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WHAT IS THE MATRIX ONLINE?

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ALSO INSIDE:

102 FREE GAMES

OUR ANNUAL GUIDE TO THE BEST
FREE GAMES ON THE WEB



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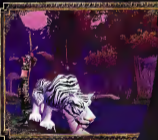
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Electronic Gaming Monthly

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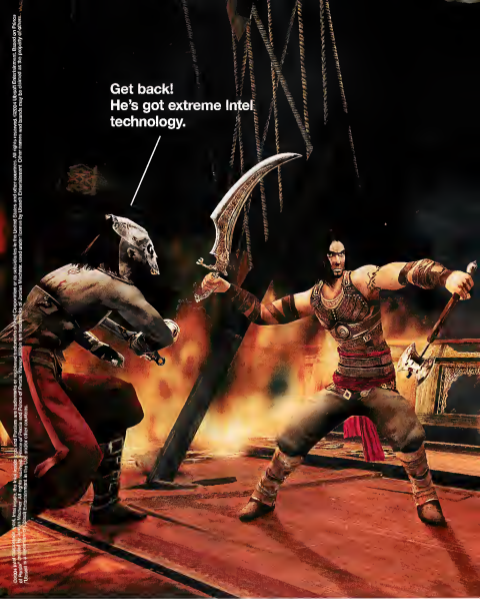
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You knew the government was using games to train troops, but to train insurgents in bloodless revolution? How about a first-person shooter with no shooting? We saw lots of interesting stuff on display at the Serious Games Summit. Want to know what's new with *Xfire*? And there was also a competition where people from all over the world gathered in San Francisco for bragging rights—and big bucks! You'll see it all (and more) in this month's Radar.

48 Previews

Squeeze back into your sneaking outfit and night-vision goggles, it's time for another stealth mission with **Splinter Cell Chaos Theory**. We also got late-breaking news and screens from the **Sims 2** expansion, as well as a look at Atari's D&D strategy game, **Dragonshard**.

COVER STORY

102 FREE GAMES

Last holiday season, we gave the gift that kept on giving: a comprehensive list of the 101 coolest free games available on the Web. Of course, this year we've got to outdo ourselves by finding even more great freebies on the Web (102—get it?!?!). So flip ahead to see what we found. Then, go online and grab 'em all for yourself.

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It's official—there are more WWII games than living WWII veterans. And we've got 'em all: **D-Day**, **Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault**, **Pacific Fighters**, **Battles in Normandy**. While we wait for developers to branch out into something original, check out this month's crop of Vietnam games, **Men of Valor** and **Conflict: Vietnam**.

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THE MATRIX

The movie trilogy is over, but the story lives on, as the Wachowskis take their mind- (and spoon-) bending epic online. It's ambitious, it's a bit crazy, and it may defy expectations. Just like the movies.





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THIS MONTH ON IUP.COM

CGW.IUP.COM

What's new on IUP you ask? Just the usual junk metal contest and winners. Also updated is the tips section, including Doom 3 keyboard



combinations and level cheats for Far Cry. After you're done cruising through those and some select parts of the magazine, drop on by the message boards, or join a club. Our personal favorite is still the Robert Coffey fan club, aka the Java Addicts.

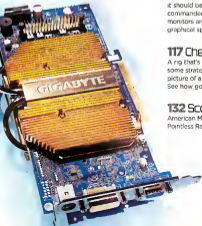
BECKERS21.IUP.COM


Between creating the CD and other weird jobs she's been saddled with, Rebecca claimed not to have five minutes to create a membership, but we finally gave her the ultimatum. Now, with only one friend invite, she's feeling a tad lonely, so go cheer her up with a comment or two.



BOARDS.IUP.COM

Ryan is our hero. He seized the initiative and made a fan club that's really taken off. Way to go! So, beloved readers, ignore the dorky name and go and post all the random stuff you wish at the "CGW Fans Unite" board. And hey, maybe if you throw us some good sound bites, we'll publish them.



A man with dark hair, wearing a white shirt with a black and red logo on the sleeve, is shown in profile from the chest up. He is holding a clear glass with a lime wedge in it. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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purged the earth
of evil. I fear only
sunlight and girls.”**

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Taking the Red Pill

Or, How I Learned to Stop Hating *The Matrix*



Like many of the dorky fanboy nerds who waste their time on planet Earth obsessing over such trivialities as computer games, comic books, and science-fiction and fantasy books, I was enamored with the first *Matrix* movie. What's not to like? It's got a stoned mind-trip of a story line, awesome fight sequences, cool special effects, and Carrie-Anne Moss in shiny black leather. Five years later, it still holds up.

The sequels? Well, that's another story. My only really fond memory of *The Matrix Reloaded*, which I saw the night it opened, was the moment right as the lights went out, when a female friend of mine—a prominent executive in the game industry—emitted perhaps the loudest burp I have ever heard, causing my hair to actually move due to the sheer sonic force of it and making the entire theater erupt in laughter. After that, it was all downhill, what with the excruciating rave sequence, the Architect, the Merovingian, and other incomprehensible oddities. I never even bothered to see the third movie.

So why is *The Matrix Online* on the cover of our magazine? Because of its potential. Because this is a universe that absolutely could and should work online. Because the talent behind this game—which includes Monolith Productions (No One Lives Forever, Iron 20), comic book author Paul Chadwick (who illustrated this month's *CGW* cover), and the Wachowski brothers themselves—is tremendous. And because the central conceit—to continue the official story line of the movies in an online game—is simply unprecedented.

Of course, there's no way to know whether *The Matrix Online* will ultimately rule or blow. But it's an ambitious, cool project from ambitious, cool people—and that's what cool stories are all about. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a spoon here that I'm trying to bend...

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JUSTIN LEVINE

Just because he's called Justin is not meant to mean that Justin is padding the list name. No, the way the dude acts around here keep missing their deadline, quite a few coded skills he coming up in the old snits future. Jay!



ROBERT GREER

Robert Greer is not a pun, or really the most punniest. If he just gave him a hug, would he still, happy camper? So many questions, and he only can: with his answer it...Sweet!



DAMIAN SLAVOV

Even so he be afraid of the technology name that he really is the...greatest number of words around the office. Damn, it would suck, now down to his music straight into his hand. With the sound comes out, we don't even know.



BRIAN SCOTT

Though he may look like the basket ball child of John Decker and Ben Kaitis, write your Scott leads the band at a winter. Got it real winter. Just, like, a DJ type with a...By good in his rock band.



MICHAEL JENNINGS

Michael Jennings is the back of the month anniversary. Nobody call it...greatest number of words around the office. Damn, it would suck, now down to his music straight into his hand. With the sound comes out, we don't even know.



MELISSA PARRIS

On a scale of 1 to 10, I'm 10 years old, which just says to show you it's not easy to know your way. By Me, we have...greatest number of words around the office. Damn, it would suck, now down to his music straight into his hand. With the sound comes out, we don't even know.

WE CAPTURED THE SPIRIT,
BUT DIDN'T TRY TO TAME IT.



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There is a "Me" in "Team"

In the days before fragboxes, I remember lugging my PC and big-assed 21-inch monitor over to a friend's house at 10 a.m. on a Saturday. Here, I found my bud Lee and 12 or so of our like-minded friends setting up an on-the-fly LAN and a game server loaded with every LAN/Life map and mod we could find. By noon, everyone is in place and set up. Some of us have opened up our home-built rigs and are showing off the latest game. The tech speak is thick but hey, this is what it is all about. Lunch is a memory as we check the supply of beer and sodas. The living room/dining room/family room area is packed with humming power waiting to be unleashed. The curtains are drawn, the phones unplugged. The first map is loading, and the mayhem is about to begin.

For the next eight to 12 hours, the sound of explosions and gunfire will fill this house along with whoops of triumph and the ever-present caustic remark from the latest honored dead. That feeling of ultimate cool is present as you nestle that 30-06 against your shoulder, scope-zoom that SOB who crossbow-sniped you five minutes ago, and put a round into his head as you yell out, "One shot, one KILLUP!" The four-letter words fly faster than the rockets. Deathmatch and teamplay for hours upon hours. Laughing and cursing till we are spent.

I will have these gaming memories with me till the day I die. I have found nothing like it on online gaming and never will. The camaraderie just isn't there. The immediacy just isn't there. The out and out FUN just isn't there. October's Scorched Earth was

100 percent right. Keep it real, have a LAN party, and kick some serious butt in REAL real time.

Eric

Awww, Eric! You make us feel like kids again! Thanks!

Irony Is So Ironic!

I noticed in your response to uberCTFan in your December 2004 letters column that you mentioned "Penny Arcade" was getting "too R-rated for a magazine like CGW." The facing page then contained a very provocative advertisement for *Playboy: The Mansion*. There was also the

Nobody Wins With Sex and Violence

The two *Playboy* ads in your last issue brought a few things to my mind. Are developers finally going to the lowest common denominator and combining porn and gaming? Have they really sunk that low? Of course, it's *Playboy*, so there's a lot more there than just porn. But you need to keep these things separate. When I'm gaming, sex needs to be the furthest thing from my mind, otherwise I lose concentration. Case in point: DON'T watch a Victoria's Secret fashion show while playing *Counter-Strike*. I lost so many times that eventually my teammates fragged me themselves. So please, for the sake of gaming, keep these two things separate.

Justin Yann

We couldn't agree more, Justin. In fact, we'd suggest that the inverse is true as well. We've lost count of how many sexual encounters we've had spoiled by engaging in congress during lamb slaughters. Sex and violence, violence and sex—nobody wins. Except the guy skinning the lambs. He does OK for himself.



ILLUSTRATION BY ARTIST JAYNE COOK

inside flap of the same issue that contained another extremely risqué ad for the new *Lessee: Sex Larry*. If those two ads aren't R-rated material or close enough to it, even with today's looser standards, I don't know what is. So, R-rated editorial content is OK, but R-rated advertisements are OK? I signed up to this magazine for games, not the next generation of interactive porn.

Ben

Hello, CGW! Longtime reader, first time writer. Anyway, I just had to comment on something I found in your December issue. In the letters section, you respond to uberCTFan's concerns about the missing "Penny Arcade" with this: "We like the strip, too, but it was getting too R-rated for a magazine like CGW..." However, I couldn't help but notice the irony in the fact that not six inches from these very words is a full-page ad for *Playboy: The*

Mansion featuring a topless model with "PLAYBOY" strategically placed across her chest. While I found this hilarious, I thought you might want to inform your peon in charge of ad placement to be more careful in the future.

Obsexperence

We've said it before, we'll say it again: We have no control over the ads in the magazine; we just do all the typing that breaks them up. Be that as it may, while these products are indeed racy, the ads for them are suitable for a mainstream publication such as *CGW*, *Field & Stream*, or *Hustler*.

Doom and Oblivion!

December's Scorched Earth was right on the nail! I work at a videogame store and every month I look forward to reading Robert's two cents—I sometimes even ☐



Mall Bites

Tom vs. Bruce is one of the most refreshing pieces of gaming journalism to come along in a long time.

—Dennis

Does anyone else think it's funny that there's a *World of Warcraft* ad right in the middle of the EQ2 preview in the latest issue?

—Tud from Accounting on TUPRoom

I wish all the vicious, buying *Doom 3* haters out there would just shut up and actually play the game.

—Chris Wittig

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skip right to it if no articles catch my attention. Now, I'm not going to overdo it here and go on and on about how much of a genius he might be. I'm sure lots of people will silently thank me for that. I'm just going to keep it short, sweet, and simple, 'cause that's the kinda guy I am, and that's what I like. Well maybe not "that" short...

The bottom line, Robert. KEEP RANTING, don't lose the fire, get pissed at EVERYTHING! You're doing one hell of a job of keeping the silent gaming community laughing their heads off at all the spoiled little bitches bickering on their message boards. We need you writing this column because it helps calm us down after looking at all the shiny new games coming our way. Now to make my way over to Kinko's—got to photocopy your article so I can hand it out as people come into my store.

That way, after witnessing your rage, mine won't look as bad.

Cephello

Robert Coffey is god. Scorched Earth in Issue 245 exploded my head all over the place. Thank you for finally speaking up and putting those idiots who put down popular games just because it seems cool to do so in their place. I've been writing for someone to do that for years. Robert Coffey is good. Robert Coffey is just. Long live Robert Coffey.

Mike Mazeloski



You Are What You Eat

I am a longtime fan, having read your fine publication ever since my sixth grade teacher brought in copies so people could read something during homeroom, unwittingly causing untold emotional damage to me and my fellow classmates. Anyway, as I was saying, I am a longtime reader, so I find it strange that the first time I write to you is on the subject of game meat. In your response to what is apparently a spam message, you casually dismissed the food as weird. While it is not the most...conventional...food out there, zebra, ostrich, gembok, and kudu all make very good steaks. On a recent camping trip to Namibia (a nation in southern Africa), we ate a lot of ostrich, and if through some freak occurrence you

are ever heading through Windhoek (the capital city of Namibia), you must stop by Joe's Bear House, which has some of the best food you will ever eat, including zebra steaks, which taste a lot like normal steaks, just a whole lot better. By the way, blesbok is a lightly purple-colored antelope (remember, wikipedia.org is your friend).

Anyway, keep up the good work.

Schuyler

We've said it before and we'll say it again: If it ain't McDonald's hamburger meat...it ain't meat.

Two Dweebs Enter...

I was reading through a recent edition of CGW and noticed something about an intern in the letters section. I would take on the Id team and your current intern for a chance to be an intern for your magazine. PLEASE let me know what I would have to do for a chance to do so, I've spent most of my adult life in front of the computer (I'm 23, but only because they forced me to be), and I will be receiving a degree in communications and sociology from Bowling Green State University. If you could forward this to the appropriate people or let me know who I need to contact, I would be forever in your debt.

Vincent Staropoli

You got it, Vincent! But are you man enough to survive a thunderdome match with Rebecca? Are you? ARE YOU?!!!!



Get a problem? Get a rent? Maybe even something nice to say? We want to hear it. Write us at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com and you're guaranteed a place in heaven.

Dept. of Corrections

We emailed our December 2004 Legitech M9000 Laser Mouse review when we lamented the lack of a ability to get the middle mouse button working in games. There is such a thing—however, it is so totally hidden in the program and so counterintuitive that we feel many users will have the same difficulty resetting the button that we did. Our four-star rating of this device remains unchanged.

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Mail Bites

You guys should really respect console games more than you do.

—Lynell Hilgel

I love Jeff Green and would have his baby, except I'm too old for him, and, oh yeah, I'm a guy.

—Robert Ingber



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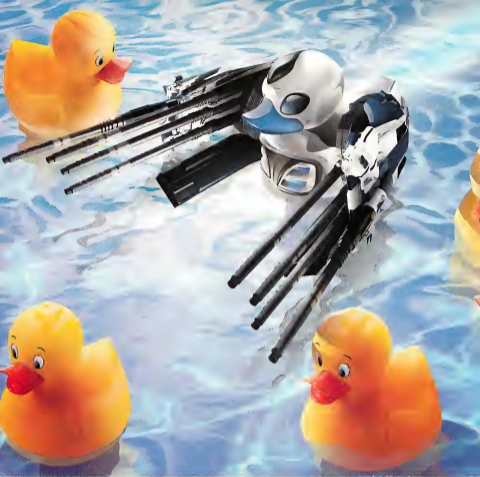
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■ SIMULATION NATION

Uncle Sam Gets Serious

GAMES ARE GRADUATING—AND MILITARY
SIMULATIONS ARE JUST THE START



Wire
 Here's how to get the most out of a wire. We made a list with a few more services.
38



Shoot!
 The world's best shooters are taking the world by storm.
40



They're Crafty
 The world's best hackers are taking the world by storm. We made a list with a few more services.
42



Full Spectrum
 Leader trains platoon commanders.

Hundreds of people in conservative suits mill around a musty convention hall in Washington, D.C. They're discussing the important games they're making—none of which you'll see in a store. Here at the Serious Games Summit, the hot topic of discussion is the future of gaming beyond combat training, and how it may well reach into social engineering and outright revolution. In other words, this is not the show floor at E3.

Even Washington Changes

While speaking at the conference, Douglas Whitley, the CEO of developer BreakAway, noted that seven years ago, his company was kicked out of meetings with government officials because the word "game" was then in the company's name. One general even said, "I don't want any software in my project." So BreakAway removed the offending word. But as the ink was drying on the paperwork, government entities began approaching BreakAway with training contracts specifically because of the company's gaming experience.

Washington, despite its reputed conservatism, is changing. Games are no longer seen just as children's playthings or targets for moral crusades. They are increasingly considered effective ways to train people and implement policy.

In fact, there is mounting evidence that gaming can be far more effective than more traditional training methods. A recent study at Iowa State University found that doctors who played videogames before performing surgery reduced their "oops factor" by 37 percent and performed their tasks faster. However, scholars agree that more research needs to be done, and data is still limited. Such studies are "difficult to do, and

results are often ugly," according to Dr. Matthew Lewis, a RAND researcher.

Not Just a Recruiting Tool

Though games like America's Army and Full Spectrum Warrior opened the door, the government gaming effort goes beyond combat training and recruiting. The Army is also making serious attempts to find noncombat uses for gaming, including cultural sensitivity training.

Ironically, two cultural training projects presented at the conference use engines originally designed for shooters. Tactical Language Learning System, from a group based out of USC, uses the Unreal engine, while Virtual Environment Cultural Training for Operational/Readiness from Chir-Systems uses the LithTech engine (NOLF, TRON). Both games are third-person shooters without guns, but instead of rocket launchers, gestures such as respectful bows are the games' weapons.

The games teach the player expressions of respect and areas of cultural sensitivity for certain Muslim cultures. TLLS even uses a speech-recognition system to teach the speaker key Arabic phrases. The designers hope that by using videogames they can engage "the videogame genera-



The VICTOR training system hopes to prevent cultural faux pas.

tion" that makes up the bulk of U.S. forces currently deployed abroad. Though both games focus on the Muslim world, the eventual goal is a plug-and-play model with a library of mods that will allow the Army to teach soldiers about any culture before they experience it in person.

An Army of Peaceniks

Nongovernmental organizations are also getting in the game. The most interesting presentation at the conference was about BreakAway's A Force More Powerful, a project commissioned by the International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. Possibly a future America's Army for nonviolent struggles and is designed to train activists in the planning and tactics needed to bring about political change. Played out as a **D**

There is mounting evidence that gaming can be far more effective than more traditional training methods.

turn-based strategy game. AFMP has a flexible engine that can model any regime in the world, and scenario goals range from stopping an unpopular war to freeing an imprisoned activist. The developers hope it can teach activists about the elements necessary for a successful nonviolent struggle.

"The client came to us partly out of frustration with activists who don't know the difference between strategy and tactics, with the consequence that planning meetings frequently degenerate and yield no consensus," notes designer Amanda Gupta. Once completed, AFMP will be freely distributed. Due to its digital nature, members of the ICNC believe that it can be smuggled into nations with repressive regimes, where cadres of activists can be trained to work more effectively toward their goals.

Despite the nonviolent theme, AFMP is neither completely idealistic nor entirely pacifistic. The designers realize that violence may result from any struggle. Still, they

maintain that nonviolence is the most effective way to put pressure on regimes to get them to do what you want. Distribution of AFMP could play a part in testing that belief in the real world.

Wisdom from Chaos

Most of the Serious Games Summit's emphasis was on actual projects, but many participants were looking toward more ambitious goals.

"I think [gaming's] greatest potential for government lies in the evolution of [MMO] games, and...using such games to study emerging behavior and bring more collective 'smarts' to bear on the hard problems facing society, both domestically and globally," comments David Reeski, director of the Foresight and Governance Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center. Games, he believes, can be used for anything from teaching leaders how to manage



AFMP is like Republic: The Revolution—but hopefully fun.

the chaos of national emergencies to finding solutions to the nation's budget deficit.

If he is correct, games may eventually become a tool for policy planning in high positions of power, rather than just a method of recruiting Army grunts. So the next time someone complains about your *City of Heroes* obsession, just tell him that you're thinking of America's future. **DI LUO**

THE GAMERS HAPSTER

Caught in the Xfire

Gaming's instant messenger goes live



Finding a buddy to play games with online is no easy feat. That's why the concept behind Xfire is easy to get: Create an instant messenger for gamers. Since Xfire's early beta release last year, both the scope of the service and the number of users has grown.

"We've now got close to 600,000 users," crows Xfire CEO Mike Cassidy. The quick growth is in no small part due to what the free service currently offers. First, there's the communication aspect of AIM. You can see all the games you and your friends have in common and then link up to chat and play online. Even midgame, you can hit Scroll Lock-X, and the Xfire chat window will pop up in most games. There's also the Friendster-like linking of you and friends of friends. But the newest, most intriguing part of the service is file sharing.

Six degrees of gaming

With the release of Xfire version 1.0 comes a new way to distribute games. Xfire's BitTorrent-style peer-to-peer network will be all about sharing demos, video clips, patches, and even mods. These files will initially be seeded to Xfire's servers. As more

people download the programs, more computers will share the server load, so you'll be able to grab any program you need in a flash. "We just want to make everything easier for gamers—easier to find each other, and now easier to get all the files they really want," says Cassidy.

Since the system is so new, there are only a few things to download right now, but Cassidy already has big plans for the future. Xfire will distribute monthly game updates through a premium service. "Instead of publishers making one expansion a year and selling it for \$30, why not regularly release new content?" he asks. Cassidy has already confirmed that he is in talks with Activision, Electronic Arts, and Ubisoft about providing paid content for major franchises such as the *Rainbow Six* and *Battlefield* series. This interesting information comes hot on the heels of news that Valve's Steam service will operate in a similar fashion. "At this point, publishers are looking to explore every avenue to sell expansions and games with minimal overhead," says one industry analyst. "[Game publishers] would be dumb not to." While there are no details at press time, expect some major updates to the Xfire service in the coming year. **DERREN GLEDSTONE**



NEWS
FEED

Why buy expansions when you can buy well-done minigames? BlowWare just opened an online store that sells small adventure modules. Average price: \$5 a module. Check out <http://store.blowware.com> for the games. **37**

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■ GOT GAME?

Shots Heard 'round the World

The biggest gaming tournament in the world comes Stateside, and—surprise!—people actually show up

Urtual or not, staring down the barrel of a gun isn't fun. That's especially true when cash is on the line. At the recent World Cyber Games in San Francisco—the first time the event has been held outside of Korea—champion gamers from around the globe competed for world titles, international bragging rights, and hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash prizes. Dave Geffon of Team 3D, the Counter-Strike world champion, says of the experience: "It was intense."

Coming to America

It's now fairly common knowledge that Koreans love to watch one another play PC games. In Korea, a junk around the prime-time television spectrum will reveal numerous gaming tournaments broadcast on multiple networks. A regular "night out" for 2D- and 3D-somethings in Seoul involves nothing more than a trip to a cyber café and several hours of first-person shooting or real-time strategizing—pick your poison. It's no surprise, then, that competitive gaming is alive and well in Korea and has been for several years. With full sponsorship from Korean megacorporation Samsung, the World Cyber Games has become huge.

Big money, big prizes. I love it!

What's significantly more surprising is just how big competitors are getting around the world: The World Cyber Games in San Francisco brought together 700 champion gamers from 64 countries to compete including national finals. The WCG paid out an estimated \$2.5 million in prize money during the 2004 calendar year, and more than \$400,000 at the San Francisco championships alone. Organizers say that roughly 30,000 people attended the WCG's tournament and outdoor festivities over the event's five days, and the total television viewership of the WCG per year was estimated to be a staggering 1.3 billion people (keep in mind that there are fewer than 6.5 billion people in the entire world.)

So who are the best gamers in the world? The Americans finished a solid third in the San Francisco finals, while South Korea earned gold and silver medals in StarCraft, solidifying second. And in something of an upset, the top medal winner in the world was the Netherlands, for winning in WarCraft III and Unreal Tournament 2004. Spoiler: people say it's strictly coincidence that the winning nation has legalized prostitution and marijuana. ■ **Evan Sherman**

5, 10, 15 YEARS AGO IN CGW

What we said when you were nursing



5 Years Ago, January 2000

On the cover Satan, Michael Jordan, and Gordon Freeman. Inside, we use the "m" word to describe Professional Bulwider Wolf, what

did you expect—after all, we were staring the ruin of civilization straight in the face as the infamous Y2K catastrophe bore down on us (hence our weird four-page Y2K CGW parody featuring a review of Paper Triangle Football). At least we had some great games like *Homeworld* and *FreeSpace 2*, both given 4.5 stars in this issue, to take our steadily declining minds off our troubles.



10 Years Ago, January 1995

What did we love a decade ago? How's about *Relentless*, the first and totally awesome TwinSonic game? It looked great, it sounded great, and it played great—all this on a 685/25 CPU with a whopping 4MB of RAM and a hard drive—gobbling 1MB of disk space. What else did we love? How's about *Doom II* and *The Fighters*, both of which got several pages of in-depth strategy coverage? We also loved *Panzer General*, which got 5 stars and was lauded for its great playability, style, and balance.



15 Years Ago, January 1990

Once upon a time, games were made by dedicated fans who had little to no marketing money left after investing in all those snazzy Ziploc bags they released their games in. So they posed for their own ads. *Buddy*. This issue featured countless wannabe ninjas and karate champs and lords and ladies and gunshoes decider out in makeshift costumes and photographed in their mom's basement. Check out the Woodwaker guy, Holy Moses, what's that all about? Next to the ads, the 16-color graphics of the games looked especially stellar.

NEWS FEED

▶▶ Can't wait for next month's 5, 10, 15 column? Neither can the guys at <http://cwgwint.net/gamers.org>, who are archiving our past 245 issues. ▶▶

THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

News and views from the Wild West



The Good Half-Life 2 ships! Finally! Really!

Yay! We no longer have to do a preview cover, an

exclusive "hands on" story, or reports about code thefts and, of course, the inevitable delays. By the time you read this, the game should be out, and unless you're in a cave, you should already own a copy. And if you do live in a cave, check to see if it's wired for broadband. Then you can just download the game off Steam.



The Bad Half-Life 2 ships!

Now that the game is finally out, what the hell else is there to look forward to?

The next riveting hex-based war game? Um, maybe not. Let's just say that the next year won't exactly going to be sparse when it comes to PC gaming, but 2004 will be a pretty tough year to follow.



The Ugly Too many games!

This has been a banner year for the PC. Half-Life 2 has finally shipped (gee, ya think

we mentioned that enough?), ditto for Doom 3, Rome: Total War, and a number of new classics. The problem: We now have a Himalayan mountain-sized pile of games to plow through well into next year. Hey, publishers, we keep saying this, but would it kill you to spread out releases throughout the year?

MOD SQUAD

StarCraft Recrafted

Devoted fans of Blizzard's classic remake the original

It's been six long years since the Zergs first invaded, and there's still no sequel to one of the greatest PC games of all time. When it comes to StarCraft, some people aren't content to wait any longer. Scott "Skizot Enigma" Deason and the Project Revolution team (<http://revolution.wc3campaigns.com/>) are undertaking one of the most ambitious mods on record: remaking StarCraft: Brood War entirely within WarCraft III.

Deason, who has been working on WarCraft III mods since the game was in beta, is amazed by how much work has gone into this. "I don't know of any other WarCraft III mod as complex as ours. This is a full multiplayer total conversion," says Deason, the project leader, "and while single-player campaigns may be created, they probably won't be in the first release." He was also quick to point out that "[the team] puts in just as many (if not more) hours as I do." Still, this isn't their full-time job—it's a labor of love. Every character, every structure, even the HUD is being faithfully re-created, but it's all in 3D. That, according to members of the team, is causing a ripple in the community. Purists hate the idea, while many others are anxious to see StarCraft in 3D. The team is not, however, putting its own spin on the StarCraft universe with new units or structures. "Then it wouldn't be StarCraft anymore," says Deason.

The legal issues

The bigger looming concern is the legality of the whole project. At press time, the team was drafting a letter to Blizzard seeking permission to continue the project without violating intellectual property laws. The only way to make a mod for WarCraft III, according to the team, is to make new MPQ files—and Blizzard doesn't take too kindly to that. The spokesperson at Blizzard we spoke to said off the record that it would be tough to convince the powers that be to let the project continue. But the Project Revolution team made it clear that they are huge Blizzard fans and only want to help grow the community. They are even willing to put in security so that you couldn't play the game without owning StarCraft: Brood War, WarCraft III and The Frozen Throne.

Besides seeing their project through to completion, what do they hope to gain from all this? Jobs would be nice—Blizzard has hired modders before.

There's still a lot that needs to be done, but after two years of development—carried out by 21 people, like Kidul from Texas, Zhernyok and Red from Russia, and Xitcos from Georgia—the game should be moving into a closed beta by the time you read this. Whether Blizzard will allow the mod to be released—well, that's another story.

By Darren Gladstone

Besides seeing this through to the end, what is the team hoping to accomplish? Getting jobs at Blizzard.



NEWS FEED

► Leisure Suit Larry is banned in Australia for sexual content. And here we thought it was because the game is lewd. ► Warren Spector, the man behind Thief, Deus Ex, and other sneaky games, has left Ion Storm to pursue "other interests."

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BOOK Vice Doss & Don'ts

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How does one describe the underground magazine

Vice? It's full of what's been kicking around in your head but you've been either 1) too drunk to write it down or 2) scared to say it out loud for fear of getting your butt kicked. This book, which is a collection of fashion critiques, is hilarious and hard to put down.



BOOK Geekwear

\$15, WWW.GEEKWEARZ.COM

If you're a nerd, you've gotta wear it on your sleeve—hence this line of

geekcentric T-shirts we stumbled across during a trip to QuekCo. We got a look at the full line of clothes, and we've got to tell you, some of the stuff doesn't suck. Check it out for yourself.



BOOK America

\$12, WWW.AMAZON.COM

We're huge fans of The Daily Show on Comedy Central. Although touted as a fake news show, it's

better than most "real" news broadcasts. And as soon as you crack open the show's book, *The Daily Show With John Stewart Presents America (The Book): A Citizen's Guide to Democracy Inactive*, you'll have instant high-school flashbacks. Constructed like a school textbook (there are end-of-chapter discussion questions such as "Why do you think the framers made the Constitution so soul-crushingly boring?"), this is the best textbook ever!



MUSIC K-Os, Joyful Rebellion

\$14, WWW.AMAZON.COM

If you're down with the Roots, then you already appreciate a

little rock and jazz infused into your hip-hop. K-Os takes that ball and runs with it. *Joyful Rebellion* has soulful sounds, great hooks, funky beats, and something that anybody can appreciate. Bang your head and grab this disc.



DVD Dawn of the Dead

\$20, WWW.AMAZON.COM

Remakes often make our zombie-lovin' skin crew. But when

this movie hit theaters, we were instant believers—all the style and fun of the original movies was most definitely there. This DVD not only adds a truckload of gore that wasn't in the theatrical version, it also includes a bunch of extra material that adds a whole lot to the backstory. See the video diary of Andy (the guy holed up in the gun store) and a compilation of newscasts covering the end of the world.



MUSIC Sasna, Involver

\$13, WWW.AMAZON.COM

Infectious electronic grooves hooked us when we gave this CD a shot. Hell,

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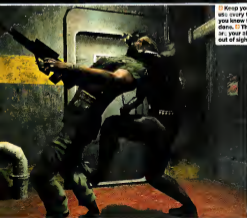


Previews

See 'em now, play 'em soon



This assignment will frequently put you in close proximity to the enemy.



Keep your cool and use every technique you know to get the job done. The shadows are your ally. Stay out of sight.





The Sims 2 University
We deliver the first-ever screens and info on EA's first Sims 2 expansion pack.



Dragonhead
Liquid's next big real-time strategy game takes place in the fantastic world of Eberron.



NEMUS: The Jupiter Incident
This sci-fi epic shows us what happens when man sets his sights on outer space.

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft Montreal** GENRE: **Stealth-Action** RELEASE DATE: **March 2005**

Splinter Cell Chaos Theory

Code Black: For the eyes of agent Sam Fisher

Sam, the Third Echelon has another highly sensitive assignment for you. Your goal this time will be hostage extraction. We know it isn't your usual type of work, but this is a matter of international security that goes much deeper than a mere rescue attempt. The hostage is Bruce Morgenholt, an engineer previously employed by computer expert Abraham Zherkezki. The two men worked together on reverse-engineering the Masse Kernel for the United Nations, and they possess potentially dangerous knowledge that must be kept out of enemy hands at all costs.

The alleged kidnappers are the People's Voice, a guerrilla group led by Peruvian nationalist Hugo Lacerda. The group has been very vocal in its recruitment of followers to aid against state oppressors, and it plays a dangerous game of information warfare. Morgenholt must be intercepted and debriefed ASAP and Lacerda—along with anyone in possession of Morgenholt's secrets—must be dealt with.

That's not all. We also have reason to believe that the kidnapping may have been contracted by an outside party. Intelligence reports indicate that Lacerda has recently come into possession of a substantial arms shipment, which may have been used to pay off his group's abduction efforts. Zherkezki himself may even be involved, judging from the inside secrets used to carry out several recent information warfare attacks in both the United States and Japan.

Carte blanche

Your mission is to extract Morgenholt, deal with the separatist group, and investigate the possibility of additional outside threats. Among your destinations this time are Peru and several potential locations throughout Asia, possibly including China and Korea. You won't receive the usual level of strict guidance from us on this assignment; you are given clearance to approach these stealth missions however you see fit, so long as the job gets done. You might even discover several ways to accomplish your objectives. We're going to trust your judgment on this one, Sam.

You'll be operating in closer proximity to the enemy than ever before, so don't hesitate to use every stealth technique at your disposal. Never underestimate the power of surprise—a guard who doesn't see you underfoot won't have time to react when you pull him from his ledge. And you can easily get the drop on unsuspecting sentries and snap their necks from overhead. Be sure to pay careful attention to the ambient noise level, too—you'll want to move as quietly as possible in low-volume areas, and loud environments can provide excellent cover for your activities.

Don't overlook your field equipment, either. Your recent knife training should be very advantageous for silent kills, makeshift lock picking, and quiet access

to certain areas. You should also employ your sticky cams whenever possible—in multiples, if necessary. We've even taken the liberty of equipping your pistol with an Optically Channeled Potentiator, which you can use to emit a brief antielectronics frequency. You should be well taken care of in terms of gear.

Reinforcements

You'll be glad to know that we're also sending in some additional support. A pair of NSA operatives will cooperate behind the scenes with their own set of objectives in order to make things easier for you. This crack team has been trained in a number of co-op exercises, including rappelling, the human ladder, and a few collaborative martial arts techniques.

We have every reason to believe you will succeed at this assignment, Sam—you're the best we've got. However, if you'd like to hone your training a little more, you are always welcome to participate in our spies-versus-mercenaries war games. We've even incorporated some new techniques and gadgets into the exercises this time around. As you can see, every precaution has been taken to prepare you for the mission ahead. We're counting on you—don't let us down. © Ryan Scott

The Word: CONFIDENTIAL

Don't hesitate to use every stealth technique at your disposal.





► PUBLISHED BY Electronic Arts DEVELOPER Maxis GENRE Real-life Simulation RELEASE DATE March 2006

The Sims 2



T You knew it was coming, and here it is: the first of an inevitable half-decade's worth of expansion pecks for *The Sims 2*. And you know what? It sounds pretty darn good. *University* shoehorns an entire new life stage—*young adult*—in between *teen* and *adult*, letting your Sim offspring go away to college to earn degrees in 11 different majors, enhance their skills, deal with a whole new slate of fears and aspirations, and just generally embarrass themselves with typically debauched collegiate behavior. Your Sims will also be able to earn money tutoring other students, hang out in new community lots, deal with the dorks in their dorm, and even pledge a sorority or fraternity (please, please, please God, let there be a big Pledge of Intention ceremony). We'll have more on this baby prior to its March release—and, no doubt, details on the second expansion approximately 15 seconds later.

University

PUBLISHER: NCSoft DEVELOPER: ArenaNet GENRE: MMORPG RELEASE DATE: February 2008

Guild Wars

Getting straight to the point



OMG HE 2 U! WANT 2 FIGHT SOME GUILD WARZ?

MMOs are a bum deal for casual gamers. If you have a day job or a second hobby, you're just not as good at those games as any 14-year-old able to devote an entire week to leveling up his bread-making skill. *Guild Wars* puts players on a more level field: New characters can ascend to the level limit very quickly, and items have been carefully balanced with disadvantages to offset their

bonuses. There's also a detailed skill system that discourages power gaming.

Skill selection is where a good portion of your strategy and preparation takes place. A character can learn up to 150 skills, though no more than eight such skills can be taken into battle, which forces players to come up with effective combinations. Strategy and creativity determine the outcome here—not the degree of social life you're willing to sacrifice in favor of your orchestrating career.

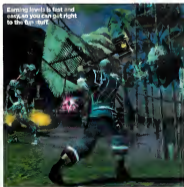
User friendly

Speaking as someone who gave up on the genre long ago, it appears to me that the people at ArenaNet hate all the right things about MMOs. Besides all but eliminating the leveling treadmill, they've also curbed the menial chores—and not just obvious ones like chopping wood or fighting the same swamp troll 800 times. For example, instead of waiting five hours for my health bar to refill after combat, I was amazed to see it replenish almost instantly. Travel times are cut down severely as well; just as I started the long walk back to town, I

noticed that I could select my destination on the map and get there much faster. Why doesn't anyone else think of these things? It's a simple yet brilliant concept: create an MMO that doesn't punish you for playing it.

Not only is *Guild Wars* fun, but the lack of a monthly fee also means you're free to play as much as you want without spending another dime—until, of course, the expansion packs start rolling in. The team is very confident that it can stay on a schedule of two new expansions every year, thanks to a streamlined set of development tools. Each will reportedly offer players a number of new character classes, skills, items, and fresh PVE missions that are comparable in scope to an entirely new game.

The developers continue to describe *Guild Wars* as *Magic* meets *Duino*. Teams of up to eight players can fight through the game's main story, which is "more Conan than *Lord of the Rings*," according to lead producer Jeff Strain. Whether the plot is compelling or not, *Guild Wars* should be a fresh experience, thanks to its strategic skill system, the attention to PVP gameplay as well as PVE, and the level of respect the developers seem to have for your need to cut the crap and get to the good parts. **S** *Scott Bailey*



Earning levels is fast and easy, so you can get right to the fun stuff.

It appears that the people at ArenaNet hate all the right things about MMOs.

The Word **BATTLE-WORTHY**

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PIPELINE

Game	Developer	Expected
• Juno	Ubisoft	Q1 2006
• King Kong	Ubisoft	Q4 2006
Lego Star Wars	Ubisoft Interactive	Q4 2005
The Matrix Online	Sega	January 2006
Middle-earth Online	World's Edge	February 2006
NetGP 3	THQ	Q3 2005
The Matrix	Ubisoft	March 2006
NASCAR 2006: Chase for the Cup	EA GAMES, EA	February 2006
November Nights 2	Atari	2006
• Nexus: The Jupiter Incident	Vivendi Universal	February 2006
Operation Flashpoint 2	Ubisoft	2006
Origin of the Species	EA GAMES	January 2006
Perth	Grain Games	January 2006
Project Snowblind	EA GAMES	January 2006
• Psychonauts	EA GAMES	2006
• Psychotic	Ubisoft Interactive	Q1 2006
• The Pentester	THQ	June 2005
Galaxy IV	Atari	2006
Robots	Vivendi Universal	March 2006
The Roots	Concept Publishing	March 2006
SEAL N.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ	Q2 2006
Secret Underworld	Atari	Q1 2006
Surface	Vivendi Universal	Q4 2005
Terminator 3	Ubisoft Interactive	TBA
• Steel Hunter II	Ubisoft	February 2006
Spider Cell: Chthon Theory	Ubisoft	March 2006
Star Wars: KotOR II: The Sith Lords	LucasArts	February 2005
Star Wars Republic Commando	LucasArts	February 2005
State of Emergency 2	San Eriq Entertainment	Q4 2005
• Sticks	Apex Games	March 2006
Stronghold 2	Global Star	Q1 2006
SWOT 6	Vivendi Universal	Q1 2006
Tekken 5	NECA	March 2005
Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Vivendi Universal	TBA
Tomb Raider VII (working title)	Ubisoft Interactive	Q1 2006
Top Spin	ATI	Q4 2006
UFO: Aftermath	Concept Publishing	Q1 2006
Vanguard: Exp of Heroes	Neocore	TBA
World of Warcraft	Bizzard Entertainment	TBA
X2: The Retribution	Deep Silver	February 2006
Yo! The Ark of Noah	Paradox	TBA

• New Updates

• Publisher: Vivendi Universal Developer: Midix/HD Interactive Genre: Strategy
Release Date: February 2006

Nexus: The Jupiter Incident

Lost in space

Ever since *Star Trek* emasculated the Klingons, there's been a dire need for old-fashioned space-based scum and villainy. The creators of *Nexus: The Jupiter Incident* have thankfully found their greatest enemy, and in the words of cartoonist Walt Kelly, he is us.

A fleet simulator in three dimensions, *Nexus* supposes man has gone out into space and that competing heartless megacorporates are struggling to achieve domination over one another. Players control the battleship *Silveto* and its stalwart commander Capt. Marcus Cromwell and must piece together the mystery of the titular Jupiter incident while simultaneously making the world safe for someone's version of capitalism.

The opening mission sees the *Silveto* racing to assist—for its own greedy purposes—an enemy base. But peril looms, reports indicate two other factions are gunning for the target as well. Worse, the installation is ringed with killer missile-spraying defense satellites that are malfunctioning, attacking anything that

approaches. Armchair generals are dropped into the fray, assigned multiple objectives, and left with the pause button as their only ally in a plight to win—or suck the void of outer space trying.

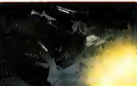
As huge starships roll in, the game's handy function keys and mouse controls allow players to assault enemy ships with long-range artillery, strike weak areas with a focused laser attack, or hammer an enemy hull with explosives. Commandos stand ready to perform rescues or reconnaissance missions. Fighter squadrons await the call to arms and can be ordered to guard, attack, or escort larger craft. Damage-control teams await catastrophe and, if used in a timely fashion, can stave it off. Crewmen grow into their roles as their skills improve with time. When you take all this into consideration, *Nexus* is nothing but brain-chokingly thorough in its simulation aspects. Prepare for battle—the day of the Jupiter Incident is fast approaching. **Greg Orlando**

The Word ZERO-G

Players must piece together the mystery of the titular Jupiter Incident while simultaneously making the world safe for someone's version of capitalism.



• You'll encounter plenty of strange interstellar craft during your travels.



• The *Silveto* hurtles through space in search of adventure.

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DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

The best games you've never seen

FROM *SimBin/Idace* AVAILABILITY Q1 2005

GTR

Word on the street: Billed as "the most realistic racing game ever," this puppy puts you behind the wheels of cars (Porsche 996 GT3-RS, Ferrari 360 Modena) from the FIA GT championship. Simulating everything from weather conditions to G-forces, the game supports a staggering 56 simultaneous onscreen vehicles and offers authentic courses including Anderstorp and Monza. Dynamic track layouts and a detailed presentation (including meticulous damage modeling and sounds sampled from real racetracks) see this one fly right past its rivals.

Sounds kinda beat: Despite a splendid sales pitch, the simulation is still targeted at a niche audience. West Racing's *Racing Legends* tried a similar approach, for all we know, that title is enjoying a permanent pit stop. Developer SimBin hasn't yet made its mark on interactive entertainment, either. However, considering that the crew there is managed by a pro driver (three-time Swedish GT champion Henrik Ros), we're fairly certain SimBin will deliver.



FROM *Croteo Games* AVAILABILITY Q1 2005

The Kings of the Dark Age

Word on the street: This game is a tantalizing cocktail of turn-based strategy and real-time skirmishes set atop the backdrop of medieval Europe. Vying for domination over 17 countries, players employ diplomacy and direct force against opponents, wielding more than 30 unique units and weapons when necessary. Highlights include castle sieges, cutthroat economic exchanges, and chaotic battles filled with flaming arrows and fallen soldiers. A 40-minute soundtrack accompanies the action during solo struggles or four-man multiplayer matches via LAN or internet connection.

Sounds kinda beat: For starters, you might have heard the premise once—or 16 times—before. Croatian-based Croteo Games has been in the business since 1996, and not a single piece of software from the firm has made its way Stateside—never an auspicious sign. But the crew has recently teamed up with Zuxex, makers of *Once Upon a Knight*, for help with production, which, depending on your fondness for cows, could be a positive or a negative thing.



FROM *ClownKeep* AVAILABILITY Q1 2005

The Chronicles of Ny

Word on the street: *Chronicles* is an episodic 3D fantasy role-playing saga featuring a series of self-contained scenarios that demands armchair adventurers prevent death from descending upon the realm of Racorr. Customize a character, assign alter egos a race and skills, then uncover an insidious conspiracy while recruiting allies and wreaking havoc on encroaching barbarians and bandits. Classic sword and sorcery fare, multiple endings, and myriad side quests give the tale character, while hidden areas and harrowing brushes with hideous beasts lend it longevity.

Sounds kinda beat: Industry insiders have seen similar concepts come and go without making a mark; it's uncertain whether anyone truly wants serialized software programs. *ClownKeep* is a textbook startup to boot—none of its core members boast blockbuster games on their resumes. But in an era of multimillion-dollar productions and bloated teams, the unknown collective could come out on top, provided it can get its act together. We'll keep an open mind—at least for now.



MAINTAINES ESRB
M
MAY CONTAIN
STRONG LANGUAGE
AND DRUG USE

Blood
Violence

PC
CD-ROM
SOFTWARE

GWI

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BY THE EDITORS OF
COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

102 FREE GAMES

Ancient Evils, Bad K-Files fan fiction, Kluge's counting down the minutes until that kid who plays Hermlone is legal...the Internet contains a lot of useless stuff. But it's also a Mecca of game freebies. The 102 we've picked out for you fall into three basic categories: Some are free to download and keep, some are free to download and try, and others are free to download and add on to something you already own. Of course, there are far more than 102 freebies out there—but there's also a lot of fan-made art focused on several former American Idol contestants. Trust us, we're getting you started with the good stuff. And we're linking up links to all of it at <http://102freegames.1UP.com>.





FREE TO OWN

That's right—you can get your hands on this stuff for nothing. Zip. Nada. Zilch. Just download the executable files and they're yours to keep. As our grandmothers would say, "Such a deal! Are you sure you're getting enough to eat? Why don't you call us more?"



Babylon 5



Cloudy Robbers

Cloudy Robbers

<http://www.dvohin.net/uk/shooting/>

As a robot equipped with thrusters, lasers, and missiles, you endure and deflect interminable onslaughts of enemy ships in this first-rate Japanese horizontal shooter. You're defending not only yourself, but also the mother ship to your left that's invisible if too much enemy fire passes by you, the mother ship is injured. So keep an eye on both health bars as you approach the big boss.

Highway Patrol

<http://retrospac.com.net>

Strut the highway patrol and satisfy your semicontrolled road rage! Demolish enemy cars with missiles, oil slicks, and smoke screens as you career down the highway at incredible speeds. Unfortunately, you're forbidden to fire upon pesky pedestrians and so-called innocent bystanders.



Highway Patrol

It might just put us out of business to say this, but you don't really need to spend \$50 at your local retail store to have a grand old time gaming on your PC. There are tons of great gaming websites that will let you play games for free right on their sites, without the need to download a thing (except maybe Macromedia's free Flash Player to run the game). There are 80 gazillion free Flash game sites out there (yes, we counted), so there's no way to cover them all, but here are a few of our favorite sites and a couple of cool games from each.

Yahoo Games

www.games.yahoo.com

It's the perfect gaming website for your mom. And we don't mean that in a bad way, we swear. Yahoo hosts a great selection of free card, arcade, puzzle, and word games, none of which has a single exploding head, swearword, or naked body part.

Alchemy

PopCap Games—mentioned elsewhere in this feature—may be the single greatest game developer on the planet. Yahoo hosts a bunch of PopCap games, including Alchemy, a puzzle game guaranteed to waste entire days. Play it at work!

Cribbage

The coolest thing about Yahoo Games is the plethora of multi-player games, and the popular-

ty of the site guarantees you'll always find an opponent. *GGW* Editor-in-Chief Jeff Green swears by Yahoo Cribbage, a nicely done version of the classic card game.

Newgrounds

www.newgrounds.com



This once small site originated in 1991 as, of all things, a NeoGeo fanzine. Now it



Mad River Madness

<http://retrobase.com.au>

You say you want a revolution? In this RPG, your goal is to incite revolt. In order to accomplish this, you'll need to use your head and your heels, highly trained operatives

King's Quest I

www.classicgaming.com

Those fan-based remakes of Roberta Williams' classics crush the competition—their incredibly enhanced graphics and improved puzzles add depth to the overall gameplay. Both King's Quest I VGA and

King's Quest II+ VGA make for engaging additions to any freeware folder.

Maniac Mansion

www.the-8bit.com

Acclaimed as the best spoof game of all time, Maniac Mansion has held its own since 1987. Sporting more than 13 possible character changes, multiple puzzle solutions, and four different endings, Maniac Mansion has a versatile, nonlinear plot. Plus, there's a great interface, decent graphics, and challenging puzzles.



King's Quest



Maniac Mansion



N

www.harveycart.com/retrobase/ahost/

While lacking in name and plot, *N* offers much more than first meets the eye. In a complicated maze format, you play a ninja trapped in an underground dungeon, collecting coins that add seconds to your overall timer. The ingenious puzzles require more thought than average puzzle games and perhaps some knowledge of physics. There are many interesting, gruesome ways for stickmen to die if you don't understand his limits—or if you're just sadistic.

The Tiny Adventures of Zak McKracken

www.25bit.com/retrobase/games/

Luckless reporter Zak McKracken is at it again. The fan-made sequel to Zak McKracken and the Alien Rocktars, this new adventure-puzzle game proves to be just as amusing and well thought out as its predecessor.



Zak McKracken

has mushroomed into a huge, popular repository of Flash games and films, among other things. Some mature content here, so parents beware.

Alien Hominid

Newgrounds' big success story is *Alien Hominid*, an excellent, wonderfully animated 2D side-scroller about to jump to the big leagues on the PS2 and GameCube—but you can play the original, for free, right here on your PC.

Ultimate Flash Sonic

Everyone's favorite digital hedgehog has been lovingly recaptured in this cool side-scroller that will give older gamers serious '90s flashbacks.

Shockwave

www.shockwave.com



Like Yahoo Games, this is a great mainstream site with an ever-growing library

of cool Flash games and films. You'll find both original content here and some of the more ubiquitous games, like the ever-popular PopCap titles.

Daily Jigsaw

The idea of doing a jigsaw puzzle on a PC screen may seem lame, but hey, so did listening to music on a PC a few years ago. Shockwave's daily jigsaw is actually loads of fun, with a very cool interface that lets you do things that "real" jigsaw puzzle

pieces don't, like only show the edge pieces. Who needs *Half-Life 2* with these kinds of thrills?

Shapeshifter

This is one of those annoying little puzzle games that seems absolutely lame at first, but before you know it, you've been hypnotized, days have gone by, and your family has moved out on you. What do you do? You match shapes with their outlines. That's it. A game even cavemen would love.



Quazatron

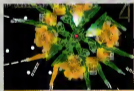
Have a shootout with enemy robots, then interface with them in order to gain their upgrades. Take care, though—with so many foes aiming at you, it's hard not to get caught in the crossfire.

Warning: Poison

This game is among the most addictive platform shooters in the business. Its graphics—like those in most freeware developed by the Japanese—are amazing. Destroy as many of the ever-growing, monstrous battleships as you can while also fighting against the timer (every time you get shot down, the timer decreases, so be wary of such tricky weapons as lasers and radiating missiles).

Nectis

In *Nectis*, there are no weapons, no combat, no huge bosses—just an endless galaxy of stars to explore. It sounds boring, but the details and spectacular graphics make up for the lack of blood and guts.



Warning: Poison



Tynan 2000

With just one life, you must survive onslaught after onslaught of enemy fire. Sporting a decent plotline, numerous ship upgrades, and cool graphics, *Tynan 2000* is more engaging than a lot of shooters you'll pay for.

Gladius

Construct mazes to trap your opponents as you blaze over the battle arena while trying to avoid their own walls. With easy controls, respectable graphics, and quick gameplay, *GLIvan* is completely engrossing but doesn't take forever to play.



Mactis



Tynan 2000

Games (cont.)

EBaume World

www.ebbaumsworld.com

Known primarily as a repository of hilarious crank phone calls and videos (Bubb Rubb, anyone?), EBaume's World also has a pretty great selection of Flash games. Like

Newsgrounds.com, this one is all over the map in terms of "appropriateness," so tread lightly.

Pac-Man

Perhaps you have heard of this one. This is an excellent little Flash version, complete with all those sounds that still reside somewhere in our subconscious. The novelty of not having to

feed quarters into the PC never, ever gets old.

Kick Ups

How long can you keep this soccer ball up in the air? How long can you play this game before you start hating yourself? This might either be the dumbest thing we've ever seen or, quite possibly, the greatest game of all time.

RuneScape

www.runescape.com



A well-done free MMORPG, with tens of thousands playing at any one time.

Graphics-wise, you get what you pay for, of course, but an amazing achievement, nonetheless.

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www.jointopsescalation.com

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Blood

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FREE TO TRY

Technically, you can play the heck out of these games and never pay a cent, but since karma is a boomerang, we urge you to ante up. Just download the executable files, check out the games, and then follow the directions to deliver some dough to the developer when the trial period is up.



Pixelus Deluxe

www.pcap.com

Our latest addiction from the land of all things shareware is *Pixelus Deluxe*, a tile-shooting puzzler that has you restoring colorful ancient Greek mosaics. It's a little hard to describe, but good luck stopping once you start this or any PopCap game.

Dungeon Scroll

www.soft.com/kenob/ledoc.html

Filing a void in the lives of role-playing word fetishists the world over, *Dungeon Scroll* has you using Scrabble-style tiles to build words to get points that damage a parade of traditional dungeon dwellers. Special tiles add power to your "spells" to help you work your way deeper into the dungeon.



- *Pixelus Deluxe*

Yohohol Puzzle Pirates

www.puzzlepirates.com

It's no surprise that the Tetris, Bejeweled, etc. clones work in a Web environment, what's surprising is how they're woven into this charming and surprisingly deep puzzle-based pirate MMO.

Wik and the Fable of Souls

www.wikgame.com

More a cousin of Galium than a cuddly hero, Wik bounds through the tangled woods of this platformer, sniping grubs with his long sticky tongue and spitting them out at his pet Siotham. This game treats us to the best graphics of any shareware title we've seen.

Alien Shooter

www.alien-shooter.com

We now officially give up lamenting the end of the *Cruader* franchise. Why? Because of *Alien Shooter*, a blood-soaked little killing machine that captures the nonsporting itch of our all-time favorite third-person action game.

Air Strike 3D: Operation WAT and Air Strike II

www.airgames.com

Air Strike 3D: Operation WAT is little more than a full-on arcade helicopter rail shooter—but it's an outstanding full-on arcade helicopter rail shooter.



- *Air Strike II*



- *Dungeon Scroll*



- *Alien Shooter*

Flatspace

www.justinflatspace.com

In *Flatspace's* universe, the universe is, uh, flat, flat, not 3D, so all your hyperspace travel plays out on a vast plane. This is no interstellar cakewalk, but the rewards are there for the gamers who stick with it.

Dr. Blob's Organism

www.drblobs.com

Quite possibly the world's first petri-dish shooter, *Dr. Blob's Organism* is a fun little shooter with a novel twist, some decent music, and a slew of power-ups.

3D Morris

www.heloterminal.com/3dmorris

Between *Checkers* and *Go* lurks *3D Morris*, a deceptively challenging little tile game with some crooked-jack A.I. Every time a competitor lines up three pieces on the oddly designed board, his opponent loses a tile. The last man standing wins. Simple to learn. Hard to master, and tough to stop playing.

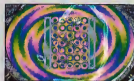
Plummit

www.puzzlemos.com

Reminiscent of *Pipe Dream*, *Plummit* tasks players with laying plumbing pipes from a tap to a sink. The gameplay and graphics are pretty basic, but the challenges aren't—even the scenarios for this action-puzzler can cause you trouble.



- *Plummit*



Plasmaworm

www.rifttothem.com

Guide your plodding anroid through a convoluted playfield, gobbling up objects like French horns, kittens, and gamepads as you go. Every item eaten slips some more progroids onto the worm, making it harder to avoid touching the lethal walls.

Hamsterball

www.soft8.com

Until someone invents Hamsterball Soccer, simple Hamsterball will have to do. Guiding the hamster-powered orb through the imaginatively laid-out levels is a lot harder—and more fun—than it looks.

Bursting Bubbles

www.bigfishgames.com

The Big Fish Games website has lots of shareware games available for download,

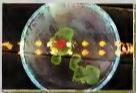


but there's something hypnotic about this *Eyeveiled*-style action-puzzle that has you popping multicolored bubbles.

Crazy Lunch

www.alpha-ivam.net

All you have to do is protect your lunch from being stolen by little gremlins. All you do is click on them—like mad. Yeah, it's incredibly simple, and you know what? It's also way more fun than it should be.



Dr. Blain's Organisms



Hamsterball



Aerial Action



Crazy Lunch

Gray area of free games

Each week previews editor and avid real-life editor Ryan Scott spends far too much of his free time tinkering with old, forgotten games instead of playing the recent and highly anticipated stuff. Here are a few of his favorite emulators programs. Just don't ask where to find games that work with these emulators (since that's the part that kind of skirts the edge of, y'know, legality).

DOSBox

<http://dosbox.sourceforge.net/>

Bummed Windows XP has no backward compatibility with DOS games? DOSBox is the answer. From *King's Quest IV* to *Crossed*, this program accurately emulates everything from music to game speed.

MAME

<http://www.mame.net>

Everybody's favorite Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator is still going as strong as ever, with support for hundreds of classic arcade hits ranging from *R-Type* and *Joust* to *Beatsmania* and *Soul Calibur*.

Kawaks

<http://kawaks.retrogame.com/>



Kawaks is a stable and functional emulator for arcade games that utilize

Capcom's classic CPS-1 and CPS-2 architectures, such as *Street Fighter II* and *D&D: Shadow Over Mystara*. It's also handy for emulating classic NeoGeo titles like *Samurai Showdown II*. And it even includes multiplayer network support!

MagicEngine

www.magicengine.com/



Not too many people remember the TurboGrafx-16 console (aka the PC Engine overseas), but it had some real gems that were never released here, most notably *Dracula X: Rondo of Blood*. This inexpensive and near-perfect emulator gives you the chance to finally experience these hits.



Sea3D

www.sea3d.com

Have a shootout with enemy robots, then interface with them in order to gain their upgrades. Take care, though—with so many foes aiming at you, it's hard not to get caught in the crossfire.

Gunner 2

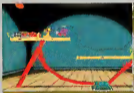
www.stardock.com

Gunner 2 is like the anti-aircraft and tail-gunner sections of *Call of Duty: United Offensive*, without the sexy graphics. You man a variety of big guns on land, sea, and air, protecting your allies from enemy aircraft.

Aerial Antics

www.aerialantics.com

In the future, we will all commute to work with personal otobots. In the meantime, we'll have to settle for *Aerial Antics*. Do you have what it takes to be an aerial or-



Chain Reaction



Think Tanks



cus performer in the future?

Gish

http://www.gangsgames.com/ies/browser.php

One seriously unique and fun game, this take on the 2D side-scroller has players guiding an amoeba-like being through an assortment of underground environments.

Think Tanks

www.brainfree.com

A mind is a terrible thing to waste, so why not perform a little psychosurgery and jam a brain inside a tank?

Chain Reaction

www.gangsgames.com/ies/browser.php

Satisfy your inner Rube Goldberg with *Chain Reaction*, a 3D reimagining of the classic *Incredible Machine*. Your job is to move a little monster on a cart from point A to point Z via convoluted gizmopacked machines using basketballs, fans, gravity,

monsters in boxes, and more.

Cleavage 3D

www.bullwing.com

When the intergalactic aliens come to enslave and devour mankind, someone is sure to cry out in anguish, "Why?" This is why. Digital big-breasted, scantily clad, sword-fighting amazons. Finally, gratuitous cleavage and bloody decapitation in one embarrassing package. Suddenly, *Bikini Kombat* seems almost respectable.

Magic: The Gathering Online

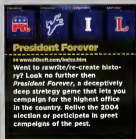
www.mtgo.com/default.aspx?magic/naag/online

This scaled-down version of the popular card game lets you play in single matches, tournaments, and multiplayer games, albeit with a fairly limited deck. New virtual cards are available at real-world, real-card prices.

Star Chamber

www.starchamber.com

Want to play a collectible card game but have an aversion to dices? *Star Chamber* offers a unique spin on the genre.



President Forever

www.2004cf.com/index.html

Want to rewrite/re-create history? Look no further than *President Forever*, a deceptively deep strategy game that lets you campaign for the highest office in the country. Relive the 2004 election or participate in great campaigns of the past.

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- Features HyperTransport™ technology for improved multitasking performance

CYBERPOWERINC.COM



FREE TO ADD ON



BATTLEFIELD 1942

Desert Combat

www.desertcombat.com/

This mod, set in the Middle East, continues to be wildly popular among *BF1942* players. It's maintained by a dedicated team of programmers and artists who recently released the final full-featured version to the public.

Empires

www.empiresmod.com/

This mod fuses the *BF1942* experience with the tactical gameplay of real-time strategy games, giving you the option to expand your base with extra vehicles and buildings as you contest with enemy teams for valuable resources.



You probably already own *Battlefield Vietnam*, *Unreal Tournament 2004*, and *Neverwinter Nights*—and you've probably already played through them all. Breathe new life into them with these free mods. Just download the executable files and install them on the computer where the original games are living. Oh, you'll probably notice the ton of *Unreal Tournament* mods on this list. Why? The "Make Something Unreal" contest dangled some serious money in front of mod makers—and lined us up with lots of great game tweaks.

BATTLEFIELD VIETNAM

BattleGroup Vietnam

www.battlegroup42.com/

This Vietnam conversion of BattleGroup42's *BattleGroup 42* mod aims to bring more realism to the game, with historically accurate equipment and much more attention to detail across all the game's weapons, vehicles, and maps.

BushWar

http://bushwar.unicef/

It's the Cuban army versus the South African Defense Force in *BushWar*, a total-conversion mod set in South Africa and Angola during the 1970s. It features all-new maps, as well as additional weapons and vehicles compatible with the existing *Battlefield Vietnam* maps.

Insurrection 1776

www.playablehistory.com/insurrection/

Insurrection 1776 is a Revolutionary War-style mod for *Battlefield Vietnam*. It's still pretty early in development, but it is set to feature new weapons, the ability to bandage wounds, and several new weapons and classes—including an officer class that commands three to six NPC units.

Point of Existence

www.pointofexistence.com/

Forget Vietnam—*Point of Existence* brings the fight into the modern day, pitting the United States against Russia in a struggle for resources. This *Battlefield Vietnam* mod features new automatic weapons, vehicles, and aircraft.

World War II Modification

http://bf1942.com/

Want to relive the glory days of *Battlefield 1942*? This official mod from EA Games and Digital Illusions updates three classic maps from *BF 1942*, taking full advantage of the more robust Vietnam engine.



World War II Modifications

CIVILIZATION III: CONQUESTS

Rise and Rule

http://civilization.com/

Variety is the spice of life in this massive modification for the *Conquests* expansion: it introduces 340 new units, 200 technology upgrades, and enough bells and whistles to keep you busy for a long, long time.

COMMAND & CONQUER: GENERALS

Battletech: The Capellan Solution

www.battletechmodandadditions.com/forgenerals/

Do you miss the *MechCommander* games? *C&C Generals* meets *Battletech* in this total-conversion mod that brings the military RTS into the realm of futuristic battle mechs. The single-player campaign sports a solid story involving three warring clans and features plenty of changes to the typical *Generals* mechanics.

SecondWave

http://1024realgames.com/

This *C&C Generals* mod brings plenty of new options to the table, including a new side to play as, 30 new units, and several additional maps for skirmish and multi-player modes.

**ONE MAN. MANY WEAPONS.
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Microsoft
Xbox 360



fasastudio



In *MechAssault 2 Lone Wolf*, you'll step into the shoes of the Wolf himself and you'll be charged with a "collectible" - a relic of the old world that will help you get into a lot of trouble. You'll have to turn your back on the world you know and go to a new world. You'll have to join one of the most elite military units in the world and you'll have to fight your way through the most intense battles the world has ever seen. With new enemies, new weapons and new weapons, the choice is yours. *MechAssault 2*. The biggest battle just got bigger.

xbox.com/mechassault2

MECHASSAULT 2
Lone Wolf



It's good to play together

XBOX LIVE

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Zero Hour Reborn: Rise to Power

► <http://1021veg.com/zhrp/own>

If you own the Zero Hour expansion pack for C&C Generals, check out *Rise to Power*, which rebalances the gameplay and adds new music, loading screens, and cinematic sequences.

DOOM 3

32-Player Multiplayer

► <http://www.d3mod.com/>

Multiplayer is a great thing—and for *Doom 3*, four players just ain't enough! With this mod, up to 32 players can connect to a server, making for an even more chaotic demon-killing gorefest.

Duct Tape

► <http://www.d3mod.com/forums/showthread.php?p=1>

If you're anything like us, *Doom 3* has instilled a new fear of the dark in you. This handy mod grafts a flashlight to your weapon in exchange for a slightly narrower cone of light.

Hello Kitty Flashlight

► <http://www.d3mod.com/forums/showthread.php?p=1>

Need a night-light? There are a variety of wacky flashlight modifications available for *Doom 3*, including the Batman logo, the Thundercats logo, and—our personal favorite—Hello Kitty.

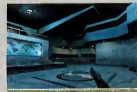
Nitro Gore

► <http://www.d3mod.com/>

Doom 3 doesn't exactly skip on the vile and disgusting carnage, but if for some reason you just can't get enough of it, this mod will ensure that you're swimming in blood and guts the whole way through. Yummy!



► Nitro Gore



► The Beginning

DUNGEON SIEGE

Copperhead: Retaliation

► www.zlancopperhead.com/

If you ask us, medieval stuff is way overrated. With *Copperhead: Retaliation*, *Dungeon Siege* goes from the Dark Ages to the space age. This mod features a new sci-fi story, as well as original enemies, weapons, and locations.

Elemental

► www.the-elements.net/

This total conversion presents *Dungeon Siege* fans with a so-called Biblepunk setting—a mythical, gritty version of ancient Judea. We don't know much about history, but this is one of the weirder "alternate timeline" ideas we've come across.

► [Copperhead: Retaliation](http://www.zlancopperhead.com/)

FAR CRY

Far Cry Co-op: Together Through Cabuto

► www.farcrycoop.de/

The multiplayer addition is great—especially for those who can't handle going it alone. With this mod, up to three players can take on the single-player missions simultaneously. After you've gotten your fill of *Far Cry*'s solo mode, try this multiplayer patch.

FREELANCER

Freelancer: The Next Generation

► www.startofstudios.com/

We had a great time blasting through this game when it first came out, but after finishing the adventure, we craved more. Many *Freelancer* mods have come and gone over the years, but *TNG* is one of the most complete. It's got tons of new spacecraft, sectors to explore, and things to kill.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: VICE CITY

Multi Theft Auto

► www.mtaonline.com/

We're still waiting for Rockstar to make *GTA Online*, but this is the next best thing. With *Multi Theft Auto*, you and your friends can square off in citywide gang wars and deathmatches. It even has some new cars and an improved aiming system!

Ultimate Vice City

► www.ultimatevicecity.com/

Bored with *Vice City*? This mod adds several additional buildings and landmarks to the game, as well as a whopping 40 brand-new cars and motorcycles for your car-jacking pleasure.



GTA: Liberty City

► <http://1021veg.com/gta3/>

Take a trip back...to Liberty City! This total conversion mod re-creates *GTA3*'s Liberty City in the *Vice City* engine, making for improved vehicle physics and smoother, faster-running gameplay—not to mention motorcycles and helicopters.



► Far Cry Co-op



► Crazy Launch



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DeGeneration

HALF-LIFE

The Beginning

www.half-life.com/

The Beginning is an objective-oriented multiplayer modification for the original Half-Life. It features squad-based gameplay, two distinct teams to choose from, 12 new weapons, and tons of graphical upgrades.

Counter-Strike 2D

http://120websites.com/

This total-conversion mod transforms Counter-Strike into a top-down 2D action-shooter. Fans of games such as Crimsonland should definitely appreciate this cool little throwback to simpler times.



MECH

Mech Mod

www.mechmod.com/

This Half-Life mod puts you in control of giant war robots armed with lasers and nuclear missiles.

Project: Timeless

www.project-timeless.de

This multiplayer 3D first-person shooter pits man against machine in the not-too-distant Half-Life future.



Matrix Edition

MAX PAYNE 2: THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE

Battle Tactics 2

http://battle.tactics.maxpayneheadquarters.com/

Battle Tactics 2 turns Max Payne 2 into a turn-based strategy game in which you'll match wits with the enemy AI as you work to escort hostages to safety. There's even a bonus Dead Man Walking level for the truly hardcore.

Matrix Edition

http://1122websites.com/

If there's one game that out-Matrixes Enter the Matrix, it's Max Payne 2. This mod takes it a few steps further, giving you an infinite bullet-time meter, some beefy new weapons, and some new music to rock out with.

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

Tomb of Horrors

http://www.dl.groove/filas/foehorror/foehorror44326900.html

Based on a classic Advanced Dungeons & Dragons module, this adventure is built for high-level characters. You may need both expansions to play this module, but it's worth it. Just consider yourself warned: With a name like The Tomb of Horrors, don't expect it to be a cakewalk.

RETURN TO CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

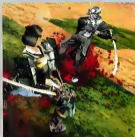
DeGeneration

www.gizabowolfenstein.com/returnto/cw/penn-athru/index.html

This team-based mod has you and your opponents racing to create your own WMDs. It's part Junkyard Wars as you race to the drop zone, where you grab and assemble pieces of a giant death ray. Yes, we know: a giant death ray.



Call to Arms



SAVAGE BATTLE FOR NEWERTH

Samurai Wars

http://www.samuraiwars.com/ps2/europe.com

The ambitious hybrid game Savage received a lukewarm reception despite blending the RTS and FPS genres. This mod takes the battle to feudal Japan with all new units and structures.

UNREAL II: THE AWAKENING

The Crystal Element

www.orgolebent.com/

Here's something that should humble just about every game developer out there: This mod of Unreal II is a school project. It's not actually finished yet, but even as is, it brings cool, consoleish RPG platforming to the PC that's better than some full-priced stuff we've seen.

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004

Action UT

www.actionutgameaction.net

Take all of UT's first-person action and slam it into what you'd expect to see in an action movie. That is, in a nutshell, is what Action UT is all about.

Anomaly

www.anomaly-factor.com/

We are unabashed speed junkies, but there are few games like F-Zero or WipeOut on the PC. Thankfully, the guys working on Anomaly also feel that need for speed.

Allen Swarm

www.defecttoplayers.com/allen2000

We love the Alien movies and top-down tactical games. Put the two together and you've

AMERICAN MCGEE PRESENTS SCRAPLAND



"With this new action-adventure Scrapland, American McGee is well on his way to becoming the PC-gaming equivalent of Alfred Hitchcock..."

"He's stamping his brand on the game: quirky and original." -PC Gamer

"...combine the open-ended exploration of Grand Theft Auto with fast-paced online and offline racing and shooting."

-GameSpot

"Scrapland is destined to become one of this year's most entertaining and refreshing games."

-Game Chronicles Magazine





Unwield

got an addictive mod in which you control a team of four specialists. In fact, it looks so slick, we'd probably pay for it if we had to.

Call to Arms

Why wait for games like *Dungeon Lords* when you can get your hands on a fantasy-fueled total conversion for *UT2*? This action-RPG has a point-and-click interface and a fairly interactive environment to explore. Not bad for two brothers programming in their spare time, eh?

Clone Bandits

There's no way to sum up this postapocalyptic FPS mod. But some cool, creative vehicles are yours to control, and the goal is to seize the clone pumps on each map, depleting the enemy's supply.

Damnation

Part third-person platformer, port FPS, this steampunk adventure is a trip. There's a cool variety of powers and characters to choose from, and weapons like a steam-blowing gun and mechanized 24-shooters. Six-shooters are so 1860!

DeathBall

It's a combination of football, soccer, and all-out war! This 5-on-5 title is one of *CiFi*'s favorites—and for good reason. Download it!

Field of Fire

This mod is all about carjacking, firepower, and sneaking on a *Call of Duty*-inspired map. The goal: Destroy the enemy base Creep stealthily through the environment and blend in with the civilians, or just roll in with a tank and finish the job.

LawDogs

Nobody escapes the long arm of the law, ya yella-bellied polecats. This wild Western mod packs 20-some-odd maps, authentic weapons, a bunch of character types—and even a horse you can ride into town on.

Murals

Arena melee combat is the name of this game, inspired by fighting games. *Murals* incorporates combo moves, stun maneuvers, and team-based combat.

Piddly's Chance

A surreal mutation of the *Unwield* engine, *Piddly's Chance* is a platformer that pays tribute to classic console games. *Metal Gear Solid* references? Check. *Frogger* levels? Yep. Mario-esque platforming? Of course. Should you download it? No doubt.

Robin Hood and the King's Ransom

This is one crazy-looking third-person adventure game. With random humor and sweet cel-shaded graphics, this feels more like it belongs on a console. But we are definitely not complaining.

Red Orchestra

Imagine if *Battlefield 1942* actually looked good. Focusing on Russia's role in World War II, this total-conversion mod is huge—and a great war game's mod. Realistic

environments, detailed models, great sound; the fact that this is a free download seems almost criminal!

Strike Force 2004

Boy, people sure can't get enough of this terrorist versus counterterrorist squad-based combat. Cue *Strike Force*. Over the years, it's gone through revisions with each new game engine that comes along, and it just keeps getting better.

Suburbs

Hey, play! Wanna live the gangsta lifestyle but too much of a dork to do it in public? Download this mod instead. Taking place in the fictional Pacifica, this game borrows a page from *GTA* and lets you freely roam through the environment.

UnWheel

UnWheel turns *Unreal* into a conventional racing sim with real vehicles. This amazing-looking mod has lots of vehicles (ranging from conventional racers and off-roads to Centipede trucks!), race types, and tracks.

WARCRAFT III

The Tales of Raviganion

This mod swaps out all the original *WarCraft III* races with new ones: Wood elves replace humans, trolls replace orcs. And the undead and night elves are replaced by the forces of chaos and swamp dwellers, respectively. Needs *The Frozen Throne* expansion.

Where'd We Find This Stuff?

Check out these sites—
they're packed to the gills with free stuff.

www.rsfmods.net/
www.dlital-out.com
www.gamgases.com/
www.gamhype.com

But Goodies

Yeah, we've already mentioned these before—but we still love 'em enough to recommend them again.

America's Army

www.americasarmy.com/

This U.S. Army-designed game is still free, and still great. An excellent team-based multiplayer FPS that's constantly updated and improved to accommodate more than 4 million players.

Crimsonland

www.crimsonland.com/



It hasn't been updated much in the past year, but *Crimsonland* is still one of our favorite action games. We hear a rumor that Reflexive might be revisiting this game soon. We hope so!

Mutant Storm

www.pongames.com/

A multilevel 3D



action game inspired by classic shoot-em-ups, *Mutant Storm* is one of those games that satisfies the *Grandus* fan in all of us.



Steel Panthers: World at War

www.steelpanthersworldatwar.com/

Steel Panthers has been a favorite download among war gamers since its initial release. The latest version has improved sound effects,


graphics, unit selection, and enemy AI.

Wolfenstein: Enemy Territory

www.ep4theterrace.com/



This free 32-player expansion pack for *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* showcases several additional character options and takes players through a new campaign. It's still a great value for owners of the original game!



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WHAT IS THE MATAIX ONLINE?

**AND HOW ARE THE GAME
DESIGNERS GOING TO
MAKE US CARE?**

BY JEFF GREEN



PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment and Sega
DEVELOPER: Monolith Productions
GENRE: Massively multiplayer online roleplaying game



Why should we believe? Why should we take the red pill? Why should we do what Monolith Productions and Warner Bros. want us to do and jack into the Matrix once again? Didn't we already suffer through one mediocre PC game? Weren't the second and third movies, despite making hundreds of millions of dollars, major disappointments that turned lots of people off of the franchise? And don't we already have too many cool online games to play anyway?



Is commuting to work less depressing if you know it isn't real?

These are just some of the tough questions facing the developers of *The Matrix Online*, a massively multi-player online RPG set in the *Matrix* universe, now due to launch on January 18. And while no one knows how it's ultimately going to pan out, we can tell you this after spending some time with the game: It's a crazy, ambitious, and potentially groundbreaking project.

That's no hyperbole. When the game goes live, the *Matrix* story line will legitimately continue, as told directly by the movies' masterminds, the Wachowski brothers. And that might be a first. While plenty of movie franchises become computer games, they usually either just rehash the movies or exist as alternate story lines that don't directly affect the movies or the main characters. In this case, however, *The Matrix Online* is essentially the "fourth movie"—continuing right where *The Matrix Revolutions* left off, featuring all the major characters, voiced by all the original actors, in the official

story that the Wachowskis are not done telling yet. The only difference? Now you get to be part of that story, too.

If this is a gamble for the Wachowskis, it's an even bigger one for the game's developer, Monolith Productions, which until now has made only relatively small single-player-focused games (*No One Lives Forever*, *Trojan 2.0*) and which now finds itself with the gargantuan 24/7 migraine that is an MMORPG—one that's up against giants like *EveQuest II* and *World of Warcraft*, no less.

History lesson

How *The Matrix Online* came to be is a story that could consume this entire magazine, but here's the short version. Back in 2001, with the first movie out and the next two beginning production, Monolith, anxious to enter the burgeoning MMO market, pitched the online game to the Wachowskis, who immediately saw in Monolith a way to realize their bigger goals for the franchise. ☐





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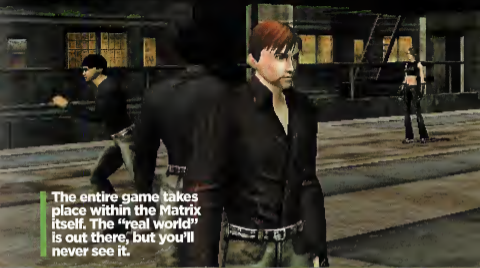


GUILD WARS



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The entire game takes place within the Matrix itself. The “real world” is out there, but you’ll never see it.

FIVE THINGS YOU DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT THE MATRIX

1 Both Will Smith and Ewan McGregor turned down the role of Neo (Will Smith passed so he could star in *Wild, Wild West*). Val Kilmer was considered for the role of Morpheus. And Jet Li turned down the role of Seraph.

2 The most successful movie of the trilogy is *The Matrix Reloaded*, which grossed over \$281 million and is the 24th all-time U.S. box office hit. *The Matrix* came in second, making over \$171 million and ranking No. 89 on the all-time list. *The Matrix Revolutions* came in at \$139 million and 145th on the list—just above *The Santa Clause 2*.

3 Morica Bellucci's character, the A.I. construct Persephone, is a program created to get males to, um, produce reproductive cells in the batteries.



4 The two window washers seen early on in *The Matrix* as Neo runs from the agents are played by the Wachowski brothers in a rare public appearance.

5 The Merovingians were a Frankish dynasty that first appeared around the fifth century and are considered to be the first French royals. That's why that doofus has a French accent in the movie.



You'll learn long jump, but forget about flying. Only Neo does that.

6 “The brothers had a very specific idea about what they wanted to do,” says Toby Ragaini, the game's lead designer at Monolith. “They wanted to continue to tell the *Matrix* story—not just have gamers ‘relive’ the movies. So our proposal showed how they could continue the story in an online game—and they were very receptive. The Wachowskis are gamers, so they understood the peculiarities of MMORPGs—that no one could play as Neo or Morpheus, for example. They were game-savvy and their ideas were very much in sync with the game we wanted to make.”

Once they had a deal, Ragaini and CEO Jason Hall (who jumped from Monolith to Warner Bros. to oversee the project during its development) were brought in to read the top-secret scripts of the second and third movies—printed on moon paper with black ink to prevent photocopying—long before filming had even begun.

“From the very beginning,” says Ragaini, “we were brought into the process of the movies and how it was going to affect the game we were making. Because *The Matrix Online* takes place



All player characters are "Redpills" who jack into the Matrix to ally with the forces of Zion, the machines, or the exiles.

after *Revolutions*, it was important that we were able to understand the implications of the movies."

Since then, Monolith has been working with acclaimed comic-book writer Paul Chadwick (*Concrete*), who was handpicked by the Wachowskis to map out the game's story through both cinematics and player missions (see sidebar). The cinematics are going to be presented to all players—no matter where they are in the game, as episodic updates—cutscenes designed to present important, world-changing events. When the world changes—that is, when the Wachowskis lay out another plot point—it changes for good, across all the game's servers, for all players.

Jacking In

Ah, this is, of course, a game—not a movie. So who are you, and what do you get to do?

The beginning of your experience in *The Matrix Online* mirrors Neo's in the first movie: You take the red pill and are "awakened" to the fact that your life until now has been an illusion. You've been released from imprisonment in the pods and are now jacking into the Matrix with other "Redpills" in the real world. Though events are indeed happening in the real world, you'll never see that world yourself: The entire gameplay experience takes place within the Matrix. Every time you log into the game you are, in fact, jacking into the Matrix.

"It's a very convenient metaphor," Ragaini explains, "because every other MMO has to deal with the question of why are people magically entering and exiting the world at various points? In *The Matrix*, it's very clear. Part of the exploration element in the game, in fact, is finding access to more hard lines. So initially, you have a very limited set of hard lines that you can enter the world in, but as you explore, you have more and more log-in points."

Though you can only play as a human, you can ally with any of the three warring factions still jockeying for control and power within the post-*Revolutions* Matrix: the machines, the exiles (rogue A.I. programs, like the *Merovingian*), or the human rebels of Zion. "We're not telling players there's a good side and bad side," says Ragaini. "It's which side do you believe? Whose propa-



WHO WILL DIE?

Everything that happens, story-wise, in *The Matrix Online*, is "official." This means it has been plotted by the Wachowskis and counts as part of the universe's continuity—this is what "really" happens after the end of the third movie.

The creators have some big things planned. Within the first six weeks of the game's launch, the Wachowskis will officially kill off one of the main characters from the movies. When we say "officially," that means he/she is dead for good—dead as a doornail, never coming back, ever. The character is, in fact, murdered, and this will form the basis for many of the player missions to follow.

So, who is getting killed? We know, but we can't tell you his/her name but we'll give you a hint. It's one of the four people pictured here.

ganda makes the most sense to you?" For the humans, the pitch is obvious: Redpills must continue to free people, to release them from their pods. The machines cannot be trusted to maintain the truce Neo achieved in *Revolutions*.

The machines, on the other hand, will try to recruit you—because, after Neo, they realize that some humans can be of use to them. William Westwater, the game's producer at Monolith, puts the machines' propaganda this way: "The machines can say to players, 'In a very realistic way, how can you possibly trust your own leaders? They're driven by ego and greed and [

"The machines can say to players, in a very realistic way, 'How can you possibly trust your own leaders?'"

emotions that we don't feel at all. We successfully kept humanity alive and provided what would have been a complete Eden from the reality of your perception. Let us continue to shepherd you and work with us to keep the people of Zion from breaking this thing into pieces."

Finally, there are the axiles, machine programs that have rejected their heritage and are hiding out in the Matrix to indulge in the extremes of human behavior—without feeling any of the normal limitations of humans. They accept the simulation but are not restricted by it. They are the "Greek gods" of the game, and they have their own reasons to ally with the humans—and that will be a tempting way to go for many players.

I know kung fu

As with everything involving the Matrix, one could theorize all day—but obviously what matters most here is the gameplay. Character development will follow the typical mechanics of taking on missions, both solo and in groups (which will vary, obviously, depending on your alignment),

and using the skills you specialize in to gain power and prestige.

A great deal of the action is, of course, combat based—and, as befits the franchise, it is mostly centered around martial arts and firearms. The combat looks

and feels unlike that in any other MMORPG. Players choose and line up moves and countermeives in an action bar, and then each move is weighed against the opponent's on a round-by-round basis—something like a real-time Magic: The Gathering game system. It's a system that, we will say, still feels "worky" in the beta, but it may offer a fresh take on what has become a largely dull and standardized mechanic.

Players do not choose one specific class, but instead follow different ability trees to customize their experience. You can, for example, learn hacking skills, which function largely as buffs and debuffs in combat, but also allow you to tap into data nodes to gain information (the game's currency) to trade with other players. You can also learn spy abilities, which will enable you to do things like disable security systems, assume disguises, and perform sneak attacks. **D**

HEY NEO, U THERE? BRB! LOL!!

One cool innovation in *The Matrix Online* is that players can send instant messages from within the game to friends logged on to AIM or ICQ, whether or not those friends are in the game. You can create a game-specific AIM account with your character's name, so any message you send out will be sent with that name. Likewise, you could open up your AIM client when not logged on and still get messages from players in the game. Using the AIM 5.0 client, you could, if you wanted, link your regular and game AIM accounts together: Matrix friends would still only send and receive messages to your in-game character name, while everyone in the real world would see the real you. Uh, if this is the real world, that is. Hey, how come that spoon is bending?

INTERVIEW WITH PAUL CHADWICK



Acclaimed comic-book writer Paul Chadwick (*Concrete*) has been involved with *The Matrix* since first creating comics for the Matrix website back in 1999; he now collaborates with the Wachowskis on *The Matrix Online*. And he illustrated the cover of the CGW that's in your hands right now.

CGW: What specifically is your involvement in *The Matrix Online*?

PC: Chadwick I write the "global" story—events that happen to major characters that survived from the films, and the Matrix as a whole. I storyboard the cinematics that illustrate this and write the year's outline detailing things players must

join on missions, in gameplay, from rumors, and by exploring their environs—et. Finally, I have started, and hope to continue, to write the text for the in-game newspaper, *The Sentinel*.

CGW: Why work on this series at all? What was your motivation for getting involved?

PC: I was flattered, honestly. Rarely in the movie business do you find powerful creators who command such loyalty and respect from the troops. If I may quote such a unique personage as Norman Rockwell, "Genius is the capacity to take infinite pains." That describes the Matrix films. Once I saw the game in its embryonic state at Monolith, I was impressed again. The game and world designers are very sharp people. I like being part of the team.

CGW: What is your take on the second and third movies, and the reception to them?

PC: *Reloaded* is clearly my favorite. The best action scene ever, and the essence of the superhero concept realized wonderfully. It also has most subversive damn scene in action film history: In the midst of Neo's race to save Trinity, the film jer-



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Heroes and villains

What the design team feels most proud of is how your individual moments in missions might conceivably impact the entire game world around you. "History is made of the great names, and for an online community the same thing is true," Ragains says.

"We might have a story line, where, say, and this is just an example, Neo would be resurrected and killed again by a player—but only one player per server would really be able to do that. That moment would be recorded and remembered. Now how cool would it be to be that guy?"

Players can become the heroes of individual story arcs, and because of the episodic way these story arcs will unfold, you'll see the aftermath of events. You'll be able to see how specific players defeated an opponent and how that affected another event to happen: your effort on the world is a tangible one.

"Players will determine how fast or how slow certain events happen," says Ragains. "If people pull together and work really hard, they might make something happen soon, whereas if they are reluctant or if there's resistance, it might take a very long time. The track is being put out in front of the players, but they determine how fast that track is put down."

All the innovative storytelling by the Wachowskis and Paul Chadwick, all of the cool tie-ins to the movies, won't mean anything if *The Matrix Online* is not fun to play—and everyone on the project seems



to get that notion.

"Monolith set out to make a fun game—period," says Jason Hall. "Whether the game was *The Matrix* or not. All of the design and energy went into what made the game fun and unique in its own right, regardless of the movie franchise. Monolith has a reputation it's worked hard to build—the company doesn't want this to just be a 'licensed product'—it needs to be a legitimately great game."

And what about those of us who had jacked out, who had had enough of the *Matrix* after the second two movies?

"We're going to win you back over" promises Hall. "That feeling of newness and exploration and mystery that you get in the first film is what we're hoarding



Code swirls around you as you level up. All your moves, weapons, and items are "code."

back to in *The Matrix Online*. You're going to want to know what happens."

A breakthrough in digital entertainment, or noble failure? There's no way to know just yet—but we'll be taking the red pill and following that white rabbit this coming January. ■

ringly stops. A new character, the Architect, gives a mind-explosion, everything-you-know-is-wrong monologue with too many revisions to follow. So I love it, it gave me something I'd never seen before. Revolutions was perhaps too noisy, too big and fast, but hardly deserved the gut stabs so many critics delivered: it was a completion, and so its mystery quotient, a quality so acute in the first film, was low.

CGW: What is the creative process like between you and the Wachowskis on the game?

PC: They set me down for a long talk. They gave me a theme: Peace and the things people do to wreck it. That's for the first year. And a seed incident—a dramatic development in the lives of some principal characters. They also had ideas on what would be interesting for people to do, such as recruiting Bluepills for Redpill status. I wrote a long memorandum of the meeting, then an outline, then a radically revised outline. They vetted each step, approving or striking down ideas. They're not micromanaging, but they're polling to make sure we don't stray from their logic or story values, as they should. If I had created something as valuable and popular as *The Matrix*, I'd protect my baby.

CGW: If I loved the first movie, but not the others, why should I play this game now? How is it going to draw me back into the *Matrix*?

PC: Part of the first movie's allure was its paranoia, its sense of huge mysteries. I think we can recapture that. Although players now know the premise of *The Matrix*, we will surprise them with some of the twists.

CGW: What are some of the stories we can look forward to?

PC: There are plenty of stories left to tell: A Citizen Kane-like examination of one of the film's characters, revealing his backstory. A murder mystery. A *Matrix*-gilted reality/weather crisis that I think will blow a few minds. A story of psychopathology born of a sensitive person's awareness that the *Matrix* is untrue—and her mistaken conclusion that other people aren't real, their pain is fake. Doorways into new worlds appearing in the *Negativity* worlds where physical laws are different—the implications of that. The problem of unregulated superpowers, and the corruption that follows. Persephane's obsession with love, and how it is cosciently thwarted. That's just my first year. I joke that there are a billion more stories in this naked city. *The Matrix* isn't over, not by a long shot. ■



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Reviews

The Good, the Bad, and the Mediocre



A downed ship at Pearl Harbor.



Holding the line during this night mission is one of the less thrilling parts of Pacific Assault.



Sleepy little villages like this are invariably crawling with the enemy. Guaranteed.

PUBLISHER: EA Games **DEVELOPER:** EA Games GAMES **SHOOTER (ESRB RATING: T REQUIRED)** Pentium 4 1.6GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 4.5GB Instal8, broadband connection for online play **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 3GHz, 1GB RAM, 128MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, LAN (2-32 players)

Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault

If only the real war had been this short



Capturing this airfield on Guadalcanal is one of the most satisfying sequences in the game.



Until you move past the event trigger in this trench, the game will keep spawning enemies and you'll keep piling them up like cordwood.



Men of Valor
Is this Vietnam shooter from former Medal of Honor designer a bungle in the jungle?



Axis & Allies
A battle-based board game makes the jump to real time...and falls flat on its face.



Sega of Azurem
This MMO beats EQ2 and WOW to sh--ives, but does it even matter?



Your LVT lurches through the pounding surf as bullets zip above your head. Manning the LVT's machine gun, you desperately mow down Japanese soldiers on a nearby pier even after you start taking hits. Your squad reaches the beachhead and you leap from the LVT, mody churning through the waist-deep water as bullets riddle your body. You scream for help, you search for medical aid, you scurry under the pier, and you die an ugly death, the unhappy memory of your drill sergeant's taunts ringing in your ears. You are dead. Dead, dead, dead. And there is nothing you can do.

Welcome to *Medal of Honor: Assault*, the latest iteration of the gold standard in WWII shooters and possessor of what is probably the most aggravating opening in a game ever. Nothing like popping that \$50 game into your PC, only to be forced to lose within two minutes. Fortunately, this is just about the only significant misstep in a game that is generally outstanding—at least while it lasts.

Back to basics

Turns out that unbriely death was just a foreshadowing of what your character, Tommy Conlon, is to face later during the conflict in the Pacific theater. Right after you die, you are whisked away back in time as you wistfully recall then plod through your prolonged and not-so-compelling basic training. This tutorial is decently handled, filling you in on the basics and introducing you to the cast of characters that will be fighting alongside you the rest of the game. Did you ever see that WWII movie with the squad of guys from different backgrounds? You know, the one with the smart-ass and that Italian guy with the thick Brooklyn accent? Yeah, those are your platoon buddies going overseas to die with you.

Once you do ship out, all hell breaks loose as the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor. Finally, gratifyingly, the game kicks into gear with a rapid-fire sequence of signature *Medal of Honor* scripted events. The game engine is a marvel, and while the lush density of the game's many jungle battlegrounds is going to get a lot of the attention, I don't know that the game is ever more impressive than it is in these opening levels, with countless Zeers tearing through the skies, men screaming orders or simply for help, and gigantic ships exploding then groaning painfully as they sink. *Medal of Honor* has staked its reputation on epic, cinematic action, and it delivers it here. Decisively.

Island hopping

The rest of the game tends to be more intimate, with your squad carefully working its way through the jungle, engaging enemy patrols or assaulting small enemy bases in pitched firefights. The enemy AI is



□ The banishing Japanese forces aren't the problem at Tarawa—it's the frequently unfair machine-gun nests and the fire that force you to keep reloading.

The vast bulk of the fighting is gripping, visually arresting, tough, and strategically challenging.

pretty good, flanking you, taking cover, retreating, or advancing dynamically depending on the current situation. About the only time the enemy AI aren't so smart is when they just charge en masse during one of the "hold off the waves" sequences the game relies upon a little too frequently. After the harrowing experience of securing an airfield on Guadalcanal, just holding the line in a shooting-gallery sequence is somewhat of a letdown.

In a nod to *Call of Duty: Pacific Assault* adds some vehicle-based rail sequences as well as some plane-gunners duty. These are generally a great deal of fun, with the notable exception of the few levels that have you flying a warplane. I understand it's a game, and I understand it's a game aping the most gung ho war movies ever, but I also understand that my infantryman would never be expected to suddenly pilot a fighter plane, let alone perform all the bombing runs and dogfighting while the other Allied pilots wait around. And I understand the plane handles like a turd with wings.

Still, the vast bulk of the fighting in *Pacific Assault* is gripping, visually arresting, tough, and strategically challenging. You can't change it, Tommy gun blazing—you'll have to pick your way through engagements, using cover and (ideally) flanking your enemy. Adding to the

strategy is the revamped health system. Instead of grabbing health power-ups, you have to request medical aid from a com-mand, and he has a limited supply of band-aids every level. The "should I heal or should I wait?" medical brinkmanship this brings to the game adds a sweet tension to meet every level.

Starting over

Actually, that sweet tension gets a little bitter during the final insanely brutal levels at Tarawa, where you died back at the beginning of the game. *Pacific Assault* is a fairly short game—maybe a dozen hours at the default setting—and these last levels feel less like an endgame challenge or a reflection of the viciousness of the actual battle than they do an attempt to oink out a few more minutes of gameplay. Hmm... maybe that's why the loading times seem to crawl as well.

It's safe to say EA has released the best WWII multiplayer game ever. It's just that that game is actually *Battlefield 1942*, not this one. *Pacific Assault* has a respectable number of multiplayer options, but really—why? The lag, more than the sparse competition, was killing me. This game is truly all about the cinematic, dramatic single-player campaign, and it is here that it shines, often brilliantly, but a little too briefly. Of all the WWII games storming store shelves this year, *Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault* is the cream of the crop. **Robert Coffey**

□ With maybe five health packs in the entire game, you have to rely on your com-mand to keep you alive.



Verdict ★★★★★:
The single player game is a lot of fun...while it lasts.



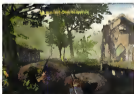
You know this makes you want to play *Wings*.

PUBLISHER: Vivendi Universal **DEVELOPER:** 2015 **GENRE:** Shooter **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Pentium 4 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 3GB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2.8GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, LAN (2-34 players)

Men of Valor

Charlie, Charlie everywhere!

While fending off subwoofer-rattling waves of attackers, you've just shot your 50th bad guy of the level. Checking your health, you consider that you need to look for some healing the next chance you get. Now you're running up to the next scripting trigger, wondering if maybe you



□ Your squadmates are smart enough to take cover, but not smart enough to fight effectively.

should trade your rifle for a submachine gun, when—whoosh!—a fugue washes over you. Where am I? Is it World War II or Vietnam? What game is this again? The name isn't much help. *Call of Honor*? *Men of Duty*? *Medal of Valor*? It's more brain fade than shell shock.

You can't really blame *Men of Valor* for not distinguishing itself. This sort of war-movie shooter has been run into the ground, dug back up, and run into the ground again, only to be dug up again for an expansion pack. Even though the developers at 2015 started it all, there's a sense that they're as much at a loss as everyone else: When it comes to making these games, what's left to do differently?

A different kind of war

At least *Men of Valor* avoids some of its competitors' mistakes. Unlike *Pacific Assault*, it's long and varied, this is a single-player

game with legs, and it keeps twisting as it goes, making you eager to see the next level. Unlike the first *Call of Duty*, it's got a hearty full-featured multiplayer game with a spread of distinct maps and interesting gameplay modes beyond simple death-matching. Unlike *Vietcong*, it's not dragged down by bad tech. In fact, when it comes to rendering tropical jungles, *Men of Valor*'s Unreal tech holds up admirably next to *Pacific Assault*'s fancy new engine. It's no *Far Cry*, but it's convincingly choked with detailed foliage.

Men of Valor's strong point is the way its gunfights tend toward a sense of realism, despite over-the-top pacing and body counts. The aiming system drives home the importance of finding a safe place to stop and line up a shot. There's a clever damage model that breaks up the action by forcing you to tend to wounds and check dead enemies. Perhaps second

only to Vietnam, *Men of Valor* feels like a gunfight rather than a shooting gallery.

The tension is helped by the fact that you can't save the game, but this doesn't necessarily improve the gameplay. The game is automatically saved when you cross invisible checkpoints. When you die, you have to restart at the last checkpoint. Although you'll rarely lose more than 10 minutes from this backtracking, you'll often find yourself playing the same 10 minutes over and over. Which wouldn't be so bad if you weren't the victim of *Men of Valor*'s cheap tricks.

Tiger trap

For instance, the Vietcong tend to come out of the jungle, literally springing from the woodwork, spawning right next to or behind you when you least expect it. They'll sometimes fire invincibly from behind the tree line. At times you have to memorize spawn sequences, as if you were learning



the pattern for a boss battle in some console game. It doesn't help that the action is channelled down a linear path, sometimes hemmed in with fallen logs or flimsy wooden gates as boundaries.

Then there's the inconsistent A.I., which at least has the presence of mind to take cover when it's randomly repositioning itself. But the A.I. is often happy simply to ignore an enemy within a stone's throw, which means you can't really rely on your squadmates to protect your flank, much less not get in the way of your gun. The whole thing has a hapless Keystone Cops quality that undermines *Men of Valor*'s great gunplay, making the action alternately frustrating and silly. And in the end, this is what you're likely to remember: *Men of Valor* was that Vietnam game that had some really cool set pieces with a bunch of dumb guys popping out of nowhere and getting in your way. **B** Tom Chick

Verdict ★★☆☆☆
Great gunplay, shme about the A.I.

When it comes to making these war-movie shooters, what's left to do differently?

WAR IS *!&##*%!

Most war-movie shooters have a bloodless T rating and a go-get-em-boys spirit. *Men of Valor*'s M rating allows for innocuous little red puffs when you shoot someone and lets 2015 touch on racial issues, opposition to the war, and drug use, although these are usually just bits of atmosphere between the gameplay.

But where the M rating is most noticeable is the language. The difference between playing *Men of Valor* and a T-rated shooter is like the difference between watching an hour-long drama on HBO and watching it on network television. *Men of Valor* uses profanity not for shock value, like *Killing*, but as a crucial part of its realistic dialogue. When a gunner in a helicopter sees a rocket while past, his response is "Holy ****, RPGs!" During a heated firefight, your men are screaming "F*** 'em up!" while the Vietcong are calling out "F*** you, GI!" Gratuitous? Not in the least. If anything, it's respectful. Thanks to 2015 for writing for an adult audience.



PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Aegis Game Action (ESRB RATING: E-10 REQUIRED) Platform: PC, 360, PS3, Wii, Xbox 360, PS3, PSP
RECOMMENDED: Gamepad MULTIPAYER: None

Pitfall: The Lost Expedition

I'm not wild about Harry

Call me grumpy, but I cringe when I see classic characters forced to wander to the fashions of the day. I didn't like Snoopy donning legwarmers in 1984 for *It's a Wonderful Life*, Charlie Brown, I don't like James Bond showing his skills at extreme sports; and I don't like seeing Pitfall Harry, star of Activision's classic Atari VCS game *Pitfall*, turned into a stylishly coiffed hipster youth with the snarky libido of Leisure Suit Larry and a penchant for hip-hop dancing.



D Pitfall Harry isn't the best of Harry. (Hard drive)

Pitfall: The Lost Expedition is Activision's latest attempt to squeeze some juke out of one of its finest—and most wrung-dry—franchises. It follows the standard mode of modern revivals of classic 1980s games: Pop the sucker into three dimensions and hope you can tempt nostalgic 30-somethings into buying it before they read a review telling them to save their money.

Save your money

This clunky 3D "collect the goodies" platformer has graphics reminiscent of a cheaply made Saturday-morning cartoon, insufferable cut-scenes, and—worst of all—keyboard controls that make it so painful to play that you'll shove it after your 10th accidental fall into a crocodile's jaws. The game opens with the opposite of a tutorial: With no explanation, you're dropped into the middle of a boss fight against a demon jaguar, meaning you'll be killed 20 times while you desperately try to learn the controls. Once you figure out how to stop running in circles (not eels), given the lousy camera system, the viewpoint-dependent

movement keys, and the charging demon jaguar, you'll eventually survive long enough to initiate a flashback explaining how Harry got into this scrape.

And that's the rest of the game: playing through the flashback. There are pits to jump over, lakes to swim, vines to swing on—and some of it might be fun if it weren't for the fact that controlling Harry's movement is practically impossible. You constantly have to inch the view left and right to line up just the right angles, and then you usually miss the jumps anyway. Of course, the game may play better with a gamepad rather than a keyboard (I didn't try), but that would only elevate it from "utterly unplayable" to "merely bad." Add in a console-style save system that only lets you save progress at the start of a level, and you've got a guaranteed recipe for infatuation. **C** Charles Adral

Verdict ★★★★★

Thank heavens the Atari VCS isn't alive to see this.

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Progenies GENE Adventure (ESRB RATING: T REQUIRED) Platform: PC, 360, PS3, Wii, Xbox 360, PS3, PSP
RECOMMENDED: Platform: PC, 360, PS3, Wii, Xbox 360, PS3, PSP MULTIPAYER: None

Secret of the Silver Earring

This Earring is a jewel

For avid readers of detective fiction, Sherlock Holmes is an icon of unmatched regard. So masterful are the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, any attempt to imitate him and add to the Holmes legacy is destined to fail. I was prepared to hate *Secret of the Silver Earring*, but this game taught me a lesson: One cannot judge a book—or a videogame—by its cover.

The story takes place over a period of several days. As Holmes, you acquire clues through solving puzzles, questioning key characters, and investigating curious locations. At the conclusion of each day, a short quiz is posed before you can proceed. You have access to your notebook while answering these questions—a smart

design choice that benefits those of us who aren't master detectives.

There is no feature in *Secret of the Silver Earring* that is not worthy of recognition. The puzzles fit perfectly into the fiction of the game, the cinematic work rivals that of any feature film, and the attention to detail in costume and set design would survive any historian's scrutiny. The story itself is inspired, and with any luck, this game is only the beginning of a rich and rewarding series of sleuthing gems. **A** Arcadian Del Sol

Verdict ★★★★★

The secret is out—this game is good. Very good.



D Thoughtful camerawork and smart presentation give the game a movie-like feel.



D For those of us who aren't Sherlock Holmes, a robust notebook feature records every clue and comment in the game.

With any luck, this game is only the beginning of a rich, rewarding series.

PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Maddox Games **GENRE** Flight sim **ESRB RATING** T **REQUIRE** Pentium III 60Hz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 150GB install
RECOMMENDED Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 1GB RAM, 512MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER** Internet, LAN (2-32 players)

Pacific Fighters

Patch it up and fly, Major!

Forget the obscure Russian fighters battling 26 subvariants of the Focke-Wulf 190. With *Pacific Fighters*, the most recent successor to the *I-2* series, we finally get the planes that those of us who grew up watching *Wack Sheep Squadron* have been dying for: Corsairs and Zeros! Not to mention Wildcats, Hellcats, Lightnings, Dauntlesses, Oscars, Vals, Tonys, and aircraft carriers to land them on. The *I-2* engine and the WWII Pacific theater go together like French fries and chili.

Hail to the fleet

Pacific Fighters can be installed as a standalone game or on top of the *I-2 Stormovik*, *Forgotten Battles—Ace* expansion pack. If you choose the latter option (making this an expansion pack for a game that was an expansion pack for an expansion pack), the new engine enhancements will be carried over to the earlier games, and those games' aircraft will be available for use in custom missions in *Pacific Fighters*, which ultimately gives you a grand total of over 150 flyable aircraft. Of these, more than 40 (actually, variants of about 20 planes) are new to *Pacific Fighters*. Disappointingly, the wide variety of flyable planes doesn't include torpedo bombers such as the *Devastator*, *Avenger*, or *Kate*. The latter two are promised in an upcoming patch, as the developer allegedly ran out of room to ship planes on the two CDs allotted by Ubisoft.

Along with missing planes, there are all kinds of signs that this sim was rushed out the door. Odd combinations such as marines flying P-39s at Midway, British B-29 bomber raids on Tokyo, and rows of parked Russian B-17s will annoy aviation buffs. The AI's suicidal tendencies from earlier games in the series remain and are exacerbated by a desire to fly directly into mountains.

Bumpy air

There are a few other things to nitpick over—the view system remains frustrating, the time acceleration/skip feature can leave you staring at planes on autopilot or a blank screen with a ticking clock for many minutes at a time, and some missions lack action. And yet, this is still one of the most enthralling sims since 1942: *Pacific Air War*. The thrill of bringing a damaged plane back aboard a tossing carrier deck, the excite-



The slew of planes includes such unusual craft as the *Puffo*, a float-equipped Zero.

The *I-2* engine and the WWII Pacific theater go together like French fries and chili.

ment of dive-bombing a Japanese carrier, and the shock of re-creating Pearl Harbor are experiences you won't want to miss. New special effects combine with ultra-detailed planes and new ship-damage effects to make this the best-looking combat sim yet.

Like in earlier games in the series, you'll find a quick mission generator, a full-blown mission editor, numerous single missions, and dynamic campaigns (be sure to download the campaign update from pacificfighter.com, as it addresses many of the mission complaints). The game shines best in multiplayer, where head-to-head carrier battles

can contain up to 32 players.

Maddox has done a superb job of supporting previous games in the series, releasing patches that contain not just fixes, but new features and planes as well. Let's hope this trend continues with *Pacific Fighters*, because with some AI tweaks, flyable torpedo bombers, and various bug fixes, this game would be a sim junkie's dream.

By Denny Adkin

Verdict ★★★★★
 It's 80 percent of the best Pacific sim yet.



Some familiar historical paint jobs are included.



Carrier landings are as thrilling as combat.

PUBLISHER: Matrix Games **DEVELOPER:** Strategic Studies Group **GENRE:** War **ESRB RATING:** None **REQUIRED:** Pentium II 400, 128MB RAM, 500MB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 600, 256MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER:** E-mail (2 players)

Decisive Battles of World War II: Battles in Normandy

A cut above the rest



Battles in Normandy may be the best operational-level computer war game on the market today.

Most of the system is standard war-game fare—it's turn-based, units have varying combat strengths based on historical records, and combat results are determined by virtually indiscoverable tables that take into account everything from terrain to artillery support.

And yet *BNW* sets itself apart by successfully straddling the fine line between playability and detail. It avoids the senseless minutiae of the *HPS* games by using regimental instead of company-sized units, but it also gives strategic choices by accounting for factors like supply lines, air power, and weather. It even has AI that presents the illusion of competence. Although it tends to counterattack too aggressively and can't recognize potential encirclements, the AI is good enough to exploit some of your mistakes and provide an entertaining game—no small feat. *BNW* has several improvements over previ-

ous games in the series: chiefly, options for naval units, artillery interdiction, carpet-bombing, and amphibious operations. Amphibious landings are the most interesting part of the lot. The Normandy coast is lined with forts and strong points that have a good chance of causing casualties in units landing nearby. The Allies must use warships to clear the beaches, but there are never enough ships, so they must decide which landing zone to concentrate on and how many casualties they're willing to risk. Done incorrectly, entire units can disappear before they can fire back a shot.

There are quite a few scenarios included in the game, from small divisional affairs to a monster 32-day scenario of the entire Overlord campaign. Most of scenarios are balanced and compelling; the Allies must generally contend with supply problems and bad weather while the Germans must decide between holding ground or preserving their limited number of troops. Nothing is perfect, and the game has a few



Big ships go boom—the Royal Navy bombards Caen.

minor bugs. It's also a bit pricey at \$59.99 for download, but for computer war gamers, there really isn't anything better out there. Note: *Battles in Normandy* is only available online at www.matregames.com. **DI LUO**

Verdict ★★★★★

Short of pushing cardboard chips, you won't find a better war game.

PUBLISHER: Games Plus Software **DEVELOPER:** SO **GENRE:** Third-person shooter **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 2GBH install, 32MB videocard **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 2GBH videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** None

Conflict: Vietnam

It doesn't completely shoot itself in the foot

The fact that *Conflict: Vietnam* is actually competent is somehow a compliment. It doesn't have an overly obnoxious or offensive story line, and it has some neat ideas—which are tempered by some annoying flaws.

Like the two Desert Storm games that preceded it, *Vietnam* is a third-person shooter, this time set during the Vietnam War—which, of course, means you'll be tramping around in a jungle environment while listening to Jefferson Airplane. What makes it better than most is that it has the squad-management system. You're in charge of four soldiers that you can switch between at any time. When you're controlling one, you'll issue orders to the others. This can sometimes be a bit of a pain since it requires switching views and making sure you have the right command high-

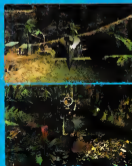
lighted; it's often better just to switch characters rather than give orders. As your characters progress through the game, you will earn points to apply toward various skills, which gives the game something of an action-RPG element.

The controls can be semicrunky, both for issuing orders and for things like manual aiming. The other major annoyance is the frustrating save system: You're given only a whopping two saves per mission, which is nearly as bad as having none.

Want a decent Vietnam shooter with a crappy save system and problematic controls? Look no further. **Thierry Nguyen**

Verdict ★★★★★

A flawed Vietnam shooter that kinda, sorta rises above other games in the genre.





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ATI.com

PUBLISHER: Atari **DEVELOPER:** TimeGate **GENRE:** Real-Time Strategy **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 550MHz, 32MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 1.4GB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2GHz, 32MB RAM, 128MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, LAN (2-6 Players)

Axis & Allies

War and Resemblance

The first thing to know about *Axis & Allies* is that it has no direct similarities to the Hasbro board game of the same name. This *Axis & Allies* is a real-time strategy "inspired" by the tabletop classic. Of the three play modes, only one, *World War II*, bears a resemblance to the old warhorse. In practice, though, even this mode plays more like *Risk*, with battles decided by dice rolls and a single-minded focus on holding territories.

The campaign mode features a short tutorial and a separate operation for each of the Axis and Allied powers. There are a heck of a lot of missions, and they'll carry you to every theater of the war, allowing you to command all five major powers. Each side has proprietary units that look, sound, and shoot like the real thing. Germans get Tiger tanks for their heavy armor; Soviets get a quartet of lumbering T-34s. Factions also get a selection of leaders (such as Nimitz for the U.S. and Yamamoto for Japan) who have special abilities that can help fend off or annihilate enemies. The campaigns will rotate you among all the generals, but in skirmish, multiplayer, and *World War II* modes you choose just one.

Still, despite the variety of locales, leaders, and units, individual missions virtually always involve the same drill: destroy the enemy or capture and hold certain map points. Storm the beach on D-Day... and capture some



❑ The requisite D-Day mission plays about the same as all the other missions—and that's too bad.

locations, sack Stalingrad... and hold some locations, retake two Jims and...well, you get the idea. This lack of imaginative significantly hobbles what could have been one of the more robust RTS campaigns to come along since *WarCraft III*.

The Wince of War

Axis & Allies' engine is lifted directly from TimeGate's *Kohan II*—right down to the hot-keys. But if you liked *Kohan II*, don't lock-and-load just yet; *Axis & Allies'* game mechanics differ notably, and not for the better.

First, *Axis & Allies'* AI is A-crappy. I have rarely encountered a game that evinces more clearly the rigid, stimulus-response nature of algorithmic thought. Dispatch even a few troops against the computer, and it will reflexively send all nearby units to counter. Obviously, this puts taking enemy positions in the same league as a Ken Jennings vs. Paris Hilton think-off. And that's with the difficulty set to "hard." Chunky AI is such a fundamental flaw in a game like this that it robs the single-player of any suspense, and winning simply becomes a chore.

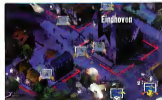
Add to this deficiency other weak elements of the game engine: controls that obscure 30 percent of the viewable area, needless complexity instead of real depth, fram-



❑ *Axis & Allies* does have some nice touches, such as the way terrain has an immediate and recognizable effect on troops' movement and combat abilities.

erate and stability issues, the overwhelming power of early infantry rushes, et al., and there's not much left to pin a medal on. Multiplayer offers some solace, but since there are so many other options in this genre, you're better off spending your money on a game that provides a more gratifying solo experience. If you absolutely must have everything WWII, consider *Axis & Allies*. Otherwise, look elsewhere, soldier. **Eric Neigher**

Axis & Allies' A.I. is A-crappy.



❑ The lack of viewable area can cause real trouble. Here, so many units are off the screen I can't even get a good assessment of how the battle is going.

Verdict ★★★☆☆

Answers the call of duty on the battlefield, but lacks the heart of iron necessary to win a Medal of Honor.

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PUBLISHER: Tri Synergy **D**EVELOPER: Nevra **GENRE**: MMORPG **ESRB RATING**: T **REQUIRED**: Pentium III 3GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 5GB install, 56K Internet connection **RECOMMENDED**: Pentium 4 2GHz, 128MB videocard, broadband Internet connection **MULTIPLAYER**: Massive

The Saga of Ryzom

Too bad you can't craft a bug zapper



Tryker is a gorgeous, whimsical water world where the fish and the flora change colors with the season.

The story of *The Saga of Ryzom*'s planet Atya is brief. One of Atya's four civilizations explored the planet's core, known as the Prime Roots, and disturbed aliens called the kitin. All four civs drove these aliens back into the Roots and then returned to their homelands. Each civ still battles stray kitins as well as its own flora and fauna, and that's where you jump into this ambitious MMO.

There are no class restrictions; every character begins with the same stats and potential for advancement in melee, magic, crafting, and harvesting. Each civ mainly offers a unique look and some different plants and animals to fight. Tryker is a lake region with art-nouveau architecture and an anime-looking populace. Meti's woodlands reveal buildings carved into trees and classically featured characters. Pyros is a desert with roughened warriors, and Zora's jungles harbor a blue-skinned race of humanoids with masks melded over their faces. Each civ is stunning and alive with insects, swaying leaves, and seasonal changes that affect harvests.

You'll only be fighting in your chosen homeland, though, unless you make the long trek through the deadly Roots or other dangerous areas to reach another civ's mainland, or you fill another of your five character slots with a different civ character.

A living world

There are no treasure chests or loot in Atya; you're immediately plunged into an organic, self-supporting planet. You can slaughter animals for parts and harvest materials like amber, wood, and shells. NPCs hawk crude items, but real fighting power comes from player-crafted articles like the armor, melee weapons, and guns that are sold over region chat. They're made using animal parts and harvested goods, and the crafting system is clean and customizable. There is costly level grinding involved with crafting, though, and while harvesting offers many prospecting and foraging options, it is complex and largely unexplained in the uninformative game manual. Thankfully, the



Tryker's bright visuals and anime characters make it a fun place to battle, but its harvestable materials seem scarcer than the other civs.

With all the bugs in Ryzom, it's no wonder enemies like the kitin resemble huge insects.



I had fun in the desert creating custom spells with my Fyros magician until inventory bugs prevented me from making the spells I wanted.



Zora's jungles have an appealing Asian flare, and their tribal armor is unique.



With *Ayzoem's* broken conning system (upper left), I never know which new aliens are going to bury me while I'm prospecting for a dig.

GMs are knowledgeable and quick, and the friendly player community is helpful, too.

You can hit the 250 level cap in all four skill trees, and leveling in magic, melee, crafting, and harvesting always results in earning skill points for each of those categories that are used to purchase new talents from trainers. Gun ammo patterns and magic training are the most costly, but an upcoming patch should lower magic costs by the time you read this. All skills can be customized with building blocks called stanzas, which allow for more powerful or less draining actions and attacks. You can chain spell effects for more damage or add an after-dodge stipulation to a melee attack so it doesn't use stamina. This emphasis on customization even extends to harvesting, allowing you to tweak it to get the results you want.

Bigger, better, faster

You will love becoming a powerful magician with high hit points who can wield two-handed weapons if you so desire. However, you won't like that you must take crafting because of inventory bugs. Certain items won't show up in your inventory, and you sometimes won't be able to make player trades until you craft something first. Additionally, there is an armor and weapon degradation bug affecting leger teams. My Matis character was part of an exciting kitin reinvader, but her new armor's hit points plummeted to near zero in less than two hours on a six-person team.

With all the bugs in *Ayzoem*, it's no wonder the kitin resemble huge insects. The conning system fails to duplicate mob

agro levels, and there are visual glitches when loading the game. My friends last shrunk then grew back by itself, too.

Nevrax is supposedly fixing these bugs, as well as the sporadic lag on its lone North American server, but there are other signs of a rushed launch, too. *Tryker's* harvestable materials seem sparser than the other civs'. All civs' quests are of the UPS variety, although they're brief and pay well. Only Matis has a PVP arena; the other civs just offer spontaneous dueling. The GMs host special events, such as Matis' kitin invasion, but Zora's event when I visited was just a hunt for a lost girl. Zora's player pop/lebon is so low that maybe one missing person is as big an emergency there as an entire alien invasion is in Matis, but it still seems like Matis gets preferential treatment.

There are no equipment losses, level losses, or corpse runs when you die in any civ, death XP debt is burned swiftly, and if a healer resurrects you quickly,

there's no debt whatsoever. This lack of stress, combined with feeling like an intrinsic part of a real world, makes the customizable battle options continually enjoyable. Moreover, stealthily exploring the heart-pounding Prime Roots area (not only to visit other civs but also to harvest its prized materials) is a blast. If a few of the civ and skill balance issues can be corrected and *Nevrax* can get some programming exterminators in soon, the kitin will be the only bugs left to fear in *Ayts*. **Derrick Cook**

Verdict ★★★★★

The only thing missing from *Ayzoem's* customizable battling, harvesting, and crafting systems is a lack of bothersome bugs.



The crafting window is pretty self-explanatory, and most forged parts can be used to make armor, weapons, and jewelry.



I don't want to say Fyros and Matis are going to the dogs, but I'm considering a "darker by ginges" tattoo for my forehead.

PUBLISHER: Koei **DEVELOPER:** Koei Computer Entertainment Tokyo **GENRE:** Action-horror **ESRB RATING:** M **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 2GB install **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER:** None

Silent Hill 4: The Room

Room with a view...of hell

PC gamers bemoaning the demise of point-and-click adventures need look no further than the survival-horror genre to find evidence of life after death. These zombie-filled exploits retain the treasured highs (detective work, deep characterization, an emphasis on narrative) and frustrating lows (crap gameplay, arbitrary puzzles, key fetching) of classic PC adventure titles. Enter *Silent Hill*—a series openly acknowledged amongst the console-gaming set as pushing the envelope of digital horror.

Continuing the series' wicked tradition of twisting the seemingly ordinary into unsettling objects of fear and discomfort, *The Room* puts you into the jeans of everyman Henry Townsend, who awakens one day from a horrific nightmare only to find himself locked inside his own apartment. His windows have been sealed by an unknown force, and likewise, his front door has been comically locked from the inside by an impossibly over-the-top web of chains and padlocks. His entire apartment also begins to gradually mutate: A handgun materializes behind a shelf, phone lines die, mysterious deaths, and a man-sized hole

suddenly carves itself out in his bathroom. In short, his place is cursed, and the answer to the riddle lies on the other side of this mysterious dark hole in the wall.

Despite this magnificent hook and some truly frightening moments, *The Room* tragically displays all the sloppiness of a quick-and-dirty console port. Since the game essentially uses the same graphics as its PlayStation 2 counterpart (except at higher resolutions on the PC), the textures lack clarity, while the overall environmental detail is kept to a crude minimum. Even worse is the game's one-two punch of awkward controls and a useless camera system, which creates additional, albeit unintended, tension and horror as you helplessly try to keep *Silent Hill*'s undead bestiary at bay.

If you can look past *The Room*'s technical shortcomings, there are some incredibly terrifying episodes to be had. The game contrasts two distinct perspectives to great effect: third person when you're roaming the dreamlike metaworld and first person when you return, confined as ever, to your tiny apartment. As a clever tribute to Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, you can even



look out the window of your one-bedroom abode to see that the world, despite your supernatural predicament, continues to carry on with its daily routine. Finally, producer Akira Yamaoka's subtle yet dynamic sound design in *The Room* completes the game's somber and oppressive mood. When it comes to sensory atmospherics, *The Room* is an unsurpassed masterpiece—just be aware that its remarkable ambience comes at a significant price. **Che Chou**

Verdict ★★★★★
Yet another great console game undermined by a sloppy port.

PUBLISHER: Activision **DEVELOPER:** Neversoft **GENRE:** Action sports **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium 4 900MHz, 256MB RAM, 2GB videocard, 2.5GB install **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 1GHz, 512MB RAM, 512MB videocard, gamepad **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, LAN (2-8 players)

Tony Hawk's Underground 2

Skate or die...or something



Two minutes into *Tony Hawk's Underground 2*, some dude slices his pants while another guy—in a body cast, no less—flips me off. At least for a change of pace, this happens in a game, not my life. OK, so *Tony's* newest game may be a little crass, but that doesn't stop it from being an evolutionary omelette from the past few incarnations.

By this point, the mechanics of pulling off tricks have been perfected. The physics and handling for skating have been so thoroughly refined that at this point Neversoft needs to focus only on improving the graphics and adding features—which it has done an admirable job of here. It's obvious that careful attention was paid to the PC port, as it's a clear step above its console cousins.

The story mode is funny in a *Viva La Dime* sort of way: in classic mode, you can coast around the various levels. If that's not enough, you can create your own skate park with the handy in-game editor.

Thumbs up to the eclectic soundtrack, too—nothing's quite like grinding a rail and hearing tomatoes at a fat man while bumping along to "Ring of Fire" and "That's Life." The only conceivable downside is that you absolutely need a gamepad to play—as if you were gonna try handclimbs with a keyboard and mouse. **Darren Gladstone**

Verdict ★★★★★

For PC skate punks, a great game, for aging former thrashers, a painful reminder that we're old.



It's funny: I can rent my frustration on my keyboard and in the game at the same time.

PUBLISHER Myelin Media **DEVELOPER** Tilted Mill **GENRE** Strategy **ESRB RATING** E **REQUIRED** Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM (256MB for Windows XP), 1GB hard, 32MB videocard **RECOMMENDED** Pentium 4 2.0GHz, 512MB RAM, 4MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER** None

Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile

Pharaoh gets a phace-lift

It looks and plays like the Impressions city-building games (the developer, Tilted Mill, is made up of former Impressions employees), but *Children of the Nile* is fairly different at its core. Tilted Mill has made some large-scale changes to the way the city operates, and everything from basic commerce to trade has been significantly revamped.

New Pyramid Scheme

As in previous city-building games, you must ensure your people have easy access to the things they want and need—you'll create farms and shops to meet basic needs and then satisfy more advanced desires with medical facilities and places of worship.

In earlier games, the goods and services would be brought to the people. *Children of the Nile* has changed this, fundamentally altering the game. If a farmer wants pottery, someone from his house must go to the pottery shop and buy it. Likewise, production has been changed. Previously, a shop gathered raw materials and an artisan turned them into goods. Now, the artisan is also the gatherer. Households work together, so the husband may gather flax while the wife turns it to linen. The end result, though, is significantly more strategy involved in city planning. Shops must be near raw materials for more effective production, and customers must be near the shops. Every moment someone is out purchasing baskets is a moment they aren't working.

This is a good model, but the AI isn't up to it. Households complain about a lack of goods when all the shops in the neighborhood are fully stocked. Residents take lengthy routes to their destinations or simply get stuck somewhere and don't move until you stop and fix the problem.

The economic system has been overhauled as well. Food is the only currency, which makes farms the most important element of your city. Noble houses support a certain number of farms, and as their prosperity increases, they can support more farms.



■ Noble houses support your farms, which are the backbone of your economy.



■ Exploration is important and will bring you new wares and supplies from traders and building sites.



■ Providing your residents with pieces of worship, such as cult temples and shrines, is vital.

Your people need enough food to eat, but you must also allocate food for expeditions (exploration plays a big role in the game) and for " upkeep" of sites under your control outside of the city. These sites will supply you with necessary materials, but if you can't pay the upkeep, the supplies stop coming.

Queen for a day

Your primary goal is gaining prestige, chiefly through exploring, building monuments, or improving your palace. Unfortunately, prestige decreases over time. This is really frustrating because you must keep expanding and exploring to keep your prestige high, and it's easy to overextend yourself. Building monuments is a good way to add prestige, but

even small pyramids take a great deal of time to complete, meaning you can't just let them be built while you admire your burgeoning town.

The biggest problem is how poorly the game runs. Well-populated cities bogged down the test system (which met the recommended specs), making it almost impossible to play the game with a large town. If the technical problems can be worked out, *Children of the Nile* will be a worthy heir to the city-building series. Some changes are a bit frustrating, but the new distribution models and the emphasis on exploration add some great new challenges. **—Ron Duin**

Verdict ★★☆☆

A good successor to the city-building series; unfortunately, it's marred by some technical problems.

Everything from basic commerce to trade has been significantly revamped.

PUBLISHER: Nordic Crusto **DEVELOPER:** Digital Reality **GENRE:** RTS **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 1GB install, 64MB videocard
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet (2-8 players)

D-Day

Not so much the Longest Day as the most tedious one

Just when it looked like the scarp heap of Normandy-based games was in danger of going a full month without any new refuse to toss atop it, along comes *D-Day*. Thank you, Digital Reality, thank you so very much.

From Humble beginnings

D-Day is based on an engine first used for *Desert Rats vs Afrika Korps*—an unexceptional 3D RTS detailing the struggles between Rommel and Montgomery in North Africa. Like its predecessor, *D-Day* focuses on many tactical elements and ignores traditional RTS standbys like resource management. All units have various combat strengths, weapons, spotting rings, and special abilities. Tanks have weaker side armor, can dig in, and even have different hit locations: Blowing up the caterpillar tracks stops them from moving, while destroying their turrets takes out the main weapons. Infantry, on the other hand, can go prone, perform special tasks like removing mines or setting demo charges, and can be used to mount vehicles and weapon platforms to increase performance. These details add extra layers to the gameplay, but they don't make the game more fun.

While *D-Day* is mired in the minutiae of reality, the gameplay actually bears little resemblance to it. The 12-mission campaign that stretches from the initial airborne landings to the Caen and Falaise operations is at best "inspired" by historical events. Rather than playing out like real battles, they're puzzle scenarios more akin to the *Commandos* games.

Enigma machine

You begin each mission with a few units and are given difficult objectives against overwhelming odds, even in missions where you're supposed to be routing the remnants of Nazi resistance. By completing secondary or hidden objectives, you might get more resources, but the mission will still depend on finding the optimal (and often only) path to victory after many restarts. The solution usually involves crawling forward with scouts to spot enemy positions, pounding

A mangled Nazi tank blazes away at Allied armored columns.



Historical footage and interviews with veterans make *D-Day* somewhat more bearable.

those positions with artillery, and then repeating the process. Making matters worse is a poorly designed interface that requires too many clicks to execute units' special abilities. Tedium might be a part of real combat, but it shouldn't be a part of gaming.

Also, the AI is nonexistent and heavily scripted. It will attack aggressively if you

enter its detection range but will sit idly while its comrades a short distance away are blasted into oblivion.

Not everything about *D-Day* is horrible, and it deserves points for its presentation. The 3D graphics are pleasant, and the tank models are very detailed. There's a lot of historical footage, interviews with veterans, and historical data explaining the weapons, soldiers, and battles of the *D-Day* campaign. This isn't enough to save a bad game, but it at least shows that the developers cared about their project.

A good strategy game should not be slavishly attached to a "perfect solution" for every scenario. By focusing on the trivialities of equipment and weapons, *D-Day* loses sight of the primary draw of strategy games: the ability for players to make intelligent choices that affect a game's outcome. With *D-Day*, Digital Reality has pressed a second-rate puzzle game into service as a historical strategy game. **D** **Dr (Day) Lao**

Verdict ★★☆☆

It's *Commandos* with dozens of units and none of the character.

Not everything about *D-Day* is horrible, and it deserves points for its presentation.

PUBLISHER EA Sports **DEVELOPER** EA Sports **GENRE** Sports **ESRB RATING** R **REQUIRED** Pentium III 600, 128MB RAM, 32MB vram, 1.5GB inst'd
RECOMMENDED Pentium 4 1.4 GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB vram **MULTIPLAYER** Internet, LAN (2-6 players), Hotseat (2-6 players)

NHL 2005

Lock it out

As if the current NHL lockout and the possibility of the entire hockey season getting scrapped aren't bad enough, EA Sports adds insult to injury with the release of **NHL 2005**.

New additions to this year's model include the World Cup of Hockey, in which the top eight teams relive the recent nationals, and the face-off playbook, which is perfect for the puck-dropping pundits. There's also a wild arcade-style game called Free4All that lets four players face off against one another using half a rink and one goalie. It's fun.

NHL 2005 resolves earlier player-bunching issues to great effect. Gamers now control the types of shots their players use, including wrist, slap, and wraparound shots. EA has also added open-ice control, which allows players to control additional skaters for improved defensive positioning, pass-

ing, and scoring opportunities.

Unfortunately, the defensive game has been ramped up significantly. Defensive players always seem to be in the right position at the right time, they come out of nowhere and block passes, create flagrant holds and illegal hooks, or just slam your players into the boards any time you move past the blue line. Scoring a goal in front of the crease is damn near impossible at the Medium and High difficulty settings. Crashing the net is the only way you'll even get a chance—and even that isn't guaranteed. Everything runs at supersonic ramming speed, and those defenders just love smashing your players into the boards.

With all the available options, you'd think you would be able to define the level of action and maybe disable these superhuman zones. Unfortunately, this can be accom-



Q What good is creating a team of all-stars if they can't score because the lone A.I. defenseman denies them due to his superhuman power?

plished only by turning the game down to Easy. At that point, all you'll get is the ridiculous farce of running up the final score to 17.

NHL 2005's real merit lies in its online play and the new Free4All mode, the raw power and speed of the single-player game is way overdone. EA Sports should be penalized for game misconduct. **R** Raphael Libertore

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

Last year's NHL king of the ice is this year's muddy slush.

definitive
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O N L I N E

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STARRING: LAURENCE FISHBURNE, MONICA BELLUCCI, HAROLD PERRINEAU, NINA GAVE, LAMBERT WILSON, COLLIN CHOU, MARY ALICE, HARRY LERWIK, AND TANVEER AHMAD. MUSIC BY: DON DAVIS. PRODUCED BY: MONOLITH PRODUCTIONS. DIRECTED BY: THE WACHOWSKI BROTHERS.



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VIDEOCARD THUNDERDOME

We test the latest and greatest and tell you what to buy



Should you go with an ATI- or Nvidia-based graphics solution? Which manufacturer offers the best options? Are you on a budget or free to spend? This month, CGW's intrepid Tech Commando tested more than 20 different videocards, force-feeding them high concentrations of textures, fill-rates, and algorithms to see which yakked first. And when the crying and whimpering finally stopped,

Raphael made the tough calls, singling out the best of the best for both AGP and PCI Express graphics solutions. And then—because he cares—Raphael tested the sexiest widescreen LCDs for showing off all that dazzling rendering muscle. So why haven't you turned the page yet?

Inside 



ASUS PRODUCT: Asus PRODUCT: Extreme AX800 XT 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express PRICE: \$499

BEST AND BRIGHTEST

The PCI Express poster boy



This Radeon X800 XT copy from Asus is golden. Ignore the fact that it offers the same upscale packaging, features, software bundle, and webcam as its

V9999 GeForce cousin. Simply put, the bad boy Extreme AX800 XT kicks ass. Both 3D GameGauge and 3DMark05 bench scores prove this, with the AX800 XT posting the biggest numbers (or darn near close to) of all the cards tested. Every game test scored well, and there was little or no video noise at the 1280x1024 resolution (2xAA, 4xAF). For fun, I cranked this baby up to a full 1600x1280 resolution and still enjoyed the ride. That's not so surprising when you consider that the AX 800XT's 520MHz engine clock and 1120Hz memory clock (560MHz DDR) allow games to run at higher resolutions with ease.

Case modders are going to love this card as well. With a psychedelic orange glow, it cries out to be slapped into a clear case.

SCORE: ★★★★★



ASUS PRODUCT: Asus PRODUCT: V9999 Gamers Edition Nvidia GeForce 6600 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU PRICE: \$440

AGP BURNER

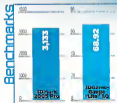
They don't call it "Gamers Edition" for nothing



Asus makes a slew of Nvidia and ATI graphics cards, and we tested several. The Asus V9999 isn't its fastest product, but it still runs with the best of them—only two other videocards scored higher 3D Marks than the V9999's 3,133. The V9999 also showed remarkable 3D GameGauge benchmark scores for possessing smaller engine and memory clocks than the BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC. As a matter of fact, it scored a whole point higher (79.02 versus 77.96).

Asus' nice software suite includes games like *Deus Ex: Invisible War* and *WarCraft III*, as well as Asus' very own overclocking utility. The V9999 also comes with an online webcam for showing friends just how stupid you look while getting gibbed in a *Doom 3* multiplayer session. Considering its lower price tag and big-time performance value, the V9999 makes for an excellent upgrade choice.

SCORE: ★★★★★



MANUFACTURER: XFX Force PRODUCT: Nvidia GeForce 6600 GT
 128MB GDDR3 PCI Express PRICE: \$149

THE FORCE IS STRONG IN THIS ONE

A budget card that doesn't skimp

XFX Force is one of the newer Nvidia partners bringing high performance to gamers, and its budget 6600 GT for PCI Express proves it. Benchmarks for the card, with its 400MHz RAMDACs, high-speed GDDR3 memory, and DirectX 9 Shader Model 3.0 support, run slightly faster than their GeForce 6200 AGP counterparts—particularly in *Far Cry* benchmarking, especially on the Regulator and Island maps. *Doom 3* at a 1280x1024 resolution with 2xAA and 4xAF ran at a very smooth 47fps to 50fps.

Give XFX Force points for its UDA (Nvidia Unified Driver Architecture), online support, and software bundle. Who wouldn't like having *Commander 3*, *NASCAR Thunder 2004*, and *X2: The Threat* out of the box? Add the Vivo connector for watching HDTV broadcasts or editing video, and you've got a super choice for the gamer on a budget.

SCORE: ★★★★★



MANUFACTURER: ATI PRODUCT: Radeon X800 XT PCI
 Express 256MB GDDR3 PRICE: \$450

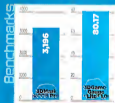
CHEWS UP POLYGONS AND ASKS FOR MORE

ATI's PCI Express monster



ATI and Nvidia have been battling for king-of-the-hill honors seemingly forever, and that ceaseless battle is good news for gamers. ATI is the first graphics card manufacturer to introduce a PCI Express videocard for gamers. The X800 XT is its flagship PCI Express graphics card, and with a 500MHz core clock and SmartShader HD, Hyper Z, and 3Dc technologies, it's a powerhouse performer. Whereas Nvidia utilizes a Vertex Shader 3.0 feature for geometry instancing, ATI actually uses its own specification, which goes by the Shader Model 2.0b route. Simply put, the ATI videocard just garners some of the fastest frames rates of the roundup. This overfast performance was especially evident in the *Far Cry* benchmark—and at higher resolutions, to boot. The X800 XT also comes ready for HDTV support for gamers dabbling in the convergence arena. All in all, the X800 XT is a standout.

SCORE: ★★★★★





▶ **MANUFACTURER:** Gigabyte **PRODUCT:** N68T256DH **Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB DDR2 PRICE:** \$450

GOOD, NOT GREAT

Gigabyte's GeForce just misses the mark

▶ The N68T256DH offers the best performance and style of any of the GeForce 6800 series cards. It features a brass-colored heat sink and fan on one side and a heat sink with stovepipes on the other, which separates it from the standard Nvidia 6800 series design. Interestingly, the fan sits on top of the card and glows neon blue.

Even though this card arrives with standard clock speed settings, it comes packaged with Gigabyte's V-Tuner 2 Plus overclocking utility for when you get an urge to push framerates in *Doom 3* (which is included). The Gigabyte's 3DMark05 of 3,177 ranks near the top of the scores among cards tested this month. *Halo* and *Doom 3* benchmarking aside, the *UT2004* and *Rankfile* scores were disappointing for a card as fast as this. Toss those scores out, though, and you have a card with stable performance and great potential for the overclocking enthusiast.

SCORE: ★★★★★



▶ **MANUFACTURER:** BFGTech **PRODUCT:** BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC AGP 256MB DDR2 GPU PRICE: \$499

BIG FUN GAMING

What else would BFGTech stand for?



▶ BFGTech hits the ground running with its overclocked GeForce 6800 Ultra OC GPU. Having an engine clock stretching past the 425MHz mark definitely helps push the envelope: The Ultra OC earned the fastest AGP (non-water-cooled) videocard scores of the roundup, flat-out dusting every competitor in every bench test, including ATI's top dog, the Radeon X800 XT PCI Express card. Watching this card chew up *UT2004* and *Far Cry* frames was incredibly impressive. Even the *Halo* scores at 12x10 (2xAA, 4xAF) moved past the 100fps barrier. The Ultra OC also features dual DVI, HD, and S-Video ports. The big bummer is that it takes up two expansion slots. But with a lifetime warranty and 24-hour technical support, I can live with one fewer PCI slot.

VoodooPC supplied us with a water-cooled FX-55 Rage housing a BFGTech 6800 Ultra OC with waterblock (basically the same card but with water cooling) and it stole the show with crazy *Doom 3* benchmarks. However, you can't touch this badass board unless your system can handle a 550-watt power supply and water-cooling setup.

SCORE: ★★★★★



MAKING SENSE OF THE LANDSCAPE

OK, so which card should you buy?



After putting more than 2D videocards through a beuising test suite that included our very own 3D GameGauge Lite 1.0 (run at 1280x1024 with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled), just which kick-ass videocard upgrade would I put in my system? My answer depends, as yours would, on what kind of computer we're talking about and how fat my wallet is.

For an AGP solution, I'd stick with the Asus GeForce V9999 Gamers Edition for any of the Maignear, Alienware, or BYC Vision AGP rigs I keep in the Cave, aka my garage turned computer lab containing more than 30 networked PCs and Macs. The card is fast, reliable, and easy to install, and the scales definitely tip in the V9999's favor due to its nice software bundle and exceptional Game Doctor overclocking app. Just make sure your power supply can handle the load.

On the other hand, if I had the bucks and a PCI Express mobo, my top choice would be the Asus Extreme AX800XT, hands down. Hey, there's reason it's the only 5-star card in what turned out to be a group of more-than-decent options.

And should my bank account for the Cave move south, I've still got options. The XFX Force 6600 GT offers fast, reliable, and top-

rated performance for less cash than the top guns demand. Oh, and for those closet Mac addicts like me, there's nothing better than the Nvidia 6800 Ultra DDL for playing with the big boys, especially if you can afford the 30-inch Apple Cinema Display to go with it. **©Raphael Liberatoro**

If I had the bucks and a PCI Express mobo, my top choice would be the Asus Extreme AX800XT, hands down.



GEEK SPEAK Graphic mumbo-jumbo decoded

RESOLUTION	The sharpness and clarity of an image on a screen or printer, measured in the number of dots or pixels across the entire screen.
PIXEL	Short for picture element, a pixel is a single point in a graphic image.
MS	A millisecond, one-thousandth of a second.
RAMDAC (Random Access Memory Digital-to-Analog Converter)	Works from a single chip on videocards and converts digitally encoded images into analog signals for display by a monitor.
MEMORY CLOCK	Graphics accelerators have their own memory for storing images, either through DirectX or OpenGL APIs. The higher the memory, the better the resolution and the more colors.
DVI (Digital Visual Interface)	Converts analog signals into digital signals in order to accommodate both analog and digital monitors. DVIs can transmit data in excess of 100Mbps.
AGP (Accelerated Graphics Port)	An interface spec developed by Intel specifically designed for 3D graphics throughput.
DDR (Double Data Rate)	A form of synchronous DRAM, DDR supports data transfers of both clock cycle "edges" on the memory chip (the rising and falling edges), doubling the chip's overall data throughput.

Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines

Evolving standards

Benchmarking can be a major undertaking. Forget about the time it takes just to install synthetic benchmarks, 3D GameGauge, and game applications. That's easy. The real time hog is installing and uninstalling drivers for each card, whether they are reference- or manufacturer-specific.

After that begins the next time gobble, benchmark testing. In this case, using 3DMark05 Pro and 3D GameGauge (Doom 3, UT2004, Far Cry, etc.) in most instances, this can take approximately three to four hours per card since you need to run each benchmark two or even three times to minimize cache load and texture affects for a more accurate fps score.

In order to streamline the process, I created 3D GameGauge Lite 1.0, which is simply the result of dumping the original Splinter Cell and Microsoft's Flight Simulator 2004. I know my Extremetech.com peers might cringe at the idea of me cutting back GameGauge, since they'd probably add more games to the mix if they could. If they did add to it, I'd recommend a standard benchmark highlighting Rome: Total War's epic 3D battles. I'd even add it to 3D GG Lite, dropping something else, of course.

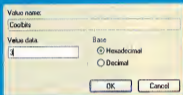
This month I built two brand-new systems for testing our videocard roundup: one for PCI Express videocards and one for AGP. Both utilize a Pentium 4 3.2MHz Extreme or higher processor, SATA HDDs, and 2GB of fast Corsair DDR and DDR2 RAM. The PCI Express machine eventually turned into this month's Killer Rig.

While beating on the latest and greatest technology is a blast, it's still not about gaming. As soon as I finished benchmarking, I picked the best performers for my own systems and settled into a long game of Rome: Total War, enjoying the brilliant graphics while conquering Carthage. There are some perks to this job after all. **© Raphael Liberatoro**

HOW TO GET MORE SPEED, FREE OF CHARGE

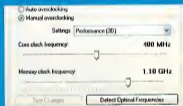
Overclocking an Nvidia 6800 GT

Want the speed of an Nvidia 6800 Ultra but just don't have that kind of cash? Pick up a 6800 GT, overclock it, and you can end up with a cheaper, sleeker version of the gargantuan high-end model. Uncovering the overclocking utilities built into the card's drivers requires making a change to the Windows Registry, which means you're flirting with disaster, so follow these instructions to the letter:



NVTWEAK IT

STEP 2: Right-click the NVTweak key, expand New, and click DWORD Value. When the new value appears in the right-hand pane, rename it Coolbits, double-click its icon, and enter 3 in the Value Data box before clicking OK.



SAFETY TESTING

STEP 4: Whenever you change a setting, be sure to stress-test it by running a graphics-intensive 3D game like Doom 3 or a 3D benchmark like 3DMark05 (www.futuremark.com), preferably at high resolution with graphic quality maxed out to keep the card as hot as possible. The goal is to find the highest possible core clock frequency setting that is stable (if the graphics ever lock up, reduce the core clock frequency immediately) and the highest possible memory clock frequency that doesn't cause white speckles, texture tearing, or other graphical anomalies to appear. Also keep a close eye on the Nvidia driver's Temperature Settings panel and never let it stray into the red zone. The 6800 Ultra runs at a core clock frequency of 400MHz and a memory clock frequency of 1.1GHz, and our 6800 GT did that without breaking a sweat. All that remains is spending that Benjamin we just saved.

REGEDIT IT

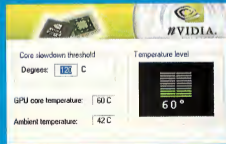
STEP 1: First, buy a fancy graphics card. Now, click Start, click Run, type "regedit" in the text box, and click OK. Click the plus symbols to expand the following keys:

HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE > SOFTWARE > NVIDIA Corporation > Global



RUNNING UP CLOCK

STEP 3: Close the Registry editor, right-click an empty portion of the desktop, and click Properties. From here, select the Settings tab, click Advanced, select the GeForce 6800 GT tab, and select Clock Frequencies in the pop-out menu on the left. Select the Manual Overclocking radio button, select Performance (3D) in the Settings drop-down menu, and if you want to play it safe, click the Detect Optimal Frequencies button. This tests the card to find overclocking settings that are virtually guaranteed to work but aren't aggressive.



DISCLAIMER

Overclocking can damage your hardware and void your warranty.



MANUFACTURER Philips PRODUCT Philips Brilliance 230W5VS 23-inch LCD PRICE \$1,099

THE (REALLY) BIG PICTURE

Widescreen comes to gaming



Any gamer would love an LCD that's big on image quality, real estate, and affordability. Add a few bonuses like WUXGA wide format, built-in speakers, DVI, convergence video connection sources, an embedded power supply, and a 6-in-1 card reader, and most gamers would toss their CRTs for one. The Brilliance 230W5VS 23-inch LCD from Philips is packed with all these features, but all the glamour and glitter comes at a hefty two grand price.

With a 500:1 contrast ratio, a 16ms response rate, and a 1900x1200 at 60Hz native resolution in widescreen, the 230W5VS so enhanced *Far Cry's* vibrant blue seas and rich white beaches that I almost booked tickets to the Caribbean. It also does a decent job on blacks, even in *Doom 3's* murk. Lower response rates keep it from choking during a huge *Rome: Total War* battle. Text display comes up short, lacking the smooth detail and clarity of an Apple Cinema Display. Still, there's a lot to love here, and if you're rich, you'll be assured of a spectacular gaming experience.

SCORE: ★★★★★

MANUFACTURER Apple Computer PRODUCT Apple 23-inch cinema HD Display PRICE \$1,499

APPLE'S VISION

Like the iPod, a cross-platform winner



Apple is best known for innovative, sophisticated, and elegant designs, and its newly redesigned 23-inch Cinema HD Display is no exception. Its brushed aluminum casing and hidden buttons make the description of "sleek" feel like a major understatement.

When running *Doom 3* at a 1920x1200 at 60Hz resolution, the images this monitor displays at 16ms are nothing short of spectacular. Blacks are jet-black, and bright whites, well, they could sear your retinas. Detail is razor sharp, especially when reading tiny NPC text balloons in *Neverwinter Nights*. Its vibrant and warm colors are simply gorgeous.

The Apple Cinema Display does lack some of the cool integrated features of the Philips 23-inch LCD, as it has only USB 2.0 and FireWire ports. And I wish it had more than just a Brightness button. However, it's a small sacrifice when the payoff is the awesome image quality this LCD delivers.

SCORE: ★★★★★



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Check Out



122

FAST FORWARD



KILLER RIG

118



REWIND 100

123



130

GAME OVER



120

A-LIST



Inside

Heroes—are they born or made? Send your answer to cwletters@ziffdavis.com. But before you launch into your theoretical treatise, check out our 5 Indispensable Tips for succeeding in *City of Heroes* and see if you can't cobble together some heroics of your own. Plus, hot advice for decorating on the cheap! No, we're totally not kidding.

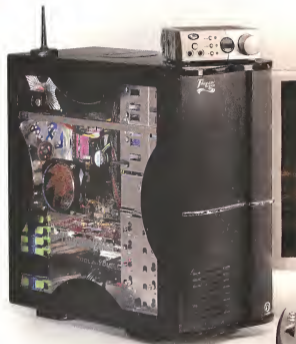
Killer Rig

The Silver and Black Express



PCI Express is the new I/O (input/output) technology with massive throughput perfect for gaming. As more and more manufacturers jump on the bandwagon with a run of PCI Express products, it's time for CGW to join the party.

The Silver and Black Express, CGW's first do-it-yourself PCI Express system, is based on Intel's Q25XE chipset and utilizes the Intel Pentium 4 Extreme Edition processor, which clocks in at a robust 3.46GHz and features a whopping 1,066MHz frontside bus. We match our Killer Rig's brain trust with a phenomenal PCI Express motherboard from Asus; its P5AD2 Premium is the best PCI Express motherboard design available, bar none. With its multitude of onboard features, such as dual-gigabit LAN, Wi-Fi 802.11g support, Dolby Digital high-definition audio, dual-channel DDR2, triple RAID, and tons of ports, as well as a handful of handy overclocking features and utilities, the P5AD2 is the most reliable PCI Express-capable board available. Best of all, Asus offers an outstanding three-year warranty. Throw in an ultrastart 400GB SATA HDD from Hitachi, two full gigs of Corsair DDR2 RAM, a dual-layer DVD writer from Mad Dog, and an ATI Radeon X800 XT 256MB DDR videocard and this rig is primed to haul ass. What do the numbers say? The machine posted a 3Dmark05 score of 3,177 and a 3D GameGauge Like score of 74.77—not Ultimate Game machine territory, but still



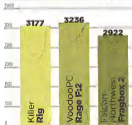
pretty damn quick.

Housed in a classy ThermoTake Tsunami Dream chassis with a Butterfly 480-watt power supply, this machine is one styling performer. The system is polished off with an earthshaking ProMedia speaker system from Klipsch and Apple's sweet 23-inch Cinema HD display monitor (see review, page 115), which makes for improved image clarity when playing games like *Doom 3* and *Full Spectrum Warrior* or just watching high-definition broadcasts.

© Raphiel Liberator

As more and more manufacturers jump on the bandwagon with a run of PCI Express products, it's time for CGW to join the party.

3Dmark05



ALL TESTS RUN WITH 4X AA (ANTIALIASING) AND 8X AF (ANISOTROPIC FILTERING) TURNED ON UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.

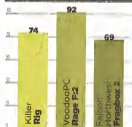
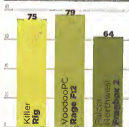


The Guts

COMPONENT	PRICE
Operating system	Microsoft Windows XP Professional with SP2 \$121
Case	Thermaltake Delta tower tower System V4330039M Aluminum Tower Chassis \$86
Power Supply	Thermaltake W0021 PurePower Super PSY 480w with silver-color LED (Black) \$62
Processor (CPU)	Intel Pentium 4 580 Processor Prescott 3.0GHz 800MHz FSB Socket 175 7MB cache retail (with fan) \$445
Motherboard	Ayus PSAD2 Premium 325X P4 800MHz LGA775 DDR2 ATX motherboard w/video, dual-gigabit LAN, RAID/serial ATA \$229
Memory	Conner XMS2 Pro 4000S/N0 512MB DDR2 memory x4 (2GB total) \$80 (\$120 retail)
Hard drive	Hitachi Deskstar 7K600 400GB Serial ATA 7200 rpm hard drive with 8MB buffer \$380
Graphics	ATI Radeon X800 XT PG Express 256MB DDR VIVO graphics card \$460
DVD-ROM drive	Mini Deep ModelTOR 80A Double Layer DVD/RSRW 8-in-1 internal drive \$110
Floppy drive	Sony 144MB floppy drive \$14
Monitor	Apple 23-inch Cinema Display \$1,826
Keyboard	Microsoft Digital Media Pro Keyboard \$30
Mouse	Razer Diamondback Magma DR12 1600 DPI optical mouse \$50.95
Speakers	Logitech ProForce Ultra S1 speaker system \$349
TOTAL COST	\$6,389.95

306 Game Gauge "Lite" 1.0

Doom 3



A-List

Our picks



Man oh man, is there a lot of cool stuff out there right now.

Good thing, too, since ever

cooler games requiring ever more power are coming down the pike faster than you can say, "Upgrade!" We want you to choose wisely, though—money's too tight to mention for a lot of us, and we want to see you get the most out of yours. Thus, this month's A-List, our quick compendium of the machines and parts we think are worth a look-see. Oh, and we threw in a few toys for good measure.



COMPUTERS

Maybe you're the tricky sort who likes to take on projects, like changing your own oil and brewing your own beer. And maybe after those mechanic and hospital bills, you've learned your lesson. When it comes to stuff like cars, food, and computers, the experts know what they're doing.

Gaming systems



PRODUCT

HIGH-END PICK

FX-55 Rage F2
\$3,700
VoodooPC

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

This company walked away with our 2003 Ultimate Gaming Machine top honors, and it's still locking out amazing gaming PCs. The Rage F2 is water cooled and boasts an AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 2.75GHz processor and a BFG Tech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC videocard. This baby was probably made for *Doom 3*.



BUDGET PICK

Gamer's Supreme
\$1,595
iBuypower

How-wheel With a Pentium 4, an Abit PCI Express mobo, an Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT, 1GB DDR 400 RAM, a DVD+/-RW drive, and a Viewsonic 19-inch monitor, the Gamer's Supreme is a supreme deal, all right. Plus, it comes with free onsite warranty coverage.



PERIPHERALS

Oh, we were going to make some lame joke about how important it is to accessorize, but we just know it's been done before. It's all been done before....

Headset



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

■ **AHS 602**
\$60
Altec Lansing

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Like clamping excellent speakers to your ears, but a lot more comfortable. And fashionable. And less expensive.



DISPLAYS

The allure of the speed-demon PC is somewhat lost if you don't have a beauty of a monitor to make the pictures look pretty. Yes, that is an Apple monitor we're recommending—but don't get your undies in a bunch. With its adoption of the industry-standard DVI connector, it's a more-than-viable option.

LCD monitor



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

■ **Apple Cinema Display**
23-inch LCD
\$1,999
Apple

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

As always, it's an Apple product in a sleek package. Our own Tech Commando has described this LCD monitor as "sharp and sophisticated." Considering the fact that he can kill people with his bare hands and survive for weeks by eating bugs and small rocks, we consider this to be fairly high praise.



GADGETS

We at CGW are like a bunch of ferrets in that we love to hoard shiny objects. We are unlike ferrets in that we don't steal your silverware, hide your car keys, or spray to mark our territory. At least, not usually.

Gadgets



PRODUCT

OUR PICK

■ **Portable Media Center**
\$500
Creative Labs

WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT

Yes, you can take it with you! This funky, chunky device is one of the first of its kind for stashing your MP3s and video footage. Compress various video formats to work on the 3.8-inch, 320x240 pixel resolution backlit LCD display, and you can kick back and watch up to 80 hours of TV shows on this baby, or output them to a TV.



OUR PICK

■ **Skelick II**
\$250
T-Mobile

This thing means instant geek street cred. Use it to surf the Web, e-mail your buddies, stay connected via AOL Instant Messenger, sync with Outlook over the Internet (via downloadable software), and generally otherwise ensure that you never have a moment's peace. Did we mention that you can make phone calls with it, too?

Fast Forward

Welcome to Fast Forward, CGW's monthly back-of-the-book hodgepodge of all things PC-gaming related. Every month, we'll offer up a handy reviews index, a few editors' picks, and whatever else we manage to think of.

CITY OF HEROES: 5 INDISPENSABLE TIPS

Heroes, your aid to the citizens of Paragon City proceeds apace, especially since *Issues 1 and 2* are either here or will be soon. Your dedication is praiseworthy! As a small token of thanks, we herewith provide you with five tips we know will aid in your crusade against crime in our fair city's streets. Onward!

© Rod Servantes

1 STAMINA

Perhaps the most useful power pool skill in the game, stamina increases a hero's ability to regenerate his endurance. Since your stamina remains at 100 from level 1 to level 50, getting a power that helps replenish endurance points means you can perform a lot more actions.



2 HASTEN

Reducing the recharge time of all your powers by more than half makes one a most formidable hero. And when you six-slot this power to a perma-hasten status, it will basically double your effectiveness as a fighting machine.



3 AREA OF EFFECT ATTACKS

It's rare to find enemies standing all by themselves at higher levels. Most of the time, there are two bosses standing around with some minions. Area of effect attacks allow you to keep pounding on the bosses while doing some damage to the minions, if not knocking them off altogether.

Kristen's
Picks 



Unreal Tournament 2004

I know I'm behind the pace on this, but at least I

haven't let it slide completely. Anyway, it's worth picking up anytime, especially for a Shoozy HoBeng-bang like me.



RollerCoaster Tycoon 3

So then, my current land-speed record to fill an open field

with a handcrafted coaster of death: 7 minutes, 20 seconds. I think I can do better...



Half-Life

I'm all about Glass from the past lately, and I figured the best way to get suitably

prepped for *Half-Life 2* was to revisit the stunning original. Y'know what? Six years later, this game still kicks ass.

4 DEFENSE

Both active and passive defenses are a must. At level 30 and above, you'll be facing ever larger numbers of enemies. Active defense powers (including Evade) are good, but a passive defense means you won't be hurt so much when a bad guy does land an attack; after all, it's pretty tough to evade 12 Freakshows.

5 TRAVEL POWER

Some people have disregarded travel power for role-play purposes, but getting around quickly means you can help your friends and sell enhancements faster, which makes for less overall downtime. In the long run, travel power is simply a must.



DOWNLOAD THIS

The Rasterbator

<http://homokaasu.org/rasterbator/>

Looking to decorate on the cheap? Check this out: The site's self-description is so accurate, we're just going to rephrase it in full: "The Rasterbator is a 'Web service' that creates huge, rasterized images from any picture. The rasterized images can be printed and assembled into extremely cool-looking posters up to 23 meters in size! If we can sneeze up the OSW offices (see photo), imagine what you can do in the comfort of your own home. The site's awesome online gallery should generate some ideas."



Rewind 100

What should you play today? Names in **red** indicate Editors' Choice games

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Across the Ocean	04/04	★★★½
Alita	Holiday 04	★★★★
Alpha Black Zero: Intrepid Protocol	12/04	★★★½



Q American McGee Presents Scribblenauts

Holiday 04 ★★★★★

Arena Wars

Holiday 04 ★★★★★

Azura's Fate of the Ages

10/04 ★★★★★

Battlefield Vietnam

06/04 ★★★★★

Besieger

03/04 ★★★★★

Beyond Divinity

05/04 ★★★★★

Breed

02/04 ★★★★★

Call of Duty: United Offensive

12/04 ★★★★★

Campaign on the Double

12/04 ★★★★★

Catwomen

11/04 ★★★★★

Chaos Legion

08/04 ★★★★★



Q Chris Sawyer's Locomotion

Holiday 04 ★★★★★

City of Heroes

08/04 ★★★★★

Cyberbane: Punzors

11/04 ★★★★★

Conspicuous

05/04 ★★★★★

Rewind100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Crusader Kings	08/04	★★★★
Crystal Key 2: The Far Realm	08/04	★★★★
CSI: Crime Scene Investigation—Dark Motives	08/04	★★★★
Dark Fall II: Lights Out	Holiday 04	★★★★
Dead Man's Hand	08/04	★★★★
Desert Bats vs. Alien Corps	07/04	★★★★



□ Doom 3	10/04	★★★★
Evil Genius	12/04	★★★★
Far Cry	05/04	★★★★
FIFA Soccer 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★
FireStarter	06/04	★★★★
Galactic Civilizations: Altarian Prophecy	12/04	★★★★
Full Spectrum Warrior	Holiday 04	★★★★
Gangland	06/04	★★★★
Ground Control II: Operation Exodus	10/04	★★★★
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	11/04	★★★★
Hissac: Connects	08/04	★★★★
Horizons: Empire of Islands	05/04	★★★★
Jack the Ripper	05/04	★★★★
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	09/04	★★★★
Judge Dredd: Droid Versus Death	03/04	★★★★
Khan in Kings of War	12/04	★★★★
KurosaiWar	09/04	★★★★



□ Leisure Suit Larry: Mega Cunt Laude Holiday 04 ★★★★★

MADDEN PREDICTS SUPER BOWL 2005

Are you ready for some football? Forget fantasy leagues—we know now how 2005 is gonna pan out. Can Madden NFL 2005 give us a decent prediction of this year's season and Super Bowl winner? Madden has no handicapping system, and the A.I., even after all these years, can make some weird strategic decisions on both sides of the ball, but if you're looking to play Jimmy the Greek during the season, here's one possible outcome. © John Mann

THE RULES

Football is all about injuries, so after a bit of debate, we decided to leave pre-existing injuries on and allow them to turn on in-season injuries. Game options were set to All Madden difficulty with 15-minute quarters.



□ Week 4

A picture begins to emerge in week 4 of the good, the bad, and the ugly. Philly and the Bengals, or, I mean the Bengals are the only undefeated teams left: A classic matchup of Denver and Tampa Bay (two Super Bowl contenders for sure) was a wild one with six interceptions and a fumbled punt returned for a touchdown. Result: Broncos 29, Bucs 17.



□ Week 12

Another season classic, St. Louis at Green Bay. On the frozen tundra of Lambeau Field the Horn Heads deliver a 45-16 drubbing to Favre and the Cheeseheads. Both teams have more than 400 yards offense (STL 490, GB 434), but the Pack takes 11 penalties.



□ Division Playoffs

Buffalo edges the Colts 18-15 in OT while the Packers fall once again to the Rams; this time 31-6. Baltimore makes the Pats play a defensive battle and makes the cut 13-6. But the highlight is the Eagles versus the Bucs. The free-wheeling Philly offense and loudmouth Terrell Owens make the Bucs pay, 27-15.



□ Super Bowl

After stopping Buffalo's charge 27-21 in the playoffs, the Baltimore defense is ready for showtime. The matchup against the Eagles, who handily beat the Rams 23-16, proves to be a grinding defensive battle. I don't remember ever seeing so many dropped and blocked passes. With some very bad clock management in the fourth quarter, the high-flying Eagles fall 13-6. Baltimore clumps the Gatorade and hoists the trophy. You heard it here first.



Rewind100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
License II: The Chaotic Chronicle	06/04	★★★★
Lords of the Realm II	03/04	★★★★
Madden NFL 2005	Holiday/04	★★★★
Mezbit	03/04	★★★★
Nicktock Since January	10/04	★★★★
MVP Baseball 2004	06/04	★★★★



Myst IV: Revelation	Holiday/04	★★★★
Nemesis of the Roman Empire	03/04	★★★★
Paladino	03/04	★★★★
Perimeter	09/04	★★★★
Port Royale 2	12/04	★★★★
Reisbow Six 3: Athena Sword	06/04	★★★★
Rise of Nations: Thrones & Politics	03/04	★★★★
Saevd	03/04	★★★★
Raven: Total War	Holiday/04	★★★★
Shadow Ops: Red Mercury	Holiday/04	★★★★
ShutlucK: Man '87	09/04	★★★★
Steak 2	09/04	★★★★
The Sims 2	11/04	★★★★
Singles: Put Up Your Life	09/04	★★★★
Soldiers: Heroes of WWI	11/04	★★★★
Soldier: Secret Wars	10/04	★★★★
Spider-Man 2	11/04	★★★★
Splitter Cell: Shadow Tunnels	06/04	★★★★
Star Chamber	01/04	★★★★



Star Wars Battlefront	Holiday/04	★★★★
Syberia II	01/04	★★★★

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THE NUGGETS: THE MATRIX

5 random facts for the Cliff Claven in all of us

The *Matrix*: deeply philosophical treatise, a bunch of Hollywood hokey—or favorite flick of ferrets everywhere? The Internet says, all of the above. Among 3,550,000 Google hits regarding *The Matrix*, we've discovered that, among other things:

1 Stephen Kiehl, a staff writer for the *Baltimore Sun*, writes that allusions to *The Matrix* have surfaced in at least three murder cases. Defendants "attempted to justify their crimes with allusions to the movie's philosophy that the world people live in is only a dream sequence controlled by a computer. Violence is condoned as a way to get out of the fake, oppressive world of *The Matrix*." Among those who have employed the defense: sniper suspect Lee Boyd Malvo. (https://www.sunspot.net/news/baltimore.md.drawing05dec05_0_6939999.story?coll=bal-home-headline)

2 Nitpickers.com lists 216 viewer-noted inconsistencies in the movie, ranging from an impossible number of bullets fired from one clip (17) to the reflection of boom microphones in windows. Of these, 128 have been refuted by other viewers.

3 Michael Welky, associate professor of brain and cognitive sciences at the University of Rochester, formed conclusions about the way brains process the understanding of reality by undertaking an experiment in which he recorded the brain responses of 12 ferrets...while they were watching *The Matrix*. (www.sciencemag.com/story/2004/10/8/75B49/9265)

4 Googling the terms "The Matrix" and "religion" yields 154,000 hits; within the top five, *The Matrix* is mentioned in the same sentences as Christianity, Buddhism, agnosticism, and atheism.

5 Googling the terms "The Matrix" and "philosophy" yields 178,000 hits; among those are the synopsis of a published paper by a member of the philosophy faculty of Oxford College arguing that we are, in fact, living in a computer simulation. (www.simulation-argument.com/)

SOUND OFF

CGW's readers speak up

Think you're clever? Got some good game suggestions? Just want to share your two cents? Give us a holler and you just might show up in the pages of a future Sound Off.



CAPTION CONTEST

Do our captions suck? Think you can come up with something wittier? E-mail your caption for this *Secret of the Silver Earring* screenshot, along with your name and address, to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject "Caption Contest," and you just might win a brand-new game.



THIS MONTH'S WINNER:

"The baby's all set but Garry still needs changing!"
Kevin Quaid
Northampton, MA

POLL OF THE MONTH

Hit up our forums at <http://boards.ign.com> and vote in our monthly poll.

Which version of *Half-Life 2* will you drop your dough on?

The retail Collector's Edition. Check out my geeky t-shirt!

36%

None of them—I'm sticking with CGW's 102 Free Games!

27%

The Gold Steam download package. Check out my geeky hat + 4 stickers!

0%

The standard retail edition. *cough* said.

18%

The Silver Steam download package. I heart my *Half-Life 1* re-release!

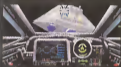
9%

The Bronze Steam download package. I want to write a sequel to *Half-Life 1*.

9%

DESERT ISLAND GAMES

✉ You're stranded on a desert island with only five PC games...which ones? E-mail us at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject "Desert Island Games" (along with your name and city/state) and give us your picks!



X-Wing: CD-ROM Collector's Edition

Maybe on a desert island I can finally take the time to learn to fly. May the Empire beware my training!



Diablo II: Lord of Destruction

Mindless action if I want it. Not to mention it's the only game I ever wanted to play online.



Heroes Of Might And Magic III

It's just so CUTE!! Even if it doesn't have peasants (Sigh)

Civilization III: Conquests I can rebuild history, over and over. If I get bored, I can tweak the rules as I wish. There are no limits!



Alpha Centauri

I will drown in the possibilities presented by this amazing game long before I have the chance to drown in the sea around my little computer paradise.

Darryl R. White
Sandy, UT

Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

By Tom Hume, LucasArts, EA GAMES, VCA, Pandemic Studios, CDPR, GIGAWATT, and the original Star Wars

Star Wars Battlefront

We love the smell of Ewoks in the morning



What happens when Tom and Bruce meet *Star Wars*? Whatever was going to happen, we knew it couldn't be worse than Hayden Christensen's acting. Or at least we thought so. We weren't counting on Bruce taking a river trip down the heart of darkness...

Episode I: I Don't Like Sand

TATOOINE: THE DUNE SEA

Tom: I talked Bruce into playing *Star Wars Battlefront* by suggesting that we write it up in the style of the movies. We could follow the maps that loosely re-create the events of *Star Wars*, with each of us taking 10 A.I. teammates into battle. He thought about it for a moment and agreed. So without further ado, we begin over Tatooine. Cue the theme music!

A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away... It is a period of civil war. Rebel spies managed to steal secret plans to BRUCE's ultimate weapon, the DEATH STAR. Pursued by the Empire's sinister agents, TOM escapes home aboard his starship, custodian of the stolen plans that can save his people and restore freedom to the galaxy...

Bruce: I'll be the first one to admit I don't know much about *Star Trek*, or whatever Tom is talking about. I mean, I saw all the movies a long time ago, but that was in an

age when you couldn't even conceive of, say, cartoon characters that look like fast food items solving mysteries and fighting crime. I was going to go back and watch them all before we played, so that Tom didn't have an advantage by knowing some twist in the backstory or something that would give him a cheat code, but that seemed like a lot of work for a game I was probably going to lose anyway. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that A) space is a lot like a river, and B) I really only know about one movie, anyway.

So I'll use that one. It's way better than *Star Trek*, anyhow. Except maybe the one where Kirk dies.

Tom: The Dune Sea is all about air power. We're using a mod that removes those annoying boundaries that force you into a mandatory U-turn when you reach the edge of the map. This makes it a lot easier to do strafing runs, which is what I plan to do to keep the Imperial AT-STs boxed up at their spawn point. So I start out in the Bluffs as a Rebel pilot and head off one of my A.I. buddies before he can hog the last X-wing.

Bruce: Tatooine, crap. I'm still only



Just like bull's-eyeing womp rats in my T-16.

on Tatooine.

Tom: Wait, wait, when I said we'd do the article "in the style of the movies," I meant *Star Wars*. I didn't mean "movies" in a generic sense where you pick your own movie.

Bruce: Every time I think I'm going to wake up back in the jungle. When I was home after our first game, it was worse. I'd wake up and there'd be nothing. I hardly said a word to Tom until I said yes to playing another shooter game. When I was here, I wanted to be there. When I was there, all I could think of was getting back to playing *Dominions*.



Tom
Last month:
Tom won the votes
of millions as the presi-
dential favorite in *The
Politics Machine*.



Bruce
Last month:
Bruce denounced
Tom as a Communist
and a threat to
national security.

2. I've been here a week now. Waiting for a game, getting softer.

Tom: I manage to get four AT-5Ts with torpedoes, picking off the odd TIE fighter that tries to take off. Total Rebel air superiority! Unfortunately, while I'm doing this, I keep getting messages that we're losing command posts. When I finally take a second to check the map, I see that Bruce's imperial troops aren't the problem. It's the damn Tusken Raiders. They've shut down my source of X-wings and combat speeders by taking the Bluffs and the Homestead. I imagine they've also slaughtered Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru. On the plus side, this means I don't have to be a moisture farmer anymore—I can fulfill my destiny among the stars.

Bruce: Every minute I stay in this room I get weaker. And every minute Tom saunters in the sand he gets stronger. Each time I look around, the walls move in a little tighter.

Tom: I land at the Bluffs and start shooting at Tusken Raiders. However, being a Rebel pilot, I'm armed with a "blaster cannon," which is apparently Star Wars speak for something that politely peltis your opponent to alert him to your presence so he can turn around and kill you, I think I'd rather have the flashlight in *Doom 3*. After being killed, I emerge at the only remaining Rebel spawn point, the Sandcrawler, to find both Imperial AT-5Ts camped here. Surprise, surprise, Bruce is in one of them rucking up kills.

Bruce: Never get out of the AT-5T. Absolutely goddamn right.

Tom: Technically, Bruce won this round, but it would be more accurate to say the Tusken Raiders won.

SCORE: Bruce 1, Tom 0

Episode II: Wretched Hive of Scum and Villainy

YATOOINE: **MOS BISLEY**

Tom: Fortunately, there are no Imperial vehicles here. This is the kind of street fighting that Bruce totally sucks at. I like to spawn at the Cantina and immediately grab the Warehouse to control the southern part of the map.

Bruce: Tom mentions something in the rules about mowing down Jews for bactus or something. I'm not going to stop there, though. We must kill them. We must incite them. Rebel after Rebel, Jawa after Jawa, village after village, army after army. And they call me an assassin. What do you call it when the assassins accuse the assassin? Tom lies, Tom lies, and I have to be merciful for those who lie. Those nabobs. I hate them. How I hate them.

Tom: I do some jumping around on the rooftops to shoot down into the streets, some running through back alleys, some sniping, and other stuff that might as well be in *Jant Ops*. But things turn really Star Wars when I see someone trying to con-



Q In the remastered version, Bruce shoots first.

vert the Cantina. I burst in and see Bruce himself! A shootout ensues. Like Han Solo, I shoot first. But unlike Han Solo, I lose because Bruce didn't listen when I called time out to get a screenshot.

Bruce: I killed Tom. Everybody wanted me to do it, him most of all. I felt like he was up there, waiting for me to take the pain away. He just wanted to go out like a soldier, standing up, not like some poor, wasted, rag-essed renegade. Even the jungle wanted him dead, and that's who he really took his orders from anyway.

Tom: It's close. We each got down to around 20 tickets, but now the Rebels' control every place but the Market. I hang out next to the hangar and pick off Imperial troops as they cross the open area.

SCORE: Bruce 1, Tom 1

Episode III: Then 'N See You In Hell

HOTIE: **ECHO BASE**

Tom: It is a dark time for TOM. Evading the draddled Imperial Starfleet, a group of freedom fighters led by TOM CHICK has established a new secret base on the remote ice world of Hoth. The evil lord BRUCE GERRYK, obsessed with finding young CHICK, has dispatched thousands of remote probes into the far reaches of space.

Bruce: My AT-ATs come in low out of the rising sun.

Tom: I jump into a snowspeeder and fly off to find someone to ride in back. I land next to the first Rebel I find and frantically slap the F2 key to order him to get in. We head off toward the two advancing AT-ATs. Unfortunately, they're walking right next to each other. Once the tow cable is fired, I

have to weave between them to cinch up my target.

Bruce: When I get about a mile out, I turn on the music. I use Wagner. I suppress the crap out of the rebels. My boys love it!

Tom: The Bunker has fallen, which means the Empire has a straight shot to the shield generators. I try landing and slapping F2 again, but now Bruce is making a point to shoot at me even when I've landed, which I'm pretty sure is against the Geneva convention of Star Wars. So I start spawning with a missile launcher since the map is now lousy with all kinds of imperial walkers. I got a bad feeling about this.

Bruce: If I had one, I'd call the forward air observer and call in an airstrike to suppress the mortar fire along that tree-line. Or something. Actually, things are going pretty well. I love driving the AT-ATs because that means I don't really have to aim at stuff. I take the shield generators down, no problem. Once those are down and we've started mopping up the resistance, I can break out the surfboards. Tom Chick don't surf!

Tom: Someone gets into the base and takes the control room. Before long, we're closed up in the outpost, with AT-ATs and AT-5Ts attacking us from outside and Imperial troops emerging from the tunnel to the control room. It's a slaughter.

Bruce: I was the one who took the control room. When it was all over, I walked up. I didn't find one of 'em, not one stinkin' Rebel body. But the smell, you know that gasoline smell? The whole hall it smelled like victory. Someday this game's gonna end.

SCORE: Bruce 2, Tom 1

Episode IV: Got Gas?

BESPIN: CLOUD CITY

Tom: There are long lines of sight on this map, so I start out at the rear flank as a sniper I can see all the way down the hall to the walkway. I snipe spawning Imperials while my guys advance. Once we've got the rear flank and walkway, I grab the forward flank. Now we've got a great vantage point to fire down into the courtyard, racking up an absurd number of kills.

Bruce: How many people had I already killed? There were those six that I know about for sure. Close enough to blow their last breath in my face. Oh, if you're talking about the game, you can kick that number up to maybe 16, which is nothing on Tom.

Tom: Eventually, I swing around to grab the rear entrance, and then run on to the carbon chamber. Me and a Wookiee take on a couple of dark troopers in here. Once we capture it, I emerge in the front of the courtyard and continue sniping Imperial troops as they spawn. The A.I. likes to run for the gun emplacements, which makes them perfect sniper fodder as they're standing stock still encased in their turrets. This is payback for Hoth.

Bruce: The Rebels don't get much USQ. They're dug in too deep or moving too fast. Their idea of great RAR is cold rice and a little bit of wamp rat meat. They only have two ways home: death or victory.

Tom: Since I control Bespin, I have an unlimited supply of Tibanna gas to power my, I dunno, my Tibannas. Now that I have the carbon freezing chamber, maybe I can lock Bruce into carbonate until he starts quoting the right movies. You'd think he could at least whip out a "The Force is strong with this one" or a "Never tell me the odds."

SCORE: Bruce 2, Tom 2

Episode V: Revenge on the Ewoks

ENDOR: BUNKER

Tom: Little does TOM know that BRUCE has begun construction on a new armored space station even more powerful than the first dreaded Death Star. When completed, this ultimate weapon will spell certain doom for the small band of Rebels struggling to restore freedom to the galaxy...

My strategy is to spawn as a Wookiee at



AT-ATs use the buddy system to keep slowpokes at bay.

the point closest to the imperial bunker, and then hop onto a speeder bike to tear through the forest. Bam to be wild! It's Bigfoot meets Easy Rider. If I can get to the bunker with my time bombs, it's pretty easy to take out the generator. The problem is that since this is a forest, there are a lot of trees between me and where I'm trying to go. I keep hitting them. Someone needs to apply a little judicious deforestation to this part of Endor. Where's Agent Orange when you need it?

Bruce: What with all the talk of jungles, we finally get a jungle map. Unfortunately, I'm all out of movie quotes for the evening. At least movies in English. The fact that Tom keeps choosing a Wookiee says a lot of things about him psychologically that I'll do him the favor of not mentioning in public. Because it's clear that being in a giant mechanized robot is better than not being in a giant mechanized robot, I get in an AT-ST.

Tom: The advantage of the spider bikes is that they go so fast, they're almost impossible to hit. This makes Endor a pretty porous map, with Imperials and Rebels zipping past each other, sweeping spawn points. I consider trying to take out the imperial barracks to shut down their AT-5Ts, but I keep getting really close to the bunker. Besides, the point of this map is that the Ewoks set up traps for the walkers, using logs to smash them and trip them. At least, that's how it worked in the movies.

Bruce: If you're going to rebel against

a massive transgalactic Empire, it's probably wise to make sure that either you pick one that doesn't have giant mechanized shooting robots, or—failing that—find some way to get some of those robots on your side. Tom is getting his ass kicked by these things, which I think is passing him off. Sorry, Tom, you're the one who decided to disobey orders and go off with your Montagnard army, who worship you like a god and obey any order, however, ridiculous—oh wait. That's not this movie.

Tom: The Ewoks aren't doing jack against those AT-5Ts. After the way the sand people decided the battle in the Dune Sea, it would be nice to get some kind of help other than a bunch of yipping teddy bears. Hell, at this point, I'd even settle for a squad of Gungans.

Bruce: The most annoying thing about the Ewoks is not that they're Ewoks; it's that when I kill them, Tom's troop count doesn't go down. It's like he's getting free troops out of the fact that George Lucas simply wanted to create some more marketing gimmicks.

Tom: OK, forget the Wookiee on the speeder bike thing. Once again, I find myself having to spawn as a Rebel vanguard, plinking away at walkers with my rocket launcher, trying to hold the line.

Bruce: You know how in car commercials it always says "professional driver, do not attempt" just before some car goes all crazy and does a Tony Hawk down an empty city street? It should say, "professional AT-ST driver, do not attempt" somewhere in the screenshots for this game. Driving those AT-5Ts saved me in the first game, and it's going to save me now. The Rebels are racking up a lot of kills, but I'm able to keep up with them by using technology. Eventually, there are no more Rebel troopers to kill, which means I get to win.

FINAL SCORE: Bruce 3, Tom 2 B



Despin, aka Sniperfest Extraterrestrial 2004.



This is pretty much how Tom saw most of the Cloud City map.

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Scorched Earth

Free To Be You and McGee

Waking up from the American dream

What's in a name? No, seriously, what's in a name or, more specifically, what's in the name "American McGee"? Who is this guy and why is his name popping up on game boxes? Or, more specifically again, what is his name doing on the game boxes of games he didn't make? Who is this guy?

Well, he's American McGee, of course, the guy behind *American McGee's Alice*. You remember, it's that fairly traditional platformer that could have been called *GothGrr158's Alice* and finally answered the question, "What would a Mario game be like if Mario had a pierced nipple?" *Alice* isn't a humble game, but it is less a game-play-oriented product than an art-direction vehicle. And while I generally liked the look of that game, I couldn't help but feel that there's a Thora Birch look-alike with too much eyeliner and a black dress wondering how Mr. McGee found those doodles in the back of her trigonometry notebook. But, hey, he made this game, he was proud of it, he wanted to put his name on it, so huzzah! Honestly, good for you, American. In a way, it's downright laudable that he put his name right out there in a Game Buck Stops Here kind of way.

But how did he get his name on *Scrapland*? That's the one that makes my brain itch. Obviously, some marketing lamprey came to the conclusion that his name sells games, but still, *American McGee Presents Scrapland*—that's the title. He didn't make the thing; his name is on the box because he's doing us the favor of introducing us to the game. Well, um, thanks there, buddy. Much obliged. But if merely presenting the game gets you on the box, shouldn't the kid at EB be getting the credit? Or does Amply Slamming Mufft Presents *Scrapland* not have enough cachet?

And what is that cachet? Ouch, that makes the pudding in my skull slosh, too. Once upon a time, American McGee was a level designer on a little game called *Doom*. Great game that, but I seem to remember another *Doom* album that put his name on a game box—it's right up there on my shelf in between *Ruins Rouge* and *Trespasser*, and it's called *John Romero's Delestone* (because *John Romero's Heartbreaking Scavandering of the Good WW of Games and Five Years of His Life* wouldn't fit on the box). Frankly, if I were American, I'd be a little more cautious about slipping my name on a box,



"What would a *Mario* game be like if Mario had a pierced nipple?"

But it would seem that McGee has deftly dodged the huons bullet that struck his colleague and has succeeded in turning his name into a brand, a brand that says, "Edgy, Daring, and Pierced in Naughty Spots." That's some feat, especially when you consider that the name American McGee summons up the image of a foote-pajmoed kid wearing a colander on his head and has blanky around his shoulders—a kid who's just a little bitter that he has to call himself American McGee because Mister Stupendous AmazoMen was already taken by another kindergarten. But he seems to have beaten that. I once worked in a bad Mexican restaurant with three siblings named Rainbow, Eden, and Arrow Harvest, and try as they might, poor Rainbow, Eden, and Arrow could never get their names to conjure up anything beyond "Golly, your mom must've been stoned." American McGee has triumphed over that as well. Maybe he really is a superhero, a good-

looking maverick who plays fast and loose and by his own set of rules. Hell, yeah!

Frankly, I think we can all learn a little something here. Since American McGee doesn't actually have to create something for his name to make it hip and cool, I've found that I can keep up my sorry excuse of a life by boiling "American McGee Presents" to it. *American McGee Presents My Microwave Burn!* Suddenly, that came asada and bean lard tube is an edgy came asada and bean lard tube. *American McGee Presents Falling Asleep in Front of the TV!* Never has gurgling up a puddle oil drool on my sofa seemed so cutting edge. *American McGee Presents My Backed-Up Toilet!* It's not a plumbing problem—it's a wottery portal to a topsy-turvy alternate world where everything is seedy and sexy and every big-eyed digitized Suicide Kid wears patstinknly torn black fishnet stockings. Once you try the American way of life, there's no going back. Trust me.

■ Robert Coffey robert_coffey@zdnet.com



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