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**GAME**  
**YEAR**  
**AWARDS**



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THE TOP 10  
GAMES OF  
2004

**WE PICK THE BEST OF THE BEST**

IS IT CALL OF DUTY? PRINCE OF PERSIA? MADDEN?  
KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC? SEE PAGE 57

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**GAMES RATED!**



- PRINCE OF PERSIA
- COUNTER-STRIKE: CONDITION ZERO
- NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND
- DEUS EX 2

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ZIFF DAVIS MEDIA

ISSUE 204  
MAY 2004  
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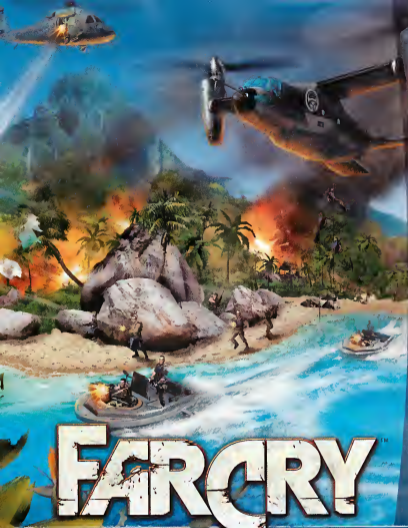


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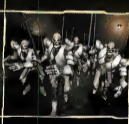


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---

I DIED AS DANIEL GARNER

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In 2004, there were more good games than you could shake our intern at.

## 16 Letters

Some people like us and some people hate us, but everyone agrees on one thing: Jeff Green is one hot tamale.

## 22 Radar

Goze into our crystal ball for a look at the 10 best games of 2004. Plus, an early look at **Sam & Max: Freelance Police**, and what could be the world's first butt-simple PC gaming console.

## 40 Previews

We managed to get our greedy little hands on the Battlefield-like **Star Wars: Battlefront**, then went deep into the jungles of **Battlefield Vietnam**. And that's not even going into our first looks at **Warlords: Battlery III**, **Ground Control 2: Operation Exodus**, and a whole lot more.



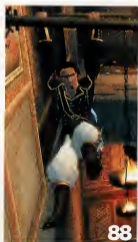
# GAME OF THE YEAR AWARDS



### ■ COVER STORY

It's our annual Games of the Year awards issue, and the decision-making was tougher than ever. That's not a complaint, though. In a great year for PC games, here are our picks for the best of the best.

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## 72 Reviews

Santa left a big, wrinkly bag for us over the holidays, and once we saw it didn't belong to a large, diseased animal, we dug right in and found some gems among the coal. A few—like *Prince of Persia*, *Beyond Good & Evil*, and *America's Army: Special Forces*—are worth rushing out and selling your kidney for right now. Others—like *Deus Ex* and the *Neverwinter Nights* expansion—aren't worth your toenail clippings.

## 100 Tech

Will reviews *ISyrpower's* Pentium 4 *Extreme Edition*. Jeff Lackey beats up on *Hercules'* awesome LCD. Joel Durham offers some BIOS-tweaking tips, and Loyd Case picks his favorite bits of hardware for 2003. And of course, there's a new "on topic:" Will Power and Tech Magic.

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For all the things that rock and the ones that are really a crock, come over to this section to hear us talk. Or else we'll go to your house, and soon the police will be lining up the chalk.

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Robert's black heart suddenly drips with the honeyed milk of love.

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## A Very Good Year Indeed

Or, why I hate passing out Game of the Year awards

**JEFF GREEN** Editor-in-Chief

**Yay carnal!** We are not at the Game of the Year awards again already, are we? Jeez, I really hate awards ceremonies. A lifetime of watching the wrong movies, TV shows, music, and American Idol contestants win awards every single year has turned me off to the whole process. Plus, I'm bitter. Why? Because every Friday, I enter the wet T-shirt contest here at our local sports bar, and every time, I lose to some good-looking female. Like that's fair.

Like I'm not hot in a wet T-shirt, too. Way to have no credibility.

So, yeah, anyway. We're handing out awards this issue. 'Yay Seriously, the reason I'm frustrated about this year's awards is that it was such a great year for PC gaming, there aren't enough awards to go around. The winners are all worthy, but just to focus on the winners would be deceptive and limiting. So if you're looking for something to buy, look at all the nominees—they all rule this year and they're all worthy of your attention. And, remember, just because we didn't pick your game as a winner doesn't mean we didn't think it was awesome. There were lots of tough decisions this year. That's why we get paid slightly more than minimum wage here. Life is hard.



**KEN EGAN**

Editor

Same way Ben is the dad of Johnny Wilson and Jordan, but only Scorpio would know for sure, and she's not talking. And the way Ken catches the letters and waffles into his drink looks like he's more than a little stoned. This isn't the DS's games.



**KRISTIN SAWYER**

Assistant Editor

Wishy-washy editor. Her job is to make sure that the most important stories in the magazine are the ones that we should read. She's a great writer and a great editor, but she's not the best at what she does. She's a great writer and a great editor, but she's not the best at what she does. She's a great writer and a great editor, but she's not the best at what she does.



**ROBERT CARTER**

Editor

Robert's job is to make sure that the most important stories in the magazine are the ones that we should read. He's a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does. He's a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does.



**GARRET GUSTAFSON**

Editor

Garret doesn't own a car. In fact, he never has and probably never will. So he's in the hot dog stand in the parking lot behind the school to play Street Fighter. He's a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does.



**WILLIAM O'NEAL**

Editor

William is a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does. He's a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does.



**JOHNNY LIU**

Editor

Johnny is a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does. He's a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does.



**EVAN SCOTT**

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Evan is a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does. He's a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does.



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Rob is a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does. He's a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does.



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Michael is a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does. He's a great writer and a great editor, but he's not the best at what he does.

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# WARS & WARRIORS JOAN of ARC

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## Bugged about bugs

While Robert Coffey's holiday wish list was right on the money [Scorched Earth, January 2004], I think he should take this once in a lifetime (unless you hit the reset button, of course) opportunity to wish for something that would benefit the entire world. No, screw world peace—if we had such an animal, then half of PC's greatest games would be no more. I am talking about a new law. Yes, you read that right...we should be allowed by the Supreme Court to drive up to game publishers' mansions and torture them for all eternity for pushing titles out the window to make their quarterly financial numbers. What ever happened to beta testing? Numerous titles have been patched the same day they hit the shelves. *Need For Speed Underground* has menu resolution issues with most ATI cards, *ROTOR* slows to a crawl due to sound issues with Live S1 cards, *Half* runs like off-poo-poo on a semidecent system, and the Technical FAQ always points to the same answer: "Make sure your drivers are up to date for your hardware."

I am getting a heart attack with all this anger building up inside me, so I say no more.

MASKRA

P.S. What ever happened to Duke Nukem Forever?

## And another thing—get off his lawn!

I remember a time long ago when I could buy a \$40 to \$50 first-person game and be entertained for days or weeks. But where have those games gone? Nowadays, it seems like everything I buy has about 10 to 15 hours of content, and that's it. Look at *Mir Payne 2*, *Jedi Academy*, or *Devil Ex*—what happened to the content? What happened to the story? Are developers focusing so much on eye candy and multiplayer that they leave the storytelling to professional authors? With the current state of FPS multiplayer, I'd rather spend my days at the dentist than in the kindergarten classroom of an online server. And what is this notion of "replayability" when the story never changes? Am I supposed to play the game on a harder level after I finish it the first time just so I can save more often? Is that replayability, my ability to replay a given section over and over since I cannot get past it on supergodlike mode?

## Fugly in Chief

The new layout in the January 2004 issue of CGW was impressive, but there was one thing that surprised me: the staff page! Like the first 5 minutes when you finally meet your classmates in person, I turned the page to a shocking sight—pictures of the people I'd been reading about for over a year now. Not that any of you were overwhelmingly unattractive, but it's hard to make the transition between the people you've created in your mind and the people as they are in real life. The most horrifying, however, was Jeff Green. In his old column photo, I had always seen a slightly older version of *Animal Planet*'s Jeff Corwin. Tall, dark, handsome. I was, for lack of a better word, horrified to see my Jeff with that creepy half-smirk and awiward buzz cut. Oh, Jeff, what am I going to do with you?

Rachel  
Indianapolis, IN

Good games to me are like books; they tell a story and keep you so entwined in them that you don't notice the sun set and rise and set again. Please God, don't make *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* big letdowns...

Rob  
Daytona Beach, FL

## CGW redesign feedback

Kudos on the new look. Especially the staff page. Its yellow and orange harvesty nature reminded me of Thanksgiving, which reminded me of the dead turkey meat still in my fridge. Overall, it's really nice. But whoever took Jeff Green's picture should have to do some serious penance. Check Out is the best idea for the nonglossy, cheap-paper section of the mag. I like Huzzah, Mr. Liu.

Steve

Help, my eyes are bleeding! I really enjoy reading all the articles in the magazine, but the new format with the light gray and small black print over solid blue and red backdrops is very hard to read, and I'm sure that wasn't your goal. I know the art team needs to "redo" the look of the mag each year (it validates their existence at the company), but for the love of all good things, those color blocks have gotta go.

Todd

The redesigned issue is excellent, but I didn't know you were redesigning your editor: Is that picture really Jeff or porn star Randy Spears on a bad day? You



## Mail Bites

Keep doing what you do best, my beloved CGW, and screw yourself raw.

—Wanker

My sister has a birdcage requiring continual crap catchers. I can think of nothing better for the job than your magazine... Keep 'em coming CGW! From now on, I will get my game reviews from your competition.

—Danny Mignone

This jungle makes the Amazon seem like a botanical garden.

# DUNGEON SEIGE

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## Share the love/ hate online!

Hey kids, now you don't have to wait a whole month to say you love us! Just go to the official CGW message board at [boards.lup.com/zd](http://boards.lup.com/zd) and post right now! That's right, within seconds of reading this, you too can have your opinions on everything from W's hair to our latest reviews published online for the entire world, including your mother, to seal so, go now! Post Big up yourself! Don't be part of the silent majority! Be part of the annoying, whiny minority!

I have gone from the "Thank God I'm a country geek. I'm so happy I just milked the cows. I'm a redneck" look to the "I have the greatest job on the planet, it's early afternoon and I'm wasted, I AM a true babe magnet" smirk. By the way, Just For Men will take care of the little problem around the temples. I speak from experience.

Computer Dave from NJ

Please convey my thanks to your art design guy for making parts of your magazine unreadable, so now I don't have to waste as much time reading it. Please note that itchy-bitsy black text + colorful background = eyestrain.

Victor De Grande  
San Leandro, CA

Just wanted to send a couple comments about the mag. The new look is cool; very clean, easier on the eyes. I like it. It can stay.

The Check Out section is great. I always build my own PCs, so your reviews of full machines were not really useful to me. I've always wished you would break down the components and peripherals more often for us do-it-yourselfers, and now my wish has been granted.

Finally, I've always enjoyed Robert Coffey's enlightened POV in Searched Earth, but the last couple of articles have actually been relevant and insightful in addition to entertaining. Whether he continues being relevant and insightful, or just grotesque and demented, I'll still be reading.

Kevin

Although most of the time the strategies in Gamer's Edge were so basic that readers really learned nothing new, there were some gems (albeit few and far between), such as your four-part *WarCraft III* strategy guide and the now-classic *Impossible Creatures* strategy guide. Will I miss *Gamer's Edge*? I think so. Reading strategy guides in a magazine is still better than getting them from the Internet.

JM Cruz  
Makati City, Philippines

### Someone actually liked our DVD

Giving gamers free games? You must be nuts! As I was playing *Warlords* and *Thief II*, I kept saying to myself, "I can't believe this is free." Like any self-respecting PC gamer, I already had *Deus Ex*, but it's still quite impressive that it's on there. For free! To put the icing on the cake, you also slipped on the *Doom 3* shareware, so I get to bask in the glorious nostalgia! The best disc ever from any magazine, hands down. If you can talk one game company a month into letting you give away an older game, I'll immediately cancel all subscriptions to other magazines. I agree with your reviews more anyway. Happy gaming!

Matt Woodley

Thank you, and congratulations on being the one person in America who didn't hate us for giving away free games on a DVD.



### The devil and Mrs. Malaise

My wife has told me not to leave the January issue of your magazine lying around, due to the picture of the *Doom 3* "weirdo" on the front.

Apparently, it's freaking her out. Is there anywhere I can buy it as a poster?

Patrick Malaise  
Toronto, Canada

You'd have to ask *id* about a poster, but given your wife's reaction, we don't recommend you try to get it. Save your money and buy a new wife.

Kevin

Mail  
Bites

Jeff! What's up with that new pic?? You are SCARY, man! BTW, Wil rules, he is way cooler than Samuel L Jackson, and I want a job there working with him! ROCK ON!!!!!!!

—John Pertwee



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# Diplomacy Is Primary Weapon in America's Quest to End Indonesian Crisis.

By Eric C. Baldwin  
GLOBAL PRESS NETWORK

was relieved that the Indonesian government had agreed to a ceasefire.

Indonesia - A government spokesman said that the Indonesian government had agreed to a ceasefire.



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■ PREDICTIONS

## Top 10 Games of 2004

Our odds-on favorites for what the year's best will bring

**U**nless you're a fervent console zealot, you've probably noticed PC gaming is back in the saddle again. In fact, 2003 was supposed to be "the year of the PC," with *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* scheduled to ship in the fall. It was still a great year—abundantly evidenced in our awards feature—but now, both of those giant-killers are scheduled for 2004, along

with a few dozen other potential greats.

We're happy to report that picking just 10 games for 2004 was pretty tough. How do you decide with an embarrassment of riches that includes *World of Warcraft*, *Sam & Max 2*, *Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault*, *Operation Flashpoint 2*, *Quake IV*, *STALKER*, *Tribes: Vengeance*, and more? The only game we felt could be safely excluded was *Duke Nukem Forever*, since it'll never be finished.

Let us know what you're looking forward to on the message boards at [www.1Up.com](http://www.1Up.com)

### Half-Life 2, Valve Software

**Odds: Even**

OK, so Valve has had a string of bad luck and missed deadlines since announcing *Half-Life 2* last year. But that doesn't mean the game won't blow us all away when it finally ships. Valve did it once, and no one's made a better



**30** **Sam & Max**  
Blizzard adds  
beyond the dynam-  
ic duo of adventure  
going wireless  
to back.



**33** **Child's Play**  
Penny Arcade  
scores big with a  
try drive for a  
Scottish Children's  
Hospital.



**34** **PC Console**  
They said it couldn't  
be done, but some  
people just won't  
listen.



game since. Our bet is that the company can do it again.

### Battlefield Vietnam

**Odds: Even**

Once we played it we were hooked—in some respects, it's more fun than *Battlefield 1942*. The jungle not only adds atmosphere, it's also the defining element of the new game's design. The graphics are great, and there's a ton of vehicles and weapons, plus 17 songs from the era—there's nothing like flying into combat in a Huey listening to *Ride of the Valkyries*. Apocalypse now!

### Doom 3

**Odds: 2 to 1**

It's a war of the gargantuans between *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*. It's baby looked awesome when we saw it a couple months ago—scary as hell and utterly gorgeous. But will it feel fresh with largely Doom-era weapons? Here's hop-

ing the gameplay and level design are as cool as the engine.

### Full Spectrum Warrior

**Odds: 2 to 1**

For those craving some quality tactical action, this looks to be a sure thing. What we've seen amounts to Tom Clancy's *Pillbox*—that is, intense military strategy without all the micromanagement. The only tack right now: We actually need to see the PC version in action.

### Rome: Total War

**Odds: 2 to 1**

Not since *Civ III* have we been so excited about a strategy title, but this looks like a landmark game for the ages: epic battle

with huge armies, cinematic graphics, war elephants, siege engines—even war dogs. Creative Assembly (*Shogun, Medieval Total War*) has a reputation for polished, balanced, deep games, so we can't wait to unleash hell.

### Battle for Middle-earth

**Odds: 2 to 1**

The RTS heads behind the *Command & Conquer*. Generals games are hard at work on this *Lord of the Rings*-fueled title. Why are we excited (besides the fact that we're dorks)? Aside from the graphical goodness is a promising game structure: control individual LOTR heroes, squads, or massive armies that intelligently wade into battle. ■

**Valve did it once and no one has made a better game since. Our bet is that the company can do it again.**



■ Battle for Middle-earth



The Sims 2



■ Unreal Tournament 2004



■ Freedom Force 2

## Unreal Tournament 2004

Odds: 2 to 1

Now that it's actually shipping in 2004, we can look forward to throwing it down on deathmatches, the return of the greatly missed assault rounds, and terror from above via many new vehicles. Plus, there will be a 64-bit processing version that has WI's tech side all in a tizzy.

## The Sims 2

Odds: 2 to 1

The addition of simulated life-spans, persistent digital DNA in families, tons of new behaviors and items, and a vastly improved graphics engine make *The Sims 2* a sure thing. PC gaming snobs may look down their +2 noses of Dorikitude at the franchise, but *The Sims* line is as hardcore as any "game's game" and features the kind of intense play-er input that makes strategy classics

## Sid Meier's Pirates!

Odds: 3 to 1

We're going out on a limb with this one because we haven't seen it yet, but this is Sid Meier, and this is his remake of his own 1987 classic, one of the most beloved computer games ever made. The action-RPG to watch for in 2004.

## Freedom Force 2

Odds: 5 to 1

We're confident that Irrational Games can deliver another deep, comic-book-based strategy-RPG. The big question now is, can the brilliantly loving tongue-in-cheek humor of the first *Freedom Force* make the transition to the earlier golden age of comics? Everyone loves beating Nazis, but can they be as funny as the outlandish villains of the original game? We sure hope so.

## The Good, the Bad & the Ugly

News and views from the Wild West



### The Good

#### Turbine buys Asheron's Call 2 license

Here's a nice victory for the "little guy." Turbine Entertainment, feeling flush, pur-

chased the rights to its massive-multiplayer game, *Asheron's Call*, back from corporate behemoth Microsoft, thus ensuring the game can continue to grow and develop, without being subject to the whims of the Dark Lord of Seattle. With *D&D Online* and *Middle-earth Online* also on Turbine's slate, they are definitely the online game developer to watch in the coming year.



### The Bad

#### Weak sales of good games

This one isn't just bad, it's downright depressing. As of January, two of the best

games of 2003, Ubisoft's *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* and *Beyond Good & Evil* were both suffering from poor sales, forcing Ubisoft to desperately lower prices, and, in the case of *B&GE*, abandon any notion of a sequel. Ubisoft blew it big by shoving these games out during an overcrowded Xmas season, and this is the result.



### The Ugly

#### Rampant code leaks

It's a terrible problem: game code leaking out onto the Internet before the games are actually finished.

Following the disastrous *Half-Life 2* leak, which stupidly helped get that game postponed, in January, three more games apparently suffered from code leaks: *PainWier*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, and *World of Warcraft*. Folks, it's not funny, and it helps no one. Do those who are trying to entertain you for a living a favor and do not download leaked, early versions of games. Go buy *Beyond Good & Evil* instead.

## MMORPGS

Odds: 500 to 1

Will there be a breakout MMORPG this year? Probably not. Every other "sure thing" MMO (i.e., *Star Wars Galaxies*, *The Sims Online*) has proven that the online goldmine of *EverQuest* may be more illusory than first believed. Every big title on tap for 2004 has not only the enormous hurdle of player-er annual to leap, but also its own potential problems. *City of Heroes*? No loot, no player-er villains, no capes. *Ultima X: Odyssey*? How many younger gamers know about this franchise beyond the capricious *Ascension*? *Matrix Online*? Have you seen the last two movies, or been suckered into buying the game? Of the lot, *World of Warcraft* and *EQ2*



have the most hope, basically because Blizzard tends to get things very right and *EQ2* can coast by slightly improving on its mysterious winning formula. That said, any MMO is a long shot at best to hold any interest for any length of time.



# WHUR WHUP WHUP ASS.



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# Sam & Max: Freelance Police

Lookie, Sam! It's the appalling visage of crime!

**N**eed someone to take care of that beast from the cereal aisle? Having a bad day on the moon? Got some trouble with monkeys violating the heavenly temple? *Ghostbusters* be damned—you need Sam & Max Freelance Police. Like a soul-sucking simulacrum swimming down your throat and possessing the hell out of you, the dynamic duo of adventure gaming weirdness is coming your way.

The madcap comic-book creations of Steve Purcell, Sam (a "gamine shamus") and Max (a "hyperkinetic rabbit thing") are self-employed crime-fighters, punishing evildoers (and anyone else who gets in the way) with their own illogical brand of justice. Their hit 1993 adventure *Sam & Max Hit the Road* laced plenty of the



Moreno!

duo's signature humor into the traditional LucasArts-style adventure gameplay, and this latest outing promises a similar journey into their bizarre world. Six separate cases to solve, 19 minigames to unlock, and bonus downloadable content means plenty for Sam & Max fans to look forward to. Did we mention that it takes place in a full 3D environment?

Longtime fans of the *Freelance Police* can also expect quite a few nods to their comic book escapades. The various missions look to echo some of the classic comic story lines, and a few key supporting characters—such as Sam and Max's insane, hard-boiled detective neighbor, Flint Paper—make guest appearances. If you ask us, the PC gaming world has been deprived of Sam and Max for far too long. You can bet we'll be waiting eagerly for the summer release of *Sam & Max: Freelance Police*. **Ryan Scott**



Are you feeling as mentally unstable as I am?

**The dynamic duo of adventure-gaming weirdness is coming your way.**

## Console Corner

What's worth taking from your little brother

We can't live in a vacuum. There actually are—gasp!—good games that are only available on the consoles. Here's this month's pick:

**James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing**, Electronic Arts (Xbox, PS2, GC)

While James Bond's record on the PC front earns him a goldfinger, the console games have generally been good. The newest in the series is probably the most ambitious attempt to put a Walther PPK in your hands. The big push in this third person action/stealth game is for the flavor of an honest-to-god film. No expense has been spared as 007 boasts dramatic camera angles and a story penned by the guy who wrote *GoldenEye*. Some will be



excited about all the celebrity talent in this game (William Balfour, Pierce Brosnan, Heidi Klum and so on), but we're looking forward to the driving levels worked on by the team behind *Need for Speed Underground*.

**Darren Gladstone**

Also noteworthy: *Ninja Gaiden* (Xbox) and *Wreck Unleashed* (PS2/Xbox)

## The Nerd Herd

Street geeks speak

**What was your favorite PC game of 2003?**



**Michael Hawash**

HOUSTON, TEXAS  
*Battlefield 1942* improved throughout 2003 with well-designed expansions and user-created mods. BF 1942 continues to wow

me with an incredible multiplayer experience that has yet to be topped. **Runner up: Call of Duty**



**Aaron Ko**

SAN FRANCISCO, CA  
*Final Fantasy XI* after wearing me never play a MMORPG again. The allure of an RP game online

grows! Too great for my trail will



**Ariel Celeste**

DAKLAND, CA  
*Call of Duty: The Gameplay* and cinematics brought a new look and feel to the WW II genre.

It's a shock or Stalingrad is like nothing I have seen before.



**Marcus Eikenberry**

PORTLAND, OR  
*Star Wars Jedi Knight*, without a doubt, is my personal favorite of the year. There's nothing hard to achieve, the goal of being a Jedi and being close to doing it.

my like working



**Seth Welch**

DAILY CITY, CA  
*Call of Duty: Call of Duty*. When you start off in Stalingrad, you feel the intensity. One in three soldiers are allotted

a gun. Of course you're not one of the three, and you have to find the nearest corpse with a free gun for an instant.



massively multiplayer...

# HORIZONS

Empire of Aetaria

...FROM A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW.

"...Horizons is the game to get this year." E3 2003 - Game of Show - *IGN Vault*

"...simply amazing to behold." E3 2003 - Best of Show: RPG - *DailyGame*

"...a cut above most MMORPGs...unique elements that have never been seen in any massively multiplayer title." - *Adrenaline Vault*

"...your ticket out of your old and boring game/life." - *UGO*

"...Unique character classes and deep skill system..." - *Gamezone*



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■ DONUS POINTS

# Gamers Give Big for Kids Hospital

Penny Arcade brings the toys and the noise, noise, noise, noise

**T**hat jolly fat guy in the red suit had some help this holiday season, and the kids at the Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle scored big.

Jerry Holkins (Tycho) and Mike Krehulik (Gabe), who run the popular gaming site Penny Arcade ([www.penny-arcade.com](http://www.penny-arcade.com)), organized a toy drive they called Child's Play for the Children's Hospital in Seattle, and the response from Penny Arcade readers was monumental.

"It's been amazing," said Krehulik, the artist who draws the Penny Arcade strip. "Our readers have really gone above and beyond to help these kids. We've collected over \$175,000 in toys and cash. That's just incredible."

In part, Child's Play started as a response to some of the negative press

gaming has gotten whenever some nutcase commits a violent crime.

"The media seems intent on perpetuating the myth that gamers are ticking time bombs just waiting to go off," Krehulik wrote on Penny Arcade's website. "I know for a fact that gamers are good people... We are just regular people who happen to love videogames."

Krehulik and Holkins hoped Child's Play might counter some of that negative publicity while benefiting a worthwhile charity. "Some of these kids are in pretty bad shape and just having a Game Boy would really raise their spirits," Krehulik said. He and Holkins have been heartened by the response Child's Play has received.

"It has really surprised us. I think we each expected to bring in a few thousand dollars' worth of stuff. The level of support

from the community for this project has really blown us away," said Krehulik.

The Children's Hospital in Seattle, which treats 190,000 children each year, is happy for the support. "We are very grateful and appreciative of Penny Arcade and the online community for their Child's Play gift drive to benefit Children's patients," said Kim Korte, Child Life Manager at the hospital. Korte said that the toys and gifts will be given to patients throughout the year and will also be distributed at Children's Playroom, outpatient clinics, and regional clinic locations.

If you didn't hear about Child's Play in time to contribute last year, you'll get another chance this year. Penny Arcade hopes to expand the toy drive to benefit even more hospitals. It looks like Tycho and Gabe will be giving Santa a run for his money. ■ **Mark Asher**

## Reality Check

How the ratings stack up among the gaming press

Game	CGW	PC Gamer	CGM	GameSpot	IGN.com	GameSpy	1UP.com	GameRankings.com
C&C Generals: Zero Hour	B+	C	A	A-	A	A-	-	A-
Contract J.A.C.K.	D	C	D	C	C	C	D+	C
Final Fantasy XI	B+	-	B+	B+	B+	B+	-	A-
Freedom Fighters	B+	B	D	A	B+	B+	B-	B+
Redwood Tycoon 3	A	A-	D	A-	A-	B+	-	A-
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic	A+	-	A+	A-	A	A+	A-	A

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TECH

# Close N Play

They said it couldn't be done—a PC game console

**W**e always considered "plug and play" an impossible dream for the PC, but some guys never got the message.

A company called DISC has introduced patented technology that lets gamers drop any Windows game into a console and play it instantly. Patches and game updates are delivered via broadband or dial-up while the user sleeps.

The DISCover PC game console is a closed system designed to play PC games and function as a kind of media center for DVDs, CDs, and music files. It has the guts of a PC, but it's not designed to let you navigate Windows or surf the web. It's purpose is to bring the great library of PC titles to the masses, simply and affordably, with multiplayer support.

DISC has so far licensed the technology to Apex and Alienware, which are expected to ship units this year. Both models support keyboards, a mouse, USB controllers, and online connectivity (Ethernet and modem). The \$400 Apex unit will use a 1.4GHz Pentium 4 chip with nForce graphics. Alienware's box will boast an AMD FX-51 processor, 1GB of memory, and an Nvidia GeForce 5850 Ultra card; the pricing and street date are still undetermined.

The company is working with Microsoft's



Enabled Devices Group and GameSpy to use Windows XP Embedded, along with GameSpy's online connectivity. Once connected to the Internet, the system recognizes your installed games and automatically downloads patches and updates. When the hard drive fills up, the device uninstalls the least-used programs to free up space (but doesn't delete saved games).

We'll have to see how the first systems shake out, but if the device works as advertised it could be a great alternative for those who want to play PC games without the hassles and expense. **Ken Brown**

## Top 5 Downloads

The best things in life are free

This month we focus on demos of less well-known games that are worth checking out.

### 1 Dominions 2

[www.greynox.com/dominions2](http://www.greynox.com/dominions2)  
 Features based on strategy game to a deep but easy-to-learn learning curve, provides us with a unique look at worlds.



### 2 Star Chamber

[www.star-chamber.net](http://www.star-chamber.net)  
 A strategy game available over games, and it's a great alternative to Star Trek: The Next Generation.



### 3 Combat Mission: Afrika Korps

[www.buchisoft.com](http://www.buchisoft.com)  
 The best World War II action game, the best of the genre. It's not to be confused with the other titles, but it's a great alternative to the other titles.



### 4 X-Plane: Space Combat

[www.x-planes.com](http://www.x-planes.com)  
 The greatest X-Plane game ever, a completely unique and the only game to offer a truly unique and exciting experience. It's a great alternative to the other titles.



### 5 Hardwood Solitaire III

[www.hardwood.com](http://www.hardwood.com)  
 Hardwood Solitaire III is a great alternative to the other titles. It's a great alternative to the other titles.



## Rise of Nations Contest

Win copies of RON and the new expansion Throne and Patriots

Who wants to take over the world for free? Sorry, Chirlean Kim, only U.S. residents are eligible. If you're a cheap-skate megalomaniac (and frankly, who isn't?), just answer the following questions and you could win a signed copy of the upcoming *Rise of Nations* expansion *Throne and Patriots*, along with a copy of the original game.

Five lucky nerds will be chosen at random from among those who answer the questions correctly. Got it? OK, here goes:

1. How many ages are there in *Rise of Nations*?
2. In which age can you build the Kremlin?
3. Which final technology allows the instant construction of units?



Send the answers, along with your name, address, and phone number, to [cglletters@ziffdavis.com](mailto:cglletters@ziffdavis.com). Please include RON CONTEST in the subject line, and be sure to say hi to Ryan Scott, the half-starved editorial half-wit you'll have to go through all your entries to pick the winners.

Good luck, strategy fans!

SIERRA

MONOLITH

WYND  
UNIVERSAL



- Weapon jam?
- Reloading?
- Giving enemy a chance?



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FIELD TRIP

# Captain Kirk Beams Down

First GenCon in Southern California a little too intimate

**G**enCon came to Southern California last December, slipping quietly into Anaheim with a modest crowd swaddled by a convention center that felt two sizes too large. There were the usual board games, role playing systems, and collectibles, but it's clear that collectible card games are dominant. "Are these cards valuable?" William Shatner asked those who'd come to hear him speak. "So, there are 52 of them?" No, there are a few hundred, someone in the audience explained. "Oh, so you don't play cards with them?"

The low turnout was evident in the several hundred empty chairs at the Shatner Q&A. "I've seen more people in the men's room," he joked, before chatting with the assembled group of about 100 people. "A very intimate afternoon with Grandpa Shatner," someone whispered as he held forth with a few rambling but entertaining anecdotes.

As for as gaming goes, there wasn't much to see: America's Army, an nVidia booth, the E3 build of Activision's *Vampires* game, Sierra's *Ground Control 2* and *Midle-earth Online*, and a couple of already

released LucasArts titles. A 10-year-old boy turned off a demo of JoWood's *SpellForce* to join a *Call of Duty* server, effectively doing an end run around an uninhabited LAN that charged by the hour.

GenCon CEO Peter Adkison said the turnout of 4725 people exceeded expectations (GenCon in Indianapolis draws about 25,000 people). "We're very happy," he said. "Some exhibitors might have been expecting more people, but we tried to manage expectations." With contracts signed for the next two years, this GenCon still has plenty of room to grow. **Tom Chick**



Grandpa Shatner holds forth. Isn't there a home for aging, loopy sci-fi TV stars? There should be.

NEWS

# Interplay Eats Its Young. Closes Black Isle Studios

The *Fallout* license appears to be up for sale

**L**ike crash survivors stranded in the Andes turning to cannibalism, Interplay, stranded on a mountain of debt, may be eating its own children.

Although Interplay hasn't made an official announcement, members of Black Isle Studios said the entire Black Isle staff has been laid off and the division has been dissolved. Black Isle Studios was working on—oh the pain!—*Fallout 3*.

According to an anonymous source, Interplay likely plans to sell the *Fallout* license to generate revenue so that other lesser-known games in development can be completed.

"It's kind of twisted if you think about it," said the source. "The guys working on the more successful brand get let go because



Light a candle in remembrance of Black Isle Studios.

it can be sold, while the ones working on the crappier brand get to keep their jobs."

Black Isle Studios was responsible for such notable games as *Planescape: Torment*, the *Icewind Dale* series, and *Fallout 2*, among others. **Mark Asher**

## 5, 10, 15 Years Ago in CGW

What we said when you were nursing



### 5 Years Ago, March 1999

Under the delusion that readers hungered for personal info about all of us, we decided to run little writer bios with every review and preview. What did we learn from this? That "Bob Proctor has it on good authority he learned to say 'choo-choo' before 'mama'" and that "Kenneth Johnson was made into a vampire in the late 14th century." We also found out that "Robert Coffey has killed 28 fat greasy slugs while living in a basement." And yet we still kept him on staff. Good judgment is not exactly our strong point.



### 10 Years Ago, March 1994

Kingmaker may have dominated the cover, but *Doom* took over inside. This watershed moment in gaming earned the kind of gushing praise we saved for hex-based tank simulations in those hoary old days: "a new benchmark," "the most believable environment...ever," "brooding, sinister flavor," and—the understatement of the year—"Deathmatches may be the most intense gaming experience available today." We didn't just like it, we loved it, and like the gamers everywhere busily crashing their universities' servers, our lives would never be the same again.



### 15 Years Ago, March 1994

"Our experienced reviewer says *Battles of Napoleon* is BETTER THAN SEX!" Man alive, that is just so...sad. So terribly, terribly sad. Sad sad sad sad sad. That is the all-time most sodeadly sad three-hankle sad weeper of a sad, sad headline in recorded history. "*Battles of Napoleon* is BETTER THAN SEX!" It hurts just to read it. Ugh, interesting tidbit: The reviewer was humanely euthanized shortly after submitting this review. A merciful closure to a sad saga.

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# GANGLAND



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# THIS MONTH'S TOP 5 PRE-ORDERS



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



**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-chilling, 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.



**Verol Tournament 2004** *EA GOLF* 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



**The Sims Nooky! Magic Expansion Pack** *Electronic Arts*  
Your Sims can now harness the supernatural, casting spells with playful or malicious intentions. With over 175 new items, a new carnival-themed location, and a host of new quirky characters, the neighborhood will never be the same.



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



**Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Athena Sword** *Activision* In this expansion pack for Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield, you command the world's most elite, multinational squad of counter-terrorist operatives in their latest mission to track the desperate remnants of Gaspic's terrorist organization.



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**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.

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# CGW Top 20

Wasted time well spent

Rank	Game	Rating
1	Call of Duty <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
2	Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic <i>(Adventure)</i>	★★★★★
3	Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of WWII <i>(Action Game)</i>	★★★★★
4	WarCraft III: The Frozen Throne <i>(Adventure)</i>	★★★★★
5	Max Payne 2 <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
6	Final Fantasy XI <i>(Open-World)</i>	★★★★★
7	C&C Generals: Zero Hour <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
8	Lord of the Rings: Return of the King <i>(Adventure)</i>	★★★★★
9	Star Wars Galaxies <i>(Open-World Online)</i>	★★★★★



Rank	Game	Rating
10	Age of Mythology: The Titans <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
11	Prince of Persia <i>(Action)</i>	NR
12	Trojan 2.0 <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
13	Freedom Fighters <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
14	Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
15	SimCity 4: Rush Hour <i>(Action Game)</i>	★★★★★
16	The Simpsons: Hit and Run <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
17	XIII <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
18	Madden NFL Football 2004 <i>(Action Game)</i>	★★★★★
19	Midnight Club II <i>(Action)</i>	★★★★★
20	Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna <i>(Adventure)</i>	★★★★★

Source: results of games from the last six months. To vote, go to [www.computergaming.com](http://www.computergaming.com).

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(Ubisoft)

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(Electronic Arts)

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# Previews

See 'em now, play 'em soon





### Warlords Battlecry 3

The sleeper hit RTS game of 2002 is back, with lots of new stuff.

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Prepare to go knee-deep in the s-t as we take a hands-on look at this FPS.

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### Ground Control 2

Can a tactical game actually look good and play well? You'll know soon enough.

53

BY ANDREW LUCAS/ARTS DIRECTOR, Pandemic Studios; GAMES, Battlefield shooter; BY ANDREW LUCAS/ARTS DIRECTOR 03 2004

# Star Wars: Battlefront

More stars! More wars! Go figure

**Y**ou've always dreamed of slipping on the shiny white metal jackboots of an Imperial stormtrooper, but fetishes aside, there's never been a proper chance to do frontline fighting as one in a game. That is, until now. Last month, we got you the scoop on the upcoming sci-fi-fueled, Battlefield-ish *Star Wars Battlefront*. Since then, we've actually had a chance to knock around an early PC build of the game—and to get some tasty screens for you in the process. The information below, however, will have to hold you over until a release date far, far away (late fall 2004).

On paper, it sounds like the game that *Galaxies* should have been. Instead of playing as the equivalent of some second-stringer telling you to "stay on target,"

you're one of the grunts down in the trenches, fighting this well-known interstellar war. O.K., two well-known interstellar conflicts. You'll be able to relive battles from the original movies, but material is also taken from the new trilogy, since you've also drafted to fight in the Clone Wars.

For continuity's sake, Imperial forces won't be able to duke it out with the clone army, according to producer Jim Tso, so the entire game will be split into two time periods across 15-plus playable levels—Empire versus Rebellion and Republic versus Federation. There's no word on whether the maps will vary a whole lot, but as Tso says, "Not a whole lot is going to change on Tatooine over

the course of 20 years—it's a desert!"

## Battlefield— Innnnn— spaaaaace

One thing that's going to change is how you suit up for battle. You play as a member of the heavily armed Republic forces or the heavy-metal droid army, and the Clone Wars are going to be hairy. Just strap into a gunship—this dreadnought seats one pilot, a co-pilot, a couple ball-turret gunners, and one side gunner. The AT-TE is the squat precursor to the AT-AT walkers. There are also the spider droids, two-wheeled Hailfire tanks, starfighters, and the imposing AATs that almost wiped out Jar-Jar in *The Phantom Menace* (saaa dooooo, so very close). Granted we only fought in Naboo, but that's just a minuscule taste of things to come. The classic *Star Wars* trilogy will also be well



**"Pandemic came to us with the idea to make a Battlefield-like game before there even was a Battlefield!"**



The pilot class is pretty useless without a ride.



As in Battlefield's conquest mode, you want to hold checkpoints.

represented—if not a little lopsided. You see, the Empire has the leg up in firepower and numbers. For every X-wing, Y-wing, and snowspeeder the Rebellion has, the Empire has AT-STs, AT-ATs, TIE fighters, and TIE bombers. Yes, this is shaping up to be a nerd's dream come true.

It begs the question: Is this game just copying *Battlefield's* style and throwing in popular sci-fi vehicles? Tso fesses up: "Pandemic actually came to us after working on *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* with an idea to make a game just about the battles [in the *Star Wars* universe]. Basically, it was a *Battlefield*-like game before there even was a *Battlefield*." Of course, *Star Wars* fans took some initiative of their own by working on the film-themed *Galactic Conquest* mod for *Battlefield 2/EM2*. To which Tso adds, "The people obviously want the same thing we do—to be in the *Star Wars* universe. If we can't

deliver a game better than the mod, we should all quit our day jobs."

### Space exploitation

Considering the scope of the conquest mode, it looks like their positions are secure. Playing a more strategic angle, this multiplayer mode lets 32 players (Pandemic is working up to 64-player capabilities into LAN play) pick sides, and then, before combat, select planets to control. Kind of like *Risk*, sides alternate choosing among the 10 planets. The ultimate goal, obviously, is to own them all.

Though we don't have a final list of all the worlds to conquer, we can tell you that

Naboo, Geonosis, Cammo, Tatooine, Yavin, Hoth ("We must have a Hoth battle in every *Star Wars* game," Tso jokes), and Endor are up for grabs. There's also word that a key world and battles from the upcoming *Episode III* will also be in the game. Some planets, such as Yavin and Endor, rely more on ground combat between soldiers, whether it's in jungles or the cities on Naboo. Other, more open battles, like ones on Hoth and Geonosis, are more vehicle-centric. Now here's where it gets interesting: Depending on the planet you hold—and the time

AT-STs are fun, but Imperial officers can summon probe droids.



Tag—you're it! A little fun and hijinks near a temple on a moon of Yavin.



## Rally the troops

All the different classes haven't been finalized, but we do know that each side will have at least five unique classes. Take the Rebel troops, for example: They have to rely on jacks-of-all-trades and spies. The Rebel's stealth soldier lets you dress like an Imperial behind enemy lines. Meanwhile, the Empire will likely have more classes and specialists, since they can churn out armies. Among the cooler innovations is the pilot class: useless in the field, but deadly behind the wheel. And the droid army has you controlling a number of heavy units, including rocket-launching assault droids and the rolling Droidica 'bots. Jim's favorite unit so far: the clone-army jump trooper, who uses a rocket-pack like Jango Fett.

period you're fighting in—you get different bonuses for owning the different planets. If the Imperials hold Endor long enough, you'll be the proud owner of a brand-spankin'-new Death Star. If the Republic maintains control of Cammo, your clone army gets bonus units when going into battle. And this is saying nothing of the NPCs who will appear in battle. The famous faces of Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, and Count Dooku number among the bonus computer-controlled NPC troops that'll duke it out with you. Then, to add more flavor, you may run into some of the indigenous people of various worlds. Tso speaks of computer-controlled Tusken Raiders populating the Tatooine deserts and picking fights with anybody who comes near. There's also talk of the playful and oh-so-annoying Ewoks sneaking onto speederbikes on Endor. Please, please let there be Ewoks for us to stomp.

Tso promises that the maps themselves will hold more strategic elements as well. He uses Hoth as an example: There are consequences to losing command posts, so if the empire can take out the shield generators early enough, the rebels are toast. Conversely, if the rebels can hold the line, there are only so many reinforcements available for the imperial forces to draw from.

While Pandemic is also hard at work on PS2 and Xbox versions of the game, Tso says they want to make sure the PC version is a quality PC title in its own right and not a port. What we've knocked around is obviously early, but as of press time, we're about a year away from seeing the finished product. This taste of the Force is more than enough to keep us going until then. **Darren Gladstone**

The Word **STELLAR**

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PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: Digital Illusions CE GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: Spring 2004

# Battlefield: Vietnam

We love the smell of frags in the morning...

**D**igital Illusions CE's decision to go all Vietnam on us caused *Battlefield* vets to panic. Some felt *BF* wouldn't be the same if it were in a dense jungle, since tanks really can't drive through trees. Others worried that Vietnam wouldn't be done justice. Well, we've recently played *BF: Vietnam*. We're not worried, but you will want to kill Janis Joplin.

*BFV* isn't a happy middle ground between what's expected from a digital Vietnam War and what's expected from the next *Battlefield*. It is, instead, *BF: 1942* with new tricks, new art, and new tactics. Renaming it *Americans vs. Random Asian Nation in Some Jungle* wouldn't change anything. The tunnels and traps that were notorious during the Vietnam War have been overlooked, but what the heck. The *Battlefield* series isn't about realism—it's about mindless shooting. When was the last time you saw a sniper balancing on a plane's wing at 10,000 feet? Thought so.

So, what real changes are in store? For starters, you'll have to cope with some damn hippy music that was used to brainwash our nation's youth in the 1950s. These same tunes blare out during chopper and boat rides, announcing your presence to nearby friends—and psyching

**It's the jungle that gives this game its biggest and most alluring twist.**



Hey buddy, need a lift to the war zone?

out the VC—making them stop and wonder, "Where da party at?"

## Welcome to the jungle

It's the jungle that gives the game its biggest and most alluring twist. Long grass and an abundance of foliage make hiding a leafy breeze. Once you start going prone, enemies can't see you or your telltale nametags. The end result has a huge impact on gameplay.

Despite the new focus on flora, the base game still revolves around vehicles and stationary emplacements, although less of a focus is being put on armor. On-foot action has been refined, but not to the level that will please *Quake* diehards. With the exception of a scrapped medic class



Just because you have the superior firepower doesn't mean you have the upper hand.

and reworked gun assignments, grunt play is very much akin to the original's. Choppers and comparatively small boats (some acting as mobile spawn points) play more significant roles in the action. Unlike *Joint Operations'* promise of a killing-machine-free vehicular system, Vietnam's gas-powered beasts still toss out rockets and bullets. The choppers, capable of hoisting and swinging friendly tanks about the map, are critical transportation and support vehicles, while jets rain fiery hell from above. *Desert Combat* fans will recognize the control schemes for jets and choppers, and they should appreciate the extra armor the new flyers have. Us? We'll appreciate our shot at the war effort come this spring. **—Sean Sulliv**

## Name That Tune

Match the in-game music to the most appropriate vehicle.

SONGS	VEHICLES
A. The Kinks, "You Really Got Me"	1. Chonk
B. Bobby Fuller Four, "I Fought the Law"	2. Phlebotom
C. 103, "Tarento: Sor"	3. Verpo
D. Grand Fux, "Psychic Reaction"	4. Huey Howl
E. Deep Purple, "Rock"	5. J08

The Word: **STEAMY**





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PUBLISHER: **Enlight Software** DEVELOPER: **Infinite Interactive** GENRE: **RTS** RELEASE DATE: **Q2 2004**

# Warlords Battlecry III

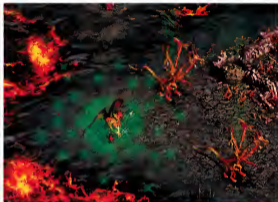
Cry havoc and let loose the dogs of war

**T**alk about not getting enough credit. Of all the big real-time strategy franchises out there, *Warlords Battlecry* has to be the most underrated and overlooked. Spun off from the venerable *Warlords* series, the *Battlecry* games have been some of the best RTS games in years. Fortunately, it seems that we're not the only ones who think so, as the third installment is already well underway.

Although *Warlords Battlecry III* is based on the same engine as its predecessor, it now sports stronger A.I., larger characters, bigger battles, better graphical detail in both units and environments, and a darker, edgier interface. It also promises another fun, open-ended campaign structure similar to the one we saw in previous installments.

## Fresh to the light

The game is loaded with a fistful of new features. For starters, three new types of terrain are available: fertile grasslands, harsh deserts, and lava-rich molten rock. Scattered throughout the terrain are



These volcanic environs are among some of the new lands to conquer.

## Of all the RTS franchises, *Battlecry* has to be the most underrated.

shops where you can purchase valuable items, potions, and spells.

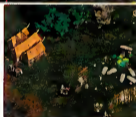
Of course, what good would that be without characters? There's good news on that front as well. *Battlecry III* gives players five new races to choose from. First up are the chameleonlike *srahti*, a tribal society of reptilian humanoids who employ powerful dinosaurs and shamanistic magic in combat. The insectoid swarm race consists of putrid scorpions, beetles, and other filthy vermin predisposed toward overpowering opponents with superior numbers of weak troops. Finally, there are the plaguelords, a disturbing mass of disease-bearing ghouls and demons who slowly whittle away the opposition with their infectious powers. Two new human factions—the magic-wielding empire and the cavalry-heavy knights—fight to keep these abysmal monsters at bay. Add to these the 11 surviving races from *Battlecry II* for a whopping total of 16 unique species. Not bad, eh?

Each race has its own unique units, including plenty of new options for the old ones. Hero units get a particularly big boost in the form of a new hero-develop-

ment system—your heroes can gain experience and level up during the game. Beyond giving players a high degree of control over how their units' statistics improve, *Battlecry III* presents a wide variety of skills based on the hero's race and class selection. Leveling should go quite a bit faster than in previous installments, although new levels now bring smaller increments of power—indeed, a level 100 hero here is equivalent to a level 40 hero from *Battlecry II*.

The other big change is the inclusion of lairs. These neutral structures routinely spawn packs of aggressive A.I.-controlled monsters, providing an extra bit of challenge in player-versus-player affairs. Destroying these lairs is not always a simple task, as they will spawn some pretty hefty defenses. High-level boss creatures emerge from destroyed lairs, and defeating them yields valuable experience and powerful magical items to bolster your forces.

Speaking of magic, there's plenty of that to be found—30 all-new spells are spread out among three different magical spheres. Divination spells, Poison magic, and the high-powered Arcane discipline



Once again, it's time to colonize the untamed wilds.

give you tons of options if you're trying to draft a magic-heavy army. Elementalist mages specialize in commanding the forces of nature, channeling their energy into powerful creations of fire and ice. Defilers are crafty poisoners who wield noxious venom clouds and rotting magic that chisels away at their foes' life force.

*Warlords Battlecry III* certainly has a solid legacy to build upon. We were huge fans of the last game—it was a contender for Best RTS Game of 2002. If what we've seen so far is any indication of what we can expect, this just might be one of those rare worthwhile entries into an otherwise worn and overdone genre. **Ryan Scott**

The Word: **HEROIC**

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# CITY OF HEROES

# Painkiller

Put this one under "not for the faint of heart." We could try to explain why you're fighting your way through purgatory—but why bother? Check out the porky hell biker getting knocked on his butt: He just got impaled by a shot from a strike gun and is now reeling from the blow. Off to the right, a DoD commando is ready to strike. Yep, this game looks twisted as hell, with a style all its own. Oh, and it's got a decent 3D engine to back it up. Look for frenzied, 32-player multiplayer matches early in early 2004.





# PIPELINE

Ship dates and slip dates for games in the stream

Game	Developer	Expected
Advent Rising	Highway Games	July 2004
▲ Akira	Academy	February 2004
Atlanta Evolution	The American Company	April 2004
The Band's Tale	House Entertainment	2004
Battlefield: Vietnam	Electronic Arts	March 2004
Black & White II	Electronic Arts	June 2004
BlackProof Monk	Empire Interactive	Q1 2004
Call of Duty: Dark Forces of the Earth	Benjamin Schwartz	February 2004
City of Heroes	NCsoft	March 2004
Counter-Strike: Condition Zero	Valve	February 2004
Deceit 2	Activision	April 2004
Dragon Empire	Castleware	Q2 2004
DOOM III	Apogee	June 2004
Dungeons Siege II: The Adventure Company	Microsoft	2004
EverQuest II	SOE	March 2004
Evil Geniuses	Yvesco, Universal	Q1 2004
Fallout 3	Hothead	2004
▲ Far Cry	Ubisoft	March 2004
▲ FireStrike: Giant City Anti-Clone	Empire Interactive	2004
▲ Hammer World	The Adventure Company	March 2004
Freedom Force vs. the Third Reich	TBA	2004
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	2004
Gasland	Whisper Interactive	September 2004
Grand Control 2: Operation London	NDA Productions	Q1 2004
Gold Worm	NCsoft	2004
Half-Life 2	Valve, Universal	April 2004
▲ Hitman II: Contracts	Empire Interactive	April 2004
It's 2: Star Trek: Forbidden Frontier Expansion	Ubisoft	Q1 2004
▲ Judd: Operation Typhoon Rising	Novogigic	February 2004
KEwitch	Empire Interactive	February 2004
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude		
Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle	NCsoft	February 2004
LOTR: The Battle for Middle-earth	Electronic Arts	June 2004
LOTR Online: Trading Card Game	Decipher	2004
Lords of the South Sea	Skull	February 2004
The Matrix Online	Ubisoft	2004

▲ New Update



By Bruce Lowry, Ubisoft, Empire Interactive, Crytek, EA GAMES, Shooter, RELEASE DATE: Q1 2004

## Far Cry Trouble in Paradise

**F**ar Cry? More like Near Done. Development has progressed swiftly across the sprawling jungles of Far Cry—from the multiple nonlinear paths you can combat your way through to the deft enemy A.I. Back in July 2003, we told you about charter boat operator Jack Carver. Now, here's an update on this promising shooter.

Crytek, the German studio behind Far Cry, demonstrated a late alpha, pre-beta build that illustrated impressive draw distance and physics-coding implementation. Enemies flail in the old-so-fashionable ragdoll style, but in a subtle improvement, fallen enemies don't collide and clip with one another; rather, they impressively pile atop one another.

Objects like a rusty oil drum can be knocked off a hill and sent barreling toward opponents below. As the barrel begins to teeter downward, one of the A.I.-controlled opponents surprisingly and desperately tries to push the can back up the hill to stave off death. It's a futile attempt that ends in pancake city.

When Far Cry is released in the first quarter of 2004, it will come packaged with the easy-to-use Sandbox map editor. Don't worry about brushing up on your programming chops here, this kit is as easy as running a paintbrush across a wall. When level designer Chris Auty used to make Counter-Strike maps, a 5-square-mile arena would take him up to a month. Thanks to Sandbox, he can easily create a level in a week.



▲ All is not well on this island paradise.

"Basically, anyone can pick up the editor [Sandbox] and put down terrain, add A.I., vehicles, trees, and brushes, and create a level. The editor is stunningly simple to use and really powerful at the same time," says Auty. "[You will be] able to design the level and play it instantly. Sandbox gives you the ability to actually enter the game inside the editor and test what you have created, this is pretty useful when testing timing and layouts, and gives you instant feedback when you're designing."

While Sandbox is designed to have an inviting learning curve, the promised strength of the system has not been compromised. "There are a lot of cool features designed for more experienced users, too. We have a very powerful scripting language that can be edited in the tools, as well as a cut-scene editor for making in-game movies." —Johnny Liu

### The Word: NEAR



▲ One evil henchman's caught sleeping on the job—again.



PUBLISHER: Vivendi Universal DEVELOPER: Massive Entertainment GENRE: Real-time Tactics RELEASE DATE: Q3 2004

# Ground Control II: Operation Exodus

Real-time strategy gets down and dirty

**S**omeone out there must really love harvesting coal and iron. How else can you explain the joy that is the modern real-time strategy game? Dig, mine, build, and then sometime before you die, wage war. Yawn. Thankfully, that hasn't been the case with the *Ground Control* series. It's billed as "real-time tactics," meaning you're assigned squads and immediately rolled into battle. It's been



three years since the original, and *Operation Exodus* promises more of just about everything that made *Ground Control* so sweet: more tactics, more vehicles, more factions, and more graphical eye candy than you'd expect.

The first thing we noticed when Vivendi swung by our office recently was the incredible attention to detail. In the traditional "God's eye" view of the world, you can make out ripples and reflections in the water and see trees swaying to indicate a breeze (as well as wind direction, which comes into play later). But you can see that in any strategy title these days. Zooming in here, you can even make out the faces of the grunts in the field. In one example, senior producer Jose Alier garrisoned up a building, and when he zoomed in, we saw soldiers poking guns out of broken windows and aiming off into the distance. When we looked at a medium tank—one of the 48 units in the game—the commander's head was popping out (which improves the unit's accuracy but makes you more susceptible). While at first these details may seem to be there for effect only, they all actually add to the gameplay.

Vivendi has also been busy refining aspects of the original. You can now control individual units, if you want, or stick with squads. You can give orders as to where troops should go and the direction they should face upon arrival. Best yet, it's now possible to return fire as you retreat, you cowardly bastards. The 24-mission campaign looks huge (at least after seeing



Roll out on a wide variety of terrain.

some of the volcanic-, tropical-, tundra-, and urban-themed maps), and you can tackle missions on your own or cooperatively over the Internet when you aren't having an eight-way deathmatch. Alier also says the development team is working on a scenario/map editor (although not yet final) that might ship prior to the game's launch.

The other big news is the announcement of a third faction, which will be sucked into the uncivil war between the Northern Star Alliance and the Terran Empire: the HR Giger-inspired Veron Nomads. While not much has been revealed about this wacky alien race, we can tell you that the idea is cool. Inspired by nano- and biotechnology, these creatures can meld together to create newer, more potent units. Merge a gas engineer vehicle with two assault troops and a thumper tank and voila—you get a giant gas-bomb-spewing monstrosity! Just like dear old dad. **Domen Gladstone**

The Word: **TACT-FULL**

## PIPELINE

Game	Developer	Expected
Proton of Honor: Pacific Assault	Ubisoft & THQ	March 2004
Age of Valor: Vietnam	Amn	June 2004
Halfway20th Online	Vivendi Universal	September 2004
The Movies	Activision	June 2004
Hybris	Remedy	October 2004
Operation Flashpoint 2	Gamestudio	Q4 2004
Pro-Man World 2	Big Interactive	Q1 2004
Punkster	Quantic Dream	March 2004
Pinot	J.C. Entertainment	2004
Psychonaut	CD Projekt	2004
Quake IV	Activision	2004
Rainbow Six 3: Alliance Special	Ubisoft	Q1 2004
Eye of Judgment: Heaven and Hell	Microsoft	Q2 2004
Road to Total War	Activision	Q3 2004
San J. Hero: President's Palace	LucasArts	Q3 2004
Shade: Wrath of Angels	Geometric	2004
Silent Storm: Scorchers	Empire Software	2004
The Sims 2	Electronic Arts	March 2004
Soldier: Secret Wars	Empire Software	February 2004
Spore	Ensemble	February 2004
Splitter Cell: Bound by Blood	Ubisoft	March 2004
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	GSC Game World	September 2004
Star Wars: Jedi Knight	LucasArts	Q3 2004
Supreme Ruler 2010	Strategy First	February 2004
Syberia II	Crystal Dynamics	Q3 2004
Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Valve	November 2004
Tief II	Big Interactive	Q1 2004
Titan Simulator 2	Blizzard	February 2004
True Violence	Sony	Q4 2004
Tribal Pursuit Unlimited	Asan	March 2004
Ultima X: Odyssey	Electronic Arts	February 2004
Ultima 8: The Awakening - Spirit Edition	Atari	February 2004
Ultima's Tournament 2004	Atari	February 2004
Vespene: The Menagerie - Bloodlines	Activision	June 2004
Wetmore: Pat Alpha	Colossal	Q1 2004
Warheads: Battery II	Biglight Software	Q2 2004
Warfare: Command & Conquer (800-945)	Colossal	Q3 2004
World of Warcraft	Blizzard Entertainment	June 2004

► New Update

# DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

Games come from out of nowhere

FROM 10/Xbox Software AVAILABLE April 2004

## Star Wolves



**Word on the street:** Freelancer whetted our appetites for interstellar intrigue. Star Wolves should sate it with a generous serving of sci-fi goodness. Space-faring bounty hunters assume command of a 22nd-century starfighter, then pursue a potential career as a mercenary or tradesman. Earn enough through these activities and you can upgrade and outfit your vessel, plus acquire up to six additional cruisers, assuming command of an actual convoy. Customizable skill sets further give this strategically sound role-playing game some character.

**Sounds kinda best:** Much as we dig the pretty visuals and respectable premise, sales of space simulations of all stripes have petered. With interest in the topic flagging, so too have development budgets, leaving us dubious about whether the title can truly live up to its considerable potential. Given the game's intricate setup, the potential for a steep learning curve also exists, and the last thing poor, beleaguered end users need is another Starfleet Command. We're keeping our fingers crossed on this one.



FROM Ascaron AVAILABLE June 2004

## Port Royale 2

**Word on the street:** The original is an engrossing yet often stuffy simulation of the business of piracy and privateering. For the sequel, developer Ascaron presents newcomers with a compromise, introducing a less-confusing play structure that offers optional missions, enhanced sea battles, and expanded town-building features. Trade plays as important a role as ever, although successful seafarers can also own land, construct production facilities, or terrorize villagers for kicks. Much-needed tutorial scenarios should shiver your timbers, too.

**Sounds kinda best:** Cool it on hoisting the masts! Landlubbers. The most satisfying pillage and plunder you'll see here involves separating the natives from their hard-earned doubloons. So rejoice, all you slimy expansionists. Tax-men-in-training may appreciate the gesture, but we're betting most don't have the stomach for the hardcore economic models churning away beneath the beautifully rendered waters of this crash course in 17th-century Caribbean capitalism.



FROM Resonance-11 AVAILABLE March 2004

## Xenos

**Word on the street:** Money can't buy love, but it purchases almost anything else—playable vehicles, 20 different weapons, ammo, gas—in Xenos, a first-person shooter with role-playing pretensions. As unwitting hero Kevin Myers, you pursue the trail of your missing sister into the Colombian jungle, where dealing with NPCs ranging from guerrillas to government officials is almost as important as gunning down the natives. Sprawling landscapes, complex character interaction, and robust multiplayer support complement your newfound adventures in advance.

**Sounds kinda best:** Nothing screams authenticity like a bunch of Russians simulating the South American jungle. In-house reps are also focusing hype efforts on the product's custom-developed Vital Engine 2 software backbone—shouldn't they be pushing a seemingly much more intriguing feature set? All told, here's hoping this game doesn't prove too clever for its own good.



Editors' Choice Award Winner - ProMagix DX-W  
PC Magazine, November 2003

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COMPUTER GAMING WORLD'S

2003

OF THE

GAMES  
YEAR

By the Editors of CGW

**T**he PC gaming event of 2003 is the one that didn't happen: On September 30, 2003, Valve Software did not release *Half-Life 2* as promised, thus depriving the gaming world of the one thing we had all—despite our varied interests and biases—united behind in excitement.

Even our cousins here at the console gaming magazines grudgingly acknowledged that this was The Big One. Then it didn't happen. And it still hasn't.

The cool thing is that for PC gamers, it ended up not mattering a whole lot, because this was an incredible year. While recent years have seen a dearth of good Game of the Year candidates, 2003 proved to be a refreshingly frustrating opposite: There were more great games than we can possibly acknowledge here. In fact, it's impossible and pointless to speculate whether *Half-Life 2* would have run away with the awards had it shipped, because, well, we haven't played it yet. And those games that did win this year are all more than worthy. *Half-Life 2* would have had to be some kind of masterpiece, indeed, to have beaten the masterpiece that is our 2003 Game of the Year.

So, to both the winners and nominees, thanks for endless hours and sleepless nights of awesome entertainment. Now let's pass out some awards.



GAME OF THE YEAR

# STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

DEVELOPER: LUCASARTS DEVELOPER: BIOWARE

**NOMINEES** Call of Duty: Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, Madden NFL 2004, True 2.0

**WE ADMIT IT: WE HAD OUR DOUBTS.** After barely being able to stay awake during an E3 demo of the game last May (which, in retrospect, we blame on booze)—and, more crucially, after learning it was to arrive on the Xbox before the PC—we began to wonder if BioWare was really going to deliver on *Knights of the Old Republic*. Were the makers of the *Baldur's Gate* games and *Neverwinter Nights* really going to be able to translate their RPG expertise to the Star Wars universe? And what was up with it looking more like a console action game than a PC RPG? Was the going to be yet another game that started development on the PC, moved to the consoles, and then lost its relevance to PC gamers along the way?

So, as we unconvincingly hand over the Game of the Year trophy

to this absolutely brilliant gem of a game, the first thing we want to say to BioWare is this: We are sorry. We never should have doubted you.

With *Knights of the Old Republic*, BioWare took everything it's learned about RPGs and game design over the years and upped the ante threefold with better presentation, better gameplay, and better storytelling, creating a game that is as entertaining and deep and accessible to both casual and hardcore gamers alike as any we've seen in years. At root, it's as complex on RPG as BioWare's classic *Dungeons & Dragons* games (with a combat system based on the same basic rules), but it has been polished to such a high sheen in terms of both appearance and mechanics that it has appeal far beyond the traditional RPG crowd. Indeed, this is the first RPG in years that has the entire CGW staff—not just RPG geeks like Jeff and Robert—hooked.

The fact that BioWare has done this with the Star Wars franchise—a license that, frankly, has seen much better days—is even more remarkable. LucasArts owes a huge thank-you to BioWare for restoring intelligence, passion, and humor to a franchise that, in the recent movies at least, seemed to forget what made it popular in the first place. Though set thousands of years before the time of the films, *Knights of the Old Republic* does a better job than the *Episode 1* and *2* films put together in telling a story worthy of the Star Wars name, with a compelling plot, a host of memorable characters,





awesome voice acting, a steady stream of compelling quests, and, as a bonus somewhere beyond the halfway point, one of the most brutal and surprising plot twists ever seen in a videogame.

For PC gamers who patiently awaited the game's release after an initial Xbox launch, there has been much reason to rejoice. Rather than releasing the typical sloppy console port, BioWare went out of its way to please the PC crowd. Not only is there a (small) new area to explore, but all the controls are also perfectly retrofitted for mouse/keyboard, and the higher-resolution graphics are far more beautiful than what you'd see on a TV, without overtaxing our machines. It's a model of how to port a game.

There were plenty of other awesome PC games this year, for sure. Other titles that made our short list for Game of the Year

included *Call of Duty: Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, *Titan 2.0*, and one very loud, insistent vote (from Wii) for *Madden NFL 2004*. In another year, any one of these games might have won and been worthy. But not this year. This year we agreed that no other game came close to matching the staggering, transcendent experience of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. It's the RPG for non-RPG fans, the *Star Wars* game for *Star Wars* haters, and the game that (as if we needed more proof) definitively cements BioWare's status as one of the most talented, ambitious, and artistically successful game companies this industry has ever seen.

In a stellar year for PC games, *Knights of the Old Republic* still manages to rise head and shoulders above the rest, and is unequivocally, resoundingly, CGW's Game of the Year for 2003. **B**



**FOR PC GAMERS WHO PATIENTLY AWAITED THE GAME'S RELEASE AFTER AN INITIAL XBOX LAUNCH, THERE HAS BEEN MUCH REASON TO REJOICE.**





STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR

# AGE OF WONDERS: SHADOW OF MAGIC

**WINNER** GATHERING STORMS  
**TELEVISION STUDIOS**  
**NOMINEES** *Age of Wonders: Magic* (Crytivo), *Railroad Tycoon 3* (Dovetail)

**TALK ABOUT JUMPING INTO THE WAY-RAIL MACHINE!**—It took three weeks to get the strategy game *Age of Wonders: Shadow of Magic* out of the oven, but the game itself turns out to be a real gem. It's a deep, complex, and highly detailed strategy game that's a real gem. It's a deep, complex, and highly detailed strategy game that's a real gem. It's a deep, complex, and highly detailed strategy game that's a real gem.

It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game. It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game. It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game. It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game. It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game. It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game.

The overall quality is really high. The game is really high quality. The game is really high quality. The game is really high quality. The game is really high quality. The game is really high quality.

So why jump into the Age of Wonders arena? Well, it's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game. It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game. It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game. It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game. It's a really fun game, and it's a really fun game.

**SPECIAL AWARD** NPC OF THE YEAR

**HK-47, Knights of the Old Republic**  
**Forget those wimps C3PO and R2D2. The best Star Wars droid ever is now a sneaky, sarcastic, and deedly sneakin' by the name of HK-47, the most memorable of KOTOR's stellar lineup of NPCs. On the other hand, what do we know? As HK-47 would say, we're just organic meetings.**





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ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR

# PRINCE OF PERSIA

## THE SANDS OF TIME

UBISOFT GAMES

**NOMINEES** *GTA: Vice City, Beyond Good & Evil, The Simpsons: Hit & Run, Splinter Cell*

**THERE IS SOMETHING PURELY MYSTICAL ABOUT PRINCE OF PERSIA:** *The Sands of Time*. Like some rich Eastern tapestry, this is a carefully woven tale threaded between action and puzzles, pulled taut by the Prince's endearing narrative in an authentic Arabian-European accent. His monologues cleverly involve you with his character, from his annoyances with Princess Farra to the horrors of the sand demon legions.

From the first moment you find yourself in the center of a battle, surrounded by the rubble of a destroyed palace and lit by the volleys of blazing projectiles, something strikes you inside. It's a feeling that captivates and transports you, leaving you gazing in misty-eyed wonder at this faraway land across the desert, armed with nothing but your wits and a dagger.

We don't know how a prince would know so many circus tricks, but that guy can catch serious air as he runs along walls, flipping and diving with the greatest of ease. *Sands of Time* is also the first game truly to nail time control and make it

fun. You might expect the maneuvers to get tired, but the intelligent level design keeps confronting you with new ways to meet the challenges. The game isn't just about using those same moves, but also about finding new combinations in which to use them.

2003 was a golden year for action games. We were so inundated with strong candidates that we had to separate them into two categories: action and shooters. Interestingly, all of the action games were also all on consoles. It's a trend often decried by PC fans, but the truth is that we wouldn't have many of these games if not for the console market.

All of this year's action game nominees are standouts. *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* is a towering commercial and critical success that greatly improved on its Game of the Year predecessor. *Beyond Good & Evil* is stylish, distinctive, and loaded with personality. *The Simpsons: Hit & Run* infuses a GTA3-style game with the TV show's talented writers and actors to yield the funniest Simpsons game yet. And *Splinter Cell* has stunning lighting effects to complement its stealth tactics. But none of these games cast a spell on us like *Prince of Persia*.

From its gorgeous graphics to its mesmerizing level design, rich storytelling, and outrageous character animations, all of the game's elements combine into something greater than the sum of its parts. Truly unforgettable. **A**

## SPECIAL AWARD BEST WEAPON

### Dagger of Time, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

This handy bit of cutlery puts the Rewind button on your TiVo onto one kick-ass blade.

Nothing's better than hopping over a foe, shoving him in the back, and leaving him frozen in time, or being able to rewind and undo your last boneheaded maneuver when you screw up a jump (not that we ever do).



SPECIAL AWARD

## FLIGHT SIMULATION OF THE YEAR

# FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2004: A CENTURY OF FLIGHT

DEVELOPER: MICROSOFT DEVELOPER: MICROSOFT

**NOMINEES** Full Cannon Jacket for Red Baron II, Lock-On: Modern Air Combat, IL-2 Sturmovik: Forgotten Battles

ALL THE DETAILS FALL TOGETHER IN FS2004: A CENTURY OF FLIGHT, the first release in this venerable series that convincingly re-creates the entire flying experience. It sports authentic terrain covering the entire Earth's surface, thousands of airports, and stunningly realistic weather based on actual current conditions. Air traffic control is smarter and flight model feel has lost its artificial touch. Though the addition of some fascinating planes—including the Spirit of St. Louis and the DC-3 airliner—is welcome, it's Microsoft's support of third-party add-ons that's key to FS2004's appeal. There are thousands of high-quality add-on aircraft, commercial and free-ware, from airliners like the DC-4 and Airbus A380 to fighters like the XP-38 and F-16 to fantasy craft like the Millennium Falcon and a giant flying pumpkin. High-detail add-on scenery covers much of the world, and you can add A.I. air traffic covering airlines from Jet Blue to Air New Zealand. On a high-end system, you can have dozens of aircraft in the pattern around a crowded airport, all flying over photo-real terrain. Out of the box, it's an excellent flight sim. Download a few add-ons and it's an amazing simulator of the entire world of aviation. **B**



MMORPG OF THE YEAR

# TOONTOWN ONLINE

DEVELOPER: DISNEY ONLINE DEVELOPER: DISNEY ONLINE

**NOMINEES** NetMaze: The Fantasy of

THE ONLINE MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER CENTRE IS STILL A REVOLUTION WAITING TO HAPPEN, and Toontown Online is the most fun and accessible MMO you can play right now. It's a colorful, cartoonish world with a simple interface and a lot of things to do. It's a place where you can play with your friends, meet new people, and have a lot of fun. The game is free to play, and you can play it on your PC or Mac. It's a great place to hang out and have fun. The game is a lot of fun and it's a great place to hang out and have fun. The game is a lot of fun and it's a great place to hang out and have fun.

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SHOOTER OF THE YEAR

# CALL OF DUTY

DEVELOPER: ACTIVISION | YEAR: 2007 | INFINITY WARD

**SPECIAL AWARDS** **NOMINEES** Max Payne 2, Rainbow Six 3, Raven Shield, Tron 2.0, Freelancer



**CALL OF DUTY WON THIS CATEGORY WITHOUT A SHOT FIRED**—there simply was no debate. There was one lone vote for *Tron 2.0*, but it was made more in the spirit of recognizing *Tron*'s innovation and stunning design. No one was willing to put forth—or even listen to—an argument that another game was better.

From the first American levels to the climactic Russian missions at Red Square and Berlin, *Call of Duty* pits one intense, electrifying moment after another into an exhilarating warlike experience. It achieves this with good level design and tough AI, but all of the nominees have that. What makes COD stand out is its huge numbers of combatants, its cinematic scenes, its lightning pace, and the overall sense that you are a part of something epic. It makes *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* seem simplistic by comparison.

You can quibble with *Call of Duty*'s length, linearity, and lack of a cohesive story, but the game more than overcomes these with the best depiction of combat ever seen on the PC. It's not always realistic—there weren't many chase scenes in WWII, but those chases were among the most exciting levels in the game. The amazing audio prompted one editor to remark, "It sounds like they recorded actual weapons being fired into sides of beef!"

The game reaches a terrifying crescendo in the Russian campaign, where it's hard to pick one best level among so many greats. We had a long debate trying to choose the best one before giving up and concluding that the whole Russian campaign was the highlight. We'll never forget crossing the Volga under deafening gunfire, running through Red Square looking for a rifle, or seeing German soldiers bludgeon our comrades with the butts of their rifles. It's simply one intense scene after another.



*Max Payne 2* and *Rainbow Six 3* are very good games in their own right, but both offer only incremental improvements over their predecessors. *Freelancer* dazzled us with its immersive interstellar world, wild combat, and ambitiously open-ended design, but it can't compete with the cinematic spectacle of Europe at war (Categorizing it as a shooter may seem odd, but the space-sim category isn't what it used to be, and we felt it was more shooter-like than the amorphous action games category.)

In the end, the only question was whether *Call of Duty* should be Game of the Year. In any other year, it could have been. Mission accomplished. Infinity Ward. **W**

## SPECIAL AWARDS BEST SOUND

SPECIAL AWARDS



### Call of Duty

Anyone who's seen *Saving Private Ryan* will attest to the contribution that sound played in the opening sequence. The same is true for the

sound in *Call of Duty*. Whether it's bullets whizzing by, shells exploding, or the low-end rumbling of an enemy tank as it approaches, the game's audio is just as impressive as its visuals.

WAR GAME OF THE YEAR

# KORSUN POCKET

STRATEGY FIRST GAMES | STEVE HODSON, STEVE HODSON

**NOMINEES** Highway to the Reich

WAR GAMES HAVE BECOME MORE OF A NICHE, their popularity faded in a period of disinterest, limited by how rugged and tactical certain competitors. While pocket games have been around for decades, they have been considered low-value, lower-quality titles. It's not until the last few years that they have found a new audience, thanks to a resurgence in the popularity of the genre. It's time to re-evaluate the genre and give it the respect it deserves.



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**OK, FIRST OF ALL: IS UPLINK AN ADVENTURE GAME?** Maybe not. The game's developer, Introversion Software, describes it as a "simulated hacking tool." Other gaming media have listed it as a strategy game. But whatever. One of the things we love about Uplink is that it

really is kind of its own unique little beast. It gets our Adventure Game of the Year award because in our minds, it's done the best job of doing what the best adventure games always do: immersing us in a good story and giving us some good puzzles to get our brains moving. Uplink puts you in the role of a fledgling agent for an underground hacking network, receiving an increasingly difficult array of assignments that involve breaking in to computer

ADVENTURE GAME OF THE YEAR

# UPLINK: HACKER ELITE

STRATEGY FIRST | INTROVERSION SOFTWARE

**NOMINEES** Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon, Dark Fall, Spore, The Sims 2, The Sims 3

systems around the world to steal, change, erase, and sabotage data. The best thing about it is its lo-fi presentation: It's all done at a computer console, as if you're really hacking. An immersive, original, and suspenseful little game.

EXPANSION PACK OF THE YEAR

# BATTLEFIELD 1942: SECRET WEAPONS OF WORLD WAR II

EA GAMES | GIGAWATT | EA GAMES | EA GAMES

**NOMINEES** Battlefield: Bad Company 2, Battlefield: Bad Company 2: Road to Nowhere

2003 WAS THE YEAR OF BATTLEFIELD. It was the year of the most popular expansion pack of the year, Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of World War II. It was the year of the most popular expansion pack of the year, Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of World War II. It was the year of the most popular expansion pack of the year, Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of World War II.



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HARDWARE OF THE YEAR

# ATHLON 64 FX-51

MANUFACTURER: AMD

Creative Decoder DDT5-100, Microsoft Wireless Optical Desktop 800, Intel 805 Chipset

**IN THE WAR FOR CPU DOMINANCE**, it's an understatement to say that AMD has been fighting an uphill battle: Intel has long dominated AMD in both performance and perception. In its attempt to carve out a slice of the CPU pie, AMD has dabbled in everything from goofy naming schemes to an ill-fated attempt to "debunk the MHz myth" that has been Intel's bread and butter. Well, it seems that all AMD really needed to do was design a processor that's simply faster than the best Intel has to offer. And that's exactly what AMD achieved with the 64-bit Athlon 64 FX-51.

The Athlon FX-51 boasts an integrated memory controller and supports DDR400, which gives it better memory efficiency and bandwidth. The FX-51 has superior gaming performance over the 3.2GHz Intel Pentium 4 Extreme Edition—it's no wonder that most of the systems in our Ultimate Gaming Machine story were based on the Athlon 64, and the three fastest rigs all rocked the FX-51.

While 64-bit gaming—as well as Microsoft's next OS, the 64-bit Longhorn—is somewhere off in the horizon, the Athlon 64's stellar 32-bit performance makes future-proofing easy. You've got great performance now, and you're well poised for Longhorn down the road. ■

## HARDWARE DESIGN

SPECIAL AWARD



After drelling with hulking monoliths for 10 years, in 2003, we finally saw a breakout new design achieve widespread popularity. The small form-factor PC, pioneered and perfected by Shuttle, has become the

darling of boutique PC builders. While the technology is still not perfect—the cramped innards and tiny power supplies limit the upgradeability of these systems—they're a LAN gamer's dream. And they look cool, too.

## UPGRADEABLE GAMING LAPTOPS

BEST TREND

We've been begging for this for years. Plenty of laptops are great for gaming, but no one wants to drop \$3,000 on a machine that will be obsolete in a year.

Mobile chips from ATI and Nvidia have modules that can be upgraded, but laptop makers were loath to open that can of worms. Alienware took the first step that others inevitably followed. Now Voodoo and Dell offer laptops with upgradeable graphics chips.









## GAMES WORTH A MENTION

SPECIAL AWARDS

**ROLE-PLAYING GAME OF THE YEAR****Knights of the Old Republic**

Apart from one gigantic exception, it wasn't a great year for role-playing games. For the word on *Knights*, see Game of the Year.

**BEST USE OF A LICENSE****Tron 2.0**

There were many good uses of a license this year, but *Tron* stood out because the series was all but dead. *Tron 2.0* laid down the resurrection code to upgrade this aged story into a new digital dynasty, without forgetting the light cycles, flashes of doom, and amber waves of pain.

**WORST USE OF A LICENSE****Enter the Matrix**

What is the Matrix? We thought we knew, but after this last year, we wish we didn't. *Enter the Matrix* substantiates and destructively compounds everything that was bad about the last two movies. The only real redeeming quality was cutting-room floor movie footage. Jack in? No—jacked up!

**BEST STORY****Knights of the Old Republic**

Someone needs to get over to George Lucas' house right now and rip the *Episode III* script out of his hands. Not only is *KOTOR* a great game, but it also has some of the best writing and most devious plot twists in memory. The dialogue is so good, we can't even compare it to other games. Some movies, that's another story...

**BEST MUSIC****Grand Theft Auto: Vice City**

It's hard to argue against the music in *Vice City*. Plenty of quality '80s music populates the soundtrack, along with a ton of "radio commercials" that are pretty darn funny. All in all, the music goes a long way toward immersing you in the world of *Vice City*. And if you don't like it, you can make your own damn soundtrack—the game even gives you the option to substitute your own tunes instead of the defaults. Sweet!

**BEST TREND****Good Licensed Games**

A few years ago, games derived from licensed material were pretty much synonymous with crap. Amazingly, this trend has started to change in a big way. This year has seen some pretty solid licensed games, such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, *Tron 2.0*, *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, *The Simpsons: Hit & Run*, and *The Hulk*. Hopefully, this will continue—and hopefully, a few developers ("cough" Shiny "cough") are taking notes.

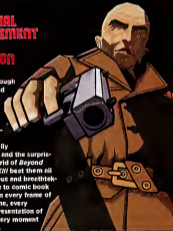
**SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT IN ANY DIRECTION****XIII**

Talk about a tough choice: We had the dizzying sweep of Prince of Persia's misty levels competing against

*Tron 2.0*'s coolly glowing neon and the surprisingly alive world of *Beyond Good & Evil*. *XIII* beat them all with its rigorous and breathtaking adherence to comic book roots visible in every frame of every cut-scene, every graphical representation of sound, and every moment of every level.

**YEAR'S BIGGEST LETDOWN****Halo**

At one point, *Halo* was considered to be among the five games that would change the face of gaming as we know it. We waited desperately as it was delayed and felt pangs of sadness when it was taken away from us. When it finally was released, it wasn't nearly what it was supposed to be. As a port, it wasn't even a solid job. *Halo* PC redefined "letdown."



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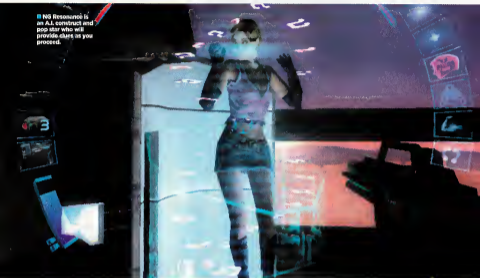
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# Reviews

The good, the bad, and the relentlessly cheesy

■ **NG Resonance** is an A.I. construct and pop star who will provide clues as you proceed.



**PUBLISHER:** Eidos **DEVELOPER:** Ion Storm **GENRE:** Action/Roleplaying **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Intel Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 2GB RAM, 52MB 3D card, 2GB install  
**RECOMMENDED:** Intel Pentium 4 1.8GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, MULTIPAYER, None

## Deus Ex: Invisible War

Morality, divinity, and a whole bunch of locked-door puzzles



■ The connection to the first game doesn't become clear until fairly late in the sequel.

■ There are several factions that want Aias's help, including a religious sect known as The Order.

■ Sometimes, you'll encounter unexpected allies.



### Beyond Good & Evil

It's the closest thing to Zeldia for the PC—and it rocks

80



### Counter-Strike: Condition Zero

It's finally here, but should anyone care?

85



### Lords of EverQuest

Wait a minute—don't I play WoW? It's like 3 years ago?

76

**H**istory has been kind to the original *Deus Ex*. Its cultlike following, whose fansites often read like theology dissertations, fondly reminisces about its story and its somewhat unique blend of action and roleplaying. But its flaws (notably its often-repetitive gameplay) are mostly forgotten. Judged on its own merits, *Invisible War* is a very good game. Like the original, it has both great strengths and significant weaknesses, but the former manage to make the latter bearable in the first game. *Invisible War* has been simplified in many respects, and something has been lost in the process.

#### Messiah complex

*Invisible War*'s story is its best feature. Set 20 years after the events of the original, *Invisible War* tells of the enigmatically and unsexually named Alex D., whose initials may be the most blatant religious allusion in a game since J.C. Denton saved the world in the first *Deus Ex*. Alex begins as a trainee at Tarsus, which at first appears to be a training ground for an elite security force, but quickly reveals itself as something more sinister. The intrigue starts immediately—the entire city of Chicago is destroyed in the opening cut-scene—and only gets more involved as the game wears on.

The story has so many twists and turns that any attempt at an even skeletal sum-



The Omnia are a group of extremely biomodified humans who often have decent items for sale.

ability to biomodify his/her body, which adds new abilities to his/her arsenal. There are several biomodification slots, and each has three choices for enhancement. Not all of the skills are useful! (For instance, taking anything other than the stealth mod for the foot slot would be a mistake), but they do allow you to customize your experience to some degree.

#### Strength or stealth?

The problem with this freedom is that every section of the game feels somewhat similar as a result. You can either charge into a hostile area with guns blazing or find some stealthy way—almost always a handy ventilation

The game has four possible endings, and strangely, none of them is clearly correct. What appears to be the good ending is actually somewhat terrifying, while the most unsatisfying ending in terms of conventional morality is actually the most rewarding.

That one can talk about the game in terms of conventional morality should be enough to recommend it to its target audience. *Invisible War*'s mechanics are often repetitive and frustrating, but the choices you make are not, which helps keep things interesting even when you're unlocking yet another door with another multiloop for the umpteenth time. **By Ron Duin**

## That one can talk about the game in terms of conventional morality should be enough to recommend it to its target audience.

mary falls victim to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. At its most basic, it comes down to a war of philosophies and morality with several rival factions attempting to enlist Alex's aid as biomodification (physically enhancing oneself with implants) threatens to become more widespread in the world. You must decide whom to help and when. Unfortunately, the decisions often come down to which task is the most convenient—there is very little punishment for betraying your current employer or for attempting to play the factions against each other. Later in the game it becomes clear that there are significant reasons for this lack of consequence, but it's disappointing that you're so easily forgiven for failing to perform assignments you've accepted.

The manner in which you execute your tasks is generally up to you. While the original's skill system has been completely removed (it definitely had quirks, so this is not entirely a bad thing), Alex has the

sheft—to sneak around. After a while, every conflict and puzzle in *Invisible War* begins to feel like a carbon copy of the previous one. This problem dogged the original as well, and it's frustrating that Ion Storm couldn't find a more interesting means of providing both stealth and action. Also problematic is that the original release of the game is very unstable and has a terrible framerate at higher resolutions, though this problem was addressed with the first patch.

Seeing the game from its own flaws are the morally ambiguous choices you are constantly forced to make. There is rarely an evil or good choice, and right up until the end (assuming you can follow the story's occasionally convoluted twists and turns), you'll be unsure of whom to trust.

#### Verdict ★★★★★

The sequel to *Deus Ex* is both dumbed down and smarted up.



#### Dude, Where's My Stuff?

*Invisible War*'s simplification extends beyond the removal of the original's skill system. While there are a variety of guns, there is only one type of ammunition. Unrealistic, yes, but also a blessing in disguise, since ammo is so scarce. Necessary items are scarce in general, and finding enough ammo or multiloops (an electronic lock pick) requires combing every area of every room. The game has a basic economic system, but, oddly, you can't buy the most basic items. Dumpster diving is encouraged, as is moving furniture and boxes—the inhabitants of *Deus Ex* discard full clips and lock picks with reckless abandon.

**PUBLISHER** LucasArts **DEVELOPER** Planet Moon Studios **GENRE** Action **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 4.5GB install, 32MB 3D card  
**RECOMMENDED** Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT** None

# Armed and Dangerous

Yuck yuck bang boom yadda yadda

**P**lanet Moon's *Armed and Dangerous* is Kelly's Heroes meets *Shrek* by way of Monty Python and Guy Ritchie. It involves shooting a lot of hapless orcs and Europeans of indeterminate accents. Along the way, there are quips about Star Wars, the French, vegetarian robots, and sheep buggery. They even slip in a reference to *Sling Blade* and "your momma" jokes. Just go with it. *Armed & Dangerous* seems to say, and don't worry about whether it makes sense.

## Punchy punchlines

In an industry where "humor" means lame sarcasm, mugging, or pratfalls, *Armed and Dangerous* stands out for actually being funny on its own terms. This is one of those all-too-rare games in which the cut-scenes are worth watching (even if they are scaled down to a horribly lousy low res). Planet Moon has a great feel for comedic timing and how to frame a shot. You'll also want to jack up the voice audio so you don't miss some of the in-game one-liners and exchanges. "You'll never guess what happened to me!" a rescued peasant tells his wife. "You turned gay?" she asks. No rim shot or laugh track needed.

As for the gameplay, if you're worried that this is just a quick console port, don't be. The controls are great and the technology is sharp, smooth, and robust. You get to wreak havoc through stylish, expansive levels that alternate between quaint medieval villages and gritty industrial settings, complete with detailed trees, water effects, elaborate skies, and flying body physics.



▶ A little *Impromptu* urban renewal.



## Punchless punching

Although the generic title doesn't do justice to the game's shrewd sense of humor, it is fitting for the fairly generic action, which is only peripherally connected to the cut-scenes. Your band of mismatched rogues will put together an elaborate scheme, only to recede into the background during 10 minutes of running and gunning. With the exception of a really frustrating "protect the village" mission, mixing up the objectives doesn't do anything to change the fact that you're really just playing a forgiving "shoot everything" game.

Although the first few levels introduce some clever and promising scripted tricks (triggering an avalanche to crush buildings, exploding barrels that rocket straight up into the sky, grunts shimmying up downpipes to snipe from roofs), these go by the wayside pretty quickly and you're left with a straight-faced shooter.

Planet Moon's *Gwint* had the same problem, running out of steam long before it was over. But *Gwint* had three distinct races to play and ambitious multiplayer support. There's nothing like that here, and



▶ On a half dozen wings and a prayer.

*Armed and Dangerous* peters out way too soon. It tips its hand early on with fun stuff like the Land Shark Gun and sticky grenades as in *Halo*. It's a bit too selfish with the crazy weapons like the Guy Fawkes Traitor Bomb, the World's Smallest Black Hole, and a corkscrew that literally turns the world upside down. Once you've seen all this, the last two thirds has a disappointing "is that all there is?" feeling. You're eventually left without much to do besides lean on the Fire button and wait for the next cut-scene. **Tom Chick**

**Verdict** ★★★★★

A straight-faced shooter with great cut-scenes.

**Armed & Dangerous** stands out for actually being funny on its own terms.

**PUBLISHER:** Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER:** EA Black Box **GENRE:** Action/Driving **ESRB:** Everyone **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 52MB 3D card, 200 Inset  
**RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 1.6 GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card

# Need for Speed Underground



Crank up the bass, it's time to race

**N**ot until you punch the nitrous do you get a true appreciation for the term "speed." The neon-laced streets blur past and the camera uncontrollably shakes. The end result: You're glued to your seat fighting Gs in *Need for Speed Underground*, the best damn racing game to roll down the avenue.

Make no mistake about it—this is not a full-on driving sim, nor is it anything like previous games in the *NFS* series. Rather than getting behind the wheel of exotic supercars you could never afford in real life, you're steering import racers—you know, sexy cars like the Ford Focus, Dodge Neon, Honda Civic, and so on. It may not sound like much, but you'll soon get sucked into the varied race types (including skidding out on closed courses, sprinting down crowded city streets, and drag racing) to earn street cred. This allows you to unlock more visual and performance-enhancing tweaks for your ride.

## The mod squad

Modding your vehicle is what import racing (and *NFSU*) is all about. The base models of all the cars handle differently, but once you start adding parts, your handling, speed, and acceleration improve. It's a nice touch to push you through the single-player game, though it's a little flawed: Instead of different brand-name components improving your car in different ways, you essentially improve your ride by leveling up. Take the drivetrain, for example: It doesn't matter whether you get the kit sporting Neuspeed parts or HKS USA parts. It only matters whether or not you buy the pro-level parts—but they're not unlocked until later in the game.

Still, this isn't some beauty contest! In this pseudo-city, you're racing through the gorgeous, perpetually rain-soaked streets. Shortcuts and dynamic slow-motion moments really play up the over-the-top racing. Unfortunately, there isn't a whole helluva lot of variety—the entire game



consists of a few city miles that get sliced and diced up differently for each match. More than once, you'll instinctively know that a left turn is coming up, but the developers will have thrown up some dividers or reversed the course to ske out one more level. And for the record, having III levels to tear through is nice, but ugh! Give me something else to look at! Would it kill these guys to take a road trip to a different city?

Let's not forget the physics. While much more believable than those in *Midnight Club II*, *NFSU* still leans more toward the arcade side. You'll see what I mean after your first drift into oncoming traffic. Also, if you take certain jumps at the wrong angle, you'll notice sparks fly as invisible walls grind you back on course.

A good selection of hip-hop and hard-rock tunes gets your blood pumping, but the utter lack of MP3 and custom soundtrack support means that Rob Zombie tune wears thin after your 70th race. Forget



❑ No, we didn't take this screenshot "under the influence." This is nitrous at its finest.

these minor sticking points, though. This game lacks asphalt! ❑ Darren Gladstone

**Verdict** ★★★★★

Racing doesn't get much better... unless you're in a real car.

## Bring it on(online)!

A new era is coming for gaming: PC owners are able to go head-to-head with PS2 gamers. Maybe we can finally settle the score and show 'em who's best. *NFSU* allows four players to go head-to-head (and we ran into little lag during test sessions).

**Modding your vehicle is what import racing (and *NFSU*) is all about.**

**PUBLISHER** Sony Online Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Rapid Eye Entertainment **GENRE** RTS **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Pentium III 500Hz, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 400MB install, **RECOMMENDED** Pentium III 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card, 500MB install **MULTIPLAYER** 2-12 player LAN/Internet

# Lords of EverQuest

Dang, another set of Iksar scale gloves



❑ The Eddard Alliance has plenty of foresty-looking structures.

**I**t's doesn't take much to make a real-time strategy game these days. There are generally two schools of thought: the Microsoft method (à la *Age of Empires*), and the Blizzard method (à la *WarCraft*). *Lords of EverQuest* does a fairly decent job of aping the *WarCraft III* formula, while making a few hit-and-miss attempts at bringing in some new features of its own.

The RTS modus operandi has been boiled down to a fairly exact science at this point. A handful of diverse warring factions are saddled into a lengthy single-player campaign, complemented by a number of multiplayer options to keep players beating the crap out of each other long after the campaign mode is over. *Lords of EverQuest* follows suit,

featuring three EQ-based factions, a like number of single-player campaign modes, and the obligatory dose of Internet play.

## Tastes like chicken

The three factions each represent a part of the *EverQuest* population: Humans, barbarians, and dwarves make up the Dawn Brotherhood, while the pint-sized halflings and various elfen sub-races comprise the Eddard Alliance. The Shadowrealm represents the darker races of the world of Norrath, such as dark elves, ogres, and the reptilian Iksar. Each faction has five Lord characters to choose from,

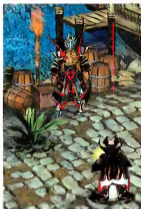
each with his or her own set of powers and attacks. Though the factions are somewhat unique, a lot of their respective units—as well as their Lords' powers—are a bit too similar. This robs a lot of the game's potential diversity—especially in multiplayer, where everything seems to run together just a little too much.



❑ Individual units level up as they fight.

**The RTS modus operandi has been boiled down to a fairly exact science at this point.**

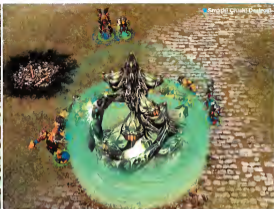




Each faction has its own associated single-player campaign, the three campaigns are equal in length, totaling about 36 individual missions. The story is rooted in Norrath's past, dealing with the animosity between the three factions, as well as their own internal strife. There's not much to be said about the game's narrative approach; if you're a die-hard EverQuest fan, it might pique your interest. Otherwise, this is run-of-the-mill fantasy fare. Expect to finish it off in about 20 to 25 hours of play.

Once you've finished the single-player campaign, hopefully, you'll be somewhat prepared to take down a few opponents online. The game supports LAN and Internet play for up to 12 players, with a number of large maps and plenty of victory conditions that should satisfy a variety of play styles. Victory conditions include the ubiquitous "Last Man Standing" king-of-the-hill mode, a "Platinum Rush" mode that determines the winner based on who can mine the most resources, and a "Lord of Levels" mode that awards those who are able to climb the experience ladder the quickest.

Regardless of which modes tickle your fancy or whether you're playing a single-player or multiplayer game, you're looking at a fairly uniform set of RTS gameplay mechanics. Resource-gathering is crucial early on, and platinum is the currency of choice. Platinum goes toward the purchase of buildings, units, and upgrades—the stuff of which mass destruction is made. Plenty of typical fantasy archetypes fill out the ranks, ranging from basic foot soldiers and magic-users to mounted aerial combatants and heavy siege weaponry. Farming the resource harvest down to a single necessity helps to alleviate a bit of micromanage-



AI-controlled monsters yield random items as well as valuable experience.

ment, though you'll definitely need to plan on looking for other mines to excavate once your initial platinum supply runs dry.

### We are the Lords of EverCraft!

After you've assembled your cadre of walking death, you'll want to beat up on a few of the local AI monsters, who yield items and experience points. Lord characters aren't the only ones who benefit from this, either; all units gain experience, with newly produced troops starting at a level roughly equal to half your Lord's current level. You'll have the option to knight units once they gain enough experience, bestowing them with their own set of extra powers. Knights are essentially less-powerful Lords; you can have up to two in play at a time.

Battles can be quite hectic—especially the large-scale variety. The AI in the single-player mode isn't the brightest in the world, though you'll want to micromanage your army as much as possible for best results. Micromanagement is, of course, an

absolute necessity in multiplayer games, where victory is usually determined by who takes a bigger pounding in the initial skirmishes. Should you lose your Lord or Knights in battle, you can call upon a recruiter unit to resurrect them—that is, if your opponent isn't already burning your base to the ground.

Ultimately, playing *Lords of EverQuest* pretty much feels like you're just going through the motions. The game is aesthetically stuck in the past, the single-player campaign is a typical helping of fantasy storytelling, and the multiplayer experience feels way too familiar. RTS veterans have already seen it all, and though curious EverQuest fans could do worse, they could certainly do a lot better.

*Lords of EverQuest* is another RTS. What more is there to say? **B Ryan Scott**

### Verdict ★★★★★

A fairly decent attempt to capitalize on a tried and true (*WarCraft III*) formula.

**PUBLISHER** Atari **DEVELOPER** BioWare **GENRE** RPG **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Platform II 800, 128MB RAM (256MB RAM for Windows XP), 1.5GB install, 32MB 3D card **RECOMMENDED** Platform 4 1.5GHz, 256MB RAM (512MB RAM for Windows XP), 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER** None

# Neverwinter Nights: Hordes of the Underdark

Epic characters, epic story, epic bugs

I can't even begin to explain what a phenomenal game this was to play! I can't even begin to explain what a buggy game this was to play! Arggh! Couldn't BioWare have waited just a little to release a stable game? You can still play as the character you used in *Shadows of Undrentide*, but now you'll meet many familiar faces from the original *NWN* game—sometimes at the most unexpected times or places. Talking about the story line will spoil the riches this expansion pack has to offer, but suffice to say, the road to the end of *Hordes of the Underdark* will take you farther than you can imagine.

## Bigger than life

Having two henchmen or the new breasts and tie sets are all worthwhile additions, but the character changes are the real focus. The character cap is raised to 40, so you'll find your character becoming



Want to feel like a champ? Summon Red Dragon to fight by your side.

## Add it; you know you've dreamed of becoming a half-dragon.

"epic" at level 21, opening up some impressive feats. The first time my epic cleric summoned a Red Dragon to fight by my side, I got chills. While you probably won't max out your character in this expansion pack, the new feats and prestige classes will give you incentive to play online (or play the single player games again). I looked enviously at the new dragon disciple prestige class for sorcerers and bards. Admit it: You know you've dreamed of becoming a half-dragon.

Morality and allegiances have always been a significant part of *NWN*, but *Hordes* ramps it up. The underlying reason you travel and meet new races is ultimately to forge alliances (and create enemies) for a vast upcoming battle. Even at the end, one simple action or double cross can topple all the planning and diplomacy you've worked for the entire game. One quest of unearthing ancient feuds between sentient golems could have been a simple side mission, but instead turns into a moral decision that leads an entire race to fight in your name. Powerful stuff.

And just when you think the end of the game is coming up, it only gets better. You go on a quasi-religious journey unlike anything in the previous games. Encountering some of the more reluctant majestic beings—like the quest to find the Sleeping Man's true love—is a surreal experience. Finding your own true love can be bittersweet, likewise, if you happen to go down that road.

But all of this great content is severely undermined by bugs. Big, game-killing bugs. Additionally, I suffered incredibly chunky framerate drops at times and an occa-



The Drow were my favorite subspecies of elves until I met the lovely winged elven race called Avariel. Tastes like chicken, yum!

sional crash. BioWare has responded with updates, but unfortunately, these seem to be buggy as well. *Hordes of the Underdark* has that woefully underbaked, released-just-in-time-for-the-holidays taint to it, and that's just a colossal shame, because underneath that nastiness is a great, great expansion. I eventually got over it. You may not. **Jason Babler**

**Verdict** ★★★★★

A five-star expansion sadly undone by bugs.

## Squashing the bugs

AFTER LENGTHY FORUM-CRAWLING, I found a decent workaround for the worst of the bugs. Uninstall the game if you already have it on your PC, move your saved characters and game folder to a safe location, then delete the leftover *Neverwinter Nights* Reinstall and move your saved games/characters back. Still, don't expect it to be bug-free, even with the updates.

**PUBLISHER:** Strategy First **DEVELOPER:** Paradox Entertainment **GENRE:** RTS **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 450, 128MB RAM, 600MB Install  
**RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 600, 256MB RAM, MULTIPLAYER: Internet (2-12 players)

# Victoria: An Empire Under the Sun

The sun almost sets on the British Empire

**U**ictoria: An Empire Under the Sun is bugger than a swamp and less intuitive than a tax form, but there's something innately fascinating about it. A fantastically detailed strategy game, it tries to simulate war, industrial revolution, politics, and colonialism during the Victorian era—and succeeds, to a point.

Veterans of the Europa Universalia games should get into Victoria without a problem. There are some new intricacies, such as population castes, more manufactured goods, and a more involved political

system, but none are too difficult to figure out. Victoria is more challenging and more involved than previous EU games and quite enjoyable when it works.

Newbies, on the other hand, will find Victoria nearly incomprehensible. The thin manual isn't bad for explaining basic moves, but it doesn't explain the game's intricacies, especially the baroque economic system. The lack of a tutorial (or at least a thicker manual) is inexcusable for a game of such complexity.

Unpatched, the game also suffers from horrible stability and balance issues. It's too



Despite the title, scenarios include the American Civil War, customized with generals like Bobby Lee and Thomas Jackson. Go figure.

easy to create huge armies and build up ridiculously large treasures, and the game frequently crashes to the desktop. Victoria could be a classic after a few patches, but in the initial release, you're paying Paradox to beta test their game. **D** **DL** **Luo**

**Unpatched, the game also suffers from horrible stability and balance issues.**

**Verdict** ★★★★★

Good game, bad bugs. Patch, patch, patch.

**PUBLISHER:** U.S. Army GIGS, FOR U.S. Army **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM, 54MB 3D card, 1.6GB Install, 51k modem  
**RECOMMENDED:** 512MB RAM, 128MB 3D card, broadband internet service, MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT: Internet, LAN (2-20 players)

# America's Army: Special Forces v2.0

The Quiet Professionals get to work

**O**K, I'll admit it. I'm biased. My longtime employer, the U.S. Army, just added steroids to the original America's Army game by adding more bells and whistles than a SOPMOD-equipped M4. As a result, America's Army is now one of the best, if not the best tactical sim to grace a computer.

America's Army: Special Forces v2.0 is notable for a number of reasons. It adds the critical role of a combat medic class, so healing injured teammates during combat can mean the difference between winning and losing a match. It includes four newly made or revised maps, along with new weapons like the Army-issue M9 9mm, SPR Rifle, MP5SD6, AKS-74U, the 4x hot Thermoite Grenade, and more. Graphics, sound, character models, and ballistics also get make-overs, including beefed up server protocols and the anti-cheating program punkbuster. But the focus of 2.0 details the history and train-

ing of the U.S. Army's elite Special Forces soldiers. It's a great glimpse into what it means to be one of these elite combatants.

Army Special Forces are the United States military experts on Unconventional Warfare (or Low Intensity Conflict), specializing in conducting a multitude of high-risk missions—all of which are covered in this update. With the Special Forces update, America's Army gives players an inside perspective on Special Forces roles and military specialties through virtual training exercises.

Once a player successfully completes a challenging written exam on enemy vehicle, aircraft, and weapons identification, along with completing the Escape and Evade course, they're able to play as Special Forces soldiers online via the revamped Pipeline, along with Hospital,



Becoming a combat medic is a great way of loading up on Honor Points. Get enough and you'll qualify for 2.0's other new class, Special Forces.

Recor, and CSAR maps. Escorting a VIP, identifying enemy vehicles, and playing as indigenous forces are a couple of the new features added to maps. However, there's a catch: Not everyone can play as an SF soldier. You need a minimum Honor (duty and integrity) level of 15 (equivalent to 10,000 experience points) in order to utilize an SF slot for the internet games.

I might be predisposed, but I know a good thing when I see it. Everything is 2.0 makes America's Army more intense, more gripping, and more deserving of its status as the top tactical sim. **E** **Raphael** **Liberatore**

**It's a great glimpse into what it means to be one of these elite combatants.**

**Verdict** ★★★★★

Special Forces is the tactical sim genre at its finest.

**PUBLISHER** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft **GENRE** Stealth Action-adventure **ESRB RATING** Teen **REQUIRED** Platform is 700, 549MB RAM, 32MB 3D card  
**RECOMMENDED** Platform is 1GHz, 128MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER** None



# Beyond Good & Evil

The best game you never heard of

**B**yond the blockbuster games and the rotten tomatoes, the runaway hits and the forgettable travesties, there lies a nebula of quality gems that are undeservedly relegated to the bargain bin. These games—these sleepers—are often passed over in favor of the big-name games, the heavy hitters that sell 400,000 copies on name alone, quality be damned. *Beyond Good & Evil* is one of the overlooked gems.

The brainchild of *Rayman* creator Michel Ancel, BG&E tells the tale of a young lady named Jade who resides on the planet Hillys. An amateur journalist and photographer, Jade is the self-appointed caretaker of the local orphans whose parents have been murdered by the extraterrestrial DomZ Armada. Prompted by a DomZ attack on her home, Jade's investigative efforts lead her to an intricate conspiracy theory that suggests her planet's militant government as the instigator of the alien invasions. With her stouthearted Uncle Pey's in tow, Jade embarks on a quest to learn the truth.

## Shutterbug

Much of BG&E's gameplay consists of running around, solving puzzles, and obtaining photographic evidence of the Hillyan government's true agenda. The puzzles start off pretty easy, and although they end up getting fairly tricky (with a few mildly irritating hunt-and-fetch quests), they rarely feel frustrating or unfair. You traipse through most of the game alongside a partner character, which becomes a key element to solving some of the more elaborate problems you encounter.

Combat is thoroughly simple, and in many cases, not even mandatory. When you do get into a scuffle, you can usually button-mash your way through it; your partner helps out with a stun attack, making battles even easier. Aside from the handful of strategically oriented boss fights you encounter, most threats can be avoided through careful timing and stealth, which is especially crucial in later areas, where being spotted often means instant death.

The world of Hillys is a vibrant archipelago, intertwining a number of Asian,



Big slimy green things = bad.



Zooming around in your hovercraft and killing unruly crustaceans is all in a day's work.

Spanish, and Caribbean motifs with a distinct sci-fi theme. You do most of your traveling in a zippy little hovercraft guided by an area map and objective list. Your hovercraft can be outfitted with various equipment upgrades, which gradually open up more areas for exploration. The game world does seem somewhat small, although the areas you visit are all very fitting and well designed.

## Partners in crime(fighting)

Designwise, another thing that definitely stands out is the collection of characters. The anthropomorphic supporting

cast gives the setting an exotic feel, and Jade comes across as a particularly endearing, emotive heroine. The excellent voice acting adds an extra layer of polish to the characters, and it all comes together to create a fun, enjoyable experience. The only caveat is the game's length—you'll finish it in about 13 hours, tops. Sweet, but short.

Still, BG&E is one fine piece of work. High production values, a compelling narrative, charming characters, and sharp aesthetics make for a sophisticated little adventure that's well beyond most of its ilk. **Ryan Scott**

**Stealth is especially crucial in later areas, where being spotted often means instant death.**

**Verdict** ★★★★★

Gorgeous, stylish, and wholly original, this action-adventure is a gem

**PUBLISHER:** Datalife **DEVELOPER:** The Adventure Company **GENRE:** Adventure/Puzzle Game **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 600MHz, 128MB RAM, 4MB 3D card, 3GB install **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 128MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT:** None

# Mysterious Journey II

Journey to the center of the death

**I**n *Mysterious Journey II*, you explore the shattered remains of a once-great civilization, a concept that might also describe the aging puzzle-adventure genre. *Mysterious Journey II* replaces the static 2D images of old with a fully rendered 3D world, but the visuals are mostly window dressing—interaction is limited to basic movement, and the only true gameplay is a series of puzzles that often have a tenuous relationship to the game world.

The game begins with you on a space station in a decaying orbit, with no memory of your past. After solving a few puzzles that somehow help you to escape from the station, you arrive on a planet torn by cultural war between the science-loving Transai and the nature-worshipping Ansa. Your role in the planet's history is slowly revealed through cut-scenes and conversations with taciturn alien "companions," yet your motivation for solving the endless stream of Mensa puzzles remains unclear to the end.

Solving the puzzles generally requires manipulating levers or buttons that change the environment in some way,



**I don't know what I am doing or why I am wearing this hat. Mysterious!**

often clearing an obstacle or aligning parts of a pathway. Many puzzles can be analyzed as math problems and solved on paper first, although some succumb to brute force. One of the more imaginative brainteasers requires use of nearby visual and audio Rosetta stones to discover a code. The serial nature of the puzzles does mean that being stumped by a single problem brings the whole game to a screeching halt, but few of the puzzles are difficult enough to be laborious.

The game is surprisingly short given

**I promise there is a clue in this picture.**

that it consumes almost 3GB of disk space. The environments, while beautiful, are disappointingly void of interaction, and the story, while interesting, is wholly irrelevant to the gameplay. *Mysterious Journey II* is a good puzzle game that also reminds us why puzzle games aren't that popular. **B** *Jonah Jackson*

**Verdict** ★★☆☆☆  
For puzzle players who like pretty pictures, too.

## Revisionist History

### New Info, Old Games

*Unreal II: The Awakening* had a huge, gaping wound right out of the box: Multiplayer support, vital to a shooter's longevity, was long ago ripped out like Adam's rib and turned into *Unreal Tournament 2003*. Legend has rectified that mistake with *Unreal II XMP*, a 300MB free downloadable patch that does quite a bit more than you might expect.

*XMP* is not a full-bore MP addition to *Unreal II*, but a single team-based strategy mode akin to *TribeX*. Essentially a rift in the co-staught mode being developed for *Unreal Tournament 2004*, *XMP* offers vehicles, multiple classes, various control points, and an expanded form of CTF.

Each side begins with two artifacts (i.e., flags) in their base; the team that controls the most artifacts wins. The landscapes are far more expansive than usual *Unreal* maps, creating a more deliberate pace and shifting the

emphasis to vehicles. Some of these are simply souped-up dune buggies, while others are midlevel tank with driver and gunner positions. Added to the mix are turrets (fixed and user-placed), mines, and field generators; together, they create a more team-focused tactical experience. None of these extras will work, however, until teams begin to capture and control generators. It's possible to gradually shut down a team's turrets, vehicles, and even mines by darning them power, a feature that adds a fresh element to CTF tactics.

Classes are standard issue, but quite functional. There's the ranger (a light, fast guy with a sniper rifle), the gunner (a heavy, slow guy with a rocket launcher), and the tech (a baby bear who's just right). Everyone has the ability to



heal and revive fallen comrades, but techs hack and rangers heal faster.

*XMP* soldiers shut the gash in *Unreal II* and offers a shake-and-bake cruise for some of the features being developed for *Tournament 2004*. There are some flaws: Vehicle control is a bit touchy and some maps can stalemate, but in the end, *XMP* is worth at least twice what you will pay for it. **B** *Thomas L. McDonald*

**PUBLISHER:** Microsoft **DEVELOPER:** Eagle Dynamics **ESRB RATING:** R **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 800, 256MB RAM, 1GB local **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 1GB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2-32 players)

# Lock-On: Modern Air Combat

False campaign promises in hardcore heaven



❑ The F-15C Eagle handles air combat only—"not a pound for air to ground."

**T**his is the first bone tossed at hardcore jet-sim fans since...well, since *Flanker 2.5*, the previous game in the series, was released nearly two years ago. *Lock-On: Modern Air Combat* takes the realism and detail associated with the *Flanker* games, kicks the graphics up a dozen notches, and finally adds some American hardware for you to fly. The long-awaited dynamic campaign remains AWOL here, so rabid Falcon 4.0 fans can stop reading now and go back to posting on message boards about how great that sim is. The rest of us, though, can load up LOMAC and marvel at the detailed re-creations of eight modern jet fighters and attack jets.

Probably this sim's most anticipated feature is the chance to fly the USAF A-10 Warthog attack jet, and LOMAC doesn't disappoint here. Not only are the plane, its cockpit, and the various weapons it can haul with its 16,000-pound bomb load modeled in meticulous detail, but the graphics engine has also seen a dramatic upgrade to keep the experience real when

flying down in the dirt. Detailed terrain, buildings, water, and effects such as ground haze and lighting look fantastic and lend an unprecedented feeling of speed to low-level flight. Also modeled in exacting

detail are the Russian Su-25 Sturmovik, the USAF F-15C Eagle, and the Russian Su-27 and Su-33 Flankers, as well as three versions of the MiG-29 Fulcrum. And LOMAC models dozens more computer-flown aircraft (backed by viciously aggressive AI), along with virtually every ground vehicle used by today's military.

## Flight school

Although LOMAC offers optional simpli-



❑ You can shoot carrier landings in the Su-32.



❑ The sense of speed during low-level flight in an A-10 is right on the money.

fied flight models and radar options, this isn't a game for gamers who want to jump in and start shooting, even with the realism turned down; you need to master the various planes' radar and weapons systems. Unfortunately, the documentation



The planes may feel realistic, but this explosion isn't pure Hollywood.



Damage location affords your performance—not that it matters in this case.



He has about a quarter second to live.



An Su-25 lays waste to a ground target.

## Detailed terrain, buildings, water, and effects lend an unprecedented feeling of speed to low-level flight.

isn't much help. There's a 50-page getting-started booklet and a more thorough PDF manual on the CD, but even that glosses over many important systems. Your best bet is to spend time watching and flying the in-game tutorials, which walk you step-by-step through basic flight, combat maneuvering, and weapons systems.

The dynamic-campaign system was victim to a number of development snafus, so LOMAC instead includes four scripted campaigns that feature persistent object damage between

missions, a number of single missions, and a quick mission generator. The powerful mission editor is extremely easy to use, so despite the canned campaign, the sheer number of add-on missions available on the Net should make for inexhaustible gameplay. Multiplayer (co-op or head-to-head) is a blast, though lag becomes a problem with more than six players.

LOMAC is not without problems, including graphics glitches, improper icons on the theater-status map, a replay [tool] couldn't get to work,



## Manual Love

The days of massive flight-sim manuals like the amazing Pe/Con 4.0 binder are long past—the best today's sim pilots can hope for is decent PDF documentation on CD. And even those PDF manuals can be light due to time and budget issues that developers face. To mollify documentation fans, Ubisoft worked with Digital Aspirin to create the LOMAC Enhanced Manual, available from [www.lomac-manual.com](http://www.lomac-manual.com) as a \$15 PDF or in full-color glory in a leather binder for \$39.99. Note that the first 150 pages of the 306-page manual are nearly identical to the PDF manual included on the LOMAC disc. The *Enhanced Manual* adds an extensive training section that walks you step-by-step through the sim's systems, as well as recognition charts for the game's air and ground vehicles. It's good stuff, although we'd like to have seen more theory and background to go along with the procedural tutorials. Although the printed manual is expensive—it costs as much as the sim—it comes in at less than half of the quote we got from a local Kinko's for printing and binding the PDF.

and the lofty requirements needed to crank the graphics settings up.

Glitches aside, this is an exciting, visceral simulation likely to offer hundreds of hours of entertainment—as long as you're the type who thinks learning which radar mode works best for a turning fight is fascinating. **D** *Danny Aikin*

## Verdict ★★★★★

A tasty treat for starving jet-sim fans—even without the dynamic campaign.



**PUBLISHER:** Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER:** Electronic Arts **GENRE:** Sports **ESRB RATING:** Everyone **REQUIRED:** Pentium III GDD, 128MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 1.5GB install  
**RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 500+, 256MB RAM, 128MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet (2-8 players)



# NBA Live 2004

EA Sports' latest basketball game is the best version yet

**O**ne problem when a company consistently dominates a genre is that it becomes complacent and ceases to innovate. Fortunately, EA Sports refuses to rest on its laurels. It's safe to say that *NBA Live 2004* is more than just the best *NBA Live* yet—it may be the best live-on-five basketball game available on any platform. We could run down an extensive laundry list of the cool features the game supports, like an enhanced dynasty mode and online play, but you can just go online and see that for yourself. Rather, we're gonna talk about why this game compels us to keep coming back for more in a way no five-on-five basketball game has ever done.

Gameplay in live-on-five basketball games has always felt jumbled up in the paint. If seeing the court well wasn't a problem, getting players to cut and passing to men players was. These problems have been mostly solved with *NBA Live 2004*. Visually, the players are more spread out than they are in other games, and gameplay is no longer about figuring out the few fancy moves and taking your star player to the hole. Playing a winning season as the Lakers requires that you bring the ball up



From the free-throw line you can really see how beautiful the game is.

the court, call some offensive plays, and find the open player. Often, that player is Shaq low in the post. But hey, that's exactly how the Lakers managed to win three straight championships.

Where last year's version of *Live* felt kind of arcadey, *NBA Live 2004*'s defensive improvements makes the game feel more like a sim. A stouter defense means games won't devolve into wild dunk fests, and the improved Freestyle Controller lets you do the one-on-one moves necessary to get an open look at cutters or the basket when you get a pass in the paint.



Darius Miles takes it to the rack.

But what makes *NBA Live 2004* a great game is that it's simply fun to play. Eking out wins against tougher teams won't be easy, which means you need to use the practice modes to hone your skills before games. Add Internet play and excellent commentary from Merv Albert and Mike Fratello, and *NBA Live* will leave round ball fans happy for some time. **William O'Neil**

**Verdict** ★★★★★  
 One of the best live-on-five games for any platform.

**PUBLISHER:** Konami **DEVELOPER:** Konami **GENRE:** Action-Adventure **ESRB RATING:** Mature, blood and gore, violence **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 500+, 33MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 4.75GB install **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card, 5.2GB install **MULTIPLAYER:** None

# Silent Hill 3

Fighting an uphill battle

**I**f you're grateful about colluding with weirdos in endless hallways only during your holiday shopping, then don't play *Silent Hill 3*. The oafish monsters in the town of Silent Hill not only invade its mall, but also slowly attempt to bump you to death in office corridors, park alleys, subways, and hospital halls. This is survival-horror.

You play as Heather, a lovely teenager visiting the town as it becomes possessed. You can't help noticing her lifeless beauty, mainly because the camera constantly swerves to face her instead of what's in front of her. There's a look command, but

it's as limited as the weapons left about. Swinging the maul is painfully slow, and gun ammo is so scarce that you'll save it for boss battles. The copper pipe and the sword rock, but you'll frequently dodge enemies instead, since they don't follow you far or drop goodies. Health kits, ammo, and simple puzzle items are usually found inside a few enterable storerooms buried among countless impenetrable doors.

Despite several scary scenes, the plot line doesn't appear till the end of the



This dinner's entire glow is while you're hearing to the words "bleedy bag."

game. It does mesh with the original *Silent Hill*, but it's plagued by the series' inane conversations. All told, *Silent Hill 3* can't be saved from the gaming graveyard. **Denise Cook**

**Verdict** ★★★★★  
 In *SH3*, the only things that go bump in the night are klutzy monsters.

**You'll frequently dodge the oafish enemies instead of fighting.**



**M**ANUFACTURER: Vivendi Universal DEVELOPER: Valve Software and Turtle Rock Studios URL: www.games.com PRICE: \$39.99 (SRP) RATING: M  
 REQUIRED: Pentium III 500MHz, 95MB RAM, 16MB 3D card, 500MB free HD RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB 3D card

# Counter-Strike: Condition Zero

More of the same...the same fun, that is

**H**ow do you review a game that you've loved for years? The fact that we've been playing Counter-Strike for so long says something about the game: It's obviously a lot of fun. That said, the idea of paying \$40 for a game we've been playing for years for free seems kind of silly. Which, of course, begs the question: What exactly is Counter-Strike: Condition Zero?

What Condition Zero started out as and what it ended up being are two totally different things. In an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of a mod based on Half-Life, Valve got control of CS and gave the Condition Zero project to Ritual Entertainment. Valve didn't like what Ritual put together, so it gave the project to Turtle Rock Studios. Years of previews and exclusive "behind-the-scenes" showings later, the final game is less the innovative title we were promised, but more the CS we've been playing for years with with some exceptional bot play, new maps, and new goals interjected into the standard "rescue the hostages" and "defuse the bomb" scenarios.

All of which begs the question: Do we like the game that Valve shipped?

## Smart bombers

The short answer is yes. Since we've enjoyed CS for years, it should come as no surprise that Condition Zero—which is



Ready, aim, snipe.



essentially CS with some excellent updates—is enjoyable. In Condition Zero, you're the commander of the counter-terrorist team as you battle terrorists in 20 maps (some old ones like Dust, Aztec, and Prodigy, and new maps like Tom and Chateau). The A.I. on both sides of the conflict is awesome; as the leader of the counter-terrorists, your A.I. pals will follow you and, in some cases, "take the point." You can give them orders via the chat feature and they'll do things like camp on a bomb site or guard the bomb. You can even tell them to back you up when things get hot. And because the game attempts to make the A.I. behave like real teammates, some bots are more cooperative than others. You may give an order only to hear an A.I. teammate respond, "No way, sir!" In online play, you can even team up with your human opponents against bots, or complete an incomplete human team with bots.

As a mission-based single-player game, Condition Zero is more replayable than many story-based single-player games. In order to advance through the various missions, you'll have to do more than simply complete the mission goal—certain missions have sub-goals like "Kill five enemies with a sniper rifle" or "Kill three enemies with the Bulpup."

One main gripe likely to be leveled against Condition Zero: You can only play the game from the counter-terrorist perspective. Since, as Ken Brown likes to refer to it, the game is essentially "CS with training wheels," that's a bit of a bummer—it would have been nice to give new players some perspective on playing as a terrorist, too. Still, Ken is right in that Condition Zero is an easy way for newbies to grow accustomed to one of the most popular online games ever. As it turns out, it's also fun for old-school CS players like me. **William O'Neal**

## Verdict ★★★★★

This game was great when it was free. For \$40, it's just good.

**Ken Brown likes to refer to Condition Zero as "Counter-Strike with training wheels."**

**PUBLISHER** Bright **DEVELOPER** EgoSoft **GENRE** Space-Trading Sim **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** **Features** 3D-SOUND, 128MB RAM, 30FPS Instinct  
**RECOMMENDED** Pentium III 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM, 3GB Instinct **MULTIPLAYER** None

# X2—The Threat

No, no, not X2—X-Men United

Like pretty much any modern space sim, it sure looks pretty.



The different ships look cool, but if you didn't buy the proper combat equipment, it just plain sucks.

For anyone who's complained about the dearth of "deep" PC games, much less space sims in general, *X2—The Threat* was lovingly crafted for you. It's a hearty throwback to the early '90s, when games like *Privateer* and *Elite* were still on everyone's minds. Unfortunately, in addition to repeating the depth of those games, it also repeats the obtuse interfaces and high-learning curves of games from those eras.

## A deeper Freelancer

Rather than focus on lots of flashy combat, *X2* is an economy-based space sim focused on zipping around the universe, discovering new sights and making money, with the occasional space fight. Sure, there's a story, but once you're done with it, there's lots more to do and explore. It's basically like *Freelancer*, melding combat and trade into an eminently playable mix. But while *Freelancer* arguably runs out of steam after a while, *X2* just keeps on giving in terms of content and depth. You can go from a mere

scout ship that's lugging some cargo to owning an actual space station and a fleet of capital ships. *X2* has a staggeringly large universe, with diverse races, ship types, and resources. It's the kind of game in which, after disabling an alien ship, you can literally jump out of your own ship and hop inside the disabled one to fly it home. You can affect the economy of a given sector by planting a wheat factory and flooding the sector with wheat. You can rob everyone to your heart's content, and they'll happily rob you back.

## Trucking at the speed of light

But for all of the game's depth, there's a painfully archaic interface and an unfriendly learning curve. Unlike in *Freelancer*, you hardly ever use the mouse in *X2*. That translates into lots of annoying keyboard banging in order to do menial things like finding jumpjets on maps or arming weapons or talking to people. If you have no docking computer, or a cheap one, you'll either have to endure slow manual docking or incorrect automatic docking. My cheap docking com-

puter kept parking me on the wrong side of the space station—I kid you not. Want to buy a space station? Go ahead, but afterwards, you have to hire a giant, obscenely slow transport craft to ship your station to your destination. *X2* also accurately models the "fresh out of college and can't get a job" experience. Most early missions tend to require more qualifications than you have—despite the fact that these same missions are how you earn said qualifications. And it will take about 10 to 15 hours of gameplay before you can afford to do any of the fun stuff outlined earlier.

*X2*'s biggest sin is a bug that causes random game corruption during auto-saves, and hence totally screws you over if you haven't used manual saves. Thankfully, that's the only technical problem, and it's apparently been solved by a patch—so go get it.

*X2* is a deep game worthy of exploration and discovery—you'll just have to exhibit high-infinite patience with its glacially slow buildup and general unfriendliness. **—Thierry "Scooter" Nguyen**

**Verdict** ★★★★★

A much deeper yet less playable version of *Freelancer*.

You can rob everyone to your heart's content, and they'll happily rob you back.



**PUBLISHER:** Ubisoft **DEVELOPER:** Ubisoft **GENRE:** Action/Adventure **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 800, 256MB RAM, 1GB texture, 64MB 3D card  
**RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 1GB RAM, 3D card, dual analog joystick **MULTIPLAYER:** None

# Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time



Have fun storming the castle



**F**ifteen years later, and you're still at it.

Another prince, another princess, another treacherous vizier. More mazelike levels to climb, jump, swing, and fight your way through. When the first game in the series came out in 1999, people were blown away by its lifelike animation because no other game offered anything comparable.

Today, of course, there are plenty of games that feature characters who look (more or less) like real people when they move. This poses a problem for designer Jordan Mechner and his nimble Arabian knight: Is fancy footwork enough to make Prince of Persia stand out in 2004?

## Light on his feet

The short answer is yes. Particularly novel moves can still make a game memorable—consider the wall-crawling in *Spider-Man* or the split jump in *Spölnier Cat!*—and Mechner and his team at Ubisoft give us

some doozies here. To cross a gap in the floor, the Prince can run perpendicularly along a neighboring wall. To reach a high platform, he can kick his way back and forth between two parallel walls like Jackie Chan. Run off a ledge and the Prince grabs desperately for the edge as he falls. In combat, he can cartwheel over an enemy's head and strike with his sword as he descends. It's great stuff.

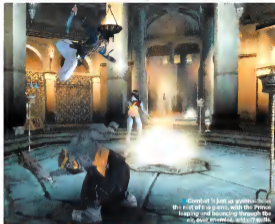
The problem is the controls. Like too many current titles, *The Sands of Time* was designed principally as a console game, and some things that are smooth as silk in, for instance, the Xbox version are awkward half a dozen enemies as they surround you feel intuitive with a control pad, but not so much with WASD keys and the mouse. Worse, the complete control you have over camera

angles on the Xbox is spotty and inconsistent on the PC. Too often you're stuck viewing the action from an obstructed angle that you can't rotate, and when you do have control, it's with an oversensitive mouse that makes the screen swing vertiginously at the slightest touch. Also, because the keyboard controls are based on relative rather than absolute orientation, you can find yourself moving in an



Large mechanical puzzles aren't this Prince's best feature and serve to slow down the hypnotic action of the game.

**You'd think we'd have become jaded over the past 15 years...but you'd be wrong.**



Combat is just as gymnastic as the rest of the game, with the Prince leaping and bouncing through the air, over enemies, and off walls.



The game is at its very best when the Prince is running, leaping, or swinging through the massive, vertigo-inducing levels.



Powering up the time-shifting dagger with the magical sands of time.

unintended direction when the game switches camera angles for dramatic effect. For example, pressing A moves you to the left as long as you're facing away from the screen, but if the game suddenly switches to a side view, continuing to hold down the same key makes you walk forward instead.

### Flipping the hourglass

These issues would be more annoying if it weren't for some of the special powers the game gives you. In the opening sequence, you steal a magic dagger and a giant hourglass from a maharajah. The maharajah's vizier tricks you into spilling the cursed sands contained in the hourglass, and you spend the rest of the game retrieving the sand. Dustbuster-fashion, with the dagger. Pick up enough sand and you can exploit certain time-related magic powers. You can shift enemies into slow motion or freeze them entirely. Even better, you can "rewind" time in 10-second chunks, allowing you to

undo mistakes and retry moves you didn't get right the first time. Since the game is saved only at level-end checkpoints—yet another sign that its heart is in console land—the reward power, which can function as a sort of minisave, is extremely valuable.

The game is at its best when it poses an apparently impossible physical challenge, such as finding a path from the top of a ruined tower to the bottom. Combat is not its strong suit: Too many scenes just fizzle dozens of enemies at you one after another and won't let you proceed till you beat them all. The occasional Myst-style machinery manipulation puzzles don't add much, either.

But all is forgiven when you find yourself swinging gymnastically from flagpole to flagpole or running up the side of a wall and leaping, at the last instant, onto the side of a shattered column. You'd think we'd have become jaded over the past 15 years, that after all the well-animated action games we've played, playing yet another wouldn't affect us much. But you'd be wrong. *The Sands of Time* is not particularly innovative technically, and the PC version in particular has flaws—but Jordan Mechner still has the magic touch. **By Charles Aron**

### Verdict ★★★★★

Thrilling acrobatic action, though the controls and camera angles could be better.



### The Real Sands of Time

In some ways, the *Prince of Persia* games never change. But in other ways...well, just look at the difference in these combat screenshots from the original game and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. "[The Prince] runs, he creeps, he leaps and ducks, he hangs by his fingertips—and he looks like a real person doing it," I marveled in these pages a decade and a half ago. "[Jordan] Mechner has crafted the smoothest animation ever seen." Those comments go double today—*Sands of Time* is one of the best-animated games ever.

**PUBLISHER** LucasArts **DEVELOPER** Totally Games **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRED** Pentium III 850, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, joystick/gamepad  
**RECOMMENDED** Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB 3D card **MULTIPLAYER** None

# Secret Weapons Over Normandy

Tossing a classic franchise out the cockpit window

**A** pure action game without a hint of simulation, *Secret Weapons Over Normandy* has more in common with *X-Wing* than it does with developer Larry Holland's 1991 classic *Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe*. Well, actually, *X-Wing* was pretty realistic compared with this flight-action game. If you enjoyed *Crimson Skies* or the various Jetfighter games, read on. If your hobbies include flight-testing snap-roll response, just go ahead and turn the page.

## The unfriendly skies

*SWON* zips you into the flight jacket of James Chase, an American pilot flying for the Royal Air Force. You'll follow his exploits from the Battle of Britain through the invasion of Normandy, with a detour to Midway in the Pacific Theater for good measure. Despite the historical settings, this game is in no way trying to re-create actual events—the writing is pulp action novel with extra cheese. You fly for a secret squadron called the Battlehawks versus Nemesis, an elite Nazi squadron of black-painted aircraft. Over the course of the game's 15 campaign missions, you'll progress from run-of-the-mill dogfights and ground-attack missions to destroying Nazivengeance weapons, stealing enemy aircraft, and performing daring rescues of captured fighter pilots. The dialogue is corny and the situations unlikely—not that this can't be fun, but the lockluster plot can't compare to the engaging story line of *Crimson Skies*.

Successful completion of missions buys upgrades, which can be used to beef up your plane's performance and ammo. A series of optional challenge missions offers additional upgrades as rewards and unlocks planes (like the XP-55 Ascender) that aren't otherwise included as part of the campaign. There are more than 20 flyable aircraft, ranging from the Hawker Hurricane to experimental planes like the XP-56 Black Bullet. Instant action mode lets you practice in each plane.



Like *X*, it's a use of the secret weapons of the Luftwaffe!

## Tailspin

You'll probably end up playing the first few missions a number of times because, despite the arcade emphasis, flying these planes is a bitch. By totally ignoring physics, the developers actually made the planes harder to fly than if they'd just created somewhat realistic but simplified handling. A host of other problems make combat



You'll take control of a ball turret or anti-aircraft gun during some multiship missions.

taught. Planes handle differently when you're in the overhead "bombing" view, there's no in-cockpit view, the external views don't pan, and the target-lock functionality stinks—you may have to cycle through 15 targets before locking up the mission goal.

The low-polygon aircraft and sloppy textures seem to have been designed for PlayStation 2, and the console version's spitscreen play is *AWOL* here. The PC version includes a mission editor, but I'd be surprised to see much user-created content.

*Secret Weapons Over Normandy* is an accessible World War II combat game that's more *Baa Baa Black Sheep* than historical re-creation. But poor control, cheesy writing, and an anticlimactic ending will frustrate action gamers and make those who remember Holland's previous flight sims nostalgic for the originals. **Danny Aliko**

**Despite the arcade emphasis, flying these planes is a bitch.**

**Verdict** ★★☆☆☆

If the combat didn't stink, it might have been cheesy, over-the-top fun.



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# WIRELESS GAMING REVIEW

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FEATURE

## NWN MOBILE PREVIEW

THE BEST RPG EVER IS COMING TO MOBILE

ALSO PREVIEWED

**NINJA GAIDEN**

FROM TECMO

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE

PRINCE OF PERSIA

WORLD'S WILD PA 3D

ACE YETI TRAPPER

SIGH...

PHONES IN JAPAN



# WIRELESS GAMING REVIEW

## PREVIEW

# NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

DEVELOPER: FLOODGATE PUBLISHER: JAMDAT MOBILE

For many of us needs, the first useful thing we could get a computer to do was roll saving throws in Dungeons & Dragons. BioWare's *Neverwinter Nights* garnered rave reviews and huge sales by taking that notion to the highest level.

In early 2004, JAMDAT and Floodgate will bring *Neverwinter Nights* to mobile phones, but it won't be the same as the PC version, let alone the pen-and-paper game. It can't be. It took PCs almost 30 years to properly represent AD&D electronically. But when this *NWN* comes out, it's going to revolutionize mobile RPGs.

We played betas of the game on an LG VX6000 and a Motorola M320 Smartphone. Both phones sport impressive graphics for their hardware, but it's hard to look at anything else once you savor the Moto's isometric perspective and detailed textures. If you are serious about mobile games, your next phone should run a Microsoft OS.

Before you play *NWN*, you've got to create a character. In the mobile version, your choices are drawn from AD&D 3.0 rules, and there are seven races and seven classes (barbarian, cleric, fighter, monk, paladin, rogue, and wizard). Character portraits and background music are pulled from (or heavily influenced by) BioWare's *NWN* game, and both add nice touches to the game.

But the story is the main thing. The members of the Floodgate and JAMDAT teams are longtime AD&D players (and environmentalists), and *NWN*'s narrative arc shows it. In the game's first chapter, your adopted father charges you with finding the cause of a blight threatening the Cede Grove. It turns out that displaced dwarves and their metallurgy are causing the blight, but they'll stop polluting if you complete several quests. These missions are nicely varied, and the characters you encounter along the way set a new



standard for mobile adventuring.

Not all of the standard RPG problems are fixed, however. There are (and perhaps always will be) too many repetitious conversations with NPCs. There are scores of buildings to visit across dozens of towns in mobile *NWN*, but there's little variation beyond the "buytel" or "sleep here" options. It would have been nice to see more of the racial/alignment effects that appear in the PC version get translated to the mobile game.

But these are minor points more associated with the RPG genre itself than this particular implementation. The version we played was only 80 percent complete, and the team is working on several improvements. Moreover, the architecture of the mobile platform makes adding new modules to *NWN* possible. Although JAMDAT has not committed to expanding the series beyond the three missions included in the download, the framework for doing so is built into the game engine. If all goes well, you might be playing *NWN* on mobile for as long as you've been playing it on your PC.

- MATTHEW BELLOWES

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## ABOUT THIS SECTION

*Wireless Gaming Review* in *EGM* and *CGW* is produced by WGR Media to bring you news, reviews, and previews of wireless games. Our editorial approach is simple: We write about the best of the best. There's a lot of junk out there. We don't want you to buy it. We do want to hear what you think, though, so for questions, comments, or advertising inquiries, please email Matthew Bellowes at [matt@wirelessgaming.com](mailto:matt@wirelessgaming.com).

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# WIRELESS GAMING REVIEW

## PREVIEW

# NINJA GAIDEN CHAPTER 1: DESTINY

DEVELOPER: TECMO PUBLISHER: TECMO



Ninjas and videogames were made for one another. The torrid affair has now lasted almost two decades—it's not just a summer thing. Soon, on your phone, you'll be able to replay their honeymoon. Don't think you'll be relaxing on Caribbean beaches, though. This postscriptal outing features none other than Ryu Hayabusa, aka "The Super Ninja," kicking the pixelated snot out of hordes of hapless, anonymous



henchmen. Yes, that's right. *Ninja Gaiden*, the seminal NES classic, has gone mobile, and the result is shaping up to be a solid port that captures the fun, frenetic swordplay of the original.

For series veterans, there's nothing new here. The upswing of that is the fact that *Ninja Gaiden* is almost a console-perfect port. You climb walls, slash badies, and wreak havoc with ninjitsu magic across five levels and against ruse enemies. The graphics and



sound (on our iPhone preview version, at least) seem on par with the NES version that so entranced us all.

My concerns for the U.S. release are twofold. First, the Japanese version I previewed has some control issues. The keypad is not always responsive enough to change Ryu's direction on the fly (for example, hitting a guy to your left, then throwing a ninja star at your right). And this is the kind of game that really makes control

### MOST ANTICIPATED MOBILE GAME

TECMO WIRELESS GAMES

*Ninja Gaiden*: 34.25%  
Call of Duty: 20.45%  
Newswinter Nights: 21.50%  
Isthmus to Glory: 7.62%  
Snowboard Tycoon: 4.76%  
Other: 50.15%

issues stand out. Second, the handheld that Tecmo is porting to are not up to Japanese standards. I shudder with fear at the AV quality loss, which could result from the port to our generally inferior phones. Tune into WGR to see how the *Sotekside* release shapes up. —AVERY SCORE  
<http://wgamer.com/game-2103>

## REVIEW

# ACE YETI TRAPPER

DEVELOPER: SUPER HAPPY FUN FUN PUBLISHER: BANDAI AVAILABLE ON: SPRINT

The *Ace Yeti Trapper* concept is simple. World-famous explorer Jack Brozac has decided to try his yeti-hunting skills in Nepal, the ultimate alpine arena. To get his shot at the Big Y, Jack must first practice his trapping skills on lesser beasts, outwitting them

and luring them into traps through a variety of maze-like levels.

Jack maneuvers around each rock-strewn level with a nicely animated apostle, swinging his arms like a manic Mono and laying traps with attention. *AYT* runs smoothly, with no hiccuping

or slowdown even on a crowded level. The control scheme takes a little getting used to, especially the trap-laying command. It takes a whopping four button presses to set and prime a trap, and an additional four button presses to arf a trapped creature off the level, so you'd better hope your keypad has a durable "5" button.

In summary, *AYT* isn't a fancy game, but it's addictive in an obsessive, *Dig Dug*-like fashion. Because trap-setting takes time, forethought is a must on the more advanced levels, which increase creature speed and maze difficulty before long, you'll find yourself muttering epithets at yaks and

yetis alike, garnering the extra bonus of increased breathing room on public transportation. —STEPHEN PALLEY  
<http://wgamer.com/game-2725>

### WGAMER RATING:



## REVIEW: PRINCE OF PERSIA

DEVELOPER: GAMELOFT PUBLISHER: GAMELOFT  
AVAILABLE ON: VERIZON



It's tough to find a more consistent mobile games publisher than Gameloft, and it's very tough indeed to find a better wireless action-adventure game than *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. From controls to graphics, the game plays like it belongs on the top shelf in the Game Boy Advance section.

Like the previous POP, *The Sands of Time* features a prince who has to climb, fence, and think his way out of a booby-trapped castle. The prince can find items that give him new techniques, such as short-term flight and forward rolls. The controls are

crisp, despite the game utilizing nearly every button for an action. And while the fighting is fun, solving the game requires more brains than brawn. Extra details (like a code in the Verizon version, which unlocks a bag-headed version of the PC game) make *Sands of Time* a mobile masterpiece.

My only complaint is that, like most Gameloft titles, the game feels too short. However, hidden items and level rankings will probably encourage you to play through it many times over. Another triumph for the Gameloft team - DAMON BROWN  
<http://wgamer.com/game-2911>

### WGAMER RATING:



## REVIEW: WORMS WORLD PARTY

DEVELOPER: KROO PUBLISHER: THQ  
AVAILABLE ON: NOKIA SERIES 60 PHONES



are there, if slightly pruned to fit on a phone. What is missing is the sense of nonstop fun that makes *Worms* such a great party game. It's surprisingly slow, and at times, it really starts to drag. The game's A.I. isn't very good, either, so you shouldn't have much trouble consistently beating it.

If I hadn't had such high hopes for *Worms* going mobile, I would have gotten a lock out of this one. But *Worms* should be a blast, and this is merely a thud. - CASHMAN ANDRUS  
<http://wgamer.com/game-1269>

I love *Worms*. Pitting those feisty, squishy little guys against each other, unleashing fiery and explosive death on their hapless brethren—what a joy. Unfortunately, the J2ME version from THQ is rather disappointing.

The basics of the *Worms* experience—fanciful, destructible environments, an assortment of weapons and plaintive death cries—

### WGAMER RATING:



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# WIRELESS GAMING REVIEW

## THE FUTURE IS UNEVENLY DISTRIBUTED

- CASHMAN ANDRUS

YES, IT'S TRUE—JAPAN HAS MUCH COOLER GADGETS THAN WE DO. THESE DAYS, THE BIGGEST GAP IS IN PHONES, WITH JAPANESE CONSUMERS BUYING ONES THAT ARE EASILY 12 TO 18 MONTHS AHEAD OF WHAT WE GET HERE. SO, HERE'S A GUMPSIE OF YOUR FUTURE. For more on this phone, check out <http://wgamer.com/device-427>

### FOMA F900i by Fujitsu

**SCREEN:** These days, it's all about QVGA. That's 240x320 pixels, with either 65K or 262K colors, packed into a 2.2-inch screen, which makes the screen about twice as sharp as those of most notebook LCDs.

**GAMES:** Whether you're looking for Tetris, MMORPGs, or shoot-'em-ups, some of the best developers in the world have games for you. For example, Square-Enix stepped up to make *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* titles for the launch of the 900 series.

**COMPATIBILITY:** NET DoCoMo cracks the whip over half a dozen manufacturers, herding their wannabe-out-phones to a very tight spec on an even tighter schedule. That means a new phone series every six months or so, which all support the same apps, services, and even accessories.

**NETWORK:** The 900 series is for DoCoMo's FOMA third-generation W-CDMA network. It supports download speeds of up to 3.1Mbps, which is about half as fast as a cable modem.

**FLASH:** Do you have a taste for kittens that sing punk ditties or for rude Web cartoons? Either way, you can watch Micromedia Flash movies on this phone.

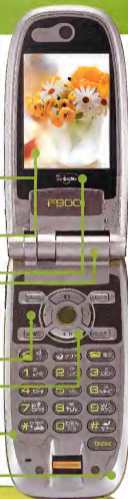
**JAVA:** With 10k of scratch-and-pace, there's plenty of space for rich graphics and substantive sound. DoCoMo has its own version of Java, called DoJa, with added support for phone socialitas.

**HORSEPOWER:** Some models run Linux and others run Symbian. Either way, you've got a truly mind-boggling 32-bit OS, running on an ARM9 processor with more power than a high-end desktop from five years ago.

**MEMORY CARD:** Memory Stick Duo or miniSD card slots let you transfer games, pics, and tunes between your phone and the rest of your digital world.

**CAMERA:** These phones come with 1- to 2-megapixel digital cameras built in, with support for movies and videoconferencing.

**DESIGN:** Since all the phones in a series have pretty much the same features, manufacturers use styling to appeal to different crowds. And they're not afraid of color, so whether you're into Pearl and, add-green, or Hello Kitty pink, you can find a phone that fits you.



# This is where the games begin.

## RAYMAN 3



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## A Team Disney's SPLINTER CELL THE FURIOUS ACHIEVE



TEEN  
**T**  
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## MARCEL DESAILLY PROFESSOR



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# Where's the Kitchen Sink?

**iBuypower's Gamer Extreme has everything you need, plus some stuff you don't**







102

**Flat Is Good**  
Is Hercules' latest LCD gaming capable? We take a look at the sleek-looking Prophetview.

**108**  
CPU Pick  
GPU Pick  
Memory Pick  
Keyboard Support  
Mouse Support  
NIC Support  
OS Support

**How to...**  
Looking to squeeze more speed out of that machine? We show you how to tweak your BIOS.



110

**Loyd's Top Picks of 2003!**  
Loyd Case gives the nod to the best hardware of 2003! See whose pocket he's in.

**Buypower's PC-building philosophy seems to be one of getting its hands on the biggest cases it can find and cramming them full of a ton of gizmos and accessories.**

That said, the Gamer Extreme is a great gaming rig. The Raidmax case sports a 420-watt power supply, but the heart of the machine is Intel's answer to AMD's Athlon 64 FX-51, the 3.2GHz Pentium 4 EE (Extreme Edition). The P4 EE's cache architecture is different from the non-EE P4's, but it still falls short of the kind of performance we've seen with the Athlon 64 FX-51. The Gamer Extreme uses Intel's D875PBZ motherboard, 3GB Dual Channel

DDR400 PC-3200 memory, ATI's 256MB Radeon 9800 XT, and dual 120GB hard drives in a 240GB RAID 0 configuration. These components come together to create a machine that delivered interesting performance during testing.

I tested the Gamer Extreme with both the 3DMark2003 and the latest version of ExtremeTech.com's 3DGameGauge at 1024x768, 1280x960 (where applicable), and 1600x1200 with 4x AA (anisotropic) and 8x AF (anisotropic filtering) turned on. 3DGameGauge is an average of frames/tes taken from several games. Because it came configured with the Pentium 4 EE processor and the Radeon 9800 XT graphics card, I expected the Gamer Extreme to perform worse than the Athlon 64 FX-51 and GeForce FX 5950 machine that Buypower submitted to this year's Ultimate Gaming Machine (UGM) story (CGW #234). Surprisingly, the Gamer Extreme's numbers were nearly identical to those of the Athlon-based UGM machine. And the Gamer Extreme is more than a thousand dollars cheaper.

The Gamer Extreme scored 3303, 2497, and 1775 in 3DMark2003 at 1024x768, 1280x960, and 1600x1200, while the UGM machine scored 3302, 2431, and 1725, respectively. Furthermore,



## By the Numbers

MANUFACTURER/ MODEL	DEFINITION/ Game Config
PRICE	\$1,199
OPERATING SYSTEM	Windows XP Professional Edition
PROCESSOR	Intel® Pentium® 4 Extreme Edition
MEMORY	3GB Dual Channel DDR400 PC-3200
HARD DRIVE	2 x 40GB IDE@1200rpm RAID0 (RAID0)
GRAPHICS PROCESSOR	ATI® Radeon 9800 XT
OPTICAL DRIVE	NEC DVD-ROM
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STORAGE	Logitech™ I™ 400™ 512
SOFTWARE/ PCG	240™ 100™ Anti™ 6™ AA™ 8™ AF™

the Gamer Extreme bested the UGM rig in *Comanche 4* and the *Unreal Tournament 2003* Botmatch. The more expensive UGM submission beat the Gamer Extreme in *Serious Sam*, *TSE* and *Dungeon Siege*.

I like the Gamer Extreme's Raidmax case, though I'd prefer it if it weren't so packed with "goodies." I like the 6-in-1

**Regardless of how you look at it, the Gamer Extreme is a great rig.**

media card reader/writer and the DVD-R/RW drive, but I could do without the floppy drive, DVD-ROM drive, SoundBlaster control panel, and CoolerMaster Volt meter. Of course, that's just me. Ultimately, though, the Gamer Extreme is a good machine that's stable and, compared with its UGM cousin, a bit more affordable. **By William O'Neal**

**Verdict** ★★★★★

A good machine with a ton of extras.

At nearly \$550, Hercules' Prophetview 920 Pro DVI ain't cheap. Of course, that price tag scores you a great LCD that's easy on the eyes.



Manufacturer: Hercules Inc. www.hercules.com Price: \$549.99

# Screen Saver

Hercules' newest LCD combines great looks with good gaming performance

**S**leek and space-saving, LCDs make behemoth CRTs look like aged technology. But high prices have kept LCDs from being

widely adopted by gamers. Hercules' 17-inch Prophetview 920 Pro DVI, though, is emblematic of newer LCDs that may well bring gamers into the flat-panel fold.

The 920 Pro DVI is 28 mm thin, and the base is easily removed so that the screen can be mounted on the wall. There are no inputs on the monitor itself; the attached video cable has a DVI plug, with a VGA adapter for videocards without DVI capability.

## How does it perform?

In a word: superb. The numbers? Response time equals 20 ms. But factory specs can be deceiving. The real test is how the screen looks and performs in real life, and it's here that the 920 Pro excels. Colors are accurate and the picture is sharp and bright, the usable viewing angle is surprisingly wide (Hercules claims 170 degrees horizontal and 160 degrees vertical), and I didn't come across any stuck pixels.

The new "standard" in LCD response times (a measure of the white-to-black-to-white pixel change time—not necessarily an accurate indication of pixel speeds in changing other colors) is set at 16 ms, but this spec is not the final word in LCD gaming performance. That 20 ms response time is respectable, but the critical data is in actual gaming performance. We tested the monitor with a variety of games, including *Unreal*, *Castle Wolfenstein*, *Battlefield 1942*, *GTA: Vice City*, and *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004*. In all but *Unreal*, we saw no ghosting or trailing, and even in *Unreal*, what we saw was very small and didn't hinder play.

Boasting great looks and superb performance, the Prophetview 920 Pro DVI is a good choice for gamers looking to go flat. **—Jeff Labrecq**

## Verdict ★★★★★

An LCD screen with a superb picture and performance that should please all but the most anal-retentive of gamers.



**Wil Power**  
His monthly spew of filth

Once again, Wil fights the powers that be

**W**hen I'm not playing *Madden 2004*, harassing Kristin, or romping the halls of Ziff Davis in search of things to keep me entertained, I hole up in my office and play with some of the extra hardware I got. Recently, I got my hands on one of those clear PC cases that Vicious used to build its UGM submission. I pulled out an Intel motherboard I had sitting around, along with an Antec True 480 power supply, and I built a pretty decent ATI All-in-Wonder 9800 Pro-based DVR (digital video recorder) system. Everything worked like a charm, with the exception that a clear case really highlights the (technical and aesthetic) importance of good, clean cabling.

This power supply has so many extra cables that I can't imagine what people could possibly have in their machines. Typically, when I build a machine, the only parts I include that need power are the DVD-multi drive (combination DVD-ROM and CD-RW), the single hard drive, the graphics card, and the case fans, in addition to the two power connectors that attach to the motherboard. This power supply has one of those old power connectors for old graphics cards, plus three extra power cables, each of which has three plugs on it. Other than the motherboard power connectors, I needed only one of the power cables with three plugs. The others just get in the way. What I'd like is a power supply that's more compatible with my specific needs. Is it too much to ask for a power supply that doesn't have a half-dozen extraneous cords coming out of it? Probably, but I'm spoiled.

What are people putting in their computers?

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# Tech Medics

You've got questions, Wil is rapidly falling in love with "new mom"



© The Voice settles in for a night of warm cocoa and Lifetime TV for women.

## I'm not alone...sort of

Ever notice that both Wil and Greg Vederman from *PC Gamer* are hardware editors that readers love to make fun of?

Zack

Have I noticed that? Uh...yeah. I don't understand why people have a problem with me. At least I don't sleep in fuzzy pink pajamas.

## The grass isn't always greener

Today I saw the promo stuff about the Radeon XT cards. It continued to talk in great length about how you really need a Radeon XT to get the full graphics out of HL2. I was just wondering how true you guys think this is (since I currently have a R9800 Pro 256MB). I get the feeling these new XT cards couldn't be that much better than my current card. Any thoughts?

Koen

They're better than your current card, but your current card kicks much ass and should be plenty powerful enough to play *Half-Life 2*.

## Tricky Nvidia GeForce FX 5200s!

Is it worth \$150 to buy a new GeForce FX 5200 that has 256MB of RAM instead of my current 128MB GeForce FX 5200? I don't wanna buy a whole new card unless it's worth \$150 for 128MB more RAM.

Eric

I don't think so. If I had an extra \$150 lying around, I'd pony up an additional \$40 to get a 128MB Radeon 9600 XT.

## Buy this graphics card

This month's graphics card of choice is the same as last month's: Everyone, go buy ATI's 256MB Radeon 9600 XT. I know you have an extra \$500.



## I hate Madden

I would like EVERYONE to know that I'm pissed. It's not enough that you can only strafe in one direction without using two hands (R to strafe, F to move right), but it is F---ING impossible to change the controls. Sure, you can change them in the Keyboard Only section with the mouse, but in the Mouse and Keyboard section, the mouse no longer affects anything—the Assign button is grey and you can no longer simply double-click to change it. Gee, *Madden* sure is fun when you can only move in one direction.

Arson

You're insane. *Madden 2004* is one of the best videogames ever. The key to that game is spending \$20 on Logitech's Dual Action USB gamepad—it's essentially a PS2 controller, and the game was pretty much designed to be used with that controller.

## Tablet gaming

Have you guys had a chance to try running games on a tablet PC? It seems like the

active digitizer would make mouse-based games work with the pen, but I was wondering if it was actually usable. Do things like scrolling when the cursor is at the edge of the screen work? The first generation of tablet PCs might have been too underpowered for gaming (and they didn't have CD drives), but newer machines like the Acer C300 look like they might be good for armchair gaming. I'd love to see you guys write a short article on this subject.

Phil

I haven't tried to play games on a tablet PC, but beyond the input choices, I would guess that the graphics choices available in most tablet PCs would be the first hurdle. That Acer C300 and Gateway's tablet PC both use Intel Extreme Graphics—and as we all know, the only thing "extreme" about the Intel option is the frustration you'd feel trying to play a game on it. Even with a solution to the graphics card problem, what are you gonna do, hold the tablet in your left hand while you navigate through the game with the pen in your right hand?

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## BATTALION-101c

- 14.1" XGA TFT LCD Display
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- Intel® Pentium™ M Processor at 1.4GHz
- Intel® PRO Wireless 2100 802.11b 11Mbps Mini-PCI Wireless Card
- Advanced 400MHz FSB and 1024KB Advanced L2 Cache
- Extreme 94MB Embedded ATI® 9800 PRO Video
- 512MB DDR Memory
- 20GB Ultra-ATA100 Hard Drive
- Removable 6x DVD/CD-RW Combo Drive
- 10/100Mbps Ethernet LAN and 56K Modem
- 4x USB 2.0 and 1x Firewire IEEE-1394 Ports
- Microsoft® Windows® XP Home Edition
- Free 1-Year A-Care Deluxe 24/7 Phone Support
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# Lloyd's Cracked Case

Lloyd names his hardware favorites of 2003

**W**hen Will asked me to compile my top five hardware items of 2003, I thought it would be pretty hard to come up with enough different picks. But as I thought about it, the list got longer and longer, and I really had to trim it back. So don't think of this as a "best five," but as my favorite five hardware choices for the year, hardware that I, in fact, use on a daily or near-daily basis.

## Athlon 64 FX-51

Nearly everything AMD said it would be, as a CPU for today's 3D game titles it's faster in most games than Intel's Pentium 4. The integrated memory controller and DDR400 support offers incredible memory efficiency and bandwidth. Certainly the folks who make specialized gaming systems believe the same, as we saw from the plethora of AMD-based systems in January's Ultimate Game Machine shootout.

## Intel 865 and 875 chipsets

It may sound contradictory to nominate an Intel chipset as one of my favorites after talking up the Athlon 64. But Intel's primary desktop chipsets offer a stable, speedy platform for Intel's Pentium 4 processor. The 875P and 865PE are really the same core logic, bin-sorted for speed and latency.

These chipsets surprised industry watchers at the time with full support for DDR400 memory. The roadmap had specified DDR333 support, but Intel shifted gears and raised the clock rate of the Pentium 4's frontside bus to 200MHz (800MHz DDR), instead of the anticipated 167MHz. The result was higher memory bandwidth and substantially improved game performance at roughly the same clock rate. Toss in support for Serial ATA, USB 2.0, and AGP 8x, and these chipsets became the gold standards for core logic. And it has enough legs to become the chipset of choice for the first of Intel's next processors, codenamed Prescott.

## ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 Pro

Sure, Nvidia and ATI have been exchanging blows over high-end desktop graphics processors like punch-drunk boxers, but in the Mobility 9600 (MIO), mobile PC users wanting decent DirectX 9 performance now have a respectable GPU inside. With four pixel pipelines and four texture units, it's not quite equal to top desktop GPUs, but ATI's efficient architecture gives gamers who need mobility decent performance.



Logitech's MX900 Bluetooth Mouse is the perfect marriage of form and function.

**Don't think of this as a "best five," but as my favorite five hardware choices for the year.**

## Logitech MX900 Bluetooth mouse

Sure, it's pricey. But it's got good range (up to 30 feet) and—more importantly for gaming—fast, precise response. Using Logitech's DSP-based MX engine, the MX900 is equal to any wired mouse for most gaming. If the MX900 is too pricey or too heavy for your tastes, the corded MX500 or MX310 offer all the precision and response of the MX900 in a tethered form factor.

## Shuttle XPC series

Shuttle proved you don't need a massive box to offer stunning PC performance. As each Shuttle XPC unit arrived on the scene with evolutionary improvements, these tiny, cube-shaped PCs became the darling of the LAN party set. Imitators have begun to flood the market, but Shuttle has steadily improved over time with two unique versions, including the only small form factor PC using the Intel 875P chipset for the Pentium 4, and the only Athlon 64 compact PC. © Lloyd Case

## Lloyd's Top Picks

Great games from the past years



### Athlon 64 FX-51

What does AMD have in store for us after the success of their Athlon 64 FX-51? Well, only time will tell. In the interim, the battle for processor dominance will continue.



### Intel 865 and 875 Chipsets

With a ton of motherboard support, Intel's 865 and 875 chipsets are built to last. And when Prescott, their next big processor rev, ships, AMD may once again have a battle on their hands.



### ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 Pro

While ATI's Mobility Radeon 9600 Pro (MIO) may not be the sexiest look part in the world, the fact remains that it packs a serious punch. And not that mobile graphics upgrades are a reality, machines with these babies are even more compelling.



### Shuttle XPC Series

Small form factor PCs are here to stay. And Voodoo's Shuttle-based rig is one of the best we've seen.



# Check Out

GADGETS

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PERIPHERALS



REWIND 100 118



LAPTOPS

117



112  
COMPUTERS

## Inside

Money might not buy you happiness, but you can use it to buy lots of technological goodies and games. Money can also buy candy! We would love to review candy, but our doctor says it won't do anything to help our little attention-span problem. The Everlasting Gobstopper is a lie! TWO STARS! Sorry, what were we saying?

# A-List

## Our picks

**D** CGW readers, let us know if there's anything we can do to tweak this list to bring it to full efficiency. More gadgets? A section that focuses on MP3 players? Condensing the items that rarely need updates for more space? After all, this is a list for the people! Plus, with the advent of the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, look for many more exciting items next month. One trend: More end-user devices are getting it on behind the closed curtains of R&D departments. Cameras with phones, PDAs with MP3 players—what's next? We predict roller-skating computers and ducks with GPS tracking.



# COMPUTERS

If there were no computers, the world would be somewhat boring. We'd be outside exercising. Or reading *Cow Grazing World*.

## Intel-based system



### PRODUCT

#### HIGH-END PICK

Dimension XPS  
\$3,126  
Dell Computers

#### BUDGET PICK

Area 51 Performance  
\$1,587  
Alienware

### WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

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

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

#### BUDGET PICK

Assassin SE  
\$1,879  
Vicious PC

### WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

VoodooPC's F1 fought its way to the top of WI's Ultimate Gaming Machine roundup (CGW, #234). It's an expensive machine, but well worth the coin if you want the power of an overclocked Athlon 64 FX-51 and a GeForce FX 5950.

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 hitger-stricken badger with a bad attitude (aka Ryan Scott, the Animal).

## LAN-boy rig



## PRODUCT

## HIGH-END PICK

**Doll**  
\$2,500  
VoodooPC

## BUDGET PICK

**FragBox**  
\$995  
Falcon Northwest

## WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

At your next LAN party, swiftly carry in a light and manageable Voodoo Doll with an Athlon 64 3200+ and a Radeon 9900 XT—or spend the entire time dead on the floor with back problems.

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

## PERIPHERALS

When you buy a pretty, pretty dress, it just isn't complete unless you accessorize with the right jewelry and shoes, is it? Peripherals are like jewelry for computers. Work it, girl!



## Speakers



## PRODUCT

## HIGH-END PICK

**Logitech Z-5300**  
\$200  
Logitech

## MID-RANGE PICK

**I-Trigue L3500 2.1 system**  
\$100  
Creative Labs

## BUDGET PICK

**Logitech X-620**  
\$80  
Logitech

## WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

There once was a mommy speaker and a daddy speaker with two baby speakers they "reared," 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!

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.

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

## WIRED PICK

**Elite Keyboard**  
\$30  
Logitech

## WIRELESS PICK

**Wireless Desktop Elite Keyboard/Mouse**  
\$80  
Microsoft

## WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Some things never change much. Case in point: a keyboard. Next year's keyboards will still be arranged in QWERTY fashion. And the Logitech Elite is still an excellent wired choice.

If you don't like QWERTY, there's the DVORAK standard. With a Microsoft Wireless Keyboard, you can repaint all those letters and avoid being held down by wires.

## Gamepad



## PRODUCT

## OUR PICK

**Dual Action USB**  
\$20  
Logitech

## WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

If you're playing sports games on a PC, then this is the gamepad to use. Many EA Sports games default to this controller, which is essentially a PC version of the PS2 DualShock controller.

## A-LIST PERIPHERALS

### Mouse



#### PRODUCT

##### WIRELESS PICK

**MX 500 Optical**  
 \$45  
 Logitech

##### WIRELESS PICK

**Wireless IntelliMouse Explorer 2.0**  
 \$50  
 Microsoft

#### WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Remember the times when you routinely had to open up your mouse and pinch out the dust? Nowadays, turning over your mouse is like looking at a robot's genitals.

Think about how nice it would be to hook up your PC to a big-screen television, snuggle into a comfy recliner with a table, and play your day away. Hence, the need for a good wireless mouse and keyboard.

### 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 own little realm. All the mean old troubles of the universe won't be able to find you when you're wearing Sennheisers.

### Joystick



#### PRODUCT

##### OUR PICK

**Extreme 3D Pro**  
 \$35  
 Logitech

#### WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

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

### Racing wheel



#### PRODUCT

##### OUR PICK

**MOMO Racing**  
 \$100  
 Logitech

#### WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

The entry-level MOMO wheel is an awesome peripheral—just the kind of thing to get your motor in gear for some *Need for Speed Underground*. Thus far, this one has been uncontested among wheels.

## DISPLAYS

Displays are a good investment. Buy a good one and it'll last you through several system iterations; buy a crappy one and you'll need a better vision insurance plan.



### CRT Monitor



#### PRODUCT

##### HIGH-END PICK

**21-inch MultiSync P8211S6**  
 \$600  
 NEC

##### SUGGEST PICK

**19-inch E90fs**  
 \$260  
 ViewSonic

#### 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.

A 14-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**  
 \$900  
 Dell

#### BUDGET PICK

- 15-inch 152T**  
 \$360  
 Samsung

### WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

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

Moore's Law predicts that every two years, the number of transistors per integrated circuit will double. Likewise, your wallet will continue to maintain a steady state of emptiness.



## 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 bedazzled as the 3.2GHz model, it's still more than capable of running any game coming your way in the next couple of years.

## Motherboard



### PRODUCT

#### HIGH-END PICK

- SK8N nForce3**  
 \$225  
 Asus

#### BUDGET PICK

- D875PBZ**  
 \$109  
 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 Z1 Platinum**  
 \$290  
 Creative Labs

#### BUDGET PICK

- Onboard audio**  
 Free

### WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Remember when it was outrageous to have rear speakers for computer gaming? Times are a-changin'—now, we've got the Creative Labs Audigy, a good match for the Gigawatts speaker set.

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

ATI Radeon 9800 XT  
\$400  
ATI Technologies

## MID-RANGE PICK

Nvidia GeForce FX 5600 Ultra  
\$250  
Nvidia

## BUDGET PICK

Nvidia GeForce FX 5200 Ultra  
\$150  
Nvidia

## WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

The Radeon XT was originally supposed to come packaged with *Half-Life 2*. Unfortunately, the game's release date slipped, but many of these cards are still being packaged with a coupon for that eventual release.

Between cards that will blow out your bankbook and those that will quickly fall behind lie the midrange pleasers, like our recommended GeForce FX 5600, which balances smooth polygon throughput with your paycheck.

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

Seagate Cheetah 10K.6  
\$180 each  
Seagate Technology

## BUDGET PICK

Maxtor DiamondMax Plus 9 80GB  
\$100  
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 also good for video editing.

80GB drives at 7,200 rpm can easily be found for \$1 a gig. Usually, they involve rebates with many finite instructions. We mailed in a rebate a day late and they wouldn't ante up our dough. Don't let the same thing happen to you.

## Optical drive



## PRODUCT

## HIGH-END PICK

Plextor Combo DVD/CD-RW drive  
\$60  
Plextor

## BUDGET PICK

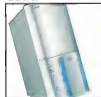
Lite-On DVD drive  
\$30  
Lite-On

## WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Prices on combo drives have significantly dropped with the incoming tide of DVD burners. Nowadays, finding a generic combo drive for around \$50 isn't completely unheard of, but we're going to recommend the Plextor combo.

Instead of highlighting a combo drive, we chose a simple, cheap, and effective DVD drive. These things are really inexpensive now, so get one already, would ya? That way, you can enjoy our DVD special from two months ago.

## Case



## PRODUCT

## TOWER PICK

Cooler Master TAC-T01-E1C  
\$150  
Cooler Master

## ALTERNATE FORM PICK

Shuttle S483G4  
\$300  
Shuttle

## WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Cooler Master's TAC-T01 is big, heavy, and not necessarily cheap—but it's a great case for building that rig of your dreams. It's solid and shiny, and it has a metal monolith inset between the case's driver. What is that thing for, anyway?

It's not the size of your computer, and when you've got a slick little number like one of Shuttle's offerings, you're sure to get many oooohs and aaahhs. Make sure you get one with a big power supply—the girls love a big power supply.



# MOBILITY

Fluorescent lights will tan your skin to that perfect shade of pasty white. Maybe, just maybe, you should try going after something a little less Powder and a little more George Hamilton.



## Laptop



### PRODUCT

#### HIGH-END PICK

**M675**  
\$2,600  
Gateway

#### BUDGET PICK

**Dell Inspiron 5150**  
\$2,000  
Dell Computers

#### LIGHTWEIGHT PICK

**Sony VAIO TR2A**  
\$1,900  
Sony

### WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

With a 128MB ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10) graphics card and a 17-inch display, Gateway's M675 is doper than most desktop PCs.

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 3.1 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 for controlling the action better. Now if only there were good games...

Thanks to the new federal policy that allows you to keep your phone number, negotiating and pinning down a really good deal on a phone is much easier. For a normal-sized phone, this model has worked great during the last few months.

## PDA



### PRODUCT

#### PALM OS PICK

**Zodiac 2**  
\$400  
Tapwave

#### POCKETPC OS PICK

**Toshiba e805**  
\$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 gnuds 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. It's built especially for the power-hungry PocketPC user, and its bells and whistles far surpass the 400MHz processor and 128MB of free RAM. What better way to run NAME and countless games?

## Gadget



### PRODUCT

#### QUE PICK

**Creative Decoder DDTS-400**  
\$100  
Creative

### WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

The Decoder translates into diversity for your computer and console systems. Coupled with any computer speakers equipped with mini-jack outputs, it'll provide every imaginable input you need, from basic analog to optical digital.



GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
	1/14	A solid entry into the burgeoning historical real-time strategy subgenre	★★★☆☆
<b>Indiana Jones</b>	8/15	Something new in the creatively mislabeled field that's worth a look	★★★☆☆
<b>Enter the Matrix</b>	5/13	Play it for the movie, don't play it for the play	★★★☆☆
<b>Exile@2</b>	12/05	A better, cheaper 3D version of Age of Empires: The Gathering	★★★☆☆
<b>Eye Online: The Second Genesis</b>	6/13	Hard to hate to see the first games of this MMO genre	★★☆☆☆
<b>EA-18: Operation Load Friends</b>	10/05	Nothing really new here, but worth a look if you need a new sim for a slow system	★★★☆☆
<b>FL Challenge '95-'02</b>	5/01	A must-buy for Formula One racing fans	★★★★☆
<b>FRF 2004</b>	2/04	It might be a rough needle point, but it's still the best soccer game on any platform	★★★★☆
<b>Final Fantasy XI</b>	2/04	A rock-solid MMORPG, one of the most ambitious games	★★★★☆
<b>Freedom Fighters</b>	1/04	Good weapons, tactics, but the PC version drew the short stick	★★★★☆
<b>Ghost Master</b>	7/03	This game is cheap, stylish, and fun to watch, but it's a little too hard to control	★★★★☆
<b>Gothic II</b>	2/04	Better than the first, but still a little too wanky and long to be a classic	★★★★☆
<b>Grand Theft Auto: Vice City</b>	8/05	EA's 2002 Game of the Year gets '05-style clothing in this sequel	★★★★☆
<b>Ham</b>	8/03	Just in transition	★★★★☆
<b>Heroes &amp; Generals</b>	8/13	Wild, yes, and utterly devoid of interesting strategy elements	★★☆☆☆
<b>Heroes of Might and Magic III: Wrath of the Dragon</b>	5/05	The dragons are cutest	★★☆☆☆
<b>Hidden &amp; Dangerous 2</b>	1/04	A really good game hampered by the same under bugs and problems as all the original	★★★★☆
<b>Highway to the South</b>	1/04	An excellent system grabber	★★★★☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
<b>Homeworld II</b>	12/05	It's no Galaxian—it's not even Asteroids!	★★★☆☆
<b>Iron's Justice Dies</b>	12/05	A robot attempt at chess for gamers that doesn't quite reach greatness—but does provide some great dice	★★★☆☆
	1/04	A rare combination of hubster and heroism	★★★☆☆
<b>Korean Football</b>	5/03	It seems like a questionable sport, but it's the best beer-based war game ever	★★★★☆
	2/04	A total masterpiece from Gameworks. Likely the best RPG of the year, and possibly the best Star Wars game ever made	★★★★☆
<b>Legacy Online</b>	8/13	A better version of EverQuest	★★★☆☆
<b>Lineage II</b>	8/13	Unbalanced, tedious, buggy, and lacking in strategy—but those are its good points	★★★☆☆
<b>LOVE: NOW</b>	2/04	Check your brain at the door for this raucous, raunchy, spell-singing good time	★★★☆☆
<b>Madden NFL 2004</b>	8/03	Lays the best Madden game yet, but is panned today as a plain old Madden sequel	★★★★☆

## More of the funny

Ha ha, ha ha, hee hee



### Space Quest series

The parody-laden adventures of former space jester Roger Wilco turned the sci-fi genre on its side. Will the hapless hero ever return?



### Day of the Tentacle

A giant purple tentacle bent on taking over the world decides to start his conquest in a little of mansion populated by weirdos.

Even if you're not a fan of tentacles, you'll love the humor and the story.



### You Don't Know Jack series

The various Jack games are a series of irreverently funny pop-culture quiz shows. Now this is the Jack you should get to know.



### Leisure Suit Larry series

previews: CGM rating system

The leisure suit may be passing to a different Larry in Sierra's upcoming revival, but the originals' raunchy humor will always have a place in our hearts and funny bones.



### No One Lives Forever

One day, people will live forever, thanks to anti-aging creams, cryogenic tubes, and endless numbers of clones in which you can swap your brain. Until then, play this sweetly funny game.

## Cream of the crap

It's a rich, velvety pulp



### Postal

The first game ever to receive zero stars in a CGW review. For some reason, the makers of the game took that as a compliment.



### Mistmare

Your future will be an endless fog of despair should you break the plastic seal of the cursed *Mistmare*.



### Midnight Nowhere

Outright offensive, odious, and abusive, the only place you should find this *Midnight Nowhere* is nowhere near you.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
<b>Rescue Journal</b>	1/04	Isomergs game fun-based	★★★★★
<b>Five Pages 2</b>	1/04	Improves upon every facet but doesn't mesh with the formula	★★★★★
<b>Midnight Nowhere: Allied Assault—Breakthrough</b>	1/05	Intense and usually satisfying, but buggy good enough to justify the price	★★★★★
<b>HalfPoint: Total War—Rising Invasion</b>	6/05	This expansion is a must for Total War fans	★★★★★
<b>Postal Gear Sold 2: Substance</b>	6/05	It's supposed to be MSZ: the Director's Cut, but the sloppy start makes it about the MSZ: the Clumsy Post-Script Cut	★★★★★
<b>Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004</b>	6/04	The most fun you can have in a plane without going	★★★★★
<b>Midnight Club II</b>	5/03	What it lacks in multiplayer, it more than makes up for in fun	★★★★★



<b>CG Midnight Nowhere</b>	1/04	Horrible horror with a zero in a zero	★★★★★
<b>Mistmare</b>	1/05	Just throw your \$20 into the street market	★★★★★
<b>Midnight Nowhere: Allied Assault</b>	1/04	A fun way to spend a single afternoon	★★★★★
<b>Neverwinter Nights: Shadows of Undrentide</b>	1/05	A much better single player game than the original game	★★★★★
<b>Neverwinter Nights: Shadows of Undrentide</b>	1/05	Protagonist or anti-hero is a more challenging backstory game	★★★★★
<b>MSZ</b>	1/04	The best MSZ experience on any platform	★★★★★
<b>No Man's Land</b>	1/04	Another follow-the-masters MSZ	★★★★★
<b>Medieval</b>	1/04	Well, at least it sounds spooky	★★★★★
<b>Drop Spins a Knight</b>	1/04	A decent enough RTS (stepped down by a lower FPS and the mistakes about that milk is funny)	★★★★★
<b>Paradise III</b>	1/04	Little more than a glorified Pac-Man rip-off	★★★★★
<b>Postal: The Caribbean</b>	1/03	The best good games don't equal our good one	★★★★★
<b>PlanetSide</b>	6/05	Massive and persistent world MMO shooter is surprisingly good	★★★★★

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
<b>PlanetSide: Core Conflict</b>	2/04	A decent view at its core, but not worth the price	★★★★★
<b>Post Noche</b>	8/05	After a slow start, a quality state game emerges	★★★★★



<b>CG Railroad Tycoon 3</b>	1/04	You can't have to love trains to enjoy the historical and economic challenges here—let a little love train love won't hurt	★★★★★
<b>Robes Prison Escape</b>	1/04	Go get a copy of <i>Democracy 2</i> instead	★★★★★
<b>Red Faction II</b>	1/05	Staged out only by <i>HalfPoint</i> as worst console port so far this year	★★★★★
<b>Republic: The Revolution</b>	1/05	Good idea, bad game	★★★★★
<b>Rise of Nations</b>	1/05	The best, greatest historical RTS	★★★★★
<b>Rollercoaster Tycoon 2: Wild World</b>	1/05	Add some window dressing and a scattering of new scenarios to a game well past its prime	★★★★★
<b>Ravenous: A Food Adventure</b>	1/05	The best of positive adventure games, both pre- and post	★★★★★
<b>Savage</b>	1/04	A potential blockbuster negated by its own obnoxious	★★★★★
<b>Star City &amp; Dark Nova</b>	1/04	The core focus on character/tech adds substantially to an already excellent game experience	★★★★★
<b>Space Colony</b>	1/04	A clever combination of real-time strategy and <i>Star Trek</i> does enough to hold your interest for long	★★★★★
<b>Star Trek</b>	1/04	Open-ended and flexible without being too complex	★★★★★
<b>Star Trek: Elite Force II</b>	1/03	Like playing one of the best competing TV seasons	★★★★★
<b>Star Wars Galaxies: An Empire Divided</b>	1/05	Might get a whole lot better	★★★★★
<b>Stinky &amp; Marsh</b>	1/04	The best top-of-the-70s cartoon in this crazy game from a cheap studio	★★★★★
<b>Temple</b>	1/04	Yet another good game ruined by bugs. <i>Where?</i>	★★★★★

## Just laughable



### Contract J.A.C.K.

★★★★★  
The black sheep of the No One Lives Forever family is saddled with repetitive shooting, and its attempts to be funny fail pathetically flat. Honestly, you don't want to know J.A.C.K.



### The Legend of Kyrandia, Book 3: Malcolm's Revenge

Not rated  
The third installment in the Kyrandia trilogy places fans in the role of the villainous jester. Nonsensical puzzles and dull humor make for highly uneven design.

GAME	DATE	REACT	SCORE
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<b>The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind</b>	1/01	This solid expansion effectively increases the usefulness of Morrowind to reveal it that of Earth.	★★★★★
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<b>The Great Escape</b>	1/05	Not quite as bad as a month in the middle, but not much better, either.	★★★☆☆
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<b>Q3 The Hobbit</b>	2/04	Staggered enough law, lightly Tolkien-themed.	★★★★☆
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<b>The Hulk</b>	9/05	Bad comic-book game—not named Avengers Force—you can buy.	★★★☆☆
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<b>The Savage Seven: Riders of the Sphinx II</b>	2/03	A puzzling archeological find (SSE) about how gamers will dig.	★★★★☆
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<b>Q3 The Simpsons Hit &amp; Run</b>	2/04	The best GDD up till now, and a must-have for Simpsons fans.	★★★★★
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<b>The Sims: Magic</b>	1/04	The last Sims expansion plays like a charm.	★★★★☆
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<b>The Sims: Superstar</b>	8/05	Another solid addition to the game's best-selling genre.	★★★★☆
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<b>Top News: PGA Tour 2004</b>	11/01	A game that will please both hardcore golf fans and casual gamers.	★★★★★
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<b>Flora of Steel</b>	1/04	An old school game with little crossover potential.	★★★★☆
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GAME	DATE	REACT	SCORE
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<b>Team Rumble: The Legend of Dragoon</b>	11/01	Not as bad as the name—oh wait, yet it is.	★★★★☆
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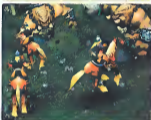
<b>Top Rank's Pro Soccer 4</b>	1/05	As long as you have a perpetua it's the most fun you can have on a stadium without putting yourself in the hospital.	★★★★☆
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<b>Tro: 2.0</b>	8/05	Best movie-based game of the year so far.	★★★★☆
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<b>U2: Rattle and Roll</b>	9/04	U2 (U2) creates a good game that should have named Bruce and the Ice Cream Truck to be named.	★★★★☆
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<b>Uplink: Hacker Elite</b>	1/01	An intriguing premise and quality execution make Uplink a winner.	★★★★☆
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<b>Uru</b>	1/04	Some good puzzles, some bad actors, no story, lots of Lancelotti elements—maybe the eventual online content can make it more compelling.	★★★★☆
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<b>Q3 New of the Ring</b>	2/04	Good use of Middle-earth elements at a nearly unbeatable RTS.	★★★★☆
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<b>NetCraft II: The Frisco Innings</b>	9/05	Some nice new stuff, but you pay in micro-management.	★★★★☆
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<b>Warlords II</b>	1/04	A strategy classic revisited as a classic strategy bundle.	★★★★☆
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<b>Warlord Kings: Battles</b>	1/05	Good game, but it's a western genre of war which what you really want is a shot at your favorite genre.	★★★★☆
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<b>Will to Win</b>	1/03	To make a limited-time classic "We're not gonna take it!"	★★★★☆
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<b>World War II: Assault Command</b>	11/03	Bad interface, some missions, and excessive, but the documentary footage is OK!	★★★★☆
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<b>X2: Wolverine's Revenge</b>	9/05	Save your money and buy the X-Men 2003 release!	★★★★☆
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<b>XIII</b>	1/04	This Belgian original walks between fun and frustration, excitement and boredom.	★★★★☆
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<b>Zero Hour</b>	09/04	GDD better than it's ever been!	★★★★☆
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## Lames of last year

The way-look machine



### NightFire

Well, Mish Moneyperny, thish ish a line mesh I've got myself into. An utterly awful, horrible mesh.



### G.I. Combat

Yo Joe, this game is a no-go! A real American Zero! Combat any urge to search for this one.



### Rock Manager

A game about taking care of a pet rock would be more fun than managing a band in Rock Manager.



### Jazz and Faust

What kinds of parents are so inept, so bizarre as to name a child Jazz or Faust? Hippies? Morons? Hippie morons? Well, it just so happens that this bish game was made specifically for hippie morons.



### Catechumen

not rated  
God must be having a good chuckle over this attempt to create a Christian videogame that involves slaying demons. We don't care what religion you subscribe to—this game is sinfully bad.

# Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

**PUBLISHER:** 300 **DEVELOPER:** New World Computing **GENRE:** Turn-based Strategy **SRG RATING:** Not Available **REQUIRED:** Pentium 133MHz, 32MB RAM, at least 60MB free disk sff, you should free up some space... 1, 2MB graphics memory, CD-ROM **RECOMMENDED:** Any computer you buy now should easily create the reqs. **MULTIPLAYER:** LAN, Internet

## Heroes of Might & Magic III

Take a trip back in time with Tom and Bruce



□ Happiness is being a warlock in a dungeon town and finding a sulfur stalk. □ Hmm, take seven free treasure chests or fight hellhounds for one gold...

**B**ruce and Tom light it out in a two-player game using the Against the Dragons medium-sized map with the A.I. set to normal. Since there are no A.I. players, this only affects the independent creatures' strength.

**Bruce:** Until *Dominions 2* came along, *Heroes of Might & Magic III* was probably the best fantasy strategy game ever created. Unfortunately, it came out right as I was burning out from nearly two straight years of nonstop *HOMM2*. So, while I still played the new version a lot, it was nothing like the life-threatening obsession I had with the previous game

and find this game sitting between *Hoary Gear 2* and *Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine*.

Each turn is one day. Creatures increase in population at the end of each week.

### Month 1 week 1, day 1

**Tom:** I start way up in the upper-left corner of the map with a rampart town. Ramparts are sort of like *HOMM2*'s sorceress towns, but with green dragons instead of phoenixes. My town is named Wise Oak, which sounds like a cross between a gated community and that sentient tree from the *Legend of Zelda* games.

**Bruce:** I'm in a dungeon town and start

spent the money on bigger armies. There is nothing more frustrating than revealing a hoard of five treasure chests and three piles of gold, only to realize that the way is blocked by an army you probably won't be able to defeat for another three weeks.

**Bruce:** I had forgotten how annoying this game's underground can be. It's divided into several noncontiguous areas that can only be reached by going through teleportation portals called monoliths. However, it's not easy to see at a glance which one goes where, because you have to match monoliths by searching for two that have the same pattern in the door. It's like someone decided there still wasn't enough gameplay in the series, so they threw in a bonus minigame of Concentration. Also, some portals are only one-way, so once you go through them, you must find new portals to take you back via some other route. The net result is that my heroes keep getting lost in circles. I'm wasting a lot of movement points and Tom is probably winning.

### Month 1, week 2, day 1

**Tom:** I have a druid named Coronus. After this game he will go on to invent a brand of Mexican beer. He has revealed a town close by, but I can't find a way to get to it because it's hemmed in by woods, and I can't find where the road comes out. This is moot anyway, since the town is guarded by a magi who would luck the ass of Coronus and his century/dwarf army. It is a lower town, which means I'll get titans once I grab it.

**Bruce:** No sign of any new towns yet, but I'm picking up lots of experience—Deemer the warlock is already up to level

## I'm not retreating. I'm advancing in the opposite direction.

Thus, I didn't actually learn every possible trick in the book. That's a roundabout way of saying I'm not an expert at this game and could possibly lose, so just a fair bit of warning there.

**Tom:** *Heroes of Might & Magic III?* The holiday shelves are brimming with games, and we're reaching back to play *Heroes of Might & Magic III?* For everyone reading, I'd like to make it clear that this was Bruce's idea. If it were up to me, we'd be playing *YARTS* (Yet Another Real-Time Strategy Game). You would all be regaled with stories of my superior peon management, how I set my footmen to defensive attitude while Bruce let all his little horsemen charge into their pits for triple damage, or how I leveled up my glych warrior by casting *Inferno* on Bruce's eleven fox squad. Instead, I had to dig into my closet

with a warlock. I'm also underground. I don't remember much about this map, except that I think one player starts aboveground and one below. This will give us plenty of time to gather our armies before we go head to head... unless I'm wrong and Tom is right next door in his own dungeon.

### Month 1, week 1, day 5

**Tom:** I've hired three heroes to scout out the map. This is "Smooth Move, Dumb Ass" No. 1, since *HOMM3* is all about closing off regions behind powerful monsters, effectively locking you out of certain areas until you've built up enough of an army to break through. Now, my heroes are running around bumping into each other, frantically looking for something that hasn't already been explored. I should have



**Tom Last month:** His prophet evangelized from his bloody pulpit in Dominions 2, though Tom just came out bloody.



**Bruce Last month:** Bruce proclaimed "Chufflu T'egni!" upon his victory. We have yet to figure out what it means.

5 Early in the game, I like to take experience points from the chests to get my heroes leveled up quickly and only take enough gold to allow me to build town-hall upgrades. The money invested early in revenue-generating structures pays off big later on when you're spending several weeks' worth of income just to get top-level recruits.

### Month 1, week 3, day 2

**Bruce:** I just found a town called Ghostwind that looks like a necropolis. It's located a few monolith jumps away from my starting dungeon. It only lists some zombies as defenders, so Deemer takes a chance with some harpies and medusas and attacks. It's an easy victory that should ease my gold problems tremendously.

### Month 1, week 3, day 7

**Tom:** No sign of Bruce yet. I'd think I'd have bumped into a scout or something by now, but there might be some sort of Shadow Land counterpart to this map.

### Month 1, week 4, day 2

**Bruce:** I've explored about a third of the underground and have my capital in my dungeon town of Colkshadow generating 4,000 gold each turn. Next turn, my other town will be upgraded with a city hall, which is the highest it can go since you can only have one capital in the game at a time. I'll be earning 42,000 gold per week, which I can get up to 56,000 if I can find one more town and upgrade it. As much gold as that is, though, I'm sure it won't be enough.

### Month 2, week 1, day 3

**Tom:** OK, I'm draining the land of goodies and monsters to fight, but my advancement seems to be stymied. Coronus is stuck at level 3, my battle mage Terik is at level 2, and I never have enough money to upgrade the structures in my town. "Smooth Move, Dumb Ass" No 2 was forgetting to upgrade my city hall into a capital until now. That would have given me a serious income boost a while back. I really need to grab Tintil, the tower town. But



These magic transdimensional portals definitely need better road signage.



A fully upgraded inferno town is a beautiful sight.

one of the trademarks of HQMM map design is that two locations that look like they're close to each other are actually separated by a long, meandering passage. To get to Tintil, I have to go all the way south from Wise Oak to an opening in the trees and then come all the way back up a road. This will make it hard for my one army to defend any cities if Bruce brings up a killer stack. And killer stacks are what this game is all about.

**Bruce:** I managed to find and capture the inferno town of Candent. Infernos are great because they generate devils, which are indispensable because of their tele-transportation power. An army full of black dragons (from the dungeon), ghost dragons (from the necropolis), and devils will be fearlessly fast and worth the morale hit you get for combining undead with other types of units. Unfortunately, it's going to take a while to build all the structures in Candent required for the devil-producing Forsaken Palace. (That actually sounds like a bad Chinese restaurant.)

### Month 2, week 2, day 6

**Tom:** Terik takes Tintil (I was hoping I'd get to write that.) I lost all my centaurs to Terik's magi and stone golem defenders, but my pegasi and unicorns galloped to victory. Horse power, baby! Terik is becoming my man hero—he's up to level 9—and he's going to be pretty tough with a combination of Wise Oakian gold dragons and Terithian titans. Unfortunately, I'm having cash-flow problems and can't



You might be surprised to hear that Expert Tactics hero skill helps a lot in tactical combat.



Two roads diverged in a magical wood / And Bruce took the one with Tom's hero on it / And got his ass rightfully kicked.

upgrade my Dragon Cliffs, so I'm kind of slumming it with green dragons.

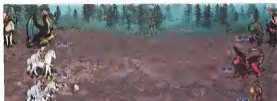
### Month 2, week 3, day 7

**Bruce:** I have a new hero—Iona the alchemist. Her job is simply to run around and collect all the remaining treasure chests down here and exchange them for gold. There is no point in leveling another hero—my warlocks are going to have to fight the battles now. I'm almost ready to head topside and see if I can find Tom.

### Month 2, week 4, day 3

**Tom:** A-ha! A red dot on the strategic map! Bruce has decided to venture forth from whatever alternate dimension he's been hiding in. His little army only has a few black dragons. Coronus the bear druid is close enough to attack in the tactical combat, I cast Dragon Slayer on my silver pegasi and watch as the little whinnying dudes team up with my green dragons to trounce Geryk. However, his hero escapes, sneaking like a girl the entire time. What a wuss.

**Bruce:** Ack, that was stupid. I should have hired a throwaway hero to do the scouting rather than my second-best warlock. Fortunately, my killer stack is close enough behind that I'm able to follow up on the next turn and defeat Tom's druid. I don't have a very good memory anymore, so it helps that we just fought last turn and I know exactly how many of each unit Tom has. I lose a few minotaurs and scorpiors, but my dragons all survive and I get some decent experience points out of it. Nevertheless, I'm going to head back. **B**



☐ Dragons and unicorns and pegs...oh, man, that's really lame.

☐ to the safety of the underground and pick up some more units before I try this surface adventure again.

#### Month 2, week 4, day 4

**Tom:** I'm not retreating. I'm advancing in the opposite direction. And now I see where Bruce is emerging onto the map. There is some kind of stone death-temple thing in the far lower-right corner of the map. That must be the gate to his secret Geryokan underworld.

#### Month 2, week 4, day 5

**Bruce:** Tom isn't following me into the underground, so I wonder what he's planning. I have my warlocks (Doemer is level 12) heading up with a pair of strong armies. The risk in having two killer stacks is that a bigger stack might be able to take both of them out in the same turn. I'm going to have my alchemist scout this one out for me first.

#### Month 3, week 1, day 3

**Tom:** Bruce disappeared last week, apparently frightened away by my druids. I just found a third town. It's a castle type that was way down in the lower-left corner where I hadn't explored. However, even with war unicorns, green dragons, silver pegasi, and blue moans, my lowly first-level druid Adelaide (that's "Sweet Adelaide" to you) was unable to take it, thanks to some crusaders and their double strike. I'm sending another hero down there now with a bigger army, but I really should have had this town much earlier in the game. We'll call missing this town "Smooth Move, Dumb Ass" No. 3.

#### Month 3, week 1, day 8

**Tom:** Bruce's heroes have reappeared, but it's an inopportune time since my heroes are spread out across the map. I was taking advantage of the fact that units exchanged between heroes can freely move with the new hero even if the old hero has expended all his movement points. This allows you to chain heroes together to quickly ferry units across the map. I had just shuttled some giants from beer-druid Coronius to Tirth-taking Terek. Sweet Adelaide is in the lower left trying to take the castle town. And here comes Bruce, right up the middle.

#### Month 4, week 2, day 1

**Bruce:** Just following this road up from the south brought me to one of Tom's towns. It seemed pretty weakly defended so I took it. I hope to hang on long enough to upgrade it and get some titans out of the deal. I can upgrade my inferno to produce arch-devils, but they're far away and the battle is here, now. If this adventure goes sour, I expect I'll have plenty of opportunities to get those arch-devils later.

**Tom:** Bruce takes Tirth. Which doesn't sound anywhere near as snappy as "Terek takes Tirth." His black dragons made quick work of my giants and a throwaway hero I had recruited for defense. Coronius was on his way back, but he had no chance of winning the battle, and if he had lost in the castle, he would have been gone forever. My only hope is to redirect Sweet Adelaide, grab whatever creatures from Wise Oak that I can afford, and try to retake Tirth before Bruce starts crank-

## Bruce takes Tirth. Which doesn't sound anywhere near as snappy as "Terek takes Tirth."

ing out titans. I can't let him dig in up here or I'm a goner.

#### Month 4, week 2, day 2

**Bruce:** Upgrading another player's town deep in his territory is risky—if he retakes it this week, I just saved him 25,000 gold and 30 gems. If this map is balanced (three towns on each of the levels of the map), that means I have four towns to his two (or one) right now, and with that kind of income difference, he has no chance. I can get some titan recruits out of this, so I should be able to finish it here.

#### Month 4, week 2, day 7

**Tom:** Terek has mustered a bunch of green dragons, silver pegasi, and war unicorns, along with my one remaining titan and a few genes I shuttled out before Tirth fell. I don't think it will be enough, but I can't wait any longer.

**Bruce:** Tom attacked me with what I presume was his best stack. It was fairly close, although I ended up with four of my seven black dragons alive at the end. So I guess it wasn't that close. My other warlock is following up with a huge army of ghost dragons, dread knights, and vampire lords. Once the week cycles, I can grab some more titans and see what's next.

#### Month 4, week 3, day 1

**Tom:** It looks like Bruce has an even bigger army following up. I'm down to the town of Wise Oak and have no chance of capturing another one. I put in my request for an honorable surrender, and Bruce's terms are that I write the following sentence: "Bruce Geryk is truly a hero of might and magic." Tune in next month when we hopefully play something that won't cater to Bruce's predilection for all things elven.



☐ Bruce finds the castle at the end of the road and knocks politely.



☐ Tom's last stand has an appropriately snowy, Russian-front feel to it.



Coming Next Month... **COMPUTER GAMING** WORLD

April 2004  
On sale March 2

## Evildoers, beware!

The world's coolest superheroes are returning to the PC once again for a story ripped from the pages of the Golden Age! It's *Freedom Force vs The Third Reich* in Irrational's mega-sequel, and CGW has the scoop. Don't let the bad guys win—buy your copy in 30 days!



# COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

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