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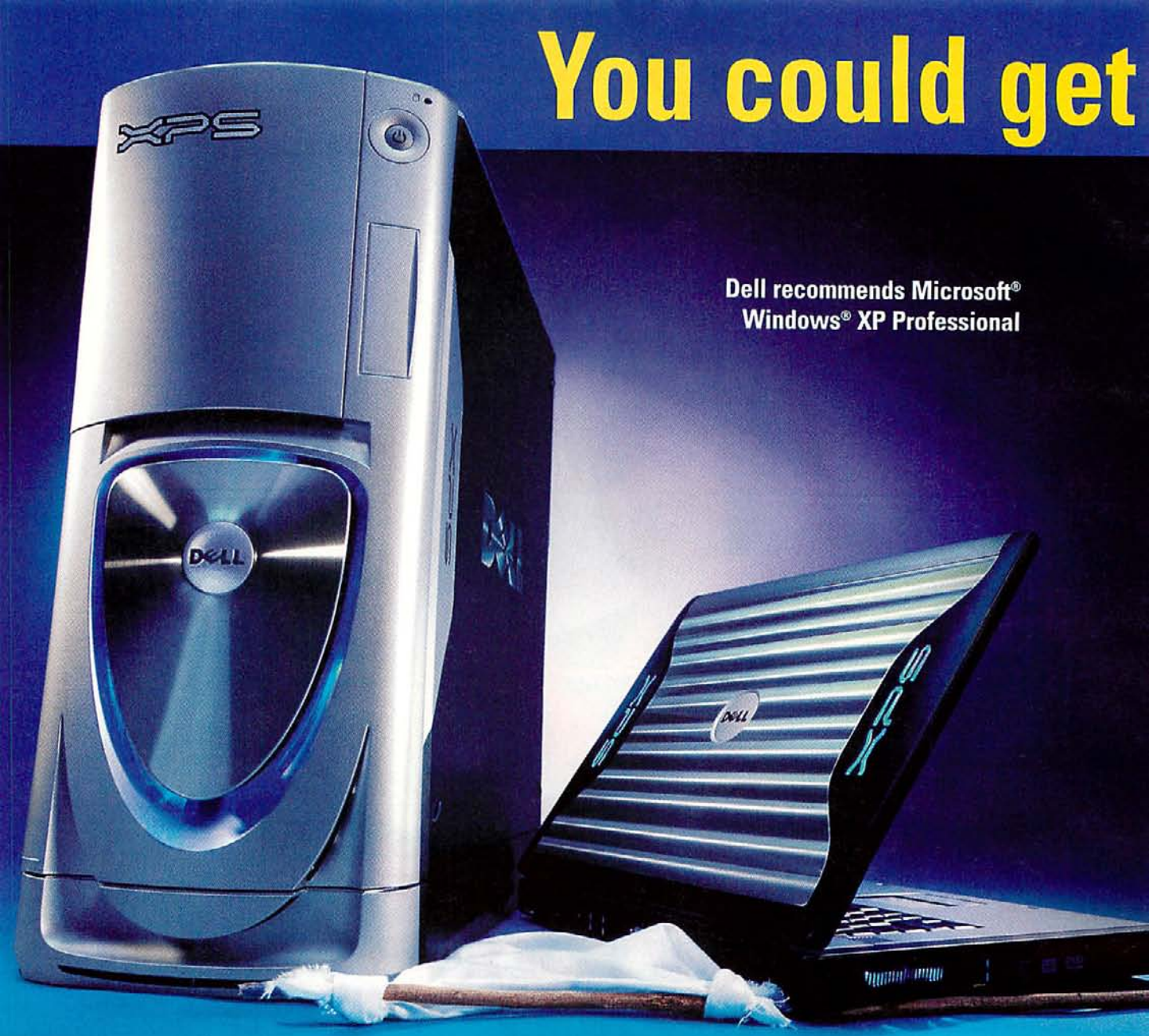

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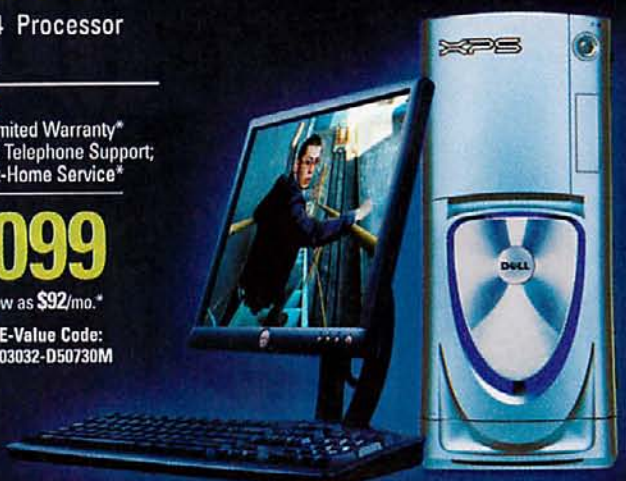

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5 GYMNASIUMS • 187 VEHICLES • 6 GAMES OF CHANCE • 33 HAIRCUTS • 7 BOUTIQUES • 10 DJS • 65 SHIRTS • ACRES OF COUNTRYSIDE
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The way it's meant to be played NVIDIA

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PLAYS BEST ON ALIENWARE

INTERACTIVE

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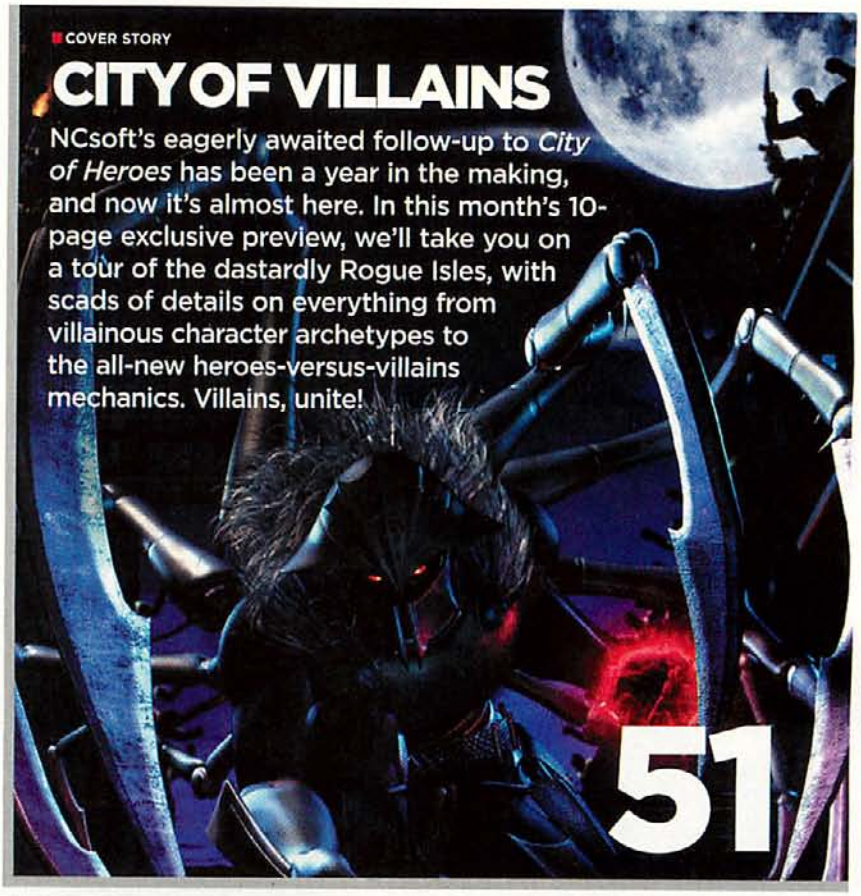
Jeff discovers something we like to refer to here at *CGW* as "teh intarweb!"

16 Letters
You've got questions, we've got random, witty, scathing remarks that have nothing to do with your questions.

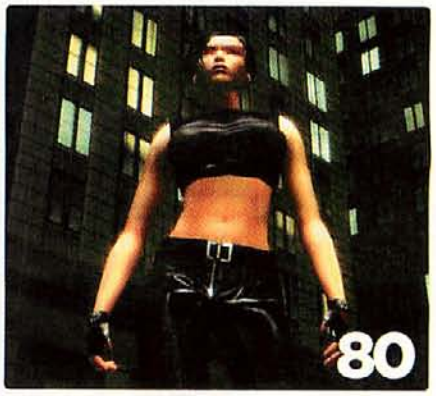
20 Radar
This month's massive new Radar section is all over the map with scoops, weirdness, and an amazing *CGW* undercover exclusive. We've continued delving deeper into the virtual sin city, and we've gone online—and underground—to infiltrate Chinese MMO gaming sweatshops. Next, we've got exclusive peeks at *Serious Sam II*, *Prince of Persia 3*, and the rebirth of turn-based strategy games...courtesy of *Heroes of Might and Magic V!* Also, we talk with Wayne Coyne, lead singer of the Flaming Lips, about work on the awesome soundtrack for *Stubbs the Zombie*. All that and more awaits you—so make with the page-flipping!

COVER STORY

CITY OF VILLAINS
NCsoft's eagerly awaited follow-up to *City of Heroes* has been a year in the making, and now it's almost here. In this month's 10-page exclusive preview, we'll take you on a tour of the dastardly Rogue Isles, with scads of details on everything from villainous character archetypes to the all-new heroes-versus-villains mechanics. Villains, unite!



67 Reviews
Just in time to alleviate the inevitable *WOW* burnout—*Guild Wars*! Hooray! And just in time to alleviate the inevitable *Matrix* burnout—*The Matrix Online*! Hooray? Maybe not so much. We've gone in-depth with both of these online behemoths, as well as *Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil*, *Lego Star Wars*, the fun-to-say but bad-to-play *Psychotoxic*, the latest (and lamest) *Close Combat* game, and a great under-the-radar RTS called *Knights of Honor*.



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91 Tech
Raphael's mission: to seek out and test technology with extreme prejudice. Our tech commando wouldn't have it any other way. This month, Raphael runs two systems through the obstacle course: a small form-factor Shuttle system and a budget SLI rig from Velocity Micro. Then, just for giggles, Raphael drops AMD and Intel into a no-holds-barred battle royal to determine which chipset you should buy for your next rig. Who triumphs, and who pukes on their shoes? All this plus some extra-high high-end Paradigm speakers, the latest Audigy soundcard, Tech Medics, Killer Rig, and more await you in the Tech proving grounds.

102 Tom vs. Bruce
The world is at war in *Gary Grigsby's World at War*—with Tom and Bruce calling the shots. Goodbye, Earth!

106 Scorched Earth
LLCOOLCGW—Ladies Love Cool *CGW*. How'd that happen?

THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

KYMMIKO.1UP.COM

1UP's resident community manager may look like just another pretty face, but Kimberly Matsuzaki is a hardcore girl gamer who could probably kick your ass at *Counter-Strike: Source*, where she's been running with the SMAK Clan for two years and counting. Once you're done reading her 1UP blog (updated 27 times daily!), you can check out her weekly *Guild Wars* exploits at death.1UP.com.

URBANVIGILANTE.1UP.COM

1UP MMO columnist Scott Sharkey shares his thoughts, experiences, and crazy rants about Paragon City in *Memoirs of an Urban Vigilante*, which chronicles the ongoing adventures of his *City of Heroes* character, The CEO of Earth. Together with his associates in the League of Extraordinary Bastards, The CEO of Earth makes Paragon City a better place—one savage beating at a time.

SEROPADOPE.1UP.COM

Curious about what's going on with Wideload's upcoming *Stubbs the Zombie?* Wideload head honcho Alex Seropian takes you behind the scenes in his 1UP developer diary, in which he waxes intellectual about the development process, E3 preparation, and general Wideload office life.

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— PC Gamer

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TEEN
T
Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org
Game Experience May Change During Online Play

EDITORIAL 253

Online Goes Prime Time

They have the Internet on computers now!

Way back when I first started at this magazine, when it was called *Abacus Gaming World*, online gaming was in the most primitive of states. Robert Coffey and I, for example, when we weren't out hunter-gathering for the females in our tribe, used to play our turn-based strategy games online through a complex system of bird calls, hand gestures, and smoke signals. Like everyone else, we maintained a healthy skepticism and wariness of Internet gaming, even as the phenomenon grew. We harshed all over *Ultima Online* at first, got on the *EverQuest* bandwagon late, and quietly maintained the belief, as many still do, that "real" games are played offline.

That seems like a long time ago now. *World of WarCraft*, last year's unequivocal Game of the Year, is an international phenomenon, with over a million players now. *EverQuest II* continues to get better and draw in new players. And the most exciting new developments in PC gaming continue to come from the online arena. Our two big reviews this month—*Guild Wars* and *The Matrix Online*—are both online-only games, and one of those two is an early contender for 2005's Game of the Year.

And then there's our cover story: *City of Villains*. This long-awaited sequel to NCsoft's smash, *City of Heroes*, in which we'll be able to indulge in our evilest supervillain daydreams online, looks as cool as we hoped it would. So dig into Ryan Scott's exclusive 10-page story, and get ready to conquer the online world—the world that's conquered the rest of us already.

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

WHO'S YOUR **VILLAINOUS ALTER EGO?**

KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR
All hail Thrashette, drumstick-wielding demon whose vicious fills leave the highways and byways littered with the remains of those who get in her way...or miss their deadlines. It really *is* a long way to the top if you wanna rock 'n' roll!
1UP.com Blog: kristenss.1UP.com
Now Playing: Guild Wars, Age of Empires (yeah, the first one)

ROBERT COFFEY
EXECUTIVE EDITOR
If Robert has an evil alter ego, then may God have mercy on our souls, for verily Satan doth stride upon the Earth and forfeit are our immortal souls. Sure, he said something about Urethra Franklin, the so-called first lady of soulless who pisses people off with her singing, but we're not buying that.
1UP.com Blog: rtfreerain.1UP.com
Now Playing: World of Warcraft (still)

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR
Darth Swag, pictured here with his lovable enforcer "Mini-D," doesn't have any superpowers, just A LOT of free stuff that gets sent to him. This ruthless mastermind commands minions to do his bidding for first dibs on his castaways, like a Mary-Kate and Ashley coffee mug.
1UP.com Blog: cgw_darren.1UP.com
Now Playing: Parish (God help him), Area 51, a Diamondo (they actually do exist!)

RYAN SCOTT
ASSOCIATE EDITOR
Ryan's evil alter ego, Bizarro Ryan, is a hip-hop gangsta who's smooth with "tha fizzadies" everywhere. His ultimate master plan: to turn the world's entire male population into Bizarro Ryans. And to keep it real. Whatever that means.
1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com
Now Playing: Splinter Cell Chaos Theory, Lumines (PSP)

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR
Dr. Pepper, captured here in a rarely seen photograph, was abandoned at age 28 near a taco stand in San Francisco. The doctor was taken in by a pod of renegade banana peppers who, even as we speak, are hatching his master plan to transform the world from mild to extra mild with a kick.
1UP.com Blog: cgw_jennings.1UP.com
Now Playing: Chronicles of Riddick (again), City of Heroes

PAULA STRINGFELLOW
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR
Donning a pair of rocket-powered roller skates, Paula is secretly the Disco Diva. She doesn't think she's bad, per se, but that stuff she's listening to at her desk—damn, that Gloria Gaynor is just straight-up evil!
1UP.com Blog: cgw_paula.1UP.com
Now Playing: Need for Speed Underground 2

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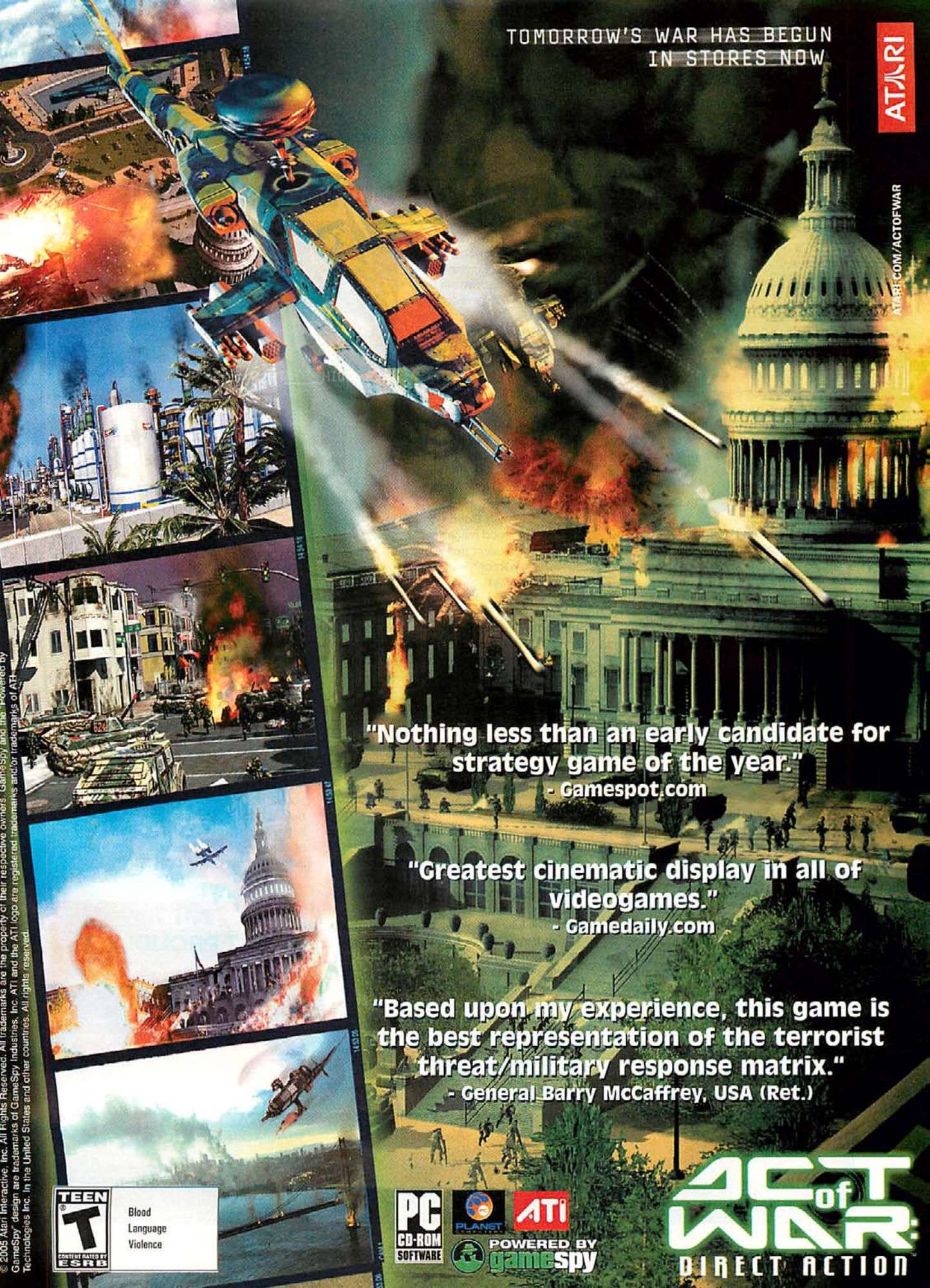

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Letters

Our monthly allotment of intercourse

ALONE AGAIN, NATURALLY

I just wanted to put my two cents in, which probably at most is worth half a cent, but here it is nonetheless. After reading the *Star Wars Republic Commando* article by Erik Wolpaw, I've had enough. Will you closet crawlers get over the last two *Star Wars* movies please? You people complain more than my girlfriend, which is an impressive feat, to say the least. I am personally looking forward to the upcoming movie, so to say "nobody's gonna like [it]" is obviously a false statement. Move on!

Steve Redding

Dear Steve Redding's girlfriend—did you see what he said about you? You're not going to take that from a Jar Jar-hugging goon like him, are you?

APPEARING NIGHTLY ON THE ROLE-PLAYING SERVER

My name is Gog. I am an orc. Do not expect me to grunt and speak like a barbarian. I am well educated. After all, I am a warlock of the 55th level. A short time ago, I read of a gnome named Eggbert. Since then, I have seen several pieces about Eggbert. I have enjoyed reading them. Now I roam the lands looking for gnomes. I am hoping to find Eggbert and make his acquaintance. There are many reasons I would like to meet up with Eggbert, but mostly because I think he probably tastes like chicken.

Gog, Warlord, Thralls Elite Guard

Thank you for finally clearing up what happened to all those kids who went missing while playing *AD&D* in their colleges' sewers back in the '80s.

WORLD OF WARCRASH

Your magazine needs to do more in the area of rating MMO games after their release as far as technical performance is concerned. Case in point: *World of WarCraft*. This game is excellent in regard to the qualities noted in your postrelease review and other articles; however, Blizzard has done a horrible job of maintaining the technical performance of this game. The lag is terrible on almost all the servers, players are frequently disconnected for no reason, and they have a difficult time logging in due to Blizzard's problem-plagued login server. In addition, servers are frequently down due to crashes, and Blizzard sometimes takes forever to bring them up again.

cherylannsut

MMOs are arguably the most difficult games for us to cover, due chiefly to their highly changeable nature. When *WOW* launched and we reviewed it, it featured one of the most stable MMO launches we could recall. Since then, things have gone decidedly downhill. Like you, we've been experiencing lag and, even worse, frequent disconnects (particularly when visiting Ironforge). However, we have seen some improvement (though some significant problems inarguably persist) with the patches. But you know what? They could be fixed by the time this sees print, because such is the constantly updating nature of online games. Blizzard has been generous, extending subscription lengths and granting rest bonuses as compensation for its difficulties, something most companies don't do.

DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HISTORY

Why has everyone been saying *Dune II* is the first real-time strategy game? Sensible Software's *Mega Lo Mania* came out a year before *Dune II*, and it is just as much an RTS as *Dune II* is. It may not be the same in terms of complexity, but it is definitely the pioneer in the RTS genre, not *Dune II*.

Zack Green

Time for an Intervention

Is there some cure for this MMORPG thing? Can you get a large person of unknown descent to bash you in the head as a reminder to eat or sleep? Please? I...I don't think I can take it much longer. Please, you have to help me. I have been to San Francisco, if it helps. I probably walked by your offices at least once, if you are anywhere near the BART. Please? (sob, sob)

I...I.... Can one of you tell me where the alchemy trainer is in Thunder Bluff? My level 11 druid really needs to find him.

PS: Oh, yeah. Good work on a very good magazine. And which talent tree is better for a warrior? Sorry, sorry, ignore that last one.

Jon Montoya

Thanks for the kind words, Jon, but we can't help you much. We're as *WOW*-addicted as you are. If it's any consolation, we can direct you to the alchemy trainer. See that cow-looking critter over there? Right near that. Hope that helps.

ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL SIEBEN

SAY IT LOUD, SAY IT PROUD!

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

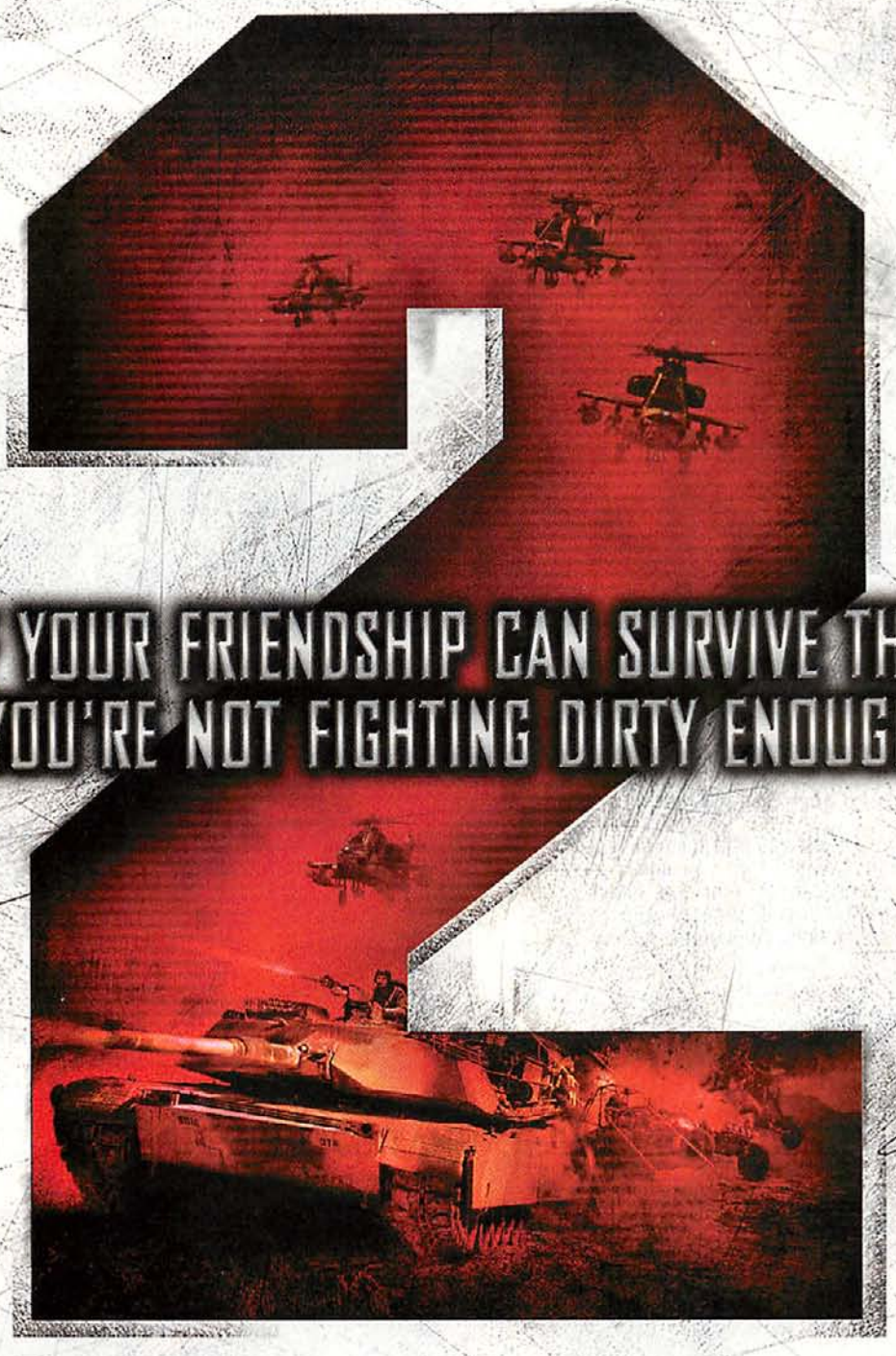
Mail Bites

Say it with me: *Grim Fandango* the movie.
—Martin

I would just like to say that the support we have had from The Creative Assembly regarding *Rome: Total War* has been terrible.
—Robert Richardson

I don't know about you guys, but bright lights and flashing colors keep me entertained for hours.
—Brandon Engler on 1UP.com

Bruce > Tom
—Adam Mitchell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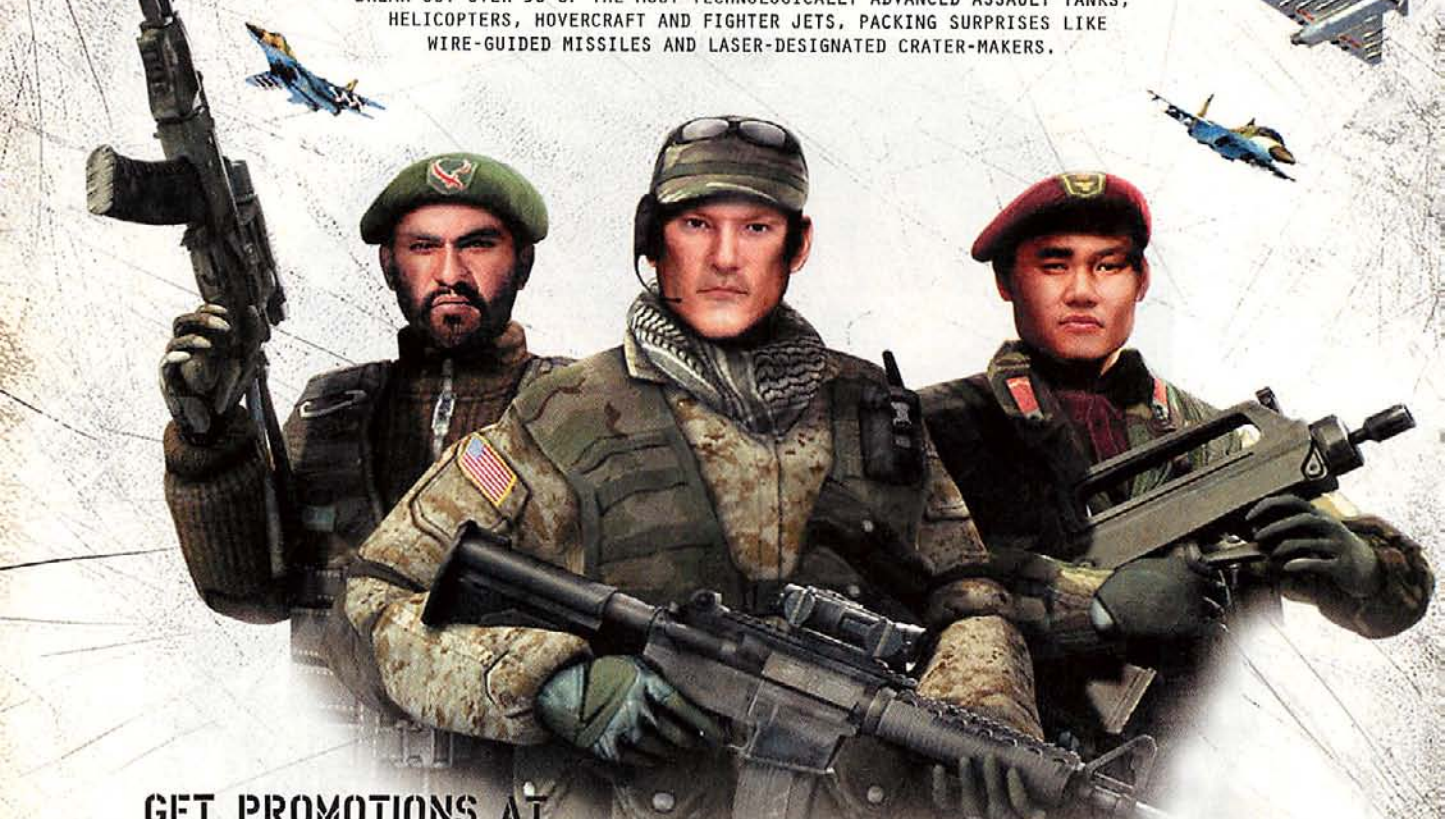

GET PROMOTIONS AT THE EXPENSE OF COWORKERS.

A NEW GAME ENGINE MEANS YOU EITHER LEARN TO TELL COVER FROM CONCEALMENT, OR YOU WON'T LIVE TO RACK UP VICTORIES AND RISE UP THE RANKS. COORDINATE ATTACKS VIA VOICE OVER IP AND PROVE YOU'RE A LEADER IN NEW COMMANDER MODE.

NO AGENDAS. JUST AGGRESSION.

THESE NEW HOSTILITIES AREN'T ABOUT PRINCIPLES OR POLITICS. IT'S PERSONAL. YOU AGAINST FRIENDS, COWORKERS OR ANYONE ONLINE WHO WANTS TO START SOMETHING NOISY.

GOLIATH OR GUERRILLA: WHAT'S YOUR FIGHTING STYLE?

GEAR UP AS THE U.S., CHINA OR THE MIDDLE-EAST COALITION. THEN DECLARE 16, 32 OR 64-FIGHTER FREE-FOR-ALLS OVER MAPS OF CHINA OR THE MIDDLE EAST THAT SCALE TO THE SIZE OF THE MELEE.

RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

Game experience may change during online play.

DICE

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Wage Slaves

FROM SWEATSHOPS TO STATESIDE CORPORATIONS, SOME PEOPLE ARE PROFITING OFF OF MMO GOLD

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES MIELKE

Lip Balm
Flaming Lips' front man Wayne Coyne on the *Stubbs the Zombie* soundtrack.

Your Move
Heroes V and *Civ IV* lead the way in a turn-based strategy game revival.

Seriously, Folks
Croteam spills some secrets about the weapons and monsters in its upcoming, long-awaited *Serious Sam II*.

Last month we showed you some of the scammers and crooks that lurk in MMO games. Now, let's go into the field for a firsthand account of another part of the online underworld.

"Sack" is the only name I'm given for the person I'm supposed to contact. He lives in the Fujian province of China, but his place of business is online—he plays *Lineage II*. He's paid about 56 cents an hour to work in a videogame "sweatshop."

If the term sounds familiar, it's because of Lee Caldwell. The notorious MMORPG scripter got busted four years ago for admitting that his company, BlackSnow, hired workers in Tijuana to earn gold by "farming" in *Ultima Online*. Caldwell sold that in-game tender online for a handsome real-world profit while only paying his employees pennies on the dollar. Since 1998, the second-party market for MMORPG loot has steadily grown. Last year alone, this newfound industry grossed roughly $500 million, according to Bob Kiblinger of UOTreasures. *CGW* decided it was high time to go underground and find some of the key players who are going after a piece of the action.

Sack is the low man in these operations. "I work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. on the U.S. *Lineage II* server," he says. He works long, boring hours for low pay and gets no holidays. Carefully constructed macros do most of the work; Sack is just there to fend off the occasional player itching for a fight or game master who's hunting for these automated farming programs. "Everyone knows where the good places are, and GMs know that your account has been online for a whole month," he says. "[A GM will] message me asking, 'Hello, what level are you, please?' I know he isn't asking my level; he just wants to know if [there's actually a person at the computer]."

How does it work? The macros for *World of WarCraft*, for example, control a high-level hunter and cleric. The hunter kills while the cleric automatically heals. Once they are fully loaded with gold and items, the "farmer" who's monitoring their progress manually controls them out of the dungeon to go sell their goods. These automated agents are then returned to the dungeons to do their thing again. Sack's typical 12-hour sessions can earn his employers as much as $60,000 per month while he walks away with a measly $150.

The people in these pics taken at one virtual sweatshop make as little as 56 cents an hour.

MACROS AND EXPLOITERS

The real money is made by the people with the resources and the right programs. Rich Thurman earned $100,000 by farming 9 billion gold in *Ultima Online*. A longtime user of the macro easyUO, Thurman says he had "up to 30 PCs running at once, automatically collecting gold for me."

That is the first step. It isn't too difficult from there to make the leap into creating your own sweatshop. All you need is the ability to write game macros or the money to purchase them. That's right, if you know where to look, they are on the open market. A macro that uses a teleportation exploit in *WOW* is currently going for $3,000. Then just hire cheap labor to monitor the bots.

Weeks go by as I chase ghosts and rumors of Chinese workers clicking 12 hours a day. Word has it that 300 farmers are working at computers lined up in airport hangars somewhere in Asia. After all, *Lineage II* banned certain Chinese IPs for a reason. Finally, I get in contact with a man in his 30s who goes by the name Smooth Criminal. He's a partner in one of the largest sellers of MMORPG gold, and he isn't apologetic. His rap sheet: banned from *Ultima Online*, *Asheron's Call*, *Shadowbane*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, and *Ultima Online* again. He says once someone even traded him a wedding ring worth $2,000 for *WOW* gold.

Smooth Criminal's game cartel made $1.5 million from *Star Wars Galaxies* alone last year, and individually, he's made as much as $700,000 in a single year. "[*SWG*] built my new house, which I paid for in cash," he says. "So when you ring my doorbell, it plays the *Star Wars* music." Smooth Criminal is in charge of writing programs, finding exploits, and locating in-game "dupes" (bugs for duplicating gold or items). "I have a real job, but when there's a dupe, I call in sick," he says. It costs him more money to actually go to his "real job." "When I dupe," Smooth Criminal adds, "I farm billions on every game server and spread out my activities." He then uses three accounts to launder the gold: a duper account, a filter account, and a delivery account—each created using different IPs, credit cards, and computers. This way, it's hard to trace the source, and the gold comes back clean.

FOLLOW THE MONEY

For every reseller of gold, there's a wholesaler who supplies it to gamers with real money to burn. And the biggest name in gold resale is IGE, or Internet Gaming Entertainment. "It's not that they pay the best; they are the most well known, and so [stuff] sells fast," says Smooth Criminal. He knows sales are good because resellers can track profits in real time—and because IGE is one of the biggest fish in the secondary gold market. In fact, IGE has been on a buying spree. It is acquiring the competition and creating a virtual

For every reseller of gold, there's a wholesaler who supplies it to gamers with real money to burn.

UNITED STATES
HEROG
HeRog is a manager of Chinese farmers who does the same job as Sell but earns a lot more than Sell's $180 per month. Herog quit his six-figure job but won't go into specifics on how much he makes now. "Six bigger figures," he says.

UNITED STATES
SMOOTH CRIMINAL
Smooth Criminal is a top-of-the-food-chain programmer who looks for exploits and dupe methods. He then gives the macros to his other administrative managers in charge of farming centers overseas.

UNITED STATES/
CHINA
IGE
IGE is the biggest reseller in the business, with administrative offices in New York and Miami (COO Alan Debonneville lives in Florida), but its customer service force is located in Hong Kong.

WOW: $60 for 500 gold ■ COH: $30 for 5 million influence ■ EQ2: $82 for 500 gold ■ FFXI: $40 for 1 million gil ■ L2

monopoly in this market.

IGE president Steve Salyer tells *CGW*, "We don't farm assets, nor do we endorse any type of cheating or abusive farming practices. IGE is leading the way in efforts to help prevent these abuses. We spend a lot of time speaking with sellers and educating people involved in the secondary market. IGE is against abusive farming practices wherever they are taking place."

But finding and shutting down these farming sweatshops is a hard thing to do. Kiblinger says that IGE's customer service is based in Hong Kong, its employees working for sweatshop wages. IGE's response: "The reason we have customer service in Hong Kong is because it's the gateway to Asia, and our customer service reps earn a fair salary in relation to the profession in that country." This is the same rationale for major companies shipping their customer service desks to India.

Even though IGE itself doesn't farm, and IGE representatives recently told us the company is working to ferret out and ban such behavior, it does buy from farmers who could use exploits. "Whoever supplies IGE controls the market," says Smooth Criminal. Even worse, he continues, "IGE looks the other way when you give them currency. They don't care where it came from even if you tell them you duped it." In fact, Smooth Criminal alleges that IGE helped him hide the illegal credits. "They had to keep moving [*Star Wars Galaxies*] credits around from account to account to avoid the credit trail (i.e., duped credits) because we told them they were duped."

(We asked an IGE representative about Smooth Criminal's experience and received no response.) Currently, Chinese farmers are the main suppliers of *WOW*'s in-game items and gold, and they control the market. Does this mean IGE needs to buy from these suppliers to stay competitive?

Smooth Criminal owns 30 percent of an Indonesian farm, and he just bought a Chinese one that was entirely funded by a recent *WOW* exploit. When he doesn't have a currency exploit, he falls back on his shops to do some wholesale farming. "Farmers in *WOW* will be stationed on like a 20-gold-per-hour spot. They have to make at least 15 gold per hour," says Smooth Criminal. However, he has only 10 computers in place so far.

"Ten computers? We have 100 employees for one game!" laughs "Sell." Sell is a recent graduate from Nanjing University. At 24, he's a manager for Vpgamesell, a large *SWG* Chinese farming center that wholesales to popular resellers. He started off by selling gil in *Final Fantasy XI*, but his farm-

Currently, Chinese farmers are the main suppliers of *World of WarCraft*'s in-game items and gold.

ROMANIA
ADRIAN2001
Adrian is a manager for Gamer's Loot, which mostly power-levels in *City of Heroes*. On a good day, Adrian and his most trusted worker (who used to farm goats) can power-level a character to level 30.

CHINA
SACK
This *Lineage II* Chinese farmer gets about 56 cents an hour. *Lineage II* had banned Chinese IPs because of their huge Chinese farming problem; however, Sack's farming center easily worked around it.

INDONESIA
THE CANADIAN
Smooth Criminal owns 30 percent of an Indonesia farming center and hired "The Canadian" as a manager. Their farmers mainly work in *WOW* on one of the 20 PCs they have set up.

for 1 million gold ■ Shadowbane: $35 for 25 million gold ■ UO: $38 for 5 million gold ■ SWG: $12 for 3 million credits

ing days are over. He's moved up to manager status, helping with marketing and delivery. His many farmers work 10-hour rotations and are paid $121 a month. Sell gets $180 a month and works closer to 14 hours a day because he lives at the office, which is a fairly common practice at farming centers—if you lose your job, you also lose your home. Sell negotiates with resellers online to determine the amount of credits they promise to purchase from Vpgamesell. While chatting with me, he's messaging five different people and making contracts for 5 million credits for each server per day.

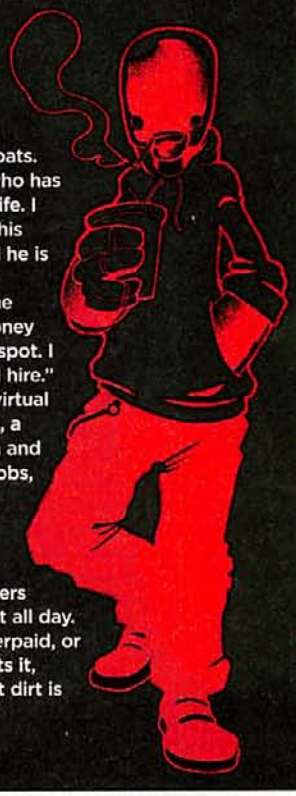
"HeRog," the owner of Your Virtual Seller, does the same thing as Sell but gets paid well here in America. "I was able to quit my full-time, six-figure-income job," HeRog says.

Smooth Criminal tells me the hiring process at his Indonesian farm is through word of mouth, and the farm turns down 10 to 20 people a day. But that process can get difficult, especially in poor countries.

Adrian2001, a manager for Gamer's Loot, says of his hiring process, "Trust is most important." He gives an example: "I have one boy here [in Romania] that raises goats. So imagine someone who has never seen a PC in his life. I hired the boy because his family is very poor, and he is honest. I tested him by putting money where he might notice it. The money never moved from the spot. I do that with everyone I hire."

For all the so-called virtual sweatshops discovered, a lot of these young men and boys don't mind their jobs, and they aren't exactly working in sweatshop conditions. There's a world of difference between making sneakers and watching bots fight all day. However, they are underpaid, or as Smooth Criminal puts it, "They get paid dirt. But dirt is good where they live."

■ James Lee



SOE'S EQBAY: STATION EXCHANGE

If only they had thought of it first

With the second-party market making money off their games, it was only a matter of time before publishers wanted to get a piece of the action. SOE will implement an official in-house auction site for *EverQuest II*, where players can put anything up for auction. Placing an item or character up for auction will immediately remove it from the server and put it on the Station Exchange auction site. SOE spokesman Chris Kramer says SOE wants to "shape the direction of the legitimate secondary market." Many companies such as *Star Wars Galaxies* publisher LucasArts will keep a close eye on SOE when it launches two new Station Exchange–enabled *EQ2* servers in late July. SOE will charge a listing fee and collect a percentage of the final sale, much like other online auction companies do. Resellers tell us that selling gold and high-level characters is about a hundred times more profitable than what these game companies make from monthly fees. But will this truly eliminate the secondary market competition?

INTERVIEW

Rock Till You Drop

The Flaming Lips talk about making sweet music for the undead

> **"[*Stubbs*] sounds promising...and creative."**
> —Wayne Coyne

We love the dead. Not the musical hippies, we're talking about *The Evil Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*—you get the idea. But when we caught wind of the plan for the *Stubbs the Zombie* soundtrack—classic '50s and early '60s tunes covered by modern artists like the Flaming Lips, the Walkmen, and Cake—we got as excited about the music as we did about the game.

Now for those unfamiliar with the Flaming Lips, these experimental rockers have been around since 1984, trying everything from recording a cacophony of car stereos in a parking garage to selling a four-CD set (1997's *Zaireeka*) that had to be played on four different CD players at once. They've written songs about bugs, aliens, and robots, made a movie about Santa Claus on Mars, and created an original song for *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*. But what exactly was Wayne Coyne, the leading Lip, thinking when he agreed to talk to us for a few minutes? ■ Darren Gladstone

CGW: Why do an original recording for a videogame? Do you play a lot of games?
WC: Not really. It was more the people that were doing it. I wasn't really sure what their theme was for the videogame. I didn't know if the zombies—or whoever the brain-eaters are in this thing—were the main theme or just one of the sort of patches you go through. It was exaggerated and silly, and they wanted there to be some element of it still being childlike and innocent. I mean, without it being sort of Marilyn Manson-esque or something like that.

I think [producer Zach Rener at Aspyr] knew we had done a cover of "If I Only Had a Brain" from the *Wizard of Oz* soundtrack a couple of times on radio stations. [Rener] approached us the right way, at the right time, while we were already in the studio doing recording sessions.

But again, it was more the guys that were putting the videogame together that made us decide, not just the theme of the game. Because for some of it, you have to work on a little bit on faith. It sounds promising, and we hope that it turns out to be something interesting and good and creative and all that.

CGW: Yeah, actually, I had a chance to hear the song. It was simultaneously creepy and funny and catchy.
WC: Right. And it's such a great song. We follow the melody and the lyrics, you know, exactly as they are, and then do some silly arranging and stuff like that. We had a lot of fun adding in Dave Fridmann's kids—Dave Fridmann is the head of the studio we were at—making all sorts of weird sounds in the background. All day, we were laughing, crying, and then we'd speed it up and slow it down. You know, you just sort of end up making the session itself kind of fun, and sometimes that really can translate onto the track, where you get a kind of enthusiasm and freakiness, but it isn't something you necessarily have to create. It just sort of happened there. ■

Wayne had so much to say, we'd have to dedicate an entire magazine to all the thoughts bumping around in his head. For more about the man, the band, and the upcoming CD, *At War With the Mystics*, read the rest of the interview at cgw.1UP.com.

Check out the lineup for the *Stubbs* CD.

Think you know your music? Who originally recorded the songs below? (answers at the bottom)

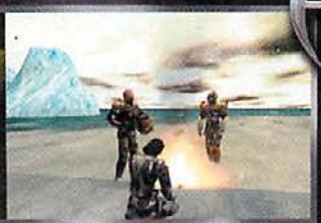
1. **Ben Kweller** Lollipop
2. **The Raveonettes** My Boyfriend's Back
3. **Death Cab for Cutie** Earth Angel
4. **Rogue Wave** Everyday
5. **Cake** Strangers in the Night
6. **The Walkmen** There Goes My Baby
7. **The Dandy Warhols** All I Have to Do Is Dream
8. **Oranger** Mr. Sandman
9. **The Flaming Lips** If I Only Had a Brain
10. **Clem Snide** Tears on My Pillow
11. **Rose Hill Drive** Shakin' All Over
12. **Milton Mapes** Lonesome Town
13. **Phantom Planet** The Living Dead

LIP SERVICE:
Want a true taste of what The Flaming Lips are all about? Get your hands on the albums *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* and *The Soft Bulletin*. Then check out *The Fearless Freaks* (DVD).

ANSWERS:
1. The Chordettes 2. The Angels 3. The Penguins 4. Buddy Holly 5. Frank Sinatra 6. The Drifters 7. Lively Brothers 8. The Chordettes 9. Performed by Ray Bolger and Judy Garland on *The Wizard of Oz* soundtrack 10. Little Anthony and the Imperials 11. Johnny Kidd and the Pirates 12. Ricky Nelson 13. OK, so that's a trick question. Phantom Planet recorded an original song.

Asheron's Call

Throne of Destiny™



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Once Upon a Time...

Fable: The Lost Chapters spins a whimsical fantasy tale

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft**
DEVELOPER: **Lionhead Studios** GENRE: **RPG**
RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2005**

Peter Molyneux's RPG magnum opus, *Fable*, released for the Xbox late last year, presents a huge, open world that gives players considerable freedom, allowing them to affect the game environment and its denizens. This fall, it's coming to the PC in a jam-packed special edition that features new mission objectives, additional story-line elements, and even more weapons and items. We've managed to sneak a peek at three of the "lost chapters" you'll be traveling through. Sit down and let us tell you a little story.... Ryan Scott

The Oracle of Snowspire

Horrifying new creatures called summoners stalk the world of Albion—and it's up to you to find out why. You'll need to sail on the Ship of the Lost to the town of Snowspire, where you'll seek the counsel of a wise oracle whose answers are wrapped up in the history of Albion itself.

Here, at Lost Bay, your journey to the town of Snowspire begins.

As you trudge through the desolate Northern Wastes, you'll receive a rather frosty reception from the local ice troll.

The final steps of your journey to Snowspire take you through Archon's Shrine to the foreboding Bronze Gate.

An ancient hero named Scythe directs you to the haunted Necropolis, instructing you to find the four Glyphs of Enquiry.

Here in the Necropolis, you'll scour several graves in search of the glyphs—and you'll have to face the city's dreaded ghosts.

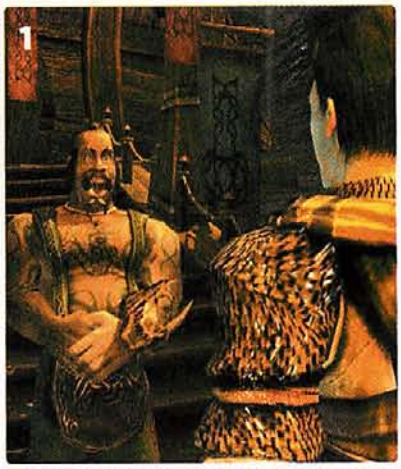
NEWS FEED ›› Diablo returns. Our spy network reports that *Diablo III* is more than a rumor. Job postings for a "AAA title" have appeared on Blizzard's website, and we've caught wind that the soundtrack was recently recorded in the Czech Republic. ››

The Ransom **Victim**

The chief of Knothole Glade has a small problem: A group of assassins has kidnapped his youngest son, and they're holding him captive in a cave in Witchwood. This looks like a job for a hero! There's more to this story, though—you'll find that the "kidnapped" son has actually run away after growing tired of his older sibling constantly stealing the limelight. Will you return him to his worried father, or will you accept his counteroffer and bring his older brother to Witchwood for him?

Ice trolls aren't your only worry—you'll have to watch out for a few other unpleasant denizens as well.

Glyphs in hand, you return to town to consult with the oracle at last—but don't expect much in the way of good news!



The chief of Knothole Glade needs a hero. It could be you...provided you don't turn your back on him like a lousy cheat.

If you're harboring serious concerns about going up against the assassins alone, you can enlist the services of the chief's loyal bodyguard. But his help comes at a steep price!

What kind of hero are you? *Fable: The Lost Chapters* is filled with moral choices that determine how much the people of Albion trust you and how they will react to you.

The Sick **Child**

One of the first new missions revolves around helping an ill child who has eaten a poisonous mushroom. The local witch immediately sends you out to collect a trio of magic mushrooms from which she'll concoct a remedy; you'll perform a variety of tasks as you seek each mushroom, from fishing to stealing to cheering up a rather depressed young lady. Of course, if you prefer, you can always strong-arm the fine folks of Albion into handing over their precious mushrooms—but you won't make many friends that way.

The town witch can brew up a potion to heal the sick boy—but only if you collect the three magic mushrooms she needs.

Collecting one mushroom involves dealing with a couple of clueless traders who blame each other for losing the mushroom you seek.

NEWS FEED ›› Undying to make more games. Horror novelist Clive Barker is now working with John Woo and Majesco to produce a thriller (and game) for 2006: *Demonik*. Developer Terminal Reality (*BloodRayne*) will bring the third-person action game to life. ››

GLADSTONED

Microsoft's finally thinking outside the Xbox again

Anybody who thinks PC gamemakers can't learn a thing or two from the console world is a complete idiot. Hear me out for one second. I just saw somebody drop a full retail version of *Need for Speed Underground 2* into a DVD-ROM drive, and the game started up. No install BS; the computer worked *exactly* like an Xbox—the only difference being that it's bigger and will run you about three grand more. You insert the disc, files get cached onto the hard drive, and the rest streams from the disc as you play.

Cue the head slap! What the hell took you guys so long to figure this out? Companies like DISCover have been dabbling at this "Tray and Play" technology (DISCover calls its method "Drop and Play"), but these attempts require an Internet hookup. Microsoft is trying to streamline the process, developing driver code that works in the background so that upcoming games will work just like console games right out of the box—of course, if you number among the h4rdcor3, you can still rock out with the good old install method.

Now, I'd reported on Microsoft's Tray and Play concept (is it just me, or is this the lamest catchphrase since "Must-See TV"?) about six months back but cynically thought that this update wasn't happening until the next Windows OS came along. However, Microsoft wise guy Dean Lester recently demonstrated the technology, which is further along than you'd think and could start working as early as this year with some games. Grab your No. 2 pencils, kids—here's some quick math for you:

Ease of use + Fewer barriers of entry = More people wanting to play PC games

More people playing PC games = More publishers wanting to publish them

Any questions?

This is *exactly* why there's such a wide variety of games on consoles, while we're mostly seeing FPS, RPG, and strategy titles on the PC. Of course, with news that the Xbox 360 is due out this fall comes another round of "the end is nigh" for PC games proclamations from "pundits" who don't know their ASCII from their elbows. Truth be told, we're only in for good things. I'm personally looking forward to having a standardized console controller that can work with the PC and more cross-platform games (see: PS2 and PC versions of *Final Fantasy XI* and *Need for Speed Underground*). Microsoft's chief XNA architect, J Allard, envisions PC gamers taking strategic roles in some games, executing orders and laying out RTS planning, while console gamers are in the field doing the fighting—the sort of thing that's been done on the PC in *Savage*, *Allegiance*, and now *Battlefield 2*, but on a grander scale. Point is, we're seeing the PC and console worlds slowly evolving to a point where—*hopefully*—the platforms won't dictate the games.

Darren Gladstone

NEWS FEED >> You've probably heard that GameStop has made a bid to buy out EB Games. Is this a good or bad thing? Sound off at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com. >>

THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

July/August 2005

The Good
Guild Wars

Guild Wars is here and it's awesome! For anyone who loves immersive multiplayer RPG experiences, yet can't fathom the notion of paying a monthly subscription fee, *Guild Wars* is for you. It's free to play, it looks gorgeous, and thanks to the brilliant engineering of the folks who brought you Battle.net, it's already running like a well-oiled machine. Check out our in-depth review on page 68!

The Bad
Jon Van Caneghem Leaves NCsoft

Heroes of Might and Magic mastermind Jon Van Caneghem has parted ways with MMORPG publisher NCsoft, where he had been heading up an untitled "secret project" alongside several of his former New World Computing teammates. NCsoft representatives would not comment on the circumstances behind this abrupt turn of events, except to confirm that both the development team and the project itself have been jettisoned in the wake of Van Caneghem's departure.

The Ugly
Joypolis—Not So Joyous

Sega has closed its Joypolis amusement park in Tokyo after a wheelchair-bound paraplegic man suffered a fatal accident on the park's sky-diving simulator. Investigators searched Sega's offices for proof of the staff's negligence and uncovered reports of over 50 other accidents during the park's nine-year history. Joypolis will remain closed until further notice—presumably until Japanese authorities get to the bottom of this incident.

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PLANET WIDE games

PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Monolith Productions** GENRE: **Action-Adventure** RELEASE DATE: **Late 2005**

Diary of a madman

Sega's *Condemned: Criminal Origins* messes with your head

WEDNESDAY, 10:30 P.M.

It's dark in this burned-out building. I've been chasing leads—but mostly finding shadows—while on the trail of a killer. Now I feel like I'm being watched. There's a flashlight on my head, a shotgun in my hands, and two shells left. Wait—something's rustling just down that hallway! The door opens easily enough...but nobody's inside. Suddenly, everything goes blurry. CRASH!

A brute rams through the door. No time to think, Ethan...just take him down. The shotgun blast knocks him back and jars my vision into focus. Where'd he go? Where's the body? What am I doing here? Oh, that's right...I'm a member of the FBI's Serial Crimes Unit. My name is Ethan Thomas. I've been framed for killing two policemen. And I think I'm going insane.

TUESDAY, 1:30 P.M.

The first tip-off as to who framed me came from Frank Rooke, Monolith Productions' lead designer for *Condemned: Criminal Origins*. He claims that the killer is hiding amongst the city's crazed homeless and is now tracking my every move. The evidence: an eerie one-level simulation that takes place in an empty subway station, entirely in first-person perspective—my perspective.

"The 'condemned,'" says Rooke, "refers to society's disenfranchised and barely sane." I have to search among them—and through the burned-out part of the city—for clues. But the clues aren't laid out on a silver platter for me; I need to use my forensic gear to scan areas for signs of the man framing me and upload data to my partner, who still believes I'm innocent. Who's hunter and who's prey?

I just know that I need to defend myself. I may carry a sidearm, but this simulation isn't some shooting gallery. I just grab whatever I can from the 30-some-odd items in the Havok 3.0-powered environment: rip a supporting two-by-four from a bookshelf, yank a pipe from the wall, grab some rebar, or even find the odd firearm.

This simulation feels a little too real. Rooke says this is intentional: "We wanted to ground this in reality, and to do that, the people and environments have to be real." The team scouted a number of locations to find the best examples of urban decay. One favorite: a shuttered department store that still has the remnants of Christmas decorations and mannequins from years past.

I think I'm on the right trail...but I've yet to figure out who has it in for me—or why I'm having these visions. This is madness.

Ethan Thoma...err, Darren Gladstone

"We wanted to ground this in reality, and to do that, the people and environments have to be real."

Using forensic tools, you can upload clues and evidence to your partner.

Everything here is a weapon. Or, when you run out of shells, just use the butt of the shotgun.

Finally, a thriller without aliens or the undead—just bona fide crazy people.

NEWS FEED ›› Excessive Anarchy. This June marks *Anarchy Online's* four-year anniversary. In that time, the original game has become free thanks to in-game advertising; you just have to pay for the expansions—like the upcoming *AO: Lost Eden*. ››

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It's Your Move

Turn-based strategy games come charging back (one space at a time)

Some things, like, say, fleeing the scene of a crime, are best accomplished quickly. The rush of adrenaline a high-speed chase provides very successfully clouds the fact that your wrong-way tear down the freeway is a fairly simple affair matching your reflexes against that of the authorities. Ah, but planning that initial crime, that is a process best enjoyed at a deliberative pace, planning and savoring each deliciously immoral nuance of your criminal enterprise.

Strategy games are a lot like felonies. They can be easily divided into the adrenaline rush of real-time games and the accumulative rewards that only a carefully plotted victory in a turn-based game can provide. And while real-time games have dominated the strategy world the last several years, it seems as though the evil genius of turn-based gaming is poised to seize control in the near future. We suspect they've been planning this all along.

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Nival Interactive** GENRE: **Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Q4 2006**

Heroes of Might and Magic V

Back with a vengeance?

The new battle animations give conflicts more life.

The charitable assessment of *Heroes of Might and Magic IV* goes something like this: It was a train wreck. With napalm. And some anthrax. Sharing the ignominy of our Coaster of the Year booby prize with the similarly hapless *Might and Magic IX*, the two alleged games combined to ring what sounded like a definitive death knell to one of our most favorite franchises ever. But now, there's a glimmer of hope that bell may be unrung and the *Heroes* part of the *Might and Magic* franchise will be snatched back from the abyss. And who is braving the inferno to rescue our beloved? Nival Interactive, the geniuses behind last year's riveting-until-the-robots strategy gem *Silent Storm*.

RESPECT FOR THE DEAD

If a die-hard *Heroes* fan were to question Nival on taking over the game from the dear, departed New World Computing, he could not help but walk away pleased—at least with the company's ideas for the game.

While the developers are reluctant to spill too many details this early, they've got all the right answers. Will the maps still be packed with resources, items, and goodies galore? Of course. Will there be subterranean levels on the sprawling maps? Sure thing. Will there be scads of maps, slews of creatures, and hundreds of hours of gameplay? You bet. Will you be able to toggle the hexes and movement info in the battlefields? Done. How about a map editor for creating your own scenarios? Already working on it. And will they be ignoring the debacle of *HOMM4* and instead look to *HOMM3* for inspiration? Thankfully, happily, a resounding YES.

All this happy retro news doesn't mean that Nival is settling for a quick and dirty remake. One look at the astounding graphical update will clue you in to that. Gone are the flat 2D maps of previous *HOMM* games—this one features a rich 3D world that is bursting with life. It's a surprising addition to the *HOMM* franchise, but not so surprising considering the source: The amazingly detailed *Silent Storm* engine was one of the highlights of 2004.

NEWS FEED ›› **California crackdown! CA AB450, a bill initially proposed last year in California by Assemblyman Leland Yee, if passed, will levy a $1,000 fine on retailers that sell M-rated games to minors. It's slowly making its way to a General Assembly vote.** ››

Heroes will still claim gold mines and the like—they'll just look better doing it.

FIT TO FIGHT

Gameplay will be classic *HOMM* fare, with your stable of heroes amassing armies and gathering experience as they charge about the map. The game will switch to the now-classic battle map mode for conflicts, and heroes will (unlike in the fourth installment) return to their rightful place behind the battle lines and not engage directly in combat. Again, the graphic update makes its presence felt, with robust and colorful combat animations giving the battles a more muscular feel than previous iterations of the game had.

With all this classicness going on, it's nice to know that Nival still feels free to experiment. Along these lines, there are plans for five different online modes. As great as the *HOMM* games have been, their slower pace left multiplayer somewhere south of riveting. *HOMM5* is slated to feature an "active-time" battle option that will speed up multiplayer games and not leave you sitting for huge blocks of time, waiting for your unseen opponents to battle hordes of NPC critters.

This game won't be out until winter 2006...if Nival stays on schedule. That's a long time from now and a lot can change, a lot can go wrong. That said, this is the turn-based game we simply cannot wait to play. **Robert Coffey**

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **Firaxis** GENRE: **4X Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Q4 2005**

Civilization IV

The world is your oyster

The videogame pooh-bahs of the world could excrete nothing but real-time games until the end of time, but as long as the *Civ* series exists, turn-based games will never be dead. The latest installment of this venerable series is slated for release later this year—but you already knew that, thanks to our exclusive preview last issue. Just as you also know the multiplayer, the A.I., the graphics, the structure of government and religion, and the combat are all getting serious upgrades. What don't you know? Just how many hours of your life this time-chomping monster is going to consume. The answer: a lot. Start clearing your calendar now. We've basically set aside all of November, December, and January just for this. Robert Coffey

NEWS FEED >> Need for Feed! The United Nations is raising awareness about helping third-world nations with a game. Download it from www.food-force.com >>

THE 5 ESSENTIAL TURN-BASED STRATEGY GAMES

X-COM: UFO DEFENSE

While you must develop, finance, and maintain a global alien-fighting organization, the heart of this game is its tense, gripping squad-based battles, with your teams battling an ever-escalating alien menace. A huge RPG component adds even more strategic depth. Oft imitated, never equaled, *X-Com* is the gold standard for squad-based tactics.

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION III

Until *Civ IV*, this is the best *Civ* ever. This version added even more depth (most notably in the effect of culture), more civs, more advances, and more wonders of the world to create an infinite number of play possibilities. The richest, most accessible 4X game is the definitive "just one more turn" time sink.

HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC III

Beautiful, sprawling maps are packed with goodies, dangling so many carrots on so many sticks that you're compelled to keep playing and building your empire. Easily understood but challenging military face-offs where even pixies can kick your ass make *HOMM3* the king of fantasy strategy.

SILENT STORM

Released just last year, *Silent Storm* blows you away with incredibly deep squad-based action coupled with an intricate layer of RPG gameplay. The gritty WWII setting is spectacularly rendered in an amazing game engine that brings the world to life and makes the environment a crucial gameplay element.

JAGGED ALLIANCE 2

Aliens and unicorns just not your thing? Then *Jagged Alliance 2* should be. Like *X-Com* before it, *JA2* melds a metastrategy game with squad-based combat, only with a decidedly down and dirty feel as you command a squad of hardened mercenaries to liberate a totalitarian state.

PUBLISHER: **TBA** DEVELOPER: **Imaginary Numbers** GENRE: **MMO Fantasy** RELEASE DATE: **Q4 2006**

Tactica Online

Will it even work?

A turn-based game is difficult enough when played between two friends online. Patience is the invisible, constantly depleting, and dearest resource, given the deliberate pace of turn-based gaming. So how does *Tactica Online* plan on making this work in a massively multiplayer environment? By streamlining combat and creating a party-based model where each character in your party functions similarly to cards in collectible-card games, encouraging you to build unique parties with complementary members. Initiative factors will break up battles, allowing adversaries to respond to attacks more immediately than a strict you-go, I-go model would. It's an ambitious effort, and it's going to take plenty of playtesting to keep it from being a Sisyphean one. Robert Coffey

THAT WAS THEN: AUGUST 1994

A fond look back at the way we were

This was a banner month in history. Was it because Barney the dinosaur was on Broadway and *It's Pat: The Movie* was in theaters? Well, for Ryan maybe. Darren and Kristen were pissed because of the baseball strike. Meanwhile, Robert was taking careful notes while watching *Natural Born Killers*, and Jeff had himself a good cry as *The Bridges of Madison County* spent its 104th friggin' week on *The New York Times* best-seller list.

Irish historians, though, take note, because this is the month the IRA officially declared a cease-fire in Northern Ireland. While we don't have any concrete evidence, we'd like to think it's because U.K. developer MicroProse released the first *X-Com* onto an unsuspecting public. This Hall of Fame classic revitalized the turn-based strategy genre and cemented its place in history by giving you control of a globe-hopping alien defense force. All hostility and productivity ground to a halt worldwide. And every turn-based strategy game since has lived in its long shadow.

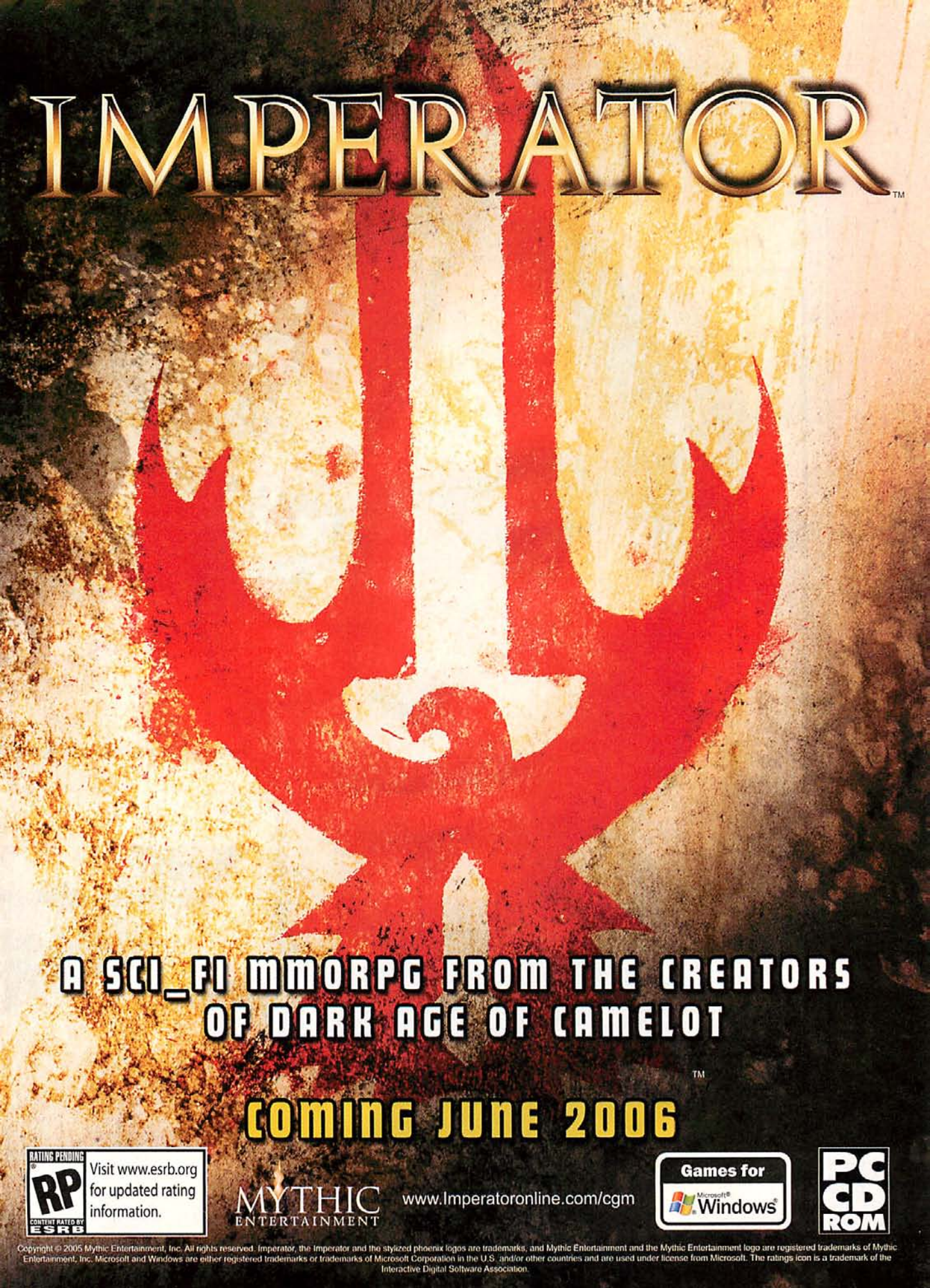
Shattered Union

PUBLISHER: **2K Games**
DEVELOPER: **PopTop Software**
GENRE: **Tactical Military Strategy**
RELEASE DATE: **September 2005**

PopTop, the studio behind *Tropico* and *Railroad Tycoon 3*, is trying its hand at the tactical turn-based strategy genre with the upcoming *Shattered Union*. After choosing one of seven factions, you'll bomb your way across a war-torn, fully destructible U.S. map, claiming contested territory as your own in a winner-take-all, near-apocalyptic military struggle. You'll be able to purchase a variety of unit types, weapons, mines, and nukes as you progress through the game's nonlinear campaign mode, and you'll also be able to jump online and battle with up to three friends. If *Shattered Union* is easy to get into and fun to play, we could see it having the same sort of addictive appeal as the Game Boy Advance classic *Advance Wars*, a game that often found us muttering "Just one more match..." late into the night. Ryan Scott

The more territories you own on the map, the more powerful your military forces will become.

NEWS FEED >> The team behind *Max Payne* is breaking out on its own with a new IP, *Alan Wake*. Shown behind closed doors at E3, this action-thriller is one to watch. Couldn't make it to the show? Go to www.alanwake.com and check out the demo for yourself. >>



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Electric Mayhem

By Darren Gladstone

Messing around online, one game at a time. This month's victim: *World of WarCraft*

We goof around in the office—admittedly, maybe a little too much. And sometimes when we're online, we can't help but act stupid. That's the point of Electric Mayhem.

Which brings us to *World of WarCraft*. For about a month, I've been traveling through Azeroth using a gnome with no name. "What's in a name?" Well, let me tell you. Half the fun of birthing an online alter ego is choosing its name. You try to be clever, and as long as you pick something inoffensive, it shouldn't matter. Right? Well, let's just say that we've had a few run-ins with the name police.

From: wowaccountadmin@blizzard.com
To: darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com
Subject: World of WarCraft Account Notice
Greetings Darren,
Server: Hyjal - Kilrogg - Lightbringer
Old Character Name: Keeblerelf, Jonwaynhobit, Beergoggles, Holycrap
New Temporary Character Name: Veranlot, Elawar, Anoalie, Eoyl
The name selected for this character is not appropriate as per our naming policy, and has been changed. We realize that you have likely grown attached to this name and [blah, blah, blah...]
Regards,
—Hanstrus [name changed to protect the innocent]
Game Master, Blizzard Entertainment

From: darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com
To: wowaccountadmin@blizzard.com
Subject: RE: World of WarCraft Account Notice
Hanstrus, if I may call you Hanstrus, I'm a little bummed here. I heard you guys were tough on character names, but still, let's rationally go over my choices:
Keeblerelf—OK, I can see the copyright issues here. Someone might confuse a purple, pointy-eared guy for little cartoony freaks that bake chemically laced cookies inside tree-based sweatshops. I can already hear the Nabisco lawyers filing their briefs.
Jonwaynhobbit—Oh, c'mon, you've got to be kidding me here! What's wrong with this?
Beergoggles—I can see where you could take issue with this one, but really, what else am I supposed to call a female troll? I'm open to suggestions....
Holycrap—OK, OK. You got me on this one. What are some other good names for a Tauren shaman? How about Holycow?
—Darren [name unchanged to mock the dumbass]

From: wowaccountadmin@blizzard.com
To: darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com
Subject: RE: World of WarCraft Account Notice
I appreciate the desire to come up with witty names for your characters.
Keeblerelf, as you noted, is a copyright infringement. So we have to change that. Holycrap and Holycow would both be unacceptable because "holy" is considered a title. Unfortunately, Jonwaynhobit of course refers to an extremely violent act. But, after making a case for your names, I would be able to give you the name "Beergoggles" back.
—Hanstrus

From: darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com
To: wowaccountadmin@blizzard.com
Subject: RE: World of WarCraft Account Notice
Wait, so that problem with Holycrap is just the "holy" part? I could call him "Crap"?
—d

From: wowaccountadmin@blizzard.com
To: darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com
Subject: RE: World of WarCraft Account Notice
Um, no.
—Hanstrus

From: darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com
To: wowaccountadmin@blizzard.com
Subject: RE: World of WarCraft Account Notice
You've got no quarrel from me for Keeblerelf or Holy whatever you call him, but what about poor ol' Jonwaynhobbit? First, it's a play on a name from an obscure pop culture event that happened ages ago. Basically, anybody smart enough to put it together is old enough for it to not be inappropriate at this point. If I created a sword-swingin' warrior called Lorena Hobbit, then I'd understand your point, so to speak. Sigh. At least I still have Beergoggles...wait a sec.
—d

What exactly is this insanity? There's a lot more online at electricmayhem.1UP.com

Jonwaynhobbit doesn't mean any harm.

His resemblance to a Keebler elf is uncanny, no?

I'm much happier calling this shaman SacredCow.

If there's a better name for a female troll than Beergoggles, I'm all ears.

FIRE EMBLEM™

THE SACRED STONES

A darkness has fallen over the continent of Magvel...

EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Fantasy Violence

ONLY FOR GAME BOY ADVANCE

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PRINCE EPHRAIM, HEIR TO THE THRONE OF RENAIS, HAS RUSHED HIS ARMY TO THE NEIGHBORING KINGDOM OF GRADO IN AN ATTEMPT TO UNCOVER WHAT TREACHERY IS BEHIND THESE NEW ATTACKS.

OK, men, stay sharp! We can't just rush in and start fighting.

First we need to survey the land to try and get some recon on their units. Scouts! See if there is a way to flank them!

Once the fighting starts, watch your back! Stay together and choose your targets well! Think before you act, and we will triumph!

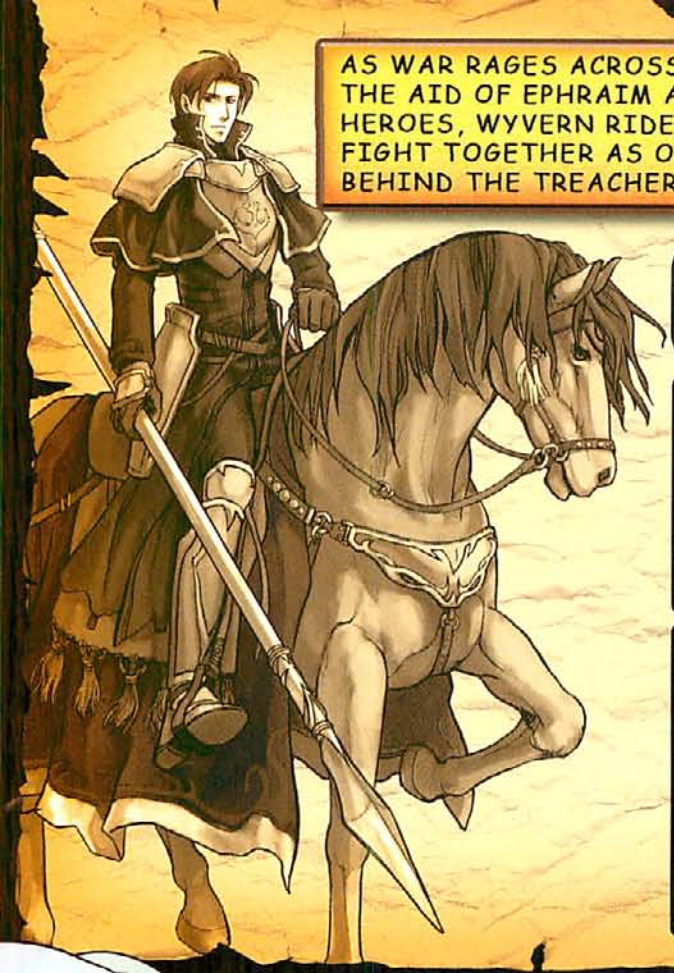
MEANWHILE, EPHRAIM'S SISTER, PRINCESS EIRIKA, HAS BEEN SPIRITED SAFELY AWAY TO FRELIA BY GENERAL SETH. THERE, THEY WILL WAIT AND PLAN FOR THE TIDE OF BATTLE RUSHING THEIR WAY.

OK, General, examine each of our troops to see where their strengths and weaknesses lie!

We should also start training as soon as possible! It's the only way we will get strong enough to bear this onslaught!

And make sure everyone is outfitted with the best weapons possible! If we find new gear in the field, get it to where it can do the most good!

AS WAR RAGES ACROSS MAGVEL, DOZENS OF HEROES COME TO THE AID OF EPHRAIM AND EIRIKA. MERCENARIES, THIEVES, HEROES, WYVERN RIDERS, SNIPERS, SHAMANS AND MORE WILL FIGHT TOGETHER AS ONE. ONLY THEY CAN UNCOVER THE REASON BEHIND THE TREACHERY OF THEIR FORMER ALLY, GRADO.



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PUBLISHER: **2K GAMES** DEVELOPER: **CROTEAM** GENRE: **FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER** RELEASE DATE: **FALL 2005**

Serious Sam II: What Were They Thinking?

A quick look at a not-so-serious game

First-person shooters can go one of two ways: They can be ultrarealistic affairs with actual firearms that you can buy at your local sporting goods store, or sci-fi adventures with otherworldly ordnance. Thank goodness for *Serious Sam II*, a game that, despite its name, doesn't take itself—or anything else for that matter—very seriously. Any game in which you can play roulette in the jungle, meet a tribe led by an Elvis impersonator, and fly an alien flying-saucer taxicab is definitely not what you'd call ordinary. So, while looking at some key bits of the game, we felt inclined to ask Admir Elezovic, *Serious Sam II* developer Croteam's lead artist, for his thoughts on just what was running through the developers' heads as they designed the ass-kicking sequel to the underdog shooter of 2001. Darren Gladstone

THE ARSENAL

"Seeing another nameless hero with a Kalashnikov in his hands doesn't exactly make our spines tingle."

THE KLODOVIK BIRD

Birds always seem to have the best aim—at least that's what Darren found out in the park last weekend. But what happens when you attach a bomb to a bird's leg and let it go? You watch it find the nearest enemy, and then it's "bombs away!" If there's nothing nearby, it returns and drops its—ahem—payload on you.

ADMIR ELEZOVIC: The idea for the Klodovik bird came directly from Mental [Serious Sam's main enemy] himself. He called us demanding to add his pet into the game or else.... What could we do?

THE CANNON

Take a big ol' cannon, light the fuse, and let 'er rip. This area-effect weapon is a little like a grenade launcher, but it also packs a ballistic punch. Just the idea of carting this thing around in your hands seems a little over-the-top and cartoony: perfect for the juvenile delinquents running *CGW*.

ADMIR ELEZOVIC: Davor Tomicic (our game designer) brought a real pirate cannon from his "things I like to play with" collection to our office. It instantly became our favorite toy, so naturally it ended up in the game.

THE SIRIAN BOMB OF DEATH™

Honestly, there's nothing that says "have a nice day" like a smiley-faced smart bomb.

ADMIR ELEZOVIC: The Sirian Bomb of Death™ is an überultimate weapon of mass destruction that should only be used in extreme circumstances, as it has side effects such as giving the player double vision and brain damage. :)

THE ENEMIES

"We start with a normal character and add impossible things until it becomes weird enough to go into the game."

KAMIKAZE

The kamikaze is the most memorable enemy from the original *Serious Sam*. There's just something about a guy with no head who's running and screaming at you. We're happy to see that he's back and as hotheaded as ever.

ADMIR ELEZOVIC: Kamikaze in the first *Serious Sam* was based on our CEO's [Roman Ribaric] personality. We couldn't re-create his lovely face, so we took it out. Adding two bombs in the character's hands was just a bonus. With *Sam II*, we've taken it one step further, and now the kamikaze's entire head is a giant bomb. Strangely, it looks even more like Roman than it did before.

BULL SOLDIER

When we saw this guy, we had flashbacks to *Doom II*. As cool as he looks, though, he's probably the most "normal" of the enemies that you'll encounter in *Serious Sam II*.

ADMIR ELEZOVIC: No comment.

ZOMBIE STOCKBROKERS

Take someone relatively normal—let's say a stockbroker, for example—and have him become a shambling, brain-eating member of the undead. Then, of course, arm him with a shotgun.

ADMIR ELEZOVIC: What's so unusual about that?

THE VEHICLES

"Vehicles are brand new with *Sam II*. Besides being recognizable, we wanted them to be fun to play with."

THE SERIOUS SURFBOARD™

Forget the Silver Surfer and Patrick Swayze's poignant performance in *Point Break*, because with this board, Sam can shred the skyways and waves of enemies at the same time.

ADMIR ELEZOVIC: The original idea was to have a flying carpet, but that wasn't working. Taking inspiration from one of our lead coders being a keen surfer, the Serious Surfboard™ was born.

ROLLERBALL

Upon hearing about a ball we could board, we thought back to the glory days of *American Gladiators*. Hawk, Turbo, Ice—where are you now?

ADMIR ELEZOVIC: Rollerball started out as an enemy, but we decided to make it a vehicle. It's cool and very funny, as it makes the player look like a badass hamster.

THE DINOSAUR

In what has to be the most messed-up and inspired mode of transportation we've seen, you get to ride a dinosaur like you're a prehistoric cowboy. Yee-haw!!!

ADMIR ELEZOVIC: The question should be, "Who *hasn't* wanted to ride on the back of a T-Rex?"

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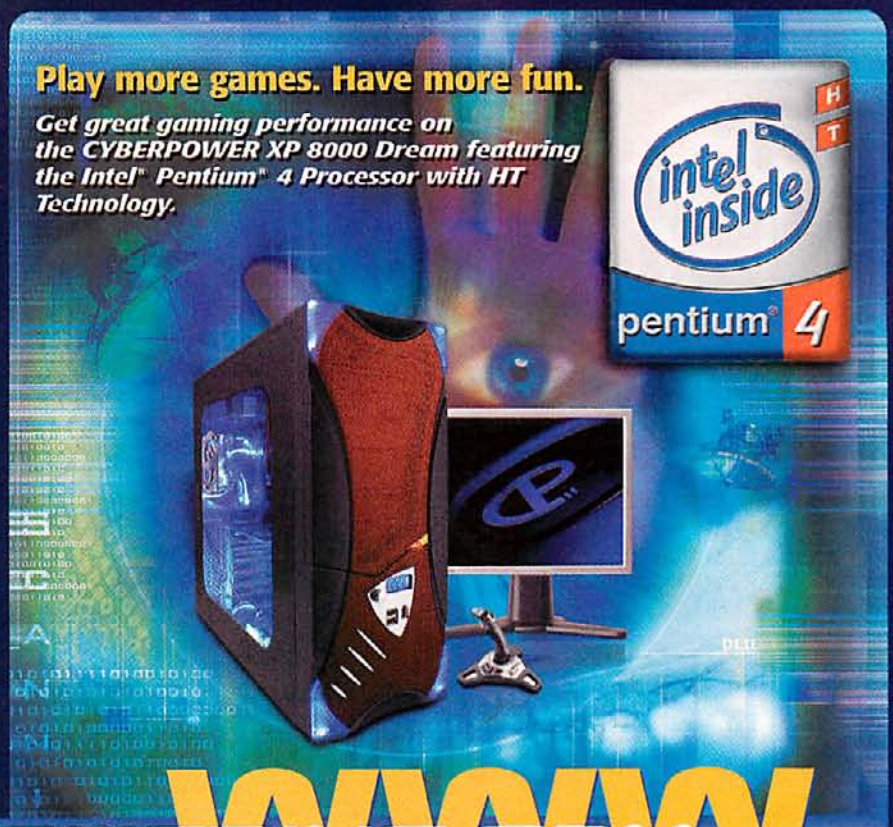

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DVD
Team America: World Police
$20, AMAZON.COM
Forget *Close Combat: First to Fight, Elite Warriors: Vietnam*, and all the other war sims reviewed this month. When the world really needs protection, we turn to Team America ("A-mer-i-ca, f*** yeah!"). We never expected to laugh so much at a marionette action-musical movie—well, let's just say that it's definitely not meant for kids. *South Park* fans, grab this DVD.

DVD
Appleseed
$19, AMAZON.COM
When it comes to animated movies, almost everyone makes a big stink about Pixar. They obviously haven't seen *Appleseed*. In the film, a whole new style of animation, 3D melded with 2D anime, jumps off the screen. And the action...well, let's just say that if you can look past some of the quirky plot points, you'll have a great time.

PULP
The Legion of Superheroes
$3, DCCOMICS.COM
The times they are a-changin'. By the 30th century, we live in a sterilized system. But a legion of teens gathers to be a force for change. The old people in charge become scared as the young continue to rally. It's an interesting spin on the 1960s on an interstellar scale written by Mark Waid. Who? He's a great writer and the guy behind the new *City of Heroes* comics.

MUSIC
Kings of Leon, Aha Shake Heartbreak
$9, MUSIC.MSN.COM
Why download this rather than buy the CD? Four words: totally absurd copy protection. You have to dig through device drivers and disable SbcpHid in order to even burn an MP3 from the CD. But KOL's second CD is worth the effort for Jeff. Although not for everyone, this disc does offer some good Southern Strokes-like songs ("Velvet Snow" is one of the better tunes). Check it out online before you buy.

BOOK
How to Be a Villain
$10, AMAZON.COM
In preparation for *City of Villains* this fall, you need the quintessential handbook of all things dastardly: making master plans, perfecting evil laughs, building a better secret lair, and picking the perfect evil name—all in one tome. And when you attain a high enough level, you qualify for the sequel, *The Villain's Guide to Better Living*.

PLUSH
Giant Microbes
$6, GIANTMICROBES.COM
Flesh-eating diseases like Ebola have never been so huggable! Be the first kid on your block to grab a stuffed microbe. Mononucleosis, the common cold, dust mites, bed bugs...you finally get to see what they're all like up close: CUTE! Perfect for helping us forget reviewing *Psychotoxic* this month.

FIGURES
America's Army Figures
$13, RADIOACTIVE-CLOWN.COM
Time to get your hands on a *REAL* American hero. Forget *G.I. Joe* cartoons; you've been drafted to play with action figures, soldier. These toys, inspired by the *America's Army* PC game (and Uncle Sam), allow tots to brush up on their soldiering skills.

SPUDS
Potato Gun Showdown
$8, URBANOUTFITTERS.COM
Ten paces, turn, and open fire. There's no problem in the office that can't be resolved with a quick showdown at the *CGW* corral. You thought we loved the *Painkiller* weapon? Just grab a tater and one spud-ball-launching firearm and let the carbo-loading mayhem ensue!

PULP
WildGuard: Casting Call
$12, WILDGUARD.COM
Around here, we're suckers for reality TV. Just ask Robert, Darren, and Paula, who can't stop talking about *The Amazing Race*. So imagine what happens when you have a comic that centers on a reality show about forming a group of superfriends. Filmed 24 hours a day, these guys compete for spots on a high-profile team. The original six-issue series is available for $2 a pop at the author's website.

PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games

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Battlefield 2	EA
Bet on Soldier	THQ
Cold War	DreamCatcher
Dragonshard	Atari
F.E.A.R.	VU Games
Fantastic Four	Activision
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Rockstar
JULY 2005	
FlatOut	Empire Interactive
Starship Troopers	Empire Interactive
AUGUST 2005	
Dungeon Siege II	Microsoft
Jaws Unleashed	Majesco
SEPTEMBER 2005	
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	Funcom
EverQuest II: Desert of Flames	SOE
Indigo Prophecy	Atari
Rome: Total War—Barbarian Invasion	Activision
Seven Kingdoms: Conquest	Enlight
The Suffering: Ties That Bind	Midway
X3: Reunion	Enlight
SUMMER/FALL 2005	
187: Ride or Die	Ubisoft
Call of Duty 2	Activision
Evil Dead: Regeneration	THQ
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos
Myst V: End of Ages	Ubisoft
Phantasy Star Online: Blue Burst	Sega
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	Ubisoft
Stacked	Myelin Media
Stubbs the Zombie	Aspyr
UFO: Aftershock	Cenega

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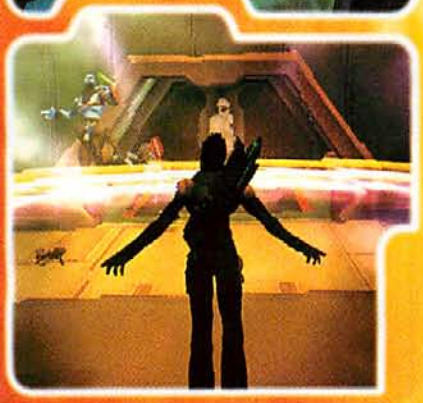

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Independent's Day

Advice from the experts

With the *Dooms* and *Half-Lifes* of the gaming world hogging all the attention all the time, some smaller games never get their chance in the spotlight. Now they will. Every month in this space we will handpick one independent title that deserves a shot at the "big time." That game will get eyeballed by a panel of two game-industry professionals and a *CGW* editor that will offer its perspective and (we hope) a little constructive criticism to the developer. This month's pick:

Aurora Watching

DEVELOPER: **Metropolis Software**
RELEASE DATE: **Q4 2005**
WEBSITE: **www.aurora-game.com**

From the makers of *Odium* and *Gorky Zero* comes a spy thriller set within chilling Arctic environments. As elite operative White Fox, you're charged with incapacitating guards with gunplay and gadgets (remote-controlled explosives, poison gas containers, and so on) while investigating a secret range of submarine laboratories.

The judges are Clint Hocking, creative director for *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*; *CGW* editorial ninja Ryan Scott (who reviewed Hocking's game in the last issue); and producer Scott Steinberg, CEO of Overload Entertainment.

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

Be sneaky, make with the stealth, then hunt creatures from the Black Lagoon. Yep, all in a day's work for special operative White Fox.

Clint Hocking (CREATIVE DIRECTOR, *SPLINTER CELL CHAOS THEORY*, UBISOFT)

There's something about isolation and freezing cold that stabs deeply into the human heart. I should know—I live in Montreal. Surprisingly, very few games have tapped this well for inspiration. *Aurora Watching* could do just that.

Stealth and fear go hand in hand. Throw in some evil Russian experiments gone wrong and straight-up action, and you've got a winning formula. But whether or not this title rises to the occasion hinges on its creators striking a balance between action and suspense, and creating likable characters. Low-level problems like camera control and minimap dependency must also be overcome.

It's impressive that Metropolis is tackling these issues with a small development team. Every game sets its own expectations—the make-or-break question for *Aurora* is whether it can live up to them.

Ryan Scott (ASSOCIATE EDITOR, *COMPUTER GAMING WORLD*)

Everything about this game sounds eerily reminiscent of the original *Metal Gear Solid*, up to and including the main character's animal-inspired code name. One might even harbor fears that it's going to be a cookie-cutter stealth-action game that adds nothing new or worthwhile to the genre. But no developer would *ever* knowingly do that, right?

Here's a good rule of thumb: Pay close attention to the things *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* did. That is to say, make me *feel* as though I'm an elite operative. Ambient noise, brightness levels—with stealth games, the little details matter the most.

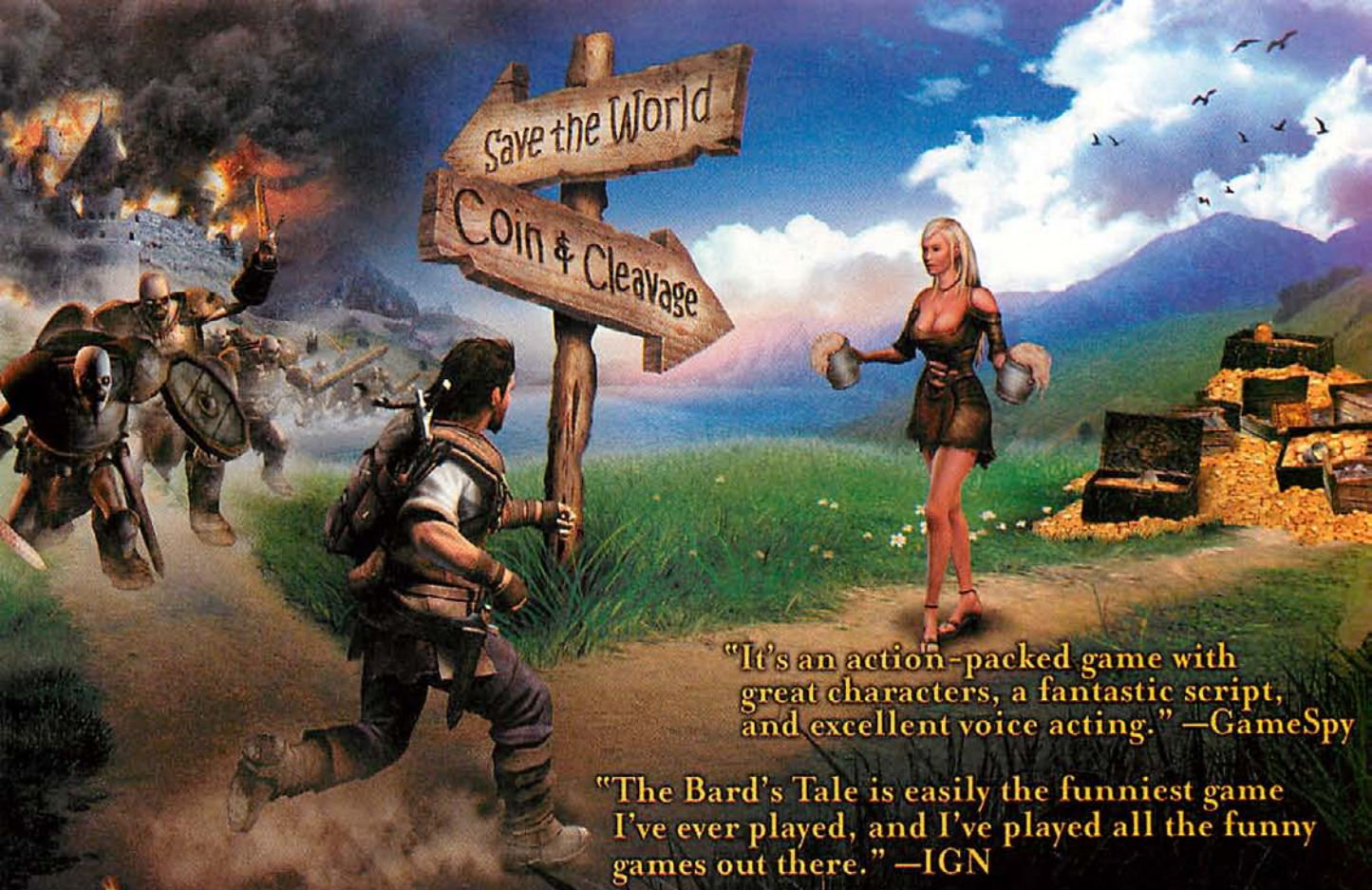
Then, of course, there's nailing all the fundamental concepts like camera controls and A.I.—which should be second nature to any good game developer at this point, considering the abundance of good examples out there from which to draw inspiration.

Scott Steinberg (CEO, OVERLOAD ENTERTAINMENT)

Bitchin'... another Eastern European import. Idle skepticism? Perhaps, but let's face facts—for every *Serious Sam*, there's a *Shade: Wrath of Angels* moldering in the bargain bins.

Nevertheless, everyone wants to be a superspy these days. After all, someone has to be buying all those *Splinter Cell* and *Metal Gear Solid* stealth-action games. If this game is half as lethal as it is lovely, it'll surely make a killing as well. There's still room for growth in this genre, and even the most casual gaming enthusiast can understand and appreciate a gritty exercise in espionage.

Presuming the developer doesn't opt for too corny a concept (terrorists tampering with genetics is so 2004) and keeps budgets reasonable, it could work. I'd buy it. Then again, I'm also one of the two losers who actually dug *Odium*, for whatever that's worth.



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PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Ubisoft GENRE: Action RELEASE DATE: Q4 2005

Prince of Persi

Kindred spirits

Last year's *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within* is true to its name. Instead of refining the clever puzzle elements and the compelling storybook-style narrative of *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, *Warrior Within*'s developers focused on making with the hack and the slash—to wit, the game's oh-so-subtle bloody skirmishes and *Mortal Kombat*-ish fatalities. Though the revamped fighting system is quite engaging, much of the charm of the previous game is nowhere to be found. With the upcoming (and tentatively titled) *Prince of Persia 3*, we just might get the best of both worlds.

Picking up where *Warrior Within* left off, *POP3* finds the Prince returning to a war-torn Babylon...but instead of a welcoming committee, our hero is faced with a fugitive hunt—only he is the prey. With the destruction of the Sands of Time, the Prince changed reality: A fiendish Dark Prince now stalks the streets, intent on usurping the throne of Babylon. Now, the true Prince has to unravel this dread doppelgänger's malevolent plan—and clear his own tarnished name.

DIRTY DEEDS

To aid him as he scours the urban setting of Babylon for answers, the Prince will have plenty of the acrobatics and time-manipulating moves you've come to expect from the series. The combat mechanics have been significantly expanded, and at your disposal is a new technique called "speed stealth," which allows the Prince to take down enemies with impressive and deadly efficiency.

But as in *The Sands of Time*, the story is what the developers hope will be the real centerpiece here. The narrative structure of that game returns, with the Prince telling a tale of mystery and wonder as you wander through the lush Persian environments. Delving further into the game, you'll get another interesting surprise (SPOILER ALERT!): the opportunity to play as the evil Dark Prince, who shows off a unique arsenal of vicious and powerful maneuvers as he spins his own twisted take on things.

Ryan Scott

A fiendish Dark Prince now stalks the streets, intent on usurping the throne of Babylon.

Once again, the Prince must utilize all of his acrobatic skills.

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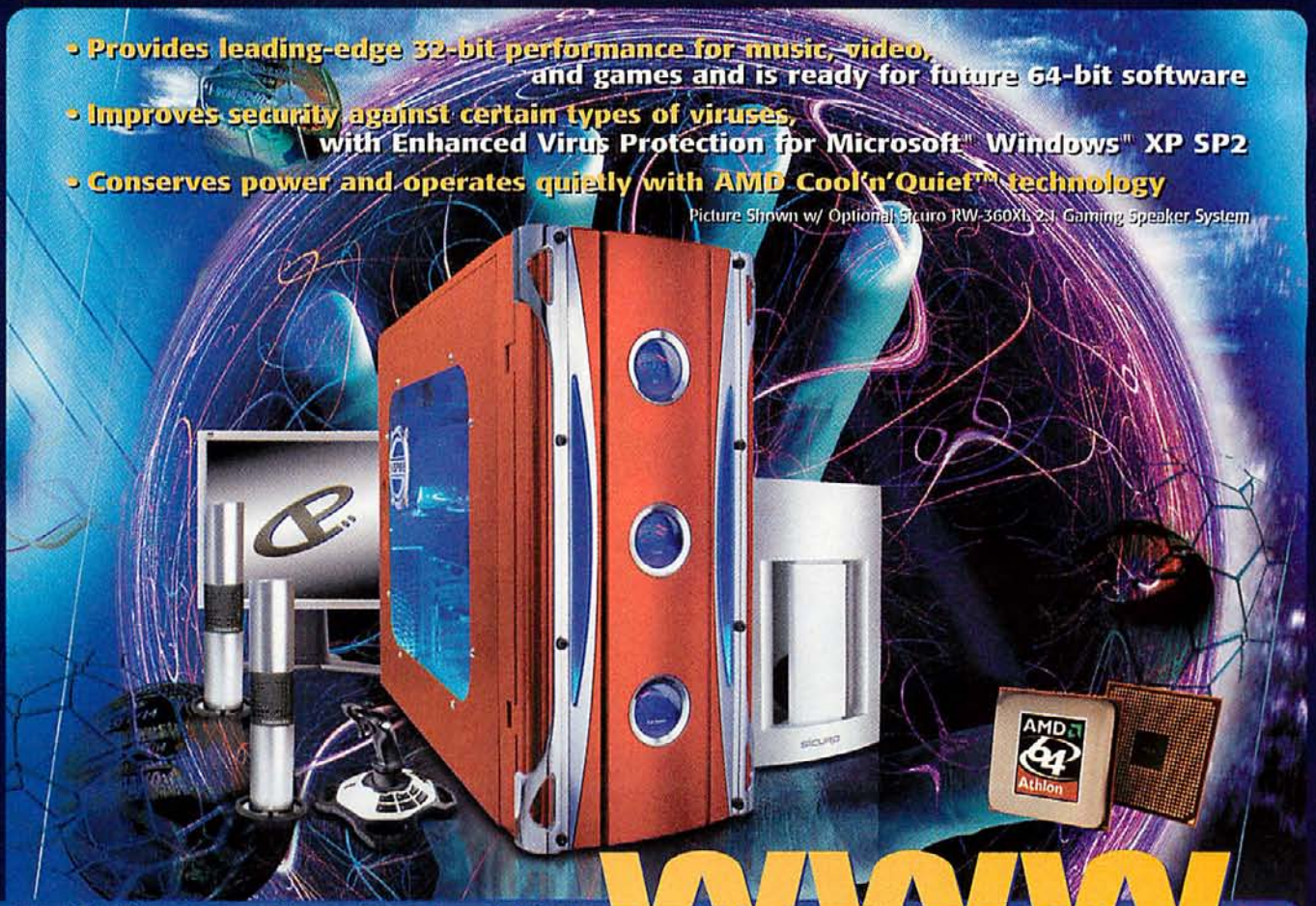

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WELCOME TO THE CITY OF VILLAINS

"Can I play as a villain?"

That was our first question when we heard about NCsoft's comic-book-inspired *City of Heroes* way back in 2002. Hey, it's good to be bad—just look at guys like Darth Vader, Agent Smith, and the Terminator. Not only do they have cool clothes, menacing voices, and all the best lines, but they've also got lots of wicked tricks up their sleeves with which to trip up the sissy do-gooders who are out to take them down.

Though the villain thing never happened with *City of Heroes*, the answer to our question finally becomes a resounding "Yes!" with *City of Villains*, developer Cryptic Studios' pseudosequel to *CGW's* 2004 MMORPG of the Year.

First things first: *COV* is a completely standalone product, which means players with no prior experience with *City of Heroes* can jump in and create a villain character. Of course, if you've already got *COH*, the two games work together to form a massive comic-book world, one big enough for the mightiest heroes and the most dastardly villains.

Name: Scirocco
Group Affiliation: Wolf Spiders
Profile: This swashbuckling Middle Eastern tomb robber was cursed to an eternal life of pain. He is armed with a magical blade, and directs the Wolf Spiders, the Arachnos Organization's branch of official government enforcers.

In *City of Villains*, you too can masquerade as a BDSM experiment gone horribly awry.

Name: Black Scorpion
Group Affiliation: Orb Weavers
Profile: The Black Scorpion is a former Nicaraguan mercenary. Obsessed with technological weaponry, he is armed with a highly modified black-market power suit. His villainous group specializes in high-tech crimes.

The new character archetypes are quite literally the exact opposites of those in *City of Heroes*.

BIZARRO WORLD

Of course, being an evildoer is what *COV* is all about, something that is made readily apparent by the abundance of bones, chains, and spikes in the costume-creation interface. There are also five devious character archetypes, four of which are quite literally the exact opposites of those in *COH*: With one exception, each template is a mirror image of its heroic counterpart, swapping primary and secondary power sets and adding a few new options.

According to lead designer Jack Emmert, these "inverse" archetypes will add some new twists to *COV*, providing fresh experiences for *COH* players who have seen it all.

"The brute is the melee monster," says Emmert, referring to the reverse tanker. "His attacks are devastating, but as a consequence, he attracts the attention of the toughest foes. In game terms, we expect him to [lock down] bosses and archvillains. [He also] has an inherent rage ability, so the longer the battle goes on, the greater the damage he does."

Moving on to the scrapper's evil counterpart, Emmert says: "The stalker can be [even more] devastating than the brute. But instead of raw power, he relies on stealth to accomplish his evil deeds. A stalker will sneak his way into a group of foes and unleash a deadly alpha strike. He also has abilities that [allow him to] escape the attention of his enemies."

BEWARE MY POWER

But not everyone is a frontline heavy hitter, as players of controller characters well know. "After the stalker ambushes a group and the brute tackles a tough foe," Emmert explains, "the dominator freezes the rest of the enemies in their tracks. [This archetype] is all about subjugating the will of those around him. He possesses the ability to mesmerize and immobilize, which is absolutely invaluable in locking down the numerous minions that might otherwise swarm his teammates."

The destroyer archetype, resembling a twisted amalgamation of the defender and the blaster, provides backup. "The destroyer is a living dynamo. He has mastered the elements [and is] probably the most versatile of all the villain archetypes, [with] ranged, buff, and debuff abilities." Emmert remarks. He goes on to explain that the destroyer is "the only real 'healing' archetype among villains."

Rather than redefining an existing hero template, the final villain archetype is a tribute to classic villain overlords. "The mastermind is the 'leader' archetype," says Emmert. "Each power set summons a different sort of lackey, like thugs, ninjas, soldiers, and robots. The mastermind can upgrade his troops, buff them, or equip them with some new superweapons. He uses his followers to protect the support archetypes."

COV also features new cut-scene technology to help tell its wicked story.

With the villainous new character options, you'll send those "heroes" running for the hills.

Name: Ghost Widow

Group Affiliation: Black Widows

Profile: The undead mistress known as Ghost Widow has served Lord Recluse since the 1930s. She was brought back from the dead after a botched assignment and now runs a deadly cabal of psychic assassins.

MARK WAID: THE MAN BEHIND THE COMIC

Mark Waid has been one of the top comic-book writers for well over a decade, responsible for successful runs of *JLA*, *Flash*, and *Fantastic Four*, among many others. We recently had a chance to ask Waid a few questions about his latest project, Top Cow Productions' newly relaunched *City of Heroes* comic.

CGW: How did you get involved with Top Cow and *City of Heroes*?

Waid: I'd known about the game for a while and had many friends trying to recruit me, but I didn't see the fascination. My mistake. Once Top Cow offered me the comics gig, I did my research, set up an account, and played for...I don't know...the next 72 hours straight or something. To be honest, it's kind of a blur. An enjoyable blur.

CGW: How do you like working with the characters? Do you have a favorite?

Waid: It'll be pretty apparent from page one that Manticore's a favorite, but that doesn't mean the other members of the Freedom Phalanx don't get their due attention. In fact, that's part of the fun—making sure everyone gets some stage time.

CGW: Is *COH* a lot different than the continuity-heavy stuff you typically have to deal with at DC and Marvel?

Waid: It's vastly different in that it's not 70 years of stories written by hundreds of different creators all shoved together to form an uneven "universe"—*COH* is at least as involved and [well thought out] as any comics universe, but because the game's creators generated all the backstory, it has a unity and coherence to it that make it rich and detailed as opposed to stifling and contradictory.

CGW: Finally, what kind of character do you play as in *COH*?

Waid: I tend to lean toward defenders and science-based heroes. I'm on there quite a bit—stop by and say hello to GoGoChex or Endymion Prime next time you're online!

SUIT UP

Haven't had a chance to check out *City of Heroes* yet? You're in luck: This month's pack-in DVD-ROM features a free 21-day trial version of the game, perfect for all the aspiring virtual heroes out there!

Sharkhead Isle, aptly named for its bird's-eye-view resemblance of a shark's head, is the industrial center of the vile Arachnos Organization. Here in the mines of the Pit, a newly formed worker's union toils to supply the Rogue Isles with raw materials.

Aeon City is located in the heart of a new zone called Cap Au Diable. This city is a mysterious source of energy in the Rogue Isles, thanks to its chief resident, Dr. Aeon, who is beset by constant opposition from a local rebel group called the Luddites.

Name: Captain Mako
Group Affiliation: Crab Spiders
Profile: This psychotic mutant is a terrible force in battle, rending his victims limb from limb with his razor-sharp claws and teeth. He leads the Crab Spiders, Arachnos' heavy infantry.

ROGUE WAR

Don't expect to see villainous players running amok in Paragon City just yet, though. *City of Villains* sports a brand-new supervillain region known as the Rogue Isles, introduced to players via the game's newly implemented cut-scene technology. After a series of near wars and a missile crisis in the late 1950s, this island chain became a haven for less-than-heroic metahumans, who underhandedly secured U.N. protection against foreign invasion. Nowadays, the Isles are dominated by an organization known as Arachnos, which trains villain characters in the art of laying the royal smack down on the tights-wearing supers who stand to oppose them.

The Rogue Isles pack in a total of 11 new zones. These include the likes of Port Oakes, an old French fort haunted by ghosts; Nerva Isle, which is filled with ancient ruins—and is under partial U.S. jurisdiction; St. Martial, where you'll bet on monster battles at the Golden Giza Casino; and Grandville, the headquarters of Lord Recluse—the black-hearted king of Arachnos.

LEGION OF DOOM

The arachnid-obsessed Lord Recluse will have a long and detailed backstory that is closely related to the origins of Statesman, Paragon City's most famous superhero. Recluse isn't the only new threat, though; in addition to many of the current *COH* villain organizations represented within Arachnos, a slew of new factions populate the Rogue Isles, each controlled by a powerful archvillain under Recluse's sway.

As you can see from the assembled profiles, each of these superpowered generals contributes something unique to the Arachnos Organization. And they're more than just cannon fodder for high-level hero groups: At level 40, villain characters have the option of joining Arachnos and carrying out unique missions for these signature archvillains; completing these missions provides characters with additional powers and unique Arachnos-themed costume options. According to Emmert, "The overall goal of any villain is to join Arachnos."

DAY OF VENGEANCE

But if you think the journey will be easy, you're wrong. You'll need to lead a long and danger-filled career before you're admitted into the upper echelons of Arachnos. "We definitely want villains to feel dastardly, so while, say, robbing banks is, of course, an

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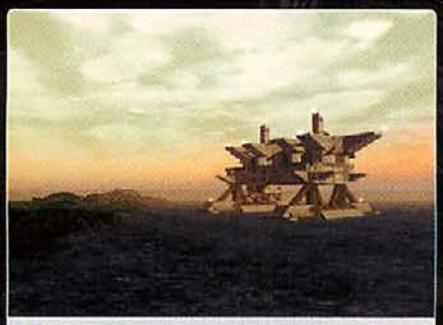


The Sky Raiders have established several bases on Sharkhead Isle, where they war with other villain groups, including the Scrapyarders.

The gothic architecture of Bloody Bay hides its true nature: It's a battleground where heroes and villains wage war for toxic meteorite fragments.

Beyond Paragon City

***City of Heroes* is everywhere!**

HeroClix

Want some more HeroClix figures to go with your collectors' edition Statesman? The *City of Villains* DVD edition includes seven more figures, including Lord Recluse, Ghost Widow, Black Scorpion, Captain Mako, Positron, Manticore, and an all-new Statesman, who now sports a cape.

Tabletop RPG

The *City of Heroes Roleplaying Game* is being primed for a summer 2005 launch and utilizes developer Eden Studios' fan-favorite Unisystem rules mechanics. Here's hoping it doesn't de-power scrappers too much.

Collectible-Card Game

City of Heroes: The Gathering, anyone? Alderac Entertainment Group—responsible for collectible-card games such as *Legend of the Five Rings* and *Spycraft*—will be bringing *COH* to a tabletop near you this November.

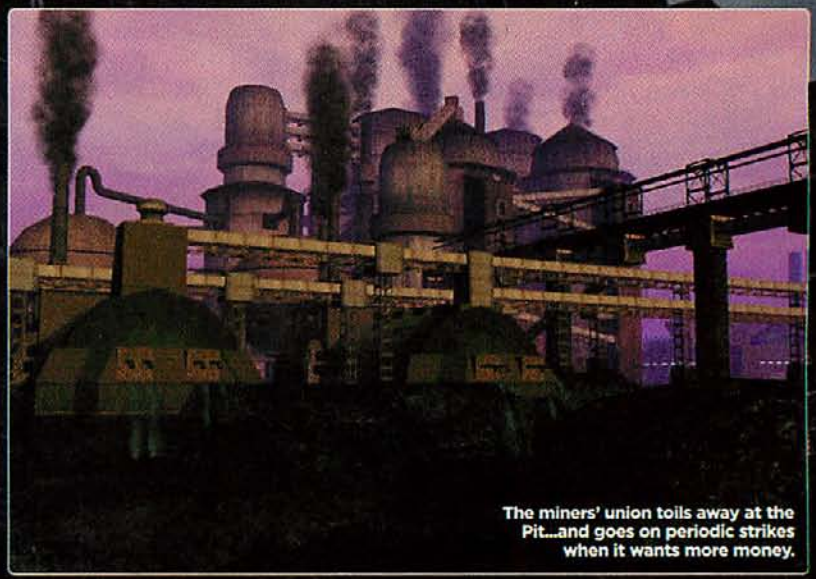
Novel Trilogy

The Web of Arachnos, by Bob Weinberg, is the first novel in a trilogy focusing on the early days of Statesman and Lord Recluse. It hits shelves this fall—with an original cover by comic artist George Perez!

"Being a villain isn't just about mugging citizens...that's for punks."

evil thing to do, player villainy should have higher goals," Emmert explains. "Being a villain isn't just about mugging citizens...that's for punks. Your villain will get the opportunity to sink cargo ships, turn a young hero to a life of crime, plant bombs in rival businesses, throw fuel on the fire of a gang war, hire [himself] out to casino crime lords, steal power from [other villain groups], and defeat the big-name [heroes]."

While you won't be able to just waltz into Paragon City outright (not at first, anyway), you can expect to see instanced Paragon City maps for some of the new villain missions. The mission structure should also be a little different than what *COH* players are used to. "Villains are more proactive than heroes," Emmert grins. "They plot, they scheme—they go out of their way to cause trouble."



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FIREFLY 2K GAMES

These supervillains and others await you in COV's PVP zones.

SOUNDS OF VIOLENCE

If you are a particularly daring villain, you will have the opportunity to go well out of your way to cause trouble, thanks to several player-versus-player zones spread throughout the Rogue Isles. Because of Arachnos' U.N. sponsorship, Lord Recluse has enacted severe laws against fighting openly in the streets or causing undue trouble in Paragon City itself. Instead, all the infighting is restricted to four dedicated PVP zones, which will begin opening up for players around level 15—at which point many hero and villain characters should have sufficient power to hold their own in combat against one another.

"We want to make PVP play meaningful but not just give you more of the same things you get through regular play," explains senior designer David "Zeb" Cook. To this end, a number of features will be implemented in order to encourage PVP participation. Dying at the hands of another player will not incur an experience penalty—but, by the same token, victory elicits only a trivial experience reward. The real incentives are special enhancements and limited-use powers, awarded for accomplishing specific tasks within a PVP zone.

WAR GAMES

Those who are up to the challenge will find that each PVP zone has a different goal with different rules. For instance, the Recluse's Victory zone catapults players into a future timeline in which a titanic superhero-versus-supervillain war rages on to determine the fate of the free world. The look and overall mood of the zone changes constantly depending on which side has the edge—the heroes of Paragon City or the vile forces of power-hungry Lord Recluse.

Emmert took us on an extensive tour of another PVP zone called Bloody Bay, which was the site of a disastrous meteor crash in the 1950s. While a hastily convened group of heroes sacrificed their lives to stop the meteor from destroying the planet, six meteorite fragments landed in Bloody Bay, where a superhero group called Longbow wages war against the Arachnos Organization.

Each faction has a base, which is armed with turrets and cannons to ensure that enemies keep their distance. The goal is to traverse the dark, gothic landscape of Bloody Bay in search of the six meteorite fragments scattered throughout. Each fragment is guarded by alien monstrosities known as shivans; defeating them will buy you enough time to collect a chunk of meteorite ore, which can be processed at nearby bunkers. You'll have to watch out for other players with the same goal—if you wind up dead, your opponent claims a piece of your ore.

"We want to make PVP play meaningful but not just give you more of the same things you get through regular play."

If you manage to collect and process ore from all six meteorite fragments in Bloody Bay, you'll be rewarded with a one-shot power that can be used to transform you into a monstrous shivan creature for a short time. Players should expect similar types of goals and rewards in each of the PVP zones.

Just what we've been waiting for... ninja vs. ninja action!

Here, Freedom Phalanx member Synapse faces off against Ghost Widow.

FAME AND INFAMY

City of Villains introduces a PVP reputation system, which rewards respectful players with additional titles, temporary powers, and new badges. "You don't get reputation points for just defeating everyone in sight, though," says Cook. "You get [them] for defeating foes equal to or tougher than you. You lose points for doing things that make PVP unfun—especially for attacking players of a lower level." You'll have to stay active in order to keep your reputation up, lest it fade over time. And players who aren't interested in PVP should have no fear: Emmert assures us, "The core gameplay will always be [non-PVP] combat."

Name: Lord Recluse

Group Affiliation: Arachnos Organization

Profile: Recluse is the undisputed lord of the Arachnos Organization, dictator of the Rogue Isles, and former comrade of Paragon City's flagship hero, Statesman. Recluse operates out of his black headquarters in Grandville, where he hatches dastardly schemes for world domination.

A supergroup base serves one other purpose: It's a battlefield for massive guild-versus-guild wars.

Either this guy is keeping a lookout for intruders, or he's watching Wonder Woman take a bath.

HALL OF JUSTICE

Emmert had one more big surprise to reveal: *City of Villains* will introduce supergroup bases to the game, which should give players an added incentive to stick together. "Supergroups in *COH* have a much shorter life span than guilds in other [games]," Emmert remarks. Not anymore—with the base-building tool included with *COV*, supergroup leaders will be able to design massive, full-fledged headquarters by using an interface that's as fully featured as the game's famous character-creation tool.

Of course, these bases don't come cheap—the bigger your base, the higher its influence cost. "Supergroups will want to pool their resources together," says Emmert. After plunking down the initial influence cost, ambitious base designers can go to work, selecting lighting and textures for walls, floors, ceilings, and every other individual part of the base.

Various special room types can be designed into a base as well, according to Cook. "Some room types include your medical center, workshop, combat room, and comm center," he explains. "The comm center, for example, houses the equipment you need to track the location of your members and manage group e-mails. You can even have an emergency hot line there. [After all], when there's an emergency, the mayor of Paragon City has to call someone!"

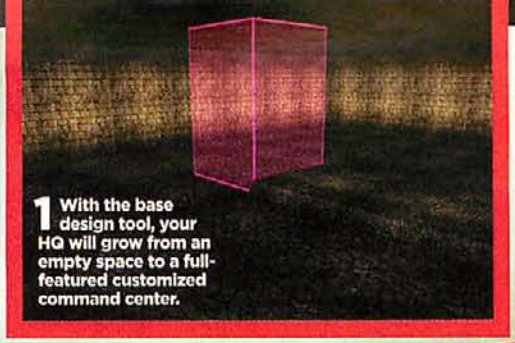
The bases themselves are hidden beneath the city, underwater, or in deep space, accessible via teleporters within Paragon City and the Rogue Isles. You might even have the opportunity to build additional teleporters to numerous areas of the game, making your supergroup base a handy, all-purpose hub.

KINGDOM COME

A supergroup base serves one other important purpose: It's a battlefield for massive guild-versus-guild wars for groups of up to 50 players per side. A base that holds at least one item of power can be challenged by an opposing team, which has the option of scheduling a specific date and time for a base raid. Once the raid starts, the aggressors have one hour to secure an item of power from the defenders, resulting in a massive knock-down, drag-out melee. Unless the supergroup openly states otherwise, a base can only be raided once per day—and, of course, groups that aren't interested in this type of PVP gameplay can always opt out. Finally, challenging a supergroup to a base raid carries an influence cost, which helps to deter potential spammers and grief players.

CITY OF HEROES: COMING IN ISSUE 5!

While *City of Villains* won't be on store shelves until late October, current *City of Heroes* players have one more free expansion to look forward to this summer. *Issue 5* will introduce archery and sonic power sets to existing archetypes, in addition to extending the "newbie" threshold to level 10 (meaning no experience penalty upon death). There are also a few solo-friendly tweaks to the mission-difficulty slider, a new zone, and a nefarious new villain group—the secretive Cabal!



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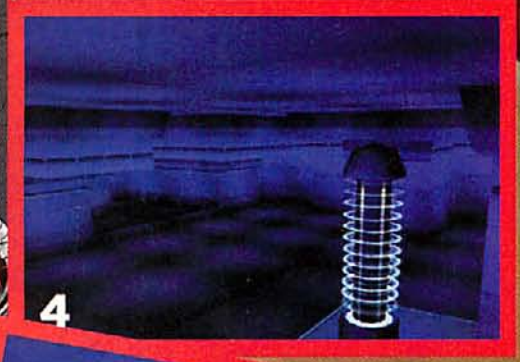

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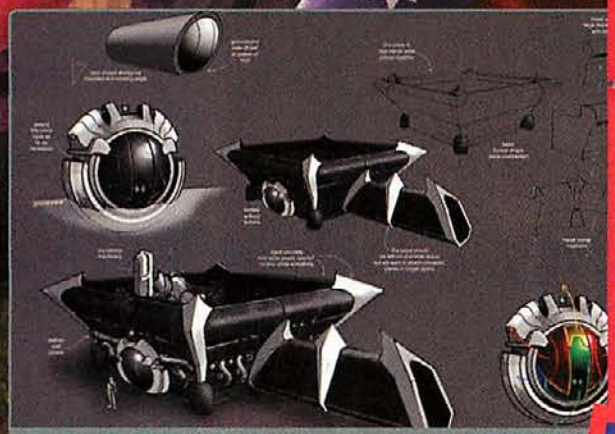

MORE POWER!

"All those cool things you put in your base need power to run," Cook explains. "One item every base is going to need is a power plant. Now, because super-types get the latest technology (or steal the best gear), you only need one power plant to run all your equipment and defenses...but, of course, your enemies know that too." So what happens when an invading supergroup wrecks your source of energy? "Your gun turrets, force fields, and other defenses will be useless," says Cook. "You might want more than one power plant in your base, or invest in power packs as backup. Of course, all this costs influence...but what supergroup wants to be called cheap?"

5

All that's left is one burning question: Will our steadfast alter egos from *City of Heroes* have the option of falling from grace, sinking into a life of villainy in *City of Villains*? The answer is "soon." The first post-*COV* expansion will tie the two games together even more, with the possibility of additional epic archetypes and perhaps even private player-owned apartments.

But for now, we'll be devilishly happy to get our hands on the finished version of *City of Villains*, which makes its first appearance this October in an aptly timed Halloween release. We'll say it one more time: It's good to be bad!

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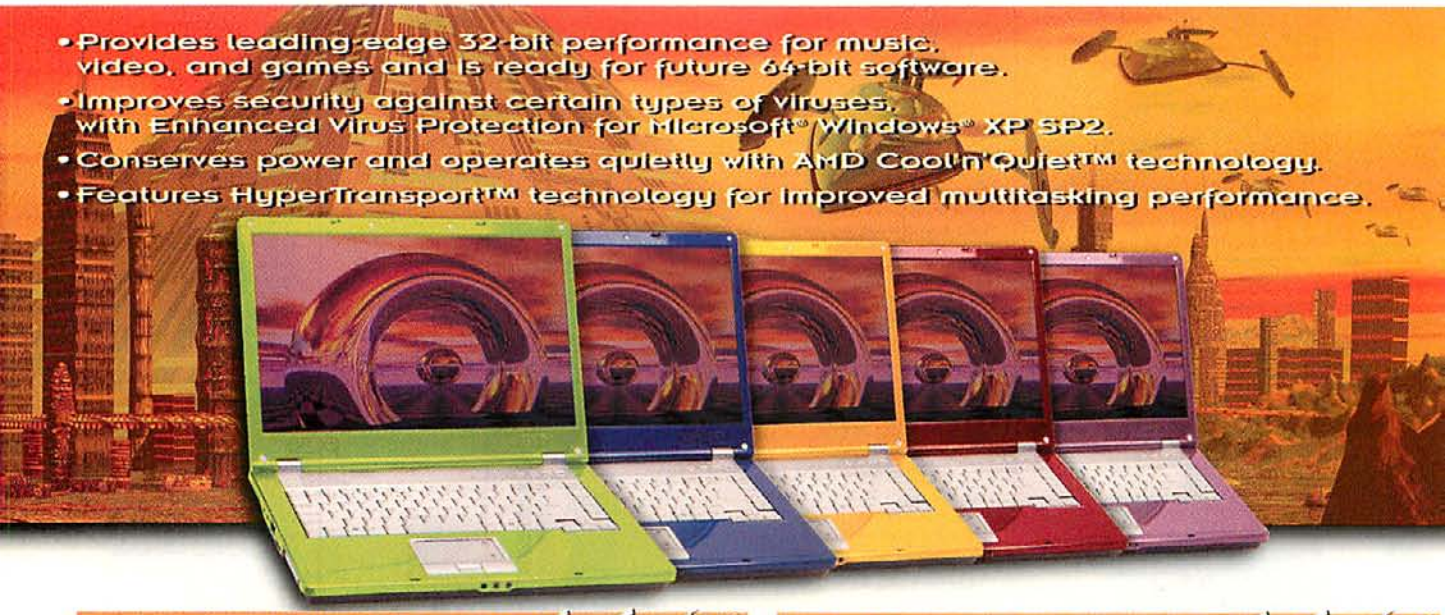

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Reviews

Those who can't do, review games

Just in case this month's massive cover story on *City of Villains*—the sequel to *City of Heroes*, our 2004 MMORPG of the Year—didn't get the point across, NCsoft is becoming a force to be reckoned with. The latest evidence? *Guild Wars*, another NCsoft online offering, this one an action-RPG with no monthly fee. That's right—no monthly fee. Whatever the merits of the game (and there are plenty—check out the review on page 68), this represents a wheel-reinvention-caliber change in the online-gaming model. And you could make the same argument for the free game expansions that *City of Heroes* has received over the last year. We're big supporters of the whole "free" concept here at *CGW*, so we're crossing our fingers that this turns into a full-blown trend. Other games could only stand to gain by following this precedent—prime example No. 1 is *The Matrix Online*, which would strongly benefit from at least one really good reason to play it.

REVIEW STANDARDS

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

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

Inside

72
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil
We're guessing you get to shoot stuff.

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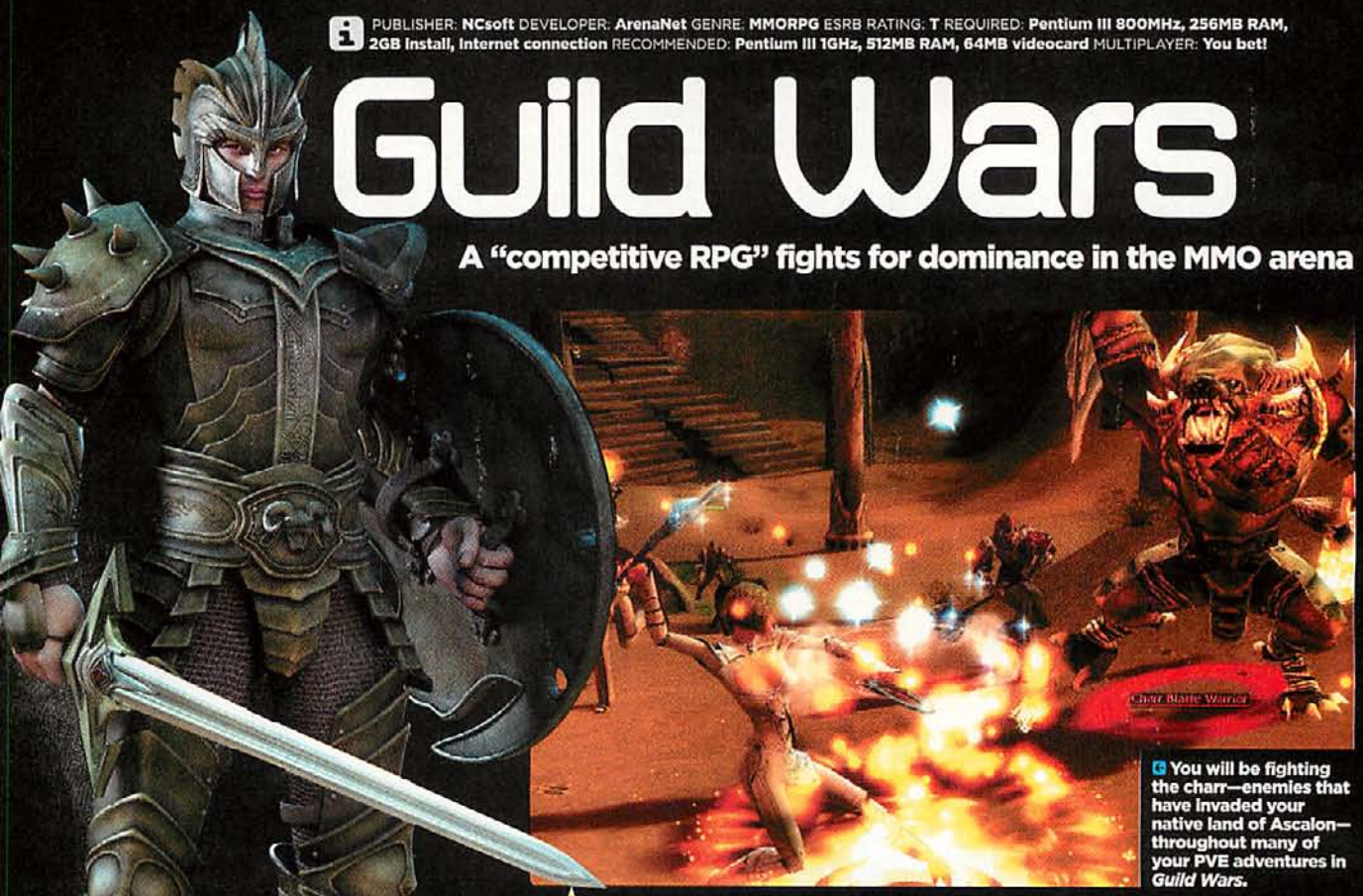
Close Combat: First to Fight
What have they done to *Close Combat*?

80
The Matrix Online
Should you even bother to jack in?

PUBLISHER: **NCsoft** DEVELOPER: **ArenaNet** GENRE: **MMORPG** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800MHz, 256MB RAM, 2GB install, Internet connection** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **You bet!**

Guild Wars

A "competitive RPG" fights for dominance in the MMO arena



You will be fighting the charr—enemies that have invaded your native land of Ascalon—throughout many of your PVE adventures in *Guild Wars*.

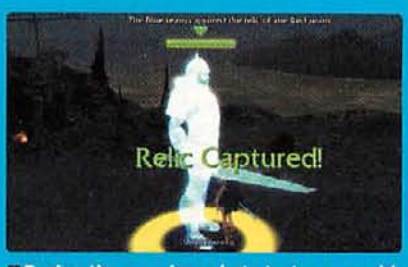
EDITORS' CHOICE GAMING

Attention all you RPG wallflowers, cheapskates, and turn-based-battle haters: There's finally an online game that's worth your time. It's called *Guild Wars*, but don't let the name fool you. Although it does offer lots of player-versus-player action (check out the PVP and guild sidebars for more info), there is an entirely separate, meaty slab of privately instanced player-versus-environment "DRPG" gaming, too ("D" as in *Diablo-, Dungeon Siege-, and Divine*

The best part is that there's no monthly fee, so you can save your pocket money for dessert.

PVP PANDEMONIUM

In *Guild Wars*, you are allowed four characters per account, with which you have a number of options. You can choose to do random PVP battling in town arenas with your work-in-progress PVE character. You can also create maximum-level PVP-only characters, create or join a guild, and enter tournaments.



During the prerelease beta test, you could unlock every skill for every class and build PVP-only characters without doing any PVE. Now, a PVP-only character's skills and gear are limited to whatever you've unlocked in PVE action first, a fact that has upset hardcore PVP gamers.

You'll get as many attribute points for your PVP-only character as any level 20 character would have to work with, so you can strengthen unlocked skills by applying those points to them. Alternatively, you can use one of 12 pregenerated characters, like this one.

STEPPING UP IN THE WORLD ON THE GUILD LADDER

Guild Wars' real-time battles against computer-generated mobs are a blast, but we suspect you'll hit the level cap of 20 long before an expansion pack is available for purchase, an estimated six to nine months from launch. Until then, you can join or start a guild and while away your continual free months of play in high-level player-versus-player combat. Some of your options:

Eliminate all other teams in annihilation battles or try king of the hill and capture the relic matches to gain control of altars/relics before the timers run out. Worlds at war is the international tournament in which whole regions compete for supremacy, and tomb of primeval kings competitions reward the top team with Hall of Heroes winner announcements over chat and, more importantly, in the winner's own guild hall. And guild-vs-guild combat escalates your guild up the guild ladder that's tracked on *Guild Wars*' website, announcing your might to the world.

When you first leave the newbie area, you can solo for a short while. Eventually, though, you'll need to be in ever-larger teams to survive.

We are cool. We are suave. And we shall kick your butt if you come anywhere near us. Especially if you ask us to play *WOW* instead.

Guild Wars' spectacular views and spell effects don't hinder the collecting of loot, which sparkles boldly wherever you are.

Divinity–style real-time action-RPG battling). And the best part is that there's no monthly fee, so you can save your pocket money for dessert.

You enter the game with the timeworn call for heroes ringing in your ears. The kingdom of Ascalon is under siege by creatures called the charr that want to sear the kingdom into bits (get it?), and it's up to you to blah, blah, blah. Fortunately, *Guild Wars*' character building, loot, action, and 3D graphics are more involving than the premise.

Realistically, though, skills are quickly earned as quest rewards in PVE action. If you prefer, you can just do larger cooperative missions for each map area instead and then purchase most skills from trainers in the towns you hit afterward. Certain "elite" skills can only be obtained via boss quests, however.

THERE IS NO "I" IN "TEAM"

Soloing is easiest in the training area of the preseared Ascalon City, although the quests are somewhat boring here. Once you port to the postseared Ascalon, the action escalates to a point at which you'll need teammates to complete both simple quests and the more involving, multipart cooperative missions. If you don't want to solicit help from other players in the towns, you can play through instances with friends or hire NPC henchmen. The henchmen aren't an even substitute for well-balanced players, but they hold their own and will resurrect you if you fall. You'll get stackable stat reductions to health and energy (which is fuel for spells and attacks) every time you die; fortunately, your stats go back to normal fairly quickly as you fight. Quest instances occur right outside the towns; you respawn at a nearby portal with reduced stats if your entire team is wiped out, but a teammate must resurrect you if any players remain (every playable character can easily earn rez capabilities, though). Cooperative missions are a bigger pain if your whole team goes down, because in that case you get bumped out of the instance and flung back to town, even if you were inches away from doing in that final boss. All the enemy mobs respawn within the instance while you're away, too, and unclaimed loot is lost.

A lot has been done to maximize fun from the onset, though. Loot drops include a barrage of cool weapons that rock from the start (see the weapons and armor sidebars om the following pages for more details), and travel is minimized as you can click on map points to return to places previously discovered. The only gripes with regard to exploring are that you can't roam anywhere there's scenery—you're held to strict linear paths—and character movement tends to stutter on stairways. Also, if one teammate decides to enter or leave an instance, your whole team is unceremoniously yanked through the portal as well, making for another annoyance. Enemy mobs don't respawn once you've killed them unless you're forced to leave an instance, though, so it is possible to /afk midmission in a cleared area.

CLASSY CLASSES

There are six classes—called professions—in *Guild Wars*, and any one character can combine two of them (making one primary and the other secondary), which makes for powerful and creative character building. Elementalists are magelike damage dealers, mesmers

If you and a friend don't feel like teaming with strangers from the towns, you can hire NPC henchmen to fill in the gaps. They have only one profession each, but they're fairly on the ball and don't take any more XP or loot than a normal teammate would.

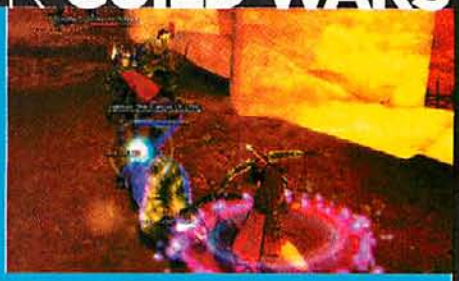
You will encounter bosses here and there in the initial training area, but the action gets a lot crazier after you are plunged forward in time to the postseared Ascalon.

You and your team will be fighting everything from centaurs to the undead to ice elementals in gorgeous 3D—it's too bad the paths through the maps aren't less restricting and linear.

handle crowd control and drain energy from opponents, warriors pound across the front lines, monks heal and buff, rangers send in buffed arrow attacks and pets from the rear, and necromancers raise undead minions and drain health from enemies. The real fun begins once you start combining the skills from two professions (see the professions sidebar for some good combos). By the time you hit the level cap of 20, you will have over 150 skills that you can further improve with attribute points you gain as you level up. The catch is that you can bring only eight skills with you into any battle. This means you must coordinate your skill selection with what your teammates choose and make such decisions as whether to focus on using area-of-effect damage or knockdown and stun effects on opponents. It's best to make complementary choices, since you

The real fun begins once you start combining the skills from two professions.

GEAR UP FOR GUILD WARS



Cool weapons can be found in droves at loot drops, and every profession can wield every weapon type. However, many weapons have skill requirements (such as a bow requiring ranger marksmanship) that prevent professions without those skills from getting maximum damage from them. About the only negative is that sometimes a weapon's buff description (like "increases damage") could be better. Each drop is preassigned to a certain teammate, but you can trade or sell the goods freely. Your weapons can be customized by NPCs to do more damage, and only at this point can no other character wield them. You can also "salvage" items (break them down with various costly salvage kits) into components that NPCs can then use to make armor for you.

There is "beginner's" armor you can quest for in the training area, but in the mainland, NPCs are your only link to better armor; however, you must bring them the right parts, such as ingots, cloth, and fur. Dye, which is used to further customize your armor, is dropped as loot or can be bought from vendors (albeit for costly sums), and runes, which are found later in the game, can add magical properties to items.

You and your team will find yourselves the subjects of certain mission cut-scenes, and you'll have instances to yourselves, too.

Where would we be without dragonlike monsters in RPGs? We'd probably die less for one thing.

Guild capes are available now just like they were during beta. Unfortunately, they cost 2,000 gold now instead of the 100 gold they did back then.

must portal back to the nearest town in order to change skills.

A "COMPETITIVE RPG" VERSUS TRUE MMOS

Guild Wars predominantly feels like a co-op RPG played on a LAN with guild-based PVP tacked on at the end. There is also occasional mild to moderate lag to deal with even if you just want to play through the PVE instances with henchmen, as you would in a single-player game. Most of the PVP is best played out once you have collected all the skills you can for your character (refer to the PVP sidebar for details), which requires hitting the level 20 cap. The player economy, crafting aspects, and general sociability aren't nearly what they are in a full-fledged MMORPG, and even ArenaNet labels *Guild Wars* a "competitive RPG." Still, for less-social gamers thirsting for high-octane, real-time online action without a monthly fee, *Guild Wars* is a solid choice.

Denice Cook

Verdict ★★★★½

MM Oh! Great skill mingling and frenetic real-time fighting will make you forgive the lack of crafting and free-roaming content that true MMORPGs offer.

Guild Wars' bosses often glow in bright colors to give you a heads-up that they're around.

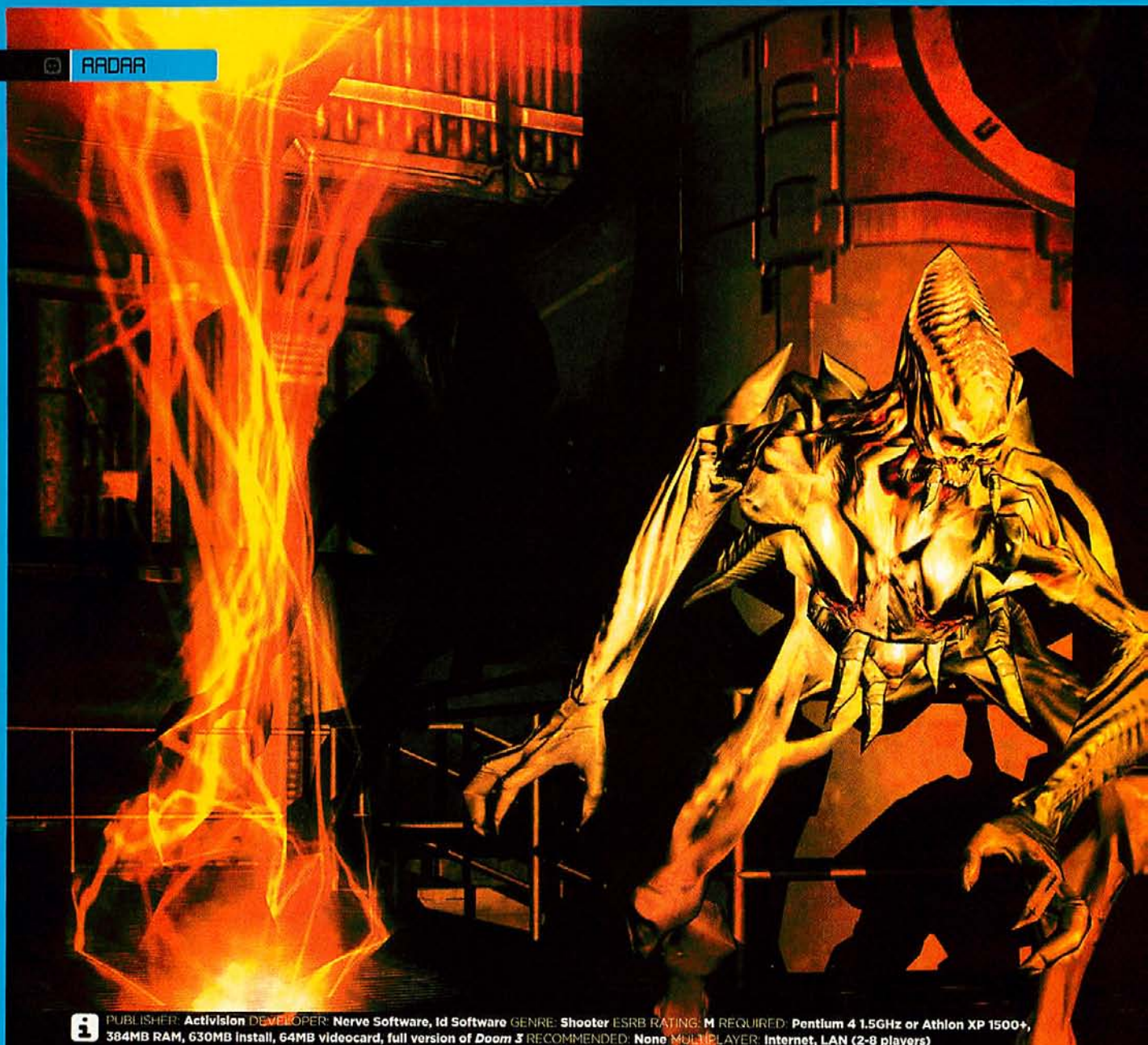
CHARACTER CLASSES, AKA PROFESSIONS

You can combine two professions (setting one as primary and the other as secondary) without penalty, although you retain the armor class and major attribute of your primary profession. That is, a character with a monk primary profession and warrior secondary profession will wear cloth armor and have a bonus for healing spells, while a character with a warrior primary profession and monk secondary profession will wear heavy armor and have a strength bonus.

One of the most powerful profession combinations in the game is having an elementalist specializing in AOE damage as your primary profession and a necromancer focusing in blood magic (which funnels health from enemies to your character) as your secondary profession.

A necromancer's minions, like the bone horror on the left, must be summoned from nearby corpses. They're fun to use when you're soloing but are riskier on teams—if the necromancer dies, the minions will immediately turn on and attack surviving teammates.

Mesmers specialize in crowd control and draining energy from enemies. When it comes to dealing damage, though, they're weaker, so they work best when coupled with higher-damage professions such as the warrior, elementalist, necromancer, or ranger.



PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Nerve Software, Id Software** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz or Athlon XP 1500+, 384MB RAM, 630MB install, 64MB videocard, full version of *Doom 3*** RECOMMENDED: **None** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-8 players)**

Doom 3: Resur

More monsters, fewer closets

After over 10 years and three *Dooms*—and now this expansion pack—one has to wonder...just how stupid is the Union Aerospace Corporation? No matter how many times it comes up with the cool idea to conduct experiments on Mars, the results are always the same: A portal to hell opens and everyone involved gets slaughtered by demons. Isn't anyone in UAC management thinking that maybe it's time for a new business plan?

Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil finds us once again cleaning up the UAC's mess, and the results are about what you'd expect. Like any good expansion pack, it gives fans more of what they liked, with tougher levels and monsters and a few new weapons to mix things up. It's a no-brainer purchase for *Doom 3* fans, while also a no-brainer pass for *Doom 3* haters. And you know who you are already.

SHOOTY SHOOTY!

I'd argue that *Resurrection of Evil*, minute for minute, might actually be the better game. Nerve Software did an excellent job with the level design, infusing it with a quicker pace, less reliance on the infamous "monster closets," and some cool and creepy multitiered excavation-site areas—which are a nice change from *Doom 3*'s relentlessly claustrophobic corridors. Though there are plenty of those here, too.

The developers go three for three on the new weapons, all of which would have made the original game more fun. The new double-barreled shotgun is the best weapon in either game, ferociously powerful at short

It's a no-brainer purchase for *Doom 3* fans, while also a no-brainer pass for *Doom 3* haters.

The artifact is an icky ball of yuck that will help you take down the game's tough bosses.

See that brain flying in the air? That's why we love the double-barreled shotgun.

Hello, monster. It's very nice to meet you. Now please die and go to hell. Um, again.

rection of Evil

range, which is where most of the monsters are anyway. The one downside: slow reload time. The grabber—or ionized plasma levitator—is oddly reminiscent of *Half-Life 2*'s gravity gun, but it is at least used to good effect here. You can use it to stop projectiles hurled at you in midair and shoot them back at the enemy. To which I say: Yay!

Finally, there's the "artifact," an icky-looking alien thingy that grants you a new power each time you defeat a boss. First you get the ability to slow down time, then to go "berserk," and then to become invincible—each invoked for short bursts of time. I first dismissed this as a gimmick, but the artifact is crucial to your survival, especially late in the game. It also succeeds in mixing gameplay up with a few nice (if not overly original) moments of puzzle-ish timing sequences.

BANG BANG!

Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil essentially does what we expect from any decent expansion pack, giving us more of the good stuff, eliminating some of the lame stuff, adding cool new stuff, and making everything a bit tougher for those who made it all the way through *Doom 3*. It doesn't revolutionize gaming as we know it, but fans of its predecessor won't be disappointed. And if you weren't one of those fans, save your $35—as if I needed to tell you. **Jeff Green**

Verdict ★★★★☆

More monsters to kill and guns to shoot them with. You were expecting, maybe, a love story?

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Crystal Dynamics** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 256MB RAM, 3GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-16 players)**

Project: Snowblind

A miss is just a miss

I wish that *Project: Snowblind* had been more thoroughly playtested, because it's really not a bad game—when it's working. Sure, it's derivative, but it's also fast paced, well balanced, and fun. Hell, it's even got respectable multiplayer. If *Snowblind* had been developed for the PC from the get-go instead of for the PS2, we might have had ourselves a beautiful friendship. Instead, its shortcomings make it just another one of the usual suspects.

THE FUNDAMENTAL THINGS APPLY

Snowblind pays homage to (or rips off, depending on how you look at it) just about every FPS that's come out in the last three years, but it's clearly most influenced by *Deus Ex: Invisible War*. Folks familiar with that game and/or sci-fi shooters in general won't get too hot and bothered over the weapons, the abilities, or the plot here. But the same old isn't necessarily a minus, either. If you're into the *Deus Ex* ethos, then you're going to be into a game that echoes it.

Even if you're not, though, *Snowblind* hits all the marks when it comes to core design, offering bankable gameplay for just about anyone. The levels are concise, well planned, and exciting. The A.I. is good enough to be a challenge (so long as it's got numbers to work with), and your fellow soldiers, for once, are an asset rather than an albatross. Plus, while the weapons may not be innovative, there's a *ton* of different kinds (see sidebar). In short, there's plenty of good here—if you can get to it.

YOU MUST REMEMBER THIS

We've said it before, but the perennial *CGW* admonition needs, apparently, to be repeated: There's no excuse for inflicting a half-baked game on an unsuspecting public. Aside from the constant, severe errors with music and sound (I finally just turned my speakers off), *Snowblind* crashed so badly and so often that I'm pretty sure my computer, having survived, is now qualified to test prototypes for the Air Force. And let me warn you: *Snowblind* has checkpoint saves. Checkpoint saves + frequent crashes = pissed off. And not your standard what-the-hell-happened-to-the-toilet-paper pissed off. We're talking some real-deal Ezekiel 25:17 wrath-of-God pissed off.

Anyway, if you're willing to risk it and you get lucky, you'll have a quality FPS on your hands with *Snowblind*. But you'd better be ready to play the same levels again and again, Sam. **Eric Neigher**

Verdict ★★★½☆

Could have been a contender, if not for the bugs and the freakin' checkpoint saves.

GUNS, GUNS, GUNS!

1 The flechette gun primarily shoots rapid, ricochet-prone energy spheres, but the alternate fire launches a cloud of nanites that seeks out and harasses enemies. Finish them off at your leisure

2 The riot wall provides portable instantaneous cover from enemy fire. It's great against gun emplacements or when your health is low—both of which you see here.

3 If you suspect you're in for a major firefight, ballistic shielding could mean the difference between reloading your gun and reloading your game. Plus, it looks pretty sweet.

Nazi cow soldiers. Really, the picture speaks for itself. Did I mention that Angie can loot her own udder gun from these?

PUBLISHER: **Whiptail Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Nuclearvision Entertainment** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.3GHz, 128MB RAM, 3GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.6GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Psychotoxic

Hell is a place on Earth

Painful voice acting. Horrendous level design. Poor physics. Bugs and crashes. I won't get into the story line, except to say that the instruction manual gives 90 percent of it away. In brief, for those who don't read instruction manuals: Angie Prophet, busty woman with guns and angelic powers, must save the world from the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse. That's all you need to know. Never mind what the other three horsemen are up to. It took four years of game development to come up with this?

Forget that it took me a full Saturday of monkeying with my video drivers to get Psychotaco...er, *Psychotoxic* to run. Forget about the frequent crashes to my desktop. Forget about the corruption of save-game files. Where there wasn't a bug, there was awful level design. Very early into the game, you are tortured with jumping puzzles and sliding log puzzles—all while being shot at. It almost beats enduring another stealth level (there are no "sneak" skills in the game, aside from a one-shot, short-lived invisibility power). Apart from these levels, most of the game is spent running through a series of cramped, dark tunnels. Oh boy.

Psychotoxic's only saving grace comes in the form of the dream levels (and the peculiar sense of delight that only screaming "Psychotaco!" can provide). Sometimes Angie needs to get inside someone's head to find an answer, and the result is a romp through someone's twisted subconscious. Some of these levels are truly surreal, imaginative, and downright weird in an entertaining way. They do break the monotony of the normal levels, which involve killing the same NYPD, FBI, and National Guard members over and over. "Ninety unique and different enemies," my ass. **Stephen Gehringer**

It took four years of game development to come up with this?

Verdict ★½☆☆☆

If an infinite number of monkeys given infinite time can reproduce the works of Shakespeare, then give me 10 monkeys and an hour and you'll have *Psychotoxic*.

PUBLISHER: **Codemasters** DEVELOPER: **Free Radical Design** GENRE: **Action-Adventure** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 1GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

Second Sight

Going out of your head

Do you know somebody you'd like to slam into a wall with a burst of untraceable mental energy, especially if you could escape invisibly afterward? If you do, and this somebody looks like a security guard, then you're in luck—because you can kill him with psychic attacks a thousand times over in everything from hospitals to sewers to laboratories in *Second Sight*.

As John Vattic, a scientist whose work centers on the paranormal, you awaken under somewhat clichéd circumstances: You're an incarcerated amnesiac who, prior to receiving psychic powers via an experimental surgery, was called upon to aid a counterterrorist group in Siberia—which you figure out via playable in-game flashbacks. These flashbacks strengthen the story line, in which you'll re-create John's days in Siberia by playing through team-based missions. *Second Sight*'s voice acting and character expressions help make the narrative quite compelling as you begin to find out just what happened to you and your teammates post-Siberia.

Who's that in the mirror? The story's amnesia beginning is its only truly weak part.

You can hammer single enemies with a psychic attack; eventually, you'll get an area of effect attack as well.

Your weapons are ordinary, with the exception of the sniper rifle—which, instead of jolting you into a first-person view, conveniently displays your target at the bottom-right part of the screen. Firefights are arcade-style duck-and-cover affairs that seem scripted to certain locations. When you're not in one of these designated areas, an unending stream of enemies forces you to employ cautious stealth instead, but the weak A.I. means many guards tend to give up on you too easily after you're spotted.

Fortunately, you excel in the use of psychic powers. You can project your holographic image through areas for recon work or to manipulate switches and computers. You can walk invisibly by enemies, possess their minds, or kill them with psychic attacks. You're also armed with telekinetic powers that you use to fling items about or destroy surveillance cameras.

Unfortunately, though, you can't destroy the game's camera, which is sometimes sloppy and tends to strand you in corners. The game also has irritating clipping issues. And while we're talking annoyances, *Second Sight* is a console port with only one permanent save at the beginning of each level. There are a few checkpoints, but when trying to get across them without error in a single sitting, you may begin to think *Second Sight* should have been called *Fifteenth Sight*. If you can tolerate its inconveniences, though, *Second Sight* is a head trip worth taking. **Denice Cook**

Verdict ★★★½☆

The psychic powers rock, but one permanent save at the beginning of each level may drive you off your rocker.

WAR GAMES

CGW is at war—war, we say!—with bad action-combat games. Seriously, we've had enough now. Stop. No more. Or we'll review your games just like these three here.

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **Destineer Studios** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM, 2.8GB install** RECOMMENDED: **None** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-8 players)**

Close Combat: First to Fight

America's other *America's Army*

Close Combat: First to Fight **isn't awful. As first-person shooters go, it's passable, saddled with the typical problems you'd find in a cheap game. It has horrible A.I. and ridiculous, mincing animation. The engine looks pretty good most of the time, but then shadows bleed through a wall or someone's gun pokes noticeably through a door. It's obviously an Xbox port, with its small levels and too tight field of view.**

The level design is extremely linear and unimaginative. At one point, you begin a mission near a mosque and the briefing implies that you're going to have to be extra careful, as the U.S. military traditionally has been around mosques. But all you get is a map with a golden dome and a minaret. There's your mosque. Now try not to shoot any civilians. That's the extent of the level design. On several occasions, the game seems to run out of steam, so it plunges you into a sewer level. So far, so middling.

SEMPER FI (NOT AVAILABLE IN ALL STATES)

But what makes *First to Fight* notable—and not in a great way—is how it trumpets its association with the soldiers of the U.S. Marine Corps who are fighting right now in Iraq and Afghanistan. You're in charge of a four-man team of Marines in Beirut shooting Syrians, Iranians, and radicals (translation: Shiites) by the dozen. It's risky business making a game that is so directly associated with controversial and emotional real-world events. If you make a game like this, you better hope the gameplay does right by reality. You better hope it doesn't occur to me that at this very moment, while I'm left-clicking to fire, there are American soldiers being shot at in similar settings, only they don't have a B key that instantly heals them, an M key that summons a corpsman out of thin air to teleport the wounded to safety,

PUBLISHER: **Bold Games** DEVELOPER: **NFusion** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 866MHz, 256MB RAM, 700MB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2GHz, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet (2-32 players)**

Elite Warriors: Vietnam

Stupor soldiers

The innocuously named Studies and Observation Group was a collection of special-operations soldiers that penetrated deep behind enemy lines in daring "black ops" during the Vietnam War. Famed for their incomparable skill, these men are credited with kill ratios of 100 to 1. *Elite Warriors: Vietnam* **is a squad-based FPS that supposedly allows you to experience some of SOG's audacious campaigns.**

Unfortunately, this budget game has everything you fear about budgetware. The graphics and sound are dated, the missions dull, and any A.I. exists only in the delusions of the game's programmers. Your team's four "elite" characters have trouble obeying simple orders like "follow" and haven't learned the art of navigating around fences and trees, much less taking cover from enemy fire. Luckily, enemies are equally stupid and often won't respond even as you pick off guys standing next to them. Just in case the bad A.I. isn't enough to cause hair-tearing frustration, there are bugs that can prevent you from achieving your objectives.

EWV has a few ideas that could have made the game interesting. Each mission is a "campaign" in which you can select team members, plan their routes, and set resupply points. Unfortunately, all this really means is you take part in a collection of random firefights in one generic stretch of jungle after another.

EWV is supposed to be about the elite of elites. Unfortunately, if this game is any indication, the SOG soldiers were blind and deaf, and had the tactical sense of lemmings. Di Luo

Villagers worship at the feet of what seems to be a mannequin dressed as a North Vietnamese soldier.

Verdict ★½☆☆☆

You've got better things to do with your time and money.

According to *First to Fight*'s ballistics model, even this little car's windows provide 100 percent cover.

or a Reload button that resurrects them at the last checkpoint.

It doesn't help that the designers all but pat themselves on the back for how realistic their game is, suggesting that it'll be used by the Marine Corps as a training tool (translation: they're bucking for taxpayer dollars to partly fund their game). Nor does it help that there's a disclaimer stamped on the box in a cramped legalese font that reads, "Neither the United States Marine Corps nor any other component of the Department of Defense has approved, endorsed, or authorized this product" (translation: the paperwork didn't go through as expected).

IF YOU WANT THE JOB DONE RIGHT...

But once you've resigned yourself to plunging through a shooter of questionable taste, you'll resent even more its shortcomings. The squad control is the main feature of the game, but without better A.I., it can't hold a candle to titles like *Vietcong*, *SWAT 4*, or *Brothers in Arms*. The control options are limited to telling your team where to stand and whether or not to throw a grenade through a door before storming the room. There are canned situations where you can call in snipers, chopper strikes, or mortar fire, which are considerably less spectacular or useful than they sound. The whole thing plays like the *Star Wars* action game, *Republic Commando*.

In the end, it's all just tedious. You'll shoot hundreds of enemies by the time you finish, picking them out with your handy radar. You'll have to reload through some cheap ambushes, which include things like enemies spawning behind you or forcing you to crawl out of a manhole into the middle of a street surrounded by snipers, machine gunners, and armored vehicles. Which, to be fair, is something Marines should be taught not to do. So if it's ever used as a training tool, at least this tasteless bauble has that going for it. **Tom Chick**

Verdict ★★☆☆☆
A tedious, tasteless mess.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Earlier titles in the *Close Combat* series are real-time World War II war games in which you control squads of soldiers. The twist in these games is that the A.I. controls individual soldiers, while you give orders at a higher level: Go there, hide in this farmhouse, fire at targets in that direction, and so forth. This system allows for a relatively sophisticated morale and suppression model. The lesson of the *Close Combat* games has been that guns aren't just useful for shooting your enemies dead; they are far more useful for convincing the enemy to keep his head down so he doesn't shoot back at you. And ideally, your firing will freak out the other guy, who will eventually run away. The *Close Combat* series hasn't been about inflicting casualties so much as it has been about breaking morale. Unfortunately, there's little sign of that legacy in *First to Fight*; instead, you should look to innovative shooters such as Ubisoft's *Brothers in Arms* and Pandemic's *Full Spectrum Warrior* as the true spiritual successors to the original *Close Combat* games.

PUBLISHER: **Groove Games** DEVELOPER: **Direct Action Games** GENRE: **Shooter** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 800MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Receipt for a quick and painless refund** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-16 players)**

Combat: Task Force 121

Shoulda sent Task Force 122

What can I say about *Combat: Task Force 121* that hasn't already been said about other, albeit natural, disasters? It's ugly, it's painful, and the human cost may well be felt for generations. This is one of those games you play for five minutes and then reverse the charges on your credit card.

CTF121's troubles start with its title, which not only sucks, but also appears to be designed to avoid bad reviews by artificially gobbling up space that would otherwise be used for negative comments. The game purports to be a "realistic" military shooter, sporting "authentic" weapons, but there are ridiculous inconsistencies with real life: The USP does more damage per shot than the M4, and the 9 mm MP5 takes "assault rifle" ammo. However, since the '80s-era graphics make all the weapons look alike, the designers probably got confused about which was which anyway.

CTF121 offers up a (thankfully) brief and incredibly hackneyed single-player campaign that revolves around a Marxist coup d'état in South America. This is only a prelude to the hurt, though, because the game (an Xbox port) features that most excellent of all console conventions: frustrating checkpoint-only saves. Multiplayer isn't afflicted by this shortcoming, but it still comes off as halfhearted: There's a maximum of 16 players to a match and only the most basic game types to choose from. But what would you expect from a game in which you kill the exact same dopey A.I. terrorist the exact same way *ad nauseam*. Plus, the game has swarms of annoying bugs, such as the sound completely cutting out for the *entire rest of the game* after I beat the first mission.

There's nothing to recommend here. If you're jonesing for some realistic military FPS action, take the CD-ROM outside and use it for target practice. Then reinstall *Operation Flashpoint*. **Eric Neigher**

The enemies look the same and they all die the same. Whee.

Verdict ★☆☆☆☆
A $20 game that plays like a $10 game.

Darth Maul—somehow not as scary.

PUBLISHER: **Eidos** DEVELOPER: **Traveller's Tales** GENRE: **Platformer** ESRB RATING: **E**
REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 2.2GB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Hotseat (2 players)**

Lego Star Wars

Toy story

Lego Star Wars is a straightforward, unapologetic platform game featuring plastic blocks, but it is a straightforward, unapologetic platform game featuring plastic blocks with style to burn.

And that style gets burned out in about five short hours. While this game spans the first three episodes of the Star Wars saga, it barely matches their aggregate running time. And why should it? *Lego Star Wars* skips all that stiff dialogue and gets right to the good stuff. You get to blast your way out of the palace at Theed, you hack apart General Grievous, and—best of all—you get to be Yoda and bounce around like an overcaffeinated Chihuahua when dueling Count Dooku. The whole Lego thing works brilliantly, creating a world that begs to be played with the same way a box of Legos begs to be played with. It's irresistible. The game looks fantastic, its colors rich and vibrant, the animations playfully perfect.

Unfortunately, this console port didn't quite stick the landing when vaulting to the PC. The controls, using either a keyboard or a gamepad, lack granularity, making some of the jumping needlessly difficult. Also, while it's fun to be able to switch among characters in your party on the fly, when your group gets big, they get in the way. Worse, party members can get caught in limbo when transitioning between screens, bouncing you right back to where you came from. I bopped between two rooms a good 30 times at one point because of characters lost in a doorway. Frustrating. Not as frustrating as the pod racing sequence, but frustrating nonetheless.

Right about the time I grew tired of the game, it was over. Not that I mind collecting "studs" to trade in to unlock characters or cheats or that going back to uncover secrets in free-play mode isn't fun, but this is a pretty simple, training-wheels-on platformer. But what do I know? I finished elementary school decades ago.

Robert Coffey

A PADAWAN'S PERSPECTIVE

I like this game because I like ships and Legos and it looks great. The free-play mode is fun to go back to and get stuff and solve puzzles. In fact, Jar Jar is very good in free play because of his extra-big jump (he's not good at fighting, though). I think most kids are going to like *Lego Star Wars*. Dashiell Coffey, age 9

Verdict ★★★½☆

For kids, it's great. For adults, eh, not so much.

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Reflections** GENRE: **Driving/Action** ESRB RATING: **M**
REQUIRED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 256MB RAM, 5.5GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 3GHz, 512MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

DRIV3R

K33p driving, nothing to s33 h3r3

The graphics are "enhanced" in that they feature high resolutions and low framerates.

You'll do this a lot just trying to use the keyboard to drive around town.

The price of decent draw distance, mildly better textures, and slightly-less-jaggy lines? Driving at 8 frames per second!

The *Driver* franchise has the unfair reputation of being a *GTA* clone when it's actually focused more on simulating '70s-style car chases. However, the atrociously named *DRIV3R* is more a case of the developer combining amusing vehicle sequences with terrible on-foot gameplay—which has somehow become even worse in its transition to the PC.

As in the original console version, the plot involves undercover FBI agent Tanner (voiced joylessly by Michael Madsen) driving around the world and tracking car thieves. Reviews of the console game discussed the 70/30 split between driving and on-foot missions, the semirealistic driving physics, and the incredibly bad execution of nondriving action. Nine months later, we get to scrutinize the nonpainstaking work done to make the PC version "different."

The bullet-pointed differences include a new mission (The Hit) and an "enhanced graphics engine." The new mission is another typical/forgettable "chase someone via boat and then by car and then do a lot of shooting" affair, and the graphics are "enhanced" in that they feature high resolutions and low framerates. The undocumented difference is "nigh-unusable interface." Besides needing you to completely remap the buttons, the game also demands a gamepad. Without analog controls, the driving is ludicrously difficult; using a keyboard will result in frequent crashes from doing things as daring as turning a corner. On-foot movement and aiming is more difficult with the mouse than it is with a control stick.

If *KOTOR* is a shining example of how to port a console game to the PC, then *DRIV3R* is a tragic *Red Asphalt* video.

Thierry Nguyen

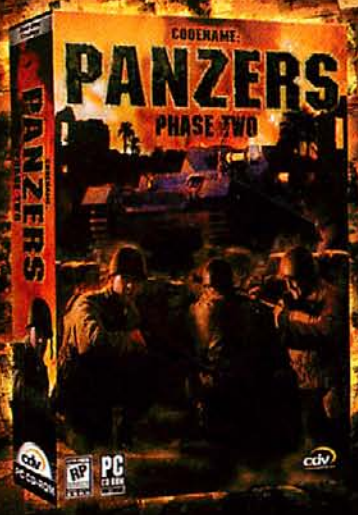
Verdict ★★☆☆☆

Proof that not everything made in nine months is a bundle of joy.

CODENAME:

PANZERS

PHASE TWO



"A GOOD MIX OF FUN AND FACT THAT CAN TRANSLATE INTO A FIRE FRENZY OF EXCITEMENT ON THE BATTLEFIELD."
- IGN

"...CAPABLE OF ASTONISHING ZOOMED-IN LEVELS OF DETAIL."
- GAMESPOT

- 3D GRAPHICS ENGINE RENDERS FIERCE RTS BATTLES IN EXQUISITE DETAIL.
- LEAD THE AXIS, ALLIES, OR YUGOSLAVIAN RESISTANCE ACROSS NORTHERN AFRICA, SOUTHERN EUROPE OR THE BALKANS.
- COMPREHENSIVE MISSION EDITOR ALLOWS PLAYERS TO CREATE THEIR OWN SCENARIOS AND MISSIONS.

FEATURING THE VOICE OF PETER WELLER
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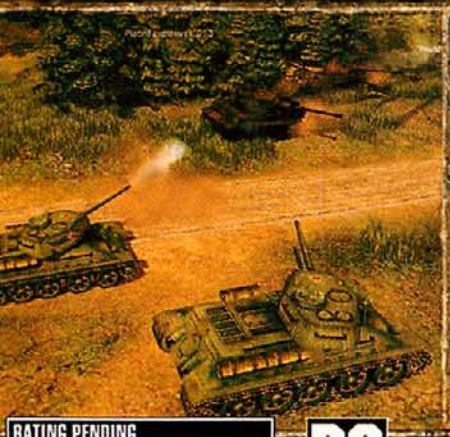
ACTUAL IN-GAME SCREENSHOTS



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Stormregion

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Early in the game, the only way to reach the tops of buildings is to climb up fire escapes.

PUBLISHER: **Warner Bros. Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Monolith** GENRE: **Massively Multiplayer RPG** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.4GHz, 512MB RAM, 64MB videocard, 7GB install, 56.6K modem** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.4GHz, 1GB RAM, 128MB videocard, 10GB install, broadband Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **Massively Multiplayer**

The Matrix Online

You might want to just take the blue pill...

The last two installments of the *Matrix* film trilogy made a ton of money but received a chilly reception from many fans, to put it mildly. That places *The Matrix Online* in an unusual position for a game based on a licensed property—rather than live up to its parent franchise, the game needs to revive it.

The films essentially tell the tale of a hugely complex multiplayer online RPG. It seems like a natural fit, then, to turn them into an *actual* multiplayer online RPG, and *The Matrix Online* succeeds in delivering most of the genre's basic requirements. There's enough stuff to collect, skills to raise, guilds (sorry—crews and factions) to form, and levels to grind through to satisfy, at least initially, the needs of today's busy RPG obsessive.

But apart from a few nonstandard touches, the game suffers from a bland sameness of content—as well as high system requirements and several technical glitches—that marks it as something less than best-of-genre. It's hard to imagine it having much long-term appeal outside the world's endangered population of *Matrix* fanatics.

THE EXCELLENT ADVENTURE

Things start promisingly enough. The character-creation process is cleverly disguised as a recruitment procedure ripped straight from the first *Matrix* movie. As you make your choices, an unseen Zion operative uses a security camera to zoom in progressively closer to your final character. Rather than pick a class, your only initial choice (other than a complete but flavorless set of cosmetic physical traits) is limited to one of 10 general dispositions that read like something straight out of a corporate personality test. Among others, there's the detached spectator, the devoted self-improver, and the troubled intellectual. When all is said and done, these funny, nontraditional descriptions really affect only the initial values of your five basic attributes.

This lack of choices leads to one of the game's two best features—its flexible abilities system. You can essentially re-spec your character on demand. Though the general mix of abilities represents all the typical RPG archetypes (thief, warrior, pet handler, mage, healer, etc.), all the abilities that define your "class" are a mixture of computer programs (which are basically nodes on a big, branching *Diablo*-esque skill tree). You have a limited "memory" into which you can place these programs, with every active ability taking up a certain number of memory slots. There are phone booths scattered all over the

It's hard to imagine it having much long-term appeal outside the world's endangered population of *Matrix* fanatics.

Some of the missions will bring you into contact with characters from the movie.

This is one of the few visual highlights in the drab gameworld.

city where you can reconfigure your memory at no cost.

Essentially, you can yank out all your warrior programs and plug in a bunch of thief programs, and suddenly you're a thief. The only catch is that you have to purchase the abilities initially, and they need to be leveled up, which also costs money (referred to in *Matrix*-speak as "information.") Raising ability levels is cheap early on but gets progressively more expensive with each level. It'd be cost prohibitive to purchase and level up every single skill in the game, but it's not impossible, either.

J-JOHNNY M-M-M-MNEMONIC

Combat is the game's other unusual feature. Called the Interlock system, it's an oddball mixture of *Virtua Fighter*, rock-paper-scissors, and dice rolling that actually manages to capture some of the kinetic kung fu action of the films. In combat, you have three basic attacks and a defense option. Certain abilities grant you extra moves that can often be executed only after successfully landing one of the basic attacks. Fights play out in rounds (executed at regular intervals in real time) during which both you and your opponent choose an attack and make a virtual die roll. The results are modified by various character stats, and whoever wins the roll executes a move while the loser totally eats it.

The animations that accompany the combat moves are impressive, varied, and painful looking. Unfortunately, rampant stuttering—a technical problem that affects the whole game—undermines the fights. Moves are sometimes jittery and a little disconnected, and you'll often get your experience reward for killing an opponent 10 seconds before the animations manage to catch up with your actions. In spite of these glitches, *The Matrix Online* has the best-looking melee combat of any MMORPG to date.

Ranged-weapon combat, on the other hand, is decidedly unimpressive. It consists of you and an opponent standing at a distance from each other and lazily exchanging gunfire. This is typical of

I KNOW **KUNG FU**

And I'm not afraid to use it

Well, actually, I never did learn kung fu. There are three basic schools of close combat in the game: karate, kung fu, and aikido. I focused on karate. That said, most of the combat skills available under each discipline are variations of the three regular moves—grab, power attack, speed attack—only with jacked up damage and unique animations. Here's a little collage of some of my awesome moves.

See that "Ad Space for Rent" sign? They're not kidding... because eventually, you'll start finding advertisements for real-world things like bad Adrien Brody movies.

the genre, but it's too bad that, after infusing the hand-to-hand combat with so much visual flair, the developers couldn't do something cooler with the gunplay. Spell effects (generally under the rubric of "hacker abilities") are also lacking in oomph. They're usually little more than an anemic spatter of glowing lines and scrolling numbers.

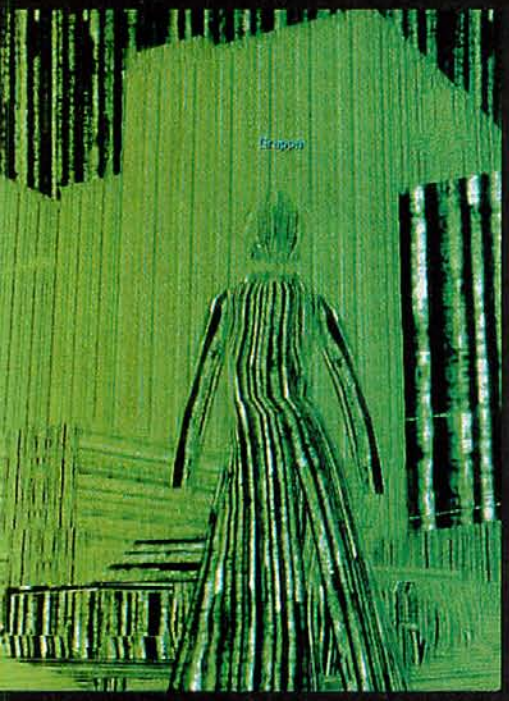
THE BOGUS JOURNEY

Environmental visuals are technically well done and manage to capture the slightly hazy, green-tinted look of the films. Unfortunately, faithfulness to the source material doesn't save them from also being pretty bland. The four urban districts that make up the entire accessible world are all very similar-looking cityscapes that get boring in a big hurry. The unexciting missions (which typically require you to enter a building and do something such as kill someone, steal something, or talk to somebody) all seem to take place in one of a few equally bland interiors. Moments when you come across some new vista and think to yourself, "Holy crap, that looks cool!" are virtually nonexistent. After a while, you'll start to long for an ice or fire world to break up the monotony.

There's nothing especially terrible about *The Matrix Online*. It's a fairly traditional MMORPG that does a good enough job of both nailing the required gameplay basics and neatly mapping genre conventions onto the universe created by the films. It just doesn't have much going for it other than that universe. So unless you're really, really motivated to fully explore the pseudo-philosophical cyber mumbo jumbo of the *Matrix* mythology, your precious 15 bucks a month (and even more precious time) would be better spent on *World of WarCraft* Erik Wolpaw

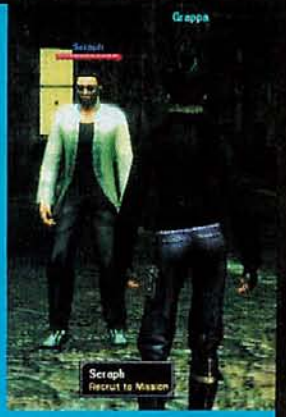
Verdict ★★★☆☆

A fairly standard MMORPG that may be too little too late.



TONY AND TINA'S MEROVINGIAN WEDDING

One of the things that ostensibly sets *The Matrix Online* apart from its competition is an ongoing story written by comic book author Paul Chadwick. Over the life of the game, an evolving plot will be revealed through occasional prerendered movies and something called "live events." These live events are encounters with one or several professional actors paid to adopt the roles of major characters in the unfolding drama and then interact with players. The problem is, it can be difficult to run across one of these actors. I never did until a friendly PR person finally forced one to talk to me. I logged in at the specified time and was met by Seraph (the Oracle's bodyguard from the films). The two of us debated gobbledygook *Matrix* philosophy for a few minutes before the super-tough karate master got tired of that and beat the crap out of me. According to him, the goal of my beating was "not to win, but to understand what it takes to win." He added, helpfully, that "pain is the doorway to understanding." Easy for him to say, since I didn't manage to land a single blow.



I didn't actually receive anything tangible from the encounter. No skills, missions, or new cowboy hat. Nothing. In spite of—or maybe because of—the fact that he was acting as hard as he could, the encounter had the uncomfortable, vaguely embarrassing feel of a Renaissance fair or, worse, an audience-participation play. Unless you're a dedicated roleplayer, this feature may not amount to much.

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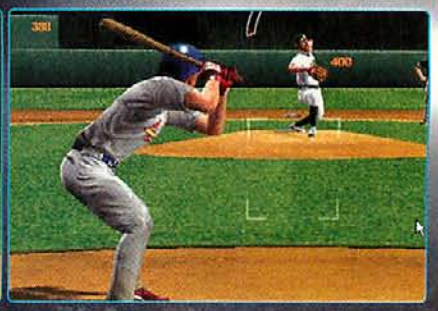
THIS MONTH IN SPORTS

Enjoy America's pastime and the world's pastime, but avoid the worst version ever of *Pong* with humans.



PUBLISHER: **EA Sports** DEVELOPER: **EA Sports** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800MHz, 128MB RAM, 1.4GB install** RECOMMENDED: **None** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2 players)**

MVP Baseball 2005

Ya gotta have heart

It's hard to explain the technical aspects of baseball (as my Irish-born beau can attest to), and it's even harder to convey what makes the game feel so downright magical to so many of us. It is, however, easy to explain that a line drive hit back at the pitcher's head can kill him. And two of the first things I noticed in *MVP Baseball* were a line drive smacked at Mark Mulder's noggin and the correct physics by which he got his head out of the way.

That kind of sums up *MVP* for me—technically, it surpasses the arcadey-ness of some previous iterations and does a decent job of both simulating the true technical aspects of baseball and coming closer to capturing the nuances of a how a game changes batter to batter, and pitch to pitch. What it doesn't capture as well as, say, some of the older *High Heat* titles is the game's soul.

BIG LEAGUE BALL

That's not to say that a technically accurate game isn't fun; *MVP*'s gameplay mechanics are pretty cool. EA's new "hitter's eye" allows you to analyze and recognize pitches just as a professional would, and the "pure swing system" allows you to actually place hits...again, like a professional would. Defensive play includes a quick pickoff attempt for pitchers, and fielders can make diving catches or try to climb the wall to rob a hitter of a dinger. You also can earn MVP points to open unlockables such as retro uniforms. And while the new owner mode doesn't necesarily rival *Baseball Mogul*'s depth, it does give you the option to muddle around in team finances, design a park, and figure such intangibles as player and fan satisfaction through a season.

If you're looking to re-create the mechanics of playing baseball, *MVP Baseball* does a nice job of giving you gameplay options that allow for all the different ways a given at-bat, play, game, and even season can play out. But...where are the fans? The faceless crowd doesn't detract from gameplay, but it does nothing to simulate the experience of being at the ballpark. Where are the quirky cheers and signs? I heard the drums from the left-field bleachers at my A's

PUBLISHER: **O3 Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Espaco Informatica** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium II 350MHz, 64MB RAM, 400MB install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium III 950MHz, 128MB RAM, gamepad** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2 players)**

World Championship Tennis

Worst tennis game ever

Over the past five years, home consoles have experienced a revolution in high-quality tennis games, thanks to titles such as *Virtua Tennis*, *Sega Sports Tennis 2K2*, and *Top Spin*. O3's *World Championship Tennis* is about as far from these games as you can reasonably get without building a time machine and traveling back to 1972 in an effort to experience the heyday of *Pong*.

Something tells us we shouldn't be able to do this.

For starters, *WCT* is plagued with flat scenery, egregiously bad character models, an oddly overcomplicated control scheme, a featureless two-player singles game, and a tepid, monotonous career mode. To make matters worse, the game is riddled with bugs. For example, it's entirely possible to wander over to your opponent's side of the court midgame—and if you're lucky, he might even stop moving altogether, prompting you to restart the entire match. This is, of course, in addition to other game-crashing and machine-rebooting bugs.

If this half-assed excuse for entertainment is any indication, PC tennis games have a long way to go before they can match the quality of their console brethren. If you're dying to play a good tennis game on the PC, do yourself a favor and download the recent *Top Spin* demo instead. *WCT* barely qualifies as a game, let alone "good."

Ryan Scott

Verdict ★☆☆☆☆

It's a good thing *Pong* isn't alive to see this.

Fans' behavior is as flat as their appearance.

Thankfully, there's plenty of on-field drama.

McAfee Coliseum, but where are the green and yellow faux-hawks? The rally caps?

Is it unfair for me to expect that kind of an experience from a videogame? It may be—and it may be that most people don't play *MVP Baseball* as a substitute for making it to the ballpark. But when you're trapped in an office for most of the season, you're looking for something more than the challenge of mastering your left-analog-stick swing. *MVP Baseball* feeds my jonesing to play ball, but not so much my jonesing to be at, or in, a professional baseball game. Kristen Salvatore

Verdict ★★★★☆

Technically great but lacks the heart that makes fans into fanatics.

PUBLISHER: **Sports Mogul** DEVELOPER: **Sports Mogul** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium II 233MHz, 64MB RAM, 75MB install** RECOMMENDED: **None** MULTIPLAYER: **In separate online version of game**

Baseball Mogul 2006

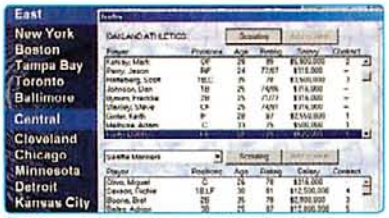
No-frills baseball

Instead of requiring you to hurl fastballs and hit home runs, *Baseball Mogul 2006* challenges you to set ticket prices, negotiate contracts, and field a team that's good both on paper and on the field. The beauty of the game is that you can play out an entire season in less than five minutes.

Among the many new features is that players now have personalities, morale, and moods that are affected by playing time, friendships, and more. Besides not being critical to success, dealing with whiny players isn't necessarily a positive addition—particularly since their personalities appear to be randomly determined.

Contract negotiations are deeper and play out more intelligently and with more options than ever before. Finally, provided you can get past an awkward interface, a detailed minor league system allows you to manage scores of minor leaguers from rookie ball to Triple-A.

Unfortunately and surprisingly, the game deviates from reality in one key category: If your franchise is in a deficit situation at season's end, you are barred from signing your players to new contracts or signing free agents. This lack of credit must represent Bud Selig's influence.



OK, so this is not exactly the flashiest game ever made, but it doesn't need to be.

The ultimate irony is that EA Sports' action-oriented *MVP Baseball* series now allows gamers nearly as much owner- and management-oriented strategic depth. In many regards—such as setting ticket prices, handling stadium management, and even dealing with the aforementioned player moods—*MVP 2005* is deeper and more entertaining.

That said, *Baseball Mogul 2006* is ideal for gamers wanting to concentrate on the big picture. Its $19.99 price tag and ultralow system requirements make it ideal for laptop gaming. George Jones

Verdict ★★★½☆

If simulating multiple seasons in a sitting is your dream, this is your game.

PUBLISHER: **Vivendi Universal Games** DEVELOPER: **Konami** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800MHz, 128MB RAM, 800MB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.4GHz, 256MB RAM, 3GB install, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2 players)**

World Soccer Winning Eleven 8 International

All Becks, no Posh

Anyone who appreciates soccer and enjoys computer games should try the *Winning Eleven* series. The previous iteration was the first available for the PC, but it was better than any other computer soccer game. So what can we say about the new version? Licensed teams are finally introduced, but they include only clubs from the Italian, Spanish, and Dutch leagues. There is now an online mode, but it's so poorly implemented (Internet is via direct IP only, with no matchmaking service) that it feels like an afterthought. The idea of an on-field referee who sometimes makes dubious calls (realism!) sounds good in theory but in practice is incredibly annoying when a clear call goes against you. The resolution goes only to 1280x1024, and the match commentary by Peter Brackley and Trevor Brooking is always vanilla and often desultory. Fortunately, the improved Master League gives you more tools to bury yourself in what is clearly the best career mode in any nontext soccer game, and the on-field play seems to get even more soccerlike in feel without becoming even remotely boring in practice. While it's not the revelation for PC soccer purists that its predecessor was, *Winning Eleven 8* is an excellent game that tops its field for the second year running. Bruce Geryk

The soccer action is much better than it is in the *FIFA* games.

Verdict ★★★★☆

Far from perfect, but far beyond the competition.

PUBLISHER: **Paradox Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Black Sea Studios** GENRE: **Strategy** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 1.2GB Install** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2-6 players)**

Knights of Honor

You'll have to do more than say "Ni!" in this first-rate strategy game

Knights of Honor seemed to have all the makings of a forgettable also-ran. EA released the game in Europe but didn't bother shipping it in the United States. The locked at 1024x768 graphics would have looked fantastic in 1999. And the designers took a *Battlecruiser Millennium*-style "everything including the kitchen sink" approach to game design, incorporating RTS-style combat, diplomacy, city building, personnel management, and strategic world conquest into one game—with none of these elements being as fleshed out as they are in more specialized games. Recipe for failure? Nope. It turns out that *Knights of Honor*, picked up by Paradox Interactive for release in the U.S., is one of the more engaging, addictive strategy games in recent memory.

Your father was a hamster and your mother smelled of elderberries!

Battles aren't as complex as those in some pure RTS games, but they're not a cakewalk, either.

HELP! I'M BEING OPPRESSED!

In *Knights of Honor*, you won't be bothered by such trivialities as questing for grails or measuring the airspeed of laden swallows. You're out to rule all of Europe—either through benevolent expansion or, more likely, by conquest. You start the game as the ruler of one of dozens of European countries in the Middle Ages and fight a campaign of conquest, diplomacy, and subterfuge.

Managing your lieutenants plays a big part in your success. Promote your princes (or hire a knight for a fee) into marshal, spy, merchant, cleric, landlord, and builder positions. Marshals are necessary to raise and lead armies, spies can infiltrate and sabotage enemy nations, and the other positions in your royal court benefit your cities—merchants and landlords mean more gold, clerics raise your land's piety and convert the heathens in conquered nations, etc. You have only nine slots in your royal court, so balance is key: Build nine armies and you'll have no staff to manage other aspects of your kingdom.

You'll also need to build military and civilian buildings, something that's done at a much slower pace than in typical RTS games, so don't count on adding a military building at the last second when your nation falls under attack. Planning is key, and the limited number of builders (who can automate city growth) you can promote means that large kingdoms can start to feel micromanagey.

JUST A FLESH WOUND

Combat is 2D *Total War Lite*. You'll manage formations of soldiers—knights, spearmen, archers, even villagers with pitchforks—and send them into battle with basic formation and attack orders. Protecting your marshal is crucial; if he's lost, chances are your soldiers will turn tail and run for home. Battlefield combat is challenging but not overwhelming, and the A.I. can lead the battle when you're in a more strategic mood or your forces overwhelm the enemy's.

Diplomacy is simple—propose alliances, marry off your progeny, threaten weak countries, declare wars, and so on. Your power and political clout are affected by diplomatic decisions. Break too many treaties and your power drops, annoying your own people and the nations around you. Be a lying bully and chances are you'll see invasion from all sides.

The game also offers multiplayer and quick battle modes, but these focus purely on battlefield combat. Quick battle is good for practice, but this game's multiplayer can't compare to that of pure RTS games. Given that a successful game of *Knights of Honor* can easily run a dozen or more hours, the lack of a strategic multiplayer game is understandable if disappointing.

Though the individual ingredients don't stand out, *Knights of Honor* comes together as a tasty stew. It's engaging, entertaining, and challenging, and it's sure to bring a smile to your inner world conqueror. **Denny Atkin**

Though the individual ingredients don't stand out, *Knights of Honor* comes together as a tasty stew.

Verdict ★★★★☆

An epic strategy game for conquerors who want more than just the standard RTS.

BAD MOVES

Turn-based or real-time? *Knights of Honor* makes a good case for an RTS, but these two show that lousy is lousy, no matter how you slice up time.

PUBLISHER: **CDV Software** DEVELOPER: **GSC Game World** GENRE: **RTS** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 1.5GHz, 512MB RAM, 2GB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 2.4GHz , 768MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet (2-6 players)**

Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars

Napoleon uncomplex

It's difficult to make a strategy game that is both historically realistic and playable. *Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars*, the latest RTS from GSC, is just the most recent example of how it shouldn't be done.

While units don the uniforms and equipment of the Napoleonic era, *Cossacks II*'s gameplay is full of anachronisms. The single-player campaign, for example, has a silly story line involving a coup and French invasion of central England. Also, units don't behave like their historical counterparts. Grenadiers actually throw grenades (phased out in the 1700s), musketry is overpowered, and cavalry and artillery are ineffective. These skewed capabilities negate the need for combined arms, and the resulting battles are too quick and arcadey.

Cossacks II errs with regard to playability as well. Rather than focusing on grand battles, you must build your armies of thousands one soldier at a time, manage resources, and build bases, as in every other RTS. Worst of all, each unit has to be given the order to fire individually. The secret to winning a battle isn't creative maneuvers or inspired tactics. Rather, the unit that fires the first volley at close range will usually rout the enemy.

But it's not all bad. *Cossacks II* has a horde of scenarios, multiplayer options for deathmatch and co-op play, and a "battle for Europe" mode that's probably the best part of the game. Here, you control one of six great European powers trying to dominate the continent, with a heavy focus on battle tactics. When you fight for control of a province, you must fight for certain strategic areas as well as villages that provide your armies with necessary supplies. These battles force you to focus on logistics, roads, and fatigue—factors that too many strategy games ignore.

Cavalry has a hard time breaking lines, much less squares in this game.

Cossacks II contains the building blocks for a great game. But it tries too hard to be both playable and realistic and doesn't get either right. Di Luo

Verdict ★★½☆☆

Trying to please hardcore and casual strategy gamers, *Cossacks II* satisfies neither.

PUBLISHER: **Matrix Games** DEVELOPER: **Black Hammer** GENRE: **Turn-based Space Conquest** ESRB RATING: **None** REQUIRED: **Pentium III 800, 128MB RAM, 500MB install, 64MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **None** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2 players)**

Supremacy

Four paths to the same place

Anyone who played computer games in the late 1980s almost certainly played *Empire*, the turn-based game that let you conquer the world with battleships, tanks, fighter planes, and other assorted generic weapons that blow things up. Almost 20 years later, *Supremacy: Four Paths to Power* takes the basic concept of conquering the world, moves it into space...and leaves a lot of the 1980s-era simplifications intact. It's not a very good start.

Supremacy feels a lot more like a board game than a 4X space conquest game. This is thanks to the square grid that regulates movement, the very basic rules governing production, the lack of any real planet development, and the frequently "gamey" strategies that you need to resort to on the usually symmetrical maps, like attacking with your least-damaged ship first so it absorbs counterattack fire and then arranging the rest of your attackers around your least-damaged ship to block enemy movement, since only one unit can occupy a single square at any time.

There are numerous scenario types, ranging from straight conquest to rescuing a hero trapped behind enemy lines, but the simplicity of the gameplay means that once you get a handle on how to play, you'll be making the same choices over and over.

The game has a few nice touches, such as the production system that regulates unit costs through a grid in which more expensive units actually take up more space, and the upgrades that you can "buy" by sending a science vessel to capture strategically placed space stations. The ground combat system gives you a lot of unit choices with some interesting synergies due to special abilities, like the ability to heal or freeze units.

It doesn't matter how many good ideas the game has, however, if the A.I. can't play well enough to force you to use any of them. Furthermore, there are no difficulty settings, so once you learn how to beat the computer, you'll need to find online opponents to get a decent game. This kind of turn-based game is particularly badly suited to online play, yet that's the only way you'll ever be forced to think very hard about strategy after learning the system.

There are moments in *Supremacy* when you find yourself thinking, "Why can't more games be this elegant?" The answer, unfortunately, is that it takes a lot of game-design skill to make a simple game that is both interesting and challenging. *Supremacy* is neither of those for very long, and even its $25 price doesn't make this a worthwhile purchase. Bruce Geryk

Verdict ★★☆☆☆

Simplicity without depth.

***Supremacy* feels a lot more like a board game than a 4X space conquest game.**

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GAME (NOT) OVER
It hasn't even begun...

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COPUBLISHERS: DreamCatcher and MC2
DEVELOPER: Hydravision Entertainment
GENRE: Action-Adventure ESRB RATING: M
REQUIRED: Pentium III 1GHz, 256MB RAM, 4GB install
RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 2GHz, 384MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: HOTSEAT (2-PLAYER CO-OP)

Obscure

Ghoul school

Was your high school so filthy that no one believed a janitor's office really existed in it? *Obscure*'s Leafmore High has a similar problem, but that's mostly because of all the blood and gore smearing the hallways. As scary as a cafeteria lunch, this game sees you playing as any one of five classmates staying after school to investigate some mysterious student disappearances. Monsters don't wait patiently for you in classrooms, but instead smash through walls (there's that mess again) or sneak up behind you, as eerie music and chilling sound effects do their part to set the horrific mood.

You control two characters at a time, which is both good and bad. On the plus side, it's fun picking locks with Stan and then switching to Ashley so you can kick monster butt with her various guns, bats, and special attacks. The in-game A.I. fluidly handles these on-the-fly switches; only occasionally will the CPU-controlled teammate get in your way. On the negative side, not only are the other three playable characters' skills underwhelming, but all characters lack substantial development and rarely converse at all. Moreover, the optional and intriguing co-op mode is awkward. If your teammate wanders off, he'll get stuck off-screen thanks to the narrow, fixed camera (a bothersome trademark of the survival-horror genre). You'll have to make him team leader so he can view his surroundings—while you blindly wait for him to catch up.

Pairing up is fairly fluid with the in-game A.I., but co-op players have to stick together to deal with the troublesome camera.

If you can ignore its flaws, *Obscure* offers some genuinely scary moments. Its plot and inventory puzzles aren't complicated, but they do meld together well. If its camera views and playable characters had more panache, then this ghoul school would be a cool school. **Denice Cook**

If *Obscure*'s camera views and playable characters had more panache, then this ghoul school would be a cool school.

Verdict ★★½☆☆
Frightful fun is ultimately obscured by an even more frightful co-op camera.

Rewind 100

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

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Act of War: Direct Action	06/05	★★★★½
Aerial Strike	06/05	★★½☆☆
Alida	Holiday 04	★☆☆☆☆
Alexander	03/05	★★☆☆☆
Alpha Black Zero: Intrepid Protocol	12/04	★★☆☆☆
Arena Wars	Holiday 04	★★★★½
Armies of Exigo	03/05	★★★★½
Aura: Fate of the Ages	10/04	★★★☆☆
Axis & Allies	01/05	★★½☆☆
Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30	06/05	★★★★½
Call of Duty: United Offensive	12/04	★★★★½
Campaigns on the Danube	12/04	★★★½☆
Catwoman	11/04	★☆☆☆☆
Chris Sawyer's Locomotion	Holiday 04	★½☆☆☆
The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay—Developer's Cut	03/05	★★★★★
Codename: Panzers	11/04	★★★½☆
Conflict: Vietnam	01/05	★★½☆☆
Dangerous Waters	06/05	★★★★½
Dark Fall II: Lights Out	Holiday 04	★★★★½
D-Day	01/05	★★½☆☆
Decisive Battles of World War II: Battles in Normandy	01/05	★★★★½
Domination	06/05	★★★½☆
Doom 3	10/04	★★★★★
Dragoon	04/05	★★☆☆☆
Empire Earth II	06/05	★★★★½
Evil Genius	12/04	★★★½☆
FIFA Soccer 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★½
Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone	04/05	★★★½☆
Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich	05/05	★★★★★

Domination

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Full Spectrum Warrior	Holiday 04	★★★½☆
Galactic Civilizations: Altarian Prophecy	12/04	★★★½☆
Gary Grigsby's World at War	06/05	★★★½☆
Ground Control II: Operation Exodus	10/04	★★★★½
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	11/04	★★★½☆
Hearts of Iron II	04/05	★★½☆☆
Heritage of Kings: The Settlers	06/05	★½☆☆☆
Immortal Cities: Children of the Nile	01/05	★★★½☆
Kohan II: Kings of War	12/04	★★★★½
Kuma\War	09/04	★½☆☆☆
Legacy: Dark Shadows	04/05	★½☆☆☆
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude	Holiday 04	★★½☆☆
Lost Admiral Returns	05/05	★★★½☆
Madden NFL 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★½
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault	01/05	★★★★½
Medieval Lords	04/05	★★½☆☆
Men of Honor	01/05	★★★★½
Missing: Since January	10/04	★★★★½
Myst IV: Revelation	Holiday 04	★★★★½
NASCAR SimRacing	05/05	★★★★½
NBA Live 2005	03/05	★★★½☆
Need for Speed Underground 2	04/05	★★★★½
NHL 2005	01/05	★★½☆☆
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager	03/05	★★★★½
Pitfall: The Lost Expedition	01/05	★☆☆☆☆
Playboy: The Mansion	04/05	★½☆☆☆
The Political Machine	11/04	★★★★½
Port Royale 2	12/04	★★★½☆
Prince of Persia: Warrior Within	03/05	★★★½☆

Silent Hunter III

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Psychonauts	06/05	★★★★½
Raging Tiger	04/05	★★½☆☆
Return to Mysterious Island	04/05	★★★★½
Rome: Total War	Holiday 04	★★★★½
The Saga of Ryzom	01/05	★★★½☆
Scrapland	Holiday 04	★★★★½
Secret of the Silver Earring	01/05	★★★★½
Sentinel: Descendants in Time	04/05	★★★½☆
Shadow Ops: Red Mercury	Holiday 04	★★½☆☆
Silent Hill 4: The Room	01/05	★★½☆☆
Silent Hunter III	06/05	★★★★★
The Sims 2	11/04	★★★★★
The Sims 2: University	05/05	★★★★½
Soldiers: Heroes of WWII	11/04	★★★★½
Soldner: Secret Wars	10/04	★★½☆☆
Spider-Man 2	11/04	★★½☆☆
Splinter Cell Chaos Theory	06/05	★★★★★
Star Wars Battlefront	Holiday 04	★★★½☆
Star Wars KOTOR II: The Sith Lords	04/05	★★★★½
Star Wars Republic Commando	05/05	★★★★½
SWAT 4	06/05	★★★★★
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005	Holiday 04	★★★★½
Time of Defiance	04/05	★★★½☆
Tin Soldiers: Alexander the Great	04/05	★★★½☆
TrackMania	10/04	★★½☆☆
Tribes: Vengeance	Holiday 04	★★★½☆
Universal Combat	10/04	★★½☆☆
Vendetta Online	05/05	★½☆☆☆
Wanted: A Wild Western Adventure	Holiday 04	★★★★½
War in the Pacific	11/04	★★★½☆

SWAT 4

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SUMMER OF LOVE

Why play outdoors when you could play indoors?

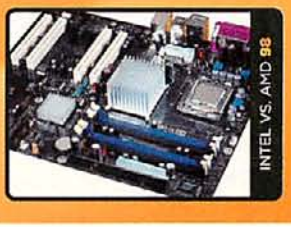
Photography by Mark Rose

Once again, we've got a Tech lineup full of bright and shiny toys you'll be lusting to buy nanoseconds after reading about them. And to help you get the best bargain on these items, we've made a nice little alteration to our product information: From now on, for products available from sources other than the manufacturer, we'll be listing the lowest price we find when shopping through 1UP.com. That's OK, you're welcome.

Inside

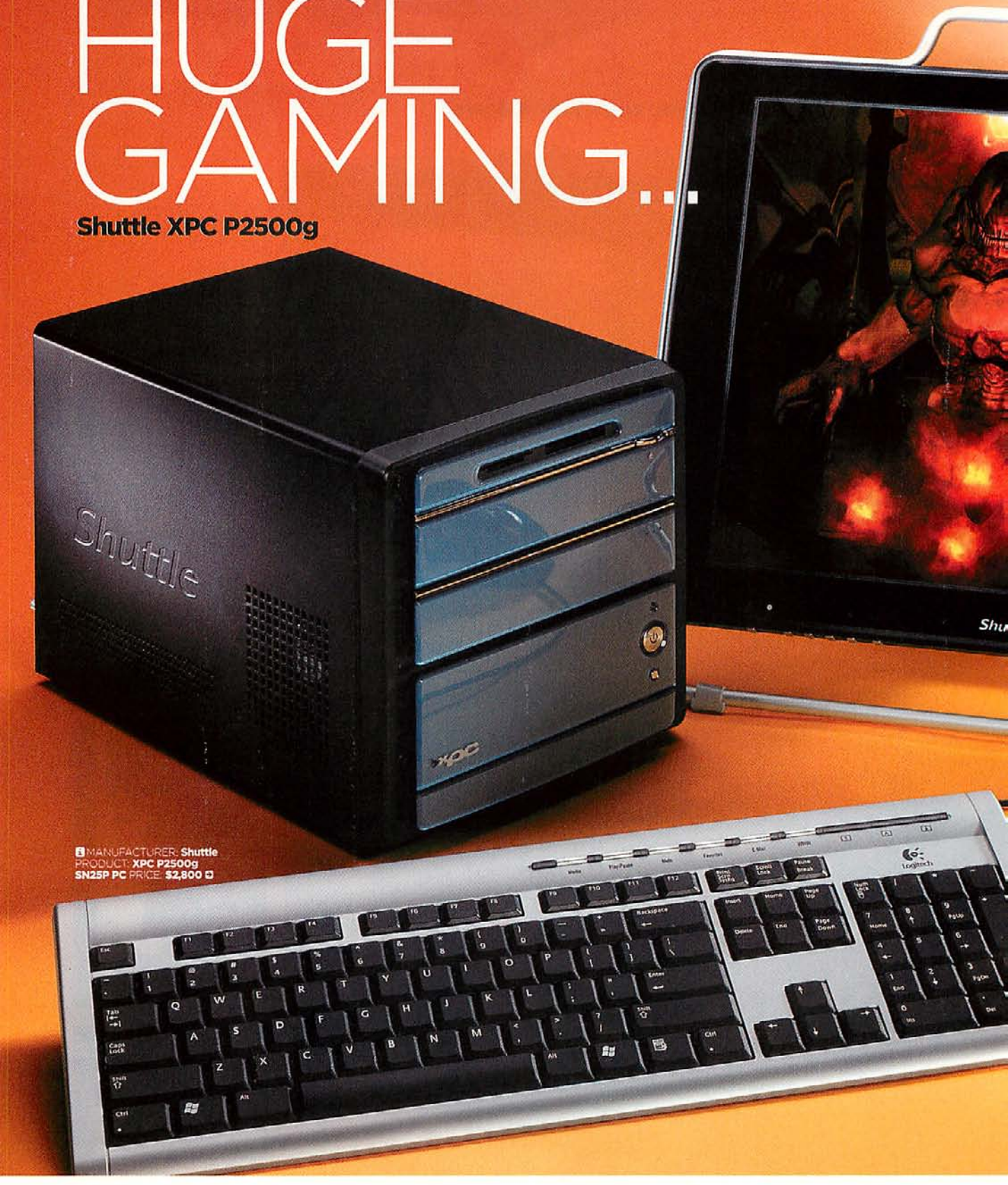
SHUTTLE P2500G 92

VELOCITY DUALX SLI 94


INTEL VS. AMD 98

HUGE GAMING...

Shuttle XPC P2500g



MANUFACTURER: **Shuttle**
PRODUCT: **XPC P2500g SN25P PC** PRICE: **$2,800**

...IN A TEENY, TINY PACKAGE

The biggest selling points for these pint-sized PCs have been style and portability, not power. However, new case designs have started to allow these breadbox-sized rigs to catch up to the performance levels of the big boys. And with Shuttle's new P2500g small form-factor (SFF) complete system based on its bare-bones SN25P package of case, power supply, and motherboard, it's time to start thinking small. This triple threat of gaming power packs a top-shelf AMD CPU, NForce4 technology, and ATI graphics power into a slick, easy-to-move XPC chassis—proving that with Shuttle's design talent, a PC doesn't necessarily have to be big to be good.

We all know AMD's Athlon 64 4000+ CPU with HyperTransport combined with an NForce4 MCP motherboard makes for a gaming behemoth. But by introducing Sapphire's Radeon X850 XT Professional Edition PCI Express VPU into the mix, the P2500g sliced through the 3D GameGauge *Far Cry* benchmarks, with the Volcano map pushing 88 frames per second. The full gig of Kingston HyperX DDR PC3200 RAM clocked at 400MHz (expandable to 2 gigs, dual channel) does a lot of heavy lifting as well, helping to push *UT2004* to, well, unreal speeds. This rig also saw great performance in *KOTOR II*, *SWAT 4*, and *Rome: Total War*. The P2500g also handled *Doom 3* like a big high-end desktop, running the game at a very respectable 72fps.

The P2500g comes in a XPC toolless chassis design made thermal proof with a Silent X cooling and noise reduction ICE heat-pipe module, Silent X 350W power supply, and active airflow. With so much hardware packed into such a small space, you need all that cooling. Further, it's an extremely quiet setup at 45dB, which makes it a great choice for gamers looking for a peaceful gaming experience. The case also provides ports galore for USB 2.0, FireWire 400, etc., along with four bays housing two Western Digital SATA 250GB HDDs. Shuttle thoughtfully included the Lite-On DL DVD+/-RW combo drive, which performs great whether you're playing your favorite games or reference DVDs like *The Incredibles*, or burning a Blue Man Group music VCD or data discs full of *Joint Ops* maps with impunity. Isn't that nice of them?

And talk about music—the motherboard's built-in 7.1-channel H/W audio using the VIA Envy24PT was more than capable of nicely powering U2's classic *War* CD, while showing its sound prowess in games like *Half-Life 2* and the *Doom 3* expansion. A dedicated audio card might provide somewhat better sound, but this onboard audio solution does such a solid job it's hard to complain too strenuously.

The only thing Shuttle didn't have room for in here was a PCI slot, six-pin connector for video. That's OK, since a Molex to PCI Express adapter does the trick. A very real problem we had was the case's unresponsive optical-drive tray buttons. Nothing an iron mallet couldn't fix.

Minor quibbles aside, if size matters and you still thirst for power, this small PC won't let you down. **Raphael Liberatore**

Shuttle's design talent proves a PC doesn't have to be big to be good.

SCORE: ★★★★☆

SHUTTLE XP17 LCD MONITOR

As the grandmaster of SFF building, Shuttle has perfected this art to the point that it now offers a wonderful mix of SFF PC designs, system enhancements, and cool accessories like its ergonomically sleek, high-performance 17-inch TFT LCD monitor. Not only does this monitor display DVDs, games, and photos in vibrant colors, as well as challenging shadowy hues wonderfully at its native 1280x1024 flicker-fast 8ms response rate at 75Hz, but it's also a high-functioning looker possibly ripped from the pages of Apple's design books. High praise for ergonomics aside, the nifty TempAG antiglare tempered safety panel minimizes scratches, dings, and bumps while also reducing eyestrain. The monitor's wide view angle enhances crystal clear images that seem to jump off the screen. High-impact tubing surrounds the XP17, and strategically positioned adhesion feet provide slip-free surface control. For the LAN gamer on the go, a 90-degree swivel stand neatly folds into an ultrathin case for easy transporting. For a mere $450, Shuttle's rugged XP17 LCD offers the perfect balance of performance and form-factor that most monitors costing $100 to $300 more just can't touch.

1UP.com PRICE INDEX Prices for products not purchased directly from manufacturers were the lowest we found shopping on 1UP.com.

MANUFACTURER: **Velocity Micro** PRODUCT: **Gamer's Edge DualX SLI** PRICE: **$3,560**

VELOCITY DOUBLED

Velocity Micro Gamer's Edge DualX SLI

EDITORS' CHOICE GAMING

In the past few months, NForce4 SLI systems have been about as stable as a Ritalin kid with a jackhammer. They crash, display image quirks, and constantly require tweaking and driver/BIOS updates (the SLI systems, not the kids). This tells me SLI technology is still maturing. Now that I've bashed NForce4, along comes Velocity Micro's budget-conscious, yet fully loaded, Gamer's Edge DualX SLI system, which shuts me up and impresses at the same time. With a phenomenal combination of performance, price, and most important, stability, this system has leapfrogged other SLI setups still in their infancy. Velocity Micro, welcome to the big leagues.

This rig packs impressive components at a wallet-friendly price.

For a gaming rig, the DualX packs an impressive level of UGM-like gaming components for a more wallet-friendly price. Check out this UGM caliber component list: AMD Athlon 64 4000+ CPU, Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard, two EVGA GeForce 6800 GT PCI Express videocards, fast Muskin PC3200 DDR RAM, two Western Digital 200GB 7200 RPM hard drives in RAID 0, and an Audigy 2 ZS soundcard for watching your favorite DVDs in DTS from either one of the two DVD+/-RW drives. These kinds of items basically equate to gaming nirvana. And considering that the feature-rich DualX's price tag sits near that of Falcon Northwest's superlative Talon system—yet the DualX is much faster and more stable—you know Velocity Micro is doing something right.

Best of all, the DualX is capable of shredding through *Doom 3* benchmarks at 115 frames per second without the typical glitches associated with newer NForce4 setups. This system is so blazing fast that in our very own 3D GameGauge benchmark, it topped out at a high score of 98!

Proving good looks can be functional, the Gamer's Edge DualX comes in a quality brushed aluminum chassis with a sleek enclosure, cathode ray tubes, and a clean wiring scheme that make it attractive for easy RAM upgrades or adding more SATA HDDs.

With SLI systems cropping up in droves, the Gamer's Edge DualX is a cut above the rest—and for a reasonable price. Heck, Velocity Micro even provides free UPS shipping and noteworthy tech support. What are you waiting for? Order it now.

Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★★½

Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines

When I grew tired of constantly swapping my only *Pirates!* play disc with my brother so he could play on another PC in the Cave, I decided to give a utility that came bundled with a review motherboard a try. Ten minutes after installing *Virtual Drive*, I told my brother to keep the *Pirates!* disc. After using *Virtual Drive* to help clear my desk of a stack of play discs, I bought the full $29 version optimized for gamers, *GameDrive*, from farstone.com. Life is good.

The program is simple. You insert the play disc into the CD-ROM drive, run *GameDrive*, and then use the friendly interface to create a VCD image (or RAM Drive) of the disc. Presto! The key disc is now on your hard drive. You'll enjoy the increased speed your games run at, since hard drives offer much faster seek and access times compared to optical drives; FarStone's proprietary RapidCache technology reduces access time as well. *GameDrive* lets you store up to 23 virtual game-disc images, and you can run them simultaneously, although I don't know anyone capable of (or who desires) playing both *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2* at the same time.

GameDrive will even let you bypass encrypted game discs using SecuROM, SafeDisc, and LaserLock, which is pretty cool. And it's not limited to games. You can utilize *GameDrive* for nongaming applications as well, and you can share your VCDs with others via the Internet (though this feature may give publishers fits).

So the next time I'm hosting a LAN party at the Cave and someone wants to use my *Joint Ops* CD to run their game, I'll kindly give them my CD, then direct them to farstone.com for good measure. You should do the same.

Raphael Liberatore

Ten minutes after installing *Virtual Drive*, I no longer needed my play disc.

MANUFACTURER: **Samsung** PRODUCT: **SyncMaster 915n 19-inch TFT LCD Monitor** PRICE: **$358**

CRT KILLER

SyncMaster 915n 19-inch TFT LCD Monitor

Because gamers want to revel in every bit of the intense action of a *Half-Life 2* deathmatch, low response times or refresh rates are the most important features in an LCD monitor. Gamers want crystal-clear images devoid of the ghosting, jaggies, jitters, and other pixel defects that have plagued previous-generation LCDs with slower response times. So when Samsung's new SyncMaster 915n 19-inch TFT LCD monitor arrived sporting an excellent 8ms response rate at a bargain-bin price, it impressed me, especially during a few rounds of *UT2004,* which is when Samsung convinced this CRT stalwart to finally make the transition to LCD.

Samsung convinced this CRT stalwart to finally make the transition to LCD.

Along with its phenomenal response rate, this monitor also features a fantastic 700:1 contrast ratio, ably showing the dark corners and black areas of what had been my tried-and-true LCD killer, *Aliens vs. Predator 2.* Brightness levels and colors were great in both *Far Cry* and the *Shrek 2* DVD, where greens were, well, quite green. This LCD can really highlight scenery at the standard max resolution of 1280x1024, and it's worth noting how font convergence looks smooth yet crisp, which is a helpful feature when sifting through *SWAT 4* mission-briefing screens or typing up hardware reviews.

Build quality is decent for an LCD at this price level, but the 915n definitely lacks some of the cool view-adjustment perks of its Philips Brilliance 190P5 rival. Tilt is limited, and there's no swivel. And though the lack of DVI is a bit annoying, its absence makes sense when you're trying to pack in this much performance at this price point. Ultimately, Samsung has created an LCD with a deft balance of performance and price. It's the perfect monitor choice for those gamers still afraid of ditching their CRTs, because at this low price, you can almost afford to play it safe by placing it beside the CRT and using dual monitors for the best of both worlds. **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★☆

Sick of tangled wires cluttering your desktop? Logitech's Cordless Desktop MX 3100 keyboard and mouse combo provides a high-performance wireless solution for gamers looking for a premium keyboard and mouse in a complete package.

The stylish keyboard is filled with features—including an array of programmable one-touch controls, media controls, an iNav wheel with zoom for navigating pages, and a zero-degree tilt angle for improved ergonomic positioning for comfort—that other keyboard manufacturers can only dream of matching. Add Logitech's *MediaLife* software package for serious control freaks, and this keyboard turns into an intuitive backbone for your digital media needs. Build quality easily matches that of Saitek's Gamers' Keyboard, providing responsive key-press feedback even after hours of relentless pounding while playing *Half-Life 2, SWAT 4,* and *Far Cry.* This device withstood a level of wear and tear that other keyboards would fail to endure.

This excellent keyboard is paired with the MX 1000 Laser Cordless Mouse (reviewed separately in Issue #245). It still rocks, thanks in large part to its robust optical laser engine, which gives it incredibly responsive sensitivity on virtually any surface. Also, the lithium-ion battery powering the mouse charges fast and lasts a long time. Precise and responsive RF connectivity from both devices drives the MX 3100's superior performance—and it does wonders cleaning up your workspace.
Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★★★

MANUFACTURER: **Logitech** PRODUCT: **Cordless Desktop MX 3100** PRICE: **$108**

DYNAMIC DUO

Logitech Cordless Desktop MX 3100

This keyboard withstood a level of wear and tear that other keyboards would fail to endure.

MANUFACTURER: **Creative** PRODUCT: **Sound Blaster Audigy 4 Pro Soundcard** PRICE: **$233**

PREMIUM SOUND AT A PREMIUM

Sound Blaster Audigy 4 Pro soundcard

Does the extra $100 make this card a worthwhile choice for the average gamer? Probably not, unless you're a serious audio enthusiast—in that case, the slight improvements in the dynamic range of DACs at 192KHz/24-bit stereo and at 113 decibels might be worth it. But for the average gamer, it probably isn't.

Does an extra $100 make this card a worthwhile choice?

Like its Audigy 2 ZS sibling, the Audigy 4 Pro arrives with a full-featured external I/O hub with just about every digital and analog connection needed for connecting your speakers, headphones, MIDI devices, and so on; this box can decode in six-channel stereo. Sampling both Dolby Digital EX and DTS-ES using *Gladiator* as a reference DVD reveals impressive levels of clarity, imaging, and dynamic range during movie playback.

The Audigy 4 ships with two exceptional games for testing the EAX Advanced HD codec: *Thief: Deadly Shadows* and *Hitman: Contracts*. Auditory clues are essential in both of these stealth games, and the Audigy 4 doesn't disappoint. I could clearly hear the guards' soft footfalls in *Thief*, and when things got ugly in *Hitman*, the loud explosions and gun spray highlighted the card's excellent EAX audio.

But the added cost for nominal performance gains makes the Audigy 4 Pro a hard sell to anyone but the sort of audiophile who specifically listens to sound content above 100 decibels or uses high-fidelity speakers like the Paradigm 110 CT system. If that's not you, stick with the Audigy 2 ZS and pocket the money. **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★½☆

MANUFACTURER: **Paradigm** PRODUCT: **Cinema Series 110 CT Speaker System** PRICE: **$800**

HIGH FIDELITY, HIGHER PRICE

Cinema Series 110 CT speaker system

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

Knowing Paradigm's ability to squeeze high-end performance from its reference line of speakers into smaller convergence speaker systems, I couldn't wait to test Paradigm's Cinema 110 CT, especially since I'm a complete home-theater zealot.

You can't help but notice the serious build quality in all six speakers, especially the Cinema ADP surround-channel rear speaker, which has a dipole-style four-drive, two-way panel design. Each of the left/right fronts and the center front speakers weigh in at a hefty seven pounds, and they are even heavier with the optional LS-series stands. You'll need a sturdy desk just to support all this high-fidelity sound. You'll also need a home-theater receiver or preamp tuner, like the Denon AVR-5803 receiver (see sidebar), to connect these elegant speakers to your PC's soundcard.

As I expected, these speakers dominated any speaker set I've ever attached to my PC. The Cinema 110 CTs took Sibelius' *Finlandia* symphony and gave it the compelling range of drama it deserves, with rich mids and crisp definition across the board. I got goose bumps hearing the coherent imaging and awesome soundstage presence that it perfectly conveyed during the last battle sequence from the *Saving Private Ryan* DVD in DTS.

And the games...whoa! The Cinema 110 CT subwoofer and its high-velocity resistive ports showcase exactly how low-frequency output should sound during a roaring session of *Half-Life 2* LAN play—the deep, thundering explosions made it feel like we were at the receiving end of a B-52 run. I can't help but recommend these speakers to anyone interested in making the jump to high fidelity—and with the bank account to support the steep price. Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★★½

These speakers dominated any speaker set I've ever attached to my PC.

The Hookup

In order to connect the Paradigm Cinema 110 CT speaker system to the Audigy 4 Pro—or any—soundcard, you'll need an A/V receiver or preamp tuner. A good choice is Denon's AVR-5803 reference receiver. Basically, satellites like the Paradigms lack a built-in powered amplifier; therefore, the receiver now "drives" them to the Audigy 4 Pro using an S/PDIF digital output to the Denon's optical or coaxial digital input, then connects to the speakers with heavy-gauge wire. The AVR-5803 also happens to pack a ton of features and sound modes like THX Ultra2 Certified THX Surround EX/DTS, Dolby Pro Logic II, and DTS-ES.

MANUFACTURER: **AMD** PRODUCT: **Athlon 64 3500+ 2.2GHz Newcastle 130nm CPU** PRICE: **$267**

FAST AND CHEAP

Athlon 64 3500+ 2.2GHz Newcastle CPU

After months of playing around with AMD's überfast FX-55 systems, the idea of reviewing its value line seemed, oh, kind of anticlimactic. However, upon testing the Athlon 64 3500+ "Newcastle" processor at 2.2GHz with a 0.13 micron (130nm) core, I can heartily recommend it to gamers looking to build or upgrade their gaming systems at a reasonable cost.

Choosing a test system was no problem since my lab has a boatload of gaming systems using the Socket 939 mobo design. I slapped the 3500+ into the Nemesis SLI Killer Rig still lying around with its Asus A8N SLI Deluxe mobo and big Zalman heat sink and fan. Performance turned out better than I expected for an Athlon 64 CPU, with benchmarks scores looking good, especially the 3DMark05 scores, which were in the high 3800 range—slightly lower than the scores for Falcon Northwest's Talon SLI budget system running the Athlon 64 3800+ CPU.

There is more good news. With the right thermal solutions, there's plenty of overclocking headspace for enthusiasts interested in squeezing out as much speed as its higher multiplier will allow. In some ways, it offers more room than its higher-priced processor siblings, so I nudged the processor to 2.6GHz, and my *UT2004* benchmarks jumped another 7fps while CPU temps stayed within parameters.

All those years of nipping at Intel's heels for market share have allowed AMD to become a master at balancing high-end performance with value, providing both hardware enthusiasts and gamers with fast processors priced to move. You can feel safe going with this budget CPU—and if you want just a tiny bit extra, there's a Winchester 90nm variant for just $100 more. **Raphael Liberatore**

SCORE: ★★★★☆

FLASH REPORT

Port your data

You can always use more storage—just take a look at your garage. Luckily, computers have better options, namely Flash drives. All four of these models—from Corsair Microsystems, Victorinox, Seagate, and US Modular—are good to great portable-storage solutions, perfect for toting save games and user settings to LAN parties and the like. Once upon a time this kind of storage would have cost a bundle and been locked into your PC. Not anymore—welcome, my friends, to the future.

MANUFACTURER: **CORSAIR MICROSYSTEMS** PRICE: **$50**

FLASH VOYAGER USB 2.0 512MB FLASH MEMORY DRIVE

Of all the drives here, this one gets the nod, thanks to a generous 10-year warranty and its rugged rubber casing, convenient size, and lanyard. And while the Flash Voyager doesn't have the most storage space, it does have the best storage-per-dollar price. Unless you have loads of giant files to move, this is the one to get.

MANUFACTURER: **US MODULAR** PRICE: **$99**

MONSTOR DRIVE 2GB

Of all the drives here, this is the fastest, with its very respectable 4,200 rpm rate. But since it lacks any extras, that's about all it has going for it—it's not as big as the Seagate, it's less versatile than the SwissMemory, and it's not as well priced or supported as the Corsair product. Still, this is a fast, reliable drive—you could do much worse.

MANUFACTURER: **SEAGATE** PRICE: **$140**

USB 2.0 5GB POCKET DRIVE

Once upon a time, 5GB of space defined a monster hard drive; nowadays, you can drop that kind of storage into your pocket. This is the drive to get if you absolutely, positively have to tote every *Half-Life* mod ever made everywhere you go. And with its fast 3,600 rpm access rate and included Software Toolkit bundle, it's a nice little package.

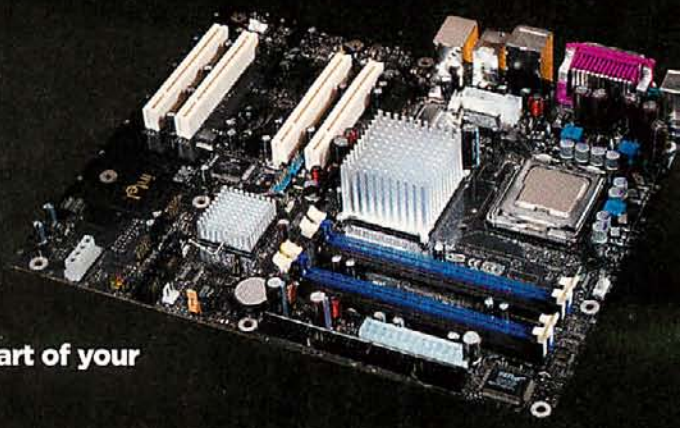
MANUFACTURER: **VICTORINOX** PRICE: **$130**

SWISSMEMORY USB 512MB MEMORY AND KNIFE

A lot of us have been carrying a Swiss Army knife for years. Now we can carry our favorite *UT2004* maps with us as well without changing a thing—the SwissMemory Flash drive comes with plenty of versatility, thanks to its classic Swiss Army knife tools. If you travel a lot, don't fret: This baby also comes in a handy air-travel model without the blade.

INTEL VS. AMD ...WHO WINS?

You've got two choices when it comes to the heart of your PC—which one packs the power you need?



MANUFACTURER: **Intel** PRODUCT: **Pentium 4 3.73GHz Prescott Extreme Edition 90nm Socket 775 Processor** PRICE: **$975** CPU AND MANUFACTURER: **Intel** PRODUCT: **Intel Desktop Board D925XECV2 Socket 775 Motherboard** PRICE: **$215** *(Motherboard not pictured).*

Looking at the matchup, you'd think that Intel's one-two punch of its flagship Pentium 4 3.73GHz Prescott Extreme Edition processor and slick D925XECV2 motherboard should be more than enough to dethrone AMD. On paper, this Intel combo packs a hefty bit of knockout performance, and besides, Intel is the more seasoned manufacturer with way more fights under its belt. Its competitive advances in Hyper-Threading Technology, 90nm processing, improved Extreme Edition delivery, and optimization give both power users and high-end gamers real muscle. This particular board has just about every mobo feature, including premium features such as Matrix Storage Technology, native SATA ports, a 1,066MHz system bus, dual-channel DDR2 533 memory, PCI Express x16 graphics, high-definition 7.1 audio, and more. Most bookies would give Intel a 3-to-1 edge.

So I built an Intel Killer Rig system for the competition, and the fight began with rigorous benchmarking. The synthetic CPU clock speed and memory-performance testing put the Pentium 4 and its 2MB of Level 2 cache memory ahead of AMD on the scorecard in the early rounds. It garnered even more points thanks to its remarkable media-content encoding and superior multitasking.

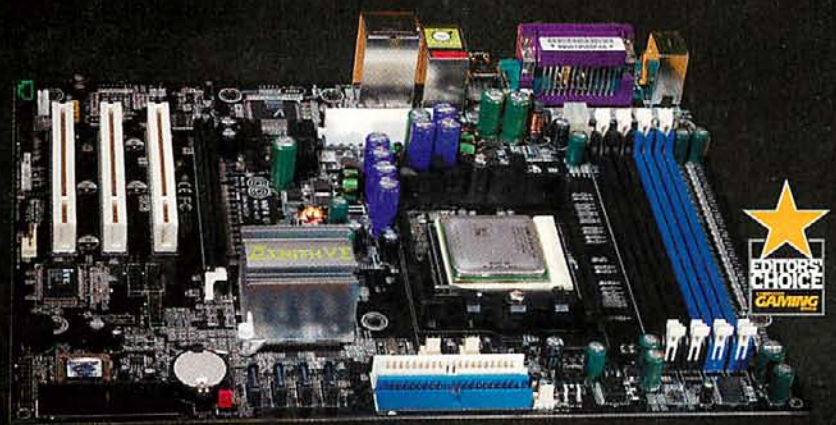
But Intel failed to connect when it came to our 3D GameGauge benchmarking suite, lagging two frames to 14 frames behind AMD in every test game, which is when it fell behind on the cards. The bookies almost called this right—but in terms of gaming performance, while the Intel solution may be good, it's not the best.

SNEAKY FAST

Chaintech may be one of the smaller motherboard manufacturers, but it's a scrappy competitor—you've got to watch out for those small guys with something to prove. Here, a championship-caliber CPU/motherboard combo has more than enough fight in it. It's simple mathematics: low price + packed features + an NForce4 Ultra + excellent performance – the frills = a great choice. This duo is ideal for both budget-conscious gamers wanting a solid leading-edge NForce4 Ultra-based gaming system and gamers desiring the simple layout of an entry-level mainboard—and you can use the savings on a killer graphics card, SATA HDD, or both. The VNF4 Ultra has true knockout gaming power thanks to its support for AMD's flagship Athlon 64 FX-55 Socket 939 processor, as well as room for up to 4GB of 400MHz dual-channel RAM. All you need to do to get outstanding 3D-gaming performance is fill the PCI Express x16 slot with a GeForce 6000 series videocard (or even an ATI X800 XT series card). With this sort of hardware installed, the setup was getting *UT2004* benchmarks of a whopping 80fps without breaking a sweat.

This CPU/mobo pair gets its punching power from the NForce4 Ultra's upgrade bonus over its plain-vanilla non-Ultra NForce4 sibling, offering a faster 3GB/sec SATA II bus in addition to Nvidia's ActiveArmor firewall security program (a boon to online gamers), both of which are missing in the NForce4-only architecture. There's a lot to digest here, but when the final bell rings, speed, performance, and a competitive price give the Chaintech VNF4 Ultra and AMD FX-55 the edge. **Raphael Liberatore**

When it came to benchmarks, the X850 XT PE performed like a champ.



MANUFACTURER: **Chaintech** PRODUCT: **VNF4 Ultra ZENITH VE Socket 939 Motherboard** PRICE: **$95** MOTHERBOARD AND MANUFACTURER: **Chaintech** PRODUCT: **AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 90nm Socket 939 Processor** PRICE: **$808 CPU** *(Motherboard not pictured).*

Who won the fight?

When the stale cigar smoke cleared from the Cave's benchmarking fight ring, Intel's new combo lost in a unanimous decision. The AMD Athlon 64 processor and NForce4-based motherboard just dominated the match. From a strictly performance standpoint based on our benchmarks, the AMD-based setup will outperform the Intel-based setup by 10% to 30%, depending on the game. For example, *Painkiller* scores from the AMD offering garnered an average of 68fps, while the Intel solution netted only 54fps. Until game optimizatin for Intel's Dual Core setup becomes common, AMD will continue to hold the heavyweight belt as the premiere gaming solution in the processor/motherboard wars.

Like Boo Radley, Jeff Green is entranced by shiny objects—that's why his Killer Rig is so deliciously silver.

KILLER RIG

Jeff Green's Silver Soprano Special

Originally, I intended to build a Killer Rig around Intel's high-end Pentium 4 3.73GHz CPU and D925XCV motherboard. But remembering I promised to build a Killer Rig for our magazine's editor-in-chief, I ditched the high end to focus on a system that would appeal to hardware-challenged PC gamers wanting to build a simple yet stylish performer for less than two grand.

Recalling how frustrated Mr. Green was with the high-end systems I'd previously created—those pesky RAID, SLI, power-supply, cooling, and BIOS/driver update requirements completely overwhelmed him—I opted for a simple yet powerful design sans the bells and whistles of a high-end system like the VoodooPC Rage SLI. Ergo, we have the Silver Soprano Special.

With the AMD Athlon 64 3500+ budget-friendly processor matched with Chaintech's VNF4 Ultra NForce4 PCI Express motherboard and a full gig of Corsair Twin X PC3200 RAM running at 400MHz, this system provides the performance needed for gaming. Plus, on the off chance that Jeff decides to overclock, both the CPU and motherboard are OC friendly.

As for the videocard, the Asus Extreme N6600GT PCI Express GeForce 6600 GT with 128MB of GDDR3 memory works great, both when Jeff is playing his usual *WOW* or the latest *Freedom Force* game and when he switches gears and reviews a graphics-intensive shooter, like he did this month with the *Doom 3* expansion.

The Thermaltake Soprano chassis is cheap but stylish. Since Jeff's storage requirements focus both on his library of MP3 tunes and his *Neverwinter Nights* character saves, I went big with Western Digital's performance SATA 7200 rpm HDD with a 250GB capacity. He can add another drive later and maybe go RAID, but for now he can save his precious library of Yma Sumac tunes by burning DVDs with a Pioneer DVD+/-RW drive. Rounding out this system are the Samsung SyncMaster 915n LCD monitor with a fast refresh rate at a bargain-basement price, a Microsoft Internet keyboard, Logitech's MX 518 gaming mouse, Z-5300e 5.1 speakers, and Zalman's Theater 6 headphones, which give the motherboard's built-in Nvidia AC97 7.1 audio codec some oomph.

After installing Windows Home Edition SP2, updating drivers, and tweaking components and settings, the Soprano's 3D GameGauge benchmark scores were higher than expected, with *Doom 3* frames as high as 70fps. Hopefully, that will score me a few points with the home office. **Raphael Liberatore**

Eggbert just loves frolicking in Azeroth on Jeff Green's shiny new Killer Rig.

The Guts

	COMPONENT	PRICE
Case	Thermaltake Soprano VB1000SNS Aluminum Midtower Case w/ window panel	$74
Operating System	Microsoft Windows XP Professional with SP2	$77
Power Supply	Thermaltake Silent PurePower 480-watt	$70
CPU	AMD Athlon 64 3500+ 2.2GHz, Socket 939 retail (with fan)	$250
Motherboard	Chaintech VNF4 Ultra NForce4 Socket 939 PCI Express Motherboard w/7.1 audio, Gigabit LAN, RAID/Serial ATA	$95
Memory	Corsair XMS PC3200 400MHz 2x 512MB DDR memory (1GB total—$70 each at 2x 512MB)	$145
Hard Drive	Western Digital Caviar SE WD2500JD 250GB 7200 rpm Serial ATA HDD	$114
Graphics	Asus Extreme N6600GT GeForce 6600 GT 128MB GDDR3 w/TV-out PCI Express graphics card	$211
DVD-ROM Drive	Pioneer DVR-A09XL	$120
Floppy Drive	SmartDisk External 2x	$22
Monitor	Samsung SyncMaster 915n 19-inch LCD	$358
Keyboard	Microsoft Internet Keyboard	$11
Mouse	Logitech MX 518 Gaming Optical Mouse	$42
Speakers	Logitech Z-5300e 5.1 Speaker System	$107
TOTAL COST		$1,576

MANUFACTURER: Asus PRODUCT: GeForce Extreme N6800GT/2TD 256MB DDR3 RAM PCI Express PRICE: $470

EXTREME GRAPHICS BUNDLE

GeForce Extreme N6800GT/2TD 256MB DDR3 RAM PCI Express

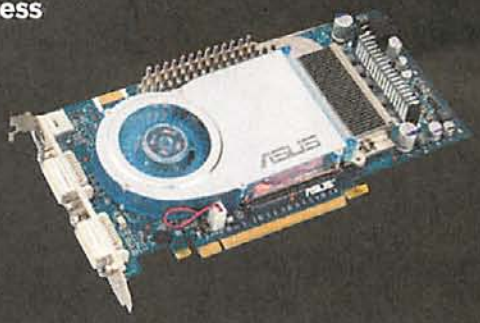
EDITORS' CHOICE GAMING

Top to bottom, Asus makes just about every known PC component for building or upgrading systems. Its talent for combining quality with technical know-how has put its motherboards and graphics cards into the high-end rigs of boutique manufacturers such as VoodooPC, Falcon Northwest, and Velocity Micro. Knowing that, is it surprising that this PCI Express card with 256MB of GDDR3 RAM simply rocks? Of course not.

In this day of overclocking mania, the N6800GT takes the opposite approach with near mellow settings, namely a 350MHz engine clock and 1GHz memory clock. These are pretty tame stats compared to other GeForce 6800 GT cards from BFGTech and PNY. But when testing the N6800GT with *CGW*'s 3D GameGauge Lite 1.0 and 3DMark05 (v1.2), the card pushed some impressive benchmarks, including *Halo* at a blistering 85fps. Of course, scores jumped six frames to 12 frames—and even 22 frames in some cases—when utilizing Asus' *SmartDoctor* overclocking utility to juice the card's memory and core clocks to GeForce Ultra–like speeds. This is not only smarter than pushing two or three more Ben Franklins toward the cash register, but it's a fairly stable solution if you're providing your case with some cooling TLC, mainly fans and a solid power supply. Do that and you'll get *Far Cry* at 1600x1200 to more than 70fps, too.

Lots of other goodies are stuffed in this card's box, for real value at under $500. Compared to other 6800 GT cards, the N6800GT is a deal. ■ Raphael Liberatore

SCORE: ★★★★½



Is it surprising this PCI Express card with 256MB of GDDR3 RAM simply rocks? Of course not.

A-LIST

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

CPUs

Best Performance Processor
AMD Athlon 64 FX-55 2.6GHz CPU
(AMD – www.amd.com – $811)

Best Budget Processor
AMD Athlon 64 3500+ 2.2GHz "Winchester" CPU
(AMD – www.amd.com – $250)

MOTHERBOARDS

Best Performance Motherboard
Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe NForce4 Motherboard
(Asus - www.asus.com - $174)

Best Budget Motherboard
Chaintech VNF4 Ultra Zenith VE NForce4 Ultra Motherboard
(Chaintech - www.chaintechusa.com - $95)

VIDEOCARDS

Best Performance Videocard for AGP
ATI Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition AGP 256MB GDDR3 Videocard
(ATI Technologies – www.ati.com – $500)

Best Performance Videocard for PCI Express
BFGTech Nvidia GeForce 6800 Ultra OC PCI Express 256MB GDDR3 Videocard
(BFGTech – www.bfgtech.com – $549)

Best Budget Videocard
BFGTech GeForce 6600 GT OC 128MB GDDR3 Videocard (BFGTech – www.bfgtech.com - $199)

RAM

Best Performance DDR RAM
Corsair XMS TWINX1024-4400 1GB Kit 550MHz 1024MB DDR RAM Kit
(Corsair – www.corsairmicro.com – $360)

Best Performance DDR2 RAM
Corsair XMS2 Twin2X1024A-5400UL 675MHz 1024MB DDR2 RAM Kit
(Corsair – www.corsairmicro.com – $287)

Best Budget DDR RAM
Kingston HyperX KHX3500A/512 433MHz 512MB DDR433 PC3500 Kit
(Kingston – www.kingston.com – $98)

MONITORS

Best LCD
Dell 2405FPW 24-inch LCD monitor
(Dell – www.dell.com – $1,299)

Best Budget LCD
NEC-Mitsubishi MultiSync 1970GX 19-inch LCD Monitor (NEC-Mitsubishi - www.nec.com - $523)

Best CRT
NEC MultiSync FE2111SB-BK 22-inch CRT Monitor (NEC – www.nec.com – $499)

SOUND

Best Soundcard
Creative Sound Blaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro Soundcard
(Creative Labs – www.creative.com – $189)

Best Budget Soundcard
Mad Dog Entertainer 7.1 DSP Soundcard
(Mad Dog – www.mdmm.com – $39)

Best Speaker System
Logitech Z-5500 Digital 5.1 Speakers
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $218)

Best Headphones
Zalman ZM-RS6F Headphones
(Zalman – www.zalmanusa.com – $60)

GAME DEVICES/PERIPHERALS

Best Gaming Mouse (tie)
Razer Diamondback Optical Mouse
(Razer – www.razerzone.com – $43)

Logitech MX 518 Gaming Grade Optical Mouse
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $42)

Best Mouse Pad
Steelpad 4D Mouse Pad
(Soft Trading – www.steelpad.com – $25)

Best Gaming Keyboard
Gamers' Keyboard
(Saitek – www.saitek.com – $37)

Best Wireless Keyboard-Mouse Combo
Logitech Cordless Desktop MX3100
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $108)

Best Joystick
CH Products Fighterstick USB
(CH Products - www.chproducts.com - $99)

Best Gamepad
Logitech Cordless Rumblepad 2
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $39)

Best Racing Wheel
Logitech MOMO Racing Wheel
(Logitech – www.logitech.com – $66)

NETWORKING

Best Gaming Router
DGL-4300 GamerLounge Wireless 108G Gaming Router (D-Link - www.d-link.com - $160)

Best Switch
SMC8508T EZ Switch 10/100/1000 Gigabit 8-port Unmanaged Switch (SMC - www.smc.com - $91)

Best Network Adapter
Belkin Pre-N Notebook Network Card
(Belkin - www.belkin.com - $79)

GAMING NOTEBOOKS

Best Performance Notebook
Alienware Area-51m 7700 Notebook
(Alienware - www.alienware.com - $3,200)

Best Budget Notebook
Dell Inspiron XPS Gen 2 Notebook
(Dell - www.dell.com - $2,850)

A simple driver update might be all you need to bring hydralisks to life on your new laptop.

EXTREMETECH

Tech Medics

ExtremeTech.com cures your technological ills

I recently got a new laptop, and when I try to play *StarCraft* on it, the game crashes—*Half Life 2* runs just fine on it. I was thinking that maybe *StarCraft* is just too old, but that doesn't seem right. I don't know if you can help me or if I am sending this to the right place. I have tried looking on Blizzard's website but couldn't find anything useful.

Colin

Without having any more specific information, Colin, this is a tough one to diagnose. The best thing to do is to call Blizzard's technical support and describe your system to them and what's happening when you try to run the game (where it crashes, what error message you get, stuff like that). Even if they ultimately can't help you, reporting these problems to tech support gets them in a database where they are looked at for future patches and such.

The first thing I would do is make sure everything is up to date: all your laptop drivers (video, audio, and system-level drivers), your copy of Windows (visit www.windowsupdate.com and get all the critical updates), and your copy of *StarCraft* (the latest patch is version 1.12b). There really shouldn't be a problem with *StarCraft* running on modern machines, but it's certainly possible that it conflicts with a particular component in your new laptop or its drivers.

I am having a little bit of trouble acquiring a new graphics card for my computer. It's a custom-built computer designed for gaming. It is about 2 years old and is still doing well. However, I have noticed that some newer games like *Doom 3* run a little slow on my machine, even at the game's recommended settings. I would like to get the best card out there, but my budget is about $300 to $350. I am currently using a GeForce FX 5600 Ultra from Nvidia. What would you recommend upgrading to?

Ryan Glazer

If your computer is about 2 years old, you'll be shopping for an AGP graphics card, not a PCI Express–based one. This somewhat limits your options, but you can still get a very recent graphics card. Your $350 price ceiling isn't enough to get the very best card out there—those cost over $500—but you can definitely get something a lot better than the GeForce FX 5600 Ultra you're using now. In the $300 to $350 price range, you should be able to find a GeForce 6800 (not Ultra or GT, just plain 6800) or Radeon X800. Either one would give you at least twice the performance of your current graphics card in the latest games. You may also be able to find a GeForce 6800 GT or Radeon X800 Pro in your price range. They cost just over $350 now, but prices are continually falling, and they'll give you just a little bit more speed, so maybe you won't have to upgrade again quite so soon.

I am in the market for a new PC, and this question has to do with backing up a PC. What hardware is available to do this? I've heard of dual-layer DVDs, but are they rewritable? Are tape drives still available? Possibly portable hard drives? Most of the systems that I have priced have a dual-layer DVD writer, so in the future, I thought backing up to a dual-layer, double-sided rewritable DVD would be the ticket. But what about before then?

Melinda Feedle

There really aren't any rewritable dual-layer DVDs out there—right now it's a write-once technology. That being said, it's still probably not the best way to back up your system. You can fit only about 8.5GB on a single dual-layer disc, and most users have at least several times that much data. In addition, dual-layer discs are quite a bit more expensive than standard 4.7GB single-layer discs, so it's not the most economical solution for an entire system-level backup.

Tape drives are still in production, but that's not a great idea for home backup. This leaves portable USB 2.0 hard drives, which are really not a bad way to go. Once you clean the junk off your drive, you'll probably find it fits on a relatively small hard drive (maybe 80GB or so). Installing an additional hard drive—or using an USB 2.0 external drive—is one of the fastest and easiest ways to back up your computer.

Got questions? *Send them to Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com*

Tom vs. Bruce

Two gamers enter, one gamer wins

DEVELOPER 2By3 Games PUB Matrix Games GENRE War Game

Gary Grigsby's World at War

It was over as soon as Bruce called Tom a Nazi

Tom: When I was in college, if we couldn't do *D&D* because our DM was at an SCA tourney, we'd do *A&A*. Sorry for all the technical jargon, but what it means in plain English is that I've studied World War II extensively. This is how I know things like the Germans have to take Karelia and that research is useless unless you roll a six for heavy bombers. I will apply this knowledge to *Gary Grigsby's World at War*, playing as the Axis powers.

Bruce: This sounds like good news for me playing as the Allies (and China), since the last time I checked, the rules for *Axis & Allies* could fit on the back of a cereal box, while the rules for *World at War* are like 5 million pages long. I read the whole manual this time. Twice.

WAR BEGINS, FRANCE SURRENDERS

Tom, spring 1940: I'm off to a good start! After a quick detour through the Netherlands and into Paris, France buckles, as it's wont to do. Assuming everyone else goes down as easily, this game will be short, furious, and won by me.

Bruce, spring 1940: The Axis player is the one who sets the tempo of the game. Once France falls, everything hinges on whether Germany can take out Russia. Japan needs to keep the pressure on by tying down the mighty Americans, because if the United States can help out England early, the Axis has no hope. But Japan does not have the manpower to take over the world, which is nicely modeled by the production system. Good going, Grigsby.

Tom, summer 1940: There's an SSI war game from 1993 called *Clash of Steel*, which is similar in scale to *World at War*. One of the tricky strategies in that game is to sweep the German army counterclockwise around the Mediterranean, hopping over Gibraltar, dashing across North Africa, and then blitzkrieging up through Turkey to hit Russia's soft underbelly. Great image, isn't it? Which is why I'm going to do just that. But first, I have to get all my tanks past the stupid Pyrenees that clog up the transition from France to Spain.

Bruce, summer 1940: While Germany and Japan take the offensive almost everywhere, the Allies need to close down one danger spot immediately: the Mediterranean. Fortunately, the English shipbuilding fetish gives them a pretty good chance to do just that. By concentrating almost all British naval power on the Med in the first turn, I should be able to prevent the Germans from getting enough units into North Africa to be dangerous. And once the British control the Med, those units will be forever cut off. Sea control is an all-or-nothing proposition in *World at War*, and the Allies need to make sure the Axis gets nothing south of Norway and west of Denmark.

The Allies strike back!

Tom, fall 1940: Why can't the Japanese be more like the Germans? Or, more to the point, why can't China be more like France? My strategy as Japan is to apply pressure on Russia from the east. But China is in the way, and its forces aren't surrendering. Furthermore, they're killing my troops and shooting down my airplanes.

Bruce, fall 1940: The Japanese have definitely gotten off on the wrong foot in China.

Tom
Last month:
Tom is to Rhino as Bruce is to Spider-Man in *Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich.*

Bruce
Last month:
Bruce beats Tom even though the last comic he ever read was *Richie Rich*, last week.

Chinese factories only produce every fourth turn until the Japanese control an inland Chinese province. At this rate, the Chinese can give their factory workers European vacations, because they're not going to be working full time anytime soon.

CARVING UP TURKEY

Tom, winter 1941: I'm running amok in the Middle East, which is a lot of fun. I have shut the Allies out of the Mediterranean, so the Italian navy can cruise around with impunity, pretending they're contributing to the war effort. And while I meant to drive my army across North Africa, there's really no need for so dramatic a gesture now that I've shut out the British navy. Instead, I ferry my troops by transport ship into Egypt, where they can carve their way up toward Turkey.

Bruce, winter 1941: The Allies ran into an unexpected obstacle in the form of the unusually hardy "Italian" fleet. Tom has had the Med open for four turns now, which means he's been shuffling units down to North Africa without me being able to do much about it. As a result, even the units I managed to shift from India weren't enough to keep Cairo out of Axis hands. Now the whole door to the Middle East is open. Tom just took Transjordan, in fact. That gives him a back door into Russia. Ay-ay-ay!

Tom, spring 1941: Although Japan is bogged down on Russia's east end, I'm sure all that action over there is making Bruce nervous. So now it's time to violate any goodwill earned by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and attack Russia from Germany.

Bruce, spring 1941: This is the real crux of the game. I need to be able to 1) rescue some factories to keep up my production, 2) keep Moscow and Leningrad from falling (the capture of Leningrad releases the Finns), and 3) manage my production so that I can start a counterattack as soon as possible. I'll be helped by sending myself (thanks, me!) supplies from the Allies as lend-lease. All this requires is a merchant chain through the Barents Sea.

RESOURCE MISMANAGEMENT

Tom, summer 1941: As Germany, I just took Iraq, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. What's all this nonsense about the German player never having enough resources? I've got plenty to go around. Unfortunately, I have to use a lot of them on supply trucks and research beakers, which isn't very sexy. My fallback plan is to keep research focused on developing nukes, represented here by how much I develop heavy bombers. This is something the real-world Germans overlooked, probably because they weren't confident they could roll a six. But you don't have to roll a six to research your heavy bombers in *World at War*. I just have to keep the research beakers coming.

Bruce, summer 1941: I guess I shouldn't have spent those points on research. There

Russian winter? What Russian winter!

Everything starts out great for those wacky Nazis.

If this were *Risk*, Tom would be in trouble. Bruce owns Australia.

isn't much point in having good tanks if you end up surrendering before you can build any of them. I've backed off and concentrated my forces around Moscow until I can bring up my newly built units. Tom doesn't seem to have a lot of units, either. I think his Middle East adventure is straining his resources, since he needs to maintain transports and supply to bring all those juicy resources home.

Tom, fall 1941: Even more unsexy than spending resources on supply trucks instead of tanks and fighter planes is spending resources to fix rail lines. Russia's crappy infrastructure makes it hard enough to keep my army moving along, not to mention that I have to keep repairing the rail lines when I conquer a territory. It feels like I'm playing *Gary Grigsby's World at Railroad Repair*. It's also annoyingly mundane to have to keep a fleet of transport ships in a row to bring in all that Middle Eastern oil. I wish someone would hurry up and invent cross-country pipelines.

DARK PRINCE OF PERSIA

Bruce, fall 1941: Tom Chick, Nazi master of Persia. I never thought I'd see it.

Tom, winter 1942: Ooh, the scary Russian winter. Big deal. Napoleon and Hitler were wimps, because I'm not letting a little cold snap stop me. My tanks and infantry push forward and I manage to capture Karelia. As any WWII scholar can tell you, this means the game is pretty much over. Time to uncork the champagne and wait for Bruce to surrender.

Bruce, winter 1942: This sucks. Tom is about to take Afghanistan, and I'm on the ropes in both Russia and China. Fortunately, the Western Allies are still OK, and Tom looks like he's stretched a bit thin on his mission of world domination. I think I can sneak into Europe a bit early by way of Spain, which he so kindly opened up for me.

Tom, spring 1942: I just invaded Turkey, which means I've almost completed my counterclockwise Mediterranean tour. On the other side of the world, however, things aren't so rosy. Japan is still bogged down in China long after it should be bombing Ben Affleck and Josh Hartnett in Hawaii. I launch a massive assault on Chungking, where Bruce has a handful of infantry, a few AA guns, and a lone fighter, which I presume represents John Wayne and the Flying Tigers on special assignment from America. But I lose the battle—curse you, John Wayne!—and most of my ground forces get chewed up. I'm left with a bunch of carrier fleets, which aren't very useful when it comes to conquering China.

Bruce, spring 1942: Tom didn't leave a very big garrison in Spain, so I do a reverse Moorish expulsion and just sail on in. When the Americans join the war, I'll let them open a McDonald's.

Tom, summer 1942: Bah, Bruce can have Spain. Sangria, bullfights, siestas, Picasso. Who needs 'em? Meanwhile, the war in the Pacific hasn't even made it out into the Pacific yet. Partisans are wreaking havoc in China. This game calculates partisan activity based on the population in a territory. If there's one place you don't want to undergarrison, it's China, the most populous country in the world. So the bad news goes out to all those Japanese troops stationed on

quiet, idyllic Pacific islands: "Get off your ass and get to China! And while you're at it, bring all the supplies you can carry, because they're not doing us any good out there, and we're running low."

Bruce, summer 1942: Now that I'm in Spain, it would be a shame not to visit France, seeing as how it's so close and everything. Not counting the Mediterranean, I pretty much own the oceans, so it's a piece of cake to land about a bazillion troops in western France two years ahead of schedule, especially when the guys from Spain open the door.

Tom, fall 1942: Fine, Bruce can have France, too. Berets, pastries, Edith Piaf, French toast. Who needs 'em? The problem is that now I have to bring some troops back from Russia to keep him from getting any ideas about coming any farther toward Germany. As if it's not bad enough, I just realized that America automatically joins the war next turn, which means this is my last chance to launch a surprise attack in the Pacific. Unfortunately, I don't have enough supplies to move my ships, so four carriers and five battleships bob harmlessly in the water around the coast of Japan. In this version of World War II, Japan is the new Italy.

ENTER UNCLE SAM

Bruce, fall 1942: Getting the United States into the game is like having Christmas finally arrive: You get to open all those presents that have been sitting for what seems like forever in "politically frozen" territories. In my case, this includes half a dozen new aircraft carriers, a lot of armor, and enough research to send them all to the moon. Half the armor goes to my newly acquired beachfront property in France. The other is going to various Pacific islands that Tom has mysteriously left unoccupied.

Tom, winter 1943: Wait, wait—what's going on here? Suddenly, I've got Americans landing in France and stealing my islands in the Pacific. The Chinese partisans are so strong that their icons have gone from a relatively laid-back yellow color to a bright, angry red. I'm being driven back toward Europe by Russians. The good news is that thanks

Hitler cowers in his bunker.

Getting the United States into the game is like having Christmas finally arrive.

to my successful counterclockwise Mediterranean tour, Germany is about to conquer India. I'd like to see Gandhi try some civil disobedience stunt now that the Third Reich is in charge.

Bruce, winter 1943: So let me get this straight: I managed to stop Tom at the northern Urals, only to have him march into...western Kazakstan? And he's already taken half of Turkey. In the meantime, I'm in Spain and western France, and am marching through the Pacific like it was made of tarmac. I think at the end of the game we'll have ended up switching places. I'm going to make my capital in Mongolia.

Tom, spring 1943: Umm, where did Russia get an air force from?

Bruce, spring 1943: Tom just got the aerial prelude to the counterattack I'm about to launch next turn, and I think he's about to lose one half of his Axis of Evil. Where is the Japanese military? All I'm finding are these transports, which my carrier air groups use for target practice.

SAY GOOD NIGHT, ADOLF

Tom, summer 1943: I guess there should be a point when you realize that a certain plan, such as conquering the whole of China so that you can attack Russia on two fronts, isn't working. At that point, you should put into effect a different plan before you squander your entire military. I have missed this point by about two years. The end result is that Japan is now about as powerful as Luxembourg.

Bruce, summer 1943: Let's make a little list of all the territories I've captured this turn: Baltic states, eastern Poland, Tobruk, Netherlands, and eastern France. Because the United States is having such a cakewalk in the Pacific, I have a ton of research points I could use to start my own Manhattan Project. At this point, though, I don't think I'll need the help.

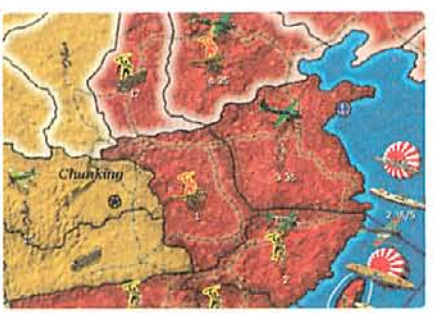
Tom, fall 1943: I'd just like to say that I've been researching the hell out of my fighters. Why can't the game give me a little Messerschmitt Me 262 icon? These are the kinds of things I think about while I'm watching the replay of Bruce rolling through my territories.

Bruce, fall 1943: The Russians are rolling, with East Prussia, western Poland, Hungary, and Yugoslavia all falling this turn. We should probably switch sides at this point so that Tom can pretend to install some of his beloved Communist dictatorships.

Tom, winter 1944: Someone once said—and I'm guessing this was someone whose plan had just failed—"No plan survives contact with the enemy." My plan didn't even survive contact with the game, much less the enemy. This whole "counterclockwise around the Mediterranean" thing worked fine but didn't take into account that minor detail known as the rest of the world. The simple fact of the matter is that games change, and you can't use the same tactics in 2005 that you used in 1993. To which most of you would probably respond, "Duh." So now I'm like some dumbass on a *SWAT 4* server who tries to use the beanbag shotgun to rocket jump and literally shoots himself in the foot.

Bruce conquers Germany in winter 1944, Tom concedes.

Playing the United States is like having your birthday every day.



Things look dicey in China.

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PLUS, A COVER STORY THAT'LL BLOW YOUR MIND!

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Hello, Ladies!

I'm happy to see you, but *sigh*, that's just a joystick

Here at the endlessly spinning Ziff Davis hamster wheel, we like to know exactly who we're alienating on a monthly basis. Were we to judge simply by the e-mail and letters we receive, we'd assume that most of you readers are either convicts or of such limited educational backgrounds that you are unable to recognize those odd blips and wiggles on your keyboards as punctuation marks that might lend your frothing-at-the-mouth defense of *Postal 2* a little something approaching coherence. But deep down in our bitter, calcified hearts, we know this is not true—after all, this is a magazine that has non-ironically referenced Kierkegaard. We know that you are intelligent enough to have at least attempted to sound that one out, though, sadly, you probably stopped at "keerky" and nodded sagaciously, lest your cohorts think you insufficiently informed enough to recognize what your panicked mind desperately surmised was Klingon for "Capt. James T. Kirk." At any rate, every so often our corporate overlords periodically take a break from gold-plating their shoelaces and diapering their children in $100 bills to commission reader surveys, the better to understand you.

ILLUSTRATION BY JACK BALINGIT

And this latest survey contained one big surprise: A full 15 percent of our readers are women. That's right, women. Actual, honest-to-God females, not women trapped in a boy's body like a certain associate editor that I shall spare the indignity of naming outright, instead referring to him only by his impossible-to-decipher Bizarro World name of Bizarro Ryan Scott. This 15 percent is a significant bump up from the 3 percent mark of just a few years ago. Why, for the first time in this magazine's life—and certainly in the lives of the predominantly male and entirely delusional "I didn't go to the prom by *choice*" edit staff—are we popular with the ladies?

We have so longed for this moment, and finally, sweetly, it has come.

By no means is it our rugged good looks. Speaking solely for myself, my looks are less "rugged" than "ragged," less "good" than "botched autopsy." Having said that, I would like to point out that my boss, Jeff Green, is older than I am, and while you, gentle readers, may be at a loss when it comes to punctuation, I am confident in your ability to perform the most rudimentary calculations and so I urge you thusly: You do the math.

Having ascertained that raw animal stench has trumped raw animal sex appeal, the conundrum becomes exponentially more conundrumishistical. It's not as if *CGW* has pandered to women, trotting down the well-worn path of *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, *Martha Stewart Living*, or *High Times* by offering fashion tips, 10-minute ab workouts, or articles like "11 Ways to Drive Your Gamer Wild in Bed" (because if you truly want to drive a gamer wild in bed, there's really only one tip—get in bed with him. The shock might kill him, but this is 100 percent guaranteed can't-fail stuff). On the contrary, the pink type on orange background pages of *CGW* have changed very little over the years in terms of content. We are still chock-full of spaceships, space monsters, space marines, space stations, ridiculously busty nymphs in chain-mail bikinis, tanks, orcs, shrink rays, comic-book allusions, Napoleonic-era cavalry, alternate histories, steampunk futures, BFGs, stealth meters, zombies, fireball spells, morale and initiative rolls, *Star Wars* trivia, and references to Danish philosophers, so *CGW* should be kryptonite on wood pulp to the average woman. But impossibly—unlike in high school, college, and all the painful years that followed—this heretofore toxic mix is actually, well, getting us chicks.

We don't understand it, but we are grateful. Not the way our corporate taskmasters in their mink-lined offices are grateful for you and the new subscription dollars you bring. Oh, their smiles may be broad and sparkling and containing all of their teeth, but do not be deceived—to them you are just one more platinum-coated 3 iron in their fine Corinthian leather golf bags. No, we are grateful because we've wanted you here all along. Remember that time we got all excited by the Beholder and tried to get you to watch us fight it? Or the day we came to you teary-eyed, seeking succor in your sweet embrace after a particularly bitter *High Heat Baseball* defeat? Remember how desperately we wanted you to share in our exhilarating triumph over Nihilanth? After all these years, you are finally joining us, dropping tangos by our sides, hacking Diablo to pieces with your Broadsword of the Bear while we slow him with ice arrows, fighting crime in a cozy little supergroup built for two in Paragon City, and gibbing us into bite-sized chunks on weekends instead of forcing us to sit through another excruciating Sandra Bullock picture. We have so longed for this moment, and finally, sweetly, it has come. At long last, we have our soul mates. You complete us.

My dear sweet darlings, you had us at "Klaatu barada nikto."

Robert Coffey robert_coffey@ziffdavis.com

Computer Gaming World (ISSN 0744-6667) is published monthly except for a combined Jul/Aug issue by Ziff Davis Media, Inc., 28 E. 28th St., New York, NY 10016. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY 10016 and additional mailing offices. Ride along enclosed in MLCD, PSCD, UBCD, USCD and USCO editions. Postmaster: Send address changes to Computer Gaming World, P.O. Box 57167, Boulder, CO 80322-7167. Canadian GST registration number is 865266033. Publication Mail Agreement No. 40030271. Return Undeliverable Canadian Addresses to PO Box 503, RPO West Beaver Creek, Richmond Hill, ON L4B 4R6. Printed in the U.S.A.

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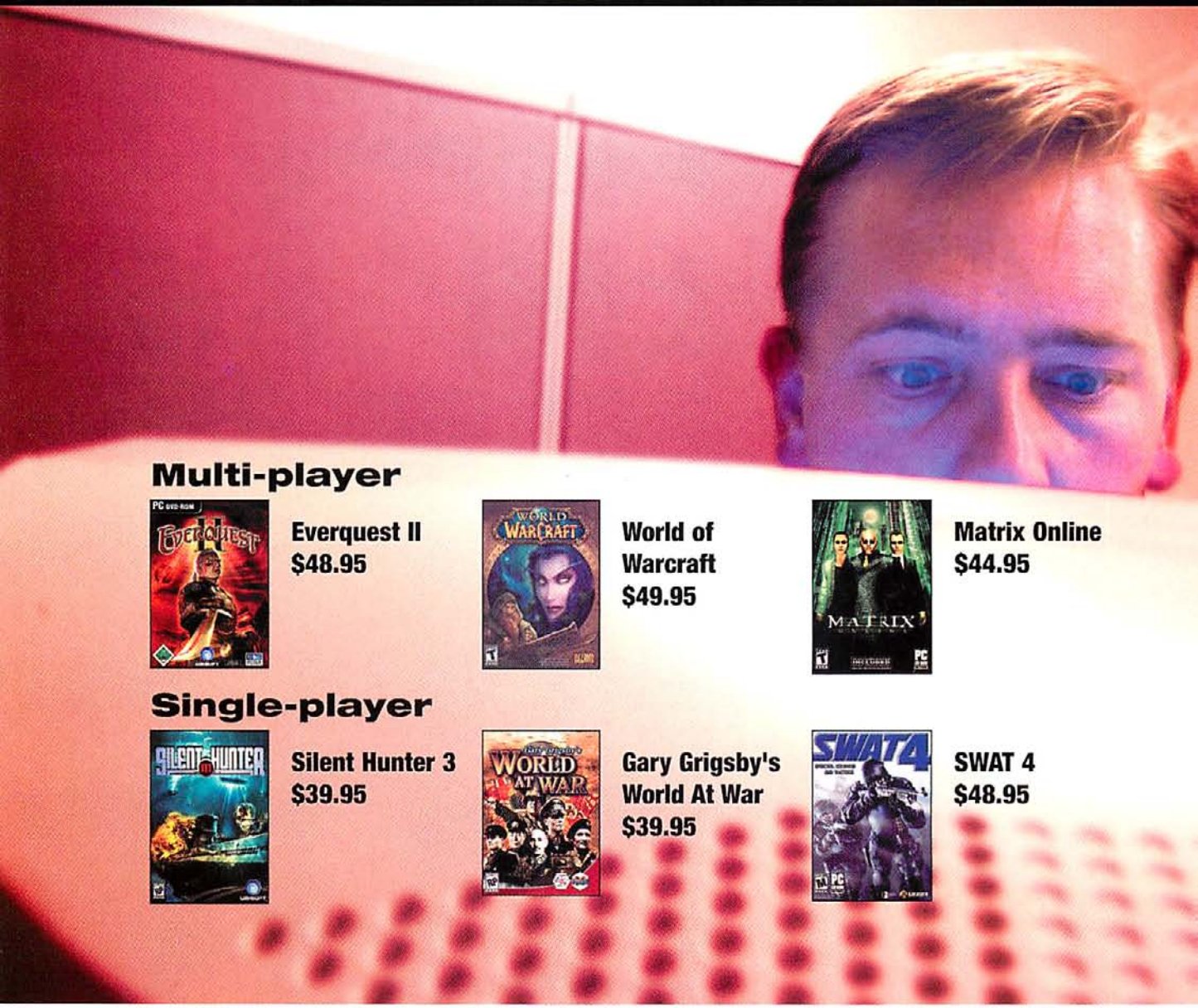

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