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10 Editorial
Jeff read this month's issue for a change, and actually liked it!

14 Letters
There's not a lot of exciting PC games out there right now, so our readers take a stroll down memory lane, reflecting on old favorites like Day of the Tentacle and Diablo. Plus there's a virtual wake for Sam & Max 2.

22 Radar
Not sure what games are gonna be big this year, beyond the obvious ones? Ace reporter "Scoop" Gladstone's got you covered. He's been digging through dumpsters and sneaking around to get the advance word on the new games for 2004. Check out his Pre-E3 scouting report. Also this month, what could be the nerdiest way to get married (Final Fantasy XI) and the return of an old franchise (Starsiege).

46 Previews
"Too many previews, not enough room!" That was a major problem this month for the CGW gang. Still we managed to swing some sweet scoops and tasty bits of info on some upcoming games such as Tribes: Vengeance and Leisure Suit Larry. And let's not forget an exclusive look at S.T.A.L.K.E.R.—we actually had a chance to see this hot game in action.

58 Cover Story
The Sith Strike Back!
The sequel to the 2003 game of the year is here! Get the world's first look at Knights of the Old Republic: The Sith Lords.

52 Overrated/Underrated
Opinions are like, well, you know, and we've got a lot of 'em—both opinions and (on our staff) the things they're like. The CGW Think Tank makes the tough calls on the overhyped and unrecognized in gaming.
78 Reviews
First you laugh, then you cry, or sometimes you do both as you dissolve into a quivering jelly of pitiable emotion. Our review line-up should pretty much accomplish all this and more.

94 Tech
Will beats up on seven mid-range PCs and Loyd waxes on about 64-bit gaming, plus a new Tech Medics and Will Power.

111 Check Out
Our research for this month's Check Out section consisted of spending way too much time playing with our new Transformers toys. See all the trouble we go through to get this thing done?

122 Tom Vs. Bruce
The gibs are flying as Tom and Bruce kill each other repeatedly in Unreal Tournament 2004.

126 Scorched Earth
The first Nanny & the Professor reference in CGW history. Can the apocalypse be far behind?

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52 BloodRayne 2
Why We Are Great
No, seriously. We are.

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

By nature, I am a self-deprecating guy. Some of that has to do with having faith. The rest comes from the fact that I really am kind of an idiot. This is not a problem. The only real problem is when I start the deprecation too far into this magazine's personality. I mean, I hate it when magazines get all braggy and spend half the issue telling you how great they are. "Yeah, we know, you have our money already. Now shut up and entertain me." But I do want to take a moment now to tell you that I actually really like this issue. A lot. Sure, yeah, I wrote the cover story on KOTOR 2, so maybe I'm biased. But I probably still would have liked it (at least sort of) if one of the other goons here written it instead. OK, probably not. But still, that's not the point. The point is, we rule. Or at least, we rule when I write the stories. Also, check out our Overrated/Underrated feature, which was a lot of fun to write, and which hopefully will be fun to read and will inspire you to write us back with your own choices.

Finally, this issue rules because it marks by genius Ryan Scott's first issue as a full-time CGW editor. KOTOR 2, Overrated/Underrated, and Ryan Scott—three reasons why, this month at least, we are great.

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COMING SOON
Letters

S&M = True love 4ever
I've been playing computer games for many years—my first was the original EGA Police Quest One. Adventure games have always been my favorite genre. Needless to say, in recent years, I've felt that computer games have passed me by (or, perhaps, the other way around). So when S&M2 was announced, I was thrilled—a brand-new sequel to one of the best adventures of all time.
And then, out of nowhere, it was cancelled: "After careful evaluation of current marketplace realities and underlying economic considerations, we've decided that this was not the appropriate time to launch a graphic adventure on the PC."
Am I mistaken, or did not Syberia sell fairly well in the past year?
Hadn't S&M2 already generated an enormous buzz, with press and gamers alike anxiously awaiting the product? Wasn't it positioned to be easily the best-selling adventure game of the past five years?
Past 10?
I don't know why, but I'm not buying this "marketplace realities" explanation from LucasArts. What really happened to our favorite dog and rabbbity thing?

Jason Mailloux

Sorry, Jason—try as we did to pay attention to your letter, we were constantly distracted by your referencing "S&M2," Dogs, rabbits, S&M, a "graphic adventure"—really, who could blame us?
Please send "work-safe" e-mails from now on or you're going to get poor Ryan fired.

Crusader: No chance
A smile came to my face when I saw the screenshot from Crusader: No Remorse in the Name That Game section of your April 2004 issue. That was one of my favorite games of all time. Then I saw in your Pipeline section a remake of Sid Meier's Pirates!, another all-time great, and that got me thinking. I have two questions:

Does anybody own the rights to Crusader, and have you guys heard any rumors of any new Crusader games or remakes?

Kevin Manning

Sorry, Kevin—the whole beloved Crusader franchise is pretty much dead, which sucks. We'd love to see a new one just as much as you.

CGW out of touch?
I don't mean to be picky or anything, but there's just something that must be said: You really need to wait longer to close your magazine. You previewed Mythica, a game that was CANCELED WEEKS BEFORE I GOT THE ISSUE! You need to keep in touch with the times. Oh, and thanks for offering a contest for Max Payne 2 mods...which I can't make because I don't have a DirectX 9 card. I'm so cynical, aren't I?

Zack Green

No, Zack, you're not cynical. You're a crybaby. Obviously, our coverage of Mythica seemed woefully out of date (though not as out of date as your 3D card), but the fact is that the game got canceled after we'd already carrier-pigeoned the calligraphy to the printer, who'd already set the type in his gigantic Gutenberg press. Thanks for whining!

Let's play the blame game!
Walk into your local Electronics Boutique and see the 30 different gaming magazines, each with in-depth previews that are becoming far more detailed than many of the reviews of published games. I make the leap of faith in assuming that you and your rivals aren't making this stuff up, which means you have to be bothering someone to get this information. Considering the cancerous-like expansion in preview coverage over the past two years, the tumor is affecting the system! They aren't writing code if they're constantly answering questions. Let 'em work! Don't feed the egos until the product is finished! Hell, Daikatana might have been a better game, and Duke Nukem might be out (OK, I'm stretching it here).

Mail Bites

This was the first issue in MONTHS not to have a fold-out ad behind the front cover. It's boggling my mind.

—William Hollar

Why do companies let marketing jackasses make development decisions without giving designers suitable input into how their game is being made?

—Colin Chude
Yeah, it’s less fun than going out to lunch with the designers, but...

Deathbouger

Hmmm... you just might not have a point, Deathbouger. Honestly, blaming us for Daitkatana is like blaming your mom for mad cow disease. Still, if you’d like more strategy sections, here’s one for your beloved Daitkatana: Uninstall it. And just so we don’t get in the way of the mindmeld at 3D Realms, here’s our last ever preview of Duke Nukem Forever: Ain’t gonna happen. Thanks for writing!

Bigger, better, faster

Few games ever influence us to upgrade our computers. I remember that these gems used to come about once every three years—which were special games we knew would change our experience if we played them. They’re like an itch you wanna scratch really, really bad. Here’s my list of games that made me upgrade my PC so I could just play that damn game!

• Day of the Tentacle—I just couldn’t help but wonder what this game sounded like, so I bought a soundcard.

• Ultima 7—Made me buy a new processor, and it took me three days to finally get a boot disk configuration good enough to make this game run.

• Doom—Had to give a new HD just to be able to play this game... then a new 4GBX4 and lots of RAM. Occupied all four slots. WOW!

• Diablo—I dreaded the day I had to play games in that clunky Win95 OS I kept hearing about. I am a DOS fanboy. Intel had a funny name for that new 586 thing, too. Heheheh...”

• Drakkhen—After seeing this game, I was screaming, “I need a new PCI!” (I was playing Duke 2 on a P200 with 2D cards... scary thought nowadays.)

Servantines on 1UP.com

CGW out of touch?—Part II

I was very excited to read about mythic [sic] in your April issue, but very disappointed when I went to the site and found out it is no longer available. I just wonder how this happened, someone was not paying attention or something. This is an up-to-date mag and should not highly praise a game that no one can play. I am an avid online game player and am always looking for a good online game, but this was not an article that was planned-out well. Also, if online games want to survive, they need to advertise where the majority of the public will see it. There is a very large following for online games, and mythica would have succeeded if they had reached many people. Just my two cents. Good luck for future endeavors.

summer ratliff

While we’ve already explained how our Mythica preview ran after the game’s cancellation, we felt we owed it to you, Summer, to let you in on a little secret: If you hold the Shift key down while typing, you’ll get capital letters. It’s like magic!

A cry for help

To whom it may concern,
I have no idea how this magazine started showing up in my mailbox, but this is a second attempt to unsubscribe. Please, someone help me.

Shawn Phelps

Thanks for your interest in CGW, Shawn! We’ll be extending your subscription by five years as you’ve requested. Please pay our invoice promptly or we’ll have your official credit rating seriously downgraded. Welcome aboard!

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Kendell Howard

Honesty, Kendell—you had us at “Visit Correctional Facilities!” A couple things you should know:
Robert won’t join unless he gets to sacrifice animals, and Jeff was wondering if he could be a high priest in the Church of the Poisoned Mind.

Mall Bites

I have taken a solemn vow to avoid all things Sim and never buy even one of those games. They are obviously a cosmic plot to take over what is left of all functioning brains on this planet.

—Granniegamer on 1UP.com
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Your inside track to E3’s hottest games

Every year around this time, game publishers pack up their bags and head to Los Angeles for the Electronic Entertainment Expo, aka E3. It’s a headache-inducing, booze-fueled three days that has us simultaneously seeing stars and all the new games on the horizon.

But why wait to report on what’s there? We’ve eavesdropped on conversations, slipped GHB to game designers (not a pretty sight, trust us), and pieced together shredded top-secret documents to find out most of what will be on display. You get a taste of what we’re expecting to see, and instead of a big, boring pile, we’ve even separated the good from the bad. Obviously, plenty of stuff will still surprise us on the show floor, but here are this year’s potential players!
The Young Bloods
New games we can't wait to see

Act of War: Rial
Every one makes a big deal about Tom Clancy-based games, but check out this RTS based on an upcoming book by Dale Brown. It promises a dynamic story mode that will leave you waging war on the home front and overseas.
WE SAY: RTS games are due for a major shift, and this looks promising.

Armies of Exigo
A multilayered RTS that lets you wage war on multiple levels.
WE SAY: Metal Fatigue tried something similar a few years ago. Will we say "Leggo my Exigo?" We dunno.

Auto Assault
A Road Warrior MMORPG? Sign us up! Kit out and hop into your own customized ride (motorcycles, semis, and so on) so you can roll with countless others online.
WE SAY: We love the idea. We've been waiting for something like this since Autoduel for the Apple II.

Baker
Let's put together a World War II first-person shooter with lots of scripted sequences! It may not be wholly original, but it boasts good looks and unique squad-mates who talk to and update you throughout this intuitive tactical shooter based on a true story.
WE SAY: Considering Gearbox's track record on PC—hello, NightFire and Halo—we're a little concerned, but we like what we see here.

The Bard's Tale
A hack-n-slash action game based on the classic RPG series. It appears to have the depth and humor of the old games, not to mention some of the game legends that started the series. So what's not to like?
WE SAY: Well, the fact that it's based on the console-friendly Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance engine could be one issue. Still, we've got high hopes here.

Call of Duty: United Offensive
Now here's a real shocker: There's an expansion to the works for Call of Duty: United Offensive puts you in several new soldiers' shoes and even lets you fly the unfriendly skies. Expect hairy ball-gunning sequences ripped from Memphis Belle.
WE SAY: The original game was awesome and loaded with tense scripted events, but it was notoriously short. We'll probably get more of the same here—and love it—come fall. We look forward to seeing what developer Grey Matter has in store.

Cops 2170
Strategy First: Somewhere between X-Com and Syndicate Wars, this strategy game shows promise with a large, interactive world, vehicles you control, plenty of quests, and the obligatory RPG-like character development.
WE SAY: More strategy games!
Dungeon Lords, Dreamcatcher
A dungeon-crawl with FPS-control leanings makes for interesting real-time combat and eight-person multiplayer adventures.
WE SAY: What got our attention here: a nod to old-school gamers. DW Bradley is the man behind Dungeon Lords.

Dungeon Siege II, Microsoft
A bigger and bolder Dungeon Siege is on its way for the holidays. There are promises of smarter A.I. to keep you on your toes, more powerful and varied allies, new Heroic Power superpowers specific to each character class, gorgeous graphics, and a dynamic world that changes as you progress.
WE SAY: Seems like a whole lot of thought and work is going into Dungeon Siege II, and we couldn't be happier. They just have to tweak gameplay so that you aren't fighting on autopilot.

Empire Earth 2, W Games
The ambitious RTS series is back for more, according to the word on the street. You'll be able to build one of 14 civilizations from the dawn of time to the 23rd century, with additional unique powers, leaders, and more.
WE SAY: This is all still very hush-hush and quite a ways out—as in, sometime in 2005.

Ghost Recon 2, Ubisoft
More good stuff, less bad. Want to learn more? Turn to page 27.
WE SAY: Wil wants this to be good. Please don't make him cry, Mr. Clancy.

Heroes of the Pacific, Encore Software
Reports are coming in of the over-the-top World War II dogfighting in this game. The tech demo apparently boasts hundreds of planes guffing for each other at the same time—and that's just the console version.
WE SAY: We'll believe it when we see it, but it sure sounds good.

Imperator, Mythic Games
The Roman Empire never faded away. In fact, it's alive and well today. That's the premise behind this MMO that takes a whole new look at the history books.
WE SAY: The guys behind Dark Ages of Camelot could be on to something, but the game isn't coming out until 2005.

Pacific Fighters, Ubisoft
You know that little game IL-2 Sturmovik? Well, it's breaking out of the European theater and going kamikaze on your ass.
WE SAY: Combat flight sims don't have the cache they once did, but the IL-2 team makes us believe we can fly.

Pariah, Groove Games
Digital Extreme's is moving beyond the Unreal franchise (and Atari, for that matter) by using a "highly modified version of the UT 2003 code" to create a different kind of first-person shooter: survival-action in the future. With a huge focus on the single-player experience, the plan is to make you care about your less-than-super alter ego who's just trying to survive. According to one source: Think The Running Man.
WE SAY: They've been quietly working on this one for two years now. There's more we learned about Pariah, we just need to see it for ourselves before we start gushing.

Pirates, Atari
Can we technically call this young blood? Sid Meier is bringing back his swashbuckling action/strategy game for a whole new generation (and a crotchety old one).
WE SAY: Hopefully it will deliver gold where Pirates of the Caribbean hit the rocks.

Star Wars: Knight of the Old Republic 2, LucasArts
Jedi-ing done right.
WE SAY: Read the cover story!

Tabula Rasa, NCsoft
"Players fight against the demonic alien horde for the freedom of the galaxy using their futuristic mystical powers." Um, yeah. The game promises squad-based, replayable experiences that will take you behind enemy lines and on covert missions.
WE SAY: From the artist formerly known as Lord British comes an interesting idea. We just need to see it in action.

Vanguard, Microsoft
The EverQuest team is reuniting in Redmond to work on a new massively multiplayer online game that it insists will be a lot more than just "EQ done better." As it was put to us: it's not just about the destination, but the journey as well. (You can own a boat and fight off buccaneers on the high seas while traveling.)
WE SAY: Sounds good, but here's hoping Microsoft doesn't call this MMO a year down the road.

Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War, THQ
Is it just us or does the WarCraft universe look a lot like Warhammer's? Still, this looks tight: huge battles, brilliant graphics, and a deep campaign with four unique races.
WE SAY: Good job, Relic. What we've seen so far is sweet and has loads of flavor.
The Old-timers
Our take on games you know about and wish would ship already

Advent: Rising, Majesco
A sweeping epic adventure that'll span three games. It looks cool, but there's a lot that needs to be done before the game can ship this September. We predict delays.

Battle for Middle-earth, EA
The more we see of this game and the new directions it's taking in the RTS genre, the more we like it.

Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth, Bethesda Softworks
We're still waiting for our chance to crack open H.P. Lovecraft's Necronomicon.

Doom 3, Activision
"It'll be ready when it's ready." Whatever.

EverQuest II, SCE
There's a major overhaul for Norrath coming this September. Also, old EQ players should keep their eyes peeled. A new graphics engine is being integrated that will update all the graphics from the old game.

Eulk Genius, WJ Games
Tweaked and plotting a fall release, this game is looking diabolically fun.

Full Spectrum Warrior, THQ
This unique strategy game came out of nowhere last year and impressed many with unique controls and squad-based fighting.

Guild Wars, NCsoft
We've given these guys props for coming up with a great concept for an action-RPG. What you probably didn't know is that they've got a tournament in store during E3 this year. During the three days of the show, you can sign up, download, and play nine missions.

Half-Life 2, Valve
Valve swears the game is coming out. We're waiting until the box is in our hands.

The Matrix Online, TO
Someone swallowed the red pill and will publish this. Can it save the series, though?

The Movies, Activision
Though we were skeptical at first, Molynieux's creative take on Hollywood could be an interesting distraction.

Rome: Total War, Activision
Epic RTS done right? We'll see.

The Sims 2, EA
It's time for some hot Sim-on-Sim action!

S.T.A.L.K.E.R., THQ
We spotted this gem long before THQ scooped it up. Where's our royalty?

Star Wars Galaxies: Space, LucasArts
We're glad to see that a certain galaxy far, far away is making some much-needed improvements. Namely, tweaking the whole Jedi experience and not making it a chore to accomplish. The spaceships kinda help, too.

Star Wars Republic Commando, LucasArts
This Clancy-esque take on the elite clone troopers has us standing at attention.

Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines, Activision
The game will probably be ready before Half-Life 2, the source of Vampire's code, and we're anticipating taking a bite.

World of Warcraft, Blizzard
We almost don't want the upcoming MMO to ship at this point because we know that we'll be hooked. —Darren Gladstone

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WWW.COMPUTERSAMING.COM 25
Shot heard 'round the world

PlanetSide has seven-day war—and more—for birthday

PlanetSide, the first "successful" massively multiplayer first-person shooter, shipped at this time last year. Today, Sony Online Entertainment says more than 50,000 people still log on every month. We're wondering, though, if this endless cycle of war will ever end.

"Not by a long shot," confirms producer Raja Altenhoff. In fact, for the game's first anniversary during the week of May 17, SOE plans to stage the largest battle ever. To do this, it's reactivating the accounts of anybody who has ever played the game. It doesn't matter whether you quit or not—you'll be able to sign in and play for the entire week, according to Altenhoff.

More important are plans for the future, which include a free major update to wash the taste of the Core Combat expansion out of our mouths. The usual balancing tweaks are in store, but SOE also plans to add slightly faster-paced "Counter-Strike-style" play in a tournament mode. Two teams from two different factions will be able to square off on smaller maps. And to help see who is best, there are plans to add stat tracking (kill-to-death ratios, amount of time played per session, and so on) to the entire game. How this will be carried out has yet to be determined, as SOE is in the middle of planning stages, but we've been assured that it'll happen by late this summer.

Another long-overdue change is giving people more incentives to play after reaching BR20. Still in the planning stages, don't expect to see this change until late 2004.

Darren Gladstone

Bot to the future

Star Siege mod set to complement Tribes with a vengeance

Mech fans, rejoice! A new Star Siege campaign is in the works and you won't have to shell out a dime for it. Why? Because it may come in the box with Tribes: Vengeance. Star Siege 2845 is a total conversion mod centered on giant-robot mech and vehicle combat. New vehicles also populate the game, presenting players with plenty of different options and combat roles.

Though Star Siege 2845 is being designed by the fan-made Clancore Design Group, the project has received Sierra's full support. In fact, the mod has been in development for roughly nine months—right alongside Tribes Vengeance. Among the professional talent attached to SS 2845 is original Star Siege creator Blake Hutchins, who has penned a brand new single-player campaign that continues the ongoing story of humanity's struggle against the mechanical cybrid menace. In addition to the single-player campaign, several new multiplayer modes are available, including a number of capture-the-flag and deathmatch variations.

Ryan Scott
Who Ya Gonna Call?

Ghost Recon is back for another tour of duty. Draft us!

Christian Allen, designer of Ghost Recon 2, is gunning to create a whole new experience for modern-warfare first-person shooters. A good story, good scenarios, better AI, and improved graphics should shake the blood lust of gamers craving more realism in their firefighters. We got the high-level word from developer Red Storm about what's on active duty for the upcoming sequel to Ghost Recon.

Campaigns and game modes
In the past, games quelled uprisings in the former Soviet Union and Incursions in Cuba. Ghost Recon 2 will involve you in an international crisis that leads to a major showdown between foreign powers. Expect a standard single-player campaign in which completing missions improves your team's attributes and unlocks new characters and weapons. And all you wheelmen can actually use the vehicles this time around. In addition to the standard campaign mode, Ghost Recon 2 will also feature recon, defend, and firefight modes that were in the previous game.

Smart AI.
Gamers who have played Ghost Recon on PS2 already enjoy the ability to give voice commands to teammates; PC gamers can expect to see voice commands in Ghost Recon 2. This, combined with a new orders system, is an attempt to make the Ghosts a more cohesive unit. While the enemy AI in the Ghost Recon games has sometimes been hit or miss, Ubisoft promises deep improvements to both the team and enemy AI in Ghost Recon 2. And for all you green recruits, Red Storm eases you in with early missions that have you following orders from an AI-controlled hero character.

How does it look?
If there's anything that has plagued the Ghost Recon games, it's (for lack of a better description) the fact that they're not terribly pretty. Ubisoft is addressing this issue in Ghost Recon 2 by promising us "top-notch" graphics that include per-pixel and dynamic lighting, multtexure rendering, specular and environment mapping, and improved outdoor environments. While the gameplay of the Ghost Recon games has always been highly realistic, the environments haven't always been held up to a similar standard. Hopefully, trees will now look like trees and water will behave like...well, like water. The Ghost Recon 2 team also claims to have completely revamped the particle-effect system, which means that explosions will be more spectacular than they've been in previous titles. Plus, the game now employs a new animation system.

William O'Neal
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Blood and Gore
Mature Sexual Themes
Strong Language
Violence
My Big Fat Dork Wedding

Getting hitched online is as complex as the real thing

In most MMORPGs, getting hitched to the troglodyte of your dreams is as easy as petitioning a game master, waiting the required few days, then calling a clan meeting. But the folks at Square Enix have imbued *Final Fantasy XI* with more red tape than a same-sex marriage. Prospective couples must fill out an online form two weeks to three months before the anticipated ceremony. Plus, depending on how elaborate they want to get, they'll have to drop anywhere from 20,000 to 80,000 gil (FFXI's in-game currency). Money isn't easy to get in FFXI, so that's a pretty big commitment. [As opposed to that whole “marriage commitment” thing—Ed.]

The good news is that the ceremonies seem to be a whole lot more elaborate than those in any other game. The aesthetics differ based on the couple's nationality, and most will include free wedding bands for the participants, as well as fireworks to set off after the ceremony. Each of the game's major cities has a few sites designated for weddings, with capacities ranging from 10 participants in the smallest ceremonies to 36 in the largest. Also, be sure to have a trusted friend come along—at least one attendant is required to guide guests through the ceremony, assist the priest, and escort the bride down the aisle.

A few questions remain: Can sexless galka marry one another? How about mithra, the female-only cat people? We don't yet know, but we urge bold social pioneers to give it a shot and send us screenshots if you're successful. FFXI's wedding service isn't set to go live for North American players yet, so you've got a little while to get your scratch together.  

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5.10.15 Years Ago in CGW

5 Years Ago, June 1999

We had two covers for our then-annual 501 cheats issue—one with "501 Cheats" in big letters, and one with Max Payne doing a shoot-dodge, firing twin Uzis in a subway. But instead of seeing a DEA agent in a leather coat in a subway, a lot of outraged readers saw a guy in a black trench coat in a school hallway. This issue hit newsstands about four days after the Columbine shootings, and emotions, understandably, were raw. If we could have, we would have shipped with a different cover, but it was too late, and a deluge of hate mail followed for months.

10 Years Ago, June 1994

You sure couldn't argue with the CGW Premier Awards—well, except for the dork-tacular name and the profoundly strange decision to announce the best games of the previous year smack-dab in the middle of the current one. And the brilliant move to publish actual photos of the extreme-makeover candidates responsible for those games. Still, it reads like a list of defining moments in gaming: Prince of Persia 2, Gabriel Knight: Sins of the Fathers, Day of the Tentacle, Betrayal at Krondor, and a little thing we like to call Doom.

15 Years Ago, June 1989

Who could resist such a challenge? It was as if your very manhood were being called into question, right there on page 45: "I am Sargon, and I challenge YOU..." Such a cunning marketing ploy, using a sixth-grader's portrait of a...well, we guess it's a knight, to shame people into playing a computer chess game! Genius! Nothing screams "quality chess challenge" more than a piece of "Sub Hotel & Caliber" paint slathering. Ah, the golden age of computer gaming—wasn't it horribly embarrassing?
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We've got some bad news for all of you out there eagerly awaiting *Sam & Max: Freelance Police*. Sadly, LucasArts has canceled the sequel to 1993’s *Sam & Max Hit the Road*. The official statement cites a “careful evaluation of current marketplace realities” as the motivating force behind the decision, which series creator Steve Purcell describes as “mystifying” in an e-mail correspondence with the maintainers of the unofficial *Sam & Max* website (www.samandmax.net). “I’m extremely frustrated and disappointed, especially for the team who has devoted so much effort and creativity to *Sam & Max*,” Purcell’s e-mail reads. “It’s a shame to think that their accomplishments will all go to waste due to this shortsighted decision.”

This isn’t the first time in recent memory that LucasArts has dropped the executioner’s ax on an adventure-game project. *Full Throttle: Hell on Wheels* was also canceled late last year, allegedly due to a number of design-related issues. Though it’s got little to do with *Sam & Max*, we can’t help but notice a trend here—are adventure games really that much of a financial risk for game publishers?

There are still a few companies out there who hold some love for the genre. Sierra, once a kingpin among adventure-game developers, recently revealed an upcoming sequel to its classic *Leisure Suit Larry* franchise. As in many of its classic titles, Sierra’s goal is to tell a good story—something that Joshua VanVeld, the game’s producer, notes as a key element in any adventure game’s success. “The ultimate goal is to tell a specific story and to create a world that people are going to be excited about exploring,” he says.

“Adventure games are entertaining in the same way movies are. A game like *Doom 3* might have an engaging story, but that isn’t really a priority in those games. With games like *Larry*, the story and the per-
sonal goals are what really drive the gameplay experience."

**Saved games**

Meanwhile, The Adventure Company continues to churn out adventure games at a steady pace. Though many of the company's titles are pretty hit-or-miss, there are a few gems to be had from its efforts. For a couple good examples, check out the recent *Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon* and *Dark Fall: The Journal*. If there's any doubt about the viability of adventure games in the marketplace, products like these two are nothing short of a shining ray of hope for the genre.

Renata Richardson, lead product manager at The Adventure Company, certainly feels that the adventure-game market is active and growing. "I think there's definite potential for the adventure market," she says. "I don't think adventure gaming is going anywhere. It's evolving, and that's it. I think there will always be a demand for games that challenge the mind, that make you think. Adventure games fill a need, and we're happy to provide products to fill that need." With comments like this, it sounds like there's still a healthy market for these types of games. Just don't hold your breath for a *Maniac Mansion 3*. —Ryan Scott

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**The Nerd Herd**

**Street geeks speak**

**What is the most overrated current trend in PC gaming?**

Amy Hoskins  
**WATERFORD, CT**

I hate all these pay-to-play online games. I mean, I've played plenty of online games that haven't charged me anything (*Unreal Tournament*). Nobody should have to pay extra for *The Sims Online*.

Aaron Ko  
**SAN FRANCISCO, CA**

I can do without "realism" in my videogames, especially FPS games. Why simulate brutal, hard-hitting football when you can actually (*gasp*) go outside and play football?

Marcus Eikenberry  
**PORTLAND, OR**

MMORPGs. All new ones claim to be the next killer one. In the last few years, not one of them has lived up to all that hype. At this point, I doubt any will. I'm still waiting for that real killer one.

Seth Welch  
**DAILY CITY, CA**

It's got to be how short some games are today. I got more info and spent more time reading my cereal box this morning than I do playing 'em.

Michael Hawash  
**HOUSTON, TX**

Developing games jointly for both the PC and consoles. Such games underutilize the awesome power of current PCs so as to accommodate console technology that is now 3 to 5 years old.

Think you got what it takes to be one of the few, the proud, *THE HERD*? Drop us a line at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com.
Get a Life
Find something else to amuse yourself with

Bubba Ho-Tep
Elvis and JFK team up to take on a mummy—what's not to like about that? Let's backtrack a little so you can wrap your head around the craziest movie concept we've ever witnessed.

Elvis, king of rock 'n' roll, hasn't died—he's alive, but stuck in a rest home. An African-American man who thinks he's John F. Kennedy resides in this same joint.

Who better to join forces and combat a soul-stealing mummy that's feasting on world-weary retirees? Can the two stop this Bubba Ho-Tep before it's too late?

In the same vein as the classic Evil Dead movies, Bubba Ho-Tep is a dark comedy to be reckoned with. The undisputed king of the B movie, Bruce Campbell, plays the old liverworts-ridden king of rock 'n' roll with style, and, as he does in the Evil Dead series, makes this movie gold with instant classic one-liners. Ossie Davis also does a great job as someone who thinks he's our 35th president. It's a fresh idea, and it's fresh out on DVD, loaded with deleted scenes and two commentary tracks. Definitely pick this one up.

Jet - Get Born
 Whoever says rock is dead needs a stereophonic boot in the ass, and these are the guys to deliver it. The driving beats and raw rhythms call to mind bands such as the Ramones and the Rolling Stones and are equally perfect for cruising down the road or blowing away the competition in UT2004 (well, not the slow songs, but you get the idea).

Initial D
For fans of import speedsters and Need for Speed Underground, Initial D lauds the joys of drift racing. The story revolves around tricked-out cars, fast women, and Tak, a tofu delivery kid who turns out to be the wickedest thing behind a wheel. On the winding roads of Mount Akina, Tak proves his mettle in his Eighty-Six. Check out the comic books (manga) and the anime series or play the networked racing game at your local arcade.

The Triplets of Belleville
A weird and wonderful animated French film, The Triplets of Belleville is an 80-minute tour de force you can't help but love. A hapless shub trains for the Tour de France with his loyal dog and whistle-blowing grandmother in tow. The wildly inventive hand-drawn animation and toe-tapping jazz score make this one a minor classic.
The way we customize our things says a lot about who we are. Like selecting a dragon gun for a battle robot says, "I'm gonna reduce you to a pile of scrap." In Custom Robo, choose from over 200 parts to create and send the ultimate combat robo into battle against any who dare oppose you.
### CGW Top 20

**Wasted time well spent**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Call of Duty</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Final Fantasy XI</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Battlefield 1942: Secret Weapons of WWII</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Prince of Persia: TSOT</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Max Payne 2</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Age of Mythology: The Titans</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Simpsons: Hit &amp; Run</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Beyond Good &amp; Evil</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Deus Ex: Invisible War</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<th>Rank</th>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Rating</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Freedom Fighters</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Madden NFL 2004</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Civilization III: Conquests</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Need for Speed Underground</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Dungeon Siege: Legends of Aranna</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Tron 2.0</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Counter-Strike: Condition Zero</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>SimCity 4: Rush Hour</td>
<td>★★★★★</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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The new single-player mode offers noobs a chance to rocket into Tribes.

Staring down a Henry.
Tribes: Vengeance

Tribes hard with a vengeance

Fans of the Tribes series have long been a tightly banded tribe themselves. Part of the appeal was the hazing ritual—the learning curve that bonds players of multiplayer games.

So, how to ensure new players in the web of Tribes’ charms? Simple: Reinvent, revamp, renew, and renovate. And much of that begins and ends with a brand-new developer: Irrational Games, the brain trust behind Freedom Force.

Tragic kingdom

The biggest difference between Tribes: Vengeance and the previous two Tribes games is an actual single-player game that’s set at a time when the powerful Empire is buckled not only serves as a shield, but can also be used specifically to knock back heavily armored foes.

Some of the primary weapons include the napalm gun and the Frisbee-o’-death disc that boomerangs back to you. Vengeance also simplifies the superfluous variety of grenades featured in Tribes 2 by offering only a single type: one worth using.

The new grappling hook latches on to nearly any surface to let you swing like a monkey. Think “elastic swing,” not the classic Quake “grapple” that lets you turbo down corridors. Tribes’ new grappling hook even lets you grab enemies, slowing ‘em down while causing some damage. One technique to master is to grapple the

“Easy to learn, hard to master”—a design philosophy focused on the freedom of movement.

holding tight to its reigns. A complex cast of characters tells a story of political dissent, manipulation, and old-fashioned killing. The main heroine is Julia, a headstrong princess with her eyes set not on the throne but rather squarely on her gladiatorial sport—so squarely that she’s swapped said eyes for cutting-edge, yellow artificial optics.

The single-player action should help newcomers get a feel for every aspect of the game without having to go through the unforgiving experience that diving into a full-on multiplayer skirmish might provide. That’s fully in line with the “easy to learn, hard to master” design philosophy that senior designer Michael Johnston espouses. “Previously, the slower speeds of Tribes made it hard to feel empowered,” he says. As such, movement rate has been ramped up, and details like air control have been tightened. During our exclusive hands-on playing session, we were impressed with the game’s new speed.

“Guns. Lots of guns.”

Guns do not have direct secondary fire, but a clever player can learn little tricks that enable secondary benefits. For example, the ground near a flag, nab the flag, and rubber-band-snap yourself for a hasty trip back to home base.

Each of the weapons is being carefully balanced. For example, the rocket pods shoot out a spiraling series of missiles that corkscrew away into the distance, but the missiles are nicely spaced apart. Vehicles are getting similar balancing attention. The pod, a one-man deployable hovercraft, moves much slower now, which, irrational hopes, will mean fewer games of chicken as players ram vehicles into one another.

You can still choose between three different types of armor/classes from the outset: heavy, medium, and light. Plus, there will be dispatchable packs that create additional job roles. For example, a repair pack essentially turns you into a medic.

Tribal warfare

Single player is all well and good, but Tribes made its rep on the multiplayer battleground. The multiplayer map Utopia has the feel of the postapocalyptic movie Akira. There’s a constant sense of paranoia as you run through war-torn urban streets. Enemies

© Stroll down the yellow-brick road of the Children of the Phoenix.

seem to be everywhere, hiding out in crumbling buildings or sniping from the rooftops.

Another multiplayer map took us inside the Empire palace, a place dripping with golden tapestries and walls of windows. On one side of the estate, the Phoenix tribe has crashed through, leaving a spaceship and a gaping hole in the sunlit ceiling. Visible through the sweeping windows: Empire tribesmen jittering over for the kill.

© Johnny Liu

The Word ROCKING IT
Check out the detail on this sniper. Even the squishy foam eyepiece is there!

Mutants and elite stalkers won't wait around for you to show up.


This is STALKER. What does that mean? It's revealed in the story.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl

Sneaking up on some bigger-name games

Excellent vodka and hearty cabbage soup aren’t the only things “under development” in Kiev, Ukraine. Ukrainian-based developer GSC Game World is cooking up a game so unique, it could give the likes of Doom 3 and Half-Life 2 a run for their money.

Nukes in Chernobyl (again)

Set in the near future, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. takes place at the site of one of the world’s worst nuclear power plant accidents: Chernobyl. A second explosion at the Chernobyl plant occurs, and in the aftermath, a black market centered on radioactive artifacts from the explosion springs up. These pieces of rubble hold a mysterious power, and... well, it’s just say that a lot of people want to get their hands on these things.

You play the role of a freelance mercenary, a S.T.A.L.K.E.R. working to collect artifacts for the highest bidder. Ah, but it isn’t so easy. Bloodthirsty mutants roam around the plant. Hidden radioactive anomalies litter the landscape. Plenty of other scavengers are also competing with you. S.T.A.L.K.E.R. takes the genre in an entirely new direction by building an independently living world around the player. There are a few event-based scripts that advance the plot, but GSC has taken a bold step by giving all the NPCs their own dynamic AI. Mutants and other S.T.A.L.K.E.R.s have to meet their own needs for food, sleep, and survival, essentially carrying out their own agenda in real time as you play through the game yourself. The crew at GSC even concedes that an NPC S.T.A.L.K.E.R. could affect the course of the game by completing a major objective ahead of the player.

GSC also promises a good number of truly unique endings, which one you see depends on the course you take. You could play the game with guns blazing at anyone who gets in your way, or you could try a less-aggressive path. Obviously, one of the benefits of such an open-ended game is the replayability of the single-player game. You’ll be able to align yourself with a completely different group the next time through for a fresh experience.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. also has some character-management elements, but it’s far from being an RPG. In addition to the usual health level, you’ll have to monitor radiation exposure, sleep, and hunger, all of which play a part in character management. You must also manage your limited carrying load: your backpack has only so much space, and you have only to much endurance. To help you carry the heavy stuff, you’ll be able to purchase a few different cars and trucks, but no boat vehicles like tanks. Weapons range from the standard combat knife to a variety of pistols, like the Beretta 92FS, to assault rifles such as the Soviet standard AK-47 and modern M16 variants. Weapons can be outfitted with silencers, scopes, and even grenade launchers (for a price, match) to make them even more deadly.

Extremely long sight lines make S.T.A.L.K.E.R.’s outdoor views very realistic, and GSC’s custom-built X-ray graphics engine can push a massive number of polygons, topping it off with some impressive lighting effects. Real-time weather and daylight to nighttime changes add to the atmosphere, but it isn’t just window dressing. Example: Poor weather causes fatigue more easily and limits your view.

Stalk up the multiplayer

CGW was provided with an exclusive look at S.T.A.L.K.E.R.’s multiplayer component, which is in the very early stages of development. Essentially, there will be three gameplay modes: deathmatch, team deathmatch, and another style currently called key mode, which will require teams to battle for possession of a key object.

The final number of players in multiplayer is also to be determined, but GSC is shooting for 18 players in deathmatch modes and five or six per team in key mode. We saw an impressive level containing a large factory train yard. Among the other scenarios to be included, one takes place at a small military outpost, another is set inside a reactor.

Much of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. remains under wraps. The good news is GSC still won’t tell us what S.T.A.L.K.E.R. stands for, or what exactly the plot circumstances are, but no matter – S.T.A.L.K.E.R. stands on its own. Half-Life 2 and Doom 3 are getting a lot of buzz, and rightly so, but S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is so unique it’ll shake the whole FPS genre to the core when it reaches a PC near you.

The World NUCLEAR

An NPC S.T.A.L.K.E.R. could affect the course of the game by completing a major objective ahead of the player.
Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude

Larry, Larry... Lovage?

Sierra is coming up... with a Leisure Suit Larry franchise. That's right, folks, the leisure suit is back for a new generation. Parents, take note: Magna Cum Laude isn't for kids—Sierra's aiming for a solid M rating, so expect healthy servings of the series' trademark sexual humor and double entendres. Female gamers: Prepare to be objectified and offended, but amused.

In this new entry to the classic PC series, namesake Larry Laffer has bequeathed the title role to Larry Lovage, his equally lecherous twenty-something nephew. The original Larry is still around to lay down playa lessons to his stalwart protégé.

Young Larry Lovage's latest scheme to win the panties... er, hearts... of females everywhere is to schmooze his way onto a reality dating show called Swingles. Unfortunately, the show's snotty hostess doesn't think Larry has the chutzpah. Determined to prove her wrong, our salacious hero sets off to win the affections and approval of several nubile co-eds.

Larry can do everything from dropping cringe-inducing one-liners ("Did it hurt when you fell from heaven?"), to taking part in a variety of minigames and puzzles, most of which revolve around his girl-wooing shenanigans. Each of the lovelies is a play on some stereotype, from naive farm girl Sally Mae Beauregard to fowl-mouthed Italian gangster Analisa Gambonzini. One found particularly amusing was Harriet Funderbunk, overzealous pep squad girl. Don't be fooled by her "band camp" appearance; she's actually quite Naughty.

Worming your way into these ladies' bedrooms isn't always easy. Instead of the classic "choose-a-line" from old adventure games, conversations work on a more active system. You control a fast-moving icon that zips along a track of conversation icons; among the icons are "right" and "wrong" things to say, as well as lewd comments and "bodily function" sounds. A heart meter indicates a girl's interest level.

To close the deal on any one of the principal "goal girls," you'll have to make your way through three conversations and various minigame challenges, such as mixing drinks, dancing, and the classic game of Quarters. Complete all these objectives and you'll witness Larry's night of love, plus score a "token of affection," proving your playa skills to the Swingels hostess.

Miscellaneous minigames include photography, paper delivery, and serving drinks at Sparkus, the local gay bar. With the money Larry earns, he can buy new outfits, bribe people, or shop at any of various Vendmaster 2000 machines.

If there's one thing Magna Cum Laude looks to have in spades, it's humor. Hilarious dialogue, amusing characters, and homey word plays, and even a few classic Larry homages (look for the Lefty's Too bar on the seedy side of town) should provide plenty of gut-busting American Pie-esque humor. All that's missing is beloved series creator Al Lowe, whose involvement is yet to be determined.

Whatever the case, we're glad to see you again, Larry—welcome back. Ryan Scott

The Word: Raunchy

"Hey, I've never seen one of THOSE before! Let alone two!"
Dragon Empires

Hear them roar

Dragons are now the hot new thing (groan) in the MMO business. It seems as if every upcoming MMO lets you play as a dragon, contains the word "Dragons" in its title, or somehow features dragons in a prominent role. Add one more name to the dragon list: Codemasters’ upcoming massively multiplayer RPG, Dragon Empires. In Dragon Empires, you’ll choose from among three races—magic-inclined humans, warlike dragonbloods, or rogish shadow— and 15 archetypal character classes in pursuit of adventure with your fellow players. In addition to all the ubiquitous fantasy trappings, quests, and crafting options, Dragon Empires will place a heavy focus on PVP combat, giving player-made clans the opportunity to rule cities and bend local economies to their every whim. The dragons mentioned in the game’s title act as high-level marshals for the various empires throughout the world—hence, Dragon Empires.

Fantasy author Piers Anthony is on board to assist in crafting the game world’s history and background fiction, lending a literary flourish to the title. Look for Dragon Empires to hit shelves later this year.

The Word: DRAGGIN

Kill.switch

Turn on a war

Take cover! No, seriously, I mean it—cover is a good thing. It’s been part of game design ever since Namco’s Pac-Man. Some places are safe. Others aren’t. Namco has developed a whole new way to “take cover” in Kill.switch, a port of the company’s war-torn console action game. A broken-down truck. Stone rubble. Ducking behind these objects and letting them be blown up—instead of you—is the only way to stay alive. As Bishop, a soldier thrown into the conflict, you must constantly find new cover to make your way past the heavily armed opposition.

For those of you having violent flashbacks of Namco’s other recent console port, Dead or Rights, rest assured—Kill.switch is a much better game right off the bat. While this port won’t have any extras, it does have full keyboard/mouse support and, hopefully, a minimum of bugs. Kill.switch should be on store shelves by the time you read this.

Johnny Liu

The Word: COVER BAND
**BloodRayne 2**

Gaming's Goth girl is back and bloody promising

Rayne is a little misunderstood. Yeah, she drinks blood and carries blades on her arms, but she's also part of a secret society out to save the world. In this supernatural sequel, Rayne fights off waves of creatures and still deals with all the design problems from the original game.

**Seeing red**

Majesco product manager Liz Buckley concedes that the original game was disjointed and more of a little unpolished. "But," Buckley says, "we're looking to address these points—and more—in the sequel." After seeing BloodRayne 2 in action, we tend to think they've succeeded.

Instead of busting Nazis in the 1940s, you'll fight modern-day enemies. The plot is ripped straight from the original Blade movie: You must stop the imminent vampire apocalypse. The story spans 10 huge acts that'll have you wasting punks and creatures as you try to stop your father, the nefarious mastermind behind a scheme to blot out the sun, leaving the planet ripe for harvesting fresh blood. With a solid story set in place, the developers can focus on the important part: tweaking the experience.

This time, they introduced a wider selection of moves in a variety of combinations. How much experience you earn depends on how you fight, and gaining experience unlocks new moves. There are even plans to include 12 additional killing blows and special kill cams.

**Princess of Persia**

"We actually learned a lot from Prince of Persia," says Buckley. What we've seen includes running along walls, catlike climbing, swinging, and perching on poles. The developers are even trying to incorporate more puzzle elements, but this time around, they are decidedly more bloody. To wit: To make it past the huge blades of a ventilation-shaft fan, you use your chain whip to yank enemies into the fan. We fear most of these yankers are of the yanking-corpse-into-various-objects ilk, but at least the whip maneuver adds variety. —Darren Gladstone

**Kohan: Kings of War**

Down with management

Kohan: Kings of War, the sequel to TimeGate Studios' Kohan: Immortal Sovereign, seeks to alleviate RTS micromanagement woes with a focus on strategy instead of clicking. Adel Chaveleh, the president of TimeGate, compares the new Kohan to an onion: "Look past the outside and you can begin to understand the details and the depth."

You don't have to look far to see Kohan: Kings of War has already taken a visual leap forward, shifting past its predecessor's dated 2D sprites. The third dimension and new game-engine cinematics add a fuller sense of the world.

Companies are formed by joining hero captains with frontline and support soldiers: as long as a single member of the group makes it out of a combat situation alive, the entire party can be revived. This design engenders empathy, as your infantry becomes more than just点击ing for the fires of war. Heroes also gain experience, enabling different grouping strategies and progressing the story.

Kings of War promises to continue the mythology of the first Kohan, while offering a longer story with more robust design and characters. Six playable races populate the game, including the kohan, man, undead, haroun, and drauga.

**Kingdom come**

When starting a kingdom in the original Kohan, the com-

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**The Word: BLOOD LUST**

**The Word: MANAGEABLE**
WHERE WERE YOU WHEN THE PERSIANS STORMED THE BEACHES OF NORMANDY?

THE PC GAME OF THE YEAR JUST GOT BETTER.

Rise of Nations: Thrones & Patriots Expansion is here. Now you can lead one of six diverse new nations into battle, including the Americans, Dutch, Indians, Iroquois, Lakota and Persians. Or you can lead the victors in four historical single player campaigns — "Alexander the Great," "Napoleon," "The New World" and "The Cold War." The expansion also offers more than 20 new units, including massive Persian war elephants and American marines, and adds governments to the original game. Every decision and detail matters as you shape history, control man’s destiny and craft the perfect plan for world domination.

MAKE HISTORY

www.riseofnations.com
DIGITAL UNDERGROUND

SOLAR

Word on the street: While "trendy" first-person shooters strive toward realism, SOLAR celebrates the universal passion for plugging undead supersoldiers. From the creator of Breed comes this ambitious sci-fi combat simulator with support for up to 32 players, bots included. Two factions slug it out in solo or cooperative and competitive multiplayer scenarios, using land, sea, and air units atop eminently destructible terrain. Our favorite feature: biological weapons, which let you spread disease like a senior prom prom date.

Sounds kinda beat: Great—it's Battlefield 2042. We're sure Mom and Dad will love it. With Halo receiving such a lukewarm reception on the PC platform, it's uncertain whether the market can support the number of upcoming futuristic fracases currently in production. As of press time, the title's predecessor—set within the same genre—hasn't even shipped. Considering there's no hard data justifying a pseudo-sequel, even we egotistical types have to wonder if Brat's being a tad bit presumptuous.

Das Reich 2005

Word on the street: Nazis...we hate those guys! So does modern-day Germany, whose very own Joylabs is hammering away on a first-person blaster set in an alternate history in which Hitler triumphed. The dictator's descendants have established a totalitarian regime, subjugating all of Europe under one blood-soaked banner. Your goal in a 2005 (hope-fully) very different from our own: Storm detailed environments powered by the acclaimed Codecreatures engine and bring it all crashing down.

Sounds kinda beat: Conceptually and technologically, this sucker's in good shape. Financially...well, take your best guess. The company's previous undertaking—the much-hyped but unreleased Y-Project—was the victim of corporate bankruptcy, leaving us dubious about Das Reich's eventual fate. But if the moneymen can pull it together and see the effort through, all signs indicate that gamers will be better off for it. For safety's sake, we'll keep the beer and pretzels handy until further news breaks.

Dangerous Waters

Word on the street: A comprehensive, independently developed simulation that could be the biggest naval-recruitment tool since the Village People's last disco hit. Players are placed in command of seven vessels, including a frigate, patrol aircraft, helicopter, and both diesel and nuclear attack submarines. Extensive multiplayer support allows for collaborative and competitive action, with team-based scenarios also a given. Database contributions by the government account for unprecedented realism across the board, with 270 platforms and 17 navies represented.

Sounds kinda beat: With sales figures for this type of title dwindling in recent years, most sensible industry watchers suspect the market for it sunk deep into Davy Jones' locker long ago. Perhaps not, although it's doubtful Dangerous Waters will be the game that provokes it. Ubisoft's recently announced Silent Hunter III should enjoy a larger marketing budget and, hence, a higher profile. Alternately, it might just tide seamen over until someone gets around to resurrecting Harpoon 4—again.
"IT PUSHES THE EDGE OF WHAT GAMES SHOULD LOOK LIKE."

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PC Gamer
Get ready, Padawan. It's time to save (or destroy) the galaxy once again.
By Jeff Green

KE BACK!

Can't get enough KOTOR? Yeah, neither can we. So be like us: Pick up the June issue of Electronic Gaming Monthly for more exclusive info and screens, including details on the Xbox version, and a super-cool poster we were too lame and cheap to include here.
How great was *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*? So great that the normally divided gaming press (including CGW) was virtually unanimous in crowning it 2003’s game of the year. So great that gamers who had no interest in either *Star Wars* or role-playing games found themselves sucked in just as much as the fanatics. So great that the fanatics themselves, conditioned to douse their expectations with a series of so-so games and two painfully disappointing movies, could breathe a sigh of relief and praise the heavens that finally, someone got it. Someone remembered why we fell in love with *Star Wars* in the first place and applied all their creative energy to channeling that experience into a videogame.

*Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic: The Sith Lords*—the long-winded official name of the sequel—promises to be more of the same, with many of the same characters, game dynamics, and story elements, as well as a totally new experience, with all-new Force powers, character classes, and interface enhancements. A continuation of the awesome story line established in the first game, it takes the series in a different, stronger, perhaps darker new direction—kind of like *The Empire Strikes Back* did all those years ago.

We traveled to Irvine, CA, for an exclusive look at *The Sith Lords* with developers Obsidian Entertainment, and though the game is not due to ship until February 2005, it’s still well in progress, with the story fully plotted, characters taking shape, and many of the levels and quests already...
Forget your character from the first game— you'll be creating an all-new character in KOTOR: The Sith Lords.

mapped out: Forget Episode III (if you haven't already)—this is the Star Wars experience you're looking for.

Fear not, Padawan
Your first question may well be: Who is Obsidian Entertainment? Those who pay attention to such things know that the first Knights of the Old Republic was developed by BioWare, the Canadian geniuses also behind the brilliant Baldur's Gate and Neverwinter Nights RPGs, but with BioWare busy working on its new Xbox title, Jade Empire, the company isn't available to handle the chores of KOTOR's sequel. BioWare recommended a group of guys it knows well—and you do, too, albeit perhaps not by name, but rather through their amazing games.

Obsidian Entertainment is a new company founded by the main uberbrains of Interplay's legendary Black Isle Studios, who—both with BioWare and on their own—were responsible for some of the best RPGs of the past decade, including Fallout 1 and 2, Icewind Dale I and II, and Planescape: Torment. So put aside any fears you may have that The Sith Lords is being given to a "B team”—these guys know RPGs as well as anyone in the business. OK? Now let's talk about the game.

War all the time
The Sith Lords takes place five years after the end of Knights of the Old Republic. Forget your character from the first game—you'll be creating an all-new character in this game. Why? Lead designer Chris Avellone explains: "I didn't want to stomp all over anyone's decisions from the first game, because I think whatever resolutions you chose in that game should factor into this one." In other words, to have continued the story with that same character in the lead role would have forced Obsidian to assume a specific ending for the first KOTOR—and it may not have been the ending you chose. (Because the original KOTOR has such a major plot twist, we are steadfastly avoiding spoilers here.)

Instead, the story picks up five years later, and you are an entirely new character: a disgraced veteran of the Mandalorian War, a Jedi exiled from the Jedi Order, just now returning to Republic space after years away. You return to find the Republic in chaos, on the verge of collapse, the Jedi Academy on Dantooine destroyed, and the Jedi Order itself disbanding and scattered—all fallout from the brutal war with Malak and Revan.

And now, as you're the last known Jedi around, Sith assassins are trying to hunt you down and wipe out the Jedi once and for all. And what about Revan? All we know is that within a year...
When's it coming out? February 2005.
Will the Xbox version come out first? No—it's a simultaneous launch with the PC version.
Can I import my original KOTOR character? No.
Why not? It's a brand-new story, set five years after the first game.
So where's Revan? We don't know, but he's coming back.
But am I a Jedi again? Duh.
is HK-47 coming back? Yes.
Why isn't BioWare doing this game? Because it's busy with Jade Empire.
Who is Obsidian? Refugees from Black Isle Studios, makers of many classic RPGs.
Will this game suck? We sure hope not.

players will tell the game what they believe the ending of the first game was, and that will affect decisions throughout our game.”
And though Obsidian wants to keep it a secret just how much of a role Revan plays in The Sith Lords, we've been promised that he's definitely coming back.

Dude, where's my lightsaber?
Although you do start the game as a Jedi, don't be fooled into thinking you come out of the gate in The Sith Lords as a lightsaber-swinging badass. You don't. In fact, you begin the game with neither a lightsaber nor Force powers, because as an exiled Jedi, your lightsaber was taken away and your connection

after the events of the first game. Revan went off to the Unknown Regions and hasn't been heard from since. Whether he was redeemed or fell to the dark side—well, that's largely up to you.
“According to the game,” says Aurellio, “is that during various conversations,

Recovering your lightsaber—and learning how you lost it in the first place—is one of the game’s major quests.
to the Force lost—a convenient plot device to ensure you're not too powerful too early on.

Recovering your lightsaber—and learning how you lost it in the first place—is, in fact, one of the game’s major quests. One of the first new characters you meet, a mysterious Jedi named Kreia, will teach you how to hear the Force and use it again, and will be among the many new companions who assist you in your quest to get your lightsaber back.

Though you start out weak (in fact, just to rub it in, Obsidian has your character roaming the entire first area of the game clad in just underwear), as you level up and recover your Jedi abilities, you actually attain much stronger powers than you could in the first KOTOR. For The Sith Lords, Obsidian has created six new “prestige” classes for you to choose from—three each for dark-
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- THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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side and light-side characters—that essentially let you attain the status of the highest level Jedi or Sith you can imagine (see sidebar page 66 for details).

Your lightsaber will also be more upgradeable, and you'll gain a host of new dark- and light-side Force powers. Though most of these are still to come, one we did see in action was Force sight, which lets you see through doors and walls to glimpse upcoming enemies and prepare yourself for battle. Force sight will also reveal a character's light- or dark-side "taint"—red for dark-side characters, blue for light-side ones. Other new Force powers mentioned include battle meditation (Bastila's special power in the first game) and Force rage, a dark-side power that will let you dish out huge amounts of damage.

**Friends forever**

If you played the original *KOTOR*, you know that it's not all about you. As it did in the *Baldur's Gate* games, BioWare created a host of memorable NPC companions in *Knights of the Old Republic*, complete with deep backstories, engaging personalities, and a variety of skills—just like the great characters in those old *Star Wars* movies.

For the sequel, Obsidian is bringing back many of the NPCs, some to be your companions again and some just to show up in cameo roles. TS-Ma, the utility droid with the awesome hacking skills, is the first-old friend you encounter, as he takes you through the Sith Lords' first level. A tutorial designed to get the *Ebon Hawk*, your spacecraft from the first game, up and running again. (How exactly it is that your new character has acquired the *Ebon Hawk* is another mystery the designers are keeping close to...
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PRESTIGE CLASSES

You start *KOTOR: The Sith Lords* as a Jedi, with the same choice of Jedi classes you eventually gained in the first game: consular, guardian, or sentinel. The new game, however, introduces all new "prestige" classes for high-level characters: three each for the dark side and light side. Here's the breakdown.

**LIGHT SIDE**


Jedi Watchman: A guardian supreme, with excellent lightsaber abilities and power and command over the Force. Think: Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Jedi Weapon Master: A fighting machine with increased powers of lightsaber deflection, resistance to pain, and the ability to do more damage in combat. Think: Mace Windu.

**DARK SIDE**

Sith Lord: An über-badass with the ability to "demoralize opponents and corrupt the will of their followers." Think: Emperor Palpatine.

Sith Marauder: Like the ultimate Sith warrior, he can use dark Force rages, master many weapon disciplines, and shut off pain. Think: Darth Maul.

Sith Assassin: An expert at stealth and deception, as well as a master of Force camouflage and a variety of stealth skills. Think: Mara Jade.

While the Ebon Hawk is parked, we take a whiz behind the tree, unobserved.

the vast right now.) We were assured that our favorite NPC, the trash-talking HK-47, is also returning in the new game, though how big a role he'll have is something else the meatbags at Obsidian declined to tell us.

All in all, you'll have 10 characters to choose from to fill out your party, which, as in the first game, will be limited to a maximum of three. Players who pursue the dark side may net different companions than light-side players, and in some cases, even your characters' gender will determine which companions you get.

One of the big goals this time around is to have all of the companions be more useful and desirable, so you'll be more inclined to play them all. "Coming off *KOTOR* 1, one of the things we realized was that we had all these really cool characters, but some of them were underutilized," says Mike Gallo, the game's producer at LucasArts. "It's possible that some players may not have ever talked to Canderous or even met HK-47." The reason? "Once many players get the Jedi, they never put anyone else in their party.

"Once you get the Jedi, like Revell, Jaden, and Jolee." Aveline confirms. "these guys are so powerful compared to the others, like Zaalbar and Canderous, there was often no incentive to use anyone else."

To fix this in *The Sith Lords*, Obsidian made a couple key design decisions. The first was to give every companion a powerful special ability so that in some cases, non-Jedi will prove more valuable to have in your party than Jedi. For example, a roguish Han Solo type named Atton Rand, who you meet in the game's first main area—Paragus, a mining facility in an asteroid field—will have the ability to never be completely knocked out, thus keeping you the game. Over time you might get even with the most powerful Jedi in tow.

An early piece of concept art from *KOTOR 2*, emphasizing the game's darker themes.
The second decision was to physically split up the party more so that different characters will assume major roles at different points in the game. "We thought this was a very Star Wars thing to do," says Avellone. "In the Star Wars movies, the friends all split up and do various things, so it made sense for us to do it here. We wanted to have more moments where each character could shine for a while and get more stage time to show off their special abilities and give you more insight into their character."

As you explore the game's worlds (five in all, with numerous levels on each), many of the subquests will feature specific companions, who, for that portion of the game, assume a "starring" role as they split off from your main character. "The cool thing," says Avellone, "is that sometimes the companions will discover things the player's main character doesn't yet know—and they'll keep that information for a long time. They'll gain insights into what's happening in other parts of the game that you can't necessarily act on at first."

Finally, companions are being made more dynamic by reacting more to the decisions you make throughout the game, says Chris Parker, Obsidian's chief development officer and producer. "One of the things we thought would be really neat is the ability to influence how your companions are affected by the light and dark side as well. How you treat your companions and the decisions you make may affect their decision making. Some companions basically idolize you," says Parker, "so if you start falling to the dark side, they'll start falling, too—but if they don't like you, then the opposite may happen."

Face-lifts and tummy tucks

We're a couple thousand words into this story now, and we haven't yet told you about the all-new graphics engine, combat system, and interface. That's because they don't exist, nor will they. Obsidian is following the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" line of reasoning, which in this case is a good call, since KOTOR was almost flawlessly executed by BioWare. Rather, Obsidian will just tweak things here and there to make the game a bit more polished.

Graphically, players can expect to see more interesting lighting and weather effects and many more—and more varied—attack animations. Now, rather than just seeing the same animations for certain attacks over and over, Obsidian is working on visually representing your upward progression—as you level up and your powers and feats get stronger, you'll see the animations for those attacks change, becoming cooler and more sophisticated.

Obsidian is also nipping and tucking the game's interface. One key change is the addition of a Quick button on the Action menu to instantly switch weapon configurations, rather than having to laboriously pause combat and go through the Equip screen. The designers hope this will encourage players to try different weapons and styles of attack. Other small tweaks include moving all the messages you receive to the Journal page, giving party selection its own screen, and adding the user interface on the main game screen when you're not in combat so that you get a less-cluttered, more "full-screen" presentation while exploring the world.

All in all, however, don't expect a very different looking game. "Technically, this is the same game," admits Parker, "Our focus is more content driven than technology driven. KOTOR has a solid engine that works, so we just want to take advantage of that as much as possible and push it hard."

Countdown to February

Obsidian's goal is to push hard through June, then spread six months playtesting and balancing the game for a release in February 2005. And fear not—LucasArts promises a joint Xbox and PC release this time.

It's far too early for us to pronounce any type of judgment on the quality of The Sith Lords. All we can tell you is that as a work in progress, with a team that clearly loves what it's doing and has nothing but the highest praise for the first game, the Knights of the Old Republic sequel appears to be in capable hands.

We have a good feeling about this.
OVERRATED
AND THE TRIUMPHANT
IN PC GAMING

THE LAST WORD ON THE TRIVIAL

ow does the saying go? “One man’s poison is
another man’s wine” isn’t it?

Since we’re PC gamers, we don’t go much for
wine—unless, you know, it’s car-
bonated or spiced with an “n.”

So, let’s rephrase the expres-
sion. How about this. One man’s

“Doom is another man’s

Pakistani. Yeah, that’s better.

Cozy up to the bar while we tell
you how we really feel about
this pastime of ours—the first
round’s on us.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TAVIS COBURN

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD’S 2004
UNDERATED LIST
**THE MOST OVERATED/UNDERATED**

**GAME FEATURE**

**OVERATED: EYE CANDY**

People come in here all the time and gush about all the graphical wonders in a game they're working on. See that smoke bellow?? Notice how the water ripples?? Did you count the ants on the developer's face?? With all this focus on the glory of texture mapping and level of detail, we humbly ask, "When the hell will you guys quit with the damn tech demo and get on with the actual game?"

**UNDERATED: INTELLIGENT A.I.**

We play games to avoid the real world (or, to be more specific, the other dumbass editors here). Notice the irony, then, when the A.I. of in-game enemies is two steps shy of the short bus. Mugging someone in Deus Ex: Invisible War results in the victim looking around and wondering where the noise is coming from. In the real world, clubbing Darren in the back of the head results in him getting pissed and looking for the person who took his digital camera.

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**THE MOST OVERATED/UNDERATED**

**HERO**

**OVERATED: DUKE NUKEM**

A good soldier never dies, but somehow this lamarian stillEngine. The only redeeming quality of this 'rold freak was stealing the good lines from the Evil Dead movies.

**UNDERATED: ROGER WILCO**

What ever happened to games with an actual sense of humor? This unassuming space janitor cleaned house in the Space Quest series, and we'd take him over Duke any day.

---

**THE MOST OVERATED/UNDERATED**

**RELEASE DATES**

**OVERATED: WINTER**

Everybody is so busy racing to get buggy, half-assed games out for the Christmas rush, all the good ones get lost. Case in point: Beyond Good & Evil. We think the only people who bought this game are the developers' parents—and that's a crime.

**UNDERATED: SUMMER**

C'mon—ship some titles in the summertime. If KOTOR for PC had shipped in June (like the Xbox version, cough, cough), people would've scooped it up.

---

**THE MOST OVERATED/UNDERATED**

**GAME COMPANY**

**OVERATED: GEARBOX**

How did these people hypnotize the game industry into giving them more work? After seeing Gearbox execute GD: NightFIRE and bundle Halo for PC, we think the company has blackmail pictures of key people with sheers. Don't race a game out the door if it isn't ready.

**UNDERATED: MONOLITH**

Microsoft shouldn't be the only company in Washington that gets all the attention. Monolith has put together some of the more truly inventive games we've seen, including No One Lives Forever, No One Lives Forever 2, and Transilvania 2. Hell, we might even care about The Matrix Online. Game Monolith is developing. It's gotta be better than the last two movies.

---

**THE MOST OVERATED/UNDERATED**

**MOD**

**OVERATED: COUNTER-STRIKE**

No disrespect, but isn't Counter-Strike getting a little long in the tooth? You've got a mod on a 6-year-old game, and yet it's still being used for tournaments around the world. Here's hoping a major revamp is coming out when Half-Life 2 ships.

**UNDERATED: DESERT COMBAT**

Battlefield's preeminent mod is so good, it actually clowns a bunch of sorry full games that you'd buy at retail prices. The levels are smartly designed, it has a fresh assembly of vehicles and weapons to deal damage with, and most importantly, it was made in this millennium.
THE MOST OVERRATED/UNDERRATED

ANNOYING MULTIPLAYER TACTIC

OVERRATED: CAMPING
“CAMPER! YOOU suxOrrs!”
Give it a rest already! Multiplayer games have changed since those straight-up deathmatch days; some specific modes actually involve strategic squabbling. And if you know where that damn camper is, just kill him. Stop complaining already, ya noob.

UNDERATED: FRAG STEALING
You've whittled an opponent down to his last shred of health. Suddenly, some fool pops out and finishes the kill. Then the punk shoots you in the head. ARGH! More games should have an "assist" score for partial kills. Plus, more hatred should be wrought upon those thieving fraggers.

GAMING CONTROVERSY

OVERRATED: VIOLENCE
Seriously, we never want to have to write about this again. Ever. It's old. It's done. And it was never more than a cack to begin with. No, it wouldn't be the worst idea in the world if game developers exercised some prudence, restraint, and maturity now and then. But blaming society's ills on videogames is a weak and hypocritical way to avoid facing a more serious problem: lousy parenting.

UNDERRATED: PIRACY
You want to know what's really going to kill this industry? It's not pressure from politicians or upright parental groups. It's the constant, increasing theft and piracy of game code. These folks work hard to make your games, people. Don't screw 'em over. Pay for your games. If developers don't make money, they don't have jobs. If they don't have jobs, you don't have games. Then what are we supposed to do? Go outside? Pay attention to our families? Don't let this nightmare come true.

MOST OVERRATED/UNDERRATED

CGW HALL OF FAME GAME

OVERRATED: TOMB RAIDER
So maybe in retrospect, it really was just the breasts. Whaddya gonna do? They were 3D, they were big...they were breasts. Nuff said.

UNDERRATED: CRUSADER: NO REMORS
 Crusader: No Remorse is among the greatest action games ever made, with a then-revolutionary use of isometric perspective and fully destructible environments. This near-forgotten classic is in serious need of a revival.

MOST OVERRATED/UNDERRATED

GAMER STEREOTYPE

OVERRATED: BASEMENT-DWELLING LOSER
Not all gamers live in mommy's basement, eating Cheetos and reeking of sock sweat. Some of them have enough money from their programming jobs to live in their own geek palaces filled with swords and cloaks.

UNDERRATED: ONLINE WOMAN
OVER 40
An interesting bit of new data reveals that women over 40 make up one of the fastest-growing populations of computer gamers. First, it's Yahoo Backgammon. Next, it's PopCap's Zuma or The Sims. These are the gateway drugs to full geekdom. We salute you ladies, brave champions of gaming! Send photos.
**THE MOST OVERATED/UNDERATED**

**STORY**

**OVERATED:** HALO

Master Chief, Cortana the A.I. Space marines. All the pretensions of a grand epic, but in the end, what really happened? You ran around a giant donut weapon. All sorts of bad stuff happened. Chief is tough. Cortana is snappy. Marines get killed. That just about covers it.

**UNDERATED:** ANACRONOX

Anacronox gets far too little credit for its witty space-adventure tale of a wide, mismatched cast that humorously subverts old clichés. It's the story of a laser detective, a back-talking robot, and a squat, smelly guy. It was set up to have a sequel...which, unfortunately, is not gonna happen.

**BAD GAME**

**OVERATED:** DAIKATANA

Where all you want about the robot frogs, the unimaginative levels and weapons, and an entire generation's worth of delays—least it actually ran when it shipped. A terrible game to be sure, but without the antistress cachet of John "Suck It Down" Romero and the towering hubris of Ian Storm. Daikatana is just another eminently forgettable shooter.

**UNDERATED:** TRESPASSER

Was it the Sponge World physics engine that made it suck so very, very hard? The health meter heart tattoo that actually forced you to glance down and check out your character's heaving bosom? Was it the insanely awkward extended character arm, the torturous 1-frame-per-life frame rate, or the near-constant stacking of those terribly spongy crates? Answer: all of that and then some. In the end, Trespasser is simply the most incompetently slapped together nonpaintball PC game in history, and one that doesn't get near the infamy it is due.

**CGW STAR RATING**

**OVERATED:** BLACK & WHITE

We were wowed early by the lifelike creatures and the graphics—but because it was the one time we didn't finish the game before writing the review, we let the designer's pedigree and our early impressions lead us into making a huge, five-star mistake. Never again.

**UNDERATED:** BALDUR'S GATE

A reviewer with an incredibly large ax to grind and an inability to see the brilliant revitalizing of the D&D license because of a plot allegedly stolen from an early '90s RPG led to the most-negative-four-star review we've ever published.

**GAMELOCK SIDE EFFECT**

**OVERATED:** STAYING UP LATE

Sure, we've all stayed up far too late playing Half-Life, X-Com, Baldur's Gate, and Battlefield 1942. But we've all stayed up too late watching Mary Tyler Moore reruns or reading comics, too. Staying up late is a genuine gaming hazard, but it's a hazard shared with lots of other obsessions.

**UNDERATED:** DREAMING ABOUT A GAME

This is the real risk in obsessive gaming: a game that won't let you go even when you've left it. Puzzle games are the worst—we can't begin to count the nights we've spent helplessly watching lemmings march to their deaths or Bookworm tiles cascade endlessly in our dreams. When a game has you in its grip even when you're unconscious, you've crossed a very special threshold.

**GENRE**

**OVERATED:** MMORPGS

The shrill, high-maintenance girlfriend of games, MMOs seem sexy at first, but in the end demand too much of your time, offer few rewards, deal constant setbacks, and are a steady drain on your wallet. We haven't played one we weren't ultimately grateful to break up with.

**UNDERATED:** PUZZLE GAMES

The reliable booty call of games, a good puzzle game can break up the grinding workday with a quick nooner or keep you up all night long with its simple, uncomplicated delights. Perfect for when you just can't work up the commitment for a more demanding game.
THE MOST OVERATED/UNDERATED

GRAPHIC EFFECTS

OVERATED: WATER EFFECTS
Yeah, the water in Morrowind and Far Cry and pretty much every game these days looks great and superrealistic—how much impact does it have on gameplay? Zilch. It may help create a more believable game world, but after the initial "Oh, look at that," we tend to overlook it and take it for granted, just as in real life.

UNDERATED: DISTORTION EFFECTS
They're the least flashy effects in gaming—and deliberately so. But the smeared monochromatic visuals, muffled sound, and drunken movements that come from various attacks in games like Call of Duty and Far Cry add a pulse-quickening sense of desperation to combat and make gameplay all the more gripping.

INFLUENTIAL GAME

OVERATED: MYST
We will grant that the original was beautiful for its time and was a watershed moment for computer gaming. Plus, it was the inspiration for a million CD-ROM-drive purchases. But its influence on the adventure game genre was awful, inspiring an endless procession of ponderous, over-serious clones with none of the original's creativity and spark.

UNDERATED: MYTH
Before Halo, Bungie made Myth, a title that does not get nearly the props it deserves as essentially the first successful 3D real-time strategy game. Complete with a brilliant, beautiful engine that lets you swoop around, zoom in and out, and change perspectives. It also emphasizes squad tactics over base building and resource gathering—a bold move at the time. Seriously, has any RTS since done anything better?

GOOD GAME

OVERATED: GTA VICE CITY
GTA3 was a revolutionary title with a grand scope, and the frenzy of media attention garnered by its violent gameplay elements only aided its groundbreaking success. Its follow-up, Vice City, reapplied all of the same benefits with a minimum of truly fresh elements. It's not a bad game—just an overrated one.

UNDERATED: SYSTEM SHOCK 2
This CGW Hall of Fame inductee is the definition of "cult classic." A first-person RPG with numerous science fiction elements, System Shock 2 is a technogeek's dream come true. Too bad it never achieved the popularity of the Looking Glass–developed Thief games that its engine was derived from—this one is a real gem.

INDUSTRY POSITION

OVERATED: GAME DESIGNER
OK, so we wouldn't exactly have all of these great games to play if it weren't for some of the talented designers out there—or the talented artists, programmers, and beta testers. The point is, game designers typically get the lion's share of the credit when there are really a lot more people working behind the scenes.

UNDERATED: QUALITY ASSURANCE
Game testers really don't get the credit they deserve. As absurd as it may sound, this is a tough job—some of these guys put in an unthinkably number of hours when it comes time to debug a game. If we didn't have testers, every new game would come out looking like an MMC on launch day—that is to say, buggy as all hell.

UNDERATED: MAGE
So your wizard can lob enough fireballs at his enemies to make 'emores out of them. That's all well and good, until someone sneezes on him. Mages can dish out the punishment, but they sure can't take it.

UNDERATED: CLERIC
When your army of fighters runs out of potions, this is who you want waiting nearby. Everybody appreciates having a trusty healer around—especially the mage who just got sneezed on.
THE MOST OVERRATED/UNDERRATED

LEVEL

OVERRATED: MOH: ALLIED ASSAULT—OMAHA BEACH

OK, OK, we get it: War is hell. This level garnered awards a couple years back, but enough with the scripted scenes showing us the chaos of World War II.

UNDERRATED: TRON 2.0—REFORMATTING LEVEL

Never before has formatting a hard drive been this exciting. If you didn’t play Tron 2.0 when you had the chance, hang your head in shame. This level had us freaking out, racing, and trying to kill off enemies while avoiding getting deleted.

THE MOST OVERRATED/UNDERRATED

WARCRAFT III HERO

OVERRATED: PRIESTESS OF THE MOON

Her scout powers and ranged bonus make her useful, but opponents are going to see your game plan coming a mile away.

UNDERRATED: LICH

Two words: Frost Nova. Keep him safe and level him up. Kills enemies.

THE MOST OVERRATED/UNDERRATED

XP-LEARNING METHOD

OVERRATED: MONSTER KILLING

Killing monsters for XP may be the status quo, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t monotonous as hell. Besides, it isn’t even accurate. When’s the last time you gained a level by killing a giant rat?

UNDERRATED: STORY BASED

Moral quandaries and multiple-choice puzzles are excellent walkabouts of experience points and actually allow us to roleplay. Plus, it’s a nice change of pace from getting into random encounters for five hours.

MORE O/U

GAMING BEVERAGE

OVERRATED: ENERGY DRINKS

UNDERRATED: BOOZE

FPS MULTIPLAYER GAME

OVERRATED: CTF

UNDERRATED: DEATHMATCH

GAME DIFFICULTY MODE

OVERRATED: HARD

UNDERRATED: EASY

CGW DISC

OVERRATED: CD-ROM

UNDERRATED: DVD

CGW MONTHLY FEATURE

OVERRATED: GREENSPEAK

UNDERRATED: TABLE OF CONTENTS

CGW INTERN

OVERRATED: THIERRY "SCOOTER" NGUYEN

UNDERRATED: DI LUC

FPS WEAPON

OVERRATED: ROCKET LAUNCHER

UNDERRATED: SHOTGUN

RPG SPELL

OVERRATED: FIREBALL

UNDERRATED: SLEEP

KING'S QUEST GAME

OVERRATED: KING'S QUEST VII

UNDERRATED: KING'S QUEST III

CGW READER COMPLAINT

OVERRATED: SPELLING ERRORS

UNDERRATED: WE'RE JUST Plain STUPID

GAMING BUZZWORDS

OVERRATED: RAG-DOLL PHYSICS

UNDERRATED: GAMEPLAY

FMV ACTOR

OVERRATED: MALCOLM MCDOWELL

UNDERRATED: KARI WUHRER

LUCASARTS GRAPHIC ADVENTURE

OVERRATED: THE CURSE OF MONKEY ISLAND

It's definitely got a unique look to it, but it's just missing...something.

UNDERRATED: ZAK MCKRACKEN AND THE ALIEN MINDREADERS

A tabloid journalist goes on a quest to stop aliens from taking over the phone company and enlisting the planet. What's not cool about that?
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Unreal Tournament 2004

Let's get ready to Giiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii

Two assault rifles, zero tolerance. That is the only way to play UT 2004.

No relation to the singer, this AVRIL is the great equalizer. I/t can take out most things in two or three shots.

A transformed Leviathan is unstoppable in the right hands—but slow as hell.
Unreal Tournament 2003 was supposed to convey the feel of a futuristic blood sport, it was spring training at best. This season, Unreal Tournament 2004 scores big in an age of slower-paced, semirealistic FPS titles. What could've been a train wreck of levels, weapons, vehicles, and play modes crammed together actually translates into the quintessential adrenaline-fueled fragfest.

Too much is never enough
There's one fundamental problem with this game: There is too much stuff here to describe within two measly pages. So let's work with the biggest, most obvious improvements first—the return of assault matches and the introduction of onslaught skirmishes. These two modes alone make UT2004 worth the price of admission. Assault, inexplicably absent in UT2003, not only returns to the delight of fans, it comes greatly improved. First, there is no more guesswork in what the hell you're supposed to be doing half the time. Prefight flybys (in single player) detail objectives while in-game arrows, voiceovers, and the in-HUD map remove all doubt. This lets you focus on strategy and action. The scenarios themselves are varied enough so that the objectives—like attacking a skarl mother ship or stealing a tank—don't grow stale.

Onslaught mode, though, is UT2004's centerpiece, and it'll suck up most of your time. It's really an amped-up Battlefield match. As in assault, all the guesswork is removed, thanks to a simple on-screen map that shows which control nodes are connected, active, or under attack—all steering you right toward the action. As you furiously scramble for nodes, the goal is to work your way toward and then disable the enemy base. Sound simple? It isn't. You'll find out the hard way when a Goliath tank and Raptor decimate your outpost.

And therein lies the game's beauty—it's expertly balanced. For every Goliath tank driver, there's a Manta master or Raptor pilot who can rip you a new one.

In the driver's seat
The vehicles are fantastic and easy to figure out. More important, each has its own nuances to master: Take a flying leap with a Manta off a cliff and then alt-fire, and you can mow down people like a riding Toro on crack. You haven't lived until you decapitate seven guys while driving by Scorpios can dart in and sting tanks with a couple of shots, and so on. The most over-the-top vehicle, though, has got to be the trundling Leviathan. It's slow but roomy, seats six, has five turrets, and transforms into a big-ass stationary cannon.

Hey, just because you have vehicles at your disposal doesn't mean you'll be able to run rampant. Many new weapons are introduced to keep things fresh. The AVRL rocket launcher can take out a Goliath in a couple hits...but you need to keep your aim trained so the missile can lock on to its target. Link guns do a lot more than double up damage when you tether with another ally; They serve as field repair kits to fix busted rides and mend your damaged outposts. So long as you can spot and hide from the enemy, try calling in air strikes with the Painted gun. Or if you're really sinister, lay down some sticky grenades or enemy-chasing spider mines. This isn't even going into all the classic weapons that return, including the sniper rifle.

Keep 'em simple, stupid
As you may have guessed by now, UT2003's biggest selling point was its graphics, here it's the polish. The controls are tightened, the interface feels right, all the new elements are balanced, and the single-player season is vastly improved over UT2003's. This time around it better reflects the impact of team upkeep, trading, and advancing through a league. But the single-player campaign also introduces the only significant beef that we could come up with about UT2004: your teammates' A.I. and your ability to command them on the fly. Don't let the PC auto-assign tasks to the bots prior to a match. When that was the case and I tried issuing overriding commands (defend this node, whatever), my teammates would make affirmative responses, but when I turned around, they were nowhere to be found. Ah, but that is small potatoes. The problem was solved by assigning offensive and defensive roles to the bots before a fight.

Besides that and the slightly tired tech-no soundtrack, we can't think of a single reason you shouldn't already own Unreal Tournament 2004—unless you have a sluggish computer, that is. The modest system specs on the box will rob you of the full experience. Still, this is only the beginning. Imagine the maps, scenarios, and mods that will come in the following months.

Verdict

But wait, there's more!
Remember how we just mentioned that there's way too much here to fit onto two pages? Well, here's why:

Over 100 maps: All the maps from UT2003, plus lots of new ones, including 1-on-1 arenas.
Lots of modes: DM, team DM, capture the flag, double domination, bombing run, as well as glorified mutators such as last man standing, invasion, and mutant.
Tons of Mutators: Yep, they are included as well.
Voiceover IP support: Don't like the in-game taunts? Make some of your own.
Battlefield Vietnam

Whoopee! We're all gonna die!

For those worried about any possible offensiveness, be aware that Battlefield Vietnam isn't really about Vietnam. This is just a generic jungle playground where online geeks can play "army," running around and pretending to shoot one another. That's not meant to be condescending or dismissive—overall, Battlefield Vietnam is an awesome game. The point is, this is an action game, a cartoon, and any similarities to real life are purely coincidental.

And for a game set in an extremely controversial, emotionally charged setting—one which many older gamers were alive to remember—this is not a bad thing. It's a relief.

Jungle boogie

This follow-up to Battlefield 1942 (it's not really a sequel or an expansion) has wisely left the original's core gameplay and controls intact while upgrading virtually everything else. There are 12 huge, new, almost all brilliantly designed maps to play on in three different modes: assault, in which one team holds all the control points and the other team must try to take them over; head-on, in which each team starts with just one control point and they race to control the rest; and mission, which provides more unique goals and challenges. The most intense of the mission maps is Landing Zone Albany, an absolutely brutal map in which new spawn points for the North Vietnamese team will dynamically appear near control points as they are captured by the U.S.—thus simulating an ambush. It's a sniper's paradise, like many maps here, and whether

There are 12 huge, new, almost all brilliantly designed maps to play on.

that's a good thing to you or not will largely determine how much you enjoy this game. (Me, I'm a weasel that way, so I'm happy.) All the weapons and vehicles are new, and many are devastating—especially the choppers, which, because they are obviously more maneuverable than planes, can rain down death in merciless fashion.

Passengers can now fire weapons while riding in vehicles—a welcome addition that makes vehicles themselves much more of an offensive force. The only real bummer in the new stuff? The M-60 machine gun, which is so powerful and easy to use that it lets even blundering newbies rack up ridiculously high frag counts. It needs tuning down.

The interface has been improved, with a timer visualizing control-point takeovers, and the graphics are much more detailed and add an almost eerie realism—you really feel like you are hiding in dense foliage. The downside is annoyingly long load times—for me, up to two full minutes—and on servers with lots of map cycling, that's a lot of downtime. All those cool '60s songs that play during the loads, very atmospheric and welcome at first, get really old really fast. I love the Kinks, but I never want to hear "You Really Got Me" ever again. Seriously.

This game is a bit more hardcore and unfriendly than the original Battlefield—and as such, it might be more appealing to veterans than newbies. The maps are tougher, the fighting more furious, the spawn points more crammed together. It's a bit chaotic, a bit of a nightmare. Which means maybe it is about Vietnam after all. —Jeff Green

Verdict

Scarier, tougher, and prettier than Battlefield 1942.
Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield—Athena Sword

Tom Clancy falls on his sword

It was six years ago that CGW first commissioned this fledgling game journalist to review Red Storm's landmark game Rainbow Six, unaware that the game was about to completely change the shooter landscape with realistic squad-based combat, heart-pounding action, and meticulous strategic planning. Rainbow Six was exhilarating and addictive...and hamstrung by game-crashing bugs and A.I. issues. Fast-forward to 2004 and Athena Sword, and you'll find the same high-octane intensity...and the same bugs and A.I. problems.

Cache report
Relying on default mission plans, Athena Sword's single-player eight-mission game should take only a few short hours to complete. Set in a richly drawn Mediterranean, Athena Sword marks the return of those pesky anarchist leftovers previously killed off in Raven Shield. Now, your elite team of global counterterrorists must hunt them down across Italy, Croatia, and Greece. True to its pedigree, operations like the Streets of Milan mission define intensity as you work your way down the street, confronting terrorists who leap out from behind cars or snipe from above. Maps are larger than normal, so more time is required for completing objectives, especially when planning the Castle in Milan, Luxury Hotel, and Plaza Xanadu missions.

Athena Sword also adds three classic maps (Siberian base, subway station, and embassy) from previous Rainbow games and tweaks them for added depth; also present is a new countdown mode, which slaps missions with the added duress of a time limit. The mission pack adds seven more weapons, creating an arsenal even Saddam Hussein would have coveted. There's the potent M240GK 7.62mm caliber machine gun, the zippy SM4 submachine gun, the overbearing MID14 (M1) shotgun, and the SKHL8, which makes for a good long-range sniper weapon. However, none of these weapons feel necessary beyond what's already been offered.

The franchise's ace in the hole is multiplayer gaming, and this is where Athena Sword stands out. There are five new multiplayer maps, along with five new game modes—adversarial terrorist hunt, adversarial scattered hunt, capture the enemy, kamikaze, and countdown—adding even more to an already excellent multiplayer spread. The addition of genuine co-op really helps clean up the cheaters and lammers, too.

Sword of Damocles
Even though Athena Sword updates Raven Shield with the latest 154 patch, several annoying bugs remain. Aside from experiencing occasional crashing-to-desktop frustration, sound anomalies, texture-compression issues, frame drops, netcode glitches, and the same "invalid CD Key" bug that haunted Raven Shield, there's also a slew of new annoyances, chiefly a stubborn problem in which the game balks at installing if you've got a CD-RW or DVD-RW drive. Granted, that info is on the box, but if you've bought a computer in the last two or three years, you'll be thwarted by this exact problem. Add a barely improved enemy A.I. that features terrorists who still patrol right past the dead guy next to them or become deadeye shots with pistols at distances over 50 meters, and it appears the franchise will never overcome this sorry tradition. What you end up with is a marginalized blockbuster.

If you can overlook the bugs, Athena Sword sits beside America's Army as the ultimate tactical simulation. But how can you? Perhaps before I'm old and gray and ready to retire my keyboard, I'll be able to report that game $7 in the series is bug free. —Raphael Liberator

Verdict
There's no excuse for this game having the same sorry bugs and lame A.I.

What you end up with is a marginalized blockbuster.

In excellent new capture-the-enemy multiplayer game, teams go at it until all players from one side get handcuffed. For a real challenge, try it with pistols only.
Kudos to *Far Cry* developer Crytek for placing this first-person shooter in a tropical paradise instead of the usual dystopian landscape. Let’s hear it for A.I. that is, for the most part, actually intelligent. Hooray for the incredible game engine with its lush graphics and seemingly endless draw distances.

Congrats on the frantic firefight, the nice variety of vehicles, and a number of open-ended environments that allow you to tackle the tactical challenges of the game in a number of ways.

Oh, and one more thing—how about a nice backdrop behind the head with a tire for a horrific save-game feature that is simultaneously terribly conceived and idiotically implemented? On second thought, how about several whacks upside the head for that one?

**Far Cry ships!**
**First patch announced!**

Incredibly, that’s the subject line of an e-mail we received the very day this review was being written. And frankly, it’s no surprise. Your response to *Far Cry* will pretty much hinge on whether you can tolerate its checkpoint-style game saving. This is a game you’ll love one minute and want to drop in a chemical toilet the next—though once this patch fixes the saving mechanism come mid-April, you’ll probably love it more. Shipping this sometimes difficult game without a quicksave, or at least a generous allotment of auto-saving checkpoints, is one of the most blatantly stupid design decisions ever. Initially, I could deal with the periodic notices that the game was saving itself—the save points seemed to appear fairly often. But before long, save placement became increasingly schizophrenic, with checkpoints placed as closely...
as at the opposite ends of a short, enemy-free corridor, or so distant it took in excess of 30 to 40 minutes of play time to reach one from the other. No one likes replaying huge, time-consuming portions of a game, and especially not when it seems that the game is cheating or playing unfairly as it forces you to retreat your steps yet again, but that is precisely what Far Cry inflict upon its players. To call the frustration and rage that follows "all-consuming" is to exercise a kindness toward it that it scoffs at bestowing upon you.

**Dry your tears**

It would be so easy to dismiss Far Cry and the devastating effects of its save system as just another game disaster, but the truth is, the game does so many other things not just well but exceptionally, that you almost hate the game more because it could be so great. The easy thing to call out is the game engine: There may not be a more stunning-looking game released this year, and yes, I'm including Doom 3 and Half-Life 2 in that assessment. The lush archipelagoes are just drop-dead gorgeous with rich color and a vibrant sense of life, and they're absolutely huge, with a viewing distance to match.

Far Cry apes the weapon restrictions of Halo, but more effectively. Here, you can carry only up to four different weapons, all with some sort of alternative fire, be it launching grenades or just zooming in slightly for sharper aim. Instead of the big, rocket-launching mercenary who couldn't have had any idea where I was or would be.

**Bungle in the jungle**

Perhaps less fair are the mutant apes and soldiers called tridgens that you eventually fight in the game. Yeah, in spite of a nice helping of originality, Crytek still felt compelled to add giant mutated superapes with rocket-launcher arms to the mix. OK, fine, we understand—giant mutated superapes with rocket-launcher arms are practically a shooter mandate. Still, Far Cry tends to throw tons of these guys at you, often in very cramped quarters, and they just don't want to die. And they won't take splash damage from their own rockets, a nifty trick that your character, unfortunately, can't pull off. And the end game with these guys and, of course, that save system...oof.

Far Cry has a multiplayer game, but Unreal Tournament 2004 is out now, so really, who cares? This is a potentially great single-player shooter undone by a staggeringly awful save system that only heightens a discomfiting sense of intentionally malicious unfairness. Never has a promised patch been more crucial; never has a game's release been more wrongheaded. —Robert Coffey

**Verdict**

There's a good, maybe outstanding, game lurking under all the frustration. Good luck getting at it.

**This is a game you'll love one minute and want to drop in a chemical toilet the next.**

bigger, biggest nature of most shooter arsenals, each of Far Cry's weapons serves a specific strategic purpose. And make no mistake, you'll be strategizing plenty. The A.I. in the game is for the most part outstanding. Oh, there's the occasional Blair Witch-style stand-in-the-corner guy but the mercenaries you battle for most of the game will attack you unpredictably (you'll get to test this a lot during those constant reloads): working in groups, circling through cover to attack you from behind, and more. But you get the same opportunity more often than not, thanks to levels that let you approach your objectives from the front, the rear, from back roads in armed jeeps, or from the air in a hang glider. To play Far Cry is to be in a state of constant vigilance.

Regrettably, some of that vigilance is due to the game apparently cheating. Despite a stealth meter on the interface, I found the game to be absolutely uncanny at times at finding me. At one point, I belly-crawled up a hill only to be immediately picked off when I reached the crest by a

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With or without the jeep, the last levels are a nightmare.

The federally mandated "crawl through an air duct and kill mutants" portion of the game.

Rappelling mercenaries are a breeze to kill when you've got some nifty night vision.

You'd think that with the supermutant apes all escaped and running amok, the mercenaries would want a truce with you. They don't, so you must put deadness into them.
Splinter Cell
Pandora Tomorrow
...or rather, Pandora Whenever the Patch Comes Out

The title of this game couldn't be more apt. For those who didn't play the first game, the term "Splinter Cell" refers to a consummate government superspy, disavowed by his country and blessed with the "fifth freedom"—carte blanche to steal, assassinate, and wreak whatever manner of havoc is deemed necessary to uphold national security. He is a ghost, a glitch in the system. And that's precisely what we have here: glitches. Lots of them. But we'll get to that soon enough.

Fisher King
In this case, the eponymous Splinter Cell is none other than cynical, hard-as-nails operative Sam Fisher, the stealthy fellow from last year's hit game. Not afraid to pull a few triggers, he's a prime candidate for plenty of messy black-ops assignments. Here, Fisher is charged with tracking a biological terrorist around the globe and putting a stop to his chemical-warfare agenda.

As Fisher, you'll sneek—and occasionally shoot—your way through nine increasingly complex stealth missions, each with its own set of objectives and rules. Some missions give considerable leeway to the amount of ruckus you can cause, while others are meticulous and unforgiving—one slip-up means game over. You've got plenty of tools at your disposal to help you stay scarce, such as an alarm counter, a visibility meter, night-vision goggles, and a thermal headset. Shadows are your friends—shooting out a few lights can often mean the difference between success and failure. After all, an enemy guard can't see a well-placed headshot coming from total darkness.

The missions in Pandora Tomorrow are entertaining and cinematic; Fisher's got lots of gadgets and acrobatics to help him through tight spots and high-suicidal situations. One particularly memorable mission involves the infiltration of a passenger train, making for a number of exhilaratingly close calls. Missions vary in length; you're in for a good 12 hours of playtime, give or take a few trial-and-error challenges brought about by the game's highly scripted and linear nature.

Abort mission
And that brings us to the bad stuff: Pandora Tomorrow's brand-new and highly touted multiplayer features. Just to clarify, the multiplayer mode absolutely rules—provided you can actually get it working. Unfortunately, it's hampered by numerous game bugs, graphical and voice-chat glitches, and a frustrating anticheat bug that has already prompted a user-created patch.

The fact that a company with Ubisoft's resources would task its customers with fixing its game's biggest feature is inexcusable. Bug issues aside, the multiplayer mode is a lot of fun. Up to four players can compete, using any of three capture-the-flag-style variant rule sets. Players are split into two teams: traditional Splinter Cell-esque spies and a band of FPS-style mercenaries. The two character types have their own unique abilities, equipment, and overall play style, and the addition of voice-chat support (via a headset) makes for an added layer of depth and strategy.

Make no mistake: Pandora Tomorrow is a worthy, good-looking follow-up to its stellar predecessor—and if Ubisoft can fix the slew of multiplayer problems, the company just might have a real classic on its hands.  

Verdict
A four-and-a-half-star game riddled with far too many critical bugs.
MVP Baseball 2004

Looks good but lacks soul

Last year, EA Sports had the courage to realize that its Triple Play baseball title was terminally terrible and happily put it out of its misery. Instead, the company introduced MVP Baseball, a much better game than Triple Play could ever hope to have been. But that's some scant praise, since MVP is now the only baseball game in town for PC. Even so, it arrives with its fair share of disappointing rough edges, such as the painfully generic commentary engine and somewhat inconvenient controls.

Several of my gripes with the game involve the occasional lack of said controls. EA caught a lot of flak for not implementing decent mouse support in last year's MVP; this year, it seems to have swung the pendulum too far in the other direction. The only way to navigate the menus is with the mouse, which is fine when you're researching player stats, but midgame it would be nice to be able to control the whole game using only a gamepad.

Where the game really disappoints is in its dynasty mode, in which you can become the GM of a team for 120 years, guiding it to greatness. It's an ambitious undertaking, but despite greatly enhanced mouse support for the menus, stats research in MVP is not well implemented, so this hampers your efforts to build that perfect team. For example, MVP doesn't let you sort players at a given position by their different stats, which really slows down research.

There have been online reports that A.I.-controlled teams in dynasty mode will often carry 15 pitchers on a 25-man roster, which is as absurd as it is unrealistic. I checked the A.I. teams' rosters in my own dynasty mode and found this to be the case with many of them. This unbalances the pool of available pitchers on draft day and leaves teams without any bench depth for late-inning strategizing.

After all that griping, the game is still fun to play, and one thing it does very well is convey the ball movement of pitches. And MVP 2004 has a slew of pitches, ranging from the ordinary (two- and four-seam fastball, curve, cutter, slider, change-up) to the more unusual, such as the screwball, knuckle ball, slurve, circle change, and palm ball (a variant of the change-up).

At the end of nine, what you have is a fun baseball game that, to some degree, makes up for its lack of depth with good looks and plenty of polish. If only MVP could couple that flash with the statistical and gameplay excellence set by High Heat a couple of years ago—then you'd have a surefire pennant winner.

MVP makes up for its lack of depth with good looks and plenty of polish.

Verdict: ★★★★★
A good game that could be destined for great things but isn't quite ready for The Show.
Two Thrones
You're fired!

Strategy First and Paradox Entertainment need to watch their step and not fire people or vote them off the island. Two Thrones illustrates the broken "paradigm" of strategy gaming in today's industry. It is, as the corporate monkeys may say, an attempt at making a successful franchise more accessible to the mass audience and therefore increasing the company's market share. This ridiculously shallow spawn of Europa Universalis is a mocking of its predecessor's depth, strategy, and loyal fan base. Two Thrones, which is based on the mediocre Crown of the North game that came out last year, is yet another attempt at "EU Lite"—one that tries to reduce the depth of EU into a mind-numbing series of repetitive tasks.

Played on a relatively attractive 2D map, TT divides Western Europe into a series of provinces, each with farms, markets, towns, churches, and castles. Towns and markets provide cash, farms provide food, and so on. Once you upgrade these things in a few provinces, cash won't be a problem, and you can build up huge armies. These armies of thousands are built by recruiting 25 men at a time; one wonders if the corporate goons thought a production queue would be too complex for newbies.

The scenario settings are interesting, covering the length of the Hundred Years War between France and England, as well as the War of Roses. Unfortunately, other than different dates and starting factions, they all play nearly the same. Diplomacy is virtually nonexistent, and any need for strategy is completely absent. Even at the hardest levels, all you need to do is upgrade your provinces methodically in order to defeat your unresponsive AI opponent. Paradox hasn't even made an effort to really update the game from Crown of the North: town options still include things like "freeing slaves," and the player can't even recruit longbow men. The distinctive soldiers of the English. The option exists, but it's "grayed out" until you install the patch.

Such shallow gameplay is ridiculous. Does Strategy First expect anyone who knows and cares about the difference between the House of York and a peppermint patty to want a game that's the historical equivalent of solitaire? Instead of trying to make millions on a budget of thousands, these folks need to stop milking the EU cash cow and make another original, absorbing, and relatively bug-free title—like the one that made them successful in the first place.

Verdict

It gets an extra .5 for the low price.

Fire Starter
Outsourcing is not your friend

Fire Starter proves a cliché: You really do get what you pay for. This FPS import from the Ukraine is better than most budgetware, but it is otherwise underwhelming in a market glutted with flashier and meatier titles.

Fire Starter supposedly has a story, but since there's no dialogue, cut-scenes, or real missions, it doesn't really matter. You simply pick one of the game's six characters (soldier, android, chick assassin, etc.), make your way through 16 levels, kill everything, and snatch "artifacts" that occasionally pop up. If you fail, you restart. Combat is repetitive and clunky, broken up by annoying pauses that show you new monsters and artifacts.

The special abilities you pick each time you defeat a level do add some depth: They make you stronger, allow you to carry more weapons, or grant you some other minor ability. The game's customizable characters would have been fun for multiplayer, but since only LAN play is supported, it's doubtful you'll ever experience multiplayer.

The sound is bland, the graphics are a bit better than those in Quake II, and the gameplay is reminiscent of a high-school project from a couple of precocious students. Buy it as a cheap gift for an annoying cousin. Otherwise, save your money for a real game.

Verdict

It's better than Deer Hunter.
Gangland

An offer you might want to refuse...

It seems that Media Mobsters spent all of 20 minutes brainstorming a plot and then set about the grueling task of designing an almost fun game. In short, five brothers grow up together in Sicily. Three of the brothers kill the fourth, Chico, and flee to America. Mario, the remaining brother, vows to teach his naughty siblings a lesson involving water and cement shoes. It's off to Paradise City, U.S.A., to see Uncle Vincenzo, the local mob boss, for a classic, if uninspired, story of revenge.

Protection racket

Gangland has its moments, and I admit that I found it to be sometimes enjoyable, if sometimes impossible. Unlike a traditional RTS, you take over structures instead of building them. The restaurant attracts standard units to be hired. The gun shop allows you to upgrade weapons and get a steady supply of ammunition. To gather resources, Mario muscles in on relevant businesses. With these resources, Mario can purchase special units from other crime families.

Gangland has some features that set it apart. Mario can choose a wife who will dutifully churn out children who grow up to become one of three kinds of underworlds: lawyer, seductress, or enforcer. You can steal or buy a variety of vehicles for use in drive-by shootings. Paradise City comes alive with hundreds of citizens wandering from business to business, spending their money or waiting to be hired. Police roam the streets, either pacified by bribe money or actively trying to shut you down. Elliot Ness style.

However, all these features are hard to savor, since the game's fast pace makes managing your turf a hectic, confusing ordeal. In gunfights, units need to be micro-managed to take cover, crouch, or use special attacks, but the frantic pace makes this nearly impossible. You must juggle a multitude of tasks, including acquiring businesses and defending them, and taking on contracts and completing them within time limits. A pause function allowing command over your units, à la Freedom Force, would be welcome. As it stands, all but the simplest tactics are impossible to orchestrate.

The game's fast pace makes managing your turf a hectic, confusing ordeal.

Each level devolves into amassing enough goons for a blitzkrieg.

Sleeps with the fishes

Other features simply don't work well. The atrocious vehicle physics make even a short cruise to the corner a bumper-car ride. An invisible barrier prevents you from driving onto the sidewalk, though you can mow down anyone foolish enough to walk into the street. Your enemies usually attack mindlessly, even moving single file through a killing zone. You cannot save your game in the middle of a level. And, each new level is a new scenario, so not all of your accomplishments follow you. By the time you read this, there should be a patch that amends this problem, but still.

In the end, Gangland can be fun, if frustrating, to play. Just steel yourself for its limitations. - Stephen Gehinger

Verdict

A lot of possibilities and potential, but the risk of unmanageable action makes it hard to enjoy.
JAMDAT Bowling 2

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- N-Gage tries again with a redesigned system and new games
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N-GAGE TRIES AGAIN

With a redesigned system and a better lineup of games, Nokia takes another stab at the Nintendopoly.

Nokia’s redesigned N-Gage OD is, by any measure, a much improved system—it’s got a stronger battery, buttons you can actually press, and (gasp!) a freely accessible cartridge port. All this effort, though, is useless without better games, something the Finns have faced problems with ever since the portable game deck launched last year.

This situation could be turned on its side once Nokia launches the OD this summer alongside a wave of new, original games that take advantage of N-Gage’s natural strengths. Top among them is Pocket Kingdom: Own the World, a strategy title from Sega that will unfold before players on a truly global scale. You use your forces to invade other players’

5 QUESTIONS WITH TRIP HAWKINS

Electronic Arts founder sees wireless as gaming’s new frontier.

He was there in the early days of Apple. He founded EA. He launched the 3DO game console and later the publishing company. Now, Trip Hawkins sees the wireless games market as the future and recently founded his own wireless studio, Digital Chocolate. We sat down with the man to see why he’s so excited by the wireless medium.

1UP: Why the move into the mobile market?
Trip: It’s the computing frontier. Entrepreneurs need to be on the frontier, where there is opportunity to blaze some new trails. It is early enough in this industry to pioneer many new ideas and to work hard to improve quality standards.

1UP: You’ve compared the mobile market to your early days at Apple and EA. How is this so?
Trip: When I founded EA, there were over 100 small game publishers in a cottage industry. Technology was very primitive, and development costs were low. There was room in the market for experiments and innovation.

1UP: How did you come up with the name Digital Chocolate?
Trip: The thinking is that names like Apple Computer and Electronic Arts are memorable and can define new categories because they combine words that do not initially appear to belong together. Words like “apple,” “art,” and “chocolate” have a lot of emotional brand value, and the concept of their digital versions intrigues people and makes them more approachable. And in the case of Digital Chocolate, we view the mobile consumer as someone who has a slice of time to indulge in a moment of indulgence with a digital snack. Chocolate is the champagne of snacks!

1UP: What do you see as the future of mobile gaming?
Trip: Mobile networking communities. Stand-alone applications like games and ringtones will be a growing market, but we have to focus on the fact that the primary reason that people carry a mobile phone is to be socially connected. Most mobile computing applications that are interesting in the future—including future games—will have significant server-side components and social interaction.

1UP: Which phone do you carry?
Trip: Of course, I now have many of them, but I primarily use two. One is a nice new feature phone with camera and color display, the LG VX6100. Since it does not yet have the hands-free car kit that I want for use in my car, I have an older digital phone that was state-of-the-art when I got it. It’s the Motorola StarTAC, which already looks like a dinosaur!
CLASSIC GAMING ON THE GO

We're taking it back to the old school

Ah yes, the classics. They never get old. They're easy to pick up, fun to play in brief spurts—why not carry them with you at all times? 1UP takes a look at some of the best vintage titles currently and soon-to-be available on your mobile phone. For info on availability, which phones support them, as well as where to download them, check out our expanded guide on wireless.1UP.com.

**FROGGER**
Both the original arcade mode and a new mode with enhanced graphics are available in Upstart Games' mobile port of Frogger. AT&T mMode subscribers with Nokia handsets can try this out, but not in traffic, please.

**MEGA MAN**
The Blue Bomber is back! All six of the original levels and weapons are present in miniature here for Mega Man fans with nothing to entertain them but their phone. Our big question: Will it still have the Elec Beam pause trick?

**COMMANDO**
Capcom's top-down shooter comes to the BREW mobile platform courtesy of Upstart Games. The mobile experience of throwing grenades and shooting your way through enemy forces is available now to Verizon subscribers.

**1942**
The coolest thing about this mobile port of Capcom's WWII plane shooter? The still-intact inverted rolls. Also carried over from the original are the weapon power-ups and accuracy counters. It's available on BREW handsets.

**LODE RUNNER**
Since this game has shown up on every platform ever conceived, a mobile port was bound to come out at some point. Good thing, as it's tons of fun. Drill and fill an unending series of mazes to trap pursuing monsters and gather treasure.

**CASTLEVANIA**
Take control of Simon Belmont and venture into Dracula's castle once again in Upstart's port of the NES classic. Unlike recent Castlevania installments that have relied heavily on RPG elements, this one is all about good ol' whip-em-up action.

**BOMBERMAN**
It's the classic, totally addictive, simple 8-bit Bomberman—sans multiplayer, but without many complicated extras either. Blast down walls, bomb a maze of monsters, and collect power-ups to build a better Bomberman.

**ADVENTURE ISLAND**
Master Higgins lives, and the jungles of Adventure Island don't look half bad on the mobile platform. This remake features eight areas, sizable bosses, and the Master's powered-up fireball attacks. Only you can save Higgins' girl, Tina.

**BURGER TIME**
The greatest food-themed maze chase ever. Why animated fried eggs and hot dogs are chasing this chef across a Donkey Kong ladder rack isn't quite clear, but why argue with a good time? One burger to go, please.

**FINAL FANTASY**
Square Enix hasn't formally announced much for the States yet, but it just bought mobile developer U EvoLution, and they'll be showing off the Japanese versions of Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest at E3. 2 + 2 = __?
What’s hotter than Half-Life 2? Playing Half-Life 2 on your PC with one of ATI’s RADEON™ 9800 or RADEON™ 9600 series graphics cards. It’s the best way to experience Half-Life 2. Nothing is more immersive. Nothing is more intense. Nothing is more real. Half-Life 2 and RADEON™ are ready. Are you?

ATI’s latest RADEON™ series — The preferred graphics solution for Half-Life 2.
LIVE OR DIE – EITHER WAY IT’S A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN
The Ultimate $2,500 Gaming Rig

TIRED OF FEELING LIKE A SCHMUCK 'CAUSE YOU DON'T HAVE A

I had been feeling so good about things. Vendors weren’t calling my bosses threatening to pull ads because of things I had written. The Tech section was growing by leaps and bounds. I was turning my stories in on time. Hell, Kristen even went so far as to call me the “king of deadlines.” Well, I just couldn’t handle all of that positive feedback. So I thought to myself, “Self, what’s the best way to make your life difficult?” “Ah,” I thought, “do a system roundup.” That always pisses people off.” Thus, here I am, a week past my deadline. I’m avoiding Kristen like she’s a bill collector, and the second this issue hits newsstands, my bosses will once again be beset by vendors who want my editorial head on a stick. Things are once again as they should be.

Through the fire

Every January, when I do the Ultimate Gaming Machine story, I get a ton of reader mail asking me why I don’t do a roundup of more affordable machines. My answer is usually something along the lines of “Because I don’t feel like it.” That said, there is a lot to be gained from rounding up midrange machines. I decided to invite a number of manufacturers to compete, with the only requirements being that they submit a complete machine (computer, monitor, and speakers) that costs no more than $2,500.

Because of the price cap, I knew some of the more expensive companies would have to make some serious compromises. But, of course, that’s where the fun begins.

BY WILLIAM O’NEAL PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARNOLD TIOSEJO
$5,000 GAMING RIG? STOP CRYING, NANCY—YOU ONLY NEED $2,500
While it isn’t the fastest machine in this roundup, Gateway’s 3.2GHz Pentium 4-based 710 Gamer has everything any gamer could want: 1GB of PC-3200 DDR400 memory, a 160GB SATA hard drive, Nvidia’s 256MB GeForce FX 5950 Ultra graphics card, multiple DVD drives, and Intel’s rock-solid DB75P8Z motherboard. Add to that a standard ATX case that’s easy to get into and parts that are easily swapped in and out, and there’s no reason any gamer wouldn’t be pleased with this beast.

In testing, the 710G Gamer ran through my battery of benchmarks flawlessly. While its 3DMark2003 (v3.40) score of 2310 at 1280x1024 with 4x AA and 8x AF turned on is a good 300 points below the 2675 that the Vicious machine scored, its 3D GameGauge 3.5 score of 63fps at the same resolution puts it right in the mix with the boutique rigs.

Incredibly, considering the price cap, the Gateway machine seems to have shipped devoid of any obvious compromises. In addition to the core components listed above (components that verify its gaming pedigree), the 710G is also an awesome multimedia machine. The DVD multi-drive lets users burn their own DVDs, and the multimedia card reader/writer has support for Memory Stick, Smart Media, CompactFlash/Microdrive, and SD/MMC/SD/MMC.

If there’s anything I don’t like about Gateway’s desktop rigs, it’s the continued use of wimpy power supplies. The 710G Gamer reviewed here shipped with only a 250W power supply. Of course, since Gateway doesn’t use proprietary parts, you can easily drop an Antec True480W power supply in its place.

**Gateway 710G Gamer**

**PRICE:** $2,160  **RATING:** 4.5
Voodoo Hexx c:355

PRICE: $2,500 RATING: 4.5

The Hexx is Voodoo's latest attempt to add a little spice to PC design. When it comes to overall performance, the Hexx is clearly the fastest machine here. It dominated the AquaMark 2003 tests and was bested only by the Vicious machine in 3DMark 2003 and Falcon's Mach V in 3D GameGauge 3.5. That said, what makes the Hexx stand out are the awesome components that ship with it, as well as its unique design. The AMD Athlon 64 3000+ CPU is overclocked, as is the 256MB ATI Radeon 9800 XT graphics card, and the case's unique design uses the 425W Enermax Noisemaker power supply to keep it all cool. While its case appears smaller than the norm, the Hexx is able to accept standard ATX motherboard. For instance, Voodoo shipped this baby with Asus' K8V Deluxe motherboard (the VIA K8T800 chipset is the current favorite chipset for building Athlon 64-based machines).

Voodoo also shipped the Hexx with 1GB of Corsair PC-3200 DDR400, dual 80GB Hitachi Deskstar hard drives in a 160GB RAID 0 configuration, and Plextor's DVD+/RW combo drive. Voodoo came in right at the $2,500 price limit, which is why it went with onboard audio as opposed to Creative Labs' Audigy 2, and AMD's Athlon 3000+ as opposed to the more powerful 3400+.

Compromises aside, the Hexx we looked at is an awesome machine. It's plenty fast, has a good mix of components, and is easily one of the best-looking PCs we've ever seen.

Falcon Northwest Mach V

PRICE: $2,495 RATING: 4.5

Where Gateway threw everything you could possibly want in its 710G Gamer, Falcon used the lion's share of the available $2,500 on core components, only "skipping" when it wouldn't affect performance. The Mach V we tested ships with an Asus K8V Deluxe (VIA K8T800 chipset) motherboard, AMD's Athlon 64 3400+ processor, 512MB of PC-3200 DDR400, a 120GB Seagate Barracuda hard drive, and a 256MB Nvidia GeForce FX 5950 Ultra graphics card. It should come as no surprise that the Mach V is a screamer. In fact, it posted the fastest 3D GameGauge 3.5 scores at both 1280x960 and 1600x1200. But that doesn't do this machine justice. More specifically, the Mach V scored the fastest frame rates in every game we tested.

That's right—every single one.

Of course, Falcon had to make some serious compromises to make our price cap. The Mach V we tested shipped with a single DVD-ROM drive—there will be no CD and/or DVD burning for you! Furthermore, it was the only machine to ship with 2.1 speakers (Creative Labs' Inspire T2900) as opposed to the more common surround-sound setups. And it shipped with the smallest monitor, a 17-inch NEC CRT.

While it lacks many of the bells and whistles the other machines boast, I rather like the Mach V's simplicity. And the CoolerMaster ATC-201 is one of my absolute favorite cases. Ultimately, though, you'll have to decide if all that power is worth compromising the extras. That said, you can easily configure this machine with a slower processor (like an AMD Athlon 64 3000+) and use the extra dough to get a CD-RW drive, more robust speakers, or a bigger display.
Like Gateway's 710G Gamer, Dell's Dimension 8300 showed up stacked. In addition to a 2.5GHz Intel Pentium 4 Extreme Edition processor, Dell's entry boasts 1GB of PC-3200 DDR400 memory, a 250GB SATA hard drive, a Creative Labs Audigy 2 soundcard, and CD-RW and DVD+RW/+R drives—not to mention Altec Lansing surround-sound speakers. If there's any shortcoming to the Dimension 8300 package, it's that Dell shipped it with a 128MB ATI Radeon 9800 PRO instead of the 256MB options the other six machines are rocking.

In terms of benchmarking, the Dimension 8300 definitely paled in comparison to the other machines and their more-robust graphics card options. Scoring 1907 and 1428 in 3DMark2005 at 1280x960 and 1600x1200, respectively, it was the only machine in this roundup that failed to break the 2000 mark at 1920x1080. Of course, benchmarks don't tell the whole story. In actual gameplay, the Dimension 8300 showed that it's a perfectly capable gaming machine, often scoring just a half dozen or so frames per second less than the other machines. And keep in mind that it's less expensive than all but the Gateway, plus it comes with Dell's excellent tech-support reputation.

Gamers familiar with Dell's desktop machines are probably wondering why the Dimension 8300 ships with the older chassis as opposed to the newer, gamer-oriented XPS box. Like I mentioned earlier, insisting on that $2,500 price cap meant that everyone had to make some compromises. Ultimately, though, anyone who drops $2,500 on this machine won't be disappointed. It won't be as fast as Falcon's Mach V, but it's still fast enough.
Cyberpower Gamer Ultra 9900 Pro

PRICE: $2,485  RATING: 3.9

When it comes to overall performance, Cyberpower's Gamer Ultra 9900 Pro is about as fast as Gateway's 710G Gamer. It achieved 3DMark2003 scores of 2553 and 1853 at 1280x960 and 1600x1200, but the Gateway bested it in 3D GameGauge 3.5 at both resolutions. This alone wouldn't have been enough to relegate the Cyberpower machine to its position in this roundup, but when it showed up, the inside was a little...uh...out of order.

Initially, the graphics card wasn't seated in the AGP slot. I'd be inclined to blame this on the shipping company, except that the screw was nowhere to be found. This leads me to believe that the graphics card was never screwed in. Once I reseated it and began testing, it ran incredibly slowly. I delved a bit further and realized that the power cord connected to the graphics card wasn't connected to the power supply. Once I got it up and running, I didn't encounter any more problems.

When it comes to raw components, the Gamer Ultra is probably the most stacked of the bunch. The AMD Athlon 64 FX-53 processor is seated in Asus' K8V Deluxe (VIA K81800 chipset) motherboard, and the rig ships with 1GB of Corsair PC-3200 DDR400 memory. In addition, it rocks both a DVD-ROM and a DVD+/-RW drive. Hell, Cyberpower even cram in an Audigy 2 ZS, Creative Labs Inspire 7700 7.1 speakers, and an 18-inch Viewsonic LCD. Which begs the question: How much money is Cyberpower losing every time someone buys this machine?

iBuypower Zillion-FX

PRICE: $2,495  RATING: 3.6

iBuypower's Zillion-FX shipped with arguably the fastest desktop CPU available—AMD's Athlon 64 FX-53—but it showed up with problems. When the machine arrived, it repeatedly failed to boot, instead returning again and again the horridly unhelpful POST message, "Boot disk failure." I poked around in the BIOS before finally figuring out that the CMOS battery was dead. Wow! I replaced it, and the machine was good to go. The thing is, had I just dropped $2,500 on a machine, I would a) expect it to work flawlessly right out of the box, and b) assure as hell not expect the CMOS battery to be dead.

Once I got it up and running, I expected the Zillion-FX to be a screamer in addition to that CPU. It boasts 512MB of PC-3200 DDR400 memory and a 256MB ATI Radeon 9800 XT. Strangely, its performance numbers were less than impressive. The only machine it was faster than was the Dell, and...well, the Dell worked out of the box. It's important to note that the Zillion-FX is the only Athlon 64-based machine here to ship with an nForce3-based motherboard, Asus' SK8N-Deluxe (Nvidia nForce3 Pro150 chipset).

While it shipped with a nice array of components, its lackluster performance and horrible out-of-the-box experience left a bad taste in my mouth. That said, I've reviewed plenty of machines by iBuypower and never experienced any problems of this caliber. Every now and then, even a Pro Bowl quarterback throws a few interceptions.
Benchmarks

While benchmarks don't tell the whole story, they do say something. What we see here is that these machines are all somewhat similar. That said, take note of the 3D GameGauge 3.5 scores, as gaming is what it's all about anyway.

**3Dmark2003 Pro v.340 (1280x960)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>Score</th>
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**AquaMark 2003 1280x1024**

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**3D GameGauge 3.5 1280x960**

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**Splinter Cell 1280x1024 No AA Bx AF**

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**Halo - Shader 1.0 1280x960 No AA No AF**

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Are roundups pointless?

I recently had an AIM conversation with PC Gamer's Greg Vederman about the relevance of desktop roundups. As many of you know, Greg doesn't do roundups. While his reasons for not doing them may make sense to some—"Uh, Wil, what's the point? Are you telling me that since machine A performed this way that it's somehow 'better' than machine B?"—I think roundups do hold some value. Of course, when you do roundups, someone (typically the company that didn't "win") invariably gets pissed, so having an official "I don't do roundups" policy is a great way to avoid pissing people off.

More than being the final judge of who makes the best machines, roundups provide a good snapshot of what a specific amount of money will get you at a given time. For instance, the roundup I did this month shows you what $2,500 will get you from seven different companies. And while Gateway "won," that doesn't necessarily mean that its 710G Gamer is "better" than Falcon's Mach V.

These roundups also show you which companies will give you the most computer for your money—and this is where outfits like Dell and Gateway shine. Because they purchase components in such high volume, they can give you the most computer for the least amount of money. (By "most computer," I mean multiple optical drives, the biggest hard drives, a ton of memory, and powerful CPUs.)

Another good thing about reviewing seven machines at one time is that you're bound to encounter a few snafus, and this gives reviewers an appreciation for what customers experience when, after dropping a few thousand bucks on a machine, it shows up and doesn't work the way it's supposed to.

Ultimately, though, Greg's comments aren't totally off base. Each machine is unique and everyone's experience is bound to be different. That said, it's always fun to drop seven beans into a jar just to see what's gonna happen.

Wil O'Neal
# Head to Head

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Manufacturer/Model</th>
<th>Gateway 7106 Gamer</th>
<th>Voodoo Hex C355</th>
<th>Razer Mach V</th>
<th>Vicious PC Ninja</th>
<th>Dell Dimension 8300</th>
<th>Cyberpower Gamer Ultra 9900 Pro</th>
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<td>Vicious PC Multimedia Office Keyboard</td>
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<td>Microsoft Connel Video</td>
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Tech Medics
You've got questions, Wil likes big butts

A tale of two graphics cards
I'm getting a new videocard, but I'm torn between the 256MB Nvidia GeForce FX 5900 Ultra and the 256MB Radeon 9600 XT. So far, I've been leaning toward the Radeon, but I ain't sure—a bunch of my friends are saying I should go for the Nvidia.

As far as I'm concerned, that's a no-brainer. Get the Radeon. Now, had you said the GeForce FX 5950 Ultra, I would've taken me more than 10 seconds to make that recommendation—although the answer would have been the same.

Are you the chipset for me?
I am thinking about building an Athlon 64 system. From what I have found on the Web, the two best chipsets seem to be the nForce2 and VIA K8T800. I haven't been able to find out which one is better. Have you done any benchmarks or do you have a clue about which one is better?

James

I've done benchmarks on mobos with both chipsets, and the VIA chipset seems to be a tad faster. Of course, any machine with an Athlon 64 CPU, a good amount of RAM, and a decent graphics card is gonna be a smoker. That said, all but one of the Athlon 64-based machines in this month's desktop roundup shipped with the VIA chipset.

Can these components go out and play?
I have a computer with a 866MHz Celeron processor, 64MB of memory with up to 11MB allocated to video memory, and a 20GB hard drive. My graphics card is an integrated Intel I810. I'm not sure what kind of motherboard I have. I'm afraid I won't be able to play games on this setup, except for maybe The Sims.

Matt

Sadly, Matt, your fears are warranted. If it were 1999, that machine would probably be considered high-end. Alas, it's 2004, and that machine is about as budget as budget gets. Aside from The Sims and anything by PopCap, you may be able to play older Tony Hawk and Madden titles. If you're interested in upgrading, start with the memory (you'll need at least 256MB). Also, try to find out if your mobo has an AGP slot. If so, dropping about $175 on a 128MB ATi Radeon 9600 XT graphics card would open up more possibilities. Of course, there's that woefully underpowered CPU... in fact, you know what? Forget what I just told you and buy a Nintendo GameCube. You can get one at Best Buy for $100.

My parents never bought me s***!
I am hoping to upgrade my system soon and I'm on a budget. I have an Asus A7V mobo with a 440MHz Nvidia GeForce 2, a 900MHz AMD processor, and 384MB of RAM. If I am lucky, my parents will let me upgrade my video, motherboard, and processor for about $500 max. First thing is the graphics card. I was looking at a GeForce 5200 or 5600 or maybe something else, and I want the most bang for my buck. What would you suggest for a motherboard and processor? I would prefer AMD. (Also, $500 is the very most, so $400 would be better.)

Ryan

Sup, Ryan? I just went to Newegg.com and found these products: Transcend's ATI Radeon 9600 XT graphics card for $149, AMD's Athlon 64 3000+ processor for $211, and Asus' K8V Deluxe motherboard for $139. That adds up to $499. You're in business, kid!

It's 2004, you troglodytes
I keep reading these letters about how people don't have DVD-ROM. They are pissed because CGW sent a DVD, and they are too pathetic to use it. They think the world should stop for them because they don't want to shell out $25 for a DVD-ROM drive? These are the people who are forcing me to switch CDs three times to get a game loaded. William, please tell these people to buck up or shut the f*** up!

DVD-ROM editor Ryan Scott says, "Everyone out there who doesn't own a DVD-ROM drive needs to buck up or shut the f*** up!"

Where do you people get this money?
I have an Athlon XP 1800+, 1GB of RAM, and a GeForce4 Ti 4600 graphics card. Would you recommend replacing my processor and graphics card? I would like to keep the cost under $800.

Mike

I'd get a 256MB Radeon 9800 XT (around $400 at Newegg.com) and the fastest Athlon XP processor your motherboard supports; probably an AMD Athlon 3200+ (around $200 at Newegg.com). But check with your motherboard manufacturer before you go out there and starting spending money.
What’s a wizard to do? The LAN party’s 30 blocks away, and Mr. Furry Pants wants a ride. Good thing he’s got Aria at his side. Because this clever cube case packs everything he needs to take on the fiercest opponents. Like four drive bays. A 300 Watt power supply. And unlike other cube cases, it accommodates microATX motherboards. So when he needs to upgrade his rig, he’ll only be limited by his imagination. However bizarre it may be. To learn how we can help you build reality-defying systems, visit www.antec-inc.com.
Loyd's Cracked Case

Why 64-bit games?

Not long ago, we discussed the real reason AMD's Athlon 64 processors make such killer gaming CPUs. But with Windows XP 64-bit edition coming down thepike and Intel now officially on the 64-bit desktop bandwagon (albeit very late to the party), the fully 64-bit desktop PC is on the event horizon. So why 64 bits, and what might this mean to PC gaming?

There are two benefits to a 64-bit processor: wider registers and larger memory addressing. Other benefits of specific 64-bit architectures may also exist, but these are the two main benefits of 64-bit processing in general. Note that all the 64-bit goodness built into a CPU is useless without a 64-bit operating system, but that’s a topic for a later column. Let’s look at each benefit a bit more closely, assuming we have a useful and usable 64-bit version of Windows with 64-bit DirectX and so on.

Wide load!

Wider registers allow a program to perform 64-bit computations without having to juggle multiple pieces. It can be done today on a 32-bit CPU, but it requires some juggling, since the standard arithmetic registers are only 32 bits wide in a 32-bit CPU. Of course, SSE2 registers can also be used for some types of computation, since those registers are 128 bits wide.

True 64-bit computation may not be all that interesting for games, but large memory-address spaces could be extremely useful. If you really want to build a large virtual world with tens of persistent objects, you'll need to keep track of them all. You can juggle data structures, but when the volume of data gets really huge, the ability to easily address more than 4GB of data could make life a lot easier.

Interestingly, the Athlon 64 doesn't directly support 64-bit addressing. The current version has support only for 40-bit addressing and 48-bit virtual addresses. Note, however, that 40-bit addressing means the CPU can directly address 1,099,511,627,776 bytes, or 1.024 gigabytes, of memory. That's 256 times more memory than a 32-bit CPU can address. It's unlikely that any game in the foreseeable future will need that much memory!

Thank goodness RAM is cheap!

On the other hand, there's a more practical reason for a large address space: Memory densities are increasing. Within a year or two, it may be difficult to find a system with less than 2GB of RAM. You won't be able to buy "low" capacity memory modules (i.e., less than a gigabyte) in a few years. So a system will need robust memory addressing just to deal with the RAM that will ship with it.

So all the people who went out and bought Athlon 64 systems are really ahead of the game, right? Well, not necessarily. Just like users who bought GeForce3 cards may not benefit from the next generation of games using programmable shaders, people who bought Athlon 64s may find their CPUs will be considered low-end processors by the time games that use 64-bit addressing become commonplace. Still, with Windows 64-bit edition just around the corner, early adopters will be able to experiment, and a few 64-bit games may ship in the next year or two.

Of course, by that time, Intel's recently announced "32e" CPUs, which are really x86-64 compatible, will be on the market, and users will be able to choose which brand they like best. But Intel is playing catch-up in this arena, and it will be interesting to see if AMD users will remain loyal to the Athlon 64.

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Most people just keep chugging along on the same obsolete computer until it up and stops being capable of running anything. Check Out is here to fix that. With this handy monthly resource, you'll have all the info you need to upgrade that dusty old has-been of a machine. Plus, we've got a quick recap of what you should be playing on your newly upgraded rig.
A-List

Our picks

Don't you hate it when your computer explodes? For those of you who are unfamiliar with the experience, believe us, it isn't fun—especially when smoke and loud noises are involved. What's even more frustrating is when a computer just inexplicably dies. No explosions, no hardware or software malfunctions...you just wake up one morning and it doesn't power up. We hope that never happens to you, but if it does, you can rest assured that the A-List is your one-stop hardware-recommendation resource when you need a quick fix. Or if you just want to brag to your friends about your über-UT 2004 framerate. Showoff.

COMPUTERS

Without computers, there would be no CGW. Without CGW, there would be no A-List. And without A-List...well, you'd probably just be playing checkers.

Intel-based system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OUR PICK</strong></td>
<td>Gateway has found the sweet spot between being a major OEM and a boutique system maker. Its 710G Gamer uses the same parts as the small guys and is damn near as fast. This machine is so sweet, in fact, that it won this month's desktop roundup. While it isn't necessarily as &quot;fast&quot; as machines by Voodoo and Falcon, its 256MB Nvidia GeForce FX 5950 Ultra graphics card combined with a bevy of awesome accessories have us sold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>710G Gamer</strong></td>
<td>$2,160</td>
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<td>Gateway</td>
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AMD-based system

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<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>OUR PICK</strong></td>
<td>While Gateway's 710G Gamer is like the Swiss Army knife of computers, Voodoo PC's Hexx is an awesome balance of speed and style. AMD's Athlon 64 3000+ CPU, in combination with a 256MB ATI Radeon 9800 XT graphics card and 1GB of Corsair memory, makes this rig plenty fast—but it's the Hexx's unique styling that really has us hooked. Whoever said PCs have to be ugly?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hexx c355</strong></td>
<td>$2,500</td>
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<td>VoodooPC</td>
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## LAN-boy rig

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<th>PRODUCT</th>
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<td><strong>OUR PICK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>FragBox Pro</td>
<td>Dave Salvator doesn’t like anything, which is why we were surprised he wanted to give Falcon’s FragBox Pro an Editors’ Choice award. Of course, one look at the thing and you can see why it’s so cool. Inside that little box lurks an Intel Pentium 4 2.80GHz CPU, a 120GB hard drive, 1GB of memory, and a 256MB Nvidia GeForceFX 5950 Ultra graphics card. Not all small form-factor PCs can pack that kind of power, but Falcon worked some serious “cooling magic” to get all that to work together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1295</td>
<td>Falcon Northwest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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## PERIPHERALS

Is it just us, or does playing flight sims and street-racing games on a keyboard feel really, really wrong? Thank goodness for all those fancy joysticks and racing wheels.

### Speakers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>HIGH-END PICK</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>GigaWorks S750</td>
<td>While some may scoff at a 71 speaker setup, who would turn down 700 watts of awesome audio power? With two rear and two side satellites, the S750s will turn your home sound setup into a movie theater.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$500</td>
<td>Creative Labs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MIDRANGE PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z-5300</td>
<td>Having earned an Editors’ Choice award in our February issue, Logitech’s Z-5300 speakers boast incredible power, quality, and some nice bass, all for a decent, affordable price. Take note, though—they lack a digital input.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Logitech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z-3</td>
<td>If you’re on a budget, then we suggest you forgo a cheap set of 41 or 51 speakers and opt for a good set of 21 speakers instead. Logitech’s Z-3s sound great and look even better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100</td>
<td>Logitech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Keyboard

<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>MultiMedia Keyboard</td>
<td>You can’t go wrong with this handy keyboard. The buttons at the top allow you to perform common functions such as launching a web browser, opening folders, and controlling multimedia apps like Media Player.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30</td>
<td>Microsoft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WIRELESS PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wireless Optical Desktop Elite</td>
<td>MS’ latest desktop set sports its new Tilt Wheel technology, which allows you to scroll horizontally through documents. In addition to being highly customizable, this keyboard’s cushioned palm rest is more comfortable than a standard plastic one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100</td>
<td>Microsoft</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Gamepad

<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>Dual Action Gamepad</td>
<td>If you’re playing sports games on a PC, this is the gamepad to use. Many EA Sports games use this as a default, and it’s essentially a PC version of the PS2’s excellent DualShock controller.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Logitech</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A-LIST PERIPHERALS

Mouse

**PRODUCT**

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**

**WIRED PICK**

*Intellimouse Explorer 4.0*
$50
Microsoft

Microsoft's latest Intellimouse Explorer boasts the company's new "lil wheel" technology, but more important, it's very comfortable and rocks plenty of customizable buttons. It can also be connected to either a standard PS/2 port or a USB port.

**WIRELESS PICK**

*Intellimouse Explorer 2.0*
$60
Microsoft

Microsoft's Wireless Intellimouse Explorer 2.0 is essentially the wireless version of the Intellimouse Explorer 4.0. While it comes in several colors, we prefer the leather-bound version.

Headset

**PRODUCT**

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**

**OUR PICK**

*PCISO*
$70
Sennheiser

One out of one editors named Darren Gladstone agrees: "You're not exactly going to record a top 50 album with these, but they're good for the job at hand: communicating and talking trash with your buddies online."

Joystick

**PRODUCT**

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**

**OUR PICK**

*Extreme 3D Pro*
$35
Logitech

While they aren't as popular as they once were, there are still some pretty good flight sim out there. Whether you're a hardcore or casual flight-sim fan, Logitech's Extreme 3D Pro will help you get the job done.

Racing wheel

**PRODUCT**

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**

**OUR PICK**

*MOMO Racing Wheel*
$100
Logitech

The entry-level MOMO wheel is an awesome peripheral. What's not to love about feeling like you're actually behind the wheel? It's just the kind of thing that'll get your motor in gear for some Need for Speed Underground.

DISPLAYS

One of these days, we'll all be using some sort of badass triple-screen surround-view monitor that totally immerses us in the gaming experience. Here's what we're stuck with until then.

CAT monitor

**PRODUCT**

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**

**HIGH-END PICK**

*22-inch MultiSync FE211SB*
$600
NEC

When it comes to gaming, CRTs can't be beat—and NEC's MultiSync has been the favorite of many of the boutiques for years. With a huge viewable area and a great price, this is definitively a recommended buy.

**BUDGET PICK**

*19-inch E901b*
$235
ViewSonic

For gamers on a budget, ViewSonic's 19-inch E901b is a fantastic CRT display. Although 14-inch monitors used to be entry-level displays, there's no reason to go below 19 inches with prices like this.
**LCD monitor**

**PRODUCT**
- **HIGH-END PICK**
  - **UltraSharp 2001FP**
  - $1000
  - Dell

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
Dell's UltraSharp 2001FP is often packaged with the company's XPS gaming system. With a slick design and a response time of 16ms, this display makes gaming a real treat. It also pivots 90 degrees for vertical document viewing.

**BUDGET PICK**
- **CM175B**
- $500
- Hitachi

This update to last year's CM174B model boasts a native resolution of 1280x1024 (great for gaming) and a 16ms response time. In other words, a great gaming LCD just got more...uh...greater(er).

---

**COMPONENTS**

What every gamer needs is one of those seizure-inducing cases with see-through panels, glowing fans, and multiple annoying flashing lights. Actually, scratch that idea.

**Processor**

**PRODUCT**
- **HIGH-END PICK**
  - **Athlon 64 FX-53**
  - $800
  - AMD

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
Among gaming processors, the Athlon 64 FX-53 is at the top of the heap. Even though the 64 bits aren't being exploited, the 32-bit applications run almost as fast as Darren can talk. We said almost.

**BUDGET PICK**
- **Pentium 4 2.8GHz**
- $200
- Intel

While the 2.8GHz Pentium 4 chip is not as king-of-the-road as an 800MHz frontside bus 3.4GHz model, it is still one zippy little core. Plus, with an Intel mobo, you'll be ready for the eventual upgrade.

---

**Motherboard**

**PRODUCT**
- **HIGH-END PICK**
  - **SK8V**
  - $200
  - Asus

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
Designed for AMD's Athlon 64 FX line of processors, the SK8V sports the 64-bit chipset of choice—the VIA K8T800. This motherboard also boasts a 400MHz frontside bus, as well as support for DDR 400 RAM.

**BUDGET PICK**
- **D875PBZ**
- $150
- Intel

Intel's D875PBZ isn't so much "low end" as it is flexible. Constructed around the i875P chipset, it has built-in SATA RAID support and makes a great backbone for an affordable Pentium 4 system.

---

**Soundcard**

**PRODUCT**
- **OUR PICK**
  - **Audigy 2 ZS**
  - $200
  - Creative Labs

**WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT**
You haven't experienced surround until you've heard an awesome 7.1 system. In conjunction with Creative's GigaWorks S750 71 speakers, the Audigy 2 ZS is awesome. Serious audiophiles can upgrade to the Platinum or Platinum Pro models for even more power.
### Videocard

<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>256MB Radeon 9800 XT</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 its eventual release.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$350</td>
<td>ATI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MIDRANGE PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>128MB Radeon 9600 XT</td>
<td>ATI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$175</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>128MB GeForce FX 5200 Ultra</td>
<td>Stay behind a generation to save some money on graphics cards. The Nvidia GeForce FX 5200 clocks in at about $80, which is quite a bargain. Just make sure you don't buy the cheaper, non-Ultra version.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$80</td>
<td>Nvidia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Hard drive

<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>Deskstar 7K250 250GB</td>
<td>A single 250GB Hitachi Deskstar hard drive provides more than enough disk space for 99 percent of the world's population. If you're in that rare 1 percent that needs more, double them up for a monstrous RAID array.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$250</td>
<td>Hitachi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DiamondMax Plus 9 80GB</td>
<td>At a little more than $1 per GB, Maxtor's 7,200 rpm DiamondMax Plus 9 80GB drive is a great option for a single-drive rig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$700</td>
<td>Maxtor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Optical drive

<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>DVR-A07U</td>
<td>This drive is not for the faint of heart—or light of wallet. Pioneer's latest combo drive does everything you need: You can create your own DVD movies, burn music CDs, or just back up your data.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200</td>
<td>Pioneer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDU1621 16x DVD-ROM</td>
<td>Judging by the responses to our first-ever DVD, many of you have yet to adopt this technology. At around $30 for a basic 16x drive, there's no reason to wait—and Sony's 16x DVD-ROM is a great choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30</td>
<td>Sony</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Case

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOWER PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAC-T01-1EC</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 there's a metal monolith inset on the case's face. What is that thing for, anyway?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$150</td>
<td>Cooler Master</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ALTERNATE FORM PICK</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SN95G4</td>
<td>Shuttle's NForce3 BIOS-based setup is the perfect option for building an Athlon 64 FX-based shuttle box. The motherboard supports DDR 400 and rocks Realtek's 6-channel audio. Plus, it's much more portable than a bulky tower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$350</td>
<td>Shuttle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**MOBILITY**

While the rest of us take notes on good old-fashioned paper, Darren "Inspector Gadget" Gladstone takes his on a handheld Sony CLIE PEG-UX50. And we thought it was just a fancy Game Boy.

### Laptop

<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>With a 128MB ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10) graphics card and a 17-inch display, Gateway's M675 is deeper than most desktop PCs. Plus, it can be difficult to put a desktop PC in your backpack.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M675</td>
<td>Gateway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2,600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BUDGET PICK</strong></td>
<td>The M6807 ships with a 64MB ATI Mobility Radeon 9600 (M10) graphics chip, but in many tests, it outperforms machines with 128MB graphics options. That said, at only $1,549, you'll be damned happy with this Athlon 64-based laptop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M6807</td>
<td>eMachines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1,549 (after $100 mail-in rebate)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LIGHTWEIGHT PICK</strong></td>
<td>The Inspiron 300m is the perfect traveling companion. The docking station's extra battery space means more than five hours of life, and additional speakers give added rockability. Just don't expect to do much gaming on it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiron 300m</td>
<td>Dell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$2,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Phone

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>WHY YOU SHOULD BUY IT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FLIP-PHONE PICK</strong></td>
<td>Of the current crop of gaming-enabled phones, this one is the slickest, most game-friendly of the bunch. With the addition of the $30 PCS Game Pad (a GBA-like docking station), it's much easier to control the action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V6600</td>
<td>Samsung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$199 ($49 with a two-year contract)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NON-FLIP-PHONE PICK</strong></td>
<td>Thanks to the new federal policy that allows you to keep your phone number when switching cell providers, negotiating and pinning down a really good deal on a phone is much easier. For a normal-sized phone, this model works great.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3660</td>
<td>Nokia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$200</td>
<td></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>For the moment, you aren't gonna find another PDA with this kind of juice for the price that Tapwave is asking. 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>Zodiac 2</td>
<td>Tapwave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>POCKETPC OS PICK</strong></td>
<td>This PDA sits atop 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>e805</td>
<td>Toshiba</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$599</td>
<td></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>Holy crap! Your wallet is probably bigger than this 5-megapixel digital camera. Sony's DSC-T1 is tiny, but it has a large LCD screen and 3x optical zoom. Poor battery life is the only price you'll be paying for high style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DSC-T1 Cyber-shot</td>
<td>Sony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$550</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Rewind 100
What should you play today? Names in red indicate Editors' Choice games

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GAME</th>
<th>ISSUE</th>
<th>VERDICT</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Across the Universe</td>
<td>4/04</td>
<td>An intense, single-scenario</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Korps battle-set-on-Dort</td>
<td>worth the admission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Mythology:</td>
<td>7/04</td>
<td>More bells, more whistles,</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Titans Expansion</td>
<td></td>
<td>same game</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of Wonders:</td>
<td>1/05</td>
<td>A great strategy game that's</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadow Magic</td>
<td></td>
<td>worth purchasing for the random-map generator alone</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Conquest:</td>
<td>11/04</td>
<td>Fight boredom and micromanage-</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ment by avoiding this lame sandbox expansion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America's Army:</td>
<td>9/04</td>
<td>Special Force: 3 is the tactical-sim</td>
<td>★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>game at its finest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aquilonex 2:</td>
<td>12/03</td>
<td>Like drowning in a sea of boredom</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolution</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armed &amp; Dangerous:</td>
<td>3/04</td>
<td>A straight-faced shooter with</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>great storytelling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle Engine Aquila</td>
<td>4/04</td>
<td>Gorgeous and fun Medievil-style action</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>but not deep or groundbreaking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battlefield 1942:</td>
<td>12/03</td>
<td>The last bit of fuel injection for</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Weapons of</td>
<td></td>
<td>the series. Battlefield 1942 remains</td>
<td>worth the money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World War II</td>
<td></td>
<td>the best and most immersive game of 2003</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Good &amp; Evil</td>
<td>5/04</td>
<td>Gorgeous, stylish, and wholly original, this action-adventure</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>is a gem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Hawk Down:</td>
<td>4/04</td>
<td>An entertaining add-on that bulk up</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teim Saber</td>
<td></td>
<td>the single- and multiplayer games. Bull-a-tat-bad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Black Mirror:</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>The Black Mirror's gothic horror</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>doesn't require much reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blade and Sword:</td>
<td>4/04</td>
<td>A maze that is just a bit</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>frustrating but doesn't break out of the box</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken Sword:</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>The story is just too much</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sleeping Dragon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GAME</th>
<th>ISSUE</th>
<th>VERDICT</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Call of Duty</td>
<td>9/04</td>
<td>Call of Duty is so much fun that I can't believe that a game can be this good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>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 using</td>
<td>★★★★☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>throwing beer cans at the television</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Champions of War:</td>
<td>11/04</td>
<td>As dry and amusing as the Arabian Desert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chase</td>
<td>1/04</td>
<td>A good-looking shooter that's only fun for the first few hours</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrome</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>A stunning sci-fi-themed shooter that makes Aliens vs. Predator look tame</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization IV:</td>
<td>4/04</td>
<td>An impressively refined new version of Civ that</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conquests</td>
<td></td>
<td>is a great game, but multiplayer is missing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold War: No Mercy</td>
<td>12/03</td>
<td>Cold War is repetitive, dreary and</td>
<td>★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>play leaves you cold</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat Command 2:</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>A great scenario editor can't save this average game</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danger Forward</td>
<td></td>
<td>that is lauded for its tactical war game above Kotton Pockit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat Mission:</td>
<td>4/04</td>
<td>Contact Mission 2.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commandos 3</td>
<td>5/04</td>
<td>Maybe the toughest game ever, and not in a good way</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Conspireides</td>
<td>5/04</td>
<td>More than the second Greek letter</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract: J.A.C.M.</td>
<td>5/04</td>
<td>No franchise shines forever—</td>
<td>★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>J.A.C.M. is the first thriller on the NES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counter-Strike:</td>
<td>5/04</td>
<td>This game was great when it was first released. So, it's just good</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Commando Zero</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dark Age of Camelot:</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>Good expansion for veteran players, but not much for new players</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dark Fall: The Journal</td>
<td>8/05</td>
<td>The only thing missing from this</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>entire game's box is a charger for underwear</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That Rules

Free Stuff

Bookworm
It's a good thing games aren't considered drugs, or PopCap Games would probably be on death row right now. Bookworm is an insatiably addictive, productivity-wrecking word game.

Zuma
Those of you who read the April issue's Scorch Board column have an idea of how much this little color-matching game sucks you in. Simple, yet mind-bogglingly addictive—it's the Tetris of the 21st century.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Verdict</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dead Rights</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>This no-bills port of an aged, derivative, repetitive shooter was cloud on arrival</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>Deep Ex 2: Invisible War</td>
<td>3/04</td>
<td>The sequel to Deep Ex is both dumbed down and smarted up</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominions II</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>The meat and gravy of any 4K game available anywhere</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dungeon Stack: Legends of Acruma</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>Good stuff for fans of the original</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empire: Dawn of the Modern Age</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>A solid entry into the burgeoning historical real-time-strategy subgenre</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etherlords II</td>
<td>12/03</td>
<td>A better, cheaper, 3D version of Magic: The Gathering</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA/IO Operation Iraqi Freedom</td>
<td>11/05</td>
<td>Nothing really new here, but worth a look if you need a new spin for a stale system</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIFA 2004</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>It might be a rough console port, but it's still the best soccer game on any platform</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Fantasy XI</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>A rock-solid MMORPG from one of the most unlikely sources</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom Fighters</td>
<td>1/04</td>
<td>Great teamwork tactics, but the PC version dawdled for too long</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost Master</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>This game is clever, stylish, and fun to watch, but it's a little too slow to have much appeal</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gothic II</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>Better than the first, but still a little too slow on even the most powerful hardware</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halo</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>Best in its class so far</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heaven &amp; Hell</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>Writers, repetitive, and utterly devoid of interesting strategy elements</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hidden &amp; Dangerous 2</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>A really good game hampered by the same pitiful bugs and problematic AI, as the original</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highway to the Reich</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>An excellent system gets better</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeworld 2</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>It's no Homeworld—it's not even Homeworld</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDV: Enforcer</td>
<td>5/04</td>
<td>More of the same, with drag-ons</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii's Majestic Chess</td>
<td>12/03</td>
<td>A valiant attempt at chess for dummies that doesn't quite teach dummies—but does provide some decent chess</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<td>CD Jack the Ripper</td>
<td>5/04</td>
<td>A good Ripper story butchered by bugs, video clips, and a bad ending</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jetfighter V</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>A rare combination of frustration and boredom</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD: Conflict</td>
<td>4/04</td>
<td>A neat attempt at a Commando-style close-up in a first-person shooter, with horrible AI</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD: Knights of the Old Republic</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>A rather good RPG from Bioware</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD: Legacy of the Crusader</td>
<td>11/03</td>
<td>Unbalanced, tedious, buggy, and lacking in imagination—and those are its good points</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD: Jack: Modern Air Combat</td>
<td>3/04</td>
<td>A fun little game for air-racing fans, even without the dynamic campaign</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CD: Lords of Everquest</td>
<td>5/04</td>
<td>A fairly decent attempt at capturing the feel of the original EverQuest</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDU: The Return of the King</td>
<td>2/04</td>
<td>Check your brain at the door for this sword-swinging, spell-palling good time</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVD: Madden NFL 2004</td>
<td>11/05</td>
<td>Easily the best Madden game yet, but be prepared to buy a new Madden Dual Action controller</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DVD: Magic: The Gathering — Battlegrounds</td>
<td>4/04</td>
<td>A winning formula in which you don't fight and don't use</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compleat Assailant</td>
<td>4/04</td>
<td>Goodness, gone mundane</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max Payne 2</td>
<td>9/04</td>
<td>Inexpensive upon release, but doesn't have the formula</td>
<td>★★★★☆☆</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### DVDs
Good TV, now on DVD

#### Smallville: The Complete Second Season
Before Clark Kent became a "superman," he was just a boy growing up in Kansas. The Smallville series reexamines familiar characters like Lex Luthor to create a compelling new backstory. This second season totally rules, making up for everything the mediocre first season lacked.

#### Chapelle's Show: Season One Uncensored
Dave Chapelle is a funny man. His loud sketch comedy dances a crazy line across a line that no one else would dare cross—except Chapelle, who crosses plenty of lines himself. A black white-supremacist? Only on Chapelle's Show.

#### Samurai Jack Season 1
Jack is a time-displaced samurai who must find a way to stop the evil spirit Aku. The bright, stylistic animation is unlike most other cartoons, and the quirky story line is rife with samurai action.

#### Crimsonland
N/A
Yeah, so there are a ton of games in which you have to pick up a bunch of guns and shoot aliens. But this one is different—it's got an overhead perspective and lots of variety, and it gets incredibly challenging.

#### Duke Nukum
N/A
Now THIS is the definition of old school. Back before Duke 3D and the laughing-stock that is Duke Nukum Forever (coming this fall in 273 ML), Duke was kicking ass and taking names in this shareware gem from Apogee.
**Anime**

**Neon Genesis Evangelion: Director's Cut**
Evangelion will soon be made into a feature-length film by the special-effects team behind the blockbuster Lord of the Rings trilogy. Until then, the newly released director's cut offers revised details on the classic series.

**Inuyasha**
Trapped in an ancient era, Kagome must join (and put up with) Inuyasha, a half-demon on a quest to undo evil. From the creator of Ranma, this series is a mix of action, comedy, and romance.

**Samurai X**
Why would the most vicious assassin in all of feudal Japan turn away from his former ways? Filled with blood, violence, and drama, the Samurai X miniseries is the prequel to the fan-favorite Rurouni Kenshin anime series.

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**Based Crap**

**Shadowbane: Rise of Chaos**
For a game with such a loyal pre-release fanbase, Shadowbane sure did crash and burn. Simply focusing on PvP does not make an MMO good, even if it is a valiant first step.

**Horizons: Empire of Istaria**
While we're on the subject of what does and doesn't make an MMO good, here's another good tip to follow: Developers aren't cool, but they need a good game to go along with them.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GAME</th>
<th>ISSUE</th>
<th>VERDICT</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Starsky & Hutch | 1/04  | The bad rep of the '90s continues with this crapy game from arappy license | !★★★★★
| G3 Siberia II   | 5/04  | Visually stunning, but the pedestrian gameplay saps some of the fun | !★★★★☆
| Teenage Mutant | Ninja Turtles | 5/04 | It's not as bad as you'd imagine—the art is good | !★★★★☆
| Temple          | 1/04  | Yet another game more by numbers | !★★★☆☆
| Terminator 2:   | 4/04  | War of the Machines       | !★★★★☆
| The Great Escape | 11/03 | Not quite as bad as a month in the cooker, but not much better, either | !★★★☆☆
| The Hobbit      | 2/04  | Standard console fare, bigotry, Tolkien-flavored | !★★☆☆☆
| The Simpsons:   | 2/04  | Hit & Run                  | !★★★★☆
| The Simpsons:   | 1/04  | Makers' Magic              | !★★★★☆
| Tiger Woods     | 12/08 | PGA Tour 2003              | !★★★★☆
| Tiltas of Steel | 1/04  | An old-school game with little crossover potential | !★★★★☆

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GAME</th>
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<th>VERDICT</th>
<th>SCORE</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Tony Hawk's     | 12/03 | Pro Skater 4              | !★★★★★
| UFO: Aftermath   | 1/04  | 4/04 | UFO: Aftermath is a good game that should have waited three weeks and a big patch longer to be enhanced | !★★★★★
| Utopia          | 2/04  | Some good pacifics, some bad action, a story, lots of familiar elements—maybe the eventual online version can make it more compelling | !★★★★★
| Vegas Tycoon     | 4/04  | A colorful and entertaining casino builder that fills the job | !★★★★★
| Victoria         | 1/04  | Good game, bad bugs      | !★★★★★
| War of the Ring  | 2/04  | Good use of Middle-earth elements in a sadly mundane RTS | !★★★★★
| Wasteland IV     | 1/04  | A chargrilled players version of a classic science fiction | !★★★★★
| G3 War & Warriors:   | 5/04  | Jean of Arc              | !★★★★☆
| Will Rock        | 11/03 | To quote a limited edition classic: "We're not gonna like it!" | !★★★★★
| World War II:    | 10/03 | Frontline Command        | !★★★★★
| Worms 3D         | 5/04  | Short doses of personality don't overcome the long frustration | !★★★★★
| X-Z: The Threat  | 1/04  | A much-delayed yet near-stable version of endearance | !★★★★★
| XIII             | 2/04  | This Belgium import wrestles between fun and frustration, excitement and tedium | !★★★★★
| You Don't Know Jack: | 5/04 | Some references are best left buried | !★★★★★
| X-Plane 7.40     | 4/04  | Let's pretend the aircraft designs create a wild variety of flyable vehicles | !★★★★★
| Zero Hour        | 1/04  | Can't be better than it's ever been | !★★★★★

**Toys**

*Let's play make-believe!*

**20th Anniversary Optimus Prime**

The new, limited-edition, 20th anniversary Optimus Prime blows any other Transformer (or toy, for that matter) out of the water. Almost a foot tall with die-cast metal parts, this grand Optimus will run you about $80, but take it from CGW's resident toy fanatic, Johnny Liu—it's well worth the price.

**XEVOC**

The maker of Stikfas delivers these infinitely poseable figures with stylistic designs. You can even swap parts between different figures to create your own fiery death bot.

**Gasapno**

Hugely popular in Japan, these small, detailed collectibles are distributed via vending machines. Gasapno toys have recently begun to show up Stateside, and though we've gotten some cool stuff (like a Marvel superheroes set), the best figures are still abroad.

**World War II Online**

The thought of a massively multiplayer World War II experience sounds cool. Too bad this one is virtually unplayable. Kids, do yourselves a favor and stick with Battlefield.

**The Sims Online**

Not everything with the word "Sims" on it is gold. We predicted good things for the online version of the best-selling game of all time, but reality proved to be a lot more boring. Designer tip: Next time, put a game in the box.
In the invasion game, Bruce is killed early by little bugs.

Unreal Tournament 2004
Bruce shoots Tom, Tom shoots Bruce

We thought it would be nice to play an action game, partly because it would be a change of pace from the strategy and RTS games we normally do and partly because some great action games have just come out. Tom suggested Unreal Tournament 2004. Bruce, a man of thought over action, was worried he wouldn't put up much of a fight.

To test this theory, we first played a 1-on-1 deathmatch on DM-Morpheus3, a map that involves leaping around the tops of skyscrapers. The results weren't pretty. We're talking “Final score: 20 to -3” not pretty. (Bruce blamed his poor showing on being able to fail to his death if he wasn't looking where he was going.) So, we limit ourselves to team games, each of us backed by a cadre of bots at the adept A.I. setting. Our plan is to play matches in various modes. The victor will be the first person to win four out of seven matches.

Invasion on DM-Ion1-Serpentine
Tom: Invasion is a co-op mode in which players have to fight waves of increasingly powerful A.I.-controlled monsters. Since each player racks up a score based on how many monsters he kills, we can play it competitively. Or so I thought. I let Bruce do the killing while I run through the level to collect the rocket launcher, flak cannon, shield, and health keg. About a minute into the game, a message flashes that Bruce has been killed. Quickly tapping the F1 key, I see that I have 6 points to his 1 point.

Since the game ends when neither player survives a wave, I figure this is as good a time as any to call it a win. I eat a couple of my own rockets—it takes several since I'd just grabbed the health keg—to claim my first victory. Or so I thought. It turns out you lose 10 points when you kill yourself.

Bruce: This mode is called “Invasion.” Tom explains that this means there will be invaders and that we will have to kill them. This almost sounds like one of those touch-feely cooperative games with the railroads and city hall that Tom likes so much because everybody wins. This turns out not to be one of those games, because I lose before I even know what's going on.

Tom dies, too, but since he dies after me, I suppose that doesn't matter—although I think the invaders are the real winners here. Along with me, that is, since for some reason probably addressed in the EU Constitution, the game says that I win.

Team deathmatch on DM-Gestalt
Bruce: I like this mode because it doesn't have any complicated objectives. Plus, I get to team up with robots, which I assume never miss because they are robots. My strategy for this match is to hide and hope Tom shoots himself again while my robots take out his robots. Somewhere along the way I manage to get a double kill, which is my best move yet and something I'm very proud of, but then I notice I have only one hit point left.

I start running around looking for those pills that look like they came from the New Order Fine Time cover, only to find out that they're adrenaline and not health. I guess that at least kind of in keeping with the whole New Order theme. Eventually, someone kills me, which doesn't surprise me. Fortunately, my robots got my back, homes. Fosshizzle, etc.

Tom: Gestalt is a cool map, kind of a combination of Tron with a more depressed palette, the lobby from The Matrix, and the office building from Disclosure (you probably just remember Demi Moore's undergarments, so you'll have to trust me that it has a cool office building). There are lots of walkways where you can look down and wait for an opportunity to jump your opponents. The bots do this a lot. In fact, the bots are doing lots of things a lot. In the mayhem, I manage to get five kills, two of
them against Bruce while he's running away. It's neck and neck for a while, but Bruce's bots win by one point.

RESULT
Bruce wins 20 to 18

OVERALL SCORE
TOM: 2
BRUCE: 0

Onslaught on ONS-Severance
Tom: I was convinced that the key to Severance was controlling the middle node where the Leviathan spawns, so I grab this as soon as I can. But several times, I advance the Leviathan toward the last node to connect to Bruce's power core, only to lose a node behind me because the Leviathan is so slow. So I hop out, run back to secure the besieged node, and return to the Leviathan only to discover someone has jacked it. You'd think by now the Lizard Corporation would have invented some way to lock your car when you park it.

Bruce: My initial joy at seeing that I can drive vehicles on a map named after a Dead Can Dance song is tempered by the fact that Tiger tanks aren't available. I plan to blame this upcoming loss on ahiistorical vehicle modeling. I head for the biggest panzer I can find (the Goliath) and drive around while my robots actually play the game. They're building some pods or bases or links or something. Good for them! I actually kill some things by tricking Tom's robots into running into me, and then I find this huge tank called the Leviathan. If there is one thing I know, it's heavy tanks.

Tom: This one goes back and forth, with a full complement of six bots on each team running around the map. It's like being online, where you have to queue up if you want to fly the Raptor. To our bots' credit, it looks like it could go either way most of the time. I waste a lot of the match fudging with the stupid Leviathan. Bruce's bots, on the other hand, have done a great job of figuring out how to use the target painter to break up a node's defense. So when time runs out and we go into core drain, my node has taken about 15 points more damage than Bruce's has. A few minutes later he's got his third win.

RESULT
Bruce wins

OVERALL SCORE
TOM: 0
BRUCE: 3

Bombing run on BR-Serenity
Tom: We've decided to turn down the bot A.I. since this column is supposed to be Tom vs. Bruce and not Bot vs. Bot. Plus, if I lose another match, Bruce is the winner, which is going to be really hard for me to explain. So we take the bots down two notches, from adept to experienced, at which point I feel like I'm making more of a difference. Serenity is pretty linear for a bombing-run map, consisting of a long winding canyon with goals at either end.

Bruce: Last month: Bruce lost to a guy calling himself Queen Tom. So this month, he's playing as a girl.

Tom: When Manta hits Goliath, Goliath wins.

Bruce steps out of his Leviathan for a second.

Bruce just sticks to the robot and hopes for the best. Remember that New Order single?

The weird rings around Tom clearly indicate his use of a cheat mode.

My first priority is to grab the shield in the center and then drive back the first wave of attackers while one of my bots plows forward with the ball. Carrying the ball heals you, but it prevents you from attacking. So when you're attacked by just one or two enemies, an important tactic is to pass the ball to the other team—basically, you shoot one of them with it—and then kill the receiver while he's helpless. If the other guys pile on you and you know you're not going to survive, just chuck the ball as far as you can toward their goal to buy yourself some time.

Bruce: It takes me halfway through the match to figure out how the radar at the top of the screen works. It's pretty complicated, giving Tom an advantage due to his mastery of hardcore flight sims. I'm trying to figure out how to cycle through the FLIR modes when Tom jumps through a big hoop.
when things turn around, I make a point to always be in the driver's seat. There's a minor setback when the magnetic crane leaves without me, and again when the turret to the second checkpoint blows the truck up just as I'm about to reach it. But ultimately, driving like a bat out of hell serves me well here.

*Bruce:* This is some crazy stuff here; I don't even know where to start. First, there's a power core, and then you have to get in a truck, drive to the checkpoint, and secure it, and then there's a bridge, and I'm already lost. Fortunately for Tom, he can just stand there and shoot at me while I'm blindly following the arrow. At one point, I follow one of these arrows into a blank wall, even though the arrow's supposed to be pointing the way to the bridge I'm supposed to lower. Eventually, I wise up and figure out that while I have no idea where to go, my robots do, so I should probably let them do the driving while I run around and shoot things. What I don't realize, though, is that Tom will get a chance to be the attacker next, and while it takes my robots just about the whole time to escape from this nuthouse, it takes Tom like five seconds. And that means no wins.

**Assault on AS-Junkyard**

*Tom:* The attackers have to drive a truck to the exit and the defenders have to stop them. Simple, right? The problem with this map—which I'll call the Tango & Cash map in my continuing effort to reference obscure movies—is that the bots aren't very good at driving the truck. Also, while I know little secrets like where the grenade launcher and AVRIL are, Bruce probably won't even be able to figure out how to get around with the jump pads. Still, we start as the defenders, and Bruce's team manages to get the truck out with about 20 seconds to spare. So Tom scores a goal in front of thousands of adoring Juventus fans.

*Bruce,* which he then tells me is the goal. No matter how many times I shoot Tom, he doesn't die, which I put down to either me not knowing how to use the gun or Tom cheating.

**RESULT**

**TOM VS. BRUCE**

**Overall Score**

**Tom wins 17 to 0**

**1-0**

**BRUCE**

**Overall Score**

**Tom wins 3 to 0**

**3-0**

**TOM VS. BRUCE**

**Overall Score**

**Tom wins 2 to 3**

**2-3**

**BRUCE**

**Overall Score**

**Tom wins 3 to 0**

**3-0**

**BRUCE**

**Overall Score**

**Tom wins 4 to 3**

**4-3**

**TOM VS. BRUCE**

**Overall Score**

**Tom wins 5 to 3**

**5-3**

**BRUCE**

**Overall Score**

**Tom wins 5 to 3**

**5-3**

**BRUCE**
Coming Next Month...

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!

Battlefield 2

War moves to the modern age and only CGW has the story. Check back in 30 days as we travel to the front lines for the in-depth scoop on Battlefield 2.

JULY 2004 ON SALE JUNE 1

AD INDEX
Scorched Earth

Easy Money
Anyone got a license to kill?

In an irrefutable sign of the apocalyp
type, Scooby-Doo 2 is on the brink of
a nationwide terror spree, or, theatrical
release as I type this. Odds are that as
you're reading this, it's raining frogs and
the gutters of your home run red with
the crimson juices of splattered amphibious
(unless tattered clumps of froggy skin are
clogging them up, in which case I recom-
mand a length of garden hose and hearty
lung power for some good old-fashioned
diphoning). What does this all mean? For
starters, you can expect to see me galloping
around on my pale horse just about
any day now. Also, the creative forces in
our world have been expanded and
have resorted to the worst sort of self-can-
nibalism imaginable. Should the world last
just long enough, I fully expect to see a 3D
Sensurround release of Nanny and the
Professor any day now.

And games? Games are no less immune
to the rehashed-license syndrome reduc-
ing our once-proud theaters to Nick at
Night with a $10 cover charge. Enter the
Matrix, Law & Order, CSI, Celebrity
Deathmatch, The Seven Samurai—for the
love of God, there's even been a game
based on Skittles. Not just based on
candy, but on candy utterly bereft of the
gameplay promise that even a Three
Muskeeteers bar would imply.

Well, I for one am utterly sick of being
kept off the licensed-property money
train. I've got just as viciously hobbled a
mind as the half-wit responsible for the
American Idol game. Punch my ticket,
conductor—these morally bankrupt game
ideas should secure me a seat for a relax-
ing ride on those golden rails!

Deliverance
A veritable treasure trove of varied game-
play, this property's got it all: bow hunting,
white-water rafting, fighting, and a Psychic
the Rapper-style bang duel. An innovative
audio-feedback system in tandem with a
specialized bundled headset grades your
sincerity and accuracy as you "squeal like a
pig," determining how long the game's sig-
nature minigame is prolonged. You don't
need a party mouth to enjoy it—but it helps!

The Beverly Hillbillies
Meet Black Emmanuelle
This cross-promotional gem isn't so much
each game as it is The Most Perfect Thing Ever.
Frankly, I don't need a whole game of this—
just some rough charcoal sketches by even
a marginally talented artist would come
close to scratching this incessant burning
itch on my brain. Either someone satisfies
these perfectly understandable longings or
I'll have to resort to DIY trepanning. Again.
Really, is this so much to ask?

The Passion of the Christ
Um, bad call.

2,000 Maniacs
The blood-soaked world of drive-in impres-
sario Herschell Gordon Lewis might seem
an odd (and somewhat redundant) subject
for a game, but this one's got a hook: It's
edutainment! A math game for kiddies
that plays off the "2,000" in the title to
make numbers fun. If hunly Tocci loses a
pint of blood every 30 seconds after an
unanesthetized operation by a passel of
bloody-thirsty freaks, how many minutes of
watching maniacs consume his still-living
kidneys in front of his horrified face must
he endure before mercifully tran"splanting
and having his corpse desecrated in the
most horrible ways imaginable? Hot jets of
blood make learning fun!

The Three Musketeers
Are you like me? Probably not, and you're
probably thanking whatever you call God
for that right about...now. Fair enough. But
are you like me in that you've always won-
dered why the Three Musketeers fought
with swords and not actual muskets? It
makes no sense: Would you create a
candy bar called Beni the Axe-Murdering
Pinhead and put a normal-headed girl
named Mavis who kills with a whip made
out of razor wire on the wrapper? This
action game finally addresses that wrong,
and even better, it's child-friendly, dodging
the docket prudence of the ESRB by having
all the excessively musketed victims bleed
creamy nought! Oh, irony, thou art deli-
cious—and so milk chocolate!

In a world utterly bankrupt of original-
ity, these ideas are positively foolproof.
And I've got more—you wouldn't believe
how gut-bustingly hilarious the Requiem
for a Dream multiplier game is. Yet one
question remains: When do I get my
money? ☞ Robert Coffey
robert_coffey@ziffdavis.com

This cross-promotional gem isn't so much
much a game as it is The Most

Perfect Thing Ever.
Zen Xtra 60GB plays longer and harder than the iPod™ 40GB

- Up to 14 hours battery life - 6 more hours of playtime than the iPod
- Replaceable battery for extended play without recharging
- The largest capacity player - 60GB holds up to 6000 more songs

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