A-List: Your Guide to the Best Hardware & Gadgets!

Computer Gaming World

TGW's 20th Annual

Game of the Year Awards

We Pick the Best of the Best


Plus:

We Predict the Top 10 Games of 2004

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NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND

DEUS EX 2

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I DIED AS DANIEL GARNER

I WAS SENTENCED TO SERVE IN PAIN SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HEAVEN AND HELL. I LOST MY FAITH, BUT GAINED A NEW NAME. NOW I AM THE ANGELS’ ONLY PRAYER.

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Some people like us and some people hate us, but everyone agrees on one thing: Jeff Green is one hot tamale.

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Gaze into our crystal ball for a look at the 10 best games of 2004. Plus, an early look at Sam & Max: Freelance Police, and what could be the world's first butt-simple PC gaming console.

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We managed to get our greedy little hands on the Battlefield-like Star Wars: Battlefront, then went deep into the jungles of Battlefield Vietnam. And that's not even going into our first looks at Warlords Battlecry III, Ground Control 2: Operation Exodus, and a whole lot more.

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COVER STORY
It's our annual Games of the Year awards issue, and the decision-making was tougher than ever. That's not a complaint, though. In a great year for PC games, here are our picks for the best of the best.

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72 Reviews
Santa left a big, wrinky bag for us over the holidays, and once we saw it didn't belong to a large, diseased animal, we dug right in and found some gems among the coal. A few—like Prince of Persia, Beyond Good & Evil, and America's Army: Special Forces—are worth rushing out and selling your kidney for right now. Others—like Deus Ex and the Neverwinter Nights expansion—aren't worth your toenail clippings.

100 Tech

111 Check Out
For all the things that rock and the ones that are really a crock, come over to this section to hear us talk. Or else we'll go to your house, and soon the police will be lining up the chalk.

126 Scorched Earth
Robert's black heart suddenly drips with the honeyed milk of love.

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STATE OF THE ART.

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A Very Good Year Indeed

Dr. Why I hate passing out game of the Year awards

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Icy carombl! We are not at the Game of the Year awards again already, are we? Jeez. I really hate awards ceremonies. A lifetime of watching the wrong movies, TV shows, music, and American Idol contestants win awards every single year has turned me off to the whole process. Plus, I'm bitter. Why? Because every Friday, I enter the wet T-shirt contest here at our local sports bar, and every time I lose to some good-looking female. Like that's fair.

Like I'm not hot in a wet T-shirt, too. Way to have no credibility.

So, yeah, anyway. We're handing out awards this issue. Yay. Seriously, the reason I'm frustrated about this year's awards is that it was such a great year for PC game. There aren't enough awards to go around. The winners are all worthy, but just to focus on the winners would be deceitful and limiting. So if you're looking for something to buy, look at all the nominees—they all rule this year and they're all worthy of your attention. And remember, just because we didn't pick your game as a winner doesn't mean we didn't think it was awesome. There were lots of tough decisions this year. That's why we get paid slightly more than minimum wage here. Life is hard.

KEN KROWN

born
Some say Ken is the child of Johnny Wilson and Scopa, but only Scopa would know for sure, and she's not talking. But the way Ken plays like Johnny and sneaks into his dark office seems like more than coincidence. Then there's the DOS games...

DARREN GLADSTONE

preview
Darren doesn't own a car. In fact, he never has and probably never will. So when in the hell did he let this discussion get behind the wheel to pick up for games! (Shameplated? Two reasons: 1) we're tired of driving his sorry but to press events, 2) skid marks. Drwm.

WILLIAM O'NEAL

review
Will had a choice between going to the nation's No. 1 public university or another school with sauce that runs like water and despitefully first dates. Guess which one he chose. If he had it all to do over again, he'd fit in twice as much boozing and women. Or go with the 80-year plan.

JOHNNY LEE

review
Socially, Johnny is going backwards. Popular preschooler. High school president... homecoming prince. Now, he's a videogame-playing Cork. When he's 50, Johnny will live in the sewers, CPU be fun scavenging around in flight and hiding from the helpful sun.

RYAN SCOTT

review
Lived about from college in New York, like a leaf in a storm. Ryan keeps his good humor and sometimes puts out great ideas to die. And I keep sharpening my knives for Judgment Day—Arm.

ROB SCHULTZ

art director
Bored, Rob Schultz has one blue eye and one brown eye. We don't know what it means. But we do know he often leaves his coffee unattended and with money missing from our wallets. And when he snaps, his fingers break like soap. It's weird.

MICHAEL JENNINGS

associate art director
Mike plays the part of dedicated designer. But, it's obvious to the rest of us that his CFO career is just a stepping stone to his true love: sheep farming. He's often overhead mumbling, "That'll be the life. Watch me..."
WARS & WARRIORS

JOAN of ARC

"Everything flows together nicely, so you can get right into the combat and throw together impressive-looking combos with just a few mouse clicks."
-Gamespot.com

"Wars & Warriors: Joan of Arc brings the sword slashing action, strategic use of armies, and customization of hero units together in an ambitious mix of 3 genres."
-IGN.com

FIGHT
BECOME THE WARRIOR
Execute awesome combos to devastate your enemy in the thick of intense combat action.

COMMAND
BECOME JOAN OF ARC
Live out the most exciting years in the life of the ultimate warrior, in her greatest battles.

SIEGE
BECOME THE GENERAL
Command troops in castle sieges with a unique mix of action and real-time strategy gameplay!

VICTORY
BECOME THE LEGEND
Become the greatest European leader of military powers throughout the 100 years’ war!

www.enlight.com
www.joa-game.com
Bugged about bugs
While Robert Coffey's holiday wish list was right on the money [Scorched Earth, January 2004], I think he should take this once in a lifetime (unless you hit the reset button, of course) opportunity to wish for something that would benefit the entire world. No, screw world peace—if we had such an animal, then half of PC's greatest games would be no more. I am talking about a new law. Yes, you read that right...we should be allowed by the Supreme Court to drive up to game publishers' mansions and torture them for all eternity for pushing titles out the window to make their quarterly financial numbers. What ever happened to beta testing? Numerous titles have been patched the same day they hit the shelves. Need For Speed Underground has menu resolution issues with most ATI cards. KOTOR slows to a crawl due to sound issues with Live 51 cards, Halo runs like elf poo-poo on a semidecent system, and the Technical FAQ always points to the same answer: "Make sure your drivers are up to date for your hardware." I am getting a heart attack with all this anger building up inside me, so I say no more.

MasKra

P.S. What ever happened to Duke Nukem Forever?

And another thing—get off his lawn!
I remember a time long ago when I could buy a $40 to $50 first-person game and be entertained for days or weeks. But where have those games gone? Nowadays, it seems like everything I buy has about 10 to 15 hours of content, and that's it. Look at Max Payne 2, Jedi Academy, or Deus Ex—what happened to the content? What happened to the story? Are developers focusing so much on eye candy and multiplayer that they leave the storytelling to professional authors? With the current state of FPS multiplayer, I'd rather spend my days at the dentist than in the kindergarten classroom of an online server. And what is this notion of "replayability" when the story never changes? Am I supposed to play the game on a harder level after I finish it the first time just so I can save more often? Is that replayability, my ability to replay a given section over and over since I cannot get past it on supergodlike mode?

CGW redesign feedback
Kudos on the new look. Especially the staff page. Its yellow and orange harvesty nature reminded me of Thanksgiving, which reminded me of the dead turkey meat still in my fridge. Overall, it's really nice. But whoever took Jeff Green's picture should have to do some serious penance. Check Out is the best idea for the nonglossy, cheap-paper section of the mag. I likes. Muzzah, Mr. Liu.

Steve

Good games to me are like books; they tell a story and keep you so entwined in them that you don't notice the sun set and rise and set again. Please God, don't make Doom 3 and Half-Life 2 big letdowns...

Rob

Daytona Beach, FL

Help, my eyes are bleeding! I really enjoy reading all the articles in the magazine, but the new format with the light gray and small black print over solid blue and red backdrops is very hard to read, and I'm sure that wasn't your goal. I know the art team needs to "redo" the look of the mag each year (it validates their existence at the company), but for the love of all good things, those color blocks have gotta go.

Todd

The redesigned issue is excellent, but I didn't know you were redesigning your editor. Is that picture really Jeff or porn star Randy Spears on a bad day? You

Steve

The new layout in the January 2004 issue of CGW was impressive, but there was one thing that surprised me: the staff page. Like the first 5 minutes when you finally meet your classmates in person, I turned the page to a shocking sight—pictures of the people I'd been reading about for over a year now. Not that any of you were overwhelmingly unattractive, but it's hard to make the transition between the people you've created in your mind and the people as they are in real life. The most horrifying, however, was Jeff Green. In his old photo, I had always seen a slightly older version of Animal Planet's Jeff Corwin. Tall, dark, handsome. I was, for lack of a better word, horrified to see my Jeff with that creepy half-smirk and awkward buzz cut. Oh, Jeff, what am I going to do with you?

Rachel

Indianapolis, IN

Mail Bites
Keep doing what you do best, my beloved CGW, and screw yourself raw.
-Wanker

My sister has a birdcage requiring continual crap catchers. I can think of nothing better for the job than your magazine.... Keep 'em coming CGW! From now on, I will get my game reviews from your competition.
-Danny Mignone

Illustration by Schubram
This jungle makes the Amazon seem like a botanical garden.

Now the original Dungeon Siege comes with 20 more hours of RPG adventures in the mysterious, lush jungle of Aranna. Travel with an arsenal of weapons and spells through rich landscapes where Bora and Zaurak are as lethal as they are stunning. A powerful new pack animal can join you in the battle against relentless enemies, including lizard-like Zaurak, feline Hassat, and giant insects. You and the party you assemble are in a desperate struggle against time to save the world from destruction. Be ready for a challenge—they don't call it a jungle for nothing. www.dungeonsiege.com
Share the love/hate online!

Hey kids, now you don't have to wait a whole month to say you love us! Just go to the official CGW message board at boards.tup.com/cgw and post right now! That's right, within seconds of reading this, you too can have your opinions on everything from Wii's hair to our latest reviews published online for the entire world, including your mother, to see! So, go now! Pos! Big up yourself! Don't be part of the silent majority! Be part of the annoying, whiny minority!

I have gone from the "Thank God I'm a country geek. I'm so happy I just milked the cows. I'm a redneck" look to the "I have the greatest job on the planet. It's early afternoon and I'm wasted. I am a true babe magnet" smirk. By the way, Just For Men will take care of the little problem around the temples. I speak from experience.

Computer Dave from NJ

Please convey my thanks to your art design guys for making parts of your magazine unreadable, so now I don't have to waste as much time reading it. Please note that itsy-bitsy black text + colorful background = eye strain.

Victor De Grande
San Leandro, CA

Just wanted to send a couple comments about the mag. The new look is cool: very clean, easier on the eyes. I like it. It can stay.

The Check Out section is great. I always build my own PCs, so your reviews of full machines were not really useful to me. I've always wished you would break down the components and peripherals more often for us do-it-yourselfers, and now my wish has been granted.

Finally, I've always enjoyed Robert Coffey's enlightened POV in Scorched Earth, but the last couple of articles have actually been relevant and insightful in addition to entertaining. Whether he continues being relevant and insightful, or just grotesque and demented, I'll still be reading.

Kevin

Mail Bites

Jeff! What's up with that new pic?! You are SCARY, man! BTW, Wil rules, he is way cooler than Samuel L. Jackson, and I want a job there working with him! ROCK ON!!!!!!!

—John Pertwee

Although most of the strategies in Gamer's Edge were so basic that readers really learned nothing new, there were some gems (albeit few and far between), such as your four-part Warcraft III strategy guide and the now-classic Impossible Creatures strategy guide. Will I miss Gamer's Edge? I think so. Reading strategy guides in a magazine is still better than getting them from the Internet.

JM Cruz
Mark City, Philippines

Someone actually liked our DVD

Giving gamers free games? You must be nuts! As I was playing Warlords and Thief II, I kept saying to myself, "I can't believe this is free." Like any self-respecting PC gamer, I already had Deus Ex, but it's still quite impressive that it's on there...for free! To put the icing on the cake, you also slapped on the Doom 95 shareware, so I get to bask in the glorious nostalgia! The best disc ever from any magazine, hands down. If you can talk one game company a month into letting you give away an older game, I'll immediately cancel all subscriptions to other magazines. I agree with your reviews more anyway. Happy gaming!

Matt Woodley

Thank you, and congratulations on being the one person in America who didn't hate us for giving away free games on a DVD.

The devil and Mrs. Malaise

My wife has told me not to leave the January issue of your magazine lying around, due to the picture of the Doom 3 "weirdo" on the front.

Apparently, it's freaking her out. Is there anywhere I can buy it as a poster?

Patrice Malaise
Toronto, Canada

You'd have to ask her about a poster, but given your wife's reaction, we don't recommend you try to get it. Save your money and buy a new wife.

—Kevin

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Diplomacy Is Primary Weapon in America’s Quest to End Indonesian Crisis.

By Eric C. Baldwin
GLOBAL PRESS NETWORK

Indonesia—A government official was relieved that the situation didn’t turn into a full-scale war with Indonesia, just days after the situation was tense. The official was also pleased to see some of the Indonesian forces begin to retreat. However, the potential for war is still very much alive.

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Top 10 Games of 2004

Our odds-on favorites for what the year's best will bring

Unless you're a fervent console zealot, you've probably noticed PC gaming is back in the saddle again. In fact, 2003 was supposed to be "the year of the PC," with Doom 3 and Half-Life 2 scheduled to ship in the fall. It was still a great year—abundantly evidenced in our awards feature—but now, both of these giant-killers are scheduled for 2004, along with a few dozen other potential greats. We're happy to report that picking just 10 games for 2004 was pretty tough. How do you decide with an embarrassment of riches that includes World of Warcraft, Sam & Max 2, Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault, Operation Flashpoint 2, Quake IV, S.T.A.L.K.E.R., Tribes: Vengeance, and more? The only game we felt could be safely excluded was Duke Nukem Forever, since it'll never be finished.


Half-Life 2, Valve Software
Odds: Even
OK, so Valve has had a string of bad luck and missed deadlines since announcing Half-Life 2 last year. But that doesn't mean the game won't blow us all away when it finally ships. Valve did it once, and no one's made a better
game since. Our bet is that the company can do it again.

**Battlefield Vietnam**

**Odds:** Even

Once we played it we were hooked— in some respects, it's more fun than *Battlefield 1942*. The jungle not only adds atmosphere, it's also the defining element of the new game's design. The graphics are great, and there's a ton of vehicles and weapons, plus 17 songs from the era—there's nothing like flying into combat in a Huey listening to *Ride of the Valkyries*. Apocalypse now!

**Doom 3**

**Odds:** 2 to 1

It's a war of the gargantuans between *Doom 3* and *Half-Life 2*. Id's baby looked awesome when we saw it a couple months ago—scary as hell and utterly gorgeous. But will it feel fresh with largely *Doom*-era weapons? Here's hoping the gameplay and level design are as cool as the engine.

**Full Spectrum Warrior**

**Odds:** 2 to 1

For those craving some quality tactical action, this looks to be a sure thing. What we've seen amounts to Tom Clancy's *PKMN*—that is, intense military strategy without all the micromanagement. The only trick right now: We actually need to see the PC version in action.

**Rome: Total War**

**Odds:** 2 to 1

Not since *Civilization III* have we been so excited about a strategy title. But this looks like a landmark game for the age: epic battles with huge armies, cinematic graphics, war elephants, siege engines—even war dogs. Creative Assembly (*Shogun: Medieval Total War*) has a reputation for polished, balanced, deep games, so we can't wait to unleash hell.

**Battle for Middle-earth**

**Odds:** 2 to 1

The RTS heads behind the *Command & Conquer: Generals* games are hard at work on this *Lord of the Rings*-fueled title. Why are we excited (besides the fact that we're dorks)? Aside from the graphical goodness is a promising game structure: control individual LOTR heroes, squads, or massive armies that intelligently wade into battle.

Valve did it once and no one has made a better game since. Our bet is that the company can do it again.
Unreal Tournament 2004
Odds: 2 to 1
Now that it's actually shipping in 2004, we can look forward to throwing it down on deathmatches, the return of the greatly missed assault rounds, and terror from above via many new vehicles. Plus, there will be a 64-bit processing version that has Wii's tech side all in a tizzy.

The Sims 2
Odds: 2 to 1
The addition of simulated life-spans, persistent digital DNA in families, tons of new behaviors and items, and a vastly improved graphics engine make The Sims 2 a sure thing. PC gaming snobs may look down their noses at the franchise, but The Sims line is as hard core as any "gamer's game" and features the kind of intense player input that makes strategy classics.

Sid Meier's Pirates!
Odds: 3 to 1
We're going out on a limb with this one because we haven't seen it yet, but this is Sid Meier, and this is his remake of his own 1987 classic, one of the most beloved computer games ever made. The action-RPG to watch for in 2004.

Freedom Force 2
Odds: 5 to 1
We're confident that Irrational Games can deliver another deep, comic-book-based strategy-RPG. The big question now is, can the brilliantly loving tongue-in-cheek humor of the first Freedom Force make the transition to the earlier golden age of comics? Everyone loves beating Nazis, but can they be as funny as the outlandish villains of the original game? We sure hope so.

MMORPGs
Odds: 500 to 1
Will there be a breakout MMORPG this year? Probably not. Every other "sure thing" MMO (i.e., Star Wars Galaxies, The Sims Online) has proven that the online goldmine of EverQuest may be more illusory than first believed. Every big title on tap for 2004 has not only the enormous hurdle of player effort to leap, but also its own potential problems. City of Heroes? No loot, no player-villains, no capes. Ultima X: Odyssey? How many younger gamers know about this franchise beyond the spectacular Ascension? Matrix Online? Have you seen the last two movies, or been suckerized into buying the game? Of the lot, World of Warcraft and EQ2 have the most hope, basically because Blizzard tends to get things very right and EQ2 can coast by slightly improving on its mysterious winning formula. That said, any MMO is a long shot at best to hold any interest for any length of time.

The Good, the Bad & the Ugly
News and views from the Wild West

The Good
Turbine buys Asheron's Call 2 license
Here's a nice victory for the "little guy." Turbine Entertainment, feeling flush, purchased the rights to its massive-multiplayer game, Asheron's Call, back from corporate behemoth Microsoft, thus ensuring the game can continue to grow and develop, without being subject to the whims of the Dark Lord of Seattle. With D&D Online and Middle-earth Online also on Turbine's slate, they are definitely the online game developer to watch in the coming year.

The Bad
Weak sales of good games
This one isn't just bad, it's downright depressing. As of January, two of the best games of 2003, Ubisoft's Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time and Beyond Good & Evil were both suffering from poor sales, forcing Ubisoft to desperately lower prices, and, in the case of B&G, abandon any notion of a sequel. Ubisoft blow it big by showing these games out during an overcrowded Xmas season, and this is the result.

The Ugly
Rampant code leaks
It's a terrible problem: game code leaking out onto the Internet before the games are actually finished. Following the disastrous Half-Life 2 leak, which stupidly helped get that game postponed, in January, three more games apparently suffered from code leaks: Painkiller, S.T.A.L.K.E.R., and World of Warcraft. Folks, it's not funny, and it helps no one. Do those who are trying to entertain you for a living a favor and do not download leaked, early versions of games. Go buy Beyond Good & Evil instead.
YHUR
WHUP
WHUP ASS.
Sam & Max: Freelance Police

Lookie, Sam! It's the appallingly visage of crime!

Need someone to take care of that beast from the cereal aisle? Having a bad day on the moon? Got some trouble with monkeys violating the heavenly temple? Ghostbusters be damned—you need Sam & Max: Freelance Police. Like a soul-sucking simulacrum swimming down your throat and possessing the hell out of you, the dynamic duo of adventure gaming weirdness is coming your way.

The madcap comic-book creations of Steve Purcell, Sam (a "canine shamans") and Max (a "hyperkinetic rabbity thing") are self-employed crime-fighters, punishing evildoers (and anyone else who gets in the way) with their own illogical brand of justice. Their hit 1993 adventure Sam & Max Hit the Road laced plenty of the duo's signature humor into the traditional LucasArts-style adventure gameplay, and this latest outing promises a similar journey into their bizarre world. Six separate cases to solve, 19 minigames to unlock, and bonus downloadable content means plenty for Sam & Max fans to look forward to. Did we mention that it takes place in a full 3D environment?

Longtime fans of the Freelance Police can also expect quite a few nods to their comic book escapades. The various missions look to echo some of the classic comic story lines, and a few key supporting characters—such as Sam and Max's insane, hard-boiled detective neighbor, Flint Paper—make guest appearances. If you ask us, the PC gaming world has been deprived of Sam and Max for far too long. You can bet we'll be waiting eagerly for the summer release of Sam & Max: Freelance Police.

The dynamic duo of adventure gaming weirdness is coming your way.

Console Corner
What's worth taking from your little brother

We can't live in a vacuum. There actually are—gasp!—good games that are only available on the consoles. Here's this month's pick:

James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing, Electronic Arts (Xbox, PS2, GC)
While James Bond's record on the PC front earns him a goldfinger, the console games have generally been good. The newest in the series is probably the most ambitious attempt to put a Walther PPK in your hands. The big push in this third person action/stealth game is for the flavor of an honest-to-god film. No expense has been spared as 007 boasts dramatic camera angles and a story penned by the guy who wrote GoldenEye. Some will be excited about all the celebrity talent in this game (Willem Dafoe, Pierce Brosnan, Heidi Klum and so on), but we're looking forward to the driving levels worked on by the team behind Need for Speed Underground.

Darren Gladstone
Also noteworthy: Ninja Gaiden (Xbox) and Wrath Unleashed (PS2/Xbox)
Horizons: Empire of Istaria

massively multiplayer...

...FROM A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW.

"Horizons is the game to get this year." E3 2003 - Game of Show - IGN Vault

"...simply amazing to behold." E3 2003 - Best of Show: RPG - DailyGame

"...a cut above most MMORPGs...unique elements that have never been seen in any massively multiplayer title." - Adrenaline Vault

"...your ticket out of your old and boring game/life." - UGO

"...unique character classes and deep skill system..." - Gamezone

www.istaria.com

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Gamers Give Big for Kids Hospital

Penny Arcade brings the toys and the noise, noise, noise, noise

That jolly fat guy in the red suit had some help this holiday season, and the kids at the Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center in Seattle scored big.

Jerry Holkins (Tycho) and Mike Krahulik (Gabe), who run the popular gaming site Penny Arcade (www.penny-arcade.com), organized a toy drive they called Child's Play for the Children's Hospital in Seattle, and the response from Penny Arcade readers was monumental.

"It's been amazing," said Krahulik, the artist who draws the Penny Arcade strip. "Our readers have really gone above and beyond to help these kids. We've collected over $175,000 in toys and cash. That's just incredible."

In part, Child's Play started as a response to some of the negative press gaming has gotten whenever some nutcase commits a violent crime.

"The media seems intent on perpetuating the myth that gamers are ticking time bombs just waiting to go off," Krahulik wrote on Penny Arcade's website. "I know for a fact that gamers are good people. We are just regular people who happen to love videogames."

Krahulik and Holkins hoped Child's Play might counter some of that negative publicity while benefiting a worthwhile charity. "Some of these kids are in pretty bad shape and just having a Game Boy would really raise their spirits," Krahulik said. He and Holkins have been heartened by the response Child's Play has received.

"It has really surprised us. I think we each expected to bring in a few thousand dollars' worth of stuff. The level of support from the community for this project has really blown us away," said Krahulik.

The Children's Hospital in Seattle, which treats 390,000 children each year, is happy for the support. "We are very grateful and appreciative of Penny Arcade and the online community for their Child's Play gift drive to benefit Children's patients," said Kim Korte, Child Life Manager at the hospital. Korte said that the toys and gifts will be given to patients throughout the year and will also be distributed at Children's Playroom, outpatient clinics, and regional clinic locations.

If you didn't hear about Child's Play in time to contribute last year, you'll get another chance this year. Penny Arcade hopes to expand the toy drive to benefit even more hospitals. It looks like Tycho and Gabe will be giving Santa a run for his money. — Mark Asher

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Reality Check</th>
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<tr>
<td>C&amp;C Generals: Zero Hour</td>
<td>B+</td>
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<td>Railroad Tycoon 3</td>
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<td>Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic</td>
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As one of the elite US Army's Delta Force Operators, you're trained and equipped for covert missions around the world...

THE OFFICIAL EXPANSION PACK* TO THE #1 BEST SELLING PC GAME

New Conflicts, New Missions.....More Action!

- Face new challenging missions in 2 separate campaigns in the jungles of South America and across remote islands in the Persian Gulf
- Pump up your arsenal with new weapons and vehicles
- Dominate 30 new multiplayer maps online via NovaWorld or LAN
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* Expansion pack requires original Delta Force® – Black Hawk Down® game to play.

A portion of the proceeds will be donated to the Warrior Foundation

www.novalogic.com

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Close N Play
They said it couldn't be done—a PC game console

We always considered "plug and play" an impossible dream for the PC, but some guys never got the message. A company called DISC has introduced patented technology that lets gamers drop any Windows game into a console and play it instantly. Patches and game updates are delivered via broadband or dial-up while the user sleeps.

The DISCover PC game console is a closed system designed to play PC games and function as a kind of media center for DVDs, CDs, and music files. It has the guts of a PC, but it's not designed to let you navigate Windows or surf the web. Its purpose is to bring the great library of PC titles to the masses, simply and affordably, with multiplayer support.

DISC has so far licensed the technology to Apex and Alienware, which are expected to ship units this year. Both models support keyboards, a mouse, USB controllers, and online connectivity (Ethernet and modem). The $400 Apex unit will use a 1.4GHz Pentium 4 chip with NForce graphics. Alienware's box will boast an AMD FX-51 processor, 1GB of memory, and an Nvidia GeForce 5950 Ultra card; the pricing and street date are still undetermined.

The company is working with Microsoft's Enabled Devices Group and GameSpy to use Windows XP Embedded, along with GameSpy's online connectivity. Once connected to the Internet, the system recognizes your installed games and automatically downloads patches and updates. When the hard drive fills up, the device uninstalls the least-used programs to free up space (but doesn't delete saved games).

We'll have to see how the first systems shake out, but if the device works as advertised it could be a great alternative for those who want to play PC games without the hassles and expense. —Ken Brown

Rise of Nations Contest
Win copies of RON and the new expansion Throne and Patriots

Who wants to take over the world for free? Sorry, Chairman Kim, only U.S. residents are eligible. If you're a cheap-skate megalomaniac (and frankly, who isn't?), just answer the following questions and you could win a signed copy of the upcoming Rise of Nations expansion Throne and Patriots, along with a copy of the original game.

Five lucky nerds will be chosen at random from among those who answer the questions correctly. Got it? OK, here goes:

1. How many ages are there in Rise of Nations?
2. In what age can you build the Kremlin?
3. Which final technology allows the instant construction of units?

Send the answers, along with your name, address, and phone number, to cglletters@ziffdavis.com. Please include RON CONTEST in the subject line, and be sure to say hi to Ryan Scott, the half-starved editorial half-wit who'll have to go through all your entries to pick the winners.

Good luck, strategy fans!

Top 5 Downloads
The best things in life are free

This month we focus on demos of less well-known games that are worth checking out.

1. Dominions II
   WWW.SHAFAQNELGAMES.COM
   This turn-based fantasy-strategy game is so deep that once you begin learning its intricacies you won't stop for weeks.

2. Star Chamber
   WWW.BATTLEFONTEX.COM
   A space-race/城市的和娱乐 game that is more than Fliper, the Simulog Diaries.

   WWW.BATTLEFONTEX.COM
   The best looking WWII game is back, and this time players can take it out in the deserts of North Africa, the mountains of Italy, and on the beaches of France and Italy.

4. X-Plane: Space Combat
   WWW.PLANEX.COM
   The game play in this space fighter is currently simplistic, but the accurate space physics engine and customization options will keep you coming back for more.

5. Hardwood Solitaire III
   WWW.PLANEX.COM
   Fall in with all the little girls, lady! This is a big hit in its category as the best portrayal of traditional card games, but its new anti-conversion modes make this a perfect going computer companion.
The answer is clear when you experience Contract J.A.C.K. with the cinematic power of an NVIDIA GeForce FX Graphics Processor in your PC.
Captain Kirk Beams Down

First GenCon in Southern California a little too intimate

GenCon came to Southern California last December, slipping quietly into Anaheim with a modest crowd swallowed by a convention center that felt two sizes too large. There were the usual board games, role playing systems, and collectibles, but it's clear that collectible card games are dominant. "Are these cards valuable?" William Shatner asked those who'd come to hear him speak. "So, there are 52 of them?" No, there are a few hundred, someone in the audience explained. "Oh, so you don't play cards with them?"

The low turnout was evident in the several hundred empty chairs at the Shatner Q&A. "I've seen more people in the men's room," he joked, before chatting with the assembled group of about 100 people. "A very intimate afternoon with Grandpa Shatner," someone whispered as he held forth with a few rambling but entertaining anecdotes. As far as gaming goes, there wasn't much to see: America's Army, an Nvidia booth, the E3 build of Activision's Vampires game, Sierra's Ground Control 2 and Middle-earth Online, and a couple of already released LucasArts titles. A 10-year-old boy turned off a demo of JoWood's Spellforce to join a Call of Duty server, effectively doing an end run around an uninhabited LAN that charged by the hour.

GenCon CEO Peter Adkinson said the turnout of 4725 people exceeded expectations (GenCon in Indianapolis draws about 25,000 people). "We're very happy," he said. "Some exhibitors might have been expecting more people, but we tried to manage expectations." With contracts signed for the next two years, this GenCon still has plenty of room to grow.

Interplay Eats Its Young, Closes Black Isle Studios

The Fallout license appears to be up for sale

Like crash survivors stranded in the Andes turning to cannibalism, Interplay, stranded on a mountain of debt, may be eating its own children.

Although Interplay hasn't made an official announcement, members of Black Isle Studios said the entire Black Isle staff has been laid off and the division has dissolved. Black Isle Studios was working on—oh the pain!—Fallout 3.

According to an anonymous source, Interplay likely plans to sell the Fallout license to generate revenue so that other, lesser-known games in development can be completed. "It's kind of twisted if you think about it," said the source. "The guys working on the more successful brand get to go because..."
Your Family May Just Be THE DEATH OF YOU.

SPEND SOME TIME WITH THE FAMILY.

Move through the fast-paced world of organized crime in Gangland, the game that's part sim, part role-player and all action. Experience 44 explosive multiplayer and single-player levels in Paradise City. Take in the sights with free camera rotation in full 3D and zoom. Interact with AI-driven characters so real you'll swear you could feel the evil chill around them. Keep your wits about you and your clip full, because you never know who you can trust, even in your own family. CAPICE?

WWW.WHIPTAILINTERACTIVE.COM
PRE-ORDERS

**The Sims 2** (Electronic Arts)
Your Sims will be more like, responsive, and more complex than ever before. You'll be able to control your Sims over their entire lifetimes. And since every Sim will have its own DNA, their appearance and personality will be passed down through the generations.

**Half-Life 2** (Interplay) Research scientist Gordon Freeman finds himself on an alien-infested Earth being picked to the bone. Its resources depleted, its populace dwindling. He is thrust into the unenviable role of rescuing the world from the wrong he unleashed back at Black Mesa.

**Doomb** (Activision) One of the most highly anticipated titles of 2003 and the next revolution in action gaming and technology. Featuring an enhanced storyline, spine-chilling, bloodcurdling, altogether unfriendly environment, and music by Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails.

**Counter-Strike: Condition Zero** (Sierra) This new standalone game extends the award-winning Counter-Strike multiplayer game with new maps, weapons, and more while simultaneously introducing new technologies, an extensive single player campaign, and cooperative play.

**Unreal Tournament 2004** (Hiya)
Reload, rev up and ride out. This sequel is faster, higher and meaner than ever. Land and air based vehicles take combat to a new level. An arsenal of new weaponry, dauntless arenas and battlefields make the gladiator blood sport of the future a brand new experience.

RELEASES

**The Sims Makin' Magic** Expansion Pack (Electronic Arts)
Your Sims can now harness the supernatural, casting spells with playful or mischievous intentions. With over 175 new items, a new carnival-themed location, and a host of new quirky characters, the neighborhood will never be the same.

**Call of Duty** (Activision)
Delivers the gritty realism and cinematic intensity of World War II's epic battle-field moments like never before—through the eyes of citizen soldiers and unsung heroes from an alliance of countries who together helped shape the course of modern history.

**Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword** (Ubisoft) In this expansion pack for Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield, you command the world's most elite, multinational squad of counter-terrorist operatives in their latest mission to track the desperate remnants of Gorgon's terrorist organization.

**URU: Ages Beyond Myst** (Blackstone) The most immersive and ambitious Myst experience ever created. Bigger, better, and more innovative than any of the previous Myst adventures. Players will be part of an ever-expanding world that brings more areas to explore and more mysteries to solve.

**Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic** (LucasArts) It is the Golden Age of the Republic. The Galaxy is reeling from a recent conflict with the Dark Lords, and the ongoing battle between the Jedi and the Sith rages on. Your actions will decide the outcome of this war—and your destiny as a Jedi.

All available now at the Computer & Video Games store at amazon.com.

Get thousands of game titles at amazon.com/videogames.
# CGW Top 20

**Wasted time well spent**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Call of Duty (Activision)</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (LucasArts)</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of WWII (M1 Games)</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne (Prey/Blizzard)</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Max Payne 2 (Rockstar)</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Final Fantasy XI (Square Enix)</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>C&amp;C Generals: Zero Hour (EA Games)</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Lord of the Rings: Return of the King (EA Games)</td>
<td>⭐⭐⭐⭐⭐</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Star Wars Galaxies (Sony Online Entertainment)</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Age of Mythology: The Titans (Mercill)</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Prince of Persia (Gremlins)</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>Tron 2.0 (Bungie)</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Freedom Fighters (EA Games)</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 (Activision)</td>
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<td>SimCity 4: Rush Hour (EA Games)</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>The Simpsons: Hit and Run (Vivid)</td>
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<td>XIII (Bungie)</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Madden NFL Football 2004 (EA Games)</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Midnight Club II (Rockstar)</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna (Mercill)</td>
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Survey results of games from the last six months. To vote, go to www.computergaming.com.

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## GREAT DEALS ON PC GAMES

**The Sims Deluxe Edition (Electronic Arts)**

- Includes The Sims, The Sims Living Large, and a host of all-new exclusive features in one Deluxe package.
- **Features:**
  - Create any Sim you can imagine with the powerful Sims Creator
  - Furnish your homes with two completely new design sets
  - Over 50 new modern and extreme fashion choices

*New Low Price!* $19.99

**Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six 3: Athena Sword (Ubisoft)**

- Expansion pack for Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield.
- **Features:**
  - 8 All-new mission campaign in locations from Italy and Croatia to Greece
  - 3 new multiplayer game modes (Adversarial Terrorist Hunt, Adversarial Scattered Hunt, and Capture the Enemy)
  - 7 additional real-world weapons (for a total of 64)

Regular Price: $29.99
Sale Price: $24.99

**Lords of the Rings: Return of the King (Electronic Arts)**

- The fate of Middle-earth is once again in your hands in the final installment of the blockbuster movie trilogy.
- **Features:**
  - Multiple gameplay paths, taking control of the motion
  - Exclusive voice-over by the actual actors from the films
  - All-new multiplayer co-op mode will let players form their own Fellowship

Regular Price: $39.99
Sale Price: $34.99

**NBA Live 2004 (EA Sports)**

- With authentic gameplay, and stunning graphics, this game delivers the definitive basketball experience.
- **Features:**
  - Enhanced freestyle control using the right analog stick to express your game
  - Run team-specific offensive and defensive sets with a single button
  - Build a powerhouse dynasty

Regular Price: $39.99
Sale Price: $34.99

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The greatest threat to the world of Norrath has been unleashed!

The lost continent of Taelosia has been discovered and a massive assault force, the Legion of Mata Muram, is creating chaos and devastation on this once peaceful continent. Experience EverQuest®: Gates of Discord®, the next expansion to EverQuest, and help the Wayfarer Brotherhood protect your world against the invading hoard of fearless, deadly monstrosities from the chaotic Realm of Discord.

- 100 all-new alternate advancement abilities
- Gain leadership experience and unlock many group and raid enhancing tools
- 20 new zones include 10 instanced zones and 10 traditional zones. The new combat zones are for characters level 50 and over.
- New Berserker class empowers you to ravage your enemies
- Unearth arcane spells, mighty weapons and other hidden treasures

In Stores February 2004
You've always dreamed of slipping on the shiny white metal jackboots of an Imperial stormtrooper, but fetishes aside, there's never been a proper chance to do frontline fighting as one in a game. That is, until now. Last month, we got you the scoop on the upcoming sci-fi-fueled, Battlefield-ish Star Wars Battlefront. Since then, we've actually had a chance to knock around an early PC build of the game—and to get some tasty screens for you in the process. The information below, however, will have to hold you over until a release date far, far away (late fall 2004).

On paper, it sounds like the game that Galaxies should have been. Instead of playing as the equivalent of some second-stringer telling you to "stay on target," you're one of the grunts down in the trenches, fighting this well-known interstellar war. OK, two well-known interstellar conflicts. You'll be able to relive battles from the original movies, but material is also taken from the new trilogy, so you're also drafted to fight in the Clone Wars.

For continuity's sake, Imperial forces won't be able to duke it out with the clone army, according to producer Jim Tso, so the entire game will be split into two time periods across 15-plus playable levels—Empire versus Rebellion and Republic versus Federation. There's no word on whether the maps will vary a whole lot, but as Tso says, "Not a whole lot is going to change on Tatooine over the course of 20 years—it's a desert!"

Battlefield—innnnn—sppaaaaaaaace

One thing that's going to change is how you suit up for battle. You play as a member of the heavily armed Republic forces or the heavy-metal droid army, and the Clone Wars are going to be hairy. Just strap into a gunship—this dreadnought seats one pilot, a copilot, a couple ball-turret gunners, and one side gunner. The AT-TE is the squat precursor to the AT-AT walkers. There are also the spider droids, two-wheeled Hallfire tanks, starfighters, and the imposing AATs that almost wiped out Jar-Jar in The Phantom Menace (swooo close, so very close). Granted we only fought in Naboo, but that's just a miniscule taste of things to come. The classic Star Wars trilogy will also be well...

"Pandemic came to us with the idea to make a Battlefield-like game before there even was a Battlefield."

The pilot class is pretty useless without a ride.

As in Battlefield's conquest mode, you want to hold checkpoints.
represented—if not a little lopsided. You see, the Empire has the leg up in firepower and numbers. For every X-wing, Y-wing, and snowspeeder the Rebellion has, the Empire has AT-STS, AT-ATs, TIE fighters, and TIE bombers. Yes, this is shaping up to be a nerd’s dream come true.

It begins the question: Is this game just copying Battlefield’s style and throwing in popular sci-fi vehicles? Tso fesses up: “Pandemic actually came to us after working on Star Wars: The Clone Wars with an idea to make a game just about the battles [in the Star Wars universe]. Basically, it was a Battlefield-like game before there even was a Battlefield.” Of course, Star Wars fans took some initiative of their own by working on the film-themed Galactic Conquest mod for Battlefield 1942. To which Tso adds, “The people obviously want the same thing we do—to be in the Star Wars universe. If we can’t deliver a game better than the mod, we should all quit our day jobs.”

Space exploitation

Considering the scope of the conquest mode, it looks like their positions are secure. Playing a more strategic angle, this multiplayer mode lets 32 players (Pandemic is working up to 64-player capabilities into LAN play) pick sides, and then, before combat, select planets to control. Kind of like Risk, sides alternate choosing among the 10 planets. The ultimate goal, obviously, is to own them all.

Though we don’t have a final list of all the worlds to conquer, we can tell you that Naboo, Genosis, Camino, Tatooine, Yavin, Hoth (“We must have a Hoth battle in every Star Wars game,” Tso jokes), and Endor are up for grabs. There’s also word that a key world and battles from the upcoming Episode III will also be in the game. Some planets, such as Yavin and Endor, rely more on ground combat between soldiers, whether it’s in jungles or the cities on Naboo. Other, more open battles, like ones on Hoth and Genosis, are more vehicle-centric. Now here’s where it gets interesting: Depending on the planet you hold—and the time period you’re fighting in—you get different bonuses for owning the different planets. If the Imperials hold Endor long enough, you’ll be the proud owner of a brand-spankin’-new Death Star. If the Republic maintains control of Camino, your clone army gets bonus units when going into battle. And this is saying nothing of the NPCs who will appear in battle. The famous faces of Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, and Count Dooku number among the bonus computer-controlled NPC troops that’ll duke it out with you. Then, to add more flavor, you may run into some of the indigenous people of various worlds. Tso speaks of computer-controlled Tusken Raiders populating the Tatooine deserts and picking fights with anybody who comes near. There’s also talk of the playful and oh-so-annoying Ewoks sneaking onto speederbikes on Endor. Please, please let there be Ewoks for us to stomp.

Tso promises that the maps themselves will hold more strategic elements as well. He uses Hoth as an example. There are consequences to losing command posts, so if the empire can take out the shield generators early enough, the rebels are toast. Conversely, if the rebels can hold the line, there are only so many reinforcements available for the imperial forces to draw from.

While Pandemic is also hard at work on PS2 and Xbox versions of the game, Tso says they want to make sure the PC version is a quality PC title in its own right and not a port. What we’ve knocked around is obviously early, but as of press time, we’re about a year away from seeing the finished product. This taste of the Force is more than enough to keep us going until then. \* Darren Gladstone

\* "Tag—you’re it!" A little fun and hijinks near a temple on a moon of Yavin.

\* AT-STS are fun, but imperial officers can summon probe droids.

\* The Word: STELLAR
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pentium 4

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Intel ® Pentium ® 4 Processor 3.2GHz Extreme Edition with HyperThreading Technology & 2MB L3 Cache
Nvidia GeForce FX 5950 ULTRA 256MB 8X AGP
MSI Intel 875P 800MHz FSB motherboard
1GB Dual Channel PC3200 400MHz DDR RAM
Dual 80GB S-ATA 150 7200 RPM RAID Array Hard Drive
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Digital Illustrations CE's decision to go all Vietnam on us caused Battlefield vets to panic. Some felt BF wouldn't be the same if it were in a dense jungle, since tanks really can't drive through trees. Others worried that Vietnam wouldn't be done justice. Well, we've recently played BF: Vietnam. We're not worried, but you will want to kill Janis Joplin.

BFV isn't a happy middle ground between what's expected from a digital Vietnam War and what's expected from the next Battlefield. It is, instead, BF: 1942 with new tricks, new art, and new tactics. Renaming it Americans vs. Random Asian Nation In Some Jungle wouldn't change anything. The tunnels and traps that were notorious during the Vietnam War have been overlooked, but what the heck. The Battlefield series isn't about realism—it's about mindless shooting. When was the last time you saw a sniper balancing on a plane's wing at 10,000 feet? Thought so.

So, what real changes are in store? For starters, you'll have to cope with some damn hippy music that was used to brainwash our nation's youth in the 1960s. These same tunes blare out during chopper and boat rides, announcing your presence to nearby friends—and psyching it's the jungle that gives this game its biggest and most alluring twist.

Hey buddy, need a lift to the war zone?

Welcome to the jungle

It's the jungle that gives the game its biggest and most alluring twist. Long grass and an abundance of foliage make hiding a leafy breeze. Once you start going prone, enemies can't see you or your telltale nametags. The end result has a huge impact on gameplay.

Despite the new focus on flora, the base game still revolves around vehicles and stationary emplacements, although less of a focus is being put on armor. On-foot action has been refined, but not to the level that will please Quake diehards. With the exception of a scrapped medic class and reworked gun assignments, grunt play is very much akin to the original's Choppers and comparatively small boats (some acting as mobile spawn points) play more significant roles in the action. Unlike Joint Operations' promise of a killing-machine-free vehicular system, Vietnam's gas-powered beasts still toss out-rockets and bullets. The choppers, capable of hoisting and swinging friendly tanks about the map, are critical transportation and support vehicles, while jets rain fiery hell from above. Desert Combat fans will recognize the control schemes for jets and choppers, and they should appreciate the extra armor the new flyers have. US? We'll appreciate our shot at the war effort come this spring.

Just because you have the superior firepower doesn't mean you have the upper hand.

Name That Tune

Match the in-game music to the most appropriate vehicle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SONGS</th>
<th>VEHICLES</th>
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<tr>
<td>A. The Rink, &quot;You Really Got Me&quot;</td>
<td>1. Chinook</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Bobby Fuller Four, &quot;I Fought the Law&quot;</td>
<td>2. Phantom</td>
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<td>C. COC, &quot;Fortunate Son&quot;</td>
<td>3. Vega</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. Count Five, &quot;Psychotic Reaction&quot;</td>
<td>4. Huey Assault</td>
</tr>
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| E. Deep Purple, "Hash"

The Word: STEAMY

Ivan Sulić
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Talk about not getting enough credit. Of all the big real-time strategy franchises out there, *Warlords Battlecry* has to be the most underrated and overlooked. Spun off from the venerable *Warlords* series, the *Battlecry* games have been some of the best RTS games in years. Fortunately, it seems that we're not the only ones who think so, as the third installment is already well underway.

Although *Warlords Battlecry III* is based on the same engine as its predecessor, it now sports stronger A.I., larger characters, bigger battles, better graphical detail in both units and environments, and a darker, edgier interface. It also promises another fun, open-ended campaign structure similar to the one we saw in previous installments.

**Fresh to the Fight**
The game is loaded with a fistful of new features. For starters, three new types of terrain are available: fertile grasslands, harsh deserts, and lava-rich molten rock. Scattered throughout the terrain are shops where you can purchase valuable items, potions, and spells.

Of course, what good would that be without characters? There's good news on that front as well. *Battlecry III* gives players five new races to choose from. First up are the chameleon-like shraevi, a tribal society of reptilian humanoids who employ powerful dinosaurs and shamanistic magic in combat. The insectoid swarm race consists of putrid scorpions, beetles, and other filthy vermin predisposed toward overpowering opponents with superior numbers of weak troops. Finally, there are the plaguelords, a disturbing mass of disease-bearing ghouls and demons who slowly whiskle away the opposition with their infectious powers. Two new human factions—the magic-wielding empire and the cavalry-heavy knights—fight to keep these abysmal monsters at bay. Add to these the 11 surviving races from *Battlecry II* for a whopping total of 16 unique species. Not bad, eh?

Each race has its own unique units, including plenty of new options for the old races. Hero units get a particularly big boost in the form of a new hero-develop-ment system—your heroes can gain experience and level up during the game. Beyond giving players a high degree of control over how their units' statistics improve, *Battlecry III* presents a wide variety of skills based on the hero's race and class selection. Leveling should go quite a bit faster than in previous installments, although new levels now bring smaller increments of power—indeed, a level 100 hero here is equivalent to a level 40 hero from *Battlecry II*.

The other big change is the inclusion of lairs. These neutral structures routinely spawn packs of aggressive A.I.-controlled monsters, providing an extra bit of challenge in player-versus-player affairs. Destroying these lairs is not always a simple task, as they will spawn some pretty hefty defenses. High-level boss creatures emerge from destroyed lairs, and defeating them yields valuable experience and powerful magical items to bolster your forces.

Speaking of magic, there's plenty of that to be found—30 all-new spells are spread out among three different magical spheres. Divination spells, Poison magic, and the high-powered Arcane discipline give you tons of options if you're trying to draft a magic-heavy army. Elementalist mages specialize in commanding the forces of nature, channeling their energy into powerful creations of fire and ice. Defilers are crafty poisoners who wield noxious venom clouds and roiling magic that chisels away at their foes' life force.

*Warlords Battlecry III* certainly has a solid legacy to build upon. We were huge fans of the last game—it was a contender for Best RTS Game of 2002. If what we've seen so far is any indication of what we can expect, this just might be one of those rare worthwhile entries into an otherwise worn and overdone genre. —Ryan Scott

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File this one under “not big on subtle.” We could try to explain why you’re fighting your way through purgatory—but why bother? Check out that porky hell biker getting knocked on his butt! He just got impaled by a shot from a stake gun and is now reeling from the blow. Off to the right, a Sado commando is ready to strike. Yep, this game looks twisted as hell, with a style all its own. Oh, and it’s got a decent 3D engine to back it up. Look for frenzied, 32-player multiplayer matches online in early 2004.
Far Cry
Trouble in Paradise

Far Cry? More like Near Done. Development has progressed swiftly across the sprawling jungles of Far Cry—from the multiple nonlinear paths you can combat your way through to the deft enemy A.I. Back in July 2003, we told you about charter boat operator Jack carver. Now, here's an update on this promising shooter.

Crytek, the German studio behind Far Cry, demonstrated a late alpha, pre-beta build that illustrated impressive draw distance and physics-coding implementation. Enemies fall in the oh-so-fashionable ragdoll style, but in a subtle improvement, fallen enemies don't collide and clip with one another; rather, they impressively pile atop one another.

Objects like a rusty oil drum can be knocked off a hill and sent barreling toward opponents below. As the barrel begins to teeter downward, one of the A.I.-controlled opponents surprisingly and desperately tries to push the can back up the hill to stave off death. It's a futile attempt that ends in pancake city.

When Far Cry is released in the first quarter of 2004, it will come packaged with the easy-to-use Sandbox map editor. Don't worry about brushing up on your programming chops here; this kit is as easy as running a paintbrush across a wall. When level designer Chris Auty used to make Counter-Strike maps, a 5-square-mile arena would take him up to a month. Thanks to Sandbox, he can easily create a level in a week.

All is not well on this island paradise.

"Basically, anyone can pick up the editor [Sandbox] and put down terrain, add A.I., vehicles, trees, and brushes, and create a level. The editor is stunningly simple to use and really powerful at the same time," says Auty. "[You will be] able to design the level and play it instantly. Sandbox gives you the ability to actually enter the game inside the editor and test what you have created; this is pretty useful when testing timing and layouts, and gives you instant feedback when you're designing."

While Sandbox is designed to have an inviting learning curve, the promised strength of the system has not been compromised. "There are a lot of cool features designed for more experienced users, too. We have a very powerful scripting language that can be edited in the tools, as well as a cut-scene editor for making in-game movies." — Johnny Liu

The World: NEAR

One evil henchman caught sleeping on the job—again.
Ground Control II: Operation Exodus

Real-time strategy gets down and dirty

Somehow out there must really love harvesting coal and iron. How else can you explain the joy that is the modern real-time strategy game? Dig, mine, build, and then sometime before you die, wage war. Yawn. Thankfully, that hasn't been the case with the Ground Control series. It's billed as "real-time tactics," meaning you're assigned squads and immediately rolled into battle. It's been three years since the original, and Operation Exodus promises more of just about everything that made Ground Control so sweet: more tactics, more vehicles, more factions, and more graphical eye candy than you'd expect.

The first thing we noticed when Vivendi swung by our office recently was the incredible attention to detail. In the traditional "God's eye" view of the world, you can make out ripples and reflections in the water and see trees swaying to indicate a breeze (as well as wind direction, which comes into play later). But you can see that in any strategy title these days. Zooming in here, you can even make out the faces of the grunts in the field. In one example, senior producer Jose Aller garnished up a building, and when he zoomed in, we saw soldiers poking guns out of broken windows and aiming off into the distance. When we looked at a medium tank—one of the 48 units in the game—the commander's head was popping out (which improves the unit's accuracy but makes you more susceptible).

While at first these details may seem to be there for effect only, they all actually add to the gameplay. Vivendi has also been busy refining aspects of the original. You can now control individual units, if you want, or stick with squads. You can give orders as to where troops should go and the direction they should face upon arrival. Best yet, it's now possible to return fire as you retreat, you cowardly bastards. The 24-mission campaign looks huge (at least after seeing some of the volcanic-, tropical-, tundra-, and urban-themed maps), and you can tackle missions on your own or cooperatively over the Internet when you aren't having an eight-way deathmatch. Aller also says the development team is working on a scenario/map editor (although not yet final) that might ship prior to the game's launch.

The other big news is the announcement of a third faction, which will be sucked into the uncivil war between the Northern Star Alliance and the Terran Empire: the HR Giger-inspired Viron Nomads. While not much has been revealed about this wacky alien race, we can tell you that the idea is cool. Inspired by nano- and biotechnology, these creatures can meld together to create newer, more potent units. Merge a gas engineer vehicle with two assault troops and a thumper tank and voila—you get a giant gas-bomb-spewing monstrosity! Just like dear old dad. @ Darren Gladstone

The Word: TACT-FULL

Roll out on a wide variety of terrain.
**Star Wolves**

**Word on the street:** Freelancer whetted our appetites for interstellar intrigue... Star Wolves should sate it with a generous serving of sci-fi goodness. Space-faring bounty hunters assume command of a 22nd-century starfighter, then pursue a potential career as a mercenary or tradesman. Earn enough through these activities and you can upgrade and outfit your vessel, plus acquire up to six additional cruisers, assuming command of an actual convoy. Customizable skill sets further give this strategically sound role-playing game some character.

**Sounds kinda beat:** Much as we dig the pretty visuals and respectable premise, sales of space simulations of all stripes have petersed. With interest in the topic flagging, so too have development budgets, leaving us dubious about whether the title can truly live up to its considerable potential. Given the game’s intricate setup, the potential for a steep learning curve also exists, and the last thing poor, beleaguered end users need is another Starfleet Command. We’re keeping our fingers crossed on this one.

---

**Port Royale 2**

**Word on the street:** The original is an engrossing yet often stuffy simulation of the business of piracy and privateering. For the sequel, developer Ascaron presents newcomers with a compromise, introducing a less-confusing play structure that offers optional missions, enhanced sea battles, and expanded town-building features. Trade plays as important a role as ever, although successful seafarers can also own land, construct production facilities, or terrorize villagers for kicks. Much-needed tutorial scenarios should shiver your timbers, too.

**Sounds kinda beat:** Cool it on hoisting the mainsail, landlubbers. The most satisfying pillage and plunder you’ll see here involves separating the natives from their hard-earned doubloons. So rejoice, all you slimy expansionists. Tax-men-in-training may appreciate the gesture, but we’re betting most don’t have the stomach for the hardcore economic models churning away beneath the beautifully rendered waters of this crash course in 17th-century Caribbean capitalism.

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**Xenus**

**Word on the street:** Money can’t buy love, but it purchases almost anything else—playable vehicles, 20 different weapons, ammo, gas—in Xenus, a first-person shooter with role-playing pretensions. As unwitting hero Kevin Myers, you pursue the trail of your missing sister into the Colombian jungle, where dealing with NPCs ranging from guerrillas to government officials is almost as important as gunning down the natives. Sprawling landscapes, complex character interaction, and robust multiplayer support complement your newfound adventures in aviance.

**Sounds kinda beat:** Nothing screams authenticity like a bunch of Russians simulating the South American jungle. In-house reps are also focusing hype efforts on the product’s custom-developed Vital Engine 2 software backbone—shouldn’t they be pushing a seemingly much more intriguing feature set? All told, here’s hoping this game doesn’t prove too clever for its own good.
Editors’ Choice Award Winner - ProMagix DX-W
PC Magazine, November 2003

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The PC gaming event of 2003 is the one that didn't happen: On September 30, 2003, Valve Software did not release Half-Life 2 as promised, thus depriving the gaming world of the one thing we had all—despite our varied interests and biases—united behind in excitement.

Even our cousins here at the console gaming magazines grudgingly acknowledged that this was the Big One. Then it didn't happen. And it still hasn't.

The cool thing is that for PC gamers, it ended up not mattering a whole lot, because this was an incredible year. While recent years have seen a dearth of good Game of the Year candidates, 2003 proved to be a refreshingly frustrating opposite: There were more great games than we can possibly acknowledge here. In fact, it's impossible and pointless to speculate whether Half-Life 2 would have run away with the awards had it shipped, because, well, we haven't played it yet. And those games that did win this year are all more than worthy. Half-Life 2 would have had to be some kind of masterpiece, indeed, to have beaten the masterpiece that is our 2003 Game of the Year.

So to both the winners and nominees, thanks for endless hours and sleepless nights of awesome entertainment. Now let's pass out some awards.

By the Editors of CGW
WE ADMIT IT: WE HAD OUR DOUBTS. After barely being able to stay awake during an E3 demo of the game last May (which, in retrospect, we blame on booze)—and, more crucially, after learning it was to arrive on the Xbox before the PC—we began to wonder if BioWare was really going to deliver on Knights of the Old Republic. Were the makers of the Baldur's Gate games and Neverwinter Nights really going to be able to translate their RPG expertise to the Star Wars universe? And what was up with it looking more like a console action game than a PC RPG? Was this going to be yet another game that started development on the PC, moved to the consoles, and then lost its relevance to PC gamers along the way?

So, as we unequivocally hand over the Game of the Year trophy to this absolutely brilliant gem of a game, the first thing we want to say to BioWare is this: We are sorry. We never should have doubted you.

With Knights of the Old Republic, BioWare took everything it's learned about RPGs and game design over the years and upped the ante threefold with better presentation, better gameplay, and better storytelling, creating a game that is as entertaining and deep and accessible to both casual and hardcore gamers alike as any we've seen in years. At root, it's as complex an RPG as BioWare's classic Dungeons & Dragons games (with a combat system based on the same basic rules), but it has been polished to such a high sheen in terms of both appearance and mechanics that it has appeal far beyond the traditional RPG crowd.

Indeed, this is the first RPG in years that has the entire CGW staff—not just RPG geeks like Jeff and Robert—hooked.

The fact that BioWare has done this with the Star Wars franchise—a license that, frankly, has seen much better days—is even more remarkable. LucasArts owes a huge thank-you to BioWare for restoring intelligence, passion, and humor to a franchise that, in the recent movies at least, seemed to forget what made it popular in the first place.

Though set thousands of years before the time of the films, Knights of the Old Republic does a better job than the Episode 1 and 2 films put together in telling a story worthy of the Star Wars name, with a compelling plot, a host of memorable characters,
awesome voice acting, a steady stream of compelling quests, and, as a bonus somewhere beyond the halfway point, one of the most brutal and surprising plot twists ever seen in a videogame.

For PC gamers who patiently awaited the game’s release after an initial Xbox launch, there’s been much reason to rejoice. Rather than releasing the typical sloppy console port, BioWare went out of its way to please the PC crowd. Not only is there a (small) new area to explore, but all the controls are also perfectly retrofitted for mouse/keyboard, and the higher-resolution graphics are far more beautiful than what you’d see on a TV, without overtaxing our machines. It’s a model of how to port a game.

There were plenty of other awesome PC games this year, for sure. Other titles that made our short list for Game of the Year included Call of Duty, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, Iron 20, and one very loud, insistent voice (from W3) for Madden NFL 2004. In another year, any one of these games might have won and been worthy. But not this year. This year we agreed that no other game came close to matching the staggering, transcendent experience of Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic. It’s the RPG for non-RPG fans, the Star Wars game for Star Wars haters, and the game that (as if we needed more proof) definitively cements BioWare’s status as one of the most talented, ambitious, and artistically successful game companies this industry has ever seen.

In a stellar year for PC games, Knights of the Old Republic still manages to rise head and shoulders above the rest, and is unequivocally, resoundingly, CGW’s Game of the Year for 2003.
STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR

AGE OF WONDERS: SHADOW MAGIC

TALK ABOUT JUMPING INTO THE WAY-BACK MACHINE—ill but two contender for Strategy Game of the Year are truly based and both maintain the spirit of turn-based gaming or at least slow enough to be turn-based. And could the turn-based games be any more old school? What has happened in strategy gaming this year?

Not a whole lot, actually and that's why this year's Strategy category was both unpretentious and oddly connected. Nothing really stands out, but both of these titles managed to make a strong visual impression. Galactic Civilizations is the best of the two—well, it was until Dominions II came out. Neither this title showed the potential of a big publisher but still, we found it impressive. All the almost-impenetrable depth of strategy they both offer. Ultimately, though, a profound lack of accessibility kept Dominions II out of the winner's circle, while Galactic as great as it is, feels too much like the staid competitor of old.

The over-familiarity of Railroad Tycoon 3 as well. While Populous II was also an amazing job updating the venerable series, the still-free-to-play title had clearly become the game of choice.

HPK-47, Knights of the Old Republic

Forget those wimps C3PO and R2D2. The best Star Wars droid ever is now a snarky, sarcastic, and deadly assassin by the name of HK-47, the most memorable of KOTOR's stellar lineup of NPCs. On the other hand, what do we know? As HK-47 would say, we're just organic meatbags.
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ACTION GAME OF THE YEAR

PRINCE OF PERSIA
THE SANDS OF TIME

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Ubisoft

5 NOMINEES: GTA: Vice City, Beyond Good & Evil, The Simpsons: Hit & Run, Splinter Cell

THERE IS SOMETHING PURELY MYSTICAL ABOUT PRINCE OF PERSIA: The Sands of Time. Like some rich Eastern tapestry, this is a carefully woven tale threaded between action and puzzles, pulled taut by the Prince's endearing narrative in an authentic Arabian-European accent. His monologues cleverly involve you with his character, from his annoyances with Princess Farra to the horrors of the sand demon legions.

From the first moment you find yourself in the center of a battle, surrounded by the rubble of a destroyed palace and hit by the volleys of blazing projectiles, something strikes you inside. It's a feeling that captivates and transports you, leaving you gaping in misty-eyed wonder at this faraway land across the desert, armed with nothing but your wits and an arsenal of acrobatic skills you effortlessly control.

We don't know how a prince would know so many circus tricks, but this guy can catch serious air as he runs along walls, flipping and diving with the greatest of ease. Sands of Time is also the first game truly to nail time control and make it fun. You might expect the maneuvers to get tired, but the intelligent level design keeps confronting you with new ways to meet the challenges. The game isn't just about using those same moves, but also about finding new combinations in which to use them.

2003 was a golden year for action games. We were so inundated with strong candidates that we had to separate them into two categories: action and shooters. Interestingly, all of the action games were also all on consoles. It's a trend often decried by PC fans, but the truth is that we wouldn't have many of these games if not for the console market.

All of this year's action game nominees are standouts. Grand Theft Auto: Vice City is a towering commercial and critical success that greatly improved on its Game of the Year predecessor. Beyond Good & Evil is stylish, distinctive, and loaded with personality. The Simpsons: Hit & Run infuses a GTA3-style game with the TV show's talented writers and actors to yield the funniest Simpsons game yet. And Splinter Cell has stunning lighting effects to complement its stealth tactics. But none of these games cast a spell on us like Prince of Persia.

From its gorgeous graphics to its mesmerizing level design, rich storytelling, and outrageous character animations, all of the game's elements combine into something greater than the sum of its parts. Truly unforgettable.

BEST WEAPON

Dagger of Time, Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
This handy bit of cutlery puts the Rewind button on your TV onto one kick-ass blade.
Nothing's better than hopping over a foe, shoving him in the back, and leaving him frozen in time, or being able to rewind and undo your last boneheaded maneuver when you screw up a jump (not that that we ever do).

SPECIAL AWARD

Nothing's better than hopping over a foe, shoving him in the back, and leaving him frozen in time, or being able to rewind and undo your last boneheaded maneuver when you screw up a jump (not that that we ever do).
FLIGHT SIMULATION OF THE YEAR

FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2004: A CENTURY OF FLIGHT

ALL THE DETAILS FALL TOGETHER IN FS2004: A CENTURY OF FLIGHT, the first release in this venerable series that convincingly re-creates the entire flying experience. It sports authentic terrain covering the entire Earth's surface, thousands of airports, and stunningly realistic weather based on actual current conditions. Air traffic control is smarter and flight model feel has lost its artificial touch. Though the addition of some fascinating planes—including the Spirit of St. Louis and the DC-3 airliner—is welcome, it's Microsoft's support of third-party add-ons that's key to FS2004's appeal. There are thousands of high-quality add-on aircraft, commercial and freeware, from airliners like the DC-4 and Airbus A380 to fighters like the XP-38 and F-16 to fantasy craft like the Millennium Falcon and a giant flying pumpkin. High-detail add-on scenery covers much of the world, and you can add A.I. air traffic covering airlines from Jet Blue to Air New Zealand. On a high-end system, you can have dozens of aircraft in the pattern around a crowded airport, all flying over photo-real terrain. Out of the box, it's an excellent flight sim. Download a few add-ons and it's an amazing simulator of the entire world of aviation.

MMORPG OF THE YEAR

TOONTOWN ONLINE

THE ONLINE MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER GENRE IS STILL A REVOLUTION WAITING TO HAPPEN. We know we hate saying this, but it continues to be true. Everyone keeps trying, but no one is really coming up with a model that stays very far from the one already mastered by games like Ultima Online and EverQuest. This year's biggest, most promising entrants—The Sims Online and Vertigo Mars Galaxies—are not living up to expectations. Will they get better? We hope so.

This year delivered a few cool new titles. Final Fantasy XI is an absolutely engrossing game, and has a tremendous in-drawing list of new genres. Including the real-world's coming soon to the high-octane online game. Sony Online's PlanetSide is the world's most original massively multiplayer game and great fun for those who succumb to large-scale battles. The only problem? Games like Battlefield 1942 offer always online for a lot less money, per month. But PlanetSide is the best massively multiplayer game of the year for those who have to immerse in the one we're about to award.

And that would be Disney's Toontown Online. You need to be a parent or a critic to appreciate it fully, but what Disney accomplished was pure brilliance—a massively multiplayer game with the perfect balance between solo play and group dynamics in a unique, vibrant and safe online game world. With a mix of tops, fan-made structures, and endless variety of activity, Toontown is the one MMORPG that all MMORPG fans should be playing and studying. A word of caution: it will pull your kid into a gaming coma like the rest of us.
SHOOTER OF THE YEAR

CALL OF DUTY

PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION  DEVELOPER: INFINITY WARD

+ NOMINEES  Max Payne 2, Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield, Tron 2.0,  Freelancer

CALL OF DUTY WON THIS CATEGORY WITHOUT A SHOT FIRED—there simply was no debate. There was one lone vote for Tron 2.0, but it was made more in the spirit of recognizing Tron's innovation and stunning design. No one was willing to put forth—or even listen to—an argument that another game was better.

From the first American levels to the climactic Russian missions at Red Square and Berlin, Call of Duty piles on intense, electrifying moment after another into an exhilarating warlike experience. It achieves this with good level design and tough A.I., but all of the nominees have that. What makes COD stand out is its huge numbers of combatants, its cinematic scenes, its lightning pace, and the overall sense that you are a part of something epic. It makes Medal of Honor: Allied Assault seem simplistic by comparison.

You can quibble with Call of Duty's length, linearity, and lack of a cohesive story, but the game more than overcomes these with the best depiction of combat ever seen on the PC. It's not always realistic—there weren't many chase scenes in WWII, but those chases were among the most exciting levels in the game. The amazing audio prompted one editor to remark, "It sounds like they recorded actual weapons being fired into sides of beef!"

The game reaches a terrifying crescendo in the Russian campaign, where it's hard to pick one best level among so many greats. We had a long debate trying to choose the best one before giving up and concluding that the whole Russian campaign was the highlight. We'll never forget crossing the Volga under deafening gunfire, running through Red Square looking for a rifle, or seeing German soldiers bludgeon our comrades with the butts of their rifles. It's simply one intense scene after another.

Max Payne 2 and Rainbow Six 3 are very good games in their own right, but both offer only incremental improvements over their predecessors. Freelancer dazzled us with its immersive interstellar world, wild combat, and ambitiously open-ended design, but it can't compete with the cinematic spectacle of Europe at war. (Categorizing it as a shooter may seem odd, but the space-sim category isn't what it used to be, and we felt it was more shooter-like than the amorphous action games category.)

In the end, the only question was whether Call of Duty should be Game of the Year. In any other year, it could have been. Mission accomplished, Infinity Ward.

BEST SOUND

Call of Duty  Anyone who’s seen Saving Private Ryan will attest to the contribution that sound played in the opening sequence. The same is true for the sound in Call of Duty. Whether it’s bullets whizzing by, shells exploding, or the low-end rumbling of an enemy tank as it approaches, the game’s audio is just as impressive as its visuals.
WAR GAME OF THE YEAR
KORSUN POCKET

AS WAR GAMES HAVE BECOME MORE OF A NICHE, their audience has had to adapt to the demands of different types of games—real-time strategy, turn-based, and so on. Korsun Pocket stands out because it's a turn-based strategy game that offers a fresh take on the genre. The game's design allows players to control a large number of units, each with its own unique abilities. The AI is also impressively advanced, adding depth and complexity to the gameplay. Overall, Korsun Pocket is a must-play for any strategy game enthusiast.

ADVENTURE GAME OF THE YEAR
UPLINK

OK, FIRST OF ALL: IS UPLINK AN ADVENTURE GAME? Maybe not. The game’s developer, Introversion Software, describes it as a “simulated hacking tool.” Other gaming media have listed it as a strategy game. But whatever. One of the things we love about Uplink is that it really is kind of its own unique little beast. It gets our Adventure Game of the Year award because in our minds, it’s done the best job of doing what the best adventure games always do: immersing us in a good story and giving us some good puzzles to get our brains moving. Uplink puts you in the role of a fledgling agent for an underground hacking network, receiving an increasingly difficult array of assignments that involve breaking into computer systems around the world to steal, change, erase, and sabotage data. The best thing about it is its lo-fi presentation: It’s all done at a computer console, as if you’re really hacking. An immersive, original, and suspenseful little game.

EXPANSION PACK OF THE YEAR
BATTLEFIELD 1942: SECRET WEAPONS OF WORLD WAR II

Secret Weapons provides the expansion stands out as a whole new experience by adding new vehicles, maps, and more depth to an already great game. Yes, the experimental vehicles are nice, and we really appreciate the addition of an objective-based mode, but the mobile's steam punk—like C-47 transport planes—really after the way you play. It's good to see that the folks at Digital Illusions didn't rest on their laurels when putting together the add-on. This is a great expansion, with all the historical and political elements that make Battlefield 1942 such a great game.
**Awards**

**Sports Game of the Year**

**Madden NFL 2004**

EA Sports / Electronic Arts

Nominees: All-NFL 2004, NFL 2004, Championship Manager

While the easily excitable William O'Neal loudly and proudly proclaims Madden 2004 to be the best overall game of 2004, he must be content with the fact that it's the best sports game of the year—which it most definitely is.


**Racing Game of the Year**

**Need for Speed Underground**

Electronic Arts / Electronic Arts

Nominees: Project Gotham Racing, Burnout

There's no mistaking the undeniable style in Need for Speed Underground. It may not be a conventional racing title like a NASCAR or F1 title, but no other game will make you feel the Gs at every turn like NFSU does. The arcade-y physics combined with tight visuals leave you crashing into the sides walls, and when the glossy neon lights aren't distracting you, the fantastic special effects always help convey white-knuckle speed.

Unlike other racing games, Need for Speed also introduces some seriously innovative race modes. Whether you're drifting around closed courses, tearing down city streets in the middle of the night, or drag racing, all the different ways that you can play (and trick out your car) keep you hooked long after you've crossed the finish line.


**Puzzle Game of the Year**

**Bookworm**

PopCap Games

Nominees: Wordcraft, Osmosis

This little worm is a disease—a green caterpillar that's seized upon the good offices of GSW, festering as he gradually turns the whole of the office into a maze. This may sound somewhat disgusting, but once you've found your way to a word, you'll find yourself powerless to resist discovering more.

The game's deceptively simple design—a combination of Scrabble and Bejeweled—not only brought to our neck, it also infected our friends and co-workers. There were many instances of non-gamers suddenly finding the time to play Scrabble all day at work to beat their scores.
IN THE WAR FOR CPU DOMINANCE, it's an understatement to say that AMD has been fighting an uphill battle. Intel has long dominated AMD in both performance and perception. In its attempt to eke out a slice of the CPU pie, AMD has dabbled in everything from goofy naming schemes to an ill-fated attempt to "debunk the MHz myth" that has been Intel's bread and butter. Well, it seems that all AMD really needed to do was design a processor that's simply faster than the best Intel has to offer. And that's exactly what AMD achieved with the 64-bit Athlon 64 FX-51.

The Athlon FX-51 boasts an integrated memory controller and supports DDR400, which gives it better memory efficiency and bandwidth. The FX-51 has superior gaming performance over the 3.2GHz Intel Pentium 4 Extreme Edition—it's no wonder that most of the systems in our Ultimate Gaming Machine story were based on the Athlon 64, and the three fastest rigs all rocked the FX-51.

While 64-bit gaming—as well as Microsoft's next OS, the 64-bit Longhorn—is somewhere off in the horizon, the Athlon 64's stellar 32-bit performance makes future-proofing easy. You've got great performance now, and you're well poised for Longhorn down the road.
COASTER OF THE YEAR

STAR WARS GALAXIES: AN EMPIRE DIVIDED

WHILE WE ARE NOT ADVOCATES OF INFANTICIDE

In more casual times, we could have enjoyed the vast array of content in the Star Wars Galaxies universe. The game featured a rich lore, engaging quests, and a vast landscape that helped pull players into the Star Wars universe. However, with the release of Star Wars: The Old Republic, Galaxies lost much of its appeal and the game was eventually shut down.

RUNNER-UP COASTER

CGW's January DVD

OK, we got it: Not everybody has a DVD drive. Still, you could potentially use our January DVD—complete with five full games, including Deus Ex and Thief II—as a colorful and decorative Frisbee. Or you could suck it up and buy a DVD drive to enjoy the seven-plus CDs worth of stuff we managed to fit on there, ya whiny ingrates. If nothing else, the sleeve doubles as a makeshift toothpick.
**BEST MUSIC**

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
It's hard to argue against the music in Vice City. Plenty of quality '80s music populates the soundtrack, along with a ton of "radio commercials" that are pretty darn funny. All in all, the music goes a long way toward immersing you in the world of Vice City. And if you don't like it, you can make your own damn soundtrack—the game even gives you the option to substitute your own tunes instead of the defaults. Sweet!

**BEST TREND**

Good Licensed Games
A few years ago, games derived from licensed material were pretty much synonymous with crap. Amazingly, this trend has started to change in a big way. This year has seen some pretty solid licensed games, such as Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, Tron 2.0, Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King, The Simpsons: Hit & Run, and The Hulk. Hopefully, this will continue—and hopefully, a few developers ('cough' Shiny 'cough') are taking notes.

**ROLE-PLAYING GAME OF THE YEAR**

Knights of the Old Republic
Apart from one gigantic exception, it wasn't a great year for role-playing games. For the word on Knights, see Game of the Year.

**BEST USE OF A LICENSE**

Tron 2.0
There were many good uses of a license this year, but Tron stood out because the series was all but dead. Tron 2.0 laid down the resurrection code to upgrade this aged story into a new digital dynasty, without forgetting the light cycles, frisbees of doom, and amber waves of pain.

**WORST USE OF A LICENSE**

Enter the Matrix
What is the Matrix? We thought we knew, but after this last year, we wish we didn't. Enter the Matrix substantiates and destructively compounds everything that was bad about the last two movies. The only real redeeming quality was cutting-room floor movie footage. Jack in?
No—jacked up!

**BEST STORY**

Knights of the Old Republic
Someone needs to get over to George Lucas' house right now and rip the Episode III script out of his hands. Not only is KOTOR a great game, but it also has some of the best writing and most devilish plot twists in memory. The dialogue is so good, we can't even compare it to other games. Some movies, that's another story....

**SPECIAL ACHIEVEMENT IN ART DIRECTION**

XIII
Talk about a tough choice: We had the dizzying sweep of Prince of Persia's misty levels competing against Tron 2.0's coolly glowing neon and the surprisingly alive world of Beyond Good & Evil. XIII beat them all with its rigorous and breathtaking adherence to comic book roots visible in every frame of every cut-scene, every graphical representation of sound, and every moment of every level.

**YEAR'S BIGGEST LETDOWN**

Halo
At one point, Halo was considered to be among the five games that would change the face of gaming as we know it. We waited desperately as it was delayed and felt pangs of sadness when it was taken away from us. When it finally was released, it wasn't nearly what it was supposed to be. As a port, it wasn't even a solid job. Halo PC redefined "letdown."
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NG Resonance is an AI construct and pop star who will provide clues as you proceed.

Deus Ex: Invisible War

Morality, divinity, and a whole bunch of locked-door puzzles

Publisher: Eidos
Developer: Ion Storm
Genre: Action/Roleplaying
ESRB Rating: M
Recommended: Intel Pentium 4 1.3GHz, 256MB RAM, 32MB 3D card, 2GB install

The connection to the first game doesn't become clear until fairly late in the sequel.

There are several factions that want Alex's help, including a religious sect known as The Order.

Sometimes, you'll encounter unexpected allies.
Beyond Good & Evil
It's the closest thing to Zelda for the PC—and it rocks.

Counter-Strike: Condition Zero
It's finally here, but should anyone care?

Lords of EverQuest
Wait a minute—didn't I play Warcraft III, like, a year ago?

The Omar are a group of extremely biomodified humans who often have decent items for sale.

History has been kind to the original Deus Ex. Its cultlike following, whose fansites often read like theology dissertations, fondly reminisces about its story and its somewhat unique blend of action and roleplaying. But its flaws (notably its often-repetitive gameplay) are mostly forgotten. Judged on its own merits, Invisible War is a very good game. Like the original, it has both great strengths and significant weaknesses, but the former manage to make the latter bearable in the first game. Invisible War has been simplified in many respects, and something has been lost in the process.

Messiah Complex
Invisible War's story is its best feature. Set 20 years after the events of the original, Invisible War tells of the enigmatically and unsexually named Alex D., whose initials may be the most blatant religious allusion in a game since JC Denton saved the world in the first Deus Ex. Alex begins as a trainee at Tarsus, which at first appears to be a training ground for an elite security force, but quickly reveals itself as something more sinister. The intrigue starts immediately—the entire city of Chicago is destroyed in the opening cut-scene—and only gets more involved as the game wears on.

The story has so many twists and turns that any attempt at an even skeletal summary falls victim to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle. At its most basic, it comes down to a war of philosophies and morality, with several rival factions attempting to enlist Alex's aid as biomodification (physically enhancing oneself with implants) threatens to become more widespread in the world. You must decide whom to help and when. Unfortunately, the decisions often come down to which task is the most convenient—there is very little punishment for betraying your current employer or for attempting to play the factions against each other. Later in the game it becomes clear that there are significant consequences for this lack of consequence, but it's disappointing that you're so easily forgiven for failing to perform assignments you've accepted.

The manner in which you execute your tasks is generally up to you. While the original's skill system has been completely removed (it definitely had quirks, so this is not entirely a bad thing), Alex has the ability to biomodify his/her body, which adds new abilities to his/her arsenal. There are several biomodification slots, and each has three choices for enhancement. Not all of the skills are useful (for instance, taking anything other than the stealth mod for the foot slot would be a mistake), but they do allow you to customize your experience to some degree.

Strength or Stealth?
The problem within this freedom is that every section of the game feels somewhat similar as a result. You can either charge into a hostile area with guns blazing or find some stealthy way—almost always a handy ventilation shaft—to sneak around. After a while, every conflict and puzzle in Invisible War begins to feel like a carbon copy of the previous one. This problem dogged the original as well, and it's frustrating that Ira Storm couldn't find a more interesting means of providing both stealth and action. Also problematic is that the original release of the game is very unstable and has a terrible framerate at higher resolutions, though this problem was addressed with the first patch.

Saving the game from its own flaws are the morally ambiguous choices you are constantly forced to make. There is rarely an evil or good choice, and right up until the end (assuming you can follow the story's occasionally convoluted twists and turns), you'll be unsure of whom to trust.

Verdict
The sequel to Deus Ex is both dumbed down and smarted up.

That one can talk about the game in terms of conventional morality should be enough to recommend it to its target audience.

Invisible War's mechanics are often repetitive and frustrating, but the choices you make are not, which helps keep things interesting even when you're unlocking yet another door with another multtool for the umpteenth time. —Ron Dulin

The game has four possible endings, and strangely, none of them is clearly correct. What appears to be the good ending is actually somewhat terrifying, while the most unsatisfying ending in terms of conventional morality is actually the most rewarding.

That one can talk about the game in terms of conventional morality should be enough to recommend it to its target audience. Invisible War's mechanics are often repetitive and frustrating, but the choices you make are not, which helps keep things interesting even when you're unlocking yet another door with another multtool for the umpteenth time.

Dude, Where's My Stuff?
Invisible War's simplification extends beyond the removal of the original's skill system. While there are a variety of guns, there is only one type of ammunition. Unrealistic, yes, but also a blessing in disguise, since ammo is so scarce. Necessary items are scarce in general, and finding enough ammo or multtools (an electronic lock pick) requires combing every area of every room. The game has a basic economic system, but oddly, you can't buy the most basic items. Dumpster diving is encouraged, as is moving furniture and boxes—the inhabitants of Deus Ex discard full clips and lock picks with reckless abandon.
Armed and Dangerous

Yuck yuck bang boom yadda yadda

Armed and Dangerous is Kelly's Heroes meets Shrek by way of Monty Python and Guy Ritchie. It involves shooting a lot of hapless orcs and Europeans of indeterminate accents. Along the way, there are quips about Star Wars, the French, vegetarian robots, and sheep buggerly. They even slip in a reference to Shing Blade and "your momma" jokes. Just go with it, Armed & Dangerous seems to say, and don't worry about whether it makes sense.

Punchy punchlines

In an industry where "humor" means lame sarcasm, mugging, or pratfalls, Armed and Dangerous stands out for actually being funny on its own terms. This is one of those all-too-rare games in which the cut-scenes are worth watching (even if they are scaled down to a horribly lossy low res). Planet Moon has a great feel for comedic timing and how to frame a shot. You'll also want to pack up the voice audio so you don't miss some of the in-game one-liners and exchanges. "You'll never guess what happened to me!" a rescued peasant tells his wife. "You turned gay?" she asks. No rim shot or laugh track needed.

As for the gameplay, if you're worried that this is just a quick console port, don't be. The controls are great and the technology is sharp, smooth, and robust. You get to wreak havoc through stylish, expansive levels that alternate between quaint medieval villages and gritty industrial settings, complete with detailed trees, water effects, elaborate skies, and flying body physics.

Punchless punching

Although the generic title doesn't do justice to the game's shrewd sense of humor, it is fitting for the fairly generic action, which is only peripherally connected to the cut-scenes. Your band of mismatched rogues will put together an elaborate scheme, only to reude into the background during 10 minutes of running and gunning. With the exception of a really frustrating "protect the village" mission, mixing up the objectives doesn't do anything to change the fact that you're really just playing a forgiving "shoot everything!" game. Although the first few levels introduce some clever and promising scripted tricks (triggering an avalanche to crush buildings, exploding barrels that rocket straight up into the sky, grunts shimmering up drainage pipes to snipe from roofs), these go by the wayside pretty quickly and you're left with a straight-laced shooter.

Planet Moon's Giants had the same problem, running out of steam long before it was over. But Giants had three distinct races to play and ambitious multiplayer support. There's nothing like that here, and Armed and Dangerous peter out way too soon. It tips its hand early on with fun stuff like the Lock and Dam and sticky grenades as in Halo. It's a bit too selfish with the crazy weapons like the Guy Fawkes Traitor Bomb, the World's Smallest Black Hole, and a corkscrew that literally turns the world upside down. Once you've seen this, the last two thirds has a disappointing "is that all there is?" feeling. You're eventually left without much to do besides lean on the Fire button and wait for the next cut-scene.

Verdict

A straight-laced shooter with great cut-scenes.
Not until you punch the nitrous do you get a true appreciation for the term “speed.” The neon-laced streets blur past and the camera uncontrollably shakes. The end result: You're glued to your seat fighting Gs in Need for Speed Underground, the best damn racing game to roll down the avenue.

Make no mistake about it — this is not a full-on driving sim, nor is it anything like previous games in the NFS series. Rather than getting behind the wheel of exotic supercars you could never afford in real life, you're steering import racers — you know, sexy cars like the Ford Focus, Dodge Neon, Honda Civic, and so on. It may not sound like much, but you'll soon get sucked into the varied race types (including skidding out on closed courses, sprinting down crowded city streets, and drag racing) to earn street cred. This allows you to unlock more visual and performance-enhancing tweaks for your ride.

The mod squad
Modding your vehicle is what import racing (and NFSU) is all about. The base models of all the cars handle differently, but once you start adding parts, your handling, speed, and acceleration improve. It’s a nice touch to push you through the single-player game, though it’s a little flawed: Instead of different brand-name components improving your car in different ways, you essentially improve your ride by leveling up. Take the drivetrain, for example: It doesn’t matter whether you get the kit sporting Neuspeed parts or HKS USA parts. It only matters whether or not you buy the pro-level parts — but they're not unlocked until later in the game.

Still, this isn’t some beauty contest! In this pseudocity, you’re racing through the gorgeous, perpetually rain-soaked streets. Shortcuts and dynamic slow-motion moments really play up the over-the-top racing. Unfortunately, there isn’t a whole helluva lot of variety — the entire game consists of a few city miles that get sliced and diced up differently for each match. More than once, you’ll instinctively know that a left turn is coming up, but the developers will have thrown up some dividers or reversed the course to eke out one more level. And for the record, having 111 levels to tear through is nice, but ugh! Give me something else to look at! Would it kill these guys to take a road trip to a different city?

Let’s not forget the physics. While much more believable than those in Midnight Club II, NFSU still leans more toward the arcadey side. You’ll see what I mean after your first drift into oncoming traffic. Also, if you take certain jumps at the wrong angle, you’ll notice sparks fly as invisible walls grind you back on course.

A good selection of hip-hop and hardrock tunes gets your blood pumping, but the utter lack of MP3 and custom soundtrack support means that Rob Zombie tune wears thin after your 70th race. Forget these minor sticking points, though. This game kicks asphalt!

Verdict
Racing doesn't get much better...unless you're in a real car.

Bring it on(line)!
A new era is coming for gaming: PC owners are able to go head-to-head with PS2 gamers. Maybe we can finally settle the score and show 'em who's best. NFSU allows four players to go head-to-head (and we ran into little lag during test sessions).

Modding your vehicle is what import racing (and NFSU) is all about.
Lords of EverQuest

Dang, another set of Iksar scale gloves

It's doesn't take much to make a real-time strategy game these days. There are generally two schools of thought: the Microsoft method (à la Age of Empires), and the Blizzard method (à la Warcraft). Lords of EverQuest does a fairly decent job of aping the Warcraft III formula, while making a few hit-and-miss attempts at bringing in some new features of its own.

The RTS modus operandi has been boiled down to a fairly exact science at this point: A handful of diverse warring factions are saddled into a lengthy single-player campaign, complemented by a number of multiplayer options to keep players beating the crap out of each other long after the campaign mode is over. Lords of EverQuest follows suit, featuring three EQ-based factions, a like number of single-player campaign modes, and the obligatory dose of Internet play.

Tastes like chicken
The three factions each represent a part of the EverQuest population. Humans, barbarians, and dwarves make up the Dawn Brotherhood, while the pint-sized halflings and various elven sub-races comprise the Eddar Alliance. The Shadowrealm represents the darker races of the world of Norrath, such as dark elves, ogres, and the reptilian Iksar. Each faction has five Lord characters to choose from, each with his or her own set of powers and attacks. Though the factions are somewhat unique, a lot of their respective units—as well as their Lords' powers—are a bit too similar. This robs a lot of the game's potential diversity—especially in multiplayer, where everything seems to run together just a little too much.

The RTS modus operandi has been boiled down to a fairly exact science at this point.
Each faction has its own associated single-player campaign; the three campaigns are equal in length, totaling about 36 individual missions. The story is rooted in Norath’s past, dealing with the antipathy between the three factions, as well as their own internal strife. There’s not much to be said about the game’s narrative approach; if you’re a die-hard EverQuest fan, it might pique your interest. Otherwise, this is run-of-the-mill fantasy fare. Expect to finish it off in about 20 to 25 hours of play.

Once you’ve finished the single-player campaign, hopefully, you’ll be somewhat prepared to take down a few opponents online. The game supports LAN and Internet play for up to 12 players, with a number of large maps and plenty of victory conditions that should satisfy a variety of play styles. Victory conditions include the ubiquitous “Last Man Standing” king-of-the-hill mode, a “Platinum Rush” mode that determines the winner based on who can mine the most resources, and a “Lord of Levels” mode that awards those who are able to climb the experience ladder the quickest.

Regardless of which modes tickle your fancy or whether you’re playing a single-player or multiplayer game, you’re looking at a fairly uniform set of RTS gameplay mechanics. Resource-gathering is crucial early on, and platinum is the currency of choice. Platinum goes toward the purchase of buildings, units, and upgrades—the stuff of which mass destruction is made. Plenty of typical fantasy archetypes fill out the ranks, ranging from basic foot soldiers and magic-users to mounted aerial combatants and heavy siege weaponry. Pairing the resource harvest down to a single necessity helps to alleviate a bit of micromanage-

ment, though you’ll definitely need to plan on looking for other mines to excavate once your initial platinum supply runs dry.

We are the Lords of EverQuest!

After you’ve assembled your cadre of walking death, you’ll want to beat up on a few of the local A.I. monsters, who yield items and experience points. Lord characters aren’t the only ones who benefit from this, either; all units gain experience, with newly produced troops starting at a level roughly equal to half your Lord’s current level. You’ll have the option to knight units once they gain enough experience, bestowing them with their own set of extra powers. Knights are essentially less-powerful Lords; you can have up to two in play at a time.

Battles can be quite hectic—especially the large-scale variety. The A.I. in the single-player mode isn’t the brightest in the world, though you’ll want to micromanage your army as much as possible for best results. Micromanagement is, of course, an absolute necessity in multiplayer games, where victory is usually determined by who takes a bigger pounding in the initial skirmishes. Should you lose your Lord or Knights in battle, you can call upon a recruiter unit to resurrect them—that is, if your opponent isn’t already burning your base to the ground.

Ultimately, playing Lords of EverQuest pretty much feels like you’re just going through the motions. The game is aesthetically stuck in the past, the single-player campaign is a typical helping of fantasy storytelling, and the multiplayer experience feels way too familiar. RTS veterans have already seen it all, and though curious EverQuest fans could do worse, they could certainly do a lot better.

Lords of EverQuest is another RTS. What more is there to say? Ryan Scott

Verdict ★★★★

A fairly decent attempt to capitalize on a tried and true (Warcraft III) formula.
Neverwinter Nights: Hordes of the Underdark

Epic characters, epic story, epic bugs

I can't even begin to explain what a phenomenal game this was to play! I can't even begin to explain what a buggy game this was to play! Argh! Couldn't BioWare have waited just a little to release a stable game? You can still play as the character you used in Shadows of Undrentide, but now, you'll meet many familiar faces from the original NWN game—sometimes at the most unexpected times or places. Talking about the storyline will spoil the riches this expansion pack has to offer, but suffice to say, the road to the end of Hordes of the Underdark will take you farther than you can imagine.

Bigger than life
Having two henchmen or the new beasts and tile sets are all worthwhile additions, but the character changes are the real focus. The character cap is raised to 40, so you'll find your character becoming

Admit it; you know you've dreamed of becoming a half-dragon.

"epic" at level 21, opening up some impressive feats. The first time my epic cleric summoned a Red Dragon to fight by my side, I got chills. While you probably won't max out your character in this expansion pack, the new feats and prestige classes will give you incentive to play online (or play the single-player games again). I looked enviously at the new dragon disciple prestige class for sorcerers and barbs. Admit it; you know you've dreamed of becoming a half-dragon.

Morality and allegiances have always been a significant part of NWN, but Hordes ramps it up. The underlying reason you travel and meet new races is ultimately to forge alliances (and create enemies) for a vast upcoming battle. Even at the end, one simple action or double cross can topple all the planning and diplomacy you've worked for the entire game. One quest of unearthing ancient feuds between sentient golems could have been a simple side mission, but instead turns into a moral decision that leads an entire race to fight in your name. Powerful stuff.

And just when you think the end of the game is coming up, it only gets better. You go on a quasi-religious journey unlike anything in the previous games. Encountering some of the more reluctant majestic beings—like the quest to find the Sleeping Man's true love—adds a surreal experience. Finding your own true love can be bittersweet, likewise, if you happen to go down that road.

But all of this great content is severely undermined by bugs. Big, game-killing bugs. Additionally, I suffered incredibly chunky frame rates at times and an occasional crash. BioWare has responded with updates, but unfortunately, these seem to be buggy as well. Hordes of the Underdark has that woefully underbaked, released-just-in-time-for-the-holidays taint to it, and that's just a colossal shame, because underneath that nastiness is a great, great expansion. I eventually got over it. You may not.

Jason Babler

A five-star expansion sadly undone by bugs.

AFTER LENGTHY FORUM-CRAWLING, I found a decent workaround for the worst of the bugs. Uninstall the game. If you already have it on your PC, move your saved characters and game folder to a safe location, then delete the leftover Neverwinter folder. Reinstall and move your saved games/characters back. Still, don't expect it to be bug-free, even with the updates.

The Drow were my favorite subspecies of elves until I met the lovely winged elven race called Aarial. Tastes like chicken, yum!
Victoria: An Empire Under the Sun

The sun almost sets on the British Empire

Victoria: An Empire Under the Sun is buggier than a swamp and less intuitive than a tax form, but there's something innately fascinating about it. A fantastically detailed strategy game, it tries to simulate war, industrial revolution, politics, and colonialism during the Victorian era—and succeeds, to a point.

Veterans of the Europa Universalis games should get into Victoria without a problem. There are some new intricacies, such as population castes, more manufactured goods, and a more involved political system, but none are too difficult to figure out. Victoria is more challenging and more involved than previous EU games and quite enjoyable when it works.

Newbies, on the other hand, will find Victoria nearly incomprehensible. The thin manual isn't bad for explaining basic moves, but it doesn't explain the game's intricacies, especially the baroque economic system. The lack of a tutorial (or at least a thicker manual) is inexcusable for a game of such complexity.

Unpatched, the game also suffers from horrible stability and balance issues. It's too easy to create huge armies and build up ridiculously large treasures, and the game frequently crashes to the desktop. Victoria could be a classic after a few patches, but in the initial release, you're paying Paradox to beta test their game.

Verdict: ★★★★☆
Good game, bad bugs. Patch, patch, patch.

America's Army: Special Forces v2.0

The Quiet Professionals get to work

I'll admit it. I'm biased. My longtime employer, the U.S. Army, just added steroids to the original America's Army game by adding more bells and whistles than a SOPMOD-equipped M4. As a result, America's Army is now one of the best, if not the best tactical sim to grace a computer.

America's Army: Special Forces v2.0 is notable for a number of reasons. It adds the critical role of a combat medic class, so healing injured teammates during combat can mean the difference between winning and losing a match. It includes four newly made or revised maps, along with new weapons like the Army-issue M9 9mm, SPR Rifle, MP5SD6, AKS-74U, the 40mm Hot Thermite Grenade, and more.

Graphics, sound, character models, and ballistics also get makeovers, including beefed-up server protocols and the anti-cheating program punkbuster. But the focus of 2.0 details the history and training of the U.S. Army's elite Special Forces soldiers. It's a great glimpse into what it means to be one of these elite combatants.

Army Special Forces are the United States military experts on unconventional Warfare (or Low Intensity Conflict), specializing in conducting a multitude of high-risk missions—all of which are covered in this update. With the Special Forces update, America's Army gives players an inside perspective on Special Forces roles and military specialties through virtual training exercises.

Once a player successfully completes a challenging written exam on enemy vehicle, aircraft, and weapons identification, along with completing the Escape and Evade course, they're able to play as Special Forces soldiers online via the revamped Pipeline, along with Hospital, Recon, and CSAR maps. Escorting a VIP, identifying enemy vehicles, and playing as indigenous forces are a couple of the many new features added to maps. However, there's a catch: Not everyone can play as an SF soldier. You need a minimum Honor (duty and integrity) level of 15 (equivalent to 10,000 experience points) to operate on the internet. One might be predisposed, but I know a good thing when I see it. Everything in 2.0 makes America's Army more intense, more gripping, and more deserving of its status as the top tactical sim.

Verdict: ★★★★★
Special Forces is the tactical sim genre at its finest.
Beyond Good & Evil

The best game you never heard of

Beyond the blockbuster games and the rotten tomatoes, the runaway hits and the forgettable travesties, there lies a nebula of quality gems that are undeservedly relegated to the bargain bin. These games—these sleepers—are often passed over in favor of the big-name games, the heavy hitters that sell 400,000 copies on name alone, quality be damned. Beyond Good & Evil is one of the overlooked games.

The brainchild of Rayman creator Michel Ancel, BG&E tells the tale of a young lady named Jade who resides on the planet Hillys. An amateur journalist and photographer, Jade is the self-appointed caretaker of the local orphans whose parents have been murdered by the extraterrestrial DomZ Annun. Prompted by a DomZ attack on her home, Jade’s investigative efforts lead her to an intricate conspiracy theory that suggests her planet’s militaristic government as the instigator of the alien invasions. With her stouthearted Uncle Pey’j in tow, Jade embarks on a quest to learn the truth.

Shutterbug

Much of BG&E’s gameplay consists of running around, solving puzzles, and obtaining photographic evidence of the Hillyan government’s true agenda. The puzzles start off pretty easy, and although they end up getting fairly tricky (with a few mildly irritating hunt-and-fetch quests), they rarely feel frustrating or unfair. You traipse through most of the game alongside a partner character, which becomes a key element to solving some of the more elaborate problems you encounter. Combat is thoroughly simple, and in many cases, not even mandatory. When you do get into a scuffle, you can usually button-mash your way through it; your partner helps out with a stun attack, making battles even easier. Aside from the handful of strategically oriented boss fights you encounter, most threats can be avoided through careful timing and stealth, which is especially crucial in later areas, where being spotted often means instant death.

The world of Hillys is a vibrant archipelago, interweaving a number of Asian, Spanish, and Caribbean motifs with a distinct sci-fi theme. You do most of your traveling in a zippy little hovercraft guided by an area map and objective list. Your hovercraft can be outfitted with various equipment upgrades, which gradually open up more areas for exploration. The game world does seem somewhat small, although the areas you visit are all very fitting and well designed.

Partners in crime(fighting)

Designwise, another thing that definitely stands out is the collection of characters. The anthropomorphic supporting cast gives the setting an exotic feel, and Jade comes across as a particularly endearing, emotive heroine. The excellent voice acting adds an extra layer of polish to the characters, and it all comes together to create a fun, enjoyable experience. The only caveat is the game’s length—you’ll finish it in about 13 hours, tops. Sweet, but short.

Still, BG&E is one fine piece of work. High production values, a compelling narrative, charming characters, and sharp aesthetics make for a sophisticated little adventure that’s well beyond most of its ilk.

Ryan Scott

Stealth is especially crucial in later areas, where being spotted often means instant death.

Verdict

Gorgeous, stylish, and wholly original, this action-adventure is a gem.
Mysterious Journey II
Journey to the center of the earth

In Mysterious Journey II, you explore the shattered remains of a once-great civilization, a concept that might also describe the aging puzzle-adventure genre. Mysterious Journey II replaces the static 2D images of old with a fully rendered 3D world, but the visuals are mostly window dressing—interaction is limited to basic movement, and the only true gameplay is a series of puzzles that often have a tenuous relationship to the game world.

The game begins with you on a space station in a decaying orbit, with no memory of your past. After solving a few puzzles that somehow help you to escape from the station, you arrive on a planet torn by cultural war between the science-loving Transai and the nature-worshipping Ansala. Your role in the planet’s history is slowly revealed through cut-scenes and conversations with taciturn alien “companions,” yet your motivation for solving the endless stream of Mensa puzzles remains unclear to the end.

Solving the puzzles generally requires manipulating levers or buttons that change the environment in some way, often clearing an obstacle or aligning parts of a pathway. Many puzzles can be analyzed as math problems and solved on paper first, although some succumb to brute force. One of the more imaginative brainteasers requires use of nearby visual and audio Rosetta stones to discover a code. The serial nature of the puzzles does mean that being stumped by a single problem brings the whole game to a screeching halt, but few of the puzzles are difficult enough to be laborious. The game is surprisingly short given that it consumes almost 3GB of disk space. The environments, while beautiful, are disappointingly void of interaction, and the story, while interesting, is wholly irrelevant to the gameplay. Mysterious Journey II is a good puzzle game that also reminds us why puzzle games aren’t that popular.

Verdict
For puzzle players who like pretty pictures, too.

Revisionist History

New Info, Old Games

Unreal II: The Awakening had a huge, gaping wound right out of the box: Multiplayer support, vital to a shooter’s longevity, was long ago ripped out like Adam’s rib and turned into Unreal Tournament 2003. Legend has rectified that mistake with Unreal II XMP, a 300MB free downloadable patch that does quite a bit more than you might expect.

XMP is not a full-bore MP addition to Unreal II, but a single team-based strategy mode akin to Tribes. Essentially a riff on the onslaught mode being developed for Unreal Tournament 2004, XMP offers vehicles, multiple classes, various control points, and an expanded form of CTF.

Each side begins with two artifacts (i.e., flags) in their base; the team that controls the most artifacts wins. The landscapes are far more expansive than usual Unreal maps, creating a more deliberate pace and shifting the emphasis to vehicles. Some of these are simply souped-up dune buggies, while others are multisite tanks with driver and gunner positions. Added to the mix are turrets (fixed and user-placed), mines, and field generators; together, they create a more team-focused tactical experience. None of these extras will work, however, until teams begin to capture and control generators. It’s possible to gradually shut down a team’s turrets, vehicles, and even mines by denying them power, a feature that adds a fresh element to CTF tactics.

Classes are standard issue, but quite functional. There’s the ranger (a light, fast guy with a sniper rifle), the gunner (a heavy, slow guy with a rocket launcher), and the tech (a baby bear who’s just right). Everyone has the ability to hack and revive fallen comrades, but techs hack and rangers heal faster.

XMP soldiers shut the gash in Unreal II and offers a shakedown cruise for some of the features being developed for Tournament 2004. There are some flaws: Vehicle control is a bit touchy and some maps can stalemate, but in the end, XMP is worth at least twice what you will pay for it.

Thomas L. McDonald
Lock-On: Modern Air Combat
False campaign promises in hardcore heaven

This is the first bone tossed at hardcore jet-sim fans since...well, since Flanker 2.5, the previous game in the series, was released nearly two years ago. Lock-On: Modern Air Combat takes the realism and detail associated with the Flanker games, kicks the graphics up a dozen notches, and finally adds some American hardware for you to fly. The long-awaited dynamic campaign remains AWOL here, so rabid Falcon 4.0 fans can stop reading now and go back to posting on message boards about how great that sim is. The rest of us, though, can load up LOMAC and marvel at the detailed re-creations of eight modern jet fighters and attack jets.

Probably this sim’s most anticipated feature is the chance to fly the USAF A-10 Warthog attack jet, and LOMAC doesn’t disappoint here. Not only are the plane, its cockpit, and the various weapons it can haul with its 16,000-pound bomb load modeled in meticulous detail, but the graphics engine has also seen a dramatic upgrade to keep the experience real when flying down in the dirt. Detailed terrain, buildings, water, and effects such as ground haze and lighting look fantastic and lend an unprecedented feeling of speed to low-level flight. Also modeled in exacting detail are the Russian Su-25 Sturmovik, the USAF F-15C Eagle, and the Russian Su-27 and Su-33 Flankers, as well as three versions of the MiG-29 Fulcrum. And LOMAC models dozens more computer-flown aircraft (backed by viciously aggressive A.I.), along with virtually every ground vehicle used by today’s military.

Flight school
Although LOMAC offers optional simplifi-
Detailed terrain, buildings, water, and effects lend an unprecedented feeling of speed to low-level flight.

isn't much help. There's a 50-page getting-started booklet and a more thorough PDF manual on the CD, but even that glosses over many important systems. Your best bet is to spend time watching and flying the in-game tutorials, which walk you step-by-step through basic flight, combat maneuvering, and weapons systems.

The dynamic-campaign system was victim to a number of development snafus, so LOMAC instead includes four scripted campaigns that feature persistent object damage between missions, a number of single missions, and a quick mission generator. The powerful mission editor is extremely easy to use, so despite the canned campaign, the sheer number of add-on missions available on the Net should make for inexhaustible gameplay. Multiplayer (co-op or head-to-head) is a blast, though lag becomes a problem with more than six players.

LOMAC is not without problems, including graphics glitches, improper icons on the theater-status map, a replay tool I couldn't get to work, and the lofty requirements needed to crank the graphics settings up.

Glitches aside, this is an exciting, visceral simulation likely to offer hundreds of hours of entertainment—as long as you're the type who thinks learning which radar mode works best for a turning fight is fascinating. B Donny Atkin

**Verdict**

A tasty treat for starving jet-sim fans—even without the dynamic campaign.
NBA Live 2004

One problem when a company consistently dominates a genre is that it becomes complacent and ceases to innovate. Fortunately, EA Sports refuses to rest on its laurels. It's safe to say that NBA Live 2004 is more than just the best NBA Live yet—it may be the best five-on-five basketball game available on any platform. We could run down an extensive laundry list of the cool features the game supports, like an enhanced dynasty mode and online play, but you can just go online and see that for yourself. Rather, we're gonna talk about why this game compels us to keep coming back for more in a way no five-on-five basketball game has ever done.

Gameplay in five-on-five basketball games has always felt jumbled up in the paint. If seeing the court well wasn't a problem, getting players to cut and pass to men players was. These problems have been mostly solved with NBA Live 2004. Visually, the players are more spread out than they are in other games, and gameplay is no longer about figuring out the few fancy moves and taking your star player to the hole. Playing a winning season as the Lakers requires you that the ball up the court, call some offensive plays, and find the open player. Often, that player is Shaq; low in the post. But hey, that's exactly how the Lakers managed to win three straight championships.

Where last year's version of Live felt kind of arcadey, NBA Live 2004's defensive improvements make the game feel more like a simulation. A stouter defense means games won't devolve into wild dunk fests, and the improved Freestyle Controller lets you do the one-on-one moves necessary to get an open look at cutters or the basket when you get a pass in the paint.

Verdict

Darius Miles takes it to the rack.

But what makes NBA Live 2004 a great game is that it's simply fun to play. Eking out wins against tougher teams won't be easy, which means you need to use the practice modes to hone your skills before games. Add Internet play and excellent commentary from Marv Albert and Mike Fratello, and NBA Live will leave round ball fans happy for some time. — William O'Neal

Silent Hill 3

Fighting an uphill battle

If you're grateful about colliding with weirdos in endless hallways only during your holiday shopping, then don't play Silent Hill 3. The oafish monsters in the town of Silent Hill not only invade its mall, but also slowly attempt to bump you to death in office corridors, park alleys, subways, and hospital halls. This is survival-horror!

You play as Heather, a lonely teenager visiting the town as it becomes possessed. You can't help noticing her lifeless beauty, mainly because the camera constantly swerves to face her instead of what's in front of her. There's a look command, but it's as limited as the weapons left about. Swinging the maul is painfully slow, and gun ammo is so scarce that you'll save it for boss battles. The copper pipe and the sword rock, but you'll frequently dodge enemies instead, since they don't follow you far or drop goodies. Health kits, ammo, and simple puzzle items are usually found inside a few enterable storerooms buried among countless inoperable doors.

Despite several scary scenes, the plot line doesn't appear till the end of the game. It does mesh with the original Silent Hill, but it's plagued by the series' innate conversations. All told, Silent Hill 3 can't be saved from the gaming graveyard. — Denise Cook

Verdict

In SH3, the only things that go bump in the night are klutzy monsters.
Counter-Strike: Condition Zero

More of the same...the same fun, that is

How do you review a game that you've loved for years? The fact that we've been playing Counter-Strike for so long says something about the game: it's obviously a lot of fun. That said, the idea of paying $40 for a game we've been playing for years for free seems kind of silly. Which, of course, begs the question: What exactly is Counter-Strike: Condition Zero?

What Condition Zero started out as and what it ended up being are two totally different things. In an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of a mod based on Half-Life, Valve got control of CS and gave the Condition Zero project to Ritual Entertainment. Valve didn't like what Ritual put together, so it gave the project to Turtle Rock Studios. Years of previews and exclusive "behind-the-scenes" showings later, the final game is less the innovative title we were promised, but more the CS we've been playing for years with some exceptional bot play, new maps, and new goals interjected into the standard "rescue the hostages" and "defuse the bomb" scenarios.

All of which begs the question: Do we like the game that Valve shipped?

Smart bombers

The short answer is yes. Since we've enjoyed CS for years, it should come as no surprise that Condition Zero—which is essentially CS with some excellent updates—is enjoyable. In Condition Zero, you're the commander of the counter-terrorism team as you battle terrorists in 20 maps (some old ones like Dust, Aztec, and Prodigy, and new maps like Tom and Château). The A.I. on both sides of the conflict is awesome: as the leader of the counter-terrorism, your A.I. pals will follow you, and, in some cases, "take the point." You can give them orders via the chat feature and they'll do things like camp on a bomb site or guard the bomb. You can even tell them to back you up when things get hot. And because the game attempts to make the A.I. behave like real teammates, some bots are more cooperative than others. You may give an order only to hear an A.I. teammate respond, "No way, sir!" In online play, you can even team up with your human opponents against bots, or complete an incomplete human team with bots.

As a mission-based single-player game, Condition Zero is more replayable than many story-based single-player games. In order to advance through the various missions, you'll have to do more than simply complete the mission goal—certain missions have sub-goals like "Kill five enemies with a sniper rifle" or "Kill three enemies with the Bullpup."

One main gripe likely to be leveled against Condition Zero: You can only play the game from the counter-terrorism perspective. Since, as Ken Brown likes to refer to it, the game is essentially "CS with training wheels," that's a bit of a bummer—it would have been nice to give new players some perspective on playing as a terrorist, too.

Still, Ken is right in that Condition Zero is an easy way for newbies to grow accustomed to one of the most popular online games ever. As it turns out, it's also fun for old-school CS players like me.

Verdict

This game was great when it was free. For $40, it's just good.

Ken Brown likes to refer to Condition Zero as "Counter-Strike with training wheels."
X2—The Threat

No, no, not X2—X-Men United

For anyone who’s complained about the dearth of “deep” PC games, much less space sims in general, X2—The Threat was lovingly crafted for you. It’s a hearty throwback to the early ‘90s, when games like Privateer and Elite were still on everyone’s minds. Unfortunately, in addition to repeating the depth of those games, it also repeats the obfuscating interfaces and high-learning curves of games from those eras.

A deeper Freelancer
Rather than focus on lots of flashy combat, X2 is an economy-based space sim focused on zipping around the universe, discovering new sights and making money, with the occasional space fight. Sure, there’s a story, but once you’re done with it, there’s lots more to do and explore. It’s basically like Freelancer, melding combat and trade into an eminently playable mix. But while Freelancer arguably runs out of steam after a while, X2 just keeps on giving in terms of content and depth. You can go from a mere scout ship that’s lugging some cargo to owning an actual space station and a fleet of capital ships. X2 has a staggeringly large universe, with diverse races, ship types, and resources. It’s the kind of game in which, after disabling an alien ship, you can literally jump out of your own ship and hop inside the disabled one to fly it home. You can affect the economy of a given sector by planting a wheat factory and flooding the sector with wheat. You can rob everyone to your heart’s content, and they’ll happily rob you back.

Trucking at the speed of light
But for all of the game’s depth, there’s a painfully archaic interface and an unfriendly learning curve. Unlike in Freelancer, you hardly ever use the mouse in X2. That translates into lots of annoying keyboard banging in order to do menial things like finding jumpgates on maps or arming weapons or talking to people. If you have no docking computer, or a cheap one, you’ll either have to endure slow manual docking or incorrect automatic docking. My cheap docking computer kept parking me on the wrong side of the space station—I kid you not. Want to buy a space station? Go ahead, but afterwards, you have to hire a giant, obscenely slow transport craft to ship your station to your destination. X2 also accurately models the “fresh out of college and can’t get a job” experience: Most early missions tend to require more qualifications than you have—despite the fact that these some missions are how you earn said qualifications. And it will take about 10 to 15 hours of gameplay before you can afford to do any of the fun stuff outlined earlier.

X2’s biggest sin is a bug that causes random game corruption during auto-saves, and hence totally screws you over if you haven’t used manual saves. Thankfully, that’s the only technical problem, and it’s apparently been solved by a patch—so go get it.

X2 is a deep game worthy of exploration and discovery—you’ll just have to exhibit high-infinite patience with its grossly slow buildup and general unfriendliness.

Verdict
A much deeper yet less playable version of Freelancer.

You can rob everyone to your heart’s content, and they’ll happily rob you back.
NASCAR Thunder 2004 from EA Sports is this year’s only real stock car racing sim for the PC, what with NASCAR Racing creators Papyrus ending their relationship with Sierra and seemingly taking the year off. It’s not a bad option, and it should suffice for many race fans, but 2004 will go down as a less than banner year for the genre.

Real cars, real fast
Simulations—driving or flying or whatever—have been a staple of PC gaming for years, so it’s surprising that reviewing them is such a prickly proposition. If judged by their authenticity and attention to detail, they can really only be truly reviewed accurately by someone with real-world experience. The average gamer (as well as the average NASCAR fan) probably doesn’t have this kind of credibility, and probably doesn’t care about that level of accuracy. Really, a computer simulation should be judged on two experiences: Is it fun, and does it allow the user to suspend their disbelief? On both counts, EA Sports’ NASCAR Thunder largely succeeds. But what it fails to do is live up to the legacy created by the NASCAR Racing series, which is known for its exacting realism but should also be credited for its accessibility and fun.

The first thing that seems a bit wrong with NASCAR Thunder is that, graphics-wise, it does not feel noticeably better than the console versions. The graphics engine is serviceable, but doesn’t take advantage of the PC’s superior technology. Other bits of polish are incongruously well done: The sound is phenomenal, and the physics—crucial to a sim like this—have been significantly upgraded. But while playing the game, one imagines it’s just as enjoyable on the Xbox.

Low octane
NASCAR Thunder also seems a bit light on content. Sure, all the requisite stuff is there—all the Winston Cup drivers and tracks, etc.—but there doesn’t seem to be much in the way of creative game modes. Maybe most people don’t want anything beyond the standard season and career modes, but scenarios might be nice, as would a good training mode that gave more driver feedback.

NASCAR Thunder’s greatest appeal lies in its sheer visceral quality. Thunder is an appropriate name, since the roar of the cars is so well rendered and relays the sheer power of these machines. But it’s not just about impressive roars. Subtle engine and road sounds not only cue you to your car’s condition, but also help to create the feeling of really sitting inside a 700 horsepower behemoth.

EA Sports would do well to give the PC version of NASCAR Thunder more special attention and really exploit the power of the platform with the next iteration. As it is, the game should be sufficient for 99.99 percent of all NASCAR fans who are racing on the PC, but some consideration should be given to the hardcore geeks. After all, they don’t have a lot of other choices right now.

Verdict
Not bad, but we expect more.
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

Have fun storming the castle

Fifteen years later, and you're still at it.
Another palace, another princess, another treacherous vizier. More mazelike levels to climb, jump, swing, and fight your way through. When the first game in the series came out in 1989, people were blown away by its lifelike animation because no other game offered anything comparable.

Today, of course, there are plenty of games that feature characters who look (more or less) like real people when they move. This poses a problem for designer Jordan Mechner and his nimble Arabian knight: Is fancy footwork enough to make Prince of Persia stand out in 2004?

Light on his feet
The short answer is yes. Particularly novel moves can still make a game memorable—consider the wall-crawling in Spider-Man or the split jump in Splinter Cell—and Mechner and his team at Ubisoft give us some doozies here. To cross a gap in the floor, the Prince can run perpendicularly along a neighboring wall. To reach a high platform, he can kick his way back and forth between two parallel walls like Jackie Chan. Run off a ledge and the Prince grabs desperately for the edge as he falls. In combat, he can cartwheel over an enemy's head and strike with his sword as he descends. It's great stuff.

The problem is the controls. Like too many current titles, The Sands of Time was designed principally as a console game, and some things that are smooth as silk in, for instance, the Xbox version are awkward here. Fighting half a dozen enemies as they surround you feels intuitive with a control pad, but not so much with WASD keys and the mouse. Worse, the complete control you have over camera angles on the Xbox is spotty and inconsistent on the PC. Too often you're stuck viewing the action from an obstructed angle that you can't rotate, and when you do have control, it's with an oversensitive mouse that makes the screen swing vertiginously at the slightest touch. Also, because the keyboard controls are based on relative rather than absolute orientation, you can find yourself moving in an

You'd think we'd have become jaded over the past 15 years...but you'd be wrong.
unintended direction when the game switches camera angles for dramatic effect. For example, pressing A moves you to the left as long as you're facing away from the screen, but if the game suddenly switches to a side view, continuing to hold down the same key makes you walk forward instead.

**Flipping the hourglass**

These issues would be more annoying if it weren't for some of the special powers the game gives you. In the opening sequence, you steal a magic dagger and a giant hourglass from a maharajah. The maharajah's vizier tricks you into spilling the cursed sands contained in the hourglass, and you spend the rest of the game retrieving the sand, Dustbuster-fashion, with the dagger. Pick up enough sand and you can exploit certain time-related magic powers. You can shift enemies into slow motion or freeze them entirely. Even better, you can "rewind" time in 10-second chunks, allowing you to unmake mistakes and retry moves you didn't get right the first time. Since the game is saved only at level-end checkpoints—yet another sign that its heart is in console land—the rewind power, which can function as a sort of minisave, is extremely valuable.

The game is at its best when it poses an apparently impossible physical challenge, such as finding a path from the top of a ruined tower to the bottom. Combat is not its strong suit: Too many scenes just throw dozens of enemies at you one after another and won't let you proceed till you beat them all. The occasional Myst-style machinery manipulation puzzles don't add much, either.

But all is forgiven when you find yourself swinging gymnastically from flagpole to flagpole or running up the side of a wall and leaping, at the last instant, onto the side of a shattered column. You'd think we'd have become jaded over the past 15 years, that all the wall-animated action games we've played, playing yet another wouldn't affect us much. But you'd be wrong. *The Sands of Time* is not particularly innovative technically, and the PC version in particular has flaws—but Jordan Mechner still has the magic touch. [Charles Ardai]

**Verdict**

Thrilling acrobatic action, though the controls and camera angles could be better.

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**The Real Sands of Time**

In some ways, the *Prince of Persia* games never change. But in other ways...well, just look at the difference in these combat screenshots from the original game and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. "[The Prince] runs, he creeps, he leaps and ducks, he hangs by his fingertips—and he looks like a real person doing it," I marveled in these pages a decade and a half ago. "[Jordan] Mechner has crafted the smoothest animation ever seen." Those comments go double today—*Sands of Time* is one of the best-animated games ever.
A pure action game without a hint of simulation, Secret Weapons Over Normandy has more in common with X-Wing than it does with developer Larry Holland's 1991 classic Secret Weapons of the Luftwaffe. Well, actually, X-Wing was pretty realistic compared with this flight-action game. If you enjoyed Crimson Skies or the various Jetfighter games, read on. If your hobbies include flight-testing snap-roll response, just go ahead and turn the page.

The unfriendly skies
SWON zips you into the flight jacket of James Chase, an American pilot flying for the Royal Air Force. You'll follow his exploits from the Battle of Britain through the invasion of Normandy, with a detour to Midway in the Pacific Theater for good measure. Despite the historical settings, this game is in no way trying to re-create actual events—the writing is pulp action novel with extra cheese. You fly for a secret squadron called the Battlehawks versus Nemesia, an elite Nazi squadron of black-painted aircraft.

Over the course of the game's 15 campaign missions, you'll progress from run-of-the-mill dogfights and ground-attack missions to destroying Nazi vengeance weapons, stealing enemy aircraft, and performing daring rescues of captured fighter pilots. The dialogue is corny and the situations unlikely—not that this can't be fun, but the lackluster plot can't compare to the engaging story line of Crimson Skies.

Successful completion of missions buys upgrades, which can be used to beef up your plane's performance and ammo. A series of optional challenge missions offers additional upgrades as rewards and unlocks planes (like the XP-55 Ascender) that aren't otherwise included as part of the campaign. There are more than 20 flyable aircraft, ranging from the Hawker Hurricane to experimental planes like the XP-55 Black Bullet. Instant action mode lets you practice in each plane.

Despite the arcade emphasis, flying these planes is a bitch.

Tough
Planes handle differently when you're in the overhead "bombing" view, there's no in-cockpit view, the external views don't pan, and the target-lock functionality stinks—you may have to cycle through 15 targets before locking up the mission goal.

The low-polygon aircraft and skoopy textures seem to have been designed for PlayStation 2, and the console version's splitscreen play is AWOL here. The PC version includes a mission editor, but I'd be surprised to see much user-created content.

Secret Weapons Over Normandy is an accessible World War II combat game that's more Baa Baa Black Sheep than historical recreation. But poor control, cheesy writing, and an anticlimactic ending will frustrate action gamers and make those who remember Holland's previous flight sims nostalgic for the originals. — Denny Atkin

Verdict: ★★★★☆
If the combat didn't stink, it might have been cheesy, over-the-top fun.
Pax Romana
A zesty Caesar without enough dressing

Wars, civil unrest, military reforms, and political upheaval wracked ancient Rome before the turn of the millennium. As it transformed from a glorious republic into an overbearing empire, Rome hosted Carthage, Macedon, Syria, and Numidia, and in turn paid an incredible price for war. Soon, the political machinations of the great generals Marius and Sulla changed the auspices of Roman ascension forever. Pax Romana does a fantastic job re-creating all of this, albeit with a handful of problems.

There are two game modes to choose from: strategic and political. The strategic game is a matter of expanding the republic as Rome’s absolute ruler in one of six historical campaign scenarios, including the Punic and Gallic wars and conquering Parthia as Julius Caesar. You expand your empire by forming alliances and conquering neighboring kingdoms. With over 100 nations, 500 cities, 40 military units, and hundreds of randomly calculated historical events, expanding the empire demands your complete attention.

The political mode is where Pax Romana deftly mixes deep strategy and roleplaying elements. As leader of one of Rome’s six political factions, your goal is to gain power while expanding the empire in one of several historically relevant scenarios. Victory means getting elected to Rome’s Consul for Life. Power is gained through political connections at the senate (bribes work well), exploiting urban and rural commodities, or even hosting a circus (keeping the citizenry content is crucial). Victory is tabulated via an extensive list of personal performances and collective objectives. For instance, if one of your faction leaders gets assassinated or pirates attack a trade route, you lose points.

Pax Romana’s scenario of menus, action panels, maps, and strategies can be overwhelming, and little is gained from consulting the manual or the game’s well-thought-out but bug-ridden tutorial. The game also contains a swarm of annoying stops (and dackling enemies. Fortunately, neither completely stifles the overall experience of ruling an empire.

With more spit and polish, Pax Romana could have been a cornerstone strategy game detailing a great civilization. Still, it contains features any die-hard—and patient—historical strategy game can get excited about.

Verdict ✪✪✪✪
A decent primer for Rome: Total War.

Eric Young’s Squad Assault: Western Front
Another mess in the hedge groves

Eric Young’s Squad Assault: Western Front is another of those small-developer, well-intentioned, but poorly executed games so full of annoyances, you wonder while you’re slogging through it if you’re a beta tester.

A cross between Close Combat and Combat Mission, Squad Assault is a 3D real-time simulation of tactical WWII combat. Battles range from platoon combat to battalion affairs and can include armor, naval bombardments, air strikes, and artillery bombardments.

There are some improvements over GI Combat. Squad Assault’s unbelievable predecessor, but one still wonders how the guys responsible for the Close Combat series can develop a game like this. While CC has a clean interface and a generally well-developed combat system, Squad Assault is clunky and full of idiosyncrasies. Squads, for example, insist on keeping some artificial formation, with some soldiers refusing to occupy fortifications or buildings. Instead they just hang out in the open with target signs painted on their chests.

Though it’s expected that your troops won’t always follow orders, Squad Assault troops have less sense than the commander of the Light Brigade. Your troops have zero fire discipline and waste their limited ammunition like they’re in a John Woo movie.

Combat also feels weird. Long-range firefights are deadly, and infantry melts away within seconds of engagement, while melees can feature half a dozen attackers surrounding and bludgeoning a single defender for minutes without result. And the A.I. opponent is anemic on attack and thinks a good defense involves deploying all its troops in the open.

Unless you have a fetish for collecting every WWII game out there, stay away.

Verdict ✪✪✪✪
Better than GI Combat, like anchovies are better than lutefisk.
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FEATURE
NWN MOBILE PREVIEW
THE BEST RPG EVER IS COMING TO MOBILE

ALSO PREVIEWED
NINJA GAIDEN
FROM TECMO

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE
PRINCE OF PERSIA
WORMS WORLD PARTY
ACE YETI TRAPPER

SIGH...
PHONES IN JAPAN
PREVIEW

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS

DEVELOPER: FLOODGATE  PUBLISHER: JAMDAT MOBILE

For many of us, the first useful thing we could get a computer to do was roll saving throws in Dungeons & Dragons. BioWare's Neverwinter Nights garnered rave reviews and huge sales by taking that notion to the highest level.

In early 2004, JAMDAT and Floodgate will bring Neverwinter Nights to mobile phones, but it won’t be the same as the PC version, let alone the pen-and-paper game. It can’t be. It took PCs almost 30 years to properly represent AD&D electronically. But when this NWN comes out, it’s going to revolutionize mobile RPGs.

We played beta of the game on an LG VX6000 and a Motorola MPx200 Smartphone. Both phones sport impressive graphics for their hardware, but it’s hard to look at anything else once you savor the Moto’s isometric perspective and detailed textures. If you are serious about mobile games, your next phone should run a Microsoft OS.

Before you play NWN, you’ve got to create a character. In the mobile version, your choices are drawn from AD&D 3.0 rules, and there are seven races and seven classes (barbarian, cleric, fighter, monk, paladin, rogue, and sorcerer). Character portraits and background music are pulled from (or heavily influenced by) BioWare’s NWN game, and both add nice touches to the game.

But the story is the main thing. The members of the Floodgate and JAMDAT teams are longtime AD&D players (and environmentalists), and NWN’s narrative arc shows it. In the game’s first chapter, your adopted father charges you with finding the cause of a blight threatening the Circle Grove. It turns out that displaced dwarves and their metallurgy are causing the blight, but they’ll stop polluting if you complete several quests. These missions are nicely varied, and the characters you encounter along the way set a new standard for mobile adventuring.

Not all of the standard RPG problems are fixed, however. There are (and perhaps always will be) too many repetitious conversations with NPCs. There are scores of buildings to visit across dozens of towns in mobile NWN, but there’s little variation beyond the “buy/sell” or “sleep here” options. It would have been nice to see more of the racial/alignment effects that appear in the PC version get translated to the mobile game.

But these are minor points more associated with the RPG genre itself than this particular implementation. The version we played was only 80 percent complete, and the team is working on several improvements. Moreover, the architecture of the mobile platform makes adding new modules to NWN possible. Although JAMDAT has not committed to expanding the series beyond the three missions included in the download, the framework for doing so is built into the game engine. If all goes well, you might be playing NWN on mobile for as long as you’ve been playing it on your PC.

MATTHEW BELLOWS

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ABOUT THIS SECTION

Wireless Gaming Review in EGM and CGW is produced by WGR Media to bring you news, reviews, and previews of wireless games. Our editorial approach is simple: We write about the best of the best. There’s a lot of junk out there. We don’t want you to buy it. We do want to hear what you think, though, so for questions, comments, or advertising inquiries, please e-mail Matthew Bellows at matthew@wgamer.com

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The Wireless Gaming Review supplement to Electronic Gaming Monthly and Computer Gaming World is published four times per year (March, June, September, and December). For advertising information, please contact matthew@wgamer.com.
“Convincing physics, beautiful interface, head-to-head competitions — Bowling 2 is a huge step forward.” — wgamer.com

The original had over two million downloads — JAMDAT Bowling 2 is twice as good. If you’ve never played a wireless game, this is the place to start.

Check out the best wireless games at jamdat.com.
PREVIEW

NINJA GAIDEN CHAPTER 1: DESTINY
DEVELOPER: TECMO PUBLISHER: TECMO

Ninjas and videogames were made for one another. Their torrid affair has now lasted almost two decades—it’s not just a summer thing. Soon, on your phone, you’ll be able to replay their honeymoon. Don’t think you’ll be relaxing on Caribbean beaches, though. This postnatal outing features none other than Ryu Hayabusa, aka “The Super Ninja,” kicking the pixelated snot out of hordes of hapless, anonymous henchmen. Yes, that’s right. Ninja Gaiden, the seminal NES classic, has gone mobile, and the result is shaping up to be a solid port that captures the fun, frenetic swordplay of the original.

For series veterans, there’s nothing new here. The upswing of that is the fact that Ninja Gaiden is almost a console-perfect port. You climb walls, slash baddies, and wreak havoc with ninjutsu magic across five levels and against nine enemies. The graphics and sound (on our J-Phone preview version, at least) seem on par with the NES version that so entranced us all.

My concerns for the U.S. release are twofold. First, the Japanese version I previewed has some control issues. The keypad is not always responsive enough to change Ryu’s direction on the fly (for example, hitting a guy to your left, then throwing a ninja star at a baddy on your right). And this is the kind of game that really makes control issues stand out. Second, the handfuls that Tecmo is porting to are not up to Japanese standards. I shudder with fear at the AV quality loss, which could result from the port to our generally inferior phones. Tune into WGR to see how the Stateside release shapes up.

- AVERY SCORE
http://wgamer.com/game-3103

REVIEW

ACE YETI TRAPPER
DEVELOPER: SUPER HAPPY FUN FUN PUBLISHER: BANDAI AVAILABLE ON: SPINT

The Ace Yeti Trapper concept is simple: World-famous explorer Jack Bivouac has decided to try his yetifinding skills in Nepal, the ultimate alpine arena. To get his shot at the Big Y, Jack must first practice his trapping skills on lesser beasts, outwitting them and loading them into traps through a variety of maze-like levels.

Jack maneuvers around each rock-strewn level with a nicely animated aplomb, swinging his arms like a manic Mario and laying traps with abandon. AY7 runs smoothly, with no hiccuping or slowdown even on a crowded level. The control scheme takes a little getting used to, especially the trap-laying command. It takes a whopping four button presses to set and prime a trap, and an additional four button presses to unflip a trapped creature off the level, so you’d better hope your keypad has a durable “S” button.

In summary, AYT isn’t a fancy game, but it’s addictive in an obsessive, Dig Dug-like fashion. Because trap-setting takes time, forethought is a must on the more advanced levels, which increase creature speed and maze difficulty. Before long, you’ll find yourself muttering epiftets at yaks and yets alike, garnering the extra bonus of increased breathing room on public transportation.

- STEPHEN PALLEY
http://wgamer.com/game-2725

WGAMER RATING:
**Review: Prince of Persia**

Developer: Gameloft  
Publisher: Gameloft  
Available on: Verizon

It's tough to find a more consistent mobile games publisher than Gameloft, and it's very tough indeed to find a better wireless action-adventure game than Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time. From controls to graphics, the game plays like it belongs on the top shelf in the Game Boy Advance section.

Like the previous POPs, The Sands of Time features a prince who has to climb, fence, and think his way out of a booby-trapped castle. The prince can find items that give him new techniques, such as short-term flight and forward roll. The controls are crisp, despite the game utilizing nearly every button for an action. And while the fighting is fun, solving the game requires more brains than brawn. Extra details (like a code in the Verizon version, which unlocks a big-head version of the PC game) make Sands of Time a mobile masterpiece.

My only complaint is that, like most Gameloft titles, the game feels too short. However, hidden items and level rankings will probably encourage you to play through it many times over. Another triumph for the Gameloft team.  

Damon Brown  
http://wgamer.com/game-2911

**Wgamer Rating:**

---

**Review: Worms World Party**

Developer: Kloo  
Publisher: THQ  
Available on: Nokia Series 60 Phones

There are there, if slightly pruned to fit on a phone. What is missing is the sense of nonstop fun that makes Worms such a great party game. It's surprisingly slow, and at times, it really starts to drag. The game's AI isn't very good, either, so you shouldn't have much trouble consistently beating it.

If I hadn't had such high hopes for Worms going mobile, I would have gotten a kick out of this one. But Worms should be a blast, and this is merely a thud.  

Cashman Andrus  
http://wgamer.com/game-1269

**Wgamer Rating:**

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CASHMEN ANDRUS

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For more on this phone, check out http://wgamer.com/device-427

FOMA F900i by Fujitsu

SCREEN: These days, it's all about QVGA. That's 240x320 pixels, with either 65K or 262K colors, packed into a 2.2-inch screen, which makes the screens about twice as sharp as those of most notebook LCDs.

GAMES: Whether you're looking for Tetris, MMORPGs, or shoot-em-ups, some of the best developers in the world have games for you. For example, Square Enix signed up to make Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest titles for the launch of the 900i series.

COMPATIBILITY: NTT DoCoMo cracks the whip over half a dozen manufacturers, herding them to crank out phones to a very tight spec on an even tighter schedule. That means a new phone series every six months or so, which all support the same apps, services, and even accessories.

NETWORK: The 900i series is for DoCoMo's FOMA third-generation W-CDMA network. It supports download speeds of up to 384Kbps, which is about half as fast as a cable modem.

FLASH: Do you have a taste for kittens that sing punk classics or for rude Web cartoons? Either way, you can watch Macromedia Flash movies on this phone.

JAVA: With 400k of scratch-pad space, there's plenty of space for rich graphics and immersive sound. DoCoMo has its own version of Java, called Doba, with added support for phone necessities.

HORSEPOWER: Some models run Linux and others run Symbian. Either way, you've got a fully multitasking 32-bit OS, running on an ARM9 processor with more power than a high-end desktop from five years ago.

MEMORY CARD: Memory Stick Duo or miniSD card slots let you transfer games, pics, and tunes between your phone and the rest of your digital world.

CAMERA: These phones come with 1- to 2-megapixel digital cameras built in, with support for movies and videoconferencing.

DESIGN: Since all the phones in a series have pretty much the same features, manufacturers use styling to appeal to different crowds. And they're not afraid of color, so whether you're into Ferrari red, acid green, or Hello Kitty pink, you can find a phone that fits you.
This is where the games begin.
Where's the Kitchen Sink?

iBuypower’s Gamer Extreme has everything you need, plus some stuff you don’t.
BuyPower's PC-building philosophy seems to be one of getting its hands on the biggest cases it can find and cramming them full of a ton of gizmos and accessories. That said, the Gamer Extreme is a great gaming rig. The Raidmax case sports a 420-watt power supply, but the heart of the machine is Intel's answer to AMD's Athlon 64 FX-51, the 3.2GHz Pentium 4 EE (Extreme Edition). The P4 EE's cache architecture is different from the non-EE P4's, but it still falls short of the kind of performance we've seen with the Athlon 64 FX-51. The Gamer Extreme uses Intel's DB75P8Z motherboard, 1GB Dual Channel DDR400 PC-3200 memory, ATI's 256MB Radeon 9900 XT, and dual 120GB hard drives in a 240GB RAID 0 configuration. These components come together to create a machine that delivered interesting performance during testing.

I tested the Gamer Extreme with both the 3DMark2003 and the latest version of Extremetech.com's 3DGameGauge at 1024x768, 1280x960 (where applicable), and 1600x1200 with 4x AA (anti-aliasing) and 8x AF (anisotropic filtering) turned on. 3DGameGauge is an average of fram rates taken from several games. Because it came configured with the Pentium 4 EE processor and the Radeon 9800 XT graphics card, I expected the Gamer Extreme to perform worse than the Athlon 64 FX-51 and GeForce FX 5950 machine that BuyPower submitted to this year's Ultimate Gaming Machine (UGM) story (CGW #234). Surprisingly, the Gamer Extreme's numbers were nearly identical to those of the Athlon-based UGM machine. And the Gamer Extreme is more than a thousand dollars cheaper.

The Gamer Extreme scored 3303, 2497, and 1775 in 3DMark2003 at 1024x768, 1280x960, and 1600x1200, while the UGM machine scored 3302, 2431, and 1725, respectively. Furthermore, regardless of how you look at it, the Gamer Extreme is a great rig.

Verdict

A good machine with a ton of extras.
Hercules' newest LCD combines great looks with good gaming performance

The new "standard" in LCD response times (a measure of the white-to-black-to-white pixel change time—not necessarily an accurate indication of pixel speeds in changing other colors) is set at 16 ms, but this spec is not the final word in LCD gaming performance. That 20 ms response time is respectable, but the critical data is in actual gaming performance. We tested the monitor with a variety of games, including Unreal, Castle Wolfenstein, Battlefield 1942, GTA: Vice City, and Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004. In all but Unreal, we saw no ghosting or trailing, and even in Unreal, what we saw was very small and didn't hinder play.

Boasting great looks and superb performance, the Prophetview 920 Pro DVI is a good choice for gamers looking to go flat. —Jeff Lackey

Verdict: ★★★★★

An LCD screen with a superb picture and performance that should please all but the most anal-retentive of gamers.
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You’ve got questions, Wil is rapidly falling in love with “new mom”

I’m not alone...sort of
Ever notice that both Wil and Greg Vederman from PC Gamer are hardware editors that readers love to make fun of?

Zack

Have I noticed that? Uh...yeah. I don’t understand why people have a problem with me. At least I don’t sleep in fuzzy pink pajamas.

The grass isn’t always greener
Today I saw the promo stuff about the Radeon XT cards. It continued to talk in great length about how you really need a Radeon XT to get the full graphics out of HL2. I was just wondering how true you think this is (since I currently have a R9800 Pro 256MB). I get the feeling these new XT cards couldn’t be that much better than my current card. Any thoughts?

Koen

They’re better than your current card, but your current card kicks much ass and should be plenty powerful enough to play Half-Life 2.

Tricky Nvidia GeForce FX 5200s!
Is it worth $150 to buy a new GeForce FX 5200 that has 256MB of RAM instead of my current 128MB GeForce FX 5200? I don’t wanna buy a whole new card unless it’s worth $150 for 128MB more RAM.

Eric

I don’t think so. If I had an extra $150 lying around, I’d pony up an additional $40 to get a 128MB Radeon 9600 XT.

I hate Madden
I would like EVERYONE to know that I’m pissed. It’s not enough that you can only strafe in one direction without using two hands (R to strafe, F to move right), but it is F---ING impossible to change the controls. Sure, you can change them in the Keyboard Only section with the mouse, but in the Mouse and Keyboard section, the mouse no longer affects anything—the Assign button is grey and you can no longer simply double-click to change it. Gee, Madden sure is fun when you can only move in one direction.

Phil

You’re insane. Madden 2004 is one of the best videogames ever. The key to that game is spending $20 on Logitech’s Dual Action USB gamepad—it’s essentially a PS2 controller, and the game was pretty much designed to be used with that controller.

Arson

I haven’t tried to play games on a tablet PC, but beyond the input choices, I would guess that the graphics choices available in most tablet PCs would be the first hurdle. That Acer C300 and Gateway’s tablet PC both use Intel Extreme Graphics—and as we all know, the only thing “extreme” about the Intel option is the frustration you’d feel trying to play a game on it. Even with a solution to the graphics card problem, what are you gonna do, hold the tablet in your left hand while you navigate through the game with the pen in your right hand?

Tablet gaming
Have you guys had a chance to try running games on a tablet PC? It seems like the active digitizer would make mouse-based games work with the pen, but I was wondering if it was actually usable. Do things like scrolling when the cursor is at the edge of the screen work? The first generation of tablet PCs might have been too underpowered for gaming (and they didn’t have CD drives), but newer machines like the Acer C300 look like they might be good for armchair gaming. I’d love to see you guys write a short article on this subject.

Buy this graphics card
This month’s graphics card of choice is the same as last month’s: Everyone, go buy ATi’s 256MB Radeon 9800 XT. I know you have an extra $500.

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Squeeze a little more power out of your BIOS

Joel Durham

3D games are some of the most demanding software products, sucking up every bit of performance your PC has to give. One place to improve your system's performance is in the BIOS setup menu, where you can tweak various settings to squeeze more juice out of your machine. After changing each setting, boot up and run a current 3D title to test for system stability. If it crashes, return the setting to its original state.

**STEP #1**
Enter the setup menu
Shortly after you power up your PC, you'll see the POST screen (usually white letters on a black background). Watch the screen for instructions on how to "enter setup" or something similar. In most cases, you can hit the Delete key to enter the BIOS setup menu, although in some cases, you need to hit the F2 key or another function key.

**STEP #2**
Speed bootup
Leaf through your BIOS menu and find the page with an option labeled Quick POST or Quick Power On Self Test. Make sure it's enabled, this reduces the amount of time the PC takes to test itself before it loads your operating system. Next, find the page with bootup options and make sure your hard drive is the first boot device. You can always change this if you need to boot from a floppy or a CD-ROM.

**STEP #3**
Tweak memory settings
Find the page with memory settings like CAS Latency and DRAM Command Rate. Try lowering the CAS Latency to 2 and setting the DRAM Command Rate to 1. Turn off ECC, even if your memory is ECC compliant, and check for system stability.

**STEP #4**
AGP settings
Set the AGP aperture size to half of your system's main memory (e.g., if you have 256MB of RAM, set AGP aperture to 128MB). Make sure AGP fast write is enabled, and that the AGP mode is 4x (or 8x, depending on your card and motherboard).

**STEP #5**
Other odds and ends
Turn off any BIOS caching options and BIOS shadow options. Disable any built-in peripherals you're not using, such as an onboard LAN adapter, sound codec, or RAID controller. Make sure CPU L1 and L2 cache are both enabled.
**GAMER'S SUPREME**

- Intel® Pentium® 4 Processor with HT Technology
- Radeon™ X820 256MB DDR AGP 8X Video Card
- 512MB DDR400 PC3200 Memory
- 120GB 7200RPM Hard Drive
- See Through 16X DVD-R/RW Drive
- SEE Through 52X/48X CD-RW Drive
- 3-in-1 Build-In Media Card Reader
- Microsoft® Windows® Xp Home Edition
- FREE Norton Antivirus 2004 CD
- **$1,249**

**BATTALION-101**

- 15.4" WideScreen 16:10 XGA TFT LCD Display
- Intel® Pentium® 4 Processor with HT Technology at 3.00GHz
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- ATI® Radeon™ 9600 PRO 128MB DDR Video
- 512MB DDR PC2700 Memory
- 60GB 5400RPM Ultra ATA100 Hard Drive
- Removable 8X DVD-ROM Combo Drive
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- 3-in-1 Build-in Media Card Reader
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---

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- Intel® PRO Wireless 2100 802.11b 11Mbps Mini-PCI Wireless Card
- Advanced 400MHz FSB and 1024KB Advanced L2 Cache
- Extreme 64MB Embedded Intel® 885 GM Video
- 612MB DDR Memory
- 2GB Ultra ATA100 Hard Drive
- Removable 8X DVD/CD-RW Combo Drive
- 10/100Mbps Ethernet LAN and 56K Modern
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---

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Loyd's Cracked Case

Loyd names his hardware favorites of 2003

When Wil asked me to compile my top five hardware items of 2003, I thought it would be pretty hard to come up with enough different picks. But as I thought about it, the list got longer and longer, and I really had to trim it back. So don't think of this as a "best five," but as my favorite five hardware choices for the year: hardware that I, in fact, use on a daily or near-daily basis.

Athlon 64 FX-51
Nearly everything AMD said it would be, as a CPU for today's 3D game titles it's faster in most games than Intel's Pentium 4. The integrated memory controller and DDR400 support offers incredible memory efficiency and bandwidth. Certainly the folks who make specialized gaming systems believe the same, as we saw from the plethora of AMD-based systems in January's Ultimate Game Machine shootout.

Intel 865 and 875 chipsets
It may sound contradictory to nominate an Intel chipset as one of my favorites after talking up the Athlon 64. But Intel's primary desktop chipsets offer a stable, speedy platform for Intel's Pentium 4 processor. The 875P and 865PE are really the same core logic, bin-sorted for speed and latency.

These chipsets surprised industry watchers at the time with full support for DDR400 memory. The roadmap had specified DDR333 support, but Intel shifted gears and raised the clock rate of the Pentium 4's frontside bus to 200MHz (800MHz DDR), instead of the anticipated 167MHz. The result was higher memory bandwidth and substantially improved game performance at roughly the same clock rate. Toss in support for Serial ATA, USB 2.0, and AGP 8x, and these chipsets become the gold standards for core logic. And it has enough legs to become the chipset of choice for the first of Intel's next processors, codenamed Prescott.

ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 Pro
Sure, Nvidia and ATI have been exchanging blows over high-end desktop graphics processors like punch-drunk boxers, but in the Mobility 9600 (M90), mobile PC users wanting decent Direct3D 9 performance now have a respectable GPU inside. With four pixel pipelines and four texture units, it's not quite equal to top desktop GPUs, but ATI's efficient architecture gives gamers who need mobility decent performance.

Don't think of this as a "best five," but as my favorite five hardware choices for the year.

Logitech MX900 Bluetooth mouse
Sure, it's pricey. But it's got good range (up to 30 feet) and--more importantly for gaming--fast, precise response. Using Logitech's DSP-based MX engine, the MX900 is equal to any wired mouse for most gaming. If the MX900 is too pricey or too heavy for your tastes, the corded MX500 or MX310 offer all the precision and response of the MX900 in a tethered form factor.

Shuttle XPC series
Shuttle proved you don't need a massive box to offer stunning PC performance. As each Shuttle XPC unit arrived on the scene with evolutionary improvements, these tiny, cube-shaped PCs became the darling of the LAN party set. Laptops have begun to flood the market, but Shuttle has steadily improved over time with two unique versions, including the only small form factor PC using the Intel 875P chipset for the Pentium 4, and the only Athlon 64 compact PC.

Loyd's Top Picks

Athlon 64 FX-51
What does AMD have in store for us after the success of their Athlon 64 FX-51? Well, only time will tell. In the interim, the battle for processor dominance will continue.

Intel 865 and 875 Chipsets
With a ton of motherboard support, Intel's 865 and 875 chipsets are built to last. And when Prescott, their next big processor rev, ships, AMD may once again have a battle on their hands.

ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 Pro
While ATI's Mobility Radeon 9600 Pro (M90) may not be the sexiest look part in the world, the fact remains that it packs a serious punch. And not that mobile graphics upgrades are a reality, machines with these babies are even more compelling.

Shuttle XPC Series
Small form factor PCs are here to stay. And Voodoo's Shuttle-based rig is one of the best we've seen.
Money might not buy you happiness, but you can use it to buy lots of technological goodies and games. Money can also buy candy! We would love to review candy, but our doctor says it won't do anything to help our little attention-span problem. The Everlasting Gobstopper is a lie! TWO STARS! Sorry, what were we saying?
A-List

Our picks

CGW readers, let us know if there's anything we can do to tweak this list to bring it to full efficiency. More gadgets? A section that focuses on MP3 players? Condensing the items that rarely need updates for more space? After all, this is a list for the people! Plus, with the advent of the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, look for many more exciting items next month. One trend: More and more devices are getting it on behind the closed curtains of R&D departments. Cameras with phones, PDAs with MP3 players—what's next? We predict roller-skating computers and ducks with GPS tracking.

COMPUTERS

If there were no computers, the world would be somewhat boring. We'd be outside exercising. Or reading Cow Grazing World.

Intel-based system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIGH-END PICK</strong></td>
<td>How long has it been since you've heard that stoned guy on television say, &quot;Duuuu, you're getting a Dell?&quot; Probably a while, since that guy got arrested for possession. Nonetheless, the Dimension XPS is still one smoking machine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Dimension XPS&quot;</td>
<td>Dell Computers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$3126</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

| **BUDGET PICK**   | Johnny Liu says, "When I was five, I saw my dad's wig holder on a desk. It was kind of dark, and I thought it was an alien head, so I screamed." Imagine the therapy he'd need if he saw one of Alienware’s sexy—but value-minded—new rigs. |
| "Area 51 Performance" | Allenware       |
| $1,567            |                                                            |

AMD-based system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIGH-END PICK</strong></td>
<td>VoodooPC's F1 fought its way to the top of Wil's Ultimate Gaming Machine roundup (CGW, #234). It's an expensive machine, but well worth the coin if you want the power of an overclocked Athlon 64 FX-51 and a GeForce FX 5950.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;PC 51&quot;</td>
<td>VoodooPC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$5,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **BUDGET PICK**   | Get the most bang for your buck with the killer Assassin. An excellent combination of powerful and more budget-minded components makes this one as lethal as a hunger-stricken badger with a bad attitude (aka Ryan Scott, the Animal). |
| "Assassin SE"    | Vicious PC                                                |
| $1,879            |                                                            |
LAN-boy rig

PRODUCT | WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
---|---
**HIGH-END PICK**
Doll $2,900 VoodooPC

At your next LAN party, swiftly carry in a light and manageable Voodoo Doll with an Athlon 64 5200+ and a Radeon 9800 XT—or spend the entire time dead on the floor with back problems.

**BUDGET PICK**
FragBox $995 Falcon Northwest

Like the Voodoo Doll, Falcon's FragBox is another option for those of us whose LAN-party experiences have never included a masseuse. While it may not be as powerful as the Doll, its sub-$1,000 price tag is awesome.

PERIPHERALS

When you buy a pretty, pretty dress, it just isn't complete unless you accessorize with the right jewelry and shoes, is it? Peripherals are like jewelry for computers. Work it, girl!

Speakers

PRODUCT | WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
---|---
**HIGH-END PICK**
Logitech Z-5300 $200 Logitech

There once was a mommy speaker and a daddy speaker with two baby speakers they "reared," as well as a pet subwoofer they kept on the ground. Don't forget Grandpa, the center of the home. And the speaker family of Z-5300 rocked the house!

**MIDRANGE PICK**
I-Trigue L3500 2.1 system $100 Creative Labs

Not everyone needs five channels of discrete audio. Creative's awesome 2.1 setup boasts excellent sound, as well as a wired remote that attaches directly to the company's MuVo line of USB MP3 players.

**BUDGET PICK**
Logitech X-620 $80 Logitech

The last speaker family in this engrossing tale was a full family of six and one sub. While they were a rather frugal family, they still knew how to make sweet noise, playing at bar mitzvahs as The Amazing X-620s.

Keyboard

PRODUCT | WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
---|---
**WIRED PICK**
Elite Keyboard $30 Logitech

Some things never change much. Case in point: a keyboard. Next year's keyboards will still be arranged in QWERTY fashion. And the Logitech Elite is still an excellent wired choice.

**WIRELESS PICK**
Wireless Desktop Elite Keyboard/Mouse $80 Microsoft

If you don't like QWERTY, there's the DVORAK standard. With a Microsoft Wireless Keyboard, you can repaint all those letters and avoid being held down by wires.

Gamepad

PRODUCT | WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT
---|---
**OUR PICK**
Dual Action USB $20 Logitech

If you're playing sports games on a PC, then this is the gamepad to use. Many EA Sports games default to this controller, which is essentially a PC version of the PS2 DualShock controller.
**A-LIST PERIPHERALS**

### Mouse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>WIRED PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MX 500 Optical</td>
<td>Remember the times when you routinely had to open up your mouse and pinch out the dust? Nowadays, turning over your mouse is like looking at a robot's genitals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$45</td>
<td>Logitech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WIRELESS PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wireless IntelliMouse Explorer 2.0</td>
<td>Think about how nice it would be to hook up your PC to a big-screen television, snuggle into a comfy recliner with a table, and play your day away. Hence, the need for a good wireless mouse and keyboard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50</td>
<td>Microsoft</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Headset

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OUR PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC150</td>
<td>When the rest of the world gets too loud and confusing, hide away in your own little realm. All the mean old troubles of the universe won't be able to find you when you're wearing Sennheisers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$70</td>
<td>Sennheiser</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Joystick

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OUR PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extreme 3D Pro</td>
<td>Along with their flight-sim brethren, joysticks have dropped out of the public eye. While there are some wireless joysticks entering the market, the heavier weight of the Extreme 3D Pro suggests you accept the cord to save some money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35</td>
<td>Logitech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Racing wheel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OUR PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOMO Racing</td>
<td>The entry-level MOMO wheel is an awesome peripheral—just the kind of thing to get your motor in gear for some Need for Speed Underground. Thus far, this one has been uncontested among wheels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100</td>
<td>Logitech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### DISPLAYS

Displays are a good investment. Buy a good one and it'll last you through several system iterations; buy a crappy one and you'll need a better vision insurance plan.

### CRT Monitor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIGH-END PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-inch MultiSync FE21MSB</td>
<td>If you never have to move and you've got a huge desk, a behemoth of a CRT is still the No. 1 choice for gaming. There's simply a better price-to-value ratio at this point across the board. This NEC model is a sweet choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$800</td>
<td>NEC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-inch E90fb</td>
<td>A 14-inch screen used to be the default entry-level monitor, but that's way too small for comfortable gaming. Thanks to technology evolution, 19-inch monitors—like this excellent offering from ViewSonic—have become far more affordable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$260</td>
<td>ViewSonic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**LCD Monitor**

**PRODUCT**
- **HIGH-END PICK**
  - UltraSharp 2001FP
  - $390
  - Dell

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
The new Dell UltraSharp is the 20-inch LCD monitor that's packaged with Dell's XPS system. It has a slick design, and the response time is a quick 16 milliseconds, but CRTs still trump it in refresh rate and price.

---

**BUDGET PICK**
- 15-inch 15ZT
- $360
- Samsung

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
LCDs are coming down in price. The 15-inch screen, while a little small for a fulfilling gaming session, runs on average $200 less than its 17-inch brethren, which is why Samsung's 15ZT is a standout compromise.

---

**COMPONENTS**

Moore's Law predicts that every two years, the number of transistors per integrated circuit will double. Likewise, your wallet will continue to maintain a steady state of emptiness.

---

**Processor**

**PRODUCT**
- **HIGH-END PICK**
  - Athlon 64 FX-51
  - $735
  - AMD

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
The Athlon 64 FX-51 is currently the top dog when it comes to gaming processors. Forget about its 64-bit pedigree—All we care about is the fact that it runs 32-bit applications—like Max Payne 2—superfast.

---

**BUDGET PICK**
- Pentium 2.8GHz
- $300
- Intel

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
If you're building a Pentium system, you can't go wrong with a 2.8GHz Pentium 4 processor. While not quite as badass as the 3.2GHz model, it's still more than capable of running any game coming your way in the next couple of years.

---

**Motherboard**

**PRODUCT**
- **HIGH-END PICK**
  - SK8N nForce3
  - $225
  - Asus

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
Asus' SK8N nForce3 main board is the board of choice for the AMD Athlon 64 FX-51 processor. It has support for dual-channel DDR 400 memory, as well as SATA RAID. Of course, it also sports Nvidia's 6-channel audio.

---

**BUDGET PICK**
- D875PBZ
- $169
- Intel

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
Intel's D875PBZ isn't so much "low end" as it is flexible. Constructed around the 875P chipset, it has built-in SATA RAID support, and it makes a great backbone for an affordable Pentium 4 system.

---

**Soundcard**

**PRODUCT**
- **HIGH-END PICK**
  - Audigy 2 Zl Platinum
  - $250
  - Creative Labs

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
Remember when it was outrageous to have rear speakers for computer gaming? Times are a-changin'—now, we've got the Creative Labs Audigy, a good match for the Gigaworks speaker set.

---

**BUDGET PICK**
- Onboard audio
- Free

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
The most affordable option among soundcards is just to pick out a quality motherboard with built-in sound. All of the drivers will come with the motherboard, and the sound quality is fine for most ears.
### A-List Components

#### Videocard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIGH-END PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Radeon 9800 XT</strong> $400</td>
<td>The Radeon XT was originally supposed to come packaged with <em>Half-Life 2</em>. Unfortunately, the game’s release date slipped, but many of these cards are still being packaged with a coupon for that eventual release.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MID-RANGE PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GeForce FX 5600 Ultra</strong> $250</td>
<td>Between cards that will blow out your bankbook and those that will quickly fall behind, lie the midrange pleasers, like our recommended GeForce FX 5600, which balances smooth polygon throughput with your paycheck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GeForce FX 5200 Ultra</strong> $150</td>
<td>Graphics cards will quickly burn a hole through the ol’ bankbook, so staying a generation behind is the smart budgeting solution. The Nvidia GeForce FX 5200 has good rates for the money, but don’t buy the cheaper, non-Ultra version.</td>
</tr>
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#### Hard drive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIGH-END PICK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Cheetah 10K.6</strong> $180 each</td>
<td>The newest drives spin at a scorchingly fast 10,000 rpm. Install two of these babies in a RAID configuration for your own roadrunner-driven chariot. More than what you’ll ever need for gaming, but also good for video editing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DiamondMax Plus 9 80GB</strong> $80</td>
<td>80GB drives at 7,200 rpm can easily be found for $1 a gig. Usually, they involve rebates with many finite instructions. We mailed in a rebate a day late and they wouldn’t ante up our dough. Don’t let the same thing happen to you.</td>
</tr>
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#### Optical drive

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIGH-END PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PlexCombo DVD/CD-RW drive</strong> $60</td>
<td>Prices on combo drives have significantly dropped with the incoming tide of DVD burners. Nowadays, finding a generic combo drive for around $50 isn’t completely unheard of, but we’re going to recommend the Plexor combo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DVD drive</strong> $30</td>
<td>Instead of highlighting a combo drive, we chose a simple, cheap, and effective DVD drive. These things are really inexpensive now, so get one already, would ya? That way, you can enjoy our DVD special from two months ago.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOWER PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TAC-T01-EIC</strong> $150</td>
<td>Cooler Master’s TAC-T01 is big, heavy, and not necessarily cheap—but it’s a great case for building that rig of your dreams. It’s solid and shiny, and it has a metal monolith inset between the case’s driver. What is that thing for, anyway?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALTERNATE FORM PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SN85G4</strong> $300</td>
<td>It’s not the size of your computer...and when you’ve got a slick little number like one of Shuttle’s offerings, you’re sure to get many oohs and aahs. Make sure you get one with a big power supply—the girls love a big power supply.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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116 COMPUTER GAMING WORLD.
## Mobility
Fluorescent lights will tan your skin to that perfect shade of pasty white. Maybe, just maybe, you should try going after something a little less Powder and a little more George Hamilton.

### Laptop

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIGH-END PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M675</td>
<td>With a 128MB ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10) graphics card and a 17-inch display, Gateway’s M675 is doper than most desktop PCs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2,600</td>
<td>Gateway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dell Inspiron 5150</td>
<td>Dell’s Inspiron 5150 isn’t the fastest gaming laptop around, but with its 64MB GeForce FX 5200 graphics card, you should be able to play any game that’s out now. We played Call of Duty and Max Payne 2 on it at 1024x768, and it worked like a charm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2,000</td>
<td>Dell Computers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LIGHTWEIGHT PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sony VAIO TR2A</td>
<td>Now, this system might not be built with gaming in mind (it’s got a 1GHz Centrino CPU under the hood), but this potent portable more than makes up for it in style. Weighing in at 3.1 pounds, this little baby is great for older games.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1,900</td>
<td>Sony</td>
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### Phone

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<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FLIP-PHONE PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPH-A600</td>
<td>Of the current crop of camera phones, this one is the slickest, most game-friendly of the bunch (nice try, N-Gage!). Flip the screen around, and there’s even a GBA-like dock for controlling the action better. Now if only there were good games....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$350</td>
<td>Samsung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NON-FLIP-PHONE PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nokia 3660</td>
<td>Thanks to the new federal policy that allows you to keep your phone number, negotiating and pinning down a really good deal on a phone is much easier. For a normal-sized phone, this model has worked great during the last few months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Nokia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### PDA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PALM OS PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zodiac 2</td>
<td>For the moment, you aren’t gonna find another PDA with this kind of juice for the price that Tapwave is asking. With it, you can bust out some grinds in Tony Hawk, juggle your contact manager (yay!), listen to music, and watch The Simpsons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$400</td>
<td>Tapwave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POCKETPC OS PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toshiba e805</td>
<td>This PDA sits at the top of Toshiba's food chain. It's built especially for the power-hungry PocketPC user, and its bells and whistles far surpass the 400MHz processor and 128MB of free RAM. What better way to run MAME and countless games?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$300</td>
<td>Dell Computer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Gadget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OUR PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative Decoder DDTS-100</td>
<td>The Decoder translates into diversity for your computer and console systems. Coupled with any computer speakers equipped with mini-jack outputs, it'll provide every imaginable input you need, from basic analog to optical digital.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100</td>
<td>Creative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Rewind 100**

What should you play today? Names in red indicate Editor’s Choice games.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GAME</th>
<th>ISSUE</th>
<th>VERDICT</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age of Mythology: The Titans Expansion</td>
<td>10/04</td>
<td>More bells, more whistles, same game</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Wonders: Shadow Magic</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>A great strategy game that’s worth purchasing for the randomness engine alone</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Conquest: Fight Back</td>
<td>11/04</td>
<td>Fight boredom and micromanagement by avoiding this home stand-alone expansion</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AquaNox 2: Revolution</td>
<td>12/05</td>
<td>Line-drawing in a sea of boredom</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandits: Phoenix Rising</td>
<td>01/05</td>
<td>A fun first-person shooter disguised as a third-person using game’s clothes</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of World War II</td>
<td>12/04</td>
<td>This big-bang battle for the aging Battlefield engine is worth the money</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Fat Truckers</td>
<td>09/03</td>
<td>A game that is better than it has any right to be</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Black Mirror</td>
<td>02/04</td>
<td>The Black Mirror’s gothic horror doesn’t engage much reflection</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billabong</td>
<td>08/04</td>
<td>A sturdy must and takes real-time war game that even manages a bit of realism</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2 Broken Sword 3</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>Dragon flamboyantly breaks out of the box, but doesn’t do it around a little too much</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call of Duty</td>
<td>1/04</td>
<td>Call of Duty is just so good and so much fun that you’ll undoubtedly wish it was longer</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity Deathmatch</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>Save your money by just burning your ass on the television</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlestown</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>As dry and inviting as the Appalachian Desert</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaser</td>
<td>1/04</td>
<td>A good looking shooter that’s only fun for the first few hours</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GAME</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cheance</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>A stunning sci-fi-themed shooter that makes Alien: Resurrection hollow</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold Zeros: No Mercy</td>
<td>12/03</td>
<td>Cold Zeros’ repetitious, drabness play leaves you cold</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat Command 2: Dungen Forward</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>A great scenario editor can’t lift this average, mid-tier tactical war game above Kotaku Pocket</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commandos 3</td>
<td>1/04</td>
<td>Maybe the toughest game ever—and not in a good way</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2 Contract J.A.C.K.</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>No franchise shines forever—J.A.C.K. is the first blemish on the BVW roster</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSI: Crime Scene Investigation</td>
<td>01/05</td>
<td>Finally, a game for mentally challenged couch potatoes</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark Age of Camelot: Trials of Atlantis</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>Good expansion for veterans, but not much for new players</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark Fall: The Journal</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>The only thing missing from this PC game’s box is a change of underwear</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day of Defeat</td>
<td>8/04</td>
<td>A great squad-based game marred only by age</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desert Storm III</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>At times engaging, but not quite all it can be</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disciples II: Guardians of the Light/Servants of the Dark</td>
<td>10/03</td>
<td>More cartoon goodness (and evil) at a bargain price</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominions II</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>The most ballsy of any 4X game available anywhere</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>Good stuff for fans of the original</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire of Magic</td>
<td>8/03</td>
<td>An odd duck of an RPG, despite Magic both entertain and annoys</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ha-ha funny games**

Sam and Max predate CGW rating system

Recently, a man was arrested for impersonating a highway patrolman. He was caught pulling over an actual highway patrolman. Freelance police work in real life = bad. Sam and Max = good.

Anachronox

Long overdue for more attention, Anachronox has an excellent story and console-style RPG gameplay. Unfortunately, it’s been overshadowed by the studio’s “other game,” Daihikotana.

118 COMPUTER GAMING WORLD
Endless Ages 10/03
Something new in the vasty
unexplored field that's worth a look... 

Enter the Matrix 8/03
Play it for the movie, don't play it for the play... 

Eternals II 12/03
A better, cheaper 3D version of
Eternals: Soul of the Universe. 

Eve Online: The Second Genesis 9/03
We'd hate to see the first generation
of this MMO space game... 

FA-18 Operation Iraqi Freedom 11/03
Nothing really new here, but
worth a look if you need a new
sim for a slow system... 

Flame Challenge '96-'97 9/03
A must-buy for Formula One
racing fans... 

FIFA 2004 2/04
It might be a rough release, but
it's still the best soccer game
on any platform... 

Final Fantasy XI 2/04
A rock-solid MUD/RPG from one
of the most unlikely sources... 

Freedom Fighters 1/04
Great gameplay, but the
PC version doesn't live up to
the promise... 

Ghost Master 11/03
This game is clever, stylish, and
fun to watch, but it's a little too
crazy for our taste...

Golfer 2 2/04
Better than the first, but still a
little too overly complex and
difficult to be a classic...

Grand Theft Auto: Vice City 8/03
Covers 2002 Game of the Year
gets '80s-style clothing in sequel... 

Halo 11/03
Lost in translation... 

Heaven & Hell 9/03
Wisely repetitive, and utterly dev-
olved in interesting strategy elements...

Heroes of Might and Magic IV: Worlds of War
6/03
The degeneration continues...

Hidden & Dangerous 2 2/04
A really good game hampered
by the same picky bugs and
problems. A.I. is as the original...

Highway to the Reich 1/04
An excellent system gets better...

Homeworld 2 10/03
It's no Cataclysm, but it's
not even Homeworld...

Hogey's Maelstrom Chess 12/03
A violent attempt at chess for
dummies that doesn't quite teach
them anything, but does provide some
distinctively chessy fun.

Jetfighter V 2/04
A rare combination of frustration
and boredom...

Klone Pocket 9/03
It sounds like a microwaveable
snack, but it's the best low-end
war game ever...

KOTOR 2/04
A total masterpiece from Bioware.
Early the best RPG of the year,
and possibly the best Star Wars
game ever made.

Legacy of the Crusader 2/04
Check your brain at the door for
this sword-swinging, spell-slinging
game...

Legacy of the Crusader 11/03
Unexpected, tedious, buggy, and
lacking in imagination, and those
are the good points...

Mafia 2004 11/03
Like the best Mafia game yet,
but be prepared to buy a Legacy
Dual Action controller...

Leisure Suit Larry series
The leisure suit may be passing
to a different
Larry in Sierra's upcoming
revival, but the
originals' raunchy humor
will always have a place
in our hearts and funny
bones.

No One Lives Forever
One day, people will live
forever, thanks to antiaging
creams, cryogenic tubes,
and endless numbers of
clones in which you can
swap your brain. Until then,
play this sweetly funny
game.
**Cream of the crap**

*Like rich, velvety puke.*

**Postal**

The first game ever to receive zero stars in a CGW review. For some reason, the makers of the game took that as a compliment.

**Mistmare**

Your future will be an endless fog of despair should you break the plastic seal of the cursed Mistmare.

**Midnight Nowhere**

Outright offensive, odious, and obtuse, the only place you should find this Midnight Nowhere is nowhere near you.

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**GAME** | **ISSUE** | **VERDICT** | **SCORE**
--- | --- | --- | ---
Massive Assault | 1/04 | Lemmings gone turn-based | ★★★★★
Max Payne 2 | 1/04 | Improves upon itself every frame, but doesn’t mess with the formula | ★★★★★
Medal of Honor: Allied Assault—Breakthrough | 12/03 | Intense and occasionally satisfying, but rarely good enough to justify the price | ★★★★☆☆
Medieval: Total War—Vikings Invasion | 8/03 | This expansion is a must for Total War fans | ★★★★★
Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance | 8/03 | It’s supposed to be MGS2. The infantry’s got more than usual, but the story and setting make it more like Metal Gear Solid: The Choppy Next Door’s Cut | ★★★★★
Minecraft Flight Simulator 2004 | 10/03 | The most fun you can have in a plane without guns | ★★★★★
Midnight Club II | 10/03 | What it lacks in multiplayer, it more than makes up for in fun | ★★★★★

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**GAME** | **ISSUE** | **VERDICT** | **SCORE**
--- | --- | --- | ---
PlanetSide: Core Combat | 2/04 | A decent idea at its core, but not worth the price | ★★★★★
Port Royale | 8/03 | After a slow start, a quality pirate game emerges | ★★★★★

---

**C3 Railroad Tycoon 3** | 2/04 | You don’t have to have trains to enjoy the historical and economic challenges here—just a little train love won’t hurt | ★★★★★
Rebels Princes Escape | 1/04 | Go on a joyride at Commander 2 for free ★★★★★
Red Faction II | 9/03 | Ended up only as a瞥目 as the console port for this year ★★★★★
Republic: The Revolution | 12/03 | Good game, bad game ★★★★★
Rise of Nations | 8/03 | The latest, greatest RTS ★★★★★
RollerCoaster Tycoon 2: Hard Drives | 8/03 | Adds some window dressing and a smattering of new scenarios to a game well past its prime | ★★★★★
Runaway 2: A Road Adventure | 12/03 | The bimo of graphic-adventure games. Both pretty and stupid | ★★★★★
Savage | 1/04 | A potential blockbuster marginalized by its own delivery | ★★★★★
Skin City 4: Rush Hour | 1/04 | The new focus on transportation adds substantially to an already excellent game experience | ★★★★★
Space Colony | 1/04 | A driver combination of real-time strategy and the 2D isn’t clever enough to hold your interest for long | ★★★★★
StarFury | 2/04 | Open-ended and flexible without being too complex | ★★★★★
Star Trek: Elite Force II | 9/03 | Like playing one of the best-selling TV episodes | ★★★★★
Star Wars: Galaxies: An Empire Divided | 10/03 | Might as well be better ★★★★★
Starsky & Hutch | 1/04 | The bad rap of the ‘70s continues in this crummy game from a crummy licence | ★★★★★
Temple Run | 1/04 | Yet another good game marred by bugs. Whoohoo! | ★★★★★

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**Just laughable**

**Contract J.A.C.K.**

The black sheep of the No One Lives Forever family is saddled with repetitive shooting, and its attempts to be funny fall patently flat. Honestly, you don’t want to know J.A.C.K.

**The Legend of Kyrania, Book 3: Malcolm’s Revenge**

Not rated

The third installment in the Kyrania trilogy places fans in the role of the villainous jester. Nonsensical puzzles and dull humor make for highly uneven design.
**GAME** | **ISSUE** | **VERDICT** | **SCORE**
--- | --- | --- | ---
The Elder Scrolls III: Bloodmoon | 9/03 | This solid expansion effectively increases the landscape of Morrowind's world, but it's not without its flaws. | ★★★★☆
The Great Escape | 11/03 | Not quite as good as a month in the cooler, but not much better, either. | ★★★★☆

**GAME** | **ISSUE** | **VERDICT** | **SCORE**
--- | --- | --- | ---
Tomb Raider: The Angel of Darkness | 10/03 | Not as bad as the movie—oh wait, yes it is. | ★★★★☆
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4 | 10/03 | As far as you have to be good at it, it's the most fun you can have on a skateboard without putting yourself in the hospital. | ★★★★☆

**GAME** | **ISSUE** | **VERDICT** | **SCORE**
--- | --- | --- | ---
War 2.0 | 10/03 | Best movie-licensed game of the year so far. | ★★★★☆
UFO: Aftermath | 8/04 | A good game that should be played on the computer, not just on the handheld. | ★★★★☆

**GAME** | **ISSUE** | **VERDICT** | **SCORE**
--- | --- | --- | ---
Gamer's Choice: Middle of the Sphincter | 8/05 | A disturbing, well-written game that will make you laugh and cry. | ★★★★☆

**GAME** | **ISSUE** | **VERDICT** | **SCORE**
--- | --- | --- | ---
G.I. Combat | 8/05 | This is a real American war game if you want to search for one. | ★★★★☆

**Jazz and Faust**
What kinds of parents are so inept, so bizarre as to name a child Jazz or Faust? Hippies? Morons? Hippie morons? Well, it just so happens that this trash game was made specifically for hippie morons.

**Catechumen**
Not rated
God must be having a good chuckle over this attempt to create a Christian videogame that involves slaying demons. We don't care what religion you subscribe to—this game is sinfully bad.
Bruceros of Might & Magic III
Take a trip back in time with Tom and Bruce

Bruce: I had forgotten how annoying this game's underground cave can be. It's divided into several noncontiguous areas that can only be reached by going through teleportation portals called monoliths. However, it's not easy to see where they go because you have to match monoliths and search for their common pattern in the door. It's like someone decided there wasn't enough game play in the series, so they threw in a bonus minigame of Concentration. Also, some portals are only one way, so once you go through them, you must find new portals to take you back via some other route. The net result is that my heroes keep getting lost in circles. I'm wasting a lot of movement points and Bruce is probably winning.

Month 1, week 2, day 1
Tom: I faced a druid named Coronius. After this game, he will go on to invent a brand of Mexican beer. He has revealed a town close by, but I can't find a way to get to it because it's hemmed in by woods, and I can't find where the road comes out. This is most anyway, since the town is guarded by a mael with the aura of Granham and the centaur/dwarf army. It is a tower town, which means I'll get titans once I grab it.

Bruce: No sign of any new towns yet, but I'm picking up lots of experience—Deemer the warlock is already up to level...
5. Early in the game, I like to take experience points from the chests to get my heroes leveled up quickly and only take enough gold to allow me to build townhall upgrades. The money invested early in revenue-generating structures pays off big later on when you're spending several weeks' worth of income just to get top-level recruits.

Month 1, week 3, day 2
Bruce: I just found a town called Ghostwind that looks like a necropolis. It's located a few monolith jumps away from my starting dungeon. It only lists some zombies as defenders, so Deemer takes a chance with some harpies and medusas and attacks. It's an easy victory that should ease my gold problems tremendously.

Month 1, week 3, day 7
Tom: No sign of Bruce yet. I'd think I'd have bumped into a scout or something by now, but there might be some sort of Shadow Land counterpart to this map.

Month 1, week 4, day 2
Bruce: I've explored about a third of the underground and have my capital in my dungeon town of Coldshadow generating 4,000 gold each turn. Next turn, my other town will be upgraded with a city hall, which is the highest it can go since you can only have one capital in the game. At time, I'll be earning 42,000 gold per week, which I can get up to 56,000 if I can find one more town and upgrade it. As much gold as that is, though, I'm sure it won't be enough.

Month 2, week 1, day 3
Tom: OK, I'm draining the land of goodies and monsters to fight, but my advancement seems to be stymied. Coronius is stuck at level 3, my battle mage Terek is at level 2, and I never have enough money to upgrade the structures in my town. "Smooth Move, Dumb Ass" No 2 was forgetting to upgrade my city hall into a capital until now. That would have given me a serious income boost a while back. I really need to grab Tirth, the tower town. But one of the trademarks of HOMM map design is that two locations that look like they're close to each other are actually separated by a long, mazy, twisty passage. To get to Tirth, I have to go all the way south from Wise Oak to an opening in the trees and then come all the way back up a road. This will make it hard for my one army to defend any cities if Bruce brings up a killer stack. And killer stacks are what this game is all about.

Bruce: I managed to find and capture the inferno town of Canidant. Infernos are great because they generate devils, which are indispensable because of their teleportation power. An army full of black dragons (from the dungeon), ghost dragons (from the necropolis), and devils will be fearsomely fast and worth the morale hit you get for combining undead with other types of units. Unfortunately, it's going to take a while to build all the structures in Canidant required for the devoteproducing Forsaken Palace. (That actually sounds like a bad Chinese restaurant.)

Month 2, week 2, day 6
Tom: Terek takes Tirth! (I was hoping I'd get to write that.) I lost all my centaurs to Tirth's magi and stone golem defenders, but my pegasi and unicorns galloped to victory. Horse power, baby! Terek is becoming my main hero—he's up to level 9—and he's going to be pretty tough with a combination of Wise Oakian gold dragons and Tirthian titans. Unfortunately, I'm having cash-flow problems and can't upgrade my Dragon Cliffs, so I'm kind of slumming it with green dragons.

Month 2, week 3, day 7
Bruce: I have a new hero—Iona the alchemist. Her job is simply to run around and collect all the remaining treasure chests down here and exchange them for gold. There is no point in leveling another hero—my warlocks are going to have to fight the battles now. I'm almost ready to head topside and see if I can find Tom.

Month 2, week 4, day 3
Tom: A-ha! A red dot on the strategic map! Bruce has decided to venture forth from whatever alternate dimension he's been hiding in. His little army only has a few black dragons. Coronius the beer druid is close enough to attack. In the tactical combat, I cast Dragon Slayer on my silver pegasi and watch as the little whinnying dudes team up with my green dragons to trounce Geryk. However, his hero escapes, shrieking like a girl the entire time. What a wuss.

Bruce: Ack, that was stupid. I should have hired a throwaway hero to do the scouting rather than my second-best warlock. Fortunately, my killer stack is close enough behind that I'm able to follow up on the next turn and defeat Tom's druid. I don't have a very good memory anymore, so it helps that we just fought last turn and I know exactly how many of each unit Tom has. I lose a few minotaurs and scorpions, but my dragons all survive and I get some decent experience points out of it. Nevertheless, I'm going to head back.
Tom vs. Bruce

Dragons and unicorns and pegasi...oh, man, that's really lame.

To the safety of the underground and pick up some more units before I try this surface adventure again.

Month 2, week 4, day 4
Tom: I'm not retreating. I'm advancing in the opposite direction. And now I see where Bruce is emerging onto the map. There is some kind of stone death-temple thing in the far lower-right corner of the map. That must be the gate to his secret Gerykian underwater.

Bruce: Tom isn't following me into the underground, so I wonder what he's planning. I have my warlocks (Deemer is level 12) heading up with a pair of strong armies. The risk in having two killer stacks is that a bigger stack might be able to take both of them out in the same turn. I'm going to have my alchemist scout this one out for me first.

Month 3, week 1, day 3
Tom: Bruce disappeared last week, apparently frightened away by my druids. I just found a third town. It's a castle type that was way down in the lower-left corner where I hadn't explored. However, even with war unicorns, green dragons, silver pegasi, and blue moons, my lowly first-level druid Adelaide (that's "Sweet Adelaide" to you) was unable to take it, thanks to some crusaders and their double strike. I'm sending another hero down there now with a bigger army, but I really should have had this town much earlier in the game. We'll call missing this town "Smooth Move, Dumb Ass" No. 3.

Month 3, week 1, day 6
Tom: Bruce's heroes have reappeared, but it's an inopportune time since my heroes are spread out across the map. I was taking advantage of the fact that units exchanged between heroes can freely move with the new hero even if the old hero has expanded all his movement points. This allows you to chain heroes together to quickly ferry units across the map. I had just shuttled some giants from beer-druid Coronius to Tirth-taking Terek. Sweet Adelaide is in the lower left trying to take the castle town. And here comes Bruce, right up the middle.

Month 4, week 2, day 1
Bruce: Just following this road up from the south brought me to one of Tom's towns. It seemed pretty weakly defended so I took it. I hope to hang on long enough to upgrade it and get some titans out of the deal. I can upgrade my inferno to produce arch-devils, but they're far away and the battle is here, now. If this adventure goes sour, I expect I'll have plenty of opportunities to get those arch-devils later.

Tom: Bruce takes Tirth. Which doesn't sound anywhere near as snappy as "Terek takes Tirth." His black dragons made quick work of my giants and a throwaway hero I had recruited for defense. Coronius was on his way back, but he had no chance of winning the battle, and if he had lost in the castle, he would have been gone forever. My only hope is to redirect Sweet Adelaide; grab whatever creatures from Wise Oak that I can afford, and try to retake Tirth before Bruce starts crank-

Bruce takes Tirth. Which doesn't sound anywhere near as snappy as "Terek takes Tirth."

Month 4, week 2, day 7
Tom: Terek has mustered a bunch of green dragons, silver pegasi, and war unicorns, along with my one remaining titan and a few gnomes I shuttled out before Tirth fell. I don't think it will be enough, but I can't wait any longer.

Bruce: Tom attacked me with what I presume was his best stack. It was fairly close, although I ended up with four of my seven black dragons alive at the end. So I guess it wasn't that close. My other warlock is following up with a huge army of ghost dragons, dread knights, and vampire lords. Once the week cycles, I can grab some more titans and see what's next.

Month 4, week 3, day 1
Tom: It looks like Bruce has an even bigger army following up. I'm down to the town of Wise Oak and have no chance of capturing another one. I put in my request for an honorable surrender, and Bruce's terms are that I write the following sentence: "Bruce Geryk is truly a hero of might and magic." Tune in next month when we hopefully play something that won't cater to Bruce's predilection for all things elven.

Bruce finds the castle at the end of the road and knocks politely.

Tom's last stand has an appropriately snowy, Russian-front feel to it.
Evildoers, beware!
The world's coolest superheroes are returning to the PC once again for a story ripped from the pages of the Golden Age! It's *Freedom Force vs The Third Reich* in Irrational's mega-sequel, and CGW has the scoop. Don't let the bad guys win—buy your copy in 30 days!
I Love Games!
You didn't have to do it but you did, yes you did, and I thank you.

I get lots and lots of mail and after it's X-rayed then defused by a crack team of experts, I'm always struck by the peculiar notion that many of you, gentle readers, think me some sort of curmudgeon. My stars! Well, I can assure you that we—and that includes me—at CGW are not the grumpy Bad News Bears of computer gaming, no matter how much Jeff Green resembles the reanimated, shambling, two-years-dead cadaver of Walter Matthau. No, beloved subscribers and newstands shoplifters, we are undoubtedly the Steel Magnolias of gaming, a warmly clucking klatch dripped with the hon- eyed milk of love—for each other, for our little CGW family, for Darren's impeccable and uncanny but unnervingly Wookiee-caliber hirsute Shirley MacLaine drag, and especially for games. And no one here loves games more than me.

I love the incredible, immersive worlds created by today's games. Not 20 minutes into Railroad Tycoon III and I was whisked away to yesteryear aboard a steam engine chugging mightily across the plains of Texas, playing with sly cardsharps in the lounge, romancing Miss Bonnie Mae in the dining car, charting with gleam as I tossed freeloadin' hobos from the cattle car into the throngy arms of the majestic saguaros we passed. Lulled by the hypnotic clack-clack of the rattlin' rails, I could practically see the sweeping prairie sunset as sleep o'ertook me...and my contact lens popped out. Alas, the discomfort of the lens springing from my bloodshot orb shattered the spell, and as I searched the worn industrial carpet beneath my desk, I was left to wonder, "Was it all a dream?"

Well, of course it was! I had fallen sound asleep—just like I do on real trains! Genius! But no less ingenious than the wondrous worlds created in games like Contract J.A.C.K., where highly trained killers are so blinded by their need to destroy me that they refuse to allow their compatriots dropping dead around them from my sniper fire to disturb their vigilance. Not a ripple! What a marvelous magic it weaves!

Yet it pales in comparison to the dedicated killers of XIII. So bent upon my destruction are these soldiers of evil that not only have they trained to the point that they absolutely never ever ever ever miss when they shoot, but they have also literally transcribed earthly existence, opting for watchtowers to be constructed beneath their ever-watchful beings. How else to explain their posting atop towers with no ladders allowing them—or me—access to their lofty perch? Or their ammo? I wonder how they eat? Or make poop? Such overwhelming self-sacrifice? To the programmer who created such dedicated enemies, I say a hearty, "Thank you!"

And thank you as well to all the war and strategy games that have taught me the important role that every unit plays in combat. Now, when we watch movies like Saving Private Ryan, Braveheart, or even Lord of the Rings, and my cherished spouse wonders aloud why you ever need infantry, I can respond with a knowledgeable 17-minute dissertation detailing the crucial role that foot soldiers play in battle, to which she can only respond, "Why won't you just die in your sleep?"

I love knowledge, games impart knowledge, so I love games! Without Age of Empires II, I wouldn't know what a trebuchet is, much less pronounce it 'tree bucket.' Thanks to the Civilization games, I now know what the Adam Smith Trading Company is, or actually, I guess I know of the Adam Smith Trading Company. As far as actually knowing what it is and why it's a big deal, I only really know that it's a pretty good bonus to get in Civ. Still, almost nobody else knows what it is, so I can casually mention it at gala affairs and homety barbecues alike, cowing the rabble with my casual knowledge of something that sounds pretty important, marking myself as a Man in the Know. (Caveat to readers: Resist the temptation of casually remarking upon the Adam Smith Trading Company whilst in a holding cell, marking yourself as Future Man-Bride in the Bottom Bunk. You're going to have to trust me on this one.)

I love games because they have given me skills I never dreamed I would have. I've never played a straight flight sim, but my experiences in the Wing Commander and X-Wing games have made me honestly believe that I could take over the controls of an airliner, should the pilot, co-pilot, navigator, flight attendants, any licensed pilots among the passengers, and time-traveling super-apes from the future become suddenly incapacitated. The only downside to this is that I remain hypervigilant when I fly, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice instead of napping like I used to do. On the other hand, staying awake lets me work on my light operetta, The Lusty Vet of Squeakly Fromme.

My life and the lives of all around me are enriched immeasurably by the role of games in my life. I can ask a waiter for some "5 saltas." I can almost forgive George Lucas for Episodes One and Two thanks to Knights of the Old Republic. I can repair sundials, telescopes, and any steam-driven machine because I have played Myst. And I have safely beheld the awesome terror of killer robotic frogs.

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