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# DUNGEON SIEGE II



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September 2005 Issue #254



**WORLD EXCLUSIVE**

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Each month, Jeff makes us wonder...about what the editorial is going to say, since it gets written after the Table of Contents. How does he do it?

## 10 Letters

You guys are so cute when you type all angry at us.



**MARVEL GAMES**



**UT 2007**



**WARHAMMER**



**E3 2006**



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## COVER STORY

### AGE OF EMPIRES III

We've got an exclusive hands-on with the next chapter in Ensemble Studios' blockbuster *Age of Empires* series—plus, a look at some action-oriented RTS games that might give it a run for its money.

## 14 Radar

Check out our expose on the upcoming slew of Marvel games, an in-depth look at *Frey*, and the latest and greatest technology from Creative Labs.

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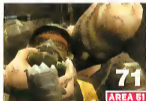
Coco, baby! We're kinda sweet on Vicous PC's newest desktop system. Plus, we engineer a throwdown between AMD's and Intel's latest SLI cards, scope some storage options, and take Gateway and Vicous PC laptops for a spin.

## 86 Tom vs. Bruce

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**AREA 61**



**PARIAH**



**STAN LEE SPEAKS**



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All we need now is an Everybody Loves Raymond game.

**THIS MONTH  
ON 1UP.COM**



### EXXY.1UP.COM

In this action-packed editor blog, CGW contributor and 1UP.com editorial intern Patrick Klapak expounds on Battlefield 2, Harry Potter, and his own impossibly huge afro.

### DEATH.1UP.COM

If you haven't jumped on the Guild Wars bandwagon yet, check out this weekly travelogue by James Mielke and Kimi Matsuzaki to see just what you're missing!

### PCGIVEAWAY.1UP.COM

Want to win a 1UP.com-branded Falcon Northwest Fragbox PC? Check out this contest, which runs throughout the entire month of August!

EDITORIAL 204

## TURN THE PAGE

Kids, please don't try this at home



THERE IS A RESTAURANT IN BERKELEY, CA—Fat Apple's—that I think of whenever I'm grasping with some kind of major change at this magazine, because after a lifetime of therapy and hallucinogens and Dr. Phil self-help tapes, I've learned one thing about myself: I hate change. Which is why I've ordered the exact same thing at Fat Apple's every time I've gone there in the last 25 years. Cheeseburger. Medium rare. Grated longhorn cheese. I don't care that the restaurant is constantly adding new items. I don't care that it drives my

wife and kid crazy. I like what I like. Why change when I'm happy already?

So I understand how longtime *CGW* readers may feel as they browse through this issue, which debuts an entirely new look for us. Art director Michael Jennings has been working day and night—literally—to bring this new design to fruition, so I sincerely hope you like it. The goal was not to start over from scratch, but to make each issue more vibrant, more readable, and more engaging on a page-to-page basis. Did we succeed? Do you wish you had your regular cheeseburger back? Let us know at [cgwletters@ziffdavis.com](mailto:cgwletters@ziffdavis.com).

And there's even more change: My compeadre Robert Coffey, the last of the "old guard" editors (along with myself) hired by legendary EIC Johnny Wilson, has departed to pursue further writing opportunities. Fear not, though, Coffeyheads: He will continue to graze (or sally) these pages with the acerbic wit and no-BS commentary that have made him one of the best writers this industry has ever seen. Good luck, Robert. We miss you. But please don't come back and kill us.

JEFF GREEN, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF



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New Physics, Battlefield 2, Battlefield 2



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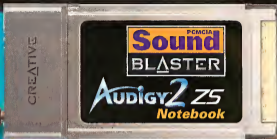
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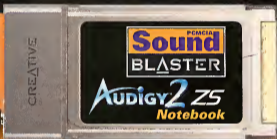
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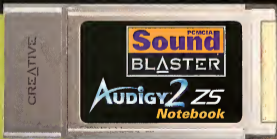
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## MISSING DVDS: CASE SOLVED!

I have a confession to make. I am a freaky comic-book fan (there are boxes upon boxes of comics in my closet in acid-free plastic) who's so fascinated with City of Heroes that I read any and all articles I can find (about the game). So imagine my delight when I heard that the July/August issue of CGW covered City of Villains and came with a trial of the game on DVD! Oh my God—I almost s\*\*\* my pants! But when I got my issue...no disc! Where's my disc? **Amy-Lee Beebe**

## RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

I have a confession to make. As much as I enjoy your magazine's detailed articles and in-depth reviews, I have to say that the things that got me to renew my subscription are the reviews of bad games—or rather, when YOU have to play god-awful games. I don't know why, but when I read about Robert Coffey losing brain cells while playing James Bond 007: Nightfire, I couldn't help but smile. I'm not a sadist, but reading about your horrible mental trauma at the hands of coarser-worthy games just lightens up my day. So thank you for your selfless martyrdom and please continue to torture Robert Coffey with mindless, broken games. He is at his best when his brain is screaming. **John Elliott**



To all the Amy-Lees who've written in—and damn if there aren't a lot of you—allow us to explain: There are two CGW subscription plans available. One includes a disc each month, and one does not. Which plan you have depends mostly on how you subscribed to begin with. But all is not lost! If you want to receive the disc from now on, simply call 1-800-827-4450, and the nice customer service person who answers will help you upgrade your current subscription and get you set up to receive the disc forevermore. Considering some of the amazing stuff that shows up on our discs—such as the World of Warcraft and Battlefield 2 demos this month—we think it's totally worth it.

## MORE BAD APPLES TO WATCH OUT FOR

Just wanted to drop you a note about the article on MMO farming ("Wage Slaves") in your July/August issue. It was excellent and worthy of a newsmagazine. However, you needed to include information on the "infiltrator" farmer. These are the ones who join the more powerful guilds and go for higher-level stuff during raids. We recently noticed a level 60 paladin who was online 24/7. At first we accepted the explanation that his brother and sister played [as the same character], too, but we started to keep an eye on where he was, and it was always in areas notorious for farming. He would go on raids with us and "accidentally" loot elite items and then say, "Sorry, my accident." Unfortunately, he was

having these "accidents" once a raid. When we issued a warning, he pretended to have trouble understanding us. During our next raid, he ninja-looted the first elite drop. We told him if he did that once more, he was out. An elite item dropped with the very next boss, and he ninja-looted again. We booted him from the guild. Afterward, we figured out that he had managed to loot probably close to 1,000 gold worth of items with his "mistakes." This type of farmer does more harm to the game than the others because they ruin the reputation of the guild they infiltrate. **Paul M. Rocconi, MD**

## WHY, HELLOOOO, LADIES...

I am responding to Robert Coffey's ludicrous claim that 15 percent of CGW's readers are women. I am living proof that those figures are flawed. Every month, when your rag comes in, I hold it under my arm [and] into the restroom it goes. Yes, it stays in the restroom for the remainder of the month as my choice of reading material for those moments of quiet solitude and philosophical enlightenment. When my wife sees the new installment on top of the commode, she puts on a hazmat suit and accordingly disposes of the previous issue. This is the same person who, given the choice between drinking a glass of arsenic or reading your magazine, would opt for the former. **Ramon Heemide**

Managing editor Kristen Salvatore responds: Ramon, despite the deep and scientific means by which you have collected your statistics, as opposed to the fly-by-night efforts of our corporate research department, one has to wonder whether the toxic fumes apparently emanating from your bathroom (after apparently emanating from, uh, somewhere else) are possibly clouding your mathematical judgment. Certainly, CGW—much like drinking arsenic—is not anecdotal evidence. I'm going to see your (obviously blessedly patient) wife and raise you myself, two other managing editors, two IUP.com staff members, the entire PMS clan, and my mother, all of whom are regular subscribers to CGW and/or various other gaming publications. Frag on, my sisters—frag on. /

## SAY IT LOUD, SAY IT PROUD!

Confession is good for the soul. And while we may harbor some doubts as to whether our readers actually have such a thing as a soul, we encourage you to get whatever is bothering or pleasing you off your chest by writing to [cgwletters@ziffdavis.com](mailto:cgwletters@ziffdavis.com). You'll be glad you did.



I have two big problems: I'm from Canada, and I'm French! —Gppl

I've never written [in] before, but I just wanted to tell you all that you're lower...in a good way. —Steven Scott

I can think of a better name for a female troll...how about Darren Gladstone? —PotatoChipLad

Please don't review anything good for the next few years...I can't get any more broke than I am! —Chris Mayo



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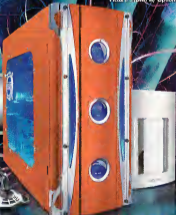
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COMPUTER  
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WORLD

## Marvel's ultimate PC-gaming lineup...we hope

THIS TIME LAST YEAR, THE WOOL—OR more accurately Spidey's mask—was pulled over our eyes when Activision released a Spider-Man 2 game for consoles and the PC. The console version is a GTA-like experience that allows for free-roaming crime busting throughout Manhattan. The PC version, however, is a totally different—and far, far worse—game, without any warning on the box that it is not the same as the console game. Picture George Wendt in Spider-Man Underoos and you have the PC game. It was a classic, inexplicable case of bait and switch. We called them on it.

So you'll understand our initial skepticism when we heard that Activision's 2006 lineup of Marvel superhero games is coming to the PC. Activision dares to have listened to the complaints of PC gamers. One Activision staffer (who asked to remain anonymous) confesses, "We learned our lesson last year with Spider-Man 2 [on the PC], and we aren't going to do that again!"

Will these games make the PC jump without any earth-shattering catastrophes? We've seen Ultimate Spider-Man and X-Men Legends II: Rise of Apocalypse in action—check out what we think so far on the following pages. And for even more details on Fantastic 4, read our review on page 67. Darren Gladstone



# FANTASTIC



REVIEWED  
ON PAGE 67



**REED RICHARDS** is Mr. Fantastic. **POWERS:** He's the superstretchy, sup-yth looker/broskie of the group. **IN GAME:** Read and stretch to punch from afar, separate into tight spaces, and hook in a puzzle minigame.



**SUE STORM** is the Invisible Woman. **POWERS:** She's all about the 'th. She can burn invisible...hence the clever name. **IN GAME:** Thanks to her telekinesis, she can also create force fields.

WE'VE SEEN JESSICA Alba's disappearing act and Michael Chiklis' big rubber rock suit in Marvel's big-screen adaptation of Fantastic 4, but we were really nervous when the topic of a day-and-date release of the game and movie was mentioned. After all, weren't these the exact same circumstances under which



**BEN GRIMM** is the Thing. **POWERS:** He's got superstrength and a soft side—sorewhere. **IN GAME:** He's a big pile of orange rocks that shouts, "It's clobberin' time!" You do the math.



**JOHNNY STORM** is the Human Torch. **POWERS:** He has the power of flight, flame attacks, and cheesy acting—and the ability to set off smoke detectors. **IN GAME:** What you'd pretty much expect—flies and fires the bad guys.



▲ Kids, if you have a scorching case of anything, see your doctor!



### IS IT LIKE THE MOVIE? (GULP)

The Fantastic Four game's action, ZAG PARRA, may be worth a stop over to the movie and the sequel. Will he succeed? Read the review!

Spider-Man 2 launched last summer, when PC gamers were left with utter gaming garbage? Enter Beenox Studios.

The Quebec City-based developer has done a fantastic job of bringing console games to the PC (uh, no pun intended—seriously). Last year's Tony Hawk's Underground 2, which earned an Editor's Choice award from this very publication, particularly comes to mind as an example of Beenox's notable handiwork.

Is it any wonder, then, that the fledgling development house has been tapped by Activision to bring another immaculate port to the PC? And, in an even more interesting recent turn of events, Activision acquired Beenox Studios to help han-

dle all PC ports going forward.

Beenox may have wrapped up Fantastic 4, but there are lots of other titles following in its stead. In fact, there are two other super-powered ports we can think of off the top of our heads—both of which are previewed on the following pages.

As for F4, which loosely follows the movie and includes a bevy of classic FF villains like Mole Man, just flip forward to the review on page 67 for our official take on this story-driven bash-em-up title. /



**Beenox has done a fantastic job of bringing console games to the PC.**

# INSIDE



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## NEW SCREENS

### UT 2007

We've managed to score some rockin' new screens and details about the next installment of Unreal Tournament.



26

## JUST IN

### Warhammer

The Warhammer franchise explodes with two ambitious new projects and an expansion to last year's Dawn of War.



28

## UPDATE

### Eggbert

Is something in the Hinterlands, but his comely companion Ceresuzette is "slip-ling" in. Get it? Hah!



▲ Sue Storm epitomizes the phrase "you can look, but not touch."



▼ The Thing is about to rock someone's world with his supermove. Rock...get it?



▲ There's no "F" in team, but you still need to be able to juggle all the character's abilities.



▲ While battling Mole Man, Invisible Woman and The Human Torch can protect each other.

# ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN

SEE IT!  
CHECK OUT  
THE TRAILER  
ON THIS  
MONTH'S  
DVD



## IN THE COMIC CONTINUUM

The story picks up where *Ultimate Spider-Man #30* left off: Eddie Brock, Peter's childhood friend, has become Venom! This game reveals Venom's ultimate sinister origin as he's pursued by the cops...and others.

## FIRST LOOK

**BENEOX IS ALSO HARD AT WORK BRINGING** *Ultimate Spider-Man* to the PC, and spiderspeeps have done everything in their power to assure us that the PC-gaming crowd won't get screwed by some half-baked version of the ol' webhead's game this time around.

What makes this game so cool? First, it takes the Manhattan environment from *Spider-Man 2* (the console version, that is) and adds the borough of Queens, where Peter Parker grew up. You have free reign to swing around the city at your leisure or advance the story line written by Marvel scribe Brian Michael Bendis (see what Bendis has to say on the facing page). Everything is presented in an extremely authentic comic-

book style, thanks to expertly animated cut-scenes that bring the game to life in much the same way the recent live-action adaptation of *Sin City* does for that comic. There are even a few in-game pop-up panels and split-screen moments that further convey the comic-book feel.

You also get the opportunity to play as Spidey's arch-enemy, Venom. As you navigate the detailed and destructible city streets of New York, you'll discover that the characters play quite differently—after all, Venom is a huge beast that consumes people to survive. A large variety of missions and side quests will take you all over the Big Apple as you bust crime and save lives. There are even a few minigames that require split-second decisions: Do you rescue the kid from falling debris or yank the fiery car blocking a subway entrance? Timing is everything.



▲ Check out how much the game spurs the feel of a comic book—there are even inset "panels." And yes, we know *Freedom Force* does this too.



4 This is how Spider-Man looks in most games: "realistically" drawn in 3D, and with the frame of a strong, young man, as he's portrayed in the movies.

► Now, check out what's being done for *Ultimate Spider-Man*: The semi-cell-shaded 3D comic-book art style looks exactly as it does in the comics. Spidey may look a little wily, but in the *Ultimate* Marvel universe, Parker is 15 years old, dating Mary Jane Watson, and working part-time on *The Daily Bugle's* website. Hooray for contemporariness!







**X-Men  
Prelude**  
Were we biased  
by the original  
X-Men game  
coming only to  
console? Well yeah.



## X-MEN LEGENDS II: RISE OF APOCALYPSE

### FIRST LOOK

THE ORIGINAL *X-Men Legends*, DEVELOPED by Raven Software, turned out to be one of the best action-RPGs of 2004. The sting: It was released only for consoles. Thanks a lot, guys! A year later, the sequel is coming to where it belongs: PCs, the home of comic nerds!

The whole premise of *X-Men Legends*—controlling four different oil-shaded mutants at once—is what made it so attractive to gamers the first time around. Want to be Wolverine for a sec? Just switch over to him and then back to Colossus again when the time is right. The A.I. intelligently manages the rest of your squad while you're busting heads, making for a sophisticated and user-friendly game. And for the PC-bound sequel, you'll have access to 16 different mutants from both the X-Men and the evil Brotherhood of Mutants.

The huge, destructible environments will provide puzzles and multiple ways to progress the

story, but the real "just one more mission" addictiveness comes from the progression system. As you earn experience, you earn more powers; you're free to choose how you want to distribute your abilities, and the mutants you customize really play and feel different. Raven has added a massive number of new powers for each character (although there's not yet an exact number), and it's all easily accessible without having to dig through a tedious menu screen.

The one thing that hasn't been worked out yet is how multiplayer will work. In the original game, a friend can plug in a second controller to join in at any time. The new version promises online co-op as well—which is especially handy for the PC kids who don't want to throw a LAN party just to play *X-Men Legends II*. But there's no exact word on how it'll work for the PC just yet.

There's a lot on the line here for PC gamers. And come this fall, we're either going to be really happy and knee-deep in comicdom or see a lot of angry comic blogs online. Then again, after *Elektra*, there's nowhere to go but up, right?



### > A FEW QUICK WORDS WITH BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS

BRIAN MICHAEL BENDIS IS ONE OF THE MOST prolific writers in comicdom today. He's penned a number of critically acclaimed crime and espionage graphic novels, the superheroic police series *Powers*, and the detective series *Alias* (no relation to the TV show). He's also revitalized a number of Marvel characters, including Spider-Man in the *Ultimate Spider-Man* series, which is the basis for Activision's new game.

**CGW:** Who would you say is your favorite character you've written about?

**Bendis:** Wow. That's like Sophie's choice. I couldn't possibly choose. But my all-time faves were *Spider* and *Daredevil*, so I am biased.

**CGW:** Is there a comic-book character you've wanted a chance to bring back but haven't yet?

**Bendis:** Yeah, there's a long laundry list. The new one is *Ultimate Moon Knight*, [which features Moon Knight], who is showing up in *Ultimate Spider-Man*. That was a big one for us, to kind of show Moon Knight in a new light and, you know, show him off a little bit.

**CGW:** Can you talk about the process of working on the story for the *Ultimate Spider-Man* game? How does it feel going from a comic book to an interactive medium?

**Bendis:** It was like college for me...and it was just a great time for me as a writer, because you have this certain thing [with] a comic book, no matter what you do. It's 22 pages and there's a format that you follow. Then all of a sudden here's this challenge: to write the same characters in an entirely different medium, an entirely different format, with the editor being the director, if you know what I mean. So really, not only was it exciting to write that, it actually altered the way I was approaching the comic as well.

**CGW:** And we understand that the story you're writing carries over directly from the comics.

**Bendis:** Yeah, it's *Ultimate* continuity, top to bottom. And it's just another *Ultimate Spider-Man* story, but this story [answers] a lot of the questions people keep asking us online. What happened to Venom? Stuff like that. And the game is the only place you'll see it. Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to talk any more about that for now!



# SIMPLY MARVEL-OUS

Five questions for Stan Lee, the man behind the marvels

STAN LEE IS A LIVING LEGEND, A COMIC-BOOK genius who helped create some of the most well-known comic-book franchises to date: *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Fantastic Four*, and *The Uncanny X-Men*. So, what exactly happens when you stick him in a room with a bunch of slobbering comic nerds and game editors? Glad you asked....

**QUESTION 1:** Do you keep an active interest or any control over the different mediums that feature your creations, like films and games?

**Lee:** Do I want control? No, I don't want control at all. Let me tell you how cegey I am. If the movie is good, or the game or the TV show or the cartoon, I somehow get a lot of credit for it. [Laughter] If it's bad, hey, I had nothing to do with it!

**QUESTION 2:** What, in general, do you think of games being made out of comic-book characters? How would you compare the two?

**Lee:** Videogames are an art form and a form of entertainment. But compared to a comic book, a videogame is really much more exciting, and it makes the person who would be the comic-book reader, it makes him or her a participant, and in a way it's more exciting and more fun. When you read a comic book, you're reading the story, and it's taking place [in the book]. When you're playing a videogame, you're part of the story, so to me that really has the edge.

Now, I have not questioned everybody who reads comic books, but I would just guess it you're a comic-book reader, you would love to play the videogames because you're familiar with the characters. You care about the characters or else you wouldn't be a reader of the comics. And

here you have a chance to move them and control them and guide them and have fights [with them] and so forth. It just seems to me to be a natural that the readers would be very enthusiastic about the games.

**QUESTION 3:** Is this a way to attract new people who haven't bought comic books before?

**Lee:** Would it attract new people who hadn't bought the comic book? It certainly can't hurt. I mean, somebody might buy the game who hadn't read the comics and say, "Hey, I gotta see more about Spider-Man; I gotta learn more about him. I love this guy." Sure. Everything helps everything else, I'm sure the comic books help the games, the games help the comic books, the movies help the games and the comic books, the comic books help the movies and the games...and if you don't interrupt me, I'll keep going.

As a matter of fact, since videogames have been in existence, comic-book sales have risen.

**QUESTION 4:** Comic books were once blamed for basically turning children into monsters. Now it's videogames' turn. Thoughts?

**Lee:** There's always going to be somebody who feels that all the ills of the world are blamed on the movies we see, the games we play, the books we read. The comic industry survived Dr. Frederic Wertham [an outspoken anti-comics activist during the 1950s]. I used to actually debate with him. I knew him. And he'd say things like, "I did a study and I found that 96 percent of the young people in reform schools read comics."

And I would say, "Well, 100 percent of them drink milk." I mean, the man was just unscientific, and he just—I don't know what his motive was, but these videogames, kids love 'em, I don't want to comment on the ones that may seem to be too violent, or...I don't know what le too violent and what isn't. I just know that kids [have] a lot of their own natural energy. [Playing videogames is] a way to expend it. It's a way to have a lot of fun. It excites them; they enjoy it. And to me, these games are great.

**QUESTION 5:** Which Marvel superhero would you most like to see in a videogame next?

**Lee:** That's a good question. Which would I like to see in a videogame next? Gee, there are so many of them. I think Iron Man would be good. I think the Silver Surfer would be great. And for something really different...maybe Dr. Strange, because he goes into different dimensions and so forth. You know, the funny thing is, I think you could make a good videogame out of almost anything, as long as you have an interesting good guy and a powerful bad guy and you could just find a way to get the great visuals and all the action. I can't think of any Marvel character, really, that I don't think would make for a good one. Certainly Ghost Rider would be good. The longer I sit here, the more of them I mention. /

Want to know more about Stan Lee and other comic geeks? Check out the documentary Countdown to Wednesday by [www.countdowntowednesday.com](http://www.countdowntowednesday.com).

➤ "There's always going to be somebody who feels all the ills of the world can be blamed on the games we play..."

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# LARA CROFT LIVES ON

Why *Tomb Raider: Legend* might not suck

PUBLISHER: EA | DEVELOPER: Crystal Dynamics | GENRE: Action | RELEASE DATE: November 2005

## PREVIEW

IT'S AN UNDERSTATEMENT TO SAY THAT *Tomb Raider: Legend* has had a tumultuous existence thus far. With a new design team, a desperate publisher, and thousands of jaded fans, *Legend* has a lot of work to do if it's going to impress anyone. Can Lara Croft still wow the few fans she has left in the wake of the unmitigated critical flop that was *Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness*? After what we've seen of *Legend*, our answer is a pleased—but reserved—yes.

The design team over at Crystal Dynamics (best known to PC gamers for the recent *Project Snowblind*) appears to have risen to the occasion, taking the series back to its dungeon-delving roots while updating *Tomb Raider*'s look and feel to take full advantage of the latest-generation PC hardware. The game is now fully rendered using Havok physics, and—as we showed you in our June issue—Lara herself is a cuter, softer, and more realistic than before. Her movements are much more agile and fluid this time around, thanks in part to an overhauled control system that looks to provide a considerable change of pace from the clunky mess found in *Angel of Darkness*.

## LARA CROFT 2.0

But make no mistake: Crystal Dynamics isn't out to "fix" anything here. *Legend* has nothing to do with *Angel of Darkness*; it's a completely new product built from the ground up and designed with the series' classic gameplay in mind. As

associate brand manager Mike Schmitt puts it, "[We took] some time off after the release of *Angel of Darkness* and essentially [took] a brand audit—we've made a conscious attempt to get back to some of the things that made the first game so special." Of course, this means some good old-fashioned acrobatics, high-tech gadgets, and dual-pistol firelights, but there's more to *Legend* than gunglery and hot pants.

Central to the game's design is the incorporation of new puzzle elements into the action. Crystal Dynamics is trying to move away from the "find the key and throw the switch" puzzles found in previous *Tomb Raider* games, instead focusing on environment-oriented challenges with multiple solutions. For example, while searching for a hidden passageway, Lara might be able to kick over a statue to uncover the entrance or perhaps blow the passageway open with a gun emplacement or a grenade. We're assured that a lot of effort has gone into making fun, exciting puzzles with minimal frustration.

## THE PLOT THICKENS

With both new and classic elements in place, what direction can the series possibly take to tell a good story that isn't just another by-the-numbers artifact-hunting plot? Unfortunately, Eidos still has its lips sealed about story specifics. "We're not giving too much away yet," remarks Schmitt. "Lara will encounter a nemesis long thought dead as the [game] unfolds. Let's just say we'll learn a lot more about Lara's past...and what makes her tick." —Ryan Scott

## PROBLEM

# THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

SEPTEMBER 2005

## THE GOOD

### WORLD OF WARCRAFT SHIPS TO CHINA

Not content with the pretty 1.6 million users the game has garnered on this side of the Pacific, Blizzard has opened the *World of Warcraft* floodgates in China. We don't know what this means for the subscription numbers, but the Chinese version's 600,000 beta users definitely can't be a bad thing. To put it in perspective: Blizzard considers North America to be this game's last market.



## THE BAD

### CITY OF HEROES PATCH WOES

The latest *City of Heroes* patch restores many of the game's travel powers (Flight, Super Jump, and Super Speed), stripping away the extreme PVP advantage they provide by disabling them during combat. This effectively punts characters with Super Speed at a disadvantage, since there's no corresponding "defense power" offering the extra kick that Hover and Combat Jumping provide to Flight and Super Jump, respectively. Angry players have the official COH forums in an uproar.

## THE UGLY

### ULTIMA ONLINE 2, TAKE 3

EA's *Ultima Online 2* has been canceled...for the third time. You've probably never heard about this one—hell, nobody's heard of this one except us, seeing as how we were pitched a *UO2* cover about 10 months back. But now it's dead again, replaced with—you guessed it—another greenworthy *UO* expansion. And this time, EA is adding elves to the game, despite the fact that elves don't actually exist in the *Ultima* continuity.



## FALLING FROM GRACE

A timeline of Lara's exploits

|   |   |  |   |  |  |
|---|---|--|---|--|--|
|   |   |  |   |  |  |
| "Just when you thought 3D games were overweird to your grip reflex... <i>Tomb Raider</i> comes & all feel fresh and new again." —GDW #102 | "They're made enough changes to make it seem retro, but if you didn't like the first game, this won't make you change your mind." —GDW #184 | "For those who ran right, <i>Tomb Raider</i> did it by far the biggest and bestest of the series." —GDW #178 | "I sincerely don't understand how you're still doing the same run-rig-jump-climb-swing-swing-swing with a few new additions." —GDW #168 | "It's 'bout 'gum' 'gum' 'gum'! Excuse my pun, but the designers have nothing else to offer." —GDW #160 | "And this game...ugh! I'm not gonna promise anymore it ran into the ground and kicked repeatedly in the head." —GDW #151 |
| ★★★★  | ★★★★  | ★★★★   | ★★★★  | ★★   | ★  |
| 1996  | 1997  | 1998   | 1999  | 2000   | 2003   |

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# UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2007

Lookin' good...

PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPER: Epic Games GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: 2006

## EXCLUSIVE SCREEN

BACK IN MAY, THE GOOD GUYS AT EPIC Games let us in on the secret to their success: perfect *UT2K7*'s gameplay in untextured level "shells" before rendering what you'll see in-game. At the time, it was too early for them to show us much more than the first step in the process, as seen in the inset pictures. Imagine, then, the s\*\*\*-eating grins on our faces when we sat down behind closed doors

with Epic at E3 and were treated to a playable level replete with the esthetics you see splashed across these two pages. Oh, and the gameplay was damn fine, too, demonstrating the less-bouncy movement the developers described back in May and featuring tons of the attitude you've come to expect from the franchise. We can't wait to get our hands on the new vehicles and weapons, like the Scorpion and rocket launcher you see here. / Kristen Salvatore



► Intel has been slapped with another antitrust lawsuit by rival chipmaker AMD, which claims that Intel has used coercive tactics to secure OEM deals ►



▶ Unreal 2.5 levels are first created without textures, to test and tweak gameplay.



▶ **"We can play through and make tweaks...before there's pretty stuff splashed all over the concepts."**

*"The Unreal World", Computer Gaming World #201*

COLUMN

# GLADSTONED

Great moments in gaming punditry

➤ Every five years, some alleged game industry "expert" earns a berth on the short bus with this half-written assessment. "PC gaming is dead." I know I touched upon this briefly in my last column, but I'm pssed. One such clown in the mainstream media recently wrote of his willingness to predict that the real loser to the emergence of the Xbox 360 and PS3 will be PC gaming. Buddy, PC gaming isn't dead. Not by a long shot. OK, so the new consoles demoed at E3 look pretty interesting (even though the Xbox 360 was

soles within a year (two, tops) of their launch. And soon, thanks to XNA, you'll finally be able to play a game on your PC as you do on the consoles, simply by sticking a disc in the drive—without having to perform an actual installation. XNA promises developers it can easily standardize game coding (and allow you to use Xbox 360 controllers on your PC). And with the coming gaming/consumer-friendly new Windows OS, code-named Longhorn, Microsoft is making a broader, more aggressive case for PC gaming in general.

➤ **You can expect low- to mid-level computers to dwarf the power of the new consoles within a year of their launch.**

running on an Apple G5 workstation and the PS3 demo was running on...wait for it...a PC with two GeForce 7800 GTX cards in SLI mode) but what those consoles can do, a PC will do better in six to eight months.

Some refer to Moore's Law, but I like to call the console-versus-PC battle "The Five Year Itch." In 1996, the original Playstation launched for \$300. It had a 32-bit RISC CPU (33.9MHz), 2MB RAM, 1MB Video RAM and proprietary technology to handle 3D graphics. At the time, a \$3,000 gaming PC packed a 200MHz Pentium CPU, 32MB DRAM, and 2MB Video RAM, and the first good 3D cards were coming out. These numbers seem a little skewed, but since a console is streamlined for gaming, it can operate faster and requires less horsepower than your standard-issue PC rig.

Over the next five years, programmers tried to eke as much as possible from the PS1 before hitting a technology wall. After all, you can't upgrade a console.

When the PS2 neared U.S. shores, promising a 300MHz CPU, 4MB DRAM, 4MB VRAM, and another proprietary graphics engine for \$300, gaming PCs similarly beefed up. A lean machine sported an AMD Athlon 750, 128MB SDRAM, and a 64MB graphics card for about \$1,500. Fast-forward another five years to mid-2005 and the PS3's arrival. The PS3 may shock you with its power when it launches but I'm willing to bet my graphics card you can expect low- to midlevel computers to easily dwarf the power of the new con-

soles. But really, how much more will it cost? Speculation has it that the Xbox 360 and PS3 will be a little pricy—possibly as much as \$400—and they can do only a fraction of the things a PC can. You can get a great performance PC for under \$2,000, and I know plenty of other things I can do with it beyond gaming, p2p downloads aside.

PCs have the market cornered on MMOs, FPS games, and countless strategy and RPG titles. Consoles have their strengths, obviously—ease of use and couch-potato gaming being at the top of the list. Point is, there's enough room in my house for a PC and a console. How about you? **Damen Gladstone** [dereen\\_gladstone@earthlink.net](mailto:dereen_gladstone@earthlink.net)

THIS IS A CONDENSED VERSION OF THE RANT OF RIVEN SPINOFF FORTH ON CGW. Q&A: TUR.COM

## NAME THAT PLATFORM

**QUESTION:** Three games on three platforms, all using the same engine. Which is which?



**ANSWER:** EPIC'S *LARCE* (A) IS ENGINE PROVIDES THE BEST EXAMPLE OF WHAT IS POSSIBLE ON EACH PLATFORM. TECHNICALLY THE XBOX 360 DEMO OF *GEARS OF WAR* (SHOT B) WAS RUNNING OFF THE SAME OS WORKSET. THEN, THE PS3 DEMO OF *LYNARC* (TOURNAMENT SHOT C) WAS DONE ON A HIGH-END PC WITH TWO NVIDIA GEFORCE 7800 GTX IN SLI MODE. MEANWHILE, THE PS3 UNRAIL TOURNAMENT 2007 (SHOT C) LOOKS EQUALLY FINE. STILL, BUT CONSOLES DON'T EXACTLY IMPROVE WITH AGE—PCs DO.

CONSOLE

## CONSOLE CORNER A LOOK AT THE REST OF THE GAMING WORLD

There are plenty of good games out there beyond what's on the PC. Whether you also own a PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PSP, DS, or— heaven help you—an N-gage, we're here to help. So here's our pick for the best of the console world now shipping to store shelves.



## SONY'S PSP

➤ NORMALLY, THIS IS THE SPOT WHERE we single out a console game that we feel you simply have to pick up. This month, though, it's a little different. Sony's handheld, the PSP, could very well be the next Walkman. We are not overreacting here—every editor at CGW has a PSP, and we're hooked.

There are already a bag load of good games—which we'll get to in a second—but Sony's new handheld is capable of a whole lot more. We've used ours to read comics, listen to a couple hours' worth of music, and even watch DVDs ripped onto Memory Stick Duo (tip No. 27: Buy SanDisk's 1GB memory card if you can find one—its cards are reliable and relatively inexpensive at \$150). And the PSP is quickly becoming a hacker's dream machine, as people are finding ways to put console emulators, Web browsers, and more onto the new portable.

As for what should be on your play list: Tiger Woods PGA Tour; Wipeout Pure; Ridge Racer; and the digital crack known as Lumines. Also promising at press time are Rockstar Games' PSP versions of GTA: Liberty City Stories and Midnight Club 3: Dub Edition.

➤ **Sony's handheld, the PSP, could very well be the next Walkman.**



## Winner, Best RPG of E3

— Game Critics Award, GameSpot, IGN, GameSpy,  
Xbox Evolved, Console Gold, Daily Game, Games Domain

"One look at Oblivion will shatter your  
conceptions about what is possible in a  
video game."

— GameInformer

"The biggest title for the Xbox  
360, and the one I'm most  
looking forward to."

— GamePro Magazine

"Oblivion is, at this time, the best-looking  
game I have ever seen in my life."

— Xbox.com

"To call the graphics 'amazing' is  
an extraordinary understatement."

— GameSpy

# The Elder Scrolls IV OBLIVION

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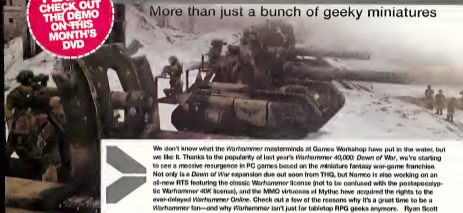
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# WORLD OF

More than just a bunch of geeky miniatures

PLAY IT!  
CHECK OUT  
THE DEMO  
ON THIS  
MONTH'S  
DVD



We don't know what the Warhammer masterminds at Games Workshop have put in the water, but we like it. Thanks to the popularity of last year's Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War, we're starting to see a massive resurgence in PG games based on the miniature fantasy war-game franchise. Not only is a Dawn of War expansion due out soon from THQ, but Namco is also working on an all-new RTS featuring the classic Warhammer license (not to be confused with the postapocalyptic Warhammer 40K license), and the MMO virtuosos at Mythic have acquired the rights to the ever-delayed Warhammer Online. Check out a few of the reasons why it's a great time to be a Warhammer fan—and why Warhammer isn't just for tabletop RPG geeks anymore. **Ryan Scott**



The imperial guard joins the four existing factions in *Winter Assault*. **A**



**DORKS WITH ORKS**

Tabletop gamers have been enjoying the Warhammer miniatures game since 1982. Every year, Games Workshop holds tournaments for both Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 around the world, where hobbyists gather to compete with custom hand-painted armies of pewter miniatures. There are roughly 14 massive armies to choose from in competitive play, and new figures and scenery are released every week. For more information on the tabletop game, check out Games Workshop's retail stores, *White Dwarf* magazine, and official website ([www.games-workshop.com](http://www.games-workshop.com)).

## WARHAMMER ONLINE

Back from the dead

BYLEIGH Mythic Entertainment DEVELOPER Mythic Entertainment RPG MMORPG RELEASE DATE 2007

### EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

**SURPRISE!** WARHAMMER ONLINE, which was canceled last year by former developer Climax, is back on its feet—and thanks to the folks at Mythic, we might be running machine-gun-toting orks and hardy space marines through a massively multiplayer Warhammer world as early as 2007. While details are still sparse in the early stage of development, we had a chance to chat with producer Lance Robertson about some of the things we can look forward to in Warhammer Online.

**CGW:** Which Warhammer license will you be using—the 40K universe or classic Warhammer?

**Robertson:** This MMORPG title will be based on all Games Workshop products relating to the classic Warhammer fantasy world. The creative people at Games Workshop have produced a wealth of great material, and this provides us with a solid foundation for the game. The depth of cool background information, the inspired designs of the races and their weapons of war, and the interesting dynamics of the warring factions make this property a pleasure to work on.

**CGW:** What will the focus of this game be? How much will PVP figure into it?

**Robertson:** The game will be centered on warring alliances in a team-versus-team setup. This means

that all of the game's activities will in some way support the broader war. This includes PVE content.

**CGW:** Will there be any crafting?

**Robertson:** Yes, crafting will be well integrated into the game and play a valuable role in supporting your realm's war effort. However, there will be no daisy picking in this game!

**CGW:** Are you going to use any of the material Climax developed previously?

**Robertson:** All the material that was created for the previous MMORPG is available to us for this project. Games Workshop was heavily involved in the creation of new material for that game and

**There will be no daisy picking in this game.**

produced some interesting and excellent stuff for that project. We are currently in preproduction mode and evaluating what designs make sense in order to create a great Warhammer MMORPG. Naturally, we'll be working very closely with the people of Games Workshop to make sure that the game is as true to the [license] as possible. We're very pleased with the relationship we're forging with them, and come 2007, the results should speak for themselves. **/**

# WARHAMMER

## WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR—WINTER ASSAULT

Nuclear winter

PUBLISHER THQ DEVELOPER Relic GAMES RTS RELEASE DATE Fall 2005

### PREVIEW

TO BE BRUTALLY HONEST, THE FORMULA for an RTS expansion is extremely predictable: Add a new faction, toss in a few extra units for the old factions, introduce a new single-player campaign or two, and make some gimemplay tweaks. Yes, *Winter Assault* follows this formula—but we're going go out on a limb and predict that this expansion to GSI's 2004 RTS of the Year will rise above the mediocrity of your everyday add-on.

Why do we say this? The development team at Relic is taking great care to incorporate player feedback into the expansion, addressing many of the original *Dawn of War*'s minor yet discernable shortcomings. Each of the existing four armies gets a unit that helps fill a hole in its battle strategy: The space marines now have the chaplain, a commander unit with powerful ranged attacks;

orks get the mage-armored nob, a mechanized terror that can mow down entire squads on the front line; the elder fire dragon is a specialized artillery unit; and the chaos marines have the khorne berserker, a fast, high-powered melee monster. These new troops bring each army more closely in line with one another—and give them the firepower needed to contend with the brand-new imperial guard faction.

### IMPERIAL ENTANGLEMENTS

The imperial guard is designed to alleviate one of the biggest complaints about *Dawn of War*: its sometimes-difficult learning curve. The faction is designed with new players in mind; troops attack in large numbers, fighting with a heavily defense-oriented ranged combat style, augmented by extremely long-range (and high-cost!) artillery units and the arcane psyker's fatal soul-sucking ability. The imperial guard's "big gun" is the Baneblade, a

gigantic tank with nearly a dozen mounted weapons. While this may sound overpowering, the imperial guard has one big weakness: low troop morale, poetically conveyed by the new commander unit that literally shoots deserters in the back.

To round things out, two new campaigns (good and evil) are present in an attempt to amend the linearity of the original game's single-player mode. Yes, it looks and sounds like a typical expansion—but with the care Relic has shown the franchise so far, we're hoping *Winter Assault* will do for *Dawn of War* what *Blood War* did for *StarCraft*. /



The development team at Relic is taking great care to incorporate player feedback into the expansion.

### BEFORE DAWN OF WAR...



**Warhammer: Shadow of the Horned Rat (Microprose)**  
This strategy-RPG featured tactical real-time battles and an engaging story, even if the clunky interface did raise for a few rough edges.

NA  
1995



**Final Liberation: Warhammer Epic 40,000 (SSI)**  
Epic 40K initially re-created the tabletop game experience—which made it especially appealing to hardcore Warhammer proponents.

★★★★  
1997



**Warhammer: Dark Omen (Electronic Arts)**  
Interface problems plagued this early Warhammer RTS. The in-depth macro-management was great for RTS jockeys, but left tabletop purists in the dust.

★★★★  
1998



**Warhammer 40,000: Chase Gate (SSI)**  
Chase Gate fell back on the turn-based approach, and despite having a short campaign with only one playable faction, it still managed to deliver a compelling Warhammer experience.

★★★★  
1998



**Warhammer 40,000: Rites of War (SSI)**  
Yet another turn-based war game, *Rites of War* combined a dated graphics engine with total, turny unmoderated gameplay, resulting in a largely mediocre package.

★★★  
1999



**Warhammer 40,000: Fire Warrior (THQ)**  
Developer Kujo Entertainment failed the strategic elements of Warhammer for a linear, by-the-numbers shooter. It had little to offer RTS gamers—and even less for tabletop fans.

★★★  
2003

## WARHAMMER RTS Total war

PUBLISHER Namco  
DEVELOPER Spring Game Studio  
GENRE RTS RELEASE DATE 2006

### BREAKING NEWS

THQ MAY HAVE THE MONOPOLY ON Warhammer 40K, but Namco has scooped up the classic Warhammer fantasy license in yet another step to cement the company's new love affair with PC gaming. Namco's upcoming RTS was shown at this year's E3, though gameplay details were scant. We do know that you'll trade *Dawn of War*'s firearms and tanks for swords and plate mail, leading armies of orks and chaos warriors across fantasy battlefields, where the game will focus on epic-scale combat scenarios. With THQ still retaining the 40K license, perhaps we might eventually get to see these two properties go head-to-head. /

# THE CHRONICLES OF CREPESUZETTE

A second gnome's journey through *World of Warcraft*

**WHERE'S EGGBERT?**  
Our little gnome is taking a well-deserved break, so his pal Crepesuzette is "filling" in. Hehe!

**YOU MIGHT BE THINKING THIS CGW** redesign is so powerful that it's even made Eggbert more attractive. But (though there's no denying the mad skills of CGW art director Michael) you'd be wrong. As Eggbert has been briefly sidetracked in his quest to find a suitable mount, he has temporarily handed over the reins to me, Crepesuzette, a gnome rogue bravely soldiering her way through the hinterlands.

## I'M A LONER, DOTTIE

Thanks to my natural antisocialness, I've been immune to MMORPGs prior to *WoW*, but the ability to slash my way through Azeroth solo has me hooked (and when I say hooked, I mean that my husband has scheduled an intervention with a marriage counselor). While I tend to be a hacker in combat, the rogue class has suited my independence well: There's nothing like going into stealth mode, sneaking up behind a skeletal fiend, ganking him, and then finishing him off with a few ferocious exorcisions.

Due to my newbie status when starting out, I didn't realize that I wouldn't be able to use any of my mining and blacksmithing skills for my own benefit, but I conned another player into studying herbalism, so we have a healthy trade going—I supply the latest fashions in prestetables, and he keeps me sedated with healing potions. All in all, these coincidences (born of good game design) have melded nicely to make my first 25 levels a hazy blur of bloody backstabbing and gory gouging that lets me sleep well at night.

## LET'S GET TOGETHER

And then comes level 26. Up until this point, I have relished the stens' call of entitlements such as "werez stiches" and "LFG deadlines need roug." But a couple of things have made me realize that I will need to change my ways. One is that dying in five seconds instead of two doesn't mark a lot of progress in my elite quests, even though the difficulty level has been downgraded from orange to green. The other is that a higher-level friend has been heckling me about whether I've tackled the Westfall Dallas Brotherhood quests, because apparently completing that series will score me some really sweet loot.

When I'm not busy being a loner, I'm busy being a control freak, which is why I decide that rather than accepting one of the guild invitations that has been extended, it would be preferable to start my own guild so I'm not stuck at the mercy of some tyrant who can't stand it when others run the show. Now instead of going on solo creaklik-messacking sprees to further my cooking skill, I'm spending time socializing with all of the people I so assiduously avoided for my first 100 hours. Damn you, Blizzard. /Dane Joergeward



In her free time, Crepesuzette likes cooking creaklik gumbo and blacksmithing bronze braces.



The first 25 levels have glided along as smoothly as a goblin ride.



These elite mo'grosh enforcers may only be level 19, but they're still kicking nonelite level 26 gnome butt.

**Dying in five seconds instead of two doesn't mark a lot of progress in my elite quests.**



No man—or gnome—is an island; Crepesuzette visits a guild master.



Crepesuzette uses her silver-tongued ways to find people to join the guild.

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**DID YOU KNOW...?**

*Prey* was thought to have been cancelled in 1995 because 3D Realms was working on three games at the same time.



# ELUSIVE PREY

Infamous vaporware, *Prey* is back from the great beyond—and looking great

In 1996, *Prey* was on every game editor's lips. The cutting-edge graphics, the promise of a deep story-driven shooter rooted in Native American culture, and 3D Realms' revolutionary portal technology were going to usher in whole new ways to play. And then, just like that, it vanished.

PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Human Head Studios GENRE: Shooter/FPS/SCIENCE FICTION YEAR: 2006

## FIRST LOOK

"THE SHORT VERSION IS THAT WE BIT OFF more than we could chew," says 3D Realms founder and CEO Scott Miller. "We had just started *Duke Nukem Forever* at the same time, and we even had a third never-announced project, *Bombahell*. After nearly two years of trying to make *Prey* with an undermanned team, we saw that it wasn't going to happen and made the tough decision to cancel the project."

During the long silence, though, 3D Realms has been busy. Busy working for what seems like forever on *Duke Nukem Forever*...and secretly retooling *Prey* for an unsuspecting public for release in 2006. Well, in truth, 3D Realms executive producer George Broussard passed the *Prey* torch to Wisconsin-based Human Head Studios. So here we are, a mere six to 12 months away

## THE STORY SO FAR

I'm reading the press release right now, and it says: "*Prey* makes use of Joseph Campbell's renowned story structure, 'The Hero's Journey,'...made famous when George Lucas used it for the original *Star Wars*." It even has bullet-pointed "a deep, emotional story of love and sacrifice" as one of the key features of the game. This is the first thing to call them on. Don't a lot of games claim to go this route? *Half-Life* and *KOTOR* sure did. Broussard, though, thinks that not one game has yet come along and sold that drama exceedingly well. Miller adds, "I think we've mostly achieved our goal of making a tragic love story within the FPS genre, one that players will care about. This was not a part of the original design for *Prey*." Cue the demo.

The game unfolds in an interactive cut-scene.

The tag line for the game, "Earth's savior doesn't want the job," pretty much sums up Tommy. Even though he's apparently chosen by the spirits of his people to save the world, he just wants to get off this alien ship and save his gal. You eventually embrace your heritage and gain mystical powers in the process. This entire story unfolds from a first-person perspective. No cut-scenes, just a living world that you're interacting with. (Well, it is a linear script and you can't choose the conversation paths, but you get the idea.)

To illustrate the point, cut to the first in-game sequence you have control of, which takes place back at the bar on the reservation. True to 3D Realms' form, the environment is highly interactive. Just as *Duke Nukem 3D*'s was way back when. Here, it's kicked up to the nth degree. Beyond flushing toilets and playing interactive arcade games, you can walk over to the jukebox, where Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper" is playing, and change the time if you like. People are talking, you chat with Jenny for a couple seconds, and then it starts. The lights flicker and the ground shakes a little. Suddenly, a bright green light appears outside. A pickup truck launches straight up like a rocket, pulled by something. The roof of the bar is being torn off as patrons scream and cling to whatever they can. Debris, bar stools, and eventually everyone follow.

The script and this scene certainly show lots of promise for what lies ahead, but there are a number of innovations that are equally, if not more, important to *Prey*.

## Your weapon of choice, the assault rifle, is ripped off an alien's arm!

from seeing the game done (or as Broussard puts it, "It'll be ready when it's ready"...yadda, yadda, yadda), and *Prey* still holds the same promise from nine years ago: that it will be a deep story-driven shooter rooted in Native American culture and include great graphics and some cool new gameplay mechanics working behind the scenes. We had to see this for ourselves to believe it.

You're strapped to a table and all you can hear are the screams of other people in the distance and the voice of your girlfriend, Jenny. As a conveyor belt moves you both, a voiceover your voice, narrates as your life is flashing before your eyes. You're Tommy. A Cherokee, you joined the U.S. Rangers of an early age to escape the reservation. Denying your heritage, you've been trying to convince your girlfriend to leave with you.

>>> The good, the bad, and the business: *Prey* Hawk developer Neversett is hard at work on *Gun, a Q&A-ish Western gun-fighting game due out this fall.* >>>



Talon (on the right) helps out by providing a distraction while you blast some alien scum. ▶



▶ He's not exactly Chief Iron Eyez Cobb, but Tommy's grandfather does his best to remind Tommy of his Cherokee heritage.



▶ Stop us if you've heard this: "What do you get when you cross an alien with a human?"

## SPIRITS IN THE MATERIAL WORLD

A big part of the narrative is steeped in Cherokee culture. It not only helps the game unfold, but also opens up some unique gameplay styles. Human Head studios CEO and co-founder Tim Gerritsen explains, "As you make your way through this alien spaceship, you start getting visions." These visions are of your grandfather urging you to accept your heritage to help save Johnny—and the planet. The Land of Anclants, the desert hills and plains of your visions, is in complete contrast to outer space. It is the training area where you gradually earn your powers.

## HR GIGER, EAT YOUR HEART OUT

Prey isn't Doom 3.5—although it does use a modified version of the Doom engine. So, yes, the creatures seem a little reminiscent of lid's monstrosities, but their attacks, and how you'll fight back, feel unique.

Senior programmer and co-founder Chris Rhinchart promises that the aliens will be super-intelligent; they'll call for backup and try to protect themselves beyond just hiding, they'll run to the nearest health power-up stations, and they'll look for ammo. They're aware of everything interactive in the environment and will use it against you.

(POTENTIAL) SPOILER ALERT! The ship in orbit around earth is actually a living Dyson sphere, according to Gerritsen. It goes through the universe absorbing whatever it stumbles upon—spaceships, asteroids (one with its own unique gravity like at the center of the sphere), people, you name it. As a result, anything not digested outright by the ship is a parasite. Some aliens will help you. Many have made their "deals with the devil," saving the ship to survive.

As a result, everything has a very biomechanical feel. Items are grafted onto each other—organic membranes serve as "splino-doms" ▶



## GOT SPIRIT?

Tommy's Cherokee power—revealed

### SPIRIT GUIDE

Talon (not so ironically, the original name of the hero of Prey) is the name of your animal totem, a hawk. A childhood pet that now helps from beyond, Talon does a number of things throughout the game. First, he can spot points of interest. If you've lost, he'll perch near something that you may have missed. Second, he's a universal translator. Walk near an alien control panel, and when Talon arrives, he can help you read what is on the screen. He can even distract aliens.



### SPIRIT WALKING

When you want to focus on stealth and puzzle solving, you can jump into spirit walking mode. In this mode, nobody can see you unless you attack. Pass through shields to unlock unreachable areas and use your spirit bow to swat away enemies—like the nasty wraiths. (In one jarring sequence, a wraith possesses a little girl who then proceeds to thrash another child. It's straight-up creepy to have to blast a bunch of possessed kids.)



### DEATHWALK

Probably the lamest but most unavoidable issue in any game is death. Kick the bucket, end you load your last quicksave. "Why pull someone out of the experience?" asks Gerritsen. In Prey, keeping with the mythology, you're kicked out of your body into a sort of limbo upon death. Wraiths circle overhead, waiting to claim your body. Now, Prey turns into a minigame. Start skeet-shooting spooks with your spirit bow until your body is reclaimed. As soon as you do that, you're born again...so to speak.



## HEADS OF STATE

What is Human Head? It's... and why is it working on Prey?

**HUMAN HEADS ON HAND:** Tim Gerritsen, CEO/co-founder, and Chris Rhinchart, senior programmer/co-founder, both former developers with Raven Software.

**FIRST PROJECT AFTER LEAVING RAVEN SOFTWARE:** Rune, a Viking-themed action game that uses the Unreal Tournament engine. Broussard was a fan of Rune and, ultimately, it is what got 3D Realms' attention.

**WAS SECRETLY WORKING ON:** DarkKatana 2 before the original was even done. Eidos rightly canned the project.

**RIGHT PLACE, RIGHT TIME:** To be able to work on Prey, Human Head has been slaving away on this project for about three years, starting practically from scratch, rebooting the story, and rethinking how to build the alien ship.



← The world's biggest E3 exhibitor, as Groussard says, "the most complicated booth switch." This is one of Prey's many puzzles.



← Using portals, hunters can seemingly pop in from out of nowhere.



← This creature is looking for the no-good pistol that shot his paw. After you perforate your first one, his sidearm (read: his arm) becomes your weapon. This is the biomechanical assault rifle. There's no "ammo," but don't let it overheat.



← Here's what happens: E3 can't feed your irradiated pups their Klubbies in E3a.

(gotta love that name!), and alien monsters sprout firearms. This comes over into your weaponry as well. The assault rifle you eventually get is, in fact, the arm of a centaur creature that you ripped off after defeating it. Small, combustible creatures known as crawlers serve as grenades—tear off one's head like it's an extra-spy Cajun shrimp and lob it into a crowd. Alternately, pluck off a couple legs and it's a sticky bomb.

But this game is far from some trippy, easily categorized FPS in which HR Giger will meet MC Escher. Beyond the melding of man (or alien) and machine comes surrealistic gravity and reality-bending environments. And puzzles—lots of logic

puzzles. In fact, Miller says, "We wanted to have an ebb and flow to the game's pacing so that it's not all relentless action. I think the Half-Life games have successfully shown that a good mix of puzzle gameplay works well in an FPS. So, with Prey, we're leaning to a 60/40 split between action and puzzles."

Portal technology was a big deal back in 1997. What it means, in essence, is that each area is treated as an individual room. Wow. Not much of a big deal these days, but the portals here are used with insane amounts of new effects. Portals tear open constantly around the ship. Alien "hound" creatures will leap out from another part

## THE NEXT BIG THING

Scott Miller on the original game: "I look back at the original Prey screenshots we have, and they make me cringe."





REGULAR

THAT WAS THEN:  
SEPTEMBER 1995

A fond look back at the way we were

COMPUTER  
GAMING WORLD

We figured the end was nigh. After all, Newt Gingrich's book *To Renew America* was topping the best-seller lists, and people were actually paying good money to see Patrick

Swxyz and Wesley Snipes dress up in drag for *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything!*  
Julie Newmar.

But the jackass of the month award winner in September of 1995 was Senator Bob Packwood of Oregon. Packwood, who served in the Senate for 27 years, was expelled due to sexual misconduct with 29 women. To which he said: "In some cases, I was very frankly so drunk that I cannot remember the evening." Nicely done!

On the tech front, a little thing called Windows 95 was coming out, and it prompted us to boldly proclaim, "DOS is dead!" in a huge feature that broke down all the ins and outs of the new OS. Also, during this "simpler" time, we offered a roundup of 14 different game controllers, all of which would eventually be replaced...by the keyboard and mouse! /



▲ "Hey, evil, possessed kids! Wanna go play with this exploding creature for a second?"



▲ Here's an artist's rendition of the world-sucking ship that you're trapped inside. Want to see its chewy center? (It's just below.)



▲ There's an asteroid sitting in the middle of this sphere ship.



▲ Learn the gravity of this situation—and quickly! There's nothing trappier than raining death down from the side of a wall.

of the ship and pounce. Hunter aliens will try to ambush you as well. (Here's a trick for you: These tears also serve as hidden areas. Quickly kill a creature and jump into the portal it came from and you can loot whatever it had stashed.) In a very house-of-mirrors area rife with portals, you need to navigate a hallway where you see reflections of yourself! everywhere. If you're not paying attention, you end up walking in circles.

Gravity plays a significant role in level design as well. Switches throughout the ship flip gravity so that up is down and down is up. And, since we're dealing with an alien, why would they need conventional ladders? Throughout the ship are well-walking areas. Providing localized gravity, they allow you to walk along the walls while your bullets follow the ordinary laws of physics. So, theoretically, you could be standing upside down while lobbing grenades to the ground below. Of course, this opens up lots of insane potential for multiplayer matches. Just pull the lever to

shut down the well-walk and enemies go splat on the ground below.

While it is premature to discuss multiplayer, *Garmen* assures us that *Prey* is still largely a single-player experience, there will be multiplayer maps. Some will play largely on gravity-breaking themes; some will have plenty of portals; others will meld elements of both. Ideally, *Human Head* wants to support up to eight players in deathmatches, but that is for another day and another follow-up story.

The jaded cynic inside has been quoted. The spirits of old, enthusiastic editors speak to me in visions: Junius Johnny Wilson and Elliott Chin just swung by the office and I was a little tipsy with some hope that this game will make good on promises from almost a decade ago. If *Prey* stays on course and breaks the 3D Realms "curse" of not releasing games, we could be in for something great. Or maybe the next generation of CGW will be writing about this in 2013. / *Damen Gladstone*

## ...OF 1998

Here's what we had to say about *Prey* way back in our June 1997 issue

▲ "Is this *Myst*? The graphics for *Prey* already look stunning. Of course, environments are still unpopulated and much of the game isn't even in the production stages yet."



▲ "*Prey* is currently scheduled for release in mid-1998 and will require at least a Pentium 133 with a 3D graphics accelerator."



▲ "3D Realms is content to let the 'rabble' fight it out for second-generation supremacy [against *Quake*]. *Prey* will come in and pick off the winner."

# CALL OF DUTY

Channeling history to your desktop—again

PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Infinity Ward GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: Q4 2009

## EXCLUSIVE SCREENS

INFINITY WARD'S SHELL-SHOCKING WWII shooter *Call of Duty 2* is almost too tense. Machine guns growl, flying clouds of dirt mix with fragments of metal and fire, and gaping Windows pour out torrents of billowing dust. On the first pass, you don't get the details so much as the general

idea—existence as a pair of terrified eyes. In a way, it's like seeing your first Axis-and-Allies shoot-em-up, back before they started to imitate of train tours through animatronic history attractions.

Then the rumbling explosions become a background rhythm. You pick out people in the bumper tide, faces streaked with filth and sweat. Your squadmate warns, "Watch out, soldier behind that 88!" and there he

is, crouching beside the German gun. You can attribute the combat chatter to veteran authenticity advisors Capt. John Hillen and Col. Hank Keisroy (both retired), who insisted that—for all its sky-splitting sound and fury—the original *COO* was too quiet, sorely in need of some unscripted intel as the action unfolded.

The spirals of smoke and flame also serve two purposes: Cover. It's never your move.

» which has us wondering about the upcoming PC game *Evil Dead: Regeneration*. Will it be groovy? Only Bruce Campbell knows. »



REGULAR

# INDEPENDENT'S DAY

Advice from the experts

▶ **WITH THE WORLD OF WARCRAFTS OF THE GAME WORLD** hogging attention all the time, some smaller games never get their chance in the spotlight. Now they will. Every month, we'll handpick one independent title that deserves a shot at the "big time." That game will be eyeballed by a panel of two game-industry professionals and a CGW editor. The group will offer perspective and (we hope) a little constructive criticism to the developer. This month's pick:

## GODS & HEROES: ROME RISING

DEVELOPER: Perpetual Entertainment  
RELEASE DATE: Q4 2008  
WEBSITE: [www.godsheroes.com](http://www.godsheroes.com)

As a hero of Rome—and child of the gods—you'll live Roman mythology, where heroes and monsters mingle. After picking

a character class (warrior, scout, priest, mythic, rogue, or gladiator) and dilly-daddy (or mommy), you'll battle the empire's enemies and mythological beasts. Perpetual is perpetuating two big budget points here: "epic" story-driven quests that are bigger and deeper than anything currently being done, and the ability to eventually helm an NPC squad—which you hire, train, and control.

This month's judges are David Cole, an analyst with DFC Intelligence who follows the MMO space; CGW's resident MMO'er, Darren Gladstone, who is currently juggling characters in four different MMOs; and Starr Long, who worked on *Ultima Online* before becoming the producer of NCsoft's *Tibia* and *Ragnarok*.



▶ In *Gods & Heroes*, you'll take on the role of a Roman hero during the empire's classical mythological time period.



Hey developers, want us to check out your games? Send an e-mail to [CGWletters@ziffnews.com](mailto:CGWletters@ziffnews.com) with the subject line: INDEPENDENT'S DAY.

### David Cole

ANALYST, FOUNDER, DFC INTELLIGENCE



Nice subject matter...but wait! This has a historical motif. Aren't all MMORPGs supposed to be fantasy or sci-fi based? What's cool here is that ancient history

is a comparatively unique, but not completely off-the-wall, theme. And as titles like *Age of Empires* prove, it's a popular one. But no one's done much with the topic online.

Of course, how far the title really strays from standard-issue fare remains to be seen...it appears dabbles and their mystical powers will play a big role. That may or may not be a positive from a consumer's perspective.

The game could stand out in an overcrowded market. But will I truly feel like a Roman gladiator or is this actually just another thinly veiled me-too fantasy MMO in disguise? Assuming *Gods & Heroes* can define itself, a success would be 100,000 subscribers. Gladiators aren't as universally popular as superheroes, so I see a 200,000 subscriber base as a long shot. /

### Darren Gladstone

SENIOR EDITOR, COMPUTER GAMING WORLD



As a guy who adored Roman history—mostly thanks to a *Ray Harryhausen* marathon—I'm ready to release the kraken...as it were. First thing I noticed "Wow, that

warrior I created looks a little too Spartacus and not enough Gladiator for my tastes." Still, I do like the deep character customization for creating Festus the Mighty. *Gods & Heroes* promises lots of skills, god powers, and so on—but what MMO doesn't? The one thing that looks "epic" is NPC squad command.

Boss around up to eight NPCs, then try teaming with other players. Suddenly, you've got a small army. Nobody's done this before. Know why? It's tough to pull off. I'd like to see Perpetual adopt some of the conventional RTS control methods we've come to know and love—especially when it comes to streamlined target designation. Otherwise, heated battles could be logistical nightmares, switching between NPCs—and keeping Festus alive! /

### Starr Long

PRODUCER, TABULA RASA, NCSoft



It's nice to see a variation on the medieval fantasy theme, even if it's still swords-and-sorcery based. It may help the title separate itself from all the *D&D*

clones. I, for one, love the idea of running around in a skirt and sandals (wait, was that out loud?).

The squad combat seems interesting...if Perpetual can pull it off. No one's doing any kind of NPC warfare like these guys are talking about. I mean, who doesn't want to order around a bunch of sweaty men in skirts? They would need lots of hard training, of course (damn, thinking out loud again).

I just wish Perpetual had gotten the *Clash of the Titans* license. Calibos, the clockwork owl, Ursula Andreas as Aphrodite, Harry Hamlin...I could go on forever, but I digress.

This appears to be an interesting game with some elements—especially the setting—that could set it apart from the pack. /

▶ producer Scott Faye claims will have a very Dirty Harry-like feel. ▶ "Hot Coffee" in GTA: San Andreas? Not that it should be a huge shock.

# SOMETIMES THE HUMAN RACE

HAS TO  
START  
OVER...

The universe is about to uncover a mythical race. A race believed to exist only in fairy tales and ancient prophecies.

A race rumored to possess unfathomable abilities.

A race destined to be the salvation of all living creatures.

A race known as Humanity.

# A D V E N T R I S I N G

"INNOVATIVE AS HELL, AND THE MOST EMOTIVE TITLE TO HIT ANY PLATFORM IN AGES."

-GamePro

"EPIC IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD." "A GAME OF EPIC PROPORTIONS."

-Play

-IGN

Soundtrack Available on Something Else MusicWorks



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# 2005 POST-MORTEM

**E3, TAKE 2**  
E3 debuted in 1995 and has since grown to multi-million proportions. This year there were more than 75,000 attendees.

## CGW editors revisit their pre-show predictions

WAY BACK IN OUR JUNE ISSUE, we put on our crystal balls and tried to predict what would be hot and not at the annual Electronic Entertainment Expo, the gaming industry's biggest, noisiest, and most effluent event of the year. Do we know what we're talking about? Are we morons? Here's a look at what we predicted we'd see...and true confessions of what we actually saw.



## RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS

PUBLISHER: Microsoft DEVELOPER: Big Huge Games  
RELEASE DATE: May 2006

**What We Said:** "Unlike its loosely history-based predecessor, [RiL] taps into a WarCraft-style fantasy vein, replacing infantrymen and tanks with magic users and airships."

**What We Saw:** The sequel to *Rise of Nations* is looking nothing like the original...it's looking better. Sci-fi fantasy fare, combined with a simplified two-resource system (gold and timberium), promises you'll spend more time building and battling and less time harvesting.

## HELLGATE: LONDON

PUBLISHER: Warner Bros. GAMES: Flagship Studios  
RELEASE DATE: 2006

**What We Said:** "The only thing missing now is practical proof that Flagship's first release can make a first-person RPG fun to play."

**What We Saw:** In theory, Hellgate's sick-looking enemies, cool environments, and nifty RPG elements should mollify those who lack serious twitch skills. We're still hoping for the best.



PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: EA GAMES  
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2007

**What We Said:** "Spore has amazing potential to become huge."

**What We Saw:** We were only slightly off the mark with our prediction—Spore has the potential to be gi-freaking-normous. The in-depth demos we enjoyed revealed a game breathtaking in its sweep, mind-boggling in its ambition, and infuriatingly far off until complete. But we'll wait. Just don't expect us to be patient.



PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: EA GAMES  
RELEASE DATE: October 2005

**What We Said:** "It's cobblebit's time."

**What We Saw:** As last month's cover story showed, this stand-alone sequel to *City of Heroes* is a massive undertaking. New zones, supergig bosses, and PVP battles should add up to an even more rewarding superhero role-playing experience.

## TIMESHIFT

PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: EA GAMES  
RELEASE DATE: Q4 2005

**What We Said:** "The notion of blending Time-shifting features into a first-person shooter [is a great twist on the genre]."

**What We Saw:** While it could have been used as a Prince of Persia-style panic button, your time-shifting suit instead gives you a lot more options, offering creative ways to mow down enemies and help clear areas. It also doesn't hurt that the game looks as sharp as a steam-powered Ginsu.

## RISE & FALL: CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR

PUBLISHER: EA GAMES DEVELOPER: EA GAMES  
RELEASE DATE: October 2005

**What We Said:** "Rise & Fall is the kind of deep, rich strategy game that PC gamers live for."

**What We Saw:** Traditional RTS gameplay goes together with third-person action like peanut butter with chocolate—and trust us...it's not just some cheap gimmick. *Rise & Fall* could be the herald of a dynamic new era in RTS design.

## MAGE KNIGHT: APOCALYPSE

PUBLISHER: Bethesda GAMES: Bethesda  
RELEASE DATE: March 2006

**What We Said:** "Besides the new options [for playable races] and slick graphics, there are other big pushes...like a lot more emphasis on action and leaving stat juggling in the background."

**What We Saw:** Demoted in the shadow of a huge Hellgate: London pavilion, this game held its own...and looked good in the process. Those tired of waiting for *Diablo III* to surface should keep an eye on this Gauntlet-esque action-RPG.

## TITAN QUEST

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Ion Storm  
RELEASE DATE: 2006

**What We Said:** "Titan Quest is an extraordinarily nice-looking game."

**What We Saw:** The big goal with *Titan Quest*, according to designer Brian Sullivan, is to give it an exciting, epic cinematic feel. What we saw at E3 was quite thrilling indeed, with cool, next-generation *Diablo*-style gameplay.



PUBLISHER: Bethesda GAMES DEVELOPER: Bethesda  
RELEASE DATE: 2006

**What We Said:** "Oblivion might be another classic RPG."

**What We Saw:** Our pre-E3 assessment hinged on Bethesda addressing the shortcomings of Morrowind: weakish combat, generic dialogue, a lack of focus, and unrewarding stealth. What we saw at E3 addressed most of our worries: Dialogue is improved, and quests are more focused. Combat seems about the same—but it sure looks amazing. A single-player RPG? Gimme.



**PHANTASY STAR ONLINE: BLUE BURST**

PLUS: E3 2005 DEVELOPER: Square Team

RELEASE DATE: 2006

**What We Said:** "Phantasy Star is coming to the PC? It's about phrasin' time!"

**What We Saw:** Higher resolutions make Square Team's colorful worlds and characters look that much prettier. PSO is as addictive as ever, while it's still most at home with a gamepad, it is surprisingly playable with mouse and keyboard controls.

## THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE: SHADOWS OF ANGMAR

PLUS: E3 2005 DEVELOPER: Turbine

RELEASE DATE: January 2007

**What We Said:** "We have one burning question: Does anyone really care?"

**What We Saw:** The game formerly known as Middle-earth Online attempts to provide a fiction-heavy experience that LOTR-savvy MMO fans should dig. But, as with all licensed MMOs, what fun is it when you're a nobody? We want to be Gandalf or Aragorn, not John Wayne Hobbit.

## DREAMFALL: THE LONGEST JOURNEY

PLUS: E3 2005 DEVELOPER: Funcom

RELEASE DATE: September 2005

**What We Said:** "We love The Longest Journey, but the sequel has us worried."

**What We Saw:** The three Lara Croft-esque playable characters confirm the de-Mytification we suspected, but all the grandeur of classic adventures still seems to linger. We're still not sold on that combat stuff, though.

## VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES

PLUS: E3 2005 DEVELOPER: Blue Onyx

RELEASE DATE: 2006

**What We Said:** "We need to see for ourselves what makes Vanguard different from everything else."

**What We Saw:** We now know what makes it different—it's the most ambitious MMORPG ever, which is its salvation or doom. Covering traditional adventuring, crafting, diplomacy, exploration, and so much more, Vanguard's design doc must be big enough to stain an ox. But is it too big?

## AGE OF EMPIRES III

PLUS: E3 2005 DEVELOPER: Ensemble

RELEASE DATE: November 2005

**What We Said:** "Rather than acting as yet another carbon copy of its forebear, AOE3 introduces some new gameplay elements."

**What We Saw:** AOE3 is the series' first 3D title, and while that's hardly a revolutionary element, its impact on the game is undeniable. In general, it seems Ensemble hasn't tried to fix what wasn't broken—thankfully. (Check out our exclusive hands-on preview of AOE3 page TK.)

## CALL OF DUTY 2

PLUS: E3 2005 DEVELOPER: Infinity Ward

RELEASE DATE: Q3 2006

**What We Said:** "Why is it we are so excited about COD2? The gameplay."

**What We Saw:** Death porn. That sounds harsh, but more than one of us was disturbed by the COO2 D-Day demo shown at E3. We understand the desire for authenticity, but this felt like it was reveling in death and destruction. We're hoping the finished product makes us feel less icky than the demo did, though the game looks great—for a look at exclusive new screens, turn to page TK.

## STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR

PLUS: E3 2005 DEVELOPER: LucasArts

RELEASE DATE: November 2005

**What We Said:** "Yeah, we know that previous Star Wars RTS efforts have been mediocre, but our hopes are still high."

**What We Saw:** After getting a good look at Empire at War, we were impressed by the in-game battles, which seemed appropriately larger than life and incredibly detailed. Well, either that or we were still on a high from seeing Darth Vader back in theaters, kicking ass old-school style.



## AGE OF CONAN: HYBORIAN ADVENTURES

PLUS: E3 2005 DEVELOPER: Funcom

RELEASE DATE: 2006

**What We Said:** "Funcom hopes that by getting players acclimated to the game offline, the MMO experience will be less daunting and more dynamic."

**What We Saw:** A single-player RPG that turns into an MMO adventure after level 20? It sounds ingenious, looks damn impressive, and is true to the Conan lore—expect a full onscreen avatar. Definitely not just another MMO, Age of Conan is one to watch.



## CGW @ E3 2005

The editors sound off about this year's show



### JEFF GREEN

It was a great E3 for PC gaming, and I'm not just saying that because it's my job. Spore, AOE3, Prey, and Enemy Territory: Quake Wars were

amongst the best games of the show, on any platform. I hate E3. E3 sucks. I wish it would go away forever. But this year I loved it.



### ROBERT COFFEY

While E3 was neat—tons of people with questionable hygiene made even more questionable thanks to no air conditioning—it was

great nonetheless. For me, this year was all about games I hadn't known much about beforehand, like Prey and Spore. I also liked Creative's X-Fi technology [see page 82 for more on X-Fi], which is going to make gamers stop taking sound for granted.



### KRISTEN SALVATORE

This was by far the most crowded E3 I've attended. In terms of getting sound and finding food, and the proximity of sweaty

bodies with which I am not interested in becoming familiar, that was a bad, bad thing. In terms of the health of our industry and the wealth of great games to look forward to, it was nothing short of kick-ass.



### DARREN GLADSTONE

This was a year of bona fide surprises. Who cares about the PS3 and Xbox 360 when we've got Spore, the most

revolutionary game I've seen since... well, The Sims? Top that off with new games such as UT 2007, Huxley, and Quake Wars, and 2005 is already looking hot.



### RYAN SCOTT

One thing never changes: E3 makes my feet hurt. But even with the legwork, the show is always a blast. My favorite game of E3 had

to be Titan Quest. I know everybody's hot and bothered for Diablo III, but, man, does this game look awesome!



## AUTO ASSAULT

PUBLISHER: NCAVE DEVELOPER: NCAVE  
RELEASE DATE: August 2006

**What We Said:** "Hopefully, you won't need a mechanic to figure everything out."

**What We Saw:** We have every reason to believe that *Auto Assault* will be just as amazing as...pretty much everything else NCAVE has published. As for the number-heavy item statistics we're so concerned about, developer NetDevil assures us it's all being taken care of.

## IMPERATOR

PUBLISHER: MYTHIC ENTERTAINMENT DEVELOPER: MYTHIC ENTERTAINMENT  
RELEASE DATE: 2006

**What We Said:** "[*Imperator*] could be a serious contender once it's finished."

**What We Saw:** This game is looking way better now that it's getting further along. Mythic is setting up a really solid tactical environment here, with the goal of making you feel like you're in the middle of a war. If it ends up being the easy-to-pick-up experience it's touted as, we're psyched.

## THE MOVIES

PUBLISHER: SONY PICTURES DEVELOPER: LIONHEAD  
RELEASE DATE: 2006

**What We Said:** "We aren't completely sold on the 'make your own movie' premise."

**What We Saw:** Make movies, save them as AVI files, and share them on the Internet. It's actually genius. Sure, we'll give the Sims-esque sandbox mode a whirl, but look out *Terminator*—that screen-play in our closet is about to get green-lighted. Uh, if the game would come out already.



PUBLISHER: MCMANUS DEVELOPER: LIONHEAD  
RELEASE DATE: Q4 2005

**What We Said:** "The Lost Chapters is a tantalizing treat."

**What We Saw:** No, it won't change your mind or fulfill the ambition of the original Xbox version, but it will satisfy hungry action-RPG fans. Playing with a mouse brings a new approach to fighting, and a good deal of new content helps to flesh out the story significantly.



## BLACK & WHITE 2

PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: LIONHEAD  
RELEASE DATE: 2006

**What We Said:** "Black & White 2 needs to be a whole lot better than the original."

**What We Saw:** Thankfully, it looks like *Black & White 2* will indeed be a whole lot better. The game has retained the charm and central premise of the original while flashing out the actual "game" part of the game. With the tedum gone, better creature A.I., and improved combat, *Black & White 2* is moving up our must-play list.

## E3 SURPRISES & MORE TO WATCH

### ALAN WAKE

PUBLISHER: TGA DEVELOPER: REMEDIY  
RELEASE DATE: TBA

The guys behind *Max Payne* are cooking up a new psychological thriller titled *Alan Wake*, in which you portray a horror novelist whose best-selling, nightmare-influenced books have come to life. We saw little more than a tech demo—but given Remedy's track record, we're excited.

### BROTHERS IN ARMS: EARNED IN BLOOD

PUBLISHER: GIGAWATT GAMES/ST. GUYARDE  
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2005

Armed in *Blood* may seem rushed, but we're assured that it has been in development for a while. Gearbox has taken a note from its first professional game, *Half-Life: Opposing Forces*: You'll play through the timeline of the original *Brothers in Arms* from another soldier's perspective, briefly interacting with some of the missions you ran through in that game.

### ENEMY TERRITORY: QUAKE WARS

PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: SPLIT  
DAMAGE RELEASE DATE: TBA

Unlike the original, freely downloadable *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* is a fully featured retail product. Denmark junkies will feel right at home in this online tactical shooter, which takes place in continuity just before *Quake II*. We've got some big hopes on this one coming down the road—stay tuned.

### INDIGO PROPHECY

PUBLISHER: AION DEVELOPER: QUENTIN GROSS  
RELEASE DATE: September 2005

Indigo who? The game formerly known as *Fairweather* is coming to the United States, and it's the most promising adventure game we've seen in a while. The game's big push is to really make you feel as though you're part of an interactive cinematic experience; it blends action with adventure, and the story progression changes depending on your actions.



PUBLISHER: WILSON DEVELOPER: WILSON  
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2006

Wilson's *Huxley* looks like a promising—and gritty—postapocalyptic urban-warfare game in which your actions actually impact the world. Everything that you succeed at not only benefits you (new weaponry, stat and skill improvement), but becomes an online version of *Play It Forward*—minus the ad acting.



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**BOUYAKASHAI**  
Check it: In 2004, Ali G gave the commencement speech at Harvard.

Respect! (And if this didn't make sense, buy the first season of the HBO show on DVD right now.)



■ **MUSIC**  
**Z-Trip: Shifting Gears**

**\$11 AMAZON.COM**  
We've appreciated the genius of DJ Z-Trip for some time now. He was the king of mash-ups before they

became MTV's flavor of the month, and his *Uneasy Listening* and *Live From L.A.* bootleg discs are ingenious mixes of rock and hip-hop tracks. This new disc, true to its name, is a major shift. And it rules.



■ **PULP**  
**Green Lantern**

**\$3.00 DCCOMICS.COM**

Hal Jordan is back, baby! Pardon this fan-boy moment, but the quintessential Green Lantern, the emerald pimp, is literally back from the dead. The guy you may remember from *Superfriends* is getting a reboot thanks to the writing of Geoff Johns, and he's off to a good start. We've already seen GL pimp-slap Batman—and that was even before issue #1 hit stands!



■ **MUSIC**  
**Spoon: Gimme Fiction**

**\$13 AMAZON.COM**  
Featuring a bunch of infectious songs that bounce around in your

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■ **OVD**  
**Kung Fu Hustle**

**\$20 AMAZON.COM**  
Stephen Chow is a genius. Take kung fu see-kickery and mix it with a *Rocky* runner cartoon and you've got the idea of what's

here. If you haven't seen *Shaolin Soccer*, that's fine. But if you missed this flick when it blew through theaters like a martial arts hurricane, check out the DVD. No excuses!



■ **MUSIC**  
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■ **STUDY GUIDE**  
**Slang Flash Cards**

**\$16 URBANOUT FITTERS.COM**

Need a grip of games? Are you a player hater? Does Jeff or Robert have any idea what

we're talking about? Probably not. That's why we're happy to supply them with these cheat study guides, so they only feel remotely out of it when trying to relate to "tha kids."



■ **PULP**  
**Invincible: Family Matters**

**\$6.50 AMAZON.COM**

Mark Grayson doesn't need to wait until all the Marvel games come out to be a superhero. He always knew that he was going to be one; after all, his father is the most powerful guy on the planet. Mark's just been waiting for his own ability to kick in. Follow Mark's senior year in high school as he starts coming of age in this collection of the first few issues.

## PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games

| AUGUST 2005                                     | PUBLISHER    |
|---|--------------|
| 107 Feds or Die                                 | Ubisoft      |
| Call of Oblivion: Dark Genesis of the Earth     | 2K Games     |
| Dangerous Streets II                            | Marcus       |
| FEAR  | VU Games     |
| Avon Walked                                     | Midcoast     |
| Madras NFL 06                                   | EA Sports    |
| MotorGP 3                                       | THQ          |
| Norco Museum 50th Anniversary Arcade Collection | Norco        |
| The Sims 2: Nightlife                           | EA Games     |
| SEPTEMBER 2005                                  |              |
| Dreadnuk: The Longest Journey                   | Foxconn      |
| EverQuest II: Desert of Flames                  | SOE          |
| Indigo Prophecy                                 | Atari        |
| LOTR Online: Shadows of Angor                   | Ubisoft      |
| Origin of the Species                           | Tri Synergy  |
| Playboy: The Mansion—Private Party              | Hip Games    |
| Rainbow Six: Lockdown                           | Ubisoft      |
| Scarface  | VU Games     |
| Seven Kingdoms: Conquest                        | Enlight      |
| The Suffering: Tale of Two Cities               | Midway       |
| UFO: Extraterrestrial                           | Tri Synergy  |
| OCTOBER 2005                                    |              |
| City of Villains                                | Midcoast     |
| Rise & Fall                                     | Midway       |
| STALKER   | THQ          |
| The Godfather                                   | EA Games     |
| Gods & Heroes                                   | Parasoft     |
| The Movies                                      | Atelion      |
| TimeShift                                       | Atari        |
| NOVEMBER/FALL 2005                              |              |
| Blitzkrieg II                                   | GDV Software |
| Brothers in Arms: Road to Blood                 | Ubisoft      |
| Call of Duty 2                                  | Activision   |
| Chicken Little                                  | Buena Vista  |
| Commando Strike Force                           | Edco         |
| Kuros 2140                                      | Zuware       |
| Bl Mindcor                                      | Emerge       |
| Evil Dead: Regeneration                         | THQ          |
| Ghost Recon 2                                   | Ubisoft      |
| Hitman: Blood Money                             | Edco         |
| Line & Color: Criminal Intent                   | VU Games     |
| Myth V: End of Ages                             | Ubisoft      |
| Rogue: Total War—Barbarian Invasion             | Activision   |
| The Roads                                       | Emerge       |
| Stacked   | Myelin Media |
| Stalder the Zombie                              | Argot        |
| UFD: AfterShock                                 | Emerge       |
| World Racing 2                                  | TDK          |
| Worms 4: Mayhem                                 | Codemasters  |
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NEW YORK POST

# AGE OF EMPIRES III

The definitive RTS gets redefined. We tell you how.

PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios  
DEVELOPER: Ensemble Studios  
GENRE: RTS  
SOLE: PC  
DATE: Winter 2005

## WORLD-EXCLUSIVE SCREENS AND DETAILS

THERE'S A GOOD CHANCE YOU'RE CURIOUS ABOUT AGE OF EMPIRES III. To date, nearly 16 million copies of the historically based real-time strategy franchise have been sold to gamers everywhere. And while some dedicated gamers are still happily gathering resources, establishing trade routes, and skirmishing among the stone-age tribes and conquerors of the first two AOE's, many more are ready to travel to the New World, meet new people...and destroy them.

Age of Empires III doesn't alter what's been working well for years (see Old World sidebar below), but it does introduce some significant new features that affect gameplay (for an overview, see the New World sidebar below). During our exclusive playtest and interview with lead programmer Dave Pottinger, producer David Rippey, lead designer Greg Street, and senior designer Bruce Shelley, we learned exactly how those features work—and how they're redefining this definitive RTS. / Jeff Green

## OLD WORLD

### ▶ SAME GOAL AS THE REST OF THE FRANCHISE:

Explore the map, gather resources, build a civilization, and destroy everyone else.

▶ **SAME ORGANIZATION:** There's a single-player campaign, a single-player skirmish mode, and multiplayer.

▶ **STORY LINE:** It directly follows AOE2's, beginning in the 1500s; focuses on the European "discovery" and colonization of the New World; and ends just before the start of the Civil War.

▶ **EIGHT PLAYABLE CIVILIZATIONS:** Spanish, British, French, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Russian, and Ottoman. (See page 61 for more on the civilizations.)

▶ **FIVE AGES (YES, FIVE):** discovery, colonial, fortress, industrial, and imperial. Why five instead of the usual four? To break late-game stalemates.



# PIRES III



## NEW WORLD

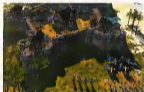
- ▶ **THE HOME CITY:** In multiplayer and skirmish modes, all civilizations have a home city that supplies resources and levels up according to players' success on the maps. The home city is persistent from game to game. (page 46)
- ▶ **SKIRMISH MODE** (aka random maps): A.I. opponents are now well-developed "characters" with deep strategies, motivations, and personalities—and more than 4,000 audio taunts at their disposal. (page 50)
- ▶ **NATIVE AMERICANS:** Not a playable civilization, but they ally with playable civs, putting their technologies and resources at that civ's disposal. Only Native American military units allied with a playable civ can be killed; villagers are not attackable. (page 50)
- ▶ **GRAPHICS AND PHYSICS:** This first 3D iteration of the series uses bump- and tone-mapping to render realistic water and shadows, and the Havok engine's cause-and-effect physics bring battles to lurid life. (page 52)





# THE HOME CITY

Ensemble adds some RPG to AOE3



BY FAR, AOE3'S BIGGEST INNOVATION IS THE home city, which brings an element of persistence to both your single- and multiplayer games and adds a ton of new strategy to the mix.

It works like this: When you first start the game in skirmish or multiplayer mode, you choose to play as one of eight civilizations, each of which has a home city. (See page 50 for details on skirmish mode and the eight civilizations.) The home city represents your HQ back in Europe—for example, if you're playing as Spain, your home city is Seville. While your conquistadors are off in the New World, Seville is supporting their endeavors with shipments of resources, civilians, technology, and military units that you create and send so that they show up on the New World map while you're playing. In return, you explore in the New World—everything from shooting bears to building structures—gain you XP that allow you to level up your home city...which in turn opens up opportunities for new, better shipments to your New World minions, and more opportunities to make those shipments.

## AGE OF EMPIREQUEST

Think of the home city as an RPG character in an RPG, the first thing you do is create a character; here, you name your town. In an RPG, the more you play, the more your character levels up; here, the more you play, the more your city levels up. As it does, you get access to upgrades and customization options (routines to architecture, different units, texture tweaks), but more important, leveling up affects the type and number of shipments you can send. Just like in an RPG, there are more powerful things deeper in the loot tree—you can send some shipments at level 20 that weren't available to you in level 10. You can send shipments every few minutes (the better you play the less waiting time between sending opportunities), and the number of ship-

**More than anything, the home city affects players' strategies—how they're used can turn the tide of a game.**

ments you can make increases as you level up.

You begin with 12 possible shipments. You may use one on something you send once, such as a technology, while you use a bunch of them on something you send repeatedly, like villagers. At the end of the game, if you have sufficient XP, you level up and can choose an additional shipment to add to your arsenal. In the next game, you'll have 13 shipment options instead of 12. Developer Ensemble is guessing that a grand total of 100 potential shipments will become available to players who have established a fully developed home city, but the limit for use in any given game is 20. That's the point at which you'll have to start making choices before each game: Which 20 shipments do you want to bring in? Says Shelley, "It's kind of like building different Mage: The Gathering decks. If I'm playing this guy and he favors one strategy, I'll play a particular city with a particular set of shipments because they're particularly good against what I think he's going to do."

In practice, you can play and level up as many home cities as you choose, though Ensemble believes the typical player will probably have one city per civilization. A particularly hardcore player, though, might have 20 home cities with different build-outs—three for each civilization. Home cities are also separate for single- and multiplayer games, with level disparities handled by restrictions aimed at keeping things fair and focused on strategy. Decks will be "fused" by level, so that, for example, any cards you receive from levels 0 through 9 will make a tier 1 deck. Levels 10-25 will be tier 2, and

so on. If you have a deck with even a single tier 3 card, then you have a tier 3 deck. And you can only play a tier 3 deck against other tier 3 players. So a guy with a level 50 home city can play a level 1 newbie—but he can only use cards available at the lowest levels. "It's not like World of Warcraft," says Street, "where if I'm level 30 and you're level 35 I have no chance against you."

## CHOICE STRATEGIES

More than anything, the home city affects players' strategies—what shipments are sent and when they're sent can turn the tide of a game. Looking to win with a booming economy? Focus your shipment choices on villagers, food, and technologies that will help to improve your colony. Seeking a military rush victory? Be sure you've got shipments that let you send in the cavalry and be ready to send in army units when your opponents don't expect it. Defending against a military rush? Consider "saving up" shipments so you have emergency supplies in case of attack.

Despite the RPG analogy, Street is quick to point out that Age of Empires III is still an RTS, and skill really matters. If you squander your shipments or get attacked really early or something, it's still possible for someone who's much more skilled than you to win, even at a lower level. An RTS is about high-level choice. It's about reacting to what another player does, not having a system where 14 games ago you got the technology that I didn't get and now, because of the map we picked, I'm probably going to lose as soon as the game starts."

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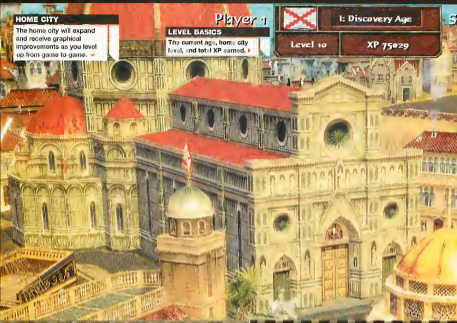
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**HOME CITY**

The home city will expand and receive graphical improvements as you level up from game to game.

Player 1

**LEVEL BASICS**

The current age, home city level, and total XP earned.



I: Discovery Age

Level 10

XP 75029

**TECH TREE BRANCHES**

New World Trading Company

The different branches of the tech tree (names will differ for each civ).

Tower of Gold

Cathedral

Manufacturing Plant

Harbor

**XP BAR**

XP bar of the current game. When the green bar fills up, you can choose one of your shipments to arrive at your town center.



**RESOURCES**

Resource in the current game.

|  |        |
|--|--------|
|  | 7 / 10 |
|  | 100    |
|  | 20     |
|  | 0      |
|  | 7      |

**MINIMAP**

Minimap of the current game.



7

New cards available

Native Long: 13 improvements for Native American allies are relatively inexpensive.



**TECH TREE BRANCH**

One branch of the Spanish tech tree. Each time your home city levels up, you get another card. Cards represent special shipments you can receive throughout the course of a game, each time you play. See letters "through" for examples of shipments.







**b. Colonial Mills:** Increases your town center's offense and lets you call out minutemen to defend the city.

**d. Advanced Mills:** Makes your mills (a primary source of food) cheaper, stronger, and faster at gathering.

**c. Forts:** Allows you to build a fort (the game's most powerful defensive structure) in the third era.

**e. Advanced Markets:** Makes markets cheaper and stronger and improves exchange rate.

**f. Factories:** Lets you build factories in the fourth age. These produce resources without the need for settlers to gather them.

## ▶ HOME CITY

HERE'S A GUIDE TO ONE PORTION OF THE TECH TREE YOU SEE IF YOUR HOME CITY IS SEVILLE, SPAIN. YOU SWAP FROM THE MAIN GAME TO THIS SCREEN TO CONTROL YOUR HOME CITY'S ACTIONS (THIS PAUSES THE GAME IN SINGLE PLAYER, BUT NOT IN MULTIPLAYER). HOW IMPORTANT IS THE HOME CITY? FOR EXAMPLE, YOU CAN BUILD A TOWN CENTER ONLY BY SENDING A "COVERED WAGON" SHIPMENT FROM YOUR HOME CITY TO YOUR EXPLORERS IN THE NEW WORLD.

# SKIRMISH MODE

A.I. with attitude



"[SKIRMISH MODE] IS THE MAIN THING THAT'S distinguished our games from everyone else's," says Shelley—and he's right. *Age of Empires* was the first real-time strategy game to give players the opportunity to compete against the computer A.I. on randomly generated maps, essentially mimicking the structure of a multiplayer game. Even today, the challenges inherent in making random maps that the A.I. can play on intelligently—and that players feel are fair—are just too great for most companies.

Blizzard, for example, never includes random maps; everything in *WarCraft* is always hand-placed. Shelley explains the difference this way: "[Blizzard] is building chess games [in *WarCraft* and *StarCraft*] for competition. One guy at Blizzard



said we wouldn't believe the amount of e-mail they get from competitive players saying stuff like, 'If you would just move that bear two pixels south it'd balance the map.' We're building a poker game, where every hand, you don't know what you've got until you pull up your cards."

AOE3's big, new skirmish mode feature is the inclusion of eight computer-player personas, one for each civilization—Napoleón for France, Queen Isabella for Spain, and so on (see page 51). Every A.I. opponent will have different strategies, motivations, and personalities.

"We wanted to beef up the feeling that you're playing against a person, not a bunch of bots calculating the most optimal way to attack you," says Street.



One way they'll do this is with audio taunts—there are about 4,000 at this point—that will chime in at key moments in recognition of what's happening in the game. *Age of Mythology* included taunt taunts from the A.I., but with AOE3's multiple audible personalities, it's much more emped up this time around.

"A really cool thing is for the A.I. to tell you what to do," says Pottinger. "Let's say that as Napoleón is marching across the map, he says, 'Yes on my way to kick your ass.' That's cool. Why? It creates a time line and some tension, because you know that in a couple minutes, this big Napoleonic army is coming to your town. That's a lot more fun than just having 40 outposts show up."

# NATIVE AMERICANS

PC meets PC



THE NEW WORLD, OF COURSE, WASN'T NEW TO everyone, and Ensemble knew from the start that Native Americans would play an important role in the game. They do, but not as a playable civilization.

"There are Native American towns on maps, and it's up to you to go discover them and forge alliances with them," says Street. You forge these alliances by building trading posts near Native American villages (and you break other civilizations' alliances by destroying their trading posts). Once you form an alliance with a tribe, you can use its units and technologies, along with those of your own civilization. So, for example, if you are playing as the French and you ally with the Iroquois, you now have access to French and Iroquois soldiers and knowledge. "They're kind of like plug-ins," Street explains. "They're an additional civ that you can plug into your main one to get extra abilities."

Strategically, this adds an interesting new dimension to the game. Native American alliances cost no population spots because you needn't provide them with food and shelter, as you would your own units. Nazing your population limit and short on warriors? If you're allied with a nearby Native American tribe,



**In a game about the colonization of America, deciding how to portray Native Americans is especially difficult.**

you have their weapons of your disposal with no hit to your population limit or resources. And as you advance, your indigenous allied friends get additional units and technologies.

What they won't ever get is attacked: Native American units are treated as opponents only when they're allied with another civilization, and then, only their military units can be attacked. For example, if you are playing against the British, who are allied with the Comanche, you can attack Comanche military units—never Comanche villages themselves. If no alliances are in place, Native Americans aren't attackable at all.

Ensemble and Microsoft admit that in making a game about the European colonization of America, deciding how to portray Native Americans was difficult. It seemed that no matter how they were represented—or even what they were called—somebody



was going to be unhappy. Native American groups themselves couldn't agree on what Ensemble should do. Microsoft conducted meetings with representatives of different tribes, but according to Ensemble president Tony Goodman, "It was impossible to get consensus on any issue. There was no topic that they as a collective group agreed upon." Some tribal representatives felt the same way as many at Ensemble: Native Americans should be a playable civilization. Others wanted them in the game, but to be unkillable. And the debate over naming ranged from Native American to First Peoples to Indigenous Peoples to...well, Indians.

Ultimately, it came down to gameplay. "We knew what we wanted from a gameplay standpoint," says Pippy. "We did everything we could to make it politically correct, but we didn't let that drive the design. Fun trumps history."

# 8 CIVILIZATIONS

AOE3's playable civs, and the corresponding skirmish mode A.I. opponents



BRITISH



**HOME CITY:** London  
**CIV BONUS:** Manor house gives quick access to settlers  
**UNIQUE UNITS:** Longbowmen, rocket  
**A.I. OPPONENT:** Queen Elizabeth



RUSSIAN



**HOME CITY:** Moscow  
**CIV BONUS:** Start with extra resources, get train infantry in batches  
**UNIQUE UNITS:** Cossack, strelitz, oprichnik  
**A.I. OPPONENT:** Ivan the Terrible



PORTUGUESE



**HOME CITY:** Lisbon  
**CIV BONUS:** Start with two town centers, strong navy, best dragoons in game  
**UNIQUE UNITS:** Caravel  
**A.I. OPPONENT:** Prince Henry the Navigator



FRENCH



**HOME CITY:** Paris  
**CIV BONUS:** Coasars ("peupliers") can form alliances with Native Americans  
**UNIQUE UNITS:** Carroux, cuirassier  
**A.I. OPPONENT:** Napoleon Bonaparte



DUTCH



**HOME CITY:** Amsterdam  
**CIV BONUS:** Banks generate coin automatically  
**UNIQUE UNITS:** Envoy, reitser, fluyt  
**A.I. OPPONENT:** Maurice of Orange



GERMAN



**HOME CITY:** Berlin  
**CIV BONUS:** Settler wagon and ulian cavalry spawn free from town center  
**UNIQUE UNITS:** Ulman, settler wagon, doppelsoldner  
**A.I. OPPONENT:** Frederick the Great



OTTOMAN



**HOME CITY:** Constantinople  
**CIV BONUS:** Town centers produce settlers automatically, more unique units  
**UNIQUE UNITS:** Abus gun, Janissary, spahi, galley, great Bombard  
**A.I. OPPONENT:** Suleiman the Magnificent



SPANISH



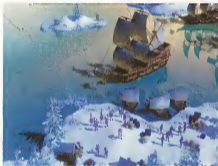
**HOME CITY:** Seville  
**CIV BONUS:** Faster home-city shipments  
**UNIQUE UNITS:** Redolero, lancer warrior  
**A.I. OPPONENT:** Queen Isabella



▲ Rag-doll physics mean that battles come alive with bodies flying and falling in a realistic fashion.

## GRAPHICS & PHYSICS

Realism and details never seen before in an RTS



▲ Outtakes even Thomas Kinkadee, *Painter of Light*<sup>SM</sup>.



▲ High dynamic range lighting makes for vibrant, realistic scenes.

ONE OF THE MOST OBVIOUS INNOVATIONS comes in the form of ACE3's graphics and physics. "I think one of the things that invigorated the genre is the graphics," says Street. "We could finally do some of the things that first-person shooters and RPGs have been doing for a while. We don't have to tell the artists, 'Oh, you can't put that unit in the game, it has too many polys' or 'We can't have shadows casting under shadows because the game will crash.' It's been nice not to tell people that."

It turns out that the game's stellar look benefited from an Xbox 360 game that was scrapped. "There was a prototyped engine shown to Bill Gates," Shelley explains, "with lighting stuff that hadn't been in many games at that point—it was a 360 game. We decided to put some of our assets—essentially, the home city—into that engine to see what it looked like. When that game got canceled, it freed up really high-end art and graphics guys, and we saw it was a good opportunity to pull them in, and pull that technology in."



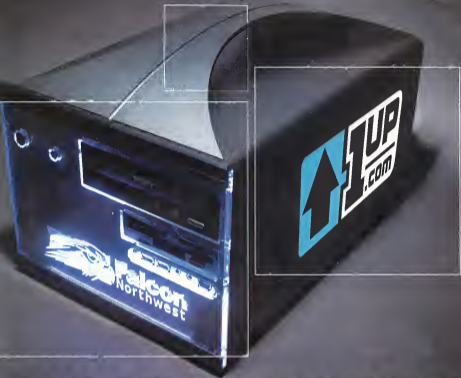
**One programmer's entire job was ensuring that water effects were portrayed realistically.**

"That" technology reads like a laundry list of the best graphics looks out there: High dynamic range lighting makes scenes look more natural because it allows for the representation of the sun's beams bouncing off reflective surfaces. Bump-mapping and specular mapping mean that shiny substances like water and metal glaze as they should. One programmer's entire job was ensuring that water effects were portrayed realistically, with details like ripples and jetsam, foam near the shore, and accurate water motion. And shadows are now "naturally" cast according to where the sun is. It all adds up to environments that are incredibly detailed and realistic looking.

That realism is also mirrored in physics effects. The Havok engine at work results in rag-doll physics that throw bodies during battles, and in structural

damage that far more accurately mirrors the actual results of, say, a cannonball striking a building. Even the trees are physics enabled, so an errant cannonball can hit them and knock them down.

AT THE END OF OUR TIME TOGETHER, BRUCE Shelley reminds me that "[CGW] wrote about how the age of the RTS is dead, how Age of Mythology was the last great RTS game," (which we did, in our December 2002 cover story). "This has been a struggle for us: trying to innovate but [still] hold on to making an Age game." It's possible that after a full review of Age of Empires III, we may end up rescinding our earlier pronouncement—but for now, we can say that if the goal was innovation within the realm of the game we know and love, the ACE3 team should already be celebrating its success. /



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Action-RTS genre,  
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## THE ACTION-RTS

Age of Empires III looks pretty incredible and delivers some great new takes on the old-school RTS...but sometimes, we'd like to stop playing "God" giving orders from up above and get our hands dirty with those peons down below. Over the years, a number of games have tried this—melding heady strategy with first-person, white-knuckled action—but they have been met with mixed commercial and critical success. Action-RTS games may finally take off in the next year, thanks to three new titles that promise to take this burgeoning genre in directions originally touched upon by games such as *Dungeon Keeper*, *Battlezone* (pictured above), and *Savage*. Here's a look at some of the action-RTS games you can look forward to in the coming months.

RISE & FALL:  
CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR

PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPER: Wireless User Studios RELEASE DATE: October 2006



## OVERVIEW

Rick Goodman and the Stainless Steel Studios gang have made a good living by knowing both history and real-time strategy gaming. Goodman worked on the original *Age of Empires* and then formed Stainless Steel to create the ginormous *Empire Earth*. Of all the upcoming game-bending strategy titles, *Rise & Fall* looks to stay the closest to its RTS roots...while throwing just the right amount of up-close-and-personal bloodshed into the mix. Unlike Goodman's previous works, *Rise & Fall* spins a "mere" 1,000 years and four empires. But what a 1,000 years they are—you can lead the Persian, Greek, Roman, and Egyptian empires to glory between 1,000 B.C. and A.D. 0.



## THE ACTION

The real innovation is the way hero units are used. Once you build up enough minions by pulling off successful tactics in strategy mode, you decide when you want to join the action, zooming down to ground level and leading alongside the troops you were commanding from above. Using WASD commands as *Alexander*, for example, you can personally lead the charge into battle. Rally the troops, fire the first arrow (which you do from a first-person view), then run in swinging (which happens in third person).



4 "First guy who makes a crack about that Dungen song is gonna get it..."



## BELLS AND WHISTLES

Just as once you have a quibble with the way the scenarios are built, the game will also wish a built-in mispoking tool. With it, you can craft your own battles, focusing them on either tactics or action. So long as Goodman can make a game that's more "Ridley Scott epic" and less "Oliver Stone epic," we've got high hopes.

# BATTLESTATIONS: MIDWAY

PUBLISHER THQ DEVELOPER Midway Entertainment RELEASE DATE February 2006



## OVERVIEW

**Battle stations:** Midway has flown under the radar for some time now, so let's get some basic intel out of the way. As you can probably guess from the name, *Midway* takes place in the Pacific theater and has you playing as both the American and Japanese navies (you unlock the latter). Destroyers, aircraft carriers, subs, recon planes, bombers—you command about 70 craft in total (45 at a time in single-player mode). A solo campaign eases you into the higher ranks, but the basic premise is this: You direct where your fleet goes, and then you hop down to the ship/sub/plane level to do the dirty work.



## THE ACTION

Whatever you have in your task force is instantly accessible, thanks to a simple bar along the top of the screen. Each craft handles uniquely with simple controls—this isn't a sim, after all. In success, you're on a sub, sneaking behind enemy lines and sinking supply ships. Next you're jumping onto the bridge of a destroyer for a completely different experience. A simple onscreen indicator tells you how many of the ship's deck guns can be trained on the target in the crosshairs, as soon as you can "cross the T" unloafed with everything you've got and then go on a bombing run over the airfield.



Ship-to-ship combat looks particularly intense.



## BELLS AND WHISTLES

*Midway* also has a pretty cool multiplayer mode, with eight players jumping between available craft in pitched naval battles. In this mode, controls are split between four different "classes" in e sense, if you control the airfield, you're in charge of ordering and controlling its aircraft—the same goes for harbors under your command.

# GHOST WARS

PUBLISHER Hip Games DEVELOPER Digital Reality RELEASE DATE February 2006



## OVERVIEW

Digital Reality is setting its sights on modern warfare with *Ghost Wars*, which may be the most ambitious game yet in the burgeoning action-RTS genre. The best way to sum this game up in 20 words or less: It's a squad-based RTS with a huge focus on action scattered around the globe in modern combat operations. On the surface, the game actually looks a lot like *Alan's Act of War*. Great visuals (each vehicle is composed of about 2,500 polygons, and every character has about 3,700 polygons) are obvious from the screenshots, but there's a lot more happening here—as we witnessed firsthand during a playtest of a level set in Cuba.



## THE ACTION

There's no micromanagement here—just issues that need kicking. Squad tactics are the focus, so you get to reflect your elite special-ops forces before embarking on a mission. After the drop, you'll direct troop movement as you would in any other RTS—the real difference becomes obvious in the field, where you can keep right into the action. Jump into the sniper and start targetting distant forces, move over to the assault trooper for some FPS action, take a tank for a spin and the game switches to third person as you blast your way through the streets. There are so many options here that you almost forget you're playing an RTS.



Looks like it's time for a little urban renewal, A10 style.



## BELLS AND WHISTLES

Units sport AI that intelligently evaluates the situation. When you aren't giving orders, your troops will know well enough to run, crouch, and take cover. For example, we took control of a tank and trundled down the street into an ambush. We switched over to command mode, leaving the unit high and dry—and after a few seconds of taking damage, the tank suddenly returned and returned fire!

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## SHOOT TO THRILL

SOMETIMES, WE JUST WANT TO SHOOT STUFF—and since we're currently knee-deep in the 24-hour-a-day hellpit that is our redesign, "stuff" pretty much means "each other." So it is with perfect timing that EA has unleashed *Battlefield 2* on the world. While some overly jaded naysayers may point out that it isn't a tentibly huge leap in evolution (despite what the outlandish system requirements might otherwise claim), we're thrilled to the tips of our raw, bloody fingers for the opportunity to experience what we at CGW hail as one of the most refined multiplayer shooters in years. And for the less skilled among us—like Ryan, whose idea of playing *Battlefield 2* is jumping in a helicopter and doing a nosedive into the ocean—we're also treated to *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, in all its pangsta-talkin', hooker-killin' glory. Finally, for those of you who prefer sharp objects and fireballs, Fate should hold you over for a bit while you're waiting for the inevitable *Diablo III*. Just make sure you stay far away from *Dungeon Lords*—lest you be tempted to take an actual sword to your poor PC. >>

## REVIEW STANDARDS

Our review policy is simple: We review only final, gold, released-to-retail code, no betas or "near-final, reviewable" builds. We don't review patches, with the notable exception of those for online games like MMOs that autoupdate as a standard part of their operation. We do this so we are reviewing exactly what you, the consumer, are buying.



All games are rated on a simple five-star scale. One-star games are utter garbage, three-star games should appeal to die-hard fans of the genre, and the rare five-star game is an instant classic. Only the best games—receiving four and a half stars or better—are awarded an Editors' Choice.

## INSIDE



58

KABOOH

### Battlefield 2

Plane is upright = Ryan's not flying it.



66

ZOOM

### FlatOut

We bet you got to drive around a lot.



70

GLOOM

### Pariah

So very aptly named...unfortunately.

PLAY IT!  
CHECK OUT  
THE DEMO  
ON THIS  
MONTH'S  
DVD



Suggs and other off-road vehicles absorb blasts over uneven terrain like rally cars do. ▶



Fake but fair: Chineses won't begin battles with three times the United States' troop count. ▼



# BATTLEFIELD 2

EA detonates an explosively great sequel

PLAYSTATION 2 EA GAMES DEVELOPER: Digital Illusions CE 32MB SYSTEM: Windows XP/VISTA 1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 130MB free space  
RECOMMENDED: 3.0GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 512MB free space MULTIPASS Internet LAN 2-64 players

WAR IS WAR, KILL OR BE KILLED AND, IN THE case of army-versus-army shooter *Battlefield 2*, fitter away the opposing force's stockpile of "tickets" (EA's slang for a team's cumulative spawn count) through simple attrition and stolen territory. But the weapons war is waged with change the way it's waged. *Battlefield 2*'s new technology (previous versions were set in World War II and Vietnam, this one is modern) calls for new tactics.

A hundred yards through slender-block hovels lies our target, one market square on a zigzagging street leading to the Mid-east Coalition's base. I proceed down the main strip in an M1 Abrams while my man on the .50 cal earns his danger pay scanning rooftops and waiting for a whoosh and the telltale trail of smoke pointing back to the shooter. Another

tank and an APC in our convoy secure the intersections to keep the bad guys from mounting attacks through the side streets.

## SERVICE DISTINCTIONS

The squad—a group of strangers, not typed-out clan guys connected via a third-party program such as TeamSpeak—can stick together and coordinate tight-knit strategy only because it's yammering via headset the whole time. Giving my gunner the heads up without taking my hands off the throttle to type some incoherent, stressed-out shorthand would've worked well enough, but *Battlefield 2* does one better. Highlighted icons mark our positions on the map and in game, letting us count heads at a glance. And only squad members can hear combat chatter, so vital orders aren't lost in the

32-man hubbub. Of course, the tech and tactics work only when players are willing to use 'em, and some people won't be (for each one who is, there's another who isn't).

A spray of bullets walks up the side of our tank. More kick up lines along the wall at our left, and our gunners get down low behind their turrets (another nifty new feature). As squad leader, I radio our side's commander, asking for a torrent of artillery rounds, a flash emanates from his eye-in-the-sky UAV, anything. Like the game's squad system, commander mode adds an essential element of global strategy. A smart chief—the engine in a well-oiled war machine—makes the battle. Guns is breaking it. And while mutiny is always an option, there's no promise that another e-hole won't take his place (see



Choppers are tough to get the hang of, but once you know how to fly, they get the job done.



Great idea, good implementation: *Battlefield 2's* TiVo-like "Battlecam" captures your finest moments for later viewing.



Perch it, please: Suicide pilots score points for flying head-on into other planes. Why encourage nihilism?



## ON OUR DISC

Install the demo and don't forget to try the following on your tour of sunny Ozan.



Strap on a sniper rifle and ace the construction crane. Set up claymores after climbing each ladder to cover your ass, then get cozy. Also: Spot passing aircraft (O, then left click) to give your pilots an adventure, and prepare to parachute to safety at the first sound of artillery.



Scale the same crane, this time as a special operative, then sprinkle the capture point with C. Wait for the flag to go grey (indicating enemy presence) before detonating. Serious players should request supply drops to keep explosives coming.

## STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

*Battlefield 2's* all-seeing stat tracker is so comprehensive, it's scary (and a god-send for guys with an appetite for glory). Among the figures in your service record: cumulative combat and commander scores; accuracy, frag count, and total-use time per weapon; revive, support, and repair points; as well as most-played classes, vehicles, and maps. In addition, doing duty-specific deeds adds one gun to each class arsenal. Ideally, EA will beef up the bonuses over time, adding more weapons and options to personalize your warrior's appearance.



Swoop over the UoMC carrier, letting its anti-aircraft batteries launch a heat-seeking salvo. Hit the afterburners, load the locked-on missiles low and Blackhawk, pull up at the last second, and laugh as the friendly-fire casualties mount.

## So far, *Battlefield 2's* rock-paper-scissors science seems sound.

sidebar for examples of effective commanding).

The real thing is that none of it—the chain of command, the silent bands of E-brothers, the Patton-approved battle plans—needs to matter, at least to the curious weekend commando looking to pop into a public server and simply shoot somebody. Sometimes even career soldiers will want to say, "Screw it—I fidgeted about duty and stats and assessing capture points," and then kamikaze a fast-flying MIG into his foe's carrier. Or stick C4 on fully crewed choppers in order to make fireworks over the open ocean. Or sprawl out and

devote an hour to sniping passing pilots through their canopies, if only to show what one ball of a steady hand (and way too much free time) can do. Authenticity isn't beside the point—all hardware here is *Soldier of Fortune* accurate—it just doesn't interfere with fun and fairness.

### VOLUNTEER ARMY

Small-arms fire still plings off the Abrams' armor. The bad-guy infantry goes into a protective crouch as they duck and dart between buildings. I try to dash through, until a missile alert goes off like a



Get to the carrier's deck and cover the Blackhawks and Harriers with C. Once they sit off, light 'em up. Now you can climb the sensor arrays and take photos or swipe some wings and get gone.



Environments in the sequel are more expansive than ever before, but with up to 64 players running around simultaneously, it won't be hard to find yourself in the middle of an intense firefight.

Don't worry, most people still don't know how to properly fly aircraft.



screaming alarm clock. I bang the escape button, popping smoke grenades, six per side. Then nothing. He hoodwinked me into wasting my countermeasures so he could wire-gauge his Predator home. Before I can hop out, I hear the parts clatter.

On foot, you'll feel rounds slap your Kevlar, but you can fire a few back before keeling over. In the sky, chaff and flares afford careless flyboys a second chance. It might take months to say for sure, but so far, BF2's rock-paper-scissors science seems sound—more so than stealth-heavy Vietnam's hide-and-seek, and maybe even more so than 1942's groundbreaking balance. This is warfare in an age of camera-guided hardware, but if developer DICE has learned a lesson with its iterations of the series, it's that hands-on

know-how has to have its place, but too much "automatic" makes war hell instead of the hellish good time we all want. And it shows. Buggies slide sideways around corners, and gunships dart and fire down into the fray—wheeled or winged, vehicles here handle with finesse. But as with 1942's tricky Messerschmitts, mastering them takes more than an explanation of what does what. It takes skill and a sixth sense to know what works and when. It takes practice, and I'm only too happy to have more. / Shawn Elliott

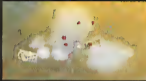
Land, sea, and air war as you like it.

COMPUTER  
GAMING  
WORLD

VERDICT  
★★★★★



Some commanders suck. Still, it's hard to blame Battlefield 2 for human error.



Medics are one of the many classes available. They're usually meant to help, but there's nothing more harrowing than being killed by an enemy healer with ducty defibrillators.



## FIVE REASONS BATTLEFIELD 2 ISN'T ALL IT CAN BE

EVEN 5-STAR GAMES HAVE THEIR NOTEWORTHY SNAFUS...

- 1 Maps load slower than molasses—1GB RAM or more is recommended. Good thing, then, that games between evenly matched teams last so long.
- 2 Sometimes the slightest escape with friendly forces (e.g., touching a non-stationary tank) results in a KIA. Keep clear, forgive allies for innocent accidents, and cross your fingers that they'll repay the courtesy.
- 3 BF2 runs remarkably well on weaker rigs, but decreased draw distance puts players at a significant disadvantage.
- 4 The showdoffs go all wonky even on powerful PCs with messed-out settings.
- 5 Solo play is fun but still so much filler next to the online mode.

## COMMAND AND CONQUER

With a competent commander calling the shots, Battlefield 2 sizzles. As a commander (in which case competency isn't an issue, eh?), it's a bloody riot. Regular supply drops, up-to-the-second recon, artillery support and how it boosts morale—that's all its own reward. There's more to the role than real-time strategy with live troops, though. A slightly self-serving leader, unafraid to abuse his authority and have a better time because of it, exposes himself to enemy fire. He uses satellites to spot camouflaged snipers during duels. He sits shotgun in a bomber, pointing the pilot directly over dense accumulations of enemy armor, and then toggles to overhead view as the 100-pounders touch down.



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Bullet-riddled corpses and over-the-top explosions are the norm in San Andreas.

#### THE TAO OF DJ POOH

**HIP-HOP AUTHOR**  
DJ Pooh, who helped write *GTA: San Andreas*, provides the music. Pooh and we're and created The Rock.

# GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS



Cross-platform crime spree

**Platform:** Microsoft Games DEVELOPER: Rockstar **North AMERICA:** Action ESDS **FRANCE:** M. PALUDOU **Portugal:** M. 1991, **GERMANY:** RAL, **USA:** GIGAWATT, **UK:** GIGAWATT **TECHNOLOGY:** NVIDIA 4, 3DMM, RAM, 128MB, **Platform:** M. PALUDOU, **Portugal:** M. 1991, **GERMANY:** RAL, **USA:** GIGAWATT, **UK:** GIGAWATT

**SAN ANDREAS IS ALL ABOUT DRIVIN' CARS** and poppin' caps in the asses of unwary fools, but it could go to a Halloween ball as one of the most ambitious RPGs in recent memory. Sure, the game is set in a thinly veiled analogue of real-world California and Nevada, there's no magic, and the only dragons to be found are tattooed on the Chinese mafia who give you odd jobs. But look again: Underneath it all, *San Andreas* is a massive, *Morrowind*-scale undertaking.

In a decidedly *Boyz n the Hood*-esque game world populated with three major cities and a dozen tiny towns, you'll take on the role of smooth gangsta Carl "CJ" Johnson. Like traditional RPGs, *San Andreas* has plenty of guilds and factions (street gangs) to deal with, and you can form up a party ( posse) and ride into combat ( turf wars) or even visit a shop for better weapons and armor ( machine guns and

Kevlar vests). The story unfolds through quest strings, with plenty of side jobs to net you extra gold (er, dollars). And, of course, there are lots and lots of stats—strength, dexterity, etc.—tracked in obsessive detail as you build CJ from zero to hero.

Maybe this is why a game originally designed for consoles plays so well on the PC: At its heart, *San Andreas* treads the same territory that PC RPGs have been covering for years. It's *Baldur's Gate* with handguns...or if you prefer, *Dungeons & Dragons* starring a chaotic-neutral male human rogue with a predilection for carjacking—which is to say it isn't a perfect likeness. *San Andreas* offers immense freedom, but the average RPG enthusiast will likely find the core of the game far too restrictive and limiting for his or her tastes. The "meat" of the game is a series of largely linear missions that gradually unlock vehicles, weapons, assets, and more missions.

#### GRAND THEFT OUT-SCENE

Over the course of the *GTA* series, Rockstar has gradually repurposed the missions to be less about gameplay or skill and more about playing out scripted story events and memorizing preset patterns. Storycentric events composed a small minority of *GTA3*'s missions, but in *San Andreas* you'll be hard-pressed to find a single job that doesn't feature a lengthy prologue and a healthy dose of running dialogue—frequently to the point where it interferes with the gameplay.

As a part, the PC version is a bit of a missed opportunity. The original PlayStation 2 game was great, but it suffered from shortcomings that really should have been addressed in the eight months since its debut. Unfortunately, PS2 veterans will encounter many familiar problems: unbalanced mission difficulty, vague objectives, the unreliable "trip skip" function, and lots of glitches.



➤ **CJ is no angel, though he's hardly unlikable.**



You'll ride through the mean streets of San Andreas in style. ➤



Gangsta gaming world! ➤

They're all here, same as ever.

Even if you have problems with the presentation, you can't fault the story itself, as it's stupendously written and acted. CJ is no angel, though he's hardly unlikable; it's difficult not to sympathize with his frustration as he's bullied around by forces far beyond his control. And while you may not approve of his more extreme methods, you have to admire his street-smart resourcefulness.

The supporting cast is top-notch as well, particularly Samuel L. Jackson's sleazebag cop and the yin-yang pair of Peter Fonda and James Woods as an ultraradical conspiracy theorist and an ultrareactionary government conspirator, respectively. But it's Young Maylay's turn as CJ—crude, angry, and more than a little cratty—that makes the story so compelling and helps you forgive occasional

lapses into juvenile pandering. You'll shift uncomfortably in your seat as you gun down Army reservists and Navy pilots or kill a guy for the unthinkable crime of being gay, but for the most part Rockstar has made a sincere effort to rise above the usual childishness.

#### WELCOME TO MY HOOD

As professional as the voice acting is, the real star of the game is the state of San Andreas itself. It's majestically designed, and the low poly count is offset by an amazing depth. Minigames, collectible items, and shops lurk around every corner. You can gamble at casinos, go truckin', and even play weekend lothario with juggling hell! a dozen romances. You can explore the immense scenery by commandeering any one of the hundreds of cars, bikes, trucks, planes, helicopters, and boats, each with its own distinct physics. It's the sort of open, living world that gamers



## WHAT'S NEW IN THE HOOD?

If you've got a PS2, you can pick up a copy of *San Andreas* for a mere \$20. So why would you want to pay nearly twice as much for the PC version? Try these pluses on for size:

➤ **Improved graphics:** The most obvious upgrade—provided you have a decent graphics card. The models haven't changed, but the PC version offers more detailed textures and a better draw distance. No more flying into unseen mountainsides!

➤ **Do-it-yourself soundtrack:** Sure, you can listen to the excellent licensed soundtrack, but maybe you'd rather do your drive-bys to your own tunes. Just drop your Britney Spears MP3s into the proper directory to create your own custom radio station.

➤ **Better load times:** That's right, sucks—scene transitions are instantaneous. Now you can peck on the pounds at Cluckin' Bell faster than ever.

➤ **Mod potential:** Modders have worked wonders with previous GTAs—all with Rockstar's tacit approval. Already, *San Andreas*' mods are floating around that supposedly unlock a sex minigame that the developers hid away to avoid an AO rating. Rockstar, for its part, claims this is a load of bunk and that the minigame is all the doing of clever hackers...but then, Rockstar would say that.

always promise but rarely deliver. Few videogame experiences are as satisfying or liberating as simply exploring this immense, complex world.

This latest GTA is an epic, involving experience, no doubt—but when you get past the expansive world and the RPG-like elements, it's the same epic, involving experience it was last year. Had Rockstar taken the time to polish up the rough spots, *San Andreas* on the PC would have been worth a look for everyone. As it is, it's only a must-have for the handful of gamers who missed it the first time around. / Jeremy Parish

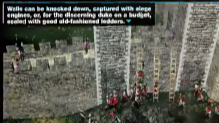
Another brilliant entry in the *GTA* series, with only a few mild FPS-ups...er, hiccups.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★★



Walls can be knocked down, captured with siege engines, or, for the discerning duke on a budget, sealed with good old-fashioned ladders. ▾



Zoom in and you'll really appreciate the artists' hard work. Here, a pig farmer brings one of his finest to the lord's kitchen, while a page rushes away to take the king's dinner order. ▾



# STRONGHOLD 2

The walls come tumbling down

DEVELOPER EA GAMES DEVELOPER Ferali Studios OFFICE WISCONSIN OFFICE 1 REQUIRE 2 PERIODS 4 1-HOUR, 30MB RAM, 1300 MBHD  
RECOMMENDED PERIODS 4 20H, 512MB RAM, 64MB VIDEOCARD 640X480, 2000 MHz CPU, LAN, DVD player

**STRONGHOLD 2** WAS SEEMINGLY BUILT ON AN ambitious plan: Combine the economic model of the Settlers series, the combat model of the Total War series, and the fortress building of the Castles series—all while staying true to previous Stronghold games. Sadly, loose coding, numskull design choices, and "special-needs" A.I. turn what could have been a sleek, multitasking Bernard Hopkins into a muddled, out-of-control Mike Tyson.

## BRING OUT YOUR DEAD

Stronghold 2 offers two separate single-player campaigns: a siege-oriented combat campaign and a hippie-fied wuxia campaign in which you mostly gather resources. Neither is much fun, although for different reasons. The warfare campaign is weak primarily because of the

A.I.'s total fixation with attacking whatever of yours is closest to it, regardless of tactical value. Obviously, this makes defeating a siege simple: Construct a bunch of throwaway structures (such as cheap wooden walls) just outside your main enclosure and have your archers leisurely install medieval air conditioning in the besiegers as they hack away mindlessly at the junk. Once you've got this "strategy" figured out, you don't exactly have to consult Merlin to create an effective stronghold. Pathfinding is another A.I. folio. Unless you micromanage their every move, soldiers insist on taking the most geometrically direct route to a target, even if it means abandoning defile for terrain that will slow them down and expose them to enemy arrows. There are also frequent traffic jams when troops move

through a narrow area, such as a castle gate. And whenever a lot is going on, the framerate takes a harder dive than a Triple Lindy. All this is compounded by the lame combat controls, which basically consist of pointing at what you want to attack and hoping your soldiers make it through the ensuing mosh pit.

## PENNY UNWISE

Less combat means the economic campaign doesn't have to deal with the A.I. deficiencies as much, but nevertheless, it has its own frustrations. First among them is the politburo-sanctioned economic system. For no easily comprehensible reason, raw materials in Stronghold 2 cannot be brought directly from the buildings that gather them to the buildings that process them. They must first be deposit-



In the end, there's just not enough fruit underneath all the rind.

Another big problem with the A.I. is that it tends to stand around while nearby allies are getting pwned.

While the enemy A.I. doesn't always thrill with tactical acumen, the uniforms at least make for colorful battles. The pink knight always triumphs!



Sometimes it's the little things that grab your eye. Note the fact that this pack of deer is led by a single stag, and check the nice water effect. If only the actual gameplay enjoyed the same amount of care.



## THE COMFY CHAIR?

CRIMINALS IN STRONGHOLD 2 ARE (unfortunately for them) subjected to a very authentic reproduction of medieval law-enforcement techniques. Mercellus Wellface would be proud of the wide variety of options a lord has for getting medieval upon the asses of the evildoers in his midst. Your "torturers guild" oem do everything from stepping a humiliating donkey meek on a transgressor to introducing the back of his neck to a battle-axe. Hell, you can even force criminals to form human pyramids while your soldiers give the thumbs-up sign. No, not really. But the game deserves props for its willingness to treat medieval "justice" realistically.



ed into a central stockpile, from which they are then picked up by the processor, taken to his shop, and used to create second-order goods. These, in turn, must be brought back to the stockpile and doled out to "end users." Everyone must share raw materials, and no one can be given preference—kind of a Dark Ages version of art class. While this might be attractive for an anarcho-syndicalist commune, here it only makes long-term urban planning virtually impossible (you can't know early on which structures should be located closest to the stockpile) as well as largely irrelevant (other than the stockpile, it doesn't matter what buildings are next to each other).

Stronghold 2 allows you to retain your towns and fortifications from mission to mission, rather than starting over with a blank slate.

While this sounds sweet, it actually ends up being a major bummer, as your stockpiles will forever be closest to buildings that were important for the previous mission. And just to further oxidize your chain mail, there's no way to shut down an individual shop if it's sucking too many resources (which the shops closest to the stockpiles naturally will). Your only options are to raze the culprit building or shut down the entire industry in which it is involved. I can't believe this amazingly lame design decision ever got past QA.

### KING FOR A DAY

But hey, it's not all bad news. While the A.I. may not be the smartest head on the pike, playing against other humans via multiplayer can be entertaining simply because they make

much more effective use of the diverse structures, defense mechanisms, and units. And the graphics, when they're not lagging, are colorful and highly detailed, conveying a real sense of being there.

In the end, though, there's just not enough fruit underneath all the rind. If it's an all-in-one medieval strategy game you're after, just All-Tab really quickly between *Medieval: Total War* and *Castles II*—that'll come closer than *Stronghold 2* does. / Eric Neigher

Lots of potential; lots of disappointment.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★★

Wanda Knows  
Check it out—  
two amazing  
games and  
another great  
book!

# FLATOUT

A crash course in offensive driving

Take out your road rage in FlatOut, where auto collisions are key to your victory.

DEVELOPER: Empire Interactive DEVELOPER: Bugbear Entertainment DEVIC: Racing EXPIRIENCE: TITANICUM PERIOD: 4.1.00MHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1.1GB disk, 64MB videocard. RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2.0Hz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1GB videocard, gamecube or xbox. MULTIPLES: LAN (2-8 players)

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, THE FLATOUT DEMO made a modest splash in the gaming community. This was because of the high jump, a hilarious mode in which you drive a car at full speed toward a steep incline and then eject the driver through the windshield to see how high he can fly before hitting the ground in a twisted slump.

The full version of FlatOut includes six of these so-called rag-doll sports, including bowling, darts, and a long jump. These events are simply extras in a surprisingly strong racing game which shines the spotlight on FlatOut's great physics engine and interactive environments.

The tracks themselves are more like obstacle courses filled with sharp turns, construction zones, insane jumps, and debris of all sorts. Almost everything can be destroyed, knocked down, or shattered to bits. Colliding with objects isn't just an option—it's encouraged. In fact, destruction is a key factor to everything here.

Smashing into things is the only way to generate nitro boosts, which are a vital part of your racing strategy—not only for gaining speed on straightaways, but also for speeding out of tight turns and correcting possible spins. It's a strange rule, but you won't question it when a huge pileup gives you enough nitro to make up for lost time.

## WHAT'S YOUR DAMAGE?

Crashes occur often on the complex courses, which range from streets to icy tundra to muddy forests. Cars behave realistically in each environment, spinning out of control in the mud and skidding treacherously across the ice. The damage effects are extensive and have a noticeable impact on your maneuverability. The competition will hit you early and often, and the AI is both aggressive and impressive. Winning races or performing well in the bonus games (which, in addition to the rag-doll sports, also include simple racing tracks and demolition derby) earns

you money, which you can use to upgrade your current vehicle or buy a new one.

FlatOut doesn't have nearly enough variety in its tracks. Though the layouts will change (sometimes only slightly), there are only a few landscapes, and they do get repetitive. This minor complaint aside, FlatOut is a great arcade-style racer. It's hard not to get excited when you sail between two cars as they smash together and roll hood-over-trunk through the air. And if you want to take a break from the racing, you can always head over to the high-jump track and throw your poor driver through a few windshields. / Ron Duin

Grimy racing with excellent crashes and superb physics.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★☆



You'll find many short, maze-filled courses to complete several times.

TRACKMANIA: SUNRISE IS ESSENTIALLY A racing game, but racing makes up only a fraction of the challenges. Even the traditional race mode takes place on crazy tracks that will hurtle you over towering loops and insane jumps as you race to beat the CPU's best records.

But the platform and puzzle modes are where the fun is really at. In platform mode, your goal is to finish in as few attempts as possible. Tracks in this mode feature a series of checkpoints sepa-

rated by ludicrous jumps and twisty roads to speed through. If you fail, you'll restart at the last checkpoint, and success is measured by how many times you restart.

## DESIGNER DRIVING

Puzzle mode challenges you to finish the race as quickly as possible, but you'll design the track yourself, using a limited number of pieces to connect the checkpoints. It sounds easier than it is, and

fine-tuning your course to better your score is both rewarding and mind-boggling.

Regardless of which mode you prefer, the tracks are the real stars here. Hairpin turns are followed by turbo boosts, which lead to missile ramps that send you soaring for several hundred yards through the air, only to land on another hairpin turn and another jump. Some tracks feature skateboard-style half pipes, requiring you to drive at full speed up one wall, sail sideways

through the air, and then land nose-down on the next wall, only to continue—without stopping—into a loop or some other hair-raising stunt.

## PHYSICS BE DAMNED

With the exception of inertia and gravity, the laws of nature are given only a casual nod. You'll never see any collisions or even so much as a dent, no matter how fast you ram into a barrier. Some outlandish perfection is expected of you as well; winning bronze and silver medals is relatively easy, but gold medals are awarded only for near-perfect races. You'll need gold medals to unlock levels, which requires dozens of repetitious attempts and a knowledge of every last twist and turn.

While it can be frustrating, Sunrise features plenty of variety. In addition to the single-player modes, there's an easy-to-use track editor and a multiplayer mode that allows you to race online, usually on custom-made tracks. Casual gamers may find a hefty learning curve, but the tracks are so inventive; it's ultimately worth the work required to unlock them. / Ron Duin

Insane tracks, insane speed, insane difficulty.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★☆

# TRACKMANIA SUNRISE

Stunt racing meets puzzle solving

DEVELOPER: Night Infallive DEVELOPER: Nixxes EXPIRIENCE: RACING PERIOD: 500MHz CPU, 32MB RAM, 1GB disk, 8.5MB videocard. RECOMMENDED: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard MULTIPLES: Internet, LAN (2-32 players)

## DID YOU KNOW?

Before playing the Thing in *Fantastic 4*, Ed Asner got the nod as The Cuckoo on *The Beverly Hills Cop*. Michael Chiklis was the loveable "Carnegie."



► Mr. Fantastic and the Thing would make a great team—that is, if they didn't spend all their time fighting over the camera.



► Just because her name is Sue Storm, that doesn't mean electricity fields hurt any less.



► We're relating the urge to make a "flaming" joke here.

# FANTASTIC 4

...Because *Mediocre 4* didn't sound as good

PLAYERS: Action (XBLA) VR: None GAME: Action (XBLA) RATED: E (ESRB) PEGI: 3 (PEGI) OS: XBOX360, PS3, PC RAM: 3GB RECOMMENDED: 4GB

THERE'S AN IMMEDIATE TEMPTATION TO write off this Hollywood by-product as a "Fantastic 4 out of 10" title not that easy, though. The game is a competent button masher with a few mildly interesting beats...but saddled with a whole lot of issues.

*Fantastic 4* does about what you'd expect, expanding the basic movie concept by creating set pieces for gameplay purposes through additional story lines penned by someone outside the development team and locked into ad nauseam gameplay—most likely due to a crunched development schedule. What you wind up with is a boat-em-up, with the game's hook hanging upon the player's ability to control Mr. Fantastic, the Invisible Woman, the Human Torch, and the Thing.

## NOT SO FANTASTIC

The settings change, new villains are fought, and minigames are woven into each level, but this doesn't save *Fantastic 4* from being standard fare. The game doesn't bring anything new to the genre, and without an active interest in the source material, most people are likely to become bored with the basic three-button combat and lack of diverse special moves. You unlock all the cool stuff right from the start and simply jack up with upgrades through the rest of the game. There's an emphasis placed on the Fantastic 4 working as a team to defeat enemies, but that happens only during the occasional earned event or boss battle.

## Fanboys, prepare yourselves for a terribly average adventure.

Even *Fantastic 4* fanboys are likely to roll their eyes at the plot, Hollywood writer Zak Penn of *X2: X-Men United* and *Elektra* fame may have added to the film's otherwise straightforward origin plot, but it's hard to tell the improvements since the dialogue and overarching narrative are both lifeless and, at times, totally random (which perfectly explains *Elektra*).

Gilgamesh are an expected side effect of rushed development and they add a layer of frustration. *Fantastic 4* is no exception, and the small problems are numerous. Remember, too, this is a console port, so have a gamepad handy unless you're prepared to smash your keyboard in two. Halfway through most boss battles, the game presents the option of executing a "finishing move" that will remove the rest of the enemy's health in one cut-scened fell swoop. Deceptively, this maneuver is initiated by pressing a single button—except it doesn't work most of the time, either because other enemies run in front of the character, confusing the game, or there is a plain "of" bug.

Surprisingly, the game does include a fully functional co-op mode for two players to work through the game together. Co-op takes the single-player adventure and simply drops a secondary character into the mix. Sometimes

this takes the form of another member of the *Fantastic 4* or a miscellaneous character (i.e., a robot). The second player is often stuck waiting for the first player because their actions drive the level forward. For example, the Invisible Woman must sneak through a prison later in the game, locking away escaped inmates as she goes. In order to navigate the security doors, however, she must turn—surprise!—invisible, an impossible feat for the second player.

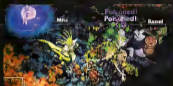
Also, fully 3D cameras are fine, but not when both players are simultaneously fighting to control the view. What's supposed to be a co-op experience devolves into you strangling your buddy with the gamepad wire.

Comic aficionados may be eager to become a part of an interactive comic world, but fanboys, prepare yourselves for a terribly average adventure. The only reason to consider *Fantastic 4* is to cope with PC gaming's summer drought. /Patrick Klepek

Your standard-issue beat-em-up with a flashy license.

COMPUTER  
GAMING  
WORLD

VERDICT  
★★★★☆



# FATE

Choose your own adventure(r)

PUBLISHER: Wild Tangles DEVELOPER: Wild Tangles OS:PC AGE-RATING: ESRB: RP (R) PRICE: \$29.99 (US) PLATFORMS: PC, PS3, XBOX 360, WII U, PS4, SWITCH, STAY AWAY FROM THE INTERNET CONNECTION FOR DOWNLOADING/UNLOCKING GAME RECORDS. SOME VIDEOCARD, 2GB RAM (MIN), 2GB HD (MIN), 4GB (RECOMMENDED)

FATE IS A HACK-N-SLASH DIABLO-STYLE game just a few lush cut-scenes and a few dozen "Stay awhile...and listen!" away from outright copyright infringement. This is not to say Fate is a bad game. It's not. It's chock-full of action, loaded with cool loot, packed with spells, swarming with packs of vicious monsters, and so on...just like Diablo.

So, for the purposes of this review, just close your eyes and think about Diablo. Got that mental picture? Good. Now here are the ways Fate differs.

## CLASS DISTINCTIONS

The biggest difference in Fate is that there are no character classes, just a couple dozen stats that you tweak whenever you level. This lets you

create a really personalized character, free from the rigidity of a barbarian, necromancer, etc. If you've always wanted to play as some weird scout/wizard hybrid, here's your chance. As you level, you gain fame, which lets you wield more powerful items as well as allocate more skill points. You can also pay a bard to sing your praises for higher fame, thus effectively giving you a way to pay your way to power.

In fact, gold is a huge part of this game. You're constantly shuffling from the endlessly generated random dungeons to the town to sell off items, buy crucial healing charms, and maybe buy a new weapon or piece of armor. Carrying around a balance in excess of 3 million gold pieces is not unusual in Fate, and needing 3 million gold for something isn't unusual, either.

While Fate is solely a single-player game, you're not alone. Every character gets a pet, a scrappy dog or cat, that can be altered into a beast from the game by feeding it fish you catch in town or the dungeon. With every enemy having different weaknesses and strengths, you might want to keep a variety of fish to transform your sidekick into the best possible adversary for the situation. Or you could just have it transform into one critter permanently.

The game has a bright, cartoonish quality and is fully 3D. There are very few one-on-one battles—fights in Fate generally have you dealing with hordes of baddies, always in tight, subterranean dungeons (there are no outside levels). The game looks good enough, but the levels get duty repetitive about halfway through. Also tiresome: the inevitability of being poisoned. I have never been poisoned so much, so often, in a game. If you're not shouting, "Of course I am!" every time the narrator announces, "You've been poisoned," you're made of sterner stuff than me.

Fate isn't going to glue new brain cells inside your skull, but it isn't going to murder the ones you have. It's a good time, it really never reaches an end, and it may be the best way to while away the lifetime between now and Diablo III. / Robert Coffey



## THE FICKLE FINGER OF FATE

AS BEETS A GAME NAMED FATE, YOUR CHARACTER'S destiny hits a number of crossroads, some more profound than others. Here's a list of the points where your adventure can potentially change course.

**DEATH:** This is the big one. You have three choices every time you die: You can resurrect right then and there (and lose some XP and items), return somewhere nearby (maybe deeper in the dungeon) and surrender some gold, or spend three levels above, forcing you to slog back down to where all of your gold went in a pile.

**GAMBLING:** You can get great items from the gambler in town. Or you may get crap. But you won't know until you've already given up the money.

**FATE STATUSES:** Random statuses in dungeons may surrender your...or summon bosses. Do you feel lucky, punk?

**ENCHANTMENTS:** That nice little tent in the town grants you the ability to upgrade your items (or a few). Do it every ability you can or curse them—for the sake of it.

**FORGES:** Make a couple of these in the town and you'll be able to craft your own items.



## DID YOU KNOW?

Also 20, John, founder of Wild Tangles, was the original creator of Monkeys' Island platform. Thanks, Alast!



We remember back when this was called Diablo. But we like it anyway.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★☆

Getting burned alive when you bash treasure chests is a pleasure compared to many other parts of *Dungeon Lords*.

Swigging that potion on the left won't do you any good—not unless you spend half an hour jury-rigging your shortcut keys, at least.



# DUNGEON LORDS

A dungeon crawl to rock bottom

**PUBLISHER:** DreamCatcher **DEVS:** DPHI **RETAILER:** Park Drive **AGE:** 12 **REQD:** 1GB **PERFORM:** 8, 2048MB **RAM:** 1.2GB **OS:** XP/Vista **VIDEOCARD:** 256MB **RECOMMEND:** 2GB **PERFORM:** 8, 3136MB **RAM:** 1GB **VIDEOCARD:** 512MB **CONNECTION:** MULTIPLAYER **Internet:** LAN **R-T:** 3/5

**DUNGEON LORDS HAS MORE BUGS THAN** a cemetery and more missing features than a medieval skull. To put it more bluntly, it makes bad games look good. And as far as looks themselves go, it doesn't resemble an empty, drab, hackneyed RPG—it resembles an empty, drab, hackneyed RPG from five years ago. I couldn't even manage to make it to the end...and it's not just because many documented features, like the in-game map, are missing. It's because this horrible real-time action-RPG is broken beyond all bounds of playability.

The trouble starts right at character creation, where you are taunted with a plethora of non-functional character-appearance options. The game features four basic character classes: fighter, mage, thief, and adept. You can even-

tually pursue four additional classes as well...that is, if you can somehow evade the endless sea of bugs long enough to do so. Some of my favorites: Quest items mysteriously vanished from my inventory before I hit the first town, effectively preventing my progress; an NPC refused to assign me a primary story quest because I apparently clicked on a conversation topic too fast; exit portals failed to appear when I saved and reloaded during certain trials; key NPCs routinely got stuck in trees and behind doors while trying to follow me during quests; and entrances to new locations flung me backward instead of forward. Other problems, such as the auto-deletion of duplicate loot and nonfunctional shortcut keys end door keys, are just ludicrous.

## SHARING THE PAIN

*Dungeon Lords* can also be played cooperatively with up to seven unfortunate people in a multiplayer mode highly prone to lag and cretche. You might want to take care who you invite to play, though—this game could be a friendship destroyer. You'll find that the "friendly fire" damage option stays on regardless of whether you opt to disable it. And you can't target hostile mobs—you just swing wildly into the air, fruitlessly hoping to hit enemies instead of teammates. One handy way to avoid hitting your friends is to add spellcasting abilities to your fighter's repertoire; of course, it's also one way to avoid hitting mobs, because after casting spells (which are consumable and run dry pretty fast), your melee attacks inexplicably go dead. There's a workaround on DreamCatcher's forums, but this—and many other game-breaking bugs—will have you pulling your hair out in frustration.

DreamCatcher has lowered the bar with *Dungeon Lords'* epic display of unfinished game design and its obvious "wait for the patch" mentality. Given the pedigree behind this title (see sidebar), we were expecting a whole lot better. Silly us. /Denise Cook

You might want to take care who you invite to play—this game could be a friendship destroyer.

## BRADLEY DOES BADLY

**DUNGEON LORDS IS A DISASTER**, but the game's developer, DW Bradley, is a seasoned designer who was the creative force behind some of the best early RPGs for the PC—*Wizardry V: Heart of the Maelstrom*, *Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge*, and *Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant* are all classic hardcore RPGs with deep combat and Byzantine plots. *Wizardry and Warriors*, Bradley's 2000 return, isn't nearly as great, but it's nowhere near the mess that *Dungeon Lords*, which shipped in an early beta state with no ETA on the promised patches that will, theoretically, improve it. Our advice: Just go find old *Wizardry* games on eBay instead.



## ZERO STARS?!

That's no typo—*Dungeon Lords* is the only game we've ever seen on a safety list of the only game in our history to receive zero star reviews.

*Dungeon Lords* puts gamers on the torture rack and then leaves them stranded there.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
☆☆☆☆



Wheel! Explosions are fun! See that cool, shimmering explosion effect? Get used to it—it's everywhere. ^

There's something timeless about a shotgun blast to the face. ^

# PARIAH

We repeat: Think twice before naming your game

**PLATFORMS:** No interactive DEVELOPER: Digital Extremes CORIC: Shooter ESRB RATED: M REQUIRED: Processor 1.5, 256MB RAM, 3GB local, DVD-ROM, internet, and a whole lot of patience RECOMMENDED: None. MULTIPLE PLAYERS: LAN, internet (8-32 players)

ONE OF PARIAH'S BIGGEST SELLING POINTS was supposed to be its solid, story-driven single-player game. Instead, at best, it's a poor man's *Half-Life* featuring a plot so convoluted, it makes you appreciate the finer points of storytelling in games such as *Psychotic*, which we awarded a whopping 1.5 stars last month.

The A.I. doesn't fare much better. Enemies (of which there are few variants) seem clueless. After we sniped one guard at a distance, other nearby troops completely ignored their fallen comrade. "Hey, you know what happened to Bart?" "Dunno. I was just talking to him a minute ago, and now he's sleeping...*assassiny*... what's that red stuff coming out of his head?" These are the guys we're supposed to be worried about? The promised "emergent A.I." has yet to emerge.

## ON THE BRIGHT SIDE

While the weapons themselves are your standard assault rifle/shotgun/rocket launcher fare, the ability to mod your weaponry is a welcome change. Finding hidden weapon energy occurs throughout

the game will allow you to add a heat-seeking ability to sniper shots and a target-locking ability to rockets, for example.

And the graphics look nice, eking out that last bit of life from the Unreal Engine 2. In fact, Digital Extremes created a nifty shimmer effect that's thoroughly abused and overused in *Pariah*.

Explosions shimmer, energy shields shimmer...If you want to wow us with effects, you've got to mix it up a little. And if the audio guys didn't exactly fall asleep on the job, they came close—the weapons could sound much more potent.

The primary bright spot in this otherwise unpolished title is multiplayer. Your standard-issue deathmatch, CTF, and assault-like slope modes are represented, but the real strength here lies in the mapmaker. All it takes is one look online to see that the most frequently played maps are all user made.

Honestly, it looks like Digital Extremes spent its entire time perfecting the proprietary map editor (which works fantastically) instead of making the game fun. Six more months of dev time and a



## MY FIRST MAPMAKER THE ONLY REASON TO BUY PARIAH



Take a good look at the interface—it looks like something out of a type-a game. From here, you can do everything. Try raising or lowering the landmass by clicking on the appropriate icon.



You can do the same with vehicles, buildings, and game objects. Set them up wherever you think they will make things interesting. But to keep you from overdoing it, an object limiter is built in. This safeguard keeps you from creating a map that could grind your PC to a halt.



Want to see how your map turned out? Jump straight into the action.

complete rewrite of the script could've made this a good game. Some free advice to Pariah's publisher, No Interactive: Drop the price and repackage this as an awesome introduction to mapmaking with a couple of decent example levels.

—Darren Gindstone

Lots of potential;  
lots of disappointment.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★★

## DID YOU KNOW...?

The mid scientist running Area 51 in the movie? Inspo reference. Dig it: It's from Star Trek: The Next Generation.

In all its bip-footed glory, you have the ability to wield two guns at once.

# AREA 51

Some things are best kept secret

PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPERS: Midway Studios Austin OLIVE: Shooter CPU/RAND: 64-BIT/64bit Features: 16:9/40Hz, 2048x 1440, DirectX 9.0c-compatible soundcard (DirectX 9.0c supplied as CD) (RECOMMENDED: 512MB RAM SLACK/LOCK: 1GB/2GB, 2-16 players)

WHILE THE INVOLVEMENT OF ONETIME Doom designer Tom Hall and Hollywood special-effects virtuoso Stan Winston infuses the arcadey *Area 51* with panache and production values previously lacking in the series, it doesn't save the shooter from being an ultimately derivative pastiche of elements found in superior games such as *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3*.

## IMITATION, MEET FLATTERY

A way-too-predictable walkthrough introduces Area 51's control scheme, heads-up display, and other conventions ("This way, sir! You'll want to pick up some ammo!"). A way-too-predictable series of events starts its story: mutants and monsters and E.T.s invade; you and a squad of surviving troopers try to evict 'em. What follows is a superlinear slog through a series of feintly familiar hallways in which an interminable number of bogeyman pop out at metronomic intervals. In fact, if you aren't asking yourself, "Haven't I played this game before?" it's only because you're staring in amazement as your rigid A.I. peers insist on sticking to their script, regardless of what's going on around them.

In the similarly linear *Call of Duty*, you actually worry about the welfare of your allies. Not so in *Area 51*. As you wander around the facility, trying to find the card key that opens the next area, your comrades maintain their positions in precisely the manner they were

programmed to—little direction and less interaction is offered here. In addition, grunts unflinchingly take whatever damage you care to dish out. (OK, so come politely protest when you pistol-whip 'em—"Pardon me, but that's my head you're hitting.") Perhaps it's all in the interest of keeping things user friendly, but it kind of kills the tension, keeping Area 51 true to its light-gun-game-in-the-back-of-the-tavern roots.

Truly Innovative Ideas are few and far between. When good guy Ethon Cole's (spoiler alert!) alien infection spreads, the hero gains access to a few additional abilities that, to be honest, aren't different enough to make the game the gripping experience developer Midway Austin undoubtedly intended it to be.

Vaguely this *Area 51* is slightly sharper than the Xbox version, but even with graphics settings cranked, the game still can't hold a candle to today's standard-setting competitors. Stellar sound effects compensate somewhat, matching the ferocity of the mech weapon selection. Still, the voice acting of David Duchovny and Marilyn Manson does little to enhance the vibe, with the always-wooden former *X-Files* star practically sleepwalking through his role.



Find the old Area 51 light-gun arcade game. The only thing missing: fat, sweaty nerds.



"Oh...well...you're not Gordon Freeman. My mistake. Sorry to bother you."▲

► If you aren't asking, "Haven't I played this before?" it's only because you're staring in amazement at the rigid A.I.

## SAVING GRACE

While the single-player game is the same old same old, multiplayer is a genuinely good time. Deathmatch maps don't offer the most compelling layouts but do a good job scaling level elze in proportion to the number of participants, unlocking doors and expanding areas as more players log on. Multiple modes (DM, TDM, CTF, and Infected, in which one costumed mutant tries to spread his coolies), the game's Earth vs. E.T.s selection of guns and grenades, and perfectly placed power-ups offer variety and make fragging fun. Perhaps the biggest problem is finding enough people online to put together a populated match.

Lacking ideas, *Area 51* plays up its license (and lessons learned from *Finer Shooters*) for a solid but unsurprising foray into the FPS field. Play that it isn't more. / James Mielke

Forget the "me-too" single-player experience, just go online—if at all.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

VERDICT  
★★★★☆

# IMPERIAL GLORY

Napoleon: Total War

PUBLISHER: Eidos DEVELOPER: Pyro Studios OS/VR: NTSC (ESRB RATING: T) REQUIRED: Pentium III 500MHz, 256MB RAM, 3.5GBs (total), 6400 videocard RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 12GBs videocard MULTIPAYER: Internet (2-4 players)

**IMPERIAL GLORY IS LIKE THE TYPICAL** Hollywood period drama: It might look and sound authentic, but in actuality, it resembles history about as much as James Bond accurately portrays real spies. Pyro Studios tried hard to make *Imperial Glory* the Total War of the Napoleonic era but achieved little more than mediocrity.

All told, *Imperial Glory* is a tepid imitation of the Total War formula. In the campaign game, Europe and the Mediterranean are divided into a Risk-style map of provinces, each of which produces the game's four resources in varying proportions. Also scattered around the map are minor powers such as Saxony and Portugal, which mostly exist for the major powers to push around. The playable major powers—Britain, France, Prussia, Austria, and Russia—are, of course, trying to conquer everything in sight.

## STRATEGY!

The strategic game isn't badly done, but it's not particularly deep. You construct buildings, recruit

armies, and march your troops off to conquer an empire. There's a decent alliance system you can use to create useful coalitions or annex minor powers peacefully, as well as a quest system that gives you various benefits once you accomplish certain goals. Unfortunately, these bright spots are marred by very limited resource production that forces you into many idle cycles of clicking the End Turn button.

When opposing armies meet on the battlefield, you enter the tactical mode to fight the battle. This area is *Imperial Glory's* biggest block mark. While units often look like their historical counterparts, the gameplay is more akin to that of a traditional RTS; there's no measurement of morale, so units fight to the death—and even the victor suffers huge casualties. Artillery, which Napoleon considered the "queen of battle," is undermanned and underpowered. Without center shot for close actions, your artillery is easily overrun, ultimately making it more of a liability than an asset in battle. Shock combat is also unbalanced, as your cavalry units are inordinately powerful. Rather than featuring elegant

interplays between the various arms and chess-like maneuvers of Napoleonic formations, the game has units with unbalanced abilities, which cause almost all battles to degenerate into giant fur balls of melee combat.

The one innovation here is the game's playable sea battles. They look great, but the interface is a hassle—you control each unit individually, so large battles are pretty much unplayable. Even the A.I. has problems here, as it tends to crash its own ships into each other when playing with a full fleet.

*Imperial Glory* is a great-looking game with a few good ideas, but it just gets too many things wrong. Despite the initial promise, the result is a pale imitation of Total War and a poor attempt at simulating history. / *Di Luo*

Looks good, doesn't crash—but it's neither historical nor very enjoyable.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

VERDICT  
★★★★☆

# TIN SOLDIERS: JULIUS CAESAR

Is that a centurion in your pocket?

PUBLISHER: Mantic Games DEVELOPER: Kalos Works OS/VR: Win/Glaze (ESRB RATING: None) REQUIRED: Pentium III 500MHz, 1024MB RAM, 1GB (total), 5400 videocard RECOMMENDED: Pentium III 800MHz, 256MB RAM, 1228MB videocard MULTIPAYER: Internet (2 players)

FOR A TIME, THE ROMAN LEGIONS WERE THE unquestioned masters of the Mediterranean world. In this 17th addition to the Tin Soldiers series, you lead those storied legions against both barbarians and fellow Romans in the many battles of Julius Caesar's career.

*Tin Soldiers: Julius Caesar*, like its predecessor *Tin Soldiers: Alexander the Great*, models itself after traditional tabletop miniatures war gaming. Its most unique feature is the simultaneous turn, in which both sides plot out their moves at the same time before executing them. Each turn is divided into three phases: main, reaction, and reserve. Orders are given to all

units in the "in" phase, and depending on the result of those actions, you may get a chance to revise some of those orders later. This "we go" method adds unpredictability and suspense to an otherwise simple system. Even the best-laid plans will probably not survive contact with the enemy, especially if you're playing against another human. And like *Alexander*, this new *Tin Soldiers* looks great, with units colorfully depicted as lovingly hand-painted miniatures. After decades of hexes and dials, it's amazing how much life a little color and flair can bring to the staid war-game genre.

JC makes several improvements over

*Alexander*. There are more unit types, including legions, which are more durable than traditional formations. The campaign is also less linear, allowing you to fight battles in different orders and giving you more control over the troops brought into each battle. Most importantly, the variety of battles has increased, including both defending and assaulting in a siege.

Unfortunately, JC kept many of *Alexander's* faults. You still can't play as Caesar's enemies, except in multiplayer. The A.I. remains pretty predictable, so most of the single-player challenge is due to the A.I.'s larger armies. Worst of all, there's no PBEM. With battles lasting for hours, multiplayer games are just too difficult to coordinate and play. / *Di Luo*

Good system and competent game crying out for PBEM.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

VERDICT  
★★★★☆



➤ *Tin Soldiers* looks great, with units depicted as hand-painted miniatures.





# REWIND

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

| GAME   | ISSUE      | RATING |
|--|------------|--------|
| Act of War: Direct Action  | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| Aerial Strike  | 06/05      | ★★★½   |
| Alexander  | 03/05      | ★★★★   |
| Archie of Elgo   | 03/05      | ★★★★   |
| Asie & Allies  | 01/05      | ★★★½   |
| Baseball Mogul 2008  | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★★   |
| Blitzkrieg: Rolling Thunder  | 02/05      | ★★★½   |
| Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30                                  | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| Cloak & Dagger: First in Flight                                    | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay—Developer's Cut | 05/05      | ★★★★   |
| Combat: Task Force 121   | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| Combat: Vietnam  | 01/05      | ★★★½   |
| Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars                                       | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| Dangerous Waters   | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| D-Day  | 01/05      | ★★★½   |
| Decisive Battles of World War II: Battles in Normandy              | 01/05      | ★★★★   |
| Demolition   | 06/05      | ★★★½   |
| Doan 2: Resurrection of Evil                                       | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★★   |
| Dragon   | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| DRIZZIL  | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| Elite Warriors: Vikings  | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| Empire Earth II  | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone                                      | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich                                    | 05/05      | ★★★★   |
| Day Drigoby's World of War   | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| Gulf Wars  | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★★   |
| Half-Life 2  | 02/05      | ★★★★   |
| Hearts of Iron II  | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| Heritage of Kings: The Settlers                                    | 06/05      | ★★★½   |
| Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile                              | 01/05      | ★★★½   |



• Doan 2: Resurrection of Evil

| GAME   | ISSUE      | RATING |
|--|------------|--------|
| Joint Ops: Recession                               | 02/05      | ★★★★   |
| Knight of Hoar                                     | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★★   |
| Legend: Dark Shadows                               | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| Logo Star Wars                                     | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★★   |
| The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth | 03/05      | ★★★★   |
| Lost Admiral Returns                               | 05/05      | ★★★½   |
| Madden NFL 2005                                    | Holiday 04 | ★★★★   |
| Manchester United Soccer 2005                      | 03/05      | ★★★½   |
| The Matrix Online                                  | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault                    | 01/05      | ★★★★   |
| Medieval Lords                                     | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| Men of War   | 01/05      | ★★★½   |
| MVP Baseball 2005                                  | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★★   |
| NASCAR SimRacing                                   | 06/05      | ★★★½   |
| NBA Live 2005                                      | 08/05      | ★★★½   |
| Need for Speed Underground II                      | 04/05      | ★★★★   |
| NHL 2005   | 01/05      | ★★★½   |
| NHL: GameDay Hockey Manager                        | 03/05      | ★★★★   |
| Obscure  | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| Penitentiaries: Battle out of Hell                 | 02/05      | ★★★½   |
| Patrol: The Last Expedition                        | 01/05      | ★★★½   |
| Playboy: The Mansion                               | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| Prince of Persia: Warrior Within                   | 03/05      | ★★★★   |
| Project Snowblind                                  | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★★   |
| Psychonauts  | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| Psychotic  | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| Raging Tiger                                       | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| Returns to Mysterious Island                       | 04/05      | ★★★★   |
| RollerCoaster Tycoon 3                             | 02/05      | ★★★★   |
| Rosen: Total War                                   | Hockey 04  | ★★★★   |
| The Saga of Ryuzon                                 | 01/05      | ★★★½   |
| Second Sight                                       | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★★   |
| Secret of the Silver Earring                       | 01/05      | ★★★½   |



• MVP Baseball 2005

| GAME   | ISSUE      | RATING |
|--|------------|--------|
| Scout24: Descendants in Time                 | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| Sid Meier's Pirates!                         | 02/05      | ★★★★   |
| Silent Hill 4: The Room                      | 01/05      | ★★★½   |
| Silent Hunter II                             | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| The Sims 2: University                       | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| Space Interceptor: Project Freedom           | 02/05      | ★★★½   |
| Splosion City: Chaos Theory                  | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie              | 02/05      | ★★★½   |
| Star Wars: KD TDR II: The Sith Lords         | 04/05      | ★★★★   |
| Star Wars: Republic Commando                 | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| SuperPower 2                                 | 02/05      | ★★★½   |
| Supecracy                                    | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| SWAT 4                                       | 06/05      | ★★★★   |
| Time of Defense                              | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| Tin Soldiers: Alexander the Great            | 04/05      | ★★★½   |
| Tribes: Vengeance                            | Holiday 04 | ★★★★   |
| Ultima Online: Serraval Empire               | 02/05      | ★★★½   |
| Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines           | 02/05      | ★★★★   |
| Vendetta Online                              | 05/05      | ★★★½   |
| World Championship Tennis                    | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★½   |
| World Soccer: Winning Eleven 8 International | Jul/Aug 05 | ★★★★   |
| Zoo Tycoon 2                                 | 02/05      | ★★★½   |



• Lego Star Wars

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▶ WHEN THE NEW LINE OF AMD PROCESSORS became the first beneficiaries of Nvidia's NForce4 SLI (Scalable Link Interface) technology for PCI Express, AMD stole the hearts and minds of gaming punts away from Intel in a big way. Exciting new technology tends to do that. Now Intel fights to get the punts back into its fold by adopting SLI. Enter Vicious PC, winner of last year's Ultimate Game Machine. Its newest Paladin SLI gaming monstie is a seductively fast machine for serious and mainstream gamers alike, and its newest speed demon, which is based on the NForce4 MCP technology, shows Intel still has a gaming pulse.

For those still favoring an AMD-based system over an Intel one for gaming, listen up, goodie. The Paladin SLI packs impressive game-performance speeds worthy of the AMD-based Paladin's past accoutrements. Kudos to Vicious PC and its computer-building prowess, because this new Paladin SLI—with its combination of Nvidia's NForce4 SLI MCP and Intel's Pentium 4 3.46GHz Extreme Edition 1,066MHz FSB processor, which resides on a feature-rich Asus P5ND2-SLI motherboard with two GeForce 6800 GT cards from XFX in SLI—simply takes

▶ MAIN COMPONENTS: Vicious PC  
PROCESSOR: Intel Pentium 4



▶ With supercool components, Vicious once again proves good looks can also remain functional.

## The Guts

| COMPONENT    |   |
|--------------|---|
| Processor    | Intel Pentium 4 Extreme Edition processor at 3.46GHz, 800MHz FSB, 3MB L3 cache          |
| System Color | Jet Black   |
| Case         | Full tower with aluminum door cover and SLI-ready 320W case with LCD temperature meters |
| GPU          | AMD Radeon 6t 3500 x 2 560m, socket 231 retail (each kit)                               |
| Motherboard  | Nvidia nForce4 SLI SLI with 1,066MHz FSB, 800 PCI Express, and DDR2                     |
| Memory       | 1 GB RAM (DDR2) PC2-5400 DDR2 667MHz memory (2 x 512MB)                                 |
| Hard Drive   | Dual 74GB SATA 150 10,200 rpm hard drive  |
| RAID Setting | RAID 0 striped drives—for performance purposes (SATA drives only)                       |
| Video        | Dual Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT 256MB DDR2 with PCI Express, DVI, and TV out in SLI mode    |
| CD/DVD/RW    | Internal DVD-CD (reversible) combo drive 16X/20X/10X                                    |
| Sound        | Onboard 3D digital 7.1 channel sound  |
| Network Card | Onboard Gigabit (10/100/1000) PCI network card  |
| Floppy Drive | 1.44MB 3.5-inch floppy disk drive   |
| OS           | Microsoft Windows XP Home Edition with CD and manual                                    |
| Service      | Standard three-year limited parts and labor warranty                                    |

gaming performance to new heights.

Testing the Paladin SLI with our 3D GameGauge Lite benchmark suite certainly proves this, scoring some unprecedented benchmarks across the charts. When all was said and done, the Paladin almost inched to the century mark with a final score of 91.29 (to put that number in perspective, its UGM-winning sibling scored 98.68 but cost about \$2,000 more). Halo, Doom 3, Far Cry, and Panicker

all scored over 100fps in their respective benchmark tests, further proving this is an ultrastat gaming system. Perhaps more impressive, the Paladin SLI pumped out the best 3DMark05 score to date with a 7,556 at a 1280x1024x32 resolution with 2x anisotiling and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled. If it could have squeezed out just 50 more frames, this rig would have topped an unprecedented 8,000 level in 3DMark05. Not even the recent AMD SLI

# GOOD KNIGHT...

Vicious PC Paladin SLI

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systems we've benchmarked scored so high.

With supercool components, Vicous once again proves good looks can also remain functional, thanks to a stylish, toolless aluminum MGE Quantum chassis. It's one of those rare PC cases that not only looks good, but is functional in spades. Two large side-grill air-vent panels and a seven-fan controller panel easily keep air flowing briskly to cool internal components, and a sleek neon-blue advanced LCD controller sits on the front panel, updating you on fan speed, GPU temperature, and miscellaneous data like no one's business.

The bottom line is Vicous PC has an obvious talent for pushing the gaming-performance envelope, especially with Intel-based systems. Considering how long AMD has dominated Intel in the gaming arena of late, it's no mean feat. Matching good looks with (more important) high-

performance components, the Paladin SLI has won the heart of its tech guru and a place of honor among the plethora of AMD Athlon 64-based systems housed at the Cave. / Raphael Liberatore

Paladin SLI \$3560

Craving an Intel system for gaming?  
My friend, your search has finally  
come to an end.

COMPUTER  
GAMING  
WORLD

VERDICT  
★★★★★

TOP  
PRICE  
INDEX

Prices for products not purchased directly from manufacturers were the lowest we found by shopping on TUP.com.

## INSIDE



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Nvidia GeForce 7800 GTX  
Unparalleled speed—at least for this month.



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### Making Sense of 3D GameGauge Lite v1.2

Each system goes through an exhaustive series of benchmark tests in order to assess overall performance and raw speed values.

Benchmarking consists of both the industry's undisputed reference synthetic benchmark utility, 3DMark05, along with CGW's own real-world game benchmarking suite, 3D Game Gauge Lite v1.2. 3DGG Lite consists of a brilliant collection of A-List action games like Halo, Doom 3, Unreal Tournament 2004, Far Cry, and PanAster. 3DGG video configurations are set at the 1280x1024 resolution with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled, except for Halo, which gets no benefit from either technique. Results are then tabulated and posted as a raw Geomean score for your reference.

### 3D GameGauge Lite 1.0



HOW OUR GRAPH WORKS We graph a product's benchmark scores to demonstrate how it compares to the scores of other products we've reviewed in the last six months. During that time, the lowest 3D GameGauge 1.0 score we've seen is 40; the highest is 98.68.



**BENJAMINS ALERT!**

As of press time, the 7800 GTX is the fastest card on the market open to the masses.

# NUCLEAR POWER

Nvidia GeForce 7800 GTX, brought to you by **EXTREME|TECH**

PC GEEKS ARE SPLIT INTO THE RED Camp (ATI) and the Green Camp (Nvidia), each staunchly defending their choice in graphics cards. For now, Nvidia's latest graphics juggernaut, the GeForce 7800 GTX, is king of the hill when it comes to raw power. But at a cost of around \$600, does it all the pixel shaders in the world can't save it from being an expensive no-no.

## BY THE NUMBERS

Nvidia is quick to point out that the 7800 GTX architecture isn't a simple product refresh or tweak of the GeForce 6800 Ultra—the vertex and pixel shader pipelines have been completely redesigned. But, since the core feature set is pretty much the same and the only differences are performance characteristics and power utilization, it's easier to understand the new architecture in comparison to the previous one. The 7800 has only 10 percent more memory bandwidth and the same pixel rate, and

runs at the same 5MHz higher clock speed. The interesting parts are the 80 percent increase in pixel shader pipelines, from 16 to 23, and the 33-percent increase in vertex shader units.

With just 10 percent more memory bandwidth, how does the GPU hope to be significantly faster than the 6800's NV40 architecture? Nearly every part of the graphics pipeline has been tweaked, redesigned, or overhauled for greater efficiency. The 7800 GTX card draws about 100 watts, compared to 110 for the 6800 Ultra. Better still, the reference cooling solution is single slot and runs much more quietly—no leaf-blowers here, which is great news for those building high-performance systems into smaller cases.

## FUN WITH BUZZWORDS

One of the 7800 GTX's big bullet points is what Nvidia calls Transparency Adaptive Anti-Mooring Filtering—TAAAF—is aimed at improving the image quality of textures with alpha (transparency) data. Current anti-aliasing methods smooth in out most occluded jagged, but they can't handle objects like chain-link fences that have "color" spots where you're supposed to see between the links. Nvidia's new solution provides anti-aliasing to the links of these chain-link fences for any other object with transparency in the textures.

However, we should point out that the 7800 GTX doesn't really do anything new to improve standard anti-aliasing modes. The cards are still limited to 4x multisample AA, plus the 64x mode, which combines 4x multisample AA with 2x supersampling. The multisample option hasn't changed at all—it's still the tried-and-true rotated grid pattern used in the first generation of GeForce cards. Nvidia promises a boost to 16x AA, which will be a combination of 4x supersampling and 4x multisampling,

but it's not in the initial driver release. The company promises a driver update soon that will enable this new mode, possibly only on SLI systems.

Essentially, the main goal of the 7800 GTX is heavily improved performance. This new architecture is all about making existing and upcoming games run much faster, especially those that use floating-point textures and HDR rendering, like those using Unreal Engine 3.

## THE TEST RUN

As the GeForce 7800 GTX stand up against the current crop of games? Maybe it was because we had a fully loaded Athlon 64 FX-55 (2x512MB DDR400 RAM and ASUS A8N-SLI Deluxe

motherboard), but the 7800—as expected—cut a bloody path through our tests. The 7800 GTX has 30 percent more pixel shader pipelines and a third more vertex shader pipes, so it's unsurprising that it sports a 3DMark05 score that's roughly 50 percent higher than the 6800's. And this is with 16x multisample resolution, as well as 4x AA and 64xPF turned on. It goes without saying: The new GPU also outpaces ATI's best by quite a margin.

As for real game tests: It's hard to believe, but it's *Far Cry*—not Doom 3 or Half-Life 2—that shows we still have plenty of need for more powerful graphics cards. A single 7800 GTX is about 25 percent faster than the 6800 Ultra, and 16 to 30 percent faster than the X850 XT PE. Is that enough to make the game CPU bound? Hardly. Two 7800 GTX cards in SLI show there's still plenty of headroom left, so long as you run at a modest state (higher than 1280x1024, without AA or AF).

Bottom line, Nvidia has unquestionably produced the fastest video card to date—at least until we see what the big deal is with ATI's upcoming next-generation architecture, code-named R680. Unfortunately, this unprecedented speed comes with an unprecedented price tag: GeForce 7800 GTX cards are expected to cost \$599. With GeForce 6800 Ultra cards selling for under \$500 now, we can't really say that the 7800 GTX represents much of an improvement in value. Basically, only those types of people who own these cards: the rich, the hoarders of hard-core gamers, and tech editors. But if you've got the green and you want to run at high resolutions with anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering at the time, it's worth a look. —Jason Cooper

## Making Sense of 3DMark05

3DMark05 is the quintessential synthetic benchmark for testing gaming hardware. It's primarily a graphics-focused test suite that utilizes DirectX 9.0c with Pixel Shaders 2 game tests, and features, batch, and CPU tests. The final score reflects a combination of graphics and CPU loads of 1280x1024 resolution with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic-filtering enabled.

## 3DMark05



**HOW OUR GRAPH WORKS** We graph a product's benchmark scores to demonstrate how it compares to the scores of other products we've reviewed in the last six months. During that time, the lowest 3DMark05 Pro score we've seen to 1,904; the highest was 7,275, until now.

➤ **It's king of the hill when it comes to raw power.**

## GeForce 7800 GTX \$500

Nvidia focuses on speed and delivers it in spades, but at a price that means many gamers won't be able to enjoy it.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★☆



formance, and more than enough space to keep you from flinching your herd of games and MP3 music. Not only is the Deskstar 7K500 a solid performer with a 16MB data buffer and a solid media transfer rate of 817 Mbps, its native command queuing (NCQ) SATA II interface at 300 MBps makes it one of the fastest drives at this enormous capacity on the planet. You'll appreciate this when you see the decreased load times for data hogs such as *Hell-Life 2* or *Blade: Total War*.

The Deskstar 7K500 comes in either SATA II or PATA interfaces. Forward-looking gamers will want the added benefit of a SATA II interface, especially in a high-performance RAID setup that matches two 500GB drives for a gigantic 1,000GB array of raw speed. I saw *Doom 3* benchmark scores jump 10 frames just by upgrading from a single 7K250 HDD to this sort of setup.

The Deskstar also runs at a very quiet 3.1 dB. And if this isn't enough, the Deskstar's "Smooth Stream" technology optimizes buffer management for improved music or movie-clip playback. If you're a hardcore gamer with big bucks, then grab one (or ideally two) of these puppies for the best native SATA II HDD money can buy. /Raphael Liberatore

MANUFACTURER: Western  
PRODUCT: Deskstar 7K500  
500GB, 7,200 rpm SATA II HDD

## GRAB A GREAT BIG PLATTER AND ENJOY

Deskstar 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm SATA II HDD

WITH GAMES GETTING INCREASINGLY larger and gobbling up precious hard-drive space like a fat Uncle celebrating the limited supply of Thanksgiving stuffing, you'll find yourself weighing which of your older games to dump for the newest arrival. Or you could just add another HDD. Hitachi's new megahuge Deskstar 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm Serial ATA II hard drive may be the answer to your storage dilemma, offering speed, perfor-

Deskstar 7K500 \*\$199

Pretty much the ultimate in SATA II hard drives.

COMPUTER  
GAMING  
WORLD

VERDICT  
★★★★★

RECENTLY ANNOUNCED

## SUV SPACE IN A SPORTS CAR BODY

LaCie Mobile Hard Drive, Design by F.A. Porsche

IF YOU'RE A NONTECHIE TYPE WHO'S afraid of opening your case to add another drive, what can you do? Simply add a LaCie FireWire drive. It's a quick, simple, external solution for adding storage without installation hassles.

Designed by an F.A. Porsche design team (yeah, the same guys behind those cars you can't afford), this sleek-looking lightweight beauty comes with a superfast FireWire transfer rate and a variety of capacities (from 80 to 250 GB). This HDD will not only provide the storage you desire, but in most cases, will enhance the look of your setup since it will stand out like a Porsche parked next to your clunky 'Yugo' of a desktop tower.

FireWire is a popular storage solution thanks to zippy transfer rates topping 400 mbps. Using the IEEE 1394 standard, FireWire is especially useful for streaming video and/or high-end game applications where isochronous data requires a delivery of sustained throughput at high speeds. Like the USB standard, FireWire is both hot swappable and plug-and-play, and can be daisy-chained using other self-powering 1394 peripheral devices.

The LaCie FireWire drive also can act as a system backup drive, and the SilverStor and SilverKeeper utilities software makes use of several system formats, including FAT32, NTFS, UNIX, and Mac OS Extended or Standard (HFS). LaCie also makes a USB 2.0



## Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines

THE IDEA OF LINKING TWO GRAPHICS cards and running your favorite games at inhumanly fast framerates sounds great, but I'm not completely sold on SLI yet. For all of its benefits, SLI still possesses a couple of shortcomings—namely, its immature technology and extreme cost.

I can certainly attest to SLI's speed, but I've experienced enough crashes, freezes, blue screens, and general system anomalies to recognize that this technology is still maturing. And while Nvidia certainly gets credit for gobbling up 3dfx and then retooling that technology to fit its own, it needs to understand that many games simply can't afford SLI. The total cost of an SLI nForce board (\$200 to \$260) plus two GeForce 7800 GTX cards (\$1,200+) in a high-end setup can be \$1,500 or more.

On the bright side, Nvidia recently introduced [www.slizone.com](http://www.slizone.com), a fantastic portal containing everything related to SLI, including info, tidbits, game lists, drivers, products, and contests for gaming enthusiasts and developers alike.

Still, I've hit a crossroads with SLI—I love it, but simply can't recommend it without considering a gamer's finances. For those with deep pockets, SLI is a no-brainer. Everyone else should just wait, and hope the technology to mature some more, and hope the price drops in the interim.

/Raphael Liberatore



MANUFACTURER: LaCie  
PRODUCT: LaCie Mobile Hard Drive,  
Design by F.A. Porsche

version of this drive for computers lacking the 1394 standard. It all adds up to a solid option for gamers needing extra storage or portability. /Raphael Liberatore

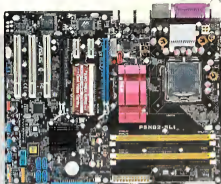
LaCie Hard Drive \*\$179

Simple, effective, and not bad looking.

COMPUTER  
GAMING  
WORLD

VERDICT  
★★★★★

©2006 MODEL REVIEWED



MANUFACTURER: **Asus**  
PRODUCT: **P5N2-SLI Deluxe**  
Motherboard

**P5N2-SLI Deluxe** **\$259**

Intel's SLI setup loses by a step, but I'm more impressed it threw gamers a bone.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★★

# SLI SHOOT-OUT

Double your processing pleasure

ONCE UPON A TIME, GAMERS LOOKING to dramatically boost their gaming framerates with SLI technology had but one option: an AMD chipset. But with Intel recently jumping onboard the SLI bandwagon, those same gamers are now faced with a choice: AMD or Intel. Most gamers don't have the luxury of building two systems and comparing the results—but I do.

I started with a pair of top-notch Asus PCI Express motherboards armed with Nvidia's powerful nForce4 chipset. The difference? Two reference-quality 64-bit-capable CPUs: In one corner, the Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard matched with the reigning king of gaming processors, AMD's flagship Athlon 64 FX-55 Socket 939 processor supporting HyperTransport technology; in the other, Asus' new P5N2-SLI Deluxe mobo with Intel's top Pentium 4 Extreme Edition 3.79GHz Socket 775 processor supporting Hyper-Threading and Enhanced Intel SpeedStep technologies.

For fairness, each system was built with identical components: two BFGTech GeForce 6800

Ultra DCs, two Hitachi 7K500 500GB SATA II HDDs in RAID 0, Windows XP Professional, PC Power & Cooling's 580-watt power supply, and the same dual-layer DVD-RW drives. The major difference came in memory management. Since the AMD-based motherboard still supports DDR while the Intel-based mobo moves into DDR2, we used 1GB of Corsair TwinX 400MHz DDR RAM modules on the AMD board, as opposed to the faster 1GB of Corsair 5400U DDR2 RAM on the Intel motherboard.

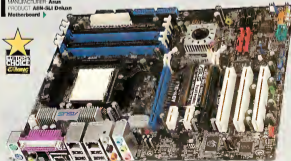
For benchmark testing, we used both the 3DMark05 synthetic benchmark as well as our very own suite of 3D GameGauge Lite 1.0 benchmark games, running at 1280x1024 with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled (except for Halo). Both systems scored pretty impressive marks across the board, with a slight edge going to AMD for scoring almost 13 points higher in our 3DGG suite. Both setups covered the same 3DMark05 scores, and in games like *Fer Cry*, both hit framerates in the mid 90s. The notable difference came when running proce-

sor-heavy benchmarks in *UT2004*, which ran at a blisteringly fast 124fps on the AMD setup while it positively chugged on the Intel setup at 48fps.

So what does all this mean? Well, the final tally proved to be closer than expected, that *UT* score notwithstanding. Simply, the high scores from both systems blew the top off our charts with their out-of-this-world performance. The AMD FX-55 end Asus A8N-SLI combo, however, moved slightly ahead of the Intel setup on the 3DGG performance scorecard, and way ahead in terms of cost-effective pricing, thereby retaining its title as the best SLI-ready processor choice for gaming.

Both reference-quality boards highlight Asus' prowess at providing each processor camp a great platform upon which to flex its graphic muscle. AMD or Intel both—on these motherboards—simply rock...it's just that AMD rocks a little bit harder, a little bit longer. The biggest winner here is you, the gamer, reaping the blindingly fast rewards provided by the continued growth of SLI. / Raphael Liberton

MANUFACTURER: **Asus**  
PRODUCT: **A8N-SLI Deluxe**  
Motherboard



**A8N-SLI Deluxe** **\$165**

AMD still offers the best SLI solution. No one remembers second place, right?

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★★

The biggest winner here is you, the gamer.



▶ **LG MUST HAVE SOMEONE ON STAFF** who previously worked for the Ringling Brothers, as the company's new Flatron L1980Q 19-inch ultra-wide LCD monitor has the flexibility of a sideshow contortionist. This monitor bends backward, swivels sideways, tilts forward, and rotates up to 270 degrees easily, all while keeping the image right where it's supposed to be—directly in front of you. How extremely can it be bent? While most LCDs tilt 10 or 20 degrees from their stationary base, the L1980Q tilts back a full 190 degrees, allowing it to serve as a very expensive TV dinner tray.

Beyond the pretzel factor, the L1980Q is an elegant LCD that really performs, with a handful of cool gaming features particularly worth noting, like its outstanding 8ms response time for blowing through fast-moving games like America's Army with almost zero ghosting or streaking. The L1980Q also features an above-average pixel pitch, a contrast ratio of 800:1 for showing off blacks and greys, and a brightness level of 250 nits, which is perfect for spotting enemies lurking in the shadows. The

resolution maxes out at 1,280x1,024 pixels at 75Hz for beautiful imaging, and the monitor supports both analog VGA and DVI-D interfaces, making it a good choice for old and new videocards alike. The proprietary 1-Engine image-processing technology enhances brightness and color simultaneously, making even the gloomiest DVDs spring to life.

The price tag will keep many gamers from bending over backward to get this baby, but if you've got the scratch and need a monitor that can literally do the twist, this is the display for you. / *Raphael Liberatore*



MONITOR PICK  
HIGHEST GRADE  
PRODUCT  
Flatron L1980Q  
LCD Monitor



**Flatron L1980Q \$589**

If only Gumby were this flexible and pleasing to the eye.

COMPUTER  
**GAMING**  
WORLD

**VERDICT**  
★★★★★

# THE CONTORTIONIST

Flatron L1980Q LCD Monitor

# A-LIST

Welcome to Computer Gaming World's revamped A-List. This asterisk list of computer components and devices for gaming covers plenty of territory—from high-performance top-of-the-line products to mainstream gear.

## CPU

**Best Performance Processor**  
AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 CPU  
(AMD) - [www.amd.com](http://www.amd.com) - \$650

## Best Budget Processor

AMD Athlon 64 3200+ 2 GHz "Winchester" CPU (AMD) - [www.amd.com](http://www.amd.com) - \$295

## MOTHERBOARDS

### Best Performance Motherboard

Abit X88 S2 Deluxe NF6000 Motherboard  
(Abit) - [www.abit.com](http://www.abit.com) - \$120

### Best Budget Motherboard

Chaintech NF4 Ultra Zenith V6 NF6000 Ultra Motherboard  
(Chaintech) - [www.chaintech.com](http://www.chaintech.com) - \$95

## GRAPHICS CARDS

### Best Performance Graphics Card for AGP

ATI Radeon X880 XT Platinum Edition AGP 256MB GDDR3 Graphics Card  
(ATI Technologies) - [www.atit.com](http://www.atit.com) - \$299

### Best Performance Graphics Card for PCI Express

BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC PCI Express 256MB GDDR3 Graphics Card  
(BFGTech) - [www.bfgtech.com](http://www.bfgtech.com) - \$249

### Best Budget Graphics Card

BFGTech GeForce 6600 GT OC 128MB GDDR3 Graphics Card  
(BFGTech) - [www.bfgtech.com](http://www.bfgtech.com) - \$229

## RAM

### Best Performance DDR RAM

Corsair XMS TWINX2M-4000 1GB 1550MHz 128MB DDR RAM Kit  
(Corsair) - [www.corsair.com](http://www.corsair.com) - \$330

### Best Performance DDR2 RAM

Corsair XMS2 Twin2X128M4-5400L3 675MHz 128MB DDR2 RAM Kit  
(Corsair) - [www.corsair.com](http://www.corsair.com) - \$340

## Best Budget DDR RAM

Kingston HyperX K1-9200A0512 433MHz 512MB DDR433 PC3200 Kit  
(Kingston) - [www.kingston.com](http://www.kingston.com) - \$100

## MONITORS

### Best LCD

Dell 2405FPW 24-inch LCD Monitor  
(Dell) - [www.dell.com](http://www.dell.com) - \$1,200

### Best Budget LCD

NEC-Mitsubishi MultiSync 19X20X 19-inch LCD Monitor  
(NEC-Mitsubishi) - [www.nec.com](http://www.nec.com) - \$490

### Best CRT

NEC MultiSync FE21119B 19-inch CRT Monitor  
(NEC) - [www.nec.com](http://www.nec.com) - \$490

## SOUND

### Best Soundcard

Creative Sound Blaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro Soundcard  
(Creative Labs) - [www.creative.com](http://www.creative.com) - \$180

### Best Budget Soundcard

Mad Dog InterView 7.1 DSP Soundcard  
(Mad Dog) - [www.madmax.com](http://www.madmax.com) - \$20

### Best Speaker System

Logitech Z-6000 Digital 5.1 Speakers  
(Logitech) - [www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com) - \$399

### Best Budget Speaker System

Gigabyte ProGamer 6600 5.1 Speaker System  
(Creative Labs) - [www.creative.com](http://www.creative.com) - \$240

### Best Headphone

Zalman ZM-R567 Headphones  
(Zalman) - [www.zalman.com](http://www.zalman.com) - \$60

## GAME DEVICES/PERIPHERALS

### Best Gaming Mouse (C)

Razer Diamondback Optical Mouse  
(Razer) - [www.razer.com](http://www.razer.com) - \$30

Logitech MX 518 Gaming-Grade Optical Mouse

(Logitech) - [www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com) - \$40

### Best Mouse Pad

Steelix 4D Mouse Pad  
(Steelix) - [www.steelix.com](http://www.steelix.com) - \$24

### Best Gaming Keyboard

Gemini Keyboard  
(Steelix) - [www.steelix.com](http://www.steelix.com) - \$50

### Best Wireless Keyboard/Mouse Combo

Logitech Cordless Desktop MK010  
(Logitech) - [www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com) - \$100

### Best Joystick

OH Products Fightstick USB  
(OH Products) - [www.ohproducts.com](http://www.ohproducts.com) - \$140

### Best Gamepad

Logitech Cordless Flightpad 2 Wireless  
(Logitech) - [www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com) - \$38

### Best Racing Wheel

Logitech MOMO Racing Wheel  
(Logitech) - [www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com) - \$90

## NETWORKING

### Best Gaming Router

D-Link 4300 GamerLounge Wireless 1080 Gaming Router  
(D-Link) - [www.d-link.com](http://www.d-link.com) - \$160

### Best Switch

SMC2804T EZ Switch 10/100/1000 Gigabit 8-port Unmanaged Switch (SMC) - [www.smc.com](http://www.smc.com) - \$190

### Best Network Adapter

Belkin F5N Network Network Card  
(Belkin) - [www.belkin.com](http://www.belkin.com) - \$110

## GAMING NOTEBOOKS

### Best Performance Notebook

Alienware Area-51m 1700 Notebook  
(Alienware) - [www.alienware.com](http://www.alienware.com) - \$3,300

### Best Budget Notebook

Dell Inspiron XPS Gen 2 Notebook  
(Dell) - [www.dell.com](http://www.dell.com) - \$2,800

**HEAR IT!  
CHECK OUT  
THE DEMO  
ON THIS  
MONTH'S  
DVD**

# MUSIC TO

Creative Labs' X-Fi technology will change the way you

Remember when 3D cards were just coming out and you'd read about them and become mildly interested—right up until you saw GLQuake in action and that mild interest immediately morphed into burning desire? A few months back, we were that excited about the prospect of a separate CPU handling superrealistic physics. Now we have a new obsession. We recently heard Creative Labs' new X-Fi (Extreme Fidelity) technology in action. And trust us, once you hear it too, you'll never want to listen to standard PC audio—be it music or gaming—ever again.

## IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD

Creative's vision for this leap forward in sound quality is aimed directly at your head... via your headphones. Why headphones? Because Creative's research revealed that a sizable majority of PC users and gamers listen to content almost exclusively through headphones. That would seem counterintuitive, considering the number of 2.1, 3.1, 5.1, and 7.1 speaker systems on the market, but think about it: Teens don't want anyone to hear what they're doing. LAN gamers need headphones to pluck up their own aural cues and to cancel out the noise of their surroundings/competitors, and unless you live alone, the odds are you or your housemate/spouse/wardens don't want to be bothered by you blasting Doom 3 demons in glorious 7.1 surround sound cranked up to 11 at 2 a.m.

Creative isn't the only manufacturer working on headphones surround (see "The Competition" sidebar), but as the company that regularly straddles and has dominated the soundcard market for some 16 years, it's the one to beat. Powered by a 3.4GHz CPU capable of 10K MIPS that lets it perform the demanding floating-point calculations you pay for in high-end receivers, the X-Fi card is actually three cards in one: a gaming-audio solution, a digital-entertainment product, and a consumer-caliber audio-creation tool. The X-Fi—which is 24 times as powerful as Creative's current top-of-the-line Audigy card—is able to do all these things so well because it dynamically throws all its processing muscle behind whichever application you want running at the time—simply pop open the appropriate console and you're good to go.

**1. CMSS-3D**—This lets you enable/disable the surround sound, both over headphones and speakers. This is tied to your speaker selection; for example, if you change from headphones to 5.1, the option here will change as well.

**2. Crystalizer**—This lets you enable/disable the Crystalizer and also has a slider used to set the intensity of the effect.

**3. EQ**—Use this to enable/disable and set standard EQ settings. You can adjust the EQ settings and save them as a personal profile or choose from standard EQ settings such as acoustic, classical, country, dance, rock, vocal, etc.

**4. Mixer**—Volume control for wave, MIDI synth, CD player, line-in, and mic, along with enable/disable controls for Smart Volume Management, GAX effects, and mic environment FX.

**5. Speakers**—Allows you to choose from among headphones, 2.1, 4.1, 5.1, 5.1, or 7.1 speakers and test all the channels. It also allows you to bring up the THX console to make sure your speakers are calibrated correctly.



**6. Bass**—Allows you to enable/disable bass redirection and features a slider to set the crossover frequency (when bass redirection is enabled).

**7. The Mode button** on the bottom left allows you to switch between game mode, mid-creation mode, and entertainment mode.

**8.** To the right of the Mode button is a Settings button that gets into a few more advanced features, such as setting the digital I/O, enabling automatic headphone detection and an external Decoder (mapping surround sound channels to different speakers, and opening DTS-ES 5.1 to 5.1).

**9.** Next to Settings is Default, which obviously restores the default settings.

**10.** The volume control is self-explanatory.

## THE OUTSIDE WORLD

Perhaps the most striking thing about X-Fi is the Creative Multi-Speaker Surround (CMSS) technology that jakes the sound out of your headphones' ear cups and into the space around you. The experience is like being perfectly positioned in a room full of speakers, instead of sound fitting back and forth between the right and left side of your headphones, an ambient field is created, making you feel as if you've been dropped into the game world and bringing an intimacy to the game action you didn't know you were missing. The effect is even more dramatic with music, as it pulls rigid stereo mixes out into the world and eases those dead zones you experience

when one side of the headphones is silent. The positional audio even reflects elevation. Perhaps the most dramatic demo we've heard had a helicopter taking off and passing "over-head." As the chopper lifted off, you could hear the clear but subtle cues indicating how high above you it was as it moved throughout the CMSS airspace and eventually came to a landing, imagine having that kind of realistic audio in a game like Battlefield 2—actually, you won't need to imagine it for long, because BF2 is one of the first games to be optimized for X-Fi. Unfortunately, you won't be able to hear it until the cards start chipping this fall (along with a special bundled version of UT 2004, also optimized for X-Fi).

But don't let all this optimization talk discour-

# YOUR EARS

## ear games

age you, because X-Fi will work with any game, intelligently creating a CMSS environment.

### CRYSTAL CLEAR

The 24-bit crystalizer just might be X-Fi's killer app. Let's look at it in terms anybody can understand: Think of a music CD. Digital audio is recorded at 24-bit and then immediately compressed to 16-bit just to slip it on a CD. If you turn that into an MP3, even more compression occurs and more audio information is lost as shepher tones are blunted, punch is deadened, and the overall sound quality is muffled. X-Fi's 24-bit crystalizer restores that lost information and brings music to life on a scale comparable to DVD Audio. X-Fi does this through a crazy kind of reverse math, "backwardizing" the compression algorithms and making logical assumptions to restore and reinsert the lost tones, particularly the high- and low-end sounds that are the first victims of compression.

Music fans will love it. Whether we were listening to The Clash's "London Calling," a Philip Glass symphony, a Queen song, or a Police song that I thought had been ruined for me thanks to obsessive playing by a college roommate, the effect was never less than breathtaking, with the music sounding as sharp and as clear as if it were being performed right there.

For gamers, the upside is just as huge. Those same compression losses occur with game audio as well, and restoring them adds a visceral punch you—once again—didn't know you were missing. Listening to a Jedi Knight battle with the crystalizer running makes the thrum of lightsabers so rich that you can practically feel the static electricity from the weapons tugging at your arm hairs. Listening to that same battle, I involuntarily jerked my head to dodge a blaster shot whipping by me—it sounded just that real.

### HEAR FOR YOURSELF

In this case, hearing is believing, so we've included a bunch of X-Fi sample audio files on this month's disc. Without an actual X-Fi card in your rig, you won't get the benefit of the crystalizer, but you can absolutely hear this CMSS tech in action. Be sure to check out the



## THE COMPETITION

► Creative Labs isn't the only company on the planet creating sound technology. Its competitors are hard at work coming up with reasons for you not to buy X-Fi. Chief among these is a little company you may have heard of called Dolby Labs. This past May, Dolby announced a deal with three leading motherboard manufacturers—Abit, AsusTek, and Gigabyte—to launch Intel-based motherboards designed in conjunction with Dolby's PC Entertainment Experience. With Intel updating the architecture of its boards to handle more complicated audio streams for the first time since 1994, these Designed for Dolby Master Studio-designated mobos will offer support for up to 7.1 channels of surround sound—including support for headphones, as with X-Fi. What the solution doesn't offer is the 24-bit crystalization that X-Fi does. Still, the surround sound tech is pretty impressive. You can check it out yourself by going to <http://www.dolby.com/consumer/pc/pobasics.html> and clicking on "Experience 5.1 Channel Surround Sound."

And Dolby isn't alone. VIA, Realtek, SRS Labs, and C-Media are also plugging their moves in the coming headphones/surround sound wars.



## The 24-bit crystalizer just might be X-Fi's killer app.

The Entertainment Mode screen is the least complicated screen and should be the most familiar to users since its look mimics a home-theater receiver's. From here, users will be able to set preferences for audio and DVD playback—once those preferences are set, however, users are most people will just fiddle with that big fat volume knob. ▶

Interested in a X-Fi headset to dig deeper into the audio and bells at it? Then check out [ExtremeTech.com's](http://ExtremeTech.com's) excellent in-depth expertise of the hardware on the Web at [www.extremetech.com](http://www.extremetech.com).



Read Me file and follow the set-up instructions. It won't come close to the experience of hearing the files running on an X-Fi card, but we're

betting afterward you'll be like us—eagerly awaiting the next big technological leap in gaming. /Robert Coffey



## MUSIC ON THE MOVE

► One of the greatest features the X-Fi card will provide is the "super-ripping" of MP3 files. These files are the same size as regular MP3s but have the benefit of CMSS technology, effectively turning your MP3 player into a portable surround sound system. But since the 24-bit crystalization and the richer sounds it produces rely on the X-Fi hardware, that feature won't be a part of the super-ripped files. But consid-

er this: With Creative's commitment to challenging Apple's iPod with its own line of Zin MP3 players, how long do you think it will take to find a way to shrink down that PCI card into a more portable size? We asked Phil O'Shaughnessy, director of corporate communications for Creative, that exact question, and while his eyes lit up, all he would say is that Creative is committed to X-Fi well into the future.



# KILLER RIG

## Kandalf Intel-SLI

WE'VE TAKEN INTEL OFF OUR KILLER RIG MA status now that it's become a charter member of Nvidia's exclusive NForce4 MCP SLI (Scalable Link Interface) club. With the Nvidia NForce4 SLI chipset firmly entrenched in Intel's gaming camp, Intel fans have plenty to be thankful for.

Scanning the guts of our new Kandalf Intel-SLI system, it reads like we're plinking our A-List again. With all DIY setups, the processor forms the basis for system building. Since our focus is an Intel-based SLI configuration, we went right to the top in choosing Intel's Pentium 4 660 3.73GHz Extreme Edition 1,066MHz FSB core CPU component.

Proxy, yes, but it kicks butt. Asus has outdone itself by manufacturing the first Intel SLI motherboard, as its new P5N2-SLI Deluxe offers the same features as its heretofore AMD-based AEN-SLI Deluxe board. Adding two Hitachi 7K500 500GB

NCO SATA II HDDs in RAID 0 gives one whopping terabyte of storage. For filling the two PCI Express video slots, we went with the best GeForce GPU cards—a pair of BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC 256MB GDDR3 cards. Finally, we stuck a couple of Corsair 5400UL 512MB RAM modules running at 667MHz in the memory channels.

The Thermaltake Kandalf full-tower chassis with its toolless design, thermal capacity, and spacious interior is perfect for housing our components. The expansive design makes it easy to work inside, especially when adding a couple of LED fans, a cabling kit, and dual cold cathode ray tubes purchased from www.xoxide.com.

Since I've been running into power-supply issues (see sidebar), I chose a PC Power & Cooling Turbo-Cool 510-watt Nvidia-certified SLI power supply for our power needs. This is a serious power supply.

As brawny as this rig is, benchmark testing shows it to be just slightly behind (and sometimes beside) the AMD SLI systems here in the cave. But if you want Intel, it has finally become an alternative for gamers looking for high-performance SLI. /Raphael Liberatore

## The Guts

| COMPONENT                 | PRICE  |         |
|---------------------------|--|---------|
| <b>Case</b>               | Thermaltake Kandalf aluminum full-tower case with window panel                                   | \$79    |
| <b>Operating System</b>   | Microsoft Windows XP Professional x64 Edition  | \$148   |
| <b>Power Supply</b>       | PC Power & Cooling 510-watt T315L power supply   | \$210   |
| <b>Processor</b>          | Intel Pentium 4 660 3.73GHz processor  | \$1,100 |
| <b>Motherboard</b>        | Asus P5N2-SLI PCI Express motherboard with 7.1 audio Gigabit LAN RAID/SATA AFD                   | \$248   |
| <b>Memory</b>             | Corsair 3x500 5400UL 670MHz 2 x 512 MB DDR memory (1 GB total, 2 x \$143)                        | \$280   |
| <b>Hard Drives</b>        | Two Hitachi 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm NCO SATA II HDD (2 x \$229)                                    | \$450   |
| <b>Graphics Processor</b> | Two BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express graphics cards with TV-out (2 x \$510) | \$1,020 |
| <b>Opto-ROM Drive</b>     | LG dual-layer DVD+RW/±RW   | \$130   |
| <b>Happy Drive</b>        | Sony 7.4MM floppy drive  | \$48    |
| <b>Monitor</b>            | 24" 2404 24-inch LED   | \$4,288 |
| <b>Keyboard</b>           | Sabek Garmen Keyboard  | \$60    |
| <b>Mouse</b>              | Logitech PowerPlay Trackball Optical Mouse   | \$50    |
| <b>Speakers</b>           | Creative 5.1 2.1 Speaker System  | \$330   |
| <b>TOTAL COST</b>         |  | \$6,044 |

If you want Intel, it has finally become an alternative for gamers looking for high-performance SLI.

## PC POWER & COOLING TURBO-COOL 510 EXPRESS (PSU)

With RAID, SLI, mod lighting, and a heavy assortment of fans, PCs today demand greater and more reliable power-supply solutions. PC Power & Cooling's Turbo-Cool 510 Express power supply saves the day. This is one of the first power supplies to officially receive Nvidia SLI certification. PC Power & Cooling built its PSU from the ground up with quality heavy-duty chips, inductors, and heat sinks, and its Turbo-Cool offers light, compact, and reliable +12VDC output at a continuous ambient temperature while maintaining output at full and peak loads, with a minimum of sag and surge issues, which can lead to a busted machine.

# TECH MEDICS

ExtremeTech.com's big brains answer your questions

**SINCE I RUN AN ATHLON 64 PROCESSOR,** naturally I have been tempted to make the switch to the new XP 64-bit OS. Problem is, I have Windows XP Home now, so making the switch won't be as easy or as affordable as I might like. My biggest question is: Will it enhance my games at all?

**Bleke Ogle**

The short answer is "not yet." Full 64-bit goodness requires four elements: a 64-bit application, a 64-bit OS, 64-bit drivers, and 64-bit hardware. If you run out tomorrow and get Windows XP Professional x64 Edition and installed 64-bit drivers, you'd have three of the four bases covered. But the all-important fourth base—64-bit games—isn't here yet. There will be some 64-bit games coming out this year, but 64-bit gaming won't go mainstream until 64-bit-capable CPUs are more widely available in lower-priced PCs. Most 32-bit games will run, though—but not games protected with StarForce copy protection used by some current Ubisoft titles).

StarForce uses a device driver for its content protection, and the company expects to have a 64-bit version ready this summer.

I am planning on building a new system within the next few months. I'm looking for the best video-card to use, but I'm having a hard time choosing the right card. I need to know what videocards are comparable performance-wise between AGP and PCI Express and their prices. For example, what PCI Express card would give me similar results to an ATI 9800 XT?

**Brett Smith**

Transitional periods are always difficult, because the GPU makers invariably don't make every GPU for both the old and new platform. For example, ATI's Radeon X700, a fine midrange GPU, is only available on PCI Express (PCIe). Nvidia's GeForce 6600 GT is available in both AGP and PCIe flavors. If you're making a platform investment at this point (new CPU, motherboard, memory), then go with PCIe. A full-duplex interconnect, PCIe can both send

and receive data much faster than AGP could ever hope to. A card based around Nvidia's GeForce 6800 GT on the PCIe side would be a very solid high-midrange solution. If you're on a tighter budget, a card based either on the Radeon X700 or the GeForce 6600 GT will get the job done.

Very few articles have been written concerning big-screen DLP HDTVs and computer gaming. I would like to know if any tests have been performed that compare the quality to traditional CRT displays.

**Bob Temple**

We test HDTVs on a pretty regular basis at ExtremeTech, and both the PS2 and the Xbox can run in progressive-scan mode and connect to an HDTV via component video output. Your PC can connect via a DVI or VGA output. One issue with DLP-based HDTVs (rear projection) is the vertical viewing angle. We've found that these HDTVs are really best viewed straight on and that color shifting can occur if your viewing position is off-axis. The other issue is that your PC games need to support widescreen resolutions to look their best on an HDTV. This resolution is usually 1280x720, which is known as 720p in the HDTV world, and while nonwidescreen games will play, the HDTV's video scaler may distort the game's image to make it fill your HDTV screen. Also, some games exhibit a tiny delay between when you press the controller and when you see a response, which can be a problem in fast twitch games.

I've seen some online reviews of the new Athlon 64 X2 and Pentium 940 dual-core CPUs, and they can be a lot faster than single-core CPUs. But will they make games any faster?

**Melinda Fedders**

It depends on the game. Game engines have historically been written as one big, single-threaded event loop, and as a result, they haven't benefited from dual-CPU setups. The dual-core CPUs simply place two CPU cores onto a single die, and an application has to be multithreaded for it to see real benefit from a dual-core CPU. However, most games are still written as single-threaded apps, and until game developers write new engines that are multithreaded, you won't see much benefit from a dual-core CPU on most games. Don't expect to see multithreaded games become common until late 2006.

Got questions? Send them to  
Tech\_Medics@extremetech.com

**Full 64-bit goodness requires four elements: a 64-bit application, a 64-bit OS, 64-bit drivers, and 64-bit hardware.**



MANUFACTURER: NVIDIA  
PRODUCT: GeForce  
6600 GT

PUBLISHER: NCsoft  
DEVELOPER: ArenaNet  
GENRE: MMORPG

## WOW KILLER?

Not quite, but Washington-based developer ArenaNet did record over 250,000 account registrations during "Beta Wars" last week. Yay!



# GUILD WARS

Tom and Bruce vs. John Kenneth Galbraith

**TOM:** JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH WAS AN economist known for taking complicated principles and delivering them as the sort of homespun aphorisms you might hear on *A Prairie Home Companion*. For instance, there's one about how if you give a horse enough oats, there will be some left over for the sparrows. Something like that. I think it's supposed to explain trickle-down economics. I'm no John Kenneth Galbraith. Here's another one: "Under capitalism, man exploits man. Under communism, it's just the opposite." He's the Winston Churchill of economics.

Today, John Kenneth Galbraith must die. **Bruce:** Tom thinks it's really funny to deliberately misread or mishear words. We're playing a mission in *Guild Wars* called *Vilany of Galbraith*. There's some backstory about stopping the vilany of someone named Galbraith, but I'm not about to read a bunch of *Guild Wars* fan fiction, and Tom isn't about to disabuse himself of the fantasy that we're going to kill John Kenneth Galbraith.

At least the John Kenneth Galbraith stuff is mildly funny. Another of Tom's favorites: He really likes it when I'm talking about my *Axe Mastery*, an attribute that determines whether I can use certain weapons. Tom loves to pretend I'm saying "Axe Mastery." Here's a typical exchange over *Teaspeake*:

**Tom:** Hey, Bruce, I just found a great axe that maybe you can use. What level is your mastery?  
**Bruce:** It's still 6, just like last time you asked.



▲ Note that we have to fight the undead critters without the added benefit of Tom's bone horrors.



▲ Once we start battling things that aren't already dead, the bone horrors join the fray. Take that, forest minotaur!

**Tom:** So you would say you're a level 6 axe master?  
Then there's the sound of muffled laughter. The whole thing will repeat in about 10 minutes.

**Tom:** The quest: *Vilany of Galbraith*. My companion: a sixth-level axe master.

**Bruce:** The quest takes us through several zones, which Tom and I scouted earlier.

**Tom:** By "scouted," Bruce means we got within sight of the end, a tower where John Kenneth Galbraith lives, and then died. Repeatedly. As we accumulated a "death penalty," whereby our health and mana were reduced after we'd been resurrected, it got harder and harder to progress. We eventually took our gloves and went home.

**Bruce:** Now that we know what we're up

against, we can tailor our characters accordingly. *Guild Wars* lets you swap out your skills when you're in town, choosing any eight for the duration of a quest. As a warrior/monk, I can choose to go heavy on the healing or load up on melee abilities. In the beginning of *Vilany of Galbraith*, we'll be fighting undead, which means taking skills that do holy damage. Everyone who took medieval physics class knows that holy spells do double damage to undead. After that, though, we face trolls, minotaurs, and human apocalypticists, which is where Tom's necromancy comes in.

**Tom:** Bone horrors are twisted, fleshy abominations that I can raise from a corpse and then keep alive by feeding them from my own health. Using this strategy, we have easily rolled through many parts of the world. Given Bruce's predilection for all things World War II, he calls it our

## TWO GAMERS ENTER, ONE GAMER WINS

ALIBIENS



**Tom**  
*Last month:*  
Tom's German regime is led to waste by a victorious Bruce in Gary Grigsby's *World at War*.



**Bruce**  
*Last month:*  
Bruce's Allied troops succeed in putting an end to Tom's Communist ways.

"bone horror parcer blitz."

But there's one problem: You can't make undead from undead. Ghouls and zombies are an exception. Otherwise, killing an undead dude doesn't leave anything raiseable. Skeleton rangers, fog nightmares, wraiths, necro horsemen, hellhounds, and so forth can't be recycled. It's a scientific fact—I learned it in medieval physics class. Until we got out of the swamps and start fighting the non-undead things around Kessex Peak, I have to rely on curses that drain health, slow attacks, and lower armor classes. I'll be a boring old support mage while Bruce looks all the glory of the actual fighting.

**Bruce:** I "rolled up" a warrior because I like to play melee characters in these types of games. Spellcasters are just a bit too fruity for me, and some of the meamer outfits are, uh, not really my style. Of course, that implies that a Village People construction worker look-alike—which is what my gray locks like—is my style.

**Tom:** I, on the other hand, am totally hot, being a scantly clad necromancer chick. I've opted for scar armor that gives me lots of extra spell-casting energy and leaves me mostly nude. I talked Bruce into giving me all his silver dye so I could make my scars all shiny and metallic. I was worried at first that I'd look like some sort of Goth Tron character, but I look totally hot.

**Bruce:** The dual-class system gives you a lot of options without a lot of duplication because of one factor: primary attributes. For example, as a warrior/m Monk, I have access to the warrior's primary attribute, Strength. That makes a lot of my warrior skills, you know, better. But I'll never have Divine Favor, which is the primary monk attribute, so no matter how many points I put into monk attributes, I'll never be as good at monk-ing as an actual monk. An even bigger, unrelated problem is that I think I want to be a ranger.

**Tom:** Rangers aren't all that. I'm half ranger, but I just use it for the pet, a cat I've been leveling since I got him. At one point, he was even at a higher level than me. He takes up two of the eight skill slots: one for Charm Animal, which is needed to bring him along, and the other for Comfort Animal, which is needed to resurrect and heal him when he's been standing in poison swamp water. But he's a great complement to my bone horror army. Because I've named him Hot Dog, after Dennis the Menace's cat, I keep accidentally calling him a dog. "The bastards killed my dog," I'll tell Bruce when my cat gets killed.

**Bruce:** I still wish I was a ranger, but not because I'd get a dog. Playing as a melee character makes it really hard to help people. One of the greatest things that *Guild Wars* does (besides outwitting [jumping] its introducing collision detection between individual units. This means you can actually use the medieval combat tactics you learned at the RenFaire to protect spellcasters with melee types. The problem is that the pathfinding isn't quite good enough to keep you (or your henchmen) from getting hung up on obstacles. As a warrior, this means I have to be very careful in deciding where to stand,



▲ If there's one thing better than a bone horror, it's five bone horrors.



▲ A girl and her bone horror—now that's something you don't see all the time...unless you're playing *Guild Wars*.

## I talked Bruce into giving me all his silver dye so I could make my scars all shiny and metallic.

because I have some melee skills that allow me to hit all "adjacent" targets. Getting to a good spot, though, often requires fighting the pathfinding system, which tends to put all the henchmen and Tom's stupid dog in my way. As a ranger, I could just stand back and cycle through targets while healing. Why can't I do that now? Well, I can, but because I'll never have the ranger attribute of Marksmanship, I'll never be very good with a bow.

**Tom:** Villainy of Galbath was one of those quests that I figured would squit in my quest log forever. It's not clear where you're supposed to go. But lucky for me, Bruce is axes when it comes to fantasy geography. Just ask him where any place is in *World of Warcraft*, and before he realizes he's outing himself as a hard-core MMO geek, he's explaining to you exactly how to get there.

**Bruce:** We start out in this town called Bergen Hot Springs. It wasn't easy to find, although it was the destination for a quest out of Lion's Arch, which is an outpost you'll find about halfway through the game. Once we uncovered this town, it became clear that it would be a good place to use as a base for finding Galbath. We had uncovered a lot of Northern Kyrle without ever finding the "Black Curtains" or "Wizard's Towers" described in the quest's text, so the area west of Bergen Hot Springs seemed

like a reasonable choice. We had already explored everything else.

**Tom:** I have very fond memories of this area, because this is where we did my favorite quest. We had to rescue someone's pig by herding it across the level back to its pen, basically the fantasy equivalent of rescuing a cat from a tree. It made me feel good about helping someone else without having to just kill stuff. Plus, the pig was really cute.

**Bruce:** I hope we never have to do another pig-herding quest. It was all about stupid A.I. pathfinding, which didn't stop Tom from saying things like, "Bruce, get out of the way, you're scaring the pig!" It took superhuman restraint not to unleash my Axe Mastery on that thing.

*Guild Wars* is automatically my favorite game over for one reason: no jumping. Of course, the downside to not having hyperactive kids jumping up and down every time your party stops moving is that you get blocked by things like tree stumps. Nevertheless, I like the twisty, maze-like environments that make exploring kind of like a treasure hunt. Except when you have to avoid poison swamp water.

**Tom:** It's easy enough for us to stay out of the poison swamp water. One thing that makes us distinctly human and that has continuously spoiled Turing tests is that we know better than to walk through poison. The A.I. henchmen aren't hip to

that, so their health bars are constantly turning green and ticking down. They're usually smart enough to get out in time, but it makes for unnerving trips through the Cursed Lands if you can't get a full party of humans who are irrevocably not walk through poison.

Only a few of our guild members are online now, but they're doing other things. So we recruit a pickup group, which involves standing around in Bergen Hot Springs and yelling "LFG for Villainy of Galbraith," all the while /twitting every monk we can find. Because monks are dedicated healers, they're always in demand. And they know it. Most of them ignore us. It's a sellers' market, like when trying to hit on the prettiest woman in a bar.

We eventually get a pickup group together and set out. They immediately split up, run off in different directions, and start drawing obscene doodles on the minimap. I think one of the doodles is supposed to be either the Eye of Sauron or a woman's privates. At any rate, Bruce and I agree that it's officially The Worst Pickup Group We've Ever Picked Up and we'd rather deal with dragging the AJ, through poisons, We head back to town and gather up some henchmen.

**Bruce:** It's a short walk through Nebo Terrace to the gateway into the Cursed Lands. The zone is silly with skeletons and zerkers or whatever those guys are called. I have an area-of-effect spell called Symbol of Wrath that, uh, I guess gets God so mad that he does extra damage to zombies. The only question I have is why God isn't mad at zombies all the time, instead of just when I hit the Symbol of Wrath button.

We zone through the portal (which on the map looks like a sweetfick) into the Cursed Lands, which seems to be exactly like Nebo Terrace, only I guess cursed. Same terrain, same monsters, same strategy.

**Tom:** Bruce is so obsessed with World War II that any swirling icon reminds him of the Third Reich.

**Bruce:** The Black Curtain! Once we step into this zone, I get the little green quest arrow, which tells us which direction to go. Since Tom and I have been here before, we know it's still a long way to the end of the zone, and a long trek through the next one before we can face off with Harvard faculty necromancers. Until then, there's this thing called swamp water.

**Tom:** If you didn't get the Harvard faculty reference, don't feel bad. I didn't get it either until I started reading up on our opponent John Kenneth Galbraith, whose villainy will and soon, taught at Harvard. We eventually get out of the Cursed Lands and emerge into the more pleas-



Having killed John Kenneth Galbraith, the victorious heroes pose in front of his ominous tower.

**They immediately split up, run off in different directions, and start drawing obscene doodles on the minimap.**

ant clime of Keesee Peak. We all died a few times, so we've got a bit of a death penalty, but at least I can fulfill my true calling and raise an army of bone horrors to rule the world. Or at least this small corner of it.

**Bruce:** At least we're out of that swamp. Rather than make a beeline for our destination, we go out of our way to beat up on forest minoturs. This works off some of the death penalty we accumulated in the swamps and lets Tom recruit a bunch of monsters to get in my way.

**Tom:** It's been a long slog, but we've made it to where we gave up last time through. I can see the tower where John Kenneth Galbraith lives. But this time our death penalty has been managed better. By the way, the cool thing about being a necromancer with an army of bone horrors is that it's in everyone's best interest to keep me alive. Because when I die, all the bone horrors turn hostile. So unless you want to add to your troubles with a pack of undead abominations, you'd better watch my back. Bruce knows this and generally keeps me well healed.

**Bruce:** This is going to be tricky. There are like 1 million level 20 dudes guarding this tower, and they're human, so they're probably a million times smarter than those minoturs. We manage to finish this sanka a bit. Unfortunately, they thin our ranks as well. On a few occasions, I'm the

only one left standing, which I guess is best since I can resurrect the whole party.

**Tom:** It looks like it's going to be just like last time: I'm at -60 percent health, which is where the death penalty maxes out. Two swipes from a hill giant and I'm dead, leaving Bruce and company to clean up whatever disgruntled undead I've left lying around. We're starting down that vicious spiral. What's more, my dog keeps getting killed.



Bruce resurrecting Tom, again.

**Bruce:** Just as we're despoiling that there are too many of them, Tom notices that we can sneak up the hill to the right and avoid most of the bad guys entirely. It's almost like a stealth mission. There are a few level 11 bandits in our way. Please. We run straight at the little green star marking the end of the quest and are rewarded by finding some guy who doesn't look anything like an economist. In fact, he looks like a floating gold knight. That goes with the floating castle he lives in, I guess. We kill him pretty easily.

**Tom:** What Bruce doesn't realize is that after you kill the gold knight, you have to use your imagination for the part where you kneel over his vanquished body and remove his helmet. You reveal a mortally wounded John Kenneth Galbraith, who says with his dying breath, "You may have defeated me, but you'll never get...John...Maynard...Keynes."

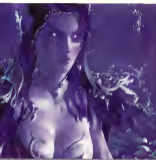
If you didn't get that one, don't feel bad. I had to look it up to wipe it /



Tom and his trusty dog—er, cat—dead again, immediately followed by Bruce resurrecting Tom—again. It's a good thing the death penalty caps at 60 percent.

Bruce and Tom each get 500 experience points. And a sense of satisfaction.





Let the fall games begin! Our big news this month (for the two people who still haven't played it, that is): a free 14-day trial of *World of Warcraft*, our 2004 Game of the Year. And if that's not enough, you can also check out the *Battlefield 2* demo to see what all the hoopla is about or the *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* demo, which we are offering again to complement this month's Warhammer manufacture.



### WORLD OF WARCRAFT TRIAL

Unless you have been living under a rock, you've already heard plenty about this amazing game. Good-bye, social Hi...hello, Azeroth!



### WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR DEMO

The winner! About expansion's coming, so brush up on DOW—and get the skinny on other Warhammer games on page 26!



### BATTLEFIELD 2 DEMO

Everybody's favorite team-based shooter gets all-new graphics and teamwork. Go online, then read our review on page 38!



### WARHAMMER 40,000: DAWN OF WAR MODS

Look and load with these mods, including some handy tools that let you create your own world of postapocalyptic high jinks.



### CREATIVE X-FI XTREME

Think you've heard your groans at their best? Think again. Check out some audio samples at X-Fi technology in action.

### WORLD OF WARCRAFT TRAILER

For those of you who actually have been living under a rock and are thus unsure what all the hype is about, watch this trailer to see what awaits you in *World of Warcraft*.

### ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN TRAILER

Spider-Man is back in Ultimate Marvel universe style—and this time, you can also take evil for a spin as the villainous Venom. This trailer will give you an eyeful of Spidey's all-new cel-shaded look.

### HITMAN: BLOOD MONEY TRAILER

Agent 47 returns in this fourth installment of the Hitman stealth-action series. This trailer shows just a few of the myriad ways to take out your targets.

### HELLGATE: LONDON TRAILER

Want to know what some of the Diablo guys have been up to? Then check out this visceral trailer set in a near-future, war-torn London.

### CALL OF DUTY 2 TRAILER

Adrenaline rush? Check. D-Day? Check. All hell about to break loose? Watch it and weep, then prepare to fight!

### COSMIC BUGS

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# CREATIVELY BANKRUPT

Panning for gold in a chemical toilet

THE NEXT TIME YOU'RE BRAGGING TO YOUR nongamer friends that games are as big a business as the movies, do yourself and the gaming population a favor and shove both fists in your mouth. Keep them there until you shut the hell up about the movies, and if that means you end up flossing slivers of thumb skin out of your molars for a week, well, at least you're getting some good protein in your diet. Hollywood and the Hollywood mode of thinking are absolutely the worst thing to happen to gaming since ever. Is it a coincidence that the worst PC game of all time is the *Jurassic Park* tie-in *Trespasser*?

Here's a bunch of announced games: *The Godfather*, *Jaws Unleashed*, *Scarface*, *Dirty Harry*, *The Warriors*, *The Matrix: Path of Neo*, *Starship Troopers*, and *Reservoir Dogs*. And *Taxi Driver*, or as I like to refer to it in family-publication-safe West Side Story-speak, *Taxi Motherfucking Driver*. These aren't all announced for the PC, but you can bet that many of the ones that aren't will be soon enough. And I shall weep hot tears of blood when they are. Because pretty much every single one of these has no business existing, a lot like the *Starsky & Hutch* game, and *Die Hard*, *Nakatomi Plaza*, and *Enter the Matrix*, and *The Matrix Online*. These are lazy, cynical, pointless, soulless exercises in avarice and are expelled from the same polluted womb as the *Scooby-Doo*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Brody Bunch*, *Charlie's Angels*, and (shudder) *Quintus* movies. Aside from that, yeah, I guess they're OK.

Incredibly, these games are doubly lazy—more than one of them is being pitched as featuring *Grand Theft Auto*-style gameplay. So that makes at least two wads of brainrot not being taxed with the effort to squeeze out something original. Hey, *Vivand*, while you're at it, why not recycle the graphics from *Tribes: Vengeance* for *Scarface* and spare yet another sliver of intellect the indignity of actual use? I saw *Scarface* at E3 this year, and how those guys are not going to have their pants suid off and then lit on fire by the *GTA: Vice City* crew is simply beyond me.

Granted, not all of this stuff is based on crap like *Starsky & Hutch*. *The Godfather* is a cinematic masterpiece—so the best this game can possibly hope for is not to totally take a hot whiz all over a beloved classic. When "Not Pissing on Genius" is the bar you're trying to clear, isn't it time to stop competing? I want a *Godfather* game about as much as I want a Vicks VapoRub enema, which, most days, is not all that much. Is the *Godfather* game going to be like the movie? No. You know what is like the movie? The movie. That's why they made it. Games like this will enhance your enjoyment of the beloved original about as effectively as that god-awful green *Shrek 2* cereal enhanced your enjoyment of *Shrek 2*.

I admit I'm being harsh, but this cash-in mentality is killing games, and not just by draining them in the digital clambroth of licensed trash: It's killing the originality and creativity that made this hobby and this industry so great. At this year's E3, more than one big-name, very successful



ILLUSTRATION BY JACK BILKETT



I want a *Godfather* game about as much as I want a Vicks VapoRub enema, which, most days, is not all that much.

developer bemoaned the state of an industry they once loved. Their complaint? They aren't allowed to take risks. Ballooning development budgets (another Hollywood "achievement") prevent them from creating anything new and exciting, lest risk-averse publishers drop them. Instead, they are tasked with developing and maintaining brands first, awesome games second. God forbid they dare tinker with formulas and surprise players with compelling new content—instead they must settle for incremental change, which is just two letters short of being excremental change. It's the same alleged thinking behind the redundant *Lethal Weapon*, *Die Hard*, and *Alien* series of movies. Some of these games may eventually not totally suck—I saw *The Godfather* at E3 and was mildly entertained. But I still have my doubts—when the guy giving the demo says, "We decided to really focus on gameplay," as if this is some "Eureka!" moment of creative genius, I start to worry, because that's right up there with saying, "I decided to really focus on not choking to death" when discussing eating lunch. Shouldn't that be pretty much a given?

But you know who else is creatively bankrupt? You are, but only if you reserve your gaming budget for *Scarface* because "that movie was so badass" and you pass over *Psychonauts* or *Freedom Force*. Do that and you're telling publishers, "I find new things terrifying and strange—please do not challenge me."

I want something new and exciting. What do you want?

/ Robert Coffey robert\_coffey@kirklin.com

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