leisure lines

Rise of the Russian Alligator

Those of you who were fans of Team Apache will welcome the launch of another title from the same software house. **Ka-52 Team Alligator** sees you take control of the Ka-52 Russian attack helicopter. Revolving around the Belarusian war and Tajikistan conflict, we expect it to be a realistic simulation with a lot of carnage. Technical improvements include better AI and a new 3D engine called Daedalus, which promises to make everything look better than ever. Check out www.gtgames.com for more details.

Battlezone II is also nearing completion. We took a peek at a preview version and it looks like a definite improvement on the original at this stage. The first Battlezone was innovative, combining the adrenaline rush of a first-person shooter with the guile of a realtime strategy game. The beauty of it was that you could get into it at different levels – choosing to launch straight into the action parts of the game, or simply

▶ FIND YOURSELF IN A WHOLE NEW UNIVERSE IN X: BEYOND THE FRONTIER
▼ BATTLEZONE II SHOULD BE READY TO ROLL OUT SOON

concentrating on the strategy side of things. We expect this sequel to be a big improvement, particularly in the multiplayer mode. Download a demo at www.pandemicstudios.com.

A space simulation, **X: Beyond the Frontier**, is nearly upon us. You play a pilot transported to a different universe by accident and end up fighting and trading for a helpful alien race. The graphics on the preview version are stunning and it appears to be quite in-depth – with six different civilisations, more than 30,000 objects and plenty of dialogue. Check out www.thq.co.uk and look out for a full review in a future issue.

Hostile Waters, a realtime 3D strategy war game, is due for release in the first few months of 2000. It boasts a strong script and narration by former *Doctor Who* star Tom Baker. Played from both first and third-person perspectives, developer Rage claims it will combine exciting missions with excellent resource management. You play the captain of a ship, building a force to fight a group of dictators. See www.rage.co.uk.

Rogue Spear

The follow up to last year's successful Tom Clancy tie-in *Rainbow Six* is nearly ready. **Rogue Spear** continues the story of Rainbow, a task force set up to combat terrorism across the globe. In the original you co-ordinated raids against targets that had been taken over by terrorists. Once you had organised your troops you sent them in to take the hostiles out.

The original game was famous for some slightly dodgy AI – members of your team would tend to get stuck in front of doors, trapping you and forcing you to shoot them. Developer Red Storm is promising to solve that problem, and add a whole host of new features, such as sniper support. Players will be able to help their team mates out with a few well-placed shots. The standard array of better graphics, sound, special effects and so on are also promised in the new version. The screenshots we've seen look pretty good, so look out for a full review soon. Until then check out www.roguespear.net.

JASON JENKINS

Grand Theft Auto 2

In a city of crime you must earn the respect of the gangs – but attract the police at your peril.

The original Grand Theft Auto was an extremely controversial game and attracted publicity from all quarters. One of the few games to receive an 18 certificate from the BBFC, it was condemned by many as being too violent. It was certainly a violent concept, and the bad language offended some, but underneath it all was lurking a very good product.

In a cross between a driving and an action game, you were given free rein in a city overrun by crime, and had to commit criminal acts in order to earn money and progress through to the next level. A mission pack kept the fans clamouring for a sequel at bay, and now the real thing is finally here. But does it live up to all the hype?

The original team from developers DMA was brought in to work on this version and opted for a policy of evolution rather than revolution. This follow-up also has an 18 certificate and definitely deserves it. The top-down view of the city has been maintained. This may disappoint those who were hoping for a true 3D environment, but we felt that it continued the distinctive feel of the original. Despite this, there have been some changes. The graphics are better developed this time around, and there is 3D of sorts in that you can stand on buildings and platforms and lob objects at passers-by.

There are quite a few fundamental differences in the gameplay, however, and it is these that make GTA2 worth playing. The biggest difference is the role that the gangs play. There are six gangs ranging from the ultra-cool Yakuza to the bizarre Loonies who drive cars with smiley faces on the top.

The way to get ahead in the game is to earn the respect of one or more of the gangs by stealing cars and taking out members of their rival gangs. You can have a very high respect level with each gang, be neutral, or have a very low level of respect. If your respect level is low and you inadvertently wander into that gang's area – watch out, they will try to kill you. If you have enough respect, each of the gangs will dole out missions for you to complete, usually involving selling drugs, helping a gang member to get away from a bank robbery or, if you're working for the Loonies, destroying a pizza van for being late with the boss' pizza.

You don't have to accept these missions to succeed, though. You can make a fairly lucrative career out of stealing taxis and buses, picking up people for a ride and taking them round the city. You can steal hot dog and ice cream vans and sell to passers-by. You can decide to be a vigilante and clean up the streets. Whatever takes your fancy, GTA2 will probably let you do it.

One thing you don't want to do is attract the attention of the police. They are now more deadly than ever. If you manage to outrun the police, they call on the FBI who then call on a SWAT team. If you defeat all of them, you are up against the military – and heaven help you.

The soundtrack is fantastic – each time you steal a car the radio is turned on and you listen to a series of original tunes and disgusting talk shows. It all sounds very much like a radio programme – the further away you stray from the transmitter the worse the sound quality gets. If you really hate the music, rather than turn your speakers down you can always destroy the radio transmitter.

DMA has even included a 'save game' option for those who found the original too hard, although you can only do it at various predefined stages. Overall, this is a cracking follow-up to the original game. If you hated the first GTA then you'll also hate this, but if you liked it then there are enough new features to make it well worth buying.

JASON JENKINS

System Shock 2

Lost in deep space and surrounded by mutant zombies – it could be a long trip on that cruiser.

There will always be a place in our hearts for good-quality first-person shooters that require nothing more taxing of the player than the ability to run, shoot and pick up more ammo. But System Shock 2 (SS2) is a great example of what can be achieved if you take the first-person concept to new levels by throwing in more complex role-playing and adventure elements.

The game sees you taking on the role of a hairy space marine type who pops out of stasis on a deep space cruiser to find himself trapped in the middle of nowhere. You're also surrounded by mutant zombie crewmen, murderous robots and alien nasties. The mission is to regain control of the ship and try to get back home – and if you can kill everything which crosses your path, so much the better.

Like an RPG, your character in SS2 has a bunch of personal attributes that affect his ability to perform a range of tasks. You set these attributes at the beginning of the game and your character's abilities continue to develop throughout the game by means of cybernetic implants that you plug into your brain. When you want to plug in an implant, you are given a choice of attributes to enhance, so you could, for example, choose to become a weapons expert or an all-rounder with basic skills in all the areas. The way in which you develop your character affects your progress though the game.

Although a large proportion of the game does involve performing acts of extreme violence with a range of weaponry, this alone will not allow you to progress very far. Other skills you'll need to master include hacking – which allows you to do all sorts of stuff such as opening locked doors, accessing computer systems and so on. Hacking is implemented as a kind of logic puzzle subgame – but you can only attempt it if your character has the necessary attributes.

Another large element involves the psionic skill that gives players the ability to perform all sorts of clever tricks using the power of the mind. There are over 30 psionic abilities which can do everything from killing bad guys to levitating distant objects. On top of this, there are stacks of miscellaneous objects scattered about the ship, all of which play some part in the proceedings. The game uses a slick inventory and character management system that allows you to take control of your housekeeping without it getting in the way of the combat system.

In terms of gameplay one thing is certain – you won't get bored quickly. SS2 is a deep, multi-faceted game which offers an entertaining plot alongside varied and involving exploration. Importantly, there's no shortage of gun-toting action but there are also plenty of other elements to keep it all interesting.

What makes SS2 a winner is the sense of atmosphere produced by the convincing virtual world into which you are thrown. Play SS2 for 15 minutes and you'll really start to believe that you are trapped on a giant deep space cruiser. The graphics are fantastic with excellent attention to detail. These static screenshots can't really do the visuals justice – you have to see them move to fully appreciate them. Perhaps just as importantly the sound effects are extremely well put together – tiny details such as the way your footsteps echo a little differently when you move into an enclosed space all help to suspend disbelief that little bit more.

The most obvious comparison to this game would be with the hugely successful Half Life and we'd have to say that while that game is undoubtedly a modern classic, SS2 is an even better game and deserves to be just as successful.

LANCE CONCANNON

PCW DETAILS

RECOMMENDED
PERSONAL COMPUTER WORLD

★★★★★

Price £34.99
Contact Electronic Arts 01753 549442
www.shock2.com
System requirements *Pentium 166 (Pentium II recommended), 32MB RAM (64MB recommended), Direct X 6.1 compatible 4MB 3D accelerator card, 188MB hard disk space, Windows 95/98*
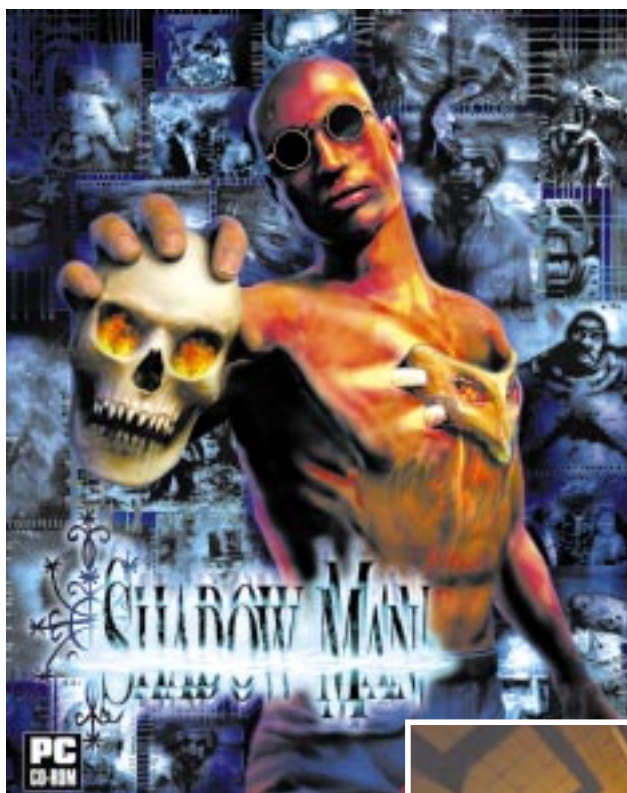
Shadow Man

What do you get if you sell your soul to a voodoo priest? A walk on the Deadside is one option.

Ever sold your soul to a voodoo priest in exchange for protection and then really wished you hadn't? Mike LeRoi, the main character in Shadow Man, knows how you feel. While working as a cab driver in Chicago, one of his passengers was executed in a gangland shooting, leaving $20,000 in the back of his cab. LeRoi took the money and fled home to New Orleans, using the cash to pay for his brother's much needed life-saving operation (money wasted, as it turned out).

Unfortunately for LeRoi, the mob tracked him down and threatened him and his family: return the money or else. LeRoi had nowhere else to turn for protection other than a voodoo priest called Bokor, whose spells prevented him being killed in a drive-by shooting by the gang. His family was not so lucky, however, and LeRoi was left alone in the world at the mercy of Bokor, whom he now served as a zombie slave.

Eventually an old and wise voodoo priestess called Mama Nettie claimed LeRoi for her own by implanting the Mask of Shadows into his chest. With this he gained the ability to transcend the world of the living and enter Deadside as the Shadow Man.

The game itself is based on the comic of the same name, which explains why the plot is so convoluted. The story goes that after Acclaim gave Iguana some of its comics and asked which one it wanted to cover, Iguana jumped at *Shadow Man*. Luckily, this game does not rely on plot alone and a lot of time and effort has been spent on the graphics and sound. Using Iguana's new VISTA engine (Virtually Integrated Scenic TerrAin) the graphics are superb, even to the level that LeRoi's untucked shirt flaps around realistically as he runs, jumps and swings into action.

The game is non-linear and you are free to complete the tasks at hand in any order you see fit. Some areas cannot be accessed until you have gained specific artefacts or completed certain tasks, but on the whole you can do things in your own way.
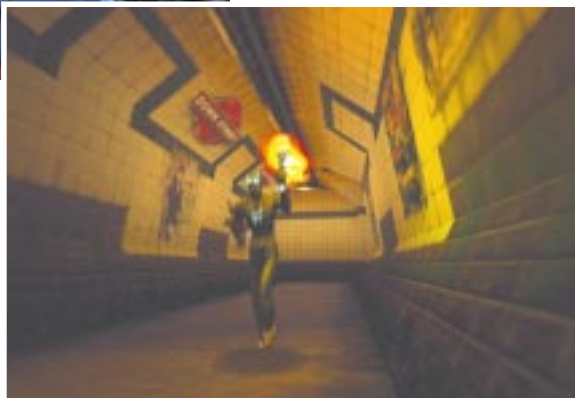
You start in a swamp with an easy walk-through of the basic controls that you will have to use to play the game. Mastering the necessary key combinations is relatively easy, allowing you to run, jump, climb and even shimmy along ropes.

After you have completed this stage, where you have previously been led pretty much by the hand, you may find yourself a little bit lost, wandering around not sure exactly what you're meant to be doing. This problem is further compounded by the lack of any mapping ability in the game. There is no way to view a map that shows you where you have been, and its omission is a real shame. Shadow Man is not a simple game to get into, and this kind of thing only makes the task harder. Another thing that may start to get on your nerves after a while is enemy respawning – just after you think that you've killed all the 'already dead' souls, lo and behold they're back, and this time they're even less happy that they've died twice.

Another feature is that LeRoi is ambidextrous and can therefore shoot just as well with his left hand as he can with his right, meaning you don't have to worry about which hand is holding an item.

The one good thing about being immortal is that when you die, you just pass over to Deadside and continue playing. If you die while in Deadside, which is harder to do, then you just start back at a checkpoint and give it another bash. You're also free to save the game at any point, which means you could be playing Shadow Man many weeks into the future.

WILL HEAD

PCW DETAILS

★★★★

Price £34.99
Contact Acclaim 0171 344 5000
www.acclaim.net
System requirements *Pentium 166, 32MB RAM, Direct X compatible graphics card, 80MB hard disk space (680MB recommended), Windows 95/98*

Darkstone

If you're too impatient to wait for Diablo 2 you'll love this addictive role-playing game.

A couple of years ago Blizzard released a revolutionary game called Diablo. This reinvented the role-playing genre by discarding the turn-based system and replacing it with a realtime environment. However, key elements of the genre remained intact, such as experience points, equipment upgrading and multiple-level dungeons. Diablo was a massive success and many game players, including myself, have been sitting on their hands waiting for Diablo 2 to appear. Unfortunately, we're still waiting for this fabled sequel, but in the meantime Delphine Software has given us Darkstone.

Darkstone is just so much like Diablo it's uncanny. That said, the whole thing is more like a homage to the greatness that is Diablo, rather than a rip off. The graphics are a lot more polished and the characters far more detailed than Diablo, but there's no denying that it's aimed at all those too impatient to wait for Diablo 2.

Before starting your adventure, you have to choose your character. There are six classes to choose from, assassin, thief, sorceress, wizard, amazon and warrior. Realistically there are only three classes, with male and female versions in each of them, but it's good to have the extra choice. What sets Darkstone apart from Diablo is the ability to control two characters instead of just one. Of course, this gives you twice the firepower, but there's something not quite right about this method. Both the characters just wander around in tandem and you seem to have no definite control over either of them. It's also easier to identify with a single character, since you can think of it as being you. That said, maybe it's just my love of Diablo that made Darkstone far more enjoyable with a single character.

The amazon and warrior are the standard fighter class, happily hacking at foes with their swords. The thief and assassin are a bit more stealthy and use a bow and throwing knives respectively. The sorceress and wizard have staffs but are better suited to spells. You can change the equipment that your character uses by either finding new stuff or buying it in the shop.

Your quest involves defeating the evil Draak, who has a nasty habit of turning into a dragon. However, killing him isn't as simple as it sounds; you can't just sneak up behind him and hit him on the head, oh no, you need the Time Orb. But to get the Time Orb you have to collect seven randomly placed crystals from around the mythical land. As with most games of this ilk, the story is just a by-product of the action and Darkstone has a fair bit of the latter.

The game starts off in the town where an annoying guide leads you around explaining things that are quite painfully obvious. However, it's easy to ditch this guy and get on with the adventure. Once you leave town it doesn't take long for the unfriendly locals to start attacking you, but things really get interesting when you climb down into a dungeon. Playing exactly like Diablo, Darkstone leads you through a series of rooms and corridors where you'll be attacked by various nasty characters. Some enemies will leave you gold or objects upon their deaths while others won't. You'll also find an array of barrels, boxes and chests which contain various goodies.

As you hack your way through the dungeon your experience will increase, helping you reach the next level. With each experience level your attributes (strength, dexterity, magic and vitality) can be increased.

The objects you find can either be used or sold in the town. Spell books can be read to increase your spell list, although whether or not you can read a book depends on your magic attribute.

Darkstone isn't a new or revolutionary game, but if you liked Diablo you'll love this. It's extremely playable and easy to get into. But be careful, the hours fly by at an alarming rate while you're adventuring.

RIYAD EMERAN

The Castle under Siege

Bed-time stories don't have to have fairy-tale endings with this DIY children's animation package.

Aimed at children between the ages of five and nine, The Castle under Siege is an animated storybook. Young users can follow the characters, Joanna and Frankie the dog, through Joanna's dream. Here they encounter Thomas the dragon and a wise man who rides his donkey backwards, before continuing their adventure to the castle of Sir Frederick the Good-hearted.

A storyteller can read the tale or the child can read it alone. When finished, there is the option for the children to create an animated tale of their own. They can choose between a single scene or they can build a whole episode with up to 12 pages. Different backgrounds, characters and objects can be used, including Joanna, Frankie and Thomas who appear in The Castle under Siege story. After completion, the creation can be printed out, coloured in, and stuck together just like a real book.
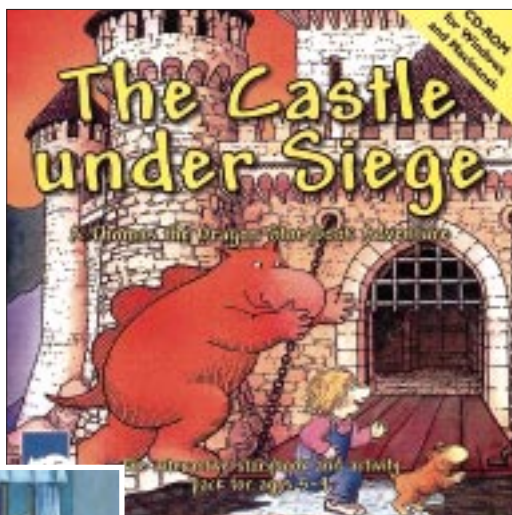
As well as story-telling and story-making, users can play a number of games. In one of them, children have to locate specific animals that are hiding in Sir Frederick's castle. In another game they have the opportunity to dress Sir Frederick and his wife Gwendolyn in variety of different clothes.

With delightful illustrations, accompanied by some beautiful music, The Castle under Siege is the perfect software tool for stimulating a young child's writing and creative skills.

ETELKA CLARK

PCW DETAILS

★★★★

Price £19.99
Contact Ransom Publishing
01491 613711
www.ransom.co.uk
System requirements Win 3.1 or higher, 486DX 100MHz processor, 12MB RAM, Double-speed CD-ROM drive

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British Isles Explorer

X marks the spot but what will the weather be like once you get there? Just pray it's not Dalness.

My First Amazing British Isles Explorer is the latest addition to the DK 'Explorer' range.

Aimed at children between the ages of five and nine, this software teaches children all about the British Isles.

The main interface is based in the bedroom of a boy called Joe. Here there are interactive animations for the user to click on. Many lead to an activity. The user can learn many facts such as that Ben Nevis is the highest mountain, and Dalness is the wettest place in the UK.

There are map outlines to label, print out and colour in and the child can even create their own weather report by placing the correct weather symbols on the map provided. A voice-over can read the report back to them or it can be saved to the television in Joe's bedroom and played through that instead.

The core task of the software is to follow Joe on his travels via the 'Explorer Challenge'. If the user chooses to take part, Joe contacts them via the animated telephone or by postcard and sets a task. Joe will often ask to meet in a certain part of the British Isles and it is up to the child to use the resources provided to find out exactly where this is. Each time Joe is found, a medal is awarded. When all the medals have been collected the child becomes a 'real' British Isles explorer.

This software will certainly help develop a child's fact-finding and map-reading skills. In true Dorling Kindersley style there is little need for improvement.

ETELKA CLARK

PCW DETAILS

★★★★★

Price £19.99
Contact Dorling Kindersley
0171 836 5411
www.dk.com
System requirements Win 95/98, 486 DX/33MHz, 12MB RAM (Win 95) or 16MB RAM (Win 98), Double-speed CD-ROM drive, 7MB hard disk space

Microsoft Office 2000 Professional at a Glance

This is a very visual book, with one or two screenshots and step-by-step instructions on each page. Alongside, there are boxes piled high with handy tips and techniques – in fact it's easy to suffer from information overload.

We've got mixed feelings about the design of this book. It's in landscape format, so it's very wide (about 46cm) when open. As you'll want it open alongside your PC, this is a real problem – most desks have areas of space which are higher than they are wide. So, you'll probably have to juggle your keyboard on your knee. Also, despite claiming to be a 'how-to' reference, it's not really task-oriented. The structure of the book is more that of the programs, than of tasks. Similarly, many people like to know what's new since the last version, but new features are only flagged up in the contents lists.
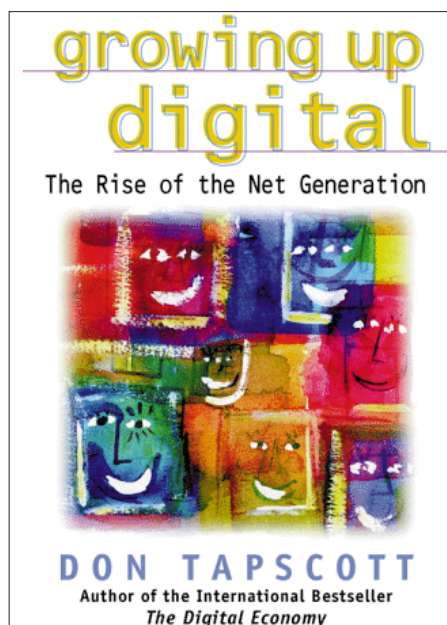
Another problem is the level of detail. Although this is supposed to be a book that absolute beginners can use, there are gaps. If you want to find a file from the Open Dialog, there's a lot of detail on how to press the buttons to get the screen up, but very little on the Boolean search concepts.

Again, in Internet Explorer there is no real explanation of the differences between subscribing and using channels – it just jumps in, assuming everyone already knows what channels are.

We'd have liked more about deciding which application to use (where we should use Word, and where Publisher, for example) and getting practical tasks done. Even so, the format is good and it's fairly easy to find what you need. There's a lot of information about Access, the most obscure application for beginners, and a fair spread of the others. It's not a bad book – it's just a shame it's not better.

BRIAN CLEGG

PCW DETAILS

★★★

MICROSOFT OFFICE 2000 PROFESSIONAL AT A GLANCE
Authors *R Romer & M Swanson*
Publisher *Microsoft Press*
ISBN *1572319372*
Price *£18.49*

Growing Up Digital

Appropriately enough, *Growing Up Digital - The Rise of the Net Generation* was written on the internet. According to the author, the idea for the book came to him in 1992 from his daughter, then aged nine.

The daughter, Nicole, was saying goodbye to a friend she had made on holiday and they were discussing how to stay in touch. The friend suggested communicating via fax, only to discover that Nicole's parents did not have one. But Nicole suggested they could communicate via computers. 'The discussion, which predated the web and the explosion of email, precipitated a series of events which resulted in this book,' Tapscott writes.

The fact that Nicole sounds like a dreadfully precocious nine-year-old does not detract from the fact that she rep-resents a whole new generation, what Tapscott describes as the N-Genders or 'the Growing Up Digital Kids'. The book was built around research carried out on the web by a team led by 24-year-old Kat Baggott, who held discussions on the net with over 300 young people between the ages of four and 20.

Nicole, it seems, is not exceptional. The book is littered with quotations from children echoing her interests and sympathies. 'To me growing up digital means having fun while you're learning,' says eight-year-old Christopher.

The book takes us through the various stages of the Net Generation and their interests. Chapters are devoted to the N-Generation at play, as consumers, in the family and at work. In the final chapter, 'Leaders of the Future', Tapscott suggests that the N-Generation will use their technology to shape the body politic.

As the book points out: 'In the 1992 [US] election many people cringed when Ross Perot proposed the electronic town hall, conjuring up the image of the electronic mob.' Perot, surely no N-Gender, had his ideas overwhelmingly rejected by the US electorate. Perhaps the younger generation will feel more able to accommodate them.

SEAN HALLAHAN

PCW DETAILS

★★★

GROWING UP DIGITAL
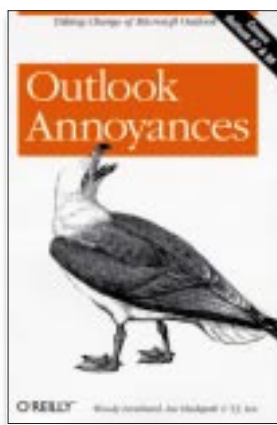**Author** *Don Tapscott*
Publisher *McGraw Hill*
ISBN *0070633614*
Price *£16.99*

Outlook Annoyances

O'Reilly's *Annoyances* series is an ambitious attempt at identifying gaps, problems and faults in the major packages on the market, and offering solutions on how to circumvent these and make your life easier.

With that in mind it is easy to understand why *Outlook Annoyances* is such a good choice. Microsoft's Outlook is one of those packages so full of rough edges that it could probably support an even larger book. The book works hard to explain what is not perfect with Outlook, even if it is just an annoying little quirk, and then identifies a solution and explains in easy terms how to implement it.

It is written in a dry, no-nonsense style that almost succeeds in hiding away the true quality of the book. There are no flamboyant explanations for some awful design features and no wry or ironic commentary, but it still ends up feeling like a humorous piece of work. There are few illustrations and the occasional example is there because there is no other way of explaining what to do. Very clean and pragmatic.

Annoyances from O'Reilly is one of our favourite hands-on IT series, and this particular book is a good example. It really does enhance the potential power of Outlook for a wide variety of users.

JELENA RUPNIK

PCW DETAILS

★★★★

OUTLOOK ANNOYANCES
Author *W Leonhard, L Hudspeth, TJ Lee*
Publisher *O'Reilly*
ISBN *1565923847*
Price *£18.50*

Official Fighter's Kompanion

Claiming to be the Ultimate Guide to Mortal Kombat 4, this book boasts every move for every character, exclusive combos, versus codes, stage select codes, hidden characters and strategies, and moves for Goro and Noob Saibot.

The 144-page full-colour, A4 book has been presented almost in a graphic novel style. The table of contents lists all of the characters, with their headshots for easy recognition, and a brief guide to what's new and what's no more in version four.

Kombat Basics kicks off the book with a look at the default controls and custom controls for the PlayStation, and Nintendo 64, as well as a run-through of some of the more basic moves – such as ducking, spinning, uppercuts and jump-kicks.

Each character is profiled in the book, and you can flick through a series of screenshots of that character's various moves, along with details of how to execute them. There are Special Moves, Weapon Moves, Fatalities and Pits, Air Combos, Ground Combos, Corner Combos and Weapon Combos. Finally, each character has a strategy profile, telling you how best to fight with that character against either a human or the computer and how best to fight against that character.

For the Kombatant in need of some back-up, this book is a must.

STEVE MASTERS

PCW DETAILS

★★★★★

OFFICIAL FIGHTER'S KOMPANION – MORTAL KOMBAT 4
Author *James MK Fink*
Publisher *Midway*
ISBN *1566867959*
Price *£10.95*

To buy these books and get discounts on the books reviewed in PCW, visit the VNU website at www.vnu.co.uk