

ON THE DISC!
TIMESHIFT DEMO!
FUTURISTIC SHOOTER ACTION!

INSIDE!

IN THE MAG:

WORLD-EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

EXCLUSIVE DETAILS: ALL-NEW SCREENS, FIRST MULTIPLAYER INFO, AND MORE!



COMPUTER

The PC Gaming

Authority

GAMING

FOR OVER 20 YEARS
ISSUE 261

WORLD

PERPLEX
CITY
CARD GAME GETS
CRAZY WITH
\$200K PAYOFF
PAGE 34 >

ALL-NEW SCREENS
FIRST MULTIPLAYER INFO

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

LEGENDARY FRANCHISE

WIND-BLOWING MAKEOVER

FANTASY ACTION REDEFINED

DO YOU NEEDS HOLLYWOOD?
MAKE MACHINIMA

W'S STEP-BY-STEP
GUIDE TO MAKING
MOVIES WITH
YOUR GAMES

SPECIAL REPORT
ARE GAMES
INSTALLING
SPYWARE ON
YOUR PC?
PAGE 28 >





Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
Suggestive Themes



\$10 rebate for The Godfather DVD Collection in every game.*

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GODFATHER.EA.COM

The
Godfather™
THE GAME



HOW WILL YOU PLAY THE GODFATHER? 03.2006



BEAUTIFULLY



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PlayStation 2



io-Interactive

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EXECUTED

SPRING 2006

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eidos 



REVOLUTIONARY GAMEPLAY

The "Cross-Cor" is the first communication device to harness the power of the U.S. military. Satellite transmissions allow players to communicate with Ghost squads, control recon drones, and direct air strikes. This technology revolutionizes multiplayer games, letting Ghosts see what others see, set rally points, and direct unmanned drones.



THE SOLDIER OF THE FUTURE

Countersnipe rifles that blow through walls to eliminate targets, assault rifles that shoot around corners, and a host of other high-tech weapons and equipment allow you to employ advanced military technology that will not be unveiled for another eight years.

WITH THE TECHNOLOGY OF

2013



YOU MAY LIVE TO SEE 2014.

STRATEGIC ONLINE PLAY

In online multiplayer modes emphasizing strategy and tactics, the team's chances depend on your team's ability to craft a successful battle plan.



BUILT WITH THE PC GAMER IN MIND

A detailed rendering of the action is provided on the Tactical Map. Ghosts can plan and coordinate attacks, locate enemy positions, and find favorable routes on the fly.


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The cover art features a soldier in a desert environment, wearing a helmet with a night vision device and holding a futuristic assault rifle. The soldier is wearing a camouflage uniform and tactical gear. The background shows a desert landscape with some foliage and a building in the distance.

Tom Clancy's

GHOST RECON

ADVANCED WARFIGHTER



UBISOFT

THE BATTLE

KURZICKS

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EARN FACTION POINTS FROM QUESTS AND MISSIONS TO IMPROVE THE RANKING OF YOUR ALLIANCE. TOP-RANKED ALLIANCES ARE AWARDED TERRITORY WHEN THEIR FACTION WINS AN ALLIANCE BATTLE.



RATING PENDING



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WWW.GUILDWARS.COM

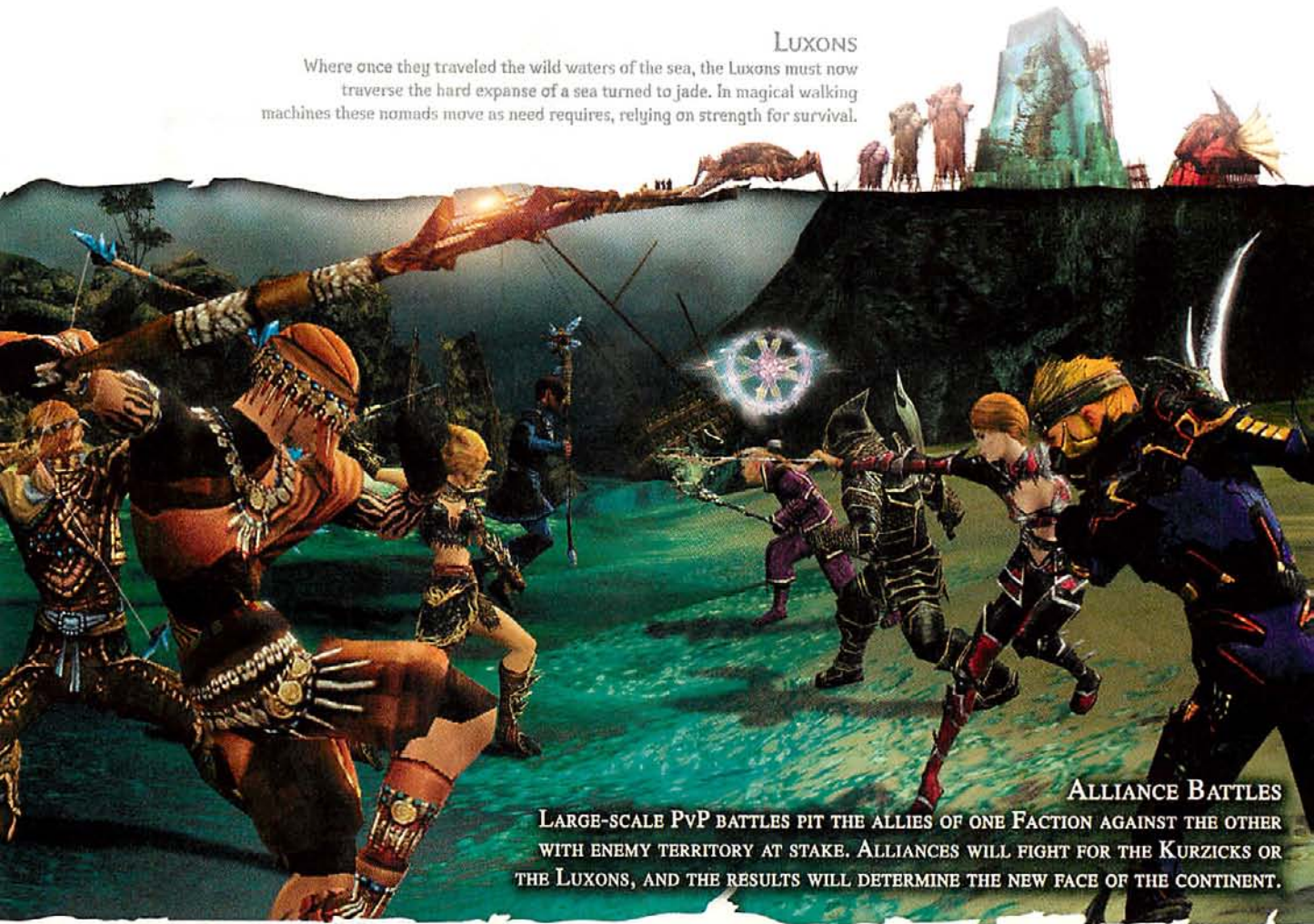
FREE ONLINE PLAY!*

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*Free online play requires product purchase and access to Internet. Player is responsible for all applicable Internet fees.

FOR CANTHA BEGINS.

LUXONS

Where once they traveled the wild waters of the sea, the Luxons must now traverse the hard expanse of a sea turned to jade. In magical walking machines these nomads move as need requires, relying on strength for survival.



ALLIANCE BATTLES

LARGE-SCALE PVP BATTLES PIT THE ALLIES OF ONE FACTION AGAINST THE OTHER WITH ENEMY TERRITORY AT STAKE. ALLIANCES WILL FIGHT FOR THE KURZICKS OR THE LUXONS, AND THE RESULTS WILL DETERMINE THE NEW FACE OF THE CONTINENT.

GUILD WARS FRACTIONS™

ALL MUST CHOOSE A SIDE





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A fanboy of *Might and Magic* waxes moronic on the rebirth of one of his favorite franchises.

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■ COVER STORY

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

We're excited about *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*—and not just because the game looks awesome. It means a return to a franchise long thought buried by onetime publisher 3DO.

20 Radar

A *World of Warcraft* community confronts the corporation behind the game, *Sin Episodes* tackles the micro-chunking trend before *Half-Life: Aftermath*, and CGW explores the ongoing controversy surrounding StarForce copy protection software.

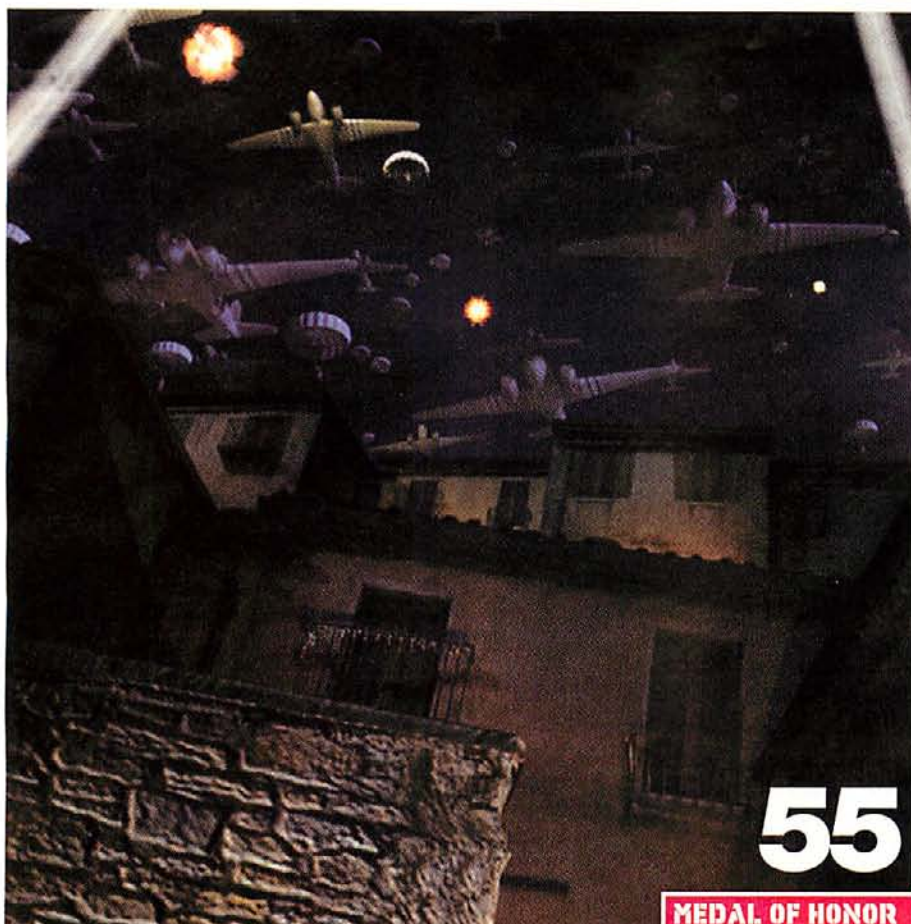
79 Reviews

What? No review scores?! Is this some kind of April Fools' joke or something? Maybe. While you're wondering, read our reviews of *Star Wars Empire at War*, *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*, and *SWAT 4: The Stetchkov Syndicate*.

- 80 *Star Wars Empire at War*
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90 Tech

In a month of wacky peripherals and a high-end headset, we—wait for it—dub a new king in the graphics card war. All hail ATI's X1900 XT! At least until next month.



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MEDAL OF HONOR

94 Tom vs. Bruce

What would happen if Tom and Bruce decided to team up instead of acting adversarial? Thank goodness we don't have to find out this month!

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Beneath the valley of the ultravixens.



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TOM VS. BRUCE

**THIS MONTH
ON 1UP.COM**



PODCASTS.1UP.COM

Got iTunes? Keep up-to-date with all the latest gaming news by subscribing to the weekly 1UP Radio podcasts—or just stream the audio off the website.

ANARCHYONLINE.1UP.COM

Anarchy Online content designer Yngvild Lothe gives readers a peek into the world of MMORPG development in her 1UP developer blog.

CRAZYBUFFET.1UP.COM

In the grand tradition of Penny Arcade and User Friendly, 1UP presents its very own web comic, Crazy Buffet, illustrated by John Pading. It's updated every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday!

EDITORIAL 261

EDITORIAL OF MIGHT AND MAGIC

Or: When dead franchises rise again



ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A GAME, AND IT was good. The game was called *Might and Magic: The Secret of the Inner Sanctum*, and it was made, in its entirety, by one guy: Jon Van Caneghem. Van Caneghem wrote the code, designed the graphics, wrote the manual, and even took orders for the completed game over the phone. The only thing he didn't do was come to your house and play it for you once you bought it. But he probably would have, if you asked.

The *Might and Magic* franchise got better with each new release (at least at first) and then spun off into

what many consider an even better series: *Heroes of Might and Magic*. Eventually, though, the party ended. Van Caneghem's company, New World Computing, got swallowed up by the ever-bumblin' 3DO, which proceeded to milk the franchise bone dry with one lame game after another (anyone remember *Crusaders of Might and Magic?*), and when the lights finally went out for 3DO and New World and the *Might and Magic* games in 2003, well, most of us—even longtime fans like me—considered it a long-overdue mercy killing.

Now it's back. And though part of me, out of reflex, groans at its return, the fact is that *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic* may, in fact, herald a triumphant return. At the very least, it looks freakin' amazing, thanks to the *Half-Life 2* engine, as the shots in this month's cover story show. So go there now and see for yourself.

Oh, and along the way, check out our interview with Van Caneghem himself, who has nothing to do with the series anymore but is up to something new these days—and has a few choice words about the *Might and Magic* series he first brought to life 20 years ago.

(And I ride a 1993 Yamaha Seca II to work every day. And love it.)

/JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Now Playing: *World Of Warcraft* (again), *Ticket to Ride*
1UP.com Blog: cgwjeff.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES)

Luxuriate in a heady bouquet of sweat and urine on the tightly packed 38 bus—also known as "the Dirty Eight." While commuting, I dream of driving the Wienermobile.

Now Playing: *Grid Wars*, *No-Action Jackson*, *HL2: Substance*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_gizmo.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (PREVIEWS)

Piss, human feces, panhandling—Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) has it all, and for the price of a hamburger, plus taxes!

Now Playing: *The Hidden*, *Battlefield 2*
1UP.com Blog: egmshawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

Riding BART is my favorite all-time commute. It's like an extra 25 minutes to do all those things I never get around to, like sleeping, playing air guitar, or pretending I'm a covert ops train conductor.

Now Playing: *Prince of Persia*, *The Two Thrones*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_jennings.1UP.com

HOW CGW GETS AROUND

KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR

My 1987 Honda Elite 150 has the most reliable motor out there, although much like the DallasKidd's kicks, its body is expected to entirely dematerialize someday soon. Like, tomorrow.

Now Playing: *Diablo II*, with fire
1UP.com Blog: kristens.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS)

I ride Caltrain, the local commuter choo-choo, to work each day. The two-hour round-trip means plenty of time to play the DS, read some comics, and catch up on sleep.

Now Playing: *Grid Wars*
1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com

LOGAN PARR
DISC PRODUCER

My favorite mode of transport has always been my old faithful Toyota MR2. It's nice and small, so it's easy to score small parking spots around San Francisco.

Now Playing: *The Sims 2*, making cartoon series postings for my...
1UP.com Blog: logans_run.1UP.com

SEAN DALLASKIDD
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

Being a city kid allows me to log extra mileage on my Chucks—so much, in fact, that I am actually waiting for them to degenerate. Walking also allows me to ponder life's great mysteries.

Now Playing: *City of Villains*
1UP.com Blog: The_dallaskidd.1UP.com

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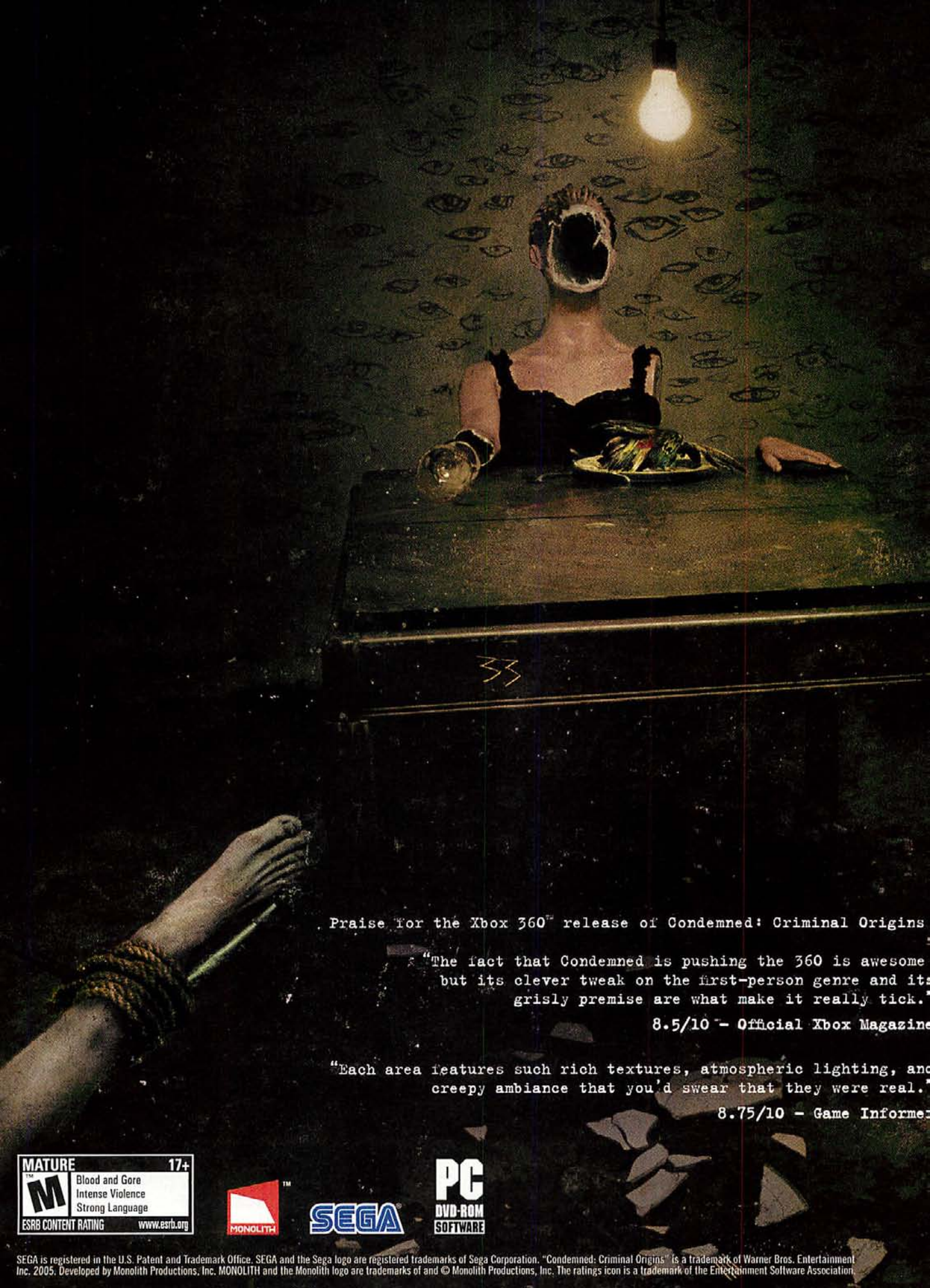
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- Play as one of 10 different races or create your own.
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Praise for the Xbox 360™ release of Condemned: Criminal Origins

"The fact that Condemned is pushing the 360 is awesome but its clever tweak on the first-person genre and its grisly premise are what make it really tick."

8.5/10 - Official Xbox Magazine

"Each area features such rich textures, atmospheric lighting, and creepy ambiance that you'd swear that they were real."

8.75/10 - Game Informer





Forensics



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Stun Guns



Chilling AI

You are FBI Agent Ethan Thomas. To hunt the world's most dangerous serial killer you'll need to keep your eyes open. Starting now. FOLLOW THE EVIDENCE TO CONDEMNEDGAME.COM

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ISSUE 261

LETTERS

BECAUSE THIS
LOVE AFFAIR
CAN'T GO ON

BLAME OF THE YEAR

Regarding the lack of Game of the Year honors in your most recent issue [March 2006, #260]: I find your rationale and general attitude on the matter more than a little disappointing. You assert that readers have probably read several other GOTY articles and will be bored with another—a bit presumptuous, don't you think? What if you're wrong? Later, you point out that after a three-hour meeting on the issue, you were "bored already just talking about it." My jaw dropped. Bored? If discussing PC games bores you, either you're not doing it right, or perhaps you need a three-hour meeting to reexamine your career choices! I think you have shirked your responsibilities as industry critics (a responsibility to both readers and developers)—and worse yet, you think you've done us all a favor.

Mark Pollard

Our March staff page included a list of each editor's personal favorites—a big indication of what games would've walked away with honors. You already know that *Guild Wars*, *Battlefield 2*, *Civilization IV*, *Indigo Prophecy*, and all those other games rocked—why would you need us to keep telling you?

I think your decision to skip the Game of the Year awards was awesome. In the age of the Internet, paying for lists of things seems more unnecessary than ever. If I want to know some uninformed tool's opinion of the best moments in sci-fi television, I can just get drunk and browse a forum. Not that you guys are tools, but if you still get *TV Guide*, you know what I mean.

Greg Chatham

FACING THE (CHIN) MUSIC

When Take-Two bought the MLB license last year, I was a bit worried, since there has never been a PC version of [the 2K] baseball series. But Take-Two promised us one, so I didn't worry about it. Now, as we approach spring training, a search on Take-Two's website shows the game coming out for every platform except the PC. Are PC [baseball fans] getting screwed this year (and possibly until Take-Two's exclusive deal expires)?

Brad Wollangk

You're right—we see no sign of a PC version...and when asked, 2K Sports failed to provide us with any sort of explanation. That kinda sucks. What gives, Take-Two?

NEWS, GAMES, AND EVERYTHING ELSE, EVERY MONTH

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INTERVIEW 32: **John Rhee**

PREVIEW 46: **Assault**

GOD MODE

Fragging for king, country, and creator

CULTURE

UNHOLY MMO-LY?

VIOLENCE ISN'T THE ONLY COMPLEX ETHICAL ISSUE RELIGIOUS GAMERS FACE

GEMINIOMEGA VS. MATT

Tom vs. Bruce—a fun section devoted to the comedy that can result when two people compete in a game without being totally familiar with it—used to be just a fun distraction for me. Then, the latest edition [Feb. 2006, #259] got me interested in playing *Civilization IV*. After trying a demo of the game, I was hooked. Tom vs. Bruce: 23 percent better than a review.

Geminiomega

By golly, you're right, Geminiomega. In fact, you've inspired us: Beginning with next month's issue, we're moving Tom vs. Bruce into the new-and-improved reviews section.

Reading the March 2006 [#260] Tom vs. Bruce column was like reading the transcript of three developmentally disabled children fighting over a rock. I'd blame it on Jeff Green's involvement, but Tom and Bruce seem to be like that even when it's just them alone.

Matt Pulkrabek

LESS ACTION, MORE RPG

Am I the only RPG fan who not only doesn't like *Diablo*-style gameplay, but is also annoyed that game companies have the nerve to call these action games "RPGs"? Where's the next *Baldur's Gate*? Why is every new "RPG" just some lame action game with an

experience system thrown in? If I wanted action, I'd play a shooter. What ever happened to the days when RPGs were either turn based or at least had a pause button (like *Baldur's Gate*)? And who decided RPGs were a single-character experience? I truly miss the days of having six party members. Something is amiss in the land of the RPG. Won't BioWare save us?

Robert Burnham

We hear you, Robert. With the exception of *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and its sequel, we've been through a serious drought of traditional RPGs these past couple of years. While we all continue to wait, check out *Ultima V: Lazarus* (www.u5lazarus.com), a fan remake of *Ultima V* using the *Dungeon Siege* engine. That ought to keep you happy for a while.



Where did all the good flight sims go?
—Servantes

When did cool shareware like *Doom* disappear? All we get now are ads.
—Paul Davis

Please explain to my mom why I can't run *BF2* on an Nvidia Geforce 4 MX 420
—Maclean Jared

There's nothing original to say about Jack Thompson's level of douchbagginess.
—Gecko_13

WOW—the endless curse of oblivion that has ruined my GPA.
—Brandon Engler

36 > COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

Winner, Best RPG of E3

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

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

- GameInformer

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

- GamePro Magazine

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

- Xbox.com

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

- GameSpy

The Elder Scrolls IV OBLIVION

The RPG for the Next Generation



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HOLY MOLY

Go figure—God gets gamers talking. Our February story on evangelical groups spreading their message via online games ("God Mode") generated so many responses that we're still sorting through them.

While I don't try to convert others, I would not have chosen Catholicism in the first place if [it weren't for evangelists]. Without people who evangelize, fewer people would probably go to church or believe in God. Since you can't talk about God in school or work anymore, why not use online gaming as a platform for spreading His word?

Caroline Ching

Many people wonder how a man who evangelizes for peace can have such a violent hobby, but they fail to realize that our savior was a true warrior Himself, hunted before He was born and persecuted all of His life until His violent death. As His follower, I abhor physical violence, but I am involved in warfare every day. I face battles at work: refraining from gossip, exercising patience, turning the other cheek and the cheek after that, and trying to show His light by example. The same goes for traffic (waving at those who cut me off, smiling instead of cussing) and shopping at the grocery store (giving people space when they cut in line). [Christians] fight our battle every day, stomping Satan and his urges at every turn—and to do so on the computer is quite a release. It's good to actually see the enemy take a fall after spending so many hours fighting an invisible war.

Jose

I thoroughly enjoyed "God Mode"—what a gutsy move on your part to print an article about ethics, religion, and gaming!

Claire Selby

I personally can't see why anyone would be offended by Christians making religious comments in an online game, especially when most online "conversations" involve constant s***-talking and random accusations of homosexuality. Most Christians seem to be good sports—gaming needs more people like them and fewer morons. Plus, if you don't want to hear what they're saying, mute them.

Wesley Hinkley

FPSes are packed with children and teens who don't yet fully comprehend religion or spirituality and are extremely vulnerable to these groups' proselytizing approach. It's one thing to speak your beliefs to like-minded Christians, but when a young Jew, Hindu, or Muslim plays a game and is told that he'll go to hell if he doesn't have faith in Jesus, it just seems as though these groups are preying on the weak to pad their numbers.

Jet Black

Interestingly enough, I find myself polishing up my shooter skills, as I think I might "fight fire with fire" by starting some sort of Americans United Toward the Separation of Church and State enforcement clan. However, my political skills are

needed in the real world by the Kicking Donkey, so it is unlikely I'll find the time. I could remark on the easily perceived desperation of evangelicals "Bible-bombing" the World of Make-Believe™ (a trademark of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, but I'll borrow it), but that's too easy a frag, er, target.

[My major problem with the article] is that you printed a complete mission statement for one of these groups and told us of some of the tactics of others—but you offered nothing resembling an opposing viewpoint or questioning of their practices.

Reginald H. Robertson

I'm a religious dude of the Shabbat-celebrating, "eight days of Hanukkah" faith. Nonetheless, I was expecting your article to be laced with criticism. Shame on me. You guys simply reported the news. No slant, no commentary—you just gave us gamers info on what's going on in the gaming world. You could have used the article to push CGW editor-in-chief Jeff Green's insane ideology that "secret sauce" is neither secret nor a sauce, but opted to allow us readers to decide for ourselves instead. Pat yourselves on the back.

Dan Chick

Christian gamers should have no problem with the *Doom* series. You're a soldier fighting against the forces of hell.

Knute Nathe

Christian Gamers Online founder Kendrick Kenerly states: "[Games] all boil down to a few things: They have a goal, they have a reward for the goal, and they have a set of rules that need to be followed to reach the goal.... [Violence is] merely 'presentation,' simply a way to convey an experience to players so they can follow the rules to reach the goal." This well-reasoned defense of violence in games also explains why many cultural critics do not think of games as art. If a game's presentation is secondary to achieving simple goals and rewards, then the game is no more artistically significant than a well-presented version of checkers. Take *Knights of the Old Republic*, touted as one of the most morally challenging games of 2003. If we apply Kenerly's argument, the allegedly deep moral choices in the game are mere presentation thinly stretched over a simple goal: to have a powerful dark side or light side character with strong Jedi powers as the reward. All of *KOTOR*'s morality can be reduced to a simplistic choice between light side points or dark side points.

As long as designers continue to create "rules and a goal," games will never become an effective art form on the level of novels or movies. As long as games can be won or lost, they will not be about the sadness of death, the joys of love, or the complexity of human life. They will be about winning and losing.

Alexander

As irritating as I find it for Christians (or any other organized religion) to contaminate gaming with evangelism, I find it preferable that they are killing virtual people in the name of their religion instead of real people, as they have done for the last 2,000 years.

Jon Stenberg

Call these evangelicals exactly what they are: spammers. If they want their own servers in which to preach all day long, that's their right—but if they take it to other servers, [they're no better than] any other sort of spammer.

Silas Ray

I saw "Online Gaming: New Frontier for Religious Evangelists" on CGW's cover and thought, "Oh, great—another media outlet bashing Christians." As a devout Christian and frequent gamer (*America's Army*), I turned straight to the article and began to read—wary that I was going to have to write a stern letter to someone asking them not to bash me and mine every chance they got. What I found was completely different from what I expected. Your article was thoughtful and respectful. Instead of judgments or political agendas, it contained only information—a rarity in news reporting these days.

Benjamin Guptill

An online evangelist actually approached me about the "Good News," and I was pissed. He kept insisting that I listen to the Christian gospels, even after I told him that I was Wiccan. Religious matters belong where they can be seen only by those who wish to see them. You don't see me, a devout Wiccan, going around preaching about the glories and wonders of Wicca [when I'm playing] *Battlefield 2*.

Firehawk



DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

What are a few decimal points between friends? A typo in March's Gladstoned column said that the XPS 600 Renegade comes stacked with a 1.5TB, 10,000 rpm hard drive. We wish! It's actually a 150GB drive.

Also: Mad props go to *Penny Arcade* (aka Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik) for last issue's snappy "God Mode"—inspired comic strip (and pardon the profanity—it was supposed to be edited out). Check out more of their work online at www.penny-arcade.com.



SPEAK UP!

You hate us. You love us. You will send us \$1 million in small, unmarked bills if you ever want to see your puppy again. Prove your blind devotion by spewing some of your bile and e-mailing cgwletters@ziffdavis.com today. You'll be a better person for it.

THE FATE OF THE ENTIRE GALAXY IS IN YOUR HANDS. ARE YOU READY?

THE FLEETS

Do you quickly build a fleet of TIE fighters and swarm the enemy before they gain strength? Or take time and build a more powerful fleet of Star Destroyers?

THE WEAPON

Do you protect the Death Star and reveal it at a critical moment? Or do you break out your big gun first and use Rebel planets for target practice?

THE CREATURES

Do you attack head-on and risk massive casualties? Or flank the enemy, circle around and hope any rancors you meet along the way aren't hungry?

THE ELEMENTS

Do you wait until after the ice storm and lose the element of surprise? Or do you take advantage of low visibility and attack when they least expect it?

THE ARMIES

Do you crush bases under the feet of AT-ATs and risk losing a few? Or do you call down ships from space and bomb them back to the Stone Age?

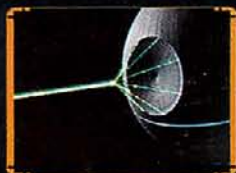
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Game experience may change during online play.



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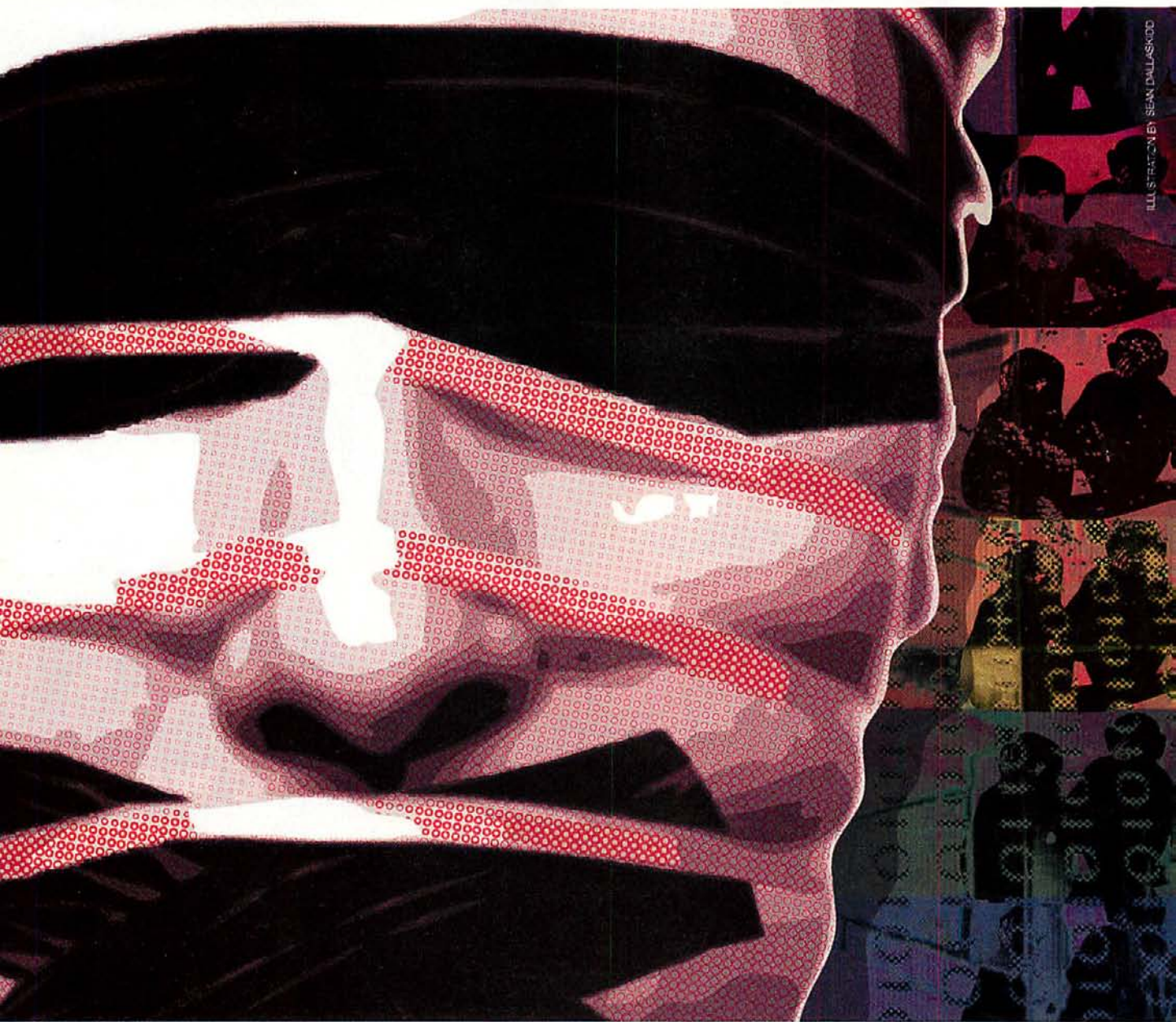




ISSUE 261

RADAR

NEWS,
PREVIEWS,
AND SPICY OPINION,
EVERY MONTH



ILL. STRATON EY SEAN DALLAS/KOD

SOUNDS OF SILENCE

Sanitizing expression in brave new worlds



PREVIEW

SiN Episodes

Trailblazer or too soon? Why SiN could forever change the way we think about format.

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INTERVIEW

Raph Koster

CGW talks shop with the MMORPG pioneer.

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HOW TO

Make Machinima

Rooster Teeth Studios shares its secrets.

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CULTURE

WHEN NOT PRANKING ORC PATROLS or raiding tauren towns, Shimmre, aka Sara Andrews, can be found peaceably hawking her guild, Oz, in the public channels of the *World of Warcraft* realm Shadow Moon. Twenty-five, transsexual, swinging long shifts as a showgirl at a gay nightclub in Nashville, and self-described as "usually quiet and reserved until [she gets] to know you," Andrews spent hundreds of hours in 2005 polishing her PVP skills and helming Oz. "I've always been a big videogame freak; ever since I was little, Nintendo was my life!" she says, laughing. "I discovered MMOs through *Ultima Online*, and I played that a little bit but never got into it. Then last summer a friend introduced me to *WOW*, and I really liked it, though I didn't care for remarks many of the players made, like the fact that everything is apparently 'so gay' when it's bad. So I decided to create my own guild, which would be GLBT friendly." Sometimes singing, other times slogging her way through *WOW*'s exacting echelons to a formidable level 60, Andrews had big endgame plans for her developing guild—until January 12, 2006, that is, when a note from publisher Blizzard blinkered everything.

DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL

Standing in Stormwind City early that Thursday morning, Andrews/Shimmre was recruiting for Oz, noting the usual quest chains, level prefs, and adding as she always did that Oz was "GLBT (gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual) friendly." This time, however, the addendum would prove hazardous. Shortly after her broadcast, an unnamed player complained about Andrews' message to a game moderator. Within hours, Andrews received an e-mail warning from "Tirauka," a senior account administrator with Blizzard. The charge: "Harassment—Sexual Orientation," specifically "both clear and masked language...which insultingly refer[s] to any aspect of sexual orientation pertaining to [oneself] or other players." According to Blizzard's forum code of conduct, the penalty amounts to a warning and temporary suspension from the forums—repeat violations escalate to permanent bans. While suspension in Andrews' case was waived, her account was nonetheless tagged and she was instructed to refrain from further public use of the acronym "GLBT" or risk further action.

Incensed, Andrews countered that nothing about the term "GLBT" is insulting, adding: "I believe there has been a HUGE mistake... [Oz] is a place where GLBT players can come without being harassed or insulted for their sexual orientation with phrases such as 'That's so gay!' and 'That horde just ganked me! What a fag!'"

Blizzard stood firm. Another account admin named "Gorido" responded, "GLBT is a known

abbreviation for Gay Bi Lesbian Transsexual... please review the harassment policy."

Andrews shot back, "I refuse to recruit any other way, because there are WAY too many people on *WOW* that use REAL antigay terms, and I do not want those people in my guild." The simmering e-mails continued, until Blizzard at last invoked its terms of use, stipulating that players may not "transmit or post any content or language which, in the sole and absolute discretion of Blizzard Entertainment, is deemed to be offensive," the operative phrase being "sole and absolute discretion," essentially claiming for Blizzard the right of final semantic arbitration.

Feeling shunned by the game's administrators and ready to cancel her account, Andrews decided to give her argument one more shot by posting the full e-mail exchange online. "Several of the replies I received sounded automated, like generic pastes," says Andrews, explaining her final reaction to the exchange. "I tried several times to get in touch with these administrators' managers by e-mail or phone, but each time they ignored me, which is ultimately what prompted me to take it public." Hot on Andrews' heels, *In Newsweekly*, self-described as "New England's largest GLBT newspaper," broke the story, Slashdot picked it up, and the issue went mainstream.

A STORM OF WORDS

Weeks passed. Other guild and news sites got involved. Blizzard's official forums rattled and blogs bristled. Andrews' case was taken up by Lambda Legal, which bills itself as "the nation's oldest and largest legal organization working for the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, and people with HIV/AIDS." Observing the story gain traction, Blizzard offered an attempt at clarification on its message boards, defending its position as, in fact, orientation protective and noting that its policies had been tailored to uniformly prevent discrimination against players "based on a particular political, sexual, or religious preference." Andrews thinks this simply missed the point. "Trying to shut out the real world in an online game as big as *WOW* is impossible," she says. "And besides, if Blizzard really wanted to censor these things, why is there a giant cathedral in Stormwind? Why do humans start in an abbey? Why when you type /silly do tauren males spit out canned jokes like 'Homogenized? No way, I like the ladies!' or male trolls tease with a Jamaican accent 'Want some of my jungle love?' or night elves respond to /flirt with 'I hope you're not afraid of snakes'? To call Blizzard's policy inconsistent would be doing it a kindness."

Spotlight-weary and PR-beleaguered, Blizzard's head of worldwide customer service, Thor Biafore, sent Andrews a brief, apologetic e-mail, describing the action taken by its customer service representative(s) as "an unfortunate interpretation of our current policies." Retracting the warning on Andrews' account, Biafore noted that Blizzard's policies on the issue "are currently under review." A subsequent letter to *In Newsweekly* from Blizzard chief operating officer Paul Sams mentioned that the company plans to create a recruitment channel where members can advertise their guilds "in an appropriate fashion."

On February 6, Lambda issued a letter to Blizzard expressing concern that "although preventing harassment is an admirable goal, a requirement that LGBT people remain invisible and silent is not an acceptable means of reaching that goal." Adding the largest GLBT-friendly guild in *WOW*, Stonewall Champions, to the list of concerned parties and citing public accommodation precedent, Lambda requested that Blizzard "inform all...system administrators that they are not to discipline any players for mentioning or discussing sexual orientation or gender identity in a non-insulting fashion." The letter concludes by asking that Blizzard "confirm that LGBT-friendly guilds are allowed to announce their existence in the same manner as any other guilds," and ultimately offers to help Blizzard craft a non-discriminatory clarification "within 30 days...to avoid the need for further action."

According to the letter, discrimination—not censorship—is the legal pivot point. "If you open a restaurant and tell gay customers at your restaurant that they're not allowed to discuss being gay while they're in the restaurant, that's discrimination," explains Andrews' attorney at Lambda, Brian Chase. "Likewise, if you have a business and tell your customers, 'You can talk about anything you want in here, except you can't mention that you are gay,' that's also discrimination."

FREE SPEECH OR SPEECH FREE?

Vend "virtual reality" to a room of cyber pun-dits at your peril. Timeworn, trite, and prone to induce fits of acrimony from cantankerous cynics, the phrase hearkens back to simplistic fantasies: flying cars, frozen heads, microscopic vein-scrubbing miracle machines. You can almost hear Lisa and Bart cawing "Are we there yet?" in mocking, nasally unison. Yet despite misalignments of movie hype and overly optimistic tech projections, in 2006 more than 5 million people worldwide periodically log on to *World of Warcraft* to animate colorful avatars in virtual strongholds, villages, >



"TRYING TO SHUT OUT THE REAL WORLD IN AN ONLINE GAME AS BIG AS *WOW* IS IMPOSSIBLE."

—SARA ANDREWS, *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* PLAYER

► forests auction houses, dungeons, and pubs. Internet access exploded worldwide between 2000 and 2005, increasing by 182 percent, according to market research aggregator Internet World Stats, with nearly 15 percent of the world's 6.5 billion people now cruising its digital byways.

Legal definitions haven't kept pace, and as in the mythical Wild Western frontier the Internet is often likened to, law and order are sometimes meted out in squeaky-wheel fashion. Contrary to Lambda's assertion that Blizzard's actions are discriminatory, Dan Hunter thinks the problem lies in how Blizzard interpreted its offensive-language policy. Hunter is an assistant professor of legal studies and business ethics at the University of Pennsylvania and coauthored a paper in 2003 entitled "The Laws of Virtual Worlds," which examined economic, legal, and moral issues as applied to personal property and player avatars in virtual communities. He's also a *WOW* gamer. "I purposely only had a Mac at home to avoid the inevitable problem of playing all night," muses Hunter. "The wheels really fell off for me when I found that *WOW* had a (good) Mac client, and I joined a guild."

Hunter understands Lambda's position but believes the issue relates back to whether what Andrews said was in fact "insulting." "[Blizzard's] policy means that Ms. Andrews should be punished if her language was reasonably offensive to the person who reported her announcement of the GLBT-friendly guild," explains Hunter. "But no one could reasonably be offended by the mere mention of the guild. So the person who reported it as an offense should have been told, no, it's not reasonable to be offended by that, go away."

Hunter posts frequently at the collaborative and scholarly MMORPG weblog Terra Nova (terranova.blogs.com). He and several of that site's participants crafted an unofficial open letter to Blizzard February 8 that, while applauding Blizzard as generally "supportive of gay players and guilds," sharply upbraids the inconsistency of *WOW*'s general chat channels, describing them as "routinely threatening, abusive, and vulgar, not to mention misogynistic and homophobic." Since Blizzard does not sanction (here meaning "penalize") "vulgar or abusive trash talk," says the letter, "[it] should not sanction the mention of a GLBT-friendly guild."

But on the broader scale, Hunter and Chase are in agreement. Both believe that Blizzard's biggest challenge will be dealing with the general chat channels. "[Blizzard's] statement doesn't fix the homophobic or vulgar language that's regularly used," says Hunter. "Gay activist groups may see this as problematic, and with some cause." On the other hand, you can always "noise filter," says Hunter, noting that a large number of gamers are gay but have been living with this kind of language for years without major incident. "In the end," he says, "they can choose, like me, to turn off the general chat feature, or execute the /ignore command in the game, so that no speech from certain characters comes through."



"NOT QUITE REAL" ESTATE

What kinds of rights do GLBT players have in virtual worlds, especially online communities created, owned, and "leased for public use" by private institutions? Joan Bertin, executive director of the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC), says that in terms of Andrews' case, it comes down to whether *World of Warcraft* is a private institution or a public accommodation. "This is not a First Amendment problem," says Bertin, noting that while the NCAC is a coalition of 50 national nonprofit organizations focusing on First Amendment education and advocacy, it doesn't deal with public accommodation issues. "It's a censorship problem in a different respect, but the First Amendment only controls government action, and this is a private act or private dispute."

Kevin Werbach, assistant professor of legal studies at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, tends to agree. "Under U.S. law, you can create a private club with a no-gays policy," explains Werbach. "Whether I like it or not, I recognize the Catholic Church's right to say that homosexuals can't be priests. The innovation of the 1960s civil rights laws, however, was to say that if I'm a government, or even a private owner of a 'public accommodation,' I'm not entitled to discriminate in certain ways."

Lambda's letter to Blizzard, however, appears to hinge on the public-accommodation argument. Its seventh paragraph begins as follows: "Online environments are public accommodations, subject to regulation as such...discrimination against LGBT individuals in the provision of public accommodations is clearly prohibited by California law."

The question then, says Werbach, is whether *World of Warcraft* is more like a restaurant

REACTION RAINBOW

"I'm pretty sure no one at Blizzard meant harm. They live and work in California—they are much more up-to-date with gay issues and probably much more comfortable with gays than most backassward folks in this country. They're certainly not a bunch of homophobes."

—Patch, posted to the official *WOW* forums

"The left-wing double standard has finally invaded *WOW*. It was only a matter of time."

—Zuru, posted to the official *WOW* forums

"*WOW* is a lot like Disneyland. It's a part of the real world, and yet it's not. The Disney folks are probably not going to let you burn the American flag in front of Epcot Center."

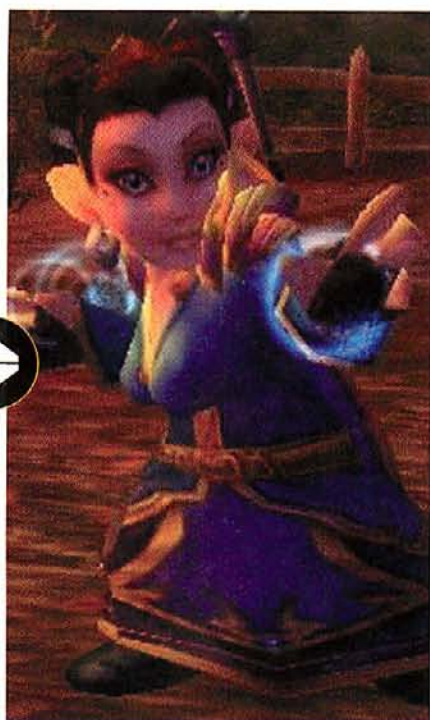
—Kadin2048, posted to Slashdot.org

"This is *WOW*, not RL [real life]. Any religious/sexual/political stance should not be allowed in a fantasy game. I don't like putting up with it in real life and I don't wanna put up with it in here."

—Synchon, posted to the official *WOW* forums

"I believe that the nature of online communities has gotten to a point where they could benefit from hiring social coordinators to work in and out of game to focus on issues not related directly to gameplay, instead of throwing it all under a GM with questionable training in these matters. Most large companies have human resources people trained to work with employees in issues of this type, [so] why shouldn't such a large community have that sort of thing available to the players?"

—Matt Belcher, *WOW* player



▲ Sara Andrews and her *World of Warcraft* toon, Shimre.

"Does this mean I can make a straight-only guild?"

—Harrymage, posted to the official *WOW* forums

"Advertising an LGBT-friendly guild is like advertising a guild that doesn't tolerate racism or sexism. It doesn't say anything about the advertiser's or the guild membership's personal characteristics."

—Snowfall, posted to the official *WOW* forums

"Somehow these people seem to think that saying 'Why do you need your own place? This is only a game! Keep your sexuality out of it!' actually means anything, when in a normal guild we hear about girlfriends, romances, or whatever constantly, but if a guy suddenly spoke up about his boyfriend, people would act all surprised. GLBT people get together so they can just talk normally without having to explain everything."

—Mike Maring, *WOW* player

"It is not OK to make a hetero-only or white-only guild. Nor is it OK to make a gay-only guild. What we're discussing is a gay-friendly guild."

—Porphyria, posted to the official *WOW* forums

"Without a GLBT-friendly option, it's a huge disadvantage to those guilds when they try to recruit. If you don't add the GLBT label, then you have to deal with letting people know through PM [private messages], which creates situations in which people are even more willing to act like jerks or harass than in public chat."

—John Blatzheim, guildmaster of the GLBT-friendly guild Army of Fairies

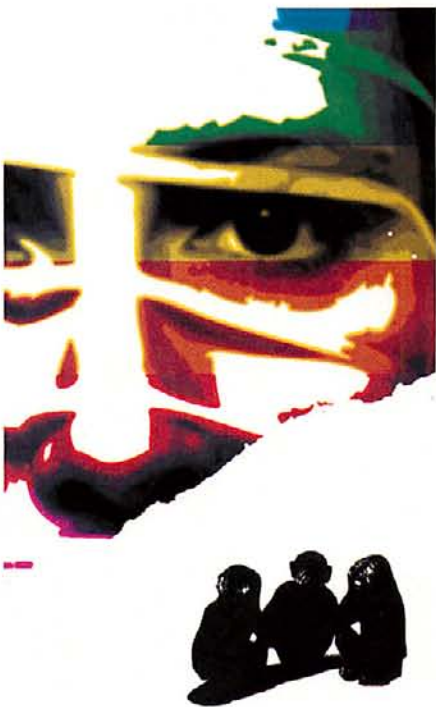
or a private club. "Legally, I think it's pretty clear today that it's a private club, although as MMORPGs become more significant parts of the culture, that might evolve. But that's not the real issue here. With over 5 million users, *WOW* is the size of Chicago. And like Chicago, it has homosexuals, homophobes, and everything in between." Blizzard's challenge, says Werbach, will be figuring out how to balance what different groups of its players might prefer in their own private groups. "In Andrews' case, they got it wrong," says Werbach. "Public pressure was the best way to convince them they got it wrong, and it appears it had exactly that effect. Our Terra Nova statement was intended as a contribution to that effort."

NCAC's Bertin tends to agree that public pressure may be GLBT players' best recourse when private censorship occurs. "Probably the most effective technique in these situations is simply to create a chorus of objections from people who are part of this community," says Bertin. "I wonder, for instance, whether everybody who's in this virtual environment understands that some messages are allowed and others are not, and somebody they don't know who's using criteria they're not aware of is making that decision, and it hit Andrews this time, but it could hit anybody the next time."

Public accommodation or no, the solution for Lambda's Chase is clear. "Allow everyone to speak in a noninsulting manner and actively police the game for rudeness and harassment," he says. "It should be clear that mentioning that you are gay is no different from

mentioning that you are left-handed or short or from the West Coast. If other affinity-based guilds can announce their presence, then LGBT gamers should be allowed to do the same. If individual gamers can identify their characters as married or dating the opposite sex, then gamers should be able to create gay characters as well. It's a simple matter of equal treatment and fairness." And while Blizzard's proposal of a guild-friendly channel is interesting to Chase, it doesn't address Lambda's underlying concerns about orientation identification in the game proper. "We need to make sure that Blizzard isn't saying that any mention of being gay or trans violates the terms of services if the mention is in a general chat channel," says Chase. "If Blizzard is saying that nonharassing comments about sexual orientation or gender identity are banned in general chat, then that's [still] discrimination."

Say Blizzard, in the end, does elect to formally allow nonoffensive, orientation-specific language in the game—would Andrews still want to play? "If they change their minds, I might consider returning to the game," she says. "I would love to be able to keep Oz going, and I definitely feel that there's a need for a GLBT-friendly guild on each server. That alone would give me reason enough to return to the game...if Blizzard does the right thing." /Matt Peckham



"IT'S A SIMPLE MATTER OF EQUAL TREATMENT AND FAIRNESS."

—BRIAN CHASE, ATTORNEY, LAMBDA LEGAL

SIN EPISODES: EM

The killer serial starts here

PUBLISHER: Steam DEVELOPER: Ritual Entertainment GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: March or April 2006

PREVIEW

RITUAL CHIEF DESIGNER TOM Mustaine is thinking of two tomorrows. In one digitally distributed future, we needn't wait for morning-after water-cooler meetings to compare impressions of *Sin Episodes*' serialized chapters. We're already connected through our PCs on message boards and chat channels in a sort of pregame show. We're talking up until the point when the preloaded game goes public, and, in some cases, still talking even when we start playing.

"When they unlocked *Half-Life 2* via Steam," Mustaine

says, "Valve was able to sit and watch as people played and posted reactions and screenshots. [That's] not something we've been able to witness before. So I absolutely see people playing simultaneously in real time, talking through their actions via voice-over-IP. People watch live TV; why not have the same thing happen here?"

As for that other future, Mustaine says, "[My] biggest fear is that we're first in this space, and as the saying goes, 'The pioneers are always the ones with the arrows in their backs.'" And those arrows are? "Adoption rate is a big one," he confides. "Consumers tend to move slowly into new technologies and concepts, even though, in this case, 'episode' is already on the tips of everybody's tongues...and the

entire industry is slowly moving toward the episodic model."

In truth, Mustaine has his mind on a third tomorrow, too: the wheneverland where *Sin* is set. Freeport City—a fictionalized mash of New York, San Francisco, and Tokyo—continues to cope with its mutant menace while hero John R. Blade wages his ongoing war with the mutagen-selling SinTEK corporation. The story, however, isn't set in stone here. "The episodic model allows us to listen much more closely to the community and respond accordingly," says Mustaine. "We have an overarching story from episode to episode that we're executing on, but making adjustments to its structure isn't hard at all. We're seriously looking into *A Death in the Family*-style scenarios," he says, referring to the *Batman* series in which >

CONTINUED ON PAGE 26

CONTEXT LOOK SYSTEM

Most objects in *Sin*'s world are interactive in some (more or less) meaningful way. "Interfacing with a computer bounces you from interactive screen to interactive screen," says chief designer Tom Mustaine, "and opening drawers and pulling out the contents can divulge info and items beneficial to the player's progression."

In addition, *Sin Episodes*' "context look system" offers second opinions via voiceover audio. Press the police radio button at any time, and allies JC or Jessica chime in with available info on whatever it is you're currently checking out.

POSTER

"Posters, notepads, and computers reveal phone numbers. Players can then use any phone in the game to call these. Some messages expand on the growing mystery surrounding [SinTEK CEO] Elexis Sinclair while others hint at upcoming plot twists. With these messages, all is not as it seems."



URGENCE

ONLY
AUTHORIZED
DRIVERS
ARE ALLOWED
TO OPERATE
FORKLIFT

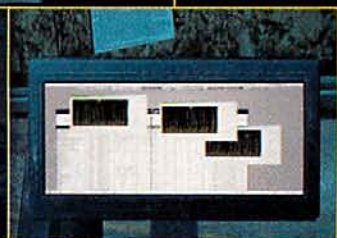
BULLETIN BOARD

"Here," according to Mustaine, "Jessica fills you in on Arch-13, a mysterious organization with far-reaching impact. We position different boards like this throughout levels, each revealing the backstory or hinting at distant events. Keep in mind, though, that many things have multiple meanings."



COMPUTER MONITOR

"Stare at this monitor long enough," says Mustaine, "and Jessica rings. If you respond, she'll talk about how the onscreen records involve [villain] Radek's drug-running operation. Nothing critical to the game flow, but it adds depth for those players who want to dig into the narrative."



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 24

► DC Comics readers decided Robin's fate. "One feature we're working on would let players upload standard performance statistics, along with a record of actions and decisions, to Steam servers when they finish the game."

Not that it takes subsequent episodes for *SIN* to tailor itself to you. The shooter's dynamic difficulty system similarly records and reacts to your input, albeit in a more immediate manner. According to Mustaine, "It tracks almost everything involving interaction and progression," and the harder you fight, the harder it fights back. "Enemies' stamina stays the same so the combat remains consistent throughout the entire game, but they will

start wearing helmets to compensate for head shots," he says. "They'll start equipping stronger weapons and using the world against you—overturning objects and stuff. Eventually, they'll work in teams and cover one another. Then we'll start spawning more of 'em or enemies that ordinarily show up only in later levels."

Ideally, action in *SIN* isn't something separate from story; it is story. Set aside cut-scenes, for instance, and say that in *Half-Life 2*, Eli's newspaper clippings and Dr. Kleiner's desktop photos are stabs at immersive storytelling. Now imagine more interactive rooms in which every artifact acts as evidence to its owner's identity. You're a voyeur in ways that Hitchcock's

camera could only make you by proxy. You're deciding which drawers to snoop in, which scraps of paper to peruse. "Cut-scenes blur the line between interactive and passive entertainment, but usually in a bad way," Mustaine says. "Instead, we're burying lots of backstory in relevant items and data all over the place, where inquisitive players can dig around a bit and put pieces of the world together in their own way [see sidebars]. Alongside direct interaction with Jessica, Elexis, JC, and any other characters, it gives us a broad base of content with which we can deliver narrative to the player, no matter how he or she decides to participate in the story." / **Shawn Elliott**

SECOND EPISODE SPOILERS

"We'll see other sides of Freeport, some of the more upscale parts of the city," says Mustaine of *SIN*'s second episode. "Emergence occurs in outlying areas, so with episode two we want to go the other way and show off some of the cutting-edge technology central to the world. Then we're expanding on elements established in *Emergence*, such as A.I. and vehicles, and looking at ways to work in very large-scale destruction, like taking down entire buildings."



"PEOPLE WATCH LIVE TV; WHY NOT HAVE THE SAME THING HAPPEN HERE?"

—TOM MUSTAINE, CHIEF DESIGNER



► Mutagen chemicals in barrels and leaky supply lines make mutants bigger and badder. Antigen bullets (your Magnum's secondary fire mode) bring 'em back down to size.

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STARFORCED

Copy protection...or malware?

PC PROBLEMS?

GAME DEVELOPERS TEND TO GUARD their products like jealous gods. You can't exactly blame them, since rampant software piracy—made all the easier thanks to file-sharing programs like BitTorrent—demands desperate countermeasures. These days, most copy protection methods rely on complex disc checks, installation keys, or a combination of the two. One particularly controversial piece of antipiracy software, StarForce (www.star-force.com), has many PC gamers up in arms thanks to a growing number of suspect system problems allegedly connected to the program.

What is StarForce? The software, owned by Russian developer StarForce Technologies, utilizes a blacklist of emulation software (such as Alcohol 120% and Daemon Tools) in order to prevent software thieves from running pirated games off of virtual CD-ROM drives. Although unconfirmed, many crackers believe that StarForce ensures an original game CD's presence by calculating the physical angle between the first and last sectors of the disc (hence, StarForce would—and does—reject a scratched or otherwise damaged game disc). It all runs via a device driver that installs itself into the Windows registry (without explicit notification) when you attempt to load a StarForce-protected game. Taken together, these factors make StarForce an especially tough nut for pirates to crack.

As more and more publishers turn to StarForce (notably Ubisoft, which now employs this software to protect many of its major releases—and declined to provide any on-record comments for this story), these factors also make it a frequent target of criticism. Many dissenters blame the StarForce device driver for causing system errors, ranging from sporadic CD-ROM drive instability to irreparable hardware damage.

TECHNOBABBLE

In an effort to bring clarity to these accusations, we turned to CGW's own desktop administrator, Nick Kalister, for a full technical report of what StarForce can (and can't) do to your PC. "StarForce doesn't directly trash your drives or your IDE controller channels," he explains. "It can, however, cause Windows to step down to programmed input/output [PIO] mode, which could possibly damage some optical drives if they are run in that mode for an extended period of time." Kalister also points out: "[Although] StarForce is not a virus, it can act as a possible Trojan gateway, as malicious third-party appli-

cations could conceivably exploit its security holes to gain [system administrator] access." Translation: StarForce doesn't harm your PC, but it certainly opens all the wrong doors.

Information gleaned from the Boycott StarForce website (www.glop.org/starforce) corroborates our independent analysis and reveals another telling piece of information: "A sure sign of this step down [to PIO mode] occurring is that the burn speeds [of the optical drive] will get slower and slower." Sure enough, an extended test using a 4X Memorex DVD-RW drive and a retail copy of Ubisoft's *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* proved it, as the drive's burn speed eventually dropped to a paltry 1X—only to return to its original speed once we removed the StarForce program.

LEGAL EAGLES

StarForce Technologies, for its part, often takes extreme offense to negative comments regarding StarForce. In late January, the company threatened legal action against popular weblog Boing Boing (www.boingboing.net) in the wake of a critical article describing StarForce's problems. StarForce Technologies' PR manager, Dennis Zhidkov, sent a similar threat to CNET last November in response to a News.com editorial that branded StarForce as a "nefarious rootkit/virus."

When questioned about these reactions, Zhidkov told us, "The issue on StarForce is obviously sponsored by our competitors or organized crime groups that run CD/DVD piracy [operations]. We are now in close cooperation with law enforcement [officials] in the United States and Russia investigating the matter and trying to find [out] who stands behind the boycott campaign." Zhidkov goes on to defend StarForce's integrity, claiming, "Neither StarForce's support service or our clients' support services have documented problems with CD burning capability, system stability, or physical hardware problems in relation to StarForce."

The company's confidence in its product also led to a short-lived contest in December 2005, when Zhidkov invited anti-StarForce advocates to the StarForce Technologies headquarters in Moscow—at their own expense—and challenged them to provide evidence of the software's alleged faults in exchange for a \$10,000 prize. With no takers as of the contest's January

31 deadline, Zhidkov claims, "We now have proof that such issues with StarForce-protected applications are pure fiction and all of these rumors are false and probably initiated by frustrated pirates."

Our advice: Keep the accompanying sidebar handy. / Ryan Scott (thanks to Wikipedia.org for several factual details)



DO-IT-YOURSELF STARFORCE REMOVAL

Even if you uninstall a StarForce-dependent game, the StarForce device driver itself stays on your system. Here's a handy three-step guide to removing all traces of the StarForce software (special thanks to the astute folks at the glop.org forums for documenting this procedure).

► **REMOVE THE DEVICE DRIVERS.** Select the System icon in your Windows Control Panel. Click the Device Manager button in the Hardware tab and then select "Show hidden devices" from the View menu. Now check the Non-Plug and Play Drivers device tree, and you should find a few StarForce entries. Uninstall these and reboot your PC.

► **DELETE THE SYSTEM FILES.** Browse to your C:\Windows\system32\drivers folder and look for a trio of files called sfdvr01.sys, sflhp02.sys, and sfsync02.sys (the actual numbers on the files may be different for you). Delete 'em.

► **CLEAN YOUR REGISTRY.** While this isn't a very difficult step, it does involve tinkering with your Windows registry—so be careful here, as damaging your registry could cause serious system problems. Now that you've been properly warned, type "regedit" into the Run dialog box from your Start menu. Once the Registry Editor opens, select the Find option from the Edit menu. Now search your registry for all instances of "sfdvr," "sflhp," and "sfsync," deleting the offending registry keys as they turn up. Once that's done, close the Registry Editor and reboot your PC—which should now be StarForce free.



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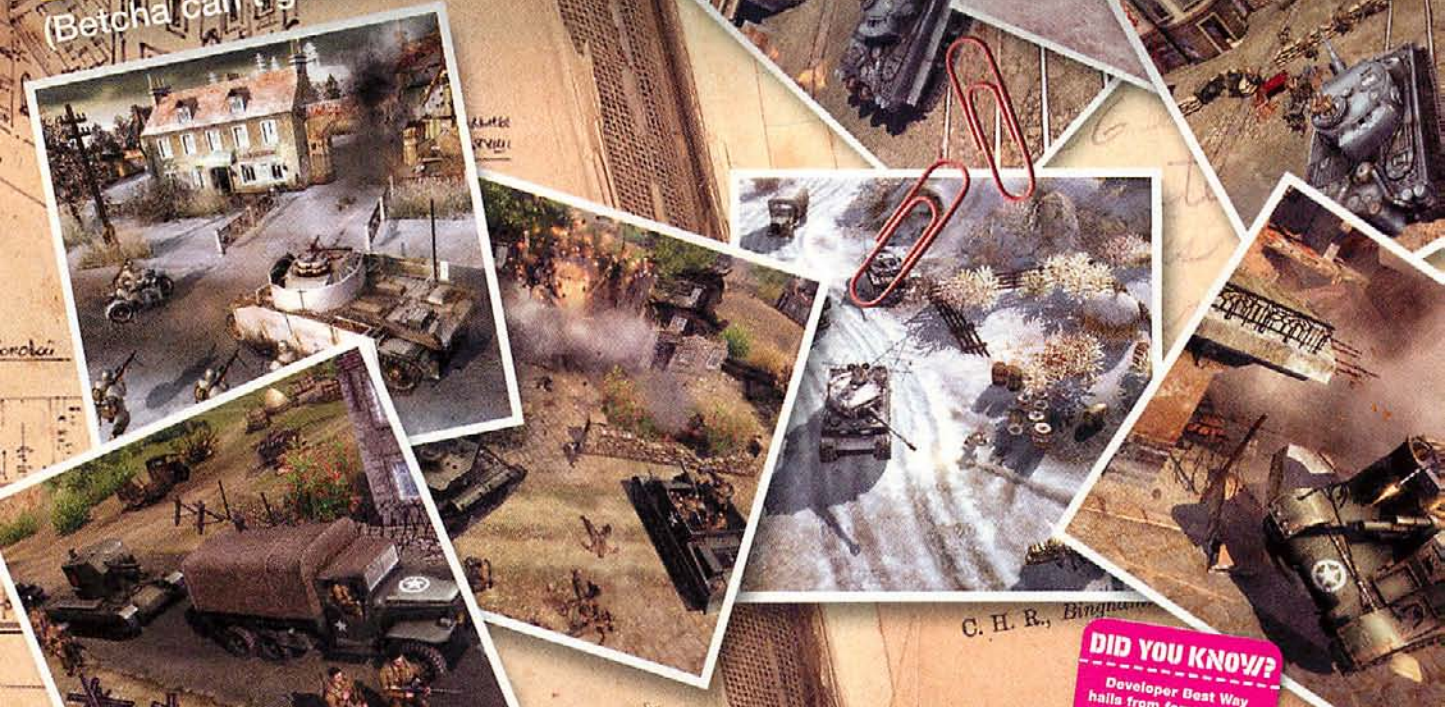
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FACES OF WAR

(Betcha can't guess which war)



DID YOU KNOW?

Developer Best Way hails from former Soviet satellite Ukraine.

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Best Way GENRE: Historical RTS RELEASE DATE: April 2006

PREVIEW

IF HISTORICAL GAMES WERE TOP-10 pop songs, World War II would chart every genre and slot. Real-time, turn-based, adventure/RPG, first-person shooter...it's possible some gamers today would have it easier fingering Operation Overlord on a map than their own hometowns. Style-cramped, era-exhausted, and fending off a flood of first-tier competition, what's a poor WWII strategy sequel to do?

Freak out, interbreed, hybridize. Unreleased *Half-Life 2* mods like *Iron Grip* and Ubisoft's oft-delayed *Ghost Wars* already argue the point, but Ubisoft's spring 2006 real-time renegade *Faces of War* wants to prove it. Sequel to 2004's *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II*, it's a half-dozen-to-12-soldier squad-level slink-and-slug through 1944 to 1945's European battlegrounds from American, English, Russian, or German angles. The tease? Drop at will out of lasso-and-click god mode and grab your soldiers behind the shoulders for near-FPS 1-on-1 action.

Play from traditional point-and-click perspective, and the game's a resource-free RTS: click, command, and scroll the map. Pinch your small squad into cover or coax them across bullet-battered beaches, all the while as A.I. enemies and allies battle independently up close or parallel. Battle of the Bulge, D-Day, Berlin—they're

all signed up in three single-player campaigns, as are 36 weapons, 10 grenade types, and anti-tank mines. Bored yet? Hit the End key to wash the ennui away. Dropping you into a tight-proximity, third-person, single-soldier view, *Faces of War* gives you almost-FPS control over individual soldiers, including weapon change-outs, sniping, delayed grenade frags, and MG bursts. If analogies trip your trigger, try *Tomb Raider* meets *Commandos*.

Howzatwork? One thing's for sure: It'll take good (or good enough) artificial intelligence to manage your suddenly promptless pals, and Best Way's claiming some of the sharpest. For one, the A.I. purportedly doesn't cheat, so what you see and hear, that's it, both ways—sayonara, supersoldier X-ray vision. And taking some cues from Atomic's *Close Combat* series, tactical decisions are point-and-think, not click-and-blunder, and A.I. soldiers on both sides take much more than straight lines into account. Environments are thoroughly destructible, from windows to walls, and the A.I. can track targets based on interposing objects or last known locations. Try to trick it using well-

worn pick-em-off-one-at-a-time exploits, and *Faces of War*'s enemy A.I. promises to surprise, alerting its companions and pulling the rip cord on cheap genre gyps.

And if you really must know, yes, *Faces of War*'s looks aim to match its gameplay vigor by heaping on enough close-in 3D dope to beguile (and/or throttle) your high-end video setup (as always, expect a little slowdown when the particle party's jumping). Coupled with the option to crew abandoned vehicles, trick out soldiers with special weapons, light objects on fire, and crater a town or landscape courtesy of its "anything blows" physics engine, and *Faces of War* has it in for trite, typical genre distinctions.

Up to 16 players will be able to fight online, or four in co-op, and two new multiplayer modes bring the count to eight total (word on the street says one tactical, one funny, but the details are forthcoming). Is blender-style gameplay the next big thing? Credit modders who've been doing it for years, then thank the boys at Best Way if this one comes through with all its promises intact.

/Matt Peckham

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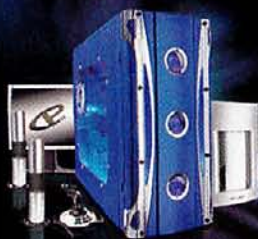


UBISOFT

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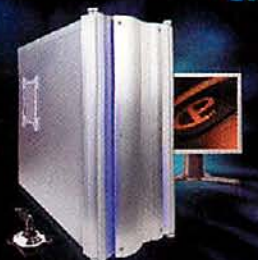
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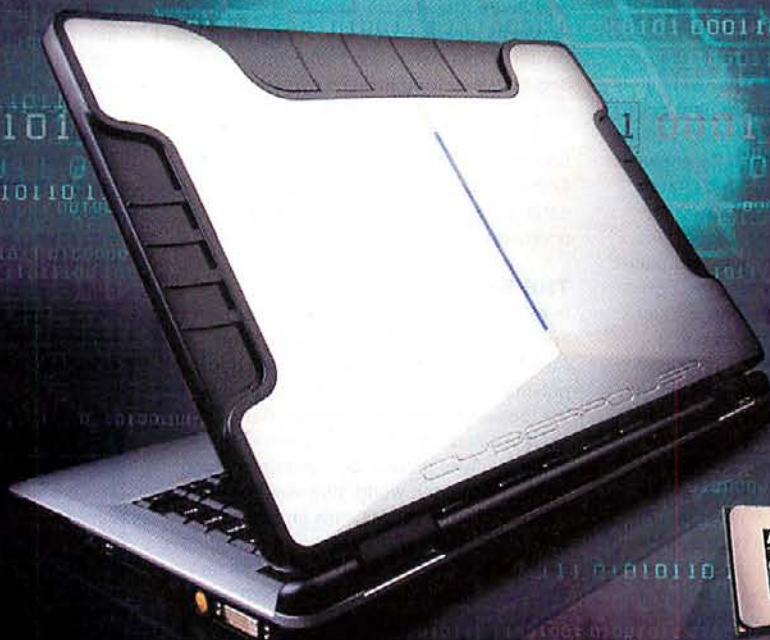
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HEAD GAMES

A \$200,000 treasure hunt takes players online and off to solve puzzles

IN THE CARDS

IT'S ANOTHER BUSY DAY IN Manchester, England. Overhead, crawling across the midday sky is a plane with a banner reading: "Need a break? Go to recedaresorts.com." Most milling about think to themselves, "Yeah, I could use a holiday." A few, though, spot a clue. Racing to the nearest Internet café, they frantically log on, searching for the next puzzle. That website is part of a larger \$200,000 treasure hunt called *Perplex City*. This huge alternate-reality game requires looking at the world in different ways. And it has just arrived in the United States.

What's an alternate reality game? Remember *Majestic* or *Missing: Since January*? Both of those PC games had players scouring the Internet for clues (on both fake and real websites) and sorting through puzzles to win. In both of those cases, it was just you playing the games by yourself. Here, a whole community works together in online groups, and the members help each other solve the larger riddles. It starts innocently enough when you buy a \$5 pack of cards, similar to the concept of *Magic: The Gathering*. That, however, is where the similarities end. On each card is a puzzle. It could be something simple that you can solve in a second, or it could be so complex that it leads you on a real-world goose chase. This is no simple card game. Once you start to get

a taste by solving one of the 256 available cards and registering it on perplexcity.com, you are one step closer to finding the Receda Cube.

The what? This alien artifact is very important to the people of Perplex. It's been stolen and stashed away somewhere here on Earth, and Sente Kiteway, the Master of Perplex City Academy, needs your help. Of course, it won't be easy. This civilization values intelligence and puzzle-solving abilities over everything else. They practically communicate this way, and their sole agents on Earth, an organization called Mind Candy, passes along clues. These leads could be hidden anywhere—either by Sente or the thieves—to help uncover the cube's location.

THE SEARCH IS ON

In reality, Mind Candy is the London-based firm that helped construct *Perplex City*. Andrea Phillips is the company's ad hoc polymath. Yes, that is her title—it means, in the loosest sense, that she is a "Renaissance woman," and considering that the entire game revolves around logic puzzles hidden everywhere in the world, that makes perfect sense. Phillips explains, "It's an amazing blend of puzzles and staged events that have been getting people really involved so far." Since the game's start in Europe last spring, *Perplex City*'s clue-seekers, in some circles called "the Perplexed," are finding fake ads in

magazines, onscreen commercials in movie theaters for faux films, and more. Two events in particular stick out in Phillips' mind:

"Some clues led to the Third Power [an Illuminati-like secret society possibly behind the theft] hiding information inside a game. This kicked off a four-hour live text adventure that people cooperatively tried to Beat. It was funny seeing people dying and constantly trying to figure out the next move." Be sure to read some highlights at http://wiki.incognitus.net/ppc/index.php/Receda%27s_Revenge_Highlights.

"Another scenario," says Phillips, "had people meeting at a real location in London. It was made to appear as if the Third Power was toying with the crowd, making them jump through all sorts of hoops to solve real-world riddles. At the end of the event, one of the people was actually a mole. He grabbed a briefcase, ran to a helipad, and took off in a helicopter." **—Darren Gladstone**

PERPLEX CITY LIMITS

Since the game has already been around for about a year in Europe, players there have a bit of a head start on us. There are a year's worth of puzzles and plot threads to follow. In fact, some of the more dedicated (read: insane) players have created a *Perplex City* Wikipedia-ish repository with all the clues and the story so far. Check it out for yourself at <http://wiki.incognitus.net/ppc>.

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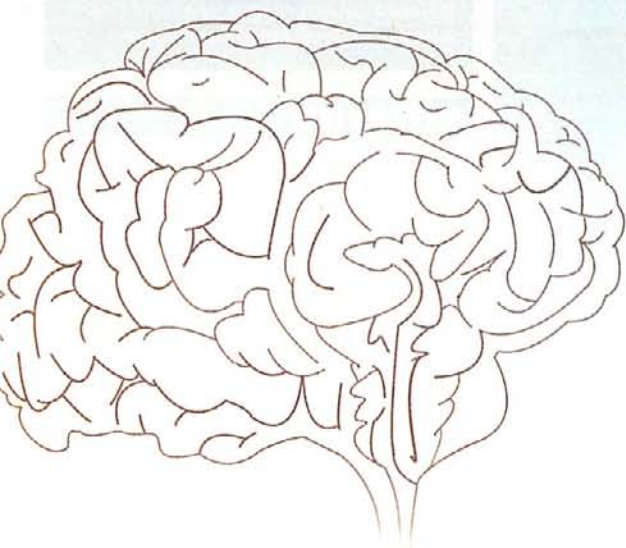
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THE CGW INTERVIEW: RAPH KOSTER

Koster of the Year BY RYAN SCOTT



"I CAN TELL YOU THAT [PLAYER OPINION] MEANS A LOT MORE TO ME THAN EDITORIAL OPINION."

—RAPH KOSTER

THROUGH THE YEARS

1994: The award-winning *LegendMUD*, codesigned by Koster, launches (www.legendmud.org—still active today). Koster also releases the shareware board game *Nexus* through a company called MoraffWare.

1995: Koster signs on with Origin Systems and eventually becomes the creative lead on *Ultima Online*, the first mainstream MMORPG.

1997: *Ultima Online* launches and wins a half-dozen online game of the year awards (including the AIAS'), as well as CGW's Coaster of the Year.

2000: Koster leaves Origin Systems after working on several unannounced (and unreleased) projects and takes a job with SOE.

2003: Bearing the title chief creative officer, Koster is credited as the creative director for *Star Wars Galaxies*, which launches in June...and wins its own CGW Coaster of the Year award.

2004: Paraglyph Press publishes Koster's first book, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*. The book gets nominated for a Front Line Award from *Game Developer* magazine.

INTERVIEW

CGW: YOU'RE A SELF-DESCRIBED "idealist on a virtual crusade." What, exactly, does this mean? Are you (forgive the wacky pun) questing for the phattest lewt of MMORPG design? What's the ultimate goal of this virtual crusade?

Raph Koster: It really just means that I have high hopes for what online worlds can be and do for people. Over the last decade and more, I've seen [MMOs] make such big differences in people's lives. I'm a true believer in their power to not only be incredibly entertaining, but also to do more: teach people, bring them together, and empower them.

Sometimes people think that means I'm not interested in the "game" side of things, but that's not it at all...I happen to believe much the same of [all] games in general.

CGW: Well, you do have a very vocal interest in cultivating virtual worlds. Do you think one day we'll all be leading lives in these online worlds that are just as important and meaningful as our real lives?

RK: I think a lot of people already are. I don't know whether it will ever be "all" of us—that's too much to expect, and I don't think we're all gonna end up jacked into the Matrix or anything. However, when we're talking about already seeing people falling in love and getting married in these games, already making their real-world living in these games, and already spending hundreds of waking hours in them, how far away are we, really? I think what we need to work on is the "important and meaningful" part.

INTO RAPH'S WORLD
Check out Raph Koster's thoughts on games, writing, music, and art on his website, www.raphkoster.com.

CGW: Well, it might be closer than we all think. Take this remark from Heather Chaplin and Aaron Ruby's book *Smartbomb*: "If the citizens of Earth were half as interested in their planet's well-being as virtual citizens are in theirs, we would live in a vastly different world." How much truth do you see in this assessment?

RK: Nobody can hang around a game forum and not conclude that [MMO games] generate a lot of passion—passion that we don't see very much in everyday public life. Then again, there's probably an equal measure of cynicism, too.

One thing I think virtual worlds give you is enough control that you don't feel like you're completely at the mercy of the world. I mean, if I don't like how they change some neighborhood ordinance, I just shrug and grumble—it's just so hard to even figure out how to participate. In virtual worlds, it's simplified and clear.

CGW: Your own book, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, was published in 2004. In it, you claim, "The most creative and fertile game designers working today tend to be the ones who make a point of not focusing too much on other games for inspiration." Where do you turn for most of yours?

RK: Mostly, reading a lot. You know, you hear about [Nintendo general manager] Shigeru Miyamoto getting ideas for *Pikmin* and *Super Mario Bros.* while working in his garden, and that [Sims designer] Will Wright gets his ideas from all sorts of wacky sources—robotics, social network theory, whatever. For me, it's about trying to encounter fresh ideas from whatever source, then copying them shamelessly and adapting them into games somehow. You never know when some article you read about particle physics or how traffic lights are timed will give you an idea for a game. I read obsessively, a few books a week—history, linguistics, popular science, mathematics, and a heck of a lot of fiction and comics.

CGW: You've said in the past, "I've got a friend who has played the big, burly, silent type in literally dozens of games in the decade I have known him. Never once has he been a vivacious, small girl." So what are your inclinations when it comes to making virtual characters? Is there a vivacious, small Raph Koster running around somewhere in *Star Wars Galaxies*?

RK: I've been making ranger-type [characters] for as long as I've played RPGs. When I was a kid, it was elves in *D&D*, and it was in *Ultima III* that I settled on the character name that I would tend to keep using for the next 20 years (Ssssh! It's a secret!).

When I started *MUD*-ing, I found that I tended to play male characters basically with [my own personality] when I was doing *MUD* admin work. But for fun, I tended to play female characters for roleplaying. There were a lot more female characters into roleplay...so I tended to meet people who weren't just interested in the hack-n-slash. In *SWG*, I started as a scout, but

I never focused on just one profession like a lot of players do—I really hate getting boxed into a single class.

CGW: One last question about your book. You assert that the reason the game medium has not matured to the level of other mediums is that "we only know 'fun' and 'boring'" in terms of our interpretations. Is this really much different than, say, film?

RK: Oh, yeah. None of the filmmakers I know would be content saying that a movie is either "fun" or "boring" and there's nothing in between or no other angles from which to view the movie. I mean, they'd have words like "touching" and "thoughtful" and "educational" and "exciting" and so on. What's more, they actually know what sorts of camera angles, dolly shots, and lighting can give you one sort of feeling over another. A whole science exists there that we've barely begun to develop. Right now, our vocabulary for talking about games pretty much sucks—we can barely define what we do and how we do it, much less dig into how to do it better.

CGW: Speaking of "how to do it better," it's time for some hard questions. Both MMOs you've been involved with—*Ultima Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*—earned CGW's Coaster of the Year award. Do you have anything to say about that?

RK: I tend to think that part of the reason for the snubs is that people were let down when all our big dreams didn't pan out. But the disappointment wouldn't have been there if we weren't dreaming big together in the first place. Many games settle for small dreams, but I'm not interested in settling.

At this point, over a million people have played and enjoyed each of them. I've had the reward of seeing populations the size of Birmingham or Newark come back month after month and tell me that they value their experience there.

At some point, you have to weigh an article in a magazine against all the people you've entertained and decide where your priorities lie. In the same issue that *UO* got Coaster of the Year, it was nominated for the CGW Readers' Choice award for Game of the Year. And I can tell you that means a lot more to me than editorial opinion—no offense. Plus, I think a lot of stuff came out of those two games that influenced later games. I measure that as a big success. So I'm proud of the work we've done.

CGW: Successful or not, we've seen some drastic measures taken with both of these games in the name of improvement—specifically, the polarization of *Ultima Online's*

population when the game's anti-PVP facet was introduced, and last year's fundamentally altered *Star Wars Galaxies* experience. It

could be (and, indeed, has been) argued by many that such changes cater more strongly toward incoming players rather than the existing population. Do these types of core changes reflect the wishes of the game designers, or those of the corporate bean-counters who only see the bottom line?

RK: Both of those changes were initiatives by the game designers on the team at the time. I know that for a fact, though I wasn't involved in either one. Management usually isn't really that interested in the specifics of the game systems—they're interested in results.

Different designers have different takes on things. They're still after the same goal, which is entertaining users. Even the bean-counters know that's what you have to do to keep players coming back month after month.

CGW: Well, thus far, do you think you've been mostly successful in translating your creative ideas and philosophies into entertaining gaming products?

RK: I think any creative person will say that they feel they can always do better, that it's never like what they pictured in their head, and that they're always learning. I feel proud of much of my work, but there's always stuff you want to go back [to] and try again. That's how life is. What I hope is that I keep learning and getting better...and maybe share some of that knowledge with other people.

CGW: And to wrap things up, let's find out what you consider fun: What five games would you want with you if you were trapped on a desert island?

RK: Does the island have an Internet connection? Oh, I guess I'd pick *M.U.L.E.*, *Dance Dance Revolution*, *Unreal Tournament*, *Tetris*... I'm just thinking of the games that have held me for the longest period of time, and trying to get a decent spread across genres. But that's not really my answer.

Being me, I'd really want a way to code. I'd want a compiler. If I wanted a given game of reasonable size, I'd make it myself. I did that not too long ago when I wanted to play *Crystal Quest* and couldn't find it for the PC. I'd want my game design kit (a couple of chests full of cards, beads, boards, dice, and other objects that I use to prototype with). My favorite game is making games. That way I get infinite levels, tough bosses...and unlimited replay value. /

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—RAPH KOSTER



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ENEMY TERRITORY:

Violent cartography



A Having descended to destroy the Ark's samples and research data, the strogg must first fight their way past the Global Defense Force (GDF) and build a bridge to allow their heavy vehicles (such as the Goliath Heavy Walker) easier access to the biodome. Success here moves the strogg spawn forward, provides more vehicles, and pushes the GDF spawn back.

B An oppressor-class strogg (which deploys missile silos, plasma mortars, etc.) must destroy the reinforced biodome doors with its strategic strike gun. Vehicle access becomes more limited, and local infrastructure, such as antennas, support buildings, and storage facilities, forces players to fight on foot.

C Strogg must infiltrate the biodome complex before finding and fragging the research facility below. As infantry faces off under artificial lighting inside, fierce snowstorms limit visibility on the surface.

QUAKE WARS



PUBLISHER: Activision DEVELOPER: Splash Damage GENRE: Shooter RELEASE DATE: "When it's done"

PREVIEW

BORG-LIKE STROGG BATTLE FLESH-and-blood humans—simple as that. Still, online army-versus-army shooter *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* offers some motive to the mayhem. "Because *ETQW* charts the original strogg invasion of Earth," says lead designer Paul Wedgwood, "we want maps to serve as a series of story beats. So if you think of the better World War II movies that follow a specific invasion or a famous battle—well, we're hoping it's the same here. For example, in one map, you might find out how humans were able to reverse-engineer slippage technology and then use that same science in the retaliation attack against [strogg homeworld] Stroggos in *Quake II*. See it as *Quake Zero*." Enter "the Ark," a kind of cryo-freeze facility for multispecies stem cells.

Secluded from unwanted attention deep within the Arctic Circle, it's become the place to pick apart strogg biology, to breed viruses lethal to the invaders but harmless to humans. The strogg—go figure—want it gone.

Rather than have players roam about a battlefield, pursuing action in pockets here and there, chasing seesawing capture points, *Quake Wars* wants us in more or less one place. In terms of acreage, its maps are as big as any out there, and yet their more or less linear series of objectives (along with the game's "solo missions," see CGW #258) mean we're never wondering where to go and why. It also means that instead of crafting dedicated "ground-

pounder maps," or "flyboy maps," Splash Damage can change pace and cater to different play styles all within a single, phased arena. Wedgwood explains: "In Ark, an icy coastal inlet runs up the center of the map. Initial combat involves vehicle and on-foot action around a pulverized urban environment. As you move to the second section, you see more air combat above the water, and then amphibious craft moving across the water while tracked and wheeled vehicles traverse the intervening island. Finally, as you move into the biodome with its dense foliage, you're dealing with infantry combat." (See the topographical map for a tactical overview.)

/Shawn Elliott

>> "WE WANT MAPS TO SERVE AS A SERIES OF STORY BEATS." —PAUL WEDGWOOD, LEAD DESIGNER

POWER TO THE PEOPLE

A new MMO game, *Seed*, turns to players for the answers

THE BREAKDOWN

THE STORY: In the distant future, man tries to colonize the stars. One of the terraforming, kilometer-long ships crash-lands somewhere in a faraway galaxy. That's when the onboard computer slowly starts bringing players out of stasis to help repair the ship.

THE GAMEPLAY: Since you're all in this together, stranded, this game downplays the violence. In fact, there is no combat whatsoever in this strictly role-playing experience. You level up and work together to achieve goals. But what's more important: colonizing the planet you landed on, trying to repair the ship, or contacting the stars to affect a rescue? It's *Lord of the Sci-Flies*!

FIRST LOOK

PEOPLE LOVE COMPLAINING—THAT'S just what they do. When it comes to a game's forum page, the griping usually devolves into a flaming battleground. The home of *Seed* (seedthegame.com) is different. Runestone Game Development, the developer of this brave new MMO, is breaking down the barriers between a game's creators and players.

According to Runestone CEO Lars Kroll Kristensen, getting the community involved not only sparks grassroots interest, but also ultimately makes the game better. Take something integral to the game: an injury/damage system, something normally used to simulate combat. The problem is, *Seed* has no combat. Still, people can get "hurt" in the *Seed* world through accidents, diseases, and such. "We had some ideas, internally, that we were tinkering with, until a thread started on our forum," says Kristensen. In that thread, players were discussing different ways of making semipermanent injury effects. "We participated in the discussion, and many of their points are now in our game design."

The story isn't set in stone, either. There is no

big endgame scenario, no planned rescue ship from Earth or world-destroying cataclysm. The game evolves with the players' actions and suggestions. "We have our own ideas, but many of our decisions are heavily influenced by community feedback," adds Kristensen.

The point is that new players won't ever feel like they need to play catch-up. Once birthed from a pod, you're in a world that already has a history, and new players will have the same potential to affect the future as anyone else.

How do you affect the future without conventional combat? Through diplomacy and crafting. The colony is a decentralized democracy with elected administrators setting the game's direction. It's an interesting system of checks and balances that could keep gold farmers and griefers at bay. You piss off enough people and you'll never stand a chance of getting elected. There are even polls held where people can debate the course of action going forward.

The goal is to put the roleplaying first. "There are, oddly, no commercial MMOs doing that," says Kristensen. True enough. While Runestone hopes to get as many as 30,000 people online, everyone plays on the same

world server, and English is the spoken language. Players form rings, the equivalent of guilds, each with its own objectives.

Seed promises dynamically created quests that get tailored to your actions. The game even has cases when NPCs will task you with helping other players achieve the same goal—even if that means doing something that's counterproductive to another ring.

Of course, what's an MMO without some degree of leveling up? Currently, the 50 to 75 skills can improve through use, but this remains the weak spot in the game. Performing odd jobs and watching a meter fill, you can literally have the game open in a window and watch your avatar level while surfing the Web. One suggestion: please add puzzle minigames. For example, if you have to work on scientific equipment to find the cure to a virus, add a little action or strategy.

This all sound hardcore? It is. *Seed* isn't for everyone, but it's worth the two-week free trial period before you have to plunk down \$15 a month. Go on, and don't be afraid to roleplay a little. **/Darren Gladstone**

Graphically, *Seed* looks unique. The cel-shaded sci-fi themes pop out of screenshots like some online comic book. This helps sell the space-opera RPG sans firefights.



5, 10, 15 APRIL 2006 A look back at the way we were



2001

April 2001 was a space odyssey for some. For us, it was a lame excuse to slap eight space-themed games on the cover of *Computer Gaming World*. We steered you right with *Freelancer* and *Star Trek: Bridge Commander*...but things went off course into the forbidden zone with *Earth & Beyond*, a game that essentially amounted to *EverQuest* innnnn spaaaaaaace. You know, like *Star Wars Galaxies*.



1996

We had a wacky idea to break the entire magazine into sections by game genre. It was like a collection of minimagazines, each kicked off by a columnist followed by news, previews, and reviews.

It was a bold, original idea with one problem: where to put the games that defy simple categorization? You could cram them all into one section that runs the gamut. Or trash the idea altogether...just like we did by 1998.



1991

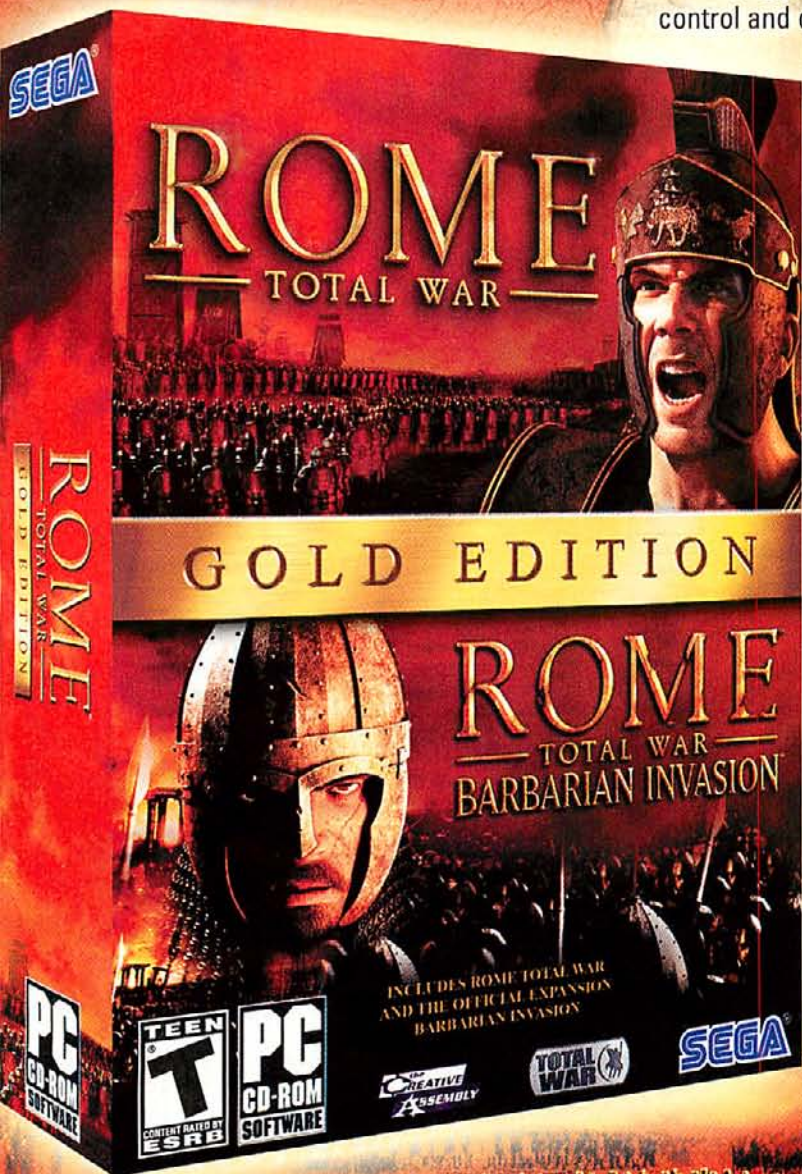
Were there signs of Will Wright's *Spore* 15 years ago? According to our strategy guide for *SimEarth: The Living Planet*, "*SimEarth* is based on James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis." The short

version: The Earth itself is a living organism. In *SimEarth*, you followed the progress of this living organism as it evolves. Cool, huh? Now, if someone would just come up with a game that lets us shoot Nazis or something.

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THE LITTLE

Should machinimists quit their day jobs?



▲ What started as a couple goofy videos in *Halo* is now big business for Rooster Teeth.

AT THE MACHINIMA

FLOATING AROUND ON THE FRINGES of the hardcore gaming community since the mid-'90s, machinima is now so mainstream that the term showed up on the yearly list of the top 10 newly coined words in the staid *New York Times*. Last year's Machinima Film Festival, once a sparsely attended hobbyists' haven, sported conference speakers spanning MIT to MTV and experienced a line of walk-in attendees that ran halfway down the street. Given the sudden spotlight, it's not surprising that some machinimists are asking, "Can I make a living at this?"

For run-of-the-mill machinimists, the answer is no. While most machinima videos get laughs from avid gamers, the clips are too amateurish. "Many projects feature bad writing with voiceovers made over a \$5 plastic microphone," says Philip Debevoise, president of www.machinima.com. Debevoise's site, serving the machinima community for more than five years, has found some gems. "Some projects are as good as what's coming out of

the top studios," he says.

A few top machinimists are already making money. Take the team behind the popular *Red vs. Blue* series, who've launched Rooster Teeth Productions. "I don't think we've ever made a conscious decision to take machinima seriously," says producer Matt Hollum, sounding like a starlet pooh-poohing sudden success. "We're just trying to figure it all out as we go along and keep having fun."

Then there are the handful of machinimists who've made it big in the gaming business, like Tom Mustaine, vice president and director of development at Ritual Entertainment. Although he was already employed in the gaming industry at the time, Mustaine's 1997 *Quake* machinima project, *Operation Bayshield*, created industry buzz that helped his career, according to Paul Marino, executive director of the Academy of Machinima Arts & Sciences, which runs the Machinima Film Festival.

Despite his history, Mustaine isn't sanguine about the potential for budding machinimists to break into the game business. "For major projects, like *The Lord of the Rings* series, the trend is to hire top professionals from major

film studios, like DreamWorks," he says, "and most game companies already have their own in-house production staff." Similarly, Blizzard Entertainment has no plans to hire outside machinimists, even though *World of Warcraft* is a popular machinima engine. "We batted the idea around for a while but ultimately decided that we'd be better served by running contests to encourage fan films," says Blizzard's community manager, Paul Della Bitta.

Marino is somewhat more encouraging. "If your work is good enough, there's always a possibility that a gaming company will hire you to shoot and direct a promotional project," he says. "Payment can range into five figures depending upon the budget and scope of the project." In the past few months, several game companies have approached Marino, who makes a living lecturing and consulting on machinima. However, Marino admits that part of the reason that he's in demand is that, before going full-time on machinima, he did 3D animation for major television studios.

Working for a game company isn't the only way to make money with machinima, though, according to Hollum. The Independent Film Channel, for example, hired Rooster Teeth to do special projects. "But commissioned work is not our company's main focus," says Hollum. "We make money selling merchandise." Indeed, Roosterteeth.com sports a full line of products, ranging from T-shirts to mouse pads to CDs and

➤ A MACHINIMIST CAN CREATE QUALITY VIDEO CONTENT IN A FRACTION OF THE TIME IT TAKES TO DO TRADITIONAL ANIMATION.

PICTURE



Starship Bloopers: Everybody dreams of becoming the next *Red vs. Blue*-ish success story.

DVDs containing the firm's creative products. Marino also notes that machinimists now have the potential to sell their films through online video supermarts such as Google Video.

THE RIGHTS STUFF

Machinimists planning to cash in on their work will have to tread lightly, though. "There's a lot of sensitivity in this area because machinimists are using intellectual property—like characters and textures—that doesn't belong to them," says Marino. Most game licenses specifically forbid the buyers of the game from making money from using the game commercially. To be entirely safe from copyright infringement, a machinimist would need to create entirely new characters, new textures, and perhaps even new animated movements. Doesn't that remove any benefit of using a game engine?

The great advantage of machinima is that a talented machinimist can create professional-quality video content in a fraction of the time it takes to do traditional computer animation. By contrast, the kind of deep customization that completely avoids copyright problems is extremely time consuming, according to Friedrich Kirschner, creator of *person2184*, a project that recently won an award for technical achievement. "The *Unreal Tournament* engine has all the hooks you need to make a completely original production," he explains, "but there's no question it takes a lot longer than just filming your gameplay."

Luckily, gaming companies haven't shown much enthusiasm for going after machinimists. "We love to see the creativity, commitment, and love that people put into these films, and we've held contests to spotlight the ones that [we] think best represent our user community," says Della Bitta.

The reason game firms encourage machinima is that it drives game sales, according to Mustaine. "An entertaining video can even revive sales of games that aren't being actively marketed," he says, noting that his company's *Star Trek Elite Force II*, a *Quake III*-based game developed in 2004, has gained new life as a machinima engine for *Star Trek* fan films.

"If you're going to make money, the important thing is to get the approval of the owner of the intellectual property," says Marino.

The success of *Red vs. Blue* is a case in point. "Microsoft contacted us after we had posted just a couple videos," explains Hollum. "We were just making the videos for fun and were surprised anyone at all had seen them, especially Microsoft." Despite Microsoft's penchant for prosecuting software pirates, the Xbox division encouraged Hollum and his friends to do more, and even asked them to create promotional videos for Microsoft's in-store kiosks at major retail chains.

MA-SKIN-IMA

The cooperative relationship between game companies and machinimists might start to fray, though, if machinimists try making money with videos that don't complement game firms' marketing plans. "We've seen some videos made with *World of Warcraft* that we consider objectionable," admits Della Bitta, who refused to give specific examples. "I think many companies have started to look at the impact that such material might have."

The animated white elephant in the corner is machinima porn, some of which has already begun to show up on the Web. At least one site, www.mmorgy.com, posts links (e.g., "DOA Upskirts"), and aficionados of *Second Life* regularly trade orgy videos.

All of this makes game companies very nervous, according to Marino. "They're leery of any adult content since Rockstar Games got clobbered in the media for the sex scenes in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*," he

says. "Game companies are terribly worried that they might get sued just for making it possible for kids to create X-rated mods, let alone X-rated movies." Not surprisingly, game companies are trying desperately to squelch machinima porn before it gets out of hand. Lionhead Studios' website, for example, refuses to post any projects made using *The Movies* that contain "content which is racist, pornographic, defamatory, or otherwise objectionable."

Barring a foray into the \$3-billion-a-year porn business, only a few machinimists will make money in the foreseeable future: those talented enough to create projects that can command a large audience, savvy enough to involve the gaming companies early, and clever enough to devise spin-offs that people will want to buy. Right now, that list is one company long.

Despite Rooster Teeth's unique success, Hollum believes that machinima is still in its infancy. "It's only a matter of time before more traditional animation companies—and software developers—begin to realize the benefits of machinima and incorporate its techniques into their workflow," he says. "And that's when machinima production will really explode."



SO YOU
WANNA...

MAKE MACHINIMA

CGW's periodic guide to getting your game on

Machinima (*Muh-sheen-eh-muh*)

n. A burgeoning art form involving videos created by using cinematic production techniques within computer software, usually games.

YOU'RE TALENTED. YOU'RE FUNNY. AT LEAST, THAT'S WHAT MOM SAYS. SO WHY IS it that you keep downloading other people's machinima rather than making your own masterpieces? You ought to be in pictures, kid, and we're here to show you how it's done in as little as an hour or as long as a day. For this month's lesson, we've lined up Mike "Burnie" Burns, Matt Hullum, and Geoff Ramsey from Rooster Teeth, the megasuccessful machinima team behind *PANICS* and *Red vs. Blue: The Blood Gulch Chronicles*. **Darren Gladstone**

STEP 1

TEST THE WATERS

"Every time a new game comes out, we try to figure out if we can use it for machinima," says Burns. "What we'll do is take a game—say, a first-person shooter—install it on a couple machines, and spend time just walking up to each other in multi-player. We check each other out, the way each character walks... we're just stupid that way."

STEP 2

WRITE THE SCRIPT

That great idea that's been bouncing around in your head? Put it down on paper! Or, rather, a word processor. For all you fancy types that want to feel like Hollywood moguls, use what the pros use: *Movie Magic Screenwriter* (screenplay.com). "We start with Burnie," says Hullum. "He writes the script, and then we sit around, read it, and tell him what a terrible job he did." Burns' response: "I wanted to make it funny."

STEP 3

START CASTING

Your first instinct will be to tap some friends to do the voices. That's cool, but don't be afraid to try hosting casting sessions. Post on a game's forum page and you're sure to find a bunch of people willing to help. Another angle: tap your local college's voice-acting students. Now a commercial success story, Rooster Teeth uses actual actors—y'know, the kind that expect to be paid at some point.

STEP 4

COORDINATE

Odds are you won't have everyone in the same room. This requires planning, or what they call in the business "pre-production." Set up calls, online chats, whatever it takes to make sure people are available when and where you need them.



STEP 5

STORYBOARD IT (OR DON'T)

Some recommend storyboarding everything first, but this ain't Hollywood. "When you're trying to storyboard something," Burns says, "you draw pictures and whatever to set the stage. Suddenly, you have to find stuff in the environment to make it work. The nice thing about machinima is that you can play in a 3D environment and storyboard on the fly." Not only does this make the process go quicker, but it's fun and flexible. Of course, dialogue drives most of Rooster Teeth's movies. Action sequences still need some advance planning.

STEP 6

RECORD THE AUDIO

Rooster Teeth separately records all audio tracks first, and then cuts them together "into a kind of radio play," according to Hullum. While Fraps will record audio in game, another option is Audacity, a free program that both records and stitches audio clips together. Hullum prefers to use professional software like Adobe Premiere. When done, the audio forms the basis for how they begin shooting the video.

THE TOOLKIT

CREATING YOUR OWN machinima from scratch? Here is the most basic, low-cost way to break into "show business."

HARDWARE:
TWO OR MORE COMPUTERS

FOR ACTORS They'll need to be networked (if they're at the same location, obviously), and you'll also need a few friends to operate them.

A SEPARATE, POWERFUL PC FOR RECORDING FOOTAGE You're the director calling

the shots, but you're also the one saddled with editing the video after the fact. Video editing requires tons of horsepower and hard drive space.

HEADSET WITH MICROPHONE No need to go crazy—Logitech's

\$30 Precision PC Gaming Headset should be fine for the job.

SOFTWARE:
A GAME—DUH You'll likely need multiple copies, so find willing actors with their own copies or download the demos.

AT THE MOVIES

We've spent all this time talking about creating your own machinima within different game engines, but what about a game built specifically around machinima? Sure, *The Movies* may be a sim game that has you running Tinseltown, but a big part of it is that you can easily shoot your own flicks.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE THINGS THAT IT CAN DO:

▶ **AUTOMATIC LIP-SYNCH** Just drop in an audio clip and the actors' mouths move.

▶ **SWEET EMOTIONS** Mood slider bars let you control emotes and gestures.

▶ **IMPORT/EXPORT BUSINESS** You can import some custom content, but more importantly, you can also export video for use with more advanced editing software. The only catch here: It only exports clips as Windows Media Video (WMV) files.

▶ **PROP DEPARTMENT** The game comes with the basics, but playing the campaign mode unlocks additional content. Publisher Activision plans to release more props and gear online.

▶ **WEATHERED** You have limited control over rain and fog to change the setting.

▶ **CRITICAL MASS** Upload your *Citizen Kane* online. Earning kudos from the critics earns you virtual bucks for buying more props.



STEP 7

SET UP THE CAMERA CREW

You're the director and the cinematographer, shooting from your player's perspective. You can also ask actors to record their viewing angles as well. Just remember these tips: 1) Get your video-capture software ready in the background and set up a hotkey so you can quickly toggle the camera on and off. 2) Kill the HUD! Nothing ruins the experience more than seeing an ammo counter in the corner. 3) Mouse-look can be twitchy. Make sure the actors slowly move their mice. Otherwise, you're stuck with epileptic onscreen action.

STEP 8

ACTION!

When using Fraps, a yellow number appears in the corner of the screen. That indicates frames per second. Hit your hotkey and the number turns red—you're now recording. Always shoot more than you think you'll need. Why do you think DVDs always come packed with deleted scenes?



STEP 9

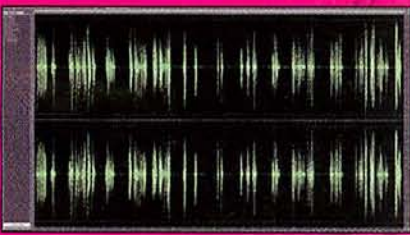
THE CUTTING ROOM

The Rooster Teeth guys have it down to a science at this point. According to Burns, "For us, the editing happens at the exact same time as the shooting. We just go through shot by shot and literally put it together like a jigsaw puzzle. As soon as we get a shot, we drop it in and sync it up with the audio." Rooster Teeth ends up with a rough cut by the time shooting is done, but they're pros and use high-end software. If you just need to make basic straight cuts, grab Microsoft Movie Maker 2.1.

STEP 10

SOUND OF MUSIC

It's time to mix in the audio. Import whatever sound files you have into Movie Maker 2.1—or whatever editing program you're using. Just make sure to sync up the video and the audio.



STEP 11

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Never forget to take credit for your flick! Click Edit Movie > Make Titles if you're using Movie Maker 2.1.



BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING: GET THE RIGHTS

The most important advice from Burns: "If you plan to go commercial at any point, get permission! If money is involved, always talk with the [game's publisher and developer] first." Otherwise, you're throwing 20-plus hours of your life away for nothing. On the other hand, if you're not looking to make any loot, go for it.

STEP 12

PILES AND PILES OF FILES

"Encoding is a pain in the ass," says Burns. "Sometimes it's the longest part—like eight straight hours of encoding video." That's because they publish each five-minute episode in three different video formats (WMV, MOV, and DivX) and at different resolutions. The more formats your movie is available in, and the shorter you make the clips, the better. People have short attention spans and, something better is only just a click away. So don't make potential viewers download more than they need.



FRAPS 2.7 (FRAPS.COM) This low-cost program (\$30) allows you to not only take screenshots, but also capture audio and video footage. The demo version only allows for watermarked, 30-second clips.

AUDACITY 1.2.4 (AUDACITY.SOURCEFORGENET) This audio program is great for a few reasons. It's free, and if you're ready for sophisticated audio editing, Audacity has you covered as well.

MICROSOFT MOVIE MAKER 2.1 (MICROSOFT.COM) With Windows XP Service Pack 2, you're a download away from free video-editing software. It's good for basic straight cuts and simple transitions. Just don't

expect anything fancy here aside from star wipes.

OTHER RESOURCES

www.machinima.com
www.machinima.org
www.machinimag.com

GLADSTONED

Senior editor Darren Gladstone's monthly rant

One disgruntled game editor is about to put his money where his mouth is—boy, is he gonna regret it.

PIMP MY GAME

SO ONCE AGAIN I'M SITTING IN A DEMO, and for the millionth time I'm thinking to myself, "Oh please, God, no. Not another tech demo of some water physics effects...wait, here comes the wave...wheel!"

The wizened-beyond-his-years CliffyB (he of *Unreal* fame) came up with a better test: Jessica Alba's rump. If you can realistically render that, people will buy two copies of your game, no questions asked. But I digress.

Look, tech nerds like me love nothing more than seeing hardware blur the boundaries of reality/surreality. At some point, though, you gotta ask, "What the hell happened to original ideas?"

Somewhere along the way, we got so hung up on amazing graphics, physics, and the promise of emergent A.I. that everyone checked their creativity at the door.

Please, spare me the flaming e-mails. I'm not discounting the implementation of new gameplay elements or even merging genres. I love a good shoot-em-up-with-strategy-RPG-bits-stuck-in-so-it-doesn't-quite-look-like-everything-else as much as the next guy. However, when I think of the PC games that shipped in 2005, maybe three stick out as even remotely different: *Darwinia*, *Guild Wars*, and *Indigo Prophecy*.

It's easy to point the finger at some poor marketing shlub. Yes, the inclination is to play it safe with time-tested genres and watch the money pour in. One developer I recently talked to told me that publisher X has a strict policy: Games can be a new IP, feature a new genre with new gameplay elements, or have a new engine—pick one. Sheesh, what were people doing before they had *Wolfenstein 3D*, *Command & Conquer*, *Ultima Online*, and *Grand Theft Auto III* to ape?

I'm not pompous enough to think I have all the answers. Hell, I wrote a crappy text adventure on a TI-99A that only my 4-year-old cousin played before eating the data cassette. (To answer your questions: Yes, cassette as in an old-school tape drive, and yes, the game was that good.)

What I can do, though, is help. While some of these giant gaming companies have multimillion-dollar budgets for their games and huge marketing machines to feed, you now have something to help even the odds: me. OK, maybe it doesn't exactly level the playing field, but you get the idea. Seriously, people, I'm tired of seeing crap and want to help YOU get your game made. Send me your design documents, game ideas, demos, tech samples, whatever. ("NO attachments—LINKS

ONLY.") If you've got something great, tell me about it. The coolest entry I see by this year's E3, the game industry's annual trade show, gets my services. That's right, I'll PIMP YOUR GAME!

Send an e-mail to darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com with the subject line "PIMP MY GAME" and hope that your idea is the best one.

/Darren Gladstone

PARDON MY LEGALESE

Neither CGW, Ziff Davis corporate HQ, nor my mom sanctions this "contest." The winning entry—the game with the most interesting premise, implementation, and fully baked idea—gets selected simply at my whim. Don't kiss my ass and don't try bribing me unless you have enough scratch to pay for my whole wedding. I will do my best to talk about the game to key people at different companies and try to set up a meeting for you, but life carries no guarantees, friends. This is no free ride. All I'm doing is introducing two folks; you do the rest.

On the IP ownership tip, what you submit is your idea—we won't own it. However, by your submission you grant Ziff Davis and its successors, assigns, and licensees a fully paid, royalty-free, irrevocable, perpetual, worldwide right and license to publish, distribute, reproduce, transmit, use, translate, display, perform, modify, revise, create derivative works of, and archive the submission, in any form or media now known or hereafter developed (including without limitation in print, magnetic, or electronic form), on any number of occasions in any form, and to sublicense third parties to do any of the foregoing with further right of sublicense. And your firstborn child. [You get one guess who wrote that last paragraph.]

Got a bone to pick with Gladstone? E-mail him at darren_gladstone@ziffdavis.com



THINK YOU GOT WHAT IT TAKES TO MAKE THE PERFECT GAME?

THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY APRIL 2006



THE GOOD

GIL FARMERS, BEGONE!

James Mielke, our in-house MMO fiend at 1UP.com, discovered that a number of gil-farming shylocks have finally been given the boot from *Final Fantasy XI*. Over the past holiday season, publisher Square Enix dealt with an artificially inflated in-game economy that screwed the whole experience. The result: a clean sweep of notorious gil farmers on various servers. Bye, IGE and company! Thanks for playing!



THE BAD

HALO 2

Raising its middle finger to PC gamers, Microsoft has let it be known that the PC port of *Halo 2*—a game that is now 18 months old and ran on the original Xbox—will only be playable on Windows Vista. Yes, you will have to upgrade your operating system (and probably your hardware), but hey, Microsoft loves us! Looking forward to a mapmaking mode and shinier normal-mapped spacesuits!



THE UGLY

I LOVE NEW YORK

Think your boss sucks? NYC's head honcho, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, fired a six-year employee of the city with a pittance of a salary (and, apparently, an inability to hit "minimize") for playing solitaire on a break, according to an Associated Press report. Says Bloomberg: "There's nothing wrong with taking a break...but [games are] not appropriate." Guess that means we should also stop looking at porn during lunch at our desks....

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PlayStation 2



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ELECTRIC MAYHEM

Messing around online, one game at a time. This month: *Vanguard*

INTERVIEW

▶ HOW MUCH LOOT DO YOU NEED to score your own mansion in Telon? It doesn't come cheap. Welcome to *Vanguard Cribbs*, the show that lets you hop the fence and sneak a peek at the homes of your favorite elves and gnomes and cat people and...er...whatever. Today, we're talking with Jeff Butler, the man behind the plan, the president of Sigil Games Online. Also being the executive producer for *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* grants Butler some pimp status in the game world. But how much fun can a ton of gold buy you?



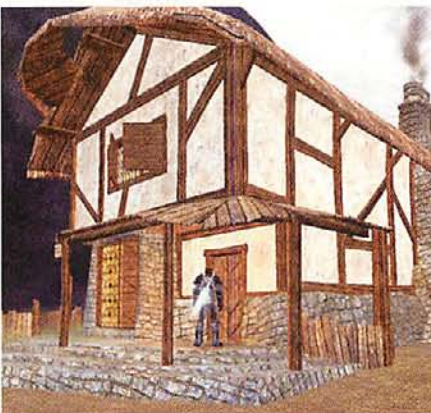
CGW: Yo, Jeff, what's the word on that bomb joint of yours?

Jeff Butler: Nobody talks like that.

CGW: Sorry, just trying to get in character. How about you tell me a little bit about your playa housing in *Vanguard*? Y'know, where you bring tha ladies.

JB: You're gonna keep doing that, aren't you?

CGW: Yeah, probably.



JB: [Sighs] OK. Well, my home is on this island on the north coast of Thestra. It's a little out of the way. You'd need a boat to live out here.

CGW: Sounds exclusive. Is that to keep out the riffraff? You only have one neighbor... "Imsosexy Forsure"? Ugh. I bet he's just a *nouveau riche* goblin.

JB: So long as someone can afford to buy the land, anybody can set up here. There's more room for someone else to build. You'll see signposts wherever a plot is for sale.

CGW: You should buy up all the property here and turn the island into a gated community for high elves.

JB: Well, each player can have one plot, and a guild can have one village. There are upkeep costs, scaled based on the player's level, the size of the house, and its location. There are also a lot of skills and materials that go into building a house, so you could hire someone or get your guildmates to help.

CGW: That sounds cool. I've always wanted to see a traditional gnomish barn raising.

JB: Right. OK, moving along, you can see the human newbie village across the water there.

CGW: So you and your GM buddies can sit out in front of your island villa, drink mojitos, and watch the level-nothing players get their asses kicked by monsters. Is that how the "other half" lives?

JB: It's not like that at all. Let's just go inside and I'll show you my place for now.



CGW: You have a bar just inside here. Nice to see that you have your priorities straight. You must have some awesome drinking stories. You, a couple cat ladies, and mead late into the night.

JB: No. A player would probably set up a shop here, either with an NPC or they could tend it themselves. Then they'd actually live in the space upstairs.

CGW: Oh! And you have some green shag carpeting in that other room. Very swank.

JB: Uh, that's the grass poking through the floor. Don't go in there. Nothing to see here, We'll have to fix that.

CGW: Think of it like Astroturf. It'll be all the rage. Make it a buyable feature.

JB: Er...no. So, moving upstairs...

CGW: This would be where you keep the spoils of war?

JB: Yep. Players will be able to place their



items and trophies in here. Weapons, furniture, the heads of fallen enemies....

CGW: Sounds kind of like my kind of apartment: Just a touch of Jeff Dahmer with the subtle tones of John Wayne Gacy. Can I see your head collection?

JB: Not yet—soon, though. Until that's implemented, items look like jars when you drop them. Like when I drop my sword here. [Butler drops his sword, and—poof—it's a jar!]

CGW: So does Imsosexy ever show up asking to borrow a cup of sword?

JB: No.

CGW: You don't have to cover for him. I know how goblins are. I bet it's ruining your property values.

JB: What?

CGW: We had goblins move in next door once. They had wargs with no legs in the front yard, up on blocks.

JB: Listen, some of my best friends are goblins. Forget it...look...let me show you my horse.



CGW: Um, I don't know how to tell you this, but your horse is flying.

JB: It's a GM thing. We're hoping to have flying mounts ready for players in time for launch. No flying horses, but we have drakes and griffins. Everyone who's seen them wants one. They control kind of like those flying ostriches in *Joust*, actually.

CGW: Your Thundercat has a pretty tricked-out ride there, though.

JB: This is my warhorse. I have another horse that's faster but isn't armored.

CGW: I'd go with the armor. Nothing says "I'm level awesome" like a blinged-out, flying horse.

JB: Actually, we feel like mounts should be more of an entitlement than a privilege. A player should be able to get their first mount between levels 10 and 15. There are better ones, though, so it can still be a prestige thing.

CGW: So did you do the bodywork yourself? You got some runner lights and spoilers planned for your ride?

JB: I made horseshoes that make it a lot faster, but players can't craft barding and armor for horses yet. "Pimp My Nag" is something we'd like to have implemented by launch.

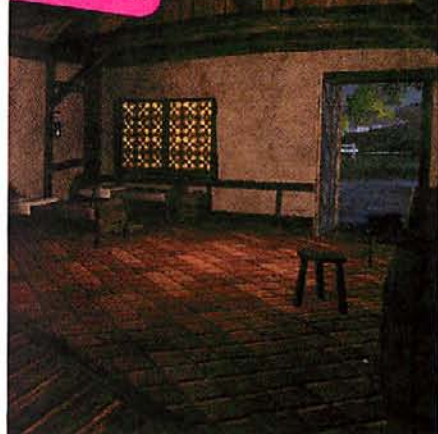
CGW: Xzibit & Bridle? All that chrome looks great, though. I won't ask where you're going to put the dubs.

JB: Here, I can change my armor to match it.

CGW: Very classy. I bet the dark elf chicks love that. "Hey, like my mount? Come on back to my place. We'll do some crafting."

JB: Heh, heh. Yeah.

MORE MAYHEM
Can't get enough of the mayhem? Check out more asinine exploits at electricmayhem.1UP.com



CGW: Baby crafting.

JB: ...

JB: OK, so this is the human starting village. I thought I'd show you this because most of the houses here are the same as the ones players can build themselves.

CGW: So now we get to see how the other half lives, huh?

JB: There are a lot of different kinds of houses here. This house uses the smallest floor plan available.

CGW: So this is as ghetto as it gets here, then? It's still bigger than my *FFXI* house. You could swing a catgirl in here.

JB: Yeah, there's a lot of space. There's room for some furniture or a forge for crafting or....

CGW: It's way bigger than my actual apartment, even. I used to have a bigger place, but times are hard lately.

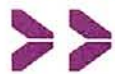
JB: ...

CGW: You know, they outsource all these jobs to goblins and....

JB: Don't you have a flight to catch or something? /Scott Sharkey



[Editor's note: Sigil and Microsoft foolishly agreed to this article ahead of time. Our thanks for them both having a sense of humor about it. No developers were harmed in the production of this article. We hope.]



JUST WHEN YOU THOUGHT WE COULDN'T
CAUSE ANY MORE TROUBLE ONLINE...

PUBLIC ACCESS

A finger on the pulse of PC-gaming fringe culture

Gamemakers make the games. We buy 'em. But what they inspire isn't necessarily what anyone expects, especially when a game goes online. / Shawn Elliott

WE WANT YOU

Going to great lengths for love of the game? Send your community's story to cgwletters@ziffdavis.com, subject: Public Access.



COUNTER-STRUCK

CHANNEL: files.filefront.com/CSS+Counter+Struck+Live+Action/3885447/fileinfo.html

MINNEAPOLIS COLLEGE OF ART AND Design student Chris Hedeon's first movie is a near masterpiece. A real-world reenactment of a *Counter-Strike* match, *Counter-Struck* nails the game's nuances—from hostages who shrug off friendly fire and follow their trigger-happy liberators to dudes going through the same door and getting stuck—and mines comic gold. We tracked the director down for an off-the-cuff Q and A.

CGW: What's in your prop closet?

Chris Hedeon: Carefully painted Airsoft guns. The helmets and vests are from a local Army surplus store, and I ordered the masks and holsters online. Oh, and then there's my mom's mixing bowl.

CGW: You lampoon campers, lag, and clueless hostages—how come no naked-girl spray

graffiti and people playing crappy music?

CH: I don't know why I didn't put in porn sprays. The thought just didn't occur to me, I guess, although I tried to focus on *Counter-Strike*'s funnier quirks because one of the goals of the assignment was to keep the film under five minutes running time. I've actually toyed with the idea of making a second movie, so maybe I could include other elements like hacking and flashbanging friendlies.

CGW: Anything you hoped to put in the project but couldn't pull off?

CH: I figured out the first-person view and the muzzle flashes. Those were my two biggest concerns. I also thought about putting in a HUD, but now I like it better without one. It blurs the line between game and reality better.

CGW: Seeing *Counter-Strike* literally inter-

preted shows how unlike life the shooter actually is. Was that part of your point, that so-called murder sims aren't much as far as sims go?

CH: I'm not trying to convey a moral or idea with the movie. I just hadn't seen any *Counter-Strike* fan films that I enjoyed, so I was like, "Hey! Let's make one!"

CGW: Any funny anecdotes from on set? Stunt injuries? A surprised local law enforcer?

CH: [Laughs] Well, on the second day of the shoot, we all arrived at the warehouse in our costumes and everything. Then, when I turned on the camera, I realized that I had forgotten to bring tape! We also had some surprised onlookers see us in the hostage room with guns and costumes before speeding away.

CGW: So what's next?

CH: Maybe a movie inspired by *Half-Life*; maybe a second *Counter-Strike*-inspired short—probably shooting from the terrorists' perspective this time around, and adding some of those elements I mentioned earlier. /

"I DON'T KNOW WHY I DIDN'T PUT IN PORN SPRAYS." —CHRIS HEDEON, *COUNTER-STRUCK* DIRECTOR

CHANNEL: video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-455326663222166633&q=battlefield+2+pilot



FALLEN BLUE ANGEL

NINE OUT OF 10 SO-CALLED *Battlefield 2* stunt vids stink. Timmy files for two minutes without wrecking his F-35, tapes it, adds a Whitesnake soundtrack, and thinks it's butt-rock aerial ballet. Not the case with whoever captured this must-see moment (although his music selection is still mute-worthy). Some stunts you see coming—fast-moving four-wheeler hits incline, yada, yada. With this one, you're not sure what's happening at first, and it's almost a better spectacle because of it. First, the pilot soars straight into the sun, stalling his jet and then ejecting. As the Joint Strike Fighter spirals down, the free-falling player follows for a breathless minute, gaining slowly as both get closer to the ground. Finally, he hops back in and soars off, seconds before a fatal, final impact. /

CHANNEL: www.youtube.com/watch?v=mh8lQleKujA&search=counter-strike%20ddr



C&C FREEDOM FACTORY

DIRECTOR MATT WHITE ADMITS THE idea wasn't his: "My friend [NYPD] Nasty, who's in Iraq now, forwarded me a video of a *Counter-Strike* character strutting his stuff on this flashing *Dance Dance Revolution* spray he created. He'd do this in public servers while playing 'The Whistle Song' (Blow My Whistle Bitch) [by DJ Aligator Project] and somehow made it so he could unmute himself every round, as people won't always notice it without the music. Most players hated it, he said. I thought it was hilarious and basically told him I wanted to make a better version."

As for the haters: You see a counterterrorist top rocking to *Now That's What I Call Techno Vol. 17*, you definitely don't shoot. Drop a flash-bang and mosey on, sure, but don't shoot. /

CHANNEL: <http://www.pointlesswastetime.com/games/gaybar.html>

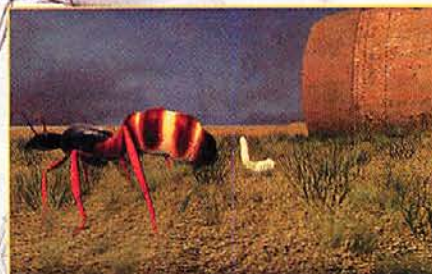
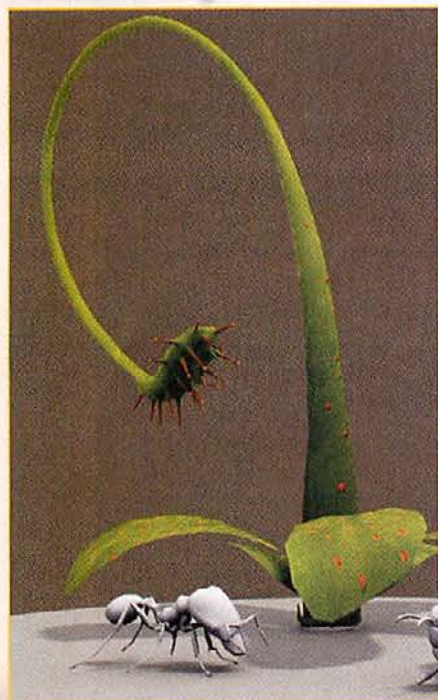


YOUNG MAN, THERE'S A PLACE YOU CAN GO

"I PRETTY MUCH TOLD THEM I WAS GOING TO FILM them dancing as nude as you can get in *WoW* and put it on the Internet," director Bakudai explains of his hilarious, adult-only, GLBT-friendly *WoW* movie, whose release was timed perfectly with the biggest *WoW* controversy in months (see page 20). Bakudai and members of his guild, Pretty Pink Ponies, gathered in a tavern in Stormwind for the production and spent 45 minutes getting the choreography down. The film itself needs little to no description. If you're friendly that way, watch the Pretty Pink Ponies get gay to "Gay Bar," a gay song by Detroit rockers Electric Six. If you don't know what we're talking about, don't ask. And we won't tell. /

INSECTS INFESTATION

Buzzworthy



Beware birds and tequila bottles—bugs begin life as maggotlike larvae.



Ants and termites walk on walls—just the thing to negotiate topsy-turvy hive interiors.



An ant worker watches an NPC follow player-created pheromone paths while collecting food.



Ants must also find fertile soil to plant fungi and other flora that the colony needs to survive and mature.

BASE GAME: *Half-Life 2* DEVELOPER: Insects Infestation Team GENRE: First-person RTS WEBSITE: <http://il.hl2files.com/> RELEASE DATE: Spring 2006

PREVIEW

WHERE MOST MODS ARE *COUNTER-Strike* and *Day of Defeat* clones, coder Sylvain Rochette would rather make a game with guts, something that stands out... on six legs, as it were. Even if its name isn't entomologist endorsed (or even grammatically correct), *Insects Infestation's* gameplay might pass muster. Social bugs—ants, termites, and wasps—wage war with one another for real estate and larder-stocking resources. You're one critter in an online colony of 11 (Rochette says the final figure may be as high as 45) playing from first- or third-person perspective; sticking to the former means seeing a pair of pinchers projecting into the screen, or an abdomen—for alt fire, if you will—that arches up over your head to squirt formic acid. Games start off with queens spawning players as larvae, which then gestate into

selectable classes, be they soldier or worker. "After the propagation process," as Rochette explains, "it's essentially a scramble to gather resources as quickly as possible while keeping an eye on the enemy." To expedite collection (and further cross-pollinate real-time strategy with shooting), workers can create pheromone paths from the queen to harvestable plants for NPC workers to follow.

"The nature of these social species of insects requires players to recognize that they're only one small part of the hive or colony," adds team member Darrin Frankovitz. "Individuals have to use their unique abilities and senses to share information with other players—for instance, the pheromone trail

mentioned already, or secretions that signal for help."

"Then," Rochette says, "it's basically a battle for territory as both teams try to seize control of resource-rich regions and upgrade spots, [since] these allow colonies to create new classes. While trying to hold these areas, teams develop different plant structures that boost players' stats or attack competing colonies on their own [see Venus flytraps]. Combat is fierce, with control of important areas constantly fluctuating. Finally, the end game entails one team gaining control of most of the map, confining the other species to a single spawning point with slim chance to make a comeback." / Shawn Elliott

SOCIAL BUGS—ANTS, TERMITES, AND WASPS—WAGE WAR FOR REAL ESTATE AND LARDER-STOCKING RESOURCES.

MEDAL OF HONOR AIRBORNE

Unfriendly skies



▲ Add a fore grip or drum magazine to your Thompson—*Airborne's* weapon alterations (don't say power-ups) are based on actual battlefield activity.

design, we're not going for an 'open-world' game. We found that the most successful designs were those which required fast, moment-to-moment tactical decisions, not the analog generalities you get from some open-world games. It became a rule of design that the player [must] always be aware that he's making a decision, not just wandering generally left as opposed to right."

That same play-where-it-lies system carries over to *Airborne's* competitive multiplayer mode (despite an online battlefield already busy with *Day of Defeat*, *Red Orchestra*, *Call of Duty*, and *Brothers in Arms*, EA insists we want deathmatch more than the originally planned co-op). "Our premise," says Gilmore, who hints at clans parachuting together from the same C47, "allows players to attack objectives from varied vectors, coordinating plans via voice-over-IP. The system's pretty generous, enabling soldiers to spread out to go after targets."

—Shawn Elliott

Instant Messages

Internet Cynic says: Choose any one of three specific landing zones for each level, dramatically doing nothing to anything!

PREVIEW

MEDAL OF HONOR AIRBORNE ISN'T the first shooter to feature men who leap from airplanes behind enemy lines (also see *Brothers in Arms*), but it might be the first to make the leaping matter. From takeoff to chute collapse, your time in the bullet-stitched sky changes history on the battleground below. Whether you aim for the church steeple and its stained glass, a shingled rooftop, a cluster of rocks, or a copse of trees, where you touch down is where you fight your way out of. "You control it all," explains executive producer Patrick Gilmore, "exiting the plane and everything from that point forward. From the air, you'll likely see every objective in the operation, but the extent to which you can reach them depends upon your exit point and the altitude of the jump."

Airdrops, by definition, are nonlinear, and as Gilmore admits, the ability to attack missions from any angle, including above, means that "everything in the game world now needs to be interactive. We need to find new ways to clearly define objectives from different starting points. That said, while we have an open

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THE CGW INTERVIEW: JON VAN CANEGBHEM

The hero of *Might and Magic* is back! BY JEFF GREEN

THROUGH THE YEARS

1985: Releases *Might and Magic I: The Secret of the Inner Sanctum*, a D&D-style RPG, for the Apple II (and later for the Commodore 64 and DOS). Does it all himself: programming, graphics, manual, and more.

1994: Releases *World of Xeen*, a compilation of *Might and Magic IV* and *V* with all-new quests linking the two games together—a novelty still not duplicated since.

1995: Creates the first M&M spin-off, *Heroes of Might and Magic*, a turn-based strategy game whose sequels will go on to eclipse the popularity of the RPGs.

1998: Don't call it a comeback. *Might and Magic VI* brings the RPG franchise all-new acclaim (and fans) with the series' first-ever 3D engine.

2003: The end of *Might and Magic*. 3DO goes bankrupt, and New World Computing shuts down.

2004: Inducted into the CGW Hall of Fame, and, after a brief "retirement," resurfaces at NCsoft. Stays just one year before leaving to start his own game company again.

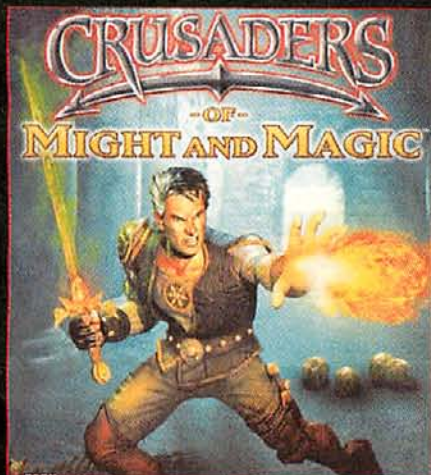
INTERVIEW

HE'S SOLD MILLIONS OF GAMES and he's been inducted into CGW's Hall of Fame, but Jon Van Caneghem is not resting easy just yet. The man who created *Might and Magic I* by himself in his apartment in the mid-1980s and then grew it into one of PC gaming's biggest franchises supposedly "retired" after his company, New World Computing, shut down following the dissolution of 3DO in 2003. However, soon after he hooked up with the folks at NCsoft to work on a new MMORPG. That partnership lasted just a year, though, and now Van Caneghem is striking out on his own again. While the *Might and Magic* franchise continues without him (see cover story, page 68), Van Caneghem seeks new challenges. We talked with him about days past and what lies ahead.

CGW: We interviewed you back when you first went into retirement [CGW, April 2004], and you looked relaxed and happy. So why the heck are you back at work?

JON VAN CANEGHEM: It's all these online games. You know, I wanted to make *Might and Magic Online* back when 3DO first bought us in the '90s, but we didn't. They had the *Meridian 59* game, and we were gonna use that technology, but it just never happened.

But I've been dying to enter this space. When I first got into gaming in '80s with the Apple II and the Commodore, it was such an exciting



▲ One of 3DO's ill-advised M&M spin-offs, *Crusaders* (2000) made longtime fans weep.

new time in terms of what you could invent for a game, and today, with broadband, I'm at that same excitement level. That's what's got me out of retirement to want to make games again. We haven't even scratched the surface of what could be done in terms of connectivity.

CGW: So your next game, whatever it is, will be online? Online only?

JVC: Absolutely. Yes. I've been accumulating all sorts of good ideas on how to do it differently, really focusing on the server architecture...and as soon as I can get into the details, I'll tell you.

CGW: Does the success of *World of Warcraft* affect you? Does it encourage or intimidate you? How do you compete?

JVC: I basically predicted it. The first round of online games didn't get as many subscribers as everyone would have thought, compared to stand-alone games. Most of the people making them came from the online world. I felt that the real key to success was that first you had to know how to make a great single-player game. I believed that if someone who really knew how to do that made an MMO, they'd have a million subscribers. And here's *WOW*. But I don't think it's insurmountable to compete against it. It's gonna take some new blood, [some] new companies that don't have the baggage of the "packaged-goods industry," where you make a game, you ship it, and you're done. You need to switch to be a service industry—it's not going to work any other way. That's the direction I'm going.

CGW: Like what? Give us an example.

JVC: Like the concept of a 24/7 world that exists even when you're not logged on—much more so than in current games, where, when you're logged off, you're not really involved with the game anymore. I want to emphasize the part that's persistent, alive, always there. For example, what if you had stores or vendors to check in with [to] see what's happening with your real estate or the NPCs you hired? There's a whole strategy game you could build. You have all these different

devices now—notebooks, phones, PDAs—and they're all connected—so the idea is to create a neat game world with all these devices working in their own ways.

CGW: So would you even be interested in making an old-school RPG at this point?

JVC: Single player—no. To me it's analogous to if we were making PC games 10 years ago and we didn't take advantage of the soundcard or graphics card. If it's there, you should use it. And we're dealing with a different generation of gamers now—what they know, what they take as a given in terms of connectivity [is] the ability to send messages and video and voice information. You have to support it because they expect it—they have it in their daily lives.

CGW: Let's speculate for a moment. If 3DO had never bought you, do you think that New World Computing would still be around today making *Might and Magic* games?

JVC: Yeah, maybe. Could be. There was a period in the late '90s when the budgets [for new games] were getting so high that you were practically betting the company on each new title. Many of the companies that were around me for years have all disappeared now. And, hey, I did some of my better work after 3DO first took over—*Heroes II* and *III*, *Might and Magic VI*. Before that I was running the company and doing game design/development. Once 3DO took over, I didn't have to worry about day-to-day office management. So it wasn't all bad at all.

CGW: So what are your own personal greatest hits in the M&M franchise?

JVC: *Might and Magic I* was the most fulfilling to me because I did the entire game by myself—the code, the graphics, the manual... I even took the orders over the phone! *Might and Magic III* won the most awards, but *World of Xeen I* personally enjoyed as one of the better accomplishments. It was the pinnacle of the old step-based mechanics.

CGW: And it had that amazing link between *Might and Magic IV* and *V*, where the two games combined and gave you all-new quests. That still seems novel, even today.

JVC: [Laughs] Yeah, that was pretty cool when we figured that out. I was also proud of *Might and Magic VI*, because it was our big comeback. We were a company that had never made a 3D engine. We took that giant leap and made a really great RPG and kept the ability to make it turn based. In the *Heroes* franchise, *Heroes II* and *III* were great pieces of work that I'm very proud of. I spent hours and hours doing everything—I drew maps, designed the creatures, did the numbers and

formulas, balanced all the events on the maps, set up the parameters so my team could make more scenarios and maps...all of it.

CGW: So are you planning on being that hands-on with your new game?

JVC: Oh yeah, absolutely.

CGW: Why not just sit in your office, lean back, and let the others do it all?

JVC: When I was retired, I went nuts. I was bored. I realized what I love doing is making computer games and being around the people who make them as well.

CGW: Have you seen *Dark Messiah* yet?

JVC: Yeah, the guys there sent me a demo of it a while ago to show me the physics and graphics...and it looked pretty cool.

CGW: Did it mean anything to you that it was a *Might and Magic* game? How did it feel to see your franchise in someone else's hands?

JVC: It was actually a good feeling to me. It was something I created that's still alive. I'm ready to do other things now, but I'm proud that the name is still around. /



▲ One of the classics: 1999's brilliant *Heroes of Might and Magic III* was a series peak.



▲ A *Heroes* death screen, or an apt metaphor for 3DO's treatment of *Might and Magic*?



"I WENT NUTS. I WAS BORED. I REALIZED WHAT I LOVE DOING IS MAKING COMPUTER GAMES."

—JON VAN CANEGHEM

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A HOLE IN
YOUR POCKET.
GO SPEND IT



BOOK
I AM 8-BIT
\$15, AMAZON.COM

Who says that games make no cultural contributions? Obviously, you haven't had a chance to eye-

ball the new coffee table book for the old-school, retro-hip, ironical cool people in the room. *I Am 8-Bit* is basically an art book inspired by some of the classic videogames of days gone by—you know, the simpler days of *Dig Dug* and *Mario*. Author Jon M. Gibson, one-time writer for this mag, hosted an exhibit down in L.A., and the results are damn cool. One favorite: Mr. and Ms. Pac-Man constructed from hand grenades.



DVD
CORPSE BRIDE
\$16, AMAZON.COM

Tim Burton has officially lost his mind. We mean, how are you supposed to classify a movie that involves a meek man accidentally

marrying a corpse? It's not quite a love story, and if you're getting it for the kids, props on the "my first necrophilia" experience. Still, as horrid as it may sound, this animated operetta is all in good fun. What we don't know, though, is how Burton manages to convey a certain degree of ick and still maintain a PG rating.



PULP
DOC FRANKENSTEIN
\$3.50, BURLYMANENTERTAINMENT.COM

Frankenstein's monster was always a bit of an outcast, but this ongoing comic written by the Wachowski

brothers takes the nuts and bolts of the old Mary Shelley story and spins them all around. You see, since getting chased out of Europe by angry villagers, Frankenstein is seen as an aberration of God's will. So, of course, throughout the centuries the Vatican sends out secret hit squads to track the "monster." Yes, despite doing many good deeds, he's still considered evil. A little preachy? Maybe, but still a good read.



MUSIC
THE GO! TEAM:
THUNDER, LIGHTNING, STRIKE
\$11, AMAZON.COM

Only in the United Kingdom can you find a band this fresh and unique. It tracks a little on the experimental side, but this disc has so much happening on it that we don't even know where to start. Bright and brassy funk horns, piano solos, intense guitar riffs, and...peppy cheerleaders?! It may feel like a chaotic mix of musical styles at times, but *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* is classic. Honestly, you'll either love it or hate it—there's no in between with the Go! Team.



DVD
JARHEAD
\$16, AMAZON.COM

You've played the *America's Army* game. You've tackled countless terrorist threats in *Rainbow Six*. (Or maybe not, if

you've wisely avoided playing *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*—see our review this issue). The question is: "Do you have what it takes to be a Marine?" Well, this Hollywood rendition of the excellent memoir is a slice of life on the front lines of fighting off boredom—and occasionally fighting to survive. The film is thoughtful and, in some ways, fun. It'll definitely get you thinking. However, if you want to sink your teeth into a real look at what's happening in the Middle East, check out a different movie completely: *Gunner Palace*. Either one is a good way to cool your heels in the DMZ.



COOL
COOLIT
USB BEVERAGE
CHILLER
\$35, THINKGEEK.COM

Cool your Bawls, son. You've

been playing hard for a couple hours on end and your energy level is dropping. The problem: a warm energy drink that's been sitting on your desk all night. That's about as tasty as a urine-soaked can of flat Sprite. The solution: The CoolIT USB Beverage Chiller. Plug the device into an open, powered USB hub and it will keep any drink that sits atop it ice cold. Got a hankering for hot coffee? Other USB peripherals are available as cup warmers. Hell, we even found a potpourri USB device, in case your game sessions leave you particularly funky.



PULP
SHAOLIN COWBOY
\$3.50, BURLYMANENTERTAINMENT.COM

A word of advice: If you see a middle-aged balding man who looks like Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita,

you magnificent bastard, God rest your soul) accompanied by a talking donkey named Burro, run for the hills. *Shaolin Cowboy* is one part comedy and two parts dementia, with a heaping helping of ass-kickery thrown in for good measure. The series, as drawn and written by Geoff Darrow, is a visually hypnotic mix of the Wild West and high tech. Worried that you won't be able to follow the plot? Don't be. Since most of the books are low on dialogue and high on brutal body counts, you won't miss a beat.

PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games!

MARCH 2006	PUBLISHER
Commandos Strike Force	Eidos Interactive
Crime Stories	DreamCatcher
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	2K Games
Faces of War	Ubisoft
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	THQ
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft
Keepsake	DreamCatcher
Stacked With Daniel Negreanu	Myelin Media
TimeShift	Atari
APRIL 2006	
Auto Assault	NCsoft
Bad Day L.A.	Enlight Interactive
Guild Wars: Factions	NCsoft
Hearts of Iron II: Doomsday	Paradox
Mage Knight: Apocalypse	Namco
NFL Head Coach	Electronic Arts
Paradise	Ubisoft
Tomb Raider: Legend	Eidos Interactive
MAY 2006	
Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures	Funcom
Battleground Europe: World War II Online	Tri Synergy
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	2K Games
Company of Heroes	THQ
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	Aspyr
Heart of Empire: Rome	Paradox
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos Interactive
Just Cause	Eidos Interactive
The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar	Turbine
Snow	2K Games
Train Master	Tri Synergy
UFO: Extraterrestrials	Tri Synergy
War for Terra: NY Invasion	Tri Synergy
SPRING/SUMMER 2006	
Fear & Respect	Midway
The Godfather	Electronic Arts
Half-Life 2: Aftermath	Valve Software
Hellgate: London	Namco
Heroes of Might and Magic V	Ubisoft
Jaws Unleashed	Majesco
Neverwinter Nights 2	Atari
Prey	2K Games
Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War	Midway
Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends	Microsoft

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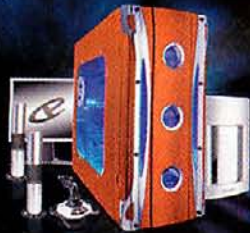
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ONLINE EVOLUTION

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ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES

AS OF JANUARY 23, BUYING 100 GOLD in *World of Warcraft* or a single plat in *EverQuest II* costs just under \$4 and requires no effort outside of punching in a credit card number. This scares Blizzard, Sony Online Entertainment, and every other MMO company trying to keep its in-game economy controlled. The genre is under siege from players gaming for profit, but this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Today's leading MMOs are thriving communities of commerce, and despite their existence in a virtual world mostly separated from reality, their underlying principles resonate with everyday economic ideas of basic supply and demand. MMO innovators of the past—3DO's *Meridian 59* and LucasArts' *Habitat*—certainly had an economic factor, but their more limited

player populations held them back.

That changed when Electronic Arts launched the Origin Systems-developed *Ultima Online* in late September 1997, taking the genre to a massive scale and introducing a Metaverse economy. Suddenly, hacking, slashing, and casting magic weren't the only ways to make a living. You could simply be, as series creator Richard Garriott tells of observing *UO* players, a fisherman who spends his days casting his line into the seas and chatting with friends.

Virtual (also commonly called synthetic) economies are a relatively recent development, and *UO* was really one of the first games to tackle the issue. Zach Thompson worked as director of technology at Origin Systems when *UO* was in development. These days he's moved out of the industry and researches molecular biology at the University of Texas, but in 1999 he presented a panel at the Game Developers Conference outlining the key problems in *UO*'s virtual economy: hoarding of resources, and too much emphasis on a macro economy (the entire game world) and not enough on the micro economy involving individual shopkeepers. Thompson also outlined several solutions: auctions, deeper production paths, a move from an improve-by-doing to a pay-to-improve skill set, and the ability for vendors to set buy prices and quantities. The solutions were aimed specifically at *UO*, but the topics are undeniably applicable to all modern MMOs.

BREAKIN' THE LAW

MMOs are a fantastic way to escape from reality. When you've finished a year's worth of work as

an in-game merchant in Azeroth, Blizzard doesn't make you fill out paperwork outlining the amount of gold you've earned. But picture the federal government coming after players for such transactions. "From a standpoint of tax policy, there just isn't a line there between fantasy and reality. If it's a transaction it's a transaction it's a transaction," says Edward Castronova, associate professor of telecommunications at Indiana University. "I can imagine why the IRS isn't saying, 'Hey, how come we're not taxing this?'"

That's a scary thought, and any high elf with half a brain understands it would undermine much of the reason that people play MMOs in the first place—not to mention the expense involved. Monthly payments are enough of a hassle without having to worry about whether you've filed the right forms with Big Brother. Here's the deal. The IRS can rightfully view in-game transactions as bartering, in which an exchange of goods and services can occur with or without money. When you hand over a couple plat for a sweet flaming sword, it's the same idea. This was used as a tax loophole in the real world until the agency began requiring all barter transactions to be reported in the early '80s.

DO MMOS FALL UNDER THIS CATEGORY?

Castronova hopes the industry doesn't reach that point, and those in the legal world believe it's a bit far-fetched. "I think that's the IRS making noise," says Scott Brown, intellectual property and technology attorney at the New York City-based Skadden firm. "My personal opinion



▲ Nothing is more exciting than waiting in line at a bank—even in a game!



is that they have enough outside the gaming world to deal with. I don't expect they'll give it much attention at all. Certainly, they would have the right to do so. [But] I think, as a practical matter, you won't find the IRS engaged in penny-pinching of that type."

Games like *Second Life* and *Project Entropia*, in which players' profits can be exchanged for real-life dough, were developed with far different goals. *Second Life* encourages players to create, build, and sell to turn a profit. In effect, developer Linden Lab has eliminated the problem plaguing fantasy MMORPGs because its players are supposed to make money. Just like in the real world, *Second Life* has its own set of tax rules for its in-game Linden dollars, but these rules are set by the developers and often heavily influenced by the players. In the past, players have had no problem reacting violently in the game world to disagreements with tax law. A few years ago, a tax-law change enraged enough people that an open protest broke out, resulting in burning buildings and signs of agitation throughout the game world. That's right—there was virtual looting in *Second Life*.

This legal battle will have to be fought eventually, but for now, players and publishers can breathe easy knowing that it's years away. When the gloves do come off, though,

Castronova predicts the government might ignore the problem. He believes the industry needs to adopt a cultural argument to justify treating online economies differently. Ideally, Castronova says he hopes the government will look at MMOs and say, "This is a fantasy world. No, you can't use real money to buy gold pieces; that's against the law. Not against the [end-user license agreement], against the law."

THE MONEY TRAIL

MMOs are exploding in North America and Europe, but most people forget how much money is coming from Asia. Korean gamers have shown they're willing to freak out over a million copycat MMOs, and besides being a source of revenue, Korean-based companies like NCsoft and Webzen will undoubtedly have an impact on the genre's future, both because of their games and because of the legal issues currently working themselves out. These will likely influence economic policy for MMOs over here.

Whereas Blizzard can (and will) ban you if you're caught selling outside the game world, that's not necessarily the case in Korea. The Korea Fair Trade Commission actually ruled that games' end-user license agreements didn't provide enough rights to players, and that companies like NCsoft could no longer permanently

suspend or seize gamers' accounts for a first offense of selling items. The importance here is a government-mandated ruling in favor of players. Korean companies are currently appealing the decision, but nothing's moved forward just yet. It doesn't make the practice government-approved, but the problem is by no means solved and leaves plenty of wiggle room.

IGE, a company that helps players buy and sell in-game items and characters, says there's an annual \$880 million market in the United States alone for these transactions. Its own analysts predict that market will even overtake the Asian markets someday. Imagine that number on a worldwide scale, considering countries where the policies are more lax. We haven't faced these problems yet, but activity overseas means it's simply a matter of time. A single case could tilt the balance in favor of players or MMO creators; imagine if a player took a ban to court and the judge decided players have every right to sell their characters and items. Companies would have no control over the secondary market.

In an effort to control the current economy, Blizzard closed more than 18,000 *WoW* accounts in late December of last year for cheating-related reasons. Though many were using third-party programs to farm gold and items, the company's statement suggested a number of account closures were related to selling gold, characters, and items on auction services. *WoW*'s terms of use state, "You may not sell items for 'real' money or exchange items outside of *World of Warcraft*." If you do, you can usually kiss your account good-bye, but that >

> AFTER A YEAR'S WORK IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT, BLIZZARD DOESN'T MAKE YOU FILL OUT TAX FORMS FOR GOLD EARNED.



▲ Are *The Sims* getting evicted? Nope, someone's a real estate baron in *Second Life*.

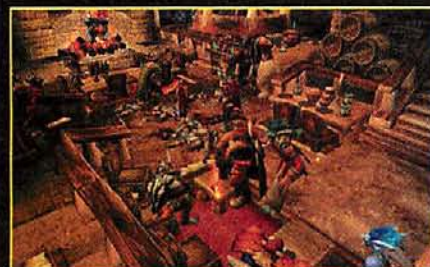
► hasn't stopped people from making thousands from their careers in perfecting the art of the level grind. It's been a problem in the past, it's a problem now, and no one knows quite how to stop it.

Then again, maybe you don't try to stop it. Station Exchange allows for legitimate sales between *EverQuest II* players; SOE takes a cut and shoves participating users onto separate servers. To date, the two servers have more than 50,000 active accounts, and the service is nearing 1 million transactions. "I know other companies have taken a very firm stand that they believe it's destructive," says Chris Yates, SOE's vice president of technology. "We don't believe that it's particularly destructive." Some servers will be open for business. Others won't. Says Yates, "Part of the future definitely involves offering these services."

NO WAY OUT

In real life, people lie, cheat, and steal to get ahead, but unless you're some omnipotent being, you can't change life on a whim. That's not true in games, and part of the problem could lie within MMO game design itself. "I think that's a fair point," Yates admits, "but it's also a true statement that no matter what the game experience is, people will always want to buy value against that game experience to have an advantage. Why don't people drive around the country on Greyhound buses? Because they want to do something faster. They only have a limited amount of time." *EverQuest II* producer Scott Hartsman offers a similar response, believing that fantasy RPGs simply lend themselves to certain gameplay, and these players dipping in and out of the economy are a natural consequence. In his eyes, the problem will never completely disappear.

That's not everyone's opinion, though. Starr Long, right-hand man to Richard Garriott during the *UO* days and even today as work continues



▲ Why sell your loot to in-game vendors when eBay is just a few mouse clicks away?



▲ Oh, Mah, Gawd. These gals in *Second Life* are mall bound.

IN REAL LIFE, PEOPLE LIE, CHEAT, AND STEAL TO GET AHEAD.

on developing *Tabula Rasa* for NCsoft, thinks game design can be altered. "While NCsoft is officially opposed to such behavior—it is a violation of our terms of service—my personal opinion is that this is unavoidable and it should be accounted for in game design," he says. "For *UO*, we were proud when one of the castles sold on eBay for thousands of dollars!"

It's been almost seven years since Thompson dished out his *UO* criticisms, critiques the rest of the industry also seems to have recognized. Auctions are a part of most major MMOs at this point, along with deeper customization as merchants develop items and equipment for sale, both of which lead to a player-driven economy. There's also been a movement for pay-to-improve in alternative-style MMOs like NCsoft's *Auto Assault*, which places more emphasis on purchasing parts

to pimp your ride. On the flip side, hoarding resources is still a problem. The establishment of "legitimate" services facilitating these players, along with the growing number of MMOs, is only fueling this economic fire.

It's a bit premature to say where economies are going in the next five years, but many developers have suggested the changes will come from an evolution of MMOs as a whole. Fantasy RPGs are the dominant form right now, but that may not hold true forever. "In *EQ2*, our game is what our game is. It is a fantasy adventure game. You're killing things and taking their stuff," says Hartsman. "That's pretty much the whole idea here; you're on quests and doing these heroic things. Do we need banks that have interest rates? No, not so much." / Patrick Klepek (additional reporting by Darren Gladstone)

CGW SAYS:

► HOW DO YOU REGULATE A VIRTUAL economy? Well, you can leave a free-market system in place and watch all hell break loose. This usually results in gold-farming profiteers that cause an in-game economic crisis. That's precisely what happened with *Final Fantasy XI* late in 2005. As the market was flooded with gil (*FFXI*'s currency), prices skyrocketed at auction houses across the land. A haubergeon, which typically sells for 3 million gil, was suddenly going for 10 million. Publisher Square Enix stopped the spiral by cracking down on well-known and suspected gil farmers. But who knows how long it'll take for prices to stabilize?

One interesting economic tactic being employed in the upcoming game *Seed* has players democratically electing leaders to set policy. Strictly a role-playing game, *Seed* is all about crafting and diplomacy. Piss off enough people (or abuse the system) and you'll never stand a chance at getting elected and setting tariff rates.

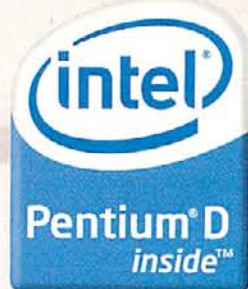
In the next couple of years, what's really going to change these economies is the continuing growth of MMOs worldwide and the industry's response—and to some degree, the government's response. All it takes is a few more phenomenon games on the scale of *WOW*, or digital Horatio Alger stories of folks selling that unique flaming sword to finance a used car, to get the government's attention. Not everybody is quitting their day jobs just yet, but \$5 million in real-world money changed hands in *Second Life* in the month of January alone. One player, Anshe Chung, is reportedly making over \$150,000 a year there.

That's just one person, though. There need to be tens of millions playing before the IRS starts caring about virtual transactions. Figuring out how to legislate a virtual game space would be a complicated use of resources, and there are probably more pressing issues for tax collection. That certainly doesn't mean it won't ever happen, but the wheels don't turn quickly in Washington.



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DEVELOPER: **Arkane Studios**
GENRE: **Action**
RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

A DARKNESS SHALL



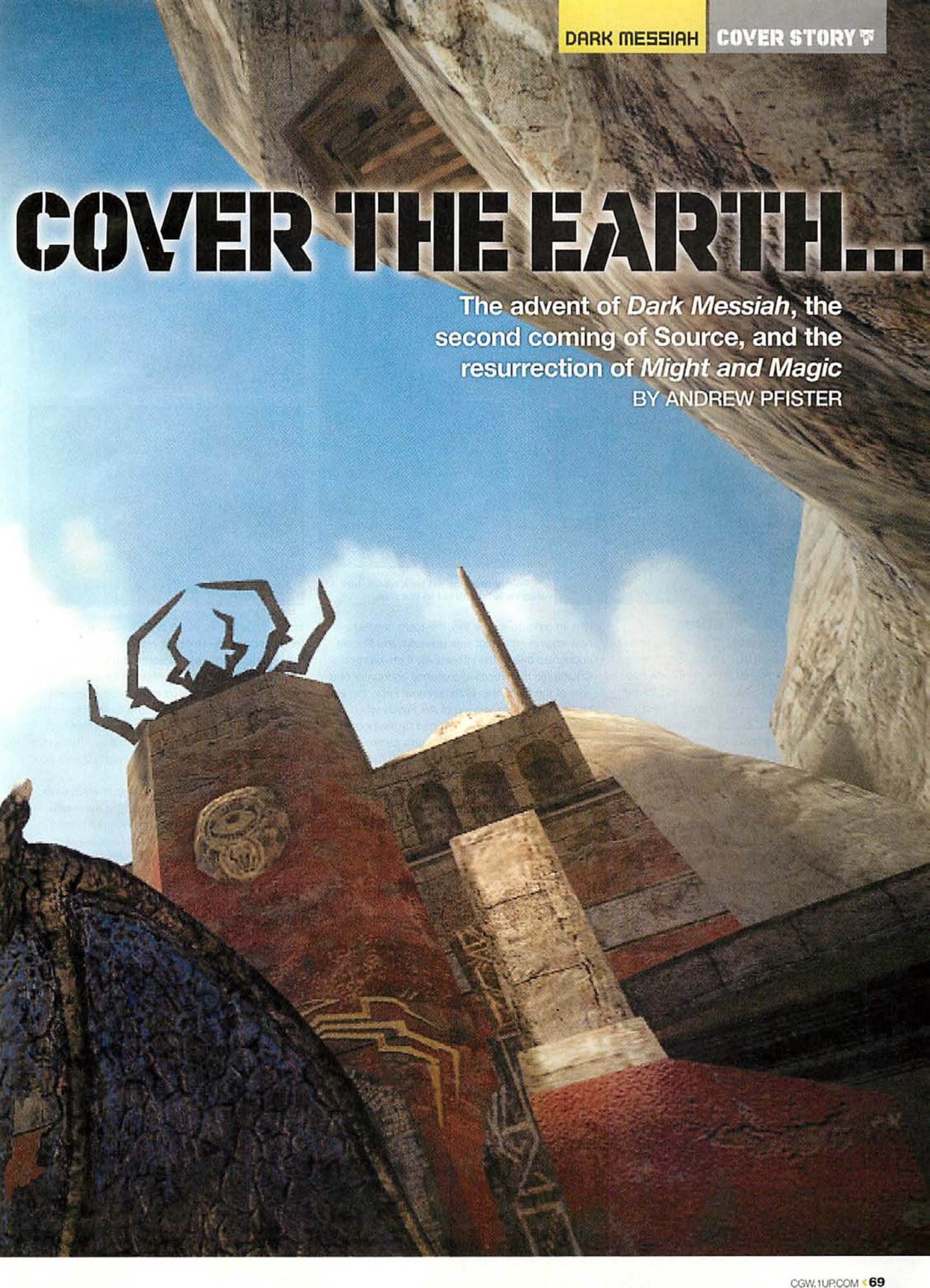
WORLD EXCLUSIVE

FOUR HUNDRED KILOMETERS SOUTH OF PARIS, IN THE INDUSTRIAL town of Lyon, France, Raphael Colantonio launches from his chair. What's the commotion? The CEO of Arkane Studios intends to find out as he walks down the hall to check on his team. The level designers have been experimenting with a frost spell, which can freeze enemies in place or create ice slicks on the ground to keep them off balance. One tester accidentally created an icy patch near a ledge and he's calling everyone over to see what's happening. The orc who had been giving him chase fails to notice the ice. Its feet give way, and the momentum of pursuit carries the orc over the edge to a gravity-assisted demise. Everyone watching hoots and laughs—a totally unplanned moment, the designers are pleasantly surprised by their own game. One could describe this small discovery as unintended design, but that'd be missing the bigger picture: *Everything in Dark Messiah of Might and Magic is unintended design.*

COVER THE EARTH...

The advent of *Dark Messiah*, the second coming of *Source*, and the resurrection of *Might and Magic*

BY ANDREW PFISTER





★ Pointy roofs might look weird, but they're totally great in the rain.

UNTO US A CHILD IS BORN

To appreciate the coming of *Dark Messiah*, you must first understand all that's gone into this game's birth. It is a result of a truly collaborative and mutually beneficial alliance between Ubisoft and Arkane Studios, made all the better by a shared vision—and a whole lot of fortunate timing.

Arkane was in the process of planning its follow-up to *Arx Fatalis*, a traditional PC RPG that enjoyed critical acclaim but saw only modest commercial success. It began work on *Arx Fatalis 2* with a new mind-set: action. The RPG elements would still be there, but the team wanted to keep the math to a minimum so that the player would be more focused on what was directly in front of

him. In order to realize this, the team needed a new engine—one that was powerful and flexible enough to deliver the interactivity it envisioned. Colantonio then recalled a chance encounter one year at the Electronic Entertainment Expo. He was showing the Xbox version of *Arx Fatalis* when a random Valve employee stopped by the booth to say how much he enjoyed Arkane's game. The two exchanged contact information, which then led to other Valve employees sending detailed notes—some Colantonio even describes as “harsh”—on *Arx Fatalis*. A mutual appreciation for each other's work was discovered, and a friendship had begun.

But in the early stages of *Arx 2*'s development, Arkane was still attempting to build its own tech



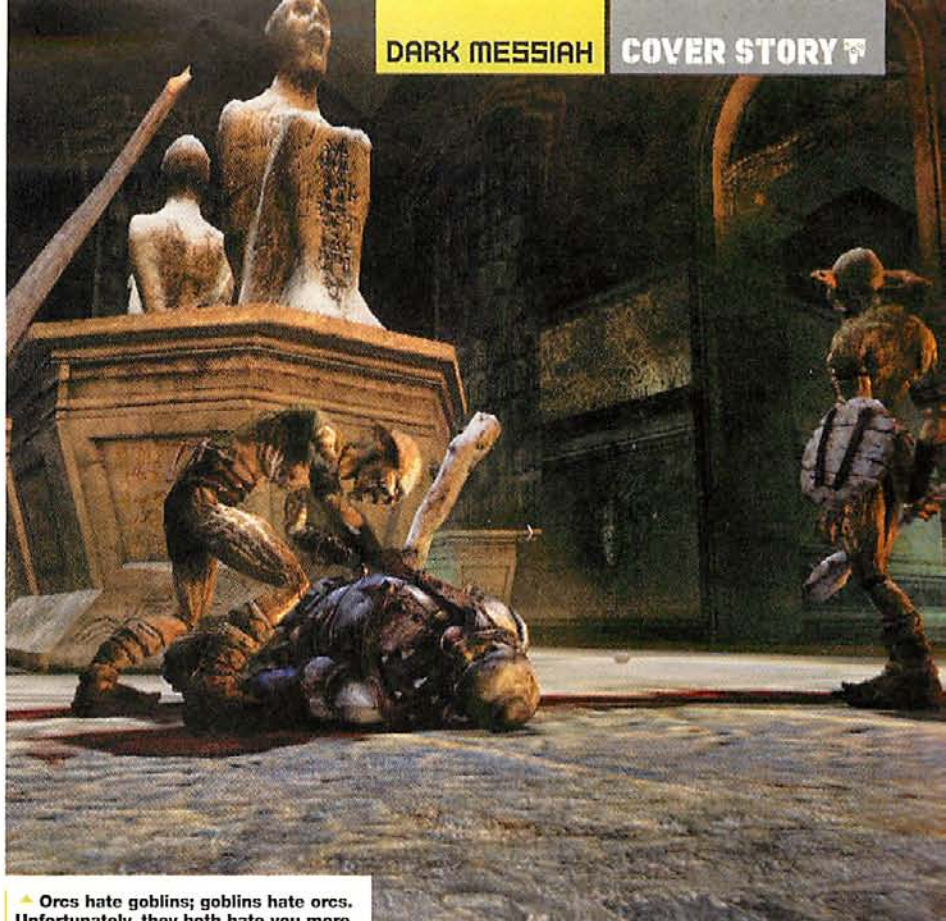
to drive the game. At E3 in 2003, everyone was talking about the stunning *Half-Life 2* demo and the technical prowess of John Carmack's *Doom 3* engine. Realizing that developing its own custom engine would take up too many resources and competing with the Newells and Carmacks of the world would eventually prove futile, Colantonio decided to call up his friends at Valve. After a relatively effortless negotiation, *Arx Fatalis 2* was now using the Source engine.

The technology question now answered, work on *Arx 2* could begin in earnest. But even with a new design approach and a powerful engine, something was still missing. *Arx Fatalis*—as appreciated as it was by those who played

➤➤ “INSTEAD OF ROLLING DICE TO JUMP THE GAP, I WANT TO JUMP THE GAP MYSELF AND SEE IF I MAKE IT.” —RAPHAEL COLANTONIO, CEO OF ARKANE STUDIOS



★ Brawny melee fighters may prefer to walk up and bash this guy on the head. But wimpy spellcasters like us prefer the long-distance approach.



▲ Orcs hate goblins; goblins hate orcs. Unfortunately, they both hate you more.

it—required a near-grassroots effort to get out the door. For its next game, Arkane wanted some bigger marketing muscle.

Meanwhile, Ubisoft had been quietly planning the renaissance of the venerable *Might and Magic* franchise, which had taken an unfortunate nosedive during the latter half of the '90s thanks to a string of uninspired sequels in the main series. *Heroes of Might and Magic* did what it could to salvage the series' rich history, but essentially, *M&M* had been dormant for years. All of this would change when Erwan Le Breton of Nival began work on the upcoming *Heroes of Might and Magic V*. This is the game in which Le Breton will introduce his brand new—and more importantly, unified—world of *Might and Magic*, one where all future games under the label will take place.

Taking the two-hour train to Paris, Colantonio met with Ubisoft. During the course of conversa-

tion, the idea came up to make *Arx 2* part of the *Might and Magic* revival by rebranding it as an *M&M* game. Though it's always difficult to put your own IP on hold, Arkane saw the potential that existed in *Might and Magic*. Thus, *Arx Fatalis 2* was reborn as *Dark Messiah*.

"It was a strategic choice that was not an obvious one" said Colantonio, "because it had to fit both our passion and our business objectives. Our choices were to keep focusing on *Arx 2* with not much budget and no real distribution network, or work on somebody else's IP with real financial support and proper distribution. We went with the second choice, because working on a known franchise that fit our game genre, with a publisher as respected as Ubisoft, was an opportunity that was hard to pass up. It would allow us to make a great game without compromising our passion, and allow us to evolve as a company."

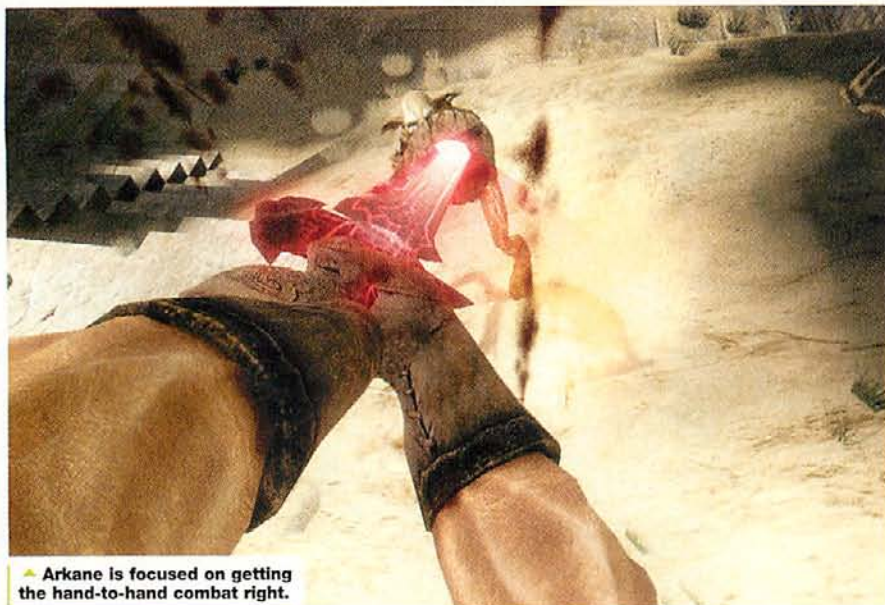
LET US BREAK THEIR BONDS ASUNDER

Capitalizing on the unified *M&M* universe for the first time, *Dark Messiah* is set 20 years after the events unfolding in *Heroes of Might and Magic V*. Here's something else that caught us off guard: *Dark Messiah* is the second part in a trilogy. A third game, still of unspecified genre and release time frame, will complete the first story arc. Plot details are scarce (the humans must stop the necromancers and their plot to introduce the Dark Messiah), but it is known that *Heroes V* will hint at the events to come. And while *Heroes V* maintains that series' traditional strategy approach, *Dark Messiah* is something new. In the first-person perspective but neither traditional RPG nor shooter, it's a game that rests comfortably between both genres—but has a focus all its own. To describe it simply, the term ▶

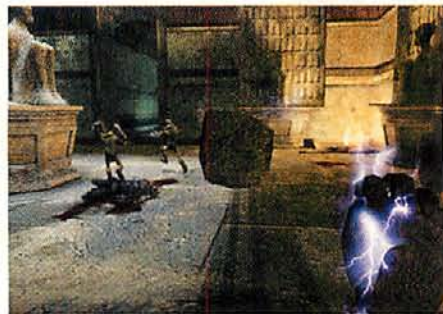


▲ It wouldn't be a proper fantasy action-RPG without skeletons to kill. So here we go. Dispatch this bony troublemaker post-haste, will ya?





Arkane is focused on getting the hand-to-hand combat right.



Magic spells allow you to freeze foes or turn your hands into a makeshift gravity gun.

INSTEAD OF TRADITIONAL PUZZLES THAT HAVE ONE OR MAYBE TWO ROUTES, LEVELS DESIGNED WITH ONE OBJECTIVE HAVE MANY DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS.

"action" would suffice, but the way Arkane presents the action reveals much more depth.

Stéphane Decroix, executive producer for Ubisoft, says that "freedom is in the choices." Colantonio says Arkane really wants to make a game that is "more about what you do" and not simply about following the path the designer draws up. Both sides appear to be on the same page: yours. This can't be done in a traditional RPG, and as much as Colantonio—a self-described *Fallout* aficionado—respects the genre, he says it's time to toss out the pen-and-paper way of thinking: "Instead of rolling dice to jump the gap, I want to jump the gap myself and see if I make it." *Dark Messiah* is Arkane's rendition of the RPG, in which the math exists underneath the hood and the player has a "visceral relationship" with what's happening onscreen.

Enter the Source engine. *Half-Life 2* proved that Source's ability to handle complex physics and environmental interactions could open up brand new avenues for game design. *Dark Messiah's* heading in the same direction: Instead of tradi-

tional puzzles that have one or maybe two routes, levels designed with one objective have many different solutions.

We've heard all of this before, and it's not totally convincing until we get to see it in action. So our Arkane guide takes us to a prison level where the necromancers have confined a number of goblins. Walking softly and in shadows, our guide uses his assassin skills to sneak into the upper rafters, then flips the lever to open the cells. The goblins escape and attack their captors, oblivious that their liberator is watching the chaos unfold from above. Though their attention varies based on their relative intelligence, enemies are just as aware of their surroundings as you are, and should the opportunity arise, they'll use it against you...or against each other. The goblins start hurling barrels at the necromancers, the necromancers start using fire spells against the goblins, the barrels soon catch on fire, and everyone starts throwing them. All the player had to do was throw a switch, stand back, and watch. But when we started throwing oil down

into the fracas, a necromancer turned his attention away and started looking for us. He began to give chase but was once again distracted by a pair of goblins who he thought posed a bigger threat. The three-way interaction between the player, the different A.I. routines, and the environment ensures that even though the result is pretty much always a big brawl, it doesn't always have to occur in exactly the same way each time. We could have used the fight as cover to sneak by completely unnoticed or to charge in and easily clear the room as our foes were busy battling each other.

LIFT UP YOUR HEADS, O YE GATES

Hand in hand with dynamic gameplay solutions is dynamic character development. Officially, *Dark Messiah* has three character types: warrior, assassin, and mage. Should you decide to focus on your melee strengths, your skill points will likely be warrior heavy. If you want to take a more subtle and crafty approach, the assassin tree offers those tools. For the more magically inclined, the mage's



Look at these guys here. They're just begging to be kicked off the platform. The guy on the right is actually wondering why you haven't yet.

WHO CAN BE AGAINST US?

The exclusive first look at *Dark Messiah's* dedicated (and ambitious) multiplayer mode

➤ Though it was still too early for a hands-on test, CGW got the first look at *Dark Messiah's* "humans vs. the undead" multiplayer mode developed by U.K.-based Kuju. Crusade mode is the love child of *Battlefield 1942* and *World of Warcraft: Battlegrounds*. Crusade supports up to 32 players on large maps that feature the now-typical control points. Naturally, the objective is to control the entire map (or wait until the other team depletes their supply of respawn tickets). Sounds a lot like

Battlefield, right? Here's the twist: There are five different classes, each one with specific strengths and weaknesses. In order to be successful, a good team will have to be balanced between power and support.

Still, this sounds like any other class-based FPS. Here's another twist: A single session of Crusade actually takes place over five maps, and the levels and skills your character gains stay with you until the end. This means that you can play as a warrior and continue leveling up by the final

map. Or, if your team is lacking in one area, you can jump between classes at will, but those will all be weaker in the home stretch. Whoever wins each round determines where the next battle takes place (always going deeper into enemy territory), and users will eventually be able to design their own maps and Crusade campaigns.

Ubisoft producer Romain de Waubert de Genlis, who, appropriately enough, was lead designer of *Battlefield 1942*, describes it as "MMO instant gratification." Sounds good. /

THE FURIOUS FIVE...

Everyone starts the game at level 1, and by killing the other team, helping your own (through healing and kill assists), or earning team achievements at the end of each round, you are given points to apply to your character's skill trees. Some skills can then be upgraded multiple times to increase the effect: for example, the warrior's max health or the number of arrows the archer can shoot at once. The current design enables you to "devolve" your character should you want to learn something new, but having a balanced team is vital to success in Crusade. Here's a brief class primer:



THE WARRIOR

The warrior is naturally the strongest and most capable of absorbing and dealing large amounts of damage. He can run faster, which can be used to rush enemies and can also see their health levels at any time. The warrior can upgrade his armor, stamina, and shield effectiveness.



THE ASSASSIN

Weaker than the other melee classes but making up for it in agility, the assassin has the power to conceal himself, move silently, set traps, and poison enemies. Upgradeable skills include stamina increase and polymorph (take on a poor disguise of the opposing team).



THE PRIEST

The priest is the healing class who casts offensive, defensive, and support spells at range due to their relative weakness. Priests can also detect invisibility, which negates the opposing team's assassin threat, as well as pinpoint enemies on the map for teammates.



THE MAGE

The mage is also weak up close but a highly powerful damage-dealing class at range. Armed with AOE spells, the mage can deal with multiple enemies at a time and can generate protective and reflective shields for anyone in the area. But be careful, friendly fire is always turned on.



THE ARCHER

The archer is the ranged attacker you need when dealing with a single foe, because his arrow skills are quite deadly. Like the assassin, he can set traps and create poison arrows. Upgradeable skills include flame/poison/flare arrows, multi-shot, zoom, and reduced reload time.

➤ DARK MESSIAH'S AMBITIOUS MULTIPLAYER MODE IS THE LOVE CHILD OF *BATTLEFIELD 1942* AND *WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BATTLEGROUNDS*.

THREE'S A COMPANY

How to play without class

DEMONSTRATION

Unlike in most other games that take place in the fantasy world, you don't have to limit yourself to one specific class or style of play in *Dark Messiah*. Accomplishing certain tasks in the game or getting kills will net you experience and skill points, which can then be used to learn new abilities in any of the three available character types: warrior, assassin, and mage. And the mixing of skills means that there are multiple ways of approaching an objective. Here's just one example of how one character can clear a room in three different ways...

WARRIOR

Master of weaponry and true believer in the use of brute force, a warrior isn't afraid to rush into any situation head-on. With increased stamina, strength, and armor, he's really got nothing to fear.

ASSASSIN

Silent but deadly, an assassin uses his daggers and power of concealment to wait for the perfect opportunity to strike. Assassin skills allow you to move silently (the walls have ears) and disappear into the shadows.

MAGE

A magic man has an array of handy spells, be they helpful or harmful, to unleash on his enemies. Those who choose to specialize as a mage will be more susceptible to damage but can be incredibly effective "artillery" from a distance.



1

▲ With sword in the ready position (most weapons have defensive functions), we enter the room in plain sight and without fear of being spotted.



2

▲ Melee combat with swords and daggers utilizes a helpful lock-on assist so that the player isn't swinging aimlessly.



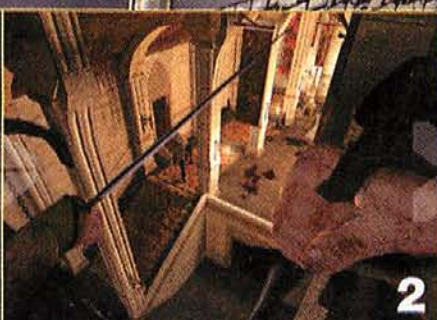
3

▲ In its current state, *Dark Messiah* has a basic combo system for hand-to-hand combat, including finishing moves like this painful stab through the gut.



1

▲ Avoiding detection, we get ourselves up into the rafters for a silent entry and a better view of the situation down below.



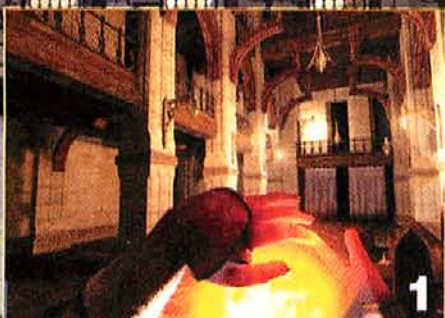
2

▲ Now that we're dancing on the ceiling, it's time to study the enemy's patrol route to figure out when's the best time to drop down.



3

▲ That chain looks pretty strong. Strong enough to support the weight of a nimble thief climbing down...or maybe it's weak enough to break as the guard walks under....



1

▲ Mage skills require mana, which slowly regenerates after use. We enter the room with a fireball ready to go, but we also have ice and healing power at our disposal.



2

▲ But clearly, it's much more fun to let our inner arsonist run amok. This fire spell is an AOE, but other spells can be guided to their destination with the mouse. Call it heat-seeking heat.



3

▲ Playing with magic requires a nonstealthy approach similar to the warrior's—but without a weapon, it's better to keep your distance and attack at range. Lest you get cooked by your own fire.



THE GAME NEVER FORCES YOU DOWN ONE SPECIFIC CLASS PATH. YOUR PERSONAL PLAY STYLE WILL LIKELY DETERMINE WHERE YOU SPEND YOUR POINTS.



▲ Defense is just as important as offense, and you'll eventually be able to use shields as well.



▲ Ratings board, schmatings board. Arkane's making its game and leaving the politics to others.



▲ Bow users can learn to zoom and snipe.

spells offer damaging power from a safe distance. But because you start the game without having to pick one class over another, you can assign the skill points you earn throughout the game's 12 levels into any of the three disciplines. You can have the strength and stamina of a warrior and still use spells or sneak quietly in the shadows. The game never forces you down one specific class path.

To show *Dark Messiah*'s open approach, lead level designer Christophe Carrier brings us through a level that involves finding a key inside a warehouse. Playing in the thief style, he bounds across the rooftops toward the warehouse, drops down into a narrow alley, and finds a secret entrance into the building. Once inside, he climbs a rope up to the rafters to get a bird's-eye view of the situation. A few guards are on patrol, so he picks the guy he suspects has the key and watches his walking

route. Dropping down to the main floor, he finds a dark spot to wait, and when the guard walks by, Carrier thrusts a dagger into his back. He retrieves the key and drags the body into the shadows.

Rewinding, Carrier loads up the level again—only this time he swaggers in like Conan. Playing as the same character, he walks nonchalantly through the adjacent courtyard and to the side of the warehouse where there's another rope leading inside. The first time through, he didn't pay attention to the hay bales on the ground or the torches on the walls. It turns out that picking up a bale of hay, lighting it on fire, and throwing it at a group of enemies causes much more excitement than a quick stab in the back. A wild melee ensues with the surviving, not-currently-on-fire guards, and once all the bodies hit the floor, Carrier locates the key.

All of these variables create an environment that

feels very alive. And when the power to create gameplay situations like these is transferred from the designer to the player, it requires a completely different approach that has its own unique challenges. That brings us back to that slippery ice patch.

Horror replaces amusement when the designers realize that the accidental ice slick could break other levels. Suddenly, those holes need to be located and fixed. Because so many things can happen during the course of the game, the team has to try to predict the many ways a player could approach an objective or react to a situation—not just to fix bugs, but to ensure that the game is consistently fun for anyone to play. After speaking with Colantonio and his team at Arkane, all of whom hold an official title of "game designer," it's obvious that making such a game is exactly what they intend to do. Amen. /



MORE ON THIS STORY...

The stoic, but unfortunately static, medium of print doesn't allow us to show our fancy moving pictures that we took during our visit to Arkane's offices in Lyon, France. So that's why we've put all our extra content on 1UP.com.

By the time you read this, we'll have posted an interview with Arkane CEO Raphael Colantonio and designer Julien Roby, direct-feed footage of actual gameplay of *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*, and an editor discussion of the game (and other things French) on an upcoming episode of *The 1UP Show*. CGW and 1UP: best friends forever!



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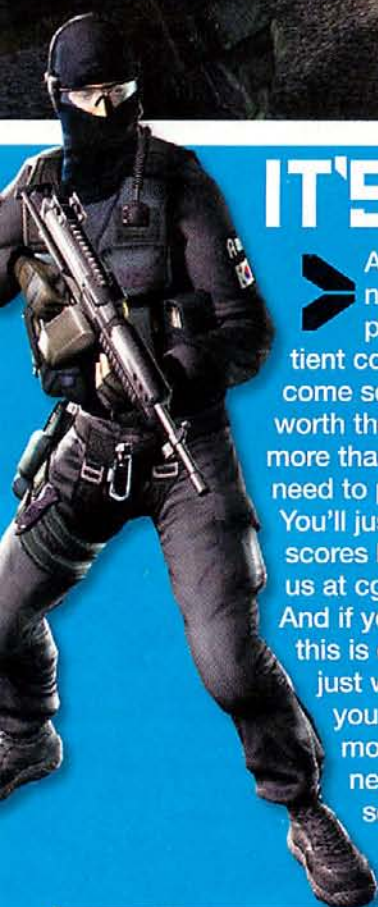
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IT'S APRIL, FOOLS!

➤ As you flip through this issue's reviews, you'll notice something...missing. Yes, CGW is playing a cruel April Fools' Day joke on impatient consumers everywhere: This month's reviews come score free. Was *Star Wars Empire at War* worth the wait? Is *Rainbow Six: Lockdown* anything more than a lazy console port? And do you really need to play a game about the Winter Olympics? You'll just have to read the full reviews to find out—scores be damned. Think it's a good idea? E-mail us at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com and let us know. And if you believe this is crazy, just wait until you see next month's all-new Reviews section. ➤➤

REVIEW STANDARDS

We review only final, gold, released-to-retail code—no betas or "near-final, reviewable" builds. We don't review patches, with the notable exceptions of those for online games like MMOs that autoupdate as a standard part of their operation and those specifically selected for our patch review page. We do this so we are reviewing exactly what you, the consumer, are buying.

OUR RATING SCALE



4.5-5.0 Stars:
Excellent

Landmark products and benchmarks for their entire genres. Games achieving these scores earn a CGW Editors' Choice award.



3.5-4.0 Stars:
Good

Certain limitations may hold these games back, but they can still be enjoyed by the majority of the PC-gaming populace.



2.5-3.0 Stars:
Average

These games don't do anything exceptionally well. We recommend them strictly to the most hardcore of genre enthusiasts.



1.5-2.0 Stars:
Weak

Games with significant bugs or other fundamental design issues that even genre fans will have trouble coming to terms with.



0.0-1.0 Stars:
Abysmal

Games that should never have been made—let alone purchased. A zero-star game is bug-ridden and unplayable.

INSIDE



Star Wars Empire at War
Stay on target!



ToCA Race Driver 3
Rev up and peel out.

STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR

Putting the "star" back in *Star Wars*

WEANED ON
WESTWOOD

Developer Petroglyph
("rock carving")
employs several
former Westwood
Command & Conquer
vets.



Space battles capture the epic movie action sequences perfectly, and the largest, densest maps can take up to an hour to resolve.



Pixel-shaded-perfect shockwaves frame the demise of an Imperial spaceport.

PUBLISHER: LucasArts DEVELOPER: Petroglyph GENRE: RTS ESRB RATING: T REQUIRED: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.7GB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED: 3GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 256MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players

I SENSE SOMETHING, SOMETHING I'VE not felt since...well, the last time a cornball quote launched a *Star Wars* review. Slap me sardonic, I grew up a Lucas sycophant but matriculated full-tilt to cranky cynic after the CGI guys pinched George Lucas' private stash, juiced up, and hurled all over the prequels. And the games...the last really good ones, as far as I'm concerned, were *X-Wing* and *TIE Fighter*, if that tells you anything.

Why have so many *Star Wars* games gone catawampus? A certain pea-colored, pointy-eared peewee might respond: "Too much on John Williams, bona fide FX, and fan fawning, LucasArts depends. Mmmmm!" Well, roll over, Yoda—someone finally bucked the streak of blah. *Empire at War* heralds a return to form for publisher LucasArts that's more fun than tossing the emperor down a power shaft.

"DON'T FAIL ME AGAIN"

Set before *Episode IV*, *Empire at War* weaves a

grand campaign, ground skirmishes, and orbital battles into one persistent package. As the Galactic Empire or Rebel Alliance, you scrap for planets splashed across a spiral backplane of stars, completing missions that culminate in the events of *A New Hope*. Tactical battles ensue as you butt space fleets or ground forces, and winning hinges on improving tech, building ground and space structures, and running a broad defense.

Story mode (you can also play it sandbox) looks sweet enough at the outset. The Empire amounts to a military-industrial juggernaut that solves its problems by chucking numbers at them, while the anemic Rebellion skulks in the shadows, swiping technology and slipping by Imperial fleets. Planets have limited build slots (you choose what to specialize in), and the ships and soldiers you forge on the galactic map follow you into (and, if they survive, out of) tactical battles on land or in space.

How you launch those battles, however, exposes a crucial flaw. Want to crush the Rebel scum on Yavin? Simple...too simple, in fact. Click-queue

an armada of Star Destroyers, then drag and drop your fleet onto one of Yavin's orbital slots. A tiny arrow skims the distance and presto, you're in combat. Wildly unrealistic, much of the campaign thus regresses to "who can ambush whom first"—peekaboo with heavy machinery, in other words. It's slightly less hectic in 1-on-1 matchups online (absent the all-seeing A.I.), but the precipitous travel times tend to eventually make any safeguard strategy indefensible. Which leaves *Empire at War*'s tactical clashes (the game's core, really) to ante up the good stuff.

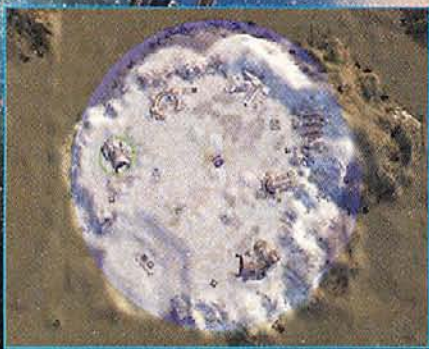
"ONE WHO WILL BRING BALANCE TO THE FORCE"

And ante up it does. Though *Empire at War* clings to RTS convention like a bashful Ewok, it's still the first in its franchise to pull six movies' worth of ideas together cohesively. As in *The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth*, you merely upgrade structures and abilities, focusing instead on matching units like rocket-launching Plex missile troopers to tank-treading TIE Maulers, or pitting AT-ATs with rappelling stormtroopers against Rebel shield generators. Mitigating population caps, you can wing massive platoons or fleets into battle but

MORE FUN THAN TOSSING THE EMPEROR DOWN A POWER SHAFT.



▲ As you upgrade space stations, their number of "hard points" increases, providing extra firepower but also extra points to defend.



▲ In space or on land, you can view the action from wide-zoom angles while still retaining the ability to select and command units.

only wield a fixed number simultaneously. Since rate of income equals owned resource nodes, brooding over what to build and put to field thus trumps clumsy blitzing every time.

Two points in particular nudge *Empire at War's* battles over the top: 1) heroes, and 2) tactical "hard points" on space stations and large vehicles. The whole gang's here, from Boba Fett to Obi-Wan, each with unique space or land abilities that can tip the scales at tight odds. Each also has a unique foil—so, for example, taking out the Death Star (yes, the Death Star) requires Luke's Red Squadron, while only assault speeders can perform tow cable attacks on Imperial AT-ATs.

And where land battles can be furiously fun, the space frays flat-out rock. Maps tend to span asteroid or nebulae fields—and in skirmish mode, the game plunks down a single Rebel or Imperial space station at opposing ends. Squads of easy-to-see 3D ships hunt across a 2D plane probing perimeters and defending resource points until huge corvettes and cruisers lumber along to assault station "hard points," which number in the dozens and include everything from shield generators to hangar bays. Nothing

beats clipping the engine off Capt. Piett's Star Destroyer straight across from your space station's heavy cannons.

Smarter still with up to eight players online (four Empire, four Rebellion), multiplayer skirmishes unfortunately lack variety. With just one minor resource-control variant, it's pretty much "brawl or nothing." And other nits exacerbate a sense that the engine itself could use a can of patch-polish. With the visual options maxed, *Empire at War* looks respectably good with soft shadows and light bloom enabled, but Petroglyph's custom 3D engine is a CPU ripper that slices, dices, and ultimately swamps the mightiest rigs as the unit counts climb.

"YOU WANT THIS, DON'T YOU?"

Campaign quirks and multiplayer meagerness aside, Petroglyph has an RTS winner on its hands with *Empire at War*, and you should play whether you're into the mythology or (like me) don't care much anymore. Pending a serious performance patch (and a way to better mitigate the campaign mode's silly fleet-move dynamics), *Empire at War* stands poised just shy of RTS excellence. **/Matt Peckham**

I NEED A HERO



Fantastic at picking off TIE fighters, the *Millennium Falcon* can temporarily render itself invulnerable.



In land battles, C-3PO and R2-D2 can repair vehicles or take control of enemy turrets.



Boba Fett's land abilities include jetpacking over obstacles to designated areas and roasting enemies with a flamethrower.



Darth Vader pilots a special TIE Advanced in space and has the ability to call for wingmen to replenish losses.

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VERDICT

The Force is "meh" with campaign mode but strong with space battles.

RAINBOW SIX: LOCKDOWN

Same name, different game

LOCKED OUT

Move over, Tom Clancy: SWAT 4's the new king of the tactical shooter genre. Learn why on page 84.



▲ Like shooting fish in a barrel.



▲ Watch your six!



▲ Your teammates are the world's foremost experts at blocking doorways.

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft DEVELOPER: Red Storm Entertainment GENRE: Tactical Shooter ESRB RATING: M REQUIRED: 1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5.5GB hard drive space
RECOMMENDED: 2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-16 players

TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS WITH unwieldy names and unfathomable agendas have gotten their hands on a nasty bio weapon. They plan to destroy/take over the world for some deranged reason—and you must lead your elite operatives to blah, blah, blah. You see the same plot in dozens of games, and it never matters because it's usually about the gameplay. Too bad this time around you won't find anything half-decent to make up for the shoddy story.

OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH THE GENERIC

Tactical shooter fans know the *Rainbow Six* series for its "brainier" sort of gameplay. Previous games feature detailed mission planning, an unforgiving damage model, and a reliance on stealth and finesse over brute force. But for whatever the reason, with *Rainbow Six: Lockdown*, developer Red Storm Entertainment throws it all away. And not for the better.

Guns now remain accurate even as you run. The damage model allows you and your terrorist antagonists to take multiple hits from assault rifles. And the planning stage? Gone. To win, all you need to do is charge in and have a quick trigger finger.

Also long gone: the sense of anticipation and tension found in previous titles. Where you used to experience a sense of dread at each new door since enemies were deadly and rare, *Lockdown's* overpopulated maps guarantee that you can find targets in nearly every room. Luckily, the A.I. isn't very smart and usually charges you head-on rather than using cover or flanking actions...despite usually outnumbering you outrageously. Along with the more forgiving damage model, this abundance of targets gives the game a shooting gallery feel, and missions regularly end with body counts nearing the century mark. It's almost like playing a level of *Serious Sam*.

NO "TEAM" IN "I"

One of the few improvements *Lockdown* attempts is squad management. Instead of having squadmates who brainlessly stick to a plan, you can now issue simple orders to them to deploy, follow, or hold; while at doors, you can command your team to breach, grenade, and finally clear the rooms beyond. The intuitive menu is also easy to use—unfortunately, with the revamped gameplay's run-and-gun nature, your teammates rarely become necessary.

Their uselessness may count as a blessing in disguise, since squadmates often act more like fresh conscripts than elite operatives. They take too long to deploy grenades, block each other's paths and lines of sight, display poor marksmanship, and occasionally charge into the unknown without eliminating tangers in plain sight. Using them to clear rooms usually results in friendly casualties, so you're probably better off on your own anyway.

LONGING FOR THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Change often represents a good thing, and plenty of games get knocked for sticking to the same formula in sequel after sequel, but the changes to *Rainbow Six* mystify us. *Lockdown* got rid of everything that made its predecessors stand out and kept the bad A.I. and even worse backstories. Even without the burden of living up to its predecessors, *Lockdown* is—at best—a generic shooter with pretensions of realism. If you really need to down some tangers, you're far better off hunting for previous *Rainbow Six* games in the bargain bin. **/DI LUO**

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT

Not so much Tom Clancy as it is *Lethal Weapon*.

IT'S ALMOST LIKE PLAYING A LEVEL OF
SERIOUS SAM.

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SWAT 4: THE STETCHKOV SYNDICATE

The sheriff gets a new deputy

Now that you've apprehended the perp, secure his weapon and report his arrest—and drop a lightstick to curb needless backtracking.

Two sniper teams report bad guy movement at key locations during each mission.

PUBLISHER: Vivendi Universal Games DEVELOPER: Irrational Games GENRE: Tactical Simulation ESRB RATING: M REQUIRED: 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1GB hard drive space, SWAT 4 RECOMMENDED: 2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-10 players



LAST YEAR, IRRATIONAL GAMES' *SWAT 4* deftly surpassed the *Rainbow Six* franchise (see our *Rainbow Six: Lockdown* review on page 82) as the best tactical sim on the market. The *Stetchkov Syndicate* expansion builds on this success by offering a sprinkling of new weapons and gear, seven original, gut-wrenching missions; and numerous engine upgrades, interface tweaks, and edit tool enhancements. Best of all, while the original game offers a marginal multiplayer component, *Stetchkov* puts online room-clearing front and center.

RED DEAD MOBSTERS

"Bring order to chaos" may be the mission of every loyal SWAT officer, but here, knowing when to use either lethal force or compliance against ultraviolent bad guys is the real trick to keeping the peace. The *Stetchkov* crime gang doesn't make your job any easier; you'll attempt to neutralize these goons at drug labs, underground concert halls, and—my favorite—an office building adorned with a gaping bomb crater. As your assault team races against the clock to locate more explosives set to blow inside the building, the giant crater leaves you all exposed to a spattering of strategically

emplaced threats from floors above. This provides some unbelievably gripping intensity and much more of a challenge than is found in the original *SWAT 4*.

Thankfully, two new in-game features give you better control of your assaulters. The "Hold" command comes in handy for splitting teams; then, room entry is executed with a single "Go" order, à la *Rainbow Six*. This valuable addition comes in handy during the ultra-tense subway level, where taking down a room full of perps requires a speedy surprise assault through multiple entry points. Another welcome addition: the melee key, a necessary evil for punching those defiant hostages and criminal underlings unwilling to comply.

But simple unarmed attacks don't even scratch the surface. *Stetchkov* also provides the latest and deadliest weapons, nonlethal toys, and other equipment, like night-vision goggles and the new Cobra stun gun. You can also forgo grenades entirely and instead utilize the pouch for extra ammo—a feature designed for those online Wyatt Earps who don't know a thing about stingers or flashbangs.

TEAM TACTICS

Internet-savvy gunslingers might note that the original's multiplayer component plays more

like an afterthought, but the expansion offers a much fuller multiplayer experience. The most obvious enhancement is the jump from four-player to 10-player co-op games. The new Smash & Grab adversarial mode provides the most challenging—and most addictive—tactical team game yet. The tension starts when one team must safely escort its briefcase-toting compatriot (armed with only a pistol) to an exit door while the opposing force does everything short of crashing the server in order to stop him cold. It's a tricky proposition for both sides—especially when the opposing team receives bonuses for forcing your briefcase carrier into compliance instead of just shooting him dead.

Other welcome enhancements include stat and ladder tracking, a built-in voice-over-Internet protocol for improving real-time commands and team communication, new co-op leader assignment, and an option to run with no armor, for those interested in increased freedom of movement during certain tasks. No matter what mode or feature you opt for, it's all incredibly tense and fun.

Debrief: *SWAT 4: The Stetchkov Syndicate* enhances the best tactical-shooter experience ever. Do I hear a 10-4 from the responding officers? **Raphael Liberatore**



KNOWING WHEN TO USE EITHER LETHAL FORCE OR COMPLIANCE AGAINST ULTRAVIOLENT BAD GUYS IS THE REAL TRICK TO KEEPING THE PEACE

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT

SWAT 4 returns with more gritty, heart-pounding police action.

TORINO 2006

It's snow masterpiece



The opening of a bobsleigh race offers some degree of challenge, but you generally hold on and enjoy the ride from then on.



This skater laments a subpar performance against a bunch of no-names.

PUBLISHER: 2K Sports DEVELOPER: 49Games GENRE: Sports ESRB RATING: E REQUIRED: 1.5GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space RECOMMENDED: 2.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 1-4 players

IN THE FOUR YEARS BETWEEN the Olympic Winter Games of Salt Lake City and this year's competition in Turin, Italy—a ton of time in the PC gaming biz—you'd think a developer could have easily fashioned a winning digital depiction of the Olympic spectacle, complete with all the pomp and pageantry. Unfortunately, 2K Sports' *Torino 2006* ain't quite that game. Though at times *molto bellissimo*, it shuns much of the Olympics' ambience, distills the roster of disciplines to a mere sampler, and often feels monotonous. Fine for the occasional high-speed fix and easy enough for total newbies, it is nevertheless far from the quintessential Winter Olympics experience.

If torches, Olympic flames, opening and closing ceremonies, and the sports of hockey, snowboarding, curling, or figure skating mean anything to you, look elsewhere. Of the 15 events *Torino* does offer, some—biathlon and cross-country skiing, for instance—might initially compel you with their anti-button-mashing control routines. Others, such as four-man bobsleigh and alpine skiing, admittedly deliver a heady sensation of speed. But the whole thing has a definite autopilot vibe throughout...and between that and the fact that most events are variants of others, long stints can become tedious.

At high resolutions of 1024x768 or better, *Torino* looks smooth and clean. It's

attractive, too, from the photo-realistic faces of the athletes to the snowy climes and often-breathtaking backdrops. Far less impressive: the commentators, who desperately need better scripts, better timing, and at least a vat of antidepressants. The game doesn't reel you in with name licensing, either, instead opting to generically address your computer-controlled foes as "Computer 1," "Computer 2," and so on.

As a quickie family entertainment tool, *Torino 2006*'s four-person multiplayer mode acts as an engaging time-waster. But if you carry a torch for the real Winter Olympics, you'd best save up for Vancouver in 2010. **Gord Goble**

TORINO 2006 IS FAR FROM THE QUINTESSENTIAL WINTER OLYMPICS EXPERIENCE.

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT

Fast and pretty, *Torino 2006* comes out of the gate well enough, but thereafter skis a slippery downhill slope to mediocrity.



[GEEKED AT BIRTH.]



You can talk the talk.
Can you walk the walk?
Here's a chance to prove it.
Please geek responsibly.

GAME DESIGN	COMPUTER FORENSICS
DIGITAL ANIMATION	NETWORK SECURITY
ARTIFICIAL LIFE	SOFTWARE ENGINEERING
DIGITAL VIDEO	TECHNOLOGY MANAGEMENT
WEB DESIGN	GAME PROGRAMMING

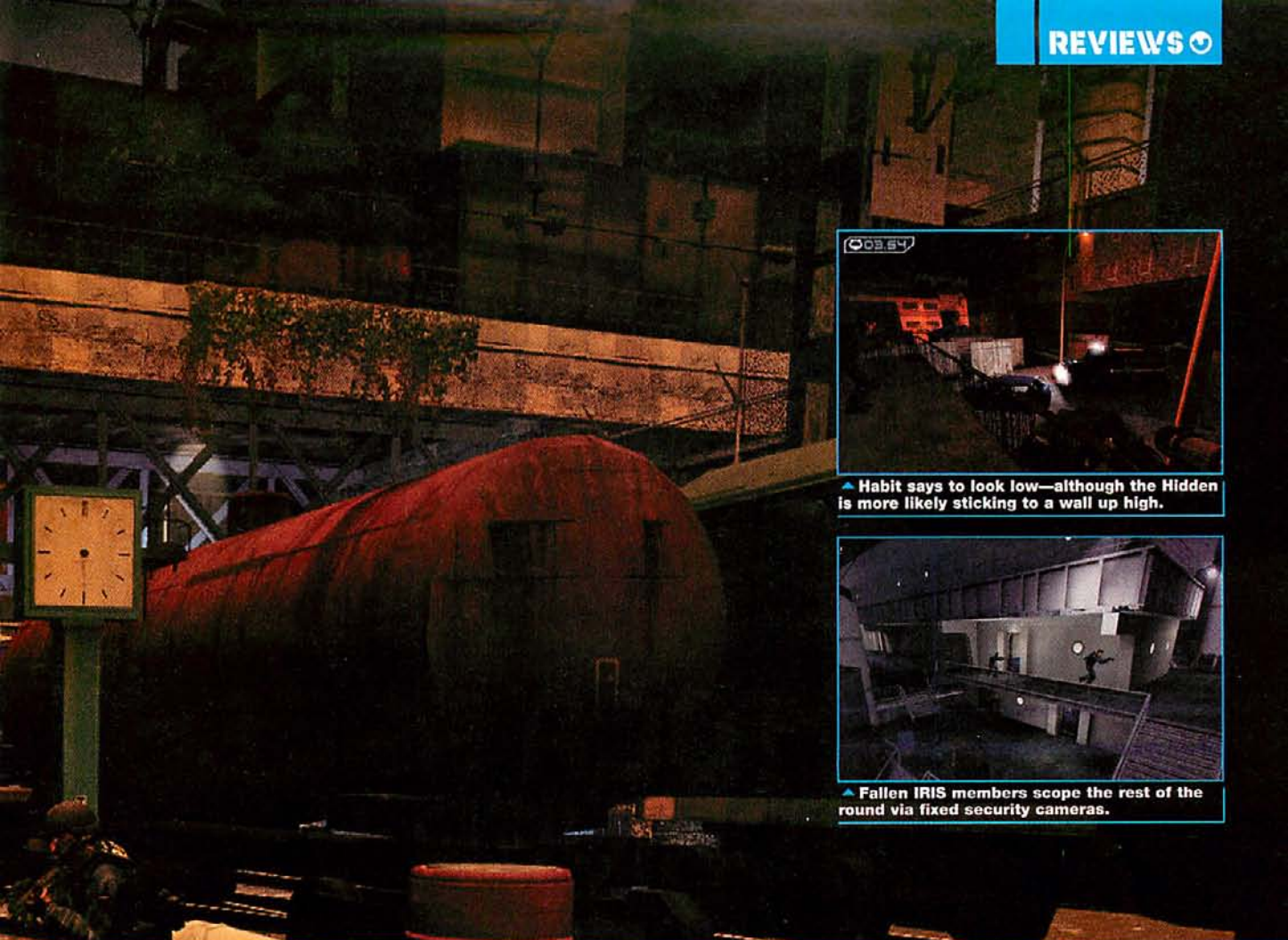
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THE NEXT LEVEL

CGW's guide to the latest and greatest postrelease content

IM SURE IM THE LAST ONE ALIVE WHEN THE SOMETHING I SEE BUMPING AT THE WINDOW TURNS OUT TO BE MY BUDDY'S DISMEMBERED TORSO.





THE HIDDEN

■ BASE GAME: *Half-Life 2* DEVELOPER: Hidden Team GENRE: Shooter WEBSITE: www.hidden-source.com VERSION REVIEWED: B2A



SURE, *THE HIDDEN*'S CLOSEST KIN is *Splinter Cell*'s asymmetrically balanced spies-versus-mercs mode, but it's a simpler, more immediate cousin. Strength in gun-wielding numbers and guts in near-invisibility replace play and counterplay: On one team is the so-called Infinitum Research Intercept Squad (or IRIS) with its submachine- and shotguns; on the other, one hard-to-see, harder-to-kill "Hidden" with a knife.

Superhuman, the Hidden moves faster, leaps farther, and leverages its surroundings by scaling walls and sticking to ceilings. The thing is both a bitch and a pleasure to play as. Invisibility, visualized as a *Predator*-style shimmer, isn't so thorough as to afford total freedom from detection, which means that skillful stalking is all-important. A Hidden who stays that way bounces from ledge to ledge, studying potential prey until someone loses it. When one squad member shoots, they all shoot, and when concrete is dust and every clip is dry, the Hidden drops down—total *Batman* or *Alien* stuff—carves one up as the rest reload, and bounds back to safety.

True story: I'm standing beneath a balcony when a picture frame flies between my squad and me. Or: I'm sure I'm the last one alive when the something I see bumping at the window turns out to be my buddy's dismembered torso (another creative abuse of power involves snatching a body and lunging over a squad—to other players it appears as a flopping, floating corpse). As, one by one, IRIS goes from a squad to a few guys with guns, seeing 'em get stupid becomes a game in and of itself...and *The Hidden*'s biggest gambit.

EVERY CAUTIOUS MOVE COUNTS

On the other hand, the IRIS members' lot as hunted is nerve-racking and less rewarding—against an adept Hidden, it's easy to give into "Game over, man!" fatalism—but again, that's part of the point. Better maps flaunt the fake-out with steam vents and fires that distort the air just enough to trigger false positives among the jumpy; ambient noise that sounds similar to the Hidden on your heels; and well-placed water puddles to give away his presence. You've got to have good eyes and ears, though.

The trick now is for developer Hidden Team

to give IRIS members more than the heebie-jeebies, to complicate their cloak-and-dagger play without overcomplicating it. According to coder Chris Janes, iterations now in the works will introduce "the idea of secondary equipment, including a LAM [mine] unit, a flashlight, light amplification goggles, a sonic trip alarm, and an adrenaline shot," along with assault and ammo-supplying support classes. And since such features require a reworked HUD, Janes says to expect "180-degree radar that shows only other IRIS members [alive or otherwise] to increase atmosphere and tension. Plus, triggering sonic alarms puts a dot on the radar to help aid IRIS members track movement."

In a way, though, that's worrying. *The Hidden* works as is, and too much of *Splinter Cell*'s tangled hunter-and-prey intimacy could spoil it. Here's to more scares along with the strategic one-upmanship. / **Shawn Elliott**

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT

Innovative and unnerving.

Look for the final version of *Panzer Command: Operation Winter Storm* from Matrix Games this month!

COLUMN

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

BETA IMPRESSIONS

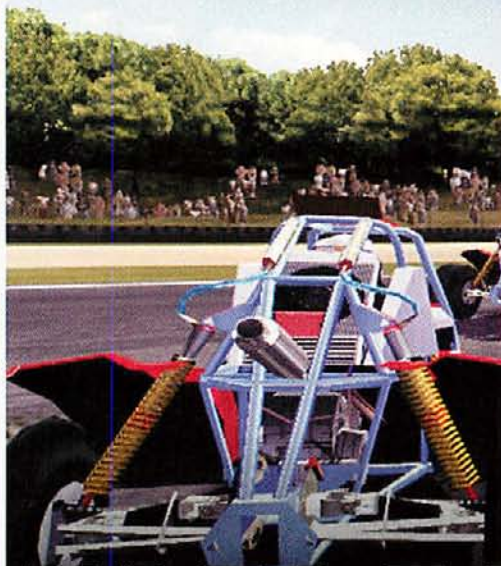
IT'S ODD THAT DESPITE THE RUNAWAY success of Battlefront.com's *Combat Mission* series, we haven't seen more attempts to capitalize on the "we-go" style of tactical World War II war-gaming (i.e., simultaneous turns). Developer Koios Works gave us the ancient-era *Tin Soldiers* series, and *Panzer Command: Operation Winter Storm* (of which I've been playing a late beta version) takes that franchise's tactical expertise and moves it to more recent times. It's superficially similar to *Combat Mission*, but with an emphasis on group tactics. The scale still gears toward individual tanks and squads, but the focus on command structure creates some interesting choices. The overriding principle here: The more a unit tries to do, the less micromanagement ability a player has. So if you're trying to move long distances, you must issue orders to an entire platoon...whereas if your units are operating in a small area, you can direct each tank individually. It's a nice way of constraining a player's choices without constraining the gameplay.

The name of the game refers to the Germans' failed attempt to relieve the Stalingrad pocket in 1942, and you can fight individual battles or the entire campaign as a series of linked scenarios. While the lack of variety may be of some concern, thematic unity could make for a more cohesive campaign. That's one thing *Combat Mission* lacks, and the genre sure needs it. **Bruce Geryk**

(For more on *Panzer Command*, including screenshots, visit Bruce at grognaards.1UP.com)



TIME 0:44.98
LAP 0:44.98



ToCA 3's damage modeling is, to say the least, shattering.



Karts—you remember them from your childhood, but not going at this speed.

TOCA RACE DRIVER 3

Pick a car, any car

PUBLISHER: Codemasters DEVELOPER: Codemasters GENRE: Racing ESRB RATING: E
REQUIRED: 1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space RECOMMENDED: 3.2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, racing wheel MULTIPLAYER: 2-12 players

DIGITAL MOTORHEADS LOOKING FOR a multidiscipline, multivehicle thrill ride should take a peek at *ToCA Race Driver 3*. Developer Codemasters brings the serious heat with more real-life cars (70-plus), more real-life tracks (100 variants), and more forms of automotive competition than in any racing game in recent memory. Accordingly, you can find yourself powersliding along a tree-lined dirt trail in one session, nimbly guiding your vintage open-wheeler through a storied European road course the next, and banging fenders at high-speed ovals such as Indianapolis Motor Speedway to finish off. You may even encounter several classes of cars at the same event. Yet the oh-so-relaxed physics haven't improved appreciably since the original 1997 *ToCA Touring Car Championship*, so you really aren't compelled to approach a formula car much differently than you would a sedan.

But *ToCA 3* is by no means a bad or even subpar game. Indeed, you could spend several weeks simply exploring the surroundings, partaking in the various championships and tours, and freeing the 95 percent of the game that's initially locked. And you certainly need to drive smartly, lest you incur penalty flags for cutting corners or leaning too hard on your

opponent's fender. You'll want to avoid collisions, too—unless you enjoy peering through a cracked windshield and leaving an impressive wake of detached parts. *ToCA 3*'s wheel-spin-heavy vehicles deliver colossal drifts in high-speed turns, and its soundscape envelopes you from the start to the checkered flag.

Yet for all this panache, the game seems... unfinished. You get some intriguing cut-scenes with your crew chief, but he otherwise dispenses a lot of generic and erroneous on-track advice. Penalty flags fly when you least expect them, your A.I. peers drive erratically, races generally last only a few laps, and your opponents' vehicles look skewed when viewed up close. Worst of all is the physics model, which makes for great fun initially but doesn't deliver an added level of challenge for veteran drivers who hunger for more. *ToCA 3* is an incredibly big game, but the intensity dies down once you make it past those first few exciting hours. **Gord Goble**

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT

ToCA 3 unabashedly adopts the trendy "more cars = better game" formula, with mixed success.



FOR ALL THIS PANACHE, THE GAME SEEMS...UNFINISHED.

REWIND

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

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
25 to Life	March 06	★★★★☆
80 Days	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Advent Rising	Nov 05	★★★★☆
Agatha Christie: And Then There Were None	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Age of Empires III	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Anglo-German War '39-'45	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Area 51	Sept 05	★★★★☆
The Bard's Tale	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Battle of Britain II: Wings of Victory	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Battlefield 2	Sept 05	★★★★★
Battlefield 2: Special Forces	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Black & White 2	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Blitzkrieg 2	Dec 05	★★★★☆
BloodRayne 2	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Bone: Out From Boneville	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood	Dec 05	★★★★★
Call of Duty 2	Jan 06	★★★★☆
City of Villains	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Civilization IV	Jan 06	★★★★★
Codename: Panzers—Phase Two	Nov 05	★★★★☆
Crown of Glory: Europe in the Age of Napoleon	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Cuban Missile Crisis: The Aftermath	March 06	★★★★☆
Darwinia	Dec 05	★★★★★
Day of Defeat: Source	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Diplomacy	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	July/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Down in Flames	Dec 05	★★★★★
Dragonshard	Dec 05	★★★★☆
DRIV3R	July/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Dungeon Lords	Sept 05	★★★★☆
Dungeon Siege II	Nov 05	★★★★☆
Earth 2160	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Empire Earth II: The Art of Supremacy	March 06	★★★★☆



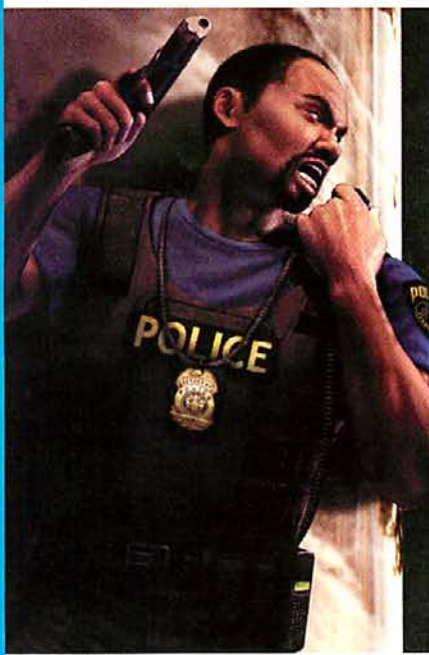
▲ Empire Earth II: The Art of Supremacy

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
ER	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Fable: The Lost Chapters	Nov 05	★★★★☆
Fantastic 4	Sept 05	★★★★☆
Fate	Sept 05	★★★★☆
F.E.A.R.	Jan 06	★★★★☆
FlatOut	Sept 05	★★★★☆
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Sept 05	★★★★★
GTR FIA Racing	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Guild Wars	July/Aug 05	★★★★★
Gun	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Hammer & Sickle	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Heroes of the Pacific	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Imperial Glory	Sept 05	★★★★☆
Indigo Prophecy	Dec 05	★★★★★
King Kong	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Law & Order: Criminal Intent	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Legion Arena	March 06	★★★★☆
Lego Star Wars	July/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Madden NFL 06	Nov 05	★★★★☆
The Matrix Online	July/Aug 05	★★★★☆
The Matrix: Path of Neo	Feb 06	★★★★☆
The Movies	Jan 06	★★★★☆
MX vs. ATV Unleashed	March 06	★★★★☆
Myst V: End of Ages	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	Feb 06	★★★★★
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2005	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Pariah	Sept 05	★★★★☆
Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	Feb 06	★★★★★
Quake 4	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Rag Doll Kung Fu	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Restricted Area	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Rome: Total War—Barbarian Invasion	Dec 05	★★★★☆
RYL: Path of the Emperor	Oct 05	★★★★☆



▲ Ticket to Ride

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Serious Sam II	Dec 05	★★★★★
Shattered Union	Jan 06	★★★★☆
The Sims 2: Nightlife	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Sniper Elite	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Space Hack	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Star Chamber: The Harbinger Saga	March 06	★★★★☆
Star Wars Battlefront II	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Star Wars Galaxies	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Starship Troopers	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Stronghold 2	Sept 05	★★★★☆
Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse	Feb 06	★★★★☆
T-72: Balkans on Fire!	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Ticket to Ride	March 06	★★★★★
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06	Dec 05	★★★★★
Tin Soldiers: Julius Caesar	Sept 05	★★★★☆
Total Overdose	Jan 06	★★★★☆
TrackMania Sunrise	Sept 05	★★★★☆
UFO: Aftershock	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Vietcong 2	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War—Winter Assault	Dec 05	★★★★★
WinSPMBT	Nov 05	★★★★☆
Worldwide Soccer Manager 2006	Feb 06	★★★★★
WWII Tank Commander	March 06	★★★★☆
X3: Reunion	Feb 06	★★★★☆

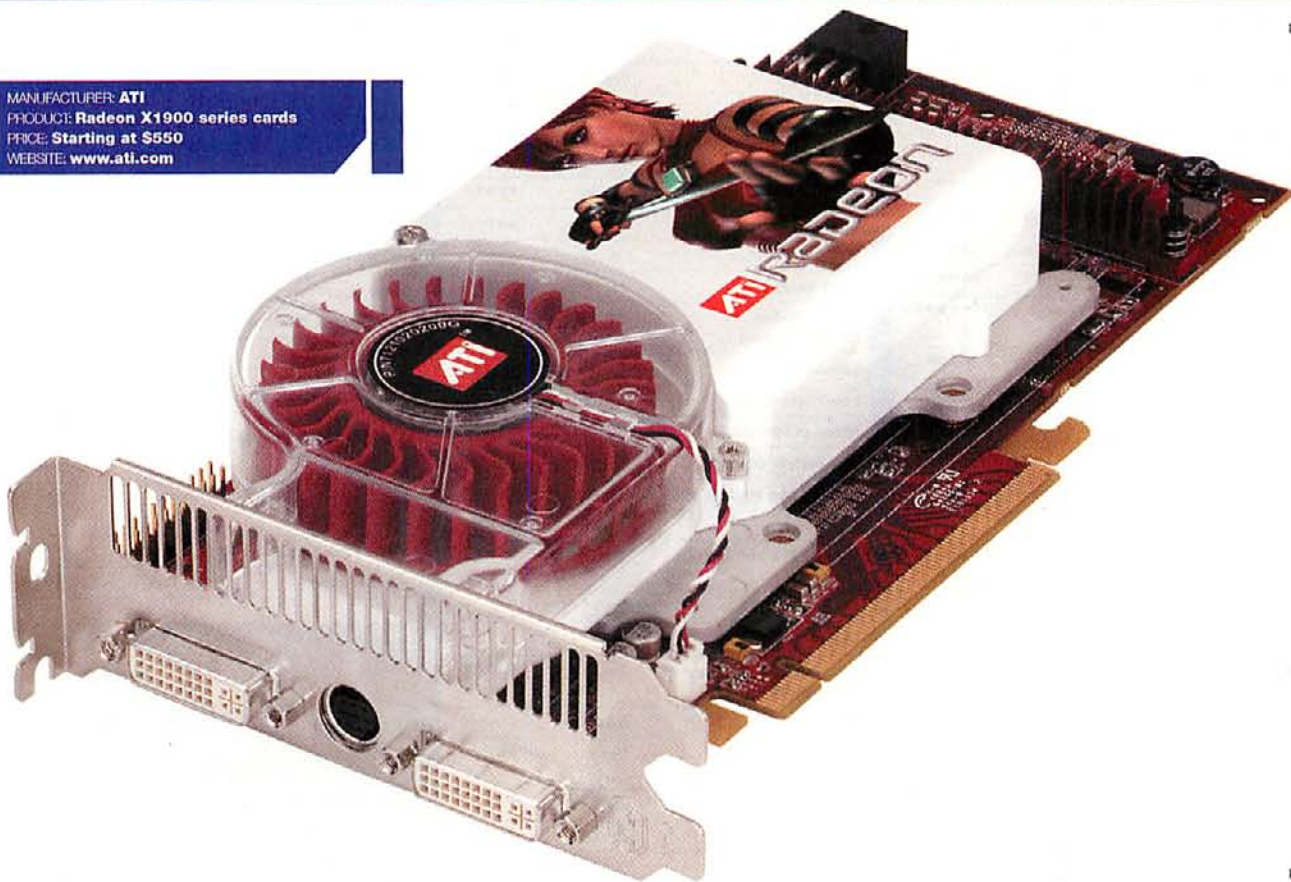


▲ 25 to Life

POWER H

ATI's Radeon X1900 cards bring the noise

MANUFACTURER: **ATI**
PRODUCT: **Radeon X1900 series cards**
PRICE: **Starting at \$550**
WEBSITE: **www.ati.com**



WELCOME BACK TO ANOTHER EXCITING installment of *Which Graphics Card Should I Buy Now?* When we last left our hero, he was trying to get his hands on the XFX GeForce 7800 GTX 512MB graphics cards. Good luck finding one card, let alone two. They are scarce and selling for over \$700 apiece online. It's almost as if the card exists solely for the press and a small handful of extremely high-end enthusiasts. Why were they such a hot commodity? Nvidia jacked up the GTX's clock speed while bolting on a heat sink the size of a bathtub. The result: It outpaced ATI's X1800 series cards, and we had a new, clear champ. Three months later, here we go again. ATI is back.

You know how this rat race goes. As solid as the X1000 series of cards has been, no medals get

handed out for second place. ATI is releasing the new Radeon X1900 cards in three flavors: the X1900 XTX, the X1900 XT, and the X1900 CrossFire Edition. These three cards are all available now, and quantities look pretty good so far. An All-in-Wonder version of the card is even shipping in small quantities, but we'll save that appraisal for another day.

The major architectural design of the Radeon X1900 is the same as that in the Radeon X1800 and other cards in the X1000 series. The difference here is that the numbers of certain processing units have been changed. There are still eight vertex shader units and 16 texture units, as in the X1800 cards. The raster operation units have actually been reduced from 16 to 12, but the pixel shader units have tripled in number to a whopping 48.

The only other architectural change in the X1900 cards worth mentioning: a 50 percent larger on-chip cache for the Z-buffer. This is primarily to help keep performance high at extreme resolutions (above 1600x1200). As resolution grows, the size of the hierarchical Z-buffer cache must grow, or performance can really drop off.

OVERCLOCKERS WELCOME

It's interesting to see that even though ATI is shipping with the same 900MHz GDDR3 memory Nvidia uses in its 512MB GeForce 7800 GTX, the ATI hardware doesn't really push the memory very hard. Overclockers will probably be able to add 100MHz or more (200MHz effective rate) to their memory speeds on X1900 cards without breaking a sweat.

EXTREME TECH!

Want a ridiculously hardcore look at all the hardware in this issue? Head over to extremetech.com, where Loyd, Jason, and a gang of geeks get down to business.

support

**Tech Medics**

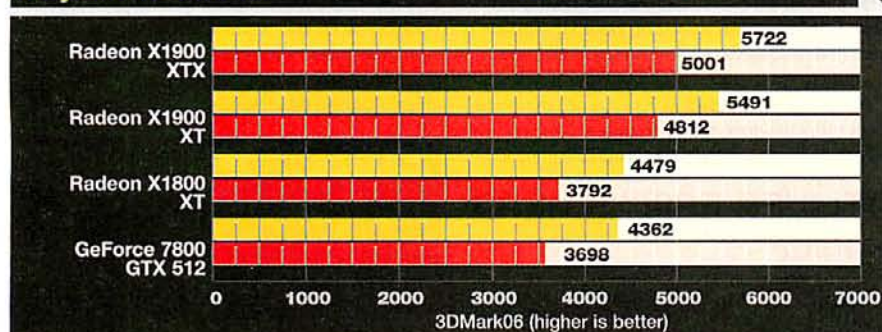
This month:

Is your computer ready for *Oblivion*? That, and many more fascinating questions in this month's mailbag.

UNGRY

GAME TESTS**Playable Resolution**

■ 1280x1024 ■ 1600x1200



In fact, there are absolutely no differences between the X1900 XT and XTX, save for the shipping clock speeds. Well, that and the extra \$100. Considering that the money buys you 4 percent more core clock speed and 7 percent more memory clock speed, it makes the X1900 XT a great deal—or the XTX version a rip-off, depending on whom you ask. It's time for the numbers to do the talking.

Futuremark's latest 3D benchmark, 3DMark06, is the only synthetic test we use to judge videocard performance. (That is, it's the only test we use that isn't an actual game.) In the single cards, we see some good news for ATI. Its \$550 X1900 XT card outpaces even the GeForce 7800 GTX 512, which currently is almost impossible to find and costs \$200 more. In dual-videocard configurations, ATI's new cards pull way ahead, running faster with 4x AA and 8x AF at 1600x1200 than a pair of Nvidia's 512MB cards without AA or AF.

In real-world, in-game tests, the X1900 hits an interestingly stuttering stride. Both X1900 cards show a marked improvement over the X1800 at high resolutions and with AA and AF applied. With few differences between the XTX and XT versions of the new card, both handily outpace the 7800 GTX. The 512MB GTX, though, still rules *HL2: Lost Coast*. The same holds true in dual-graphics card configurations.

Something about *Lost Coast* just really likes the higher number of texture address units and raster ops in Nvidia's hardware while not particularly taking advantage of ATI's greater number of pixel shader units.

ATI also lost a little ground with the *Doom 3* engine. Nevertheless, ATI turned up the heat as soon as the antialiasing and anisotropic filtering were turned on. What is notable here is the big performance bump from the previous flagship X1800 XT to the X1900 XT. For a \$50 difference, you get a lot more "oomph." In *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* tests using Shader Model 3.0, ATI's new X1900 cards speed ahead of Nvidia's. For those sporting a dual-card configuration, ATI scores about 15 to 20 percent better than a pair of 512MB 7800 GTX cards while costing a couple hundred bucks less.

The most impressive difference, though, comes with *F.E.A.R.* With rich real-time shadows all over, spectacular dynamic lighting, tons of normal mapping, lots of physics, and particle systems galore, *F.E.A.R.* will give your computer a real workout. With these super-high-end cards, ATI is totally kicking butt. With AA and AF enabled, a Radeon X1800 XT runs a little faster than the 512MB GeForce 7800 GTX, and the X1900 cards improve upon this stellar performance across the board. It looks like *F.E.A.R.* really loves the drastic increase in pixel shader units.

INSIDE

92

REVIEW**Rock**

High-end headphones for tuning out.



92

REVIEW**Roll**

Nod your head if you're a hardcore sim fan.

When Nvidia introduced the GeForce 7800 GTX 512, it was seen as a monster. How could ATI top it without sticking itself in the same supply situation that Nvidia has? (The 7800 GTX 512MB cards now sell for \$750 and are impossible to find in stock.)

At a suggested retail price of \$650, the Radeon X1900 XTX isn't as good a deal as the XT. Without a doubt, the XTX is the fastest graphics card on the market. The performance improvement over the X1800 XT is especially visible in games like *F.E.A.R.* and in 3DMark06. This leads us to believe that the X1900 architecture is geared mostly toward high-end future content, which is expected to be heavy on the pixel shaders. Still, at \$650, we can't immediately recommend it. Not with the more affordable XT version nipping at its heels.

The real missing piece of the puzzle here is availability. If card prices become scarce and prices spike upward, everything changes. With the X1900 cards, ATI has done a fantastic job of attacking Nvidia's "glory SKU," the 7800 GTX 512, by boasting superior overall performance and, at least for the time being, better availability and price. Spending \$550 for one of these cards is still an expensive proposition. The upside for penny-pinchers is that the introduction of the X1900 should also push down the price of X1800 XT and XL cards. /Jason Cross

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD**VERDICT**

X1900 XT: Scoring only a few points lower than the XTX, and costing \$100 less, this card is a much better buy.

X1900 XTX: A new "fastest card on the block." It never gets old. The nose-bleed-inducing prices do, though.



OVERCLOCKERS WILL PROBABLY BE ABLE TO ADD 100MHZ OR MORE TO THE MEMORY SPEEDS WITHOUT BREAKING A SWEAT.

I HAVE NO MIC AND I MUST SCREAM

Alienware's high-end Ozma 7 headphones work well—you just won't be able to tell anyone about it

MANUFACTURER: Alienware (technically, Ultrasone)

PRODUCT: Ozma 7 headphones

PRICE: \$199

WEBSITE: www.aliware.com

"DIE, YOU F***IN' BITCH!" DESPITE COMPETING against the roar of gunfire and sound of shattering glass, that nasal, high-pitched taunt rings with perfect clarity. He can't be more than 14 years old, this kid, and he just won't shut up. Thank you, Alienware, for delivering the "full" auditory experience with your new headphones.

Yes, the gaming-PC manufacturer is treading on new ground, producing a high-end set of over-ear cup headphones. Hard, adjustable plastics and comfortable leather pads make the Ozma 7 headphones a pleasure to drop atop one's dome. In countless audio tests, both in and out of games, the headset sounds impressive. Meaty, tight bass usually masks weak mid- to high-range tones, but

that's not the case here, though.

Whispered, ethereal laughter in *F.E.A.R.* eerily lilts around your ears, but as bullets are belching out, the noise remains ferocious. Music sounds especially crisp, whether it's the rasp of Ray Charles or the rhymes of A Tribe Called Quest. And this is just from plugging the headphones directly into an Asus A8N motherboard's audio-out jack! The only thing that can make this even better is test-driving the Ozma 7 phones with a Creative Labs X-Fi sound-card (the headphone-friendly X-Fi settings sound even more amazing).

But you should expect as much audio dynamite from these headphones. Alienware is basically rebranding a pair of high-end Ultrasone cans (the

HFI-700). At least that explains the hefty \$200 price tag. What it doesn't explain, though, is why Alienware would think to deliver gaming headphones without a mic. If you've got nobody to talk to, no problem—eat your caviar, sip your tea, and enjoy the opulence these headphones provide. But any serious gamer that wants to keep in contact with *Battlefield 2* squadmates or taunt losers in *HL2: The Hidden* will find these headphones utterly worthless. That is, of course, unless you enjoy feverishly tapping "STFU, n00b!" between shots. /Darren Gladstone

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT

These headphones sound great. The lack of a mic: not so great.

ALIENWARE. WHY DELIVER GAMING HEADPHONES WITHOUT A MIC?

HEADS UP

See the world in a snap—all of it—with the new TrackIR 4 Pro

tracker translates your head movements into in-game camera motions.

It won't get you laid, but the results are worth the naking of potential nookie—at least if you're a flight-sim or racing-game fan, the unit's target market. This newest model is much sleeker and has a wider field of view than the older ones. That wider field helps capture "six degrees of freedom" (6DOF). It's a feature that goes beyond simply letting you look left, right, up, and down; it means you can lean in your seat, scoot close, or even rotate your head, and the onscreen camera will weave, zoom, and spin accordingly. Note that TrackIR 3 users can add 6DOF functionality to their units with an optional \$30 software add-on. Not all TrackIR-enhanced games support 6DOF (you'll find the full list at www.naturalpoint.com), but those that do will sell you on the feature once you try it.

Take *Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004: A Century of Flight*. Prop yourself up higher in your chair, and you can see the top of your aircraft's virtual dashboard. Lean out of the pilot's seat in your helicopter and look down, and you

can see the landing skid. The trouble is, TrackIR 4 Pro's wow value is still limited to the flight and racing genres. While *NaturalPoint*, for instance, encouraged the makers of the *Battlefield* series to include support in their latest titles, that never materialized. And switching on the unit's mouse emulation—basically, you use your head to move the mouse pointer—just doesn't work in the *Battlefield* games and is impractical in many other first-person shooters. *NaturalPoint's* reps tells us that the upcoming *Armed Assault*, due this summer from *Operation Flashpoint* developer Bohemia Interactive, will be the first shooter to support 6DOF. So it's clear the company is at least trying to break into new genres with its gizmo.

But if driving or flight is your thing, the TrackIR 4 Pro is a must-get. It's easy to set up and install, demands very little from your system, and adds so much situational awareness to your games that you'll wonder how you ever got along without it. /Crispin Boyer

COMPUTER
GAMING
WORLD

VERDICT

Will make heads roll, which, in turn, makes your sim games rock.

THE WIDER FIELD OF VIEW HELPS CAPTURE "SIX DEGREES OF FREEDOM."



EXTREME TECH

TECH MEDICS

Something stuck in your ASCII? Tell ExtremeTech's Jason Cross all about it

Q: I have an Athlon 2K machine with a GeForce4 64MB DDR videocard and 512MB RAM on XP. I have been anxiously looking forward to the release of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* for some time, and I thought maybe some planning ahead was in order. Do I try to pump up my current computer (i.e., 1GB RAM, 256MB videocard) with the vain hopes that it will be enough to play *Oblivion*, or should I save that \$150 to \$200 toward the purchase of a newer computer?

Ray Lammers

A: Well, Ray, *Oblivion* looks like it is going to be one of the more strenuous PC games on the market, and your machine does not meet even the minimum system requirements (it's very close—a 128MB graphics card with DirectX 9 drivers would put you right at the bare minimum). Expanding your RAM to 1 gigabyte and buying a reasonable 256MB graphics card will certainly help, but you're still going to have to turn all the options down to minimum and run the game at a very low resolution, and it won't look anything like all those pretty screenshots. To do right by the game, you're going to need a new computer. You want a 3GHz Pentium 4 or 3000+ rated Athlon 64 CPU, a gig of RAM, and a reasonably powerful DirectX 9 videocard (something in the \$200-and-up price range). For you, that means a new CPU, motherboard, RAM, graphics card, and possibly some other components (like power supply) as well.

You basically have three options, Ray. You can upgrade your computer for a couple hundred bucks and barely meet the minimum requirements, but playing *Oblivion* probably won't be a very good experience. Your second option is to spend a lot more money, upgrading your computer to get a

really good experience. This is expensive, but all your other games will run much better, and you'll be ready for other demanding games in the future. Option three is to just buy an Xbox 360 and play *Oblivion* on that. At \$400, it's cheaper than a full system upgrade, but that's still a good chunk of change, and you won't get to freely download all the user-made content you'll be able to find for the PC version after release. The other trick is actually finding an Xbox 360 for sale.

Q: I'm running an AMD Athlon XP 2600, 1GB of RAM, and an Nvidia 5200 Ultra. I'm trying to find a new setup but don't have \$1,600 dollars for what I want. What would be a good AGP card for under \$500? I was thinking of a 6600 or 6800 if they make the 6800 in AGP.

Chris G.

A: Chris, Nvidia just released the GeForce 7800 GS, and you can find it for as low as \$299 online. That's definitely the way to go. The card delivers great bang for the buck, and it'll hold up well in all the latest games, at least until you save up for that new computer. You can also find some pretty great deals on the ATI Radeon X800 XT these days, which is a pretty much the same speed (a little bit faster in some games, a little slower in others).

Q: Recently, I switched from dial-up to DSL Lite. Primarily with a router, I can run two systems on the Internet at the same time, plus it doesn't tie up the phone. My questions are: 1) If my kids are doing homework research on the Internet while I'm playing something like *Guild Wars*, how much effect does this have on lag time?

2) If they are talking on the phone while I am

gaming, does that effect lag time?

3) Finally, would something like Hawking Technologies' Broadband Booster be of any benefit?

Steve Broesder

A: These are common concerns for new broadband users, Steve. Let's take them one at a time:

1) If your kids are really doing "homework research" and not downloading huge files or trading files on peer-to-peer networks (BitTorrent, LimeWire, etc.), you'll be just fine. Basic webpage loading, e-mail, and instant messaging use very little bandwidth and won't stress your connection much. Your performance in *Guild Wars* shouldn't be affected.

2) Talking on the phone does nothing at all to the performance of your Internet access. If you are noticing hitches, contact your provider—something's wrong. 3) The Broadband Booster from Hawking is only good if you have multiple computers just saturating your upstream bandwidth. In other words, you're sending a truckload of data. This happens a lot with peer-to-peer file-trading programs, which can and will use every ounce of available upstream bandwidth you've got if you're not careful. Sending huge e-mail attachments or sending files via FTP can have the same effect. Sending simple text e-mails or instant messages and browsing the Web aren't a big deal. So if you want to game while someone in your house is sending a whole lot of data or maybe downloading huge files a lot, the Broadband Booster might help.

Got questions? Send them to
Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com

DEVELOPER: Maxis
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
GENRE: Strategy

THE SIMS 2

From the cradle to the grave with Tom and Bruce

BRUCE: I'VE JUST BEEN TOLD SOME VERY disturbing news. According to someone at Blizzard, there are forces trying to affect past events by messing with the world's timeline. It's in a place called Caverns of Time, and we're going to have to hurry if we're going to save Azeroth from...huh? We're doing what this month? I see. OK, I guess we're going to be playing *The Sims 2*. So instead of a time-traveling orc warrior saving the world, I'm going to be playing computer Barbies. Something about this makes me think it was Tom's idea.

TOM: The idea—yes, it was mine—is to play *The Sims 2*, complete with all the expansions, taking a Sim from the cradle to the grave. We'll see who can rack up the most Aspiration points along the way. The only rule is that we cannot actually spend the Aspiration points, which are normally used to buy quasimagical objects like money trees, smart helmets, love tubs, or water coolers that allow you to stop aging. Our Sims will live out their natural lives, learning, earning, loving, and eventually dying without supernatural aid.

BRUCE: I just skip the whole cradle thing and go straight to college. I name my Sim Silvio Berlusconi because my ultimate goal is to become prime minister of Italy. I have a lot of ideas about

the Northern League, plus I really wanna stick it to Romano Prodi. For my college I choose the Académie Le Tour because that sounds Italian, or at least foreign, which I assume is one of the prerequisites for being prime minister of Italy.

Unfortunately, it's hard to make your character look like Silvio Berlusconi, which makes sense since I think the game was made in France. I make my ultimate aspiration to be knowledge, since I'm pretty sure you have to be smart to be in charge of Italy.

TOM: Unlike Bruce, who is going to shoehorn a Sim into his own inscrutable notion of European politics, I am going to roll the cosmic dice, which is what being born is really like. Sometimes you're a genius medical student who climbs mountains and hates 90 percent of all games. Other times you're a guy from Arkansas whose childhood was a living hell thanks to his father's last name.

So in the interest of realism, I roll up two parents: Norwood and Rita Lee Pratt. I move them into a modest house and, umm, let nature take its course. Ichabod Pratt is born.

BRUCE: One of the first things I notice about *L'Académie de Tour* is that it's firmly based on European socialism. People keep coming into my room and using my computer, even though they probably have computers in their own rooms.

My guess is that this doesn't matter because the government owns all the computers. So the government computer in the downstairs room is just as good as the one upstairs. Since you probably need a unanimous vote by all the Belgians and Luxembourgs to get a new computer in Europe, I'm worried that mine will wear out faster and I'll need to get the expansion pack where you can buy typewriters. That's another thing I plan to fix as prime minister of Italy.

TOM: Rita Lee gets pregnant again and gives birth on the same day as Ichabod's birthday, the occasion that marks his transition from child to teen. So instead of enjoying his birthday party by flirting with the gorgeous Dina Caliente now that he's finally old enough, he has to help take care of an infant. After a few days of dealing with a screaming baby, psycho mother, and frazzled father, Ichabod does what any teen in his position would do: He leaves. A quick phone call nets him

LAST MONTH...
Bruce smacked down both Tom and COW Editor-in-Chief Jeff Green in a rousing game of Ticket To Ride. Jeff is still withholding Bruce's paycheck, out of spite.

INSTEAD OF A TIME-TRAVELING ORC WARRIOR SAVING THE WORLD, I'M GOING TO BE PLAYING COMPUTER BARBIES.



▲ Ichabod Pratt as a young adult.

TWO GAMERS ENTER, ONE GAMER WINS

PLAYERS



Bruce Geryk
When he's not writing about nerdy war games, Bruce Geryk spends his days putting a hard-earned medical degree to good use.



Tom Chick
In addition to being one of the videogame industry's most prolific freelance journalists, Tom also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.

a \$1,000 scholarship and then he's off to Sim State University with a total of 37,000 Aspiration points.

BRUCE: It's always nice when the game has to interrupt your fun to tell you that you're going to class too much. Apparently, the Maxis college simulator doesn't have an algorithm for people who actually go to all their classes, since it feels that I am "wasting time" in class because my "class performance" bar is "maxed out." I can only assume that some of the classes are superfluous, like the ones about Pascal. And I don't mean Blaise.

TOM: Because they never have to roll to turn undead or figure out their armor class, Sims don't have stats like Wisdom and Dexterity. Instead, they have positions on a set of continuums, such as Lazy to Active or Grouchy to Nice. Since my Sim was born, not made, I don't get to choose these (this also explains why Ichabod has a hideous "bowl cut" hairstyle). Ichabod's most notable trait is that he's all the way at the Outgoing end of Shy to Outgoing. He's the kind of guy who will just randomly start talking to you if you're in line in front of him at the supermarket.

So I have him choose popularity as his lifelong aspiration, which determines what he wants from day to day. For Ichabod, this means lots of partying. His college years are spent throwing parties in the dorm. When a party happens, Ichabod gets lots of Aspiration points for "talking," "flirting," or "telling a joke," which are like killing rats in an RPG. Also, many of these give Ichabod Influence points, which he uses to convince Suzie Stompie, a girl who constantly admires him, to write his term papers.

BRUCE: The game just told me that I can get 500 Aspiration points for declaring a mathematics major. Since this is a better reason for choosing a major than the one used by probably 90 percent of everybody in real life, I do it. The tips say this is a good skill to know if I want to have a career as a mechanic.

TOM: While Bruce's Sim will be changing sparkplugs, Ichabod will be ruling cities. His lifelong want is to reach the highest level in the political career track. Ergo, he will be a political science major. Since this requires a few points in the Body skill, he occasionally visits the gym. That's where he meets Tammy Parker. Ichabod spends the rest of the day hanging out with her. He even misses class. He invites her to a party the next day, and a date the day after. He buys a dresser so he can change into formal wear. They go to the Lulu Lounge, where Ichabod pushes his luck a little too much during the slow dancing. Kids.

BRUCE: Since Tom brought it up, my Sim has a crush on someone named Jessica Benson. There are a couple ways I know this. One is that every time she walks by, a bunch of hearts fly up, like in that superhero power in *Freedom Force*. Another is that sometimes my Sim just runs out into the middle of the street when Jessica is walking by. Based on my Sim's favorite activity of playing chess, I'm sure he'll score real soon.



Ichabod Pratt as an adult.

AS SOON AS ICHABOD POPS INTO ADULTHOOD, THE GAME DECIDES TO GIVE HIM A RECEDING HAIRLINE. THANKS, SIMS 2.

TOM: For his next date with Tammy, Ichabod takes her bowling. Yes, bowling. And it goes swimmingly. There is even making out. When Ichabod gets home, Tammy has left him a single flower and a big-screen TV. Yes, a big-screen TV. Maybe I should try the bowling thing in real life.

BRUCE: Since I'm doing so great in my classes just because I'm showing up, this must mean my Sim is a genius. That makes the "Dean's List" goal pretty attractive, since I'm basically guaranteed to make it.

TOM: One of Ichabod's recurring wants is, well, something any college age kid wants: woohoo. Ichabod had come close with Dina Caliente, but Tammy ends up being his first. It happens in the hot tub behind the frat house during a sports party. Yeah, kinda seedy, but it racks up a whole mess of Aspiration points and influence. When Ichabod finally graduates magna cum laude, he has 147,250 Aspiration points. And he is no longer a virgin.

BRUCE: I'm guessing *Sims* creator Will Wright had a pretty weird college career. While I'm eating lunch one day, a guy comes down and sits at my table. I'm almost done, so when I finish eating, instead of leaving, I choose "hang out" so I can talk to the guy while he eats and maybe increase my Social bar or whatever that thing is. So of course both guys promptly get up from the table and sit on the floor. No wonder Will ended up making computer games for a living.

TOM: As soon as Ichabod pops into adulthood, the game decides to give him a receding hairline. Thanks, *Sims 2*. As if it wasn't enough to grow up looking like Ringo Star in the '60s, now I look like Matt Frewer. And here's where things start to get seriously weird. Sims only get older when you play them. So I'm now the same age as my own parents. Tammy Parker looks young enough to be my daughter. It gets creepier later.

BRUCE: Now that Tom's Sim has graduated, his politico friends must be pressuring my Sim's

professors, because I just took the exam for the first semester of my freshman year and the game says I got a C. Huh? I thought I was maxed out on smartness? I think I need to reevaluate my Dean's List goal. Conveniently, one comes up which says "complete freshman year." That one may be a little more realistic.

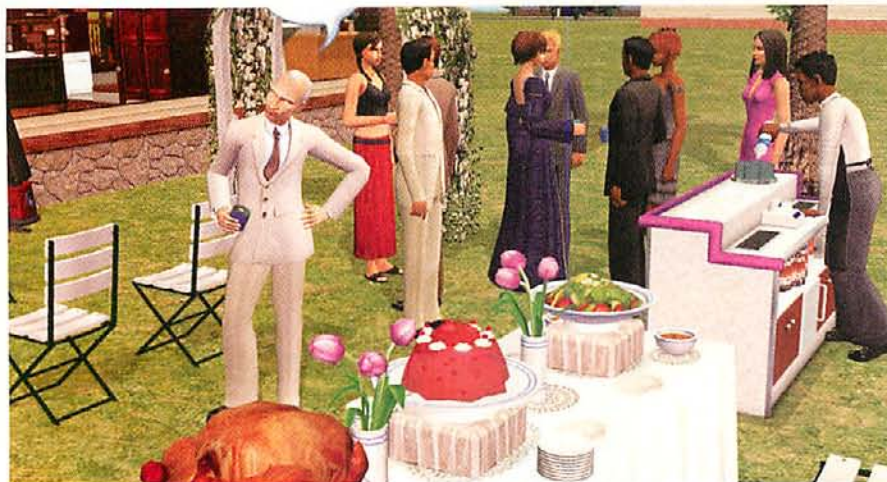
TOM: Ichabod's first order of business is to get a job in politics. None are available. At E-minus 23 days (i.e., 23 days until Ichabod goes from adult to elder), I'm down to four simoleons and no way to pay the bills. But that doesn't stop Ichabod from partying. He also goes on a group outing to the Deh'Javu Modern Art Museum, but the group includes both Tammy Parker and Dina Caliente. Dina gets jealous and immediately makes a big



Hell hath no fury....



You gonna eat that?



FOR THE BIRTHDAY PARTY MARKING HIS TRANSITION FROM ADULT TO ELDER, ICHABOD TURNS INTO A WHITE-HAIRED OLD MAN.

scene. The outing abruptly ends with a rating of "disaster." What's more, Dina shows up every night and knocks over the garbage can in front of my house. This leads to bugs. Lots of bugs. Ichabod can't sleep because he's freaking out about bugs.

BRUCE: Locking in goals seems to be the main activity in this game. That, and going to the bathroom. Whenever a goal comes around that says "finish X year," I automatically lock it so it won't go away. These kinds of goals get you lots of Aspiration points, as well as some influence. I'm going to need a lot of influence in the Italian parliament or the Northern League will eat me for lunch.

TOM: The bug situation is getting serious, despite my best efforts to spray and stomp them. Dina even comes over during the day and knocks the garbage can over, right in front of me. She refuses to talk. Ichabod takes a job in business, because he really needs the money to hire an exterminator. For the bugs, not Dina.

BRUCE: Meanwhile, back in college, my Sim missed class due to the important activity of playing SSX on the PC. Except that there isn't a version of SSX for the PC that I know of. I guess this is a sort of preview for the upcoming version of PC SSX soon to be released in the same make-believe land where scorned women come to Tom's house in the middle of the night.

TOM: Finally, on E-minus 17, after 10 days of looking for a job in politics, Ichabod sees a notice in the paper for a lobbyist. He is quickly promoted to campaign manager.

BRUCE: There must be a fine line between being a genius and failing out of school, because I am now suffering from low class performance. Some scary window just popped up to tell me this. So going to every class is a waste of time, but if you miss one, you fail. I wonder what was taught in that one class.

TOM: By E-minus 7, Ichabod has been promoted to congressperson. But the next step requires some serious work on charisma and logic. No more parties for the time being. Ichabod buys a telescope for raising Logic and a fancy mirror for practicing speeches to improve

Charisma. But then the telescope, mirror, and his car are stolen by a burglar. So Ichabod buys a burglar alarm the same time as most other people: one day too late.

For the birthday party marking his transition from adult to elder, Ichabod turns into a white-haired old man. Now that Tammy looks like his granddaughter, it's really creepy when they flirt.

BRUCE: My Sim went to his final exam but failed anyway. Now he is on academic probation, which is one of his fears so he loses a bunch of Aspiration points. In other news, Jessica Benson smells bad. She has like some sort of green gas coming off her all the time. I wonder if it's too late to go save Azeroth.

TOM: If you think the 50s in *World of Warcraft* are a slog, trying getting those last two points to max out your Logic score in *The Sims 2*. Ichabod has to do this to qualify for mayor, and it takes several days of concentrated effort. Finally, he becomes as logical and charismatic as he can possibly be. Imagine someone as brainy as Bruce Geryk and as charming as George Clooney. That's Ichabod Pratt.

He is promoted to Mayor of SimCity at the age of 64 (days), thereby achieving the highest rank in the political career track, fulfilling his lifelong aspiration, and attaining a perpetually platinum



▲ Rita Pratt is born.

mood. Without much left to do in life, he proposes to Tammy at a fancy restaurant over a meal of lime glazed prawns and crepe suzettes. And, yeah, it looks pretty creepy. Fortunately, when Ichabod seals the deal a few days later at a wedding party, Tammy pops into her adult stage. Ichabod still looks too old for her, but at least it's not so much a May/December romance as, say, a June/December romance.

BRUCE: Because of the advanced time-simulation algorithms in this game, it takes me the entire lifespan of Tom's Sim to finish college. Or something. I didn't quite hear the last thing Tom said before I got into the Frostwolf queue. Only 2,000 people in front of me!

TOM: At the age of 73, Ichabod "tries for a baby" with Tammy. Still slightly creeped out, I avert my eyes. A few days later, Rita is born, named after Ichabod's mother. As Rita grows into a toddler, there's a grand birthday party, with Ichabod's closest friends and his mother and father, all of whom are considerably younger than him.

The next day, at the age of 80, Ichabod has just finished teaching Rita how to talk and he's put her to bed. Ichabod's mother, Rita Lee, is in the living room listening to Tammy play the piano. Ichabod is preparing salmon for dinner. At 7:05 p.m., Death walks in and hands Ichabod a little drink with an umbrella in it. Ichabod turns ethereal, takes up his suitcase, and disappears forever, leaving Tammy and Rita Lee Pratt sobbing, a newly talkative Rita babbling in her crib, and some half-prepared salmon steaks gathering flies in the kitchen. /

FINAL SCORE.

TOM 327,500

BRUCE LEVEL 48 SHAMAN



AT 7:05 P.M. DEATH COMES INTO THE KITCHEN



Time is on your side in this month's demo of *TimeShift*, Atari's futuristic sci-fi shooter. Also: Take a peek at *The Godfather* before enjoying some classic shareware titles from the good folks over at PopCap. Last—but certainly not least—check out some of our favorite applications from around the CGW office.



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TIMESHIFT (DEMO)

Use your time-shifting abilities to infiltrate heavily guarded buildings in this dark steampunk universe. Be sure to review the included readme file before playing.

THE GODFATHER (TRAILER)

Take a peek at this open-ended videogame version of *The Godfather* before plopping down your hard-earned cash and joining the virtual Mafia.

HEAVY WEAPON (SHAREWARE)

Lock 'n' load with this popular game from PopCap and experience some '80s-style arcade mayhem.

SEVEN SEAS (SHAREWARE)

Ahoy, mates! Prepare to fire broadsides, sink pirates, and dodge sea serpents in this test of strategy and skill.

HOT POTATO ONLINE (FREE GAME)

Enjoy this fast-paced arena sport game, which involves a short-fused potato bomb. Think dodgeball with a grenade and you'll see what we mean. Thanks to the Potato Entertainment gang for this free game!

AD AWARE SE (APPLICATION)

Tired of hackers and spammers knowing your every move on the Internet? This anti-spyware program is your answer—and a personal favorite here at the CGW office.

SECRETMAKER 4.2.5 (APPLICATION)

Here's a handy application that combines several useful security tools to enhance your online experience.

TWEAKNOW REOCLEANER 2.6.5 (APPLICATION)

We all know how the Windows registry fills up with obsolete entries. Well, this handy program cleans them up for you, giving your system performance a nice boost.

RUN, LULA, RUN!

Keeping abreast of our titular heroine and her bosom buddies

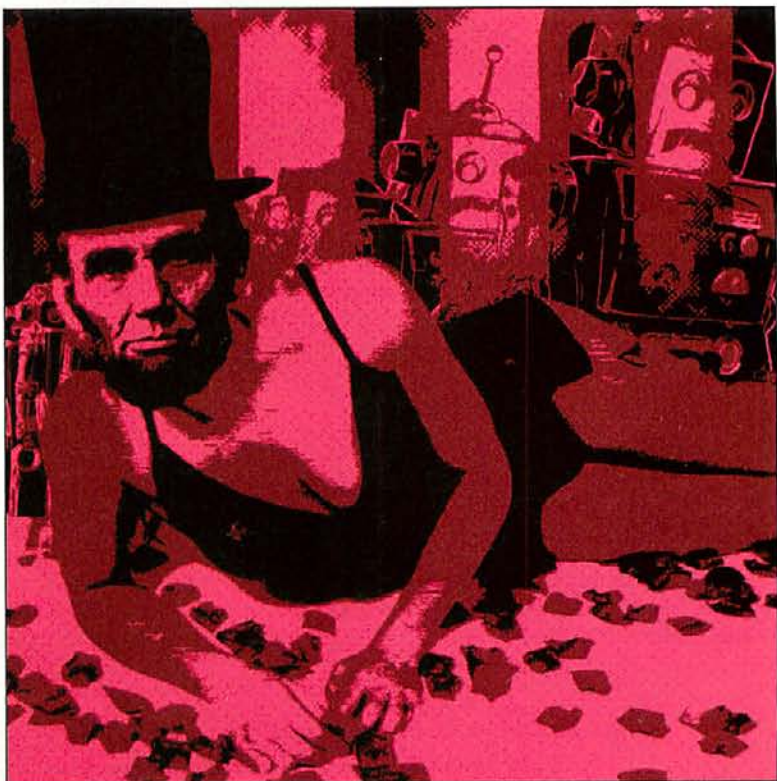
IT SEEMS SOMEHOW FITTING THAT I BEGAN PLAYING *LULA 3D* the day Betty Friedan died. It was a real "drove the Chevy to the levee" sort of synchronicity, except in this case it was a hot-pink Chevy driven by a Hindenburg-breasted blond compulsively stuffing the ginormous crevasse between her bosoms with liquor bottles, beer cans, house cat-sized pillows, dirty magazines, DVDs, a cell phone, hot sauce, a megaphone, and a fistful of cigarette butts. Oh, and a bag of licorice. Stupid, to be sure, but preferable to other inventory locations that certainly must have crossed the stunted imaginations of the no doubt pantsless programmers of this relentlessly and ineptly smutty game.

My expectations were suitably and soberly low. I wasn't expecting *Sam & Max Hit the Road* so much as *Sam & Max Hit That Azzz!*, but I was playing this game for the same sort of contrarian enjoyment that I get watching the *Nude for Satan* DVD. After all, this is a game that trumpets "Bouncin' Boobs Technology" on the game box and actually includes the in-game command "Use [discomfitingly large and knobby black vinyl marital aid] on Sarah." How could it not fail in the most delightful fashion? Well, as it turns out, pretty easily. *Lula* should have been so deliciously bad it was good; instead, it was so bad it was just really bad.

A big part of the problem is that the character models look so terrible. Now, if I were making a dirty adventure game—just for hypothetical fun, let's say it's a Sapphic romp called *Squeaky Loves Tyne*—I'd make damn sure that when Squeaky Fromme surprised Tyne Daly by dressing up as Alice B. Toklas in a merry widow, she'd be the most sizzlingly sexy naked Manson family hottie ever digitized. That swastika carved into her forehead would absolutely "POP"! And when Tyne would momentarily lift her massive head from her feeding trough, overcome and in thrall to the lusty burnings in her sagging loins, you can be just as sure that the calzone sauce and mushrooms dripping from her slack jaw and splashing across her heaving mammary regionals would be extra-super-duper-hot. Scalding, in fact.

The characters in *Lula 3D*, not so much with the hotness. As expected, every woman in the game is a grossly exaggerated caricature of femininity—the last time I saw pontoons the size of Lula's, a gigantic fan was strapped to them and Dennis Weaver was riding them around the Everglades with a really friendly bear. OK, that's all well and good, but...imagine, if you will, the animatronic glory of Disneyland's Hall of Presidents. Now imagine Abe Lincoln's lurching robotic ass in Frederick's of Hollywood knockoffs and you've got a pretty good approximation of the polygon-shearing spastic marionettes clumsily aping sexytime in *Lula*. It's obvious the developers have no understanding of their market, especially when you consider that *Lula 3D* is a product that can only be purchased online, a marketplace where consumers urgently searching for women stuffing licorice in their cleavage must grapple not with the challenge of finding it, but of deciding which 24-hour webcam they should subscribe to. If you're going to promise titillation on the Internet, buddy, you've got one heck of a bar to clear. The Real Dolls awkwardly bumping into each other in *Lula* don't come close.

Of course, I should have expected this. None of the smut games have ever really delivered on their promise. *Custer's Revenge* and its castus rape subtracted so much eroticism from the universe that it is most likely responsible for the death of Kelly LeBrock's career (though that whole Steven Seagal marriage thing probably didn't do her any favors). *Riana*



IMAGINE ABE LINCOLN'S LURCHING ROBOTIC ASS IN FREDERICK'S OF HOLLYWOOD KNOCKOFFS.

Rouge and her high-minded efforts to unite the other-dimensional Sinep and Yssup tribes via postage stamp-sized QuickTime topless videos was simply Citehtap and Lulud. The best of the lusty lot might be the *Phantasmagoria* games...which is kinda like calling *Basic Instinct* the pinnacle of filmmaking. *Leisure Suit Larry*? He's supposed to be unsexy in the same repellent yet lovable sort of way Ron Jeremy is. If you're finding Larry Laffer sexy, you have problems that cannibals wouldn't wish on their worst enemies.

To be fair, *Lula* has its moments, however brief. I grew particularly fond of the English as a 14th Language student doing the voice acting for the scantily clad heroine. Hearing her repeatedly mangle simple exclamations like "Oh my Gardt!" or somberly intone "Gills who tebble dansh dunt have anuzee joab" never lost its simple charm. At least, that is, until the basset hound that inexplicably followed Lula into every porn shop and strip club started humping someone's leg or looking up a stripper's skirt or taking a massive leak on the floor. That did a pretty efficient job of quashing simple charms.

The thong-wearing bottom line for *Lula 3D* is that it is so resoundingly inconsequential that even Joe Lieberman and Hillary Clinton won't be able to muster any outrage over this AO title. "Our kids are playing this?" I imagine them muttering as Lula crams some tomatoes into her boob-ventory. "What morons." / **Robert Coffey**

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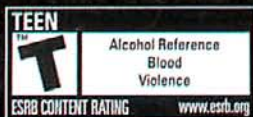
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