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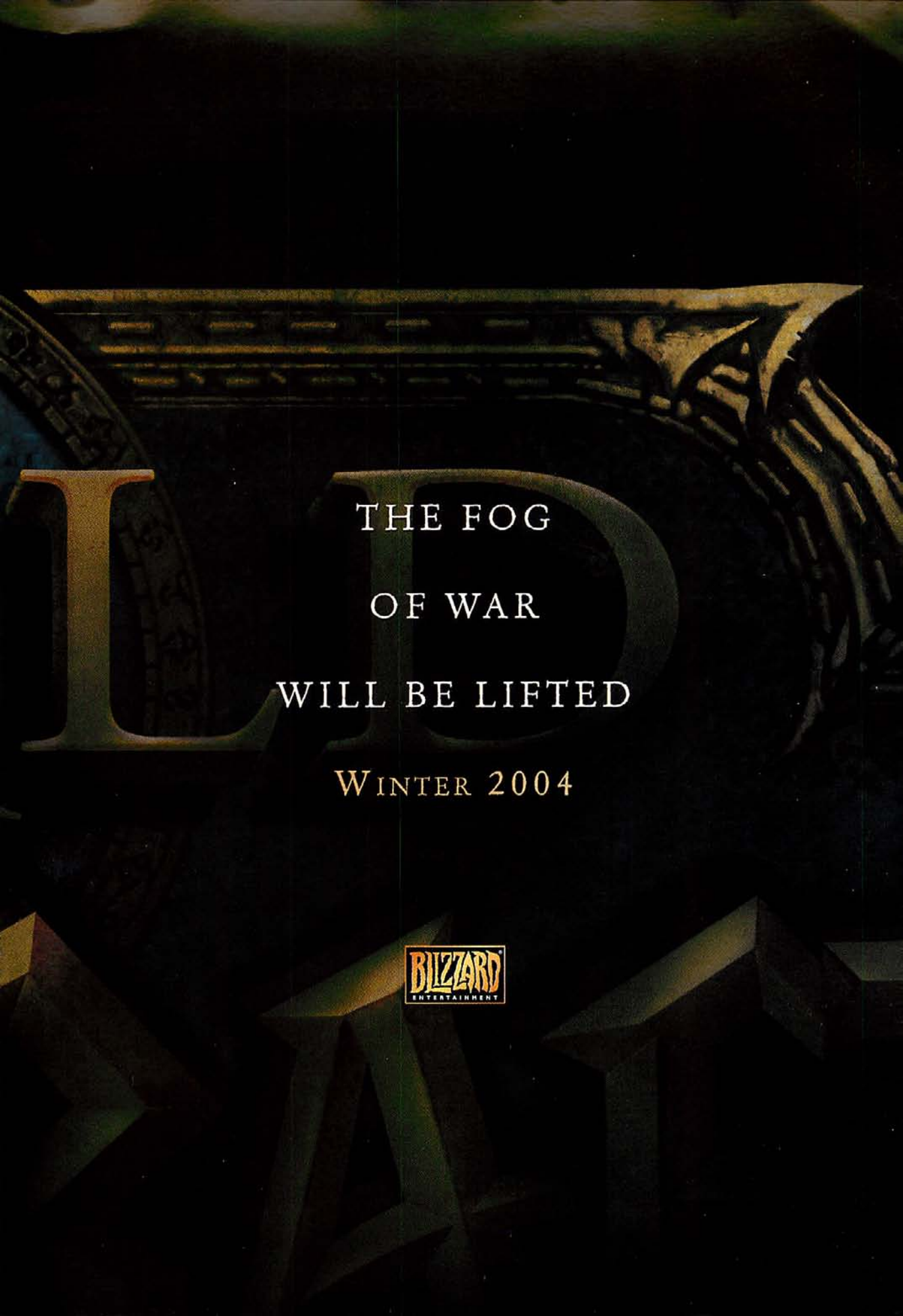
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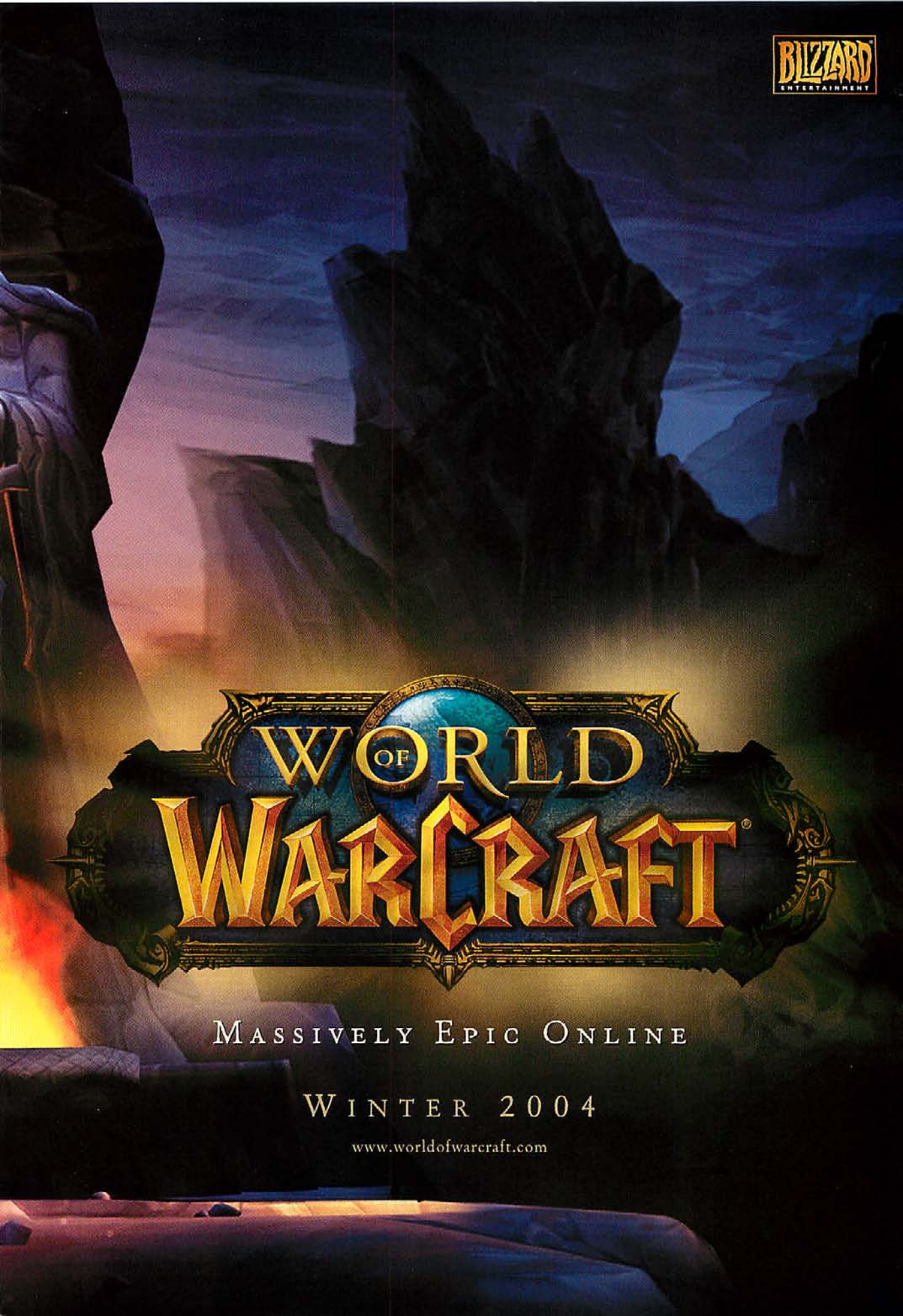
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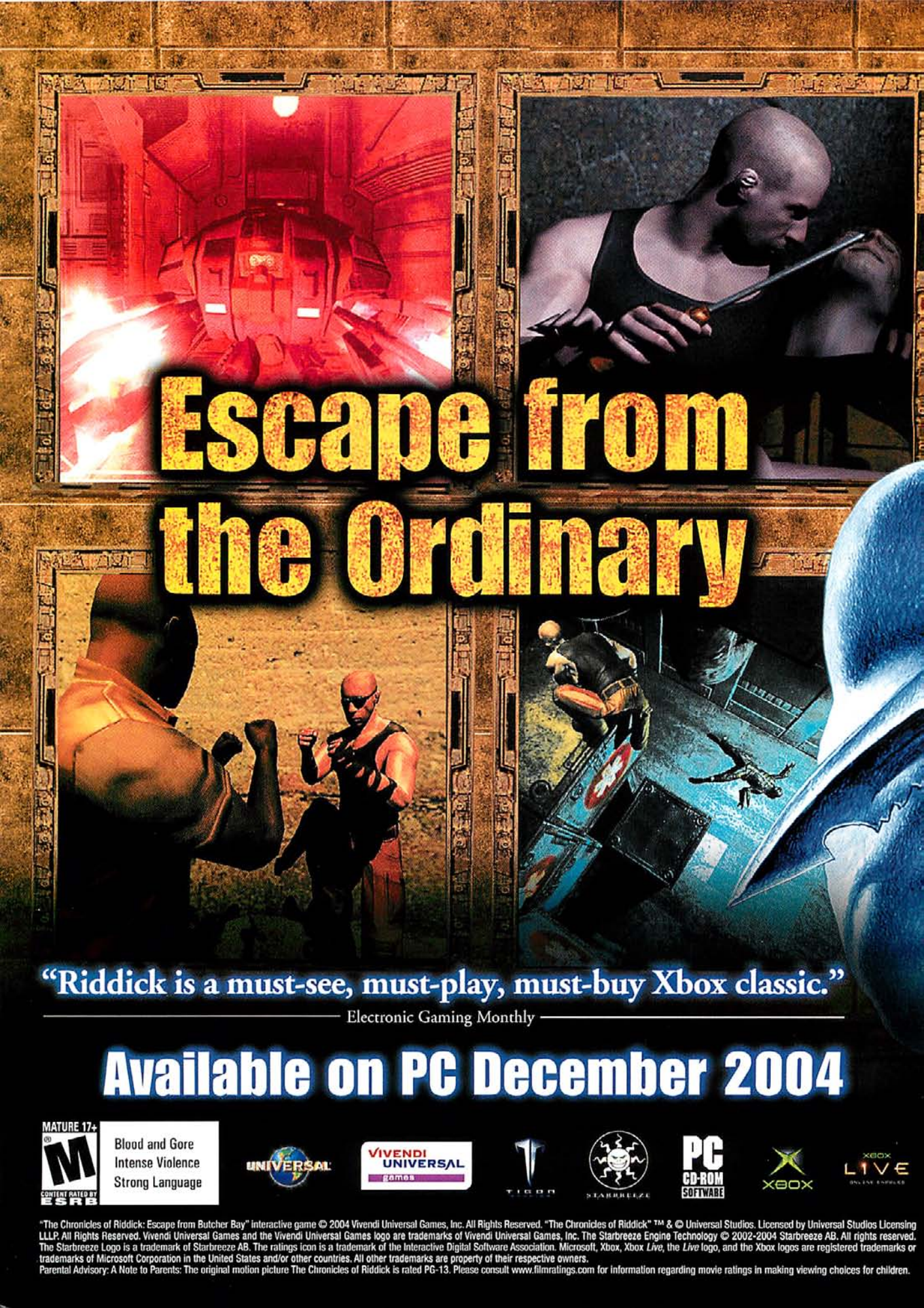

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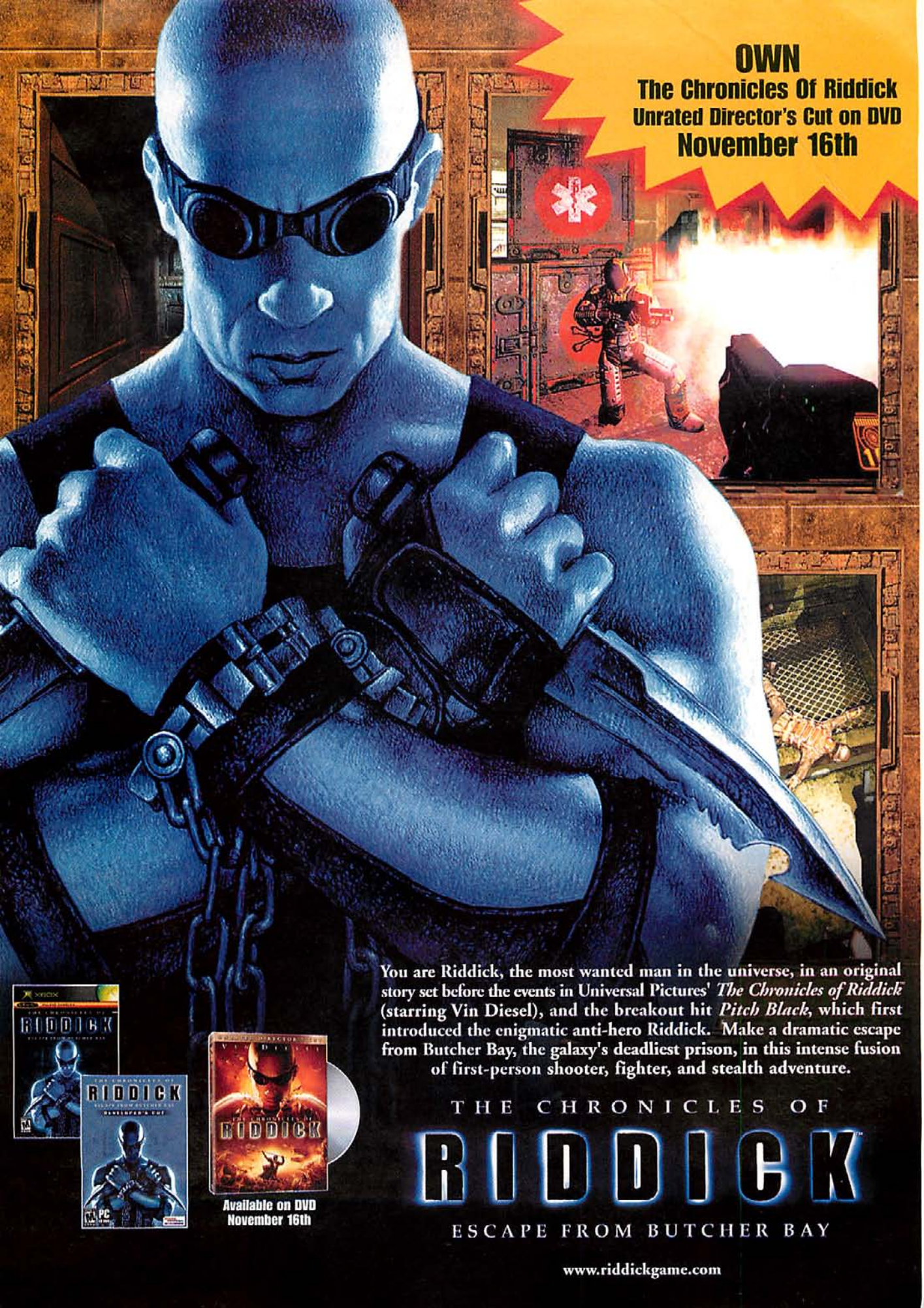
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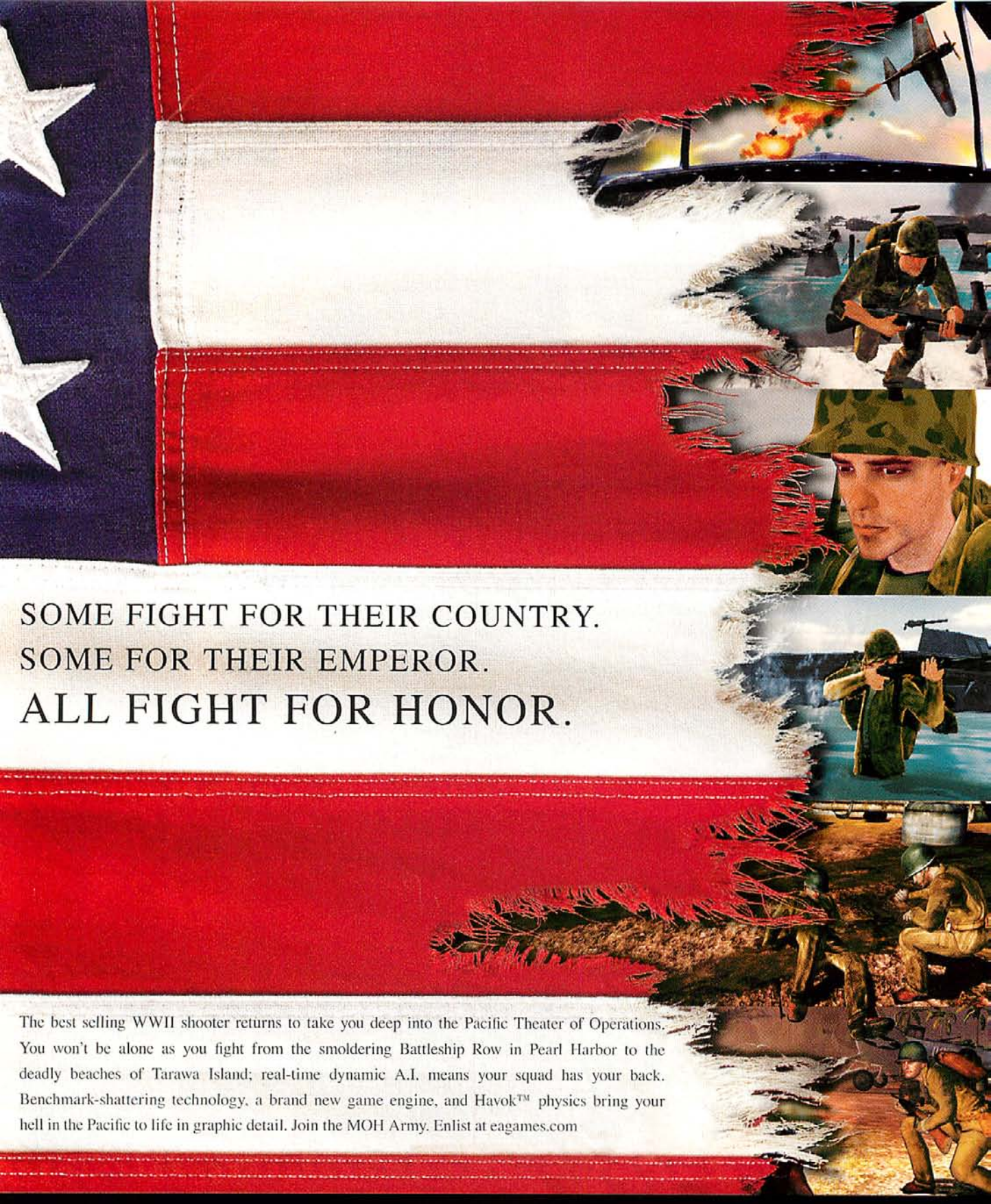

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26 Letters
Remember the good old days when all those angry Canadians wrote in saying they hated us? Now it's like the whole world hates us. We love YOU, though. Why are we so dysfunctional?

34 Radar
Radar may be smaller than usual this month, but it's huge in the news department. In these pages, we have the first info on *Age of Empires III*. After you've finished firing off your first rounds from a trebuchet, keep looking, because we interviewed Cary Elwes, the voice of the Bard from the upcoming *The Bard's Tale*. That, and we took a look at the *Half-Life 2* delay, Steam, and what this could mean to the future of how you'll be buying games.

46 Previews
This month, we insert tongue firmly in cheek with a look at InXile's upcoming remake of *The Bard's Tale*. We've also managed to dig up new information about Mythic's upcoming *Dark Age of Camelot* expansion, as well as its next MMO, *Imperator*.

COVER STORY

LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH

With the plethora of epic real-time strategy games that has recently come out, how does the newest *Lord of the Rings* entry hope to stand apart from the pack? Will style, slick graphics and presentation, and ease of use be enough for EALA to succeed? Read this month's lead feature and see for yourself.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY JEAN-PIERRE ROY

78 Reviews
The end-of-the-year heavy hitters are hitting the shelves. Heavily. We have the final word on the games you've been lusting for, including *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War, Scrapland, Tribes: Vengeance, Star Wars Battlefront, Full Spectrum Warrior, Rome: Total War*, a nd more. Plus, the shameful sadness that is *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*.

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DOOM 3: RESURRECTION OF EVIL

Hot on the heels of *Doom 3's* release, we have the inside scoop on the franchise's next step. Check out our exclusive hands-on first look at the upcoming expansion!

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105 Tech
CGW's new Tech commando, Raphael Liberatore, kicks in the door and kicks out the jams in a remarkable feat of coordination. Raphael's exhaustive Holiday Buyers' Guide lets you know exactly which PC, soundcard, videocard, mouse, keyboard, joystick, gamepad, case mods, and purebred puppy you should be begging your nearest and dearest for this holiday season.

117 Check Out
We practically put together your holiday shopping list for you—you looked like you needed some suggestions. Plus, we hook you up with a *Doom 3* Easter egg tip, our favorite downloadable ways to stop adware and spyware madness, and a very special walk down a slightly icky memory lane....

128 Tom vs. Bruce
If we knew what they were talking about, believe us, we'd tell ya.

132 Scorched Earth
A terrible mind has gone to waste.

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THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

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Amazingly, or perhaps not, *Doom 3* still tops the 1UP webpage charts. It's joined by two of the hottest sequels: The *Sims 2* and *Half-Life 2*. But definitely not on the popularity list is *Leisure Suit Larry*, which bottomed out by being banned from Australia. Other rankings, news stories, and much more can be found at the URL above.

CGWJEFF.1UP.COM

Ask anyone around here and they'll tell you that we love our Editor-in-Chief—he makes us look good. Jeff's incredible knack for procrastination gives us hope that no one will notice our negligible efforts. Prime example: Take a look at his online journal. Anything we write will look good in comparison, because he hasn't updated it since the magazine's debut in 1982.

BOARDS.1UP.COM

"Look! Up in the sky. It's a bird, it's a plane, it's a frog...a frog?" "Not bird, nor plane, nor even frog, it's just little ol' me, Underdog."

Our personal underdog Bruce Geryk has beaten the snot out of Tom Chick lately, but only on the message boards. Winning an overwhelming 5 out of 7 votes, Bruce has captured the fans' hearts. He's still a long way from capturing Tom's troops, though.

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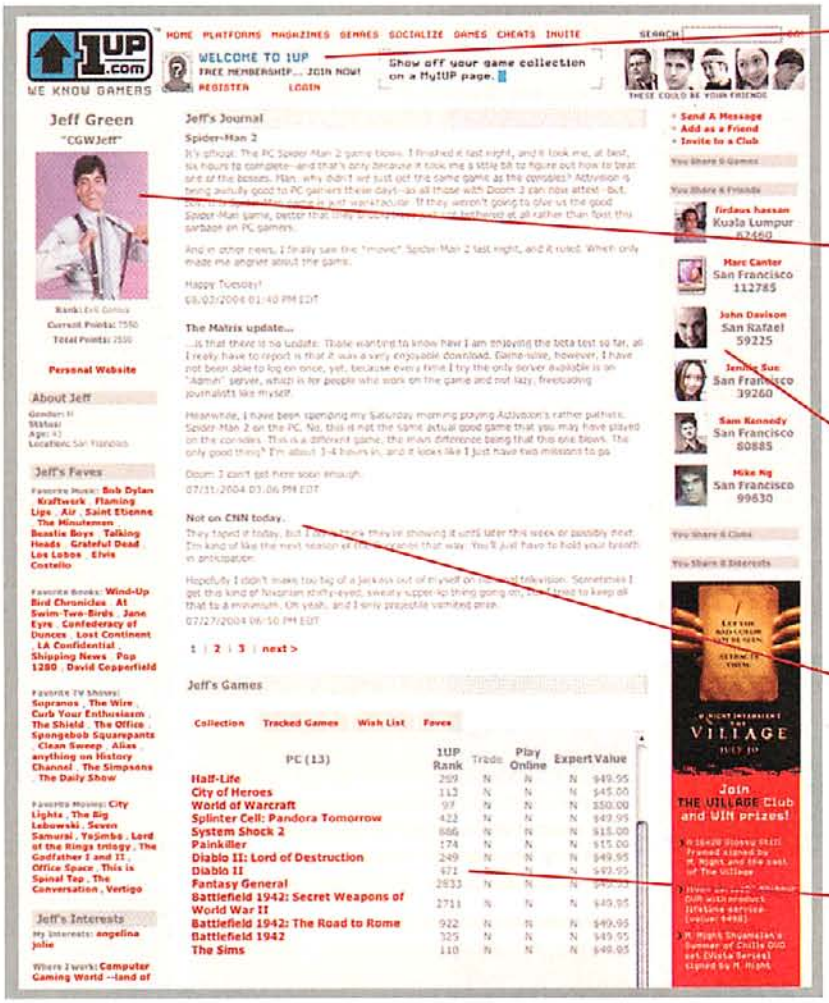

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The PC Gaming Authority

Taking game-playing seriously since 1982...

So I was talking to a game company executive the other day about the company's new real-time strategy game. I was reading the "exclusive review" of this game in another magazine, and I wondered aloud why it was that I had not been given a similar opportunity. We had shown interest in this game throughout its development—even put it on our cover one month—but had not been asked to do an early review. Why was that?

The answer I received goes to the core of why I love working here. It's the key to what has distinguished *Computer Gaming World* for the last 22 years, the reasons we have long been trusted over the rabble of pretenders and wannabes who keep coming around. The answer I received was this: The company was worried we wouldn't give their game a good review. They didn't want to grant an "exclusive review" if that review wasn't going to be a glowing one, and that was something they felt was much less of a guarantee at *CGW* than at the publication they chose instead. Why go with the magazine that might be hard on you when you can play it safe and go with someone...easier?

We've been doing this since 1982—longer than many in this business have been alive—and though we have of course had our share of ups and downs, the one thing that has always stayed constant is our commitment to getting things right, to telling the truth and refusing to pander to the game companies—or to you. Of course we're going to play the same game as other magazines and fight for those "exclusives"—that's the nature of this business. But we will never be "first" if being first means compromising our integrity or credibility. That's a contest I'll let the other guys win.

Speaking of integrity, I'd like to formally welcome, and introduce you to, Raphael Liberatore, our new "at-large" editor who is manning our Tech section from his lab in San Diego. Raphael's been writing for us for years, and has been writing about hardware and games for even longer. He is one of the most knowledgeable and authoritative tech writers I know, and he arrives with a bang this month with a big blowout holiday buying guide.

Enjoy the rest of the issue, too. It's a good one. And you can believe what you read, too. We're the PC gaming authority. Don't settle for anything less.

JEFF GREEN **EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

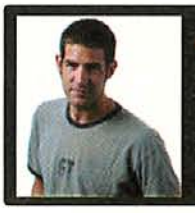
KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR
Kristen is coming up on her one-year anniversary as *CGW*'s managing editor. She's been in publishing for 12 years, most recently as the Ziff Davis Game Group's copy chief.

ROBERT COFFEY
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
Robert Coffey has been a *CGW* editor since 1999, first as an associate editor, and now as the executive editor in charge of reviews. He also writes the back page "Scorched Earth" column.

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR
Darren is the senior editor in charge of features and the Radar section. He is an industry veteran with eight years of magazine publishing experience—the last two here at *CGW*.

RYAN SCOTT
ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Ryan Scott is the associate editor in charge of previews. He's our newest editor, now coming up on one year at *CGW*. This month's cover story on *Battle for Middle Earth* is his first.

REBECCA GROSS
INTERN
Our brand-new intern Rebecca was immediately thrown into the fire, given the task of putting together this month's disc and doing everything else the rest of us were too busy to do.



MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR
With this issue, Michael Jennings takes over as *CGW*'s art director. Michael's been with *CGW* for just over two years as associate art director, and has worked as a professional designer for over 10 years.

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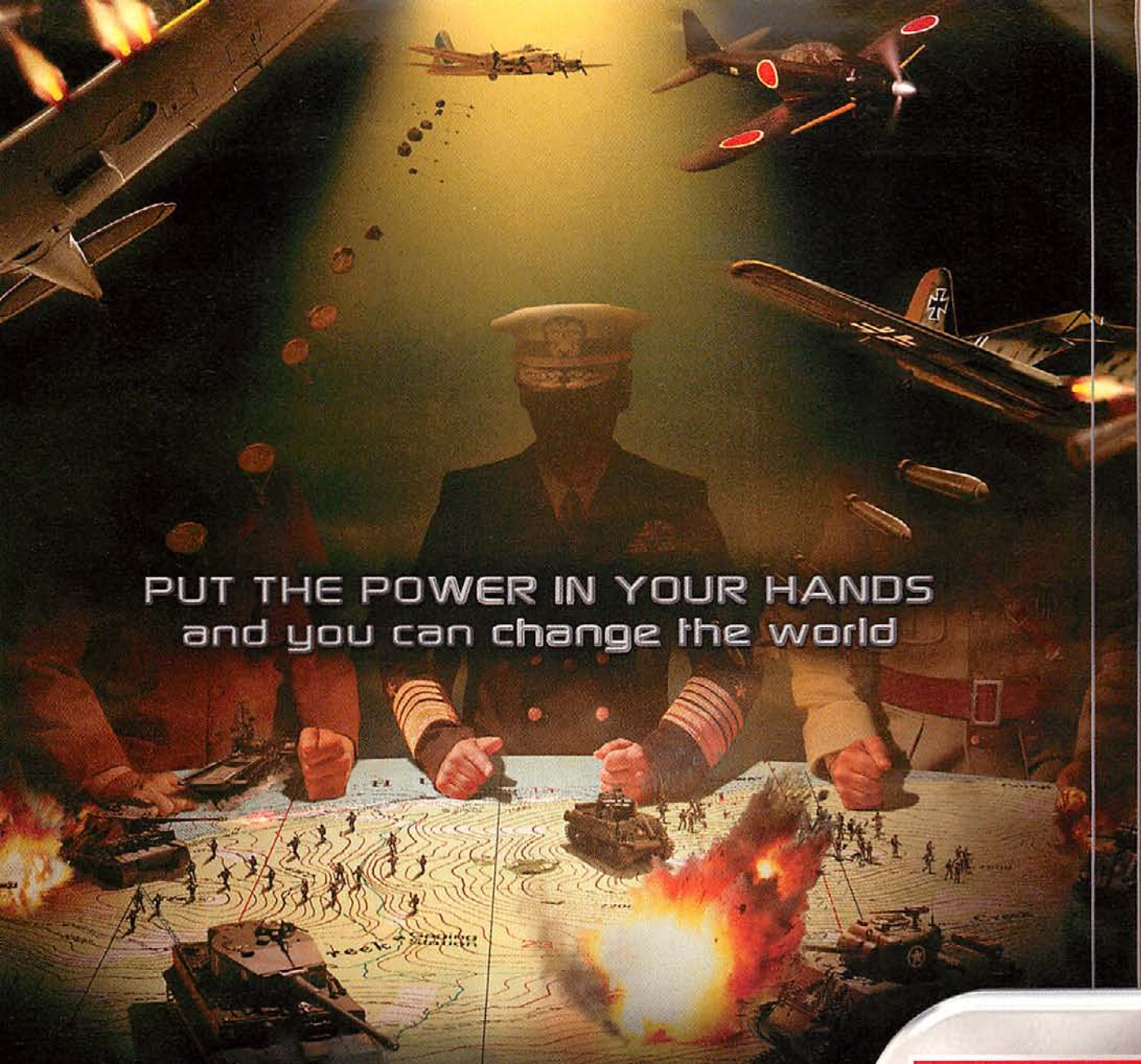

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Letters

20 years of lowering the standards of debate

ELECTRIC BOOGALOO

Even though I have friends who have used those electric muscle stimulators for purposes probably illegal in many countries, I have not tried the Lightning Reaction, which apparently is the latest buzz around the office. (Baboom, ching!) However, you say its novelty has worn off. I say put the thing to good use. Use it as an incentive to Tom and Bruce for their monthly ordeal. Whoever loses must endure the pain of the "Potential Voluntary 15 Seconds of Self-Electrocution." Articles turned in late? Well, that's easily remedied with a little voltage. With a little modification, you could sit back and watch the fun as people walk around afraid to touch anything for fear it might be connected to a battery. Sure, it's cruel. Sure, it's sadistic. But if you guys have to endure reviewing some of the junk that comes in (e.g., *Catwoman*, *Spider-Man 2*), you can probably plead insanity. If nothing else, the experiment would give you a future article...who knows, you may end up with a Nobel Prize for psychology.

Enjoy!

Jason Davis

This is a fine suggestion, Jason, but unfortunately, Robert has taken the Lightning Reaction home to settle disagreements between his two trolls, er, children. According to him, Saturday morning arguments about whether to watch *Teen Titans* or *That's So Raven* have been blessedly replaced by silent, compulsive rocking and cold sweats.

CASTING COUCH

I liked your idea of casting for a *KOTOR* movie. I suppose most fans of that brilliant game had their own whimsical notions of who would star in a movie version, and I am no different. So here are my own revisions and additions. Not that yours was *bad* or anything....

Ben Browder (of *Farscape* fame) as Carth Onasi: Justin (who?) Theroux is out.

Rhona Mitra (from ABC's *The Practice*) as Bastila Shan: This English beauty not only looks like Bastila, but *she also sounds exactly like her*. And she's really hot.

Jennifer Garner would be my second choice. She's hot, too.

Ron Perlman as Canderous Ordo: Forget Ron Perlman playing a Wookiee, masking his distinctive face and voice with fur and growls. Ron and Canderous are practically clones if you take a second look. And Kurt Russell would always want top billing.

Joe Morton as Jolee Bindo: The gifted actor played Miles Dyson in *Terminator 2*.

Peter Mayhew as Zaalbar: A Wookiee veteran—get him off the sci-fi convention floor selling signed photos of himself and back into his walking-carpet costume.

William Daniels as HK-47: Steve Buscemi was not a bad choice, but as the voice of K.I.T.T. from *Knight Rider*, this guy has a really good résumé.

Hilary Duff as Mission Vao: I couldn't think of anybody, so why not this pop princess? Besides, the way her lame movie track ◘

All Together Now

What's wrong with game developers nowadays? Why has co-op become the feature devs love to avoid? Do a search for "co-op mod" on the Net, and you'll find some 111,000 (yes, that comma is in the right place) hits. How on hell, Mars, or Earth could Todd Hollenshead claim that PC gamers aren't interested in it like console gamers are? Take a look: *Far Cry* and *AVP2* have co-op mods. *UT2004* has a top-down co-op mod and great bots in every shipping mode. *Serious Sam*: Co-op was the only multiplayer mode ever played! *Hidden & Dangerous* and its add-on were EXCELLENT played in co-op. *H&D2*: stupid *BF42*-wannabe multiplayer, no co-op! *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* announced that it would have it, then that it wouldn't. *Painkiller* should've had it. *Far Cry* was "crying" for it, with its open-ended approaches, but the mods all have serious troubles. *NOLF2*'s co-op maps were great but too few, and the expansion *Contract J.A.C.K.* did away with it once again. Developers always seem to give the same tired answers: "PC gamers don't want it, the A.I. can't handle it, the scripting would need to be fixed too much (so get rid of it, then!), blah blah blah—can we talk about our AWESOME shaders or COOL environments now?" The very notion that co-op is too hard to do now when it was commonplace before, after years of advances in programming and PC hardware, is ludicrous. Add it in a patch if you don't want to hold up the release to test it. Make it a beta patch and don't support it even, but GIVE US CO-OP IN FPS GAMES, "TACTICAL" OR OTHERWISE.

Robert Z.

Socially maladroit freaks that we are, we must confess that more co-op gaming can only be a good thing, gently drawing us out of our protective shells to interact with others in a new, peaceful way. Seriously, we tore through *Serious Sam* repeatedly in co-op and had a blast. We'd love to share the painstakingly crafted experiences of the best shooters cooperatively, but until then, at least we've got 5 million MMOs to choose from and team-based shooters like *Battlefield 1942*.

ILLUSTRATION BY SUPER CORN

Mail Bites

CGW, please keep Coffey far, faaar away from any more character-creation systems! Some of his Sims were crazy ugly.

—Venom3bytes on 1UP.com

I live in Florida and am writing this at my house, because I live in Tampa and had a hurricane track line over my house four times but didn't get hit at all. Which means I must be awesome. Or at least superlucky.

—Matt Lubner

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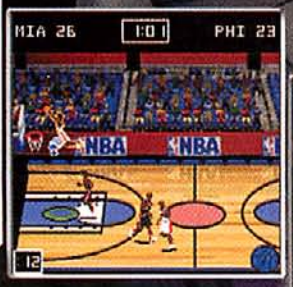

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record looks, she could use a hit.

Ray Park as Darth Malak: The guy played the *very* memorable Darth Maul, so he has experience at both Darthing and being in a makeup chair for most of the day. Even though he's bald, Vin Diesel wouldn't work because he likes playing the hero (in most cases, *antihero*).

Jennifer Garner as Juhani Brave: Jennifer Garner in cat makeup and leather, wrestling with her inner demons, *examining* her dark side...mmmm. Oh, sorry, got carried away. And just stick Ben Browder in as Revan for a final touch as the protagonist. The guy can act and is a good romantic lead. And no, *I don't have a thing for Ben Browder! Really!*

Dan Tindell

Any big doofus in a monkey suit can play a Wookiee! (I'm thinking NBA here.) Perlman is a natural for the role as Canderous, sorry Kurt. I also have another suggestion for Carth Onasi. Now bear with me here: Matt LeBlanc. Think Major West from the *Lost in Space* movie, and you'll see what I'm going for here. Have your people call my people. We'll do lunch. Who loves ya, baby!

Crevel on 1UP.com

Listen, when I played the game, my character got Carth to fall in love with her. If I'm gonna do that, I don't want it to be Matt LeBlanc! Could we try Ben Affleck if it's gotta be a young guy? Wait a minute, here! Carth has a grown son—he can't be that young. All right, then, let's pick a well-seasoned, still-sexy guy with a lot of experience around the galaxy: HARRISON FORD. Yeah!

I do agree that Ron Perlman would be a very good Canderous.

Granniegamer on 1UP.com

Whatever, as long as Kate Beckinsale is Bastila, Evan Rachael Wood is Juhani, and Michelle Trachtenberg is Mission Vao, I'm happy.... Oh yeah, and Gary Oldman as Darth Bandon.

Jsoftcheck on 1UP.com

OK, let's see you geniuses cast *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*. Or the *CGW* edit staff. Just make sure you've got a part for this gal.

EYE HART EWE

Deer Jef,
Your the best. Your inspires to all us raeders out their. Keep up the work is god. I dream One day aisle meat you.

Joey

Words fail us. And Joey as well, it would seem.

FLY GUY

Several issues back, you said playing *Microsoft's Century of Flight* on a 52-inch screen was awesome. Well, I purchased my copy (in the pretty metal box at Costco for $24.99), and you're right, it is, although I'm using a 19-inch Viewsonic monitor. I found out through the Flight Sims bulletin boards about these great add-ons. Although they're a little pricey (I spent $100 for "some" of the add-ons), they make some of the airports, such as LAX, really cool to see during the day, with working A.I. as you go into the gate area to pick up/drop off passengers. And seeing it all lit up at night! Makes you want to just taxi around the airport in a Cessna! You might want to check them out and do an article about them sometime.

Jon Martinez

It sure is cool, Jon. You know what else is cool? Dating. We're just saying.

LOVE IS ALL AROUND

I just wanted to tip my hat in appreciation to the guys in the *CGW* office. Over the course of your last several issues, more and more content concerning the gaming community in general (developer features, game-related news, companies' status, sites like mmodating.com) has emerged. It's always great to see the behind-the-scenes details to make you feel like you're a part of something more and not just sitting in your room late at night with a ridiculous passion very few others understand.

I know it's not necessary for a magazine whose primary responsibility is to review games for us to buy and repeat that process over and over to add quips of actual info, but I thank you for what you've done to draw your readers closer, ensuring your grip on their lives.

Matt Entrekin

Mail Bites

I love Gregorian chants. I have both the regular and Christmas albums.

—Kuredan on 1UP

The only reason I got into computer gaming in the first place, really got into it, was your magazine.

—Wil the StarSkipper

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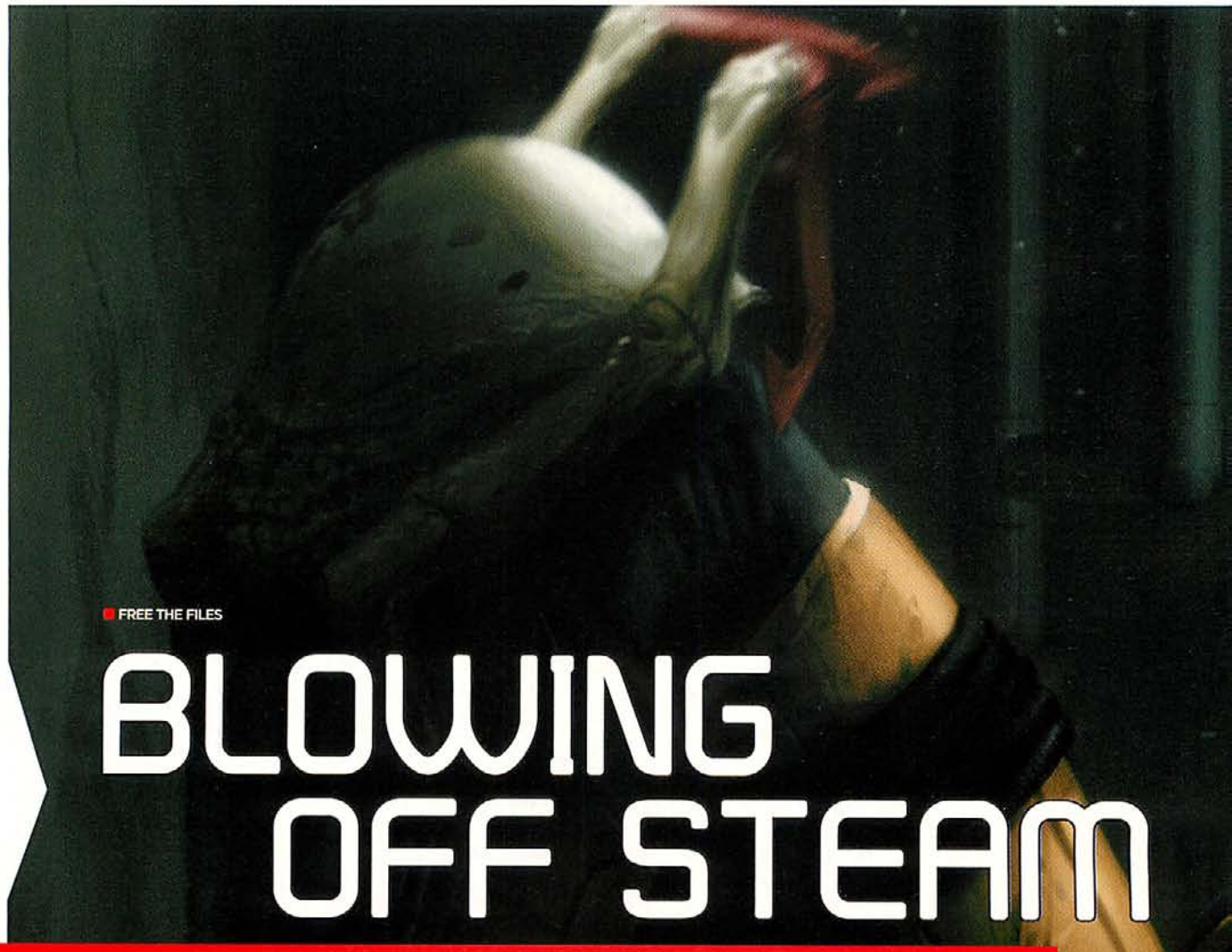

FREE THE FILES

BLOWING OFF STEAM

THE CUSTODY BATTLE OVER GORDON FREEMAN AND THE FUTURE OF GAME SALES

As we go to press, *Half-Life 2* is ready to ship. It has been for months now. But you haven't seen it on store shelves because of an ongoing dispute between developer Valve and publisher Vivendi Universal Games. How did it get to be this bad?

On August 14, 2002, attorneys from Preston Gates & Ellis filed a complaint against VUG (then Sierra Entertainment) alleging unauthorized distribution of Valve products in cyber cafés. That was just the beginning. "Almost a year and a half into the lawsuit," says Doug Lombardi, director of marketing at Valve, "Vivendi responded by making a number of claims in an attempt to invalidate our agreement and be awarded the ownership of the *Half-Life* intellectual property."

Bickering over money is one thing, pulling out a six-shooter and demanding Valve hand over the *Half-Life* brand is another. VUG refused to comment on pending litigation, and Howard Rice, the firm handling its case, did not return our requests for comment. Lombardi sidestepped speculation by saying he "cannot speak to [VUG's] motivations."

IRRECONCILABLE DIFFERENCES

Case documents reveal VUG's areas of concern, which stem from contract renegotiations in 2001. Steam, Valve's online distribution service, was part of negotiations, but VUG claims Valve "misrepresented" its importance. VUG alleges that Valve managing director Gabe Newell downplayed Steam, stating, "Valve did not plan to engage in anything other than de minimis [small] distribution [of] games online." Valve does not feel Steam was "misrepresented." Conspiracy-laden plots may be part of Valve's games, but they do not make for good business practices.

Instead, blame may fall squarely on ignorance. "Vivendi has to have known about Steam," suggests an industry analyst at a respected financial institution who requested anonymity. "They sort of shrugged off Steam." Apparently, that is no longer the company line. "They really believe they're going to lose a lot of

ILLUSTRATION BY JEAN-PIERRE ROY

Ageless
Our insidious spy network snagged the first info about *Age of Empires III*.

Contest!
Want to win some of the swag that comes into our office?

A bard's tale
Cary Elwes, actor and voice of *The Bard's Tale*, talks to *CGW* about wearing tights.

"Digital distribution is part of gaming's future."

Here we see Gordon and friends dealing with the worst case of crabs known to man

sales," continues our analyst. Someone must be seeing the writing on the wall.

An ace still exists up VUG's sleeve. Part of VUG's contract states it has six months after submission of a final release candidate to ship a game. As the holiday shopping season rapidly approaches, the companies have been playing chicken. Financially, Valve has the upper hand. VUG is the only division of Vivendi Universal losing money, reporting a record loss of $136 million in June. "It's no secret that Vivendi's bleeding cash; it's no secret that morale is low there," says our analyst.

In the event that VUG turns up the heat and sits on *Half-Life 2*, Valve is prepared. "We're hoping it doesn't come to that, but we are considering all of our options in case it does," says Lombardi. Valve aims to meet the obligations of its current agreement. Just don't bet on Valve and VUG working together again anytime soon. Outside of settling a score, the case will likely create industry standards on how Internet distribution plays in to the developer-publisher relationship. "With the rapidly expanding use of the Internet," says Dick Lester, a lawyer of over 25 years and currently VP general counsel at Riddell, "it will be necessary for courts to develop a new set of precedents to define this unique means of distribution."

Stephen "Blue" Heaslip of popular news site Blue's News also senses the industry paying close attention. "I think there are a good number of people watching with great interest to see how the great Steam experiment progresses," he says, while cautiously noting he does not know "if [online distribution] can ever supplant retail sales anytime soon."

"Digital distribution is part of gaming's future," stresses our analyst, "and it's going to have to be lead by someone like Valve. If they're successful with it, you'll see other studios like Valve try and do something similar."

Heaslip agrees. "Valve is taking some lumps as the early adopter here." But if *Half-Life 2* distribution over Steam is a hit, more online game distribution will follow. Us? We just want to blow up some headcrabs already. **Patrick Klepek**

BREAKING NEWS

Age of Empires 3 Coming

Man the trebuchet, *Age of Empires* is back!

As we went to press, our spies told us that Ensemble Studios is hard at work on *Age of Empires III*, the next game in the award-winning, best-selling real-time strategy franchise—with a release planned for the end of 2005.

Ensemble could not comment on any specifics, but one insider offered us these thoughts:

"We have been experimenting with some revolutionary features based on comments, especially in game reviews, that the RTS genre is tired and needs to be revitalized. I think we have innovated with all of our games, but [with *Age of Empires III*] we have tried some big leaps. In our testing, however, some of our people push back on the innovation in favor of more traditional RTS gameplay." There is some speculation that Ensemble might eschew a traditional story line in favor of a world map to conquer (as was done in *Rise of Nations*).

"It is natural for gamers to want innovation," our source continues, "but we also see *Age of Mythology* holding strong in the top 10 list of best-selling PC games almost two years after its release. Although we hear that other genres are more popular than RTS, it doesn't look to us like many individual games are as successful as the best RTS games."

We're planning to get a hands-on look at *Age III* sometime after the game is officially announced. But it's safe to say that Ensemble plans on remaining faithful to the franchise while still trying to drive the genre forward. **Jeff Green**

WALK THIS WAY

On the Carpet

The videogame stars shine for awards

The stars of the videogame world got a little extra life recently at the first annual Walk of Game ceremony in San Francisco. The gaming press and other industry members nominated only a select few dozen game series to represent the past two decades. Chosen by public opinion, only four will be immortalized in the San Francisco Metreon's (www.metreon.com) walkway, so of course the nominees on hand tried their best to impress.

Tomb Raider babe Lara Croft was first on the scene. Then again, she's got nothing better to do these days. Looking scandalous in her skintight suit and gun garter, she strutted down the carpet and then came back out to make sure people got pictures of her.

Max Payne never does anything subtle. Who else would dive down the length of the red carpet and fire off a couple dozen rounds from his twin magnums? The world slowed to a crawl as observers tried to figure out what the hell's wrong with him.

Following a stunt like that, fellow nominees Sid Meier and Will Wright felt a little out of place. Still, they put on a brave front.

Tomb Raider babe Lara Croft was first on the scene. Then again, she's got nothing better to do these days.

After all, it's not every day you get nominated for lifetime achievement awards, right?

But those weren't the only stars out. *Vice City*'s Tommy Vercetti showed up, as well as representatives from *Myst*, the entire *Star Wars* franchise, and a few blocky *Tetris* puzzle pieces.

In fact, everything was going smoothly until a hell knight was freaked out by a barrage of paparazzi flashbulbs and started chomping on select chunky members of the gaming press. Luckily, a generic space marine took care of the problem before it got too out of hand.

Of course, *Half-Life*'s Gordon Freeman appeared fashionably late as usual; he strutted in, flossing a diamond-encrusted Lambda necklace. Hey, better late than never. So, with such prestigious games competing, the question on everyone's mind is, who won? Check www.walkofgame.com for the results. **Rebecca Gross**

1UP.com **NEWS FEED** >> What's the half-life of a vampire? We've heard that *Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines* has been ready but is contractually bound to come out after *Half-Life 2*. Expect it out the next day. >>

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THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

News and views from the Wild West

The Good

Real-time strategy roars back!

It wasn't that long ago that we were bemoaning the dearth of decent real-time strategy games. Now, suddenly, it's an embarrassment of riches, with three great games released all at once: *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*, *Rome: Total War*, and *Kohan II: Kings of War* (hmmm, that's a lot of war). And now that word of *Age of Empires III* has leaked out, we can say this genre is officially undead. Yay!

The Bad

Exclusive reviews

Yeah, we know—we do them, too. But it's a lame trend in this business that we'll be happy to see go away, the sooner the better. In an effort to be timely and to score "scoops," magazines and websites are jumping all over games before they really should, rendering opinions that would be better formed with a little more time. We're not calling anyone out here—we're navel gazing. Do you agree?

The Ugly

More code leaks

Another month, another new game gets leaked out over the Internet before its official ship date. This time, it was a console game—*Halo 2*—but that's no reason for us to be complacent or smirky about it. This is bad news, folks, and it's not funny at all. There are hundreds of people working on these games for years on end—don't bring the industry down by stealing. Please.

THE DEATH OF SUPERMAN

In a tribute to the recent death of Christopher Reeve, several *City of Heroes* players held a moment of silence. Want to do your part to honor a fallen hero? Donate to the National Spinal Cord Injury Association (www.spinalcord.org).

IMAGE COURTESY OF WARCRY NETWORK (HTTP://COH.WARCRY.COM).

WIN IT

Contest Time

Win a *City of Heroes* cape from the mighty *CGW*!

Toys, swag, tchotchkes, whatever you call it, we get random stuff sent to us all the time. Swords, axes, fake guns, jars of slime—all in the name of marketing to promote the newest games coming out. Well, it's about time we shared the wealth. Every once in a while we're going to hook up you, our loyal readers, with the good stuff. But, of course, we've got to make you work for it.

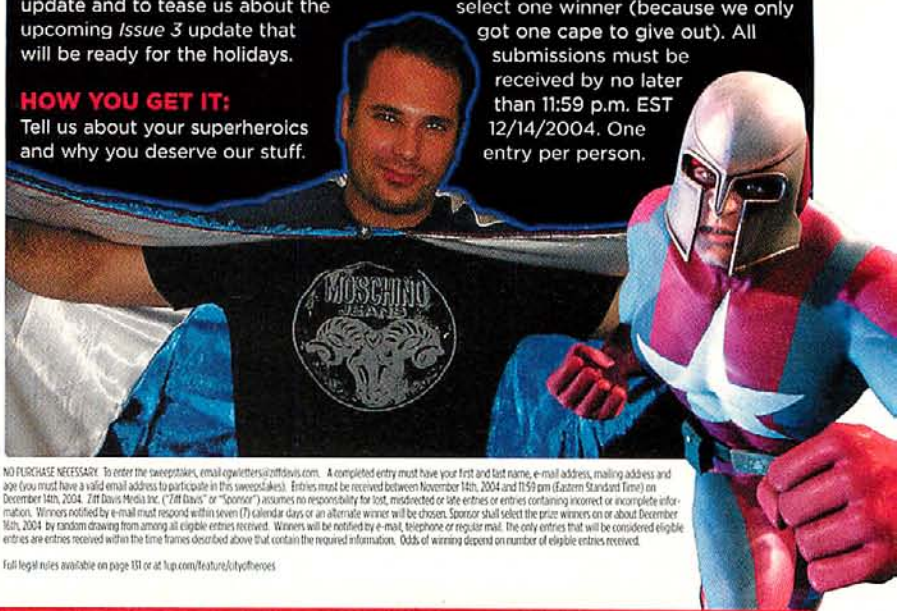
WHY IT WAS SENT OUT:

Besides a chance to humiliate Darren in print? To promote the inclusion of capes in *City of Heroes* with the *Issue 2* update and to tease us about the upcoming *Issue 3* update that will be ready for the holidays.

HOW YOU GET IT:

Tell us about your superheroics and why you deserve our stuff.

Be as creative as you wanna be and send an e-mail to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject line: CITY OF HEROES CAPE. We will randomly select one winner (because we only got one cape to give out). All submissions must be received by no later than 11:59 p.m. EST 12/14/2004. One entry per person.



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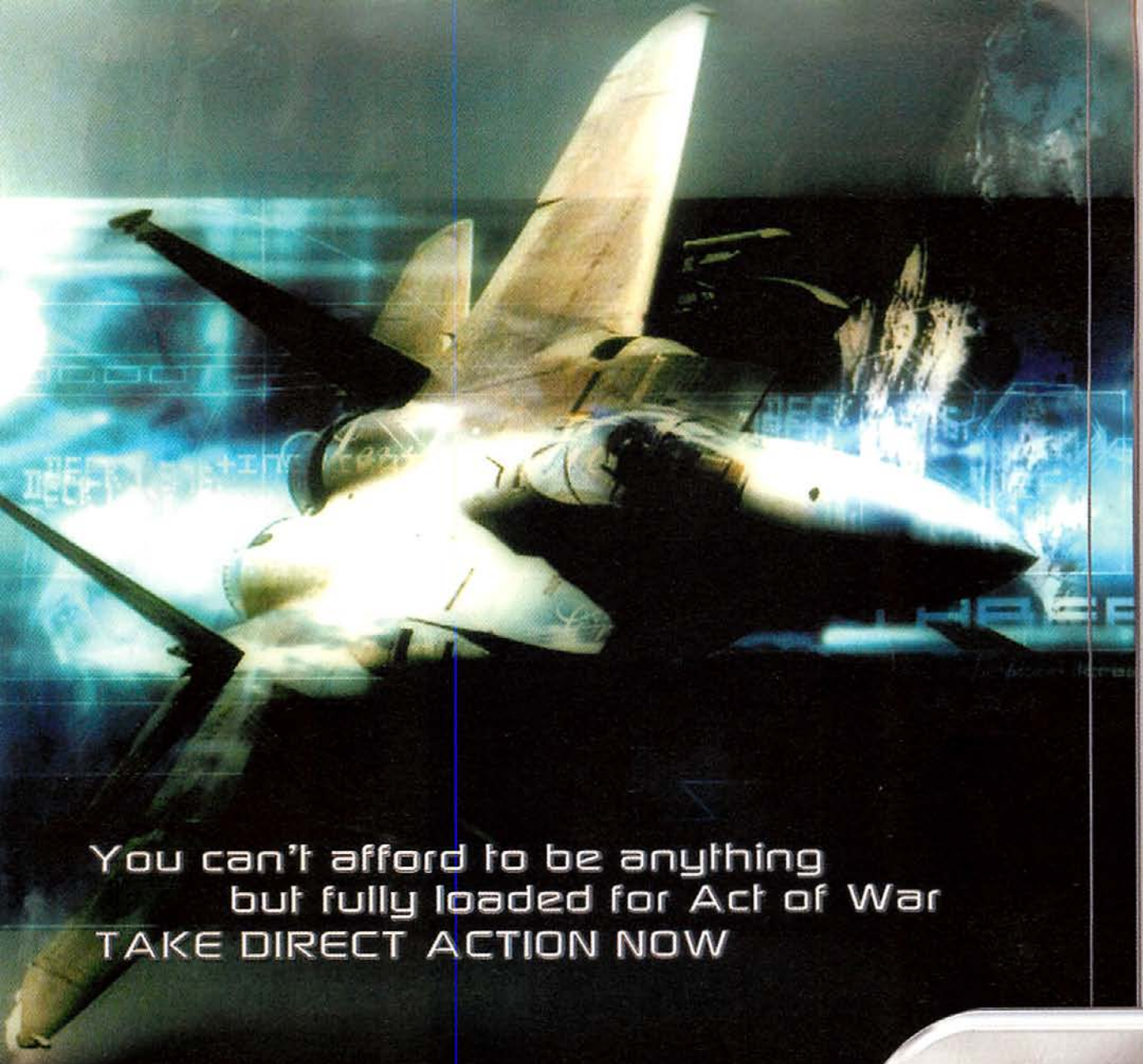
Full legal rules available on page 151 or at 1up.com/feature/cityofheroes

NEWS FEED >> Despite a lockout, there is a hockey season. G4techTV is airing a full season of hockey videogames (1,230 games). >> Mad skillz redux. Remember the new skill system for *City of Heroes' Issue 3* update? It's been delayed. Wait for the fourth exciting issue! >>



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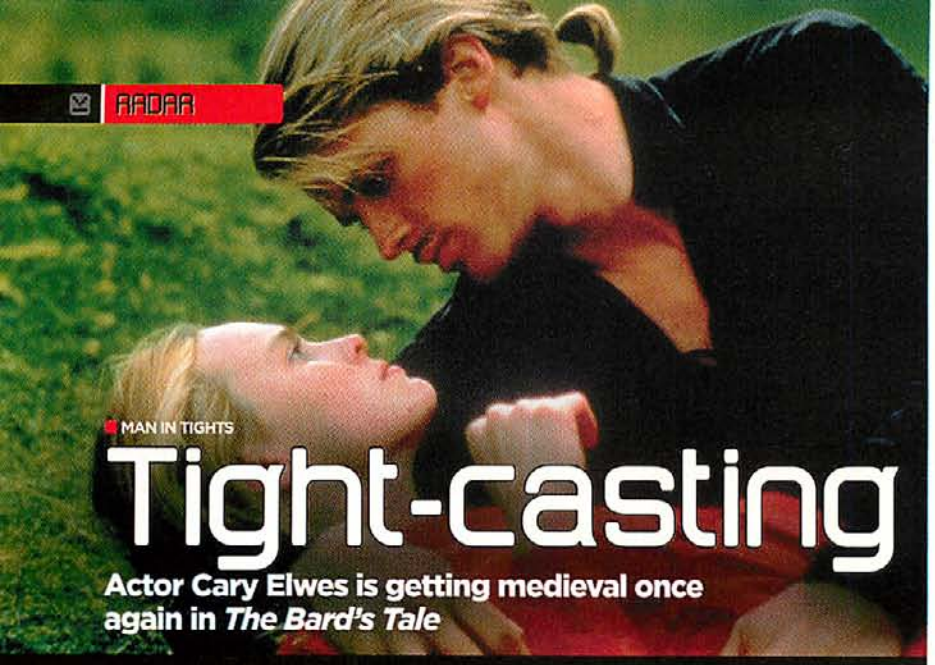

MAN IN TIGHTS

Tight-casting

Actor Cary Elwes is getting medieval once again in *The Bard's Tale*

He wore a flight suit in *Hot Shots!*, a Civil War uniform in *Glory*, and a guilty look in *The Crush*, but when most people picture Cary Elwes, he's wearing tights. That's because the English actor is best known for playing Westley in *The Princess Bride* and the titular hero of Mel Brooks' *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*. So it's hardly surprising that this busy Brit is playing the title role of the Bard in VU Games' *The Bard's Tale*. "When you make more than one medieval comedy," Elwes admits, "it definitely puts you in the running to make a medieval comedic videogame."

NO STRANGER TO DANGER

"Doing voiceover work is a different kettle of fish than acting on camera," he notes. "So I'm sure that had I not done voiceover before that they wouldn't have approached me." Prior to *The Bard's Tale*, Elwes had been heard but not seen in such cartoons as *Batman Beyond* and—surprise, surprise—*The Quest for Camelot*. However, Elwes says that some aspects of voice work and acting are the same. "Either way, it's an art that takes a little time to acquire," Elwes explains. "The early work I did on *Batman Beyond* and *Pinky and the Brain* was not that enthralling, but it's like riding a bike: The more you do it, the easier it gets. In fact, you actually have to overact for voice-over." Which, he says, was perfect for the Bard. "One of the directions I got on this project," he recalls, "was that I could not be too over-the-top. And that gave me free range to do a lot of fun things."

Of course, it probably helped that Elwes is no stranger to videogames. And we don't mean he once played *Pong* when he was a kid. "I'm very into them," he admits. "I own a NASCAR game, I own some F-16 fighter-pilot games, and, of course, no home is complete without *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*."

"I chuckled when I read the game's script...and that's usually the criteria for me."

SHOW ME THE FUNNY

Though, he continues, it was the message, not the medium, that attracted him to *The Bard's Tale*. "I chuckled when I read the game's script," he explains, "and that's usually the criteria for me. If it's not on the page, it's not worth getting involved in, and this was definitely funny. They had already done most of the CGI on the game, so I got to see quite a bit of it, and I was very impressed by how much fun the designers were having with it. It totally makes fun of other games about guys with swords—like how destroying barrels becomes a fixation in those games. They actually have this character who says, 'Well, I'd love to stay and chat, but I have some barrels I need to smash.'"

Surprisingly, *The Bard's Tale* contains no references to Elwes' previous work. Not anymore, anyway. "I think there was one line in the script that sounded like something from *The Princess Bride*," Elwes recalls, "but we changed it. We didn't want to reference that if we could help it. We'll save that for *The Princess Bride* game." Which isn't happening anytime soon, he says, though if it does, he's in. Just not in the tights. "I wouldn't recommend wearing them," he says. "Though I do now have an appreciation for women who do." **Paul Semel**

CONSOLE CORNER

Swipe this from your kid brother

PLAYSTATION 2

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

So what if we listed *GTA: San Andreas* last month (in "also check out")? Whatchu gonna do about it, bee-yotch!?! Ahem, sorry. Guess we've been playing a little too much of this game. Anyhow, we wanted to give *San Andreas* its props because there is so much going into it. Yeah, yeah, we know that it'll eventually come to the PC—but do you want to wait the six-plus months that'll take to happen? Didn't think so.

San Andreas is so huge, it's not in one city—it takes place throughout an entire state! San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas are mimicked in this Californicated take on the West Coast. Gangbang, hit the highways, and live inside the virtual world that has become a staple of the series. The only thing that gets us wondering is the whole diet and exercise thing. We mean, we barely take care of ourselves in real life. Now we gotta sweat if we eat too many cheeseburgers in a game?

ALSO CHECK OUT: *Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal* (PS2), *X-Men Legends* (GC, PS2, Xbox)

NEWS FEED >> Red vs. Blue vs. Sims. Machinima team Rooster Teeth is starting a *Sims 2* series called "The Strangerhood." Check it out at www.roosterteeth.com. >> Speaking of Simoleans, *The Sims 2* sold more than a million copies in its first 10 days. >>

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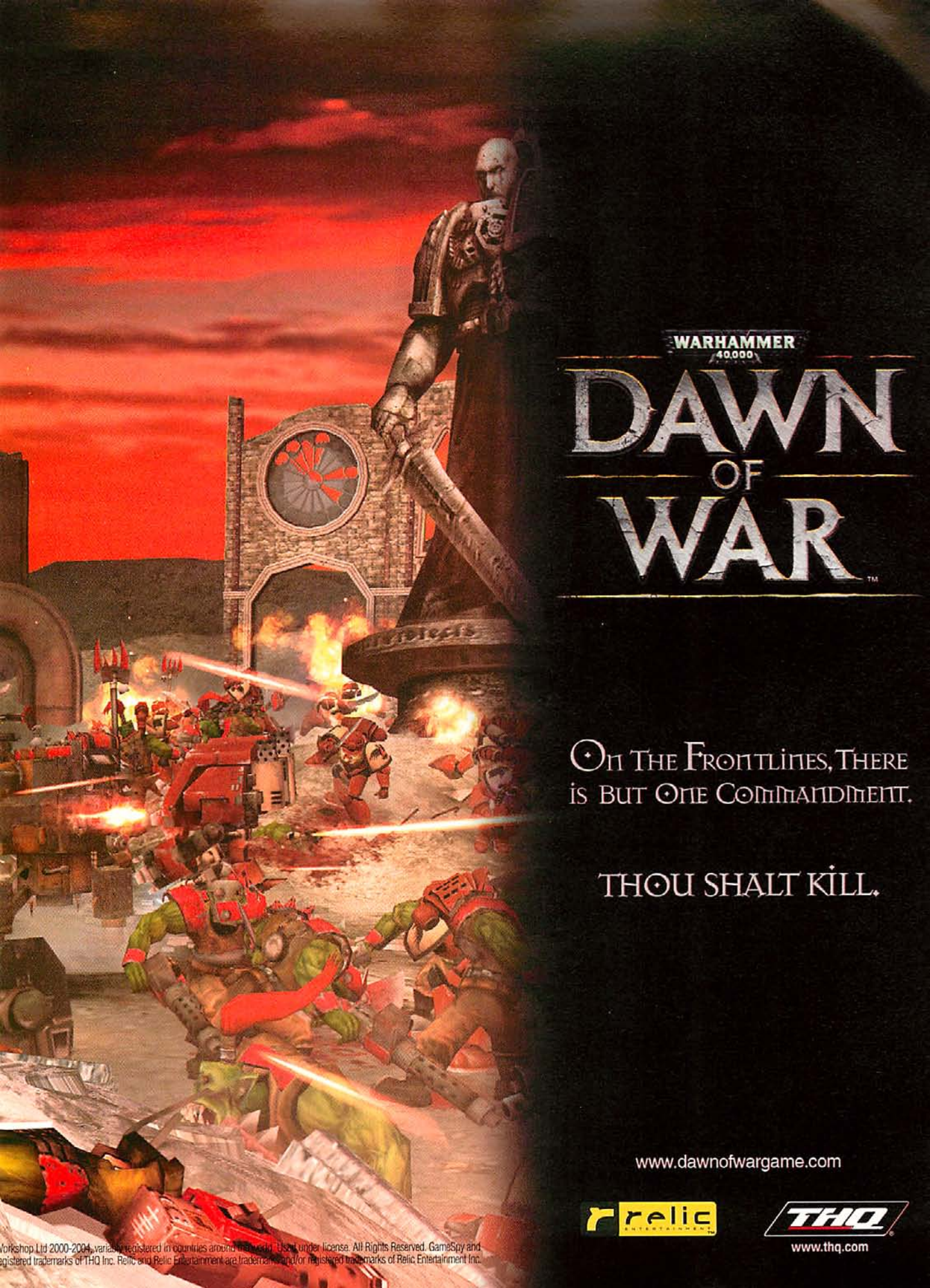
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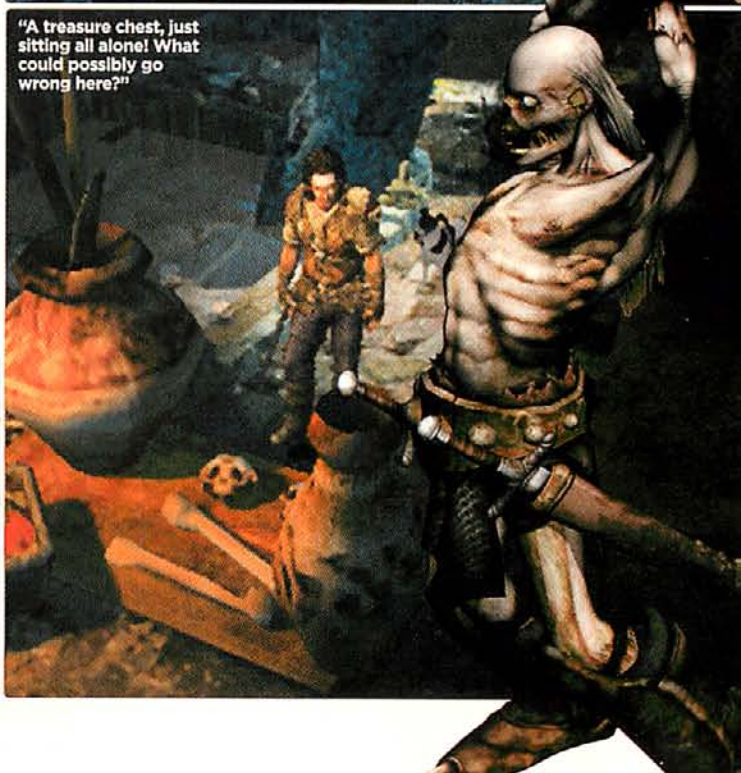

The Bard's URL

To get a good idea of *The Bard's Tale*'s unique brand of humor, head over to www.thebardstale.com. And make sure you mouse over the blonde's breasts three times (we only tell you this because we know you're too decent to do such a thing on your own...right?).

Inside

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Blitzkrieg II
This *Blitzkrieg* sequel has plenty more tank-driving RTS action...now with multiplayer!

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Imperator
Mythic's next massively multiplayer RPG presents an interesting alternate-history possibility.

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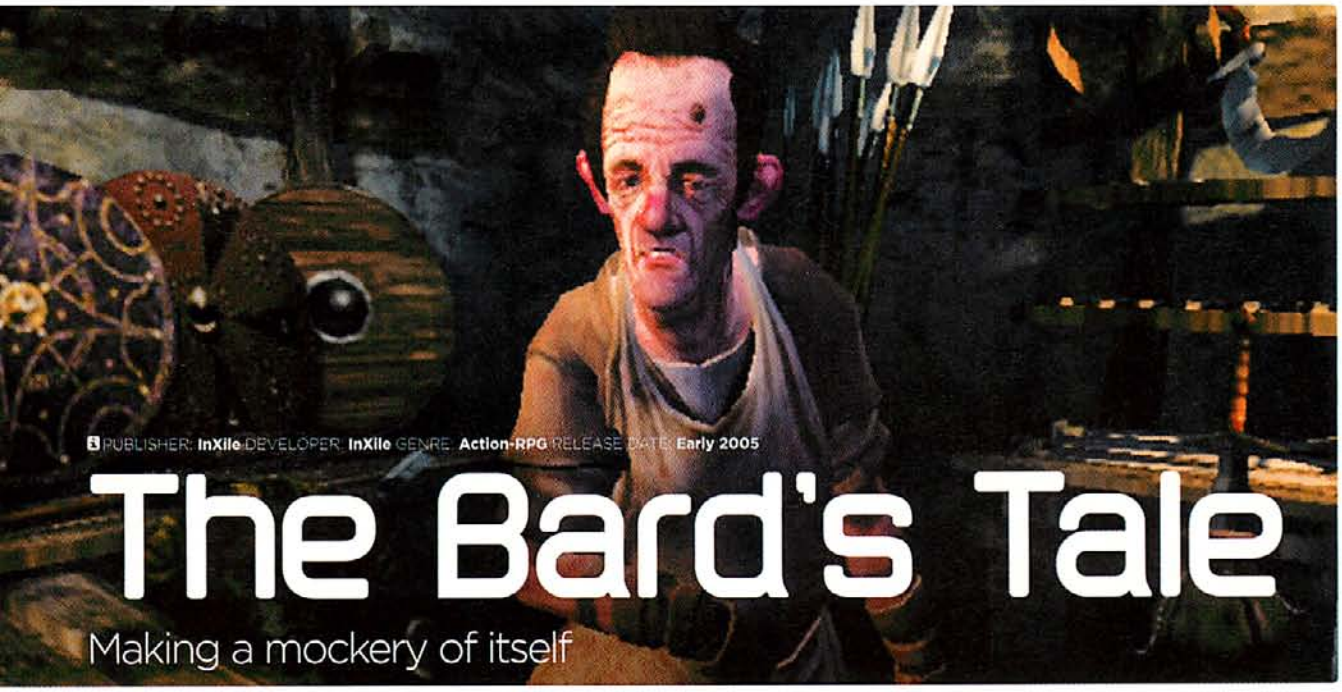
DAOC: Catacombs
The latest *Dark Age of Camelot* expansion introduces a vast subterranean realm.



PUBLISHER: InXile DEVELOPER: InXile GENRE: Action-RPG RELEASE DATE: Early 2005

The Bard's Tale

Making a mockery of itself

Stop us if you've heard this one: A wandering hero walks into a bar. Upon talking to the ultrahot blonde behind the counter, he learns that said watering hole has a bit of a rat problem. So what does he do? Why, he draws his sword and heads to the cellar to extinguish the threat, of course.

What's that? You say you saw this exact same thing in *Baldur's Gate* and *Icewind Dale*—and countless other RPGs? Well, that's exactly the point in *The Bard's Tale*.

EN GARDE, TOUCHÉ!

InXile Entertainment is taking this new installment of the popular '80s RPG series in a decidedly new direction—and we're not just talking about the gameplay, which is based on an evolved version of the *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* engine. Rather, the focus of this reinterpretation is pure satire of the role-playing genre. And what we've seen has had us rolling.

Take the example above, for instance. Assuming you actually choose to take on the rat quest—and you don't have to, thanks to a conversation system that allows you to be a nice guy or a total jerk—the Bard encounters a single rat, slays it in one swipe, then declares in a snooty voice provided by the one and only Cary Elwes (check out our interview with him in this month's Radar on page 40), "Mission accomplished!" But once informed that he killed *a* rat—not *the* rat—the Bard once again descends below...only to have his ass kicked by a fire-breathing rodent the size of a horse. He shamefully heads back upstairs and is greeted by a bar full of drunks pointing and laughing at him. It's about this time that you realize this is no ordinary action-RPG.

OH, THAT IS SO CLICHÉ!

As the game progresses, the Bard encounters—and wholeheartedly mocks—a handful of RPG clichés. He meets more than a few "chosen ones," each of whom dies a horrible death, followed by a sing-along from a throng of Oompa Loompa-like goblins. After retrieving a golden chalice from the corpse of a slain wolf, he berates the narrator about how commonplace such nonsensical booty is. He impatiently tells a Viking skeleton to "get on with it," spoiling its sneaky attempt at coming back to life. Tongue is firmly inserted in cheek, and it seems that nothing is safe here.

We only have a couple of questions. Can the game *stay* funny for 30-plus hours, as InXile promises? And even if it does include a bunch of baddies to slay and loot to nab, will the hack-n-slash gameplay hold up for that amount of time? If yes is the answer to both, there's a good chance that *The Bard's Tale* will be among the first must-have titles of 2005. **Chris Baker**

The Word PARODY

The focus of this reinterpretation is pure satire of the role-playing genre.

"Oh well, the ogre doesn't seem to be home. I guess we should leave now!"

"OHHHHH YEAAAAAH!! WHO'S BAD?!"

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Crystal Dynamics** GENRE: **FPS** RELEASE DATE: **Early 2005**

Project: Snow

All the action of *Deus Ex* without the role-playing BS that came with it: That, in essence, is *Project: Snowblind*. Eidos denies this was originally a multiplayer spin-off of Warren Spector's FPS/RPG series, but we can see some definite influence here. Fortunately, thanks to the development team at Crystal Dynamics, *Project: Snowblind* is growing into a whole lot more than just a *Deus Ex* clone...and it's looking good. There's an interesting 11-mission campaign, 16-player deathmatches, smart A.I., and, of course, lots of funky gadgets and cybernetic implants.

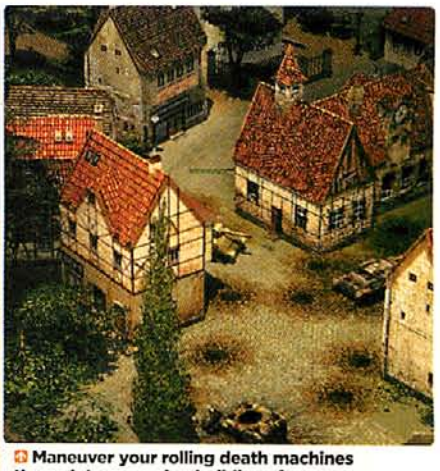
As you can see from the picture, there are some sharp visuals in store, but the real reason you'll want to play it is for the over-the-top arsenal. One favorite from the demo is the fléchette gun—its alternate fire mode sends out small nanobots that will seek, circle, and kill your targets. The cool part is seeing enemies fire back at the bots and, when they realize they can't kill 'em, run.

blind

PUBLISHER: **CDV Software** DEVELOPER: **Nival Interactive** GENRE: **RTS** RELEASE DATE: **Q2 2005**

Blitzkrieg II

Rolling out the big guns



Maneuver your rolling death machines through towns, using buildings for cover.

Strategic games based on World War II never get old...they get *really* old. Honestly, I rarely get pumped about these games at this point, but when the CDV war machine rolled *Blitzkrieg II* into our offices, it eventually wore down my resistance. The original game showed promise—at least the focus was on keeping supply lines open instead of on resource harvesting, which was a fresh approach. Now, with a whole new level of polish, degree of detail, and (finally!) the inclusion of multiplayer, the sequel could earn more medals than the original did, which was met with a lukewarm reception.

THE DAWGS OF WAR

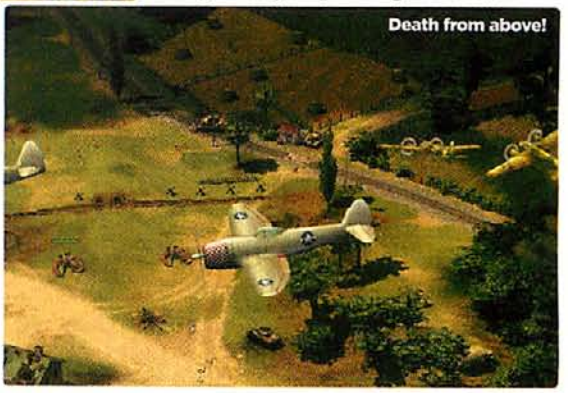
Like just about every other WWII title, the first game focused solely on the war that raged across Europe, while the expansion pack focused on Irwin "The Desert Fox" Rommel's campaign. The sequel presents you with a lot more choices—and a hell of a lot more variety in the missions.

Two things you can definitely count on: more tanks and more explosions.

There are four single-player campaigns, each examining a different aspect of the war. There's the German ground war (hence the whole "blitzkrieg" thing), an English naval campaign, a focus on the Russian solution (that is, just throwing bodies at the problem), and America's air war (the U.S. campaign largely takes place in the Pacific).

Here's where things get interesting. Each campaign has five chapters that ease you into the action; you'll get a few consecutive missions with optional branching missions that will affect future battles (stopping a German advance in one mission will give them fewer reinforcements for the next battle). As your performance improves, so does the potential size of your army. There are even plans to include famous historical figures as hero units, as well as mechanics such as one-shot kills.

Blitzkrieg II presents you with more choices—and a hell of a lot more variety in the missions.



Death from above!

WAR: NEW AND IMPROVED

Also fresh to the fight is a brand-new 3D graphics engine. Even in its pre-alpha state, *Blitzkrieg II* is looking good. Tanks rock when firing, jeeps bounce over hills, and the pyrotechnics look great. Terrain now affects movement, and graphical effects ranging from the weather to the time of day can sway the course of battle. All in all, it seems to be a good goose step forward for the series.

The other big news is the multiplayer mode, which was a noticeable omission from previous games in the series. We don't yet have details on this, but CDV assures us that the long wait will be worth it. **Darren Gladstone**

The Word **TANKS!**

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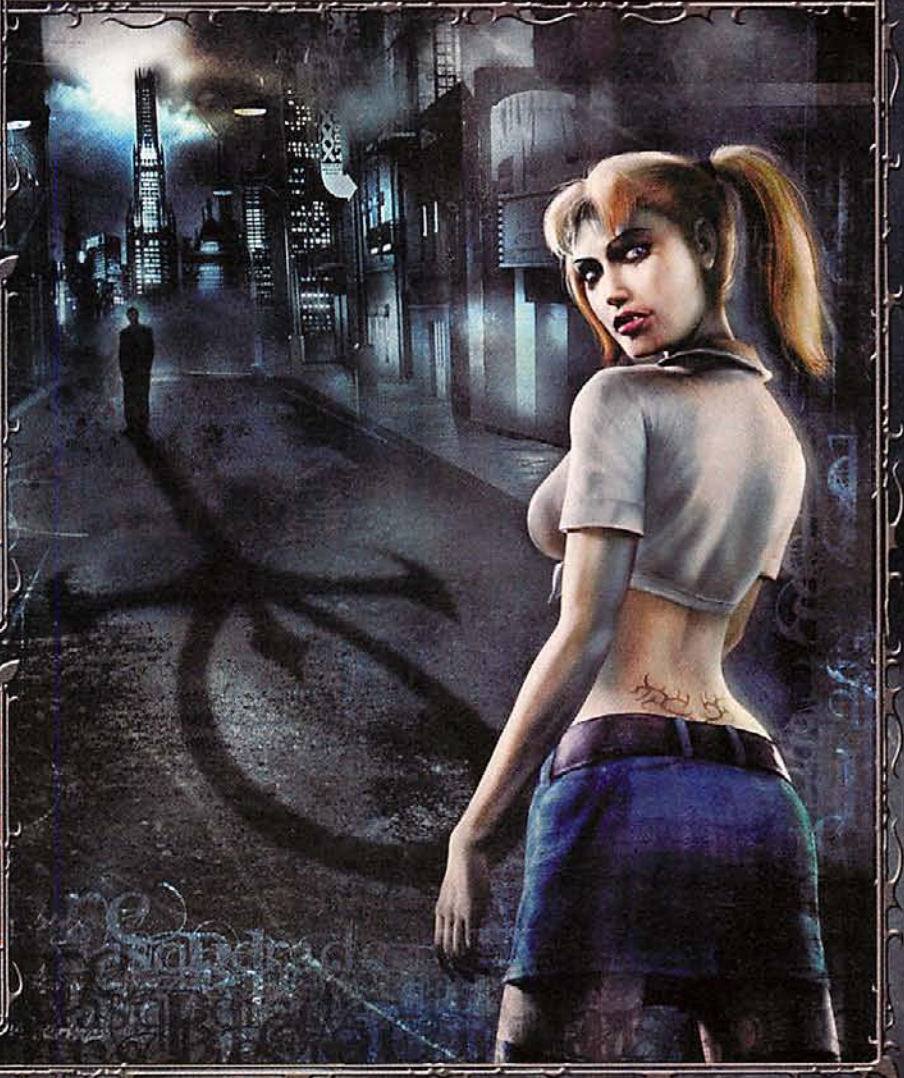

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Ship dates and slip dates for games in the stream

Game	Developer	Expected
Advent Rising	Majesco	Q1 2005
Asheron's Call: Throne of Destiny	Turbine Entertainment	Q2 2005
Auto Assault	NCsoft	TBA
The Bard's Tale	Vivendi Universal	2005
Battlefield 2	Electronic Arts	Q1 2005
Black & White 2	Electronic Arts	2005
■ Blitzkrieg: Rolling Thunder	CDV Software	December 2004
Blitzkrieg II	CDV Software	Q2 2005
Brothers in Arms	Ubisoft	February 2005
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	Bethesda Softworks	February 2005
Call of Duty 2 (working title)	Activision	TBA
Carmageddon 4 (working title)	SCi	2005
The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay	Vivendi Universal	TBA
City of Villains	NCsoft	2005
Civilization IV	Atari	TBA
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	CDV Software	Q1 2005
Dark Age of Camelot: Catacombs	Mythic Entertainment	December 2004
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	Funcom	January 2005
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft	Q1 2005
Dungeons & Dragons Online	Atari	2005
Dungeons & Dragons RTS (working title)	Atari	2005
Empire Earth II	Vivendi Universal	Q1 2005
F.E.A.R.	Vivendi Universal	2005
Fallout 3	Bethesda Softworks	TBA
Freedom Fighters 2 (working title)	Eidos Interactive	Q4 2005
Freedom Force vs. The Third Reich	Vivendi Universal	Q1 2005
■ Ghost Recon 2	Ubisoft	February 2005
Gothic II: The Night of the Raven	JoWood	TBA
Gothic III	JoWood	Q4 2005
Guild Wars	NCsoft	February 2005
Half-Life 2	Vivendi Universal	2004
Hitman 4 (working title)	Eidos Interactive	Q2 2005
■ Imperator	Mythic Entertainment	2006
Imperial Glory	Eidos Interactive	January 2005
■ Kreed	Russobit	Q4 2004
■ Lego Star Wars	Eidos Interactive	April 2005

■ New ■ Update

In *Imperator*, the Roman Republic is a vast futuristic cityscape.

PUBLISHER: **Mythic Entertainment**
DEVELOPER: **Mythic Entertainment**
GENRE: **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

Imperator

The rise of Rome

What if the Roman Empire never fell? That's precisely the question Mythic Entertainment is tackling with its next massively multiplayer undertaking, *Imperator*. While the game is still in the early stages of the development process, we recently had a chance to take a behind-the-scenes look at some of the people and places you'll be seeing in the finished product—which, according to Mythic, should be ready to roll out the door in 2006.

Though fans of Mythic's *Dark Age of Camelot* should feel at home with *Imperator*'s modified version of that game's engine, the two titles couldn't be more different. Here, we're getting a gritty glimpse at a possible alternate future—one in which the modern-day Roman Republic reigns. After an alliance with the neighboring Mayan Empire shatters, the Romans find themselves embroiled in a full-scale interplanetary war, with only the freewheeling Dragon Empire to count on as an unsteady ally. Despite all the conflict *Imperator*'s backstory perpetuates, the game is strictly player-versus-environment in nature—which means you'll have to stick with *DAOC* for all your player-killing needs. Mission-based gameplay, with plenty of instanced content and character-specific tasks, is at the heart of *Imperator*.

GLADIATORS WITH GUNS

Many of the character-creation details are still up in the air, but there will be at least two distinct races, including your everyday human as well as some sort of humanoid servitor species. Progression will be skill-based; plans call for four major skill trees, each with three subcategories comprising numerous skills. Several character archetypes will be in place to help you decide what sort of role you want to play, and a handful of in-game organizations—such as the Roman Legion or Secret Service—will give your character an even more narrowly defined focus as he traipses across the galaxy in the service of mighty Rome. **Ryan Scott**

The Word BIZARRO ROME

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PUBLISHER: **Mythic Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Mythic Entertainment**
GENRE: **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE: **December 2004**

Dark Age of Camelot: Catacombs

Kick ax and take names

Attention, player haters: PVP combat is alive and well in Mythic Entertainment's *Dark Age of Camelot* franchise. In fact, we've got three good reasons why *Catacombs*, the next expansion, will keep you going medieval on people's asses.

1 A vast subterranean realm to explore. *Catacombs* introduces eight new underground adventuring zones and one new undercity in each of the game's three realms for a total of 27 new zones. The undercities are friendly areas, each with a massive, sweeping quest attached to it—along with a collective sum of roughly 350 other new missions to keep you busy as you delve deeper into the earth, even riding mine carts through dimly lit tunnels in classic *Indiana Jones* style.

2 Five brand-new classes. Hibernian players, say hello to the bainshee and vampiir. The former is a wraithlike female-only undead creature, while the latter is a necromantic spellcaster with the power to siphon life from others. These spooks can't turn into bats or mist, but their undead appearance deteriorates over time, and they might be more susceptible to magic weapons than your average *DAOC* character. The Midgard faction gets a warlock class with the ability to preload multiple spells for überdamage, as well as another female-only profession, the warmongering valkyrie. Albion players will have to make due with only one new class—the unholy zealot, who functions as an evil cleric.

3 Character model updates. Mythic makes graphical upgrades with every expansion, and *Catacombs* follows suit by overhauling the game's aging character models. It also sports a robust customization system, allowing you to tweak numerous character appearance details. This is quickly becoming the norm, thanks to games like *City of Heroes*, and Mythic is certainly taking its due diligence to keep *DAOC* competitive well into the next generation of MMOs. **Ryan Scott**

The Word CAVERNOUS

PIPELINE

Game	Developer	Expected
The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth	Electronic Arts	Q4 2004
The Matrix Online	Sega	January 2005
Miami Vice	Davilex	Q4 2004
Middle-Earth Online	Vivendi Universal	February 2005
MotoGP 3	THQ	Q3 2005
The Movies	Activision	March 2005
NASCAR 2005: Chase for the Cup	Electronic Arts	February 2005
Neverwinter Nights 2	Atari	2006
Operation Flashpoint 2	Codemasters	2006
Origin of the Species	Tri Synergy	January 2005
Pariah	Groove Games	February 2005
Project: Snowblind	Eidos Interactive	January 2005
Quake IV	Activision	TBA
Robots	Vivendi Universal	March 2005
The Roots	Cenega Publishing	February 2005
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl	THQ	Q1 2005
Sacred Underworld	Ascaron	Q1 2005
Scarface	Vivendi Universal	Q4 2005
Scrapland	Enlight Software	Q4 2004
Serious Sam 2	Global Star	TBA
Silent Hunter III	Ubisoft	2005
Splinter Cell Chaos Theory	Ubisoft	March 2005
Star Wars: KOTOR II—The Sith Lords	LucasArts	February 2005
Star Wars Republic Commando	LucasArts	February 2005
Starship Troopers	Empire Interactive	Q4 2004
State of Emergency 2	Bam Entertainment	Q4 2004
Stronghold 2	Global Star	Q1 2005
SWAT 4	Vivendi Universal	Q1 2005
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft	March 2005
Team Fortress 2: Brotherhood of Arms	Vivendi Universal	TBA
Tomb Raider VII (working title)	Eidos Interactive	2005
Top Spin	Atari	Q4 2004
Total Club Manager 2005	Electronic Arts	2004
UFO: Aftershock	Cenega Publishing	Q3 2005
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	Microsoft	TBA
World of WarCraft	Blizzard Entertainment	TBA
X2: The Return	Deep Silver	February 2005
Ys: The Ark of Napishtim	Konami	TBA

New Update

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FROM: **Enigma Software Productions** AVAILABILITY: **2005**

War Leaders: WWII

Word on the street: Turn-based strategy, real-time battles, and historical detail make sweet love. Commanding one of seven nations as well as famous figures such as Stalin, Patton, or Rommel, players attempt world conquest. Manage research and tactical planning at your own ppace before engaging in 3D duels, where over 350 unique units (tanks, planes, submarines) can destroy one another and deform surrounding terrain. Three accuracy settings let you pump up the realism or play fantasy general.

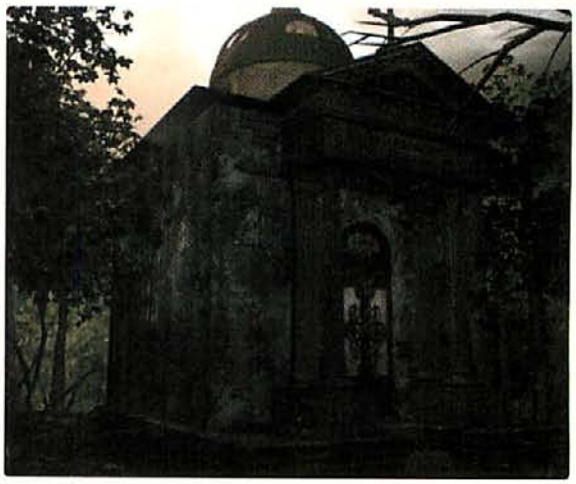
Sounds kinda beat: Something tells us potential publishers won't be printing "From the creators of *Hello Kitty Football Cup 2002*!" on the box. And there's presumably a sound reason why the company's most recent effort, *Angels vs. Devils*, never invaded American shores. But in the interests of fair and unbiased journalism, early peeks at the combat simulator do leave us wanting more. With any luck, Enigma's latest won't go AWOL.

FROM: **Invictus** AVAILABILITY: **2005**

Cross Racing Championship

Word on the street: A supercharged racer packing impeccably realistic physics and dynamic damage modeling. More than 60 on- and off-road events are spread across icy mountains, seaside byways, and sprawling countryside. Bump-mapping and motion blur augment the action as you cripple customizable vehicles, and emotional A.I. opponents provide ever-present danger. Hold it together through hairpin turns and hot-seat matches, though, and you just might claim pole position.

Sounds kinda beat: Developer Invictus, a Hungarian start-up of some notoriety, was formerly responsible for Codemasters' catchy 4x4 racer *INSANE*. Since then, however, the team's only output has been Yugo-priced titles such as *Street Legal* and *Monster Garage*. Let's call a spade a spade, though: The crew's entire catalog consists of automotive offerings. If anyone stands a chance of not skidding out, it's these guys—assuming, that is, they haven't lost their flair for four-wheeled mayhem.

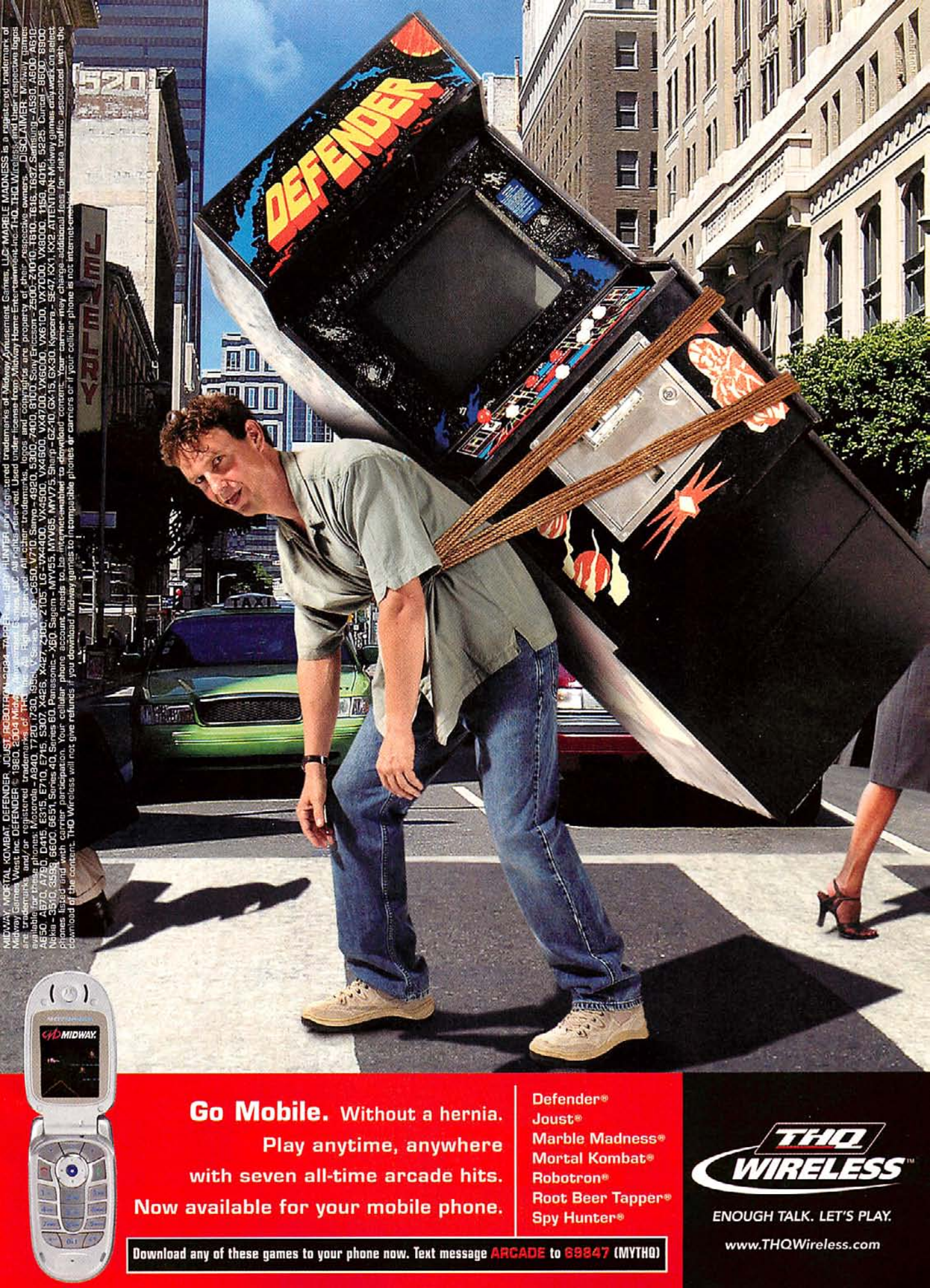


FROM: **Nucleosys** AVAILABILITY: **2005**

Scratches

Word on the street: Straight from Argentina comes a spooky story crafted as a first-person adventure. Per usual, the tale is set in an atmospheric Victorian mansion located on the outskirts of a small English town called Rothbury, whose walls have hosted myriad murders. Unforeseen twists and turns accompany a suitably unsettling script, which unveils its secrets only to those who complete logic and inventory puzzles. Try it with the lights off (and clean underwear handy) for maximum effect.

Sounds kinda beat: *Myst* clones aren't most gamers' passion these days. Nor has any South American software producer made a splash this side of the border since Brazil's Continuum Entertainment brought *Outlive* Stateside. Then again, the right distribution partner—DreamCatcher, perhaps?—could carve out opportunities for the title on a small scale. Given proper attention and care during the development process, this creepy tale could serve up some satisfying scares.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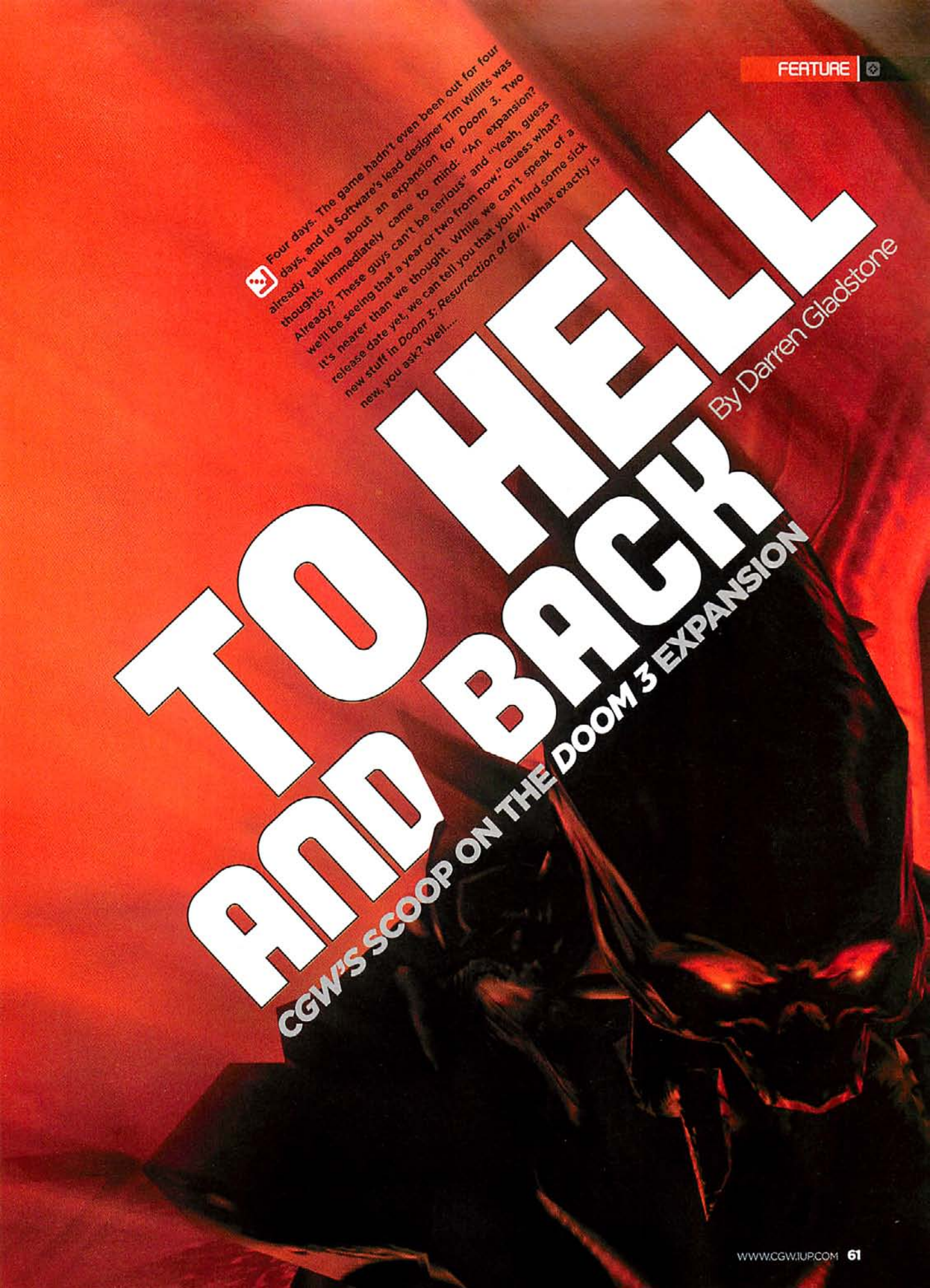
TO HELL AND BACK

CGW'S SCOOP ON THE DOOM 3 EXPANSION

By Darren Gladstone

Four days. The game hadn't even been out for four days, and id Software's lead designer Tim Willits was already talking about an expansion for *Doom 3*. Two thoughts immediately came to mind: "An expansion? Already? These guys can't be serious" and "Yeah, guess we'll be seeing that a year or two from now." Guess what? It's nearer than we thought. While we can't speak of a release date yet, we can tell you that you'll find some sick new stuff in *Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil*. What exactly is new, you ask? Well....



There's more to see than the inside of the same ol' research facility.

THINGS THAT GO BUMP!

Of course, the game is replete with some familiar zombies and demons. What else would you expect? Fortunately (well, maybe unfortunately), some new creeps also showed up for the party. Thanks to a special-ops security force that headed back to the Martian research facility, there's plenty of shotgun fodder.

FORGOTTEN

The forgotten more closely resemble the lost souls from the original *Doom* games, which are basically small cyberdemon heads that zoom around and fly at you. Yes, they are just as annoying as the lost souls from *Doom 3*. Think of them as infernal insects that buzz around your head. The fly swatter in this particular case: a shotgun.

VULGAR

Vulgars are smaller, faster versions of the imps. They're harder to hit, and they climb walls, launch fireballs, and generally make your life miserable. Enjoy.

BRUISER

By far the most inventive (and twisted) creature is **the bruiser.** These monstrosities have heavy weapons grafted to their arms, their heads are deformed, and their mouths are on computer screens dangling around their necks. Imagine the surprise when you walk up to a monitor, thinking you're about to interface with a computer, and all of a sudden this thing busts out of a wall like the Kool-Aid Man.

SPOILER ALERT!

The whole story behind *Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil*

Liquor is better than truth serum. Thanks to it, we managed to eke out every last kernel of information about the expansion, including what the point is and, most important, why anybody would be crazy enough to go back to Mars after all hell broke loose the first time around. It's all here, so IF YOU DON'T WANT THE STORY SPOILED, READ NO FURTHER!

Resurrection of Evil takes place about three years after the events in *Doom 3*. United Aerospace Corp (UAC) covered up the Mars incident, claiming there was a reactor meltdown. Now, years later, a beacon is picked up by a satellite at Site One. An unknowing expedition is sent to Mars to see what the source is. Double the security force is sent, as is a full contingent of scientists (read: plenty of zombie fodder).

As part of the expedition, you are a combat engineer. Early on, you're fixing generators and rerouting power, and next you're deep in the first alien dig site, unearthing a strange relic. Upon touching it, the gate to hell is reopened, and, as you discover while playing, this Artifact is hell's ultimate weapon. Your mission, whether you choose to accept it or not, is to go back to hell. Sealing the gate again and making sure that the relic doesn't fall into the demonic Dr. Betruger's hands won't be easy.

Besides the regular evil hordes, hell-hunting minions will be tracking you down. These hunters (the minibosses), when defeated, will be absorbed by the Artifact and will grant you more powers in combat. Needless to say, gladly accept all the help you can get.

Hopefully, you'll be able to grab these flaming skulls with the grabber.

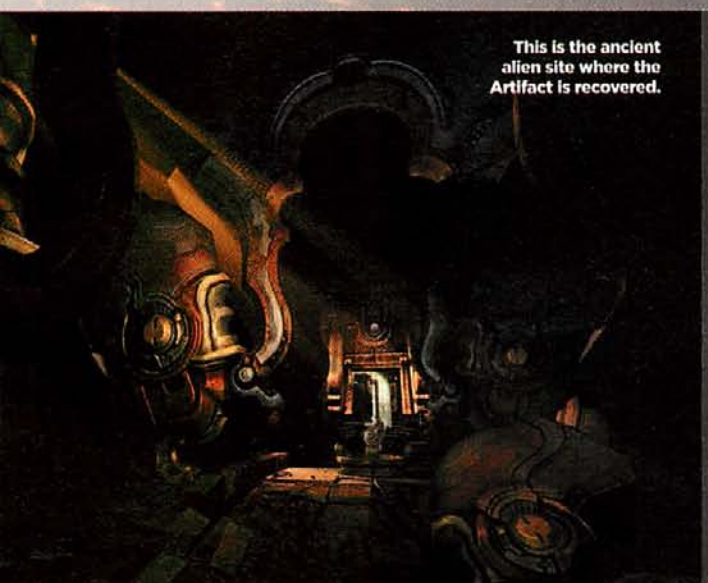
Gaming under the influence? Nope, this is the Artifact slowing down time.

SITES FOR SORE EYES

"People wanted to see more of the ancient alien civilization [that's at the end of *Doom 3*]," says producer Matt Hooper. The plan for *Resurrection* is to get people back there as quickly as possible and get them to see more of the really unique environments. There will also be another trip to hell (big surprise, we know), and expect to see more of the meshing between hell and reality that looked so surreal and cool the first time around. How long will the game be, though? Hooper confesses, "It's already a lot longer than we were expecting." While Id doesn't want to make any promises, it looks like there could be 11 levels—maybe more. By comparison, *Doom 3* has about 25.

Multiplayer, though not getting up to *Battlefield* sizes (there are mods that allow for 32-player matches), is beefing up to eight players in this expansion, with optimized performance. There's no word on whether the Soul Cube and/or the Artifact will somehow find their way into multiplayer matches, but a whole lot of balancing and performance tweaking would need to be done for that to work. What we can tell you is that the four new maps are larger. Two take place in hell, one is in the ancient alien civilization site, and one is a "standard" map in the Mars base.

This hell hunter has the ability to shift time. Beat him at his own game and the power is yours.



This is the ancient alien site where the Artifact is recovered.

"I want my MTV!"

"WHEN IT'S READY"

Developer Nerve Software, located down the street from Id Software HQ, has been working on this expansion for more than a year already. But Nerve is hardly doing this on its own. Take the bruiser, for example. It was a last-minute creation by Id, and since the company didn't have time to incorporate it into *Doom 3*, Nerve gets custody of the critter for the expansion. The voice acting, the level design, and the multiplayer maps are all part of one big collaborative process that's evident throughout *Resurrection*. So when the hell is this coming out? Willits utters the famous mantra: "It'll be ready when it's ready." Well, at least they're consistent.

How come demons are never cute and cuddly?

Wave after wave of these vulgar demons await you.

GEAR UP

In light of current first-person shooters that offer dozens of unique weapons with alt-fire options, we wanted more varied weaponry and some interesting new gear in this expansion. Wish granted.

DOUBLE-BARRELED SHOTGUN

Old-school players will get a kick out of the **double-barreled shotgun**. Just look for it in Sergeant Kelly's old office. This nod to the original games may not be earthshaking, but according to Hooper, the fans have been demanding this weapon. It won't be as invaluable a tool as the single-pump shotgun because of slower reloads, but there's something to be said for a face full of buckshot. The two other new weapons are, thankfully, much more unique.

THE GRABBER

The Ionized Plasma Levitation gun, or, more commonly, **the Grabber**, makes excellent use of the physics engine in *Doom 3*. This tool allows you to hold and launch just about any imaginable object in the game. See a box, target it, use it as a shield, and then launch it at the demons as a weapon. It introduces a whole new mechanic to the game. Small creatures like trites are also fair game. Pick 'em up and send 'em flying. We even got creative in our demo and started catching fireballs and rockets in midair, only to launch 'em back at foes. There's no better humiliation kill than gibbing someone with their own shot.

THE ARTIFACT

And then there's **the Artifact**. At the risk of spoiling the surprise (most spoilers are earlier in this story), this device is hell's equivalent of the Soul Cube from *Doom 3*. As you defeat the minibosses (hell hunters) throughout the expansion, this relic absorbs their powers. You'll be able to slow time to a crawl and run at normal speed, get quad damage, and be invulnerable. Sound plays a huge part with this weapon, as you hear time slow down and then gradually fade back to real time. How do you power this weapon? It runs on human souls. Nice touch.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUITS

You might not remember, but sci-fi hazmat **environmental suits** were used in the original *Doom* games. It's used only in a few parts of this expansion, and, unfortunately, we weren't able to snag a good picture of the suit in action, but the excellent effects are worth mentioning. When equipped, a headlamp lights the way, and the sound is muffled as you walk through toxic-waste areas.

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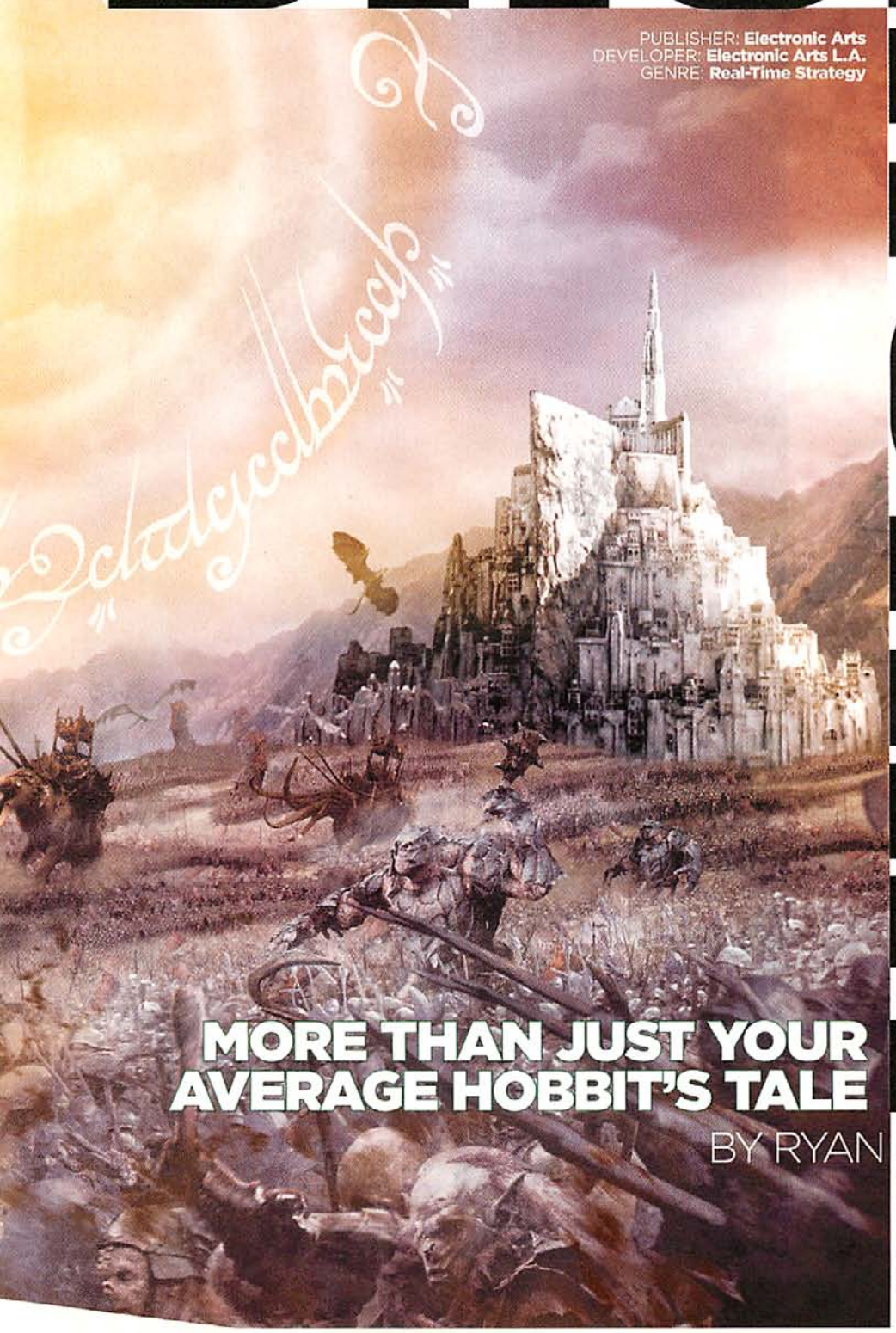
THE END

Just what we need: another RTS. What's more, it's another *Lord of the Rings* RTS. Didn't Vivendi already screw this up with last year's mediocre *War of the Ring*? What makes *The Battle for Middle-earth* any different? What's going to set it apart from the RTS crowd—a highly competitive pack that includes recent (and great) releases such as *Rome: Total War* and *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*? These are the very questions that the design team at EA's Los Angeles studio pondered as it set out to create this game. "Is this going to feel like the films?" asks executive producer Mark Skaggs. "That's the big question with *BFME*. Our goal is to give players a great *LOTR* experience and to really put them in Middle-earth and show them what the characters went through in the films." The team has been working full-steam for the past 14 months to craft an RTS that breaks out of the typical follow-the-numbers mold, while at the same time bringing J.R.R. Tolkien's beloved fantasy world to life.

BACK TO THE SHIRE



PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts**
DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts L.A.**
GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy**

MORE THAN JUST YOUR AVERAGE HOBBIT'S TALE

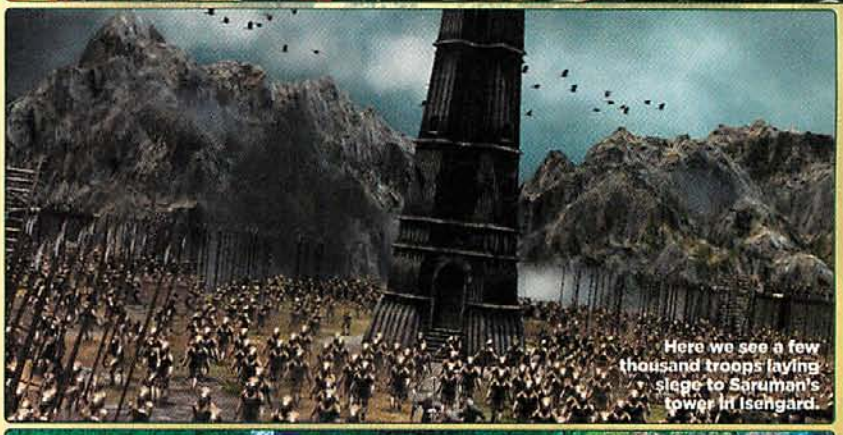
BY RYAN "BILBO" SCOTT

WELCOME TO MIDDLE-EARTH

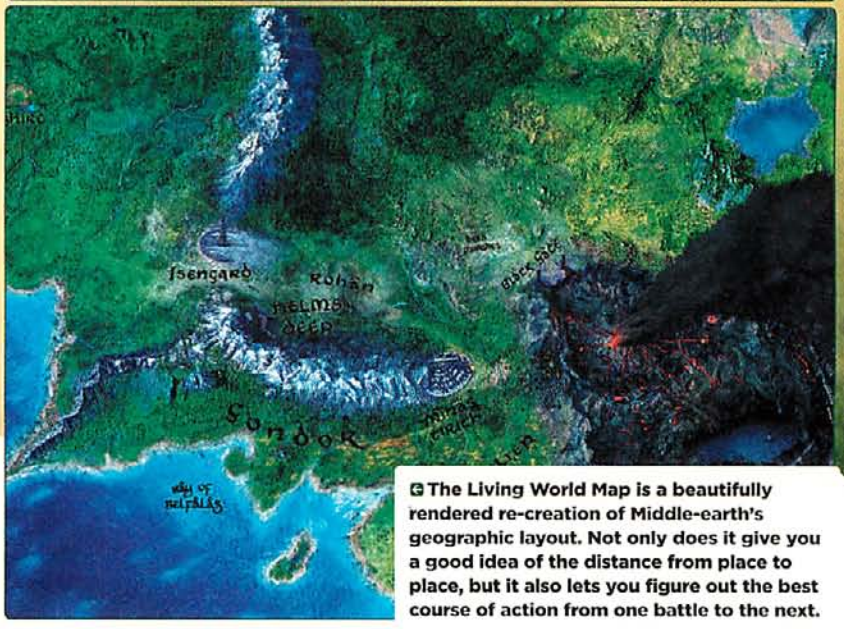
"Middle-earth is a very central component of *LOTR*," says Skaggs. "We did a lot of photo research at the set locations in New Zealand to make sure we got everything right. I think we've made the world very accurate to the films, and the source material really makes the game come alive." This is due in large part to the Living World Map interface, where you'll be able to survey the entire breadth of the world, from the sunny Shire to the Pelennor Fields. This map does a great job of conveying a sense of distance, accurately showing just how far Frodo and his companions had to travel in their quest to get rid of that pesky ring once and for all. "It should also help a lot of fans remember the names of all those confusing locations," laughs Skaggs.

Other than helping you learn the difference between Moria and Minas Tirith, the Living World Map serves another very functional purpose: You'll use it to chart your epic journey across the two single-player campaigns, each of which should keep you enraptured for a good 20 to 30 hours of gameplay. Whether you elect to stand on the side of good with the forces of Gondor and Rohan or on the side of evil alongside Isengard and Mordor, this map is your primary tool for traveling from one mission to the next, carefully choosing your fights as you edge ever closer to a final confrontation at the foreboding Black Gate. Small film clips play in the lower left corner of the screen to remind you of what exactly went on in a particular location, and each level provides you with a mission summary that outlines your objectives, your opposition, and your prospective reward.

Each mission takes the form of either a mandatory objective-driven story battle or a traditional RTS skirmish, in which you are tasked with defending your base while striking out at the enemy. Everything takes place in a modified version of the *Command & Conquer: Generals* engine; the game is peppered with radial menus for issuing orders, erecting structures, choosing new abilities, and selecting other special commands. These menus are an interesting deviation from the prototypical bottom-of-the-screen RTS interface—something the design team is particularly proud of. "It's much cooler than the *Generals* interface," says Skaggs. "I went back and tried playing *Generals* again just for the sake of comparison, and my first thought was 'Eww...this interface is so outdated! What were we thinking?' So we've

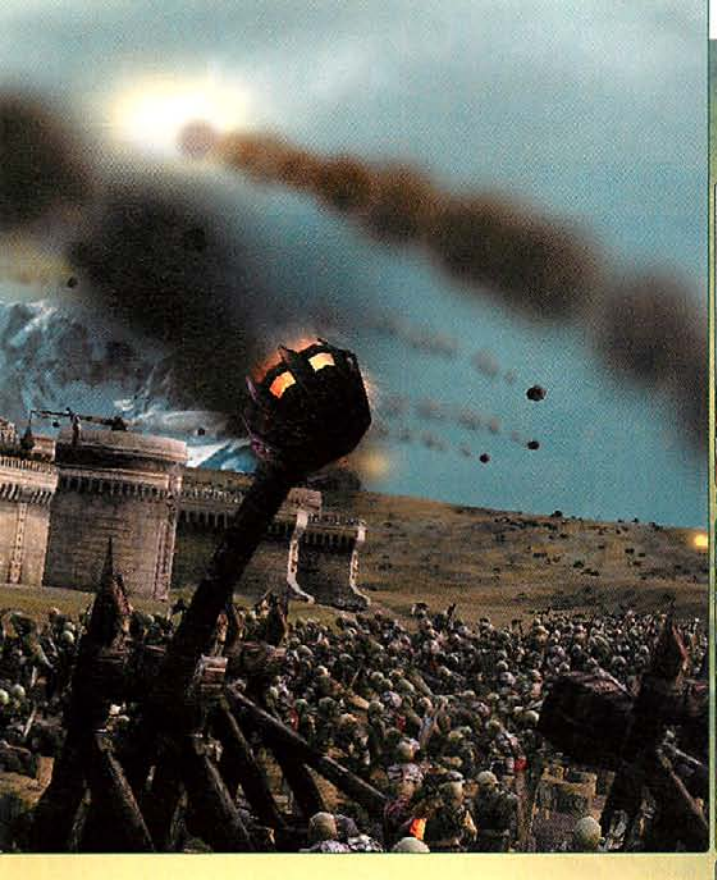


Here we see a few thousand troops laying siege to Saruman's tower in Isengard.



The Living World Map is a beautifully rendered re-creation of Middle-earth's geographic layout. Not only does it give you a good idea of the distance from place to place, but it also lets you figure out the best course of action from one battle to the next.

The Living World Map does a great job of conveying a sense of distance.

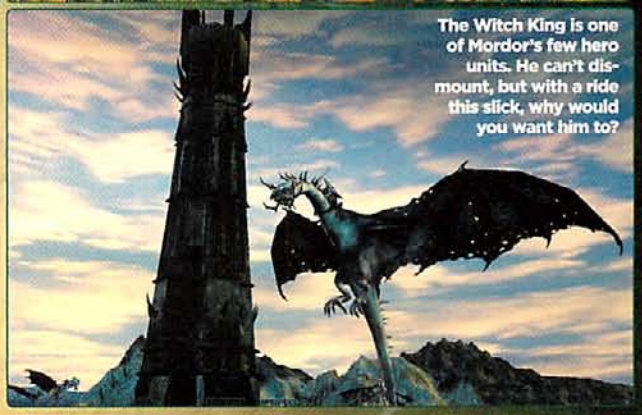


He's here to chew bubble gum and kick ass. And he's all out of gum.

What we want to know is, can we re-create Legolas' oliphant-killing überstunt from the last movie?

really come a long way in terms of that with *BFME*."

The game also dares to change a number of economic standards. One of the first things you'll notice in skirmish missions is that your base structure is preordained; you start off in a walled castle area with a hero unit, a few troops, and a finite number of building plots. All the typical RTS structures are available: farms, blacksmiths, archery ranges, and barracks. However, the limited number of building areas brings an extra element of strategy to the table—will you go resource-heavy and pump out as many infantry units as your videocard can handle, or instead take a quality-over-quantity approach with your army? Regardless of how you expand your forces, you'll have precious little resource micromanagement to worry about, as there's no need to fuss over any annoying food-gathering peon units.



The Witch King is one of Mordor's few hero units. He can't dismount, but with a ride this slick, why would you want him to?

THE INTERFACE

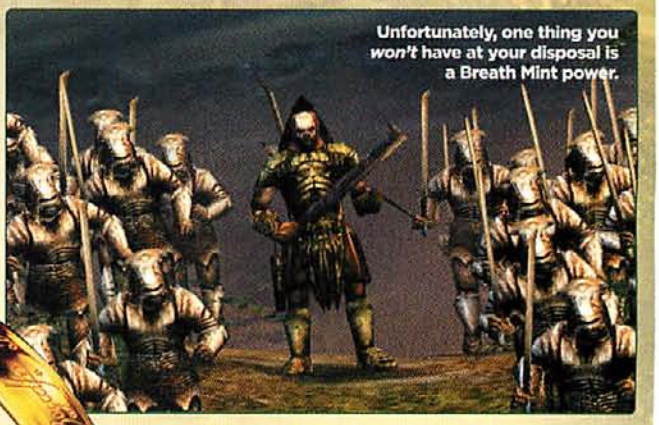
The interface that EA has created for *The Battle for Middle-earth* has a number of interesting features. Building plots, as well as the buildings themselves, use a radial command menu that feels a whole lot faster and more convenient than the standard lower-screen RTS interface. Quick-select icons for your hero units occupy the bottom of the gameplay area, and your available faction powers take up the left margin for easy access. The mini-map area contains plenty of standard stuff, such as a resource readout, a population summary, and several icons to aid in selecting powers and leveling up your hero units.

BETTER MANAGEMENT OF MICROMANAGEMENT

There is but a single catchall resource in the game, but you can earn it in several different ways. Playing as Gondor, you might build your reserves from either farms or blacksmiths, while Isengard makes use of lumber mills and slaughterhouses for its supply. Regardless of the building combination you select, your resources all pool into the same place. Additionally, having multiples of the same structure—or even certain combinations of structures—provides you with various gameplay bonuses, economic benefits, and unit price discounts.

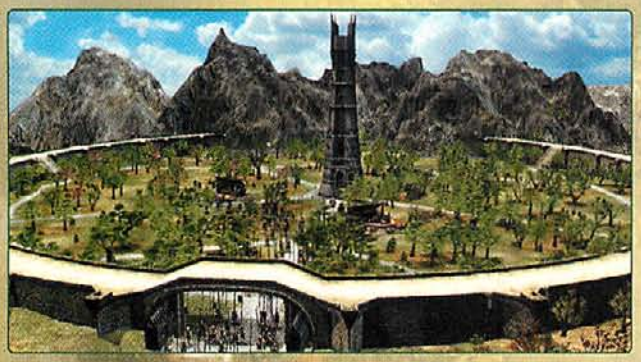
The other major economic alteration is the lack of a traditional tech tree. Your buildings automatically gain "veterancy" through continued use; that is to say, the more Rohan archers you pump out, the better your archery range will become, and the more your archers will improve. This brings about a very tangible attachment to your individual structures, since once a veteran barracks is destroyed, you'll have to build a new one from the ground up. You can also risk constructing a building at a neutral outpost; these, obviously, could easily be wiped out, but they also start with a higher veterancy level than structures on your main base. Larger neutral territories—as well as razed enemy bases—can be claimed for your own use, further expanding your hold on the map.

You'll also want to take care of your soldiers. Existing units don't receive any flashy retroactive upgrades from newly improved buildings, though they will level up as they continue to do battle. There are a lot of the little buggers to worry about, too: Your forces grow and expand throughout the campaign, and surviving units stick with you as long as you keep them alive. Your population cap and resource output rise accordingly as you win more victories in skirmish missions. Before you know it, you'll have a whole legion of foot soldiers, fancy-pants elves, and powerful heroes ready to fill a few orc mouths with arrows.



Unfortunately, one thing you *won't* have at your disposal is a Breath Mint power.

"Is this going to feel like the films?" asks executive producer Mark Skaggs. "That's the big question with *BFME*."



MARSHAL THE TROOPS

Building your army is the core of *BFME*'s gameplay. There are, of course, all the standard infantry, cavalry, and archers you'd expect from an RTS, but you'll also see plenty of *LOTR* staples, including ents, elves, trolls, and oliphants. Many units have a number of emotion-based responses to various gameplay elements—such as the mumakils' tendency to go berserk when exposed to fire, the cave trolls' near-death battle rage, and the cacophony of morale-boosting victory cheers issued forth by your troops when you do something cool, like when Legolas pulls off that impressive shield-surfing stunt in *The Two Towers*.

The types of troops and hero units you'll have at your disposal depend on which faction you're using. The mighty forces of Gondor are very defense oriented, sporting nigh-impenetrable castles that can withstand heavy siege attacks. Ranged attacks by archers, stealthy rangers, and giant eagles are favored here. Gandalf is clearly the big name in Gondor's hero lineup, though Pippin, Faramir, and Boromir round out the army. Unfortunately, we haven't heard any definite word on which faction Aragorn will end up with.

Gimli and Legolas headline Rohan's all-star cast, alongside other noteworthy heroes such as Merry, Eowyn, and King Theoden. Speed is the name of Rohan's game, and its quick-moving cavalry can lead to some nasty early game rushes. This faction also has the ents on its side; these walking, talking tree-people are fairly high-end, and pretty much spell certain doom for anything that gets in their way. Getting an ent within sight of an orc lumber mill fuels its rage—and when it starts smashing up your buildings,

THE BALROG

The goody-goody dwarves and elves may have the Army of the Dead on their side, but the forces of Isengard and Mordor have their own end-game equalizer: the mighty Balrog. This hulking, flame-spewing monstrosity stomps a crater-sized hole in the ass of goodness. Inspiring pants-wetting dread in all who gaze upon him, this beast will send terror-stricken units fleeing in a frenzied panic until they're far, far away, ignoring any and all commands issued to them in the meantime. You'll need some big guns to take the Balrog down, but he'll also time out after a fixed period—probably after he's decimated half your buildings.

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TAKING THE BATTLE ONLINE

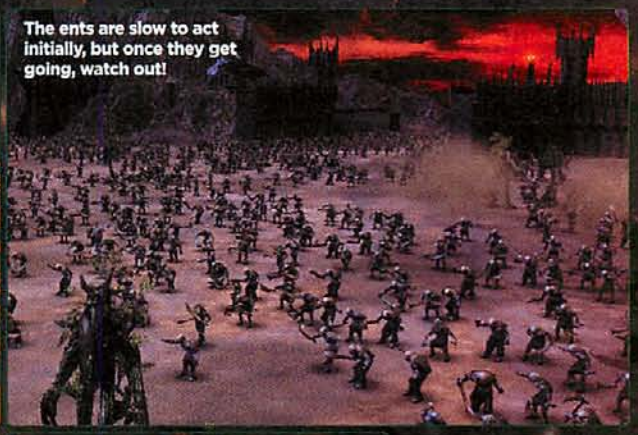
We didn't actually get to take the multiplayer for a spin during our hands-on, but fear not: Once you've finished the single-player campaigns, you'll be able to take the fight online against up to seven opponents. You can choose from any of the four factions for quick skirmishes or team games. Just imagine the possibilities—what if Gondor and Isengard settled their differences and teamed up against Rohan and Mordor? That's about as likely as a *Silmarillion* movie, but it's definitely possible in multiplayer. The game also ships with a comprehensive editing tool that you can use to create your own custom maps or tweak the units and game balance to your heart's desire. Even the art assets are moddable—*Dragonlance: The RTS*, anyone?

Before you know it, you'll have a whole legion of foot soldiers, fancy-pants elves, and powerful heroes ready to fill a few orc mouths with arrows.

THE ARMY OF THE DEAD

The forces of Gondor and Rohan have an extra-deadly secret weapon at their disposal when they enter the late game: the Army of the Dead, which is—as the name suggests—a legion of ethereal death-dealers. These units are disturbingly efficient at mowing through anything and everything in their path, and they can walk right through doors and walls. Seeing as how they're already dead, you're going to have some problems dealing with them, unless you've got some beefed-up hero units standing at the ready. Otherwise, you're better off sticking with the tried-and-true solution—run!

The Uruk-hai rely on good, solid unit upgrades, unlike their expendable orcish counterparts in Mordor.


The ents are slow to act initially, but once they get going, watch out!

grabbing chunks of rubble, and then throwing them at other buildings, you'd better hope you have a plan B.

The bad guys are a bit lighter on the familiar faces—Isengard has the white wizard Saruman, as well as Lurtz, captain of the Uruk-hai forces. Mordor has to make do with the Witch King and a few ringwraiths; fortunately, this faction can easily amass a ridiculous number of expendable orc units to pick up some of the slack. Isengard focuses more on siege tactics and multiple unit upgrades for its hardy Uruk-hai army. Sadly, the almighty Sauron is nowhere to be found on the battlefield—and neither is Gollum, who shows up only as a nonplayable unit in the main story missions.

Make no mistake about the battles—they're every bit as massive as those in the films.

MAKING THE CUT

To the legion of fans looking forward to playing the creepy yellow-toothed Grima Wormtongue, we've got some bad news: His hero unit was cut from the game. Instead, there's now a Wormtongue power, which lets you single out an enemy unit to control. A few other things also ended up on the cutting-room floor, including a prologue mission involving Sauron and Isildur. You'll also have to make do without the full entourage of ringwraiths—only two (plus the Witch King) can be summoned into play at any given time.

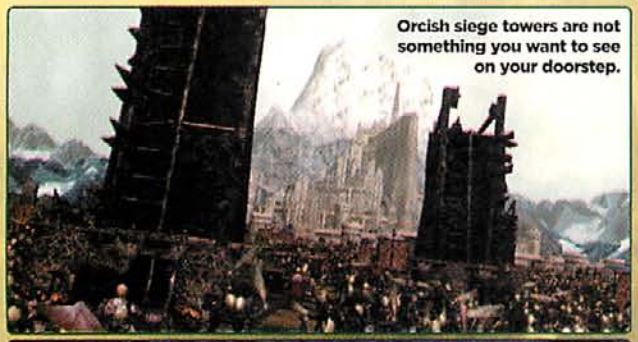
POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Heroes improve to an even greater degree than your other units. As heroes earn experience, they will gain access to an extensive selection of special powers and techniques. For example, some of Legolas' early abilities allow him to fire two arrows at once or to fight up close with his knives. Eowyn can disguise herself as a typical Rohirrim rider and then pop out at an unsuspecting enemy with a nasty surprise attack during the heat of battle.

You'll gain lots of non-unit-specific powers as well; these are purchased with power points, which you earn by completing specific skirmish missions. The forces of evil can call on the Eye of Sauron, which reveals hidden enemy units and imparts a radius fear effect. There's also Call the Horde, which forces your orc camps to generate units at a much faster rate, bolstering Mordor's massive numbers even further. Several nasty weather effects round out the list, such as a demoralizing Freezing Rain.

The good folks of Gondor and Rohan can use Elven Wood to create a large patch of forest on the map, which yields a leadership bonus to friendly soldiers and provides an excellent spot to hide rangers and other stealth units. They also get a few hero-specific powers, such as Anduril and Gandalf the White, which amplify the damage output of Aragorn and Gandalf, respectively. You can even use a Draft power to recruit lowly peasants, possibly giving you that extra edge you need to claim victory.

Think Boromir died a little too soon in the movies? Here, he sticks around for as long as you can keep him alive.



Orcish siege towers are not something you want to see on your doorstep.

The Army of the Dead tears up anything in its path.

Many units have a number of emotion-based responses to various gameplay elements.

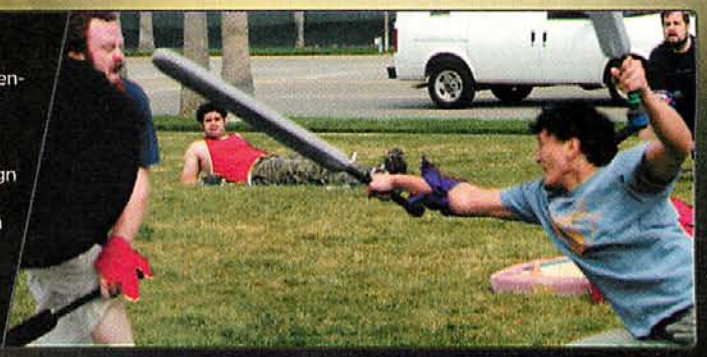
FOR FRODO!

With these words, the *LOTR* films reached their defining moment: A massive army storms the Black Gate of Mordor in a final stand against the forces of darkness, while a magnificently orchestrated chorus swells up in the background. Make no mistake about the battles in *BFME*—they're every bit as massive as those in the films. The symphony-orchestrated soundtrack goes a long way toward immersing you in the action, and the heroes—featuring the voices of such stars as Ian McKellen, Christopher Lee, and Andy Serkis—move through the field with a determined and realistic grace. "It took a while to get everything to look really good," notes Skaggs. "Organics can be really tough to get right."

As the game's December release draws near, Skaggs is confident that the team has gotten more than a few things right. "We've created a user-friendly strategy title that casual players can pick up and learn," he explains, "but that still holds a lot of depth for hardcore gamers." A solid engine, some bold interface design changes, and of course, the *Lord of the Rings* license certainly give us some hope for what *The Battle of Middle-earth* might achieve. But will this be the one RTS to rule them all?

BATTLE DORKS

A few of the guys at EALA engage in some pretty inventive stress-relief exercises: When they're feeling a little too overworked, they'll step outside and fight to the death with foam swords, shields, pikes, and other weapons. "You can pretty much hit anyone as hard as you want," says design director Dustin Browder. "Head shots are illegal, and torso hits are kills." Did these mock battles provide any inspiration for *BFME*? According to Browder, they did indeed. "The guys who use the pikes are deadly—they just come out of nowhere and get you. When you see how annoying the pikemen in the game are, now you'll know why!"



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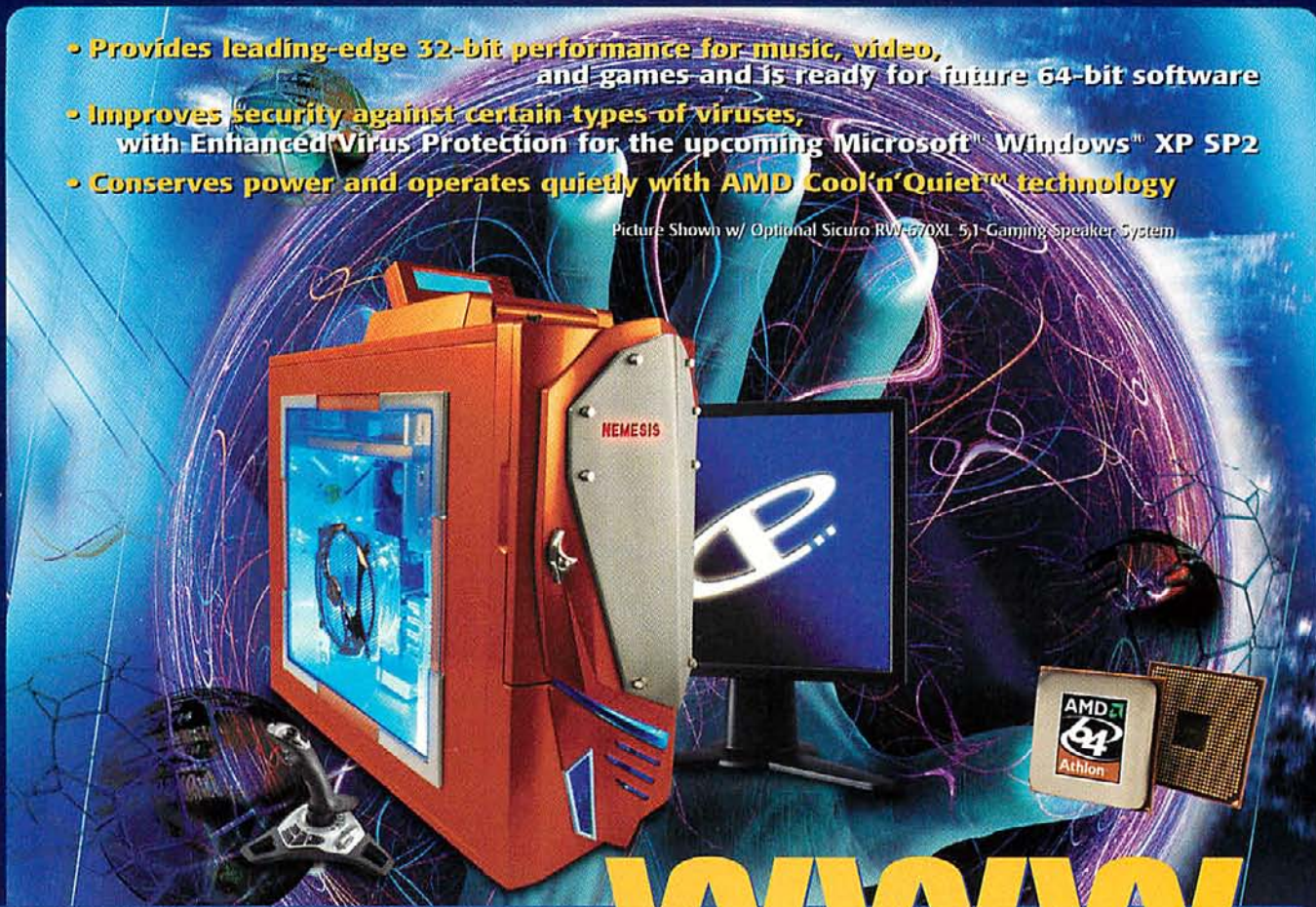

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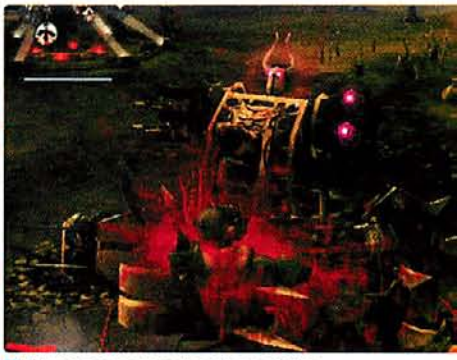
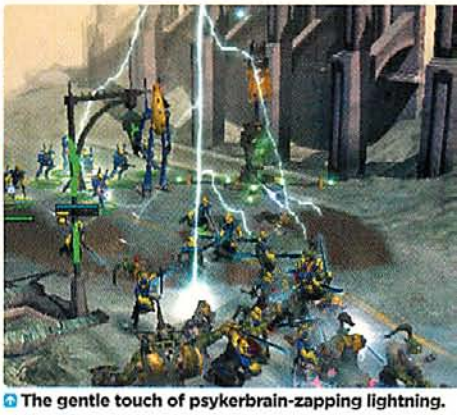
A big ork mek's playful, affectionate swat.


The tender caress of a chaos defiler.


The gentle touch of psykerbrain-zapping lightning.

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Relic Studios** GENRE: **RTS** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.4GHz, 256MB RAM, 1.8GB install, 32MB videocard**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.2GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-8 players)**

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War

Warhammertime!

Howling banshees attack with vicious aplomb.

No airy-fairy Tolkien elves in *Dawn of War*.

Orks, orks, orks!

Scrapland
American McGee proudly presents this game—yet none of the robots have weird piercings!
88

Star Wars Battlefront
You know that *Star Wars* mod for *BF1942*? It's like that, only better.
82

Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude
Finally, you can ogle breasts on your computer.
102

For years, Relic Studios has been struggling with the calculus of what makes a good RTS. *Homeworld* has the gameplay, *Impossible Creatures* has the imagination, and they both have the technology. But neither has that elusive synergy that causes everything to click into place and makes you an addict. Playing a good RTS is like chain-smoking: You're looking forward to the next game before you've even finished the last one.

"These space marines are very tough hombres. They pack state-of-the-art firepower!"

OTHER RTSES CAN'T TOUCH THIS!

So it's pretty gratifying and maybe even a little scary that Relic has finally worked it all out. *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* is one of the most compelling RTS titles since the genre began, a shot of pure-grade real-time strategy adrenaline straight into the veins—an absolutely dizzying rush. It's not particularly innovative, but it is tightly designed, brimming with personality and visual flair, and flexible enough to let you wring a few hundred games out of it before you can say you've tried everything.

The basic model is similar to *WarCraft III*'s —a focus on fewer units, each with specific roles and special abilities; a minimal economic subgame; and four sides, each with distinct gameplay mechanics. But there are a few twists: Resources are earned—and games are won—by simply holding locations on the map. You do a lot of the building directly from the units themselves, which are controlled as squads rather than ragtag drag-selected mobs. You can complement squads with leaders and heavy weapons, and you replenish them wherever they are, instead of herding in a string of reinforcements that roll out from a barracks. Even more so than *WarCraft III*, *Dawn of War* knows you'd rather click on your units instead of a bunch of buildings. It obliges you early and often.

Roll up your sleeves and plunge your arms elbow-deep into the smoke, dirt, and guts, because the battles are interactive and tactical. Morale plays a huge factor, and it's done in a way that doesn't shut you out of the game. When a squad gets freaked out by heavy losses, snipers, or flamethrowers, you don't lose control of them. Instead, red circles pulse under their feet, indicating that their attacks aren't doing any good. Unless you need meat shields to soak up damage, you'll want to move them away to let them recover. This is one of the many examples of *Dawn of War* striking a careful balance between micromanagement and tactics.

PLEASE, WARHAMMER! DON'T HURT 'EM!

In addition, nearly every unit can be ordered to hang back and fire guns or charge into melee. A lot of the learning curve involves knowing when to do this and with whom. It's also up to you to throw grenades, plant antivehicle bombs, put your troops behind cover and out of exposed areas, stop them so they can set up their heavy guns, and fire turbo boosters to rush them across the map. Make no mistake, this isn't a game like *Kohan* or *Rise of Nations*, where the A.I. will play for you. You call the shots, and your troops live or die based on what you do.

Delicately flambéed marines. Delicious.

There's a sort of loose infantry/archer/cavalry balance going on, with guns trumping melee fighters, who trump guys with jetpacks, who trump guns. Things get shaken up quite a bit when you mix in badass leaders, mental powers, orbital drops, and teleportation. Then in the mid- to late game, vehicles come along...and all bets are off. Every game tends to have a spectacular "Oh, crap!" moment when the first vehicle rolls out—or stomps out, since many of them are giant robots—and starts chewing up infantry. Suddenly, the rules have changed...and they will again when the end-game überpower for each race comes into play.

FUNKY HEADHUNTERS

The icing on the cake is the *Warhammer* license, which wrenches fantasy clichés from their medieval roots and violently flings them into grungy sci-fi. The tone here is darkly humorous—character types include raucous Cockney orks, devout space marines, fanatic chaos marines, and spaced-out elven eldar. Their distinct visual styles are just as dramatic as the gameplay differences; *Dawn of War's* artwork is top-notch, rendered with an awe-inspiring graphics engine and brought alive by some of the most vivid animation this side of the latest first-person shooters. The mangling, the explosion-flung bodies, the fried brains, the clanking metal, and the smashed tanks all manage to bring you closer to the action, if not visually, then at least viscerally. Most RTS games are played from the aloof perspective of a god or general, but *Dawn of War* pulls you down into the breathing and sweating and cussing and bleeding. It feels antsy, maybe a little pissed off, daring you to get in there and swing a chain sword or let loose with a flamethrower. You'll get *Dawn of War* for the animation and the graphics, for the gratifying thump of metal on flesh. But like the most enduring games, you'll ultimately stay for the gameplay. **Tom Chick**

A shot of pure-grade real-time strategy adrenaline straight into the veins.

Verdict ★★★★½
Get it for the graphics, stay for the gameplay.

PUBLISHER: **Sierra** DEVELOPER: **Irrational Games** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 5GB install, 32MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.5GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **LAN, Internet (2-32 players)**

Tribes: Vengeance

Warning! Newcomers will be shot. Repeatedly

Float like a butterfly....

***Tribes* is the first-person shooter of choice for elitists. In more democratic shooters, such as *Unreal Tournament 2004* or *Joint Operations*, anyone can jump in and get a few kills—gratification is quick and easy. But *Tribes* calls for practice, patience, and lot more than just WASD. Your speed is a matter of how well you can finesse skiing down slopes, and jetpacks add a potentially confusing vertical element to the game. Your choice of weapons and packs also makes a huge difference, and base defense is a vital part of teamwork. The newest in the series, *Tribes: Vengeance*, does nothing to change this dynamic.**

DEAD AGAIN

So the good news is the bad news: This is as demanding as the previous games, with just as much variety and depth. Newbies jumping on to servers will have to power through the frustration of a player base that looks like a few sharks in a pool full of minnows. Without bot support or any sort of skirmish mode, and with a single-player mode that has almost nothing to do with the multiplayer game, the learning curve is a short, sharp slide into the deep end with the sharks. Which means the sharks will be having a grand ol' time.

Of course, the longer you play, the greater the sense of accomplishment as you improve. But as gaming gets more mainstream and more democratic, it's hard to

Piloting a fighter is kids' play.

***Tribes*...now with ninjas!**

Heavy armor does, in fact, look heavy.

imagine many new players being drawn to a game with this steep of an entry barrier. It's particularly disappointing that Irrational Games used the *Unreal* engine for its graphics but declined to use that engine's excellent bot support. This would have given less dedicated players a chance to enjoy *Tribes*' depth and breadth. But by the time you read this review, the online *Tribes* community will probably consist of a hardened core of skilled players who will slap you down before you can even get up.

BLAND SOLO

The single-player game isn't much of a selling point. It's brief and clunky, hamstrung by several problems. The art design is wonderful, with distinct architecture for the Imperials and the different tribes. But the level design is dull (unlike the clever and distinct multiplayer maps), consisting of long corridors strewn with fake doors and linear A-then-B-then-C goals across open maps. There are plenty of hackneyed tricks, like triggers to spawn enemies out of closets or "Hold off X waves of attackers while I hack this door!" A few defense missions let you place deployable items, which give the action some distinct *Tribes* flavor. There are also some satisfying missions in which you drive a floaty vehicle through a gauntlet, blowing up lots of stuff along the way.

Next to managing movement, the main challenge of the single-player game is choosing which weapons to carry in your three available slots. Since the weapons differ dramatically, and since you can pick up an enemy's guns, this gives the action some flexibility and forces you to make meaningful choices. But this challenge is minimized because the A.I. has a hard time navigating the levels in any meaningful way. Bad guys fly around willy-nilly, trying to shoot through walls, blowing each other away with spinfusors, and setting each other on fire with burners. And, of course, there's the first-person-shooter trademark of sniping some guy while his buddy hangs out three feet away as if nothing had happened. The latter part of the game relies on cheap ambushes with turrets, mines, and hidden enemies. Then there are the boss fights—although thankfully, there isn't a final boss fight, leaving no open hook on which to hang a sequel.

Running the gauntlet.

The new assault ship looks as nice as everything else in the game.

The multiplayer learning curve is a short, sharp slide into the deep end with the sharks.

OPERA BUFFO

The single-player game is tied together by a desultory operatic story line that might have sounded great on paper but looks silly in the cut-scenes. Games very well could be ready for emotionally charged stories about love, betrayal, and familial obligation, but with titles like *The Sims 2* demonstrating how expressive the latest graphics can be, *Tribes*' fidgety polygonal puppets are an absurd cartoonish throwback. The magnitude of the story's tragic twists just doesn't hold up with these little figures shifting their weight back and forth, making idle gestures and staring blankly.

However, if you're a *Tribes* fan who just wants to see the old community revived, *Vengeance* should do it. Expect a small base of dedicated and skilled players killing each other and discouraging newcomers, just like in the good old days.

Tom Chick

Verdict ★★★½☆

Practice and frustration followed by depth and variety.

When I say "jump jet," you say "How high?"

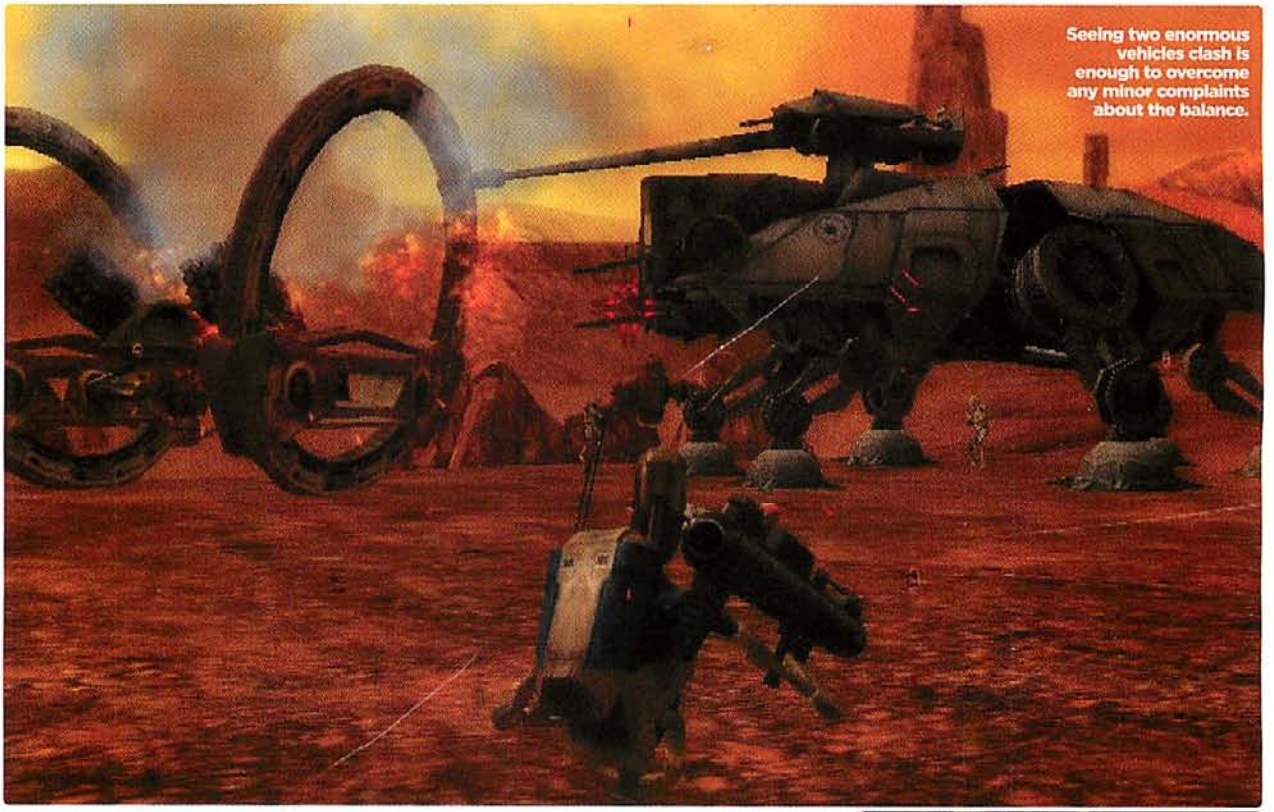
HOOK, LINE, AND SLINGER

The jetpacks and skiing already made *Tribes* unlike anything you've played before. But the new grappling hook adds a hint of Spider-Man's webslinging, introducing a welcome twist to the jumping puzzles in the single-player game. The grappler is particularly important for multiplayer on indoor maps such as Detritus and especially Cavern, where a skilled player can bring the flag home without ever touching the ground. Excelsior!

PUBLISHER: **LucasArts Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Pandemic Studios** GENRE: **FPS** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 3GB install, broadband Internet connection** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-32 players)**

Star Wars Battlefront

Clone Wars



Seeing two enormous vehicles clash is enough to overcome any minor complaints about the balance.

Your enjoyment of *Star Wars Battlefront* will depend entirely on how much the subject matter appeals to you. If you gave up on all things *Star Wars* a long time ago, in some game far, far away, or never cared to begin with, *Battlefront* won't win you over. But if you think a moderately fun *Battlefield 1942* clone set in the *Star Wars* universe sounds like a great idea, I have some very good news for you: *Battlefront* is a moderately fun *Battlefield 1942* clone set in the *Star Wars* universe.

LIGHT SIDE, DARK SIDE

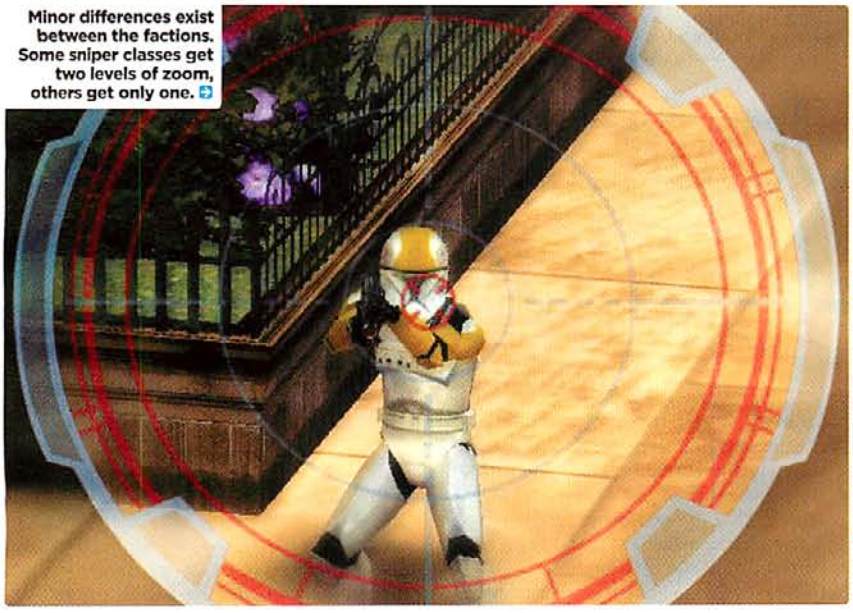
If this sounds like a backhanded compliment, it isn't. *Battlefront* does exactly what it sets out to do, and does it fairly well. You get to fight in battles from both the original *Star Wars* trilogy and the more recent prequels, playing factions from both periods. In the "historical" battles, those based on the newer films, you can play as the Republic or the CIS. For battles from the later period, you fight for the Rebel Alliance or the Galactic Empire.

This seems like a wide array of choices, but it isn't. Only two factions are available for any given battle, and each faction has roughly the same types of units. There's a basic infantry soldier, a sniper, a heavy weapons soldier, and a pilot. Each faction also has a specialized infantry unit with a unique ability: The Empire's dark trooper has a jetpack that allows it to fly in brief bursts, the Republic's jet trooper has the same ability, the Rebels' Wookiee smuggler has timed detonation bombs, and the CIS's droideka has a shield.

The overall similarity between the factions is actually a good thing. Though there are slight differences—the CIS's infantry unit, for instance, is more powerful than the Republic's—the similarity of the units helps to keep things balanced and familiar, while the slight differences keep things interesting.

The ground fights like this are fine, but the real fun is in the vehicular combat.

Tauntauns aren't good for much of anything but getting across the map quickly or getting their riders killed.



Minor differences exist between the factions. Some sniper classes get two levels of zoom, others get only one.

Most maps have plenty of choke points that basically become kill zones as players continually respawn and return to them.

The starships, like this X-wing, are the least fun of the vehicles available. They don't do much good against ground troops, and fighting other starships is strategically useless.

THE PHANTOM BALANCE

The vehicles, on the other hand, are anything but balanced. The Empire has the enormous AT-ATs at its disposal, while the Rebels are stuck with snowspeeders and tauntauns. Things are slightly more balanced in the historical battles. The Republic has the AT-AT-like AT-TEs, while the CIS has huge, rolling hailfires that shoot missiles, and Spiders, which have beam weapons and move around like their namesake.

At first, the vehicular disparity can be a bit frustrating since troop allocations are based on movie scenarios. On the Hoth map, for example, the powerful AT-ATs can easily guard the Rebel spawn points, making it almost impossible for Rebel soldiers to survive very long. And AT-ATs act as spawn points themselves, giving the Empire a constant stream of reinforcements. It's true to the movie, but that doesn't stop it from being annoying. Still, the vehicles are what make the game fun. While there are some terrific ground fights to be had, the vehicles make it feel like *Star Wars*, and weakening the mammoth machines would have only made the game feel less epic. The only poorly implemented vehicles are the ships (such as X-wings and TIE fighters), which don't do much good against ground troops, and there's little strategic advantage to just blasting each other out of the sky.

The starships are even more problematic on computers without high-end videocards. Even on a moderately new card, ground detail is almost nil from medium altitude, meaning you have to fly very low to see enemy troops on the ground. The graphics, though generally good, cause problems in other areas. On Endor, riding the speeder bikes can be a huge problem, as foliage (including trees and dead logs) pops up at very close distances, making for a dangerous ride (the foliage does make for great camouflage for foot troops, especially the earth-tone-clad Rebels). The more spacious maps, like Hoth and Geonosis, with their huge, flat plains, don't have this visibility problem.

STAR TOURS

The maps cover all the famous locations, including Tatooine, Naboo, Hoth, Bespin, and Endor, and some less famous places, like Kashyyk, Geonosis, Rhen Var, and Kamino. The best maps give you plenty of space and vehicles; the closer combat maps aren't quite as great. Even the wide-open maps generally have some sort of choke point where ground troops can ostensibly hide from vehicles. But these typically just become death traps, as one side or another stakes them out and kills any opposition that appears there. On tighter maps, such as Mos Eisley, the choke points are numerous, and huge battles can be waged just to gain inches down a small street.

There are several single-player modes available, but *Battlefront* is meant to be played with other people. The single player acts as good practice for the online, but it gets boring quickly because of the predictable artificial intelligence. *Battlefront* gives fans a perfectly good way to act out their fantasies of being a grunt in either of the series' wars. And for those who feel like Lucas has been spitting on their childhood memories, *Battlefront* allows you to shoot Gungans and Ewoks, so you can feel you are part of a more epic fight: one for the integrity of the franchise. **Ron Dulin**

Verdict ★★★½☆

If the recent movies haven't killed your *Star Wars* enthusiasm, then you'll find *Battlefront* to be a good multiplayer shooter.

Battlefront gives fans a perfectly good way to act out their fantasies of being a grunt in either of the series' wars.

AT-ATs can be taken down by snowspeeders using a towrope, but they are still fairly difficult to defeat.

The game lets you visit plenty of famous locales, from the forests of Endor and the tundra of Hoth to the city streets of Naboo.

PUBLISHER: **EA Sports** DEVELOPER: **EA Redwood Shores** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 500, 128MB RAM, 2GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 512MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-8 players)**

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005

Even Robert Coffey likes it

Golf is the only sport in which spectators whisper as if they were in a library. No wonder many view computer golf sims as sedate and even boring games. And unless you're a golf fanatic, these people have pretty much been right. Until now.

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005 has the audacity to make a golf sim a *game*, and a great one that's packed with a variety of entertaining game modes and features. Serious golf fans needn't worry: There's a hardcore golf simulation here with superb physics and everything the advanced PC golfer could desire, including play against a variety of PGA tour pros in a plethora of standard golf formats. Add to that stunningly beautiful graphics and a TV-style presentation. But what makes *Tiger Woods 2005* the golf game for the masses is the additional features that go beyond "straight" golf sim offerings.

The new Game Face II is a supercharged version of last year's utility, letting you create and tweak the appearance of your players all the way down to the depth of crow's feet around the eyes. Your new virtual duffer is immersed in a world of options. Take lessons to develop new skills or play a series of matches in which you attempt to win your way up a pyramid of colorful opponents, with the goal of taking on the legends of the game (Nicklaus, Hogan, etc.) and ultimately facing Tiger himself. As in most of the game modes, winning results in unlocking more goodies (such as new playing equipment, apparel, and game options). You can enter a series of skills challenges, such as a closest-to-the-pin contest or a putting challenge on extremely difficult greens. Design a Dream 18 course and modify it in an attempt to lure famous pros onto your course for a match. Or play out a full season of tournaments (herein lies the one major flaw: The user-modifiable custom season mode of previous *Tiger Woods* versions is missing). Sadly, there is no course architect, although EA promises it as a downloadable feature in the near future.

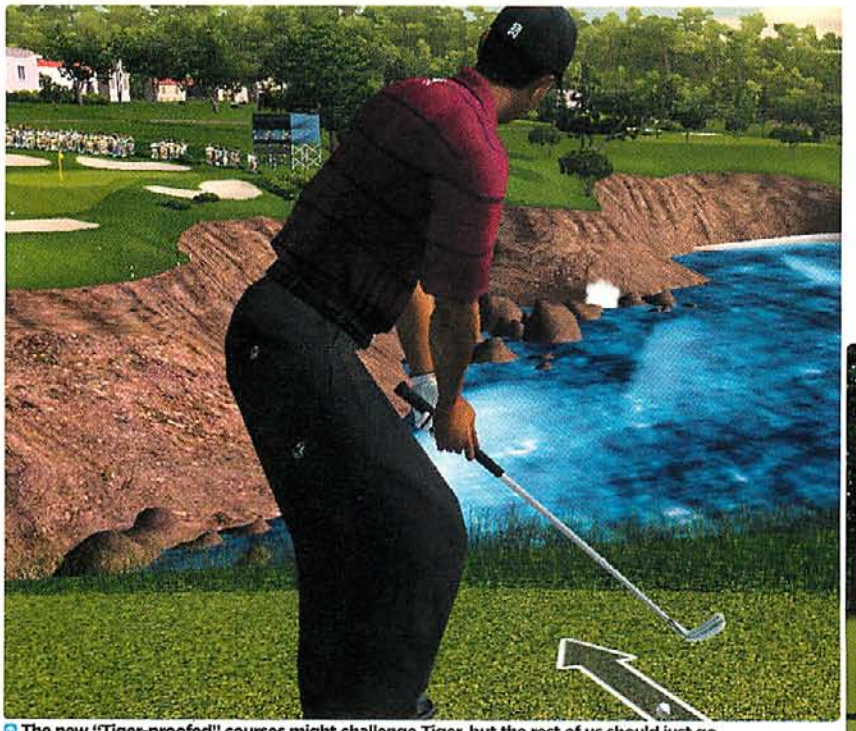
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005 has the audacity to make a golf sim a game, and a great one.

The new look of the LPGA.

A few of the new features, such as the wilder-looking opponents and the occasional exuberant dances on the green, may feel a bit too "console-y" for some hardcore computer golfers, but PC golf fans will find a lot to like here. Even more important, those who've never played a computer golf sim may discover that this is one of their favorite games of the year in any genre. **Jeff Lackey**

Verdict ★★★★½

More than a great golf sim, it's a great game.



The new "Tiger-proofed" courses might challenge Tiger, but the rest of us should just go ahead and throw our ball in the water.

Hmm, looks like it breaks a little to the right.

RUNAWAY COASTERS, SCREAMING KIDS, AND NO LIMITS- it's so cool when you control it all

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PUBLISHER: **EA Sports** DEVELOPER: **EA Canada** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700MHz, 128MB RAM (256MB for Windows XP and Windows 2000), 32MB videocard, 1.3GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, gamepad** MULTIPLAYER: **Hotseat, Internet (2 players)**

FIFA Soccer 2005

Less sim, more fun

Andriy Shevchenko isn't the only player who can regularly do this.

Until this year's release of Konami's *Winning Eleven 7 International*, EA's *FIFA* series was the final word on the subject of PC soccer action games. This year's iteration of EA's juggernaut boasts some surprising gameplay refinements and an extended and improved career mode. In the process, the game has actually moved further away from being a soccer simulation but paradoxically closer to what *FIFA* has always been: a good time that sacrifices realism for flash in the name of style.

The new gameplay focuses on polishing the controls and ball movement to create a whole game flow in which players regularly perform technical feats that would have made Johan Cruyff proud. The animations and models are stunning, and the controls are such that competitive play on the highest level is simply a series of highlight clips strung together. Of course, this has been the hallmark of the series: Every aspect is hyperreal, right down to the signature soundtrack.

Career gameplay has been extended to 15 seasons, and there are a host of improvements, including staff management and a job-security rating that changes with your results. In short, there's a lot more to do outside the matches.

FIFA 2005 is a slick and highly enjoyable production, and what it lacks in realism, it makes up for in pure entertainment value. While Konami will have the last word with soccer purists, the *FIFA* series has successfully evolved to the point where it no is longer competing on those terms. **Bruce Geryk**

Verdict ★★★★☆

Taking soccer in a hockey direction.

PUBLISHER: **EA Sports** DEVELOPER: **EA Tiburon** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800, 128MB RAM, 2GB install, 32MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **LAN, Internet, 2-4 players**

Madden NFL 2005

Are you ready for some football?

PC football fans don't have a plethora of choices when it comes to NFL games these days. You can either pick *Madden*, or you can opt for *Madden*. Thank the gridiron gods that with each new season, the good folks at EA roll out some new whiz-bang features that are sure to dazzle those fat guys who go shirtless at Bears games.

NO-HUDDLE OFFENSE

Once inside the game, fans will find some nice new goods to savor. The most practical are the new defensive adjustments you can make before the snap. *Madden* vets know that reading an offense is half the battle, and blitzing the right linebacker, double-teaming a receiver, or shifting the secondary coverage just so can make a huge difference.

The second main gameplay add-on for this year is the hit stick, which only works if you have a dual-analog gamepad. By pushing the right stick at the precise time and in the right direction, you can lay a very heavy hit on an opposing player. Nice idea, but not very practical. It's too easy to miss tackles if you use it, and I just forgot about it after attempting to use it for a while.

The new additions to the franchise mode are actually pretty good, although they may sound silly on paper. Now PC managers can get team and league news through newspapers and radio personality Tony Bruno's show. Player morale also weighs very heavily and can affect not only their performance, but also their ultimate worth to another team if you want to dump them.

BROKEN PLAY

Strangely, the computer A.I. will set up for an extra play when the game clock would've expired—not a big deal, but awkward. Also, the audio blurbs in the game from Madden and Al Michaels can cut in and out at strange times, with Michaels often talking over himself. Luckily, you can turn the broadcast booth blather off. To its credit, though, *Madden* still looks great and runs well, even on a midrange PC. You don't need a barnburner system to get all of the eye candy.

In the console world, Sega's ESPN sports line is challenging EA Sports' dominance. On

In the console world, Sega's *ESPN* sports line is challenging EA Sports' dominance. On the PC, we're left without any option plays. Don't get us wrong. There's plenty of good stuff in the latest *Madden*, but it's not as juicy as his Thanksgiving turducken. This 15-year veteran scores extra points with its new franchise mode goodies, and although the new gameplay features are welcome, especially the presnap defensive adjustments, there are some odd quirks that detract from the overall experience. *Madden 2005* doesn't make any huge leaps forward in the gameplay experience, but after so many years, firing up the latest *Madden* game is like putting on your favorite team jersey to watch the Sunday game—it might not smell springtime fresh, but it sure feels comfortable. **John Marrin**

Fins quarterback AJ Feeley will be feeling this hit for the rest of the week.

You don't need a barnburner system to get all of *Madden*'s eye candy.

Verdict ★★★★★

Stop kidding yourself, you know you're going to buy it anyway, you NFL geek.

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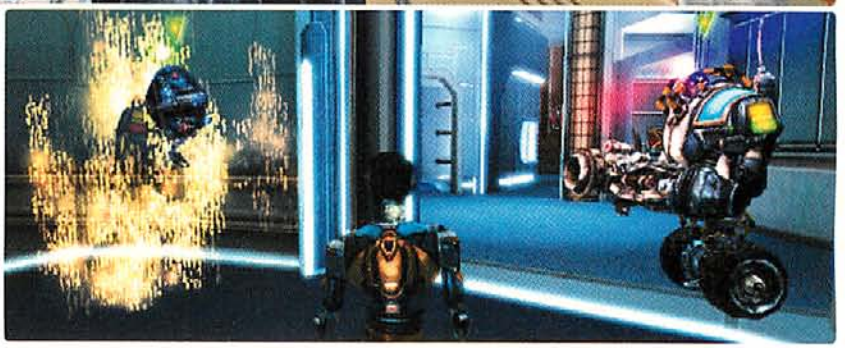
PUBLISHER: **Enlight** DEVELOPER: **Mercury Steam** GENRE: **Action-Adventure** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 1.7GB install, 32MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-4 players)**

American McGee Presents Scrapland

And we present our review



Had American McGee's name been, say, Joe Smith, *American McGee Presents Scrapland* would, no doubt, have a much shorter title. *Scrapland* is the work of Spanish developer Mercury Steam, with McGee (the former Id level designer who jumped to name-in-the-title status with his first solo outing, *American McGee's Alice*) joining the project late in the game to add some marquee value and bring it to the American (so to speak) market.

Whoever ultimately was responsible for *Scrapland*, the end result is a remarkably entertaining third-person action/adventure/flying game. It's become standard reviewer shorthand to compare free-ranging games like this to *Grand Theft Auto*, and for good reason. While it wasn't the first "open city" game, *GTA* popularized the subgenre and serves as an effective comparison. And it works for *Scrapland*, where the "city" is a set of neighborhoods on a planet created from scraps and entirely populated by robots. A junk-built robot culture has evolved, complete with laws, religion, government, and murder. This world is one of *Scrapland*'s most appealing elements, both completely familiar in its shape (with its shady underworld, government corruption, and muckraking newspapers) and wildly original in its particulars. Whether you're following the strands of the robot-noir plot or trying to pick up spare credits by completing crazy challenges, the original art design and wide array of funny and original characters keep the experience fresh and engaging.

YO, ROBOT

This originality doesn't stop at the milieu. The gameplay itself strikes sparks within its open-ended structure. The story casts you in the role of D-Tritus, a robot new to the planet, and establishes the gameplay patterns fairly quickly. D-Tritus traverses the inside world (buildings and their immediate surroundings) on foot and uses a custom-built spacecraft to navigate the highways and airspace above and between cities. Both elements use simple, fluid controls and largely unobtrusive third-person perspectives.

But there's more to it than blasting through some robot city. D-Tritus has the ability to instantly "rewrite" his code at special terminals, transforming himself into one of 15 different robot models. He can also morph by simply touch-

D-Tritus can change into a wide array of different robot types at special terminals.

Flying, shooting, what's not to love?

ing another robot, an act that's against the law since it destroys the unlucky target. Each robot model has one or two unique characteristics (fighting, slowing down time, flying, fitting into small spaces, and so forth), which are useful not only for navigating the world and gaining access to restricted spaces, but also for advancing the plot. Sometimes you have to be a particular character in order to do or get something. And while some of these models are geared toward fighting, relying on firepower indoors usually results in failure. The game measures just how suspicious law enforcement is of you. Assault, loitering, morphing, and other crimes will trigger an alert that lasts until the police kill you or you effectively evade them.

The other main gameplay element is vehicular, as you buy and upgrade a ship for a variety of different missions. Sometimes the action is straight aerial combat in the expansive skies of the cities. Other times you may partake in a particular challenge, from a one-on-one arena fight to a race through the cities. Victories can earn you scrap credits (the currency used for buying ship upgrades), new design plans, or information. You can have up to nine different ships, each with unique equipment and handling.

GRINDING GEARS

There are definitely rough edges to the game and a few bothersome (if not show-stopping) bugs. One reloaded saved game displayed a completely black room, and other graphic flakiness intrudes on the action now and then. One mission requires you to "call" a crazy gambler for some information, but the call seems to work only from a single communication center. Plus, you have to actually call: You won't get the information you need if you go to see him in person. Some of the dialogue has not made a particularly smooth leap into English. The voice for D-Tritus slides into a strangely jarring accent at points; there are odd mispronunciations, mismatched voice and text, and characters saying the same name in different ways. For the most part, however, the voice acting adds to the experience. It is done with a light touch, and some good voices call to mind the original BBC *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. (The similarity is close enough in places that it had to be deliberate.)

Scrapland is a big game with large (and often confusing) indoor layouts and vast open spaces, each with a distinct look and atmosphere. Dozens of different missions and jobs are available, and a mission screen tracks how far you've gotten in each one. The free-ranging gameplay and active environments, coupled with an original sense of style and plenty of robot and ship types, combine to make *Scrapland* a long and satisfying experience. **Thomas L. McDonald**

In his original form, D-Tritus has a charging attack that can do serious damage. He can also destroy another robot simply by touching it, but this consumes more power and turns him into whomever he touched.

The original art design and wide array of funny and original characters keep the experience fresh and engaging.

Verdict ★★★★☆

An original and entertaining open-ended action-adventure game.

In the expansive outside world, D-Tritus can fly around at his leisure, picking random fights or completing challenges and missions.

Firing on anyone in sight of police will lead to an alarm state; law enforcement will converge on your position until you're dead or manage to evade them.

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** GENRE: **Adventure/Puzzle** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM (256MB RAM required for Windows XP), 3GB install, 32MB videocard, DVD-ROM drive** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 8GB install** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Myst IV: Revelation

So good, they could have called it *Myst IV: Redemption*

The requisite drop-dead gorgeous *Myst* graphics.

More monkeylike things than in any previous *Myst* game!

The original bad boyz of *Myst* have returned. Sirrus and Achenar, once only able to demand red and blue pages, take a more active role in *Myst IV: Revelation*. Their escape from their father Atrus' prison Ages is only the beginning, as they proceed to lead you on a chase across four Ages, leaving a trail of earthquakes, explosions, bizarre inventions, and dead monkey things. Yes—dead monkey things. They're called mangrees. It's up to you to follow the clues and put the pieces together to solve a kidnapping and a 20-year-old conspiracy—and let's stop there so we don't spoil the rest of the story.

OLD RELIABLE

Myst IV steadfastly adheres to its basic gameplay model. You have the familiar first-person view, with a hand cursor that changes depending on the hotspot it brushes over. Like in *Myst III*, you have the ability to completely examine whatever area you find yourself in, the picturesque scenery presented in a panoramic view. However, the "hotspot hunting" persists as the most vexing drawback of this otherwise venerable system. Trying to crack the combination of Achenar's lake house lock is a puzzle. Trying to find that elusive exit hotpot is just annoying.

Still, *Myst IV* has made a few tweaks in an effort to improve. For instance, you now carry a camera with you, which proves useful for snapping pictures of clues you might want to refer to later, or you can simply use it to take screenshots.

Another notable feature is the in-game hint guide. If you access this feature, you may select your level of help, from general clues to having the entire solution spelled out for you. Not that real adventure gamers need such things. (*cough* *cough*)

What kind of *Myst* game would it be without exotic machinery?

STORYBOOKS

The story line is compelling, often presented as flashbacks channeled through a mysterious amulet that has the power to display strong memories left on objects. You will find it invaluable as you track Sirrus and Achenar and visit the places they have been and left their mark. You will also find the plot revealed by NPCs who, as in the previous *Myst* games, talk at you, offering hints or plot points. Maybe in the next game, you will finally be able to talk back.

Probably the most significant improvement over past *Myst* games is a stronger integration of the story with the puzzles. In *Myst III*, solving a puzzle most often meant a rewarding bit of animation or eye candy, and just maybe a piece of the story. In *Revelations*, the puzzles are just that: revealing. Encountering a puzzle more often than not sets off the memory amulet, giving you a vision containing hints and pieces of the story. Solving the puzzle then reveals new items and locations that set off more flashbacks, thereby uncovering more of the plot.

For those into adventure games, *Myst IV: Revelation* is a must. Fans of the series with the required DVD drive and the patience and brain cells demanded by the extremely challenging puzzles will find this game to be, well, a revelation.

Stephen Gehringer

Verdict ★★★★☆

If you're into challenging adventures, then there is no excuse to avoid this time-devouring temptation.

The most significant improvement over past *Myst* games is a stronger integration of the story with the puzzles.

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PUBLISHER: **Tri Synergy** DEVELOPER: **Ascaron/ExDream** GENRE: **Action-RTS** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 32MB videocard, 80MB install** RECOMMENDED: **256MB RAM, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-8 players)**

Arena Wars

An RTS for the action-game crowd

Not defending your power plant will lead to this.

Once I grab the flag, it's time to use the power-ups on the right to seal my victory.

Arena Wars presents a different take on real-time-strategy games by forgoing the often plodding building and farming components of the genre and focusing on fast-paced battles; in fact, the speed at which these matches takes place makes the game more of a _Doom_-like twitchfest than a typical RTS.

Players start with $1,000 and choose from among six unit types costing $50 to $175. When a weapon is destroyed, the player recoups its cost; therefore, new units can be built each time one is lost. Each round takes about 15 minutes and requires you to constantly survey the board in order to create new units, seize power-ups, and defend against attacks—it's the fastest RTS you're likely to find.

WATCH YOUR BACK

Arena Wars includes capture the flag, bombing run (players pick up a bomb, take it to an enemy base, and hold the position for 20 seconds), and double domination (players must hold two positions on the game map) modes. In all modes, players must protect both a base and a power plant—destroying an opponent's power plant causes a series of explosions at his base. Every map is strewn with a variety of power-ups: Some will improve the attributes of your own units (making them faster, temporarily invincible, or able to cause more damage), but even more useful are the items you use on your opponent. You can slow down units or have them come under fire from a number of different attacks. And when the battle seems sure to be lost, you can bust out the insanity power-up, causing your opponent to lose control of a unit, so instead of stealing your flag, the affected unit will turn on his comrades. Since you can hold only five power-ups at a time, and they regenerate at set places on the map, players are encouraged to regularly use and acquire power-ups rather than hoard them.

The mix of unit types, power-ups, and attack points allows for an almost limitless number of strategies. Sometimes, rushing an opponent's base with a large number of small, quick vehicles works; other times, using artillery pieces to shell the power plant is a better move. The A.I. and online players (its early European release has resulted in some hardcore players) will throw new kinds of attacks at you, so you can never stick with one scheme for too long.

But that's a good thing, because *Arena Wars* is the sort of game that will keep you coming back for one more match, one more challenge, one satisfying, frenzied victory after another. **Tom Edwards**

Verdict ★★★★☆

***Arena Wars* offers a great, replayable mix of strategy and action.**

PUBLISHER: **The Adventure Company** DEVELOPER: **XXv Productions** GENRE: **Adventure** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 450, 128MB RAM, 970MB install** RECOMMENDED: **256MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Dark Fall II: Lights Out

Creative spark that's not just a flash in the pan

An exploration crew in A.D. 2090 vanished as quickly as the lighthouse crew of 1912 did—and they left just as many clues behind for you to follow.

Despite a lack of high-budget flash, game developer Jonathan Boakes lights up his _Dark Fall_ adventure game series with ingenious ghost stories, organic puzzles, and a deluge of details that reflect unique time periods. If you're not averse to a Macromedia slideshow interface and low-res graphics, then _Dark Fall 2: Lights Out_ is an eerie trip to a Cornish harbor that's well worth taking.

You are a young cartographer sent to the harbor town of Trewarthan in 1912 to map its coastline, but you're quickly drawn into local lore concerning a haunted lighthouse. You can see this lighthouse from the shore even though it doesn't show up on any of the current maps, and when its light goes out and its crew goes missing, you feel compelled to row over and investigate.

Like in the previous *Dark Fall*, the creepy sound effects and British voiceovers are spot on, and once again, there is plenty of ghost hunting to do. A new element has been introduced in the form of time travel, allowing for some clever plot twists. Visiting Trewarthan in 2090 B.C. and A.D. 2090, as well as in the initial 1912 setting, gives more background on the *Dark Fall* entity and reveals surprises about your character as well.

The original *Dark Fall's* puzzles required note taking and code breaking, and I'd recommend sharpening up that pencil again. You'll be breaking into antiquated private quarters and storage areas, exposing clues by using ghost-hunting equipment, and activating space probes and high-tech gear. You will also find that, like last time, the answers are there for you, as long as you're diligent in your exploring.

I wish The Adventure Company would give Boakes a bigger budget for the upcoming finale to his *Dark Fall* trilogy, but since it has already halted Jane Jensen's planned big-budget adventure, *Gray Matter*, it doesn't seem likely. That's unfortunate, too, because with a better game engine and higher-quality visuals, a new five-star adventure could easily emerge from the dark. **Denice Cook**

Verdict ★★★★☆

***Dark Fall 2* is as uniquely unnerving as its predecessor.**

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Team Alpha, about to move out.

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Pandemic** GENRE: **Flanking Edutainment** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 1.8GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Broadband Internet (2 players)**

Full Spectrum Warrior

Aka *DMZ Crossing Guard*

***Full Spectrum Warrior* is an odd bird. It looks like a squad-based third-person shooter along the lines of *Ghost Recon* or *Raven Shield*. It's advertised as more of a fast-paced strategy game—an action title for the dreaded "thinking man." In reality, it's neither of these things. It's essentially an abstract puzzle game encased in the production values of a high-quality shooter. The novelty of it all is enough to carry the whole thing for a while, but it'll eventually dawn on you that you're playing the world's most elaborate version of tic-tac-toe.**

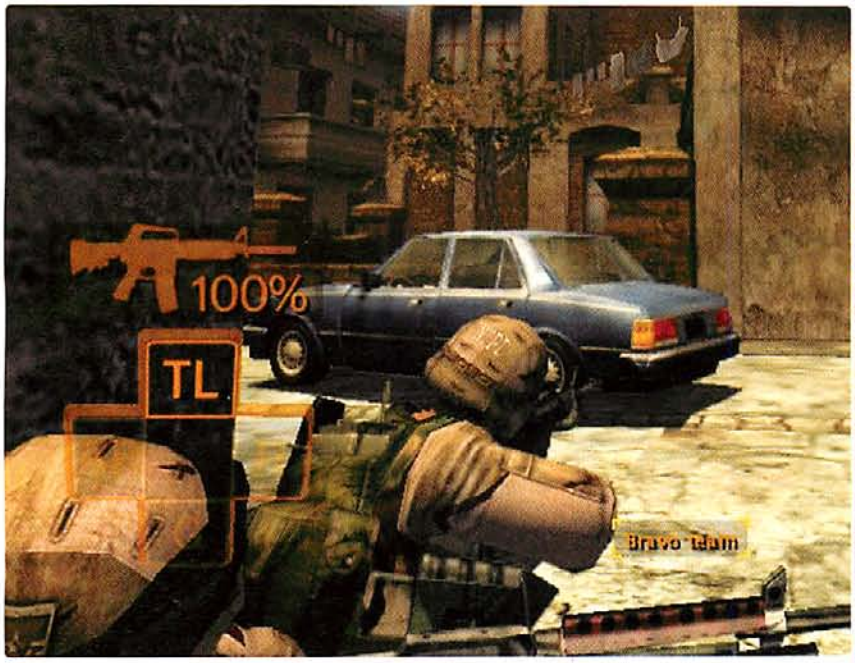
RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The game began as a training tool for the U.S. Army, and it shows. The entire experience seems designed to hammer home, through mechanical repetition, two simple lessons: Stick to cover and flank your targets. You're given control of two (and occasionally three) squads of four soldiers. Each squad moves as a unit. A mouse-controlled aiming reticule, composed of four floating circles, indicates both the position and final formation that will result from any move order. A separate icon describes the type of cover at your final destination—corner cover, obstacle cover, or no cover. You don't give your squads direct fire orders. Instead, you point them to the direction you'd like them to shoot if an enemy appears. There are several exceptions to this: You can order them to lay down a stream of ammunition-depleting suppression fire, and you can command them to toss one of their very limited supply of fragmentation or smoke grenades or fire the squad's grenade launcher.

As long as it's behind cover (represented by a shield icon above each soldier's head), a squad is completely safe from enemy fire. Enemies behind cover are similarly protected, though a well-placed grenade can kill even an entrenched "Zeke"—the Army's nickname for the inhabitants of Zekistan, the fictional Middle Eastern country that provides the game's setting.

Though the game's 13 levels each have a little story attached to them (relayed through a bunch of aggravatingly uninterruptible cut-scenes), the goal of every one is the same: Move to the next checkpoint and kill whoever gets in your way. Enemy A.I. is virtually nonexistent; every opponent is simply a stationary obstacle that periodically sprays bullets at your soldiers. An

It'll eventually dawn on you that you're playing the world's most elaborate version of tic-tac-toe.



The game's great lesson: Corners provide excellent cover.

Calling in a sitrep—military jargon for saving your game.

enemy will occasionally advance into its initial position or fall back under pressure from an advance by one of your squads, but these actions appear to be largely scripted.

FIGHTING THE LAST WAR

Taken together, the limited range of squad commands, the binary implementation of cover, and the simple enemy behaviors allow for basically two tactical situations, which are repeated throughout the entire game. Either one squad keeps an enemy occupied while the second squad flanks him for a clear shot, or one squad advances from cover to cover until an unflankable opponent is either in grenade range or retreats to a new position. At Normal difficulty, it's not necessary ever to utilize smoke grenades or suppressing fire, further reducing any requirement for tactical thought.

A big problem with this gameplay device is that there's no real way to ratchet up the difficulty from level to level, which kind of breaks one of the fundamental rules of gaming. There's no middle ground—either there's a covered path to an unobstructed shot or there isn't. And if there isn't, it's game over, so there always is. As a result, the first level of the game is, roughly speaking, no harder to complete than the last. In fact, a sniper mechanic that's introduced briefly late in the game actually makes your job easier.

THE UNIFORMS LOOK NICE, TOO

Full Spectrum Warrior's focus on movement rather than shooting is actually refreshing for a while. The elementary gameplay is also both camouflaged and somewhat redeemed by high production values. The visuals are terrific. The game engine utilizes a unique effect that blurs the edges of everything in a way that, if not exactly realistic, is undeniably striking. There's lots of serious, military-sounding squad chatter as well—and fans of salty language will be happy to learn that every character swears like he just hit his thumb with a hammer. This might even be the most foul-mouthed game ever released.

An online mode is included, in which two players can tackle the missions cooperatively, each person controlling one squad. This works, but it leaves each person with even less to do than in the already stripped-down single-player game.

With its simple controls and even simpler tactics, *Full Spectrum Warrior* might be the world's first beer-and-pretzels real-time strategy game. In fact, like the perennial barroom favorite *Golden Tee*, you can actually more or less play the game with one hand while holding a cold beverage in the other. As long as you're not expecting anything more, there's something to be said for that. Until it wears out its welcome about halfway through, *Full Spectrum Warrior* is an uncomplicated, pretty diversion. **Erik Wolpaw**

Verdict ★★★½☆

An Army training simulator that doesn't quite cut it for entertainment purposes.

Under cover. Not pictured: Lots and lots of swearing.

About to reap the deadly rewards of a successful flanking maneuver.

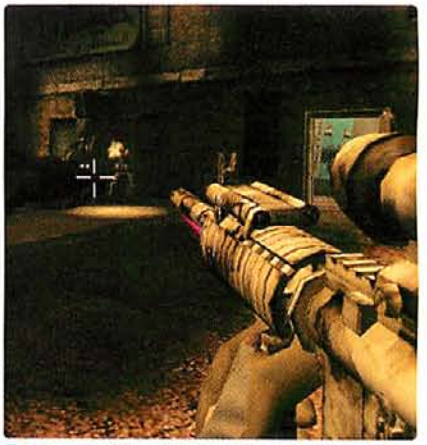
Advancing through a sandstorm.

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Zombie** GENRE: **FPS** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 4GB install, 64MB videocard, DVD-ROM drive** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-32 players)**

Shadow Ops: Red Mercury

The Chuck Norris sequel of gaming

Why do evildoers like helicopters so much?



Because of the T rating, there is a distinct lack of blood, despite the bullet-ridden carnage.

It's ironic that Atari née Infogrames, a very French company, would release a game that portrays a nuclear detonation above the Eiffel Tower. Alas, that event is the single most memorable part of *Shadow Ops: Red Mercury*, as the rest of the game is an example of sheer unremarkability.

NOT-SO-SECRET FORMULA

Shadow Ops is nothing but a plain FPS. If anything, it is much like the formulaic action movies that plagued the '80s and early '90s. You know, the ones that followed the typical cookie-cutter formula: Open with either a car chase or an explosion, introduce the female lead (who eventually becomes the love interest), cue the obligatory hostage situation, and end with the hero riding off into the sunset with the girl. *Shadow Ops* follows a similar sort of predictable routine: Show enemies who hide behind crates for cover (but do nothing else of intellectual note), have a sneaking level, be sure the hero can access a rocket launcher right before he encounters a tank, drop in a level where you dart around while avoiding a sniper, and make sure to have the player fight a badass helicopter. Oh, and don't forget to throw in some random deathmatch/CTF/escort maps for the multiplayer mode. The only way it strays at all from the FPS formula is that it's really stingy with ammunition and health.

It does nothing spectacular, nor does it do anything truly grievous.

Bang bang! This gun tries to shoot me down.

The "plot" is, as with the rest of the game, stock action-movie filler. You're some superbadass soldier. Check. There is a very mighty and imminent threat. Check. There is a nefarious villain (a bit of imagination is displayed here, as said villain is a nefarious, one-armed arms dealer) with a nuclear device. Check. You jet around the world, performing missions in a jungle (the Congo), the snow (Russia), war-torn buildings (Syria), a train, and a major landmark. Check. To be fair, *Shadow Ops* does the decent trick of starting the game at the "end" (when the red mercury is detonated) and rewinding the clock back a ways to let players experience everything that leads up to the opening explosion.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Don't forget that not only is it an FPS from the FPS factory, but it's also a port of a console game. This means you get no in-game save system (again, to its credit, the 25 levels are pretty short, each lasting no more than half an hour), and you get the paradox of a higher-resolution game that looks worse than the console version (due to bland textures and character models). *Shadow Ops* also inherits the clunky, imprecise controls of an Xbox stick, despite using the mouse like any other PC game.

Shadow Ops is just so very average. It does nothing spectacular, nor does it do anything truly grievous. For every time you encounter dumb A.I. or lame scripting, there's an equal chance of seeing decent-looking explosions or engaging in fast-paced shooting action. There are much better games to spend your money on, but there are much worse games to waste your money on. **Thierry Nguyen**

Verdict ★★½☆☆

An FPS that just kinda sits there on your hard drive.

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PUBLISHER: **The Adventure Company** DEVELOPER: **Revistronic** GENRE: **Adventure** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 850MHz, 128MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 901MB install** RECOMMENDED: **256MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Wanted: A Wild Western Adventure

The return of Woody, er, Fenimore Fillmore

I first encountered Revistronic's *Wanted: A Wild Western Adventure*, the sequel to the 1996 cowboy cartoon adventure *3 Skulls of the Toltecs*, when the company released a playable demo of it in Spanish last June. Even though my entire Spanish vocabulary consists of working at "el desko," I made it through the demo of what was at that time titled *Fenimore Fillmore: The Westerner* just fine. This is largely because the inventory puzzles were logical and earthy enough to make clear what was required, despite the language barrier. I was also spurred on by the fully 3D point-and-click game's likable cowboy hero, Fenimore Fillmore. He had returned from the original *Toltecs* game and now bore more than a passing resemblance to the effervescent Woody from Pixar's *Toy Story* movie. Fenimore's many facial expressions were entertaining (courtesy of PICTuRE, Revistronic's new proprietary gaming engine), and I was hoping that when the U.S. version was released, I would be able to enjoy Fenimore's conversations as well.

Unfortunately the American voice acting in *Wanted* ranges from barely decent to flapjack flat, even though the dialogues themselves are well translated and humorous. The story of a cattle owner's tyranny over local farmers (who rebel with Fenimore's help) is somewhat thin, and stereotypical characters abound. However, the elements I saw in the demo are still there. The visuals and cut-scenes are vividly colorful and entertaining. An abundance of locales and inventory items are connected to life in the Old West. Most of the puzzles, like stealing apparel from a doctor to impersonate him or using well water to grow carrots to feed to your horse, emerge sensibly from the surroundings. Backtracking for items necessary to solve puzzles will drive you crazy, though, unless you grab everything you see from every location the first time you're there. Even so, you'll wind up repeatedly tromping across town to send telegrams for more money as you find new contacts.

Several arcade sequences occur as the game progresses. You'll be catching a fish as well as completing some timed carnival-style shootouts, the latter of which may have you repeating more than down-home Texas chili would, if you aren't the coordinated type.

***Wanted* pokes fun at technology; here, Fenimore uses a wireless handheld telegraph.**

Overall, *Wanted* is a fairly polished and comical game. It's too bad it didn't emulate *Toy Story* a little more, though, and provide a better plot and stellar acting. **Denice Cook**

Verdict ★★★★☆

Enjoy this decent adventure game before the Pixar lawsuits begin.

PUBLISHER: **HPS Simulations** DEVELOPER: **John Tiller** GENRE: **Real-Time Historical War Game** ESRB RATING: **None** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 200, 32MB RAM, 250MB install** RECOMMENDED: **None** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-12 players)**

War Over Vietnam

Hands-off war gaming

You have to give John Tiller credit for trying. Long known as the driving force behind Talonsoft's *Battleground* series and a long line of traditional hex-based war games on a variety of topics, Tiller has again tried to craft something unique. *War Over Vietnam* succeeds in this area, but it has the same shortcomings as Tiller's previous efforts.

The game is a simulation of the air campaign fought during the Vietnam War, which involved many huge U.S. air strikes against North Vietnam in an era before precision-guided munitions existed. It's not a flight simulator—instead, it's a detailed technical simulation of the campaign itself, with units representing flights of aircraft that maneuver on a map which looks like an air-traffic controller's screen. The technical aspects of the simulation are extremely well done and include everything from SAMs and electronic countermeasures to the ability to calculate the aspect angle at which missiles contact target aircraft.

This is as exciting as it gets.

The problem arises from the fact that, as with *Jutland*, there just isn't much to do besides simply give some orders and then watch to see whether you blew up the bridge or not (which can take several hours). Furthermore, the game's lack of personality (no pilot tracking, no linked missions, no tie to the ground war) means that it's almost impossible to get into the game unless you have a very serious interest in the subject. Even then, it's not really as much a game as it is a study tool. It's a valiant try at something new, but it needs more game and less grind. **Bruce Geryk**

Verdict ★★½☆☆

A great technical simulation that just isn't much fun.

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PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Creative Assembly** GENRE: **Strategy** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 3.5GB install, 64MB videocard, broadband connection for online play** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 768MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-6 players)**

Rome: Total War

The rise of an empire

Terrain, weather, and morale play major parts in the signature sweeping clashes of a *Total War* game.

***Rome: Total War* is a blessing for many and a disappointment for a select few. Creative Assembly has once again executed a master stroke of strategy and tactics—and yet, the detailed mechanics that vaulted the *Total War* series into *CGW*'s Hall of Fame have been toned down. *Rome: Total War* still allows players who relish details to govern provinces, turn border towns into grand cities, recruit peasants and train them into a veteran army, and methodically expand their empires through deliberate conquest—and in a bigger way than any other game. Except earlier *Total War* games, *Rome* has been designed more for the mainstream gamer than the hardcore player.**

THE GLORY OF ROME

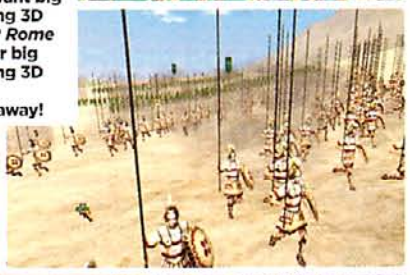
Rome is the first *Total War* game to utilize a true 3D engine. The epic battles are magnificent to behold as thousands of highly detailed polygonal units—including the Roman Hastati, the famed Armenian Cataphract cavalry, rampaging Carthaginian war elephants, and flaming pigs (yes, flaming pigs)—slug it out on beautifully rendered maps. Players disinterested in or daunted by all the gory complexities of fighting battles can simply dive into the broader strategic game, letting the new arcade mode do the fighting (an option to autoresolve battles carries over from previous games). The campaign game has also made the transition to a 3D strategic map, allowing more perspective for the budding Caesar. Visually, this game is as good as it gets. It has to be seen to be believed.

Historical battles let you see if you can do better than the real Crassus did at Carrhae. It's damn near impossible on the Difficult setting.

As with the rest of the *Total War* series, *Rome* offers a variety of play options, including multiplayer, custom battles, quick battles, and two single-player campaigns—the Imperial campaign, in which you must conquer Rome and its neighboring nations while playing as one of three Roman factions, and the aptly titled Short Imperial campaign, in which victory is achieved through satisfying less-demanding conditions.

FORCED MARCH

A big change for this series comes in the form of new movement allowances for all units on the campaign map. Basically, units occupy specific points on the map, which means troops aren't just "in a province" and able to block your forces; instead, they're in a *specific* part of the



Roman forces exploit their high ground to drive back Greek hoplites. You want big sprawling 3D battles? *Rome* has your big sprawling 3D battles. Run away!

Siege warfare—what's not to love?

The new 3D strategic map is as gorgeous as the battle maps, and it also intuitively relays invaluable information regarding terrain, troop movement, troop position, and the way to best exploit them for your gain.

province and must come into direct contact with your forces in order to initiate any sort of action. This is a great enhancement to the core game, allowing you to slip past enemies as well as set up ambushes and create choke points.

TOGA PARTY

The Roman Senate plays a vital role in the campaign game. The accurate depiction of its power, influence, and citizen support adds a realistic and compelling element to the gameplay. You may start off with allies, but soon everyone's vying for control of the senate, even at the expense of a bloody civil war.

This is one of the few additions that actually complicates the gameplay—most of *Rome* seeks to streamline this complex series in an effort to reach more mainstream gamers. The Marius event occurs in both single-player campaigns and gives gamers the option to retrain all their troops into better units all at once. Menus have lost some detail, there are a bunch of new advisors and help menus, and a comprehensive automanage option almost lets the game play itself. This is great for newbies, but hardcore fans of the *Total War* games (people like me) may find themselves lamenting a loss of depth and detail thanks to building trees that have been pruned, less town management, and a campaign that starts you off with the unearned protection of allies.

Despite all that is good, *Rome* is not without problems. The A.I. possesses some ugly troop pathfinding and grouping issues, especially with phalanx units and during bridge battles. A particularly vexing bug will occasionally leave your mighty armadas beached. The engine still needs optimization during the bigger battles, when the game drags to a crawl even with top-of-the-line computing power. Bugs include corrupted saved games and the occasional performance hiccup. Sea battles could also use a shot in the arm since the A.I. that resolves sea engagements isn't as challenging as the artificial generals that guide the battles on land.

Still, like *Medieval* and *Shogun* before it, *Rome: Total War* is a stroke of brilliance. With its unparalleled scope and enough strategic gameplay for two top-flight games, let alone one, *Rome* is a game that triumphs over its minor bugs and A.I. glitches and once again redefines what a historical strategy game can—and should—be. **Raphael Liberatore**

Like *Medieval* and *Shogun* before it, *Rome: Total War* is a stroke of brilliance.

Verdict ★★★★½

Die-hard fans might miss some of the detail of the earlier *Total War* titles, but *Rome* is still one of the best games of the year.

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal Games** DEVELOPER: **Sierra** GENRE: **Gropinator** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800MHz, 128MB Ram, DirectX 9.0-compatible soundcard, 3.5GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.5GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

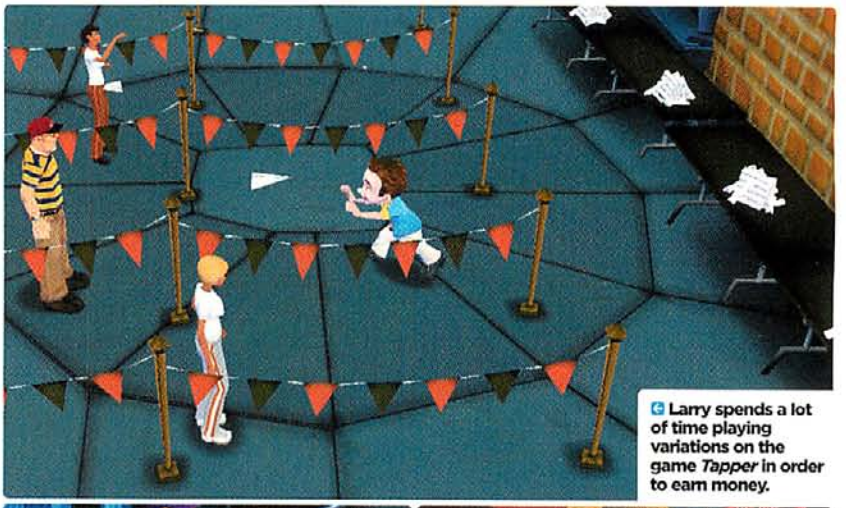
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude

Top-heavy and brain-dead

My boyfriend isn't really into videogames. He is, however, really into boobs, so I figured *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude* would be the right gaming gateway drug for him. Boobs will make a man do almost anything, right?

Wrong. Boobs will not make a man play repetitive minigames. Boobs will not make a man sit patiently through innumerable loading screens. And boobs will not stop a man from recoiling in horror at a cut-scene in which a girl appears to have sex with a bundle of flaming twigs that is actually a short guy dressed in a mascot suit.

In short, boobs will not make a man endure a bad videogame.



Larry spends a lot of time playing variations on the game *Tapper* in order to earn money.

Those things must give her a helluva backache.

Have we mentioned that the women are busty?

SIMPLY RESISTIBLE

In *Magna Cum Laude*, you control Larry Lovage (nephew of the original *LSL*'s Larry Laffer) as he attempts to flirt his way through college and onto a television dating game called *Swingles*. You help him by completing minigames, ensuring that no matter what inanities come out of Larry's mouth, he'll be able to get dates with—and ultimately win tokens of affection from—various lovelies. Once he's collected enough tokens, he wins a spot on the show and eventually gets to choose one lucky lass to, uh, date.

While much of *MCL* is pretty cringeworthy, I did laugh out loud more than once. There's a dance number set to the melody of "Summer Nights," from the musical *Grease*, in which one of Larry's lovers explains why she's now a lesbian. And there's a *Welcome Back, Kotter* reference followed by pictures of Gabe Kaplan himself. That's good enough for an extra half-star right there. The graphics (it's the first 3D *LSL*) and voice-acting are really well done, too.

MILKING IT

The main problem with *MCL* is that it's so tediously repetitive. *Tapper* was fun when I first played it at age 12, and it was a nice walk down memory lane the first time I played it in *MCL*. The 10th time? Not so much. Whack-a-mole? I didn't even like it when I was 12. There's also a *Dance Dance Revolution*-style game, a wet T-shirt contest, a "picture-taking" game that may not even qualify as a game, and a truly miserable game of quarters. There's also the minigame that controls most of your conversations: guiding a sperm through an obstacle course.

Over and over, you're forced to complete the same minigames in order to earn money so that you can buy items that will make you more appealing to girls. You can buy your way out of the minigames with secret tokens you might find, but the implication here is that there's a reason to go back to playing the game. If you're 12, there might be—boobs, masturbating monkeys, egregious use of the F-word, and loading screens of girls in their underwear are the stuff of little-boy dreams. For the rest of us, it gets old really fast. It's not funny or sexy enough to keep grown-ups interested, and it's totally inappropriate for kids.

In short, boobs will not make a man endure a bad videogame.

The linchpin of the original *LSL* games' humor was that, try as he might, Larry Laffer couldn't get laid. Of *course* he couldn't—he was a buffoon. But he was a loveable buffoon, and you kept playing because, well, you kinda wanted to help him out. (Check out our *LSL* history lesson on page 122.) When Larry Lovage gets laid, it's almost infuriating that such a gross nimrod is actually making headway. Gabe Kaplan notwithstanding, *LSL* just isn't that funny or that fun—and no amount of boobs can make up for that. **Kristen Salvatore**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

Sometimes boobs are not enough.

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Chris Sawyer** GENRE: **Strategy** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 500MHz, 128MB RAM, 85MB Install**
RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 800MHz, 256MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2 players)**

Chris Sawyer's Locomotion

Planes, trains, and...ah, who cares?

Before being propelled into gaming superstardom with *RollerCoaster Tycoon*, Chris Sawyer was known for *Transport Tycoon*, in which you play the CEO of a new transportation company. In every scenario, you're supposed to either move a certain amount of cargo or earn a certain amount of money by any means possible. Littered around each map are towns and industries that provide the cargo. *Locomotion* is *Transport*'s sequel—and it's hard to figure what's improved in the last decade.

Can you spot the winery in that hilly mess?

Everything from the graphics to the interface seems designed to make creating a good route difficult.

The brain-dead A.I.'s idea of efficient tracklaying is unsafe at any speed.

SISYPHEAN CONSTRUCTION, INC.

The economic model remains simplistic, and there's none of the monetary maneuvering that's seen in other business games. It seems to be a metaphor for man's struggle to control nature, rather than the cutthroat capitalistic competition—nearly all the scenario maps are covered with difficult terrain, including torturously rugged hills and endless jungles. Rough terrain seems to exist simply to make your life difficult; some cities sitting side by side are actually separated by cliffs, just to force you to create convoluted tracks to link them up. Your biggest challenge is to lay a good route without going crazy with frustration or going bankrupt...once you create an efficient route, there's not much of a game left.

Everything from the graphics to the interface seems designed to make creating a good route difficult. *Locomotion* uses the same interface as the *Tycoon* games—all routes are laid out one tile at a time. There's no simple click-and-drag; this means you have to clear off every bush and level every hill manually. What's worse, you can't even preview your ideas for tracks. It's all done through trial and error, and you can regain parts of your investment only when you delete mistakes. Laying a new track can become a monetary black hole. This, rather than astute A.I. competition, will be your biggest challenge.

2D = DISMAL AND DRAB

A strategy game like *Locomotion* doesn't need great graphics, but they shouldn't hinder gameplay either. Pixilated and ugly, *Locomotion*'s scenery actually obscures important stuff—like roads. Options for viewing underground areas or fading out the scenery are ineffectual. Being 2D, the map rotation isn't effective enough to let you see everything, especially around big mountains. The minimap that helps you locate places of interest is also cumbersome, and finding the correct sources of and destinations for raw materials can be infuriatingly difficult. In short: The graphics are simply a mess.

Even the A.I. has problems dealing with terrain. It'll often build ridiculously confused tracks or ignore metropolises while constructing some half-dozen stations in a tiny town. The poor A.I. affects your vehicles as well, as they often end up taking around-the-world tours unless you set waypoints very carefully.

There are too many other minor annoyances and problems to list. Though it's not an entirely offensive game, in its attempt to be individualistic, *Locomotion* has learned nothing from other games in the genre and ends up feeling like a 10-year-old game with a 5-year-old coat of paint. **Di Luo**

Verdict ★½☆☆☆

***Locomotion* is a sustained battle against dirt and about as fun as actual ditch digging.**

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PUBLISHER: **Got Game** DEVELOPER: **Dejavu Worlds** GENRE: **Adventure** ESRB RATING: **E**
REQUIRED: **Pentium III 700, 128MB RAM, 285MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Alida

Lost in the *Myst*

This gigantic guitar anchors the theme park. Pretty sexy, ain't it? They wanted a hand, too, but it was so huge that they couldn't get it to work. Seriously.

Chances are, if you're reading a computer gaming magazine in 2004, you're not looking for a first-person adventure game set on a deserted mysterious island and built around the 90-degree turn. In which case, move along—there's nothing for you to see here.

It's the same old setup you've seen in 100 other *Myst* clones. This time the plot revolves around an Australian band (named Alida) whose first album was so big that its members became the richest men in the world and decided to build a theme park (also named Alida), which happens to be focused around a gigantic guitar.

There are those who will defend *Alida* and all games like it to the death, extolling the pretty pictures and nice bird and water sounds. But they're defending it mostly because of what it's not (violent, bloody) rather than what it should be (a good story with relevant puzzles).

It's the same old setup you've seen in 100 other *Myst* clones.

And they do themselves a disservice—it's the passionate defenses of undiscerning fans that allow developers to continue to turn out lazy, half-assed pieces of work and pocket the money.

Start holding the publishers of these games to a higher standard, and maybe the adventure genre will finally see some innovation—and some good games. Games unlike *Alida*. **Dana Jongewaard**

Verdict ★☆☆☆☆
This game is lazy and derivative—and it's your fault.

Oh no—however am I going to open this trapdoor so I can climb down yet another ladder and encounter yet another locked door?

HARDWARE BUYERS' GUIDE

Naughty or nice, we've got you covered...

Welcome to *Computer Gaming World*'s Buyers' Guide 2004. This all-star list of computer components, devices, and gadgets for gamers covers everything from high-performance, top-of-the-line products to mainstream performance gear priced to move. Check out the **CGW POWERHOUSE** PICK products for the fastest, most powerful gaming hardware you could wish for; for Scrooges or the more budget minded, our **CGW BEST BUY** items will get you the most bang for your buck. So, start making your lists and checking them twice.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARNOLD TIOSEJO

Inside

ATI RADEON X800 **110**

MS OPTICAL **108**

LOGITECH Z-5500 **110**

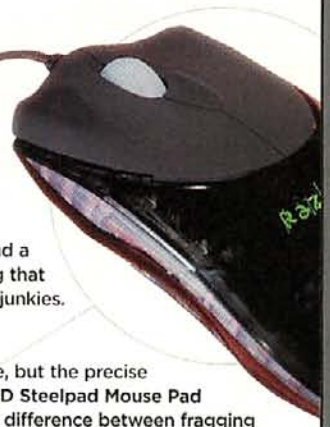
THE TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Don't want to end up as merely another body at the Just-OK Corral in your next online showdown? Invest in quality mice and keyboards for a winning mix of precision and speed.

URL: www.razerzone.com PRICE: $59

RAZER DIAMONDBACK

Razer has come up with another hardcore gaming mouse that is slick and stylish, with seven buttons and a framerate of more than 6,400 with a 1,600 dpi rating that means almost no skips or lags for you hardcore FPS junkies. **CGW POWERHOUSE PICK**



It's the most overlooked piece of gaming hardware, but the precise tracking you get from a quality mouse pad like the **4D Steelpad Mouse Pad** (Soft Trading - www.steelpad.com - $29) can be the difference between fragging or getting fragged.

URL: www.microsoft.com PRICE: $60

MICROSOFT WIRELESS OPTICAL DESKTOP KEYBOARD AND MOUSE—COMFORT EDITION

Have there ever been as many options for gaming keyboards? No. From gamercentric boards to quality general-purpose ones, the right keyboard for you is definitely out there—it's up to you to find it.

Logitech Elite Media Keyboard (Logitech - ww.logitech.com - $25) CGW BEST BUY

Ideazon Doom 3 Zboard (Ideazon - www.zboard.com - $20) **CGW POWERHOUSE PICK**

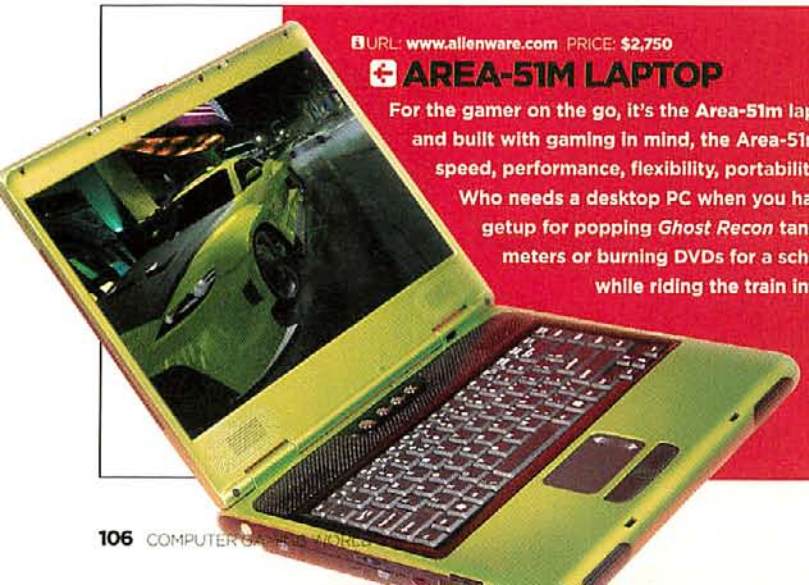
PC Gamers' Keyboard (Saitek - www.saitek.com - $59) sports a lighted keypad that has mod written all over it.

GameShark Keyboard (www.gameshark.com - $20) CGW BEST BUY

URL: www.alienware.com PRICE: $2,750

AREA-51M LAPTOP

For the gamer on the go, it's the Area-51m laptop. Designed and built with gaming in mind, the Area-51m has it all: speed, performance, flexibility, portability, and style. Who needs a desktop PC when you have this sleek getup for popping *Ghost Recon* tangos at 20 meters or burning DVDs for a school project while riding the train into the city?



POWERFUL PROCESSORS

The microprocessor, or CPU (central processing unit), houses your PC's command center. It's also the performance barometer of your PC. Plunking down heavy bucks for a top-of-the-line Intel or AMD processor can be one of the most crucial decisions when buying or building a gaming rig. Now, we could make your head spin explaining the technical jargon behind CPU chipsets, cache sizes, megahertz ratings, socket pins, and retail versions, but we'll spare you the headache and just tell you what to get. Whatever you decide, buy the retail version of any CPU, since it typically includes a three-year warranty, heat sink, and fan.

Intel (www.intel.com)
Intel Pentium 4 Processor Prescott 3.4GHz Extreme Edition Socket 478 Retail ($990)
800MHz FSB, integrated 2MB of L3 cache and 512KBL2 cache, and supports Hyper-Threading Technology.
CGW POWERHOUSE PICK

BEST COMBO: **Intel Pentium 4 550 Processor Prescott 3.4GHz Socket 775 ($240)** and **Asus P5AD2 Premium Wireless Edition Intel 925X PCI-Express Motherboard** (Asus - usa.asus.com - $259) This is some serious computing muscle, enough to be next month's Killer Rig nominee. Add **Thermaltake's Polo 735 CPU Heat Sink and Cooler** (Thermaltake - www.thermaltake.com -$39) for a winning array of top-notch performance.
CGW POWERHOUSE PICK

Intel Pentium 4 Processor Prescott 3.2GHz Socket 478 ($229)
800MHz FSB, integrated 1MB cache and 512KBL2 cache, and supports Hyper-Threading Technology.

AMD Athlon 64 FX-53 Clawhammer 2.4GHz Socket 939 (AMD - www.amd.com - $840) 64 bit, Level 1 64KB+64KB cache and Level 2 1MB cache, and supports HyperTransport Technology.
CGW POWERHOUSE PICK

AMD Athlon 64 3800+ Newcastle 2.4GHz Socket 939 ($622)
64 bit, Level 1 64KB+64KB cache and Level 2 512KB, and supports HyperTransport Technology.

THE DRIVE WAY

Hard drives and optical drives are probably the least sexy part of your PC, but face it, you aren't going to be doing any gaming without them. These are your best choices.

Mad Dog MegaSTOR 16x Double Layer DVD+/-R+/-RW 6-in-1 Internal Drive (Mad Dog – www.mdmm.com – $119) The MegaSTOR can write up to 8.5GB of data on double-layer media at 4x burning speeds, as well as 16x for DVD+/-R media. Unlike the competition, Mad Dog offers a two-year replacement warranty on the drive. **CGW POWERHOUSE PICK**

If you're on a tight budget or you just want a plain old CD rewriter for your upgrade, then get the **Asus CRW-5232AS 52x/32x/52x CD-Rewriter with QuietTrack** (Asus – usa.asus.com – $32). Asus wasn't kidding when it labeled this an ultraquiet drive, especially considering its superfast 52x CD burning speed. With FlextraLink Anti-Coaster and FlextraSpeed auto-recording technologies along with a great bundled software package, the CRW-5232 is both powerful and priced to move. **CGW BEST BUY**

The Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 Serial ATA Drive 7,200 rpm 200GB HDD (Seagate – www.seagate.com – $125) offers 1.5GB transfer speeds, and two or four drives make a great RAID setup. Or get the **Hitachi IBM Hitachi Deskstar 7K400 400GB Serial ATA 7,200 rpm** hard drive (Hitachi – www.hitachi.com – $430). **CGW POWERHOUSE PICK**

NETWORKING

Seasoned gamers know that broadband is the only way to go for online gaming. But what good is having massive bandwidth if your network gear only supports the older 10-base whatever speeds? It's time to get with the program and upgrade your network. The first order of business is to start with your system and make sure your rig is using at least a 10/100Mbps connection rate or higher at 10/100/1000 (aka gigabit) speeds through either an onboard LAN or a NIC card in the PCI slot (I like Belkin products, personally). If you have more than one computer, then next in line is the switch, or hub. If you want to take advantage of the gigabit throughput, then I recommend adding the SMC EZ Switch 8508T 8-Port 10/100/1000 Gigabit Switch (SMC – www.smc.com – $110) to your holiday list.

PRETTY ON THE INSIDE... AND OUT

This year, ditch the beige box for something flashier, dressing up your PC with the Mutant Mod Lighting (StarTech.com – www.mutantmods.com – $16 to $28) series of cathode tubes, LED fans, and illuminated cables for extra yuletide cheer. For a complete makeover, grab the Thermaltake Tsunami Dream Chassis (Thermaltake – www.thermaltake.com – $120) and Butterfly PurePower 480W Power Supply (Thermaltake – www.thermaltake.com – $35) to make your PC the envy of all who behold its glory.

URL: www.ibuypower.com PRICE: $1,595

GAMER'S SUPREME

If the price of a complete gaming system has you reeling, then look no further than IBuypower. It knows how to build wicked-fast computer systems filled with components that cost way less than the competition's. Check this out: Intel Pentium 4 3.4GHz CPU, Abit AG8 i925 PCI-Express motherboard, Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT 256MB DDR videocard, 1GB DDR400 RAM, double-layer Pioneer DVD+/-RW optical drive, Viewsonic 19-inch monitor, etc. Rounding out this budget rig on steroids is IBuypower's free onsite warranty coverage. Insane. **CGW BEST BUY**

ROCKING SOUND

Whether blasting away with your rocket launcher during a *UT2004* team deathmatch or strafing enemy bunkers from a helicopter in a massive *Joint Ops* game, you want—no, you *demand* quality sound. These are the products that will give you the best sound for your games, music, and movies. It's OK—you're welcome.

URL: **www.logitech.com** PRICE: **$399**

LOGITECH Z-5500 DIGITAL 5.1 SPEAKERS

Audiophiles only. Logitech's new top dog, the **Z-5500,** brings the firepower that was missing the last time around. A 10-inch, 187W subwoofer (500W system) delivers rich bass to complement the natural mids and highs. Even the new facelift for the system is a welcome change. **CGW POWERHOUSE PICK**

If your goal is to rock the house with bass-rocking lows, then the **Klipsch ProMedia Ultra 5.1 Speaker System** (Klipsch – www.klipsch.com – $499) has the potent kick you're looking for, while the **Creative Gigaworks S750 7.1 Speaker System** (Creative Labs – www.creative.com – $499) is for those who want to boast eight channels of quality audio.

URL: **www.creative.com** PRICE: **$189**

CREATIVE SOUND BLASTER AUDIGY 2 ZS PLATINUM PRO SOUNDCARD

The **Audigy 2** is the king of PC sound. No other product comes close to offering the Audigy's unlimited audio features.

However, if price is a problem, then the **Mad Dog Entertainer 7.1 DSP Soundcard** (Mad Dog – www.mdmm.com – $39) **CGW BEST BUY** and **Philips Ultimate Edge Soundcard** (Philips – www.philips.com – $49) are less expensive alternatives.

If your budget is threatening to silence your PC, don't worry. There are still some decent options. For just a little more than $100, the **Altec Lansing MX-5021 2.1 Channel Multimedia THX-certified Speaker System** (Altec Lansing – www.alteclansing.com – $129) may be your best option for simulated surround-sound gaming as well as a movie-theater experience, and it won't eat up a ton of desk space, either. If you can't break the century mark, look into the **Logitech X-530 5.1 Speaker System** (Logitech – www.logitech.com – $59) for a cheap surround-sound alternative, or the **Logitech X-230 2.1** ($39) for, well, just a cheap alternative. Or you could forgo speakers entirely with some **Altec Lansing AHS 602 Headphones** (Altec Lansing – www.alteclansing.com – $60).

RAM-MING SPEED

RAM is the cheapest system performance boost and the one overlooked by most gamers. With more motherboard manufacturers providing dual-channel DDR-memory performance enhancements, landing a matched pair of high-performance **Corsair TwinX-4000Pro 512MB RAM** (Corsair – www.corsairmicro.com – $140) for a full 1GB of pure adrenaline is a no-brainer for improved system performance and stability.

URL: **www.falcon-nw.com** PRICE: **$2,665**

FRAGBOX 2

The second generation of Falcon Northwest's LAN gaming gem sports a new look with its completely redesigned small form-factor casing. Inside, faster system components include Intel Pentium 4 Extreme CPUs and PCI-Express motherboards, improved cooling, and more upgradeability. Don't let the FragBox's size fool you. This small rig packs a BIG wallop.

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- DCR-DVD201 DVD Digital Camcorder
- DSC-T3 Digital Camera
- SDM-204/B 20" LCD

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SECOND PRIZE

LOGITECH®

- Z-680 THX Certified 5.1 Speaker System
- MX900 Bluetooth Optical Mouse
- DiNovo® Media Desktop
- QuickCam Orbit

THIRD PRIZE

- Logitech® Z-560 THX Certified 4.1 Speaker System
- Rosewill RW400/256
- Apricorn® EZ Bus Mini 40GB Portable External Hard Drive
- Optorite 16X DVD+/-RW Dual Layer CD/DVD Burner
- Canon CanoScan 3000EX Color Image Scanner

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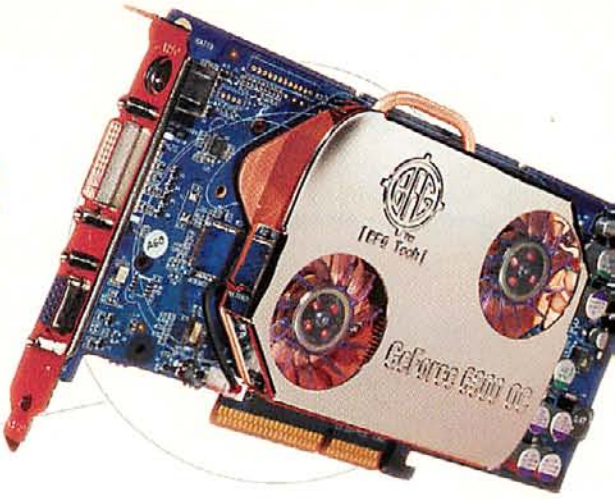
VISIONS OF GRANDEUR

With graphics card resource gobblers like *The Sims 2*, *Painkiller*, and *Far Cry* under the tree, videocards are certain to be especially well-received gifts this holiday season. Thanks to the never-ending graphics war between ATI and Nvidia, the newest generation of the Radeon and Nvidia AGP and soon-to-be-popular PCI-Express videocards can more than handle the load of blockbuster games.

But should you go with an ATI- or Nvidia-based graphics solution? And which manufacturer is worthy of your system? Those questions will have to wait for a future issue of *CGW*—in the meantime, you can't really go wrong with these videocard upgrade suggestions.



URL: **www.ati.com** PRICE: **$499**

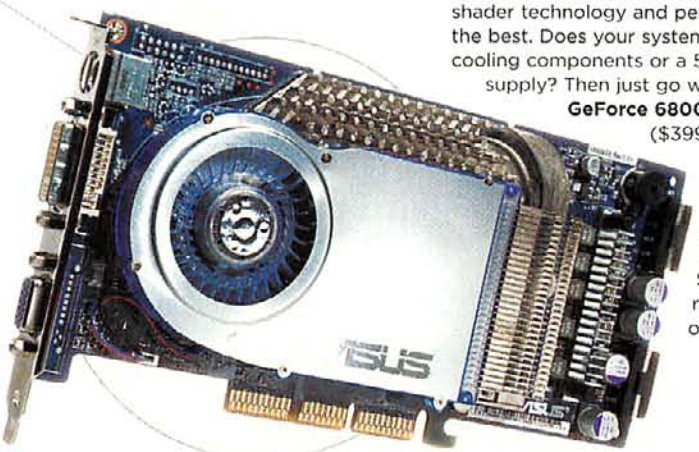
ATI RADEON X800 XT PLATINUM EDITION AGP 256MB DDR VIDEOCARD

Do you crave the best videocard, yet lack the power or space for the GeForce 6800? Then **ATI's X800 XT Platinum Edition** is the perfect choice. It's just as badass as Nvidia's top-dog GeForce 6800 Ultra and offers two new technologies: 3DA compression technology for improving surface details and temporal antialiasing for creating smoother images without straining the CPU. ATI also offers a PCI-Express version at the same price.

URL: **usa.asus.com** PRICE: **$230**

ASUS EXTREME AX600XT/TD PCI-EXPRESS 128MB DDR VPU

It's Asus' mainstream ATI Radeon loaded with all kinds of goodies, including HDTV connectivity! **ATI Radeon 9800 Pro 128MB DDR AGP** videocard (ATI Technologies – www.ati.com – $220) CGW BEST BUY Or you could go for the **MSI Nvidia GeForce FX5700 128MB DDR AGP** videocard (MSI –www.msicomputer.com – $139).



URL: **www.bfgtech.com** PRICE: **$599**

BFG TECH NVIDIA GEFORCE 6800 ULTRA OC AGP 256MB DDR VIDEOCARD WITH WATERBLOCK COOLING

If your Santa has deep pockets and you want the best *Doom 3* benchmarks in the Western Hemisphere, then the **GeForce 6800 Ultra OC with Water Cooling** by BFG Tech will secure you those precious bragging rights. Nvidia's new 3.0 pixel shader technology and performance are the best. Does your system lack water-cooling components or a 550W power supply? Then just go with **BFG Tech's GeForce 6800 GT OC AGP** ($399) or **Asus' V9999 Gamers Edition** cards (Asus – usa.asus.com – $400). Nobody remembers second place, right?

URL: **www.voodoopc.com** PRICE: **$2,700**

FX-55 RAGE F:2

Winner of 2003's Ultimate Game Machine, VoodooPC knows performance. Just take a look at its sexy new FX-55 Rage F:2 water-cooled high-performance rig with AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 2.75GHz, BFG Tech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC videocard, Audigy 2 Platinum Pro, and 2x74GB Western Digital Raptor 10,000 rpm SATA RAID setup. It's so fast, it runs *Doom 3* benchmarks in standby mode.

LCD or CRT?

What good is a top-dollar videocard if your ancient, cheap-ass monitor refuses to handle the higher resolutions, color depth, and pixel counts of all that new muscle? It might be time to consider adding a monitor to your wish list. The big question for gamers: Do you stick with the old-school cathode ray tube (CRT) for best price and performance? Or do you go with a liquid crystal display (LCD) for ergonomics, color ratios, and possibly HDTV hookup? Both options have their pros and cons, with the ultimate choice narrowing down to technological innovation versus best performance.

URL: **www.philips.com** PRICE: **$1,899**

PHILIPS BRILLIANCE 230W5 HDTV-READY 23-INCH LCD MONITOR

With a 16ms response time and 1920x1200 native resolution, the **Brilliance 230W5 LCD** is a gamer's dream. It's a stylish LCD with performance to match. Too big or too steep a price? Check out its little brother, the **Philips Brilliance 190P5 19-inch LCD monitor** (Philips – www.philips.com – $699).

CGW POWERHOUSE PICK

URL: **www.apple.com** PRICE: **$1,999**

APPLE CINEMA DISPLAY 23" LCD

Apple has always been deft at combining image and quality, and its newly redesigned LCD monitors are sharp and vibrant and come in a sleek package. But best of all, Apple dumped its lame proprietary Apple-only connector and replaced it with the industry-standard DVI connector. PC gamers looking for the best gaming LCD available will have to bite their tongues and "think different."

CGW POWERHOUSE PICK

Need more LCD options? The **Eizo FlexScan L885 20-inch LCD** (Eizo – www.eizo.com – $1,450), the **iiYama ProLite E481S 19-inch LCD** (iiYama – www.iiyama.com – $599), and the **Hitachi CML174B 17-inch LCD** monitor (Hitachi – www.hitachi.com – $599) offer big improvements in contrast ratios, black levels, and pixel response times. With a huge drop in prices across the board, LCDs in 2004 are a more viable option than they were just last year.

They're not as sexy, but dollar for dollar, CRTs still outperform LCDs in pretty much every area across the board. They're bigger and clunkier, but with superfast pixel rendering, sharper images, accurate color fidelity, higher resolutions, and lower prices, CRTs like the **NEC MultiSync FE2111SB-BK 22-inch** (NEC – www.nec.com – $550) or the priced-to-move **Viewsonic E90f+B 19-inch** (Viewsonic – www.viewsonic.com – $230) still remain the best and most affordable choices for 3D gaming.

Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines

The Gaming Claus(e)

Of all techno-geek hobbyists, computer gamers are the most discerning by default. Why? Because we endure a constant barrage of technological innovation brought about by the very nature of computer gaming. When eagerly anticipated games cripple systems barely more than a year old, we're forced to adapt—by spending our money. Just to play the latest games the way they're meant to be played requires a willingness to upgrade systems and components regularly. This is the Gaming Clause.

When ATI released yet another superfast Radeon videocard a few months back, I plunked down my $500. For a short while, I could boast about FPS scores and Direct3D benchmark scores. Then ATI rolled out its X800, and suddenly my Radeon was old technology and I was dreaming about upgrading again, another victim of the Gaming Clause. Making peace with it requires an understanding of where the computer gaming landscape is headed, where it may end up, and what it's going to take to keep our rigs up to spec.

As you've probably noticed, I'm the new Tech guy. Wil O'Neal has moved on, leaving behind some pretty big shoes to fill. As *CGW*'s Tech Commando, I'll strive to maintain *CGW*'s high standards and integrity, while offering you a Tech section you want to read every month. It's my mission to make sense of the tech landscape for you and help you figure out how best to handle the Gaming Clause. Hopefully, this month's buyers' guide will go a long way toward making the Gaming Clause more of a Santa Claus for you.

Raphael Liberatore

Making peace with constant upgrading requires an understanding of where gaming is headed.

DIGITAL CAROLING

With the MP3 market booming in a big way, we can thank Apple for its part in making our favorite music accessible at all times. Creative gets a pat on the back, too, along with some figgy pudding.

URL: www.creative.com PRICE: $220

CREATIVE NOMAD ZEN TOUCH DIGITAL AUDIO PLAYER

20GB; WMA, MP3, and WAV formats; USB 2.0; 24-hour battery life; carrying case; weighs 7.6 ounces.

URL: www.creative.com PRICE: $95

CREATIVE MUVO SLIM DIGITAL PLAYER/VOICE RECORDER/FM RADIO

256MB flash memory; WMA, MP3, and ADPCM formats; USB 2.0; 16-hour (voice) or 8-hour (music) battery life; carrying case; weighs 7.6 ounces. With everything it does, this is one cool gift idea.

Apple iPod (Apple – www.apple.com – $399) 40GB capacity; AAC, MP3, AIFF, Audible, and WAV formats; FireWire or USB 2.0; 12-hour battery life; weighs 6.2 ounces. It also includes an iPod dock and customized laser etching for an additional fee.

Seagate 5.0GB USB 2.0 Pocket Drive (Seagate – www.seagate.com – $150) Add more capacity to your digital-media player with this handy 3,600 rpm, 2MB cache hard drive.

LOOK MA! NO WIRES!

Gaming with your laptop at LAN parties or in the dorm with wireless connectivity isn't just possible, it's outstanding thanks to wireless products utilizing the faster 802.11g protocol.

SMC2862W-G EZ Connect g 2.4GHz 54Mbps Wireless USB 2.0 Adapter (SMC – www.smc.com – $65)
This wireless USB adapter is the best way to go for wireless networking. Because the unit is attached externally via a long cord, you can actually increase the reception by aiming the adapter and grabbing the best possible 802.11g reception.
CGW POWERHOUSE PICK

AirPort Express with AirTunes (Apple – www.apple.com – $129)
Designed to support both Mac and PC users, the AirPort Express with AirTunes allows you to play iTunes music over your wireless network and feed it to your home stereo or powered speakers. It also serves as a wireless bridge for up to 10 users.

Asus WL-330g Pocket Wireless Access Point (Asus – usa.asus.com – $55)
This little gem of a product does it all for wireless networking on the go. The WL-330g doubles as both an Ethernet adapter and access point for setting up a wireless network anywhere, anytime.

GEAR AND GADGETS

If you're plugging your computer (or other important electronics) directly into the wall socket, you should be pelted with snowballs. Blackouts, brownouts, spikes, EMI line noises, and other types of unabated power weirdness can render your $5,000 performance system worthless. With a hefty protection of up to 2,950 joules and 150,000 amps, this Belkin will make a nice gift to go along with the killer machine or television you purchased for your special someone.
Belkin 9-Socket SurgeMaster Gold Series Surge Protector (www.belkin.com – $65)

Samsung Multimedia MM-A700 Mobile Phone (www.sprintpcs.com – $399)
Multimedia is an understatement for **Samsung's MM-A700 cell phone.** It's more like a Swiss Army utility knife, with voice activation, digital and video cameras, and Sprint's PCS Vision Multimedia service for television and Web access.

Harmony 688 Remote Control (Logitech – www.logitech.com – $249)
The **Logitech Harmony 688** is a stylish, feature-rich remote that's easy to use, easy to set up, and can hook directly to your computer for ease of programming. It also includes access to a TV listing guide (the first two months are complimentary) and 2MB of flash memory.

VoodooPC Stealth Laptop Case (www.voodoopc.com – $50 with laptop purchase) This sleek aluminum casing is built tough, making it the preferred laptop case for mobsters, cold war secret agents, and gamers fantasizing that they're all of the above.

Thermaltake LAN Party PC Carry Harness (www.thermaltake.com – $30) Walk into a LAN party wearing this stylish computer backpack case, and you're almost guaranteed to become the envy of every other geek craving their very own—but you won't get any dates. It's just that geeky.

POWER

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The thrill of victory was never quite so scintillating. The cutting edge features of Antec's NeoPower let you take maximum advantage of all the latest technology - now. Like an advanced cable management system. Native support for PCI-Express graphics cards. Full ATX12V v2.0 compliance. Plus 480 Watts of supremely stable power with a single 120mm fan for virtually silent operation. And that's just the beginning. For the complete story on NeoPower 480 visit www.antec.com or your local Antec retailer today.

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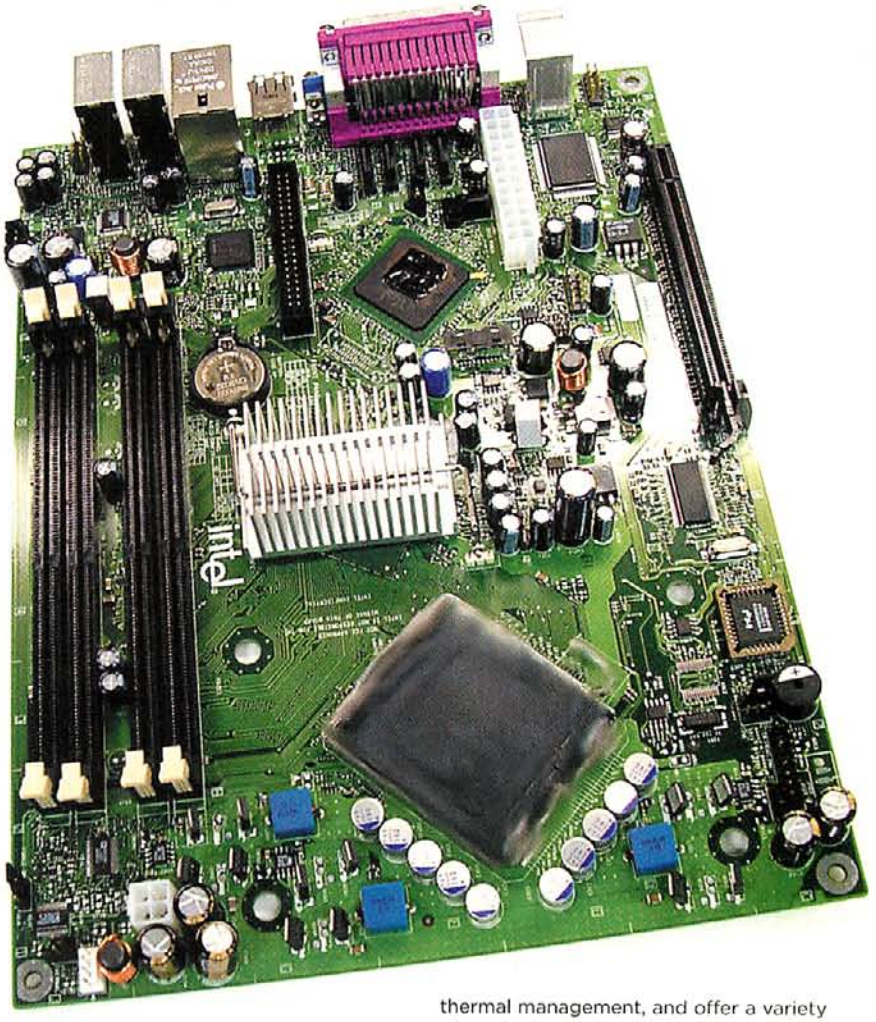
Loyd's Cracked Case

Cool it, buddy

In the past several months, I've received a number of e-mails talking about spontaneous reboots, oddball crashes, or mysterious shutdowns. In many of these cases, the components in the system are all high-quality gear, including the memory. I've been surprised at how often stability issues can be traced to heat problems. The causes are often more subtle than "the CPU is too hot."



BURN, BABY, BURN

The fact is, as modern gaming PCs get faster, they also get warmer. Much warmer. A 3.6GHz Prescott dissipates as much as 115 watts, while the Athlon 64 FX-53 can pump out as much as 100 watts. Toss in a GeForce 6800 Ultra or Radeon X800 XT, a massive 7,200 rpm hard drive, and a gigabyte of memory, and you've got a veritable little inferno brewing up inside that PC case.

The current ATX motherboard specification was designed at a time when active cooling existed only for the processor. Graphics cards often lacked even passive heat sinks—but they weren't trying to run 200-plus million transistors at 450MHz, either. These days, even core logic chips on the motherboard often have a cooling fan. Memory runs at 200MHz or 266MHz (stock speeds) and commonly ships with thermal-dissipation shields. Even low-cost graphics cards now have cooling fans. Hard drives spin at 7,200 rpm and generate additional heat in an already thermally challenged environment.

Typical ATX cases rarely take all these factors into account. With all those fans spinning inside the case, attempts to shoot the air in different directions often create odd vortices and hot spots in unexpected places. I've seen photos of thermal images taken of PC chassis with a noticeable hot spot right over the memory sockets. This isn't all that common, but the fact that it can happen is an issue for concern.

I've seen photos of thermal images taken of PC chassis with a noticeable hot spot right over the memory sockets.

If you're running a stock ATX system, a good case fan can often help things immensely. I've become fond of cases that support larger, 120mm case fans. These turn more slowly but still move lots of air—and don't make it sound like you're sitting next to a vacuum cleaner. Another factor is dust, which will often clog up cooling fans and prevent airflow. A little canned, compressed air can blow away the dust from between heat sink fins and inside GPU coolers. It's amazing how much difference that can make.

WE CAN REBUILD IT, WE HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY

The real answer is to rearrange the system in order to maximize airflow over thermal hot spots. Intel has been spearheading a new form-factor for systems known as BTX (Balanced Technology Extended). The goals are to minimize noise, maximize thermal management, and offer a variety of motherboard form-factors, ranging from normal-sized boards to ultracompact products.

The layout of a typical BTX board uses one active cooler, typically over the CPU. However, the fan is oriented sideways, pulling air over the CPU heat sink fins. The other hot components—the graphics card and chipset—are in line with the airflow. So air passes over all three hot spots, but only one larger, slower-rotating fan is needed. Note that memory isn't in the main airflow, but since the fan pulls air out of the case, rather than just blowing air around inside, hot spots over key components should be minimized.

So, as processors and graphics cards get faster and hotter, look to solutions like BTX to keep your system cool. Gateway is already selling BTX systems, and BTX cases and motherboards will likely be arriving for the DIY set as you read this.

Loyd Case

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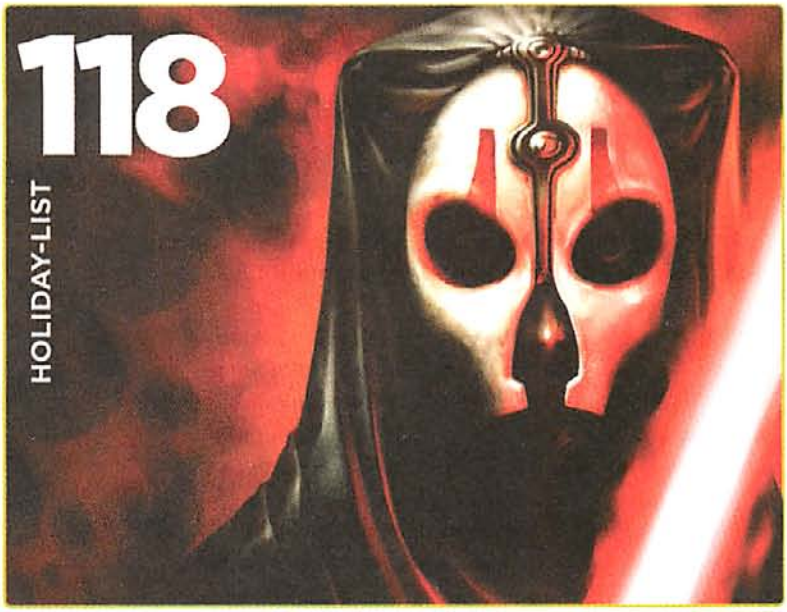
Check Out



Inside

Ch-ch-check it out! What's it all about?

Hey, if you know the answer to that question, please forward it to us at cgwletters@cgw.com, because clearly, we haven't figured it out yet. But that's what makes Check Out so darn fun—every month, it's a cornucopia of different, unique, and often entirely unrelated topics! We're just keeping you on your toes.

HolidAy-List

***CGW*'s oh-so-deserving editors give you their holiday wish lists. Finally, you can start shopping!**

Yeah, it's a break from the norm, and no, it's not just because we didn't have any other new stuff to add to this month's A-List. It's because we want you to buy presents for us! Nah, not really. OK, yeah, really. But since that's pretty unlikely, we figured that giving you an idea of what's on our personal A-Lists right now might help you suss out what should be on your own, or that of your husband/wife/parent/podiatrist. Please note that not one of us wimped out and said something like "world peace." We're way too cynical for that! The holidays come but once a year, so choose wisely. We did.

Jeff Green

Despite making a cool 8 million dollars a year, Jeff Green still wants more toys.

iPod

$229 www.apple.com/ipod

OK, sure, I already have Creative Labs' Zen Nomad, and I love it—but what can I say? The iPod is an aesthetic beauty, and I'm shallow that way. We are talking serious techno-lust here. Plus, I use iTunes to play all my music on my PC already. I still love all my old vinyl LPs, but this is one modern technology I'm glad I lived long enough to see.

The Wire: The Complete First Season

$69.99 www.hbo.com/thewire

The best, most exciting, most complex series on television is finally arriving on DVD, and though I've seen the first season twice already, I still want this box. Why? Because, like a great novel, this show resonates more and becomes ever more impressive with repeated viewings. The best "cop show" ever, by far, and one of the all-time great TV shows in any genre.

Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault

$49.95 www.ea.com

I loved the first *Medal of Honor* but wasn't quite able to get excited about this sequel (even though we put it on our cover) until I saw it again a couple weeks ago. Now, it's the game I want to play most (OK, other than *Half-Life 2*). The graphics look amazing, the controls are fantastic, and the story line and missions are dramatic and compelling.

TiVo

$99 + $12.95 per month www.tivo.com

This is why being married sucks. If I were single, I would have had TiVo long ago, like everyone else around here. I mean, duh—we all know it rules. But my wife? Oh no. It's a "waste of money." We have to "buy a house." We have to "educate our child." Whatever. I need TiVo and I need it now. Please, someone, hook me up. My marriage depends on it.

Bob Dylan: Lyrics 1962-2002

$30 www.bobdylan.com

The reason I became a writer, and still an inspiration to me on a daily basis, Bob Dylan is the only person on the planet (er, besides Larry David) for whom I have genuine hero worship. This new book collects the lyrics of nearly every song he's ever written, making it a near-religious necessity for me. You gotta serve somebody—and I serve Bob.

Kristen Salvatore

Chief whip-cracker Kristen is firm but fair, and she has a deadly stash of suppository-sized red-hot jellybeans. Just how naughty have you been?

KOTOR II

$49.99
www.lucasarts.com/games/swkotor_sithlords/

Y'know, it's not even that I'm a particularly freakish *Star Wars* fan. It's more that the first *KOTOR* was the first RPG on which I've ever really gotten hooked. I confess that I'm more of a light side kind of gal, but that dark Sith Lord we got a look at in our June 2004 cover feature is so scary...it's appealing. In typical nice-girl fashion, I like the bad boys.

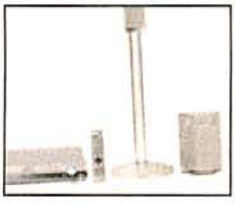
SpongeBob SquarePants Seasons 1 and 2 on DVD

$40.99 each www.amazon.com

Not since *The Muppet Show* (and I own all of that show's episodes on DVD, too) has a program ostensibly for little ones worked so well on two levels. I can't wait to spend some quality time in the Krusty Krab, pondering that most important of questions: Who lives in a pineapple under the sea? Oh, I think you know....

1964 Ford Falcon Futura

A 1963 would also do, but I'm partial to the 1964's less-rounded edges. These babies were originally produced and marketed as compact economy cars. They're actually the precursor to the Mustang, and while I wouldn't exactly turn down a Pony, it's the Futura that has my heart. I'll take a red one, please—sedan or convertible, I'm not picky.



Panasonic Multimedia Display and Home-Theater-in-a-Box Setup

display $3,999 *HTIB setup* $999
www.panasonic.com

Big, sleek, and high-performing—Panasonic's components offer all the things a girl wants...in her home-theater setup. The PT-60LCX64 60-inch LCD projection HDTV screen acts as a TV and a PC monitor, and can even splitscreen between TV and PC, so I can level up in *City of Heroes* without missing a second of *The Surreal Life*! I'm hoping to pair it with the SC-HT1000 home-theater-in-a-box setup. I just know that if I wish hard enough, I'll find this setup under my tree.

Of course, I'm also wishing that I'll wake up and find that Salma Hayek and I have switched bodies. Not under the tree, of course. That would be weird.

Robert Coffey

Frankly, we'd just as soon Robert ask for an exorcist since it would do him and us the most good. In the meantime, these trinkets are apparently attracting his attention.

Star Wars Trilogy

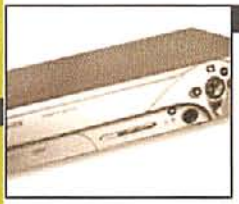
$42 www.amazon.com

The first movie pretty much saved my life during a hot, humid, miserable summer divided between Virginia, Missouri, and chicken pox—I think I saw it like 13 times. The others, while initially viewed less, were still beloved. I prefer to forget the new movies and just cherish these—widescreen only, of course.

128MB SwissMemory Knife

$82 www.swissarmy.com

When skinning a cat or menacing a neighbor, you really shouldn't skimp on a quality knife. I've carried a Swiss Army knife forever, and this new model gets rid of that pointless toothpick in favor of tools a geek like me needs: 128MB of Flash memory, a ballpoint pen, and an LED light.



DirectTV HD TiVo Receiver

$999 www.directv.com

I love the way my current TiVo remembers to grab every episode of *Gilmore Girls* and *Dharma and Greg*, thus giving me the time I need to really hide the bodies just right. I don't love the way it won't record hi-def broadcasts of all those HBO *Autopsy* shows. This overpriced baby should rectify that.

The Late Great Daniel Johnston: Discovered Covered

$16 www.hihowareyou.com

My all-time favorite songwriter is a manic-depressive schizophrenic who lives at home under his increasingly elderly parents' care. This tribute/benefit album raises money for Daniel while showcasing the genius of his songs, courtesy of great covers by Tom Waits, Beck, and others. Plus, you get Johnston's original versions as well.

Half-Life 2

$50 www.half-life2.com

Once upon a time, I lived in a basement apartment that would fill up with slugs every time it rained, which happened a lot. But I didn't care, because I was playing the original *Half-Life*—over and over again. The first game was amazing, and I'm expecting nothing less from the sequel.

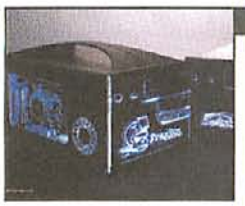
Darren Gladstone

Darren doesn't really deserve anything, but we're afraid to tell him that, since he's prone to breaking mice. We have to keep his cube well stocked with whiskey—only the cheap stuff, though.

Portable Media Center

$500 www.creative.com

I travel a whole lot for this job, and the PMC is my new best friend on road trips. The 20GB hard drive can stash up to 85 hours (!) of video and a bunch of MP3s. How else am I supposed to catch up on all my TV shows when I'm living out of a suitcase?



FragBox 2

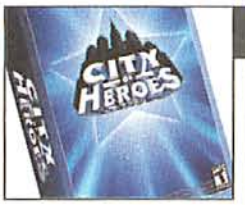
$2,600 www.falcon-nw.com

I'm not clogging up more desk space with some butt-ugly PC. That's why I crave the FragBox 2. Not only is this squat terror a powerhouse, it also looks tight! The new case can accommodate more cards, and it's got a real power supply this time around! There are 520 watts at your disposal—and I, for one, plan to push them.

Delphi SKYFi Audio System

$100 + $10/month www.xmradio.com

Lately, I've been hitting the road a lot with the girlfriend. Nothing's worse than being in the middle of nowhere and having to listen to polka music. Get me satellite radio! All the choices, all the coverage, and I can plug it into my car or take it to the park. I love this boombox.



City of Heroes Special Edition DVD-ROM

$50 www.cityofheroes.com

The fact that I'm still logging in to an MMO months after I've written the review for it is a testament to how different this game is from all the other crap out there. This deluxe DVD-ROM has all the latest updates and a bunch of extra junk I'll probably chuck (Heroclix? Puh-leez!), but there is a new prestige item for DVD owners. Look for me on *Justice*!

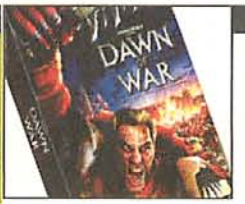
Nokia N-Gage QD

$99 www.nokia.com

Laugh all you want—I did after the first N-Gage came out. But holy crap! I've got to confess, the QD marks a major turnaround. I'm really digging the redesigned phone, and now there are actually games I might play: *Asphalt: Urban GT* and *Pathway to Glory*.

Ryan Scott

Ryan's been handling as many as three areas of the magazine simultaneously. But 'tis the season, which means it's time for a well-deserved holiday break...and some nice new toys to play with.



Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War

$50 www.thq.com

It's been a while since I was into a good strategy game—I loved *Age of Empires II* and *Rise of Nations*, but I just couldn't get into the whole *WarCraft III* level-building thing. *Warhammer* looks great, plays great, and just generally is great. Definitely my top pick from the holiday RTS crop.

Panasonic DVD-LA95 9-inch Portable DVD Player

$700 www.panasonic.com

Actually, any good portable DVD player will do, but Panasonic is a name I trust. This sleek little machine plays DVD video and audio discs, DVD-Rs, audio CDs, and even MP3s. The 2.5-hour battery life ain't the greatest, but for a short plane ride, it's more than enough.

LOTR: The Return of the King Extended Edition DVD Gift Set

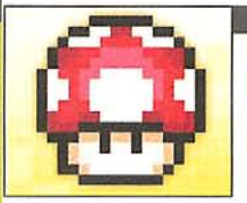
$80 www.lordoftherings.net

As if the theatrical cut wasn't long enough, the extended edition of *Return of the King* clocks in at over four hours. That's OK, though—Christopher Lee's scenes have been reinserted, along with plenty of other goodies. And now we can have our 11-hour *LOTR* marathon!

Detective Comics #27

$375,000 www.ebay.com

This comic features Batman's debut, and it is the second most highly valued comic in the world (the first being *Action Comics #1*, which includes the first appearance of Superman). Sure, I've got a snowball's chance in hell of actually ever owning it, but I can dream, can't I?



Power Up

$14 www.amazon.com

Being a lifelong Nintendo fanatic, I'm pretty intrigued by Chris Kohler's new Nintendo-focused book about Japanese videogames. I know this doesn't have much to do with PC gaming, but hey—I'll be the first person in line when someone comes out with a book about the heyday of Sierra On-Line, too.

Rebecca Gross

Our staff's newest young'un insists that all she wants for Christmas is her two front teeth. Hey, we may be cheap, but we're not that bad.

Dell Inspiron XPS

$2,499 www.dell.com

Hey, an aspiring college student needs a good computer. This top-of-the-line laptop should do the trick, what with its 3.4GHz processor and 256MB videocard. Sure, it's heavy, but I need to build muscle anyway, and this will save money on a gym membership.

Harry Potter Six-DVD Box Set

$59.92 www.dvdtown.com

Despite having played the latest *Harry Potter* PC game, I'm still an avid fan. I'm hoping to have my loyalty rewarded with this collection of the last three movies. Oh, and a new DVD remote control so I can pause to drool over Alan Rickman and Daniel Radcliffe at will.

Prince of Persia: Warrior Within

$39.99 www.ebgames.com

Ever since I drew big hearts around this game on the whiteboard, I've been hoping someone would take note and hook me up. Otherwise, I might have to start dropping bigger hints. Maybe they'll foist the review on me, too.

Samsung SCH a670

$59.99 with two-year contract
www.verizonwireless.com

Our "editor-type guy" Ryan has been raving about his new phone for the last two months, so I decided that I could use one. I like to tell everyone that I hate cell phones in theory, but if one showed up wrapped in a pretty bow, I bet I'd find a way to like it.

Sony MDR-CD 280 Consumer Headphones

$29.99 www.sony.com

Everyone who sits near me in the *CGW* bullpen is getting a bit tired of my classical music. Not only might it increase their intelligence, but it also makes their music look bad—especially Darren's crap. These should help. Or maybe we should add them to Darren's list....

Michael Jennings

Angel to some, devil to others...whether or not he's been good is debatable, but there's no doubt he's been dealing layouts like a madman this year.

Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay

$49.99 www.riddickgame.com

Kind of a dark secret, but I was hooked on the Riddick character quite a while ago and it wasn't the special effects of *Pitch Black* that did it. You have to love a bad guy who's just trying to make a dishonest living. Although the sequel didn't break any records at the box office, I'm betting this console hit will be a blast.

T-Mobile Sidekick II

$249.99 www.t-mobile.com/products

AIM, e-mail, Internet, cell phone...this bling-bling all-in-one gadget is guaranteed to help solve my communications issues, create new ones...and make me feel like Jay-Z for a few seconds.

The Office: The Complete First and Second Series

$54.50 www.amazon.com

Although I've been formally introduced to this "reality" series about the goings on in a British office, I'm looking forward to getting properly acquainted with the painfully funny miscommunications between David Brent and er...friends. You get season one, season two, and the special follow-up episodes, all in one set.

Les Dirt Clods: Earthrooster

$12.98 http://lesdirtclods.com/

Don't be fooled by the name—the Clods rock! With a nod to Keith Richards and a healthy portion of R&B, this six-member setup includes plenty of serious guitars and lyrics that take me back to the farm....the party farm!

Kino's Journey

$29.98 www.advfilms.com.

If you think a story about a little girl who rides around on her talking motorcycle Hermes while searching for life's answers sounds like something for the dork kid next door, just wait until you see Kino blow away a band of cannibalistic human slave traders. It's not about the destination here...it's about the ass-kicking journey.

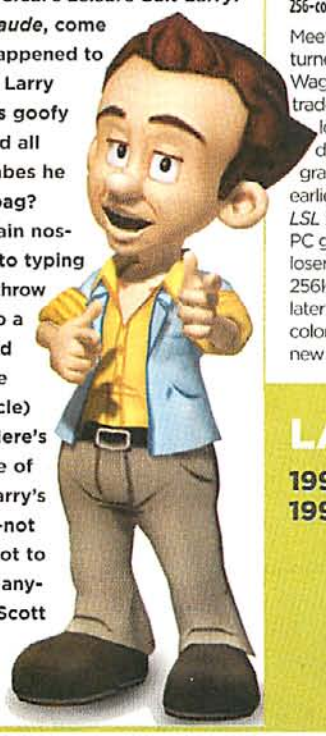
Fast Forward

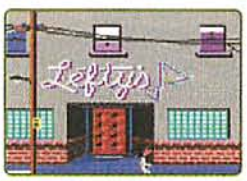
Welcome to Fast Forward, *CGW*'s monthly back-of-the-book hodgepodge of all things PC-gaming related. Every month, we'll offer up a handy reviews index, a few editors' picks, and whatever else we think of.

HISTORY LESSON

THE MANY MISADVENTURES OF LEISURE SUIT LARRY

Just where did this new Larry Lovage guy, star of Vivendi Universal's *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*, come from? What happened to our old friend Larry Laffer, with his goofy leisure suit and all those killer babes he never got to bag? There's a certain nostalgic quality to typing phrases like "throw bra at pig" into a text parser, and for this, we owe thanks to (Uncle) Larry Laffer. Here's a look at some of the original Larry's greatest hits—not that he ever got to "hit" much of anything ■ Ryan Scott





Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards

256-color VGA remake released in 1991

Meet Larry Laffer. He's just turned 40 and he's in Lost Wages, decked out in his trademark white leisure suit, looking to score—and we don't mean money. A graphical remake of Sierra's earlier text adventure *Softporn, LSL* introduced audiences to PC gaming's most lovable loser in this whopping 16-color, 256K graphic adventure. It was later remade in glorious 256-color VGA using Sierra's (then) new icon-based interface.

Leisure Suit Larry Goes Looking for Love (In Several Wrong Places)

One of the first titles to use Sierra's much-improved SCI adventure game engine, *Looking for Love* saw our hapless hero tangled up with sexy spies, dating-game shows, an absurdly lethal cruise ship, and the nefarious Dr. Nonookee (say it slowly). It even featured real sequenced midi music that used the hot new Ad Lib soundcards!

Leisure Suit Larry 3: Passionate Patti in Pursuit of the Pulsating Pectorals

Set on the exotic Nontoonyt Island from the previous game, *LSL3* introduced Larry's on-again off-again soul mate, Passionate Patti. The series really climaxed here (no pun intended); not only did players get to control both Larry and Patti over the course of the story, but the trademark humor built over the previous titles really hit its stride in this game.

LARRY SPIN-OFFS

1991 The Laffer Utilities
1998 Leisure Suit Larry's Casino

There have been a few *Larry* spin-offs and minigames over the years, but two stand out in particular. The first is a *Norton Utilities* spoof called *The Laffer Utilities*, which includes such useful programs as a joke database and an excuse maker. *Larry's Casino* presents you with a number of Vegas-style casino games spiced up with the familiar *Larry* brand of humor.

Robert's Picks

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005

Golf just seems boring and frustrating. I'm married with two kids, so golf would be satanically redundant. And yet this game has me in its kid leather grip even though I can't bludgeon Gary Player with a sand wedge in it.

The Sims 2

I thought I'd overdosed on *The Sims 2*, but after a break, I'm sucked in again. I'm trying to get Juniper Bindle and Gelatinous Cube to marry, but G-Cube's constant flirting with strangers keeps getting in the way.

City of Heroes

The *Issue #2* update has made the game too hard, too frustrating, and too much of a time-sink. So why can't I stop? Because I have a pretty, pretty cape! Look at me! Please...someone shoot me now.

These three lovely ladies make appearances in *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude.*

Leisure Suit Larry 5: Passionate Patti Does a Little Undercover Work

Series creator Al Lowe swore he'd never make *LSL4*...and he didn't. Larry begins this game with some memory loss and wonders what exactly happened after he rode off into the sunset with Patti at the end of *LSL3*. Fortunately, they cross paths once again when their dual undercover adventures collide here. *LSL5* was the first *Larry* game to feature 256-color graphics and Sierra's classic icon-based interface.

Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out!

Thanks to the modern magic of the CD-ROM, *LSL6* featured more locations, more babes, and—for the first time—full voice! Larry, voiced here by Jan Rabson, wins an all-expenses-paid trip to the La Costa Lotta health spa, where he's determined to woo as many nubile young women as he can. Curiously, *LSL6* was completely free of copy protection—mostly because Sierra figured no one was ever going to be able to copy CDs.

Leisure Suit Larry: Love for Sail!

Larry sets sail once again, this time on a cruise ship decidedly less deadly than the one he encountered in *LSL2. Love for Sail* gave the series a new animated look and a much more risqué overtone, as evidenced by the bizarre "Where's Dildo?" minigame and the bevy of clothing-free "Easter eggs" hidden throughout the adventure.

How Lowe Can You Go?

A few words with the father of *Leisure Suit Larry*

Q: Did you ever think the *Larry* series would be as wildly popular as it was?

A: Sure I did! At Sierra, we always predicted everything would be popular...of course, most of the time, we were wrong, and things didn't always go as smoothly as we wanted. *LSL1* was the worst-selling game we ever did—it sold 4,000 copies in its first month. The funny thing is, the sales kept doubling every month, and Sierra never spent a cent on advertising or promotion. It just sort of sold itself by word of mouth, and about a year later, it was at the top of the sales charts.

Q: What do you think of the new *Larry*? Did you have any input during the design process?

A: Well, I have to withhold my opinion for now because I've never seen it, except for a few magazine articles and previews. I'm not involved with the project, but I think things have hopefully turned out for the best.

Q: How do you feel about adventure games these days? Do you think there will ever be a significant demand for that type of game, or have those days passed forever?

A: I think the types of adventure games we did in the early '80s and '90s are dead and won't ever be back. But I think good plots, storytelling, character development, and those kinds of things will always be considered important, regardless of the technology being used.

Check out Al Lowe's personal website www.allowe.com for more Larry history and other funny stuff.

Rewind 100

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

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Across the Dnepr	04/04	★★½☆☆
Alpha Black Zero: Intrepid Protocol	12/04	★★½☆☆

Aura: Fate of the Ages	10/04	★★★½☆
Battlefield Vietnam	06/04	★★★★½
Besieger	09/04	★★½☆☆
Beyond Divinity	08/04	★★★½☆
Breed	07/04	★½☆☆☆
Call of Duty: United Offensive	12/04	★★★★½
Campaigns on the Danube	12/04	★★★½☆
Catwoman	11/04	★½☆☆☆
Chaos Legion	08/04	★½☆☆☆
City of Heroes	08/04	★★★★½
Civilization III: Conquests	04/04	★★★★½

Codename: Panzers	11/04	★★★½☆
Conspiracies	05/04	★½☆☆☆
Crusader Kings	08/04	★★★½☆
Crystal Key 2: The Far Realm	08/04	★★½☆☆
CSI: Crime Scene Investigation—Dark Motives	08/04	★½☆☆☆
Dead Man's Hand	08/04	★★½☆☆

Rewind100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Desert Rats vs. Afrika Corps	07/04	★★★½☆
Doom 3	10/04	★★★★★
Evil Genius	12/04	★★½☆☆
Far Cry	06/04	★★★★½
FireStarter	06/04	★★☆☆☆
Galactic Civilizations: Altarian Prophecy	12/04	★★★★☆
Gangland	06/04	★★★☆☆
Ground Control II: Operation Exodus	10/04	★★★★½
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	11/04	★★★☆☆
Hitman: Contracts	08/04	★★★½☆

Horizons: Empire of Istaria	05/04	★★½☆☆
Jack the Ripper	05/04	★★½☆☆
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	09/04	★★★★½
Judge Dredd: Dredd Versus Death	07/04	★★★½☆

Kohan II: Kings of War	12/04	★★★★½
Kuma\War	09/04	★½☆☆☆
Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle	08/04	★★☆☆☆
Lords of the Realm III	07/04	★☆☆☆☆
Manhunt	07/04	★★½☆☆
Missing: Since January	10/04	★★★★☆
MVP Baseball 2004	06/04	★★★½☆
Mysterious Journey II	03/04	★★½☆☆
NASCAR Thunder 2004	03/04	★★★½☆
Nemesis of the Roman Empire	07/04	★★½☆☆
Painkiller	07/04	★★★★½

HOLIDAY TRAVEL GUIDE

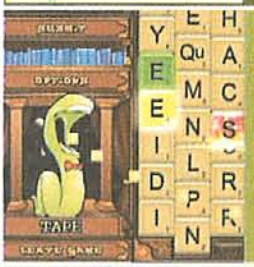
Pack your bags, chickens—it's time to head home for some family holiday time! Someone, please kill us now! Here are a few suggestions for easing your time in the friendly skies. Hey, you might as well make the most of it—it's probably not as bad as what's waiting for you on the other end. Really, why *don't* you visit your mother more?

PLAY GAMES

Yes, Virginia, you can play games on your laptop. *Diablo II* and *The Sims 2* are both pretty low powered, so your battery life won't ebb away before the drink cart comes by. Or check out some classics: *Grim Fandango* and *Sam & Max Hit the Road* are great ways to while away a few hours, and are "family friendly." Do not underestimate this—we were once privy to a very embarrassing moment between a 10-year-old boy, his mother, and the guy next to them watching *Requiem for a Dream* on his laptop.

PAINT, SHARE, AND SLEEP

Ah, art—timeless unifier of disparate peoples...unless they're battling it out for who gets the middle armrest. Get yourself some real estate by thoroughly alienating your seatmate with unconventional artistic creations. Use your laptop's paint program to create a really messed-up masterpiece, then show it to your neighbor with pride. If you execute this properly, he should immediately request a seat change, thus providing you with an extra two-foot square on which to rest your head. Happy holidays!



PLAY GAMES V.2

If you're trying to travel light, leave the DVD drive at home altogether and play games you've predownloaded onto your machine. We continue to worship at the altars of *Zuma* and *Bookworm*, both of which are practically made for occupying the time of someone who is forced to sit in a confined space for many hours. This may explain why they are so popular in our office.

ROCK ON WITH YOUR BAD SELF

True, an iPod is a lot easier to carry around, but if you're dragging your laptop along anyway, you might as well enjoy an iTunes party shuffle. Better yet, use this time to create some playlists that you can burn to CDs later, as the mix tape remains an excellent gift option—especially if you're headed home on a Christmas Eve red-eye and haven't actually done any shopping yet. Hey, it beats what you'll find in the "housewares" aisle of the only supermarket open on Christmas morning.

DOWNLOAD THIS

Just about everyone with a computer has spent time lately grappling with an adware and/or spyware problem. Here are our top choices for programs that combat these nasty buggers.

AD-AWARE

After it scans, choose exactly which "dangerous" components you want to remove.

Ad-Aware SE: free download; Ad-Aware Plus (blocks the bad stuff in real time so it never gets installed): $26.95

www.lavasoft.de

SPY SWEEPER

Finds and alerts you to problematic programs already installed and actively monitors for new invaders.

Free fully functional trial; $29.95 to keep it

www.webroot.com

SPYBOT—SEARCH AND DESTROY

Labor of love detects spyware and "usage tracks," such as your recent *Word* docs, then lets you decide which to dump.

Free (though donations are solicited)

http://spybot.safer-networking.de/

ALL-IN-ONE SECRETMAKER

It's a "spam fighter/pop-up killer/banner/blocker/cookie eraser/history cleaner/privacy protector/worm hunter." Maybe it does windows, too.

Free *www.secretmaker.com*

SPYWARE DOCTOR

Detects and removes spyware, adware, keystroke loggers, and trojan programs.

Free fully functional trial; $39.95 to keep it

www.pctools.com

HOT TIP!

Doom 3 Easter egg

You've just about blasted your last demon and you're almost done with the *Doom 3* experience, but have you found the PDA from hell—or, more accurately, the PDA in hell? Toward the end of the game, underneath an overhang of cobblestone in a well hidden dead-end hallway, lies the Id Software corporate logo.

Push that block for a bonus surprise! On an altar lies a PDA with the final notes from the entire Id Software team. OK, it isn't the cure for cancer, but it's still a cool little thing to look for just before you finish off the Cyberdemon.

Rewind100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Perimeter	09/04	★★½☆☆

Port Royale 2	12/04	★★★½☆
Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword	06/04	★★★½☆
Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patriots	07/04	★★★★½
Sacred	07/04	★★★½☆
ShellShock: Nam '67	09/04	★½☆☆☆
Shrek 2	09/04	★★★½☆
Silent Storm	04/04	★★★★½
Singles: Flirt Up Your Life	09/04	★☆☆☆☆
Soldiers: Heroes of WWII	11/04	★★★★☆

Soldner: Secret Wars	10/04	★½☆☆☆
Spider-Man 2	11/04	★½☆☆☆
Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow	06/04	★★★½☆
Star Chamber	05/04	★★★★½
Syberia II	05/04	★★★½☆
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	05/04	★½☆☆☆

The Political Machine	11/04	★★★★½
The Sims 2	11/04	★★★★★
The Suffering	10/04	★★★½☆

Rewind100

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Thief: Deadly Shadows	09/04	★★★★☆
Title Bout Championship Boxing	05/04	★★★★☆
TrackMania	10/04	★★½☆☆
Trainz 2004	04/04	★★★½☆
True Crime: Streets of L.A.	09/04	★★½☆☆
Two Thrones	06/04	★½☆☆☆
Universal Combat	10/04	★★½☆☆
Unreal Tournament 2004	06/04	★★★★★
Virtual Skipper 3	10/04	★★★½☆
War in the Pacific	11/04	★★★½☆
War Times	08/04	★★½☆☆
Warhammer 40,000: Fire Warrior	07/04	★★☆☆☆
Warlords Battlecry III	08/04	★★★½☆
Wars & Warriors: Joan of Arc	05/04	★★½☆☆
World Soccer Winning Eleven 7 International	10/04	★★★★½
Worms 3D	05/04	★★★½☆
You Don't Know Jack—The Lost Gold	05/04	★★½☆☆

HIGH SCORE

Our favorite things at 1UP.com

Man alive, 1UP.com has been hoppin' lately. What's that? You say you don't have your own 1UP.com page? You're not tracking your game collection, blogging, chatting with other gamers, and joining clubs? Uh, listen, you might wanna get on the stick, Sonny Jim. Go to 1UP.com to get started, and while you're there, swing by the pages of *CGW* editors and readers and join http://cgwfans-club.1UP.com. C'mon—it's not the same without you.

FEATURED BLOG

Bev McClain, aka granniegamer
http://granniegamer.1UP.com

This die-hard *CGW* supporter digs movies and shares Kristen's love of all things food related. She's also so well spoken that she makes *CGW* readers look like brainiacs. You should all thank her now. Rock on, Grannie!

CLUB OF THE MONTH

Total World Domination TWD-club.1UP.com

"Future opressors [*sic*], slave drivers, ninjas, russians [*sic*] with heavy accents, or anyone bent on the destruction of the planet, unite! Popular topics include: total world domination, blowing stuff up, capturing beautiful young ladies, total world domination, constructing giant laser beams and attaching them to endangered animals, hiring large german [*sic*] henchmen with funny names like Hans and Lamar, and total world domination. Join today!"

WHAT'S UP WITH 1UP?

A few words from 1UP.com's editor-in-chief

In my ongoing quest to keep hyping up the new 1UP until each and every reader of *CGW* has signed up, this month I wanted to let you in on a cool trend that I've started to notice. It seems that a lot of 1UP users have taken it upon themselves to cover a certain beat—a topic or interest that they're enthusiastic about and willing to share insight and opinions on with the many other users of the site. For example, one of my current favorite weekly reads is Vince Matthews' DVD Insider blog (http://dvdinsider.1UP.com). An avid DVD fan and collector, Vince updates his 1UP.com space with new info on the big releases and special deals each week. The neatest thing, in my opinion, is that other users will often give him insider tips, so it's turned out to be a great resource for DVD info. Other users will use clubs to own a topic, such as 1UP's own senior production manager Mike Ng's HDTV resource club (http://hdtv-club.1UP.com). I'll admit that ever since buying my HDTV last year, it's been hard to watch anything but HDTV programming, and this club has been a terrific resource for keeping up to date on anything going on in the HDTV world (such as Comcast adding more HD channels or new network shows being broadcast in HD). Of course, the folks at *CGW* also run a club on a topic that they're more than familiar with. As a preemptive strike against the inevitable disgruntled reader, they started the CGW Sucks! club (http://cgwsucks-club.1UP.com). Smart, eh? Anyhow, if you have a particular area of interest that you'd like to take on, just start up your own blog or club on the site—and when you do, let me know so I can check it out.

Sam Kennedy http://capnsmak.1UP.com/

SOUND OFF

CGW's readers speak up

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

CAPTION CONTEST

So our captions suck, huh? Think you can do better? E-mail your caption for this screenshot from *Tribes: Vengeance*, along with your name and address, to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject "Caption Contest," and you might win a brand-new copy of the game for yourself!

THIS MONTH'S WINNER:

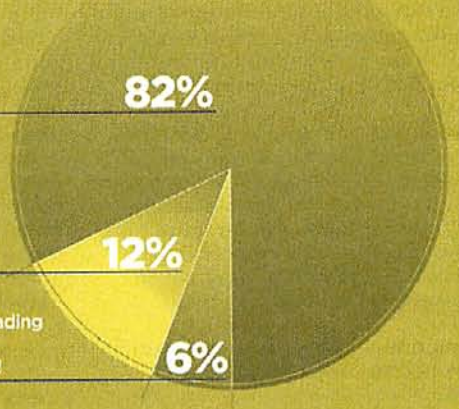
"Look, Tom and Nicole are back together."

Jon Tran
Anaheim Hills, CA

POLL OF THE MONTH

Hit up our forums at http://boards.1UP.com and vote in our monthly poll.

Harry Potter versus Lord of the Rings: Fight!



Gollum would bite Harry's snivelling little face off: *LOTR* rocks! **82%**

Frodo's a pouty wimp to begin with; faced with Harry's stag patronus, he'd wet himself: *Harry* rulez! **12%**

Who cares? I'm too busy downloading JPEGs of Lindsay Lohan playing Hermione on *Saturday Night Live*! **6%**

DESERT ISLAND GAMES

Poor you—stuck on an island all by your lonesome, with just five PC games to keep you company. Whatcha gonna pick? Let us know at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com with the subject "Desert Island Games" (and your name and city/state).

Half-Life It's not just the game—it's the dozens and dozens of mods! Even though it came out five years ago, this game still isn't old.

Battlefield 1942 Again, some of the best mods ever. *DC*, *EOD*, *FH*. This would definitely deliver countless hours glued to the computer, fragging n00bs. Some of the best moments of PC gaming were on a 50-player Forgotten Hope sever. [Sorry, no LAN or broadband access on this island, Royce—you'll have to pretend. —*Ed.*]

RollerCoaster Tycoon Must...make... roller...coasters. Chris Sawyer is both my friend and enemy. Sooooo much fun packed in one game, and I'm glued to my computer for so long that I forget what the outside world is like. Which in this case is a deserted island.

Grim Fandango Whoever says adventure games suck should be shot and stabbed. *Grim Fandango* combines a great story and some of the funniest moments in any game. Its humor is on par with *Leisure Suit Larry*'s.

Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun Definitely as fun as RTS multiplayer gets. [Uh, again, you're by yourself. On an island. Multiplayer is out, unless you're conjuring up people in a brain, fevered with thirst and exposure. In which case, cool! —*Ed.*]

Royce Marcus
via e-mail

Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: Relic Studios GENRE: Real-time Strategy

Warhammer 40,000: The Dawn of War

Oy! Da boyz slug it out in dis killa game!

The game is *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*. The combatants are Bruce's space marines versus Tom's orks. Tom has actually created his own color scheme, fitting his orks in bright yellow with red pants and a tasteful mauve trim. He calls it Chick's Sunny Boyz. The map is Outer Reaches, where both players start near each other but are separated by a ridge. The battle is to the death, with no namby-pamby territorial victory conditions, which Bruce says will make him lose too soon.

Bruce, 0:00 This is the point in the article where I'd normally make fun of the backstory. But I'm actually a big fan of *Warhammer's* story, and I can sum it up in two words: space church. That's not why I'm playing as the space marines, though. Instead, I like them because they never really have many units. In my life, I've chosen to develop a set of technical skills that does not include rapid clicking on space monsters. I'll have a few übersquads with upgraded weapons and the like.

Ork rokkits sailing past a dreadnought.

Big mek go BOOM!

Orkz Gone Wild!

Tom, 0:21 Oy, us orkz smash humies. Waaagh!

Bruce, 0:23 Is he going to do that for the whole article? I don't think I can work this way. At any rate, the space marines have an early disadvantage because their scouts can't stand up to the basic orc melee units. I need to build some stronger units fast.

Tom, 0:31 Waaagh! Ork is ork, not orc!

Bruce, 0:34 Can you at least speak English?

Tom, 0:36 'Ere we go! Where's da fight?

Bruce, 0:39 Can you speak non-orc English?

Tom, 0:42 If you'll spell ork correctly.

Bruce, 0:44 Fine. Ork. Once I get an armory built, my priority will be to build a force commander. He's great for disrupting Tom's close-combat squads.

Tom, 2:05 So, oy, I'm minding my own business, sending squads out to grab the strategic points that generate resources—mind you, I'm just talking about the ones on my side of the map—when I see some of Bruce's scouts, who think they can just come over here and take stuff from me. A fight ensues in which one of my squads chases around two of his scouts. Which is fine by me, since that's two fewer of Bruce's units claiming resources.

Bruce, 2:17 One of my scout squads is wiped out by Tom's big mek. That's like my force commander, only with a way more stupid name.

Tom, 2:24 Hey, force commander is a pretty stupid name when you consider it's what LucasArts called that god-awful *Star*

Players

Tom
Last month:
Tom crushed Bruce so badly in *Kohan II* that Bruce cried all month long.

Bruce
Last month:
Bruce said that since he was playing as the undead, Tom didn't really "kill" him.

Bruce spends the last of his resources to feed the squiggoth a delectable tank.

One of the orks' favorite pastimes is blindly shelling enemy positions.

Look, up in the sky, it's a bird, it's a plane, it's a bunch of smelly orks!

Wars RTS. But yeah, big mek is kind of silly. Just for the record, I was doing that earlier stuff to annoy Bruce. It's embarrassing enough having to type this argot. I can't imagine sitting around a tabletop saying things out loud like, "I'm going to research more choppy for my slugga boyz." It's Jodie Foster in *Nell* and Chuck D playing a board game.

Bruce, 3:50 My scouts try to draw Tom's squad deeper into my territory. They follow, but my force commander is ready with a marine squad. It's no contest as they rout Tom's orks.

Tom, 4:19 While the slugga boyz retreat, I bring up my big mek and two squads of shoota boyz. Bruce runs off—ha!—and leaves the top corner of the map to me.

Bruce, 5:27 Tom has taken control of the majority of the strategic points, which is as unfair as getting Australia in *Risk*. So I counterattack. The force commander and big mek manage to kill each other. I can't beat Tom on manpower, but I've equipped my marines with a flamer, which can really torch enemy morale. Unfortunately, the orks kill my flamer marine.

Tom, 6:23 Would it be out of line to make a "Don't ask, don't tell" reference here? It would? OK, never mind. Eventually, even without the flamer, Bruce's superior morale wins out in this roughly equal engagement. Orks aren't known for their discipline in battle. Time to fall back.

Bruce, 6:31 Trying to match the orks' numbers is impossible, so I opt for the superior firepower of vehicles and start building a machine cult. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to build listening posts on my strategic points because I was saving up for the machine cult. It's probably going to hurt me in the long run, but it'll be worth it when my dreadnoughts show up.

Tom, 7:12 Oy!

Bruce, 7:31 I have my machine cult, but space realism dictates that machines need power, and I haven't built any generators. If the fog of war were turned off, Tom would resign out of laughter. In an earlier game we played, which I would like to point out I won, Tom built mainly close-combat units that I destroyed with ranged weaponry. In this game, he seems to be building mainly ranged units. So I'd love to build a regular dreadnought, which is a deadly close-combat counter to ranged units. Sadly, due to lack of alternative energy sources, I'm forced to use the cheaper hellfire variant, which is kind of like the Yugoslavian econo car of dreadnoughts: energy efficient, but not so good against orks.

Tom, 7:52 Bruce hasn't taken all the resources on his side of the map. So I guess he won't mind if I help myself.

Bruce, 8:10 Tom is going after the relic on my side of the map. I have no idea why, since I assume he has his own relic on his side of the map. It just shows what a greedy bastard he is.

Tom, 8:40 While Bruce and I were fighting for the top of the map, I've been quietly building up a strategic point in the middle of the map, just above our bases. I'll call it the gateway, since it controls access to two victory locations. We're playing to the death, so these locations won't win the game for me. But they do provide income and extend a much longer line of sight than the regular strategic points. I cap the gateway with a listening post and start building up waaagh! banners and mine fields to keep Bruce out. This should channel the action to the top of the map, where my army is gathered.

Bruce, 9:39 Thanks to some invisible scouts, I discover that Tom has built some towers in the middle of the map that give him some kind of ork benefit or something. Plus, they shoot things. Fortunately, so does my hellfire. I start my assault on the middle area with the hellfire and a space marine squad toting a rocket launcher. The first strike takes out a third of his tower's health from extremely long range.

Tom, 10:02 Someone is firing rockets at the waaagh! banners around the gateway. They're firing from out of range of my view. When I swing my shoota boyz squads around from behind, to my horror, I discover he's already got a dreadnought. Uh-oh. Time to hastily equip my shootas with rokkits. Yes, they're spelled "rokkits."

Bruce, 11:06 Tom's ork rockets must be old Soviet reissues because they can't hit the virtual side of a futuristic mecha barn. My space marines close, using a crater as cover, and unleash the dreaded flamer. Half of Tom's squads break and he retreats, taking losses as I give chase. He goes only as far as the next crater, though, before unexpectedly turning to fight. He has cover, but I have space marines, a hellfire dreadnought, and the blessing of the emperor. I predict victory.

Tom, 13:17 I'm trying to fall back, but Bruce keeps following with that damn hellfire dreadnought. He walks it right past the defensive line my gretchens are building. How inconsiderate. He could at least stop to engage it. But no, he keeps on coming! So I go to my contingency plan, which involves calling up the squad of stormboyz waiting back at my base. They light up their jetpacks and jump the intervening ridge, landing gingerly in the middle of Bruce's base, which they proceed to pummel.

Bruce, 13:50 One of Tom's many towers is down and his builder units are scattered, but somehow my scouts got hammered by Tom's retreating orks, who were themselves being pursued by my space marines as he flew a bunch of guys into my base who are now attacking my machine cult, which is on the verge of producing another hellfire. Complicated? Let's just say I have no idea what is going on right now, except that I'm down to my hellfire and two squads of space marines with their ever-useful flamer, which is fast becoming my favorite weapon.

Tom, 14:23 At the rate my stormboyz are doing damage to Bruce's machine cult, I'm guessing they are armed with soggy baguettes. In fact, they're taking so long that while they're slapping away at it, another hellfire dreadnought pops out. Time to, as the orks say, "leg it." Meanwhile,

Oy, we're Chick's Sunny Boyz!

Bruce's other dreadnought is sweeping around the top of the map, chewing up my stuff. Because ork technology is dependent on the number of troops and waaagh! banners you have, this is making it really difficult for me to use the mek shop I just finished.

Bruce, 15:20 With the help of a full squad of marines, Tom's towers are down, and I can retake the strategic points that should have been mine in the first place. The problem is that this whole battle is being fought on my side of the map, which means Tom has been controlling most of the resources. Except due to the nature of ork tech, he gets screwed every time I kill his units. Or something. I'm not really sure how it works, since I never painted the action figures or whatever they were.

Tom, 15:54 Time to bring everything to bear at the top of the map. "Everything" is two midstrength stormboyz squads and a shoota squad with big mek attached. The shootas chase off Bruce's marines while the first group of stormboyz swarms the dreadnought, slapping it limply with their soggy baguettes.

Bruce, 16:32 To try to take some of the heat off the northern units, I bring my second hellfire up to the middle strategic point and start picking off towers again. Meanwhile, my marines retreat toward another group of marines who just finished converting back my relic, drawing the orks into the firepower of two squads. But just as I think the plan is working, Tom drops another jetpack squad on my ass. Damn.

Tom, 17:38 That dreadnought isn't going down, plus Bruce has managed to bring up another squad of marines. Time to pull back, regroup, consider my options, and do some deep ork soul-searching while the mek shop finishes another looted tank. With two tanks, I can hit him in earnest and drive back those dreadnoughts.

Bruce, 18:40 I have a third hellfire in action now, which is good because Tom is rolling up some kind of ork claptrap tank.

Tom gets a big rocket surprise.

Bruce on the offensive for once.

Fun with flamers.

This seems promising.

"It is better to die for the emperor than live for yourself."

Orkz of Valor.

Since when can orks drive? Of all the ridiculous design decisions. Didn't these Relic guys do any research?

Tom, 18:44 Bruce has obligingly assembled all his units within the line of sight of the middle victory location, which is mine. So it's simply a matter of arranging everything for a coordinated strike. Stormboyz lead to engage the marines, a nob squad follows up to reinforce them, the tanks hang back and fire at the dreadnoughts, and the shootas work their way into a good firing position with cover. This is the "strategy" part of "real-time strategy."

Bruce, 19:33 I suspect Tom just likes flying his jetpack guys around. Makes him feel cool. He flies a squad up with a bunch of nob infantry and some kind of heavy artillery shells falling all around. I don't think I can stand up to this. While I'm sitting in my chair in front of the computer, I look down and see a red pulsing circle at my feet.

Tom, 19:37 Bruce must have built a dreadnought breeding farm or something, because as soon as I kill one, another comes stomping up to join the battle. The newest arrival isn't a hellfire, but rather the default version that kicks total and complete ass when it goes toe-to-toe with infantry. It's wading into my nob squad, making ork smoothies out of them. Since my stormboyz aren't doing much good slapping their soggy baguettes against his armored vehicles, they jet over to Bruce's base and slap their soggy baguettes against his buildings.

Bruce, 19:49 Time for some base defense. I pull my remaining hellfire and marines back and start building a heavy bolter turret. Tom's jetpack guys wisely fly away.

Tom, 20:14 OK, I'd just like to announce that I call this map. I called it, it's mine, so now Bruce can't go mucking around on it anymore. That's just the way it works, and I have a whole bunch of orks with looted tanks to back me up. And to reinforce the point, I'm building a squiggoth.

Bruce, 23:30 With all of this vehicle building, I haven't had a chance to do many tech upgrades. I build a sacred artifact and a fortress monastery, hoping to eventually get an orbital bombardment. For now I'd settle for a giant ork-crushing tank. Since I control only three of 10 strategic points, I send out my newly repaired hellfire, hoping to even the economic playing field a bit. But I run into Tom's upper-level commander, the warboss, who makes his orks glow orange like John Kerry, which seems like a bad thing. I try to retreat, only to run into three looted tanks.

Tom, 25:43 With my tanks this close to the edge of Bruce's base, I might as well put them to use. Blind shelling! I'm occasionally rewarded with a body being flung by the blast of a shell into my line of sight.

Bruce, 26:07 Tom is dropping artillery on me, which is really messing up my marines. My hellfire clears his spotters from the ridge above me, but even firing blind, his artillery is a nuisance. So now I'm squeezed back into a tiny corner of my base to escape.

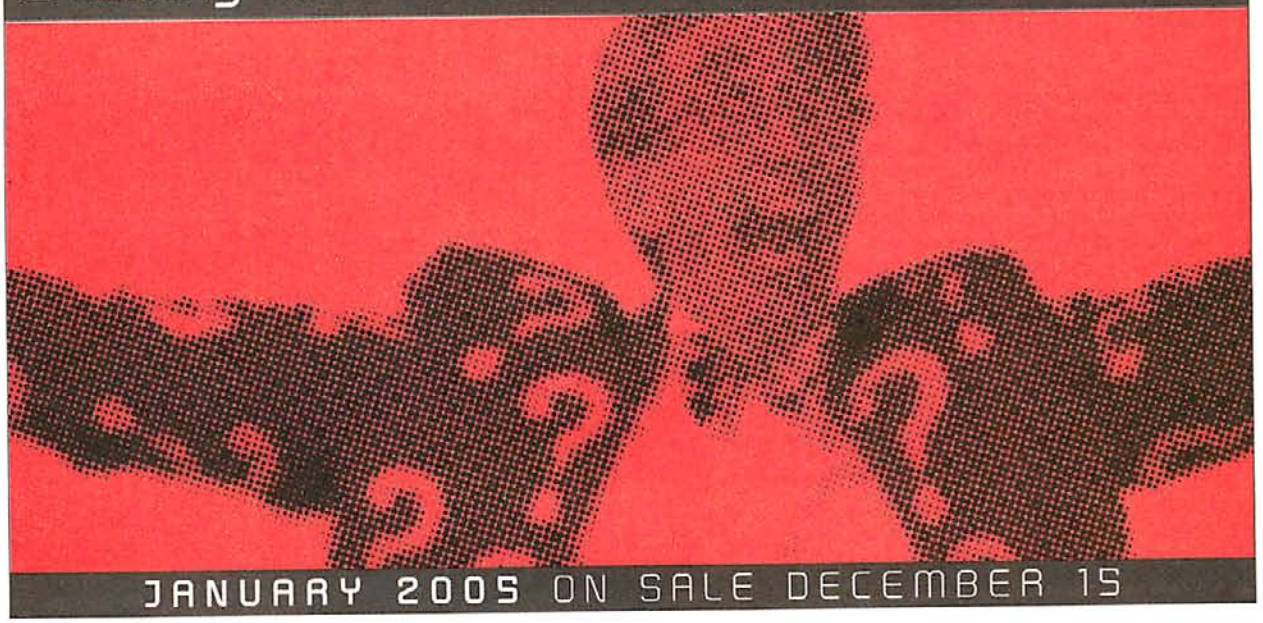
Tom, 30:11 Is Bruce still even in there? I'm lobbing artillery shells into his base, and there's no sign of activity. My squiggoth arrives, with slugga boyz and a nob squad tucked into the basket on his back, and he advances alongside my three looted tanks.

Bruce, 30:15 Just as I finish a predator tank, Tom arrives with a giant elephant called a squiggoth, which is the stupidest name imaginable and, I think, one of the guys on *Laverne & Shirley*. Unfortunately, this game is not decided on who has the coolest units, because if it were, this would have been over a half hour and 14 seconds ago.

Tom, 30:30 Oh, look, Bruce has a cute little tank. I think I'll smash it. The ensuing slaughter of innocent buildings is kind of pointless but nevertheless gratifying. After all, this is a fight to the death. So the squiggoth smashes things, stormboyz slap their soggy baguettes against things, sluggas and nobs bang against things, and all the while, the three looted tanks lob shells into the proceedings, sending bodies flying, most of them orks. But who cares? This orks gone wild is an entirely appropriate ending. Oy!

Coming Next Month...

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD



JANUARY 2005 ON SALE DECEMBER 15

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Prize List	Estimated Retail Value	Quantity	Total Estimated Retail Value
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Gaming Has Ruined My Brain

I got great SAT scores...no, really, I did

On my house are two saltwater aquariums within which I keep a variety of fish, corals, and anemones and occasionally wage furious wars against green hair algae. It's a peaceful, contemplative hobby that's a nice karmic balance to the real-world people-punching and digital *Doom 3* slaughtering that fills the few idle moments in my life when I'm not explaining to the authorities that, no, I do not actually use my children's gaping maws as ashtrays. But I digress....

Periodic water changes are a big part of aquarium keeping, and to that end, I purchase gallons of clean saltwater from a local store (the time that would be wasted mixing my own can then be spent on other pursuits, such as making my own clown suit out of actual clowns). So this weekend, my wife was out running errands near the aquarium store and I realized I was out of saltwater. No problem, I thought; I'll just call her and let her know I'm teleporting the three 5-gallon jugs I need filled to her. Let me be clear: I wasn't *wishing* I could teleport them, I was *planning* on teleporting them, so much so that I actually went to the garage and started collecting the containers.

So let me say, "Thank you, *City of Heroes*, for providing me with the most acutely painful instance of self-discovered idiocy in the entire history of my life." Jugs in hand, one foot out of the garage I realized that my chances of teleporting these containers were actually less—*less*—than shoving them up my ass and expelling them the seven miles to where she was. I admit I am prone to bouts of magical thinking: 20 years ago, I seriously believed the only things preventing me from flying were the cruelly tethering chains of my own unbelief, and thus, I fought this unjust limitation by abruptly flinging myself in the air at the exact moment I believed I could, or I thought I had forgotten that I couldn't, fly. It was kinda complicated, but I used to be drunk a whole lot back then, so it made sense to me at least, and I enjoyed the added bonus of walking home late at night through a somewhat dicey part of Brooklyn untroubled by local ruffians no doubt assuming that the idiot pogoing down the street muttering "To the heavens!" and occasionally falling flat on his stupid face could not possibly be carrying anything of value. But again, I digress....

Now, I could take the coward's way out, blaming this teleport-believing lapse on the powerful psychic abilities of the half-formed symbiotic twin sloshing around in my guts, but I shan't. I admit it: I believed in teleportation, albeit briefly, albeit long enough to wonder if my wife would be able to lift three 40-pound jugs of saltwater. Besides, this was not the first gaming-induced brain failure in my life.

Despite my predilection for tight blue spandex tops, I am no Lara Croft.

Once I wondered if there was a leak in my roof, and instead of getting a ladder, I started plotting a course involving my fence, a telephone pole, and the side of my house that I would negotiate *Prince of Persia*-style, somehow ricocheting the 432 pound glob of suet with an implanted pig heart that is me up to my roof with the agility of a siamang. This, to my credit, I didn't even try, though that was probably due to the fact that I decided that shimmying up the phone pole and rappelling down the power line would be a better choice. Eventually, I came to what is left of my senses, got the ladder, fell off, and almost broke my neck. Apparently, despite my predilection for tight blue spandex tops, I am indeed no Lara Croft.

Gaming is an endless bottle of canola oil dripping steadily on my tenuous grip on reality. I have tried to throw an RTS lasso around my kids in order to escape Costco, I have manically mashed my thumb into my palm as I desperately tried to trigger a sports-game-style instant replay on a phantom gamepad, and I have honestly thought to myself, "Boy, I sure could use my mech right now." Don't get me started on the damage both *Sims* games have done to my perception of that sorry charade I call a life—let's just say I couldn't be checking the big diamond mood indicator thingies hovering over people's heads any more if they were real.

Am I alone? Can I be the only half-wit on the planet trying to cast a hold spell on opposing base runners in a softball game or trying to trigger *Max Payne* bullet time while sparring with someone or mentally flailing while trying to remember what key to press to take a screenshot of that totally hot girl that just walked by? Just in case I am, I am doing my level best to continue the cycle of delusion. Last week, my son told me he "leveled up" at recess. I had no idea what he was talking about, but I understood completely. **Robert Coffey**

robert_coffey@ziffdavis.com

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