IN THE MAG: CGW'S LEGENDARY ANNUAL
101 FREE PC GAMES

HANDS-ON REPORT
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ONLINE: STORMREACH
WE SAW DUNGEONS—AND DRAGONS!

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

The PC Gaming Authority

FOR OVER 20 YEARS
ISSUE 260

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FIRST LOOK!
GOTHIC 3
YAY! THE SINGLE-
PLAYER RPG
RETURNS!
PAGE 18>

ZIFF DAVIS MEDIA™

ON THE DISC
STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR DEMO!
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MAPS AND MODS!
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THE TROOPS
Do you use guerilla tactics, conserve resources and slowly pick off enemy forces? Or do you go for broke and overwhelm the enemy with a sea of troops?

STAR WARS
EMPIRE AT WAR

›› CONTENTS

MARCH 2006 ISSUE #260

72

FIRST LOOK

■ COVER STORY

CRYSIS

This month, *CGW* delivers the goods on *Far Cry* developer Crytek's next big game. In this exclusive preview, we ask questions such as "Will every Crytek game have 'Cry' in the title?"

18
GOTHIC 3

26
MOD SUMMIT

44
NEOTOKYO

38
PUBLIC ACCESS

GAME INDEX

56 101 FREE GAMES

94 TOM VS. BRUCE

97 ON THE DISC

94 Tom vs. Bruce
Tom, Bruce, and editor-in-chief Jeff Green all have a *Ticket to Ride*.

98 Scorched Earth
A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

82 25 TO LIFE

83 MX VS. ATV UNLEASHED

88 ULTIMA V: LAZARUS

90 TECH

THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

1UPVS2005.1UP.COM
The 1UP staff takes a look back at some of the most noteworthy—and infamous—events of 2005.

PREY.1UP.COM
Pumped for *Prey*? Get the latest hands-on details on this long-awaited game in 1UP.com's world-exclusive *Prey* cover story!

WOWBLOGS.1UP.COM
Got some good *World of WarCraft* stories to share? Enter this competition for the best *WOW* blog, and you may win a Blizzard-branded iPod Nano!

BEST EDITORIAL OF THE YEAR!

When awards get tiring

A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON OUR WAY TO DECIDing our 2005 Game of the Year awards: We decided not to hand any out. Now, please, don't spaz. Don't torch our office. And don't, under any circumstances, interpret this as some kind of "sign" about PC gaming, this magazine, or our commitment to either.

The fact is that there were more than enough worthy contenders for awards, as PC gaming enjoyed a solid year of awesome, original titles. No, the decision had nothing to do with the games themselves, but more with just, well, the Reality of Magazines Today. That reality being: By the time you read this, you will already have read roughly 250 other "best of the year" articles, and you probably don't need to see another one. I know I sure don't.

The *CGW* editors did actually gather, as we do every year, to pick out the awards: one for every game genre, numerous special awards, and an overall Game of the Year. But after meeting for roughly three hours and picking most of the winners, we realized that, frankly, we were bored already just talking about it, let alone having to sit down to write it all up. Really, at this point in time, is it of any practical use for yet another list to spell out what we all know already? Yeah, big surprise: *Battlefield 2* ruled. So did *Guild Wars*, *F.E.A.R.*, *Call of Duty 2*, and the many other games you could easily guess would have made it onto our best-of list.

So why point out the obvious? Why phone in the same article the way lazy game magazines always do? Answer: We're not going to. So there. Make your own list. And then let's talk about something more interesting.

(But if you must know, here is my personal top 5 for 2005: *Indigo Prophecy*, *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*, *Civilization IV*, *Call of Duty 2*, and *F.E.A.R.* Happy now?)
/JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Now Playing: *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory, Ticket to Ride*
1UP.com Blog: cgwjeff.1UP.com

TEAM CGW

KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR

My favorite games this year: *Need for Speed: Most Wanted*, *Indigo Prophecy*, and *The Managing Editor Says: Obey!* Oh wait—that last one's not on the PC....
Now Playing: *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*, with your mind
1UP.com Blog: kristenss.1UP.com

DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES)

What a great year for truly innovative games! My top five: *Battlefield 2, Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood, Darwinia, F.E.A.R.*, and *Indigo Prophecy*.
Now Playing: With Firefox in search of the ultimate freeware, the fool
1UP.com Blog: cgw_gizmo.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS)

To no one's surprise, my 2005 PC game of the year is *Guild Wars*. But I've also been spending an awful lot of time lately on fan-run *Ultima Online* shards. And *Civ IV* is getting awfully addicting, too.
Now Playing: *Civilization IV, Ticket to Ride, Ultima Online* (www.uogamers.com)
1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (PREVIEWS)

Top five faves of '05, in no particular order: *Battlefield 2, Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30, F.E.A.R., Call of Duty 2*, and *Guild Wars*.
Now Playing: *SWAT 4*
1UP.com Blog: egmshawn.1UP.com

LOGAN PARR
DISC PRODUCER

My favorite games of '05 are: *Gun, Call of Duty 2*, and *Indigo Prophecy*.
Now Playing: *Condemned: Criminal Origins* and *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*
1UP.com Blog: logans_run.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

F.E.A.R. and *City of Villains* each took a few weekends off my life, so in addition to being my favorite games of '05, they probably also qualify as some kind of techno substance abuse. Either way, they were serious fun.
Now Playing: *Indigo Prophecy*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_jennings.1UP.com

SEAN DALLASKIDD
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

Yeah, I like games—got a problem with that? My 2005 favorites: *City of Villains, Madden NFL 06, Stubbs the Zombie*, anything with scorpions.
Now Playing: *City of Villains*
1UP.com Blog: The_dallaskidd.1UP.com

HOLY MOLY!

We love hearing from you, dear readers, so your overwhelming response to the story in our February issue on evangelical groups spreading their message via online games ("God Mode") was most welcome. In fact, your missives continue to pour in even as we go to press on this issue, so while we're able to publish only a few letters here, check back next month for an extended Letters section with plenty of space devoted to your many responses on the topic.

TAKE THAT, JACK THOMPSON

"God Mode"—great article! I appreciate *CGW*'s unbiased reporting on this subject. I find all too often "gamers" and "agnosticism" and especially "atheism" seem synonymous. I am a Christian who loves blowing things up in videogames. I can execute a great head shot or massive explosion that takes the lives of many [in-game] innocents, but I can't stomach real violence and can't fathom the mind that could. I will continue to play violent games, as a Christian. My gaming will never separate me from my love of Jesus Christ, just as my gaming will never separate me from real life or my self-proclaimed soundness of mind. God bless.

Griffin Smith

OVERCOMPENSATING? US?

WTF?!?! Given the current media climate, I respect your decision to treat the subject of religion as objectively as possible [in your "God Mode" story]. However, you overcompensated. What exactly does it mean to have the Department of Homeland Security monitor one's guild? How does someone arrange that, and how dare they assume that anyone playing games on the Internet is just looking to abduct young boys? Are taxpayer dollars involved? If a guild requires background checks for its officers, how do we know they aren't secretly investigating everyone else who signs up? What are the safeguards they take to avoid promoting the wrong types of people, and who are the "wrong people" they're referring to, anyhow? I'm also wondering how *WOW* is less based on the concept of honor than a game like *BF2*, where you're keeping a kill score that's based on a historical event where real people died?

I think you really dropped the ball here. You're the premier gaming magazine, the only print publication that demonstrates any sense of perspective on the hobby, and you didn't challenge these jerks on their statements at all. Instead, you spent

the issue sticking it to a guy who made a game about scorpions, and who, from what I gathered in your interview, doesn't even know you're making fun of him. Wow, that took guts.

Greg Chatham

Interestingly, most of the positive letters to this piece came from those who identified themselves as "religious," while the negative ones came from those who thought we should have pressed harder. Our goal was simply to shed light on the phenomenon. It's up to you to decide whether it's good or bad.

SHADY BUSINESS

I just wanted to let you know that the article for our game in your magazine was really damaging and quite mean-spirited. Your reviewer tore the game apart because he did not like the campaign mode or story and then gave us the lowest score the game has received in over 200 reviews internationally. To say the least, we are very disappointed, and as [we are] a smaller studio, it is one-sided articles like this that can bury you for good.

I am hoping in the future that we get a fairer shake than this as, like I said, this was, to us, a very mean-spirited article, and the owner of our company wants me to exclude Ziff from all reviews and ad spends from now on. I told him that was a bit drastic, but he is livid, and I mean really livid. I really wish you could rereview the game or take a look at the scoring based on what was left out of the article.

If not, perhaps we can get things going again as we have a cool new budget game coming out soon. We think it is a strong 80-90 percent title, especially at this price point, and would like you to take a look

at it. I really want to keep things going in a positive direction with Ziff—especially [in preparation] for our new blockbuster game coming out in 2006.

**Regards,
Upset Marketing Dude #6452**

Translation: "We're upset about your review score, but if you'd like to rereview it with a better score or perhaps give our upcoming crappy budget game the equivalent of an 80-90 percent score so we can get a good box quote, it will make us happier and we'd be more inclined to offer you some exclusive coverage on another upcoming game that actually may not suck."

Uh, no.

DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

"X" most definitely did not mark the spot in our "Mystery Shopper" story [*CGW* #259, pg. 40]. Our apologies to gaming boutique WidowPC, which does actually offer a 30-day unconditional money-back guarantee and a zero-dead-pixel policy on notebooks. It was marked incorrectly on the grid.

SPEAK UP!

MAIL BYTES

Look *CGW*, I really like your magazine a lot, OK?
—Bryan (aka Yogi)

I feel the love. And that love is *EGM*. Thank you for loving me, *EGM*.
—Ryan, in an e-mail to *CGW*

What the hell is on page 28 [*CGW* #259] from the ESRB? You have no idea how pissed I am.
—Recon

One does not simply walk into Mordor.

or FORNOST.   or ETTENMOORS.

or The BLUE MOUNTAINS.

or RIVENDELL.

or MITHLOND.

or The SHIRE.

or MORIA.

or ISENGARD.

EPIC CONFLICTS ARE ARISING ON THE FRIGID PLAINS OF THE NORTH. VAST
NAVIES APPROACH FROM THE SEA. YOU MUST COMMAND THE GREATEST
HEROES OF MIDDLE-EARTH AND BECOME A LEGEND YOURSELF. BUILD UNIQUE,
IMPENETRABLE FORTRESSES. CONTROL ARMIES OF ALL THE RACES OF
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NOT-SO-SPLIT PERSONALITIES

Learning lessons from the virtual people we play

INSIDE

POSTMORTEM
Prince of Persia
Morning-after talk with the makers of *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones*.
22

INTERVIEWS
Mod Summit
All-angles roundtable talk on art of mod-making.
26

PREVIEW
D&D Online
Neverwinter Nights 2 and *D&D Online: Stormreach*—a double dose of *Dungeons & Dragons*.
30

CULTURE

LIKE CHEWBACCA, ANNIE PLATOFF, A 42-year-old librarian at the University of California, Santa Barbara, is a Wookiee. Unlike many of the walking carpets populating MMO *Star Wars Galaxies'* planets, however, her character Moya is complete and internally consistent. Platoff, or Moya as it were, is a roleplayer.

According to some so-called roleplayers, average RPG addicts don't really play roles. Defining identity with statistics alone (40,000 experience points, 2,000 gold), they say, is akin to sizing someone up by counting the Abercrombie items in her closet. Substance is something else, something neither accumulated through grinding nor acquired on auction sites.

While still a toddler, Moya lost his loved ones to slave traders. Later, as an adolescent, he decided he owed a "life debt" to those who saved him (à la Chewie's commitment to Han Solo) and offered to fight for the Rebellion. At first xenophobic and wary of non-Wookiees, by degrees he warmed up to others, became a musician, formed the group Def Stars, and founded the city of Symphonia and, in it, a Wookiee Cultural Center. (Visit the WCC's website at wookieecenter.home.mindspring.com.)

No, we aren't quoting the big book of secondary *Star Wars* stories. Platoff created the character, his habits, his history. Splitting her personality between virtual and actual selves, she is and isn't him: "I trained in museum studies but work as a librarian, and since librarians make a lot more money than curators, Moya's museums are outlets through which I pursue a profession I otherwise couldn't afford to. When I do in-game museum work, I actually use my real-life museum training—that applies to exhibit creation, label writing, educational activity coordination, and the ethics of dealing with donations and museum property. Moya would never use WCC funds for his own benefit."

GENTLE GIANT

That roleplayers' alter egos often reflect and act as outlets for their real-life interests isn't surprising. But what about when it works the other way around? When the fiction influences the facts of the roleplayer's real life? When a librarian learns from the person she plays on a PC?

"It started with name calling," Platoff says, "'fur face,' 'overgrown Ewok,' and 'fleabag.' I don't mind when friends affectionately call me 'fuzzy,'… but these guys got in my face and harassed me. And then there are the stereotypes about Wookiees being violent and irrational—people love to quote the *Star Wars* line about letting the Wookiee win and say things like, 'Oh, don't pull my arms off.'"

As a woman, Platoff says she knew discrimination, but this was different. In a way, she was experiencing it directly, as when an antagonistic armor smith hired hit men to assassinate Moya. "This," she thought, "is like living in a different country or dominant culture." Without wanting to trivialize racism, she says, "While I knew that this wasn't real, it affected me. Moya's life has helped me better appreciate what it's like to be the target of racist attention; it's made me much more sensitive to these issues in real life."

Feeding the loop in which her day-to-day identity intertwines with that of her fantasy figure, Platoff says she looked to the lives of Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal and the exiled Tibetan Dalai Lama for influence. "Neither perpetuates hate against those who wronged their people," she says, "and I think that Moya, too, has accomplished more for the Wookiee cause with his museums than he could have with his bowcaster."

ARE WE WHAT WE PLAY?

Other lessons Platoff says she's learned while roleplaying are less loaded—"It puts me in touch with Internet culture and the college-age crowd"—but no less interesting. And she's not alone. Before beginning his double life as Fissel in *World of WarCraft*, Carl Hutchens described himself as "by the book and superserious." His droll, wisecracking gnome mage who "hurls puns along with explosive spells," taught him the defusing power of humor. "Fissel helps me blow things off and laugh at what could otherwise become stressful situations in real life," he says. "As a lead chef, I've seen the difference in how people react to me when I can crack a joke under certain high-pressure circumstances. Humor is a powerful tool."

Similarly, Jason Mack says his go-getter of a *Galaxies* character has influenced his identity. "Before, I lacked that attitude. I was right there in line, bleary-eyed at the coffee pot, just begging to get through the day without incident. One day, however, I discovered that from [my character's] viewpoint, I could look forward to everyday challenges. Now, I welcome it when someone comes along with a huge project for me; that way I can handle it well and be proud of the accomplishment, much as my character would when going three rounds with HK-47."

What's striking about self-professed roleplayers such as Platoff and Hutchens and Mack is how grounded they seem, how, rather than conflating fantasy with reality, they readily reflect on what they give to and get from games and how fact and fiction can inform and enrich one another. "You could call what I do extreme," confesses Platoff, "and some people I encounter probably think I'm convinced I am a Wookiee. In fact, whenever someone suggests as much, I just smile, knowing I've done a good job playing the part. Then, I log off, walk away from the keyboard, and return to the real world. I like both my real and virtual lives. What more could I want?" **/Shawn Elliott**

CARPETERIA

Roleplayer Annie Platoff says millions of credits and hundreds of artifacts from generous donors make her Wookiee Cultural Center the must-see museum in *Galaxies*: "Aside from the WCC in Symphonia, we also have the Wookiee Hall of Fame, the Kashyyykian Museum of Tatooine, and the Kashyyykian Roadshow—a traveling exhibit that I can move from city to city."

RULES OF THE ROLE

Roleplaying rules change from community to community, but most groups follow a few guidelines.

- Your character has to have come from somewhere. He needn't have a glorious past, but then, he shouldn't have popped into being with the click of a Create Character button, either.

- Accents often make sense in certain contexts (e.g., Scottish-sounding dwarves and the Jamaican patois of trolls in *World of WarCraft*), but an accent alone does not create a character.

- Avoid dramatic irony (i.e., letting on that you know what your character could not). If you must bring in some outside info—say, that one in five krilldor dragons drops a dorkrill saber—say your character heard a rumor from someone sometime that such and such might be somewhere.

- Stay thick skinned. When someone talks trash or starts flirting, it could have nothing to do with the person playing and everything to do with the character he is playing.

- Learn the ways of the world you're living in. Find out more about an MMORPG's backstory in its manual or on its website (e.g., www. worldofwarcraft.com/info/story/ chapter1.html).

>> "PEOPLE I ENCOUNTER PROBABLY THINK I'M CONVINCED I AM A WOOKIEE."
—ROLEPLAYER ANNIE PLATOFF

GOTHIC 3

That other orcs-versus-humans series

PUBLISHER: Aspyr DEVELOPER: **Piranha Bytes** GENRE: **RPG** RELEASE DATE: **TBD**

PREVIEW

BIG HITS IN GERMANY BUT BUSTS beyond, the *Gothic* RPGs slipped under the radar Stateside. Sporting grizzled graphics and a lousy interface, the first two were tough-love treks for the dedicated and diehard alone. A complex low-fantasy story further disaffected RPGers weaned on operatic dragon-dungeon-missile-magic, though a select few recognized the game for what it did get right: pre-*Oblivion* (multiform, evolving) A.I., the deepest dynamic social hierarchies to grace an RPG, and not-mere-hype alternate play-styles and endings. With the third installment slated for delivery this year, we cornered German developer Piranha Bytes for a sitrep.

Topping *Gothic 3*'s list of from-the-ground-ups is the new feature-stacked Genome engine. "Our engine is now 90 percent proprietary," says in-house composer and sound designer Kai Rosenkranz. "And while we're not using a physics system as a gameplay element where everything can be pushed or pulled, in some situations players can now make use of realistically calculated physics." Magical gravity guns are out, in other words, but Rosenkranz says that items (or bodies) can drop down a staircase and the collision detection works perfectly. "We've upped the detail level tenfold using a tool that churns out vast amounts of trees and bushes with minimal render time."

Don't confuse render with random, though. Every single polygon in *Gothic 3* is 100 percent handmade. And the interface for interacting with the environment has been completely reworked, too. In the first and second games, everything save panning your view was a finger-gnarling key press, including combat. "Most experienced RPG players liked the keyboard interface," defends Rosenkranz, but he admits the team listened carefully to first-person control feedback to eliminate many of the old system's flaws. "Everything is drag-and-drop now, and combat can be controlled with nothing but the mouse."

MAN OF MYRTANA

Capitalizing on its stock in trade, *Gothic 3* spins the story of another nameless fellow who starts as a greenhorn and becomes a hero in the end. "Actually, we never planned any sequels," notes Rosenkranz. "But since everyone loved our protagonist from the original *Gothic*, he's been our mainstay for the follow-ups. And now he's off the island." About time. Finally hauling tail off said island (it was called Irdorath) and sailing for the mainland (three times the size of *Gothic II*'s), Piranha Bytes intends to escalate the series' clichéd humans-versus-orcs story in entirely untypical ways. "Essentially, the kingdom of Myrtana is shattered by the war against the orcs," explains Rosenkranz. "By the time the player arrives, the orcs are about to the deliver the death blow. They're basically enslaving the human race."

Common enough plot fodder, but that's too simple a reading. Like the earlier games,

> "EVERYTHING IS DRAG-AND-DROP NOW, AND COMBAT CAN BE CONTROLLED WITH NOTHING BUT THE MOUSE."
>
> —KAI ROSENKRANZ, COMPOSER

▲ NPCs go about their daily business with even more elaborate day and night schedules for your interactive pleasure.

▲ You'll have to decide whether to help the humans or the orcs in a war that's been brewing since the original *Gothic*.

Gothic 3 gives you concrete antiplot options. Want to save humanity's sorry selfish butt? Go for it. But you can also side with the orcs or just tell both sides to get bent. In fact, even the alternate paths are now decidedly skewed. "In contrast to the previous *Gothic* games, we're not nailing you down in terms of how you achieve your goals," says Rosenkranz, highlighting new extensions to the series' already open-ended story system. "Once a quest is accepted, you can freely decide the best way to solve it. So, for example, the game continuously checks if you've done something related to a certain quest, i.e., finding an item, talking to a character about something, and so on. If a number of abstract conditions are fulfilled, the quest is considered finished." According to Rosenkranz, completing certain quests will synergistically activate further plot points and spin the story out in a very nonlinear way. "We've taken care to ensure you never feel overwhelmed by too many options, like dispatching someone who reminds you of the overall goal," explains Rosenkranz. "But the question then becomes, whom will you trust?"

Sounds like a certain other massively non-linear RPG (read: *The Elder Scrolls IV*), but don't confuse Piranha Bytes' design approach with Bethesda's. While both toy with multi-

form freedom, *Gothic 3*'s expansiveness is focused. That also means you're still not rolling a scratchboard character. "All *Gothic* games have one thing in common," says Rosenkranz. "They're RPGs without the character generation at start-up." From *Gothic 3*'s outset, your "nameless self" already sports a list of talents. Thereafter, it's up to you to shape and personalize the character by expanding all the usual skills, plus a host of new ones. "In addition to the principal weapon and fighting talents, you'll now find a variety of small skills that work like perks," Rozenkranz continues. "That's brand new, like, for example, extra damage against orcs, two-weapon combat, or shields."

No discussion of a *Gothic* game would be complete without an A.I. drill-down. Peek in someone's house or draw your weapon in public in the prior games and you'd score a stern talking-to. Stubborn players got a sword in the gullet. "We gave our original A.I. a major overhaul," says Rosenkranz. "In addition to the human-to-human level, we've added two new layers: regional and global." Rosenkranz defines the regional layer as covering townwide attitudes and events for a specific region. "So whenever the hero manages to fall out of favor with the inhabitants of a town, this is being handled by the regional layer," he explains. "In time, the protagonist might use his persuasiveness to

▲ A new graphics engine ushers the series into next-gen territory—players have three times as much terrain to explore as in *Gothic II*.

gain followers. If he wins over enough people in a city, he might trigger a revolution and expel or kill the occupying orcs." The global level, on the other hand, plies the huge, panoramic events that affect things like major plot checkpoints and war outcomes.

Comprising a cast of 1,000 unique characters and 75 kilometers of densely forested terrain, *Gothic 3* has next-gen freeform play on the brain…and hopefully in the final product when it ships later this year. / **Matt Peckham**

FROM SYBERIA TO PARADISE

Story time with adventure game maestro Benoît Sokal

PREVIEW

AFTER THE SLAM-DUNK CRITICAL success of last year's *Indigo Prophecy*, you could say that future entries in the adventure game genre have a pretty high bar to clear. Benoît Sokal, designer of the acclaimed *Syberia* games, sees this as a plus—though he's quick to point out that his next adventure game, *Paradise*, paints a distinctly different picture in terms of atmosphere.

"It's a very good game," Sokal says of *Indigo Prophecy*, "but its ambience is [far different] than what we're trying to create [with *Paradise*]." *Paradise* takes place in Africa—but not exactly the Africa we're all familiar with. Sokal's managed to conjure up an entire fictional African country for his story: Maurania,

which houses a mixture of Arabian and traditional African cultures across four distinct regions. The tale picks up in the city of Madargane, where an amnesiac young woman named Ann Smith has just survived a harrowing plane crash.

The circumstances behind Ann's arrival in Maurania form the driving force behind *Paradise*'s plot. "She wakes up in a prince's palace," Sokal explains. "The prince tells Ann that the only way for her to escape from the country is to head south, as the airport and the [northward] routes are controlled by rebellious forces who oppose [the country's] cruel dictator." The prince agrees to help her if she does a small favor for him—which involves taking a mysterious leopard along for the journey and eventually freeing the majestic beast back into the wild.
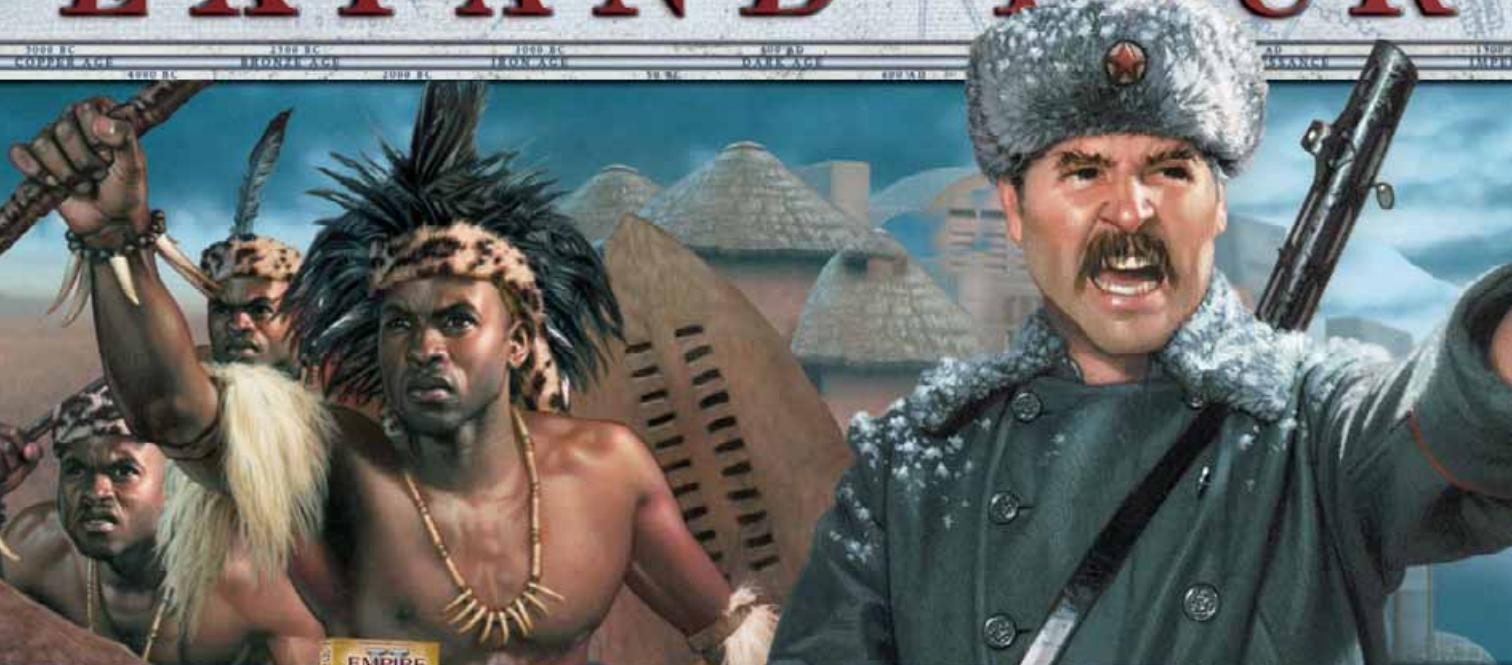
MOVIE MAGIC

"If it weren't so cliché at this point, we'd compare *Paradise* to an interactive movie," Sokal muses. "We want players to feel the kinds of emotions that good movies generate, along with [a sense of] wonder about what's next, how the story will end, and what will happen to the heroine."

The unfolding story also involves some puzzles…but Sokal sees this as a strictly secondary element of his design. "In our games," he says, "it is the story that drives the player—not the puzzles. Therefore, players aren't necessarily challenged by the difficulty of the puzzles,
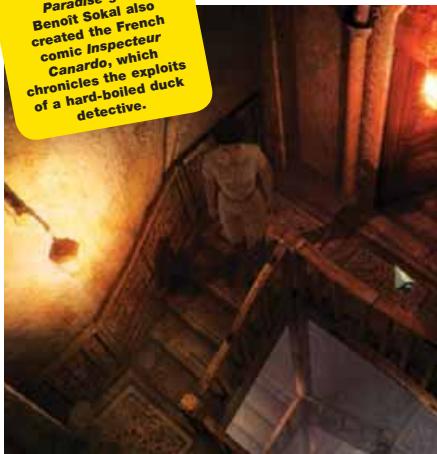
◀ Adventure gaming meets animal activism—do it for the kitties!

🖾 BRAINTEASERS

Puzzles make or break any adventure game—and according to publisher Ubisoft, we won't be going through the typical "push the button to open the door so you can flip the switch and lower the bridge" rigmarole with *Paradise*.

"For the uninitiated, Benoît Sokal's puzzles are intuitively woven into an artistic framework," Ubisoft producer Ashley Bushore explains. "You feel like you're in the story itself, assisting to spin out Sokal's tale. Though [some puzzles] seem a bit abstract on their own, taken in the context of Sokal's fantasy world, they're really pretty mild. Most are quite instinctive."

but rather are [encouraged] to have fun while watching the story [unfold]." Sokal also points out that "We try to build 'logical' puzzles. For example, if you leave the city in a car, you'll need to [repair] it, find fuel, and then forge a passport."

The storycentric design philosophy seems to be working well for *Paradise* so far, as Sokal notes that the game has already spawned a graphic novel, with a novelization and a mobile-phone version in the pipeline. "We believe in stories," says Sokal. "Our vision is to go where the image goes. Who knows? Tomorrow, *Paradise* could be a movie." One word of advice, Mr. Sokal: Boycott Uwe Boll if that happens, eh? **/Ryan Scott**

> "IF IT WEREN'T SO CLICHÉ AT THIS POINT, WE WOULD COMPARE *PARADISE* TO AN INTERACTIVE MOVIE."
>
> —BENOÎT SOKAL, AUTHOR/ART DIRECTOR, WHITE BIRDS PRODUCTIONS
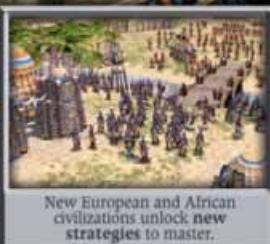
POSTMORTEM:
PRINCE OF PERSIA:
THE TWO THRONES

Producer Ben Mattes tells a tale of two princes

INTERVIEW

CGW: Looking back on the trilogy you just completed, how close do you feel you came to realizing the vision you had at the start?
Ben Mattes: We came very close to what we envisioned in terms of how the Prince was going to evolve in the three episodes, from a young and naïve character to a seasoned warrior. There are a lot of features and ideas we had to cut for lack of time, but that's how every creative process goes! You have about a million ideas at first, and you have to keep only the best and most feasible ones.

CGW: What kind of feedback did you get after the previous game, *The Warrior Within*, whose ramped-up gore earned the first M rating in the series' history?
BM: The feedback we got about the more mature art direction was either very enthusiastic or very critical, depending on fans' likes and dislikes. But what was most important to us was that the completely new combat system we implemented was really well received. Players didn't ask for more changes to the core gameplay after *Warrior Within*. Their main requests were to bring Farah back and to return to a more Persian atmosphere in the music.

CGW: What was the genesis of the "speed kill" option you added in *The Two Thrones*?
BM: We wanted to push the Prince's athletic skills a step further. The speed kill system makes the most of the Prince's acrobatics, and because it's only possible [to pull off] if the Prince has not been noticed by patrolling enemies, it also adds a bit of strategy to the overall action.

CGW: When you're designing the third game in a successful trilogy (never mind the sixth game in this now-legendary series), how do you continue giving players something they haven't seen before?
BM: For each game, we've tried to come up with new ideas: an innovative time-control feature in *Sands of Time*; a completely new fight system in *Warrior Within*; and the speed kill system, the chariot races, and a new playable character, the Dark Prince, in *The Two Thrones*.

CGW: Was the idea of splitting gameplay between the Prince and his dark alter ego inspired by the original *Prince of Persia* sequel, 1993's *The Shadow and the Flame*, in which the Prince has to die at one point and then play the rest of the game as a shadow version of himself?
BM: Yes, it's a tribute somehow. In *The Shadow and the Flame*, though, the Prince and his alter ego eventually unite and form one person; in *The Two Thrones*, the Prince ultimately chooses to ignore his dark side. He does not kill him; he does not accept him. He just stops listening to him. It's our way of showing how he reaches his maturity.

CGW: Watching the old flick *The Crimson Pirate* the other day, we noticed some scenes could've come straight from a *Prince of Persia* game. Did you scour classic movies to get ideas for cool moves? And did some poor stuntman in a motion-capture suit have to reproduce them for the game?
BM: Yes, we've been inspired by classic Hollywood adventure movies, but also by other types of cinema, such as Asian kung fu movies with their incredible choreographed combat. And no, we did not use any motion capture for the Prince. We left it in the hands of our very gifted animators. /
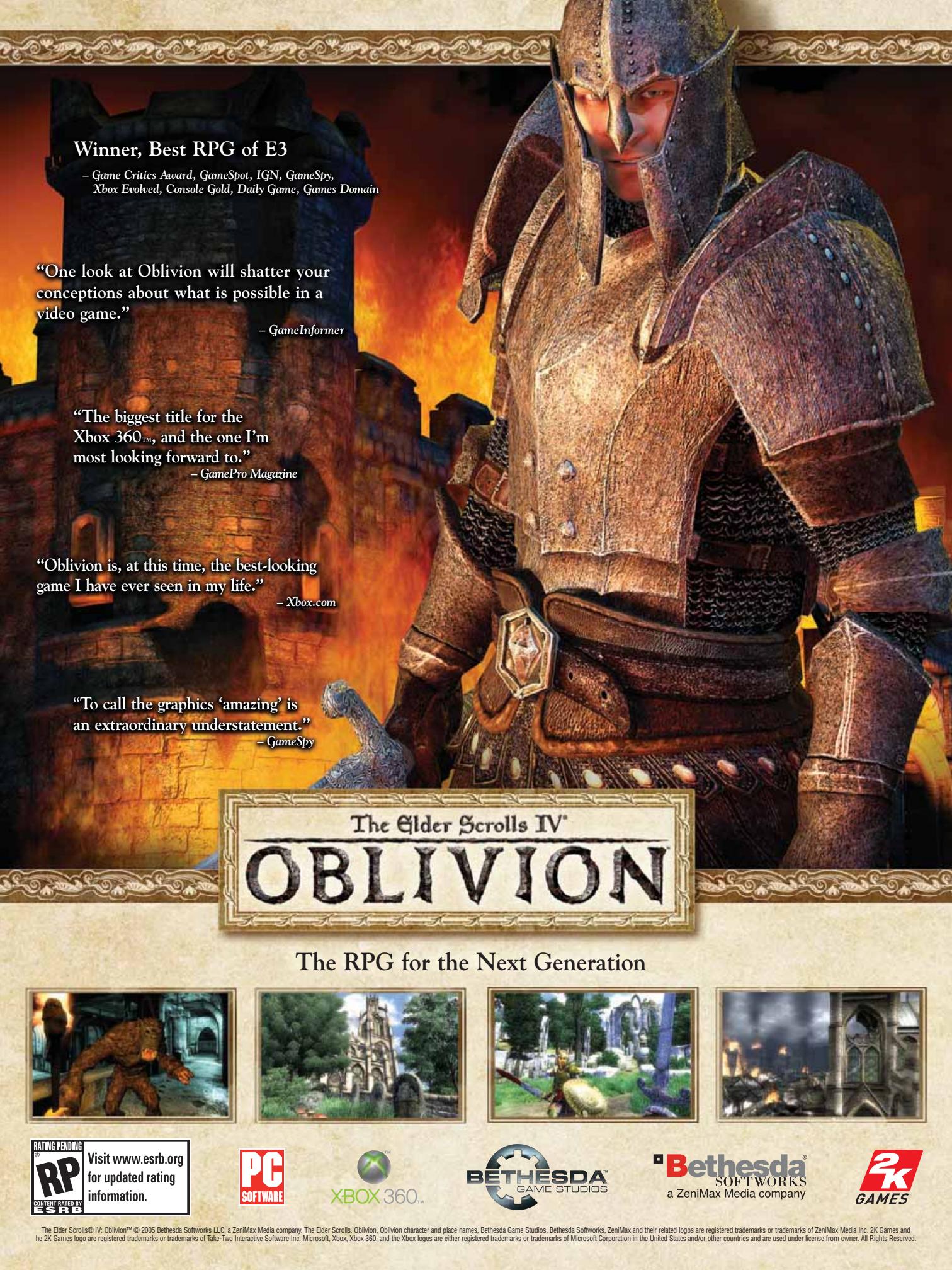
ROYAL PAIN
Our favorite prince: Albert. There's no particular reason, really.

>> "WE'VE BEEN INSPIRED BY CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD ADVENTURE MOVIES...."

—PRODUCER BEN MATTES

Winner, Best RPG of E3

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

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

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

"Oblivion is, at this time, the best-looking game I have ever seen in my life."
– Xbox.com
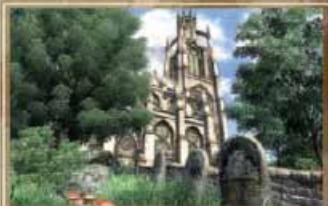
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The Elder Scrolls IV
OBLIVION

The RPG for the Next Generation

WORST. IDEAS. EVER.

Think you've seen some bad games? It could be worse

SLIGHTLY GAMEY

JEREMY GAFFNEY HAS HEARD IT ALL. Technically, that's his job as vice president of product development at NCsoft. This gaming talent scout is constantly looking for new MMOs, ferreting out interesting new concepts and then making the good ones a reality. It's these searches that helped uncover a gem like *City of Heroes*. *Auto Assault* is another prime example, and more projects are secretly percolating in development as you read this.

But to ferret out these finds, Gaffney sifts through about 100 different game proposals a year. "We've heard all sorts of strange stuff," he says. "What's amazing isn't how odd some of these ideas are; it's that the people pitching them think they're really good." A majority of the meetings Gaffney suffers through are freaky, funny, painfully sad, or a combination of all three. What is the most painfully bad experience that comes to mind?

The game: *Alien Infestation* (name changed to protect the innocent—and the insane)

The pitch: Aliens have infiltrated the Earth! How, you ask? By infesting the wildlife and insidiously making them dance. So the next trick is figuring out how to stop cows, rabbits, and such from uncontrollably cutting a rug. The solution: use force poles to cut off the saucer's signal. Of course, you battle through dance.

If you thought the pitch was bad, the game looked worse. The artwork was lousy and the technology was god-awful. With its busted animations, the demo, featuring break-dancing bun-nies, ran at about 1.5 frames per second. That's barely faster than a View-Master reel of *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*.

Gaffney says: "I actually felt bad for the poor investor, who had put millions of his own money behind the game. He was desperately trying to convince himself it was a good idea and a good demo while he was pitching it. He wasn't fooling anyone; that was obvious. I just have no idea how he got sold on the game to begin with, or how he felt after seeing what his investments had wrought…but you could see a panicked sadness in his eyes throughout the entire pitch.

"After the meeting, I ran down the hall to [Richard] Garriott's office. We always play practical jokes on each other, so I figured that this was the ultimate joke and he had totally nailed me. Sadly, it was no joke—he really had no idea what I was talking about. It was a 100 percent legitimate pitch.

"Hey, we've all been n00bies at some point. I respect anyone who has the guts to take your ideas and get in front of a bunch of industry execs and make your pitch. We've seen many good pitches, a lot of bad ones, and a few William Hung pitches in there for good measure. It's sometimes tricky to see the fine, fine line between innovation and outright insanity. I don't want anyone to feel picked on, and I wish every game the best. It's painful enough to reject titles—it's one of the toughest parts of the job—and if someone can make a pitch work that I didn't like, more power to them!" **/Darren Gladstone**

>> FILE THIS STORY UNDER "TRUTH IS WAAAAAY STRANGER THAN FICTION."

GREATEST MISSES
Check out some other, stranger pitch meetings in the NCsoft offices.

▶ **THE FOREIGN OBJECTS GAME**
The pitch: "You know, this was the first pitch I'd ever sat in where I've heard the sentence, 'And then you have sex with the toaster!' during a game overview," says Gaffney of a sex-based MMO pitch that came from a "prominent game developer." Please, no jokes about dinging, leveling up, or looking for SM.

▶ **WATERSHIP DOWN INNNNN SPAAAAAACE (BUT WITH SNAKES)**
The pitch: Ever wanted to roleplay as a talking alien snake on another planet? Same here! But hey, consider *Katamari Damacy*. If a game about rolling up garbage into giant balls and shooting them into space can become popular, anything is possible.

▶ **THE CRYING GAME**
The pitch: One guy came in pitching a WWI online real-time collectible card game flight simulator. Not exactly the best genres to start trying to mesh together. After Gaffney gently told him that the idea might not be salable, the pitchman began sobbing. Says Gaffney, "We sat around the table somewhat awkwardly after that…."

▶ **THE GPS GAME**
The pitch: Take virtual cross-country road trips. You drive in real time across the United States. Therefore, you can play 30-plus hours, see the world, and never get off your ass. Does that mean someone else can drive for you to power-level?

▶ **THE POWERPOINT GAME**
The pitch: Why bother with an actual game when all you need is a business plan? Gaffney says: "I sat through an entire 1.5-hour pitch from two business guys, true suits, who had left a major game publisher to do their own thing. During the first hour and a half, they spoke with great enthusiasm about their great model of funding for the game, a complex setup involving—my eyes glazed over, too—completion bonding, warrants, and an obscure variety of insurance options. At the end of the business discussion, I asked, 'Well, what is the game about?' Their answer: 'Well, it's a science fiction thing. Do we have a deal?' Yes, the sum total game portion of the pitch was, 'It's a science fiction thing.'"
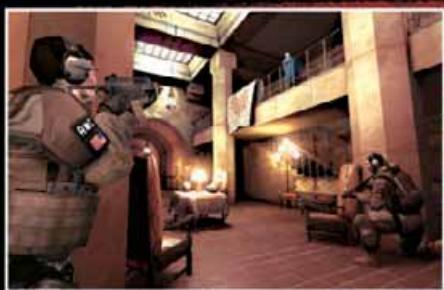
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RORY MANION

CALL IT A FRIENDLY GATHERING...

...a cheery online battle with a few of your closest pals. You hunt down a few terrorists, blow off some heads with your sniper rifle, and use night vision to stalk each other in the dark. In the world of Rainbow Six, only one rule of friendship applies: watch your back if you want to get out alive.
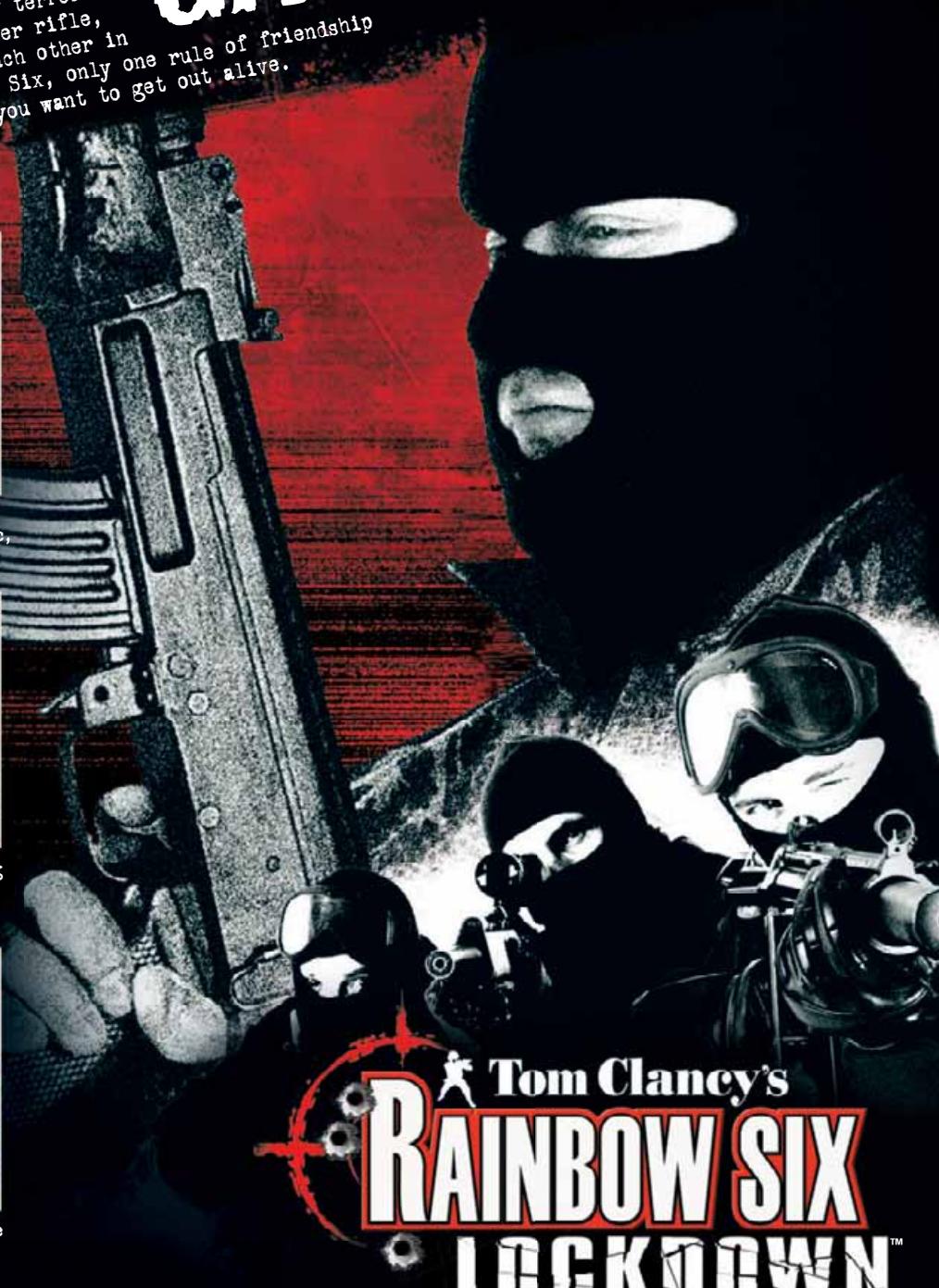
Engineered specifically for the PC with enhanced graphics, unnerving AI, and classic, pulse-pounding close-quarter battles.

The total multiplayer experience, including signature Co-op and Deathmatch modes, plus all-new "class-based" gameplay

Featuring new cutting-edge technology like motion sensors, surveillance PDAs, and 42 customizable weapons.

Tom Clancy's RAINBOW SIX LOCKDOWN™

SCI-FI **mod**

FANTASY mod

WW2 mod

character

char a6c

LEGEND

STATESMEN, Part 1
Guys who make the games that get modded.

SUCCESS STORIES, Part 2
One-time modders who've "made it."

UPSTARTS, Part 3
Promising mod-makers

BONUS!
Get the extended version of "Mod Summit" at modsummit.1UP.com.

MOD SUMMIT

An all-angles roundtable talk on the art of modmaking

▶ **SOME MODS ARE AMAZING—GAMES THAT CHANGE THE LANDSCAPE ALMOST FROM THE MOMENT THEIR WEB LINKS FIRST APPEAR** pasted in instant-messenger windows and on message boards. And since the success of packaged and price-tagged software is often settled in advance, we want these potential *Counter-Strike*s of tomorrow to achieve the unexpected, partly because the populist conditions behind their creation—frequently involving networking students who've never met face-to-face—inspire such sympathy. We like the little guys. But then, the big guys do, too.

From auspicious up-and-comers, to one-time mod authors who've already made big breaks, to major developers without whose sanction and support mod communities could not exist, we've assembled the voices of those involved at every level to sound off on the state of the art. / Shawn Elliott

STATESMEN

PARTICIPANTS: PART 1

CGW: Stakes are getting higher, and more people are now involved in creating any given game. Are the big names having a harder time generating and seeing through fresh and independent ideas? Are mod teams the new source for outrageous variety?

Jeff Morris: Being a "big name" requires repeated commercial success. That implies sticking to things that you're reasonably sure can achieve commercial success. Modmakers, on the other hand, don't have those sorts of restraints, and so [they] can often be a great source of originality.

Lars Gustavsson: [Current conditions] call for a much more controlled environment where you aren't fooling around and hoping you have something that might work in the end. Dividing the production schedule into different phases is important. It's in the initial phase that we pick up totally out-there ideas and don't limit ourselves. Then, later on, we do a reality check and decide what doesn't fit or can't be done.

Robert Duffy: We always try to do things or not do things for the right reasons. In most cases where we don't do something, it isn't because of publisher pressure or financial pressure. Every day of development you decide whether or not a feature or idea should be implemented based on hundreds of factors—your team's capabilities, technology limitations, time to implement, etc. Removing the money side of the business doesn't make these decisions go away. They're all issues that mod teams must consider, [too].

CGW: Is it in developers' interests to make easily modified engines?

JM: Player-created content keeps products on store shelves. It pretrains potential hires, can generate great mainstream press, and is a wonderful feedback mechanism for fans. The downsides, however, are pretty potent. One is opening your game up to vulnerabilities. You also have the potential of copyrighted material showing up "in your game," requiring some sophistication on the part of IP holders to appreciate that the original developer isn't responsible. And the ability to differentiate between developer and mod content can become even more troublesome. If the quality of the latter is inconsistent and consumers think it's your company's work, it can reflect poorly on your franchise.

CGW: How far are you willing to go to help a group with its mod and/or game derivative?

JM: Epic has done virtually everything it can to help modmakers. This includes mailing lists that our programmers and content people read daily, million-dollar contests to motivate and provide structure, implementing feature requests and bug fixes, video tutorials with our partners at 3DBuzz, and even training events like Unreal University.

RD: This past August we released the source code for *Quake III Arena*. Understand that this is id's most successful technology platform ever—games using it have sold over 10 million units worldwide and generated over $250 million of industry revenue worldwide—not to mention it's the core technology

for games that still sell tens of thousands of units a month right now. And we've made it free for anyone who wants to use it, even for a commercial product. A mod or development team can download the *Quake III Arena* source code, develop a product on it, sell it, and not have to pay us a dime as long as they make their code publicly available as well.

Erik Johnson: There really isn't a limit…as long as we're helping to grow their community in a meaningful way. This could range from pointing our customers to them in Steam news updates to helping with distribution on Steam.

CGW: Say you're positive a publisher won't support an idea of yours. Would you consider giving it to a modder, if only to get it out there?

JM: It's an interesting, if unrealistic, idea. Everyone who plays games has a million great ideas. The trick isn't coming up with a great idea, it's implementing any idea to the point that someone else can enjoy it.

LG: Interesting point. I always keep my thoughts up my sleeve since I think that all ideas can be sold, only it requires the right time and presentation. Still, I'm close to the guys doing *Desert Combat*, and I truly enjoyed working with them. We'd been thinking about the same problems, only from two different angles. For me, it was, "Will we have time to put support in for this feature?" Their approach was, "How can we use existing elements to make this happen?" And that's something we've learned here: Rather than always asking your programmers for more support, try thinking like a modder and using what you have at hand. But back to the beginning: If I had an idea that I think they could deliver on, and that I, for various reasons, couldn't, then I'd trust them to make something of it.

RD: Yes, although we typically don't rely on publishers to make primary decisions on our technology or design. This would be a decision about whether or not we thought the idea made sense within our own game. If it's a great idea, we'd probably hold onto it for a future opportunity, though.

EJ: I don't see any shortage of ideas among mod teams, so we tend to focus on delivering support for the mod community—be that updating the SDK [software development kit], helping spread word about their creations, or simply answering an e-mail.

CGW: Ever see a mod and wonder, why didn't we do that?

RD: [*Grins*] Yes…there was this flashlight-on-the-pistol mod for *Doom 3*.

CGW: What puts a project on your radar?

JM: Public release. I've read too many design docs to get existed about a website with concept art and a world bible.

CGW: Anything about the modder's lot that you envy?

JM: The modder's world is free, though freedom can be its biggest pitfall. As irksome as it can be to cut a feature because of deadlines, those deadlines keep us focused on the goal of shipping the game. A favorite saying of mine is that no one wants to read a poem by someone who doesn't know how to write a grammatically correct paragraph. In other words, you need to know how to make a game from beginning to end before you can really appreciate and take advantage of the liberty associated with no deadlines, burn rates, etc.

RD: Complete freedom to try new ideas without having to worry too much about production schedules and the intense scrutiny most triple-A titles are subjected to.

EJ: The mod community has the flexibility to take risks that traditional development studios aren't willing or able to take for a variety of reasons. It's their primary advantage, and the teams that are able to recognize this are the ones that tend to be the most successful. Now, they also have to deal with a number of challenges that we don't, not the least of which is physical proximity to the rest of their team. The mod community tends to evolve at a faster rate than the "professional" development community, though, and we're already seeing some teams that are actually software development companies building games in their spare time. Given the ability to take those kinds of projects to market with Steam, I'd expect to see more than a few software developers moonlighting from their real jobs and building products.

CGW: Have you considered something along the lines of Steam to showcase and make mods more accessible?

JM: We're investigating a number of new ways to put player-created content into our customers' hands for our upcoming products. Installing and switching between mods and the core game has not been as easy as it should have been in the past with *Unreal*, so we're going to be addressing that in *UT2007*.

RD: Internally, id hasn't looked into developing something like this on its own, but digital distribution is going to grow as a prominent method of product delivery. ▸

▲ Jeff Morris
Producer
Epic Games

▲ Lars Gustavsson
Creative director
DICE

▲ Erik Johnson
Product manager
Valve

▲ Robert Duffy
Lead programmer
Id Software

"THE MODDERS WORLD IS FREE, THOUGH FREEDOM CAN BE ITS PITFALL."

—JEFF MORRIS, PRODUCER, EPIC GAMES

NEGOTIATE?

NEGOTIATE?

INTIMIDATE?

PARTICIPANTS: **PART 2**

▲ **John Gibson**
President
Tripwire Interactive

▲ **Alan Wilson**
Vice president
Tripwire Interactive

▲ **Joe Halper**
Production lead
Desert Combat

▲ **John Morello II**
Animator
Day of Defeat

▲ **Paul Wedgwoo**
Lead designer
Splash Damage

SUCCESS STORIES

CGW: Would you say your perspective as one-time modders who've found success is different from developers who've taken the traditional path? Are you more inclined to innovate?

John Gibson: I've been on both sides…and I would absolutely say that we are more apt to innovate than a traditional development studio. A pack mentality seems to permeate much of the established game industry. I saw it at the studio where I worked and have seen it elsewhere. We saw it when we started pitching *Red Orchestra* to publishers. Any elements of our game that went outside of established norms were the very things publishers wanted to cut. And that was out of the question for us. We'd rather push the boundaries and reinvent them than conform to them.

Paul Wedgwood: Our inexperience means we're probably more likely to try something new, and quite possibly mess it up, but fortune favors the brave. The great thing is that id Software and Activision are very flexible and supportive, so providing we're prepared to cut something that isn't working out (regardless of the effort we've invested), they're generally happy with us trying new things.

CGW: What, if anything, has going corporate done to your design philosophy?

JG: Well, I wish I could say it hasn't changed at all, but that wouldn't be the truth. You do have to be more mindful of a broader audience. Still, I'd say we have an incredibly strong rebellious streak.

Alan Wilson: One of the key elements that we started hitting the team with at an early stage is "get it right the first time." That matters in the mod world, but not so much. You can try something and change it. But being "corporate" means that we can't have that luxury; we can't be casual. It leads to some heated debate, since the old "try this and change it if it doesn't work" way simply won't cut it now. It also makes you more efficient, as you aren't continually tinkering with and reworking things.

John Morello II: "Going corporate" has such a negative sound to it. [With modding comes] the ability to communicate about and iterate on designs much faster than you'll find at any company. However, with Valve we get to watch the greatest minds in the industry at work, and we've learned a lot from them.

PW: With *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, our design goals remain exactly the same—generatively evolving class-based multiplayer combat. What has changed is our approach, and the biggest influence on this has been how much we've learned from id. We're far more confident debating issues involving game mechanics and are somewhat less likely to sponsor a bad idea. Also, we're far more analytical now. When we started out, we sometimes felt a need to amass an impressive portfolio of stuff to show off. That said, we still haven't acquired the knack of using terms like "franchise," "product," or "SKU" with straight faces.

CGW: Top advice for mod teams still in the trenches?

JG: Try to pick an appropriate engine for your mod. If you're doing a total conversion with vastly different functionality than the game whose engine you're modding, make sure and stick to something with a good SDK such as [the] Unreal or Source [engines]. If you're merely replacing models and artwork, then something like the *Battlefield* series might be the best choice.

AW: Listen to what players like about your mod, listen to what stops people [from] playing it—both offer important information. But balance that by remembering what your own aims are.

Joe Halper: Keep a steady schedule (we released *Desert Combat* every 45 days). It'll help you both internally with development and externally with the fan base. At the beginning of the 45-day development cycle, we'd give each member goals for the next release, which also gave fans a time frame to play the [previous] build, post opinions, and anticipate the next release. The level of excitement was so intense at the week of each release that our website and e-mail would go down for days.

JM: Don't try and make the greatest game of all time out of the gate. Take your good ideas, pick the smallest set that defines your game the best, and get it working. Then, when you get that out the door and working, add the next few features and release those. Release early, release often, iterate quickly.

CGW: Would you say you're more concerned with making things easier for mod teams that follow in your footsteps?

AW: While we may be the start of a new wave in some respects (which does sound desperately arrogant, I know), what we've really done is remind the industry that there's all this talent out there. That talent may be inexperienced by industry standards, but it's far more prepared to take risks and try new and radical ideas.

While some areas of the industry are throwing ever more money into development budgets, gamers simply want entertaining games at a reasonable price. Big production values don't guarantee fun games. Combine that with the new routes to market that are opening up, and you realize that this is potentially a great time for small and innovative teams to break in.

JM: We definitely do share our experience with those here at Valve who work on the SDK. However, I will say that making a mod today is harder than it was when we did it. Sometimes people, modders and players alike, forget about the man hours and money that go into phenomenal retail games and put too much pressure on making a megamod from the start. Pretty high-poly models and high-res textures don't determine how much fun something is.

CGW: Have you ever had your mod further modded by someone else? Do you support modding of your mods?

AW: I don't see any reason why people shouldn't do so. We encouraged mappers to make new material for *Red Orchestra*, as it immediately enhanced the mod. But one thing I've discovered is this: People can be very protective of their work, and I think it has a lot to do with the amount of effort put into the creative process. They do get upset when someone butchers their work or claims some derivative as their own.

JM: A couple *Day of Defeat: Source* mods are currently in the works. It's great as long as they stay within the guidelines of the end-user license agreement that ships with all *Half-Life* games. I'm looking forward to one [particular] Pacific Theater mod.

PW: Yes, and absolutely. Iterative revision and refinement is almost as important as innovation in game design and development. Iteration is far easier for a mod team, too. We can't wait to see what modmakers do with *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*.
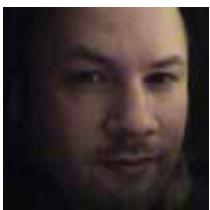
>> "PRETTY HIGH-POLY MODELS AND HIGH-RES TEXTURES DON'T DETERMINE HOW MUCH FUN SOMETHING IS."

—JOHN MORELLO II, ANIMATOR, *DAY OF DEFEAT*

PARTICIPANTS: **PART 3**

▲ **Garry Newman**
Modmaker
Garry's Mod

▲ **Thearrel McKinney**
Lead designer
Lost Marine

▲ **Robert Crouch**
Project manager
Dystopia

▲ **Justin Harvey**
Lead programmer
Neotokyo

▲ **Andrew Spearin**
Project director
Insurgency

▲ **Adam Foster**
Mapmaker
Minerva

UPSTARTS

CGW: Would you say you're less risk averse than some major publishers in terms of trying new and untested things?

Garry Newman: Definitely. Having nothing to lose is one of the huge strengths of making a mod.

Thearrel McKinney: If a mod team spends a year creating a completely new type of game and it doesn't go over well within the community, it's OK. They can either improve that title or move on to something else entirely.

Robert Crouch: Investors and publishers see innovative product as a massive financial risk. Without a proven market, they're hardly going to sign big contracts and give developers free reign to create anything out of the ordinary. As modders, we risk only our own spare time, and even if our projects fail to pick up players, we've still gained valuable experience.

Justin Harvey: The nature of the risk is different. If no one plays your project, it can be incredibly disheartening. Maybe our emotional investment is greater because our work is a labor of love.

Andrew Spearin: Perhaps we're able to explore areas publishers might not want to. For instance, *Insurgency* is set in present-day Iraq. The trend seems to be to base games such as *Joint Operations*, *Battlefield 2*, and the *Clancy* stuff on real locations but fictional conflicts.

Adam Foster: We don't have to deal with focus groups insisting on lowering things to some lowest common denominator. My first *Minerva* maps are fairly straightforward, but I have some much more outlandish ideas for the future. One dispenses with combat entirely—at which point, those hypothetical focus groups are violently scribbling in their notebooks with red ballpoint. I couldn't care less.

CGW: Garry, would you wager that *Garry's Mod* or something like it could succeed as stand-alone software at retail?

GN: I don't think anyone would release a real sandbox game like *Gmod*—they'd have to base some sort of game around it. That said, Steam-like distribution systems are changing how retail works and reducing the risks. Valve made it clear that the option is there if I want to start charging for my mod, but I can't imagine it bringing in enough money to risk killing the community, so I refused. Plus, it's buggy as hell and I'd be embarrassed to charge for it.

CGW: How supportive have developers been if you had questions or design obstacles?

TM: That definitely varies from development house to development house. I've had some developers

not reply to serious issues and other developers respond to not so serious issues. It's important to connect with your community, but there's a flip side to that, too. Many modders expect way too much from developers. Truth be told, developers…don't owe anyone anything.

RC: Valve was wonderful during our development of *Dystopia*. They flew four of our team [members] to Seattle to spend a week working on our game in their office.

AS: Working with Valve is a pleasure. Mods get much more exposure as a result of Steam news updates. For instance, when *Insurgency* was featured in a July 2005 update, our website had over 100,000 unique visitors within four days and ended up with over 130,000 unique visitors for that month.

CGW: What can devs do to make your life easier all around?

GN: Examples, examples, examples. People wanted to mod, not start from scratch.

RC: 1) Release timely updates to SDK code bases. 2) Provide marketing and advertising for mods. 3) Help with distribution of mod content.

AF: Accurate documentation on using design tools is essential.

CGW: Are mod toolkits getting more or less easy to pick up?

GN: What's getting harder is creating highly detailed content like maps and models.

RC: The learning curve for any dev kit is definitely going to be directly linked to the complexity of the engine it's [made] for. Countering this is the fact that professional developers are releasing more documentation and offering higher levels of support.

JH: Again, documentation is key. A large part of Epic's business is engine licensing, and they've spent a great deal of time and effort documenting their development tools.

CGW: Have you ever had your mod further modded by someone else? Do you support modding of your mods?

TM: I'm not supportive of people modding another person's projects, especially without permission. I suppose I'd be more supportive if they were interested in working with the original modmaker.

RC: Recently, someone approached us, asking for permission to export *Dystopia*'s player models to *Garry's Mod*. We said sure—it's an excellent way to show off our artists' wonderful work, since so many

people use *Gmod* to create wallpaper and comics. We also actively support people creating third-party maps for *Dystopia* and are about to relaunch a mapping contest with cash prizes.

AS: *Half-Life* mods, from *Day of Defeat* to *Counter-Strike* to *Firearms*, all had strong third-party communities that created new models and maps, and I hope the same goes for *Insurgency*.

CGW: Any genres that have better modding tools overall or that are easier to mod for?

AF: Perhaps FPSes in particular are the most versatile. Chalk it up to John Carmack's work—the *Quake* design of having a general-purpose engine with game-specific logic contained in a separate module seems to have been quite influential. In many games, the engine is synonymous with the game logic, with no real separation between where one ends and the other begins.

CGW: Is an immediate wide release with potentially more bugs better for the mod format in terms of finding and squashing bugs?

GN: The community does the testing—not the consumer. And a mod is never finished—this is something that I think a lot of modders forget. These things don't need to be perfect. The community enjoys playing iterations as they evolve.

RC: We held off on a public release until we had a very polished demo version ready. First impressions count. Players often say things like, "I think I'll wait until it's out of beta," and then never take the time to try the mod again.

CGW: How do you handle feedback?

AF: One message I received shortly after releasing the first *Minerva* map outlined some plot failings and omissions. These were questions a player should have been asking, so I worked out some answers, which I'll slowly reveal in subsequent maps. Constructive criticism is brilliant. I only wish I'd get more of it.

GN: Not to sound bigheaded, but I've never focused on positive feedback because I've always known that the features I added were awesome, otherwise I wouldn't have added them. I paid more attention to negative feedback. A lot of it made me think, "I'm making this mod for free, be f***ing grateful," but eventually it drove me to make it so they didn't have anything to bitch about. Now the feedback is "Garry is gay," which is a good sign that they've run out of arguments. ∕

> "INVESTORS AND PUBLISHERS SEE INNOVATIVE PRODUCT AS A MASSIVE FINANCIAL RISK." —ROBERT CROUCH, PROJECT MANAGER, *DYSTOPIA*

KING'S RANSOM

The rise, fall, and rebirth of a *King's Quest* tribute game

Even royalty has to occasionally deal with crazy panhandlers. ▼

ON THE DISC EXCLUSIVE VIDEOS!

▲ Beauty's first date with Beast had a shaky start. But over aperitifs, both realized they shared a passion for the *Teen Wolf* movies.

▲ Project director César Bittar says *The Silver Lining* does much with drama and character development. The proof: mindful chin-stroking.

PUBLISHER: **Phoenix Online Studios** DEVELOPER: **Phoenix Online Studios** RELEASE DATE: **Mid-2006**

BACK FROM THE DEAD

ON NOVEMBER 14, 2005, AN IMPAS-sioned plea went out to the gaming community: "Save *King's Quest IX*!" That's right, *King's Quest*. There hasn't been a new entry in the classic adventure series since 1997, but a group of dedicated fans took it upon themselves to make a sequel. Not for profit. Not for glory. Just to give back to the series they loved.

Over four years, 50 people scattered across the globe have worked with fanatical devotion on *King's Quest IX*—writers, programmers, actors, animators, artists—and it almost came to a screeching halt when Vivendi Universal Games' legal department issued a cease-and-desist letter. After all, a group of people was using VU's intellectual property without per-mission. *King's Quest IX* was over.

RETURN OF THE KING

As the team complied and tried working with VU Games on an agreement, graphic-adven-ture fans like Matt Compton (www.savekqix .org) staged a grassroots writing campaign to save the game.

"At first we all were sad and shocked, but at the same time amazed," says *KQ9*'s PR director Saydmell Salazar. "We didn't expect this [level of] attention, but the fans give us motivation to go on." Due to the overwhelm-ing support and even mainstream media cov-erage, "VU saw itself dealing with something they didn't expect…and they have been great about it," Salazar adds.

Project director César Bittar says, "[VU's]

big concern was evaluating [*King's Quest IX*] to ensure it wouldn't harm the series' [reputation]."

Upon receiving a demo build of the game, a number of bona fide *KQ* vets took the code to see what they thought—and according to VU Games' director of PR Marcus Beer, everyone was impressed with the work. Says Beer: "[Bittar and company] are so enthusiastic about the project and the *King's Quest* fran-chise that it made our interaction with them a pleasure. I'm glad to see that *KQ*'s interesting characters and stories will get a new lease on life thanks to César and his team."

Even the series' creators, Ken and Roberta Williams, have been aware of the project. "We're honored and think it's great that people still like *King's Quest*. When we saw the demo, it was somewhat emotional for us. That was the one moment since leaving Sierra that I really wished I were back in the indus-try," says Mr. Williams. "We're happy that the team has found a way to keep going." He's speaking of the fact that in order to avoid IP conflicts, the developers had to give the game a new and very appropriate title—*The Silver Lining*. "However," he warns, "now comes the hard part—producing a game."

With a green light and a new studio name, Phoenix Online Studios, Bittar is back in busi-ness. The first of three installments, when ready, will go to VU's legal department and a product manager for approval. After that, Phoenix Online Studios will make *TSL* avail-able for a free download. Hopefully, we'll have part one in our hands by mid-2006.
▕**Darren Gladstone**

WHAT IS THE SILVER LINING ABOUT?

César Bittar, project director at Phoenix Online Studios, explains what this tribute to *King's Quest* is all about:

"First, it's a pure adventure game that we wanted to bring into the 21st century. The story has a darker, more mature plot [than previous games in the series]. It is somewhere between *Lord of the Rings*, *Final Fantasy*, and, well, *King's Quest*. We're exploring a lot of the world and backstory from the *King's Quest* games.

"Taking all the loose ends from the series and binding them together into a single thread will span a thousand years with a prophecy that involves the whole Daventry family. Two secret societies, the Black Cloak (which we learned of during *KQ6*) and the Silver Cloak, are vying for power.

"What I love about the game, though, isn't the story—it's the characters. We studied past games and took into account every-thing that's happened, showing what has happened to people. Even the undeveloped characters that just passed through the original series get much deeper treatment here. The plan is to have many rich and fully developed personalities. They'll each have problems and demons, figurative and literal, to overcome."

>> "IT'S GREAT THAT PEOPLE STILL LIKE *KING'S QUEST*." —KEN WILLIAMS, SERIES COCREATOR

▲ "And that is where lesbian robot babies come from."

▲ "You mean, your name is Mary, too?"

THE SIMS 2:
OPEN FOR BUSINESS

Yeah, it's back again. There is no escape

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Maxis** GENRE: **Strategy** RELEASE DATE: **Winter 2006**

PREVIEW

ACK! NOT ANOTHER *SIMS* EXPANSION! OK, but before you turn the page, we just have two words for you: lesbian robots. Yeah, that's right. Just when you thought the ubiquitous, gazillion-selling series might have nothing left to offer, Maxis has come up with a virtually indispensable new feature: girl-on-girl robot action.

Oddly enough, this expansion is not ostensibly being marketed with this as the primary bullet point. No, *The Sims 2: Open for Business* is actually about something much more mundane: making money. With this expansion, your Sims can go into business for themselves, earning bucketloads of extra simoleans to supplement or replace their regular careers. In the demo we played, our Sims created a pathetic one-man lemonade stand, a popular floral shop with a bevy of paid employees, and a makeshift outdoor beauty salon on our front lawn, where we proceeded to give passersby the worst haircuts and makeovers of their tiny digital lives.

As with other *Sims* expansions, *Open for Business* is essentially a game within the game, giving you a whole new set of goals to pursue. Now, instead of watching the clock spin ahead as the game fast-forwards through business hours, you can actually go to work in the game (because we don't get enough of that in our real lives) and micromanage your business operation, from setting up the lot to creating items to hiring, training, and firing employees. If you're successful, Sim citizens will become loyal, returning customers, helping you rake it in and possibly even quit that "regular" career track of yours.

Of course, if you're a failure, you can always comfort yourself at home with those robots. As part of the expansion, your Sims can learn how to build a variety of items—including robots—that they can either sell or keep for themselves. The great thing about robots is that not only are they inherently cool (because they're robots), but they can also do your housework for you, be friends with you, and even, um, get extremely close to you, in a romantic kinda way, if you're into that sort of thing. One word of advice, though: Don't invite them into the hot tub with you. The results might be unpleasant for all involved. **/Jeff Green**

> ## BEFORE YOU TURN THE PAGE, WE JUST HAVE TWO WORDS FOR YOU: LESBIAN ROBOTS.

DUNGEONS & DR STORMREACH
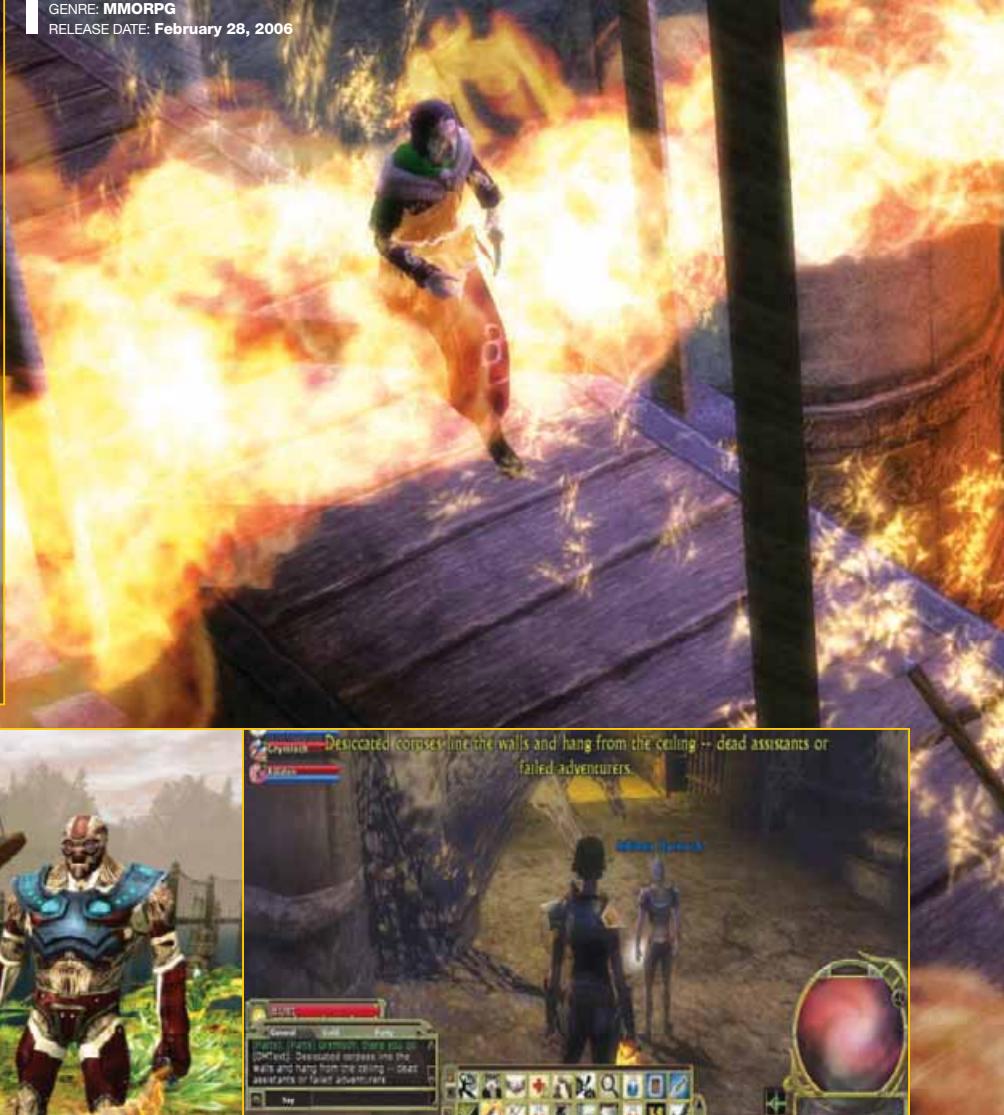
Why is this dungeon different from all other dungeons?

PREVIEW

> We're hardly the first to mention the upcoming MMO set in the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe, but that doesn't mean we haven't been watching the game's development with great interest. After all, a *D&D* pedigree is like geek insta-cred. Be that as it may, we can't help but wonder: Outside of the (admittedly exciting) heritage, what's going to set *Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach* apart from the gaggle—nay, the glut—of other fantasy-based MMOs already out or about to emerge? Outside of the in-quest narration of a dulcet-throated Dungeon Master, what will we find in *DDO* that we won't find in, say, another fantasy-based MMORPG that millions of people are currently playing and that we probably don't need to name here?
>
> Here's what the Turbine team told us to look for...and what we actually saw during a recent high-level quest in the *DDO* beta. /

AUTHENTIC D&D

Turbine says: The game is based on the *Dungeons & Dragons* version 3.5 core rules, with nine classes and five races, including the Eberron Warforged race (like the character on the right in the screen above). Every attempt is being made to duplicate the feel of a "real" *Dungeons & Dragons* session, with a Dungeon Master setting the tone and narrating the scene during your adventures.

We saw: A slower, more deliberately paced MMO than the norm, and in this respect it's definitely faithful to the *D&D* spirit. But whether that's a good thing or not depends on how difficult you like your MMOs to be. The voice and text narration was nice enough and brought back happy pen-and-paper memories, but like all in-game narration, it was also easy enough to just blow by and ignore completely.

AGONS ONLINE:

ACTION/COMBAT

Turbine says: While your character's stats are obviously important in affecting combat and other actions, you can actually use twitch skills to influence and improve combat results. By blocking, tumbling, and staying active in combat with your mouse and keyboard, you have a greater chance of beating A.I. enemies.

We saw: Lots of random jumping and tumbling and frantic mouse-clicking as we tried to beat the skeletons, spiders, and other monsters in our path. It was certainly more engaging, on a visceral level, than the "I hit you, now you hit me" turn-taking of other MMO combat, which can usually be done with a sandwich in one hand and/or a game of *FreeCell* running in a separate window. On the other hand, it was hard to tell how much our frantic clicking and dodging were really helping. And it was equally hard to tell how necessary they were.

> BEATING DUNGEONS REQUIRES THE SKILLS OF MULTIPLE PARTY MEMBERS OF DIFFERENT CLASSES.

NO NINJAS!

Ninja looting is so *World of WarCraft*. *DDO*'s loot system assigns treasure to each member of your party, so completing a quest always means getting your fair share.

>> **DDO'S NINE CLASS-ES AND FIVE RACES** INCLUDE THE EBERRON WARFORGED RACE.

ADVENTURING

Turbine says: Pacing and teamwork are a must. Successful parties consist of characters of diverse races and classes filling roles that will be essential to conquering dungeons. Dungeons will present physical obstacles not seen in other games—like traps—that will require careful planning and coordination from party members. Quest rewards and loot will be divided up and "reserved" for specific party members, based on character class. (No more ninja looting!)

We saw: Dungeons that truly required the skills and abilities of multiple party members of different classes to beat. Tanks alone would have failed, as would spellcasters. One of the dungeons we visited was full of traps, like the one seen above, that could only be disabled by our rogue; when the rogue died, it essentially ended the quest for all involved. But before his tragic death, the rogue was having a blast scouting ahead of the party, searching for traps, and disabling them before the party advanced—just like in a real *D&D* game. And opening the treasure chest after finally beating a different dungeon yielded rewards specifically reserved for each of us. Yay!

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2
Two minutes with *NWN2*'s producer

▶ WHILE TURBINE SLAVES AWAY on *Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach*, Obsidian Entertainment (developers of *Knights of the Old Republic II*) is working equally hard on getting this year's other blockbuster *D&D* game, *Neverwinter Nights 2*, out the door.

Like BioWare's original game, *Neverwinter Nights 2* is twofold: a single-player RPG and a toolset for letting players create *D&D* modules they can share with other players around the world. We caught up with Obsidian producer Chris Parker to ask him some questions about the new toolset for user-created modules.

CGW: Is this *Neverwinter Nights 2* toolset an upgrade of the original game's Aurora tool-set? Or is it a whole new deal?
Parker: Obsidian rewrote the *NWN2* toolset from scratch. The basic functionality is similar to that of the original toolset, but there are many advancements and improvements that make it faster, easier, and more powerful to work with.

CGW: Well, that's good, because the original toolset was notoriously difficult to use.
Parker: BioWare had the difficult task of balancing ease of use while still maintaining flexibility for the user. The *NWN2* toolset is fundamentally very similar to the original toolset, so those familiar with the original will be able to hit the ground running. But for those new to the toolset, we've tried to decrease the learning curve with a streamlined interface and various wizards.

CGW: What are the biggest changes users can expect to see?
Parker: Like I said, it's been redesigned to allow much faster, easier development. Windows are no longer modal, so if you're looking at a conversation, for example, you can easily flip back and forth to other parts of your module.

The classic example of *NWN1*'s modal difficulty is a scenario in which you're writing a script and you need a tag. In the original toolset, before you could go look up that tag, you had to close the script you were working on, and if the script was from a conversation file, you had to close that, too. Then you had to open the properties of the blueprint, copy the tag, close the properties, and then go find and reopen the script you were working on. All of that is a thing of the past now—you can have scripts, conversations, object properties, and area files all available simultaneously, and viewing the properties of an object is a snap.

Another significant change is the terrain editor. For natural, outdoor areas, *NWN2* doesn't use tile sets, but rather uses height-mapped terrain. This allows for an amazing variety of landscapes simply by using brushes to contour and texture the terrain. Rolling hills, arctic tundra, deserts, coastal regions, mountains—all this and more can be easily crafted with the new terrain editor. ▌

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PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **EALA** RELEASE DATE: **March 2006**

PREVIEW

ONE COULD REASONABLY ARGUE, AT this point in time, that *The Lord of the Rings* franchise is now "done." The movies, as awesome as they may be, are over. Merry is now a heroin addict on *Lost*. But in the videogame world, franchises—especially hardcore nerd magnets like *LOTR*—tend to live forever. So, surprising to absolutely no one, Electronic Arts is getting set to release *The Battle for Middle-earth II*, a sequel to last year's pretty good RTS. And if all this sounds less than enthusiastic so far, that's because, well, we're being honest with you. We were having trouble mustering up excitement this time around...that is, until we saw the new game's War of the Ring mode.

MAP QUEST

"Many of the designers on the team are board game fans," says associate producer Amer Ajami. "So, along with the main game, we wanted to include a full-fledged metagame based on true board game rules." And that's what War of the Ring is: a stand-alone *Risk*-style, turn-based digital "board game" that ships in the box but is completely separate from the main RTS game.

In War of the Ring mode, which can be played single or multiplayer, you play on a beautifully rendered overhead map of Middle-earth, trying to conquer territories one by one. You can play as one of the six factions from the RTS game: men of the West, elves, dwarves, goblins, Mordor, and Isengard. A hero unit (who can be exported out to the main game) leads your faction across the board's 38 territories in an attempt to beat opponents under a variety of victory conditions (capture players' starting cities, conquer at least 20 territories, eliminate all your opponents' territories, or capture and hold predefined strongholds—including Helm's Deep and Minas Tirith—for three turns).

Upon attacking another territory, you'll have the option of either autoresolving the combat or playing it out in real time. If you choose the latter, you'll fight it out on one of the 38 unique RTS maps, and typical battles, according to Ajami, could last from 45 minutes to two hours—in other words, the length of a regular RTS game.

FOR FRODO!

Once a territory is yours, you can do more than just gloat about it to your opponents. Among your options, you can choose to train new units, recruit minor heroes, build structures like forts for increased defense or barracks to generate new armies, or upgrade structures to strengthen your existing armies. Oh, and when we said that War of the Ring was completely separate from the main RTS game, we lied. A little. Hitting certain milestones in War of the Ring matches (like unifying all the areas of a certain region) will unlock awards or bonuses in the main game. So the incentive is there to at least give it a shot.

But what's interesting to us is that War of the Ring is the kind of simple, easy-to-understand mainstream game that casual gamers, intrigued by the movies, might comprehend and appreciate more than the "main game" itself. Actually, that might be true of us hardcore nerds, too.
/Jeff "What about second breakfast?" Green

▲ An overhead view of the War of the Ring Grey Havens map. Where's Tom Bombadil?

▲ This preview screen, which pops up before each battle, lets you autoresolve or fight.

▲ You can build barracks on a territory to queue up more military units to join your army.

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PUBLIC ACCESS

A finger on the pulse of PC-gaming fringe culture

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

HE SAID/ HE SAID

> PRO TIP: NEVER SHARE YOUR MMO character account info with anyone, especially a pal eagerly promising assistance. The two-sided tale of cyber chums Andrew "Sigma" and Brendan "Monkeysama" proves the point.

Monkeysama: "Hip-deep in *World of WarCraft*'s grueling honor grind, Sigma said he had to do homework or something. Being both selfless and magnanimous, I offered to play his Alliance avatar while he was away. He thanked me and handed over the account info.

"After a while, I went back onto my account and marshaled my funds. I found someone who could make a wedding dress, commissioned one, and bought a bunch of booze. I then mailed it all to Sigma before getting back into his game. Next, I went to the bank, where I deposited his hearthstone and transporter (the two ways to warp in *WOW*). Wearing the wedding dress and holding the bags with booze, I headed to the Horde's capital city.

"Sneaking in, I alarmed a low-level Horde and eluded a sweeping search. I then got sloshed and made my way to the roof of their auction house, right in plain sight, and logged out. Now, as soon as Sigma started *WarCraft*, he'd see himself wearing a wedding dress, in the Horde capital city, very tipsy, and without a way to get home."

Sigma: "So, to my surprise, I log in to see my rogue in a wedding dress, location: Orgrimmar. Oh, joy. I immediately open my bags to hearth back, but of course, my hearthstone is missing. Then I tried my transporter to Everlook, and that was missing, too, along with my daggers! Luckily, Monkey left me my mount, so I hopped on and sped out. Being a good rogue, I took the zeppelins back to Grom'gol (man, I love stealth) and from there made my way back to Booty Bay, where I got my hearthstone back." /

Sigma
Level 60 Rogue
Orgrimmar

Hamburgaler
Level 1 Rogue
Elwynn Forest

Sygma
Level 2 Druid
Teldrassil

Rho
Level 7 Warrior
Darnassus

Sabera
Level 3 Hunter
Teldrassil

Brucewillis
Level 1 Warrior

Demimoore
Level 1 Priest
Elwynn Forest

Create New

Sigma

Enter World

Delete Character

> "SO, TO MY SURPRISE, I LOG IN TO SEE MY ROGUE IN A WEDDING DRESS, LOCATION: ORGRIMMAR." —ANDREW "SIGMA"

+5 BAND OF MARITAL BLISS

I ♥ MY GAMER

WoW Widow

EQ Widow

▲ Undies (above) also available in XXXL.

▶ HERE'S HOW SHERRY MYROW LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING and start accommodating her hubby's MMO addiction: "To understand his point of view I started playing—and managed to become addicted myself! After a month, though, I quit cold turkey and created GamerWidow.com." The site, which aims to provide a portal for people in relationships with partners who pay more attention to leveling up than loving, has since attracted 476 members and saved at least two marriages. "In both cases," says Myrow, "the gamer widow showed the site to their gamer, and together [the three of us] worked through their problems."

Myrow argues that widows and widowers aren't as irked by their gamers' gaming as they are by being neglected. "Making your loved one feel like they're top priority in your life is important," she explains. "A gamer has to be OK with letting his hero die when his loved one needs him. The first time my husband was completely OK with letting his character croak was momentous for me. I felt important and special, and I had no problem with him playing for another four hours!"

Myrow has since gone back to MMORPGing and insists that hands-on experience helps widows in more ways than one. For example, forum-goer Lyoness writes, "My man used to lie—'Baby, I can't pause this, I'm not safe'—and I'd believe him, but now I can [tell] whether he actually can press pause or not. Likewise, I know that when he says, 'Oh, I'm just going to do this instance really quick,' [it] means it'll take him three to four hours."

In addition to its forums, Gamer Widow also hosts a weekly show-and-tell section, Widow's Corner, and peddles cutesy shirts and undies. Not that it's all girly. "Granted, we see more widows than widowers, but we still have several of the latter on the site," Myrow says. "In one case, a woman abandoned her husband and child for someone she met in-game. It's sad." /

▶ "A GAMER HAS TO BE OK WITH LETTING HIS HERO DIE WHEN HIS LOVED ONE NEEDS HIM." —SHERRY MYROW

ONCE YOU GO HORDE...

▶ TO HELL WITH PRETTY HUMANS— Tristan Pope would rather we play as *World of WarCraft*'s ugly-on-the-outside Horde. To persuade us to switch sides, he's making a trio of tongue-in-cheek propaganda clips and modeling 'em after Apple Computer's commercials (see them at craftingworlds.com/switch). "Horde has always been the neglected, weak—not to mention ugliest—race in the game," he says. "'l33thaxxor' is more likely to stick to a stacked night elf than a tauren whose ass is larger than the screen."

Pope says that so far, people like what they see: "The first installment has grossed over 500,000 downloads in less than a month." /

▲ Never-before-seen *Electric Boogaloo* footage!

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GLADSTONED

Senior editor Darren Gladstone's monthly rant

> Recently, 250,000 people choked Las Vegas, slowing the city to a standstill. Many tried sneaking into the Adult Entertainment Expo. Everyone else attended the Consumer Electronics Show.

THE 2006 DORK REPORT

> TO SUM UP CES IN FEWER THAN 20 words: huge 103-inch plasma displays, video on demand anywhere you want it, and a PC so monstrous it eats babies. But you probably want something more specific.

GAMING

AMD unleashes the Athlon 64 FX-60 CPU (turn to page 90 for the review), Intel tries going wireless with Viiv, Nvidia's SLI tech is making its way to notebooks, and ATI hands out the new Radeon X1900 graphics cards for testing (you'll see those results next issue). First, though, let me answer the question, "What's it like having lunch with a billionaire?" The fish was a little cold.

While we ate, Michael Dell talked about how seriously he is taking the gamer crowd as he unveiled a special-edition XPS 600, the Renegade. How serious can this machine be without an Athlon 64 FX-60 under the hood? Dell sure is determined to try to impress the hardcore. This monster machine is driven by an overclocked Intel Extreme Edition 4.25GHz CPU, a 10,000 rpm 1.5TB hard drive, and not one, not two, but four Nvidia GeForce 7800 GTX chips working in Quad SLI. Somebody is compensating, but I don't care. I saw *Call of Duty 2* running smooth as silk on Dell's crispy new 30-inch LCD monitor at an amazing 2650x1600 pixel resolution. Epic's Mark Rein couldn't stop talking about this machine and neither could I. I'm just surprised that the cooling solution for the XPS 600 kept this PC from melting. How much will it cost? "A lot," says Dell. Now guys, when Dell says "a lot," start running. My best guess is somewhere near $7,000.

Intel's Viiv initiative, as I understand it, is all about getting away from the PC and bringing your music, videos, and games around the house. According to Intel's master plan, you will one day be able to have a thin client device that receives a signal from your PC and displays games wherever you are (maybe on

▲ **Dude! I had lunch with a Dell…but the XPS was *sick!***

some übernerdy visor). Intel spokesman Tasos Kaiafas says he's seen it working in firsthand tests. It'd sure be nice to see it working for myself, though.

Unfortunately, no PlayStation 3. At least the show featured plenty of peripherals. Fatal1ty pimped a branded mouse; Razer fired back at Logitech's G15 with the Tarantula, a keyboard that actually encourages you to rip out the keys; and I found a water-cooled mod for the Xbox 360. However, sadly, the only "cool" gaming peripheral was D-Link's Secure Spot. It's not sexy, per se, but this little box works in the background, providing "total network security from harmful viruses, spam, pop-ups, spyware, and other unwanted content." If it works, you can free up system resources on your PC and let the Secure Spot work as a gatekeeper.

THE FORMAT WARS

Here's a quick tale of the tape: HD-DVD can store 30GB of data on a dual-layered disc. Blu-ray holds 50GB and has faster transfer speeds. Seems like there's a cut-and-dry winner? Not so fast. HD-DVD players will go for at least $500 in March. Sound bad? Blu-ray players will cost at least twice as much. Even if Sony sells the PlayStation 3 for $500, it's going to be a HUGE loss leader—and will probably be the default Blu-ray disc player people will buy. Shrewd, but Sony's going to be eating most of the costs. Something else to chew on: Microsoft announced that an external HD-DVD drive will plug into the Xbox 360's USB 2.0 port. Will there be room for more than one format? Who will win? Who remembers Betamax? Go on, raise your hands.

MORE GIZMOLOGY

Then comes some of the wackiness: an Asian-market LG 410 cell phone that works as a Breathalyzer (no drunk dialing—YAY!), a $450 leather jacket with 40 pockets to hold gear, a portable XM radio that can record 50 hours of programming, and a Gibson guitar that doesn't plug into an amp—it jacks directly into your PC via a CAT5 line.

All of that sounds great, but only two items reached "must-have" status this year. First, Creative Labs' Zen Vision: M delivers a backhand bitch-slap to Apple's iPod with its sweet colors, slick design, and 30GB for stashing music, photos, and video (not to mention a gang of extra features like a built-in FM tuner). Technofetishist PC owners, like myself, really have no reason to buy a Mac-centric iPod. The other bit of cool kit to come out of CES wasn't even on the show floor….

/Darren Gladstone

◄ **Forget iPod. If you have a PC, get the Zen Vision: M.**

THE BEST THING NOBODY SAW AT CES

Product: Pleo
Manufacturer: UGOBE
Price: $200
Release date: Q3 2006

Everybody dreams of having a robot sidekick. Hell, I'm putting together my own booze-toting Vex robot, R2-Drink2™. Those toy Robosapiens and goofy Sony AIBOs feel as artificial as they look—like some clumsy pile of plastic. Pleo, though, is a different story. What looks like a rubberized toy baby dinosaur (a camarasaurus, to be precise) is really a supersophisticated robot. With a learning OS and biomechanically correct motors, it moves and behaves as you'd…err…expect a baby dinosaur to act. I guess. It can even interface with a PC. The parent company, UGOBE, has big plans for the future—even working with game designers. Imagine creating a character in *The Sims* and uploading it into an action figure that plays with you. Just imagine the potential if you loaded this technology into a Real Doll! All right, settle down. When these robots control the Earth in 50 years, remember who told you about 'em first!

> CES, WHICH USUALLY IS A SNOREFEST FOR GAMERS, HAD LOTS OF INTERESTING STUFF HAPPENING THIS YEAR.

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

NEOTOKYO

PREVIEW

AS IN THE ANIME ITS NAME CONJURES, *Neotokyo* is about to explode…but *Akira* this isn't. Thirty- to 40-some years from now—when robots rule or all restaurants are Taco Bell, depending on your chronometer—Japan drifts into sociopolitical strife. "Many Japanese no longer feel that the constitution forbidding offensive military action is relevant, considering the reality of China," says managing director and lead programmer Justin Harvey. "Following an unsuccessful power grab by elements of the far right and portions of the military, the existing government forms a new branch of the interior ministry, tasked with rooting out any further coup attempts. *Neotokyo* is the fight between the National Security Force and a hardcore element of the military called the Jinrai. It's civil war at the highest levels for control of the country's future."

In the end, however, the hawks-versus-doves stuff is more about scene setting than storytelling, an excuse for the makers of this *Half-Life 2* mod to stage team-based shootouts on neon-collaged streets. ("I'm hoping they're not too sci-fi and more subdued than what you might expect from a 'futuristic' FPS," says modeler Leri Greer.)

In terms of combat, Harvey sees *Neotokyo* as "*Rainbow Six* plus 30 years of technological advancement." Soldiers come in three classes—speedy scout, standard assault, and sturdy heavy trooper—and complement and counteract one another's strengths and weaknesses. For instance, where light and nimble scouts can leap to otherwise inaccessible ledges, only heavies can breach certain choke points. Plus, a variety of vision modes further distinguishes classes with cloak-and-danger play.

"It's a rochambeau relationship," Greer explains. "Heavies spot the scouts' thermo-optic camo with motion detection, scouts move in dark areas with night vision, assault class picks up the heat signatures of heavies with thermal vision, and so on."

Your performance in *Neotokyo*'s capture-the-flag and capture-and-hold matches nets you experience points to spend on 20-some weapons (à la cash in *Counter-Strike*). "Each weapon is cool in its own way," Harvey says. "We have a sophisticated system with independent penetration and damage factors, and it's possible for a bullet to enter and exit a player's arm before entering his chest, effectively hitting him twice. Although in this case," he adds, "it would do less damage due to the prior penetration. It's really cool to see it happen in the game." / **Shawn Elliott**

▲ Gizmos and countergizmos include thermo-optic camo and motion-detecting goggles.

▲ "Our bloom effect looks better than Valve's and runs a bit faster," Harvey brags.

>> "[THINK] *RAINBOW SIX* PLUS 30 YEARS OF TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT."

—LEAD PROGRAMMER JUSTIN HARVEY

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■ BOOK
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■ BOOK
FREAKONOMICS
$15, AMAZON.COM
The world fits together in some strange ways. Who better to play this adult version of connect the dots than...an economist? Steven D. Levitt sees things differently than most people, and this book logically breaks down why the world works the way it does. Here's a fun little side game to play while reading: Count the number of head-slap moments when you catch yourself saying, "Of course!"

■ PULP
HATTER M: THE LOOKING GLASS WARS
$3.50, IMAGECOMICS.COM
What if Lewis Carroll's tales of Alice in Wonderland were real? That's the mighty big supposition behind the book and this comic series offshoot. Princess Alyss escapes the horrors of war in her homeland by seeking refuge in our world. Hatter M, one of her elite guards, is searching 19th-century Europe to protect Alyss from assassins. Think Wolverine, but with a top hat.

■ PULP
THE WALKING DEAD
$3, IMAGECOMICS.COM
Here they come, walking down the street. They get the funniest looks from every human they meet. Where most zombie books focus on the utterly absurd gore of the dead rising, *The Walking Dead* follows a group of survivors struggling to keep their sanity during a zombie apocalypse. Reading this is akin to tearing through a flesh-eating, soap-operatic version of *Lord of the Flies*.

■ DVD
MIRRORMASK
$18, AMAZON.COM
This trippy—and visually amazing—fractured fantasy tale is a collaboration between Neil Gaiman (of *Sandman* comic fame) and the Muppet factory known as the Jim Henson Company (hey, after making *Farscape*, *Labyrinth*, and *The Dark Crystal*, anything is fair game). With her mother deathly sick, Helena slips into the bizarre dream world of her own drawings. But what is real, and what is the dream?

■ DVD
ENRON: THE SMARTEST GUYS IN THE ROOM
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A company bilks the public out of hundreds of millions of dollars annually, it flames out, and the company executives walk away (nearly) scot-free. Years ago, these jerks would have been beheaded. Today, they get a fortune. Are we pissed? After seeing this documentary of the infamous Enron scandal, you will be, too. Based on the book of the same name, the film features insider accounts and is backed up with audio- and videotapes revealing all of Enron's excesses.

■ MUSIC
WE ARE SCIENTISTS: WITH LOVE AND SQUALOR
$11, AMAZON.COM
Those of you paying close attention to console-game soundtracks over the past few months might have heard We Are Scientists sneaking into EA's rotation. The Brooklyn-born supernerd band may seem like a Weezer rip-off gimmick, but it's not. The 13 deftly polished pop-punk tunes whip around your ears for an issue-free 36 minutes. From the adrenaline buzz of "Nobody Move, Nobody Get Hurt" and "This Scene Is Dead" to the mopey "Textbook," this trio drops musical science. You'd better take some notes.

■ MUSIC
13 & GOD: 13 & GOD
$14.50, AMAZON.COM
When you try combining two disparate musical styles, like indie hip-hop and German electronica, you don't know what to expect. Expect something amazing. 13 & God layers good verbal flow over ethereal electronic beats. It may not be for everyone, but you at least owe it to yourself to give this a listen. Start with "Men of Station" or "Tin Strong" for a quick sample of the band's The Postal Service–like delivery.

■ SUDS
SHOWER SHOCK
$7, THINKGEEK.COM
Get up, you dirty bastard! You need to kick-start a day of kicking ass in games. No time to swing by Starbucks? No need. Next time you hit the shower, lather up with the world's only caffeinated soap. No kidding. A few scrubs and you'll be buzzing—ready to take on the world or a couple clans. It's a little pricey at $7 a bar, but we STRONGLY recommend that all people planning to attend the next QuakeCon invest in the Costco-sized 10-pack for $38.

POCKET CHANGE: $0

PIPELINE
Save some money for these upcoming games

FEBRUARY 2006	PUBLISHER
American Conquest: Divided Nation	CDV Software
Battleground Europe: World War II Online	Tri Synergy
Curious George	Namco
Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach	Atari
Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords	Stardock
Heroes of Might and Magic V	Ubisoft
Marc Ecko's Getting Up: Contents Under Pressure	Atari
Origin of the Species	Tri Synergy
Rainbow Six: Lockdown	Ubisoft
RF Online	Codemasters
Star Wars Empire at War	LucasArts
Tycoon City: New York	Atari
UFO: Extraterrestrials	Tri Synergy
MARCH 2006	
Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth	2K Games
Commandos Strike Force	Eidos Interactive
Faces of War	Ubisoft
Fear & Respect	Midway
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	THQ
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft
L.A. Rush	Midway
Scarface: The World Is Yours	VU Games
TimeShift	Atari
APRIL 2006	
Auto Assault	NCsoft
Bad Day L.A.	Enlight Interactive
Paradise	Ubisoft
Tomb Raider: Legend	Eidos Interactive
SPRING 2006	
Company of Heroes	THQ
Dreamfall: The Longest Journey	Aspyr
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion	2K Games
The Godfather	Electronic Arts
Guild Wars: Factions	NCsoft
Half-Life 2: Aftermath	Valve Software
Hellgate: London	Namco
Hitman: Blood Money	Eidos Interactive
Jaws Unleashed	Majesco
Just Cause	Eidos Interactive
The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II	Electronic Arts
Mage Knight: Apocalypse	Namco
Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends	Microsoft
The Sims 2: Open for Business	Electronic Arts
Snow	2K Games
Splinter Cell Double Agent	Ubisoft
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ALTERNATE REALITIES

MMO GAMES MEAN DIFFERENT THINGS to different people. That's why, if you take a step back from the three-billionth orc you've slain, you'll find two schools of thought when it comes to the modern MMO. On the one hand you have painstakingly detailed and wide-open virtual worlds, while on the other you'll find more traditional, quest-based RPGs. Sure, we're starting to see an increasing amount of overlap as the genre continues to mature—but by and large, online games remain handcuffed to these two design mantras.

Brad McQuaid, CEO of *Vanguard* developer Sigil Games (and codesigner of the original *EverQuest*) hits the nail on the head. "This is what I call 'breadth versus depth,'" McQuaid

▲ Currently, *Guild Wars* does the best job of breaking out of the box in which most of its competitors exist.

says. "I think most designers would like to have breadth—lots of different things to do, nonlinearity, multiple paths of advancement…as well as depth—solid gameplay, hack-n-slash, crafting—but the issue is, what do you focus on first? From a production and scheduling standpoint, it's really hard to give equal priority [to both]."

Like in any other industry where millions are at stake, the developers of many MMOs play it safe. Games like *World of WarCraft* provide more accessibility and direction in lieu of complete and total freedom, while virtual worlds such as *Eve Online* offer more expansive, yet less easily defined, experiences that often present players with extra barriers to success—you have to work a little harder to get to the fun stuff, but once that's done, you rarely run out of things to do.

Eve Online creative director Reynir Hardarson sees this as a good thing. In his opinion, "The virtual-world approach is definitely the right way to go, as it provides a much deeper experience." *Eve Online* and *Ultima Online* still stand as the two best examples of virtual worlds to date; in fact, *UO* forefather Richard Garriott, executive producer of NCsoft's upcoming *Tabula Rasa*, still sings the praises of the granddaddy of MMOs, saying, "All non-*UO* MMOs have become horrific level-grinding games with little else of value." Ouch.

MORTAL COMBAT

Several important elements separate the two camps. The most controversial (and, some would undoubtedly say, the most critical) factor: player-versus-player interaction. When "free-

dom" is listed as one of an MMO's bullet points, you can be sure that justice rests in the players' hands…at least to some extent. The days of open PVP warfare (à la *UO*) have waned heavily, with *Shadowbane* coming in as the only popular "modern" MMORPG to offer this degree of unrestricted combat. *Shadowbane* designer and community manager Sean Dahlberg puts it into perspective: "Without the power to back up your words, what good is a well-acted swagger?"

Shadowbane assistant community manager Danielle Vanderlip backs up the pro-PVP argument. "Anytime there's an unknown element of 'what could be,' it makes a game more exciting," she explains. "The advantage to putting justice in the hands of the players is that players no longer have to feel like victims unable to exact vengeance on others."

Plenty of players don't care about justice, though—they just want to kill the next monster and level up without having to worry about PlayaKilla1337 whacking them. *UO* began its existence without any PVP moderation in place but eventually evolved in a drastically different direction because, in the words of *UO* producer Aaron Cohen, "Games with nothing but nonconsensual PVP tend to become more and more hardcore, which limits their growth." Numbers don't lie at the independently run MMOGchart.com; the latest results show that *Shadowbane* and *Eve Online*, both of which feature PVP play, are in the lowest tier of popularity by numbers.

Some MMOs try to meet both sides halfway by concentrating largely on player-versus-environment gameplay while also offering some form

of PVP incentive. *World of WarCraft*'s solution came in last year's Battlegrounds patch and its introduction of several different PVP arenas into the game. *City of Heroes*—and its pseudo-sequel, *City of Villains*—evolved in much the same way. "PVP, when introduced as a voluntary feature that provides strong incentives for players to group and collaborate, can create exciting and rewarding repeatable gameplay experiences," says *COV* producer Brian Clayton.

Mythic Entertainment's *Dark Age of Camelot* offers perhaps the most successful approach thus far, encouraging players to participate in PVP by pitting different in-game nations against one another in an ongoing realm-versus-realm struggle. "Killing another character in an online game is one of the most entertaining things [a player] can do…but being killed over and over by someone else's character really sucks," remarks Mythic vice president Matt Firor. "You have to find ways to protect players who don't want to participate [in this type of action]."

Many vocal pro-PVP players tend to agree on the key sentiment here, which SOE chief creative officer (and outspoken MMO designer) Raph Koster sums up nicely: "Without risk, [you get] no real sense of reward." And while Koster speaks specifically of PVP, this line of thought goes much further than that.

ECONOMIC RISK
Another more subtle yet equally important hallmark of a thriving virtual world: a free economy. Some may argue that player-driven financial systems cater more toward early adopters

and business-savvy gamers, but this type of model provides a complex—and potentially very rewarding—way to affect the game world.

"Any way that players have control over the world will ultimately make it a more immersive experience for them," says *EverQuest* producer Chris Lena. "[But] you have to be careful because, as we all know, players are exceedingly clever, and safety measures must be in place to keep the economy in check. Player-run economies are beneficial to the game, but only if there is an economy still left to play with."

Ultima Online has had its own share of in-game economic issues. According to Cohen, "For many players, the game isn't about killing monsters or leveling—it's about making money, negotiating, getting a good price for your wares…in short, getting rich. Once you lock in a controlled economy, you kill free-market capitalism."

Star Wars Galaxies senior producer Dallas Dickinson looks at it differently. "Join any online game six months after release and you're effectively a second-class citizen," he says. "And the steps you have to take to remedy that situation seldom fall into the category of something one could consider to be 'fun.'"

Lineage II's North American producer Adam Davidson goes one step further, pointing out that "I think we've seen over and over again that whether or not the players 'should' have control of the economy, they almost always DO have control of the economy."

A flourishing economy provides one of the cornerstones to a stable in-game commu-

nity—something that turns up quite rarely in most non–virtual world MMOs, aside from the occasional auction houses and strong, established guilds. Beyond scheduled server events and the need to formulate groups for mutual gain or added protection in these quest-choked MMOs, players generally don't have much of an incentive to interact in-game on an ongoing, large-scale basis.

A good example of a strong player-controlled economy in action calls to mind one of *Eve Online*'s most infamous tales (read it in full at static.circa1984.com/the-big-scam.html), which revolved around one player's carefully executed moneymaking scheme. He spent several months negotiating with and befriending many powerful, well-respected players before springing ›

▲ What happened to you, *Star Wars Galaxies*? You used to look like Leia. Not quite gold bikini Leia (more like bad-British-accent-and-cinnamon-bun-hair Leia), but still Leia nonetheless. Now you look like Chewbacca.

▲ Infamous moments in MMO history: Lord British's assassination during the *Ultima Online* beta (left), and some idiot named Leeroy Jenkins getting his *World of WarCraft* group killed during a quest (right). Which person deserves the recognition? You decide.

> an impressively Machiavellian trap that successfully netted him a ludicrous sum of in-game cash. Not a very moral story—yet an entertaining one, made possible by the intricacies that *Eve Online's* virtual world offers.

THE HAMSTER WHEEL

Many MMO players don't care for that intricacy in the same way that many moviegoers don't care for fancy-pants subtitled French films—and quest-heavy games cater to the lowest common denominator. Like it or not, questing serves as both ends and means, according to *EverQuest's* Lena. "As a player," he says, "you should be working for a reward and you should have fun getting there. Without both elements, the content is just not complete."

After creating *Eve Online*, Hardarson disagrees: "In the core design of an MMO, the game world should be totally playable without even a single quest in it. When you have that nailed down, adding quests will only improve the game. Many games rely too heavily on their quest systems at the expense of other gameplay possibilities."

Many MMOs also rely on inflexible character development mechanics, instituting rigid class-based systems instead of the more versatile and open-ended skill-based evolution that games like *Ultima Online* and *Eve Online* employ. The advantage of an open-ended system: You can always change your mind, and you can always fix mistakes. But at the same time, this brand of character development can greatly overwhelm players who just want to jump in and play.

"When the player jumps into the game for the first time, it is vitally important that they know what type of character they are creating; otherwise, confusion can easily result," says Mythic's Firor. "When I play an MMO, I think, 'I want to be a fighter' or 'I want to be a mage.' I don't think, 'I want to be an open-ended character who can learn anything'—and I think most MMO players fall into this camp."

The question of game balance also factors heavily into this particular debate. Sigil's McQuaid explains his choice to use a class-based system

in the upcoming *Vanguard*, claiming, "Purely skill-based systems are often much harder to balance. You run the risk of one or a small subset of skill combinations being the best—and therefore the only—preferred set of skills to pursue. You actually run the risk of ending up with less variety than [what you'd find in] a class-based system."

Skill-based systems still have their supporters, though, including SOE's Koster (whose two past games, *Ultima Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*, both feature wholly skill-based systems). "Classes and levels are legacies from pen-and-paper gaming that don't entirely suit the sorts of things that MMOs can do," Koster argues. "We have assumptions about MMOs; we usually think of them as basically large-scale RPGs. That's not really all they are or can be—they offer much more than that. As long as we keep using systems that proceed from different assumptions, it's going to be harder to get different [types of] gameplay."

SWG's Dickinson believes it's all a matter of player aptitude. "While freedom is great for hardcore gamers," he says, "it can put most other players into unfun states, which just isn't a good place to be." Perhaps we shouldn't be distinguishing between virtual worlds and traditionalist RPGs at all, but rather hardcore players and casual players.

TRAMMELED

PVP; PVE. Free economy; closed economy. Open-ended mechanics; rigid mechanics. Together and separately, these dichotomies underscore an important reality in the MMO space: Increased liberty goes hand in hand with increased complexity. Your average, everyday player just wants to get into the game world, not go for a Ph.D.—*World of WarCraft's* 5-million-plus players stand as an undeniable testament to that.

In the never-ending race for higher subscriber numbers, it comes as little surprise that most developers avoid the risks inherent to full-on virtual worlds. *UO* has desperately attempted to

imitate certain key concepts from "safer" games for the past three years, and *SWG* recently underwent the MMO equivalent of a sex change operation, trading its virtual-world atmosphere for a comparatively unbending experience…an act that left large portions of its existing fan base in a state of livid shock. Dickinson defends his product's position, explaining that "hardcore gamers will always be the core of any MMO's audience, but the more a game does to provide easy-to-understand gameplay and fun, rewarding adventure to a broader market, the better off we all are."

Meanwhile, niche titles like *Shadowbane*, *Eve Online*, and *Mankind* manage to retain a devoted population of hardcore, freedom-loving players unfazed by the candy-coated carnival rides that competing MMOs offer. Even the old-school *UO* fans continue to play the game "their way" thanks to the existence of free, fan-run, and arguably superior servers. Meanwhile, *Lineage II* and *Guild Wars* show that with a little ingenuity, it's still possible to be unique in this crowd.

Will an MMO ever get everything right? Koster sounds off: "There is no 'everything right.' Different games appeal to different people. For any given batch of players, you're going to have a mix of tastes. We know that even the biggest and most popular MMOs don't get everything right for everyone, because plenty of folks still play the smaller ones. That's how the world works." **/Ryan Scott** (with additional research from Matthew Chase)

» "THE ADVANTAGE TO PUTTING JUSTICE IN THE HANDS OF THE PLAYERS IS THAT PLAYERS NO LONGER HAVE TO FEEL LIKE VICTIMS UNABLE TO EXACT VENGEANCE ON OTHERS."
—DANIELLE VANDERLIP, ASSISTANT COMMUNITY MANAGER, WOLFPACK STUDIOS

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The definitive guide to the best new free games on the Web

GAMES

You don't care how you get your fix. You just want to play a new game right now and you don't want to pay a lot for the privilege. Thank God for the Internet, where everything (and its mom) is available for free. So, taking a break from downloading patches and porn, we set upon a journey to gaming-freebie Mecca.

What you're looking at is the result of countless hours spent searching for the best and newest free games. You'll find some mods, a little shareware, and a couple Web games, but most of the titles on the next few pages are 100 percent free with no strings attached. When you're done here, go to 101freegames.1UP.com for links to some of our favorite free games from years past. / **Darren Gladstone**

ACTION
Run, jump, and shoot

AKUJI THE DEMON
URL: **http://www.1UP.com/do/feature?cId=3135544&did=1**
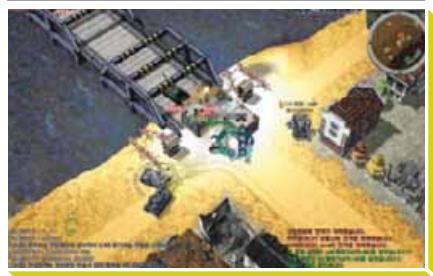
From Japan, the home of *Castlevania* and sushi, comes a surprisingly good free platform game. Don't mind the Japanese…think of it as a short break in the action.

BLITZ 1941
URL: **http://www.blitz1941.com/Blitz.1941**

This MMO import is coming to America, and it looks hot. Going back to WWII, you take command of vehicles, form clans, and wreak havoc.

CHAINSAW MANIAC
URL: **http://www.chainsawmaniac.com/**

It's designed like those old-school Nintendo Game & Watch handhelds; dodge left and right to stab zombies.

HIDDEN AND DANGEROUS
URL: **http://www.acid-play.com/download/hidden-and-dangerous/**

Hidden and Dangerous puts you in control of an elite World War II squad that goes behind enemy lines. Wait long enough after the original game's release and they make a deluxe version. Wait even longer and you can download the game for free.

HOT POTATO ONLINE
URL: **http://www.hotpotatoonline.com/**

If only every sport had a ball that comes with a short fuse. This free action game has you hurling explosive spuds against bots or buddies.

⊚ JUMPER: REDUX
URL: **http://www.helixgamesinc.com/**

There's nothing sophisticated about a tiny red box of a creature that jumps over obstacles, but that doesn't stop this game from being a good, quick time killer.

NANACA CRASH!!
URL: **http://nanaca.narr.as/**

This little Web game brought the office to a standstill for a couple days. This is the premise: You're a schoolgirl on a bike. You have to slam into a guy at top speed and send him flying as far as you can.

OCULAR INK
URL: **http://pistachioproductions.com/dart/**

Where to even start with this acid-trip-induced game? Let's see, you're a huge rolling eyeball. Once you paint patterns on the ground, you can do everything from teleporting to flinging rocks. Sounds normal enough.

ROOM WAR
URL: **http://www.acid-play.com/download/room-war/**

Aliens are invading your bedroom! Get in your spaceship and defend…your…computer? Riiiiiight. Don't expect much gameplay—it's more an interesting use of a 3D modeled room.

⊚ RUNMAN'S MONSTER FRACAS
URL: **http://coolmoose.net/v4/cmp.php**

A giant monster is chasing you! Run for it! Simple. Addictive. Fun.

SDI
URL: **http://cinemaware.com/clsgame_sdi.asp**

Don't forget this oldie-but-goodie in which you defend the Earth from space invaders. Cinemaware opens its vault to bring you this classic action-strategy game.

SEA OF CHAOS
URL: **http://www.digipen.edu/main/Gallery_Games_2004**

Take to the high seas, set sail, and blow the living crap out of anything that moves. Outfit your boat and go through the brief single-player campaign or fight off the pirates on the Internet.

SEIKLUS
URL: **http://www.autofish.net/clysm/games/seiklus/**
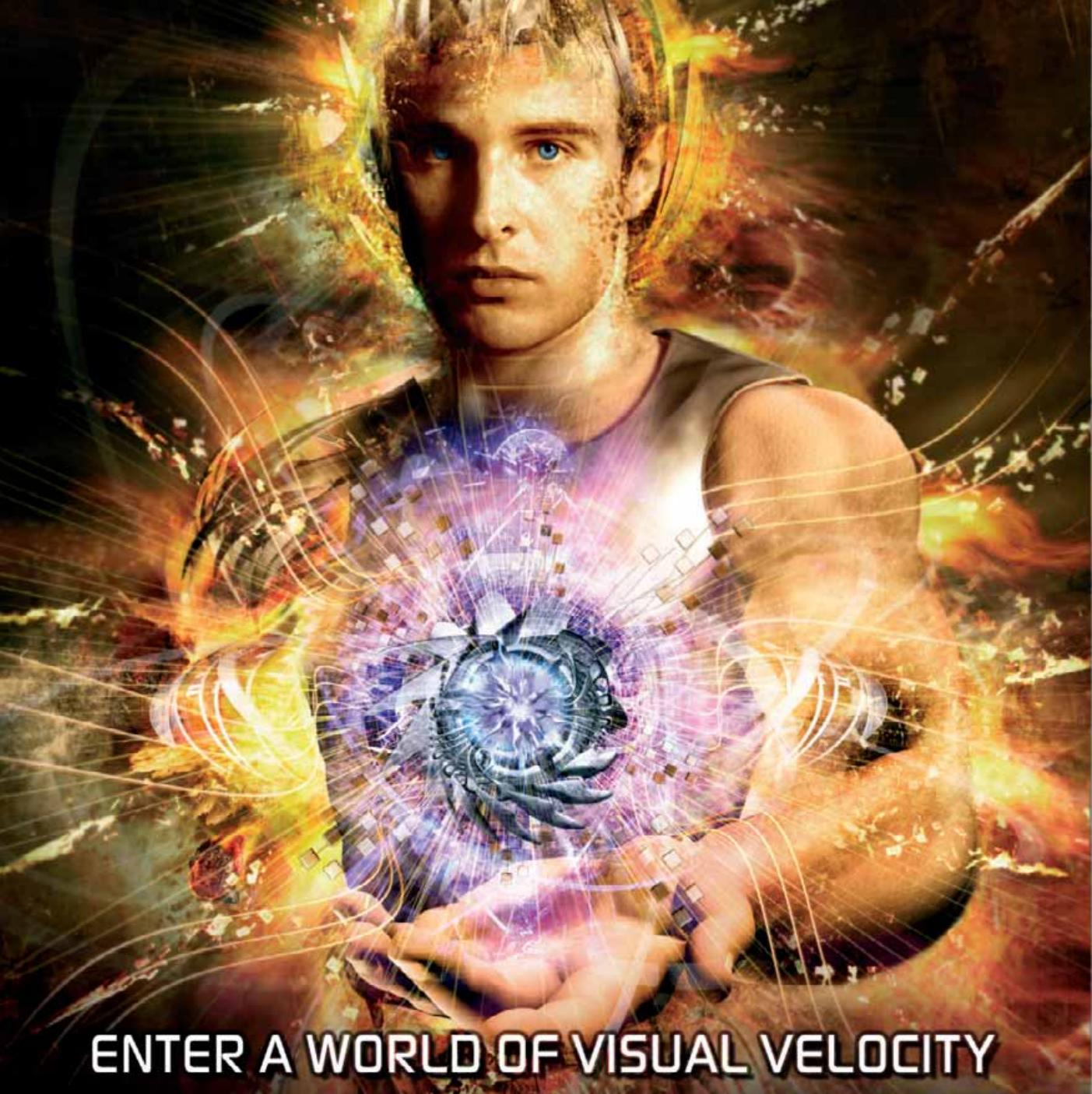
Why is it that we're attracted to strange games? Well, maybe you need to try this for yourself. This exploration game has you jumping over snails and spelunking inside trees.

ROAD RAGE

MACHINES OF DESTRUCTION
URL: **http://www.faind.com/file.asp?id=16**
Gentlemen, start your engines. This free multiplayer death race is good for a quick fix of burning rubber—and opponents.

MEXICAN MOTOR MAFIA
URL: **http://www.scienceoftomorrow.com/mmm_main.htm**
Hit the road and remember to reload. This highly styled top-down drive-by shooter is reminiscent of the early *GTA* games (don't believe us? Check the screenshot below). The big differences are that there are no innocent bystanders and you don't ever get out of the driver's seat. Earn bounties, bigger guns, and cooler rides—not bad for shareware.

WILD METAL COUNTRY
URL: **http://www.rockstargames.com/classics/wmc.html**
Rockstar has done a lot more than just release controversial games. Years before *GTA*, there was *Wild Metal Country*, now available for free on the company's website. Get in the cockpit of one of several tanks and lay waste to the countryside.

> **Mexican Motor Mafia**

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ADVENTURE/RPG
Living in a fantasy world

CAVE STORY
URL: **http://www.acid-play.com/download/cave-story/**

You get it all right here. Action. Adventure. RPG elements. Platforming. And it all comes in under 1MB.

DAIKATANA—GAME BOY COLOR
URL: **http://rome.ro/games_daikatana.htm**

Straight from the homepage of John Romero comes his blessing to download the Game Boy Color version of *Daikatana*. Here's the crazy part: It's actually not bad for an adventure/RPG.

DUNGEON SIEGE: COPPERHEAD
URL: **http://www.planetcopperhead.com/main.htm**

Proof that some good things can come from *Dungeon Siege*, this sci-fi total conversion is a free game that's good enough to pay for. More interesting news: A *Copperhead* take on *Far Cry* is also in the works.

DUNGEON SIEGE: ULTIMA V: LAZARUS
URL: **http://www.u5lazarus.com/**

More good things from *Dungeon Siege*. These guys have re-created the classic *Ultima V* with this *Dungeon Siege* mod. We dug it so much that we gave it a review (check out page 88).

ETERNAL DAUGHTER
URL: **http://www.acid-play.com/download/eternal-daughter/**

Addictive, fun, and in the vein of all those early '90s Nintendo RPGs, *Eternal Daughter* is a must-play bit of freeware, especially for Nintendo fanboys.

FLIGHT OF THE AMAZON QUEEN
URL: **http://www.scummvm.org/**

FOTAQ is a throwback to the simpler days of LucasArts-style adventure games. This classic has it all: crazy Nazi scientists, great dialogue, and lots of puns! If you want the whole experience, download the CD version.

THE HITCHHIKER'S GUIDE TO THE GALAXY
URL: **http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/hitchhikers/game_nolan.shtml**

The classic Infocom text adventure is back, it's an online Web game, and now, technically, it's a graphic adventure.

MOUNT & BLADE
URL: **http://www.taleworlds.com/mb_download.html**

This isn't a typical RPG. Sure, it's got your standard stat building, but combat takes place with third-person action. It's a little primitive but certainly worth the free download.

PROJECT JOE
URL: **http://www.adventuregamers.com/article/id,433**

This demo of an adventure game in progress looks great, as long as you don't mind the fact that the adventure is almost over before it's begun. Still, download it now to get a sample of things to come in the final game.

SAMOROST 2
URL: **http://www.samorost2.net/**

This Flash graphic adventure has a unique style all its own. The online experience will take you to trippy alien worlds as you hunt and click onscreen to see what happens next.

◉ THE UR-QUAN MASTERS
URL: **http://sc2.sourceforge.net/**

See the stars! Ah, the classic *Star Control 2*, now back in an authentic, free emulation. Explore the universe, exploit trade tariffs, and revel in interstellar combat. We wish more games like this were still around.

WEIRD WORLDS: RETURN TO INFINITE SPACE
URL: **http://www.shrapnelgames.com/digital_eel/Weird_worlds/6.htm**

Wish granted! This tribute to *Star Control 2* tries and succeeds at capturing the flavor of the original game but has vastly improved graphics.

MMORPGS WITH NO MONEY DOWN!
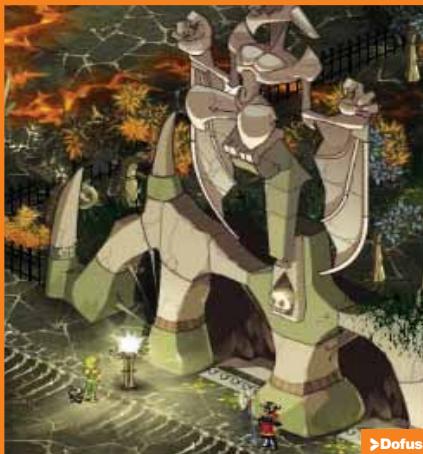
ANARCHY ONLINE
URL: **http://www.anarchy-online.com/**
This great sci-fi MMO game is blazing trails. The basic version is fully free—you just need to deal with in-game ads and billboards. It's just a little distracting when you're blowing away enemies and you see "Wanta Fanta?" ads.

DOFUS
URL: **http://www.dofus.com**
Entirely Flash-based and beautifully rendered, this tactical fantasy MMO is free to play on just about any PC. The screenshot to the right shows what this will look like in your Web browser. The only real downside we can come up with is its unfortunate name.

>Dofus

FLY FOR FUN
URL: **http://flyff.gpotato.com/**
Looking for a free online way to get your *Diablo* fix or just jonesing for some anime-style fantasy? Grab a broomstick or hoverboard and soar.

MAPLESTORY
URL: **http://www.mapleglobal.com (Internet Explorer only)**
Yet another free MMO, *MapleStory* is sure to hook you with its deviously cute graphics, but this 2D side-scroller isn't for all action seekers.

RUNUO SERVER
URL: **http://www.runuo.com**
Ultima Online isn't dead. Far from it. Download this server program and you can give the classic MMO a new home with this emulator.
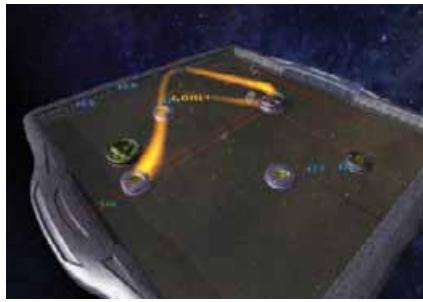
ARCADE

Save yourself the quarter and a trip to the mall

AIR HOCKEY 3D

URL: **http://avagames.net/airhockey/air-hockey-download.htm**

This is about as straightforward as it gets: a 3D, spacey version of arcade air hockey.

ARM JOE

URL: **http://armjoe.hp.infoseek.co.jp/ArmJoe.htm**

Apparently, the French Revolution had its share of strife. Y'know—fireballs, dragon punches, and a flurry of kicks. This 2D fighting game is actually a messed-up take on *Les Miserables*. Seriously.

BEATS OF RAGE

URL: **http://www.acid-play.com/download/beats-of-rage/**

Double Dragon and *Final Fight*—two classic beat-em-ups lost to the ages but far from forgotten. You won't get much in the way of a story here. Just pick one of three characters, mash the buttons, lather, rinse, repeat.

BMX PARK

URL: **http://www.break.com/articles/bmxpark.html**

Tony Hawk's got nothing on this bit of webware. If you're aching to grind rails or pull off tricks on your lunch break, *BMX Park* will give you that "extreme" buzz. Rad, dude!

◎ CRUSH!

URL: **http://coolmoose.net/v4/cmp.php**

Remember that old arcade game *Rampage*? So do the guys who made this stylish experiment in mass destruction. Punch a building, chow down on some civilians, and enjoy.

DAD 'N ME

URL: **http://www.newgrounds.com/portal/view/254456**

Is anything more fun than beating up little kids on the playground? Didn't think so. From the messed-up minds that brought you *Alien Hominid* comes a *Final Fight*–style beat-em-up Web game in which you're a muscle-bound kid who looks like a cross between Jason and Hulk Hogan.

DINER DASH

URL: **http://www.playfirst.com/r/p1/game/dinerdash**

Being a waitress sucks. Ask one sometime. Better yet, check out this simple, addictive bit of shareware that improves upon the classic arcade game *Tapper*.

GRAVITY DRIVE V1.0

URL: **http://www.elementxgames.com/index.html**

Raise your hand if you remember *Turrican*, the game about a human in a robotic tux that can jump and shoot at anything in its way. This is the same concept, but it looks a whole lot better.

ICY TOWER

URL: **http://www.freelunchdesign.com/games.php**

There's nothing wrong with a short, mindless arcade platformer, even if it features a main character named "Harold the Homeboy" who wants to climb the titular Icy Tower.

MIKI THE FIGHTING GIRL

URL: **http://www.ausystem.org/muteki/**

This 2D fighting game is still a work in progress, but we had to include it in this list for one simple reason: hot anime nurses beating the crap out of each other.

NINJA LOVES PIRATE

URL: **http://student.gamemaker.nu/~patlil030/projects/ninjapirate.htm**

Like a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, this action/platform/adventure game brings two of our favorite things—ninjas and pirates—together at last. Prepare to kick it old school in this eight-level demo.

ROCKETBOWL PLUS

URL: **http://www.largeanimal.com**

Open courses and rocket-powered bowling balls: That's our kind of game. If this crazy take on bowling were in your local bar, you'd be playing it until they kicked you out.

RUMBLE BOX

URL: **http://phackett.com/rumblebox/**

This one looks like a bunch of balls and cubes in an arena version of Rock 'Em, Sock 'Em Robots. Beat the stuffing out of oncoming geometry and climb out of the box. Sound simple? It is. It's also lots of fun.

SHOT ONLINE

URL: **http://www.filefront.com**

Time to go online against others and see if you can shave some strokes off the back nine in this free golf MMO. Yes, folks, it's a real Cinderella story out of nowhere. The only question on our minds, though: "Who's going to roleplay the gopher?"

SUPER COSPLAY WAR ULTRA

URL: **http://go.to/alicuu**

You ever see those pictures of anime or videogame fans who get all trussed up like their favorite characters? Yeah, well, apparently now they are ready to throw down in a 2D fighting game to settle who is the hardest of the hardcore. The only thing you have to worry about (besides laughing) is entering this password to unlock the game: **http://www.fkdigital.net**.

SWITCHBALL

URL: **http://www.atomicelbow.com**

This cross between *Super Monkey Ball* and *Marble Madness* is a great little arcade puzzle game. Using NovodeX physics software, it's also a great test of Ageia's physics cards—if they ever actually come out.

VIRTUAL PINBALL

URL: **http://www.vpforums.com/**

Welcome back to the gray area of gaming: emulation. *Virtual Pinball* and *PinMAME* are your gateways to playing a little silver ball. The only problem is, it requires a little hunting to grab all the files you need. Want the full story? Search Google for "Computer Gaming World: Pinball Wizards."

WHEN FPS GAMES GO FLAT

CODENAME: GORDON

URL: **http://www.halflife2d.com/**
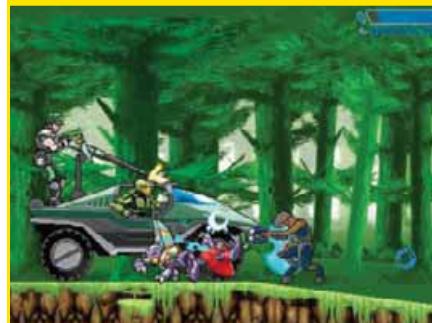
Yeah, 3D shooters are nice, but even Gordon Freeman craves a little old-school action every once in a while. While this may look like a flattened version of *Half-Life*, it feels more like the classic side-scrolling shooter *Contra*.

HALO ZERO

URL: **http://www.halozero.new.fr/**

Gordon isn't the only one going 2D. Here, Master Chief gets the *Contra* makeover as well.

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

When you need a bit of the ultraviolence

BATTLEFIELD 1942: BF40K

URL: http://www.battlefield40k.com/forums/

If you've dabbled in the awesome *Warhammer 40,000* strategy games, it's time to get your hands dirty with some futuristic combat. This mod proves that there is still some life for the original *Battlefield 1942*.

◎ BATTLEFIELD 2: MERCENARIES V6.0

URL: http://www.mercenaries.dies-world.com/

Are your *Battlefield* battles not being all they can be? *Mercenaries V6* adds a lot of extra tweaks to the already awesome *Battlefield* experience. Also be sure to grab the optimized map pack.

DOOM 3: CLASSIC DOOM

URL: http://cdoom.d3files.com/

Thanks to this mod, everything people loved about the original *Doom* is back, but with a fresh coat of paint from the latest game's engine.

◎ DOOM 3: DUNGEON DOOM

URL: http://doom3.filefront.com/file/
DungeonDOOM_XP;47406

Turn *Doom 3* into an action-RPG? Why the hell not? This mod generates random mazes and monsters to take down.

DUCK DOOM DELUXE

URL: http://doom3.filefront.com/file/Duck_
DOOM;46598

We can't think of a better way to shoot fowl than with a BFG. Take the Nintendo classic *Duck Hunt*, add *Doom*'s arsenal, and enjoy.

HL2: EXTERMINATE

URL: http://varmvaffel.no-ip.com/varmvaffel/
exterminate.htm

Here's a mod that's about as simple as it gets. Shoot anything that moves and just try to survive for as long as possible.

◎ HL2: COMBINE DESTINY

URL: http://cd.bounced.de/

The rebels hiding in Coonersville needed to be dealt with. First, the Combine fired headcrab canisters to clean out any resistance. Now, a sweeper squad has to take care of the zombies.

◎ HL2: DAYHARD

URL: http://www.smanu85.it/public/site_
inside/dayhard/home.php?pag=news

Everyone always talks about Gordon Freeman. But does his brother, Morgan, ever get any credit? Nooooo! Check out this comedic mod.

◎ HL2: DODGEBALL ALPHA 6

URL: http://www.fileplanet.com

Those days of lobbing red rubber balls of doom in the school gym are back thanks to this mod and the Havok physics in *Half-Life 2*.

HL2: DYSTOPIA

URL: http://www.dystopia-game.com/

Cyberpunk team-based fighting at its finest, in mod form. Play in the "real world" with guns or as a hacker in cyberspace to accomplish goals.

MARATHON TRILOGY

URL: http://trilogyrelease.bungie.org

Before *Halo*, Bungie cut its first-person-shooting teeth with a game called *Marathon*. Want to see what the big deal was all about for Mac users? Download the games—and a Mac emulator.

RAINBOW SIX 3: IRON WRATH

URL: http://www.fileplanet.com/154363/150000/
fileinfo/Tom-Clancy's-Rainbow-Six-3:-Iron-Wrath-
Expansion-%5BUS%5D---Requires-Key!

Ubisoft delivers a fully free expansion for *Rainbow Six 3*, loaded with six new weapons and a new seven-mission campaign. We wish more publishers backed up their fans like this.

WAR ROCK

URL: http://warrock.net/

Take a look at this screenshot and keep one thing in mind: This amazing find is a fully free FPS game that's taking some potshots at *Battlefield 2*. Just like the EA game you likely paid $50 for, *War Rock* has stat tracking and a full complement of modern weapons. While it's not quite ready to dethrone *BF2*, the price is certainly right.

PUZZLE GAMES

Riddle me this

BLOSSOM

URL: http://www.snowbeat.com/Games/
EpAuulukpZbFAXovsG.php

The world's a little too drab. It's up to you, the Johnny Appleseed of games, to plant stuff and strategically kill critters so that you can bring color back to the world. Different, but stylish.

DEADLY ROOMS OF DEATH

URL: http://www.drod.net/

How do you sum up *DROD*? It's not a puzzle game, it's not an action game—it's a little of both. The basic, free version is a 2D classic. *DROD* junkies will also be happy to know there's a 3D version available at **tlkgames.com**.

DYADIN

URL: http://www.dyadin.com/links.php

Not recommended for the color-blind, this two-player cooperative game requires two differently hued creatures to work together to open doors and beat levels by mixing pigments.

MOLECULOUS

URL: http://www.gametrust.com/moleculous/

Your lab partner is Dr. Von Leakentube for *Moleculous*. Solve his addictive chemical puzzles alone or go head-to-head through the 40 mind-bending levels.

SHAPES

URL: http://www.acid-play.com/download/shapes/

It's kind of like a turn-based *Tetris* with claustrophobia as you try to cram odd shapes into a small space. We love foreign objects!

SIEGE

URL: http://www.faind.com/file.asp?id=2

Siege rides that fine line between a strategy and a puzzle game. As a general, you summon unit types by forming puzzle patterns.

SOLID BALANCE

URL: http://solid-games.com/soga/
solidbalance_en.htm

It takes a very steady hand…OK, wrong game, but think of *Solid Balance* as a PC version of *Jenga*—minus the lameness.

STRANGE ATTRACTORS

URL: http://www.ominousdev.com

Here's an action-puzzle game that comes with just one control input: the spacebar. Hit it and you control the gravity between the ship and the objects in the area.

THE FOOL'S ERRAND

URL: http://www.thefoolsgold.com/downloads/
games-windows.htm

This classic collection of brain-breaking puzzles may not look pretty, but the important part is that it will kill lots of time.

WHIZBALL!

URL: http://kids.discovery.com/games/
whizzball/whizzball.html

Those of you who want another shot at playing a game similar to the classic puzzler *The Incredible Machine* need only to look for *WhizBall!* on the Discovery Kids website.

ZOOMINES

URL: http://www.yakyak.org/viewtopic.php?t=34125

This poor man's (hey, it is free) version of the PSP hit *Lumines* is fun—but a little weak in the music department.

SHOOTERS

Blast first, ask questions later

ESCORT WING

URL: http://www.idevgames.com/contest/
downloads/details.php?file=26

There's just something about simple top-down shooters like *Escort Wing*.... Here, along with your allies, you protect carriers from incoming enemy fire.

GLOBAL DEFENSE NETWORK

URL: http://www.evertt.com/moreinfo_gdn.htm

GDN is a stationary skeet shoot. In some ways, it reminds us of the electronica shooter, *Rez*. Target incoming objects and enjoy the light show. The added bonus is that your shots (and the explosions) make sweet music.

GUNZ: THE DUEL

URL: http://www.gunzonline.com/

This free MMO action-heavy shooter has been floating around the Web in Asia for a while. While still a beta, this feels like a running, gunning version of what *The Matrix Online* should've been.

◎ MAELSTROM 3.0

URL: http://www.devolution.com/~slouken/
Maelstrom/
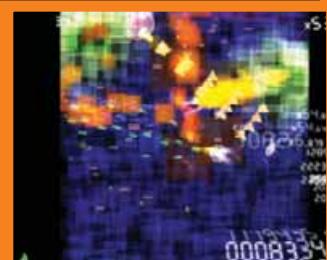
Think *Asteroids*, but colorful and free.

MONO

URL: http://www.binaryzoo.com/games/mono/

Binaryzoo.com sums *Mono* up the best on its website: "part *Asteroids*, part *Robotron*, part *Paint Shop Pro*." This game is a trip…in more ways than one. Drugs optional.

ROBOHORDE

URL: http://www.fileplanet.com/159419/
150000/fileinfo/RoboBlitz-Demo-%5BUnreal-
3.0-Engine%5D

This tech demo is meant to show off what Intel's Hyper-Threading Technology can do. If you've got Intel inside, give this 3D take on *Robotron* a shot.

SPACE CORPS 5: DOOMSDAY

URL: http://spacecorps.bansheestudios.com/

This is a simple interstellar shoot-out in which space armadas try to blast each other into space dust. Pick a side and wage war.

WEBSITE SHOOT-OUT

GUNROAR
PARSEC47
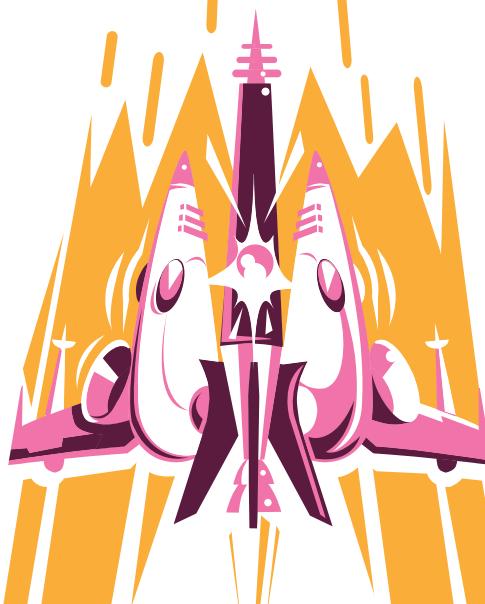
URL: http://www.asahl-net.orjp/~cs8k-cyu/index_e.html

All those console junkies are making a big stink about *Geometry Wars*. It's a 2D shooting game with classy vector graphics—and people are paying for it on the Xbox 360. Let those poor suckers do whatever they want. Right here, we have two awesome shooters that you can download right now for free. Then, if you go to ABA Games' site, there are even more great games to choose from.

SIMULATIONS

You're in control

HACKER V3.1

URL: **http://home.iprimus.com.au/chenluu/hacker.html**

Let's get this straight. You've watched *WarGames* 200 times and you know that you are sooo much more 3L33t than Matthew Broderick. Prove it with this hacking sim.

HOT SHOT BUSINESS

URL: **http://www.disney.go.com/hotshot/hsb.html**

It's a good thing that Disney is teaching kids early on to run a business with this Web game—it's not like we want them to enjoy their youth. Still, this is an excellent business sim.

ORE NO RYOMI 2: THE RESTAURANT

URL: **http://www.vertigogaming.net/onrpage.htm**

You ready to run your own restaurant into the ground? We sure are! Manage a fast-food joint, create recipes, and order advertising—all while making sure the patrons are happy. Hell, there is even a bartending minigame where you master pouring the perfect pint.

⦿ BLOCKLAND

URL: **http://www.blockland.us/index.asp**

You used to build elaborate Lego fortresses. Now—by using this PC version of this childhood activity—you don't have to sweat losing those blocks.

GOLF?

URL: **http://www.golfquestionmark.com/**
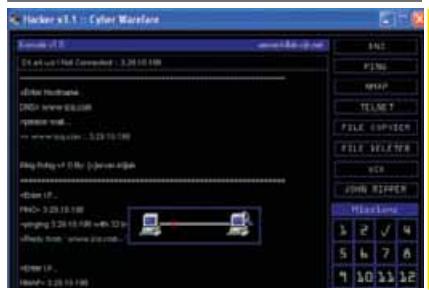
Honestly, we didn't even know how to categorize this game. You're tooling around in a vector graphics cart. Cubist Tiger Woods action figures march along. Basically, this game consists of screwed-up rounds of high-art golf. Take some peyote and swing away.

SPACE CASES

ALLEGIANCE

URL: **http://research.microsoft.com/research/allegiance/**

Microsoft's multiplayer space shooter was way ahead of its time. Strap into various cockpits, form squadrons, and fight online with this game now that it's available for free.
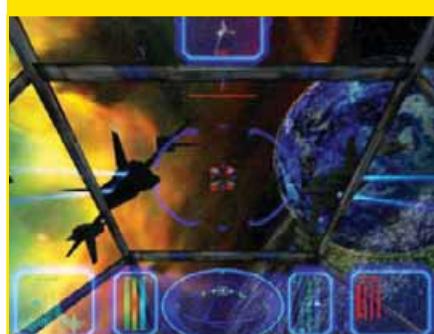
SPACE MERCHANTS: CONQUERORS

Space Merchants follows in a long line of spacefaring sims and impresses with its amazing amount of style. The controls are simple and the graphics are beautiful—perfect for first-timers who want to think they are Han Solo for at least 5 minutes. If only it didn't take years to get between planets in-system....

⦿ STAR WRAITH 2

URL: **http://darkbasic.thegamecreators.com/?m=showcase_view&i=64**

If you've got what it takes to rip off *Wing Commander*....err...be an ace space pilot, then ride in *Star Wraith*'s cockpit and try to survive in hostile territory. This freebie is a teaser for the rest of the series.

Coming Soon…

GAME VIDEOS
watch now, play later

GAMEVIDEOS.COM

STRATEGY

Chin-stroking masterminds need only apply

CURATOR DEFENSE

URL: **http://www.davidbhowe.net/cd/**

Damn museum guests, always screwing up the exhibits! Someone needs to put a stop to them. Bet you never knew so many machine-gun turrets were actually in an art gallery.

DEFENDER OF THE CROWN

URL: **http://cinemaware.com/clsgame_dotc.asp**

Take *Risk* and wrap it around a bunch of minigames. This simple notion is what made *DOTC* a classic back in the days of the Amiga. Now you can grab the full game gratis.

FOOD FORCE

URL: **http://www.food-force.com/**

Who says that games can't be positive influences?

This strategy-sim from the United Nations World Food Programme has you helping impoverished third-world nations and shows you how to help.

GROUND CONTROL
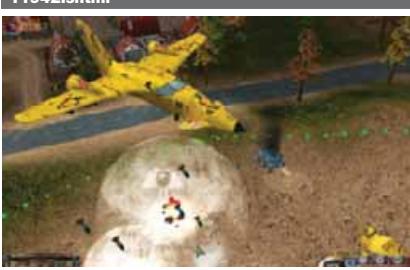
URL: **http://www.fileplanet.com/promotions/ groundcontrol/**

This squad-based RTS doesn't get the credit it should. It's got a decent design and no resource-juggling BS, plus you can download the full version of the game for free. There's even the promise that the much-improved *Ground Control II: Operation Exodus* will be made available soon.

S.W.I.N.E.

URL: **http://www.gamershell.com/download_ 11942.shtml**

Following the *Command & Conquer* school of RTS thought, this game is a little different: Here you're fending off attacks from an army of hostile pigs. Cry havoc and let loose the hogs of war! Sorry about that—couldn't resist.

TRIBAL TROUBLE

URL: **http://tribaltrouble.com/**

A gang of bloodthirsty—and incredibly stupid— Vikings get stranded on a tropical island, and

the natives aren't too pleased. There goes the neighborhood in this slightly goofy RTS.

WARCRAFT III: DIVINE RIGHT

URL: **http://www.campaigncreations.org/ warcraft/divineright/**

This total conversion for *WarCraft III* sure is ambitious. Four races square off, each thinking they are the chosen ones. Throw in some multiplayer and let the fun begin. The single-player campaign, while not ready yet, should also be good.

WARHAMMER 40K: DEPTH OF HERESY— BLACK CRUSADE

URL: **http://dawnofwar.filefront.com/file/ Depth_of_Heresy_Black_Crusade;50626**

Was the *Winter Assault* expansion not enough for you? What? You want more? This mod fleshes out the *40K* universe with more units, abilities, and weapons for both the space marines and the forces of Chaos. Still not enough? The team promises upgrades for more races in later updates. ▮

> Food Force

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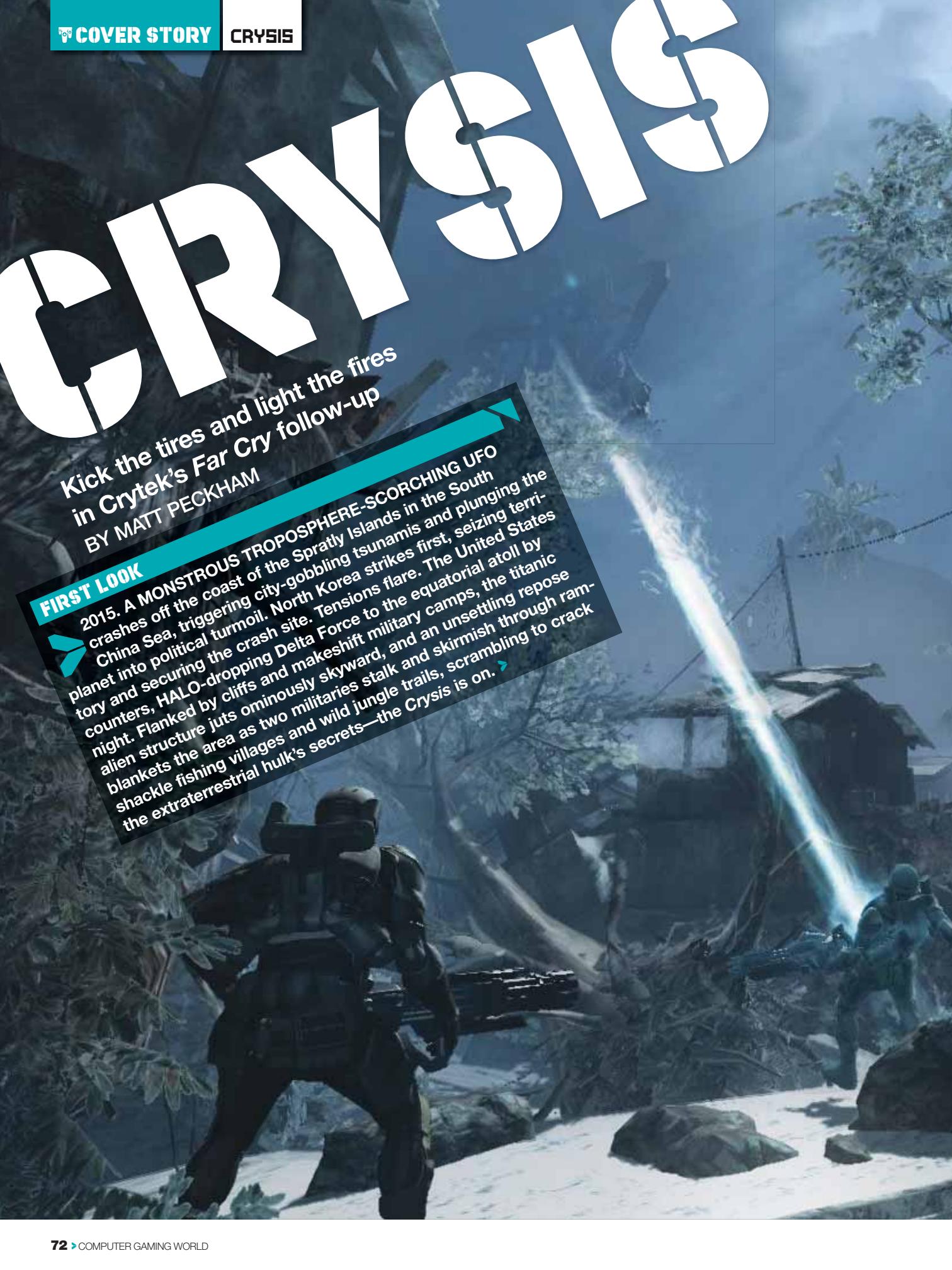
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CRYSIS

Kick the tires and light the fires in Crytek's Far Cry follow-up
BY MATT PECKHAM

FIRST LOOK

2015. A MONSTROUS TROPOSPHERE-SCORCHING UFO crashes off the coast of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, triggering city-gobbling tsunamis and plunging the planet into political turmoil. North Korea strikes first, seizing territory and securing the crash site. Tensions flare. The United States counters, HALO-dropping Delta Force to the equatorial atoll by night. Flanked by cliffs and makeshift military camps, the titanic alien structure juts ominously skyward, and an unsettling repose blankets the area as two militaries stalk and skirmish through ramshackle fishing villages and wild jungle trails, scrambling to crack the extraterrestrial hulk's secrets—the *Crysis* is on. ❯

"THERE'S NO REASON WE CAN'T DELIVER AN EXPERIENCE EQUIVALENT TO SEEING AN OSCAR-NOMINATED FILM."
—JACK MAMAIS, LEAD DESIGNER, CRYTEK

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts**
DEVELOPER: **Crytek**
GENRE: **Action/Shooter**
RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

Like a dark horse demiurge, European developer Crytek jolted the industry in early 2004 when it loosed *Far Cry* on an unsuspecting press and public alike. Scoffing at the parade of rat-maze corridor-creepers, ex-SEAL Jack Carver's gonzo-horror island adventures flash-broiled our eyeballs with sunny tropical venues baptized in swaying palm fronds, lush lagoons, and shimmering white-sand beaches. Inside was out and outside was in as we scurried through paradise vast, brandishing our machetes, cat-and-mousing with quick-witted mercs, and cackling madly at the unbridled audacity of the little international team from Coburg, Germany, that could.

It's not so little anymore. Crytek's staff now tops 100 and includes artists, designers, producers, programmers, and sound engineers from 23 countries (up from 16). "We've always tried to be different as a fundamental principle," explains Crytek CEO and president Cevat Yerli. "We decided early on that no matter where we were located, we should be international. Whether it's the organization, the way we work, our projects, the technology we use, or our toolsets, we try to approach everything we do uniquely."

Most fans of critical darling *Far Cry* would agree. Scrubbing trigger-play stereotypes from its limber CryEngine, Crytek stole much thunder from powerhouses like id Software and Valve. Still, *Far Cry* has its share of foibles. The game's first half sees you unceremoniously chucked into an island sandbox swarming with brutally cunning mercenaries, but later gameplay devolves into sophomoric run-and-gun hokum. And the cliché-ridden story is often plain batty, careening from serious to silly without comfortably inhabiting either medium.

WELCOME (BACK) TO THE JUNGLE

After *Far Cry*, Crytek took a hard look at its baby and concluded that the follow-up project would go one of two ways: accept and suppress *Far Cry*'s deficiencies, or reverse them entirely. The choice was obvious. "Since story was the weakest part of *Far Cry*, we decided our next game needed to flip the idea of story around and make it, at the high level, mid level—any kind of level—as exciting and central to the gameplay as possible," says Yerli. "It's the biggest change from *Far Cry*, the new story-driven approach, and the major strength of the entire project." That project is finally ready to go public, but if you're thinking Crytek's follow-up is just another bigger, better, bolder sequel, you may be surprised.

Say, for instance, the fact that *Crysis* isn't a sequel at all (it's a "*Cry*" game, but not *Far Cry 2*), and the main character answers to Jake Dunn, not Jack Carver (you see the pattern here?). In *Crysis*, the aliens are on your radar from the get-go. After their megacraft smacks into an atoll, you're rapidly thrust into battle with the North Koreans. As hostilities escalate, the alien ship opens unexpectedly, generating a "dome" of supercooled air that flash-freezes everything in the vicinity. "The initial idea was to create a frozen paradise," explains Yerli, "because it's about freezing what people deem as warm and interesting and inviting, making it cold and unsettling and incongruous."

Lead designer Jack Mamais agrees but points out that the original plan was to go tropical all the way. "It's funny working with Cevat because he always reverses what everybody else is doing," muses Mamais. "When we were working on *Far Cry*, he said, 'Everybody has corridor-based gameplay—let's do outdoor stuff, but in a way no one else has yet.' So when we were looking at making the new game, he said, 'Let's take the jungle and freeze it.'"

In *Far Cry*, Jack Carver is a talky, affable superstud. Jake Dunn, by contrast, leans decidedly toward a surly Sam Fisher. "Jake is going to
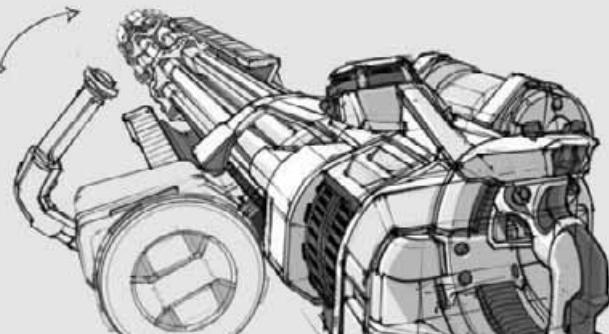
▲ *Crysis* does detail—inside and out.

be a more enigmatic character than Jack, but he'll still have some vocalization—he won't be a mute," says Mamais. "We're driving toward more serious, more dramatic tones, because it's all about making the core story work, about engaging the player in more ways than the merely visceral." Mamais describes *Far Cry* as a B movie and *Crysis* as its A-grade, older, wiser sibling. "There's no reason we can't deliver an experience equivalent to seeing an Oscar-nominated film, with a story and characters you can care about, or dramatic emotional moments, but funny ones, too," he says.

BUBBLES OF JOY

Crytek hopes to lock up the usual lofty PR speak by radicalizing the way you interact with *Crysis*' world. Many action games still double back on their promises, teasing a panoply of options—go where you will, do as you want—only to periodically reach over and slap you back onto invisible rails, whether it's plot-snapping NPC deaths or simply circumstances in which obviously better choices are stubbornly scripted out to artificially augment difficulty. "We want players to create their own action story as they go, to take their time and assess a situation, and [to] explore their environment fully and comprehensively," says

ARSENAL NOW

HUMANS

NANO-MUSCULAR SUIT: Think military-grade plastic or fiber, specialized, stylized, and capable of stealth or slaughter. Based on actual U.S. Department of Defense research into a "future warrior" system, the suit works like a superpowered endoskeleton, allowing you to divert energy to various parts of the suit and enhance the performance of different parts of your body. "The suit will also have the ability to cling or walk on metallic surfaces throughout the environment," adds Crytek CEO Cevat Yerli, noting that some of the aliens themselves may be covered in metal. You do the math.

THE SCAR: Your main weapon, a hybrid assault rifle using classic 7.26 mm ammo and firing 600 rpm in standard "assault rifle" configuration. Moddable to a sniper rifle or submachine gun with the right attachments.

XM102 ROCKET LAUNCHER: Shoulder-mounted, short-range anti-tank weapon (think LAW, but next generation and with targeting features). Antivehicle, antihelicopter, and antigentle.

MX2014 SHOTGUN: No-nonsense pump-action shotgun, moddable with a reflex sight, targeting laser, or tactical flashlight.

MPXA SUBMACHINE GUN: Short range, small rounds, easily penetrates Kevlar. Includes support for a laser-targeting system, reflex sight, silencer, and flashlight. Basically, it's an Uzi on steroids.

EM70 ELECTROMAGNETIC RIFLE: Accelerating a metal slug to eight times the speed of sound, and with a range measured in miles, it's your definitive heavy sniper weapon. "We like to call it the vehicle sniper," says lead designer Jack Mamais, "because that's what it's good at taking out." If you can see it, you can hit it with the EM70.

THE MINIGUN: "This one's like you ripped the minigun off an Avenger cannon," says Mamais. "Your suit needs a certain amount of strength to use it, because it's very heavy, but it's like a mini-Avenger cannon off an A-10 attack jet."

ALIENS

MOLECULAR ACCELERATOR: Sucks the moisture out of the air and freezes it, then hyperaccelerates the frozen precipitate to superfast speeds using gravity manipulation. Think of a flechette gauss rifle that fires unlimited rounds of ice crystals.

MOLECULAR ARRESTOR: Freeze ray that works against single or multiple targets. Turn your enemies into frozen blocks, switch weapons, and shatter away. Shrink-ray and foot-stomp, anyone?

SINGULARITY CANNON: Shoots a miniature black hole that creates a massive explosion. "You'll actually see people getting sucked in toward the black hole a little bit," says Mamais. "This is the aliens' payloader."

Mamais, noting that patience and thoroughness will reward characters with richer backstory. "*Far Cry* taught us that people will explore to investigate something they've learned. In *Crysis*, people can completely blast through an area, ignoring extras and taking in the major brush strokes, but exploring and applying all you've learned will allow you to see and do more. Say, for instance, you take the time to examine something—you may be able to use a vehicle you couldn't before, and completely new avenues will open up."

Another common criticism leveled at *Far Cry* is that despite its open-ended environments, the plot often resembles an arbitrary chain of minibattles, with nothing to really link your actions from one to the next. "What players didn't like was stopping at one bubble, then having to go to the next, and the next, and so on," explains Yerli. "In *Crysis*, we're extending that concept so players can bypass a bubble, or if they approach a bubble in a certain way, it may affect the other bubbles. Or if players choose to switch the order of the bubbles, it may affect the end results down the path, so there's now a kind of nonlinearity between the action bubbles themselves." Weaving through these "bubbles" like meshwork are concepts the team calls "threats." For example, say an important character dies in mission two. That death can now have a game-changing impact on mission five. "We wanted to give the player options second by second, hour by hour," says Yerli, "so a player could get a message from someone saying, 'Because you didn't take care of this guy, we have to do this and this,' and then the player says, 'Holy…that was three missions ago!'" Every character in *Crysis* has a journey related to the overall story line, and depending on your actions, some of those journeys may not be experienced. "If the player feels a sense of responsibility for these characters, then we did our job," says Yerli, "because he understands that people's lives do matter." >

▲ Stalk or storm a leaf-choked jungle; *Crysis* rewards the patient and gung-ho differently.

"THE PHRASE WE'RE QUOTING INTERNALLY IS 'VENI, VIDI, VICI!'"
—CEVAT YERLI, FOUNDER AND CEO, CRYTEK, ON PLAYER-A.I. INTERACTION

▲ Advanced backlighting and shadow techniques create dramatically more lush environs over the course of real-time day/night cycles.

BUILDING THE PERFECT BEAST
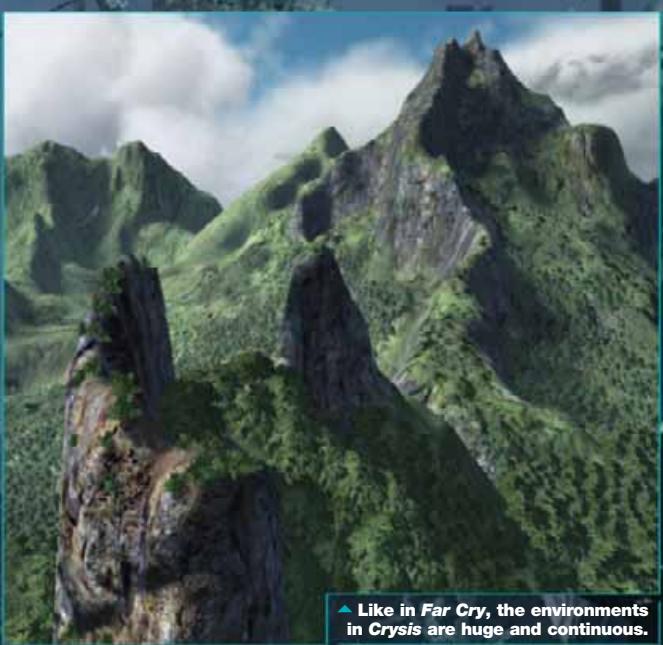
In *Far Cry*, you're able to make choices or trigger A.I. activity based primarily on sound, but this acts more like a switch than a slider, leading to an oft-voiced complaint about the game's difficulty level: A.I. responses are typically all for one and one for all, escalating minor subterfuge missteps to war-zone-level brawl-outs. "The old A.I. was based just on hearing and seeing, and from that it could derive positions and react accordingly," explains Yerli. "In *Crysis*, the A.I. is now fully aware of objects, such as vehicles, things you've destroyed, trees, and rocks, and it understands its relationship to those objects, allowing it to engage in far smarter tactical decisions and adjustments."

Let's say you're scouting the edge of an enemy camp, with lots of weeds and grass and maybe a few fallen trees around. In any other game, the most you'd see might be a little vague artificial rustling, maybe some treetops swaying in the wind. In *Crysis*, as you move through the bushes or the tree leaves, they'll actually bend and stay bent appropriately and with the proper physics, and the A.I. can recognize that bending. "On ferns, for example, or on bushes," explains Yerli, "if the player hides in these, an A.I. scout might see where the player walked and might backtrack the player's trail a certain distance. It's not the player the A.I.'s

MULTIPLAYER

Crysis will ship with several multiplayer modes, including tactical deathmatch, tactical team deathmatch, and an "Artifact" component that sounds a bit like *Half-Life* mod *Science and Industry*. Think *X-Com* meets capture the flag. Nabbing artifacts for your team opens research "branches" to enhance your abilities; likewise, stealing your opponents' artifacts neuters their analytical advantages. "And the more you use a certain piece of equipment, the more skilled you become," says Jack Mamais. "Also, rank up, rake in points, and you can actually redeem them for weapons and vehicles." Factor in the nanotech suit and things get wiggy, such as a match that begins as "mercs vs. spies" morphing fluidly into a mission-based convoy assault.

ORDNANCE NOW, GENERATION NEXT

▶ *Far Cry*'s hyperarsenal is grounded firmly in contemporary weapons theory, and the same principle applies to *Crysis*. "The player is essentially special ops rather than a battle-line unit, but he's going to have the highest-tech equipment available, including customizable weapons with add-ons like scopes and laser sights," explains lead designer Jack Mamais. "We've also given you a nanotech suit. You can decide whether you want a more combat- or stealth-[based] experience, and the suit will adapt to the situation as you choose."

In other words, players can make themselves stronger or stealthier according to their tactical preferences by reallocating energy to different parts of the suit. "Think of the X-Wing shield system," says Mamais. "You have a power level and can devote power points to different things. It's almost like an RPG, with elements that you'll pick up as you explore and learn things."

Say you want to jump higher, for instance. The suit can divert energy to the legs, which simultaneously increases speed and strength, much like artificially augmented muscles. "Our original idea was to go from a Delta Force to a Master Chief kind of guy," says Crytek CEO Cevat Yerli. "But we changed our minds early on and decided to start with a guy who's more ninja than tank." And Crytek wanted to make a hero people could customize to their individual play style. "Players can 'pimp their ride' any way they see fit, but just like loading or firing a weapon, there are time costs involved. So when you change the suit configuration, it's going to interrupt whatever you're doing."

Vehicles are still mostly under wraps, but Crytek revealed two options: a helicopter and a tank. "With the helicopter, you can actually fly through the volumetric clouds," says Mamais, hinting at spectacular sky battles. "In terms of control, the physics system is still the same, but we've improved the process of designing vehicles in our editor, so they're much better by default. Also, we're adding component damage so, for example, you could give someone a flat tire to decrease their speed, as opposed to all-or-nothing immobilization." /

▲ Like in *Far Cry*, the environments in *Crysis* are huge and continuous.

---

seeing, but the bent leaves or the bush rustling, allowing it to sneak up, stealth-style, to locate the source of the disturbance."

The same procedural A.I. processes that govern the way you interact with your human opponents also apply to the aliens. "When you see an alien, you can, of course, approach [it] in traditional gaming fashion," says Yerli. "You shoot, he shoots back, you dodge, he dodges, and you kill him, which is the sort of experience everyone else offers. In *Crysis*, you can also pursue an 'outsmart' strategy, in which you observe a whole constellation's dynamic—maybe you look at individual behavior patterns, or maybe you see someone who tends to

control or direct the group, and you engage with that in mind."

In other words, it's always beneficial for you to play smart, analyzing behavioral "mini-ecosystems" for takedown clues or to single out influential group leaders. According to Yerli, everything in *Crysis* is about observation and inference, scrutinizing and planning as opposed to just looking for the quickest solitary drone to pop with a head shot. "The difference in gameplay with our approach, starting with *Far Cry* and expanded greatly in *Crysis*, is the difference between outreacting and outsmarting," says Yerli. "Our approach is simple yet vastly more powerful: look, observe, and then you

overcome the challenge. The phrase we're quoting internally is 'Veni, vidi, vici!'"

As with the Covenant ship in *Halo* or the omnipresent Citadel in *Half-Life 2*, it's inevitable that *Crysis*' coup de smackdown will require plunging into the enigmatic alien structure itself. As for the aliens, it's anyone's guess. All we could pry out of the obviously giddy design team is that the aliens are cold-based life forms that flourish in low-gravity environments. "The alien is our top-secret effect," says Yerli. "We went through hundreds of alien concepts to get the perfect one. Let's just say you won't be disappointed." ▶

JUST IN TIME
Scheduled for release this fall, *Crysis* will support Microsoft Windows Vista and DirectX 10.

▲ (left) Enemy units work tactically as teams—traditional blind charges will invariably end in misery.

PRIMO PIZZA FACE
Render me this: The new engine supports textures—pocked, pitted, and wrinkled—on an unprecedented level. Don't you wish *Doom 3* looked this good? Check out those pores!

CRY ME AN ENGINE

▶ To get the scoop on the new power behind the throne, we sat down with Crytek founder, CEO, and creative director Cevat Yerli to talk about Crytek's latest wonder engine, the auspiciously named CryEngine 2.

DUAL-CORE PROCESSOR SUPPORT
"Not only [do we support] dual core, what we're doing is implementing a dynamic system that will assess how many cores or CPUs are available and scale the game accordingly. The idea is to increase the quality of the experience, not the mechanics or the gameplay itself, but rather the presentation."

INCREASED DRAW DISTANCE
"The original CryEngine supported up to 1.2 kilometers draw distance; CryEngine 2 supports up to 2 kilometers draw distance."

DESTRUCTIBLE ENVIRONMENTS
"Most objects will be entirely breakable at random points, so the basic line is, what looks destructible, is destructible."

SEAMLESS TRANSITIONS AND MORE CHARACTERS ONSCREEN
"We could have made the level transitions seamless, but our research showed that it's actually better to give the player a break between levels. I know some might say this is less immersive, but to tell a story, a break is actually a good thing. We can always tell better stories with breaks. The engine itself supports up to 100 characters onscreen at once, but depending on how many A.I. the character triggers, a more typical situation might involve 10 to 20 [onscreen] simultaneously."

ENHANCED PHYSICS AND WEATHER DYNAMICS
"Weather patterns develop dynamically, so while you play the game, the weather kicks in and you can see cloud formations changing. You'll witness a sort of darkness, and ambient light changing from all directions, because we wanted people to see the world transforming and really coming alive. So, for example, rain and thunder might kick in, and the raindrops will make surfaces wetter, and depending on the wetness, the properties of physics on those surfaces will change accordingly. The goal has been to create atmospheric changes relative to the environment that are as real as possible, so that means things like wind and rain physics, day/night cycles, and tornadoes."

ZERO-GRAVITY ENVIRONMENTS
"The navigation system for zero-G is pretty straightforward, so without elaborating on the details, anyone should be able to sit right down and pick up the controls pretty easily. The best way to conceptualize the system is to think of the controls as derivative of how you control a vehicle."

IMPROVED SAVE SYSTEM
"How about no save at all? You start from the beginning and have to go all the way to the end, or actually, if you die, you have to reinstall the game! In all seriousness, the system has been improved. We're going to add more checkpoints, but also there's going to be a quicksave option, so yes, you can save anywhere." /

▶▶ "THE GOAL HAS BEEN TO CREATE ATMOSPHERIC CHANGES RELATIVE TO THE ENVIRONMENT THAT ARE AS REAL AS POSSIBLE, SO THAT MEANS THINGS LIKE WIND AND RAIN PHYSICS, DAY/NIGHT CYCLES, AND TORNADOES."
—CEVAT YERLI, FOUNDER AND CEO, CRYTEK

MARC ECKO

Marc Ecko, designer of *Getting Up:*
Contents Under Pressure

Check out Marc Ecko's video blog
& the rest of the Game Developer
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IT'S:
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ON BACK

ESRB
Entertainment Software
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WWW.ESRB.ORG

84

CRAPTASTIC!

> What's with this early-2006 crap-a-thon? It's as if game developers have suddenly been given license to expel every piece of bottom-rung garbage that wasn't good enough for the holiday shopping crowd. Just because we're done playing actually *good* games like *Guild Wars*, *Battlefield 2*, and *Civilization IV* doesn't mean we're lining up to trawl the depths for whatever gaming-industry cast-offs happen to be floating to the surface at the moment. "Hey, I really had fun with *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*. Now it's time for some *WWII Tank Commander*!" Yeah, right. If we wanted this kind of entertainment, we'd be pulling all-day *BloodRayne* movie marathons. >>

INSIDE

82 PIMP

25 to Life
Ready for execution.

83 RIDE

MX vs. ATV Unleashed
Zoom, zoom!

REVIEW STANDARDS

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

OUR RATING SCALE

★★★★★
4.5-5.0 Stars: Excellent
Landmark products and benchmarks for their entire genres. Games achieving these scores earn a *CGW* Editors' Choice award.

★★★★☆
3.5-4.0 Stars: Good
Certain limitations may hold these games back, but they can still be enjoyed by the majority of the PC-gaming populace.

★★★☆☆
2.5-3.0 Stars: Average
These games don't do anything exceptionally well. We recommend them strictly to the most hardcore of genre enthusiasts.
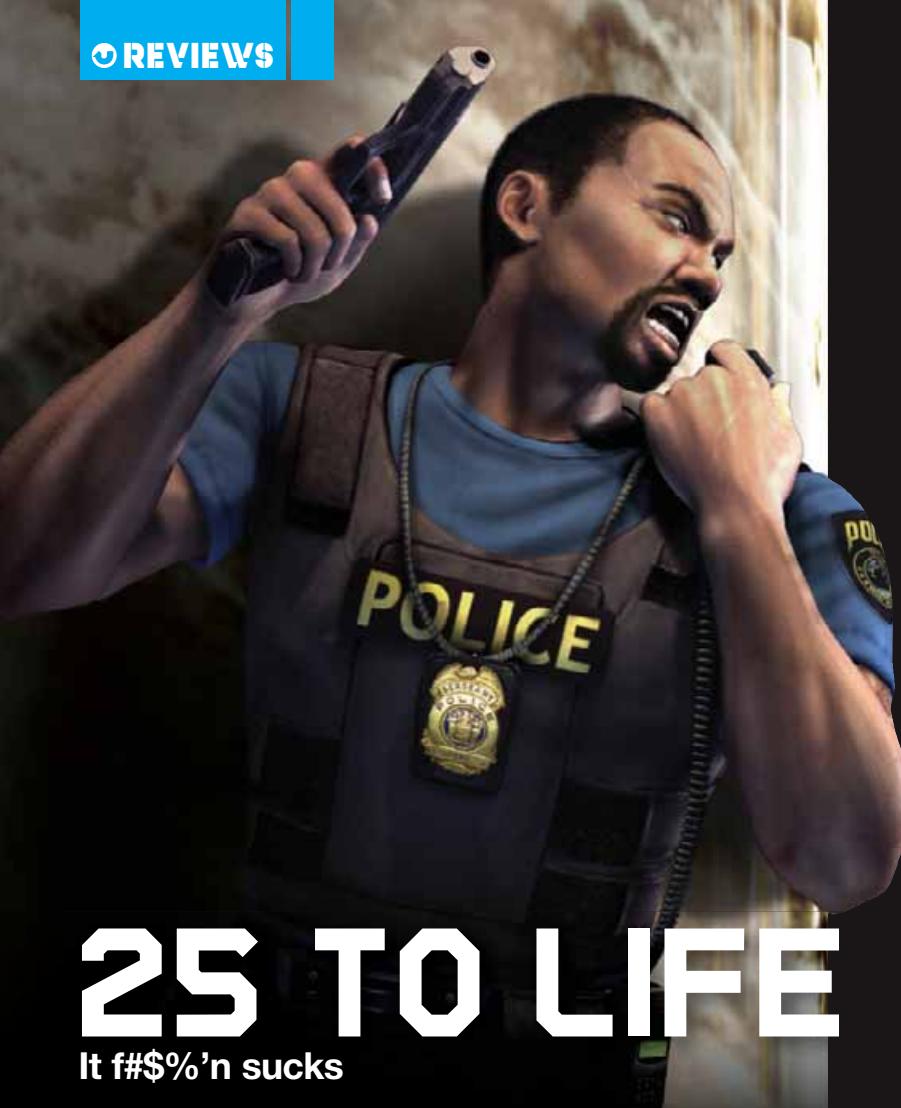
★★☆☆☆
1.5-2.0 Stars: Weak
Games with significant bugs or other fundamental design issues that even genre fans will have trouble coming to terms with.

★☆☆☆☆
0.0-1.0 Stars: Abysmal
Games that should never have been made—let alone purchased. A zero-star game is bug-ridden and unplayable.

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING

▲ During your brief stint as a cop, you can arrest people instead of killing them. Including, apparently, other officers you just rescued.

▲ Ow! Stop shooting me! Can't you see that I'm dead?! And on fire? And plagued with existential angst?

▲ Graffiti—the sensible way to spend your time when fleeing from squads of Tijuana hit men.

25 TO LIFE

It f#$%'n sucks

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Avalanche Software** GENRE: **Action** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space**
RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players**

I CAN REALLY RELATE TO *25 TO LIFE*, perhaps more so than with any other game. Not because my cushy suburban life matches up all that well with that of a murderous drug-dealing gangbanger, but because I have Tourette's syndrome—and thus, the game's relentless torrent of profanity feels eerily like I'm talking to myself. Therefore, I'm probably a lot less inclined to take offense when, upon launching the game, it tells me to, hmm…how to say this…"Engage in carnal relations with yourself, my dusky friend, for you are an intestinally based conundrum as quick to display excessive affection for your blessed mother as you are to gargle a rooster. Kindly remove your maw from my reproductive organ and, oh yes—f*** you. Dear sir."

To play *25 to Life* is to subject yourself to the incessant, awkwardly self-conscious swearing of middle school boys desperate to appear tough in home economics class. Oh, and that wet stuff dripping from your disc drive as you play? That's a delightful combination of clammy overcompensation and flop sweat.

This third-person shooter reeks of it, with an insanely overwrought story that spews some drivel about a gangster named Freeze who's trying to go straight. But said story is vomited out so artlessly that it makes those Cinemax late-night Jeff Fahey vehicles seem like Chekhov. And while the packaging and manual appear to offer a choice to play as either street hood or cop, in truth you have to play as both, since the story jumps among three characters in a halfhearted homage to *Rashomon* (err…excuse me, *Rashso-motherf***ing-mon*). So much for choice.

WTF?

25 to Life accomplishes just one goal it sets for itself: to achieve the sort of notoriety that gives games a bad name, à la *Grand Theft Auto*. But instead of garnering this infamy through edgy material and innovative gameplay, it does so by getting pretty much every single aspect of enjoyable gaming dead wrong. You wind up with unskippable, crappy in-engine cut-scenes in which characters cradle invisible objects; you're forced to endure painfully blurry FMV sequences that weren't optimized for the jump from console to PC; and while you can take hostages to protect yourself, for some reason you can't maneuver them through arbitrary doorways or up or down staircases.

Seriously: To make a more lazily constructed product, you'd have to be in a coma. The concept of collision detection barely exists, as you can't hit enemies standing behind cars, even if their heads are clear and they're able to hit you. The throwing physics aren't any better—you end up immolating yourself with Molotov cocktails every time you stupidly try to throw one at someone hiding behind…oh, let's say thin air. How lazy is *25 to Life*? The final fight finds you squaring off against your old boss—and five copies of some guy in a hat.

Then again, in a game where your characters inexplicably have an enemy-revealing radar display and where only certain pieces of pottery break when hit with a rocket launcher, what do you expect? Ditto the obligatory and utterly needless multiplayer. *25 to Life* sets the gaming bar about as low as it can go. Then trips over it. **/ Robert Coffey**

Piece of shiznit.

COMPUTER **GAMING** WORLD | **VERDICT** ★☆☆☆☆

TO MAKE A MORE LAZILY CONSTRUCTED PRODUCT, YOU'D HAVE TO BE IN A COMA.

▲ *MX vs. ATV*'s helmet cam can induce vertigo in even the strongest men.

MX VS. ATV UNLEASHED

Thrilling, spilling, and not completely fulfilling

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Rainbow Studios** GENRE: **Arcade Racing** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1.2GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, gamepad, Internet connection** MULTIPLAYER: **2-6 players**

THQ'S OFF-ROAD MONSTER *MX VS. ATV Unleashed* compensates for outwardly exhilarating, yet generic, driving dynamics and several key inconsistencies by delivering more variety and more sheer quantity than most of us could ever hope to explore. Indeed, the game's roster of bikes, vehicles, environments, racing surfaces, modes, options, and stunts is just this side of infinite. But while that may be enough for many players, those who lust for sophisticated physics, smart competitors, and something more than a direct console port won't be nearly so satisfied.

MX vs. ATV Unleashed feels hauntingly similar to developer Rainbow Studios' *Motocross Madness* games. It keeps you in the air almost as much as on the ground, it favors button-clicking stunts and turn-on-a-dime handling over tactical racing and skillful maneuvering, and it bounces you around and upside down like a beach ball at a rock concert. It begins as a roller-coaster festival of thrills and certainly keeps you busy liberating its colossal treasure trove of locked goodies, undertaking its numerous events and quickie challenges, and marveling at an incredible number of gorgeous and gloriously lighted environments. You can even craft your own fully customizable courses via the easy-to-use track editor.

However, once you peel away the layers, you see the warts underneath. The biggest one: the physics engine, which is far from the claimed "ultrarealistic" and places so little emphasis on factors such as gravity and tire-to-track dynamics that it makes you feel like you've landed on the moon. Collision logic varies wildly from instance to instance, and your artificially intelligent foes remain blissfully unaware of your presence. Vehicular damage is as nonexistent as a setup garage and career mode, and multiplayer events top out at just six entrants. The game's stunt-loving, high-flying target audience will find a treat…but even they may eventually grow weary of its foibles. / **Gord Goble**

▲ Nothin' better than a sharply dressed rider in custom clothing.

Great short-term, crash-happy fodder for airborne thrill seekers.

COMPUTER **GAMING** WORLD | **VERDICT** ★★★☆

>> **ONCE YOU PEEL AWAY THE LAYERS, YOU SEE THE WARTS UNDERNEATH.**

WAR-BLOGGER!
Check out columnist Bruce Geryk's blog at grognards.1UP.com

COLUMN

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

BATTLEFRONT.COM RELEASED FOUR new campaigns for *Down in Flames* over the holidays, so if you own the game, you should definitely log on and get all the updates. And if you don't have it yet, it's definitely worth a look.

Paradox Entertainment signed an agreement a while ago to publish a computer version of Avalon Hill's *Squad Leader*, and hopefully it turns out better than Paradox's dismal *Diplomacy* port. The real *SL* is actually already available for your PC…albeit only as a module for Rodney Kinney's VASSAL applet (www.vassalengine.org), which allows you to play board games over the Internet. That just leaves the small problem of A.I.

To the rescue comes programmer Lars Thuring, who's hard at work on an A.I. module for the game. You can find his project, JASL, at www.thuring.com/asl. Right now you can play a version of the introductory scenario, "The Guards Counterattack," by downloading the latest version of JASL from Thuring's website.

JASL definitely needs work, but it already illustrates how such an incredibly complex game can seem very simple when you have a computer implementing the rules for you. Those hoping for Paradox to "stick to the rules" when developing its version of this landmark game should consider whether it really would make for a good product, or if this is just nostalgia for an era of war-gaming long gone.

Look for an interview with Lars on my 1UP.com blog later this month! / **Bruce Geryk**

▲ To everyone who's ever wished for a good PC port of *Squad Leader*—you're in luck.

You and what army? Oh, that army.

Playing king of the hill is easier when the A.I. doesn't know enough to take the hill.

The red on the blue. Red, arranged into an army, wins.

EMPIRE EARTH II: THE ART OF SUPREMACY

The art of supernumerary

THE SUBTITLE FOR THE NEW *EMPIRE Earth II* expansion pack, "*The Art of Supremacy*," has the ring of one-upmanship you'd expect in an expansion. Unfortunately, the actual game has no such thing.

Four new civilizations, only two of which bring anything fresh to the table, top *Art of Supremacy*'s list of additions. The Masai and the Zulu—being African—get their own African epoch powers and African wonders of the world, while the French and Russian factions sit at the same table as all the other Europeans. Everyone's unique units continue to differ only marginally from their nonunique counterparts, except that the names of the Zulu and Masai unique units are harder to pronounce. The new civilization editor at once provides an example of *Empire Earth II*'s flexibility and an indictment for how little character the different sides have. Just pick your own bonuses, units, and powers…then save them under whatever name you like. This "hey, might as well roll your own!" approach just goes to show how minimally your choice of civilization impacts anything in a game so chock-full of—and choked with—detail.

A HERO AIN'T NOTHING BUT A BANNER

The most groundbreaking new feature: a formation unique to the Zulu that gives their units a damage bonus. Along the same lines of units having new ways to stand next to each other, any civilization can set up armies led by heroes. If you use a unit long enough, it can become a hero—i.e., a supersized version of itself with an "H" flag sticking out of it. Use these to make armies, which are control groups with a damage bonus (aka one more thing to lose track of in all the micromanagement).

The new tug-of-war mode lines up a series of maps, giving the loser of the previous map an advantage on the next one. You fight to push each other back and forth over this series of maps, waging war with persistent units and bases. Push far enough to hit the end and you've won. It's a great way to draw out your playing time, with the caveat that you're playing *Empire Earth II*. You can also draw out your playtime in larger multiplayer games by swearing fealty to another player when you've been beaten, which basically means you continue running your conquered, crippled economy while someone else plays with your military units. This is probably the first time that Finland-ization has been considered a bullet point.

NATIVE RESOLUTIONS

New native tribes (i.e., minibases with mini armies) can limit expansion but offer a boost later in the game if you station a leader in their territory. Great idea…but like so many of *Empire Earth II*'s great ideas, it's often lost in the micromanagement. The A.I. is still horrible, with the computer enjoying the advantageous ability to finesse the overcomplicated economy. The interface is still messy, and the graphics are still ugly—new lighting and explosion effects notwithstanding.

The whole thing feels more like feature creep in a box than an expansion pack. Even for fans of *Empire Earth II*—in fact, especially for fans of *Empire Earth II*—the *Art of Supremacy* expansion provides a disappointing exercise in uninspired padding. **Tom Chick**

AFRICA ASCENDING

The Art of Supremacy features two "Turning Point" battles and three short campaigns with enough scripting tricks to keep them interesting. But the futuristic Masai campaign is actually pretty clever, putting these nomadic people in charge of a new energy source found only in Kenya. You go from herding cattle to mining something more precious than gold that's coveted by superpowers and corporations. It's every Third World country's revenge fantasy!

> THIS IS PROBABLY THE FIRST TIME THAT FINLAND-IZATION HAS BEEN CONSIDERED A BULLET POINT.

Feature creep in a box.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★☆☆☆

STAR CHAMBER:
THE HARBINGER SAGA

CCG with a twist

PUBLISHER: **Matrix Games** DEVELOPER: **Worlds Apart** GENRE: **Strategy** ESRB RATING: **None** REQUIRED: **1GHz CPU, 128MB RAM, 250MB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **None** MULTIPLAYER: **2-4 players**

▶ COLLECTIBLE CARD GAMES (CCGs) often fall through the cracks in the floor of the PC gaming industry. But for those who pay attention to them, the cheap starter decks hook you in…and before you know it, you're scrounging between sofa cushions for booster-pack money. The Matrix Games–published *Harbinger Saga*, an update to 2003's *Star Chamber*, makes a remarkably good attempt at luring you into another downward spiral of CCG addiction.

Star Chamber freshens up the CCG genre by blending traditional card play with a strategic game of planetary conquest. *SC* players take their turns simultaneously, and games unfold on maps made up of a series of planets and a "Star Chamber" that provides the resources necessary for victory.

Instead of mandating you to bash on your opponent until he's dead, *SC* offers three different victory conditions. Control of industrial planets gives you build points to create units for conquest—you can win militarily by capturing your opponent's home world. Artifact planets produce culture points; accumulate 30 more points than your opponent and you win. Finally, you can win politically through a series of votes at the map's Star Chamber. With multiple victory conditions, as well as multiplayer games that accommodate up to four players, *SC* offers greater depth and far more variety than most CCGs.

You get a decent deal with the basic *SC* package, too; it features a good tutorial, two single-player campaigns, and a couple of starter decks. Unfortunately, this isn't enough to make the game really accessible to newcomers, as the weak starter decks lack some basic elements. With 10 different species and four different card series, it'll take a lot of booster packs to get what you need to be competitive…especially since most of your opponents have probably been playing for years. But those willing to invest a bit of time, patience, and money will find a rich CCG that trumps pretty much everything else currently available—in either electronic or cardboard form. **/Di Luo**

▲ Make sure you're prepared to pay for your new hobby—CCGs never come cheap.

▲ You can win the game through political maneuvers by securing a majority vote.

A great CCG that'll be the black hole of your gaming dollars.

COMPUTER **GAMING** WORLD | **VERDICT** ★★★★☆

LEGION ARENA

Historical strategy for dummies

PUBLISHER: **Strategy First** DEVELOPER: **Slitherine Software** GENRE: **Strategy** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players**

▶ LIKE AN EPISODE OF *THE YOUNG Indiana Jones Chronicles*, the sort-of-turn-based and sort-of-real-time *Legion Arena* wants us to believe that learning is fun, as evidenced by the vaguely History Channel–like narrations of the Roman Empire's conquests across Europe that you're treated to after every few battles. Between this and the short premission text boxes that set up the circumstances of each skirmish, you don't exactly get a gripping story here.

Who needs a story, though? This ain't *WarCraft*. On the contrary, strategy buffs might be tempted to draw some knee-jerk parallels to *Rome: Total War*, but *Legion Arena* bears little more than a superficial resemblance to—and lacks the tactical depth of—most strategy games. Here's how the typical battle goes: Deploy a general and several battalions (your typical cavalry/infantry/spearman types) across the battlefield, give them stance and move orders, click the "Fight!" button, and watch the warring armies collide. Yes, you may have grown up, but you're still doing the rough equivalent of winding up toy soldiers and letting them go.

You can issue additional commands to your units midfight (via an exhaustible supply of order points), but most of the game's limited strategic value lies in the preparation itself, since you don't get much of a chance to change your mind once the troops start marching, and prep-time factors like terrain and unit placement play key roles in the outcome. Skirmishes unfold quickly; a loss results in getting booted to the beginning of the scenario, while victory earns you experience points, fame, and denari (currency), which are used to upgrade existing units, heal wounded units, and purchase new units, respectively. Then it's off to the next skirmish…and the next…and once you finish with Rome, you get to do it all over again in the Celtic campaign.

Tactical freaks won't find much here to really challenge them, but *Legion Arena* might serve as a good introduction for players unfamiliar with this type of strategy game. If nothing else, it's something that you can play in quick bursts without a lot of mind-boggling micromanagement getting in the way. **/Ryan Scott**

▲ Stances and movement orders matter—unit deployment is half the battle.

▲ To battle! With any luck, my army won't run away like a bunch of pansies. After all, no one likes to rumble without backup.

Ultimately shallow, yet fun for what it is.

COMPUTER **GAMING** WORLD | **VERDICT** ★★★☆☆

WWII TANK COMMANDER

The lights are on, but no one's home

PUBLISHER: **Merscom** DEVELOPER: **Sylum Entertainment** GENRE: **Action** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 950MB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **1.2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 1GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

I'M HANGING OVER THE EDGE OF MY Sherman's turret—right over the lip. Fifty yards ahead in the shell fog is another M4. He's got incoming at 3 o'clock: German panzer. I swing my 75 mm around and bang away until I see nothing but blaze. "I've got this one covered," chirps the Sherman's commander on my radio. He's clear! I rumble forward anyway, just to be sure. Suddenly his tank explodes, black char jetting skyward…but the hostile was neutralized! WTF?!
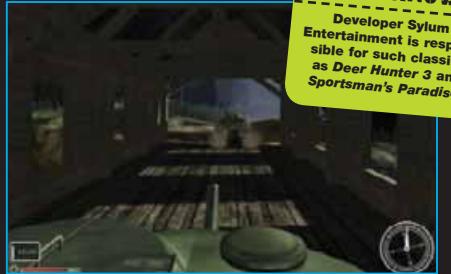
No, it's not the Al Qaeda version of World War II. Turns out saving Mr. "I've got it covered" was never in the cards: You're supposed to plunge forward and trigger the script before clobbering the panzer. Oops. Tally another one of countless snarls in Sylum's action-loony *WWII Tank Commander* that makes you beg for Lorne Michaels to pop out from behind a flaming howitzer and chortle "Just kidding" (or…well, anything at all) to justify this waste of 20 bucks.

Hop in your Sherman, hover over its turret, use the keyboard to move and the mouse to swivel, and fire your 75 mm boomstick or machine gun. There—you've mastered *Tank Commander*'s entire control scheme. Ten missions long, it spins up maybe five hours of going "toro toro" with dozens of vegetable-A.I. villains, whacking bridges, and escorting a few feckless compadres to safety.

Half the time you can't tell friend from foe, the A.I. can only sight a straight line (thus firing uselessly into barriers), and an audio crash bug graces the readme as a "sound driver issue." Come on, people—fix the bugs, don't memorialize them. No check or save points, no sense of where people are when they radio for help, splash damage that kills from up to 50 meters away, no multiplayer whatsoever—need to hear more? Stay away. Stay very far away.
/Matt Peckham

▲ Take out bridges by simply eliminating the enemy forces on the opposing side, at which point scripted air strikes do the rest. Ho-hum.

▲ Fun with the AUI (artificial unintelligence)—block your friends and they'll…block back! For hours!

COME ON, PEOPLE—FIX THE BUGS, DON'T MEMORIALIZE THEM.

Bad for 20 bucks, bad for zero bucks.

COMPUTER **GAMING** WORLD | **VERDICT** ★☆☆☆☆

CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS: THE AFTERMATH

Buyer blockade

PUBLISHER: **Strategy First** DEVELOPER: **G5 Software** GENRE: **RTS** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **1.7GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM** MULTIPLAYER: **2 players**

SPECULATIVE HISTORY IN GAMES IS usually the irrelevant cellophane wrapping that gets hastily discarded in favor of complex gameplay. But in the case of *Cuban Missile Crisis*, we get a world destroyed by nuclear war—sparked by, yes, a Cuban missile crisis—and you get to play RTS general with early Cold War toys like the British Centurion and the Russian T-55. It makes for a nice change from the usual World War II real-time-strategy landscape.

Likewise, the strategic layer between battles allows you to move your troops using a turn-based system, where capturing facilities gives you the ability to buy new units, resupply your forces, and conduct better reconnaissance. Your troops also gain experience from battles, which makes the campaigns—although not really open-ended—feel at least somewhat persistent and dynamic. Four separate campaigns and a wide range of equipment help to expand the game

universe yet fail to extend that same courtesy to the variety of gameplay.

If you're getting all excited about this so far and haven't already looked at the final score, you can officially stop now. *CMC*'s big problem: its dismal real-time battles. The game doesn't support formations, so combat is a mess of fiddly clicking and positioning, and the vehicle pathfinding can cause traffic jams in the middle of open fields. What's worse—even if this were fixed, the battles wouldn't be very interesting. They almost always amount to straightforward set-piece affairs where the attacker predictably needs to root out a dug-in defender. It gets old fast.

Developer G5 Software should get credit for making a game that uses every angle of its interesting premise to try and break out of the genre's rut. And if the actual battle engine were better, this would be a great game. It isn't, so it's not.
/Bruce Geryk

▲ *CMC*'s opening cinematic: epic. The game itself: actually kinda boring.

▲ Many scenarios essentially amount to painful root-out-the-defender puzzles.

IF YOU'RE GETTING EXCITED ABOUT THIS AND HAVEN'T ALREADY LOOKED AT THE FINAL SCORE, YOU CAN OFFICIALLY STOP NOW.

Solid…except for the core gameplay.

COMPUTER **GAMING** WORLD | **VERDICT** ★★☆☆☆

TICKET TO RIDE

Casually irresistible

BOARD GAME PORTS HAVE A PRETTY dismal history—and *Ticket to Ride* just might be the revolution. The original cardboard version from creator Days of Wonder (the same folks behind this port) won numerous awards and sold hundreds of thousands of copies in less than two years. Perhaps the most amazing thing about the game is that it may actually play better on the PC. A first for the genre!

What at first appears to be a trivial card-collecting game reveals itself as a contest of strategy, bluffs, and maneuvers—once you play it a few dozen times. But because your average game lasts about 15 minutes, this won't take you all that long. Players compete to connect routes between cities on maps of the United States, Europe, and Switzerland; the player who scores the most points for length of routes and connected cities wins. You can learn the game in almost as little time as it took to read that sentence.
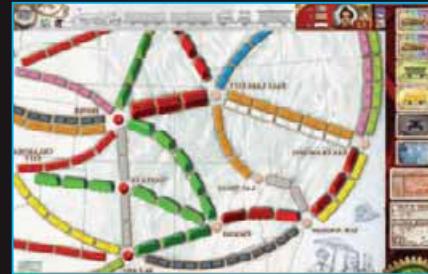
It takes a lot longer to stop playing once you start, though, as this has to be one of the most addicting little games since *Bejeweled*. As you learn the routes and see what other players are up to, you'll discover a whole different level of depth. Games play quite differently with two players than they do with four or five, and each map has its own distinct feel, requiring new kinds of strategy.

Then you can go online and find yet another level of competition. *Ticket to Ride* has a robust online multiplayer community, and you can quickly find a game at almost any time of day (or night) thanks to the international composition of the player base. Furthermore, because games take so little time, it's a perfect procrastination tool.

Ticket to Ride is a strategy purist's dream game: It plays quickly, the tension level stays high, and you have many ways to win (or lose). This combination of qualities rarely comes across in most publicized titles yet exists in abundance in this little gem, available only from the company's website at www.daysofwonder.com. Don't keep it a secret. **/ Bruce Geryk**

▲ The U.S. map has the fewest special rules—and it's the most popular one online.

▲ The zoomed-in view isn't useful for much except admiring the scenery.
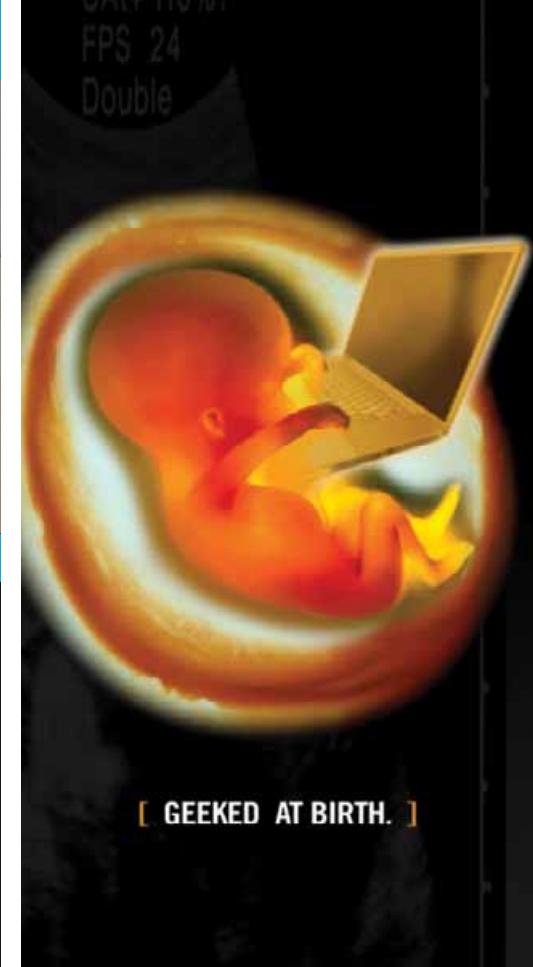
▲ The European map introduces tunnels, ferries, and stations.

The best surprise of the year so far.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD | **VERDICT** ★★★★★

YOUR AVERAGE GAME LASTS ABOUT 15 MINUTES.

THE NEXT LEVEL

CGW's guide to the latest and greatest postrelease content

▲ I hope she's not talking about her "other" merchandise.

DEVELOPMENT HELL
Lazarus spent over five years in development.

ULTIMA V: LAZARUS

BASE GAME: *Dungeon Siege* DEVELOPER: **Team Lazarus** GENRE: **RPG**
WEBSITE: **www.u5lazarus.com** VERSION REVIEWED: **1.1A**

OLD-TIME GAMERS LOVE GETTING NOS-talgic—a fact made clear by the recent surge in home-brew remakes of classic PC games. Add one more to the list with *Ultima V: Lazarus*, which utilizes the *Dungeon Siege* engine to create a modern PC version of one of the best RPGs ever—the fifth installment in the legendary *Ultima* series.

The main differences between the original *Ultima V* and *Lazarus* lie in the mechanical realm; classes, for instance, throw back to their *Ultima IV* counterparts—instead of just fighters, bards, and mages, you get tinkers, druids, and paladins, too. But this works quite well with the expanded features that *Dungeon Siege* makes possible, such as the ability to train up skills—exactly the sort of stuff you'd want modernized.

Likewise, the stuff you'd want untouched receives a careful eye toward preservation, most notably in the game's story-line content: For as long as anyone can remember, the realm of Britannia was ruled by Lord British—and the virtuous examples set by the Avatar (that's you) served as a binding moral code. But now, with British missing and feared dead, the once well-meaning intentions behind the regency of Lord Blackthorn seem increasingly corrupted, leading him to enforce maligned interpretations of the virtues at the point of a sword.

REVISIONIST FANTASY

The *Lazarus* team didn't just do a straight port of this content, though—rather, it expanded the story in all the right ways while still remaining true to the original *Ultima V*. Cleverly interwoven dialogue and nuanced plot subtleties abound, and the sumptuous hand-rendered artwork and character portraits—along with the passionate musical score—easily immerse you enough to forgive the dated-looking 3D graphics in the actual world environment…which really stem from *Dungeon Siege* itself showing its age.

Some things just can't be forgiven, though; none of the aforementioned upsides means anything if you can't play the game reliably. Horrendous amounts of technical glitches remain unfixed, ranging from critical buttons that you can't click to completely fatal crashes that leave you spending most of your time loading saved games. Though *Lazarus* exists as a free, fan-created labor of love, these bugs utterly ruin it like paint thinner splattered upon a masterfully rendered canvas. To be perfectly clear, I can't tear myself away from this game—but it just doesn't work the way it should.

Just as classic works of literature should be read by every student in school, *Ultima V* should be played by every RPG fan…and once *Lazarus* gets patched more thoroughly, it'll be a great modern alternative to the original game.
/**Matthew Chase**

▲ The *Ultima* series' trademark ethical quiz helps to determine your character's lot in life.

▲ I have at least four arrows sticking out of my chest here. But don't worry, I'm fine!

With all the unpatched bugs, it currently reminds us more of *Ultima IX*.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT
★★☆☆☆

» I CAN'T TEAR MYSELF AWAY FROM THIS GAME—BUT IT JUST DOESN'T WORK THE WAY IT SHOULD.

REWIND

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
80 Days	Feb 06	★★☆☆☆
Advent Rising	Nov 05	★★★☆☆
Agatha Christie: And Then There Were None	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Age of Empires III	Dec 05	★★★☆☆
Anglo-German War '39-'45	Feb 06	★★★☆☆
Area 51	Sept 05	★★★☆☆
The Bard's Tale	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Baseball Mogul 2006	July/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Battle of Britain II: Wings of Victory	Dec 05	★★★☆☆
Battlefield 2	Sept 05	★★★★★
Battlefield 2: Special Forces	Feb 06	★★☆☆☆
Black & White 2	Dec 05	★★★☆☆
Blitzkrieg 2	Dec 05	★★★☆☆
BloodRayne 2	Oct 05	★★★☆☆
Bone: Out From Boneville	Dec 05	★★★☆☆
Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood	Dec 05	★★★★★
Call of Duty 2	Jan 06	★★★★☆
City of Villains	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Civilization IV	Jan 06	★★★★★
Close Combat: First to Fight	July/Aug 05	★★☆☆☆
Codename: Panzers—Phase Two	Nov 05	★★★☆☆
Combat: Task Force 121	July/Aug 05	★★☆☆☆
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	July/Aug 05	★★★☆☆
Crown of Glory: Europe in the Age of Napoleon	Oct 05	★★★☆☆
Darwinia	Dec 05	★★★★★
Day of Defeat: Source	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Diplomacy	Dec 05	★☆☆☆☆
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	July/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Down in Flames	Dec 05	★★★★★
Dragonshard	Dec 05	★★★★☆
DRIV3R	July/Aug 05	★★☆☆☆
Dungeon Lords	Sept 05	☆☆☆☆☆
Dungeon Siege II	Nov 05	★★★★☆

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Earth 2160	Jan 06	★★★☆☆
ER	Oct 05	★★★☆☆
F.E.A.R.	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Fable: The Lost Chapters	Nov 05	★★★★☆
Fantastic 4	Sept 05	★★★☆☆
Fate	Sept 05	★★★★☆
FlatOut	Sept 05	★★★★☆
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Sept 05	★★★★★
GTR FIA Racing	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Guild Wars	July/Aug 05	★★★★★
Gun	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Hammer & Sickle	Feb 06	★☆☆☆☆
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	Jan 06	★★★☆☆
Heroes of the Pacific	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Imperial Glory	Sept 05	★★★☆☆
Indigo Prophecy	Dec 05	★★★★★
King Kong	Feb 06	★★★★☆
Law & Order: Criminal Intent	Jan 06	☆☆☆☆☆
Lego Star Wars	July/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Madden NFL 06	Nov 05	★★★★☆
The Matrix Online	July/Aug 05	★★★☆☆
The Matrix: Path of Neo	Feb 06	★★★☆☆
The Movies	Jan 06	★★★★☆
MVP Baseball 2005	July/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Myst V: End of Ages	Dec 05	★★★★☆
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	Feb 06	★★★★★
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2005	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Pariah	Sept 05	★★★☆☆
Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones	Feb 06	★★★★★
Project: Snowblind	July/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Quake 4	Jan 06	★★★★☆
Rag Doll Kung Fu	Jan 06	★★★☆☆
Restricted Area	Oct 05	★☆☆☆☆
Rome: Total War—Barbarian Invasion	Dec 05	★★★★☆

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

▲ King Kong

▲ Battlefield 2: Special Forces

▲ Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones

MANUFACTURER: **AMD**
PRODUCT: **AMD Athlon 64 FX-60 Dual-core Processor** ▼

MANUFACTURER: **Intel**
PRODUCT: **Intel Pentium Extreme Edition 955 Processor** ▼

▲ **AMD's FX-60 marries the dual-core expandability of the X2 series with the raw power of the FX series.**

▲ **Hot and hotter, and we don't mean in a Jennifer Connelly and Nicole Kidman way.**

SOMETIMES CHRISTMAS COMES twice—more specifically, we were pretty excited to get both our Intel Pentium Extreme Edition 955 and AMD Athlon 64 FX-60 processor review kits for this issue. One thing we can say: This particular competition heated up quickly. Simply booting up the Intel CPU saw the processor temp surge from 89 degrees Celsius to 103 degrees Celsius, whereupon the system promptly keeled over and begged for a ice pack. After we bribed Intel's PR goons Dan Snyder and Dave Salvator (as in *CGW* and ExtremeTech alum Dave Salvator) with Tootsie Rolls and tongue-blistering office coffee, they brought us a new Intel kit. Problem solved, sort of: The new motherboard and CPU idled at around 60 degrees Celsius—not great, but at least stable, letting us get down to business. Successfully navigating our benchmarks fuss-free, we can comfortably say AMD and Intel's flagship CPUs are neck-and-neck in terms of performance, but the 955EE is a barn burner…literally.

Die-shrink the Prescott (840EE) architecture to 65nm, multiply by two, and you get Intel's Presler (955EE), a dual-core CPU with twice the number of transistors. The cores share a single 1,066MHz frontside bus, which tops the Pentium Extreme Edition 840's speed by 266MHz. The 955EE also trumps the aging 840EE with double the L2 cache. As a result, heat and the 955EE processor are bosom buds, and while Intel suggests the 955EE should peak at around 69 degrees Celsius full throttle, we discovered that's not quite the case.

In the other corner, AMD also makes the dual-core leap, as its FX-60 sports a pair of cores running at 2.6GHz, which represents a 200MHz bump over the Athlon 64 X2 4800+'s speed but is 200MHz slower than its predecessor, the single-core FX-57. Another way to think of the FX-60 is like you're getting two FX-55s on a single chip. Similar to the 4800+, the FX-60 has 1MB of unshared L2 cache per core, and like the FX series chips, the FX-60 is clock-unlocked, allowing users to ratchet up CPU performance with ease.

BENCH-PRESSED
Throwing down with the older Extreme Edition 840 and a game-spanking Athlon 64 4800+, the 955EE and FX-60 clearly best their older siblings, with the 955EE edging ahead in a few of the system tests and the FX-60 mopping up when it comes to game performance. In our SYSmark 2004 SE test, which simulates real-life workloads for both Internet content creation (ICC) and office productivity (OP), Intel's 955EE nearly caught up with the 4800+, but AMD's FX-60 pulled ahead by a comfortable margin on the ICC test. In PCMark05 (our other synthetic test), AMD fared poorly, while Intel's new 955EE kicked out a much better CPU score, probably because several of the multithreading tests run more than two simultaneous tasks. Interestingly, AMD's 4800+ and FX-60's 4KB memory-write performance was substantially greater than Intel's, most likely reflecting the difference in L1 cache size, though Intel's CPUs offered superior

▲ **Under heavy loads, Presler runs hot. Really hot. Surface of the sun hot. Here, we see it running at 95 degrees Celsius.**

memory-read performance across the board. Both the 4800+ and FX-60 also performed well in memory writes using blocks larger than the L2 cache, likely due to their integrated memory controllers.

Nothing beats real-world numbers, of course. In the 3ds Max 7 SPECapc test, both AMD CPUs simply own. Even with their SSE extensions enabled, the Pentium processors can't keep up. For pure rendering, on the other hand, both Intel CPUs pull well ahead of the 4800+, though AMD's muscular FX-60 manages to clock toe-to-toe with Intel's 955EE. Using LightWave 8.5 for rendering and animation tests, it's no contest, with both Intel processors besting AMD's CPUs by hundreds of seconds. Next up is the Adobe After Effects 6.0 test, which was traditionally an

AMD VS. INTEL:
## Captain Cool vs. Sergeant Swelter

Players

93
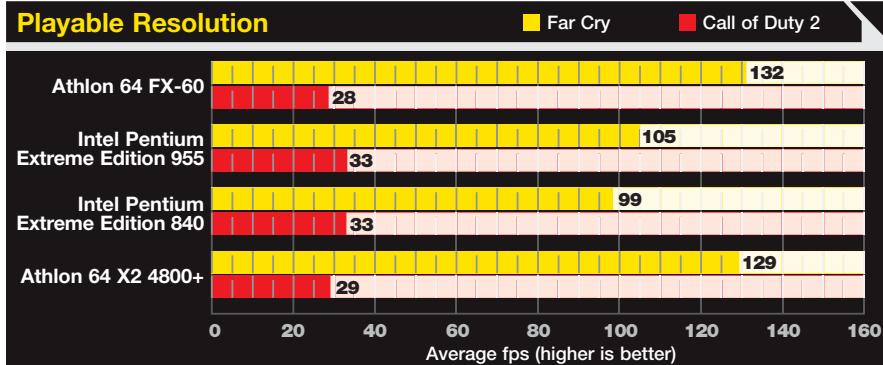
> **Tech Medics**
This month:
Gamepads, CPUs, and *Civ 4*—this month we've got a little bit of everything answered by our resident know-it-alls.

GAME TESTS

Playable Resolution

■ Far Cry   ■ Call of Duty 2

CPU	Far Cry	Call of Duty 2
Athlon 64 FX-60	132	28
Intel Pentium Extreme Edition 955	105	33
Intel Pentium Extreme Edition 840	99	33
Athlon 64 X2 4800+	129	29

Average fps (higher is better)
0 20 40 60 80 100 120 140 160

> ## THE COMPETITION BETWEEN AMD AND INTEL IS HEATING UP AS INTEL CONTINUES TO CLOSE THE PERFORMANCE GAP.

Intel hunting ground until the Athlon 64 X2 came along, and here the FX-60 easily keeps pace with the 955EE. Likewise with video encoding, where it's a dead heat between AMD's top-of-the-line dual-core CPU and Intel's latest progeny.

Games tell the same story we've been hearing for some time now: AMD simply overwhelms Intel in most benchmarks. In *Flight Simulator 2004*, *Far Cry*, and *Serious Sam II* (high resolution, high detail), the FX-60 toasts Intel's 955EE by a 4fps to 27fps spread. The exceptions are *F.E.A.R.*, where the two break even (though the FX-60 runs well ahead in the low-res tests, indicating the high-res benchmark is graphics-bound), and *Call of Duty 2*, which saw the 955EE slip a notable 5fps ahead of AMD's CPU. In summary, AMD still rules the gaming roost, but depending on what you're playing, Intel's 955EE is nipping at its heels.

BORN TO BURN?

If you recall the thermal issues we had with the first Intel 955EE we tested, you may be wondering how its replacement fared, and unfortunately, the results aren't pretty. Even the working 955EE CPU runs at high temperatures—nearly the boiling point, in fact. Even under duress, AMD's FX-60 is a fridge by comparison.

At 5 percent CPU load, idle temps on our replacement 955EE ranged from 57 degrees Celsius to 62 degrees Celsius using the stock Intel cooler, but when we loaded up PCMark05 and looped the CPU tests a few times, the temperature hit an egg-incinerating 95 degrees Celsius. Compare this to the Intel 840EE, which clocked a still-blistering 73 degrees Celsius during the test,

and the AMD FX-60, which purred along under the load at a balmy 55 degrees Celsius. Temperatures regularly popping higher than 80 degrees Celsius are problematic and cause for concern (to say the least). Based on Intel's own manufacturing data, we suspect the die shrink (i.e., the CPU getting crammed into a tinier space on the chip) on the 955EE resulted in severe hotspotting on the CPU, though Intel suggests most of the heat may be coming from the Intel D975XBX motherboard. Laying out CPU circuits is becoming more challenging, and sources tell us that much of the design of Intel's next-generation CPU (code name: Conroe) revolves around spreading out the heat-generating portions of the CPU.

Does this mean rigs with the Intel 955EE processor will replace your household heating system? Possibly not, if you buy off the prebuilt market. Companies like Gateway, HP, and other major OEMs have spent a lot of time designing their PC cases to dissipate heat adequately and quietly, and a Dell XPS Renegade with an overclocked 4.26GHz Intel 955EE is right around the corner. If you still plan on building your own Presler system, be careful about choosing the right case and CPU cooler (consider yourself duly warned). We've had great luck with the Zalman CNPS9500, for instance, but $65 more to keep your CPU happy seems excessive.

If you want a dual-core system for everyday use, including fairly serious 3D gaming, the Athlon FX-60 is probably the better pick. For specific applications—3D rendering, for example—Intel's new CPU might fill the bill, but be sure to at least check out systems designed for the CPU rather than

building one yourself immediately. At similar price points and with performance scores too close to call a winner, the main issue separating the Intel's 955EE from AMD's FX-60 is power draw and heat: The FX-60 is simply more efficient (meaning it's also the choice for overclockers). We salute the Intel 955EE's solid numbers, but one furnace per household is plenty. **/ Loyd Case**

INSIDE

92 REVIEW

Budget Racer
ATI's X1600 price drop makes it worth a look.

92 REVIEW

Live, Hot Nerds
Logitech's newest webcam is one of the best.

Intel 955EE $995

Better performance than in the past but hotter than a hellfire BBQ. The trick is keeping it cool.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★☆☆

AMD FX-60 $1,031

AMD no longer has the definitively swifter CPU, but the FX-60 runs much cooler than the Intel 955EE.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★★☆

BATTLEBOXES

BETTER LATE THAN NEVER

Steep discounts make ATI's midrange card a decent buy

▶ BACK IN OCTOBER 2005, ATI TROTTED out an entire family of products, from the high-performance (and wallet-blistering) X1800 series to the entry/value-level X1300 lineup. The last to hit the market was the X1600 series, which lies right down the middle in that $150-to-$200 price range where affordability best converges with performance—and where most users spend their money.

With a robust 12 pixel shader processors, ATI's 256MB Radeon X1600 XT ought to be a crack midrange player, considering that the company's flagship X1800 XT only tallies 16. The trim from eight to five vertex shader units shouldn't hurt much, either. Unfortunately, the numbers of texture address units and raster operators take a dive, from six to four

of each. Still, the high core clock speed (almost 600MHz) and decent memory speed (effectively 1.38GHz) are certainly encouraging. When ATI launched the card at a not-worth-it price of $249, it was getting spanked by Nvidia's comparably priced GeForce 6800 GS, but the price has since dropped to a more reasonable $179 or so.

The X1600 XT scored 5 percent faster than the X800 XL (a popular older card that is comparably priced) in 3DMark05, but when facing off against the 6800 GS, it took dive after dive in games like *Half-Life 2* (31 percent slower), *Doom 3* (22 percent slower), *Far Cry* (24 percent slower), and *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* (19 percent slower). Prospects were better for *F.E.A.R.* and *Call of Duty 2*, but even then the X1600 XT tended to ride the GeForce 6800

GS' wake (though it was slightly faster in *F.E.A.R.* with AA and AF enabled).

When priced directly against the 6800 GS, the X1600 XT simply gave you no reason to buy it. Now that the card's cost has taken a dive in such a short time, its main competition is the GeForce 6600 GT, and the X1600 XT comes out looking pretty good. If you simply can't spend $200 or more on a graphics card, this one is worth a serious look. But if you want our advice, cough up another $30 or $40 and spring for that 6800 GS. **/Jason Cross**

▶▶ A GOOD BARGAIN, BUT COUGH UP $40 MORE FOR THAT 6800 GS.

ATI	$179

Recent price drops make this a pretty attractive low- to midrange card.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD | **VERDICT** ★★★½☆

LOOKING GOOD

One of the best webcams we've used

▶ YEARS AGO, WEBCAMS WERE MOSTLY übergeeks' toys, used to watch outside traffic or the baby's room and to power those "view hot girls now!" amateur porn sites that love to spam us. Today, they're expanding person-to-person communications. However, there's a world of difference between a generic $20 plastic orb and a pro setup that can cost several times more.

The Logitech QuickCam Fusion is the company's latest pitch toward the spectrum's high end, promising improved image quality in low light and higher-quality stills and videos. Featuring a new 1.3-megapixel sensor for true 1280x960 shots and a wider-angle lens, the Fusion snaps a mean still picture, and you can capture video at resolutions up to 640x480. As far as audio, the software does a good job at echo cancellation—don't expect miracles, but with reasonably low amounts of background noise, feedback isn't an issue. Balancing the Fusion atop a monitor—especially an LCD—is easy once you figure out how to work the funky rubberized attachment.

True to its word, the Fusion does well in low-light situations by using what Logitech calls RightLight technology. With it, we're supposed to have better color and contrast in those dark

caves we call computer rooms. It's not a panacea, but if your current cam shots look like a dark red, muddy mess, the Fusion can probably help.

The Fusion's caveats come in two flavors: the flaky software and the price. A Video Effects tool lets you superimpose silly graphics over your facial features, mapped to motion-sensing tech, but the calibration and sync are wonky, frequently "breaking" video avatars. Instead of replacing my mug with a jolly gingerbread man, for instance, I got a nursery rhyme with palsy.

And at $100, the Fusion is one of the most expensive webcams on the market. Serious users will find plenty to admire, but if you only fire up your cam once in a blue moon, you should probably consider a less-expensive model. **/Jason Cross**

▶▶ THE QUICK-CAM FUSION IS EXPENSIVE BUT GOOD.

QuickCam	$100

Well suited to LCD monitors, but a bit expensive. If only the video effects worked perfectly.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD | **VERDICT** ★★★★☆

TECH MEDICS

Curing computers and charging your HMO since 1998

Q: My brother and I like to play each other in *Madden*. But with only one gamepad, one of us has to use the keyboard, making it practically impossible to play an even match. Would it be possible to plug two gamepads into the same computer, so I can face my brother and kick his ass?

Daniel Singleton

A: You bet. Assuming you're playing on a relatively recent system running Windows XP, you can hook up two gamepads if you have enough free USB ports. We also have to throw in a quick plug for our current favorite controller: the Xbox 360 gamepad. Don't leave home without it. The real question, Daniel, is if you think this'll really keep your brother from continuing to kick your ass.

Q: I've spent a pretty good part of my meager salary as a teacher upgrading my rig. I have a 3GHz LGA 775 Prescott with HT and an X800 XL in an Asus P5GDC Deluxe motherboard. I heard that my RAM configuration could be slowing me down. I currently have two gigs of Crucial ValueRAM PC2700 (1x1GB and 2x512MB). Is there any problem with my setup that could be causing problems? My computer is really chugging on some parts of *Age of Empires III* and other newer games.

Michael Foor

A: Hey, Teach, with all that fancy book learning, you got the right idea for the most part. The Pentium 4 processor is sensitive to memory bandwidth. Your system likely supports dual-channel PC3200 memory, but you're effectively running in single-channel mode at only PC2700 speeds. Now, I hate suggesting that you spend even more money, but getting 2x512MB or 2x1GB identical memory modules will almost certainly improve your game performance and benchmark scores, perhaps by as much a 15 percent. For a little extra credit, do some online bargain shopping at places like techbargains.com.

Q: I recently bought an e-GeForce 6600 GT AGP 128MB 8x. My friend has a Radeon 9800 Pro, and people tell me the 6600 GT is better than a 9800 Pro. My friend says that he always gets 100fps flat on *Counter-Strike.* But every time I play *Counter-Strike* with my 6600 GT, I get 60fps. (My computer is similar to his.) What the hell is going on here?

Alan Diep

A: Maybe your friend is lying through his teeth. Actually, it sounds to us like you've got V-sync enabled. When you run a game, it often defaults to a 60Hz refresh rate for the display. If V-sync (also known as "sync every frame") is enabled, then your game will never run faster than the refresh rate of the display. You might check your display control panel to see if the graphics card has a setting for disabling V-sync (most do).

Q: I have a 4-month-old Alienware system that contains only an AMD 3800 single-core CPU. Is it possible to drop an AMD dual core in this computer at some point in the future? If so, will the motherboard require a CPU driver update?

Tom Adams

A: Yes, Tom, it's very likely. What you'll need to do is determine what motherboard the Alienware system is using. Once you do that, you'll probably need to download and install a new BIOS for the motherboard. Now, this is not a task for the fainthearted and may void your warranty, so you might check with Alienware first. Is your tech kung fu strong enough for the task? If you are confident about your ability to update the system BIOS, then you'll also need to install the latest AMD CPU driver, which you can find at http://www.amd.com/us-en/assets/content_type/utilities/amdcpu.exe.

Q: Whenever I get toward the late stages of any game (like A.D. 2070 in *Civilization IV*), the game really starts to chug and sometimes just freezes on me. I have a P4 2.4GHz processor, 512MB (PC2700) RAM, and a 64MB GeForce4 Ti 4200. What can I do to alleviate the problem?

A: I see you're playing *Civ 4* with "time victory" turned off. At any rate, if you haven't yet, you should update *Civ 4* to the 1.52 or later version. Part of the problem you're having, though, is with memory. *Civilization IV* likes it a lot better if you have at least 1GB of RAM. Secondly, you can update the graphics card to something more current. The AGP GeForce 6600 GT would be a relatively good jump for you, and it'll cost you about 140 bucks, tops, according to pricewatch.com./Loyd Case

> **THE REAL QUESTION, DANIEL, IS IF YOU THINK USING A GAMEPAD WILL REALLY KEEP YOUR BROTHER FROM BEATING YOU.**
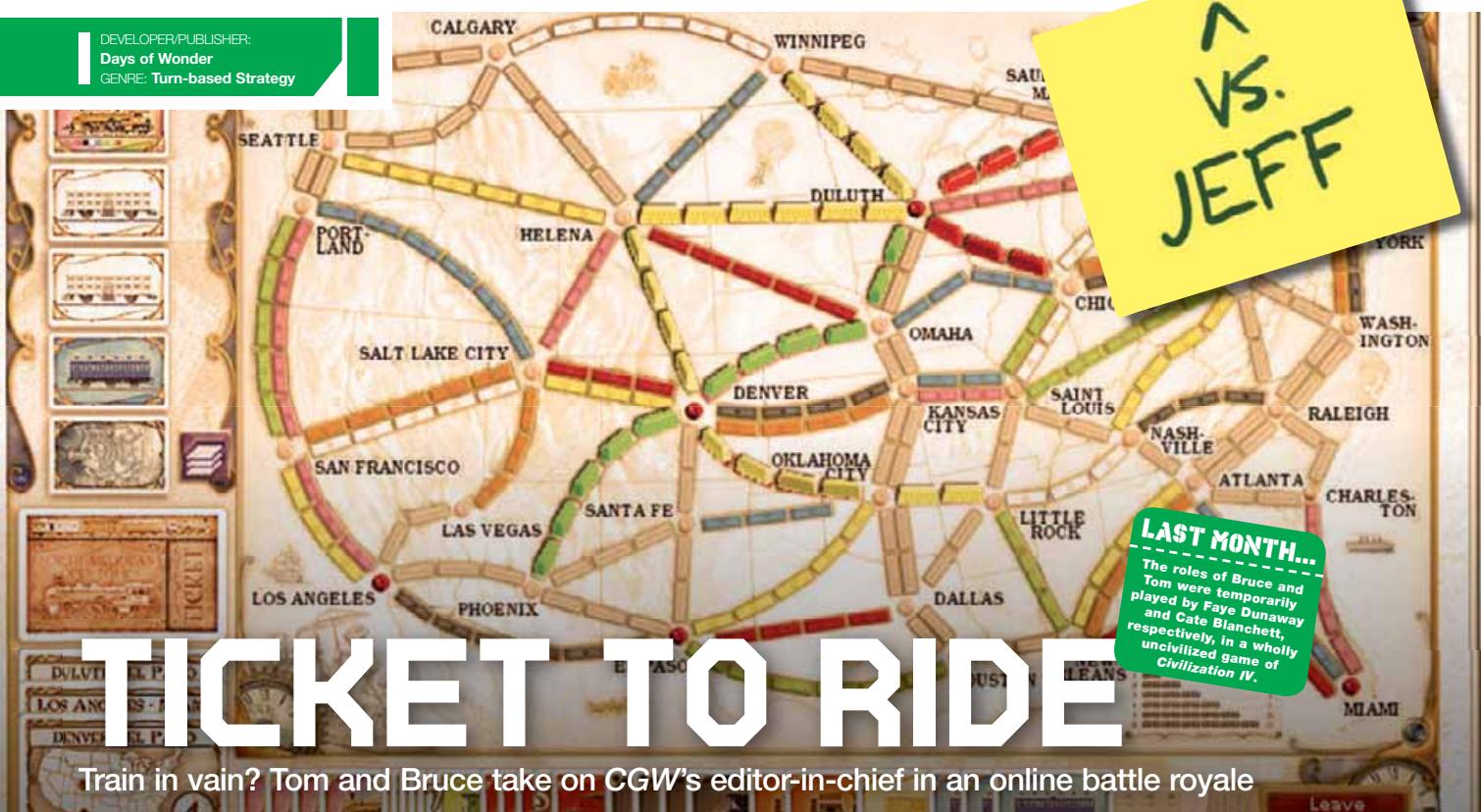
^ vs. JEFF

DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER:
Days of Wonder
GENRE: **Turn-based Strategy**

TICKET TO RIDE

Train in vain? Tom and Bruce take on *CGW*'s editor-in-chief in an online battle royale

TOM: *Ticket to Ride* is a board game that you can also play on your PC. Either way, it rules (see the review on page 87). The game is played on a map of the United States (or "Europe," wherever that is!), and the basic idea is that players collect sets of colored train cards that they use over the course of the game to claim routes between cities. The longer the routes, the more points you receive. In addition, all players have secret destination routes—unknown to everyone else—which are pairs of distant cities that will yield you bonus points at the end of the game if you manage to link them together. The problem is that the other players are doing the same thing and might get in your way, either inadvertently or vertently blocking you. And you lose points for any destination routes not completed. So things can get pretty cutthroat.

This time, we're joined by editor-in-chief Jeff Green, who is kind of our boss, but also like the little brother who keeps asking if he can play. "Hey, guys, that looks like fun," he'll tell us after we turn in an article. "Maybe I could do one with you." Normally, we brush him off by explaining that we're doing one of those complicated RTSes or maybe a Napoleonic war game and that he wouldn't get it. But *Ticket to Ride* has pretty trains and colors. So here he is. It's a difficult dynamic. Just imagine what it would be like if you worked for your little brother.

JEFF: Remember, guys, your little brother gets to win or he has a tantrum. And reedits the article.

BRUCE: *Ticket to Ride* has everything. Gambling, bluffing, second-guessing. All the stuff that could have saved *Planescape: Torment* from

being so boring. But the key is that to get the full effect of the game, you need to watch what everybody else is doing, keep track of the cards, and know what the possible tickets are. Otherwise, it's just kind of a random card-collecting game.

JEFF: *Planescape: Torment* is boring? Can I fire him for that? And what's with this "the key is to watch what everyone else is doing" thing? WTF? Who plays that way? I can't even keep track of my own cards, let alone everyone else's. If Bruce is taking this game that seriously, we need to give him a few drinks or bong hits to even the playing field.
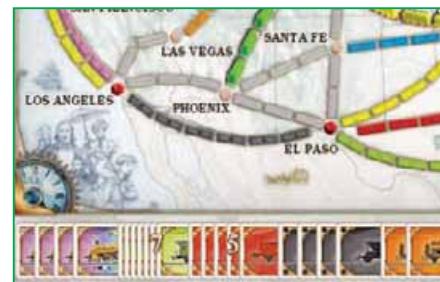
TOM: In *Ticket to Ride*, Bruce is like that guy from *Crossing Over* who will ask you a few questions and then tell you all sorts of details about your dead grandmother. But Bruce doesn't have to ask you any questions. He just watches you pick one of the available face-up cards. And instead of telling you about your dead grandmother, he'll casually announce exactly what ticket you have. For instance, if I pick up a black card, Bruce will correctly inform me that I'm trying to connect Los Angeles and Miami. I then have to spend the rest of the game pretending I'm not trying to connect Los Angeles to Miami so that Bruce doesn't block me, all the while laying down trains that will connect Los Angeles to Miami.

Also, I don't know what a bong is. In case my mom is reading this.

BRUCE: I drew one of the big cross-country tickets with Los Angeles–Miami, which gives me 20 points if I connect them. In a three-player

game, you're more likely to be locked out of a crucial city if you draw more tickets later on in the game. (On any given turn, you can claim a route between two cities, draw two new train cards, or pick more destination tickets.) For this reason, I'm keeping all three of my tickets: Duluth–El Paso (10 points), Denver–El Paso (four points), as well as L.A.–Miami. With any luck I can keep everything connected and score the 10-point bonus at the end for longest continuous route.

TOM: I hate my tickets. I drew Calgary–Phoenix, Los Angeles–Chicago, and Sault Ste. Marie–Nashville. Forget Calgary to Phoenix. My best bet is to leave from L.A. and then drive up the middle of the continent, zigging from Nashville to Chicago to Sault Ste. Marie. Lots of short routes, lots of different colors, lots of gray connections that could be any color, and a name I don't even know how to pronounce. The bad news is that this is a bad

▲ **Bruce launches his controversial Denver-Phoenix gambit, which causes Jeff to cry.**

Players

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

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

hand. The good news is that Bruce will never be able to guess where I'm going.

JEFF: I lucked out. Two of my three routes start from the same city: Winnipeg. At least, I think that's a city. You never know with Canada. Maybe it's a "province" or "territory." Or moose sanctuary. In any case, it's a huge advantage in *Ticket to Ride* if you can consolidate your destinations, so this is great. And it also doesn't hurt that the other ends of the routes—Little Rock and Houston—are close by. At least I think they're close. Honestly, I'm from California, so the rest of the country is just one big, giant Wal-Mart full of mouth-breathers to me.

BRUCE: The most direct path from L.A. to Miami has three six-card routes. These are the longest in the game and are worth 15 points each. Short routes are worth fewer points, so a connection with 12 trains in four three-train routes is worth a lot less than a connection with 12 trains but two six-train routes. By about half. That's huge. I want to grab all three, as that's 45 points.

JEFF: Bruce's nonstop number crunching over voice chat is giving me a headache. Dude, shut up. This is like playing multiplayer Excel.

BRUCE: The downside of having those juicy routes on my ticket is that I need to pick up a lot of matching sets of cards. If someone has the same needs (or, even worse, is planning on using the same links), then it becomes a race. You really have to watch what cards people are taking in order to gauge just how long to wait before starting to place trains.

JEFF: It's official: Tom and I are playing with Rain Man.

TOM: Since I'm not like that guy in *Crossing Over*, until trains get laid down, I can't begin to guess who's going where. All I know for sure is that I want black and yellow cards so I can take that long route from L.A. to El Paso to Oklahoma City, and the only way I can keep this straight in my head is to think "bumblebees."
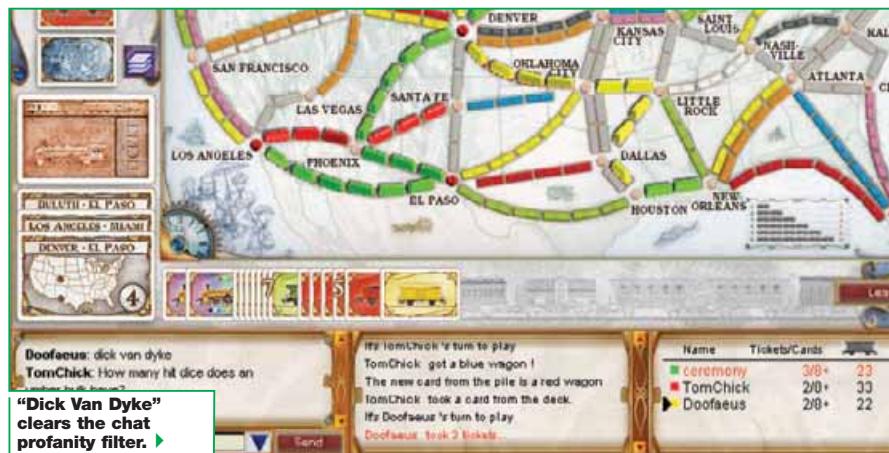
BRUCE: Tom is drawing a lot of black cards, which I also need. He is also taking greens. Black and green are usually a tip-off for L.A.–Miami, except I already have that card. A good second possibility is L.A.–Chicago. That means we're going to end up playing chicken for access to L.A.

TOM: Bumblebees.

BRUCE: Tom is drawing some yellows, which is more evidence that he has L.A.–Chicago. I need to grab L.A.–El Paso before he does or else I'll be taking the slow route through Phoenix. Both Tom and Jeff kept two tickets, meaning that it's unlikely either one of them has tickets worth much more total points than mine. This lets me concentrate on my mad skillz playing phat cards for lewt. That's talk I learned from Jeff's *World of WarCraft* character.

TOM: Bumblebees.

JEFF: OK, I can't take it anymore. We've been at it for 15 minutes and all we've done is draw cards.

"Dick Van Dyke" clears the chat profanity filter. ▶

The board is still empty. All we're doing is hoarding cards, apparently for some future game. I play Winnipeg–Duluth for seven points. Go me.

Jeff plays Winnipeg–Duluth (7)

TOM: Bumble—whoa, whoa, wait, Jeff screwed up my concentration by actually doing something! In Duluth, no less, which is near Sault Ste. Marie. He's trying to shut me out!

BRUCE: All of my card collecting has been about making sure I can complete my L.A. to Miami route, so if everybody starts playing around Duluth and I have to go through Chicago, I'm screwed, or at least I'll have to waste valuable turns drawing cards.

Bruce plays Duluth–Omaha (2)

TOM: I manage to secure a little zigzag from Sault Ste. Marie to Chicago, which leaves me a million ways to get down to Nashville and then over to L.A. I heave a sigh of relief. Bruce tells me to stop blowing into the microphone. And now I've forgotten what I was doing. Something about dragonflies, I think.

Tom plays Duluth–Chicago (4); Jeff plays Duluth–Helena (15)

BRUCE: Jeff is going west, and Tom is going east. But the fact that he is going through Chicago makes me almost positive that one ticket is L.A.–Chicago. Tom is an actor, and right now I suspect he's making like Kevin Spacey in that one movie where he made up all that stuff just by looking at that cop's bulletin board.

Bruce plays Omaha–Denver (7); Tom plays Sault Ste. Marie–Duluth (4); Jeff plays Helena–Denver (7)

TOM: Hummingbirds.

Bruce plays Denver–Phoenix (10); Jeff plays Denver–Oklahoma City (7)

BRUCE: There are two ways out of L.A. going east: a short hop to Phoenix or the six-card link to El Paso. Tom needs one of these. I'm gambling that Tom and Jeff won't conspire to cut me off by playing L.A.–Phoenix and Phoenix–El Paso in
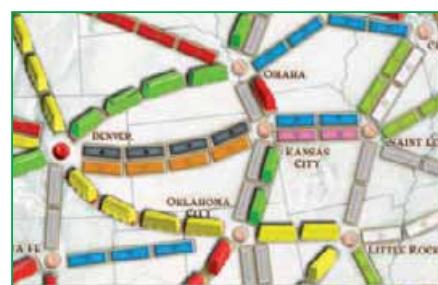
succession right after me; I'm pretty sure they're not this coordinated. So I take L.A.–El Paso because I'd rather have 15 points than four.

Bruce plays L.A.–El Paso (15)

JEFF: That was huge. Bruce is going to have a humongoid route here unless Tom and I block him. But only jerks block. I'll take my chances.

Jeff plays Oklahoma City–Little Rock (2)

TOM: Wait, I needed L.A.–El Paso! I've been saving up black cards for the express purpose of connecting L.A. and El Paso! I deny Bruce the satisfaction of hearing me blow a gasket by turning off my microphone before cussing loudly and stomping around. That's what I get waiting for a last black card instead of parting with one of my precious rainbow locomotive wild cards. Fat lot of good it's doing me now that I have to go through Phoenix, which is where Bruce has worked his way down from our Duluth hub. I try to cut him off, ▶

▲ It's getting mighty crowded in the midwest. Hopefully there's enough hot dogs for everyone.

▲ To some it's a strategy game. To Jeff, it's a neat drawing of pretty colored lines!

> ### WHOA, WHOA, WAIT, JEFF SCREWED UP MY CONCENTRATION BY ACTUALLY DOING SOMETHING!

> but he just goes through his El Paso connection because that pansy Jeff Green doesn't bother blocking him.

Tom plays L.A.–Phoenix (4)

JEFF: Ahh! I should have blocked! I saw it coming and I did nothing! The problem is that blocking in *Ticket to Ride* is akin to belching loudly on a commuter train. It's just rude. Do that against strangers online, and they'll swear at you, usually in German, which is scary. Especially if you've been bar mitzvahed, like me. That's right: I'm blaming my lame nonmove on the Holocaust.

Bruce plays Phoenix–El Paso (4); Jeff plays Little Rock–Dallas (2)

BRUCE: OK, Tom is going L.A.–Chicago. My longest possible route is now only worth 39 points. It's unlikely I'll be getting the 10-point bonus for the longest route. Dammit, Tom! Stay out of L.A.! But I'm holding six red cards and seven greens, so I'm confident of completing the southern route if no one takes Houston–New Orleans.

JEFF: The biggest bummer about having north-to-south destinations, like mine are, is that the routes only give you one or two points each, as opposed to the gigantic east-to-west routes that Bruce keeps claiming. It's a guaranteed way to lose, unless you widely zigzag your way down, as I've been trying to do. But now I have no choice but to claim these crappy little routes to finish off my destinations. And I do. Awesome. That's 25 points in the bag, and I will have time to draw another ticket.

**Jeff plays Dallas–Houston (1); Bruce plays Houston–New Orleans (2)**
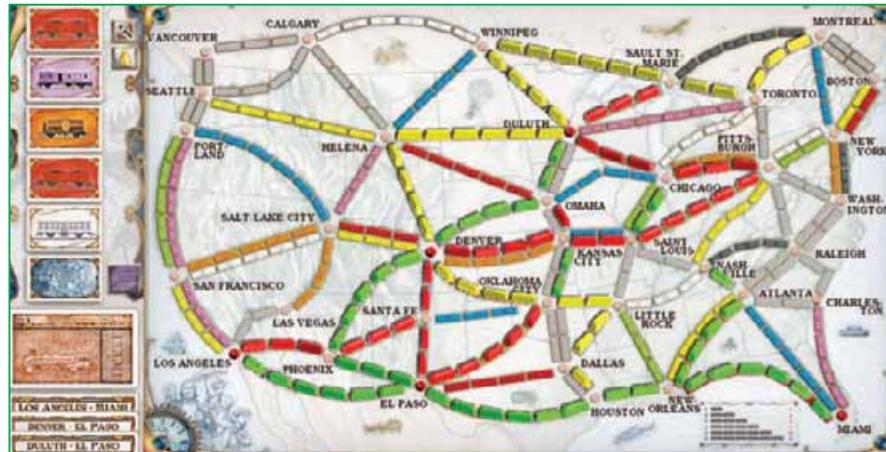
BRUCE: Because I'm probably going to lose longest route, I can use some trains for blocking. I play Oklahoma City–Kansas City just to force Tom to go around. If I can grab some orange cards to block Denver–Kansas City, maybe I can cost Tom big points by blocking his L.A.–Chicago run. That would knock him out of the running for sure.

Bruce plays Oklahoma City—Kansas City (2)

TOM: There's an advantage to playing board games online instead of on a board. You don't have to have a good poker face; you just have to know where your microphone's mute button is. So when Bruce plays Oklahoma City–Kansas City, I again deny him the gratification of any kind of reaction from me by turning off my microphone. Then I throw a few pieces of furniture around.

I might still be able to connect my initial tickets, but only after working long ways around. This means I won't be able to draw additional tickets to improve my score. So my strategy now is to quietly pretend that I haven't been shut out of the game.

JEFF: Life is good. My new destination card is right in line with what I have on the board

▶ THIS IS JUST HORRIBLE. HORRIBLE. OH, THE HUMANITY. OOPS, I FORGOT TO TURN OFF THE MICROPHONE.

already: Montreal–New Orleans. Even better, these guys are so busy trying to screw each other that they're leaving me alone, making me feel confident I can do this. It's so cute the way they bicker!

Jeff plays Winnipeg–Sault Ste. Marie (15)

BRUCE: Three orange cards are face up. I have two in my hand. Tom just grabbed a wild card, which means he's likely getting that fourth card to go from Denver to Kansas City and save his route to Chicago. I take the two oranges just in case he forgets or gets confused and doesn't play that critical move next time.

TOM: I think I'm pretty much playing spoiler now. If that. I'll just limp my way over toward Nashville as best as I can, which means not very well.

JEFF: Hey it looks like Bruce has made an outline of a little goldfish with all his green trains! It's like a little green goldfish!

Tom plays Denver—Kansas City (7)

BRUCE: Damn, Tom played it. That leaves me with four oranges I can play, along with some wild cards and singles. I need to figure out who is ahead, because if it's me, I need to end the game as quickly as possible. Tom is way behind on points, so my competition is Jeff. He is the only person with a third ticket, but he's 20 points behind me. Assuming he gets longest route, he's 10 points behind me. He would need to complete tickets worth 44 points, and he hasn't connected any of the big-value routes like Seattle–New York or Vancouver–Montreal. And I have L.A.–Miami. My guess is that I'm winning. Even if I'm not, my only recourse would be to draw tickets and hope to get lucky, and I'd hate to cost myself the game on a

random draw. Time to finish.

Jeff plays Sault Ste. Marie–Toronto (2); Bruce plays St. Louis–Chicago (2); Tom plays St. Louis–Pittsburgh (10)

JEFF: I connect Toronto to Montreal and I'm now done with Canada. Thank goodness, because these moose smell pretty musky.

Bruce plays New Orleans–Atlanta (7)

BRUCE: I play New Orleans–Atlanta, which uses up the last of my trains and means everyone gets one more turn.

TOM: Wait, what happened? Suddenly the game is telling me I have one turn left! But, but, but...I have plenty of trains left that I need to play to get my measly two tickets connected. This is just horrible. Horrible. Oh, the humanity. Oops, I forgot to turn off the microphone.

Tom plays Pittsburgh–Chicago (4)

JEFF: Freakin' Bruce! He ended the game! I can't get to New Orleans! That means minus 13 points for not completing that last ticket! Gah!⁄
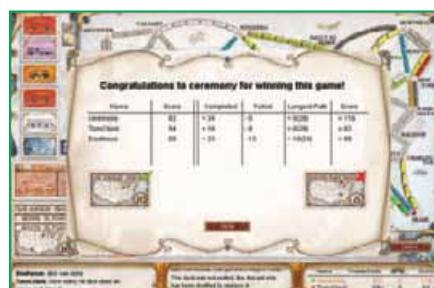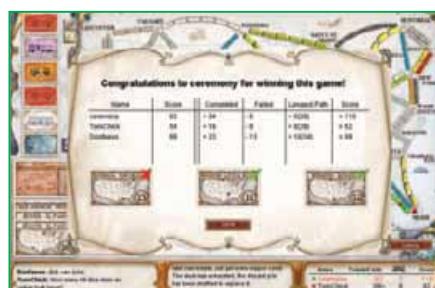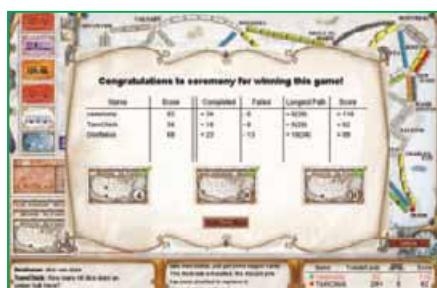
FINAL SCORE:
BRUCE 116 / JEFF 89 / TOM 62

JEFF: Remember at the beginning when I said I get to win? Remember how cool that sounded? Remember how I said I'd have the final edit? Check this out:

FINAL SCORE:
JEFF 10,409 / TOM 2 / BRUCE -51

▲ Final game screens. Bruce (left) completes all three tickets and wins, while Jeff (middle) and Tom (right) each flub one. Verdict: Bruce sucks.

ON THE DISC

THE LATEST AND GREATEST PC DEMOS

> This month's DVD lets you decide the fate of a galaxy far, far away with the *Star Wars Empire at War* demo. Also: Don't forget to check out some of the great games that we covered in our annual 101 Free Games feature—we've thoughtfully included a selection of them on the disc. Not enough? Then load up on the latest *Half-Life 2* and *Doom 3* mods!

STAR WARS EMPIRE AT WAR

The war for the *Star Wars* galaxy is under your command in this demo. Play as the Empire or those trusty Rebels…and perhaps even rewrite *Star Wars* history.

WORLDWIDE SOCCER MANAGER 2006

Try your hand at playing as a soccer team manger with this demo, which lets you try out the game for a full six simulated months.

EARTH 2160

Sample the fight for the survival of the human species after the destruction of Earth in this month's timed demo.

SPLINTER CELL DOUBLE AGENT

The fourth *Splinter Cell* game gives us a new twist on the stealth-action series: Agent Sam Fisher returns… but whose side is he on?

FREE GAMES
We went all through the Net to find all the good free games out there. Sample some of our picks on this month's disc.

TIMESHIFT
This shooter looks promising—and we'll have a demo for you next month! While you wait, go ahead and drool over this sweet trailer.

FULL SPECTRUM WARRIOR: TEN HAMMERS
Watch this trailer for the follow-up to last year's infantry squad command game, which features all-new multiplayer modes, sniper units, and player-controlled vehicles.

THE GODFATHER
This game promises to put you in the world of the Mafia, and we've got some trailers that should give you a taste of what your life of crime will be like.

WIK & THE FABLE OF SOULS
Enter a mysterious fairy-tale world in this three-time 2005 Independent Games Festival winner.

MYSTERY CASE FILES: HUNTSVILLE
Here's a game for those who have a keen eye for detail. Explore crime scenes for clues and solve mysteries in this little gem.

BONNIE'S BOOKSTORE
PopCap has done it again with its latest addictive word game.

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004
Update your game to the most current version and as a bonus get new death-match, assault, and CTF maps as well. W00t!

QUAKE 4 MAP PACK
Check out these hot new official maps for even more fast-paced, intense multiplayer combat options.

THE SILVER LINING
Formerly known as *King's Quest IX*, this unofficial sequel shows just how passionate a group of fans can get.

HALF-LIFE 2 MODS
Want more out of your *Half-Life 2*? Reap the benefits of the modding community's hard work. Thanks, guys!

DOOM 3 MODS
Whether you need Marine backup, feel like playing chess, or want to give your game a little RPG shake-up, these mods should help.

BATTLEFIELD 2: MERCENARIES MOD
This latest mod from the *Mercenaries* team increases the map size and throws in aircraft and vehicles as well.

WANT THE DISC?
DON'T MISS OUT! UPGRADE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION TODAY BY CALLING 800-827-4450.

COASTERS OF THE YEAR

The best of the worst

WHILE THE MARKETING DRONES OF THE GAMING INDUSTRY no doubt lamented *CGW*'s decision not to bestow end-of-the-year awards, thus denying them the possibility of creating various misleading "Game of the Year" game boxes for their titles (how I hate those lying boxes and the way they dishonestly conflate an Adventure Game of the Year award—which is practically on par with a Least Sweaty Fat Girl award—into a Game of the Year designation), there was at least one more person bemoaning the loss of "awards season." Me. Let's get our priorities straight: What the hell about me?

It's not that I'm so enamored of the end-of-the-year stress to make an informed vote by playing all those award-worthy games I'd been meaning to play but had been too busy being narcotized by *Bejeweled 2* to bother installing. I can easily live without that sort of pressure. But to forgo the annual joy of writing the Coaster of the Year booby prize as I have for the last six years? To miss out on likening a game to gargling fishhooks (*Nocturne*) or to a delusional melon jumping from a tower (*Daikatana*)? Please, do me a favor and put me into a sack full of Ebola-infected and peppermint-scented rats.

And while my wife, children, extended family, coworkers, neighbors, casual acquaintances, and the federal government would be only too happy to oblige stuffing me into that bag of diseased and perfumed vermin, I am saved such an ignominious—though spectacular—fate. I have this column. The streak is alive…though I might not be after owning up to those write-ups. So before I go into hiding from Sony Online, Mike Wilson, Gabe Newell, and others, I'd like to spread the loathing around a bit this year in a one-last-gasp gesture of hateful largesse. Here are the games I deem most deserving of scorn this year.

Hammer & Sickle: It's one thing not to live up to expectations, but it's another altogether to completely shatter faith in a company. So bravo to you, *Hammer & Sickle*, for successfully calling into question Nival Interactive's ability to make sound decisions by supporting this third-party product. With Nival so blithely squandering its *Silent Storm* legacy, one shudders to think what it will do with its next game, *Heroes of Might and Magic V.* Will it land that moribund franchise on the Coaster list all over again?

Dungeon Lords: Speaking of squandered legacies…yikes. Playing this game caused me actual, honest-to-God physical pain. While *Dungeon Lords* is ostensibly a DW Bradley game, it plays more like a William S. Burroughs game, in which the code had been feverishly scissored up into millions of separate ones and zeros and then pasted together randomly. Not only is the game broken to the point of unplayability, the game's box lies to consumers by boasting of features (such as a minimap and the ability to run) utterly missing from the (un)finished product. Slapping "Tastes great on toast" on the box would have been more honest. And actually eating the CD on toast would have probably been more enjoyable.

Starship Troopers: How best to describe this? Hmm…complete, total s***. Yeah, that about does it.

Psychotoxic: This game sucked so hard that it was like a little black hole in a box: In fact, if you want to visualize *Psychotoxic*, just imagine those "portable holes" from *Looney Tunes* cartoons. Now, instead of Daffy Duck, imagine your money, your time, and your capacity to ever again experience joy or fulfillment vanishing down that hole. Actually, picture Daffy Duck, Foghorn Leghorn, Tweety Bird, and everyone else disappearing, too. And once they're in the hole they're ripped apart by a thousand rusting meathooks. That's *Psychotoxic*, the game so bad that it murdered Daffy Duck.

>> SLAPPING "TASTES GREAT ON TOAST" ON THE BOX WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE HONEST. AND PROBABLY MORE ENJOYABLE.

The Matrix Online: All this game needs is a literal shark-hurdling sequence to make it complete. It's not that the game is so horrible (though boring, ugly, and uninspired are nothing to brag about), but that it's so incredibly unnecessary and ill timed. Whose idea was it to base a game upon a franchise that had not only peaked but embittered and disenchanted its fan base with some of the most disappointing movies ever? Such a monumentally poor decision is unprecedented in gaming.

Star Wars Galaxies: Uh, my bad. Apparently, such a monumentally poor decision had precedent, chiefly in this previous Coaster of the Year winner. But *SWG* achieves the heretofore unachievable, crapping all over itself so spectacularly that it lands on the list a sloppy second time. On the face of it, redesigning the game to actually include things gamers might want this time around—like a modicum of enjoyability—sounded great. But *SWG* is all about sounding great and not being great: The new game is not only broken and buggy, it also infuriated what fans it did have by negating most everything those poor souls had achieved over the last two years. And it still isn't fun. No more do-overs for you, SOE.

That about covers it until next year. Come back in 12 months when I compare *25 to Life* to scrubbing your eyeballs with broken lightbulbs. See you then. **▐Robert Coffey**