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ZIFF DAVIS MEDIA

MAY 2005 ISSUE 251
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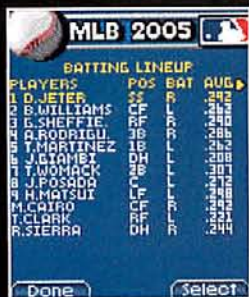
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Display Until May '05

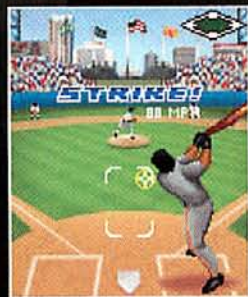
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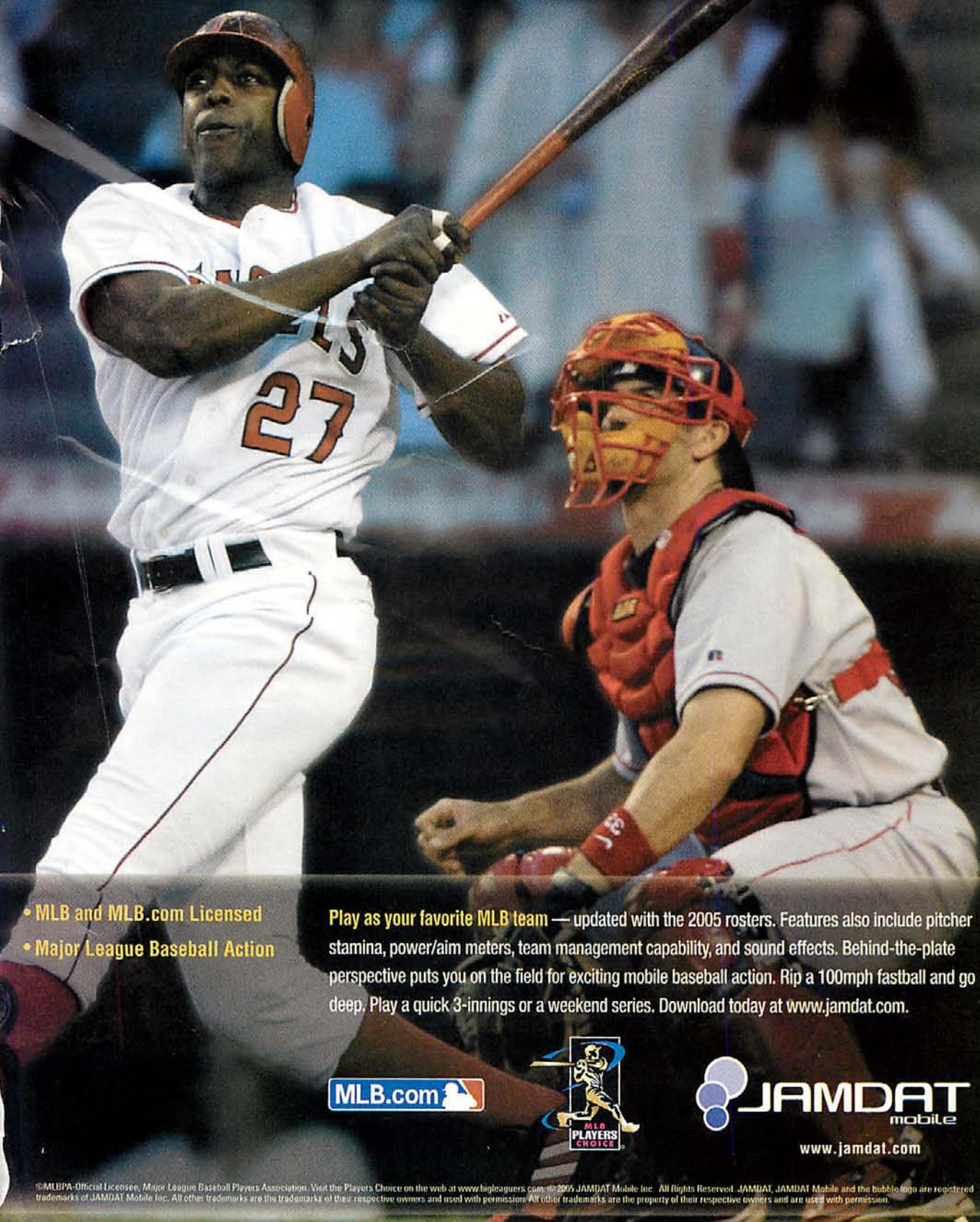
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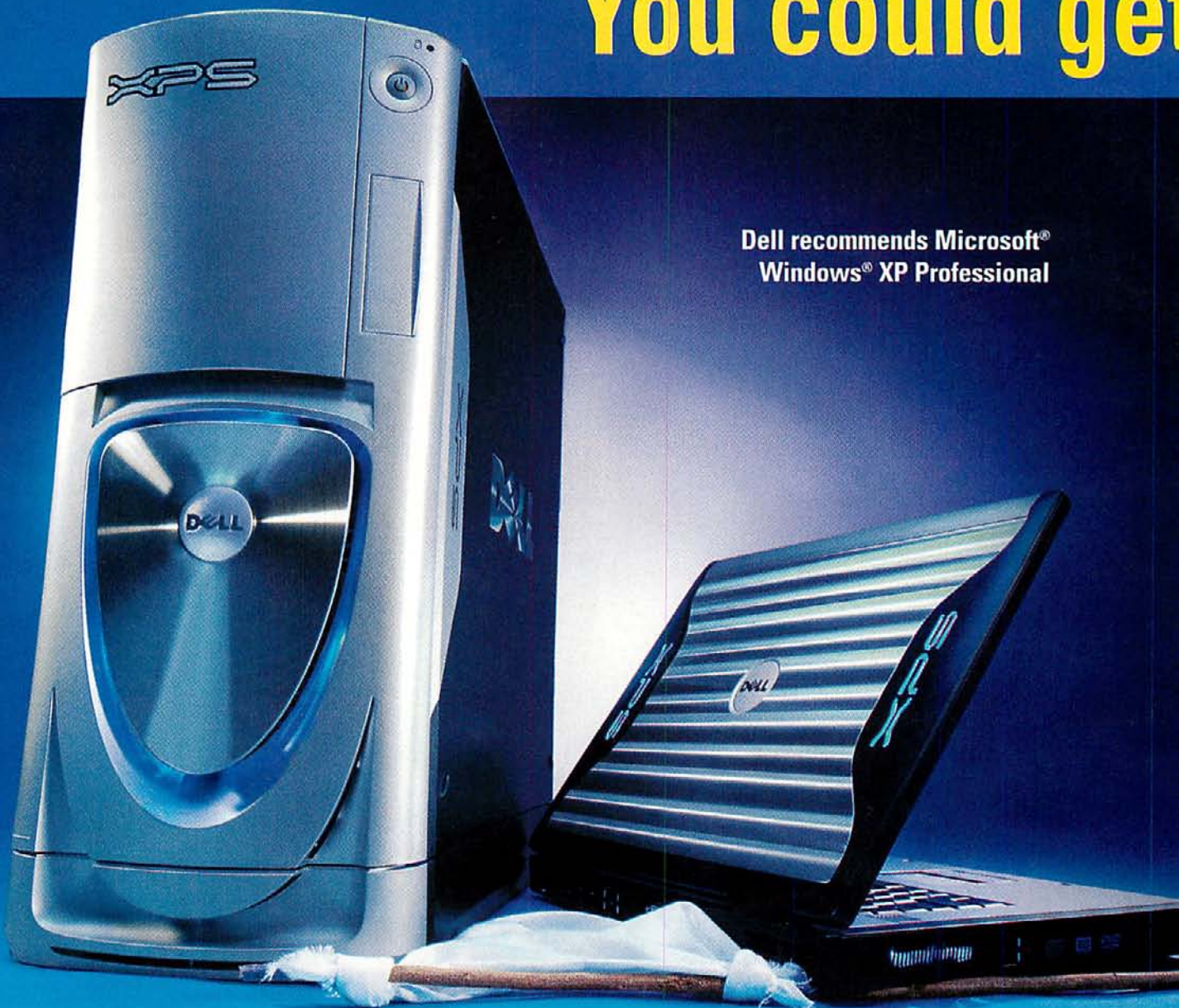
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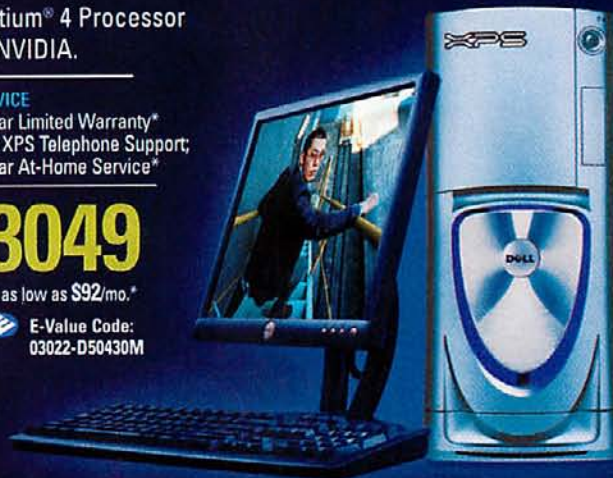
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maneuvers provide great tactical depth.



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May 2005 Issue #251

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Our doddering, senile leader mumbles and yells at passersby while pushing his shopping cart of tin cans down the street. Our advice? Avoid eye contact.

22 Letters

We love letters. We really, really do. So this month, we added another page to our usual slew of nonsense. Lucky you!

32 Radar

We know that games have been evolving, but what's the holdup? Why is it that games *still* aren't seen on the same level as books or movies as a form of entertainment? Read our in-depth look into the future of the game business. Also, we chat up Jack Emmert, lead designer and creative director for the *City of Heroes* franchise, in the AIM Game, getting the skinny on the latest news for the *City of Villains*.

56 Previews

We've gone preview crazy this month! To start things off, we've got an in-depth look at some of the cool psychic powers you'll be using in Majesco's sci-fi adventure *Advent Rising*. We've also got an early look at *Call of Duty 2* and some great-looking screenshots from Ensemble's next big RTS, *Age of Empires III*. After that, it's time to tune up the engine with *Auto Assault*, and then it's off to the mean streets with an imaginative sequel to everyone's favorite gangster film, *Scarface*.

86 Reviews

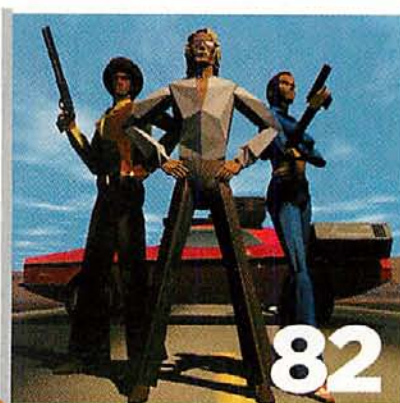
Just when you think you couldn't stomach another WWII game, along comes *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich* to super-heroically save the day. *Star Wars Republic Commando* and *The Sims 2: University* also do their franchises proud. Hey, our Review section may be small, but it's grade-A stuff.



COVER STORY

THE UNREAL WORLD

Unreal Tournament 2004 delivered so big, it took CGW's 2004 Multiplayer Game of the Year award. So why is Epic Games already at work on a new *UT* game (and why the heck didn't the demos we saw have any art in them)? Because the development team wants to make the next *Unreal Tournament* the best *Unreal Tournament*—and they've told us how.



CGW HALL OF FAME!

Arguments and death threats thrill us. That's why we decided to induct new Hall of Fame games and developers. Some of them were shoo-ins, others weren't.



COMPUTER GAMING



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Four incredible gaming LCDs, a killer SLI videocard, a brand new Killer Rig, iBuyPower's latest monster machine, Creative's newest gaming speakers, the triumphant return of Tech Medics, and more—our bigger, better Tech section launches with a bang!

110 Tom vs. Bruce

Tom and Bruce battle for world domination in *Laser Squad Nemesis* while hordes of semiclad cheerleader babes root on the sidelines. Does life get any better?

114 Scorched Earth

Robert waxes poetic on the boundless joy his children bring to his life. Then he devours them like a caged gerbil.



THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM



CGWFAME.1UP.COM

In honor of the newest (and oldest) titles we're inducting into our Hall of Fame this month, we have bestowed upon you, our readers, a great gift: the entire CGW Hall of Fame. Here you can vote for your favorite games and designers and bash our sorry uneducated choices. We're so good to you.

BECKERS21.1UP.COM

Cough drop obsessions? *Mary Poppins*? Jabba's sluglike tongue? Apparently, our young intern has more time on her hands than she lets us believe. So we gave her a 1UP project to complain...er, blog about.



View Poll Results

Half-Life 2 is here! Which version are you getting?

- The retail Collector's Edition. Check out my geeky t-shirt! (26%)
- None of them—I'm sticking with COW's 102 Free Games! (27%)
- The standard retail edition... huff said. (18%)
- The Silver Stain download package. I heard my Half-Life 1 remake. (9%)

BOARDS.1UP.COM

If you ever go check out the 1UP boards, you'll find that since *Half-Life 2*'s release, *Counter-Strike*'s popularity has gone up. Whether you're simply looking for help or polling other gamers about their favorite weapons, you can always find something to enthuse or argue about.



Shoot to Thrill

Polygonal guns don't kill people



Way back when I was a kid (in the 1950s), I was not allowed to play with toy guns. My mom and dad were adamant on the point. No guns, no soldiers, no war toys of any kind. It wasn't that big a deal to me, because it was just as easy (and ultimately more satisfying) to just hit my little brother with a stick than to pretend to shoot him with a gun.

I bring this up because I have been thinking about how it is that now, as a grown man with a wife and daughter, I spend a great deal of my time shooting things on my computer. Part of it is the nature of my job. Someone has to get paid to kill all those Nazis and mutant zombies, and it might as well be me. I'm a public servant that way. But I'm also not afraid or ashamed to admit that, hey, I just flat out like doing it. Shooters are not my favorite—I'll always be an RPG and fantasy-strategy dork first—but some of my most memorable gaming moments have come from shooters, especially online against other players in games such as *Quake*, *Unreal Tournament*, and *Battlefield 1942*.

Delayed reaction over not being able to play army as a boy? Maybe. I do know, however, that more than anything else, it's just a game. I'm playing to win, to try to be smarter and quicker and more devious than the next player. I don't really want to kill them—I just want them to lose. And when the game is over? Let's play again or grab some pizza or watch television or do any number of other peaceful, friendly activities.

In my real life, I've never owned a gun and have no intention of ever doing so. And as a father, I don't let my 11-year-old anywhere near any of these kinds of games—not even to watch me. And no, I don't feel it's hypocritical, in case you're wondering. She knows they exist, and she knows I'm playing them for my work. But I see a bit more clearly where my mom and dad were coming from. Yeah, they're just toys, just games. Sometimes games are best left in the hands of adults.

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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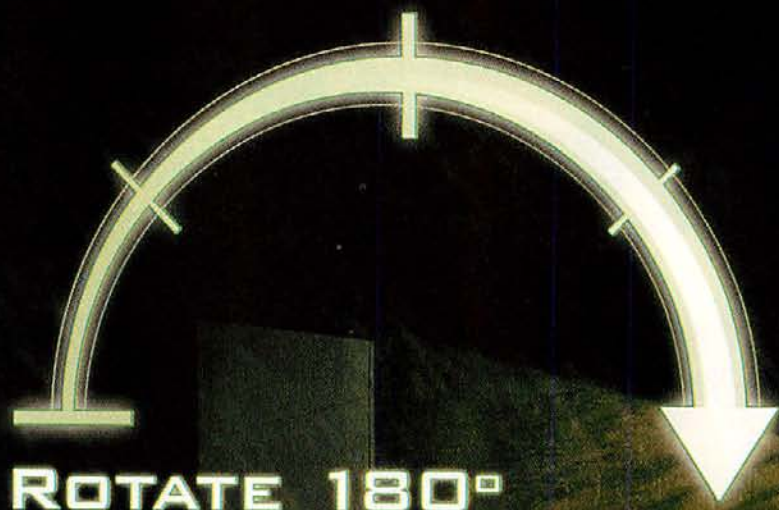
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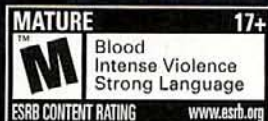
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Letters

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AWARD SEASON

As usual, our Game of the Year issue stirred up plenty of controversy and discussion. Here are just a few of the letters we received:

I just finished reading your Game of the Year award issue and had to write. I am shocked that you would give an MMORPG the Game of the Year award. I dabbled in the original *EverQuest* for about six months, but I never thought it was GOTY award worthy. I don't think any MMORPG game is ever worthy of such an award, not even one made by Blizzard. I personally prefer single-player games. That doesn't mean I don't like to socialize; I love throwing LAN parties or meeting up with my buddies online for some great gaming, but to do it with total strangers, that's where I draw the line. I just don't see the attraction. Maybe it's because I'm an old-school gamer (since 1989), but I don't like to socialize in my games; I like to play them to get away. I'm sure many other gamers feel similarly. Many of us in the PC gaming community will never play an MMORPG game in all our PC gaming lifetimes. Based on this, you should give the highly regarded CGW GOTY award only to a worthy SINGLE-PLAYER game. Next year, I hope you get it right.

Eric Wendeler

Just because some gamers will never play an MMO shouldn't preclude such a game from garnering our highest award. A lot of gamers will never play an RPG or a shooter, but that shouldn't prevent those sorts of titles from contending either. We think we made the right call—but like every year, you and a number of other readers had bones to pick with our decisions. Read on.

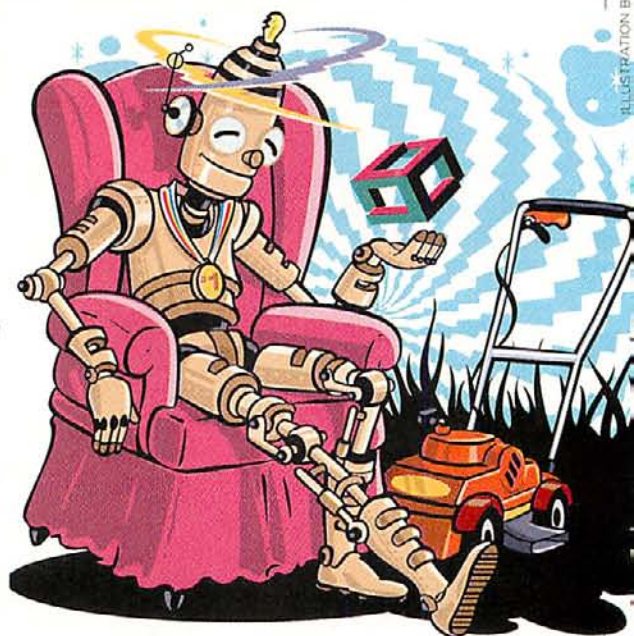
So, let me get this straight: You choose as the No. 1 Game of the Year a game that I 1) have to pay \$50 for just to take home, 2) have to subscribe to for an additional \$13 a month just to play, and 3) can't play offline by myself at my leisure. What the hell is wrong with you guys?! I don't care

Letter of the Month

You said that for the second year in a row, the NPC of the Year goes to a robot. (True. Last year's was HK-47.) I went back through my files, and as far as I can tell, HK-47 was the very first NPC of the Year. So every NPC of the Year so far has been a robot—all two of them!

Darryl R. White

Actually, after clawing through the mildewed brain matter suppurating in our skulls, we were able to come up with two more NPC of the Year notables: Morte, the floating disembodied skull buddy from *Planescape: Torment*, and the lovable lug Minsc from the *Baldur's Gate* games—all meat or bone, these guys, no circuitry. Though, now that we think about it, since they are essentially computer code, maybe they are robots. In fact, maybe we all are robots in some kind of cosmic PC game. And if grass had mouths and nerves, would our lawns scream and beg for mercy every time we mowed them? Whoa...we just blew our own minds.



how great an MMO it is; it doesn't deserve GOTY if it doesn't offer a single-player element. I may be part of a dying breed, but I like to immerse myself in computer games to GET AWAY from the people I have to deal with in everyday life. Give it the No. 1 spot for its category (best MMO), but save the big title for something more deserving and more accessible, such as *Half-Life 2* or even *The Sims 2*.

Alex Nikolai

I can't believe you gave *Painkiller* the Single-Player Shooter of the Year award over *Half-Life 2*. Sure, *Painkiller* is fun at first, just hardcore killing and all, but that doesn't last long, because it's the same thing over and over. God knows I love killing hordes of monsters, but not over and over in a similar fashion every level. I'm sure this isn't the only letter like this

you'll be getting. *Half-Life 2* = Amazing. *Painkiller* = Monotonous.

Ryan McGuire

Thanks for the square assessment of *Half-Life 2*. I think you were right on not to give it Game of the Year. *Half-Life 2* is nice. Not spectacular, but nice. Not revolutionary, but nice. In particular, I personally thought the boat sequence was about three times longer than it should have been; I was cursing for it to be over. Good job, CGW.

Rich Fought

As I was reading through your latest issue I was appalled to see that *World of Warcraft* got Game of the Year! I mean, sure, it's a good game, but with stuff like *Half-Life 2*, *Doom 3*, and *Sid Meier's Pirates!* out there, how could you give the award to this?

Mail Bites

Steam is a wonderful program, especially for someone who's ever lost a game disc or CD key!

—Matt Kendrick

I just wanted to say that I have had the most delightful time playing *Sid Meier's Pirates!* I was very pleased to see that it was a contender for Game of the Year.

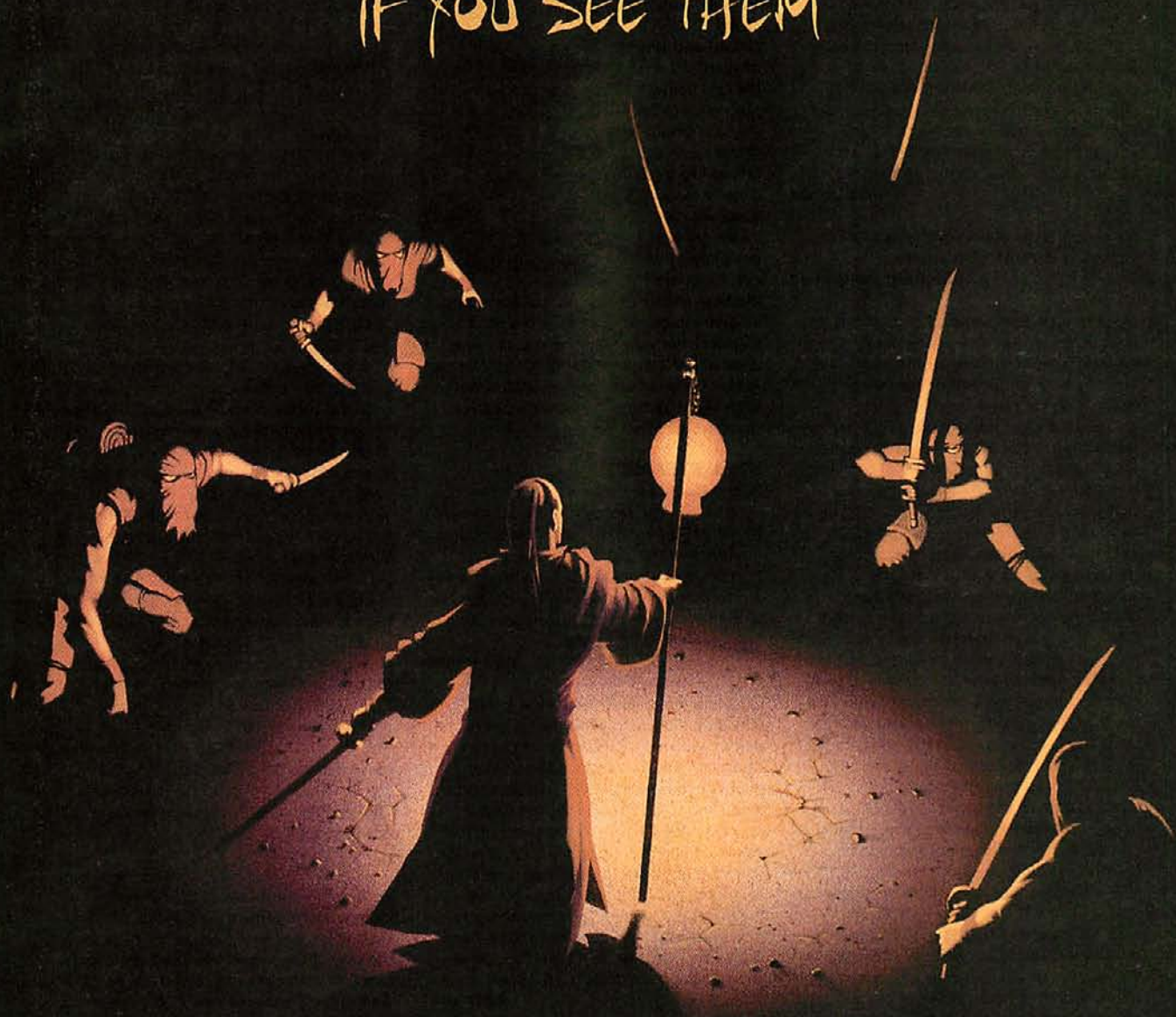
—MOC-owlhOOT

I think any *Star Wars* game set in the same timelines as the movies is bound to disappoint.

—Twelvebar on 1UP.com



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comparatively mediocre game? And on your personal most-wanted lists, not one of you listed *HL2*! And *Riddick* getting best action game? Sure, it has good graphics, but graphics do not a game make. And *Painkiller*? Definitely not as good as *Doom 3*. I am disappointed in you. P.S. *WOW* did not make MMORPGs accessible for the first time. *City of Heroes* did that.

Rob Jones

Nice job on the Game of the Year awards. I agree with most of it; you rule.

Richard Rodriguez

Do you guys have some sort of grudge against Valve? *Half-Life 2* was barely featured in the 2004 Game of the Year awards, winning only in the minor category of Best Music. And for some strange reason, not one of your eight editors listed *HL2* on their favorite games of 2004 lists. This, coupled with Steam's "win" for Coaster of the Year, has led me to believe that you have something against Valve. Or do you simply want to show the world that you had enough guts to deny the sequel to the greatest game of all time the GOTY award.

And as for *World of Warcraft*, there is absolutely nothing about it that makes it Game of the Year material. It is just an average (a rare quality in an MMORPG) game that was released about the time you were choosing the winners, so I must assume that the initial "wow factor" influenced your decision. The game may bring the genre to the masses, but in the end, it is just another MMORPG. It is a game that provides massive freedom at the expense of story, purpose, compelling characters, and engaging quests. And no game with a viewpoint of freedom with no direction deserves GOTY.

Daniel Singleton

I am having a really hard time understanding the Game of the Year awards in CGW #249. You guys have all these nice categories to represent the different types of games, and then the winner for the best in that category. What kind of sense does it make to have *World of Warcraft* as a contender for MMO of the Year and lose out to *City of Heroes* but then win Game of the Year. You guys are essentially saying that *City of Heroes* is a better game (kill yourself now), but that of all the games played through the whole year, *WOW* was the best. If *COH* is better than *WOW*, how can *WOW* be better than any other game? And for the record, *COH* blows!

Justin Mitchell

To be honest, Justin, *City of Heroes* and *World of Warcraft* were the two games duking it out for the top honor. *WOW* came out on top like a giant game-eating kitty. However, our award criteria designates our eventual Game of the Year winner as a game that transcends its genre to be the best of all the titles released that year (for example, the year the original *Half-Life* won Game of the Year, our Action Game of the Year was *Battlezone*). With *WOW* getting the top prize, *COH* grabbed the MMO trophy.

STILL STEAMED

I completely agree with your review of *Half-Life 2*. The installation process was EXTREMELY annoying, and I personally downgrade the game because of it. Furthermore, here I am at midnight trying to play some *Half-Life 2*, yet Steam won't even work. I'm pretty sure I didn't buy an MMO game here.

Will Ranish

I just finished reading the review of *Half-Life 2* in Issue #248, and while the review of the game made my mouth water at the thought of playing this masterpiece, the sidebar guaranteed I would NEVER buy this game.... If you had to go through the registration process once before you could play it, that would be fine, but according to your article, you have to log on to your Steam account each time you boot your computer. Well, that's just p*** poor. If I pay my money to buy a product, I shouldn't have to be hassled each time I want to play it. And the game should have been docked a full star for this.

BadAxe41

Best game ever made, they said. Well, I say it's BULL! *Half-Life 2* is the biggest headache I have ever had! I finally got it installed just right, and now I find out that this Steam account thing is an even bigger pain—it's almost impossible just to set up an account, let alone get the game to run. Tech support is even worse; I've sent three letters and still haven't gotten any help that works. My machine practically outclasses even a high-end machine on their list. While working on



this problem, I managed to finish two other games on the side. Until I can get some satisfactory help from these guys, I may as well just say adios and uninstall the darned mess.

Royally Steamed

Your Coaster of the Year award was spot on. Steam is invasive, absolutely unnecessary, and a slap in the face to customers. It has no offline mode button (though some people claim to have made it work offline by uninstalling their LAN cards.... Gee, great idea, Valve). It is merely an advertisement to "buy direct using Steam." (Gee, and to think normally I would have to open a Web browser to do that. But I guess Valve is still "working on" that.)

Most people don't realize where this is going. Imagine if all game manufacturers used this model. I would have dozens of little craptastic pseudo-spyware programs running at all times. How much of my total Internet bandwidth would be used just to keep "updating" all these companies' servers with my information? Then there would be the fun of having a company go under. Guess what—you would NEVER be able to play the game legally again because, as you know, if you were to use a patch to remove the spyware, you would be in violation of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.

I will never buy any product that requires Steam or a Steam-like product. When I play *EQ* or *WOW* or *City of Heroes* or anything that is an online multiplayer game, I know what I am in for, but Valve's bait-and-switch tactic has started a disturbing trend in the industry that will gain momentum for a while until people speak out and express their opinion to Valve.

Sluggo

While we are not fans of the current incarnation of Steam, we fully recognize that digital delivery services are most likely the way of the future. We just hope they function better than this one. Until that day, we'll enjoy Steam the way God intended us to—in our own private steam coffins. ☠



Mail Bites

I'd like to ask you something very personal. Where did Tracy Espeleta go?

—MOC-owlhOOT

You know, I used to think that Jeff was a dork. But the more I find out about him, the more I realize HOW ALIKE WE ARE!!! Man, my self-image is just in the crapper right now.

—Crevel on 1UP.com

If Master Chief took on Gordon Freeman, who would win?

—Devin Abrahams

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R.I.P.

Your Check Out section bites. Really. Especially the one in Issue #244

Dennis

You'll be happy to learn that Check Out has passed on as of this issue. In its place is our new expanded Tech section. Hurray!

FASHION POLICE

Just noticed on the Staff page that you've FINALLY hired a woman (Paula) who has longer hair than the guys! Way to go, folks, way to go. About time.

Bryan Berkebile



Bad news, Bryan—as you can see, Paula has kinda changed up her overall look. On the plus side, Jeff is now sporting a delightfully feminine set of Heidi-style pigtails.

THE WRONG MAN

I believe that Robert Coffey missed the point in his Scorched Earth piece about the game *The Journey to the Wild Divine* [Issue #249]. I've played *The Journey to the Wild Divine*, and I loved it, and just to make things clear, you should understand that I've played and loved *Doom*, *Half-Life*, *Halo*, and other shooters with huge satisfaction and glee. That said, I feel that *Wild Divine* is a neat, new experiment that deserves more than just being shot down by someone who isn't giving it a fair shake. Granted, it definitely leans toward New Age-y sentiment, and if that puts you off, then it most certainly is not the game for you. But the interactive experience is truly cool: I've never before played a game where my own laughing, breathing, or relaxing caused things to happen on the screen. Also, it is designed as a learning

tool: It's for biofeedback, and all those interactive experiences are really just exercises to learn to control one's physical and mental states at will. If you're looking only to explore a pretty world through the solving of puzzles, à la *Myst*, you will likely be disappointed. But if you're interested in biofeedback and in the application of that technology to a gaming concept, I think you'll find it at the very least a really interesting and worthwhile experiment. Coffey just missed the point. He should probably learn to meditate.

Anonymous

Yes, he probably should learn to meditate. And we'd tell him that, too, if he weren't chewing through his lips. Frankly, we were hoping some actual feedback from that biofeedback device would have done the job the electroconvulsive shock therapy failed to do.

YOU-A CULPA

About a month or so ago I e-mailed you a pretty mean letter about how I thought you all were Intel fanboys because I never seemed to see AMD in the limelight. I was under the impression that Intel had bought you guys off, too. Then about three days later I got my issue with Mr. Vader himself on the front, and inside were pages and pages showing AMD systems. It was awesome and hands down the best issue so far. More people need to know that AMD kicks Intel in the kahunas and its products are cheaper than Intel's. So I apologize, and thank you!

Brandon Moore

Got a problem? Got a rant? Got a painful, burning itch? We want to hear about it. Write us at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com and you're guaranteed place in heaven.



Remember the sweaty rave scene from the second *Matrix* movie? Here it is again! Only on a *Guild Wars* beta test server. Not such a bad shot, but c'mon—you guys can do better. Send your wild and wacky screenshots to us at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com and you too can enjoy 15 seconds of fame!

Mail Bites

I noticed in your review for *Painkiller: Battle Out of Hell* that the subheads were both titles of Meat Loaf songs. It's little touches like this that make your magazine the greatest.

—Julian Gluck



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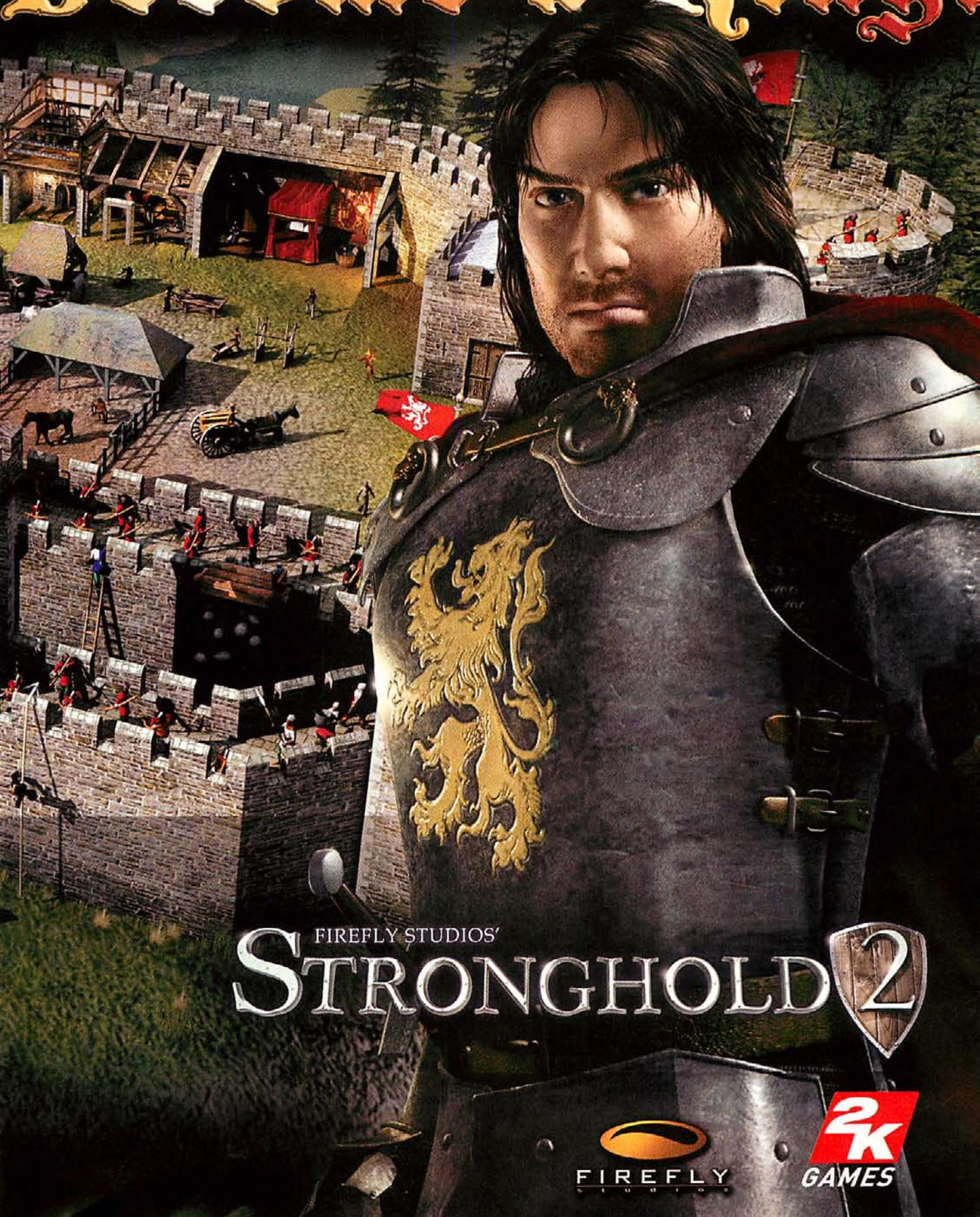
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Radar

A closer look into the things that matter



■ THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

Star Struck

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORIES IN GAMING



Adult Ed
Instead of trying to "protect kids," maybe, just maybe, we should teach parenting.

36



Cellie
There's a new CPU on the block. Check out why it should matter to you.

38



Well Built
The modding equivalent of Lego blocks has been created for *Half-Life 2*. We talk to Garry Newman about a man and his mod.

48



Hey Vin, quit your day job! If only the *Riddick* movie was half as good as the game.

Can a computer game make you cry? A tiny company called Electronic Arts posed that question back in a 1982 advertisement. Even now, as EA flings its platinum weight around Tinseltown, the challenge remains. Despite the number of movie scriptwriters game companies hire, no matter how many high-profile Hollywood talents line up to make a game more cinematically appealing, it still hasn't happened. With the exception of when we played the bungled *Enter the Matrix*, we still haven't cried. Why?

GAMING'S CITIZEN KANE

Most games just scare you. "The next big step [for games]," according to Neil Young, "is being able to move people emotionally versus purely adrenally." That is a big push for EA LA's VP and general manager.

"The truth of the matter," says Young, "is that the game industry has yet to create its equivalent of *Citizen Kane*." Before *Kane*, films were shot like stage plays in front of a camera. But Orson Welles was the first person to use the medium to its full potential. That is part of the problem today. "The

biggest challenge is understanding how to tell a story in this new medium," says Young. After all, making an interactive game is not like creating a movie. It didn't work in the dreaded FMV era of the mid-90s (blame Digital Pictures) when publishers cranked out movies and passed them off as interactive games and it certainly wouldn't work now.

Just ask Hollywood scribe David McKenna, who is currently working on VU Games' *Scarface*. "The player controls the game, so you have to write ancillary scenes and dialogue for every possible scenario [instead of a straight plot]. That word, 'ancillary,' I will no doubt despise the rest of my life." This project is a labor of love for McKenna, but the usual MO in Hollywood is very different. Write a script, send it off, and you're done. Plus, the pay is usually *much* better. McKenna explains, "I made one-tenth of what I make on a movie for twice as much work. My first inclination is to say the gaming industry has to wake up a bit and start treating this like Hollywood before the two have any chance of getting closer." A developer on another game spoke of hiring an Oscar-winning writer, but when asked to redo or modify parts, the moody author



Here's one classic game that provides an amazingly entertaining experience.

stormed off the project. Translation: You want good scriptwriters that can evoke emotion? You get what you pay for.

THE EVOLUTION OF ENTERTAINMENT

Then you have examples like *Riddick*: *Escape From Butcher Bay*, which shows that a licensed game created by developers who understand the medium and storytelling can create a better experience than the movie that spawned it. Mikael Saker of Starbreeze Studios explains: "We started work long

"The next big step for games is being able to move people emotionally versus purely adrenally." —Neil Young, EA LA



before production began on *[The Chronicles of Riddick]*. When it started, two external scriptwriters were appointed to help us out. However, since making a game story is so extremely tied to the rest of the production and differs hugely from filmmaking, we had to keep the control of the script in-house. Any external input or revisions went through our internal processing and were adapted and rewritten before they went into the game." By understanding the interactive experience, Starbreeze was able to craft what went on to become our Action Game of the Year for 2004.

It's a start, but Professor Tracy Fullerton, codirector of the EA Game Innovation Lab at USC, thinks the idea of conventional storytelling needs to change. "Games are not going to be the next cinema. What people really want, though, is for [games] to have that same level of emotion, to get the same amount of respect and artistry." Today we may be able to get an experience equivalent to what's in theaters and on television, but, she adds, "People like us—we can't even imagine what [technology advances] lie ahead. We need people with a fresh take to imagine where games can go next." It also doesn't hurt that EA, the company investing heavily in this adjunct of USC's film school, gets a crack at cherry-picking the best to work on its next games.

VU Games is already married to Hollywood. Other publishers are being eyed for acquisi-



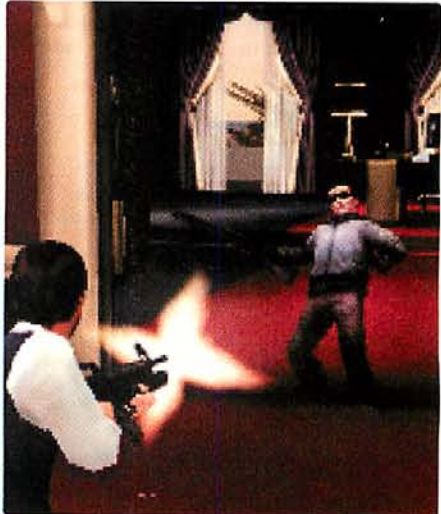
EA has officially perfected an old method of storytelling in the *Lord of the Rings* games. Now they need to innovate new ways.



Enter the Matrix had the potential to bridge the entertainment gap. Too bad it stank.

tion by media giants. But EA seems infatuated with the idea of being enmeshed with other media as the game industry evolves. "All you need to do is see what is happening with games like *The Godfather*," says one analyst who requested anonymity. "EA really wants to be the next Disney or Fox."

There's nothing wrong with that and it's not far-fetched as the courtship of these entertainment mediums mature. A generation has grown up playing games, and according to Young, "They look at games as valid an entertainment form as film or television, but through a twist of fate found themselves working in Hollywood." These are the high-level creative thinkers who one day will be running things in the movie and TV biz. These are the people that will be in the high-level meetings, seeing the game industry as more than some get-rich-quick licensing opportunity (fingers crossed). This is just the start for creating whole new ways to play. **Darren Gladstone**



David McKenna, the man behind *American History X*, wrote the plot for VU Games' *Scarface*.

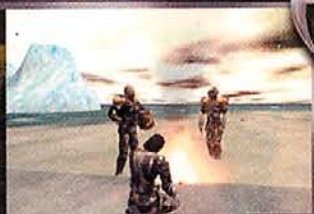


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EDJUMAKATION

Adult Education

In a nation gone censor-crazy, a sane solution for videogames and kids

This is an age of censorship. When confronted with unpopular or objectionable subject matter, some clown grabs his 15 minutes of fame, trying to guilt or scare people by telling them what they can view, read, or play. However, the flip side is hard to deny: The videogames we love so dearly are often not appropriate for children. How many of us would honestly play *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude* in front of anyone below the age of 18 (or in front of anyone, for that matter)?

EDUCATION VS. CENSORSHIP

The National Institute on Media and Family, a nonprofit organization, focuses on the media's impact on children. We always knew there was a huge disconnect between parents and their children, which makes an educational approach the most logical. Many parents are simply out of touch with the videogames that cater to a more adult market. To this end, Mediawise (<http://www.mediawisefamily.org/>) was created to educate parents by providing articles, materials, and in-depth videogame ratings that address issues relevant to children. Mediawise's goal is to let parents make

informed choices, not have the government make informed choices on our behalf. No legislative solution can effectively protect children from videogames with inappropriate content while still affording parents the right to raise their children as they see fit—and, at the same time, protect gamers' right to play and allow game developers to express and profit from their art.

GET INVOLVED

According to Dr. Douglas Gentile, director of research for the National Institute on Media and Family, "Research is becoming clearer on two fronts: One is that games are effective teachers, capable of teaching both the good and the bad to children. The second side of research is that when parents are involved in helping to choose the game, that is a powerful mitigating factor—increasing benefits and minimizing harm."

The moral of this story? Computer games are not bad. In fact, several can be beneficial to children. However, as with any other form of media, parents must step up, do their jobs, and be aware of and involved in what their children are doing. **Stephen Gehringer**



Mediawise has positive and negative things to say about the industry. On one hand, the videogame industry has responded quickly to the public's demand for ratings and has continually refined its ratings system. On the other hand, industry leaders still opine that videogames have no harmful effect on children. Dr. Gentile of the National Institute on Media and Family asserts that this sends a mixed message to parents, who see a ratings system to guide their choices for their children but are simultaneously being told not to worry about the content of games.

DUMPSTER DIVER

Digging up gold in the bargain bins

As a game, *Playboy: The Mansion* is the equivalent of an unretouched, non-Photoshopped picture of a model with a beergoggle-worthy grill. There's nothing pretty about it. Lame from start to finish, we were tortured with horrible design and even painfully bad music! (Just ask Robert.) To that we say, "Enough!" Go back to *The Sims*. If you want your virtual peeps to hook up, send them out on a hot date. But if you really need to see women, just subscribe to *Playboy*, instead. You'll be able to keep a little of your dignity—and honestly, the articles aren't bad.

SIMS DELUXE EDITION \$8

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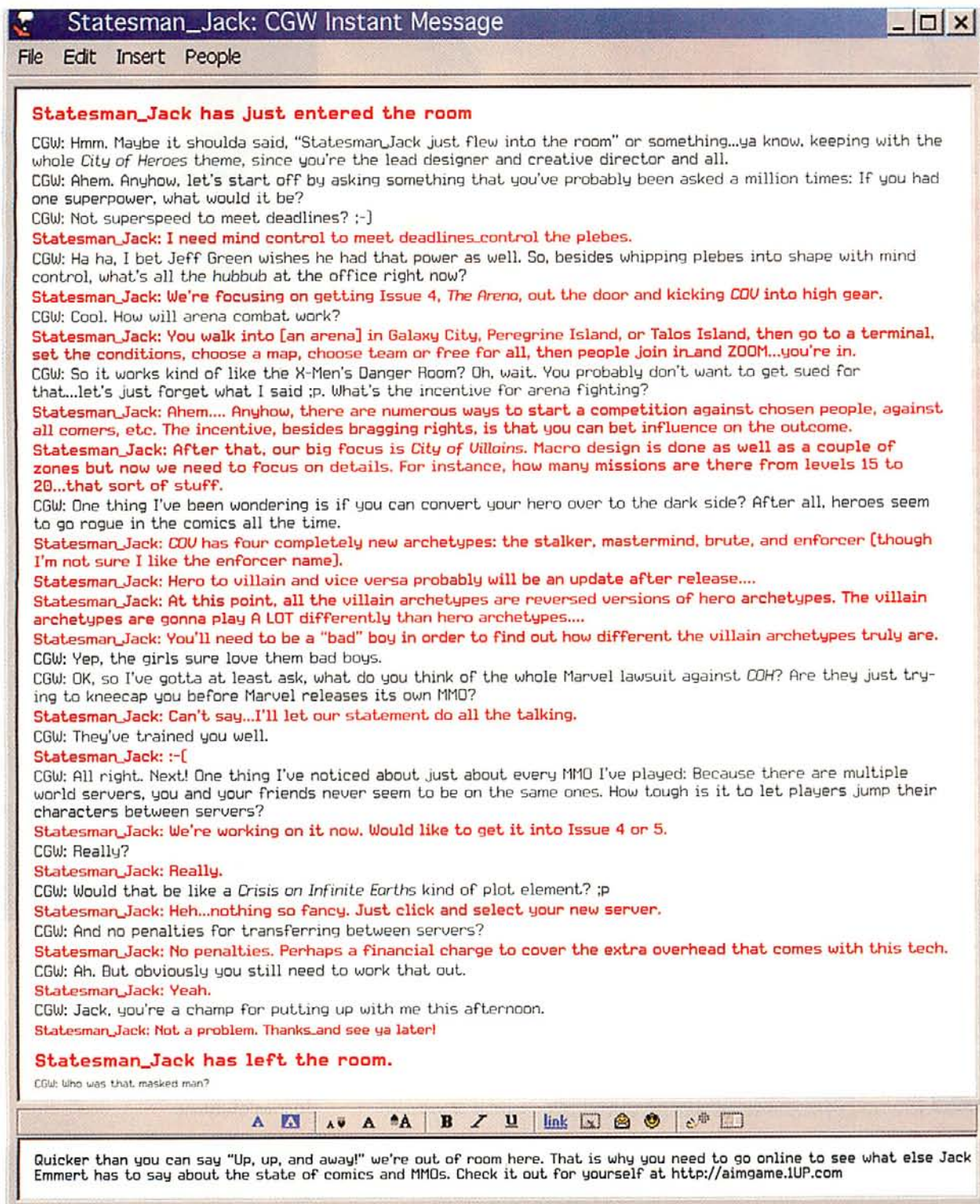


NEWS
FEED

► Where-is-troika? A moment of silence for Troika as another great developer goes the way of the dodo. ► Exit the Matrix! Atari is working on another *Matrix* game. It follows the path of Neo. But are we skeptical? ►

CHAT ROOM INTERVIEW

The AIM Game





■ SPLIT PERSONALITY

Splinter Cells

Top brainiacs at Sony, IBM, and Toshiba talk about the future of computing

The key to a new "supercomputer" is no bigger than a thumb-tack. We're talking about the Cell processor. Sony, Toshiba, and IBM have been working together since 2000 to create this CPU. The goal is to "create a scalable multimedia-friendly CPU ready for broadband-rich media applications." Translation: the foundation for the ultimate gaming machine.

One of the first applications will be for Sony's next-gen console, which will be unveiled in Japan at the end of March, but Stateside our heads are spinning after a recent technology briefing where we got numbers—lots and lots of numbers. In fact, when IBM's Dr. Jim Kahle started talking about what makes this new processor so great, all we heard were ones and zeroes.

The whole framework behind Cell is shared computing between multiple CPUs. Eight synergistic processing units (SPUs) with a Power-based core can exceed 4GHz clock speeds. What the heck does that all

mean? Theoretically, this tiny solution could be 10 times more powerful than the current top-of-the-line processors. That was the finding of initial lab tests, at least. However, Masakazu Suzuoki of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. warns, "It is not fair to compare [the current processors] with the Cell. What we can say is that in some applications, namely digital media and entertainment, [the Cell] works much better." All Kahle could add was, "Stay tuned."

And as a scalable solution, you can expect to see these chips in a number of consumer electronics devices: cell phones, home media servers, computers, and even high-end workstations. The larger, overriding idea for Sony is that through a simple, unified interface, those devices will all be able to work together one day.

While initial lab numbers are available (see "By the Numbers" sidebar), there's still a lot that the companies couldn't talk about. For example, while they say the Cell is OS-neutral and can simultaneously run multiple operating systems, they can only confirm that the Linux OS works. And how

are they going to handle the asymmetry of the Cell? Multiple processors working together introduce new layers of complexity—and the possibility for errors.

Another big concern for the PS3, and future computers, for that matter, could be heat and power. While the Cell is capable of well over

STONED

GLAD



Is your brain hurting enough from the other story on this page? Look, before you start asking, "Why the hell is this jackass getting a column?" let me assure you that I am a bona fide dork—I just hold my liquor better than most. I'm going to try to use this space every month to continue asking the questions that nobody else is asking and making the observations that'll matter the most to you down the road. And here's the scary part: I'm actually gonna try to make some sense!

This is where you guys come in. What's buggin' you? What cool stuff are you trying to do with your computer? What games are ticking you off? Want to invent a drink in honor of Microsoft? Whatever. Just drop me a line: Darren_Gladstone@ziffdavis.com.

One sidenote on these Cell developments: Is anyone else out there noticing how the manufacturers are lining up? You've got Sony, Toshiba, and IBM in one corner trying to find a way to perfect the consumer experience in the digital living room. Microsoft, meanwhile, is aligning itself with Intel (as always) to bring the full PC experience to the home theater with media center PCs. It's like the Apple-Windows war all over again. FUN! Next month, let's delve deeper into what Microsoft has in store.

4GHz clock speeds, the amount of heat generated by it (and everything else in the machine) will require a lot to keep the processor cool under the hood. There may be 10 digital thermal sensors on die, but this bad boy still needs some breathing room. We'll need new cooling solutions or we'll wind up with monster machines that require wheels to move.

✉ Darren Gladstone

BY THE NUMBERS

The Cell—and we don't mean the J-Lo movie

8	Synergistic Processing Units (SPU) working together
64	bit Power architecture with VMX runs the whole show
4.6	GHz clock speeds possible (compared to 3.8GHz clock speeds with Intel's current top-end CPU)
2.5	MB of on-chip memory (512KB L2 cache and 8x 256KB) that can carry data to and from off-chip memory at speeds up to 100 gigabytes per second
234	million transistors on a 221mm square
256	billion operations per second (Gflops). Not quite top-500 supercomputer range (851+ Gflops) but still not too shabby

news
FEED

▶ Thanks, 2K Games! The *Family Guy* cartoon is eventually coming to the PC. Better still, Midway also has plans for most of Cartoon Network's Adult Swim stable. Stay tuned. ▶ Xbox great, *Fable*, is PC-bound in 2005 as *Fable: Untold Stories*! ▶

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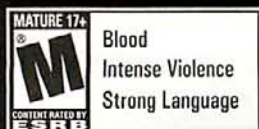
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MIDWAY



PlayStation 2



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Board of the Damned

From polygons to plastic, *Doom* joins the ranks of *Chutes and Ladders*

The tension mounts. Pulse...racing. With a red key card in hand, that cardboard cutout door is easily bypassed. Then, a sound...heavy pounding (oh, it's just dice rolling). Then another...this time, a goony devil-bitch scraping plastic against board as he wobbles toward you. "Shoot, dammit, shoot!"

Welcome to hell—scale 1:1,000,000. Demons have hoofed through a portal and found their way from Mars Base to your living room. It's *Doom: The Boardgame* (\$54.95; www.fantasy-flightgames.com)! That's right, it may cost as much as the PC title, but all those plastic figurines and board pieces you need to set up make it worth it. Kinda. All you need are dice and a dim remembrance of why you dropped \$600 on that *FatalTTY* graphics card.

THE SETUP

Three geeks play marines; another controls the demon hordes. The DM (Doom Master? Who knows....) lays out the customizable board in a scenario and manipulates the 62 two-inch hellions. The first marine to escape through the ventilation shaft wins. The losers pay for pizza.

THE DRAW

There are two decks of cards to pull from. First is the marine pile, being your special, ass-blasting skills that can make you a manlier marksman or a smarter scout. The DM draws the invader cards, which spawn demonic bastards and hellish events like rage, permitting multiple maulings during the same turn. Guess that makes it the board-game equivalent of "monster closets."

THE TOKENS

Scattered throughout are these convenient cardboard bits, slapping you with ammo, armor, weapons, and wounds, all stocked in your "equipment bin" (see: fancy name for flimsy paper thingy). **Jon M. Gibson**



WOW (WORLD OF WARBOARDS)

Bitten by the board-game bug? Tabletop wizards Fantasy Flight have a catalog that spans first-person shooters to real-time strategy—in all their cardboard glory. *WarCraft* was another recent addition to the game-maker's library of licenses, letting Blizzard aficionados ditch the digital world of orcs for dice. Surprise, surprise—there's even an expansion pack. **Jon M. Gibson**



CONSOLE CORNER

There are plenty of good games out there beyond what is on the PC. Whether you also own a PS2, Xbox, GameCube (or, in our case, all three), we're here to help. So here's our pick for the best of the console games now shipping to store shelves.

XBOX

Jade Empire

The next RPG evolution to come out of BioWare, *Jade Empire* has all the trappings of the now-classic *Knights of the Old Republic*, but honed with an even larger degree of polish. What matters more, though, is an even bigger focus on the action.

Like in *KOTOR*, your character

evolves, but you're traveling through feudal China instead of hyperspace.

Magic and martial arts rule the day here. Inspired by the likes of *Five Venoms*, the game features over 30 fighting styles that your character can learn. Map different styles to your controller and you can change a fight's flow on the fly. As you progress in the game, so do your chances of swaying toward the good or evil side (as in *KOTOR*) through conversation and rash actions. We've heard that this game may come to the PC (hopefully in 2005), but to be perfectly honest here, we can't wait that long. **Jon M. Gibson**



NEWS FEED

►► Activision is working on an expansion to *Rome: Total War*. *Barbarian Invasion* is set to come loaded and ready for combat by the middle of September. ►► Not to be outdone, a *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* expansion is due later this year as well. ►►

GAME OF THE YEAR

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

March, 2005 RTS
Warhammer 40,000:
Dawn of War



WARHAMMER
40,000
**DAWN
OF
WAR**

And the List Goes On...



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THE chronicles OF EGGBERT

One gnome's journey through *World of Warcraft* BY JEFF GREEN

The only good thing about *not* playing *World of Warcraft* 24/7—other than the spousal loathe-o-meter going down a notch—is the “rested” bonus that Blizzard bestows upon you for your time logged out. It’s a bizarre reverse incentive thing that Blizzard has going, like the way the U.S. government pays farmers to not grow crops. Basically, the more you *don’t* play, the more experience you get. So, what I’m thinking right now is that if I never play again, I’ll get to level 60 faster than ever.

This is great news, because for much of this month, my other CGW responsibilities (like sleeping in a puddle of drool at my desk) kept me away from *WOW*. What could have been annoying was actually great. The bonus XP enabled me to breeze my way up to level 32 in no time at all.

HOURS 120-160

OK, well it wasn’t all because of the bonus XP. Finally, this month, I went and tackled some of the elite quests I had heretofore been avoiding due to my misplaced, misanthropic desire to play this massively multiplayer game by myself, with no help from others. (File that under: Missing the Point.)

So for a while, I spent a good chunk of time mopping up a pile of quests both in the stockades and at Gnomeregan. The bad part about waiting so long to tackle those quests was that most of the rewards were armor or weapons that were already too weak for me, especially the stuff in the stockades. But, hey, there was money involved, too, which never hurts, and it really is quite a different, and fun, game—duh—when you find yourself facing tough enemies and *need* the help of others. Young Eggbert learned quite a bit about controlling his Voidwalker, who kept stupidly aggro’ing every enemy in sight, as well as the value of giving the group healer the soulstone, rather than hogging it for himself so that the healer can quickly reincarnate upon death. Trying to tackle even the relatively “easy” dungeons with no healer turns out to be a quick trip to the graveyard. I can’t imagine ever having the patience to want to play as a healer, but, ya know, “big ups” to those players who do. We need you.

In other news, upon hitting level 30, I finally got my revenge on all those freakin’ Plague Spreaders and other monsters in Duskwood who had been killing me repeatedly while in my 20s.

I also continued my personal quest to become the most pimped-out mack daddy in Azeroth, and with the addition of my Dread Mage hat and Silk Mantle of Gamm, let’s just say that this little gnome is going to be scoring beaucoup de babes in the very near future. ☺



☺ Pardon me while I level up. Eggbert hits 31.



☺ The view from above is much cooler now that I've made my Green Tinted Goggles.



☺ As the sun sets in Azeroth, Eggbert enjoys a quiet moment. Ahhhh.



☺ Ladies Love Cool Eggbert.

ON THE DL

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Cosmos UI for World of Warcraft

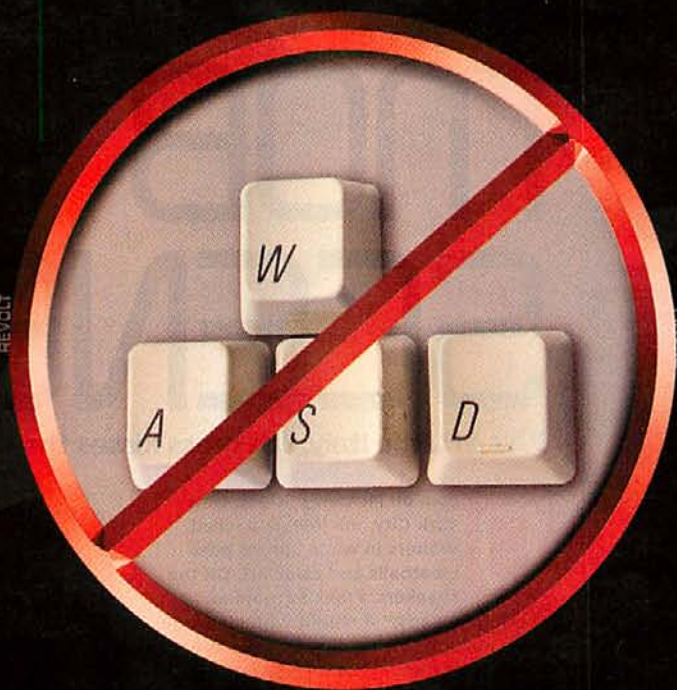
www.cosmosui.org

☺ With more than 600,000 people all trying to make level 60 at the same time, *World of Warcraft* has players looking for every edge they can get—if you’re one of them, the Cosmos UI is your razor. This mod gives you the ability to add additional toolbars anywhere and everywhere and stuff them with buttons, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg. This collection of user-interface enhancements lets you control everything from an in-game clock to a combat caller that automatically screams when your health dips to a predetermined level. Want to see how much damage that fancy new blue weapon you just equipped is doing? Turn on the DPS tracker and get detailed stats. The ability to mark the map with unlimited notes is also a godsend.

Want even more control? GypsyMod (gypsymod.themad.net) is another interface enhancement that is much more streamlined. Auctioneer (norgs.internutter.org) lets you get the best possible prices for your swag, and Gatherer (norgs.internutter.org) marks all of those scattered herb and ore spawn points. ☺

NEWS FEED

☛ Sega and Monolith get *Condemned*. The two are partnering up to bring a horror game to both next-gen consoles and the PC this winter that has you hunting down a serial killer. It follows on the heels of Monolith’s *F.E.A.R.*, which is also in development. ☛



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THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

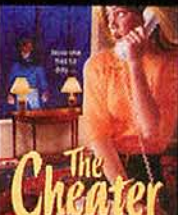
May 2005



The Good Uwe Boll, a Critical Reevaluation

By handcrafting a steady stream of surreally baffling videogame-licensed movies,

maverick filmmaker Uwe Boll is the spiritual successor to Ed Wood. In a recent interview with the Horror Channel, Boll revealed that his next project, *Dungeon Siege*, will be a modest cross between "Conan, Braveheart, and Lord of the Rings." Should be awesome, but not nearly as good as *Alone in the Dark* or *The House of the Dead*.



The Bad First They Came for the Cheaters...

Online miscreants picked a bad week to not stop cheating at *America's Army*.

According to an article in *Information Week*, the game's producers have warned hackers that "The Army is angry, and we're coming for you." When combined with the words "Army" and "angry," it's hard to imagine "coming for you" as anything other than a euphemism for "going to murder you." Hopefully, there are no plans to go after people who don't play it.



The Ugly Hands Off!

ChestRest has introduced the world's first "Busty Mousepad." Emblazoned

with saucer-eyed anime cuties, the pad features an anatomically incorrect set of boobs to cradle your wrist in carpal-tunnel-defeating, extreme-embarrassment-creating luxury. How does it work? According to the official site (www.chestrest.com), "Wrist is supported by the valley between the two gelatin mounds." ❧

SLEEP WITH FISH

MOB SCENE

EA's in Little Italy, the press kisses the ring

Down on Mulberry Street, New York City, the joint is packed. Walters in white aprons pass meatballs and calamari. On the speakers, Frank's crooning "Luck Be a Lady." A starlet with cleavage deep enough to hide Jimmy Hoffa spears a wedge of mozzarella we had our eyes on. Then the lights dim. On a big screen, a familiar logo appears: a puppeteer's fist holding six strings over the words *The Godfather*. Then another logo: Electronic Arts.

You're still about six months away from getting your hands on Electronic Arts' new *Godfather* game, but EA is so excited about it, the company is giving a sneak peek to several hundred of its closest friends. It's even brought in stars from the movie to say a few words—James Caan and Robert Duvall show up in person, while Brando speaks from beyond the grave in a snippet from the four-hour session he spent recording new dialogue as Don Vito Corleone. "Brando really got the interactive medium," insists a smarmy EA exec. And then comes the great man's voice, hoarse and magical, explaining how



EA execs were beaming as the gaming giant continues to edge into Hollywood's turf.

computer games work: "It's the audience that's doing the acting."

Well, maybe. The snatches of gameplay we were shown look limited and underwhelming. But when Nino Rota's lush score starts to play and the period street scenes appear, we're carried away in spite of ourselves. Yes, there are plenty of things that could go wrong with this game, but we've been *Godfather* junkies for years, and the chance to spend hours or days inside the *Godfather* universe is just (how do they say it? Ah, yes) an offer we can't refuse.

❧ Charles Ardai



The tactic we expect EA's PR will use if we "disrespect" the game in any way.



It's still early, but any game that lets you play as Michael and kill Sonny is OK by us.

NEWS FEED

➤ Brace yourself for a big shock: A *Half-Life 2* expansion is in the works. As expected, it features Alyx Vance as a playable character with a new weapon: a combination SMG, pistol, and sniper rifle. We'd still rather play as Dog. ❧

REVOLT

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SOE SORRY

mmo Betta Blues

The future is here: Behold the +5 pepperoni!

Hey, buddy! Wanna get some pizza?" "Sure. No 'chovies!!!" By typing "/pizza" in *EverQuest II*, a browser launches in which you can order grub directly from Pizza

Hut. Not quite what we expected from the next developing stage of the MMO genre, but what the heck, you still need to eat. Right?

SOE president John Smedley recently released a 1,000-word missive to the MMO community (http://eqlive.station.sony.com/news_section/newsview.jsp?story=49927). In it, he recounts the history of SOE, talks about Blizzard forcing SOE to bring its "A game," and raises some very valid questions about the future of online entertainment. Let's tackle these points one by one as we ponder the MMO evolution.

SOE asks: What if you could have families in MMOs? Virtual children. What if your characters could have children and pass on the family name?

Our answer: The concept isn't exactly new. The MMO *Mourning* (www.realmsofkel.com) already has that feature in the works, and word has it that *Saga of Ryzom* (www.ryzom.com) will be doing something similar by adding aging and children. We know *EQ2* has aging in the mix, but the real trick is providing players with a good reason to continue a familial dynasty. Will your pups gain extra powers?

SOE asks: What if players could build fantastic dungeons that become part of the worlds we create with tools we give them?

Our answer: This isn't actually unheard of. *Neverwinter Nights* (<http://nwn.bioware.com>), which has been out forever and a day, allows users to create maps and mods and open up servers, cities, and so on. But this is on a small scale. Can it be done on an MMO scale? That's a better question, to which we say, "possibly." You could likely create your own dungeons, but they'd have to be instanced off the main server. And it goes without saying that the quality of any user-created map is only as good as the creator's imagination and the tools he has to work with.



SOE asks: Can MMORPGs have skill-based combat?

Our answer: Of course they can. *PlanetSide* (www.planetside.com) sure tried hard to show that off. However, its setup had two flaws that became more obvious over time. First: It didn't fully reward skill. No matter how many sniper head shots you pulled off, a one-shot kill was impossible.

Second: Once *PlanetSide* added too many layers, variables, and rules, too much was taken away from the core experience. The real trick is in the implementation. Don't make the game overly complex. Or at least find a better way to remove the barriers of entry. Take a good, long look at *Guild Wars* (www.ncsoft.com) when it ships this month.



SOE asks: What if?

Our answer: Continue asking these questions and try to come up with some bold new ideas, because there are lots of hungry companies biting into the action now. Besides the obvious direct assault on the "classic" MMO from Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*, NCsoft has done a good job by reaching out to new audiences with some of its titles. Just look at *City of Heroes* and the upcoming *Auto Assault* as games that break the mold. What we do know is that to continue the evolution of MMOs, it's going to take more than offering pizza with cheese in the crust.

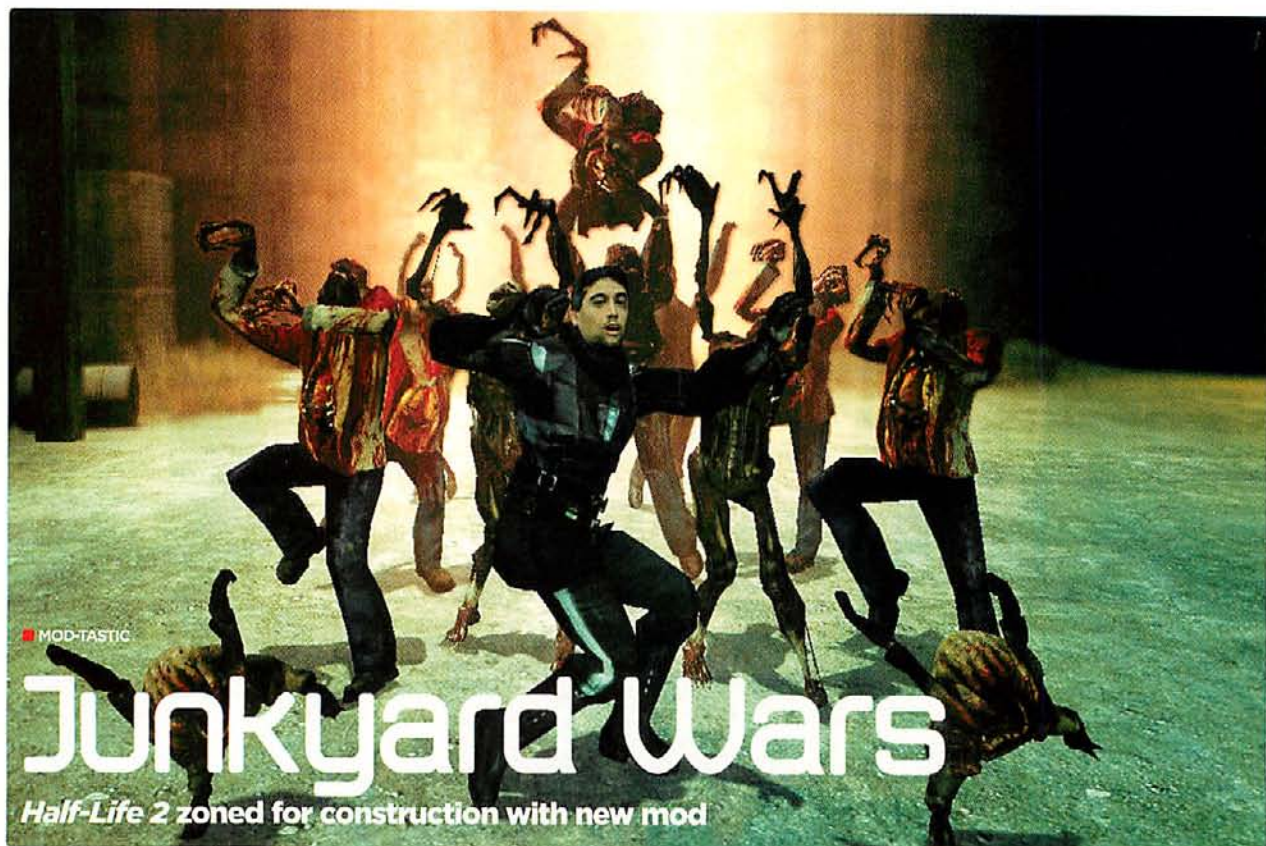
✉ Darren Gladstone





RESIST

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Bailing wire, a rusted big block engine, corrugated sheet metal, and a bathtub for a seat—looks like someone's been playing that old board game *Mousetrap* a little too much. Actually, it's a ramshackle plane quickly built in *Garry's Mod* that isn't flying quite right. Not a problem. Just whip out some in-game tools and solder together the right parts till she's airworthy.

Garry Newman, the man behind the mod (www.garry.tv/garrysmod), has created a let-'em-build-it-and-they-will-come masterpiece that turns *Half-Life 2* in all of its Newtonian detail into a treatise on cause and effect. But instead of requiring map-editing tools and technical savvy, *Garry's Mod* does it all in game. No texture alignment or exploit-proofing to fuss with. Equip-able, weaponlike construction tools handle

everything. One fires ropes for tethering junk together and creating pulleys, a second creates wheels and shortcuts to control them with, a third welds joints and sets pivot points, and so on. "Like Legos, I tried to keep it as simple as possible," Newman explains.

And his forums are filling with demo videos. One member displays the destructible Tower of Babel he built with wood pallets; another proudly



BLOCKLAND

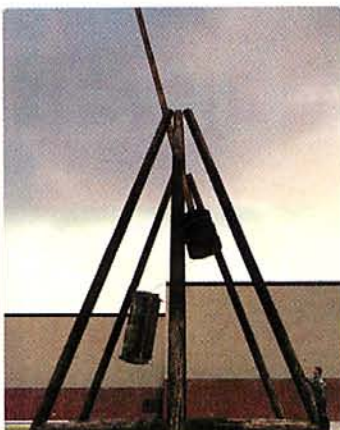
Concerned that li'l bro might try restaging *Caligula* with the cast of *Half-Life 2*? Free, fam-friendly download *Blockland* (www.ageoftime.com/blockland/index.asp?p=home) lets you build whatever you want with Lego-like bricks. 



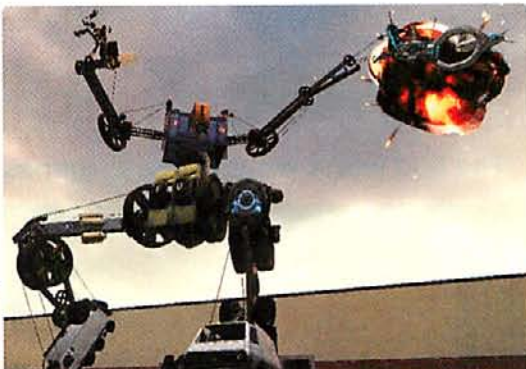
Modmaker Garry Newman passes off the few comic strips fans have made, saying, "Some are really awful; actually, most are awful." Still, the potential is there.



❖ This town needs an enema! Want to make the Joker? Pose and position



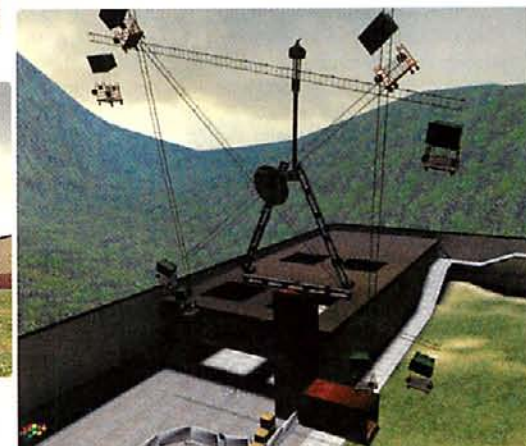
❖ Toothpick bridges are for tykes—check out Ryan Williams' work. Williams'



❖ Transformers got nothing on me!



❖ Balanced, working motorbike by "Glubags"; tank by Tyler White.



❖ Jeep Barnett's Ravenholm-themed fun house.

presents his working amusement park complete with Ferris wheel and Ravenholm-themed fun house. "The hours people spend on it always amazes me," says Newman, "but the Rube Goldberg devices are the greatest—a barrel blows up, which sends a wheel rolling, which knocks a door down, which pulls a rope—that sort of thing." (Watch http://euler.math.pacificu.edu/~davi3246/rube_goldberg_2.avi to see this stuff in action.)

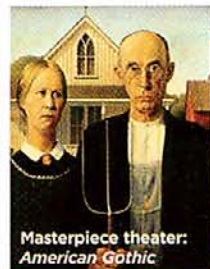
But there is more to this than inanimate objects. The mod also lets players

manipulate character models right down to their smiling/grimacing/shouting facial features. Newman's heard of some more unusual projects and requests: "A nude Alyx. That's what everyone seems to want, although I won't guess what for..." Meanwhile, less depraved types can create armies of artificially intelligent minions to fight one another: 20 zombies versus as many antlions, 30 humans against two striders—you want it, you got it.

What's next for the project? "I'm still

tuning axis constraints that allow you to build working doors and drawbridges, along with a slide constraint that restricts movement along one axis like a curtain rod. I've got it working with a messy melon guillotine," Newman reveals. "After that, I'm hoping to see a few mods spring off of mine; maybe something where two teams have 15 minutes to build a fort before doing battle."

❖ Shawn Elliott



Masterpiece theater:
American Gothic



Sistine Chapel



The Last Supper

VALVE ON GARRY'S MOD



"Just about everyone here has checked it out, and we actually show it when speaking to students and folks interested in using the Source SDK to build games—it's a great example of thinking outside the box and how our tech is modular enough to support more than FPS-style applications. As for what else we'd like to see from it: 'More, please.'" —Doug Lombardi, director of marketing

■ SNUFF

Faces of Death

The five worst ways to die in games



1 Death by Jumping Puzzle

Can we agree on one thing? If a character in an FPS is strong enough to carry nine different types of guns, a rocket launcher, and a backpack full of grenades and still be able to sprint, then that character should be strong enough to manage a 3-foot running jump. We play shooters to shoot, not to satisfy some weird desire to roleplay as an Olympic track-and-field star. And while we're at it, let's make it so a hero who's blessed with the eye-hand coordination to take out a squad of bad guys with a rapid series of head shots from a small-caliber handgun is nimble enough not to slide off that inexplicably moving platform. Just do it, and no one gets hurt.



2 Death by Poison

It just sucks. Bad.



3 Death by Tank Rush

They could be tanks, they could be zerglings, they could be any pissant early-game unit you could name, but few things sting as sharply as watching your carefully nurtured economy and intricately built high-end base fall before a seemingly endless, infuriatingly artless wave of idiot melee units. When your insanely brilliant and devious plan for total late-game victory is undone by a 12-year-old pumping out archers, life just feels monumentally unfair.



4 Death by Ladder

The higher you are, the harder you fall, and until some genius designer figures out a foolproof way to negotiate climbing down ladders in first-person shooters, you can pretty much count on falling to a maddeningly unnecessary death at least three times in the single-player portion. As brain-bendingly tortuous as that is, it doesn't compare to ladder deaths in an online multiplayer shooter, where that one accidental plummet to the great digital beyond might be all that stands between bragging rights and irrelevancy.



5 Death by Quicksave



A subset of so many other aggravating ends, death by quicksave wreaks more havoc on game enjoyment than any other demise. Generally, it works like this: You receive a fatal dose of poison/start to fall/waste your last ammo or mana/get hit by a flamethrower or something worse and smack the Quickload key in order to finesse this treachery—but you hit Quicksave instead, forever dooming yourself to a Sisyphean cycle of torment as you're forced to witness your death again and again. God help the CD-ROM if you don't have a normal save somewhere near the bad quicksave.

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BOOK
Bringing Down the House
\$10.50, AMAZON.COM
Ben Mezrich's "the geek shall inherit the Earth" true-life tale is about six MIT students

who figured out how to legally beat the blackjack tables. They walked away from casinos with millions. Sorry you didn't pay attention in math class now? Same here.



DVD
Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle
\$18, AMAZON.COM
Harold, Kumar: We dub thee brilliant. This movie goes right up

there with *Half-Baked*, *Dazed & Confused*, and countless other slacker classics. Maybe it's the random humor, maybe it's just the thought of those delicious little burgers with tiny onions that explode in your mouth like flavor crystals.



MUSIC
Kasabian
\$14, AMAZON.COM
Maybe Robert found it because this rock band was named after a member of the Manson family. (What?

Was "Squeaky" taken?) But we digress. Much ass was kicked with moody rock songs like "Club Foot." Hell, we got black eyes just listening.



COLORS
Gangsta Rap Coloring Book
\$8, AMAZON.COM
You keepin' that Crayola rill, dawg?

Umm, yeah. Anyhow, start your kids off on the right path: y'know, by coloring in pictures of famous rappers like Method Man.



FIGURES
Crazy Cat Lady
\$10, URBANOUTFITTERS.COM
Insane neighbors are always the best or, at least, the best for people-watching. If you

don't have a crazy cat lady living near you, NOW YOU CAN! Just buy this bleary-eyed "action" figure. Wild hair: check. Helter-skelter look in the eyes: yep. She's even got extra cats!



DVD
Star Wars: Clone Wars
\$13, AMAZON.COM

What happened during the Clone Wars after *Star Wars Episode II*? If you even remotely care, you need to get volume one of this animated series. Genndy Tartakovsky, the guy behind *Samurai Jack*, brings his style to the *Star Wars* universe. Besides, the remastered digital print looks great and the action sounds awesome thanks to THX surround sound. Grab this—the second series should be starting soon.



PULP
Madrox
\$3, MARVEL.COM
What would you do if you had the ability to create multiple versions of yourself? Madrox, over the

years, has sent clones of himself all over the world to learn everything from martial arts to medicine. Now, his detective agency is open for business. Good scripting and film noirish leanings makes this mutant book a must-buy.



MUSIC-ISH
William Shatner, Has Been
\$13.50, AMAZON.COM
The original rocket man is rocking out once again! The

biggest shock is that this CD isn't a musical mess. Ben Folds, the man behind the music, makes it actually work. But the best musical performance by a member of the USS *Enterprise* is still Leonard Nimoy's rendition of "The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins."



PULP
Bloodhound
\$3, DCCOMICS.COM
It's kinda hard to draw a bead on the badass bloodhound Clevenger. Smart, superstrong, and not someone to mess

THAT WAS THEN: MAY 1993

Looking back at the way we were



Happy May Day, everyone! Well, not exactly. It was a *bit* of a downer back in 1993. The president of Sri Lanka was assassinated during a parade. On the pop culture

scene, some fools released a movie based on *Super Mario Bros.* By the end of the month, the final episode of *Cheers* aired, and, we're sorry to report, *The Bodyguard* soundtrack topped the Billboard 200 for the 19th consecutive week. But there was at least one ray of sunshine. Let's turn to the pages of *Computer Gaming World*.

Long before *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six*, Electronic Arts was toying with the idea of having you control an elite squad of soldiers. In *SEAL Team*, each mission began with a planning session before you were inserted behind enemy lines in a first-person simulation. Gets you thinking, huh? This was an attempt to follow hot on the heels of *Wolfenstein 3D*, but the game was quickly overshadowed by the likes of *Doom*.

In these very pages was the article "How the Pentium Processor will 'Hot Rod' Gamers' Computers." We dug deep to explain how scorching fast a 66MHz processor really is (hint: it's a helluva lot slower than the CPU in your cell phone). And we covered the hot trend of the day with a *massive* section on telegaming (playing a game over your phone lines—CRAZY!). That's right, before teh Interweb we called it telegaming. Isn't that...quaint? ☒

with, this former cop is now an ex-con who gets tapped to lay major beatdowns on supervillains. This comic is—how should we put it—not exactly for the squeamish. His nonsense approach to cracking cases usually leads to someone missing a couple limbs, but boy is it a good read!

TENSION RELIEF
Wood Massager
\$7, SUZANNES.COM

After a long night at the office trying to make deadlines, we're tense. A good back massage is only a URL away, friends. We just don't know what to make of the design of this thing. Ummm...this is only supposed to be a massager, right? ☒

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Previews

See 'em now. play 'em soon

PUBLISHER: Majesco DEVELOPER: GlyphX Games GENRE: Action

Adventure

Rising to the occasion

Myth is the world's most enduring storytelling device. Think about it: The legends of ancient Greek gods, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and even *Star Wars* are among our greatest stories. But what sorts of myths does the future hold? In *Advent Rising*, the answer is simple: tales of an apocryphal race known as "humans."

Renowned author Orson Scott Card takes us deep into his sci-fi closet with this, the first chapter in a monumental action-adventure trilogy that spans the breadth of the known universe. Not only will the consequences of your actions carry over from game to game, but the main character—young Gideon Wyeth—will grow and evolve during his spiritual, intergalactic journey. The psychic powers that Gideon develops during *Advent Rising* are just the beginning...and if these are any indication of things to come, we're going to be in for one hell of a ride.

Renowned author Orson Scott Card takes us deep into his sci-fi closet.





Call of Duty 2
It's the sequel to Activision's acclaimed military shooter...and we've got all the details.

58



Auto Assault
NCsoft continues its trend of delivering wildly imaginative MMOs with this *Mad Max*-esque thrill ride.

64



Scarface
Al Pacino's infamous Tony Montana returns in this imaginative sequel to the fan-favorite film.

66

RELEASE DATE: May 2005

Advent Rising



WIELD

With this power, Gideon can use surrounding energy particles to levitate free-standing objects. This could potentially be used to solve environmental puzzles—or, of course, to send heavy objects flying at your enemies, Darth Vader style.



NEGATE

This power conjures a field of pure energy, which Gideon can use as a handy force field. Projectiles that collide with this wall are deflected back toward their point of fire at full velocity...though the field dissipates upon any type of organic contact.



TIMESHIFT

Thanks to Gideon's ability to wield a powerful gravity shell, not only can he achieve lightning-fast speeds and leave his foes in the dust, but he can also slow the action to a momentary crawl when the situation calls for precise moves.



SURGE

Gideon's telekinetic talents include domination over gravitational energies. He can hurl waves of force, which should send even the toughest enemies flying. Surge can also be used to yank the guns right out of your enemies' hands.



AEON PULSE

Gideon can focus the waves of electromagnetic energies coursing through his body, sending them out in a crackling burst of radial energy as they reach near-unstable proportions. It's great for toasting a few marshmallows...or an oncoming wave of alien scum.



SHATTER

With this chilling power, Gideon creates a flurry of unstable ice spikes. These frozen crystals home in on the biosignature of a nearby enemy, whose energy they feed off of before exploding in a bright, violent mess. **—Ryan Scott**

The Word: AWAKENING



SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

P The PC screen isn't the only place you'll be seeing *Advent Rising*.

Plans call for a tie-in comic series courtesy of Echo 3 Worldwide, which also publishes comics based on Majesco's *BloodRayne* games. The comic will be written by Orson Scott Card, with art by penciler Will Conrad (*Angel*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and colorist Rain Beredo (*Conan*, *Galaxy Girl*). Majesco is also serious about the game's music, with a soundtrack orchestrated by Emmy Award-winning conductor Mark Watters and performed by a 70-piece Hollywood orchestra.



PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Infinity Ward GAME TYPE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: Q4 2005

Call of Duty 2

1 Like in the first game, you don't fight alone. But this time your squad is smarter. Too bad the enemies are, too.

1 We loved the cinematic intensity and nonstop action of the original *Call of Duty*—so much so that we're finding the wait for the sequel excruciating, especially after getting a firsthand look at the dramatic changes the brand-new game engine and more open game design are bringing to the title. This series of screenshots vividly captures all the drama and beauty from one of the game's early campaign levels.

1 SMART TEAMWORK While the graphical enhancements are obvious, the A.I. upgrades operating underneath may result in the biggest difference in gameplay. When making an assault on a village, your squadmates will intelligently seek cover, utilizing multiple pathways to reach an objective—don't expect them to slavishly follow you. Even more, they'll alert you to the actions of the enemies in great detail, making comments like, "Get that guy behind the car!"

2 A WIDE-OPEN WORLD Every level offers multiple objectives, giving you the opportunity to beat them in any order you want. Here, the player has opted not to flank the village and is instead pushing on for a more frontal assault. The improved enemy A.I. might send reinforcements (there're no endless spawning bad guys) to repel you—possibly making another objective vulnerable. The bigger world will also accommodate battles up to five times larger than those in *COD*.

ALL-OUT ACTION

Get ready to support the troops!



2 Most overlooked new feature? Saucy soldiers in short pants. Oh yeah....



2 The levels may be larger and more open, but you'll still have to deal with a few tight—and deadly—spaces.



2 You can expect more realistic vehicle interaction, such as escorting tanks during the North African missions.



2 Do you make the frontal assault or try to flank? The choice is up to you—just don't expect these guys to follow.

3 SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES Visibility is a huge factor in deciding A.I. behavior, and here you can see how graphics can influence gameplay. With the brilliant new smoke grenade effects providing cover, the Allied troops make their charge. Blinded by the slowly dissipating smoke, the Axis soldiers hold their fire—until it is too late.

Robert Coffey

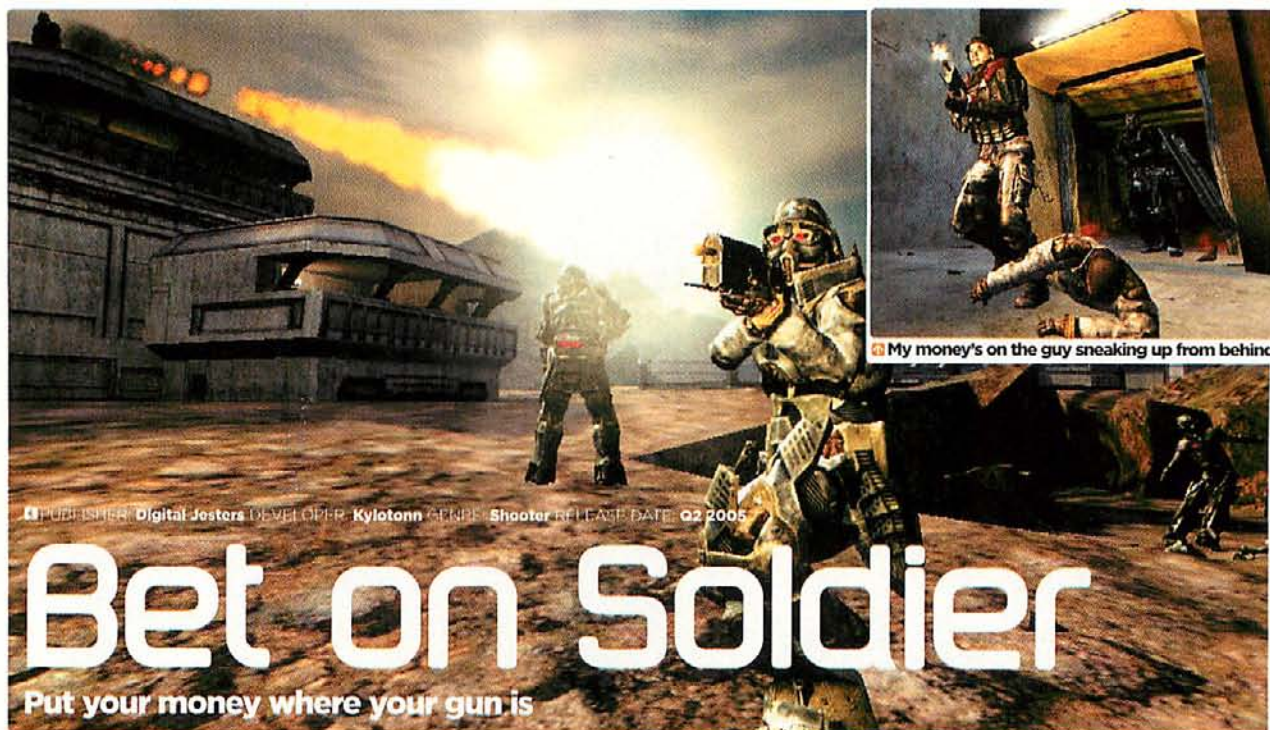
The Word: SUPERTROOPERS



2 The soldiers don't like the falling snow, but us gamers sure will.



3 The new smoke effects add a great realistic feel to the game, but it's how they influence the A.I. that really matters.



PUBLISHER: Digital Jesters DEVELOPER: Kylotonn GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: Q2 2005

Bet on Soldier

Put your money where your gun is



My money's on the guy sneaking up from behind.

Few games have titles more literal than *Bet on Soldier*. It's not just some clever phrase: You actually bet on yourself, Pete Rose style, in the game. That's the big twist in this new FPS from neophyte developer Kylotonn, but don't mistake it as an attempt to create a cookie-cutter *Unreal Tournament*-style sports arena. In *Bet on Soldier*, the action revolves around the story.

You play as a mercenary thrown into the middle of a war that's been raging for the last 80 years. "Nobody really knows why it began," claims publisher Digital Jesters. But that's fine by us—it's a great excuse to pit a handful of mercenaries against each other in bloody televised battles. It gives off a

sort of *Running Man* vibe, which does a great job of conveying the competitive gameplay style.

GENTLEMEN, PLACE YOUR BETS

At the beginning of each level, you'll visit a screen that shows you the boss characters you'll fight, and you can use your money to bet on which of those enemies you think you'll be able to take down within 60 seconds of encountering them. Each boss has weak points for you to exploit—for instance, if your foe is holding a shield, you'll have to wait for him to drop the shield while he reloads, at which point he'll be vulnerable to attack. Obviously, the bigger the threat a given boss poses, the

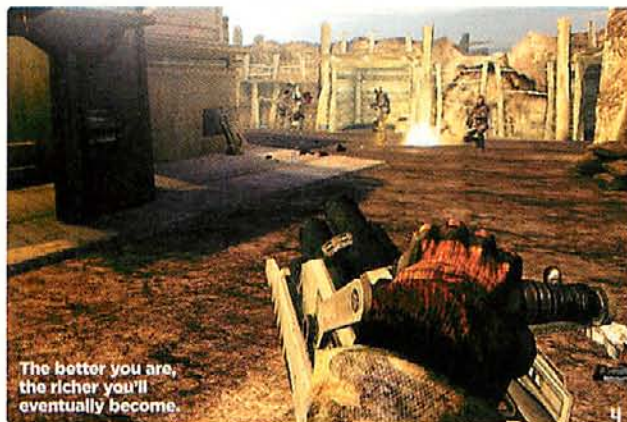
more lucrative your potential winnings. You can take risks by betting more on the difficult challengers or play it safe and put your money on

the easy guys. The money's not just for bragging rights, either; you'll need it to buy armor and upgrade your weapons, meaning that your progress directly correlates with your performance.

The betting idea extends to the multi-player modes as well. Similar to the setup in the single-player game, you'll pick out which players to go after ahead of time and see how well you can do against them. To prevent experienced players from taking advantage of newcomers in online battles, the game includes a ranking system that rewards players for taking down higher-ranked opponents.

It's always risky for an unknown development team to tackle a technology-driven genre like the first-person shooter, but Kylotonn seems to have found a very creative hook—and it's got a nice physics engine and impressive visuals to boot. Our money's down. **—Matt Leone**

The Word \$\$\$\$\$



The better you are, the richer you'll eventually become.

You actually bet on yourself, Pete Rose style, in the game.



This is the Tip of America's Military Spear. You're on Point.



You are the First to Fight — a US Marine on the front lines of urban combat in Beirut. Lead a 4-man fire team that executes authentic Marine tactics. Move aggressively, knowing your team gives you 360-degree security, and devastate your enemies with precise air and mortar attacks. Experience a first-person shooter so realistic, the Marines use it as a training tool.



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PUBLISHER: Microsoft DEVELOPER: Ensemble Studios GENRE: Real-Time Strategy RELEASE DATE: Q4 2005

Age of Em



P We all knew it was coming...it was just a matter of when. But rest assured: *Age of Empires III* is well underway. The long-awaited sequel to *Age of Kings* picks up right where its predecessor left off, taking place between the years 1500 and 1850 and

pires III



putting players smack dab in the middle of a European power struggle between eight civilizations—each with its own strengths and weaknesses. For example, Spanish forces receive heavy homeland support, while the British army claims economic superiority in its mission to conquer and colonize the New World.

Beyond all the expected statistical innovations, *AOE3* also promises some eye-opening visuals, as you can see from this beautiful screenshot. Developer Ensemble Studios is pulling out all the stops here, leading the next generation of RTS games with what many consider to be the biggest name in the genre. ☒



PUBLISHER: NCsoft DEVELOPER: NetDevil GENRE: MMORPG RELEASE DATE: Late 2005

Auto Assault

Redefining the term "road rage"

NCsoft came out of nowhere with last year's award-winning *City of Heroes*, exploding onto the MMORPG scene with a stellar product that dared to differentiate itself from the typical fantasy-RPG fodder. And the company's next big project, a postapocalyptic car-combat MMO aptly titled *Auto Assault*, is ready to defy expectations once more. "You might say it's our MO with MMOs," jokes NCsoft representative Janna Bureson. For this project, *Jumpgate* developer NetDevil has been tapped to create what can only

be described as the MMO equivalent of *Mad Max*. Here are just a few reasons to get revved up for what is sure to be one of 2005's most unique RPGs.

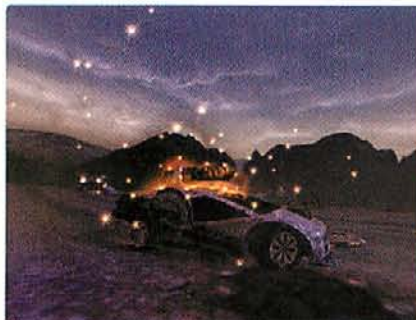
1 POSTAPOCALYPTIC CHAOS

Alien invasions, nuclear explosions, and robots...does it get any better than this? *Auto Assault*'s world is a complete wreck—and that's a good thing. Contaminated, overzealous mutants engage in road wars with cold, uncaring biomeks, while the humans who hit the nuclear panic button now struggle to

regain a foothold in a world largely devoid of their corporate influence. Their money's no good here—especially when giant lasers and plasma cannons do most of the talking.

2 MASS DESTRUCTION

As you've probably guessed, most of the game is spent rolling around in tricked-out rides that are armed to the teeth. Sure, you'll take a quick run into town every now and then to buy a new chain gun for your latest four-wheel death machine, but the



Get to town, get some heat, and get gone.



Flamethrower? Check. Insane jump? Check.



On the mean streets, your guns do the talking.

majority of your time will be devoted to cruising the mean postnuclear streets, smashing up anything and everything in your path, and wreaking general havoc in an effort to get your mitts on whatever valuables you can. Cars are fast, handle loose, and include separate aiming controls for your myriad weapons. Just don't let your trigger finger get too itchy—an overheated gun won't do you much good.

3 A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

For all the highways and byways that litter the world, you'll never find yourself getting lost. Waypoints direct you toward your destinations, with plenty of color-coded mission text.

Giant lasers and plasma cannons do most of the talking.

Highway exits lead to instanced mission areas, which you'll periodically revisit, lending a sense of continuity to your actions. Not only do your malicious efforts earn you fistfuls of cold, hard "klink" (the game's currency), but they also net you valuable experience points and crafting materials. Need to reinforce your vehicle's armor or add a few intimidating decals to it? Snag some scrap metal from the building you just knocked down and get cracking!

4 PLAYER VS. PLAYER COMBAT

We don't know much about this yet, but hey, in this kind of world, you're sure to meet more than your fair share of troublemakers. Sure, there are



They call themselves biomeks for a reason.

safe havens among your own people, but once you leave your safety net, you'd better be ready for a fight. There are even a few tournament arenas for the truly bloodthirsty types—and plenty of repair stations for all the unlucky SOB's who can't cut it. **Ryan Scott**

The Word: CAR WARS



PUBLISHER: Empire Interactive **DEVELOPER:** Bugbear
GENRE: Racing **RELEASE DATE:** June 2005

FlatOut

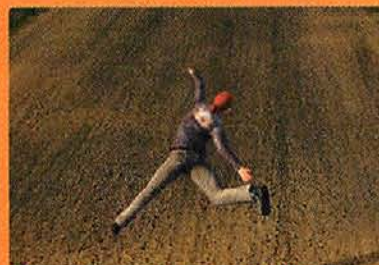
Definitely not the next Burnout

It's saying something when a racing game's standout feature is a crash engine that sees your character flying through the windshield and, in an impressively sick display of rag-doll physics, cartwheeling over a concrete barrier before landing in a pile of akimbo limbs. *FlatOut's* no standout as a racing game, and it's not nearly pretty enough for our tastes. But using your character as a crash test dummy practically constitutes a "Whose body can fly the farthest?" minigame. **Kristen Salvatore**

The Word: FLAT



During this race, you'll be jammin' to the music of the Killer Barbies.



It's unlikely this will turn out well.



PUBLISHER: Enlight Software **DEVELOPER:** Nadeo
GENRE: Racing **RELEASE DATE:** June 2005

TrackMania Sunrise

Everything old is...still old

There's something to be said for crazy-ass tracks with first-person-perspective loop-de-loops, races that begin with a sort of automotive cell mitosis that generates your competitors, fast cars with no damage modeling, and a soundtrack strongly reminiscent of late-'80s techno-pop. And just like its predecessor, crashing or running off the track in *Sunrise* means your car stays where it lands—for example, floating bottom-up in the middle of a pretty jaggy ocean. Unusual and unrealistic race tracks and physics make this one a very weird, very cartoonish arcade racer—but for now, I'm sticking with *NFSU2*. **Kristen Salvatore**

The Word: LOOPY



PUBLISHER: Vivendi Universal **DEVELOPER:** Radical Games **GENRE:** Action **RELEASE DATE:** October 2005

Scarface

Say hello to our leedle preview

You bunch of f***ing cock-a-roaches! You think you can kill off Scarface that easily? Ahem. Ever since the seminal '80s gangster flick hit theaters, Tony Montana has been a cult icon, enduring well beyond his rise and inevitable fall. "In the hip-hop world, where Tony is still celebrated to this day, people conveniently forget the ending, where he's betrayed by his friend Sosa and then killed," says Stephen Van Der Mescht, producer on *Scarface*.

Tony isn't known for keeping a cool head.

BACK FROM THE DEAD

Radical Games makes one *teensy* supposition for this game: Tony never died at the end of the movie—in fact, the very first level of the game begins with that infamous shoot-out. We know, it's a little hard to swallow. Still, Tony survives with nothing but the shirt on his back and an M-16 in his hand. Does this mean Pacino will reprise his role? Spokespeople could neither confirm nor deny this, but at least we know the game promises to deliver a regular clawing-your-way-back-from-bloody-rags-to-riches story. After spending several years underground, Tony resurfaces, only to find that his once-great criminal empire is gone. He's on the streets again—and he has to get back into business.

THE GRAY AREA

After recent Radical efforts such as *The Hulk* and *The Simpsons: Hit & Run*, the source material seems staggeringly racy. Bloody killing, rampant drug use...will this stuff make it past the ESRB? "We won't make the game extra gory just for the sake of blood," says Van Der Mescht. "Tony doesn't kill civilians [like you can in a certain *other* thug-life game]...it will make sense with his moral code. As for drug usage, you won't see him snorting lines or selling drugs to innocent people. He buys the drugs and sells them to dealers." This admittedly crosses into a bit of a gray area, but considering the intended mature audience, parents have little cause to complain.



You DARE to take my parking spot, you lousy piece of %\$*!?



It may be "No wife, no kids" on the streets, but not in the clubs.

PLOTTING AND SCHEMING

CGW: David McKenna has a solid résumé on the silver screen, having penned movies such as *S.W.A.T.* and *American History X*. He's currently working on *The E-Ring* with Jerry Bruckheimer and Taylor Hackford for NBC next fall. We caught up with him to ask about the movie script that was turned into a game...and the 30,000-plus lines of dialogue he wrote.

CGW: Can you talk about your decision to pick up at the end of the flick?

McKenna: Obviously, Tony dying at the end of the movie creates a bit of a problem. But I think the game is so funny and entertaining that players won't have any problem looking past it. When I first made my pitch for the project, I had Tony in the Jacuzzi tub addressing a bunch of studio executives. He's chastising the "f***ing cock-a-roaches" for always killing the bad guy in the end. Tony then pulls out a machine gun, wastes them all, escapes the mansion, and we're into the game. I don't think the upper brass at VU were amused, but we were.

CGW: What's your favorite moment or line from your script?

McKenna: That's easy. I hope it's still in the final cut. After Tony escapes in the beginning, he tells his lawyer that he wants Sosa's head on a platter. His lawyer replies, "Sosa? That's impossible." Tony says, "Why? Is there a shortage of platters?" McKenna had much more to share about his experience working on *Scarface*. Check out "Star Struck" in this month's Radar section (pg. 32) and at 1UP.com.



The obvious question is how *Scarface* will translate to the PC screen. After all, *GTA: Vice City* borrowed liberally from the film's '80s-era Miami. How will *Scarface* compare years after the fact?

THE (INTERACTIVE) WORLD IS YOURS

The fictionalized setting of Miami, the Keys, and the Bahamas is vast...and it's yours to explore right from the start. As in *GTA*, you'll move the story forward at your own pace, avoiding rivals (and the DEA) while smuggling drugs Stateside. If you just want to relax on the high seas between shoot-outs, there's even a real-time ocean wave simulation.

THE FEAR FACTOR

Whether you're orchestrating a business deal or a bloodbath, you're in full control. Passive and aggressive conversation abilities flesh out Tony's character—he can get information, negotiate deals, or just intimidate enemies in battle. Believe us, nothing's more satisfying than hitting the Taunt button and watching rivals flee as Tony spouts off a string of profanities. Subtle, it's not. But what do you expect?

GETTING EMOTIONAL

Tony isn't known for keeping a cool head: Recall the end of the movie, when he seems nigh oblivious to bullets. This scene was the inspiration for the Rage meter, which causes time to slow

slightly, giving Tony a razor-sharp focus and opening up opportunities for precision sharpshooting. To counterbalance this, Tony is governed by a strict moral code—you can't target civilians, women, or kids. In Tony's own words, "I never killed nobody that didn't have it coming."

THE WAY WE RIDE

Though you'll remain on foot for most of the game, plenty of vehicles are at your disposal. But why resort to carjacking when you can whip out your brick-sized '80s-style cellie and call your limo driver? You'll also find several other kinds of rides—including boats and seaplanes. **✎ Darren Gladstone**

The Word: F*!**



✎ All Tony wanted was a quiet night at home watching TV.



✎ There are lots of offshore havens for black market operations.

PIPELINE

Ship dates and slip dates for games in the stream

Game	Publisher	Expected
Advent Rising	Majesco	May 2005
Age of Empires III	Microsoft	Q4 2005
Area 51	Midway	Q2 2005
Auto Assault	NCsoft	Late 2005
Bad Day L.A.	Enlight	Q3 2005
The Bard's Tale	VU Games	May 2005
Battlefield 2	EA	May 2005
Battlestations: Midway	THQ	Q2 2005
Bet on Soldier	THQ	Q2 2005
Black & White 2	EA	2005
Blitzkrieg II	CDV Software	Q2 2005
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	Bethesda	Apr 2005
Call of Duty 2	Activision	Q4 2005
Carmageddon	2K Games	Q3 2005
City of Villains	NCsoft	Q1 2005
Civilization IV	2K Games	Q4 2005
Cold Fear	Ubisoft	Q2 2005
Commandos: Strike Force	Eidos	Q2 2005
D&D Online	Atari	Nov 2005
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	Activision	Apr 2005
Dragonshard	Atari	2005
Elder Scrolls IV	2K Games	2005
Empire Earth II	VU Games	Apr 2005
FEAR	VU Games	Jun 2005
Ghost Recon 2	Ubisoft	Jun 2005
GTA: San Andreas	Rockstar	Jan 2005
Guild Wars	NCsoft	Apr 2005
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos	Q2 2005
Imperial Glory	Eidos	May 2005
Jaws	PlayStation	Aug 2005
King Kong	Ubisoft	Q1 2005
Lego Star Wars	Eidos	Apr 2005
The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe	Buena Vista	Nov 2005
Middle-Earth Online	VU Games	2005
Myst V: End of Ages	Ubisoft	Q3 2005
Pariah	Groove Games	Mar 2005
Psychonauts	Majesco	Apr 2005
Quake IV	Activision	2005
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	Ubisoft	Q2 2005
Rise and Fall	Midway	2005
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.	THQ	2005
Scarface	VU Games	Oct 2005
Star Wars: Empire at War	LucasArts	Fall 2005
Stolen	Hip Games	Apr 2005
Stronghold 2	2K Games	Apr 2005
Stubbs the Zombie	Aspyr	Q3 2005
SWAT 4	VU Games	Apr 2005
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft	Sep 2005
The Godfather	EA	Nov 2005
The Movies	Activision	2005
TimeShift	Atari	Fall 2005
TrackMania Sunrise	Enlight	Jun 2005
UFO: Aftershock	Cenega	Q3 2005
Ultimate Baseball Online	Natsume	Apr 2005
Unreal Tournament	Midway	2005

New Update



Can you say arachnophobia?

PUBLISHER: DreamCatcher DEVELOPER: Heuristic Park GENRE: Action-RPG RELEASE DATE: April 2005

Dungeon Lords

Ye olde dungeon crawl

The kingdom is in turmoil, a beautiful heiress is missing, and you're the closest thing to a hero that the world can scrounge up. Yeah, it sounds like your run-of-the-mill RPG story, doesn't it? Fortunately, the talent behind the upcoming *Dungeon Lords* is anything but typical: Designer David W. Bradley, best known for his work on the *Wizardry* series and 2000's *Wizards & Warriors*, brings nearly two decades of RPG design experience to the table. But unlike Bradley's previous efforts, *Dungeon Lords* takes a much more action-oriented approach to things.

You've got your typical assortment of fantasy races—elves, dwarves, and the really weird stuff like wylvans (cat people) and

urgoth (big, brutish types). You'll also pick from an array of classes with which to delve into the dungeons, though your choice is more of a guideline than a rule. For instance, a warrior may be able to cast spells and move quietly...just not as well as a mage or a thief could. No matter what your choice, you'll be in store for a fast-paced monster-killing adventure with plenty of key RPG elements and a treasure trove of cool weapons and items. Between this, *Demon Stone*, and the various *Lord of the Rings* games, action-RPGs certainly seem to be in vogue lately—and the pedigree behind *Dungeon Lords* can only mean good things for this genre. **Rebecca Gross**

The Word: HACK-N-SLASH



PUBLISHER: 2K Games DEVELOPER: Firefly Studios GENRE: Strategy RELEASE DATE: April 2005

Stronghold 2

Medieval war and peace

Stronghold 2 has a little bit of everything. It lets you raise cows, build castles, and lead vast armies into battle. And as the sequel to Firefly Studios' first game, *Stronghold 2* continues the tradition of combining an economic simulation of castle life with real-time battles.

The basic idea hasn't changed much from the original: You're provided with both peaceful economic gameplay and combat-heavy sieges. However, everything's bigger—and hopefully better—than in the original. The maps are several times the size of the previous game's, and the battles are correspondingly larger. There are more siege engines and castle traps, and the economic model takes additional facets of

running a medieval castle into account, such as waste disposal. If you've ever wondered how swine, vermin, and man lived in such close proximity, now you can watch it happen in glorious 3D.

Though most of its ideas are simply evolved from its predecessor, *Stronghold 2* has some interesting wrinkles. It's nonlinear, which means you'll have several different paths to choose from, as well as the option of revisiting your old castles and taking on additional missions. As long as the micro-management doesn't become too tedious due to the expanded scale, *Stronghold 2* should be entertaining for those who enjoy this type of gameplay. **Di Luo**

The Word: TREBUCHET!

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DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

The best games you've never seen

FROM: U-235 Studios AVAILABILITY: 2006

Retribution

Word on the street: Imagine, at age 12, watching your parents croak in front of your eyes.... Pretty traumatic, right? Guess again: It's not half as horrific as the revenge you plan on exacting upon their killers throughout this cinematic shooter. Hiring and equipping intelligent associates who'll fight at your side, you'll storm Marine camps, tropical hideouts, and drug compounds. Planned activities also include training allies, hijacking boats, and hocking hostages to fund your insane enterprise.

Sounds kinda beat: Australian newcomer U-235 promises the world gorgeous graphics, co-op support, and a movielike experience. We've heard similar claims before. For now, all anyone's seen or heard of the title—due for the next-gen Xbox as well as the PC—are a few screenshots and claims of an advanced game engine—specifically Artificial Studios' Reality system. For now, it's just too early to call the outing's eventual fate.



FROM: 7FX AVAILABILITY: Q2 2005

Loco Mania

Word on the street: Hallelujah! Aspiring dispatchers, your prayers have been answered. Now anyone can live the dream: Controlling switches and tracks at mountain, valley, and desert depots, you'll guide 22 lovingly rendered locomotives through railways as efficiently as possible. Details make all the difference here, with meticulously animated backgrounds sporting delicious smoke, steam, and real-time weather effects. It's a puzzlingly original take on train spotting...and a potentially great way to kill spare time.

Sounds kinda beat: Czech creator 7FX put forth a rather poor showing in its initial effort, *Team Factor*, and sophomore release *Rapid Gunner* didn't burn up the shelves, either—so forgive us if we're somewhat dubious about *Loco Mania*'s potential. However, a loyal fan base does exist for this type of title, as evidenced by the success of PopTop Software's similar products. If it's afforded a decent distribution, this game could certainly be carried into a comfortable chart position through strong word of mouth.



FROM: Digital Reality AVAILABILITY: Q2 2005

1944: Battle of the Bulge

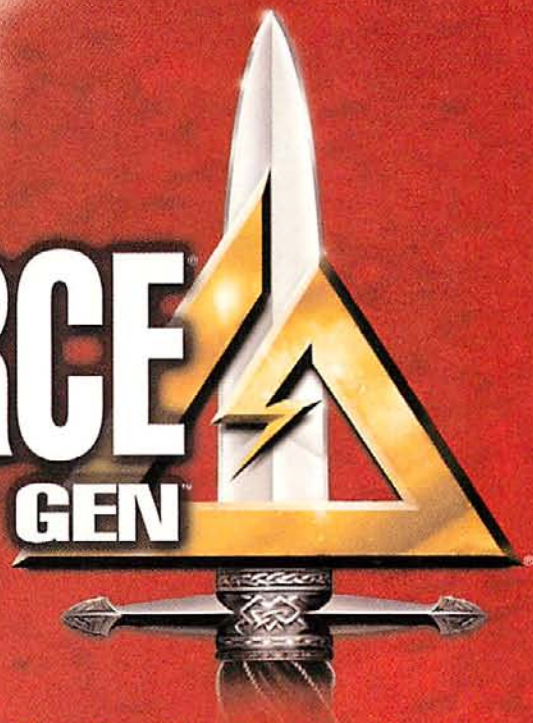
Word on the street: Dug *Desert Rats* vs. *Afrika Korps* and *D-Day*? Then you'll love the trilogy's conclusion: a ridiculously well-endowed war game touting 20 single-player missions, multiple perspectives on each conflict, and historically accurate environments. In a novel twist, your units—who engage adversaries atop snowy landscapes—are affected by the wintry weather. Forget scraping ice off your Buick before work; you don't know the meaning of road rage until you've seen a much-needed *Nebelwerfer*'s engine heave its dying breath.

Sounds kinda beat: How to put this delicately.... Let's just say those who answered the above question with a resounding cheer are in the minority. While good looking, Hungarian developer Digital Reality's designs are notorious for their haphazard quality and unremarkable replay value. Naturally, we applaud endeavors at dragging games for grognards screaming into the 21st century. Whether purists will actually appreciate the gesture, however, depends entirely on how well the simulation's execution pans out.

**"TARGET, 2 KLICKS OUT.
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GENTLEMEN."**

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Blood

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I'm looking at a level from the next *Unreal Tournament* game, and it's not pretty. In a darkened conference room at Epic Games' North Carolina offices, lead designer Steve Polge, lead level designer Jim Brown, and producer Jeff Morris are walking me through a level that appears to be made of the equivalent of digital cement blocks—and gently explaining to me why this is a good thing.

"The programming is ahead of the art right now, which is kind of intentional," Steve calmly notes. "We really wanted to focus on gameplay before art." I can see why this statement makes sense, but it doesn't do much to erase the look on my face as I watch Jeff maneuver through a bunch of blocks masquerading as a level from the next iteration of one of the biggest multiplayer shooters ever. I realize that I'm looking stunned and try to lighten the mood.

"Don't worry, I'm not scared. I'm not going to write a story that says, 'It's the craziest thing, there's no art in this game—it's all bricks!'" I chuckle brightly.

And because neither Steve nor Jim nor Jeff looks convinced, I become privy to the details of just how the next *Unreal Tournament* is being made.

THE UNRE

HOW EPIC GAMES WILL MAKE THE NEXT *UNREAL* TOURNAMENT THE BEST *UNREAL* TOURNAMENT

PRETTY ON THE INSIDE

Considering the number of games whose pretty faces hide less-than-stellar gameplay, Epic's plan sounds refreshing: build each level without any art, use those level shells to hone gameplay, and then when every hallway, ramp, and jump is doing exactly what it should to deliver perfect gameplay, "stick the pretty stuff on top of it."

But why pull apart a great game so drastically, and just a year after its release?

"Actually, we don't think *2K4* was very successful," Steve offers. Jim and Jeff nod their heads in agreement, while I'm certain mine is spinning in disbelief. Steve continues, "It wasn't a bad game...I just wish it had been a better game than it was."

Apparently, members of the hardcore *UT* community agree. "We've paid...a lot of attention to what the guys in the community are saying, and we take that feedback to heart. We've got guys that troll the forums every day [and read feedback]," Jim says. What's their biggest critique? "I would say mobility. Mobility and weapon balance. That's more for the hardcore guy who plays every day or on a regular basis, but balancing that out overall will make the whole game feel better, and so everybody will benefit."

As someone who consistently enjoys *UT2K4* but also consistently eats the fruits of other players' rocket launchers, I'm not

going to argue—for any but the most hardcore, *UT2K4*'s learning curve is a painfully steep one. Certainly, more balanced movement and weapons will help that. So why even show us these bare-bones level shells at all?

"The original *Unreal Tournament* was on the threshold of being a great game," Steve says. "If we had done *2K4* without having to feel kind of in the box of what we had started in *2K3*, I think it would have been a much better game than it was. We think there's a lot we can improve. This is a completely new game, new engine. All the code is really being rewritten. No assets from *UT2K4* appear in here again. In fact, in terms of how the games have evolved, this is more of a leap, I would say, than the original *Unreal Tournament* to *UT2K4*."

It's not that these guys have pulled *UT2K4* apart. They're rebuilding the game altogether. No wonder there's no art in the demo—we're looking at the frame of the house before the Sheetrock has even gone up.

UNREAL MAKEOVER

This is not an iteration, it's an entirely new game—which is why it's entirely possible it won't be called *Unreal Tournament 2006*. "Yeah," Steve says, "It's a real generational change."

The polygon jump is going from thousands to millions. ■

AL WORLD

BY KRISTEN SALVATORE



courtesy of the Unreal Engine 3. New technology, new engine, new gameplay...new everything. "You can tell from our [demo] levels," Steve says, "we're not trying to make a prettier *UT2K4*. We're really trying to make a very new game."

We've already discussed why link-gun fodder like me will likely appreciate this the most, but aren't there a lot of people out there who really, really like the franchise the way it is?

"It's a weird balance," Jim admits. "You want to keep those people who have been playing for a long time, but you still want to innovate and do new things for new people."

Steve agrees. "We're having our cake and eating it, too: We're giving people something that's an improvement over familiar game types but also evolving them in different directions."

This philosophy shows at the deepest levels of the process—namely, in the creation of those level shells, which can be built in a matter of hours and are actually built from parts of earlier *Unreal* titles.

"We use the gameplay of 2004 as a base," Jim explains. "We wanted to start off with a known quantity so that as we made changes to it, we knew that they were [quantifiable] improvements—it's not just

different, it's different in ways we can point to specifically.

"The level we brought in first is called Deck 17, which is kind of 'the level' people associate with *UT2K4*, because we knew if we made changes and tweaked the movement, everyone would be able to see the difference and the improvements because they knew what the level felt like before. It's those kind of subtle things [we're changing right now], things that are not real sexy but are really important to the feel of the game."

"Pretty much every day, we play either the original *Unreal Tournament* or *Unreal Tournament 2004*, or some other popular Internet games, and then we'll play the new *UT* and compare and contrast and try different things," Steve explains.

Jim continues, "And we'll keep going back and forth [between the old games and the new one], saying what we like and what we don't like about each in terms of balance, movement speeds, those sorts of things. After we're happy with the way a level feels, we sit down with the artists and come up with a theme, and then we start populating it. It's a lot easier to change a map [when it's] like this, where you can make a corridor wider and not have to worry about 'are the textures in line; it's going to mess with my lighting.'"

"Building a shell before we actually had artists trying to pretty it up was always a good idea," Jim says, "but now it's really mandatory with the amount of time it takes for the new engine technology assets to be created. It just takes so much longer to build these million-poly models that you'd better be damn sure that what you build

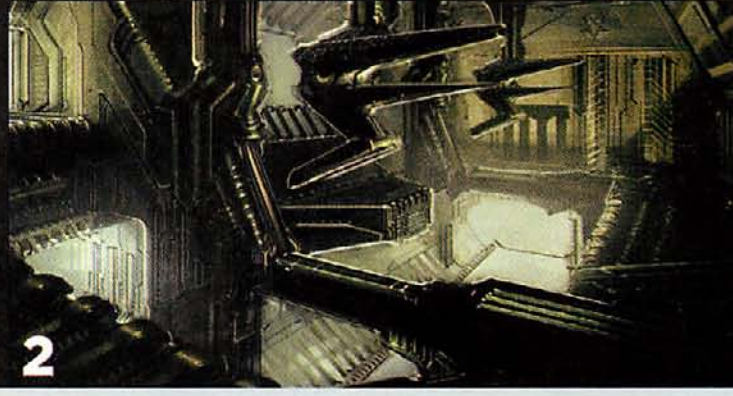
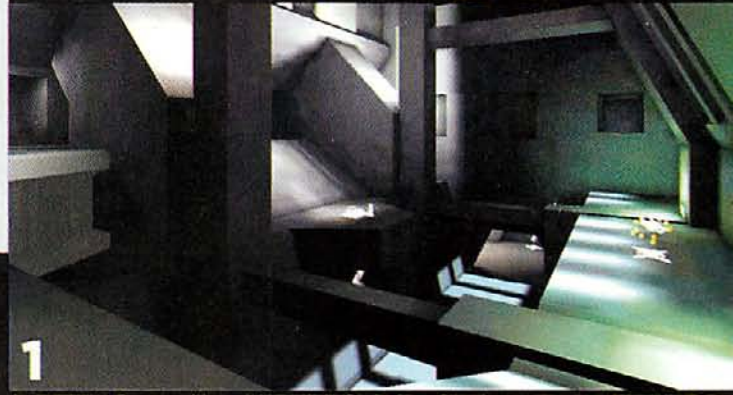
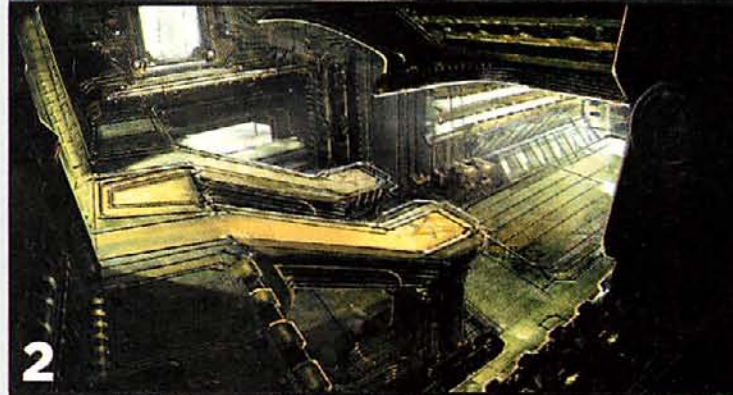
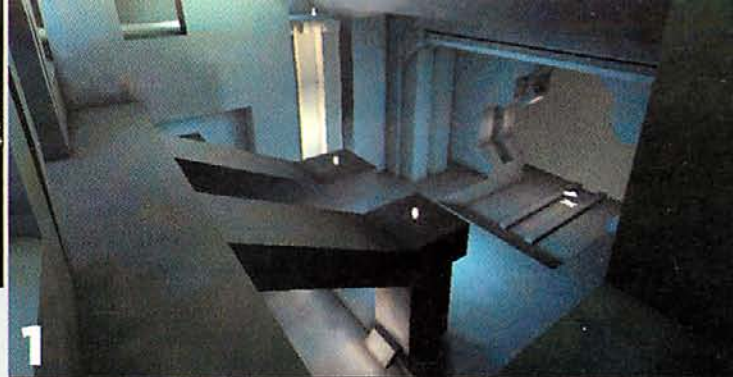
"WE'RE NOT TRYING TO MAKE A PRETTIER *UT2K4*. WE'RE TRYING TO MAKE A VERY NEW GAME."

Unreal Art and Artistry

Considering the time and money involved in producing the million-poly assets that the Unreal Engine 3 is capable of, putting in the time up front on detailed models and artist renderings makes a lot of sense. Like the levels themselves, every character, vehicle, and weapon gets conceptualized and refined before it's created in-game.



Before every scar and tattoo are rendered on the red team leader's face, he's modeled and conceptualized by a freehand artist.



gets used and that everybody likes it before it gets made."

Imagine what would happen if a gorgeous-looking level was discovered to have a game-breaking exploit. Most likely, you'd end up with a retail copy that included that very pretty, very broken level. Not here. Daily adjustments, tweaks, and all-out rebuilds of what are already the best parts of a great franchise should mean that by the time they look good, they play even better.

TOTAL WARFARE

So what's new? Not that there's a shortage of amazing levels and game modes already, but the changes in the works are impressive—particularly a new as-yet-unnamed mode (currently code-named "conquest") set to replace assault mode. Imagine a multiplayer map potentially as large as three onslaught maps with assaultlike objectives and even a limited form of resource management planned. But it's so early on, says Steve, that "we only have conquest on paper at this point." (For more details, see sidebar, page 80.)

But Epic is focusing on far more than just the game's multiplayer aspects—namely, creating a far deeper single-player game.

"Statistically speaking, more people play offline than they do online," Jim explains. His bit of trivia momentarily slays me, until I consider the number of times I've abandoned an online ass-kicking in favor of honing my skills with the relatively safer A.I.

"The single-player game has always been about giving the multi-player experience offline," Steve says, "but we see a lot of room for improvement." Right now, it's a disjointed set of maps—you play a match here, you play a match there—and this tournament story kind of ties together why you're playing these different matches. We want to tie it together more by giving a lot more personality to the bots."

So much for the relative safety of the A.I. Does this mean I'm now going to get my keister handed to me offline as well as on? That I will, and it'll probably be accompanied by a healthy dose of trash talk, too. You'll still move through the single-player game as a team leader hiring and firing members of your tournament squad, but this time, those team members will have personalities that make them better suited for some roles than others. How will you know what each guy is like? They'll be interacting with you throughout the single-player campaign—and with each other, too.

"I think a really good way of bringing out their personalities is having them interacting with each other, bantering with each other,"

MAKING WAR

While we didn't see any completed in-game levels, these shots give a great view of the development process—and an idea of how amazing the game will likely look. Here, you're seeing steps 1 and 2 in a multistep process: The screens labeled 1 show level shells; the 2s are the concept artist's rendering of how those very same areas may look with "the pretty stuff" in place. Only after both are perfected does step 3—creating actual assets in the UE3 engine—get started.



Behold, the new and improved version of the Scorpion, in concept form and as a kick-ass in-game render. Unlike the previous Scorpion, this one is enclosed, so driving it is less likely to get you picked off, and additional rocket launchers make for a much meaner mode of transport.

The Goliath tank is back, and may have destructible treads this time around.



says Steve. "So if you're doing a flag run, you can hear what's going on back at your base because guys are shouting to each other where the enemy's coming from and what they're doing to prevent it."

That's right—shouting to each other. Voice command will play a much bigger role in the new game. Rather than simply a means of executing menus, as it is in *UT2K4*, it will offer you an actual interface for commanding bots.

"In *2K4*, the voice-command stuff would basically take the stuff in the voice menus and allow you to speak it instead of do it. But here there are a lot of things that I'd like to be able to have that would be hard to ever do in a menu. For example, each level will have specific locations that you'll be able to use voice command to tell the bots to act on, so you can say, 'Go cover the cavern,' and they'll know what that means. They'll also be a lot more responsive, so you'll be able to ask them questions about their status: 'Is there anybody down in the

"YOU WANT THE A.I. TO DO THINGS THAT SURPRISE YOU."



THE REAL THING

Epic considers Malcolm to be the representative character of the *Unreal* franchise. He's made appearances in every game since the original *Unreal*—but he's never looked so good onscreen as he will in the next game. That's right—these aren't artist renderings or *Photoshop* images, these are actual in-game renders... which show you better than possibly anything else here just what amazing feats the *Unreal Engine 3* is capable of.

cavern?' 'No, cavern's all clear.' Or you can throw out warnings like, 'There's a sniper on the tower. Go get the sniper.'"

"The main thing is that they understand what you're saying. The more words you add, the more processing power you have to dedicate to getting it right—and right now we have the processing power to really do that on the PC," Jeff notes. "Of course, there are little tweaks you need to make. I read one usability report in which the player told the A.I. to go left and he was so amazed that they actually did it, he said, 'Wow, they did the right thing!' And suddenly, the A.I. says, 'Going right!' So you have to tweak it, but given the choice between a menu that they navigate through to give orders versus actually using language, as long as it's not frustrating to use, almost universally, players prefer to [speak rather than type]."

Altogether, the idea is to make players more invested in the single-player experience—and more challenged by it. "With *2K4*'s free agent system, you really didn't have players you got attached to," says Steve. "They weren't personalities at all. Here, they will be. We're going to use that to build tension, so, for example, you know the team you're about to play is really, really good, not just some other team of random-looking guys." You'll know more about them and about their personalities, but, if Steve and Jeff have their way, not so much that their moves won't surprise you.

"You never want the game to feel like it devolves into 'Oh, I know the A.I. can't handle this tactic.' When you find a tactic that the A.I. can't handle, then the game is broken. You want the A.I. to do things that surprise you so that you feel challenged in terms of your reaction time, your strategies, and your tactical skills."

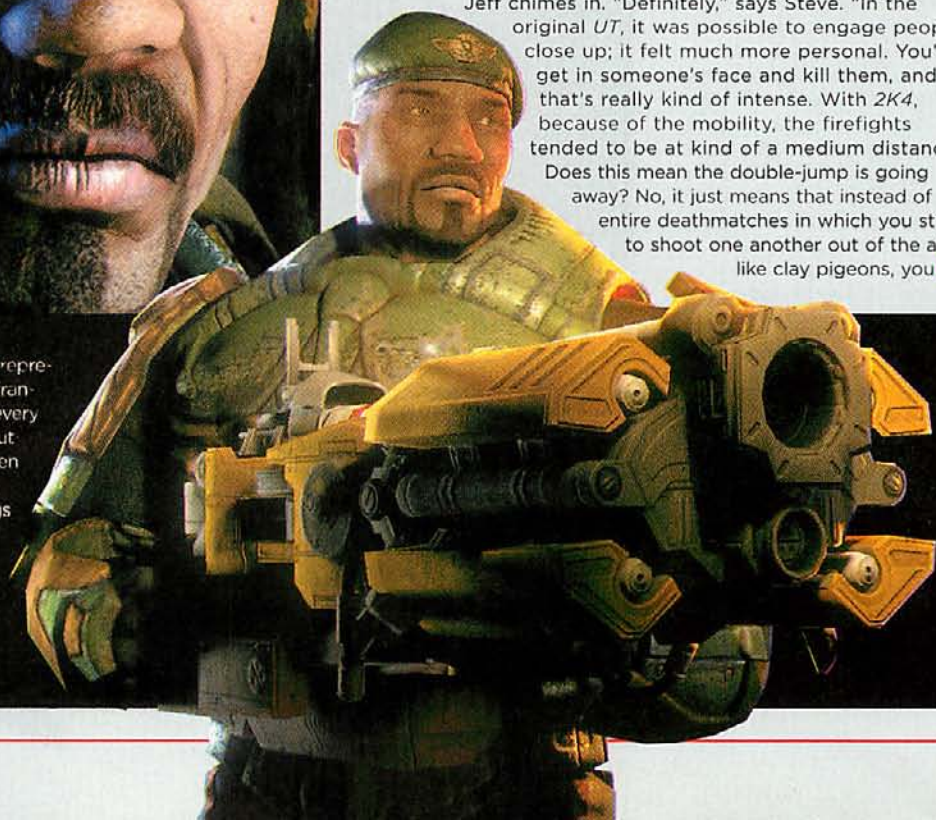
DOWN WITH THE HIP-HOP

Also expect to see a big change in player movement, with a lot of *UT2K4*'s bounciness dialed down. "You want the player to feel very powerful and free and able to do all kinds of cool stuff—but it's not so cool when you can't hit the people you're playing against because they're doing [so much jumping around]. And there are also network considerations, especially since [a big part of this game is] Internet focused, it's hard when you've got some latency," Steve says.

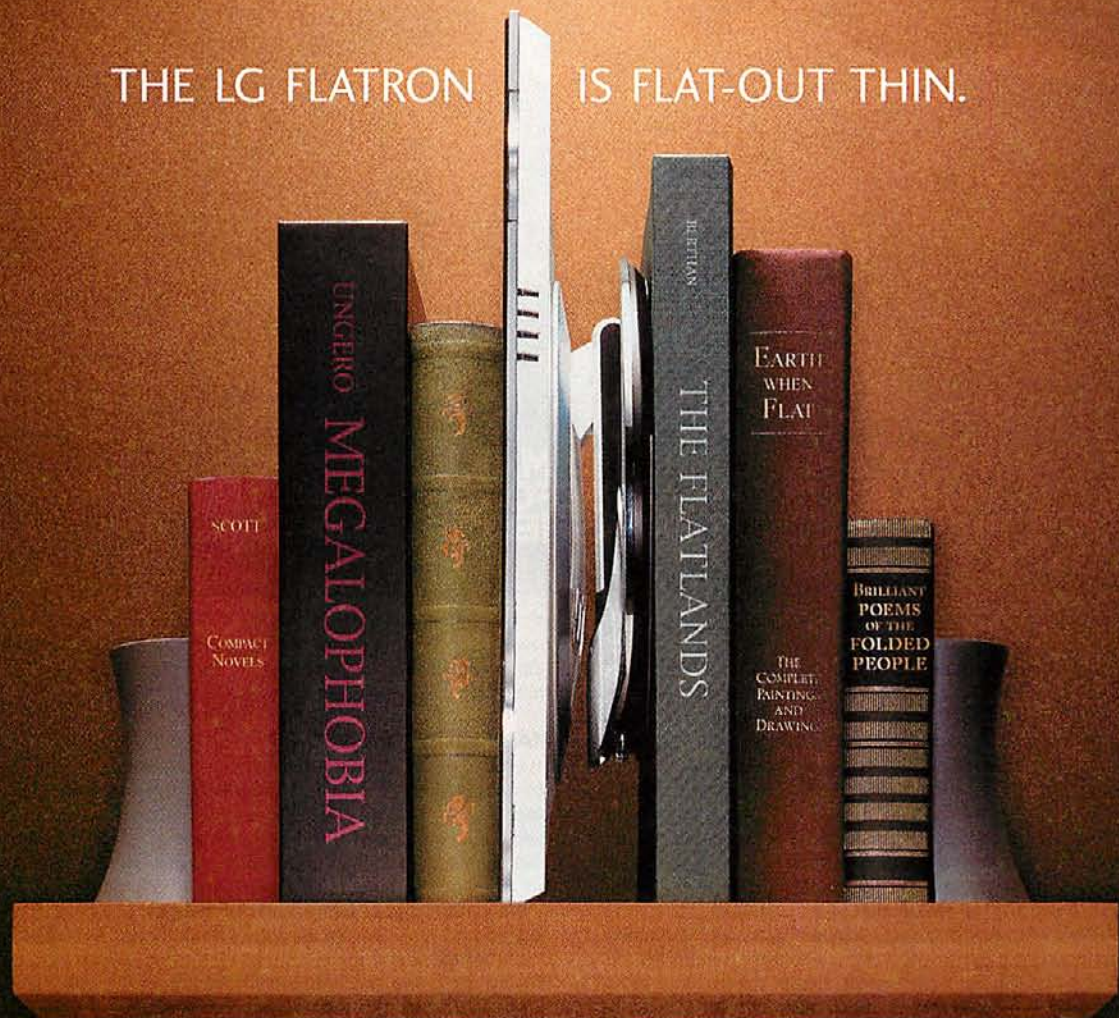
Not to mention the fact that only experts can ever draw a bead on their prey. "Yeah, [in *UT2K4*] you miss the feeling you get from being in someone's face and fighting with them,"

Jeff chimes in. "Definitely," says Steve. "In the original *UT*, it was possible to engage people close up; it felt much more personal. You'd get in someone's face and kill them, and that's really kind of intense. With *2K4*, because of the mobility, the firefights tended to be at kind of a medium distance."

Does this mean the double-jump is going away? No, it just means that instead of entire deathmatches in which you strive to shoot one another out of the air like clay pigeons, you



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WALL MOUNTED (front view)



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Life's Good



80 Series model shown

"WE CAN PLAY THROUGH AND MAKE TWEAKS WHILE IT'S CHEAP, BEFORE THERE'S PRETTY STUFF SPLASHED ALL OVER THE CONCEPTS."

■ should expect to do more up-close-and-personal fighting with your foes.

"One of the big problems we saw with *UT2003* and *2004* is the huge learning curve, the huge difference between expert players and novice players," Steve says. Rather than intimidate first-time online players, Steve wants to "reward people for expertise, but you don't want to completely make it not fun for the novice player."

But experts and n00bs won't necessarily be forced into combat with one another—the next *Unreal Tournament* is slated to include a matchmaking system based on persistent player ratings, so as you strive to better your overall rating and keep track of how you're doing against the rest of the *UT* world, you can also use your stats to find similarly abled worthy opponents.

"It's more fun for the experts and it's more fun for the novice players if everybody else playing with them is about the same level," Steve explains. "We'll have a quickmatch kind of thing, where you hit a button and it finds a server that's about the right level with the best ping and sticks you on there. Or we'll have lobbies where you can go in and talk to people and join a game. People in the lobby can say, 'Hey, I want to play a capture-the-flag match on this map,' and you'll set it up from there and boom, you'll all go off and play it."

Expect more of that kind of community building through deeper in-game integration in the next *UT*. Examples? Automatic downloading of mod content if you choose, perhaps in the form of a check box that allows for daily downloads of new content for a particular mod. Or support for clan pages built into the game's menus, such as a simple HTML browser that will allow clan pages to be viewed in-game. Or the ability to enter your clan ID in the stat server, so you can view the stats of clan matches in a global rating system of how clans have done against each other.

The philosophy at work here mirrors that of the overall game: support longtime fans and excite new ones. "The guys who are already

in clans are already in clans. What we want to do is try to introduce new people. There are a lot of people who play online but know nothing about that whole part of the community. We want to make that stuff more evident," Steve says.

MANY MILESTONES TO GO

The finished product is still well over a year away (there are 13 "milestones" in the creation process, and we're visiting just after the completion of No. 3), but that suits everyone at Epic just fine. Long before the entire game world gets prettied up, Steve and company plan to have put together a gameplay framework that's tweaked to within an inch of perfection.

"We want to have all [the parts of this game] working for probably about a year before we ship. I think a big part of the success of *Unreal Tournament* will be that we've had such a long cycle of playing the game and improving it based on the idea, 'This is fun, but it would be more fun if...' and then really refining it—tweaking weapon balance, tweaking movement, tweaking vehicles, tweaking gameplay mechanics," Steve says. "We have to have a lot of time where we really playtest it and try all the different kinds of things you can do."

"That's the thing with the level shells—we can play through and make tweaks while it's cheap, before there's pretty stuff splashed all over the concepts," Jeff notes. "We already have everything this game will have in terms of movement, weapon selection, range of motion, things you can do—everything is already there." Everything but the visuals, that is. But, according to the team, the A.I. and the gameplay are already better than *UT2K4*'s—and most other things currently out.

"Our goal is to make a much better *UT* than anything anyone's ever seen," Steve says. Cement blocks notwithstanding, we're on board with that. ■



■ Look for a number of new teams in the new game (check out the next page for a list), a few of which you see here in the concept-art stage.

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What's the 411?

The lowdown on the next Unreal Tournament

Will the new UT include a software renderer like the last game did? Not necessarily, although there will be something that allows lower-end systems to run the game reasonably well.



Which of the following is not an announced Unreal Engine licensee?
a) Midway
b) BioWare
c) U.S. Postal Service
d) The nation of Taiwan
Answer: c) U.S. Postal Service. Taiwan wants to distribute copies of UT in order to foster more interest in math and science programs.

GAME MODES

IN

- Onslaught
- Deathmatch/team deathmatch
- Capture the flag
- Conquest

OUT

- Bombing run
- Domination
- Assault



NOT APPEARING
IN THE NEXT UT

18

VEHICLES: nine Axon vehicles from UT2K4; Editors' Choice DVD Edition, nine new Necris vehicles

BOOM!

The Scorpion vehicle is now enclosed and has rocket boosters affixed to it that allow for bigger jumps (and midair tricks). Combine the rockets with the Eject button to turn the Scorpion into a giant self-destructing bomb.

Kismet *n.* Script sequencing tool that allows for more-than-rudimentary level prototyping without the need for a math degree. Usage: "Who needs a bunch of programmers to create this mod? Using Kismet, the level designer can just do it himself and jump in and out of the game to see if it works."

ENVY

Epic's code name for the next Unreal Tournament game

Normal mapping

n. Graphics process in which a low-poly model and a super-high-poly model are used to make an asset that looks like the higher one but runs like the lower one.

8

Teams, each with unique armor: Nakhti, Necris, Juggernauts, the Corrupt, Iron Guard, Krall, Jakob's team (actually the UT2K4 team, unnamed), and player's team (whom you play as in the single-player campaign, also unnamed)

11

Weapons: rocket launcher; flak cannon; redeemer; link gun; shock rifle; AVRIL; translocator; sniper rifle (complete with puff of smoke that occludes vision); dual enforcer pistols (replacing the assault rifle); "Tridium Stinger" (instead of the minigun); and a canister gun (tentative name), which houses a grenade launcher, mine layer, and goo gun

CODE NAME: CONQUEST

According to the Epic team, the biggest addition to the next Unreal Tournament is a game mode currently code-named conquest, in which two teams battle to take control of one another's bases. Considered onslaught mode's successor but bigger, conquest will take advantage of the Unreal Engine 3's ability to seamlessly stream maps by putting you in a battlefield the size of several maps stitched together. Players will battle on one of two teams, each of which holds a certain amount of territory at any given time—and each side's territory will actually look physically different, so as you take territory, it'll convert from, perhaps, the Necris' neogothic towers (check out the kick-ass concept art for this in the background) to another team's more lush surroundings.

As in onslaught, you'll vie for strategic objectives scattered around the maps—take out a bridge to cut off a supply route or capture a bunker to occupy the territory surrounding it, for example—but while you'll be able to make forays into the other team's territory, a limitation on how long you can be there without losing health will keep combat focused on the front lines. Conquest will also include a resource-

management aspect: Certain bunkers will house tridium resources that determine how quickly your team can build assets such as vehicles and turrets. But controlling the lion's share of the tridium doesn't automatically secure your team victory. The number of bunkers you control directly opposes the speed at which your resources regenerate, so the more bunkers you control, the slower your resources appear. It's a good way to ensure that a successful push on one team's part doesn't essentially end the game.

Conquest should look more like a progressive game than the limited-time deathmatches and CTF games populating many current Unreal servers. There may be the option to treat a conquest match like a long-term war, so you can play, take a break, and then go back and play more later. This should allow for improved strategic opportunities.

If things turn out how Epic described them to us (the mode exists only on paper right now), conquest should appeal to a wider gaming audience and provide a place where longer-term strategy, teamwork, and face-to-face fragging all meet.

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PUBLISHER: Activision
DEVELOPER: Activision
GENRE: Shooter **RELEASE DATE:** 1997

Interstate '76

In a time when every game publisher was trying to jam you into the cockpit of a plane or giant robot, *Interstate '76* was the only good PC game that strapped you into the driver's seat of tricked-out muscle cars with hood-mounted machine guns. It has you

tweaking salvaged weaponry and car parts between missions, but once you get behind the wheel, it's pure action. *I76* inspired more than one editor around here to upgrade to a "blazing" Pentium 90, because it was the first game that truly felt the funk. Imagine *The Road Warrior* as if it were shot for some '70s action TV show à la *Starsky & Hutch*. Then drive tricked-out wheels through the sand-blasted American deserts and blow the hell out of anything that gets in your way. *I76* oozes style in ways that most games don't ever attempt. All that, combined with a wholly original '70s funk soundtrack, makes this a classic.

No One Lives Forever

No One Lives Forever is like the dream version of a blind date: funny, good-looking, clever, and riotously fun. At a time when first-person shooters were virtually defined by dank and foreboding environments and tough-guy heroes, *NOLF* broke the mold with an eye-popping swingin' '60s setting; dialogue that, while occasionally corny, often elicited out-loud laughs ("Do not be apprehensive about this apprehension!"); and, in the sultry and whip-smart Cate Archer, a videogame heroine who actually did the tribe of two X chromosomes proud (take that, Lara). Yet for all its surface gimmicks, *NOLF* delivers solid gameplay, with missions that take real brainpower to crack and actually grow tougher as the game progresses. Take a break from turning monsters and zombies into Bolognese sauce and reinstall this one—it stands up to the test of time.



PUBLISHER: Fox Interactive
DEVELOPER: Monolith **GENRE:** FPS
RELEASE DATE: 2000

Hallof

AD&D "Gold Box" Games

Easing the painful transition from shut-in AD&D geek to shut-in AD&D computer geek, SSI's fantastic games set a standard for party-based *Dungeons & Dragons* gaming that resonates to this day. Composed of two sprawling franchises—*Forgotten Realms* (*Pool of Radiance*, *Curse of the Azure Bonds*, *Secret of the Silver Blades*, *Pools of Darkness*) and *Dragonlance* (*Champions of Krynn*, *Death Knights of Krynn*, *The Dark Queen of Krynn*)—and one minor misfire (the *Buck Rogers* games), these games tell enormous stories that spread across each installment. Combat in these games is incredible, a virtually nonstop squad-based tactical challenge of fantastic depth that would be evoked later in X-Com, *Icewind Dale*, and BioWare's brilliant *Baldur's Gate* series. It's a pedigree of influence that few other games enshrined in our Hall of Fame can match.



PUBLISHER: SSI **DEVELOPER:** SSI
GENRE: RPG
RELEASE DATE: 1988-1992



PUBLISHER: PopCap Games
DEVELOPER: PopCap Games
GENRE: Puzzle **RELEASE DATE:** 2001

Bejeweled

William S. Burroughs once said that "language is a virus from outer space." He might have revised that had he ever been exposed to *Bejeweled*, one of the most insidious games to ever infect the gaming populace. It would be easy

to dismiss *Bejeweled* as just another simple puzzle game, but fellow Hall of Famer *Tetris* is a simple puzzle game, and there's no denying its brilliance. What's amazing is that *Bejeweled* virtually came out of nowhere, a shareware game from a modest little online start-up peddling modest little games for a modest little price. The game became a viral, word-of-mouth obsessional hit, consuming both hardcore and casual gamers. Why? *Bejeweled* is elegant in its simplicity, and therein lies its particular genius—it simply distills everything that gamers love about games to its essence. Attractive? Not bad for a downloadable puzzler. Rewarding? It's tough to top the satisfaction of setting off a huge cascade of gem destruction. Addictive? Well, let's just say that had Burroughs known about it, *Naked Lunch* might have had a whole different substance controlling the lives of its characters.



Tim Schafer

Tim Schafer

Before this man came along, most graphic adventures were strictly business. Grab sword, go east, save princess. Lather. Rinse. Repeat. Not discounting the *Space Quest* and early *Leisure Suit Larry* games, but what Tim Schafer brought to this industry was a mature (or immature, depending on how you look at it) and often side-splittingly funny way to tell stories. Roberta Williams may have birthed the graphic adventure genre, but Schafer infused it with a whole lot of life. When you think of classic LucasArts

games, more often than not you're thinking of Tim Schafer's most beloved stuff: the hilarious *Maniac Mansion* sequel, *Day of the Tentacle*; *The Secret of Monkey Island*, which kick-started one of the most popular series in PC gaming history;

the roughhousingly good *Full Throttle*; and *Grim Fandango*, which many people regard as one of the last great "traditional" adventure games. Just take a good look at the bottom of this page—you'll notice that a bunch of Schafer's greatest works are already sitting pretty in our Hall of Fame. We say it's about damn time he joins them. And as he enters our hallowed halls, we continue to expect great things from his upcoming action-adventure, *Psychonauts*, which blends his unique storytelling style with action and platforming. Schafer still has loads of twisted thoughts and innovative game ideas after all these years. That alone proves that there are still plenty of virtual worlds to conquer—and ways to crack us up.

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Fame

THE CGW HALL OF FAME

PEOPLE

Dani Bunten Berry, Game Designer
Jon Van Caneghem, Game Designer
John Carmack, Programmer
Richard Garriott, Game Designer
Ron Gilbert, Programmer, Game Designer
Sid Meier, Game Designer
Roberta Williams, Game Designer
Will Wright, Game Designer

GAMES

Alone in the Dark (I-Motion, 1992)
Age of Empires (Microsoft, 1997)
Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn (Interplay, 2001)
The Bard's Tale (EA, 1985)
Battle Chess (Interplay, 1988)
Battleground series (TalonSoft, 1995–present)
Betrayal at Krondor (Dynamix, 1993)
Chessmaster (Software Toolworks, 1986)
Civilization (MicroProse, 1991)
Command & Conquer (Virgin/Westwood Studios, 1995)
Counter-Strike (Mod, 1999)
Crusader: No Remorse (Origin, 1995)
Dark Forces II: Jedi Knight (LucasArts, 1999)

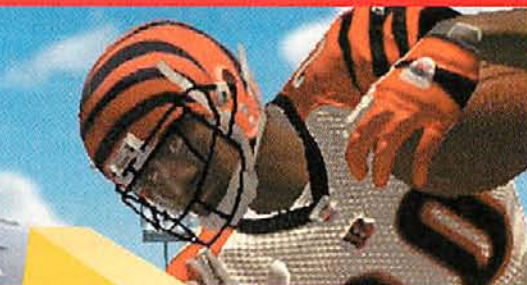
Day of the Tentacle (LucasArts, 1993)
Diablo (Blizzard, 1997)
Doom (Id Software, 1993)
Dungeon Master (FTL Software, 1987)
Earl Weaver Baseball (EA, 1986)
Empire (Interstel, 1978)
EverQuest (Sony Online, 1999)
F-19 Stealth Fighter (MicroProse, 1988)
Falcon 3.0 (Spectrum HoloByte, 1991)
Fallout (Interplay, 1997)
Front Page Sports: Football Pro (Dynamix, 1993)
Gabriel Knight 2: The Beast Within (Sierra, 1996)
Gettysburg: The Turning Point (SSI, 1986)
Grim Fandango (LucasArts, 1999)
Gunship (MicroProse, 1986)
Half-Life (Valve Software, 1999)
Harpoon (360 Pacific, 1989)
Heroes of Might and Magic II (New World Computing, 1997)
High Heat Baseball 2000 (3DO, 1999)
John Madden NFL Football series (Electronic Arts, 1988)
Kampfgruppe (SSI, 1985)

King's Quest V (Sierra On-Line, 1990)
Lemmings (Psynosis, 1991)
Links 386 Pro (Access Software, 1992)
M-1 Tank Platoon (MicroProse, 1989)
Master of Magic (MicroProse, 1994)
Master of Orion (MicroProse, 1993)
Medieval: Total War (Activision, 1987)
Mech Brigade (SSI, 1985)
MechWarrior 2 (Activision, 1995)
Might and Magic (New World Computing, 1986)
M.U.L.E. (EA, 1983)
Myth (Bungie, 1997)
Panzer General (SSI, 1994)
Planescape: Torment (Interplay, 1999)
Pirates! (MicroProse, 1987)
Quake (Id Software, 1996)
Railroad Tycoon (MicroProse, 1990)
Red Baron (Dynamix, 1990)
The Secret of Monkey Island (LucasArts, 1990)
SimCity (Maxis, 1987)
The Sims (Maxis, 2000)
StarCraft (Blizzard, 1998)
Starflight (EA, 1986)
System Shock 2 (Electronic Arts, 1999)

Tetris (Spectrum HoloByte, 1988)
Their Finest Hour (LucasArts, 1989)
TIE Fighter (LucasArts, 1994)
Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six (Red Storm Entertainment)
Tomb Raider (Eidos, 1996)
Ultima III (Origin Systems, 1983)
Ultima IV (Origin Systems, 1985)
Ultima VI (Origin Systems, 1990)
Ultima Underworld (Origin Systems, 1992)
Unreal Tournament (Epic Games, 1999)
War in Russia (SSI, 1984)
WarCraft II (Blizzard, 1996)
Wasteland (Interplay, 1986)
Wing Commander (Origin Systems, 1990)
Wing Commander II (Origin Systems, 1991)
Wing Commander III (Origin Systems, 1994)
Wizardry (Sir-Tech, 1981)
Wolfenstein 3D (Id Software, 1992)
X-Com (MicroProse, 1994)
You Don't Know Jack (Berkeley Systems, 1996)
Zork (Infocom, 1981)

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Reviews

Four chords and the truth

Whip-wielding half-man, half-gorilla monstrosities. Yep, it must be a secret underground Nazi lab.



PUBLISHER: Sierra DEVELOPER: Irrational Games GENRE: RPG ESRB RATING: T REQUIRED: Pentium III 733MHz, 128MB RAM, 700MB install, 64MB videocard RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 1.8GHz, 256MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Internet, LAN (2-4 players)

Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich

Once more...for freedom!



Has Time Master switched sides to fight alongside our heroes!?



So that's what happened to all the Checker cabs.



Star Wars Republic Commando
You're a clone... without a heart of your own.

90



The Sims 2: University
Bob Newbie Jr. goes to college.

92



NASCAR SimRacing
Tune it up, gas it up, and start turning left.

93

Batter up!



Duke it out in the rumble room and you can recruit villains like Rising Sun to fight with you.



This game is almost impossible to resist. If you love comics, then you will love this game. If you love great, stylish game-play, then you will love it. If you love to laugh, if you love a good story, or if you just love to have a really good time, then you will love it. Like a great movie, *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich* is the rare product that leaves you glowing with delight long after you've finished it. Twice.

DIABLOLISTO!

You needn't have played the first game in order to enjoy this continuation of the series—indeed, as with any great comic book, you can jump in right here. (And, as with any great comic book, you'll probably find yourself wanting to buy the "back issues" to satisfy your hunger for more.)

3rd Reich retains the original characters and early Silver Age time frame, putting you in charge of a team of superheroes, each with his own unique abilities and personality. As the game begins, it seems that the protectors of Patriot City are all too efficient at their job...so efficient that the team has all but disbanded. The call to regroup goes out when the Freedom Force is alerted by the deputy director of the CIA that the body of Time Master—their original archene-



Why is it that the giant floating tentacle eyeballs always fight for evil?

my—has been stolen. The few remaining members jet off to missile-crisis-era Cuba to recover Time Master from another returning foe: Nuclear Winter.

PEACHES AND CREAM!

But *3rd Reich* isn't a simple rehash of the first game, and you'll realize that as soon as the Cuba missions begin. The first thing you'll notice is the huge graphical upgrade; while the game retains its color-drenched comic-book style, the game world is so much more intricate and vibrant this time around. Character and object shadows inject a greater sense of life into the environments, animated neon signs blaze at night from atop skyscrapers, and object textures are much more detailed, as evidenced in the weathered buildings and sun-blasted landscape of Cuba.

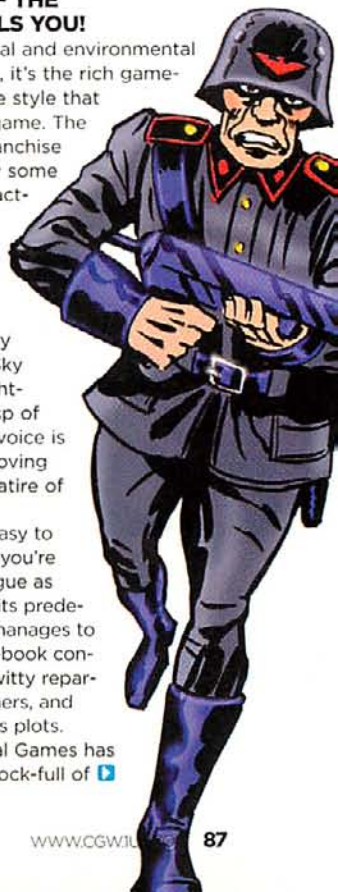
The world is also much more interactive. While superstrong heroes such as Minuteman and Super Collider can still hurl cars at their foes or wrench lampposts from the ground to smack evil minions, the environments are packed with many more items and structures—which means even more deeply satisfying collateral damage. The beefed-up game engine can now animate countless pieces of fruit spilling from a clobbered cart, as well as partially collapse a building to reveal interior wreckage. There are fences to tear from the ground, trees to

uproot, chunks of fractured statues to sling, and more. In no other game do you have such a sense that the levels exist purely as playgrounds for your enjoyment.

THE POWER OF THE GRAVE COMPELS YOU!

As nice as graphical and environmental enhancements are, it's the rich game-play and incredible style that really power this game. The *Freedom Force* franchise continues to enjoy some of the best voice acting in PC gaming. From the throaty stentorian proclamations of Minuteman, to the "aw-shucks" Jimmy Stewart drawl of Sky King, to the straight-from-the-crypt rasp of Tombstone every voice is simultaneously a loving tribute and a sly satire of comic archetypes.

Then again, it's easy to sound good when you're blessed with dialogue as sharp as this. Like its predecessor, *3rd Reich* manages to poke fun at comic-book conventions through witty repartee, snappy one-liners, and wildly preposterous plots. Somehow Irrational Games has crafted a game chock-full of



It's easy to sound good when you're blessed with dialogue as sharp as this.



■ Microwave is still superslow, but his radiation powers are incredibly effective.



■ Minuteman rallies the troops.

Laugh-out-loud moments, while still telling a classic story that sends the Freedom Force back in time to battle Nazis alongside Golden Age-style gadgeteering heroes such as the fearless swordswoman Tricolour and the jetpacking Sky King. Each of the new heroes has a great origin story, told in cut-scenes that play out as lightly animated comic panels. And just when you think the story is winding down, an incredible twist sends the narrative spiraling dramatically in another direction. It's a great comic conceit, and it's executed perfectly.

RINGS OF REXOR!

The nuts and bolts of the game are executed just as well. Each character's powers are beautifully balanced, making each and every team member (even that annoying Sea Urchin) both viable and vital as they level up, gaining new abilities and improving upon existing ones. *3rd Reich* also features a revamped interface, which helps you make the best use of

your team members by clueing you in on your enemies' strengths and weaknesses and which attacks might be most effective in thwarting them.

Or you could just practice: The new "rumble room" feature lets you pit a team of heroes and/or villains against waves of attackers or against a set group of enemies.

YOUR EVIL IS UNWANTED HERE!

But just as Superman has his kryptonite, *3rd Reich* is not without some weaknesses. Pathfinding can be faulty at times, trapping a hero behind an open door—a door he should, in theory, be able to tear from its hinges. While the camera control is pretty good, the action is so beautifully realized that it would've been nice to get in closer and angle the camera up once in a while, if only to bask in the view.

The villains are, as expected, brilliantly imagined...but they have no origin movies.

How Two-Face became Two-Face is a huge part of that character, and the lack of similar background on the villains is a regrettable omission and a missed opportunity (though it should be noted that one particular villain's genesis is detailed, since it's an important plot point). Finally, at the Normal difficulty setting, it's fairly easy to blow through the game in a rather short period of time.

Then again, it just might have felt short. *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich* is so outstanding you never want it to end. I'm hoping that the great—and totally appropriate—cliff-hanger ending means more adventures to come. As with any great comic, I can't wait for the next issue.

✎ Robert Coffey

Verdict ★★★★★

Once again, *Freedom Force* is a triumph.

Just when you think the story is winding down, an incredible twist sends the narrative spiraling dramatically in another direction.

MARVELOUS TEAM-UP

One of the few shortcomings of the original game was its lack of multiplayer. Not this time out: *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich* is packed with multiplayer options for two to four armchair superheroes. Game modes include the expected deathmatch and team deathmatch, but it's the other modes that really make multiplayer interesting. Arena/team arena mode puts players through five deathmatch rounds, with a point going to the last man standing; whoever has the most points at the end of five rounds wins. Massacre/team massacre is a timed mode; points are scored by KO'ing opponents or lost by having your heroes KO'd. Knockouts are also scored in leader mode, where a point is garnered for every KO'd opponent, and 10 points are awarded for every designated "leader" hero you cream. In destruction mode, one team defends an object while another tries to destroy it. Finally, tag mode lets you swap heroes in and out, again racking up points with knockouts. Just one caveat: There's no Pause function in multiplayer, so you might want to practice your marathon battling skills in the rumble room before you go online.



Rewind 100

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

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Alida	Holiday 04	★★★★★
Alexander	03/05	★★★★★
Alpha Black Zero: Intrepid Protocol	12/04	★★★★★
Scrapland	Holiday 04	★★★★★
Arena Wars	Holiday 04	★★★★★
Armies of Exigo	03/05	★★★★★
Aura: Fate of the Ages	10/04	★★★★★
AxIs & Allies	01/05	★★★★★
Besieger	09/04	★★★★★
Beyond Divinity	08/04	★★★★★
Call of Duty: United Offensive	12/04	★★★★★
Campaigns on the Danube	12/04	★★★★★
Catwoman	11/04	★★★★★
Chaos Legion	08/04	★★★★★
Chris Sawyer's Locomotion	Holiday 04	★★★★★
The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay—Developer's Cut	03/05	★★★★★
City of Heroes	08/04	★★★★★
Codename: Panzers	11/04	★★★★★
Conflict: Vietnam	01/05	★★★★★
Conspiracies	05/04	★★★★★
Crusader Kings	08/04	★★★★★
Crystal Key 2	08/04	★★★★★
CSI: Crime Scene Invest.	08/04	★★★★★
Dark Fall II: Lights Out	Holiday 04	★★★★★
D-Day	01/05	★★★★★
Dead Man's Hand	08/04	★★★★★
Dead to Rights	04/04	★★★★★
Decisive Battles of World War II: Battles in Normandy	01/05	★★★★★
Doom 3	10/04	★★★★★
Evil Genius	12/04	★★★★★
Far Cry	06/04	★★★★★



Alexander

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
FIFA Soccer 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★★
FireStarter	06/04	★★★★★
Full Spectrum Warrior	Holiday 04	★★★★★
Galactic Civilizations: Altarian Prophecy	12/04	★★★★★
Gangland	06/04	★★★★★
Ground Control II: Operation Exodus	10/04	★★★★★
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	11/04	★★★★★
Hitman: Contracts	08/04	★★★★★
Horizons: Empire of Istar	05/04	★★★★★
Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile	01/05	★★★★★
Jack the Ripper	05/04	★★★★★
Joint Operations: Typhoon Rising	09/04	★★★★★
Kohan II: Kings of War	12/04	★★★★★
KumaWar	09/04	★★★★★
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude	Holiday 04	★★★★★
Lineage II: The Chaotic Chronicle	08/04	★★★★★
Madden NFL 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★★
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault	01/05	★★★★★
Men of Honor	01/05	★★★★★
Missing: Since January	10/04	★★★★★
Myst IV: Revelation	Holiday 04	★★★★★
NBA Live 2005	03/05	★★★★★
NHL 2005	01/05	★★★★★
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager	03/05	★★★★★
Perimeter	09/04	★★★★★
Pitfall: The Lost Expedition	01/05	★★★★★
The Political Machine	11/04	★★★★★
Port Royale 2	12/04	★★★★★
Prince of Persia: Warrior Within	03/05	★★★★★



NHL 2005

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Rome: Total War	Holiday 04	★★★★★
The Saga of Ryzom	01/05	★★★★★
Secret of the Silver Earring	01/05	★★★★★
Shadow Ops: Red Mercury	Holiday 04	★★★★★
Shadowbane: Rise of Chaos	04/04	★★★★★
ShellShock: Nam '67	09/04	★★★★★
Shrek 2	09/04	★★★★★
Silent Hill 4: The Room	01/05	★★★★★
The Sims 2	11/04	★★★★★
Singles: Flirt Up Your Life	09/04	★★★★★
Soldiers: Heroes of WWII	11/04	★★★★★
Soldner: Secret Wars	10/04	★★★★★
Spider-Man 2	11/04	★★★★★
Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow	06/04	★★★★★
Star Chamber	05/04	★★★★★
Star Wars Battlefront	Holiday 04	★★★★★
The Suffering	10/04	★★★★★
Thief: Deadly Shadows	09/04	★★★★★
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★★
TrackMania	10/04	★★★★★
Tribes: Vengeance	Holiday 04	★★★★★
True Crime: Streets of L.A.	09/04	★★★★★
Universal Combat	10/04	★★★★★
Unreal Tournament 2004	06/04	★★★★★
Virtual Skipper 3	10/04	★★★★★
Wanted: A Wild Adventure	Holiday 04	★★★★★
War in the Pacific	11/04	★★★★★
War Over Vietnam	Holiday 04	★★★★★
War Times	08/04	★★★★★
Warlords Battlecry III	08/04	★★★★★
World Soccer Winning Eleven 7 International	10/04	★★★★★



The Saga of Ryzom



PUBLISHER: LucasArts **DEVELOPER:** LucasArts **GENRE:** SHOOTER **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 2GB install **RECOMMENDED:** Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, 2.2GB install **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, LAN (2-16 players)

Star Wars Republic Commando

Tom Clancy's Clone Wars

Between generally respectable recent titles such as *Knights of the Old Republic II*, *Battlefront*, and the *Jump to Lightspeed* expansion for *Galaxies*, the *Star Wars* license has been rejuvenated across a wide variety of genres. *Republic Commando* continues this trend by successfully combining the inherent goofiness of *Star Wars* and the hard edge of a tactical, squad-based shooter.

Well, sort of. "Tactical" might be too strong a word. Though you do control a four-man squad of elite commandos, the action has more in common with recent highly scripted shooters like the *Medal of Honor* series. The game's focus is clearly more on fast-paced combat than the skulking deliberateness of a true tactical shooter. Which is fine, since the action is constant and satisfying, with some robust squad control options that add a little brainwork to the nonstop blasting.

ATTACK OF THE CLONES

The game takes place sometime during the Clone Wars, for those of you who don't follow the goings-on in that galaxy far, far away. This also means it occurs during the same period as the most recent two movies that ruined everybody's childhood and the upcoming film that nobody's gonna like either. Luckily, most of the crappy parts of the universe are ignored, and you'll see the occasional R2 unit and a few of those wheeled black lunchbox droids just to remind you that it's still *Star Wars*. But for the most part, the game focuses on the two things to survive George Lucas' every misstep more or less intact: Wookiees and Boba Fett.

You play as "35," the leader of a four-



Close-in fighting with a Geonosian warrior.

man commando squad—the *Star Wars* equivalent of an elite Special Forces unit. Technically, you're all clones underneath your Boba Fett armor, though oddly, each member of the squad has a distinct personality and a wildly unique accent. Each also has his own specialty: There's a sniper, a hacker, and an all-around gung-ho demolitions expert who sounds a whole lot like *Seinfeld*'s Puddy.

Left to their own devices, your squad members act intelligently; they'll press

forward, take cover, and attempt to kill whatever gets in the way without becoming a nuisance. You can give simple orders to the entire squad, such as "Fire on my target," "Form up," "Search and destroy," and "Secure area." Scattered throughout the levels are maneuver points, preset positions where certain actions—such as sniping, tossing a grenade, healing at a bacta station, or simply setting a detonation charge and blowing the snot out of something—can be initiated. Though it's not as flexible as being able to order your men to set up positions arbitrarily, given the often furious pacing of the combat and the ease of the interface (just point your reticule at the position and press the Action key), it works well in context. Within a given combat area, there are usually enough maneuver points to force you to think at least a little bit about how you'll want to utilize them.

SCUM AND VILLAINY

The action (a roughly 12-hour trek through 17 levels spread across three distinct missions) is, generally speaking, a linear corridor crawl punctuated by frequent stops for combat. Enemies are a mix of droids, Geonosian bug people, lizardlike Trandoshan slavers, and a few surprises. What they lack in A.I., they make up for in numbers. For instance, droids often stream out of spawners; these must be destroyed to staunch the endless flow of robots, which leads to plenty of tense moments as you're forced to protect whomever is setting the demo charge while simultaneously fighting off enemies coming from various other directions. It's hectic, but the game consistently stays on the good side of the fine line between challenge and frustration.

Republic Commando's visuals are powered by the Unreal Engine, and while it's no *Far Cry* or *Half-Life 2*, it's not bad looking. The character models are a little chunky, but they're well animated, including some



Everyone looks cool when they're wearing Boba Fett helmet.

For the most part, the game focuses on the two things to survive George Lucas' every misstep more or less intact: Wookieses and Boba Fett.

very cool deaths. The level architecture is less successful—for every notable sight, there are at least three nondescript caves...or that *Star Wars* staple, the featureless gray corridor.

Still, given the intensity of the combat, you won't have a lot of time to brood over the sometimes monotonous environments. Somebody deserves credit for making a gritty, Jedi-free *Star Wars* game without any fruity Force powers or lightsabers. **Erik Wolpaw**

Verdict ★★★★★

A unique, intense *Star Wars* shooter—without Jedi!



Lightsabers are for fancy-lads. Now a shotgun—that's a man's weapon.

THE FORCE IS WEAK WITH THIS ONE

Republic Commando's multiplayer doesn't live up to the single-player experience. It's a bare-bones affair that features deathmatch and two variations of capture the flag for up to 16 players. Without squad-based mechanics and interesting little interface novelties like the maneuver points, there's not much that will keep anyone's attention for very long. And even though we were bad-mouthing fruity Jedi Force powers up above, the arsenal of standard weapons could stand to have a little more variety.



PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts **DEVELOPER:** Maxis **GENRE:** Strategy **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 800MHz, 256MB RAM, 1GB install, *The Sims 2*
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** None

The Sims 2: University

Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor?

Fans of the *Sims* games might be the world's largest cult. Despite the franchise's incredible popularity, it is still something that many people—hardcore gamers in particular—just don't get. "A game where I have to get a job and go to the bathroom? Fun!" Me, I haven't totally swallowed the *Sims* Kool-Aid, but I still admire the games tremendously for their humor and creative energy. *The Sims 2: University* is the first of what will no doubt be a gazillion expansion packs, and the bottom line here is the same as it ever was: If you love *The Sims 2*, you'll be happy. But if you still don't get what this is all about, the expansion will not change your mind.

ASSUME THE POSITION

The core of this expansion is in the title: You now can send your teenage Sims to college, where, like all college kids, they will learn the fine art of doing as little as possible while still getting by. The college game is a self-contained one, like an extended minigame. You either create a college-age Sim or take one of your existing teenage Sims and enroll him in one of three universities. All the subsequent gameplay then takes place in the new college living areas (dorms, private homes, or Greek houses if you can get in) and surrounding campus neighborhoods until you either graduate or get expelled. Then the Sim moves back to the regular *Sims 2* neighborhood.

At root, it's not very different from the main game. You spend almost all of your time at home, working on your wants and needs, vanishing for part of the day to go to class instead of your job. Each "semester" lasts three days, after which there is a final exam. If you want to succeed, you'll have to spend a lot of time completing assignments, writing your term paper, and doing research. The more you do, the better your GPA will be, and the more scholarship money you'll be rewarded. Successfully graduating opens up four new careers for that Sim—paranormal, show business, artist, and natural scientist—that you can pursue back in the main game.

DOUBLE SECRET PROBATION

As in real life, you can just goof off instead, but here the expansion is something of a letdown. If my actual college experience had been this G-rated,



🔗 [Here's what I majored in at UC Berkeley.](#)



⬆ Insert level treadmill joke here.

If my actual college experience had been this G-rated, I wouldn't have bothered taking seven years to graduate.

I wouldn't have bothered taking seven years to graduate. There are "pranks," but they are toothless ("joy buzzers?"), as are the opportunities to destroy your life and/or brain. I know *Maxis* needs to keep *The Sims* safe for a mass audience, but more depravity and irresponsibility would have gone a long way.

Still, there are many pleasures (like trying to sleep with a professor) to be had. I never did successfully get into a frat, but that's about par for the course for me anyway. You can now "influence" other Sims to do things for you, though I never really got why I should care about that. The new objects, which also show up in the main game, are lots of fun—I spent tons of time playing the bass, hustling

pool, and dancing to my MP3 player. As usual, the accompanying animations for these new objects are awesome. This is the only game I know of where zooming in and sitting back and watching is just as entertaining as actually playing.

The Sims 2: University preaches to the converted. Fans should go ahead and get it. There's nothing transcendently brilliant here, but there's enough new stuff to keep you happy. Everyone else, you can keep scratching your heads.

 Jeff Green

Verdict ★★★★★

More yummy *Sims* Kool-Aid for cult members.

PUBLISHER: EA Sports **DEVELOPER:** EA Tiburon **GENRE:** Racing/Sports **ESRB RATING:** E **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 3GB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2GHz, 128MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** Internet, LAN (2-44 players)

NASCAR SimRacing

Roll over and tell Papyrus the news

NASCAR *SimRacing* is the best-looking, most realistic, most in-depth NASCAR game on the market today. Aside from the put-you-into-the-wall graphics, realistic sound, and authentic driving feel, the game gives you real-world drivers, sponsors, and race teams—it's authentic right down to the decals on your left fender. If you hear "Papyrus" and think stock cars instead of Egyptians, get happy.

MOONSHINE SONATA

Among *NSR*'s strong suits is its huge variety of options and tweaks. You get multiple driving realism settings, allowing for everything from hypertwitchy deathtraps to invulnerable bumper cars. While this affords even neophytes a chance to enjoy the game, it's time to face facts: The dudes who are going to lay cash on the barrelhead for this one are into hardcore racing—which is where *NSR* really shines.

Boasting one of the most comprehensive garage modes ever, *NSR* even sports its very own integrated telemetry suite. Want to see how many shifts you made with that new gear set? Want to compare engine temperatures from lap to lap at Martinsville? It's all here: the virtual keys to the teeny-weensy pearly gates of micromanagement heaven. And it's not just about the guys in hard hats. The career mode includes some natty "owner" elements that allow you to invest your team's winnings (or proceeds from sponsorships) into improvements for your car or even into merchandising. Of course, the owner feature ain't exactly *Capitalism* in its complexity (win races and people buy your stuff; lose and they don't), but it's nice to see the designers trying to add some twists among all those left turns.

DROP THE HAMMER

While you'll need a pretty powerful graphics card to see *NSR*'s Castrol-slick graphics at their best (make sure you turn on hardware antialiasing), I'd be remiss if I didn't single them out. Drive from one side of the track to the other and watch the shadows move across the cockpit. Or, if two speed demons get a little over-



Real-life sponsors, real-life-quality graphics—thank goodness you can't actually feel the crashes.

friendly, hoods and tires could very well come flying right into your windshield. In a sport where you're likely to see a lot of the same stuff go round and round, *NSR*'s graphics are detailed and gorgeous enough to keep you mesmerized.

Still, the game has its flaws, the annoying load times between races first among them. It's one thing to have to wait between venues, but sitting for half a minute between qualifying and racing at the same damn track can really get your goat. And loading the telemetry suite sometimes caused me to crash—into my desktop. Also problematic is the fact that the game gives you essentially the same level of guidance for the garage mode as the old man from *Zelda* gave you for defeating a dodongo. It's neat to have so many tools to choose from, but *NSR* could benefit from some integrated tips (or at least a tutorial) on how to make use of them.

Even considering the drawbacks, though, it's a no-brainer that *NSR* is the best stock-car racing game on the market. The checkered flag goes to EA Sports...again. **Eric Neigher**

Verdict ★★★★★

EA Sports continues its tradition of dominance with this fine offering.



Eye candy extraordinaire: Note the cars of the leaders way ahead, as well as the weather's effect on the lighting in the rearview mirror.



NSR's level of detail in both its graphics and physics engine is really impressive: Roof flaps come up during a spin to prevent your car from flipping over.



It's all here: the virtual keys to the teeny-weensy pearly gates of micromanagement heaven.

PUBLISHER: Guild Software **DEVELOPER:** Guild Software **GENRE:** MMO **ESRB RATING:** T **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 200MB install
RECOMMENDED: 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard **MULTIPLAYER:** MMO

Vendetta Online

At least no one can hear you scream

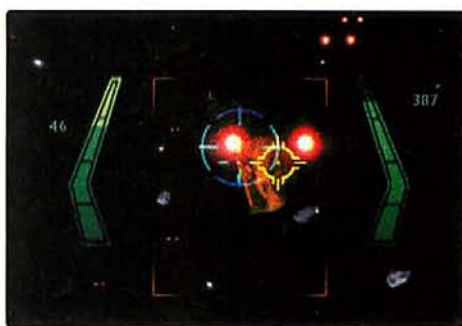
You get to fly a variety of spaceships in a persistent universe, explore the galaxy, and find fame and fortune through mining, trading, piracy, and bounty hunting. It sounds like *Freelancer*, but this game's online, it has some RPG elements, and there's a monthly subscription fee.

Vendetta Online is the first space-based action-MMORPG, and it stands out from other MMO games by having combat that's completely "twitch" (unlike *Earth & Beyond's* turn-based space combat). Instead of character sheets and dice,

your performance in battle depends on your skills as a pilot. The leveling treadmill is slow and unrewarding. Instead of improving your abilities, leveling up simply gives you "certificates" that allow you to purchase better equipment.

Vendetta's execution lacks truly engaging elements. Missions are pretty dull and are often of the FedEx variety. You'll waste much of your time just flying from system to system. Combat against bots is monotonous, proving challenging only if you are attacked in great numbers.

In *Vendetta*, traveling through space is a pretty lonely and solitary experience—there's very little player interaction beyond the occasional duel. The teamwork that makes so many multiplayer games engaging is largely absent. With so little to make it stand out, playing



This is as exciting as it gets in *Vendetta*.

through *Vendetta* is like eating a thin gruel: bland, but not revolting. **Di Luo**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

A lot like *Freelancer*, only boring and with a monthly fee.

PUBLISHER: Fogstone Games **DEVELOPER:** Fogstone Games **GENRE:** Strategy **ESRB RATING:** None **REQUIRED:** Pentium III 600MHz, 128MB RAM, 44MB install **RECOMMENDED:** None **MULTIPLAYER:** None

Lost Admiral Returns

Return of the good old days

Back in the days when 386 computers were state of the art, Thurston Searfoss and QQP made a living on simple strategy/war games that played like a cross between chess and *Stratego*. Though titles like *Lost Admiral* and *Conquered Kingdoms* lacked flash, they offered rich gameplay and a lot of replayability. It's been 14 years since *Lost Admiral*, and Searfoss is back with a sequel.

LAR plays almost exactly like its predecessors. All the maps are archipelagos dotted with cities; control of these cities provides resources and facilities to buy reinforcements as well as victory points. Before the mission begins, you get a predetermined number of points to purchase your fleet with. There are only eight different units in the game, ranging from aircraft carriers to PT boats. Smaller ships excel at screening and raiding, while capital ships provide firepower. Once your ships enter the same square as an enemy unit, combat occurs.

Battles are completely predictable and use neither dice nor luck—unit capabilities have a distinct "rock, paper, scissors" quality, with each unit designed to counter a certain ship.

A destroyer will always kill a submerged sub but remains useless against battleships. Transports are necessary for city conquest but have little combat ability. The aircraft carrier is vulnerable but adds firepower to nearby ships through air support and also provides extended scouting range.

Without the luck factor, your success is wholly dependent on your tactical acumen and the wisdom of your unit selection. Though sometimes predictable, the enemy A.I. can be quite challenging at higher levels: It's very methodical, rarely makes mistakes, and will aggressively exploit your weaknesses, even making daring raids behind your lines.

LAR also boasts a few improvements over its predecessors. You can now perform missions (such as reconnaissance or escort duty) to liven up the usual "conquer the world" scenarios. There is also a role-playing element: Your officer profile earns perk points you can use to purchase flagship units with special abilities. With a campaign, a dozen maps, and a random map generator, you get plenty of gameplay for your money.

Unfortunately, *LAR's* presentation is



The initial setup displays and interface are confusing and cluttered.

subpar. The interface is unintuitive and clunky and lacks an Undo button to rectify mistakes. The ugly graphics are forgivable, but the displays are overly cluttered, and navigating the map can be difficult.

Still, *LAR* is a pretty good choice for strategy gamers looking for deep gameplay without a lot of unnecessary fluff. *LAR* is only available for purchase at www.fogstonegames.com, where you may obtain a free month-long trial. **Di Luo**

Verdict ★★★★★

A deep strategy game with charmingly simple mechanics.



IN THE MATRIX YOU NEED
EVERYTHING TO SURVIVE

The Matrix Online – There's really only one way to
GET IN THE GAME, that's with the world's fastest,
most powerful HD 3D graphics experience –
ATI's RADEON®. Find out more at ati.com.

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Tech

Like you've got better things to spend your money on



MANUFACTURER: CyberPower
PRODUCT: Gamer Ultra SLI Pro **PRICE:** \$3,260

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RACHEL + RACHEL



Enzo Ferrari
Always crashing in the same car.



Allenware Laptop
It's not actually come from outer space, but its performance is out of this world.



BFGTech 6800 Ultra OC PCI Express
Double your pleasure, double your fun, double the cost.

BADA BING!

CyberPower Gamer Ultra SLI Pro



CyberPower jumps right smack in the middle of the NForce4 SLI arena with its new Gamer Ultra SLI Pro. This rig offers the right combination of performance and price for gamers looking to increase their frag counts while making their hard-earned dollars go a long way toward a built-for-speed system primed for years of high-quality gaming.

Compared to VoodooPC's Rage SLI UGM-winning system, the Gamer Ultra SLI Pro packs a similar punch—but for \$800 less. Both rigs share a number of high-performance components such as the AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 CPU with HyperTransport technology and the Asus NForce4 SLI MCP PCI Express-based A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard for top-notch computing power. CyberPower's rig also mimics the Rage SLI with a pair of Western Digital Raptor 10,000 rpm HDDs in RAID 0 but ups the ante by adding a Maxtor 250GB SATA hard drive for file backup and more file management. Just as in the Rage SLI, matching this superior set of components leads to ultrafast gaming, as evidenced in our 3D GameGauge and real-world benchmark testing.

For the most part, the Gamer Ultra SLI Pro ripped through *Doom 3* and *Halo* at more than 100 frames per second while using the standard 3DGG 1280x1024 2x AA and 4x AF test parameters. With a pair of EVGA's GeForce 6800 Ultra PCI Express videocards and a full gig of Geil's DDR PC3200 RAM clocked at 400MHz, this rig barely broke a sweat when running through ExtremeTech's *Half-Life 2* benchmark with everything maxed. The system also uses the Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe onboard eight-channel audio instead of the high-end standard Creative Audigy 2 card, but the ALC850 codec easily played various games, music, and DVD media like Shostakovich's Piano Concerto No. 2 with exceptional clarity and soundstage presence.

The Gamer Ultra SLI Pro's only blemish revolves around the Aspire X-Navigator server case, which uses poorly designed and breakable swappable faceplates, along with a rather noisy (78 decibels) enclosure. Compare this to the Rage SLI's higher quality brushed aluminum chassis, and you can see why spending the extra money for good looks can pay dividends. However, the case



Ah, *Doom 3* how scary you are when powered by a fire-breathing SLI system.

does have an LED thermal temperature display, three extra LED fans, cold cathode ray tube, and fan-control dial for notable enhancements in both functionality and modlike aesthetics. Fortunately, buyers have a number of alternative case choices when purchasing the Gamer Ultra SLI Pro. And gone is the messy wiring scheme found in CyberPower's UGM Titanium entry.

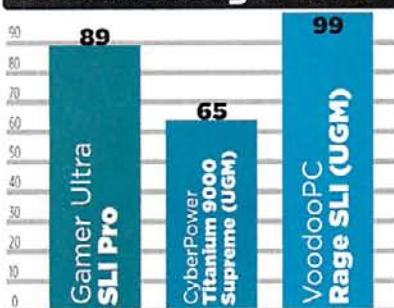
The Gamer Ultra SLI Pro employs a couple of optical-drive solutions, including Samsung's dual-layer DVD-ROM drive for cranking out *Half-Life 2* or burning your favorite music to DVDs. Add CyberPower's one-year on-site tech support warranty just in case the system goes down, and you have a high-end gaming machine you can afford to keep for a long time. If you crave NForce4 with SLI horsepower for improved *Half-Life 2*, *Pirates!*, or *Rome: Total War* gaming performance, then the Gamer Ultra SLI Pro's priced-to-move value is difficult to pass up. But unless you covet the X-Navigator's swappable faceplates, you're better off choosing a better case for your system.

by Raphael Liberatore

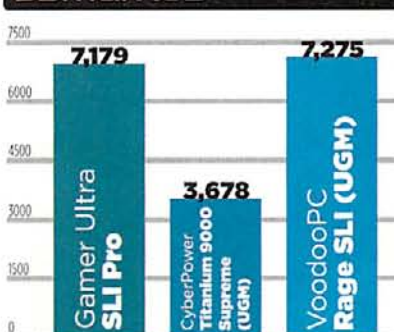
SCORE: ★★★★★

The Ultra SLI Pro's superior set of components leads to superfast gaming.

3D GameGauge Lite 1.0



3Dmark05



ALL TESTS RUN WITH 2X AA (ANTIALIASING) AND 4X AF (ANISOTROPIC FILTERING) TURNED ON UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED

MANUFACTURER: Thrustmaster
PRODUCT: Enzo Ferrari Force Feedback Wheel PRICE: \$80

YUGO RACING

You wouldn't find this in a real Ferrari

Thrustmaster has tried hard to reproduce the world-famous Enzo Ferrari steering wheel for PC racers. Aesthetically, it has succeeded at creating a model worthy of the Ferrari tradition. However, once you're behind the wheel, the experience feels more like it's from a kit car than a sports car costing more than a half a million bucks.

Any racing-sim enthusiast will tell you a wheel's clamping system and pedals make all the difference, especially when driving the intense Daytona 500 in a Papyrus NASCAR sim. The Enzo Ferrari's clamping system is well made—it keeps the steering wheel secure to the bench even when you're whipping around hairpin turns. The same cannot

be said of the ultra-small Mini Cooper-quality pedal setup. Undersized and lightweight, the pedal platform constantly slips during aggressive racing, while the pedal's spring mechanism feels rigid and lacks pedal flow.

Thrustmaster's force-feedback implementation proved smooth and responsive during a tour on the NASCAR circuit. But after moving from the track to the street in *Need for Speed Underground*, the force-feedback effects became jerky and overbearing even after recalibrating the wheel, a process that proved problematic. During force-feedback driver calibration, both the gas pedal and button accelerator fought for control, even-

tually crashing the system numerous times.

Disabling force feedback altogether fixed the problem.

The Enzo Ferrari's layout offers loads of buttons for a customized racing experience. With an eight-way D-pad, nine action buttons, gas and brake controls, and a pair of wheel-mounted gearshift levers, you won't have to peck at your keyboard during the race. At \$80, this wheel is priced to move—but that doesn't mean you should be moving it to your PC. **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★☆☆☆

Undersized and lightweight, the pedal platform constantly slips during aggressive racing.

MANUFACTURER: EDimensional PRODUCT: AudioFX headphones PRICE: \$50

NOW WITH HEAD MASSAGE!

AudioFX headphones

Historically speaking, I've had only a few simple requirements for gaming headphones: high-fidelity sound, sturdy design, and please, God, don't let me look like a complete idiot when I strap them on. Enter EDimensional's attempt at gaming gear.

The AudioFX is a solid pair of stereo headphones that warrants attention based solely on one gimmick: deep, meaty bass coupled with back-breaking, booty-shaking vibrations that practically make the headphones jump off your head.

Flicking the toggle on the wired remote kicks the force feedback into action, and mercifully, it isn't too obnoxious. The bass response is solid and appropriate enough for all of *Half-Life 2*'s explosions and *World of Warcraft*'s majestic orchestral pieces. Keen ears will quickly notice, though, that all this emphasis on the bass reproduction and head-bangin'

leaves you with slightly flat highs and hollow mids. Voices get lost over the roar of just about every deep sound. It didn't help that I heard a little crackling between audio tracks when I plugged the headphones directly into a Creative Audigy 2.

More disturbing (and maybe this is just me being shallow) are the lame blinking lights on the sides of the ear cups. That's right, tiny flashing lights blinking on your head are supposed to signify "Busy playing games. Do not disturb!" It just makes you feel like a nerd who desperately aspires to be a Deception.

Designwise, though, other companies could learn at least one thing from EDimensional: AudioFX scores high for comfort. The padded cups sat on my dome for hours during tests and were totally unobtrusive. Points also go to the noise-canceling microphone that worked exactly as advertised. If only the rest of it did the same.

Darren Gladstone

SCORE: ★★★★★

MANUFACTURER: Alienware PRODUCT: Area-51m 7700 Notebook PRICE: \$3,481

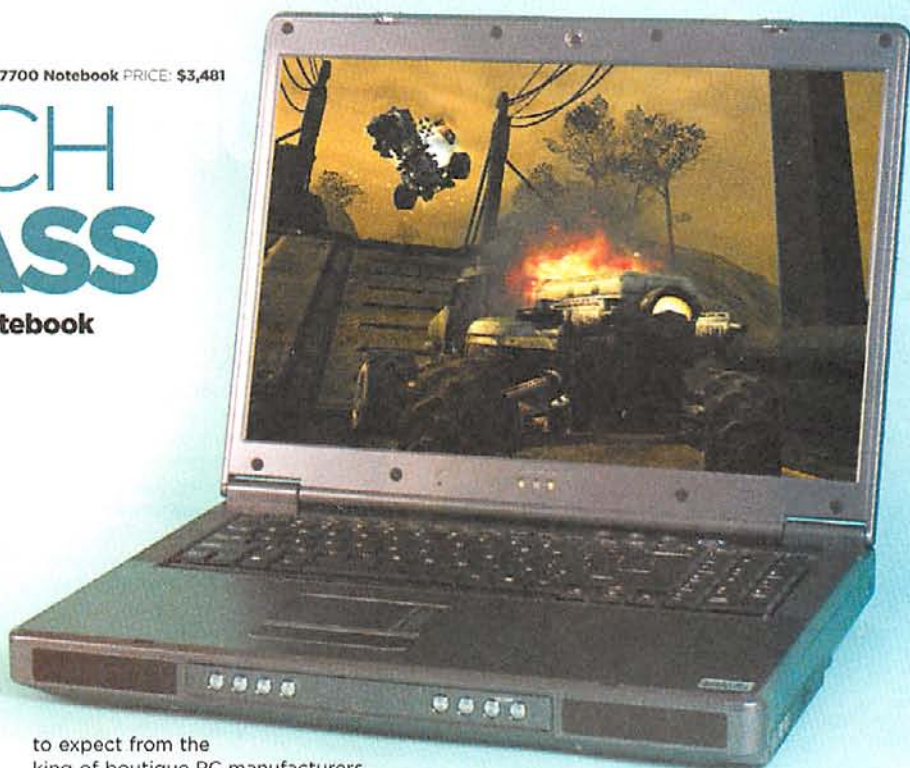
A TOUCH OF CLASS

Alienware Area-51m 7700 Notebook



Alienware's latest gaming laptop is jam-packed with innovations, making it one of the fastest notebooks we've had the pleasure of testing. Weighing in at just over 13 pounds and measuring 16-inches long by 12-inches wide, it's a hefty notebook for sure, but the trade-off is it provides plenty of space for a vibrant built-in 17-inch Clearview widescreen SXGA LCD display. This screen allows for awesome gaming and movie playback at a whopping WQXGA 2048x1536 resolution—in spite of being supported only to a 1600x1024 aspect ratio. Alienware also adds a host of TV in/out and DVI connections, along with an integrated 300k-pixel Blison webcam for a multitude of viewing options. The Area-51m is a looker too, with rubberized grips and Alienware eyes for showing off your rock-solid Clevo notebook chassis.

And it plays just as good as it looks. Designed with gaming in mind, the Area-51m 7700 houses a slew of high-performance components while offering the essential high-end features we've come



to expect from the king of boutique PC manufacturers. The main attraction is the ATI Mobility X800 256MB DDR3 PCI Express video-card (see sidebar), which pushed *Doom 3* scores past the 60fps mark at 1400x1200 resolution with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic-filtering enabled. Matched with the Intel "Grantsdale" i915P chipset Clevo motherboard is an Intel Pentium 4 3.6GHz processor with Hyper-Threading technology and 1GB of DDR2 533MHz RAM (upgradeable up to 2GB)—this system packs the kind of raw power needed for processor-intensive games such as *Unreal Tournament 2004* and *Painkiller*. It's hard to name a laptop more serious about gaming when your *UT2004* game runs seamlessly.

Our Area-51m 7700 came with SATA HDD in a Raid 0 striped configuration for faster read/write speeds. There's also a removable PCMCIA DVD-R/RW combo drive bundled with *PowerDVD* and *Nero* software for your media essentials, such

as burning DVDs or watching your favorite DVD movies. There's also space for an additional optical drive.

The goodies list is filled out with a 7-in-1 memory card reader; a headphone jack; USB 2.0, FireWire, parallel, printer, and dual-infrared ports; and the usual networking essentials such as Gigabit Ethernet, a 56K V.92 modem, and an 802.11b/g mini-wireless card. As for a power source, the smart lithium-ion 12-cell 6600mAh battery lasts just under two hours. Keeping the 180-watt AC adapter nearby is a smart move, just in case a *World of Warcraft* session goes longer than expected.

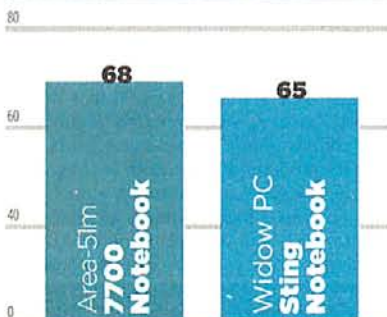
With quality and performance neatly compressed inside a rugged, feature-rich chassis, the Area-51m 7700 provides mobile gamers with a rig bursting with unprecedented speed. **Raphael Liberator**

SCORE: ★★★★★

ATI MOBILITY RADEON X800

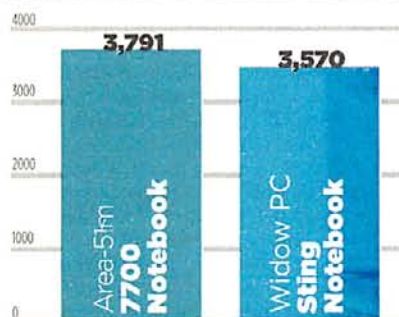
ATI's Mobility Radeon X800 ups the ante in mobile graphics by offering a PCI Express architecture based on the .13 micron, low-k fabrication manufacturing process. The Mobility X800 provides blisteringly fast video performance without sacrificing battery life during off-peak 3D usage, courtesy of ATI's PowerPlay technology. This chip also offers a 12-pixel pipeline, a 400MHz engine clock (faster than the GeForce GO 6800 300MHz engine clock), a 400MHz GDDR3 memory clock, DirectX 9 support, and breakthrough image-enhancement technology. An integrated high-definition encoder provides the ultimate video and HD experience in a notebook design.

3D GameGauge Lite 1.0



ALL TESTS RUN WITH 2X AA (ANTIALIASING) AND 4X AF (ANISOTROPIC FILTERING) TURNED ON.

3Dmark05



MANUFACTURER: NEC-Mitsubishi PRODUCT: MultiSync 1970GX 19-inch LCD Monitor PRICE: \$599

THE BIG PICTURE

MultiSync 1970GX 19-inch LCD Monitor



At first glance, the MultiSync 1970GX 19-inch LCD comes packed with the kinds of features gamers want in an LCD monitor. With a great 8ms response rate, a 700:1 contrast ratio, a .294 dot pixel pitch, superbright OptiClear screen technology, an integrated USB 2.0 hub, color saturation, Ambix dual-input technology, a swivel stand, and multidirectional NaViKey, the 1970GX would seem like gaming nirvana. In some ways, it is. But during testing, the 1970GX, while generally performing well, was unable to steer clear of the occasional image anomaly.

At 8ms, this monitor offers one of the fastest LCD response times available for gaming. Shooters like *Joint Ops* and action-heavy DVDs like *The Matrix* ran

fine, with none of the blurry images, jagged pixels, and ghosting effects that plague slower-refreshing LCDs. Additionally, the MultiSync 1970GX deftly balances a very excellent 700:1 contrast ratio with a notable brightness level for improved black-level performance and greater color palette range while decreasing color dulling in beautifully rendered games like *Far Cry* or the darkest of environments in *Lord of the Rings* DVDs. At 400 candelas (or nits), this monitor shines brighter than any other LCD.

Unfortunately, the MultiSync 1970GX fell flat a couple of times while connected to the fastest gaming PC setup around: an NForce4 SLI system utilizing two GeForce 6800 Ultra PCI Express videocards. For some reason, the monitor had trouble handling higher frequency settings in certain games—problems ranged from artifacts, split screens, and rise/fall bandwidth issues to blank screens and out of sync errors.

Still, NEC-Mitsubishi has designed a state-of-the-art LCD monitor for gaming. If not for the weird frequency glitches, this would be an almost-perfect monitor choice.

✖ Raphael Liberator

SCORE: ★★★★★

The 1970GX generally performs well but is unable to steer clear of the occasional image anomaly.

MANUFACTURER: Sony Corporation PRODUCT: Sony SDM-P234 PRICE: \$2,000

FLAT-PANEL HEAVEN

Sony SDM-P234



Other than my ongoing sordid love affair with my iPod, I do not lust after hardware devices. But the arrival of Sony's 23-inch widescreen flat-panel SDM-P234 monitor changed all that. Did I want to use this monitor, Sony asked, while I played *Half-Life 2*? Oh yes. Yes I did. And now that I'm done, do I want to give the monitor back? Oh no. No I don't.

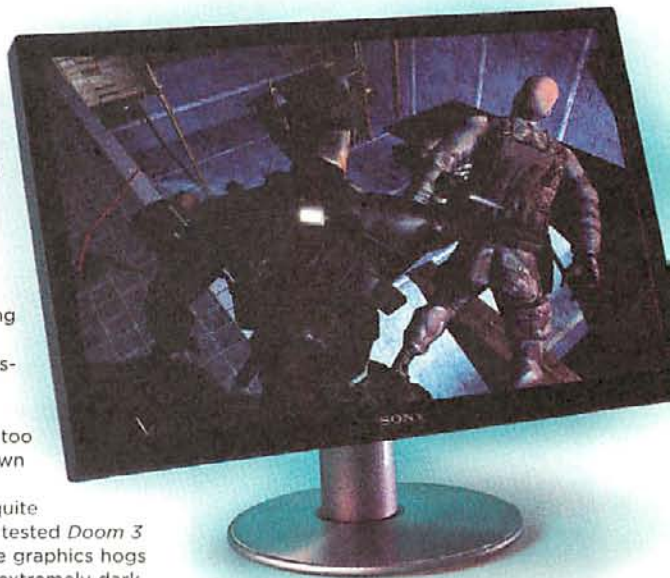
The SDM-P234 is a beauty, but for \$2,000, it better be. With a thin black bezel atop a circular metal base, it's got a cool, minimalist feel. The controls are nearly invisible along the monitor's right side but light up upon touch. A sliding panel in back hides the three connector ports (two VGA, one DVI). There are no built-in speakers (just an audio-out jack) or USB ports. You want frills? Spend less.

What you do get is a phenomenal viewing experience. The huge width

allows for what feels like two monitors of real estate—I could run a *Word* doc on half the screen and still have *Outlook*, *iTunes*, or even *World of Warcraft* running in the other half, with everything remaining crystal clear. The monitor's native resolution is 1920x1200, which is way too high for me, but even down to 1024x768, detail was sharp and contrast was quite good across the board. I tested *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*, and these graphics hogs looked amazing, even in extremely dark or monochromatic areas where I was expecting to see ghosts and/or jaggies. Clearly, the CRTs are doomed.

Do you need this gorgeous \$2,000 monitor? No. But are you wrong for wanting one? No you are not. ✖ Jeff Green

SCORE: ★★★★★



Now that I'm done, do I want to give the monitor back? No I don't.

MANUFACTURER: Dell PRODUCT: 2405FPW LCD Monitor
PRICE: \$1,200

HIGH STYLE, LOW PRICE

Dell 2405FPW LCD Monitor



Three out of four techno-fetishists agree: The bigger the LCD monitor, the better. If it's a solid performer, that's a bonus. But if you can nail these two things and still come in at a reasonable price, you've got yourself a winner.

I didn't know what to throw at this 24-inch widescreen monster first after plugging it into the DVI input of a GeForce 6800 Ultra card, so let's start with the basics. The 1920x1200 native resolution of the 2405FPW is sharp and bright, and for the important stuff (y'know, like actually trying to read text onscreen), this monitor is a star.

With a 12ms response time and good refresh rates for an LCD panel, this monitor will tempt gamers. That's why I was surprised when I started firing up the games. The 90-degree viewing angle removed ghosting concerns, but on more than one occasion in *Doom 3* (running at 1024x768), I noticed the occasional line streak and outcropping of jaggies. At least the monitor managed to

deal with the dark, dank halls on Mars and the wreckage in the Ravenholm level of *Half-Life 2*.

The rest of this package, though, is bulletproof. The no-nonsense display is constructed of heavy plastics that look good on your desktop; however, the detachable speakers are an option you can do without. Underneath the back panel are component, S-Video, DVI, and VGA inputs, and two powered USB 2.0 ports. On the side, behind the screen lie a 9-in-1 card reader and two more USB ports. Overlooking some slight flaws, the unit did well, performing



decently at resolutions from 720x400 up to 1600x1200. If you've got the money and that desire to have larger-than-life gaming up in your face, then the

\$1,200 price tag makes this monitor a good deal. **✎ Darren Gladstone**

SCORE: ★★★★★

With a 12ms response time and good refresh rates for an LCD panel, this monitor will tempt gamers.

MANUFACTURER: Philips PRODUCT: Brilliance 190P5EB PRICE: \$595

LASTING VISION

Brilliance 190P5EB



Philips' Brilliance 190P5 LCD has the kind of feature-rich properties gamers crave. First on the list of gaming goodies for this 19-inch monitor is exceptional build quality. At a hefty 18-plus pounds, it's a sturdy unit with a larger than normal base, which steadies the monitor for adjusting height, swivel positioning, or for a complete 180-degree rotation when toggling between landscape and portrait-view modes. The

Brilliance 190P5 also provides a wide viewing angle for those moments when you're peering at the monitor from odd angles or when a group of friends is huddling around the monitor watching DVDs.

A fast 16ms response time and .29mm dot pitch mean the 190P5 doesn't stint on displaying the finer details in the fast-moving

environments of games such as *Half-Life 2* and *Far Cry* at a max 1280x1024 native resolution. Since overall image quality is the 190P5's main highlight, natural tones tend to stand out as more realistic when compared to competitive 19-inch monitors. Contrast-heavy games such as *Aliens vs. Predator 2* and *Doom 3* are completely playable due to the monitor's ability to show black levels and dark hues in sharp detail—a 700:1 contrast ratio will do that for you. Overall, colors appear noticeably crisp across the color spectrum, although subtle brightness variation stifles perfection.

Add in a set of integrated speakers, audio and headphone jacks, and both analog and DVI interface connections, and the 190P5 is a great choice for gamers looking for an LCD worthy of its hefty price tag. If Philips would just lower its price by \$50, it'd be looking at an Editors' Choice rating. **✎ Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★★



MANUFACTURER: Creative PRODUCT: GigaWorks ProGamer G500 5.1 Speaker System PRICE: \$250

SMALLER, LOUDER

GigaWorks ProGamer G500 5.1



Priced much lower than its more potent MegaWorks and GigaWorks siblings, the GigaWorks ProGamer G500 5.1 THX-certified speaker system isn't an upstart youngster trying to catch a ride on the back of the rock-solid Creative speaker family name. On the contrary, the ProGamer G500 represents the family well by closely reproducing the signature sound quality of the Creative speaker line without depleting your wallet.

ALL TOGETHER NOW

Like most PC speaker systems available today, the ProGamer G500 comes in a typical six-channel (5.1) analog flavor. With convergence making a big roar in

PC, home theater, and gaming console circles, I would have been willing to drop some extra cash if Creative had added the DTS-100 Digital Decoder to this system. Without a speaker decoder and the accompanying digital coaxial and optical jacks, analog speaker systems like the ProGamer G500 must rely on both a multichannel soundcard such as the Creative Audigy 2 and a software decoder program like CyberLink's *PowerDVD* for digital surround sound reproduction, and there's a noticeable sacrifice in sound quality. The system also comes with a poorly placed auxiliary input jack (in the rear of the sub) for plugging in your favorite MP3 player.

Like its siblings, the ProGamer G500 produces impressive sound in everything across the board. Rated at 36 watts RMS, the G500 uses five Flared DynaPort satellites sporting 3-inch drivers for

conveying high-resolution sound with little to no distortion, even with the volume cranked to a whopping 95 decibels. The G500 reproduces smooth tonal characteristics, which were evident when listening to the horns in Glinka's classical masterpiece, *The Russian and Ludmilla Overture*. Midrange is crisp and enveloping, which was evidenced during my favorite *Gladiator* DVD playback clip, where Maximus defeats the former gladiator champ before thousands of frenzied Romans. Jeri Southern's classic female vocals come across as vibrant and enveloping. During a Norah Jones listening session, however, highs lacked detail and, in some stanzas, sounded slightly bright. But these are minor annoyances.

BOOM, BABY

The real highlight of the ProGamer G500 is an impressive 185-watt RMS subwoofer built around an 8-inch front firing woofer and twin Flared DynaPorts for tighter airflow resulting in loud and deep bass. Booming lows rival those produced by the excellent subwoofers from both Klipsch and Logitech. Shotgun blasts from *Doom 3* rattled my windows, while hefty after-shock rumbles caused by the explosions of an *Unreal Tournament* Redeemer rocket sent me into a giddy sensory overload. It's the same with DVDs, with the ProGamer G500 busting out the deepest tones of high-resolution audio from movies such as *Jurassic Park III* and *The Matrix*. The subwoofer's only weakness is in reproducing extremely deep bass music above 100 decibels, with some slight distortion heard past the constant rhythmic pounding of a Moby house track.

Despite a couple of sound-quality dings, the ProGamer G500 sets the bar for gaming speakers at the sub-\$250 price point. Crank it during *Half-Life 2*, and you'll probably wonder why you even considered dropping \$500 for a high-end speaker system from Logitech, Klipsch, or even Creative. If you're serious about great-sounding speakers but can't afford the high-end decoder types, this bad boy is a great choice. **✎ Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★★

The ProGamer G500 produces impressive sound across the board.



MANUFACTURER: Corsair PRODUCT: XMS Xpert
TwinXP1024-3200XL 512MB PC3200 DDR Memory
Module PRICE: \$250

LONG-TERM MEMORY

Corsair XMS Xpert PC3200 RAM



As a longtime hardware enthusiast, I've always put Corsair RAM high on my cool-factor list. Why?

Because its memory modules, encased in cast-aluminum heat sinks for improved heat dissipation, exemplify the convergence of performance, innovation, and style. Corsair memory is designed specifically for gamers wanting to achieve the best possible performance while still maintaining good looks.

Here, two 512MB 184-pin DDR XMS Xpert RAM modules come packaged in the 1GB memory upgrade kit. Thanks to some cutting-edge technology, it provides blisteringly fast performance in a dual-channel configuration; the 400MHz clock speed coupled with 2-2-2-5 low latency values provides substantial performance gains. While the XMS Xpert RAM uses Corsair's nifty LED color activity meters for displaying memory usage, its best feature is a built-in microcontroller designed for measuring memory voltage, temperature, and frequency settings, all of which are displayed in real time on cool 10-digit LED marquees that reside along the tops of both RAM modules right beside color activity meters. The marquees' cycle and scroll-speed display outputs can be customized using Corsair's Memory Dashboard

software utility. Who would have thought RAM could get so tricked out? As an added bonus, the software provides the cool capability of adding personal messages of up to 23 characters.

True, this XMS Xpert RAM with LED is not cheap. But with a lifetime warranty, the ability to add more PC3200 RAM for additional performance gains, and cool factors galore, the XMS Xpert is perfect for deep-pocketed gamers wanting the best.

✉ Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★★★

As an added bonus, the software provides the cool capability of adding personal messages of up to 23 characters.

Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines



I recently replaced a friend's motherboard and videocard that were damaged by the effects of electrostatic discharge (ESD). While attempting to add more RAM, he suddenly lost both components because he neglected to take the necessary ESD precautions. Unfortunately, this isn't unusual. Most computer users scratch their heads in bewilderment whenever I suggest that triboelectric charging or ESD might be the culprit behind damaged hardware components. Others insist ESD is hogwash and upgrade their systems without taking precautions. Their luck will eventually run out.

Triboelectric charging (or tribocharging for short) is a serious yet little understood threat to computer components. Believe it or not, the majority of computer component and system manufacturers consider ESD to be the primary reason behind component damage and/or system failure; it affects components and devices directly or indirectly due to improper handling during installation and removal.

Basically, particles are attracted to various silicon wafer and electrical component surfaces; the charged surfaces attract and hold contaminants, resulting in random wafer defects and reduced product yields. In some instances, ESD causes latent defects—random crashes, reboots, blue screens, etc. Virtually all materials, even conductors, can be triboelectrically charged—material type, speed of contact, uncontrolled environment, board separation, and humidity are all factors that can determine whether this problem occurs. In most cases, static discharge is subtle and largely goes unnoticed until it's too late.

In order to minimize ESD, I recommend using materials and procedures that dissipate tribocharging—simple precautions like grounding wrist straps and antistatic mats (read this month's Tech How To on page 104 for more). Considering the cost of all the components in your PC, why wouldn't you? ✉ Raphael Liberatore

GEEK SPEAK LCD technobabble de-babbleized

SXGA

Super extended graphics array is the term for an LCD monitor capable of supporting a 1280x1024 resolution or 1.3 million pixels.

QXGA

Quantum extended graphics array is the term specifying an LCD monitor capable of supporting 2048x1536 resolution or 3.2 million pixels.

DPI

Dots per inch refers to image resolution. The more dpi, the higher the resolution.

NTSC

The National Television System Committee definition of a video signal is incompatible with most computer video protocols utilizing a RGB video signal. An NTSC-capable video adapter or graphics card can convert the NTSC-standard signal in a computer.

Bit map

An image represented as rows and columns of dots, typically stored in memory in one or more bits of data. The density of the dots (the resolution) determines image sharpness, expressed as dpi by the number of rows and columns, i.e. 640x480. The more bits used to represent a dot, the more colors and shades of gray can be represented.

Vector graphics

Vector graphics use a sequence of mathematical formulas to define shapes and lines within a two- or three-dimensional space. Vector graphics are more flexible than bit-mapped graphics because they look the same even when scaled to different sizes.

How to Avoid Electrostatic Discharge

Stop your shocking behavior By Raphael Liberatore



STEP #1

Environment

Components and devices should be properly packaged in anti-static materials or bags and shielded during transportation. It's also wise to work on a clutter-free bench rather than on carpet or a desk sharing various electronic components. Also, don't wear just socks or ugg boots while working. Keep the environment static free and maintain dissipative control when unpacking, touching, or handling ESD-sensitive components and devices. Provide the appropriate layer of input protection while unpacking and repackaging boards, devices, or whatever silicon you come in contact with. Finally, make sure your workspace is above 40 percent humidity.



Have you ever experienced a static shock after walking across the room or when simply changing your T-shirt? This is known as triboelectric charging, or ESD (electrostatic discharge), and it can occur when two neutral but highly conductive surfaces (positive and negative) come in contact and then separate, causing a discharge of static electricity. Since virtually all materials, especially silicon and semiconductor-board surfaces, attract and hold electrical contaminants, even the slightest static discharge can adversely affect and even destroy system components and devices. Sensitivity varies significantly, depending on the environment and a variety of other factors such as material type, speed of contact and separation, and humidity. This is why it's extremely important to take antistatic measures when upgrading or installing system components.



STEP #2

Grounding

Grounding is the most important factor in minimizing ESD. By providing proper grounding or shunting, both to you and your components, you should be able to dissipate ESD away from the device and/or component. Antistatic products—such as ESD bench mats, grounding cords, and wrist wraps—are worthwhile expenditures if you want to avoid the traumas related to ESD. Combine all three if you spend a lot of time inside the chassis upgrading your system.

STEP #3

Alternate choice

If you lack the funds to acquire appropriate ESD tools, simply touch the unpainted metal portion of your case while it's grounded (plugged into an AC power supply with a ground-fault circuit interrupter) before working with a system to minimize ESD. Though it's not a foolproof method, it is a far better alternative to zapping your silicon wafer with static electricity.

ESD can be reduced if you follow these failsafe steps. When tinkering with your system's insides or upgrading system components and/or devices, minimizing the effects of ESD should be a primary consideration in your performance-upgrade venture—you're not going to be able to exchange that expensive videocard because you got sloppy, receipt or no receipt. ☐

MANUFACTURER: Asus PRODUCT: A8N-SLI Deluxe NForce4 PCI Express Socket 939 motherboard PRICE: \$179

BIG BAD MOBO

A8N-SLI Deluxe NForce4 PCI Express Socket 939 motherboard



The team of mad scientists at Asus is setting itself up to reap the benefits of Nvidia's powerful NForce4 PCI Express chipset and Scalable Link Interface (SLI) technology, as

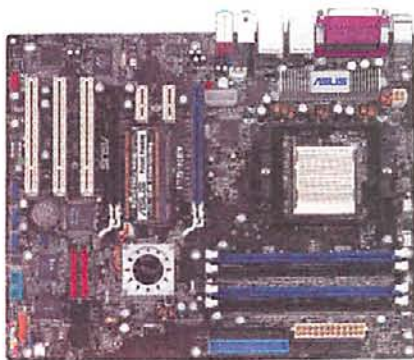
Asus is the first major manufacturer to release a motherboard sporting both innovations. And that's just the beginning.

The A8N-SLI Deluxe offers tremendous storage options, with eight SATA channels, including the new SATA II 3.0 Gb/s standard and two IDE channels ripe for multiple RAID configurations. There are also external SATA power and cable connectors for providing hot-swapping SATA drives without opening your case.

Most important, the A8N-SLI Deluxe supports AMD's flagship Athlon 64 FX-55 Socket 939 processor, provides 400MHz dual-channel RAM module support for a focus on high-end gaming, and incorporates

Nvidia's SLI technology to combine two PCI Express GeForce 6000 series GPUs for a substantial increase in raw 3D-gaming muscle, which gives the motherboard a way above average *Halo* benchmark score of 103.77fps. Of course, two GeForce 6000 series cards along with an expensive Asus motherboard could cost more than \$1,200. In my mind, the performance gains are worth the financial discomfort when you consider that Asus provides an extensive software library of overclocking utilities, allowing your rig to belch out *Doom 3* benchmarks at an incredible 109.77fps.

Rounding out the feature set are two Gigabit network connections using both Nvidia's and Marvell's PCI controller chips; several USB 2.0 and FireWire connections for connecting multiple controllers, devices, and media; and high-fidelity audio courtesy of a Realtek ALC850 onboard eight-channel audio codec with optical and SPDIF output



support, which allows for crisp and detailed digital surround-sound capability.

Considering all this, is it any wonder this year's Ultimate Gaming Machine sported one of these? Not at all. **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★★

MANUFACTURER: BFGTech PRODUCT: GeForce 6800 Ultra OC PCI Express PRICE: \$599

DOUBLE YOUR PLEASURE

GeForce 6800 Ultra OC PCI Express 256MB GDDR3 RAM GPU



BFGTech manufactures some of the fastest gaming-ready and overclocking-friendly GeForce 6000 series graphics cards, and its customer support and lifetime warranty are simply the best in the business. With PCI Express fast becoming commonplace, BFGTech takes advantage of the faster architecture in its new flagship GeForce 6800 Ultra OC PCI Express videocard. Add another for an Nvidia SLI-configured setup, and it's love. If you can live with the \$1,180 price tag.

BFGTech basically transfers the DirectX 9.0 and superscalar performance features from its AGP Ultra OC card into a PCI Express version with excellent results. I tested the BFGTech 6800 Ultras in an SLI configuration and found that the overclocked 425MHz engine clock coupled with its overclocked 1,100MHz memory clock pushed the envelope for substantial framerate gains across the board (especially when compared to the earlier AGP boards). Even with the resolution maxed to 1600x1200, both *Doom 3* and *Far Cry* benchmark tests showed impressive results, with *Halo* scores at 1280x1024 (2x

AA, 4x AF) moving well past the 110fps barrier. *Half-Life 2* not only plays fast in SLI, but looks good, too.

The Ultra OC is a monster, with a huge heat sink and fan for optimal cooling. It also features dual DVI, HD, and S-Video ports. But like its previous OC Ultra AGP brother, you'll need a minimum 480-watt power supply in order to use it. This shouldn't be too much of a concern for gaming enthusiasts building an SLI rig, since most computers come with a 24-pin EPS 12V ATA power supply and 6-pin PCI Express connectors capable of handling this giant.

Best of all, the 24/7 lifetime tech support, lifetime warranty, and new BFGgaming.com gaming portal for dedicated game server support and contests make the GeForce 6800 Ultra OC PCI Express videocard a hard deal to pass up. Yeah, you could use this card by itself and expect great results, but since the fastest PCI Express mobos support SLI, why would you? **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★★



The Ultra OC is a monster of a card.



4 The SLI Nemesis Revisited is fast, and it looks good, too.

KILLER RIG

SLI Nemesis Revisited



Last issue, we scored what was arguably the biggest gaming enhancement for a PC since the 3dfx Voodoo graphics card: an Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe NForce 4 PCI Express motherboard (see review, pg. 103). If

you've been reading Tech, then you already know Nvidia's NForce4 PCI Express chipset with SLI leads to the fastest framerates, and Asus has perfected it with this feature-rich mobo design. The SLI architecture provides double the performance with two identical videocards linked via dual PCI Express x16 slots (two x8 in SLI). Combine this with AMD's very powerful Athlon 64 FX-55 processor and you'll find yourself at the top of a hardcore gaming mountain.

Our SLI Nemesis rig returns mostly intact but with a graphics overhaul and audio swap. The highlight comes from ditching the two previous XFX Force GeForce 6600 videocards in favor of two Ultimate Gaming Machine-level graphics cards. The BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC SLI-ready videocards installed in the SLI Nemesis Revisited

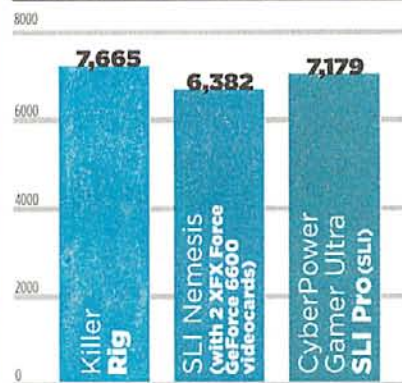
offer the absolute best framerates in any gaming system, and the incredibly high benchmarks it achieved support this claim.

When it comes to finding the best surround-sound PC system available, scaling up from the Logitech Z-5500 digital speaker system is almost impossible. However, the Creative ProGamer G500 5.1 speaker system's deep and compact bass provides a worthy challenge to the Z-5500's LFE, so we went with it. Replacing the gorgeous Apple 23-inch LCD was next on the list, so we downgraded size by swapping it with the NEC 1970GX 19-inch LCD, which improved game performance due to its faster refresh rates and better black and brightness levels. Based on the scores, our upgrade process perfected the rig, making it the fastest gaming PC to grace this magazine. **Raphael Liberator**

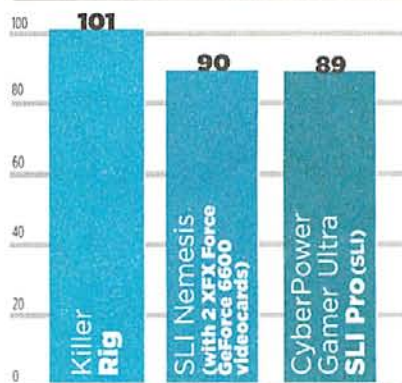
The Guts

COMPONENT	PRICE
Case	NZXT Nemesis Elite Edition midtower case \$65
Power supply	Thermaltake Silent PurePower 680-watt with active PFC power supply \$150
CPU	AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 \$880
Cooling	Zalman CNPS7700-Cu heat sink and fan \$45
Motherboard	Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe \$190
Memory	Two Kingston HyperX KHX4300 533MHz 1GB DDR memory module kits (2GB total) \$580 (\$290/2)
Hard drive	Two Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 SATA 200GB 7200 rpm hard drives with 8MB buffer \$270 (\$135/2)
Graphics	Two BFGTech GeForce 6800 Ultra OC 256MB GDDR3 RAM PCI Express videocards \$1198 (\$599/2)
Optical drive	Mad Dog MegaSTOR 6-in-1 16X Double Layer DVD3R3RW internal drive \$65
Optical drive 2	LG 52x/32x/48x CD-R/RW drive \$25
Floppy drive	Sony floppy drive \$12
Monitor	NEC 1970GX 19-inch LCD monitor \$369
Keyboard	Saitek Gamers Keyboard \$60
Mouse	Razer Diamondback optical \$50
Speakers	Creative ProGamer G500 5.1 speaker system \$240
Misc	Cold cathode ray tube \$5
TOTAL COST	\$4,404

3DMark05



3D GameGauge Lite 1.0



ALL TESTS RUN WITH 2X AA (ANTIALIASING) AND 4X AF (ANISOTROPIC FILTERING) TURNED ON UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED.

EXTREME TECH

Tech Medics

ExtremeTech.com's big brains answer your questions



I seem to remember an article in your magazine several months ago on the newest Windows updates, particularly Service Pack 2 and whether it was advisable to install it because of the negative effects it might have on gaming. I have kept my download but have not installed it yet for this very reason. Would you please advise me on this matter? I usually purchase a new computer tower every year and a half to two years, so my games on any particular machine are fairly recent. Should I be concerned about this update? Thanks so much. My son and I love the magazine; keep up the outstanding work.

Fred McKenzie

Lloyd Case: If you're playing current-generation games, most will run fine under Service Pack 2. There are a few games that have issues, such as *Command & Conquer: Generals*, but we've been running a large number of games under SP2 with no problems. Occasionally, a dialog box will pop up asking you if you want to keep blocking network access to a game or enable it. We usually just click "enable" and move on.

I noticed a glaring anomaly when I started researching videocards. All of the PCI cards are selling for substantially less than the AGP cards. Isn't PCI Express supposed to be the new "gotta have it" graphics tech? I'm not a Gen-Xer; I remember when *Pong* was the coolest platform system anyone could have. Heck, I remember when computers were called Univacs and grad students ran inside them pushing shopping carts full of vacuum tubes so that they could swap fresh tubes for the ones that burned out with astonishing regularity. And no, I wasn't one of those guys—I was still in high school. In all this time, I have never seen the new "with it" tech sell for less than the old, soon-to-be-abandoned tech. So what's the deal here? Are the manufacturers getting ready to abandon PCI because it has some terrible drawback they're keeping mum about? Or is it all just hype?

Cal Morrison

Lloyd Case: PCI and PCI Express are two quite different things. What you're probably seeing are actual PCI cards that plug into 32-bit PCI slots. These are typically very lowball cards, so they would be cheaper. Now, to cut you a little slack, it is true that the graphics card companies shipped entry-level and mainstream PCI Express graphics cards first, mainly to fill demand from the big guys, such as Dell and HP. But we are now seeing high-end PCI Express cards, and they cost every bit as much as or more than the AGP spread.

Hey guys, great mag, accurate reviews. Where can I get benchmarking software for games on my computer and how much would it cost? By the way, thanks for sucking my life away and turning me into a complete nerd.

Joe Bohannon

Jason Cross: The simplest gaming benchmark you can get without spending any money is 3DMark. Head to www.futuremark.com and download the free version there. There are two benchmarks: 3DMark03 primarily tests DirectX 8-class hardware and is modeled after games of the last year or so. 3DMark05 is a more

If PCI Express is so new and cool, why doesn't it cost more?

advanced DirectX 9 benchmark that uses a lot more shaders and graphics effects than current games actually do—it's designed to gauge performance with future games. There are pay versions of both benchmarks that let you change around a lot more options.

Beyond that, some games have built-in benchmark functions. *Doom 3* lets you run benchmarks very easily. Simply bring down the console by holding down Ctrl and pressing the Tilde key (that's the one with the ~ on it to the left of the 1 key). Type "timedemo demo1" and the game will run through a recorded game-play demo using the current graphics settings, then give you an average frames-per-second score. There's a bit of I/O activity on the first run, so you may want to run it twice and take the second reading. There are quite a few other games that have some form of built-in benchmarking: *Half-Life 2*, *Unreal Tournament 2004*, *Far Cry*, *Splinter Cell*, and *Painkiller* are some popular choices. Detailed instructions on how to benchmark your system with each of them would take a lot of space, but we have lengthy how-to articles for some of these at www.extremetech.com, and some Google-fu will help you find the rest.

Got questions? Send them to Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com

A-LIST

The latest and greatest gadgets you gotta get

By Darren Gladstone

URL: www.audiovox.com PRICE: \$200

AUDIOVOX SMT5600 SMARTPHONE



I'm a digital couch potato. There, I said it. It started simply enough with TiVo: I'd record a show and watch it whenever I wanted. Next came the TV tuner card for my PC, the inevitable recording of *Chappelle's Show*, and the ability to drop an entire season on a notebook. Now, I'm taking nerddom to whole new frightening levels with Audiovox's SMT5600.

The smallest smartphone around does a whole lot more than hit the Web and stash all your Outlook contact info. This snub-nosed cell is the first to pack Windows Media Player 10. Just imagine how hardcore you'll be when you're watching last night's shows on your morning commute thanks to the Mini SD card slot. Did I get any cock-eyed looks on the bus? Who cares? I'm too busy watching *The Daily Show* on my phone.



URL: www.skullcandy.com PRICE: \$200

SKULLCANDY MACGYVER WATCH



MacGyver, the mullet-sporting supergeeky superspy of the 1980s, finally has a product worthy of his name. It's about time! At first glance, you might blow off this bit of gear as some oh-so-trendy, ruggedized sports watch. I did. So imagine my surprise when I found a hidden USB plug to the 1GB thumb drive lurking in this timepiece's guts. Plug it into your PC to stash whatever files you've got and charge up the watch at the same time.

Ready to roll? Grab your favorite headphones and the MacGyver also works as an MP3 player. It has a five-mode equalizer and rocks relatively hard for about five hours before crapping out. Back on the spy tip, use the built-in mic for covert conversation recording. ("Hey Jeff, what was that about a raise? Just speak into my watch....") I can officially say right here, right now: Who needs an iPod Shuffle when you have something this cool rocking your wrist? Just knowing you've always got some tunes on the backup (and a hard drive on your wrist) makes this sucker worth its price tag. The best part is people won't know how much tech you're flossing.



The only thing that could make this more MacGyver-y would be constructing it yourself out of lightbulbs, puppies, and gum.

TECH REWIND

18 months of Tech scores at your fingertips

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
ABS Mayhem G1	05/04	★★★★☆
ABS Ultimate M6	07/04	★★★★☆
Actiontec 54Mbps Wireless Cable/DSL Router	11/04	★★★★☆
Alienware Aurora	01/04	★★★★☆
Altec Lansing MX5021	07/04	★★★★☆
Asus Extreme AX800 XT 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express	01/05	★★★★☆
Asus Radeon 9800 XT	04/04	★★★★☆
Asus V9980 Ultra graphics card	05/04	★★★★☆
Asus V9999 Gamers Edition Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU	01/05	★★★★☆
ATI 9600 XT	05/04	★★★★☆
ATI All-in-Wonder 9800	10/03	★★★★☆
ATI Radeon X800 XT and XT Pro	08/04	★★★★☆
ATI Radeon X800 XT PCI Express 256MB GDDR3	01/05	★★★★☆
ATI Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition PCI Express	03/05	★★★★☆
ATI X600 XT	10/04	★★★★☆
Belkin Wireless Pre-N Router	03/05	★★★★☆
Belkin Nostromo SpeedPad n52	04/05	★★★★☆
BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC AGP 256MB GDDR3 GPU	01/05	★★★★☆
BFGTech GeForce 6600 GT OC 128 MB DDR AGP Videocard	04/05	★★★★☆
Bose Companion 3	07/04	★★★★☆
Boxx Technologies GameBoxx	07/04	★★★★☆
Creative Labs Decoder DDT5-100	04/04	★★★★☆
Creative Labs GigaWorks S750	04/04	★★★★☆
Creative SoundBlaster Audigy 2 ZS Notebook	03/05	★★★★☆
Cyberpower Gamer Ultra 9900 Pro	06/04	★★★★☆
Cyberpower Infinity 9900 Extreme	04/04	★★★★☆
Dell Dimension 8300	06/04	★★★★☆



BFGTech
Nvidia GeForce
6800 Ultra OC
AGP 256MB
GDDR3 GPU

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Dell Generation 3 Dimension XPS	10/04	★★★★☆
Dell Inspiron XPS	09/04	★★★★☆
Dell W20040 LCD TV	09/04	★★★★☆
D-Link DGL-4300 GamerLounge Wireless Router	03/05	★★★★☆
D-Link GigaExpress DGS-1008D 8-Port Gigabit Switch	03/05	★★★★☆
EMachines M6807	05/04	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest FragBox	10/03	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest FragBox 2	11/04	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest FragBox Pro	05/04	★★★★☆
Falcon Northwest Mach V	06/04	★★★★☆
Gateway 200 ARC	09/04	★★★★☆
Gateway 710G Gamer	06/04	★★★★☆
Gateway 710XL	01/04	★★★★☆
Gateway FMC-901X	05/04	★★★★☆
Gateway M675	02/04	★★★★☆
Gigabyte N68T256DH Nvidia GeForce 6800 GT AGP 256MB GDDR3	01/05	★★★★☆
Hercules Prophetview 920 Pro DVI	03/04	★★★★☆
Hypersonic Aviator AX6	05/04	★★★★☆
Hypersonic Cyclone	01/04	★★★★☆
IBuyPower Back to School Machine	09/04	★★★★☆
IBuyPower Gamer Extreme	03/04	★★★★☆
IBuyPower Titanium-XP	10/03	★★★★☆
IBuyPower Zillion-FX	06/04	★★★★☆
IBuyPower Zillion Pro	04/05	★★★★☆
Ideazon Zboard keyboard	12/04	★★★★☆
Intel D925XCV	10/04	★★★★☆
Logitech MX510 Performance Optical Mouse	07/04	★★★★☆
Logitech X620 6.1 Speakers	02/04	★★★★☆
Logitech Z-2200	04/04	★★★★☆
Logitech Z-3	04/04	★★★★☆



NaturalPoint
TrackIR 3-Pro

PRODUCT	MONTH	SCORE
Logitech Z-5300	02/04	★★★★☆
Logitech Z-5500	12/04	★★★★☆
Logitech Cordless Rumblepad 2	04/05	★★★★☆
NaturalPoint TrackIR 3-Pro	04/05	★★★★☆
Nvidia 128MB GeForce 6600 GT PCI	12/04	★★★★☆
Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra	08/04	★★★★☆
Nyko PC Air Flo EX	12/04	★★★★☆
Philips Brilliance 230W5VS 23-Inch LCD	01/05	★★★★☆
PC Laptops Annihilator 987	03/05	★★★★☆
ProStar 9095-1B	03/05	★★★★☆
Razor Diamondback Mouse	04/05	★★★★☆
Saitek Gamers' Keyboard	04/05	★★★★☆
Saitek X52 Flight Control	04/05	★★★★☆
Tapwave Zodiac	02/04	★★★★☆
Thrustmaster 2-in-1 Dual Trigger Gamepad	04/05	★★★★☆
Toshiba Qosmio E15-AV101	12/04	★★★★☆
Toshiba Satellite 5205-S705	09/03	★★★★☆
Toshiba Satellite P25-S670	09/04	★★★★☆
Totally Awesome Computers Ridiculously Insane PC	01/04	★★★★☆
U.S. Robotics USB470 54Mbps Wireless Network Kit	03/05	★★★★☆
Velocity Micro Gamers Edge	01/04	★★★★☆
Velocity Micro Vision 64	10/04	★★★★☆
Vicious PC MSI MEGA 865	08/04	★★★★☆
Vicious PC Ninja	06/04	★★★★☆
Voodoo Hexx c:355	06/04	★★★★☆
VoodooPC Envy M:860	11/04	★★★★☆
VoodooPC F1	01/04	★★★★☆
VoodooPC F50	10/04	★★★★☆
VoodooPC Voodoo Doll	02/04	★★★★☆
Widow PC The Sting	03/05	★★★★☆
XFX Force Nvidia GeForce6600 GT 128MB DDR3 PCI Express	01/05	★★★★☆
Zalman ZM-R56F Theater 6 headphones	03/05	★★★★☆



DGL-4300
Wireless Router

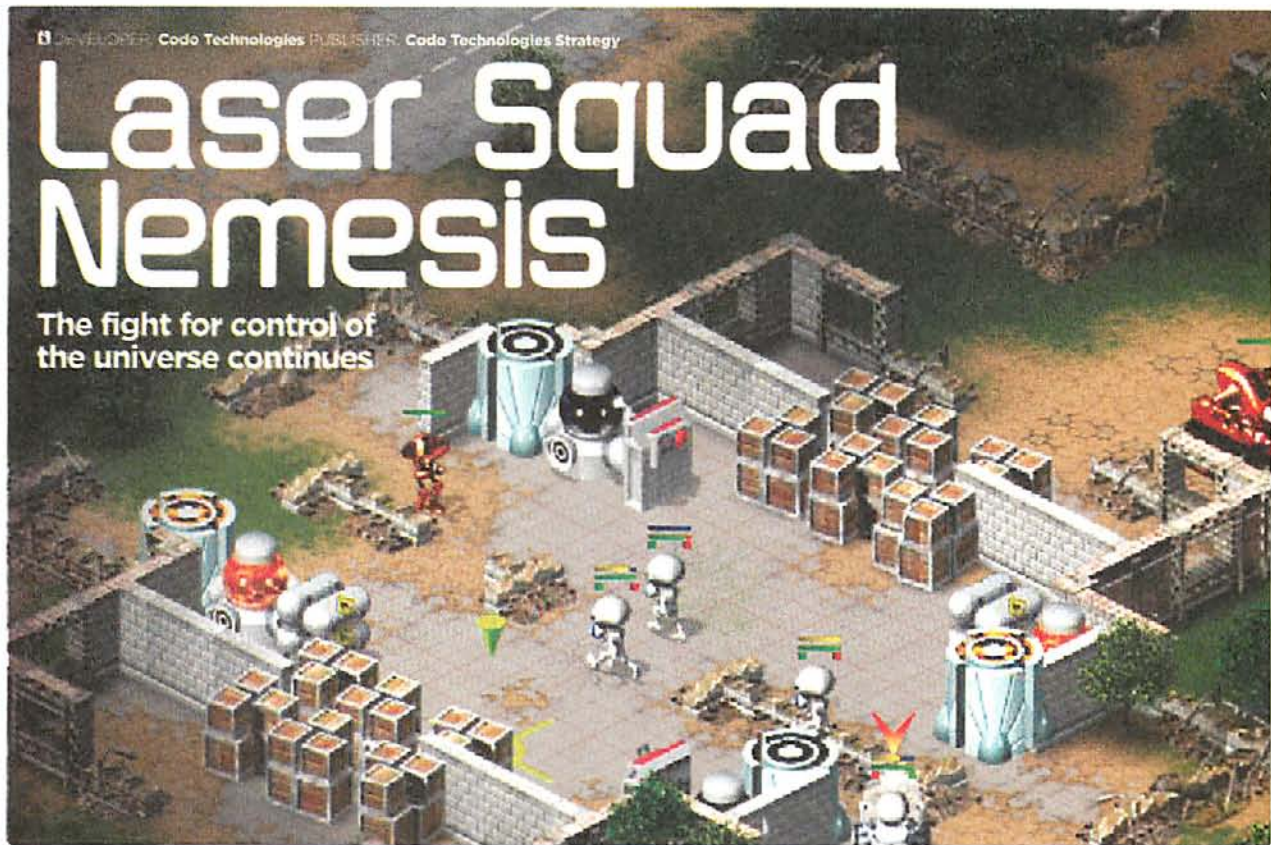
Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

DEVELOPER: Codo Technologies PUBLISHER: Codo Technologies Strategy

Laser Squad Nemesis

The fight for control of the universe continues



Tom: *Laser Squad Nemesis* is basically multiplayer *X-Com*. The developers at Codo Technologies are some of the folks who did *X-Com*, including the Gollop brothers, Nick and Julian. We're playing an HQ game, in which the winner is the first player to destroy the other player's HQ. Bruce sets up in the north and I set up in the south. In the tradition of *X-Com*, I chose the greys. Since Bruce gets nervous playing any nonhuman race, I told him to just take the Marines.

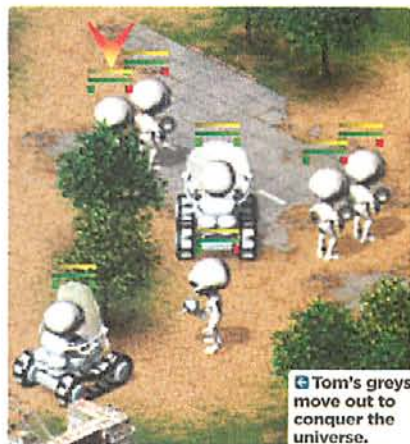
My force consists of sentries and two guardians in the center. I have a warp gunner hidden in a building at either end. The sentries are my basic troops; they have an energy reserve that powers their weapons and their shields, so energy serves as both ammo and health. The guardians are unarmed fellows on tracked sleds with shield generators that provide protection and cloaking in a radius around them. Warp gunners are little guys with powerful guided missiles that I can plot to explode anywhere on the map.

Bruce: I'd like to give you an involved backstory kind of like the one Tom just told you, only with lots of slashfic and whatnot. Sadly for everyone, but most of all for me, which is all that matters anyway, I can't do that because I have no idea

what's going on. Tom said we were going to play multiplayer *X-Com*. That sounded great—give me a chance to play one of my favorite games ever in multiplayer and you can basically convince me of anything, like the fact that it has multiplayer when, in fact, it does not. Like all things that are too good to be true, this *X-Com* doesn't even have a story. What happened on Cydonia? Who shot the president?

Tom: We're moving out cautiously, since I need to keep my sentries close to their guardians. I've split them into Alpha squad, which is on point, and Beta squad, bringing up the rear. We're working our way up toward the east side of the building in the middle of the map, which I'll call the relic building (the map is called Relic, so I figure if there are any relics here, they're inside that building, which has a force field you can turn on to protect you once you're inside).

Bruce: In case you were thinking all that slashfic I wrote just now was a joke, I want to make it clear that I honestly, truly have no idea what is going on. I made the mistake of thinking I could just figure it out as I went along, while Tom is apparently deep into a massive NIH study of the capabilities of Relic guardians. At least he's naming all of his little dudes, as he did when we played *Pirates*. Some things stay consistently fruity.



Tom's greys move out to conquer the universe.

Tom: Forty-three seconds in and I see one of Bruce's units. But it's not a Marine! It's an exterminator, which is the basic soldier for the robot race, called machina. Bruce must have misheard me when I told him to be the Marines. He's also got a couple of tanks up here: a tank that can fire devastating missiles and an A.I. tank that can heal machina units and fire a heavy rapid-fire plasma gun.

Bruce: Contact! That's either one of Tom's guys or a riot policeman on a little scooter. At this point I should probably have read the manual about how to make my robots



Tom

Last month:
Tom's Protoss kicked
Bruce's Terran arse old-
school style in a retro
match of *StarCraft*.



Bruce

Last month:
Bruce blamed his
defeat on the game's
low resolution, as all
sissies will do.

shoot. Fortunately, they don't seem to need my help and they start firing some kind of robot laser guns without me even telling them to.

Tom: Bruce gets off the first shot. An exterminator pings my advancing guardian in Alpha squad and knocks four points off its shield, which is down to 56 from 60.

Bruce: I'd like to point out to the audience right now that according to what I just read, one of us has shields. Incredibly enough, that person turns out *not* to be me. Can you believe it? What are the chances that Tom would have some amazing advantage and I wouldn't?

Tom: Alpha squad has stopped, but they're all clustered behind the guardian, so they can't return fire! Beta squad is coming up and spots a hunter that Bruce must have rushed to the relic building.

Bruce: My guys are shooting, but they don't seem to be able to get past those cute little riot policeman shields on Tom's scooters. He obviously read the manual, figured out which race had the best shields, and gave me the crappy leftovers. I'm not mad, though, because that gives me the moral high ground. Kind of like the UN, except without Angelina Jolie.

Tom: Bruce's missile tank is heading off to the west side of the map, away from my advance, right toward one of the warp gunners I have creeping up the edge of the map to find his HQ.

My sentries get the first kill of the game when they take out a hunter. The guardian with Alpha squad is depleting his energy reserves, so I switch off his shield and retreat him and his three sentries into the relic building. We'll turn on the building's force field and hole up in there to recharge. Meanwhile, on the west side of the map, I plot a pair of shots from my warp gunner to detonate where I anticipate his missile tank will be.

Bruce: I'm not saying the Gollops aren't total geniuses, but someone might have mentioned to them that if you're going to call a unit a "hunter" without making it good at hunting, you need to include a long, involved backstory about how it was once really good at it but then the Burning Legion came, yadda yadda. Otherwise, how am I supposed to figure out that instead of hunting, my "hunter" is going to get blown up by the first international law enforcement official it happens to run across?

Tom: As Alpha squad is entering the relic building, it's confronted by an exterminator and another missile tank to the north.

Bruce: I send my guys into whatever Tom has named that building with all the crazy dials to trade shots with his motor scooters. Unfortunately, I don't quite get the line-of-sight rules because my exterminator fires at him repeatedly but just hits a tree. Nice work. My exterminator gets wasted. Tom is winning 2-0, and it's

Bruce's hunter is the first casualty.



Alpha squad tries to take out Bruce's missile tank, but it dodges behind a tree.



Bruce flanks Alpha squad and forces it to vacate the relic building.

issing me off. Tom probably even knows what those crazy dials do.

Tom: We hold the relic building, but I got caught with my cloaking shield down, so one of Alpha squad's sentries is completely stripped of his shields and is slightly injured.

Bruce: One of Tom's sentries is "completely stripped"? Sounds sexy! However, basic math tells me that because Tom started out with shields and I didn't, this means we're now exactly even, even though I just shot the heck out of him with an invincible robot. Later I find out the robots aren't so invincible.

Tom: As near as I can tell, my warp gunner in the west gets two direct bursts on Bruce's missile tank, but doesn't kill it. On the east side of the map, my other warp gunner is working his way around the fire-fights to slip into Bruce's rear and probe for his HQ. Meanwhile, two more exterminators penetrate the relic building and succumb to Alpha squad's fire. Beta squad, still outdoors, is going toe-to-toe with an A.I. tank and is getting pounded; its guardian's shields are stripped and its two sentries are outmatched in this *ménage à trois*.

Bruce: Ever notice how half of Tom's game descriptions end up being sexual innuendo? As you can tell from the screen-shots, his units are not hot. In fact, they look like Pillsbury doughboys. So imagining them stripping and so forth doesn't really do anything for me.

Tom: Beta squad's guardian is depleted and useless, so it falls back, leaving the sentries exposed. They die shooting it out with Bruce's A.I. The warp gunner to the west fires off two more shots in the vicinity of

Bruce's advancing missile tank. Since this depletes his energy, he holes up to recharge. Meanwhile, the gunner on the east side of the map has slipped past the fighting and is peeking into the ruined buildings to look for his HQ. Hopefully, I can keep Bruce busy in the middle while this little fellow goes for the win.

Bruce: I think my robots' energy must be low. Unless they don't have energy at all, which would make that another thing Tom's units have that mine mysteriously don't. To be fair, my units could all have 88mm antitank cannons and I wouldn't know it, since I still can't figure out how to make them do basic things like shoot at Tom. They seem to just do it on their own, which is OK, I guess. They're robots—they probably know what they're doing.

Tom: From the relic building, my sentries advance to take a few shots at the missile tank to the west, which has been badly damaged by my warp gunner.

Bruce: It looks like Tom has a doughboy sneaking around my HQ, although I guess he doesn't see it. He's taking a bunch of potshots at a missile tank of mine on the left, which is weird because the tank just sits there like it's fine for him to be doing that. Never send robots to do the job of scary aliens from space.

Tom: My greys in the relic building are grouped so closely that a single missile could take them all out, since the guardian's shield is barely holding out and it's recharging very slowly. But just as the missile tank is almost dead, it disappears behind a tree without even firing at us. I'm guessing Bruce doesn't know that

missile tanks begin a game in the Hold Fire setting, so you have to manually fire their missiles. This is a great help to me, and I can imagine that all wars would be easier if your opponent didn't know how to shoot his guns.

Bruce: I hate to constantly harp on this, but the Gollops really need to come up with some kind of better naming scheme. You'd think something called a "missile tank" would have missiles, or at least rockets. I'm not saying guns would be bad, either. Instead, all my missile tank does is sit around while Tom shoots at it. Well screw that—at least I know how to move it. I send it to hide behind a bush to await for further orders.

Tom: The A.I. that decimated Beta squad now engages Alpha squad in the relic building, only this time it's accompanied by two hunters. We're flanked by machina tanks, and the guardian has only one point of energy left to power his cloaking shield. This will get very messy if Bruce figures out how to fire missiles. So on the off chance that Bruce deigns to look in the manual, Alpha squad evacuates the building and takes cover in the trees.

Meanwhile, the warp gunner that crept up the east side of the map has checked all the buildings but one, which is where Bruce's HQ must be. He plots a shot at the building, which should put me on the path to a win.

As for the warp gunner that had pounded Bruce's missile tank, he finally gets up enough energy to pop off another shot, which manages to find Bruce's crippled tank and destroy it in a massive explosion and cloud of smoke. Those things make a big bang when they're fully loaded with ammo.

Bruce: I hope the country we're fighting in has already had free elections, because you know the one thing Tom's going to get rid of when he takes charge is any semblance of democracy. For example, who voted to play this game? Not me. Instead, I got some kind of secret "challenge" from an anonymous game server probably controlled by the government.

Tom: My warp gunner at Bruce's end of the map blew open what I thought was the building where Bruce had hidden his HQ. Yet, no HQ! Like the Bush administration, I must have gotten bad intel. Time to



Tom's warp gunner whaling away at Bruce's HQ.

work my way back across the map to check the other buildings more carefully.

Bruce: I think my units are getting wise to Tom's electoral plans for after the game because they're actually starting to fight back. Thanks to the dynamic story arc that Codo updates daily, my hunters can now actually hunt, and one of them kills a riot policeman in self-defense. That makes it 9-3, but this is like the eighth or ninth inning or something. Or at least it is until Tom outlaws baseball.

Tom: Alpha squad isn't going to last long. We're taking heavy casualties and we're low

Tom: Aha! My infiltrating warp gunner manages to stumble across a perfect line of sight through one building into the building past it to spy Bruce's HQ in a corner I hadn't checked. The warp gunner dashes toward it, since warp guns do more damage at close range. This war will be over soon.

Bruce: At this point it's Tom 10, Bruce 3. I still really haven't read the manual, but my guess is that means I'm losing. At this point, I start wondering if maybe that HQ I have does something, or if maybe Tom has one, too, and what

At this point it's Tom 10, Bruce 3. My guess is that this means I'm losing.

on energy. But the warp gunner that just took out Bruce's missile tank plots a shot directly into the relic building, which I vacated just as his units charged in.

Bruce: Let's examine the facts: My whole army seems to be armed solely with light pens, half of which must be broken, since they never shoot anything. Tom, on the other hand, has secret weapons that he imported from the *WarCraft* universe, because that sure looked like one of those night elf wisps that just flew by one of my tanks and into a building. And then totally blew up the building.

might happen if I were to, you know, blow his up. That would be sweet: "Hey Tom, sorry about the score, but I blew up your headquarters, and you know what that means!"

Tom: Holy crap, Bruce has that other machina missile tank up near his HQ. I'd forgotten about it! It comes charging unexpectedly out of the smoke of the warp gun explosions, ready to fire at my defenseless little warp gunner.

Bruce: You probably expected Tom to make a *deus ex machina* joke right there, right? I know, I thought it was a great game, too. I have no idea what Tom was thinking.

Tom: Luckily, Bruce's missile tank just sits there and watches as my warp gunner destroys his HQ.

Bruce: Tom blew up my HQ. I'm just counting on the possibility that because the Gollops decided to call it an "HQ," that really means it's a latrine and has no effect on the game whatsoever.

Tom: Four warp-gun shots later and I've won. The greys have saved the world from robots. And I, for one, welcome our benevolent alien overlords. ☒



Beta squad is heavily outgunned.



And victory!

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Band of Brothers and Sisters

We few, we sappy few

A Mohawk bristles from his head, a necklace of camel teeth clatters around his neck, and he's screaming for blood, calling out his enemies with increasingly cruel braggadocio and cackling with glee as he inflicts vicious bleeding wounds. He's 8 years old, the Mohawk and camel teeth are real, and he's my son. I think he's found his element.

My 10-year-old daughter, not so much. Or maybe. It's hard to say, really—she seems to enjoy the killing, but she spends most of her time dancing, flirting, and giggling endearments to my pet pig, Benny. Playing an MMO like *World of Warcraft* with a couple of kids is an entirely different experience than playing with the usual 133t power-gaming malcontents I find online.

Is it a better experience? Well, I enjoy it, but then I've grown inordinately fond of these kids in spite of the constant drain they impose on my wallet, my free time, the contents of my refrigerator, and my ability to marginally sustain the will to live. That fondness smooths over a lot of the rough spots. For instance: fishing. My son loves fishing in *WoW*, though in real life he lacks sufficient patience to stick around long enough to pronounce the second syllable of the act, let alone actually fish. But in *WoW* he's Lord God Bassmaster, plunking his hook into every body of water he sees and making his sister and I wait and wait and wait. If I had casually grouped with such an avid angler, you can bet I'd ungroup in a second, but in this familial team I'm obliged to wait since I have to lead him and his sister out of Orgimmar.

The whole fishing thing is eye-opening—literally. I am so thoroughly bored by the incessant fishing that I have resorted to an improvised *Clockwork Orange*-style knot of eyelid retractors in order to keep awake (ironically enough, real fishhooks figure prominently in its construction). But everything I could not care less about when



Yelling "Hello" to a bunch of strangers and then clucking and farting is apparently empowering.

playing with my "real" level 34 night elf character and not the low-level troll I play with my kids is what entrances them, the more meaningless the better. Like the emotes. Please, Blizzard, in your next patch, either kill all the voice emotes or add about a thousand more. Because the map-challenged trolls set to autofollow me as I lead them to the next quest are flirting, joking, laughing, cheering, and farting every single plodding step of the way. In much the same way that godforsaken *Pocahontas* videotape (oh how I longed for those to be flesh-and-blood actors I could autopsy alive with a melon baller as payback for getting that damn wind-painting song stuck in my head for three straight years) repeatedly entranced them when they were in diapers, so too does /train. And when we reach our destination, we dance. For a very long time. We are more Azeroth's Solid Gold Dancers than thrillingly dangerous agents of the horde. I haven't danced this much since *Star Wars Galaxies*, but at least then I made a very good living at it.

But to these critters that fell out of my wife, all of these little things are fun. Of all the illusions of power even the best console games can give, something about being able to yell "Hello" to a bunch of strangers and then cluck like a chicken and fart seems to do the trick way better. When you're at an age when you have to wear a foot-and-a-half chunk of wood on a lanyard around your neck just to go to the bathroom, blowing raspberries at strangers must be tremendously empowering.

And it seems all of it is more fun because we are doing it together. Something about the three of us tromping around a cartoonish world experiencing things as a unit just lights them up, lights them up in a way that playing a co-op console game never has. And it has destroyed their minds utterly. Where is the little boy who crammed half a bag of microwave popcorn into

his mouth rather than give one kernel to his sister? Surely he is not the same child who is compulsively trying to trade everything he loots to her because "she probably needs it more than me." Who is this beneficent being? And whither the girl with feelings as delicate as blown glass? That girl would never have laughed so much at her brother typing "You are stupefied" to her in a game.

I guess they'll come back eventually. Probably too soon. Until then, it's worth the monthly fee just to keep them getting along (not to mention the increased incentive to finish their uncommon denominator fraction homework sometime within their lifetime). All three computers are in different rooms, and I'm the only one who can type, so *World of Warcraft* may not do much to diminish the amount of yelling in our house, but finally, at least for now, the daily cries of "Kill Kill! Kill!" are communal. And that's a feature Blizzard should really think about putting on the game box.

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