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10 Editorial

Jeff dedicates this month's editorial to Mythica, R.I.P.

14 Letters

A couple intrepid souls come to our defense on the infamous free DVD, plus we reveal Jeff's secret life, and give you vultures a little more of Kristen to look at.

18 Radar

In his inaugural month of running the Radar section, Darren threw himself into a hotbed of controversy. One minute he's talking to the FBI about the current status of the *Half-Life 2* code theft (page TK) and the next he's "prating" gamers with new game copy software program that's legal—for now (page TK). Be sure to check these stories out. While you're there, also read up on a new TV show based on videogames, how the gaming world is about to get its own walk of fame, and CGW's exclusive *Red vs. Blue* video.

32



38



46



70



You Rule

Epic-scale RTS games are now coming of age. In addition to *Rome*, we also went to Middle-Earth for exclusive info and to see firsthand how the strategy genre is evolving.

This means
War!

■ COVER STORY

We shipped our own little emperor-wannabe, Darius Gladstonicus, to England for the skinny on *Rome: Total War*, and got the scoop on what could be the next great RTS.

58





81



88



90



86

76 Ultimate Game Pad

You may have a hot PC, but if you play in a pig sty, who cares? Create your own private gaming mecca and you won't be trading spaces with anyone.

32 Previews

Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines, classic Bond villainy in **Evil Genius**, and the goods on **Thief: Deadly Shadows Plus**, **ShellShock: Nam '67**, **Lineage II**, and **Hitman: Contracts**. Largest previews section ever!

80 Reviews

You know what's great? Really superb cool games. Someday, we will run reviews of those games. In the meantime, here's **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles**, **Syberia II**, and **Wars and Warriors: Joan of Arc**.

94 Tech

We review **Falcon's FragBox Pro**, an **ASUS** graphics card, **ATI's All-in-Wonder 9600 XT**, and **Gateway's Media PC**. Bonus: a **WI Power** column that's actually related to gaming!

111 Check Out

We clue you in on the best new tech stuff, remind and recap a few recent PC gaming gems, then it's on to Queen Tom vs. El Bruce in **Civiltation III: Conquests**.

REVIEWS

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 80 SpellForce: The Order of Dawn | 86 Horizons |
| 82 Vietnam Horizons: Empire of Istana | 88 Wars & Warriors: Joan of Arc |
| 83 You Don't Know Jack—The Lost Gold | 89 Jack the Ripper |
| 83 Conspiracies | 89 Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles |
| 84 Star Chamber | 90 Syberia II |
| 85 Worms 3D | 92 Title Bout Championship Boxing |

94

126 Scorched Earth

Our resident tool wants more tools.

PREVIEWS

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 33 Vampire: The Masquerade-Bloodlines | 44 Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle |
| 35 Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patrois | 46 Hitman: Contracts |
| 37 Evil Genius | 48 Manhunt |
| 38 Unreal Tournament 2004 | 48 War Times |
| 40 Thief: Deadly Shadows | 48 True Crime: Streets of L.A. |
| 42 ShellShock: Nam '67 | 52 Beyond Divinity |



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-24/7-

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Toasters of the coaster

I don't understand why anyone would complain about your January DVD. I think it's the best disk my son has ever received. He encouraged me to try *Deus Ex* and to my surprise, I am having a rollicking good time.

Of course, it took a while for my fingers to do the right keyboard things (I am 65 years old), and I must have died 15 times on the Easy setting before I learned what not to do. But I managed to finish my first mission, and I am rather pleased with myself. So to hell with going fishing, I am going to spend my retirement putting down bad guys with one shot to the head. Extremely satisfying. Thank you, CGW, and thank you, Eldos. If I should manage to finish *Deus Ex*, I will certainly buy *DE Invisible War*. And there are four more games on the disc! I don't think I would have time for fishing, anyway.

George Pieper

How could you even think to suggest that the fabulous "free" January DVD be anywhere near the Coaster of the Year section? Matt Woodley praised the gift so well in the Letters section of the same issue. Shame on you, CGW! Matt's not the only one who enjoyed the DVD. And for all you "whiny whiners" out there who weren't smart enough to realize that it was a DVD and not a CD (the DVD sleeve clearly reads "DVD" in two places), do yourselves a favor: buy a DVD-ROM drive instead of spending \$50 on 2004's Coaster of the Year.

Brad Ernst

We have to agree with you guys—we thought our DVD full of free games was a great idea. Still, in order to accommodate all those whiners without DVD drives, we would like to include all that game code in a more readily accessible format. Here you go: 1, 0. Simply arrange and rearrange these two digits gazillions of times and you'll be playing *Deus Ex* in no time! Enjoy!

Pathetic WH seeks SWF

with whip

Did Kristen Salvatore write, "Knock that flame-casting bitch on her ass"? I'm in love. That she's swearing, drinking, and gaming with a sadistic menacing style are the few things I have learned about her. How about giving us loyal readers

if Robert and Jeff Indian leg-wrestled, who would win?

—Entola (on Top.com boards)

In-console-able

Not even giving ROTOR game of the year, giving *Prince of Persia* and *Beyond Good and Evil* good reviews, calling *Deus Ex 2* "dumbed down," giving *Star Wars Galaxies*



Coaster of the Year, writing a preview for *Sam and Max: Freelance Police*, putting *The Sims 2* on your top games of 2004 list, writing a story on the DISCover, giving *Toontown Online* MMORPG of the Year instead of *Final Crapiness XI* and *Planets*™, recognizing *XIII*'s cel-shaded art, or making a Tom vs. Bruce article about *Heroes 3* will make me forgive you for the atrocity you call the "Console Corner."

I'm also not pleased that you gave *Bookworm* Puzzle Game of the Year instead of *Zuma*—but that, I can forgive.

Zack Green

more to look at than the little picture in the staff section? Like a pullout centerfold of Kristen in a wool sweater and sweatpants, hunched over a computer at 2:00 a.m., Mimes, sixty.

Joe Askvig

Well, she's in a skirt, not sweats, but here you go...

Not quite a haiku

I typed this message using only eight words.

**Desolator Dan /Zoogly/
Daniel Meinzer**

We call you "bonehead" with just seven.

An actual straight answer to a legitimate question

Please, please, please, put the URL of each game in your reviews. Often I want to research it and have to hunt around the Internet for it.

Stryker

We used to do this with every review, Stryker, but we dropped it after our most recent redesign in order to save page space. We fully understand your desire to read up more on a game, but we reasoned that the vast majority of game-related URLs are no longer the mystery they once were; usually, an official page is linked at the publisher's or designer's website, generally in the form of "www.publishername.com." If that doesn't work, we suggest just Googling the game name and the word "official" to find out more.

Mail Bites

Why does it seem that computer games are just remakes of old titles with new graphics? I feel trapped. I am afraid to buy games because I think I might already have an older version that was good.

—MeisterMail

Another life senselessly thrown away...

I've been a videogamer in love with the art since I was very young. I'm now a senior in high school, and I'm getting ready for college. I'm planning to attend the University of Minnesota in Morris, and perhaps to transfer to the University of Minnesota in the Twin Cities later on.

My main question is this: As I'm getting ready to go to college and pick a major, I want to know what majors you guys would recommend if I ever want to work at CGW or a gaming magazine like EW. The majors I'm looking at are English, creative writing, and journalism. Right now, I'm leaning towards creative writing, but I really want to know what is most valuable when pursuing a career in videogame journalism.

Philip Koller

Why waste your time and money on fancy book-learning, boy? Take a few words of advice from CD Editor and Beaker the Muppet Stunt Double Ryan Scott: "I came from a mutated human zygote implanted in an oversized lop-eared rabbit. When I



was eventually excised from my womb-mother, Lapin Jauno, I was forcibly exposed to videogame content as in *A Clockwork Orange* for nigh on two decades. Was it worth it? Are beers Catholic?" So, our recommendation: Run. Run as fast as you can.

Ryan, Marmy misses you. Please stop the men in white coats from putting more mascara in my eyes.

Succinct don't stink

Hey, guys: Being a long-time reader, I still can't find a better encompassing review for a bad game than Mr. O'Neal's beautifully poetic "This game sucks" for *T3: ROTM*. There is no need for lengthy explanations when a game blows. Take care and keep up the fine work.

Darren Herrick

We'll do our best to keep it pithy, Darren, but as for any sort of "fine work," I wouldn't hold your breath. Let's be realistic, chum.

Love...exciting and new!

My son wanted a PS2 for Christmas, so, being a good father (and figuring it would keep him off my PC), I bought it for him. Not knowing what games out there were good for consoles, I picked up a magazine devoted to them, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*. Well, surprise of all surprises, it's a Ziff Davis publication, just like my beloved *CGW*.

If I know the corporate types that run these publications, they like to keep all of their employees together (so they can keep an eye on them). In the same city, same building... maybe you guys at *CGW* and *EGM* are even on the same floor. If this is true, do you guys have heated debates at the water cooler over which platform is better? Play practical jokes on each other? Who wins at softball at the company picnic?

Or is all this console-bashing just a sham to disguise the fact that it's all the same people writing both magazines under different pseudonyms? Oh the depths of the conspiracy, the subterfuge! It makes the grassy knoll and Area 51 theories pale in comparison. Maybe that's why we've never seen a picture of Jeff Green and Dan Hsu (Editor-in-Chief of *EGM*) together.

Just sign me,

**Suspicious
(Brian McGowan)**

While we can't address all your questions here, Brian, we can tell you that thanks to recent changes in local San Francisco marriage laws, you'll be seeing lots more pictures of Dan and Jeff together.



Mail Bites



I poured my heart and soul in to this piece of schmuck and all you give me is a mail byte with the wrong name. Shame, shame, you dirty people. Publish the whole thing or pay.

—Morg

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Radars

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by JEFF LABRECQUE

You Got Served

FBI on the trail of Half-Life 2 source code theft



Game Over

A new 3D game looks into the lives of game characters when you're done playing with them.



Red vs. Blue

We get a new handheld premiere with the guys behind the series, plus a chance to buy your own Master Chief suit.



Walk This Way

Outdoor simulations to get the pieces in the puzzle.



I imagine for a second that this is happening to you: It's a Wednesday morning at about 6:30. You've got another quality hour of sleep before it's time to get up for work, but the doorbell is buzzing, and, groggy, you head over to see who's there. Waiting outside is a squad of FBI agents armed with a search warrant. They root through your place and give you the third degree.

This is exactly what happened to Chris Toshok. As the search for the stolen Half-Life 2 source code continues, Toshok bore the brunt of the FBI's attention this past January. The actual event is documented in great detail on Toshok's blog (<http://sawed.lyspsuch.com/blog/archives/000072.html>), but the short version is this: His former roommates, members of the Hungry Programmers, were suspects. Though Toshok maintains his innocence, the FBI confiscated all his computer equipment: discs, drives, memory cards—heck, they even took his Xbox.

Unfortunately, the FBI was unable to comment on the particulars of the ongoing investigation, but we did get the opportunity to speak with Special Agent Shelagh Sayers. Sayers, who works out of the bureau's San Francisco office as part of the Regional Computer Intrusion Squad, says the agency pursues a search warrant only if a lot of the pieces are already in place.

If, for example, Toshok's former roommates really are involved in the Half-Life 2 code theft, things could

try to minimize the impact on a business. "We typically [copy the hard drive] on-site if possible," she explains. Generally, agents take business computers to the labs only if the work is too difficult or unproductive to do on-site. "The FBI does its best not to affect legitimate business operations and will work with the company to minimize the effects of a search warrant on their operations," Sayers adds. That might have something to do with what happened to Steve Jackson back in 1990.



The FBI confiscated all his computer equipment: discs, drives, memory cards—heck, they even took his Xbox.

get a little sticky.

Taking computers back to the FBI's labs is a part of the process and, according to Sayers, "In Northern California, we're commonly required to return [equipment] within 10 days." Of course, a judge could decide differently and give the FBI more time. Who knows what would happen if you downloaded one errant song off Kazaa or grabbed one video file you shouldn't have. Sayers says the FBI does

Covering your assets

Those with a good memory may remember the case the Secret Service made against Steve Jackson Games. The creator of GURPs, Car Wars, and countless other games stood accused of inciting computer crime with the GURPs Cyberpunk pen-and-paper game. We aren't kidding; it wasn't until four months after the items were seized that SJ Games had most of its hardware, software, and notes returned. **3**



❑ Toshok is apparently closing his eyes and praying for the best. And so are we.

all the time. What's to stop someone from attacking your home network and depositing the *Half-Life 2* source code in some hidden directory, essentially stashing it in a good hiding place, away from the long arm of the law? Special Agent Sayers says, "There are far too many variables to consider." This is where the honest-to-God detective work comes in, no doubt.

So, let's get past all these score fac-

"You'd be surprised how many people don't have any sort of firewall on their home PCs."

years later, when the case went to court, "The judge gave the Secret Service a tongue-lashing, and ruled for SJ Games on two out of three counts, and awarded over \$50,000 in damages, plus over \$250,000 in attorney's fees," according to a statement posted on SJ Games' website.

Back to the question of innocence or guilt in the case of Chris Toshok. What happens if the FBI finds some suspect code on his PC? If he's guilty, we say throw the book at him—but what if he's not? We asked Special Agent Sayers about the possibility of getting hacked. After all, hackers exploit big-business PCs

tics and cut to the important part: How can you prevent the FBI from showing up at your door at some ungodly hour tomorrow morning? Besides keeping your nose clean, employ a firewall. "You'd be surprised how many people don't have any sort of firewall on their home PCs. Big corporations need to protect themselves and so should you," says Sayers. Most antivirus programs provide some modicum of protection, but setting up even a basic firewall (we recommend Norton Personal Firewall 2004) is a smart move as our dependence on the Internet continues to grow. ❑ Darren Gladstone

■ MMO NEWS

Exit the Matrix

Warner and Ubisoft take the blue pill for *The Matrix Online*

There is no spoon. And for the time being, it looks like there's no *Matrix Online* publisher, either. Warner Bros. Interactive and Ubisoft recently announced a mutual decision to end their relationship on this particular title—which leaves the upcoming MMO, set in the same universe as the movie and its two lackluster sequels, without a publisher. Despite this turn of events, development of the game is still moving forward at Monolith Studios, and though a new publisher is yet to be named, Warner Bros. Interactive maintains that it is still scheduled for a late 2004 release. As per their mutual agree-



ment, neither company was able to comment on the announcement, other than to confirm their continued cooperation on other projects.

This comes hot on the heels of Ubisoft's cancellation of its planned online support for last year's adventure game sequel *Unr: Ages Beyond Myst*. We've been told that the two events are unrelated and completely coincidental, so no worries—Ubisoft isn't abandoning the online gaming arena.

If everything stays on track, *The Matrix Online* should enter open beta in the spring, with a retail release to follow in November. ❑ Ryan Scott

The Nerd Herd

Street geeks speak

What is the first computer game you got hooked on?



Amy Hoskins
WATERFORD, CT
Definitely *The Sims*. It's one of those games that can be played for what seems like 10 minutes but in reality is really four hours.



Ryan Coyle
ORLANDO, FL
I'd say my first PC game addiction was *Quake Team Fortress Classic*. Finding unique places to set up my engineer's sentry gun never got old!



Ariel Celeste
ORLANDO, CA
The first game I ever saw was *Quake*. It was the most amazing thing I had ever seen. I watched someone else play for hours. Then I was in the chair for five minutes, and that's all she wrote.



Seth Welch
DALY CITY, CA
I was playing *Myst* nonstop. Maybe it's because *Myst* was the first CD-ROM game I played, but I was amazed. Every game after that seemed ugly and not worth my time.



Michael Hawash
HOUSTON, TX
The original *Ultima* on my 48K Apple II. Back in 1980, its combination of state-of-the-art graphics and open-ended story line remains the formula for just about every successful role-playing game through the present day.

Do you have what it takes to be one of the pros? The few, the herd? E-mail us at CGWLetters@idnews.com





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TAKE F-4 PHANTOMS, POR RIVERBOATS, AND M551 TANKS INTO COMBAT. FIGHT ACROSS JUNGLES,
RIVERS AND BEACHES. FROM THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL TO THE STREETS OF HUE. AND STAY SHARP,
BECAUSE CHARLIE HAS SOVIET T-54 TANKS, MiG-21S AND Mi-6 CHOPPERS. NAPLAW CAN'T DO IT
ALL. SO CRUISE. SO SADDLE UP. YOU GOOD TO GO?

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MMO BAD NEWS

Viking Funeral

Microsoft gives Mythenica team the axe

Remember all those nice things we said in the April issue about Microsoft's Norse mythology-based MMORPG Mythenica? Well, forget it. In its latest attempt to throw the baby out with the bathwater, Microsoft Game Studios has cancelled the title.

"After careful evaluation of the MMORPG landscape, MGS has decided to streamline its portfolio," says Adam Waalkes, studio manager at Microsoft Game Studios. The innovative massively multiplayer title had just weathered a lawsuit from Mythic Entertainment (makers of *Dark Ages of Camelot*) before this final blow to the 40 some-odd employees who worked on Mythenica. Waalkes went on to say that the decision was made "after a rigorous review of current and future projects."

There is no word as to whether Microsoft will try to sell off the property or just let it



set sail for Valhalla. What we can tell you is that there's another PC-based MMORPG in the works that may be unveiled at E3 in May '08; this opens up the field for other front-running titles such as the upcoming *EverQuest II*, *Worlds of Warcraft*, *Lineage II*, and *City of Heroes*. After all, there are only so many MMORPG players willing to shell out monthly fees. **Darren Godstone**

Dumpster Diver

Digging up gold in the bargain bins

The first-person-shooter genre has a multitude of really, really bad entries. Most recently, that's been evidenced by the horror/shooter suckitude that is *Noisefest: The Wrath of Malachi*. If you're itching to play a freaky first-person shooter, steer clear of that one and stick with the stuff that works—namely, the original *Half-Life*, which remains pretty scary to this day. Heck, you could also pick up a copy of *Deus Ex* (get it on store shelves or just mug someone for our January DVD, which has the whole game for free), and it still wouldn't cost as much as *Malachi*.



Half-Life: Game of the Year Edition
\$20



Deus Ex Game of the Year Edition
\$10



Noisefest: The Wrath of Malachi
\$30

★★★★★
—Maxim

"Best Action Game"
—Spike TV Video Game Awards



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LINEAGE II
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It Takes the Skill of a Mighty Clan





It Takes the Strength of a Fearsome Alliance

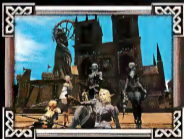




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LINEAGE II

THE CHAOTIC CHRONICLE

PLAY AND SEE



NCSoft

www.lineage2.com

5, 10, 15 Years Ago In CGW

What we said when you were nursing



5 Years Ago, May 1999

Remember when *Star Wars Episode I* seemed like a bright and shiny promise about to be fulfilled? Remember when you didn't know Jim-Jar from a hole in the ground? Remember how puzzled you were when our big *Star Wars Episode I* cover story detailed an arcade racer and a crappy action-adventure game? Remember thinking, "Well, the movie can't possibly be that lame?" Remember that feeling of crushing disappointment?



10 Years Ago, May 1994

Hey, speaking of incredible promise unfulfilled, how's about our *Battlecruiser 3000 A.D.* story? Yikes. We admit, sometimes our radar is just a bit off. Other times, it's incredibly off, like in this house ad where publisher Russell Spee invited readers to fill out a survey: "Would m'lady care for a copy of *Armored Flat?*" he seems to inquire. "Mayhap m'lady prefers the lightweight romp that is *Freddie Pharkes Frontier Pharmacists?*"



15 Years Ago, May 1989

Time flies when you're building power grids. It was 15 years ago this month that we reviewed the very first *ShinCity* game. The final word from the venerable Johnny L. Wilson? "Buy this game." The other highlight was 688 *Attack Sub*, a submarine sim that wasn't just "a quantum leap for naval-oriented war gaming" but also featured head-to-head play over a state-of-the-art 1200 baud modem. Yeah, baby! We also revealed the big winner of CGW's Top Ad awards, *Magic II*. Sadly, this incredible accolade did little to quell the fury raging in New World Computing president Jon Van Caneghem, who wrote a 12-paragraph letter decrying Scorpier's less-than-similar review of that same title.

WALK THIS WAY

Walk of Game

Gaming industry to celebrate its stars



As geeky as it may sound, the gaming industry will soon be getting its own stars. A takeoff on the world-famous Hollywood Walk of Fame, the aptly titled Walk of Game, is set to debut at the Sony Metreon shopping center in San Francisco this fall. The first batch of nominees, culled from suggestions made by the gaming press (including CGW), will be announced at the end of April. Gamers will get to vote for their favorite nominees at the official Walk of Game website (www.walkofgame.com); two winners will be selected from each of the three categories: gaming franchises, characters, and lifetime achievement for groups and individuals.

The plan is to induct six winners per year, with their stars inlaid into the second floor of the Metreon. There will also be an internet forum where fans can discuss potential candidates, as well as an online store where gamers can buy things like videogame ring tones for their cell phones. Keep an eye on the official website and get ready to vote. Your favorite game could be a star! **Ryan Scott**

Console Corner

What's worth swiping from your kid brother

Damn those console gamers. They get some good titles that, for some reason, aren't on PC. Ah, well—here's this month's pick:

GAMECUBE

WarioWare Inc.: Mega Party Game\$

This game is twisted and addictive as hell. Basically, WarioWare lumps together a series of short multiplayer games. Wait, did we say short? To be more precise, these are made for the ADD-stricken, retail-addicted youth of today. You have about five seconds to understand and win each demented minigame. Want an example of what's in store? A nose with flared nostrils is rotating in the middle of the screen. At each of the corners of the screen are hands with a finger pointing toward the center. Quick! What are you supposed to do? If you guessed (erm your finger up a nostril, you're right. That is



just a taste of the madness to follow. Earning high scores (guess in this example, that means being the best at picking your nose) and advancing unlock more minigames. If you own a GBA, grab the Microgame\$ version.

ALSO CHECK OUT: *Resident Evil: Outbreak* (PS2); *Spyton Filter: The Omega Strain* (PS2)



"Atta, poor Sarge, I know him well!"

BY MACHINIMA

Starship Bloopers

Waiting for Godot meets Halo



"Hey, I think I can see my house from here!"

One soldier turns to another and waxes poetic about why a Humvee is called a Warthog.

That, in essence, is what *Red vs. Blue* is all about: footage from *Halo* used to create the comical story of rival soldiers trapped in Blood Gulch, a box canyon in the middle of nowhere.

What's funnier, though, is talking to the popular Web series' creator, Rooster Teeth, over the phone—after all, this is how the team records the show. With a cast spread throughout the Western hemisphere, the phone not only serves as a useful tool, but also gives each character his "voice."

As the series has grown, so has the

While on the topic of *Halo*, there's a whole line of action figures. All man-children report to jayfridstudios.com.

weekly work cycle. From writing to voice recording, a clockwork pace is demanded. During "filming," one person is at the controls while another directs, going through the lines. And these guys are making the series while having real full-time jobs!

But the hard work shows. The series has gone on to win awards and play in film festivals; in January, the team kicked off its second season with a premiere at New York City's Lincoln Center. Not bad for a series that got its humble start in Computer Gaming World.

That's right, *Red vs. Blue* began in our own pages. The infamous Di Luo, one-time CD editor, had discovered a comical video directed by Burnie Burns. Looking for something else to bring readers to their website, Burnie's team put together what would become *Red vs. Blue*.

Episodes from the first season are still available for download, but an extra-laden DVD of season one is available. Also,

Halo-Weenie



And for those with a couple grand to blow, have we got the gear for you: a full-on Master Chief costume built by the people at www.knightmarearmor.com.

The suit has all the components needed to replicate the buggy PC-game character's exploits in the real world. Cosplayers, you may now exhale.

check out this month's CD, which gives you an exclusive *Red vs. Blue* short. Who loves you, baby? Fancy yourself an indie filmmaker? Go to machinima.computer-gaming.com. **Johnny Liu**



SMALL SCREEN

Days of Our Extra Lives

UPN hits reset switch for new series



You're married to Lara Croft and the next-door neighbors are kung fu monks. Life goes on for videogame characters after you're done playing, according to the new TV show *Game Over*. Best described as a computer-generated, game-tinted version of *The Family Guy*, show executive producer David Goetsch explains, "There's never been a TV show to comment on the unbelievable impact of videogames—and we happen to think that this is it."

The midseason replacement on UPN follows the "normal" lives of the Smashburn family. Rip (Patrick Warburton, *The Tick*) is the accident-prone race car driver; Rachel (Lucy Liu, *KW* *BN*) is the Croft-like adventurer; the kids (Rachel Dratch of *Saturday Night Live*

and E.G. Daily of *The Powerpuff Girls*) haven't figured out what they want to do with their lives yet; and Turbo (Artie Lange, *The Howard Stern Show*) is the Jack Daniel's-drinking, walrus-toothed, wise-ass mascot.

Expect the show to be peppered with random jokes based on game moments, whether it's Rip getting mugged in Vice City or seeing a frog trying to cross a busy intersection. In fact, there are already plans to have game characters such as Lara Croft, Crash Bandicoot, and Abe (of Abe's Oddysee fame) make cameo appearances. While there's no word of Gordon Freeman or the odd space marine showing up, there is one recurring character we're looking forward to: The next-door neighbor is a first-person-shooter

guy with entire scenes in his perspective. In episode five, he is looking down his arm and sees that he's holding a beer. Just imagine the family taking a picnic in Halo's Blood Gulch or visiting the old folk's home in the lo-res district.

Six episodes are already done, with six more waiting for a green light from UPN. But an even more fascinating prospect lies at www.gameovertv.com. Beyond the usual promotional materials, Goetsch says there are plans to open up all the CGI assets to the gaming community. This way, you'll be able to skin characters from the show into *UT 2004*, create mods, or make your own machinima episodes.

Game Over airs Wednesdays on UPN before *Entourage*. Check local listings for times. **—Damen Galdstone**

Reality Check

How the ratings stack up among the gaming press

GAME	CGW	PC Gamer	CGM	GameSpot	IGN.com	GameSpy	GameRankings.com
Battle Engine Aquila	C	C	C	C	B+	C	C+
Civilization III: Conquests	A	B	B+	A-	A-	B+	A-
Magic: The Gathering—Battlegrounds	D	C-	C	C+	B	D	B-
Shadowbane: Rise of Chaos	C-	—	—	D+	C	—	C
Silent Storm	A	B+	B+	B+	B+	B+	B+
Terminator 3: War of the Machines	D-	—	—	F	—	F	F

BITTO THAT

Back That Disc Up

New game copy software could ruffle publishers

When you buy a game, there isn't any kind of real warranty for it. If you drop, smash, scratch, or otherwise mess up the CD-ROM, you're pretty much screwed—and it's 40 bucks down the drain. That is the justification for backing up your software and the allure of a new program called Games X Copy. Released by 321 Studios, this program lets you put a backup copy of your PC games on CD- and DVD-ROMs. What sounds fantastic for the end user, though, is a red flag for software publishers.

The obvious concern is this program's effect on piracy, since it's able to make perfect replicas of games. At press time, we tried contacting a few larger publishers for their take on the topic, and all declined to comment. What we did learn, though, is that there are now meetings taking place within the Entertainment Software Association to decide which approach to take on this particular topic. Spokespeople for the ESA say they have to stick with a "no comment" policy for now, although the few weeks to follow will no doubt bear some interesting news.

Free the files

"The owners of digital content always get worried when new and useful backup technology comes along," says Jason Schultz, staff attorney with the Electronic Frontier Foundation (eff.org). Xerox machines, videotapes, MP3s—the list goes on and on, but the concern has always remained the same: free distribution of copyrighted materials. Schultz adds, "It's a basic rule written into copyright laws: If you've paid for it, you have the right to back up your game or home video."

That is exactly what Julia Bishop-Cross of 321 Studios maintains. According to Bishop-Cross, 60 percent of the people



Next on the list of America's most wanted.

who buy the company's DVD X Copy are parents protecting their investments. She says Game X Copy was developed because consumers have been asking for a way to protect the games they buy. While 321 can't release numbers, the company will say that Games X Copy is selling "very well." The bigger picture, in Bishop-Cross's eyes, though, is the fact that demand for the software "shows the content providers that the consumer wants the ability to back up their movies and their games."

Yes, there's been—and there will continue to be—piracy, but Schultz maintains that this software won't likely increase the threat to companies all that much. Too bad we may never get to see if this program can incite more piracy. As we went to press, a San Francisco court ruled in favor of content providers, and 321 Studios was ordered to stop selling DVD X Copy. 321 will likely appeal the case, but this opens the door for game makers to put their foot down next. **Damen Gladstone**

Top 5 Downloads

The best money you'll never spend

Shooters have come a long way since dominating the arcade in the '70s and '80s, and the PC currently has consoles beat when it comes to innovative, gorgeous, and tough-as-nails blasters.



1 Air Strike 3D: Operation W.A.T.

BY [WWW.4VGAMES.COM](http://www.4vgames.com)

Ever glad that you're in a helicopter that can hover? This game's over-the-top power-up speed, insight from space shooters combine with its gorgeous 3D graphics to create one of the most fun and colorful shooters ever called.



2 Alien Shooter

BY [WWW.SIGMA-TEAM.NET](http://www.sigma-team.net)

Clear waves of aliens from the base using loads of powerful weapons. You move via the keyboard while aiming and shooting with the mouse from a first-quarter perspective.

3 Noiz2sa

BY [WWW.KASARI-NET.ORG/](http://www.kasari-net.org/)
-[CMR-CSU/WINDOWS/NOIZ2SA_EJ.TM](http://cmr-csu/windows/noiz2sa_ej.htm)

Among the best in a series of so-called abstract shooters, Noiz2sa is all about tons of bullets and strange enemies made up of various random shapes.

4 Ultra Assault

BY [WWW.SHALLSHOOTERS.COM](http://www.shallshooters.com)

This beautiful game is all about balance. Weapons upgrades slow the ship, so it's important to pay for speed upgrades often to avoid turning into a sluggish target.

5 Flatspace

BY [WWW.LOSTINFLATSPACE.COM](http://www.lostinflatspace.com)

If the other shooters highlighted here numb your brain, kick it back into high gear with Flatspace. This gorgeous top-down shooter puts the "deep" in "deep space," offering tons of missions, equipment, autosaves, and public users can take as they explore a living, breathing universe.

"It's a basic rule written into copyright laws: If you've paid for it, you have the right to back up your game."

Get a Life

Find something else to amuse yourself with



★ DVD

The Office Season 2

Shuffling uneasily in your chair. Eyes rolling in a pained wince. Groans. That describes the scene in our office while watching season two of the uproariously funny BBC series. Watch as the employees of Slough's most miserable office endure the pains of the work world and David Brent, their insufferable boss, who multiplies every nauseous feeling you've ever had about middle management. In his faltering attempts at befriending the staff, he continues only to disgust them more. Season two finds Brent facing management of his own, when the Swindon branch of the company moves into Slough. Neil, Brent's new manager, is everything Brent is not: funny, charming, and a good leader. Actor, director, and show creator Rick Gervais does one spot-on job playing Brent and making *The Office* such a unique (and award-winning) comedy series. Season two comes out on DVD April 20. You don't need to watch the first season to understand the continuity of the show, but for God's sake, do yourself a favor and pick it up. The entire series is simply painfully brilliant. **B**



★ ANIME

Kimagure Orange Road GAV and movie box set

Kyouzuke is in a love triangle between hotties. Oh, boohoo. The TV series might have stretched it out, but this triangle gets completely resolved in the movie. Without revealing all the details, it's like a train wreck you can't turn away from—but in a good way, because you realize that you've come to care for these characters.

★ TOYS

Transformers Alternators

See that hot rod in your garage? It's a robot. Someone finally got the big picture (for the big kids) with Alternators, the new line of Transformers that reference real cars. Though made out of plastic instead of full-on die-cast metal, these are some of the slickest Transformers ever. Take Smokescreen; he changes into a Subaru Impreza with wicked deuces. No word on how many miles per gallon he gets.

★ NEEDS TO GET A LIFE

Dancing with doggies



We're not making this up; it's an actual performance act at dog shows. Little poochies yip and yap while running through the owner's hapless two-steps in choreographed routines. Trust us, you haven't lived until you've seen a pup hop to

"9 to 5," "You Can't Touch This," or our personal favorite, "You're the One That I Want." Get inspired and learn this craft for yourself at www.music4dogsport.org.

KATE WALKER'S ADVENTURE CONTINUES

B. Sokal

Syberia II™

“Gorgeous graphical
adventure sequel”

Gamespot.com

“Mesmerizing...
another hit...”

Tech TV

www.syberia2.info




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Previews

See 'em now, play 'em soon



Bloodline offers a range of explosive possibilities. Negotiate or go bombastic.



"Why won't anyone love me? All I want is a date to the prom."



Uh, I think I'd better run...

Thief: Deadly Shadows

We stealthily recovered this preview just for you, in honor of our shadow hero, Garrett the thief.

Lineage II

An MMORPG with PVP, dark elf classes in limited clothing, and a pet cat named Kat.

Hitman: Contracts

Rusty meat hook or goose-down pillow? How you dispense death is up to you.

PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Trion GAMES ACTION-RPG RELEASE DATE: Late 2004

Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines

Insert “not sucking” joke here

There's more to being a vampire than not being able to see yourself shaving. These children of the night live in a world rife with political intrigue and power struggles, masking themselves to the throes of humanity in their efforts to blend in and lord over the world. In the words of White Wolf, the creators of the original pen-and-paper game, the vampire is “that which must be feared, worshiped, and adored.” That is the world you'll be exploring firsthand in *Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines*.

For those new to the series, the RPGs and stories pool together nearly every different canon of vampire literature into one big bloodbath, threading everything from

wielding Tremere are also present, as are a few other clans that Vampire fans are sure to recognize.

Each clan gets three special abilities with some overlapping powers in between. The some-odd 12 or 13 abilities have fancy-schmancy names, but that just adds to the poetic Gothness of it all: Why say “really fast” when you can say “Celerity?” Other abilities include *Obfuscate* (Invisibility) and *Auspex* (the power to see enemy auras through walls).

These abilities are fully detailed on your character spec sheet. The sheet looks like it came right off the pen and paper set, although some adjustments are still being planned in order to strike that difficult balance between appealing old-school

The uglier you are, the more you will be reviled. It's a lot like high school.

angsty Anne Rice romance to modern Buffyish action into a cohesive Gothfest.

In the Anarch State of Los Angeles (not quite the sunny SoCal of memory), trouble is brewing. Familiar landmarks such as the Santa Monica Pier and Hollywood abound, but darkness rules this realm. A new prince has been ushered in, and he's not one to be taken lightly—with a name like Sebastian LeCrox, he's either a cruel and malevolent ruler or an animal-fur-care specialist. Either way, he's bad news.

High stakes

This is where you come in, taking on the role of a newly turned vampire and selecting which of the game's seven vampiric clans you'll ally with. Each has its own strengths, weaknesses, and quirks: The Toreador are wily seducers, while the Brujah are big, brawny, punked-out warriors. The hideous Nosferatu and magic-

players and those just jumping aboard. All of the RPG's numerics, which govern the action-leden sides of gameplay, are present here. These varied abilities will change the way you play, granting you the open-ended powers to confront situations as carefully or aggressively as you are built for. Landing shots with a firearm, for instance, is much easier for a character with higher firing stats.

As you lurk in the world, an onscreen indicator keeps you aware of how much light is in your surroundings, which helps you plan out stealth maneuvers. Don't worry too much about sunlight, though—there aren't any day and night cycles. Prowling through the dark streets of L.A., you must maintain your humanity by not giving in to your vampire urges. Suck blood, but leave your human prey dangling by a thread of life, if you recklessly kill, you will lose control of your character. ☐



☐ Bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, Count von Casey steps up to the plate...

An exclusive look at the gargoye smashing. In this battle deep in Chinatown, the player uses behemoth throws a holy fl. The Half-Life 2 engine takes care of the falling behemoth pillars.



And an exclusive look at the gargoye, smashed.



Who is White Wolf?

White Wolf has been around since 1991, offering a variety of story-heavy RPGs centered on various denizens of the night. The World of Darkness setting gives players a chance to take on the roles of such creatures as vampires, werewolves, magics, and demons—or even wily hunters charged with ridding the world of these abominations forever.

Yet when you are in one of the free-combat zones, you can make your enemies vomit and boil their blood with complete gleeful abandon.

The rules of the Masquerade—the vampiric code—must also be maintained; you can't just reveal yourself as a bloodsucker to every Joe on the street. This is easier said than done for some of the clans—the uglier you are, the more you will be reviled. It's a lot like high school. That would make the Nosferatu equivalent to the kids who dug for nostril candy. Too many Masquerade violations will cause your own clique to turn on you, thereby ending the game.

Spinal tap

Vampire's backbone is Valve's Half-Life 2 engine. Thanks to this technology, characters emote and act with subtle ferocity. Little hand gestures and other such details can be set off by specific parts of dialogue. At this point, the acting already looks promising; there will likely be some last-minute tweaks so everyone's performances hit their mark.

Ever since Half-Life 2's E3 demo, people have been crying out "physics" this and "physics" that. The strengths of the engine carry over to Vampire, enabling you to interact with objects, such as throwing cans or fence posts. Through

combinations of both scripted events and physics-dependent action, you can trigger larger-scale happenings as well, such as toppling over a water tower to crush the criminals below.

Truoka's solid relationship with Valve has allowed the developer to receive plenty of support while it built its game with Valve's still-evolving cutting-edge engine. Working with this type of up-and-coming technology entails some limitations, though—since Vampire won't be allowed to beat its alma mater to store shelves, we must look to a vague "late 2004" release.

Big trouble in little Chinatown

CGW recently had the opportunity to take an exclusive look at a boss battle in the heart of Chinatown. A stone gargoyle, the product of blood magic gone awry, is on the rampage—and you've been tasked by a Tremere clan rep to clean up the mess. In the remnants of an aging building, garish in its Oriental reds and greens, the beast crashes through the ceiling. Shards of glass fall, and a terrible roar echoes.



Complex facial animation adds to each character. So do low cut pants.

Now, if you're an especially charming vampire, that gargoyle may stop long enough to mince words with you—convince him properly, and he might just put a willing end to his troublesome defiance. More than likely, though, the gargoyle will just let loose in a berserker rage, smashing pillars in his wake. All the while, the physics engine runs its magic, crumbling that second floor down atop your head. Hence, story, statistics, and engine come together to shape the gaming narrative.

As an RPG, how good Vampire is will rest heavily on the story; White Wolf has already set the game as an official prequel to its impending *Time of Judgment* and *End of Days* series. With the support of Valve's engine to cover the back end, compounded with Truoka's own RPG experience (from *Fallout* to *Arcanum*), the blood is set to boil. Ladies, this Vampire has teeth. **Johnery Liu**

The Word: **BLOODY GOOD**

BY **ERIC LIPP** / Microsoft / **COVER** / **Big Huge Games** / **GENRE** / Real-Time Strategy / **RELEASE DATE** / April 2004

Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patriots

Rally the troops

It's refreshing actually to have something big to look forward to in the stagnating RTS genre. Big Huge Games scored a hit with last year's *Rise of Nations*, which fused real-time strategy with a number of Civilization-like concepts. Its upcoming expansion, *Thrones & Patriots*, looks to add even more of the good stuff to what was already a rock-solid game.

For starters, there are six brand-new nations to choose from: American, Dutch, Persian, Indian, Iroquois, and Lakota cultures join the already-massive 18-nation roster, totaling a monstrous 24 playable factions. Each new nation has its own unique quirks and abilities, such as the Persians' ability to build a second capital; the Indians' steady, nonramping building costs; and the Iroquois' talent for staying invisible while occupying friendly territory. One of the coolest new benefits has to be the Lakota nation's ability to build outside its own borders—get ready for some early-game rushes.

Next, it seems like all the attention is being focused on the new nations, having no fear—those 18 other nations are getting new abilities and balance tweaks. A few of the overpowering nations, such as the Mayans and Spanish, will be toned down slightly for the expansion.

Patriot games

Aside from nation tweaking, which undoubtedly will send hardcore players into a message-board-posting frenzy, the biggest change to gameplay is the addition of Senate buildings (hence the *Thrones & Patriots* subtitle). These buildings confer a few bonuses to your nation and allow you to select from six different types of government. Whether you elect to rule as a tyrannical despot or as an enterprising capitalist, your Senate will spawn a unique patriot unit whose abilities differ based on your choices. Pick a democracy and you get a president unit immune to bribery and sniping. Why, it's just like real life!

Even more historical liberties and stretches are taken in the four new single-player Conquer the World campaigns. You can discover the New World as one of 12 different nations, fight the Cold War from behind the Iron Curtain, and retrace—or even rewrite—the footsteps of Napoleon



The Statue of Liberty in the middle of a city's lobby here.



Plenty of new multiplayer options are available in *Thrones & Patriots*.

and Alexander the Great.

Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patriots is slated for an early spring release. It might be on store shelves by the time you read this, so keep your eyes peeled. Be sure to check out our next issue, in which we weigh in with our full review of this eagerly awaited expansion. —Ryan Scott

The Word: TRIUMPHANT



With battles this epic, who needs those silly Civil War reenactments?



PUBLISHER: Vivendi Universal DEVELOPER: Elixir Studios CORE: Revevil Strategy RELEASE DATE: September 2004

EVIL GENIUS

Everybody wants to rule the world

Here's one game concept that could be well worth one beeeelion dollars: the chance to play as a classic Bond villain. When *Evil Genius* was first shown last May, it appeared to be a *Dungeon Keeper*-like spin on being the bad guy. It looked promising, and since Elixir Studios wanted to make sure the game was fully realized, it used the focus testing.

Producer Peter Gilbert spoke of allowing large windows of time to work on the postproduction of *EG*, which should lead to many improvements, several of them direct responses to that focus testing. We've gotta tell ya, what we've seen so far is already looking pretty damn sinister.

Got evil?

The main point of the game is, obviously, to take over the world, but there are a few other goals to accomplish first. The basic tenets of being an evil genius are constructing your lair, training minions, researching new technologies, and creating crime franchises all over the world. Before you even get that far, though, you must select your persona. You can be the Hans Slofeld-ish Maximilian, a sexy femme fatale, or a third yet-to-be-revealed mystery villain.

Building a lair on a tropical island is no vacation, but fortunately, there's a gentle learning curve. As you carve out your underground fortress, you need to arrange your facilities and defenses. This is done through a straightforward interface. When you start laying out rooms, they first appear like an onscreen blueprint before your minions start construction.

Next, you need to wrangle those minions and whip 'em into shape. Essentially cannon fodder, these nameless grunts do the dirty work. Through a branching training system, you can eventually prep your minions as diplomatic envoys, scientific researchers, or martial arts masters. All told, there are some 15 different professions. Usually, the A.I.-controlled minions intelligently go about their business, carting away the body bags of fallen foes or repairing gears throughout the halls. If any of these underlings get on your bad side, just torture them (more on that in a second). But let's not forget your right-hand henchmen: You need your own Oddjob or Jaws to do that extra dirty work.



Best way to deal with a rat: Invite him back to the base, only to keeeeeel him with an evil death ray during a meeting.

Dirty deeds done dirt cheap

In the final game, Gilbert says there will be roughly 12 henchmen you can draft. Among them are Eli (think Samuel L. Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*), Jubel, the rovin', and a voodoo priest. Each is rated in health, loyalty, attention, intelligence, and endurance. We played around with Red Ivan, a fun-loving, muscled commie who likes long walks through minefields and dances a mean cossack grenade jig. While the A.I. is perfectly up to the job of fending off attempted incursions from tuxedo-clad good guys, you can exercise a lot of direct control over your henchmen—one prime example of the changes that came from focus-testing feedback.

Another fun aspect involves creating your own weapons of mass destruction, torture devices, and so on—there are hundreds of booby traps and equipment to research. Try tossing your henchmen in a

Goody-goody secret agents will find ways to disturb your island paradise.

centrifuge and you'll see what we mean. And, true to form, every doomsday weapon has a mandatory self-destruct sequence.

Another more recent addition is strategizing and creating your global empire from the world map. With a strategic risk-based agenda, you'll need to balance resources, keep tabs on other villains, and see how much heat you're attracting from those nefarious forces of good. In one example, a mafia boss has betrayed you. You've got to exercise some creativity to deal with him. Our choice: Have a diplomat shove him back to the ranch, only to keeeeeel him with an evil death ray during the meeting.

Of course, being evil has its repercussions, such as 148 different types of agents from around the globe. The only thing we'll miss is a multi-player mode. Our future suggestion: good guy versus evil genius, though Gilbert assures us the team is focusing on creating one solid single-player experience. **GG**



The Word: **PURE GENIUS**



Unreal Tournament 2004

There's nothing quite like waking up in the morning to hot and fresh pancakes—especially when those pancakes are lovingly made from the crushed bones of your enemies. Thanks to the “smash-and-go-boom” Manta hoverbikes, you can wall across open fields, leaving a steamy trail of blood-soaked casualties. Other vehicles include the bestial multigun Leviathan (pictured) and the flying Panther. Unreal Tournament 2004: the best part of your daily balanced breakfast. Look for our full-on review next issue.





Spider-Man? Spider-Man? Does whatever a spider can!



Having not been invited to the Debrautier's Ball, Gaspard moves a heavy fire, knocking everyone away.



Be verry, verry quiet, I'm hunting hoodlums. Heh heh heh.

ESSENTIAL: Deus Interactive **TECHNOLOGY** Ian Storm **GENRE** Stealth Action **RELEASE DATE** Spring 2004

Thief: Deadly Shadows

What lurks behind the shadows?

Like a thief in the night, CGW stole confessions from famed game designer Warren Spector. Spector, the man behind *System Shock 2* and *Deus Ex*, never even beat his own game, *Thief II: The Metal Age*. And just to set the record straight, the first *Thief* wasn't his: Spector's role in that title was advisory.

Revelations aside, Spector's involvement was critical in *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, the continuing tale of Garrett the thief. After Spector rounded up the usual suspects (the best talent from the original *Thief* games), a new creed was set for the design: Respect the source material while pushing the game forward to a broad new audience. In Spector's own words, "You can't make a game by and for MIT grads. You have to make the game accessible."

One of the most critical changes in *Deadly Shadows* is the ability to easily switch between first- and third-person perspectives. This isn't some half-measured alternate view, either—both modes are fully tuned to have just the right feel. When you aim an arrow in third-person mode, the camera will quickly and appropriately switch to first person for the kill.

In former *Thief* games, attempts at going on the offensive precluded death. Thanks to the design adjustments, you can now actually fight your way out of a horned situation. The possibility of survival adds one notch for reality.

More flexible gameplay has also been implemented, in a central hub area, Garrett can flex his master thief skills by freely looting the unsuspecting citizenry. These stages will not have lasting implications on the larger story, but the money Garrett nabes will give him a chance to buy more powerful weapons and bring up his loot.

Once a thief

Don't worry about catching up on the backstory of the previous *Thief* games; *Deadly Shadows* is the perfect time to jump in. Garrett is your basic medieval Snake Plissken or Han Solo. We all know what happens to these archetypes: Just when they've finally found peace, something happens to pull them back into the fray. Garrett has been hired to uncover a growing plot



Look at the quality of light across this unlucky guard, soon to meet his end.

"You can't make a game by and for MIT grads. You have to make the game accessible." —Warren Spector

to bring about "The End of Worlds," problematically, he has just become the lead suspect in the police investigation. Over the course of several days, Garrett will find himself knee-deep in secret societies, assassins, and unabashed evil.

The classic *Thief* gameplay conventions are still solidly intact: Garrett has an arrow for every occasion; Enemies can be knocked out with a gas arrow; A distant torch can be extinguished with water arrows; Bloodstains can be cleaned up with one of those water-balloon-like bursts; Fallen bodies can be picked up and moved into the darkness.

Cleanup is more important than ever with the focused A.I.; bloodstains and fallen bodies are among the details the enemy will be attentive to. Not every computer-controlled character will react the same way, either—scripted events are all but eliminated to strive toward that simulation experience. City guards will keep a sharp lookout, but the average Joe Schmoe on the street will see Garrett as just another cloaked nobody.

This belongs in a museum

We checked out a demo mission set in a museum. As a game focused on light and shadows, *Deadly Shadows* has high-quality light effects with a very organic glow. The model texturing imbues the quality of a moving painting with the crosshatched feeling of canvas. From the dark alleyways lit only by whispering torchlights, Garrett must work his way past the doors of the castle.

Attempting to enter a locked door will bring up an onscreen lock-picking tool. While you jimmy your way in, you can look over your shoulder to watch for danger. After piffing the target painting, it's time to leap back into the shadows from whence you came—mission accomplished.

Deadly Shadows looks to shine a spotlight on the underappreciated *Thief* series and really spread the wealth of intelligent, thought-out gameplay. *Thief: Deadly Shadows* will sweep its way into stores this spring. **© Johnny Liu**

The Word: TAUTLY DRAWN

No, this isn't a screenshot, but our sure is hot, isn't it?



Call in air strikes, but pray your flyboys can hit the mark.



While you're smart to lobby, there are plenty more whom he came from.

PUBLISHER: **Endeavor Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Guerrilla Games** GENRE: **Third-Person Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **August 2004**

ShellShock: Nam '67

Your own personal Vietnam

When it comes to videogames, World War II is an almost too-common subject. It's easy to understand why: Good and bad in a WWII tale are pretty cut and dry. Now, the Vietnam War is becoming fair game—if you'll pardon the pun—and *ShellShock: Nam '67*, Guerrilla Games' maiden voyage as a developer, attempts to put you in the middle of the action like never before.

Martin de Ronde, commercial director for the Dutch development house, says the company wanted to make a historical action game. There may be other eminent Vietnam games, such as *Vietcong* and *Battlefield Vietnam*, but Guerrilla Games wanted to set itself apart and "do it right," according to de Ronde. He adds that he "doesn't want to throw controversy in for controversy's sake. The game should actually play the way the war was fought." Translation: Expect loads of guerrilla warfare and hidden enemies—the way the Vietnam War actually was, without shying away from the truth.

Just like being there

ShellShock puts you in control of a soldier through the use of a third-person chase-cam perspective. In *Freedom Fighters*, although you can switch to an over-the-shoulder view of the world when you

need more precision. According to de Ronde, the decision to put you out of first-person view actually does a better job of conveying the war's scope and letting you see the part you play in it. On a different note, it also gives you cooler visuals to look at.

The most striking thing you'll notice when you first start playing is the presentation. The developers applied two filters to the game's camera to make it feel as though the entire experience was captured with old '60s film footage. Several gritty cut-scenes introduce each level, but most of the cinematic action plays out through scripted events within the game. Of course, this says nothing of the A.I., which de Ronde promises will provide plenty of challenges. There are instances in which characters communicate with each other about enemy positions and duck for cover. Guerrilla Games hopes to

You're a nameless, faceless grunt just trying to survive his tour of duty and get home in one piece.

convey the confusion and chaos of the war during firefights without completely losing the player in the fray. Thank God for tactical maps in the Pause screen and an onscreen compass.

An army of one

ShellShock tells the loose tale of one soldier (hence the reason for no multiplayer, we suppose). You are a nameless, faceless GI, like in the movie *Pátrón—de Ronde's* favorite Nam flick. The point is to convey the life of one guy just trying to survive his tour of duty and get home in one piece. For the sake of the story, you're cast as either an African-American, Caucasian, or Hispanic soldier.

The action looks to hook players with everything from large-scale battles of survival to squad-based patrols in which you follow solo operations orders (after you have received Special Forces training that lets you be a stealthy sniper who's able to infiltrate, assassinate, rescue POWs, and so on). While not based on historically accurate missions, the game promises plenty of feasible scenarios from the time.

Missions are linked by a base camp that you can freely explore. This is where you rearm, restock, heal, and take a break to shoot the breeze with other soldiers, which offers that "calm before the storm" feel, although some missions require you to defend your base. You can also pimp out your character *Tony Hawk*-style. Earn cash and buy sunglasses, tattoos, radios, and countless other bits of contraband.

While on the topic of gear, we should mention the game's focus on realism. Unlike other shooters in which you have an entire weapons factory strapped to your back, *ShellShock* allows you to carry one main weapon, a sidearm, a grenade, and one bit of equipment at any given time. While we don't have the full list of weapons, we can tell you there will be flamethrowers and rocket launchers, and you'll be able to pick up the weapons of fallen Vietcong.

The small taste of what we've seen is already enough to make us want to dig into the trenches and play some more in the coming months, we plan to see more of the minigames (e.g., disarming traps, surviving torture) and the rest of the kick-ass experience that'll take you back to Nam. **Damon Deldorone**



The Word: **FLASHBACKS**



Choose from five races, including this misanthropic elf.



Double the pressure. Double the fun.



Yeah. You can ride those things.

PUBLISHER NCsoft DEVELOPER NCsoft GENRE MMORPG RELEASE DATE April 2004

Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle

The art of siege warfare

In its native Korea, *Lineage* is more popular than breathing. The ratio of subscribers to the national population is 7 to 3. Stateside, the original *Lineage* slipped under the radar due to the lack of a retail box, but the *Unreal Warfare*-powered *Lineage II* will make no such secret of itself. The question is if its bold, PVP-centric approach to gameplay will take hold.

The background fiction behind *Lineage II* is your typical fantasy schtick—three large kingdoms rife with ego problems and delusions of grandeur trip over their own feet to usurp power from one another. Gobs and gobs of internal strife complicate matters across the board, allowing the chance for all aspiring young upstarts—that would be the players—to overthrow a few rulers and claim their own piece of the world.

You won't be overthrowing anyone without a decent character, and *Lineage II* has plenty of options in that department. Five different fantasy races are available: humans, orcs, elves, dark elves, and dwarves. Newbie classes consist of little more than basic warrior and spellcaster templates, but you'll be able to pick more focused occupations down the road. Each race and class combination also has plenty of unique hairstyles and equipment textures, which means the chance to dress up—or in more perverted cases, dress down—a female dark elf to your heart's content.

Doing battle with the game's randomly spawned monsters nets you experience and spell points. The latter are used to buy new skills and occupations—you start with a limited array of skills, and new skill trees become available when you pick up additional professions. Although the occupation list isn't finalized, it's a safe bet that weapons and magic will be evoked. Guns and ballistic missiles probably won't be. Dwarf characters draw the short stick



That cuddly dragoning is going to kick someone's ass when it grows up.

when it comes to spellcasting (as in, they can't), but they make up for it with their unique item-crafting talents. This reportedly yields some of the game's better items, so look for the dwarf community to rule the economy with an iron pudgy fist.

Ruling and controlling is the name of the game in *Lineage II*, with much of the action being centered on player conflict. Not so fast, though—unprovoked attacks bring karma penalties, and too much negative karma will turn you into a bright cherry-red target. Other players will then have an open license to finish you. Death brings an experience hit, along with a quick boot to the nearest town and the possible loss of a few precious items. Read lightly, vicious player-biters.

Puff the Magic Dragon

If you're looking for better gear, there are plenty of NPC quests to undertake. One noteworthy mission rewards high-level players with a dragon egg, which can be

hatched into a cuddly dragoning pet, and later incubated into a mountable two-legged "strider" and eventually after much effort, a badass flying wyvern.

Wenton violence and NPC quests are just the tip of the iceberg—at its core, *Lineage II* is all about siege warfare. Setting siege on a castle results in a free-for-all, winner-takes-everything battle that anyone and everyone can jump in on. Being lord of the manor grants you control over the local shopkeepers and castle defenses. It's also a fair assumption that the longer you hold a castle, the harder it will be for others to usurp your rule. Fortunately, you can forge alliances and create a player clan to help secure your holdings.

Lineage II looks solid from what we've seen so far. It has a variety of detailed character models, some impressive environments (such as the exotic dark elf city), and plenty of room for growth. Indeed, plans call for new downloadable expansions approximately every six months. Assuming the PVP aspects come out solid, *Lineage II* looks to break the lines of your typical MMORPG. **D Ryan Scott**

The Word **ASCENDANT**

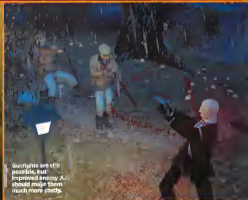
It means the chance to dress up—or in more perverted cases, dress down—a female dark elf to your heart's content.



Behold slaughterhouse overlord, the Meat King. Maybe strict Atkins adherence isn't all it's cracked up to be.



Postfilter effects give this level its stoney feel.



Gunights are still possible, but improved enemy AI should make them much more costly.

► **PLAYSTATION 3** | **DEMO INTERACTIVE** | **PC** | **WII** | **INTERACTIVE GRAPHICS** | **South Action** | **BY STEPHEN VAUGHAN** | **April 2004**

Hitman: Contracts

His business is killing, and business is good



► **Hiding isn't cowardly—it's smart.**

Finally, a game that lets you travel the globe from China to England to Russia, exploring strange and exotic locales, meeting new and interesting people—and crushing their skulls like eggs with a pool cue. Or gutting them with a rusty meat hook. Or just smothering them with a fluffy goose-down pillow. Granted, the *Hitman* series of murder-for-hire simulators has been giving you these sorts of cherished opportunities since the beginning, but with *Hitman: Contracts*, the third in the series, there are now plenty of new ways to dispatch the deserving meat bags.

Postcards from the edge

To interactive's biggest goal this time around was to put you right into the grim, dark reality that is the world of our beloved protagonist, Agent 47. To that end, each of the 12 sprawling levels in the game is uniformly forbidding, from the stormy midnight courtyards of a Tokyo stronghold to a blood-drenched slaughterhouse hosting a rave. Good-bye, sunny Sicilian picture postcards of *Hitman 2*; hello, shadowy scream-rent insane asylum.

A muscular new graphics engine renders these charming heliobascs, with particle effects, weather effects, and real-time mirrors. So what? Nobody ever paid for a game just to ogle particle effects—how those effects are used is what matters,

Really—when does digging a meat hook into somebody ever get old?

and he is doing a great job. Storm-whipped snow and driving rain visually better Agent 47. Sophisticated post-effect filtering is used to create subtle but significant touches of realism by properly "smudging" objects and light sources in a storm, be they distant buildings or wildly swinging, glowing paper lanterns. All these effects work hand in hand to create some truly nightmarish scenarios—perfectly fitting, since every mission is in essence a flashback, played back in the fevered mind of Agent 47 as he struggles against a potentially lethal dose of drugs

The right tool for the job

Since every mission is essentially a memory, players will be forced to play it as Agent 47 remembers it, thus restricting them to a very limited weapon loadout at the start of every mission (once a mission is beaten, it can be replayed, and only then can you pick out your weapons). Does this add to the challenge? You betcha, but there are still plenty of ways to deal death. Finding new, colorful ways to take out your targets is simply a matter of keeping your eyes open for the odd shovel or fire poker. A variety of animations have been created for all the melee

weapons in the game, with different killing strokes and death throes triggered depending on Agent 47's body position and angle, relative to the victim. This is intended to keep these methods from growing stale, but really—when does digging a meat hook into somebody ever get old?

It is working on beefing up the enemy AI significantly in order to make the game more realistic. Guards will be more suspicious when you're running around levels, even if you're

wearing the appropriate clothes, and disguises will be dicier. Guards will respond better to alarms, so while trying to shoot your way through or out of every mission will still be possible, it will be much tougher. The developers are really trying to encourage the "silent assassin" approach to the game's challenges and are bending over backward to offer even more possible solutions to mission objectives. They've even added the ability to knock enemies unconscious to let you focus on just your primary target and achieve the game's highest ranking. Of course, those guys aren't going to stay unconscious forever, so watch out.

Easily the darkest in the series, *Hitman: Contracts* is also going to be the biggest. A single level rivals the scope of two or three of *Hitman 2*'s levels, offering more choices, more gripping tension, and more despicable enemies than ever before. This game should be hitting store shelves right about the time you read this. Do us a favor: Pay for the game—don't garrote the poor EB clerk. **Robert Coffey**

The Word **KILLER**



PIPELINE

Ship dates and slip dates for games in the stream

Game	Developer	Expected
Assault Rising	Team Epic	March 2004
Alan	Neat	April 2004
Atlanta Evolution	The Academy of Chemistry	April 2004
The Bard's Tale	Beam Software	Q3 '04
Back & White II	Electronic Arts	Q2 2004
BloodRayne 2	Meridian Games	Q3 2004
Call of Oblivion: Dark Corners of the Earth	Redheads Software	August 2004
City of Heroes	NCsoft	April 2004
Civilization IV	Asin	2004
Creature Conflict: The Clan Wars	Concept Publishing	Q4 2004
Doom 3	id Software	April 2004
Dragon Empires	CodeMasters	Q3 2004
DRIVE	Asin	June 2004
Dragon Siege II	Microsoft	2004
Egyptian Prophecy	The Adventure Company	April 2004
EverQuest II	SOE	June 2004
Evil Geniuses	Warhead Studios	Q3 2004
Fire Out	Empire Interactive	Q3 2004
Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich	TBA	2004
Full Spectrum Warrior	THQ	September 2004
Grand Central 2: Operatives Exodus	HOA Productions	Q3 2004
Gold Wars	EPIC	2004
Half-Life 2	Valve Software	Q3 2004
Heroes Contracts	Empire Interactive	April 2004
I of the Beast	Empire Technology	Q2 2004
John Operatives: Taskforce Rising	Neologic	May 2004
Jurassic	Asin	Q3 2004
Life and Soul: Larry Major Can Lead	Serra	Q3 2004
Overage to the Chocic Crusade	NCsoft	April 2004
QDIE: The Battle for Middle-earth	Electronic Arts	June 2004
Manhunt	Rockstar Games	2004
The Matrix Online	Ubisoft	October 2004
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault	Electronic Arts	June 2004
Men of Valor: Vietnam	Serra	Q4 2004
Middle-Earth Online	Valve Software	October 2004

» New » Update



» PUBLISHER: Rockstar Games » DEVELOPER: Rockstar North » GENRE: Stealth Action » RELEASE DATE: Spring 2004

Manhunt

It's raining *Manhunt*. Hallelujah

While *Manhunt* would be the perfect title for a bachelorette sim ("Heey girlfriend, it's time to go on a Manhunt!"), this PS2 port is anything but a world of society girls on the prowl for love. *Manhunt* drops you right into a seedy world of brutal snuff films.

As a former prisoner sentenced to death, you are brought before a sinister game show with a focus on killing people. The master of ceremonies has cameras placed throughout the "hunting grounds" so he can get every last close-up. While the game has received flack for its exploitation of dark violence, underneath the barbed wire and heads in a duffel bag is stealth-laden action spicily.



Details like the scan lines on video feeds and varied animation flex the game's dark spirit. While it looks like this port will be fairly vanilla, we can at least assume the standard framerate and resolution bolstering the PC offers. *Manhunt* will be released in spring 2004. **» Johnny Liu**

The Word: MANTASTIC

» PUBLISHER: Strategy First » DEVELOPER: Legend Studios » GENRE: RTS » RELEASE DATE: Late March 2004

War Times

Difficult times call for difficult measures

In times of war, protesters exercise their constitutional right to dissent. But in *War Times*, the new RTS from Legend Studios (not to be confused with Legend Entertainment), there's little to complain about. Set in World War II, you follow either the Axis or the Allies, with the ability to play as one of four countries: the United States, England, Germany, or the Soviet Union.

Even though Legend isn't exactly as big as Blizzard, the animation production values aren't half bad—they're certainly good enough to ground the feeling of war before each campaign mission. The game's dynamics recall the *Battle Realms* RTS, with a deep level of zoom and a whole range of different tactics. Multiplayer can handle a warmongering maximum of 14 players.

Admittedly, there is already a fierce



RTS and military-themed games market—competition in both genres is crowded. Combining these two together requires all the more effort to stand out. *War Times* might just pull its way through come late March. **» Johnny Liu**

The Word: UNDERDOG



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64-bit Processor
Model# ADA3200BOX

\$282.00



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64-bit Processor
Model# ADA3000BOX

\$227.00



\$404.00
Athlon™ 64 3400+
1MB L2 Cache
64-bit Processor
Model# ADA3400AEP5AP
OEM



\$270.00
Athlon™ 64 3200+
1MB L2 Cache
64-bit Processor
Model# ADA3200AEP5AP
OEM



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Athlon™ 64 3000+
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Model# ADA3000AEP4AP
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Motherboards



ASUS VIA K8T800
Chipset for AMD Socket 754 CPU
Model# KBV Deluxe

\$155.99



MSI VIA K8T800
Chipset for AMD Socket 754 CPU
Model# K8T Neo-FIS2R

\$124.00



Gigabyte nForce3 150
Chipset for AMD Socket 940 CPU
Model# GA-K8NXP-00

\$209.99

Video Cards



Sapphire ATI Radeon 9800 Pro 128MB DDR - OEM

\$212.00



Gigabyte ATI Radeon 9200 128MB DDR, Model# GV-R92128DH

\$67.99



EVGA nVidia GeForce FX5900SE 128MB DDR, Model# 128-AB-N32L

\$188.00

Sound Cards



Creative Labs Sound Blaster Audigy2 25 PCI Sound Card Model# SB0350

\$88.00



Chaintech 7.1 Channel PCI 24-bit/192kHz Model# CT-AV710

\$24.00



M-Audio 7.1 Channel PCI Dolby Digital 5.1 Model# Revolution 7.1

\$100.00

CD/DVD ROMs



Sony 16x DVD-ROM Drive Model# DDU1612/B2 OEM

\$32.00



Lite-On 16x DVD-ROM Drive Model# LX-H166 BLACK OEM

\$25.00



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PIPELINE

Game	Developer	Expected
The Movies	Electronic Arts	July 2004
Mythica	Electronic Arts	July 2004
Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	Q4 2004
Pro-Hot World 2	Top Hat Studios	Aug. 2004
RoboRider	Digital Art of Montreal	Aut. 2004
Playboy: The Mansion	Warner Bros. Interactive	2004
Print	3D Interactive	2004
Project Area-J	THQ Adventure	Q4 2004
Quake IV	id Software	2004
War of Nations: Tiberium & Infested	Hasbro	Q2 2004
Return Total War	Age of Mages	Q3 2004
Sans & Mac: Preference Police	Warner Bros.	May 2004
Serious Sam 2	Geometric	2004
Shade: Wrath of Angels	Geometric	2004
SIM Meats! Protect	Age of Mages	2004
Silent Hunter II	Ubisoft	2004
Silent Storm: Sentinel	Electronic Arts	2004
The Sims 2	Electronic Arts	Q3 2004
Soldiers: Heroes of World War II	Codemasters	Q3 2004
STALKER: Call of Chernobyl	THQ	September 2004
Star Wars: Battlefront	LucasArts	Q3 2004
State of Emergency 2	TBA	Q4 2004
Stargate: Four Paths to Power	Strategy First	Q2 2004
Supreme Ruler 2010	Strategy First	Q2 2004
SWAT: Urban Justice	Evtek	2004
Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Valve	December 2004
Theat: Deadly Shadows	Edca Interactive	2004
TOCA Race Driver 2	Codemasters	Q3 2004
Trek: Simulator 2	Paradox	July 2004
Vibes: Vengeance	Swire	Q4 2004
Ultima X: Odyssey	Electronic Arts	April 2004
Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines	Activision	2004
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War	THQ	Q4 2004
Warlords: Battleground	Enlight Software	Q2 2004
Warline: Command Battle for Europe 1939-1945	Codemasters	Q3 2004
W. V. The Ark of Nostradamus	Warner	Q4 2004
New Update		

PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: UTA CLUNE GAME: Action PLATFORMS: PC, PS2 DATE: Spring 2004

True Crime: Streets of L.A.

The straight truth about a crooked world

Unlike most cobbled-together, rushed porting jobs, *True Crime* is getting off on the right foot—production on the PC version began months before Xbox's *True Crime* was complete. So, hey, maybe this game will make the jump from console to PC more gracefully than *Dead to Rights* or *Chaos Legion* did.

The focus is on interface tweaks, including completely remapped controls, proper mouse tuning, and more precision aiming with bullet-time dives. There won't be any single-player updates, but completing the game will unlock more secrets.

The big news is the brand-new multiplayer mode for up to four players, which looks to offer a generous variety of options and goals, including a competition to catch the most crooks and a street racing challenge that extends through the vast lay of Los Angeles.



There are also more musical tracks, with plenty of good old rock 'n' roll for those who aren't into the hip-hop beats. Tracks are accessed randomly and can now be skipped. If all things go as planned, look for *True Crime* to put an end to bad ports when it hits shelves this spring. **Johnny Liu**

The Word: TRUE DAT

PUBLISHER: CDV Software DEVELOPER: Larian Studios GAME: RPG RELEASE DATE: April 2004

Beyond Divinity

Find a special bond with Hell's angel

Aside from last year's *Knights of the Old Republic*, the RPG well has pretty much run dry. Fortunately for all you RPG addicts out there, Belgian-based developer Larian Studios is putting the finishing touches on *Beyond Divinity*, an intriguing follow-up to 2002's *Divine Divinity*.

Set in the same universe as the previous game, *Beyond Divinity* features an all-new story putting players in the role of a cursed human who finds himself bonded to an evil Death Knight. The unlikely duo embarks on a mission to undo the soul forging, which takes them through a multitude of adventures and side quests across the world.

The game utilizes an improved version of the *Divinity* engine, featuring flashier graphics and spell effects, spoken dialogue, full control over your party mem-



bers, and a new character development system with tons of skills and traits. *Beyond Divinity* might just be in stores by the time you read this—and if it's as good as its critically acclaimed predecessor, RPG fans will be in for a pleasant surprise. **Ryan Scott**

The Word: DIVE BOMB



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than 20 new units, including massive Persian war elephants and American marines, and adds over 100 new buildings to the original game. Strategy and detail combine as you change history, control a nation's destiny and exact the punishment the world deserves.



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02

DIGITAL UNDERGROUND Games dismissed from out-of-nowhereEFFECTIVE **Abella AVAILABLE** / Q2 2004**Metalheart: Replicants Rampage**

Word on the streets: Despite sounding like a budget-priced peacemaker, this isometric sci-fi tactical role-playing game, in which you control a team of up to six, offers cyberpunk thrills aplenty. Body implants, high-tech gear, extensive character-development options...with these afforded luxuries, your crew of replicants, cyborgs, mutants, and nomads might even survive the many featured turn-based battles. Random quest generation and choices with lasting implications on the broad story line give the game grand potential, as do the dozens of optional missions.

Sounds kinda beat: Mother Russia's bosom has been all but sucked dry of quality productions in recent months, as evidenced by fellow futuristic RPG *Paradise Cracked*, which really scraped the tent. Plus, favorite son Akella's last foray into the genre, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, was more poop deck than peg-legged bounty. Assuming the development/publishing house can rely its flagging forces, however, the company might just deliver a title that hogs the Soviet spotlight like a dancing bear in a prom dress.

EFFECTIVE **3D People AVAILABLE** / Q2 2004**Kull**

Word on the street: An isometric RPG that could be the next *Divine Divinity*, *Kull* blends traditional play mechanics with modern three-dimensional graphic convention. Visiting Rywennta, a storied realm, you'll explore seven worlds and 50 maps replete with dozens of quests, including several hosted by a parallel reality known as the Dreamworld. With more than 50 spells to master and hundreds of weapons and items up for grabs, *Kull* will have homebrew heroes reaching for their broadsword in no time.

Sounds kinda beat: Props to Slovakia; between this and *Empire of Magic*, the country has the market cornered on low-rent fantasy fare. Looking at the fairly nondescript features list, it's obvious that creator 3D People isn't planning on raising the bar. However, if the firm can make good on promises and capitalize on the same play formula that vaulted *Diablo* into the charts, this first effort could prove a minor victory and a stepping stone toward bigger and better projects.

EFFECTIVE **Magitech AVAILABLE** / Q2 2004**Strength and Honour**

Word on the street: Xicat's *Talked* was no *Shogun: Total War*, but the sequel, *Strength and Honour*, sure puts the "feud" back in feudal Japan. Integrating a far-reaching turn-based strategy model with real-time combat, the title expands upon its predecessor's pure warlike nature, demanding engagement in city planning, building construction, and even diplomacy. In either historical skirmishes or full-blown campaigns, up to four players will command armies of 1,000 units apiece on the battlefield at any given time. Banzai, indeed.

Sounds kinda beat: With but a single title to its credit (and not exactly a critically acclaimed one at that), Canadian outfit Magitech suffers from a dubious track record. In the developer's defense, it is once again tackling the same subject matter and taking previous criticism to heart. Still, the production team is only five individuals strong, which is barely the size of the janitorial staff at Lionhead Studios. It's anybody's guess whether the end result will match the pretense hype.



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BY DARREN GLADSTONE

War!

Can Activision change the course of RTS history with the newest Total War game?





Rome: Total War isn't being built in a day. It's been more like three-plus years of realistically re-creating the Roman Empire, perfecting gameplay, crafting a stunning 3D graphics engine—oh, and let's not forget putting together a TV show around the game. A lot is happening at the offices of The Creative Assembly—not bad for a 70-person firm nestled away in the rural English countryside around Hensham.

Turning back the clock (again)

Those unfamiliar with the Total War franchise deserve a quick introduction before we dig in. Shogun: Total War turned the strategy world on its ear back in 2000. Part Risk, part real-time-strategy game, Shogun's biggest selling point was its huge pitched battles with as many as 5,000 units squaring off against one another. But technology limited what you could do. The field was 3D, but the fighters waged war as 2D sprites. A more legitimate gripe: Strategic planning, diplomacy, and campaigning were, well, MIA. With 2002 came the Medieval sequel, which boasted better graphics and further developed the game experience both on and off the battlefield.

Now Rome, the third installment in the Total War franchise, takes a step in a slightly different direction. All the major criticisms from previous games are being addressed here, and yes, the graphical gauntlet has been thrown down—we'll get to all that soon enough. First, it's interesting to note the attempt at making the game more accessible to new players.

Rome can be as basic or as deep as you want it to be, thanks to a revamped system of drop-down menus and mouse controls. Whether you're tasking governors with running cities or choosing computer-controlled generals to lead selected troops into battle, you can always grab the reins for full control or just let the computer do the dirty work.

"Just because a game has a lot of complexity to it, doesn't mean the game has to be complex," says Tim Ansell, managing director of The Creative Assembly. The whole point is not to punish the player with unnecessary micromanagement if the player doesn't want to deal with it.

To that end, players will be eased into the experience with a deep and well-thought-out single-player campaign that casts you as a member of either the House of Jullii, Brutii or the Scipii family in your ascension to the throne. Your rocky road to imperial rule is broken into several different eras: the prologue (a tutorial that walks you through the unification of Rome), the Imperial Campaign (the outward expansion to start conquering the rest of the world), and the Provincial



This is just one example of the many types of wars to be waged in Rome. Here, you're witnessing a full-on siege in action. Every detail is worked out, down to the great stacks of catapults and the volleys smashing against the city walls. Best of all: You can control as much or as little of the action as you'd like. Perfect for the armchair general!

Anatomy of a Battle





Someone has to
adjust the barbarian
hord—and why
shouldn't that
someone be you?



"Just because a game has a lot of complexity to it doesn't mean the game has to be complex."



Campaign (which is confined to smaller, more focused areas—the equivalent of instant action) round out the single-player experience. Additionally, there are a number of historical battles, like the Battle of Asculum, which you can immediately jump into and command.

For those about to die

The prologue starts you off on a very small scale and introduces you to basic game concepts. Advisors, which you can toggle on or off, serve as your in-game guides.

Roman senators describe the ins and outs of raising taxes, while generals give you the rundown on how to take the fight to the barbarian hordes. Whether you're a crusty *Total War* veteran or fresh to the fight, the prologue not only preps you on some of Rome's *Total War*'s improvements, but also puts you squarely in the middle of an

experience taken straight from the movies (or some show on the History Channel). Scripted deployment sequences pan over the landscape and show troops making their way into formation as music dynamically adjusts to give flavor. And, while not evident in the demo build, Anseli says there are plans to add even more cinematic elements, like a voiceover description of what leads up to a battle.

Theatrical scripting aside, the first change that'll appeal to real-time strategy fanatics is the inclusion of more conventional controls. In the thick of the fight, you can drag boxes around various units and assign them to attack together. You can also assign A.I.-controlled generals to lead these groups into battle while you focus your attention elsewhere. (The generals, by the way, are rated in three categories: command, influence, and management. These all affect your army's performance in battle.) Onscreen indicators show who you're controlling, where **B**

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they're headed, and the direction they're facing. Heck, just being able to use the right mouse button to quickly change troop positions and directions makes it less of a chore to get a handle on the action. While at press time the interface was still going through a lot of tweaking, there are already plenty of shortcuts, but only the most frequently used buttons will be left onscreen.

Speaking of making things less of a chore, The Creative Assembly has given a major overhaul to the game experience, particularly when you aren't in the thick of the fight. The first thing you'll notice is the map. The previous games use 2D clothlike maps, but this time around, there is a topographical 3D display that conveys a ton of valuable information. For starters, it's easier to see which territories belong to whom. The campaign map also clearly shows each city's attributes (like income from taxes, loyalty, and population fluxes) and build-queue status in one place. More important, though, is how this 3D map can give you advance warning of battle situations. If you see mountains, canyons, or water on the 3D world map, rest assured, it's an element you need to factor in while you're fighting.

This 3D map does a lot more than make



Total War TV

Coming this fall to a snooty cable channel near you. Check local listings for Total War.



NOW WE'VE JUST ABOUT SEEN IT ALL! A TV game show that revolves around early pre-alpha code of Rome: Total War (and, according to Ansell, throughout the show's run, the game didn't crash once).

While the name of the BBC series, *Time Commanders*, is pretty lame, the idea is solid. Set up a war room and have a team of people work together, formulate an attack strategy, and try to win historic battles set in ancient Rome. Insert random contestants each week, have real military advisors do color commentary, and let the high jinks ensue.

One example Ansell enjoyed pointing out was of a teacher and three students who were trying to fight as the barbarian horses. The group came up with a sound strategy, but one of the kids thought it might be better to play a defensive game. They lost, and at the end, the advisor commented, "You all had a great idea—and it would have worked. But then along came the voice of cowardice! In ancient Carthage you, [the student], would have been strung up and crucified for your orders on the battlefield." The kid looked like he was ready to burst into tears. Public humiliation always equals fun in our book!

Anyhow, the show is being mercifully renamed for the American audience as *Total War*, and while the details haven't been worked out yet, Ansell says that they are in talks with several American networks to hopefully have something ready for the fall season. The idea is to have one season based on Rome and then, thanks to the flexibility of the game's engine, design and create other famous battles throughout history. Who knows? Maybe this can lead to a few extra downloadable freebies. **C**



REC

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"For those about to die, we salute you... hey, wait a sec!"



It's easier for you to wage war; it's also an integral part of the new gameplay elements. Spies roam the land scouting enemy positions, assassins can be ordered to take out generals, and diplomats can bargain with or threaten neighboring city-states. Encouraging more open gameplay, random missions—which you can accept from the Senate in order to gain favor in your rise to power (though if you acquire too much power too quickly, the Senate will likely feel threatened by you)—are also included. And when you need a break, you can zoom in on a city you own to see how it's growing. You can't change things like the design of the city in this view, but it's good to see the results of all your hard work conquering the world.

Starring a cast of thousands

Thanks to these changes, *Rome: Total War* feels less disjointed than previous efforts and more like one seamless, massive war effort. Even at this early stage, it's a major improvement upon the lopsided focus of the previous games, which lack death outside the fighting sequences.

"Some people may just want to play the map portion of the campaign," says Ian Roxburgh, marketing manager of The Creative Assembly. Hey, the new 3D world map does look nice and the improvements are noticeable, but playing only the global politics part of the game? Not likely. With the battlefield

The little-known campaign of Flavius Majoris



A minor side note in the annals of history is the short-lived reign of Darius "Flavius Majoris" Gindstonicus. Take this brief example of the swift—and evil—precision with which he claimed the Roman Empire for himself.

Following the tutorial, a scout, assassin, and diplomat made their way to a neighboring city. As I slip in a few turns rallying troops and positioning two armies, I had my diplomat give my demands: In exchange for not attacking, I am to receive 1000,000 dinari and trading rights. If I could have, I'd have asked for a couple hundred vestal virgins as well. Ah, well. The Gauls scoffed, offering only 475 dinari. Deal! OK, so I'm not the best negotiator. Next, my scout came in to see which armies these cheapsos had. Enough to be a challenge. Then came my assassin. Sneaking behind enemy lines, he successfully dispatched the Gaul leader. That was the cue to pounce on both sides of the city in a perfect pincer attack. The remaining defenders were rounded up and summarily executed. My wrath is mighty.

looking as good as it did in the demo, I can't imagine not wanting to play out the massive battles.

We'll concede that the term "epic" has been used so often to describe games these days that it's losing all meaning—except here. Just try wrapping your head around the fact that a top-end machine will be able to have upward of 10,000 units onscreen in a single battle (20 playable factions, eight in the single-

player campaign, each army with roughly 20 unique units) or in an eight-man multiplayer fracas.

While The Creative Assembly as a whole politely declined to comment on other upcoming "epic" tactical games, Ansell says that the sudden surge of interest in the genre is vindication for what the team has been working on for years. They have a huge head start on the rest of the pack. And, with the 3D

engine, we're looking forward to the modding opportunities that are possible with the game. Right out of the box, they expect to have a map editor and allow for full skinning. Technically, you could use this engine to re-create battles up to roughly A.D. 1350, when firearms started getting introduced. This means creative modders can reconstruct their favorite battles from previous Total War games.

The term "epic" has been used so often to describe games that it's losing all meaning—except here.

Activision says battles can have as many as 10,000 units. Care to count 'em? We don't.



Or not. Who says you have to stick to the history books? Who wouldn't want to see a massive 10,000-unit fight between the forces of light and dark? The only downside is that The Creative Assembly hasn't put in any code for flying units. So, no dragons, nazgul, or whatever you want to call 'em in this world until an ambitious modder takes up the cause.

What's next, you ask? The code is

stable and making its way into alpha as we go to press, ready for a late fall release (CGW's oddsmakers are placing it in October). Oh, and keep an eye out for more instalments in the Total War franchise. In a moment of inebriation, word slipped that another game is currently in the works and has been secretly in development for some time. All we can say for now is that we expect more news to come out at E3 this May. ■



Here's a comprehensive list of all the factions that will be under your control and laying siege throughout Europe and North Africa:

20 for the History Books

The House of Juli
 The House of Bruti
 The House of Scipii
 The Senate and the People of Rome
 Macedon
 Egypt
 Seleucid Empire
 Carthage
 Persia
 Pontus
 Gaul
 Germania
 Britannia
 Armenia
 Decia
 The Greek Cities
 Numidia
 Scythia
 Iberia
 Thrace



For a nice, peaceful break, check out your cities' progress.



What you can't see here is Neno playing rhythm guitar as Rome burns...or something like that.



YOU ARE THE RULE

By Darren Gladstone

The rebirth of the RTS is coming: playing on an epic scale

How many times, we ask, can you mine ore before hitting Ctrl-Alt-Del and ending civilization for good? As we detailed in this month's *Rome: Total War* feature, some designers are (thankfully) trying to change things by looking at strategy on a grander scale. Add Electronic Arts' *Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-earth* and *Black & White 2* to that list. That's why we hit the road and got a load of exclusive scoops on these two ambitious titles. It's all here and nowhere else—so hang on tight as the RTS world gets shaken.

If you want to better counting turns all, you should find 500 units in battles, according to EA.



Lord of the Rings: Battle for Middle-earth

Don't call it Generals 1.5



When we caught up with senior producer Harvard Bonin to talk about the state of *Battle for Middle-earth*, he was adamant about letting us know that this isn't *Command & Conquer: Generals* in fantasy land—it's a whole new experience. Matter of fact, what we saw recently wasn't anything like the game the EA Los Angeles team showed the world late last year. The old demo that had already impressed us (December 2003) is officially yesterday's news. "We took a long, hard look and

realized that what we had started putting together would've made for a mediocre RTS," says Bonin. More than ever, the primary goal is to create a huge experience in which Middle-earth is the star. And you're going to be able to see a different side of this star than the one you saw in the movies (the Mordor campaign, for example, takes you places the fiction doesn't go—Bonin can't wait to raid Rivendell).

A big part of doing all this means breaking a bunch of conventional RTS rules. The EA Los Angeles team

"...And here we are in beautiful Siloas as the horses get ready for the ribbon derby. The big matchup today is seeing how Shadowfax will do against Deathstalker."



The noise of horses' feet is a little sluggish, when they make the first cup of coffee.



Don't let the white lines of Minas Tirith fall. 'Cause if that happens...well, you'll have to restart the level.



hopes to push the boundaries of what people should expect from a strategy title by bringing new gamers into the fold—without scaring off the die-hard RTS fans. "The RTS convention defines us, and we want to change the nature of the game," Bonin says.

The plan is to do this through a lot of attention to detail, like breathing life into the world and making players feel attached to the units they control. Dustin Browder, the project's design director, gave a hint of that when he first talked to us about the game, but the general idea is to make the game

maps part of a living, deformable world. From a distance, you'll see armies on the move, sure, but you can also zoom down into forests and see fish in the stream, deer foraging, and birds overhead (and hear it all in Dolby Digital surround sound, no less). A quickie flyby of Minas Tirith reveals a town bustling with life, people walking around, and so on. It's all about the subtleties.

The team's other focus is to pay more attention to the units themselves. The troops look good, no doubt, but they should behave. ☐



This Middle-earth mission is about to have a world-class break-out.

appropriately—they react to the world and situations around them. “In Generals,” Borin says, “your units are cannon fodder. You don’t care about them because they are mostly machines, and then you just rush your target and generate more troops if you need them.” Because of the graphical horsepower this time around, the team wants you to be able to focus on individual units. Or, as Borin puts it, “it’s all about style—you don’t want to control robots.” In our demo, we saw some very cool examples of how the units won’t be mistaken for robots that mindlessly wade into battle.

In one scenario, a rampaging mumakil is plowing through soldiers and citizens alike. People are running for cover. Then comes the ambush. Instead of the typical fighting animation for a creature, you see the Middle-earth mascot taking a beating and reeling from the blows. After a few seconds, it freaks out and stampedes through town, causing more damage before it collapses from the pain. These reaction animations were random.

Next we saw Treebeard taking on a group of goblins. As he approaches, the goblins light up the walking willow with flaming arrows. Like any normal talking tree, he falls about and runs toward water, douses himself, then, wet, heads back into battle.

It looks very convincing, and these touches actually humanize (or goblinize, or whatever) each of the soldiers at your command. But Borin acknowledges that this also introduces new problems: “We have to deal with lots of skepticism of breaking out of the RTS mold. There are new problems to fix in fundamental game design when you change things this drastically.” A good example: All this “emotion” being poured into the units is likely going to drive old-school RTS fans nuts, because what the hell are you supposed to do when all your units have a life of their own and run for cover? One suggestion we had: Your forces may have natural inclinations, but you, as the commander, should be able to give them overriding orders. They should also show off a little of that “emotion” in the process. In the Treebeard example, he runs to the water. But what if you could tell him to forget about his own safety and press on—and get to see that feral rage drown onto his leafy face?

The EA Los Angeles team is still very much experimenting with ideas, gameplay balancing, and so on. Some of these unanswered questions are the ones that they, themselves, are wrangling with as we go to press. ■



This photo was ripped straight from Borin's family album. Look here as dear ol' Dad grounds him for flinging poo at the neighbors.

Black & White 2

The gods must be crazy



Where the *Battle for Middle-earth* team is looking to put the entire world under a microscope, Peter Molyneux's newest work, *Black & White 2*, is pulling the camera back a little and focusing on improving upon the original game.

What you might not know is that Molyneux envisions *Black & White* as a five-game epic that'll span into modern times. To get to that point, though, the team needs to improve the A.I. The creatures under your sway in the first game were big dummies, and the gameplay basically consisted of sipping around your larger-than-life tameoatch, *Black & White 2*'s titans (wolf, cow, lion, ape, and tiger) will more dramatically and visibly reflect how they've been raised. This time around, developments in A.I. also

allow your creatures to do a whole lot more. They become your helpers and, in some cases, your generals in the heat of battle (we'll get to that in a second). Such changes assure a truly unique character at your beck and call. We've seen all this in action, and the creatures are looking really good.

Creating an open-ended game obviously creates a bunch of designing headaches, according to Molyneux, the head of Lionhead Studios. But by far the biggest is how you decide to play. For those who take the beneficent route, you can just build a great civilization and defend yourself when necessary. In fact, Molyneux says, “The game becomes more like *SimCity* if you choose to build up the Greeks peacefully.” Ah, but where is the fun in that?

"That King Kong is floating... huh? ...what the hell is the Cowardly Lion doing here?"



A whole lot more emphasis is being put on the fighting parts of this Black & White sequel.



This big, glowing nekkid woman is a siren. She's a part of an epic spell that leads enemies to their deaths.

For the sake of this story, let's skip to the fun stuff: going to war. This, after all, is where the biggest changes are in store for *Black & White 2*. For starters, there are lots of defenses that you can build up to protect your city—or you can take advantage of natural barriers. Canyons, for example, make great places to drown enemy troops in if you build walls in the right places. Or, when you don't want to be creative, just use an epic spell like Siren, which dramatically sucks all your enemies up into the skies.

As for your armies, you have a lot more to command. More important, though, is that *Lionhead* is simplifying the process. Want troops to follow someone? Take the identifying flag for a group and drag it to another group.

Congrats—you've just set up an army. Hitting the Shift key gives you advanced unit commands, like setting up unit directions and attack behavior. Most people probably won't want to access the advanced menu and commands, Molyneux says, but they are all still there. The fascinating part here is that you can also assign your creature as army commander and it will lead the troops into battle. Your creature will also face a lot stiffer competition—more opposing creatures leading other armies—to fight off.

Both games are still quite a ways off—at least until the end of 2004—with plenty of work still to be done. But one thing is for certain: Real-time strategy games could be getting that long-overdue kick-start we've been waiting for. ☐



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Computer Gaming World's

ULTIMATE GAMING PAD

By Johnny Liu • Photographs By Maurice Ramirez



Before

Piles of games on the floor. Holes in my socks. And I'm all alone—so alone! Life is miserable because I don't

have a cool computer gaming room. But then, wham! I redid my room and took a shower—look at me now, baby! Hopefully, these girls like me for my sensitive soul instead of just my stuff.

Call me sensei as I try some gaming feng shui on you. Most home offices are cramped little corners you use to get your work done—not the best place to get your frag on. We gutted out one bland room and modded it to make it the ideal computer gaming world. We applied a fresh coat of paint in a chill computer scheme of silver and black and then broke down some closet doors to make room for a TV stand.

We wanted to take full advantage of a multiple-monitor setup, so instead of turning the desk toward a lonely corner, we faced it out toward the television. Both the television and the desk monitor are in the same line of sight, so essentially, we created one giant monitor.

As the gear guy for you game guys, we then outfitted our game room to the girls with the tech you need to get the most out of your play. And hey, maybe once you've pimped out your own pad, the honeys will be more inclined to pay a visit.



Portable computer games are easier than ever to play with less.

DESK

What do you need in a gaming desk? Lots of wide, flat open space. Knickknack shelves aren't necessary. Most important, this desk should handle it mobile being snugly smashed against its surface. A sleek keyboard drawer (see 100) is a

The cheapest solution is a fold-up dining table sold at office supply stores. They're ugly, but they get the job done. Especially as a quick LAN game solution. A better solution would be a \$100 blue-minded adjustable work desk. It's a solid choice with all the right tools

in order to build a functional workstation for gaming, we turn. Life and work desk at Overkill Design Solutions. www.overkilldesign.com

1 Dell UltraSharp 2001 FP

www.dell.com

Just like your average desktop monitor, but the 2001 FP is a response time champ. It's a Dell UltraSharp 2001 FP. It's the best of both worlds. It's the best of both worlds.

2 X-Arcade Joystick

www.x-arcade.com

There are many MAME-compatible joysticks, but the X-Arcade sticks have just a touch of magic. You connect the sticks to your mouse port.

\$100

3 Logitech Cordless RumblePad

www.logitech.com

Similar in shape to the PS2 dual-stick controller, the Logitech wireless offers glorious freedom from wires. \$50

4 Logitech DiMovo Bluetooth Mouse

www.logitech.com

The base unit doubles as a charger for the mouse and a hub for all of your Bluetooth devices. \$100

5 Logitech Cordless Freedom 2.4

www.logitech.com

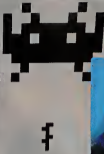
Flight sims and Battlefield Vietnam vehicles call for an ace joystick like the Logitech Cordless Freedom 2.4. \$70

6 iPod mini

www.apple.com

Yes, the original iPod is only \$50 more for 11 more gigabytes, but the mini's style is damn sexy. \$250

8 **Biik**
www.ah-fabbi.com
 Biik makes wall art that you can easily apply and remove. The company has a wide range of designs, but the most popular one is the space invader. \$45



9 The more help, the better.

9 **Bottle-Chair**
www.bottle-chair.com
 Better if this table, the Bottle-Chair looks like a stool. The embedded "corkery" extra base lets add some damping to your seating, and they can be removed to serve as the rear speakers to the Z1 desktop. \$430

OVERKILL

I confusedly described an ideal gaming desk to Overkill: a rock-solid surface to work on that's sharp and sexy, with a black-and-silver color scheme. I really had no idea what they would do with my scrambled thoughts, but the final product was right on. Featuring a strong, right-angled face with sexy inner curves and rivets against the metal edging, this desk is simultaneously a work of art and an operating table to frag on.

Keep in mind, a one-of-a-kind product is going to be expensive, but man, does it look good and hold this room together. The guys at Overkill Design have preexisting designs, or you can work with them to make something ideal for your own banged-out room.

12 **Creative S750**
www.creative.com
 The Creative S750s are 700 watts of boom, with one speaker for each deadly sin! Pictured here are Greed and Gluttony. \$675

15 **Intel 8670P4Z**
www.intel.com
 The budget board of choice for those of you on the Intel side of the fence. \$150

14 **Arise Speakers**
www.arise.com
 The Overkill Design desk would make the best in your room, but how about your desk?

10 **Logitech DiMuvo Bluetooth Keyboard**
www.logitech.com
 Sleek and fat, Logitech's DiMuvo keyboard also features a breakout media pad that can be used as a remote. Plus, it comes with the DiMuvo mouse (see #5). \$150



12 **Radeon All-in-Wonder 9800 Pro**
www.ati.com
 Until there's an All-in-Wonder of the 9800 XT model, the A/W 9800 Pro is the top of the line for your dual HTPC and gaming needs. \$400



11 **Tapwave Zodiac**
www.tapwave.com
 With its large color screen and smooth metal feel, the Tapwave Zodiac is the gaming PDA organizer that'll burn heads. \$300



16 **Sound Blaster Platinum Pro**
www.creative.com
 The Platinum Pro features a handy breakout box; if you want to fit your HTPC's drive slot, choose the Platinum model. \$92



LoveSac

Our favorite foam chair, the LoveSac (www.loveSac.com) has the largest selection of outer coverings. And just imagine the fun of being pedaled at on your favorite TV. The *Hot Seat* (www.hotseat.com) and *Foot Seat* (www.comfortseats.com) are also comfortable, and are less expensive.

In this PC-centric world, the Logitech-covered Rumblepad can be brought over for some TV-output gameplay. And for all those MAME games, the X-Arcade joystick is the answer.

STYLING: LISA HOYT; MAKEUP: SARAHA VORONKHINA



TV STAND

The Overkill desk directly faces the television; you can just pick up that DIMUO set or one of the joysticks and sit yourself down for the big-screen experience. Our TV stand of choice, by Boltz (www.boltz.com), has an industrial minimalism that really stands out. Boltz also has many multimedia shelves and other kinds of furniture to choose from. Inside the TV stand is Pelican's System Selector (www.pelicanacc.com); you can use it to choose between your principal PC on an HDTV connection and up to seven other components.



Electronic Gaming Monthly's Ultimate Videogame Room

Want skinny on how to put together the ultimate videogame room, more details on different lounges and shelving options, and a hot new way to play Dance Dance Revolution, check out *Electronic Gaming Monthly's* May issue.

For the expanded feature on pinning out your game room and more of "high ratings," including outtakes, go to www.gameroom.3UP.com.

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Reviews

We hate them so you don't have to!

The task of *spell* wizards destroying buildings is tedious process.



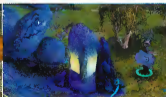
PUBLISHER: JoWooD **DEVELOPER:** Planomic Game Development **GENRE:** RTS/WPG **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 70Hz, 256MB RAM, 205 Instx86, 32MB videocard **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 1.8GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** 2-8 players, LAN or Internet

SpellForce: The Order of Dawn

Finally! A game that lets us fight orcs!



Just like at CoW, I stand idly by, doing nothing, while the peons do all the work for me.



If you die, you'll warp back to your last bastions, which, in the shipping version, were few and far between. The 1.10 patch fixes this.



Your avatar can join in the fray with a powerful set of spells and combat skills. Here, I blast a goblin with my powerful Halitoids spell.



Wormz 3D
Can this oddly beloved franchise survive its siblinging journey to a 3D game world?
85



Wars & Warriors: Joan of Arc
Tiding you over while you wait for *Medieval Thrones*: Avington's Fury.
68



Syberia II
Point, click, biddle, whir whir, talk talk talk, snow.
90

Could *SpellForce: The Order of Dawn* have a more hopelessly generic name? Let me answer that: No, it couldn't. And could the box it comes in—which features a sword-wielding babe in some kind of formfitting sadomasochistic leather getup—be any more embarrassing? Nope. Add the fact that this is probably the 10 millionth fantasy-based strategy game released in the last couple of years, and you have a game that just seems to beg the question, why? Do we really need another one of these?

But surprisingly, *SpellForce* makes a good case for itself. Mostly, it gets lots of points for trying in the played-out field of fantasy real-time-strategy games, *SpellForce* mixes about the muck with ambition, a few original gameplay touches, and some truly spectacular graphics.

You got roleplaying in my RTS game!

German-based Phenomic Game Development has a nice idea here, which it pulls off with more success than would seem possible. The developer has merged elements of fantasy RTS games like *WarCraft*—complete with resource gathering, base building, and army building—with traditional role-playing games, in which you create an avatar who solves quests, earns experience, and gets more powerful over time.

The experience is framed within one large single-player campaign (sadly, there's no skirmish mode or random-map playing) that, storywise, is about as original as you'd expect a game named *SpellForce* to be, including orcs and goblins and ancient powerful mages and forces of darkness and magic runes.

The game begins in traditional RPG fashion by letting you create your own character. This mode is limited, however—there are no races or classes to choose from, so when you read of *SpellForce*'s "six playable races," be aware that this refers only to the armies you'll command, not your own resolutely human character. You just pick a gender and a name, decide whether to specialize in melee combat, ranged combat, or a type of magic, and then divvy up 30 points into the standard sheet of character stats. As you level up throughout the game, you'll be able either to deepen your particular specialization or to generalize across the board.

So far, so good

In the game's earliest stages, there's lots of fun to be had, as the game's unique approach and look makes itself felt. At each

stage of the campaign, you quickly amass a series of quests and subquests that can be tackled in any order, lending a nice degree of nonlinearity and flexibility to the proceedings. Yes, *WarCraft III* essentially did the same thing, but in *SpellForce*, with its emphasis on improving your own self-created character, you have stronger motivation to get it all done.

The problem comes with what ends up being the bulk of the gameplay experience: the real-time-strategy game. In order to battle the blandly unoriginal array of orcs, goblins, and spiders overtake Fantasyland here, you must soon get down to the business of base building. And sadly, this, as usual, involves creating lots of worker units to start chopping down trees, mining iron, breaking stones, and more, in order to amass the resources needed to construct your buildings to crank out military units, which you then lasso en masse as quickly as possible before the enemy AI builds up too powerful of an army.

Sound familiar? Yeah, it does to me, too. As the campaign progressed, I found myself getting increasingly weary, as every map boils down to the standard war of attrition. It doesn't help, either, that all the game's highest-level units and structures are introduced early on, thus not giving you anything new to do or try after just a couple scenarios. In other words, it's just the same damn town, with the same damn units, over and over and over again.

Want some eye candy, little boy?

Although the gameplay grows tiresome, *SpellForce* scores big points for a stunningly cool graphics engine and interface, which eclipses pretty much every RTS I've ever seen and honestly was enough to keep me playing. So, if you're as shallow as me (and have a high-end system), take note: Phenomic's 3D engine lets you play *SpellForce* in a standard top-down or isometric view, but it also lets you zoom all the way in to a behind-the-shoulder third-person view in which you can see the gorgeously rendered world—with all its excel-



Building rocks? It's a game, it's almost always in doing it for fun.



What's building rocks doesn't add up to win? Don't worry—you can carry lumber instead.

lent character and creature animations—up close and personal. Although you must play the bulk of the game from above, this ability to wander the world and see and fight with your armies in third-person view is a neat trick that never got old to me.

Other smaller problems abound, however. This import suffers from horrendous English voice acting, and the written text (both in the game and manual) is riddled with egregious spelling errors. Although the interface does have some nice touches—such as context-sensitive icons at the top of the screen for your avatar's and hero units' spells during combat—a lack of hotkeys makes it hard to quickly get your other units to perform the tasks you need. Two of the worst problems—disorganized inventory screen and a paucity of band points for your character's resurrection—were thankfully fixed in the 1.10 patch as we went to press—so be sure to pick that up!

Is *SpellForce* great? No. Does it suck? Not even close. *SpellForce* at least tries something new, which is more than can be said for most RTS games these days. But whether that's enough for you depends on how badly you want to kill armies of orcs again. **Jeff Green**

Verdict ★★☆☆

This hybrid RTS/RPG gets points for trying, but you might want to wait for the sequel.

It's just the same damn town, with the same damn units, over and over and over again.

PUBLISHER: Gathering **DEVELOPER:** Pandemon **GENRE:** Tactical Shooter/Action **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 700, 25MB RAM, 1GB HD **INSTALL RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4, 64MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, LAN (2-64 Players)

Vietcong: Purple Haze

'Scuse me while I shoot this guy

For those who enjoyed the original, *Vietcong: Purple Haze* is a keeper for a handful of reasons. Priced to move at just \$30, *Purple Haze* contains both the *Fist Alpha* expansion pack and the original game. Like *Vietcong*, *Fist Alpha* provides a short single-player campaign with more of the game's signature gutsy, squad-based combat, a quick-mission mode gleaned from the campaign game maps, and an underrated multiplayer game. *Purple Haze* is a tactical sim/shooter enhanced with a nice but slight improvement upon the look and feel of the game's somewhat underwhelming graphics engine. Still, this game is a must-have for gamers craving a realistic shooter fix.

In country

The eight action-packed campaign missions focus on the foulmouthed SFC Warren Douglas and his Special Forces teammates as they attempt to build and develop a CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) camp in the hostile mountains of Vietnam. The Special Forces backdrop is almost decent, but it does miss the accuracy mark on various concepts. Missions are shorter than you'd expect or hope, but they do contain a variety of downright challenging objectives. Tension is heightened, thanks to rich jungle environments that create a palpable sense of fear of getting ambushed at any point during the mission by VC or NVA soldiers. The same combat disquiet is present in quick-mission games, played either with or without teammates.

Fist Alpha adds a few new weapons, such as the *bezonet* (a most gratifying weapon when used successfully in multiplayer games), US M-16 rifle, British Sten MK II submachine gun, and Soviet Degtyarev machine gun. A more meaning-

The ability to fire behind cover effectively in *Vietcong* is a notable feature lacking in almost every shooter game to date.



□ We're getting out of this place—even if it's the last thing we ever do.

ful addition is the improved AI, already a *Vietcong* strong suit. The VC attack in groups and usually behind bushes, rocks, and fallen trees, only to retreat behind a canopy of green before you or your teammates return fire. Your own teammates follow orders and jump into the thick of things better than many of those in A-list tactical shooters, and the Nung scout, SGT Nham, serves as a capable point man. Using Nham to lead the team from objective to objective is a refreshing alternative to the minimap.

The ability to fire behind cover effectively in *Vietcong* is a notable feature lacking in almost every shooter to date and allows SSG Douglas and his teammates to improve their chances of repelling Viet Cong attackers. And just in case you get stuck on any one particular mission, *Purple Haze* also includes the official BradyGames strategy guide on the disc, which provides remedial action tips for getting unstuck.

Apocalypse now

Purple Haze's multiplayer games provide a variety of game types, including the usual co-op, deathmatch, team-deathmatch, last-man-standing, and capture-the-flag objectives, as well as a United States ver-



□ Stop, listen...what's that sound?

sus Vietnam deathmatch game in which players have the option of playing for America or the Viet Cong. The new turn table mode, a search-and-destroy-type game, is a hoot. *Purple Haze* adds a handful of large multiplayer maps to the original multiplayer mix, including those from the *Fist Alpha* campaign.

Top it all off with a mission editor and *Vietcong*. *Purple Haze's* combination of fierce small-unit tactics, riveting firefights, immersive environments, capable AI, and fluid nonstop action, and you've got enough to commend it for a medal.

□ Raphael Libertore

Verdict ★★★★★
Add it to the "Get some!" list of Tactical Shooters!

3 PUBLISHER: Jellyvision DEVELOPER: Jellyvision GENRE: Trivia ESRB: None (sexual references) REQUIRES: Pentium II 300MHz, 128MB RAM, 200MB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 500Hz

You Don't Know Jack— The Lost Gold

You know slightly more than they do

Back in the halcyon days of gaming, before the concept of online multiplayer really caught on, three people would huddle around a single keyboard to play *You Don't Know Jack*. It was a unique idea: Compete against your buddies, answering questions, screwing the competition, and getting insulted by the game-show host in the process.

Maybe it's because I'm looking through the rose-tinted lens of yesterday, but the old games seemed funny at times and the logic puzzles were generally challenging. Ah, but that was about eight years ago and people change. Violating all personal space

issues, I invited Robert and Johnny into my cube to see who really knew Jack (ew).

Obviously, you can't bash the game for its graphics—it's just text in a variety of pretty fonts displayed at a glorious 640x480. What really matters are the questions, categories, and the host, who is supposed to be both entertaining and insulting you while you're playing. Not nearly as amusing as the host of yesterday, this one delivers a couple of groaners between the 300 questions. Not shabby for 20 buns, but it raises the question of whether the original games were really any good. And the thing that leaves us scratching our



Q Joker, Joker, JOKER! No whammie!

heads—besides some of the gibberish questions—is the lame pirate theme. Avast, this game should probably start walking the plank. **D** Darren Gladstone

Verdict ★★☆☆☆
Some treasures are best left buried.

3 PUBLISHER: Get Some Entertainment DEVELOPER: Avante Prod./Ironline GENRE: Adventure ESRB RATING: T REQUIRES: Pentium II 450, 64MB RAM, 3,000 words, 16MB videocard, DirectX 8.1 RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 500Hz, 256MB RAM, 4GB install, 64MB videocard MULTIPILER: None

Conspiracies

The real treachery here involves the production values

It's been six years since futuristic FMV adventure detective *Tex Murphy* last prowled the 3D sci-fi streets, and there hasn't been anyone able to fill his esteemed gumshoes since. Unfortunately, after playing Greek developer Avante's new sci-fi mystery, I can tell you this: there still isn't. Try as it may, *Conspiracies* isn't even a poor man's *Tex Murphy* game. It's more a "dying man who's living in a box on the side of the road's" *Tex Murphy* game.

Detective Nick DeLos takes on a murder case that mushrooms as interesting plot twists surface. The game features inventory and code-breaking puzzles galore, but their overall execution is so weak that they drag down the story instead of propelling it along. Inventory manipulation is awkward, and certain 3D items must be spun by holding down the Ctrl key while dragging the mouse all over the edge of the screen. This leaves your upper limbs

contorting like you're trying to steer a crashing plane to an emergency landing. There are also limited inventory slots and multiple red herrings. Managing inventory becomes a game of dropping random items and praying that you don't need them later. The cursor is no help with the scenery, either, never indicating which things can even be interacted with. There is much pixel hunting, too, as tiny items can scarcely be distinguished from the brutally rendered 3D backgrounds.

The low-res, full-motion-video cut-scenes are as amateurish as the 3D, and the lip syncing from the game's original Greek is poor. Additionally, when viewing NPCs from a distance, they look ridiculously like cardboard cutouts pasted into the scenes. Although the vocally overdone actors try to give decent performances, *Conspiracies'* overall



Q Nick can be funny, but the 3D-rendered world around him is laughable.



Q Bloody Mary is a realtor with, oh, wait, a bloody war.

quality is so much like a B movie that you'll be surprised no killer tomatoes ever attack—and you just might be praying that they do. **D** Denise Cook

Verdict ★★★★★
Cheesier than the ripest Greek feta.

It's a "dying man who's living in a box on the side of the road's" *Tex Murphy* game.

PUBLISHER: Nyanzara **DEVELOPER:** Nyanzara GAMES **Turn-based Strategy** **ESRB RATING:** None **PRICE:** Varied **REQUIRED:** Pentium II 300, 8MB videomem, 23MB install **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium II 500 **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT:** Internet, 2 players



Star Chamber

CCG: The Next Generation

Star Chamber provides everything a good multiplayer game should: It's easy to play, allows multiple paths to victory, and has great replayability. This brilliantly designed game breaks out of the clichés of the collectible-card-game genre (Magic, Pokémon, etc.) and provides gameplay that can rival that of the deepest of strategy games.

A less-abstract abstract game
Star Chamber's most distinct feature is its playing board. Rather than a meaningless playing mat, there are dozens of maps made up of planets, asteroid fields, and nebulae. The planets you must fight over provide either technology and destiny points or industrial production. Tech points are the game's mana and drive card play, while industry builds the ships and populations necessary for galactic conquest.

There are three paths to victory: cultural, military, or political. To win culturally, you must control artifact worlds and accumulate 30 destiny points at the end of a turn. Military victory requires conquering the enemy homeworld. Political victories are achieved at the Star Chamber, a neutral planet that's home to the galactic government. A vote takes place there every six turns, and the antagonists may use their populations at the chamber to influence three different elections: Power Play, which gives you certain bonus cards or technologies and a political victory if you win three of them; Alien Support, which gives you extra destiny points; and Peacekeepers, which gives you ships.

With so many options, the strategies available are virtually limitless. You can win through force or diplomacy, or feint one way and then surprise your opponent with the opposite. Due to the depth of strategy, SC is not overly reliant on rare and expensive cards, allowing individuals on a small budget to challenge players with thousand-dollar decks. The multiple victory paths also limit the length of games—few last more than 18 turns, or



■ A vote at the Star Chamber.

around 30 minutes of play

Strong suits

The game's card design complements the strategic game perfectly. Played through various combinations of five different technologies, cards can upgrade your fleets, interdict your enemy, conquer planets, and so on. Each of SC's nine races specializes in two technologies and can research these techs at will. Only when you initially conquer an artifact planet or win a Power Play can you access the alien techs.

Cards are also reasonably priced: Starter packs of 200 are \$19.99, and expansion packs of 45 cards are \$5.99, so for less than \$30, you can construct several reasonably good decks. Most common cards are quite useful, and even the most expensive decks will probably rely primarily on



■ The game's only "luck" factor: which ships are targeted in combat.

common cards. One minor complaint is that you can't access tournaments unless you pay a subscription fee to buy "tickets."

Although this independently produced game lacks multimedia flash and its sounds are occasionally annoying, its quick and compelling play sets it apart from its showier brethren. If you still aren't sure about paying for virtual pieces of cardboard, there's a free beta version at www.starchamber.net. **D** **Luo**

Star Chamber is not overly reliant on rare and expensive cards, allowing individuals on a budget to challenge players with thousand-dollar decks.

Verdict ★★★★★
Original, fun, competitive, and free to try. What're you waiting for?

PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Team 17 GENRE: Turn-Based Strategy OVER-RATING: **F** REQUIRED: Premium \$1,000, 256MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 1.4GB install RECOMMENDED: Premium \$110MB, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard MULTIPAYER: Internet, LAN

Worms 3D

Annelidically flawed

Up to now, the Worms series has consisted of 2D turn-based strategy games that focus on blowing your enemy into smithereens. The series' newest entry takes us into the third dimension, but unfortunately, frustration comes along for the ride.

You still control a team of worms, and they still have a vast arsenal of weaponry that requires you to take into account trajectory and timing (along with some luck). That sense of trajectory has made the transition into the third dimension, but now there are more factors to consider. The bazookas—which you can aim in first-person view—fires a shot in an arc, but you have to keep tabs on the amount of wind resistance and your firing power. Making a long-range shot is as fulfilling as ever.

Among the rest of the arsenal are shotguns, various types of grenades, and the return of the ninja rope and exploding sheep. Environmental destruction has also survived the upgrade—watching the scenery become littered with gaping potholes as you play across a LAN or over the Internet is all part of the fun.

Leap of hate

But these new 3D twists open up a whole other can of... right, anyway. There's no way to adjust the camera distance or even change the controls. You're often forced into cramped corners with barely any room to rotate your view. Also, the environmental objects have no degree of transparency and tend to get in the way.

In order to get a better view, you move around with various jumps, including the standard hop, backward somersaults, and double jumps. You'd think jumping would be precisely tuned for a game all about accuracy, but instead it feels like a crapshoot. The tap timing can be completely unforgiving. Watch in utter frustration as



▣ The Holy Hand Grenade will lay a religious smackdown.

your worm back backflips right over a cliff.

Shoot to kill

Each campaign mission gives you a loose challenge to accomplish. Most stages simply involve destroying the other team, but sometimes, you're required to take more of an action-game edge by navigating a maze, parachuting to the ground, or killing zombie worms that keep respawning. And aside from a humorous short preface to each mission, there's no big story behind the game.

In between missions, you're rewarded with one of several animation sequences. These comical vignettes of worms attacking each other are a Worms tradition, and while they look slick thanks to the new graphical style, it doesn't seem like enough were made—they start to replay too soon. Visually, the worms' new 3D style looks sharp, and there are still all those cute little high-pitched voice samples.

The original Worms games were fun and easy to get into, especially in multiplayer. Worms 3D sacrifices the simplicity for clever ideas held back by bad design (such as the lack of a restart option, so that when you screw up—and you will screw up—you must exit and then plow through all the menus to get back into the campaign mode). These problems could have been easily fixed with control tweaks, coherent camera control, and a little more forgiveness. As it is, it's hard to summon enough forgiveness for Worms 3D. **B** Johnny Liu

Verdict ★★★☆☆

Short doses of personality don't overcome the long frustration.



▣ Jeff goes on a machine-gun rampage.



▣ Choose from random environments or preset realms of battle.



▣ Once again, it's in multiplayer that Worms is the most fun.

You'd think jumping would be precisely tuned in a game about accuracy, but here, it feels like a crapshoot.

PUBLISHER: Atari **DEVELOPER:** Artifact Entertainment **GENRE:** MMO/RPG **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 550, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 300 Instx, 56K Internet **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, broadband Internet **MULTIPLAYER:** Massively

Horizons: Empire of Istaria

Déjà vu with a monthly fee



The majority of enemies, including skeletons, zombies, mummies, and ghosts, are undead.

Horizons: Empire of Istaria is a competent game in every respect, but it's as if someone listed the basic features of every other online RPG, scratched off "player versus player," hastily inserted "playable dragons," and then used the list to design a game. The end result is a shrugging "so what" game that—judging by the barren servers—seems to be keeping players away in droves.

Putting out the unwelcome mat
If you've never played an online RPG before, Horizons isn't the best place to start. Although it has a basic tutorial, several key game concepts aren't explained at all. Training points? Combat stances? Dragon hoards? Don't expect much help

The so-called leveling treadmill has become a hamster wheel.

from the skimpy manual, which basically tells you to ask another player if you don't understand something. This is difficult to do, considering the servers are all but empty at anything but peak hours.

Even experienced online RPG players will find some of the above-mentioned concepts baffling. Everything else, you'll just find familiar: With a few minor exceptions, Horizons doesn't offer much that you haven't seen numerous times already. The landscape, the majority of available character races, the endless hunting and crafting—it's all been done before. The so-called leveling treadmill

has become a hamster wheel, and it's impossible to stare ahead and pretend you're making any progress toward anything but higher numbers.

Players are few and far between, even in towns, and Tazoon (the largest city in the game) is a ghost town of ornate, empty buildings. The wilderness itself seems barren, with long stretches of nothing at all punctuated by small groups of monsters. There's a notable lack of monster variety as well: You could spend your first 15 levels fighting nothing but the warthoglike gnooks, but if you wanted diversity, you'd be hard-pressed to find it.



Other players and monsters are rare sights in the wilds.



If you choose a crafting school, you'll have dozens of resource-gathering hours ahead of you.



Almost every character in the game has a task or quest for you.



Dragonplayer

Meant to be the game's distinguishing feature, *Horizons* allows you to play as a dragon that ages and grows and, once it's experienced enough, flies around. Dragons are sort of übercharacters, having both melee and spellcasting abilities and access to all of the crafting techniques. They're an interesting option for players who want to try a bit of everything, but they require a great deal of patience and persistence. Dragons must have a hoard, a hidden cache of valuables, which adds to their power. Keeping your hoard stocked means that you must be constantly making expensive items to stash away or else you'll be noticeably weakened.

Class and economics

The character classes seem familiar at first, but *Horizons* allows you to modify and specialize as you progress. Classes are broken into two schools—adventure and crafting—and you can belong to one class in each school. The first adventure classes are mage, cleric, warrior, and scout, but you can join prestige classes after you reach certain milestones. What's interesting is that you can switch among the basic classes at any time, allowing you to try a new skill set without having to start a new character.

Likewise, you can switch among crafting classes at will. The basic classes are blacksmith, outfitter, and scholar, but again, *Horizons* offers the chance to specialize in certain aspects of these classes and find a more specific trade later. The involved crafting system is one of the game's distinguishing features, requiring you to harvest and process resources and then use them to build items. You can also add "techniques" to items you craft, essentially

creating magic items.

Almost everything available for sale in *Horizons* is player made or player found, but the lack of a large player base means prices are all over the place. Moreover, you can have only five stacks of items for sale at any given consignor, and there's only one consignment shop per town, which makes crafting for profit somewhat prohibitive, especially considering items such as armor and weapons don't stack. You'll find yourself destroying the majority of your creations just to gain experience.

The level grind in the crafting schools is miserably monotonous. You can't access the higher-grade materials until you've reached a certain skill level, so, for instance, you'll spend dozens of hours making bronze items until you can finally process iron. Running back and forth from resource nodes to processing facilities is tiresome, and while an argument can be made that it's no different than running around attacking, at least combat poses some risk. It takes a special mind-set to find the fun in

gathering lumber for hours on end.

As with every online RPG, *Horizons* will probably improve with age. The developers have already begun holding in-game events and promise to add new races and areas based on players' actions. But in its current state, it's just another variation on *ElderQuest*. It may be more refined and offer a few subtle twists, but chances are you're either already playing a very similar game or you stopped long ago because you tired of the formula. **B Ron Dulin**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

More of the same, with dragons.

PUBLISHER: Enlight **DEVELOPER:** Enlight **GENRE:** Action/RTS **ESRB RATING:** T **MULTIPLAYER:** No **REQUIRED:** Pentium II 600, 256MB RAM, 1GB hard, 32MB videocard **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 528MB videocard

Wars & Warriors: Joan of Arc

Right hero, wrong game

With "freedom fries" now part of the lexicon, not to mention the naad for the fine people at French's Mustard to send out a press release stating that they are unequivocally patriotic Americans, the time has come for a French hero to captivate an American audience and get us to love all things Francais. The titular star of *Wars & Warriors: Joan of Arc* very well could have been that hero. Not satisfied with merely leading the charge into battle, this version of Joan takes the hacking and slashing into her own hands. In fact, Joan is so adept at felling her English foes, the game's other playable characters seem superfluous. Why spend time as the lumbering La Hire when you can play as the do-it-all Joan?

Level up early, level up often

Joan has one other thing going for it: immediate gratification. Throughout the early levels, I was constantly finding useful items. After every few skirmishes, I leveled up, which allowed me to add to my hit-point total, develop attributes, and learn new attacks. But in the end, the time spent developing Joan didn't really matter, regardless of where points are spent, she can easily take on a dozen foes with little chance of losing more than a few hit points. Boss fights are simply a continuation of the button-mashing. For all but the largest battles, the soldiers under your command are rarely needed and, in fact, can be a hindrance—at one point, Joan was trapped on a staircase as her comrades surrounded her, not letting her move.

However, just as I grew tired of the repetitive button-mashing, Joan hit me with a surprise: Time for an RTS! In later levels, instead of simply taking on a few enemies at a time, Joan and her fellow generals control troops that must complete larger objectives, such as reclaiming a French town controlled by the English. Unfortunately, while the RTS interface is easy to use, your fellow generals' A.I. is as poor as your English foes'. Characters not under your direct control get themselves



Large-scale battles take place in RTS mode.



Joan fights like she's on some kind of crusade or something.

into trouble easily, so you'll constantly need to switch to them and bail them out. And while it's engaging to watch your fellow soldiers take it to the English, the game's framerate suffers during large battles.

Joan of Arc may be the first installment in a *Wars & Warriors* series. While Joan has some serious flaws, Enlight has shown it can create an interesting character, better A.I., for one, would do a lot to improve future titles. **—Tom Edwards**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

Though it has its moments, Joan lacks a certain je ne sais quoi.



Making Martyrdom Fun

JOAN MAY BE THE FIRST SAINT to star in a videogame, but there are others ready for the spotlight.

Petrels & Rats: Magnus of Fusan This petron saint of protection from vermin is said to have befriended a bear by giving it a piece of cake.

Bans & Bertenders: Amand In this business sim, you play as Amand, the petron saint of bertenders, and attempt to build the most heppening club in town. But look out—Angelo of Folligno (petron saint against temptation) is working to shut you down.

CeteroWars & Cocoon: Magnus of Fusan That's right, this saint does double duty! Inspired by console favorite *Dance Dance Revolution*, you utilize a dance pad to squish ceteropiers underfoot—and lose unwanted pounds in the process!

The time has come for a French hero to captivate an American audience.

PUBLISHER: The Adventure Company **DEVELOPER:** Galika (GORE) **Adventure** **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 300, 64MB RAM, 1GB HD **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM, 32MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** None

Jack the Ripper

Cuts like a knife...a dull one

Set in 1901, this saga of Jack the Ripper's fictitious move from London to New York is at least intriguing. While the game focuses on imaginary additions to the real Jack the Ripper case, its historical documents are well researched and lend credibility to the game without bogging it down. As a New York newspaper reporter, you visit a famed detective agency to peruse its files and are made privy to police-report findings of that era, plus you do some investigating on your own.

Yes, the in-game police work is good, but as far as interactivity with the environments or detailed cut-scenes go, there's nothing to see here. Unfortunately, instead of having most of its plot points triggered by puzzles you solve, the game's story largely progresses on its own. This makes it feel more like a point-and-click movie

than a game, as there are only about six notable puzzles here.

When tiny cut-scenes do appear, you may appreciate their brevity, as they tend to hang with repetitive sound loops or freeze altogether. The static, mostly puzzle-bareft backdrops will bother you even more, though—there is little to do in many areas except pick up paperwork or ask a few questions of a particular interviewee. The plethora of engaging NPCs speak in heartfelt tones that do enhance the tale and make these interviews pleasant enough, but none are fleshed out as much as they could be.

Jack the Ripper features low-res, slightly blurry graphics similar to some of The Adventure Company's other node-based point-and-clickers such as *Mystery of the Mummy* and *Post Mortem*. Despite this, Ripper's backgrounds do feature a lot of



The grisly handwork of Sausy Jack.

ambient details—unfortunately, you can't do much with them. Moreover, even if you tolerate Ripper's lack of interactivity because of its swiftly paced, absorbing story, the game's anticlimactic, unsatisfying finale will leave you feeling as frustrated as those original London police were back in 1888. **D** **Denise Cook**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

A good Ripper story butchered by bugs, feeble puzzles, and a bad ending.

PUBLISHER: Ravens **DEVELOPER:** Ravens (GORE) **Action** **ESRB RATING:** B **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 500, 16MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 1GB HD **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium III 1000, 32MB RAM, 128MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** 2 players (local only)

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

So...this is hell

When I was a kid, my parents gave me a little pet turtle that I kept on a little plastic island environment complete with a green plastic palm tree. I forgot to feed him and he died, was consumed by ants, and stank up my bedroom—but not as badly as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* stank up my cubicle.

This console port lets you play as any one of the four heroic turtles and then lashes you with razor wire to some of the least enjoyable gameplay ever. Each turtle has precious few combat moves, making this the best game ever for gamers lacking the energy to move their thumbs from the A button to the B button on their gamepads.

The "mash one button repeatedly" play experience is not unlike compulsively arm-jacking and disarming your car alarm for hours at a time—just not as entertaining. Odds are you won't be able to enjoy the appropriately cartoony, cel-shaded look, since the onscreen action of fighting waves of the same damn turtles and robots will undoubtedly have you wearing vision-obscuring veils of blood. The bosses are lame, the cut-scenes are lame, the insanely repetitive catchphrases are lame, and everything from the nastiest to the inevitable-but-not-soon-enough uninstalls is lame, lame, lame. **D** **Robert Coffey**



In this thrilling mission, I attack an inanimate object while precious seconds of my actual life tick away.



Here's a helpful hint to battling these guys: Get close and then press the A button until your thumb dislocates.

Verdict ★☆☆☆☆

It's not as bad as you'd imagine—it's worse.

The best game ever for gamers without the energy to move their thumbs from the A button to the B button on their gamepads.

PUBLISHER: XS Games **DEVELOPER:** Nivalis **GENRE:** Action-Adventure **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 350, 64MB RAM, 400MB Install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM, 239MB videocard, 1.2GB Install **MULTIPLAYER:** None

Syberia II

Baby, it's cold outside



□ A candle-lighting puzzle—yes, it's an adventure game, all right.

It's not as much of a tautology as it sounds to say that *Syberia II* is what it is. Like the best graphic adventures you see these days, it offers breathtaking visuals—but it also offers the sort of gameplay that gives people who dislike adventure games all the ammunition they need to justify their feelings. We've come a long way since the days of the first *King's Quest* games in terms of graphics, sound, animation, and interface design, but you're still moving a little figure around, picking up objects here and delivering them there, scouring each screen for just the right spot to click on, and mechanically plowing through dialogue trees. At its best, the game is quite a lot of fun, but it's not one of those breakout titles that will convert naysayers into adventure-game fans.

The story thus far...

A sequel to CGW's 2002 Adventure Game of the Year, *Syberia II* picks up the story of Kate Walker and Hans Voralberg from where the first game left off. The elderly automaton maker is on a train headed through the frozen wastes of Russia in search of the mythical island of Syberia, where the grass is blue and woolly mammoths still roam. What he plans to do when he gets there is anyone's guess, though we're told that mammoths make good eating. Kate has quit her job as a



□ I caught a fish this big.

New York lawyer and decided to accompany Hans on his quixotic journey. Along the way, his job is to cough tubercularly and to get abducted periodically. Hers is to rescue him and to get him to Syberia, mostly by manipulating mechanical devices, climbing ladders, pulling levers,

***Syberia II* is a seriously intended and well-made game and its heart is in the right place, but I got tired of it sooner than I expected.**



❑ The graphics are so uniformly good that transitions to higher-res cut-scenes are barely noticeable.



❑ Too much backtracking through game locations takes the luster off the beautiful artwork.



Art Show

The artists working on *Syberia II* really outdid themselves. Led by European illustrator Benoit Sokal, Microlids has crafted a richly imagined world full of storybook architecture and strange creatures. The animators did their bit, too, adding wonderful grace notes—for example, animals that fit around the edges of each scene, effects like ripples and reflections resulting from Kate walking over a puddle (or the way she skids when she tries to run over one), and cut-scenes that are genuinely exhilarating. If only the gameplay were of the same caliber as the visuals, *Syberia II* would be a must-have.

and so on. She also has to coax help from a cranky robot, some cute natives, and some cuter animals, none of whom are quite as amusing as the designers seem to think.

There are some good puzzles along the way, but most are either too hard or too easy—too hard because completing them requires you to find an obscure hotspot or do things in just the right order (I wasted half an hour trying to light a candle with a box of matches, only to find that the game wouldn't let me do so till I'd also found a carved idol to put the candle in), and too easy because characters often tell you the solutions to puzzles rather than give you a chance to figure them out on your own. There are only a handful of major locations in the game, which is good because you get to explore each thoroughly, but bad because you have to backtrack tediously over ground you've already covered. (In the outpost town where the game starts, you're forever shuttling between the monastery grounds,

the train station, and the general store, crossing and recrossing screens many times.) And, unlike in the first game, the locations tend to blend together—the visuals of falling snow are great, but one snowy exterior looks a lot like another

Talking points

For the most part, the voice acting is strong (and the movie-quality soundtrack is even stronger), but it's a chore to click your way down a list of dialogue topics one by one, miking all the characters until they run out of things to say. And the story that unfolds is somehow not as satisfying as the first game's. You get tired pretty quickly of people blathering about following their dreams, finding their personal rainbow, and so on. Plus, there's the usual problem of a European game that has been translated into English: The writing is stilted, as though produced with the aid of an imperfect dictionary.

Where the game really shines is in its

visuals (see sidebar). But as anyone who has watched Jessica Simpson's TV show can tell you, being pretty to look at is no guarantee of horsepower under the hood. *Syberia II* is a seriously intended and well-made game and its heart is in the right place, but I got tired of it sooner than I expected. The periodic injections of wonder and delight don't come as often as they did in the original *Syberia*, and in between such moments, the landscape can start to feel a little desolate. **B** Charles Ardai

Verdict ★★★★★

Visually stunning, but the pedestrian gameplay saps some of the fun.

PUBLISHER: OOTP Development **DEVELOPER:** OOTP Development **ESRB RATING:** None **REQUIRED:** Pentium processor, 64MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 20MB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium II processor **MULTIPLAYER SUPPORT:** None

Title Bout Championship Boxing

Soaring higher than Don King's hair

Would heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano have remained undefeated if he had fought Mike Tyson or Muhammad Ali? If Joe Cortez refereed the controversial Chavez-Taylor welterweight match, would he have called the fight with 4 seconds remaining, like Richard Steele did? Thanks to OOTP Development's text-based boxing game, boxing fans can relive or rewrite history, resolving these and any other scenarios they come up with.

Converted from the classic Avalon Hill board game, *Title Bout Championship Boxing* is a feature-rich boxing sim available only at OOTP's website (www.ootpdevelopments.com). Players manage boxing matches from the ground up, including single bouts, tournaments, and six-match fight cards complete with Las



is a hypothetical fourth Gotti-Ward contest, Ward still loses by decision in what amounts to a slugfest.

Vegas-style purses. *Title Bout* has a phenomenal database of more than 3,600 boxers rated in 39 categories, allowing players to tailor everything from hitting power, counterpunching, style, and killer instinct to corner men, draw power, conditioning, rankings, and more. You can even custom-design new boxers or modify existing ones.

The nuanced attention to detail required for setting up matches is just as amazing. For example, promoting a six-match smoker at Madison Square Garden involves such tasks as picking a venue, mixing and matching contestants according to weight class, dealing with ratings and rankings, finding capable corner men and cut men,



Looking over AI's stats—high intellect and strategy, plus trainer Dundee's Strategy rating—it's no wonder he's still The Geezest.

picking unbiased referees and judges, choosing announcers, and sanctioning the fights according to one of the bazillion major boxing organizations.

Once the bell rings, fights unfold very realistically through a text-based blow-by-blow analysis. If you're into working the corners, you can try to motivate your fighters, shape their strategy, or work on cuts and swelling. The only thing keeping this game from becoming a top sports sim is its generic graphics. **Raphael Liberatore**

Title Bout has a phenomenal database of more than 3,600 boxers rated in 39 categories.

Verdict ★★★★★
 The undisputed heavyweight champion of boxing sims.

Revisionist History New info, old games

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

When *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* finally made the leap to PC after its launch on Xbox, it brought some of the best roleplaying of the year with it. It also brought significant problems for many, which is not totally surprising, since the Xbox version isn't bug free, but the PC port added a number of its own.

Well, nothing solves QA problems better than drafting thousands of unwitting beta testers in the form of paying customers. The result is version 1.02, a 25MB update that appears to solve some problems for some people and introduce new problems for others. The good news is that many persistent crashes have been fixed. That's not to say they all have, and some configurations are still yielding graphical issues, movement problems,

lockups, and desktop dumps. Some users are reporting memory leaks that can gobble up to a gigabyte of virtual memory. Plus, the symptomatic error that results all attributes to 0 is still nuzzing its head, and *Sand People* are still attacking gamers in *Sand Person* clothing. Both of these problems are listed in the patch's README file as being fixed.

Most of the serious issues are related to hardware configuration, in fairness to BioWare, I've experienced few hard crashes or performance issues. Then again, as a reviewer, I use a powerful but simple, streamlined hardware configuration with no exotic components. Since user experience with v1.02 ranges from gamers noting improvements to those noting new problems, it might be best to wait and see what v1.03 has in store. Let's just hope it's not another three months coming. **Thomas L. McDonald**



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Lloyd reviews Gateway's awesome media center PC.



Too Good to Be True? Will has some warnings against PC makers who may not keep their promises.



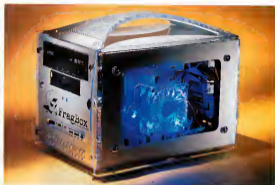
Who needs iVivo when there's FreeVo? Joel shows you how to make your own media center PC.

On

Small form-factor PCs being all the rage these days, longtime gaming-PC maker Falcon Northwest recently released its FragBox, which sports a pretty good midrange component loadout. But as usual, Falcon wanted to stuff even more performance into a small box, so now it's shipping the FragBox Pro, complete with upgraded CPU, system memory, and 3D graphics.

The FragBox Pro arrives with the an Intel Pentium 4 2.60GHz CPU, a 120GB 7,200 rpm hard drive, 1,024MB of PC3200 DDR memory, a BFG Asylum Nvidia GeForce FX 5950 Ultra 256MB video card (the original FragBox shipped with a GeForce FX 5600), a DVD+/RW drive (the original FragBox lacked a CD burner), and Windows XP Home. Motherboard-down components include a four-port USB 2.0 controller, a three-port FireWire controller, a 10/100 Ethernet port, and a Realtek 5.1 audio solution. Most of these are standard issue for a high-end gaming rig, although we were surprised to see Falcon use a motherboard-down audio solution rather than a

disk, Sound Blaster Audigy or Audigy 2. The machine weighs in at just over 16 pounds, and the built-in handle makes it easy to transport to LAN parties, although you'll still need to bring along a display device of some kind, which



□ Falcon builds the FragBox Pro with "cooling mods" that are necessary to get that piping-hot GeForce FX 5950 Ultra graphics to work in such a small and unforgiving environment.

Falcon sells separately.

Falcon used BFG's Asylum GeForce FX 5950 video card, thanks to its slimmed-down thermal ducting. (Until recently, GeForce FX 5900 and 5950 cards would not fit into small form-factor PCs due to their large cooling system that effectively eat two slots.)

Front panel connectors include FireWire and two USB ports, audio line out, audio line in, S/PDIF in, and mic in. However, during our initial testing, none of these ports actually worked. We cracked open the case and found that the motherboard connector had come loose in the course of shipping. Once we plugged it back in, all was well, and having USB and FireWire ports on the front of the CPU made connecting game controllers and FireWire devices a breeze.

By the numbers

In terms of performance, the FragBox Pro is heads and shoulders better than its predecessor and makes an admirable showing. The only low point? Audio performance: In Audio WinBench tests, the Realtek audio solution ate around 10 percent while using 32 simultaneous CD-quality sounds. The use of motherboard-down audio in a \$1,800 gaming system is an unfortunate design decision that Falcon should definitely revisit. Given how inexpensive Audigy and even Audigy 2 Sound Blaster soundcards have become, this system should have a dedicated soundcard to handle audio chores and give back that 10 percent of the CPU for other processing tasks.

In terms of gaming performance, the FragBox Pro performs like just about every Falcon that's come before it: fast

and stable. In 3D GameGauge, it turned in scores that rival full-sized desktop systems, and all seven games stayed at playable framerates even at 1600x1200x32 with 4X AA (antialiasing) and 8X AF (anisotropic filtering) enabled. During the course of testing, we didn't encounter a single glitch or blue screen of death—not so much as a hiccup. The FragBox Pro ran like a tank, plowing through just about every test we could throw at it. The one test that did slow it down a bit was Aquamark3, though, its scores were still on par with others we've seen from the GeForce FX 5950 Ultra in similarly equipped systems.

If you're looking for a transportable, solid LAN-party box and aren't inclined to build one yourself, then Falcon's got the rig for you. Appreciate, however, that the \$1,800 price doesn't include a monitor, keyboard, mouse, or speakers—getting these components from Falcon will add another \$325 to the system price. Another downside is that the machine's key components (except for the amount of system memory) are fixed; in other words, you can't substitute in a Radeon 9800 XT video card or an AMD CPU. But the box's current configuration is strong enough to play today's games, and it leaves you in good shape for upcoming titles like *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*. **EDave Salvator**

Verdict ★★★★★

A very good LAN rig with solid performance and nearly all the right components, but it'll cost you.

ASUS FACTORY ASUS US WWW.ASUS.COM PRICE \$500

Big Copper Sandwich

Asus' V9980 Ultra graphics card is loaded for bear

With its new Nvidia FX 5950 Ultra-based V9980 Ultra, Asus dares to fly in the face of reference design. The FX 5950 chipset needs serious cooling, especially for users inclined to overclock it. While the Nvidia reference design uses a fat wind tunnel of a cooler requiring two expansion slots (the AGP slot and an adjacent PCI slot), the Asus version features a big copper sandwich, complete with dual fans, that takes only a single slot. The result is a sleeker, quieter, and altogether more civilized part.

But that's not all Asus did to stand out from the crowd of final-market boards based on Nvidia's fastest chipset. As it did with the Asus ATI Radeon 9800 XT (reviewed last month), Asus crammed as much bonus material into the package as it could, resulting in a full-featured graphics solution that's more than just a great gaming card.

The core chipset operates at 475MHz, as does the 256MB of DDR memory (for a frequency of 950MHz). In performance benchmarks, it competed admirably against the Radeon 9800 XT, sometimes taking the top spot and always scoring

very close when it didn't. It shredded all the games we threw at it, from *Unreal Tournament 2003* to system pig *Halo*, from *Call of Duty* to *Hidden & Dangerous 2*. Titles ran smoothly even with FSAA cranked up, although the

FSAA quality was a tiny bit fuzzy compared to that of the Radeon cards.

With this card, it's really the extras that steal the show.

Three rear ports include a VGA-out port, a DVI-out port, and a round DIN port for a breakout box. Asus includes a DVI-to-VGA adapter so you can connect two VGA monitors, and the black breakout box—which might remind you of a similar device that comes with ATI's All-in-Wonder cards—has composite and S-Video in-and-out jacks.

It's through the breakout box that the V9980 flexes its VIVO (video-

in/video-out) muscles. Asus includes CyberLink PowerDirector 2.5 ME, a video-editing suite that lets you capture, cut up, rearrange, drop slow-motion effects into, and otherwise edit and perfect your home movies. Your sources and destinations can include any composite or S-Video device, such as a camcorder or a VCR.

Extras don't stop at editing. For gamers, Asus includes full versions of *GunMetal*, *Battle Engine Aquila*, and *Delta Force: Black Hawk Down*, as well as shareware versions of six titles, including *Spinter Cell*, *Breed*, and *Colin McRae Rally 3*.

The only real downside to the V9980 is its price, with GeForce FX 5900 cards available for around \$200 less than the V9980, it's an investment only for the gamer who already has everything—including an immense wallet. That doesn't stop it from being an incredible accomplishment in gaming-graphics goodness, but it seriously limits its audience. **By Joel Durham Jr.**

Verdict ★★★★★

It's extremely powerful and fully featured, but there are cards almost as fast for a lot less.

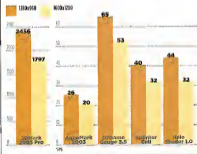


Like its Radeon cousin, Asus' GeForce FX 5950 rocks two fans and a ton of copper.

How does the ASUS V9980 stack up?

Keep your jittery gamer, benchmark numbers don't lie

We put the ASUS V9980 through our standard battery of tests: 3DMark2003 (or 980), AsusMark2003, and 3DMarkSieve 1.5, all with a full screen, antialiasing and mipmapping filtering turned on (with the exception of 3DMarkSieve 1.5).



Note: 3DMark2003 Pro & 3DMarkSieve 1.5 are 32-bit benchmarks. All other benchmarks are 32-bit.

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Good Laptop, Great Price

ABS' Mayhem G1 has most bells and whistles available...but not all

The gaming notebook market has been blown wide open. Since Alienware began shipping its Area-51m some time ago, everyone from Voodoo to industry juggernaut Dell has launched gaming-specific notebooks. And while most manufacturers haven't made big changes, Alienware, Voodoo, and Dell have distanced themselves from the pack by eliminating the biggest problem to plague so-called gaming-specific notebooks: upgradeability. While many of the gaming notebooks we've seen are perfectly capable machines (for the time being), their lack of upgradeability guarantees that the customer will have to upgrade the entire machine down the road when new games require even more horsepower. And that is the Mayhem G1's only drawback.

How does it perform?

Criticism aside, the Mayhem G1 is a formidable machine for the price. This baby ships with a 3GHz Pentium 4 processor, 1GB of PC-320 DDR 333, an 80GB hard drive, a DVD/CD-RW combo drive, and ATI's 128MB Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10) graphics card. I tested the Mayhem G1 at 1024x768x32 with AA (anisotropic filtering) turned off.

While it's possible to run many games with AA and AF turned on, it typically taxes the Mobility Radeon 9600 to such a degree that many games effectively become slide-shows. That said, with AA and AF turned off, the Mayhem earned a 3D GameBench 3.5 score of 43 frames per second at 1024x768x32. That's right up there with the 46 frames per second from the Dell Inspiron XPS laptop we reviewed last month. More specifically, the Mayhem G1 achieved framerate scores of 77, 57, and 55 in *Servus Sam: TSE, Dungeon Siege*, and *Unreal Tournament 2003*, respectively. *Splinter Cell* and *Halo* seriously taxed this machine, and it was able to achieve framerates of only 25 frames per second in each of those titles at 1024x768x32. I then ran both games at 800x600x32, and things sped up tremendously, with the Mayhem G1 achieving *Halo* framerates of 36 frames per second and *Splinter Cell* framerates of 28. Of course, since *Halo* disables AA, the only way to make it look good (sans jaggedies) is to crank the resolution way up. And since you can't with this machine, the game doesn't look as good as it does on more powerful machines.

Of course, there's more to do with laptops than play games. That said, the Mayhem G1 is a pretty good multimedia

machine. The 80GB hard drive provides enough disk space for all those precious MP3s, movie files, and Action Girls video clips. This baby also rocks integrated 802.11g wireless connectivity, a multimedia card reader, and S-Video TV-out. My only complaint in this department is with the relatively wimpy speakers. I would've liked a bit more volume and some more substantial bass.

If upgradeability were no longer an issue, the Mayhem G1 would easily have scored an Editor's Choice award. As it stands, though, its lack of upgradeability seriously hinders this machine's overall score. Of course, it's still reasonably priced, and I'm sure that some time down the road, ABS will consider putting together an upgrade package in order to compete with the big boys.

By the Numbers

FEATURE/TEST	ABS Mayhem G1
PRICE	\$2,057
OPERATING SYSTEM	Windows XP Home/Edition
PROCESSOR (CPU)	Intel Pentium 4 3GHz/660MHz
MEMORY	1GB/1,024MB/DDR 333
HARD DRIVE	80GB/7,200 RPM/ATA-100
OPTICAL DRIVE/COMBO	Combo (DVD/CD-RW) 8X/16X/24X
VIDEO/VIDEO CARD	ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10)
WIRELESS	802.11g
SCREEN	15.5" WXGA (1280x800) TFT Display
KEYBOARD	Standard
MOUSE	3-Button with TrackPoint (3-Button PS/2 not included) and wireless (sold separately) \$199.99 (MSRP) \$149.99 (street)
VIDEO (FPS/BENCHMARK)	43
PRICE	43
STABILITY	43
SOUND	4
UPGRADEABILITY	2
SCORE	3.4

Verdict ★★★★★
A good gaming machine for now, but the lack of upgradeability is a serious weakness.

Verdict ★★★★★
A good gaming machine for now, but the lack of upgradeability is a serious weakness.

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A New Destination



Gateway takes another stab at the living room with the FMC-901X media center PC

The phrase "living room PC" seems to be an oxymoron, but the advent of Microsoft Windows XP Media Center Edition has enabled a better 10-foot viewing experience for PCs. Gateway now takes the concept of the living room PC a step further with the FMC-901X.

A stock 3GHz Pentium 4 PC lurks inside the box, along with 512MB of DDR 400 memory, a 250GB hard drive, and a 128MB Radeon 9800 Pro. Gateway also supplied a Creative Labs Audigy 2 soundcard, although it goes almost unused if

you're using Windows Media Center Edition (WMCE prefers to use the integrated audio).

There's nothing quite like *Flight Simulator 2004* on a 50-inch display.

you're using Windows Media Center Edition (WMCE prefers to use the integrated audio).

But it's what's outside the box that counts for a lot here. Gateway has designed the FMC-901X to look like a home A/V device—more like a high-end DVD player or personal video recorder than a PC—so it looks great in your home-theater rack. The front panel has transport controls and a clock, plus a flip-down panel with audio and USB 2.0 connectors. The system ships with a cool, compact Gysation keyboard/mouse combo that resembles a notebook-PC keyboard. The mouse is gyroscopically driven, so you use it by waving it in the air (though it can also be used as a standard optical

mouse). It's not the best setup for gaming, but it works.
 The system is great for capturing video, time-shifting TV viewing, and storing tons of digital music files. A remote control that integrates with WMCE ships with the system. WMCE's 10-foot user interface is similar to that in PVR systems, but with added functionality for music recording and playback. One plus: Windows Media Player supports the new WMA lossless codec for best audio playback quality.
 The presence of the ATI Radeon 9800 Pro makes for a solid gaming system, too.

We ran *Halo* and *Flight Simulator 2004* just to get a feel and filed it a lot—there's nothing quite like *Flight Simulator 2004* at 1280x720 on a 50-inch display. Performance wasn't too shabby at HDTV resolutions, either. We got around 43fps for *Halo* and 56fps for *Flight Simulator* with most of the eye candy turned up.

If you want a PC in your living room, then the Gateway FMC-901X is the one to get. No one will realize it's really a killer PC in A/V clothing. **By Loyd Case**

Verdict ★★★★★

Excellent TV capture, good 3D graphics, and superb ergonomics, but a bit pricey for a 3GHz Pentium 4.

► **The FMC-901X** passed the all-important "Wife Test." After Will set it up in his living room, his wife declared the media center PC hers and refuses to give it back to Gateway.



Will Power
 His monthly spew of fluff

When is a good deal too good?

When is a good deal too good? It's a great question that good can be fine, which it probably is." That said, would her bewilderment about Gateway computer purchases that seem to "go wrong" just as quickly as they appear. For instance, a couple of years ago, I purchased a machine by the 0 (inserted) non-default Windows. A side effect was horrible calling; it performed about as well as my machine that I had bought by Picooh, Voodoo, or Alienware for that matter. A few months later the company's PR rep submitted a second machine for me to review. That second machine, reportedly found its way into Windows, I was instructed to send the machine to what I thought was Windows's tech support (Gateway's home address, only to have the so-called "repair" machine return and exhibit the worst case behavior. I returned it a second time and I never heard from Windows again.

For a tech-enthusiast reviewer, companies like Windows pose a dilemma. When a new company calls me and expresses an interest in sending a machine my way, it's a thrill to not get cranked. But when I want to inform you all about new companies that offer great machines at good prices, I'm also wary of giving a glowing review to a company that I haven't really been "imp-acted." And that's why not really be ready to give glowing machines, so I may not be around six months down the road when your motherboard (which is also under warranty) goes belly-up. Unfortunately, it comes down to the risk you're willing to take in order to save money. Saving computers aren't cheap, and the lure of being able to get one from [boredom.com](http://www.boredom.com) for half-price less than a year if you call or Alienware is tempting. But do your research: Make sure the company (I will do the same in a moment). It will send you the actual hardware you intended to purchase. I will not send you 500GB of the software. **By Will Power**

BY WILLIAM O'NEAL Hypersonic USA, www.hypersonic-pc.com PRICE \$2,754

Hypersonic Aviator AX6

A good multimedia machine, but gamers need more horsepower

Hypersonic's AX6 has a lot going for it: AMD's 64-bit 3400+ processor is plenty powerful, the machine has 512MB of PC-3200 DDR 400 memory, it ships with ATI's Mobility Radeon 64 (M10) graphics card, and it's backed by the company's awesome tech support. Unfortunately, these attributes don't shine so brightly when you consider that as far as gaming is concerned, the AX6 is underpowered and lacks upgradeability.

As a purely multimedia machine, the AX6 is great. The DVD/CD-RW combo drive makes burning CDs a snap, and DVD movies look great on it. Hypersonic has a "dead-pixel" policy whereby the company guarantees the quality of the display, and it shows on the AX6. And that 60GB hard drive means you'll have plenty of storage space for all those games and music files. But gamers need a machine that does all that and plays games well, too. The AX6 we reviewed shipped with a 64MB version of ATI's Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10) graphics processor. (By the time you read this, a 128MB version will be available.) Compared to other power-empowers we've reviewed, such as Dell's Inspiron XPS and ABS' Mayhem G1, the AX6's underpowered graphics card just couldn't compete. And compared to the ABS machine, the AX6 is also damn expensive.

I ran a number of benchmarks on the AX6, including 3DMark2003, Aquamark 2003, and 3D GameGauge. Because of the limitations of the graphics card, I

ran all of these tests at 1024x768x32 with AA (antialiasing) and AF (anisotropic filtering) turned off. The AX6 got a 3D GameGauge score of 34 frames per second. Compare that to the 46fps and 43fps the Dell Inspiron XPS and ABS Mayhem G1 scored, respectively. The AX6 got its best scores in Serious Sam: TSE and Dungeon Siege, scoring 56fps and 53fps in those games. It scored 40fps in UT2003 and a woeful 26 in Comanche 4, 22 in Splinter Cell, and 24 in Halo. I decided to test the machine at 800x600x32, and its 3D GameGauge score only improved to 38fps.

While the AX6 (as tested) wasn't the fastest gaming notebook we've seen, we're sure that getting one with the 128MB Mobility Radeon would greatly improve performance. Of course, that'll also knock the price up a pretty penny. Now that Alienware, Voodoo, and even



That 64-bit processor is nice. Too bad the graphics card is so underpowered.

Dell are offering notebooks with upgradeable graphics, the idea of dropping nearly \$3,000 for an underpowered machine that you can't upgrade is too bitter a pill to swallow. © William O'Neal

Verdict ★★★☆☆
Too expensive for an underpowered machine that you can't upgrade.

By the Numbers

FEATURE/TEST	Hypersonic Aviator AX6
PRICE	\$2,754
OPERATING SYSTEM	Windows XP Home Edition
PROCESSOR (CPU)	AMD Athlon™ M 3400+ (600MHz TDP)
MEMORY	512MB PC-3200 DDR 400
HARD DRIVE	60GB 7200rpm hard drive
GRAPHICS PROCESSOR	ATI Mobility Radeon™ 64 (M10)
SPECIAL DEVICES	DVD/CD-RW combo drive
WEIGHT	5.1-lb (2.3kg) (includes full AT body)
INPUT DEVICES	Trackpad
MSRP	\$2,754 (incl. tax) (\$2,425 plus, plus GST) (incl. tax) (incl. GST) (includes warranty)
SPEED (PERFORMANCE)	33
PRICE	13
QUALITY	45
SUPPORT	5
UPGRADEABILITY	C
SCORE	2

While the AX6 (as tested) wasn't the fastest gaming notebook we've seen, we're sure that getting one with the 128MB Mobility Radeon would greatly improve performance.

EMACHINE'S FACTORY Emachines URL: www.emachines.com P44... \$1,549 (after \$100 mail-in rebate)

Affordable Portable Gaming

Emachines' M6807 is both a great bargain and a potent gaming laptop

When I first unpacked Emachines' M6807 and got a peek at what was inside, I was disappointed. Everything about this machine seemed poised to kick some serious ass: The AMD Athlon 64 3000+ processor is no slouch, 512MB of PC-3200 DDR 400 memory is enough to drive any good multimedia machine, 60GB of hard-drive space can hold a ton of MP3s and video files, and that \$1,549 price tag (after the \$100 mail-in rebate) can't be beat. Why then, I thought, did Emachines ship this machine with the 64MB version of ATI's Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10) graphics card? The answer, of course, is obvious: The company was hoping to keep that price down. The Emachines M6807 got a higher 3D GameGauge 3.5 score than the 128MB M10-enabled ABS laptop, which we also reviewed this month! This is why we actually test the machines.

While pundits continue to argue the relative merits of 64-bit computing com-

pared with 32-bit computing, the fact remains that AMD's 64-bit processors continue to shine in 32-bit gaming. And to this end, AMD's Mobile Athlon 64 3000+ is a great part. While Mobile Pentium 4 machines continue to outpace the Mobile Athlon 64 in CPU tests, the AMD part continues to outdo the Pentium in actual game tests. And since we're a gaming magazine, that's enough for us.

I put the M6807 through its paces with 3D Mark 2003, AquaMark 2003, and 3D GameGauge 3.5, all at 1024x768 with AA (antialiasing) and AF (anisotropic filtering) disabled. This machine absolutely smoked! With the exception of Halo and Splinter Cell, the Emachines laptop bested the better-equipped ABS machine we tested this month, and it absolutely destroyed the nearly identically configured Hypersonic machine we tested as well. And the Hypersonic machine is over \$1,000 more expensive! The Emachines rig achieved a 3D GameGauge score of 48 frames per second, while the ABS machine earned 43 and the Hypersonic 34. Specifically, the Emachines machine achieved frames rates of 69, 81, and 65 in Dungeon Siege, Serious Sam TSE, and Unreal Tournament 2003, respectively. In other words, unlike on many other laptops, it's entirely possible to play these games on this computer at 1024x768 with AA and AF disabled. Of course, its Halo and Splinter Cell scores of 22 and 21

mean you'll be better off playing these titles at 800x600.

But the numbers don't tell the whole story

Ergonomically, the Emachines M6807 is great. The 15.4-inch WXGA TFT display has a native resolution of 1280x800 (essentially a 16:10 aspect ratio, similar to that of a widescreen television). The display scaled down well to 1024x768 and 800x600, and I saw no ghosting during gameplay. The M6807 weighs about 7.5 pounds (which isn't light), but thankfully, it feels pretty sturdy—sort of like an old-school Dell laptop. And the keyboard is big enough so that it causes no problems during gameplay.

It's rare that a machine surprises us and performs in a way that shows a computer is often greater than the sum of its parts. That said, we would like to see a 128MB M10 option with future Emachines notebooks. Also, now that Dell, Alienware, and Voodoo are offering laptops with upgradeable graphics, not having that option is a huge ding. **William O'Neil**

Verdict ★★★★★

In spite of shipping with a 64MB graphics card, this machine performed like a real champion.

By the Numbers

Performance Area	Machine	Score
OS	Windows XP	100
OS/DRIVE TOTAL	Windows XP/ATA 60GB	100
RESOLUTION (CPU)	1024x768 (1024x768)	48
MEMORY	512MB (DDR 400)	48
HARD DRIVE	60GB (ATA 60GB)	48
GRAPHICS PERFORMANCE	ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10)	48
DISPLAY	15.4" WXGA (1280x800) TFT	48
WEIGHT	7.5 lbs	48
PORTS	2x FireWire, 1x USB 2.0, 1x FireWire, 1x USB 2.0, 1x FireWire, 1x USB 2.0, 1x FireWire, 1x USB 2.0	48
PRICE	\$1,549 (after \$100 mail-in rebate)	48
3D MARK 2003	3D Mark 2003	48
AQUAMARK 2003	AquaMark 2003	48
3D GAMEGAUGE 3.5	3D GameGauge 3.5	48
HALO	HALO	22
SPLINTER CELL	Splinter Cell	21
UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2003	Unreal Tournament 2003	65
DUNGEON SIEGE	Dungeon Siege	69
SERIOUS SAM TSE	Serious Sam TSE	81
SCORE		48

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All-In-Wonder 9600 XT

The Swiss Army knife of midrange graphics cards

It's a TV tuner. It's a digital video recorder. It's a video editing tool. It's a gaming graphics monster. What are we talking about? We're talking about the latest stud in a proud line of thoroughbreds, the All-In-Wonder 9600 XT.

The card features the Radeon 9600 XT core with the chipset clocked at 525MHz and 128MB of DDR memory running along at 325MHz. It's a fully DirectX 9-compliant part capable of 8X AGP. While it rocks plenty of gaming power, it's not a top-of-the-line card like the GeForce FX 5950 or ATI's own Radeon 9800 XT. That said, the All-In-Wonder 9600 XT has plenty of spirit and crunches current titles at playable framerates. Besides our benchmarks, we assaulted it with *Call of Duty*, *The Lord of the Rings: War of the Ring*, *Gothic II*, *Chrome*, and a few other odds and ends, and it served them all up hot with a side of glazed carrots.

Setting up the All-In-Wonder 9600 XT can be a more daunting process than popping in an average videocard. The All-In-Wonder comes with a breakout cable for its outputs and a breakout box for inputs, and the neces-

sary wiring can turn into a snake's nest. One note of disappointment: The card is dependent upon your system's speakers; without purchasing a separate cable, you can't pass the audio signal through the PC and out your television's speakers.

It's like your very own media center PC

The All-In-Wonder 9600 XT has its own TV tuner, so you can use cable TV or an antenna as a source and watch television through your computer. This opens up possibilities for a whole range of TiVo-style features, which have been a strong selling point of prior All-In-Wonder cards and which the 9600 XT handles admirably.

Armed with a handy USB-based remote control (for which batteries are included), you can pause live television, which the All-In-Wonder takes care of by creating a looping temp file. You can then play back from the point at which you paused with near-perfect video quality. You can also fast-forward, rewind, and record your shows for future viewing.

It doesn't begin and end with television. The 9600 XT's DVD decoding is stellar,

and of course, ATI includes its DVD player software (which, like every other facet of the All-In-Wonder's functionality, can be invoked through ATI's Control Panel).

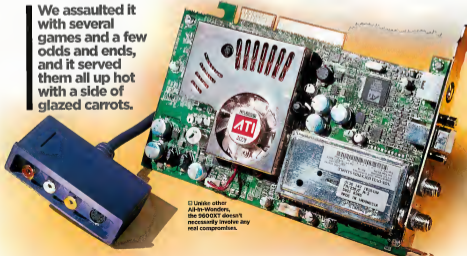
As a video editing solution, the 9600 XT is above average. While it lacks FireWire ports, it can import and export video from/to 5-Video and composite devices and create all manner of video files, including MPEGs, DVDs, and VCDs. Pinnacle Studio 8 "ATI Version" is included for editing, which is friendly but not quite as handy as Ulead VideoStudio, which was included with prior All-In-Wonder cards. Also included is MatchWare Mediator 7 for Web-framed video.

The All-In-Wonder series adds to its ranks another winner with the 9600 XT. A complete video toolbox, this powerful graphical wonder does it all without sacrificing gaming strength. © Joel Durham Jr.

Verdict ★★★★★

Capable gaming muscle with an incredible array of features, but the audio pass-through is weak and installation is complex.

We assaulted it with several games and a few odds and ends, and it served them all up hot with a side of glazed carrots.



□ Unlike other All-In-Wonders, the 9600XT doesn't necessarily involve any real compromises.



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How to...

Turn your PC into a media center with the ATI All-In-Wonder 9600 XT

by Joel Durham

TV and other DVDRs (digital video recorders) are all the rage, and it's no wonder. You can easily tell these which shows to record and they'll do it, without all the complexities of programming a VCR. Plus you can pause live television and skip commercials, among other amazing feats. But did you know that with the help of an ATI All-In-Wonder card, you can do all that stuff with your computer? Here's how, using the latest addition to the AIW family, the 9600 XT. (Note: There are a few assumptions we make regarding this procedure, the most important being that you're running Windows XP—although, if you're running Windows 2000 or 9x, the steps won't be very different.)



STEP #3

Get a signal

Your ATI All-In-Wonder 9600 XT, which you connect to the AIW through the coax connector on the rear of the card. You might also want to send a signal out to your television, which you can do via the composite video-out plug or the S-Video plug; a cable is supplied for each.

STEP #5

Install the software

Boot the ATI Catalyst Control Panel. Have Hardware Wizard's assistance to detect and install drivers. Pop in the AIW install CD and let the autoun program start. Click "Software Install," then "Next." Click on the Express button and follow the prompts. Reboot when prompted. When the computer starts back up, it might run the Found New Hardware Wizard if it hasn't already. Click OK and let it find the drivers automatically.

STEP #1

Uninstall your old videocard

Hit the Start button, click "Control Panel," and open the Add/Remove Programs applet. Select your current video card drivers, then click on Change/Remove. Allow Windows to uninstall the drivers, and when it's done, shut down the computer. Open the case and remove the videocard.



STEP #2

Install the AIW 9600 XT hardware

Slide the ATI All-In-Wonder 9600 XT into your PC's motherboard. Then connect the wires. First, connect the black breakout cable to the big, square connector on the back of the AIW card. Plug your monitor into the connector labeled VGA 1. Connect the USB switch module on the breakout cable to your soundcard's line-in jack. Unless you plan to pull video and audio together, you don't need the purple breakout link.

STEP #4

Connect the remote

The Remote (Monitor) remote control system consists of a IR-to-station, which connects to a USB port on your PC, and the remote itself. Connect the base station to a front USB port. Insert the batteries (included).



STEP #8**Launch the TV applet and configure the TV viewing options**

Look on the right side of the desktop; you should see a vertical ATI control bar. Click on the TV button. Follow the instructions to get up to the A/V for TV section by hitting the applet (if that's your preferred method) or cable TV (if you're interested in configuring the options, entering a parental control password if desired, setting up the audio, and selecting an ATI VCR (ATI's name for its TiVo-style function) format). When you're finished, the applet should display a television signal in a window on the desktop, along with a control bar. Close this window for now.

STEP #7**Enable your TV (this step is optional—use only if you've connected a television)**

Right-click on a blank space on the Windows desktop. Select Properties. Click on the Settings tab, then click on the Advanced button. Click on the Display tab. Find the picture of the television and tick or untick Enable/Disable button. A copy of the Windows desktop should appear on the television.

STEP #9**See what's on!**

Use the on-screen Guide, Play Interactive Program Guide to check out the schedule and see what's on. Launch it through the ATI control panel or the Start menu. The first time you run it, you'll have to give it some information about your television service. After that, you can download the guide file and check out ATI's on-line TV schedule.

Watch		Record	
This Week		Planned (2/20/03)	
WBTV	10:00 AM (60min)	Sunday, Feb 1	
News Talk			
Ch	Time	Title	Action
WBTV			
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Tech Medics

You've got questions, Wil's got an appointment to have that rash checked

Top processor?

I'm thinking of replacing my desktop with a laptop that's able to play the latest games. I've noticed that the upper-end laptops are available with either Pentium 4 or Pentium M (Centrino) processors. I ran the question by my brother-in-law, who works for a computer company, as to which of the two would be best in a gaming laptop. Even though the Pentium M is seemingly less powerful (1.7GHz versus the 3.2GHz Pentium 4), he felt it ran applications faster than the Pentium 4. In his words, "The speed is relative to power consumption." I've also noted that Dell's top-of-the-line laptops extensively use the Pentium M and are touted as "Ultimate Multimedia Powerhouses." Which is the better processor for a laptop that will be used to run the latest games?

Bob

Ultimately, the CPU is less important than the GPU. For instance, in this very issue, we review a Hyperionic laptop with a screaming 64-bit Mobile Athlon processor and a woefully underpowered 64MB version of ATI's Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10). The thing isn't a very capable gaming rig.

The problem with many laptops that use desktop CPUs is that they can't handle all the heat that the things create, so they "throttle back" the CPU to "more reasonable speeds." A desktop processor might get so hot during a rousing game of *Call of Duty* that it's no longer operating at 3.2GHz, but rather 2.4GHz. Meanwhile, a Mobile Pentium 4 that runs at 2.4GHz is much better at dealing with thermal issues and is less likely to run into heat problems during gameplay, so it will actually run at the prescribed 2.4GHz.

How does this relate to your question? It doesn't, really. My advice to you is to buy a laptop with a 128MB graphics card and 1GB of RAM from an outfit such as Alienware, Voodoo, or Dell that'll upgrade your graphics card in six months when you'll need a new one.

Buy this graphics card

Everyone wants keep asking me, "Which graphics card should I buy?" So this month, I'm launching a progressive strike and still recommending the 257MB ATI Radeon 9600 XT. Happy?



Which boutique gets my money?

I'm looking to buy a relatively low-end PC to replace my two-year-old Emachine. I can spend no more than \$1,000, not including a graphics card, and I think I'll get an Athlon 64 3200+ based system. Because of budget constraints, I'm not going to be getting my computer from Alienware (darnit). I found a cheap alternative from Cyberpower, but I've never heard of the company before, so I don't know if it's any good. I then saw your positive review of iBuypower's Gamer Extreme. My ideal PC configuration at the company's site costs just under \$1,000, but before I buy it, I want to be reassured that iBuypower will put together a quality machine for me. Would you spend your money on one of iBuypower's lower-end systems? Would it be smarter for me to build the same PC myself?

DJ Bauman

I've reviewed machines by both companies and they both build quality rigs. I did review a Cyberpower machine that showed up with a bad power supply, but Cyberpower remedied the situation almost immediately. I have more experience with iBuypower, so I'm inclined to recommend it over Cyberpower right now.

Celeron rosters!

I know your first reply will be to rip out the Celeron, but hear me out. My old computer is really outdated, and my girlfriend got a new tower for Christmas. It's an HP with an Intel Celeron (2.6GHz, 400FSB), 256MB of memory, and two empty PCI slots. I love playing games on the PC (though I'm not hardcore enough to buy a \$3,000 system), and until I can afford to put together a system of my own, would two sticks of Corsair 512MB memory, a decent 24-bit 7.1 soundcard, and a nice 128MB videocard get that little HP humming (to game) for a while? I play a lot of driving sims and first-person shooters and would like to get by for about six months.

Milyn

I'm not necessarily an anti-Celeron guy. Anyway, with 1GB of memory, a dope soundcard, and a powerful graphics card, I see no reason why that machine wouldn't scream in most games. Of course, anything that taxes the CPU (some of Halo's more enormous firefights come to mind) will likely chunk up a bit, but that won't happen all the time.

INTRODUCING

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Lloyd's Cracked Case

Don't lose the forest for the tweaks

Note: The following is apocryphal, but it's based on encounters with real people over the years. Since it's not completely accurate and true, I hereby voluntarily forgo my shot at the Pulitzer this year.

Met Joe Gamer. Joe is mostly a PC gamer, though he does log some time on his Xbox. Joe also faithfully reads CGW. Joe spends a fair amount of time surfing the Web, checking out hardware reviews in particular. You see, Joe is in search of the Ultimate Gaming Experience.

Over the years, Joe's become quite knowledgeable about his PC. In fact, he now builds his own computers and upgrades them himself. He blows off pre-built systems, particularly from lesser OEMs. "I'd tell my mother to get a Dell," he says, "but you'd never catch me owning one."

Joe keeps up on the latest 3D graphics technology, and he even understands most of the settings in his graphics control panel. "If I can't play with 4x AA and AF," he tells his friends, "I just don't play Games like crap without AA and AF."

Recently, Joe's also gotten into online gaming, especially now that he's got a broadband connection. He's added a router to his network, too, because he wanted to offload the firewall. While he was pretty happy with Zone Alarm, he really preferred to not have those CPU cycles sucked away from his gaming experience.

In his quest for the Ultimate Gaming Experience, Joe's really tricked out his hotrod, homebrewed gaming rig. It's got a pair of Serial ATA drives set up in a RAID 0 array. He's got the latest audio card, so he can have surround sound and save a few more CPU cycles. He couldn't afford a high-end surround-sound speaker setup, so for the time being, he's settled on a decent stereo speaker setup—though he spends most of his gaming time wearing headphones. "Headphones sound better than surround-sound speakers anyway," Joe says.

In his quest for the Ultimate Gaming Experience, he's also dropped some serious coin on his input devices. His mouse sampling rate is second to none, and the keyboard is perfect for gaming. "None of that ergonomic crap for me," Joe tells his buddies. "I want to know where my keys are."



However, Joe's latest discovery is overclocking. He's got a water block on order, but even his air-cooled rig gets 20 percent over the rated CPU clock. He's started fooling around with his graphics card, too, and has replaced the native cooling solution with a hot-pipe solution, which allows him to run his GPU 15 percent higher. "My frame-rates are silky smooth," Joe boasts.

So, Joe has really built himself one killer rig. Fully modded, it's not cheap, but hey, he's after the Ultimate Gaming Experience. But what about games?

"I don't have as much time to play as I used to," Joe says. "But I have a great time when I do play."

So, Joe, what is your game of choice these days?

"Counter-Strike."

At CGW, we spend a lot of time reviewing hardware and helping you wring just a bit more performance out of every game. That's our job. But I've talked to a lot of Joe Gamers in the world, those who seem to have lost sight of the fact that the PC is there as the platform.

Sure, tweaking and tricking out your PC can be a great game on its own. And if you like doing that, we're happy. But I'd just as soon have a straightforward system that just runs so that I can play a boatload of games instead of spending too much time messing out the hardware. After a full day of work, I'd certainly rather be booting up *Half* or *KOTOR* or *Battlefield 1942* than pushing the

memory on my graphics card. When you fire up a game and get so into it that you forget about the world around you—that's the Ultimate Gaming Experience. © Lloyd Case

Lloyd's Top Picks

Games the 9600 does really right

Half, KOTOR, and Battlefield 1942 aren't the only games that look good and run well without having to over clock your graphics card. Here are a few recently reviewed games that are sure to look great and run well on that Radeon 9600 graphics card.



Silent Storm

This tactical strategy title by JoWood was good enough to earn an Editors' Choice award from none other than Robert Coffey.



Civilization III: Conquerors

With nine new historical campaigns, Firaxis' latest Civ title looks great and is addictive as hell. And for all of you who want multi-player that works, Firaxis managed to fix all the problems that plagued the *Play the World* add-on.



Black Hawk Down: Team Sabre

Forget about realism. *BHD*: Team Sabre is about one thing and one thing only, killing. Leaving the ill-fated streets of Mogadishu, *BHD*: Team Sabre takes you to Columbia and Iran, where you'll go about the business of robbing the world of drug dealers and terrorists.

In your quest for the Ultimate Gaming Experience, don't lose sight of the reason for all the questing.



Check Out



PERIPHERALS

113



COMPUTERS

112



REWIND 100

119



117

GADGET



113

PERIPHERALS

Inside

It's Ryan's inaugural month doing

Check Out, and he's got plenty of gadgets and gizmos for you to...well, check out. This month's A-List showcases everything from the latest high-end Athlon 64 FX machines to Darren's favorite new digital camera, and the Rewind 100 will clue you in on some stuff you shouldn't miss—and some stuff you should.

A-List

Our picks

There's lots of high-tech stuff out there to choose from: all those fancy-schmency computers with neon cases and flashing lights, a new videocard every 15 minutes, and cellular phones that do everything except brush your teeth and baka out the gerbega. Sometimes, you just want to separate the fleshy from the functional—and that's where we come in. Every month in CGW, you can count on A-List to point you toward the stuff that's worth spending your hard-earned dollars on. Note that prices vary from retailer to retailer—we're just giving you an estimated average. Happy shopping!



COMPUTERS

You know, a computer is pretty much obsolete as soon as you buy it. Isn't the Information Age wonderful? And on that note, check out this month's computer picks!

Intel-based system



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

710XL Peak Performance
\$4,000
Gateway

BUDGET PICK

Area 51 Performance
\$1,700
Alienware

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Gateway has found the sweet spot between being a major OEM and a boutique system maker. Its 710XL uses the same parts as the small guys' machines and is damn near as fast.

The Area 51's plastic door hinges have been replaced with durable metal, and there's also a new shimmering crimson-orange paint offered. That's right, there are aliens of all colors—black, green, puce...

AMD-based system



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

PC 51
\$5,000
VoodooPC

BUDGET PICK

Assassin SE
\$2,000
Vicious PC

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Behold, the winner of our Ultimate Gaming Machine award, boasting the power of an overclocked Athlon 64 FX-51 and a GeForce 5950. It costs about the same as a first-tier engagement ring. Get your priorities straight!

Vicious PC's Assassin is a great Athlon 64-based rig. While it's not as fast as the Athlon 64 FX-53 machine, that 256MB Radeon 9800 XT ensures it'll still smoke when running any game you throw at it.

LAN-boy rig



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

Doll
\$1,800
VoodooPC

BUDGET PICK

FragBox
\$1,095
Falcon Northwest

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Voodoo's Doll starts at around \$1,800, but expect to pay about \$2,500 for one similar to the rig we tested in February. We banged on one with a 256MB Radeon 9800XT graphics card and 1GB of RAM.

Falcon's FragBox doesn't pack the same punch as Voodoo's Doll, but it's also about \$1,400 less expensive. That said, it's a great second rig for anyone who doesn't want to lug a 40-pound behemoth back and forth. Just ask Kristen, the state Wif's.

PERIPHERALS

Who doesn't need a wireless keyboard, a sleek USB game pad, or a rockin' 7.1 surround-sound speaker setup? Not Mr. Jeff "What? More than two speakers?" Green, that's for sure.



Speakers



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

GigaWorks 5750
\$500
Creative Labs

BUDGET PICK

Z-5300
\$200
Logitech

BUDGET PICK

Z-3
\$100
Logitech

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Some may think a 7.1 speaker setup is a bit over the top, but why turn down 700 watts of THX-certified audio power? With two rear satellites and two on the side, the 5750s will make your home theater rock that much more.

This setup earned an Editor's Choice award in our February issue. Logitech's Z-5300 system boasts incredible power, quality, and bass at a decent price. Take note, though—it lacks a digital input.

If you're on a budget, we suggest you forgo a cheap set of 4.1 or 5.1 speakers and opt for a good set of 2.1 speakers. Logitech's Z-3s sound great and look even better.

Keyboard



PRODUCT

WIRED PICK

Multimedia Keyboard
\$30
Microsoft

WIRELESS PICK

Wireless Desktop Elite Keyboard/Mouse
\$100
Microsoft

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

You can't go wrong with Microsoft's Multimedia Keyboard. The buttons at the top allow you to perform common functions, like launching a web browser or opening folders, or you can use them to control multimedia apps like Media Player.

Microsoft's latest desktop set sports the new tilt-wheel technology that allows you to scroll horizontally through documents. The cushioned palm rest is quite comfy, and the board boasts a bevy of customizable buttons and keys.

Gamepad



PRODUCT

ONE 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

- **IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0**
 \$50
 Microsoft

WIRELESS PICK

- **Wireless IntelliMouse Explorer 2.0**
 \$60
 Microsoft

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

This is easily a toss-up between Microsoft's IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0 and Logitech's MX500. Each costs \$50, boasts plenty of customizable buttons, and can be connected to your PC's PS/2 port or a USB port.

Microsoft's Wireless IntelliMouse Explorer 2.0 is slightly more comfortable than the standard IntelliMouse Explorer, and it also sports tilt-wheel technology. While it comes in several colors, we prefer the leather-bound version.

Headset



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

- **PC150**
 \$70
 Sennheiser

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

One out of one editors named Darren Gladstone agrees: "You're not exactly going to record a top 50 album with this, but it's good for the job at hand: communicating and talking trash with your buddies online."

Joystick



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

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

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Along with their flight-slim brethren, joysticks have dropped out of the public eye. While there are some wireless joysticks entering the market, the performance 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 that'll get your motor in gear for some *Need for Speed Underground*.

DISPLAYS

When Ryan started here, he nearly went blind staring at the supersmall monitor we gave him. He deals with it better now, but that doesn't stop him from wishing he had one of these!



CRT monitor



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

- **21-inch MultiSync FE2105B**
 \$600
 NEC

SUBBET PICK

- **19-inch E90F6**
 \$260
 ViewSonic

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

CRTs are still arguably the best choice for gaming when it comes to the ever-important price-to-value ratio. You can buy a huge screen and still have cash left over to buy a plastic fee-wearing monkey.

Fourteen-inch monitors used to be the awful first tier of displays. Thanks to product growth, 17-inch monitors are now available at entry-level prices, with 19-inchers also often within reach.

LCD monitor



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

UltraSharp 2001FP
\$900
Dell

BUDGET PICK

Prophetview 15-inch 152T
\$500
Hercules

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

The UltraSharp is packaged with Dell's XPS system. It has a slick design and a response time of a quick 16 milliseconds, but CRTs still trump in refresh rate and price. On the other hand, LCDs are just plain wicked-cool.

In the world of LCDs, ghosts are the grim specters that bring ruckus to gaming. The Prophetview casts away those ghosts with its sharp image and smooth titanium casing.

COMPONENTS

Building your own computer is a money-saver, plus you can have fun getting nagged for help by all your tech-impaired friends and family when their computers break!



Processor



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

Athlon 64 FX-53
\$900
AMD

BUDGET PICK

Pentium 4 2.8GHz
\$300
Intel

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Among gaming processors, the Athlon 64 FX-53 is at the top of the heap. Even though the 64 bits aren't being exploited, the 32-bit applications run almost as fast as Darren can talk.

While the 2.8GHz Pentium 4 chip is not as king of the road as an 800MHz frontside-bus 3.2GHz model, it is still one zippy little core. Plus, with an Intel mobo, you'll be ready for the eventual upgrade.

Motherboard



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

5K8N nForce3
\$225
Asus

BUDGET PICK

D875PBZ
\$169
Intel

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Asus' 5K8N 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. 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 makes a great backbone for an affordable Pentium 4 system.

Soundcard



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

Audigy 2 Z1 Platinum
\$250
Creative Labs

BUDGET PICK

Onboard audio
Free


WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Remember when it was outrageous to have rear speakers for computer gaming? The times, they are a-changin'—now, we've got the Creative Labs Audigy 2, a good match for the Gigawatts speaker set.


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

A-LIST COMPONENTS


Videocard

	PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
	HIGH-END PICK ATI Radeon 9800 XT \$440 ATI	The Radeon XT was originally supposed to come packaged with <i>Half-Life 2</i> . Unfortunately, the release date slipped, but many of these cards are still being packaged with a coupon for that eventual release.
	MIDRANGE PICK ATI Radeon 9600 XT \$175 ATI	ATI's midrange part is plenty fast enough to handle any game you're currently playing.
	BUDGET PICK Nvidia GeForce FX 5200 Ultra \$90 Nvidia	Stay behind a generation of graphics cards to save some money. The Nvidia GeForce FX 5200 clocks in at about \$90. Don't buy the cheaper, non-Ultra version.


Hard drive

	PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
	HIGH-END PICK Dual Seagate Cheetah 10000 \$180 Seagate Technology	The newest drives bolt in at a scorchingly fast 10,000 rpm. Take two of those in a RAID configuration for your own road-runner-driven chariot. More than what you'll ever need for gaming, but good for video editing.
	BUDGET PICK Maxtor 80GB, 7200 \$80 Maxtor	80GB drives at 7,200 can easily be found at \$1 a gig. Usually, they involve rebates with many finite instructions. We mailed in our rebate a day late and they wouldn't ante up. Don't let the same thing happen to you.

Optical drive

	PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
	HIGH-END PICK Pioneer DVR-A07U \$225 Pioneer	This drive is not for the faint of heart—or light of wallet. Pioneer's latest combo drive does everything you need: creating your own DVD movies, burning music CDs, or just backing up data.
	BUDGET PICK DVD drive \$25 Lite On	Judging by the responses to our first-ever DVD, many of you have yet to adopt this technology. At around \$25 for a basic 16x drive, there's no reason to wait.

Case

	PRODUCT	WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
	TOWER PICK COOLER MASTER TAC-T01-E1C \$150 Cooler Master	Cooler Master's TAC-T01 is big, heavy, and not necessarily cheap, but it's a great case for building that ring of your dreams. It's sold and shny, and there's a metal monolith inset on the case's face. What is that thing for, anyway?
	ALTERNATE FORM PICK SHUTTLE SN85G4 \$300 Shuttle	Shuttle's nForce3 150-based setup is the perfect option for building an Athlon 64-based rig.

MOBILITY

Cell phones are chock-full of games, cameras, decorative displays, and annoying ring tones. Pretty soon, they'll be able to shoot laser beams and hold intelligent conversations.



Laptop



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

M675
\$2,500
Gateway

BUDGET PICK

Inspiron 5150
\$2,000
Dell

LIGHTWEIGHT PICK

Inspiron 300m
\$2,000
Dell

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. Plus, it can be difficult to put a desktop PC in your backpack.

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.

The Inspiron 300m is the perfect traveling companion. The docking station's extra battery space means more than five hours of life, and additional speakers give added rockability. Just don't expect to do much gaming on it.

Phone



PRODUCT

FLIP-PHONE PICK

SPH-A600
\$350
Samsung

NON-FLIP-PHONE PICK

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 better controlling the action. 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 works great.

PDA



PRODUCT

PALM OS PICK

Zodioc 2
\$400
Tipware

POCKETPC OS PICK

e805
\$500
Toshiba

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

For the moment, you aren't gonna find another PDA with this kind of juice for the price that Tipware is asking. You can bust out some grids 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 MAHE and countless games?

Gadget



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

DSC-T1 Cyber-shot
\$550
Sony

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Holy crap! Your wallet is probably bigger than this 5-megapixel digital camera. Sony's DSC-T1 is tiny, but it has a large LCD screen and a 3x optical zoom. Poor battery life is the only price you'll be paying for high style.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Dead to Rights	2/04	This is the best part of an aged, discredited, repetitive shooter that was dead on arrival.	★★★☆☆
Devil May Cry 3	2/04	It's times engaging, but not quite all it can be.	★★★★☆
			
DJ Hero 2: Rockin' Star	2/04	The sequel to DJ Hero is both dumbed down and smacked up.	★★★☆☆
Dragon Ball: Origins of the Light/Sevens of the Dark	12/03	More colorful contrast (and not) at a bargain price.	★★★★☆
Overlord II	2/04	The most garish of any EA game available anywhere.	★★★★☆
Overlord Origin: Legends of Ironma	2/04	Good start for fans of the original.	★★★★☆
Empire: Dawn of the Modern Age	2/04	A solid entry into the burgeoning historical real-time strategy subgenre.	★★★★☆
Godlike Ages	10/03	Something new in the innovatively unappealing field but it's worth a look.	★★★★☆
Warcraft II	12/02	A better, cheaper 3D version of Magic: The Gathering.	★★★★☆
			
EA G18: Operation Wolf Revolution	8/03	Nothing really new here, but worth a look if you need a new fix for a slow shooter.	★★★☆☆
PGA 2004	2/04	It might be a cheap console port, but it's still the best soccer game on any platform.	★★★★☆
Real Factory II	2/04	A rock-solid MMO/RPG from one of the most unlikely sources.	★★★★☆
Freedom Fighters	1/04	Great gameplay laces, but the PC version drowns the short stack.	★★★★☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Ghost Maker	8/03	The same ol' clever, dumb, and fun to watch, but it's a little too hard to control.	★★★★☆
Godic II	2/04	Better than the first, but still a little too wonky and foreign to be a classic.	★★★★☆
Hot	10/03	Last in a bad series.	★★★☆☆
House of Hell	8/03	Wishes, together, and utterly devoid of anything resembling fun.	★★★☆☆
Kidz & Bergans 2	2/04	A really good game trapped by the same goofy logic and peddlerable A.I. as the original.	★★★★☆
Highway to the Black	1/04	An excellent system gets better.	★★★★☆
HomeWorld 2	12/03	It's no Galaxian-4's not even Alienware!	★★★★☆
Key's Project Chess	12/03	A sequel attempt at chess for dummies that doesn't quite reach chess-lovers but does provide some decent chess.	★★★☆☆
Jetlight V	2/04	A new combination of freedom and freedom.	★★★☆☆
Kevin Conroy's Conflict	1/04	A nice attempt at a Conroy-style comic in a flash setting, with some A.I.	★★★★☆
			
Knight of the Old Kingdom	2/04	A slow-paced epic from Bethesda. Easily the best RPG of the year and possibly the best Star Wars game ever made.	★★★★☆
Legacy Online	8/03	A better chance at best.	★★★☆☆
Outpost: Legacy of the Crusader	8/03	Unpleasant, inflexible, buggy, and lacking in inspiration—and there are its good points.	★★★☆☆
Jack the Ripper: All About	8/04	A truly great (or starting, at the least, new) without the dynamic German.	★★★★☆
Lords of EverQuest	1/04	A truly decent attempt at exploring on a level and war (RPG/RTS) format.	★★★★☆
GOBLIN: Return of the King	2/04	Check your love of the dots for this smart-swinging, spell-singing good game.	★★★★☆
Madness MEL 2004	1/05	Easily the best Madness game yet, but it's canceled in favor of a Legends Bull Action controller.	★★★★☆

DVDs

Award-Winning Releases



American Splendor
Harvey Pekar writes an autobiographical comic called American

Splendor He's also one ornery bastard. This artful movie about his life draws upon a world of parallels, straddling the lines between movies, comics, and reality.



Lost in Translation
Have you ever had that sense of being some-where other-

where? Traveling out of the country can often feel like an out-of-body experience, and *Lost in Translation* perfectly captures that feeling of dislocation.



The Lord of the Rings
We can't spotlight just the artsy-fartsy flicks—the geek police

would have our heads! If you haven't gotten the first two extended editions, the geek police will be after you, too. Plus, *Return of the King* comes out in May, with the extended edition arriving in September, and undoubtedly some gargantuan ubertrilogy edition to follow at some point in the not-so-distant future.



Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic
★★★★☆

As evidenced by our 2003 Game of the Year Awards, this is one of the best damn RPGs we've ever played. Forget that loopy prequel trilogy—KOTOR is Star Wars done right.



Tron 2.0
★★★★☆

Annoying jumping puzzles and lightcycle levels aside, this spin-off of the classic movie (and sequel to the 1982 arcade game) is one of the most inventive, original shooters to come around in a long time.

Anime Rewind

A Look at Two Genres



Shojo vs. Shonen

Shojo anime caters to girls, with deeper characterizations and story lines amidst teen angst. On the flip side, a good number of Shonen "guy-centric" anime are about endlessly powering up or being an impossibly hopeless clunk who still manages to get the ladies.



Boys Over Flowers

Tsukushi has transferred to an expensive prep school, where she soon becomes the target of a popular gang of bullies. Yeah, *Boys Over Flowers* is mired in high school, but it's charming and has strong characters that grow throughout the series.



Urusei Yatsura

Ataru is a skirt chaser who lusts after women—but not his alien girlfriend Lum, a hottie in a tiger-striped bikini. Maybe it's because she does out electric zaps like candy. Check out the first movie release, *Only You*.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Magic: The Gathering—Darkspores	4/04	A painful fighting game in which you don't fight and don't see each other.	★☆☆☆☆
Massive Assault	4/04	Learning-games fare based on the board game.	★☆☆☆☆
Neo-Geo 2	4/04	Impressively gamey only faced but doesn't mess with the formula.	★☆☆☆☆
Model of Horror: Allied Assault—Breakthrough	3/05	Intense and visually satisfying, but barely good enough to pull it to the front.	★☆☆☆☆
PicoSplat! Fight Simulator 2004	10/03	The best fun you can have in a place without guns.	★☆☆☆☆
PlayStation Club II	10/03	What it looks like in multiplayer, it more than makes up for in fun.	★☆☆☆☆
Midnight Network	2/04	Horrible horror walk-a-thon for a time.	★☆☆☆☆
Pathways	3/03	Just throw your \$20 into the street and win!	★☆☆☆☆
Hyperion: Journey II	3/04	For space players who like pretty pictures, too.	★☆☆☆☆



ASAC Live 2004	3/04	Not bad, but we expected more.	★☆☆☆☆
ASAC Live 2004	3/04	One of the best 3-on-3 games for any platform.	★☆☆☆☆
CD Red for Speed Underground	3/04	Really damn fast, but much better unless you're in a car.	★☆☆☆☆
Knightrider Reload	1/04	A fun way to spend a night without violence.	★☆☆☆☆
Neverwinter Nights: Hordes of the Underdark	3/04	A five-star expansion sells another by itself.	★☆☆☆☆
Bravura: Deathmatch	10/03	Back-packer shooters is a more challenging strategic game.	★☆☆☆☆
MSX 2004	1/04	The best MSX experience of the year.	★☆☆☆☆
No Man's Land	1/04	Another follow-the-leader MSX classic.	★☆☆☆☆
Northside	3/04	Well, at least it sounds spooky.	★☆☆☆☆
Over Upon a Knight	3/04	A decent enough RTS bogged down by a lame RPG and the mistaken belief that such a thing exists.	★☆☆☆☆
One Must Fall: Full Contact	4/04	If you're into three-person fighting games with robots, knock yourself out.	★☆☆☆☆
Paradise II	1/04	Larger than a glorified Pac-Man patch.	★☆☆☆☆



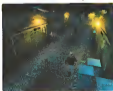
GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
CD Red Adventure	3/04	A decent primer for those who don't know the game.	★☆☆☆☆
Parties of the Caribbean	10/03	Two half-good games don't equal one good one.	★☆☆☆☆
PlanetSide: Core Combat	3/04	A decent idea at its core, but not worth the price.	★☆☆☆☆
Rainbow Troops 3	3/04	You don't have to love wars to enjoy the historical and economic challenges here—but a little bit does hurt.	★☆☆☆☆
Rebels: Price Escape	1/04	Go set a state of Government's freedom.	★☆☆☆☆
Rescue: The Revolution	10/03	Good idea, bad game.	★☆☆☆☆
Reveries: A First Adventure	10/03	The limits of graphic adventure games, both pretty and stupid.	★☆☆☆☆
CS Savage	1/04	A political blockbuster magnified by its own delirium.	★☆☆☆☆
Secret Weapons	3/04	If the combat didn't stink, it might have been decent, even the fun.	★☆☆☆☆
Shackbase: Rise of Chaos	4/04	A decent add-on that's barely enough to satisfy true Shackbase junkies.	★☆☆☆☆
Shed III 3	3/04	In 3D the only things that go bump in the night are bloody monsters.	★☆☆☆☆



Shed Storm	4/04	Like a computer WWII mod to the second F-Com. Highly recommended.	★☆☆☆☆
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Thumbs Down: Licensed Crap

Thumbs Down:



The Great Escape

Steve McQueen is probably rolling in his grave. Even if you loved the movie, this is one stealth-action game you don't want to suffer through. Do yourself a favor—go play *Splinter Cell* instead.



The Hobbit

Yeah, apparently it's based on the book. We must have missed the chapters in which Bilbo had to find his neighbor's missing butter churn, collect a bunch of jewels, and navigate a dungeon full of disappearing ropes.

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Stardust: A Book About	10/01	The nice bonus on transportation adds predictably to an already one-hack game experience	★☆☆☆☆
Space Galaxy	1/04	A decent combination of real-time strategy and The Simpsons' clever enough to hold your interest for long	★★☆☆☆
Squad Busters: Western Front	5/04	"Better than 60 Minutes, like employees are better than Leland"	★★☆☆☆
Star Fury	2/04	Open-ended and flexible without being too complex	★★☆☆☆



Star Wars Celebrate: An Empire Divided	10/03	Might get a whole lot better	★★☆☆☆
Stargate: A Hatch	1/04	The bad eye of the '70s continues with this cheap game from a crazy house	★★☆☆☆
Stargate	1/04	Yet another good game saved by bugs. Whiner!	★★☆☆☆
Stargate 2: War of the Machines	4/04	Ugly and just plain as dull	★★☆☆☆
The Steel Escape	10/03	Not quite as bad as a month in the closet, but not much better, either	★★☆☆☆
The Wheel	2/04	Standard console fare, lightly Tolkien-flavored	★★☆☆☆
The Simpsons: Hit & Run	2/04	The best GOTW top-oil ever, and a real-hack for Simpsons fans	★★★☆☆



The Sims: Make a Hero	1/04	The first Sim expansion plays like a charm	★★★☆☆
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2004	11/03	A game that will please both hardcore golf-sim addicts and casual gamers	★★★☆☆

GAME	ISSUE	VERDICT	SCORE
Titan of Steel	1/04	An identical game with little to no new additions	★★☆☆☆
Tombs Raider: The Age of Darkness	1/03	Not in bed as the crowd—the work, yet it is	★★☆☆☆
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4	10/03	As long as you have a joystick, it's the most fun skater you can get on a skateboard without putting yourself in the hospital	★★☆☆☆
True 3.0	10/03	Best cruise-themed game of the year so far	★★☆☆☆
UFO: Aftermath	1/04	UFO Aftermath is a good game that doesn't have ridiculous work and one big patch larger to be avoided	★★☆☆☆
Uta	2/04	Some great tactics, some bad action, no shiny, job of senseless elements—made the overall online content can make it more compelling	★★☆☆☆



Utopia Heaven	4/04	A colorful and entertaining online builder that fall by all the plot	★★☆☆☆
Victory	3/04	Good game, but bugs	★★☆☆☆
War of the Ring	2/04	Good use of Middle-earth elements on a really mediocre RTS	★★☆☆☆
Warcraft III	1/04	A strangely pretty version of a classic strategy franchise	★★☆☆☆
Warrior Kings: Battles	10/03	Good game, but it's a warm-glass of milk when you really need a bit of your favorite poison	★★☆☆☆
Will Rock	10/03	To make a "harder" game: "We're not gonna take it!"	★★☆☆☆
World War II: Frontline Command	10/03	Bad interface, boring mission, and no realism. But the downsides are in 100	★★☆☆☆
X-2: The Threat	5/04	A much deeper yet less enjoyable version of Age of Empires	★★☆☆☆
X3	2/04	The Belgian report makes behind fun and beautiful, excitement and drama	★★☆☆☆
X-Plane 2.0	4/04	Lets would-be aircraft designers create a wide variety of usable vehicles	★★☆☆☆
Zero Hour	3/04	GGG better than it's ever been	★★☆☆☆

Aeruns

Big, Hilarious DVD sets



Curb Your Enthusiasm
Larry David's brilliant schtick is the best comedy series to hit the small screen in years.

The former producer of *Seinfeld* has an uncanny knack for creating humor out of the mundane, the profane, and the just plain insane. We can't get enough.



24
Have you ever tried to watch 24 in real time? It beats having to wait week after week

for the next episode. Plus, the amnesia in season one and the cougar in season two are just a tad more plausible when you have severe "marathon viewing" sleep deprivation.



Futurama Volume 3
Why do all the good things in life get canceled? From the mind of Matt

Greening, creator of *The Simpsons*, comes this sci-fi look at the future. The third season really hit its stride, with episodes that touch upon the enduring side of all the loud-mouthed, angry characters.



MTV's Celebrity Deathmatch

Game developers don't seem to realize: Dumb TV show equals dumb game. Claymation "celebrities" beating the crap out of each other? What's next, a videogame version of *The Surreal Life*?



Stargate: A Hatch

Every time we think of the *Stargate: A Hatch* TV show, we remember a bunch of repetitive driving, lame shootouts, and indestructible cars able to withstand hundreds of bullets. No, wait—that's the crappy game we're thinking of.

Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

DEVELOPER: Firaxis GEMRE: Turn-based Strategy FIRST PUBLISHED: 2009 RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 400, 128MB RAM, 2GB install RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 3.0GHz, 256MB RAM, broadband internet connection MULTIPLAYER: LAN, Internet, e-mail (2-6 players)

Civilization III: Conquests

Queen Tom versus El Bruce



El Bruce's Spanish conquistador will give him an early advantage on land, while Tom's Elizabethan sea dogs will eventually give him the upper hand at sea.

The Conquests expansion for Civilization III includes scenarios from various points in world history. We chose the Age of Discovery scenario for two reasons: 1) It offered a great balance of expansion, direct conflict, and diplomacy, and 2) we wouldn't have to deal with any long Japanese names.

In Age of Discovery, five European powers begin in the Old World in 1400. The map includes the Atlantic Ocean, the Americas, and the western coast of Africa. The goal is to establish cities near strategic resources, like gold in Central America, furs in North America, or gems in sub-Saharan Africa. Such cities can build plantations or mines that will periodically generate a treasure unit. By transporting the treasure back to an Old World capital, a player gets 200 gold and 1,000 victory points. The first player to collect 35,000 victory points wins. Tom will be England. Bruce will be Spain.

Tom: In this scenario, England can develop a powerful new unit called the Elizabethan sea dog. Every time a sea dog gets a kill, there's a 1 in 3 chance the victim will be enslaved instead of killed. As a seafaring nation, England's ships get a movement bonus, so my strategy will be to control the



The French miapacc Guebet, interfering with Tom's plans for an all-English Cuba.



Tom's English forces earn the respect of Native Americans by killing them for money.

seas. Which isn't very imaginative of me, since this is exactly what England did in real life. However, in pursuing my strategy, I intend to colonize the Caribbean, where the weather is nice and land empires are helpless without naval support. My initial destination is Cuba, since it's possible to reach tobacco, sugar, spices, and gold with a city at either end of the island.

Bruce: Spain's special unit is the conquistador, a combat unit that crosses rough terrain as easily as an explorer. However, if you've ever seen Werner Herzog's classic film *Agua: The Wrath of God*, you know it's risky to rely on some crazy guy building rafts on the Amazon to deliver the gold you need to beat Tom. Consequently, I'm going to hedge my bets and conquer Portugal. How tough can that be? It's Portugal! It's like going to Wisconsin.

Tom, 1496: I hoped to get either Portugal or France to declare war on El Bruce and keep him busy. Unfortunately, neither power is willing to enter a military alliance with me. What's

more, when I refused a Dutch attempt to coerce 27 gold from me, the belligerent tulip-growers declared war. The good news is that I landed my first pikemen on Cuba, and he started clearing out the natives and making the island safe for the genteel people of England. I've also landed an expeditionary force on North America to relieve native settlements of the money they're not using. This way, I can finance an 80 percent science budget to quickly develop better ships.

Bruce, 1498: Hispanola is founded somewhere in the region of French Guyana, although in this case, it's more like Spanish Guyana! Booyah! It may be the late 15th century, but the Spanish have a ton of street cred. They are also going to have a metric buttload of treasure, because Hispanola is founded right on a tobacco resource and adjacent to some gems. At the end of the game, I'll have my jewelers make me a fancy victory ring.

Tom, 1500: The French just built Quebec on Cuba. Bad news for me, since it means I have to share Cuba's riches, but good news for Canada.

Tom, 1502: In addition to the European powers, there are three Mesoamerican civilizations in this scenario. I just encountered the Mayans and gave them the technology of writing to ensure that future generations will enjoy the beauty of Mayan literature. Also, the ignorant swigges are willing to



An Elizabethan sea dog cruises the Caribbean.



Tom
Last month:
Tom "lost" at
StarChamber—if you can
call losing at a collectible-
card game "losing."



Bruce
Last month:
Bruce channeled his inner
12-year-old and whopped
Tom with cooler cards.



Who says teachers' pay sucks? Tom makes bucks educating Aztecs.



Tom blockades Gibraltar to keep Bruce bottled up in the Mediterranean.

empty their coffers in exchange for basic technology, making me 70 gold richer. Now to find and exploit—er, I mean educate—the Aztecs and Incas.

Bruce, 1503: I just completed my first wonder, the Sistine Chapel. Spain truly is the jewel of Catholicism. Now to focus my rapid military buildup on Portugal. I hope the Portuguese CIA is on the job, because it'd be here for the upcoming blitzkrieg to be a surprise.

Bruce, 1504: Brave forces of the Spanish Crown have liberated Oporto from the Portuguese oppressors. When Lisbon falls, I'll have two new bases and a powerful engine for economic and military growth with which to conquer all of South America. Unless, of course, I get bogged down with the Old World war. But what are the chances of that?

Tom, 1506: A passing caravel notes that El Bruce is eating up Portugal. No wonder the Portuguese were finally willing to join a military alliance. Let's give El Bruce a war on two fronts! To get France on board, I empty my treasury of 140 hard-earned gold, which I guff by teaching heathen civilizations about stuff such as writing and money.

Tom, 1509: I empty my coffers again to get a sugar plantation quickly built in Havana. Since it looks like there's no one else in this area except France's errant Quebec, I'm going to go ahead and found a city in the Gulf of Mexico in the interest of geographical reciprocity. I call it Corpus Christi, which I believe is Spanish for "spring break" to distract Bruce from economic develop-

ment. I set a trebuchet and pikeman ashore near his Hispaniola colony.

Bruce, 1510: The problem with Tom is that he's never satisfied. With all the undeclared territory just waiting for subdivision development and chain restaurants, he has to land troops near me. Can't he see the dotted blue line around my city? Hey, Chuck, that means it's mine. In a fit of pique, I attack Tom's pikeman with another pikeman. Imagine my surprise when it succeeds and I suddenly capture a brand-new trebuchet.

Tom, 1513: There are no colonies along the tobacco-rich East Coast, so I might as well set up a city. I call it Virginia and spend gold to quickly build a tobacco plantation. It looks like the English will be trafficking mainly in sugar and tobacco. We will be sipping candy and smoking our way to victory, laying the foundation for RJ Reynolds and Nestlé.

Bruce, 1516: I've been at war with the cheese lovers for 10 turns now, and it's really hurting my New World expansion.

Fortunately, my city of Veracruz is in the middle of some rich gold deposits in the Amazon basin. Normally, I'd fund temple construction to expand my culture to nearby resources, but my treasury is doing all it can just to keep guns trained on the French.

Bruce, 1518: It cost me 80 gold, but I was able to pay off France. Beautiful peace—I can start building some needed European improvements, like banks, cathedrals, and whatnot. However, this means that I'm going to fall even further behind Tom in the naval arena. Still, the rapid rate of treasure production by gold and gem mines should be enough to offset the slower pace of whatever soft goods Tom's designer leather shops are stocking this season.

Tom, 1519: Peace on our time? I don't think so. Get back to the fighting. To convince you, here's all the gold I got teaching the godless Aztecs about monotheism.

Bruce, 1520: I can finally build frigates, but Tom's already had them for several years. I'm

never going to be able to challenge him for control of the sea. Spain is supposed to compensate for this by being powerful on land, but unfortunately that power is concentrated a few miles from Madrid, fighting my fellow Europeans. By now I should have had an army led by conquistadors tasting the spoils of Chichen Itza!

Tom, 1523: I'm always happy to help my Portuguese neighbors, so my frigates are shelling El Bruce's knights as they lay siege to Lisbon. An explorer scouting Spanish colonies in South America found the Incas, who paid me to teach them storytelling. While he was counting his money, my explorer found three Spanish workers hacking away at the jungle. I've got a knight posted just outside their viewing range, ready to capture them next turn and carry them to a waiting caravel, which will spirit them away to their new homes in the English Caribbean.

Bruce, 1524: Tom just stole three workers that I desperately needed. Then he got overconfident and tried to seize Santo Domingo. Since I'd stocked up on pikemen, Tom wasted his military in a futile attempt to unlawfully seize Spanish territory.

Tom, 1529: In a battle off the Canary Islands, one of my sea dogs attacked a pair of Spanish caravels. Although the sea dog was sunk by the second caravel, the battle triggered a golden age for England and Queen Tom (I forgot to change the gender of England's leader in the Setup screen). I will enjoy improved commerce and production until the year 1550.

Tom, 1530: England begins the scenario as a Catholic monarchy (I'd flirted with going Protestant, but the tightwad Dutch wouldn't trade me the tech). The biggest problem with a Catholic monarchy is its rampant corruption. I'm countering this by building a colonial capital in Miami. It's the perfect place for the enterprising monarch who doesn't want to worry about populists.



Tom uses Amarillo to secure a land route for gold from the Rocky Mountains.

It may be the late 15th century, but the Spanish have a ton of street cred.



Q Havana and Virginia supply Tom with a steady supply of candy and cigars to keep the English hale and healthy.

nonsense like elections

Bruce, 1533: As my colonists toil in heroic circumstances half a world away to claim the bounty of the New World for the Spanish Crown, the only treasures I've been able to deliver have been from the spice fields of Barcelona. A spice resource respawning just outside the city and is now my only reliable treasure supply. Pretty pathetic.

Tom, 1532: Havana is cranking out the spirit, sugar, and tobacco. I also have a city with a gold mine on Haiti. Or is that the Dominican Republic? Whatever. It's called Queen Tom's Isla now.

Bruce, 1539: Tom was apparently so sure he couldn't best me by himself that he had to pay three imaginary computer friends to help him out. I have no chance of winning this scenario fighting France, Portugal, the Netherlands, and whatever cheat code Tom is using. I can't even try to pay for peace because the computer players keep refusing to receive my envoys. Even if they did, I wouldn't have any money to offer, because I'm too busy paying upkeep on the giant army I need to fight all of them off.

Bruce, 1543: I have a pile of treasures in Hispanola waiting to be transported to Madrid and a fleet of ships in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, Tom is blockading me at Gibraltar. I bust out frigates and a corack, to be joined by more frigates from Seville once they hit the Atlantic.

Tom, 1544: Bruce's fleet managed to disappear after outrunning my sea dog. They either put in at the Canary Islands or struck out straight across the rougher waters of the Atlantic. I fan out to search for him.



Q The Spanish treasure fleet sails into the teeth of the allied blockade.



Q Everybody hates Bruce.

Tom, 1545: Spaniards, hol Four Spanish frigates escort a corack out of the Canary Islands. I've got three sea dogs and two men-of-war poised to strike. I sink two frigates, capture two more, and damage the corack (which is sunk by someone else's privateer nest turn). That'll teach you to try to run my blockade, Geryk. However, just to be sure he doesn't try it again, I'm going to take over the Canary Islands and deprive Spain of any mid-Atlantic shelter.

Tom, 1547: After a galleon puts into Plymouth and its cargo of treasure marches to London, I now have 15,000 victory points to Bruce's 6,000. England's most productive city is Virginia, thanks to the bonus from all of the tobacco around it. I built Denver to mine gold from the Rocky Mountains, and a colonist just founded Amarillo to secure a route for that gold through Aztec country. The sun might set on this British Empire, but only for a few hours.

Bruce, 1548: It isn't truly a beating until the primitive nations start kicking your ass. Encouraged by the nightly news broadcasts from Spain about the war, the Mayans decide this would be a good time to attack the workers around Santo Domingo. I easily hold them off, and even capture two workers, but please—the Mayans?

Tom, 1550: I sink another fleet of five Spanish ships trying to run my blockade. Since I seem to have El Bruce's navy nicely bottled up, I think I'll let him keep the Canary Islands. Instead, my new army will join the donkeybrock on the Iberian peninsula, where the Portuguese and French are roaming the Spanish countryside. I put troops on the northern coast and get to pillaging.

Bruce, 1551: Not content with messing up two other continents with his mad imperialistic ventures, Tom has decided to terrorize the poor people of Spain by tearing up their roads and bombarding their farms. We'll see who ends up laughing when Firaas releases the Hague Convention edict on pack.

Bruce, 1554: I get a great military leader

from a battle outside Barcelona. Christopher Columbus decides to show up half a century after his real-life counterpart led the groundwork for a bank holiday and camp protesters. If my military weren't reduced to fashioning weapons and armor out of stone knives and bearskins—thanks to the French and English cutting off my supply of iron and saltpeter—Columbus could form an army and drive the invaders off the Iberian peninsula. Sadly, the best he can hope for is to plead not to get his ass kicked.

Tom, 1557: My cannons knocked down the walls of Spain's capital, Madrid. However, I don't want Bruce to lose his capital for fear that it might be relocated to one of his colonies. This would allow him to simply waltz treasure over land and rack up victory points. To make sure France doesn't take over Madrid, my English troops surround the city to establish the Madrid enclave. This will have the added effect of making it difficult for El Bruce to get any treasure in

Bruce, 1558: I've finally built up a fleet in the New World, including a galleon to carry treasure to Madrid. Tom lost a sea dog and two men-of-war attacking the fleet off the coast of my colonies. Now if I can just melt it into Seville.

Bruce, 1559: With the help of French and Portuguese ships, Tom has completely blockaded Seville. I'm going to try to punch through Gibraltar to put in at Barcelona.

Tom, 1560: El Bruce's Spanish armada is stalled at the mouth of Gibraltar thanks to the valiant effort of an Elizabethan sea dog. My warships sink three Spanish men-of-war, and the sea dog captures a galleon with five treasures on board.

Tom, 1562: Ah, the irony! I sail the captured Spanish galleon directly into London. The gems from El Bruce's South American colonies seem just enough victory points to put me over the top. England wins with 37,618 points to Spain's 10,412 points. Long live the, err, Queen!

It isn't truly a beating until the primitive nations start kicking your ass.



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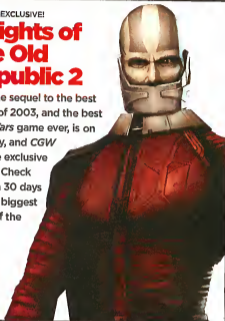


Coming Next Month... **COMPUTER GAMING WORLD**

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

Knights of the Old Republic 2

Yep, the sequel to the best game of 2003, and the best *Star Wars* game ever, is on the way, and **CGW** has the exclusive scoop. Check back in 30 days for the biggest story of the year!



JUNE 2004 ON SALE MAY 4

AD INDEX

ACTIVISION True Crime PC	25	Microsoft Rise of Nations Expansion	53
Alienware Corp Alienware High Performance Systems	10-13	Nc Soft Corp. City of Heroes	55-57
City Software Events/Insight Broad	63	Nc Soft Corp. Lineage II	36-4
Creative Labs Audigy 2 ZS	120	Newegg.com Newegg.com	50-51
Cyberpower Systems PC	103, 105	Nvidia Per Cry	16-17
Dell Computer Corp. Dell Home Systems	4-5	TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE SOFTWARE Nehalem	65
Eidos Interactive, Inc. Nitren: Contracts	3-3	TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE SOFTWARE Syberia II	31
Electronic Arts Battlefield Vietnam	23-21	TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE SOFTWARE Syberia II (Demo)	demo disk
Electronic Entertainment Expo E3 2004	65	The Guildhall at SHU Game Design Degree Program	15
Genially Genially	37	Ubisoft Entertainment Per Cry	6-7
Google, Inc. Toolbar/Download (demo)	demo disk	Vicious PC Vicious PC	83
IluyPower IluyPower Computer	97, 98	Wizards of the Coast Magic Online City	11
Intel Corp. Centrino	49		

No Peripheral Vision

PC games are stuck in a mouse trap

Right now I am this-close to spending \$199 to play an Xbox game. What is stopping me? Well, aside from a little thing called "dignity," there's the matter of my wife and the Law Offices of Jacoby & Meyers. Without access to my spouse and the early less effeminate Tony Randall stunt double that is her mother, how would I know how truly awful cooking could be? Have you ever had broccoli served as a fluid? Not as soup, but boiled to the point where its cellular structure has broken down so thoroughly that it runs. Well I have, and let me tell you, it's the kind of thing that makes a soylent green and carb chip cookie as appealing as licking honey off a supermodel. Thanks to them, I am the early less masculine Juko Child every day of the week, but I digress...

Why would I even want to buy *Steel Battalion*? After all, I've played plenty of the *MechWarrior* games from which it gleefully cribbs. I've piloted so many giant robots that when the inevitable war between man and machine comes, I'm good to go (right after our pointless superhero and sweaty rave). There's one reason and one reason only: the controller. Have you seen this thing? It's a 40-button monstrosity with foot pedals and lights and an ejection button with the little plastic flip-up shield, and it comes in at least three separate pieces that have to be assembled. This is not a game—it's a friggin' craft project! The last time I would have invested this much effort into creating something would have been in college, and that only involved a Foster's car, a gas mask, and some duct tape. Everything about this controller says, "Brother, this is serious business." OK, everything about this controller also says, "Brother, you are some kind of loser," but who cares? It's cool in that nerdy, let's-play-dress-up, "I'll save you, Leia!" kind of way, and when was the last time any PC game made that much effort on your behalf?

When I first played *MechWarrior*, it was with a joystick—a joystick with an eight-



It's cool in that nerdy, let's-play-dress-up, "I'll save you, Leia!" kind of way.

way hat switch and plenty of buttons, and if you were really serious, you had eight-ten pedals so you had to take every step in the game as well. You played from a cockpit view because, dammit, that's what piloting an actual, real-life mech is like! But now? Now mech games are played with a dinky-ass mouse that doesn't even come near conveying the sense of piloting a massive steel beast that a violently rumbling force-feedback joystick did. Can you even really play mech games with a joystick anymore? I know that the last time I tried to use my Microsoft SideWinder 2 stick in a game, my Windows XP system refused even to acknowledge it. Oh, I updated drivers and everything, but to no avail. My friends, when even the *Evil Empire* has turned its back on its own products, you know it's over.

There was a time when PC-gaming geeks had all the cool and allegedly cool devices. Granted, plenty of these were horribly misguided—did you ever try playing a shooter with those 3D glasses that tracked head movement? One right turn in a game and God slapped the "Go" button on the egg timer, counting down the scant minutes

you were away from a lifetime spent in character's warring rooms. Still, we were once subject to a relentless barrage of head helmets and power gloves—but those days are long gone. At least for us PC gamers.

What are console gamers playing with while we pilot our *Freelancer* starships with the same mouse we use for filing our TPS reports in Excel at work? They're firing light-guns, stomping around on dance pads, slapping away things with their EyeTos, singing karaoke, shaking specially designed maracas, and maddy punching buttons on a 40-button beast of a controller that I'd buy in a second if my home office didn't look like the Unabomber's shack without the benefit of trained housekeeping squirrels named Minka and Danny. We can't take games as "interactive entertainment" until the Earth plummets into the sun (so the upside is that we only two more weeks of touting to do), but as long as PC games are content with drawing you further into the experience by adding lowens as a playable civ in the latest cookie-cutter RTS without making those lowans animated holograms that dance on your head and shove your dog, they aren't doing anything special to make their fantasy fun any longer.

PC-gaming elitists can denigrate console gimmicks as little more than, well, gimmicks, but so what? Does that custom paint job and clear side panel on your PC make it run any better, wise guy? It's all toy talk, pure and simple, and there's nothing wrong with that. If we're the sort of stuffed willing to build our PCs inside ducted raccoons and fashion speakers out of Visible Man models, aren't we the kind of colossal misfits who would happily put aside our leather-wrapped cordless optical mouse in order to wear a limited-edition superhero costume to play a game? Damn straight. Now for God's sake, will someone please make that game? **Robb Coffey** robert_coffey@z.earthlink.com



when's the last time
mail got you this excited?

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