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The Sims Online is recognizable to anyone who's ever played The Sims before—but everything works differently now.

This is DJ Kauia Kilo, bringing you the latest in hip-hop luau flava!

I'm sure I'll lose my hearing at this distance, but who cares?!

Having a hot tub in a club that blasts cool tunes...best idea since sliced bread!

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Pretty on the outside, ugly on the inside—must be art boy Babler.

18 Letters
Rants and raves from our core audience of major geeks, Wil O'Neal haters, and angry 12-year-olds.

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42 Read Me
We're back from Camp EA with a mysterious rash and a bag of useless crap, but at least we got to play Battlefield: Bad Company 2 and see all of EA's latest, including James Bond: NightFire, Madden 2003, and the upcoming Medal of Honor add-on. And check out our coverage of ATI's bad-ass new graphics cards, The Lord of the Rings for PC, and the Top 10 RPGs of All Time. Join us, won't you?

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129 Gamer's Edge
Part I of our definitive WarCraft III guide focuses on hero killing. Also, get tips on making great characters and fighting the last battle in Neverwinter Nights, watch Tom and Bruce sling spells at each other in Age of Wonders II, let Prima help build your first deck for Magic: The Gathering Online, and learn this month's really dirty trick.

144 Greenspeak
Jeff says it isn't cool to say The Sims isn't cool.
"I made a quick guess and then let the bombs fly."

**BATTLEFIELD: 1942**
Planes, tanks, and automobiles—jump into the nearest vehicle and get ready for World War II.

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**GREENSPEAK**
Take some advice from a man who knows cool.

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Graphics vs. Gameplay

In last month’s feature on Unreal Tournament 2003, we used real screenshots for the primary art in the design. A few years ago, that wouldn’t have been possible because the image quality in games just wasn’t that great (that’s why there used to be so many 3D renders dressing up magazine layouts). Now, it’s becoming commonplace to use actual game imagery in print. It’s incredible how good games look these days and how quickly they are getting better. The future holds a lot of good-looking games: Unreal II and Doom III are nothing short of spectacular.

But I wonder if all of that eye-popping visual appeal comes at the expense of great gameplay. Is Doom III ever going to be as fun as the original, despite the fact it looks like a playdate cut-scene? I don’t know. Doom blew us away with an entirely new genre but Doom III, I fear, is going to blow us away just visually. Great visuals aren’t a bad thing, but are we going to see any genre-busting gameplay in the near future?

We’ve had one of the best years in gaming already, but we haven’t had a revolutionary game come along in a while, either.

It’s recent visual leaps seen in Castle Wolfenstein were accompanied by a linear, ho-hum playing experience. On the flipside, Medal of Honor didn’t blow us away graphically, but wow, what a game. Star Wars: Galaxies is promising to be an incredibly beautiful, vast gameplay arena, but if it comes out broken like Anarchy Online doesn’t deliver the fun, it won’t last. Even Blizzard’s looker Warcraft III received “only” four stars from us: incredibly polished and beautiful, but nothing really new in the gameplay. There are plenty of memorable games that fall in the “good-looking but disappointing” category: Black & White, Ground Control, Throne of Darkness, Emperor: Battle for Dune, Battle Realms, and Quake III. (Send your flaming emails to take_criticism like a man, all_you_fanboys_who_live_at_home.)

The typical gamer is growing up, and while we upgrade our graphics cards twice a year, who’s upgrading our adrenaline-pumping gaming moments? PC gaming needs to remember that now, more than ever, it has to nurture new thinkers, not just new artists. Cultivate the odd, the surreal, and the bizarre. Sure, some games will flop like Majestic—but remember, that wasn’t because the concept flopped, it was due to poor execution.

If a truly original game such as The Sims (or my favorite, Grim Fandango) were produced every year, one game that made people say, “Whoa,” what a rich game collection we’d have. Speaking of Grim Fandango, would somebody please make Tim Schafer an offer he can’t refuse and bring him back to PC development? If you haven’t seen what he’s doing with Psychonauts, check it out right now.

Jason Bahler
Associate Art Director

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Spend That $20 on Some Ritalin Instead...

I am a 12-year-old gamer! I love your 'zine! It rules!! Scooter has great reviews!!! He told gamers about a kick-ass show—Cowboy Bebop rules! I bought Black & White—I think it deserves 3 stars!!!! I am buying Serious Sam off the Internet for $20—is it a good deal?!! I can't wait until Doom III comes out!!

Sincerely,

madcat12pc

P.S. Was Jeff Green thrown off a cliff when he was a baby?

---

Game of the Year award (April 2002), and this month we have a two-page review of the Operation Flashpoint expansion (page 100). So we're kinda thinking that we gave the game enough credit.

---

Why You Should Never Skip an Issue of CGW

Operation Flashpoint, I believe, is the best game that I have ever come across! However, I am disappointed that your magazine did not give it enough credit for being a great game. In your May 2002 issue, in Gamer's Edge you had a play-by-play game between Bruce and Tom that was about three pages long. What the hell was that? You could have taken the time to appreciate the game with a full review and screenshots. A great game like OFP was developed by talented designers, but you did not give it enough credit—what the hell is wrong with your magazine? I demand that your magazine crew find a way to acknowledge the greatness of such a beautiful game!

Garrett Neubauer

---

And We Were Like, Yeah, You're Wrong

Hey, I'm a fan of your mag—it rocks! But I have a complaint about a review. You gave Freedom Force 5 stars and an Editors' Choice award (June 2002). It looked cool, so I went to Wal-Mart and bought it and came home and played it—and it sucked! For a while I was in denial cuz I was like, "This doesn't suck, it can't, I paid 40 bucks and my favorite mag liked it." But the truth settled in: it sucked, I guess it wasn't your fault, but I think it just didn't register with me or something—don't know. I think I'll trade it for a copy of Half-Life to my dumb

---

...And Then Share Some With This Kid

Hey CGW! I'm 12 years old and an avid reader of your magazine. First, I'd like to say that Star Wars Galactic Battlegrounds is the best damn game EVER!! Now then, with that said, I would also like to say that all of The Sims games really suck!! I mean, why would anyone wanna play a game with people who say stuff like "abaHOOCHer" and "mooki-hooki"? It's not even interesting. I mean, you should be able to have your Sims buy guns and go around shooting other people!!! My idea of hell is having to play The Sims forever. Well, that's pretty much all I have to say, except screw the person who said Galactic Battlegrounds sucked (August 2002).

Peace out, CGW.

Jango Fett
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letters

“If you put Wil O’Neal’s brains in a gnat’s butt, it would look like a BB in a boxcar.”

friends or something. (No, I don’t have Half-Life.)

Tyler “Lunchbox” Thompson

Please don’t try to out-geek us. We are the übergeeks. Yes, technically, Fallout 2 did use the word first, but only in text dialogues. Die Hard is the first game to repeatedly use the word out loud. That’s what we meant.

Wil O’Neal: The Man, The Myth, The Retard
I am writing again to vent my displeasure at the Tech section of your magazine. Having been a subscriber for about three years and a reader for many more, I have found lately the Tech section SUCKS. Why are we forced to read the views of a small-minded editor (If you put his brains in a gnat’s butt, it would look like a BB in a boxcar) who cannot find anything to review unless you jam headphones in his ears? I know that I did not subscribe to Computer Audio World.

Anyone seen Loyd Case?

Rocky Ramon

Why do half of this magazine’s readers choose to write nasty things about Wil O’Neal? I’m pretty sure this (great) magazine’s sole purpose is to keep its readers updated on games and what to play on them. Everything in CGW is great, except for the unneeded reviews of CD players, and we have to thank Wil for a lot of our enjoyment that comes from this mag. He can be a retard at times, but I’m sure he knows that by now. So fellow readers, quit taking up space in the Letters section!

Garrett

Free Computers for Every Reader!
I was recently reading the Tech section in your July issue, Wil O’Neal had an article that compared six computers, and I was wondering, what do you do with all the hardware that you get to test? Perhaps you have a greater plan for it all, perhaps you give it back when you’re done, or, heck, for all I know you take it outside so you can test your M-795 on it. Whatever it is, I was thinking maybe you should give it to those who are truly needy...us, your readers. Maybe you could give it out as a prize in a random drawing for your subscribers.

Anyway, love your mag, keep up the good work. Hope this makes it into your Letters section, with all that other crap everyone puts in these letters. (I do truly enjoy reading your magazine, though.)

Charles Guthrie

Don’t Question Our Authority, Motherf***er!
Hello to you at the magazine that is CGW. I have to say that I thoroughly enjoy your magazine however, I would like to point out an error in the August 2002 review of Die Hard: Nakatomi Plaza, by Tom Price. Mr. Price states that DieHard has the “dubious distinction” [of being the first] to utter the phrase that begins with “mother” and ends with “ucker.” While I can excuse the error, I would like to point out that, to my knowledge, it was the infinitely better Fallout 2 (released almost four years ago which first uses the phrase. I suppose this is a useless letter, but hey, at least it’s another reason why you shouldn’t buy Nakatomi Plaza.

Zetura Dracos

Penny Arcade

BY MIKE KRAHULIK AND JERRY HOLKINS

I know we have a rule against it, but maybe we should play each other at Warcraft III.

Oh no.

No way. Huh-uh. We have that rule for a reason.

What? Warcraft II was seven years ago. My humiliating victory over you is just water under the shattered bridge of your crushing defeat.

You don’t still think about that fight, do you?

Only every morning, when I put in my glass eye.

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20 Computer Gaming World
Death is my business and business is good.
"I hate piracy and what it stands for, so my guilty conscience will haunt me every time I try to play my illegal copy of Warcraft III."

Nick the Greek

How many times do we need to tell you people? The correct pronunciation is: first name "Scoo," last name "tet."

Rating the Ratings System
First, I really enjoy your magazine. I read it cover to cover and find your reviews accurate and informative, for the most part. But I've got an idea for a new ratings system that I think would be good for you guys. Not that there's anything wrong with what you have now: the normal 5-star ratings system is good and simple and to the point, but it needs something to add more variety, specifically to the 5-star games. I've noticed that a good number of games end up getting 5 stars, up to two in each issue. So to better compare among the games that get 5 stars, I thought it would be a good idea to add a bronze, silver, or gold star thing. When a game gets 5 stars, you then decide: is it a bronze, silver, or gold 5 stars? It's just an idea, and I think it would give a game better value. Keep up the good work.

Ivan Pate

solve my problem. I would die for a copy of Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos Collector's Edition, but there is no way I could buy it considering I'm a minor and all my financial aid comes out of my parents' wallets. So I am thinking of other ways to get the game. The two other choices I have are asking someone nicely for it (that's where the CGW crew comes in) or downloading a pirated copy of the game. The only problem is that I hate piracy and what it stands for, so my guilty conscience will haunt me every time I try to play the game. So will you please...PLEASE try to send me a copy of Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos Collector's Edition?

Alan "cheeto" Shultz

P.S. Love the Get A Life column and worship your Tech section. Best hardware section in any magazine I've seen.

Will would've sent you his Warcraft III, but he already sold it on eBay to buy some...oh, OK, enough already.

Too Bad He Loses All Credibility With No. 2
Hello. This is my first time writing in, but let's get to the point.
1. My June issue fell apart as soon as I turned the first page.
2. Star Wars Episode II was great (especially at the end).
3. Y'all's reviews are usually off target.
4. The star rating stinks.
5. I hate Wil O'Neal. He doesn't let his son play games that are actually fun. That must suck. I was playing Duke Nukem when I was 4.
6. I like two things, Jeff and Scooter.

Darin
Arkansas

Or Call Him "Dumbass"
Like Everyone Else
I have been a subscriber for a long time now, and I still have the same question since I bought my first issue in 1994.

How do you pronounce "Thierry Nguyen"? I've read that you sometimes refer to him as "Scooter," and I can understand why. Researching pronunciations, I have found so far:
1. Theory en-guy-en
2. Terry Nguyen
3. Tieve Nguyen
Which is it already?!

How about a copy of Unreal Tournament 2003 when it comes out to ensure my renewal slip comes back to you????????
???????

John

Winner! Geek of the Month!
After reading Greenspeak In the August issue, I am left with one lingering burning* question: which Gollum imitation?
1. The Brother Theodore version from the Rankin-Bass cartoons,
2. The Andy Serkis version from the Peter Jackson films, or
3. The Gollum Chug version from the Mind's Eye Public Radio version? Not that it matters much, I suppose, since all of the above sound pretty much alike (a gallon of spit gurgling in the back of the throat, which wasn't so much of a challenge for Brother Theodore, unless you consider that he had to swallow 4 gallons of the stuff already back there so he could be at least vaguely understandable).

Evil Kumquat
Angola, Indiana

P.S. I'm aware of the BBC version, separate from the above, but I just never found a copy for sale, or for stealing either.
P.P.S. I am also struck by the irony that, as I type this, my girlfriend is staring at me, waiting for me to come to bed.

*We no longer burning after applying some creme lotion-now just a minor sticky feeling.
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TEEN
Mature Sexual Themes
Mild Violence
Use of Alcohol

PC
CD-ROM

EIDOS
INTERACTIVE

SpringBreakGame.net
What We Really Need Is More Angry Canadians

I suggest using better discretion in the Letters section. I do not subscribe to read rants like Jason C. Kessler's "Enough With the Xbox" (August 2002). CGW editors have a right to print content that they feel is suitable. However, CGW editors must have sound judgment in keeping gross, misinformed commentary off the paper. Please tell me there are better letters to choose for print than Kessler's.

Cordially,

Ryan Ernst

Unfortunately, unless we print letters like the one you objected to, we're stuck filling this section with even lamer ones, like those complaining about other people's letters.

PC Buying Angst

With great games like Jedi Outcast, Warcraft III, and Neverwinter Nights all released recently, I decided to look into buying a gaming PC. What I found shocked me. The minimum I would have to spend for a machine that would last into 2003 would be $1,600. I may be naive, but I wasn't prepared for that kind of investment after seeing television commercials that advertised $700 "fully-loaded" PCs.

I quickly recovered and was still willing to fork over that kind of cash until I started reading customer reviews for these PCs on CNet and other Websites. Perhaps a much larger percentage of people with bad experiences leave feedback than those with good experiences; but according to what I found, anywhere from 25 percent to 55 percent of the big-name PCs (think dudes and cows) have major problems right out of the box. Many of the unfortunate purchasers of these PCs had to go through technical support nightmares to get any kind of assistance. Smaller companies had better feedback, for the most part, but the price for the same system jumped drastically. Did I decide to forego gaming and find another hobby? Nope - Halo is awesome!!

Disappointed Gamer

And Now a Word From the President of Mensa

I scrubbed to this offbeat mag thinking that its reviews rocked well I was in for a real shocker they sucked there were a few exceptions and the demons were crazy nothing was up to my goals it would be ok for a nimrod but that would be an average person like every person that works at CGW the ganators would probably give better rating than y'all did.

pcgamer

Remember when they used to say that computers would make people illiterate? Like that could ever happen?

Arcadian Del Suck?

One more useless review from "Arcadian Del Sol" and my subscription is toast. Once again he gives us a "review" (Underlight, August 2002), wherein he regales us with magical tales of his overarch "old-school-ness." While telling us NOTHING of substance about the game in question except that he didn't like it. Oh, and that the graphics suck - I did at least get that.

I would imagine that someone, somewhere cares that this idiot is "gamier-than-thou," but who is proofing his work? Who actually thinks that this moron's past experience is worthy of aggravation? Who imagines that we care? "Arcadian" obviously does (and that's another thing - why allow him this virtual byline? Does it say this on his birth certificate? I doubt it. because he shoves it in our faces time and time again, and never fails to say anything of substance about the games reviewed. WHO IS SIGNING OFF ON THIS TRIPLE??

Kevin (I'm only Veekachu ONLINE, DAMMIT) Dailer

Actually, it's the guy in the letter right above this one who signs off on Arcadian's articles.

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This world is Dereth.

Do you want to go?

Or are you already there?

COMING WINTER 2002
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell

Don't make the silly mistake of thinking, "Oh, a Tom Clancy game, I probably end up controlling a team of counter-terrorists in various adventures of the hostage-rescuing sort." In fact, not only is Splinter Cell not a counterterrorism sim, it's not even a first-person shooter. Think of it as a black ops simulator, meant to dethrone console darling Metal Gear Solid. As Sam Fisher, a solo operative for the supersecret Third Echelon department ("splinter cell" refers to his lone wolf status), you'll have your fair share of third-person sneaking and killing. Watch this game sink into stores soon after its Xbox debut.
Sam Fisher has plenty of neat toys besides these night-vision goggles–like fiber-optic cameras, thermal-vision goggles, security-camera jammers, and even the odd canister of nerve gas.

You can choose to swoop down, kill this dork, grab his gun, and engage in gun-toting mayhem, or you can leave him alone, sneak around, and not kill a single person. We prefer bloodshed.
No, it's not an oil painting or a rendered cut-scene. This is an actual game screen in a playable resolution—unretouched—of a game coming soon to your PC (eat your hearts out, console boys). The game's stunning graphics are courtesy of a new engine designed for rendering low-altitude combat. When you're coming in for that strafing run, enemy units nestled in the European countryside won't look like plywood dummies anymore. So dig your joystick out of the closet and get that new video card, because when this baby takes to the skies, you don't want your P47 to handle like a B17.
The game's 18 flyable aircraft include medium bombers and early jet fighters. Bomber pilots can also man the gun turrets and bombardier station.

Check out the particle effects on that explosion. Maybe Fritz here should have skipped the bratwurst and hefewezen before today's mission.

New higher resolution terrain looks like video footage. It's also topographically correct.
We know the Loading section is usually reserved for games that are yet to come out, but we just want you to take one more look at EA Sports' *F1 2002* before you turn to page 102 and read the review. The game's graphics are just too amazingly realistic to pass up giving you another peek. Hardcore racing simulations just seem more and more like reality, but without all that pesky life-threatening danger. Once someone figures out how to pump the smell of burning rubber out of your PC, we will have truly arrived.
This might be the most unscenic part of the track at Monaco, but with this nasty S-curve, it's surely one of the most exciting.

Tires marks, from full skids to repeated wear marks, are persistent throughout the race.

Car damage is modeled realistically, so small pieces might fall off and affect performance.

Talves like the drivers leaning into turns are subtle but make the experience great.
TOOLE

for MAYOR

Enormous tax hikes. Yes ✔
Paving over parks. Yes ✔
Housing on active volcanoes. Yes ✔
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Read Me

Postcards from our journey to the holodeck Edited by Ken Brown

FIELD TRIP

CGW Goes to Camp EA

No canoeing or horseback riding, but plenty of food, lots of good games, and a renewed focus on PC titles By Tom Price and Jeff Green
Will Wright even mixed us all piña coladas. Now that's good media relations.

Electronic Arts, the undisputed king of computer and video game publishing, sure knows how to make us gaming editors happy. Feed us, give us some T-shirts and cheap trinkets, and condense your current lineup of games in late development into one place where we can stroll about and get quick demos from the producers themselves. Hell, Will Wright even mixed us all piña coladas. Now that's good media relations.

This year's Camp EA was a great chance for us to catch up with some of their biggest titles in development and find out how they're coming along. We also learned that EA is recommitting itself to the PC platform, which was definitely great to hear.

Taking the lead on the PC were all the Sims games—not surprising, because they generate so much cash. In addition to the devilishly weird Sims Online, Maxis was on hand to show off The Sims Deluxe, a super-expansion that includes Livin' Large, new clothing and objects, as well as the powerful new Sims Creator, which allows you to map your own face onto your Sims. And the latest iteration of the game that started it all, SimCity 4, looked impressive—it's a significant leap from SimCity 3000.

You can read about the new Sims games in more detail in this month's cover story.

As for the EA Sports line, we're happy to report that NBA Live is returning to the platform, and EA is continuing to enhance its NHL and Madden games. Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2003 looks fantastic thanks to a new 3D engine.

On the action front, James Bond 007: NightFire will finally bring some good Bond action to the PC. We weren't able to play it, but we'll bring you a full, hands-on preview of this stylish FPS next month. We spent a lot of time playing Battlefield 1942, which totally charmed us and earned a spot on our can't-wait-to-play list (see a full preview on page 76). We also got some play time with the new multiplayer maps included in the Medal of Honor expansion pack (as yet untitled). EA was showing a couple of strategy games, too: the increasingly impressive C&C: Generals as well as 1503 A.D., an RTS/Rompe building hybrid set in the age of the conquistadores. There were even a couple of racing titles on display: Drome Racers, a fast-paced arcade-type racer based on the LEGO license, and Need for Speed Hot Pursuit 2.
Maxis expects *The Sims Online* to have 1 million subscribers within a year of its launch. The follow-up to one of the best racing games ever to grace the PC, and let's not forget about EA's return to NASCAR PC games with *NASCAR Thunder 2003*. Now that's something to be excited about.

**Massively Multiplayer**

Now that the embarrassing disaster of Majestic is behind them, EA developers are focusing on massively multiplayer games that will actually appeal to gamers. Their biggest and most-likely-to-succeed game is, of course, *The Sims Online*. If you don't think this game is for you, that's because you haven't played it yet. Its ingenious design means that it could appeal to both hardcore and casual players. It clearly bears the best hope yet of a massively multiplayer game that will break through to the mass market. (Maxis expects to have 1 million subscribers within a year of the game's launch.) But even though you can't kill anyone, there's more to the game than just chatting with neighbors and decorating your house (see our feature story on page 82).

*Earth and Beyond*, Westwood's massively multiplayer RPG set in outer space that is not-repeat, NOT-a space sim continues to impress with great graphics and compelling gameplay that's like a weird amalgamation of *EverQuest* and *Privateer* (but remember, it's not a space sim). Without a recognizable franchise name and with the specter of *Star Wars* Galaxies looming, *Earth and Beyond* has to fight a bit of an uphill battle, but this is a smart game made by smart people—so keep your eyes on this one. As we went to press, EA officially announced a ship date of September 17.

Finally, there's *Ultima Online*. It's amazing, but this September marks the five-year anniversary of the game that essentially paved the way for the entire massively multiplayer genre. EA showed us some concept drawings for the next expansion, *Age of Shadows*, which will be released in 2003. The big deal this time around is the addition of two new character classes, as well as a tool that will let players design their own homes. CGW was no small feat on US when it first shipped, but with the five-year anniversary approaching, we're going to take a close look at the groundbreaking title in a special feature next month.

---

**CAMP EA HIGHLIGHTS**

**Madden Football 2003**

EA Sports recognizes that the console versions of *Madden* have been far better than the PC counterparts for a couple of seasons now. Developers will try to lend the PC version of *Madden 2003* some parity by adding improved graphics, more realistic animations, better control, and a generally more polished appearance, especially in the Franchise mode—something of key importance to simulation freaks. A new suite of online gaming options should also help to make the PC version the one to buy this year.

---

**Medal of Honor Add-On**

It's no small feat that *Medal of Honor* has stood out as one of the best first-person shooters this year. It's done that thanks to superior gameplay, and fans will now get to enjoy more of that gameplay in nine new single-player levels—taking you through historical events like the Battle of the Bulge and the fall of Berlin—as well as 12 new multiplayer levels, including one for Armham Bridge. There will be new multiplayer modes and new weapons to go along with new skins of British and Russian soldiers.

---

**NASCAR Thunder 2003**

After having it on blocks the last couple of years, EA is getting ready to roll out a new and improved *NASCAR Thunder*. It's going to be big: you can race in 43-car fields on all 23 Winston Cup tracks, racing against AI versions of more than 60 NASCAR drivers. A new engine will deliver a much greater sense of realism and more accurate damage modeling. New special effects include flying car fragments, sparks, and track debris that can actually damage your car. Geared for the hardcore, though even newbies will be able to ramp up thanks to a host of driver assists.
The Lord of the Rings
The Tolkien adventure we've all been craving or just another game with Orcs and Fairies? By John Houlihan

It's based on the book trilogy, not the movie, so there's no virtual Liv Tyler (sigh).

The Lord of the Rings is the great grandaddy of them all—you can blame it for every tree-hugging Elf, surly Dwarf, and mysterious wizard who's ever stalked an RPG. It's surprising that there've been so few decent LOTR games, but with Peter Jackson's spectacular trilogy reviving interest at the movies, you can prepare for a whole wave of Tolkien-inspired titles.

Unfortunately, the only one that's coming out on the PC this fall is LOTR: The Fellowship of the Ring, from Seattle-based Surreal Software. Although FOTR would seem like a prime candidate for the full RPG treatment, Surreal has instead opted for an action-oriented, third-person adventure—which isn't such a shock given their Drakan heritage. You'll play as three members from the Fellowship, each of whom has his own distinctive style: Frodo's skills make him a natural for stealth but he's balanced by the power and burden of the ring; Aragorn is a full-on brawler armed with a bow and the mighty Anduril, while Gandalf is a finesse fighter, wielding Glamdring and five devastating spell attacks to smite the Orkish hordes.

Tempted by the power of the one true ring? Sure, but every time Frodo uses it, he steadily loses purity which will attract the attention of the ring wraiths and eventually cause him to succumb to the dark power. And there's more than enough to worry about from some of Middle Earth's deadliest creatures, with the watcher in the water, the giant cave troll from Moria, and the fiery Balrog providing some spectacular boss fights.

EA has snapped up the official movie license, so Surreal's Fellowship is based on a book license from Tolkien Estates, which means there's no virtual Liv Tyler (sigh). But it means they can be more authentic and explore characters like Tom Bombadil and locations like the Trollshaws and the Wight's Barrow, which the film didn't quite reach. And, of course, because EA didn't bother to develop their LOTR game for PC players, their game can go to Mordor for all we care.

The Fellowship of the Ring will take the first steps in its epic journey toward Barad-Dûr this fall.

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- GameSpy

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Radeon Dethrones GeForce4

New graphics cards from ATI outperform Nvidia's fastest

By Jason Brown and William O'Neal

Since E3, ATI has been claiming superiority in the graphics card market. NVIDIA has been kicking ass in the graphics card market for so long that it took us by surprise when ATI announced new cards that are faster than those using Nvidia chips. According to preliminary reports from Ziff Davis's ExtremeTech.com, the top-of-the-line Radeon 9700 Pro bested Nvidia's flagship, the GeForce4 Ti 4600, at everything from 3DMark2001 SE Pro to a suite of common games. The Radeon 9700 Pro will retail for $399, the same price as the best GeForce4.

Since E3, ATI has been claiming superiority in the graphics card market. When id Software showed Doom 3 on a machine using a Radeon prototype, ATI said their card was the only one capable of running the game smoothly. However, Doom III creator John Carmack says, "Doom 3 is designed around what was made possible on the original GeForce and reaches an optimal implementation on the (Nvidia) NV30."

The new Radeons come in different configurations: some sold by ATI; some licensed to third-party card makers; and some made expressly for system builders. ATI's 9700 comes with 128MB of RAM; the 9000 ships with 64MB. Both boards will have a faster version called the "Pro," which will have a higher clock speed.

The 9000 and 9000 Pro share the same abilities as the 9700 and use much of the same architecture. The 9000 cards roughly match Nvidia's GeForce4 and GeForce3 line of cards in their DirectX 8.1 support and abilities, but the 9700 takes the lead and is the first to incorporate the advances of DirectX 9.0.

ATI appears to be leading the pack for now—at least until Nvidia releases its much-anticipated NV30, but that may not be for several months. Stay tuned to see which card will come out on top and for our reviews of the new Radeons as soon as we receive shipping versions. All should be available by the time you read this.

THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY

THE GOOD
MORE COMIC BOOK GAMES?
The CGW Super Dorks are frothing at the mouth over two rumors currently floating around regarding comic book games with both Marvel and DC superheroes. The first is that Irrational may be working on a Freedom Force game with DC characters. The second is that Sony Online, maker of EverQuest, is negotiating with Marvel to make an MMORPG based on the Marvel universe. Please, mommy, let it be true!

THE BAD
SUMMER DROUGHT
It seems like it's feast or famine with PC gaming. A few months ago, we were besieged by good games. Now, we're on the second month in a row of a fairly weak group of games (just check out our reviews lineup for proof). The upside is that now we can turn off our computers and pay attention to our friends and families instead. Just kidding.

THE UGLY
TRIBES FRANCHISE SLIDE
At one time we actually thought Sierra's Tribes franchise had the potential to own online gaming. But after the promising first game, things have just steadily gone to hell. Tribes 2 we already know was a buggy nightmare, but now word is that the latest patches from GarageGames have made the game even worse. Plus, Sierra announced the cancellation of Tribes: Fast Attack, a port of the single-player PS2 game. Here's hoping they get this thing back together again.
Spells punishing: 26,875
Tournaments underway: 882
Games being played simultaneously: 0
Prizes on the line: 5,000
Killer trades: 99,999
Online chats: 10,174

Creatures attacking: 49,438

Deadly strategies: Unlimited

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HANDS ON

Dragon’s Lair 3D
Playing the new Dragon’s Lair reveals something bigger than Daphne’s oversized D-pads

By Jason Babler

When film companies make sequels to hit movies, they often fail. The originality of Batman was completely and utterly absent in Batman & Robin. Instead of amping up the story, they amp up silly action sequences and the pecs on George Clooney’s suit. Apparently, Dragonstone Software is following the same approach. They’ve made sure that Princess Daphne’s nipples are prominently poking through her lingerie in the opening sequence, but they’ve forgotten to expand on the gameplay concepts that made the original unique.

Daphne’s protruberances also point up a major contradiction within the game. Her front-and-center D-pads would suggest Dragon’s Lair 3D is for adults, which makes sense because the majority of gamers drawn to this game are going to be nostalgic old-timers who blew countless quarters at arcades playing Dragon’s Lair in their youth. So if Dragon’s Lair 3D isn’t a kid’s game, why does it play like one?

Jumping, leaping, and swinging my way through the first few levels of the beta only confirmed my fears: this game could be a huge disappointment.

Dragonstone has ably turned its signature franchise into a 3D adventure with cartoonish cel-shaded characters and mandibles running around in realistic, richly detailed environments, but at the expense of the nerdy, tongue-in-cheek knight humor and interesting scenes. Why is there nothing but simplistic combat and jumping puzzles? With all the rope swinging, plank hopping, and abyss jumping, I don’t see much for adults to get into. Controls seem great at first, but jumping on ropes practically ensures your death and thus the infamous, annoying, repetitive death cut-scene. Hopefully the complete game will allow quick saves wherever you want and not at the beginning of long jumping sequences or repetitive cut-scenes.

The bottom line is that right now, months before its release, Dragon’s Lair 3D seems to have whiffed on an opportunity to enrich the original game. I really hope the full version has something that will overcome these tired gimmicks. If it doesn’t, and if the game doesn’t decide which audience it’s supposed to appeal to, then ironically this may be the game that puts Dirk the Daring in the greatest peril of all.

DESIGNER BEAT

Raves and faves of the game designers

By Mark Asher

CHARLES MOYLAN
Battlefront.com (Combat Mission)

NOW PLAYING: I’m too busy making games to play any right now. But when I have some time, I want to play Combat Mission 2: Barbarossa to Berlin of course, and then check out the latest Front Mission, then conquer Europe in Strategic Command.

LISTENING TO: Beck, Cornershop, Kristin Hersh.

READING: Game Programming Gems 2, Scary, I know, but this is pleasure reading for me!

LENNART SAS
Triumph Studios (Age of Wonders II)

NOW PLAYING: Warcraft III and Age (PS2). I’m no big console fan, but ICO is one of those rare games with a unique charm that is fun at the same time.

LISTENING TO: Porcupine Tree—British progressive music with a pinch of Pink Floyd. Combines beautifully written songs with modern electronics and sometimes metal influences.

READING: The Wealth and Poverty of Nations—very inspiring. In fiction I just picked up the last volume of Tad Williams’ Otherland series.

BILL ROPER
Blizzard Entertainment (WarCraft III)

NOW PLAYING: A quick trip around the home and office reveals for PC: Warcraft III/Dark Age of Camelot/Neverwinter Nights; console: Grand Theft Auto III; tabletop: Carcassonne.

LISTENING TO: The three CDs currently in the changer are Stunt (Bare Naked Ladies), Lager Than Life (The Posey Boys), and Giant Steps (John Coltrane).

READING: I usually have more than one book in progress—the latest include The Stand, The Three Musketeers, and The Operator.
“Not just a classic RTS but a classic PC game, period. It's a must buy.”
-PC Gamer

“Unbelievable!”
“5 out of 5.”
-Gamers Asylum

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-Maxim Magazine

“Warcraft III is a must-have game”
-Gamespot

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TEEN Blood
Violence
The differences between Activision's Spider-Man Game and Irrational's Freedom Force offer some interesting clues as to how superhero games in general might mature in the next few years.

The Spider-Man game takes its hero very seriously and conveys the thrill and drama of personal power effectively -- while the wickedly satirical characters of Freedom Force offer their power fantasies with tongue firmly planted in cheek.

Freedom Force's superhero send-up is a throwback to the comic book camp of the '60s and '70s -- a time when comics were seen as nothing more than the village idiot of pop culture.

Nevertheless, the designers at Irrational Games show a great knowledge of and affection for their Lee-Kirby era comic book source material.

Spider-Man, on the other hand, takes both the movie and the comic books as mere springboards to explore the potential of such power fantasies in a new medium.

For comics readers, superheroes have long offered a special kind of escape -- a chance to rise above it all. The Spider-Man game does this both literally and figuratively with great skill and considerable style.

Spider-Man's semi-first-person orientation helps boost the sensation of true "role-playing" in the more literal sense.

You ARE Spider-Man.
Whereas, the omniscient, bird's-eye view of Freedom Force's RPG-style game play discourages an emotional connection to any one character.

There's also an intuitive quality to Spider-Man's fighting game style keyboard controls which, with practice -- can seem as automatic as our own motor impulses, leading to a sense of personal participation more than F.F.'s menu-based actions.

On the other hand, Freedom Force's extensive customization and avatar choices offer the kind of control and sense of free will that would be prerequisite of the perfect power fantasy.

Freedom Force also more fully explores the variety of possible superpowers...

In some ways, the very presence of cut-scenes and storylines are a necessary infringement of the whole idea of the power fantasy.

...though it may be another generation or two of designs and input devices before the full spectrum of superpowers becomes available.

After all, what could be more emasculating than to have someone else writing your life for you?

In this respect, it's really the shooters and games like Grand Theft Auto that have best captured the boundless territory of the power fantasy with their "no rules" game play.

But there's a special direct appeal to power that only superheroes can deliver, and with two such well-done games on the shelves, the genre is bound to grow.

Now let's hope the game market doesn't let them grow out of control. Comics already made that mistake once and we've been paying for it ever since!
Bad Trends

Premature Strike

Wal-Mart shoppers discover their “Special Version” of Strike Fighters wasn’t quite finished  By Jeff Lackey

Gamers who bought Strategy First’s WWII Online upon its release may have a sense of déjà vu.

The special version of Strike Fighters comes with special features, such as this block of black tiles in the middle of the ocean.

For its part, Strategy First claimed the game was in fact finished and that the decision to release it was a joint one made by publisher and developer. According to a company spokesperson: “The release that you are discussing is a limited release to one specific retailer [Wal-Mart] and is not a beta copy, as some have insinuated...The game is in fact playable. However, we understand that there are some gameplay issues, and we are addressing them in a patch that will be released shortly...If people do not want to download the patch, Strategy First will be more than willing to send them the patch on CD.”

We’ve played the “special version” – many commands and features don’t work, “To Do” reminder placeholders are visible, graphic anomalies abound, and crashes are frequent. As the developer and testers stated, the game is unfinished.

So why did Strategy First release an unfinished game? Officially, they’re reluctant to say. Privately, they say they had little choice but to release the game to meet a critical deadline necessary to get onto Wal-Mart shelves. Sources unrelated to Strategy First or Third Wire say that Wal-Mart carries new titles (other than “hot” titles) only at certain times during the year; miss your deadline and Wal-Mart won’t shelf your product. Whatever the reason, gamers who purchase the Wal-Mart version of Strike Fighters: Project 1 are paying $40 for an incomplete product.

Those who bought Strategy First’s WWII Online upon its initial (and very buggy) release may get a sense of déjà vu from this. But the real culprit here appears to be the power of the nation’s largest retailer and not negligence on the part of the publisher. Regardless, for the sake of consumers, developers, and retailers, we hope that big retailers reconsider such heavy-handed policies.

Dumpster Diver

Digging up gold in the bargain bins  By Robert Coffey

We’re not the sort of people to say that spending lots of real money on intangible things of imaginary value (Hello, Enron! Hiya, WorldCom!) isn’t a wise life plan, we’re just saying Magic: The Gathering Online wastes your money and makes potty in your pillowcase while you’re away at work. Might we suggest the following alternatives?

Homeworld: Cataclysm $11
Star Trek: Elite Force $14
EverQuest* $5
Undying $14
Myth II $10
Unreal (jewel case version) $5
Competitive Magic Online Deck $59
The new Bond adventure.
Coming November 2002.
“All Who Challenge Me Shall Feel My Vengeance and Fire Shall Rain From the Sky.”

Solusek Ro, The Burning Prince

Behold the portals. Journey to the throne rooms of the Gods of Norrath and challenge them to battle. In the Planes of Power lost treasures, mighty challenges, and adventures unknown await the hearty and brave.

- Classic version of EverQuest included
- 18 new zones for experienced players
- New translocation zone specifically linking all cities
- Hundreds of new and powerful weapons, spells, armor, & jewelry
- Over 50 new creatures to combat including - Rallos Zek the God of War, Bertoxulous the God of Disease, Saryrn Goddess of Torment, and more
- Dozens of enhanced quests for experienced and non-experienced players alike

Also look for the official EverQuest Atlas, a complete and detailed collection of all the maps of Norrath.

www.everquest.com
Top 10 Role-Playing Games

CGW's favorite dress-up pixie-dust games of all time By the CGW Editors

Another month, another internal CGW poll, another opportunity for genetically-predisposed to irritate reviews editor Robert Coffey to toss a monkey wrench in the works. This month, Mr. Ass of Dumb tried to nominate The Sims by comparing it to the free-form, make-your-own-adventure experience of Morrowind. Although he got a few sympathetic nods, in the end no one voted for The Sims anyway. However, when we included The Sims in the online voting, it rocketed to the No. 2 spot. Knowing our readers, you might have a bone or two to pick with all of this. Feel free to rip Robert a new one at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com.

1. Fallout
   Instead of elves, hippogriffs, and wands, our No. 1 RPG served up radioactive heaps of supermutants, drug addiction, a quest about crop rotation, and some of the most brutal gun-blasting combat of any game, any genre.

2. Baldur's Gate II
   Simply the definitive AD&D game of all time, brilliantly blending character, an epic story, and tactically rich combat.

3. System Shock 2
   So what if System Shock 2 grabbed the No. 4 spot of our Top 10 first-person shooters last month? You still can create and play as a noncombat character. The scariest game we ever played, System Shock 2 is also the game to knock most frequently on the CGW Hall of Fame door without getting in.

4. Betrayal at Krondor
   When you talk about great stories in RPGs, you have to talk about Krondor. Based on the popular series of Raymond Feist novels, Krondor created an absorbing, gritty fantasy world all its own, without crutch standbys like Orcs and hobgoblins.

5. Might and Magic World of Xeen
   The undisputed apex of John Van Caneghem's outstanding fantasy RPG series, World of Xeen was also one of the most uniquely structured RPGs ever, encompassing both Might and Magic IV and V with a "crossover" quest that linked the two together. A charming, goofy masterpiece.

6. Ultima VII
   It introduced the most infamous RPG villain of all, the Guardian, but Ultima VII was also the pinnacle of all that made Ultima great. Absolute freedom, a "living world," bread baking, murder (featuring a corpse strung up on a barn wall), and a cult, Ultima VII was the last of the great Ultimas.

7. Dungeon Master
   This real-time hack 'n' slash dungeon crawl was a revelation when it came out more than a decade ago. Its graphics and sound were amazing in its day, and Dungeon Master's interactive, seemingly living game-world set standards that other games would long to be copied by.

8. Ultima IV
   Considered one of the best games ever, Ultima IV was noteworthy for introducing morality. It was a game in which you had to weigh the morality of your actions and figure out how to be Virtuous, Just, or Compassionate. And what other game ends not by slaying a Loral Lord of Beastes, but by reading a book?!

9. Diablo
   Without a doubt, Diablo was the most addictive RPG ever. Stripping role-playing to its bare essentials, this classic had gamers hacking Undead ass within three minutes of loading the game. Sure, you could plow through it in one marathon session, but the genius of this game compelled you to immediately start over again as a new character or at a higher difficulty level or online. We couldn't get enough.

10. Morrowind
    Finally fulfilling the promise of the entire Elder Scrolls series, Morrowind gave gamers a breathtakingly huge gameworld and let them loose in it to do as they wanted. No RPG has come close to Morrowind in offering players such flexibility and freedom in play and character creation. Quite possibly the last RPG you'll ever need.
MMORPG FYI

Less Dorky Role-Playing

Multiclassing in Shadowbane makes characters unique
By Thierry Nguyen

Long the realm of hardcore D&D dorks, Shadowbane will be the first massively multiplayer online RPG to offer multiclassing. Rather than follow a strict template like other MMORPGs, in which your character's skills are largely predetermined, Shadowbane lets you cross skills and classes so your character can become truly unique among the hordes.

After picking a base character class (fighter, rogue, mage, or healer) at the start of the game, players have the chance to pick a special promotion class upon reaching Level 10. After this, the player can pick a new discipline or sub-class every 10 levels. Examples include archery, blademaster, wyrmslayer, and stormlord. Hence, you can end up with wizards who can actually fight, fighters who can sneak up on you, or thieves who can cast spells.

Multiclassing also makes player-versus-player more interesting, as you can't simply glance at other players and immediately know all of their abilities; they might have some tricks up their sleeve. Now Jeff can finally combine lute-playing, pansiness, sneakiness, and general dorkitude into one hybrid character.

Civ: The Board Game

By Ken Brown

Most computer gamers got into gaming so they didn't have to deal with people, so why is Civilization being converted into a board game? Because there are a heluva lot of board games sold every year, and, frankly, the world could use an upgrade from Monopoly and Risk.

As befits the classic PC game, Eagle Games has put a lot of time and design attention into Sid Meier's Civilization: The Boardgame. The game features 884 miniature plastic pieces representing armies, navies, settlers, leaders, and cities from four historical periods: ancient, medieval, gunpowder, and modern. The board is big—at 46 by 36 inches—and colorful, and the game comes with more than 100 cards depicting technological advances and Wonders of the World. Perhaps best of all, you can play it three ways (basic, standard, or advanced), which should please everyone from newbies to hardcore board gamers (most of whom do not look at all like Ferengi).

The game should be in stores September 6, available for $49.95 from large retailers or $59.95 from specialty stores. Eagle Games is a relative newcomer to the board game scene, but the company's other games have been well received, particularly War! Age of Imperialism, which board gaming critics have hailed as an instant classic. For more information, go to www.eaglegames.net.
CASINO EMPIRE SUPPLY
When the chips are down...

LOADED DICE
By Craptastic

Put Lady Luck in the palm of your hand FOR GOOD with these house-friendly, odds-enhancing dice featuring breakthrough INVISI-CON Technology. Then stand back and watch your customers throw their money at you...LITERALLY.

REMOTE DESERT PROPERTY

Make your troubles disappear with these deluxe "permanent vacation" plots located in private, seldom patrolled areas just outside city limits. HUSH MONEY MAY BE REQUIRED UPON PURCHASE.

KNEECAP BAT

Nothing says "Pay up, punk" like a few home-run swings to the patella. These rock-hard joint busters are heavy enough to split a knee open like a ripe melon, yet light enough for all-night jobs WITH LITTLE OR NO ARM FATIGUE.

FEATHERED HEADDRESSES

Who knows why audiences love gaudy, six-foot headdresses so much...BUT THEY DO! Watch tourists FLOCK to these sky-high crowd-pleasers, each made with the feathers of 12 simulated ostriches! And with sturdy titanium framing, you're limited only by the height of your ceiling and the strength of your shoelaces.

"HOSPITALITY" EXPERIENCE
SEEKING ALL "POSITIONS."

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

These "eager-to-please" Soviet starlets work "overtime" for your big spenders...references from over 9,650 "satisfied" with their own thigh-high leather boots! Say "Nyet!" to prudish American tastes...COST INCLUDES IMMIGRATION FEE.

TEEN
Gambling
Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
MARBLEX STATUARY
By SKULPTED KLASIX

From the world's top Kraftsmen come these semi-original reproductions of actual historical celebrities. Each can be modified to spray water from ANY ORIFICE!

Choose from:
MICKEY ANGELO'S DAVID, CAESAR, NAPOLEON, LIBERACE.

INSPIRATIONAL POSTERS

Spread the spirit of shameless exploitation with these full-color Profit-Ganda reproductions, perfect for office and employee restroom.

POPULAR WORKS INCLUDE:
- "LOYALTY. Or else."
- "You Didn't See A Thing."
And the instant classic:
- "GUILT is for Nuns."

GREAT FOR
- Magic Shows
- Lobby Attractions
- Petting Zoos
- "Accidental" Mauling of Competitors

Genuine Fool's Gold Gilded Frames Extra.

White Tiger Cubs

Masterfully bred for a gentle-ish temperament and flame-resistant fur, these albino showstoppers will soften the hearts and loosen the purse strings of animal lovers everywhere. As seen on stage and TV's "When Exotic Pets Maul Their Handlers."

Available in: Male, Female & Gender-Mysterious.

HOYLE

CASINO EMPIRE Your Casino. Your Call.

Welcome to business, Vegas-style. Now you can build and run your very own Sin City empire, complete with bright lights, free booze, mob ties and bona fide Hoyle gaming. Basically, you're like God with a pinky ring.
Dress Warmly, Comrade

Wargamers look to the eastern front for Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin

By Bruce Geryk

It was almost cruel the way Battlefront released Combat Mission; all it did was leave wargamers craving more. That addiction is about to be fed, with the upcoming Combat Mission: Barbarossa to Berlin, which just proves that it's not really World War II until the Russians show up.

It's not really World War II until the Russians show up.

CMBB will add everything necessary to fight it out on the snowy steppes of Russia or at Stalingrad or even in Finland. Sixty standalone scenarios and 10 operations will cover every aspect of the fighting, from the invasion through the enormous tank battles at Kursk to the last, bitter, inevitable struggle for ruined Berlin.

As the product of almost two years of development, though, CMBB is far more than just Combat Mission with Russian uniforms. The system has been refined in so many ways that it would almost take a separate manual to detail the changes. Of note: Battlefront reworked the machine gun system to more accurately portray things like suppressive fire, they revamped the armor penetration algorithms to include even more data, and they made historically specific adjustments for such things as the problems peculiar to Russian artillery early in the war. CMBB also boasts several graphical improvements, including higher resolutions, more detailed textures, and more realistic infantry animations.

To cope with the huge number of new vehicle models required, Battlefront.com turned to its fanatical user base, which responded enthusiastically. The result is that more than 50 modelers have credits in CMBB. Some submissions were used as is, while others were combined to take advantage of the best features of each. CMBB will be available by September 20 for PC and Macintosh. In the United States, the game will be available only online, but PC gamers in western Europe will be able to find it in retail stores thanks to German publisher CDV Software. All Macintosh users will have to order online.
Build a Mythic Empire...

www.microsoft.com/games/ageofmythology
Light effects for spells liven up the stodgy but detailed dungeon graphics.

PRELIMINARY PREVIEW

Divine Divinity

Enjoyable enjoyment from Germanic Germany By Robert Coffey

Somewhere in Larian Studios there must be a whiteboard with several titles crossed out: Swords & Swords & Swords, Glorious Glory, The Adventuring Adventurer's Adventurous Adventure, and Dukatana II. Seriously, how awful did the other choices have to be to make the designers of Divine Divinity go, "Oh yeah, baby, that's the one! That one is a winner?" Thankfully, some hands-on time with this game revealed that while Larian Studios may need a remedial course in game titles, they have a better handle on the whole game design side of things.

This RPG isn't going to break any new ground - Divine Divinity looks like a stodgier Diablo, with the same isometric view and loads of monsters that need killing. Although the art has a slicker, old-school feel to it than the Blizzard game, the amount of detail in the settings creates a rich and unique sense of place. At first it appears you have just three character classes from which to choose, but the truth is you have something more on the order of a Morrowind scale of choices: every time I fledgling fighter leveled up, I could pick new skills from across all classes to augment him. As there are 96 skills with five levels each, you have enormous leeway in creating exactly the character you want.

Throw in that there are often multiple solutions to various quests and problems, a la Baldur's Gate II, and the replayability of the game should be very high.

I was suckin' in by the depth of character development and the beginnings of what seemed like a good storyline. There's still a fair amount of work to be done, though, prior to the game's fall release. It could benefit from stealing the livelier battle animation from Diablo II as well as a "locate treasure" hotkey. But if Larian pays as much attention to the gameplay as they have to the levels, we might one day see Divine Divinity II: The Sequel: Act Two.


GET A LIFE

Is it about time?

Flaming Lips The Flaming Lips have been making some of the most gloriously weird psychedelic rock for years, but with 1999's The Soft Bulletin, the band created a sonic masterpiece. Their new Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots is another trippy chunk of art-damaged bubblegum. It's ELO meets the Butthole Surfers, for smart people.

Wedded Bliss! Now that our managing editor Dana Jongewaard has succumbed, we suddenly have way more wed than unwed people on staff. God forbid we suffer alone. Get out there and meet someone - we've found people on death row are generally eager to get hitched, and you don't have to live with them. It's a win-win!

Fraud Mix David Sedaris with Homer Simpson and you get David Rakoff's Fraud, a hilariously insightful collection of essays on subjects such as poising in a department store window as Fraud, attending spiritual retreats led by Steven Seagal, and even tracking down a decade-old sperm donation. You'll laugh your geeky nerd glasses off.

Godzilla DVD: When you need to tickle the lowbrow lobe, nothing beats five DVDs' worth of monster mayhem. One package gets you Godzilla: King of All Monsters, the way-too-surreal Godzilla vs. Mothra, the wholesome Godzilla's Revenge, the xenophbic Terror of Mechagozilla, and even a decent non-Godzilla monster flick, Rodan.
Follow a Legend...

www.microsoft.com/games/ageofmythology
Stronghold: Crusader

Firefly Studios works on building castles in the sand
By Robert Coffey

Last year, Stronghold captivated us with its appealing graphics, deep economy, and gameplay that was a cool mix of defensive strategy and castle design. We loved it. We're a little less certain about the sequel. But after some time spent playing the Stronghold: Crusader beta, we're giving designers Firefly Studios the benefit of a somewhat reserved doubt.

The one visual bright spot is the appearance of oases, which actually figure into gameplay. With water obviously at a premium, food producing buildings must be built on the oases. Whereas you could walk off a lot of your essential buildings in the first game, Stronghold: Crusader forces you to be a lot more active in guarding your resources. These oases will be huge points of contention in multiplayer.

On the surface little has changed. You still build a castle and an entire medieval community from the ground up, planting and harvesting crops, refining raw materials, manufacturing goods, levying taxes, and so on. If anything, Stronghold fans are likely to be initially excited by all the new units and gameplay features and the shifting of the game into a more historically grounded experience, that of the Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries.

I found myself drawn into the campaign but a little put off as well. The Arabian desert milieu is much less colorful than the green and pleasant lands of medieval Europe. The charming character animations remain, but overall graphics suffer against the rugged backdrop of unrelenting brown.

Firefly is pushing hard for a robust multiplayer, but I can't help wondering why, in light of the still-on-shelves Age of Empires II and the impending Medieval: Total War, do we really need another siege-focused medieval warfare game? Crusader seems to be playing against Stronghold's defense-focused strength. My skirmishes against the Crusader AI were interesting—the multiplayer here is slower and more economy focused than any competitor—but it didn't really pull me in. At least right now, the game isn't visceral enough for my taste.

Then again, this game has time before its early autumn release. I'm hoping that the single player keeps what made the first game so much fun and forges the full-tilt offensive.

After playing it for a while, we're going to give Stronghold: Crusader the benefit of a reserved doubt.
Unleash the wrath of the gods

Enter a world where legends are real and the will of the gods decides the fate of mortal man. Build majestic temples, farm the fertile valleys, and seek out wealth in distant realms. Join brave heroes in the greatest battles of mythology, from the walls of Troy to the gates of the Underworld. Summon mighty minotaurs to smash enemy citadels, or call down fire from the skies. The choice is yours.
**Hands On**

**Links 2003**

Caddyhacking comes of age **By John Marrin**

Get out on the links a few times a year, and if I stroll into the 19th hole for a cold one with a few good shots under my belt, I'm a happy duffer. Usually my ball is so deep in the woods, I think I'm deer huntin'. But *Links 2003* makes me feel like a PGA pro with some new features that virtual golf nuts will appreciate.

Links veterans will notice that the 2003 version has 3D golfers with plenty of new animations. PGA pros Sergio Garcia, Jesper Parnevik, David Toms, and Annika Sorenstam are showcased, but you can create a custom golfer to suit your style. Your player’s muttering (the pro’s own voices have been recorded) and their reactions, like kissing their club after a sweet shot, add a human touch to the game.

*Links 2003* also includes some very sweet courses to play: Cabo del Sol, Gleneagles, Skeleton Coast Golf Club, Cambrian Ridge, and Kauri Cliffs are all included. The terrain is high-res with very detailed textures. Microsoft claims that the courses have been mated with GPS data and are extremely accurate. Well, they certainly are intimidating...and tough. But if you yearn for a different challenge, there's the full-featured Arnold Palmer Course Designer so you can design and share your fantasy course with other Links players online.

All I can say is that I played the beta of *Links 2003* a lot like I play golf in real life—meaning not very well. But I take some solace in the famous words of Ty Webb, “Be the ball.” Get ready to tee off this holiday season.

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**The Art of Conquest**

**Empire Earth expansion takes gamers into space** **By Tom Price**

Fans of *Empire Earth* are getting what they asked for: a brand-new epoch, as well as two complete single-player campaigns, each with a host of new units, buildings, powers, and calamities. The Space Age Epoch begins on your home world and then allows you to explore and conquer other planets. As you advance, you'll be able to build new units, including fighters and capital ships that let you travel through space.

The new single-player campaigns focus on specific moments in history. The first, set in ancient Rome, puts you into power as consul Calus Marius, and later as Julius Caesar. You'll have new units to play with, such as Legionnaires, and the ability to conscript regular citizens into the military.

The second campaign involves the Pacific Theater of World War II. This one focuses more on combat:

SAS commandos can swim and plant charges, radio men can call in paratroopers, and flamethrowers can roast enemy units.

All of the game's original civs are also getting something new and unique, be it a unit, a building, or a special power. Get ready to start building new empires when *The Art of Conquest* ships this winter.
## CGW Top 20

The reign of Warcraft has begun

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Last Month</th>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos ($59, Vivendi Universal)</td>
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<td>Diablo II: Lord of Destruction ($31, Vivendi Universal)</td>
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June retail sales results by NPD Intelllect

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**NOTABLE QUOTE**

"The only thing that could be more hostile to newbies than Magic: The Gathering Online is sending young convicts to prison without pants."

—Robert Coffey, CGW
Can you believe it's almost fall? The holidays are rapidly approaching, when many publishers release their biggest titles. It's also the time when we hear about games that just won't make it and have to slip until next year. Here's the latest as of August 1, but as always, for up-to-the-minute news and updates, head on over to www.gonegold.com and see when games are shipping.

1. **Command & Conquer: Generals**
   - Looking great, and Westwood is going to take more time to get it out to us. It's now slated for the first quarter of 2003, giving developers plenty of time to streamline the new and improved RTS graphics engine. Although many of us would love to have the game this year, Westwood is known for holding onto a game and making sure it's polished before it goes out, so there's really no surprise here.

2. **With Emperor: Rise of the Middle Kingdom**
   - Impressions take their City Building series online for the first time with the help of Breakaway Games. The game is set in China, and players can control neighboring cities, form alliances with friends, trade goods, and, of course, invade each other. Those who like a more peaceful game can form alliances to work together on massive projects, such as the Grand Canal. Emperor is scheduled to take over this fall.

3. **Not only does Combat Flight Simulator 3 look spectacular (see this month's Loading), it's going to please everyone who found previous campaigns flat. Microsoft has added in some role-playing elements to your onscreen pilot, with stats that will affect your performance. Bombing skill and health will also play a part. With 18 flyable aircraft, cooperative multiplayer missions, and an incredible new graphics engine, this looks to be one of the best Microsoft has to offer.**

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**Games**

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<td>Age of Mythology</td>
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She's Smart... She's Sexy...
And She's Knocking'em Dead
From India to a Trailer Park in Ohio.

No One Lives Forever 2

The Sequel to The Operative™: No One Lives Forever™
Winner of 3 Action Game of the Year Awards
Computer Games Magazine, PC Gamer, Computer Gaming World

Fox Interactive
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- GameSpy

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Outsmart your captors to gather vital information and discover flaws in camp security.

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Infiltrate German soldiers' quarters to steal military secrets, uniforms and other tools to escape.

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APRIL 18, 1944: 16:45 HOURS
Impersonate a prison guard to access off-limits areas of camp and communicate with Allies.

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WORLD WAR II
PRISONER OF WAR™
Escape is all in your mind.
BATTLEFIELD:

With 64-player games and 35 vehicles, Battlefield has multiplayer more
After two nosedives, one crash into the aircraft carrier's control tower, and one not-so-happy encounter with a forest, I was finally flying my F4U Corsair on my first bombing run. But much like the real-life pilots of World War II, I had no way of knowing exactly where my bombs would hit when I released them. I made a quick guess, taking into account my flight speed, angle, and height—and let the bombs fly!

But don't think Battlefield: 1942 is a flight sim; that is only one small aspect. Due in early September, EA's new World War II multiplayer action game is a 64-player shootfest. The Infantry I hit were really other players, not just AI scripts (though bots are also available). The tank I broadsided was being driven by a live person, with another gamer manning the machine gun. Even the offshore aircraft carrier I took off from was being controlled by one of my fellow

As do GTA III and even Tribes, Battlefield: 1942 gives players the freedom to play the game any way they want to.

The maps I played were like huge, outdoor capture-the-flag maps, but with elements reminiscent of Unreal Tournament's old Assault mode. Using Conquest mode, teams vie for control of key capture points, which double as vehicle and player respawn locations. When players are killed, they are kicked back to a menu that lets them choose which kind of soldier they want to be—Scout, Assault, Medic, Anti-tank, or Engineer (each has a different loadout or special ability)—and at which capture point they want to respawn. But respawning costs a ticket and it's subtracted from the team's total. The game is over when either all the tickets are used up or all the points are captured. Standard team deathmatch and capture the flag are also available for those who are too chicken to try something new.

There will be 16 maps in all, drawn from famous World War II locations spanning Europe, the Pacific, and North Africa. You can be part of the U.S. forces duking it out mano-a-mano with the Japanese in a Pacific archipelago, with ships and aircraft playing a huge support role to the ground troops. Another map is set in a thick Eastern European forest where Russians confront the Germans with Jeeps, APCs, and truck-mounted rocket-launchers.

Play Well With Others

In one match I played, I was driving a tank up to an enemy-held capture point, running down a luckless enemy infantry and anything else in my way. In my carelessness, I drove straight into a tank trap, which ground me to a halt. While I struggled to move, an enemy Scout relayed my position to a nearby battleship. I was a sitting duck.

Tanks, planes, ships—any vehicle you need to get the job done is at your disposal.

After one miss I was vaporized by the ship's main battery, thanks to the Scout who used his special ability, viewing with binoculars, to let his teammate manning the ship nail me with pinpoint accuracy. Even with the wide range of vehicles and weapons and class-based special abilities, game balance is maintained with good cooperation a well-coordinated team can make short work of its enemies. Battlefield: 1942 is all about interaction and teamwork, with each person a small piece of a huge, ever-changing strategy. Multiplayer games that require this much coordination between gamers are rare; ones that are as fun as Battlefield: 1942 are even rarer.

**GAME STATS**

**PUBLISHER:** EA
**DEVELOPER:** Digital Illusions
**GENRE:** Action
**URL:** www.battlefield1942.com
**RELEASE DATE:** September 2002

1942

massive than some MMOs By Jason Brown

www.computergaming.com 77
Note the difference in scale between the gigantic Romulan warbird and the small Defiant-class ship.

The revamped interface is much less intimidating.

Recruiting experienced officers can enhance your combat capabilities and add new abilities such as subsystem targeting and high-energy turns.

STAR TREK STARF

The next generation of Starfleet Command games By Denny Atkin
Hardcore Star Trek fans—call us "Trekies," "Trekkers," or "those guys still living in their parents' basements!"—will tell you that the even-numbered Trek films are the best. With Star Trek: Starfleet Commander III, developer Talden is about to prove that the "odd-number curse" doesn't apply to Star Trek games. This sequel has made some significant jumps: from original publisher interplay to Activision and from the original series era to The Next Generation time period. Yet players of earlier games in the series will feel right at home. SFC III boasts a familiar interface, but the underlying game has undergone a complete refit to be more accessible, immersive, customizable, and reliable.

Strange New Worlds
The game takes place in the TNG era, specifically between the last episode of Voyager and the upcoming Star Trek: Nemesis film. The three campaigns focus on the Klingons, Romulans, and Federation. (In Sharmah and Conquest modes, the Borg are playably as well.) The secondary races from earlier SFC games, such as the Hydrans, Lyrans, and Mirk, are AWOL, but other races, such as the Ferengi and Cardassians, have cameoed. Although there are fewer campaigns, scripted missions (about 20 for each campaign) are richer than in previous games.

Online play using the Dynaverse 3 campaign engine is slated to support at least 128 players per server. Talden promises that you won't see the Dynaverse glitches of previous SFC titles this time. Online play is getting months of prerelease testing—the game was "feature-complete" back in June, and it won't ship until November.

The Bridge
Newbies and experienced crew alike will appreciate SFC III's simplified interface. While it still has the same general look as earlier games, icons and controls have been rearranged in a more logical, less intimidating layout. There are some new systems as well. Chief among these is warp drive, very useful for evasion and hit-and-run torpedo attacks. At impulse speeds, you can now travel in reverse, which makes getting a bead on enemy ships in close-quarters combat much easier. A subtle change in weapons control significantly enhances gameplay: as long as a weapon has some power going to it, you can still fire it, albeit at a weaker strength. You spend a lot less time evading while you wait for phasers to recharge now, which makes combat a lot more interesting.

SFC III reintroducts officers to the series, adding a bit of an RPG element to the game. Officer skills build on each mission, and you can use prestige points to hire new crew members at starbases. Advanced tactics such as high-energy maneuvers and subsystem targeting are available only to experienced officers. If your helmsman gets stunned or killed during a melee, you'll find your tactical situation dramatically changed, with an unskilled redshirt at the station.

Ship configurations have also gotten key changes. Previous games in the series offered a number of variants in each starship class, but SFC III goes further by giving you MechWarrior-style customization. As you gain prestige points, you can spend them on refits for your ship's systems. Upgrade your targeting computer, beef up your rear shields, drop in more powerful quantum torpedoes, or load your ship with starships and torpedoes. There are mass limitations specific to each ship class, which keeps weapons loads within the realm of sanity.

New Life and New Civilizations
As you play, you'll notice other enhancements popping up faster than tribbles. The graphics engine has seen a significant rebuild, with more detailed ships, system-specific damage textures, and impressive hails from warp engines, weapons fire, and solar halos. The engine now supports dropping in custom bitmaps in addition to new 3D objects, so look for some interesting "total conversions" from the SFC community.

Even though the team is still working to balance the play, we're already impressed with SFC III. With the addition of custom weapon loads, warp drive, and officers, combat is a lot more tactically engaging than in previous releases. More intelligent handling of power management and weapon cycling makes for faster-paced gameplay, without turning SFC III into an action game. Best of all, the missions we played had more depth and tactical challenge than the "oh, joy, another space monster" encounters you'd see too often in previous SFC games. Expect the game to beam down this November.
He who builds superior city makes grand gesture.

CITY BUILDING GETS MEAN. Introducing history’s first multiplayer city sim, complete with a serious mean streak. Join forces with neighbors to erect authentic Chinese monuments and structures, or annihilate online rivals with ruthless military tactics and underhanded diplomacy. All in the most civilized manner, of course.
Will Wright's twisted dollhouse is going online. Only this time, we are the dolls.
ims Online
By Jeff Green
Ask the folks at Maxis a question about *The Sims Online*, and, chances are, no matter what you've asked, you may get back the same answer: "The Sims are real!"

The answer is a mantra of sorts. It's a sentence they repeat over and over, as a way of differentiating the game from all previous Sims titles. It's also a warning—almost a warning—to the millions of gamers who have spent the past two years managing/destroying the lives of the tiny digital people in Will Wright's phenomenally successful human ant farm.

When *The Sims Online* launches this November, it's going to look much like the game that has dominated the bestseller charts for two years, but in fact it is a completely new, fundamentally different experience.

Gone are Bella and Mortimer Goth, as well as every other AI-controlled Sim in the game. Gone, too, is your ability to control the world. In *The Sims Online*, you're not God. You're just a Sim. And all those other Sims—they're real people, too. Now, when you try to shake a Sim's hand, or kiss a Sim, or punch a Sim in the face, that other Sim will be another human, another Sims Online player—and that player is sitting behind a computer somewhere out there in the real world. A good idea? A lame one? No one, not Will Wright himself, nor anyone else at Maxis, has any clue how this will play out. Because even Will Wright has no control over the Sims this time—because we are the Sims. The Sims are real.
**The Man Machine**

The Sims Online is a huge, ambitious, and risky attempt to translate the gameplay that made The Sims--the best-selling PC game of all time (16 million copies have been sold to date, including the expansions) into a language that works in the massively multiplayer arena. Why risky? Because it doesn't fit the profile. There are no monsters to kill, no levels or armor class to attain, no Dwarves to kick. You can't kill other players. It's neither fantasy nor sci-fi based. And The Sims fan base (which is more than 50 percent female, according to Maxis) includes a great many casual gamers, not the kind of hardcore fans who spend their entire waking lives in games like EverQuest. But these differences are obviously what make it such a strong candidate (along with the very different Star Wars Galaxies) for being the breakthrough massively multiplayer game we're all waiting for—if it works.

Gordon Walton, the game's executive producer (and former producer of Ultima Online at Origin) says there is now "a small army" of nearly 100 people at Maxis trying to ensure that The Sims Online does work, and a public beta should be in progress by the time you read this. Like everyone else involved, Walton realizes that it's the fans who will determine how the game plays out. "The players themselves will create and own the world," he said. "We're giving them the tools and then watching to see what they do with them."

Those tools include many that longtime Sims players are already familiar with. The graphics and interface look nearly identical to the single-player game, and the basic mechanics of building a home, earning skill points, and keeping your "natives" up—hunger, comfort, hygiene, bladder, energy, and fun—are still intact. The Sims Online is thus instantly recognizable and playable to anyone who's ever played The Sims before. But everything works differently now.

**Hall of Mirrors**

The first time you log on, you'll create your Sim, your online persona. The character creation screen features hundreds of skins and heads to choose from, serious to ridiculous, and eventually you should be able to upload your own skins. Next you'll choose a place to live in the online world. Maxis will initially ship the game with four city maps (replicated over many servers) and give players enough starting "cash" ($1000) to buy a lot and start building a home. Lot prices will vary, depending initially upon the terrain you choose—a beachfront, island, or mountainside lot will be more expensive than an inland one.

After the cities become inhabited, lot prices will fluctuate according to local demand and the players' own dynamic real estate market. You can own only one lot per city, but you can sell it at any time, either back to Maxis for a fixed price, or to other players for a price you negotiate. You can sell your home to other players completely furnished, meaning that in theory you could just play the game as an architect, buying one lot at a time, designing and furnishing a home, and then selling it for more cash to others.

So after you have a Sim and a home, then what? What is there to do? Well, unless you have some perverse desire to roll-play a poor, sad, friendless hermit online, you're going want to interact with other players, to make friends and earn cash and become a thriving member of the community. Or not. Maybe you'd rather be an annoying, wandering pest or a beggar or a ghost or the leader of a cult. How you play will be limited only by your imagination.
The friendship web lets you see at a glance how many friends you or other Sims have in the game. Clicking on a face will bring up info about that person.

**Rat Race**

For many players, the goal of The Sims Online will be the same goal they have in real life: to make tons of money and have lots of friends. How you earn money in the game is entirely up to you. Unlike the single-player game, there are no career paths in The Sims Online. Your Sim doesn't just go to work off-screen and earn you cash. Now you actually have to earn it yourself, but you get a number of ways to do this.

Because each player gets only one lot, your home is also essentially your place of business. Simply by getting other players to visit your lot, you'll earn money. Every 24 hours, you'll receive a visitor bonus from Maxis based on how many people have visited your lot and how long they stayed.

But how do you get people to visit? Will Wright calls it an economy of motives. All Sims need to keep their eight motives in the green to function properly—they need to eat, sleep, have fun, socialize, and so on. So you need to bait people, give them incentives and rewards for visiting and sticking around. A nice restaurant, for example, will increase people's food, comfort, and social motives. A dance hall or club will increase people's fun and social motives. Skill points are another incentive you can exploit. Open a gym with pools and exercise equipment, for example, and players can come in and improve their Body skills. Finally, you can take advantage of others' desires for cash by placing job objects in your house, which let players make objects (such as pizzas or wooden gnomes) that they can then sell for cash themselves. The beauty of the systems is that you, in turn, get a cut of everything sold—in addition to getting a bonus for drawing them into your house in the first place. The

You need to bait people—give them incentives and rewards for visiting your place and sticking around.
Sick of The Sims yet?
Too bad. There's a lot more on the way...

Sims Unleashed
For those who have perfected the art of managing their virtual self's urination rate, the Sims Unleashed is about to throw out an entirely different challenge—making sure your dog doesn't mark your entire living room as his territory. Sims Unleashed adds the most-requested feature to the Sims stable: pets. Expanding beyond the decorative fish, your Sims can now walk out of a pet store with a bird, reptile, dog, or cat. Pets help the social dynamic by being a friend. They're considered family members, so they count toward your "family total" of eight. You can arrange the family total in many ways, from a nuclear family with a dog and a cat to four roommates and four dogs to one crazy old lady with seven cats. Not only are pets considered friends and family, but they also get you the classic "single fellow takes cute dog to the park and attracts a multitude of attractive ladies." Pets are a great people magnet, making it easier for your Sim to forge relationships with others. Birds and more exotic pets are basically objects like the fish; the dogs and cats are the real focus of this expansion. In fact, dogs and cats have their own statistics and skills to manage. (But

rather than control pets directly, you issue orders through your Sim.) Besides the pets, Sims Unleashed adds even more vacant lots and the ability to view all of your lots on one massive neighborhood screen. That makes it easier to swap views between households, and it's a kick to be able to gaze upon your entire virtual society all in one screen. New career fields include fashion, education, animals, the circus, and the food industry. That doesn't count gardener, which isn't a job but a new activity. Players can now purchase dirt to plant seeds in, grow their own food, and either store it for consumption or sell it at a farmer's market. Maxis could have easily added just pets and been done with it, but with the new careers, locations, Sim and how to make adjustments later. With the ability to modify clothes, tattoos, accessories, and faces, Sims fanatics can go completely nuts when creating their virtual selves.

Sims Deluxe
Also coming in September is this re-release, which incorporates The Sims and Livin' Large in one pack. Most significant, it includes the new Sims Creator, which will let you create a whole new Sim for use in the game and insert a face (whether yours or Mr. T's) as well. Just take a digital image, and the Sims Creator will show you how to wrap the face around your

...and the gardening subtheme, Sims Unleashed looks to be the most comprehensive of the expansion packs. Check it out this September.

SimCity 4
A lot of the focus for SimCity 4 at press time is on polishing the terrain, modifying tool and weather effects, and adding "life" to the city. Details such as policemen using firehoses in riots or firemen striking when their funding is cut are the kind of things the team is adding. The most impressive addition is working tornadoes, with houses and animals doing their best Twister impression when getting swept up by a particle-system-created tornado. Look for a snifty Loading shot of this city builder next month.

"Thierry Nguyen

www.computergaming.com 87
ALL AMERICANS PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE.

A SELECT FEW SHOW IT.

You're one of the most highly-trained U.S. warfare experts on the planet. Put your skills to the test as you battle your way through fifteen levels of realistic tactical combat. When the brass wants a target secured, they send in a platoon. When they want a target erased, they send in your squad of four U.S. special forces. This is the part of the war that the media didn't cover. Welcome to Desert Storm.

WWW.GOTHAMGAMES.COM/CONFLICT
Conflict: Desert Storm

No diplomats.
No negotiation.
No surrender.
smart players will provide everything a Sim needs—
including beds, bathrooms, and food (all of which you
could charge for)—to keep people around as long as possible.

**Eight Is Enough**

The catch to all this, however, is that you need to be logged
on and at your lot yourself for anyone to visit. This leads to
perhaps the game's most crucial social relationship:
roommates. Having roommates, who live on your lot with
you, is the easiest and most lucrative way to play The Sims
Online's economic game. You can have up to eight
roommates, who all share the objects in the house and split
the daily profits. Only one person needs to be home for
people to visit, so obviously the more roommates you have,
the easier it is to stay open. Plus with each roommate
acquired, your lot size increases, enabling you to make
a bigger, cooler, and more impressive home.

For some the incentive to become someone else's
roommate may be as strong as the incentive to have their
own place. For new players, it means they don't have to
spend their limited cash on a lot; they can start sharing in
the profits of someone else's labor, and they get an instant
social group.

Because, as in real life, roommates can quickly turn into
nightmares, the original property owner will have ultimate
authority over the lot, which comes with certain privileges,
such as the ability to build rooms or sell objects, that the
other roommates won't have. (So as an owner, you won't log
on one day and find your home gutted or sold.) In addition,
you'll have access to menu items that let you maintain
control, such as an admit/ban list for Sims, as well as the
crucial ability to permanently kick out any psychotic
roommate.

**Money for Nothing**

Of course, you don't have to participate in the rat race at
all if you don't want to. You don't have to work or live
anywhere. You can be a roving vagabond, a bum. You could
wander from lot to lot, giving back rubs for money, playing
the guitar, or begging. You could spend your time being a
social butterfly or a nuisance, and although you may not
have access to the tons of stuff for sale, you can only
survive in the game if that's how you want to play.

According to Chris Trottler, the lead designer, this has
always been one of the team's goals. "Right from the start,
this was one of our big design challenges," she said. "We
wanted to figure out how to reward people for different
kinds of behavior. We didn't want to force you to play the
economic game." Thus, Maxis will provide players below
a certain economic threshold with a weekly allowance
(previously called "welfare" by the team) that will allow you
to at least buy enough food to stay alive and keep playing.

Menu items allow you to maintain control—one crucial ability
is being able to permanently kick out psychotic roommates.
The Civilized World is Threatened!
Conquer the Hordes, or Die Trying!

Form a band of adventurers using the 3rd Edition Dungeons & Dragons® rules, feats and skills.

Fierce new monsters, powerful spells, magic items and quests await you on your journey.
On Griefing: An Open Letter to "Dude"

Dear Dude,

There you were, minding your own business, just looking for some help in making a pizza to earn a few simoleans, when we showed up and made our personal mission from God to destroy your Sim life. For two hours straight, we systematically haunted, insulted, belittled, badgered, harassed, demeaned, and humiliated you. What had you done to deserve this? Absolutely nothing—were we complete and unabashed jerks who targeted you simply for the glee in kicking digital sand in your virtual eyes. We urged other players to boycott your pizza-making efforts and they did. We exclaimed that you wore diapers—other people’s diapers—that you ate children, and kept your shoes filled with urine. We were incorrigible, and with the encouragement of Will Wright, who was chuckling at our antics over our satirical shoulders, we were unstoppable.

Unstoppable until we got thrown out of the house. Physically picked up and thrown out by the seat of our natty clown suit pants by the owner of that particular house for playing too rough. We knew The Sims Online had no police—we didn’t realize that players could exercise a real-world type of authority over whom they’d let in. But like a bad case of crabs we came back—thankfully, the owner of the home was too distracted to exercise her option to ban us permanently from her property. And so the harassment continued.

But we’re sorry now. We aren’t usually grief players. Maybe there’s something tasty in the water at Maxis. We promise to play nice from now on. If you just answer this one question: où est Sylvie? —Robert Coffey

Trottler also pointed out that such players may very well succeed on their own in other ways. The Sims Online will have a number of daily Top 100 lists on which players can keep track of not only things like the most popular or lucrative sites, but also the most popular individual Sims, the funniest Sims, or the biggest lotharios.

"There are a number of different paths to success," said Trottler. "Our goal was to find ways to reward people for however they wanted to play."

Good Grief

Of course, as veterans of online games already know, the way some people want to play is as—how can we put this delicately?—total freaking jerks, playing only to make others’ lives miserable (see sidebar "On Griefing!"). Maxis is well expecting a certain amount of antisocial behavior and, in fact, could be said to be somewhat encouraging it, with some hilarious new animations that will let players act out their darker sides: vomiting, having publicly meltdown, pile-driving one another, and, in a particularly inspired piece of cruelty, ripping another player’s heart out and then stomping on it (figuratively—not for real).

But there’s always a limit to what’s acceptable online, and there are always gamers unwilling or unable to stay within that limit. However, The Sims Online’s very structure makes griefing nearly impossible to sustain. There are no common areas or public property where griefers can torment people. Every single lot is owned by a gamer who maintains complete control. If a guy is bothering other players on your lot, you can have him out, or even ban him permanently: the end. If you’re really upset about keeping the peace, you can even limit access to your lot to only those officially registered as your friends.

By the way, although there’s no player-killing in the game, you can indeed die. Starvation will be the most common way, but you can also electrocute or drown yourself, among other tragic means. Once you’re dead, you stay dead, wandering the game as a ghost, until you can convince another live player to resurrect you. Which will require a special skill or job object. You can die on purpose, if being a ghost appeals to you, as it apparently does to none other than Will Wright himself.

"I like the idea of death parties," he said, "where the first thing you do when you walk in a house is die."

House Party

Death parties: this is the kind of game element that will set The Sims Online apart from the rest of the massively multiplayer crowd. Freed from the burden of the typical treadmill that characterizes most of these games (killing stuff to buy stuff so you can kill bigger stuff), The Sims

Every day The Sims Online will display a host of Top 100 lists, ranking players and their property by a variety of criteria. Top players earn bonuses daily.

Think you’re funnier than Conan and Letterman? Be the star of your own show.
SORORITY GIRLS.
IF YOU CAN'T DATE'EM,
SCARE THE PANTS OFF THEM.

FINALLY A LIFE-SIM GAME WHERE YOU GET TO SCARE THE HELL OUT OF PEOPLE.
You can forget the manual, your mission is simple: you are The Ghostmaster and you control ghosts and ghouls as they haunt classic horror settings. Scare the sorority girls or terrify the mobsters, it'll be anything but a quiet night in.
The Sims Online has more of an aura of a free-form, barely-in-control, worldwide house party.

Online has more of an aura of a free-form, barely-in-control, worldwide house party that you'll want to log into just to see the new, weird stuff people have come up with. Certain lots are going to be popular not because they help you earn anything, but simply because they're so much fun—the online equivalent of a popular bar. Groups may organize for events, such as putting on a live play, and Maxis even has plans in the works to be able to broadcast special live events that would be viewable by thousands of players at once. You might be able to log in at a certain time on a certain server for example, and see the real-life trailer to a new movie or hear a new single, all within the world of the game.

This is brand-new territory for both Maxis and the gaming community. It has the makings to be either something truly new and exciting in online gaming or a colossal bellyflop. Is Maxis pushing their luck with the seemingly indestructible Sims license? Will gamers line up for an online game in which killing dragons and aliens is not the main goal?

And what kind of world will we create as Sims? Will it be a mirror of the real world? Or something funnier, scarier, and, as impossible as it seems, more bizarre?

I don't know. Will Wright doesn't know. No one knows. The Sims are real now. They can't be controlled. The possibilities are endless.
Your father’s reign has come to a dramatic end and your brother’s deception has put your honor at stake. Seek the ultimate revenge and search for the truth in **Prince of Qin**, an Action RPG that blends fighting and strategic elements for an incredible voyage through ancient China and the historical Qin Dynasty.

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**Each step you take affects the game’s ending. So make every move count!**

**Plot against 499 of your closest friends on a dedicated server – for free!**

**Create custom-made weaponry by combining a variety of raw materials!**

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**“Diablo with a history lesson”**

- GameSpot
Missions +490% Violence +430.5%

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Make a Killing.

Welcome to the business of destruction. Violence is on the rise. Now you can hire and command your own team of up to 8 mechs to crush your enemies and gain notoriety. With over 50 different missions and 10 new mechs to choose from, you’ll rake in the cash to buy serious upgrades, meager weapons and widespread panic. Who says you can’t mix business with pleasure?
EQ TAKES TO THE STREETS!

Dragons, Warriors and Elves invade cities across the Country.

Experience the magic of the extraordinary game. Meet and greet other players in your town as well as SOE's own EQ experts who can provide insight to the game. Get a free copy of the game and register to win other great prizes.

The 2002 EQ Invasion will cover more than 10,000 miles of the U.S. this summer.

The tour kicks-off in San Diego, CA on June 21st and ends on/around September 14th in Boston, MA.

The centerpiece of the 2002 EQ Invasion Tour is a modified v-nose cargo trailer. The EQ trailer is equipped with 13 Sony VAIO computers with Intel® Pentium® 4 processor, 13 Altec Lansing sound systems, and 1 world of Norrath.

Visit www.eqinvasion.com for event schedules, stories from the road and more.
Operation Flashpoint: Resistance

Vive la Résistance! By Raphael Liberatore

The CO2: Battlefields mission is a high-octane single-player battle—your objective is to take the hill from the enemy and then hold it against their counterattack.

Operation Flashpoint: Resistance

Vive la Résistance! By Raphael Liberatore

Riding fast on the heels of last year's tactical shooter megahit, Bohemia Interactive has created an expansion pack worthy of its predecessor. In fact, Resistance is so complete that Codemasters could have easily sold it as a stand-alone sequel. A multitude of added features—including a brand-new, 100-square-kilometer island; a 20-mission campaign; five stand-alone missions; new weapons and vehicles; an enhanced graphics engine, and a handful of multiplayer maps and game types—makes Resistance the new benchmark in expansion packs. It's that good.

**Guerrilla Warfare**

Resistance's single-player game is played as either a finely scripted campaign game that takes place during the Cold War or five independent missions pumping with adrenaline-infused combat. The campaign builds on the successful principles of the original and adds dynamic activities such as scavenging for weapons and equipment and recruiting new soldiers, which help determine how well each mission is performed. The script is quite good, with a few pseudodynamic sequences and improved dialogue and voiceovers sprinkled throughout the missions. The events here occur a few years prior to those in Operation Flashpoint: Cold War Crisis. The campaign focuses on the life of Victor Treoka, a retired Russian Special Forces soldier whose home island of the Independent Republic of Novgora is invaded by the Soviets. You play Victor in either first or third person as he leads his resistance fighters through 20 well-crafted missions, from blowing bridges and aircraft to protecting supplies and stealing tanks.

Missions are challenging and offer a variety of objectives, adding multiple layers to an already difficult combat environment. The real challenge lies in sniping enough gear to arm yourself against the Soviet onslaughts—your troops lack weapons, equipment, and mechanized armor. Scavenging for supplies sets the tempo of each mission, in which precious troop resources are spent carrying out mission objectives and picking up gear from dead Soviet soldiers. The added ability to grab and drop weapons, ammo, and equipment makes arming the resistance possible.

Obtaining the right gear really enhances your chance to build an effective guerrilla force powerful enough to repel the Russians. Although they are sometimes tedious to watch, cut-scenes are dramatic and actually help propel the story. By the end of the game, you'll feel as though
Resistance is so complete that Codemasters could have easily sold it as a stand-alone sequel.

you've played through an epic movie, because large portions of the story are conveyed through compelling scenes. The climactic final battle, for example, when Troska must overcome overwhelming odds in order to save his island ends with a dramatic do-or-die mission. It is stuff of memorable gaming moments.

Resistance's five independent single-player missions are designed for the serious Operation Flashpoint fan. To call them challenging is an understatement, as each mission presents a difficult objective that requires you to be on your toes throughout the entire operation. Slacking will get you killed fast. More important, each single-player mission offers a wide range of mission types, such as escorting a convoy of supplies, zipping around the map in a Hummer and avoiding the enemy, flying cargo to the resistance, or attacking an enemy base with an Apache helicopter.

Low-Intensity Conflict
One of Operation Flashpoint's shortcomings was its lean graphics engine. Resistance fattens it up rather nicely. Terrain features and character models now look smoother at high resolutions, with more trees, foliage, and clouds for depth. But, unless you possess a super-fast processor and graphics card, the game will plod. I experienced occasional frame drops while playing the game on a high-end 2.4GHz machine with a GeForce4 Ti 4600 video card. Audio also suffers from a number of bugs; EAX and multichannel support rarely work. Disabling hardware acceleration did help, but not enough to make me appreciate Bohemia Interactive's ambitious attempt at creating surround-sound environments. But neither shortcoming is enough to stifle gameplay.

Resistance also improves on Operation Flashpoint's multiplayer. The interface has been revamped with improved menu features, an in-game browser, GameSpy server support, and an easier way to set up player roles. Not only does Resistance run more stably than the original game, thanks to reworked network coding, but joining a game is easy. The inclusion of a handful of new missions from the campaign game along with the original maps turns Resistance into a big-league multiplayer experience.

Without a doubt, Operation Flashpoint: Resistance should take its rightful place in the halls of expansion fame. Diehard fans will enjoy it as much as a full-fledged sequel, but they can do so at an expansion price point. Run, don't walk, to your nearest game retailer and join Nogava's movement.

VERDICT
With features and content worthy of a brand-new game, Resistance is the new benchmark expansion pack.
F1 2002
Speed thrills… By Rob Smolka

Do you have the urge to get in the cockpit of a four-wheeled missile, to negotiate hairpin turns at absurd speeds while battling 21 bloodthirsty opponents who would be more than happy to see you end up a crumpled wreck in their rearview mirror? Yeah, me neither, but I must admit that simulating that experience from the comfort of my office chair is a whole lot of fun, and EA Sports’ F1 2002 is about the best representation yet of this popular racing style.

Despite this being the fourth game in the F1 series in two years, the quality has improved by leaps and bounds in this short time frame. Each successive release has improved in nearly every area, and the 2002 edition is no exception. From its uncannily accurate physics model to its drop-dead gorgeous graphics (assuming you have the system horsepower to crank up the settings), it sets a new standard for F1 racers—one that the next installment in Geoff Crummond’s Grand Prix series will be hard-pressed to match.

Like Papyrus’s award-winning racing games, F1 2002 manages to be all things to all gamers. Experts have an amazing array of options for squeezing every last bit of torque out of their engines. Utter novices can turn on all of the many driving aids, adjust the intensity and smarts of the AI drivers, and have fun right from the get-go, while learning the skills needed to play the game at its intended realistic level.

Unlike the figures in way too many racing games, F1 2002’s drivers tend to act like and, more important, have the frailties of real human beings. Unlucky engine failures and tire blowouts put contestants out of races at inopportune times, and close-quarter jostling feels approximately competitive. Drivers are also programmed to act like their real-world counterparts, yet one more great feature in a game that includes all the real-life teams, circuits, vehicles, and league rules.

The perfect game is as hard to achieve as the perfect lap. Unfortunately, and F1 2002 does show some signs of tire wear. The loading times between screens are interminable, even on extremely high-end systems. During the waits, you’ll hear a repeat of the dialogue that plays during the loading screen. The weather is dynamic, often changing as the race goes on, but the graphical effects of the wet stuff don’t live up to the rest of the visuals, and the frame rate takes a major hit in the process. Finally, although the game is completely playable with a keyboard or gamepad, you’ll need a force feedback-enabled wheel (or, less desirable, an analog joystick) to get the most out of the physical aspect of the game.

None of these complaints manage to dim the light of F1 2002’s bulb very much, though, and the flaws only stand out because of the rest of the game’s elegance. Whether solo or with friends and foes over the Internet, F1 2002 is a game that racing fans will definitely want to take a few laps around the track with.

VERDICT ⭐⭐⭐⭐
F1 2002 delivers authentic, yet accessible, racing enjoyment for all.
Massively Merciless.

Shadowbane
Persistent Challenge, Persistent World.

ubi.com  shadowbane.com
Le Mans 24 Hours

Turn, damn you, turn!
By Rob Smolka

There are very few things in this world I would want to do for 24 straight hours. And as much as I love auto racing, being forced to participate in or even watch an event that lasts an entire day sounds like a torture devised by an evil mind rather than an activity that some folk engage in. Nevertheless, the 24 hours at the Le Mans track is one of racing's most well-known and popular events, joining the Daytona 500 and Indianapolis 500 as an icon of the sport.

This is Infogrames' attempt to simulate it on the PC. More accurately, this is a port of the PS2 version, which was a lot of fun to play. But at some point in the translation, somebody took a syringe and extracted the most important ingredient needed to make an enjoyable racing game: the ability to properly control your car. They also forgot to add a cockpit view, a common exclusion on the console side but a sin for a PC racer, especially one with such ludicrous system requirements. But give Le Mans 24 Hours the power that it needs, and you will be treated to a pretty sweet-looking game.

Of course, you don't really have to compete for a full, real-time day to win the eponymous race. Though the option is there if you're crazy enough to want it. Because the goal is to complete as many laps as possible during the time frame, things work out just as nicely when you participate in shorter races with condensed time; you're given choices ranging from 10 minutes to 10 hours. There are six tracks to race on in addition to Le Mans (the box claims 12, but five of them are just shortened versions of the main tracks), and more than 70 cars to choose from, but all the options and features in the world aren't going to save a game that's essentially very little fun to play.

The most obvious sign of trouble in a racing game is when it's an improvement to play with a digital gamepad rather than an analog wheel or joystick. Guess which controller is best for Le Mans? You'll quickly develop Schwarzenegger-like biceps if you try to play with a wheel, regardless of the difficulty level you choose or the adjustments you make: each turn requires you to crank it all the way to the left or right, and then, maybe, you can pivot the car enough to make it through without having to jam on the brakes and nearly come to a stop.

There's really no point in even considering buying this game, what with the huge number of superior products on the market. It has a few attractive elements—the graphics (though some low-res textures left over from its console origins rear their ugly head at times), an animated pit crew, and the strategy that comes with a superlong race—but the passing and the dearth of action. An arcade and sim hybrid, the game has a lot of appeal and no damage model, so the other cars can be completely ignored and have no bearing on your actions.

Overall, Le Mans is boring, the deal of sins for a racing game, especially one whose major selling point is based on staying interested for an entire rotation of the earth.

VERDICT ★★★☆☆

Despite some pretty graphics, mushy controls will manage to turn off both the arcade and sim crowds.
The war is far from over!

"Solid premise, solid presentation...the hopes for Sudden Strike 2 are certainly high" IGN PC

"With its richly detailed and historically accurate units, the game will appeal to all fans of WWII games" GameSpy

The world is an enormous battlefield, and you're on the front line, in the center of realistic WWII strategic battle action! Command German, Russian, British, American or Japanese troops and fight on water, land and in the air to destroy your enemies and win the war!

Features:

- Five powerful campaigns with more than 40 breathtaking missions
- More than 50 new units, with up to 1,000 units per scenario
- Controllable crews can capture and use every motorized vehicle, including: tanks, aircraft and trains
- Fast-paced multiplayer mode with up to eight players

For further information please see our website: www.SuddenStrike2.com
Magic: The Gathering Online

Tap my elf, please By Jason Kapalka

I know, you just got Warcraft III and Neverwinter Nights, but you gotta see this. Oh yeah. Check out those sweet, circa-1995 graphics-classic stuff, never goes outta style. And, oh yeah, we even got sounds. Listen to that thing beep. Sweet.

Not sold yet? How about that interface? You can totally resize it. Awesome, huh? You might have to spend six or eight hours figuring it out, but it's worth it. OK, here's some combat. Check this out: see that dragon? Yeah, the little white box with the blurry picture. OK, it's gonna attack now...WHOAA! Did you see that? It totally rotated 90 degrees. And beeped. That's hell, hot, dude.

And I haven't even gotten to the best part. You have to buy all of your units and spells. Yeah, you can't really pick the ones you want, but if you buy enough at random you're sure to get some good ones. Oh yeah. You can totally get a decent starting collection going for, oh, $200, maybe $300.

Awesome, huh?

You might think I'm exaggerating for comic effect here. But you'd be wrong. The long-awaited online version of Magic: The Gathering is in many ways a colossal affront to gaming. Never mind the antiquated, ugly graphics or the sanity-twisting interface: the pricing scheme will send many prospective players bounding for the hills, shrieking with laughter. If you thought the geeks in the back of the comic book store dripping nacho cheese on their collectible cards were pathetic, think how cool you're going to feel spending a lot of real money on imaginary cards.

There's an almost insulting paucity of imagination on display throughout the entire product. Unlike the recent Etherlords, which used Magic-style mechanics but represented creatures and spells with gorgeous 3D effects, the official version couldn't be troubled to include any sort of audiovisual stimulation beyond a few generic sound effects. Watching "cards" flip over on their sides is about as exciting as it gets.

Sure, players get to select one of about, oh, three avatars, but because the play areas are displayed as a bunch of tables with guys playing cards, it's

The brilliant game design endures, like a sweet-smelling rose atop a giant mountain of dung.
hard to figure why they didn’t just go for total verisimilitude, with the nacho cheese, comic book racks, and more realistic avatars like “Sweaty Guy in Hoodie” and “Acne-Scarred Teen.”

But the weird thing is, none of this matters, not if you’re one of the people this game is targeted at. If you’re not already familiar with Magic, forget it—despite a few half-hearted tutorials, you’ll probably find it much, much harder to learn the game online than in real life (see sidebar for a newbie’s perspective). But if you’re already a regular player, or, like me, a former player who abandoned the game for lack of opponents (or lack of desire to frequent the stale-smelling back rooms of comic stores), then you’re probably going to be hooked despite everything.

For us, the electronic cards may be worth more than the real ones; the next time I’m likely to use my dusty collection of physical cards is approximately never. And somehow, the gauge of life, indefensible prices, and make those cards seem all the more valuable and prized when you get a nifty rare. Just as in “Real Life.”

Although graphics and sound were given short shrift, the game does include just about every imaginable tourney, league, and variant of Magic that it’s possible to play, from the hardcore Constructed tourneys for “suitcase” players with thousands of cards, to assorted sealed-deck events that level the playing field, to month-long league games for the more casual player, to esoteric booster drafts and Rochester drafts, and on and on and on. Of course, to compete in all these, you’re going to have to spend real cash on card packs and event tickets—every single time you participate.

And the big thing: the brilliant game design, conceived by Richard Garfield and polished to a high sheen over the years, endures, like a sweet-smelling rose atop a giant mountain of dung. Not everyone will want to climb that mountain, but those who make it to the top will be amply rewarded—assuming they haven’t lost their sense of smell.

VERDICT

Astonishingly good and frighteningly bad at the same time.

A NEWBIE'S PERSPECTIVE

Being a complete and utter newbie in the world of collectible card games like Magic, I was exactly the sort of casual gamer Wizard of the Coast was hoping to rope in with their low-pack price. My experience? I floundered beyond belief when I tried to figure out how to play this game. The tutorial, while it hints at the strategy involved, doesn’t expose you to anything useful except the procedure for laying down the cards.

When I was in real game, the only way for me to figure out how to use my cards was to hope that someone else beat the crap out of me using those same cards. Figuring out which cards to buy was an even worse nightmare. The online storefront offered no direction at all toward what might be helpful for a new player, no instructions, no nothing. Even more maddening? One of the virtual booster packs that I wanted to buy was “out of stock.” How??? It doesn’t even exist!

In a recent EOTW interview with Wizards’ senior marketing manager Kyle Murray, he claimed the developers were creating a system that would make it easy for new players to become a part of the community. Well, Kyle should make a visit to the practice room and watch all the people struggling through this nightmarish system. Were it not for free credits toward cards and the helpfulness of my coworkers, I would never have ventured past the box purchase.

—Dana Jongewaard
With the same graphics engine as MechWarrior 4, the pack looks pretty spiffy, if a bit dated.

MechWarrior 4: Inner Sphere Mech Pack

Paying for free content By Thierry Nguyen

Who wouldn't want more gigantic robots to smash the crap out of other ones? Or a new jamming device that fools your enemy into thinking, "Hmm, he's not out to kill me, he's here for the scenery," until you show him what for? Well, expect to fork over some cash for these new trinkets.

The Inner Sphere Mech Pack gives you old-school mechs like the Zeus, the Dragon, the Highlander, and the Hunchback, along with an IFF Jammer and two multiplayer maps: all stuff meant for either multiplayer matches or Instant Action mode. Because the pack lacks a single-player campaign, it seems a bit sparse. I'm used to having a solid single-player campaign as a foundation for multiplayer hijinks, and it felt plain weird that I had to go online and beat up some other dorks just to play with the new stuff. Heck, Instant Action lets you use only the new mechs and the IFF Jammer—the new maps aren't even available in Instant Action.

What it boils down to is that you are paying for a new weapon and four new mechs. Yes, you get two new multiplayer maps in the box, but you can also download these maps for free. So whether you should buy the pack depends on how you feel about paying 13 bucks for five new items that work only in multiplayer. If you're a diehard multiplayer Mech fan who's lucky enough for money to not be a factor, then go right ahead. But I think that if a bunch of Eastern Europeans can manage to independently release new vehicles for free (see Operation Flashpoint and IL2 Sturmovik), it's weird for Microsoft to make us pay $2.60 for each item in this pack.

At least Counter-Strike and Operation Flashpoint give owners of the original game a choice between downloading a humongous patch for free or paying a nominal fee for the convenience of having a CD. But Microsoft just wants players to fork over money, rather than give them the option of using their DSL connections or cable modems to download the 60MB that this pack comprises. Let the people who hate downloading stuff pay the money, and let the patient ones grab it online. At least the pack isn't in the $30 price bracket.

This isn't a bad little multiplayer addition, but I can't help feeling stung by Microsoft making gamers pay for a patch and some new vehicles, the sorts of things companies that support their products generally provide for free.

VERDICT

It's fun stuff for multiplayer Mech nuts, but shouldn't this have been free or something?

Whether you should buy it depends on how you feel about paying 13 bucks for five items that work only in multiplayer.
... high on my list of games I can't wait to play."

- GameSpy

What if World War I still raged on?

All you have ever known is a crazed humanity where days are filled with the madness of trench warfare, where soldiers rush out of their muddy holes, over barbed wire and straight into a barrage of enemy machine gun-fire.

Now you have been assigned to a mission that could end the eternal war and bring peace to the world.

www.iron-storm.com

The Face Of War Changes
October 2002
Rock Manager
Everybody Wang Chung tonight
By Dana Jongewaard

With TV shows like American Idol and Making the Band
earning high ratings,
DreamCatcher has jumped on that bandwagon with Rock Manager,
answering the prayers of all those gamers who’ve
clamored for the opportunity to manage
losers to a career of stardom. Through the
course of eight missions, you deal with
talentless prima donnas, washed-up
rehab-loving metal bands, and sensitive
reclusive alternatypists. Your job is to keep
band members happy and healthy while
simultaneously ushering them through
the process of recording a single, getting
a distributor, promoting the record, and
setting up concerts and tours.

The missions provide a decent variety of
scenarios, but gameplay is very
repetitive. Promoting your single is a sad
joke—recording studios provide surveys
indicating the target audience, but the
promotion tactics through the local
media outlets offer no way to reach the
potential buyers directly. You can mix the
songs performed by the band in the
studio, but how you mix the song does
little to affect the chances of the single
getting picked up or not—I mixed all of my
bands’ songs exactly the same way and
was able to successfully complete each
of the missions. The concert halls you
play are determined by the type of music
your band performs—it has nothing to do
with talent.
One of the worst downsides of the game
is the inability to have more than one
constant profanity that bumps the game
rating to M eliminates that audience.
With a total of four hours of gameplay
(eight if you count the bonus technical
fulling made me repeat the first half),
you don’t get much for your money. But if
you have $20 burning a hole in your
pocket and want to spend four hours of
your life listening to annoying cartoon
characters whine about their need for a
vacation, then go for it.

VERDICT
Better than playing a Wilson Phillips
box set, but not much.

Deal with talentless prima donnas, washed-up rehab-loving
metal bands, and sensitive reclusive alternatypists.

Maximum Capacity: Hotel Giant
For the Basil Fawcitty in you
By Rick Ernst

The 1999 release of
Rollercoaster Tycoon gave
the ancient business-sim
game a big boost. Since then, games
looking to milk that same cash cow have
let you run everything from pizza chains
to zoos. Maximum Capacity: Hotel Giant
fares better than many recent tycoon
games, no doubt due to the experienced
hand of designer Trevor Chan.
Hotel Giant gives you control over a
range of accommodation, from suburban
inns to huge resorts. You set the layout,
staff, policies—all the nuts and bolts you
would expect. You also have access to an
impressive array of competitor informa-
tion, market research, and other busi-
ness tools. The fully 3D view makes
layout a breeze, and you can zoom in
and follow any of your patrons or staff,
or even walk around your hotel from
your customers’ point of view.

Graphically, the game breaks from the
traditional “eye in the sky” viewpoint of
most business games and instead takes
a cue from another recent runaway hit,
The Sims. Hotel Giant is similar in look
and feel to the voyeur’s dollhouse but
focuses on business goals rather than
basic housekeeping and bathroom
duties. All told, it’s a solid and enjoyable
game that should appeal to both busi-
ness tycoon fans who want to focus
more on their customers and fans of
The Sims who want to play a more goal-
oriented game.

VERDICT
The Sims meets a solid, if not rivet-
ing, business simulation.
Master desert tactics, before they master YOU!

www.gatheringofdevelopers.com
Syberia
Adventure gaming comes in from the cold By Charles Ardai

It's been a long time since I played an adventure game that really made me happy—so long, in fact, that a few issues ago I declared the whole field of adventure games dead. Well, I was wrong. There is still one man out there who knows how to make a great adventure game and somehow keeps managing to talk game companies into letting him do it. His name is Benoit Sokal, and his new game, Syberia, is easily the best traditional adventure game in years.

From the very first scene, in which an automaton leads a funeral procession for its maker through the rain-swept streets of a town in the French Alps, Syberia draws you in and doesn't let you go. The graphics are the finest I've ever seen—Myst looks like a crayon drawing compared to this. The classical score and ambient sound effects make the game world feel full and alive rather than empty and sterile. The puzzles are conventional slots of gears and levers to manipulate, but they are incorporated into the story with care and so avoid coming across as abstract brain teasers. And the story they're incorporated into is intriguing and deftly told. You're an attorney representing the Universal Toy Company in its attempt to buy the famous Vorvalberg automation factory from the last surviving member of the family, Anna Vorvalberg—only it's Anna's funeral procession that you come across in the opening scene, and then you learn that her long-dead brother, Hans, may actually be alive...

As you follow Hans's trail from town to town, you uncover secrets about his and Anna's past, often told in cut-scenes that are genuinely breathtaking. The game is not without its flaws—run-intrusive dialogues that go on too long, the need to cover the same ground repeatedly as you shuttle back and forth between locations you've already visited—but each time you feel a twinge of frustration or impatience, the designers come through with a stunning bit of storytelling or a graphical grace note, and the smile creeps right back onto your face.

Like Sokal's previous game, the under-appreciated Amerzone, Syberia is eccentric and charming—and likely to be underappreciated. The pace is leisurely, the story thoughtful. Nothing blows up in the opening scene; no zombie dogs erupt from the shadows to eat your face. In some ways, despite its cutting-edge graphics, Syberia is a throwback to an earlier era, when there was room for games that made you think as well as ones that honed your reflexes. Alas, as the automaton makers in the game lament, "Computers, video games, and electronic robots now predominate in our society, rendering traditional clockwork mechanisms obsolete. The age of the wind-up toy is over. Such technology cannot compete in the modern economic climate and has fallen by the wayside." Old-fashioned adventure games are the wind-up toys of the computer gaming world: elegant, mesmerizing, virtuoso creations that people have lost the habit of enjoying. It would be a shame if Syberia fell by the wayside, but it might. Encourage you to find a copy before it's gone.

VERDICT

Easily the best new adventure game in years, though it loses some steam after its outstanding first act.
FOR GOD...
& COUNTRY.

Celtic Kings
Rage of War

Fight for the Gods and for your beloved homeland in Celtic Kings: Rage of War, which brings you the Roman conquests in two exciting game modes! In adventure mode, play as a warrior who has given his soul to the Goddess of War and is caught in the struggle between good and evil as he swears revenge on the evil forces who killed his wife. Or battle for your country in strategic mode as the leader of the Romans or the Gauls, where tactical and strategic moves are the key to victory.

strategyfirst.com • haemimont.com/celtickings

“Combines both RTS and RPG in one enjoyable gaming experience.”
- Gamezone -
Shadow of Destiny
Interactive, but just barely By Rob Smolka

The original PlayStation 2 version of Shadow of Destiny received fairly high scores from many console game reviewers when it was released last year, which makes me wonder...were they all completely out of their minds? Maybe I'm way off base here, but I expect my games to contain actual gameplay and not be a series of long, poorly acted cut-scenes, lightly salted with puzzles that require the intelligence of a gnat to solve.

Shadow of Destiny is saved only by its intriguing storyline. The game starts with you witnessing your death, and with the help of a mysterious benefactor who gives you a time-traveling device, you must go back to prevent your own murder. Each mission requires little more than running around and finding the right character or object you need to thwart that particular death, and the solutions are so obvious that even a nongamer should have no trouble completing the game in a matter of hours. The vast majority of that time will be consumed by the drawn-out cinematics, fighting the terrible control scheme, or dealing with the dopy console save system. There are multiple endings and additional scenes for those who opt to play through again, but once was more than enough for me.

With a maximum resolution of 800x600, the look of the game is acceptable but nowhere near what PC gamers have come to expect these days. The characters are straight out of an anime movie, with the requisite large eyes and flowing hair, and their animation is rather stiff. The textures of the buildings could have benefited from a higher resolution, but for the most part, the graphics in the interactive portion are sufficient. The cut-scenes are beautifully rendered.

As for the audio, it misses more than it hits. The voice acting ranges from mediocre to downright annoying, and the background music is forgettable at best. The dialogue is long-winded and often painfully hilarious. You can turn off the voices and stick with reading the captions that automatically appear on the bottom of the screen, but there's no way to speed past the dialogue, unfortunately.

If you're looking for a slightly interactive movie with a decent story, you may like Shadow of Destiny. But I think those easily impressed console gamers need to be exposed to some LucasArts classics like Monkey Island or Grim Fandango to understand what a good adventure game really is.

VERDICT

Our hero, Elke (the chap with the long hair), deals with the incessant prattling of the locals.

Maybe I'm off base here, but I expect games to contain actual gameplay.

GAME PATCHES

Revisionist History

By Thomas L. McDonald

This month's Revisionist History goes into double overtime to bring you not one, but two patches.

Dungeon Siege II is behind this unexpected larceny. Although Gas Powered Games hasn't managed to quiet either the siege editor or the first patch past the beta stage, the minor progress they've made is worth noting. The siege editor beta (v1.09B.306) has about all the functionality we can expect, and it even works most of the time. It's, well, an editor: 3,600 nodes, 1,200 objects, 200

monsters, 150 NPCs, lighting, scripting, and all those other feature list bullet points. As for the pre-patch (v1.09B.306), it has a modest slate of improvements.

Slowdown and other performance problems were among the few serious complaints, and Gas Powered is diligently working on smoothing out these nasty bits. This includes sound drops as well as some annoying object problems, such as things that float or are inaccessible. A few other features, such as repaired journal updates, expanded ZoneMatch functions, and improved boss encounters, round out the bill. Maddox, on the other hand, has taken a

more vigorous approach in their latest, sweeping patch for IL-2 Sturmovik (v1.x). Included is a generous selection of new flyable aircraft for all sides.

Fixes and tweaks fall into three categories: realism enhancements, fixes to co-op mode and server support, and general stability and bug fixes. A variety of improvements were made to the realism. Padlocking was completely reworked and now offers better target selection and increased maximum locking distance. Maddox has also expanded the flexibility for multiplayer sessions by accommodating console commands, as well as allowing timeouts and player autokicking.

114 Computer Gaming World
Jazz & Faust

A long, stiff nail in the coffin of the adventure game by Thomas L. McDonald

W

hen old-school gamers gather round the cracker barrel out front of the general store, one of them inevitably says something like, "Adventure games..." and trails off while heads nod sagely and say, "Ayup." That's because the old-timers know that adventure games are deader than 5.25 floppies.

If you had any reason to doubt this, Jazz & Faust is a poke from a sharp stick to remind you. Even when adventure games were at their peak, Jazz & Faust would have been considered a stiff. A bland, badly written import from Russia with excruciating voice acting, it attempts to hang its hat on some pretty backgrounds and the slightly novel feature of being able to play the game from the perspectives of two characters. Jazz is a roguish kind of fellow, and Faust is a sea captain and a bit of a dandy. The game uses the same backgrounds to create a different adventure—different puzzles and dialogue—for each character.

The locations themselves are nice to look at, and even have night and daylight versions, but there's precious little going on within the frame. When either character walks into a location, the pixel hunt begins as you diligently run your mouse from side to side and top to bottom looking for hot spots. The vexing thing, however, is that even hot spots are not always accessible depending upon where you are in the story. Hot objects may be all around you, but unless you've passed a certain point in the story, you can't pick them up or use them.

The result is constant backtracking to check out every "locked" object after you perform a task, on the off chance that a designer found it logical to let you pick up, say, a ladder after giving a drunk a bottle. Most of the puzzles involve little more than finding object A and giving it to person B in order to get object C and give it to person D. As if that weren't enough of a gaming deterrent, developer Saturn Plus hobbled Jazz & Faust with repetitive sound effects, voice actors straight out of the methadone clinic, and absolutely torturous dialogue.

Traditional adventure games went the way of the woolly mammoth because their function—providing gamers with a world to explore—is done better by 3D games. If you loved adventure games and think even slim pickins' are better than none, Jazz & Faust will disabuse you of that notion right quick. Better to let the games live on in your memory, where terrors poles are always moist with mayonnaise and Leisure Suit Larry never scores.

VERDICT

Simultaneously boring and frustrating, with a design that buries the needle on the irritation-o-meter.

Fulda Gap '85

Return to the Cold War with the latest monster boardgame from HPS by John Fletcher

B

ack in the Reagan '80s, when Red Dawn was considered plausible moviemaking, wargamers delighted in endlessly slugging out imagined Russian invasions of Western Europe. Fulda Gap '85 returns to those glory days, a testament to paranoid fantasies past in a world of paranoid reality present.

As usual, HPS delivers a polished, engaging boardgame that will devour countless wargaming hours. My favorite style of play is in one of the marathon campaign games, as NATO with the fog-of-war option on. The tension is continual as seemingly endless numbers of Connnie tanks relentlessly break against beleaguered Gis. The AI shrewdly pulls tired formations out of the line and replaces them with fresh divisions. I rely on pocket defenses with German line divisions while the U.S. V Corps' studyd armored cavalry and attack helicopter formations race from crisis to crisis. Eventually NATO reinforcements enable counterattacks against increasingly battered Warsaw Pact units, but it's a nail-biting time the entire way through.

My only complaint is with the subject. Cold War what-ifs are simply dated in this era of very hot conflicts. The Persian Gulf, Iraq, or Pakistan-India would be more pertinent topics. Still, FG '85 is great fun and well worth the money—and that's the bottom line, right?

VERDICT

A great what-if simulation of a rather dated topic.
Revised Horizon's Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM, multiplayer None

VERDICT  
Still a fun game, but the competition has left Baseball Mogul in the dust.

Hooligans: Storm Over Europe
Burger off, ya bloody ponce! By Tom Price

It's the unparalleled success of Grand Theft Auto III on PS2 and, thankfully, the PC, it was inevitable that game designers would consider the restrictions of good taste null and void and attempt to duplicate that game's success. Of course, they missed the point that GTA III was great because of its open-ended game design and not because of the anything-goes theme of murder and mayhem. Hooligans is not built upon a solid foundation of game design, although it does get a point for finding some humor in its ultraviolent subject matter.

Of course that's the viewpoint of an American who's never been in a soccer riot or had my town torn up by one, as many in Europe have. Some members of the gaming press over there are so offended by this game they've refused to cover it in any way whatsoever.

Still, the concept's not a bad one: an RTS in which you control a raucous crowd of bikers, racers, and butches (I have no idea) with one main resource: beer. In fact, the tagline for the game is "The only thing to fear is running out of beer." You guide your gang in robbing and looting to raise more money, to buy more beer, to recruit more hooligans. Seems simple, but the control is janky. Your guys wander around a lot, and brawls are uninteresting. And right there is the crucial mistake. If you're going to have a game about riots, they better be damn fun to watch.

VERDICT  
Offensively boring or boringly offensive. You pick.

Baseball Mogul 2003
Just a bit outside By Rob Smolka

The category of text-based baseball sims that feature a career mode has, as opposed to season replay games like Diamond Mind Baseball or Strat-o-Matic, has heated up considerably these last few years. Where the Baseball Mogul series once reigned solely and supremely, it now faces the stiff competition of Out of the Park Baseball and PureSim Baseball. Unfortunately for the Mogul men, their product has stagnated, while the new bloods have beaten them at their own game.

That's not to say that Mogul 2003 is a bad product. It has a believable statistical engine chugging beneath the surface, and it's by far the most multimedia rich of all the mentioned games. It also has the benefit of the Major League Baseball Players Association license, which I don't find terribly compelling in a game that focuses on a fictional future, but that feature may be a selling point for some potential purchasers. Most important, Mogul can be quite addictive and loads of fun for the statistically enamored baseball fan who yearns to be a silicon Steinbrenner.

The problem Mogul 2003 faces is that it's a base model in a field filled with luxury rides—it'll get you where you need to go, but you'll need to hand-crank the windows, manually adjust the seat, and forgo the CD player for the wonder that is AM radio. There's little direction to help you along as you try to set up and run a league, and the interface is poorly designed at nearly every level. New features like the fantasy draft are great, but they're difficult to enjoy thanks to the tedious way the game forces you to search for players. The lack of drag-and-drop functionality is still a (excuse the pun) drag, and not being able to enlarge the playing window beyond about half the size of your screen is infuriating. The game was also infested with bugs upon its release, although most of the problems have been fixed with several patches.

Mogul 2003 still has the huge advantage of being the most visible product in its genre; the franchise has been around long enough now that people recognize it, and the competition is mainly sold online (OOTP is marketed as Season Ticket Baseball and sold in stores, but I would guess that this just confuses people). However, anyone interested in this type of game would be advised to take a long look at the friendlier, more polished alternatives.

VERDICT  
Still a fun game, but the competition has left Baseball Mogul in the dust.
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DOWNLOAD PHOTOS 
AND TRANSFER FUNDS 
FASTER THAN EVER. 
ONLY PROBLEM, 
THEY'RE NOT HERS.

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Apple
Apple's newest G4 PowerPC computer, like every other Macintosh before it, speaks of elegance, sophistication, and ergonomics. But is it buff enough for demanding gamers who want pounds of muscle? I put the G4 to the test and found that it is indeed plenty powerful.

The new G4 sports not one, but two, Motorola 1GHz PowerPC 7455 processors with Altivec (codename: Apollo). The processors come equipped with 128-bit internal memory paths and L2 and L3 caches. Interestingly, the G4's L3 cache uses 2MB of DDR SDRAM at 500MHz, with throughput clocked at 4GB per second.
Third-party devices such as ThrustMaster’s Pro Digital 2 Racing Wheel and a Saitek flight stick make the G4 a worthy gaming rig.

BUT WHAT CAN YOU PLAY?

Historically, the problem with gaming on the Mac has been the dearth of available titles. And few things frustrate dedicated gamers more than knowing that there’s a great game out there that they just can’t play. While there still are fewer Mac-compatible games out there, the gap between PC and Mac choices seems to be shrinking.

The best place to get Mac gaming information is, of course, Apple’s Games channel (www.apple.com/games). Here you can find a comprehensive list of games, new and old, that are currently available: everything from classics like Quake to newly announced titles like Max Payne and Warcraft III. Apple’s Games channel is also a great place to find out about hardware announcements that relate to Mac gaming.

Another problem with Mac games is finding them, which is where Aspyr Media (www.aspyr.com) comes in. Based in Austin, Texas, Aspyr Media distributes a ton of games, including Tom Clancy’s Ghost Recon: Desert Siege and Medal of Honor: Allied Assault. You can also go there to preorder games.

To Castle Wolfenstein in 32-bit 1024x768 with everything turned on, the G4 averaged a steady 120 frames per second between the GeForce4 MX and Radeon 8500 cards. At 1600x1200x32, however, the rate dropped to 95 fps. These are decent scores for a rig branded as a mom-and-pop computer, and for a new Mac OS that still needs some tweaking.

The only problem remaining for Mac gamers is getting the games they want. Fortunately, more and more PC games are making it over to the Mac, with titles like WarCraft III, Freedom Force, Shadowbane, Jedi Knight II: Doom III, and Soldier of Fortune II having crossed the once-ominous chasm. This is a positive trend for Apple gamers, as ultimately raw speed and cool features don’t make for the ultimate gaming rig. Games do.

VERDICT

Has enough muscle for just about any task, but game content remains thin.
MADE WITH NO LIMITS IN MIND

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Apple PowerBook G4

Take note, PC makers: there's more to computing than raw power  By William O'Neal

The first thing you notice about Apple's PowerBook G4 is how cool the thing is: its sleek looks, lightweight design, and wide screen make you wonder why PC makers can't make machines this aesthetic. And when it's powered up, the PowerBook G4 continues to impress. It sports the types of bells and whistles seen only in top-of-the-line PC notebooks, and if not for the sub-par 32MB graphics card and dearth of Mac-compatible games, this baby would easily have earned five stars.

The PowerBook G4 we tested came with an 800MHz PowerPC processor that also boasts a 1MB level-2 cache. For PC guys like me, that 800MHz designation stands out like Longfellow Deeds's black foot. But this 800MHz processor is comparable to Mobile Pentium 4 processors that run at up to twice that speed.

It sports bells and whistles seen only in top PC notebooks.

The PowerBook G4 comes with good features: 512MB of PC133 SDRAM, a 40GB hard drive, 15.2-inch active matrix TFT display with a native resolution of 1280x854, a slot-loading DVD/CD-RW combo drive, PC card/PC Card slot, FireWire, two USB ports, 10/100/1000 base-T ethernet and 56-kbps modem, integrated 802.11b wireless, and DVI and S-video output ports.

I used to despise the Mac OS, but OS X has me changing my tune. It's backward-compatible with older Mac operating systems and is easy to learn how to use. But enough about that. You all want to know how good the PowerBook is for gaming. Here's where things get dicey. The G4's 32MB ATI Mobility Radeon leaves a lot to be desired. In Quake III: Arena, it achieved rates of 56 frames per second at 1024x768x16 and at 1024x768x32. A year ago these numbers would have been impressive, but with non-Apple laptops shipping with 64MB GeForce-440 Go chips that achieve Quake III: Arena frames rates of 150 fps, it's hard to look past this machine's graphical handicaps. The Radeon is perfectly capable for gaming, but you will see some choppiness and often be forced to lower the resolution for games.

On the games-supply front, things are looking up for the Mac. Not only did we test this laptop with Quake III: Arena, but we also played Medal of Honor Allied Assault, Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 2, Star Wars Galactic Battlegrounds, American McGee's Alice, and Return to Castle Wolfenstein. Mac-compatible games on the horizon include Ghost Recon and this game called Halo that I think a lot of people like.

If you're looking for the best portable for gaming, you won't find it in the PowerBook G4. But if you're a creative type who spends a lot of time in Quark and Photoshop and also wants to game, I think you'll be happy with it.

VERDICT
A stylish and powerful laptop that's held back by its sub-par graphics processor.
HP DVD Writer
dvd200e
External DVD writer supports FireWire and USB 2.0
By Ken Feinstein

This DVD writer seems to defy the law of the universe that no new technology can work properly in its first iteration. But the dvd200e introduces two brand-new technologies, USB 2.0 for fast data transfers and the DVD+R write-once DVD format, and they both actually work well. Will wonders never cease?

This external drive connects via FireWire (IEEE 1394) or USB 2.0. We tested both interfaces with excellent results. Both offered truly plug-and-play installation; we connected the drive and Windows XP Home Edition automatically recognized it. USB 2.0 runs at 480 Mbps, a little faster than FireWire's 400 Mbps. Compare that to USB's pitifully slow 12 Mbps and you can see USB 2.0's potential. The two interfaces delivered the same performance, writing 8GB of data in only seven minutes.

The drive can read CDs and DVDs and write CD-Rs, CD-RWs, DVD+Rs, DVD+RWs, and DVD+Rs. You can rewrite on 4.7GB DVD+RWs thousands of times, which makes them ideal for backups and archiving data. However, most DVD players can't play DVD-RWs, so they're of little use in creating your own DVD movies.

The write-once DVD+R format promises much better compatibility. HP bundles the excellent MyDVD authoring software; using it, I created in only a few minutes a DVD of MPEGs downloaded from the Net. This disc played without problem on a wide variety of DVD players. I don't expect this format to work with all players, but it seems to be broadly compatible.

As you'd expect, all of this leading-edge technology doesn't come cheap. The drive itself costs $599 and you'll need a PC with FireWire or USB 2.0 support. HP sells DVD+RWs for a hefty $10.99 but DVD+Rs are only $5.99.

Overall, though, this drive's power and flexibility make it well worth the price.

VERDICT
This DVD writer does it all and does it well.
Monsoon Planar Media 9 Speakers
Monsoon gives 2.1 speakers a new image By Raphael Liberatore

Monsoon's speakers have a reputation for innovative style and technology. A few months ago, I had an opportunity to review their two high-end dipole Planar Focus Technology transducer systems, which both scored well. Their latest 2.1 offering, the Planar Media 9, offers the same technology but at a lower price. But the question remains: can speakers rated at 76 watts total watts deliver the same performance and quality as their 5.1 and 4.1 siblings? The resounding answer is yes.

The Planar Media 9 comes with two dipole-radiating, ribbon transducer flat-panel satellites rated at 19 watts each. The subwoofer has two 19-watt, 6.5-inch, dual-voice coil drivers housed in a small cabinet. The Control Center possesses a mute button, master volume and bass dials, and a headphones jack.

After turning in the speakers with a Best of Trance CD, I set the volume at 90 decibels, using a sound level meter for testing. The speakers fared extremely well at this high volume, producing a strong soundstage presence that rivals more expensive 5.1 systems. Highs were clean, and I heard a lean midrange tonality in Pat Coil's Sheffield Drive track "Escape Clause," as well as in Eugene Ormandy's stellar performance of Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade. High-energy songs from Queen's Greatest Hits and with The Best of the Rippingtons conveyed good tonal balance. I was also impressed with the PM 9's crisp localization, displayed when playing an assortment of DVDs, from The Matrix and Star Wars: The Phantom Menace to Fantasia 2000 and Shrek. During The Matrix, for example, the satelites produced in crisp detail the sound of rounds dropping to the floor when Neo and Trinity penetrated the high-rise to rescue Morpheus. Of course, games are where these speakers really show off. In Medal of Honor and WarCraft III, the booms and rumbles emanating from the subwoofer were coherent, with little distortion.

Without a doubt, Monsoon's Planar Media 9 is the best 2.1 speaker system I have ever had the pleasure of listening to. If you're concerned about space and price, then look no further.

The PM 9 fared well at high volumes, rivaling expensive 5.1 systems.
Toshiba e310 PocketPC

This pocket rocket is sexy, but it still won't make you a hit with the ladies By Darren Gladstone

Power users and dorks will love how the e310 handles, while the fashionable will dig its slim looks.

It's getting so you really can fit the power of a PC into your pocket. The Toshiba e310's power might be on par with that of some old desktops, but it's more than sufficient for tuning out the jackass sitting next to you during your commute. Better still, this slick handheld lets you do it in style.

Power users, corporate types, and grade A dorks will love how this PocketPC handles, while the fashion-conscious will dig the slim looks and gunmetal casing. This sucker is slim—less than a half-inch thick—and it weighs only 4.5 ounces, which is impressive. The 206MHz Intel StrongARM CPU delivers the goods under the hood.

One of the rallying cries for Microsoft's PocketPC 2002 OS is that it handles multimedia. PocketPC's abilities are well displayed here: with the e310's built-in media player you can listen to MP3s or watch an episode of Curb Your Enthusiasm on the road. As the device is fronted by a sharp, colorful, 3.5-inch reflective LCD (320x240 pixels and 65,000 colors), it's good for games, too. For proof, try playing the RTS game Argentum, a port of SimCity 2000, or any number of other titles we've found for the OS—they look downright impressive.

Of course, there's usually a price for such power. But whereas most PocketPC devices suck down juice like 12-steppers gulp coffee at an AA meeting, the e310's rechargeable lithium-ion battery just keeps going. We actually lost track of the battery life after a couple hours.

The only downside is that the thing needs memory for all this entertainment, and although the e310 has a built-in Secure Digital card slot, it has only 32MB of RAM inside—and that needs to be divvied up between the CPU and your files. This PDA lists for $399 on its own, and the price goes up another $100 or so when you start shelling out for extra MMC or SD cards.

More powerful PocketPCs, like the e740, are starting to ship with the new X-Scale CPU. They promise better video and game performance, but, of course, the extra muscle costs about $200 more.

VERDICT

Four stars out of five.

If you're looking for a good all-around deal, you can't go wrong with the e310.
Tech Medics
You've got questions; we've got answers By William O’Neal

What's the Deal With GTA III?
Last month in my review of Grand Theft Auto III, I mentioned the bug that disables menus when you're running Windows XP in conjunction with an Nvidia-based graphics card. Since then I've been deluged with reader mail asking me about the fix. According to Take 2 Games' Website, "This problem is solved by the use of a newer version of d3d.dll than is shipped on CD with Windows XP." You can find the file by going to the Rockstar Games Website at www.rockstargames.com, navigating to the official GTA III (for PC) page and clicking on the Support button. From there, click the Technical Help button and scroll down to the Video section. You'll find a description of the problem as well as a link to the downloadable file that fixes the problem.

Move to the Mountains and Stop Bothering People
My buddy has a 500MHz Pentium III with 128MB of RAM with a 16MB ATI Rage I26 Pro graphics card. Any suggestions for free tweaks like overclocking utilities?

Ivan

No.

Big, Big Hard Drives
I have a question about the new large hard drives. How do you suggest configuring one of these beasts (100GB or greater)? Do most people section them into multiple partitions or use them in one large chunk? I know that partition size used to affect performance, and older versions of Windows could support only certain size partitions. But I don't know if those limitations are gone. So if you were getting a new XP system with a 120GB hard drive, how would you set it up?

Steve Motley

A lot of people still partition their hard drives. A common configuration would be a 10GB C: drive for the OS with a 110GB D: drive for applications. Partitioning your hard drive will improve performance, but today's machines are so fast that, in my opinion, the performance gains are negligible. I mean, how many frames per second do you really need in The Sims?

Say My Nizzle...
I plan to buy an AMD Athlon XP 2200+, and I'm not sure which motherboard to get. I'm seriously considering an ASUS A7V266+, but I want to get your opinion. I don't necessarily need onboard audio or video, because I plan on getting an Audigy X-Gamer and a GeForce4 Ti 4600. Also, a word on cases because they are easy to find, inexpensive, and simple to use. If, however, you want a case that's truly off the shizzle, get an aluminum CoolerMaster case.

Pricewatch.com
I recently upgraded my computer to that I didn't have to call it an ancient piece of ****. I got rid of my old Pentium II, Riva TNT, my motherboard, and my memory. I was able to find the replacements for those on Pricewatch.com quite easily. I found an ASUS A7V333 motherboard with audio for $120, an AMD Athlon XP 1800+ for $110, a GeForce4 MX 420 for $100, and 256MB of Crucial PC2700 DDR RAM for $60. I have noticed that this magazine and many others don't represent the prices that are easily found on the Internet. Representing prices accurately would allow people to make an equal or better machine than the Killer Rigs with less money. Just a suggestion. Keep up the good work.

Bryan Hockey

PS. Got any extra Killer Rigs lying around?

I agree 100 percent. But getting close to accurate prices for the items used in my Killer Rigs is harder than putting the damn machines together. Within my lead time of about two months, prices invariably drop. But rather than hedge in that direction, I err on the other side, and the retail prices that I list are higher than those that will exist on Pricewatch.com by the time an issue ships. So what's a reader to do? Well, just know that you can easily find parts at prices lower than those printed in this magazine.

Getting close to accurate prices for the Killer Rigs is harder than putting the things together.
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Killer Rigs
The best recipe for building your ultimate gaming machine By William O’Neal

Remember last month when I promised to update my Killer Rigs? Well, I lied. But I didn’t intentionally lie, as I was hoping to build a new machine around ATI’s recently announced Radeon 9700. Unfortunately, it’s press time, and I won’t be receiving the card until next week.

Well, in the words of Dave Salvador, “hope springs eternal.” Next month, I promise, you’ll see two entirely new rigs, one of which—I hope—will sport the Radeon 9700.

POWER RIG

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TOTAL $3,240

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TOTAL $1,540

BENCHMARKS

- Quake III: Arena 1024x768x32: 244
- Quake III: Arena 1600x1200x32: 135
- Serious Sam: TSE 1024x768x32: 158
- Serious Sam: TSE 1600x1200x32: 116
- Ziff Davis 3DMark2000: 332
- MadOnion.com 3DMark2001 SE 1024x768x32: 11691
- MadOnion.com 3DMark2001 SE 1600x1200x32: 7443
Dirtiest Trick O' the Month

Here's a little prank for Blizzard's latest, WarCraft III. Tricks that anger and confuse people like this one get you free schwag, like Morrowind or even WarCraft III: Collector's Edition.

My attempt at trick of the month involves WarCraft III. It works with the Undead race only, and requires making lots of shades (evolved acolytes). After you get a bunch of these guys, put them in front of the entrance to your or your enemy's camp, in a line with no gaps between them. When an enemy ground force tries to get in, it won't be able to because the entrance is blocked by the shades. Because the shades are invisible, most units won't be able to attack them. This doesn't work against air units, as they can just fly over, but it's great against ground units.

A variation on this is to surround an enemy's hero with shades, say two per side (depending on the size of the hero), have them "hold ground," and then watch the hero spin around in circles trying to move. The only way out of this is a scroll of Town Portal or the archmage's Mass Teleport spell. I've done this many times, and I find it hilarious each time someone doesn't understand what's going on—and most don't. Thanks. —David Clark

You just snapped yourself the other hefty RPG, Morrowind. You like playing the Undead, so try being a vampire in Morrowind.

We're now giving away the Criterion edition of WarCraft III: Collector's Edition. Write in a Dirty Trick to claim one as yours!
EXCLUSIVE STRATEGIES FROM PRIMA

MAGIC
THE GATHERING
ONLINE

YOUR FIRST DECK

Your first attempts at deck building don’t have to produce lemons. Keep a few simple rules in mind to cruise through Magic Online’s Casual Playroom in a heartbeat.

COLOR CODING

Magic Online’s five colors come with different styles of play. Whichever you feel most comfortable with is ideal for your first deck, although you should include two complementary colors.

BLACK

Black features a mix of creatures—some flying, some ground-based—and ways to deal with threats played by the enemy. The color also has many cards that force your opponent to discard, diminishing their options with each turn. Overall, black combines aggressive and reactive play styles.

BLUE

Blue’s strengths are flying creatures, counterspells to keep your foe’s threats from entering play, and ways to draw additional cards. Blue is a conservative, reactive color, however, and is the most difficult to learn to play. It takes practice to learn which spells to cast and which spells to let your opponent cast. Don’t play a counterspell-heavy deck early in your Magic Online career.

GREEN

If you like large creatures, green’s your color. Green mages are about power, crushing your opponent by playing creature after creature, and overwhelming enemies with brute force. No need for blue’s flying creatures or black’s evasive techniques when you have 5/5 creatures or bigger. You won’t find much defense here, just a high-octane offense.

RED

Whereas blue keeps out creatures, red lets creatures enter play—and then shreds them apart. Direct damage spells are red’s forte, and there are a lot of them in Magic Online. Red supplements its scorched-earth strategy with small creatures and, like green, plays aggressively. If you like defense with your offense, play red.

WHITE

White’s credo is damage control, and it offers plenty of damage prevention for its flying creatures. Hypochondria, Embolden, and Solitary Confinement cards are stellar; you can’t die if your enemy can’t hurt you. To avoid being overwhelmed by green creatures, consider playing white for its best card, Wrath of God, which clears the board of all creatures. Like blue, white plays a slow, reactive game. If you’re aggressive, play green. Choose white or blue to control the game. Red’s best for creature killing. Black offers a mix of elimination and brutal creatures.

MIX AND MATCH

Ninety-five percent of Magic Online decks consist of one or two colors. Each of the 10 color combos has its advantages, but some are better than others. Here’s a guide to the game’s best color combos.

BLACK/RED

Black and red are Magic Online’s best colors for creature elimination. Combine these colors with their best creatures, and your machine is tough to stop.

BLUE/WHITE

Blue counters the enemy’s best spells, while white takes care of anything that makes it into play. It’s the best control combo out there.

RED/GREEN

Speed kills. Green’s Elves ramp up the deck’s pace in putting in cheap, powerful creatures and burning spells that let them hunt with impunity.

BLUE/BLACK

A combination of counterspells with elimination and flying creatures is what this combo offers—and it means slow death for its adversaries.

BLUE/RED

Counterspells and burn are effective. It’s hard for enemies to do much damage when nothing can make it into play and survive.

GREEN/WHITE

In the new Judgment expansion, look out for this creature-based combo. Green/white’s strength is in its force, which lets you assault foes from air and ground.

BLUE/GREEN

Great for the speed/threshold decks but a difficult mix. Blue wants to play a passive game; green wants to be aggressive.
**BLACK/WHITE**
Each color offers control, but its creatures don’t fit well together. Other decks’ sideboards easily attack each color.

**BLACK/GREEN**
Not for beginners. The Apocalypse supercards Pernicious Deed and Spiritmonger require these colors, but otherwise they aren’t compatible.

**RED/WHITE**
Red has the creature kill, but white lacks the speed to supplement it. Don’t go this route unless you’re feeling ambitious. Go with black/red or green/red if you like aggressive play. Choose blue/white if your bag is control.

**PRECONSTRUCTED PICKS**
Wizards of the Coast sells four theme decks for each Magic Online expansion set. These builds contain only two rares and won’t be mistaken for world beaters, but they are a handy starting point for new players. Your first step in Magic Online should be to purchase one of these decks.

Let’s start with the Whirlpool deck from the Apocalypse expansion set. This deck features a balance of direct damage spells, using cards like Fire and Scorching Lava that deal damage to creatures or players, as well as counterspells and bounce spells to keep your opponent's best creatures out of play while yours attack. The deck also has multiple copies of Apocalypse’s Bloodfire creatures, which can sacrifice to damage creatures in play. You will quickly see how brutal these beasts are.

**WHIRLPOOL DECK: VERSION 1**

**ARTIFACTS**
- 2 Chromatic Sphere

**BLUE CREATURES**
- 2 Fairie Squadron
- 2 Rainbow Crow
- 3 Whirlpool Rider

**BLUE SPELLS**
- 1 Confound
- 2 Jilt
- 1 Opt

**GOLD CREATURES**
- 2 Minotaur Illusionist
- 2 Razorfin Hunter

**GOLD SPELLS**
- 2 Quicksilver Dagger
- 1 Sulfocating Blast

**RED CREATURES**
- 2 Bloodfire Kavu
- 1 Dwarfven Patrol

**RED SPELLS**
- 2 Bloodfire Infusion
- 1 Scorching Lava

**SPLIT CARD**
- 1 Fire
- 1 Ice

**LANDS**
- 12 Island
- 12 Mountain

Whirlpool, in its prefab form, is not difficult to play. You don’t have to hold anything back, but you should not play multiple single-toughness creatures if you have a Bloodfire Kavu in play. If you sacrifice the Kavu, it deals 1 point of damage to each nonblocking creature in play.

Go in for the kill if your opponent plays many creatures such as Llanowar Elves and Birds of Paradise, which produce mana that will speed your enemy's strategy along.

If you like your hand, don’t play a Bloodfire Drake or Whirlpool Rider. When cast, these creatures make you shuffle your hand into your library, so you won’t get to keep the same cards.

When you have five mana in play, hold extra lands you draw in your hand, so you can cycle more cards when you play a Whirlpool creature.

Your spells are designed to keep you in control of the game. Confound, Exclude, and Sulfocating Blast are counterspells. Jilt returns a creature to its owner’s hand and damages another monster. Fire splits its damage between two targets. Quicksilver Dagger allows any creature in your deck to deal a point of damage to your opponent, and then you get to draw an extra card.

**TO THE NEXT LEVEL**
Play Whirlpool a couple of times to see how it holds up in the Casual Play room. Notice that some cards among them Stun, Melathran Transport, Dwarfven Patrol, and Opt—don’t cut it.

Before you optimize a deck, ask yourself, which cards do you not see enough of? How about Fire/ice? This deck has only one. Same goes for Flamerocket Kavu, one of the best creatures in the game, and for the Bloodfire creatures that are supposed to keep the board clear.

If you find yourself playing that you pull a certain card often in the course of a game, add more copies of that card. Two copies of Jilt aren't enough in this deck. You can put up to four copies of one card in your deck, so run more of your best.

Stun lets you draw an extra card. But for you to maximize its effectiveness, your opponent must have only one creature in play—not likely against most decks. Chromatic Sphere, which also gets you a card, is sometimes necessary to get a color of mana not produced by the deck's lands.

But you’re playing only red and blue, and you have plenty of Islands and Mountains.

The preconstructed build also has several lesser creatures. It’s hard to get around Dwarfven Patrol’s drawback: non-red spells untap Dwarfven Patrols, so many times Dwarfven Patrol gets stuck and doesn’t untap until you play another non-red spell.

Coastal Drake is great in combination with Flamerocket Kavu, but it’s tough to pull off. You have only 60 cards, and it’s better to do one thing well than three or four things adequately. Focus your deck.

Trying to do too many things often means accomplishing nothing. Make Whirlpool into a better deck. Look at the list for our fresh, improved deck. We’ve stripped the deck’s two rares—Sulfocating Blast and Whirlpool Warrior—to trade for commons and uncommons.

**WHIRLPOOL DECK: VERSION 2**

**BLUE CREATURES**
- 4 Coastal Drake
- 4 Whirlpool Rider
Tour of decks of each type, so you can build your own after you've cracked a few virtual booster packs. Each deck has a limited number of rare cards, and we'll even offer some replacement options so you can get going without much effort.

**CREATURE THEMES**

Magic Online's most entertaining decks are based on creature types—merfolk, angels, zombies, centaurs, dragons, and more. Throw in a bunch of whichever monster type you choose. Don't clutter a zombie deck with creature elimination when you can add more zombies.

Weapon. Each time one of your birds is placed in the graveyard with the Aerie in play, all birds get +1/+1. Your opponent wants to clear the board with Wrath of God? Good. The next bird you play will be an 8/8, or larger.

Speed is the deck's best weapon, so your 20 birds cost only one or two mana each to cast. Sage Owl is particularly powerful, because you can rearrange the top four cards of your desk when it enters play. Soulcatcher grows each time one of your birds bleeds it. Mystic Familiar's toughness of 2 gives it a boost. Suntail Hawk is the deck's best bargain, costing just one mana.

**BIRDBATH**

If squirrels aren't your thing, how about dropping some terror on your enemies from above? With Magic Online's Judgment expansion, birds place a tournament-caliber theme deck within your talons' grasp.

**AIR FORCE ONE DECK**

**BLUE CREATURES**

- 4 Sage Owl
- 4 Stormscape Apprentice
- 4 Mystic Familiar
- 4 Suntail Hawk

**WHITE CREATURES**

- 4 Aerie Keeper
- 4 Soulcatchers' Aerie

**LANDS**

- 10 Island
- 10 Plains

Flying high with the bird deck is simple. Throw creature after creature onto the table as you draw and attack like crazy-only flying creatures can block your birds.

In most cases, the deck plays out in three or four turns. Play creatures first, because fast damage is the name of the game. Play Soulcatchers' Aerie when you draw it—this card is a potent

Stormscape Familiar makes all of your white spells cheaper once it hits play.

On the defense side, Prismatic Strands prevents damage from all sources of a single color for one turn. Draw two or more against a monocolor deck, and you’re done. Two or more Battle Screches also win almost any game. The Screche is the best creature token producer in Magic Online. Four mana and one untapped white creature in play get you four birds in the Air Force. One deck those birds are 4/4 or so.

Speed decks have a problem: when you play cheap spells quickly, you soon find yourself with no cards in hand. In this deck and any other fast blue deck, you want to play Keep Watch. For three mana, you draw a card for each attacking creature. In this case, that’s one card for the entire flock, because you’ll want to keep attacking even if your adversary has plucked one or two cards that can block and kill a bird.

Experiment with the Judgment expansion’s Quiet Speculation. Toss Battle Screches and Prismatic Strands into your graveyard, where you can flash them back with ease. For these purposes, this version of the bird deck uses copies of Invasion’s Kangee, Aerie Keeper. Kangee can pump your birds through the roof if you pay its kicker cost.

**COMING NEXT MONTH**

More tips on making a good, cheap deck and the rest of Prima's guide to creating your first deck.
Neverwinter Nights

Tips on tackling terror in Neverwinter Nights

By Elliott Chin

Baldur’s Gate series. Here are a few tips to help you get started with character generation, skill and feat selection, and multiplayer games. We also look at the final encounter of the game. Be warned, though: there are spoilers ahead.

Choosing a Character
The choice of which class to play could be your most important one in the entire game. There are 11 classes in Neverwinter Nights, and they all have excellent strengths and benefits.

NNN is very melee heavy. Thus, you might be best off playing one of the four melee classes: fighter, barbarian, ranger, or paladin. They are the simplest to learn because all they do is attack. They also have great abilities, with the fighter being best and the paladin and barbarian tied for second (the former is better defensively and the latter better offensively). The ranger is the weakest fighter of the bunch, but he can summon creatures starting at Level 4. Thus, a ranger can add a third member to his party, something the other warrior types can’t do. To compensate for the ranger’s low damage potential, multiclass him with a rogue to get the extra sneak attack damage.

The lure of spellcasters, though, is undeniable, and if you want to unleash high-powered spells of destruction, you have no better choice than the sorcerer. This class can cast the most spells per day of all the classes, but it has a very limited spell selection. Again, because everything is combat-based here, you really don’t need a big selection of spells—just need high-powered spells. To make up for a small selection, grab several metamagic feats, which will improve the longevity of your low-level attack spells and free up some of your later spell slots for more utilitarian spells.

You can’t go wrong with fighter or wizard types, but don’t overlook clerics: in third-edition D&D, they make up perhaps the most powerful class. They can also summon creatures, but they have more hit points, a better attack bonus, and can wear any armor without risk of spell failure. They might not be as good in melee as fighters, but with their extensive array of buffs (like Bull’s Strength, Bless, and Divine Power) they come close. Because the third edition provides more attack spells for clerics, they aren’t too far behind wizards in terms of firepower, with spells like Searing Touch, Hammer of the Gods, and Firestorm. And have I mentioned their ability to heal themselves and their companions?

The druid is a good choice as well. Although he can’t wear the heaviest armor, as a cleric can, he does get an animal companion in addition to his summoned creature, which means the druid, like the wizard and sorcerer, can have a four-character party as well.

If you choose to play a ranger, you must carefully choose your favored enemies. You fight a lot of humans, so pick them as your first favored enemy. You’ll also fight quite a few giants early in the game, with ogres and trolls showing up frequently in chapter 2 and then joining up with giants in chapter 3. Orcs and Undead are also good choices because they show up throughout the game. Don’t bother choosing dragons or goblins. Dragons are few in this game, and goblins are so weak you don’t need a bonus to take them down.

If playing as a thief, always attack with a buddy (your henchman or a summoned creature)—you do sneak attack damage if you double up on an enemy.

Hired Help
Hiring a henchman is a must. But which one should you choose? You can select a barbarian, bard, cleric, monk, rogue, or sorcerer. Obviously, you want a henchman who can shave up your weak spots. If you are a fighter, you need healing or magic firepower, so you want the cleric or sorcerer.

If you are a wizard, you will need muscle and healing as well. You don’t necessarily need a fighter henchman, because your summoned monster will fulfill that role (if you still want a fighter, go for the excellent monk). And you can bypass the need for a thief by choosing a pike as your familiar. So go for a cleric.

Filling the Spellbook

Damage reduction spells like Stoneskin are essential for a spellcaster’s survival. No wizard or sorcerer should be without them.

Although high-damage spells such as Fireball and Horrid Withering are great, don’t forget utility spells like Haste, Stoneskin, and Dispel Magic. These spells will greatly enhance your longevity. Haste offers many benefits, including an AC bonus and the ability to cast more spells per round, but it’s also great for buffing your henchmen or summoned monsters. Often, buffing up your support will benefit you in the long run better than just hurling around more damage spells.

Damage reduction spells, like Ghostly Visage, Stoneskin, and Ethereal Visage are must-haves; many encounters devolve into melee battles because enemies close in so quickly. Having a spell like Stoneskin makes up for your low hit points if you’re playing as a wizard or sorcerer.

Dispel Magic is useful when you’re facing powerful individual boss creatures, which tend to have several spell buffs on them. Unlike a tabletop game of D&D, though, Neverwinter Nights doesn’t have many instances that call for the spell, so sorcerers might be better off learning something else. But you should at least keep a few Dispel Magic scrolls handy just in case.

Characters like the sorcerer and bard, who have to choose a set number of spells to learn, can use metamagic feats to get more mileage out of the spells.
Opening Chests
If you don't have a thief in your party, you can always bash chests and doors open. If you go this route, get the Power Attack and Improved Power Attack feats. All inanimate objects have damage reduction, which absorbs some of the damage you deal. If you're hitting a chest for only 5 damage per attack, and it has damage reduction 5, you'll never bash it open. But with Power Attack and Improved Power Attack, you can subtract from your attack roll and add the same number to your damage roll. Chests and doors are inanimate objects, so they have extremely low AC and hitting isn't a problem.

Better Booty
If you want to get better loot in the game, always quack before you open up important chests—not the ones you find lying in the street on the Peninsula, but the chests in a major NPC's final stand. Because treasure in chests is generated randomly, you can save and then open, reloading and repeating, until you get a more valuable item or one that is more appropriate for your character.

A thief is good for disarming traps and opening chests and locked doors. You won't find many traps, though, and you can bash open most chests. The bard is similar to the thief, but she can't provide nearly the same quality of support that the other henchmen do. Although she does have good buffs, she doesn't have the hit points to withstand battle like the cleric, and unlike the sorcerer, she can't help you end battles quickly with a few fireballs when things get desperate. The sorcerer can open chests and doors, thanks to his Knock spell, and he provides lots of firepower. In the end, the best choice for a warrior-type character is either the sorcerer or cleric.

Skill Selection
Within the variety of skills, there are some obvious good choices. Warrior types (except the ranger) don't have a lot of skill points, so just go for the combat skills, like parry and discipline. Discipline is especially useful if you are playing a multiplayer game like Contest of Champions, because player characters will usually use combat feats more than the computer does in the single-player campaign. Skills like persuade are not very useful to characters other than paladin.

Spells are must max out their concentration skill. Encounters almost always end up at melee range, so you need to be able to cast spells under duress, which concentration lets you do.

Lore is good because it saves you time, but the money savings are negligible—you'll have so much gold by the end of the game you won't even notice the identity costs. Get lore only for the convenience.

Taunt is overlooked but good if you have the skill points to spare. Don't use it against spellcasters, who are likely to have high concentration skill. Instead, try it on fighters and the like to lower their AC. Odds are they don't have any ranks in concentration.

Feats
Feats help to differentiate characters from each other. There are quite a few good ones to choose from, and everyone but the fighter will be faced with tough choices.

Toughness is an excellent all-around feat (better than its pen-and-paper counterpart), and is a must-have for sorcerers, wizards, bards, and

Creating a Four-Character Party
The benefit of playing a spellcaster such as a wizard or sorcerer is that you can have four members in your party. Every character can hire a henchman. Spellcasters (except paladins) can summon one creature to act as a companion, which makes three. And wizards and sorcerers also get a familiar, which gives you four party members. You could thus control a classic four-class party in Morrowind: play a wizard, hire a cleric henchman, choose a fairy familiar, and summon a burly monster every day, and you'll have a well-rounded group. This benefit alone is enough to make the wizard or sorcerer selection a wise one. Just remember you will have to rest often because your spells will be exhausted long before any of your companions have to rest. In this case, it's wise to take a level in fighter (if you are a wizard) or paladin (if you are a sorcerer) for the extra hit points and weapon and armor proficiencies.

Because your daily capacity for adventuring usually outlasts your spell selection, you'll end up engaging in quite a bit of fighting, so getting in a level or two in a warrior class is wise. Remember: don't take more than two levels or you won't be able to learn the ultrapowerful Level 9 spells.
MULTIPLAYER TIPS

If you're a thief or have a rogue character like this one in your party, always double up on enemies to take advantage of sneak attacks.

PVP games, like BioWare's new Contest of Champions, melee characters are king. Distances aren't very great in NWN, and whereas battles in tabletop D&D can start with the combatants hundreds of feet apart, in NWN you almost always get within melee range in a matter of seconds.

Take note of your party size first. In groups of three or fewer, have only one spellcaster. You need this character for buffs—like Bull's Strength, Stoneskin, and See Invisibility. But beyond that, go with more warrior types than spellcasters. Rush the enemy casters first and press the attack. They won’t be able to cast spells without provoking Attacks of Opportunity. If they run, they also provoke Attacks of Opportunity, and could very well go down while trying to run. The key to defeating spellcasters is to get in their faces right away. After you do that, you have the edge, and most casters go down easily.

In the CGW offices, we tried several games of Contest of Champions, and the team with the two fighters and one caster beat out the team with two casters and one fighter eight games in a row before the losers gave up.

ROGUES—those characters with low-hit die.

Another essential feat for spellcasters is Combat Casting, which makes it easier for you to cast spells in melee. Combine it with the concentration skill to ensure you don’t get disrupted when casting.

If you are a sorcerer, take the Empower Spell and Maximize Spell feats. These feats bolster the power of your spells, making them as strong as their higher-level counterparts but without taking up a valuable “spell known” slot. For example, if you were a Level 12 sorcerer and had Maximize Spell, you wouldn’t need to select chain lightning as your Level 6 spell because your maximized fireballs would do 60 damage per hit, more than the average of a chain lightning spell. Thus, by using a metamagic feat to emulate the damage potential of a Level 6 attack spell, you free up that Level 6 slot to learn an equally useful spell, like Ethereal Visage or Mass Haste.

Improved Critical is good, but only if you can be sure of using a great weapon without having to change it often. Fighters and barbarians should choose this feat to increase their damage potential.

Warrior types need Power Attack and Cleave. You fight lots of hordes in NWN, and Cleave just clears them out. Also, as you reach the middle and later portions of the game, your base attack bonus is high enough (and monster ACs don’t progress fast enough) that you can use Power Attack for an extra +5 damage without worrying about missing your targets. When using Power Attack, stay on top of which rolls you need to make in order to hit your enemy. You must have a better than 50 percent chance of hitting with each attack, so if your attack bonus is +15, and your enemy has AC 19 or 20, it’s safe to use Power Attack. But if you’re fighting a dragon with AC 30 or so, Power Attack is worthless, and using it will simply hasten your deaths.

Unless you are a monk, don’t bother with the unarmed strike feats—Improved Unarmed Strike, Stunning Fist, and Deflect Arrows. These make you use your bare fists, which are vastly inferior to weapons (though not in the case of monks, who get those feats automatically anyway).

FINAL ENCOUNTER

The final showdown with Morag can be a very tough encounter, especially because the game gives you no warning about the unfair circumstances of the fight. After you eliminate Maugrim, take the exit to the Inner Sanctum. But beware: you’re actually making a detour before you get to the real Sanctum.

Before going through the portal, make sure to cast damage reduction spells and Protection From Elements on yourself and your party. When you step through the portal, you will be beset by two corrupted dragons, a brass and a silver one. These dragons are very tough and will quickly engage in melee. The brass dragon breathes acid, and the silver breathes cold, so your Protection From Elements spell comes in handy. But it’s their rapid attacks and high melee damage that can do you in. Any spellcasters you have in your party will probably die first, unless they have immense concentration skill or some form of damage reduction, like Stoneskin or Ethereal Visage. The dragons, though, can be beat. And if you get into a real tough spot, you can always teleport back to base with your Stone of Recall.

After you defeat the two dragons, you will find the doorway leading into the real Inner Sanctum. It’s very important that you save your game here with a real save file and not the quick save, and you must fully rest up and prepare new spells. The game fails to tell you that where you’re going, you can’t respawn and you can’t teleport back to base. You can even rest once you enter the Inner Sanctum, there is no way out. The portal you come through disappears. And without the means to rest, respawn, or teleport, what you come in with—spells, hit points, items—is all you get. So go in prepared.

When fighting Morag in the final battle, you have to touch the statue first or it will kill you with one blow as you rush past it. When you begin your battle with Morag, she’s immune to all attacks. First kill whichever praying Old One corresponds to your attack type (for example, kill the Protector Against Mace). If you are attacking Morag with a bladegunning weapon, and then you can fight her. She will still have a Stoneskin or Energy Resistance spell on her, but when you’ve done enough damage to bring down her protection, you’ll start harming her.

Morag begins the final battle immune to all attacks. You need to attack the praying Old Ones surrounding her in order to make her vulnerable to your attacks.

Concentrate on Morag and ignore her minions. Do that, and victory will be yours.
perhaps the most dramatic change in WarCraft III from previous Craft games is the introduction of heroes. These units can gain experience, use items, and eventually become much more powerful than normal troops.

Heroes are the key to victory in WarCraft III, and you'll want to acquire one as soon as you can. They're very slow to recruit, though, so don't wait until you build a barracks before you start your altar. The altar should be your second building, right after a population center (such as an Orc burrow or farm).

As soon as you get a hero recruited and assign him two units, you should go hunting for creeps to kill. Heroes grow immensely in power as they level up, so you should be at least Level 3 before you fight other players. A Level 3 hero means that you can have a Level 2 skill or spell. The difference between Level 1 and Level 2 chain lightning, for instance, is that you hit two more targets and cause 25 percent more damage per target.

You must manage your heroes carefully. More than in StarCraft, good unit management in WarCraft III is vital to survival. You can't throw units at the enemy, return to base, and then go back to the battle hoping to achieve a win. You have to watch the battle and manage your troops as the situation requires. Your most important task is monitoring the health of your heroes. If their hit points start going into the red, it's time to get them out of there. Run heroes around so they avoid melee attackers. Most often, the enemy units will try to chase them down, giving your troops the chance to attack the enemy troops with impunity. If you become desperate, use Town Portal to teleport back to town.

You also want to kill an enemy's hero as soon as you can. Target the hero with your ranged units. If you have only melee units, run up and surround him before attacking. This ensures that he can't escape. Instead of first right-clicking on the hero, move all of your units to his area and encircle him. Then issue the Attack command. If the hero tries to flee, having ranged troops around gives you the opportunity to kill him when he runs.

These tips should aid you in controlling heroes in WarCraft III. For race specific strategies and more tactics, check back with us next month.

Stop That Hero

**Orc**
- Tauren Chieftain War Stomp: This special attack is great against heroes because it stuns them while doing damage. War Stomp ends quickly, though, so you have to use it several times and have grunts nearby for maximum damage.
- Wolf Raider Ensnare: Ensnare is great for immobilizing heroes, who can then be picked apart by ranged units. At the very least, even if you attack an ensnared hero with melee units, the hero won't be able to flee.
- Shaman Purge: This is a great spell for hero killing. Cast it on the hero as he tries to flee and you'll slow him down, giving your units time to catch up and cut him down.
- Witch Doctor Stasis Trap: This is a very tricky spell to use, not least because you can stun your own units. However, you can plant this ward down near the enemy hero while keeping your own units well out of range of the Stasis Ward. When the ward triggers and stuns the enemy hero, you can rush in to bring down the hammer.

**Human**
- Mountain King Stormbolt: This is the ultimate hero killer. The attack does a considerable amount of damage and also stuns the hero for several seconds, during which time you can easily destroy him with support units.
- Sorceress Slow: This spell, like Shaman Purge, is excellent against heroes. You not only hamper their ability to attack, you also slow them to a crawl, making them unable to flee and thus susceptible to lots of punishing attacks. But unlike Purge, Sorceress Slow is an autocast spell, so you'll need to disable that ability if you want to specifically target a hero.

- Mountain King Thunderclap: Like the Tauren Chieftain War Stomp, Thunderclap allows for a
It's important to kill creeps early, but don't rush off alone. Your hero needs several units to support him during creep hunting.

Don't neglect items. They can often make a hero twice as good as he normally would be. If you are a spellcasting hero who enjoys area attack spells, consider getting an invisibility potion immediately after casting Earthquake, Blizzard, or Death and Decay. Use the potion so that you can maintain your spell without being attacked. Players are much less likely to have detectors in Warcraft III than they did in StarCraft, so this tactic should work well (until other players get wise to it).

It's always a good idea to have a Town Portal in your inventory, especially if you have one truly strong hero out in the field. In multiplayer games, a Town Portal is essential for rescuing your allies in dire times. Don't ever run over to an ally's town. They'll die before you can reach it. Use the Town Portal instead. If you are using a spellcasting hero, try to acquire mana regeneration items. Potions of mana are good, and you also want intelligence enhancing items.

**Undead**
- Dread Lord Sleep: This spell is great for immobilizing heroes, but if you attack a sleeping unit, it will wake up. This spell is best for removing a hero from a fight while you deal with his minions. You can also use it to stop a fleeing hero and give your army a chance to chase him down.
- Lich Frost Nova: This spell duplicates a slow effect on the target struck by the Frost Nova (while surrounding enemies also suffer some cold damage). Thus, targeting a hero will not only hurt him, but also slow him down.
- Necromancer Cripple: This spell works in principle like the Orc's Purge and Human's Slow, although it is even more debilitating because it halves the attack and defense of a target hero. Consider this a version of Slow on steroids.

**Night Elf**
- Archdruid Entangling Roots: This spell is like Wolf Raider Ensnare, except that it affects a much larger area. It will immobilize heroes and let you beat on them—and they can't run away.
- Druid of the Talon Faerie Fire: This is great because it lowers the armor of the targeted hero. The best thing about this spell is that it can reduce armor to negative numbers, which in turn leads to bonus damage from attacks.
- Druid of the Talon Cyclone: Use this spell to cut short a hero's escape—it immobilizes him for several seconds. Although you can't attack him during this time, you can rush underneath his position so that you can resume a full barrage of attacks when the hero lands.

Use Town Portal scrolls to quickly move across the map. If your ally is in trouble, use Town Portal to move instead of running.
Age of Wonders II: The Wizard's Throne

The Chronicles of the War of Tom and Bruce

By Tom Chick and Bruce Geryk

A long time ago, in the ancient month of July, Tom and Bruce took the Council of Wrath scenario in Age of Wonders II and used powerful magicks (i.e., the scenario editor) to turn it into a two-player match. The land of the Council of Wrath consists of two halves: one inhabited by Tom, Karissa and her Orcs, and Yaka the Tigran lord; the other inhabited by Bruce, Undead Nekron, and Tempest the Human wizard. These halves are separated by a mountain range that can be traversed with pairs of teleporters or via an underground passage. The map's namesake, the city of Council, lies in ruins on an island to the north, where Rift Lords guard a cluster of mana nodes and magic items. This is the story of the war fought for that land over an Internet connection between Tom of California and Bruce of Illinois.

Tom, Day 0: When led by a peacekeeper wizard, the Tigrans are the ideal diplomatic race. They rate polite or better with every race except the Archons and Undead, meaning they can buy most of the independent cities on the map (which is where their gold bonus is particularly handy). Spells from the Sphere of Air can improve mobility, which is important on a big map. My goal is to have Haste Domain, a powerful global enchantment, up and running by the time I'm fighting Bruce. This effectively doubles unit movement in my domain, so I can quickly gather reinforcements and outmaneuver his armies.

Bruce, Day 0: As this is a large map, I'll take Forge: giving my units a 20 percent movement bonus. I can further improve this by casting Enchanted Roads, which reduces the cost of road travel. I also take Constructor for the production bonus. Base production is offset with a disadvantage, I choose Decadence, which raises the cost of unit upkeep, but as an Earth wizard, I can eventually offset this with Golden Age, a spell that increases city income. I choose the Goblins as my starting race.

Tom, Day 12: Bryn, a Dark Elf city in the center of my realm, is my first purchase. It's a steal at 335 gold. I'm building a stack of Bladedancers and Archers on whom I'll cast Enchant Weapon. This spell is particularly powerful on units that get multiple attacks, because it compounds the +2 attack and +2 damage bonuses; an Archer's three weak shots become three medium power shots and both of the Bladedancers' double strikes are boosted.

Bruce, Day 15: I split my initial group and had my wizard capture structures while my main forces went after nearby cities. You have to be careful not to divide your forces so much that they can't recombine quickly when threatened. Don't let your wiz wander too far from a tower in case you need to restore your magical domain.

Tom, Day 35: Because you can build only one thing per turn in a city, there's no point in increasing a city's production if you're just going to be making inexpensive units. Therefore, one or two of my cities will be geared toward increased production for expensive units and structures. A few will train armies, but most of the cities will all idle to provide gold. It's important to keep in mind that Age of Wonders isn't like Civilization, in which every city should always be building something. That way lies destruction.

Bruce, Day 40: I've captured an Elf city, and because Elves are naturally wary of Goblins (wouldn't you be?), I'm building a temple to raise morale and avoid revolts. It looks like I'll also have to do this for the Halfling and Archon cities on my half of the map.

Tom, Day 42: I now have a monastery to train monks in my main city of Halacly. Every army should have a monk in tow to provide healing.

Bruce, Day 81: I'm concentrating my research on raising my wizard's casting specialist skill. With more casting points, I'll be able to quickly cast summoning spells, which is a more flexible way to react to threats than training armies.

Tom, Day 61: I've taken out one of my neighboring races, the Tigrans to the south, but my armies were too far away to save Bryn when Karissa, my neighbor to the north, attacked it with a stack of Orcs and Goblins. I rushed to build a wooden wall around the city, but it couldn't get enough defenders there in time. This just goes to show that it's important to have scouts at the borders you share with hostile neighbors. Cities and watchtowers can see out 12 hexes, a distance many armies can cross in two turns. Fortunately, Karissa's army pulled back and I was able to retake Bryn from the small garrison she left behind.

Bruce, Day 77: In a full-fledged war with Nekron, the
Undead wizard and my last rival for dominance on this half of the map. I'm a bit overmatched, but I've been careful to keep my units in mutually supporting triangles. I've been able to bring superior numbers to the battles, but he has more advanced units, so I'm taking a lot of casualties.

Tom, Day 82: I have Karissa's last city, Raglam, effectively surrounded. She's holed up behind a stone wall with five catapults, but I should be able to rush them with my wall-crawling prowlers. I'm walking on reinforcements, but Karissa keeps summoning hell hounds. This is going to be messy.

Bruce, Day 90: There's been far too much back-and-forth in fighting Nekron. I'm going to back off and give myself time to build up a large army before attacking anymore. I outmatch him in terms of resources, so I'll eventually win any arms race. I just hope I'm not squandering time that should be spent getting ready to attack Tom.

Tom, Day 91: Raglam has fallen, but I lost a lot of units to those catapults. Although this half of the map is now mine, I have only one good stack left. My gold income is decent, but I've been funneling a lot of money into improving research; I want to get haste Domain in effect before I attack Bruce, and it's going to cost a lot of mana. Therefore, I'm going to try to take the Council Island for its four magic nodes, which will provide 80 mana per turn. There are four elementals parked on the teleporter to the island, and then there's the Rift Lord and his spawns on the island itself. These are all summoned creatures, so I'm saving up mana to use the Banish Summoned spell. It's expensive, but it has a relatively high attack value of 12 to counter their resistances.

Bruce, Day 122: Finally killed Nekron. Having taken out two...
wizards and solidified my hold on this part of the map, I'm going to use my cave crawling Goblins to go underground. This will give me a jumping-off point for an assault against Tom, who I hope won't see it coming.

**Tom, Day 126:** Among the considerable casualties on the island was Lilly, my Level 6 ranger, who was killed by a Rift Lord. But I've nearly doubled my mana income and I have a few useful magic items, as well as a useless Dwarf tool for repairing siege engines. Anyone want it? I sent Winger, my deranged looking Halfling rogue, to recover Lilly's magic items and take up the banner of leadership. Time to rebuild my army again.

**Bruce, Day 142:** My underground offensive has been a huge success (see screen below), and I've taken over another Dark Elf city. Now I'm just mopping up the spires down here. I've also been using my Raise Terrain spell to close off my main city with mountains. If you keep a line of units along the road, you can cast the spell over them and they'll only carve a path through the raised mountains. If I can raise these natural walls and cast Poison Domain, I should be able to mount a home defense with only a few units, freeing up more units for the attack.

**Tom, Day 143:** I'm not about to field an army made exclusively of flying units or water dwellers, so I have two choices for getting across the mountain range to Bruce: the teleporters or the underground passage. But a defender could easily make a deadly bottleneck in either of these routes, so I don't want to rely on them for bringing in reinforcements. Instead, I'm going to seize Bruce's closest city with a wizard's tower, Darkhaven, and use the city as a stronghold. This will allow me to use one of Age of Wonder's greatest wonders: the teleportation gate. This instantly sends an army to any wizard's tower you control. My gate in Kaelby will be completed in three days, and I've just finished research on Haste Domain, which will take four days to cast.

**Bruce, Day 150:** I'm assembling a main attack force in the underground near the northernmost exit. I'll send some flyers with a few Free Movement-enhanced units across the south end of the mountains to distract Tom. Then, after I've engaged him with this decoy force, I'll emerge from the sewers, etc., caves. It'll just be like in the movies, only this time the Goblins will be coming.

**Tom, Day 154:** Undead Darkhaven is almost completely undefended, as is nearby Kador, a Frosting town. Bruce obviously wasn't expecting me. With my hastened units, by the time he saw me coming, I was less than a turn away. I rush to build in anticipation of the counterattack. Meanwhile, I detach some cat masters to seize two nearby mana nodes for good measure. I notice Bruce hasn't converted the nodes to his sphere of magic, so I'm guessing he's not playing a strong spellcasting game. I've made a point to convert every node I've found to air and now my mana income, before upkeep, is more than 250 per turn.

**Bruce, Day 154:** It looks like Tom put the jump on me! I need to research Poison Domain, which will take 10 turns, and it will take another three turns to cast. It looks like I'm not going to have time to set up my diversionary attack, so instead I'll immediately launch my attack from the underground.

**Tom, Day 157:** Bruce just grabbed Bryn, my main source of army fodder, with a bunch of Goblins and Wyvern Riders. I can't trickin' believe he had all those units down in the caves. No wonder Darkhaven was undefended. Unfortunately, I can't pull back my big stack to defend my cities because the teleportation gates work in only one direction! I've put a hold on all new units being teleported and I'll assemble some impromptu defenders over the next few days. Fortunately, with Haste Domain in effect, I can easily outrun his slow Goblins. If he detachs his Wyvern Riders, I can hunt them down with cat masters and archers.

**Bruce, Day 162:** Now that we're able to play out the tactical battles. Tom's chain lightning is proving very powerful. It can attack up to five units as long as they're next to each other, and he can cast it before I move my attackers, making me very vulnerable. My counterattacks on Darkhaven got chewed up this way. I'm hampered by my reluctance to cast spells in combat, because doing so would make Poison Domain take longer to research and cast. When attacking Tom's stacks, I try to team up on one at a time because the position on the strategic map (inset) carries over to the tactical one (large map, below), where his other stack has to spend a few turns just moving across the map to engage.

**Tom, Day 167:** Bruce just cast Poison Domain, which won't affect my Dark Elves but will weaken and continually damage my Tigrans, Dwarves, and Orcs. This is not good news. Fortunately, I captured the magic relay that extended his domain toward Darkhaven, so my units there are safe. Because I have mana to spare, I'm whipping up a Disjunction that'll take five turns and have a 74 percent chance of dispelling his Poison Domain. After that, I'll start on a Power Leak to cut his mana income in half.

**Bruce, Day 167:** I'm running up against a mana shortage because of my spellcasting and because Tom has captured some of my mana sources. I'm going to have to cancel Enchanted Roads in order to keep Poison Domain in effect and build up a reserve of mana for combat.

**Tom, Day 172:** Disjunction worked and now I'm sending out two armies, each led by a hero. The heroes' domain projection permanently flowers on the map. I rush past Bruce's defended central cities and attack the cities in the back.

**Bruce, Day 174:** I'm trying to scrape up enough mana to recast Poison Domain. Unfortunately, Tom's Disjunction canceled it, but a bigger problem is that Tom blew right past my cities toward Domir and Eddo, which are undefended. I have no way of getting any defenders there.

**Tom, Day 177:** I razed the two cities at the back of Bruce's realm and seized two more mana nodes. It's time to administer the coup de grâce. I moved everyone out of Darkhaven and razed it. I'll ignore the rest of his cities and head straight for Draded, the site of his last wizard's tower, which he has somehow closed up in a ring of mountains. I've got four buffed stacks, two heroes, a full store of mana, and a surprise for him when I arrive.

**Bruce, Day 180:** I have a nice defense set up in Bruce, but it's just delaying the inevitable. Once Tom got behind my defenses, his speed advantage really took a toll, as I was being constantly outmaneuvered and having to recapture magic nodes and the like. Also, I relied too much on a big army and didn't pay enough attention to developing my wizard skills. Tom showed how a powerful spellcaster accrues so many advantages that military force alone cannot overcome them.

**Tom, Day 184:** This is kind of anticlimactic, but it's still gratifying. He had two stacks of fairly strong defenders in his main city. The mountains were arranged so I'd be able to attack with only one stack at a time. So Winger rides up to the gates of Draded, just close enough to extend my domain into the center of the city. I have a Torpedo spell queued up, which floods many of the units in a stack, several layers away. Not only does it decimate his strongest stack, but it hurts his wizard so far away that he can't even extend his domain into the ensuing city battle! I take the city and in the same turn I send one of my stacks after his wizard, who's sitting alone in the countryside, probably twiddling with flowers like Lear. It's a short battle of six Balordancers against cat masters and a tower of druids against one torado-flung wizard. Thus ends the Chronicles of the War of Tom and Bruce.
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Gateway to Geekdom

Don't hate The Sims—it's creating new dorks every day By Jeff Green

Back before I got old and deaf and incontinent, I used to hang out at clubs, listening to bands. Really, I did. I know it's hard to believe when you see me now—a graying 40-year-old playing air clarinet to Benny Goodman CDs—but I was young once, too, and I kind of knew what was going on.

What I remember most about those days, actually, was how snooty my friends and I were about it all. We'd sit around and smugly congratulate each other for being the only ones on earth who knew that our new favorite band, Vegan Stool Sample, was the greatest thing ever. That would last just until they finally got famous with their breakthrough album, Smells Like Burnt Toast, at which point we would proclaim that the band had sold out and that all the cool people already knew that it wasn't cool anymore.

This same kind of insular, fear-of-success thinking permeates the gaming community. We may have our favorite genres or games and bicker continuously over which is better, but we can unite in our hatred of any game that commits the ultimate uncool crimes: crossing over into the mainstream.

Take Myst. For years, Myst was the one game that everybody had heard of, including my grandma, who died four years before it came out. Although many of us liked the game, its popularity became so huge, its presence so pervasive, that hardcore gamers began resenting it and ultimately dismissing it. It became embarrassing to admit you liked the game.

Now the same thing is happening with The Sims. Although the game originally started out with a lot of geek cred, as its popularity has skyrocketed, it has begun to wear out its welcome among the hardcore and lose credibility. We forget the humor, originality, and genius that caused the hype the game legitimately earned. Now we just think: How could a game this popular with nongamers be any good? Isn't it just a "girl's game" now? Enough already!

But I contend that any game that draws people in is a good thing, because the more people you have playing computer games, the more the hobby becomes legitimized and loses its social-rewarded status. And it's especially good if the draw is a game like The Sims, a nonviolent game antithetical to the stereotypes the mainstream media has been pounding into people's heads for years.

The Sims is a "gateway drug." It's the harmless vice that leads to the serious stuff. Take the sorry case of CGW's own managing editor, Dana Jongeward. Here we have a nice, normal, nongaming, professional-type woman, whom we stole from a magazine called Smart Business (though they weren't smart enough to stay in business). When Dana first arrived at CGW, she looked upon those of us playing and talking about games all day with the same wary, horrified face one might make upon seeing a man defeating in public.

You could just imagine the conversations she was having with her friends after work. "You would not believe this place," she'd say. "These guys just play games and talk about Star Wars all day long. Except when it's Lord of the Rings. Or comic books. It's the saddest thing ever. My boss is like 40 going on 13."

But then we introduced her to The Sims, and the brainwashing had begun.

Dana took to the game for the same reason that millions of others have: It's funny, it's easy to understand, and its two biggest features aren't guns and breasts. Casual play turned into obsession. That look of intense concentration at her desk was not that of a professional trying to get a magazine out—it was the look of someone trying to get Mortimer Goth to leave his bitch wife Bella.

And now? The process is complete. Now we have a woman playing not just The Sims, but a full-on Obergeek game, Magic: The Gathering Online. Now we have the almost surreal spectacle of a formerly normal woman, sitting in her office at CGW yelling things like, "If it wasn't for that freaking mana burn, I would've crushed you with my Benthic Behemoth!"

This is what it's all about, folks. This is why The Sims is so cool. So stop hating on it. We have claimed another victim. If Dana can be turned, we can get anybody. The world is almost ours.

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