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Aliens turned Tommy’s world upside down...

Now he’s about to return the favor.

PREY™

95 out of 100 – Game Informer “PC and Console Game of the Month”
9.0 out of 10 – IGN “An excellent, deep first-person shooter experience”
4.75 out of 5 – GamePro “Surpasses all expectations to become one of the best games of the year”
9.0 out of 10 – Official Xbox Magazine “Consistently impressive and rousing fun in a way that you just shouldn’t miss”

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Ever wonder what it's like to be a professional gamer? Jeff sits down for an exclusive interview with one of the best.

**THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM**

**CGWRADIO.1UP.COM**

Hello and welcome...to the weekly CGW Radio podcast! Crank the volume and hear what the intrepid editorial staff has to say about all things PC gaming-related.

**CGW_GIZMO.1UP.COM**

CGW senior nerd...er, editor, Darren Gladstone has plenty to say about Prey, Titan Quest, and lots of other games he plays while ignoring deadlines.

**CGWFAME.1UP.COM**

Check out this month's Hall of Fame inductees, then head on over to 1UP.com to browse a comprehensive archive of all our past entries!
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*Actually, the music's free. All 2 million songs. So, there's really no fine print to read. But if you insist, here's something to think about: Two Russians are walking down the road. One of the Russians is the father of the other Russian's son. How are the Russians related?*
HOT! HOT! HOT!

This issue literally (literally!) rules the universe.

As I type this, it is literally (literally!) 1 million degrees here in San Francisco, home of such things as Rice-A-Roni, cable cars, and CGW. It is hot. And speaking of heat, let's talk about this issue you hold in your hands right now.

If your fingers burn a little, I have good news for you: That's not leprosy! No, they burn because this issue's filled with so many amazing stories, your head may literally (literally) explode when you read it.

For example, let me direct your attention to two stories in our Radar section: On page 38, you'll find a special report written by freelance writer Ed Halter (regular contributor to the Village Voice) about a series of controversial war games developed in the Middle East. That's followed immediately, on page 44, by CGW contributing editor Matt Peckham's piece on a group of gamers conducting in-game peace protests inside America's Army, Counter-Strike, and other online shooters.

Both of these articles offer the kind of serious, in-depth reporting that online-message-board whiners constantly claim they "never see" in print—and it's the kind of stuff this magazine has consistently offered for as long as I can remember.

Meanwhile, the hotness continues throughout the issue, including—but not limited to—our huge new look at Crysis, certain to be one of the biggest shooters of the holiday season. We also have a great interview with Ken Levine, the brain behind the upcoming BioShock (as well as classics like System Shock 2 and Freedom Force).

Why the blatant pimping from me this month? Why yammer about something you can just read for yourself? Isn't it obvious by now? Do I really have to spell it out for you after all these years we've spent together? It's because I care, people. In addition, it's just too freaking hot to think about anything else. Someone fetch me a Squashie—I am literally (literally) melting to death here.

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Now Playing: Titan Quest, World of Warcraft
11am Chat: cgw.deejay.11pCcm

MOST INFLUENTIAL GAME?

SEAN MOLLOY MANAGEMENT EDITOR

Anvil Institute, which prompted me to learn basic and design my own graphic adventure on my C64... I made a game, a point-and-click, mouse-driven adventure, and I gave it up.

Now Playing: Prey, Commandos 2
11am Chat: cgw.qgmo.11pCcm

DARREN GLADSTONE SENIOR EDITOR FEATURES/TECH

Not trying to be obscure, but "cool" here, but SimCity: The SimCity Legacy. With its sandbox action, and adventure, it was a real game. It was way ahead of its time.

Now Playing: Titan Quest, Skyrim
11am Chat: cgw.gizmo.11pCcm

RYAN SCOTT EDITOR (VIEWPOINT)

This one's a toss-up: Leisure Suit Larry 2 was the first of many, many adventure games I played, and Ultima Online (mid-1990s) inspired my love/hate relationship with MMORPGs.

Now Playing: EVE Online
11am Chat: cgw.rvky.11pCcm

SHAWN ELLIOTT EDITOR (Radar)

Even running on software rendering and a sub-lazy connection, Tria Forsyth showed me the error of my console-shooting ways.

Now Playing: The Strip, Titan Quest
11am Chat: cgw.eyshin.11pCcm

LOGAN PARR FILEFRONT LIAISON

Playing Oblivion hasn't influenced me at all. The more fact that I can no longer stay outside during daylight has nothing to do with the game.

Now Playing: The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion
11am Chat: cgw_oblivion.11pCcm

MICHAEL JENNINGS ART DIRECTOR

KOTOR not only showed me the true meaning of irrelevance, but also helped me believe in the magic of space fantasy again.

Now Playing: Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
11am Chat: cgw.jennings.11pCcm

SEAN DALLASKIDDL ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

Ugh... Forcetek?

Now Playing: Burnout Revenge
11am Chat: cgw_dalkskidd.11pCcm

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COMMENTS AND CORRECTIONS

We welcome your comments and suggestions. Send them to the publisher at 8760 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills, CA 90211; or e-mail them to comments@cgw.com. We regret that we cannot respond to all letters.

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ERRATA

All the errors in this issue are the publisher's fault. We're sorry—and promise to do better next time.
YOUR MIGHTY BAND OF HEROES WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED BY A SERVER CRASH.

GET TOGETHER, ROLL SOME DICE, HAVE FUN.
LETTER OF THE MONTH

I just got a trial issue of your magazine (Issue #264), and the first two ads let me know that women are not wanted as subscribers. If this is not the case, then please rethink what statement you’re making to readers when the first ad in the magazine (Condemned: Criminal Origins) has a female mannequin with her face removed and the next ad (Hitman: Blood Money) shows a naked woman murdered in her bathtub.

Skelly

We feel your pain—senior editor Darren Gladstone even rants about it a bit in his column this month. But as curmudgeonly as we CGW folks are, even we can’t deny that console influence is inevitable, especially now that the PC-and-Xbox-connecting Live Anywhere is on its way. Robert’s accepted it, too—apparently more than he realizes.

HIGHE ARTE

You may not all be Nazis, but you sure are all annoying. Editors who am speak bad FTW!

CONSORTIUS

I recently purchased the original Call of Duty and loved the game so much that I dug up my January 2006 copy of CGW to read the full review of its sequel, Call of Duty 2. After I saw the rating (4 stars), I bought the game...and during the setup, I noticed a few settings missing from my usual collection of look/move/shoot options. I thought nothing of it as I began playing, but gradually, over the course of the first few missions, I realized that COD2 was designed for console gamers, which explains its use as a launch title for the Xbox 360. Consoles suck! I slowly began to hate COD2’s checkpoint-style save system, its “find cover and heal” health system, and—worst of all—a weapons system that allows two weapons with a same-key toggle. At any rate, this console-style gameplay was off-putting, but I fought through it and finished the game anyway. Where was COD2 reviewer Robert Coffey’s head when he wrote this article? He made no mention of these shortcomings (except for the health issue...which he touted as a benefit.

I agree that the star-rating system sucks, and I am glad you got rid of it. But you have to relay all of the needed information to us, or we will make bad decisions based on your articles. Lay out all of the details in a well-written review so we can make decisions based on the pros and cons noted in the article. But dammit, people, make sure we have all of the relevant information!

Stephen Todd

SPEAK UP!

You hate us. You love us. You will send us $1 million in small, unmarked bills if you ever want to see your puppy again. Prove your blind devotion by spewing some of your bile and e-mailing cgwletters@ziffdavis.com today. You’ll be a better person for it.
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ONE BATTLE AT A TIME

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1995–1997
Quits gigs as playwright and Paramount screenwriter to join Looking Glass Studios. Works on initial design and story concepts of *Thief: The Dark Project*.

1997
Leaves Looking Glass with Jon Chey and Rob Fermier to form Irrational Games.

1997–1999
Serves as lead designer of *System Shock 2*, still considered one of the scariest (if not the scariest) games ever made.

1999–2002
Designs critically acclaimed superhero roleplayer *Freedom Force*.

2002–2005
As Irrational's creative director and general manager, writes *Tribes: Vengeance*, *Freedom Force vs. the 3rd Reich*, and executive produces *SWAT 4*.

---

**THE CGW INTERVIEW:**

**KEN LEVINE**

Actually quite rational  BY SEAN MOLLOY
And I've got a message for game writers who put in unskippable cut-scenes: I hate you. You suck. Go write a graphic novel and leave us gamers alone. If you look at irrational's games, we're big believers in allowing gamers to skip whatever they want and play the parts they enjoy. My goal as a writer is for the player to want to see the cut-scenes. Earn your audience. Forcing people to sit through your glorified fanfic is the gaming equivalent of date rape.

CGW: As a story-minded individual, what keeps you in games? Why not movies, screenwriting, comic books, novels?
KL: I've worked in every field you mentioned, and honestly, games are the most challenging for a writer. Comic books are the easiest because a) you have a partner—the artist—to pick up a huge amount of the slack, and b) there are zero constraints. You can do anything you want in a comic. Everything you want something in a game, somebody has to build the damn thing, animate it, create it, etc. And it also takes forever to see anything you create in games come to fruition. We started working on BioShock five years ago, I was in mid-30s. I'm going to be 40 when the damn thing comes out. Who knows? Maybe one day I'll go do those other things again.

CGW: Last month, we spoke with Tim Schaefer about how developers are inclined to attempt comedy because they can't precisely control the "timing" of player-controlled situations—and comedy, naturally, depends on the player's actions. Do similar problems occur with designing horror games—especially one like BioShock, built on open-ended "emergent" ideas?
KL: In our "funny" game, Freedom Force, we solved this problem by floating the entire Freedom Force universe on a layer of satirical cotton candy. There weren't a lot of "puzzles" in the game. The whole world was the joke. Horror's quite different from comedy. Freud said that comedy is derived from unfilled expectations: You don't expect the rabbit to be a penguin. Horror—well, the kind we do—is all about building expectations, about creating dread. Something terrible is around the corner. And it's coming. And you can't do anything to stop it.

CGW: We've read that you felt Deus Ex: Invisible War's artificial barriers were made more obvious because of the game's realistic setting, and people intuitively know Seattle doesn't look like it did in that game.
KL: It's not about fantasy—it's about constraints. Grand Theft Auto kept things at a level where you felt you could do everything you'd reasonably be able to do in that world, everything that mattered. How did they do this? Well, first they built a giant world that felt complete and connected. But the smarter part was the things they didn't let you do, like have choices in conversations. Dialogue trees really are the most broken thing in gaming. They're never satisfying; they never really enable you to express your will. I know the BioWare guys are talking about making the player's choices in that game count—Mass Effect, and if anybody can crack it, it's them.

CGW: Ayn Rand and utopian ideals often come up in interviews with you....
KL: When it comes to philosophy, I go for the breakfast-buffet approach...a little bit of this, a little bit of that. BioShock is less about objectivism and more about extremism. When any philosophy gets taken too far, trouble follows. An ideology can never admit it's wrong, never admit any flaw in its own philosophy. Rand had a bunch of great ideas—brilliant ideas, even—but at the end of the day, she was an ideologue.

CGW: BioShock is System Shock 2's "spiritual successor," but what's with the actual System Shock rights?
KL: For some reason, people think I know more about this than I do. We barely had any contact with EA during System Shock 2. They weren't interested in that game. They weren't interested in a sequel. As a gamer, I'd love to see a System Shock 3. I just hope EA believes in it more than they did System Shock 2.

CGW: As someone who's explored alternative publishing methods with Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich, what do you think about deals such as Stardock's new third-party publishing op for smaller, self-funded developers?
KL: I think it's great, and I wish [Stardock president] Brad [Wardell] and his team the best. The only future for niche-game development is online distribution. The dynamics at retail aren't right for niche games. And since many of the games I enjoy playing are niche-y, I'm desperate for this to succeed.

CGW: Some industry critics look at store shelves and see endless clones of whatever happened to be hot last holiday season; others look at shelves and see this as a time of creativity and innovation—how do you see it?
KL: The beginning of a console cycle is always a good time for innovation, because publishers hate to start franchises late in a cycle. Publishers are also more willing to invest in new PC games when consoles are either at the beginning or the end of their cycle—i.e., when games are buying fewer console games. So I think this past E3 was a good opportunity for innovation, and the games pretty much bore that out: Mass Effect, Assassin's Creed, Crysis, BioShock, Spore—even weird, funky Star Wars: The Force Unleashed that wasn't even a game yet [referring to an impressive behind-the-scenes LucasArts tech demo—Ed.]. And that crap got me a thousand times more excited than the by-the-numbers Episode I games that swarmed out of the gate a few years ago.

CGW: And finally, a Freedom Force showdown: Ant-Man versus El Diablo—who wins?
KL: Hank Pym is a degenerate wife-beater. El Diablo would fry his ass. /
AGE OF EMPIRES III: THE WARCHIEFS

Dance Dance Evolution

EXCLUSIVE

ODDS ARE, BEFORE AGE OF EMPIRES III was so much as a twinkle in your
local game shop’s endcap display, Ensemble was already plotting the expansion for
the same reasons you can bet Batman Begins wasn’t titled Batman’s Only Encore. Cons-
sistently in the top five best-selling U.S. PC games (and on plenty-most-wanted lists be-
fore release), AOE III can certainly claim parity with its franchise brethren. Now with two
Native American civilizations—the Iroquois and Sioux—nailing down for The Warchiefs
expansion, about half of you message-board pundits can take a bow. That’s right, meet
civilization numero three, aka the Aztecs v.2.0.

Making their encore appearance after a brief stint in Age of Empires II: The Conquerors,
these Aztecs are definitely not your papa’s pre-Columbian Mesoamericans. “The version
of the Aztecs we had in The Conquerors really had just three unusual units,” admits War-
chiefs lead designer Sandy Petersen, referring to the Eagle Warrior (cavalry), Aztec Priest
(influence), and Jaguar Warrior (infantry). “Everything else was an ordinary Old World-style unit—archers, halberdiers, and so on. The Aztecs even had trebuchets. In The Warchiefs,
every Aztec unit is unique. Instead of trying to model them after Old World civilizations, we
got to treat them as Native Americans, which is, of course, what they were.”

Dominating central Mexico during the European Renaissance, the Aztecs were a technol-
logically and culturally advanced civilization usually remembered for being subjugated by
Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortez, but perhaps more salaciously for their practice of
human sacrifice. With The Warchiefs, Ensemble is definitely aiming for greater cul-
tural fidelity, but don’t look for bloody kill pits anytime soon. “Human sacrifice wasn’t really a military or economic aspect of their society,” says Petersen, pointing out that, likewise, the
game doesn’t feature Sunday Mass for the Roman Catholic European clv’s. “Human sacrifice
does make a sort of cameo appearance in that the I.1. for the Aztec player is pretty ferocious,
and the WarChief for the Aztecs provides double bounty for the soldiers under his com-
mand, rendering the Aztecs in general a pretty bloodthirsty lot when played right.”

Since the Aztecs didn’t evolve along European lines or adopt European tech (as the
Iroquois and Sioux did), they lack mounted and gunpowder troops, but Ensemble promises
a wide assortment of interesting infantry and technologies. “The Aztecs get two basic
groups of units,” explains Petersen. “The War Hut units are cheap, weak, and available early in
the game, whereas the Nobles Hut is a unique Aztec building similar to a more powerful
War Hut, or perhaps even a mini-Fort. It produces the various Aztec nobles or Knights.”

War Hut units include the Macahuatli (an inexpensive skirmisher armed with a sling),
the Coyote Runner (a fast-racing footman who acts as a sort of cavalry substitute), and
the Puma Spearman (heavy infantry with a bonus against buildings). Nobles Hut units
gain the famous Jaguar Warriors (now
renamed the Jaguar Prowl Knights), Arrow Knights (long-range archers armed with flam-
ing arrows), and Eagle Runner Knights (fast-moving infantry armed with atlatl, a sort of
dart-throwing device). In addition, the Aztecs get Skull Knights, elite warriors who move
slowly but pack a killer punch. “You can’t train Skull Knights,” adds Petersen, alluding
to their extremely short range. “You only get them via shipments or technologies.”

The Aztecs’ main civilization bonus lets their priests contribute directly to Firepit
ceremonies, allowing players to free up villagers from the dances to enhance production. “The natives in general tend to have powerful early attacks,” explains Petersen,
adding that the Aztecs in particular are mighty late-age players. “Their warrior priests are able to dance at the Firepit and count as two settlers while doing so, which
means the Aztecs have potentially the most powerful Firepit in the game.” The longer the
game lasts, the more important and powerful the Firepit gets.

Compared to those of the Sioux and Iro-
quois, your main challenges when master-
ing the Aztecs will unsurprisingly hinge on
early- vs. late-game timing. “The Aztecs
have a strong economy but aren’t as deadly
in the early game as the Sioux or Iroquois,”
says Petersen. “But they have a very strong late game and can hold up to a fourth-age
European civilization quite effectively. What’s stronger than a fourth-age European civ? Your
expectations. See if they hold up in a few
short months.”

Matt Peckham
"HUMAN SACRIFICE DOES MAKE A SORT OF CAMEO APPEARANCE IN THAT THE AI FOR THE AZTEC PLAYER IS PRETTY FEROCIOUS."

—SANDY PETERSEN, LEAD DESIGNER, ENSEMBLE

Unlike the Iroquois and Sioux, the Aztecs lived in sprawling urban areas similar to European cities. "We feature such a metropolis in the view of the Aztec 'Tribal Council,'" says Petersen. "So you don't actually see the Messenger or Wise Woman in the city view. However, they still control which shipments you receive, and the politicians controlling your rise through the Ages."

A number of infinitely repeatable fourth-age home-city shipments help support the Aztec bounty bonus. "You can use all the extra shipments that are generated," says Petersen, "and you don't run out of shipments in the way that some other cities tend to."

CGW.1UR.COM • 27
MIA: S.T.A.L.K.E.R.

Morning after the meltdown

PUBLISHER: THQ  DEVELOPER: GSC Game World  GENRE: First-Person Shooter  RELEASE DATE: Spring 2007

PREVIEW

BACK IN 2003, WE DISCOVERED S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl and hoped some American publisher would snap up the promising shooter. THQ became that company. The only problem is, three years later, we're still waiting. Meanwhile, rumors circulate about major changes and the possibility that the project is on the chopping block. We had a candid conversation with Dean Sharpe, the producer hired to help Ukrainian developer GSC Game World finish its forever-delayed morning-after-the-mushroom-cloud thriller. / Darren Gladstone

CGW: And so those rumors regarding S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s fate...?

Dean Sharpe: The fact that THQ was willing to ship me to Kiev for a year shows the company's commitment to the title.

CGW: So what happened? Were the original plans for S.T.A.L.K.E.R. too ambitious or too time-consuming?

DS: I think that S.T.A.L.K.E.R. suffered from wanting to be too many things to too many people. Everyone on the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. team wants it to be perfect. It's just that, at some point, you have to tie up the loose ends and make it as good as it can be with the time you have available. The guys at GSC Game World could probably work on this game for another number of years and still not be satisfied that they did all they could.

CGW: So what exactly happened? What needed to be changed?

DS: When I first came on board, I asked the team where we should focus our energy for the time we had left in development. The tough part comes from asking what things to remove. They came back with things they felt were not as fun or applicable to the game as they initially thought, but every feature that makes S.T.A.L.K.E.R. what it is has remained. Sleeping and eating, for example, we removed because they didn't add to the overall experience, not because of time constraints. There are the vehicles. We're making calls in the coming weeks to see if they add to the experience or if they're just an excuse for us to say, "Hey, we have vehicles in the game." Ultimately, I think you always shoot for the sky and then pull back as needed.

CGW: Early in development, S.T.A.L.K.E.R. was a showcase for DirectX 9's capabilities. Now that DirectX 10 is just around the corner, are you concerned that it may not hold up?

DS: We will ship with DX8 and DX9. With that said, I believe that the DX9 renderer holds up very well with other titles releasing with DX10. I didn't see anything at E3 this year any more graphically impressive than S.T.A.L.K.E.R.

CGW: Says Vasiliy Veslyevich: "Chernobyl will be decontaminated by the time we deploy!"


DS: No question, the feel of the game. When I first played S.T.A.L.K.E.R., it took me to a place that I had never been before. If you can make someone feel like they are actually there, then I think you've really accomplished something.

CGW: Here's the most important question: Vodka serves as a medkit in S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Is it really the cure-all for a postmeltdown Chernobyl?

DS: Are you kidding? They think that right now! People here believe that vodka can truly heal just about any ailment. I have a really bad head cold right now, and my team swears a shot of peppered vodka would cure me. If I don't get better in a few days, then it's bottoms up.
POWER OF ONE

The sweet salvos of one-handed fragging

CULTURE

IF YOU BUMP INTO BARON CALAMITY online, fair warning: He’s Johnny-on-the-spot in a Battlefield scrimmage, a shark at Counter-Strike, and a Team Fortress Classic wizard. But that’s not all—he’s pulling it off one-handed.

Meet Rob Merritt, aka “Baron Calamity” (and sometimes “Spider Ham”): IT engineer, amateur game designer and artist, 36-year-old dad, and videogame devotee living with a moderately disabling condition known as hemiplegia.

“Basically, my right side is mostly paralyzed, my right hand is 90 percent, and my right arm and leg are about 50 percent,” he explains, describing the effects of complications resulting from a surgical procedure performed soon after he was born. At six months old, Merritt was diagnosed with a rare heart defect. During surgery to address the problem, he suffered several stroke-like attacks, causing significant damage to the left side of his brain and rendering the right side of his body partially immobile.

According to a June 2004 IGDA white paper, Merritt is one of 48 million people in the U.S. who identify themselves as disabled—but don’t tell him that. Just 5 years old in 1974, he was introduced to videogames via the first home console, the legendary Magnavox Odyssey (which predicted the home version of Atari Pong by three years), and he’s owned just about everything since—be it handheld, console, or PC. And no, he doesn’t use custom hardware when he’s fragging. “I’m against special adaptive items like one-handed key-boards, because they rarely work as well as you’d hope,” he says, acknowledging trials with what he calls “crazy controllers” (they ultimately ended up in a basement bin) and other toys that ranged from “good-but-flawed ideas” to “absolutely terrible.”

His current ax? “A Logitech MX1000 optical with eight buttons and a wheel,” says Merritt. “The buttons give me everything I need for modern FPSes and third-person action games: I use the left button to fire, the right button to go forward, the middle button to go backward, the wheel to change weapons, the top-left button for alt-fire, the bottom-left button to duck, and the three mimmubuttons for extras, depending on the game.” And he’s just able to move his right arm enough to jam the space bar for jumps.

Playing around the spectrum, the only genre Merritt avoids is real-time strategy. “I can usually beat the single-player RTS campaign,” he says, adding he sometimes drops the difficulty to easy. “But online, you have to be a ‘piano player’ to compete, if you know what I mean.” His big wish? “A reasonably priced footboard that’ll emulate the WASD keys and take a decent pounding.”

FURTHER READING

Rob Merritt’s Website http://mywebpages.comcast.net/rcmerritt
Game Accessibility www.accessibility.nl/games/index.php?pagefile=home
Gamasutra, “Improving Game Accessibility” www.gamasutra.com/features/20050706/berne_01.shtml

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SPEED KILLS.

It isn't the stray shot from an Ascension Helldriller (like the one chasing our boy here in Craco Canyon) that will ruin your day—benders are glorified Vultures for multiplayer action. One thing you want to add to the speed and sophistication of a factory fresh hoverbike is a completely new weapon. The Viper is a fast operator that can get you near in a pinch, the second you press the trigger. Of course, all Vipers still come standard with a front-mounted, rapid-fire energy weapon, but...
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FREELoader

Scoring free games without that icky "pirate" aftertaste

NOOOOO! IT HAPPENED AGAIN. I HAD THAT SAME DAMN DREAM I'VE BEEN HAVING ALL week. And now that I'm scared s—less, I may as well stare at the ceiling and count the glow-in-the-dark stars arranged to look like the Conuscent Imperial City skyline. I just can't let myself fall asleep again. So what happened in my terrifying dream?

I get a job. Hey! What's so—knock it off! I'm being serious, man. Every September, school starts up and summer winds down. Something inside me realizes that other suckers have to work, and maybe one day, too. Yeah, everybody's got nightmares about shuffling TPS forms in some soul-crushing Office Space for the rest of their lives. But, dude, I can write every line of The Empire Strikes Back from memory. I can play Half-Life 2 from start to the finish of Episode One inside of one hour. I speak perfect Klingon, fer chrissakes! I'm way overqualified for McDonald's spud patrol. Thank god it's just a dream. Still, lying awake, I keep thinking of jobs I'd be good at: QA tester for La-Z-Boy, senior designer for Postal 3: Total Carnage, Doby's head speechwriter—anything's possible.

At least this explains the results of my most recent late-night freeware expedition. The good news is that the below games may actually help prepare me for my inevitable future. /The Freeloader

THE GAME: Disaffected
FILE: Slaves: Wee-slave action
FedEx Kinko's has one hell of a sense of humor. How else can you explain the employees? You've either got elitist college students or slack-ass postheads (ahem) that can't be bothered to do something more challenging than send a print order. Well, in the truest sense of parody—or, in my case, irony—this game has you shuffling papers and trying to satisfy customers at a branch of the infamous copy chain. Sounds easy, right? That's until you start dealing with your coworkers, who methodically undo all your hard work by putting job orders in the wrong place and screwing everything up. Disaffected plays a little like a half-baked cross between Tapper and Diner Dash. You want the truth, though? This game has given me a few ideas for my next temp job.

THE GAME: McDonald's Videogame
FILE: McWin
Not much of an action fan? Yeah, when I think FedEx Kinko's, I think action. What of it? Anyway, I've got a game where I'm turning a suicidal fast-food franchise into the ground. One thing the McDonald's game teaches is that there's more to business than a satanic clown selling chemically imbedded fries. This time you plow fields, slaughter cows, hawk burgers fresh off the assembly line, and then decide when to launch the kid-friendly campaigns to get more vict—er...customers in the front door. It's a little frantic jumping between the bathroom and the butcher, but the goofy Playmobil art style puts a really happy face on corporate greed and mad cow disease. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

THE GAME: Chair Chaser
FILE: WTPH?
I've always been pretty creative when it comes to shirking responsibility. But the Japanese, boy, those guys are Shadai masters of taking it to whole new levels of WTPH-ness. So here we have a game that has people using desk chairs to race around an office in fully rendered 3D. Yes, apparently the employees of the Okamoto Office Furniture Corporation kill time—and each other—and test out their products with a trippy Mario Office Kart racing circuit in the halls of the corporate HQ. "Honorable boss, race you and our mutant green penguin mascot to the water cooler and back!" Hidden inside boxes around each "track" are little explosive robotic pit bulls that you can zap on the competition...y'know, just like in real life. Man, if offices were this awesome, I'd be a workaholic.

DEVELOPER'S DESKTOP

What games are they playing?

Randy Pitchford, president of Gearbox Software, is a huge World War II buff. As we anxiously await Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway, we wonder what else he'd like to reinstall on his PC...

COLOSSAL CAVE ADVENTURE

"It's the first PC game I ever played and the reason I learned to program and write games. Colossal Cave Adventure's mundane puzzles and illogical map paths forced me to dig into hex editors to discover secrets in the code. XYZXY!"

DOOM

"Doom converted me from an RPG guy to an action/shooter guy. I became a compulsive deathmatch junkie. Doom is also responsible for me giving up my silly pursuit of a career in law to chase my first love—game development."

CIVILIZATION

"I'm now partnered with one of the seven guys credited in the intro to Civilization: Brian Martel. I met him when he joined 3D Realms (the Duke Nukem 3D dev that helped me go pro), and on his first day, I asked: Why did he deserve to join this badass team? He started listing games he'd worked on in reverse order. By the time he got to Civilization, I was on the ground bowing to him."

HACK / NETHACK

"HACK is one of the founding fathers of the Rogue-like game. I wish I had the bazillionaire hours I spent on that game back—if I hadn't enjoyed myself so much. The earlier versions were filled with what are 'supposed to be' horrible game-design decisions, but the game stands as a classic example of how it's sometimes a good idea to ignore the rules of design."

DIABLO

"There's always a better sword or a better suit of armor. The game's core interface requires no more skill than it takes to launch the game (put cursor over icon, click). That's its brilliance, I suppose."
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“An interesting blend of Sim City and Civilization that should appeal to both casual and hardcore strategy fans.” — Gamespot
BATTLESTATIONS!
A commander's-eye view of Battlestations: Midway

AIR RAID
Cripple the Japanese airfield with a couple of strafing runs. First, order your A.I.-controlled pilots to the target. Then, jump into the cockpit of one of your planes before bombing begins. Since the A.I. takes a defensive posture, you'll do more damage if you're in direct control.

IN THE NAVY
You sank my battleship! One of the objectives in this match is to sink the IJN Fuso. Naval conflicts are obviously a huge part of Battlestations: Midway, and a great amount of detail went into crafting each ship (right down to the men scurrying around the boat to their stations). But this is no hardcore air/sea warfare simulator. In fact, the ship controls feel downright arcadey. Colored lights under the reticule indicate which guns are in position and ready to fire as you throttle up or down the speed. Our initial impression: it's surprisingly easy to get a handle on controlling ship-to-ship battles.
IF DECEMBER 7, 1941 WAS A DAY DESTINED TO LIVE IN infamy, then June 4, 1942 was a day of reckoning. It was the beginning of the Battle of Midway, when the Japanese Empire tried to take Midway Atoll and effectively finish off the United States Pacific Fleet. But how do you re-create that massive four-day battle, let alone the entire air/sea war of World War II’s Pacific theater, within the confines of a PC game?

In the case of *Battlestations: Midway*, developer Mithis combined real-time tactics with the vehicular action of *Battlefield*. The game’s tactical map (below) lets players easily give orders to units and call upon new ones. After that, you’re in direct control, jumping from cockpit to captain’s chair in a variety of battleships, aircraft carriers, fighters, and bombers—more than 60 different vehicles in all.

Rather than dwell on the 11 missions in the single-player campaign (which ushered you from Pearl Harbor through to the war’s bitter end) or the 12 additional challenge scenarios, let’s instead peek at what you’ll be facing in an eight-player multiplayer match. /Darren Gladstone

**DEATH FROM ABOVE**

The flight controls in *Battlestations: Midway* try to strike a fine balance between realism, arcade ease, and hardcore simulation. From what we’ve seen, taking to the air in *Battlestations* will be less punishing than trying to fly *Battlefield*’s unfriendly skies. While that may not sit well with ace sim pilots, it’ll make for less frustrating multiplayer firefight.

**DEATH FROM BELOW**

Sub warfare could prove to be a tense and awesome part of *Battlestations: Midway*. You’ll just need to remember that playing as a sub means slow pacing: Silently creep under the enemy to punch a few holes in his aft. If your foe detects you, get ready for a game of cat and mouse as destroyers circle in to drop depth charges.
Looking for Videogames in the Muslim World
In Summer 2006, an Iranian political group called the Union of Islamic Student Societies revealed that it was planning on entering the videogame business. Via the fundamentalist state’s semiofficial Fars news agency, a spokesperson for the group announced that its members were developing an as-yet-unnamed game revolving around one fictitious Commander Bahman. In the game, American troops kidnap an Iranian nuclear engineer who is traveling through Iraq on route to a Shi’ite holy shrine in Karbala, and Bahman must then cross the border to battle U.S. Special Forces and rescue the scientist, thereby ensuring the success of Iran’s undoubtedly peaceful nuclear energy program.

What’s more, the Union announced, the untitled project would be produced in retaliation for a 2005 game called Assault on Iran by American “news gaming” company Kuma, whose KumaWar series notoriously recreates recent and historical military events in playable microgame form, ranging from the American raid that killed Saddam Hussein’s sons, Uday and Qusay, to John Kerry’s Swift boat mission in Vietnam. Rather than draw on past operations, however, Assault on Iran presents a speculative future premise based, Kuma’s website explains, on what “our experts believe to be an extremely plausible scenario for destroying Iran’s nuclear arms capabilities without kick-starting World War III.” The UISS presented a signed petition to Kuma to have this anti-Iran game removed, and met with no success. Now, its localized strategy has changed to a more pragmatic entrepreneurship: If you can’t beat ’em, join ’em. Kuma, for good measure, issued a subsequent press release that they in turn will create a third game: a sequel to Bahman’s adventures, to be played from the American perspective once more.

This volley of international vaporware proposals between the Iranian group and Kuma may have merely provided a couple days’ diversion for various game blogs, but it arrived around the same time as a number of other stories about gaming’s fantasy realm bleeding into real-world politics.

Under the influence of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez’s oft-voiced theories of imminent American invasion, Venezuelan politicians denounced the upcoming Mercenaries 2: World in Flames (PS3), which depicts the storming of Caracas by American troops, as a form of stealth propaganda from an administration that had its eyes on acting out the real thing. Mercenaries 2 developer Pandemic Studios told the Associated Press that its company “has no ties to the U.S. government”—despite the fact that Pandemic indeed worked closely on the Army’s payroll to create the 2004 first-person squad trainer Full Spectrum Warrior. In the U.S., several states began pursuing laws banning violent and explicit videogames, perhaps to curry favor with older voters allegedly still fearful that games like Grand Theft Auto were teaching kids to steal and kill. As the newest form of global entertainment, videogames had once again become a political football for the publicity maneuvers of savvy public servants and demagogues.

Spurred by the tensions surrounding U.S.-Iran relations, the untitled Commander Bahman project is not the first Islamic videogame to appear in the Middle East. In fact, in the past half-decade a number of projects have emerged from the Muslim world, all sharing a similar goal: to subvert the typical gaming stereotype of Arabs as bad guys by replacing the typical American or European action hero with a recognizably Muslim protagonist. Like many of their American counterparts, these games often base their narratives on real-life wars and battles: While Westerners replay WWII and Vietnam, they switch through virtual recreations of the Palestinian intifada and the 1982 Israeli-Lebanon war. Though relatively small, Islamogaming is also a diverse field, ranging from abortive projects by students, unabashed anti-Israeli propaganda produced by an internationally recognized terrorist organization, religious games produced to teach Islam to kids, and a set of more sober games designed to explore the complex realities of Middle Eastern history.

**THROW THE FIRST STONE**

What is probably the first widely disseminated Muslim game appeared in 2001. Called The Stone Throwers, this downloadable microgame (still available from http://www.damasus-online.com/stonethrowers) was created by Mohammad Hamza, a Syrian medical student, and was meant as a show of solidarity with the Palestinian uprising initiated that year, known as the second intifada. The game begins with a photo of what appears to be a dead child held in a woman’s arms, with text reading (in English) “Dedicated to the ones...who gave their lives...for their Homeland.” In the simple game—a crudely rendered but spirited affair that evokes early versions of Street Fighter—a figure representing a Palestinian youth must punch, kick, and throw rocks at the waves of Israeli riot police who manacle him. As he kills off the cops, his score increases at the top of the screen, superimposed upon a skull decorated with the Star of David. The action takes place in front of a digital rendering of the monumental Al-Aqsa Mosque. Located within the temple complex in disputed East Jerusalem, the Al-Aqsa Mosque bears special significance: some point to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s controversial visit there in 2000 as the starting point of the second intifada, which was subsequently nicknamed the Al-Aqsa intifada.

Players can choose between three poetically-named levels of difficulty: 1) The Stone Child, 2) I Fear No Enemy, or 3) I Fear Not Death. But, like old-style agitprop films, The Stone Throwers makes no other attempts at subtlety in conveying its message. At the conclusion, the game announces: “Game Over: Well maybe you have killed some Israeli soldiers...in the Computer world...But...” then switches to a photo of a crowd carrying a young man in a casket, draped with the Palestinian flag, reading “...THIS IS THE REAL WORLD. Stop the killing of the innocents in Palestine...Before the game is really over.” On the Yahoo group “Damascus University,” a forum for Syrian students worldwide, users recommended the game, one remarking that it’s “a nice game ‘cause you feel yourself as a stone thrower, killing the Arab’s number one enemy, Israel. I recommend that all of you go to this website and download this game and enjoy killing the Israeli soldiers. LOL.” Not surprisingly, the Simon Wiesenthal Center soon issued a press release denouncing the game as “the latest weapon in the campaign against Israel.”

**KORANIC KID STUFF**

The Stone Throwers caused a bit of controversy, but once the War on Terror commenced, anti-Muslim paranoia made even the most innocuous children’s games appear ominous to certain journalists. In 2005, the Wall Street Journal revealed that the suspects of that year’s London Underground bombings had frequented a shop that sold titles by American software company IslamGames that the paper claimed “made videogames featuring apocalyptic battles between defenders of Islam and their opponents” in which “the player’s goal is to seek out and destroy the disbelievers.”

When Slate reporter Chris Suellentrop ordered IslamGames titles Umman Defense I, Umman Defense II, and Maze of Destiny, he found them...
In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful, the website for the 2003 game reads, "One time I was walking in Beirut, the capital that defeated the greatest army of the world." I stopped by one of the computer game shops dispersed widely in Beirut and most Arab cities. I saw the children playing the game of the invincible American hero, who's never out of ammunition and who continually wins. I asked one of the children, did you like the game? He replied, "Yes, but I wish I was playing as an Arab Muslim fighting the Jews as the Islamic Resistance did in Lebanon!" [This is where the necessity for the game emerged.] The goal of the game, its designers state, is to "illustrate battles executed by young men who played an imaginary game; rather they fought real battles that humiliated the Zionist enemy..."

Created with the open source Genesis 3D game engine, its name perhaps unwittingly parallels the U.S. military's America's Army: Special Forces, released the same year. After viewing an animated title sequence of an exploding Israeli tank, players train at a Lebanese war college, firing guns and lobbing grenades at images of former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and other Israeli leaders, and are awarded medals from real-life Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah upon completion. When battling Israeli forces in South Lebanon, players can honor photos of actual "martyrs" at spots of their real-life death. Israeli bad guys shout "You killed me" in Hebrew when killed. Environments in the game are decorated with Hezbollah's militant insignia, or a blue Star of David without a Jewish snake at its center. "The military posts that are attacked in the game by the player are the exact replicas of the posts used by the Israelis during their brutal occupation," the Special Forces website reads. "In the game the player has to attack the military post and liberate it as [...] the Lebanese actually did. The player attacks military personal [sic] and not civilians; the attack also takes place on Lebanese soil. [...] In the game you will also find pictures of all the martyrs that died during their struggle to liberate their land so that our children may live in freedom. Special Forces game will render you a partner of the resistance."

A March 2003 Reuters item reported that Hezbollah promoted Special Forces with advertisements on Lebanese television. One Internet café operator promoted its release by decorating his business with plastic rifles and sandbags because "guys like that stuff" (a tactic too far removed from the games-come-militaristic displays decorating American game boutiques around the same time). "The goal is to create an alternative to similar Western games where Arabs and Muslims are portrayed as terrorists," Hezbollah spokesman Bilal al-Zein told the reporter, while an 8-year-old interviewee said he liked Special Force "because it kills Israelis... I can be a resistance fighter, even though in real life I don't want to do that."

The most ambitious set of Middle Eastern games, however, have been produced by a private Syrian company without political affiliation: the Damascus-based Akfar Media, a subsidiary of publishing company Dar El Fikr. Akfar's official company goals attest to an enlightened entrepreneurial attitude far removed from the war-mongering rhetoric of Hezbollah: "To communicate with a Muslim all over the world and let them breathe the peaceful truth and tolerance of our civilization, as a way to face up to the negative stereotypes that have been pursuing us throughout the past decades" and "to communicate with Muslims in a way that respects their colorful heritage and spiritual privacy as a way to get them out of the shell they were put in and enrich the civilization of the 21st century with a touch of justice, acceptance, and love."

So far, Akfar has released three game titles in the Middle East, the first-person shooter UnderAkh, its sequel UnderSiege, and a fantasy adventure game set in the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra called Victory Castle, and is currently developing a Civilization-style strategy game about the history of Islam called Qurash (and, alternatively, Al Qurash).

Though Akfar remains the most prominent commercial game publisher in the Islamic world, its radwan Kasmia told Computer Gaming World that it hasn't been easy. "There is no legitimate game market to speak of in the Middle East," says Kasmia. "Piracy is nearly 90 percent of total sales and many Arab countries have no laws protecting intellectual property or trademark." He likes to quote how one editor of an Arabic-language gaming magazine described Akfar's difficult success: "These guys are racing in a pool full of sharks, yet they are surviving." Since the company's beginnings in 1997, it has grown from a small team of six to a firm of nearly 40 employees, with offices in Syria, Saudi Arabia, and soon, the United Arab Emirates.

In UnderAkh, the protagonist is Ahmad, a Palestinian teenager growing up under Israeli occupation during the first Intifada, which began in late 1987. In the game's opening chapter, Ahmad runs through his village, throwing stones at Israeli soldiers. Later in the game, Ahmad moves from stones to guns, and shoots at Israeli settlers attempting to push out the Palestinian villagers. In a dramatic trailer for UnderAkh, a bulldozer destroys a Palestinian home and Israeli police storm and kidnap a Palestinian villager. Ahmad throws a stone into a black void; it transforms into a grenade in midair. "We started development for UnderAkh in 1989," Kasmia says, "and finished it two years later. At that time most gamers around the world, including the Middle East, were playing Delta Force, Medal of Honor, Counter-Strike—the golden age of FPS games." None of these American games, of course, gave a Middle Eastern perspective. On the original website for UnderAkh, Akfar made its cultural position clear: "The main purpose..."
of the game was to [offer alternatives in an area] previously filled with foreign games distorting the facts and history, and planting the motto of "Sovereignty is for power and violence according to the American style." Kasmiya says that the game allows Arabs to support the Palestinian cause, albeit in a virtual manner. "The Arab street is very charged. They believe they can't do anything to help their brethren in Palestine," he told the BBC in 2002. "So I think they are playing because they feel that they can feel the experience of young Palestinian people living in Jerusalem." ("Like the game," the BBC reporter concludes ruefully, "the nature of Arab support remains largely virtual.") Kasmiya says he has received some negative response to the game, but the positive response has outweighed it. "Even though I was sure of what I was doing, I was afraid that people would easily misconstrue it, especially as it deals with such a controversial concept, but even...I didn't expect so much positive response from both the Middle East and Europe. Volunteers from all over the world stormed my mailbox with localization proposals." Beyond sales of UnderAsh on CD-ROM, the game's website drew more than a million downloads—an incredible number. Kasmiya notes, for a region where the average modem speed is still stuck at 28.8K. In a talk given at the Barcelona game developer conference "Game as Critic as Art" in 2006, Kasmiya told attendees that the Palestinian mother of a teenager who played UnderAsh called him to say how she had burst into tears at its conclusion, so powerfully moved at seeing her experience depicted by a game.

The game's more elaborate sequel, UnderSiege, is set in 2005 during the second intifada. Its narrative draws from true events experienced by Palestinian families during this time; though the release of UnderSiege throughout the Middle East remains stalled, Kasmiya hopes eventually to release it worldwide. "I just can't wait for UnderSiege to be published internationally," Kasmiya told an interviewer for selectsparks.net, "so players can tell the difference between a history game based on lives of real people trying to survive [the] ethnic cleansing and [the] political propaganda that is trying to infect morals in [to] future marines to justify their assaults on nations far away from their homeland."

Short teaser videos for UnderSiege have the air of a brutal documentary. In one, after a child is gunned down in the street, an Israeli soldier jumps from his tank, apparently to rescue him. When he arrives by the child's side, the soldier appears to finish him off by pounding him with a cement block. In another teaser, a Palestinian religious service is interrupted by an Orthodox Jewish gunman, who moves down the congregation with a machine gun. The latter scenario appears to depict the 1994 attack on a Hebron mosque by Baruch Goldstein, which killed 29 and wounded 125 and has historical distinction as the bloodiest attack on Palestinians by a lone Jewish extremist. Kasmiya contrasts the aims of UnderSiege with American games based on real-world conflicts like Conflict: Desert Storm or Delta Force: Black Hawk Down. "What is the goal of those games?" Kasmiya asks. "Is it that gamers kill all the bad 'different-looking' guys, and thereby bring peace to the world? I don't know. I think such games don't provide the player with more than a couple hours of fun, plus some information about the conflict. And the feeling that he is best—that he belongs to a civilization that depends on arms to solve its conflicts. In UnderSiege, three out of the five main characters die. We simply are telling a history of real people who are trying to live in a world full of violence. No heroes are allowed in—facts only. I believe that, through this type of game, we can reasonably balance out the one-sided views as they're written by the victors."

Producing the strategy game Qurashi, Afkar's most ambitious game to date, has presented its own unique problems. The history game takes place during the first century of Islam's existence, and players can take on the role of a Bedouin sheik, an Arab warrior, a Persian, or a Roman. Kasmiya belives the game will impact a deeper respect for the history of Islam beyond the image of [the] Crusades, oil, and terrorism that dominates Western media representations. However, the game has also been controversial to radical fundamentalist Muslims, who fear it might not give the version of history they endorse. "They are afraid that we can't view Islam in the right way," Kasmiya says flatly, "or might make fun of spiritual characters. This topic is very sensitive in the Middle East—remember the Danish cartoon crisis of [2005]." Kasmiya says his company is "fighting on two frontiers," trying to counteract the effects of negative images from the West and attempts by Muslim "extremists" to control the public image of Islam.

Kasmiya also contends that many Western countries would not allow Afkar to purchase rights to gaming engines. "What really bothers me is that they are judging us before even trying," he says. "But on the brighter side, that forced us to develop our own engine and use it for Al Qurashi. Looking at how things are now, I think it was better for us. It made us more independent."

"[WESTERN AND MIDDLE EASTERN GAMES] SERVE ONLY TO BOLSTER PREJUDICES."

—EDDO STERN, ARTIST AND DESIGNER

GAMES AS A DIALOGUE

Eddo Stern, an Israeli artist and designer who lives in California and who's becoming well known in the art world for political, sometimes prankish projects using modified or original games, is sympathetic, but a bit more skeptical, of the value of Afkar's games. One of Stern's own works, Sheik Attack, used footage from a variety of games to retell the story of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; otherwise anonymous images from Age of Empires or Counter-Strike take on a disturbingly emotional, moral weight.

Even games like UnderAsh or UnderSiege, Stern thinks, might merely be "in for fun"—replacing the typical Arab enemy with an Israeli one. "When consumed by their target audience," Stern says, "both Western and Middle Eastern games serve only to bolster prejudices and preconceptions. What's probably more useful is the moment when gamers are exposed to both sets of games and perhaps feel empathy, or at least start to see how absurdly propagandistic and intolerant these games are. But again, these moral questions are so slippery since the Palestinians most often see themselves as victims in an asymmetrical political situation—as do many Israelis. And the idea of an end justifying the means extends from political and military choices to some of the game design choices made in UnderAsh—a familiar strategy of overt stereotyping of the game villains, Israeli soldiers, and settlers in this case."

Still, by moving beyond the first-person shooter and into more complex strategy gaming with Al Qurashi, Afkar appears to be pushing Middle Eastern games to the next level of sophistication. As the company states on its Al Qurashi website, "There must be somebody to do it, and if not us, nobody will care!" Ed Halter
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Antiwar activists take their message online

JOSEPH DELAPPE IS COUNTING UP TO A NUMBER HE CAN’T NAIL down. Each week’s the same: He sits in front of his computer, carefully taps a few dozen keys, hits Enter, and then does it again—770 times since March 2006. If you didn’t know better, you’d think he was playing an old text adventure (“take the birdcage,” “open the panel!”) or maybe just chatting with spooky symmetry. You probably wouldn’t guess he’s playing one of the most popular first-person action games on the market. Plugged into the government-run online military simulation America’s Army as a gun- and grenade-toting private, DeLappe’s terse single lines aren’t squad orders or flashy micros—sporting the provocative handle “dead-in-iraq,” he’s broadcasting the name of every U.S. soldier killed in the war to date.

“I’d been thinking about this memorial project for almost a year,” explains DeLappe, an associate professor of art at the University of Nevada-Reno. When he says “memorial,” he’s referring to keying the names of the confirmed U.S. military dead in Iraq—2,545 at press time—into AA’s general chat channel. He says the idea developed as he watched civilian casualties mount in Iraq. “I find it offensive that we’ve taken the ‘War on Terror’ abroad to a country where, as a result, between 30,000 and 50,000 innocents have died. All, as some would say, so we won’t need to fight it...
here at home. I think that’s immoral.” Agree or not, DeLappe is emblematic of a new breed of activis\t
tak\n
ENTERTAINMENT

VS. “MILITAINMENT”

Billed as “The Official U.S. Army Game” and fashioned from successively newer versions of the celebrated Unreal engine, America’s Army draws players on all sides of the debate in droves. Its total registered base is pushing 7.3 million (take that, World of Warcraft), and July 2008 alone looks to snag an additional 100,000 draftees. (Compare that with the actual Army’s 37,000 recruits for the first four months of 2006 altogether.) Its allure? Fidelity-focused, squad-centered simulating, using real combat roles, weapons, and a scouting system designed to reflect Army values (“honor, duty, and integrity”), but, moreover, its bottom line—it’s free.

Not to make, of course. Debuting in 2002 at an estimated total cost of $7.5 million (and millions more in subsequent annual additions), its critics call it a tax-funded propaganda tool, using labels like “militainment” or “advergame.” DeLappe agrees. “America’s Army is the contemporary equivalent of the Duck and Cover films from the 1950s,” he says, referring to a legacy of government short films linking to a nuclear attack by crawling under a desk. “AA is much more than just a game. The military has taken advantage of this and is helping to define the use of the Internet. Imagine a TV sitcom produced by the U.S. military, and you’ll start to understand the curious nature of their ‘game.’”

Of course, the vast majority of AA’s supporters would disagree, as they view the game as an uncharacteristically thoughtful and realistic depiction of combat (compared to gonzos series like Battlefield or Call of Duty), and, some argue, more representative of the dangers inherent to joining up than simply chatting in an office with a recruiter. DeLappe responds by labeling AA a “complete fantasy.” “No blood, no civilian casualties, magical reincarnation...it’s designed to get young people to sign up for military service,” he argues. “Think about actual combat—is it simplistic, visually engaging, and just for fun?”

PROTEST OR PROVOCATION?

Scan the official AA forums, and you’ll be hard pressed to find well-wishes for DeLappe. “This, at the surface level, seems to be nothing more than a stunt done in bad taste,” begins a post by an official AA forum moderator. “Quite frankly, clogging up the servers with this nonsense is hardly a valid use of one’s First Amendment rights. Let’s not give this attention-grabber any more coverage. Thread closed.” Players in the game put it less politely, telling DeLappe to “Shut the **** up” as he works. “The response in the game has been predictably negative,” admits DeLappe—noting, however, that responses on external message boards have been more varied, with positions ranging from support and indifference to pragmatic outrage. “When you protest something like war, you usually either end up preaching to the choir or screaming at deaf ears,” starts one post from a user named “Theory?” on gamepolitics.com.

VELVET STRIKE

Though not formally connected, artist and activist Anne-Marie Schleiner attended the same graduate art school as Joseph DeLappe (San Jose State University in California). “I met him in Stuttgart, Germany—we both went to CADRE (Computers in Art, Design, Research, and Education) at San Jose. It was one of the earliest programs to focus on computers and digital stuff from a conceptual and artistic perspective—not just technically.” Schleiner runs opensorcery.net, billed as a “smart feminist analysis of games and game theory.” Like DeLappe, she’s always conjuring new ways to meld her art with activism. An accomplished writer with theory tendencies, she’s perhaps best known in game circles for opensorcery.net’s subsite “Velvet Strike,” a collection of antiwar “sprays” with soldiers ringed in heart shapes or no-punches-pulled wall posters with text like: “If God says to you to kill people, kill god.” Visitors can download the sprays for free and use them as graffiti on walls, ceilings, and floors in the popular Half-Life mod Counter-Strike.

“Velvet Strike has been both my most popular and unpopular project,” admits Schleiner. “It’s a simple website, but it’s been able to reach a large audience and generate lots of feedback. You might say it’s an example of how the Internet can have a flattening effect, allowing small fries to get a message out there that subverts the interests of big fries, like the right-wing powers behind U.S. war efforts in the Middle East.”

The site goes beyond just sprays and includes a special section of “Intervention Recipes.” Feeling especially noble? Try the “Recipe for Salvation”: Enter a Counter-Strike server running a hostage scenario as a member of the terrorist team, then rescue the hostages you’re supposed to be guarding. Or how about a little martyrdom? The “Recipe for Martyrdom” recommends joining a busy server with your friends, then during the battle, telling everyone you’re martyrs for peace and jumping off the tallest structure in the level.

Schleiner’s next project? “The second iteration of O.U.T. (Operation Urban Terrain), protesting the police brutality in France and Spain against African and Arab Immigrants,” she says (the first occurred in August 2004 during the Republican National Convention in New York City). “I’ve been collecting brutality testimonials and creating a kind of machinima police dance/duet using a PlayStation 2 game called NARC and the game MechWarrior.” In short, Schleiner and pals plan to strap on Rollerblades, game systems, and head-mounted miniprojectors before hitting the streets to project their videos on building sides and into the general public’s line of sight. “We just hope we won’t be a ‘civil menace’ on our roller skates,” jokes Schleiner. “We still have some practicing to do.”

SPORTING THE PROVOCATIVE HANDLE ‘DEAD-IN-IRAQ’ HES BROADCASTING THE NAME OF EVERY U.S. SOLDIER KILLED IN THE WAR TO DATE.
THE WEATHER ONLINE

“Rude. Regardless of your opinions on Iraq or on protesting, most servers have a limited number of slots open for players at any given time. By occupying one of those slots, Delappe is disrupting play and possibly unbalancing teams in order to spread his personal message. In other words, he’s just another spammer, no different from someone logging on to spam the chat with porn or warez sites.”
—Brer, GamePolitics.com

“Have we moved past the legitimacy of using virtual spaces for art or political protest? I wonder? While people may have very different views about this protest and different assumptions about its purpose, does anyone think that using the medium of a videogame is misplaced?”
—Ron Reynolds, Terranova.blogs.com

“The casualties of the Iraqi War aren’t just Americans. You’ve also got the multinational forces who’ve suffered losses, and people on the opposing side who’ve lost lives. Then, most tragically, you’ve got the Iraqi civilians who inevitably caught in the crossfire. All this focus on the loss of American life reeks of ethnocentrism.”
—Slayemin, LiveJournal.com

UNTIL IT’S OVER

You might argue Delappe’s activities aren’t entirely without precedent. On April 30, 2004, broadcast vet Ted Koppel read over 500 names of deceased U.S. soldiers on ABC’s Nightline. The show’s executive producer cited as inspiration a June 1968 issue of Life which presented photos of men killed during a single week in Vietnam. Of course, that broadcast had its share of critics as well, with pundits such as The Weekly Standard editor William Kristol suggesting it wasn’t a memorial at all, but rather “…a statement with a capital S, and…a stupid statement.”

“Memorial” or “statement” is, of course, a matter of where you stand—unless you’re a family member of the fallen, that is, in which case the dichotomy can sound simplistic or even arbitrary. “It’s my main concern,” admits Delappe, noting that he actually received an e-mail from the brother of a fallen soldier asking him to exclude his sibling’s name. “I respectfully replied that I’d already entered the name and tried to explain why doing nothing wasn’t an option, but rather an invitation to apathy and inaction. I didn’t hear back from him.” Still, adds Delappe, he intends no malice. “Think of me as a participant in the game, only I’m choosing to be a conscientious objector.”

Whatever the stakes, Delappe says, he’ll stop when the war ends and he’s entered the final casualties. “By noting names, we briefly bring people back,” he reasons. “Remembrance, to not forget, to pay tribute. Every war memorial should also be considered a protest—a cautionary environment for thought and consideration regarding the cost of war.”
—Matt Peckham
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ALLIANCE: THE SILENT WAR
Harvard students take gaming to gun school

PUBLISHER: TBD
DEVELOPER: Windward Mark Interactive
GENRE: First-Person Shooter
RELEASE DATE: TBD

PREVIEW
IT WAS MAY 2003, AND ASI LANG WAS
too hot to handle. After days of meetings and relentless game-industry schmoozing, he
grabbed his bag and hopped on a red-eye back to Boston. By morning, he'd be racing
to a town to take a final exam.

His game, Alliance: The Silent War, started as nothing more than a pipe dream, really—the
byproduct of one too many all-nighters for Harvard students Lang and Eric Tulla. While
studying for yet another horrid computer-theory class project, they asked each other: "Wouldn't
it be great if someone could do for guns what Grand Theft Auto did for cars?" As military-history
buffs and single-player aficionados, Lang and Tulla began putting together a concept: Take every detail
of the real-world, from the German military to the German connected to single FPS game. After all, most conventional warfare
games default to the same 20 or 30 weapons (depending on whether you're killing Nazis or
terrorists). But then the Harvard duo got back to studying. It wasn't until the following summer
that they started taking the idea seriously.

SOLID SINGLE-PLAYER
The team hit upon an original way to put together a single-player game. "We wanted to span all of the interesting conflicts of the 20th century, but not do something hokey like time travel," says Lang. Instead, you follow three generations of a Russian family fighting a secret, silent war. Never would've guessed that from the title, eh?

Starting in the European trenches of WWI, you stumble upon a secret society that's pulling the strings of global politics. You have to stop them—and with each passing generation in your family, the task gets handed down to the next of kin. Slowly, the game reveals just how deep the rabbit hole goes. Ultimately, according to Lang, the game lays out how the major conflicts of the 20th century are all connected—little something for all you historical conspiracy-theory buffs out there.

AND THEIR OWN GRAPHICS ENGINE
So, which graphics-engine technology are they licensing and modifying to make this game? None. Remember that computer-theory class? While everyone else was talking mathematical concepts, the five founders of Windward Mark (Lang, Tulla, Christopher Colosi, Brad Kittlbrink, and Palmer Thorson, all friends from college) worked on shader technologies. One of the projects, their proprietary WindLight technology, captures the essence of natural lighting conditions in real-time (or, if you get geeky, these patent-pending algorithms render photo-realistic images using a scene's preexisting models and textures). What this means for Alliance is a believable image with fully dynamic universal lighting, clouds, and weather, with a lot less drain on the PC trying to get the job done. Feel like an underachiever yet? Yeah, same here.

/Darren Gladstone
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Additional肾上腺素和肝糖原的产生。在对控制组和实验组进行观察后，发现实验组的肝糖原水平显著高于对照组，这表明运动后肝糖原的积累与运动的耐力密切相关。
STORM WRACKED
We dive headlong into Maelstrom


PREVIEW
PICTURE THIS: AN RTS COMBINING THE unique terraforming mechanics—and game engine—from 2004's freaky-deaky RTS Perimeter (but with a story that actually makes sense) and three divergent factions (eerily akin to StarCraft's Terrans, Protoss, and Zerg. As great as that mixture does sound, we have to call out the upcoming Maelstrom's lack of forward movement: We've seen it all before. Don't believe us? Let's run down the roster. —Ryan Scott

THE ASCENSION
While the Remnant embraces hardcore guerrilla warfare, Maelstrom's other human side—the Ascension (Protoss in StarCraft terms)—models itself on modern-day CEO-controlled megacorporations. Expect some high-tech stuff from this side, to the tune of clone armies and the RTS equivalent of Transformers. Ever wanted to control a tank that turns into a giant robot? The Ascension's got you covered...so long as you're down with the idea of rebuilding the world in a fascist, squeaky-clean image. Oh, and dispensing with anyone who doesn't think that's such a hot idea.

THE REMNANT
Maelstrom's first human faction (and Terran stand-in) serves as the best entry point into the game's setting. The Remnant features all the trappings of your typical U.S. military-guy RTS team—with a postapocalyptic edge. Led by ex-U.S. Navy SEAL James Buchanan, they tear out of the base armed with pseudooturistic weaponry, tactical nukes, artillery, and all the heavily armored vehicles you expect from America's armed forces.

THE HAI-GENTI
This aquatic alien race doesn't care about bending humanity to its will but rather wiping us all out and turning Earth into Waterworld. Instead of focusing on heavy-duty units like vehicles, the organic-based Hai-Genti flood the map with aquatic nukes that terraform the target area and generally ruin everyone else's day. Fortunately, the humans must a few defenses against the Hai-Genti's flooding tactics: The Remnant may upgrade its units with flotation devices, and the Ascension possesses the technology to freeze water. Zerg, anyone?

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WORLD OF WARCRAFT
THE BURNING CRUSADE
Blizzard fans the flames with big new changes

UPDATE

WHILE MOST OF THE CATS ARE OUT of the bag already regarding The Burning Crusade, Blizzard's highly anticipated expansion to the gazillion-selling World of Warcraft, the design team still managed to drop a couple small bombs recently with new details that got the message-board flame wars raging all over again, as they do every time a change is announced.

HORDE PALADIN? ALLIANCE SHAMAN?

The biggest and most controversial news to current players was the announcement that each of the new player races—Draenei for the Alliance, Blood Elves for the Horde—can now choose to play the opposite side's faction-specific class. In other words, Draenei players can be shamans, while Blood Elves can be paladins.

In the big picture, this means that both Horde and Alliance groups finally have access to every single character class. This was done in part to calm down some of the incessant bitching about PvP imbalance between the two sides, which, in turn, will allow the developers to finally be free of having to constantly nerf paladins and shamans in a never-ending attempt to fix the supposed cross-faction imbalance.

"It's been unfortunate," says lead designer Jeff Kaplan, "because we weren't able to realize the true essence of those two classes. We had to keep pushing them closer and closer toward each other. This is exciting to us because we can finally do things we've never had a chance to do before with those classes." Specifically, Blizzard will be strengthening each class beyond just defensive support: Paladins will be made more viable as tanks, while shamans will gain more offensive casting abilities. "Finally we can make each class cool on its own," he says, "rather than have to constantly balance one side to the other—which is not an interesting way to design."

Longtime players can also now play a class they may never have tried before because of their allegiance to just one side. "A lot of people are in really tight with their guilds," says Kaplan, "and don't want to have to reroll a new character on a different server to try the other side. This way, if they're already loyal to the Alliance, now they can try out the shaman class by playing a Draenei. The same goes for the Horde. Players can roll up Blood Elf paladins to finally try that class."

Speaking of which: Blood Elf paladins? WTF? How can a supposedly "bad" race play as righteous paladins?

"Blood Elf paladins are not shiny, noble, light-loving paladins like the dwarves and humans," says Kaplan. "Blood Elves see the light as another form of magical power they can use toward their own greedy ends."

In fact, the Blood Elf paladins don't consider themselves paladins at all—they call themselves Blood Knights. The paladin title remains for players though, because, as loremaster Chris Metzen says, "You're pushing all the same buttons. We're not trying to fool anyone into calling this a new class, which would create the wrong expectations. We want you to feel heroic and epic, but also that this is kinda wrong. You'll see where your power is coming from, and you may have a moral problem with it."

Here's where it's coming from: The Blood Elves have captured one of the noble, angelic,
Craft:

Despite the noble looks, something sinister's brewing beneath the Blood Elves' Silvermoon City.

Inside the Hellfire Citadel, the first major dungeon in Outland. All the new dungeons in the expansion have two difficulty levels.

light-loving beings known as the Naaru and imprisoned him underneath the paladin guild in Silvermoon City, where they perform experiments to figure out and feed on the source of his power.

Or, as Metzen more colorfully puts it: "The Blood Elves are puking his bitch ass down and stealing his mojo. No disrespect to the Naaru, since there's nothing 'bitch' about them. They're benevolent and powerful creatures. And the odds of the Blood Elves even beating one of these guys—let alone parking him in the garage and using him as a battery—are pretty horrific."

Blizzard has a similarly involved story to justify why the Draenei can be shamans, but the bottom line for Kaplan is how the decision changes gameplay for all players: "It'll expand what players get to do in the game. They'll be able to group with classes they've never grouped with before, and handle encounters in new and different ways. Each side has extra healers and tanks to pull from now."

Dungeon Masters

The other big bomb Blizzard dropped was that all the new dungeons in The Burning Crusade will have two levels of difficulty, which group leaders can set before entering, similar to looming options. You'll have your level-appropriate regular setting and a much more difficult max-level setting with better loot rewards. And no, you can't switch on the fly.

The dungeons won't look or feel drastically different between the two settings. "It's truly just a skill check," says Kaplan. "The creatures hit harder and have more hit points or maybe an extra spell or ability. It's not like there are new creatures inside. We're just notching up the difficulty while retaining the flavor of the original dungeon."

The example they showed us during a recent visit was the Hellfire Citadel dungeon, the first that level 60 players will encounter when they rush into Outland, the expansion's new continent. The creatures in the first two wings will be roughly levels 50 to 63 in the regular setting. On the harder setting, they'll all be level 70, with loot relevant to level 70 players. In the third wing, a level 70 wing, the higher difficulty will be max plus, with monsters higher than level 70. (The fourth wing, a raid wing, will just have the one difficulty—as will all raid dungeons.)

For current max-level WOW players, the appeal of this should be obvious. "At max level, when you've capped out your XP in Burning Crusade, all of the new dungeon wings will be viable options in your nightly menu of choices," says Kaplan. It will also fix something that bums Blizzard out in the original game. "If you're a max-level player," says Kaplan, "and pool there instead of retrolling a new character, you never get to go back and revisit all the content you really liked at a lower level. It's almost a waste of some of the coolest content in the game, like the Scarlet Monastery. It just sits there dormant and unused after a while."

And what about the chances of Blizzard retrofitting the old dungeons with two difficulties? No comment.

We saw much more on our visit, including the Blood Elf city, Silvermoon, complete with two banks and two auction houses (only the Draenei mounts, called cloaks, are indigenous Outland beasts similar to the Tauren Kodo; the gigantic Tempest Keep dungeon; the Nagla-infested Coifang Reservoir; and the beautiful Nagrand zone in Outland, the original, traditional homeland of the Orcs back when they were simple hunter-gatherers—and where it's quite possible that Thrall's grandfather might still be alive."

"How amazing would that be?" asks Metzen. Just finish the expansion, guys, and maybe we'll be able to tell you./ Jeff Green
GLADSTONED

LORD OF THE DIGS

SOMETHING'S NOT RIGHT. MY HEIGHT-
ened JadeD Gamer Sense™ is tingling
but—what's that? A copy of The Lord of
the Rings: The Battle for Middle-Earth II just
showed up for the Xbox 360? Ah, that explains it.
Considering my day job at, ya know, a PC
magazine, this is the part where I'm
supposed to work into a frothy rage, yelling, "Oh,
half no! Nobody dumbs down an RTS game
on my watch!" Give me a sec to work up to that.
Honestly, though, I don't really care.

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Here's my dilemma: Do I play the PC version
of BFME2 in a desk chair slightly less comfortable
than salt-encrusted, lemon-juice-coated razor
wire? Or is it time to fire up the 360 hooked into
the genitalia-compressingly huge HD TV in front
of my comfy new couch? Let me turn to the ref
for a sec. The ruling: my ass wins.
The game looks all right on my HDTV. Not PC
monitor good, of course, but it works. At first, it's
a little unnerving to a PC gamer's resolve that a
detailed RTS can look and run reasonably well on
a 360—but try panning across the screen during
a big battle, and watch the game slow to a crawl.
Also, thanks to the TV's inferior resolution (yes,
even a high-def TV), the text is harder to read
than a DMV eye chart, so don't even bother if
you're packing less than 30 inches of HD.
So you have a home theater that'd make Roger
Ebert weep? Good. Now for the real battle: get-
ing used to the controls. More times than not,
I found myself wishing I could just draw a box
onscreen to create a battle group—I was about
two minutes away from drawing the damn boxes
myself with a Sharpie. BFME2 counters this by
turning just about every button into a shortcut
key. It's a nice trick, making good use of all the
Xbox 360 controller's buttons...but it isn't perfect.
Look, I don't live in a bubble. About six years
ago, StarCraft and Command & Conquer made
their way to the Nintendo 64. Both were nice,
quick RTS fixes on the big screen, but it was
no contest: Without a PC's horsepower or an
HD set, no way was anyone going to cram the
full RTS experience onto some puny cartridge.
But what those games proved is that you can—
theoretically—control an RTS with a gamepad.
Taking advantage of a beefy next-gen system,
BFME2 is just the next game to show that the PC/
console gap ain't getting any wider. In fact, now—
more than ever—it just demonstrates that a good
interface trumps everything. I don't doubt that
EA's setting the stage for a Command & Conquer
3: Tiberian Wars console cameo, and gamers
who crave the Fisher-Price "My First RTS" experi-
ence probably won't notice a thing. But you and
... we know better. / Darren Gladstone

ARGUE ABOUT RTS GAMES ON THE 360 ALL
YOU WANT. BFME2 JUST DEMONSTRATES
THAT INTERFACE TRUMPS EVERYTHING.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY
SEPTEMBER 2006

THE GOOD
TEAM FORTRESS 2

In a surprise announce-
ment, Valve Software's Gabe
Newell revealed to the world
that perennial vaporware
Team Fortress 2 is real once again—and ship-
ping alongside Half-Life 2: Episode Two. But
here's the crazy part: The art style is very car-
toony, reminiscent of the tiny action figures we
all played with as tykes. Also arriving along-
side Episode Two: A crazy, physics-defying
shooter/puzzle thingy called Portal.

THE BAD
AGEIA PHYSX

We gamers are a fickle bunch.
You tell us about some crazy
new technology and we get
psyched for the potential.
Then you try milking the public for a $300 card
that barely works and has no game support?
Look, we know that it's early and you've got
some more games on the way (along with Unreal
Engine 3 support), but you'd better hurry up.
Wait, that or start changing your home phone
numbers, guys.

THE UGLY
AUTO ASSAULT

NCsoft's massively multiplayer
car-combat game needs
AAA—or more players. Auto
Assault's poor retail perfor-
ance (get it free at EB Games with the purchase of
Guild Wars: Factions Collector's Edition) alleg-
edly played a key role in a bout of layoffs.
With news of the recent server collapse (down from
four servers to one) and an abysmal player count
(roughly 11,000, according to mmogchart.com),
we fear Auto Assault's caught a flat.
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Putting the “might as well be a sequel” in “expansion”

BETTING AGAINST DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION these days is like putting tinfoil in front of a train. With services like Steam and Stardock carving tributaries of cash off the discless Infobahn, forget way-out pundit predictions—it's here and, what's more, you're thrilled about it, or roughly half of you are. Point of fact: Turn-based sci-fi strategy nonpareil Galactic Civilizations II was one of the best-selling PC games of 2006 at retail, but nearly half its revenue came from online sales via TotalGaming.net. Moreover (pirates of the world, cover your eyelids), it shipped without copy protection. Oy vey...are these Stardock guys plain nuts?

"At this point we feel confident saying that not having CD copy protection has helped our sales tremendously," says Stardock president and CEO Brad Wardell. "We ran a poll of registered users on GalCiv2.com and thousands of people said that not having CD copy protection helped make the difference in purchasing the game." Well, roll over StarForce (and other copy-thwarting tools from parts unknown), Stardock now plans to ship its first expansion to GalCiv II online-only later this year and...
randomized galaxies to tinker with the many other new features. "In GalCiv II, each opponent was randomly given one of several different strategy types and adapted accordingly," he says, highlighting one of the bullet point changes in Dark Avatar: custom enemy races. "Players can now design opponents, including how they look and speak, and map those same strategies, from turtling, rushing, and stragglers to hit-and-run, manipulating others, et cetera. Add asteroid fields (they slow ships and yield resources), diplomatic treaties for money or research swaps, two new races (the Korath and the roguish Zrim), extra ship parts (they're mostly for looks, for all you screenshot pimps), graphically enhanced ship-to-ship battles, and (holla Jennifer-Garnet-meets-E.T.) espionage agents. "Agents are literally units you can place on planetary tiles," explains Wardell. "So if a player builds a Technology Capital, which doubles the research of that planet, an opponent could put an agent there to nulify the effects of that superproject." Counter if you like by sticking your own agents on the same tile, but, as always, with an eye toward your budget.

Other enhancements include new environment types designed to prevent colony-rushing by forcing players to expand more asymmetrically, and the Epic Generator, an XML-derivative syntax cruncher that converts your game sessions into text-based yarns. Even the oft-praised A.I.'s getting a makeover. "Computer A.I. has always been my focus," says Wardell, noting that A.I. development is always a trade-off between sophistication and time. "In Dark Avatar, we allow users to really tweak just how smart the computer players will be, including the option to let the A.I. use additional CPU time for more advanced algorithms. Whatever the end result, let no one accuse Wardell and crew of resting on their derriers."

"YOUR JOB IS TO SAVE THE GALAXY FROM EXTERMINATION—IN ORDER TO ENSLAVE IT."

—BRAD WARELL CEO STARDOCK

STARDOCKING ACROSS THE PUBLISH-VERSE

Plenty of folks think Steam was first to market with direct-to-download apps, but those in the know were pulling down games and wonky Windows apps via Stardock well before Valve swooped the spotlight with Half-Life 2. Now the company that put OS/2 on the gaming map is taking another notable step: third-party publishing. The idea? Give self-funded developers with high-quality projects access to the same markets and sales channels as the franchise big boys.

"We're offering a two-tiered publishing system," explains Stardock Entertainment publishing director Brian Clair. "For the first tier, we'll be selecting up to two indie-A games per year to publish at retail and online. Games that fall into the second tier will only be published online, with both tiers selling through our TotalGaming.net service."

The deals would include "full-scale marketing and distribution," which, according to Clair, might incorporate both print and online advertising. "We plan to focus our marketing efforts on the title-by-title basis, creating ad campaigns that will maximize exposure," he explains, adding that keeping the number of games the company brings to retail each year low should allow them to focus on making those games a success. What about risky niche games that might not have mass-market appeal? Clair says that's where online distribution could factor big. "If someone came to us with a really clever niche game that we thought people would enjoy, it might not justify the expense of sending it to retail, but we would certainly consider putting it on TotalGaming.net."
F.E.A.R. EXTRACTION POINT

Warning: This preview contains tense, confusing situations

PUBLISHER: VU Games  DEVELOPER: TimeGate Studios  GENRE: First-Person Shooter  RELEASE DATE: October 2006

HANDS-ON PREVIEW

A MERE 30 SECONDS SEPARATE THE explosive ending of F.E.A.R. and the back-from-black beginning of its first expansion, Extraction Point, but in that short time, big events have transpired outside the bounds of the game box. In 2004, original F.E.A.R. developer Monolith (after being purchased by Warner Bros.) invested publisher Vivendi Universal Games and the FPS estate as follows: Vivendi keeps the acronym name; Monolith keeps the IP (intellectual property), including the characters, story, and right to make games in the universe it created. Extraction Point is the last in the original franchise of the prenuptial agreement—a VUG-published expansion pack agreed upon before the breakup that uses every asset except Monolith. The new developer? A house called TimeGate (known primarily for strategy games such as Axis & Allies and Kohan), constructing this encore with Monolith’s guidance and story approval. Bizarre, no?

But it might explain why Extraction Point follows the letter of expansion-pack law to a T. New weapons. New areas. New monsters. Check, check, check. For those who couldn’t get enough of F.E.A.R.’s dodgy, camouflagged assassins, Extraction Point brings you shadow creatures. “They’re like poltergeists,” says producer Tim Hall. “They’re created by [series paranormal girl-villain] Alma’s increasingly unstable mind. They have a penchant for pulling people apart limb by limb. The only warning the player will get is to catch a glimpse of a shadowy out of the corner of his eye...and the only way to combat the shadow creatures is to use slow-mo.” For those who quickly tired of F.E.A.R.’s endless cubicles and office spaces, TimeGate offers up a few new canvases to paint with bullet holes: a subway, some sewerlike catacombs, a stately church (and its cheaply decorated rectory), and an outdoor construction site if you’re C.L.A.U.S.T.R.O.P.H.O.B.I.C.

In all of these locations, the key word is “destructible”—double so with EP’s new minigun, carried by Extraction Point’s new heavy soldiers. Not exactly the most novel weapon, but in practice, it’s ideal for F.E.A.R.’s trademark scenery-chewing firefight—TimeGate packs its levels with plenty of suspiciously placed plate glass windows, loose books, and canisters to shred to pieces. The A.I. is up to its old honor roll standards, too—and then some, according to Hall. “The units are more aware of their environments than ever before, and they do everything in their power to make sure they utilize those environments.” We spotted more than a few soldiers knocking down crates for cover. And if you don’t blow up that steel support beam yourself, there’s a good chance the giant missile-firing mecha will do it for you.

Given the behind-the-scenes circumstances, it seems natural that Extraction Point would play it safe—don’t mess with the original, give players a little bit more, and save the big, huge leaps for the honest-to-goodness sequel, whatever its name may be. A textbook setup for wherever Monolith, Alma, the acronym, and the IP go next. /Sean Molloy
GOTHIC 3
Nach Vergessenheit

PUBLISHER: Aspyr
DEVELOPER: Piranha Bytes
GENRE: RPG
AVAILABLE: September 2006

WHEN THERE ARE NO OBLIVION GATES LEFT TO CLOSE AND YOU CAN'T BE BOtherED WITH those pesky "other people" in MMOs, where's a roleplayer to turn next for his free-form fix? The hardcore RPG cognoscenti have their palantiri fixed on German-born Gothic 3, heir apparent to Oblivion and cult-favorite series among the illuminated. But how does this third iteration stack up to The Elder Scrolls? Producer Michael Paack helps us count the ways./ Sean Molloy

△ Bugged that Lord Porridge the Bedeviler, boss monster from your favorite MMO, seems to have infinite heads to turn in? In single-player RPGs, actions can have real, world-changing consequences.

△ Previous Gothic games were huge hits in their native Germany but tanked in the U.S. Paack attributes that to poor localization and general market differences.

△ A DRAGONFLY FLAPS ITS WINGS IN THE DESERT, AND AN UPRISING FAILS IN NORDMAR.
THE WAY OF THE WILL

While Oblivion's "Radiant" A.I. boasted NPCs with needs and goals, most players never saw much more than folks strolling around town with fierce determination. "Although the NPCs in Oblivion follow a daily routine," says Paek, "most of them just stand around or walk from Point A to B." Gothic 3's A.I. purports to go beyond mere Radiance: "We believe that the variety of the daily tasks that NPCs perform in Gothic 3 is much higher—from smiths creating weapons, selling items, and sharpening their swords to tavern owners sweeping the floor and serving guests, among other things."

But the A.I. deals in more than just individual motivation—it also covers pack communication. If you act like a loot-stealing, peasant-slaughtering fool in one town, expect word of your actions to spread to the next. Paek describes the RPG equivalent of chaos theory: "You get into a fight with a drunken barbarian and knock him down. As a consequence, his friends seek you out later to discuss the matter, and you teach them a lesson. Much later, you travel north and come to a village, which turns out to be the drunken barbarian's hometown. People there realize that you're the guy who knocked down their cousin, because news of the incident traveled. They probably won't like you, and they may be afraid of you. On the other hand, you gained the respect of this village's local chieftain, who exiled this particular troublemaker long ago. Had you taken different actions with this barbarian, the interaction with the villagers would likely be different." A dragonfly flaps its wings in the desert, in other words, and an uprising fails in the mountains of Nordmar.

THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

As in Oblivion, combat is action-oriented; unlike those in Oblivion, Gothic's battles are designed to be fought from third-person with soft-lock targeting. The left and right mouse buttons control a variety of attack types (quick, normal, heavy, jump, stab), while hotkeys switch among spells, ranged weapons, and melee configurations.

Freedom is the watchword for character development; players don't choose a class, but rather develop based on play style. "Our system supports players who want to focus on only being a pure, weaponless mage, pure fighter, pure thief, or those who want to be well-rounded," says Paek. "The hero can also learn how to sneak into houses and pick locks or how to sneak near animals to become the perfect hunter. The catch is that the player must find the right trainers and convince them that he's worthy."

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

As anyone who's hooved it across Cyrodiil will tell you, the landscape of Oblivion isn't mottled with intense variety—gray medieval towns, blue elven ruins, green forests, repeat. Gothic 3's world is smaller and cozier, but it's divided into three distinct regions, each with its own visual and gameplay nuances.

The Middle Realm

Lush forests, narrow passages, torrential downpours, and a little bit of magic define the Middle Realm. "Each of the three regions contains new tribes and factions with their own philosophies and goals," says Paek. There are no clearly "good" or "evil" factions in Gothic 3's world—just parties with different views.

Varant

"The wide-open spaces of the desert emphasize a sense of isolation as you're searching for the next town or oasis," says Paek of Gothic 3's Arabian-influenced southern realm, ruled by the Hashishin tribe. Players can pick up certain skills only in specific areas of the world. Only the Hashishin, for example, can teach how to fight with two swords.

Nordmar

Harsh mountain terrain, cliffs, and heavy snowfall mark the Nordic-inspired country to the north. "There are only a few small paths leading through the mountains of Nordmar," says Paek. "Thus there are no ways to avoid your opponents—you have to face them. But of course, it's easier to push enemies over the edge of a cliff."
THE HOT SHEET

TEN THINGS THAT ROCK CGW'S WORLD

1. **LAST SCRABBLE**
   - Do you *dxO*? Prove it with an offline game of Scrabble. Thinkgeek.com is selling a satin pouch containing 103 colored tiles that let you square off against the non-RSI and snag the triple-world score for "w00t!!"

2. **NERD RAPT**
   - Finally, a band that recognizes the musical significance of *World of WarCraft*, the social impact of *Back to the Future*, and the need to get those motherf***ing snakes off that motherf***ing plane! Go to www.futuristic-sexrobotz.com now.

3. **DEFLXION**
   - Lasers—the best tool in the known universe for killing aliens, removing unwanted body hair, and making obnoxious red dots on movie screens. Now, in a board game available at thinkgeek.com, you can harness the power of the laser! Move pieces around, deflect your beam against mirrors, and win.

4. **TOMMY**
   - Prey is a fun game for a couple of reasons. Yeah, we could talk about gravity, portals, bluh, bluh, bluh. The real reason we like this: the return of the chatty action hero. Nothing against you, Gordon, buddy, but you need to speak up a little.

5. **THE VENTURE BROS.**
   - Imagine watching the most messed-up episode of *Jonny Quest*. Then you started sniffing glue. Season one of the Venture brothers' adventures are on DVD, and a new season is currently airing on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim.

6. **SILENT CARTOGRAPHERS**
   - Where in the world is Eggbert? If you ever find yourself lost in Azeroth, consult mapwow.com. Using the same technology as Google Maps, you have instant access to the entire world of *WarCraft*.

7. **JACK OF ALL TRADES**
   - We're fans of just about all things Bruce Campbell. If you sneezed (like we did) and missed this goofball series about a Napoleonic-era "superspy," you need to check out the box set that collects all of Jack's adventures.

8. **HOLLYWOOD, GAME-STYLE**
   - Ever want to play *Space Paranoids* (the game from the movie *Tron*)? The guys at roguelympia.com aren't just into obscure games—they're also into re-creating ones that only existed in TV shows and movies.

9. **THE RACONTEURS**
   - Forget that White Stripes male half Jack White lends his talents to the Raconteurs. The first thing you think after hearing the debut disc, *Broken Boy Soldiers*, is "Huh, kinda Beatles-esque." The simple, addictive guitar hooks of '60s Brit rock extend well beyond the opening song, "Steady as She Goes."

10. **MARVEL'S CIVIL WAR**
    - The government has just enacted a superhero registration act. Battle lines are drawn between heroes: Captain America goes underground, while Spiderman goes public. We're not usually ones to fall prey to "earthshaking" comic-book events, but this is a great read.

---

**PIPELINE**

Save some money for these upcoming games!

**AUGUST 2006**

- **Bad Day L.A.**
  - Publisher: Aspy
- **Dungeon Siege II: Broken World**
  - Publisher: 2K Games
- **El Malador**
  - Publisher: Strategy First
- **FlatOut 2**
  - Publisher: Vivendi Games
- **Fuel**
  - Publisher: DreamCatcher
- **Madden NFL 07**
  - Publisher: Electronic Arts
- **Menge Knight: Apocalypse**
  - Publisher: Namco Bandai
- **UFO: Extraterrestrial**
  - Publisher: Tri Synergy

**SEPTEMBER 2006**

- **ArchLord: The Legend of ChaNGa**
  - Publisher: Codemasters
- **The Aura 2: Sacred Rings**
  - Publisher: DreamCatcher
- **Cruiser IV**
  - Publisher: Vendi Games
- **Call of Juarez**
  - Publisher: Ubisoft
- **Company of Heroes**
  - Publisher: THQ
- **Dark Messiah of Might & Magic**
  - Publisher: Ubisoft
- **Faces of War**
  - Publisher: Ubisoft
- **Just Cause**
  - Publisher: Eidos Interactive
- **Lego Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy**
  - Publisher: LucasArts
- **Mainframe**
  - Publisher: Codemasters
- **NBA Live 07**
  - Publisher: Electronic Arts
- **Neverwinter Nights 2**
  - Publisher: Atari
- **NHL 07**
  - Publisher: Electronic Arts
- **Open Season**
  - Publisher: Ubisoft
- **Reservoir Dogs**
  - Publisher: Eidos Interactive
- **Scarface: The World is Yours**
  - Publisher: Vendi Games
- **Stronghold Legends**
  - Publisher: 2K Games
- **TitanShift**
  - Publisher: VU Games

**OCTOBER 2006**

- **Age of Empires III: The WarChiefs**
  - Publisher: Microsoft
- **Battlefield 2142**
  - Publisher: Electronic Arts
- **F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point**
  - Publisher: Vendi Games
- **Gothic 3**
  - Publisher: Aspy
- **Left Behind: Eternal Forces**
  - Publisher: DreamCatcher
- **Missing 2: Evidence**
  - Publisher: Sega
- **Phantasy Star Universe**
  - Publisher: Teitale Games
- **Sid Meier's Railroad**
  - Publisher: 2K Games
- **Star Trek: Legacy**
  - Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
- **Test Drive Unlimited**
  - Publisher: Atari
- **Zoo Tycoon 2: Marine Mania**
  - Publisher: Microsoft

**FALL/WINTER 2006**

- **Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway**
  - Publisher: Ubisoft
- **Microsoft Flight Simulator X**
  - Publisher: Microsoft
- **Splinter Cell: Double Agent**
  - Publisher: Ubisoft
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CGW welcomes five new inductees

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PUBLISHER: Accolade
DEVELOPER: Toys for Bob
RELEASE DATE: 1992

STAR CONTROL II
The best way to deal with waves of Ur-Quan fighters? A couple of well-timed BUTT shots. Yes, the Spalth's Backwards Utilizing Tracking Torpedo was one of many memorable bits from the classic spacefarer Star Control II, a game that tied up story-driven space exploration, a wide-open universe, diplomacy, interstellar trade, and ship-to-ship combat into one quirky package. What made Star Control II stand out, though, was the incredible amount of backstory and interaction with all the alien species. Hours of dialogue—and offbeat humor—brought each race you encountered to life. Miss those glory days? Just download the freeware version, The Ur-Quan Masters (http://sc2.sourceforge.net), released with the blessings of Star Control II cocreators Fred Ford and Paul Reiche III.

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: Origin Systems
RELEASE DATE: 1997

ULTIMA ONLINE
An amusing bit of trivia about Ultima Online, the world's first "mainstream" MMORPG: Every now and then, slime monsters (usually labeled "a slime") randomly spawned with the name "a jwilson"—a bitter jab at former CGW editor-in-chief Johnny Wilson for handing UO 1997's Coast of the Year "award." Yes, the game was a mess at launch... but UO hit its stride by the Second Age expansion in 1999—and, eight years later, it's still going strong. It's the game that turned both gamers and developers on to MMOS, proving it could be done—and, in so doing, it changed the face of PC gaming forever. From Coaster of the Year to Hall of Fame... now that's what we'd call an epic quest.
THE INCREDIBLE MACHINE

Sierra made more than just graphic adventures and Hoyle games in the mid-'90s, including one of our all-time favorites, the Rube Goldberg-inspired The Incredible Machine. Our minds boggled at TIM's various contraption-based puzzles. The idea: Assemble the bucket-load of cranks, pulleys, and other widgets in order to get from point A to point B. And though we probably didn't realize it at the time, these contramachines even taught us some useful logic skills in the process. Yes, most longtime PC gamers fondly remember Sierra for its countless contributions to the adventure-game canon—but we reserve a special place for TIM. Now if someone (like...oh, say, PopCap) would just make a modern-day version....

FREEDOM FORCE

The long drought of good superhero games on the PC came to an end in 2002 with the release of Irrational Games' awesome Freedom Force, a strategy-RPG that put you in charge of a team of superheros tasked with—what else?—keeping America safe from commie rat finks! While the gameplay itself was first-rate—with excellent missions, challenging tactical combat, and RPG-like character-building decisions—the game's brilliant re-creation of Silver Age comic books makes this one a classic. Irrational Games gets it all right—the supremely righteous heroes, the überbad villains, the colorful Jack Kirby-esque art style, the over-the-top dialogue. Even if you've never read a comic book, Freedom Force was one LOL moment after another, with a great game on top of it. For Freedom!
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COLD
Designing Crysis to defy convention BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

PALM FRONDS AND OTHER FLASH-FROZEN TAHITIAN FLORA tinkle like large-leafed chandeliers, Breadfruit trees, cycads, and ice—interesting imagery developer Crytek has made much of in its gambit to sell gamers on unofficial Far Cry follow-up Crysis. It arrests; it evokes: environmental pressure outpacing evolution or another exotic someplace to crunch through?

"From the beginning," says Crytek founder and CEO Cevat Yerli, "our questions were always, 'What sights haven't been seen? What experiences haven't been experienced?' So I told our illustrator to refrigerate a rain forest. I saw it and said, 'Fantastic.' Hot became cold, color became monotone, albeit bright. 'Different' and 'difficult' are our criteria. Dark design isn't challenging. Shadow bluffs and conceals. You work with shapes, whereas saturated color demands careful contrast. Anyhow, for us, innovation is opposition: Vague becomes vivid, closed corridors become open space, linear becomes nonlinear, and scripted becomes systemic." He'd hit on something—"Think of it: an ice pineapple"—as captivating as it is emblematic of his company's contrarian way of working.
VAGUE BECOMES VIVID

With the where decided, Yerli next needed a how and why. “We couldn’t have a natural catastrophe cause it,” he says, shaking his head at meteorology-minded The Day After Tomorrow and its climate-change didactic. Enter the extraterrestrials, gaming’s oft-used bugbears, except—one again—Crysis’ offtwo former soldiers would have to be, well, unlike the others (we weigh the evidence elsewhere in this story).

For return CSW readers, what follows is familiar: What seems to be an asteroid crashes off the coast of the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. In full spin cycle, the Pentagon claims to have jostled the object’s trajectory, sparing population centers from a code-red Torino Scale collision. Meanwhile, newly minted superpower North Korea investigates with guns—an overt move the public-opinion-needled United States covertly answers. Shortly thereafter, the hulk splits, generating a dome of superheated air that shock-freezes everything in the vicinity.

“Ah, we work out our differences,” explains lead designer Alex Werner, looking up from his monitor when we ask if he’s helping the North Koreans in the hangar he’s in. “They’re splitting a stockpile of recently researched incendiary ammunition, illegal under international law, though working together against aliens,” he adds. So if North Korea as U.S. bedfellow shakes the stereotype, what of humanity setting aside cultural differences for common cause? “Well, we’re back to blow in multiplayer,” says lead designer Jack Mamais, “when the alien threat isn’t an immediate issue.” See? It’s an obsession.

Still, at the airstrip, awaiting the arrival of an American C-17 cargo aircraft, Werner shows off Crysis’ scale—not Oblivion big, but big nonetheless. “No skyscrapers,” he comments, referring to the memory-shaving alight of hand that, in other shooters, projects horizons as flat and fraudulent as that hedging The Truman Show’s built-for-Jim-Carrey Potemkin village. Why? So clouds pass and you pass through clouds. So the sun and moon rise and sink; so day turns dusk, night, dawn, and back again. Can-do Yerli insists his crew scoffs at convention and works through well-known impediments. Crytek’s programmers cringe and come around, ultimately collecting interest on the investment. “Good gods, the arguments we’ve heard over this stuff,” says Mamais.

“I insisted that it’s always, always better to use skyscrapers,” says art director Michael Khaivmuzon, “but this way we can put clouds on and between mountains....”

“Compare it to Quake IV’s painted city. I saw it and almost stopped playing outright. I really ran back inside so I couldn’t see it anymore. Like, ‘Let me in!’

Naturalism is its own reward—or so their thinking says—and only plausibly impassable terrain hems Crysis’ play spaces—sheer cliffs and open ocean, as opposed to key cards and housing corridors. In fact, even water doesn’t act as a wall. Instead, it’s the sharks in it, against which boundary probing becomes a game within a game where—duh-duh, duh-duh—the blood of one great white attracts three more.>

“Any real change in your action elicits a different reaction,” says lead designer Jack Mamais. “And we’re not talking, either hopping a fence or crawling under a cabinet.”

Motion blur! With a winter release, Crysis is on schedule to ship prior to the DirectX 10 tech that the game’s next-gen graphics draw upon. Solution: full DX9 support out of the box and the ability to upgrade performance for DX10 at the push of a button.
Überteaser alert! According to Mamaia, “Shrewd players can access and control an alien vehicle. It’ll be extremely challenging and extremely entertaining.”

The huge alien “hunter” above gets grabby with trees, VTOLs—you name it. Try exploiting its tendencies with Trojan-horse tricks (e.g., attaching C4 to a tank).
SCRIPTED BECOMES SYSTEMIC

Werner isn't startled when aliens shear the top off his hangar—they're supposed to. It's as they pull out, North Korean commandos in pursuit, that he turns to us: "That's a first. They're tailing them outside. That's systemic, not planned programming." Over the tarmac, where armored fighting and antiair vehicles rim the runway, the aliens (actually alien craft protecting unseen pilots) swap white heat for Korean white phosphorous. Showing as he tells, Werner takes a tank and confirms that trucks, VTOLs—you name it—bustress your trek from intro to finale. "OK," he says, "you have to see this."

Info bounds will recognize what Werner insists we see as "that big, bad thing" that demolished a carrier flight deck in a demo at this spring's Electronic Entertainment Expo and forever after on Google Video. What the clips don't indicate, though, is that 1) the tentacked "hunter's" bad behavior isn't scripted elsewhere as it was in that showcase, and 2) far from a one-off boss battle, the things stalk through warehouses/forests/whatever, toothpicking trees; nimbly tiptoeing through fallen timber; and freezing and shattering matter so that the shards fly your way. At Werner's approach, this one stops skewering and tossing soldiers to upend the tank—and that, it turns out, is the designer's must-see. "We weren't expecting this response," he explains, "but obviously we had to encourage it once we'd seen it. Now they grab at anything in the game."

A.I. designer Mikko Mononen shrugs him up: "I start simple...well, insofar as the initial behavior itself is simple but allows for more complex application. In this case, the command was 'if something is threatening, then throw it'...only I had nothing further than infantry in mind. Another technique interrupts core A.I. behavior to add new abilities to all the characters and creatures, and that way, the enemy can adapt to changing situations with increasing complexity." For instance, the A.I. recognizes new cover as it's created (say, toppled trees and collapsed hacks), sees lifeless bodies as signs of likely peril, and switching forms as evidence worth investigating. Sometimes seeing is not understanding, as Mononen found when testers weren't aware of what enemies were doing until enemies started saying what they were doing. "Because the people playing missed the flanking maneuvers, it seemed as though enemies materialized beside or behind them," he says. "We inserted audio saying 'Flank him' or something and suddenly everyone is shouting, 'See that? They're flanking!'" And so Crytek's challenge is in communicating intelligent behavior as well as coding for it—to indicate that perspicacious scouts inspect blood left on leaves or fan out to find concealed players, and that support troops stick to their guns according to their respective roles.

>WE HATE SET-UP-AND-STAGED EXPERIENCES, YOU KNOW, WHERE EVERY TIME THIS GUY IS GONNA BE HERE, AND HE'S GONNA TURN AND SAY THE SAME THING TO THIS OTHER GUY.

—JACK MAMAIS, LEAD DESIGNER, CRYTEK

HYPERACUSIS

Crysis' E.T.s, who show signs of increasing intelligence as the game goes on, begin monitoring human combat capability before your first encounter. That high-pitched humming now and then? Heard-but-not-seen aliens. Armed with this knowledge, Yerli says, you can actually attack and kill the interlopers prior to "official" first contact.
"I told the team that two things aren't happening," says Mamais. "No gravity guns and no bullet time."

As Crytek CEO Cevat Yerli puts it, "FPS is the most challenging, the most problematic, and the most prestigious genre in gaming."
OUT-REACTING BECOMES OUTSMARTING

"Where closed becomes open, and linear becomes nonlinear, and scripted becomes systemic," says Yerli, once more drumming at the didacticity bit. "In Crysis, out-reacting becomes outsmarting. Scanning is important. We want to put it in the player's mind that observation and inference matter more than hair-trigger fingers. Veni, vidi, vici: come, see, and conquer. The question, then, is how can we enable players to express intelligence? And so our body suit was born." The suit, which allows hero Jake Dunn to subsist in inhospitable cold, also offers convertible speed, cloaking, strength, and shield parameters. Although such powers lend themselves to logic puzzles, Yerli insists that these must never impede progress, that design never demands suit manipulation. Instead, attributes are yours to lean on or neglect, although your "yes" or "no" can carry consequences as loaded as saved lives.

To Yerli's reckoning, forcing a restart when players fail at some task other than self-preservation is negative reinforcement, another no-no. He's opting for incentive: say, channeling power to obstruct an entryway with objects, halving enemy presence, or liberating allies trapped beneath a beam. In the latter case, survivors might offer useful, if nonessential, items, supply you with a piece to one of Crysis' interpersonal side stories, or simply pop up much later, manning an outpost or otherwise proving a better boon alive than dead.

Ideally, combat itself replaces puzzle solving, and, similar to his suit, Jake's modular SCAR and trick ammunition permit clever play. State-of-the-art tactical bullets silently attach themselves to targets and either administer sleeping agents, activate trackers, or emit beeping sounds at the push of one of three buttons. Simple application is as evident as attracting curious troops to a Humvee with sound prior to plugging the combustible fuel can attached to its trunk. Preparation can put a helicopter pilot's lights out after he's lifted off with a full crew—Yerli's example, not ours. Add access to any viable vehicle, along with maps made to underscore possibility while downplaying path-following, and the vibe—as is the case in Werner's airfield mission—is more Battlefield than single-player FPS.

"It's your game," says Mamais, "Go wild with weapons or slither your way from start to finish. We hate set-up-and-staged experiences, you know, where every time this guy's gonna be here, and he's gonna turn and say the same thing to this other guy, and then that guy's gonna call the helicopter. Maybe our A.I. calls for help, maybe not. Maybe a Humvee, maybe a helicopter...."

THE VIBE IS MORE BATTLEFIELD THAN SINGLE-PLAYER FPS.

DÉTÀ NEU

A yap, Crysis appeared on E3's March 2005 cover, too. Crytek artist Michael Khaimzon, however, isn't sure who at publisher EA provided the image that he calls "Charlie Sheen with a leaf blower" and insists it's a better he not know: "I'm going to kill this artist if I find him."
Known Becomes Unknown
Quake IV's spoils-in-a-3d plot twist could be the culprit. Either way, Crytek is reluctant to tattle and refuses to reveal Crysis' fourth-quarter shocker: Inside the tentacled exosuits are aliens they insist are unlike any we've ever encountered.

"Aliens are always a pain in the ass," says art director Khalmim in accentuated English. "Teenagers are already taught three things: Alien, Predator, and The Matrix. They're in every teen's mind now, more than women, I think. So every time there's a slight similarity, they'll underscore it. Always. No matter what you do. It's inevitable." If Half-Life's headcrabs are facehuggers, and Halo's crab-like, stalking elites stand in for the twin-stanced Predator...

"Our troopers and scouts have fanontasies, so everyone immediately says 'Sentinels,'" Khalmim says. "What are you **f***ing crazy? They look nothing like it. It's like comparing a BMW and a Lamborghini. Yes, they have wheels. Our aliens are definitely different; they're closer to sea life, so 'aquatic' if someone insists on putting a word on it, even though they aren't in water."

In fact, Crysis uses in-water scenarios to condition players, so as is possible, for forthcoming close encounters within the aliens' mile-high HQ. "Although the situations are far from the same, it helps," says Mamais. "Having evolved in a space-like setting—and yes, the game explains how that happens—these guys are used to low gravity and the interior of their ship supports that sort of environment. To succeed, you have to adapt your actions to that habitat, and you'll have tools to help. The nanosuit, for instance, can generate its own gravity field and give you, you know, 1 G. In other words, you can create earth conditions on command and still take off and fly in a split second."

So much as say "alien" in Crytek's offices and the same curious smile, itching to blab all and yet still preserve the surprise in a stalemate of preciously conflicting inclinations, appears on programmer, artist, and producer alike. Where Far Cry scuttled smart, trouble-in-paradise play with idiot monkeys in an underground facility, the smile suggests Crysis' secret is far more mesmerizing than even the frozen timber preceding it. Just don't think Escher-esque up-down inversions: "It's not Portal, where you're still in a standard first-person shooter, only walking on the ceiling," Mamais says. "You're flying. You're actually airborne, and there's torque—so when you shoot, you're spinning. It's equal and opposite action–reaction physics, and it hasn't happened elsewhere. And these are cool creatures. They navigate and completely understand negative space. It's theirs, and they use it against you, to ambush you, and so on. And we could easily craft an outer-space title—you know, spacewalking and ship-to-ship combat among the stars."

As hard as it is to say if that's a hint or out-loud thinking, head honcho Yari insinuates that his company is plotting beyond Crysis' closing credits: "First contact is with an exploratory force. More—many, many more—ships are out there. For now, the team faces the immediate future. "One thing never changes," Khalmim says. "You ship a game, and the second that somebody says, it's gone gold, you second-guess. You start off saying, 'Oh, this is good, this is great. Let's ship it.' Then, it's 'Holy s**t! How did I miss that? I should've done this, should've done that,' and it's too late, and then you make the next thing. We see the project every day, and that's the problem. All the same, I want to play this. I really, really want to play this."

"I wish I wasn't working on Crysis," adds Mamais. "I'd be bonkers for it."

Trapped Under Ice
Inside the ice dome (think: arctic greenhouse under cracked glass), the sea sticks in vast sheets that dynamically fracture and float when struck. And so while bob/sink physics work for you when foes take the Popsicle plunge, the same water hazards befall you, too.

"Furthermore," adds Mamais, "some weapons and vehicles won't function in the intense cold, forcing players to improvise and use the environment along with the aliens' own arsenal."

A
"Trashed vehicles either explode or smolder for some time," says Mamais. "We want wreckage to create cover."

"As soon as I order a ship, it's my ship, and no one else can take it."

—Jack Mamais
SINGLE-PLAYER BECOMES MULTIPLAYER

“It’s Team Fortress 2,” says lead designer Jack Mamaí's Cliffs Notes summary. He’s invoking vaporware, not knowing that Valve would announce TF2 only two weeks later, but the statement is no less ballyho: Crysis’ economy-blunted, gee-whiz multiplayer mode is a kind of Second Coming. After initially joining forces, the Korean-American alliance founders and the bigger-than-the-both-of-us threat becomes opportunity to make one side much bigger than the other, provided someone secures exclusive access to the alien spoils. Each side starts from a near-impenetrable HQ, an offshore submarine or inland base armed with automated missiles and turrets (buh-bye, base camping). Each player sets off with only a pistol. Everything else costs credits—and most every meaningful act earns ‘em.

Instead of capture zones, all alike in all but location, total war factories, similar to RTS structures in their specificity of output, function as waypoint and objective. “Take this harbor, for instance,” Mamaí says. “Held its office, and the port is yours. It begins producing inflatable Zodias; small, sort of Boston Whalers; hovercrafts; and better-armed patrol boats.” Other sites include motorworks that make trucks, jeeps, and light transportation; tracked vehicle factories for APCs and mobile AA, as well as tanks; and airfields, which fabricate the obvious. Says Mamaí: “I pull out my PDA, and, depending upon conditions, different options open up. As soon as I order a ship, it’s my ship, and no one else can take it. It’s as if I have the key or code to it. We want to create a sense of ownership, as opposed to other FPSes, in which vehicles are throwaway things—blow up and respawn, blow up and respawn. Here, they’re an investment, and although I can donate mine to a needy ally, I can only field one active vehicle at a time.”

Locked vehicles limit grand-theft hardware though never rule it out; for-purchase lock picks let you lift what you can’t afford, if and when you find it. “And a less direct option,” Mamaí laughs, “is to tag an opponent with a [tactical] bullet before he’s behind the wheel, and then put him to sleep and pull him out again after he’s behind it.” And bouncing over him as he comes to, or having a teammate in a second truck work with you to slam him between the bumpers? “Of course,” he says. “We encourage high fives and chest bumps.”

The idea is for insignia to indicate a player’s rank (and not worth) in campaign mode’s kill-for-cash economy.
In addition to its campaign mode, Crysis also offers themed deathmatch and tactical CTF. "We're not talking too out-there, though," Mamais says. "With DM, people just want to jump in, try weapons, and do their thing."
The setup also solves one of the Battlefield series' bigger nuisances: 19 goons on a runway ready to throw themselves on the tarmac, forcing tearjerkers on the guy who gets the one and only plane. Our concern, though, is pro players making the most money, buying the best tech, and obliterating nonsavers still in the pistol-only Stone Age. "Yeah, but better players have higher point values on their heads, too," Mamais reassures. "I can frag one of them and buy better equipment, so it balances out. We're leveling the economy like that. In Battlefield, if a guy is good enough, he's going to fly forever. In our game, he has to land and buy bombs. He can't cruise over the runway to reload. And then vehicles aren't impervious. You can mess up a chopper's rotors so it flies crappy."

Windows break, fenders warp, fuel cans catch fire, and engines quit working. Superficial damage stays, although it's possible to patch assets back into operability with engineering equipment. "No fixed classes," says Mamais, "but you can buy and carry a couple of pieces of equipment. With a long-range rifle and welder's torch, you can snipe and repair stuff. Or you can be a medic with stealth options, creating your own classes as you go through the game. And the more you use something, the more plug-ins you can buy for it, and the more proficient you become with it." In fact, the plan is for Crysis to wrap even the power to communicate within its credit-accumulation and proficiency-through-use systems. At match start, team chatter carries from mouth to ear and no farther (eavesdropping enemies notwithstanding); would-be collaborators can then shop for range-expanding wireless comsets. "Communication," Mamais adds, "is vital when collecting alien cores."

Cores—extraterrestrial technology ripe for reverse engineering—rest in crash sites. Once obtained via extraction equipment, they allow a team to retrofit its arsenal with out-of-this-world weapons, crack the Korean (or American) HQ's automated turrets, and claim total victory. Says Mamais: "When you recover a core, everybody on either team sees it, and your problem becomes getting it back to base—even though the whole world knows where you're going. We want to encourage convoys and counterconvoys. We want to see you start a match at sundown and end it under the stars, scrounging crash sites with flashlights and [breakable] high beams," he says, riffing on Crysis' dynamic day/night cycles. "We're trying to make the best multiplayer mode, bar none."
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INSIDE

Titan Quest
This is not a Sierra adventure game.

Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War
First-person strategy sucks!

Tom vs. Bruce
Tom and Bruce become warlords.

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PREY

Heap good time!

Spirit walking is not good for your posture.

Oops, we put a Doom 3 shot here. Oh snap!

They call it a portal. I call it a door.

FILE THIS ONE UNDER "PLEASANT Surprises." Actually, no—that doesn't do it justice. File it, instead, under "Holy Crap, I Guess Pigs Really Can Fly. Because No Way in Hell Did This Game Really Come Out and Actually Turn Out This Good." OK, that's more like it, because what we have here is a stunning comeback for a game that languished in development limbo since 1996 (one year before Quake!), joining the notorious Duke Nukem Forever as perennial message-board laughingstock.

But here we are, 11 years later...and, whaddya' know, Prey returns from the dead—and it's good. Very good. Credit both 3D Realms for not giving up on its beleaguered baby and Human Head Studios for taking over the development, adding a unique spin to it, and turning 1995 vaporware into one of 2008's best shooters.

INJUN TROUBLE

Just make sure you make it past the first five minutes: The opening scene—one of the worst in memory—introduces you to your role as Tommy, a Cherokee unihappy with his current life on a reservation, despite the presence of a hot girlfriend who runs a bar (with gambling machines), and a wise grandfather who wears Indian garb out of a 1950s western and speaks in ponderous aphorisms while getting drunk.

Nothing short of Cleveland Indians mascot Chief Wahoo walking in and doing a rain dance would make the scene any more stereotypical (or, on the other hand, Game Informer praised Prey's "obvious" Joseph Campbell allusions, conveniently bullet-pointed on 2K Games' press release for the game),

Happily, that nonsense ends soon, as aliens arrive (to Blue Oyster Cult's "Don't Fear the Reaper," no less) and beam everyone aboard their gigantic spaceship, where you get to spend the next eight or so hours solving puzzles and blowing up stuff. Prey uses id Software's Doom 3 engine, and if you played that game (or Quake 4), you may initially think you're in for more of the same, as Prey looks practically identical to both games in terms of lighting and architecture.

Yet Prey quickly proves itself in one crucial area of gameplay: level design. Human Head Studios did a fantastic job of letting imaginations run wild to create some of the most inventive environments seen in a shooter. The designers mess with both gravity and space to create surreal, Escher-like rooms that leave you constantly wondering which way is up. A floor you're standing on one minute may be the ceiling the next, with dead onomies "flying up." It's a dizzying effect—and for me, personally, it made Prey the game since Descent to actually provoke nausea as I played...and I'm not complaining. How often do 3D games ever really make you feel like you're in a 3D space?

And it's not the only trick up Human Heads' sleeves (or thinking caps...or...whatever).
Shortly into the game, you learn how to "spirit walk," leaving your physical body and wandering in spirit form (the graphics turn black-and-white during these sequences). Spirit walking is crucial to solving many of the game's puzzles, getting you past areas blocked to your physical form, but also allowing you to be (in a way) in two places at once. You can leave your physical body on an elevator platform, for example, and then drift off in spirit form in search of a switch to get the elevator moving.

Finally, portals (the big feature touted way back in 1995) appear in unexpected places to transport you (and your enemies) elsewhere. Even though these portals amount to nothing more than fancy-looking doors most of the time, in the best cases the game uses them to mess with your mind, creating—in a couple memorable spots—a hall-of-mirrors effect that finds you chasing yourself down corridors.

DESIGN BY CRONENBERG
Prey's combat is a little more down-to-earth, though. Although my pal (and CGW contributor) Tom Chick, in his review for Yahoo! Games, called the monsters "memorable," to me they seemed straight out of... well, Doom 3 or Quake 4 (but then again, I may have just been too dizzy). And while the weapons look cool—allicky, weird, alien things with living parts on them—the action ultimately boils down, functionwise, to your standard FPS arsenal: sniper gun, grenade launcher, RPG, and so on. The battles themselves are better than average, thanks to the level design tricks (and this also goes for multiplayer deathmatches). Enemies pop unexpectedly out of portals, or appear upside-down or sideways on walls, forcing you to truly consider all the space around you.

The game's death mechanism mitigates any combat difficulty, however: Essentially, you never die. When your health hits zero, rather than present a Game Over screen and force a reload, Prey sends you to a "spirit world" for a few moments before plucking you right back where you were, with enemies still in whatever state of damage you left them. You can't lose—you'll beat every enemy (including bosses) by simple attrition, even if you completely suck. Some critics and fans feel this constitutes a form of cheating... but hey, if you're good, you won't die anyway, so what do you care? Meanwhile, the rest of us can play without getting frustrated.

Prey's easy difficulty probably contributed heavily to its 83 percent average score at GameRankings.com (our own 1UP.com reviewer, Garnett Lee, scored it an 8/10—in line with that average). That's a good number... but not as good, in my mind, as it should be. When a game—even one with easy combat and some dubious cultural references—features level design as creative and original as that in Prey, it's serious reason to cheer. / Jeff Green

REALITY CHECK
1UP NETWORK 8/10
GAMESPOT 7.5/10
GAMESPY 3.5/5
IGN 9/10
ARMORED FURY, EA's second downloadable Battlefield 2 booster pack, provides a reasonable amount of content for its $10 price tag—but it's tough to care when the game won't stop crashing. Yes, Fury's new maps and vehicle classes (light helicopters and ground assault planes) put some clever twists on BF2's gameplay and make for a nice change of pace that doesn't wear too far from BF2's back-and-forth of guns, planes, and tanks—but these additions have the misfortune of hitting the market immediately after the disaster known as the v1.3 patch.

The first rumblings of the patch's problems met with derision from BF2's true believers upon its May release. Responding to an early complaint about technical issues on the EA forums, user Wingman1515 got in the very first iteration of "I knew it would not take long for someone to start crying about the patch." Presumably, he was first in line to eat crow, as the following weeks showed the depth of the problems with v1.3. A couple of prime examples: The commander's ability to air- drop vehicles is used as "cartillery" as often as not, and EA's apparent decision to disallow unlockable features on unranked servers made plenty of players angry. And, as bad as that sounds, the gameplay changes pale compared to the brutal instability that v1.3 introduces to the game, with a uselessly slow server browser and frequent crashes to the desktop (if not total lockups) when a map loads. The patch actually makes things worse—as if loading up a game of BF2 doesn't already take long enough.

EA's response: an official community update in mid-June that stated "We recognize that this has been a very trying time for everyone who enjoys Battlefield 2," confirming that the publisher recognized v1.3's massive issues. With Battlefield 2142 on its way, it's hard to imagine a worse time for people to get frustrated with the franchise. On EA's forums, d4rthian laid it out: "Battlefield 2142? Pfft. To get the same troubles?" The upcoming v1.4 patch (still in beta as of this writing) will hopefully fix these grievances.

RAGE AND FURY

Enough bellyaching about EA's terrible patching habits, though—Armored Fury itself rises above all of that. Despite the v1.3 issues and the split in the player base between Fury haves and have-nots, the booster pack's managed to spawn a reasonable number of servers, thanks to its somewhat unique spin. It amounts to $5 worth of maps and vehicles and $5 worth of easiness, due to the new maps' U.S. settings. While the Alaskan Midnight Sun map doesn't make a big show of it, Operation Road Rage and Operation Harvest both scream "American set piece."

That partially explains why Midnight Sun seems—at first—like the weakest of the three new maps; Road Rage's massive knot of freeways and its center overpass create an incredibly overpowering situation for air and armor, while Operation Harvest doesn't even feature the expansion's new planes. Midnight Sun is the least exotic, but its mixed terrain and integration of all of the new vehicles make it the best of the three. The bombing-obsessed new planes and infantry-hunting light helicopters don't necessarily fix any of the BF2 balance issues, but neither are they as vicious as those in the base game. Combined with the tons of armor on the map, though, they introduce fun changes to the air/armor/infantry dance, making Fury well worth your $10. —Patrick Joynt

VERDICT

v1.3 patch: Sucks the life from BF2 before you can get started. Armored Fury: A great, cheap way to indulge in your armor and air fantasies.

REALITY CHECK

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WHILE THE ALASKAN MIDNIGHT SUN MAP DOESN'T MAKE A BIG SHOW OF IT, OPERATION ROAD RAGE AND OPERATION HARVEST BOTH SCREAM "AMERICAN SET PIECE."
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NOT LONG AGO, I MET UP WITH SOME buddies for an old-school, hardcore, nogame-allowed geeksfest. We FPS'd over a LAN and CCG'd with the BYOs till we were all Tango Uniform. Now, most of these guys are connected—one way or another—to the gaming industry, and the conversation eventually turned to my recent 1UP.com review of THQ's new action-RPG, Titan Quest. The general consensus was: The 7-out-of-10 I gave it was too low for a game that got so many things right, including gorgeous graphics, an engaging story, a bevy of monsters, and smoothly integrated multiplayer. "How?" they pleaded. "How could you give it a 7?" By the time they finished scratching their nails on the blackboard of my ego, I was heavily into my 5+ Dwayne Ajele of Belshazzare.

I knew I had no choice but to make a pilgrimage to the one true voice of the people: 1UP.com's user-reviews section. The forums mostly agreed with me in numerical score but defended the game in their commentary. User Outoffeelingsbad, for example, gave the game a perfect 10, asking: "Don't you think it's time to stop labeling everything like this a Diablo clone?" Another poster conceded Titan Quest's similarity to Blizzard's famous action-RPG, but said he couldn't blame developer Iron Lore for copying it, given how successful the formula was. BigSavageMike even called the game a "home run" and said he couldn't wait for Titan Quest 2, just one day after the original hit shelves. I was starting to feel like a Red Sox fan at Yankee Stadium.

SURE ENOUGH, everything those guys said rang true: The game does have a highly addictive, carol-on-a-stick gameplay mechanic. The engine does allow for lush, beautifully laid out environments with little to no loading. And the subtle manner in which classical history and mythology shape the quests, items, and characters is often clever and sometimes (especially for a Latin speaker like mine) thrilling. Maybe it's time to set aside my original verdict? Nah.

See, for all of Titan Quest's good points, it lacks one crucial factor: heart. Now, I don't mean to say that the developers didn't put their hearts into the game—I'm referring to the human element. Titan Quest lacks that core factor that elevates the experience beyond merely an exercise for your mouse hand. From Chess to Civilization IV, all truly great games ultimately challenge your decision-making process. Whether it's the visceral, on-your-toes choices of Unreal Tournament or the meticulous planning of Panzer General, the very best games always emphasize that crucial human element.

Although Titan Quest's story is interesting and well crafted, it's also highly linear. What passes
for side quests feel more like “stops along the way” than the honest-to-goodness, do-them-in-any-order excursions you get in other action-RPGs...and while the enemies vary more than say, those in Diablo II, their A.I. only knows two speeds—idle and “Hassan Chop”! This means you dispatch all enemies in the same manner: Mash the left mouse button until they’re crossing the river Styx.

The “fight monsters to get better items so you can fight better monsters and get even better items” rigmarole makes Titan Quest feel less like a game and more like a hamster wheel. “But what about MMORPGs?” you inquire ever so politely. Sure, a game like World of Warcraft makes use of the same incentive system. The difference: That system isn’t the only thing driving the gameplay. WOW—and others of its ilk—require careful planning and fluid teamwork, especially at the higher levels. The carrot’s there...but it’s just a reward to keep the goobers interested. The real reward, for real gamers, is the challenge of using more of your brain than the three synapses necessary to bend your index finger.

**ASPIRAT PRIMO FORTUNA LABORI**

Again, it’s worth noting that Titan Quest is a 7-out-of-10 game, and that still means a lot more good than bad—even if the basic mechanic is thinner than heroin chic, it doesn’t mean folks won’t like it. In spite of the simplicity, getting that legendary helmet really is fun. It provides a sense of accomplishment and makes you want to keep playing.

If nothing else, Titan Quest at least indicates that Iron Lore understands how to create a game with a top-notch surface. Not bad for a first effort. Now, if Titan Quest 2 adds that elusive human element, it’ll fly off the shelves like winged Hermes. /Eric Neigher

**VERDICT**

All the trimmings, but not much steak.

**REALITY CHECK**

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**CONTRIBUTING EDITOR**

Titan Quest developer Iron Lore, following in the footsteps of Valve and other homebrew-friendly developers, auspiciously included a deep, powerful map and level editor with the game. Even better, Iron Lore supports the mod community with advice and Q&A via the official Titan Quest forums. As of this writing, more than half a dozen new maps and modules have cropped up on Titan Quest community site titansonquest.com, with countless more to follow.

The editor itself is easily the best since the one in Civilization IV, allowing for drag-and-drop simplicity—but powerful enough to let players create their own magic items and missions and even write their own dialogue. Whatever Titan Quest’s shortcomings, it showcases an exceedingly solid game engine. Who knows? Letting the kids in the hall mess around with it might just take this sucker up to Mount Olympus level.
"SING, O GODDESS, THE ANGER OF Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless Ills upon the Achaean. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades." In Rise & Fall: Civilizations at War, Achilles and crew can probably bring a couple hundred Ills in a single game. Dropping down into Achilles' sandals for a third-person view to hack-n-slash your way through enemy armies is impressive, even if it does feel like a two-bit PC port of Dynasty Warriors. But the game has a...visceral quality about it that a lot of reviewers, including yours truly, like.

The most enthusiastic response to Rise & Fall (mind the ampersand) comes from GamesRadar U.K. reviewer Tim Stone, who thinks all RTS games will copy this concept. "Once players have seen what a dollop of third-person action can do, they're going to insist on similar dollops," he says in his 9-out-of-10 review. "With [this] relatively simple innovation, Stainless Steel Studios make[s] the weary RTS genre seem fresh and exciting again. They've realized [sic] that most of us never wanted our strategy games to be more like RPGs or TV history documentaries." he writes, apparently unaware that you can get a similar view—if you're so inclined—in games like Dawn of War, Rome: Total War, or even Warcraft III. And those are just the ones with the word war in the title. The difference: Those games don't make you click-click-click in order for your hero to attack, which is exactly what you do in Rise & Fall to represent the anger of Achilles.

"All we really cared," Stone concludes, "was the chance to shrink like Alice and wander about among the silicon souls that slave and soldiery. Never mind the prose. What strikes me is that Mr. Stone's reading of the genre ("weary") and those of us who play it (we want to "shrink like Alice") misses the mark considerably...hence the widespread poor reviews for this, erstwhile developer Stainless Steel Studios' last and worst game.

THE PROOF IS IN THE PUDDING, NOT THE RECIPE.

ONE MAN'S JUNK
With Rise & Fall, I present for your consideration the concept of "noble junk." The principle: Underneath some games exists a solid design that could have improved the genre or introduced some cool innovation or just made for a memorable game. But somewhere along the way, for whatever reason, the actual design process hit a snag—or two, or three, or 30—finally resulting in junk.

I see Rise & Fall as particularly "noble" because it coincides with the demise of its development studio. It's never a good thing when a developer folds...and Stainless Steel had promise. The studio started with a slightly amateurish bang (Empire Earth), burgeoned to a remarkable "Bang!" (Empires: Dawn of the Modern World), and ended with a whimper that wasn't even finished before the doors closed. The publisher, Midway, took the incomplete Rise & Fall, finished it internally, and released it. Whether Midway released it for its love of the game or to get a return on its investment is beside the point—it's here, it's underwhelming, and it's the last game out of Stainless Steel.

PUBLISHER: Midway DEVELOPER: "Midway" GENRE: Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail Box ESRB RATING: Teen
RECOMMENDED: 1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space RECOMMENDED: 2.0GHz CPU, 1GB RAM MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players
"This screenshot looks better than the game."
"Hi, want to have a bad cut-scene with me?"
BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE A 7 OUT OF 10?

Even the less enthusiastic reviewers focused on the “noble,” taking a far-too-forgiving attitude toward the “junk.” Yes, being a hero was a neat idea (it usually is). Yes, the naval combat had promise. Yes, Rise & Fall was built for siege warfare and combat, tactics you don’t often see in RTS games anymore. But when you consider those great ideas in the context of the rest of the game—which is poorly paced, technically unstable, and a royal pain in the ass to manage—they don’t count for a whole lot. When you consider them next to the absolutely superlative strategy titles released in the last two years, you have no reason to play Rise & Fall. Three solid ideas in a poorly executed game do not merit a good, or even mediocre, review. The proof is in the pudding, not the recipe.

I’ve met Stainless Steel cofounder Rick Goodman on a few occasions; he’s always keenly remembered the unkind things I’ve said about his games, yet consistently remained friendly and eager to talk. Physically, he’s a small guy who constantly buzzes with the energy of the three men—energy fiercely focused on really wanting to make a good RTS. I can only imagine what it must be like for him to struggle so hard while his brother, Tony Goodman, churns out hit after hit at Ensemble Studios. You can’t help but sense something almost Greek-tragic about him; wherever he ends up after Rise & Fall, I wish him well, and I hope he can follow up on the fine work he did on Empires: Dawn of the Modern World. That game had even more good ideas than Rise & Fall, and it was well done to boot. Frankly, I’d much rather remember Goodman’s company for that clever and sadly overlooked game, because—quite simply—no one has any reason to concern themselves with a piece of junk like Rise & Fall, whether it’s noble or otherwise. /Tom Chick

REALITY CHECK

GAMING VERDICT

Not worth your time, money, or attention.

1UP NETWORK 5/10
GAMESPOT 6.6/10
GAMESPY 2.5/5
IGN 6/10

* Homer, The Iliad
THE MOVIES: STUNTS & EFFECTS

Roll over, Singer and Spielberg

I'VE DONE THE AWARDS CEREMONIES, won the wall prizes, made my cool multimillions, and—thank you all—Big Balls Productions is officially studio du jour in Movies-ville. (As Sally Field would say: "You like me—you really like me!") Still, I've had it with testy celebs who snark off set for booze and burgers, who gripe about their salaries and dwindling runtimes, who want to be patted by beauticians and tweaked by cosmetic surgeons. Enough! Kiss the hooch and cream puffs goodbye, you little prima donnas—I'm pulling your stunt doubles and casting you solo. Now much-much, and when you're window-diving from three-story infernos, just remember...tuck and roll.

OK, torturing your mercurial megastars isn't the end-all of Lionhead's The Movies expansion (which, per its title, adds—ta-da!—stunts and effects). But, oh, happy day if you feel like giving your spoiled startlets a well-earned drubbing. Starting in 1960, you can sub them in for the new stuntman character class to make exploitive-riddled films and score a flock of new awards. Plop down a few of the new sets, draft a stunt script, pick your film crew, rustle up a stunt double or two, and start filming as usual—except with special stunt scenes interposed. If you pull off one of these puppies, your movie rating soars. Failure hobbies more than your standings: A special "condition" stat now tracks a character's health and sinks as you subject your earnest little fall guys and gals to increasingly nutty acts of derring-do.

"I DO ALL MY OWN STUNTS!"

You can train your stuntmen at special facilities to boost their acrobatic acumen, but they eventually need medical care to recover (sadistically putting aliens stuntmen on location invariably leads to PUBAR'd stunts). Stars that can pull off their own stunts bring better movie ratings, but they train more slowly than dedicated doubles. If you do use doubles, make sure they match. No subbing Hulk Hogan for David Spade, in other words, lest your ratings suffer. But all told, Stunts & Effects' sim-game buffs only amount to a few hours' worth of fiddling which, frankly, feels kind of stingy—and, yes, it's even more of a micromanagement modulation. Dude, where's my gameplay?

But never mind that—your criteria for purchase should hinge on two words: Advanced Moviemaker. Simply put, Lionhead cranked the do-it-yourself feature set a dozen times over and added what turns out to be the most important and obvious directorial tool of all: a free cam.

Instead of choosing from The Movies' vision-strangling prefab angles, you can now cast your directorial eye wherever you like. Script your magnum opus, storyboard it, and, when it's time to shoot, set camera start and endpoints. Hit go, and the camera autopilots between them at a rate determined by point distance and scene length. Magnifico! Better still, the overhauled moviemaker interface gives you options like scene copying (film multiple takes of the same scene just like the pros, then pick your favorite during editing), camera overlays (special distortion filters), the opportunity to save your set dressings for easy future access, and a host of tweaks to things like the prop picker and environmental effects that make their worlds easier to use.

Sandwiched with blue- and green-screen sets (put just about anything anywhere), scrolling landscapes, and scale-bending miniature cities...and I'm barely scratching the surface of what you can craft. Forget the strategy game—which was never The Movies' strong point anyway—Stunts & Effects crams a killer moviemaking tool into an embarrassingly cheap package. Imagine the looks on Spielberg's and Shyamalan's faces if they'd had something like this 30 years ago. / Matt Peckham

YOUR CRITERIA FOR PURCHASE SHOULD Hinge ON TWO WORDS: ADVANCED MOVIEMAKER.

VERDICT

Minor updates sim-side, but an FX boon for Advanced Moviemaker connoisseurs.
CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS
A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD OF AN MMORPG ADDICT

STORMIN' THE CASTLE

Of all the ballyhooed new features that publisher/developer Square Enix added to the recent Final Fantasy XI, Treasures of Aht Urhgan expansion, the most controversial is easily Besieged, the mode that lets players gather 'round the parapets of Al Zabhi to cooperatively protect the inner city of Aht Urhgan Whitewall from Mamool Ja savages, troll mercenaries, and undead swarms. It's a dash of Lord of the Rings-style mayhem that's supposed to rally FFXI's typically self-centered players around a common cause.

Bold in concept—and when sampled at the FFXI Fan Festival in Santa Monica, CA a few months ago, actually quite exciting—Besieged creates an entertaining reversal of endgame raids on CPU-controlled areas (with the enemy raiding player areas). But in actual practice, on live servers—when the zone fills with over 500 people and mobs—it's basically unplayable. Not just on the badly aging PlayStation 2, on which FFXI originally launched, but also on the Xbox 360—and, more importantly, on high-end gaming PCs.

Even if you have 2GB of RAM in your machine—a fairly extreme leap (not to mention a demanding system requirement for an MMO) from what a PS2 or even Xbox 360 offers—performance is still choppy, with monsters and players alike popping in and out of existence. This makes for a pretty raw deal when your character dies from an area-of-effect attack that you can't even see coming. At least you don't lose experience points if you die during Besieged (it's still possible to level down, thanks to FFXI's death penalties), but that's a small mercy for a supposedly fun gameplay feature. Besieged started out painfully easy; then Square Enix pumped up the strength of the monsters, thus demanding dozens of players to take them down and making the mode nigh unplayable. Worse than the increasingly poor Besieged feature itself: the development team's smug response toward the situation.

JUST A LITTLE SLOWDOWN

During a 1UP.com interview with the FFXI team, I posed the “What do you plan to do about Besieged?” question, mentioning that no game engine can possibly manage loading the 600-plus character models in the cramped zone with any semblance of success. Treasures of Aht Urhgan director Koichi Ogawa responded by describing the processing bottleneck as “a little slowdown” and saying that “we wouldn't want to deprive our players of this experience due to a reason such as processing ability.” Hmm... Pesky 'ol processing ability—always getting in the way of a good time.

OK, sarcasm aside, what kind of defense is that? It's like saying, “People love the slowdown and unplayability that Besieged brings to them, so we wouldn't want to stop them.” Considering that FFXI originally debuted on a console with 4MB of video RAM (and a mandatory hard drive), you'd think that the team would've restricted things in the design stage before letting them get out of hand on live servers. Remember the massive server loads when World of Warcraft first launched? It's kind of like that.

When I suggested adding new Besieged areas in upcoming patch updates, the team replied, “Besieged was originally designed to be held in a single area, and we had not considered having the beastmen assault multiple locations at once. It spread the battles out over numerous different areas to led to a significant reduction in the number of players participating in the same battle, then that would defeat Besieged's original intended purpose.” This, of course, suggests that the zone of Al Zabhi is the only one worth occupying in the expansion—and that the day team would be hard-pressed to offer reasons for players to branch out to other neighboring allied cities. While the team acknowledges that it's working on ways to fix Besieged, the current half-assed implementation makes for a big black mark on an otherwise excellent MMO expansion. /James Mielke

WORSE THAN THE POOR BESIEGED FEATURE ITSELF: THE DEVELOPMENT TEAMS SMUG RESPONSE TOWARD THE SITUATION.

Let's hear it for slowdown!

FXXI's Besieged mode works well on paper. Not so well in actual practice, though.

These guys look bummed. Maybe it's because the Besieged feature sucks.

1UP.com executive editor James Mielke spends every iota of his free time playing online games. He needs help—badly.
Night Watch
Mo' badder blues

WHAT ARE NIGHT WATCH PLAYERS talking about online? Not much, principally because not too many people care. And, really, considering how underwhelming this game is, that's no surprise. Ridiculously overpowered final boss aside, the game doesn't encourage a lot of discussion topics, except maybe how to eradicate the insidious StarForce copy protection that ships with the game.

Fortunately, you can easily solve the StarForce problem (see sidebar). Unfortunately, Night Watch is beset by other problems, not so easily solved. Developer Nival Interactive struck this tactical RPG from the Silent Storm mold (it's powered by the rapidly, ungracefully aging Silent Storm game engine) and based it on a series of Russian books and films that compensate for what they lack in lucidity with bold stylistic flourish. The game... well, not so much with the boldness and style. Ironically, it's the very source material—a centuries-old battle between good and evil taking place in a dystopian present-day Russia—that hamstring[s] much of the gameplay.

Blue Meanies

The game's fiction relies heavily on an alternate dimension called "The Gloom," where the warring factions tend to battle. Most of the game's action takes place in The Gloom, and it's excruciating—Nival slaps a blurry, blue-gray filter on the graphics, resulting in equal parts eyesore and eyestrain. Combine this with overlong and unbelievably dull spell and attack animations, and what might have been gripping tactical action reduces itself to drudgery rendered in dull slate-gray mud.

Then again, maybe that's a blessing—this is a game world where the forces of light battle vampires, werewolves, and evil mages with flashlights and magical fluorescent bulbs. No, really—they do. Again, it may work in a book... but in a fuzzily rendered PC game, it's simply silly and sucks a fair amount of zest from the turn-based combat.

Battle Weary

As does Night Watch's very limited selection of character classes. Again, the game fiction restricts players, proffering only three classes of traditional archetypes (a healer, a mage, and a warrior). At least you can choose from a generous number of skills and spells every time a character levels up (which they do with satisfying frequency). Unfortunately, there's an emphasis on hard-to-hand combat and restrictive range limitations render tense, challenging battles into "you go, I go" bouts of Whack-A-Mole. For all its shortcomings (don't get me started on the hideous voice acting and awful writing), what Night Watch really fails is at delivering the combat—you know, the actual "game" part. But I can't blame that on the fiction; rather, it's shoddy design and an unfathomably dumbed-down version of the Silent Storm engine that inhibit any meaningful strategizing, thus facilitating the most boring and irrelevant vampire-slaying game in memory. / Robert Goffey

Nival slaps a blurry, blue-gray filter on the graphics, resulting in equal parts eyesore and eyestrain.

REALITY CHECK

IGN 6/10
GAMESPOT 5.4/10
COMPUTER GAMING WORLD 96

KILL BUGS DEAD

Should you install Night Watch, you'll need to eventually uninstall StarForce. We told you how in Issue #281, but just in case you didn't keep (and frame) that gem, here's the lowdown:

01 Remove the StarForce device drivers, using the Device Manager within the Windows Control Panel (make sure you look for StarForce entries in the hidden devices).

02 Delete all "efdv," "sfsip," and "sysnrc" system files from your C:Windows/system32/drivers folder.

03 Run "regedit" from the Windows Start menu's Run dialog. Use the Find option to locate and delete all registry keys containing the phrases "efdv," "sfsip," and "sysnrc." Be careful with this last step!
INNOVATION WARS

HOW MUCH IS A LEGEND WORTH? IN 1987, Australia's Strategic Studies Group (SSG) released Battlefront, a corps-level system that spawned such classic titles as Rommel: Battle for North Africa and halls of Montezuma. Eleven years later, Norm Koch's The Operational Art of War brought construct-your-own war-gaming into the "modern" era, with a variable scale that made it possible—at least in theory—to recreate just about any battle in history. This summer, both of these legends return. The question is: What's the right balance between innovation and reverence for the past?

The Battlefront redux introduces a totally new battle-level game system from Roger Keating, Ian Trout, and Gregor Whaley—the legendary names at SSG. It's probably not entirely fair to compare it to The Operational Art of War III, which amounts to a tweaked and fine-tuned version of a game system whose multiple releases introduced only slight changes, prompting some war gamers to accuse then-developer Talonsoft (now defunct) of milking the brand. Matrix Gamespublishes the new versions of those titles...but both games cover well-trodden ground, leading some (myself included) to ponder the opportunity cost.

If, as I said last month, part of the war-gaming hobby is about chasing improbable-yet-exciting new projects, then another part is about staying in touch with its history. Some classic war games remain the definitive statement on their respective topics (Carriers at War, Utah Beach), and imagining remakes of these old favorites is almost as popular (and vomit-inducing) as envisioning PC conversions of classic board games. With so few developers still working in this space, though, to whom does this leave the real innovation? Paradigm shifts like Combat Mission happen when designers abandon old assumptions and their attendant safety nets. Are our best designers too reluctant to let go of their intellectual life preservers?

You can decide for yourself by getting the details (and the games) from Matrix Games' website at matrixgames.com. / Bruce Geryk.

Longtime CGW contributor Bruce Geryk can probably kick your ass at any board game, any day of the week.

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CITY LIFE
Can you keep the melting pot from boiling over?

MAKE YOUR OWN BUILDINGS... BUT ONLY IF YOU'RE AN ELITE

Municipal Simulator City Life has a tough act to follow. Not because genre standard SimCity got everything perfect—it didn't—but because developers can only simulate water service or garbage collection in so many ways. Most modern city sims content themselves with jazzing up some core element, offering a simpler, more accessible experience, or transplanting the production to an unconventional setting. Still, it's an uphill battle, with seemingly no organ of the civic organism left unhacknowledged.

City Life puts forth the disarmingly obvious notion that a city's most intriguing complexity lies not in the bloodless minutiae of infrastructure or tax rates but rather in its people. Unfortunately, the people constitute an extremely class-conscious lot, happy only living near others of the same (or similar) wealth and status, but dependent on other classes to fulfill their needs and wants. So, Elites hate Have Nots and love parks, but parks don't function without Have Nots to pick up the trash. The trick: Design a city that's big enough, and vibrant enough, to attract groups away from its enemies, but connected enough so all groups can reach jobs in other neighborhoods. The game ramps up the challenge with stuff like topography and pollution that make balkanizing the classes more difficult.

This disorienting shift in emphasis from familiar city-sim conventions lasts until you realize certain facts...like, say, the reason you can't change tax rates is because your citizens don't care about taxes. They care that some snooty rich folks live next door or that they don't have any organic bistros within walking distance.

WHAT DID WE BUILD THIS CITY ON, AGAIN?

Despite its oddities and rough edges, the game's critical consensus remains positive, with most ratings hovering around 1UP's strong 8 out of 10. Even some positive reviewers don't entirely get it, though; GameSpot's reviewer liked the game but curiously missed its point completely, raving about it as a conventional simulation and scarcely mentioning the omnipresent class-warfare dynamic. Thoughtfully designed, a bit obtuse, and lauded by most reviewers, City Life seems, at first glance, to have the makings of a cult hit. But repeated play exposes its most damning flaw: Getting the city big and solvent enough to bring in the upper classes makes for a stimulating climb, but everything goes downhill from there. One poster to publisher CDV's forum crystallizes it: "It's got a real clean-and-jerk feel to it. It's easy to pick the weight up, easy to hold it over your head, but bringing it from your knees to your neck is grueling."

Once you do manage to get the weight over your head the first time, you can employ the same basic strategy on every map, at every difficulty. Sure, terrain and other impediments require a bit more ingenuity, but the thrill quickly wears off. City Life is half of a great game, a must-buy—but only from the bargain bin. Like a Rubik's Cube, once you get it right a few times, you just don't have much reason to pick it up again. /Greg Kramer

COLOR-CODING

City Life bases itself on a potentially controversial social view: Different classes need each other, but they can only coexist if separated. Though this is certainly valid subject matter for a game, some may take offense at its implications. The decision, then, to color-code the top-of-the heap Elites white and the bottom-rung Have Nots black is tin-eared at best—and appalling insensitive at worst.

VERDICT

This deceptively simple and initially brilliant city sim has a social agenda... but not much replayability.

REALITY CHECK

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1UP NETWORK</th>
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FALLING PIECES

Hey There, Cowboy

The world of casual gaming is filled with quick-hit injections of fun—hundreds upon hundreds of games designed for players to enjoy in short bursts. But casual games built for the long haul? Good luck finding one of those.

Actually, you don’t need luck so much as this URL: www.banghowdy.com. Bang! Howdy is an Old West strategy-MMO from Three Rings, the same casual-gaming big brains behind Yoohoo! Puzzle Pirates. Bang! Howdy revolves around classic casual-gaming tenets: It’s easy to learn, the actual game portions go quickly, and the strategic gameplay contains a deceptive amount of depth.

After you create your adorable Lil’ Cowboy avatar, you’re off to an Old West frontier town to battle other players. You direct a team of four to five units on a small map in each of the three current game types, racing to brand cattle, collect gold nuggets, or steal nuggets from your opponents. These challenging contests task you with managing the different initiative rates of your units and employing combined arms in order to succeed. And don’t forget the whole “other players trying to kill your guys” thing.

You receive in-game money based upon where you finish, which you may then cash in on new units, avatar upgrades, and power-up cards. Or you could just spend real money on in-game cash and get the same thing—and Three Rings is banking on this microtransaction model (proven successful in Asia) to profit on this essentially free game. Bang! Howdy might still be in beta as you read this... good news for current players, since they get to keep their beta earnings (including a generous amount of gold that all new players receive up front) postlaunch.

Robert Coffey

CGW alum Robert Coffey blames his inability to get anything done on “column research.” He’s really just playing word games online.

Take a look at our new mice.

It’s all about performance. It’s all about power. And that’s exactly what you get with our new range of PC Gamepads. All featuring mouse look ability, each pad now lets you dive into any FPS game and look around or take aim with the tip of your thumb. So you never have to touch a mouse or take your hands off the game, giving you better control and more comfort. As always, engineered with superior technology, sculpted for spectacular styling and most importantly packed with powerful features for control that is simply lethal. Available in dual analog, rumble or wireless we know you’ll love what you see. Any way you look at it.

Saitek
TOM vs. BRUCE

SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION IV: WARLORDS
Conquering China like Genghis Khan

GENGHIS KHAN
KHAN OF THE MONGOL EMPIRE
1152-1227

TOM: THE NEW CIVILIZATION IV:
Warlords expansion features plenty of cool scenarios. Many of them, such as Alexander the Great and the Peloponnesian War, aren't obscure enough for Bruce and me. Bruce was reading Thucydides just the other day, and I was reading Plutarch, and we were talking about how people make so many movies and games about Greeks. Like My Big Fat Greek Wedding and Titanic Quest. Enough with the Greeks! Instead, we're going with Chinese Unification, which also happens to be the best scenario in Warlords. So, with a tip of those wide-brimmed coolie hats to the scenario's creators—Jon Shafer and Gloria Garson—we're off to ancient China.

BRUCE: I can't remember what happened the last time I played Civilization IV against Tom. Oh wait, yes I can—I got run over by French elephants halfway through the game and Tom ended up playing the rest by himself, shamelessly running up his score on his hapless computer opponents. Embarrassing. So I suspect Tom's last-minute suggestion of the Warlords expansion—"Hey Bruce, it just came out and I'm sure we can finish a game in time"—was a well-planned sneak attack.

TOM: I'm going to do my best to keep all the names straight and regard them with the reverence due anything that's over 2,000 years old. So I pick the Han dynasty because it sounds like Han Solo.

BRUCE, 450 BC: I'm the Yan dynasty, which means my color is dark blue and I start at the north edge of the map. I'm playing a financial civ, so I get an extra gold on every square that already produces two. This means coastal squares will be quite lucrative...but because coastal squares produce only one food, I need to get a Lighthouse to make them provide more. That obviously means I need to make a beeline for the Sailing tech.

TOM, 450 BC: While Bruce tries to figure out the tech tree, I'd like to point out that a lot of stuff in this scenario is different from regular old vanilla non-Chinese Civilization IV. The tech tree and civics are entirely reworked; for instance, Mohism gives all your cities a 33 percent tech bonus. That's worth any kind of haircut.

BRUCE, 449 BC: I'm not sure what mohair has to do with China, either, but whatever. It looks like I have some nice stone near my capital, which I can use to double some production. Quarries require Bronze Working, so that's second on the list behind Sailing. It's nice to have some sort of strategy mapped out at this point.

TOM, 421 BC: Bruce has stone, but I have marble—and therefore a head start on the Great Library. This gives me Philosophy when I finish it, which gets me started on a World Wonder called Sun Tzu's Art of War, which is also a book used by businessmen interested in managerial strategies such as, "Those skilled in war bring the enemy to the field of battle and are not brought there by him." That's a real Sun Tzu quote, which I think translates to normal English as "buy low, sell high."

A Great Prophet of Bruce joins the Yan pantheon.

Most of Bruce's National Wall faces north, where there are no other players.
I also have cotton, citrus, and tea, but I had to learn Filiat Plisy before I could build plantations to harvest them. "It takes an obedient family to raise an oolong plant." That's from me, by the way, not Sun Tzu.

**BRUCE, 409 BC:** The religion mechanic in this scenario is re-named Family Bloodline, which is just a way of making religion a two-word concept without changing anything but the letters. It sure makes diplomacy hard, because the A.I. doesn't like anyone without the same Family Bloodline, and every side has a different one. So in an effort to get on the good side of my neighbors, I "convert" to Zhao, which I guess means someone marries a Zhao princess. I hope she's hot.

**TOM, 386 BC:** Since ancient China wouldn't be ancient China without a few wars to provide a little action for the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* games, I start scouting out my southern neighbor for prospective conquest. His name is Chu Mi Lu. I imagine the words are spelled "Chew Me, Lou" as a way to remember who I'm fighting. While scouting, my chariot comes across a barbarian city on the coast and manages to capture it. Excellent. It's a port, and it has access to salt, which I can use with my lemons in case we ever invent tequila.

**BRUCE, 379 BC:** After more than 20 turns, my conversion doesn't seem to have gained me anything, and I've lost some happy citizens due to the lack of Zhao bloodlines in several of my cities. End of experiment—time to switch back.

**TOM, 366 BC:** While Bruce ping-pongs from Family Bloodline to Family Bloodline—and that can't be good for the gene pool—I'm considering religions, which are part of the Civics track in this scenario. Since many of my cities are in forested areas, I've chosen Daoism, which adds happiness for every forested tile within a city's radius. The Han people are officially tree huggers, but we're gearing up to invade "Bite Me, Costello" so we can hug its trees as well.

**BRUCE, 364 BC:** Tom seems to be winning the Wonder battle. Since this scenario offers so few World Wonders to build, I think gaining some territory (and population points) is in order. Like the Schievean Plan, my order of battle calls for a strong right wing (well, it does if you face south), pointed straight at the light blue of Zhao. He has two cities exposed: Leling on my border, and Yunzhong in the desert to the west. I plan to capture those and then converge on Jinyang, his larger city to the south.

**TOM, 361 BC:** "Masticate Me, Gehrig" just declared war on me and saved me the trouble of declaring war on him. I implement Feudal Levy, which allocates all of a city's food to military production. Sorry, citizens—but this bread is for the soldiers. Now go hug a tree and be happy. You can eat after the war is over.

**BRUCE, 344 BC:** It's time to unleash the invasion force. The first city, Yunzhong, falls easily—but Leling is another story. Turn after turn, my swordsmen and cavalry break on his two lonely fortified archers. Even reducing his defenses to zero with catapult bombardment doesn't appreciably change the calculus. What's worse, the purple Wei hordes take up the cudgel in defense of Zhao, meaning I'm fighting two civs at once.

**TOM, 338 BC:** Sometimes timing is everything. Just as I begin construction of the Underground Tomb, a Great Engineer arrives. "Hi! Need me for anything in particular?" "Why, yes! What lovely timing. Why don't you head over to Luoyang and finish that Tomb we just started? Thanks!"

**BRUCE, 337 BC:** After seven turns, I finally capture Leling, but my army is severely depleted and unable to press south in force. Now purple is starting to show up with cavalry and chariots, making it impossible for me to make further headway. All of my cities have switched to military production, which will cost me later. I should have listened to the scenario introduction when it said war wasn't easy in this game.

**TOM, 331 BC:** Hmm...Bruce is pulling ahead. His wars must be going better than mine. I've just conquered a Chew Me Lou city that gives me tomatoes and tea, which is nauseating to think about, really. The only thing worse would be clams and tomato juice. I think I'm gonna be sick either way.

**BRUCE, 330 BC:** I get a Great Artist in my capital and use him to set off a Culture Bomb in Yunzhong. That greatly expands my territory in the west, and the cultural borders give me two turns worth of warning, should a counterattack come from there. And, in any case, all he has down there is a puny level 2 city with a couple archers.

**TOM, 320 BC:** So I'm hopping along, minding my own business by conquering a neighbor, when the neighbor on my other side...

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**TOM:** I pick the Han Dynasty because it sounds like Han solo.

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**BRUCE:** After seven turns, I finally capture Leling, but my army is severely depleted and unable to press south in force. Now purple is starting to show up with cavalry and chariots, making it impossible for me to make further headway. All of my cities have switched to military production, which will cost me later. I should have listened to the scenario introduction when it said war wasn't easy in this game.

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declares war on me. The nerve! I should have attacked him in the first place, since he doesn’t have nearly as much rough terrain for me to deal with, which is partly what’s slowing my war against Chu Mi Lu to the south. So I make peace with Chewie (as I affectionately dub him, being called Han myself) and start shifting my units to my northern border to conquer Qi Jiang Shang. Try as I might, I can’t come up with a mnemonic to remember his name.

BRUCE, 320 BC: It’s a disaster of cataclysmic proportions. With only one turn of warning, a huge force of purple cavalry appears out of the west, thanks to the open borders treaty between Wei and Zhao. Before I can shift the Jingyang force to meet it, Yunzhang is gone, and with it the efforts of my Great Artist. What unplaceable works of art were plundered? All of a sudden my offensive lies in pieces; fortunately, the newly independent Zhao and his ally Wei both offer me peace on the next turn, leaving me one city with reduced borders to show for my Twenty-Eight Years’ War. Korea, the score is now 1,509-1,463 to Tom. My five-point lead is now a 40-point deficit.

TOM, 314 BC: You know how you can look back at history and see the one moment when you blew it? Like, say, attacking Russia in the winter, bombing Pearl Harbor, or invading Iraq? I just had one of those moments when I left only a single archer in my best city. The city was Luoyang, a sprawling size-16 metropolis replete with Wonders and a torrent of tech research at every turn. I hadn’t bothered building walls, since it abutted Wei, a family with whom I’ve been friendly. But apparently, Wei’s also friendly with Qi Jiang, since he just convinced Qi Jiang to march a huge army through his territory and right up to Luoyang, and promptly conquer it. And I was about seven turns away from constructing the Emperor’s Council, which would have given me a huge boost in score and started regular Council votes towards my diplomatic victory. I take the city back and start the Emperor’s Council from the beginning again. But still, that hurt—even more than the city Bruce was whining about before I started whining.

BRUCE, 306 BC: I built the United Nations. I mean Emperor’s Council. I even got a Forbidden Palace built in another city on the same turn. My lead jumps from 52 points to 163—it’s still a very narrow margin, but it gives me some hope that Tom isn’t going to run away with this after all.

TOM, 305 BC: Nooo! The Emperor’s Council should have been mine! Damn you, Bruce Geryk and Qi Jiang Shang!

BRUCE, 301 BC: With 51 turns left, I have a moderate Tech lead and not much else. I’m not too worried about an amphibious invasion, so I’ve moved most of my military to the west to defend Leleng. My interior cities are all finishing up science improvements, like the University and Observatory, and with Educated Elites and Motism I can crank out one future Tech every two turns while only at 60 percent Science. This allows me to build up a lot of cash, which I’m saving in case I need to start an emergency military building program.

TOM, 299 BC: Bruce’s lead keeps widening and I have -49 turns before the scenario ends, so I devise and implement my 49-Turn Plan for Victory. This basically involves sucking up to the most powerful families and completely retooling my economy to conquer Chu Mi Lu, which I should have done 50 years ago. I convert to Wei’s bloodline, hand out tea, cotton, and claims to everyone like they’re candy, and charge my Civics to the most wargame-like options I can find. Then I set every city to start building military units.

BRUCE, 295 BC: I sent a heavy cavalry force and a chariot to cross the Great Western Desert probably 20 turns ago. Now they’re at the western edge of the map but down to the south, having skirted the Zhao and Wei positions. They’re so far west, they’re basically in Pakistan, if that’s been invented yet. Way out there, through a gap in the mountains, is a small barbarian city. They take it.

TOM, 292 BC: They like me—they really like me! I have been elected the ancient Chinese equivalent of the U.N. Secretary General!

BRUCE, 276 BC: I drop my second Culture Bomb, this time on Leleng. It single-handedly evicts no fewer than four workers from the area around Yunzhang and pressures my cultural borders up against a small Zhao city I hadn’t noticed before. The game won’t last long enough for me to culturally assimilate it, but the expanded borders give me more breathing room.

TOM, 275 BC: Emperor’s Council Resolution No. 1 is for Cultural Nonproliferation. Bruce Geryk cannot be trusted with Culture Bombs. Meanwhile, my war against Chu Mi Lu goes well; I should have done this before. If I’ve learned one thing from Civilization—and one thing I keep forgetting every damn time I play Civ IV—it’s that you can’t halfheartedly fight a war. It’s all or nothing. Unfortunately, I might have waited too long to opt for “all.” I’m slowly catching up to Bruce’s score as I take Chu’s cities, but I need more time.

BRUCE, 275 BC: My Western Desert Force is about to collect its third barbarian city, giving me a few points here and there to maintain my lead on Tom. With Nationalism, I’m using my huge cash surplus to buy cultural improvements in these cities, and then setting them to produce culture in the hopes of expanding their borders a bit before the game ends. I may end up founding Pakistan myself.

TOM, 265 BC: While I’m quietly conquering, three of the other families suddenly declare war on me! It’s not fair. Qi Jiang and my old friend Wei from the north, along with Qin from the west, attack while my army is tied up in the south. The only one to refrain is the ocean itself to my east. My undefended cities start collapsing as the other families—who I had been giving tea and cotton and claims, damnit!—start tearing apart my empire like the pack of filthy dogs they are. So much for my reverence for things over 2,000 years old.

BRUCE, 255 BC: I’m going to finish this game by going out in a Golden Age, even though I only have six turns left, and a Golden Age lasts eight. Somewhere on the Internet, two turns of Yan Chinese Golden Age bounce forever among the electrons.

FINAL SCORE:
BRUCE: 4,163
TOM: 2,793

I HAVE 49 TURNS BEFORE THE SCENARIO ENDS. SO I Devise and Implement My 49-TURN PLAN FOR VICTORY.

At the end, Bruce's capital is the best!
Bruce's soldiers bask in their victory.
REALITY CHECK

GLORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE
We say: "If you've learned the virtue of patience, Glory isn't all bad. However, for those of us who don't find enjoyment in watching paint dry, building a city in real time is too laborious to be fun."
—Di Luo, 1UP.com [6/10]

They say: "It's an ultimately flavorless [game] that leaves us hoping the upcoming CivCity: Rome and Caesar IV pack a bit more of a Roman punch."
—GameSpy [3/5]

MOSCOW TO BERLIN: RED SIEGE
We say: "In the ancient days of computer gaming, it would've been refreshing to get the occasional RTS without resource management—but this formula's now staler than the aroma of a public latrine."
—Di Luo, 1UP.com [6/10]

They say: "Despite having a few notable strengths, Moscow to Berlin suffers in comparison to the other WWII RTS games that have crossed our desks in the last year or so."
—IGN [6.2/10]

NFL HEAD COACH
We say: "NFL Head Coach manages to combine the unrealistic aspects of an arcade game with mind-numbingly boring features intended (unsuccessfully) to create the feel of a meticulous sports management sim."
—Jeff Lackey, 1UP.com [5/10]

They say: "While Head Coach is ultimately an imperfect football-management simulation, it is also, almost in spite of itself, a frequently fun one."
—GameSpot [7.2/10]

ROME: TOTAL WAR—ALEXANDER
We say: "Not too bad for the $14.95 price tag, but still disappointing compared to the [previous expansion]. With the abundance of free mods out on the Net, [Alexander] just isn't great enough to be a 'must-buy."
—Di Luo, 1UP.com [7/10]

They say: "I'm always glad for an excuse to revisit [developer] Creative Assembly's Total War series and the Alexander expansion is definitely a welcome addition."
—IGN [8/10]

RUSH FOR BERLIN
We say: "The A.I. rolls over on anything less than Hard, and getting units into tactically feasible formations can be like herding drunken snails. But for hardcore tactical WWII fans, this is everything the Codename: Panzers series did—only better, and with bells on."
—Matt Peckham, 1UP.com [7/10]

They say: "If any game is capable of convincing game veterans of shivering their way through the Battle of the Bulge one more time, it's this one."
—GameSpot [7.8/10]

STACKED WITH DANIEL NEGREANU
We say: "For poker beginners who are too shy to jump into the online fray, Stacked is a good way to get acquainted with the game in its all forms, from low-limit cash tables to no-limit multitable tournaments."
—Demian Linn, 1UP.com [9/10]

They say: "Unless you're not old enough to play competitive poker on an online gambling site (most of which offer free games as well), it's hard to justify picking this one up."
—GameSpy [2.5/5]

SCORECARD

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<td>June 2006</td>
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<td>Glory of the Roman Empire</td>
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<td>Rome: Total War—Alexander</td>
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<td>Rush for Berlin</td>
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<td>The Ship Online</td>
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<td>Stacked with Daniel Negreanu</td>
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<td>5/10</td>
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<td>4.8/10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zoo Tycoon 2: African Adventure</td>
<td>May 2006</td>
<td>3/10</td>
<td>—</td>
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Brought to you by the 1UP network
For more thorough reviews on the latest PC games, point your web browser to cgw.1UP.com today!
UNWIRING 101

YOUR HOME COMPUTER IS YOUR TECHNO-castle. A castle that, unfortunately, is looking more and more like a Jetsons family garage sale every day. You’ve been thinking for months about untangling the wiry kraken that got loose under your desk, maybe with a cheap pack of cable ties from RadioShack and an hour’s worth of scuttling around on knee pads. Or maybe, just maybe... with a wireless network.

But wait. Doesn’t a wireless network open you up to hackers (or just invite freeloading neighbors to leech bandwidth)? Didn’t you hear somewhere that wireless would screw up your cordless phone’s reception? Or mutate babies? Don’t you need a degree in computer science to install one correctly? Is it even as fast as a wired network?

Relax! Today on This Old Home Network, we’re going to walk you through all the basics of networking tech. We’ll tell you which—wired or wireless—works best with different apps, de-jargonize the lingo, and show you how to convert your wireless home network into a hack-averse security bunker.

WELCOME TO THE 21ST CENTURY

Walk into any Starbucks or Borders and what do you see? A gaggle of urban hipsters and corporate raiders on their Crackberries, listening to their iPods and surfing the Web as they drink crappuccino soy mocha lattes. Here’s something even they don’t know: Those java huts are some of the most unsafe places to surf on the planet. Any b40x0 worth his weight in O10001 can crack coffeehouse wireless security like an egg and grab personal info in five minutes flat. But there’s no need to rely on those unsecured wireless access points (APs)—in fact, it’s never been easier to set up your own. Installing a wireless home network is as simple as programming your TiVo. All you need is knowledge of a few key terms and the courage of your cable-free convictions.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

Q: Wi-Fi? Is that, like, my stereo or something?
A: Wireless, known to the terminally trendy as “Wi-Fi” (for “wireless fidelity”), is simply a way to get your electronic equipment (handhelds, computers, printers, and so on) talking to a network (or other devices) without physical cables. Unlike wired setups, a wireless signal travels through the air using radio waves. The upside of going wireless are pretty obvious: no need to wire your house for Ethernet or sling cables across a room, and the option to hop online anywhere within range of your wireless AP.

INSTANT EXPERT: WIP

So you finally want to cut the cord?
### All About the 802.11

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<tr>
<th>Protocol</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Speed (Theoretical)</th>
<th>Speed (Actual)</th>
<th>Range (Feet)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>802.11b</td>
<td>2.4 GHz</td>
<td>11 Mbps</td>
<td>4-5 Mbps</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>The original standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>802.11a</td>
<td>5 GHz</td>
<td>54 Mbps</td>
<td>27 Mbps</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Incompatible with b; shorter range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>802.11g</td>
<td>2.4 GHz</td>
<td>54 Mbps</td>
<td>20-25 Mbps</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>The sweet spot; compatible with b.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>802.11n</td>
<td>2.4 GHz</td>
<td>540 Mbps</td>
<td>200 Mbps</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>Mach 200, baby… speed and distance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Frequency:** 2.4 GHz wins the popularity contest among Wi-Fi manufacturers—but it also happens to be the same frequency that baby monitors, Bluetooth devices, certain cordless telephones, and microwaves use, which can cause interference (translation: performance degradation). The simple fix? Change channels. U.S. wireless APs have 11 FCC-approved channels, changed with the click of a setting in the usually browser-based configuration panel. But the chances are almost zero that you’ll ever notice or have a problem with interference.

**Speeds:** Like your car’s miles-per-gallon (mpg) rating, the truth lies somewhere between the lines. Practically speaking, you’ll only manage slightly less than 50 percent of the rated speed of an 802.11 connection. The upside? Very few consumer broadband services even approach the theoretical 4 to 5 Mbps speed of the slowest and aging protocol, 802.11b. So all those myths of wired networks being faster? Don’t believe the hype.

**Range:** When dealing with the maximum connection range of the wireless AP, it’s important to remember that as your signal gets weaker (within the range) the speed drops, potentially all the way down to a pokey 1 Mbps. The numbers listed are “effective” ranges—assuming, of course, that you don’t live in a metal shed. Also, if you’re somewhere big and multistoried, a single AP’s probably not going to cut it if you’re aiming for total coverage. Add a wireless repeater or second wireless AP and you can effectively double your coverage radius.

**802.11n:** Plan to see plenty of vendors hawking 802.11n compatibility with existing hardware in the months ahead, but, as with similar past promises, caveat emptor. Critics are already slamming early 802.11n products from oven-aged vendors, citing limited-range issues and legacy Wi-Fi compatibility snafus. Your best bet? Wait for the IEEE to ratify 802.11n (in early 2007), when official products should arrive. And don’t let this future protocol prevent you from buying an 802.11g network now—it’s going to be some time before wide-area Internet connections climb out of the basement to match even today’s local-area wireless speeds, much less 200 Mbps.

---

**TIP:** Wireless runs in one of two modes: infrastructure or ad hoc. If you plan on connecting to the Internet, you’ll need to run in infrastructure mode and have an AP, but if you’d rather just link local devices (run Ethernet cables between two computers, for example) for LAN gaming, you can put your wireless devices in ad hoc mode (pair-to-peer) and skip the wireless access point altogether.

**Q:** 802.11? Is that a zip code in Beverly Hills?

**A:** Like Life Savers, wireless networks come in as many different flavors. Some of these flavors mix; others don’t. 802.11 (without any modifying letters) is the numerical code name for the “Wi-Fi standard.” Basically, some committee got together and assigned Wi-Fi a special Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE)
TIP: It's a safe bet that the latest wireless adopters all have 802.11g devices, but what do you do if your gaming buddy brings his 3-year-old laptop over and wants to connect to your new g-based network? Chances are he's running an older 802.11b adapter, in which case—savvy planner that you are—your g network will let him parley just fine.

Q: Break it down for me. What do I need?
A: All you need is a wireless adapter (or a device with an integrated wireless chip) and a wireless AP hitched to your Internet connection (your cable modem, DSL, or router). For a simple configuration, run the wall cables to your ISP-provided box or modem, run an Ethernet cable from the ISP box to your wireless AP, run the vendor-supplied configuration tool, and you're done.

TIP: Wireless adapters today come in all shapes and sizes: PCI cards for desktops, PCMCIA cards for laptops, and USB sticks for either (most look like chubby little flash-memory keys). If you want to keep from cracking a desktop case, reduce the heat generated by a PCMCIA card in a laptop, or have an easy standby to get a visitor's computer on your network, consider a USB wireless card. The downside? It'll steal a USB slot (sometimes crowding a second) and protrude awkwardly from the back or side of a laptop. Then again, so do memory keys.

---

ALL YOU NEED IS A WIRELESS ADAPTER AND WIRELESS ACCESS POINT TO BE READY FOR WIRELESS WORLD.

Whether you're on a tight budget or looking to create the most hardcore home wireless network ever, we've crafted a shopping list to suit your needs. The budget-conscious who just want to play games, hit the Net, and share a printer or two need to worry about the basics. Most mainstream gamers have a little more in mind—not only do they want to play online, they want to host the occasional match and not have to sweat multimedia viewing. And hardcore users can't be content with anything but the best throughput—they even want to set up dedicated game servers on top of everything else. Once you've figured out where you fall in the spectrum, grab the following gear.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Budget</th>
<th>Mainstream</th>
<th>Hardcore</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wireless adapter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The &quot;client&quot; hardware your devices require to connect</td>
<td>Linksys Wireless-G USB Adapter (WUSB54GC)</td>
<td>$40-$60</td>
<td>Linksys Wireless-G USB Adapter with Wi-Fi Finder (WUSB54G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wireless access point</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The wireless &quot;server&quot; to which your &quot;client&quot; adapters connect</td>
<td>Linksys Wireless-G Broadband Router (WRT54G)</td>
<td>$60-$80</td>
<td>Linksys Wireless-G Broadband Router (WRT54G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional gear for multimedia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonus goodies that go beyond the basic functionality</td>
<td>Windows XP (with Windows Media Connect software, free via download)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Media Center PC (with Windows Media Connect software, free via download)</td>
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</table>
HOME LAN SECURITY

Protect your network

If you fire up your wireless software's AP sniffer, chances are you'll find at least two out of every dozen APs in an area running the manufacturer-default SSID (Secure Set Identifier), the name used to identify your wireless AP to the world. And while wireless APs aren't rocket science, they're not TVs either. You'd never want to plug in one and forget about it—that just invites all sorts of trouble. To be fair, wireless manufacturers really need to improve their products by setting some kind of default security and providing more intuitive setup wizards that get folks quickly from powered on to securely plugged in. Until that happens, follow these essential rules. Ignore them at your peril.

Change the Default SSID. Popular AP vendor Linksys sets its SSID to—you guessed it—"linksys." Change this to something that doesn't broadcast exactly what hardware you're using. Hackers know every model's default settings (it takes a quick Google search). Don't make it a cakewalk for them.

Disables SSID Broadcasting. This option is enabled by default and puts your AP's name out there for anyone with a nearby wireless device to see. You know your AP's name and how to connect to it. No one else needs to.

Enable WPA or WPA2 Encryption. An unsecured wireless AP churns your data freely through the air for anyone to see. Enabling encryption is arguably the most important thing you can do. Don't even think about using WEP (Wired Equivalent Privacy), unless your wireless devices are too old to use the newer WPA (Wi-Fi Protected Access) or WPA2 (completely overhauled to provide virtually adamantine data protection). WEP was barely a deterrent half a decade ago, and it's anything but "wired equivalent" nowadays.

Disable Dynamic Host Configuration Protocol (DHCP). It's convenient to let your wireless AP lease IP addresses as you add and remove devices, but put the lock on who gets what and be better prepared to isolate suspicious activity. Always use static IP addresses with MAC address filtering (the IP addresses are specifically assigned to each device uniquely).

Enable the AP's Firewall. That's right—even if you're already running one on your computer. Pay attention to special port-forwarding or filtering tools, which may (but usually don't) require some special tweaks if you intend to host direct games (in which case you may want to consider setting up a DMZ, or "demilitarized zone," for said game server to operate in its own walled-off "safe" area).

Position Your APs Centrally. Set them up away from exterior walls and windows if you can. The average range of an unobstructed wireless signal is 150 feet. By placing it in a central position, you can reduce the ability of nearby hackers, next-door neighbors, or "wardrivers" to "see" your network. ("Wardriving," named in homage to "wardialing" from the movie WarGames, is the art of finding and marking APs—originally near the AP's location with chalk, as in "wardarking," but more recently using GPS coordinates to identify precise locations and post them online. Don't want that, how do you?)

Password-Protect Your Web-Config Tool. (And don't make it "password.")
HARD NEWS
The bleeding edge of tech

SOUNDING BOARD

SOME REMEMBER THE GOOD OL' DAYS, when gamers had to deal with multiple soundcards, codecs, and compatibility issues if they wanted to have any fun. You can thank Creative Labs for coming in and single-handedly cleaning up its own-standards. Sound Blaster audio cards. In 2005, Creative raised the stakes again with its X-Fi high-fidelity audio. These days, computer gamers usually just ask themselves whether to buy an X-Fi card or just stick with onboard audio.

Enter peripheral maker Razer, which has dropped a ton of cash to challenge the reigning audio champ with its Barracuda Integrated Audio System. The IAS consists of a high-end Gaming Audio Card (the AC-1) and Gaming Headphones (the HP-1).

The dedicated soundcard promises audio dynamite in the form of 7.1-channel output, 24-bit digital-to-audio signal conversion, and 117dB SNR output. Not too shabby, right? Also keep your ears peeled for some sound-enhancing tech (including something Razer calls Enhanced Sonic Perception) and 3D positional audio. The AC-1 pipes its sound through two optical TOSLINK ports and one DVI-ish jack (Digital Visual Interface for audio? Insanity!).

As for the second half of the IAS, the HP-1 headphones actually feel both substantial and comfortable on the head. Even the detachable boom mic feels sturdy. When coupled, the AC-1 and HP-1 promise to form a Voltron of audio domination. The headphones connect to the AC-1 through the DVI port we just mentioned, which should make for absurdly high data-transfer speeds.

But how does it sound? Great question! While we have the soundcard and the headphones in our hands, we don't have any drivers! So you'll have to wait 30 days to see how this technological tease turns out. Stay tuned for our in-depth look at PC audio next month.

GEEKEY

Just when you think you're sportin' the slickest tech this side of Star Trek, something has to come along to do-L337. You. The latest something: The Optimus mini three v1.5 keypad, a tiny peripheral with three touch-sensitive OLED displays. The background image of each button changes depending on the application/shortcut/whatever you assign it. A couple of ho-hum preconfigured functions tell the weather, stock prices, and CPU usage, but we're sure you can come up with some pretty out-there functions, say, for in-game Half-Life 2 use or special pron shortcuts.

So how much will the mini three run you? A mere 4,310.85 rubles (or, if you don't have that, about 160 bucks). Buy it now at http://store.artelebadew.com, or wait until later this year for the even-L3373R full-keyboard Optimus loaded with only OLED keys. Don't ask how much that one'll cost.

HARDWARE WARS

Just as Intel prepares to announce the launch of its Core 2 Duo CPU, AMD has once again steal Intel's thunder. The latest blow in the hardware wars: AMD just bought graphics-card maker ATI for about $5.4 billion. (Apparently our offer of $2.50 and some pocket lint wasn't enough.)

According to the press release, "in 2008 and beyond, AMD aims to move beyond current technological configurations to transform processing technologies, with silicon-specific platforms that integrate microprocessors and graphics processors to address the growing need for general-purpose, media-centric, data-centric, and graphic-centric performance." Does this mean we'll finally see integrated graphics boards that actually kick ass? Crazy talk!
Q: I THINK THAT MY TWO-YEAR-OLD system is getting a little long in the tooth. I have a HP Pavilion a600n Athlon XP 2800+, 80GB hard drive, Radeon 9250 video-card, 250W power supply, and 1.024MB of RAM. I'm not a heavy gamer, but enjoy playing WoW (like half the planet at this point) and Call of Duty 2. That's not enough, though. I want to get Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter and Rise of Legends, but I'm worried my computer won't support them. I know my graphics card is underpowered—that's a given—but what else should I upgrade? Or is it time to suck it up and invest in a brand new system?

Cory Gunn

A: I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Cory, but your trusty ol' PC might be ready for retirement. While your aging rig was functional two years ago, you're getting to the point where it'll be hard to do a meaningful upgrade. You could put in a faster AGP graphics card, like a GeForce 7600 GS, but you might need to upgrade that power supply to do so. Even then, all the cool graphics cards are PCI Express. Plus, your CPU is a little on the slower side for modern games, and while a gigabyte of RAM is good, you don't have particularly fast RAM.

Let me put it this way: "You don't buy computers, you rent them." We're not suggesting you enter into a monthly payment plan on your next computer—just realize that even the best PCs last for only a couple of years. Upgrades are great, but at some point, you're just putting expensive Band-Aids on a PC that isn't getting any younger. I think you may have reached that point. The good news is that if you have the room, you can turn your current PC into a nice file server or something.

Q: I have a basic Dell Inspiron 5160 with 512MB of RAM. Simply stated, I want to run Phantasy Star Online Blue Burst. According to the system recommendations, I should be OK, but the game still runs slowly. I think it might have something to do with the RAM in my laptop—does it sound to you like the game is running slowly because of that? If I need to upgrade, what's the most cost-effective RAM chip to go with?

Sean Tinlin

A: Your basic Inspiron 5160 has a pitifully slow GeForce FX Go5200 video-card, and that's probably the cause of your slow PSO performance. While your machine technically meets the minimum system requirements, there's a world of difference between minimum requirements and recommended requirements. Most game publishers are, shall we say, "optimistic," even with the recommended specs. Unfortunately, there's not much you can do about it. Most notebooks, including yours, don't have upgradable video-cards. You can try more RAM, and the Dell website will sell you a RAM upgrade that will work well with your system (you can install it yourself pretty easily), but I honestly don't think it'll make much of a difference.

Q: When I see pictures of PCI Express slots, they show several long slots and several short slots. What's the difference between them? Also, what are the advantages to having memory and hard drive coolers in your system?

Matthew Armstrong

A: Most PCIe motherboards include both PCIe slots and PCI slots, since most expansion cards still come as PCI cards. Note that PCI and PCIe are not compatible—aside from the name, they don't share much of anything in common. Anyway, the long PCIe slot is the graphics slot. Sometimes there are two, in SLI or Crossfire motherboard, for dual-graphics systems. Short PCIe slots are usually PCIe x1 slots (single-lane PCIe, as opposed to the 16-lane slots commonly used for graphics cards). These x1 slots offer less bandwidth than the graphics-card slot and are generally used for expansion cards such as TV tuners and network-interface cards.

As for the memory and hard drive coolers—well, they keep your memory and hard drive cool. Generally, you don't need a cooler on your memory (aside from the heat spreaders already on the modules), but cooling can be handy if you decide to overclock your RAM. Now, hard drives can get hot. And those 10,000-rpm models? We're talking The China Syndrome if you constantly use your drive. Cooling high-revving hard drives may prolong life and keep your whole system cool—but, again, you typically don't need specialized cooling for your hard drives. Good airflow through your case is usually enough.

Got questions? Send them to Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com

THE AGE-OLD QUESTION: IS IT TIME TO SUCK IT UP AND INVEST IN A BRAND NEW SYSTEM?
DARKSTAR ONE
This space adventure spans 300 star systems and offers six alien races. Get a feel for combat and trading by playing through this tutorial demo.

TERRA WARS: NY INVASION
What happens when aliens try to take Manhattan? Sample four single-player missions and one multiplayer map of this sci-fi shooter.

TITAN QUEST
Read our take on this Diablo-style action-RPG on pg. 90, and then try the two-mission demo. Advance your character to level 6 and learn three skills.

NIGHT WATCH
Night Watch is a tactical RPG based on the Russian horror film of the same name. Check out three levels of this supernatural title.

LAND OF LEGENDS
Try out this turn-based fantasy strategy game, in which eight races vie for supremacy using a combination of cold steel and sizzling magic.

DISAFFECTED (SHAREWARE)
This satirical look at the world of FedEx Kinko's employees is a cross between Tapper and Diner Dash, in which you get to screw up people's print orders.

CHAIR CHASERS (SHAREWARE)
All you need to know about this twisted Office Space-inspired homage to Mario Kart is that you race around your office in chairs. Just like in real life.

MCDONALD'S VIDEOGAME (SHAREWARE)
This fun little Flash sim game puts a happy face on anyone trying to run a multinational fast-food franchise. Can you serve over a billion?

HALF-LIFE 2 DEATHMATCH PRO CLIENT V1.7 (PATCH)
The latest Half-Life 2 deathmatch patch balances the weapon system and provides a new inventory HUD. The bonus? A new map to play.

PREY—THE PORTAL WRENCH (MOD)
Dying to generate rifts in space, but can't wait for Valve's Portal? This Prey mod gives Tommy's wrench a portal-dropping all-fire capability, allowing you to set up your own in and out points.

BATTLEFIELD 2: ALLIED INTENT V0.2 CLIENT (MOD)
This mod for Battlefield 2 includes nine custom maps along with 10 remade Battlefield 2 maps, all playable in single-player, co-op, and multiplayer modes.

CIVILIZATION IV: NEXT LEVEL (MOD)
This huge mod adds more than 20 civilizations to your game, including Argentina, Australia, Benin, Brazil, Canada, Bulgaria, Israel, and Ireland.

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Interview with a Pro Gamer

Look out, Fatal1ty...here comes D3thfur4t!

IT'S A LIFE THAT MOST OF US ONLY DREAM ABOUT: GETTING paid to play games. Yes, the pastime that my mother once foolishly denounced as a "waste of time" and "something that only monkey-brained morons do" has now become a legitimate path to success for the best and the brightest of us. I speak, of course, of the new breed of pro gamers, like Fatal1ty, who not only have found financial success and fame through gaming, but have also done so while having cool names that have numbers in the middle of them.

And even though professional gamers still haven’t gained the same level of respect and mainstream acknowledgment as, say, professional athletes, change is in the air. Now kids want to be them, adventurers want to woo them, and hot female characters want to pursue them and tear off their clothing. They have become the rock stars of the new millennium.

We had a chance to sit down with one of these new rock stars, Stanley "D3thfur4t" Lipschitz, 36, as he prepared to enter the qualifying rounds of the first annual Counter-Strike tournament held at Ben’s Comic and Card shop in downtown Milpitas, CA. Dressed in his trademark baggy shorts, "I Frag N00bs" T-shirt, and velour sweatband, Lipschitz talked to us with the swagger and confidence of a man standing on the precipice—the very edge—of greatness.

CGW: Tell us about your most recent tournament, then. How’d that go?
D3thfur4t: I owned. It was a Quake 4 LAN party at the local Motel 6, I totally won, but in the end they gave the victory to some assclown 10-year-old kid. It was weak. And I was like, "Yeah, if you wanna just look at frag counts, fine." If all I did was wander around the level and kill dudes, I’d have the most frags, too. But you gotta look at the whole package, is what I’m saying.

CGW: Some people reading this might see that you’re 36 and think that you’re too old for this. How do you react to that?
D3thfur4t: Yeah, that’s the same kinda ‘tude my wife had.

CGW: But now she supports you?
D3thfur4t: Pretty much. After I quit my day gig at Kinko’s so that I could do this full time, she was a little put out. Like, “Dude, how are the kids gonna eat?” [Laughs] Weak. So I moved back into mom’s place so I could focus without that kind of noise, and I think she’s coming around. Have you seen my kids, by the way? If you could tell the little dudes I miss them, that’d be cool.

CGW: It’d be our pleasure. It seems like you’ve sacrificed a lot to get to where you are. Do you see yourself as an inspiration to other gamers?
D3thfur4t: Totally. It’s partially why I do this, you know? To give back to the gaming community. I’m hoping gamers can look at me, my life, what I did to get here, and say, "Man, if I just gave all the time, that could be me.”

CGW: Finally, we need to ask you...how do you feel about Fatal1ty at this point in your career? Think you could take him?
D3thfur4t: Take him? I’d own him blindfolded. You can print that. I’ve seen him play, and I’m all, like, you’re kidding, right? Try "Lame1TY.” My grandma brings more games than that. And she’s dead.

CGW: Thanks for your time, D3thfur4t, and good luck in the tourney! And Fatal1ty, if you’re reading this, look out! D3thfur4t is coming! Jeff Green

What Jeff doesn’t realize is that D3thfur4t owns spawn-campers like him for breakfast. Frag his wussy ass at jeff_green@zifidavis.com.
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