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A chaotic battle scene in Vietnam. In the foreground, a yellow and black aircraft with a shark-mouth painted on its nose is flying. The background is filled with explosions, smoke, and other military vehicles like helicopters and tanks. In the upper right, a large, fiery skull is superimposed on the sky.

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BAM!! Face front, true believers. We've got the latest, most comprehensive dirt on *City of Heroes* (even better than some magazines' cover stories "ahem"). Also tune in for juicy looks at such promising titles as the mob-themed *Gangland* and German import *Soldner*.

COVER STORY

MOH: Pacific Assault

The day that will live in infamy is recreated in all its terrifying glory in EA's next installment of the acclaimed *Medal of Honor* series. Will it live up to its predecessor? See our exclusive story inside.



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One game to rule them all and in darkness bind them... that's this month's theme, what with a collection of **Lord of the Rings** games covering everything but *The Silarion*. But there's plenty more non-hobby titles complicating the competition for Game of the Year 2003, including *Knights of the Old Republic*, *The Simpsons: Hit & Run*, and *Dominions II*. What's the best game this month? It's not *Nasferatu*, you can bet on that.

130 Tech

We review Gateway's awesome 17-inch **M675 laptop** and Voodoo's small form-factor machine the **Voodoo Doll**, while Darren checks out Tapwave's **Zodiac**. We review two sets of Logitech speakers, and, of course, there's a new **Cracked Case**, **Wii Power**, and **Tech Medics**.

149 Check Out

Here's where we tell you how to spend your money, so you don't throw it away on stupid, wasteful things like food or toilet paper (they're overrated anyway—2 out of 5 stars).

160 Tom vs. Bruce

The gents duke it out on the Urgaia map of *Dominions II*.

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EGM

9.5

Game Informer

9.5

GMR

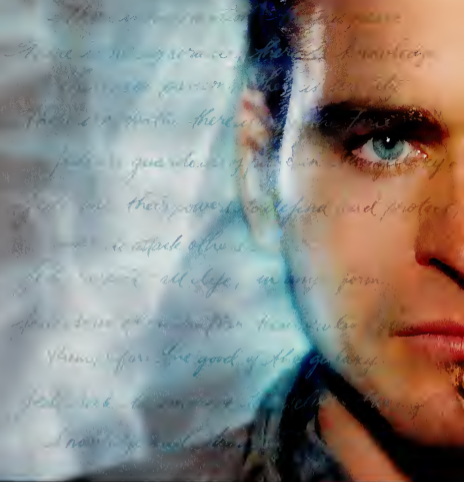
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IGN

9.5

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Hot flash!

My name is Rebecca Hulem. I am the author of a new book called *Feelin' Hot? A Humorous, Informative and Truthful Look at Menopause*.

I would like to send you a copy of the book for your review but don't know the correct address or who to send it to. Please notify me as to the correct address and I will send off a copy right away.

Sorry, Rebecca—you've made an honest mistake, confusing us with that other CGW, *Creative Gyro World*.



Review or review not, there is no try

Helloooooooooooooo CGW,

Question greatly, I do. Complain about Halo PC, you do, and computer came out, it finally has. Talking backwards I am for reason what? (Ahem) Why do you complain and bitch about Halo for the PC when it finally came out? You are overexcited that it is out and you shoot it down. WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU!!!

On another note, what are the system requirements for Ameca's Army, and where can I get it—as in not downloading

Kill! Kill! Kill!

I have to tell you, the article in your December 2003 issue (CGW #233) is one of the best I have read about how foolish it is to blame videogames for violence. I for one am tired of every politician news reporter, etc. that blames video games for violence by kids adults and anything they can think of. I play computer games and some console games and I'm not violent. People should be held accountable for what they do and not blame anyone or anything else. I know if a person commits a violent act, they caused it themselves, and to say a computer game caused it is an insult to everyone who plays games, and to the makers of games. The person who commits a crime was unbalanced before playing games and is unbalanced after playing.



James E. Wilkins, Jr.
Thurmont, MD

it? I am incredibly lazy and don't have the time or patience to DL it.

Korey with a K

What the hell is wrong with you, Derky with a D? We were excited about Halo—right up until we played it and discovered what a disappointment it is. As for your other question, you can get Ameca's Army (and your own rifle) for free at any Recruiting Office—unless you call two years of your life a fee.

Feel Our Pain

Every PC-gaming junkie has heard of or been in a PC versus console debate. The console devotees always claim that their gaming hardware is the better platform because the console games are tested thoroughly for bugs and run fantastic due to development on proprietary hardware, whereas PC games are pushed out the

door early and constantly need patching. Well, if you get the October 2003 issue of *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, on page 34 you'll see an article with the title "BUST-ED! Game-crashing bugs in big-ticket titles have players wondering: What happened to quality control in the gaming industry?" They're not talking about PC games, folks!

When I ran across this article, I couldn't help but bust out laughing hysterically. Now the PC gamers have a great retort: At least we can download and patch our buggy games. Ha ha! I love it!

Samduhman

Dept. of Corrections

I understand that your feature on *Doom 3* [CGW #234, January 2004] was supposed to be a no-holds-barred, show-everything peek behind the scenes, but did you really have to include that shot of

Mail Bites

Thanks to *Disciples 2: Rise of the Elves*, I no longer crave nicotine.

—NIX

I always picture Chief Inspector Dreyfus in his padded cell when I read Coffey's "happy time" writings. Oddly, I used to picture Green as Clouseau.

—Cavero

This jungle makes the Amazon seem like a botanical garden.

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Of John Carmack sitting on the crapper (page 74)?

Kevin J. Hackett

Did you really think we'd run a pic of Carmack on the can? C'mon, Kevin, get real. That's clearly a bidet.

Review Lag

I am rather confused about why some reviews are taking such a long time. *Max Payne 2* has been out in Britain for at least three weeks and *Empire: Dawn of the Modern Era* has also been out but has not been reviewed. I want to buy *Max Payne 2* and was looking forward to reading a review from your website to tell me if it was any good. Other game sites have reviews of these games, and many you don't make you become a member. So, is there any point becoming a member [of the CGW site] if other, more accessible sites can review games quickly and easily before they're released but your site can't? As it is, I am waning from your site much more because the reviews just aren't coming quick enough and other sites get them. Can you please throw some light on this?

Edward

First, CGW reviews take a long time because the vagaries of the print industry dictate ridiculously long lead times of up to three months. We try very hard to be as timely as possible with our reviews, but you're right, it's hard to beat the websites, especially because most of those sites rush their reviews out after just a few hours of play. But there isn't any point to becoming a member of any other site just for reviews—our new Ziff-Davis site www.tup.com will have timely reviews of games across all platforms.

Bad Negotiating Tactics 101

Your magazine is terrible. I foolishly plunked down 25 bucks for a subscription and have been assailed with shoddy reviews, whole sections based on cell phones, and the manne babbling of Robert Coffey. I've realized from past letters that your readers either love or hate him. I, however, feel only pity for this troglodyte. It's obvious that he utilizes vocabulary to disguise an average intellect and an inability to form coherent thoughts. What prompted me to write you fools, however, is your CD I just received. Tons of full games! A Doom 3 preview! Wool I pop it

Wrong Turn

Important notice regarding CGW's *NASCAR 2004* review

Our January issue was a milestone in many respects. It was the first issue with the new design and it boasted CGW's first-ever DVD. Unfortunately, it also featured the first review we've had to retract in the magazine's 22-year history.

Due to an oversight beyond our control the review of Electronic Arts' *NASCAR Thunder 2004* included a number of inaccuracies. It is our policy at *Computer Gaming World* only to review final PC code, and only to provide star ratings after the reviewer has finished the game. This was not the case with this review. With this in mind, we are officially retracting the review, and a new assessment will be found in our March issue. (The new review will also be posted on www.tup.com in the coming weeks.)

Computer Gaming World is proud of its long publishing history, and we take our responsibility as journalists and editors very seriously. We sincerely apologize for this oversight.

Jeff Green
Editor in Chief

into my brand new Dell Dimension XPS and lo and behold: There's nothing on the disk. Zip. Nada. Your new makeover, complete with Total War calendar (yes, let me pin that to my wall) hardly makes it all better. Immediately send me *Deus Ex: Invisible War* and your sins will be forgiven. I'll still cancel my subscription, of course.

madgiee

Um, yeah, we'll be rushing that game out to you right away. By the way, that's a DVD not a CD—maybe that's why it won't work, Mr. Big Brain.

Another One Bites the Dust

Yeah, what can I say? I feel like crying. I waited over a month for the CGW disc that was supposed to contain the full version of *Deus Ex*. I've always wanted to play this game, and I thought the disk would be my chance. When I opened it, I was all, "Screw these other games, I need to play and beat *Deus Ex* before *Deus Ex 2: Invisible War* comes out next week!"

In Johnny's review of *Stargate and Hutch*, he says he can't relate to the '70s because he wasn't born yet. As a baby-boomer gamer, I suddenly feel very, very old. Thanks a lot.

—Computer Dave from NJ

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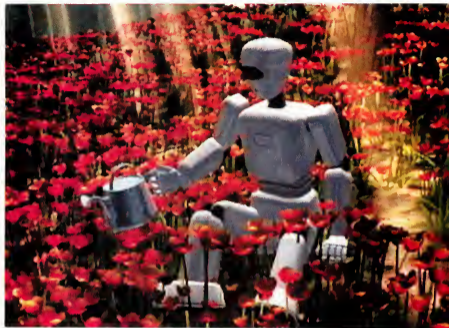
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■ GAME CULTURE

Ghost in the Machinima

How *Quake* accidentally gave rise to a new form of animation

Two soldiers stand idly at their base, engaged in a philosophical conversation that sounds like *Waiting for Godot* with a lot more swearing. It looks like a game, but it definitely doesn't have the usual lame NPC dialogue. It's actually the first episode of *The Blood Gulch Chronicles*, a series of short movies "filmed" using Bungie's *Halo*. The series

won Best Picture at the latest machinima Film Festival in New York City. "Our goal was to make something that had a continuous story line with characters that people were interested in. Kind of like the serials they used to show in the old days," explains Burnie Burns of Red vs. Blue. "We thought we were so original doing this stuff, but we quickly learned about the machinima movement and how many people have already been working

on their own pieces." The concept of machinima—defined as "filmmaking within a real-time virtual 3D environment"—isn't new. The phenomenon started in 1986, when a group called The Rangers made *Diary of a Camper*, which used *Quake* levels as sets and *Quake* models as actors. It had no sound and wasn't very exciting, but people took notice. More and more groups started making *Quake* movies, as they were then



Nerd Herd
 Our featured panel of geek's spoils: All about PC games, Mac OS X, or the hot latest.



Chris Taylor
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Battlefront
 Everything from a good idea to a great game: Battlefront, Star Wars games, they're actually fun.



NTV broadcast in the Waiting Line, which tells the story of a lonely robot's search for meaning.



By John "Fidji" Chronos—filmed Halo: The Fall of Reach—won Best Fictional at the Indie Mackie and Cos Festival.



Many gamers participated in Halo, which was filmed on a standard Battlefront server.



A gladiator fights to avenge his wife's murder in *The Solace of Nerves*.



Jake Hughes created Anachronox: The Movie by combining all the cut-scenes from the game.

called, following the Rangers' lead but improving upon the idea. Within the next few years, films such as *Avatar & Wendigo's Blahblahious*, *Ill Clan's Apartment Hunting*, and the *Quake Done Quick* series showed significant advances in quality. And though they were mostly silly little movies made for the very insular Quake community, they were unwittingly pioneering a new form of animation.

In the subsequent years, machinima has moved beyond the Quake community and even has its own awards festival, The Mackies, the second of which was held this past October at the American Museum of the Moving Image in New York City. More than 800 attendees were at this year's festival, and the variety of films extended far beyond the goofy humor of the original Quake movies. "In this year's festival alone," explains Machinima Academy of Arts & Sciences

executive director Paul Marino, "we saw Machinima comedies, dramas, music videos, and the first machinima documentary, *Avatars*—shot entirely within the virtual community of DigitalSpace *Traverse*—with both the interviewer and interviewee represented onscreen by avatars."

The homegrown quality is part of machinima's appeal. Jake Hughes, whose *Anachronox: The Movie* was the first feature-length work of machinima, says, "Homebodies are doing this stuff. As more people realize there is an avenue of interest, maybe more people will show their work, machinima is a lot like daymation—sometimes crude, sometimes clunky, but

wildly entertaining. That's all that's needed. And the crude and clunky is disappearing." Hughes' own film used the cut-scenes from Ion Storm's *Anachronox*, on which he worked, edited into a feature-length film using brief gameplay snippets as bridges between scenes.

Marino, also a co-founder of the aforementioned Ill Clan, points to Fountainhead Entertainment's *Anni*, this year's Mackie winner for Best Direction, as a harbinger of more serious works that can be made using the technique. "[*Anni* is] a sterling example of how advanced game engines can help produce works that break these boundaries. No longer

Machinima is a lot like claymation—sometimes crude, sometimes clunky, but wildly entertaining.

Is game technology looked at as low-poly models that suggest character—they're actual characters now." The film, in which a flower struggles to bloom in a hostile environment, was created by Fountainhead's Katherine Anna Kang, who recognized the potential for machinima while working as director of business development for id Software.



■ The award-winning Anna tells the story of a flower blooming in a hostile environment. Sort of like Jeff.

"We want to present another side to machinima—not just one of people playing a game, saving demos, and cracking jokes," explains Kang. "Though machinima is currently much better suited to comedy, it does the art form a disservice to pigeonhole and keep it there since there are many different stories that can be told through the medium." Kang hopes that machinima will find a wider audience, and Fountainhead's video for Zero 7's "In the Walking Line" made steps in this direction by being broadcast on MTV.

Machinima is slowly gaining more widespread acceptance. "We have an audience of young people who are immediately comfortable with digital technology," says Manno, "so with this built-in audience comes a comfort level with which they will embrace machinima as a standard way of creative expression." Marino sees a bright future for the form.

"While I do not expect Pixar-quality visuals on game hardware by next year, I anticipate it by 2005 at least."

Red vs. Blue's Burns also has high hopes for the medium. "Unlike in Hollywood, it's easy to take risks with this stuff. I think that there's lots of room to grow, and it's just going to take a couple of key projects to open up new territory." ■ **Ron Dulin**

For more information

- Academy of Machinima Arts & Sciences
www.machinima.com
- Fountainhead Entertainment
www.fountainheadent.com
- Machinima.com
www.machinima.com
- Red vs. Blue
www.redvsblue.com

Overheard

Quotes from the wacky world of gaming

I would have wanted to see more action. I would've liked to see more stars and more wars.

—MICHAEL LEWIS

POSTER: MICHAEL LEWIS FOR IGN.COM
PHOTOS: ANDY HARRIS FOR IGN.COM

"STORY IN A GAME IS LIKE STORY IN A PORN MOVIE. IT'S EXPECTED TO BE THERE, BUT IT'S NOT THAT IMPORTANT!"

—ADAM CARROLL

This is the best disc I've gotten from any mag, ever.

—CANDLESTICK
GUY (IGN.COM)

You sick monkeys. I don't have a DVD player. This sucks.

—CHUGA
LARRY (IGN.COM)
PHOTO: JEFFREY
MAYHEW

The Nerd Herd

Street geeks speak

Are PC games innovative enough for you?



Michael Hawwash

HOUSTON, TEXAS
What innovation?

These days, it's extremely rare for an innovative game to make it past the corporate money-men, who fund proven formulas and franchises only until a genre is dead. Hence, Tomb Raider 5.



Ariel Celeste

OAKLAND, CA

The two biggest directions now seem

to be A.I. and graphics. It seems to all just be baby steps perfecting what's already out there. Take Halo beautiful game, but the gameplay wasn't that great.



Tracy Espelota

REDWOOD CITY, CA

There is definite room for more innovation in the game-design aspect of PC games. Developers should look at games targeted toward a mainstream audience, much like Will Wright has, in order for the industry to grow.



Marcus Elkenberry

PORTLAND, OR

No, not at all. Most games are just a variation of good themes. I want something that will really knock my socks off. Nothing currently on the market does that for me.



Aaron Ko

SAN FRANCISCO, CA

Innovation is at an all-time low, seeing that the best new releases have all been done before, like Call of Duty. Still, if "same old, same old" is this much fun, I'm satisfied.

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Kiddie Counter-Strike

The Xbox invades our formerly exclusive refuge

Yes, Virginia, there are people out there who have never played Counter-Strike. For those people, CS is now on Xbox. But why should we care? After all, you can easily get it on the PC.

If you, like me, are asking that question, then Xbox Counter-Strike probably isn't for you. While it is a well-done port, its intended audience is driven toward console players who aren't already playing it on the PC. The Xbox version is easier to jump in and

play. The new pie-shaped buying tool is swift, and the one-player mode against bots is fun. Cheating is also much more limited, if not altogether impossible (though Steam promises to eliminate that problem on the PC).

While the Xbox version promises more levels available for future downloads, the PC will always be king when it comes to offering a continuous stream of user-created maps and mods. PC Counter-Strike will keep evolving and changing, even when

the Xbox is pushing up daisies.

PC users can think of Xbox Counter-Strike as an indie musician gone mainstream. Despite the stigma, the reality is that when something goes "mainstream," it has more power to propagate and improve. Now, everyone can enjoy. But those who were there from the beginning can still claim exclusive ownership—the kids have their own play area, since the two versions can't be played together.

■ Johnny Lee

5 Year Plan

Your favorite designers' past, present, and future



Chris Taylor
Gas Powered Games

What were you doing five years ago? The year was 1997. I'd just covered game financing after completing the book *Console Wars*, and was in the early stages of starting Gas Powered Games. I remember writing the office after-school notes and thinking the only thing to watch on *PlayStation* was *It's a Wonderful Afternoon* and go from thinking "What else will we do with this?" to "Will we have our own console strategy?"

What are you working on now? We recently wrapped up the design for our upcoming title, the game is now out of the studio and the sales pitch is in my back pocket. I developed a total relationship with Xbox, including an exclusive Steam ID, which is fun and nice to see.

What do you hope to be doing five years from now? I hope that the PC industry has clearly established a ground for all that's to come, and that I can still be working there. In five to ten years, I hope to be working on creating some little indie product, the development of it, and modifying options telephonically to customer questions. I don't want to end up in a position that I can't get out of, and I don't want to be stuck in a job that I don't like. As a professional game developer, I will be a great fit.

tools that cool



fig.1 - AIR FLO PC
13 Action Rubber

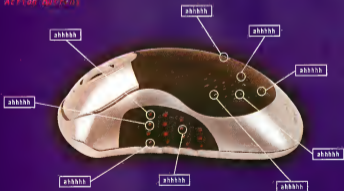


fig.2 - AIR FLO MOUSE
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■ EDITOR

Star Wars Battlefront

LucasArts enters a crowded battlefield

The people demand it: A proper multiplayer game set in the Star Wars universe. *Galaxies* tried, but there were few stars, and even fewer wars. A mod for *Battlefield 1942* (*Galactic Conquest*) let players take on the empire, but it had limited features and player support.

LucasArts plans to strike back with *Star Wars: Battlefront* (working title), which turns the idea of *Galactic Conquest* into a full-fledged commercial release. In development at Pandemic Studios (*Battlezone*, *Full Spectrum Warrior*), the game will let 32-player groups duke it out across 15 environments. Using material from all the *Star Wars* movies, you'll be able to fight on planets such

as Hoth, Endor, Yavin, Geonosis, and Naboo. Players will be able to pilot more than 10 ground and air vehicles, including AT-STs, X-Wings, and speeder bikes—all of which was promised in *Star Wars Galaxies* but still hasn't been delivered.

You'll be choosing sides with 20 different soldier types from four different armies from the classic trilogy (Empire versus the Rebel Alliance) and the new films (the Clone Army and Battle Droids). The game is currently scheduled to ship in fall 2004. Stay tuned for next issue, when we'll have a whole lot more to tell you.

■ Darren Gladstone



Star Wars Battlefront hopes to deliver the fast-paced action of Battlefield 1942.

Reality Check

How the ratings stack up

Game	CGW	PC Gamer	CGM	GameSpot	IGN.com	IUP.com	GameRankings.com
Call of Duty	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
Max Payne 2	A	A-	B-	A	A	B+	A
Thief: The Darkening Below	C	B	B-	B	B	-	B-
Battlefront 1942: Secret Weapons of WWII	A	A	D-	B+	A-	-	B+
Halo	B-	A-	B+	A	B+	-	A-

5, 10, 15 Years Ago in CGW

What we said when you were hurting



5 Years Ago, February 1999



Sure, everyone remembers the heavy hitters (this was the month we gave *Half-Life* five stars and *Grim Fandango* four and a half), but what about the forgotten ones, the titles languishing on the island of Lost Toys? What about their frequently dead publishers? Does anyone care about *Space Bunnies Must Die*, *Plane Crazy*, *Fly Hunter*, *Vigilance*, or *Clive: Murder at Boddy Mansion*? Nope. Nor should we.



10 Years Ago, February 1994



In CGW's continuing nosedive into the realm of digi-mut, the mag sported a brand-new full-page ad for *Dream Girl*. "Do you have what

it takes to be with the most beautiful models around?" asked the ad. Obviously, no, or else you wouldn't be playing this "advanced interactive multimedia game...on CD!" Yuck. This was an issue with but one highlight: the glowing review of the fondly remembered and soon-to-be-sequestered *Sam & Max Hit the Road*.



15 Years Ago, February 1989



This issue featured a review of *Hall of Famer Dan* Buntin's *Modem Wars*, the first game designed to be played human

vs. human over a modem. Despite the game's programmed challenges, the biggest challenge might have been trying to play the game over a null modem. Ever helpful, CGW printed directions on how to set up a null modem, including directions for soldering. Say what you will about using Windows XP—at least you don't have to whip out a damn soldering iron to play *WarCraft III* with your buddy.

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THE GANGLAND



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THIS MONTH'S TOP 5 PRE-ORDERS



The Sims 2 (Electronic Arts) Your Sims will be more lifelike, 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.



Half-Life 2 (Valve 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.



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



Counter-Strike: Condition Zero (Valve) This new standalone 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.



Street Tournament 2004 (Bandai) Reload, rev up and ride out. This sequel is faster, higher and meaner than ever. Land and air based vehicles take combat to a new level. An arsenal of new weaponry, daunting arenas and battlefields make the gladiator blood sport of the future a brand new experience.

THIS MONTH'S TOP 5 RELEASES



Call of Duty (Activision) Delivers the gritty realism and cinematic grandeur 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 (Aurora) 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.



Myst: Ages Beyond Myst (Gameloft) The most immersive and ambitious Myst experience ever created. Bigger, better, and more invaluable 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.



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



Lords of EverQuest (Sony Online) Combines the best elements of the real-time strategy (RTS) world with the epic storyline and depth of the legendary EverQuest fantasy role-playing game (RPG). From its graphics, to its ease of use, this game is sure to be the new king of its genre.

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amazon.com.



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CGW Top 20

Wasted time well spent

Rank	Game	Rating
1	WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne (Board/Bread)	★★★★
2	Call of Duty (Game)	★★★★
3	Max Payne 2 (Board)	★★★★
4	Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 (Board)	★★★★
5	Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of WWII (Game)	★★★★
6	Age of Mythology: The Titans (Board)	★★★★
7	Madden NFL Football 2004 (Game)	★★★★
8	Star Wars Galaxies (Game)	★★★★
9	Tron 2.0 (Board)	★★★★
10	C&C Generals: Zero Hour (Game)	★★★★



Rank	Game	Rating
11	Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic (Game)	★★★★
12	Midnight Club II (Board)	★★★★
13	SimCity 4: Rush Hour (Game)	★★★★
14	Temple of Elemental Evil (Game)	★★★★
15	Freedom Fighters (Game)	★★★★
16	NHL Hockey (Game)	★★★★
17	Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004 (Board)	★★★★
18	The Sims: Makin' Magic (Game)	★★★★
19	Ghost Master (Board)	★★★★
20	Homeworld 2 (Board)	★★★★

Survey results of games from the last six months. To vote, go to www.computergaming.com.

GREAT DEALS ON PC GAMES



Lords of the Rings: Return of the King (Windows/PC)

The tale of Middle-earth is once again in your hands in the final installment of the blockbuster movie trilogy.

- Features:**
- Multiple gameplay paths, taking control of the motion
 - Exclusive voice-over by the actual actors from the films
 - All-new multiplayer co-op mode will let players form their own Fellowship

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Call of Duty (Windows/PC)

Delivers the gritty realism and cinematic intensity of World War II's epic battlefield moments like never before.

- Features:**
- Play as part of a well-trained squad
 - Authentic squad movements and tactics
 - Each soldier's distinct personality and training comes out on the battlefield.

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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: \$59.99
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Horizons: Empire of Ishtar (Linux)

Imagine beautiful, massive, zone-free environments, epic level combat encounters on a scale never seen before.

- Features:**
- Extensive support for player-run communities
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Previews

See 'em now, play 'em soon



It's no Statue of Liberty, but it'll do for Perigon City.



Never before has the power of magic been so potent.



The Rugs just took one on the chin from this freak show.

But this game isn't about dealing with NPCs—it's about dealing out justice with your friends. Partner a 20th-level veteran with a 5th-level newbie and you can have one hell of a team. So long as the sidekick sticks close by, his powers get ramped up to his boss' level.

One teammate not enough? Form your own supergroup of 15 to 30 people (a final number hasn't been set yet). This is the only way you can get a vault to stash all the upgrades you acquire and earn the ability to fight in the epic big battles. Still no word on whether you can get your own Hall of Justice or Fortress of Solitude.

Give supervillainy what-for

OK, so, we've got a bunch of people bandying about in their underwear. We need some heads to bust. Sadly, there's no PvP in this game—not yet, at least. That's because Emmert wanted to focus on perfecting the hero experience. Don't worry, an expansion is already planned—at some point, City of Villains will let you blow off some steam and strike menacing poses, but there's no firm date yet on when that will happen. In the meantime, you'll have to settle for the huge number of gangs and memes you'll encounter (see sidebar), and that's without mentioning 144 different enemy models and three power ranks (mission, lieutenant, and boss). Long story short, there's a whole lot of variety in villainy these days.

There are also plenty of deep story lines to uncover. Years of pulpy plots already squirreled away have you speunking below the city and fighting aliens on the moon, among other places. And while the company couldn't announce a publisher, Emmert says full-fledged comic books will introduce new plot elements, enemies, and parts of the city.

A warning to those expecting a campy experience similar to that of *Freedom Force*: All the action here is inspired by



Fifth Column: a modern-day take on good old-fashioned Nazis.

comics from the '60s to the present day. As a former comic-book store owner, Emmert was quick to point to Merv Wolfman's run on *X-Men* and Chris Claremont's work on *X-Men*. Heck, most of the areas in the game are named after noted comic-book artists and authors.

The game has been in development for several years, and as we speak, it's speeding toward a March release date. What we saw a few months back was enough to convince us this game has the goods. In fact, we called it out as one of the few MMORPGs that shows lots of promise ("*Online Overload*," September 2003, page 82). Are we anxiously waiting to bust some heads and deliver two-fisted justice? Oh yes. And so should you.

Darren Gladstone

The Word: POW!!!



Rest easy, citizen: Headcase is on patrol.

Rogues Gallery



There are years' worth of stories and villains lying in wait around Paragon City. Are you ready to do battle?

Avast! Paragon: Mystical abilities that recently appeared in town.

Circle of Doom: A more secret society that lives below the city's streets.

Chonwick: A hidden whole subterranean.

DEE: Full opposition (don't they all?)

The Family: No game is complete without the mob.

Fifth column: You'll find it hidden, safe holders, and so on.

Headcase: Cyberpunk gang that evaded the local defense to drive.

Headcase Bikes: on their best.

Genesis: A 13th century thompson suppressor, a big battle.

GRID: Alien insects that wiped out most of the old superheroes.

Justice: Superpowered things.

Key Builders: Flying things.

Knave: Trap-powered gang bangers who fall green when they die.

The Nave: Medical team guys.

Valkyrie: Gang of killer zombies and zombie resurrection.

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PUBLISHER: Whiplash INTERACTIVE DEVELOPER: Media Hoboken CLINIC Mob-time Strategy FULL RELEASE: Q1 2004

Gangland

Making you a game you can't refuse

There's no way CGW could be mistaken for a crime family. Hell, with enforcers such as Jeff the Gimp and Will "Not in the Face" O'Neal, we'd be run out of town in a day. It's probably a better idea to stick with the likes of *Gangland*, a new mobster-sim action game that defies simple explanation.

There have been other gaming attempts to run the mob—namely, Eidios' strategy-heavy *Gangsters* series, which now sleeps with the fishes. *Gangland*, however, combines strategic empire building with RPG elements and some badass action borrowed from the early *Grand Theft Auto* games and *Mafia*. It has a decent 3D graphics engine, but can Whiplash pull off a good story, too? Ah, fahgedabowfff!

Goodgamers

You're Mario, one of four immigrant brothers fresh off the boat from the old country. Upon arriving in a fictional city that resembles Chicago during the Roaring '20s, you start working to reach the top of the mob—and there's a lot to do. Each



☐ You can drive *Gangland*'s mean city streets.

It's strategic empire building with RPG elements and a hint of GTA mayhem.

map contains a vast number of city blocks, all alive and populated with more than 800 characters per map. People mill about, commuting and shopping, and they're all ripe for extortion. Cars primed for boosting roll by Paperboys shout out the big news stories of the day, in short, the city is bustling all around you. The random-event generator ensures plenty of new missions and events that will keep this nonlinear experience fresh.

As for the game itself, there are a number of different ways to rule the crime world. The 10 challenge maps are short and action-packed, with simple mission objectives: Blow up this guy's restaurant, steal his car, kill his ol' lady. But check your historical accuracy at the door—guys in Hummers and Dodge Vipers roll down the street firing Tommy guns—not quite in the vein of *The Godfather*, but what the heck? The explanation given by PR monger Alex Josef is that concessions were made for cars that could realistically take a beating. Who wants to drive a roadster that'd get toasted with a couple of rounds from an Uzi? Which brings us to one of our favorite *Gangland* pastimes: drive-by shootings.

You control cars with the keyboard and use your mouse to aim and shoot at people on the street. Want to cap a couple of civilians? Just be prepared to deal with the consequences, which means either avoiding or bribing the cops.

Conventional gang combat, on the other hand, is supposed to work a little more like a cross between an RTS and a turn-based strategy. While you can't pause *Gangland*'s action, you can give detailed commands: Tell cronies to assume positions, crouch, change equipment, or go to sniper positions and coordinate fire in real time.

Achieving smaller goals and getting high scores—the highest number of henchmen kills, for example—will unlock bonus weapons, vehicles, and people you can draft. In addition, as you gain prestige and kill (or steal or blow up, you get the idea) your way to the top, your character improves in three areas: leadership, business flair, and combat. Leadership earns you a loyal following and more lockkeys to command; business flair and combat are both pretty self-explanatory.

The 35 single-player conquest maps are

☐ Meet a few members of the immediate family. Cowering, aren't they?



a lot longer and involve lots of business planning. After all, that bookie operation won't run itself. These in-depth campaigns have you running everything from numbers to legit business fronts. More amusing is that as your crime family grows, so does your own family. Through marriage, molls, and children, you get more trustworthy family members who'll follow your commands.

Those looking to take down competing crime families will be happy to know that there are a number of action- and conquest-based maps, which allow eight potential multiplayer "dons" to rub one another out. You'll get your chance soon—*Gangland* is expected to ship early in 2004. ☐Darren Gladstone

The Word CANNOLI

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Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle

Get ready to fry the friendly skies. Here, over the city of Giran, you can see one of the many cool things about *Lineage II*: If you've got enough juice (i.e., if you own a Castle), you can raise your own fire-breathing dragon. Here's our pet, Sparky. He started off as a hatching that followed us around and lost battle. Aww, isn't that cute? But they grow up so quickly these days. He got bigger and became a strider—a flightless, rideable dragon. Once he finally reached maturity, he sprouted wings and took to the skies. Maybe you'll be able to do the same when this game launches Stateside in Q1 of 2004.



PUBLISHER: **Eschsch Software** DEVELOPER: **Wings Simulations GMBH** Shooter
RELEASE DATE: **February 2004**

Soldner

Translate the name for this slick-lookin' game



Do not adjust your spell-check software. *Soldner* is actually German for "mercenary," but our loose translation is "interesting FPS game." It looks like this newest entry in the quickly bloating *Battlefield*-wannabe genre will stand out with a massive destructible environment, tons of modern military might, and some extra design firepower thrown in for good measure.

How will *Soldner* distinguish itself from the pack? For starters, its huge map, which measures roughly four-by-six miles, not only looks good—it's also fully destructible. You can lay waste to trees with a FAMAS and watch 'em fall. More important for the game's development manager, Kevin Hoekman, though, is that "the days of camping in a building are over." While waxing poetic about safely sniping away from inside buildings in *Battlefield 1942*, Hoekman rolled a Type 85 tank into—and through—the wall of a house.

As you may have gathered, *Soldner* equips troops with the latest and greatest in warfare technology, including roughly 60 weapons and 70 vehicles. Yes, those itching to launch a Stinger at an Mi-17 helicopter carrying a T90 tank will get their chance. There are six character classes: soldier, scout, medic, sniper, heavy-weapons expert/engineer, and the new twist, the commander class. Able to go out in the field and deal damage, the commander also has satellite access and can see and command from a top-down view.

Like most current massive combat games, expect frenzied multiplayer action. Thirty-



"Hope I'm not missing anything behind me!"

two players can be accommodated in a run-of-the-mill fight, but those using a Linux server on the back end will be able to host 128-player fights. And, according to Hoekman, you'll be able to change server settings via a webpage.

What about the single-player campaign? The shoestring plot places you in the year 2010. Because they've blown their budgets on firearms, the superpowers have gone bust. As a result, local mercenary forces have to come together to defend their turf. With 250 randomly generated objectives, even the single-player experience promises good replayability.

And if all that still doesn't make you happy, don't worry. This game is fully modifiable. In fact, Hoekman says the game ships with every tool you'll need, so expect to see new moos, soldier and vehicle skins, and weapons from the modding community shortly after we go to war in February.

By **Damen Gladstone**

The Word INCOMING!

PIPELINE

Ship dates and slip dates for games in the stream

Game	Developer	Expected
Advent Rising	Free Game	February 2004
Alan	Artisan	February 2004
Atlantis Evolution	The Adventure Company	January 2004
The Bird's Tale	WETA Interactive	2004
Battlefield Vietnam	Electronic Arts	March 2004
Black & White 2	Electronic Arts	June 2004
Bloodproof Hawk	Linux Interactive	Q3 2004
Call of Chivalry: Dark Crusades of the Earth	Bethesda Softworks	February 2004
City of Heroes	DCIsoft	March 2004
Codename: Panzers	CDV Software	Q3 2004
Delta Force - Black Hawk Down Team Sabro	Evolution	February 2004
Doom 3	Activision	April 2004
Dragon Empires	Cosmosphere	Q3 2004
Driver 3	Alan	June 2004
Duke 3	3DRealize	February 2004
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft	2004
Egyptian Prophecy	The Adventure Company	January 2004
EverQuest II	SOE	March 2004
Civil Genes	Wired Universal	Q3 2004
Fading Suns: Noble Armada	Micro Games	January 2004
Fallout 3	Interplay	2004
Far Cry	Ubisoft	February 2004
Forever Worlds	The Adventure Company	January 2004
Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich	TGA	2004
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	2004
Geogrid	Wiglat Interactive	February 2004
Ground Control 2 Operation Exodus	1024 Productions	Q3 2004
Gold Wars	NCsoft	2004
Half-Life 2	Valve University	April 2004
Il-2 Sturmovik: Forgotten Battles Expansion	1C World	Q1 2004
Jack the Ripper	The Adventure Company	January 2004
Killswitch	WETA Interactive	February 2004
Legacy: Sub Zero: Hells Gate Leads	Sims	Q3 2004
Lineage II: The Chivalric Chronicle	NCsoft	February 2004
LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth	Electronic Arts	June 2004
LOTR Online: Trading Card Game	Decipher	2004

► New Updates



DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

Games.com's top 100 out of 100 new

FROM PH Studios AVAILABILITY June 2004

Etrom

Word on the street: From Italy comes an anachronistic action-RPG that blends fantasy and technology with some good old-fashioned biblical references. Former console-only development house PH Studios take a stab at the PC market with a multidimensional adventure that incorporates spellcraft, melee combat, and some heavy-duty gunplay. More than seven endings tempt those who travel the space-time portals from the City of Light to the Abyss, with rides on playable tanks and mechs making the journey smoother.

Sounds kinda best: Another *Diablo* clone—how, um, original. Even better, this one is couched in the obscurest of trappings. Neither mass-market consumers nor hardcore role-playing fans stand to find anything worth clamoring over here, but Europe's answer to *Planescape* may find a welcome domestic reception yet. Fully fleshed-out single- and multiplayer outings could present a compelling draw for a niche user base, presuming anyone can noodle out an inventive way of marketing the game. Our suggestion: hookers in every box.



FROM Octopus Motor AVAILABILITY Q1 2004

They Came From Hollywood



Word on the street: Washington, D.C., lies in ruins! A giant mantis just ate it. Such is the scenario in a real-time strategy title based on B-movie staples that sees a dozen genetic freaks (overgrown ant, spider, lizard, etc.) trample six American cities. Demolish buildings. Eat people. Purge cars down the street. Anything goes as you rampage through thriving metropolises, spreading terror across four different eras. Customizable creatures and fully destructible environments should whet audiences' appetites for destruction.

Sounds kinda best: A sum total of two people are making the game—roughly the same number of folks that know who in Hades creator Octopus Motor is. With no notable successes to the company's credit, a minuscule budget, and limited resources at the company's disposal, anything could go wrong before launch. Need proof? The product's already been delayed several months beyond its proposed summer 2003 debut. Still, unless *Godzilla 2000*, we've got a good feeling about this one.



FROM Humon Soft AVAILABILITY March 2004

Lunatic Wings

Word on the street: An aerial racer with a humorously touch, this nutty speedster swipes a page—all right, the entire manual—from Midway's PlayStation title *Freaky Flyers*. Pilots fly '67 "zany" planes through a whopping 64 levels of high-flying havoc, where dynamic weather conditions, fluctuating environments, and a dozen wacky weapons wreak havoc on good sportsmanship. Extremely lighthearted, the action demands quicker reflexes than it does wits, making the game an excellent alternative to most PC products.

Sounds kinda best: A derivative of garden-variety console kart-racing titles, *Lunatic Wings* won't ever see the light of day as a full-price package. Even so, a value publisher, such as Big City Games, could reap some rewards from a modest debut, presuming it targets a younger audience with the offering. This one won't stop hardcore enthusiasts in their tracks, but it does make a winning coffee-break diversion.



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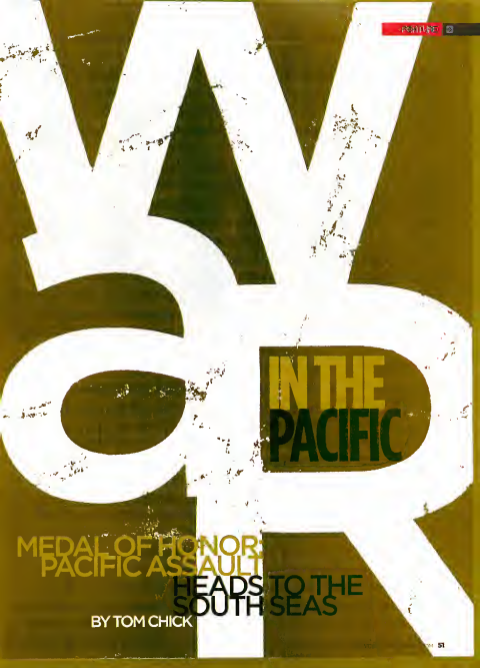
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▶ A fellow Marine with an M1 Carbine.



▶ Your squad prepares to ambush a Japanese patrol on Guadalcanal.



▶ Do not adjust your monitor! American grenades were—get this—yellow.

Ed Moore and Dave Nash are leaning over a map on a table, studying ways to bring the war from the European theater into the Pacific. The map is of Tenaboggo Island, which was attacked by the United States as part of the Guadalcanal campaign in World War II. But, unlike the almost unopposed Guadalcanal landing (the real fighting occurred when the Japanese tried to take it back), Tenaboggo was fiercely contested.

Moore and Nash are designing *Pacific Assault* and, in the process, taking the *Medal of Honor* series for PCs into new territory.

Using *Medal of Honor's Breakthrough* expansion, Moore has created a prototype multiplayer Tenaboggo level for *Pacific Assault*, and he's using the map to explain how the new invader multiplayer mode will work. "It's different from tug-of-war [in *Medal of Honor: Spearhead*]," Moore says, gesturing toward symbols for U.S. and Japanese spawn points that run the length of the island. "Here, the spawning is centered on the objectives. Your first objective is this water catchment area. And when that objective is taken, the next objective comes up farther down the map, where you have to seize this wharf! At that point, the spawn points change. The Allies respawn at the water catchment area, and the Axis [respawns] at the wharf!"

"We wanted multiplayer to feel a bit more like single player," says Nash, *Pacific Assault's* lead designer. "Single-player games are about achieving a series of objectives, moving through an area. But at the same time, we wanted to have that back-and-forth that really drove the tug-of-war in *Spearhead*. You have the five objectives out there, you're fighting back and forth, one side captures them all and wins. So we're focusing on the progression—now you're battling over this area, now you're battling over that area."

Comes a green tank

Just north of the wharf, a causeway crosses to another small island to the north, where the final objective is located. "When the Allies control the wharf, a vehicle will appear at the dock," says Moore, who is *Pacific Assault's* multiplayer designer. "So now you have a vehicle you can hop into to get across the causeway. The tank is a sort of chess piece that can be used to augment your offense. It's up to the players to decide how to manage it." Moore points to a sort of spur off the northern island and says, "We'll have this artillery on a third island, so you can either try to get across with this artillery attacking you or maybe use the tank to take it out...or maybe try to get some people over there first."

The game's different player classes include engineers, who must come forward to clear barricades, scouts, who can set targets for other players' portable mortars, and medics. "We've tossed around the idea of carrying [the] wounded," Nash says. "We think it'd be really cool, especially for round-based maps with limited spawns, that the only way you can get saved is if your buddy comes out on the field and takes you back."

Tenaboggo was chosen as a setting mainly because it was a real battle that could be modeled as a multiplayer level. There will also be multiplayer levels based on Wake Island, Bougainville, and Corregidor, as well

DID YOU KNOW?

Many outfits of Japanese marines had a 6-foot height requirement, which gives lie to the stereotype of the short Japanese soldier.



as some generic locations. Nash is quick to point out that all the levels will be designed specifically for multiplayer games rather than just borrowing single-player maps.

With 100 percent less Ben Affleck

Level designers Kevin Mack and Tom Hess showed off some of the single-player levels as works in progress. The game's second level is the attack on Pearl Harbor, which Mack has carefully built with an eye for authenticity, taking advantage of the original game engine's power and flexibility. "It's the first time someone has been able to do it with this scale, so we want to do it right. We want to give you the ability to look around and say, 'This is how it really looked.'" Mack's background as a film student is obvious as

he narrates a walkthrough of the unfinished map. He paints the scene as your character reports for duty at the CINCPAC building. A plane flies low overhead, and a seaman notes that the pilot is going to catch hell for buzzing headquarters.

"No, no, look at the meetball on that wing," another sailor says. Then the explosions start. A moment-by-moment re-creation of Pearl Harbor's decimation one Sunday morning unfolds before your eyes. Eventually, you're riding a PT boat down Battleship Row to help look for survivors. Mack names the ships, and their eventual fates as they are hit, like a lot of casualties. "There's the Oklahoma, the West Virginia, which took five torpedoes and kept fighting until the Japanese left. Now the Nevada gets underway but doesn't make it past Hospital Point." When the Arizona is hit, Mack somberly notes that 2,000 people died instantly.

By this time, a lot of the other team members have crowded into

Mack's office, where his computer is flanked by maps and photographs of Pearl Harbor. There's not much to see: He's showing a huge, empty map with untextured battleship models and scripted explosions. But with his narration, there are ships capsizing, men falling into the water, rescue ships crossing the burning harbor, explosions from Hickam Field, and smoke everywhere. There's a reverent hush as Mack paints his picture—reverent, but also slightly uncomfortable. In the post-9/11 compassions between Pearl Harbor and the World Trade Center, does this treatment cross the line between realistic and lurid? "If you approach it with respect," Mack explains later, "and remember as you build that these were real people who never expected to suffer through something like this, who never expected to lose their friends that

day, then the individual decisions that go into crafting the scene become clear. What really keeps me grounded are interviews with Pearl Harbor survivors—to hear a man talk about friends he lost on the Arizona 60 years ago. It's hard to hear that and not think about it while you're working. If you remember what this really meant to those who were there, that mindfulness in turn tells you what's right."

You're in the Marines now

Hess' job is a bit easier in terms of scale and tone. He's built a boot camp for the game's first level, which he insists isn't simply a tutorial; rather, it's a prelude. By introducing Pacific Assault's main characters, the boot camp will be more than a lesson in how to crouch and reload. There's Frank from Jersey, the heavy gunner; the medic James Sullivan; and Willy Gates, the diminutive farm



The team has worked painstakingly to re-create Pearl Harbor, based on archival photos from before and after the attack.

DID YOU KNOW?

With a fixed bayonet, the rifle used by the Japanese was actually taller than many of the men who carried it.





❑ "If you would like to make a call, please deposit five cents." A fellow grunt calls in air support.

❑ boy who's a crackpot with the sniper rifle. All will be persistent characters from boot camp on "We're going to f---ing shootem story into this game," says producer Brady Bell while Hess walks through the unfinished boot camp. Bell uses his hands to make a gesture of someone stuffing something into a hatch.

By way of example, Hess explains how the boot camp will give the player a nickname that'll come up throughout the rest of the game. Do well with a Thompson submachine gun and you'll be called "T-gun." Hit the sniper target with every round and you might be called "Bull's-eye." Peg the dummy jeep with your first mortar round and you'll hear a conversation about it later in the game. Screw up the obstacle course and you'll be saddled with "Klutz."

This is one of the more benign examples of how the developers want to avoid the desultory white noise of a bunch of scripted battles (no one mentions *Call of Duty* by name, but it's clearly on their minds). A more gameplay-related example might come when the guy on point signals an approaching Japanese squad. Your men recede into hiding places in the foliage, watching and waiting for you to fire the first shot. If you let the Japanese creep



❑ Now would be a good time to shoot.



❑ Incredible facial modeling includes eyes that dilate depending on lighting. Whoa.

by—a tense moment, to be sure—then later, you'll surprise a base that hasn't been reinforced because its patrol found no sign of an American presence. "Good thing we didn't attack those Japs," one of your squad members will note. If you do ambush the patrol, you'll face more enemies and hear a comment to the effect that you should have let that patrol pass by. ❑

DID YOU KNOW



In the Pacific theater, the Thompson submachine gun has the sort of round drum you'd see in a gangster movie rather than the straight clip you're used to from European theater games.

GETTING IT RIGHT

DURING PREPRODUCTION, members of the Pacific Assault development team traveled to Pearl Harbor, Singapore, Guadalcanal, and Iwo Jima. They personally fired every single weapon featured in the game, from now-obsolete Japanese sidearms to huge water-cooled anti-aircraft guns. They built 3D models from exhaustive photo shoots of restored vehicles and full-scale working replicas.

Military personnel and historians occasionally came in and looked over their shoulders. You'd almost think Electronic Arts was staging a meticulous reenactment instead of developing a game.

Although producer Brady Bell admits that playability is the team's main concern, he considers this sort of homework to be an important part of honoring the subject matter. "If you've ever had a veteran say to you, 'Thank you for getting it right'—which has happened to me—you'll never again question whether exhaustive research is worthwhile."



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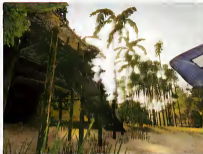
to lift the Atlantians to supremacy. Harness and wield the force of 10 new mythological units so that the sun may never set on the Atlantis empire. The battle for heaven and earth continues.

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■ A sun-flare effect softens the outlines of foliage.



■ A Japanese hut pays the ultimate price in a game of grenade toss.

■ In one of the more extreme examples of choice and consequence, it's possible that one of your teammates will die depending on whether you do something that could save him.

Citizen soldiers

There's a good deal of effort aimed at filling *Pacific Assault* with unique character models. "You're normally going to be traveling with about 10 guys, so we wanted at least that number of unique heads," says technical artist Chris Shelton. "We wanted to make sure there weren't any twins in your squad." The same is true of attacking ene-



■ You won't fly, but you do get to shoot from aircraft.

emies Shelton shows a gallery of expressive and nuanced faces, each one every bit as expressive as anything demanded for *Half-Life 2*. "It's a matter of not exaggerating expressions," Shelton explains. "We have a lot of controllers in the face, so once we understood how expressions work, we were able to do a lot. We talked to one of the animators for *Gollum* [in Peter Jackson's movie adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*], and she helped us understand a lot. For instance, you get a lot more from head motion than you do from facial motion. Once we learned that, it made a difference."

Then there are the physics, which are being used here in ways you're not used to seeing. It's subtle, but it makes a huge difference when a character lifts a headset to his face and it bumps his helmet up. Another character uses his rifle to heave himself off the ground into a standing position. The helmet and rifle aren't just cosmetic additions to character models—they're also details built into the way the characters move and interact with the environment.

Perhaps all this detail explains why *Pacific Assault* has slipped past its Q1 2004 release date. At one point, Bell notes a tricky physics problem he's dealing with and sympathetically notes, "That's what's probably ailing the *Half-Life* boys right now!" He should know—like the team at Valve, he's struggling with a hugely ambitious game, one with a premium on dynamic storytelling using all-new original technology. If his transition from Europe to the jungles of the Pacific isn't a project on par with Valve's potential juggernaut, nothing is. ■

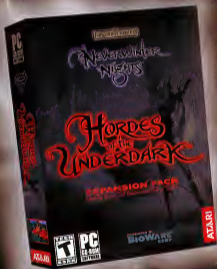
DID YOU KNOW?

The relatively ineffectual M1 Carbine is the most requested weapon for the *Medal of Honor* series. It'll make an appearance in *Pacific Assault*, but with improved firepower and accuracy for gameplay reasons.



■ During the course of the game, your squadmates charge from baby-faced recruits to beat-up, dirty, war-hardened vets.

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In the world of Painkiller, you need to be properly equipped to fight off the advancing hordes of demons from hell. And the next best thing to a well-oiled stake-gun is an NVIDIA GeForce FX graphics processor. Painkiller's got old-school gameplay with the next-generation graphics you're itching for, so you need the right hardware. NVIDIA. The Way It's Meant To Be Played.



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A man with dark hair and a serious expression, wearing a dark leather motorcycle jacket over a black turtleneck. He is holding a handgun in his right hand, which is partially visible at the bottom of the frame. The background is dark and moody.

I DIED AS DANIEL GARNER

I WAS SENTENCED TO SERVE IN PAIN SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL.
I LOST MY FAITH, BUT GAINED A NEW NAME. NOW I AM THE ANGELS' ONLY PRAYER.

HEAVEN'S GOT A HITMAN

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Reviews

The good, the bad, and the relentlessly cheesy.

Combat is easy to comprehend but tough to master. It also looks great.



PUBLISHER: LucasArts **DEVELOPER:** BioWare **GENRE:** RPG **PRICE:** \$49.99 **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 4GB HD **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 512MB RAM **ESRB:** Teen

Knights of the Old Republic



BioWare and LucasArts deliver a brilliant *Star Wars* RPG



▣ The game's graphics are more detailed and crisp on the PC than on the Xbox.



▣ You'll have to man the turrets of the Ebon Hawk in a few completely random, unnecessary action sequences.



▣ The PC version features this Rodian who sells high-end armor and weapons.



The Simpsons: Hit and Run
 Treasures of morose meets Grand Theft Auto III—can it possibly work?



LOTR: ROTK
 We review a trilogy of Tolkien, and this game rules them all.



XIII
 Is this Belgian export as tasty as their stoned waffles? No, not even close.

Let's get the superlatives out of the way first, so we can then proceed in less breathless fashion. BioWare's *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* is more than just the best RPG of 2003. It's more than just the best Star Wars game since the original X-Wing (if not the best ever). Every single aspect—story, dialogue, graphics, interface, game-play—works together in rare harmony. Confident and exhilarating, sprawling and sublime, *Knights* is a true masterpiece, made by a great company at the absolute top of its game.

Death Who?

Knights is wisely set a full 4,000 years before Anakin Skywalker began stinking up the galaxy's movie screens, thus freeing the developers from the shackles of the movie's over-familiar story line and characters. Ironically, by doing so, BioWare has created a story closer in spirit to the original Star Wars film than any game actually featuring Luke, Chewie, and the gang. For once, this is game where plot actually matters, the less said, the better. Here's a rough outline: During a pre-game war against the wampa-like Mandalorians, two promising Jedi—Revan and Malak—have



Q You can have three people in your party at any one time: your character, plus two NPCs. Switching between them is a simple matter of clicking on their icon in the bottom left corner.

Combat in *Knights* is easy to comprehend but ultimately as complex as you want to make it. Combat is turn-based, but can be played out in real-time or paused at any moment to perform specific powers or feats, use an item, or even queue up a series of actions. Micromanaging the combat takes more effort but will definitely yield better results—and in the game's tougher battles, it's absolutely necessary. Switching party configurations is so user-friendly (you can switch on the fly, except in certain dungeons) that if you find yourself losing a battle with one group, you can easily give it a shot with a different bunch.

Confident and exhilarating, sprawling and sublime, *Knights* is a masterpiece.

fallen to the dark side. As the game opens, Darth Revan has been disposed of, but now his apprentice, Darth Malak, is intent on taking over the galaxy. You play a mysterious Republic soldier enlisted by the Jedi to stop him. But will you? Or will you be tempted to the dark side yourself? The choice is yours, and has real consequences with regard to how the game plays out.

With its third-person 3D engine and use of the WASD keys for movement, *Knights* may look like an action game, but, game-play-wise, it is in fact very similar to BioWare's awesome *Baldur's Gate* RPGs. You begin by creating the main character yourself, choosing from three basic character classes (soldier, scout, or scoundrel), and then fiddling with attributes, skills, and combat feats. Later, you'll choose a Jedi path to follow, one specializing in either combat. Force powers, or somewhere in between. As you level up, you'll have tons of choices for enhancing or adding to your abilities, ensuring that virtually every gamer's experience will vary by some degree.

Along the way, a host of NPCs will join your party—and, as proven in the BG games, no one does NPCs better than BioWare. All rare party members—of which you can use two at any given time—have distinct personalities and skills, some with extended backstories dribbled out as the game progresses. Voice acting and dialogue

are as sharp as anything BioWare's ever done, making every conversation, with party members or NPCs, funny and entertaining, and, at times, even moving. And here's a special shout-out to HK-47, the galaxy's most obnoxious (yet lovable) droid.

Knights begins in a strictly linear fashion, but soon breaks open completely, allowing players to explore and travel between the game's numerous planets, all while keeping the larger plot moving along. Each planet has its own set of quests—for more sophisticated than most games' "FedEx" missions—that constantly challenge your commitment to the light or dark side of the Force. In the game's best side quest, you're asked to investigate a murder and then represent the accused in court—and by the time you know all the facts, you're left with a very tough decision indeed: Is the "right" thing always the "best" thing to do? It's the kind of moral ambiguity rarely explored in videogames.

Of course, much of the time, you'll just be killing things.



Hero, villain, conqueror, savior.

With *Knights of the Old Republic*, BioWare has constructed a brilliant Star Wars tale—arguably the best one since *The Empire Strikes Back*. It captures everything that was great about those first films and wraps it around a deep, thoughtful role-playing experience. Do not hesitate, Padawan. This one is a classic. Buy it.
 —Jeff Green

Verdict ★★★★★

A masterpiece from BioWare. Easily the best RPG of the year, and possibly the best Star Wars game ever made.

PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Cyan Worlds **GENRE** Adventure **ESRB RATING** E **REQUIRED** Pentium III 600, 256MB RAM, 3GD install, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED Pentium 4 3GHz, 4GB install **MULTIPLAYER** Internet (date of functionality TBA)

Uru: Ages Beyond Myst

Look before you leap into this puzzler

If you've played the three previous point-and-click Myst games, you've already heard about the underground city of D'ni and how its inhabitants created living worlds called Ages by writing arcane literary works known as Linking Books. After a plague destroyed the city's population, D'ni descendant Atrus and his wife Catherine (Myst's former protagonists) taught their daughter Yeesha this art. In *Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*, Yeesha requests that you help rebuild D'ni by visiting Ages from certain Linking Books and then bringing back four artifacts. Unfortunately, the plotline skips faster than invisible ink shortly thereafter, and many critical questions about Yeesha, D'ni, and the artifacts go unanswered.

Picture books

Uru could've benefited from interactive dialogues or cut-scenes featuring more story details, but instead it opts for the decade-old series' standbys of randomly placed



Every Age features picturesque landscapes rich with vibrant colors and textures.

Slipping off rocks, falling into boiling lava, and plummeting into canyons become irksome when you realize there's no save-anywhere feature.

journals and largely static, unpopulated backdrops. That said, the new real-time 3D panoramas are breathtaking and a lot easier to explore using *Uru's* first-person perspective, which offers more fluid mouse and keyboard movement and better camera control than the choked, quirky third-person option.

Most puzzles don't really pertain to the plot. In the usual *Myst* fashion, they just

linearly propel you toward each Age's exit, where you then collect artifacts for Yeesha. The Ages predictably harbor telescopic devices and mechanical contraptions requiring activation, but *Uru* sparkles with some creative puzzle gems as well. One area is accessed by manipulating shadows; elsewhere, flying bugs must be lured through hazardous natural elements using baskets. However, the puzzle's glow is dulled since you can't carry these baskets and are forced to kick them along erratic paths. *Uru's* real-time 3D action adds immersion and excitement to this formerly stress-free series, but slipping off rocks, falling into boiling lava, and plummeting into canyons gets irksome when you realize you're without a save-anywhere feature.

Travel books

The only safeguard is Reto, an island hub area you automatically return to instead of dying. There are no parachutes in the



The most creative puzzle involves a long, perilous trek for these green bugs.

closest, but you can return to the Age of your choice via the books, arriving back at the last Journey Cloth (aka save point) you touched. Yeesha requires you to find and activate all of *Uru's* Journey Cloths while on your quest for artifacts, but too many are placed after an action area instead of before one.

Uru claims to contain one other groundbreaking new feature: online multiplayer content. Unfortunately, the game shipped with its pay-to-play multiplayer unfinished and nonfunctional, so the only groundbreaking you'll do until that's fully completed is the kind that results from plummeting off cliffs. **D** **Devise** Cook

Verdict ★★★★★

Some good puzzles, some bad action—maybe the eventual online content can make it more compelling.

PUBLISHER: Vivendi Universal Games **DEVELOPER:** Radical Entertainment **GENRE:** Action-Adventure **ESRB:** T **PRICE:** \$49.95 **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 700MHz
16MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 1.2GB hard drive space **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** None

The Simpsons: Hit & Run



Even better than BoneStorm



Bart and Milhouse stand by a familiar Springfield landmark.



"Hi, Lisa! These man-leslies told me to give you a mission!"



Lisa Simpson goes soaring into the night.

Though *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* sounds far more like something dreamed up by a marketing weasel than a game designer ("It's *The Simpsons* meets *Grand Theft Auto III*"), the fact is, for once, someone figured out how to take a great TV show and make a great game out of it. With all of the original voice actors, a suitably ridiculous story, and a steady stream of laugh-out-loud jokes, *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* is, like the show itself, awesome entertainment—smart, irreverent, and funny as hell. And it's one of the best action games of the year.

I need Amanda Hugandkiss
Grand Theft Auto III is indeed the start-

ing point here, but it'd be unfair to call this game a total rip-off. Let's call it a partial rip-off with Simpsons-esque elements of parody throughout. In any case, what we have here is an action-oriented driving game in which you face a variety of challenges in a colorful, cartoony 3D version of the Simpsons' beloved Springfield. As in *GTA3*, you follow a story over a linear series of missions, but you can opt out of the campaign at any time just to drive around and indulge in

activities that will help you unlock vehicles and other bonuses.

The game's story is as silly as any episode of the show—some kind of nonsense about Springfield being overrun by mysterious black vans and mechanized bees, which may or may not be the dogs of evil Montgomery Burns—but the designers do a nice job of structuring it so that it makes sense in relation to the gameplay. The main campaign is divided into seven levels, and each puts you behind the wheel

How can you not love a game that has Apu declaring, "I'm a lean, mean Vindaloo machine!"?



Evil Homer hitchhikes a ride from Smithers.

as a particular Simpsons character, beginning with Homer, followed by Bart, Lisa, Marge, Apu, and then Bart and Homer again for the last two levels. Springfield is divided into three giant maps that change and open up new areas as the game progresses, eventually transforming into a nice Trehouse of Horror-style freakout for the game's final level.

Each level has seven primary missions and one bonus mission, all of which boil down to being races, item pickups, or search-and-destroy-style missions. Your tasks are full of the usual Simpsons silliness: Help Comic Book Guy race another nerd to a coffeehouse to be the first to post comments online about a lousy movie, assist the neckbeek Cletus in "harvesting" ketchup packets for the winter, and so on. The difficulty of these missions runs the gamut—some tasks are ridiculously easy, while a few are exercises in keyboard-banging frustration.

Most can be beat handily with the right vehicle and proper familiarity with the levels' many shortcuts, but, in my case at least, a few were nearly impossible because of the unforgiving time limits. Thankfully, the developers understand the need to keep *Hit & Run* fairly easy for casual gamers, so they not only made it simple to restart missions with no penalty, but also built in a Skip option to use after you've repeatedly failed a mission. This will allow even those who suck to progress through the campaign, try all the missions, and see all the cut-scenes. That's a lesson all game developers should heed.

This game tastes like grandma!

But really, this is all about *The Simpsons*.



A reflective Bart watches the moon.

Hit & Run is not just bogus shovelware with the license slathered on—it's a full-fledged, genuine Simpsons production created by some of the show's writers, featuring virtually every minor character you can think of, and jampacked with hundreds of references to past episodes—enough to keep Comic Book Guy himself scouring the official episode guide for weeks. How can you not love a game that has Apu declaring, "I'm a lean, mean 'Vindelloo machine' while racing or has poor, pathetic Ralph Wiggum counting down "One...one...one...go!" for a race? *The Simpsons Hit & Run* is relentlessly funny, constantly entertaining, and a total joy to play. For Simpsons fans (and is there anyone who isn't one?), it's nothing less than a must-have game.

Jeff Green

Verdict ★★★★★

The best *GTAS* rip-off ever and a must-have for Simpsons fans.



Remember the owners? Bart can ditch it from the tracks and side it around town.

Porting Games 101

AS WITH *GTAS*, this is a port that arguably works better on PC than its original consoles. Graphicswise, there's no comparison. Though the game's 3D engine may not rival state-of-the-art beauties like the one in *Trojan 2.0*, the 3D Springfield is still gloriously rendered, and on PC, the ability to jack up the resolution makes for a huge improvement—everything looks much crisper and clearer. It's done efficiently, too. Unlike some dedicated PC games, I was able to play this all the way up to 1600x1200 on my P4, with no loss in performance whatsoever.

While some gamers may insist *Hit & Run* needs a console controller or gamepad, I had no trouble getting through the game with a keyboard and mouse, and I suspect that anyone who's logged time behind vehicles in games like *Battlefield 1942* will find it similarly easy. And having mouse-look when you're out of your vehicle makes exploring levels on foot much easier.



PUBLISHER: Activision **DEVELOPER:** Stainless Steel Studios **GENRE:** RTS **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium II 600, 128MB RAM (256MB RAM for multiplayer games of 3+), 1.2GB install, 32MB 3D card **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 300+, 256MB of RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN or Internet (2-8 players)

Empires: Dawn of the Modern World

Civilization goes real-time—again

Empires: Dawn of the Modern World's title seems to say it all, alluding both to Stainless Steel's previous game, *Empire Earth*, and to the game with which it's most comparable, *Age of Empires*. It's another game in the burgeoning historical real-time-strategy subgenre, and though it lacks *Rise of Nations*' radical gameplay innovations and *Empire Earth*'s massive scope, it's a solid entry that makes some great, if initially unapparent, changes to the standard formula.

If you've played *Age of Empires*, *Rise of Nations*, or *Empire Earth*, you'll immediately be at home with *Empires*. It looks and plays the same as those games, allowing anyone familiar with its predecessors to jump right in. But while there are mechanical similarities, *Empires* distinguishes itself with some unique elements, particularly in relation to the nine available civilizations. England, for instance, is all about automa-



No longer can you play as the United States in medieval times.

tion, allowing you to build mines and food warehouses that automatically harvest resources, while China has mobile town centers and unit-production buildings.

A real "Real World"

Anachronistic civilizations have been removed, you can no longer play as the United States in medieval times. *Empires* covers the Middle Ages through World War II, but certain civilizations become available only in the later ages, while others become obsolete. England

evolves into the United Kingdom, the Franks evolve into France, and when you reach World War I as Korea, you must switch to Russia, the United States, or France.

Although this seems to imply a strict adherence to realism, *Empires* has its fair share of magical abilities, described in the game as "classified projects," which are one-use abilities that must be researched. You can create typhoons that slow enemy troops, instantly finish all current production, or restore the power available to your units to perform their special moves. These unit-specific moves can also have dramatic effects. The Russian commissar's ability, for instance, allows him to temporarily increase the combat effectiveness of troops by shooting one of his fellow soldiers.

History of the world

Even with its unique features, *Empires* is primarily a traditional RTS. It's a bit baff-

ling that Stainless Steel chose to break from convention with the three included campaigns, each of which follows a famous warlord—Prince Richard the Lionheart, Admiral Yi Sun-sin, and General George S. Patton—through a mission-based account of his career. The campaigns, though good, are excessively story driven and include little in the way of straightforward build-and-raise missions. Instead, they're primarily made up of puzzles and small objectives by which you gain the troops and buildings necessary to progress. However, there's a good skirmish mode for those who want a more traditional single-player experience.

Empires is not a simple game. There's a great deal to learn for each civilization, and the single-player campaign—traditionally the training ground for multiplayer and skirmish modes—isn't much help in understanding how the game works. But the additions make surmounting the steep learning curve well worth the effort. **B Ron Duin**

Verdict ★★★★★

A solid entry into the burgeoning historical real-time-strategy subgenre.



PUBLISHER: Strategy First **DEVELOPER:** Bluebird Game Design **GENRE:** Turn-based Fantasy Strategy **ESRB RATING:** Not Rated **REQUIRED:** Platform B 300, 64MB RAM, 250MB Install **MULTIPLAYER:** 2-17 via Internet/LAN, P2P, or Hotseat

Dominions II: The Ascension Wars

Return of the king

The original *Dominions* is the poster child for brilliant game design obscured by interface opacity and primitive graphics. The sequel won't win any art awards and the interface is still cumbersome, but these two aspects have been improved just enough to let the incredible gameplay shine through. And once you're hooked, the rest makes little difference.

Deep, deeper, deepest

The way the game reveals itself in layers is simply stunning. At first glance, it appears to offer just a map divided into various provinces in which you move your armies, collect income, build fortresses and temples, and research magic, all with the goal of extending the religious dominion of your pretender god. Even with the help of the thick manual, it all seems a bit bewildering at first. Then you'll figure out how to take advantage of your race's strengths in the tactical-combat system. (You can give detailed setup and targeting orders, but you can't directly control armies in combat—instead, you watch a not-biting replay of the battle.) Then you'll learn how to augment your armies with selected spells from the rich magic system. Then you'll start to see how dominion control works. Then you'll realize that you've spent points on your god in the entirely wrong way, and you'll see how to improve everything. Then it will be 3 a.m.

The game has a lot of nuances that can be picked up only from repeated playings, but the basic rules are straightforward. Provinces are rated for income, resources, native race, and population, and they may have magic sites that provide crystals for the detailed magic system. Armies can't move without commanders, and the way in which you set up your troops before combat makes a huge difference in their performance. You'll have to build temples to expand your dominion, fortresses to gather resources, and laboratories to research magic and hire special units. There are many races with widely varying abilities—



It focuses a lot on unit abilities and magic spells, but the strategic possibilities are complex as well.

ties—not just renamed units with different models. All turns are resolved simultaneously, which creates a real feeling of tension, especially in the excellent multiplayer mode.

Head of the old-school class

Those who harbor any nostalgia for the old days of gaming will find that *Dominions II* actually brings them closer to the cherished immersion they got from games like *Seven Cities of Gold* than any emulator or port can, yet it also stands on its own as probably the best 4X strategy game of the past five years. The way in which barely adequate graphics combine with incredible gameplay depth is mysterious yet intoxicating. The game has everything: massive armies, epic battles, a ton of cool spells and magic items, great music, and more strategy than you'll be able to figure out in a year. You can even play as the Cthulhu race, complete with

Don't give up yet!

AS GOOD AS *DOMINIONS II* IS, it's in dire need of tutorial to help players get past the twin barriers of the interface and the game's complexity. Fortunately one die-hard fan has done Ilwinter's work, creating a nifty tutorial you'd be well-served to download at www.meladjustice.com/dom2_walkthru.html. Don't say we didn't warn you.

void summonings and Deep Ones as your soldiers. Trying to describe the game in this small space is futile—if you end up buying it, you'll be talking about it forever. **B** Bruce Geryk

Verdict ★★★★★

The most gameplay in any 4X game available anywhere.

It can stand on its own as probably the best 4X strategy game of the past five years.



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PUBLISHER Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER** Electronic Arts **GENRE** Action **ESRB** T **REQUIRED** Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 2GB install
RECOMMENDED Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER** 1-2

Lord of the Rings: Return of the King

Finally, a movie-based game that deserves a thumbs-up!



It's you against 200,000,000 of Sauron's forces. Feel lucky?



Frodo is just one of the many characters you can play as.



Tip: Never step on a hobbit's toes.

The *Return of the King's* incredible in-game cinematic experience is blowing people away. Me? I'm just impressed by the fact that we've finally found a movie-licensed game that doesn't belong on the cutting-room floor. At its core, *King* is a tarted-up hack-n-slash game, a la *Golden Axe* or *Gauntlet*. That isn't a bad thing, mind you. The difference here is that *ROTK* is the best at what it does: letting you experience a movie as if you were in it through cinematic storytelling that melds together movie clips and the game.

The Middle-earth amigos

The bloodthirsty among you will be glad to know that Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli are all here to deliver orc-sized helpings of whoop ass; in addition, you'll have a full contingent of the fellowship to back you up, Gandalf, Frodo, Sam, and (for the sake of avoiding too many spoilers) three more unlockable adventurers are available to join your

quest. Each starts with a basic set of moves and attacks, but by completing each level in style, you gain experience points that you can use to purchase more attacks. There's a wide variety of bonuses and power-ups, but an interesting feature is the ability to share the wealth—that is, you can opt to blow all your experience souping up one

character or invest extra so every other playable character will have the same upgrades. Still, while each fighter has a variety of special moves (spellcasting and cloaks of invisibility notwithstanding), this is strictly a button-mashing experience. Hell, who knew that Samwise Gamgee and Gandalf were such ass kickers in battle? Your course is charted through tightly



Never believe that a hobbit does so much with so little.



Oh, this battle should be a snap! You take the thousand on the left, and I'll take the thousand on the right.



Legolas kicks some ghost tucks.



Keep Frodo from being found.



planet has their PC connected to the Internet at this point. Hey, and while we're on a roll here, why are the save points so few and far between? I lost track of how many times I died and was forced to wade through the same huge battle.

Ultimately, *Return of the King* is a basic but very good action game. The only thing missing is that coin slot to buy more health for the wizard who "needs food badly." This is the place where I'm supposed to tell you to race out and buy the game because it's so much damn fun. I won't. In fact, don't buy this game until after you've seen the final movie in the trilogy. With all the action and unlockable DVD-like special features, this is not only a good game that drags you right into the movie, it's also a fantastic supplement for die-hard Rings fans. **Darren Goddane**

Verdict ★★★★★

Check your brain at the door for this sword-swinging, spell-slinging good time.

Who knew that Samwise Gamagee and Gandalf were such ass kickers in battle?

scripted camera angles, so if you haven't seen the last film or read the books, this game will pretty much run the story for you. There are also plenty of things to interact with in the environment, some of which will award bonuses and help you in battle. A good throw of a pike, for example, will fell a troll in one shot. While some objects seem superfluous and will even slow you down, most of the things you can interact with are there for a reason. In one level, for example, if you don't use the catapults, you're screwed—the enemies will keep swarming you until you're dead. Thankfully, there are occasional hints and audio cues for those too boneheaded to realize what needs to be done next (ahem).

The fellowship has broken

The game looks great, no doubt. *ROTK* is gorgeous on a high-end system running at 600x1200. In addition, at certain points, the camera angles simultaneously make the game very dramatic and very annoying. For example, I died many times while trying to escape from the Hall of the Dead—the camera hastily changed posi-

tions as I attempted to navigate past falling rocks. And at the gates of Minas Tirith, a huge troll disappeared into my blind spot between camera angles, resulting in multiple clabberings for me.

The scripted sequences look very cinematic and dramatic, but like the extras on a film set, many of the NPCs do little when off camera. Gimli sat by on his ox while Legolas occasionally chipped in with an arrow shot or two as ghosts and goblins swarmed me. Likewise, enemies waited in the wings even though I could plainly see them lurking not a few steps away. At least you can draft someone to join you in multiplayer adventures. One thing that boggles the mind, though, is why the PS2 version of this game supports online play while the PC version doesn't—everybody on the



Yeah, it's really easy to believe this thing can sneak up on you...

PUBLISHER: Sierra **DEVELOPER:** Liquid Entertainment **GENRE:** RTS **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 600, 256MB RAM, 2GB install, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM, 256MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2-8 players)

Lord the Rings: War of the Ring

Battle Realms in Mordor, where the shadows dwell...

What we have here is a textbook case of glorious buildup and shattered expectations. *The Lord of the Rings: War of the Ring* dives deep into the work of J.R.R. Tolkien and, with great care and craft, creates a marvelous setting for real-time strategy gaming. Liquid Entertainment has mined the depths of Tolkien's vast legendum to create landscapes, units, and battles that reflect and amplify the novel and work ideally in an RTS context.

Right up until units actually start to fight, the game is a treat for both Middle-earth and RTS fans. Then it all goes straight to hell. As with Liquid's colossally disappointing *Battle Realms* (upon which *War of the Ring* is built), combat is nothing more than a cluster frag: a mass of flailing limbs and slashing weapons in a tiny view screen that ultimately signifies little. It's like buying a big, beautiful car and then using it to haul trash.

Two Towers, two stories

The game's core is broken into two sequences of battles set into a narrative campaign: One is told from the good side (elves, humans, dwarves, etc.), the other from the evil side (orcs, trolls, nazgul, goblins, etc.). Maps of familiar places, such as Lotherion, the Iron Hills, Minas Ithil, and Helms Deep, are ably divided from a landscape palette that offers three terrain types: grasslands (browns and plan), Mirkwood (green and marshy), and Mordor (dark and rocky). Terrain is used to great effect in mission structure and map building, with a definite focus on defendable choke points and the use of elevated terrain for tactical purposes. This, together with



Always a fan favorite, the ents look like...well, walking trees. An upgrade, however, lets them root in the ground to slow and tangle enemies.

the game's sensible resource distribution (wells for food and mines for ore) and pieces of power that impart bonuses, makes for some satisfying maps.

Unit creation and development also follow a simple but interesting pattern, requiring tactical choices in deciding which units to create and enhance for the best combined-arms fighting force. The familiar blend of ranged attackers, infantry, fast movers, and magic wielders is enhanced by heroes who are drawn from the books and impart a performance boost to nearby units while also delivering their own unique attacks.

Yet even with the expanded hero abilities and combined-



Problems with *War of the Ring's* design include the very narrow view window and limited zoom and rotation range.

force armies, combat always devolves into mass confusion. There are no complex commands, no formations, no finesse at all. Liquid left the control scheme as a click-to-attack, rush-tactics dud. Some may like this approach because it keeps things fast and simple, but after so many RTS games with complex commands (most recently *Empires*), it seems woefully lacking. **—Thomas L. McDonald**

Verdict ★★★☆☆

Good use of Middle-earth elements in a sadly mundane RTS.

Like buying a big, beautiful car and then using it to haul trash.

Publisher: Vivendi Universal Games **Developer:** Amazon Entertainment **Genre:** Action-Adventure **ESRB Rating:** E **Platform:** Pentium III 450, 64MB RAM (128MB RAM for Windows XP), 1.6GB install, 32MB 3D card (recommended: 64MB 3D card) **Multiplayer:** None

The Hobbit

Over Hill and underwhelming

Do not remember Tolkien writing about Nintendo Baggins, but after playing Vivendi Universal's *The Hobbit*, you'll likely believe that Frodo and Bilbo must have had a Japanese cousin with the same name. Hairy footed as you might expect (although cursed with a face that looks more like Denny Boneduce than Sir Ian Holm), our hero leaps from rock to rock and fly pad to fly pad, climbs chains and slides along zip lines, rides in mine cars à la Indiana Jones, and collects mushrooms and colored crystals for extra power. Somewhere along the way, he picks up a magic ring that can turn him invisible and has confabs with a wizard and some dwarves, but the small bits of Tolkien in this game are far outweighed by the gunk that could have come out of any random fantasy-themed console title.

Smaug alert!

There are some nice animated sequences, chief among them the ones featuring a variation of Gandalf, who sounds remarkably like Ian McKellen. And complaining that the gameplay is overly familiar and



Remember when Bilbo had to jump across the raised grassy platforms? Me neither.

Fighting goblins and wolves is more exciting than carrying a butter churn.

generic isn't the same as saying it's bad—sometimes it's fun to hop from platform to platform in a game of this sort. But the connection to *The Hobbit* is tenuous, and sadly, the gameplay is a mixed bag.

Following an odd dream sequence, the game opens with the obligatory Explore Hobbiton level (anyone who's played Vivendi's recent *Fellowship of the Ring* will experience an extreme sense of déjà vu). It

will take stouthearted adventurers indeed to maintain their enthusiasm in the face of such quests as "Fetch my butter churn, please" and "I seem to have lost my knitting needle somewhere in town—if you find it, can you bring it to me?" Those who do soldier on will find themselves fighting goblins, wolves, and spiders outside the Shire, but while this sort of thing is more exciting than carrying a butter churn, the sluggish and unpredictable controls combine with the occasionally fishy camera to make combat annoying. A number of scenes require you to sneak past patrolling monsters—prepare to replay these sequences till you're sick of them. And the climactic face-off with Smaug the dragon owes more than a little to (and is no more fun than) the equivalent scene in *Dragon's Lair*.

On the positive side, many of the death traps are clever and exhilarating (there's an especially nice bit early on in which you ride floesim into the center of a warboat), and some of the combat moves are fun, although Bilbo's walking stick looks like a nimp's staff and is used for pole-vaulting in



Without the power of the Ring, Bilbo must hide from trolls.

a most un-hobbit-like fashion.

The Hobbit is unlikely to make anyone's list of favorite games. Adult gamers will find it too basic, children may find it too frustrating, and fans of *Lord of the Rings* will prefer a more authentic Tolkien experience. But if you find yourself at Blockbuster, desperate for a console-game fix, and all the games you really want to play aren't available, you could do worse than blowing an hour or two with this one. **C** Charles Aedel



This whirlpool sequence is one of the better parts of the game—although the "floating collectible jewels" thing still feels out of place.

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

Standard console fare, lightly Tolkien flavored.

PUBLISHER Take 2 Interactive **DEVELOPER** Pop Top Software **GENRE** Strategy **ESRB RATING** E **REQUIRED** Pentium III 400, 128MB RAM, 1.2GB install
RECOMMENDED None **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT** Internet

Railroad Tycoon 3

An awesome sequel that goes much deeper than pretty graphics



■ We don't know what this F3 unit is doing in Australia, but we've always thought they were pretty.



□ A French Class 9100 power unit is all that's available in this scenario, where German E18s, Italian E42s, U.S. EP-2 Ripplers, and Swiss Re5/7s form a strange locomotive pool.



□ In RRT3, it's now possible to own many of the vendors and end users for whom you are providing the transportation infrastructure.

If Pop Top and Take 2 had titled their latest release *Railroad Tycoon 3D*, we probably would have dismissed the entire project as being little more than a face-lift for a classic game that was looking a little worn. Even with its actual name, *Railroad Tycoon 3*, there will be gamers who think it's all about the graphics. To be sure, there is great satisfaction in being able to lock your camera onto a train of your choice and watch it traverse the rolling hills of your expertly designed system. Certainly, there is great satisfaction in viewing the lovingly crafted 3D models of some of your favorite locomotives as they steam through the mountains. And it's extremely gratifying to see the rain, lightning, and nightfall effects play over geographical features that evoke the actual look of the places being simulated.

Railroad Tycoon 3 is more than a face-lift, however. The 3D adds to your track-

laying problems, providing real grades that affect the speed of your trains. Plus, *RRT3* features a scenario builder, so you no longer have to provide game saves and describe artificial problems for another player to keep track of and solve. Now, you can build entire scenarios with clear-cut victory conditions. There's also a wider variety of locomotive power (40 different locomotives) than in any previous *RRT* game, complete with a massive grid of comparative features for each included railroad engine.

Wrong train on the tracks

Unfortunately, this is where my main quibble with the game arises. If Pop Top went through the trouble of localizing geography and the historical goals of the scenarios (which has been done masterfully), why not do a better job of restricting the locomotive power to the appropriate country? It's possible to

play French scenarios in which you see only one French locomotive, as opposed to a strange assortment of German, Italian, U.S., and Swiss power. The Australian scenario features articulated U.S. steam engines (Big Boys) that were relatively rare even in the United States and aren't mentioned in any of my sources on Australian rails.

Still, the new economic system is marvelous, with more load types than in previous games. The production chains are easy to follow, with some changing according to an advancing timeline within the scenarios (for example, lumber is delivered to the toy factories until 1955, when plastic becomes the dominant demand). Better still, you can better manipulate *RRT3*'s stock and bond markets more effectively than you could in its predecessors; now, you can set or suspend stock dividends and buy back stock to entice new investors.

Cornering the market

Best of all, your company can now own industries other than the restaurants and hotels that adjoin the stations. Once your company supplies a steel mill that

The new economic system is marvelous, with more load types than in previous games.



A great new 3D engine makes this the prettiest Railroad Tycoon ever.



Newspaper headlines usually forecast economic news that will affect the values of your assets.

starts to produce profits, it's possible to follow your monopolistic, robber-baron instincts and buy that industry. In one Australian scenario, I followed the principle of horizontal consolidation, buying the logging camp, lumber mill, paper

mill, and furniture factory in that order. Since I had connected all of the elements, I was able to buy them before they went up in value and thereby increased my net worth by about double what it would have been with pure rail traffic alone.

The bottom line is that any would-be robber baron should be pleased with Railroad Tycoon 3. It has all the features that made its predecessors great, plus more economic options and a lot of beautiful model trains, trestles, and terrain. It may not be perfect, but it's still awesome.

—Johnny L. Wilson

Verdict ★★★★★

You don't have to love trains to enjoy the historical and economic challenges here—but a little train love won't hurt.

Tips for Tycoons

MARKET CAP This trick may seem obvious to many investors, but it has served me well: Just before I plan for my company to issue stock, I purchase 1,000 shares using my personal purchasing power. The higher demand raises the stock price so that the new issue will be roughly \$2 higher per share, increasing the total capital received. Keep some purchasing power in reserve in case you need to do it again.

INDUSTRIAL ESPIONAGE Click on the industries served by your route and monitor their profits and losses. If you know they're being supplied with the right raw product for the production chain (for example, coal and oil to an electric plant), purchase the industry just as it's moving from single-digit losses per year into the profit column. It's a nice boost for your annual profits.

UPGRADES/DOWNGRADES

Sometimes, the fastest locomotive isn't your best choice. Don't wear out expensive locomotives on short hauls or waste fast locomotives in curving, mountainous terrain that only encourages them to crash and burn. Save the expensive engines for the larger stations and longer runs. Use the older power on the little runs till the wheels drop off.

PUBLISHER Sony Online Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Sony Online Entertainment **GENRE** Action **ESRB** T **REQUIRED** Pentium III 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, 600MB install **RECOMMENDED** Pentium 4 1.0GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card, 800MB install

Planetside: Core Combat

Journey to the center of the death

My character is packing a powerful mechtrom heavy assault rifle as I sprint through some alien subterranean complex. Coming topside for air, I feel confident because no one can touch me. No, I'm not that good and I'm not cheating. It's just that no one else was willing to drop the \$30 for the first Planetside expansion, Core Combat.

A host of new advanced weaponry allows you to fire a burst of static cling while the reactor lays down some toxic waste on the ground. Vehiclewise, there's a teleporter station, a hoverbike, and a mobile artillery platform. Take this gear aboveground and you can blow away those who haven't plunked down their 30 bucks for the expansion—you can use this stuff, but they can't. Nyah, nyah, nyah!

What's the alien name for tumbleweeds?

Since you can recharge these weapons only underground, you're stuck carrying around

the sci-fi equivalent of a disposable camera. Great. And there's little incentive to stay below-ground for too long: between the lame zap lines that ferry you around and the endless precarious perches, I wanted to run out as quickly as possible. It didn't help that the many times I went spelunking, nobody was there. No doubt, if more people start drinking the Planetside Kool-Aid, it'll be fun. But as it stands, it's like running errands. Need to borrow my tools? Let me go into the basement to get them. Need that flak mobile artillery cannon (which is very cool, by the way) or some module? I've gotta get to one of the four active Geowarps scattered around the world first to get down below. See you in about 30 minutes.

Coercing people to buy Core Combat so they can get more-potent weaponry seems shady. This expansion should cost a lot less—or be free. The perpetually patched



❑ A flak mobile artillery platform rolls into position.

updates have fixed the horrible stability issues that plagued the launch. Hopefully, it won't be long before we see similarly streamlined gameplay and more reasons to go down below. ❑ **Darren Gladstone**

Verdict ★★★★★

A decent idea at its core, but not worth the price.

PUBLISHER Shrapnel Games **DEVELOPER** Mantis Mechanics **GENRE** Action/Strategy **ESRB** NR **REQUIRED** Pentium 500, 32MB RAM, 400MB install, 10MB 3D card **RECOMMENDED** None **MULTIPLAYER** None

Space Empires: Starfury

Freelancer on 200 credits a day

Starfury is the latest game in Shrapnel Games' Space Empires franchise. Unlike previous titles, which feature strategy-heavy gameplay, Starfury is much more action oriented—you could really call this a "sci-fi strategy action-adventure sim RPG." As the captain of a lone starship, you're tasked with various missions stretching over three campaigns. ostensibly, your main goal is to infiltrate and deal with pesky space pirates; however, the gameplay is open-ended enough to accommodate plenty of exploration and random misadventures.

Your ship is easy to pilot, and though it's a bit flimsy at first, you can purchase multiple upgrades (such as better beams, missiles, torpedoes, shields, and armor) for it once you've earned some cash. Indeed, you'll start buying new ships once you've had enough fun with your initial vessel.

Of course, all those fleshy weapons of mass destruction don't do you any good unless you're vaporizing unwelcoming enemies, right? If you're the trigger-happy type, combat is simple: Choose your weapons, line up a target, and fire away. Bounty hunting and piracy are good ways to earn cash, though there are plenty of other mission types for the less combat-inclined. That's what's nice about Starfury. Whether you're into search-and-destroy or the more mundane courier missions, the game caters to you on some level.

Although repetition eventually sets in, things manage to stay fresh for a good length of time. Starfury won't win any awards for spectacular audio or visuals,



❑ Simple controls make maneuvering your ship a snap.

but it definitely packs some solid gameplay that sci-fi fans are sure to dig.

❑ **Ryan Scott**

Verdict ★★★★★

Open-ended and flexible without being too complex.

PUBLISHER: Atari **DEVELOPER:** Reality Pump **GENRE:** RTS/RPG **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium II 733, 32MB RAM, 600MB Instal, 32MB 3D card **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 1.2Ghz, 256 MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, LAN (2-8 players)

Once Upon a Knight

Milk. It does a kingdom good

Once Upon a Knight is an example of lofty ambition brought low by poor execution. On the surface, I should have loved this game. It's an RTS game. I love RTS games. When you tire of the RTS side, you've got the whole RPG side. I love RPGs. It's supposed to be funny. I love comedy and satire. Unfortunately, Knight is a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none.

First and foremost, this game isn't funny. Cow references, mother-in-law jokes, and the superfluous use of "eth" in all the dialogue sum up its pathetic attempts to make the player laugh.

Knight's best side is a solid, fun RTS made with some interesting features, though it offers little that surprises. The resource system consists entirely of cows and the milk they produce. Why milk? Because the developers thought it was inherently funny. The humor falls flat (surprise!), but the system results in a streamlined economy that requires little management, allowing the player to

focus on building cities and fighting battles. Knight's RTS breaks the monotony of city-versus-city battles with missions that take Prince John and nine followers of your choosing on quests through wilderness and dungeon. Another nice touch: Knight rewards you for intelligently using your units. These units not only can level up and find better equipment, but, provided they survive, can also move between missions. Your village carries through missions within a campaign, allowing it to be expanded and upgraded.

The RPG side of the game feels like dumbed- and stripped-down Diablo, and it's interesting only because you get to be something other than Prince John and have a few more stats to play with. Side quests are repetitive—literally. You'll often be asked to repeat a quest you completed in the previous chapter. Fortunately, side quests are optional.



Wizards are exceptionally powerful siege units capable of laying waste to whole villages.

Skip the RPG and enjoy the RTS portion of Knight. **—Stephen Gehring**

Verdict ★★☆☆

A decent-enough RTS bogged down by a lame RPG and the mistaken belief that milk is funny.

PUBLISHER: Gotham Games **DEVELOPER:** Rio Ave **GENRE:** Fighting **ESRB RATING:** M **PRICE:** \$19.99 **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 400, 32MB RAM, 400MB Instal, **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4, 35MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, frontal lobectomy

MTV's Celebrity Deathmatch

Bring me the head of Carrot Top!

How much would you pay to see Ron Jeremy assault Carrot Top with an enormous banana-shaped phallus? If your answer is "less than \$20," stop now—there's nothing here for you. The amount of pleasure you'll derive from Celebrity Deathmatch is

dependent upon how badly you need to see the dentists of infamicals, Top 40 radio, and the WB face a horrifying array of injuries. Miss Cleo emasculated? Yep. Lance Bass beheaded? Check. Shannen Doherty flimbeed? You betcha.

But do you really hate Jerry Springer so much that you want to spend the evening assaulting him with Anna Nicole Smith's fluid-shooting mammas? Hopefully not. A cast of characters for whom you have actual dislike rather than just disinterest would have made Celebrity Deathmatch at least bearable. Where's Lorenzo Lamas? Or Tyne Daly?

This button masher is not so much a game as an opportunity to become deeply familiar with your computer's J key.



Excuse me, but are those Meyer pikemen?

although a variety of attacks are available to your character, it makes little difference which one you choose. For \$20, you could probably hire Miss Cleo and Shannen Doherty to wage a battle to the death in your own backyard. Why bother with an imitation? **—Tom Edwards**

Verdict ★★★★★

Save your money by just throwing beer cans at the television.



The warioff, one of the game's unlockable "celebrities."

PUBLISHER Gathering/Two-Compas **DEVELOPER** Hako Software **GENRE** Tactical shooter **ESRB RATING** M **REQUIRED** Pentium III 500k, 2-4GB install, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D card **RECOMMENDED** Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER** LAN, Internet (2-32 players)

Hidden & Dangerous 2

Victory, but at what cost?

Hidden & Dangerous entered the budding tactical-shooter market a few years back with a deft balance of action and strategy based on the exploits of WWII British commandos. *Hidden & Dangerous 2* continues this tradition with gutsy, realistic WWII squad-based combat, unfortunately, it also continues the dubious tradition of bugs, A.I. glitches, and a poor interface.

Hidden & Dangerous 2 has been upgraded in several key areas—most notably, the graphics and sound in the detailed and atmospheric war-torn environments that really set *H&D2* apart from games like *Battlefield 1942* and *Black Hawk Down*. In first- or third-person perspective, your elite team of British Special Air Service (SAS) commandos combats Axis forces across four theaters of operation in 20 real-world combat missions. The campaign inserts your commandos behind enemy positions to rescue downed Allied pilots, disrupt German communications, destroy key Axis bunkers, and recover important documents. Immersive cut-scenes and well-designed briefings and debriefings bring the grittiness of WWII combat to life. Replay value is significant, since missions are also accessible in two new game modes: cinema, in which your team must destroy all enemies, and lone wolf.

Armed and dangerous

Players form and outfit four-man teams from a pool of 30 SAS operatives, and tailoring a commando's weapons and equipment for each mission is crucial if you are to succeed. There are more than 40 weapons to choose from, and developer Illusion Software has beefed up the arsenal with lightweight submachine guns like the German MP 40, sniper rifles like the British Lee Enfield 303, and machine guns like the Czech ZB26. And there's plenty of equipment: binoculars, cameras, decoders, combat knives, grenades, magnetic mines, antitank mines, and TNT. If you run out of ammo or equipment, your commandos



Shooting is a matter of finding the weapon's crosshairs and zeroing in on the target. Get used to weapon play and breathing anomalies, which can ruin a good firefight.

Immersive cut-scenes and well-designed briefings and debriefings bring the grittiness of WWII combat to life.

can pick up weapons and supplies from dead allies or enemy soldiers.

Each commando possesses a variety of attributes and skills, including shooting, stealth, strength, endurance, and first aid. Snipers perched high in a church steeple shoot more effectively if they possess the highest shooting skill, while machine gunners with high endurance and strength skills can mow down even more assaulting Nazis from their fixed position.

Difficult maps become easier if you choose the right mix of operatives, weapons, and equipment, so you'll need to think before entering a mission. Outfitting your team in RPG fashion is part of *H&D2*'s charm, but gamers wishing to avoid the tedium of permission hoopla may utilize *H&D2*'s handy auto-setup feature.

Shooting duds

H&D2 requires adept shooter skills and tactical savvy. The Tactical Squad Management screen has been streamlined a bit, though it still feels like it's in need of fine-tuning. Simply hitting the space bar

brings up the map screen for quick coordination and control of operatives, or for calling air strikes and artillery.

Unfortunately, *H&D2* is marred by the same buggy A.I. team and enemy script that hamper the original. Commandos move without shooting or simply ignore orders, while enemy soldiers do stupid things like run at your men without firing. Even on the easiest of settings, missions are still darn tough, micro-managing lame A.I. teammates gets really tedious really fast. Though the multiplayer aspect of *H&D2* offers more players (up to 32) and game types (objective, deathmatch, and occupation), online games are riddled with minor bugs, making *H&D2* an annoying pretender to *Battlefield*'s online throne.

Even with these shortcomings, *Hidden & Dangerous 2*'s small-unit tactics, riveting action, addictive gameplay, and immersive environments make this a winner.

Raphael Lambertson

Verdict ★★★★★

A really good game hampered by the same pesky bugs and problematic A.I. as the original.

The Silent Movement commands allow your team members to follow orders using hand signals without alerting nearby enemies. Now, if only the A.I. script would just follow instructions.

Revisionist History

New info, old games



Space horrors come to Star Wars

Star Wars Galaxies

Perhaps the most pertinent fact about *Star Wars Galaxies* is this: In early November, the first Jedi appeared... via

Monolith after the game launched, and only after the developers introduced Jedi/Sith Holocrons to nudge prospective Jedi in the right direction. Peeling has never been a strong point of Galaxies, and that's putting it mildly. Upon launch, the game was about as engaging as sorting your change jar.

In the half year since its release, Galaxies has undergone the kind of maintenance and gradual expansion you'd expect of an MMO. Yes, the "open beta" stage (i.e., publication) has given Lucas/EOE a chance to tighten up the belts a bit, refine the performance and engine, and iron out some of the more obvious problems. The graphics still clip like a mother, and once in a while, a building—particularly when you happen to be inside it—will kind of, well, vanish. But by and large, the game is in a decent-enough technical state.

The major additions are mounts and player cities. Pets such as dewbacks, falumpasset, and other beasts can be trained for riding by a creature handler or bought pretrained. With the player-city option, a politician can become mayor of his own city, adding structures and decorating to create a custom location.

Does this add enough to the actual gameplay to help you forget that the game's predominant characteristic is one of drudgery? Not really. It's a thunderingly repetitive game, and only those investing a vast amount of time can reap any real rewards. It still feels more like work than play.

By Thomas L. McDonald

PUBLISHER: Vivendi Universal **DEVELOPER:** Monolith **GENRE:** Shooter **ESRP RATING:** M **PC REQUIRED:** Pentium III 750, 128MB RAM (256MB for Windows XP), 1MBd install, 32MB 3D card **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2-16 players)

Contract J.A.C.K.

Go back, Jack, don't do it again

If you can catch a shuttle to the new moon colony, do so now. In this standalone *No One Lives Forever 2* prequel, Monolith has dropped the ball so soundly, it has penetrated the Earth's mantle and is heading pell-mell for the molten core, thus triggering a planet-destroying catastrophe that will annihilate us all. Spin-offs are a tricky thing, and sadly, *Contract J.A.C.K.* lies well south of *After MMSM*.

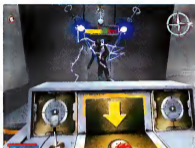
To its credit, Monolith has said that *J.A.C.K.* isn't meant to be a *NOLF* game, and that's a good thing, because this game lacks the wit, originality, enjoyment, polish, and even the collision detection of the *NOLF* franchise. How this can be set in the *NOLF* world and not be a *NOLF* game is puzzling, but I guess saying "*J.A.C.K.* isn't a *NOLF* game" sounds a lot better than "*J.A.C.K.* is a crappy game."

This non-*NOLF* game casts you as the eponymous Jack, a killer for hire working for H.A.R.M., the evil syndicate from the *NOLF* games. This non-*NOLF* game also features specific characters from *NOLF* and ham-handed references to *NOLF* heroine Cate Archer. OK, whatever. The gameplay is decidedly non-*NOLF* as you mow down endless swarms of bad guys during your quest to reclaim a mad scientist from rival bad-guy club Danger Danger.

Shoot, wince, repeat

The run-and-gun action is unrelenting, as are the bad guys; crash-test dummies can take less damage than the enemies you'll empty clip after clip into in this game. OK, so Monolith wanted to make a straightforward shooter. Did it have to make such a flat and unimpaired one? Weapons are so ineffective at dropping enemies that they blur into one abstract "kill" thing. There are some vehicles—a snowmobile and a moped—with guns mounted on them so you can drive and shoot, but those brief sequences are dull.

Boss battles are so routine as to be



In a sly bit of ironic computer art, I torture someone in the game while the game tortures me. Geriatric!



Space junk, er, I mean, a challenging midgame shooting gallery in up—ah, the hell with it...

laughable, and that's about all the laughter you'll be doing, as *NOLFs* great comedic dialogue is noticeably absent. The entire game feels slapped together, especially the featureless levels, including the Arctic and a moonbase. Collision detection is so incredibly flinky that half the time you run over a dead enemy's gun, you never pick it up. There's a workaround for this, but just because I'm a bad guy doesn't mean I should have to jump up and down on the bloody corpses of my enemies—an act that's also needlessly time consuming when another dozen killers are pelting me with bullets.

In some ways, this is a towering triumph for Monolith: *Contract J.A.C.K.* is definitely not a *NOLF* game. And that's a shame.

By Robert Colley

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

No franchise shines forever—*J.A.C.K.* is the first blip on the *NOLF* series.

PUBLISHER: Strategy First **DEVELOPER:** Techland **GENRE:** Shooter **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 650, 256MB RAM, 1.7GB install
RECOMMENDED: Intel PIII 450, 32MB RAM, 1.7GB install

Chrome

The sleeper sci-fi shooter of the year

Chrome is an easy title to overlook, since it shipped with so fanfare and little in the way of a pedigree. It was developed in Poland and published by Strategy First, which ranks it somewhere between a 7-Eleven sandwich and Kathy Bates for sheer sex appeal. But this game blows Halo PC away and stands up well with better known sci-fi shooters such as Unreal 2 and Deus Ex in terms of variety, challenge, and overall polish. It's not perfect, but it's visually stunning, well executed, and loaded with interesting features.

Macho man

You play as Logan, a macho mercenary who takes high-paying jobs for interstellar corporations. Logan gets shafted early on and teams up with an attractive partner named Carné, who crews the ship and feeds him coordinates during missions. The two become involved in a nasty corporate drama over a colony that's mining a rare resource called Chrome. The story is better than standard shooter fare, and the cut-scenes and voice acting give Logan a credible presence as a crusty, cynical SOB.

Except in the first mission, Logan fights alone. The missions play out in a variety of locations, from lush tropical islands to frozen outposts to the obligatory space station. Mission goals include data recovery, hostage rescue, and even holding a defensive position against an organized attack. Despite the apparent variety, many of the missions evolve the usual activities of



Logan sparks a mechtike walker with a rocket launcher. Later, he gets to pilot a couple walkers of his own.



Chrome puts a lot of firepower in your hands. And the graphics are outrageous.

unlocking doors and killing dumb guards. Some of the stealth missions are huge and can take hours to get through.

Your limited inventory adds to the challenge. You can carry only one long-barreled weapon, so you're constantly deciding whether to keep the machine gun or switch to something like the sniper rifle or rocket launcher. Fortunately, there's always plenty of ammo and health to recover from your victims. You can even find portable, working music players, but they take valuable inventory space.

All of this stuff is fairly standard, but there are several things that set Chrome apart. The big one is its use of Deus Ex-style implants, which can enhance Logan's abilities. You can speed his reactions by slowing down the action (à la bullet time), improve sighting and accuracy, or see enemies through walls, among other things. While you might not use all of them, you'll have to use some to get through the game. The effects are temporary and impair Logan briefly, so you have to pick your moments

There's also heavy-duty hardware to play with, an all-terrain vehicle equipped with a minicannon, speeder bikes, and even MechWarrior-style walking tanks. Sometimes you get to pilot the mechs, and sometimes you have to take them out—and it's a kick to do either one.

More than just Chrome

Chrome ain't the year's best shooter, but it certainly exceeds the sum of its parts. Despite jolly AJ, missions are challenging enough to keep you from finishing the game in a weekend. The language and interface don't suffer at all from the usual translation of a European product, and occasional use of four-letter words and snarky remarks such as "I say 'G'das my ass'" and "Goddamn corporations!" give the characters some added punch. There are even three different endings to choose from, depending on how much of a mercenary you want to be. All of this combined makes Chrome more than a shiny toy—it's a solid, entertaining game that makes us eager for Techland's next project. **Ken Brown**

Verdict ★★★★★

A stunning sci-fi-themed shooter that makes Halo look hollow.

Chrome isn't the year's best shooter, but it certainly exceeds the sum of its parts.

PUBLISHER: **Nielsen** DEVELOPER: **Mad Dog Software and the Powered Games** GENRE: **Action-RPG** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Features 16 GB, 32GB RAM, 1GB SSD** INSTALL/RECOMMEND: **Position 4 3GB, 32GB RAM, 128MB 3D card** MULTIPLAYER: **LAN, Internet (2-6 players)**

Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna

Do you like to watch?

Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna is a stand-alone expansion that improves upon various aspects of Dungeon Siege, but with a less-striking level design and without addressing the original game's biggest problem: lack of difficulty. Aranna is so easy, it becomes boring.

You can expect 20 to 30 hours of gameplay, which is a liberal offering for an expansion. And in a mysterious bout of generosity, Microsoft tossed Dungeon Siege into the box. If you haven't played it yet, you've got a lot of gameplay awaiting you.

The Aranna backstory involves a big foezle named the Shadow Jumper, who has run off with the Staff of Stars and plans on using it to destroy the Great Clock. You chase 'em across the world, always a step behind, defeating his henchman minibosses a long way until you confront the Jumper himself, who, strangely enough, never actually jumps.

Aranna does offer some improvements on the original. You can hotkey spells, which lets you easily flip between 10 different spells (or weapons). Treasure drops are more interesting, with the inclusion of

matched sets of items to collect, and the characters sometimes utter little catchphrases, lending more personality to your group. Also, various interesting spells have been added—for instance, with the Orb spell, you can circle a character, firing offensive bolts or casting heals, and free up a mega-type to cast other spells or even mace. The themed adventure areas are a bit smaller and less interesting than those in Dungeon Siege, but add to the mix better potion management, a new type of pack mule (trags, which fight better), and a new half-giant playable race, and you've got some good stuff.

Unfortunately, nobody fixed Dungeon Siege's really hairy problem: The game almost plays itself. Here's how 95 percent of my encounters went: 1) Drag group toward monsters, 2) group automatically fights monsters and wins while I twiddle my thumbs, and 3) repeat steps one and two. Every now and then, I'd slow down the game speed and pay more attention



❑ The big eyeball thing needs glasses—it couldn't hit the broadside of a pack mule!

to a fight, which mostly meant managing the healing potions.

I was hoping this expansion would be more challenging, but it isn't. It's a maddeningly beautiful game filled with the tedium of being an observer more than a player. If you liked Dungeon Siege, your money's well spent on the expansion. If you found it dull, you'll find Aranna equally dull. **Mark Asher**

Verdict ★★★★★
Good stuff for fans of the original.

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal** DEVELOPER: **Mythic Entertainment** GENRE: **FRP/RPG** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Position 8 1.4GB, 384MB RAM, 1GB HD** INSTALL/RECOMMEND: **Position 4 2GB, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, High-speed Internet** MULTIPLAYER: **Indeed**

Dark Age of Camelot: Trials of Atlantis

Obesity required!

Are you über? Mythic's Trials of Atlantis expansion for Dark Age of Camelot wants to know. Although you can roam new lands and fight a level-30-plus character, you really need an über-level-40-plus character (and a group to play with) to experience the "trials," a series of quests.

If you answered yes, you'll enjoy the generous amount of new content Atlantis adds: There are huge new areas to explore, including cool underwater realms, plus master-ability ranks to be gained from completing a series of trials, and, best and worst of all, the trials themselves.

Best and worst? The 30 trials are some of the most creative quests you'll find in an RPG, be it single player or massively

multiplayer, and they often require the cooperative play of multiple groups, involving having to be ferried across the river Styx but being taken by the ferryman only if you're dead.

Unfortunately, Atlantis shipped with numerous frustrating bugs. Also, Mythic didn't provide much information about the quests, instead angling for that sense of mystery. Mystery? Imagine not knowing if you're stymied due to a quest bug or your own lack of knowledge. Frustration!

Trials of Atlantis also adds modestly improved graphics and three new playable races. At a high level and still playing?



❑ The game features a wide variety of weapons, including this highly effective artifact gun.

Grab it. At a low level or just thinking about playing? Skip it. **Mark Asher**

Verdict ★★★★★
Good expansion for veteran players, but not much for new players.

PUBLISHER: Matrix Games **DEVELOPER:** Wargaming.net **GENRE:** Turn-based Strategy **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium 6 600, 256MB RAM, 650MB install, 32MB 3D card **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 600 **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT:** Internet (2 players)

Massive Assault

Massively dazed and confused

Massive Assault is like a teenager struggling for identity. It's a turn-based, sci-fi hex war game disguised by a 3D engine that uses simple game mechanics, but the gameplay is often so difficult that there's no room for error.

The game is nearly as easy to learn as Risk. Units move, then they attack with no luck involved. Both sides have the same units, which look different but have identical capabilities. With most land units restricted to the movement rate of one or two hexes, these "futuristic" conflicts fight more like the slugfests of World War I trenches. Cheap infantry hold the line and slaughter each other while armored units attempt to flank or break through enemy lines. Often, the game devolves into affairs of attrition in which wealth triumphs.

The economic game gives limited build capabilities in your territories, as long as they aren't occupied by the enemy. When a territory is invaded, it gets guerrilla

points to buy a small defense force, and captured territories occasionally give you indemnities to purchase reinforcements.

The simplicity of this system betrays the insidiously difficult gameplay. Every mission is a puzzle in which a wrong move means defeat. Unless you arrive upon the optimal solution, you will have to restart or reload. A.I. is also vicious—given MA's limited options, it plays like a chess engine. While it lacks imagination, it usually performs the optimal move with all of its units.

If you treat Massive Assault like a regular war game, you will find no enjoyment. If you can get over that prejudice and treat it like



It's great-looking for a war game, but the 3D engine slows down the "action" too much.

The simplicity of this system betrays the insidiously difficult gameplay.

a puzzle game with combat, you'll find many brainteaser scenarios. They aren't necessarily fun, but they're definitely challenging and maybe even addictive. **D** Di Luo

Verdict ★★☆☆
Lemmings gone turn-based.

PUBLISHER: Matrix Games **DEVELOPER:** Vicious Byte **GENRE:** Turn-based Strategy **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 400, 64MB RAM, 400MB install **RECOMMENDED:** None **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT:** None, Internet (2-4 players)

Titans of Steel

Roll, roll, roll your dice, gently down the screen

If you're familiar with the BattleTech board-game system, you know what Titans of Steel is about. If you aren't, you can get a good idea by imagining MechWarrior plus a board game minus the copyrighted universe, plus some really primitive graphics.

The structure, pacing, and play of Titans rest on one-at-a-time combat mechanics that feel like board-game moves, although the game does a nice job of using the computer to implement a unique, impulse-like turn style that puts a premium on advance planning. It's a thinking man's game, especially if that man has a beard and can stroke it thoughtfully while planning moves.

The game is at its best when you're not playing the battles. You can spend hours huddling with approaches, and the role-playing elements through which titan jobs develop skills and attributes are well done.

Once you get these beasts to the battlefield, results are mixed. Game mechanics reward careful planning and what is some-



The fog-of-war can be turned off, but it adds complexity when you're using random maps.

times exasperating attention to detail. While the slow pace will delight those who like playing what is essentially MechWarrior Chess, the board-game conventions can seriously impede the flow of play, since multiple-weapon alpha strikes are resolved individually and can drag on interminably. The interface works well for executing moves but poorly for keeping track of your titans' status. Playing on large maps slows play fur-



Designing your titans is one of the best parts of the game.

ther enough that the game can devolve into hours of hide-and-seek. The graphics don't help, so you're advised to bring your imagination. And a love for metal monsters with guns. And a beard to stroke. **B** Bruce Gark

Verdict ★★☆☆
An old-school game with little crossover potential.

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft **DEVELOPER:** Gergaud **GENRE:** Stealth Shooter **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 700, 16MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 1.5GB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 1000, 32MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 2.5GB install **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, internet **OS:** Windows

XIII

It's called XIII because there are XII better shooters

In a sense, it's fitting that XIII's protagonist has amnesia—apparently, the game's developers do as well. How else do you explain the fact that they have forgotten such simple PC gaming conventions as meaningful quicksaves, hotkeyed weapons, logical checkpoint placement, and fair and intelligent AI? For all its delicious style, this spy shooter is ultimately as fractured as its hero's memory and the comic-book-style cut-scenes that goose the story along.

Cornucopia o' onomatopoeia

Lots of developers are hopping on the cash-shaded bandwagon, but XIII has a look all its own, thanks to a richly colored, thickly lined, yet fundamentally realistic appearance that expertly retains the look of the European comic on which it's based, right down to the serrated red BADOMI blossoming from an exploding truck and the dimming Tap Tap Tap of patrolling guards. The jazzy, dynamic soundtrack fits perfectly, and together, these elements create a unique, engaging game world.

But playing this game is the real problem. You can forgive the amnesiac-hero-uncovering-the-government-conspiracy story, since this is hardly

the first game to throw that tripe on a plate and call it dinner. You can forgive the uneven voice acting (a near-comatose David Duchovny mumbles your action-hero lines) because quality voice acting in games is still the exception, not the rule. You can even forgive the unimaginative mix of real-world weapons because, well, unless it's a death ray kungie game,



Q A disturbing number of guards tend to serene themselves. It's like they're asking to be shot in the head with a crossbow.

it's the same mix in every other game. And you can forgive all these things because when you're running and gunning, the action is generally good, generally challenging, and always presented with style.

But you can't forgive everything. XIII's chief source of aggravation is the checkpoint save system left over from its console iterations. I can deal with a good checkpoint system, but an inconsistent, incoherent, infuriating system isn't a good one. Checkpoints are unevenly placed in both the very short and torbously long levels. One little slipup in the demanding stealth missions dominating the last third of the game means starting over and enduring lengthy, non-skipable cut-scenes and long, uneventful "follow me" sequences again.

Checkpoint placement is consistent only in its inconsistency and lack of thought—really, why aren't these checkpoints immediately before or after boss fights? Repeatedly replaying long stealth missions (complete with the glacially slow lack of fun entailed in hiding enemy bodies) veers out of the realm of entertainment and straight into the heart of digital punishment.

Unarmed and dangerous

Sadly, every time XIII threatens to break out into the sort of absorbing enjoyment you play games for, it quickly curtails being fun. Some weapons are conveniently hotkeyed—the useful ones aren't. Using



Q Yeah, no one walks in my valley of death. They just bleed.

your mouse wheel to snap to the best weapon for a given situation is tricky at best, maddening at worst, and it's at its worst a lot because, while your enemies aren't all that smart, they don't miss much. Decent players can probably survive the most heated skirmishes, but the bigger firefights that lack a checkpoint after them serve mostly to deplete you to a level of frightening vulnerability immediately before one of the cheating-ass-never-miss-won't-die-flits-like-a-mosquito-on-track boss fights. Time to replay the whole level again!

There's evidence that XIII wanted to be something more than run-of-the-mill (there's a window for viewing skills you gain, but there's no mention anywhere or anytime of how you get, improve, or select these skills—this is no Deus EXIII), but aside from its angular style and presentation, this game is routinely frustrating and frustratingly routine. **Robert Coffey**

Checkpoint placement is consistent only in its inconsistency.

Verdict ★★☆☆

This Belgian import waffles between fun and frustration, excitement and tedium.

PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Square Enix **GENRE** MMORPG **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Peripherals: 800, 12GB RAM, 6GB install, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED Peripherals: 4, 25GB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER** Interest-mixed

Final Fantasy XI Online

Odd jobs for slobs clobbering mobs

Surprise! Square Enix—a company synonymous with saccharine-sweet, cinema-heavy console RPGs—has produced one of the most competent MMORPGs in existence. If you hate these sorts of games because they're aesthetically barren and lacking in meaningful interaction, then *Final Fantasy XI* just might be what you've been waiting for. In a nutshell, it's as if Square took the best things about single-player console RPGs and applied them to an MMO—a world densely populated by talkative NPCs, interesting, well-conceived quests, and a whole lot of visual gloss. All of this has been accomplished with a level of polish that makes all current MMORPGs feel like staid, semi-interactive wax museums in comparison.

The bad part

FFXI doesn't so much reinvent the wheel as embellish it, making it more immediately palatable. The game still exhibits some

FFXI applies the best things about single-player console RPGs to an MMO.

of the genre's more archaic, draconian conventions—experience loss (with the potential for level loss) upon death, you need to sit down for minutes at a time to heal, and leveling up takes an incredibly long time unless you're among a group of talented, experienced players. It's also ridiculously difficult (if not straight-up impossible) to travel long distances until you've reached a relatively high experience level, so if you're playing with friends, you'd better pick the same starting nation.

What do you want to be when you level up?

FFXI, despite all the backward crap hold-



▣ The Summoner job can actually invoke powerful avatars to fight alongside parties.



▣ Prettiest combat ever!

ing it down, does have one key element that makes it feel like the most progressive MMO in the world: its "job" system (*FF* shorthand for character classes), which allows you to change your character's class at any time during its career, without penalty. Granted, you're required to start at level one in your new class, but all progress you've made is still there, so if you want to switch back, you can continue from where you left off. This means you can go from Caster to Tank to Healer and all the way back—all on the same character. There's no need for alternative characters, and "gimping" yourself is pretty much impossible—if you don't like the way things are going, just go back to your old job. Once you complete a certain quest, you can even choose a sub job with abilities that complement your main job and make your character more powerful.

FFXI didn't adhere so closely to the genre's more aggravating conventions, then perhaps it could have been a breakout MMORPG. Alas, it feels like someone at Square was playing too much *EverQuest* while this game was being developed, so in its current state, it's sadly relegated to sit near, but not on, the top of its genre.

But that's OK, isn't it? **Miguel Lopez**

Verdict ★★★★★

A rock-solid MMORPG from one of the most unlikely sources.

PUBLISHER: Global Star Software **DEVELOPER:** Interactive Vision **A/D GENRE:** Flight Sim **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium II 600, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 200KB install **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 1.2GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN (2-16 players)

Jetfighter V: Homeland Protector

Coming in for a crash landing

Lite* combat flight sims can be fun for aficionados and casual gamers. The best (Jane's USAF) are easy to learn, and they provide enough excitement, drama, and action to make up for the lack of realism. Unfortunately, *Jetfighter V: Homeland Protector* demonstrates that slapping together pretty planes and repetitive missions results in a game that's unsatisfying on every level.

A good, casual sim simplifies the process of flying and fighting to make your life easier—for example, the radar should give you more information than in a realistic sim. However, the simplifications in *Jetfighter V* only make the game harder and more confusing for the novice. Here's a short laundry list: The radar doesn't discern between ground and air targets, it's practically impossible to tell whether an incoming missile is radar-guided or heat-seeking (and thus know which countermeasures to employ), the training missions teach you how to synch the LANTIRN (Low Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night) to the weapons lock, but there's no explana-

tion as to why you'd want to do so, you can't padlock enemy planes or incoming missiles, and so on. Similarly, the manual fails to explain essential information, like the need to open bay doors on two of the jets before firing A-A missiles. The lack of difficulty settings is another alleged "simplification" that prevents veteran pilots from tuning the game to suit their experience level.

Jetfighter V offers single missions, LAN multiplayer (Internet multiplayer is not included, though promised in a later patch), and a linear scripted campaign. The campaign premise (an unknown enemy has invaded America's West Coast) has some potential, but it is cold and sterile. Regardless of the mission briefing, whether you're clearing the way for Air Force One or stopping an invasion of a base with nukes, the action is always the same: Shoot down some jets flying straight at you, kill some tanks on the ground with your Miwericks, or fly to a location and identify a building or a vehicle. No drama, no surprises, no tension. And, other than an occasional scripted mes-



0 F-16s guarding Las Vegas.

sage, no communications. No matter how many planes are involved, there's no battle radio chatter, just sterile silence.

With design issues likely to frustrate novice players, a lackluster campaign, and no Internet multiplayer, *Jetfighter V* is a disappointment for all flight-sim fans. **C Jeff Lackey**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

A rare combination of frustration and boredom.

PUBLISHER: Gotham Games **DEVELOPER:** Pivotal **GENRE:** Tactical Shooter **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium 100MHz, 128MB RAM, 1.5GB install **RECOMMENDED:** 256MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER:** None

Conflict: Desert Storm 2—Back to Baghdad

Mission not quite accomplished

Conflict: *Desert Storm 2* follows the further adventures of the elite Special Forces squad featured in the original game. It seems, though, that these soldiers could have used some R&R rather than a sequel.

The game does have its merits. Newcomers to the genre will appreciate the extensive training missions and will quickly get the hang of switching between squad members and issuing commands. What they will not enjoy are the long periods of relatively easy going that are punctuated by frustratingly difficult engagements. When the difficulty level is right, however, the missions (par-

ticularly one where you start alone and must free your squadmates from a POW camp) allow for a good mix of strategy and run-n-gun action.

Squad members can carry hundreds of pounds of gear and survive multiple shots to the chest, but they cannot walk over a pile of debris or out of a gully. Such movement limitations reduce the number of ways you can complete a task. Additionally, though there are two squads to choose from (Delta Force or SAS), their differences are minimal, further reducing replayability. Throw in the occasional bugs that cause your soldiers to get stuck in corners or run in place, and you may think twice before signing on for this tour of duty. **C Tom Edwards**



0 The game features a wide variety of weapons, including this highly effective antitank gun.

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

At times engaging, but not quite all it can be.

These soldiers could use some R&R.

PUBLISHER The Adventure Company **DEVELOPER** Revolution Software **GENRE** Adventure **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Pentium II 750, 128MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, 1GB install **RECOMMENDED** Pentium III 1.2 GHz, 128MB 3D card, gamepad **MULTIPLAYER** None

Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon

Awakening adventurers in grand cinematic style

Revolution Software sent adventurers into a state of panic when it announced that the third game of its *Broken Sword* trilogy would break out of its predecessors' 2D point-and-click box and venture forth via RenderWare-powered 3D. Gamers needn't have worried—the series' warmth and humor remain intact in *Sleeping Dragon's* exciting story, which segues between chapters with plot cliffhangers and visits an old locale. Brain-over-brawn action events and a strong puzzle emphasis remain, although there are easier inventory puzzles and more timed sequences than before. Lack of mouse support eliminates dreaded pixel hunting, and the leap to 3D offers deeper immersion in the resplendent backdrops and lighting. Actor Rolf Saxon returns as George Stobbart, America's most-traveled patent lawyer, and Sarah Croak makes her suave debut as the voice of chic French journalist Nico Collard. You begin as George, who flies to the Congo to help a scientist harness a new type of power. Next, you're plunged into Paris as Nico to pursue an interview with a computer hacker who has deciphered a document linked to worldwide meteorological disturbances. An assassin interrupts their meeting.

Control Issues

Character movements are screen relative, and a gamepad provides easier control



than the keyboard. The simple interface prompts you for the occasional jump, climb, or shimmy, and neither character can accidentally fall. Most action sequences involve pressing one key in response to an onscreen prompt, after which a cut-scene takes over. For instance, in Nico's first chapter, a single key press is all that's needed for her to deflect an assassin's bullet with a frying pan. Several areas require stealthy creeping or running out of harm's way, but failure means repeated ejection to the start



Gorgeous locales underscore a standalone tale that references the *Broken Sword* series while taking it to new places.

power source together. You control one character and the other follows; communication is as simple as activating the inventory bar and choosing the other character's face icon from it. Dialogues are represented by face icons or inventory items and are initiated by pressing the action key on the icon.

Dynamic plot twists and cut-scenes flow through every exotic locale, and the leter-game mechanical conundrums are worthy of the *Broken Sword* series. If it weren't for the inventory-puzzle simplicity and the box dragging, this dragon could have soared to an even higher rating.

Denise Cook

Verdict ★★★★★

Dragon flamboyantly breaks out of the box, but drags it around a little too much.

Dynamic plot twists and cut-scenes flow through every exotic locale.

of the scene until you succeed.

Although *Dragon* is comical, fun, and swiftly paced, the inventory puzzles appear simplified for novices. The same goes for the interface, which provides glowing stars and prompts alongside useable items. There are also too many drag-the-box puzzles and permanently locked doors. Things do expand puzzle-wise once Nico and George meet up in the second half, with a few interesting mechanical puzzles that sometimes require both characters. For example, George and Nico must intelligently disarm a large floor-tile trap in tandem, then activate and direct a mysterious



PUBLISHER: THQ Synergy **DEVELOPER:** Setaon Plus **GAME:** Adventure **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM, 1.5GB install **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 733, 128MB RAM, 1.5GB install **MULTIPLAYER:** SPLIT-SCREEN **Notes:**

Midnight Nowhere

It's midnight—do you know where your horrible adventure game is?

If you're a lewd, foul-mouthed hero in aficionado who enjoys lame, linear puzzle games, then play **Midnight Nowhere**. If you're more the genteel and discriminating sort, consider yourself warned: The gameplay in this game about serial murders is even more horrific than its story line.

From the moment your amnesiac character awakens in a hospital morgue, you fall victim to a tedious inventory puzzlefest. The mysteries about a psychotic killer and your involvement in the case take forever to unfold and are bogged down by your character's nonsensical statements, as well as risqué puzzle-solving duties like finding keys and codes for endless doors and computers. If you do happen to encounter an unusual item, it tends to be drug-related or something overly sexual, like a sex toy or a condom. But even puzzles involving these items manage to become mundane (e.g., the condom's use as a water balloon), and numerous prickly puzzles require repeated cursor sweeps to find articles

Although several of the in-game wall posters and medical books are humorous, the pre-rendered locations are generally uninspiring. The many corpses strewn about are largely superficial, offering little in the way of plot clues or even visual shock value. *Midnight Nowhere's* gore level won't scare the dark out of a closet—but the personality of its protagonist will. About the only time you'll really pay attention to said corpses is when your character is making lecherous remarks about the female ones or chopping up the males like it's Halloween and he's Michael Myers. His dark humor is occasionally funny, but the perpetual, pointless swearing and the poor translations make it hard to stay immersed in what little story there is. In particular, female gamers may not appreciate *Midnight Nowhere's* continual pornographic portrayal of the fairer sex. An in-game



Finally, a game with a hero who openly lusts after cadavers!

magazine ad claims that "big, firm breasts are the dream of every woman." Personally, I spent my time in the game fantasizing only about finding a suicide pill for my character. **Dennis Cook**

Verdict ★★★★★

Horrible horror with a zero for a hero.

PUBLISHER: The Adventure Company **DEVELOPER:** Versavision **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 400, 64MB RAM, 200 MB install **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER:** None

The Black Mirror

Medieval mystery with yesteryear's puzzles

The Black Mirror contains many stunningly gothic 2D backdrops and detailed locales that frame an engaging murder mystery laced with family betrayal. Travel between them is swift, but if pretty is as pretty does, then this mirror doesn't shine—the puzzles dull its glass. Although plentiful, they rely too much on time-worn elements for adding creative spark to the



Even gods can't make one too many slider-type puzzles sparkle.

gameplay. You'll piece together teen paperwork, complete several sliding-tile-like puzzles, and navigate a maze. You'll also encounter a lot of easy key-collecting missions and manipulate simple inventory items, like changing a blown fuse. Adding insult to injury, your character actually muses aloud about possible puzzle solutions as you play.

Regarding dialogues with others, many talks begin slowly, and the voiceovers tend to lack emotional range, making it hard for you to care about some of the characters. Still, it will always be clear what's expected of you—as fact, you'll likely



This horror story wouldn't be complete without multiple grave robberies.

ly identify the killer long before your character does. **Dennis Cook**

Verdict ★★★★★

Gothic horror that doesn't require much reflection.

PUBLISHER: Atari **DEVELOPER:** Piranha Bytes **GENRE:** RPG **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIREMENTS:** Pentium III 700, 256MB RAM, 2.3GB install, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED REQUIREMENTS: Pentium III 1.2GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT:** None

Gothic II

Fresh out of prison and looking for trouble

One could easily describe the original *Gothic*—a free-form RPG that takes place in an intricately crafted fantasy prison—as *Morrowind* crossed with HBO's *Oz*. After choosing a faction and fighting many orcs in tunnels, the nameless hero destroys the prison banner, setting everyone free. *Gothic II* starts just weeks later, and it not only improves somewhat upon the previous game, but also opens up the game world.

Navigate this

One of the major problems with the original is how boring and linear it is after Chapter 1. Once you finish exploring the intriguing setting, you're strapped into a traditional dungeon crawl, complete with orcs. While *Gothic II* has a similar structure—you explore the world and choose a faction, then progress through the main plot as a paladin, dragon hunter, or mage—it's not as dull. There are more unique quests per faction this time, as well as better locations and enemies to hunt. Like in the previous game, NPCs have their own schedules, and, combined with the day-night cycle, the world feels less generic and more immersive than even *Morrowind's* (although you can tell the voice-talent pool was small—it sounds like the same guy did six different voices).

Thankfully, you no longer need to do insane things like hold down Ctrl-Up to



No matter which guild you join, you'll have to go toe-to-toe with at least four dragons.

pick things off the ground. While keyboard-centric, the combat and exploration interfaces have been streamlined. Curiously, there's no hotkey for health items; you either dig in your unsorted inventory for a health boost or edit the INI file for a hotkey. And when will Piranha Bytes learn that all PCs have mice? The inclusion of a mouse interface for the inventory would be welcome, since using the keyboard to sell and buy items feels more 1993 than 2003.

Broken hero

Despite its openness, the design leads to occasional scripting errors and omissions of blindingly obvious quest solutions. I'm told I need to pay someone 50 dollars, but because I fought him earlier, I can neither pay nor offer to pay. When I see mercenaries musing a farmer, they treat me like a nobody, whether I'm indeed a nobody or a high-ranking mercenary. Scripting errors, like the game thinking you've killed four dragons when you've killed only three (leaving the fourth dragon invincible, so you're unable to get his loot or XP), also mar the experience.

Combat, while a bit easier than in the first game, remains a chore when it comes to multiple enemies; use the standard MMO game trick of "pulling" an enemy or you'll be gang tackled. Even when you've upped your weapon skills, it's a chore to use your weapons, maneuver around enemies, or target different enemies with just the keyboard.

Despite all of this, I enjoyed *Gothic II* quite a bit. It significantly improves upon *Gothic*, and it's an excellent game—once you learn to work with it. After all, what other RPG lets you hunt dragons and sell swamp weed? **Thierry Nguyen**

Verdict ★★★★★

Better than the first, but still a little too wonky and foreign to be a classic.

The world feels less generic and more immersive than even *Morrowind's*.



Environments range from familiar forests to more remote mountains to even the old prison colony. And the game world is noticeably bigger.



PUBLISHER: EA Sports **DEVELOPER:** EA Sports **GENRE:** Sports **ESD RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 600, 64MB RAM **CDROM RAM:** for Windows XP or 2000, 32MB 3D card, 800MB **INSTALL RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 600, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, Hotseat (2-4 players)

FIFA 2004

Still the best, but could use some polish

Dynasties have a downside: maintenance. EA Sports has been the unchallenged leader in soccer games with its FIFA series for over five years now, and FIFA 2004 still holds the high ground. But the FIFA franchise also finds itself hitting some growing pains as it seeks to add managerial depth.

Getting to run the front office is one of FIFA's more highly touted features in this 2004 installment, and while there's a lot to like, rough edges abound. It starts with management user-interface screens that aren't easily navigated with a mouse, which is a result of FIFA 2004 essentially being a console port. When looking over your roster, you can't sort players by the various skills to see which player is especially strong in a given area, like, say, shooting.

As you prepare for your next game, there's no scouting report about which players on your opponent's team are currently on a tear, which would (and should)

influence your defensive marking assignments. Overall, career mode lacks a sense of backstory. And since pro sports are as much about the players as the game itself, having some kind of newspaper or website-style event ticker during the 34-game season (in the case of MLS) would add a much-needed backdrop.

Off the ball, one of FIFA 2004's noteworthy features is a more sophisticated version of EA's time-honored player-lock feature, in which you can be one player on the field and call for the ball when the time is right. Wannabe strikers, this is for you: You can get yourself set up, cheat the line on the defenders, get a good look at the net, call for a cross, and drive it home. It works well enough, but it's poorly documented. In fact, FIFA's entire manual often gives incomplete instructions on the game's many features.

The new features' many rough edges aside, this is still the best soccer game



Roberto Carlos sizes up the German line.

going. Its newest features need some time to mature, but the ingredients that make FIFA a success—great gameplay, a solid graphics engine, and nearly every pro soccer club on the planet—are still there in force. So, if 2006's World Cup seems like a lifetime away, FIFA 2004 will tide you over until the next time the world gathers to play the beautiful game. **Dave Salvatore**

Verdict ★★★★★

It might be a rough console port, but it's still the best soccer game on any platform.

PUBLISHER: Encore Software **DEVELOPER:** Ascaron **GENRE:** RTS **ESD RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 233, 32MB RAM, 960MB **INSTALL RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 450, 64MB RAM, 32MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet, (2-8 players)

Patrician III

An empire of pickled fish

All you really need to know about Ascaron's latest installment in its flagship franchise is that *Patrician III* was released in the company's home of Germany as an add-on, not a new product. There are a few new weather effects, minor changes in the interface, a map editor, and some gameplay tweaks, including differently priced goods and a bit more control over your city when you become the mayor.

You start the game in one of the cities of the Hanseatic League (a loose trade federation of free cities in Northern Europe) with a ship or two and a few thousand coins. Through wise investments and trading, you can establish a mercantile empire and rise in rank, as well as eventually

become the lord of your home city.

There's an almost Zen-like quality to the trading. Though prices will vary according to supply and demand, you will probably be trading the same goods in the same cities over and over. This repetitive mindlessness will lull you into a near meditative state.

Things get more interesting after you accumulate a war chest. With capital, you can build businesses, become a pirate, and eventually rise to power as a politician and the executive of your city. There are many goals to pursue and even more ways to go about pursuing them. This freedom is the game's greatest strength—assuming you like open-ended games. If you want narratives, though, *Patrician III* won't do



A wild wale between a merchant convoy and pirates.

much for you. The missions are generic, and the few included scenarios simply change your victory conditions.

For those who have recently discovered a fetish for medieval cogs and selling barrels of pickled herring, there is no game better than *Patrician III*. But if you've played its predecessors, there's no pressing reason to run out and buy this game at full price. **Di Luo**

Verdict ★★★★★

Little more than a glorified *Patrician II* patch.

If you've recently discovered a fetish for selling barrels of pickled herring, there is no game better than *Patrician III*.

PUBLISHER: Funcom **DEV/OP:** Funcom **GENRE:** MMORPG **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 400, 128MB RAM, 1.4GB Install, 32MB 3D card
RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 1GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** Massivel

Anarchy Online: Shadowlands

Can it compare to last year's award-winning expansion?

Anarchy Online is likely the deepest, most statistically involving MMORPG currently available—but it often feels like the most barren and soulless. *Shadowlands* injects into the game a quadruple dose of what it most desperately needed: namely, compelling gameplay content.

The *Shadowlands* are the spiritual counterpart to coporeal Rubi-Ka, and in this new land, you must complete different story-based missions to progress. It almost resembles a super slow-paced single-player RPG—monsters actually seem mindfully placed in the environments, and the zones themselves are more compact and aesthetically sound than anything that existed pre-*Shadowlands*. Simply, it feels more like a world. But really, it wouldn't be AO without some threadbare wonkiness, and sure enough, there's a bunch of that here, too—in the form of NPCs that forever spit out the same lines (whether or not you've solved their quests), and stretches of land seemingly

designed to test the game's /stuck function.

All that weirdness aside, *Shadowlands* brings more of what makes AO worthwhile even during its darkest moments: a sick amount of depth. A new perk system lets your character specialize in certain skill areas, sometimes even granting new special attacks. You gain access to a new perk every 10 levels, and you can reset points every 72 hours, thus encouraging experimentation. Finally, two new classes have also been added—the Keeper and the Shade.

If you're already playing AO, then you probably don't need a reason to upgrade to *Shadowlands*—it just gives you more of what you already like. But if you were in-



The city of Jobe is one of the sweeping new areas in *Shadowlands*.

tially deterred by the game's content deficiency, this might convince you to give it a shot. **Miguel Lopez**

Verdict ★★★★★

One more good reason for gamers to discover *Anarchy Online*.

PUBLISHER: Pandemic Games **DEVELOPER:** Pandemic Games **GENRE:** Real-time Historical War Game **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 640MHz, 64MB RAM, 400MB Install **RECOMMENDED:** More **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2 players)

Highway to the Reich

Get your motor running

Last year, Pandemic Games brought a decidedly new twist to PC war gaming with its excellent *Airborne Assault: Red Devils Over Arnhem*. While the game had the misfortune of being released

around the same time as *Shogun: Warrior* and *Combat Mission*'s sequel, it nevertheless came close to capturing this magazine's War Game of the Year award. A year later, *Highway to the Reich* takes the original game, upgrades it slightly, expands its scope, and adds an editor. Put together, it's a pretty good package.

The game system is unique in that it concentrates on the command aspects of military planning, but it does so in a way that allows players to make significant decisions without burying them in pointless detail. Unlike some command simulators, such as *Decisive Action* and *BCT Command*, *Highway to the Reich* feels very much like a game, in large part because the AI is designed to give orders to subordinate units. The individual companies of a panzer battalion, for exam-

ple, play for action based on the orders you give to their headquarters. However, since the game offers company-level management, you can get in and get involved more deeply, and the order-delay mechanic is just realistic enough not to be annoying. While the game plays out in real time, it can be paused, sped up, or slowed down without penalty.

While the original game focuses only on the British (and Polish) paratroopers' fight for Arnhem, the sequel adds the significant American airborne actions at Nijmegen, as well as XXX Corps' drive for Enchoven. There's also an editor that lets gamers make new maps and scenarios. Even if you own the original, this game is worth buying. And if you are a war gamer and haven't yet played the *Airborne Assault* game system, quit polishing your sword and join the fray. **Bruce Geryk**

Verdict ★★★★★

An excellent system gets better.



Massive offensives are manageable when the A.I. does your work for you.

Similar to Darren's search for the perfect man-purse, I've been on a never-ending quest for the perfect gaming laptop. And because I'm technologically spoiled, it doesn't seem like too much to want a laptop that has great graphics, an awesome display, a powerful CPU, tons of storage space, and at least 512MB of RAM, not to mention one that doesn't weigh too much and won't leave me in a technological lurch in a few months when ATI and Nvidia release their next graphics chips. While I'm still on the hunt for the laptop of my dreams, the Gateway M675 satisfies so many of these criteria that it's damn close to perfect.

The M675 is one of those rigs that's even better in person than it is on paper. It boasts an Intel 3.2GHz Pentium 4 processor, 512MB of DDR PC-2700, a 75GB 7,200 rpm hard drive, ATI's 128MB Radeon 9600 graphics card, and an awesome 17.1-inch WXGA wide format (16:10 aspect ratio) display. I expected the M675 to weigh a ton, but it came in at only 8.8 pounds—considering that the thing has a 17-inch screen, that's incredible. And last, but not least, throw in the fact that the M675 only costs \$2,600. Right now, you're probably waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The M675 isn't perfect. For instance, the 17.1-inch display has a native resolution of

By the Numbers

MANUFACTURER/ MODEL	Gateway M675
PRICE	\$2,600
OPERATING SYSTEM	Windows XP Professional Edition
PROCESSOR	Intel Pentium 4 3.2GHz
MEMORY	512MB DDR PC-2700
HARD DRIVE	75GB 7,200 rpm
GRAPHICS PACKAGE	ATI Radeon 9600
SPECIAL DRIVE	None available
DISPLAY	17.1-in. WXGA wide format
WEIGHT	8.8 pounds (with wheel)
KEYBOARD	1.5 million key 108-key with 16 function keys, multimedia (media) buttons on the front of the case & 8 memory-card slots on the top (PCMCIA slot)
WIFI	IEEE 802.11b/g/n
INTERNET PORT	10/100/1000 (Gigabit Ethernet)

1024x768, and it looked great.

Ultimately, the M675 is one of the best laptops I've ever used—it's superfast, the display is awesome, and it won't break your back. Aside from the resolution issues, the only problem I have with it is the fact that Gateway, as of yet, doesn't offer laptop graphics upgrades like Alienware, Voodoo, and even Dell do. This means that, while the 128MB ATI Radeon 9600 that ships with the unit is great at the moment, a few months down the road, I'll be jonesing to upgrade to the newest ATI or Nvidia release. In the meantime, though, the M675 is about as close to perfect as a laptop can get.

By William O'Neal

The M675 is one of the best laptops I've ever used—it's superfast, the display is awesome, and it won't break your back.



1440x900, which is awesome for movies. However, while the display scales down well to 1024x768, many games wouldn't run at more standard resolutions, such as 1280x1024 or 1600x1200, which is why I only reported benchmark scores at 1024x768. It's easy to look at these benchmark numbers and think that the M675 is a dog when it comes to games. Remember, though, that with the exception of Halo, all of these tests were run with 4x anti-aliasing and 8x anisotropic filtering turned on.

Great for now, but tomorrow? Benchmarks aside, I played several games on the M675 and loved it. Activision's *Call of Duty* ran like a charm at 1024x768 with AA and AF on. The same was true of *Max Payne 2*. The game ran perfectly at

PRODUCT: M675 Laptop MANUFACTURER: Gateway PRICE: \$2,600

Gateway's Portable Big Screen

With a 17.1-inch screen, Gateway's M675 is perfect for games as well as movies



☛ **Why, Dull?**
Voodoo gets into the small form-factor PC game with the Dell, its Shuttle-based system.



☛ **Got Crank?**
Logitech's Z-5300 speakers boast great sound in a 5.1 setup that even you can afford.



☛ **64-bit Tutorial!**
Can't make heads or tails of the 64-bit hype? Loyd breaks it down.



☛ With a full-sized keyboard and a screen that rivals most desktop CRTs in size and clarity, the M675 sometimes proved more fun to play games on than a desktop.

PRODUCT **Voodoo Doll** MANUFACTURER **Voodoo PC** PRICE **\$2,195**

Voodoo Goes All Out With Its Shuttle Box

The Voodoo Doll is a Lanboy's dream come true

The first time we saw Shuttle's XPC, we knew the company was on to something. While we've been hyping huge custom-built rigs for some time, it was nice to see a fully functioning, upgradeable PC that you can easily take with you. While some would argue that the bare-bones boxes provide the framework with which to create a fully functioning PC, their relatively tiny power supplies limit how much upgrading you can do to them. Needless to say, the small form-factor PC trend is an exciting one. The first one we reviewed was Falcon Northwest's \$1,000 FragBox, which is built around PIC's (one of Shuttle's competitors) basic setup. While we loved its size and price point, we weren't terribly impressed with the performance of the 128MB GeForce FX 5600 Ultra graphics card it shipped with, not to mention the fact that it has only a DVD-ROM drive (no CD-RW). Of course, it costs just \$1,000. Since Alienware and Falcon are shipping these systems, it was only a matter of time before Voodoo hopped on board. And boy, has it ever.

What's in the box?

The Voodoo XPC S185G4 is built around the Shuttle XPC S185G4, an nForce3 Pro 150-based system, and ships with AMD's Athlon 64 3200+ processor. In other words, this small form-factor PC isn't rife with compromises. Voodoo ships the Doll with 1GB of Corsair PC-3500 DDR 400 memory, a 250GB Western Digital hard drive, a Plextor DVD-RW combo drive, and Logitech's Cordless MX Duo keyboard and mouse combination. Beyond that, the Doll rocks some pretty dope touches: its paint job is top-notch, and it has four USB



Voodoo is known for shipping desktop PCs with awesome paint jobs, and the Doll is no slouch in that regard.

2.0 ports (two in front), a 6-in-1 media card reader/writer, and two FireWire ports (one in front).

But enough about that—all you really care about is how the damn thing performs. And the Doll performs like a champ. I tested it with 3DMark 2003, as well as Lloyd Case and Dave Salvatore's latest version of 3D GameGauge, which takes framerate scores from *Comanche 4*, *Senos Sam*, *TSE: Dungeon Siege*, *Unreal Tournament 2003*, *Spinter Cell*, and *Halo*. Because *Spinter Cell* disables AA, we tested it only with AF. Also, the only way to remove jaggies in *Halo* is to crank up the resolution (enabling AA and AF slows down the framerate without actually improving image quality), so the game was tested with both AA and AF turned on. Compared with more "standard" desktop rigs, the Doll's framerate scores are lower. That said, when the scores are looked at on their own, it's easy to appre-

ciate this box's abilities.

One major problem with these small form-factor boxes is that they're not terribly upgradeable. The Shuttle box around which the Doll is built has just one AGP slot and one PCI slot, so if you have a peripheral in the PCI slot (I put a Belkin S4g wireless card in mine), you can't put in one of those double-wide GeForce FX cards. I also tried to install a 128MB ATI All-in-Wonder 9800, but the All-in-Wonder's voltage requirements gave the Doll fits.

Ultimately, if you're interested in a small form-factor machine, you'll no doubt love Voodoo's option. It's just important to know what you can and cannot do with it. © William O'Neal

Verdict ★★★★★

Easily the fastest small form-factor box we've seen, the Voodoo Doll is also good looking and boasts some excellent touches.

If you have a peripheral in the PCI slot, you can't put in one of those double-wide GeForce FX graphics cards.



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PRODUCT **Zodiac** MANUFACTURER **Tapwave** PRICE: \$300

Porta Party

Hey, you got your PDA in my GBA!



Don't mistake Tapwave's Zodiac for a Game Boy Advance. The Zodiac has a larger, more colorful screen (3.8 inches, 480x320 pixels, 16-bit color) backed up by an ATI graphics chip, a Yamaha audio chip, analog controller, and six buttons to make for a more game-friendly experience. Sure, GBA has years and hundreds of games under its belt, but technically, so does Zodiac, since it's based on the Palm OS. The big draw will be in the games made specifically to take advantage of Zodiac's hardware, and the few initial titles we've seen show promise—although the system needs more than *Doom II* and *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*.

If all game-developer support dried up tomorrow (doubtful, since there's word of more titles in development from Activision, Atari, Midway, Sega, and others), you'd still be left with a kick-ass PDA. And since it's based on the multimedia-friendly Palm OS 5, this handheld can handle a whole lot more than games. MP3s? Yep. Video running at 40 frames per second? No problem. And, of course, Zodiac can run the countless productive and unproductive Palm OS applications available on the Internet. Since the built-in 32MB of RAM isn't enough, two SD card slots ensure you'll have tons of room for media and expansions. IR and

Bluetooth transmitters let you stay connected, and the lithium-ion batteries have already done a decent job of providing approximately four hours of music and gaming.

The only noticeable problems right now are superficial at best. The weighty metal stylus that attaches to the back of the unit will be the first thing you lose, since you can't slide it into the device. The second thing to go will be the screen cover—the cheap little flap does a piss-poor job of covering the screen, requiring you to be much more careful with the device. And, finally, we weren't crazy about the bundled air-bud headphones, but the device's sleek styling means there isn't enough room for some headphone plugs to fit into the jack. Data juries will also be bummed about the lack of support syncing with Microsoft Outlook right out of the box—you need third-party software for that. Still, at a price that's supercompetitive with many comparable PDAs (\$300 for the 32MB version, \$400 for the 128MB version), this is one helluva deal. **By** *Daren Gladstone*

Verdict ★★★★★

It ain't no Game Boy—it's a Game Man, baby!

The big draw will be in games made specifically to take advantage of Zodiac's hardware.



Will Power
His monthly spew of fluff

Forget about the future—you can have fun today

Every month, I get tons of messages from readers asking me if their current graphics card will be able to play such upcoming games as *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3*. Of course, it comes as no surprise to anyone that gamers are obsessed with the future. And when I cater to gamers, I'm including a lot of my colleagues in the gaming press, too. The thing is, so-called gaming journalists are all guilty of creating this atmosphere with our year-in-advance game previews and slavish focus on hardware performance even when the current crop of games work fine on midrange products.

But we're not alone—hardware vendors fuel this. For example, AMD touts its new 64-bit processors by saying you're preparing yourself for some promised slew of 64-bit games and for Microsoft's next OS, Longhorn. The thing is, with all this talk of the future, it's easy to lose sight of the present.

While testing computers, I get to play quite a few games, and I'm happy to admit that I'm really pleased with a few games that are...well...out right now. On the Gateway laptop I reviewed this month, I've been playing *Max Payne 2*—forget about *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3*. *Max Payne 2* is not only awesome, but it's also incredibly beautiful. It supports the laptop's native 1640x990 resolution (which is essentially a 16:10 aspect ratio), making the game look like a DVD! Similarly, after playing *Call of Duty* and reviewing it for CGW, I'm playing it again for myself, and since I'm not under the deadline gun, I'm in a better position to appreciate it. The game's visuals are fantastic, whether it's smoke effects from blowing things up or water effects on the dem.

When you work for a magazine, it's easy to get caught up in what's coming down the pike. But it's nice to be able to step back sometimes and appreciate what's available right now.

By *William O'Neil*

PRODUCT Z-5300 Speakers | EDITOR'S CHOICE | Logitech PRICE \$300

Big Audio Dynamite

A nearly perfect set of PC speakers at a reasonable price

Logitech's Z line of speakers hit the market with a bang, and the company continues to crank out new speaker systems in order to saturate every price point imaginable. If a \$400 price tag for the phenomenal Z-680 5.1 set is too steep for you, consider the new Z-5300 system. It clocks in at half the price but still features gobs of power and the THX certification that gamers crave.

The Z-5300 is a 260-watt RMS system with five satellites and a subwoofer. The four corner satellites, each with 2.5-inch cones, weigh in at 35 watts. The center speaker is slightly heftier at 39 watts, while the subwoofer's 6.5-inch driver cranks out a full 100 watts. Logitech has patented the dual-chamber subwoofer technology, and rightfully so—the bass is formidable. The system is supplemented by a powerful floor of low tones that shake the house.

Bells and whistles galore

The box is chock-full of goodies. Each of the satellites features tricked-out stands that can be used to prop up the speakers or mount them to a wall. The cables are color coded, so just about anybody with a

The system is supplemented by a powerful floor of low tones that shake the house.

pulse can successfully set up this system. The tall and thin corner satellites fit almost anywhere, but the wide center speaker may be tougher to find a home for. A wired remote that includes a head-phone jack lets you control master volume, sub, center, and surround levels with the help of a sleek LCD screen.

With a source selector allowing input from stereo, four-channel, and 5.1 surround sources, the Z-5300 can crank out glorious audio through all of its channels from any soundcard. While it accepts input through the USB-minijacks found on the back of soundcards, you won't find digital inputs. But if you're into consoles, you'll appreciate the included adapter for



Logitech's Z-5300 speakers sound great and look good. If not for the lack of a digital input, these babies would be damn near perfect.

use with Xbox, PlayStation 2, and GameCube systems.

We field-tested the Z-5300 with a host of games, a couple of movies, and a slew of music CDs and MP3s. The system wowed us the whole time. It thrived in the bass-heavy tones of *Soul Coughing's El Oso*, let us hear bullets from every direction in *The Matrix DVD*, and brought home the Normandy invasion in all its chaotic audio splendor in *Medal of Honor Allied Assault*. The Z-5300 also excels at delicate accuracy without a hint of hiss.

faithfully highlighting *Hidden and Dangerous 2's* trudge of enemy boots, and the acoustic blues of Beck's *Sea Change*.

While it may lack the demolishing power of Logitech's Z-680s, the Z-5300 system can still make your ears bleed at its highest levels. It's a killer setup for a gamer seeking incredible clarity, needle-bouncing bass, and handy convenience in one package. **Joel Durham**

Verdict ★★★★★

incredible quality and power for the price, with huge bass and some nice conveniences—but it lacks digital inputs.

Budget Blasters

A 6.1 setup for the masses



Loud things come in little packages with the X-620, Logitech's new 6.1 speaker system. The system's satellite speakers aren't much bigger than a clenched fist, but they pack a wallop.

The X-620 divides up a total of 70.1 watts RMS: The front left and right speakers each pack 7.4 watts, the rear left and right weigh in at 7.5 watts each, the front and rear center speakers clock in at 8 watts apiece, and the subwoofer splits out 24 watts. They sound phenomenal, although we never thought we'd complain about too much bass. With the subwoofer cranked at more than 1/4, the bass overwhelmed the midrange in our music and gaming tests.

The other problem is that the input is analog only. Otherwise, the sixth time's a charm! Well done, Logitech! **Joel Durham**

PRICE \$100 VERDICT ★★★★★

Tech Medics

You've got questions, Wil's got educated guesses

The people have spoken...and they want cake!

Someone tell Wil to review the GS I want to know how fast it really is, compared with a top-of-the-line PC. I know that on Apple's website, the company claims that the GS is about twice as fast as a 3.2GHz Pentium 4. How much truth is in that statement?

Seen

Are you trying to get me fired? I'd love to review the new GS. The thing is, whenever I cover anything Mac related, every jackass between San Francisco and New York jumps on my ass. So, no, I won't be reviewing it.

AMD bests Intel

What's the difference between the Pentium 4 and the AMD Athlon 64? I've been reading your magazine for a while, and I noticed that when you make your Power Rigs, you tend to use the Pentium 4. Is there any particular reason for this, or are you just partial to Pentium 4?

AbysalDeath

Until AMO came out with the Athlon 64 FX-S1, Intel's 3.2GHz Pentium 4 was the fastest option available, which is why I used it. Now that the Athlon 64 FX-S1 is available, I'm running that in my Killer Rig—my tests have shown it's about 10 percent faster than the 3.2GHz Pentium 4 in some game tests and benchmarks.

Size matters

I am thinking about updating my computer, which I got about three or four years ago. It's an 866MHz Pentium 3 with a 32MB GeForce2 GTS graphics card and 512MB of SDRAM. I'm not sure about the motherboard, processor, RAM, and graphics card at the same time. Are there different sizes of motherboards or anything that I need to know? I'm afraid I might get one that won't fit in my computer case (it's a Dell Dimension 4100).

Dan

Yeah, motherboards do come in differ-

Buy this graphics card

Everyone wants to know, "Which graphics should I buy?" So this month, I'm launching a preemptive strike: buy ATI's 256MB Radeon 9600 XT.



ent sizes. Most people go for standard ATX motherboards. The thing about Dell machines is that a standard ATX motherboard may or may not fit in that case. You're better off dropping an additional \$100 on a new case that will accommodate all of your new components.

PS2 + VAI0 = ?

Do you think Sony would ever consider building PS2 (or PS1 or PS3, for that matter) functionality into its VAIO PCs? I've seen USB adapters that allow you to connect PS controllers to a PC, and VAIOs seem to come equipped with DVD-ROMs at the very least (and often with a DVDR/RW), I have a VAIO laptop, and I keep thinking about how awesome it would be to be able to get rid of my PS2 and my television and have a keyboard, modem, and mouse to play my PS2 games with, all built right in. Dream a little dream.

Mark

I've thought about this myself. Back in the day, I played PlayStation games on my PC with Bleem, a PlayStation emulator. As for Sony making a VAIO that plays PlayStation games, I just don't see the company ever doing that. While it wouldn't be difficult (or expensive) technologically, Sony hates emulators—and although it wouldn't necessarily be an emulator, it would sure as hell feel

like one. More than that, though, I imagine Sony is more concerned about protecting the lucrative PlayStation brand and establishing its foothold in your living room than getting people to play its games on ever more devices. Still, who knows?

Video trouble

I am currently working on my coworker's Compaq Presario 500D. We had to reformat it, and now I can't get it to use the correct drivers for the onboard video-card. Could I get a PCI or AGP video-card to work in it? And would it bypass the mobo's built-in stuff? What would be a good card to use? It won't be seeing a whole lot of gaming—Serious Sam and maybe a little more. The machine has an AMD Athlon, and Windows says it's running at 993MHz.

Matt

If you get a PCI or AGP graphics card, it will probably disable your coworker's onboard video automatically. If it doesn't, you can go into the BIOS and manually disable it. As far as which card to buy, check to see if you have an available AGP slot (the gray one). If you do, I'd get a good midrange card like the ATI Radeon 9600XT. Finding a good PCI card will be tougher, but try to get something with at least 64MB of RAM.



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How to...

This month, we show you how to speed-tweak Windows XP  [and](#)  [TechNet](#)

By default, Windows XP is full of clutter and not optimized for anything. Hose it out and speed up your games with these easy tweaks.



STEP #1 Murder the Maintenance Apps

Start off by choosing the System icon in the control panel. You can get rid of Automatic Updating and Remote Assistance. Navigate to each tab and check or uncheck the appropriate boxes and select the appropriate radio buttons to cleanse your system of these basically useless applications.

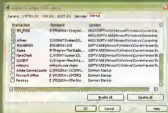
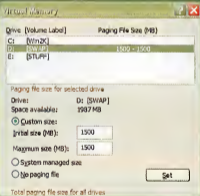


STEP #2 Purge Unnecessary Services

Open the control panel and select Administrative Tools, then choose Services. Set some of the services to manual by right-clicking on the service, choosing Properties, then pulling down the startup-type box and selecting Manual. Do this to indexing Service, Automatic Updates, Task Scheduler, Error Reporting Service, Internet Connection Firewall (unless you're using it), Messenger, Nvidia Driver Helper Service, and Portable Media Serial Number. If you don't know what a service does, leave it off!

STEP #3 Make Your Swap File Huge

Open the control panel, then choose System. Select the Advanced tab, click the Performance Settings button, and go to the Advanced tab. There, you can set your own swap (Virtual Memory) file size. If you have a large drive and enough free space, make it 1,000MB. Choose the Change button, then make both the initial and maximum sizes 1,000MB. If you don't have that much free space, make the swap file as large as possible. Reboot when you're done.



STEP #4 Get Rid of Stupid Startup Items

The easy way to do this is to use the System Configuration utility. Launch it by hitting the Start button, then choosing Run, Now type MSCONFIG. Choose the Startup tab. Uncheck anything frivolous, like Creative Labs' Audigy, any quick-launchers from RealPlayer, MusicMatch, WinAmp, Kazaa, or Microsoft Office; and, unless you use their special functions, hardware utilities like MouseWare, Microsoft SideWinder, and so on.

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INNOVATION 'IN' CREATION

Lloyd's Cracked Case

Beyond the buzzwords surrounding AMD's 64-bit chip

AMD's new 64-bit Athlon processor has created a lot of buzz in gaming circles, and a lot of gamers are wondering whether to make it the heart of their next gaming system. In last month's Ultimate Game Machine roundup, it was AMD's FX-51 chip that powered the fastest systems. But today's games aren't 64-bit games—they're 32-bit games. On top of that, if you run a 32-bit game in the 64-bit version of Windows (assuming you have the beta), you'll find that it runs slower than it would on good old Windows XP. What's going on here?

Don your propeller caps

Why does the Athlon 64 FX-51 perform so well in 32-bit Windows XP? It's all about memory—or rather, memory bandwidth and memory efficiency.

The current Athlon 64 integrates the memory controller on the CPU die itself. If you recall from past columns, the memory controller usually lives in the motherboard chipset—specifically in a chip called the north bridge (or, as Intel calls it, the Memory Controller Hub). The CPU communicates with the memory controller over a dedicated link, requesting memory accesses and passing along memory writes. Typical memory-controller clock rates for modern systems are 200MHz.



The integrated memory controller, due to its high clock rate...offers very low latencies.

6.4GB per second. At first blush, that's identical to the Pentium 4's bandwidth. But the integrated memory controller, due to its high clock rate and fast internal bus connection to the CPU, offers very low latencies.

The FX-51 also has a substantial 1MB of L2 cache. This L2 cache is exclusive, meaning no data already in the L1 cache is replicated in the L2 cache. While the L2 cache is somewhat less efficient than the L1 cache (it's "farther away" from the CPU), it's still akin to having a full 128MB of internal cache.

Those are the real reasons the Athlon 64 FX-51 is so damn fast when it comes to games—and the reasons you might now see the rationale for the Pentium 4 Extreme Edition. The P4 boasts a very efficient cache architecture, although 2MB of the cache on the P4EE is L3 cache, which is slightly less efficient. All that cache, which runs at the 3.2GHz CPU clock rate, means the P4EE's performance comes close to the Athlon 64 FX-51's—but doesn't quite catch up.

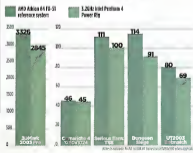
Note that the Athlon 64 3200+ isn't quite as speedy as its FX-51 brethren, despite the fact that it also clocks at 2.2GHz; the integrated memory controller in the 3200+ supports only a 64-bit-wide interface to memory, so the effective bandwidth is lower.

In the end, all that 64-bit stuff is irrelevant with regard to today's games. It's actually the integrated memory controller, plus the 128-bit-wide data path to main memory, that makes the Athlon 64 a killer CPU for gaming—buzzwords be damned. **By Lloyd Case**

Ditch the Jibber Jabber—show us the numbers!

Benchmark numbers continue

We recently pitted an Athlon 64 FX-51 system against a similarly equipped regular 3.2GHz Pentium 4 machine. Our results showed that AMD's boards are, in fact, better in memory- to both bandwidth and games. The FX-51 appears to be about 10 percent faster than the new EE Pentium 4.



When AMD built the memory controller into the Athlon 64 die, the controller was suddenly able to run at full clock speed—2.2GHz in the case of the FX-51. Memory itself hasn't gotten faster, but the link to the controller, as well as the memory controller's ability to respond to requests, has become a lot more efficient.

The FX-51 has a 128-bit-wide memory controller, which communicates with two channels of DDR 400 memory (each channel is 64 bits wide). That adds up to an aggregate memory bandwidth of

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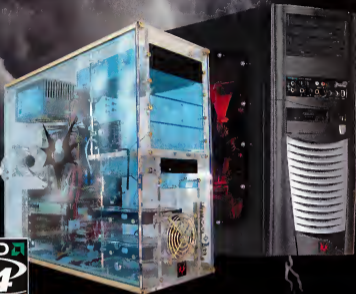
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NEC MultiSync FE991+ SuperFlat 19" 0.25dp Monitor
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Translucent Side Panel and Voice-Activated Lighting
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Check Out

COMPUTERS **110**



PERIPHERALS **111**

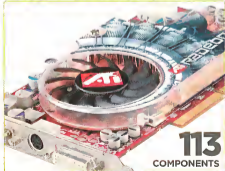


REWIND 100 **116**



DISPLAYS

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COMPONENTS

Inside

Check Out: where we check out the stuff you should check out

In case you didn't already get the clever joke, "check out" refers both to you checking out various goods we've hand-picked and to the "check out" counter at which you'll pay for these choice selections. Yeah, now that we've explained it, it's not so clever after all.

A-List

Our picks

▶ Another month and the A-list is still here. Hurray! Johnny Liu hasn't been traded for better print stock...yet. Month to month, changes will be continually updated. Even if some of our choices remain the same, you can still look forward to reading updated thoughts and entertaining brain drippings.

Also, there are many bargain websites that are exceedingly helpful in nailing a good deal. Fatwallet.com is good for a broad overview of general deals. Bensbargains.net has deal highlights on many tech goods, such as hard drives and cases. And cheapsgamer.com is excellent for both your PC and console thrifty gaming needs.



COMPUTERS

Twenty years ago, if you tried to cut the side out of a giant computer and stick in some neon lights, Marv the security guy would proceed to beat your lights out.

Intel-based system



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK
 ■ **Dimension XPS**
 \$3,326
 Dell Computers

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

How long has it been since you've heard that stoned guy on television say, "Duuude, you're getting a Dell?" Probably a while, since that guy got arrested for possession. Nonetheless, the Dimension XPS is still one smoking machine.

BUDGET PICK

Area 51 Performance
 \$1,587
 Alienware

Johnny Liu says, "When I was five, I saw my dad's wig holder on a desk. It was kind of dark, and I thought it was an alien head, so I screamed." Imagine the therapy he'd need if he saw one of Alienware's sexy—but value-minded—new rigs.

AMD-based system



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK
 ■ **PC 51**
 \$5,000
 VoodooPC

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Last month, VoodooPC's #1 fought its way to the top of WI's Ultimate Gaming Machine roundup. It's an expensive machine, but well worth the coin if you want the power of an over-clocked Athlon 64 FX-51 and a GeForce FX 5650.

BUDGET PICK

Assassin SE
 \$1,879
 Vicious PC

Get the most bang for your buck with the killer Assassin. An excellent combination of powerful and more budget-minded components makes this one as lethal as a hunger-stricken badger with a bad attitude (aka Ryan Scott, the Animal).

LAN-boy rig



PRODUCT

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

HIGH-END PICK

Doll
\$2,900
VoodooPC

At your next LAN party, you can either swiftly carry in a light and manageable Voodoo Doll with an Athlon 64 3200+ and a Radeon 9800 XT or spend the entire time dead on the floor with back problems.

BUDGET PICK

FragBox
\$995
Falcon Northwest

Like the Voodoo Doll, Falcon's FragBox is another option for those of us whose LAN-party experiences have never included a massage. While it may not be as powerful as the Doll, its sub-\$1,000 price tag is awesome.

PERIPHERALS

If your rig is nothing more than a mobo, all you truly have is a silicon pizza. So spend more money on your stuff, lest your stalwart pizza get lonely.



Speakers



PRODUCT

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

HIGH-END PICK

Logitech Z-5300
\$200
Logitech

There once was a mommy speaker and a daddy speaker with two baby speakers they "roared," as well as a pet subwoofer they kept on the ground. Don't forget Grandpa, the center of the home. And the speaker family of Z-5300 rocked the house!

MID-RANGE PICK

i-Trigue L3500 2.1 system
\$100
Creative Labs

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

BUDGET PICK

Logitech X-620
\$80
Logitech

The last speaker family in this engrossing tale was a full family of six and one sub. While they were a rather frugal family, they still knew how to make sweet noise, playing at bar mitzvahs as The Amazing X-620s.

Keyboard



PRODUCT

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

WIRED PICK

Elite Keyboard
\$30
Logitech

This keyboard will put an end to all your nighttime sniffing and sneezing, plus make you five times more attractive. Honestly, no, but it has buttons and a smart layout. And it's a slick black and silver.

WIRELESS PICK

Wireless Desktop Elite Keyboard/House
\$80
Microsoft

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

Gamepad



PRODUCT

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

OUR PICK

Wireless Gamepad
\$40
Saitek

Since everything under the sun has gone wireless, your gamepad should, too. The charging base station and agreeable price make the Saitek Wireless Gamepad an excellent PC gamepad choice.

A-LIST PERIPHERALS

Mouse



PRODUCT

WIRED 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

When the rest of the world gets too loud and confusing, hide away in your little own little realm. All the mean old troubles of the world won't be able to find you when you are wearing Sennheisers.

Joystick



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

■ **Extreme 3D Pro**
\$38
Logitech

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Along with their flight-aim 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 katten. The MOMO wheel is an awesome peripheral for all racing fans.

DISPLAYS

Your computer has lots of mystical and tantalizing images to show you—such as a sexy text file or a curvy pie chart!



CRT Monitor



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

■ **27-inch MultiSync FE2715B**
\$600
NEC

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

If you never have to move and you've got a huge desk, a behemoth of a CRT is still the No. 1 choice for gaming. There's simply a better price-to-value ratio at this point across the board. This NEC model is a sweet choice.

BUDGET PICK

■ **19-inch E901b**
\$250
ViewSonic

A 19-inch screen used to be the default entry-level monitor—but that's 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 Monitor



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

UltraSharp 2001FP
\$600
Dell

BUDGET PICK

15-inch 152T
\$360
Samsung

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

The new Dell UltraSharp is the 20-inch LCD monitor that is packaged with Dell's XPS system. It has a slick design and the response time is a quick 16 milliseconds, but CRTs still trump in refresh rate and price.

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

COMPONENTS

The heart and soul of any computer is found in those complex circuits. A brilliant think tank of men strapped to machines comes up with these circuits so we don't have to.



Processor



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

Athlon 64 FX-51
\$733
AMD

BUDGET PICK

Pentium 2.8GHz
\$300
Intel

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.

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.

Motherboard



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

SK8N nForce3
\$225
Asus

BUDGET PICK

D875PBZ
\$169
Intel

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Asus' SK8N nForce3 main 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.

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

BUDGET PICK

Onboard audio
Free

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.

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

HIGH-END PICK

Radeon 9800 XT
\$400
ATI Technologies

MID-RANGE PICK

GeForce FX 5600 Ultra
\$250
Nvidia

BUDGET PICK

GeForce FX 5200 Ultra
\$190
Nvidia

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

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.

Between the cards that will blow out your bankbook and the ones that will quickly fall behind are the mid-range plensers that balance smooth polygon throughput with the paycheck, such as our recommended GeForce FX 5600.

Graphics cards will quickly burn a hole through the ol' bankbook, 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

HIGH-END PICK

Cheetah 10K.6
\$180 each
Seagate Technology

BUDGET PICK

DiamondMax Plus 9 80GB
\$80
Maxtor

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

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.

80GB drives at 7200 rpm can easily be found for \$1 a gig. Usually, they involve rebates with many finite instructions. I mailed in my rebate a day late, and they wouldn't glime my money. Don't let the same thing happen to you.

Optical drive



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

DVD A06U
\$200
Pioneer Electronics

BUDGET PICK

LTC4816H DVD/CD-RW combo
\$60
Lite-On

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

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 set the standard for DVD-R/RW burning, and the A06U is an excellent value.

Prices on combo drives have dropped significantly with the incoming tide of DVD burners. Finding a generic combo drive for around \$50 is not completely unheard of, but we recommend the still value-minded Lite-On combo.

Case



PRODUCT

TOWER PICK

PlusView 1000AMG
\$70
Antec

ALTERNATE FORM PICK

SN41G Small Form-Factor
\$300
Shuttle

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

There are many cases that run in every shape and size, from a rinky-dink \$40 beige model to some brushed-metal \$200 affair. The classic, durable Antec falls right in the middle. Save a little more or find something more outrageous—it's up to you.

When small form-factors first came out, they were expensive and hard to come by. Now there's a much larger selection, which can be found at nearly every parts vendor. Let's hear it for progress! Shuttle's small forms are still among the best.

MOBILITY

Get out, get some sun, but stay connected to the digital dials in the center of your life. Because that e-mail, phone call, and last level are just too important.



Laptop



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

Area-51M
\$2,800
Alienware

BUDGET PICK

Dell Inspiron 5150
\$2,000
Dell Computers

LIGHTWEIGHT PICK

Sony VAIO TR2A
\$1,900
Sony

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

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.

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.

Now this system might not be built with gaming in mind (it's got a 1GHz Centrino CPU under the hood), but this potent portable more than makes up for it in style. Weighing in at 3.3 pounds, this little baby is great for older games.

Phone



PRODUCT

FLIP-PHONE PICK

SPH-A600
\$350
Samsung

NON-FLIP-PHONE PICK

Nokia 3660
\$200
Nokia

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

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...

Realizing that most people don't want to get used to a circular dialing keypad, Nokia updated the stylish 3650, giving it a normal keypad. Now if only Nokia could find some way to atone for the N-Gage.

PDA



PRODUCT

PALM OS PICK

Zodiac 2
\$400
Tapwave

POCKETPC OS PICK

Toshiba e605
\$300
Dell Computer

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

For the moment, you aren't gonna find another PDA with this kind of juice for the price that Tapwave is asking. With it you can bust out some grinds in *Tony Hawk*, juggle your contact manager (yay!), listen to music, and watch *The Simpsons*.

This PDA sits at the top of Toshiba's food chain. Built especially for the power-hungry PocketPC user, it has a lot of bells and whistles beyond the 400MHz processor and 128MB of free RAM. What better way to run MAME and countless games?

Gadget



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

T-Mobile Sidekick, Color
\$200
T-Mobile

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

T-Mobile's Sidekick is a seriously cool communication device. The good news: You're always connected to the internet, and you can chat through AOL Instant Messenger. The bad news: It's like carrying a brick in your pocket, and it's kinda awkward.

Rewind 100

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



GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
------	-------	---------	-------

A Tale in Two Cities	4/03	This odd little game is perfect for the social gamer exhausted by scroll-fest-based gaming.	★★★★☆
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Days of Wrath: The Flame Expansion	1/04	More balls, more whisks, same game.	★★★★☆
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Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic	8/03	A great strategy game that's worth purchasing for the random-map generator alone.	★★★★☆
-------------------------------------	------	---	-------

American Conquest: Fight Back	1/04	Right border and micromanagement by moving the lone sand-strike expansion.	★★★★☆
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Aquatic 2: Evolution	1/03	Like drawing in a sea of boredom.	★★★★☆
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QBallistic: Phoenix Rising	6/05	A fun first-person shooter dressed up in a third-person racing game's clothes.	★★★★☆
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Redemption 2: Secret Weapons of World War II	10/05	The best bit of fast repetition for the aging Battlefield engine is worth the money.	★★★★☆
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GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
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Big Mouth Tracker	9/05	This Biting game is better than it has any right to be.	★★★★☆
--------------------------	------	---	-------

Bitching	8/05	A steady snarl-and-bites real-time war game that even manages a bit of humor.	★★★★☆
-----------------	------	---	-------

BloodRayne	3/03	Wily, delecting, fairly generic, and thoroughly tasteless.	★★★★☆
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Call of Duty	10/04	Call of Duty is so good and so much fun that you'll undoubtedly wish it were longer.	★★★★☆
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Castle, Inc.	3/05	"Beehive, dove, flint" business sim with books.	★★★★☆
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Competition Manager 4	3/05	It's an incredible sports-simulating game disguised as a soccer-management sim.	★★★★☆
------------------------------	------	---	-------

Chronos of War	1/06	As dry and leveling as the Arabian Desert.	★★★★☆
-----------------------	------	--	-------

Chaser	1/04	A good-looking puzzle that's fun only for the first few hours.	★★★★☆
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Grid Zero: No Mercy	12/03	Grid Zero's repetitive, disjointed play leaves you cold.	★★★★☆
----------------------------	-------	--	-------

Combat Command 2: Dances Forward	1/06	A great screen editor can't lift this average general tactical war game above obscure Pocket.	★★★★☆
---	------	---	-------

Communico 3	1/04	Maybe the toughest game ever—and not in a good way.	★★★★☆
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Crime Scene Investigation	8/03	Finally, a game for mentally challenged couch potatoes.	★★★★☆
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Dad Left: The Journal	1/05	The only thing missing from the entire game's base is a change of underwear.	★★★★☆
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Day of Defeat	8/03	A great squad-based game marred only by age.	★★★★☆
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CGW Recommends Good Military Games (Atten-HUT!)

CGW



Battlefield 1942 Series

Battlefield 1942 has no pretenses about being a military sim—just pick a role, pick a vehicle, and roll off to war. We've played matches with people sniping from the wing of a plane, jumping off, and landing in a tank!



Call of Duty

Call of Duty is easily one of the best shooters of 2003. From many of the same people who created *MOHAA*, this WWII game from Activision lets you experience the war from the perspective of the U.S., British, and Russians.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
DevilMay Cry: Resurrection Bloods Remake	10/05	Too big to be aimed, too bad to be a full-on remake	★★★☆☆
DevilMay Cry: Guardians of the Light Servants of the Dark	10/05	More catenary goodness (and evil) at a bargain price	★★★★☆
Empire of Magic	0/0	Avoid a clunk in an RPG, Empire of Magic isn't interesting and messy	★★★★☆
Exotic	1/05	Conkers 20 to 30 hours of gameplay, and not a single one of them is worth a damn	★★★★☆
Galaxy Angel	10/05	Something new in the massively multiplayer field that's worth a look	★★★★☆
Order the Rabbit	0/04	Play it for the comic, don't play it for the play	★★★★☆
Otherlands II	12/05	A better, cheaper SR version of Magic, the Gathering	★★★★☆
Over-Being: The Second Genesis	0/03	Weld here to see the first genesis of this MMO genre	★★★★☆
USA-III Operation Iraqi Freedom	10/05	Nothing really new here, but worth a look if you need a new one for a class system	★★★★☆
RT Challenge '90-'02	0/03	Aimed best for Formula One racers	★★★★☆



GI Freedom Fighters	1/04	Great gameplay ladies, but the PC version broke the best stick	★★★★☆
Galactic Civilizations	7/03	Forget the cloning disappointment of MOO—this is the best space 4X game in years	★★★★☆
Meat Hooker	1/03	The game is clever, stylish, and fun to watch, but it's a little too hard to control	★★★★☆
Grand Theft Auto: Vice City	0/05	GTA's 2002 Game of the Year gets '05 style changes and a sequel	★★★★☆
Green	2/04	Pandy-colored cards make the wild poker ones more appealing	★★★★☆
Kali	0/03	Good in transition	★★★★☆
Reven & Bill	1/03	Wides, reactive, and utterly devoid of interesting strategy elements	★★★★☆
Heroes of Might and Magic V: Winds of War	0/05	The degeneration continues	★★★★☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Highway to the Rock	1/04	An excellent system gets better	★★★★☆
HomeWorld 2	11/03	It's no Civilization—it's not even close	★★★★☆
Ray's Majestic Chess	11/03	A valiant attempt at chess for dummies that doesn't quite reach dummies—but does provide some decent chess	★★★★☆



GI II: Lowest Strike	2/05	The tactical death shooter is more special than Special Forces	★★★★☆
RemonPoker	5/03	It sounds like a microwave snack, but it's the best tea-based war game ever	★★★★☆
Legacy Online	10/05	A tedious exercise at best	★★★★☆
Line of Sight: Return	3/05	The VC are dirty devils in this best yet restrictive and monotonous port of a great title in the Vietnam War	★★★★☆
Legend: Legacy of the Guardians	7/05	Enhanced, better, bigger, and looking in magnificent—and looks like its good points	★★★★☆
Madden NFL 2004	7/05	Early the best Madden game yet, but be prepared to buy a Logitech Dual Action controller	★★★★☆



GI Marine Assault	1/04	Learning gets here based	★★★★☆
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Sporting Good Fun

Call me Jacques Strapp



■ Madden NFL

Ten out of 10 people agree with us that Madden 2004 is the best Madden yet.



■ Tony Hawk 4

Extreme sports are always better with the man, Tony Hawk. Besides, who else can you see Jango Fett on a skateboard? Maybe in *Episode IV?* Uh, we doubt it.



■ NHL 2004

Ice, Ice baby! NHL 2004 skates past its lackluster predecessor for a cool and complete package.

■ Operation Flashpoint: Resistance

Flashpoint doesn't have the big name of other military games and is often overlooked, but it definitely warrants a search-and-recover mission at your local store.



■ America's Army

Who better to turn to for a military game than the military? Some might call the free America's Army series a brainwashing scheme by the evil "gummint," but that would mean ignoring what a good and accurate game it is.



Patch Adams

Need bandaged?



Temple of Elemental Evil

It's pretty pathetic when fans release a patch before the developers. Two months passed before the official patch came out of the chute.



Giants: Citizen Kabuto

Beautiful, bizarre, and buggy. The team behind Kabuto will have another chance with the much-anticipated *Armed and Dangerous*.



UFO: Aftermath

UFO actually stands for Unplayable Faulty Ownage. Without the patch, expect system-sinking memory leaks—but underneath lurks a good game.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
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Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	1/04	Improves upon levels every good but doesn't mess with the formula	★★★★☆
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Final of Honor: Allied Assault—Breakthrough	0/00	Robust and visually satisfying, but barely good enough to justify the price	★★★☆☆
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Redwood: Red Wolf—Waking Inception	0/00	This expansion is a real let for Dual HD fans	★★★☆☆
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Red Gear Solid 2: Substance	0/00	It's supposed to be MS2. The Director's Cut, but the MS2 copy makes it more like MS2. The cheap also Dual HD's Cut	★★★☆☆
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Reservoir: Flight Simulator 2004	0/00	The most fun you can have in a plane without guns	★★★★☆
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Strategic Chick II	0/00	What if birds in multiplayer, if more than makes so far in fun	★★★★☆
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Wizards	1/00	Just throw your \$20 into the street instead	☆☆☆☆☆
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Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	1/04	A fun way to spend a couple of hours	★★★★☆
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Revolution: Nights	1/01	A much better single-player game than the original game	★★★★☆
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New World Order	0/00	Only Postal 2/Zero New World Order from damaging the life of World's Largest Shooter	☆☆☆☆☆
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Resign: Deathmatch	0/00	Rock-paper-scissors is a more challenging strategy game	★★★★☆
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GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
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Red Bull	1/04	The Red Bull experience on its best yet	★★★★☆
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No Man's Land	1/04	Another follow-the-members RTS	★★★☆☆
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Planet of the Apes	1/00	Even half good games don't equal one good one	★★★☆☆
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PlanetSide	0/00	Blizzard's first personal-world MMO shooter is surprisingly good	★★★★☆
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Port Royale	0/00	After a slow start, a quality pirate game emerges	★★★★☆
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Postal 2	0/00	No	☆☆☆☆☆
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Pro Beer Brewer	0/00	Same thing, same thing, same A—same game	☆☆☆☆☆
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Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc	1/00	If only the camera system were half as responsive as the bad guys	★★★★☆
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Red Bull: Planet Escape	1/04	So go a copy of FarCry instead	★★★☆☆
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Red Faction II	0/00	Edged out only by Abotrover as worst console port so far this year	☆☆☆☆☆
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Republic: The Revolution	1/00	Good idea, bad game	★★★☆☆
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Rise of Nations	0/00	The latest, greatest historical RTS	★★★★☆
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Red Faction: Guerrilla 2: Wacky World	0/00	I add some window dressing and a smattering of new scenarios in a game we just did praise	★★★☆☆
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Reservoir: A Good Adventure	1/00	The bible of graphic adventure games, both pretty and stupid	★★★★☆
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Savage	0/04	A potential blockbuster marginalized by its own delivery	★★★★☆
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Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2	1/04	Killer: then kill computers over and over again, build cities and an empire	★★★★☆
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San City 4: Bush War	1/04	The new best on Iraq/terrorism adds substantially to an already excellent game experience	★★★★☆
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Space Galaxy	1/04	A clever combination of real-time strategy and Star Wars stuff clever enough to hold your interest for long	★★★★☆
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Star Trek: Elite Force II	1/00	Like playing one of the less-compelling TV episodes	★★★☆☆
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You Shouldn't Buy Bad Military Games (Fubar'd)

4 Games



American Conquest: Fight Back

America's Manifest Destiny was to expand from sea to shining sea. Playing *American Conquest: Fight Back* will only manifest small sores in your stomach and pains in your neck.



Republic: The Revolution

You say you want a revolution? After this game, you'll learn to stay in your place, which is hopefully far, far away from *Republic: The Revolution*. A poster child for disappointment.

GAME	OS/AT	VERDICT	SCORE
Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided	10/05	Might not be a whole lot better	★★★☆☆
Starly & Patch	10/4	The best rep of the '70s pot smokes in this cozy game from a crazy indie	★★★★☆
Temple	10/4	Yet another good game named by bugs. Winner!	★★★★☆
The Elder Scrolls III: Bloodmoon	10/3	This solid expansion effectively restores the lordliness of Morrowind to exceed that of Grim	★★★★☆



□ The Great Escape	10/3	Not quite as bad as a month in the Pacific, but still much better, either	★★★★☆
The Walk	10/3	Redeems bleak game-not named Another Aardvark—you can bow	★★★★☆
The Omega Stone: Battle of the Sphinx II	10/3	A pushing archeological fest that adventure gamers will dig	★★★★☆



□ The Sims: Makin' Magic	10/4	The best Sims expansion plays like a charm	★★★★☆
The Sims: Superstar	10/5	Another solid addition to the planet's best-selling game	★★★★☆
Top Gun: P4: You 2004	10/3	A game that will please both hardcore jet-set addicts and casual gamers	★★★★☆

GAME	OS/AT	VERDICT	SCORE
Names of Stars	10/4	An old school game with little creative potential	★★★☆☆
Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness	10/05	Not as bad as the name—of said, get it in	★★★☆☆
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4	12/03	As long as you have a skateboard, it's the most fun you can have on a skateboard without putting yourself in the hospital	★★★★☆
You 1.8	10/05	Red name-formatted game of the year so far	★★★★☆
Yupka 2: Plaine One	10/3	A completely done-the-building game with nothing to set it apart from the crowd	★★★☆☆



□ EGO: Altered	10/4	EGP: Alters into a good game that should have added three weeks and one big gold tongue to be released	★★★★☆
Uplink: Under Siege	10/3	An intriguing premise and quality execution make Uplink a winner	★★★★☆
Vibron	10/3	While it doesn't match other Vertibus' control experience, this game's great, the graphics can be problematic	★★★★☆
Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne	10/05	Some nice new stuff, but occupies mismanagement	★★★★☆
Warlords IV	10/4	A strongly polished version of a classic strategy franchise	★★★★☆
Warrior Kings: Battles	12/05	Good game, but it's a waste of an ink when what you really want is a shirt of your favorite possum	★★★★☆
Will Rock	10/3	In quite a limited sense, classic "Will is not gonna take it!"	★★★★☆
World War II: Frontline Command	10/03	Red vintage, being realistic, and no minis, but the documentary footage is OK	★★★★☆
□: Wolverine's Revenge	10/05	Save your money and buy the X-Men: DVD instead	★★★☆☆
Zero Hour	10/4	CSG better than it's ever been	★★★★☆

Ancient Periods

You are history.



Medieval: Total War

Risk and fire, row by row, the armies of the Total War series look stunning in their re-creation of large-scale battles.



Age of Mythology Expansion

This RTS expansion sees the mythical Atlanteans joining the Greek, Egyptian, and Norse pantheons in an era-spanning struggle for supremacy.



No Man's Land

With recycled "historical" gameplay and an abundant lack of anything really cool, this game takes us back to the Dark Ages in more ways than one.



World War II: Frontline Command

The interface and missions are lousy, and there isn't a lick of realism in the conflict. The game does boast some good documentary footage, but if you want that, go watch the bloody History Channel.



World War II: Panzer Claws

Why, lookee! Another game with World War II in the title! Originally Panzer Pancake in the developer's native language of Polish, this game of derivative and frustrating gameplay can simply be entitled Sucks.

Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

PUBLISHER: Strategic Games **DEVELOPER:** Mivstar Game Design **GENRE:** Turn-based Strategy **ESRB RATING:** None **REQUIRED:** 64MB RAM, 250MB (extra), OpenGL accelerated 3D card **RECOMMENDED:** Plenty of patience to read the tome-sized manual **PLUS PLAYER:** Internet, e-mail, hotseat

Dominions II

Tom and Bruce duke it out on the Urgaia map



□ Battle of Mchaka



□ Bruce takes Pergami

Tom: As a guy who hates spiders, I figure I'll take a walk on the wild side and play as Mchaka, the spider race. They're adept with death, fire, nature, and earth magic, so I'll lead them with an archmage, who can take advantage of multiple paths of magic. I name him John Spider because I can't think of anything better to name him.

Since gold is precious early on, I boost my order scale all the way up to improve the income of my provinces. My spiders like heat, so I'll use the Desert Sun theme, which increases my heat scale and spreads my sweltering climate to adjacent provinces. I plan on doing lots of research and spell-casting, so I boost my magic scale as well.

I want to spread my religion, so I improve my domain to six. I spend the rest on a fortification for my castle, which should hold up under several turns of siege.

Bruce: I wish I could say I chose Rlyeh because of some inherent advantage. Or that I was able to scientifically determine this process, but the sad fact is, I just like the idea of playing a Cthulhu. If that makes me a dork, so be it.

One of the advantages of playing as Rlyeh is there really isn't much trickery to

be done in tactical combat. Lobo guards are the main part of my army. They aren't particularly strong, but they are incredibly cheap. Best of all, they're mindless, which means they'll fight to the death, saving me the aggravation of watching a whole squad of units turn and flee.

As an amphibious race, I could start out by striking to the water, but this would give Tom a head start on land, and I'm leery of letting him get his dominion out there. I'm going with an average dominion, so I expect to build a lot of temples. Since it's going to be a while before Tom gets his feet wet, I should be able to take the underwater provinces at my leisure.

My pretender is a level 7 water mage and level 6 astral mage. All hail Fubar, the lord from the outer void!

Year One

(The years in *Dominions II* run from spring to the following spring.)

Tom (spring): I anoint Msmaki, a Voice of the Lord, as my prophet, and I spend the next four months building up a force of spider knights to back my fairly weak Mchaka warriors. Unfortunately, I haven't started out near any lucrative farmlands, important for

early income. While my army grabs the surrounding provinces to guarantee a steady flow of resources, I recruit a few Ears of the Lord to scout out the far territories. I need to find out where Bruce is going to crawl out of the sea to contain him before he establishes a beachhead.

Bruce (late spring): The continent of Urgaia is divided into a large western portion and a smaller eastern one, with a bay in the middle and a narrow, two-province bridge between them. Tom is probably on the far side of one of those two halves.

Bruce (autumn): No sign of Tom on the eastern half of this continent. My guess is he's on the larger western half. I'm going to consolidate my position on this half by building a castle in the mountain province of The Great Feral. Any invading army has to come through these mountains. This province produces both heavy infantry and crossbowmen, so I'll be able to construct a formidable defense here.

Tom (early winter): There it is—a Rlyeh banner to the southeast. I send Shaaboni to investigate. He's a bare-spider assassin with a complement of half a dozen stealthy spider warriors.

Tom (late winter): Bruce has a castle up here already—so much for containing him before he establishes a beachhead. Since there's a buffer of independent provinces between me and The Great Feral, I'm going to leave him be for now and hope he does the same to me. Shaaboni will skulk around and foment unrest, looking for assassination opportunities while my Ears and Voices of the Lord stealthily preach.



□ Bruce's forces maneuver for an assault on Mchaka.



□ In his house in Rlyeh, dead Cthulhu speculates as to the location of Tom Chick.

Year Two

Tom (early summer): While trying to take



Tom
Last month:
Tom's Titans cleaned
Bruce's clock with author-
ity in *Age of Mythology*:
The Titans.



Bruce
Last month:
His Ph.D. proved to be
a Ph.D. of hell when Tom
smashed Bruce's hard
work into so much dust.

Ecnaphak, a rich farmland to the west, I lost my entire army, my prophet, and my summoned cave drakes to a swarm of independent infantry and crossbowmen. I essentially just pissed away several turns of precious income. The good news is that I found Bruce's prophet in the castle he built in The Great Feral. This is a perfect opportunity for a bene-spider assassination.

Bruce (summer): I'm doing quite well on land in east Urgas right now, and I need to think about expanding in the west as well. One thing I haven't done is conquer adjacent underwater provinces. My spy report on the province of Sath Dago to my east indicates it is being defended by hordes of Amber Clan titans and guards. This game really needs a boss/bary of some sort, because I have no idea what those things are. You either have to deduce all monster attributes from first principles using Kent's *Critique of Pure Reason* or take a wild-ass guess. My wild-ass guess is I can kick the crap out of anything with the girly name 'Amber'.

Tom (late autumn): Bruce's illithid lord just mind-blasted Shaabon, my poor bene spider, during the 1-on-1 assassination attempt. He never got within striking distance of the foul beast.

Bruce (late winter): Because RTyh is an underwater race, building surface castles doesn't automatically allow me to recruit my nation's monsters. Building castles in coastal provinces gives me access to hybrid soldiers, which, if you know anything about the Cthulhu myths (I don't, by the way), you will recognize as the offspring of humans and deep ones. That's creepy.

Year Three

Bruce (spring): Watching for negative dominion is one way to tell where the enemy is. My province of Flonen has been a pain in the ass ever since I conquered it. It currently has -3 dominion and almost 300 unrest. The people in that province worship another god, and they're mad about my god occupying their land. Problematically, you can't have a negative dominion unless another god is exerting dominion. There's only one explanation: Tom. Chuck. I strongly suspect cheating. I don't want to have to e-mail Jeff Green about this again.

Tom (summer): I start construction of my second fortification in Solan, which is to the southwest of my capital. Unfortunately, I see that Bruce has come ashore here as well. Looks like I'll be fighting on both fronts.

Tom (early winter): As I'm clearing the provinces around my second fort, Bruce moves an army up through Oak Hills, the independent province that's supposed to be a buffer zone between my territory and The Great Feral. Fortunately, my Machaka units can easily traverse my forested provinces, so they rush back to head off the invaders.

Tom (late winter): He moved into my



An unexpected event has occurred in Aidor. An embassy from the shadow seers of Nexus has arrived in the province. They bring you three gifts from the hidden tower: Astral pearls, an item of magic and one hundred pounds of gold.

Exit

Good fortune visits Bruce

“My guess is that I can kick the crap out of anything with the girly name ‘Amber.’”

capital and I've got him cornered now! That's right, Geryll, I'm on my way to smash your soggy fish men into anchovy pâté.

Tom (early spring): The coward jumped into Devourer, a sea province north of my capital. I thought I had him pinned, and now he's threatening Ecnaphak, my richest farmland.

Year Four

Tom (early summer): Now he's come out of the Depths of Dago to the south and taken Pergaen, one of my richer farmlands. I can't let him continue to threaten all my valuable beachfront property. So I take a lesson from the 1977 movie *Shock Waves*, in which a Nazi fugitive played by Peter Cushing breeds a race of underwater zombies. This movie teaches us that although the dead can't dance, they can swim—and

therefore are an important part of any world conquest. I alchemize enough death gems to revive an undead mound king and cast a few Resurrection spells to muster an army of skeletons.

Tom (early winter): Sure enough, Bruce's rampaging armies converge on my capital again. This time, I hold him off with wolves and bears (courtesy of the excellent but expensive Summon Animals spell), Scrofula the mound king, and earth and fire elementals. The wolves charged ahead, softening his labo guards, the bears held the gateway after the wolves had been killed, and then the elementals mopped up. Finally, it was Scrofula and Bruce's traitor king going toe-to-toe. The traitor king got his just desserts.

Bruce (winter): A battle in Devourer? Huh? That's underwater? Oh man, Tom captured one of my underwater provinces!



It's an ugly thing now!



Machaka under siege.



❑ The armies of R'lyeh have assembled before the Machaka citadel.

What's up with that? I'm supposed to be the water lord! This sucks. I haven't built up any defenses in my underwater provinces because I figured Tom was stuck on dry land. This could be bad.

Tom (winter): Scrofula easily took over Devourer, but now those damn fish are laying siege to my second fortification in Solaia. Furthermore, Bruce has a huge force moving out of The Great Feral toward my capital again! Luckily, my dominion is holding fast, so maybe it's time to just forget my borders and try to stamp out his religion by doing some good old-fashioned preaching with my prophet and priests. If I can choke Bruce's dominion off the map, I'll win regardless of how many armies he has. Kimweik, my second prophet, is going to move southeast to contest Bruce's dominion around The Great Feral. My mound king will work his way southwest through the oceans to take out Bruce's dominion in that direction. Good-bye, homelands. We can only save ourselves now by abandoning our own empire.

Year Five

Tom (spring): Abasi the Hero showed up at our gates to join Machaka. Hey, thanks, Abasi, but you're a bit late, and you really should have brought an army along with you.

Bruce (late spring): Tom is definitely going after my underwater provinces. I just lost

my defenses in southwestern Urygaa; are pretty weak.

Tom (late spring): My mound king was just defeated by a Starspawn throwing Banishment spells. I should've seen that coming. Tagg Kkaetu, a summoned undead being, was running around the remnants of my empire, gathering fled armies. He's got a few spider knights, some bears, and a handful of Machaka warriors. Now he'll head south to grab undefended R'lyeh territories and take up the slack left by the banished mound king.

Bruce (early summer): Aaah! Tom is invading the eastern half of Urygaa! I'm not quite sure how he got here, but I'm not in a position to kick him out right now. Fortunately, I have a large force concentrated at my fortress in The Great Feral. The walls are high and strong, but I just need a few turns to recruit reinforcements. He's not getting out of here alive.

Tom (summer): OK, the gates are down in Machaka. Time for some last-ditch summoning to see if I can hold out. My gem supply is sadly low since I've been losing magical sites while Bruce snatches my provinces. John Spider spends my last 20 nature gems on Summon Animals. I have four black sorcerers who summon a fire drake, a cave drake, a wight, and a handful of skeletons. Here goes the Battle of Machaka.

Bruce (summer): Hero is my second try at storming the Machaka citadel. I suspect I'm

going to need my pretender here, but due to the huge, negative dominion penalty for fighting in this province, he has a whopping total of 17 hit points. I'm not thrilled about getting my pretender killed because he's weakened by the fact that people don't believe in him. I feel like I'm playing the Tankerbell role-playing game.

Tom (late summer): Bruce's heavy cavalry drives off my spider knights, my bears drive back his cavalry. A handful of Machaka warriors are all that's left. Bruce even has his pretender here, a void lord named P'ubar. He totally fatigues himself summoning water elementals, at which point my towers peg the bastard with a volley of arrows. HA, take that! In the end, I hold Machaka. It comes down to Abasi the Hero, who lives up to his name and chases F'ubar away.

Tom (late autumn): More R'lyeh armies are moving toward my capital. All I can manage to summon are a few vine men, a few more skeletons, and a single cave drake. I lost most of my spiders, and Bruce was able to venture out and round up only a few who had fled before he had to dart back to Machaka to avoid Bruce's advancing armies.

Tom (winter): I didn't think Bruce would attack me in the southeast, where I was reeling his temples, so I had split my forces in two to cover more ground. But sure enough, he attacked my divided armies, cornered my prophet, and killed him. In the southwest, Tagg Kkaetu was overrun by reinforcements moving toward Machaka. It's an ugly thing now, this map. It's dotted with tall, regal white candles of my god's dominion, but each one was marred by the ugly black flag of R'lyeh.

Year Six

Tom (spring): It's down to my pretender and a handful of black sorcerers in the fortification of Machaka. They are besieged by an army of more than 100 lobo guards, Abatenzo spearmen, and heavy infantry in the distance. I can see some more armies moving in. The end is nigh.

Bruce (early autumn, turn 66): Machaka is conquered! Because I won, I get to say this: Cthulu f'taght I don't even know what that means, but I win, so it doesn't matter.

“I like the idea of playing a Cthulu. If that makes me a dork, so be it.”



❑ Underwater undead. Let's all go swimmer!



❑ Battle of Machaka 2

Coming Next Month...

March 2004
On sale February 2

CGW's Annual Games of the Year Awards!
It was a banner year for PC gaming, but who will emerge victorious?



Call of Duty



Knights of the Old Republic



Prince of Persia



American Idol

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

Stay tuned for the big
results in **30 days!**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

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A Scintillating Symphony of Sycophancy!

One editor's breathtaking, original ballet of death from embarrassment

I never wanted to work in marketing. I'm no gladd-handing, gregarious quipster still who can charm and con the public. In fact, one peevish perspicacious PR pool-bah once posted, "The cool thing about you, Robert, is that you say what you think." Which was her way of not saying what she thinks: "The thing about you, Robert, is that your people skills are so atrocious, you practically qualify for handicapped parking." But somehow, in spite of an inability to sway people to my way of thinking without resorting to chloroform, a good 23 minutes with a lovingly rusted EZ-Grip vegetable peeler and a hatbox full of smothered squirrels, I have been converted into a company shill.

"A breathtaking, original ballet of death." That's the quote I came up with it while writing *CGW's Max Payne 2* cover story a few months ago, and now, because the catchphrase gurus at Rockstar Games decided that "So much like the first game, you may not notice the difference!" might not be the most effective selling point, everywhere I look, those hyperbolic words come back to haunt me. Every fignin' ad for the game, be it in game magazines, general-interest magazines, gaming websites, www.hotcoedshow.com—even the podforsaken game box—has that one single line pulled out as a glowing endorsement of the game. For me, the month following the release of this game has felt like this: A breathtaking, original ballet of death. A breathtaking, original ballet of death. A breathtaking, original ballet of death.

But here's the thing—the litter of money pigs encouraging you to line their feeding trough with your dollars is using a line from a preview as if it were from a review, bursting optimistic early speculation and presenting it as if it were a glowing endorsement of the final product. Now, you might think I'm splitting hairs, but there is a huge difference here: It's the



"Full of possibility" can easily turn into "Two heads means double the kisses!"

difference between commenting on a baby's ultrasound and the finished product. "Beautiful and full of possibility" can easily turn into "Two heads means double the kisses!" when that joyous bundle is finally released.

Not that I don't like or wouldn't recommend the game. It's perfectly fine. But I don't think "It's perfectly fine!" is exactly what Rockstar is looking for on its box cover. And odds are "I loved it the moment I started playing it—three years ago!" or "I lost interest halfway through Chapter 2!" aren't exactly the company's dream quotes, either, and that's why no one there bothered asking what I thought about the finished product: I understand the inclination to go with the sneezier quip—it just makes me very, very uncomfortable.

Now, Gene Shalit may be happy blurring every flick with a halfway-decent buffet at the press junket, and Roger Ebert may not mind having his increasingly dubious thumb and nose will up every studio's ass and trumpeted on every full-page ad, but that's not who I want to be. And that's not what I want *CGW* to be. I don't like being

taken out of context, I don't like the gnawing feeling of watching what I say and write, and I don't like worrying about getting excited about a game before its release because some doid looking for a holiday bonus wants to subtly misrepresent me and this magazine. It's not like we hated this game—we gave *Max Payne 2* four and a half stars, for cryin' out loud. There are plenty of kind words in the review, which is based on the actual finished product, which is what Rockstar is actually trying to sell people, which is why those words are more valid—which is why Rockstar's current campaign is disingenuous. It's just not right to use words from a preview to build hype post-ship. Man alive, I wrote nice things about *DeKatané* in previews. *Daikatané!* Say what you will about John Romero, et al—at least they didn't put positive preview quotes on their game box. (Of course, they didn't put "Makes you want to punch the developers in the face!" on the game box, either.)

Ultimately, there's not much I can do here. I could try to avoid writing breathless hype about unreleased games, and while there's definitely a good lesson to be learned there, the fact is that we—the editorial staff, and all two of you reading this—are die-hard game fans who enjoy the excited anticipation of games almost as much as we enjoy playing them. Gushing that would be awful—I'd like to fully enjoy my hobby while I can, thank you, and judging by the all-hot-up nature of most of our reader mail, I'm guessing you would, too. Besides, if you want brittle, joyless takes on upcoming games, you've got options out there, believe me.

To be safe, I'm going to start hedging my bets. If I liberally pepper my previews with lots of exclamation points and quotes such as "Probably won't totally suck!" and "Not the worst game in history!" then maybe I can still convey a sense of excitement—and maybe, just maybe, the publishers will have to play fair and wait for the review.

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