fun being led around by the nose, but it's even less fun wandering around huge, deserted levels searching for the one thing you need in order to get out. Example: the two levels in which you're in a small submarine twisting through labyrinthine shipwrecks looking for the only way out. Imagine doing that for three hours, then popping out at the beginning of the level. You'll beg for a little linearity, I guarantee you.

So much promise

The beginning offers no clue about the horrors to come. Most players will blast through the first seven (of 19) levels talking about what a refreshing throwback *Chaser* is to *Half-Life*. The story is another hackneyed conspiracy with an amnesiac protagonist, but the developers (Cauldron, a Slovakian outfit) really try to involve the player with cool cut-scenes and interesting scripted events. The first level takes place on a space station, and it's loaded with design cues from *Aliens* and *Half-Life*.

The first few levels are standard run-and-gun fare. You've got a healthy variety of conventional weapons, such as SMGs, rifles, and grenade launchers, and there's plenty of ammo and health to be found. The graphics (running off Cauldron's proprietary CloakNT engine) look good and feature nice lighting, smoke, and blood effects. The enemy A.I. is laughably bad and the voice acting is worse, but I was having fun plowing through the levels.

The game certainly lacks polish. One enemy emitted clip after clip at me through a glass door while he recited

It may look like NOLF, but don't let that fool you.



The early cut-scenes are impressive, paying homage to *Aliens*.

Enemy A.I. is laughably bad, and the voice acting is worse.

his scripted lines: "He's bleeding! Shoot while he reloads! He's running out of ammo! A-ha!" My health was 100 percent, I wasn't moving, and the glass door never had a scratch. Some of the later cut-scenes even show trucks driving through people.

I'd be willing to forgive the weak A.I. and the lack of polish if the game held up.

There are moments when the cut-scenes, music, and gameplay meld into a James Bond/NOLF kind of thrill ride—but those moments are rare.

The game bogs down in level 8, where the maps become massive and nonlinear. It takes only 20 minutes to clear out the enemies, and then you're left wandering aimlessly through enormous, bleak, washed-out levels, looking for something—anything—to help you out. And there are 11 more levels to go, each of which takes hours to get through.

So little satisfaction

When I got stuck, I went online to look for clues. That's when I saw dozens of people begging for help



Clipping problems aside, this guy is a boss character, and his A.I. still sucked.

on various message boards. (There's a walkthrough available at johnchaser.info/walkthrough.htm, but you know something's wrong when a walkthrough begins a level by saying, "This one is also a pain in the ass.")

The later levels can be rewarding only because they're so difficult, but the majority of gamers will never see the ending, even with the walkthrough. There are just too many places where the sadists who made this game devised herculean obstacles that make it virtually impossible to go on. Maybe *Chaser* is an artful meditation on Eastern European existential angst—in that case, huzzah, well done—because as a game, it seems something significant got lost in translation. **Ken Brown**

Verdict ★★

A good-looking shooter that's only fun for the first few hours.

PUBLISHER Encore Software **DEVELOPER** JoWood Productions **GENRE** Adventure/puzzle **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Pentium MMX 566, 64MB RAM, 120MB install
RECOMMENDED Pentium II 290, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT** None

Neighbors From Hell

Stick it to the jerk next door

My neighbor isn't actually from hell—he's from France, and I have to think that counts. And while no jury in America would likely send me to jail for breaking into his house and doodling a beard on pictures of his mother, I have opted to follow the letter of law. Besides, JoWood Productions has given me the next best thing to acting on my daydreams.

The premise of *Neighbors From Hell* is no more complicated than any reality show—probably because that's what the premise actually is. You are Woody, the lowly devious star of a reality game show, whose object is to torment his manic-depressive neighbor by laying traps

mailbox to a masterfully orchestrated combination of paper in the toilet, soap on the floor, hair-growth formula in the aftershave, and black shoe polish on the bath towel. Each episode of the game show awards points for each prank you successfully hatch; while you can perform them in any order, laying them out so that they generate an entertaining chain of pratfalls and outbursts will earn you thunderous



■ If you get caught soaping your neighbor's bathroom, he tends to make you clean it up—with your face.

The premise of *Neighbors* is no more complicated than any reality show.

about the house. The interface is an old-school side-scroller whose only learning curve is trying to figure out what a foo is. The traps you lay for your neighbor range from a simple mousetrap in the

laughing and applause from your audience and a well-deserved high score for the level.

The one thing lacking in this game is the actual lack of a game. It's a bit repetitive,

and it should be about four times longer—an experienced prankster can finish it in a single afternoon. Other than that, this one is a keeper. My neighbor said it is "fres boss." I'm pretty sure I'm legally allowed to punch him for that. ■ Arcadian Del Sol

Verdict ★★★★★
 A fun way to spend a single afternoon.

Revisionist History

Halo, Madden 2004

HALO HAS FINALLY made it to PC (albeit three years late) with relatively few problems beyond its system-busting graphics. Patch v1.02 is notable mainly for offering multiple instances to the d-dicat, 0-3-urver support, which allows many more servers to run at once. Some card-specific graphical glitches and problems with the auto-updater have been cleared up, as have some rare creches during multiplayer chat.

The only other significant change is to Timedemo, which is a strangely elaborate way of testing framerate. If you run Timedemo after installing the patch, it may show a boost in performance since the last time you ran the program, even though the patch has no performance enhancements. The boost comes from a change in the way Timedemo makes its calculations, so if you think the game runs better, relax: it's all in your head.

Madden 2004's double-patch blitz

(Bringing the version number up to 1.3) gives a fin-spit polish while also making some significant changes. Owners of ATI Radeon 8500, 9700, 9800, and higher cards and Nvidia GeForce FX series cards can now thrill to uniforms that get dirty over the course of a game, gasp at stadium shadows that fall on players, and marvel at metallic-colored helmets that glint in the sun. All of this looks terrific when the options are cranked up to 11.

Also, the long end noble tradition of football roster updates continues, reflecting real-world rosters up to September 16. Some significant crash bugs are ironed out, among them problems with saved games in franchise mode, setting Sign Player to CPU in franchise mode, and right-clicking on an in-game Pause menu. A host of



other enhancements and minor fixes are included, addressing everything from problems with long MP3 file names to issues with jersey numbers when creating or editing a player. Aside from the crash bugs (which I never experienced), these are mite-sized changes, but they're certainly worth a download. ■ Thomas L. McDonald

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PUBLISHER EA GAMES DEVELOPER EA GAMES GENRE Strategy (ESRB RATING T) REQUIRED Platform(s) PC, PS3, XBOX 360, Wii
RECOMMENDED 2GB RAM MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: None

Warlords IV: Heroes of Etheria

Lean, not-too-mean Warlord machine

Warlords *IV* does a lot of things right. The persistent characters and dynamic campaign, carried over from *Warlords: Battlecry*, are great. The unit variety, carried over from the previous *Warlords* turn-based games, is great. The A.I., carried over from everything else Infinite Interactive did when it was part of SSG, is great. The random-map generator, skirmish options, and multiplayer support are all great. Unfortunately, all this is built around anemic gameplay. If ever there was a game in need of a little healthy feature creep, this is it.

Warmongering for dummies

Warlords IV is simple. You're basically capturing cities, each of which is associated with one of 10 races, determining which units can be trained there. Neutral locations can be ransacked for treasure and magic items for your heroes, who are powerful units capable of learning unique skills. There's a simple magic system by which you can choose a school of magic for your warlord; you then spend a set number of turns to learn progressively more drastic game-bending spells.

For all its simplicity, *Warlords IV* is missing the elegance you'd expect. Gameplay comes down to shuffling individual units around. You can automatically direct newly trained units to a rallying point, but this still leads to steady streams of lone units marching hither and yon. Unavoidable busywork involved in assembling your units into stacks means larger games can become epic, logistical nightmares.

This sort of shepherding is arguably the long-established core of the *Warlords* games, but in the previous games, each stack was a sort of synergistic metaunit, assembled from the bonuses and special abilities of its individual units. In *Warlords IV*, there aren't so many group bonuses, so a stack feels more like an annoying, arbitrary limit of the number of little guys who can stand in one place. There is, to be fair, a lot of strategy in creating stacks, particularly since battles almost always guarantee casualties—you'll need cannon fodder if only to send entire stacks to their death



If there was ever a game in need of a little healthy feature creep, this is it.

to soften up a particularly formidable enemy group.

Combat takes an "every man/boast for himself" approach. Early in development, Infinite Interactive planned a tactical-combat screen à la *Heroes of Might & Magic*—this would have lent itself much better to the types of units in *Warlords IV*. But in the final product, it has instead delivered a quick and dirty mano-a-mano approach: When two stacks meet, each side picks a unit. The two units fight it out to the death, at which point the loser brings in a replacement. It's very neat and polite, with a kind of Pokémon vibe ("I choose you, Swamp Dragon!") and not a hint of battling armies that gave the previous *Warlords* a little sense of grandeur.

The student is the master

It doesn't help that the competition looks and plays so much better. Next to the elegance of the *Disciples* series or the death of *Age of Wonders*, *Warlords IV* feels a



I choose you, Wolf Rider

day late and a dollar short. Although *Warlords IV* is by no means a horrible game, it's something far more damning: strangely joyless and conspicuously missing the spark of enthusiasm that often manages to find its way into even the worst of games. **Tom Chick**

Verdict ★★

A strangely joyless version of a classic strategy franchise.

"...the game's look really comes alive and makes this one of the most visually impressive computerized Dungeons & Dragons experiences to date." -Gamespot

"I can't wait to lose more sleep unraveling it."
-PC Gamer

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ATARI

PUBLISHER | Games Developer **32 Games** **GENRE** | Online real-time strategy shooter **ESRB RATING** | T **REQUIRED** | Pentium III 400, 128MB RAM, 650MB install, 56k modem **RECOMMENDED** | Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, broadband **MULTIPLAYER** | LAN, Internet (2-64 players)

Savage

More mice than men...and there aren't enough mice

Savage mashes together first-person shooters with real-time strategy, with players slugging it out in a fantasyland as man, beast, or one of two commanders. The concept is intriguing, the game's foundation solid but two issues, along with myriad quibbles, confound Savage.

More bang for your gang

Savage's primary draw is fast, fluid 3D slugfests where up to 64 online players battle as either the Legion of Man or the Beast Horde. Players can choose either side when joining a game or act as a team's lone commander, thus directing Savage's RTS portion for their team. For non-commanders, the game starts in FPS mode, where players begin as the basic warrior units for their respective races. Warrior units gain experience and gold by collecting resources, combating neutral creatures, or attacking enemy players and structures with weapons or spells. As the game progresses, and if a commander's strategic acumen is strong, more warrior unit characters, special abilities, weapons, equipment, and spells can be made available at the stronghold or lair. The easily managed tech tree produces five warrior class upgrades per side, each with distinct, worthwhile combat skills. Matches are straightforward, with one side claiming victory after demolishing the other's stronghold. When all is finished, stats are



Savage's shortcoming is a death of capable commanders.

recorded and rewards are given.

The commander role is crucial. Commanders shape strategy, manage gold and stone resources, build structures, promote lieutenants, and utilize special commander powers. Unfortunately, only two players can wield this frequently thankless responsibility. Victory or defeat rests squarely with commanders, and a lack of skill here usually leads to an unfortunate experience for the other 62 players...well, at least for the side with 31 losers.

This is Savage's main shortcoming: a dearth of capable commanders. You can play six games before finding a competent leader. A tutorial to teach players the commander interface and some simple strategies is sorely absent. Still, you'd

think that after a couple of months, skilled commanders would emerge. Sadly, this isn't happening.

Is anybody out there?

Good luck finding populated games. Though Savage supports up to 64 combatants, I rarely found matches with more than 20 players. There's also a problem with players coming and going or switching sides at will. This is especially annoying during a crucial maneuver or engagement. Like many online games, players drop due to lag or because they simply don't want the loss on their records, but that doesn't make it any less irritating. Savage doesn't provide contingencies for such unfortunate in-game anomalies. Other quibbles include

mediocre camera controls, constant lag problems, lame AI and worker pathfinding, and lackluster environments.

Despite Savage's potential, the lack of skilled commanders and populated servers hampers enjoyment for players hungry to test their mettle in a massive fantasy battle. After spending a few hours online scouring for a populated server or losing thanks to bad leadership, players will ultimately lose interest—and we'll be left to lament Savage's unrealized potential. **Raphael Liberator**

Verdict ★★★

A potential blockbuster marginalized by its own delivery.

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THE THREAT

"Overall, though, X2 could turn out to be one of the truly great space sims, ready to take its place among the Wing Commanders, Freelancers, and Independence Wars of the genre...X2 may even be the long-awaited successor to the Elite throne."

- GameSpy

The sheer size of the universe and the astounding number of ships to fly, solar systems to visit and commodities to buy blew me away. X2 makes you feel like you're a part of a living, breathing cosmos."

-The Adrenaline Vault

EIDOS

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Drug Reference
Mild Violence

PUBLISHER: EA Sports **DEVELOPER:** EA Sports **GENRE:** Sports **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM (256MB RAM for Windows XP), 32MB install, 32MB 3D card **RECOMMENDED:** 512MB RAM, 650MB install, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2-12 players)



NHL 2004

Bring on the Stanley Cup!

NHL 2004 is the best computer hockey game ever, period. More visually sleek and refined than previous versions, **NHL 2004** has new dynasty mode, international leagues, and an enhanced fight system, all of which elevate it to benchmark status.

Fabulous face-offs

A rewritten graphics engine makes the virtual mug of Toronto Maple Leafs' goon extraordinaire, Tie Domi, just as menacing as the original. But it's the revamped physics and collision systems that create an amazingly realistic level of authenticity.

What's truly unique about **NHL 2004** is the marvelous level of detail regarding how the puck handles. It slides, bounces, and rolls just like a regulation puck. Game mechanics reflect the current state of professional hockey, relegating the runaway scoring antics of Wayne Gretzky and the juggernaut domination of Mario Lemieux and Bobby Orr to the record books. **NHL 2004**, like the professional sport of today, is a low-scoring affair due in part to methodical neutral zone traps, along with other complex defensive schemes, which ultimately leads to fewer and fewer break-away opportunities. Sharpshooting blue liners are now forced to make every shot count or rethink their strategy completely.

Not only is gameplay faster and more precise in all game modes, but players also have a multitude of options for ensuring that their team and player strategies win games. Players must not only possess nimble fingers for deking, spinning, and faking passes, but also show an acumen for strategy—or they'll end up with a barrage of pucks filling their net. During one tough match, for example, my opponent was down by one late in the game. As their top line pressed toward my net, I needed my team to control the neutral zone and guard the net. I utilized the on-the-fly Quick Play feature to change my



Crashing the net is one of the new offensive strategies for your goal-scoring bliss.

What's unique is the level of detail regarding how the puck handles.



Goocoooooooo!

offensive strategy to defend the lead, while modifying my team's defensive posture to protect the net. It paid off, and ultimately I won this hard-fought game.

Cheap shots and slap shots

A brand-new fight system, along with more physical actions such as boarding, tying players near the net, and checking, embodies the violent side of professional hockey. Gamepad skill isn't the only factor in winning a fight—a player's toughness, endurance, and size matter, too. But you'll probably be too transfixed by the gritty brawls—complete with flying helmets and players struggling to grab their adversary's jersey—to notice.

A new international league game mode lets you play as any one of the 30 teams



It may not look like much, but the dynasty mode is a great, hardcore GM sim.

from the elite European, Olympic Team, Elitserien, DEL, and SM-Liga leagues, all under the umbrella of their official league-specific rules and traditions.

The other new game type, dynasty mode, is essentially a sports RPG. You play as a team's GM, juggling salaries, trades, drafts, TV contracts, and more as you drive for the Stanley Cup. It's like having another great game within a game.

Packed with tons of game modes and enhancements, **NHL 2004** is the perfect solution for fans who can't swing the second mortgage to cover the cost of season tickets. **Raphael Liberton**

Verdict ★★★★★

The best NHL experience on virtual ice.



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PUBLISHER EA Sports **DEVELOPER** EA Sports **GENRE** Racing **ESRB RATING** E **REQUIRED** Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM, 1GB free HD, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED 256MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER** LAN, Internet (2-16 players)

NASCAR Thunder 2004

Should EA's exclusive license be revoked?

EA Sports' exclusive license makes *NASCAR Thunder 2004* the only new NASCAR title to become available this year. Fortunately, it appears that EA Sports is making an attempt at appealing to a broader range of racing fans. But there are a few seasons to go before this game can be a true contender.

The core remains unchanged from previous titles in this series; it's the two new modes that set it apart from its predecessors. Speedzone is very similar to *NASCAR Heat's* Best the Heat challenges in that you're placed in various situations designed to teach rookies the fundamentals of driving successfully in a NASCAR-style race. The Grudges & Alliances mode gives you the ability to make friends and enemies based on how you treat them on the track, creating some accountability for your actions—something that other racing titles haven't been able to

duplicate. This is a cool feature and a strong selling point, but it still needs some tweaking to be effective.

Graphically improved since last year's version, *NASCAR Thunder 2004* still isn't stellar compared with other racers. The graphical depiction of friend or foe on the track is represented by green or red car numbers placed directly above the cars, which makes the view busy and cluttered. The physics model isn't much better than last year's—it still feels unrealistic and unresponsive, thus allowing you to drive aggressively without losing control of the car. The audio does a good job of producing realistic engine



❑ The in-car view gives you a pretty good feel for being in an actual stock car.

EA Sports' efforts to reach a wider audience are laudable.

sounds, and the commentary excels in creating an exciting atmosphere, although the spotters aren't always timely when calling high or low traffic.

NASCAR Thunder 2004 is a definite improvement upon its predecessors and is loaded with playworthy features. The efforts to reach a wider audience are laud-

able, however, with the new features still in need of work, hardcore drivers should look elsewhere. **Wade Hemes**

Verdict ★★★

Good for the casual race fan, but disappointing for the hardcore.

ESRB Rating K-A **Genre** Action **ESRB Rating** K-A **Required** Pentium III 400, 64MB RAM, 1GB free HD, 32MB 3D card **Recommended** Pentium III 400, 64MB RAM, 1GB free HD, 32MB 3D card **Multiplayer** LAN, Internet (2-16 players)

Rebels Prison Escape

Like digging a tunnel with a tiny, tiny spoon

If you've ever seen a prison-escape movie and thought, "Boy, those scenes with the running and sneaking and knocking-out of guards are awesome!" then *Rebels* is for you. That's all it is. The same thing over and over.

The story line is a weak backdrop. Rebels in some unnamed country fight the evil dictator Friedrich, who, predictably enough, wants to control everyone's minds and is developing a chemical for this purpose. The end.

The game itself is challenging when it's not crashing. AI is above average, with guards who react intelligently to stimuli. The suits of the different rebels are varied and add a strong element of strategy, even if they are illogical. For example, Alessandro can disguise himself by switching uniforms, yet no other rebel is able to



❑ As if being in prison weren't bad enough, body Blake is forced to dress like a nazi.

change his clothing.

Ultimately, however, *Rebels* offers no carrot to keep you interested. The only reward for your hard work is the advancement of the pathetic story line. After the novelty of play wears off, it becomes an



❑ Alessandro the magician throws his voice, allowing Jeffrey to sneak past the guards.

exercise in tedium broken only by crashes to the desktop. **Stephen Gehring**

Verdict ★★★★★

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PUBLISHER: Atari **DEVELOPER:** Troika Games **GENRE:** Role-Playing **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 1GB install, 16MB 3D card
RECOMMEND: Pentium 4 1.7GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** None

The Temple of Elemental Evil

Prettier than Baldur's Gate, but way, way buggier

With just a little more time and care, *Temple of Elemental Evil* could have been great. But this ambitious RPG ends up being yet another in the seemingly endless procession of PC games released before it was properly finished, with an unacceptably huge pile of bugs, imbalances, and performance problems that needlessly and stupidly obliterate any goodwill the game itself engenders. Instead of a potential RPG of the Year, we have yet another poster child for the evils of greedy, unscrupulous game publishers, foisting an incomplete product onto an unsuspecting, eager, and soon-to-be-burned fan base. Bravo.

What *TOEE* aspires to be is the first great *Dungeons & Dragons* game of the 21st century. Troika Games, whose core team made the classic *Fallout* for inter-



The big question is whether you'll quit the game before you even make it to the main dungeon. Why? Bugs.

play, are hardcore RPG fanatics, and their dedication shows, from the lovingly designed main dungeon to the generous 150+ page spiral-bound manual. It's an unabashedly old-school, single-player affair, beginning, properly enough, with the creation of an entire Level 1 party—an event that can last hours and for many will be the highlight of the game.

Days of yore

TOEE is based on a popular pen-and-paper module, and old-school D&D-ers who know swear it's faithful. Don't ask me, though, because I never played it. I can tell you, though, that without those fond old memories, *TOEE*'s plotline, characters, and quests are pretty generic and not nearly up to the level of the *Baldur's Gate*, *Icewind Dale*, *Planescape: Torment*. In the game's first big area, the town of Hometown, a series of completely cardboard NPCs send you on a series of bland, awkwardly written *Fallout* missions, in one case even "sending" you to talk to someone who is

literally standing right there already.

Combat is turn-based, and the interface for fighting and casting spells is intuitive and nicely designed—the on-screen radial menu works well and keeps the screen clutter-free. Battles are long, complex, methodical affairs. This is mostly good, but is occasionally extremely frustrating, especially early on, when your characters will die repeatedly, and attempts at resting seem to always, annoyingly, spawn more monsters before you've earned any hit points back. This is a seriously tough game—a difficulty slider is sorely needed.

The meat of this game is the titular dungeon—a huge, multi-story twisting labyrinth, gorgeously rendered, with tons of traps, secret doors, and monsters. It's a great piece of design, but the big question is whether you'll quit the game before you even make it there. Why? Bugs. On two different PCs, I suffered innumerable game-stopping crashes, as well as more minor annoyances like system slowdowns and broken pathfinding (where characters simply refused to move where I ordered



Hey guys—wait for me! Lane pathfinding will often leave party members hopelessly stranded.

them.) More often than not, my game sessions would end unceremoniously with a total crash to the desktop.

Pathetically, a group of fans patched this game, and while this helped with smaller issues, it did not fix the crash bugs. And any game that is likely to cause many gamers to not even be able to finish is one we flat-out cannot recommend, regardless of how ambitious or beautiful or well-designed it may be. This one is a real shame. **—Jeff Green**

Verdict ★★★☆☆

Yet another good game marred by bugs. Wheeee!

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PUBLISHER: CDV Software **DEVELOPER:** Related Designs **GENRE:** Real-time strategy **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 450MHz, 32MB RAM, 70MB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 1.2GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2-6 players)

No Man's Land

Evolution at its most nonexistent

If one were to liken each genre and subset of the gaming market to the prototypical members of a family tree, the real-time strategy genre would, without a doubt, represent the crotchety old uncle who drones on and on about the good ol' days and never quite knows when to shut up. No Man's Land wastes no time reminding us about those good ol' days, walking the exact same road that classic *Age of Empires II* has. Unfortunately, it's walking backward.

The historical hook in *No Man's Land* is the colonization of America. Six different cultures populate the single- and multi-player modes, including the English, Spanish, Native Americans (two different varieties, forest and prairie), Pawtots, and Settlers (both derivatives of early American colonists). Beginning with a simple headquarters, your goal is to gather an abundance of resources, build an efficient community of your own, and send forth a legion of troops to beat down whatever opposition you happen to be facing.

The economic and military structuring of *No Man's Land* will be old hat to anyone who's ever picked up *Age of Empires II* or

**An unabashed
retread of
concepts that
were innovative
four years ago.**



Demote those English!

Age of Mythology. You gather food, gold, and wood, all of which fuel building construction, unit production, and helpful performance upgrades. There is, naturally, plenty of micromanagement to be, um, relished, and the interface caters to this, providing plenty of hotkeys and other such amenities to help prod the game along.

Different armies, same war

Much of the game's combat unfolds just like combat in *Age of Empires II*—which is to say, most of the troops follow something of a rock-paper-scissors dynamic when they deal with one another. The different cultures are equipped with similar varieties of troops, with a few unique units here and there. Beyond this marginal uniqueness and the obligatory cosmetic differences, the cultures are all pretty similar. There isn't any sort of evolutionary mechanic to set them further apart later in the game, either—no tech levels, ages, or other such equivalent. When taken together, these factors make for what could be construed as a de-evolution of the genre. The game even looks like it should have come out years ago.

Other than a lengthy (though bite) 3D-mission single-player mode spawning three separate



Imagine *Age of Empires II*...choo-choo trains.

campaigns, *No Man's Land* sports the usual assortment of multiplayer conquest and team modes for up to eight players. There's even a neat "race to the finish" mode in which players compete to be the first with a finished railroad line, while simultaneously fielding armies to defend against their opponents' inevitable sabotage attempts.

No Man's Land isn't necessarily a bad game. It is, however, an unabashed retread of concepts that were innovative four years ago. Absolutely no attempt has been made to refine or expand anything. Ultimately, *No Man's Land* serves as a shining example of a game that's stuck in the past. Unless you're absolutely fanatical about the genre, you're better off leaving it there. **—Ryan Scott**

Verdict ★★★☆☆
Another follow-the-numbers RTS.

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ESRB RATING



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Tech

The best ways to part with your hard-earned money.



Voodoo PC F1

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Alienware Aurora

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Falcon Northwest Mach V FX-51

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Vicious PC Assassin SE

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Gateway 710XL

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Velocity Micro Gamer's Edge 1500

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11TH ANNUAL

The Ultimate Gaming Machine

It's CGW's biggest system showdown yet, as 12 top systems vie for the 'Ultimate' honor



Choosing a so-called "winner" in a competition like the one for the title of Ultimate Gaming Machine is never easy. Last year I judged the entrants purely on performance, to try to simplify things. Since then, I've realized that choosing a winner is more complicated than that, and that no matter what I do, someone will take umbrage with my results. But that's what happens when you pick a winner—somebody has to lose.

This year, I've tried to do things smarter by expanding the criteria to five key areas: speed, price, stability, support, and upgradeability. I've been evaluating desktop machines the same way for many months now, and it's been hard to argue with the results.

This year's price ceiling was \$5,000. We invited 14 premier system builders to send us their best rigs at or under that price, and 12 of them enthusiastically submitted an entrant. All but three chose one of the 64-bit processors from AMD. And, while Nvidia's GeForce FX 5950 is the reigning speed champion, a few vendors went with ATI's Radeon 9800XT. This meant that not everyone had identical machines, which made the results a little more interesting.

So how did they stack up? Dana, let's bring in the contestants... **William O'Neil** Photography by Arnold Tiesop



CyberPower Gamer
Ultra 9000 SE

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Totally Awesome
Ridiculously Insane

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Hypersonic
Cyclone

140



Dell
Dimension XPS

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Bluyewer
ZillionFX

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ABS
Ultimate M5

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Voodoo PC F1

PRICE \$5,000 RATING: 4.8

This year, the balance Voodoo achieved between breakneck speed and stability makes it the overall UGM winner. The F1 that Voodoo submitted comes in right at the \$5,000 limit and is packed with all kinds of awesome stuff—most notably, a Glycol-filled coolant system that allows overclocking of both the 256MB GeForce FX 5950 graphics card and the AMD Athlon 64 FX-51 CPU. The risk you take when overclocking your graphics card is that it often has an adverse effect on the overall stability of the system. However, the only stability issues I encountered with the F1 occurred in *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*, *IL-2: Sturmovik*, and *3DMark2003*—all three paused and/or hesitated just once during testing, and I wasn't able to repeat the problems. Other than that, the F1 purred like a kitten and gamered the best scores in four of the seven games I used at 1280x960 with 4x anti-aliasing and 8x anisotropic filtering turned on, as well as *3DMark2003* at the same resolution.

WHAT'S INTERESTING?
A Glycol-filled coolant system keeps the CPU and graphics processor nice and cool.

The one-two punch of AMD's Athlon 64 FX-51 processor (the fastest desktop processor available at press time) and Nvidia's 256MB GeForce FX 5950 makes this the fastest machine we saw. Where many of the machines in this story displayed stability issues with the 5950, aside from the aforementioned anomalies, the F1 didn't.

The F1 ships with Asus' SK8N nForce3 Pro150 motherboard—not necessarily the fastest motherboard to support the Athlon 64 FX-51, but possibly the most stable. Rounding out the F1's package are a Plextor DVD+RW drive and a three-drive storage system that uses a 720GB RAID-0 configuration for the OS and a single 200GB drive for data, offering the performance gain of RAID and safe data storage.

Alienware Aurora

PRICE \$4,402 RATING 4.5

Where Voodoo went balls-to-the-wall and gambled (and succeeded) with the F1, Alienware went for stability. Like the Voodoo offering, Alienware's Aurora ships with AMD's Athlon 64 FX-51 processor and Nvidia's 256MB GeForce FX 5950 graphics card. Unlike Voodoo, though, Alienware didn't overclock its

parts. I laud Alienware for taking this route, as overclocking can introduce risks that aren't necessary. Benchmark results showed that while the Aurora isn't as fast as the F1, it's still a screamer. And since the parts aren't clocked to extremes, you have a machine that's likely to do much better in the long run. The Aurora is also built around the Asus SK8N nForce3

Pro150 motherboard, has 1GB of PC3200 DDR 400 memory, boasts a Creative Labs Audigy 2 soundcard, and ships with a 21-inch NEC MultiSync monitor. It differs from the F1 in its storage, handled by two 120GB Seagate drives in a 240GB RAID-0 configuration.

The only reason the Aurora didn't win is the F1's edge in performance. But the Aurora still earns an Editor's Choice for its combination of speed, top-notch peripherals, and stability.

WHAT'S UNUSUAL? Alienware has always led the boutique market in design, and this one-of-a-kind "alien" design adds flair.



While Alienware and Voodoo built machines around Asus' SK8N nForce3 motherboard, Falcon's AMD Athlon 64 FX-51 showed up with MSI's K8T Master2 VIA K8T800 motherboard. Many people agree that

the VIA motherboard is faster than the nForce3, but Asus' reputation for stability often wins out. Falcon's Mach V initially had some stability issues that Falcon remedied within one day's time (after

WHAT'S UNUSUAL? The MSI VIA motherboard gives the Mach V a bit of a turbo charge.

Falcon Northwest Mach V FX-51

PRICE \$4,995 RATING 4.4



that, the machine ran like a dream.) Because of this, I had to lower Falcon's stability score, but it was good to see the company live up to its legendary reputation for support. Like the Alienware and Voodoo machines, the Mach V has 1GB of PC3200 DDR 400, a 256MB GeForce FX 5950 graphics card, an Audigy 2 soundcard, and the ubiquitous NEC MultiSync monitor and Klipsch Promedia S1 Ultra speakers. It also ships with two 120GB Seagate hard drives in a 240GB RAID-0 configuration.

Once Falcon solved the stability issues, the machine ran like a dream, screaming through the various games and benchmarks. The Mach V even scored the fastest Dungeon Siege marks at 1280x960 with 4x AA and 8x AF turned on.

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Vicious PC Assassin SE

PRICE \$2,899 RATING 4.4



Gateway seems to have adopted a new approach. Keep it simple. While other large original-equipment manufacturers complicate matters by using proprietary components, Gateway built its 710XL with parts that are both widely available and in current use by boutique outfits like Voodoo, Falcon, and Alienware, which makes the 710XL extremely upgradeable.

The 3.2GHz Intel Pentium 4 processor utilizes the same Intel D875PBZ Cantarwood motherboard that every other manufacturer uses, which means the case is standard, so you can replace the board if needed. Gateway's case also has a tool-less entry system; I was able to remove the two 250GB Maxtor MaxLina Plus II SATA hard drives by pulling a lever.

While the 3.2GHz Pentium 4 isn't as fast as the FX-57, it's widely available, a ton of motherboards support it, and it takes standard nonregistered memory that's inexpensive and easy to find. If there's a weak link in this system, it's the 250W power supply, which is underpowered compared to those in other systems.

If the UGM was simply a cost-benefit analysis, Vicious PC's Assassin SE would win hands down. It's fast, stable, and, at \$2,899, a real bargain. While the top three contenders ship with AMD's 64 FX-57 processor and the GeForce FX 5950, the Vicious PC showed up with the Athlon 64 3200+ and a GeForce FX 5900.

Neither part is top-of-the-line, but both make the machine much more affordable. That said, Vicious squeezes the most power capable out of its machine. It's built around an MSI K8T Neo MS-6702 VIA-based motherboard, and it rocks 1GB of PC3200 DDR 400 memory and 72GB of storage in the form of two 36GB Western Digital drives in a 72GB RAID-0 configuration. Vicious' machine wasn't the fastest machine in this roundup, but—aside from the small amount of storage—I like the component choices. Vicious has also proven that you don't need to spend a king's ransom to get a screaming, stable machine.



WHAT'S UNUSUAL? This machine is all geared up with its nifty clear case.

Gateway 710XL

PRICE \$3,659 RATING 4.2



WHAT'S UNUSUAL?

The Gateway 710XL has Compact Flash/Micro Drive, memory stick, SD/multi-media card, and SmartMedia slots, one FireWire port, and two USB 3.0 ports—all on the front panel.

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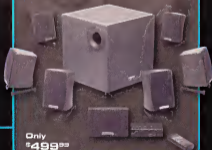
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Like *Vicious*, *Velocity Micro* opted for the less expensive AMD Athlon 64 3200+ processor, which kept the cost down. This rig is one of three that shipped with ATI's 256MB Radeon 8800XT graphics card, which may not be the fastest card available but is still plenty fast and stable and has great image quality.

WHAT'S UNUSUAL?

A RAID-0 config for system files and a single drive for data contains performance with safety.

In terms of performance the *Velocity Micro* rig is right in the thick of things. What I really like is that, by using conservative parts, the company had dollars



Velocity Micro Gamer's Edge 1500

PRICE \$3,190 RATING 4.2

saved to put toward three hard drives: a 72GB RAID-0 configuration for the OS and system files, and a 120GB hard drive for data. *Velocity* rounds out the package with ViewSonic's crystal-clear 21-inch G220B monitor and Klipsch Promedia 5.1 Ultra speakers, which are both excellent choices.

CyberPower Gamer Ultra 9000 SE

PRICE \$3,267 RATING 4.1

WHAT'S UNUSUAL?

The CPU fan is automatically controlled by the motherboard and comes on when the CPU reaches specific temperatures.



Considering that the *Gamer Ultra 9000 SE* ships with an Athlon 64 FX-51 and a 256MB GeForce

FX 5950, that \$3,267 price tag is a bargain. It also includes Asus' *S8RN nForce3* motherboard, 1GB of PC3200 DDR 400, and two 80GB Seagate hard drives in a 160GB RAID-0 configuration. In spite of the top-notch parts in this rig, I was disappointed that it didn't perform better. Its numbers were just slightly faster

than those of the *Velocity Micro* and *Gateway* machines—rigs that had more storage options and were more stable. The 18-inch LCD it comes with works great, but I would have used more robust speakers.

Ultimately, the *Gamer Ultra 9000 SE* is a good gaming computer with an interesting mix of top-notch and mid-range components—but for the price, I expected more competitive results.



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Totally Awesome Computers Ridiculously Insane

PRICE \$4,699 RATING 4.0



Despite having a name that makes people roll their eyes, *Totally Awesome* knows how to build a PC. Along with Gateway and Dell, *Totally Awesome* is the only other outfit to submit a Pentium 4-based machine. The *Ridiculously Insane* is built around an Asus P4C800-E motherboard and has 1GB of PC400 DDR 400 memory. Similar to a few others, this machine has a small, separate 72GB RAID-0 configuration for the OS and system files, and a single 250GB drive allotted to data.

WHAT'S UNIQUE? Though everyone continues to hype K8s, the Logitech Z-680s are awesome speakers.

For the most part, the *Ridiculously Insane* shipped with all the components you'd expect from a company's flagship machine: an Audigy 2 soundcard,

Logitech Z-680 speakers, and a 19-inch LCD. However, this machine showed up with a

GeForce FX 5800 as opposed to the newer 5850, which impacted its performance score. While I like the *Ridiculously Insane*, at damn near \$5,000, I'd expect a faster graphics card and better performance.

Hypersonic Cyclone

PRICE \$3,499 RATING 4.0



Hypersonic's Cyclone is one of the few machines to show up with the Athlon 64 3200+ processor, and this machine performed so well that I'm wondering if the Athlon 64 FX-51 is worth the added cost. Initially, the *Cyclone* had some technical

issues, but machines from *Hypersonic* come with a binder that includes the name, photo, and e-mail address of the technician who built it—in this case, Rob. After looking into the problem with Rob, we discovered that one of the hard drives had been damaged during shipping and needed to be

replaced. Once that was fixed, the machine proceeded to blaze through the various game tests and benchmarks. Because it had problems out of the box, I had to ding *Hypersonic*, but Rob's speedy diagnosis and resolution earned the company top honors for support.

On the component side, the *Cyclone* doesn't have the all-out storage capabilities that many of the others do have, with just two 36GB hard drives in a 72GB RAID-0 configuration. Ultimately, though, the *Cyclone* is still an awesome machine.

WHAT'S UNIQUE? AMD's Athlon 64 3200+ is both fast and economical.





THE ULTIMATE GAME MACHINE

Vicious PC Paladin Shreds the Competition

~~Voodoo~~ ~~Alienware~~ ~~Falcon~~ ~~Northwest~~ ~~ASUS~~



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The case lighting glows in the dark.

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Dell Dimension XPS

PRICE \$3,399 RATING 4.0



Dell's latest Dimension XPS is nearly everything you'd want in a machine: fast, stable, well-built, and well-supported.

But it has two fundamental issues that result in a lower ranking in this roundup:

Next to high-end machines by Voodoo, Alienware, and Falcon, it's not that fast, and because Dell uses many proprietary parts, it's not as upgradeable as the other machines.

The XPS is one of three machines to show up with

Intel's 3.2GHz Pentium 4 processor and ATI's 256MB Radeon 9800XT graphics card. This combo results in performance below that of the boutique builders, but it does yield good stability and reduced cost.

Dell's 19-inch LCD is flat-out awesome, and the 500GB of storage (in the form of dual 250GB hard drives in a RAID-0 config), 1GB of RAM, and DVD+RW/+R drive means this baby can handle all kinds of multimedia tasks. The XPS is the perfect choice for people who want to buy from a well-known company but don't plan to do major upgrades down the road.

WHAT'S UNIQUE?

That 19-inch LCD monitor, 500GB of storage, and a DVD+RW/+R drive make the XPS a multimedia dream.



iBuyPower Zillion-FX

PRICE \$4,949 RATING 3.9



Considering its \$4,949 price and its components, I had high expectations for the Zillion-FX.

iBuyPower built its machine using some of the same components as the

WHAT'S UNIQUE?
The 20.1-inch ViewSonic is great for gaming as well as regular use.

winner in this roundup: the Athlon 64 FX-51, GeForce FX 5950, and Asus' 516BN nForce3 ProSD motherboard, it even has 1GB of PC3200 DDR 400 RAM.

But when the numbers were in, the Zillion-FX didn't stack up very well. In

fact, it was outperformed by the Victus machine, which uses slower components (the Athlon 64 3200+ processor and a GeForce FX 5900 graphics card) and is nearly half the cost. In its defense, the Zillion-FX has one of the coolest LCDs in this story, the 20.1-inch ViewSonic LCD has a 16ms response time, which reduces the ghosting effect you often see while gaming with LCDs.

The Zillion-FX is a good machine, but it should have performed better. If you want the same components, you can have them in the CyberPower Gamer Ultra 9000 SE for \$1,700 less.



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ABS definitely has aspirations of competing with the big boys. To that end, its Ultimate M6 has many of the same components you'd find in the big boys' machines: AMD Athlon 64 FX-51 processor, Asus SK8N nForce3 Pro 150 motherboard, and 1GB of PC3200 DDR-400. Unfortunately, there's more to competing than buying the same parts. The Ultimate M6 is a fast machine—it scored a whopping 4,074 in 3DMark2003 with 4x AA and 8x AF turned on. And its game scores were fast,

ABS Ultimate M6

PRICE: \$3,340 RATING: 3.6

too. Unfortunately, it couldn't run several games

(Serious Sam; TSE; Jedi Knight: Jedi Outcast, iL-2) with AA and AF turned on. Thinking it could be a faulty card, I replaced the GeForce FX 5850, but the problems still occurred.

The Ultimate M6 does ship with some nice components

with nice support.

The Ultimate M6 shipped with a Plextor's headset that's perfect for online games with voice support.

Storage comes in the form of two 80GB hard drives in a 16GB RAID-0 configuration, and everyone knows how much I like the Logitech Z-640 speakers. I was disappointed, though, that ABS opted for the on-board nForce audio instead of the Audigy 2 everyone else chose.

UGM Benchmarks 3DMark2003 @ 1280x800



Will Power
His monthly spew of fluff

When All's Said and Done, It's All About the Games

When you're as hardware-obsessed as I am, it gets pretty easy to lose sight of the big picture. For instance, after I'd been running tests, giving recommendations, and writing reviews for each of the 12 rigs in this year's Ultimate Gaming Machine story, Robert Coffey asked me if I'd be willing to review Activision's *Call of Duty*. After watching the game and of course running over and over again on the 12 UGM configurations, I couldn't let the chance to play something new pass me by.

Of course, being a hardware guy, I was impressed with the graphics in *Call of Duty*. I played the game on the Gateway 770XL that I reviewed (and loved) several months ago. That machine comes with an 18-inch LCD that has a native resolution of 1280x1024, and a Radeon 9800 Pro graphics card, and I ran the game with 4x anti-aliasing and 8x anisotropic filtering turned on. *Call of Duty* looked absolutely fantastic.

Playing *Call of Duty* after spending a month merely "testing" computers helped me understand something that is easy to forget. When it comes down to it, hardware is all about the games. As I proceeded my way through the benchmarks, testing one machine after another, I wondered, "Does anyone need a machine that's this powerful?" Of course, the answer to that question is, "It depends on what you want to do with it." (Also, when you're in the midst of examining the seemingly minute differences between machine A and machine B, it's not unusual for you to find yourself thinking, "Am I the only one who cares about this?")

Now that this year's UGM is behind me and I'm no longer testing machines just for the sake of testing machines, it's time, once again, to be playing games for the sake of playing games. Especially since that's the reason I'm here gaming PCs in the first place. **William O'Neal**



"The Vector VX is a testament to Velocity Micro's ability to put together a quality rig; this machine is not only the fastest of the three tested, it's also the most stable." **June 2003**

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Inside

**Check out the new section—
Check Out. Pretty clever huh?**

Each month you'll find 12 pages of our top picks for games and gaming hardware. Looking for the latest great games? Want to know what computer or 3D card is the best? Well, we're going to show you—every month. **Check it out.**

Rewind 100

What should you play today? Game names in **red** indicate an Editor's Choice game



Age of Wonders: Shadow King

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE	GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
AGE OF WONDERS: Shadow King	6/10	The faded visuals won't grab you, but the game's depth keeps things interesting if not exciting	★★★☆☆	Blazing	6/10	A sturdy mind-and-tales real-time war game that even manages a bit of realism	★★★☆☆
Age of Wonders: Shadow King	6/10	A great strategy game that's worth purchasing for the random-map-generator alone	★★★★☆	BloodRayne	3/10	Widely derided, fairly generic, and thoroughly tasteless	★★☆☆☆
American Conquest	5/10	Impossible to control, impossible to play	★★☆☆☆	Darkness Rising	6/10	More addictive than quick and better for your brain, too!	★★★★☆
Aquatica 2: Revivalize	5/10	Like swimming in a sea of boredom	★★☆☆☆	Destiny Inc.	3/10	Runs slow, open that business, sits with boredom	★★☆☆☆
BeaTic: Plume Rising	5/10	A fun first-person shooter dressed up as a third-person racing game's clothes	★★★☆☆	Overlord: Ripto's Rage!	3/10	It's an incredible sports role-playing game disguised as a soccer management sim	★★★★☆
Chivalry 100: Secret Weapons of World War II	12/10	The last bit of fun ripens for the aging Battlefield engine is worth the wait	★★★★☆	Overlord of War	10/10	As dry and sniveling as The Android Overlord	★★☆☆☆
Big Girls Insex	3/10	This big girl game is better than it has any right to be	★★★☆☆	Gold Zero: No Mercy	12/10	Gold Zero's repetitive, deathless play leaves you cold	★★☆☆☆
				Combat Commander 2: Danger Forward	10/10	A great scenario editor and I'll fill the average grand-medal war game above Arnhem Road!	★★★☆☆
				CS: Cross-Sector Investigation	6/10	Finally, a game for mentally challenged couch potatoes	★★☆☆☆
				CS: Back Fall: The Journal	10/10	The only thing missing from this case game's box is a change of underwear	★★★★☆
				Day of Defeat	6/10	A great scene-based game named only by age	★★★★☆
				Drift Force 2: Black Iron Down	6/10	The spin-banking man's down DriftForce's action over tactics	★★★★☆
				Dungeon Siege II	3/10	For big to be a good, too bad to be a full release!	★★☆☆☆
				Duodes II	10/10	More cartoonish games (and evil of a better pace)	★★★★☆



CGW Recommends



Diablo II
★★★★★
Blizzard's classic action RPG inspired an even better sequel complete with dark minions of Hades, wraiths of the netherworlds, and items that are still being sold on eBay for cold hard cash.



Dungeon Keeper 2
★★★★★
Demon Almighty! Before there was *Black & White*, Peter Molynieux offered you the chance to be another kind of god—this time, you were reigning over dungeons as a big guy in red.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
The Elder Scrolls III: Bloodmoon	3/05	This solid expansion effectively increases the landmass of Morrowind to exceed that of Gears	★★★★☆
Empire of Magic	4/05	An odd duck of an RPG, this game both entertains and annoys	★★★★☆
Endless Space	7/05	Thirty hours of gameplay, not a single one worth a damn	★★☆☆☆
Endless Space	10/05	Something new in the massively multiplayer field that's worth a look	★★★★☆
Enter the Matrix	6/04	Played for the movie, don't play it for the play	★★☆☆☆



Enter the Matrix	6/04	A better, cheaper, 3D version of Matrix: The Game	★★★★☆
Europa MMO: The Guild	5/05	Three or four expando and add-on games are lurking here	★★★★☆
Evolution: The Second Genesis	6/05	We'd hate to see the first genesis of this MMO space game	★★☆☆☆
Evolution: The Legacy of Phobos	6/05	If you're always wanted to replace a frog, this is the expansion for you	★★☆☆☆
Evil IP: Specimen	7/05	Nothing really new here, but worth a look if you need a few new for a new system	★★☆☆☆
FF Challenge '95-'01	5/05	A must-buy for Formula 1 romps fans	★★★★☆
Finalizer	05/05	The finest space war since Planetfall	★★★★☆
Galactic Civilizations	6/05	Among the disappointments of 2005—this is the best 4D space game in years	★★★★☆
Ghost Hacker	6/04	The game is clever, stylish, and fun to watch, but it's a little too hard to control	★★★★☆
The Gladiator: Gladiator Class Omega	6/05	These gladiators are nothing more than you run-of-the-mill blood sport	★★☆☆☆
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City	8/05	GTA's 2002 Game of the Year gets some 3D-style clothes in this version	★★★★☆
The Great Escape	7/04	Not quite as bad as a movie in the co-op, but not much better	★★☆☆☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Gears	7/05	Poorly designed controls make this polished <i>Autumn Jones</i> clone unplayable	★★☆☆☆



Gothic	11/01	Just in translation	★★★★☆
Kingpin	6/03	The so-so <i>Blackbeard</i> is best of all	★★★★☆
Knives of Night and Magic IV: Winds of War	8/05	The degeneration continues	★★☆☆☆
King Heat 2004	6/05	A great formula goes in the wrong direction	★★☆☆☆
Highland Vikings	5/05	Better than <i>Vikings</i> , but not by much	★★☆☆☆



Star Wars: Battlefront 2	6/05	It's no <i>Star Wars</i> —it's not even <i>Battlefront</i>	★★☆☆☆
King's Majesty Chess	12/05	A valiant attempt at chess for consoles that doesn't quite reach	★★☆☆☆
The Hulk	9/05	Best <i>spineless</i> game not named <i>Proton Force</i>	★★★★☆
MLB 2: Diamond Strike	3/05	This <i>Testoff</i> <i>Day's</i> shooter is more sports-related than <i>Special Forces</i>	★★☆☆☆
0-2 Star Trek: Voyager Battles	6/05	<i>Forgotten Battles</i> the passage of <i>Wings</i> flight sims	★★★★☆
Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb	6/05	Like that <i>swirl</i> <i>golden</i> <i>haze</i> <i>shot</i> , the game may look a little funky, but it's definitely worth the effort	★★★★☆

Planets, worlds, and nations

The world, then the next



PlanetSide

Darren yells and screams at his incompetent teammates, but he still keeps coming back to the persistent MMO of *PlanetSide*.



New World Order

On the legs of the deplorable *Postal 2* comes *New World Order*—the honorable mention in the category of World's Laziest Shooter.



Rise of Nations

Nations will rise and tumble, but three things remain the same: death, taxes, and solid RTS games like *RON*. *Di* likes it, which means a lot.



Grim Fandango

★★★★☆

Set in the Land of the Dead, this game casts you as Manny Calavera, grim specter of death and travel agent. Artistic and clever, *Grim Fandango* is still the example of what an adventure game ought to be.



Planescape Torment

★★★★☆

Talk about "born again!" You're cast as the nameless one and have been saddled with amnesia, a body full of tattoos à la Memento, and a penchant for dying. This ranks as one of our favorite RPGs in the office.

Good pirates, bad pirates

Any excuse to say "Yo-ho-ho!"



Port Royale

Despite the slow start, this should be a rollicking, hearty time for any land-lubber yearning for the freedom of the black flag.



Monkey Island series

Guybrush Threepwood and his wannabe pirate adventures are more fun than a coconut bikini. Just watch out for the three-headed monkey behind you.



Pirates of the Caribbean

Johnny Depp kept the movie fun and exciting. The computer game is anything but. Walk this one down the plank.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Access Point Operations Genesis	6/03	A decent take on the tycoon genre, with the excitement of seeing people get chewed up by a fire.	★★★☆☆
Kronen Pack	5/03	It sounds like a tremendous shoot 'em up, but it's the best first-person shooter ever.	★★★★★

Laser Squad Remake 6/03 An addictive game that'll have you pulling for your next e-mail. ★★★★★



Legacy Online 10/03 A tedious exercise of best. ★☆☆☆☆

Line of Sight: Babylon 4/03 The '03 war derby shooter on the left has restrictive and impersonal control of space like in the Vietnam War. ★☆☆☆☆

Linebacker: Legacy of the Crusader 1/03 Battlefield, Sidewalk, Buddy, and being in progression—and those are its good points. ★☆☆☆☆



Madden NFL 2004 1/03 Truly the best Madden game yet, but it's priced to buy a Legions Road Action card while. ★★★★★

Master of Orion 3 5/03 So reminds me much and provides too little. ★★★★★

Model of Honor: Allied Assault—Breakthrough 12/03 Inferno and deadly shipwreck, but better good enough to justify the price. ★★★★★

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Medieval Total War: Viking Invasion	6/03 The expansion is a must for Total War fans. ★★★★★		
World Game Solid 2: Substancer	6/03 It's supposed to be MS2? The Director's Cut, the cheap post-match it says the MS2. The Champ Next Door's Cut. ★★★★★		



Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004 6/03 The most fun you can have in a plane without guns. ★★★★★

Nightingale Club II 6/03 What if locks in multiplayer, it more than makes up for its fun. ★★★★★

NIP Baseball 2003 6/03 Ed Sports delivers an unprecedented level of control and accuracy to PC baseball. ★★★★★

NASCAR Racing 2003 Season 5/03 Payoffs of real NASCAR game do better like a bad line. ★★★★★

Neverwinter Nights: Shadows of Karastad 9/03 A month before single-player game than the original game. ★★★★★

Nevspac: Earthmarch 1/03 Rock/paper/scissors is a more challenging strategic game. ★★★★★

The Omega Squad: Battle of the Sphinx II 1/03 A fascinating archeological find that adventure gamers will dig. ★★★★★

Prayer of the Co. Blood 1/03 Two half-good games don't equal one good one. ★★★★★

Real Politics 6/03 A far star story depicted by criminal combinations. ★★★★★

Revelations 5/03 A light, revealing real-time Roman war game on a nice scale. ★★★★★

Pro Race Driver 10/03 Lame story, lame racing, lame AI—same game. ★★★★★

ProSieX Baseball 2003 5/03 A great simulation of what it's like to be an MLB team manager. ★★★★★

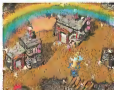
Robbery Six 2: Raven Shield 6/03 Best game in the class. River Jethro's business the 20 zones and supports the entire series in every way possible. ★★★★★

Ryona 3: Freedom 3 2/03 If only the cable to replace were half as responsive as the best ones are. ★★★★★

Red Faction II 6/03 Only edged out by Robbery Six 2 on its list year. ★★★★★

Republic: The Revolution 12/03 Good idea, bad game. ★★★★★

4 Games You Shouldn't Buy



Heaven and Hell

Somewhere between heaven and hell lies the purgatory of this really bad Populous rip-off. This game rapidly goes downhill in a landslide of repetitious commands and nondescript design.



Messiah

We were promised a second coming...but this most definitely is not it. One cool idea (a cherub that can possess other people) does not a game make, especially when it's weighed down by bugs galore.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
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Restaurant Empire 6/05 Forget those cheap-grocery-wishes-and-casual-dreams—this is close to *Dineria*. **★★★☆☆**

Revelation 6/05 You say you want a revelation? Not this one you don't! **★★☆☆☆**

RollerCoaster Tycoon 2: Wildly Worlds 6/05 It adds some window dressing and a smattering of new scenarios to a game well past its prime. **★★★☆☆**



CS: Runway & Real Adventure 12/03 The limits of graphic adventure games, both pretty and stupid. **★★☆☆☆**

Shadowbane 7/03 Rather than kill zombies, cover and over-armor, build cities, and so on. **★★☆☆☆**

Shrek: Hit 2 4/05 The world's first canceled Duke game will boss you to death. **★★☆☆☆**

The Sims: Strike 4/05 If you want to pay \$70 per month for a 3D chat room, then this is the perfect game for you. **★★★☆☆**

The Sims: Superstar 5/05 Another solid addition to the planet's best-selling game. **★★★★☆**

Six Tank: Sixe Force 2 9/05 Like playing one of the less compelling TV episodes. **★★☆☆☆**



Star Wars Galaxies: 10/05 Might get a whole lot better if Empire divided. **★★☆☆☆**

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
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A Tale in the Desert 7/03 This odd little game is perfect for the social-gamer enticed by conflict-based games. **★★★★☆**

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004 10/05 A game that will please both hardcore golfers and casual gamers. **★★★★☆**

Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness 10/05 Not as bad as the movie—oh, well, not it is. **★★☆☆☆**

Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 10/05 As long as you've got a girlfriend, it's the best fun you can have on a skateboard without pulling yourself in the hospital. **★★★★☆**



Utter 2.0 10/05 Best movie-themed game of the year, so far. **★★★★☆**

Twinsies 4/05 John Diller takes another obscure conflict and makes it playable. **★★★☆☆**

Empire 2: Rise of Rome 7/05 A completely done city-building game with nothing to set it apart from the crowd. **★★★☆☆**

Utter 02: The Awakening 4/05 You're going to like this shooter, but you're not going to love it. **★★★★☆**

Judith: Under Siege 4/05 An intriguing premise and quality execution make *Judith* a winner. **★★★★☆**

Vietcong 3/05 While it delivers a much better Vietnam combat experience than you might expect, the graphics can be problematic. **★★★☆☆**

Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne 5/05 Some nice new stuff, but you pay in macro-management. **★★★★☆**

Warner Bros. Battles 12/03 Good game, but it's a warm-glass of milk when you really want a shot of your favorite poison. **★★☆☆☆**

Will Rock 7/05 To quote a *Weekend Update* classic: "It's not your best idea!" **★★☆☆☆**

World of Warcraft: Spirit Cas 6/05 There's a whole lot more to this than this "bedrock" learning is! **★★★★☆**

World War II: Frontline Command 10/05 Another face-booring imitation, and no reason, but the documentary footage is OK. **★★☆☆☆**

3D: Wolverine's Revenge 5/05 Some nice money and fun, but the revised X-Men 2000 instead. **★★☆☆☆**

Happy fiery cheery games

Fun for the whole family



Rocket Mania

There are no demonic creatures in this puzzle game—unless you consider Satan to be an eternally cheerful drag-on with a love of fireworks.



The Sims 2: Seasons + millions of expansions

Stop worrying about your eternal damnation and spend that time lordling over your Sims, making them eat, sleep, and light themselves on fire at your every whim.



Toontown

Start kids down the road to introversion early with *EverQuest* for little tykes. Play with Disney figures and make friends, build your home, and fight cogs.



Mistmare

In the words of Eric Jeff Green, "Strategy First could have put a rattling dead rat in a shoebox and charged \$20, and it would still have been a better value than *Mistmare*." And that's being nice.



Postal 2

An utter abomination to mankind, infantile humor, exorcuculating load times, embarrassing graphics, framerate drops, broken gameplay, awful voice acting—we can keep going if you're not convinced yet. Just say no to *Postal*.

A-List

Our picks

Welcome to the brand-new A-List. Here you'll find our picks for nearly every facet of your digital life—products that we use ourselves and think are nifty. The Strategies section has died and gone on to that great big place up there where all good and faithful former sections go. If you are really itching for some strategies, do what everyone else does and go find them online.

Our prices are taken from a variety of sources, including Pricegrabber.com. Prices can and will fluctuate by the time this shows up in print, so just accept these numbers as good estimates. Since we're always looking for the latest and greatest, check back every month for our new favorites.



COMPUTERS

There are these funny little boxes out now that let you do "wecky" things like surf the Internet, play games, and write articles. Which ones are tops in our book?

Intel-based system



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

Dimension XPS
\$3,126
Dell Computers

BUDGET PICK

Area 51 Performance
\$1,587
Alienware

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Dell's 3.2GHz Pentium 4 rig sports a stylish case, quality components, and reputable customer care. It's not good for upgrading—the motherboard and power supply are proprietary—but the monitor is outrageous.

Alienware's 2.8GHz Pentium 4 system offers stability, speed, and that slick alien head-style case for a price that won't break the bank. Just probe your way through the features in this budget-minded rig, and you'll be pleased.

AMD-based system



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

PC 51
\$5,000
VoodooPC

BUDGET PICK

Assassin SE
\$1,079
Voodoo PC

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

The Voodoo PC 51 outdid everything in WI's Ultimate Gaming Machine roundup. The overclocked Athlon 64 FX-51 CPU and GeForce FX 5950 graphics card help the unit push the limits of speed. It will also push the limits of your wallet.

When you want to squeeze the most out of your price to value ratio, the Voodoo PC Assassin SE comes in a winner. Even if it isn't the fastest, the components are smart and the power is impressive—especially for the price.

LAN boy rig



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

DoIt
\$2,500
VoodooPC

BUDGET PICK

FragBox
\$995
Falcon Northwest

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Voodoo's small form factor PC is built around a Shuttle case, but they push it to its limits by including an Athlon 64 3200 CPU, 1GB of RAM, and a Radeon 9800 XT graphics card. Nice.

The average shelf life of a gaming rig is what, two years? If you want your power to go (and on the cheap), the FragBox not only has a great portable design, it also has the juice you'll need to play the current crop of games.

PERIPHERALS

Until the day comes that you can directly jack your head into a computer, peripheral makers can breathe a sigh of relief. For now, check out these game-friendly—and useful—devices.



Speakers



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

Z-680 S1 system
\$350
Logitech

MID-RANGE PICK

I-Trigue L3500 2.1 system
\$100
Creative Labs

BUDGET PICK

Z-640 S1 system
\$80
Logitech

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

While this speaker kit has been out for about a year now, the power and dual still can't be beat. Hell, with PC inputs and a digital optical in, you could hook this into your home theater (as several C&W editors have) and be very happy.

Not everyone needs five channels of discrete audio. Creative's awesome 2.1 setup boasts excellent sound as well as a wired remote that can attach directly to the company's Muvo line of USB MP3 players.

So you want a quick and easy solution that won't force you to eat ramen? This S1 speaker set offers great bang, especially when you consider how few bucks you'll need to sacrifice to obtain it.

Keyboard



PRODUCT

WIRED PICK

Elite Keyboard
\$30
Logitech

WIRELESS PICK

Wireless Desktop Elite
Keyboard/Mouse
\$80
Microsoft

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Honestly, it's hard to wax on about a keyboard—it has buttons, it's black...what more can we say? But the Logitech Elite is reliable, and the accessory buttons are well designed and laid out.

Microsoft's latest wireless desktop offers side-scrolling action that's awesome for surfing and spreadsheets. The keyboard has a "leatherette" wristpad that's super-comfortable, and the bay of programmable buttons is a power user's dream.

Gamepad



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

Wireless Gamepad
\$40
Saitek

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Keyboards are going wireless. Mice are going wireless. So why not gamepads? The Wireless Gamepad offers up an excellent solution, with a charging base station, a good control feel, and an agreeable price.

A-LIST PERIPHERALS

Mouse



PRODUCT

WIRELESS PICK

MX 500 Optical
\$45
Logitech

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

The sleek design of this Logitech mouse makes you look cool...OK, not really, but between the full complement of mouse buttons and the stylish look, this is one mouse that will dress up your desktop nicely.

WIRELESS PICK

Wireless Intellimouse
Explorer 2.0
\$50
Microsoft

Essentially the same mouse that's in the Wireless Desktop, this mouse has a side scrolling feature as well as five fully programmable buttons. Also, unlike older wireless mice, this baby doesn't "fall asleep" on you.

Headset



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

PC150
\$70
Sennheiser

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

There's a reason you play games: to avoid the outside world. Want to guarantee that cone of silence? Then grab these headphones. They not only sound great and have a serviceable mic built in, they're also comfortable as hell.

Joystick



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

Extreme 3D Pro
\$35
Logitech

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Along with their flight sim brethren, joysticks have dropped out of the public eye. While there are some wireless joysticks entering the market, the heavier weight of the Extreme 3D Pro suggests you accept the cord to save some money.

Racing wheel



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

MOMO Racing
\$100
Logitech

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

If you can find one of the deluxe MOMO steering wheels, the stitched leather steering wheel will let you think you've got your own Italian race kiten. The MOMO wheel is an awesome peripheral for all racing fans.

DISPLAYS

Desk-hogging but inexpensive CRT monitors or sleek, sexy, and pricey LCD panels? It's your call what you have room for—these are our recommendations.



CRT Monitors



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

21-inch MultiSync FE2115B
\$600
NEC

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

CRT monitors are still the cheaper, more-bang-for-your-buck solution for your rig. And this NEC monitor gives you a nice sharp big picture, perfect for when you're plotting to take over the world in Rise of Nations.

BUDGET PICK

19-inch E901b
\$260
ViewSonic

14-inch screens used to be the default entry-level monitor—which is way too small for comfortable gaming. Thanks to technology evolution, 19-inch monitors, like this excellent offering from ViewSonic, have become far more affordable.

LCD Monitors



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

- 17-inch AS4315UT
\$600
Iiyama

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

LCDs are generally more expensive and have refresh rates less than traditional CRTs, but Iiyama's offering keeps the trailing blur to a minimum, making this monitor a capital choice for gamers anywhere.

BUDGET PICK

- 15-inch 152T
\$360
Samsung

LCDs are coming down in price. On average, the 15-inch screen, while a little small for a fulfilling gaming session, runs \$200 less than its 17-inch brethren, which is why Samsung's 152T is a standout compromise.

COMPONENTS

If you are scratching your head wondering why we don't also have a fatherboard section, then you are probably not a do-it-yourself kind of guy.



Processor



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

- Athlon 64 FX-51
\$733
AMD

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

The Athlon 64 FX-51 is currently the top dog when it comes to gaming processors. Forget about its 64-bit pedigree: All we care about is the fact that it runs 32-bit applications—like Max Payne 2—superfast.

BUDGET PICK

- Pentium 2.8GHz
\$300
Intel

If you're building a Pentium system, you can't go wrong with a 2.8GHz Pentium 4 processor. While not quite as badass as the 3.2GHz model, it's still more than capable of running any game to come your way in the next couple of years.

Motherboards



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

- 5KBN nForce3
\$225
Asus

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Asus' 5KBN nForce3 mini board is the board of choice for the AMD Athlon 64 FX-51 processor. It has support for dual-channel DDR 400 memory as well as SATA RAID. Of course, it also sports Nvidia's 6-channel audio.

BUDGET PICK

- D875PBZ
\$169
Intel

Intel's D875PBZ isn't so much "low-end" as it is flexible. Constructed around the i875P chipset, it has built-in SATA RAID support, and it makes a great backbone for an affordable Pentium 4 system.

Soundcard



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

- Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro
\$250
Creative Labs

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Remember when it was outrageous to have rear speakers for computer gaming? Well, the ante is up—now we've got the Creative Labs Audigy 2 with a whopping seven speakers of audio driving power.

BUDGET PICK

- Onboard audio
Free

The most affordable option among soundcards is just to pick out a quality motherboard with built-in sound. All of the drivers will come with the motherboard, and the sound quality is fine for most ears.

A-LIST COMPONENTS

Videocard



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK Radeon 9800 XT \$400 ATI Technologies	The Radeon XT was originally supposed to come packaged with Half-Life 2, but unfortunately, the game's release date slipped. Still, this is one offering that will assuredly be geared for the inevitable second coming.
MID-RANGE PICK GeForce FX 5600 Ultra \$250 Nvidia	Between the cards that will blow out your bankbook and the ones that will quickly fall behind are the mid-range pleasers that balance smooth polygon throughput with the paycheck, such as our recommended GeForce FX 5600.
BUDGET PICK GeForce FX 5200 Ultra \$150 Nvidia	Graphics cards will quickly burn a hole through the ol' bank book, so staying a generation behind is the smart budgeting solution. The Nvidia GeForce FX 5200 has good rates for the money, but don't buy the cheaper, non-Ultra version.

Hard drive



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK Cheetah 10K.6 \$180 each Seagate Technology	The newest drives spin at a scorchingly fast 10,000 rpm. Install two of these babies in a RAID configuration for your own road runner-driven chariot. More than what you'll ever need for gaming, but it's also good for video editing.
BUDGET PICK DiamondMax Plus 9 80GB \$80 Maxtor	80GB drives at 7,200 rpm, like the DiamondMax Plus 9 featured here, can easily be found for around \$1 per gigabyte. Usually they involve rebates with many instructions—so don't forget to send out the paperwork as quickly as possible.

Optical drive



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
HIGH-END PICK DVD A06U \$200 Pioneer Electronics	You won't need a DVD burner for gaming, but combine it with a TV card and recording software, and you've got your own TiVo. Pioneer started the DVD-R/RW burning standard, and the A06 is an excellent value.
BUDGET PICK LTC4816H DVD/CD-RW combo \$60 Lite-On	Prices on combo drives have significantly dropped with the incoming tide of DVD burners. Finding a generic combo drive for around \$50 is not completely unheard of, but we're going to recommend the still value-minded Lite-On combo.

Case



PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
TOWER PICK PlusView 1000AMG \$70 Antec	This popular tower offers plenty of space for future upgradability, and the aluminum construction keeps the unit light. The clear panel feeds the need to mod, while durable construction promises years of use. Plus, the price is right.
ALTERNATE FORM PICK SM41G Small Form Factor \$300 Shuttle	These cases run at about \$300 with motherboards included. More expensive units offer flexibility for faster processors and graphic cards, but a cheaper unit is an excellent first step towards building a media server.

MOBILITY

Every once in a while you're going to need to leave the house. Prepare for when that day comes with these handy cell phones, handhelds, notebooks, and gadgets.



Laptop



PRODUCT

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

HIGH-END PICK

Area-51M
\$2,800
Alienware

Finally, a laptop that can change with you! Alienware's top-of-the-line laptop offers "user upgradeable" graphics, a 3.2GHz Pentium 4 processor, and 1GB of RAM! Now that's a desktop replacement.

POCKET PICK

Dell Inspiron 5150
\$2,000
Dell Computers

Dell's Inspiron 5150 isn't the fastest gaming laptop around, but with its 64MB GeForce FX 5200 graphics card you should be able to play any game that's out now. We played *Call of Duty* and *Max Payne 2* on it at 1024x768, and it worked like a charm.

LIGHTWEIGHT PICK

Area-51 Sentia
\$1,900
Alienware

Ultra portable laptops are geared towards traditional office functions, not the latest in engine-burning first-person shooters. Nonetheless, there are still plenty of games you can enjoy, such as *StarCraft* and EA Sports titles like *Madden* and *Tiger Woods*.

Phone



PRODUCT

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

FLIP PHONE PICK

SPH-A600
\$350
Samsung

Of the current crop of camera phones, this one is the slickest, most game friendly of the bunch (nice try, N-Gage!). Flip the screen around and there's even a GBA-like dock so you can control the action better. Now if only there were good games.

NON-FLIP PHONE PICK

3650
\$200
Nokia

The Nokia 3650 is a styling camera phone that will surely turn heads. The oddly shaped keypad will take at least a week to get used to, but the easy-to-use camera and organizer functions more than make up for it.

PDA



PRODUCT

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

PALM OS PICK

Zodiac 2
\$400
Tipwave

This is an amped-up Palm OS 5 PDA that can play games and a whole lot more—like MP3s and video clips. Oh yeah, and it can also play the hundreds of Palm games already out. Now we're waiting to see how good Zodiac-only games will be.

POCKETPC OS PICK

Axim X5
\$300
Dell Computer

For those on the PocketPC side of the fence, you'll find powerful software (HAME, anyone?) and some sweet games. The catch: You need the horsepower of this PDA to play. Slim lines, smart design, and a reasonable price all add up to a winner.

Gadget



PRODUCT

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

ONE PICK

MuVo NX
\$130
Creative Labs

The MuVo will quickly become an indispensable part of your life. It doesn't hold the gigabytes of other MP3 players, but it works like a USB hard drive, easily plugging into your computer so you can transport those save-game files.



2 PUBLISHER: Microsoft DEVELOPER: Ensemble GAMES Real-time strategy **ESRB RATING: T** (REQUIRED) Platform: PC 4GB, 12GB RAM, 45GBH install
RECOMMENDED: Platform: PC 6GB, 25GBH RAM, 32GBH 3D card MULTIPLE PLAYERS LAN, internet (2-8 players)

Age of Mythology: The Titans

What happens when two mortals enter the realm of gods and monsters?



Tom uses Kronos' Deconstruction power to be a pain in the ass.



Tom's Behemoths doing Bruce's town some serious damage.

Bruce 00:00: While *Age of Mythology* is probably my favorite RTS to date, I was dreading the release of *Titans* because I knew I'd have to play Tom again. He kicked my ass when we played the original last year, mostly because he runs a weekly PC-game training school called Shoot Club where he and other RTS professionals train. I'm just an everyday working man trying to make my way in a world of mythological creatures, most of which scare me. Between being scared of the game and being scared of Tom, that's a lot of scared. If some of the screenshots look blurry, that's my mouse hand shaking.

I'm playing the Atlantians with Gea as my major god, which makes me a Gaian. I hope that isn't pronounced the way it's spelled. Gea's initial power is plucking trees, which doesn't sound scary, but several of her minor gods look hot—that's good enough for me.

Tom 00:00: We're playing on a random map and Mediterranean came up, a large lake rimmed with land. My most immediate decision is whether to fish for food. It's a cost-effective way for the Atlantians to diversify, because it feeds up expensive citizens for other duties. However, since Bruce is Geia, he can out-produce me when it comes to lumber—the god power of Geia's forests gives him extra wood that can be spent building up a formidable navy. That's an arms race I don't really want to have, since I need my wood to upgrade my towers so Kronos can time-shift them around. Until I get farms in the Classical Age, it's a fish-free diet of chickens and pigs for my people.

Bruce 01:28: Atlantian citizens build and collect faster—and cost a lot more—than other races, meaning you need fewer of



Tom time-shifts a tower forward to steal a settlement from Bruce.



The Herpetides tree charges hands.

them. This helps me because it means fewer units to keep track of—remember, I'm not a professional. I'm using berry groves to assure a steady stream of food while I race to the Classical Age. With the big lake in the center of the map, I can get a good portion of my food from fish. I need extra food to build soldiers who can fend off the attacks Tom always launches before I'm ready for them.

Bruce 02:30: I've hit the Classical Age before Tom! Leto is my god of choice by default, because Oceanus doesn't really do much for me. The lake will probably end up a fishery, since you can get across the map on land. Plus, I hate nerves in RTS games.

Tom 03:00: Ack, I lost track of my timing and suddenly had a glut of food but no temple. I quickly addressed that and just now hit the Classical Age. I've chosen Prometheus, who lets me build Prometheus. I prefer the little clay dukes to Leto's self-repairing Automotons, since Prometheus are cheaper and they last longer in a fight. Since Atlantians don't unlock their basic conventional military units until the Heroic Age, they tend to rely on their myth units until then.

Bruce 04:45: Time to claim my third settlement. Using a trick I learned from Tom, I

send a citizen to build a guard tower next to the settlement I'm trying to claim. I saw it that way to interfere.

Tom 04:35: I've upgraded my towers and they're ready to be time-shifted forward. I'm on the right side of the map and Bruce is on the left; we each have two nearby settlements. We're both in a position to hunkier down with three town centers, but if I can grab one of Bruce's settlements, I'll have him at a disadvantage. I'm going to take the settlement to the north of his starting position.

Bruce 05:00: Tom's attacking me at the settlement I'm trying to claim. I saw it first!

Tom 10:45: He's got his Automotons up there and he's already built a tower. I use Kronos' Deconstruct on the tower and my Prometheus pummel his Automotons, splitting into pairs of smaller Prometheus in the process. Clay triumphs over metal! Now that they're running off his citizens, I've time-shifted one tower forward and I'm building a second tower. I'll use my citizen to build a town center and wait out the counterattack. This is where the game will probably be decided, and I've just gotten the upper hand.

Tom 12:15: Oops, I time-shifted my temple forward to help defend the town center and



Tom
Last month
Tom's Shadow Demons
prove to be no match for
the Wizardry of Bruce in
Age of Wonders.



Bruce
Last month
Bruce, playing as the
dreaded Elves, manages
to vanquish Tom in Age
of Wonders.



❑ Bruce's defense of his Wonders is valiant but in vain.



❑ Bruce's offensive started out pretty well.

I left my relics behind. Rats, I always do that as Kronos. Now I need to get someone to go back to get the relics, which is decidedly un-godlike. "Umm, excuse me, Mr. Mummilo, but I seem to have left two valuable relics sitting out in the open. Could you be a dear and run back to get them for me? Yes, I know it'll take two trips all the way to the other end of the map, but I'd be much obliged and you'll get to be a hero in the process."

Bruce 11:15: OK, time to build some Automators to go teach Tom a lesson. I make sure to research volcanic forge, as this makes them more resistant to the pierce attacks they'll face from Tom's towers.

Tom 12:35: No counterattack yet. I'm building a barracks here as well.

Tom 14:25: I have four settlements to his two. All quiet an every front.

Bruce 15:33: Once again, I age up before Tom does. I choose Theta for her coat. Hesperides tree, which will let me build Dryads, as well as form a zone of protection from god powers around the tree.

Tom 17:09: I just hit the Heroic Age, I've chosen Rheia for Behemoths, who are a cross between norseman wrecking crews and regenerating armadillos. I also get Valoc, which instantly transforms human units into heroes and will come in handy when you consider Bruce's penchant for those Automators. Now it's time to spend some serious wood on a force of Atlantean archers, called Arcuses. Arcuses? Arcus? Arc? I haven't had Atlantean since high school, so I don't remember how to decline Atlantean nouns. Suffice it to say I'm going to build an Arcus, and then build a whole bunch more.

Tom 17:59: Ah, there he is. He's on the southern coast with a few guys and a Stymphalian bird. I love those birds! I think I'll take it, courtesy of Rheia's Traitor god power.

Bruce 18:10: What? My bird disappeared. It wasn't even half-dead when it flew over Tom's guard tower, and then it disappeared. I suspect Tom is cheating. I've turned into a wood exporter, using my market to sell the tons of wood I'm gathering from my forests. Even after buying all the market improvements, though, I'm depressing the price of wood with all my selling. One hundred units of wood is going for 15 gold, which won't

make me rich anytime soon.

Tom 19:38: Bruce is getting sassier and creeping up on the settlement. I took from him. He's dropped his Hesperides tree so I can't use Valoc or Traitor. I run up, grab the tree, and realize I can use my god powers now (I thought the tree would lock out friendly god powers as well). I deconstruct one of his towers, fire off Valoc, and start smashing things up. Looks like it's going to be another quick win for me because Bruce squandered all his resources in the race to age up.

Bruce 20:20: My failure to claim that settlement has led to serious problems. Tom is swarming my main city and there isn't much I can do about it—I'm barely able to crank out a soldier before Tom kills it. Never, ever send troops into battle individually in this game. If necessary, set a rally point far away from the action and then bring your army in as a group. Fortunately, I have one last trick up my sleeve, as I just hit the Mythic Age.

Tom 20:40: Look at that Behemoth god! If I were Bruce, I'd dash off a hasty e-mail to



❑ Bruce's Tartarian Gate breaks Tom's offensive.

out most of Tom's buildings. They are hostile to everything, so it's best not to get your units too close.

Tom 21:09: Damn it, Goryk, I'm trying to win a game here! I pull everyone back and spend all my gold on Dryads. I have to destroy this gate, but these spawn are coming out too fast and tearing everyone up.

Tom 22:35: By the time the gate is destroyed, there are a half-dozen spawn chewing up my town center, my barracks, and my temple. They've knocked down both my towers. OK, this is a lost cause. I would retreat, but I don't have anyone left to retreat. I'm hurrying for gold so I can't keep

“If I were Bruce, I’d dash off a hasty e-mail to Ensemble asking for a patch.”

Ensemble asking for a Behemoth nerf patch.

Bruce 20:52: I chose Hekete as my major Mythic age goddess for one reason: the Tartarian gate. Now, with Tom swarming my base, I send a lone Lampades on a suicide mission to get as close as possible to Tom's nearby settlement, and I place the gate. This opens a portal and releases Tartarian spawn, which are nasty creatures that should take

up the reinforcements. At least those damn spawn will keep Bruce from recovering the settlement too easily.

Tom 24:12: Plan B is to choke off Bruce's gold supply, since I still control most of the map. My traitored Stymphalian bird and a few Arcuses are scouting a line of four gold mines along the southern strip of land. I need to hold these if I can. I run into some



❑ Bruce's Titan gate barely gets past the planning stage.



❑ When there's nothing else handy, turning citizens into heroes gives them fighting ability.



Using Allies' Impulse, Tom makes Bruce's last-ditch effort at a counterattack.

"I don't want to compare myself to anyone associated with Hitler, but..."

Automatons who savage my Arcuses, but they have no way to attack the bird, so they retreat after killing the citizens I had mining gold over here.

Tom 26:31: I'm hurting for gold now that my marketplace doesn't have that long path to the town center I lost to the Tartanian gate. My excess wood supply doesn't help because Bruce's tree-hugging Gaians have apparently been flooding the market and driving prices down. If Ensemble ever makes an Age of Market Forces game, Bruce would probably be really good at it.

Bruce 27:00: One of the reasons I don't do well at these games is that at heart, I'm pretty nonviolent. I'm about to prove this by going for a Wonder victory. I'm building a decent-sized army, which is going to go on the offensive just as soon as the Wonder is completed. Tom will probably send his own force to destroy it, and I'd like to fight that battle under the protection of my own guard towers, which I'm building around the Wonder site. I've upgraded them with every possible improvement in order to have a chance against Tom's Behemoths, which are truly nasty against buildings.

Tom 27:00: What are you thinking, Geryk? I'm not going to let you get away with a Wonder. It's right between his two town centers, so it's relatively well defended. It's also on the coast, so I'm guessing Bruce does have a navy after all and I was right not to contest it. Time to accumulate Murrilos, Arcuses, and a Behemoth or two

Tom 28:30: I hit the Mythic Age. I chose you, Adu, for your mighty Impulse—not so much for those Arguses, since I don't have much need for an army of lustulent octopi.

Tom 29:10: The traitored bird has advanced to the fourth gold mine

along the southern coast. I shift my temple up here, then a barracks if I'm lucky, he may not even know I'm coming from this direction. He's about halfway done with his Wonder. Not a chance, Geryk.

Tom 30:36: Ack, he's jumped me with about 20 troops. I pull back my troops and drop Impulse. It'll damage my own buildings, but it's more important that I keep his army busy if he breaks this offensive. I might not be able to get to his Wonder in time and I'll lose the game.

Bruce 30:40: I don't want to compare myself to Hitler or anyone associated with Hitler, but that felt a lot like my own personal Alzheim in this game. There I was, on a roll and with Tom on the run, and all of a sudden, it's all gone. If I had been able to take out Tom's settlement and secure some of these gold mines, it would have been a whole different make-believe war of mythological creatures. Instead, I have no army and I'm probably going to lose my adjacent town center and the Wonder.

Tom 31:20: I'm going to press on to his southern town center, which seems to be all that stands between me and his Wonder.

Tom 32:35: I took down his town center, but I can't build on the settlement yet. Stupid Gaians kush terrain.

Bruce 33:00: The Wonder is finished. Now, to build on to it.

Tom 34:30: It was a short walk to the Wonder, which is about half knocked down. He's got towers covering the other side, but I

have a few Behemoths and Arcuses at work. He's tricking down Murrilos, but I'm easily picking them off.

Tom 35:15: See the Wonder is down. The world will not see the marvels of whatever fountain thingy the Atlanteans build.

Bruce 36:31: The consequence of my pseudo-North African misadventure is that I'm totally out of gold. As a result, I have to go on a gold-finding expedition, which will take me past Tom's (now-destroyed) settlement and toward the northwest corner of the map. I hope Tom hasn't taken over that mine.

Tom 40:33: Now, Bruce is pouring infantry and Automatons towards the northern gold deposits. Time to hit him from the south with my Wonder-breaking team of Behemoths and Arcuses equipped with the building-raazing Blazing Pitch improvement.

Tom 44:10: Bruce keeps attacking around the gold to the north, I've got the strategic advantage, but I can't keep up with his military prodding. If he takes this area for long, it opens up new gold for him. Time to break this stalemate. I spend everything to start researching a Titan.

Bruce 46:02: I finally manage to clear out Tom's barracks, but just barely.

Tom 46:37: Bruce's base is pinched between two town centers that are holding him like tongs. Now, for the judicious application of a Titan! I lay down the meditation and start building.

Bruce 49:15: Instead of building a Wonder, I should probably have researched the Titan gate. I start one now, but I have no chance of finishing it before Tom finishes his, and I expect his Titan to be on my case long before mine is done. Oh well.

Tom 50:15: I don't plan to let Bruce finish that Titan. My southern Wonder wrecking crew makes a beeline past his Towers and takes out his Titan gate before it's finished. This is the best way to shut down another player's Titan. Once they lay down their gate, if it's wrecked, they can't make another.

Tom 50:50: My Titan is on the way. Hear footsteps, Geryk? They're coming for you.

Tom 52:06: My Titan arrives and knocks over everything. Ah, the sweet spectacle of Bruce's buildings collapsing into dust, along with his hopes of besting me at an RTS! He may have a Ph.D., but when it comes to the Age of Mythology, the doctor is out.



Bruce's Titan gate at the mercy of Tom's Behemoths.



Ask not for whom the Titan tolls, Geryk. It tolls for thee.

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus...

...and I've got him bound and gagged in the basement

Like a greasy, cat-sized rodent trapped in your walls, the holiday season has arrived, keeping you up nights as it sitters noisily in the dry-wall for two weeks before dropping dead and stinking up the house, forcing you to unintentionally and repeatedly rend its liquefying corpse as you fish it out through a well outlet you pried off with the sharpened foot of a Barbie doll because you can't risk having a single Philips screwdriver in the house after "The Cheese & Kitten Incident" of '02. To celebrate the single worst part of the year, we at CGW have coughed up another gift guide, and like every year, it's pretty much worthless. Oh, there's some nice stuff listed, don't get me wrong—it's just that the things gamers (and I) really want aren't listed there.

But things have changed this year. I've got the big, bearded guy in the crawlspace, bound in intricate knots with little more than a coating of Nutella to protect him from the elements. I'm pretty sure it's Santa—that or former editor-in-chief Johnny Wilson—but either way, I'm not releasing him until my demands, er, wish list is fulfilled.

An apology from Microsoft

It is worse that they made us wait two years for a PC Halo or that they delivered the PC Halo they did? Let's see, the most-overrated shooter ever came out with nonupgraded textures and environments, bugs, no co-op play, no map cycling in multiplayer, and chugging like The Little Engine That Couldn't at higher resolutions on beefy PCs. I'd say the latter. While you're at it, a mea culpa for the known but unpatched Outlook hole that let *Half-Life 2*'s source code get stolen, thus delaying the game's release even more, would be nice.

Original titles

You can no longer use the following



Like a greasy, cat-sized rodent trapped in your walls, the holiday season has arrived.

words in the title of any game again ever: *Dark, Extreme, Angel, Mystery, Warrior, Dragon, Crystal, Legend, Tycoon, Kings, Age, Battle, Throne, War, Destiny, Shadow, Evil, Lords, Sword, Star Trek*, and years. Unless your game is *Lord King Tycoons of the Star Trek War Throne 3113 Battle for the Extreme Dark Sword of Shadow Destiny—An Evil Ages of Crystal Legend DragonAngel Warriors Mystery*. And while you're at it, enough with the subtitles already. Any idiot can slap five extra words after *Tomb Raider*—that doesn't mean it's going to suck any less.

Original titles, part deux

This is for you, *Stainless Steel Studios*—stop letting your publisher's marketing weasels name your products. We all know Rick Goodman worked on the first *Age of Empires*, but calling the studio's first game *Empire Earth* in order to exploit the Ensemble connection was just kind of lame. And calling your next game *Empire: Dawn of the Modern World* is just plain sad. Listen, if you're going to let the suits

mislead the public, at least commit to it fully. Put a giant, three-eyed topless showgirl with a flaming monkey on a leash shooting laser beams from its eyeballs on the Empire box and do it right.

No more crystals

Seriously, enough already—we're gamers, not friggin' geologists. I don't want to harvest crystals, I don't want to wield crystals, I don't want to use crystals to power something, I don't want to collect the five crystals of power, and I really don't want to discover the Dead Crystal of Wrath before the Dark Lord Vestik uses it to bring unending darkness and torment to the world. Go ahead, Vestik, I just don't give a damn anymore. The only crystals I want to deal with are the severed limbs of pandering nonfunnyman Billy Crystal. If you make a game like that, I'm preordering.

Let the first add-on to *The Sims 2* be *The Sims 3*

Whatever the merits of *Makin' Magic*, the hard truth of it is they should've just called it *Makin' Money*. I suspect the only reason this is the last expansion pack is that Maxis couldn't come up with a catchy, kitschy title to describe and market a self-addressed envelope and a demand for \$25 in cash. You want hardcore gamers to care about *The Sims* again? Don't dilute and diminish your franchise by trying to upgrade your mistress stuffing from \$50 to \$100 bills.

Oh, there's plenty more, believe you me. But I'm not greedy—it's the season of giving, isn't it? If I found just three of these under my tree, I'd be, well, probably not a happy man, but certainly a less openly hostile one. At least for a couple of days. Don't do it just for me—do it for Johnny, um, Santa.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got a New Year's Resolutions manifesto to compile.

Robert Coffey robert_coffey@cdjnews.com

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