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ISSUE 264

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SPECIAL REPORT
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EXCLUSIVE HANDS-ON PREVIEW!

SPLINTER CELL DOUBLE AGENT

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MOTHERBOARDS
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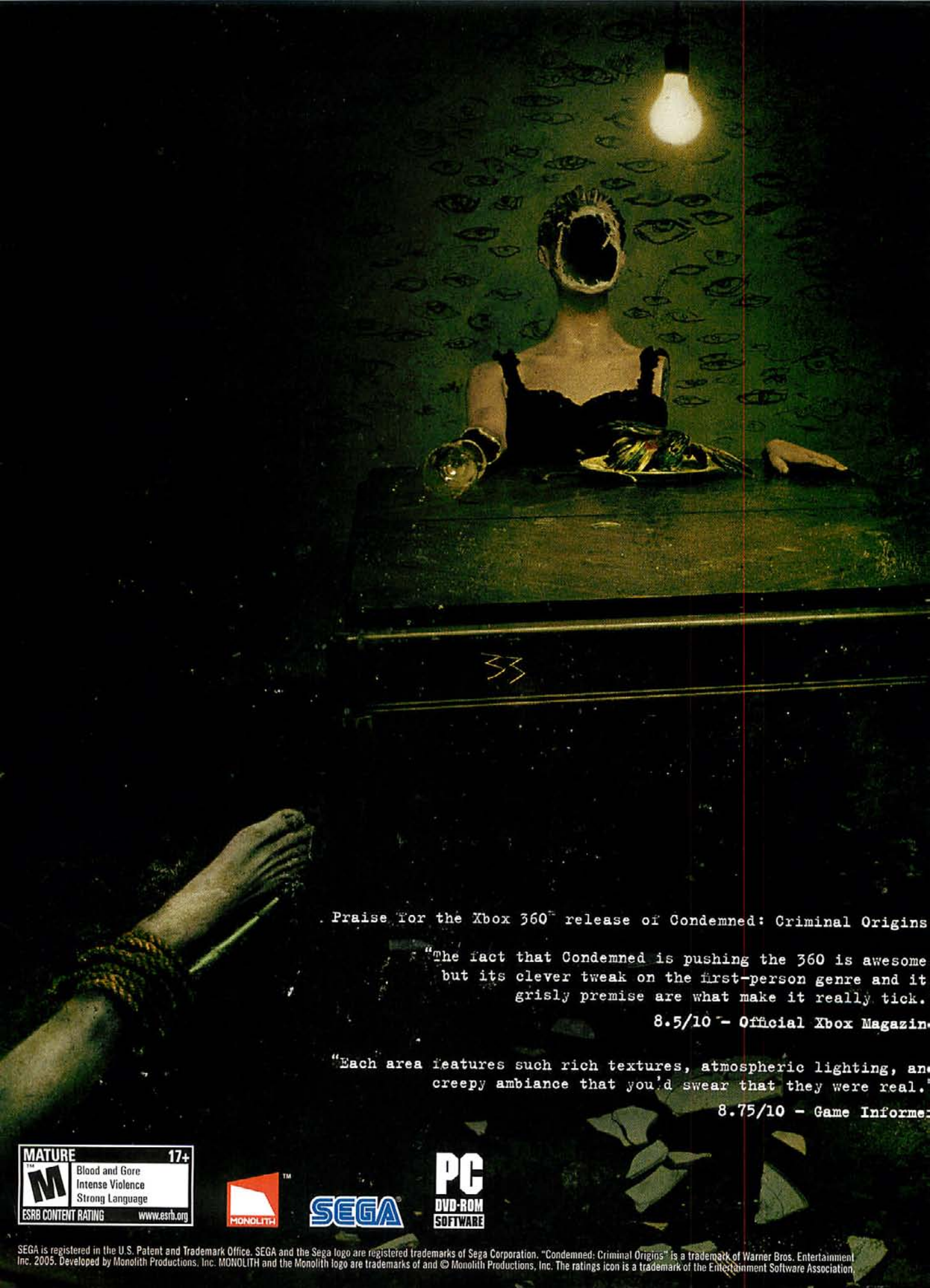
PLUS:
WARREN SPECTOR INTERVIEW
4 PAGES WITH THE MAN BEHIND DEUS EX!



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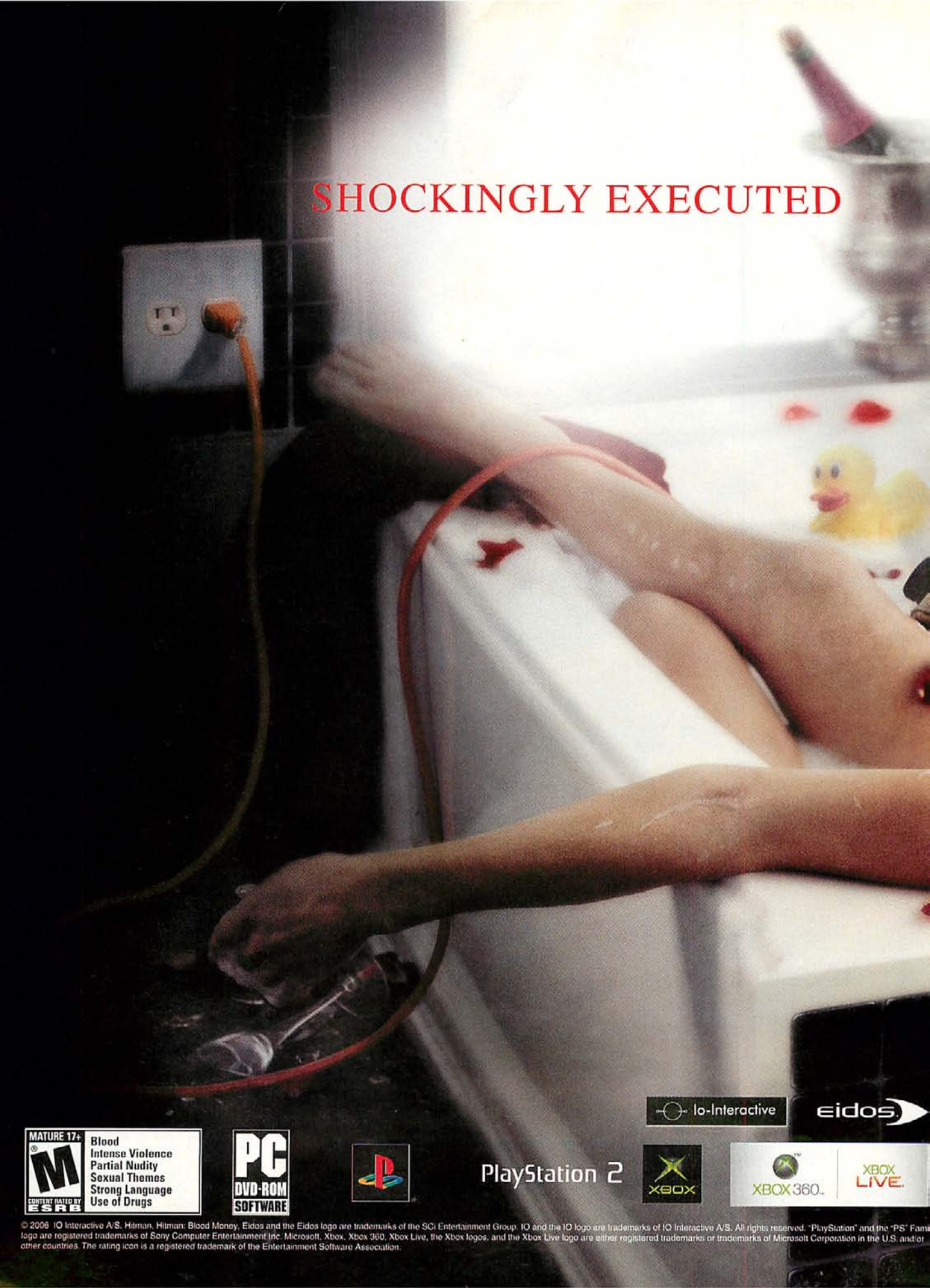

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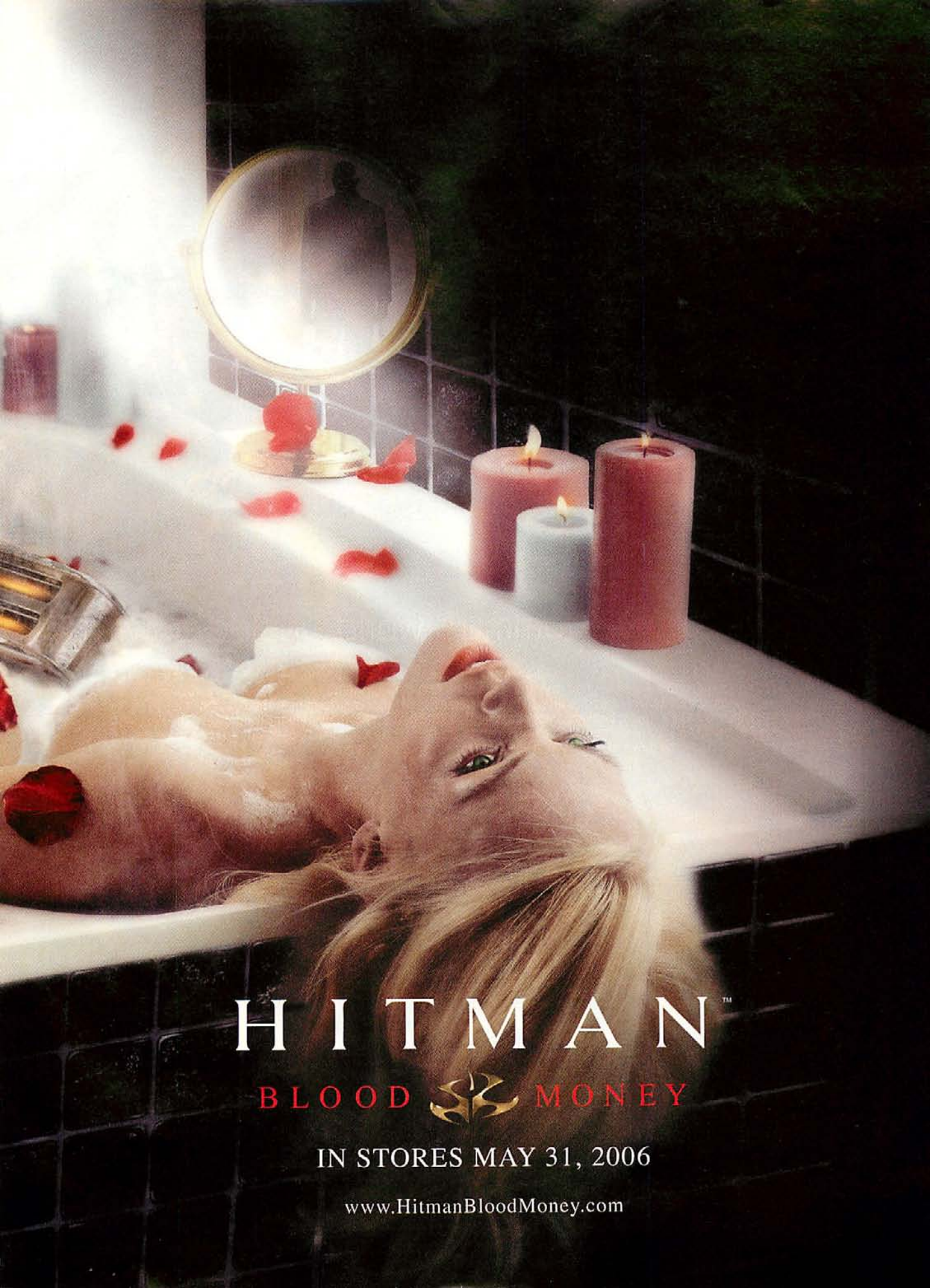
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Aliens turned Tommy's world upside down.

"Prey is built around a carefully crafted, cinema-worthy storyline."[1] "An alien-abduction epic, Prey casts the player as Tommy, a reluctant Native American hero trying to save himself and his girlfriend from a gigantic organic spacecraft--a sentient Dyson sphere powered by the artificial sun inside its shell--that is strip-mining the Earth for human food."[2] "The environments have a fleshy, biomechanical, organic style that hints at a variety of filmic influences...The flesh-and-bone body of the alien ship is merged with a variety of stolen alien technologies that mess with gravity, direction, and relativity."[3] "...Possibly the dawn of a spiritual awakening for the shooter genre."[4]

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PREY
Now he's about to return the favor.
"Prey looks like one of the best first-person shooters of the year in both graphics and gameplay." – IGN
"Absolutely incredible to look at, packed with scintillating effects." – Play
"Doom 3 hiked the bar. Prey may transform the bar altogether." – 1UP
Imagine a place where gravity isn't always down! It can be controlled, twisted, flipped, and even wrap around small planetoids? Imagine walking on walls and ceilings? Can you handle this new challenge?
Multiple gameplay innovations from the developer that brought you Bullet-time, including Deathwalk (dying is no longer annoying...it's fun!) & Spiritwalk (leave your body to explore, ambush, and solve mind blowing puzzles).
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What's the real-time strategy for getting the EIC to turn in his editorial? We have no clue.

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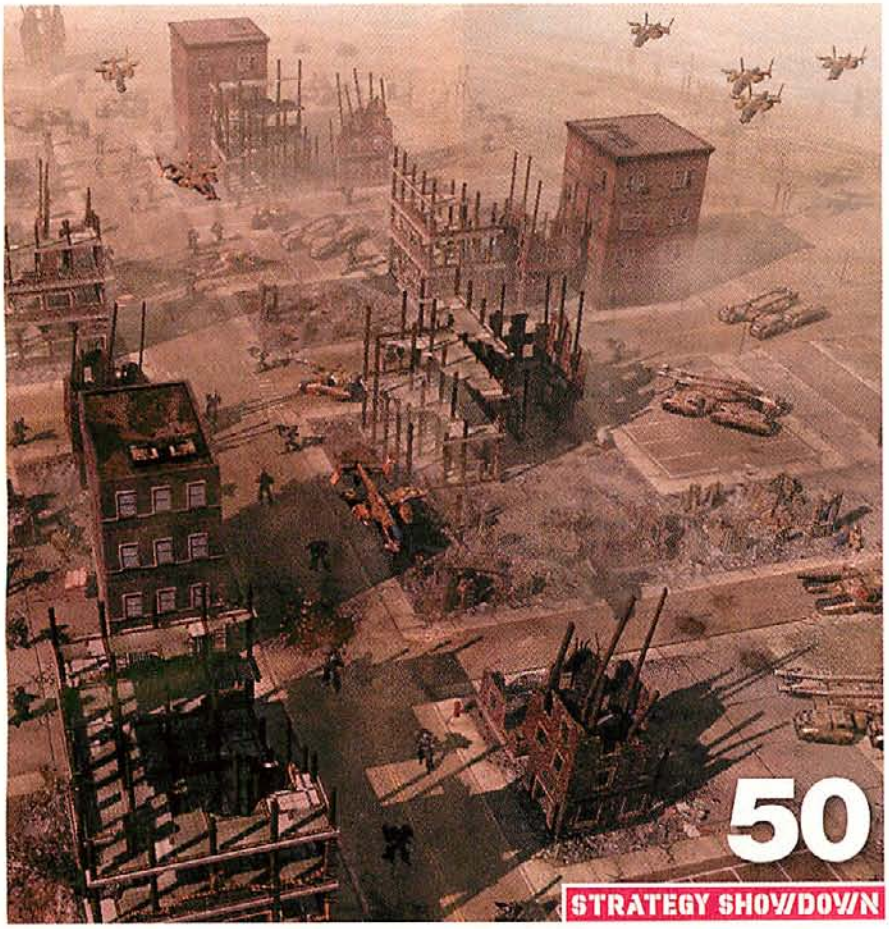

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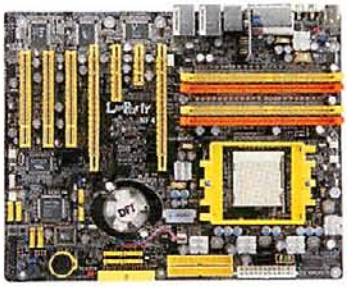

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Gahz'rilla or pasta? One brave and lonely man must decide between *World of WarCraft* and dinner.

THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

WWW.GAZERK.COM

The world's greatest videogame search engine is here! Gazerk, the newest addition to the growing 1UP Network, is now in public beta—and it's the perfect way to find whatever info you're looking for on your favorite games.

WWW.GAMEVIDEOS.COM

Gamevideos.com hosts the latest game trailers, as well as machinima, speed runs, and all those wacky joke videos that get forwarded around the office.

CGWRADIO.1UP.COM

Why read what the *CGW* editors have to say when you can listen to their geeky, whiny voices instead? Join the fun and find out why all the girls are going wild.

EDITORIAL 264

RTS REBORN

Not just your daddy's clickfest

PARDON ME FOR SLIPPING INTO GEEZER MODE for a moment, but let me give you younger kids a quick history lesson regarding real-time strategy games (you old folks can either proceed to the rest of the issue or stick around just to be, ya know, part of the hip crowd here).

Way back in ye olden days of *CGW*—when I was still the new guy, *Quake* was the deathmatch game of choice, and current reviews editor Ryan Scott was still in diapers (and in 10th grade)—real-time strategy games like *Dune II*, *Command & Conquer*, and *WarCraft: Orcs and Humans* were breaking ground by making the then-revolutionary decision to remove the mechanic of players taking turns. No longer would you be able to methodically mull over your next move, plotting your strategy while the other players grew cobwebs waiting for you to react—now everyone would keep moving simultaneously, forcing you to not only think smartly but to think *quickly*.

And of course, many old-time players, distrustful and antagonistic to change of any kind, balked. "That's not a strategy game!" said one *CGW* editor, while watching two other editors play *Command & Conquer*. "It's just an action game! Whoever clicks the fastest wins!"

It's now 10 years later, Ryan is out of diapers (during the daytime), and real-time strategy has firmly established itself as "real" strategy. It's even subdivided into two genres: those that balance economics and combat, and those that offer just straight-up combat. This issue, we take a close look at the next generation of RTS games, and see what (if anything) they bring that's any different from those classic decade-old titles. Kudos to Darren Gladstone and Shawn Elliott for putting this one together. And the rest of the issue doesn't suck, either! IMHO, of course.

/JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Now Playing: *Heroes of Might and Magic V*
1UP.com Blog: cgwjeff.1UP.com

ZERGLING RUSH

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR

After a series of near-fatal *StarCraft* and *Total Annihilation* LAN binges in college, I've been a lot more careful about my former addiction. Doh, gotta run, Molten Core raid in 20!

Now Playing: *World of WarCraft, Galactic Civilizations II*
1UP.com Blog: cgwsean.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES/TECH)

You want strategy? Here we go: Right now, I'm dragging a big box across all our desks. Edit gang, you're hotkeyed to group one. Art guys, group two. When I give the order, we converge on the bar downstairs. *Go!*

Now Playing: *SiN Episodes: Emergence*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_gizmo.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/COLUMNS)

The Battle for Middle-earth II monopolizes most of my current RTS time...but I can't wait to get my hands of *Rise of Legends*, as I still hold a soft spot in my heart for its predecessor.

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

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (PREVIEWS/FEATURES)

How I learned to loathe dirt farming (RTS resource hunting and harvesting): *Star Wars Galactic Battlegrounds*. Carbon, ore, nova, wha...screw all umpteen varieties of space crystals; why not let the walkers walk and the speeders speed?

Now Playing: *Auto Assault*
1UP.com Blog: egmshawn.1UP.com

LOGAN PARR
FILEFRONT LIAISON

Does anyone remember *Impossible Creatures*? Talk about making some pretty wicked hybrid critters. I think I spent more time building my creations than I did using them for fighting in this game.

Now Playing: *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*
1UP.com Blog: logans_run.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

Huge stack of story folders in the queue. Hotkey between four environments and multiple (often highly erratic and sometimes unresponsive) units. Hours until deadline: 72. *CGW*: The ultimate RTS.

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

SEAN DALLASKIDD
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

RTS games...? Those are the ones with the maps, right?

Now Playing: *Tomb Raider: Legend*
1UP.com Blog: The_dallaskidd.1UP.com

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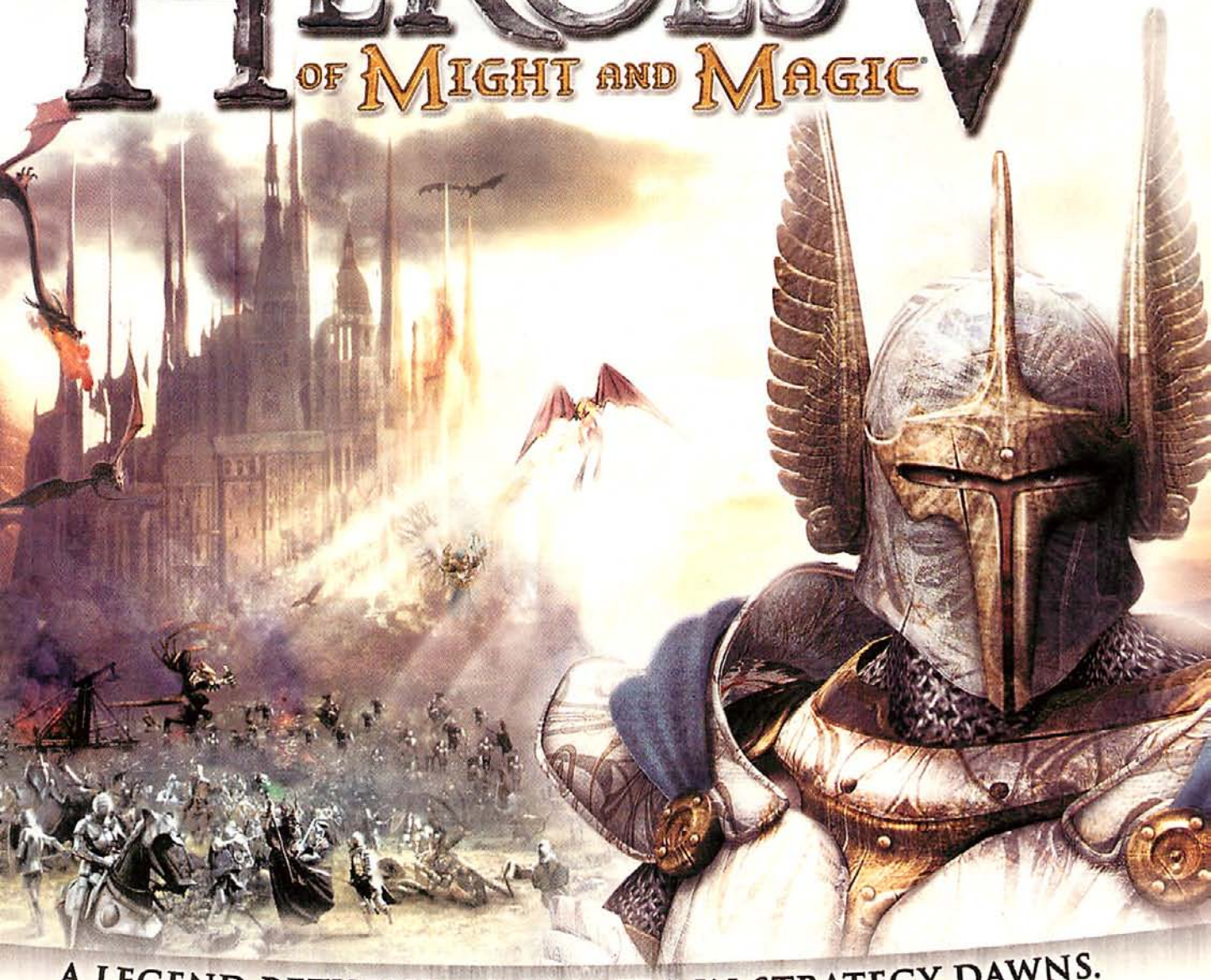

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LETTERS

REMEMBER KIDS, WE TAKE CASH, TOO!

LETTER OF THE MONTH

A bountiful [number] of centuries ago, when Canadian Corner adorned the Letters section, my dearest papa spoke of E3. His dying eyes glazed upon my brother and me as he spoke with the quietness of a monk of the close-lipped Russian-bride–like women called "booth babes." He told us momentous tales of wonder about magnanimous greats such as Sir William Wright, John Carmack, and Sid Meier, which stirred our minds. Magnificent imagery gleefully churned in our humble and simple hearts. In our eyes arose flickers of joy and happiness, as if we were reading a new Greenspeak column, when poor Papa told us of the abundance of games waiting to be viewed. We wept with despair as our poverty-stricken father passed away. We promised that one day in the forthcoming future, we would travel to the enchanted E3. But, sadly, we don't have the financial means to purchase those precious tickets. Our poor and undernourished country has been tarnished by a plague of e-mail spam. All of the hard-earned money has gone to a royal member of a Nigerian family. Humble and great *Computer Gaming World,* do you have any leftover tickets for my brother and I?

Redder (the orphan)

Sadly, we got your plaintive e-mail after the show was over. Oh, the irony! But just to make you feel better, above is our one and only shot of E3 booth babes to appear in this magazine. Live it up.

SINCE YOU THREATENED US...

I am once again e-mailing you because ya didn't answer this question before. I'm a complete dips*** when it comes to getting mods to work, so if you'd actually answer it this time, it'd be great for all of the dips***s out there that play *Doom 3* and can't figure out what directory to send *Doom 3* mods to. There are so many people out there that don't know things like this and won't know unless smart f***ers like you tell them how to do it, so just tell us. If you don't, you will receive this same e-mail at least five times per month. ANSWER ALREADY!

Ralphy

Dear Ralphy, try this: C:\Program Files\Doom3\Base. Also, try Google next time. We're too busy finding pictures of E3 booth babes to deal with dips*s like you.**

HOORAY FOR FLIGHT SIM X!

I read your preview of *Microsoft Flight Simulator X* [June 2006] with some interest. However, when I looked for the release date—it was missing! So release the release date! Or I'll buzz your offices! With Jeff Green strapped to the wings! Ummm.... Note to staff: That's supposed to be a threat, not an offer.

Jonathan Fischer

P.S. CYA legal stuff: No threats are real. It's all a joke! Really! Please don't send the Department of Homeland Security after me!

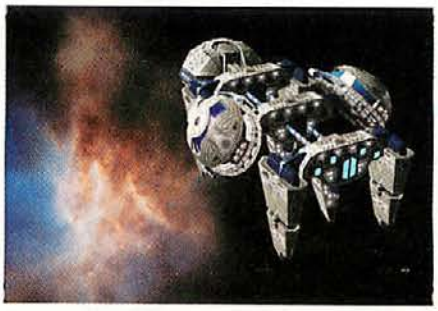
As much as we'd love to see Jeff strapped to a plane (preferably on Oceanic Airlines), we'll tell you Microsoft's estimated release anyway: Holiday 2006. But don't blame us if they blow it.

HOORAY FOR GALCIV II!

Kudos to the good folks at Stardock who put together *Galactic Civilizations II*! Any company that puts out a game without copy protection nowadays is OK in my book!

I wasn't going to buy the game (I didn't care for the first one that much), but after all the raves I've been hearing from my friends—plus this decision by Stardock not to copy-protect it—I decided to support the decision not to protect the game, so I purchased a copy. My decision to buy the game is directed more at the rest of the protection-crazy companies, like Sony and that Russian company's StarForce protection... whatever the hell it's called. I urge all my fellow gamers to pick up a copy of *Galactic Civilizations II*. Reward this company for its gutsy move.

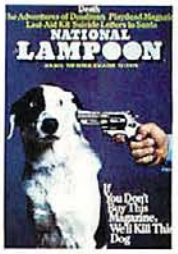
Rax Nahali



VIOLENCE/DRUGS/ALCOHOL = GOOD. SEX = BAD.

I don't know if y'all noticed, but the May issue I received was FILLED WITH PORN GAMES! Come on! Seriously, I love to read *CGW* to find out about the RPG and action games coming out, but this issue was a disgrace. The April issue had the queer story in it, and now this. That's strike two for me. If the next issue is anything like the last two, I don't think I'll be renewing my subscription anytime soon. Please calm down the sex. The violence, drugs, and alcohol are funny stuff, but the sex? Come on—you don't need that to sell your magazine. It's awesome enough without it.

Semi-Loyal Subscriber, Chad Engler



SURE, IT WAS A "JOKE"!

I have to tell you guys, I loved the deadpanned death-threat ad campaign for your podcast on the hotly anticipated 1UP Yours Wii-stravaganza. I hope to hear more crew members and sympathetically fluffy animals threatened with death and mutilation on the air, and I have been converted to a fervent supporter of your radio show by this one ad alone.

Toodles, Marcus Mattern

Amazingly enough, not everyone got the joke. And, for what it's worth, we should give credit

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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.

MAIL BYTES

Green is great. Green is good. Let us thank him for our food.
—Yamaben

Keep your editors and writers away from the NoDoz, LSD, and the big, tempting Oxford Thesaurus.
—DoomGoober

Computer Gaming World: the Crystal Pepsi of magazines.
—AB

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where it's due. The inspiration for the joke came from the legendary *National Lampoon* cover shown on pg. 14, recently voted by the American Society of Magazine Editors as one of the top 10 magazine covers of the past 40 years.

WHITHER FALLOUT 3?

What is the fate of *Fallout 3*? Please give some news, good or bad. I've played through *Fallout 1* and *2* so many times that I've lost count.

KiddIcarus87

The good news is that Bethesda had the cool-looking poster of *Fallout 3* shown above at E3 this year. The bad news is that that's all they had on *Fallout 3*. So it's safe to say that the game's still years away. But, hey, at least the poster is cool!

GAME GEEZERS UNITE!

Dear Grandma [Letters, May 2006],
There are lots of us older gamers out here! My husband and I have been playing for years! "After the kids move out, the cats will play!" We have had Elders' guilds on a number of MMORPGs, starting with *EQ* and now on *WOW*. I travel for my work and take my PSP right along on the planes. I also hook up my laptop and play with my husband from the hotels at night. It sure makes being away from home easier. Pulverizing ogres is very therapeutic after a long day at the office! Welcome to the club!

Milo

WE DON'T UNDERSTAND THE TRUCK REFERENCE EITHER

I was reading the Viewpoint article about *Oblivion* today in your June 2006 issue. In it, you mention the "short sip of wood elf you meet in Cheydinhal." Perhaps all that *Oblivion* action is becoming one great blur, because Glarthir was in Skingrad.

I don't meant to make you paranoid about readers watching your every move (it's a conspiracy, I tell you!), but...readers are watching.

I love it so far; I just need to decide which platform I prefer: PC or Xbox 360. At least the 360 doesn't randomly crash like my new Dell Inspiron 5015.... Great computer...when it works.
Thanks for an entertaining article; I shall continue enjoying them. Cheers!

Lance Zielinski
Covington, WA (Our trucks are newer than Kent's!)

CGW LOVERS AND HATERS CORNER

Editor's Note: The mail continues to pour in—both pro and con—about our recent editorial changes. We don't want the Letters section overrun with this stuff (unless it's from our Canadian readers!), but we will continue to highlight occasional missives of hate and love.

As a longtime subscriber to your magazine, I only ask that you do one thing: Rate games. I read your magazine so that I know what sucks and what doesn't. If a game scores low, it's because of some kind of issue that I trust your staff to understand and relay to me through a rating. I don't need to read about that low-scoring game, because that's what your staff does. I don't ask you to do anything else. This is your JOB. I pay you to do this job through my subscription. If you don't do your job, I will find another magazine that will. Thank you.

Kirk

I was looking through all the letters from readers in your June issue, and it struck me as odd that a recurrent topic seemed to be that you were ripping people off and wasting their money by not including ratings in your reviews. I was rather amused by most of these letters, as a lot of the people stated that they didn't have time to read through the entire magazine and just wanted the rating for a specific game. I was just wondering exactly what kind of imbecile would purchase a magazine solely for a rating of a game, since they "didn't have time" to read the reviews? If people are really only concerned with the ratings, they could just as easily have browsed through the ratings part, and then put the magazine back down. I find your reviews (and Tom vs. Bruce, of course) far more satisfying than arbitrary numbers that can be affected by how someone is feeling on a given day. Regardless, keep up the good work, and ignore the haters. If they're so angry, then they can go publish a magazine that only has a picture of a game and a rating next to it. See how many subscribers they'll get.

Ryan

To the letters editors: I'm typing this with one hand, as the other is broken, so forgive any typos. I really like the new direction you're going with the magazine. I think there's a wide gap between largely hype-filled magazines (such as *PC Gamer*) and industry magazines (like *Game Developer*) that needs filling. The move away from rating-centric content and articles seemingly written by speed-addicted chipmunks with ADD is, frankly, quite refreshing.

That said, I wish you'd keep the level of content more consistent. Some of your feature articles are quite well written and interesting, with well-developed and complex thoughts presented in an engrossing and coherent manner. However, at least in the first issue after the change [May 2006], the reviews have a way to go. They felt like reading preliminary wire reports from a first-year AP writer, or maybe stories in a fifth-grade school newspaper (a really smart fifth grader, though). Maybe it's just a matter of time and growth to get into the new style and away from the rapid-fire simplicity of the old reviews style, and if so, I hope you guys get some growth hormones with your meals.

Like I said, though, I really like the new direction. Don't listen to all the whiners; the direction you appear to be going is a direction that needs to be taken (now, just go back to the 400-page issues so that I can cancel my other subscriptions).

Silas Ray

A fifth-grade school newspaper?! Cool! We were aiming for fourth grade!

AT LEAST HE'S NOT COMPLAINING ABOUT REVIEWS

BOOOOO!!! Do you want to know why I boo you, *CGW*? It's because of your demolition of the Check Out section. Why, may I ask, did you get rid of a part of your magazine where, in the last issue, you said—and I quote: "One-thousand-frickin'-forty people" sent you e-mails about not destroying the Check Out section, and you "couldn't be more pleased." And what does *CGW* do? YOU FREAKIN' MORONS AXED IT! In my humble opinion, that was a funny part of the magazine with cool bits of info. I would never have learned about the Rasterbator without it. And now it's being replaced by an extended Tech section?!?!?! If you wanted to make the tail end of the magazine more interesting, I don't see how a longer Tech section is going to help. Now, I'm sure that, with this e-mail, the editors of *CGW* will realize what a grievous mistake they've made and will reinstate the Check Out section—or I may have to go down there and get medieval on your asses.

Elgringo

MAIL BYTES

I loved all the propaganda about *Spore* [June 2006] and am waiting for my chance to evolve!
—Jon Elliott

Switching back to scoreless reviews means that Scorpia wins.
—Rogue

Basically, I am happy whether you rate games or not. But if you start rating again, replace stars with puppies.
—KC Rau K

For the record, I don't give a flaming, exploding turd about 1UP.com.
—Steve Woodward

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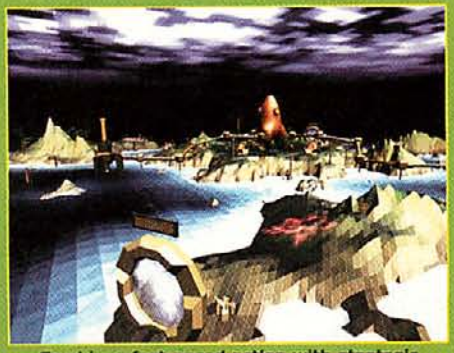

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Kembar 2, like many border worlds, has much of its production priorities diverted towards its starport to ensure that it can defend itself.

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LOVE BYTES

When in-MMO marriage isn't enough

INSIDE

PREVIEW
Test Drive Unlimited
Hawaii minus the five-o.

INTERVIEW
Warren Spector
Our candid chat with *Deus Ex*'s distinguished daddy.

CULTURE
War Lust
Svelte *Counter-Strikers* take it all off for cash and attention.

CULTURE

"LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT MARRIAGE and what BS this 'fairy tale' is," says William Hughes, a 42-year-old veteran of romance in online games and, apparently, bad online-gaming breakups. The object of Hughes' cynicism? A four-year-long relationship that began in the virtual world of a role-playing game and ended in the real world only months before the couple's prospective wedding date. "Live by the sword, die by the sword," says Hughes. "How my relationship came to be was also how it came to end." It's a familiar story for those who find in computer games not just entertainment, but also the perfect pick-up bar—a place where first impressions are formed by what you say instead of how you look, where you are whoever you pretend to be.

LEVEL 1: COMMUNICATION

Unfortunately, when you build a relationship on the fiction of roleplaying, it's hard to separate what's real from what's character. "In the online game world, you're seeing the person—and you're not seeing the person," says Hughes. "A lot of it is alter ego. You're not a *Quake* killer or a jet pilot. You're doing a lot more exciting and memorable things in the game than you are in real life." In 1999, Hughes (a systems engineer) and his now-ex-fiancée Caron (a dental assistant) began their comparatively action-packed alternate lives in a game called *Starship Troopers*. They soon found themselves decoding the subtle flirtations hidden in text messages. "Typically, when you meet people [in real life], there's a physical reaction. There's eye contact, hand gestures, a lot of subliminal messages going on," says Hughes. "With text, you're just getting these words and phrases. A word could mean good things for one person and bad things for another. It's just your choice of words."

The two played the game together, typing out an elaborate modern-day mating ritual for a year before finally agreeing to meet in person. It might seem like a long courtship in this age of socially acceptable online dating, but for Hughes and his ex-fiancée, the jump from the screen to the street was huge. "Nowadays, you have all these audiovisual communications that you can use," says Hughes. "You can just get online, talk to the person, use webcams. You can see what they look like before you get in your car to drive up there." The couple had traded pictures, of course, but the vast majority of the time they spent getting to know each other had been inside *Starship Troopers*. It put them in a strange new situation, having to guess each other's real-life personality based on the way they play a computer game. "Depending on the type of game, you get to know a lot of their real qualities," says Hughes. "Are they a hacker or an exploiter? Are they uptight? Do they have a sense of humor? If you're doing that every day for weeks and months, you really get to know the fiber of a person." Or so he thought.

LEVEL 2: REAL LIFE

Separated only by the four-hour drive between Hughes' Connecticut abode and Caron's former residence in Massachusetts, the couple decided to take a chance on human-to-human contact. The short commute allowed what might've been a one-time hookup to turn into something more serious. "You can fly from New York to L.A. to meet someone," says Hughes. "You can like or not like them, have a one-night stand, whatever. But it's very difficult to keep that kind of relationship going if you're not in a close proximity. That opened the door."

Door opened, Caron and Hughes walked into the harsh light of real life, where things weren't exactly how they'd seemed online. There was the issue of Caron's marriage, which she had claimed was over. "The online thing allowed her to take liberties," says Hughes. "She really wasn't divorced, separated, or anything else that she said at the time." Alarm bells should've gone off, but the couple continued their relationship. Eventually, Caron moved into Hughes' Connecticut home, where they discovered a new love: *Star Wars Galaxies*. Plugging away at separate computers for hours at a time, they fell into the grip of a 30-hour-a-week fantasy-life habit. "A game that should have consumed free time began to eclipse all time," says Hughes. "The game devoured so much time that, after six months, Caron left her job at a dental practice. She played over the next six or seven months nearly full time." It was during this gaming binge that the couple became engaged and began to plan their wedding. But while Caron and Hughes seemed to grow closer in real life, their online lives were diverging.

LEVEL 3: BETRAYAL

"Our gameplay started to change," Hughes says. "I'm a pretty hardcore combat type, and so was she. But *Star Wars Galaxies* offered all these other things that I hadn't done: crafting, creating a financial empire, different forays. I started going down this other road, while she continued down the player-versus-player road. As our gameplay and styles changed, we kind of grew apart." We've all known couples that split over religious, political, or lifestyle differences, but can you really destroy a relationship with role-playing character development? "You start grouping with different people," says Hughes. "One's gathering resources, and the other is gathering bullets." As in real life, bankers don't spend their time hanging out with soldiers, so the two soon formed separate social circles. "We were getting involved with all these other

IN THE HARSH LIGHT OF REAL LIFE, THINGS WEREN'T EXACTLY HOW THEY SEEMED ONLINE.

FOUR WAYS TO PLEASE YOUR ONLINE LOVER

Thanks to *Cosmo* and Oprah, you know how to treat a real-life lover, but how do you maintain the fire in an online role-playing tryst?

1 **In games, as in real life, approach your romantic interest with tact and subtlety.**

2 **Shower your gaming crush with presents brought back from your adventures.**

3 **Don't just drag your girl out for another night with the guild hooligans you call friends. Ask her out on a date.**

4 **Express interest in your mate's real life, but don't be a creepy stalker.**

people around the country," says Hughes. "It wasn't just her flirting with other guys; I was flirting with girls in other parts of the country. The only difference was that she actually followed through."

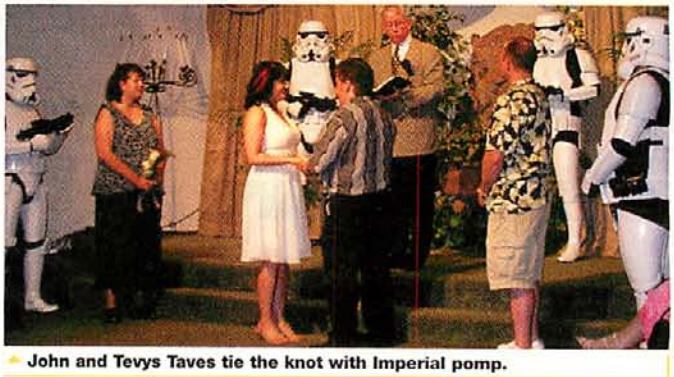
Then one day, on the same carefree whim that took her to Connecticut, Caron flew halfway around the world to live with another *Star Wars* player, though Hughes calls him an "online boy." "I stress 'boy,'" says Hughes, "because he was 21 when she flew to Germany to meet him...after four months of knowing him online. She was 41 at the time."

With that, this half-fictional role-playing romance was finally put to rest. William Hughes came out of it relatively unscathed. He still cruises for single women in online games, though he keeps his gaming habit down to a more reasonable 10 hours a week. If he did find himself in the throes of another gaming relationship, though, he would do things a bit differently. "In retrospect," says Hughes, "it's probably advisable to set some guidelines: Always play together. Don't allow yourself to be in 1-on-1 situations with members of the opposite sex." Those are rules that most real-life relationships adhere to, but, again, Hughes' situation is complicated by the deceptive possibilities of online communication. "The hard thing in the gaming world is that with everybody on their own monitor, you never really see what the other people are doing, even if you're sitting side by side," says Hughes. "If you're not in the exact same space, you can't see what their interactions are. And worse, when they're typing text, there's no way to know. They could be saying, 'Please pass me more ammo,' or they could be setting up a rendezvous."

LEVEL 4: TRUST

And then there are people like John and Tevys Taves, a couple—now married—who met and fell in love while playing *Star Wars Galaxies*. They're the kind of perfect couple that miserable single folks love to hate, never short on good things to say about each other, floating around in a state of perpetual teenage gaga love. Their story is the exact opposite of William Hughes' nightmare scenario. Where Hughes now feels a need for ground rules to keep a gaming mate on the up and up, John Taves thinks good relationships, gaming or otherwise, are built on trust.

"Setting rules for a relationship is asking for trouble, whether it concerns online or offline activities," says John. "There should be a natural respect and limitations that are understood. We live our lives trusting that each of us will respect the other. In the case of roleplaying online, I'm fully secure that whatever she roleplays stays in the game—and that when we step away from the computers, we're a happily married husband and wife."



John and Tevys Taves tie the knot with Imperial pomp.

Of course, that's easy to say when you've got the (*Star Wars*–themed) storybook marriage of John and Tevys Taves. The couple got to know each other mostly through the game's message boards rather than in the game itself. Instead of growing in different directions in their game, they started at opposite ends of the spectrum. John was well on his way to becoming a Jedi Knight, while Tevys was a notorious villain on the dark side. "I was a hardcore Imperial, and he was one with the Force," says Tevys. "We were worlds apart, but we somehow found each other in the vastness that is *Star Wars Galaxies*." Separated by character class and culture, they interacted mostly on the boards, where Tevys was impressed by John's suave persona. "One of the things that first attracted me to him was that even when he knew I was a girl, he didn't try to flirt with me or follow me around like a puppy dog," says Tevys. "He just played it cool."

The strategy paid off. After a year of forum flirtation and occasional run-ins in the game, Tevys asked John if he was interested in taking their online friendship in a romantic direction. "I knew I was going to open a big can of worms," says Tevys. "The next PM from him was: 'Where do I turn in my application?' So I sent him all sorts of personal questions. His application was by far the best, so he got the job."

LEVEL 5: DEVOTION

While William and Caron lived only a few hours away from each other, John and Tevys were separated by more than 5,000 miles. John worked (as he does today) as an engineer for the U.S. Department of Defense in Germany, and Tevys lived smack in the middle of the U.S.—Minnesota, to be exact. It was an insane distance to travel for what could've been a disappointing meeting, but the couple's online relationship had gone as far as it could. "All I could think was: 'I have got to meet this woman,'" says John. "We were so alike. Either this was meant to be, or we were going to bring about the apocalypse when we occupied the same space at the same time."

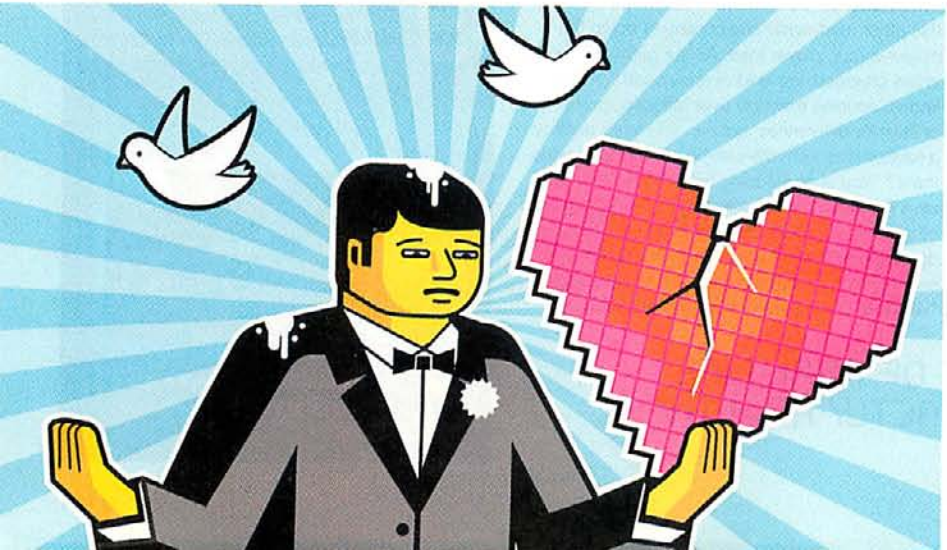
Stateside, the two *Star Wars*–crossed lovers had their first real contact. It was a nerve-racking experience...until John stepped off the plane. "It was very scary for a while, wondering if he would be the same," says Tevys. "But he was the same character I grew to love. It was perfection at first sight. He ran up and planted a big kiss on me. I was mush from that point on."

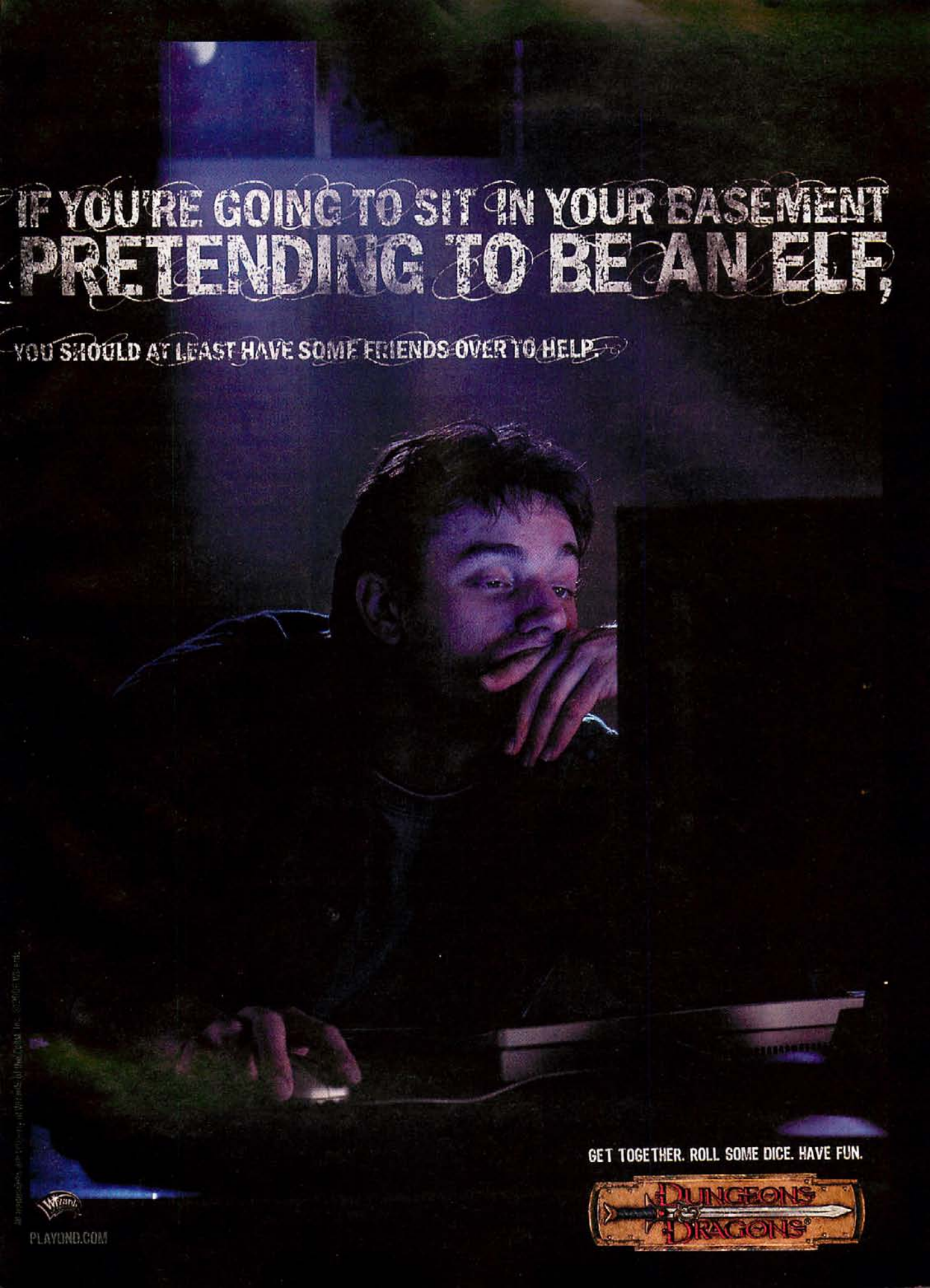
John proposed months later. "I went to the forums where we had gotten to know each other," says Tevys, "and there was a thread titled 'TEVYS.' I clicked on it, and it was a picture of him in a suit on one knee with a ring in his hand. He had Photoshopped a bubble over his head that said, 'Will you marry me?' He flew in to give me the ring in person a couple of days later."

LEVEL 6: FAIRY-TALE ENDING

The forceful brass of the "Imperial March" plays from loudspeakers as Darth Vader marches down the aisle with Tevys Taves at his side. They're joined by four silent stormtroopers, perfect reproductions from head to toe. This is not some star system in a galaxy far, far away. It's much more exotic and strange: Las Vegas, where Team Taves put on their ultimate *Star Wars* fantasy wedding. Their best friends from *Galaxies* were there, along with the usual family crowd, whom the couple delighted in freaking out. "All I could think was, 'Man, I wish I could see what they're seeing,'" says Tevys. "It must have been awesome, from the looks on their faces." The couple now lives in Germany, where they remain a model for role-playing relationship seekers. "This is the happiest I have ever been in real life," says Tevys. "Keeping roleplaying and real life separate is not the easiest thing to do, especially when they end up as intertwined as ours. *Star Wars* has impacted both of our lives in so many ways, and we couldn't be happier about it." / **Robert Ashley**

» GOOD RELATIONSHIPS, GAMING OR OTHERWISE, ARE BUILT ON TRUST.

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LIVE ANYWHERE

Microsoft gets aggressive on Windows gaming

XBOX LIVE GOT CONSOLE GAMERS ONLINE AND got them talking. We don't have it that easy. Here's how coordinating team activity usually goes on some remote gaming forum. "Which chat client are you on? AIM?" "Are we set up for TeamSpeak or Ventrilo?" "Anyone on Xfire?" Yeesh! While not quite the Tower of Babel, connecting PC games and PC gamers isn't exactly user friendly, either.

Meeting with Microsoft execs over these past few years, we've hounded them about connectivity. "When are you going to connect the Xbox Live service with MSN Messenger and let us chat, communicate, or even—crazy thought, here—play games across platforms?" Finally, someone has an answer: Live Anywhere.

The promise of Live Anywhere is that you can track down people to play with or against no matter what you're doing—chatting on a Windows Mobile phone, playing Xbox 360, or even writing a story. Of course, this also means that your wife/fiancée/boss can see when you're screwing around.

Microsoft obviously has a stake in pushing its various platforms (Live Anywhere will only work on Xbox 360, Windows Vista, and Windows Mobile cell phones), but several questions remain unanswered. How will the service work? Is it an evolution of Xbox Live, in that the service comes at a membership cost, or will it be free? Are PC gamers cool with the idea of a single gamertag for all of their games? No word yet, but check out these concept screens and examples of how Live Anywhere will work. **/Darren Gladstone**

AT A GLANCE

Games for Windows

Microsoft's Games for Windows initiative is giving the industry a long-overdue boot in the ass. More accurately, MS is treating the OS more like a gaming platform—and it's about damn time!

- Some 3,000 retail stores will have huge interactive kiosks promoting PC games (just like in the Xbox, Nintendo, and PlayStation aisles).
- Windows Vista, which will likely launch in 2007, has many concessions for gamers. "Drop and play" functionality (no installation headaches) and easy-to-access control panels top the list.
- Full DirectX 10 support in Vista will clown "next-gen" console graphics capabilities from the get-go.
- Live Anywhere.

EXAMPLE ONE: SEEK OUT THY ENEMY

Playing *Shadowrun* on the 360, you hit the Guide button looking for buddies to challenge. (*Shadowhuh*? Read the preview on the next page.) As ever, Joe Shmoe is on his PC working. He needs a break, so you send him a game invite. On his PC, a message pops up. If you wanted to text chat, you could. Voice chat, no problem. But play a game? Now yer talking! *Shadowrun* connects PC and console gamers for cross-platform firefights.

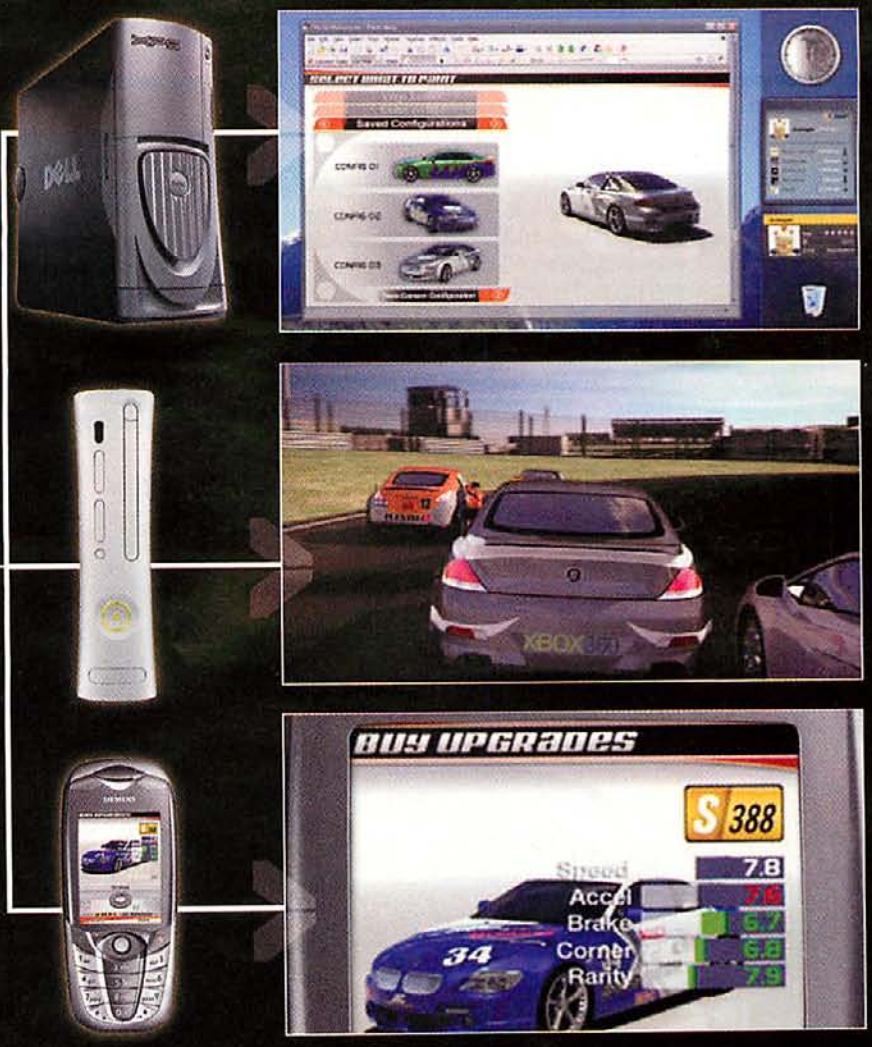
▲ Microsoft puts on its game face.

EXAMPLE TWO: PAY ONCE, PLAY ANYWHERE

Xbox's Live Arcade offers loads of casual games, and console gamers can't get enough. But currently, if you pay for a 360 copy of *Zuma*, you must then buy another in order to play it on your phone or PC. It's almost as bad as having to buy three different special editions of the same DVD. Imagine buying a game once and having the license to play it on any device attached to your account. Kind of like how digital-distribution system Steam works. Well, at least that's how things *could* turn out. Microsoft's director of Games for Windows, Rich Wickham, says, "Licensing in Live Anywhere is undetermined. Publishers and developers will have input into our business model as it evolves."

EXAMPLE THREE: SAME GAME, DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES

The operative phrase here is transmedial access. It means interfacing with the same world in different ways. The best way to illustrate this is with an example: *Forza Motorsport 2* on 360. On the bus ride to work, use your phone to buy car parts. Tweak your speed demon for performance and then save the car back to the Live service. Of course, you don't actually *need* to work. So upon firing up the office PC, load that same car and customize the paint job on your computer. Again, it synchronizes with the Live service so that you can race your new pimped-out wheels at home.



SHADOWRUN

Is this the poster child for Live Anywhere?

CYBERPUNK AND HIGH FANTASY COLLIDE IN 2021, AT LEAST ACCORDING TO *Shadowrun*'s pen-and-paper RPG universe. Magic reawakens in the world, as elves, trolls, and spell-slingers coexist with gun-toting hackers and corporate mercenaries. They just aren't exactly getting along. This is the setting for the first game to push the Live Anywhere agenda.

Instead of tapping the RPG's roots, though, *Shadowrun* is sounding more like *Counter-Strike* with lasers and fireballs—technology versus magic. Between battles you earn and upgrade faction-specific abilities (the RNA corporation, for example, can provide cybernetic enhancements, whereas the magical Lineage can grant the power to resurrect allies). As a result, the game is already raising hackles. Hardcore *Shadowrun* message boards buzz with fans upset about the diluting of their beloved RPG. Meanwhile, FPS fanatics wonder what else it brings besides different weapons and powers.

The one current standout feature is how the game focuses on competitive play, pitting 16 PC and Xbox 360 gamers head-to-head. In recent demos, the PC version looked a little sharper graphically while the 360 version was a little more forgiving with shot accuracy. Still, the graphics and level design are in a very raw state. A lot of tinkering needs to happen before *Shadowrun* hits its January 2007 target release date.

Microsoft still has much to divulge (including classes, races, weapons, powers, and game types), but we can only hope for something more than the usual capture-the-flag fare. Otherwise, we PC gamers can always keep playing the *Half-Life 2* cyberpunk mod *Dystopia* until someone gets it right.

▲ ***Shadowrun*** **has been resurrected, but not in the RPG form fans are familiar with.**

TEST DRIVE

Selling dreams

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Eden Games** GENRE: **Racing** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

PREVIEW

ONLINE GADABOUT *TEST DRIVE Unlimited* wants to detail Hawaii's Oahu in Google Earth density, from Waikiki's white sands and high-rise glitz to the wave-smashed and somewhat seedy North Shore. Such accuracy doesn't conflict with the demands of designing raceways, says producer Ahmed Boukhelifa: "You don't need closed circuits to enjoy driving, and we began breaking boundaries in our previous racers, *V-Rally* and *Need for Speed: Porsche Unleashed*. Plus, this place is the perfect setting." Island variety—valleys bracketing Koolau's volcanic spine and one-road-wide communities of run-down housing and rickety storefronts—bears him out. "We have, however, simplified the interstate network in one important respect," he reveals. "We've eliminated annoying dead ends. The remaining 1,000 miles of pavement recreate Oahu's more pleasurable routes."

Reflecting the postcard-pretty scenery in Turtle-Waxed carbon fiber, *TDU*'s lineup licenses Aston Martin, Pagani, McLaren, Koenigsegg, Lamborghini, and other ultracar manufacturers. "Our cockpit cam, a *Test Drive* tradition, offers unprecedented detail," says Boukhelifa, citing the dashboard gauges, working windows, and normal-mapped steering wheels that make a skin-deep difference. "When you want to invest in a vehicle, you drop by the actual dealer and choose a model, along with all the true manufacturer's options," he says. "Rims, body and inte-

rior colors, materials such as carbon, alcantara, burlwood—you name it, we got it."

Lifestyle branding takes a backseat only to *fahrvergnügen*...and barely. According to Boukhelifa, "*Test Drive* encompasses the entire automotive experience: driving cars, collecting them, cherishing them, gazing at them. We've made every design choice with that in mind, and the island offers many places to live the life: clothing shops to pick up apparel for your character, realtors to invest in better houses with bigger garages...." We wonder whether PC players will much mind this less conspicuous consumption (at least to other online players who can't see your Guccis on the aluminum pedals), but if paper-doll play in detached menus cranks your shaft, then more horsepower to ya.

Instead, player-to-player interaction rides on wheels. "When free-riding online, you can see and chat with the nearest players who fit your preferences (friends list, skill level, and so on)," Boukhelifa says. "Essentially, you're in an eight-player peer-to-peer session that dynamically and constantly updates as you move."

Competing against CPU-controlled bots and plugged-in people nets cash and pink slips—capital in an emerging market economy—and Boukhelifa sees trade areas, accessible from your house, as a sort of stock exchange: "You can pick one of the cars you own and make a sell order at the price you wish, and you can also scan all of the cars other players are selling (it's possible to monitor prices on *TDU*'s website, too). And even though vehicle dealers vend recent makes and models, less recent rides might be more difficult to track down—in which case, contacting other players about that Aston Martin DB4 Zagato might be the more convenient and cheaper option." **/ Shawn Elliott**

▲ **Create custom challenges from Oahu's existing roadways, and post them for other players online.**

"ON- AND OFFLINE EXPERIENCES INTEGRATE SEAMLESSLY. EVERYTHING YOU OWN ONLINE CARRIES OVER OFFLINE; EVERYTHING YOU DO OFFLINE COUNTS ONLINE." —AHMED BOUKHELIFA, PRODUCER

Instant Messages

Internet Cynic says: Drive your LeBaron to Target and buy some undies—welcome to the "entire automotive experience."

UNLIMITED

COLUMN

FREELOADER

Scoring free games without that icky "pirate" aftertaste

YA KNOW, YOU LOOK LIKE THE KINDA GUY WHO SPENDS A METRIC ASSLOAD OF TIME looking for ways to entertain yourself without getting off your ass. You are? Dude, I'm right there with you. Last night, I got into a fight with my roommate (as in, the guy who actually pays the rent) about the "good old days" of gaming. "Games are too expensive now!" he bitched. "They aren't as good as they used to be!" he whined. Games back in the '80s and early '90s cost, what, $35? That's like...friggin'...I don't know—$500 today. [*If we're talking 1985, more like $70 adjusted for inflation in 2006.—Ed.*]

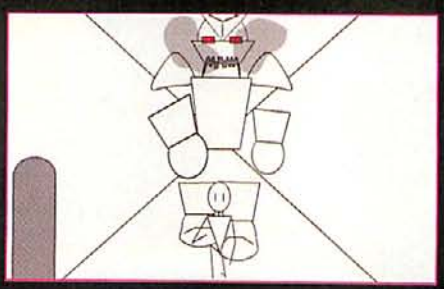
As for games not being as good as they used to be, now *that* sounds like a challenge to me. Time to turn off the latest "Celebreality" VH1 show and get off the bas-relief couch impression I've honed so that I can prove a point. The bet: Not only could I find a bunch of games that'd send my buddy back down memory lane, but he wouldn't have to pay a single dime to get his gaming fix. I'll give you one guess as to who won the bet.

/The Freeloader

THE GAME: **No-Action Jackson**
FILE UNDER: **LucasArts tribute**
URL: **cubiclespace.net/projects/noaction**

To say that I miss the classic days of LucasArts adventure games is like saying I'd only be mildly interested in training a monkey in the deadly art of ninjutsu. While LucasArts may have given up on the genre they helped pioneer, at least one faithful gamer still remembers.

"Hey, this is my life story!" is what I thought after seeing *No-Action Jackson* in, er, "action." *NAJ* pays full-on tribute to all those classic graphic adventures that I played back in the '80s. In this case, the game focuses on the life of a *D&D* and PC-gaming freak (translation: me). Anyhow, the dialogue is funny and the graphic style spot-on. It's fantastically reminiscent of *Day of the Tentacle*—if I didn't know any better, I'd expect to see this on a store shelf. And I'd probably cough up a couple of bucks for it.



THE GAME: **Dungeon Escape**
FILE UNDER: **Dragon's Lair-ish**
URL: **studiohunty.com/dungeon**

Back in 1983, I was hypnotized. In the local arcade, it stood there like some obelisk with a top-mounted TV: a fully animated cartoon that you could actually control! Holy crap! That *Dragon's Lair* machine was one of the first animated laserdisc games—and the first time I actually waited in line behind a crowd of people just to see a game in action. It also broke the bank at $1 a pop and 50 cents to continue after dying—which happened often.

That'll price any 12-year-old out of regularly playing games. Funny thing is, the game was simple as hell. Wait for a flashing light, then tap the joystick in the right direction. That's it. Why dwell on this? Well, you can get a small taste of that past glory right now with the free Flash game *Dungeon Escape*. Never mind the lame stick figures—just click on the flashing circle and see how far you get before dying.

THE GAME: **Another World**
FILE UNDER: **Remade masterpiece**
URL: **anotherworld.fr/anotherworld_uk**

I could play this game all day—and I did. I lost track of most things for a solid week while fixating on this trippy 2D action-adventure. *Out of This World* blew away anyone who saw it back in 1991. The simple, sweet graphics got your attention, and the great combination of adventure puzzle solving and platform action hooked you.

So here we are, 15 years later, and Eric Chahi, the creator of the original masterpiece (which, by the way, was known as *Another World* in Europe), has updated the game to work on your modern PC. It ain't *Crysis*, that's for sure. The crazy part: This "high-resolution collector's edition" still has a unique style that'll draw you right back.

ONLINE!

When it comes to free games, you only need to remember one website: freeloader.1UP.com, my online cardboard box...er, homo. Check back for new finds every month.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY JULY 2006

THE GOOD

GUILD WARS: CAMPAIGN THREE

Guild Wars developer ArenaNet recently pulled the curtain off the third, as-yet-untitled campaign for its popular free-to-play MMORPG. The setting this time around: An African-themed continent that mixes tribal and Arabian motifs, with plenty of uniquely bizarre new monsters to fight (our favorite: monkeys riding lizards). No details on new professions just yet—but you can expect two of 'em.

THE BAD

OBLIVION RERATED

The watchdogs at the ESRB recently bumped *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*'s rating from Teen to Mature thanks to the topless mod currently making the rounds on the Web. The topless skin itself was hidden deep within the game's code, though a press release issued by *Oblivion* publisher Bethesda Softworks insists that "there is no nudity in *Oblivion* without a third-party modification." Call it *Hot Coffee: The Sequel*.

THE UGLY

CALL OF DUTY 2 V1.2 PATCH

Last April's *Call of Duty 2* v1.2 patch added much-needed PunkBuster anti-cheating support (strangely absent from the initial retail release) to the game's multiplayer mode...and it took dedicated hackers a mere eight hours to crack, undoing the six months of work that developer Infinity Ward put into the patch. Oh well...at least we can still play *Battlefield 2* in relative peace.

ARMED ASSAULT

Unofficial *Flashpoint* follow-up

▲ Skip from controlling one soldier to another according to solo play's shifting circumstances.

PUBLISHER: **TBD** DEVELOPER: **Bohemia Interactive** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Summer 2006**

PREVIEW

CUE THE COULD-HAPPEN-BUT-HASN'T conflict, cold war baking on a common border: As the pro-West, prodemocratic kingdom of South Sahrani stink-eyes its northern communist neighbors, America sends in troops for training purposes. "It's primarily a means of posturing," says *Armed Assault* community manager Paul R. Statham. "Patronizing photo ops with no real intent of providing an actual presence." Political cachet turns Pandora's box when the North irrupts with Yanks still on Sahrani soil.

See *Armed Assault*, Czech developer Bohemia Interactive's sophomore combat sim, as the unofficial follow-up to *Operation Flashpoint*, the army-versus-army shooter that trailblazed warring over land, lake, and air well before *Battlefield* stormed the same space. Yet unlike EA's built-for-online blockbuster, *Armed Assault*'s unplugged play is fully featured. "Single-player campaign proceeds upon the initial invasion," Statham says. "South Sahrani is caught with its drawers down, so it's pretty much a case of 'up, on with the socks, and at 'em.' First, you'll struggle to slow the North's swift aggression, but with a little skill and a lot of luck, you'll make progress."

Freedom rings in the form of wide-open space (some 250 square miles' worth of encompassing cities, boomtowns, and whistle stops), and attack plans (clandestine or direct) are yours to plot. According to Statham: "What happens in one mission affects the next, whether that be the squadmates you save or the hardware you spare. And that's true in real time. For example, blast enemy artillery early, and it won't bombard you when you attack a base; frag roving patrols first, and they won't shoot you in the keister later as you approach your primary objective."

Where macrotactical dividends pay out over time, zoomed-in intuition serves the moment when hawks and insects fly and flit through trees and shrubs—false positives for the high-strung and itchy-fingered. "Much of *Armed Assault*'s environment is interactive and, more importantly, functional," says Statham. "It's primary in our mindset: Only introduce features and effects if and when they have some sort of useful functionality and can contribute to the entire experience. It holds true for our use of special sound and HDR lighting—where staring into the sun, a flashlight, or a vehicle's high beams interferes with your vision."

Online, *Armed Assault*'s nationwide scope—orders of magnitude bigger than *Battlefield*'s—is the stuff of up-all-night firefights. Flexible win conditions allow for anything from attrition and set score to the assassination of a specific target to the complete capture of every single city and shanty on Sahrani, coast to coast. "Of course," says Statham, taking aim at *Battlefield*'s seesawing cap points, "seeing some missions through might take serious time—although players can come and go over the course of the campaign—but beating feet from one checkpoint to another and back with a few vehicles haphazardly thrown in is no comparison." **/ Shawn Elliott**

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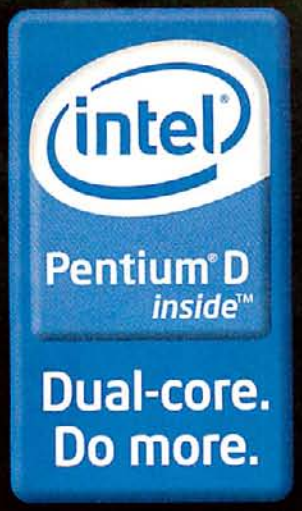

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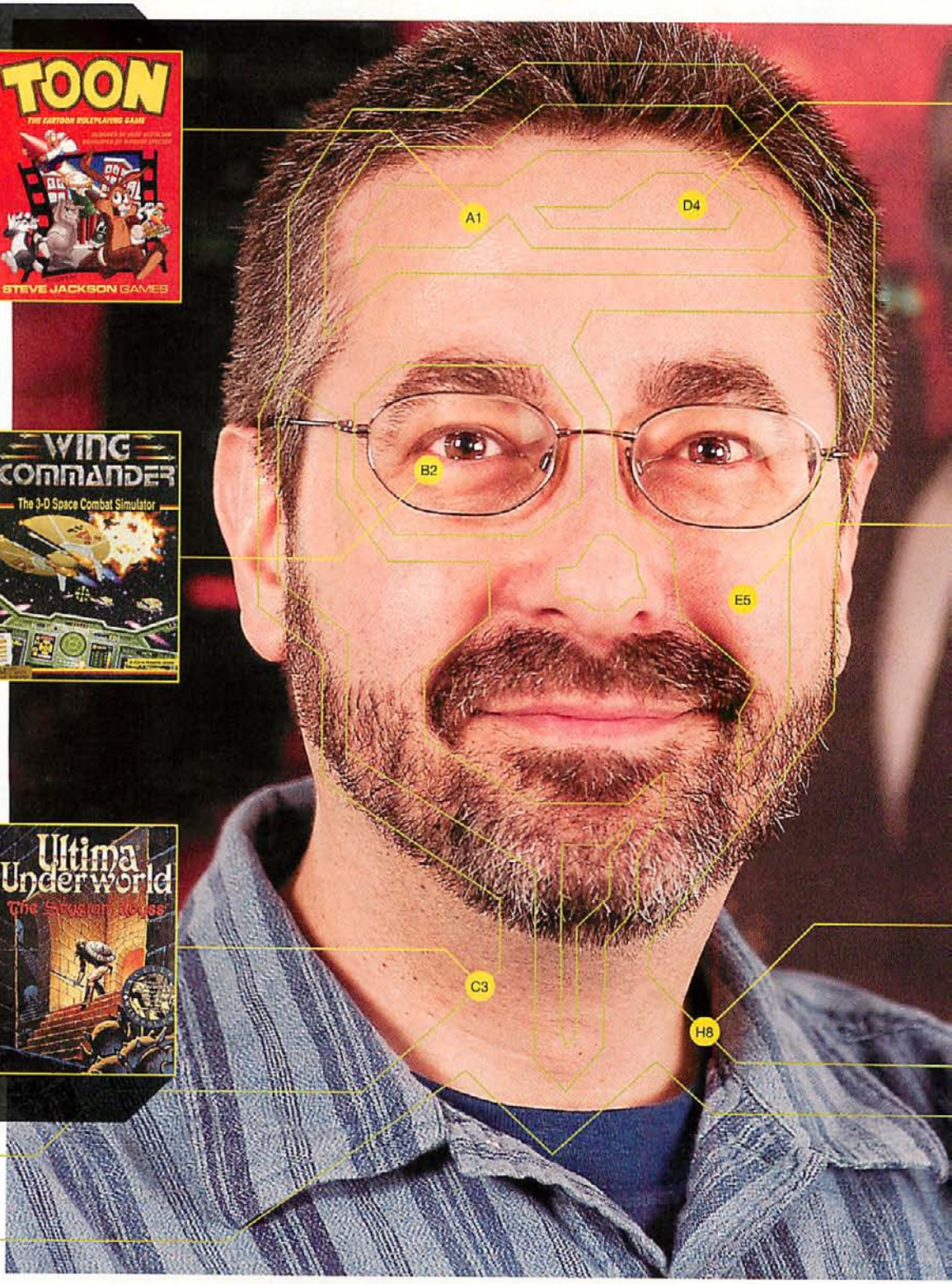
1984
Develops the pen-and-paper RPG *Toon* (with all its cartoon cats, mice, and rabbits) for Steve Jackson Games.

1990
Associate-produces *Ultima VI* and *Wing Commander* for developer Origin Systems.

1992-1993
Produces the award-winning *Ultima Underworld* games for Origin.



THE CGW INTERVIEW: WARREN SPECTOR

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT AND MATT PECKHAM

1994
Produces *System Shock* for Electronic Arts.

1997-2000
Accepts a seat on Dallas-based developer Ion Storm's board of directors and founds Austin branch. Produces *Deus Ex*.

2005
Establishes Junction Point Studios and begins work on an unspecified game to be built with Valve's Source engine and released through Valve's Steam digital distribution system. A studio job advertisement called for artists for a game that has "classic Hollywood cartoons" featuring "cartoon mice, cats, and wabbits."

INTERVIEW

CGW: Do consumers want innovation and change, inspiration and challenge?
Warren Spector: Man, I wish I knew! Certainly, some consumers want that, and others don't. I mean, gamers are no different from moviegoers in that sense—some folks want summer action flicks, and some want art flicks. I wish we made more "art games," but that's a separate issue. I'm sure there's an audience of some size for innovation. As far as inspiration and challenge go, I think games that don't inspire players in some way are doomed to triviality. They may allow players to pass the time pleasantly, but they won't be remembered. Not a concern for a lot of developers, I know, but it is a concern for me, for better or worse. And challenge? Challenge kind of defines games. The trick is finding an appropriate level of challenge.

CGW: In terms of challenge, we're not thinking of, say, a particularly taxing platforming sequence, but cases where you're challenging our expectations. Take, for instance, forking paths. *Resident Evil*'s design dictates that we explore each and every path, if not to obtain some object necessary for progression, then for items useful to that progression (e.g., ammo or med packs). So we start setting down mental string, and since each new fork requires us to trail another strand, the very existence of additional paths, literal or figurative, annoys us. Now, say someone introduces an RPG with umpteen routes—aren't some of us likely to resist this rather than feel liberated?
WS: Ah, I see. [With *Deus Ex*,] instead of flowing smoothly from choice point to choice point along a path of their own choosing, most players responded to each either by stopping dead in their tracks—paralyzed because they had a real choice to make—or they saved at each choice point and tried all of the options, eventually settling on the path they liked the best, once they'd experienced them all. It was totally weird to me and, at first, pretty disappointing, but in the end I came to terms with this all too common approach—after all, the *DX* idea was to put players in control of the experience, and if that's the way they wanted to play, more power to 'em. As for your more general question—shouldn't developers challenge player assumptions about how games work? You bet we should. If we don't challenge those assumptions, if we just give players what their experience leads them to expect, we'll stagnate and die. Eventually, even the least jaded gamers will get tired of what we have to offer and find other ways to amuse themselves. Frankly, I think we're already starting to see some of that.

CGW: Are the challenges you've set for yourself satisfying/rewarding? Or do other outlets call—say, your rocket or robot science?
WS: Making games is plenty challenging, satisfying, and rewarding. But nah, I'm not like John Carmack or Will Wright, guys who go home and tinker with rockets or robots. The nongaming stuff I want to do is largely driven by a desire to control the creative process—gaming is such an incredibly collaborative endeavor, such a team effort. I find myself drawn to stuff that's just me and a blank page or me and six strings. I need outlets where the creativity's all mine and not a group effort.

CGW: Elsewhere (i.e., in *The Escapist*), you've written that the worthwhile questions are: Does this advance the state of the art? Does this prepare us for success when players get tired of mugging virtual old ladies? Does this enrich our culture or debase it? Which gamemakers have answered these questions to your satisfaction?
WS: Well, I don't know that anyone's "answered" these questions successfully, but clearly some folks are trying. I can't begin to express my admiration for Will Wright and Shigeru Miyamoto—they shame the rest of us in the game business (in a good way!). Ditto for Doug Church [*System Shock 2*, *Thief II*], clearly the unsung hero of gaming. Of the next generation, Clint Hocking [*Splinter Cell*] is doing some great work, as is an old colleague of mine, Harvey Smith [*Deus Ex: Invisible War*]—both of them will, I think, "change things" before they're done. Tim Schafer [*Grim Fandango*] is a guy with a unique viewpoint and personal style that comes through in his games—and his games are always "about something," which I love. Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern went after some big game in *Façade*—that points us in a good direction, I think. And you gotta love the guys who made [PS2 games] *Ico* and *Katamari Damacy*, and pretty much everything in the Nintendo DS lineup.

CGW: Spector on Spector: "Maybe it isn't the games or the game business that have changed—maybe it's me." How so?
WS: This one hurts. The fact is, I'm, well, let's just say I'm older than most of the folks still actively involved in game development. I've lived through my 20s, 30s, 40s, and just recently entered my 50s. Which is totally bizarre—most of the time I still feel like I'm 18. But as I've gotten older, I want different things from my entertainment. I'm no longer as interested as I once was in alien invasions and space marines, and I'm less interested in orcs and elves, too. I still enjoy that stuff, but the occasional game about real people, in the real world, dealing with real issues would sure be nice! And I think this is as much a function of age and experience as it is just about me, personally. That's really all I meant by that comment—I still love games and want to continue playing them, but I'd like some games that are about my life, not some teenage kid's life, if you see what I mean. As far as the physical aspects of getting older, I simply don't have the energy for extended crunch hours the way I used to—I used to really love that stuff. Now, not so much. And I want to spend time with my wife and nonwork friends. So basically, the kinds of games I want to play have changed, and the way I want to make games has changed.

"ROGER EBERT HAS NO IMPACT WHATSOEVER ON THE FUTURE OF GAMING."
—WARREN SPECTOR

CGW: Real people, real world, real issues—aside from *The Sims*, what might a grounded game look like?

WS: Wow, man, if I knew, I'd go make that game! *Deus Ex* was an attempt at dealing with real-world issues and slightly more believable people who behave in more sophisticated ways than gamers might be used to. I'm desperate to play a political story game (our *West Wing*, where players get to run for office and interact with political enemies and campaign staffs and so on, where players get to govern, etc.). Or how about a game that lets me walk in the shoes of an African kid trying to survive, or, dare I say it, a game that allows me to experience the Israeli-Palestinian conflict firsthand to get a better handle on how each side sees the world?

SOUND OFF
E-mail Warren Spector at wes@junctionpoint.com

CGW: Speaking of aspects of the human experience that games often overlook...could we use more comedy? Even on the level of simple slapstick, has a first-person hero ever tripped and fallen flat on his face? Still, we're thinking less "comedy as genre" and more "funny as part of a package."

WS: I'd love to see more funny games. Problem one is that comedy is hard. Outside of Tim Schafer, I can't think of too many truly funny people in this business. Well, there are plenty of people who are funny and fun to hang out with, but that's not the same as being a comedian or a comic writer.

Adding to the difficulty is the fact that, at least according to theorists like Henri Bergson, humor derives from an ability to look at a situation without emotion. Put another way, "funny" is something that happens to someone else—the same thing happening to me is simply tragic. If you buy that (and I do), it's tough to ask a player to be the central character in a comedy and have a "funny" thing happen to him. Watch it happen, and it's funny. But experience it yourself (and that's what games ask us to do—experience things for ourselves), and the same event becomes distinctly less humorous. Games are largely about repeated events, and comedy can lose its punch with repetition, unless that repetition is planned in advance and carefully controlled. In a game, you can count on neither prior planning nor careful control, thanks to those pesky players making gameplay decisions! In a way, it seems to me that the very nature of games works against comedy.

CGW: You write, "What usually passes for innovation in the mainstream of game development and publishing is painfully conventional—usually limited to interesting use of physics, or a new lighting effect, or two prescripted paths instead of one." How do you respond to critics that insist this describes *Deus Ex: Invisible War*?

WS: Yoiks! I've been hoist by my own petard! Not really, though. Yes, *Invisible War* relied pretty heavily on enhanced physics and lighting, but those systems were enhanced specifically to allow players greater freedom to explore the game world as they saw fit, rather than as a way to provide prettier or more realistic graphics. Given the stealth model and A.I., the lighting and shadow effects could have provided radically different gameplay opportunities [from those] a more traditional lighting and shadowing system [could provide]. Similarly, a world designed to encourage player choice and unique experience all but requires a sophisticated physics system—again, the goal wasn't to make the world look more believable or to create a different kind of puzzle, but to provide a world that rewarded planning and experimentation in new ways. Whether we used either lighting or physics effectively is a separate story.

I'm proud of the team and, while I acknowledge the game's flaws, I think it's worth looking at just how lofty our goals were and how many risks we took in the creation of the game. Heck, if we'd been smart, we would have just pushed out a quick sequel and not tried to move things forward. We didn't, and we paid the price, I guess, but I wouldn't have had it any other way.

CGW: Quoting from *The Escapist* again: "[In the '80s,] games had style. Developers had style. You could tell who made a game within seconds of beginning to play. There was variety in form, technique, genre, style—you name it." Isn't this like agreeing to remember the "aughts" as the decade of *Battlestar Galactica* rather than of *The Simple Life*?

WS: I like to think of "style" a little differently than the question implies. I'm not just thinking about what subject matter we deal with in our games, but the way that subject matter is treated. What I meant when I wrote that comment for *The Escapist* was that the people making games back in the '80s were able to (or chose to, or were allowed to) put more of themselves into their work than developers [can] nowadays. I mean, I guess you could say that you can spot a Will Wright game from a mile away. And Tim Schafer's work isn't like anyone else's. You could always tell an *Oddworld* game. Maybe you can tell that *Shadow of the Colossus* was made by the same folks who brought us *Ico* without checking the credits. And there's probably something you could call the "Rockstar style." But by and large, games feel pretty generic to me these days. I get in trouble when I start naming names, so I'm not gonna do it now, but just look at all the shooters out there and tell me who made this one versus that other one without looking at the box. Can't do it. Probably has something to do with team size or budgets or something. Still, a David Fincher film requires a big team and a big budget, and it doesn't look or feel anything like a John Woo film. A David Lynch film will never be mistaken for a Robert Zemeckis film. Doesn't matter what the genre is, or the subject matter, or who the editor is, or the director of photography, or the best boy, or the caterer. Those [directors] have their own styles, and it comes through in all of their work. Game developers used to have that, too. More than they do now, anyway. Sad.

CGW: Have games truly been creatively stunted? What about indies like *Garry's Mod*? *Space Rangers 2*? *Darwinia*? Anything contradictory in the notion that commercial success ought to accompany innovation?

WS: I've been called on the carpet a lot recently for decrying the "lack of creativity" in gaming. The critics—and you, given your question!—may be right. Maybe there is as much creativity and innovation as there ever was. I mean, *Façade* is an interesting experiment. *Katamari Damacy* is pretty amazing. And as you point out, there are folks in the indie space trying to do interesting stuff. But for whatever reason, those games aren't reaching a large enough audience—even within the developer community—to have much influence.

Publishers should be doing more, I think, to foster creativity. I'm not arguing that all of their games should be crazy experiments, costing tens of millions of dollars—they have to make money, which is tough enough in this business. But surely, they could and should fund one or two really crazy things a year. Surely they could support a little genuine R&D that doesn't involve rendering or physics! In the long run, it's in their best interests as well as players' best interests to encourage original thinking.

CGW: Is Steam gaming's Sundance? Can independent developers prevent Valve from becoming another glorified EA?

WS: I don't know that gaming has a Sundance yet. Our indie movement, if you can call it that, is pretty early in its development. Steam is a great opportunity to get a project that might not have obvious publisher appeal in front of an audience; that's for sure. But I think that, while Sundance is clearly designed to get indie movies before an audience, its success is largely driven by alternate funding models that allow people to make those movies in the first place. Steam doesn't do anything to address that problem. Make no mistake, though: Steam and other direct-distribution opportunities

are hugely important now and will only become more so in the future.

I just know we'd be better off—developers and gamers alike—if we could find a way to separate publishing from funding. Frankly, if we don't find alternatives, even some of the small- and medium-size publishers may find it tough to compete as costs go up and up in the mainstream game space. I mean, how many publishers can afford to make a bunch of $10 million, $20 million bets? Doesn't take too many flops to hit your bottom line hard.

CGW: Can you comment on the differences and similarities between classic author-reader relationships and contemporary game-player relationships?
WS: The simplest way to differentiate traditional media and games is to say that authors, directors, and painters tell stories *to* players, while game creators tell stories *with* players. Consumers of linear media (books, movies, music) absorb and interpret; consumers of interactive media absorb, interpret, and act. Linear media can't respond to users; interactive media must respond. The big problem for me is when interactive media responds to all players in the same way—if that's the case, why bother making a game? If your interactions are all canned or scripted, if your choices are all "false" (or limited to "Which weapon will I use this time?"), why bother? If you're not interested in putting players in charge—really in charge—and if you're not willing to share authorial control, why aren't you making a movie?

CGW: In Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's book *Rules of Play*, you challenge the assumption that the whole point of gaming is immersion. Is immersion still a technology fetish we'll one day overcome?
WS: It's funny. I used to be one of the guys hoping I'd live to see a real, live holodeck. But the longer I do this, the more I think it's irrelevant if we ever get to the point where players are interacting with a re-creation of reality that's indistinguishable from reality itself. I don't care if I never touch or smell a character in a game. I don't care if I never feel the thud of virtual bullets or the caress of a virtual lover. OK, maybe that last one wouldn't be so bad!

What I've come to realize, rightly or wrongly, is that total immersion in a completely free-form world is kind of a waste—fun comes from constraints. Significance comes from how we bound the player experience. Games aren't about dropping players in a virtual world and letting them do whatever they want; games are about presenting players with interesting problems and seeing how they deal with them, responding to their solutions, and then forcing them to deal with the consequences. That can be done just as effectively—maybe more effectively—on a 19-inch flatscreen as it can in a holodeck. Immersion is important only insofar as it convinces players that what they're experiencing is worth taking seriously, worth responding to, worth thinking about.

CGW: Do fledgling "emergent" games like *Oblivion* or *Grand Theft Auto* make the design process prohibitively complex because of all the possible outcomes? Will we ever see game designers willing to let a game be "not fun" in certain percentages in exchange for some greater free-form whole?
WS: Creating games that allow players to drive their experience in the direction they choose is incredibly, incredibly hard. Given the current state of the art, you really only have two choices that I know of: You can spend a ton of time creating a bunch of content many (most?) players won't see. Or you spend a ton of time creating game systems unpredictable enough in their functioning (at least from a player's perspective) that developers are left hoping players find some fun. Neither one's a good option. My hope and dream is that we'll eventually create toolsets that allow us to autogenerate a bunch of our content. But just as important, we need to create systems that can basically read the minds of each player as he or she plays and adjust the experience in significant ways by learning what each player wants to do—who each player wants to be. We're sure not there yet, but we're moving in the right direction. Luckily, games like *Oblivion* and *GTA3* sell well enough that we can assume players want to take more control of their experience than we've traditionally allowed them to do, which means the folks with the money have an incentive to make this sort of game better, more efficiently, and more economically.

CGW: Do you ever feel disconnected from your projects compared to how you felt a decade or two ago?
WS: Sure. I have, on occasion, felt disconnected from the games I've worked on—and no, I won't tell you anything specific about which occasions or which games! There are a lot of reasons for that when it happens. Some of it has to do with how passionate I am about a specific project. Some of it, more recently, has to do with my age and energy level, much as it pains me to admit that! Some of it has to do with talented, experienced coworkers who've been with me for a long time and deserve a shot at driving a game vision. And some of it gets back to modern development practices.

With team sizes getting so big and development taking so long, a disconnect between the guy "at the top" and the work on the screen sometimes seems inevitable. I stay as involved as I can in the conceptual and preproduction phases of a project. And I love the endgame of development, where you're testing and tuning and making sure everything's just right for players. But to be honest, I've never been much of a production-phase guy. Luckily, there are people who live for production—folks who love building maps, pushing pixels, writing a gazillion lines of code to realize a shared vision. So in that sense, I always get a little "disconnected" from "my" games, by choice, during that middle production period. (Man, I'm probably never going to get work again after admitting this!) But it isn't, or shouldn't be, about me—this is a team effort. The ideal for me is that every member of the team be able to say, "That's my game," and mean it.

CGW: Roger Ebert recently held a debate about the much-reviled "games as art" issue, but included no acknowledged specialists like Henry Jenkins. Does it damage the "cause" when prominent media personalities have these kinds of "disconnected" debates?
WS: Roger Ebert has no impact whatsoever on the future of gaming. I think we should just ignore the guy—and the argument—and move on. The fact is, almost everyone under the age of 30 grew up with games (and a lot of us over the age of 30!), and there's no sign that gamers stop being gamers as they get older. As I've said, people start demanding different kinds of entertainment, but not different forms. We do need to create a wider variety of game types and offer a wider range of content, but games are here to stay. Universities are starting to recognize our cultural significance. Parents are playing with their kids. It's only a matter of time before the President's a PlayStation owner. We're an art form. We've won. Get over it, Roger.

2004
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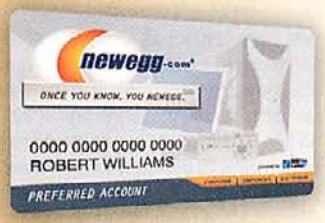

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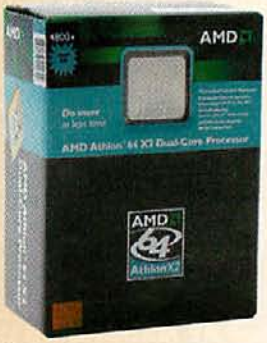

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TOP FIVE OBLIVION MODS

Get more game out of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*

EXTRA LIFE

IT'S BEEN COOL OF BETHESDA TO begin offering extra downloadable content for its awesome *Oblivion*, but we really don't need to drop $2 on the odd bit of horse armor or another couple of bones for an additional quest. Thankfully, the mod community is already on top of creating new gear and new worlds to explore. The best part? It's all 100 percent free, no strings attached. Below are our five favorite mods to date. Before getting to it, though, we need to hand out a very honorable mention to the creators of Oldblivion (www.oldblivion.com), a mod equivalent of the Peace Corps, for bringing *Oblivion* to those with less-than-privileged graphics cards—even GeForce3! / **Darren Gladstone**

5 SENTIENT WEAPON 2.0 BY NARKYBARK

It's bad enough to die, but to have your sword mock you for getting your butt kicked? You've heard of smart bombs; well, Tamriel has smart swords. This mod starts a quest (look for the wandering weaponsmith named Krunk near the crossroads of Bravil) that ends with you owning your very own wisecracking weapon. You'll have three choices of weapon, each with its own personality and abilities: Fred the Coward is an eternal pessimist that can instill fear with a critical hit; Atkivir the Murderer is a bloodthirsty psychopath that deals heavy damage; and Samson the (wannabe) Hero cripples enemies' combat abilities.

4 BENEATH THE WALL BY DAVIMUSK AND JÄGER

Oblivion only came out a couple months ago, so it's still too soon to expect many brave new worlds and missions. However, this short and sweet adventure will have you doing some gangbusting in Bruma.

A secret cave under the city is the current hideout for the Black Bow Bandits. Keep a lookout for a door to the cave, which is hidden behind some shrubbery. We know, it's not much to go on, but half the fun is finding the way in.

3 SADDLE BAGS V2.1 BY MABOROSHI DAIKON

Put that mount of yours to good use. Sure, it helps you roam through the countryside quicker, but we found it a little hard to believe that nobody in Tamriel ever thought to invent some saddlebags for your horse so that it can hold some heavy gear. And yes, it's even compatible with Bethesda's official horse-armor mod.

2 NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS BY MAX TAEL

As if *Oblivion* weren't pushing the graphical threshold enough already, the Natural Environments mod is a 9.3MB must-have for your game. Polishing textures and tweaking ESP files here gives a huge overhaul to the entire game.

1 BTMOD V2.20 BY TIKIGOD AND BEIDER

This is one of the first mods to race out after *Oblivion*'s release, and you simply cannot play the game without it. BTmod is a series of major improvements to the game's UI, including increased view areas on the journals and larger inventory screens. In short, this cleans up the interface and shows you more info without your having to dig for it. /

ON FILEFRONT
For these mods and more, go to cgw.filefront.com.
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DEVELOPER'S DESKTOP What games are *they* playing?

EPIC GAMES
Producer Jeff Morris is busy working on *Unreal Tournament 2007*. What are the five games he'd love to play again if he had the time?

CRUSH, CRUMBLE, AND CHOMP! — I used to pay the owner of Santa Monica's Aero Hobbies four bucks an hour to play this game on his Apple II. Of all the retro games I still play, this one holds up the best. It's my all-time favorite and gets my vote for the most neglected genre.

SPACE HULK — This still embodies how to convert "analog" games to computer games. Great tension with the PauseTime feature, awesome squad customization options in later missions, and chillingly atmospheric audio. This game screams pure playability.

MAGIC CARPET — Complete immersion in such a fantastic environment, this action game has everything: base building, player-controlled armies, even a stereoscopic mode for faux 3D. In my mind, *Magic Carpet* invented the "living battlefield" that's only being rivaled now.

IT CAME FROM THE DESERT — The open-ended nature of how you deal with the mutant threats was acutely ahead of its time. *ICFTD* did an incredible job of creating memorable characters, especially for an action/strategy hybrid. The map that shipped with the game is actually framed and hanging in my house.

X-COM — I'll always remember my first *X-Com* mission. Loading into a transport to investigate a downed UFO, each of my soldiers is kitted and combat ready. I've got grandiose tactics in mind, with much flanking and opportunity fire. As we bravely tromp down the ramp, an alien grenade is tossed almost casually into the midst of the lethally packed formation. Instant liquefaction. What followed was a month-long gaming marathon. /

WEBCELEB GAMER: DIVES

World of WarCraft's infamously ill-tempered guild leader goes off

INTERVIEW

MEET THE PISSER WITH THE PINCHED accent. He's *Full Metal Jacket*'s ball-busting gunnery sergeant; he's *A Christmas Story*'s Ralphie swinging blind in the narcotic throes of comeuppance served. Only he's playing. Yes, Marius-Daniel "Dives" Balea is "that guy," generalissimo of *World of WarCraft* guild Wipe Club, and his YTMND fame (webpages with looping sound files) dialed the egg timer to 15.

Where Dives' smokestacking and potboiling make for the funny, it's his recordings' subject matter that cinches it. To *WOW* mavens, they're so much cold water in the kisser. Yup, if, like us, you have the foggiest as to what he's storming about—DKP, DOTs, Onyxia—you've followed the rabbit *that* far (see the Geek Glossary below). For the rest of you, it just confirms that long-held hunch: Raiding is—literally—*seriously* dorky.

Cue the freaky-deaky accent: We chat with Dives and Wipe Club first officer Dani "Xaifer" Shalem via instant messenger. / **Shawn Elliott**

GEEK GLOSSARY

Courtesy of The Daedalus Project: MMORPG Lexicon at www.nickyee.com/daedalus

DKP: Dragon kill points. An elaborate score-keeping system used by guilds to fairly distribute loot based on participation and contribution to the guild. Dives routinely threatens to dock members' DKP for offenses.

DOT: Damage over time. Refers to a class of spells that deals damage over a period of time. Dives loves DOTs.

DPS: Damage per second.

WIPE: When an entire group, whether a party or a raid, dies.

TANK: As a noun, refers to character classes capable of withstanding serious damage.

AGGRO: As a verb, refers to a hostile mob that has noticed a player and is actively trying to attack that player. As a noun, aggro refers to the amount of "hostility" the player has generated among the mob.

CGW: Word has it you hail from Turkey. True?
Dives: Born in Romania, but I've been in Finland since about the age of 6. I'm also Greek and German.

CGW: You're a hit but haven't been in control of your fame so far. Why not make your own website and pull in enough page views to warrant a saucy Mate1 advertisement or two?
Dives: We're gonna put some small ads on our guild site, wipeclub.org, to help with upkeep costs.
Xaifer: It's cool to see Dives mania spreading to U.S. servers.
Dives: Thirty-some people made a tribute guild on the Chromaggus server, and a hundred others made characters to talk to me.
Xaifer: When you see "do this, do that, or it's -50 DKP!" in other games, you know it's out there. I've heard that in *Diablo II*, heard it in *Counter-Strike*.
Dives: It's got to go on in *Guild Wars* and *EverQuest*, too.

CGW: So even Arnie Schwarzenegger could say it in his next California campaign speech?
Xaifer: "Pass this law or it's -50 DKP!"

CGW: Dives?
Dives: Eh? Sorry, I'm playing at the same time—got dual screens going. Arnold is a pimp.

CGW: So it'd sound natural coming from him, then?
Xaifer: Nothing sounds natural coming from Arnold Schwarzenegger.
Dives: What can you expect from a person who's f***ed every female he's worked with? It would be an honor to have him as main tank in the guild. We'd never advance or anything, but hey....

CGW: Say we're Arnie, and we charge into an encounter before the crew's prepped. Bitch at us.
Dives: You need more intellect. Being main tank ain't all about stamina and strength! And if you can't handle it, I'll f***ing replace you! I have the f***ing Remove button! Take a chill pill or I'll use my Blizzard-given power! Chuck Norris does too many roundhouse kicks.
Xaifer: I'm a big fan of Chuck Norris. In fact, I watch *Walker* when my Net connection's down.
Dives: Jean-Claude Van Damme's new movie *Second in Command* wasn't bad. *Universal Soldier* was nice. It was original—the government throws you in a freezer and pumps you full of chemicals, making you super.

CGW: Better ball-buster—you or *Full Metal Jacket*'s R. Lee Ermey?
Dives: Nothing beats *Full Metal Jacket*. Just like in the movie, I am hard, and for that you will hate me. But the more you hate me, the more you learn.

CGW: As Van Damme has it, a hard man is good to find.
Dives: F***! Gray mobs are ganking me—typing and running. I would give the Blizzard employee who replaced paladins with shamans -50 DKP. I wouldn't kick him from Wipe Club, but I'd make a rank called "guild retard" and demote him to that.

CGW: What's Wipe Club's turnover rate? Has the crew ever challenged your authority?
Dives: We used to lose one or two members per raid at one point. One time we lost four at once. We're democratic. Officers decide, and I have veto power. Those who challenge our authority don't last long, though—Blizzard implemented a shiny red button with the word "remove" on it.

CGW: Has membership and main tanking helped you get more skirt (you say so in one of your recordings)? How legendary is your mount?
Dives: Nah, its just pep talk. I actually dumped my girlfriend when *WOW* came out.

CGW: Onyxia's wing-buffet de-aggro affects the main tank in phases one and three, but you order "more DOTs," tell the clothies to "nuke," and tell the melee DPS to "hit hard, like you've never hit before." Consequently, a squishie aggros Ony, and the raid wipes. Who gets the -50 DKP? The guy who drew aggro, or you for telling the raid to go balls-out?
Dives: First of all, I order more DOTs in phase two, since phases one and three are about steady and controlled DPS. As for people getting aggro in phases one or three, the -50 DKP is for a major offense or a wipe mistake. As for me getting a DKP penalty, well, that'll never happen. The guild is trained to do what I say; they need to trust me. And besides, even if I am wrong, I'm still never wrong. Basic army regulation says leadership is never wrong. /

WEB'S BEST OF WIPE CLUB

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COLUMN

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FIELD REPORT

FIVE HOURS! SOME PEOPLE SPENT HALF THE flippin' day waiting to lay hands upon Nintendo's Wii (the new console) during the 2006 Electronic Entertainment Expo. I, on the other hand, spent that time casually strolling through gamingdom's undiscovered country—the infamous Kentia Hall. It's where small developers with big dreams start. It's where nations of the world come together. It's where I learned that Tai Chi is "The only Kung Fu Which kills in Space [*sic*]." Yes, when *I* think of the gateway to China, I think of Asian women in space-suits striking martial arts poses. Don't ask; just accept it when walking past the Hong Kong pavilion—the Ultra Dimension of Digital Entertainment.

Elveon

THE GAMES

It'd be far too easy to dwell on lost-in-translation beauties like the *Ultraman Happy Fun Unicorn Princess Study 3* (in case you hadn't already guessed, no, that's not real). Instead, how about the games you might actually want to install on your PC at some point?

Dead Island (techland.pl/e3). I'm vocal in my love for all things zombie. But when Techland stranded me on a digitized desert island, the developer had me at "Braaaaaains!" *Dead Island* looks like a tropical Romero flick...but with box-lifting puzzles. It promises a fully interactive environment to use against the zombie hordes, but one thing that already works for me is the setting. While walking through the tall grass, tension ratchets up since you're unsure where a zombie might lurk. And I can't fault the game for any bad A.I., since the enemies are—after all—the bumbling undead.

Elveon (www2.elveon.net). It's medieval Earth with elves. Honestly, this game caught me by surprise—I mean, a high-fantasy sword-and-sorcery action-RPG using Unreal Engine 3? Hell yeah! Though you start *Elveon* as an elite archer, this isn't a fantasy FPS. The game emphasizes swordplay through group combat and *Soul Calibur*-esque 1-on-1 dueling. As your skills improve, you learn new combat styles with multiple weapons (will you use a polearm or dual-wield a dagger and short sword?). Definitely one to watch.

Death to Spies (int.games.1c.ru). Not since *Snakes on a Plane* have I seen a more self-explanatory title. However, 1C's new stealth game is more than just squashing spies—it's based on real events. The Soviet army's SMERSH department had a dirty job during World War II: detect and deal with German spies. *DTS* tells the same tale, taking you behind enemy lines to eliminate the bad guys (and wear their uniforms, and then booby-trap their bodies). Eidos: This is what *Commandos Strike Force* should've been.

Trimersion

THE GEAR

Kentia is also where gadget-loving gamers step into tomorrow. Or go to die. If you want to hear more about actual, useful, and innovative hardware, turn to this issue's Hard News report (pg. 102). If you want potentially embarrassing, nookie-repelling products, read on.

CGW editor Shawn Elliott practically bought the R2 Mark II gaming mouse (gamingmouse.com) on the spot for all his fragging needs...but the superfluous Fragpedals (sold separately) look ridiculous. An extra $80 for what amounts to foot-pedal mouse buttons? Who am I, Def Leppard's one-armed drummer?

The people behind the BodyPad (bodypad.com) have a different approach—they assume you actually want to get off your ass. Strap the sensors onto your limbs and, once you calibrate the thing, real-world kicks translate into game-world moves. The upshot: You'll be in great shape to beat up all your hecklers.

Me? I'd rather just shed my humanity and strap a TV to my face. Yes, $600 is a small price to pay for turning yourself into a cybernetic death-dealer from Dimension Awesome. 3001 AD's Trimersion (trimersion.com) is a wireless, head-mounted display and gun controller guaranteed to make even the nerdiest of the nerdy run screaming from the room. I don't know what made my head spin more: the less-than-optimal 320x240 resolution or the heave-worthy head-motion-based aiming system. It's an...interesting...idea, but I'm more impressed that 3001 AD managed to talk the pictured booth babes into wearing fashion-forward silver unitards to enter the Matrix.

Indeed, the future is now. / **Darren Gladstone**

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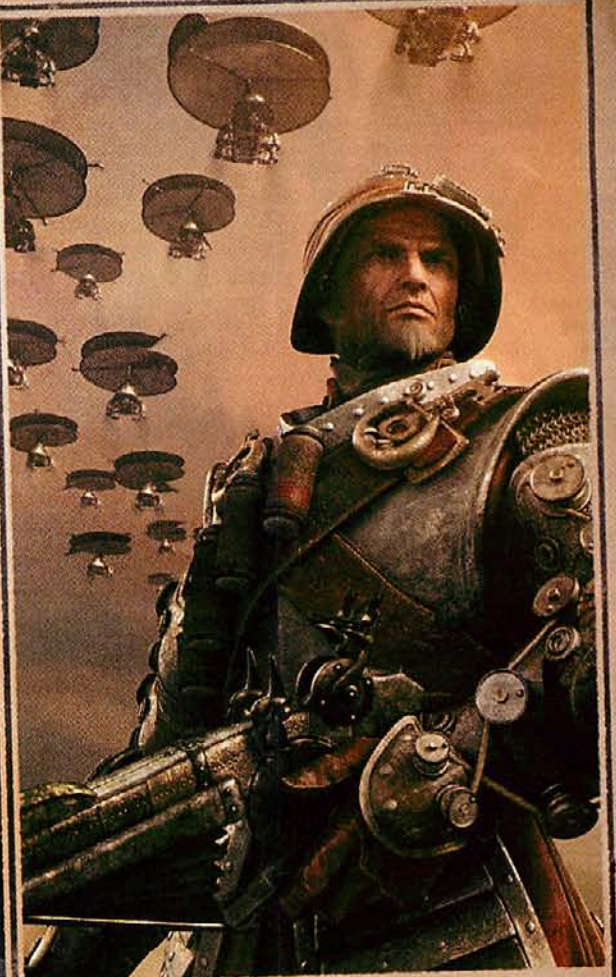

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PROFILE

WHAT'S ANOTHER GAL GAMING GROUP TO DO TO GET ATTENTION?

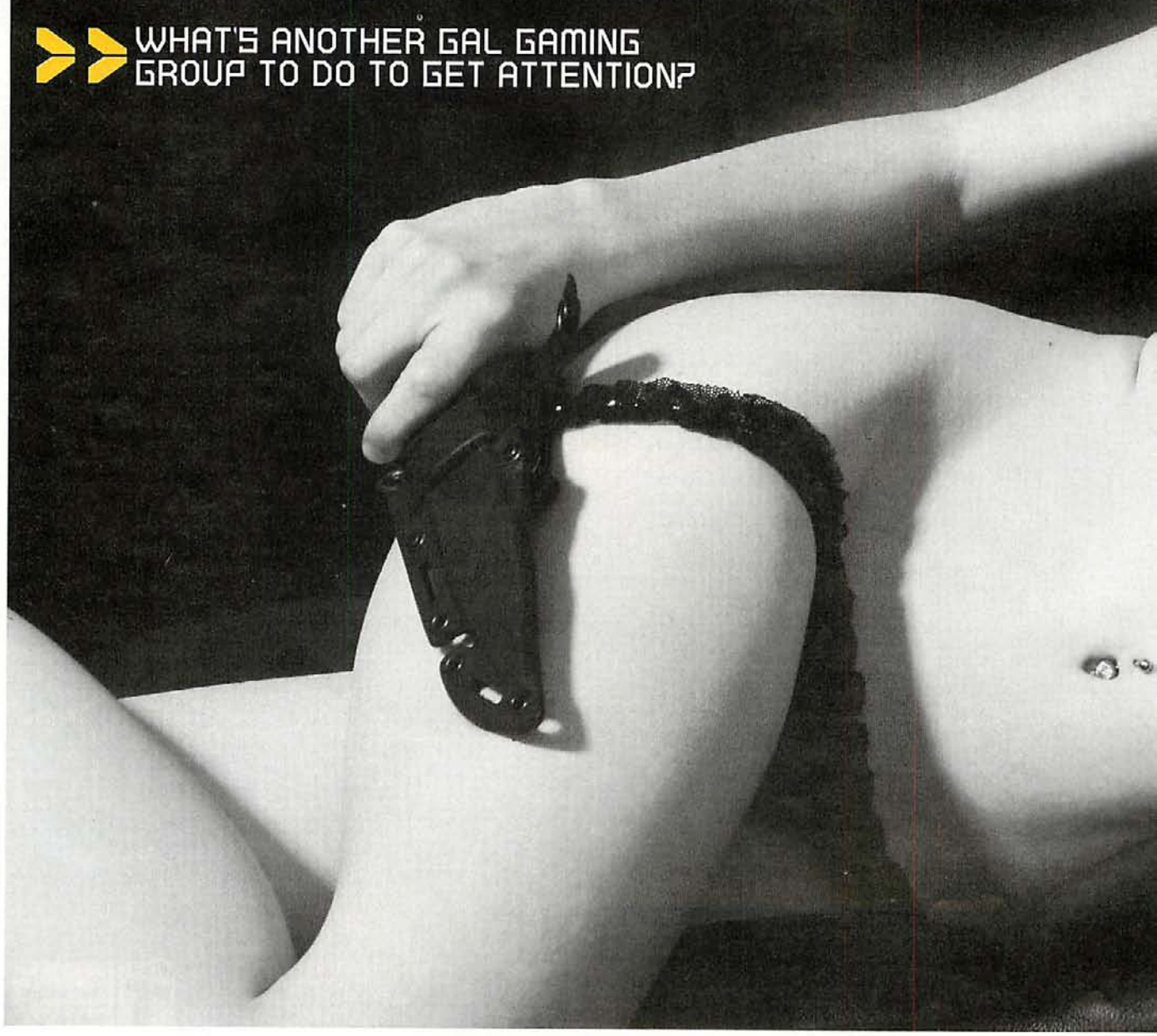
GIRLS GAME FOR THE THROAT—WE'VE gotten used to it. Now ubiquitous, the Ubisoft-sponsored Frag Dolls started spreading their message of equal-opportunity deathmatching with a foxy face in '04. Others share similar stories, including the international all-female team girlz 0f destruction and Les Seules, the so-called Swedish Girls of Gaming who use pro coaching and Olympic-like training regimens to triumph in *Counter-Strike* and other red-toothed shooters. So, what's yet another gal group to do to get attention? Challenge the rest and rise to the top. Or, if you're the Girls of CS (an offshoot of the LANFusion network), simply take the top off.

"We're coding our website for community, with custom user profiles, blogs, message boards, and everything else you'd expect," says Dan Matthews, co-owner of the adults-only GirlsofCS .com. "Premium members get access to a private voice-over-IP (VoIP) channel and CS server to interact with models outside of the site. They also have first access to physical events, LAN parties, and such." To wit: pay, ogle, yap, play—more or less in line with the other taut trigger-pullers' homepages, plus pinups. To answer your second question first: Yes, Hillary, Mousie, Princess, and Girls of CS' other models know team flashers from blockers from mic spammers. Partial to map Dust2 and her AK-47, Hillary says she plays daily. Adds Matthews: "We set certain requirements with regards to how often models play and how active they need to be in the community."

Of course, female players need neither pose nor look the part to participate, and according to Hillary, "The Girls of CS tag just identifies models; anyone can apply for admin privileges and compete. Last weekend, for example, we got together for a LAN party, and five or so other women gamers who don't model showed up to participate." As for your first question...well, one second.

Nixing the network's original reason for being (to thwart the assumption that formidable gal gamers have to be homely ones), Matthews now has an easier-to-buy explanation: It is what it is. "By charging a membership fee," he says, "we can cover overhead costs and afford to pay models for their participation in the community." And make something for himself—or so it stands to reason. For her part, Hillary cites "the community and competition" as personal motivation, adding: "Of course, the money is also a nice perk."

As for specifics on the site's cheesecake content, Matthews says: "We might incorporate playful *Counter-Strike* themes into some of the shoots, but one of the site's points is that the models are normal people. So with that in mind, we try to tie the photo shoots into their personalities. The girls have creative control of settings and overall feel. One of the sets, for instance, is of Hillary walking around her apartment and then playing *CS*." Scandalous. **/Shawn Elliott**



WAR LUST

Counter-Strike clan battles terror in the buff

HILLARY

LIKES: competition, community (in game and out), knife kills

DISLIKES: h4x0rz, skill stackers, AFKs

RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
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View Review

Video Games

Juiced

By showing off your modding and driving skills, you'll gain 'Respect' from the rival crew chiefs, and will soon be invited to their race events, challenge them to race 'for pinks' and bet against them for cash. As your notoriety grows, new drivers will ask to join your crew, opening up the never before seen 'crew races' where your skills at managing your drivers while you race are key to beating your rival crews.

MotoGP URT 3

The MotoGP series is the definitive motorcycle racing game for the Xbox and PC. The game accurately captures the excitement of Grand Prix motorcycle racing. This time, MotoGP 3 is taking the franchise to the extreme, expanding beyond the realms of Grand Prix racing [illegible] high adrenaline Stre[illegible] hone their skills on the [illegible] through the Grand Prix ch[illegible] progress [illegible]

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War

Ten thousand years have passed since the treasonous acts of Chaos toppled the Golden Age of mankind. Fires burn brightly throughout the galaxies, illuminating carnage and slaughter as mankind defends itself from ancient enemies.Control one of four unique races in head-to-head or cooperative multiplayer action, where faith, skill, and strategy are requisites in ruling the [illegible]

Red Faction II

For the last 15 years the corrupt dictator, Sopot, has oppressed the people of the Commonwealth. His relentless pursuit of unification with the neighboring United Republic has left the country soaked in unnecessary bloodshed and poverty. Propaganda is plastered through communities and a Public Information Building, built as a tribute to the self-centered chancellor spews news broadcasts with claims of victory as more and more soldiers fall victim.

Big Mutha Truckers 2

Big Mutha Truckers 2 begins with Ma Jackson being taken into police custody for tax evasion. The only way she can win her case is by hiring Cousin Jacob, the most "fancy-talkin' legal fella" this side of Booger's Canyon. Players will be challenged to locate six jurors and raise the cash needed to bribe them to let Ma off by trucking, trading, wheeling and dealing.

Full Spectrum Warrior

Based on a Training Aid developed for the U.S. Army*, Full Spectrum Warrior is a squad-based, real-time combat game that allows players to experience the intensity and gritty realism of urban warfare. Featuring advanced AI, your squad will act like a highly trained infantry unit – with team members reactively responding to situations based on combat training and taking the appropriate formations based on combat situations.

Evergirl

Hit the town with your friends as you plan the hottest events and prepare for summer camp. Be an actress, train with the soccer team or throw an end of the year party! At everView, it's up to you!

MX vs. ATV Unleashed

Rainbow Studios has mastered ATV's, conquered motocross, and now redefines the genre they built on the PC. Rainbow Studios isn't the only one building anymore, as the MX vs ATV Unleashed franchise introduces a track editor for the first time, allowing players to create the ultimate off-road environments

HAZE

Fog of war

▲ **Mantel Corp.: healing minds and quashing insurrection worldwide.**

▲ ***Haze* begs you to question your conscience every time you pull the trigger.**

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Free Radical** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2007**

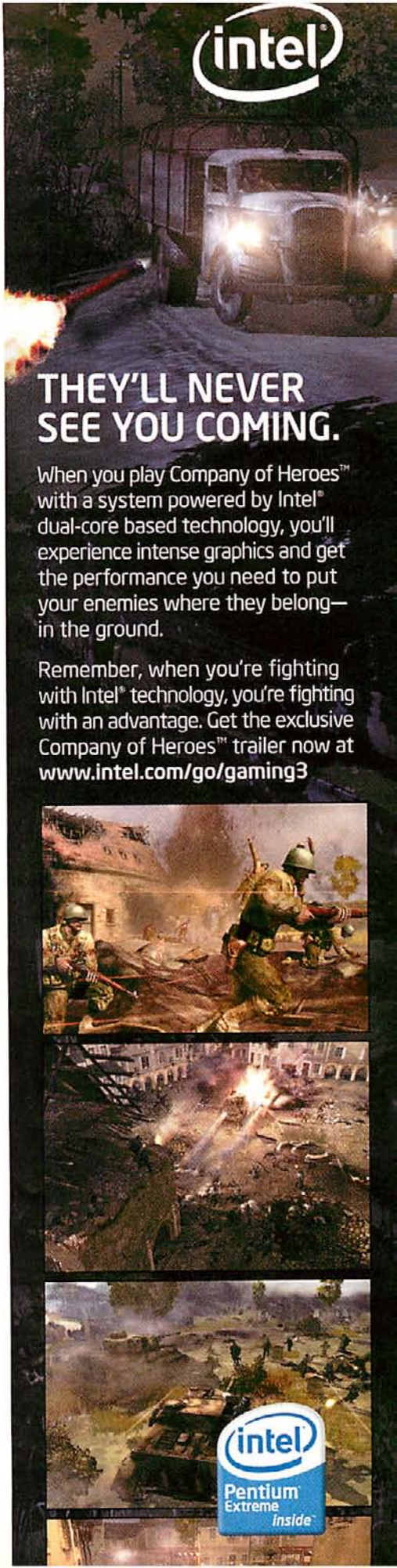
PREVIEW

IN A GENRE DOMINATED BY WORLD War II grunts and biomechanical alien invaders, sometimes all it takes is a mysterious plot device to stand out in the FPS crowd. It worked for *F.E.A.R.*, so why not *Haze*, developer Free Radical's shrouded-in-inscrutability shooter?

Haze drops you into the head of Jake Carpenter, a soldier in the world-dominating Mantel drug conglomerate's private army, hopped up on the company's famous (and fun!) supersoldier drug so you can kick ass against freedom-hating enemy insurgents in a steamy South American jungle. *Haze* seeks to push the glowy-effects processor in your graphics card to 11, bathing the fertile tropical scenery in a strangely soothing hyperreal glare. Pause for a moment, and a radiant white butterfly alights on your superheated gun barrel. Obviously, all is not what it seems in this rose-colored corporatocracy.

Soon, the computer voice inside your ear issues an "administration error." The world drains in color, and time seems to freeze stock-still as your companions callously shoot what appears to be an innocent civilian desperately trying to surrender. When asked what it all means, the Free Radical folks shift, shrug, and smile—but we can safely speculate that Mantel's miracle drug cocktail does a wee bit more than initially advertised. Whether or not your variable internal reality actually has some sort of gameplay repercussions—at this point, only omniscient superbeings know.

This isn't the first time Free Radical has tried to guide us up *Jacob's Ladder* with an arsenal on our back. 2004's *Second Sight* bounced between protagonist John Vattic's time as an amnesia patient with latent psychic powers and his stint a few months earlier as a covert op investigating Russian science gone mad. And fragging monkeys and gingerbread men in the developer's signature *TimeSplitters* series? That's just f***ed up right there. / **Sean Molloy**



THE HOT SHEET

TEN THINGS THAT ROCK *CGW*'S WORLD

1 OLDBLIVION

You've stuck by that trusty ol' GeForce 3 board since 2001, even though your friends and family laugh at you. Now, thanks to the user mod at oldblivion.com, you *still* don't need to upgrade. Oldblivion dilutes the card-crushing *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* so that it's still playable on older machines.

2 LARA CROFT

Like an overweight and coked-up Anna Nicole Smith, Lara needed a major makeover after her last "adventure." *Tomb Raider: Legend* brings back the girl we loved.

3 THE FLAMING LIPS: AT WAR WITH THE MYSTICS

Trippy tunes are the trademark of these fearless freaks. Just make sure to buy the album from the iTunes Music Store to snag three exclusive tracks, including "Bohemian Rhapsody."

4 DOCTOR WHO: THE COMPLETE FIRST SERIES

Don't know what a TARDIS is? Don't worry. This fresh take on the classic BBC hero will rivet for the entire five-disc set.

5 WHERE IN THE WORLD IS OSAMA BIN LADEN?

A terrorist-hunting tribute to *Carmen Sandiego* at brewsterjennings.com uses Google maps to play.

6 THE COMPLETE CALVIN AND HOBBES

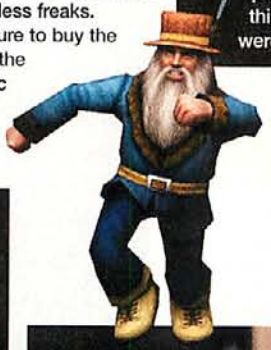
Those with 150 bucks to burn: Put down that caviar and buy this huge hardbound collection of the classic comic strip. Harrumph!

7 D.I.Y. TREBUCHET

If you can't wait for *Medieval 2: Total War*, you can at least lay siege to the neighboring cube. Thirty dollars and a trip to thinkgeek.com will arm you for your next invasion. Don't forget to plunder that red stapler.

8 GAMES GET LOST

ABC is turning its hit TV show *Lost* into an interactive Web game. During the broadcast of each episode (including commercial breaks), ABC will drop clues about the show's mysterious Dharma Initiative that you can then pursue online. We'd roll our eyes at this blatant marketing stunt—if we weren't so dang addicted to the show.



9 THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II

Here's proof that the neither the *Lord of the Rings* franchise nor the RTS genre are dead. It's a huge improvement over the first *BFME*, and we can't stop playing. Moreover, we all get to drop the Bombadil on *CGW* top dog Jeff Green.

10 A CASE OF THE HEAD CRABS

Want your very own lovable, huggable *Half-Life 2* head crab? Sure you do! The plush little critters are available at store.valvesoftware.com for a mere $25.

PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games!

JUNE 2006	PUBLISHER
Battleground Europe: World War II Online	Tri Synergy
Cars	THQ
FlatOut 2	Vivendi Universal
Front Mission Online	Square Enix
Heart of Empire: Rome	Paradox
IHRA Drag Racing: Sportsman Edition	Bethesda Softworks
Mage Knight: Apocalypse	Namco Bandai
The Movies: Stunts & Effects	Activision
NFL Head Coach	Electronic Arts
Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War	Midway
Titan Quest	THQ
WarPath	Groove Games
JULY 2006	
ArchLord	Codemasters
Prey	2K Games
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes	SOE
AUGUST 2006	
El Matador	Cenega Publishing
Madden NFL 07	Electronic Arts
Spetsnaz: Project Wolf	Tri Synergy
TimeShift	Atari
Train Master	Tri Synergy
UFO: Extraterrestrials	Tri Synergy
War of the Worlds	Tri Synergy
SEPTEMBER 2006	
Aura 2: The Sacred Rings	DreamCatcher
Broken Sword: The Angel of Death	THQ
Caesar IV	Vivendi Universal
Company of Heroes	THQ
Faces of War	Ubisoft
Enemy Territory: Quake Wars	Activision
Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy	LucasArts
Maelstrom	Codemasters
Neverwinter Nights 2	Atari
Scarface: The World Is Yours	Vivendi Universal
Splinter Cell Double Agent	Ubisoft
Test Drive Unlimited	Atari
OCTOBER 2006	
Enemy in Sight	Atari
Phantasy Star Universe	Sega
Tabula Rasa	NCsoft
Unreal Tournament 2007	Midway
World of WarCraft: The Burning Crusade	Blizzard

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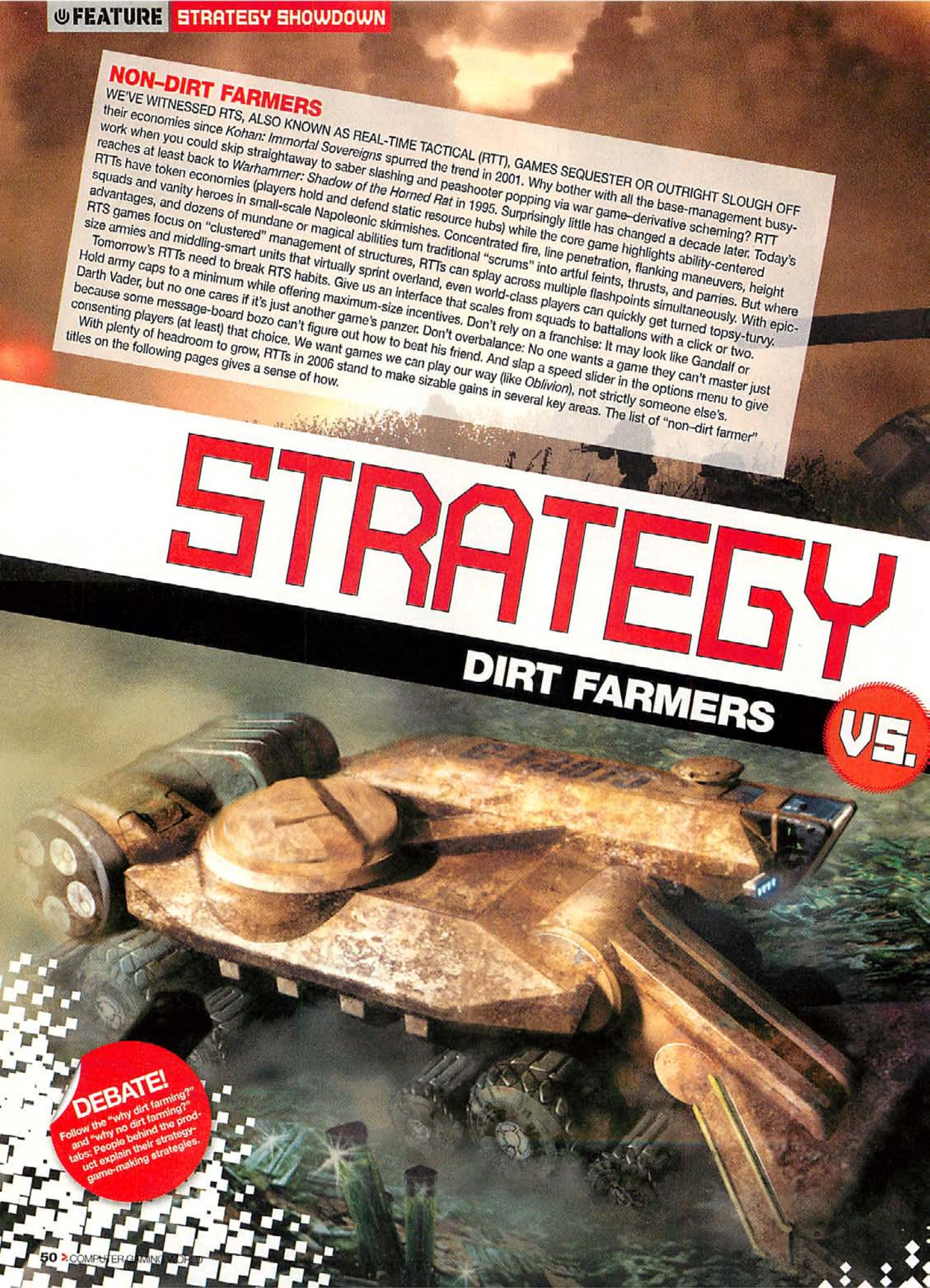
NON-DIRT FARMERS

WE'VE WITNESSED RTS, ALSO KNOWN AS REAL-TIME TACTICAL (RTT), GAMES SEQUESTER OR OUTRIGHT SLOUGH OFF their economies since *Kohan: Immortal Sovereigns* spurred the trend in 2001. Why bother with all the base-management busywork when you could skip straightaway to saber slashing and peashooter popping via war game–derivative scheming? RTT reaches at least back to *Warhammer: Shadow of the Horned Rat* in 1995. Surprisingly little has changed a decade later. Today's RTTs have token economies (players hold and defend static resource hubs) while the core game highlights ability-centered squads and vanity heroes in small-scale Napoleonic skirmishes. Concentrated fire, line penetration, flanking maneuvers, height advantages, and dozens of mundane or magical abilities turn traditional "scrums" into artful feints, thrusts, and parries. But where RTS games focus on "clustered" management of structures, RTTs can splay across multiple flashpoints simultaneously. With epic-size armies and middling-smart units that virtually sprint overland, even world-class players can quickly get turned topsy-turvy. Tomorrow's RTTs need to break RTS habits. Give us an interface that scales from squads to battalions with a click or two. Hold army caps to a minimum while offering maximum-size incentives. Don't rely on a franchise: It may look like Gandalf or Darth Vader, but no one cares if it's just another game's panzer. Don't overbalance: No one wants a game they can't master just because some message-board bozo can't figure out how to beat his friend. And slap a speed slider in the options menu to give consenting players (at least) that choice. We want games we can play our way (like *Oblivion*), not strictly someone else's. With plenty of headroom to grow, RTTs in 2006 stand to make sizable gains in several key areas. The list of "non–dirt farmer" titles on the following pages gives a sense of how.

STRATEGY

DIRT FARMERS VS.



DEBATE!
Follow the "why dirt farming?" and "why no dirt farming?" tabs: People behind the product explain their strategy-game-making strategies.

SHOWDOWN

NON-DIRT FARMERS

DIRT FARMERS

WE DUB THEM "DIRT FARMERS" WITH ENORMOUS RESPECT: HUMANS HAVE BEEN DAISY-CHAIN RESOURCE-DELVING since day one. Dam a river, dig a ditch, scoop water with a wheel, balance a million ravenous zerglings on the end of a pin—we love to fiddley-diddle those microeconomic details. It's an impressive 15-year stroll from Westwood's breakthrough *Dune II* (1992) to EA's forthcoming *Command & Conquer 3* (late 2007). But while developers have long since turned 16-color sprites into million-dollar 3D babies, we're still mostly prodding mush-brained peasants to build miniature armies that typically collide in muddled blitzes—which may explain why so many designers are trimming RTS economics in favor of fleshed-out tactical ops. If dirt farming wants to stay relevant, future iterations need to think outside the gold-and-lumber box. We want savvier enemy A.I. that builds smarter and chases alternate paths to victory (and friendly A.I. that doesn't wander dopily around the map during pathfinding jams). We want physics-based settings, where realism serves the flow and not vice versa, and organically interesting Lego-like structures that can scale cliff walls or dangle from subterranean ceilings with gravitational relevance. We'll gladly accept a "cinematic level of visual quality," but don't bet the farm on cribbing film techniques if that's all you've got. And we're happy to see "procedurally generated" (i.e., context-driven) unit behavior as long as it's more than just a fancy way of describing "fight" and "retreat." Oh, and interface? Everything we just said, simple as tic-tac-toe.

Want to see what's coming? Read on for a peek at the next generation of dirt farming, through 2006 and beyond. >

COMMAND AND TIBERIUM WARS

Winning the hearts and minds of old-school RTS fans

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **EALA** RELEASE DATE: **2007**

DIRT YOU ALWAYS REMEMBER YOUR FIRST TANK RUSH. The original *Command & Conquer* helped popularize the RTS genre as it is today: Explore, find resource X (tiberium, in *C&C3*'s case), build a base, advance the tech tree, and raise an army. OG dirt farming, if you will. However, the real-time-strategy world isn't the same one from 10 years ago. How do you go back to a classic series and still please an army of devoted fanboys? Make *Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars*.

Though *C&C3* is still in early development, it already shows the foundation of a shipshape RTS, thanks to a greatly refined SAGE engine (the same used in *LOTR: Battle for Middle-earth II*). Gameplay also gets a tune-up while sticking with the time-tested RTS routine: Harvest a tiberium cash crop and juice up generators before blitz-krieging with rapidly responding units. What you won't see right now is the interface, but executive producer Michael Verdu promises that it will hearken back to the original *C&C*, but with some streamlined nips and tucks.

Verdu's master plan, though, involves fixing "plumbing issues" he's had with the series as a gamer. He promises that unit A.I. will be more adaptive to a player's given style. For example, noticing your aggressive or defensive tactics, your troops align themselves with your leadership-by-example, even while awaiting your next command. Pathfinding is another sticking point. Past games had troops taking ass-backward routes to get to a waypoint—usually traipsing behind enemy lines.

C&C3's bullet-pointed "innovations"—partnering up two units to create one superunit (while cool, it's been done before in several games) and troops that can control the weather (a new take on the superweapons used in most RTS titles)—sound fine, but it's the implementation of mobile bases, first seen in *StarCraft*, that adds interesting depth here. The headquarters serves as your trump card. Charge in, drop your HQ—with its bristling defensive turrets—smack in the middle of a war zone, and press the attack. Then again, putting your base on the front lines is also a big risk, which makes for fascinating late-round endgames.

What really excites is the battle flow in the single-player war and the metagame, World Domination. The single-player campaign will have you going through a full story, jumping between the GDI (Global Defense Initiative, aka the good guys) and the Brotherhood of Nod (the bad guys) as you please, getting two perspectives of the same battles. You also choose the theater of war. Let's say, for example, you're raiding the Eastern Seaboard. Do you take out a seaport or an airport? You can cut off enemy supply lines or air superiority in future battles. The World Domination mode turns the entire globe into a living, persistent battlefield. The enemy is always advancing, and what you build on the world map follows you into each fight.

When will the game ship? All anyone will say is "2007," and the information is still sketchy. GDI-force classics like the Orca air units and Mammoth tanks will be back, as will some of the Nod's exotic high-tech arsenal. Meanwhile, the mysterious third faction players will be able to unlock remains just that: a mystery. However, Verdu alludes to this third race having a *Voltron*-like ability to merge mechs. Smart money is on the scrin, the alien race that's been hinted at—but never seen—throughout the series. Considering how far out *C&C3* is, let the message-board navel gazing begin! / **Darren Gladstone**

WHY DIRT FARMING?

"C&C has always been about fast-paced gameplay that favors combat, but building and resource management are key elements of the RTS experience. Players spend their time exploring, building, and fighting—and all three are core compulsions. There's a fascinating interplay between the primal urge to create and destroy in an RTS, and you lose something if you make it about tactics alone."
—Michael Verdu, executive producer

CONQUER 3:

Voice over IP (VoIP) and a full spectator mode mean that players can color-commentate on matches.

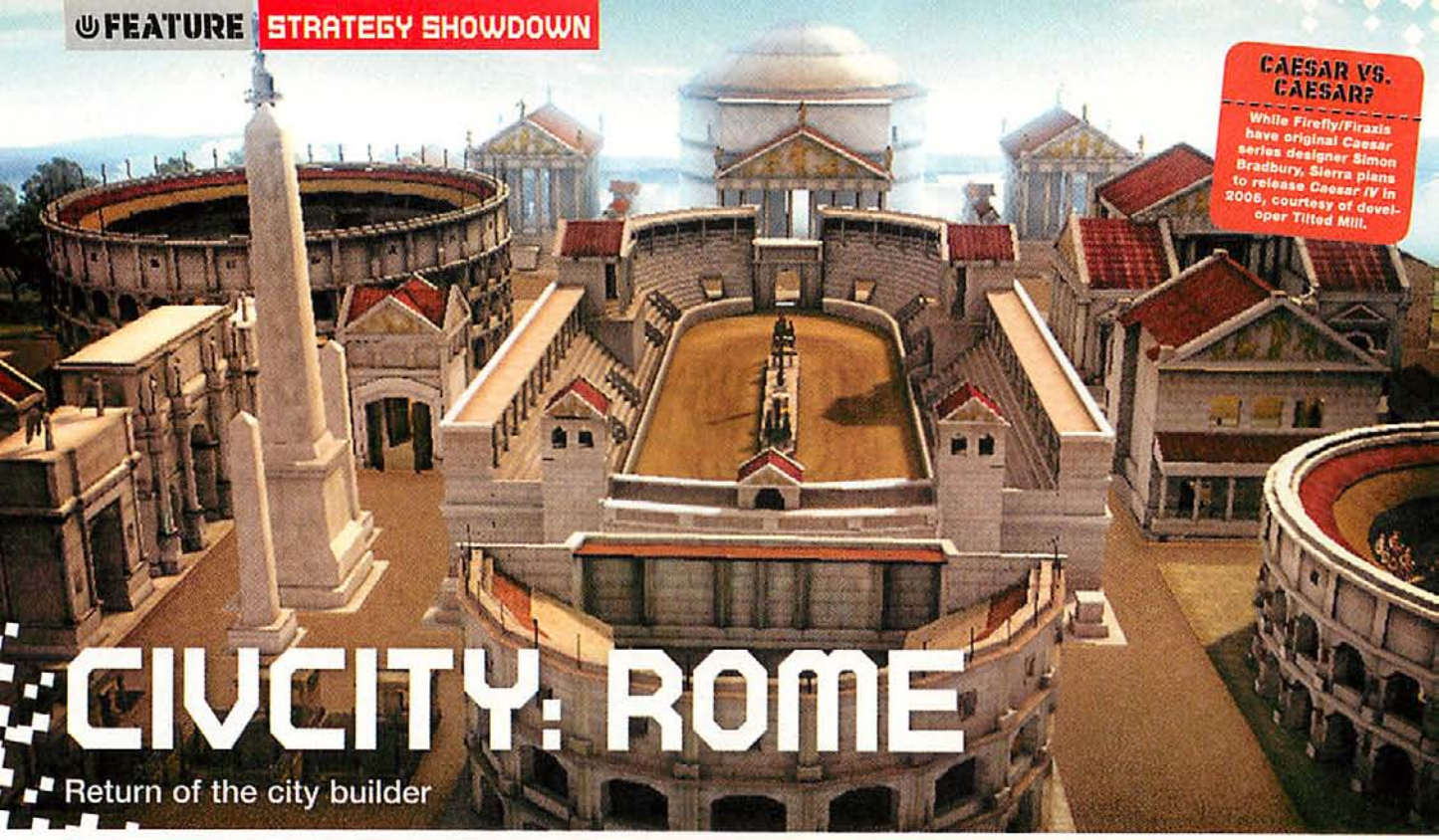
Turn yet another once-teeming RTS town into a depressing Hooverville (now with grittier grit).

EARTH SCIENCE

At EALA's offices, a tome of 100-plus pages explains *C&C3*'s world in minute detail. Internally, the developers call it the bible. "Whenever an artist isn't sure what the effects of tiberium look like, they consult the bible; if an engineer doesn't know the physical properties of something, they consult the bible," says Verdu.

According to the good book, the GDI (allied nations rebuilding the world) and the Brotherhood of Nod (a cultlike terrorist organization that worships high technology and their enigmatic leader Kane) strike an uneasy peace. Meanwhile, the invaluable alien mineral tiberium is destroying the planet. By 2047, things get worse. Only 30 percent of the Earth's surface is untouched by war and catastrophe. Meanwhile, most of the planet's population struggles with abject squalor in the "yellow zones." Nod forces take out the GDI's center of military might, the space station *Philadelphia*, in a bold attack that reignites the war.

A detailed world history isn't enough. EA commissioned MIT scientists to ascertain the properties of tiberium, as if it were a real substance. The goal: to explain scientifically why it's so valuable and why it's affecting the planet with freak weather patterns and geological disasters. Now that's some serious dirt.



CAESAR VS. CAESAR?

While Firefly/Firaxis have original *Caesar* series designer Simon Bradbury, Sierra plans to release *Caesar IV* in 2006, courtesy of developer Tilted Mill.

CIVCITY: ROME

Return of the city builder

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **Firefly Studios/Firaxis Games** RELEASE DATE: **Summer 2006**

▲ **Rome implements a "civilization" rating, illustrating just one of the many impacts of Firaxis' *Civ* series.**

▲ **Clicking on citizens or houses provides access to individual workers or householders. "You can then highlight them, and arrows on the city map will arc over to show you where they are," explains Bradbury, "like where their house is, where their job is, and where they're going."**

DIRT IT'S BEEN EIGHT YEARS AND SLIM PICKINGS SINCE critically acclaimed Roman-city-forging sim *Caesar III* let us stroll Rome's baths, amphitheaters, and coliseums. Original *Caesar* series designer Simon Bradbury hopes to rekindle builder fans' interests by melding *Caesar*'s daisy-chained, structure-driven economy with some of the most popular abstractions from the *Civilization* series. "The biggest change to come across from *Civ* has been research," says Bradbury, outlining aspects of the conceptual symbiosis. "It's been a tremendous 'find' for us in the city-building world, and it's frankly strange we didn't think of it sooner."

Technology, in fact, plays a major role in tweaking city efficiency all around, like increasing date-farm output, smoothing rough roads to boost unit speed, increasing taxes, streamlining ships, and so on. "We have over 70 things to research and a ton of tempting options," says Bradbury. "On any one mission, however, you're only able to research a few items—thus, you're forced to think strategically about your mission goals."

It wouldn't be *Civ* without wonders, of course. "They're the only structures in the game that take time to build—but when finished, they confer permanent benefits upon the city," explains Bradbury. But perhaps the key area in which *CivCity: Rome* could differ from other builders is the way it adopts the *Civ* series' multiple city attributes. "Factors like city happiness, production, culture, food, and religion won't just be 'bottom of the chain' variables," says Bradbury. "They're now entire resource chains in themselves." Sid Meier's arm has grown long indeed. / **Matt Peckham**

> DESIGNER SIMON BRADBURY HOPES TO REKINDLE BUILDER FANS' INTERESTS.

WHY DIRT FARMING?

"We're very close to 'dirt farmer' in that we're absolutely about managing lots of resources. But like in other builders, or even in hybrids like our *Stronghold* series, you don't micromanage to the point of pushing peons, but rather place buildings and lure peasants to come and work in them."
—Simon Bradbury, series designer

SUPREME COMMANDER

Economic tiger

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Gas Powered Games** RELEASE DATE: **2007**

DIRT *SUPREME COMMANDER*, TOUTED AS THE SPIRITUAL successor to the popular late-'90s RTS *Total Annihilation*, preaches strategy over tactics (yes, they're different). Former *TA* designer and current *SupCom* creative director Chris Taylor lays it out for us: "We accomplish [the strategic experience] with our strategic zoom feature and by taking the scope and scale of the game to new levels, meaning vastly bigger maps, massive experimental units, and huge armies." Don't forget the dirt farming, either.

Taylor doesn't shy away from the economic question—he insists that the dirt-farming rigmarole acts as one of *SupCom*'s strategic linchpins. "Almost every conflict that takes place on a large scale has to have an economic component because of the direct relationship between economic strength and military strength," he explains. "Now, if you're just simulating a small battle or focusing on tactics rather than strategy, then the economics can fade out of the equation. But for a game like *Supreme Commander*, the economic simulation plays a key role."

It also played a key role in *Age of Empires III*, a game that ran like a tired rehash of its 7-year-old predecessor. We have faith in Taylor's vision, though—*TA* gave RTS fans something unique for its time, and we're crossing our fingers for a shiny, new, modern equivalent. "I have a very different view of what makes an RTS game fun, and this has lead me to the current design direction of *Supreme Commander*," says Taylor, curbing our dirt-farming fears a bit. "I believe that players don't want to stray away from the core tenets of what makes RTS games fun, but instead want to see us improve and expand upon all of their favorite parts." Sounds about right. / **Ryan Scott**

WHY DIRT FARMING?

"Almost every conflict that takes place on a large scale has to have an economic component."

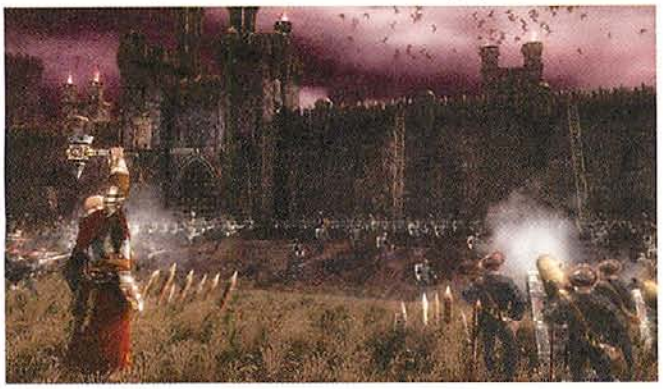
—Chris Taylor, president and creative director

WARHAMMER: MARK OF CHAOS

Unleaded

PUBLISHER: **Namco Bandai** DEVELOPER: **Black Hole Entertainment** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

DIRT TELL *WARHAMMER* FANTASY BUFFS THEIR BELOVED TURN-based tabletop war game's been assimilated by the real-time-strategy Borg, and duck. With 25 years of tweaks propping all those paint-daubed figurines, why veer at all? "We tinkered with the idea early on of perfectly emulating the tabletop experience in real time," says *Warhammer: Mark of Chaos* senior producer Chris Wren. "Deemed the 'battle chess' approach, we quickly decided to get a bit more ambitious with the design." Augment *Warhammer*'s dice-and-tape-measure battle mechanics, in other words. "Focusing on the battle meant adding a few new layers to how you build and command your armies," explains Wren. "To this end, we included custom combat options, a deep campaign, an RPG-like hero skill and leveling system, champion dueling, siege mechanics, environmental conditions, total unit and army customization, and loads of multiplayer options."



Pick a side and jump into the franchise's Great War between the Hordes of Chaos and the Empire, and Wren says you'll get about 30 to 40 hours of solo campaign play per side. "What allies you make, what resources you procure, it's all up to you," he explains, outlining a strategic mode that synthesizes real time with turn-based play and sounds more than a little like *The Battle for Middle-earth II*'s War of the Ring mode: Move troops, reinforce units, and truss up your holdings; your army, resources, and alliances persist as you advance. But a *Warhammer* game ultimately stands on its battles.

"Depending on experience and your equipment and training choices, units will have different formations, attacks, and defenses at their disposal," says Wren. "Attaching a hero to a unit adds even more options." For example, bundle the right hero with long-range archers and you might keep the enemy in range by confusing them, slowing their advance, or terrorizing them into retreat for easy in-the-back pickings. "The tactics you come up with and the way you group and command units will vary greatly based on your choices in the game," adds Wren.

In the end, Wren says the team wants a game that appeals to non-*Warhammer* RTS gamers without compromising core franchise principles. "If we do it right, we'll get *Warhammer* fans who'll become rabid RTS gamers, and RTS gamers who'll become die-hard *Warhammer* fans," he says. "I think we're on track to do both." / **Matt Peckham**

WHY DIRT FARMING?

"Battle is the main focus of the game. There are resources to manage, but your decisions are more geared toward taking those resources by force or defending them if needed. Almost every building can be garrisoned, upgraded, or destroyed."

—Chris Wren, senior producer

WORLD IN

Cold war hot

PUBLISHER: **VU Games** DEVELOPER: **Massive Entertainment** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2007**

NON-DIRT 1989: THE NEVER-ENDING, EVER-ESCALATING arms race with NATO threatens to collapse the already decrepit Soviet economy, and the USSR's politburo knows the end of the Cold War is near. What better way to keep a fractured wartime economy afloat than hot war? So begins *World in Conflict*.

Developer Massive Entertainment has never done things the easy way. Its first two games, *Ground Control* and *Ground Control II: Operation Exodus*, went against the grain by focusing solely on tactics, not resource management or civilization building. The only thing you harvested in either game was a body count. *World in Conflict* is the logical evolution of that idea: a presentational tour de force with fast-paced tactical action and an all-new multiplayer network.

Here's how the next-gen RTS' multiplayer mode works. Start by picking the specialty of your officer: infantry (more varied troop units and scout vehicles), armor (tanks and such), air (choppers and planes, duh), or support (medics, transports, and artillery). Each one plays an important role and, with its huge emphasis on teamwork, *World in Conflict* starts feeling more like the *Counter-Strike* of RTS games. In multiplayer mode, teammates need to coordinate actions (and classes) to win.

Battles begin with a set amount of points with which to buy units. Let's say you choose to emphasize infantry. Set up troops in the woods or garrison buildings for bonuses and hold your ground. As the fight rages, the USSR drops a tactical nuke and levels the city. Crap, your infantry are sitting, irradiated ducks. The fluid tactics of the game let you switch your specialty on the fly. Pick armor and start the tank rush as your units die out. But where's all the money to pay for replacements coming from?

Ultimately, you're fighting for control points. Securing locations earns tactical points that you can allocate toward artillery strikes or additional paratroopers (any welcome relief, really). If one of your units dies, that money slowly siphons back into your account, and you can call in more forces. The constant credit kickbacks ensure that the match never becomes lopsided or slows down. RTS strategy at this breakneck pace "also allows players to join ongoing multiplayer games midmatch," says Massive Entertainment CEO Martin Walfisz.

Walfisz, meanwhile, has new designs for multiplayer with the enigmatic Massgate matchmaking service. "We have very efficient friend lists, clan support, chat, tournaments, and much more," he says, but that's all he's willing to share for now. Is Massive building the next Battle.net? Maybe an RTS-centric Steam?

While the company is anxious to talk about multiplayer, its glasnost doesn't extend to the single-player campaign. Nevertheless, even closely guarded secrets can occasionally slip. Penned by novelist Larry Bond (*Dangerous Ground*), the campaign begins with the Soviets launching an attack on Seattle. It's World War III—keeping the world safe from the scourge of venti Frappuccinos. The game, played from the perspective of a young American officer, will take you to from America to Europe. Sources say a third faction exists (a powerfully pissed-off European Union, maybe?), but we had no official word at press time.

All the right pieces are coming together to make *World in Conflict* a contender. However, some lingering questions remain. Will the multiplayer matches lean too heavily toward requiring teammates? Can the game work with bot-controlled backup? Will the single-player mode contain more than some A.I.-aided skirmishes? We'll report back before the game ships next year. **Darren Gladstone**

▲ **Massive CEO Walfisz is currently contemplating a Direct Fire Mode that allows players to jump into a soldier's shoes (or cockpit). "But," he points out, "it will not be necessary to win the game." *Field Ops*, the tactical RTS-shooter hybrid we previewed last month, might suddenly have some stiff competition.**

▲ **"We wanted well-balanced armies from a time that everyone gets. Besides," says executive producer Greg Goodrich, "what better time than when two competing superpowers still existed?"**

WHY NO DIRT FARMING?

"Dirt farming is about planning and executing strategies that will come into effect minutes or even hours later. We wanted to focus on making combat fun. *World in Conflict* is about giving players tools to affect outcomes quickly."
—Martin Walfisz, CEO

Will someone please cue up the Wagner? Thank you.

Patrick Swayze was right. Grab an AK-47 and shout to the sky, "Wolverines!" Someone has to stop the Ruskies.

CONFLICT

LOST IN SPACE?
J.J. Abrams will helm Paramount's 2008 reboot of the *Trek* film franchise. Conceptual title? Kirk and Spock: The Wonder Years.

Between missions you'll be able to view the historical stat drill-down for every ship in your fleet, from commissions to combat trophies.

STAR TREK: LEGACY

Star Trekkin' across the universe

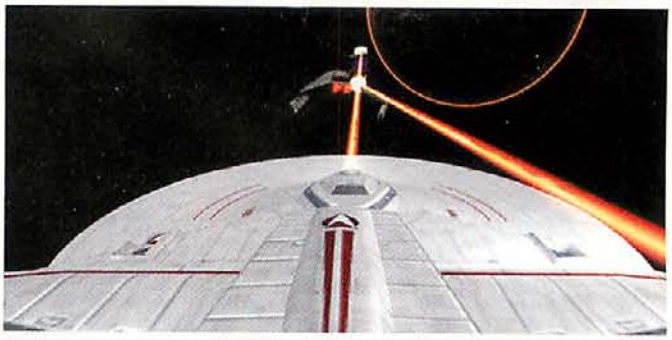
PUBLISHER: **Bethesda Softworks** DEVELOPER: **Mad Doc Software** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

NON-DIRT *STAR TREK* DEVOTEES ARE FUSSY FANATICS. Whether they're debating the gloomy aesthetic of *Deep Space Nine* (best *Trek* ever!) or *Voyager*'s time-travel flapdoodles (stoo-peed?), no detail ducks dissection. Plotting a ship-combat game covering the entirety of *Trek*-dom—from the Archer era to Janeway—therefore sounds practically Sisyphean. Does Mad Doc's own "mad doctor," Ian Lane Davis, worry about nerfing Trekkie depth for breadth? "Not at all," he counters. "Our story line carries the game very well. In fact, I think fans will really buy into the concept of a persistent fleet that spans the whole time line, because it lets you really experience the evolution of the ships and characters."

Picture yourself as a fleet admiral controlling a task force in small- and large-scale 3D space combat. You pick ships, equipment, and captains, and add to or mod your fleet between missions. As battles occur, you can jump from ship to ship, manipulating each one's mechanics in real time. "We want *Legacy* to be the ultimate computer representation of the real *Trek* experience," explains Davis. "Sure, you're clicking the Fire button, but it's hardly a button masher—phasers take time to recharge, photons take time to reload, and the ships generally have a grace and mass that are appropriate to *Trek*." To flesh out scenarios, Mad Doc's adding strategic and tactical elements such as taking over planets, defending and attacking star bases, using nebulae to hide, and tackling simultaneous objectives with multiple ships.

Does Davis see parallels with Mad Doc's last game, *Empire Earth II*? "*Legacy* really isn't an RTS," he responds. "The battles take waaaay more time than a skirmish between similar RTS unit counts. Each of these starships is designed to take a pounding, repair, escape, and dive back in. A four-ship-on-four-ship battle could be 20 to 30 minutes if you're careful with your ships." But don't rule resource management entirely out, either; it just occurs between missions, based on command points earned in battle. "Ships are treated like characters in the game," explains Davis. "Thus you've got the 'base-building' element. But the commissioning (and destruction) of a ship is a huge deal. In *Star Trek*, you wouldn't whip up a star base or ship in the course of a half-hour battle."

With all that fidelity, can *Legacy* be more than just a love letter to *Trek* fans? "We want to break new ground while paying serious attention to the core conceits of the franchise," says Davis, "with the hope, of course, that breaking new ground and delivering an exceptional gameplay experience aren't mutually exclusive." We hope so, too. / Matt Peckham



In *Legacy*, you're immersed in the most compelling elements of battleship control—energy allocations, weapons, movement, firing, repair focus, special maneuvers, warping, cloaking, targeting, and so on.

With over 60 ships and four playable races, *Legacy* lets you witness the building of the Federation Starfleet and impact its evolution.

WHY NO DIRT FARMING?

"Dirt farmers will enjoy playing as the Klingons. Non-dirt farmers will enjoy the Romulans. Everybody loves playing as the Federation, and the Borg will assimilate all dirt farmer technology and integrate it into their collective." —Ian Lane Davis, CEO and founder

JOINT TASK FORCE

Look out; the media's peeping you

PUBLISHER: **Sierra Entertainment/HD Publishing** DEVELOPER: **Most Wanted Entertainment** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

NON-DIRT LASSO AND POINT, FLANK AND FIRE—SMACKING toy tanks and helos into pygmy platoons has a certain crude appeal, sure. But ratchet up the realism and tease us with current-affair tie-ins and we inevitably crave perks: tactics with greater brio, shrewder single-player A.I., less interface to wrestle...and perhaps, in the case of *Joint Task Force*, combat with more than a casual body-count calculus.

"The acceptable amount of civilian deaths in any conflict is naturally zero," says Jasper Vis, product manager for Sierra's upcoming multinational tac-ops scrapper. "But since it's a game, the number of innocent bystanders and amount of wanton destruction will mostly affect your available resources. Gamers can be as politically correct as they choose, though only particularly bloodthirsty players will have to restart a mission." Collateral damage factors, in other words. But it goes beyond bodies.

Embedded journalists, political volatility, officially licensed "top defense" contractor units, the United Nations—hot-button topics these days, and *JTF* taps them all. "Without revealing too much, both the story line and the gameplay will involve these issues rather heavily," says Vis. By adding elements like media influence on funding, the team hopes to engage both tactical as well as political aspects of modern warfare, whether in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, Africa, or Central Asia—*JTF*'s five campaign war zones.

Missions include saving hostages, protecting civilians, and executing combined-arms tactics using armor, air, and reconnaissance units. "Since only officers are carried between missions, the game is faster paced," says Vis. "So players won't have to reload after losing their favorite tank, for instance." *JTF*'s fact sheet also claims that "units, when grouped together, automatically work as a cohesive team," which suggests an A.I. capable of automatic squad-based streamlining.

Take *JTF* online and you can play as one of three military factions, though the team wasn't ready to talk about the mechanics of the multiplayer Commander mode, which purports to be an interface for commanding multiple squads effectively. Vis says the team wants to make the multiplayer experience as flexible as possible, and notes that players will be able to define "a multitude of parameters" to liven up the battlefield.

/ Matt Peckham

...continued on pg. 62

ROM PANZERS O PROTECTING

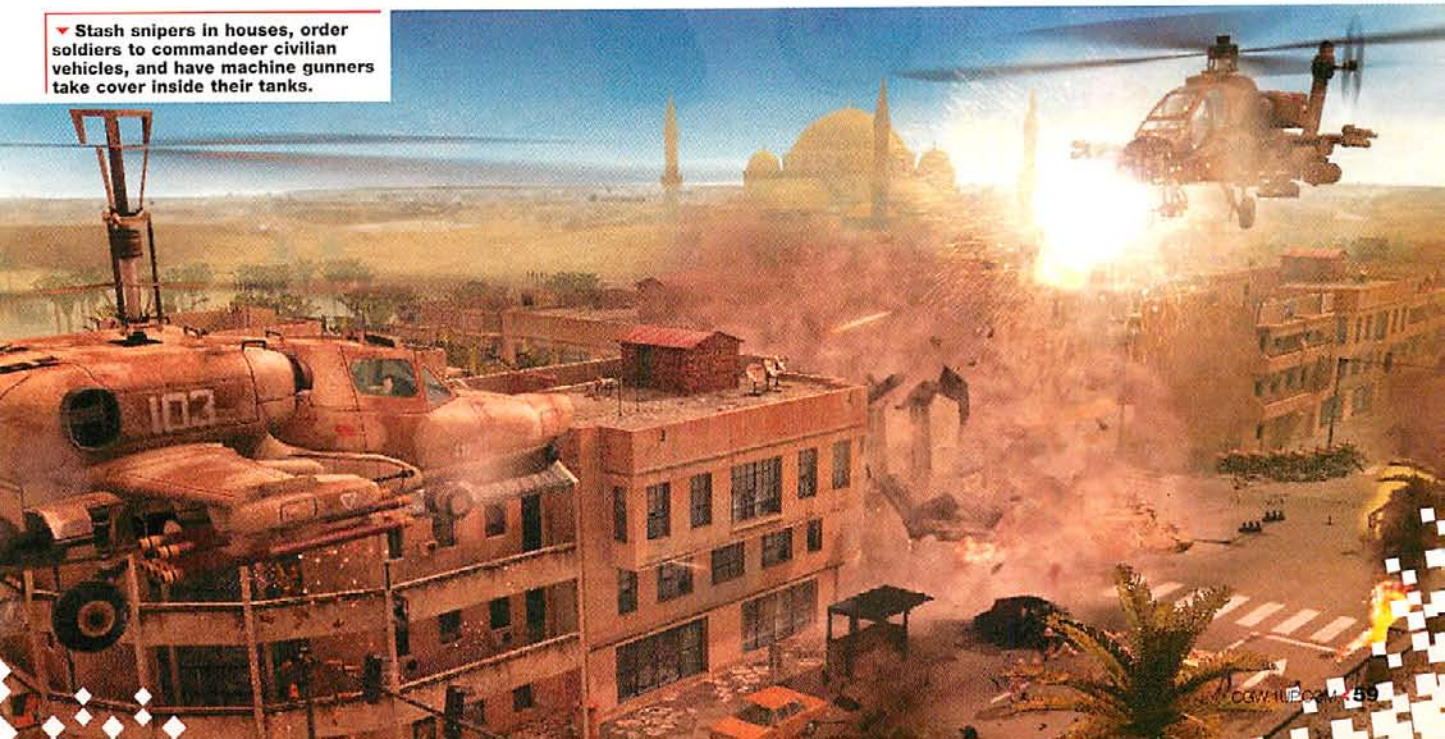
Joint Task Force's design team includes developers from Stormregion's Codename Panzers: Phase One.

WHY NO DIRT FARMING?

"*JTF* is mainly tactical, with resource management both derivative and evaluative of the player's success in the field. The only resource-influencing factor is the media—if you screw up badly, your funding decreases, even to the extent where you're forced to change tactics. We felt that adding resource management would decrease the realism feeling and change the tactics."

—Jasper Vis, product manager

COMBAT WITH MORE THAN A CASUAL BODY-COUNT CALCULUS



▼ **Stash snipers in houses, order soldiers to commandeer civilian vehicles, and have machine gunners take cover inside their tanks.**

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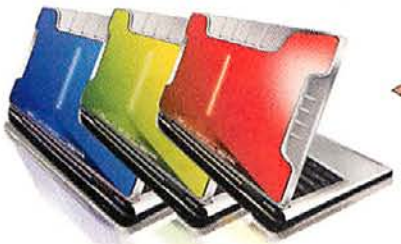

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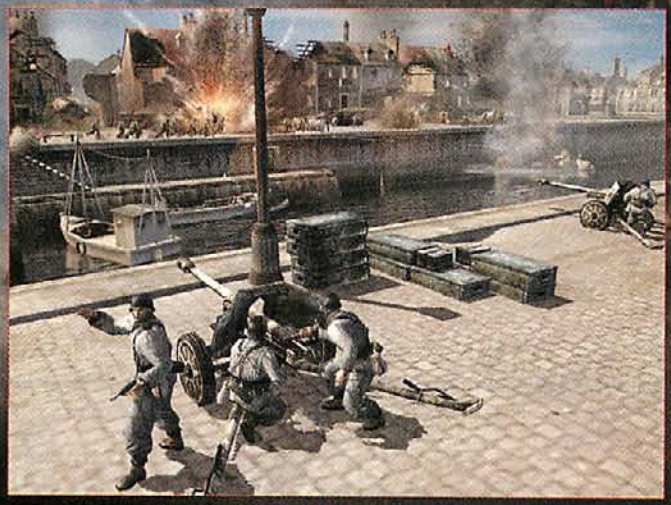
PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Relic Entertainment** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

COMPANY OF HEROES

Dawn of (World) War (II)



NON-DIRT "WE'VE SET OUT TO CREATE AN RTS THAT IS first and foremost about visceral tactical battles and less about micromanagement." Coming from most developers, this sounds like soulless PR spin, but from Josh Mosqueira, lead designer for Relic Entertainment (the design house behind *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War*), it actually means something. Relic's next RTS, *Company of Heroes*, guns for the intense battles of World War II—a far cry from *Dawn of War*'s postapocalyptic orks, but an equally engaging conflict with game mechanics to match.

"Our goal," says Mosqueira, "was to create a game where you're leading squads of real, live soldiers, not simpleminded RTS units. Squads adapt to changes in their environment; for example, soldiers can dive into craters to escape deadly machine gun fire, allowing the player time to plot out his attacks." Fully destructible environments play a key part in the war-torn atmosphere as well. "Having the power to interact with the terrain—either by raining artillery and creating craters to use as cover or by having tanks crush through walls—exposes a level of what we call environmental strategy," Mosqueira says. "How the player uses environmental strategy to exploit tactical advantages opens up a whole level of emergent strategic gameplay. Maps in *COH* are no longer a series of static choke points, but living environments where every bush, crater, wall, and structure can be used for strategic advantages."

The bottom line: "[We want] to make players feel that they are commanding real soldiers in real combat situations and not micromanaging their units." Same goes for resources—don't look for any Private Pyles picking berries down in the trenches. Mosqueira explains: "*Company of Heroes* removes much of the inherent abstraction in RTS games and focuses gameplay on making battlefield decisions, not on worrying about farms or chopping wood. All too often, gathering resources becomes the whole goal of RTS games, and combat—the exciting part—takes a backseat. This is something we wanted to change." We need only look at *Dawn of War* to know Mosqueira's not whistling "Dixie," and *COH*'s action-oriented resource mechanic takes a note from the *Warhammer* world. "We wanted a resource system that fit the setting and was contextualized," Mosqueira tells us, "which is why we went with a sector-based mechanic. As you capture key strategic areas, you will earn resources. These represent additional reinforcements and supplies being trucked into your area of operations to help hold those sectors."

That's what we like to see: situation-specific mechanics that don't involve harvesting seven types of lithium ion crystals. It's all in a day's work for Relic, says Mosqueira. "From *Homeworld* to *Dawn of War*, we've [focused] on meeting the player's expectations," he muses. "We believe that when players sit down to play an RTS, they have images of the battles in *Star Wars*, *Braveheart*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Gladiator* in mind. What we try to do—and *COH* is the closest we've come to this—is to give players the most intense, immersive, and visceral RTS experience we can." **Ryan Scott**

WHY NO DIRT FARMING?

"*Company of Heroes* is all about capturing and holding territory. You will never see a soldier chopping down trees."

—Josh Mosqueira, lead designer

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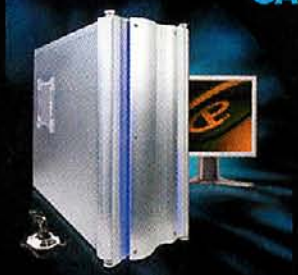

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COVERT OPS

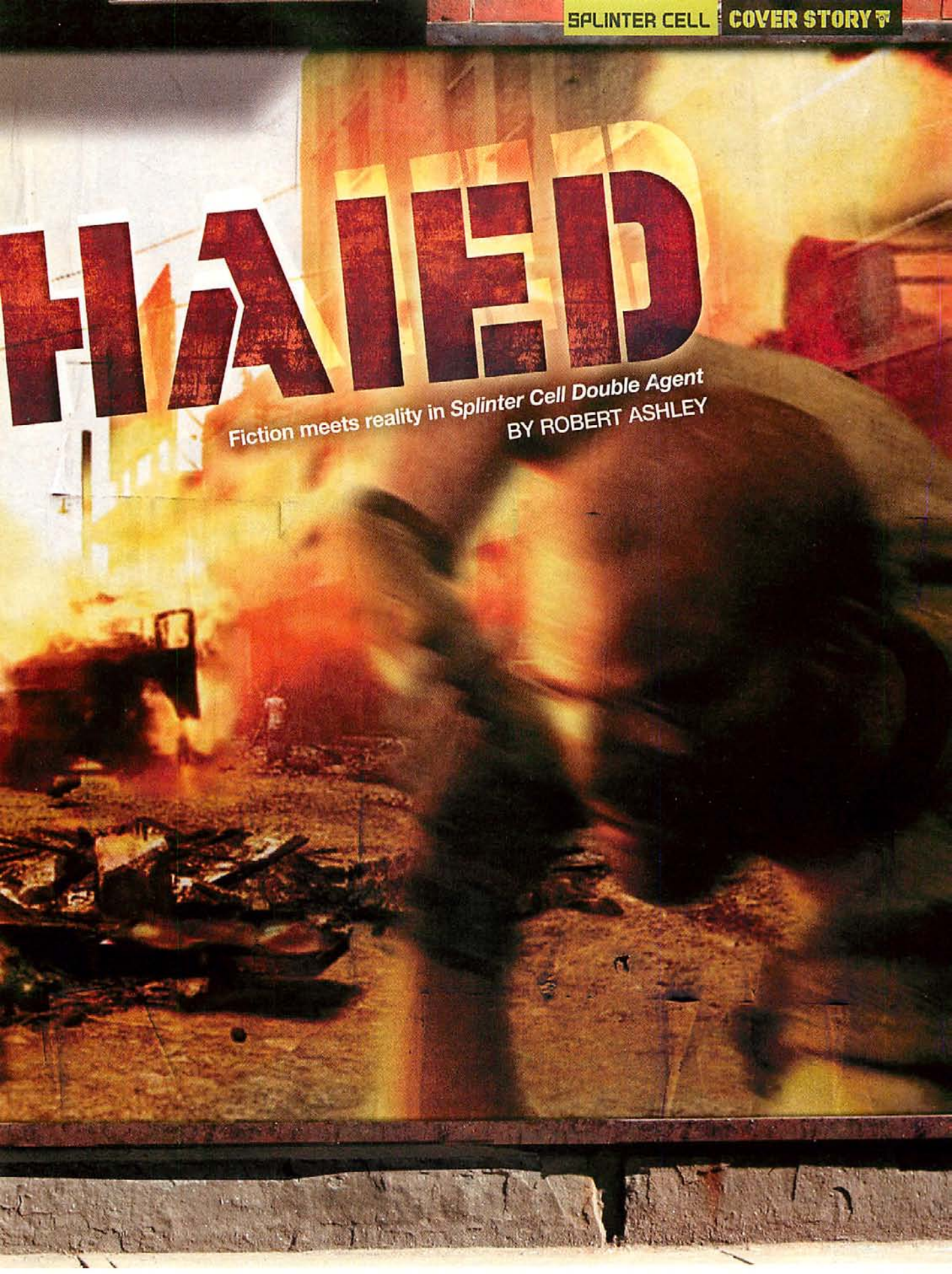
I CAME TO SHANGHAI TO SEE THE LATEST FANCY HIDE-AND-seek espionage game, but I sure won't be slipping under anyone's radar: Texas tall in my trusty cowboy boots and shamelessly flashing a big, dumb American grin everywhere I go, I stick out like the neon signs that paint the purple skyline of this Chinese New York City. It's easy for Fei and Lan, my new best friends, to pick me out of the sea of people surging down Nanjing Road.

"Hello." Lan, twirling her umbrella like a natural southern belle, matches my pace. "Where are you from?"

"California...the U.S."

"'Hotel California.'" Fei leans into view, beaming his big, toothy smile. "I love that song."

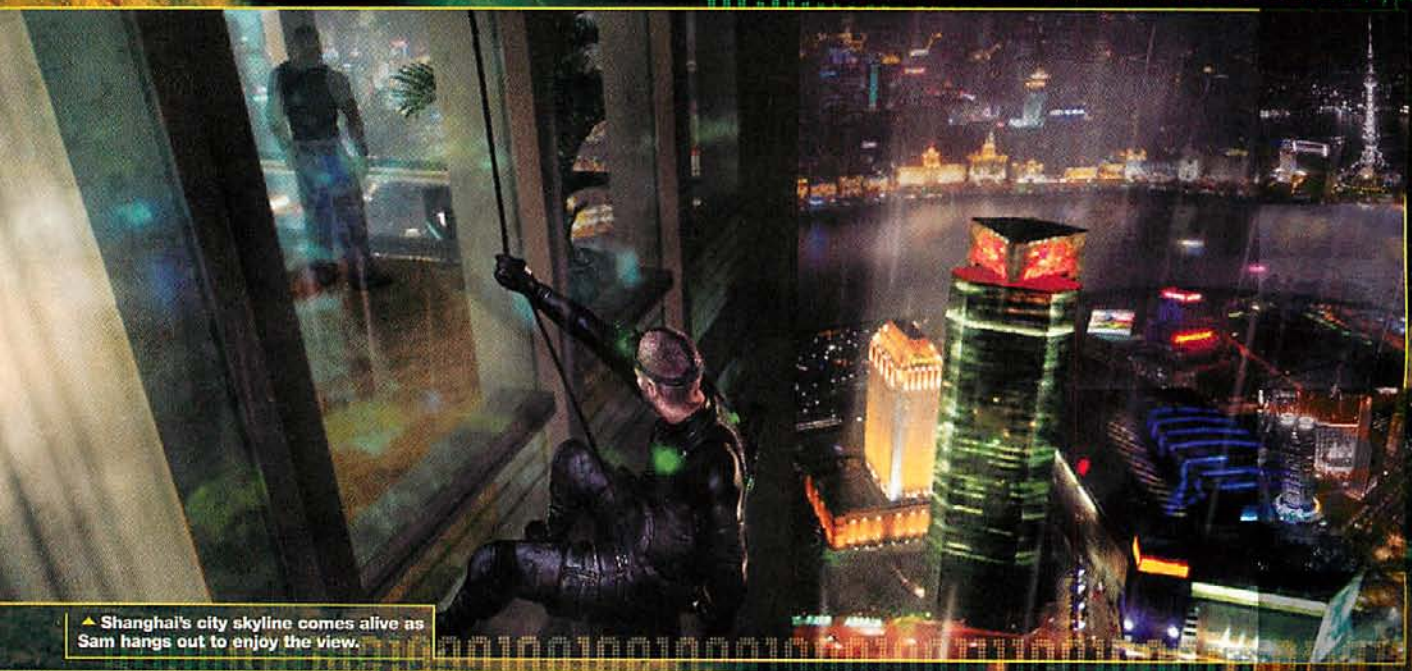
We laugh (though for different reasons) and continue our stroll down the boulevard together, falling quickly into the universal conversation of cultural strangers: What do you like to eat? The couple invites me to join them for a "traditional Chinese tea ceremony" which, on paper, already sounds like a scam. It doesn't cross my mind, though, and when they pass me a menu in the oriental-kitsch-covered teahouse, I don't bother to look at the prices. We sample tea after tea. Fei is kind enough to translate the stories and instructions of our hostess, while Lan demonstrates a fine level of tea connoisseurship—sniffing the dry leaves, observing the subtle color of each freshly poured cup, and slurping the extract like an expert Italian espresso drinker. We have a blast...until the bill comes: 15,000 RMB—almost $200. I've been had. >



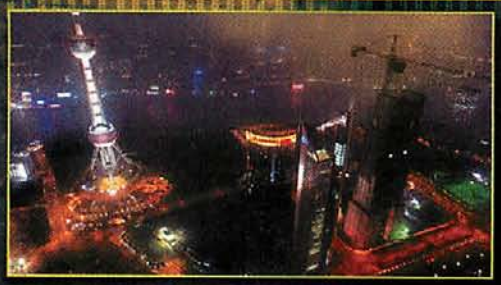
HAIED

Fiction meets reality in *Splinter Cell Double Agent*

BY ROBERT ASHLEY



▲ Shanghai's city skyline comes alive as Sam hangs out to enjoy the view.



>> "WE WANT TO CREATE SOMEONE WHO'S...NOT JUST A GUY WITH GOGGLES."

–JULIAN GERIGHTY, COPRODUCER, UBISOFT

DON'T BE A SUCKER

Shanghai is a town full of hucksters, hustlers, and con men, from the bootleg merchants pushing fake Prada bags on the street corners to folks like Fei and Lan who prey on stupid tourists like me. So I make sure to keep an eye out for Julian Gerighty, coproducer of the newest version of the *Splinter Cell* series, *Double Agent*. Gerighty's a slick character: half French, half British, all Shanghai salesman. But he's not out to con me—he just wants to make sure I understand all the work he and his team have put into *Double Agent*. At my visit to Ubisoft's downtown studio, it's clear that "emotion" is his buzzword of the day. Gerighty repeats it like a mantra—like a politician hitting talking points. "We're a French company, so we're very conceptual and emotion heavy," he says. For this, the fourth game in the popular stealth-action series, he and his team envision a "super, super emotional experience."

Emotional experiences rank high on the lists of today's gamemakers, who often claim that they can evoke intense feelings on new, expensive hardware. But few games, however shiny and "realistic," manage to push our buttons the way movies and books do. They just don't tell stories as well.

Gerighty loads up a level from *Double Agent*. The scene: a dank New Orleans basement where a man kneels chained against the wall. Sam Fisher, *Splinter Cell*'s (now balding) superspy, has been charged with infiltrating a homegrown terrorist organization. To prove his terrorist credentials, Sam must shoot the bound man in cold blood. Unfortunately, that man is Sam's best friend.

"There's an innocent guy in front of you," says Gerighty. "He's on his knees. He's gagged. Somebody hands you a gun. The terrorist leader says, 'You want to join our group? Take him out.' What would you do if he was your best friend? What if you knew that 3,000 lives were on the line? These are the sort of questions we want to ask people." But Sam, controlled by a *Double Agent* team member, doesn't ask any questions. He just trains his weapon on the man's face. The camera zooms in—we can see the man's red eyes pleading with Sam not to shoot. We can hear his gagged, desperate yelps. Sam pulls the trigger.

It's disturbing. It's creepy. It definitely pushes buttons. By playing to the strength of gaming—the audience's ability to play a part in the story—the scene sidesteps the usual pitfalls of bad scriptwriting and voice acting. It just gives you the real, raw moment. This is something the series tried before, with less success, in *Splinter Cell Pandora Tomorrow*. "We had this whole mission where a female agent guided you through the streets of Jerusalem," says Gerighty. "At the end of the mission, [Sam's commander] Lambert gets on the intercom and says, 'Kill her. Don't ask any questions, just kill her.' When we playtested it, 95 percent of the people just went 'pop.' We discovered that Sam Fisher was seen more as a soldier who was following orders all the time. We want to break that by giving Sam less of a soldier attitude during the game. You're not the good soldier that you were before."

In fact, Sam Fisher, the quiet guy in the black stretch pants, seems a totally different person here—darker, older, and more world-weary. As *Double Agent* begins, Sam's daughter, "his only connection to humanity" according to Gerighty, dies in a car accident. This triggers Sam's sudden veer into antihero territory. But aside from the brooding attitude, the most obvious change is the absence of Sam's iconic night-vision goggles—at least for a few levels. "What we want to do is [to] show people that Sam Fisher exists as a character, not just as equipment," says Gerighty. "We want to create someone who's not just a guy with a five o' clock shadow, not just a guy with goggles. We want to give it some depth, to give it some dimension that hasn't been in the game so far. If we didn't do something, we'd be stuck in the same Lara Croft shorts and tight top."

Don't wear white stealth suits after Labor Day. Apparently, it's tacky.

MORAL NO-MAN'S LAND

That's how we end up in this New Orleans dungeon with formerly unassailable good guy Sam Fisher murdering his best friend in cold blood. *Double Agent* features several such uncomfortable moments of sticky moral judgment. It's a subject that Gerighty seems particularly nervous about; he's careful to point out that Sam isn't choosing between good and evil, that he won't be taking a detour into the morality of, say, *Grand Theft Auto*. "None of the decisions are black or white," says Gerighty. "So there's no real right or wrong."

I find that hard to believe when the team boots up another level: Kinshasa, a miserable place in real life, located in the unstable African country ironically called the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It's a big departure from the dark, empty office parks *Splinter Cell* is known for. The streets are alive with soldiers and rebels fighting a bloody civil war that—if the A.I. works out—will unfold differently every time you play it. The African sun blazes above Sam's head. Not only can you (and any enemy not distracted by the war in the streets) see Sam in the harsh light of day, but you can also see the sweat dripping down his skin. The level of realism makes it especially gruesome when Sam sneaks past a group of rebel prisoners lined up against a wall for execution. "You can save them, but you risk being exposed," says Gerighty. Sam does the easy thing—standing by while the three men are shot, one by one. The final man scurries up the wall in vain before rifle fire drags him back down to the ground.

I wonder aloud if the game has anything to say about the real-life atrocities that—as we sit on plush couches playing videogames on Ubisoft's massive HDTV—are happening in the real Congo, thousands of miles away. The ongoing war there has caused the greatest number of casualties in any conflict since World War II. Gerighty's defenses kick in.

"We're not trying to make a political statement," he says. "We really just want to make a piece of entertainment." Then is it appropriate to use a miserable real-life war as a playground for simple entertainment? "We want to stay believable," Gerighty replies. "We can't set a civil war just anywhere. Kinshasa was chosen because a Hollywood scriptwriter and an ex-Mossad agent [both consultants on *Double Agent*] decided that it's an area that is likely to have a summit of worldwide terrorists, a place which is war-torn...a place which is falling to pieces."

It's all about realism—that fanatical religion of the modern game developer. To the credit of Gerighty and his team, *Double Agent*'s version of Kinshasa is filled with the realistic horrors of war. Sam narrowly avoids a mortar blast but arrives just in time to witness its victim consumed by flames and convulsing on the ground. Elsewhere, a grenade blows the legs off a soldier. His blood pools in the dusty street.

I want Sam to be a hero—to save the prisoners before they're executed, to do something about the horrors in the streets of Kinshasa...but that will be my call when I play the game. These kinds of choices fall into the player's hands in *Double Agent* as part of a larger openness in the game's design—one that extends from huge, branching levels to crucial moments in the story. "If you thought that *Chaos Theory* [the previous game in the series] gave you a lot of choices, this game is much more open," says Gerighty.

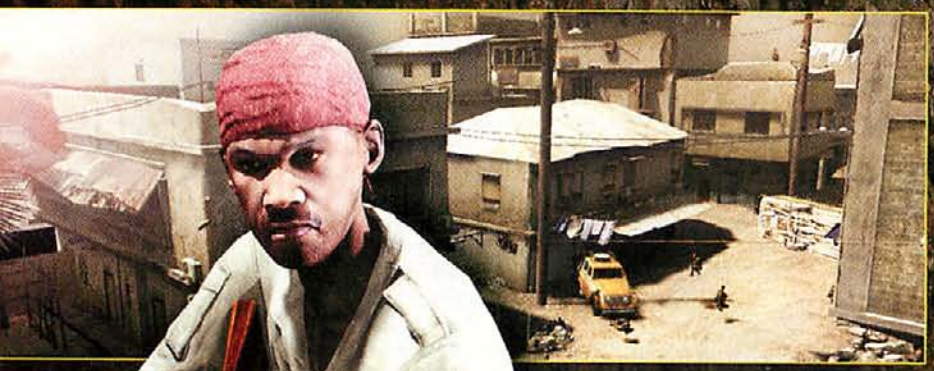
Sam's actions—your actions—have consequences. Depending on the choices you make as you play through *Double Agent*, the final third of the game (and the game's ending) changes substantially. But according to Gerighty, none of these paths lead Sam Fisher, hero, to become Sam Fisher, villain. "We can't turn him into a bad guy overnight," he says. "It's not like you come out completely clean, but you'll never be the most wanted terrorist in America." >

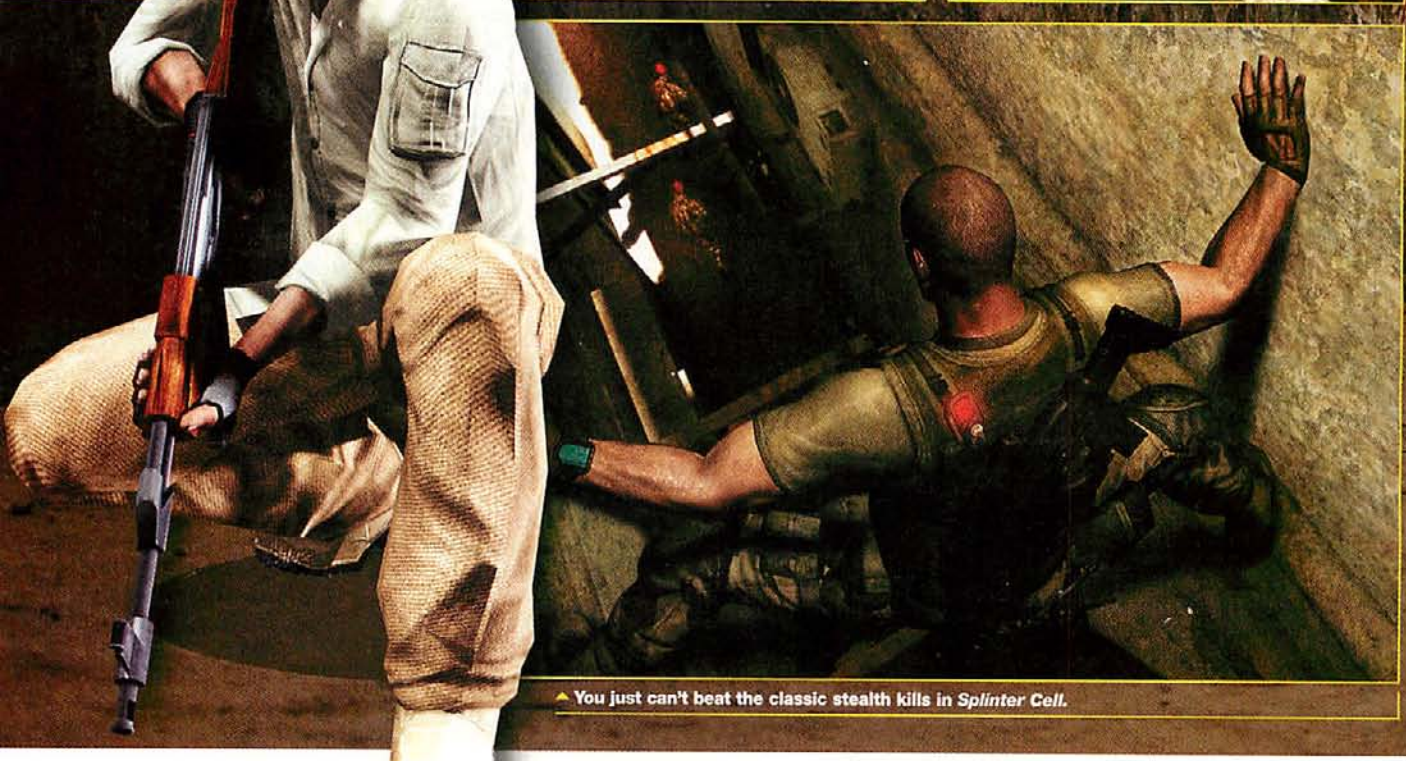
THE HIVE MIND

I wake up at 4 a.m., jet-lagged, in my room on the 65th floor of the Shanghai Grand Hyatt, the highest hotel in the world. After a bout of tossing and turning, I give up on sleep and pull back the curtains to reveal a panoramic view of Pudong, Shanghai's towering business district. Skyscrapers shoot up from the ground for miles and miles. Red aircraft warning beacons blink on the arms of a dozen giant construction cranes erecting ever-taller, ultramodern buildings. It takes me a few moments to realize that the cranes are running. Welding sparks flash in the night. Concrete trucks stream in and out of construction sites. This rapidly expanding city is being built constantly, all day and all night.

The 130-man team working on *Double Agent* in Shanghai seems to share this work ethic, plugging away at the game's E3 demo on Labor Day while most of the city's workers enjoy the day off. *Splinter Cell* is known for high production values, and it's obvious that this has less to do with technology or a big budget than with the obsessive dedication of the people involved. They sweat the details. Where you or I might simply see Sam Fisher, superspy, creep across a desert battlefield, they see the watery coating of sweat on Sam's skin, painstakingly created for just this level; the special lighting effect that lets sunbeams realistically bounce off surfaces; the soldier and rebel character models, all created from scratch, each character different in size and weight, each wearing a costume that was put together in real life on a mannequin and photographed with a superhigh-res camera. Some team members' duties consist entirely of making facial expressions look natural and making sure Sam's sneaking animation feels just right. When I talk to lead character designer Jean-Michel Tari, the guy who, among other things, dresses up the aforementioned dummy, I can't help empathizing with him. He speaks anxiously about his work, trying to explain—in 15 minutes—all of the elaborate details he's cramming into the game's characters. It's as if this guy, who toils away on the things players never consciously notice, *finally* has an opportunity to point out his hard work.

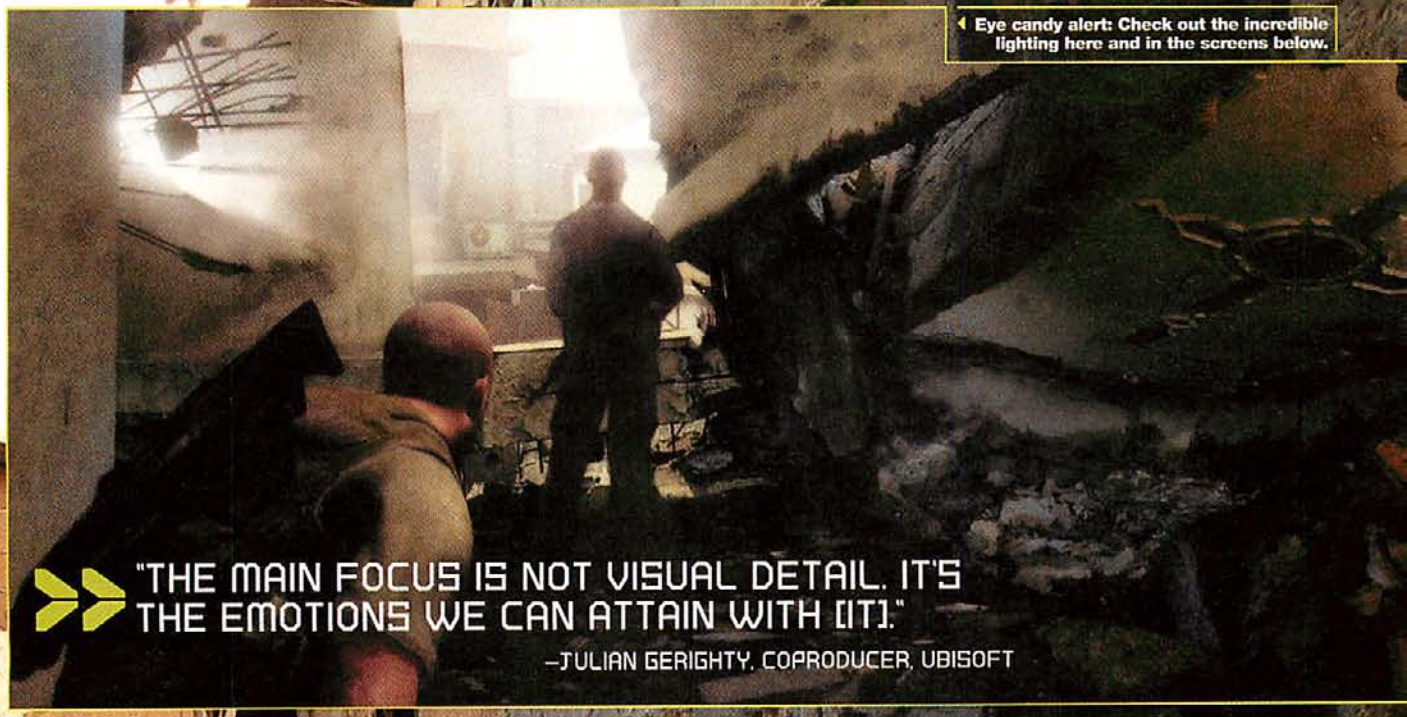
But you have to wonder where this style of massive production is going. Does spending so much effort on the tiniest of details really take us somewhere new? "I think that people really take pleasure from seeing details," says Gerighty. "It's the attention to detail that makes something feel high quality. If you cut corners, you're going to have something that just feels cheap." *Double Agent* certainly doesn't look cheap—it practically slides off the screen with a thick veneer of polish. But obsessing over lighting effects and smooth animation won't create a compelling game. "The main focus on this game is not the visual detail," says Gerighty. "It's the emotions we can attain with those elements." Here we go again. "Everything is done with a high level of visual fidelity to create this tangible world. If it's just an arms race to be the best eye candy around, that's not going to last. But if the emotions are there, it's going to last." >





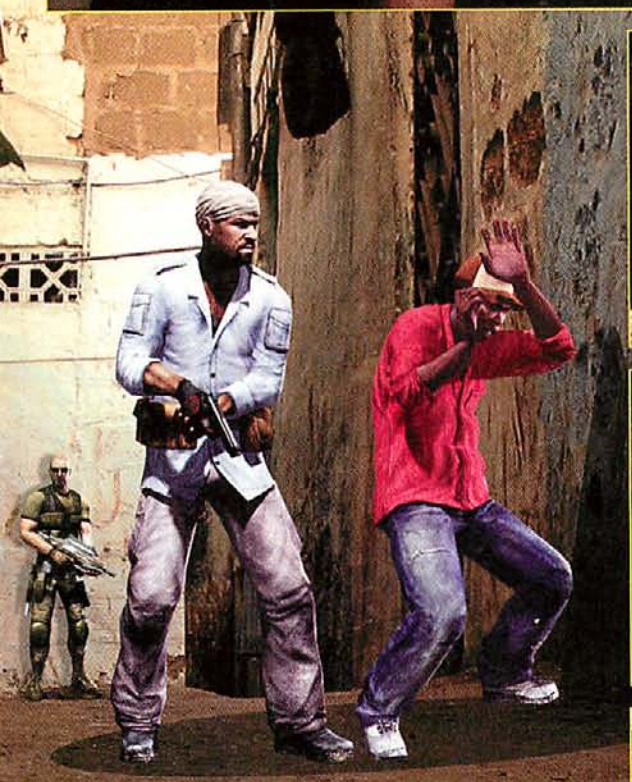
▲ You just can't beat the classic stealth kills in *Splinter Cell*.

Eye candy alert: Check out the incredible lighting here and in the screens below.



"THE MAIN FOCUS IS NOT VISUAL DETAIL. IT'S THE EMOTIONS WE CAN ATTAIN WITH [IT]."

—JULIAN GERIGHTY, COPRODUCER, UBISOFT



Human shield: a game that's fun for the whole family!

NOTE: Background image has been modified for artistic purposes and does not reflect actual gameplay or graphics.

SPLINTER CELL GOES HOLLYWOOD

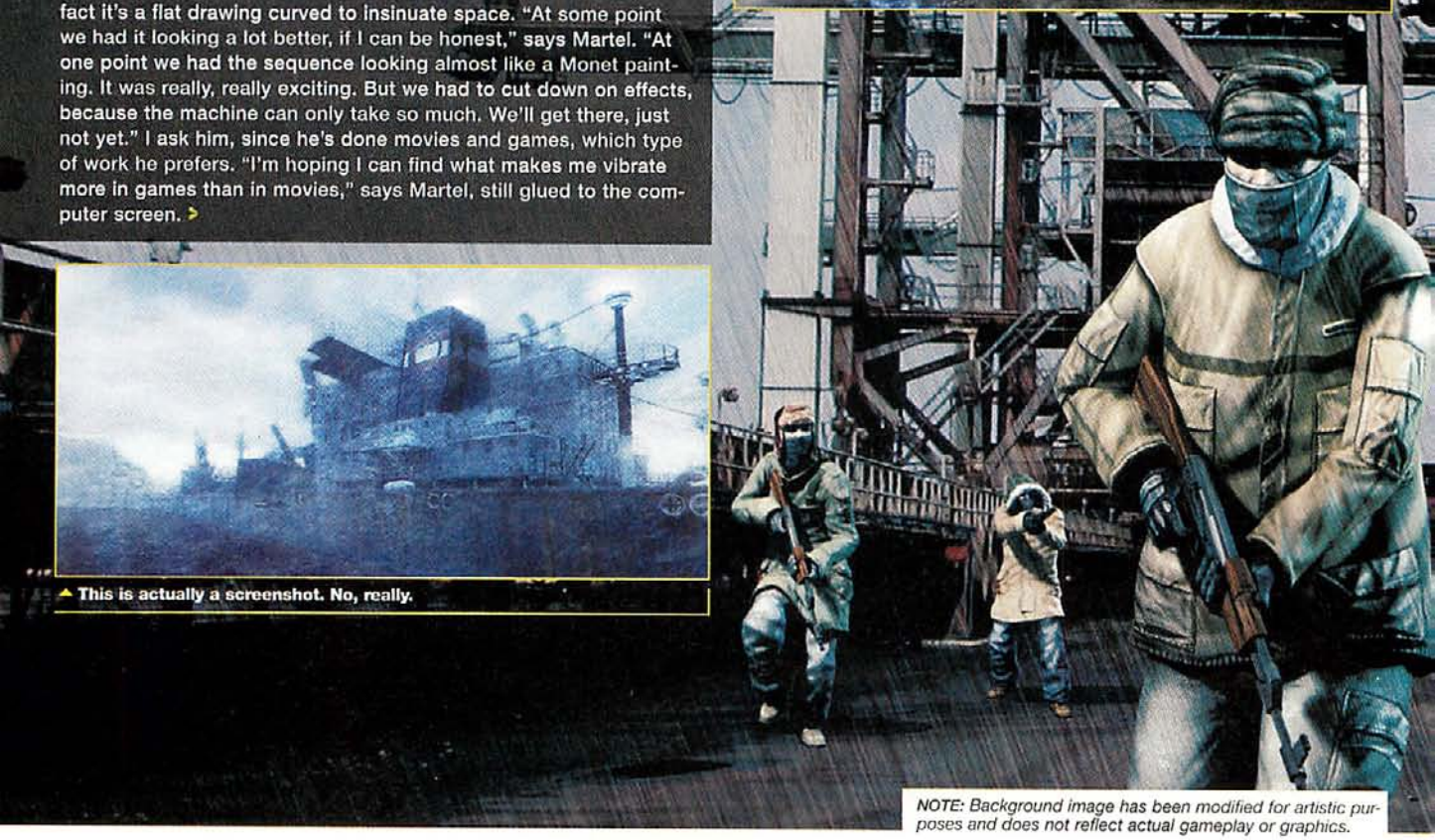
Any time Gerighty mentions emotions, he's almost certainly talking about the work of Hugues Martel, an outspoken animator more familiar with pen and paper than the high-tech tools of videogame development. You may have seen his work in the surreal French animated film *The Triplets of Belleville*. Martel is the man responsible for the New Orleans execution scene, hired to direct several of these story-pivotal moments. He boots up another scene he's been hard at work on.

Sam stands in the open hatch of an airplane as it buzzes through picturesque blue skies. He peeks over the edge, down thousands of feet to the earth below. Without pause, he kicks his supply box off the plane, then falls into the endless blue. The clouds glow with subtle shades of pink and purple as Sam performs a few showy spins. He's overconfident. The weather takes a turn for the worse just before it's time to pull the chute. The camera—our view of the action—shakes violently in the wind as the parachute tangles, limp above Sam's head. Sam struggles to pull his secondary chute, which sets the player to work at a simple lock-picking minigame. The chute opens to a wave of relief as Sam descends to the earth, cool and collected as usual.

Martel is so new to games that he hasn't yet developed his colleagues' guardedness around journalists. Like any good artist, he can't help launching into a critical analysis of his successes and failures as *Double Agent*'s one-man Hollywood studio: "We went from in-game cinematics to interactive in-game cinematics, to 'it would be so much better if we could have gameplay, too—we never designed the scenes to have gameplay,' to failure, to success...." He runs on in a fury, never turning his face from the monitor. To me, the parachuting sequence looks stunning. To Martel, it's not what he envisioned.

He's a movie man forced to compromise with the limitations of games. "For the skydiving one, which at first everyone thought was total craziness, I had never really drawn with a computer before," says Martel, pointing to the Wacom tablet on his desk. He uses the tricks of 2D animation to make the sky seem enormous, when in fact it's a flat drawing curved to insinuate space. "At some point we had it looking a lot better, if I can be honest," says Martel. "At one point we had the sequence looking almost like a Monet painting. It was really, really exciting. But we had to cut down on effects, because the machine can only take so much. We'll get there, just not yet." I ask him, since he's done movies and games, which type of work he prefers. "I'm hoping I can find what makes me vibrate more in games than in movies," says Martel, still glued to the computer screen. >

▲ This is actually a screenshot. No, really.



NOTE: Background image has been modified for artistic purposes and does not reflect actual gameplay or graphics.

DIDJA KNOW?
Hugues Martel, the animator behind *The Triplets of Belleville*, is responsible for animating key in-game scenes.

Great tactic: Get the drop on mercenaries and use your hacking tool to blind them.

MULTIPLAYER FOR DUMMIES

Opening up without dumbing down

Splinter Cell Chaos Theory's co-op mode, wherein you and a friend join forces for a set of online team missions, gets officially scrapped in *Double Agent*. It's a shame, but you can console yourself with the knowledge that *Splinter Cell*'s competitive online mode, Spies vs. Mercenaries, now receives all the attention. SVM is a high-tension game of cat and mouse, limited to six players and split between two teams: the spies and mercs for which the game is named. On the spy side, players sneak, Sam Fisher–style, into enemy territory using high-tech gizmos and the cover of darkness. On the merc side, players hunt down the infiltrating spies with flashlights and heavy firepower, their advantage handicapped by a narrow, first-person field of vision. It's a nervy, slow-burning, highly original game, but one that comes with an off-putting learning curve. Veteran players are known for their merciless treatment of newcomers. "The community that plays [SVM] are some of the hardest-core people out there," says coproducer Julian Gerighty. "When you play it and you're not an expert, you get destroyed. We wanted to open that up." But how do you open the game to new players without dumbing it down and driving away the pros?

BOTS

Instead of taking a blind leap into a ring full of heavyweights, why not spend a little time hitting the punching bag? *Double Agent* lets you to train offline against A.I.-controlled opponents, giving you a chance to explore each level's nooks and crannies.

EXFILTRATION

A simple, easy-to-read map shows you where you and your teammates are in the level, marking the location of your objectives as well. However, it's more than simply meeting objectives. The tension jacks up while you make your escape.

GHOSTS

SVM maps feature secret routes, fences to jump over, and air ducts to crawl through. For the first hour new players log in, ghost characters pop up. They highlight important parts of the map, showing you exactly what you can do at each junction.

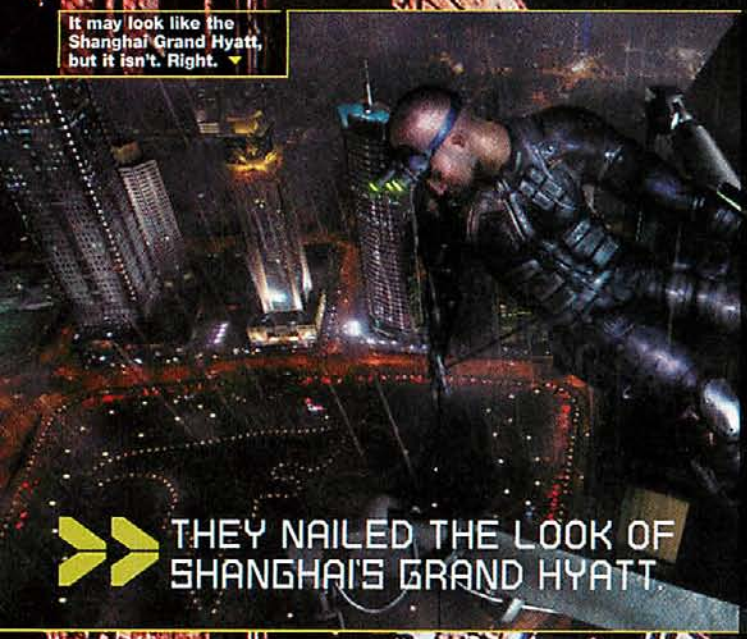
HACKING TOOL

Spies get an upgrade thanks to this handy little device. It turns off the lights in any room at the flick of a button—and if you can aim it long enough at an unsuspecting merc, you can hack his equipment, disabling gadgets and inhibiting vision.

Being bald is not required to be a mercenary or a spy. Well, we hope not.

Bigger, more open maps make for better balanced matches.

MULTIPLAYER WILL BE MORE NEWBIE-FRIENDLY WITHOUT DRIVING AWAY THE PROS.



It may look like the Shanghai Grand Hyatt, but it isn't. Right. ▼

THEY NAILED THE LOOK OF SHANGHAI'S GRAND HYATT.

CHINESE NEW YEAR

"The Girl from Ipanema" sambas through the air in Cloud Nine, an eagle's nest of a bar on the 88th floor of the Grand Hyatt. If you listen carefully, you can hear conversations in Chinese, French, Japanese, and English among the sounds of rattling ice and glass. I'm enjoying my last night in luxury, with a stiff Kentucky bourbon and the view of old Shanghai just across the Huangpu River. Shanghai was the first Chinese city to open its doors to the West; before the Communist revolution, French, British, and American nationals exerted a huge influence on the city, one I can see in the Western-style buildings that line the riverside. But just outside my window, I spot a Western influence of another era: Sam Fisher, nearly invisible in his sneaking suit. He hugs the windows as he makes his way to the other side of the building. In the distance, a giant fireworks display signifies that it's Chinese New Year. Rockets arc across the night and explode, revealing miniature details in the city below. Cloud Nine patrons looking out at the display catch a surprise glimpse of the crazy man outside. One particularly drunk patron rises from his table as if he's seen a ghost...or perhaps a sake-induced hallucination.

Technically, *Double Agent* isn't allowed to call this level the "Shanghai Grand Hyatt," presumably because the Chinese government is so vigilant in its enforcement of copyrights. But the team definitely nailed the look of this unusual piece of architecture: Cloud Nine's riveted iron beams and swanky atmosphere are pitch perfect. The hotel's atrium, a wide-open cylinder shot straight through the floors of the hotel above, sets up a nice scene as Sam rappels down to the cocktail lounge below. Meticulous realism may not be the most exciting thing going on in games, but it's hard to not appreciate the concreteness of the world *Double Agent* creates. I lose track of Sam, who's slipped away into some dark corridor. Perhaps he's up in my room poisoning the minibar. Or maybe he's waiting patiently in my closet. It's hard to tell, in this world halfway between reality and fantasy, what he's up to. Keep an eye out.

NOTE: Background image has been modified for artistic purposes and does not reflect actual gameplay or graphics.

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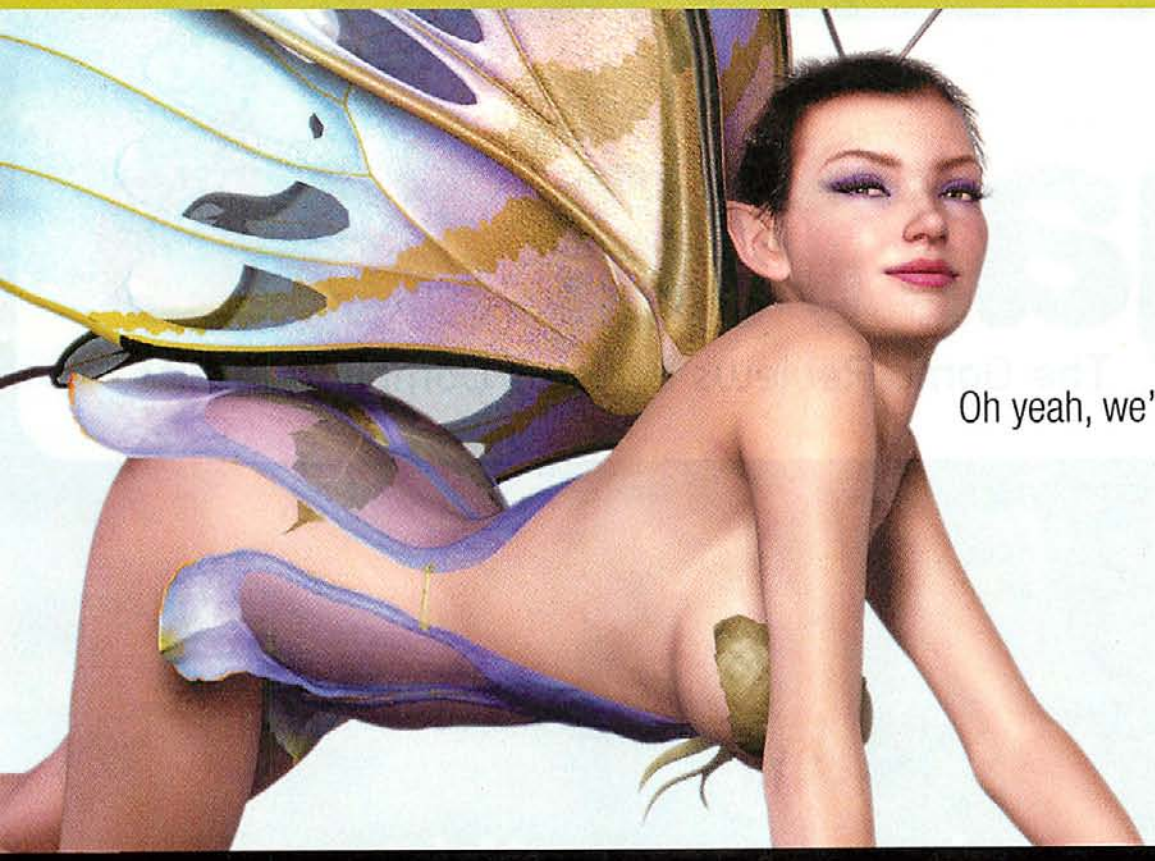

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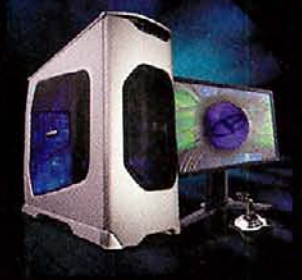

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VIEWPOINT

AN INFORMED LOOK AT THE GAMES YOU SHOULD BE PLAYING

THE YEAR OF THE EIDOS?

IT'S AN INTERESTING MONTH FOR EIDOS INTERACTIVE. ON ONE hand, the publisher gives us *Tomb Raider: Legend*, which marks series heroine Lara Croft's first appearance since 2003's dismal *Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness*. Shockingly enough, *Legend* manages to restore quite a bit of the franchise's lost dignity—all while treating us to the kind of beautiful next-gen visuals that many console-to-PC ports lack. Color us impressed—and welcome back, Lara.

But this wonderful surprise upshot gets balanced out by Eidos' *other* game this month: *Commandos Strike Force*. Many gamers held the *Commandos* strategy series in high regard prior to *Commandos 3*, and now *Strike Force*—the franchise's first foray into FPS territory—further tarnishes the series' once-great image. Color us depressed—and get the hell off of our PC screens, *Commandos*.

And by the time you read this, Eidos' next two games—*Rogue Trooper* and *Hitman: Blood Money* (both pretty decent, according to early reports)—should be in stores. Here's hoping they end up more like *Tomb Raider: Legend* and less like *Commandos Strike Force*. >

REVIEW PHILOSOPHY

EDITORS' CHOICE Computer GAMING

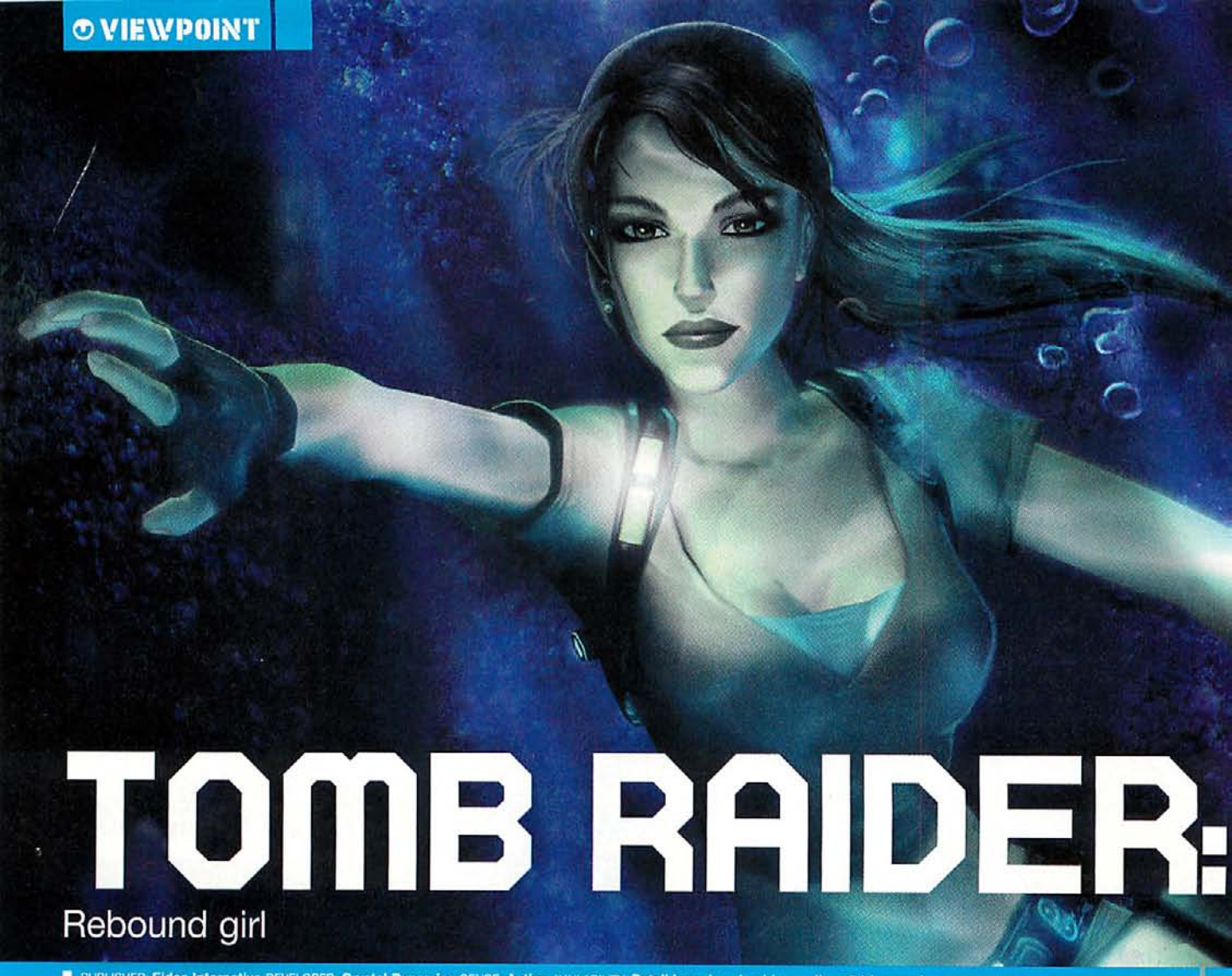
CGW's reviews don't concern themselves with scored evaluations; you can find those at 1UP.com well before the magazine arrives in print. Instead, we offer something different: in-depth opinion features that dig deeper into the PC games you're playing via the discussion of relevant topics, including fan reaction, press reception, Internet buzz, and postrelease gameplay evolution. Sure, you can find plenty of reviews and aggregate scores online—but in *CGW*, you get the big picture. A *CGW* Editors' Choice emblem signifies the best in PC gaming.

INSIDE

Tomb Raider: Legend
Lara's back. And she's still hot.

Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45
Most realistic shooter ever!

Tom vs. Bruce
Spiraling toward *Oblivion*.



TOMB RAIDER:

Rebound girl

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Crystal Dynamics** GENRE: **Action** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box, download (www.direct2drive.com)**
ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 9.9GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 256MB videocard, gamepad**
MULTIPLAYER: **None**

IN THE LATE '90S, NO "VIRTUAL celebrity" was as famous as Lara Croft. Her debut in the original *Tomb Raider* broke new ground and defined an entire genre. Half a dozen games, two movies, and a spate of product endorsements later, Eidos inauspiciously coughed up *Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness* in 2003—an ugly, difficult-to-control, buggy, inanely plotted mess. And with the arrival of brilliant competition like *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time* and *God of War*, even Croft-oholics began to lose interest.

CRYSTALLIZED

Eidos took drastic measures with *Legend* in an attempt to bring *Tomb Raider* back to its exalted status, eighty-sixing longtime British developer Core Design and tasking U.S. design house Crystal Dynamics with Lara's resurrection. In turn, Crystal Dynamics brought on Toby Gard—the man responsible for the original Lara Croft character—as a consultant. The new team opted to scrap much of the convoluted backstory from previous *Tomb Raider* games, giving Lara a new origin, several new outfits, a new body shape, and even a new voice actress.

The gameplay stays basically the same, though. Like previous games, *Legend* emphasizes acrobatics and puzzle solving, with some occasional gunplay thrown in. Thankfully, the control system rectifies the gaffes of *Angel of Darkness*, and Lara now responds to commands as instantly as a shock therapy patient. Of course, you still need a gamepad to get the most immersive experience, but the keyboard and mouse combo remains serviceable this time around. The camera also works better, intelligently tracking your movements and allowing for free manual alignment when you need it.

Another big *Angel of Darkness* complaint: a lack of bona fide tombs for Lara to raid. Much of that game takes place in urban environments, where she squares off primarily against human enemies (as opposed to the series' traditional wild animals). *Legend* addresses this to some degree—while men with guns still form the bulk of Lara's enemies (only the occasional leopard slipped through the PETA censors, it seems), she spends more time Indiana Jones-ing her way through ancient ruins and temples. The problem: Those ruins and temples suffer from highly formulaic architecture. Jump from ledge to ledge, swing on a vine or two, solve a large puzzle room, defeat a boss, and repeat. I wish that were an oversimplification, but it's unfortunately an accurate summary of how every level plays out.

Another flaw in the level designs is that they are—with few exceptions—easier than cheating at solitaire. Eschewing the stealthy elements

IF *LEGEND* SERVES AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE "HOLLYWOOD-IZATION" OF GAMES, THEN I WELCOME OUR NEW LATTE-DRINKING OVERLORDS.

▲ Some puzzles have multiple solutions. Here, Lara uses an object to shield herself from a gun.

▲ Lara's guns figure into a variety of puzzle solutions.

CORPORATE SHILLS

Tomb Raider: Legend incorporates some not-too-subtle product placements from companies like Jeep™ and Ducati™.

LEGEND

of, say, the *Splinter Cell* series, but also lacking the balls-to-the-wall action of titles such as *God of War*, *Legend* treads a precarious middle path. This might please casual gamers, but it's likely to alienate the more hardcore among us. I never found myself challenged by the firefights, puzzles, or acrobatics; the only truly tough part was tracking down the hidden goodies needed to unlock Lara's swimsuit (admittedly, a worthwhile endeavor). Increasing the difficulty makes the gunfights a bit harder by reducing Lara's damage threshold, but otherwise imparts no noticeable effect. Crystal Dynamics seems to have forgotten that the original *Tomb Raider*'s formidable challenge helped make it a classic, and that's a real shame.

PLOT TWISTS

Previous *Tomb Raider* games (especially *Angel of Darkness*) suffered criticism for their overly simple—or outright lame—story lines. And while *Legend*'s writers won't exactly give Tom Stoppard a midlife crisis, at least the script is internally consistent. The plot doesn't make much sense once you step back and think about it for a second, though: *Legend* tries to tap into the whole *Da Vinci Code* monomyth ethos but lacks coherence and focus. From what I could gather, Lara's got to put together the pieces of an ancient sword that her father had attempted to locate before his death in a plane crash in Nepal. Also on that flight: Lara and her mother. But they survived, winding up in a ruined temple in the Himalayas. Lara's mom unlocked an ancient, greenish-black demon of some sort...then suddenly disappeared. King Arthur is involved in the plot, too, along with some goth-looking chick from Lara's past.

In contrast to the uneven story, the characters are more expertly fashioned. Some familiar faces from previous games reappear in *Legend*, including Zip the tech whiz and Winston the butler—but you control only Lara. The voice acting is uniformly excellent, though I must give extraspecial kudos to new Lara voice actress Keeley Hawes. More than any previous actress, she evokes the smolderingly sexy, yet still upper-class, sensibilities of our favorite ass-kicking archaeologist. If *Legend* serves as an example of the "Hollywood-ization" of games, then I welcome our new latte-drinking overlords.

As for the graphics, much depends on how diesel your system is (see "Next-Gen Lara" on the following page), but if you've got a killer rig, prepare for some lovely visuals. But even those of us still languishing in old-gen-GPU land get treated to lush and diverse environments, subtle graphical touches, and a few flashy special effects. *Legend* won't send *F.E.A.R.* running in...er...fear, but it can certainly hold its own.

COMEBACK KID

A classic "mixed bag" (pardon the cliché), *Legend* does a lot of things relatively right and a few things relatively wrong. But considering how low the series had sunk with *Angel of Darkness*, Eidos unquestionably made the right choice in going with Crystal Dynamics, who in turn made the right choice in completely reinventing Lara Croft. The vine's finally swinging back in the right direction—if the designers add some more challenge and diversity to the levels the next time around, Eidos could once again have a flagship property on its hands.

/ Eric Neigher

...see our next-gen-Lara comparison on pg. 80

NEXT-GEN LARA

The jihad between the PC and console faithful inevitably flares up whenever next-gen consoles are released, and this time around is no different. Forums everywhere ring with the fevered jibes of snobby PC gamers and snotty console lovers—but *Tomb Raider: Legend*, at least, should silence some debate. It's a clear victory for PC gamers (at least those with top-notch machines), thanks to its Next-Gen Content option.

Essentially an ultrafantastic ramped-up graphics engine, the Next-Gen Content option offers beautiful, intricately detailed textures, shifting lighting effects, and glistening reflective surfaces. On a top-end PC (and we do mean top-end: those without 512MB graphics cards need not apply), the game looks at least as good as it does on an Xbox 360. But here's the kicker: The PC version retails for a mere $40—20 bucks cheaper than the 360 version and 10 bucks cheaper than even the PS2 and Xbox versions.

This is no anomaly; due to console manufacturer licensing fees, PC versions of many recent games (*The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter* come to mind) consistently price out at $10 to $20 less than their identical console counterparts. As PC technology inevitably begins to outstrip the next-gen consoles, PC gamers will get better-looking versions that cost less than identical Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3 titles. That, along with the ability of PC gamers to make and apply mods, expansions, and fan content (which console games simply can't support), and it's the PC for the win!

▲ A couple of clever cinematic sequences find you controlling Lara from the POV of something trying to kill her. In this case, a big rock.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

Eidos' flagship series recovers well with this latest episode, but it has a few more temples to conquer before recapturing the glory of the original.

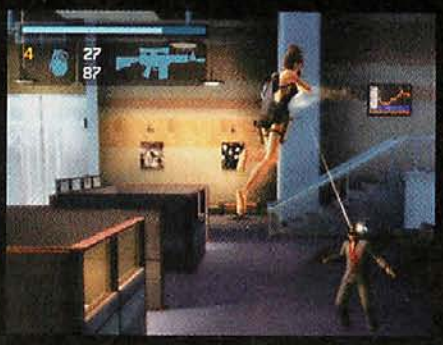
REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	8/10
GAMESPOT	7.8/10
GAMESPY	3.5/5
IGN	8.2/10

PC NON-NEXT-GEN

XBOX 360

PC NEXT-GEN



▲ The gunfights employ a limited bullet-time function that starts automatically once Lara vaults off of an enemy.

▲ *Legend* features two aiming modes: lock-on and free-look. The free-look mode (seen here) is much more useful if you employ the mouse.

THANKFULLY, THE CONTROL SYSTEM RECTIFIES THE GAFFES OF *ANGEL OF DARKNESS*.

COLUMN

FALLING PIECES

OUR FAVORITE WAYS TO WASTE SPARE TIME

CASUAL CENTRAL

Looking for a good casual game to play? We recommend heading over to PopCap Games at www.popcap.com.

THE FATE OF ATLANTIS

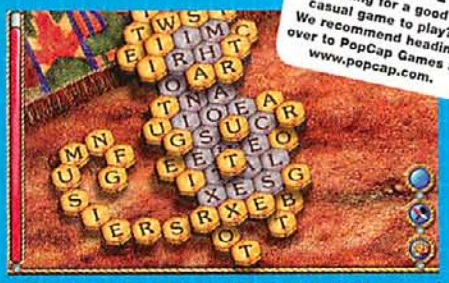
I THOUGHT THE WHOLE ATLANTIS thing died right around the same time as Patrick Duffy's career. Still, the siren song of this soggy society remains almost as irresistible to game developers as that of ancient Egypt. *Atlantis Quest* (www.terminalstudio.com) is a nice little match-three puzzler in the spirit of *Bejeweled*, and adds enough new things—chiefly power-ups and a large dose of strategy (and frustration)—to make for a different experience.

The tiles skirt the unconventional (lots of ankhs and hieroglyphs), but the "match three tiles" gameplay is immediately familiar. The trick here: getting the puzzle pieces sprinkled throughout the playing field to drop through the bottom of the table before time runs out. It's harder than it sounds, especially when the game introduces a variety of blocking mechanisms and odd grid shapes to complicate matters. You can win power-ups to shatter or remix tiles and to extend time, but they're barely enough to help late in the game. *Atlantis Quest* may be a casual game on the surface, but the level of challenge and frustration it can generate stands head and shoulders with hardcore strategic games.

▲ What are Egyptian motifs doing in an Atlantis game? Maybe the designers are *Stargate* fans.

WHAT ARE WORDS FOR?

Shangri-la Deluxe (www.realarcade.com) follows *Atlantis Quest*'s lead, adding features to a tried-and-true formula (in this case, the word puzzler). The game does this by stapling extra goals to each of its levels—optional things like forming longer words and reaching a score threshold. Frankly, it's not all that hard to find words here, but a ticking clock and a nonoptional goal for every level (freeing the star tile that could lie under multiple layers of letters) give the game urgency and strategic depth. You can replay any level in order to meet missed goals—a siren song far more appealing than the call of *Atlantis Quest* and one that's simply irresistible, as anyone who's spent hours grabbing achievements on Xbox Live these days could tell you. **/Robert Coffey**



▲ It's a monkey! Made of lettered tiles! How adorable!

When he's not spewing hate-filled editorial, CGW *alum Robert Coffey spends plenty of free time playing* Bejeweled 2.

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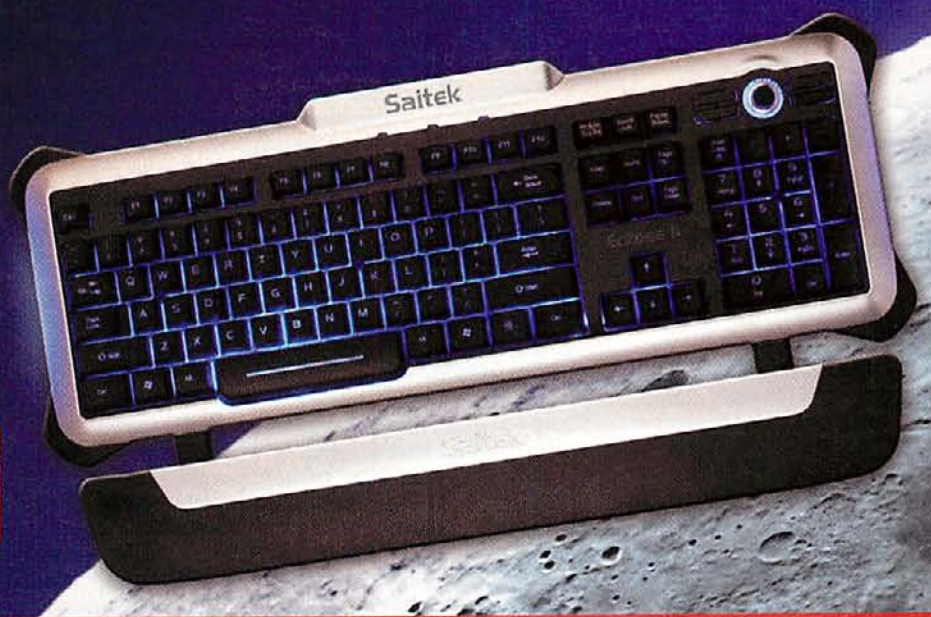

What if you could change everything? The way you work. The way you play. The way you move. With the all-new **Eclipse II** you can. With more power and features than its predecessor, it's all here. Illuminated backlit keys that glow red or blue at the touch of a button and dim with the turn of a dial. An adjustable wrist rest and 3 keyboard angle positions that adapt to your needs for your comfort. Side end lighting to help reduce eyestrain and media transport keys that control your music effortlessly. It is more of a revolution than an evolution and it can be all yours now.

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COMMANDOS STRIKE FORCE

Casualties of war

▲ Unloading two machine guns on those lousy bales of hay should teach 'em who's boss.

▲ You'll patch up your idiotic allies. Often.

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Pyro Studios** GENRE: **Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **T**
REQUIRED: **1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 3.5GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players**

IT TAKES MORE THAN A STEADY STREAM of hot lead to beat back the Nazis. So how do you make a thinking man's World War II shooter? *Commandos Strike Force* attempts to infiltrate the FPS market with strategy and puzzle elements. It sounds good on paper—paper doodled on, crumpled up, shredded, and burned.

The big draw of the strategy series that spawned this game was the challenge of controlling a team of six specialists that you'd switch between on the fly. You'd spread this dirty half-dozen out to systematically sabotage massive Nazi installations. In *Strike Force,* an FPS spin-off of the early games, you control only three commandos—a Green Beret, a sniper, and a spy—and, on most missions, you only get to toggle between two.

UNITED THEY FALL

The Green Beret brings with him the generic FPS experience you've come to loathe. With dual machine guns blazing, he mindlessly wades through missions. Equally dumb are the mundane level designs, rife with waxy visuals—obviously the work of a dated graphics engine. Imagery often gets a pass when it comes to strategy games, but FPS titles go under the microscope. Pyro should have done its homework...or licensed a good engine.

Similarly, the strategy series' signature activity of skulking and pouncing on unsuspecting guards is a bit of a letdown here. The Jerry-garroting spy smartly borrows stealth from the likes of *Thief*... sort of. You toss coins and lit cigarettes to distract foes, but so long as you crouch, you're practically invisible. Stand up, and the alarms go off. Here's where it really falls apart: The classic *Commandos* games have you offing Nazis, taking their clothes, and stowing the bodies. Not so in *Strike Force.* As soon as a Nazi drops dead here, he disappears seconds later. Steal his uniform, and—poof!—the body instantly vanishes.

Not that anyone would notice it missing. As 1UP.com's Scott Sharkey says, "Guards have short attention spans, often returning to unalert states less than a minute after a buddy is snuffed right in front of them." With guards this dumb, how did the war last so long? You might as well go in *Rambo*-style and mow down the entire compound, taking with it any of the tension that made the *Commandos* series fun.

Plenty of reviewers tagged *Strike Force* for its crummy A.I.—but what they all missed is that the series *never* had good A.I., featuring more of a puzzle-game feel. Here, Nazis walk around in set routes. Your job: Find and exploit the patterns. All the difficulty setting adjusts for is the detection radius and number of Nazis to avoid. That doesn't fly with gamers today—and it certainly doesn't work in the FPS genre, where players demand randomization and replayability. To make things worse, you must depend on the game's A.I. to keep your allies alive. In one level, when I left the Green Beret in a covered position, he refused to shoot back at Nazis that plainly crossed his field of view. He's either an idiot or a traitor.

THE GOOD WAR

The game's most versatile character, the sniper, utilizes some of the stealth elements of the spy and can lay waste to dozens from a distance. Given a choice, you'll find yourself tabbing to him on any given mission—particularly in the White Alamo level, where all that stands between a French town and a German counterattack is you and a bridge. "[It] was downright electric...so intense and long that everything else before and after felt like a dry run for the real game," says IGN's Tom McNamara. He's right—that manic mission is the only bright spot in an otherwise half-baked campaign.

How were the multiplayer modes? I'd love to tell you...but in two weeks of searching online, I only found one "Sabotage" match, and that got cut short because the two of us got tired of waiting for others to show up. Some good news: The sound direction and music are peerless. If only you could play with your eyes closed. For all its faults, *Strike Force* isn't terrible, just wholly unremarkable. Instead of taking the series in a smart direction, Pyro went a bridge too far. / **Darren Gladstone**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

Even fans of the *Commandos* series will desert their posts. Single-player mode merely teases you with what could have been. And multiplayer? If you find someone to play with, tell us about it.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	5/10
GAMESPOT	5.7/10
GAMESPY	—
IGN	7.5/10

WHEN I LEFT THE GREEN BERET IN A COVERED POSITION, HE REFUSED TO SHOOT BACK AT NAZIS THAT PLAINLY CROSSED HIS FIELD OF VIEW. HE'S EITHER AN IDIOT OR A TRAITOR.

COLUMN

LINE OF ATTACK

YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO HARDCORE WAR-GAMING

BLITZKRIEG!

I'M CONTINUALLY PUZZLED BY THE LACK of good strategic-level World War II games for the PC. After all, it's a pretty compelling game setting, no? Yet the largest military conflict in history sets a dismal track record in this genre. It probably hit its apogee with 1993's *Clash of Steel*; we haven't seen much progress since then. You could call *Strategic Command*—released a decade later—a clone of *Clash of Steel*...with some severe limitations (such as imbalance and a lack of viable strategies) that kept it from reaching classic status. While the sequel, *Strategic Command 2 Blitzkrieg*, tries to address these problems, it introduces a few serious new ones that erase any progress made.

SC2 adds new technologies to the game and introduces a diplomacy system wherein you try to influence nations to either join your side or stay out of the war, depending on which side they're aligned with. Thus, it's possible to bring Franco's Spain into the war on the Axis side, changing the whole calculus of the naval war in the Atlantic. This simple change is nice, but renders the game almost unwinnable for the Axis if the Soviets enter the war early.

However, *SC2* also employs an isometric map view with tiny tanks and planes for units. Not only is this viewpoint less clear than the one in the original *Strategic Command*, but it also governs movement using squares instead of hexes. This makes the game feel much clunkier without adding anything aesthetically. Things like individually upgrading units with new tanks and creating new research categories relegate *SC2* to just another sequel that adds features instead of addressing fundamental design problems. / **Bruce Geryk**

▲ **You can play diplomat with the new political options.**

▲ **Even more than before, it's all about invading Russia.**

WAR-BLOGGER!

Check out columnist Bruce Geryk's war-gaming blog at grognards.1UP.com.

Longtime CGW contributor Bruce Geryk can probably kick your ass at any board game, any day of the week.

▲ **Adding new research categories is strange, given the persistent imbalances.**

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Where your armor-piercing shell strikes a panzer decides the fireworks' candlepower.

RED ORCHESTRA:

East beats West

PUBLISHER: **Bold Games (retail)/Valve Software (download)** DEVELOPER: **Tripwire Interactive** GENRE: **Multiplayer shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box, download (www.steampowered.com)**
REQUIRED: **1.3GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space, Internet connection** RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, broadband Internet connection**

IN SOME CIRCLES, REALISM'S A COMmodity—as in "Now with more!" If a little is good and a lot is great, then absolutely authentic Russo-German WWII shooter *Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45* is the grail. Material-penetration properties matter; angles of incidence determine degrees of deflection; die, and the game uninstalls itself for good (nah, not really).

Any discussion of *Red Orchestra* ultimately wends its way to realism. "Daggummit, no sooner do I step out into no-man's-land than, BLAM, I get blown away." Realism. "I put four armor-piercing rounds through that Panther. Where's the smoke?" A-yup, that's realistic, too, smarty: Your shells skipped off. And where *RO* itself can't enforce a code of proper conduct to match its on-point ordnance, some so-called "realism" servers can and do. Accused of and banned for hip-firing in one, DoombatINC logs on to the SomethingAwful.com forums to debate in what becomes Run-and-Gun Summit '06: "The PPSh41 holds 71 rounds of ammunition and fires 14 of 'em per second for a reason, and it ain't because watching brass eject is such a doggone gas or because the metal butt dancing against your shoulder beats a massage at a Swedish spa." See? Even those banned for "unrealistic" behavior insist realism's on their side.

The trouble with realism—and *RO*—isn't determining whether or not this is really "the way it was," but rather if it's entertaining. Is playing ashes-to-ashes in the Reichstag as IS-2 crews happily swap 122mm rounds for higher kill counts a privilege we're willing to pay for? Or going first out of the chute in a charge against grenades, rifles, machine guns, artillery, and Tigers? Or discovering that your antitank kit's PTRD antitank rifle doesn't dent tanks? ("It was a crappy weapon in real life," says SomethingAwful.com forum's Etalian, without wondering what it's doing in *RO*. "You're trying to blow up a tank with what amounts to a big, 14.5mm high-velocity machine-gun bullet.") For the moment, never mind the Soviet infantrymen's moonwalking, their likeness to waxy Lenin, and other nitpicks. *Is realism really fun?* Not at first...and at times, not ever.

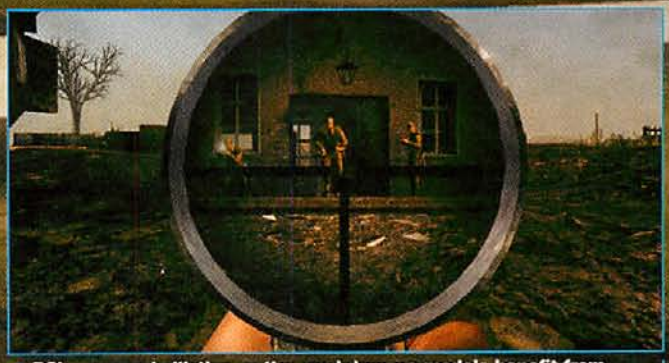
BASIC TRAINING

RyanTheIllest: "It's harder to get the hang of this game than any other FPS I've played, and I'm a die-hard FPS fan." Crafty: "If I hadn't paid for this game, I'd have probably uninstalled it by now. Your positive posts are the only reason I'm still playing—there must be something I'm missing." Me: "F*** this s***!"...at first.

Headshrinkers dub it *avoidance learning*: doing this or that to escape a loud sound, electric shock, or—as *RO* has it—sudden death. The point is...it's painful. Trial and error (and time in *RO*'s offline practice mode) won't teach everything, either; you'll want to study some online as you would with an MMO or RTS

THE TROUBLE WITH REALISM—AND *RED ORCHESTRA*—ISN'T DETERMINING WHETHER OR NOT THIS IS REALLY "THE WAY IT WAS," BUT RATHER IF IT'S ENTERTAINING.

▲ *RO* models true-to-life tank interiors, from crew positions to the commander's cupola, à la the cockpits in full-blown flight sims.

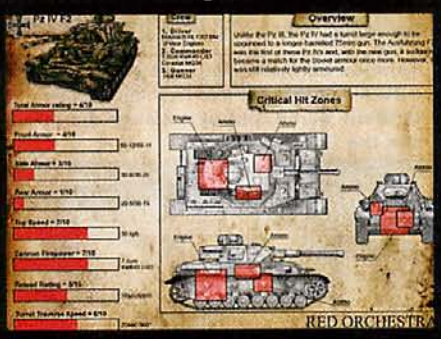


▲ *RO*'s weapon ballistics, optics, and damage models benefit from recently declassified intelligence files.

OSTFRONT 41-45

ESRB RATING: **M**
MULTIPLAYER: **2-32 players**

(strange stuff for a shooter). Take, for example, the illustration below: Red areas indicate the positioning of critical-hit zones: stored ammunition and the panzer's combustible power plant. These vary by vehicle, and a gunner needs to intuit their locations as he attacks from any angle while also accounting for motion and intervening armor. Velocity matters, too—though not so much, since maps are small—and tanks can sight out to some 1,500 meters to compensate for "shell drop." In addition, a good gunner jaws with his buttoned-up driver via voice-over-IP to defilade the chassis and deflect incoming fire.



And this is why it puzzles me when bestselling *Everything Bad Is Good for You* author Steven Johnson seemingly dismisses shooters, at least in terms of required intellectual labor. As criteria for differentiating cognitive junk food from what is genuinely nourishing, Johnson (who mostly advocates gaming as mind-improving) suggests we ask, "Is your onscreen character running around shooting everything in sight, or is she trying to solve problems and manage resources?" But what when "shooting everything" *is* an exacting problem involving all of the aforementioned factors, plus the ability to predict human opponents? Grasping that complexity is gratifying, which, I think, explains the haters turned lovers, the about-facing and flip-flopping you see on so many forums. The more frustrating the failure, the sweeter the success.

Picture QuarterToThree.com poster Natus belly-crawling in a blast crater. "A Russian tank comes along," he says, "heading right toward me. I fire my Panzerfaust to no effect and huddle in the pothole. When the T-34 passes right over me...I fire the Panzerfaust into its rear, this time killing it. These brilliant moments offset any tedium." On this last point we part ways. Look, making that iron-sights money shot after lying prone in a flooded pit, tracking movement through 10 minutes of downpour is satisfying, no doubt. Just not satisfying enough to totally offset the grind (of gimp-walking there again and again, for example, since movement is geriatric and *RO*'s spawn system rules out presto arrival) for everybody, all of the time. Walk far, die fast. That's it, the pace of things, and not so much specific problems (although—like tanks stopping dead on debris they ought to bulldoze—they're there). / **Shawn Elliott**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

Perfect (i.e. Editors' Choice–worthy) for the realism purist; frustratingly paced for rest of us.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	8/10
GAMESPOT	7.9/10
GAMESPY	4/5
IGN	8.5/10

WOULD YOU BELIEVE?

BFME2 developer EA Los Angeles used to be DreamWorks Interactive, the studio responsible for dino disaster *Jurassic Park: Trespasser*.

Catch Gollum when he pops up in a map and you can steal the One Ring. Smuggle it back to your base and you can build Galadriel (good) or Sauron (evil).

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II

Better, if not quite best

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts LA** GENRE: **RTS** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players**

SOME PEOPLE—I KID YOU NOT—WOULD rather see *V for Vendetta* as a platformer (bomb London's landmarks before Natalie Portman's hair grows back!) or a 9/11 puzzle game (*Jenga* with planes!) than their beloved *Lord of the Rings* starring "I see you" Sauron in an obsidian metal goth-suit stomping hobbitses. Well, a pox on their highfalutin houses: EA's second crack at salvaging Tolkien's much-abused source material abandons the original *Battle for Middle-earth*'s gluey bases and resource nodes and cranks the battle engine, fixing much and fouling up only a few new (and unnecessary) features.

Case in point: I don't read Tolkien for the writing ("...and when at last [Aragorn] had supped..."), and I don't watch the movies for the dialogue ("No one tosses a dwarf!"). Likewise, I'm not expecting Shakespeare from a campaign that commendably sidesteps "We're following just behind the Fellowship!" (see EA's silly *LOTR: The Third Age*) by focusing instead on the war in the North. Still, most of the way through the histrionic adventures of Glorfindel and Gloin, I was pretty much "Yeah, mm-hmm, whatever." They don't suck, but the missions seem like skirmish mode in fetters. The cut-scenes are blurry, and the plots of the two eight-mission campaigns (good or evil) worked better in...I dunno...*Willow* or something. And while the turn-based War of the Ring mode now spans the whole of Middle-earth, it's just a "For Dummies" version of *Risk* with clunky panels that adversely block a full third of the map. File this stuff under feature creep: Someone's eyes (or perhaps ears—EA did lots of community testing) were clearly bigger than our stomachs.

DROPPING BOMBADILS

But forget all that for a moment. What if you could simply pitch real-time battles with the movie units and more from the books (now including fan-favorite mystery man Tom Bombadil)? Would you care about the other junk? I didn't, and you probably won't either once you've notched a few of these sorties online.

While skirmishes in *BFME* were boring tug-of-war resource grabs that pivoted on fixed bases and neutral structures, *BFME2* lets you build organically, joyfully plopping structures and walls wherever you like. Instead of "defend me" resource points, you build them as you go, their efficiency gauged according to spacing. Likewise, your potential force size tallies in proportion to total resource nodes owned. The downside is that it's not uncommon for two aggressive players to smack into each other early on, reducing tactics to frenetic frontier bulwarking. And once you're that extended, winning usually comes down to who is the quicker clicker. Are you listening, EA? Some of us still clamor for a speed slider.

Overall, the bump from four to six balanced factions puts *BFME2*'s skirmish mode on par with *StarCraft* for praiseworthy versatility. Nothing here's brilliant, but everything works more or less as it did in the movies. Fidelity is its own reward, though: New maps, new heroes, new special powers, and a visual shot in the arm combined with open-ended base building makes *BFME2* rich RTS pickings. Just pretend the other stuff is additive they forgot to cut. / **Matt Peckham**

PATCH V1.03... THIRD TIME CHARMED?

THE GOOD: Bugs squashed; shadows no longer look crappy; elves' Silverthorn arrows nerfed; Shelob notably augmented; wall-building cost halved; five new maps for free.

THE BAD: Walls still too vulnerable (and should be limited to damage from siege weapons); Rangers a bit overpowered (they're too cheap to build and gain the Longshot ability too early).

THE UGLY: Naval units are still pointless, totally inane, and a complete waste of our time.

OVERALL: Two hobbity thumbs up.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

Bundles an unexciting campaign/story with an untidy Parker Brothers–style strategy game, but skirmishes sparkle like the light of Elendil.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	8.5/10
GAMESPOT	8.3/10
GAMESPY	3.5/5
IGN	9/10

EA'S SECOND CRACK AT SALVAGING TOLKIEN'S MUCH-ABUSED SOURCE MATERIAL ABANDONS ITS PREDECESSOR'S GLUEY BASES AND RESOURCE NODES.

COLUMN

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS

A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD OF AN MMORPG ADDICT

GUILD WARS: YEAR ONE

AS I WRITE THIS, IT'S APRIL 26—AND *Guild Wars* fanatics everywhere feverishly count the hours leading up to the launch of the game's second campaign, *Guild Wars: Factions*...which means just one more day before anime-crazed kids everywhere blanket the game with characters from the new assassin class. Chances are, you're knee-deep in *Factions* at this point—but let's quickly reflect on where the game's been so far, shall we?

When I first started playing *Guild Wars*, it fascinated me that an MMORPG developer could so boldly go against the money-train grain of the typical pay-per-month model. I thought it was great, that it would put other publishers on full alert, and that perhaps times were a-changin'. Developer ArenaNet built some pretty innovative technology into the game, like constantly streaming patches and updates that eliminate the need to download hundreds of megs of data during server maintenance (see: *Final Fantasy XI*). To top it off, I thought the graphics were particularly sharp: Character models didn't look too derivative of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the environmental detail, high-quality textures, and other bells and whistles made for some nice eye candy.

I really enjoyed the option to keep a full party of NPC allies with me at all times, even if the A.I. pathfinding stunk (and it did). It was the perfect tonic to group-centered games like *FFXI* and *World of WarCraft*—which, at the time, offered nothing similar. I like to play MMOs on a noncompetitive level sometimes, just questing by myself as a way to relax, yet still seeing lots of other people enjoy the game while doing so. It's like living in New York City: You can stay at home if you want, but if you're itching for some action, you don't have to look far.

I also loved *Guild Wars*' instanced content, as it meant I didn't have to compete with 50 other jerks trying to camp the same monster for the same damned überitem. *WOW*'s not too shabby here, either, but since *Guild Wars* instances every noncity adventure zone, it wins this particular battle.

MORE PHAT LEWT PLZ

After the early rush, though, I found myself growing weary of what *Guild Wars* initially offered. It doesn't take long to hit the 20-level cap, and the game becomes mostly about PVP after that. I guess that's sorta the point of a game called *Guild Wars*, but I usually play MMOs to level up and collect cool stuff. And I won't lie when I say that all of the skills and rock-paper-scissoring of the myriad profession combinations gets daunting—I'd probably get smoked in *Guild Wars*' PVP.

▲ Don't expect the NPC henchmen (those guys over there on the right) to ace any IQ tests.

DEVELOPER ARENANET BUILT SOME PRETTY INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY INTO THE GAME.

I lost the drive to find new areas, thanks to the repetitive monster types and the propensity to get blindsided by a surplus of beasties that either see you from miles away or burrow up from underneath. I also didn't see much variety in the different types of gear—surprising, considering all the ex-Blizzard guys behind the game. Beyond the camaraderie, people play games online so that they can look and feel cool. It's a commonality that affects every aspect of our lives, from the cars we drive to the clothes we wear. So, in the game, I wanted to instantly recognize the difference between a level 5 newbie and a level 20 mesmer/monk who's seen countless PVP battles and tons of endgame content—and the difference ain't always that apparent.

Perhaps *Factions* fixes some of this stuff. Next month, I'll chime in about how all of the changes ArenaNet's made to *Guild Wars* over the past year have helped (or hurt) things, and let you know how assassins (and the rest of the new content) turned out. / **James Mielke**

1UP.com executive editor James Mielke spends every iota of his free time playing online games. He needs help—badly.

▲ Warrior/monk—one of *Guild Wars*' easiest (and most universally derided) class combinations.

DUNGEONS & DRA STORMREACH

It's my party, and you'll cry if I want to

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Turbine** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM,** RECOMMENDED: **3GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 5.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, headset** MULTIPLAYER: **Massively so**

"PARTY OR DIE!" IT'S WHAT HIGH-school fullbacks with nicknames like "Reaper" chant at football games or keggers while their cronies foot-stomp and head-knuckle unlucky nerds into soda-sticky bleachers or swirling toilet bowls. "Party or die!" Now you—and you know I'm talking to good ol', dice-rollin', *Monster Manual*–lovin' you—can have that mantra for your very own. Your precious. Sing it with me: Party or die! It's your new feng shui maxim, and it's also *Dungeons & Dragons Online* in a three-word poem.

EVERY HOME A HIDEAWAY

I wonder what Keith Baker, creator of *D&D*'s pen-and-paper Eberron setting, thinks about Turbine's rendition of Stormreach, the northerly city on the continent of Xen'drik (Ex-en-dreek? Zend-rick?), where *D&D Online* unfolds. Picture an exotic marketplace: bobbing dirigibles, mossy pipework, tangerine-stained palm fronds, the sultry glow of magically bulwarked taverns hovering improbably in the air...a total topside gilded with piles of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*–meets–*Casablanca* riffs, but sadly close-packed, sardine style. Oh, yeah—wipe those sugarplum visions of epic *World of WarCraft*–y continents clean. You might as well rename it The Itty-Bitty City: Where Everyone's House Is a Freaky-Huge Dungeon.

Think of Stormreach as astoundingly vertical. You start in the harbor and "unlock" other city sections gradually, like rolling through locks in a canal. Statuesque NPCs plead quests outside their homes—stuff like, "Clear those nasty basement spiders!"—which somehow escalate to sewer trolls and finally culminate in unholy, tittering hobgoblin orgies of subterranean evil. It's like walking into the bathroom at a 7-Eleven to spray for roaches and finding *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* villain Mola Ram ripping out the Slurpee guy's heart. Who let all this riffraff in? As with *Star Trek*, some questions are best smothered with a pillow before your TV-enfeebled logic center wobbles briefly to life and you're giggling uncontrollably at the absurdity.

D&D ONLINE IN A THREE-WORD POEM: PARTY OR DIE!

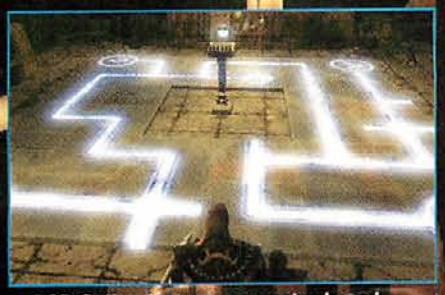
But that's *D&D*, after all—absurdity of the understandable. It made geekery geek-chic, from the pizza-and-grease-stained graph paper to the antijock egghead manifestos. I was a *Rolemaster* guy myself (which, you're no doubt thinking, explains a lot), but *D&D* basically improved through its latest tabletop iteration, and Turbine has courageously crowbarred a considerable chunk of *D&D* owner Wizards of the Coast's revised mechanics. In other words, *D&D Online* should slap Cheetos-and-chocolate-stained smiles on the faces of literalists who take to blogging about discrepancies in their beloved game systems like gleeful archaeologists of the irrelevant.

What's missing? Mostly campaign padding and a few races and classes here and there. You're limited to humans, elves, dwarves, halflings—and Eberron's one "look at me!" ethnicity, the steampunky "iron giant" warforged. Classes conform to *D&D*'s standard barbarian-to-wizard docket, and you can multiclass to taste. In fact, you'll probably want to regardless, because *Stormreach* rudely slams on the brakes at level 10. Oh, you get "action points" to spend between levels on a few prosaic skills, but once you accept the game's dictatorial partying requirements, your party will sail through conquest after conquest like an armor-clad Hugh Hefner chugging +3 Vials of Viagra. You have to wonder how many people cap and cancel before their free 30-day trial period's over.

THE BUDDY SYSTEM

But you can certainly come up with a few solid reasons to play through *D&D Online* more than once. Better even than *World of WarCraft* or *Guild Wars*, *D&D Online* crafts quests that require "toolkit" party configurations. Enter the waterworks under Stormreach's harbor without a cleric, and you're begging to be bitch-slapped. Try the Tempest's Spine without a

GONS ONLINE:



▲ *D&D Online* features geometry-based puzzles, like this one that requires you to flip each tile to connect the four corners.

▲ The dance animations won't out-boogie *WOW*'s gyration insanity, but they do help pass the time.

5GB hard drive space, Internet connection

high-level rogue and prepare to knead plenty of magical aloe into your skin-char. Play by yourself, in other words, and you'll be a welterweight forever. But who wants to party up all the time? Not me. Until I tried it, that is.

Getting a good group swinging can almost be magical. Fun enough to—yes, I'm really typing this—occasionally trump *World of WarCraft*'s grueling monolithic instances. Partying in *WOW* may be necessary, but it's like clamping a pack of bickering panzers together. *D&D Online* instead makes every class and ability really count for something; it forces people to play to their strengths. As in the tabletop game, wizards are magically delicious but scrawny, dagger-slappy wimps; fighters can pretzel-tie troglodytes but go butterfingers before traps; and multiclass characters offer versatility in lieu of focused expertise.

Consider *D&D Online*'s commendable grouping tools as well: Sell yourself on the market or go shopping. It's easy to get a small party going in minutes, then gradually tease together a tidy six- to 12-person group while occasionally backfilling turnover. Of course, whether you lure a stodgy college professor or some punky 10-year-old who chews nervously (and loudly) on his headset mic—that's completely random. And don't even think about playing without the headset. *D&D Online* lists it neither as a requirement nor as a recommendation, but without one you'll miss A) the classic "chit-chat round the table" element, and B) a necessary component for saving your ass from finger-fumbling sentences in the game's clunky interface of teensy, disorienting toolbars.

PLAY TOGETHER

With a balanced party, the quests can really entertain. Instead of monotonous dungeon mobs, *D&D Online* offsets its cramped quarters by packing every dungeon with traps, puzzles, hack-n-slash combat (dice-rolled, not contact-based, sadly), physical "climb this and swim through that" challenges, and melodramatic dungeon-mastery voiceovers like "You can almost taste the repugnant stench of death in the air!" and "Something raw and yellow oozes viscously from the decrepit walls!" Purple-prose pulp-fantasy fans, eat your hearts out.

Sure, playing quests twice (or thrice) for experience gets tedious. Yeah, other MMOs probably feel better rounded. But not even *Neverwinter Nights* came this close to capturing the social spirit of the pen-and-paper granddaddy that sired 'em all. Can't find an offline gaming group? Herein lies a potential alternative. / **Matt Peckham**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

Commendably faithful to *D&D*'s core rules—including a 2-6 player minimum (7-12 preferred). You simply can't solo in *D&D Online*.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	6.5/10
GAMESPOT	7.5/10
GAMESPY	3/5
IGN	7.5/10

DID YOU KNOW?

Keith Baker's pulp-fantasy Eberron setting was chosen from over 11,000 entries in Wizards of the Coast's 2002 Fantasy Setting Search.

Hey! What's the lunch lady from my high-school cafeteria doing here?

CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

Kill the homeless!

PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Monolith Productions** GENRE: **Survival-horror** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **M**
REQUIRED: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard, 8GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 768MB RAM, 256MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS IS SO relentlessly grim and violent—without a hint of comic relief—that it's hard to consider it a "good time." But if 10 hours of skulking through dark, blood-spattered corridors and bashing people over the head with a steel pipe sounds like your kind of thing, you're in luck. This is the best survival-horror game on the PC in...well, forever. It's also one of the creepiest, as afterward I just wanted to drink some milk and watch *The Sound of Music*. You know—do something wholesome and happy.

First released for the Xbox 360 last November, *Condemned* (made by Monolith, the folks behind the equally sunny *F.E.A.R.*) puts you in the role of FBI agent Ethan Thomas, an investigator in the Serial Crimes Unit. The game opens with you assigned to investigate the latest work of a *Se7en*-like killer who murders his victims and then poses them in charming tableaux with mannequins. Following the time-honored thriller cliché, you are soon mistakenly wanted for murders of your own—and you must stay one step ahead of the authorities while chasing the real bad guy.

In typical survival-horror fashion, gunplay gets downplayed. Melee weapons—pickaxes, pipes, and two-by-fours—litter each level, but guns show up only occasionally and have limited amounts of ammo. Fortunately, *Condemned*'s melee combat is both visceral and satisfying, with nice meaty sounds accompanying every whack. Monolith accomplishes something fairly rare here: Melee combat actually *works* from a first-person perspective. Distance factors into your strategy, as does the enemy A.I.—which, not surprisingly (these guys did make *F.E.A.R.*, after all), is quite good here.

More problematic: who and what you kill throughout the game. Because you're on the trail of a single killer, Monolith has to give you other stuff to destroy until the game's climax. The solution: drug addicts and squatters, who may or may not be sick/mutated/infected (one of the game's many loose ends that's never explained). Urban cleansing as gameplay—it's vaguely disturbing. Couldn't we just kill zombies or Nazis instead?

Also a drag is the assortment of forensic tools you use to collect evidence along the way. You do get some pretty cool gadgets—UV lights, laser lights, and such—but you never have to figure out which one to use at any given point or even how to use them. The game holds your hand for you every time, automatically choosing the right one and telling you exactly what to do with it—it's like a tutorial that never ends. So instead of good puzzle-solving potential, we get mindless mouse clicking.

> URBAN CLEANSING AS GAMEPLAY—IT'S VAGUELY DISTURBING. COULDN'T WE JUST KILL ZOMBIES OR NAZIS INSTEAD?

WE ARE SHOWROOM DUMMIES

Fortunately, though, *Condemned* exudes good, creepy atmosphere—and lots of it. At times the game is genuinely scary, and not just in a monster-closet "gotcha!" way. The music and lighting establish a steady feeling of dread and horror...and while some of the levels are a little generic (the abandoned subway line, for instance), one in particular—the mannequin shop—reaches the height of game creepiness, featuring pale, battered mannequins that may or may not be alive.

1UP.com scored *Condemned*'s Xbox 360 version an 8.5 out of 10—which, to me, feels high for this PC port. Maybe it's just that it pales (in both the gameplay and the graphics) next to Monolith's previous PC games—*F.E.A.R.*, *Tron*, and *No One Lives Forever*. Maybe it's the annoyingly incomplete story line. (Just what *is* my connection to the killer? And what's the deal with the dead birds?) Still, the atmosphere is great, and we never get good survival-horror games on the PC, so maybe I should just shut up and stop complaining. Kill the homeless! / **Jeff Green**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

Scary, creepy thriller from the makers of *F.E.A.R.*, but it's more like an Xbox 360 showcase than a satisfying PC game.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	8/10
GAMESPOT	8.1/10
GAMESPY	4/5
IGN	8.5/10

DREAMFALL: THE LONGEST JOURNEY

A trip into storyland

▲ "Hey, didn't I see you in Neo-Tokyo?" *Dreamfall*'s story-intensive cut-scenes are, undoubtedly, its greatest strength.

▲ "It's clobberin' time!" Woefully clunky button-mashing mechanics form the centerpiece of *Dreamfall*'s action sequences.

PUBLISHER: **Aspyr Media** DEVELOPER: **Funcom** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box** ESRB RATING: **M**
REQUIRED: **1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **2.5GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

AT THIS YEAR'S GAME DEVELOPERS Conference, industry veteran and self-avowed "curmudgeon" Chris Crawford declared videogames dead. But he assured his shocked audience this: "There's an infant [with] a better future...and it's called interactive storytelling." Crawford's fightin' words highlighted, once more, the enduring debate between those who love deep stories and those who valorize "gameplay" in interactive entertainment. *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey*, the sequel to 2000's award-winning adventure game *The Longest Journey*, is their latest battleground.

That's why I'm not surprised that 1UP.com editor Garnett Lee scored the game a tragic four out of 10, saying: "The bulk of the gameplay involves ferrying whichever character you happen to be playing to the next event, and then watching it play out.... As a game, [*Dreamfall*] fails," while GameSpot's Greg Kasavin awarded it an 8.1 out of 10, blogging, "Last night, in fact, I had pretty much become convinced that the game was just utterly amazing." From Lee's perspective, gamelike moments crop up...but they are like Band-Aids on a cinematic corpse. Several comments—trailing both his review and the blog post that defends it—echo his sentiments: "If you want a story, read a book," wrote one user curtly.

TELL ME A TALE

The injunction implies that stories have no place in games...or, at best, that they act as a mere subservient footstep to boost the exalted game mechanic. But where does that leave *Dreamfall* (which builds storytelling into its core)? The game is about stories, storytelling, and dreams—it investigates the human imagination. The narrative frame that launches the game is a story told by a young girl in a coma, which serves as a jumping-off point for the exploration of classic postmodern narrative techniques like fragmented plotlines, shifting viewpoints, and even the use of memory-in-narrative, with its delightfully oblique references to the original *Longest Journey*.

But applying rarefied analysis to *Dreamfall* does it a disservice, occluding the shimmering emotional core of this work. Above all, the game reaches out to your heart with a cast of appealing, memorable characters, a heartbreakingly lovely musical score, a plot filled with mystery and twists, and some breathtakingly imaginative locations. The superbly crafted, vibrant world of *Dreamfall* hums with hidden mythologies, inviting you to spend time exploring it.

The semantic quibbling over what is—or isn't—a game finally deflates when you're faced with the shocking climax that is symbolic of *Dreamfall*'s commitment to unrestrained emotional truth. Numerous complaints on message boards that labeled the ending cheap and abrupt (and, as 1UP.com's Lee calls it, "sloppy") even compelled the game's creator, Ragnar Tornquist, to explain it on his blog (which you can read at ragnartornquist.com). It's true that the finale requires a high tolerance for ambiguity, because it avoids the neat stitching of loose ends we've come to expect from many Western morality tales. This story bears more relation to open-ended Asian fables or the animated films of Hayao Miyazaki, which don't always explain everything by the time the curtains close. It's also quite clear that the game sets up the final episode in a trilogy.

ALL GOOD THINGS...

I can't forget how I felt when the game ended: deeply shaken, overwhelmed with *tristesse*, but somehow also satisfied, as if I'd reached the end of a long trip suffused with laughter, tears, frustrations, romance, danger—the whole shebang. I actually felt slightly disoriented as I put down my headphones, and certain moments from the game haunted me for days afterward. I personally can't remember the last time any game had this kind of impact on me. That realization compels me to insist that *Dreamfall* is, unquestionably, worth playing.

Crawford had to invent a new genre of "interactive storytelling" out of disgust for the current state of videogames. But the solution may be simpler: Perhaps we need merely to expand our definition of "game" if we expect the medium to grow. / **Jane Pinckard**

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT

A compelling, thought-provoking, emotional exploration of how games can address narrative elements.

REALITY CHECK

1UP NETWORK	4/10
GAMESPOT	8.1/10
GAMESPY	5/5
IGN	7.4/10

TOM vs. BRUCE

LAST MONTH...

The mighty Orlando Bloom and his elf pals weren't enough to save Bruce from Tom's unstoppable orc army in *The Battle for Middle-earth II*.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

Thirty days in Tamriel

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **Bethesda Softworks** GENRE: **RPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail box**
ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4.6GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard**
RECOMMENDED: **3GHz dual-core CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

NO PLUG-INS, NO MODS, NO HORSE armor, no touching the difficulty slider. It's Tom and Bruce in naked *Oblivion* for 30 days from the moment they wake up in their Imperial City cells. At midnight on the 30th day, they'll compare their progress in five categories: 1) furthest along in the story line, 2) highest level, 3) most money, 4) highest fame or infamy, and 5) most places found. The victor is the one who wins the most categories.

BRUCE: Despite my deep suspicion of elves, some of my favorite games are RPGs. *Baldur's Gate*, for example. And the *Baldur's Gate* expansion, whatever it was called. And *Baldur's Gate II*.

And we're off! Here I am in a dungeon of some kind. WTF? I am trapped in a cell with no escape! This sucks. Why can't I pick up the bone? I want to hit things with the bone. Instead, I just punch things.

So much for this being the most intuitive world simulator ever—I had to find the manual to learn that E is not the Use key. I thought E was always the Use key. I guess it doesn't matter, because just like Balin in Moria, *I cannot get out!*

I then find that I *can* get out, but not before listening to a lot of backstory. I don't really pay a lot of attention, though, so I hope I don't have to take a quiz or anything later. I choose to be a Nord Crusader, born under the sign of whatever makes you invisible for a minute every day. I have a feeling that is going to be important—*role-playing important*.

TOM: I'm going to win by breaking *Oblivion*. I will make a 100-percent Chameleon suit.

Invisibility is all good and well, but it goes away as soon as you interact with something. Open a drawer, swing a sword, or pick a flaxseed and—*voilà!*—you're de-invisible-ized. The Chameleon spell has no such restrictions, but it only keeps you partially unseen. That's what they call "game balance."

But here's the trick: You can enchant an item to give you, at most, a 20-percent Chameleon effect. But the effects stack. By wearing five such items, you're 100-percent Chameleoned, at which point no one sees anything you do. If you attack someone while 100-percent Chameleoned, he can't retaliate. This loophole effectively removes any challenge from the game. Bruce doesn't stand a chance.

BRUCE: I don't mean to be the guy who's always keeping score and reporting irregularities to various governing bodies like FIFA so they can disqualify people like Tom, but didn't he say that he was planning to "break the game"? I think that's a pseudonym or allegory or whatever it's called for "cheating."

Unlike Tom, I'm going to play this game straight, which means I'm just going to do the main quest and see what happens. I'm one of those people who always has to do the main quest, because games are stories about princesses and dragons, and I want to know how it ends. I get my marching orders from Brother Jauffre, and I'm off.

I teleport into the big, bad Oblivion gate near Kvatch. Some guy tells me he's glad to see me so he can leave. No way, I say—your friend is trapped in the tower; we both go get him. OK, he says. So we go.

We run across a bridge and are about to kill a goblin when some rocks come down. I back off so they don't hit me, but the goblin attacks, and so my henchman runs across the bridge. Huge boulders come down and hit him and the goblin. They both get knocked off the bridge by the boulders. The boulders crush my henchman, and he is dead. The goblin is OK and fireballs me from where I now cannot reach him. I reload.

▲ **Dungeons everywhere—just like in *D&D*!**

TWO GAMERS ENTER, ONE GAMER WINS

players

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

Bruce Geryk
Longtime *CGW* contributor Bruce Geryk has written about videogames for over 20 years; he loves war games like most people love oxygen.

▲ **Uh, you want me to go in there?**

TOM: I spend an hour trying to create a hot elf chick before I conclude that it's simply not possible given the game's lack of attractive-face technology. So I content myself with a nonhot elf chick named Elf Chick. She's a battlemage. And aren't we all, pretty much?

I've already played *Oblivion* once, so I'm not doing any of the story missions. I'll leave those to Bruce. As soon as I get out of prison, I try to throw the Amulet of Kings in the lake. But the game won't let me. "You cannot remove quest items from your inventory," it says, more concerned with the fate of Tamriel than with realistic physics.

BRUCE: I teleport into the big, bad Oblivion gate near Kvatch. Some guy tells me he's glad to see me so he can leave. No way, I say—your friend is trapped in the tower; we both go get him. OK, he says. So we go.

This time I remember the boulders. I wait well out of range so the goblin doesn't see us, and we cross the bridge and kill the goblin. Sweet! We're about to run up a hill and between some boulders when my henchman screams, "Now it's my turn, you bastards!" and stops right in front of a boulder and doesn't move. I try to get him to follow me, but he stands there, looking up at the boulder. I run ahead and kill some goblins. Then I figure out that a goblin that he can't reach is standing directly in his path, so he's just standing there instead. Cool. I find my way up onto the boulder and kill the goblin. The guy is still stuck. I spend 10 minutes trying to get him to move, without success. I reload.

TOM: The first thing I need to do is get in good with the Mages' Guild at each city so that I can use the Arcane University's Chironasium, which is the Tamriel word for "place where you enchant items." It takes me a week to do the quest for each city's guild. As I travel between cities, I make a point to actually walk the route the first time, visiting nearby sites along the way. Bruce is probably fast-traveling everywhere, so this should help me win for most places found.

A student at the Arcane University levels up his Destruction magic. His player is probably AFK.

BRUCE: I teleport into the big, bad Oblivion gate near Kvatch. Some guy tells me he's glad to see me so he can leave. No way, I say—your friend is trapped in the tower; we both go get him. OK, he says. So we go.

Now I'm looking out for the boulders and the goblin on the boulder. We negotiate the falling rocks, and then I wait until the top goblin wanders a bit away so my friend doesn't notice him. We run between the boulders and get hit by some animated weeds that we can't fight. OK. My henchman then makes a beeline down the road to the left and gets killed by a land mine. I reload.

TOM: Next up, I need to learn the Chameleon spell. Unfortunately, you have to be a journeyman in Illusion magic, and I'm only a novice. In order to earn 35 points of Illusion skill, I hang out in the Silverhome-on-the-Water Inn in Bravil, repeatedly casting Captivate on the patrons, a spell that increases how much they like me. It's the fantasy-world equivalent of passing out drugs at a rave.

Just over 12 hours later, bored and waiting on my magicka to regenerate, I try to jump up on a table to kick some things around and enjoy *Oblivion*'s fancy physics. You know, the ones that won't let me throw the Amulet of Kings into a lake. The people in the inn don't mind if I kick their plates, goblets, and cheese wedges. But in the process of jumping, I accidentally pick up an apple, which constitutes stealing no matter how much magic love candy I pass around. I'm arrested and hauled off to jail, where I have to pay a one-gold-piece bounty.

In front of the prison facilities, I continue practicing Captivate on the fine men in uniform who serve as Bravil's guards. This is easier than Captivating inn patrons, since guards stay in the same place for longer periods of time. Twenty hours later, I've become a journeyman in Illusion and by far the most popular elf chick in Bravil.

BRUCE: I teleport into the big, bad Oblivion gate near Kvatch. Some guy tells me he's glad to see me so he can leave. No way, I say—your friend is trapped in the tower; we both go get him. OK, he says. So we go.

I'm not sure what to do at this point, but at least now I quicksave after the falling rocks, thus saving myself two minutes on the inevitable next reload. We get past the unhittable weeds and start fighting some goblins. In the midst of the battle, I get careless and hit my henchman with a swing of my sword. He dies, and a caption says that my killing has been observed by unseen forces. Alberto Gonzales? Fine with me. I give up—I quicksave and head for the tower.

TOM: The Chironasium isn't cheap. The 20-percent Chameleon items I'm going to make cost 1,300 gold apiece, so I make a habit of grabbing potion ingredients whenever I can, mixing them into potions, and selling them. Most of these are energy drinks—called Fatigue Potions in the world of Tamriel—created by

▲ **Winning friends and influencing orcs at a Bravil inn.**

> THE CHAMELEON LOOPHOLE EFFECTIVELY REMOVES ANY CHALLENGE FROM THE GAME. BRUCE DOESN'T STAND A CHANCE.

▲ Got any spare magic swords you could give me?

> WHILE TOM IS ROLEPLAYING CONAN OR ELRIC OR WHATEVER, I'M A VAMPIRE. OR I GUESS I'M GOING TO TURN INTO A VAMPIRE. I'M ALSO STUCK.

mixing, say, leeks and pears. Which isn't much worse than Red Bull. Have you ever tasted one of those? Ugh.

I also make a fair amount of money helping myself to the alchemical equipment at each Mages' Guild. This is one of the fringe benefits of guild membership, because no one objects when I gather up all the alembics, calcinators, retorts, and mortar and pestles to sell them next door at the local goods shop.

BRUCE: After cleaning out Kvatch, I get a pretty conclusive demonstration of the fact that if you don't want to lose something in the virtual world of *Oblivion*, you shouldn't entrust it to one of the virtual *Oblivion* NPCs...which is how I find myself tracking down a secret cult somewhere in the woods. In order to get access to their secret ceremonies, I have to join the cult. Since that means giving them all my stuff, like they're some kind of medieval Hare Krishnas, I decline and fight them instead. That doesn't go so well.

My next strategy: join the cult while leaving all of my gear back at the base. But when I try to steal the magical thingy, I get killed just the same. So I hit upon a plan.

I go back to the fighting strategy, but when I get to the place where the magic thingy is, *I use my secret role-playing power and turn invisible*. That's thinking, eh? Then it goes back to being another dungeon crawl, where I roleplay a guy fighting monsters in a dungeon. That's much easier.

TOM: When you enchant an item, the power of the spell effect is based on the strength of the Soul Gem you use. It's easy enough to get crappy souls by killing rats and mud crabs. But I need a Grand Soul to get the 20-percent Chameleon effect. These come from higher-level monsters, so I spend a fair amount of time in Chorrol trying to summon and then quickly kill various demons. But it's no good. I'm not a powerful enough fighter to beat my own minions.

So I do what any frustrated gamer would do: I go online. I find out that if you get a Black Soul Gem, it can capture a Grand Soul from an easily killable regular person instead of a monster. You can convert Grand Soul Gems to Black Soul Gems by going to a necromancer's altar and waiting on a magical light beam to shine down on it. So I spend several days hunting Grand Soul Gems, and then several more days camped out at an altar behind Fort Istirus. After nearly a week, the stars align, the beam of light shines down on the altar, and I'm all set. I have the Chameleon spell, enough gold, and five Black Soul Gems. Time to find some people to murder.

I kill a few homeless people and campers out in the wilderness so that no guards will interfere. Then, one stormy night, I show up at the Chironasium with my fully charged Soul Gems and some fancy clothes. I give them the Chameleon effect, put them on, and look at myself in the mirror. I'm not even there.

Now, as anyone who's seen *Hollow Man* or *The Lord of the Rings* knows, invisibility makes you evil. I roleplay appropriately by killing random people—mainly guards in cities where they wear light armor, which has the best weight-to-price ratio. I'm getting rich, and dead bodies line the streets. The Dark Brotherhood is a bunch of amateurs compared to me.

BRUCE: While Tom is roleplaying Conan or Elric or whatever, I'm a vampire. Or I guess I'm going to turn into a vampire. I'm also stuck. I have to eliminate some creepy monsters located in this cave, but unlike my last cave visit, this time I can't even get past the first guy before he gives me hemolytic anemia or something. I try this about five times and—not getting any new bright ideas like I did with the cult—finally decide to lay off the main quest for a while. Probably forever.

TOM: I've got a full week to slaughter innocents for loot, but it gets pretty tedious. Besides, I figure I should level up a bit just to make sure I beat Bruce in that category. I use what I call "cantrips" or "exploits"—these are cheap spells I've created to cast in midair over and over, for the sole purpose of improving my skill for that magic. I remap the cast ability to the Enter key on the keypad. I rest the top of a two-liter Mountain Dew on the button, put a copy of George R. R. Martin's *A Feast for Crows* against the bottle to keep it from rolling away, and go out into the living room to play *Oblivion* on my Xbox 360. By the time I come back, I've maxed out a few skills at 100, gone up 12 levels, and still have a few days left to slaughter guards.

BRUCE: So now Tom is using magic catnip to cast spells he doesn't even need. While he's wasting our planet's precious legacy of magical natural resources, I'm galloping around the countryside discovering new places. But while Tom is a veritable hot elvish Rand McNally, I'm like a Boy Scout on a snipe hunt.

◀ "What's his problem?" "I think he's dead." "Oh, I see. Let's resume our patrol pattern, then."

▲ Here's a typical Mages' Guild...

▲ ...and here's the alchemical equipment that members are allowed to loot and sell.

THE SCORE, 30 DAYS IN:

Story line
TOM: N/A
BRUCE: The part where he got stuck being a vampire (nine quest missions in)

Level
TOM: 26
BRUCE: 4

Gold
TOM: 17,812
BRUCE: 216

Fame/Infamy
TOM: 47 infamy
BRUCE: 8 fame

Places Found
TOM: 81
BRUCE: 16

Tom wins, with the best score in 4 out of 5 categories.

REALITY CHECK

YOUR HANDY GUIDE TO WHAT WE SAY—AND WHAT THEY SAY—ABOUT THE LATEST IN PC GAMING

AUTO ASSAULT

We say: "So far, the game is worth playing just for the novelty of the experience, and it's remained shockingly addictive for the first 30 levels. Some issues and missing features should have been worked out before launch, but most of them don't impact the most important bits."
—Scott Sharkey, 1UP.com (8/10)

They say: "In the long run, *Auto Assault* isn't as ambitious as I'd hoped, to the point where it feels incomplete and sometimes generic."
—IGN (7.5/10)

BLACK & WHITE 2: BATTLE OF THE GODS

We say: "*Battle of the Gods* is about standard as an expansion can get. With new units and lands, it adds about a third as much content as the original game, as well as some much-needed additional depth of strategy."
—Scott Sharkey, 1UP.com (6/10)

They say: "For only 20 bucks, the new expansion is a pretty good deal for fans of the original game."
—IGN (7/10)

FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR: TEN HAMMERS

We say: "If you actually played through the entire first [*Full Spectrum Warrior*] game and still want more, well, here's more. Unfortunately, it's mostly more of the same, plus the possible bonus of some extra guilt and doubt."
—Scott Sharkey, 1UP.com (5/10)

They say: "The game feels like a slightly more refined, challenging, and lengthy version of its predecessor."
—GameSpy (3.5/5)

GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

We say: "As a package, it's an incredibly complete product of flabbergasting quality; more than any other game, *GRAW* puts the player in the nerve-snapping tension of pauses between engagements. It thrusts you into the terror of modern, quicksilver-fluid combat."
—Patrick Joynt, 1UP.com (9/10)

They say: "When you consider the overall package, *GRAW* for the PC just isn't as balanced and refined as it ought to be."
—GameSpot (7.8/10)

GUILD WARS: FACTIONS

We say: "Whether you want to gather with a few friends or start a massive guild, [or] whether you'd care to play through the adventure or take on the world, *Guild Wars: Factions* has something for you—and unlike many games, it doesn't spread itself thin by trying to do too much."
—Joel Durham Jr., 1UP.com (9/10)

They say: "The game offers a whole mess of engaging, polished content, along with some of the most gorgeous visuals yet seen in an MMO."
—GameSpy (4.5/5)

RISE OF NATIONS: RISE OF LEGENDS

We say: "*Rise of Legends* is an RTS with familiar conventions, but the game world is different from anything you've seen before. Steampunk and fantasy mesh in a way that's thrilling and engaging, and perilously addictive."
—Joel Durham Jr., 1UP.com (9/10)

They say: "There isn't anything here that you haven't seen before, especially if you've played *Rise of Nations*."
—GameSpot (7.6/10)

SCORECARD

On store shelves now

GAME	RELEASE	1UP NETWORK	GAMESPOT	GAMESPY	IGN
Auto Assault	April 2006	8/10	7.2/10	3.5/5	7.5/10
Black & White 2: Battle of the Gods	April 2006	6/10	7.2/10	—	7/10
Blazing Angels: Squadrons of WWII	March 2006	6/10	6.9/10	—	6.8/10
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	April 2006	—	7.9/10	—	7.8/10
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	April 2006	5/10	7.3/10	3.5/5	8.2/10
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	May 2006	9/10	7.8/10	—	—
Guild Wars: Factions	April 2006	9/10	8.5/10	4.5/5	—
Keepsake	March 2006	—	5.2/10	—	7.2/10
Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends	March 2006	9/10	7.6/10	—	8.2/10
UberSoldier	March 2006	—	4.6/10	3/5	6/10

BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE 1UP NETWORK
For more thorough reviews on the latest PC games, point your Web browser to pc.1UP.com today!

MOBO MADNESS

CHANGE IS INEVITABLE (JUST ASK Martha Stewart). To keep up with the latest games, you keep buying extra RAM, new CPUs, and better graphics cards, but at some point, you hit that glass ceiling. You can't shoehorn an AMD Athlon 64 FX-60 CPU into an ancient Socket 7 processor plug or jam that new $600 PCI Express X16 graphics wonder card into an AGP slot. (What? You missed last month's Instant Expert on graphics cards? For shame.) Eventually, you're going to need to start from scratch. Every great computer starts with a good motherboard. Nerds in the know call 'em mobos. That's the first step on your road to becoming an Instant Expert.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

Q: Er, what's a motherboard?

A: All right, we'll give you a little more credit than that. You know that a motherboard is like the foundation to the most kick-ass house in Asskickville. It determines what else you can pack into your budding supercomputer. On to the fun questions!

Q: AGP? Chipsets? Is this even English?

A: Rolling with that "foundation of a house" shtick, a chipset is the blueprint to your gaming crib. It is the core that dictates a motherboard's capabilities. When a company like Asus or DFI decides to manufacture a mobo (see? We're gonna sneak in that nerdy 733t speak on you), it licenses a chipset from companies like Intel, Nvidia, and ATI—all popular among gamers. These chipsets determine all sorts of things, including:

CPU. Dual core or not dual core—*that* is the question. Not to mention that whole AMD-versus-Intel debate. We'll get to that later.

MEMORY. How about memory sockets? Does the board have room for future expansion?

STORAGE. You need to plug those hard drives and optical drives in somewhere. Support for both SATA (Serial ATA) and EIDE are a must—SATA for modern hard drives, and EIDE for older hard drives and optical drives. Does the board have multiple EIDE channels? Does it support SATA II? How many drives? How about RAID controllers? Think ahead for expandability.

EXPANSION-SLOT SUPPORT. How many PCI slots does it have? What about PCI Express? You're not getting stuck with some old-school AGP graphics card slot, right?

EXTERNAL PORT SUPPORT. Does the motherboard come with a card reader or some other useful gadgetry? FireWire, anyone? How many USB 2.0 ports are sprouting out? Does it have any PS/2 ports for your legacy keyboard or mouse?

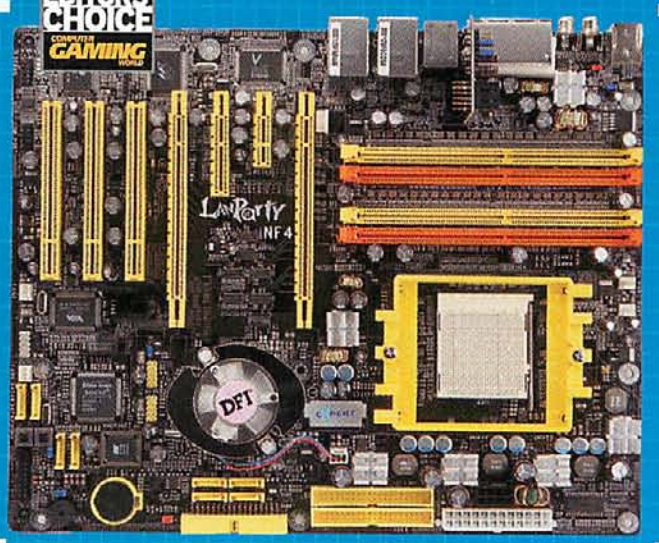
MULTIMEDIA SUPPORT. Does the board have an audio processor or just a codec? How many speaker outputs does it include? Does it support the major gaming APIs?

NETWORKING SUPPORT. How many 10/100/1000 (Gigabit Ethernet) networking adapters are built in? One or two adapters? Does it come with Bluetooth or 802.11a/b/g/n?

Now, we have to be straight with you: Most of these are moot points. Nearly all current chipsets support the same base features. For example, these days you can't find a motherboard *without* USB 2.0 support.

DFI LANPARTY UT NF4 SLI-DR EXPERT

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD



VERDICT: KICKS MUCH ASS

WANT TO HAVE YOUR CAKE (SERIOUS OVERCLOCKING) and eat it, too (dual-graphics-card SLI)? DFI offers up its LANParty UT NF4 SLI-DR Expert motherboard. Members of the "set it and forget it" school of personal computing, look elsewhere. Built for extreme overclocking and top-notch gaming performance, the Expert promises an agile, yet robust, package for demanding enthusiasts. Does it deliver the goods?

While gaming performance is a bit sluggish at low resolutions on some games, the flexible overclocking BIOS and hardware provide plenty of clout at higher resolutions and detail levels, where most gaming takes place. At this point, we can recommend the Expert for most applications. One other issue: The small, high-speed fan on the chipset is a little noisy for those trying to construct a quiet rig.

WHO IT'S FOR: **Serious tweakers only!**
HOW MUCH: **$180**
WEBSITE: **www.dfi.com.tw**

INSTANT EXPERT:

Building a better computer starts with choosing a good motherboard

Tech Medics
This month:
Still stuck with StarForce? ExtremeTech.com's Loyd Case can give you a shot and clear that right up.

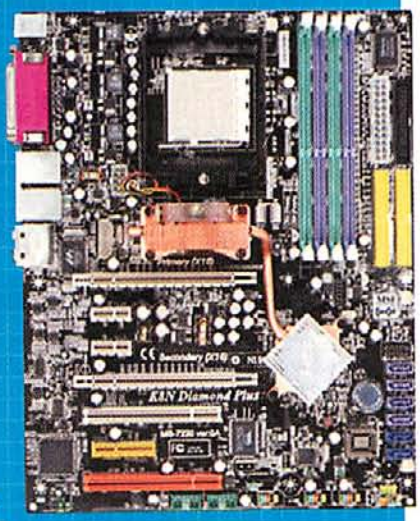
EXTREME TECH!
Want a hardcore look at all the hardware in this issue? Head over to ExtremeTech.com, where tech experts like Loyd Case and Jason Cross get down to business.

MSI K8N DIAMOND PLUS

VERDICT: GOOD, NOT GREAT

IT ISN'T THE FASTEST BOARD (IT RUNS a hair slower than Asus' A8N32-SLI), and it certainly isn't the cheapest, but we still found ourselves liking MSI's K8N Diamond Plus. The biggest plus for us: The smart layout of the expansion slots keeps this ATX board tight without getting cramped. Not only can you use the outboard 32-bit PCI slot, but you can squeeze a PCIe X1 adapter between the two graphics cards. Not an easy feat.

Where this SLI X16 board goes wrong, though, is the color-coded memory slots. Most motherboards use similar colored memory sockets to designate which modules to install for dual-channel memory support. With the K8N Diamond Plus, the dual-channel memory slots are adjacent but colored differently. The problem is exacerbated by the poor documentation: A table in the manual shows the correct memory configuration, but the text suggests that you need to fill one slot color first when installing memory modules. Hint: Use the table. Still, if you value easier installation and a more usable set of expansion options, then this board is a diamond in the slightly rough./



WHO IT'S FOR: **Expansion freaks**
HOW MUCH: **$200**
WEBSITE: **www.msicomputer.com**

PRO TIPS

HOW TO BE A HARDWARE HERO

Handle your motherboard by the edges. Try not to touch the chips, and never directly touch the CPU socket.

Static is your worst enemy. If you want to play it safe, don't work in a room with a carpeted floor, and make sure to touch the computer chassis to ground yourself before messing with the motherboard.

Before you install the motherboard, drop in the CPU and memory, and connect all the cables—it's much easier to do outside the case than inside. Lay the motherboard flat on a clean surface before applying pressure to it.

Don't forget to install the CPU cooler. You can blow the chip permanently, forever, and for all eternity by powering up the PC without a cooler on the CPU.

Don't overclock unless you know what you're doing. Without high-performance cooling and other important considerations, you can seriously damage your equipment.

Check all of the connections before closing the case. If anything is unseated, the PC won't boot./

MOTHERBOARDS

Now it's time for some Nerd Extra Credit. Want to impress that annoying sales guy over at CompUSA? Learn these mobo factoids.

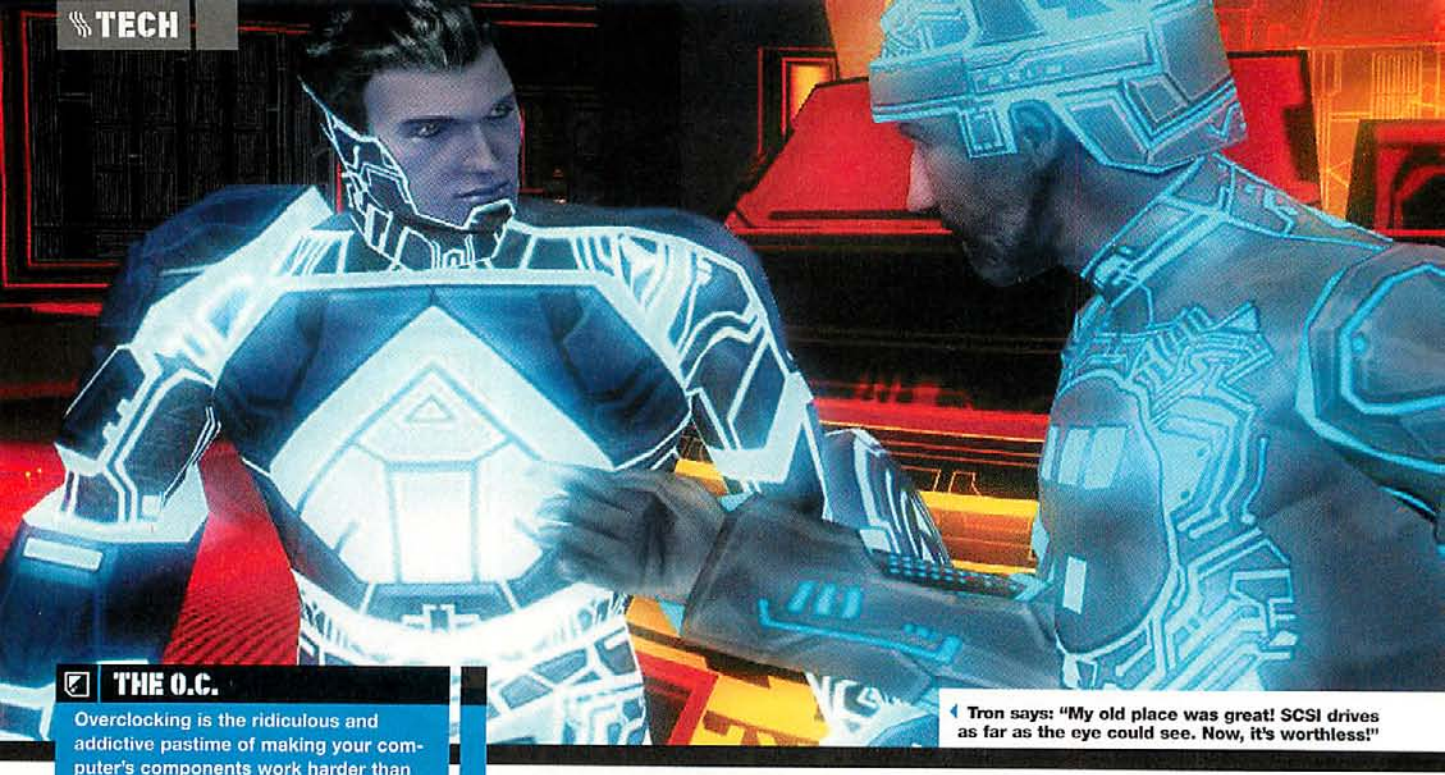
2 POINTS: Most chipsets feature a pair of controller chips: one northbridge and one southbridge. The northbridge controls CPU access, memory access, and graphics architecture. The southbridge, or multimedia controller hub (MCH), interfaces with audio, networking, expansion, and other subsystems. Nvidia's NForce4 chipset combines both "bridges" into a single chip.

1 POINT: ATI and Nvidia, known primarily for graphics components, make motherboard chipsets. In fact, for SLI or CrossFire support, it's probably wisest to go with one of theirs. For Nvidia SLI, the NForce4 chipset is fantastic. ATI's CrossFire Xpress 3200 will get two Radeon cards working right. If you're not interested in dual graphics cards, though, don't sweat the chipsets. All of the companies we just mentioned make great ranges of products.

50 POINTS: BIOS (basic input/output system) is the most rudimentary system controller for the motherboard—it lets you shut off features you don't need (RAID controllers, audio codecs, and so on) or change the CPU frequency. You need to monkey with the BIOS when overclocking.

Q: Will any motherboard fit into my rig?
A: Check your specs to find your PC case's form-factor. Otherwise, just eyeball the case for a second. Here's how the Vegas odds break down: If it's a mid- or full-tower, it's almost definitely ATX. These cases fit about 90 percent of the high-performance motherboards out there. >

>> KNOW YOUR CASE'S FORM-FACTOR BEFORE BUYING A NEW MOTHERBOARD.



Tron says: "My old place was great! SCSI drives as far as the eye could see. Now, it's worthless!"

THE O.C.

Overclocking is the ridiculous and addictive pastime of making your computer's components work harder than their manufacturers intended—kind of like that kid down the street putting some stupidly huge hood scoop and dubs on the family Camry. A popular target of overclocking is the CPU, which runs at a certain frequency but can work a hell of a lot harder. And hotter. And less stably. Want to join those illustriously hardcore ranks? Here are a few things to remember:

- Motherboard BIOS tweakability is key! You need control over both a CPU's frequency and multiplier (which determines its ultimate clock frequency). That goes double for chips whose multipliers are unlocked, such as the Athlon 64 FX-60.
- What's the frequency, Kenneth? The core frequency should be separate from the memory frequency. This keeps you from pushing the RAM and CPU past the redline. While it may sound cool to break the sanity and speed barriers, if the frontside bus (the thingie that controls the core clock speed) and memory bus aren't separately controlled, you're asking for a meltdown of Chernobyl proportions.
- If all hell breaks loose, the best mobos can detect problems and reset their BIOS to its default state. This is especially handy if you push the CPU too hard.
- Keep it cool. Windows-based temperature-monitoring utilities can warn the user if the CPU gets too hot, and even shut the system down if the CPU endangers itself. Overclocking dramatically increases the CPU temperature, which can cause all sorts of problems.

Smaller cases may house microATX or even Mini ATX form-factors. While handy for smaller profiles (think Shuttle cases), these cases give you a *very* limited upgrade path; small mobos tend to have fewer slots for goodies like soundcards and network adapters, and some tiny cases won't accommodate larger graphics cards like the massive and wonky ATI X1900 XTX.

Then we have Intel's BTX. We can't say enough bad things about this mobo form-factor. These boards have issues, besides the fact that they are, so far, an Intel-only solution. BTX boards need a special cooling apparatus, and, well, are just weird. Unless the hardware market throws support behind this creepy new form-factor, try to avoid it.

Still not sure of the motherboard size you need? Check out your current motherboard's make and model, look up its specs on the manufacturer's website, and be wary that sometimes people try to sneak smaller ATX mobos into full-size machines.

Q: Will I need to upgrade my system's graphics card, CPU, and/or memory?
A: It's entirely possible. The latest motherboards are fitted with PCI Express graphics slots (two, in the case of SLI- or CrossFire-compliant boards). Current Intel Pentium-friendly motherboards usually have CPU receptacles called Socket 775 (or LGA775) and support DDR2 memory, while AMD Athlon 64 FX and X2 mobos feature CPU Socket 939 and plain old DDR memory. If any of your old stuff will fit into these slots and sockets, feel free to use that board. Just remember that you may still want to upgrade. Performance *will* vary based on the specs of the parts used.

Q: SLI or CrossFire? Which one is better? Hell, do I even need it?
A: Since you're getting a new motherboard anyway, you might as well get one that supports a dual-graphics-card mode. Don't worry, you don't *have* to have dual cards with these boards; it's just nice to know that the option is there if you suddenly win the lottery.

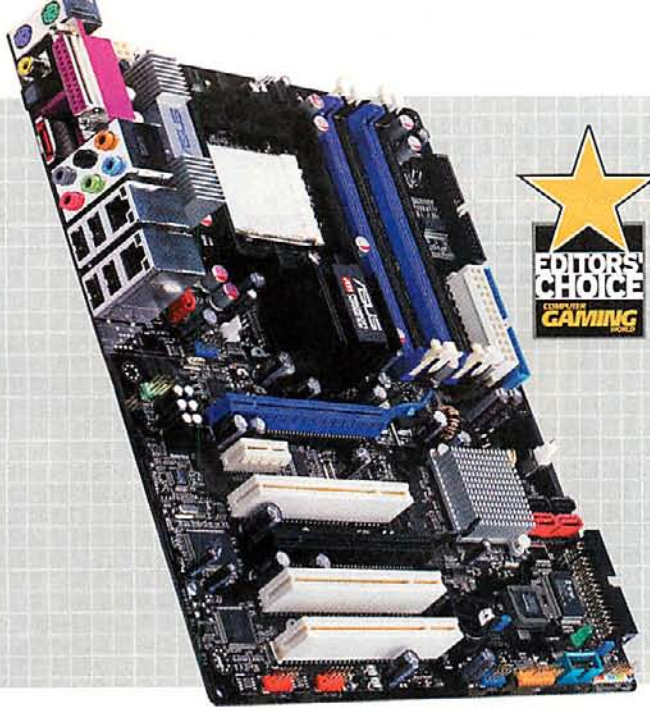
The trade-off, however, is board space: Most dual-card ATX motherboards only have room for two or three PCI slots. Worse, massive graphics cards like ATI's double-wide Radeon X1900 XTX can block access to one of the available PCI slots. If you need a slew of PCI slots for things like soundcards, wireless LAN cards, physics-processing cards (if you're *that* cool), or other such craziness, you might stick with a single-card motherboard.

Here's something else to keep in mind: CrossFire can work on both ATI and Intel 975 mobos, but not Nvidia (doh!). SLI only works on Nvidia chipsets. Which is better? Well, that debate of who pwnz whom still rages, but we can't find a definitive winner. All that matters is that either of the big $600 cards will let you play *Oblivion* with all the details cranked up to 11.

Q: Will I need a new power supply?
A: Don't fight the power; take into account the real resource hogs: all the parts you plan on stuffing into your computer. Does your current power supply (PSU) just barely meet spec? Modern motherboards have 24-pin power receptacles, adding four pins to cover PCI Express power needs. Also, modern power supplies have special ports incorporated for graphics cards and Serial ATA drives.

And don't forget the wattage. A cutting-edge CPU and an Nvidia SLI or ATI CrossFire

> STICKING BY AN OLD-SCHOOL AGP MOTHERBOARD MAY SOUND LIKE A GOOD, CHEAP WAY OUT—BUT DON'T DO IT!



EDITORS' CHOICE
COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

ASUS A8R32-MVP DELUXE

VERDICT: SUPERB PERFORMER

THE A8R32-MVP DELUXE INCARNATION OF ATI'S NEW CrossFire Xpress 3200 core logic is a perfect rival to Nvidia motherboards. In fact, just think of this as the Radeon-friendly flavor of Asus' A8N32-SLI Deluxe. What's intriguing is the overall pattern of performance gain from the Xpress 200 to the Xpress 3200 in games. In our tests, ATI's chipset shaped up as a performance leader. The most glowing recommendation we can give: This is the mobo currently used in ExtremeTech.com's Killer Rig, the Holy Grail of gaming PCs. The Rig adopts an ATI CrossFire dual-graphics configuration, and this is the fastest, most feature-rich board you can get to enable that.

WHO IT'S FOR: **CrossFire converts**
HOW MUCH: **$190**
WEBSITE: **www.asus.com**

configuration needs at least 500 watts. Sticking with one graphics card? You can get away with 450 watts. Upgrading? Pony up the cash and get as much wattage as you can afford in an SLI-certified PSU from a trusted brand such as Antec, PC Power and Cooling, or Enermax. Off-brands may be budget friendly, but they can create more headaches. You wouldn't believe the problems that a bad PSU can cause: hangs, mysterious reboots, and stuff that even hardened gearheads tend to blame on electrical failures of graphics cards, memory, and CPUs.

Q: Why don't I just buy a whole new computer instead?
A: Hey, can you pick a slightly easier question? How about the meaning of life? This story has two sides, so let's weigh 'em out.

First, disregard the self-built system we've been blabbing about for the past few pages. This is your baby! You can pick out the exact motherboard you want, while most computer manufacturers have limited selection. You can pick the audio, the BIOS features, the expansion room, the CPU support—it's all you.

> BEYOND FEATURES AND EXPANDABILITY, CONCENTRATE ON A MOTHERBOARD'S PERFORMANCE AND STABILITY.

You haven't upgraded your PC in a while? Start scrapping the case, motherboard, CPU, memory, and graphics card. Then watch the fun as the bill suddenly jumps. This is when you start getting tempted to turn to dedicated gaming-systems manufacturers. Boutique shops like Falcon Northwest, VoodooPC, and Alienware charge top dollar for pimped-out rigs that you can configure yourself (to a degree). You can also take some comfort in a little thing called customer support. Really, you're paying for the right to bitch to some other person about how your 'puter is, like, totally busted and you need them to fix it.

If you have any doubts, and we mean *any*, about building your own PC, stop. Find a friend, hit some online forums, or better yet, experiment with an old computer—one that you wouldn't miss if you broke it.

Q: All right, you talked me into it. Which motherboard should I get?
A: First, be honest with yourself. What are your needs, and realistically how much money do you have to fund this little do-it-yourself upgrade project?

Sticking by an old-school AGP motherboard may sound like a good, cheap way out—and a way to avoid cashing in your 401(k) to buy a new graphics card—but don't do it! Next-gen games and DirectX 10 graphics cards are coming soon; you'll regret not having those in your system. Going with the most modern breed of mobos means upgrading your CPU and graphics card as well. This doesn't come cheap, but you won't have to make as big an upgrade jump for a while.

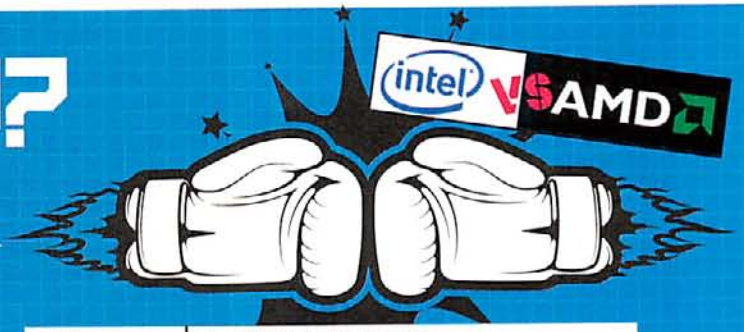
You should set a budget and then decide how much you're willing to invest in each component you need to upgrade. Figure out >

WHICH CPU?

So, what brand of CPU are you going to stick in your new motherboard? Before your decide, get the facts.

PRICE AND PERFORMANCE. In the old days, AMD offered friendlier-priced CPUs that lacked the stability of Intel's processors—but now, AMD's stuff is solid and priced about the same as Intel parts. AMD also had minor heat problems in the past, whereas nowadays, the latest Pentium Extreme Edition processor, the 955, is actually hotter than AMD's Athlon 64 FX-60. In lab tests here in the office, the Athlon squeaked past the Pentium in gaming, while the Pentium tiptoed by the Athlon in the sexier applications—you know, spreadsheets.

STABILITY. Virtually all games run equally well on AMD- and Intel-based systems. Even games with technical issues, like *Oblivion*, suffer from problems with graphics cards, not CPUs.



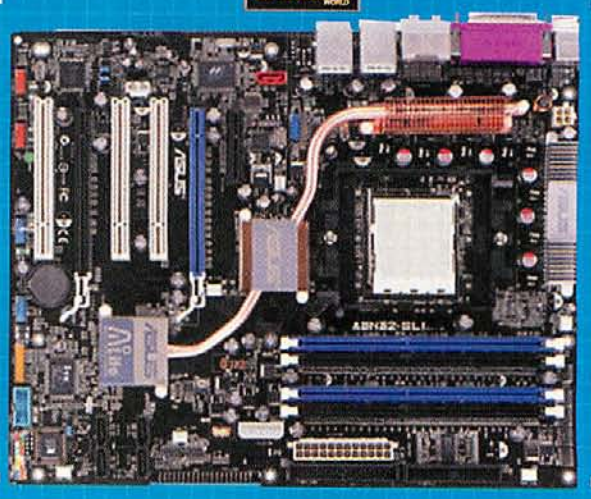
COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT**

If we were talking about business applications, we'd say that Intel wins—but this ain't *Computer Spreadsheet World*. When it comes to games, we're sticking to our Athlon guns for this generation. While Intel is making fantastic strides, the next-gen CPUs could make this fight too close to call.

ASUS A8N32-SLI DELUXE

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT: SLICK, BUT STUFFY



PUT TOGETHER A WISH LIST OF EVERYTHING YOU'D EVER want from a motherboard: all the connectivity you can handle (multichannel audio support, FireWire, two Ethernet ports); an infinitely tweakable BIOS; passive cooling that keeps noise to a whisper; and rock-solid stability in tests. That's the A8N32-SLI, Asus' top-of-the-line gaming motherboard. However, it's still not perfect.

For starters, this isn't exactly what we'd call n00b friendly. You'll need to do a lot of BIOS voltage tweaking to get good overclocking performance, and the sheer volume of options can be overwhelming at times (no thanks to the anorexic manual). More important is the awkward slot configuration on the board layout. Install a pair of double-wide graphics cards in SLI, and fitting a soundcard in becomes a real squeeze play. But if you're ready to wade into hardcore waters and have the cash, this is one great mobo.

WHO IT'S FOR: **Fraggers craving some stability**
HOW MUCH: **$220**
WEBSITE: **www.asus.com**

whether you want to (or have to) upgrade components, and which brands you want to choose. When you've determined your price point for the motherboard and its necessary capabilities, read lots of reviews. Don't look solely at performance, either; check out features, convenience, stability, and other important factors. Narrow it down until you've chosen a few specific boards, and then find the one that offers the best bang for the buck. Some standout brands in the motherboard universe include:

- Gamers'-favorite manufacturer Asus is known for its blazing performance and stability that makes the Rocky Mountains look like Mt. Krakatoa. Check out AMD-friendly boards like the A8N32-SLI Deluxe, and the A8R32-MVP Deluxe.
- DFI offers colorful LANParty motherboards that look fantastic in an illuminated, modded case. They also tend toward speed, and are known for *awesome* overclocking tweakability. Problem is, you really need expert knowledge to get it all running right. Scope out the LANParty UT NF4 SLI-DR Expert, but this is definitely not a beginner's board.
- The underappreciated MSI tends to offer features beyond the call of duty, like onboard Creative Labs audio. Among its best boards are the K8N Diamond Plus and, for Intel users, the 975X Platinum.
- Ah, good old Intel, whose 975 chipset is purported to support both SLI and CrossFire (however, boards with such tasty support have yet to surface). And Intel still offers ATX motherboards, like the D975XBX, ready for your Pentium 4 Extreme Edition gaming CPU.

And that's just a taste of what's available as of press time. The last—but probably the most obvious—thing to remember is this: Beyond the features and expandability, concentrate on performance and stability. After all, nobody is dumb enough to build a house on the San Andreas Fault. We hope.

WHAT ABOUT WINDOWS?

Nothing pisses off a Windows XP installation like putting in a new motherboard. What do you do to appease the mighty Microsoft operating system when you perform your upgrade?

STEP ONE. Before you crack open your case, back up everything! MP3s, game saves, homework, pictures, your finances—even backup drivers for your devices. If it's on your system's hard drive and you can't recreate it, back it up onto a removable hard drive, DVD, CD...heck, even floppies, if that's all you've got.

STEP TWO. You don't have to reformat the hard drive and start from scratch, but we highly recommend it. Granted, you'll have to reinstall all your old programs, but nothing beats that fresh feeling of a new install. No more bloat, and it's the easiest way to ensure that Windows gets along with your new motherboard.

STEP THREE. Now you need to reinstall the chipset drivers and drivers for any other gadgets on the motherboard (audio, LAN, RAID, and so on) and for any other new parts in the system (such as the graphics card). And don't forget to run Windows Update.

THE UPGRADE UPDATE

Late-breaking news from the hardware front lines

THE PROBLEM WITH MOTHERBOARDS: Blink and you miss the launch window of a new one. As of this writing, AMD is about to roll out Socket AM2 on its mobos. What does this mean to you? Well, current Athlon 64 processors use a 939-pin socket called—you guessed it—Socket 939. All the current chips, up to the Athlon 64 4800+ and FX-60, have to go in a motherboard with Socket 939. If you want a new Athlon 64 5000+ or FX-62 (or future, faster processors from AMD), you need a Socket AM2 motherboard. Socket AM2 boards have 940 pins and are not backward compatible. Plus, the Socket 939 boards use regular DDR memory while the AM2 boards use DDR2 (at speeds of up to 800MHz). If you're expecting some major performance leap right off the starting line with the new CPU socket, don't. You'll maybe get a couple extra performance points.

If you're buying an AMD CPU, you have to make a choice. Do you get a Socket 939 board with DDR RAM and have the option for less-expensive processors now but limit the possibility for future upgrades (word from AMD is that it has no real plans to continue with 939-based CPUs)? Or do you buy an AM2 motherboard with DDR2 RAM and have better upgrade potential in the future?

And don't get us started on Intel's Conroe CPU that's coming in a few months, which will work with some mobos using the current 975X chipset—but not all of them. In other words, this is only the beginning. Check back here and at ExtremeTech.com to get the latest word.

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HARD NEWS

The bleeding edge of tech

AGEIA PHYSX HARDWARE ACCELERATOR

VERDICT: TOO MUCH, TOO SOON

WHO IT'S FOR: **Waaay early adopters**
HOW MUCH: **$290 (street)**
WEBSITE: **www.ageia.com**

EARLY ADOPTERS HAVE BEEN BUZZING about the notion of a hardware-accelerated physics card since Ageia unveiled the idea last year. The promise of getting more realistic in-game physics while improving performance is enough to get anybody's attention. Well, Ageia finally sent us one of its first-generation boards for testing (you can buy 'em through BFG or Asus), and we took it for a whirl.

In order to sell this sort of hardware, you need a shining example of what the card can do. That game—and the only one currently shipping with PhysX hardware support—is *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*. We played through areas of the game both with and without hardware acceleration. The dynamic nature of *GRAW* makes it almost impossible to do the exact same thing each time we played, but we did our best to repeat our actions with as little variance as possible. We blew up a car, ran down a street taking out some enemies, and shot up the walls.

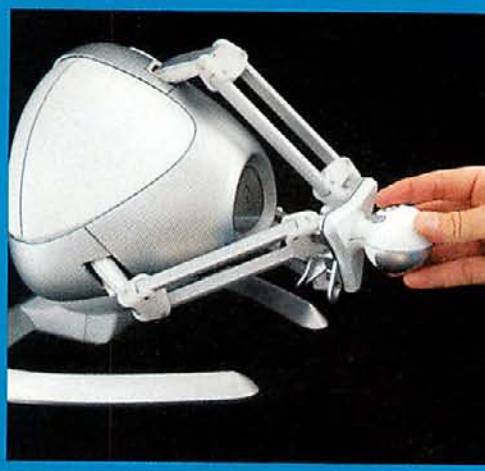
Plugging in the PhysX card resulted in a small but noticeable performance bump. Ageia's marketing materials talk about how explosions in *GRAW* feature large chunks of flying debris, wheels falling off cars, and so on. Honestly, we didn't see significantly more of this kind of stuff than we saw with no physics acceleration—and we looked pretty hard. We noticed a few more large pieces of debris when objects blew up, but not enough to really make it that much more spectacular than without the PhysX card. We also noticed that shooting walls threw off some chunks with the PhysX acceleration, but it's hardly an earth-shattering effect.

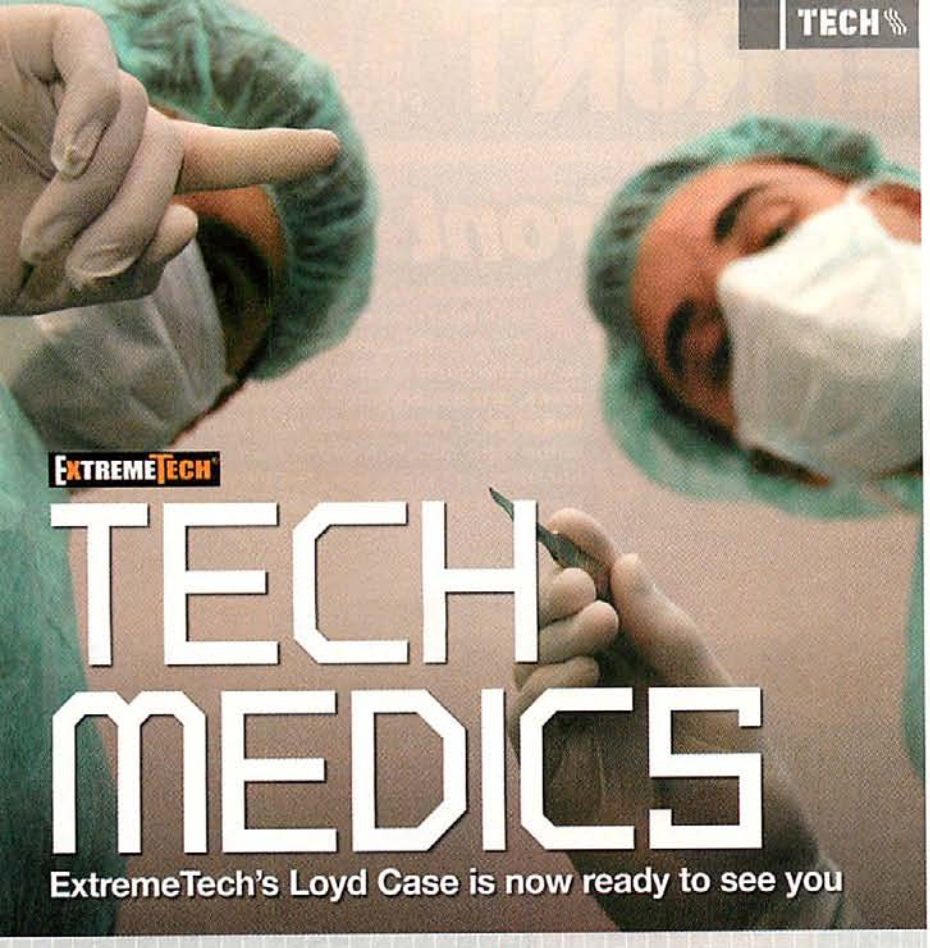
Adding a PhysX card to your machine doesn't do a whole hell of a lot right now. We've seen some awesome demos (the upcoming FPS *CellFactor*, shown above, requires a physics-processing unit and looks impressive) that illustrate what the technology is capable of, but without some triple-A games to push PhysX, that $300 asking price seems a little hard to swallow. Upcoming patches in *City of Villains* and *Rise of Legends* will support PhysX, and Epic Games is integrating PhysX into its Unreal Engine 3—but right now, you're betting a couple hundred bones on a possible future. Our advice: Wait six months. Maybe then, Ageia will really have something.

BEST. PERIPHERAL. EVER.

BEYOND AGEIA'S PHYSICS CARD, you'll have a lot of interesting hardware choices by year's end, and we had a chance to see them all—well, at least prototypes—during the 2006 Electronic Entertainment Expo. The Zboard Fang is a great gaming miniboard. (But also apparently used by the U.S. Army for training. WTF?) Hardcore manufacturer Razer is making a ballsy move with its Barracuda. Can this gaming soundcard/headphone combo topple Creative Labs' high-end X-Fi boards? We'll report soon.

What blew us away, though, was something hiding in Kentia Hall—the slum of E3—in an unassumingly small booth drawing a huge crowd. Forget Nintendo's Wii-mote; Novint Technologies' Falcon (www.novint.com) is a three-dimensional controller that adds a whole new layer to gaming. With this haptic device, you can actually feel the weight, shape, dimensions, and textures of objects. Each of the three servo-motor arms exerts force, so if, say, you're shooting a basketball (as in one of the tech demos), not only can you tell how hard you're throwing the ball, but you can feel its weight and when it leaves your "hands." The booth had more than tech demos to show off what can happen—real games were working, too. PhysX poster child *CellFactor* shook players' hands as they powered up telekinesis abilities. The big shock came from a modded version of *Half-Life 2*: Crowbarring a crate felt a whole lot different from hitting a wall or chain link fence, and shooting a .357 Magnum provided a satisfying kickback. Novint plans to release the Falcon in time for the holidays at a price of $100. If enough games support the device, we're buying two.





EXTREMETECH

TECH MEDICS

ExtremeTech's Loyd Case is now ready to see you

Q: I bought an AGP-based system a couple of months before PCI Express systems came out. Replacing the entire system is too expensive, so I hit on the idea of replacing the motherboard. I have a Pentium 4 EE 3.4GHz and an Asus motherboard. Will I need new RAM, and are there any other parts I will need to replace, like the power supply?

Dan Lazarus

A: We've replaced a number of AGP motherboards with PCI Express mobos. Since you have a Pentium 4–based system, you'll need to get a new processor. AGP Pentium 4 boards used CPUs with 478-pin sockets, while newer P4s use 775-pin sockets. If you go with an Intel processor, you'll probably need to upgrade to DDR2 memory as well. Of course, you could also make the switch to an AMD processor—most of the motherboards out now will accept the DDR/400 memory that you're probably currently using.

However, upgrading to DDR2 may be a good idea, too. AMD is just starting to make the transition to DDR2 memory; if you're looking for a longer life span for your system, then DDR2 is a good bet.

Other complications: If you have two hard drives and an optical drive, many new Intel-chipset motherboards only support two IDE connections, so be sure to look for a motherboard that has more than two. And yes, you'll probably need a new power supply that supports the 24-pin main power connector.

Q: I'm planning my home theater, which will include my gaming PC, and I've already laid out a lot of money for my little project. I've purchased a Logitech Bluetooth mouse and keyboard in order to play games on my big-screen TV. Now I'd like to add a wireless headset, and I was wondering: Is there a wireless box that I could plug in to chat while playing games?

Malcolm Andrews

A: You could take one of several approaches to this. The first is to use a headset. We know of at least one wireless USB headset out there, the Plantronics CS50-USB, although it's pretty pricey (the CS50-USB lists for $300, but we found it on Amazon recently for $184). But since you're using a home theater setup and plan on talking anyway, why not take advantage of your 5.1 surround sound speaker system? You can hook up a cheap microphone to your soundcard and talk that way. Or, if you want better voice quality, check out the Blue Snowball from Blue Microphones (www.bluemic.com), which is a high-quality omnidirectional USB microphone. Then you can hear that great game audio from your home theater system and just talk naturally.

Q: I followed the instructions in your April issue (#261) on deleting the StarForce spyware sneakily installed by one of my games. But I wasn't successful. I'm not sure if there is a particular order to it, but I followed the steps as they were written in your article on page 28—but the drivers just keep on coming back. Help me! I'm sick of StarForce.

Brian

A: StarForce is kind of like computer herpes at this point. The good news is that Ubisoft, one of the biggest users of StarForce copy protection, is dropping it in future games. We can hope that other game publishers follow suit.

Anyway, on to your problem: If StarForce refuses to go away, try the StarForce removal tool. Although it was written by the company that created StarForce, it does seem to work pretty well. Here's the URL: onlinesecurity-on.com/downloads/sfdvrem.zip.

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

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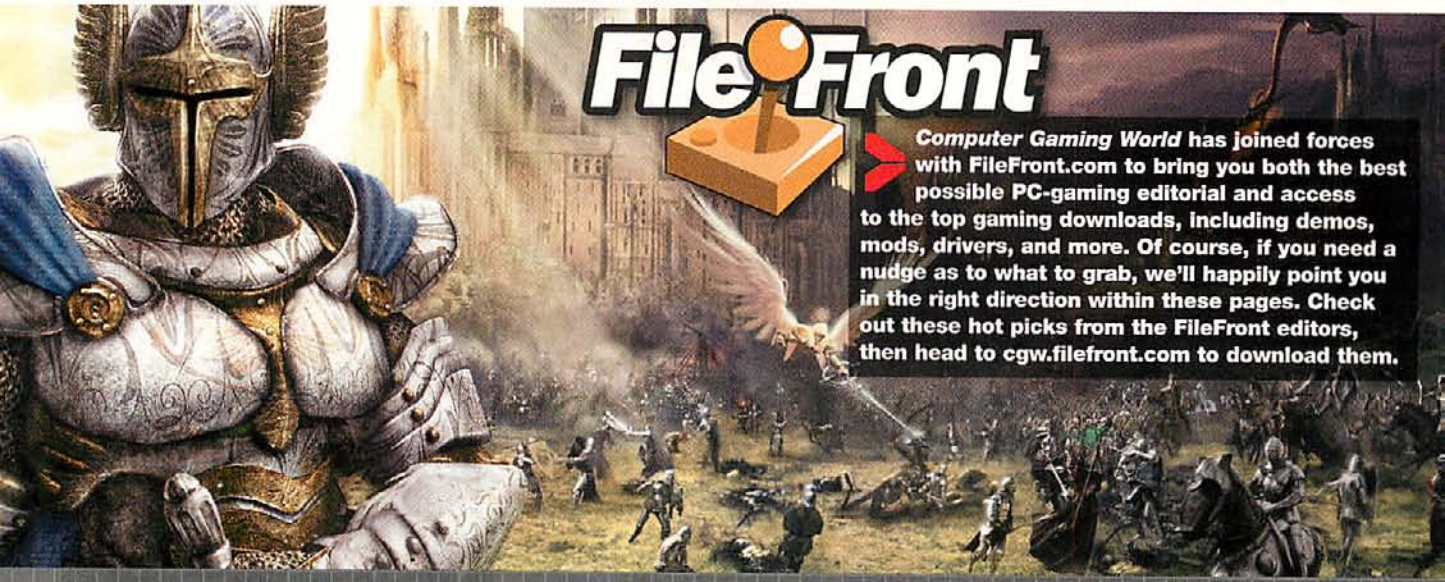

FileFront

Computer Gaming World **has joined forces with FileFront.com to bring you both the best possible PC-gaming editorial and access to the top gaming downloads, including demos, mods, drivers, and more. Of course, if you need a nudge as to what to grab, we'll happily point you in the right direction within these pages. Check out these hot picks from the FileFront editors, then head to cgw.filefront.com to download them.**

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V

Try your hand at the latest in the *Might and Magic* series with three playable missions featuring two races, or test your might online in multiplayer against other heroes.

STARSHIFT: THE ZARAN LEGACY

Backstab your allies, corrupt your enemies, and mess with pretty much everybody else in this turn-based online strategy game that takes place in a far-off universe.

GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

Don't write this game off as merely a console port, and don't miss the brilliance of this tactical shooter—download the demo from FileFront today.

CITY LIFE

Load up this city-building simulation, create your own metropolis, and govern its citizens. This demo has one scenario and three socio-economic classes.

RISE & FALL: CIVILIZATIONS AT WAR

Build an empire and assume the role of one of history's greatest heroes—each with a unique set of abilities and weapons—and lead your armies into battle.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION SENTIENT WEAPON V2.0 (MOD)

A wandering weaponsmith promises to make you a sentient weapon capable of audibly commenting on your adventures... if you can get all the materials needed.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION BENEATH THE WALL (MOD)

This mod allows you to discover a secret cave underneath one of the city walls, full of Black Bow Bandits who threaten the beautiful northern city of Bruma.

F.E.A.R. V1.04 (PATCH)

Update *F.E.A.R.* to version 1.04, which features support for the new SDK, along with a number of new tools, including WorldEdit.

QUAKE IV V1.2 (PATCH)

Download the latest patch for better hyper-threading support, a variety of gameplay tweaks, and seven new maps.

BATTLEFIELD 2: NATIONS AT WAR V3.8.1.2 (MOD)

This *BF2* mod adds NATO and Asian Alliance flags, along with new gunships, med helos, unarmed civ vehicles, and full arctic, woodland, and desert camo.

TOM'S HEN HOUSE (SHAREWARE)

Help Tom catch all the eggs that the hens lay before they break, but be warned: This game is addictive.

JELLY WARS V4.1 (SHAREWARE)

Design your own jelly character and duel with your friends' characters in a vibrant, bird's-eye-view world.

GOOGLE SKETCHUP

Grab this easy-to-learn program that enables you to create 3D models of houses, sheds, decks, home additions, woodworking projects—even spaceships!

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WE ARE FAMILY

I've got all my druids with me!

THERE COMES A TIME IN THE COURAGEOUS AND SELFLESS life of every hardcore gamer when he or she has to take a stand. To draw a line in the sand. To make a firm, final commitment to What Really Matters. It's the kind of choice that separates those of us who mean it from the noobs and lamers of this world.

My big stand took place at approximately 7:00 p.m. on the evening of May 4, 2006. It was just moments after I had made a smaller, but still brutal, *Sophie's Choice*–like decision: Doritos or Cheetos? Though both make for excellent and tasty snack treats, each has pros and cons that one must weigh before committing (see chart).

It only took a moment or two of brow-furrowing to reach my final decision: two bowls. One in my lap, one next to the keyboard—both within reach at all times, just in case. Best to play it safe, I reckoned.

CHEETOS

PROS: Made from same alien radioactive "cheese" dust as Kraft Macaroni & Cheese; easy to stuff down your throat in huge handfuls, reducing unnecessary game disruptions.

CONS: Radioactive "cheese" dust on fingers gunks up keyboard.

DORITOS

PROS: Chip shape more palpably resembles food; heartbeat monitor on package offers definitive proof that they're actually good for you.

CONS: Loud crunch factor + unwieldy chip size = distractions at key in-game moments.

With this crisis resolved, I returned posthaste to the evening's real business: completing the final quests in *World of WarCraft*'s Zul'Farrak dungeon. My party and I were already hours deep into it by this point. We had polished off the easier quests and were now getting ready to tackle Gahz'rilla, one of the zone's biggest monsters. Killing this bad boy would yield each of us the sweet Carrot on a Stick, providing a 3 percent speed bump to our mounts. In a word: Woot. But it was here that my real problems began. Just as we were healed, buffed, and ready to go, I heard the dreaded sound from beyond: the clarion call of The Wife, signaling that dinner was ready. Dinner. Family. "Real" life. I was hosed. A man can't choose to play games instead of have dinner with his family.

Or can he?

***

It had been a bumpy road getting here. None of us had ever played together before, and the de facto leader, a level 52 human warrior named Lollerz, was a tyrant and a blowhard, barking orders as if he were the boss of us, which Fubar—a testy level 50 dwarf priest—kept reminding him he wasn't.

Fubar: You're not the boss of us.

Lollerz: Why don't you quit then?

Fubar: Why don't you?

Lollerz: Why don't you?

The rest of us—two level 49 night elf hunters and me, a level 51 gnome warlock named Eggbert—didn't want either of them to quit, because we would die without them. So we tried to keep the peace. Secretly, I was happy they were feuding, because it took the focus off me. One stupid mistake earlier had condemned me as group 'tard.

Lollerz: WTF you 'tard!!

Me: Me?

Lollerz: Your f'in voidwalker just aggroed all those trolls!

Me: Is that my voidwalker?

Lollerz: OMG you suck. You're the only warlock! You almost got us wiped!

Me: Ack, sorry. :(

ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN DALLASKOO

Lollerz: F'in pay attention or you're out. Fubar, f'in heal Eggbert and let's go.

Fubar: You're not the boss of me.

But that was hours ago. The worst was behind us. We approached the confrontation with Gahz'rilla as a team now, as family. We had fought together, healed each other, danced together. We stood together now, our armor resplendent under the Tanaris moonlight, ready to roll.

"Let's roll," said Lollerz.

***

But then came that clarion call. Dinner. Family. "Real" life. I knew the consequences of continuing to play. The Wife had made it clear many times before where she stood on the issue of me choosing gaming over family. And I also knew that "the group needed a warlock" was probably not going to sound so great in divorce court.

But it really wasn't that simple, was it? My group would die without me. I had made a commitment. A social contract. Grouping with people in a high-level dungeon isn't just some frivolous activity. This was important. Furthermore, it wasn't like tonight was our wedding anniversary or anything. *(Or was it? Uh oh.)*

"Come on, Eggbert, let's roll!" Lollerz repeated.

So I made my choice. I took my stand. I yelled downstairs for them to eat without me. I was busy. I was needed. I had responsibilities.

"Crap!" said Lollerz. "My mom says I have to take a bath now." He logged out. "Fuggit," said Fubar. "I'm gone. You guys suck anyway." The two night elves followed. Suddenly, I was alone in Zul'Farrak. My stomach growled.

There would be no Carrot on a Stick tonight for Eggbert. But there was about to be a whole lot of crow. **/ Jeff Green**

What Jeff doesn't realize is that a real gamer would have just soloed Gahz'rilla. Gank this clueless n00b at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

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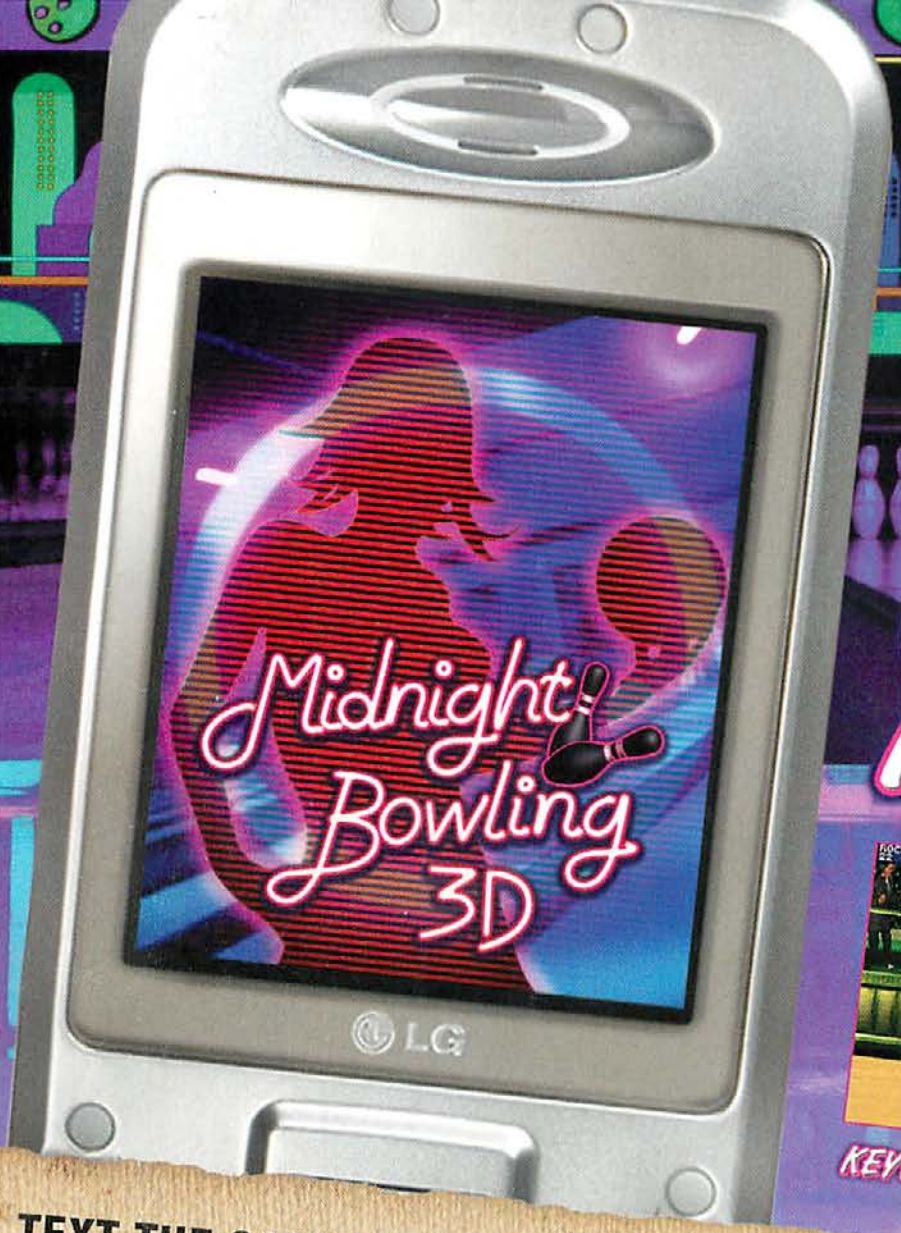

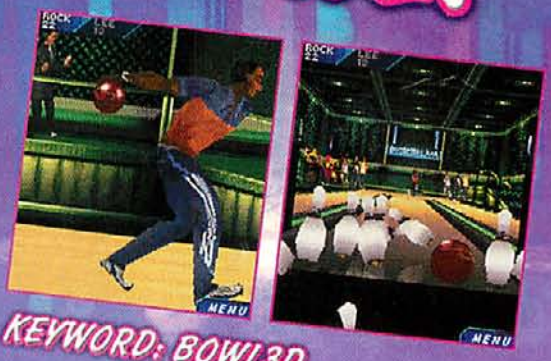

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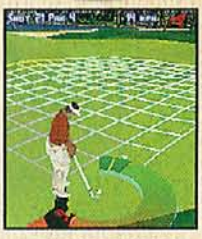

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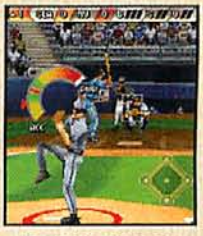

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