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102 **Extend**

Tom and Bruce go head-to-head in **DEFCON**, casual-games columnist Robert Coffey talks **Trivial Pursuit**, and editor-in-chief Jeff Green revisits the world of the original **EverQuest**. Plus: A look at a mod that transforms **Half-Life 2** into...an adventure game?

116 **Tech**

We’ve thrown down the gauntlet to find out who can create the most powerful PC on the planet. What’s inside it? Who walks away the winner? Which machines crashed and burned? Also, check out our reviews of the first DX10-ready graphics cards!

126 **Greenspeak**

Yet another rant about buggy games. Would you like some whine with that?
Their world is a skeevy cesspool of vile and demented miscreants. But funny! Sam & Max, the Freelance Police, keep the self-propelled guttertrash on the run — episode after episode, case after mind-boggling case. Grab your oversized hand cannon and catch the debut of Sam & Max: Season 1 on GameTap.

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EPISODE 2 PREMIERING EXCLUSIVELY ON GAMETAP DECEMBER 21ST

www.gametap.com/samandmax
On the day that I am typing this editorial (November 17, 2006), the PlayStation 3 has officially gone on sale. Just two blocks from our office in San Francisco, hundreds of eBay scalpers—errr, I mean gamers—have waited overnight to buy the shiny new machine. And in a few days, the same insanity is going to be repeating with the Nintendo Wii. Taking aside the fact that I personally would never wait overnight to buy anything (except for, say, tickets to a Jessica Alba–Evangeline Lilly oil-wrestling match), I find the current next-gen console madness to be a good thing, an inspiring thing, another sign that gaming is finally, definitively emerging from the barrios of geekdom and into mainstream popular culture.

I know you might—given the magazine I work for—be expecting me to now say something here like: “LOL! These next-gen consoles are crap next to the PS3! Only little kids and morons play console games!” But you know what? That attitude is just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, little kids and morons play console games!” But you know what? That attitude is just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired. It’s also shortsighted, ignorant, and just flat-out wrong. In fact, if you’ve been so busy defending the Great PC Way that you’ve missed out on games like Guitar Hero 2 on the PS2 or (I kid you not) Viva Piñata on the Xbox 360, then you are simply denying yourself some of the best pleasures to be had just beyond tired.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

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THE REAL WORLD

I love the magazine, I get much enjoyment from it every month, and the writing is witty and informative—often makes me laugh out loud. However, I do sympathize with the reader (“Computer Pinko World,” CGW #268, pg. 24) who wrote about his unhappiness with politics in the pages of CGW. Like many, I also use gaming as a break from real life, work, and the news. But most importantly, there are just so many other places to get that editorial comment on social and political issues outside of gaming. Leave such commentary to Time and Newsweek. Can there be no escape anywhere? So, let me say that I would also prefer if CGW/GFW stuck with the games and avoided the political op-ed.

Andy

“I use gaming as a break from real life, work, and the news.” We get a lot of letters containing that exact same phrase, Andy, so you’re not alone—but we like to think gaming has evolved past being a purely escapist medium. The real world influences games, and games influence the real world, whether it’s global conflict (look at Kuma Reality games) or an acute interest in xenomicrobiology (peek at Spore)—they’re impossible to separate. And we think our readers would like to know what these external forces that shape their games are.

Check out our S.T.A.L.K.E.R. story on pg. 24 if you think we’re bluffing.

Well, yeah, we like Unreal as much as the next guy, and it made the next-to-last-round of cuts when we were paring that list down, but the deciding factor was that UT2K7 looks like another (much prettier) version of a game we’ve seen a few times now already. We’re more enthralled with games that seem like they’re trying to break the mold—BioShock with its A.I. and atmosphere, Enemy Territory: Quake Wars with its complex class-based team mechanics. Don’t get us wrong—we’d love for Epic to surprise us…but what we’ve seen so far hasn’t knocked us for a loop yet.

OVERBLOWN CONSOLE

I swear, all I see in PC stores today are overblown consoles—integrated sound, integrated video, only two slots, 1GB of RAM, flat monitors worse than CRTs, and an AMD chip to heat up your coffee—and the neighbor’s coffee, too. I have to ask, “Why would anyone pay $1,000 for a console?” Imagine when 64-bit and DirectX 10 finally come out…1 billion 2006 console-look-alike PCs will have to turn their virus protection off just to get the memory necessary to play games because the machines all need to be upgraded.

Chris “Please Pray for Us in Upgrade Hell” Snarski

You’re forgetting that some people buy PCs for, ya know, work and stuff—but obviously, if you’re buying a PC to seriously game beyond PopCap and WOW, don’t buy one of those $1,000 specials. Regrets, you’ll have a few. We’d even suggest waiting for a good PC till things with DirectX 10 and Vista shake out. In the meantime, if you’ve got $1,000 to spend on an overblown console anyway, we’d recommend getting an Xbox 360—Viva Piñata rules. And we’re not saying that because Microsoft’s our official sponsor. We are f***ing serious.

RIGHT NOW THE ONLY LINK WE HAVE TO FREeware GAMES IN GAMES FOR WINDOWS: THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE is that measly Freeloader article that lists three games a month. Three a month! More than three freeeware games a month are being made. And there aren’t any reviews, either—so here I am, a cheap-ass wanting more. I wind up having to search the Internet for games, and while I’m playing them, I know that others don’t feel my joy. Please don’t leave out games such as Chart Wars 3, GameBiz, The Ocean Battle, Freeciv, or any others. Thank you.

Kurt Naro

After freeing the Freeloader from a mountain of Taco Bell wrappers, we showed him this letter, to which he had this to say: “I read this note, took it to heart, and by gum, I put four write-ups in Freeloader this month. No, no, there’s no need to thank me. Oh, and thanks for the recommendations—looks like I don’t need to do jack for next month’s column now.”

MAIL BYTES

I was worried when CGW became GFW, but it all looks, smells, and tastes just like CGW...thanks for keeping it intact!

Adam Ruhoff

Civilization IV: Warlords didn’t add any chicks.... When do we get more chicks for leaders? Come on, Firaxis, make some up, for pity’s sake. I’m getting tired of playing Catherine.

Megan Crocker (aka PallyDog)

MY PC IS DIEING BECAUSE TO MUCH DEMOS INSTALLED!

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AW, SHUCKS

Congratulations on your continued success; the new magazine looks just as good as previous CGW magazines. True to your word, you have remained the same by providing descriptive and accurate reports related to gaming (and I expected nothing less). I have been a subscriber for nearly 10 years and always refer to your reviews of games and hardware before purchasing. My favorite features include the GFW podcasts and episodes of Tom vs. Bruce. If I had to pick a dream job, it would be reviewing games and hardware. There is nothing quite like having a job that doesn’t feel like a job (at least most of the time). Kudos to all of you. Just thought it would be nice if the editors of GFW received some well-deserved praise instead of hate.

Ian Laseke

WHY AREN’T YOU WRITING A LETTER?

I really despise a trend I’m starting to see more and more of: people who criticize game critics with the line, “If you can do better, then why aren’t you making games?” The assumption that all game developers are experts on game design is laughable at best. The industry seems full of people like John Romero who were essentially just in the right place at the right time. I don’t know how many times I’ve seen a game that would have been 100 times better if the designers [had] listened to the more critical gamers out there.

Aaron Edmondson

WHOOSH

You claim many times in the first issue of Games for Windows: The Official Magazine that you are not under Microsoft’s thumb. So what do I find in the first issue? An article about Halo Wars, an Xbox game that will not be released for Windows (“Ensemble Studios: Bruce Shelley Speaks,” GFW #1, pg. 34). I am sad, you are a tool.

Albert Macias

SIX MILLION WAYS TO DIE

Just wanted to offer a word of encouragement to developers trying to find more than just “Six Million Ways to Die” (CGW #268 pg. 23) in gaming. Indigo Prophecy’s David Cage points out that now that he’s 37, he “expects more from the medium than cutting off heads.” Well, I’m 37, too. In fact, there are a buttload of us. The first generation of video-gamers is ripening, but not diminishing. We—bitched by Commodores, Ataris, and ColecoVisions, weaned on NES and Sega; now settling into the glorious PC evening of our days—are still gaming. Now is the time for industry innovators to look to the maturing future of gaming and cash in on a market that will only grow from now to forever. Cutting off heads was a blast—now let’s see what else we can do.

R. Lyon

THE SUN ALSO SETS

In your Alan Wake cover story (CGW #268), Alan notes that “the sun rises over the Pacific Ocean” and “sets over the Cascade mountain range.” You should have labeled this a spoiler, as he is obviously delusional. In the real world, the sun rises in the east (Cascade Mountains) and sets in the west (Pacific Ocean).

Brian K.

CORP POR

I’d just like to thank you for not leaving out the niche market and making an honorable mention of EVE Online in last few months. I couldn’t be happier to see something in the Crisis on Infinite Servers column other than the king of bandwagon-jumping, Care Bear–wannabe roleplayers, WOW. On a side note, one of my coworkers pointed out to me that the PK attack of doom in Ultima Online was “Corp Port!” (which is an energy bolt), not “An Ex Port!”, the lightning bolt.

Farulosonoth

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• Left: An abandoned Ferris wheel located in the ghost town of Pripyat, Ukraine.
On April 26, 1986, a reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power station just outside Kiev, Ukraine, exploded, igniting a four-day-long toxic blaze that sent a cloud of fallout across much of Europe and the Soviet Union. Just over 20 years later, I’m touring the highly radioactive remains of Chernobyl to better understand a computer game. Yes, I know that I’m an idiot.

This much is clear to me as we enter the “exclusion zone,” a military-secured no-man’s-land of roughly 30 square kilometers surrounding the reactor. I suppose it’s not a real no-man’s-land, as several (insane) people work inside the zone—environmental cleanup workers, military personnel, and tour guides. Yes, tour guides. Our guide, an unsmiling Ukrainian dressed (like the other exclusion zone guides) in full camo and combat boots, could pass for a James Bond villain. A member of our party musters the courage to ask about his get-up: “Are you required to wear camouflage in the zone?”

“Uh...these kinds of clothes are, eh, more cheap than other clothes,” he says. “We throw them away...after a time...because of radiation.” Oh. Right. I’m an idiot.

Hurtling down a silent stretch of abandoned road toward Reactor No. 4, the site of the disaster, I steady my nerves with a desperate logic: “This guy travels around here all the time, and I don’t see any festering tumors.... I wonder if he’d let me feel his thyroid gland?”

But before I can ask, I’m interrupted by a terrible sound: The slow and steady click-click-clicking of our guide’s Geiger counter is picking up tempo. On the horizon, just beyond a manmade river of coolant water, the ominous smokestack of Chernobyl Reactor No. 4 comes into view.

“No more pictures now,” says the guide, his chilly disposition cooling another 30 degrees. He tells us that, should we ignore the warning and snap photos of our approach, we will be arrested, our cameras confiscated, and our interrogation dragged out until our flights out of the country take off without us. All the while, the clicking accelerates.

In the days that followed the Chernobyl explosion, after the fires had been extinguished, the Soviet government jury-rigged a layer of concrete and steel over the badly damaged building, a temporary structure appropriately called “the sarcophagus.” After 20 years of deterioration, the building is now structurally unsound and leaking radiation. Engineers predict that a small seismic event might collapse the roof, exposing the surrounding area to additional (possibly more dangerous) fallout. Needless to say, I can’t wait to get as close as possible.

As we pull in just a few hundred feet from Chernobyl’s rusted remains, our Geiger counter tunes into some long-abandoned radio station, producing an ever-louder static. Our bus comes to a stop so that we can get out. I’m practically banging on the windows of the bus, so eager am I to stroll in the cancerous sunshine. Yet, in this moment of mortal danger, I spot a Chernobyl
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. IMAGINES A KIND OF ALTERNATE ENDING FOR THE CHERNOBYL DISASTER.

REMAKING A DISASTER

The locals seem fearless, which is exactly why I’m here. Along for the ride, some on their third or fourth zone excursions, are members of GSC Game World, a game developer based in Kiev. Its long-in-the-works game, S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl (which for the sake of typographic sanity will be referred to in the rest of this story as Stalker) is set in and around the wasteland of Chernobyl. I ask Oleg Yavorsky, the team’s English-fluent PR manager who is visiting the zone for the fourth time, if he thinks getting this close to the reactor is, um, f***ing scary.

“Not anymore,” he says. “The first couple of times were, but you get used to it.” Surprisingly, his breath doesn’t smell of vodka.

Stalker imagines a kind of alternate ending for the Chernobyl disaster. Set in the near future, the game describes a fictional (though apparently plausible, judging by the state of the reactor) second explosion, one which transforms the area into an environment even more hostile to life. When researchers sent into the zone to investigate the incident never come back, the government seals off the area with a military force. Motivated by curiosity and financial reward, adventurous scavengers called (wait for it...) Stalkers begin entering the zone illegally. You play as one such character, a Stalker whose memories have been (conveniently) erased, a blank slate to fill with the mysterious details you encounter along the way.

The central mystery, however, is how Stalker has required so much time to complete. First announced in 2001, the game hit several speed bumps along its five-year-long development. When asked about the delay, Stalker’s project lead Anton Bolshakov faults the game’s ambitious simulation aspects and a last-minute revision to add storytelling elements. “We decided to do a really huge, complicated game,” says Bolshakov. “We wanted to make a game completely ruled by live simulation, the whole game. So...we spent some time making it and then realized that we [needed] a strong storyline inside the simulation. If you implement a game complete-
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you will automatically make enemies of their rivals. And in the end, the way you roleplay will affect the outcome of the game in a fundamental way, according to Yavorsky: “Depending on how you accomplish tasks in the game, you will reach one of seven different endings in the game.”

**TURNING GREEN IN THE RED FOREST**

Hanging out in front of the radioactive remnants of a nuclear meltdown for too long can result in only one ending, however. I’m anxious to get some distance from the reactor. Once everyone has finished taking pictures (allowed from a single angle) of themselves in front of the sarcophagus as if it were the Eiffel Tower, we’re once again off.

Ah, relief. I came. I saw. I conquered the most seemingly senseless tourist destination in the world, and I haven’t even grown a hump. But my warm and fuzzy feeling of safety quickly fades as we pass through (more like drag-race through) what looks to be a normal patch of forest.

“This is a very dangerous area,” our guide says. “The Red Forest.” I wish the name had something to do with communism, that maybe it’s the place where the disappeared have disappeared to. Unfortunately, the Red Forest was so named because a large concentration of radioactive material fell on it in the days after the accident. The trees of the forest reacted by turning a frightening shade of red. It’s still one of the most radioactive sites in the zone today.

I try to concentrate on the invisible menace, to at least be aware of the risks I’m taking in the name of gaming, but outside on the road I see packs of roving feral dogs, descendants of pets left by the inhabitants of the area after the disaster. They look healthy. Actually, they look like they might eat us if we stop.... Even the forest itself, once shriveled and healthy, actually, they look like they might eat us if we stop. Even the forest itself, once shriveled and healthy, turns once again alive. Wildlife has returned en masse to the Chernobyl zone. In fact, our guide on the tour seems more concerned that we might run into a wolf than a patch of highly radioactive organic material. This seems to be the focus of his extremely brief safety lecture as we pull into the ghost city of Pripyat. He tells us, basically, that if we daily and get left behind on our tour, he won’t be there to fend off the wolves. Oh, and there’s something about not stepping on rusty nails covered in radioactive dust. Sweet....

**PRIPYAT, A MODERN POMPEII**

Outside the windows of the bus, we pass blocks of abandoned high-rise apartment buildings. “Before, Pripyat was a great place, a perfect place. People lived well here,” our guide says. It’s hard to imagine. Trees now clutter the narrow font yards of the apartments, obscuring our view from the street. Vines crawl in and out of shattered windows.

We come to a stop in the center of town, an overgrown square where the town’s shopping center and a building called the Palace of Culture stand. Pripyat features prominently in Stalker, and I can see why. Creepy quiet (we’re the only visitors for miles), overgrown with moss and weeds, and ruined by looting. Pripyat is a modern day Pompeii.

We walk over piles of broken glass to stand in the town’s abandoned theater. We walk over thousands of decaying books—many with stately drawings of communist leaders on their covers, to stare at the broken tiles at the bottom of an empty swimming pool. We feel our way through a dark corridor to emerge in a gym, one of its walls completely collapsed. We trapeze through grass and mud to reach an amusement park, at its center a rusted Ferris wheel that has never seen a passenger. It was scheduled to open only days after the accident. We look at the remains of a set of bumper cars, rotten and overturned, and think about the more than 50,000 people forced out of their homes, taking what they could carry, and I wonder if it’s OK to use such a place as a playground for entertainment.

“The story of Chernobyl is quite sensitive over here,” says Yavorsky. “I was a kid at the time when everything happened, but I do remember people with Geiger counters going around the yard where my parents lived. Many of the people on our team, their parents used to help evacuate people from Pripyat.”

Bolshakov says that he and his team know to tread lightly: “We treat the Chernobyl tragedy with extreme caution, and we were hesitant for a long time before starting to work with this subject matter.” He hopes to use the setting not as a simple backdrop but as a commentary on the incident. “We think that Stalker will tell much about human carelessness, which can lead to ecological catastrophe on a global scale,” said Bolshakov. “Our game is a kind of hyperbole, an exaggeration. It is a warning to mankind about its consumption of technologies that are rife with hidden dangers.”

But even Bolshakov doesn’t think that his team’s creation will be able to fully communicate the terrifying sense of danger we feel in the exclusion zone: “Only those who have a chance to visit the vicinities of [Chernobyl], to wander through the deserted streets of Pripyat and literally feel this peril with their skin (as it is impossible to see it)—only those can be terrified.” Standing in the eerie quiet of Chernobyl’s radioactive ruins, I completely agree. —Robert Ashley
THE ACT

Catch it if you can

PREVIEW

Remember Dragon’s Lair—guiding Dirk the Daring through a medieval dungeon stuffed with timed challenges, tapping a control stick in cardinal directions at precisely the right moment to move the hero along unscathed and progress through the rescue-the-princess story? Or Don Bluth’s signature animation style and the arcane new tech called “laser disc” that powered the whole thing?

The Act takes this sort of simple-yet-engrossing gameplay a bit further. You play the role of Edgar, a wistful window-washer with a serious crush on the leggy young nurse who he spies through the hospital window he’s cleaning. As it turns out, Edgar’s a regular Frank Abagnale—he initially daydreams about winning Ms. Right with smooth threads and a smooth style, and ultimately winds up impersonating a surgeon in order to win her heart (and save his binge-drinking brother from “certain death” while constantly evading his fuming boss).

Edgar’s wacky misadventures unfold via a series of professionally animated, timing-based minigames, all controlled by a small dial. Example: At one point, Edgar’s sham finds him awaiting an elevator alongside a throng of doctors; dressed in MD garb himself, he’s got to act natural to avoid arousing suspicion. Spin the dial to the right to ham it up and laugh at the other surgeons’ jokes…or spin it to the left to play things straight. The doctors’ reactions help you gauge your progress; the trick lies in the timing—overdo it (or underdo it), and the game ends.

And when it does end…just insert another quarter to continue. The Act is currently on a test run in arcades and cafés on the East Coast, with tentative plans to expand nationwide and (eventually) to the PC. The coin-op format fits nicely; the game’s designed to eat up a good $10 for a first-time playthrough, and the professional animation and quirky storyline provide plenty of incentive to fish for quarters—at least until a desktop version arrives. *Ryan Scott*

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Peter Perla once observed that the games he loved were “consistently misunderstood, denigrated, even denounced.” Nongamers looked askance at players who filled hours battling each other with simulated soldiers, tanks, and artillery. “Anyone who has ever been asked the incredulous question ‘You mean you play games about war?’ (often accompanied by a look of borderline revulsion) might be forgiven for a certain reluctance to discuss the hobby with the uninitiated,” he remarked. But Perla wasn’t talking about his overweening obsession with Call of Duty or Battlefield 2. Rather, this quote is taken from his 1990 book The Art of Wargaming, the canonical study of old-school board-and-map wargaming, played out with pencil, paper, and small model armies.

War-gaming has held a place in the practice of real military strategy for almost two centuries. Civilized into a form of entertainment in the Victorian era, the pursuit attracted figures as distinguished as Robert Louis Stevenson and H.G. Wells, who filled their parlors with miniature troops and artillery, playing out little wars with fellow gentlemen. The hobby saw a revival in the U.S. during the 1960s and ‘70s with the rise of board war-gaming publishers like Avalon Hill and Simulation Publications, and some of the earliest games for home computers included the first strategy war games like Chris Crawford’s classic Eastern Front (1941), a World War II–themed title published in 1981. Fantasy role-playing games, which had evolved out of war-gaming, had an even greater impact on the development of videogames, influencing the themes and character structures of adventure games. Though some of war-gaming’s digital descendants have flourished—most notably series like Civilization and Age of Empires—the more traditional noncomputerized versions today see fewer adherents, and they’ve largely failed to capture the imagination of generations raised on faster-paced, twitchier fare.

Board war-gaming and its face-to-face camaraderie may be waning, but many aspects of the old gaming culture have been resurrected in the computer-gaming world by a new practice: the burgeoning community of military-themed “reality mods” devoted to historical accuracy. Whole partial conversions of multiplayer war titles like Battlefield 2 or total conversions of familiar foundations such as Unreal Tournament 2004, these historical war mods have fostered amateur development communities quite unlike the typical computer gamer. Obsessed with re-creating the most exacting details—a precise rendering of a 1940s German train’s undercar-
riage, for example, or the proper epaulets for a Japanese officer in 1938—reality modders aren’t just looking for engaging gameplay and a few fast frags. They’re after something much more time-consuming: the rendering of historical worlds in as much detail as technologically possible. Falling somewhere between board war-gaming and historical reenactment, reality modders pursue re-creation as their recreation.

**WORLD GONE MOD**

A casual-looking guy in his early 40s who could pass for younger, StrangerThanFiction—who prefers to appear in print by his online moniker—lives and works in New York City. In his offtime, he works on Forgotten Hope, a popular World War II mod originally created for Battlefield 1942 and now deep in development on its as-yet-unreleased Battlefield 2 iteration. The only Forgotten Hope developer based in New York, StrangerThanFiction works as part of an international team of around 50 members, mostly based in the U.S. and Europe but spread out among 15 countries. “When I was really busy, I was probably spending 30 hours a week on the mod, at least,” he says, “and a lot of people spend more than that.” Of those working on the game, he estimates that “maybe only three or four are professional game developers or people who want to be.”

“I was an old-line board war gamer for a long time,” he says. “Long before I ever had a computer. I taught myself how to play [the classic board war game] PanzerBlitz from my brother’s copy when I was 13 or 14.” Later on, he played Dungeons & Dragons as well as “monster games”—massive board war games known for their complex detail and plodding play—like the Civil War title Terrible Swift Sword and the notoriously intricate World War II–themed Drang Nach Osten!, although the latter, he says “was a little too much.” After doing some modding for Unreal—“just goofy stuff like mapping one of my bosses’ face on a player model”—he approached the Forgotten Hope team as a prospective participant.

“Most mods are always interested in recruiting new people,” he says. “They had an application process where they gave me a project to do, which was a texture for a Soviet KV-2 tank, and then a Type 94 Japanese transport truck. So I applied, and they eventually decided, ‘OK, this guy is good.’ I was just a texture artist at that point. Later on, I got a little bit into modeling. I learned to code, and I did some sound work. I’m a digital graphics professional, so a lot of the skills I have in regular life have been very transferable.”

The team communicates via public and private online forums, instant messaging, and IRC. Less than half the team is currently based in the U.S., with a significant number in the U.K. and Germany, and the discussions are based in English. Beyond the specifics of artillery models and tank...
A team of 50 war-gaming enthusiasts in 15 different countries united to create Forgotten Hope.

"WWII is the epic struggle between good and evil for the 20th century."
—STRANGER THAN FICTION, DEVELOPER, FORGOTTEN HOPE

design—as well as the typical gamer-board chit-chat—the talk sometimes drifts into weightier issues. Players and developers trade tips on the best military books or discuss definitions of fascism; in one case, a debate ensued about how a Nazi general who disobeyed Hitler’s orders to lay waste to Paris should be considered by history. A history buff himself, StrangerThanFiction says he has over 200 books on the war, including a number of Russian- and British-published collections of photos and diagrams of weapon and vehicle designs typically used by hobbyists who build plastic scale-model reproductions.

“You really need this kind of detail to re-create this stuff,” he says. “I’ve been doing a lot of research into trying to get my head into the personal experience of different soldiers on different sides. What was it like to be in the Japanese army? What did you think about your officers? What did you think about the Americans? That ‘soft stuff’ doesn’t play directly into the game as such, but it does influence my attitude about what kind of suggestions I make about gameplay.”

Extracurricular research extends beyond developers, however, to the players themselves. “One of the things that’s kind of interesting about the game is that to be able to play effectively, you have to learn a little bit about the war,” StrangerThanFiction says. “If you don’t know at least what the stuff is—like what the tank that’s coming to you is like—you don’t know whether to shoot at it or run away. You have to know enough at least about the equipment to recognize it and know the appropriate way to respond to the threat.”

HOW REAL IS REAL?

Board war games began to deal with a problem that has carried over into reality mods—how much historical detail is too much detail? In other words, how do you balance realism and playability? And what’s does “realism” mean in any case—a preponderance of accuracy in machine design? Removal of typical HUD interfaces? High character mortality rates? All are possibilities that mods have explored, and each development team has to, in a sense, choose its own battles.

“People do have very different expectations of realism,” says Alan Wilson, who worked on the Unreal Tournament 2004 mod Red Orchestra: Combined Arms, set in the Eastern Front of WWII. Wilson is now vice president of Tripwire Interactive, creators of the commercial version, Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45, which was released by Valve earlier this year. “Some people want it to be hideously complicated tank sims. Every button you push is right…. I was never interested in quite that level of detail. I don’t want to go out and buy a special set of controls so I can have the cannon trigger under my foot. But I wanted to find a balance where all machinery performs exactly as it should. [In Red Orchestra] guns perform as they should, tank cannons perform as they should—although we’ve simplified the controls so you can actually play it on a computer in an acceptable amount of time. If something is simple and natural in real life, it has...
to be simple and natural in the real game. A lot of the simulations want to put in every single complexity they can think of."

Even if the best reality mods aim for better playability, StrangerThanFiction says that Forgotten Hope is still “not for everybody. A lot of people who enjoy Battlefield 2 are going to find this thing excessively complicated, and they would be annoyed by the fact that if they run out across an enemy field, they’ll immediately be cut down by enemy fire.”

Another varying expectation: detail in the game. “Some people want it to add a lot of gore, blood, and brains, and I don’t want to do that,” says StrangerThanFiction. “Another argument is about things like Nazi regalia—swastikas and stuff. We don’t include them, even when they were historically appropriate, for two reasons. One is that there’s always an aspect of role-playing, and it’s a very sticky issue with WWII. There are a lot of complicated moral issues. It’s also a legal issue in Germany, where a lot of the developers and fans live. So we don’t—we just leave them out. Occasionally, people come along and complain bitterly about this.” In some cases, the most bitter complaints come from a small minority of neo-Nazis who gravitate toward reality mod—an unfortunate but perhaps unavoidable online side effect of the subject matter.

GREAT WAR—OR GREATEST WAR? Forgotten Hope and Red Orchestra may be two of the best-known reality mods, but they’re far from alone. Doomlab.com runs an ongoing poll of the top 100 Battlefield 2 mods; a significant number of the most popular are reality mods. Though a range of contemporary and historical scenarios appear—including Eve of Destruction, a Vietnam War mod, and the famously popular Battlefield 1942 Gulf War mod, Desert Combat—WWII continues to dominate as a favorite topic.

Wilson speculates there may be practical reasons for this. “I always think it’s because it’s huge and everyone knows something about it. The technology is recognizable without being too old. And trying to model a modern battle tank—they’re very, very complex things! You realize that to do justice to 1980s onward, you’ve got to throw in radar-tracking of shells and god knows what else.”

But the allure of the Greatest Generation has more to it than technical convenience. “I think a successful mod has to have a compelling story,” StrangerThanFiction says. “WWII is the epic struggle between good and evil for the 20th century. Vietnam’s a good story, too. There are a lot of good stories, but WWII is the defining conflict of the modern era. And as such, it’s of immense interest for anyone who is interested in military history, conflict simulation, in war, in games. Most 3D games are some kind of conflict simulation—so we’re doing the greatest story you could make a game out of.”

“It was a ‘good war,’” notes Wilson. “It’s interesting for us—having picked the Eastern Front—that, of course, the Soviets weren’t exactly good guys either, but at least we know the ending. It all ended happily, with the defeat of Nazi Germany. It led into the Cold War and a rather grisly Soviet Union, but that’s ended, too. So it’s all in the past, and we can all look at it relatively reflectively. It’s a war we can step into and step out of completely.”

In other words, pondering the reality of, say, the current war in Iraq might not be so fun. “It is, in that respect, much cleaner,” Wilson says, “whereas the much more modern wars—the whole terrorism/counterterrorism thing—isn’t clean. It isn’t easy. There’s far too much emotion tied up with it and the real world.”

Ed Halter
Ten questions with Valve cofounder and front man Gabe Newell

GFW: Pundits compare Steam to Sundance, Amazon.com and more. In what ways are these analogies appropriate and/or inappropriate?

GABE NEWELL: Steam was a first of its kind, and it leveraged both the independent and emerging online community. So, in some ways it is relevant. But that also dismisses the coolest part of Steam: It’s the first channel/platform that allows creators to have a live and ongoing conversation with their audience.

GFW: Has vocal skepticism accompanied Steam’s success (for example, in the way it has with EA)?

GN: We don’t spend much time battling skepticism as much as we focus on trying to increase the value of Steam for both developers and end users. You really have to be determined about listening to your customers and making it better month after month, year after year. It’s about being a butler, not a supermodel.

GFW: What are Valve’s plans for less prominent Steam applications such as Source TV and noninteractive video?

GN: This is an interesting area, but we’ve got three games already in the queue.

GFW: Is Source a success as a licensed engine, especially in comparison to its competition?

GN: Source is something that’s always evolving, both from a technology standpoint as well as from a licensing standpoint. We’re constantly looking to incorporate new features and functionality and explore new ways of working with our licensees. In some cases, it makes sense to do the traditional type of licensing, so we do those deals. In other cases, there’s a more interesting opportunity to pursue, one that allows us to work more closely with other developers with the hope of creating a more interesting end product.

GFW: Do you monitor developers you’d be delighted to work with? Complicated contracts aside, who would you invite to Valve?

GN: I’d like to work with Rob Pardo at Blizzard or any of the founders. In ultra fantasyland I’d like to work with Brad Bird [writer/director of The Incredibles] and Shigeru Miyamoto [Super Mario Bros.].

GFW: Would Portal exist if you weren’t packaging it as an Episode Two extra? Are there any other out-there ideas that you’re interested in exploring as future “pack-ins”? (We’re thinking of an earlier interview in which you mentioned elementals speaking to players through ordinary objects such as pieces of wood.)

GN: The ability to package it with Episode Two in the Black and Orange boxes is a product of moving toward episodic development. Finding new independents to work with and combining new independent projects with our games are things we’ve been pursuing since [Team Fortress creators] Robin Walker and John Cook were young (prior to Half-Life 1 shipping).

GFW: Have you considered canvassing the worlds you create and work so hard to immerse us in with advertisements?

GN: We are going to run some experiments with ads in Counter-Strike 1.6. We’ll see how it goes. We’re pretty sure we’ll get a few things wrong at first. And there’s a chance it may be a total waste of time. But there’s a lot of logic to support the notion that advertising of some nature is going to be part of gaming as it continues to grow and grow. So, we are going to give it a shot, and of course we will manage implementation to limit its intrusion upon gameplay.

GFW: Have you considered outsourcing asset-generation work? Why or why not? Is episodic content a work-around of sorts?

GN: No, we’re going the other way. We’re not looking for the cheapest person in the world to paint a pixel, we’re trying to find the best people in the world to create an experience. Episodic [content] is more about risk management and project complexity than cost management.

GFW: Has Steam effectively solved piracy problems for you?

GN: We feel it’s more effective than anything else out there. It’s certainly solved the issue of “Day Zero” piracy (after the game goes gold but before the product arrives at the store). And we have the ability to constantly increase that protection—ever for products already on shelves.

GFW: Have you considered canvassing the worlds you create and work so hard to immerse us in with advertisements?
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Something’s wrong with Battlefield, and I can’t put my finger on it. The graphics are passable enough, and the level design was pristine. But the problem is paying to play. I mean, here’s War Rock. The graphics are good (not great), and it can run on just about any computer. Most importantly, I satisfy my modern-combat multiplayer bloodlust without dropping a dime.

As always, though, there’s a catch: The base game amounts to an ongoing beta test. The developers are banking on the “your first taste is free” pricing model. Upcoming plans include a retail game with added play modes and weapons. Me, though, I’m perfectly happy with an open-beta freebie that liberally lifts material from Battlefield’s Desert Combat mod.

I love the smell of bacon in the morning. It smells like…victory. First, let me salute the soldiers at Stormregion. These guys got so loopy one night, they decided to make an RTS war game of Animal Farm proportions. Siding with an army of rabbits or pigs, you command and conquer your way through a full single-player campaign or watch the fur fly in multiplayer combat. Do you want to know what really makes my stingy heart sing, though? S.W.I.N.E. is a fully functional retail game that came out a couple of years back. Of course, it was a little hard to spot amongst a stack of other RTS games. So, the developers decided to just make this whole thing freely available on the Web. For that, you magnificent SOBs, I award you the Purple Heart for meritorious service.

Computer war games not realistic enough for you? Well, here’s the real deal. Since 2002, my tax dollars—well, if I did actually pay taxes, that is—would have helped fund this fully free recruiting tool and game. The latest iteration, America’s Army: Special Forces, isn’t as glamorous as Chuck Norris suggests in Delta Force. However, it does give me a chance to become a Green Beret while slamming a sixer of Mountain Dew. Some will get stoked by using new gear—Javelin antiarmor missiles and CROWS (which basically is like playing a videogame while in the field. So, technically, this is a video game inside a videogame—how meta!). Me? I’m psyched for the in-game virtual recruiting station! I get to fill out forms and join the online army! Sweetness!

Savage is a little tough to summarize. Still, I’m gonna give it a shot. It’s a full RTS game. It’s a third/first-person melee/shooter game. It’s a total fantasy mash-up. Oh, and did I forget to mention that it’s 100 percent free? What? You actually want details? All right, the game works like this: You have two sides—Humanity and the Beast Horde. Pick one, and then pick a role. The commander plays the entire game as if it were an RTS while everyone else follows orders and fights it out on the ground. Do you want to know what really makes my stinky heart sing, though? Savage is a fully functional retail game that came out a couple of years back. Of course, it was a little hard to spot amongst a stack of other RTS games. So, the developers decided to just make this whole thing freely available on the Web. For that, you magnificent SOBs, I award you the Purple Heart for meritorious service.

XTRAS

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THE GAME: S.W.I.N.E.
FILE UNDER: Hogs of War

FREELOADER

Scoring free games without the icky “pirate” aftertaste

War. What is it good for? Well, let’s see...only...everything! Take this morning. I caught The Dirty Dozen for the millionth time on TBS. Days of Our Lives wasn’t on yet and the reruns of Three’s Company just weren’t cutting it—but that’s beside the point. The Dirty Dozen did more than cement my Charles Bronson–Lee Marvin–Telly Savalas world-domination theory; it reminded me just about every kick-ass game has a conflict where a moderate amount of ass gets kicked. I don’t know about you, but right about now, I want to get my war on. And that’s saying a lot—I’m more of a lover (OK, loafer) than a fighter.

With that in mind, it was time to smear on some greasepaint, tie on the bandana, and go recon the Web. The objective: locate and secure three games that epitomize the credo of the Couchbound Mooch Corps—“free and good.” Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a mission to complete...and a bag of Cheetos to finish. The Freeloader
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Enter gaming, rocking the entertainment biz to the tune of $7 billion in combined annual computer and videogame software sales for 2005 alone. TV today chucks at least 15 of every 60 minutes into clusters of 15-second hooks. Movies open with prepreview shorts such as student films touting Coca-Cola’s “refreshing filmmaker” award. And games? The NES version of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles was already pitching Pizza Hut on tiny in-level wall placards in 1989, and mega-publisher Electronic Arts’ perennial sports franchises mime their real-world models by splashing polygonal stadiums, diamonds, rinks, and greens with billboards, banners, sportswear logos, and nearly any other merchandising parallel you can think up.

Recent deals between Electronic Arts and videogame ad providers like Massive Inc. and IGA (In-Game Advertising) Worldwide promise to hoist these conventions to new heights.

But on its face, sticking ads for Subway (“Eat Fresh!”) or Allstate auto insurance (“Are you in good hands?”) in a game like The Battle for Middle-earth sounds at best intrusive (if not downright offensive). On the other hand, so-called “next-generation” production costs have more than tripled in recent years, threatening to hike retail prices past mass-market thresholds just to secure sustainable levels of revenue. Consequently, companies are trying to find a way to capitalize on the game industry’s potential advertising windfalls—but can they do it without alienating gamers who want an experience that’s streamlined and nondisruptive?

**ADVERTAINMENT**

“In-game advertising is part of an overall trend to reach people in their lives,” says T. Bettina Cornwell, professor of marketing and leader of the marketing cluster in the UQ Business School at the University of Queensland. “Brand placements in movies and TV, sponsorship of sports, arts, and charity...
events, and all forms of ambient marketing are part of this trend toward embedded experience advertising.” Cornwell sees several trends coalescing in the wake of expensive traditional advertising practices being outpaced by savvier technology. “The big rant about media fragmentation is real,” she adds. “The best way to find your audience is within their entertainment, whether it be movies, games, or sports.”

But delivering seamless, unobtrusive game ads is a brand-new balancing act in an industry that hasn’t yet locked down the sort of standards common to older, established mediums. It’s one thing to play Lego Star Wars, for instance, where stackable toys based on a film franchise pose their own conventions (heaping, assembling) as one of the primary gameplay conceits, but another entirely to slap Bionicle posters inside the Millennium Falcon’s cockpit. The current debate in publisher circles seems to pivot on how to incorporate thematically related “drop-in” ads of a sort that risk marginalizing the escapist fundamentals of their fictitious environments, versus a more “integrative” approach—call it “advertainment”—where the gameplay is the commercial.

Recent studies by researchers like Nielsen Interactive Entertainment shed some light on the issue. One NIE study in partnership with games publisher Activision found that increased product recall for a majority of participants was tied directly to their sense that the product “fit” the game they were playing, e.g., banners on racecars or signs along freeways. The study also indicated—powerfully—that a higher percentage of gamers were more positive than negative about the products after playing the game. “There are plenty of instances where you’ll still find fake ads or brands are being used in games, e.g., ‘Goop’ instead of Gap or ‘Soda Pop’ instead of Coke,” says IGA Worldwide’s CEO Justin Townsend. “The feedback from gamers in general is that fake ads are not what they want to see, as it detracts from what are otherwise very realistic environments. I’ve had the opportunity to see stadium games or racing games without any ads at all, and frankly, these games look naked.”

Simulating reality is obviously a vital immersive component in certain genres, but games also offer something their spectator-driven real-world counterparts lack: interactivity. Townsend believes that interaction with a brand through product placement serves a different goal than ads displayed within the environment. “The purpose of concepts that allow a consumer to interact with a brand is to drive product association,” he argues. “Whereas ads displayed visually drive brand or product awareness.” In other words, using Lego Han Solo to build a minigun or some puzzle-solving artifact in Lego Star Wars II creates >
Brand-Aid

(or enhances) a rapport with the real-world franchise, i.e., the "flexible, buildable" nature of the Lego product. Whereas a sign or billboard in the game pitching "Star Wars Bran Flakes" has no associative value, save to perhaps make you curious enough to go looking for (or simply notice) it at the grocery store. In either case, says Townsend, the key is ensuring that the experience be contextual and not disruptive.

PLAY AND GO SEEK

What about self-referential experiences where the game in a sense becomes the ad? "I think parallel placement or marketing communication programs with limited integration will continue, but the goal is clearly toward integration," says Cornwell. "Although the potential for integrated tie-ins does depend a bit on genre, it has distinct advantages from an information-processing perspective. With more elements tied together and self-referencing, the possibility of a strong, long-lasting memory for the brand is increased. Each referenced 'associate' to the brand offers another pathway to recollection."

Cornwell and a former University of Queensland student, Lars-Peter Schneider, copublished a paper last year in the International Journal of Advertising that considered the effects of experience and game flow on player memory. Exploring the impacts of various-sized banners around a racetrack in terms of recall and recognition, the study found—not surprisingly—that spatially prominent banners increased recall and recognition levels over subtle ones. But more importantly, the study also revealed that subtle banners related to the actions of players were also able to influence memory significantly. "We call this 'centrality to action,'" explains Cornwell. "In-game advertising adds an element of interactivity; it's not just how big a placement is or the duration of exposure, it's how the gamer interacts with a placement." Thus, says Cornwell, an ad that's small in size but placed on a tough corner in a racing game may be remembered better than a large banner because each time a player takes the corner, the small placement is serving as a mental marker.

Lest you worry that "interactive" also implies "transactional," don't look for virtual vending machines in your games anytime soon. "Stopping to deliberate and make a transaction would definitely pull gamers [out] of the experience," says Cornwell. "One could imagine setting up account transaction details in advance so that disruption would be minimal, but this would have consumer protection issues similar to mobile gambling. Are people really in the right state of mind when playing a game to make these sorts of decisions?"

FOR LOVE OR MONEY

The greatest challenge facing in-game ads may lie in simply convincing players that ads are an acceptable way to offset spiraling production costs. "If it’s well done, many gamers will accept some advertising for a well-priced game," says Cornwell. "Moreover, if the advertisement is clever, entertaining, and has a reasonable shelf life with regard to wear-out, gamers might even like it. On the other hand, blatant placements without regard to game context and flow will take a hard beating." Truer words were never spoken.

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Hold up. History versus fantasy? Sure, but the firepower freak who cites his virtual CAR-15’s specs—30-round clip firing 11.6 rounds per second—isn’t just flashing his Soldier of Fortune subscription; he’s also measuring himself against AK-47-armed opponents (where the one is interesting only in opposition to the others). That same artillery-nerd factor holds true, fact or fiction, Heckler & Koch or hyperblaster.

“It was important to create classes that not only appear unique, but have well-accented roles and abilities,” says Splash Damage owner and ETQW lead designer Paul Wedgwood. “For instance, the Global Defense Force Engineer wears a distinctive helmet and has mines on a belt harness—you can look at him and know how many he has left—whereas the Strogg Oppressor strikes a bold silhouette with the wing structure on his back. See it as a sort of communication array that animates up and into position as the Oppressor calls on fire support weapons.”

We pull a page from ETQW’s imaginary military reference manual to study the GDF Engineer and Strogg Oppressor.

\* Shawn Elliott

“A strong defensive class armed with either the N22 combat shotgun or N80 assault rifle with an optional 45mm grenade launcher attachment, the Engineer constructs objectives, repairs vehicles and deployables, plants land mines, and defuses Strogg plasma charges,” says Splash Damage owner and Enemy Territory: Quake Wars lead designer Paul Wedgwood. “He also deploys and maintains his own defense turrets such as the Crossfire antipersonnel, Ogre antivehicle, and Guardian artillery-Interceptor turrets. Crossfire and Ogre turrets automatically detect and engage Strogg infantry and air/ground vehicles, respectively, and can also be manned, allowing players to override automatic systems and engage targets of their choice.”

Says Wedgwood: “The Oppressor is the Strogg offensive fire-support specialist. While only lightly armed with a standard Lacerator plasma rifle, he can inflict massive casualties on the enemies of the Makron, bringing colossal destruction to the battlefield. The Oppressor deploys bombardment devices such as the rail howitzer, plasma mortar, and the terrifying dark-matter cannon, raining down fire on enemies by designating them with his targeting device. The Oppressor can also throw a beacon to bring down a catastrophic Violator orbital strike, a fearsome pillar of energy that burns across the landscape, destroying everything in its path. He can also drop a tactical energy shield to provide his teammates with temporary cover from enemy fire.”
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Remake, reimagining, reinvention—what's the difference? According to Crystal Dynamics, plenty—so file Tomb Raider: Anniversary (October 31, 2006 marked the 10th) under "original retelling," if you've gotta give it a name.

Inspired by, though not ripped directly from, the original game's giant ancient temples and box-pushing/lever-pulling puzzles, Anniversary fleshes out the first TR's story (Lara's hunt for "the Scion," for those keeping track of MacGuffins) while building a new game from the ground up. Crystal Dynamics' directive: Take you on a nostalgia trip without tripping over the original game's outdated grid-based level design and drives-like-a-truck heroine mechanics. Levels feature familiar sights and elements (from rampaging T-Rexes to ancient contraptions composed of cumbersome cogs and gears), but they've been overhauled to take advantage of Lara's Tomb Raider: Legend physics tricks and revamped controls. (To put a fine point on it, Crystal Dynamics tried re-creating a few levels from the original note-for-note in the Legend engine, only to find Lara could blow through most of them in quadruple time.) You still place that cog on that peg, yeah—but after the gears start grinding, Lara now pole-vaults Prince of Persia–style from gear to gear of the creaking machine.

What's most appealing to us about Tomb Raider is Crystal D's promised return to the original game's less-is-more philosophy of combat—to revisit the quiet expanses of antediluvian antechambers where it was just you, some perplexing ancient apparatus, and 20 minutes of nerve-racking leaps set to the stark lack of a musical score.

What's least appealing about Anniversary is Crystal Dynamics' decision to bring the game out for the PC, PlayStation 2, and PSP only. Without an Xbox 360 or PS3 version to drive the need for shiny next-gen-console graphics, Eidos has no plans to offer a high-end "Next-Gen Content" graphics option in the PC version à la Tomb Raider: Legend. (Crystal Dynamics admits it's also working on a "truly next-gen" Lara game, presumably/hopefully for PC, too).

Earthshaking it's not, but Eidos isn't trying to reinvent so much as reinvoke. Other sepia-tinged specifics range from familiar incidental melodies that strike up when animals attack to the old "ring inventory" system. The "new" Legend Lara model is even decked out in classic tomb-raiding garb, from tight blue leotard and butt-hugging gun harness to cute li'l backpack and fashionable braid. And really, that's the whole reason you read this article, isn't it? —Sean Molloy
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Fallen angel Lennox launches a postteleport surprise attack.

LENNOX ANIMATES LIKE SOME DEMONIC PANTHER READY TO POUNCE.
God works in mysterious ways—and apparently, he has a whole secret agency just to handle his earthly dirty work. Ah, but the upcoming Infernal isn’t shaping up to be some typical goody-goody world-saving scenario. You see, you’re not working for the heavenly Etherlight agency; you’re a fallen angel and one of hell’s newest operatives. The game’s goal is to put the unholy hurt on God’s minions and restore the balance. Someone call Todd McFarlane—stat—and see if he’s miffed about his Spawn shtick getting aped.

Sparing most of the gory plot details, Ryan Lennox may have been Etherlight’s top agent, but being a hothead ruffled a few angelic feathers. From the looks of the demo’s dustups, Lennox’s former employer is about to receive some payback.

No doubt about it, Infernal’s graphics are tight. The two-level sneak peek looks smart, and Lennox animates like some demonic panther ready to pounce: Crouch behind objects, post up on walls, or dive out of harm’s way. The camera and style remind us of modern console classic Resident Evil 4 (which, by the way, is PC-bound. But we digress….), while the unfolding action is strictly balls-out gunplay. Load up with some conventional gear—pistols, shurikens, SMGs, and shotys—or let loose with some ungodly powers. The most mundane gifts are the demon’s stock-in-trade flaming gouts that erupt from your hands. As you get more infernal, you’ll unlock more abilities. Among the more intriguing powers is line-of-sight teleportation. By simply pointing the reticule and hitting a button, you can warp to another location for a few seconds before returning to your original position. It’s perfect for hitting heavy troopers from behind. Another power worth noting is something you’ve seen before: telekinesis. Lift up stuff with your mind. Yeah, yeah, big whoop.

What really matters here is that the game uses Ageia PhysX. Brace yourself—a game actually built with the Ageia Physics Processing Unit in mind. Crazy, eh? Well, in early tests, we’ve seen curtains of floating dust mites in what must be the mustiest cloister this side of Vatican City. Debris, flamable barrels—but it’s nothing you can’t already see in Havok’s software-based physics. Here’s hoping the pyrotechnics will get cranked up to justify Ageia’s pricey peripheral.

Speaking of “cranked,” the angelic agents of Etherlight might need to get their heads screwed on straight. In our playthrough, the enemy A.I. had moments of greatness: Enemies ducked behind cover, peeked out, and occasionally fired blindly around a corner…only to be shuffled onto the short bus for bipolar team tactics. Foes failed to coordinate attacks, even when standing near each other—or they set up preposterous ambushes, knowing exactly when we’d turn a corner into a hail of gunfire. It’s not quite Three Stooges moronic, but it’s not fit for tactical Mensa membership either.

The only other possible obstacle could be in the storytelling. Developer Metropolis is based in Poland, and Eastern Euro titles tend to have more broken English than a Scrabble game at Borat’s pad. We’re keeping our fingers crossed for no lost-in-translation moments after hearing a few early sampled bits. Unless, of course, the developers want to intentionally amp up the audio cheese—in which case, we say, “You’re off to a great start!”

You know what? Take any critiques with a grain of salt. We’re playing with an 80-percent-complete build; as we go to press, there’s still time for the developers to tweak the game. But if they hope to hit their intended holiday release schedule, the clock is ticking. • Darren Gladstone

### Infernal

**Part Resident Evil 4, part internal affairs, all hell breaks loose**

**Publisher:** Playlogic  
**Developer:** Metropolis  
**Genre:** Action  
**Release Date:** December 2006

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**Teleportation trick No. 26: Warp behind foes and shoot ‘em in the back before the power meter depletes.**

**Tiger Punching Muay Thai monks? Ayup. Asbestos jackets? Ditto.**

**Soul sucking—seen it before? Infernal’s indebted to Psi-Ops: The Mindgate Conspiracy.**
“Online, every player creates and customizes his or her own character,” says Hassinger. “See Two Worlds’ eight-man multiplayer mode as a small-scale MMORPG. Matchmaking servers save characters, inventory, stats, and replays.”
EUROPE RISING?

Is it becoming financially feasible to develop PC games primarily for the European market? Surprisingly, TopWare chairman Dirk Hassinger says no. “In all of Europe, only Germany has a market with definite tastes that differ from the continent, and which is big enough to make focused development feasible. Anno 1701, Gothic 3, and The Settlers II: The Next Generation are games designed specifically for the German market—they sell there, but they have a harder time reaching an international audience. However, this means that nearly all development costs need to be recouped in Germany. Currently, the German PC market is big enough to do this, but I suspect that it will shift to something more in line with North America in the near future.”

So what, if anything, characterizes Polish- and/or Eastern European–developed games? “The only thing that I can think of is the technical advantage,” Hassinger answers. “East European developers mostly use proprietary game engines and no middleware.”

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Note the wind-ruffled woods and busy NPCs and know where, between The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion and Gothic 3, to tack Two Worlds’ pin on the role-playing-game-genre map—Krakow, Poland–based developer Reality Pump charted both RPGs.

Although an admirer of each, and as little as he likes to poke fingers at first-rate programming, TopWare chairman Dirk Hassinger argues that Oblivion and Gothic 3 alike “feel unfinished. The former’s world shouldn’t seem so empty. NPCs should lead full lives, not simply stand in hours on end,” he says. “And if you ride a horse, able to fight from that horse as better atmosphere and a more believable world (than Oblivion), especially in NPC behavior, but in other ways strikes me as a technical step backward.”

So far, evidence that Two Worlds—some of these shortcomings is found in—decides who you war with and when, war itself is unavoidable.

Two Worlds does away with computational die rolling, and Hassinger describes the spellplay and sorcery on tap as a “next-gen take on the system introduced in Oblivion. Fighting is physics-based, but because we permit more moves and animations, our combat is more interesting and challenging. Actually, I’d compare melee action to the Tekken series (PS2), fighting on horseback to Shadow of the Colossus (PS2), and spellcasting to action-RPGs in general.”

Also, as with RPGs in general, players opt into

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Two Worlds

Polish team takes on Gothic 3 and Oblivion

PREVIEW

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Also, as with RPGs in general, players opt into
WASD-centric games until my hand gets better. Gladstoned

**COLUMN**

My middle finger won’t move. It’s stuck. Totally immobilized. I’m not kidding. I could use a little help here.

You know, at times like this—even when I’m being sincere (it happens on occasion)—it’s hard to get any sympathy. No tears lost over some jerk whose chief responsibilities include playing videogames for a living and figuring out new ways to sneak the phrase “brown applesauce” into a national publication.

Here I am, benched—unable to play games, wearing some freaky voodoo glove to ward off carpal tunnel, and hunting and pecking my way through this story. And please, no jokes about my love life. What brought this on? I have a name for my pain, and it is “WASD.” That’s right: I’m now a tendinitis casualty from playing too many PC games. One minute, I’m minding my own business—and then, all of a sudden, some renegade digit on my left hand forgets who’s boss. The clawed formation my left hand assumes when playing first-person shooters has put me in a world of hurt. I know I live a pretty damned charmed life, playing games and all—and if this is the worst that can happen to me, I’m friggin’ ecstatic. In the meantime, the doctor’s orders: I can’t play any WASD-centric games until my hand gets better. Talk about bittersweet irony!

So no Battlefield 2142? No Dark Messiah of Might and Magic? Hmm. Wait a sec. Maybe this isn’t as bad as it could be. This whole tendinitis thing could be my body’s way of saying, “Hey, maybe now’s a good time to take a break. Go outside, maybe check out that new flick at the multiplex. Or, you know what? Your fiancée is sitting right near you. Try talking to her. She might actually like it.”

Now that I think about it, I can use the break. Athletes get some downtime in the off-season, so why can’t I? (Yes, I just compared myself to an athlete. You got a problem with that?) When something goes haywire, they run to the doctor and start some Herculean physical-therapy routine until they’re ready to return to action.

But this does actually get me wondering: Do professional gamers worry about this, too? Does Fatal1ty ice down his mitts after a training session? Does he perform regular hand-calisthenics routines? Does he have a personal hand trainer? Man, that’d be sweet. Wish I had one of those right about now.

Barring that, I just gotta take it easy—maybe switch hands. Hands out. First, extend your left arm and hold your left hand parallel to the floor, palm down. Take your right hand and place it across your left one. With the four fingers from your right hand on the back of your left hand, and the right thumb pressed against your left palm’s base, gently push the left hand downward. Now, switch hands.

**HANDY TIPS**

At the risk of getting even remotely serious, I’m gonna save you a trip to the doctor. Here are some things to keep in mind when gaming.

**Stop.** If you’re playing anything for more than an hour, take a breather. Miss a round of fighting or just find a safe spot in-game and walk away. Go see that “sun” thing you’ve been hearing so much about.

**Hands up.** Extending fingers and placing palms together put your elbows out and gently press your hands together. To achieve the proper form, envision something between “Shaolin monk” and “scheming mastermind.”

**Hands out.** First, extend your left arm and hold your left hand parallel to the floor, palm down. Take your right hand and place it across your left one. With the four fingers from your right hand on the back of your left hand, and the right thumb pressed against your left palm’s base, gently push the left hand downward. Now, switch hands.

**All right,** back to World of Warcraft. Send me $25 for the copay, take two aspirin, and call me in the morning.

I’m now a tendinitis casualty from playing too many PC games.


High noon in PC gaming’s Wild West

**THE GOOD**

**MICROSOFT CHANGES VISTA LICENSING TERMS**

Rejoice! Microsoft recently went back on its PC-community-infuriating decision to only allow a single postactivation reinstall of the upcoming Windows Vista operating system. Under the new licensing terms, Vista works more like the current Windows XP. You can reinstall it as many times as you need to, but it can only remain active on a single PC at a time. Yay!

**THE BAD**

**VIRUSES FOR EVERYONE!**

According to security vendor Symantec, ever-increasing amounts of exploit code—meaning viruses, spyware, adware, and denial-of-service attacks—are expected to plague Apple’s Mac OS X as it continues to gain in popularity. Much like celebrities and their paparazzi, this negative attention is the steep price that such vital software pays for fortune and glory.

**THE UGLY**

**SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS**

They’re getting out of hand again. Practically every new game coming out these days is screaming the message: “Get a new PC, loser.” But not all of us want or can afford a new one yet. Developers: Calm down. Yes, we love new and shiny, we love bells and whistles, but we also love to play our games. So ease up on designing for PCs none of us have yet. Not everything has to be on the bleeding edge.
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OVERHEARD IN OUTLAND

WOW geezers on life after 60 in The Burning Crusade

PREVIEW

SEREVIAN: Forget Blood Elves, Draenei, what bit of obscure lore gets fouled up by putting Paladins in the Horde...

PHLENSE: ...or the Draenei crash-landing their spaceship in Azeroth...

SEREVIAN: ...The main thing I’ve taken from playing the Burning Crusade beta is that it is the Great Equalizer: Everyone gets to basically start over.

PHLENSE: Yeah… I’ve already forgotten the new races; there’s no way I’m grinding to 60 again, but your Great Equalizer is kinda pissing me off. I went through the three-boss Hellfire Ramparts five-man instance in an hour and got some blue boots that are better than my tier 2 Bloodfang Boots. Once BC hits, there won’t be much difference between my character, who’s been at level 60 for over a year, and a rogue that just hit 60 two weeks ago, and that’s just weird.

SEREVIAN: But this is just how MMOs and expansions go—you get the best gear then a new dungeon opens up (or, in this case, an alternate universe) with better gear. There’s no light at the end of the tunnel—there’s just the tunnel, and the tunnel, and the tunnel. From what I’ve played, BC’s “gear replacement curve” is proving fairly evenly paced—it’ll be several levels before I have my hat, bracers, cape, or even half of my entire armor set replaced—but yeah, by level 70, all bets are off.

PHLENSE: “Muddification” is inevitable, and I still think it may be severe enough in this case to make people reconsider how and why they play the game. For me, it already has; my guild’s final Blackwing Lair run was last week—partly because of my new-blue-boot story—and now we’re concentrating on Ahn’Qiraj.

I spend the rest of my in-game hours trying to figure out which alt to level (my 30 hunter or 34 warrior), which class is going to be overpowered god mode in BC, and how much I’ll hate myself if I’m playing a female Night Elf hunter named Gams.

I think my guild will transition to the new 25-man endgame dungeons with only a little drama—but what’s going to happen with the überguilds that have evolved to conquer the cutting edge of 40-man content? I know that if my guild broke up I’d seriously consider quitting the game.

SEREVIAN: My guild drama has already begun—mine’s a 500-plus-member monster with a layered caste system. There’s an elite 40-man raiding crew within the metaguild; a minor league crew (that’s me) that runs mostly 20-man raids but can’t hold a steady roster; an underground shadow guild of subversive complainers who want to be on the elite squad and keep threatening to form their own guild; a bunch of normal people who just like to play; and then some filthy untouchables who exclaim “Ding!” when they hit level 9 and ask, “Does anyone else here cut themselves?” in guild chat.


SEREVIAN: Can you imagine what would have happened if Blizzard had tried to implement hero classes in BC? Or even one regular new class? That’s the only thing keeping me from harshing too much on the fact that the beta feels so much like business as usual—refinement, yeah, but lacking anything that’ll radically change the game. How sad is it that I’m excited about a looking for group interface?

PHLENSE: Hell, I’ll be happy if my rogue can just take out a shadow priest/frost mage/hunter/warlock 50 percent of the time. And if not, say hello to Gams, boys. Her tree-trunk thighs may mesmerize, but her multishot will crit for, like, 4K.

SEREVIAN: AFK, guildie is cutting himself again. • Sean Molloy and Demian Linn

Serevian

Level 61 Night Elf priest, aka GFWSXTRAS

Nice boots.

Nice shoulders.

I’ve wasted my life.

Phlense

Level 61 human rogue, aka GFW02.1UP.com producer Demian Linn

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PRESIDENTIAL OVERSIGHT
Before Dubya’s victory in the 2000 elections, <i>South Park</i> creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone proclaimed they would produce a presidential satire based on whoever won. The short-lived result—<i>That’s My Bush!</i>, which mercilessly mocked politics and sitcoms—is now available on DVD.

SHOOT!
Don’t move. You lie in wait, one shot—one kill. Campers, your weapon has arrived. The $30 Nerf N-Strike Longshot CS-6 comes with 12 darts capable of hitting targets up to 35 feet away. This spongy sniper rifle can be easily broken down for hits while on assignment (translation: some assembly required).

THE SOFTWIRE
This inventive sci-fi book by P.J. Haarman is a lot more than a cybernetic <i>Harry Potter</i>, though it may sound similar at first: An orphaned child develops uncanny powers—in this case, interfacing with computers. Be sure to check out <a>ringsoft8.com</a>, a free MMO game based on the series.

ROTISSERIE CONGRESS
Representative Bob Goodlatte (R-VA-6th District) is a good bet. He snagged 120 points when H.R.3408 became a law. Just avoid Representative Roy Blunt (R-MO). His latest bill, H.R.6130, got kicked to subcommittee and earned a measly five points. The creators of Web game <http://fantasycongress.us> are betting that you’ll be into politics if you treat it like fantasy football. Want to see what all the hubbub is about? The short-lived result—<i>That’s My Bush!</i>—is now available on DVD.

FARE PLAY
Some stuff is too weird to make up—not that it matters. Baffled by political intrigue? Consider <i>Very Bad Company</i>: Should you betrayed your heart and soul to this game and the people that love it? Or should you sell it for your personal gain? It’sf’s—it’s fun, it’s democracy: the game!

THE PAYBACK
Those capes-and-tights guys may save the world, but when it comes to collateral damage, they get a pass. Not anymore. In the new comic, <i>The Boys</i>, writer Garth Ennis assembles a twisted team of psychopaths to make ‘em pay. WARNING: NOT FOR KIDS!

10 things we’re into this month

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

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3.

4.

1.

INTELLIVISION 2
While everyone else is lining up to find PS3s or WIs, you can distract your little bro with Mattel’s Hyperscan (hyperscan.com). This simple $70 console uses CD-based games and playing cards with RFID chips that upload abilities into the games. Think <i>Magic: The Gathering</i> meets <i>Mortal Kombat</i>.

KEEPIN’ IT UNREAL
Want to see what all the hubbub is about with Epic’s new graphics engine? The first place you get to see it in action is the Xbox 360’s <i>Gears of War</i>. Now that Epic finally got that game out the door, maybe we’ll be playing <i>UT 2007</i> soon.

OFF THE HOOK
Yeah, you want to show off your latest sweet-ass cell phone to people. Now, it’s time to go seriously old school on ‘em with a slightly modern take (Thinkgeek.com). $40 retro phone isn’t a prop; it’s a slightly modern take. Thinkgeek.com’s $40 retro phone isn’t a prop; it’s a wireless Bluetooth handset.

COVER STORY
If you’ve never heard of Me First and the Gimme Gimmes, the band’s shtick is performing punk covers of popular nonpunk songs. Their latest release, <i>L.A. Street Racing</i>, features Willie Nelson songs and the theme from <i>Smokey and the Bandit</i>. Goofy, maybe—but catchy as hell.

10 things we’re into this month

5.

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PIPELINE
Save some cash for these upcoming games

DECEMBER 2006
Rainbow Six Vegas
Ubisoft

The Shield
Aspyr Media

JANUARY 2007
Battletstations: Midway
Edios Interactive

Heart of Empire: Rome
Paradox Interactive

Jade Empire
2K Games

World of WarCraft:
The Burning Crusade
Blizzard

FEBRUARY 2007
Dead Reefs
DreamCatcher

FUEL
DreamCatcher

Genocis Rising:
The Universal Crusade
DreamCatcher

Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising
SOE

L.A. Street Racing
Groove Games

Maelstrom
Codemasters

PureSim Baseball 2006
Matix Games

Storm of War: Battle of Britain
Ubisoft

Test Drive Unlimited
Atari

War Front: Turning Point
CDV Software

MARCH 2007
Command & Conquer 3:
Tiberium Wars
Electronic Arts

Dungeons & Dragons Online:
Foraken Lands
Atari

Enemy Territory: Quake Wars
Activision

The Lord of the Rings Online:
Shadows of Angmar
Midway

Marine Sharpshooter III
Groove Games

Resident Evil 4
Ubisoft

TimeShift
Vivendi Games

WINTER/SOPIER 2007
Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures
Funcom

Deative
Atari

BIOEHOCK
2K Games

Brothers in Arms: Hell’s Highway
Ubisoft

CALL OF JUAREZ
Ubisoft

CRYsis
Electronic Arts

Erache Extreme Metal Racing
Metro3D

Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar
Stardock

HAZE
Ubisoft

HELLGATE: LONDON
Namco Bandai

HUXLEY
Webzen

PROJECT OFFSET
Offset Software

SPORE
Electronic Arts

Supreme Commander
THQ

SURRENDER? “NUTS!”
Kudosoft

TABULA RASA
NCsoft

Shadowrun
Microsoft

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THE NEW FACTION

Tiberium Wars’ third faction is revealed: Tiberium-hungry biomechanical aliens. The Global Defense Initiative treats them as foes. The Brotherhood of Nod welcomes them as visitors. The truth’s probably somewhere in between.

EXCLUSIVE HANDS-ON

Kane. Tank rushes. Resource hoarding. Full-motion video with B-list sci-fi celebs. Yup, the legendary Command & Conquer RTS series is back, and nostalgic fanboys couldn’t be happier. The emergence of Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars last May, however, left more questions than answers. Who’s the mysterious third faction? How does the game play? And can the C&C legacy hold its own in a post–Company of Heroes world?

We’re here to answer those questions. We’ve seen the third faction and confronted the enemy in the single-player game. We’ve challenged EA’s finest to a winner-takes-all multiplayer match and lived—so now we’ll tell about it.

BY ERIC NEIGHER
A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMAND & CONQUER

COMMAND & CONQUER: TIBERIAN SUN

It’s revealed in this sequel that GDI “won” the first C&C, but that it’s now fighting to preserve what few “clean” (i.e., non-Tiberium-infested) areas of Earth remain. Meanwhile, the down-but-not-out Brotherhood of Nod fights among itself until its former leader, Kane, reveals that it takes more than some wimpy ion cannon to keep a bald man down.

COMMAND & CONQUER

GDI and the Brotherhood of Nod struggle to gain control of an extraterrestrial but incalculably valuable substance called Tiberium. This first game had two mutually exclusive campaigns, so you could work toward your preferred conclusion: Either GDI vaporizes Nod’s headquarters with an orbital ion cannon, or Nod nukes Paris. Tough choice, we know.

THE ONLY PROBLEM WITH ALIEN URBAN RENEWAL—A STARBUCKS ON EVERY CORNER.

WE MISS THE NAÏVE TÉ, BUT THE INDUSTRY HAS CHANGED FOR THE BETTER.”

—GREG ZESCHUK
SATELLITE UPLINK

First, let’s get you up to speed. Forget the greenhouse effect or holes in the ozone—the crystalline green compound Tiberium is slowly poisoning the planet, spreading across the landscape and threatening to wipe out life as we know it. Its value as a resource has sparked a worldwide war. The Global Defense Initiative (GDI) has finally developed a means to combat the alien mineral’s spread; while cleanup commences in Europe and the States, the evil Kane and his Brotherhood of Nod are back to their old terrorist tricks.

Suddenly, the war takes an unexpected turn. A mysterious force hits Germany: Munich goes dark, and formerly spotless Cologne is suddenly sprouting fields of Tiberium. Nod isn’t behind it. It’s aliens—part biological, part mechanical, and 100 percent dependent upon Tiberium to survive. Flying swarms of intelligent razor blades slice GDI’s scouts to ribbons. Massive, shambling tripods with laser-bearing tentacles punch through the toughest tank armor. City-dwarfing motherships belch out plasmatic destruction. There goes the neighborhood.

While the GDI calls them “invaders,” the Brotherhood of Nod hails them as “visitors.” At some point during C&C3’s 30-mission single-player campaign, all becomes clear. You start by choosing either the GDI or Brotherhood of Nod—but by the game’s end, you’ll be crushing humans under foot, tentacle, and/or pseudopod. In order to tell this apocalyptic tale, EA assembled a team of screenwriters, producers, directors, and even MIT eggheads to hash out the campaign’s story line. Executive producer Mike Verdu promises the plot follows right in the footsteps of previous C&C Tiberian titles—he even talks about incorporating limited branching elements during the single-player experience.

Your first mission in the GDI campaign in Germany, for example, is a recon sweep through Munich. After its successful completion, you may choose between confronting the alien menace in either Cologne or Frankfurt. Choose Cologne, and you’ll liberate an airfield that will provide air support for you in the Frankfurt scenario. Opt for Frankfurt, and you’ll get extra tanks in Cologne. Ultimately, though, Verdu insists that “no matter what order you do the missions, the story will unfold coherently and end in a satisfying way.”

LOW POWER

Even though the calendar in EA’s Los Angeles office says 2006, the first thing you see in the single-player campaign is full-motion video—a nod to 1996 and the Velveeta-dripping salad days of FMV. Tiberium Wars’ cast includes fanboy fave Joe Kucan returning as Kane (see “Raising Kane,” pg. 73). Watching his back is a veritable who’s-who of sci-fi stars, including Josh Holloway (Sawyer from Lost), Tricia Helfer (Number Six from the new Battlestar Galactica), and Lando “Billy Dee Williams” Calrissian, just to name a few. The cut-scenes hit that sweet-spot level of camp: just east of Pacino, a bit west of Shatner.

The “cinematic” vibe extends beyond cut-scenes. Deserts, bleached out and bleak, give way to Tiberium-heavy “red zones” with vibrant >
primary colors. (The visuals are gorgeous, but Verdu assures us the demo is running on a single graphics card, with no dual-graphics-card SLI mumbo jumbo.) For units themselves, detailed animations bring each trooper to life, and it’s very easy to pick out even small units from the map at a glance. Considering Nod leans heavily on stealth tactics, scrutinizing every pixel is essential or you might not notice that tank uncloaking inside your base.

All this environmental detail exists for more than just your pixel-hunting pleasure. Slick, reflective office buildings can garrison infantry à la Company of Heroes. Indeed, even if you don’t order your forces to garrison in a structure, troops near any kind of cover—buildings, cars, rubble—will automatically use it as defilade. The catch: Nearly everything on a C&C3 map is destructible. That means if you keep units in a location too long, the enemy will be sure to redecorate the sky with a stunning combination of drywall and troopers.

HARVESTER UNDER ATTACK
C&C3 will no doubt draw some flak for sticking to the old-school “dirt-farming” model of RTS gameplay. The best modern games of the genre, including Relic’s Company of Heroes and Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War, sport tactical, capture-and-hold resource-gathering models with less emphasis on ordering around servants, peons, peasants, or—in this case—big, bulky harvesters. C&C3, by contrast, still has you scooping up crystals and building power plants—just like in the ‘good ol’ days.”

Systems like C&C3’s are easy to pick up, but hard to master—hell, Ensemble Studios has predicated an entire series on resource gathering. In addition, dirt farming lends itself well to C&C3’s simplified

C&C COMMUNIQUÉ
While the music is not being written by C&C vet Frank Klepacki, newcomers Steve Jablonsky and Trevor Morris are composing pieces in the classic C&C style, complete with some shout-outs to popular old tracks.
controls. For better or for worse, you don't customize individual units for particular combat functions or micromanage special abilities in the heat of a fight. You won't clash over map control points, or get into constant firefight in key areas. Moreover, you're not going to know ahead of time where the majority of battles will go down, so there's almost no camping or bushwhacking in a game of C&C3. Of course, if you're into tactical gameplay (or if you have 1337 micro skills), that may not sound particularly appealing—this game is built for players more into action than minutiae. It's also another gameplay decision clearly geared toward making C&C3 "console friendly." The serendipitous coincidence also makes the game "more accessible" on PC.

As with the classic resource-gathering setup, the units doing the gathering don't double as soldiers—so that means you need to keep a vigilant watch on your infrastructure units. Verdu notes, "Some players' entire strategies revolve around attacking harvesters." Some call it "cheese," some say it's fair game, and others might kick the crap out of you at school the next day for doing it—but for better or for worse, it's back. To help reduce some of the frustration players might experience, harvesters are now equipped with some basic defenses. Of course, combat-ready harvesters may prove to be counterproductive—rather than run for cover when they're attacked, your gatherers now stubbornly stand their ground and fight back, even against overwhelming odds. Worse, there's no button to recall them to a safe haven. On the other hand, if your little buddies do end up getting bullied, you'll at least get a cheerful "a harvester is under attack" warning from the console so you can send in the armored cavalry. And, to be fair, harvesters are stubborn, but they aren't totally dim: They'll automatically seek out replacement Tiberium supplies once their original cache depletes, even if it means traveling across the map to find more. Moreover, should you have more than one harvester, the A.I. is smart enough to send one on a long-distance Tiberium run while keeping the other near the depleted supply, harvesting the stuff as it slowly replenishes.

The goal, as with most modern RTS games, is to allow you to make strategic decisions without having to micromanage every single unit on the battlefield. (C&C3's upcoming competitor Supreme Commander takes a similar approach, allowing you to queue up orders—all the way out to the endgame if you're thinking that far ahead.)

Strategy and planning are all well and good, but nothing beats authentic combat experience. Tiberium Wars moves at a fast, frenetic pace—and maps are small in relation to how quickly your units move. As Prussian general Helmuth von Moltke noted: "No battle plan survives contact with the enemy." With that, it was time to face my foe.

---

RAISING KANE

Not everyone gets to come back from the dead three times. Decked out in his familiar sinister leathery garb and with his dome freshly polished, Joseph D. Kucan (aka the guy who plays Kane) hasn't aged a day in 10 years. That only lends more credence to Kane's "immortality" as the maniacal mastermind behind the Brotherhood of Nod. How does it feel to rule an international terrorist cult and reprise his role after all this time?

On Kane's new look: "I've gained 200 pounds, so obviously Kane's going to be a little heavier. And there's the long, curly hair cascading boyishly down my shoulders. No, just kidding."

How Kane survived that ion cannon blast: "One of my favorite things about the fiction of [C&C] is unanswered questions. I think it's very important, when you're dealing with an audience of one...to leave some space for imagination. I know why Kane comes back—as an actor I have to answer those questions for the character to work—but I ain't tellin'."

On what makes Kane such a good dictator: "I think what separates evil dictators from the rest of us is the willingness to use people, to view them as cattle. Kane preaches an ideology of 'brotherhood,' but he's also [a user]."

On his favorite unit: "If I say Mammoth Tanks, I'll be drawn and quartered, right? However, I will say I used to be the Stealth Tank king. That was my favorite unit ever. And Banshees are pretty cool."

On what's next for him: "The Command & Conquer 3 expansion pack!"
My opponent, C&C3 producer Amer Ajami, walks into the room. We nod, two cagey opponents eyeing each other before the battle of wills begins. There’s a catchphrase at EA that you can expect to hear more of: “RTS as a sport.” Verdu says, “We want to make C&C3 as much fun to watch as it is to play.” Most of you are probably going, “Shyeah, right.” Whatever the case, EA has inserted all sorts of bells and whistles into C&C3’s multiplayer game, hoping it’ll become the next major competition vehicle in the world of electronic “sports.” While matches only allow eight actual players, they’ll accommodate far more folks as spectators. Among these spectators, one guy can be designated the “administrator”; he’ll be able to move the camera for everyone else, offer commentary on what’s happening via voice-over-IP, and even use a built-in John Madden-style “telestrator” to break down plays. Good thing, too—I’ll want to replay those reels countless times after I beat this man at his own game. You can mark my words on that.
Game 1:
Amer promises to go easy on me as Mr. Goody Two-Shoes chooses GDI. “I didn’t get into the game biz by being coddled,” I reply while siding with Nod. A Nod harvester bug nixes the first round. Amer quits out, and the “Mission Successful” screen declares me the winner. One for one!

Game 2:
This time, it’s civil war: GDI versus GDI. “Our design philosophy was to make C&C3 as fast as possible,” Verdu says, “right down to loading times.” And C&C3 proceeds at a breakneck pace. From the speedy mission load times (less than 10 seconds) to the relentless tempo of the build-gather-tech-build cycle, there isn’t a single moment to sit back and relax.

This is a real-time strategy experience for quick draws and steely nerves. One benefit (or drawback) of the game’s swift pace is that it’s tough to rush. I should know—I tried. By the time you get your units ready to overrun enemy territory, he’ll be three levels up the tech chain and more than capable of taking you on with only a few of his advanced units ready.

PLAYER: Juggernaut
POSITION: Offensive Line
TEAM: GDI
YEAR: Freshman
This walking artillery platform is capable of carrying out both direct attacks on buildings and units and providing indirect artillery support. Simply use your Sniper Team to call in a little bad news on your enemies’ head. A single Juggernaut can take down a reinforced structure in a matter of seconds.

C&C COMMUNIQUÉ
The Forgotten (those creepy mutants from previous C&C games) are best left forgotten. They won’t be a playable race, nor will they factor into Tiberium Wars’ story line.
Now for the play-by-play: First thing up—build a power plant, then a refinery. By design, you can’t queue up multiple building orders with a single base. In order to do this, you need to build separate structures called “cranes.” Each crane occupies a tab on your interface and can build simultaneously with your main base. I find that it’s kind of a pain to have to switch from tab to tab while ordering the airstrike. The Orcas rain fire two-by-two, (and yes, this is a figure of speech) with two missiles each. I could be the perfect opportunity to press the assault repelled, this is more than an easy goal for the ) Mammoth Tanks go down, but who’s for this. Antiaircraft turrets and missile troops are fierce (perhaps even a wee bit overpowered in this build) and well worth their cost. Turtling is most definitely not a solid option in this game, especially for new players—as long as you cover all the angles. Defense turrets have limited fire arcs. Next, I decide to take a page from the German war machine and try a Luftwaffe-style air blitz. With three airfields erected, I need to start constructing Orcas—and quick. Amer somehow has another force on its way to attack already, this time with at least six Mammoth Tanks. It’s all but over for me, right? Wrong! My Orcas tear through the tanks like a razor-blade tornado. Honestly, it’s a bit disappointing how easily the Mammoth Tanks go down, but who’s complaining? With the assault repelled, this could be the perfect opportunity to press the attack. I hum Wagner’s The Ride of the Valkyries while ordering the airstrike. The Orcas rain fire upon a few of Amer’s factories, but he was ready for this. Anti aircraft turrets and missile troops turn them into shrapnel. He didn’t plan this, did he? Did he lure me into a trap? At this point, Amer, who had expanded his base into another Tiberium field, quickly rebuilds, and I’m quickly overwhelmed.… well… this fight is over. What should I have expected? He is the game’s producer, after all.

The ease with which cheap missile troops took down my expensive air units is a harsh reality, but it demonstrates the rigid rock-paper-scissors dynamic built into C&C3’s combat. This tête-à-tête with Amer also underscores the inherent back-and-forth gameplay of a C&C3 multiplayer match. He explains that our match’s tug-of-war style was not only typical, but intentional. C&C3 makes it tough for one side to get the upper hand straight out of the box, even if that side is more experienced. You’ve got to exploit strategic rather than tactical mistakes to win, and that makes the matches—quick as they may be—more evenly balanced.

Easy for him to say. I’m still wiping sweat from my brow after that loss. Maybe I’ll review the reels and use the telestrator to highlight where things went wrong. Next time, Amer won’t know what hit him. • Eric Neigher
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“Wait for the patch,” they say. What about the guy who bought your game on day one, developer? Why should he have to wait for the freakin’ patch to properly play the game he just plunked down a hard-earned $49.99 for? Here’s some advice for the publishers of three of this season’s most eagerly awaited games—Neverwinter Nights 2, Battlefield 2142, and Dark Messiah of Might and Magic—all of which suffer from severe technical FUBARs: Make sure your game works right before you ship it, geniuses.

In the case of Dark Messiah, things get even more complicated. While a large percentage of players couldn’t even load the game, many others experienced zero tech issues. You’ll note that our reviewer was among the blessed latter group...though those of us at the GFW offices who tried to play this game had no such luck (and even now, as we go to print some three weeks after Dark Messiah shipped, we still don’t have the thing operational). Bear this cautionary tale in mind as you make your holiday purchasing decisions...although, after you read what we’ve got to say about it, you may not need any further warning at all.

Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor
Reviews \ Neverwinter Nights 2

You need high strength and fortitude to endure NWN2’s tech issues.

Obsidian’s single-player campaign trumps the one in the original NWN.

HALF MY COMBAT EXPERIENCE WAS MARRED BY FIGHTING THE CAMERA WHEN I SHOULD HAVE BEEN FIGHTING THE ENEMY.
NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2

Your next quest: finish developing the game!

The first NWN was hailed mostly for its toolest that let gamers create their own D&D campaigns. BioWare's own campaign, on the other hand, kind of blew. This time around, BioWare enlisted the aid of Obsidian, longtime collaborators and D&D veterans (Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II, Icewind Dale II, and Planescape: Torment, among others), and the result—in terms of storytelling, characters, and quests—is a much more engaging single-player experience.

Obsidian's campaign doesn't break new ground (Uh-oh! Something evil is happening in the Forgotten Realms!), but it's done with much humor, intelligence, and love and respect for the wonky fantasy fest that is D&D. This is an old-fashioned RPG, where brains take precedence over twitch skills, and success is largely determined by the understanding of a role set that only a genius or a 13-year-old could fully comprehend. Not that the game's inaccessible—in fact, Obsidian did a nice job of demystifying D&D for newbies (a friendly 175-page manual helps), while the relatively linear plot and simple side quests keep you moving along and leveling up at a good, strong pace.

Obsidian wisely increased the first game's one-companion limit up to four, giving you a full, controllable party...as it always should be in D&D. The NPCs that join you are the usual assortment of fantasy clichés (the dwarf is grumpy!), but again, the strong writing makes it work—even if none of the characters quite rise to Minsc-level greatness. Your actions and decision-making influence your party's loyalty to you and affect elements of the plot, and a healthy injection of moral ambiguity ensures that not all of those decisions are easy to make.

DUMMIES AND LAGGIN'

All of this is great—and if the review ended here, we could all sing 'Kumbaya' together in happy harmony. But the sad truth is that NWN2 shipped in a pretty messy state, and even after a couple of patches (as of this writing), the biggest problems remain. In general, and depending on your system and tolerance, you're going to spend a lot of time up front doing the job the developers should have done before shipping the game: fixing the weak A.I., futzting around with the graphics options and camera controls, and resetting basic gameplay options until the thing is playable. And good luck with all of that, because not all of it is easily done (or even possible).

Obsidian's touting an updated graphics engine, but what exactly is new about it is hard to discern...other than that it runs like crap, even on high-end systems. I played the game on two different gaming PCs, and in both cases had to suffer, at times, through slideshow speed and terrible stuttering.

The future success of NWN2 will depend, in the short term, on Obsidian and Atari patching the game...and then, as with the first game, on the fans to provide modules of their own. In the latter, at least, we have faith. But in its current state, and for those who just want a single-player RPG, this is recommended to D&D diehards only, who are probably the only ones with enough goodwill to slog through the problems. Everyone else—wait awhile. A great RPG is in here somewhere; it's just not ready yet. • Jeff Green

VERDICT

Campaign is better than the one in NWN1; user mods will keep it alive for years.

Horrendous performance; awkward controls; lame A.I.
their “levels” on pace with your foes is no easy feat, either, especially when you’re saddled with M2’s callous diplomacy system. Get ready for your diplomats to “level down”…a lot.

Replayability is high, as each faction starts in a unique situation that forces you to shift your strategy—and 20-odd factions sharing the same map means 20-factorial things that can go awry. An innocent mistake one turn could have unexpected, game-screwing repercussions hours later. Innocent mistake: Sending my good Christian Crusaders on a 20-turn trek to Antioch at the pope’s behest. Unexpected outcome: Former pal Hungary turns on me when the Crusade abruptly ends…and my Crusaders revert to a “normal” army in the middle of their territory. Bizarre mission quirks frustrate: The pope threatens to excommunicate me unless I call a temporary truce with “fellow Christians” in the Holy Roman Empire. The Holy Roman Empire, however, was issued no such edict…and is freely tearing down my walls. M2 quickly makes you pick a side of that fine line between “punishing details” and “richly nuanced rule system.” But those are just quirks, and Medieval II is a lot of bang for the bullion—whether you crave a detailed toy-soldiers-in-1197-AD simulator or a complex, rewarding Civ-style strategy game, this Total War is a total package. 

**REVIEW**

In Medieval II, every siege is a snowflake: Hunker down close, marvel at the intricate details, and take it as proof of God or intelligent design—or at least godly game design. The broken bodies (measured in hundreds) left littering a battlefield, the way a castle wall crumples to cannon fire, the arc of flaming arrows fired by archers and rotting cow carcasses flung from trebuchets—Total War more than earns its moniker. Even the rules of engagement are nuanced: Cavalry units work wonders with a charge-retreat-charge pattern, flanking matters, and morale is as powerful a weapon as a catapult.

But taken from afar and in large heaps, sieges and snowflakes tend toward sameness; one can only roll a siege tower up to a wall so many different ways (assuming said tower doesn’t get confused on the way—M2’s got a few pathfinding issues). This rampart, this town square, these legionnaires with ladders—didn’t I just do this battle a minute ago? If you spend your Tuesday nights watching History Channel docs about trebuchets, you’re in heaven…but if you’re used to the wilder variety of RTS games like Rise of Legends, déjà vu sets in sooner rather than later. Field battles (and quick battles or online skirmishes) offer a change of scope and pace, but in the Grand Campaign, they come few and far between.

**THE FINE LINE**

Luckily, an “autoresolve” button lets you skip to the less-flashy but more-lasting, addictive stuff when battle fatigue sets in: turn-based Civilization-style wheelings and dealings across olde-tyme Eurasia. While the town-building and army-raising is pretty standard, M2 makes smart, interesting use of agents—priests, princesses, and other specialized pawns that operate outside your armies. They’re important and fun (especially assassins—nothing’s more satisfying than successful regicide), but finding your idle agents is obnoxious…and keeping

**VERDICT**

- Exquisitely detailed battles; complex and addictive Civ-style main campaign.
- Once you’ve seen a few sieges, you’ve seen ‘em all; pretty mean learning curve.

Exquisitely detailed battles; complex and addictive Civ-style main campaign.
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THE GUILD 2

Married—insulted, stabbed, pickpocketed, and kidnapped—with children

PUBLISHER: Aspyr DEVELOPER: 4Head Studios GENRE: Strategy-RPG AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.6GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard
MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

The problem with fusing a city builder and a real-time strategy game is that one’s mainly about building stuff, and the other’s mainly about breaking stuff. Sure, there’s some breaking in a typical city builder, just as there’s some building in a typical RTS. But if you don’t make a clear choice, you’re asking for trouble. Sure enough, Stronghold Legends is asking for trouble. By combining Firefly’s trademark castle building with a full-fledged RTS, this game dumps a lot into your lap. It ramps up easily enough, as do most city builders. But then the fighting starts and everything falls to pieces. Part of the problem is that it’s simply not a very good RTS, with terrible artwork, a chintzy interface, sloppy controls, expensive throwaway armies, and a lot of twiddling that you’re supposed to do when you should probably mind the apple farming, bread baking, and pole turning.

Economies this brittle don’t play well with armies. The walls, boiling oil, and flaming arrows might be briefly pitted against über-unit dragons, werewolf catapults, and a gaggle of knights with special powers, all looking quaint with this 10-years-ago graphics engine. But eventually, someone’s economy breaks and the game is over. Stronghold Legends is a game about someone trying to kick over your sand castle, which was never much fun on the beach, and isn’t much fun here either. • Tom Chick

VERDICT

• Castles are fun to build...
• ...but not while you’re also playing a bad RTS.

THE GUILD 2

Weathering insults and scoping far-off villages for buildings worth buying or spots to raise new ones is mostly what you do in The Guild 2 when you’re not baking cakes, settling feuds, having affairs, blowing up rival businesses, or robbing the local muck-a-mucks blind. The idea in this sequel to Europa 1400: The Guild is to once more glom the character-creation aspects of an RPG onto the resource-building of an RTS and glaze the resulting whatchamajigger with a coat of medieval dynastic scrumming where he who sleeps around most sticks around longest.

Pulling it off entails consuming busywork as you navigate a sizable three-dimensional medieval landscape populated by hundreds of citizens, juggling both social and economic relations. The good news: You can automate tedious responsibilities, like day-to-day business operations—or hauling raw materials from market to industry and (in crafted form) back again. The bad news: Once you stack the local council with family members, you’re incessantly recalled for new elections and criminal proceedings to fend off rival slander or outright bids to wrest you from office. It doesn’t help that The Guild 2 ships with technical issues: characters that disappear into walls, visual artifacts that take a restart to clear, buttons that don’t work at all, and drop-sync issues with multiplayer games. Fans of the original have cause for modest excitement…but not before developer 4Head gets things patched up to snuff. • Matt Peckham

VERDICT

• Rich, immersive RTS/RPG synthesis meets The Sims; wonderful medieval visuals.
• Too much to manage at once, even with automation; extremely glitchy.
POLITICIANS CONSIDER VIDEO GAMES TO BE AS DANGEROUS AS GUNS AND NARCOTICS. AND THEY'RE SPENDING $90 MILLION TO PROVE IT.

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Welcome to the adventures of Sir Kicksalot Deathboot in the land of the conspicuously placed spike racks.

- Keep an eye out for the cyclops
- One particularly hilarious sequence involves Sam's psychiatric evaluation.
- Generic Scary Underground Temple Thingie.
- Wait, wait, I’m not a melee class!

Katana skills for the win!
Dark Messiah of Might and Magic

These boots were made for kicking

**REVIEW**

*Dark Messiah* is littered with racks of spikes, conveniently propped upright with the sharpy sides pointing outward. There are also walkways without railings and open fires everywhere. Racks of heavy barrels or marble sarcophagi are precariously held overhead by creaky wooden beams. It is an OSHA inspector’s wet dream.

The message is clear. “Use the kick button!” is all but written in neon. With a simple thrust overhead by creaky wooden beams. It is an OSHA inspector’s wet dream.

For everyone else there’s hand-to-hand combat. The spirited melee is an admirable attempt to breathe some gory life into this otherwise drab fantasy game. It’s got a “You Are There and You’re Totally Kicking Ass/ Getting Your Ass Kicked!” vibe. The camera jerks around to suggest the viewpoint of someone getting beamed by a mace, or lunging forward to skewer a fallen orc, or being picked up by a 20-foot-tall cyclops who roars in your face before flinging you across the room.

The visceral thrill of this clang and slash is pretty much the only thing that keeps *Dark Messiah* moving forward. Because it’s certainly not the leveling, and it sure as hell isn’t the storyline, in which you’re led by the nose through a rigidly linear world that quite literally is about going there and back again. It even reuses every boss creature at least twice. Remember that dragon you killed? Well, you didn’t.

**THE DEMON WHO LOVED ME**

There’s a slutty demon chick in your head (and eventually elsewhere, too) who reminds you to do things like, “Use the rope bow” if you get stuck and occasionally offers droll single entendres. This Cortana wannabe is a foil to the girl-next-door mage chick you’ll have to rescue a few times. You can easily guess where the ham-handed love triangle is going, and the Dark Secret™ is pretty obvious early on. The visuals are as uninspired as the story. The Source engine has never looked worse than it does in these dimly lit, rotely drawn dungeons infested with technical glitches like stuttering sound and disappearing polygons.

At least the multiplayer is an attempt at something different (i.e., something that hasn’t been done in the series since 2001’s *Legends of Might and Magic*). You’ll have to install Valve’s Steam and you’ll have to power through some absurdly long loading times. No, your system hasn’t crashed. But once you get past these hurdles, you’re in a refreshingly fantasy take on *Unreal Tournament*’s assault mode. The multiplayer goes back and forth over the course of several maps, which increasingly favor the losing team. The whole time, you’re earning experience for new abilities, which change up the gameplay. Immediately after *Dark Messiah*’s release, there was a lot of fumbling around, with most players inclined to play warriors wildly swinging their swords. But there’s lots of tactical potential here that should appease anyone interested in getting more than a few kicks from *Dark Messiah of Might and Magic*.

**VERDICT**

- Multiplayer.
- Single-player.

*Tom Chick*
complete customization options to players. You can tweak these heroes’ weapons, armor, and skills to your heart’s content and order them around the battlefield in a sort of pseudo-RTS fashion that virtually eliminates the typical “provoke everything in sight” default henchman behavior. It saves a lot of headaches…and makes *Guild Wars* feel more like a single-player RPG than ever before.

*NIGHTFALL!* NIGHTFALL, I TELL YOU! The plot’s some trite fantasy gibberish involving a generic eeeeeeevil zealot’s gambit to resurrect the world’s biggest and baddest (and previously unmentioned) dark god via a catastrophic event called—you guessed it—Nightfall. The key NPCs basically spend the entire campaign yammering about how, “Nightfall is coming! Nightfall is upon us!” to the extent that it feels like an advertisement for a product you already own. But hey, at least they do it with mouths that finally move during cut-scenes. Bless that cutting-edge 2006 technology!

Silly story aside, the campaign shines. The pacing’s on par with *Factions*, and the game’s 20 missions present lots of replay incentive thanks to a tiered reward system (though you’ll likely pull your hair out during one late-game sequence that pairs you with a giant sandworm). One area, Tihark Orchard, stands out: Instead of the usual monster bashing, this mission tasks you with attending a royal party where you must participate in various festivities in an effort to recruit a trio of nobles. At one point, you’re challenged to a mime fight—an emote contest with an NPC. How’s that for unconventional?

The entire game’s laced with similar bits of geek humor, including a duo of complementary skills that reference Tim Allen’s catchphrase from *Galaxy Quest* (“Never Give Up!” and “Never Surrender!”). *Nightfall*’s certainly a game that knows its audience…and if you aren’t a part of that audience yet, this is unequivocally the best place to indoctrinate yourself.

*Ryan Scott*

**VERDICT**

Awesome hero NPCs; good new classes; a lengthy, good-humored campaign.

Clichéd story; a ridiculous extended sequence involving giant desert worms.

My Ranger/Mesmer packs a mean poison/fire/health degeneration combo.
**WARHAMMER: MARK OF CHAOS**

Cure for the grit fit

While you’ll officially play as Elves, Empire, Skaven, and Chaos, sub-factions and mercenaries add in unique heroes and extras like Dwarves, Orcs, Giants, Goblins, and Trolls.

**REVIEW**

*Mark of Chaos* plays in fits and starts over grungy fields of mud or ice, with gothic villas hugging crescent palisades or stacked in baileys behind castle battlements. It’s about defending flak-bitten ramparts with Empire halberdiers as warp-lightning cannons snap like ectoplasmic spark-guns, or sneaking under walls with chittering Skaven gutter runners to scope for enemy intel. Swivel and click, flank or charge, duel or flee, you’re either untangling flailing throngs of Orcs, Goblins, Rat Ogres, Elves, and Chaos-spawn…or creeping along fogged-over vistas, scanning for range-closing pistoliers, archers, axe-throwers, and poisoned wind globadiers. Lose first dibs to a Chaos hellcannon at your peril.

**TOTAL WARHAMMER**

For all its stylistic bluster, *MOC* is not a faithful translation of the *Warhammer* fantasy tabletop rules, but were you really expecting it to be? If instead you’d like a cup of real-time *Warhammer* that’s like the *Total War* series’ tactical battles—only with magic, monsters, and that trademark “grim world” panache—this is that game. To *Warhammer* fanatics, that might sound like nerfing. It’s not. You still have facing, flanking, and charging with *Warhammer*-like unit attributes such as “fear,” “frenzy,” and “unbreakable.” High terrain lets you fire farther (and increases your defense versus units charging uphill), while fighting in streams and rivers makes you more vulnerable. Fleeing units are easier to hit, and tight (versus loose) formations defend better against area attacks. Suffice to say, it’s not lack of detail that turns out to be *MOC’s* Achilles’ heel, but rather, too few ways of letting that detail sing out.

Flanking, for instance, is supposed to increase damage and morale loss, but it’s tough to get a sense of anything unusual happening when you slam a regiment of Empire cavalry sideways into a gaggle of Rat Ogres. Charging suffers the same problem, and it’s a real mess sorting things out when you get into scums where unit overlap turns organized regiments into brawling blobs. In short, you get plenty of detail under the hood, but too few helpful barometers. The designers claim those criticisms—along with missing features like friendly fire (an inexplicable omission)—will be addressed in an upcoming patch, but as it stands, *MOC* lacks some key elements, hobbling the overall experience.

**DEueling TOOL**

The only cast-iron sore point is dueling, where opposing heroes enter a little circle and start whaling on each other (if you’re into tabletop, think “challenges”). Your level of engagement is to let special abilities rip by tapping buttons on recharge timers. No clever animations, no finishing moves—just two tanks trading blows (may the one with the most healing potions win). Thanks, but no thanks.

That said, it’s hard not to fall under *Warhammer: Mark of Chaos*’ “almost-there” spell. Factor in two well-written campaigns (one for Empire, one for Chaos) that let you upgrade your army and buff heroes’ combat and command skill trees, as well as an elastic army composer for online battles. Prize-winning? No, but certainly promising…if we can hold our breath for fixes.

*Matt Peckham*

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**MARK OF CHAOS LACKS SOME IMPORTANT ELEMENTS, HOBBLING THE OVERALL EXPERIENCE.**

**VERDICT**

- Translates rather than transplants the tabletop miniatures rules.
- Poor tactical feedback; click-frenzy hero dueling.

**GAMES FOR WINDOWS**

7.10 GOOD
**Star Wars: Empire at War—Forces of Corruption**

**Distant Guns**

**Star Wars: Empire at War—Forces of Corruption**

We’re fresh out of witty *Star Wars* quotes right now

**Publisher:** LucasArts  
**Developer:** Petroglyph  
**Genre:** Real-Time Strategy  
**Availability:** Retail Box  
**ESRB Rating:** Teen  
**Minimum Requirements:** 1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space. *Star Wars: Empire at War*  
**Multiplayer:** 2-8 players  
**Version Reviewed:** Gold Master

**Review**

Those crazy kids at LucasArts certainly love ‘em some *Star Wars*. They even laced our review kits with dossiers on their new expansion’s faction leader, Tyber Zann, including his eye color, birthday, and height (in inches and meters). Can you blame them? *Empire at War* is the best Star Wars RTS going, even if it drops to a more vanilla “pretty decent” when you drag it into the pitiless glare of a year that’s brought us minor miracles like *Company of Heroes* and *The Battle for Middle-earth II*. *Forces of Corruption* supplements with a guerrilla-smugger faction, but also adds more heroes (Luke, Yoda, Bossk, IG-88) and a new story-driven campaign that lets you “corrupt” planets and more-or-less coexist with the Empire or Rebellion, taking your profits in the shadows. Of course, you’ll still want to skirt around the stuff that works no better here than before. Even with devious saboteurs and cloaking transports, land battles remain mazelike and boring and, for all its clever slipstreaming, the new campaign feels like the same tedious planet-plod with an insider angle.

Still, the *Forces of Corruption* expansion is worth some kudos, if only because it packs the sucker with enough new units that you can spend all your time with only 33 percent of the game (the exceptional space battles, which I’d pay full price to play by their lonesome) and still feel like you’re getting your 30 bucks’ worth.  

**Verdict**  

Matt Peckham  

**Distant Guns: The Russo-Japanese War at Sea, 1904-05**

**Publisher:** Storm Eagle Studios  
**Developer:** Storm Eagle Studios  
**Genre:** Historical Naval Simulation  
**Availability:** E-tail (www.stormeaglestudios.com)  
**ESRB Rating:** Not Rated  
**Minimum Requirements:** 1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 275MB hard drive space  
**Multiplayer:** 2+ players  
**Version Reviewed:** E-tail Download

**Review**

The split between gaming and simulation in war gaming is one of the geekiest conflicts imaginable, and it’s hard to think of a game that illustrates this dichotomy better than Norm Koger’s *Distant Guns*. It’s not surprising that the designer of *The Operational Art of War* made this game, because it has exactly the same philosophy: Put as much of the real world into the game as possible, and then let people play with it. This game is an homage to all the toy boats we played with as kids. The new campaign feels like the old campaign with a fly-on-the-wall tech.  

**Verdict**

Bruce Geryk
F.E.A.R.: EXTRACTION POINT

Point-counterpoint

PUBLISHER: Vivendi Games  DEVELOPER: TimeGate  GENRE: Shooter
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.7GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, F.E.A.R. MULTIPLAYER: 2-12 players

Here's the specs of the system on which I played F.E.A.R.: Extraction Point: Intel Core 2 Duo 2.67GHz CPU, 1GB DDR2 RAM, 850GB RAID 0 disk array, and Nvidia 7950 GT graphics card. Does your system exceed those specs? If not, you can forget about running this game at anything approaching max resolution—even that beast couldn't max it out without chugging and lagging. Consider yourself warned.

If you don't mind turning down the settings a bit, though, you F.E.A.R. fans will find Extraction Point an enjoyable extension of the original. While publisher Vivendi went with TimeGate rather than Monolith (the original's designer) for this expansion's development, you wouldn't really know the difference. Extraction Point sports some new weapons (the coolest is the minigun, with which you can “juggle” dead bodies), some slightly improved enemy A.I., and a few wider-open maps, but is otherwise identical to its parent game.

So, if you dug the original and yearn for more atmospheric horror, challenging A.I., and sweet, sweet eye candy—you’ve got yourself another six to eight hours of thoroughly competent game. But if you felt F.E.A.R. was too linear, that the levels weren’t varied enough, or that the multiplayer was weak, Extraction Point won’t make a flip-flopper out of you.

•Eric Neigher

VERDICT
Same as ever: fantastic visual effects, solid A.I., creepy atmosphere.
Same as ever: repetitive level design, tepid multiplayer, ridiculous specs.

GF W.1UP.COM • 91

ROBOBLITZ

The squeaky wheel gets the Unreal 3

PUBLISHER: Valve Software  DEVELOPER: Naked Sky Entertainment  GENRE: Action
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 400MB hard drive space, 256MB videocard (gamepad recommended)

Incredible detailed textures. Ageia’s physics engine in action. If you have 15 bucks in your pocket, you have a front-row seat for a glimpse at Unreal Engine 3 on a PC. However, instead of coming in with the bang of a flak cannon, it’s on the squeaky wheel of a quirky robot named Blitz. Our slightly rusted hero may have a couple of upgradeable laser blasters bolted to his arms, but RoboBlitz isn’t some Unreal-based FPS—it’s a fun little platformer. The heart of the game centers on reactivating your busted-up space station in hopes of repelling the villainous MegaNOED and his robot minions. Yes, the plot’s fairly disposable, but the game exudes enough personality to keep you playing (among other things, you fight giant refugees from a robotic smiley-face factory).

The only unfortunate part is that the fun ends fast. Given a couple hours, you’ll probably breeze through most of RoboBlitz... but then again, you’re definitely getting your money’s worth. At least all the pieces are there for you to enjoy—interesting gear, a controllable point-to-point gravity beam that lets you monkey with in-game physics, and some puzzles thrown in for good measure. If you’re jonesing for a little more, try your hand at creating a few levels with the editor. Fifteen bones is a drop in the bucket for this quick fix.

• Darren Gladstone

VERDICT
$15 games just don’t look this good...
...but they are this short.
RANK-RESTRICTED UNLOCKS SEDUCE THE SAME COLLECTO-MANIAC INSIDE MMORPGERS.

- EMP missiles ground gunships with impunity.
- Hover beside or below a Titan and trash its belly turrets for multiple medals.

Massively mobile boarding pods work well for Titan blitzes.
BATTLEFIELD 2142

Future imperfect

**REVIEW**

It has neither the Mustang’s history nor the Humvee’s headlines, but, clomping center stage, the battle walker is the face of 2142’s far-out, far-off future—a future foreseen not to pose “what ifs,” not to predict “what wills,” only to plant the franchise somewhere—anywhere—that sells. And so we find a planet encased in Pleistocene ice (liquid, solid, it’s still watered down), with unlived-in-looking streets, and ho-hum science (suppose developer DICE averaged all available futurist standards to arrive at its wheeled getaways and wingless flyers). What’s in question here isn’t whether this or that technology is hooey—it’s impoverished, store-brand imagination.

One thing about the battle walker: Though recklessly wobbly, it’s utterly lethal and a load of fun for it. MechWarrior-like and all night angles, it’s 2142’s life-taker and moneymaker, surrogating BF2’s multirole jets, only stoppable where the J10 and MiG-29 weren’t. This is a ground pounder’s game, in which infantry’s rock where the J10 and MiG-29 weren’t. This is a

**VERDICT**

- Addicting player promotion program.
- Buggy and superficially bland.

**SEVEN SINS**

1. As in Battlefield 2, some servers neither register players’ rank nor record their accomplishments at times. DICE says it’s working to resolve the error.

2. 2142 users must also install advertising technology developed by IGA Worldwide Inc. CEO Justin Townsend tells gaming news site Gamasutra.com that, “IGA’s software uses IP addresses for geo-targeting in-game ads. It also creates a unique user number that is able to reidentify the gamer when he next appears online.” Townsend adds that advertisers are generating game-specific ads to better blend their content with 2142’s setting (because the hard-to-reach audience of future soldiers with five-minute life expectancies is hot, hot, hot).


4. Another commonly occurring bug makes battle walkers both skate across the surface without appearing to walk and march in place when they’re supposed to stand still, reducing accuracy. Less often, a player may discover that the selectable spawn point on his Titan has disappeared.

5. Moving Titans create massive performance problems, making combat impossible inside ships and causing bodies to slide through walls before medics can resuscitate them.

6. Reviews often make token mention of team killing. Intentional TKing, however, is not and has never been an issue in BF2 and BF2142, as victims are able to punish offenders (punishment maximizes point loss and leads to kicking/banning). What’s wrong is the ease with which one can accidentally off allies (pilots, for instance, are faulted when disembarking passengers die). Furthermore, it’s possible for griefers to force TKs on unsuspecting players simply by guiding one vehicle into another, even in friendly fire–free games. Now that points matter more than ever, losing them to foul play is twice as infuriating.

7. Limited vehicle variety (14 in total counting Titans as well as PAC and EU skin swaps compared to Battlefield 1942’s 43) suggests that EA’s withholding content for future sale in booster and expansion packs.
**Scarface: The World Is Yours**

Say good night to the bad guy

*Publisher: Vivendi Games*  
*Developer: Radical Entertainment*  
*Genre: Action*  
*Availability: Retail, E-tail*  
*ESRB Rating: Mature*  
*Minimum Requirements: 1.8GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.9GB hard drive space*  
*Multiplayer: None*  
*Version Reviewed: Retail Box*

**Review**

I can’t play this game in front of my wife. Heck, I can only play it late at night when no one’s around. *Scarface: The World Is Yours* features so much violence, bloodshed, gore, and colorful language that it’s embarrassing to get caught indulging in it. The classic Brian De Palma film never descends this far into excess. Credit Al Pacino for walking that fine line between drama and cartoon, but blame the game for stepping over that line too many times.

This descent into killing sprees is a failing of computer games. If you were to remove the film license, the mechanics would stand up well enough; missions aren’t especially unique, but they’re well positioned in the overarching story. The time in between is spent building your empire by selling drugs, crushing rival gangs, and doing other entertaining gamey things like racing cars around town, winning cleverly disguised minigames, and shooting up Miami for thrills.

That’s where things diverge from what Pacino’s Tony Montana stands for in the film. Pacino created a human, not a game automaton. But *The World Is Yours* disposes of any softness by offing Tony’s momma early on, even turning you loose with a chain saw—something Tony himself seems to find animalistic and beneath him in the infamous film scene. Montana is a complex film character, but his game is a gruesome blast-a-thon built around a proven formula for player interaction.  

*David J. Long*

**Verdict**

- Solid Grand Theft Auto-style driving, shooting, and running.  
- Depth of the film lost under genre conventions; rudimentary 2002-era looks.

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**Reservoir Dogs**

Some super sounds of the ’70s

*Publisher: Eidos Interactive*  
*Developer: Volatile Games*  
*Genre: Action*  
*Availability: Retail*  
*ESRB Rating: Mature*  
*Minimum Requirements: 800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space*  
*Multiplayer: None*  
*Version Reviewed: Retail Box*

**Review**

*Reservoir Dogs* is like the side-scrollers that every movie spawned in the ’90s. The formula’s aped just right, with scenes from the classic Tarantino flick tied together by linear levels—you get the film’s plot, some fan fiction (i.e., no filmmaker input), and an action game all in one. It’s not bad while it lasts; few games put such emphasis on using your gun as a deterrent instead of as a battering ram, and I especially enjoyed snapping hostages headfirst into a desk to get the cops’ attention midheist, which let me disarm the officers and escape without firing a shot. Go ahead and shoot first all the time if you like, but it’s more entertaining to play a pro instead of a psycho. You also earn a different ending if you go all Mr. Blonde on people (“if they hadn’t done what I told ‘em not to do, they’d still be alive!”) instead of trying to keep it cool like Mr. White (“I ain’t no madman.”).

Gunfire sounds are superb. That scene where Mr. Pink unloads a clip into the cops before he drives off with the diamonds? It sounds just like that. Even the voice acting’s OK. The whole thing’s over in a few hours, but it makes for cheap fun after you watch the film for the 50th time.  

*David J. Long*

**Verdict**

- Captures the look and sound of the film; hostage-taking is unique and vital.  
- Super-short; a few technical glitches; limited variety.
JAWS UNLEASHED

The world’s first self-jumping shark

PUBLISHER: Majesco
DEVELOPER: Appaloosa Interactive
GENRE: Pro-environment Shark Simulator
AVAILABILITY: Retail
ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2.5GB hard drive space, gamepad (recommended)
MULTIPLAYER: None
VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

Cashing in on classic film franchises is a popular move for hack game developers these days (just look at the rest of this spread for ample proof). In the case of Jaws Unleashed, the license got glommed onto a previous shark tale titled Sole Predator, originally announced in 2003 and then delayed to the point of entirely missing Jaws’ 30th anniversary. Which begs the question: What the hell did developer Appaloosa do for the past three years? Whatever the answer, Jaws Unleashed clearly wasn’t high on the priority list, as the entire game’s an exercise in pure stupidity. You play the titular great white in a vaguely Grand Theft Auto-esque open environment, rampaging around Amity Island and terrorizing the locals (or trying to, at least) while fulfilling a series of story objectives that revolve around a lame eco-friendly agenda. That’s right: You’re an environmentally-aware killer shark.

Last time I checked, Jaws mauled beachgoers because that’s what killer sharks do. Here, your murder spree is couched in goals like “find an I.D. card!” and “destroy the refinery!” that usually boil down to egregiously clumsy trial-and-error as you wrestle with horrid controls and an ever-draining “hunger” bar (Quick! Feed Jaws before he starves to death!). Even the basic people-eating routine’s busted, as you usually wind up wiggling Jaws back into the water after running him aground mid-mangle. This game’s no shark—it’s a bottom-feeder.

• Ryan Scott

VERDICT

10
TERRIBLE

None whatsoever. Horrible camera and controls; ridiculously difficult goals; awful level design.

Thrilling performance at 3200dpi

It’s here. The answer to your high-performance dreams. Meet the new Saitek GM3200 laser mouse. Created to put the perfect blend of intelligent design and innovative features at your fingertips for perfect control. With a true top speed of 3200 dpi this is no ordinary mouse. Laser guided optics, adjustable weights and changeable Teflon feet provide precise accuracy like never before. While its ultra relaxed finger-hugging contours mean hours of thrilling performance in absolute comfort. Add to this 7 buttons and 9 super-cool pulsating LEDs and you’ll be flying through everything that gets in your way with the greatest of pleasure.

GM3200 Laser Mouse

www.saitekusa.com
TIGER WOODS
PGA TOUR 07
Déjà vu all over again

Ironically, its strongest competition comes from
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06—and it’s not too
clear-cut as to which game’s better.
Tiger Woods 07 includes a wealth of
entertaining gaming options that make it more
than just a golf-physics simulation. All of the
normal stuff, such as matches, stroke
play, and skins, is here. The new
“Team Mode” challenges you to
build a team with which you can take
on Tiger and his fearsome foursome.
An addictive role-playing mode
casts you as a hacker hustling
your buddies and playing local
tournaments, working your way
up to Q-school and ultimately a spot on the
PGA Tour.
It’s a great golf game, but as series fanatics
can see, it doesn’t have much more than its
predecessor (aside from some new bugs—e.g.,
lies have no apparent effect on your shot).
Additionally, the PC version ships with a mere
12 courses versus the 21 on consoles. EA
informed us that it has no plans to release a
course architect for Tiger Woods 07, and courses
designed under Tiger Woods 06’s architect
experience significant issues when imported into
Tiger Woods 07. That alone may make last year’s
dition, with its wealth of community-designed
courses available, a better choice for armchair
golfers. • Jeff Lackey

VERDICT
• Game modes that even
nongolf fanatics will enjoy.
• Not much different from
last year’s version; a lack of
a course architect means no
new community courses.

VERDICT
• More ball-movement
options than ever; good
multiplayer enhancements.
• Incidental players are not
perfect; games limited to 20
minutes.

FIFA 07
All that’s missing are the hooligans

EA Sports sequels rarely overwhelm
the senses. They don’t horribly
underwhelm, either—they usually just...
whelm. But FIFA’s different. Perhaps driven
by constant pressure from Konami’s excellent
Winning Eleven series, EA’s canned the
complacency and cranked up the innovation.
Consequently, the FIFA of today is better
than ever.
Is FIFA 07 real soccer? No. The thought
processes and reactions are too acute, the
minute-to-minute fatigue too subtle, and
the scores too high. And the maximum
length of each half (10 real-time minutes)
is unreasonably brief. However, the sensory
side of the game—including a new eerily
reactive crowd and a gamut of authentic
player movements—is beyond reproach.
But it’s the credibility and the fun of the
gameplay that’ll keep you captivated. The
graduated buildup, the tactical maneuvering,
the necessity for tic-tac-toe passing,
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2007

Could you have more fun in a suit?

Remember when the sports genre was all about...sports? When players spent their entire careers with a single team? Today, your favorite sports talk-show host likely babbles more about the latest front-office maneuver than the latest last-second victory. It’s this growing interest in the business of sports that makes management sims so relevant. One of the best and certainly one of the most comprehensive is Sports Interactive’s NHL Eastside Hockey Manager 2007.

EHM delves deep into the global hockey fabric, encompassing more than 20 professional and junior leagues from around the world and no less than 45,000 real players. Budding hockey moguls can begin wherever they want and run their organization as they see fit, moving through the game’s multiple interfaces and its gargantuan storehouse of objective and subjective information with the knowledge that they’ll rarely encounter programming-imposed restrictions. Indeed, the sense of total freedom offered here is downright enthralling.

Unfortunately, the game’s few downsides are undeniably glaring. Interface navigation, for example, is counter-intuitive and more than a bit cumbersome. Secondary statistics are sometimes flawed. And online play is limited to 16 owners, even though the NHL has 30 teams.

Nevertheless, some impressively complex stuff is at work here. The game responds well to even the subtlest decisions, looks far prettier than most managerial sims, and even features a workable top-down 2D “tactical view” of each match—complete with appropriate sound effects. If you have the patience, this one could suck you in for a good long while.

Gord Goble

Take a look at our new mice, PADS

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.
Marvel: Ultimate Alliance

Fantastically formulaic fun fare!

Marvel: Ultimate Alliance is pretty much like picking up the latest issue of Uncanny X-Men: It’s the latest in an established franchise with a set formula, doesn’t have many surprises, and tends to rely on your love of Marvel lore to make up for its flaws. M:UA evolves just enough to justify its existence as a separate game from X-Men Legends I and II, but these “advancements” feel more like tweaks to the core formula. Some such tweaks: Health potions get replaced by instant health orbs, heroes possess fewer (but more well-defined) powers, and alternate costumes modify stats and team-leveling bonuses (received for using a “personalized” team of the same four heroes for an extended time). Essentially, anyone who’s played the XML games knows what to expect here. What’s left is how much the Marvel Universe appeals to you—M:UA manages to cram in everything from Dr. Doom to Fin Fang Foom.

As a proto-nerd who knows what MODOK is an acronym for, I wholeheartedly ate up the fan service. Sure, the game doesn’t explain why Deadpool and Ghost Rider would team up, but the fact that I’m able to have Deadpool crack wise while Ghost Rider pulls his mystic chains is enough reason for me. If the idea of wielding the power cosmic as the Silver Surfer doesn’t immediately add points for you, then M:UA is simply a solid (yet not particularly noteworthy) action-RPG.

• Thierry Nguyen

The Sims 2: Pets

Cats rule, dogs drool

In the background, I can hear my real dog barking…but my eyes are glued to the screen as I feed my Sim’s dog, play fetch with her, and watch her bark at the cat. Just like the first three Sims 2 expansions, Pets has the same addictive qualities—especially if you’re a pet lover—that make some of us forget our real lives. Just as with the humans, you can customize your pet’s looks and personality to create a unique dog or cat (or parrot or hamster) for your Sim. Having so many options can intimidate, but the end result is an incredibly cute animal. And I’m not just saying that as a 12-year-old girl—even my dad, GFW editor-in-chief Jeff Green, squealed embarrassingly when he saw the cuddly dog I created.

But the actual game isn’t just about looks, as these animals aren’t all good: They can destroy the couch, soil the rug, and dig up your lawn. You can’t control the animals directly, so they can do whatever they please. Sometimes they won’t even fulfill their basic needs; you just have to sit there and watch them get more and more miserable.

In general, though, Pets shows great attention to detail (such as what dogs versus cats can and can’t do), and the wide variety of choices minimizes boredom. Cat care is superior to dog care if you want to enjoy other aspects of The Sims 2 because—surprise—cats aren’t as needy. Dog care requires so much intense care that it’s hard to focus on anything else, which gets frustrating. Still, pet lovers will love this expansion. Everyone else can safely skip it.

• Sarah Jaisser Green
2006 AWARDS
http://bestof2006.1up.com

Use your power. Vote for your favorite games of 2006!

Vote for the best games in these categories:
2006 Game of the Year
Action
Adventure
Fighting
Hardware
Innovation
Online/Multiplayer
Racing
RPG
Shooter
Sports
Strategy
How cool’s a name like “Sid”? Think about it. Would you buy Rufus Meier’s Alpha Centauri? How about Eugene Meier’s Civilization? And when Sid drops that full John Hancock behind stuff like Gettysburg! and Pirates!, does an angel get its wings? When it comes to Railroads!, the answer is “not quite.” But hey, you can only have so many angels, right?

ALL ABOARD!
The good news: Sid Meier’s Railroads! is an all-around likable update of the original Railroad Tycoon (1990) that winks respectfully at torchbearer PopTop’s followup Tycoons II and 3, then gutsily reimagines the series as a cuter, cozier, supply-and-demand contest that looks a bit like playing a board game in a sandbox with buckets of choo-chooing parts.

Did I say “cozy”? Here comes the bad news: Right away, you’ll notice the maps aren’t just like playing in a sandbox, but pretty much the size of one. That’s fine early on when you’re minding a city or two, but with more than two players, the trackage starts crisscrossing confusingly until it looks like a ride in RollerCoaster Tycoon.

That’s a problem, because while Sid was obviously after the intimacy of “model training,” Railroads! is a strategy game, not a toy-train sim (the token “train table” mode’s just solo play without the competition). It’s as if Firaxis tried to mash the two together in an attempt at symmetry that benefits neither. That doesn’t mean Railroads! isn’t enjoyable (it is!). But...well, imagine track fine-tuning that’s like forking individual noodles off a plate of spaghetti. How they saw past these jams is baffling.

PARDON ME, BOY...
Scale issues aside, as a strategy game, Railroads! feels like a Sid Meier product should, meaning everything’s a click away, and you’re focused on connecting, buying, and selling without worrying about structure placement or resource buswork. You have one resource (cash) and you make it by linking industry supply to demand or completing supplementary minitasks—say, getting a certain amount of oil to a given city before your opponent does.

Laying track’s a snap. Drag an endpoint over the terrain for an easy cost estimate: Uneven areas cost more, flat ones less. Once you’re satisfied, click to build, plop down a depot (for cities) or annex (for industries), and you’re set. Creating routes is just as easy: Click the route button, the origin point, what you want to transfer, and finally, where you want it to go...and presto, instant train-o! The challenge lies in keeping your track straight (i.e., fast), upgrading passenger and freight trains judiciously (the latest isn’t always the best), and eventually snapping up all of your opponents’ stock before they do it to you. It’s delightfully nail-chewing in multiplayer, where you’re trying to sneak business from your opponent’s mainline cities.

In the end, it’s hard not to fall a little bit in love with Railroads!, because it’s just a lovable kind of game. Now if only Firaxis would release some scaled-up maps to match the game’s ambitions.

• Matt Peckham

VERDICT

- Terrific interface; easy on new players; tough enough for vets at higher difficulties.
- Claustrophobic maps; no quick-undo button; some graphical terrain glitches.

IT’S LIKE PLAYING A BOARD GAME IN A SANDBOX WITH BUCKETS OF CHOO-CHOOSING PARTS.

Animations are complex and detailed, and you can watch everything from oil tanks filling to animals clambering into cattle cars.
With the recent release of Sid Meier’s Railroads!, we figure some readers might be interested in checking out a few classic games by legendary designer Sid Meier. Take a look at five of his best.

**CIVILIZATION CHRONICLES**

Behold the mother of all game compilations. Civilization Chronicles assembles 14 years’ worth of Civilization lore—from the original 1991 Civilization to 2005’s Civilization IV, along with every expansion in between—for a total of nine games. This boxed set also includes tech-tree posters for each game, a book on the history of the franchise, the tabletop Civ card game, and a special DVD featuring marketing material and Sid Meier interviews. It’s a Civ fan’s dream come true.

**PIRATES!**

Ahoy! This modern update to Sid Meier’s classic Pirates! game puts you in command of a smelly pirate crew as you search for booty, booty, and more booty in 17th-century Europe. It essentially amounts to a minigame collection: sword fighting, treasure hunting, ship-to-ship combat, daring prison escapes, and courtyardly dancing form the backbone of the game’s open-ended action, loosely connected by a basic rescue-your-family storyline. It’s easily one of the best and most addictive games in recent memory, and you’d be remiss to pass it up—something’s here for everyone.

**CIVILIZATION IV: WARLORDS**

For some bewildering reason, the team behind Civilization IV: Warlords saw fit to include Joseph Stalin as a Russian leader. Questionable as that choice may seem to some, it’s one of Warlords’ only letdowns. Most of the changes here come in the form of minor A.I. tweaks and additions (nothing new to Civ fanatics), but a handful of excellent scenarios provide the real meat of the game.

**SIMMANIA 3**

OK, so this compilation isn’t strictly a Sid Meier production—but Meier’s critically acclaimed SimGolf makes an appearance, along with five other sim games: SimCopter, SimSafari, Sim Theme Park, SimCoaster, and SimCity 3000. Longtime gamers will note that Maxis’ Sim games are essentially ancestors of the various *<Insert Any Random Noun Here>* Tycoon titles that flood Wal-Mart’s shelves today—they’re not exactly the most hardcore of games, but everything in this collection (and especially SimGolf) definitely justifies the $20 price tag.

**RAILROAD TYCOON**

The game that ultimately led to the recent Railroads! also happens to be one of Sid Meier’s earliest hits. For those of you wondering where to buy it, the answer’s easy: You don’t have to. Railroads! publisher 2K Games has graciously made the original Railroad Tycoon available for free on its website (www.2kgames.com), fully supported and playable in the DOSBox emulator. At that price, who can complain?
Extend
Where your games live on forever!

- Radar coverage is the key to DEFCON.
- America defends freedom, again.
- Radar coverage is the key to DEFCON.
DEFCON

Everybody dies—especially Bruce

PUBLISHER: Introversion Software
DEVELOPER: Introversion Software
GENRE: Real-Time Strategy
ESRB RATING: Not Rated

DEFCON is made by Introversion, the developers of Darwinia. You can download a demo from www.everybody-dies.com. The full game is $17.50. It’s also available on Steam.

BRUCE: Even though Tom’s heroes of the Soviet Union lost the most important battle of our time 15 years ago, I don’t think Tom has ever gotten over it. So when he suggests we play Introversion’s cool downloadable game DEFCON about a nuclear war just like in the movies, I knew I’d have to shoulder America’s burden for the free world one last time. What I didn’t realize was that the game had been designed by Communist sympathizers.

TOM: Look, you can’t very well have a two-player nuclear war without one of us being the U.S. and the other being the U.S.S.R. I mean, come on—who wants to read about Africa lobbing nukes at China? That’s about as sexy as Britain versus Argentina. So it’s the U.S. versus the U.S.S.R. I’ll be the bad guys, just like last month when I had to play as the Nazis in Company of Heroes.

BRUCE: The game starts with an appropriately ominous alert that it’s “DEFCON 5.” Well, boys, I reckon this is it. Nook-lee-uhr combat, toe-to-toe with the Rooskies!

TOM: Frankly, I don’t mind being the Russkies, because DEFCON isn’t a game about human rights or who can make the best sitcoms or jeans. This isn’t the Cold War. This is the Hottest War. And as such, the Soviets have a few advantages. Firstly, we have Siberia on one side and Europe on the other. Russia loves her buffer zones. They’ll keep Bruce’s carriers and subs from getting too close with their nukes. The U.S.A., however, is flanked by oceans. If I play my cards right, I can practically dock at New York or Los Angeles to launch nukes.

Russia’s other advantage is that no one wants to live in Siberia, so the bulk of her population is clustered on the west side of the country. This makes most of the U.S.S.R.’s people easier to defend with a few well-placed silos, which will shoot down incoming nukes in their default defensive state. I cluster four of my six silos in the Moscow and Leningrad area. I drop a fifth in the middle, around some cities called things like Omsk and Irkutsk, and a sixth near someplace called Khabarovsk way out in the east. I haven’t heard of any of these places because there aren’t any spy novels in which they figure in the title.

BRUCE: The first time we played this game, I put all my silos in Montana so Patrick Swayze would have an easier time defending them. Then I found out that, thanks to the great Ronald Reagan, my ICBM silos also fired anti-ICBM missiles. So for this game, I’m putting two silos on the West Coast and three silos on the East Coast. A single silo defends the Midwest, but in Soho and Berkeley, nobody cares.

TOM: I divide my fleet in two, putting half in the Pacific and the other half in the Barents Sea. The half of my subs in the Pacific will circle south to hit the U.S. from over Mexico, while the half of my subs in the Atlantic will creep along the Arctic Ocean to hit the U.S. from the north, over Canada. I put two airbases near Leningrad to defend the Atlantic front, and two on the Siberian coast to cover my Pacific fleet. Radars go all around, including the mandatory station right up on the Bering Strait.

BRUCE: In the first version of this article, Tom spelled that “Being Straight.” The fact that I’m picking on him for, of all things, spelling errors less than a third of the way into the article might give you a clue as to how this is going to end up.

TOM: In the first version of this article, Bruce inverted the order of the DEFCONs. That will be another clue as to how this is going to end up. DEFCON 5 proceeds uneventfully, as DEFCON 5s will. At DEFCON 4, our radars around the Bering Strait light each other up. I’m sending >
bombers out from my Siberian airbases so they'll be in position to poke out that Alaskan radar installation in time for DEFCON 3, which is when conventional hostilities start.

**BRUCE:** Thanks to Tom's reliance on Soviet SIGINT and questionable ethics, I don't know how you "launch bombers so they'll be in position...in time for DEFCON 3." My game just tells me that I can't target Tom's radar now, because of the Helsinki Accords or Stockholm Syndrome or Los Angeles Cheating Disease. So while his planes home in on liberty's sentinels, SAC is grounded by cheap-shot lefty programming tricks. "Visual" Basic my ass.

**TOM:** Contact! I see an American battleship in the Pacific. Just in time for DEFCON 3, when weapons go hot. I redirect the bombers that were en route to his Alaskan radar installation. The carriers behind my battleship screen launch fighters and a few bombers. The battle for the Pacific begins, and I've got air cover from Siberia.

**BRUCE:** I put an airbase in Alaska specifically to support my Pacific fleet (U.S. Seventh Fleet for you grognards) because, for some reason, the Japanese have reneged on their defense commitment to the Pacific. But because this game is bugged, and Tom is cheating, and the designers live in Moscow and Beijing, I can't seem to get a lock on any of Tom's ships. I catch a glimpse of a Soviet "battleship" (note to Introversion: the Soviets never built anything larger than a battlecruiser) but the USS *New Jersey* and USS *Iowa* and the rest of my battlewagons are being slowly sunk by wave after wave of ship-launched missiles and Backfire bombers. What's weirder is that my ships have no missiles they can use against cities. I should have kept them off the California coast to protect the ungrateful hippies while my subs sneaked past the Philippines to strike at the people queued up in Tom's Siberian breadlines. But I'm a crusader for freedom, and I can't sit back when liberty calls. And so, despite my admirals' protests, the Seventh Fleet sails into eternity.

**TOM:** Meanwhile in the Atlantic: I see some of Bruce's battleships pecking through the GIUK gap into the Norwegian Sea, where I've been holding back, expecting their arrival. Normally, I think Russia is supposed to come charging out of the Barents Sea, but I have no desire to stay too far from my Leningrad airbases, which are now fully mobilized to support my navy over here. It should be a repeat of the Pacific battle. By the way, I mention the GIUK gap as a shout-out to all my old-school Harpoon homies. Arleighburgh, bitches!

**BRUCE:** This is one of the big flaws in DEFCON. The Russians really have no need to engage in the Atlantic, because a sub on the U.S. Pacific coast can still nuke New York. An American sub defending freedom in the Atlantic, however, can only hit Leningrad. American subs need to almost get to the Kola Peninsula just to reach Moscow. So, unlike in the Pacific situation, I have no choice but to try and force my way into the Barents Sea. Unfortunately, this means that, once again, I'm fighting Tom's navy without land-based air cover. The NATO base at Keflavik? Nonexistent, thanks to Introversion's Marxist New World Order fantasy.

**TOM:** Now that I've knocked out Bruce's Alaskan radar, my ICBMs will be able to get closer before they're intercepted. With the Pacific secured, I've got carrier-based bombers on the way with nukes. Two are inbound for Seattle, four for San Francisco, and five for Los Angeles. I still haven't sussed out his defenses, so these might not make it to their targets.

**BRUCE:** I don't know how Tom can live with himself, queuing up nukes after nuke to strike cities that give sustenance to American treasures like Electronic Arts, BioWare, and Vivendi. But if Tom is having a crisis of conscience like the hero of Nikita Mikhalkov's *Burnt by the Sun*, he isn't showing any signs of it yet.

**TOM:** I didn't see that movie, as I'm not a big Bruce Willis fan. Oh, and this just in: The first nuke has landed! Most of my bomber-launched missiles were shot down, but a single Russian missile impacted San Francisco and killed 4.7 million people. Sweet. Now I see Bruce's subs trying to squeeze through the IUK part of the GIUK gap. After some pitched fighting, I've got naval and air superiority over here. So I'm moving my carriers in to try and sink them before they can launch their missiles.

**BRUCE:** Did I mention that this game was designed by Red Communists?

**TOM:** As we're playing and I'm winning the naval battles, Bruce occasionally mutters things like, "They need to nerf the U.S.S.R." "The American player is at a serious disadvantage," and,
"Who made this game? A bunch of Communists?"

So when I see silo launches light up all over America, I’m overjoyed; he’s gotten exasperated and launched nukes out of impatience! Bruce has blinked first. Although the gesture more closely resembles a heavy sigh and a resigned shrug.

This is great news, because it means his silos won’t be in defensive mode. My subs immediately launch their missiles from off the coast of Mexico, all my bombers are rerouted to targets around those silos, and any bombers on the ground or in carriers are immediately queued for launch. My silos hunker down in defensive mode to prepare for the onslaught of American ICBMs.

**BRUCE:** Looks like *Half-Life 3* is going to be delayed.

**TOM:** Hmm, so Leningrad has taken a couple on the chin. Who cares? We’ll just change the name again. The good news is that there are 11 million dead in New York. I also got direct hits on Houston and Dallas.

**BRUCE:** There goes Ensemble.

**TOM:** Bruce is pounding the hell out of Siberia, but I don’t mind. Most of my population is just hanging out drinking vodka and reading Tolstoy under the defensive silos around Moscow. Since I don’t need to defend my Siberian cities any more, and since I can’t even remember their names, I launch ICBMs from a pair of silos out here.

**BRUCE:** For some reason, my missiles aren’t getting through to the Russian heartland, even though we know from KGB archives that the most sophisticated defense systems the Soviets had guarding the Kremlin consisted of wooden catapults for firing potatoes at incoming minute-men. And half the time, they weren’t loaded, since people kept stealing the potatoes. But the finest Raytheon technology can’t seem to reach Omsk, Tomsk, Minsk, or Pinsk. Especially since Minsk isn’t even on the map, being safe in Bielorussia on this oddly post-Soviet map.

**TOM:** Is one of my cities really named Tomsk? That’s pretty cool. Bruce is saturating my defenses around Moscow. There are 22 million dead in Moscow, and Leningrad is gone. But I’m very much in the lead, thanks to having my defenses up longer while my bombers and subs did their thing. There’s not a single U.S. city that hasn’t taken a hit, whereas many of my cities are still untouched.

**BRUCE:** Gen. Thomas Power, once commander-in-chief of the Strategic Air Command, was purported to have said, “The whole idea is to kill the bastards…. Look. At the end of the war, if there are two Americans and one Russian, we win!” To which his interlocutor was supposed to have said, “Well, in that case, you’d better hope they are a man and a woman.” This is reflected in the game by the fact that each enemy civilian killed is worth two victory points, while each surviving friendly civilian is worth only one victory point.

**TOM:** We each began with 100 million citizens. There are 74.8 million Americans dead, but only 48.8 million Russians dead. This means my 51 million survivors when it comes to the mine-shaft gap. And in the immortal words of Vera Lynn: “We’ll meet again.”

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**FINAL SCORE**

**TOM:** 89  
**BRUCE:** 11

Tom Chick

In addition to being one of the videogame industry’s most prolific freelance critics, Tom Chick also runs the popular website [QuarterToThree.com](http://QuarterToThree.com)

Bruce Geryk

GFW contributor Bruce Geryk has written about videogames for over 20 years. He loves war games like most people love oxygen.
HALF-LIFE 2: IRIS
The return of the point-and-click adventure begins with the people!

**PUBLISHER:** National Academy of Digital, Interactive Entertainment  
**DEVELOPER:** Team 1  
**GENRE:** Adventure  
**AVAILABLE:** Download (www.filefront.com)  
**ESRB RATING:** Not Rated  
**MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS:** 1.2GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 250MB hard drive space, Half-Life 2 REQUIRED  
**MULTIPLAYER:** None  
**VERSION REVIEWED:** Proof-of-concept download

**MOD REVIEW**

AFTERLIFE

**COMPANY OF HEROES V1.3**
www.companyofheroesgame.com

The latest patch for Relic's phenomenal military real-time strategy game introduces the new Seine River Docks multiplayer map and features improved gameplay functionality, better performance on Nvidia videocards, and numerous bug-and gameplay-related fixes.

**BATTLEFIELD 1942: EVE OF DESTRUCTION V0.51**
www.secretsofthegods.com

Battlefield junkies fed up with 2142’s blunders should check out the latest version of Eve of Destruction for good ol’ BF1942. This mod uses the Indochina/Vietnam conflict as its backdrop and provides dozens of new weapons, vehicles, and maps. A Battlefield Vietnam version is also available, with a BF2 version in the works.

**VERDICT**

- The base is there for a great adventure game.
- Terribly short; interface issues make point-and-click gameplay difficult.

**AVERAGE**

6/10

**THE STUDENTS WHO BUILT IT WANT TO PROVE TO THEIR INSTRUCTORS THAT THEY'VE GOT ENOUGH TO BUILD A GAME AROUND—NOT CONVINCE A PUBLISHER TO CONTINUE FUNDING.**

**MILITARY STATE**

The story is mostly set in the year 2024, where Iris’ home has fallen on hard times between her childhood and young adulthood. In the opening moments, we see soldiers with laser-sighted rifles march through the night’s gloom, blow open the door to a local restaurant, and loudly murder the man working there. No one spares the event a glance, although that’s partially because most of the folks nearby are busy vomiting, hiding, or clubbing. Back in the past, soft daylight falls on the young Iris. The character is maybe 7 or 8 years old, carrying a backpack, and doing most of the actual problem-solving. By changing the situation in the past, Iris can create chances for herself in the future.

**A FOR EFFORT**

Iris is the work-in-progress brainchild of a student group at the National Academy of Digital, Interactive Entertainment, and it reveals tons of potential...and nearly equal quantities of frustration. It places you in the role of a female protagonist named Iris in two different time periods—as a young girl and as a young woman—in “Chinatown.” The gimmick: Pressing the J key “jumps” you between the past and the environment in the future. In the future, you can then finish your puzzles—in this case, finding the “forbidden newspaper” of a freer time. The art style leans toward a smooth, cartoonish look that exaggerates each key aspect of a character perfectly. Picture Team Fortress 2 in an alley-ridden block of a quiet, underdeveloped part of China where everyone speaks English with a thick “Asian” accent. The grey-clad murderous troops of the future Chinatown look ghastly, Iris as a child looks adorable, and the village itself looks appropriately idyllic—and later, ruinous.

**UPDATE**

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches

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**Patrick Joynt**
Falling Pieces

COLUMN

Any idiot can be smart. That’s the beauty of trivia—it validates the useless crap filling your brain at the expense of things like math, history, geography, and basic toilet-training. By celebrating the very things that stunt your personal growth as actual knowledge, trivia competitions make you feel good about yourself.

The granddaddy of them all is Trivial Pursuit, and the Silver Screen Edition of this board-game classic is now available for just $20 at www.trivialpursuit.com. The nice thing about this game is that you can tweak the rules for faster play—and it’s a good thing, because the animations are excruciatingly and unnecessarily lengthy. Still, if you’re up for a (very) moderate movie-trivia challenge, you could do worse.

Could you do better? Sure, but you’ll have to buy an actual physical product called You Don’t Know Jack, a gleefully snarky take on quiz shows.

Questions about mutilation and torture? What’s not to love about You Don’t Know Jack?

Finally, if you’re hooked on VH1’s I Love the 80s then you should check out The ‘80s Server at www.80s.com. The games on this site are all about Top Gun and Michael J. Fox...and yet still manage to present a stiffer trivia challenge than any of these other games. And they’re all free.

Robert Coffey


Falling Pieces

The best in casual gaming

COLUMN

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Robert Coffey

Can you go home again? If you’re me and it’s real life, you can’t because your mom has changed addresses and taken a new name just to get away from you. In the world of EverQuest, however, the answer is a little more complicated.

Ahhh, EverQuest. Just thinking about the hundreds of hours I put into that game back in the day brings back happy memories as well as an uncomfortable feeling of existential dread, as I contemplate what else I might have done with all that time. (Like, for example, play other games.) As was the case with many gamers, EverQuest was my gateway drug into the MMO scene. I tried Ultima Online the day it launched in 1997, but when my character was killed by a goat, well, that was it for me.

EverQuest, however, was unavoidable—and, in its day, amazing. Released on March 16, 1999, the game went from relative obscurity to sleeper hit of a year, as more and more people—including fans get bored, move on, find other loves and addictions. In my case, personally, it had been my gateway drug into the MMO scene. I tried Ultima Online the day it launched in 1997, but when my character was killed by a goat, well, that was it for me.

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of a year, more and more people—including me—discovered the sheer addictive joy of adventuring with other gamers online. “EverCrack.” It was a love/hate relationship all along. I was addicted to the nation of the environment, the challenge, and the addictive joy of adventuring with other gamers online. “EverCrack.” It was a love/hate relationship all along. I was addicted

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looking for—a feature that might have saved me 40 hours or so back in the old days. But I’m not going to sugarcoat things here. It is what it is: A game that’s now 7 years old. The graphics, by modern standards, are—to be nice—primitive. The downtime still sucks. When my new character, Mohran, a Drakkin Warrior, took his first XP loss after dying at level 7, I got mad like it was 1999 again. I can’t imagine a new player, used to the conveniences of WOW, being able to put up with EQ or even understand why it was ever so big.

And yet...there it sits, still on my hard drive, with this article now done. I hear the music in my head. The EQ atlas is open on my desk. I think about the 400 zones in the game, and the fact that Mohran’s only seen two. Surely I couldn’t be getting sucked back into this old game again. Or could I?

Jeff Green

GFW’s editor-in-chief is so glad he doesn’t waste his life as a Dwarf Paladin in EQ anymore. Now he’s a Gnome Warlock in WOW!

Hi. I’m a monster. I’ve been sitting in this dungeon for seven years, waiting for you to kill me.

It’s not the prettiest MMO on the block anymore, but if you’re willing to get past its looks, the charms are still there for lapsed players.

SOMEBODY ON A MOUNTAINTOP. DOARKUS STILL WAITS FOR ME.
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On FileFront

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine and FileFront.com have joined forces to bring you both the best possible PC-gaming coverage and access to the hottest game downloads—demos, mods, patches, and more. Head to GFW.FileFront.com to try these yourself.

SID MEIER’S RAILROADS! (DEMO)
Check out a sampling of the goods, resources, industries, and objectives in this train simulation from the creator of Civilization.

NEED FOR SPEED CARBON (DEMO)
Prove your worth in circuit racing and drifting before tackling the ultimate canyon duel in this demo of the latest game in the Need for Speed series.

PERIMETER: EMPEROR’S TESTAMENT (DEMO)
Explore the single- and multiplayer aspects of this sci-fi RTS. This demo gives you access to the entire game for three hours of uninterrupted, unrestricted fun.

ANNO 1701 (DEMO)
Sample the next installment in Sunflowers’ real-time strategy game. This demo features a tutorial, one single-player map, and one multiplayer map.

STARSIEGE: 2845 ALPHA (DEMO)
Mix MechWarrior with the fast-paced action of Tribes and you will find why this game is ready to challenge you. Give the demo a whirl and see.

ALARM FÜR COBRA 11: NITRO (DEMO)
Sample two of the tracks from the 15 different missions of the full game, set on six authentic stretches of motorway.

MADE MAN (DEMO)
See what it takes to live the life of a Mafioso in this third-person action demo featuring an intro cut-scene and one level from the game.

BATTLEFIELD 2142 V1.01 (PATCH)
What can we say about this patch? It addresses a client-side crash issue in Titan mode, that’s what!

PUTT MANIA (SHAREWARE)
Take this arcade-style miniature golf game for a spin. It features 90 custom-built holes and an in-game editor to build your own.

PARAWORLD V1.01 (PATCH)
This patch fixes a number of minor bugs that plagued the initial release of the game.

F.E.A.R. V1.08 (PATCH)
This update adds a number of minor improvements, including the ability to reuse Proximity Mines and Remote Detonators you threw in a hasty moment of panic.

JETJUMPER (SHAREWARE)
The name sums it up: Pilot a jumping rocket through a variety of trial levels, but beware: One wrong move and it’s game over, man.

BLAST MINER (SHAREWARE)
Get down and dirty with TNT and gasoline to create huge explosions that blast through the earth. Did we mention there are explosions?
In one month’s time, Microsoft will undertake its biggest product launch in years, ringing in the New Year with a new operating system, Windows Vista.

Simply put, Windows Vista is the most consumer-friendly operating system Microsoft has ever released. Windows Vista is full of entertainment features such as Media Center, Windows Media Player 11, improved movie and memories capabilities, and, of course, numerous gaming-friendly features. From the moment gamers load Windows Vista, they will find a brand-new space dedicated to gaming, the Games Explorer, which is an easy way to create a safer gaming environment with parental controls, and an unparalleled graphic experience with DirectX 10.

Let’s take a quick look at Windows Vista’s gaming-friendly features:

**The Games Explorer:** In the past, music, photos, and even TV and movies have had dedicated spaces to call their own in Windows. Now, in Windows Vista, games are front and center, right on the Start menu. The Games Explorer is the single location on the PC to manage your gaming experience. Players can easily install, organize, launch, and remove all of their games on their PCs. Plus, games displayed in the Games Explorer will include game-related information, including publisher, developer, website addresses, and game ratings, as well as any parental controls that have been established by the Administrator.
Parental Controls: One of the most compelling advancements in Windows Vista is the rich set of parental controls built right into the operating system. Microsoft has designed a very simple-to-use interface for parents to create a gaming environment suitable for their children. Game access can be restricted or allowed based on:

1) Game title
2) Game rating (integrating ratings from six different international ratings-board standards)
3) Game content descriptors
4) Time restrictions—by day and time

Parents also can review activity on the PC through weekly activity reports, to help give them peace of mind and confidence.

DirectX 10: What all serious players can get really excited about are the DirectX 10 graphic advancements built into Windows Vista. With the correct GPU, users playing DirectX 10–based games will experience a significant upgrade in gameplay. Stunning use of shadow and light, blurring, realistic 3D, and fully destructible environments are just a few of the huge improvements that will make Windows Vista gaming an unparalleled experience. For more on DirectX 10, see “DirectX 10” on pg. 114.

Of course, game technology and hardware doesn’t mean much without great games. And with the advent of DirectX 10, there will be a slew of new titles (and patches for current titles) that will take advantage of this cutting-edge technology. Games like Crysis (EA Partners), Company of Heroes (THQ), Hellgate: London (Namco Bandai), and
Flight Simulator X (Microsoft Game Studios) all will support DirectX 10. You’ll be able to play these great games on Windows XP with DirectX 9, but if you want the best experience, you’ll want to play on Windows Vista with DirectX 10.

You will continue to see fresh new titles from the biggest publishers bearing the Games for Window banner. That banner means the game takes advantage of many Windows Vista features and is simple, safer, and fun. For example, these games will install directly into the Games Explorer, launch from the Media Center interface, support multiple screen aspects, and work with the full range of Xbox accessories, including the Xbox 360 Wireless Controller, Headset, and Racing Wheel.

But it doesn’t stop there. Microsoft is also bringing the power and community of Xbox Live to Windows Vista with the release of Shadowrun and Halo 2 for Windows Vista, both from Microsoft Game Studios. Finally Windows gamers will be able to experience the rich features and easy multiplayer features of Xbox Live right on their Windows Vista–based PCs. And, incredibly, Shadowrun players will be able to play against their Xbox 360 friends, the first chapter in settling the Windows-Xbox 360 debate. (Note that Xbox Live subscribers will need an Xbox Live Gold Subscription to do this.)

Finally, when Windows Vista releases, you’ll notice four different versions of the operating system: Windows Vista Home Basic, Windows Vista Home Premium, Windows Vista Business, and Windows Vista Ultimate. Which version makes sense for you? Since most gamers often enjoy other types of multimedia entertainment, including TV, movies, music, and photography, you should consider Windows Vista Home Premium. If you are an intense player and need an Xbox Live Gold Subscription to do this.

Whichever version you choose, rest assured you’ll have the best PC-gaming experience on Windows Vista. But don’t take our word for it. The press and gaming community have been looking at Windows Vista for the past few months, and here are a few of their thoughts:

New York Times: The PC Embraces Its Gaming Abilities
Seth Schiesel, July 18, 2006
• “In fact, the world’s most popular game machine is the personal computer. And that doesn’t mean Macintoshes....That means PCs based on Microsoft’s Windows operating system.”
• “…Microsoft is beginning to embrace gaming as a core part of using a computer. That means marketing the PC as the world’s most powerful gaming system and revamping Windows to make it more game-friendly.”
• “So there will certainly be some new buzz around computer games this holiday season. But that will hardly compare with what the general public should expect to hear about PC gaming from Microsoft early next year as the company trots out its next version of Windows, called Vista.”

ExtremeTech: Microsoft Pushes Game Development Forward at Gamefest
Jason Cross, August 17, 2006
• “The push to treat Vista like a games platform on par with the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, Wii, or other premium modern consoles is a pretty big deal. Microsoft projects that they will sell 80 to 120 million copies of Vista in the first year alone, and with Vista’s more robust hardware requirements (especially in the graphics arena), they should all be pretty capable game-playing machines.
That’s an absolutely enormous market, and has the potential to eventually make the PC the largest single platform for game sales.”

GameSpot: A Look at Windows Vista Installed Games
James Yu, July 24, 2006
• “Microsoft is working with casual-game developers to help them produce high-quality games that users will expect to see on the Vista platform.”

Forbes: The Vista Domino Effect on Tech
Peter Topolewski, August 18, 2006
• “Speaking of multimedia functionality, Vista is expected to give gamemakers a boost. The operating system is going to mark a major step forward in cross-platform gaming capabilities, and while not really on the radar for many investors in gamemakers, Vista—once it hits the market—is going to provide a pleasant tailwind for companies like Electronic Arts.”

DigitalTrends: Windows Vista: Game On
Scott Steinberg, August 31, 2006
• “No matter if you can’t tell Company of Heroes or Crysis from a cantaloupe. The OS still boasts numerous sweeping improvements guaranteed to generate excitement in virtual circles. And yes, that goes for both casual and diehard enthusiasts.”
• “Taken together, you’re looking at an operating system that pumps up the audiovisual capabilities, gives users additional feedback on/greater control over their leisure experiences, and makes gaming more accessible than ever.”

CVG: What Does Vista Mean for You?
Staff, September 25, 2006
• “With leading developers excited by and supporting this new operating system, and with an aggressive in-store marketing and sales campaign projecting the PC as a serious competitor to Xbox 360 and PS3, it’s starting to look like the PC could be about to realize its potential as the most powerful and exciting gaming platform of them all.”
Last month, we told you about the amazing power of DirectX 10 graphics hardware and what it will mean for gaming on Windows Vista. This month, we’d like to give you some insight into the remarkable software that is powering this hardware—DirectX 10.

Windows Vista gamers will be the first to experience the next revolution in immersive and interactive graphics beyond anything currently available in the current- or next-gen console space. This is made possible by DirectX 10, Microsoft’s new graphics platform available only in Windows Vista.

By using DirectX 10, game developers can drive upcoming DirectX 10 graphics hardware with maximum performance, leveraging the breadth of new hardware capabilities to deliver spectacular visual experiences.

The DirectX 10 architecture has been almost a half-decade in the making: During this period, Microsoft’s graphics architects worked in close collaboration with top-tier game developers and hardware manufacturers to build the most powerful graphics platform to date, with a focus on matching the power of the tomorrow’s games and graphics hardware. DirectX 10 leaps forward, providing a series of new features and blowing away old limitations to enable developers to realize their creativity without being bogged down by hardware constraints or differences.

Unlike in past versions of DirectX, where many hardware features were optional, in DirectX 10 all hardware features and functionality are required (“no caps” in game-developer-speak). This means every DX10 card provides the same feature baseline, which ensures DirectX 10 games “just work” on DirectX 10 hardware.

Most notably, DirectX 10 will deliver more richly detailed visuals: more visual diversity, more complexity, more vegetation, more detailed characters, more materials, more unique objects, and larger textures. Simply put, you get more with DirectX 10: more power, more realism, and more immersive, lifelike environments. Take a look at the top example on the right: Generating a scene like this in DirectX 9 could take hundreds or even thousands of “commands,” taking precious processing power away from other game systems like A.I., gameplay, or physics. With DirectX 10, the power of the hardware and the flexibility of DirectX 10 mean it can all happen completely on the graphics card, leaving the CPU to concentrate on other elements of the game.

DirectX 10 isn’t only about displaying more content. For the first time, DirectX 10 allows generation of new content dynamically. Features like the new DirectX 10 geometry shader and stream output allow developers to “amplify” and “recirculate” geometry on the fly. The result is a constant stream of new and unique content—new characters, new worlds, new environments. For example, in the center shot, developed by Nvidia, 3D terrain and waterfalls are “grown” dynamically on the graphics card—something not feasible without advancements provided by DirectX 10 software and hardware.

By raising the bar of programmability and flexibility in DirectX 10, we can scale the hardware to approach the imagination of game designers and artists. The result? More sophisticated material shading, complex lighting calculations, and film-inspired environmental and post-processing effects. The bottom example illustrates character headshots in Crytek and EA Partners’ upcoming title, Crysis.

In order to play games designed to take advantage of DirectX 10 features and performance, you’ll need Windows Vista and a DirectX 10–capable graphics processor. Currently available hardware includes the Nvidia 88xx, but more is on the way from the other graphics hardware manufacturers. Of course, any DirectX 10–capable video card will also support playing older DirectX 9 games.

Microsoft Windows continues to be the innovation engine for graphics and gaming, and DirectX 10 in Windows Vista is no exception. For Windows gamers, DirectX 10 will ensure that you will continue to be blown away by the most cutting-edge visual experience out there, only available in games for Windows.
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GO ONLINE
We pound PCs into submission. However, there’s only so much room here to detail the gaming gauntlet each computer runs. So get online to see everything our sinister Tech Medics did to these PCs. Get the info at GFW02.1UP.com and go.extremetech.com/UGM.
**HARDWARE WARS**

**We editors are a secret cabal** of the most jaded tech-heads on the planet. Buried inside EMP-proof bunkers with bleeding-edge gear, we won’t bat an eye at most dual-grapics-card setups or quad-core CPUs. We demand the best—a one-of-a-kind machine that’d make children run screaming and grown men cry. So, a challenge was sent out across the land:

“Build us your ultimate gaming machine. Prices be damned—pack as much as humanly possible into a single, colossal computer. The winner will walk away with the honor of knowing that they have indeed created the most powerful gaming PC on the planet.”

Only nine vendors were brave enough to answer the call. Upon entry, each agreed to the following rules:

1. Any computer entered in the contest will be available for purchase by November 15, 2007 (barring chip/board delays) at the given price or less.
2. Said computer remains fully supported under the company warranty—especially if overclocked by the vendor.

ExtremeTech’s Loyd Case and Jason Cross worked in conjunction with GFW’s Darren Gladstone to create the most demanding series of tests and benchmarks in the business. Everything from real games in real-world settings to synthetic benchmarking programs helped with scoring, but we ultimately relied on three criteria in determining a winner: performance, stability, and quality. In the case of a negligible tie, case design factored into selecting the champion. A special honor also went to the best overall value.

The most exciting part of this competition is that many entrants submitted rigs with new DirectX 10 Nvidia boards. That’s right: We’re the first hardware reviewers on the planet to get a true taste of things to come. Who is the winner? Which machines didn’t even make it to the finish line? Who are the almost-rans? On to the tale of the tape! ● **Loyd Case, Jason Cross, and Darren Gladstone**

**THE WINNER WALKS AWAY WITH THE HONOR OF KNOWING THAT THEY HAVE CREATED THE BEST-POSSIBLE PC.**

**WHAT “THEY” SAY ABOUT UGM**

“Forget all the awards and editors’ choices in other magazines—the honor of being GFW’s Ultimate Gaming Machine is like winning the World Series.” These aren’t our words; the CEO of a major gaming-PC manufacturer said this about our “little” contest. This wasn’t brownnosing. We hope.

**SCORE KEY**

GFW uses a 10-point scoring scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a product is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce a score of 5 as the median, meaning that any hardware receiving a score of 6+ is certainly worthwhile—at least to some extent. Here’s how the numbers break down:

**9-10:** Excellent
Bleeding edge tech that is virtually bulletproof. A must-have.

**7-8.5:** Good
This is a solid performer saddled with some minor flaws.

**5-6.5:** Average
Eh, it’s all right. It’ll do the job, but it might not be your best bet.

**3-4.5:** Bad
Caveat emptor, friend. Serious shortcomings may vary your hardware mileage.

**0-2.5:** Terrible
Someone needs to get punched for selling this junk.

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**Editors’ Choice award**
Any game scoring a 9 or higher receives a GFW Editors’ Choice award, signifying the very best in PC gaming.

**YOU BE A JUDGE!**
Reviewing top-gear rigs is no easy task. It’s even tougher to police that all will follow the rules after we declare a winner in the magazine. That’s why we’re deputizing you, the readers, as honorary judges. If there’s any funny business—be it machine availability or full warranty support—e-mail us techmedics@ziffdavis.com. If anyone in the competition doesn’t adhere to the letter of the law, we’ll call them on it and select a new winner if necessary.

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**GAMING MACHINE**

The search for Earth’s most powerful PC*

*Until newer hardware comes along next week, that is
ALIENWARE’S AREA-51 ALX IS ONE OF THE BEST ALL-AROUND PERFORMERS IN THIS GROUP OF BLAZING-FAST RIGS.

One of the key selling points of Alienware’s new Area-51 ALX systems is the Alien FX lighting system. The colored glowing lights that emanate from the alien-head logo in front and shine out through those big-1950s-car-style chrome fins are user-adjustable, so your system can glow differently than anyone else’s—if only it worked on our system. We got no lights at all, and Windows delivered a message that read: “There was an error while the Alien FX controller was communicating with the computer.” Our test system whirred along alone in the dark, unable to alter the glowing color in each of its five lighted zones. At least Alienware’s new case isn’t quite as huge as those of some of the company’s competitors.

Beyond that, the system was perfectly stable, reliable, and fast—damn fast. The custom liquid cooling lets Alienware crank up the clock speed on the Core 2 Extreme dual-core CPU to 3.64GHz. Coupled with a pair of GeForce 8800 GTX graphics cards (also liquid-cooled), the system is one of the best all-around performers in a roundup full of amazingly fast PCs. In fact, for some reason we can’t quite explain, this box delivered significantly faster results in our Half-Life 2: Lost Coast benchmark than any other Ultimate Game Machine contestant. A kilowatt power supply keeps everything fed with enough juice to make it perfectly stable; outside of that odd Alien FX problem, we didn’t experience any crashes, corruptions, or slowdowns.

A pair of 150GB 10,000-rpm hard drives in a RAID 0 array, together with a 500GB 7,200-rpm data drive, deliver fantastic drive performance. Tweakers will be glad to know that the BIOS exposes the full wealth of overclocking and voltage-tweaking options available on these nice new nForce 680i motherboards.

Like many of these systems that opt for ultimate performance, the ALX is quite loud, so don’t expect to get much sleep with it running in the same room. The internal cabling is fairly neat, but the snaking tubes for liquid cooling together with the wires required for the Alien FX lighting system make for a little more wiring jumble than we like to see.

Ultimately, you either like Alienware’s latest case designs or you don’t—but either way, you’re stuck with them. The Alien FX is a good visual customization option (had it worked), but we find the aesthetics of some other high-end boxes more appealing. There can be no denying the performance of Alienware’s new top-of-the-line ALX system, but we’d love to see something with a little more sex appeal—inside and out.

VERDICT

One of the fastest systems in a field of amazingly fast systems. Very stable.

Pretty noisy. We’d like to see a more attractive case and neater cabling inside.
THE AFFORDABLE ALTERNATIVE

**MANUFACTURER:** CyberPower  
**PRODUCT:** Gamer Infinity SLI KO  
**PRICE:** $3,999  
**URL:** www.cyberpowerpc.com

**VERDICT**

- Lowest-cost GeForce 8800 SLI system tested; great price/performance.
- Not quite as fast as the bleeding edge; lacks dedicated sound card.

**REVIEW**

You have to hand it to CyberPower: Shipping an overclocked Core 2 Duo system with a pair of GeForce 8800 GTX cards at a buck under $4,000 is no mean feat. That’s right—for a bargain-basement price (well, that’s all relative in this competition), you can get some kick-ass performance.

The Gamer Infinity SLI KO comes from off-the-shelf, vanilla parts. None of that fancy-pants, high-end boutique stuff here. No slick, painted chassis, unique industrial design, or a CPU overclocked to stellar-core temperatures. What you will find is a well-behaved, competent system that performs well, runs stably, and offers few amenities.

CyberPower builds its liquid-cooled monster inside a standard CoolerMaster CM Stacker 830 Evolution aluminum case. This massive case houses a sealed CoolerMaster Aquagate liquid-cooling system that keeps the Core 2 Extreme X6800 system icy while running at 3.46GHz. While performance wasn’t quite up to the superoverclocked VoodooPC system, it’s still pretty damn impressive. The pair of GeForce 8800 GTX cards kept the benchmarks humming along with nary a stutter. The Gamer Infinity held up like a champ and ran through all our tests without an issue.

One item the Gamer Infinity lacks—and this is a bit of a head-scratcher—is a dedicated sound card. CyberPower opted instead to use the motherboard’s integrated HD audio. Sure, integrated audio has come a long way, but using it means two things for this system: First, since we can’t truly calculate the CPU load that audio demands, it could cause a slight performance hiccup. Second, you’ll have to give up some of the more refined and immersive 3D positional audio capabilities of the Sound Blaster X-Fi cards used in the rest of the systems in this roundup. Really, if you’re buying a “money is no object” machine, you expect to at least see a soundcard in there.

If your budget won’t allow you to buy into the rarefied altitudes represented by Falcon Northwest, Alienware, or VoodooPC, then CyberPower looks like a good option. With the money you’re saving, kick an extra hundred or so into a good dedicated sound card.

SEEING GREEN

**MANUFACTURER:** Falcon Northwest  
**PRODUCT:** Mach V  
**PRICE:** $7,995  
**URL:** www.falcon-nw.com

**VERDICT**

- Expert craftsmanship inside and out, coupled with a fantastic custom paint job.
- Even for a price-is-no-object PC, that’s a lot of money.

**REVIEW**

Eight grand for an über-gaming PC? You better believe it, buddy. There’s at least $1,000 worth of custom paint on the case alone. The green airbrushed flames adorning this Falcon Northwest system are an example of Falcon’s Exotix custom paint service. Basically, Falcon can put anything on your case that can put on a car—any color and style of paint, any logo or design.

Inside, the box is a work of art and rigid, tied-together cabling. The interior seems spacious, with only a couple of small tubes heading to the CPU to cool it with a sealed Sanyo Denki watercooling system (no refills necessary). Some of the cables are a bit more visible than we consider ideal, but everything is very neatly folded and bound to avoid getting in the way of the internal connections—or your twiddling fingers. Speaking of twiddling, the nForce 680i motherboard has all its overclocking, voltage-adjusting, and tuning options fully exposed.

Not that we suspect you’ll want to fiddle with the razor’s-edge performance the folks at Falcon managed to squeeze out of this box. The quad-core Core 2 QX6700 processor has been bumped up to 3.51GHz, and it runs as solid as a rock. We didn’t see a single crash, error message, or warning in all our testing. The pair of GeForce 8800 GTX cards, though not overclocked, delivers amazing graphics performance even at our most absurd ultra-high-res test settings. Opting for a quad-core instead of dual-core processor makes the system slightly faster at a couple of game tests and slightly slower at others, but we’re taking about “slightly slower/faster than world-class” here. Make no mistake—this Mach V breaks the sound barrier. Equally impressive is that it isn’t particularly noisy when idling—only when it spins up under heavy load does it approach the volume of many other UGM contestants.

It’s all top-shelf gear, but you don’t buy a system like this just for the gear. You buy it for the amazing custom case and matching keyboard/mouse (which share the case’s striking green paint job), for the obvious care and attention to detail in the system’s construction. And Falcon Northwest treats you like you just spent three months’ pay on a high-end gaming PC, right down to the “thanks for buying a Falcon” note in the box.

So why not a perfect 10? The little front flap covering the USB and audio ports at the bottom of the case are chintzy, and some of the internal cables could’ve been hidden better—small stuff, we know. But that makes it fall just short of perfection.
ULTIMATE GAMING MACHINE®

GAMES FOR WINDOWS: THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

MANUFACTURER: VoodooPC
PRODUCT: Omen Intel Core 2 Duo
PRICE: $5,700
URL: www.voodoopc.com

TOWER OF POWER

REVIEW

VoodooPC's custom Omen case is far from ordinary. Sure, the anodized aluminum is available in 22 different colors (we like the "Talladega Black" that was shipped to us), but it's more than that. This isn't just a slightly tweaked and repurposed standard OEM case. From the big rubber feet, custom machine-cut logos, bottom-mounted power supply, and tool-less drive bays, it's obvious to any computer enthusiast that this is something different. It's sleek, stylish, and eye-catching—and though it glows bright white inside and the Voodoo logos glow red, it never seems gaudy.

Inside, this is one of the most elegant machines we've ever seen. The plastic tubing that runs from the way-overclocked (3.8GHz!) Core 2 Extreme X6800 processor and motherboard north bridge chip to the liquid cooler in the front gives it a bit of a mad scientist sci-fi look. The cabling is exquisite—sturdy power prongs poke out from the back of the system here and there to plug into the two GeForce 8800 GTX graphics cards or motherboard power connector, but, other than that, you simply don't see cables at all.

It's all relatively quiet, too. "Relatively" is the key word, there—it's far too noisy to leave whirring in your living room or overnight in your bedroom, but the noise level is quite reasonable for such a high-power, overclocked PC. Interestingly, the sounds are split between the whoosh of whirring fans and a soft gurgle emanating from the liquid cooling tank (don't worry, you shouldn't ever need to refill it).

In addition to achieving one of the highest overclocking speeds we've seen in a shipping system, Voodoo opted to include three 10,000 rpm hard drives all together in a single RAID 0 array. While this achieves the fastest drive speed of all the Ultimate Game Machine systems, we would caution potential buyers to make sure they back up often—if one drive goes down, you're hosed. Our stability testing went very well indeed, with no errors, hang-ups, or shutdowns in all our benchmarking. We even tried to kill it by looping 3DMark06 for hours, and it kept on truckin'. Voodoo's impressive engineering efforts produced the fastest overall system in the lineup—albeit by the smallest of margins.

As with the system from Falcon Northwest, the out-of-box experience with VoodooPC is something special. Espresso chocolate, temporary tattoos, a Voodoo T-shirt, and a folder of documentation that is a work of art unto itself—all this stuff may not be a big deal next to the hardware in the PC you just bought, but it makes you feel like a special customer. Though this system doesn't have the impressive custom paint job the Falcon system does, it's around $2,000 less expensive, and it certainly doesn't suffer from lack of sex appeal. No system is perfect, but this one is about as close as you'll ever get.

WINNER: 2006 CHAMP!
ALMOST FAMOUS

MANUFACTURER: Gateway  PRODUCT: FX530XT  PRICE: $4,029.99  URL: www.gateway.com

REVIEW

Gateway gets kudos for trying a little harder. It’s the only major PC manufacturer to actually ship an overclocked quad-core processor in its FX530XT system—and we applaud that move. However, the performance of its ATI CrossFire subsystem proves inconsistent, actually placing behind the lower-clocked Dell XPS 710 in about half the game benchmarks.

Despite lagging in the back of the pack, Gateway’s PC feels more refined than Dell’s impressive XPS 710. Here we have a machine whose Intel Core 2 QX6700 CPU is clocked a half-gigahertz higher than the Dell processor, and yet it runs quieter, even at full load. The Gateway costs significantly less, too (though the Dell does ship with an additional 750GB secondary hard drive. But still...). The Achilles’ heel of the FX530XT is its CrossFire graphics subsystem. Interestingly, the X1950 XTX master card uses the same cooling solution as the older X1900 XTX. Gateway notes that this is necessary because the smaller BTX chassis wouldn’t accept the longer card. This could be problematic if you want to drop in one of the even-longer GeForce 8800 GTX cards as an upgrade.

The real problem, though, is the inconsistent performance. In several game tests, the Gateway posted lower scores than the Dell, which runs its CPU slower. It could simply be a driver revision or timing mismatches between the overclocked CPU and the DDR2-667 RAM that causes this slower performance. Despite these variances in scores, the FX530XT crosses the finish line intact.

The Gateway really loses out, though, is against the boutique hot-rodders. While overclocking the Intel CPU to 3.2GHz is a bold move for a mainstream supplier, even the most conservative boutique manufacturer pushed their processors even higher. And like Dell, Gateway hasn’t finished qualifying the faster GeForce 8800 GTX DirectX 10—ready graphics cards. So expect to see a more powerful flavor of this machine in the coming months.

The Gateway chassis is substantially more compact than anything else in the running—and it comes with a reasonable price. If money is on your mind and there’s only room under your desk for a modest mid-tower case, then consider the FX530XT.

VERDICT

- Small, stable, quiet, and affordable.
- Not quite monster machine performance (due to CrossFire issues).

PLAYING IT SAFE

MANUFACTURER: Dell  PRODUCT: XPS 710  PRICE: $5,314.00  URL: www.dell.com

REVIEW

Walking into any room, you can’t help but notice Dell’s XPS 710. It may lack the Falcon Northwest system’s bold paint job, but the 710 is substantial nonetheless. And we mean that in almost every sense of the word: Cancel your gym membership and just keep deadlifting this 55-plus-pound monster case.

Besides bigger muscles, the XPS 710 also offered the smoothest benchmarking experience. That’s because it’s one of the quietest systems. Even with a 1,000W power supply, three hard drives, and a pair of ATI X1950 XTX graphics cards running in CrossFire mode, fan noise rarely ramped up to annoying “turn that off!” levels.

And that’s part of the problem. Dell took the fewest risks of any of the systems in the roundup. While some vendors pushed their systems into noosebled territory, Dell clocked its quad-core Intel QX6700 CPU at the standard 2.66GHz. So while the Dell was trouble-free and quiet, it also posted some of the lowest benchmark scores we tested. If you don’t break any records, at least you reach the checkered flag.

To be fair, Dell does expose overclocking options in the XPS 710 BIOS, but that means you have to be comfortable playing around with clock multipliers and other settings yourself—though the options to overclock are somewhat limited. Still, the Dell left us scratching our heads. Despite the use of quad core, it seems like a last-generation system. The chipset is Nvidia’s last generation 590 SLI for Intel, and the graphics are still DirectX 9.0. And we were rather bemused to see a pair of ATI cards running in CrossFire mode on an Nvidia-based motherboard.

In the end, if you’re willing to tweak this system, you can probably get to 3.2GHz fairly easily, and if you’re willing to wait, Dell is qualifying GeForce 8800 GTX cards. But nimblier and smaller competitors already offer more.

THE STRENGTH OF THE XPS 710 IS THE CASE DESIGN. UNFORTUNATELY, ITS OLD TECH SPELLS POOR PERFORMANCE.

VERDICT

- Solid and stable performance from a beautiful case.
- Playing it safe means packing the oldest tech.
When we started testing machines for the Ultimate Game Machine feature, we had nine systems—a virtual who’s who of high-end boutique-PC manufacturers—representing the hopes of nine different PC companies. Each was ready to race off the starting line—but three never even made it past the pace lap.

Every vendor made a good-faith effort to ship us a rock-solid system. As we started to experience problems with some units, each manufacturer assured that they were tested, retested, burned in, tortured, and signed off on after days of abuse.

Despite all that, we had problems—serious problems—with three of the systems. Spontaneous shutdowns and reboots, numerous lockups during benchmarks—you name it. We sat on the phone for hours, double-checking cables and reseating cards.

One manufacturer issued dire warnings that some of these overclocked systems draw so much power that using a power strip can be problematic, so we should plug them directly into an outlet. In another case, we returned a system to have parts replaced, as anyone might for a warranty problem. When we got it back, it behaved even worse—it wouldn’t even boot into Windows before shutting down. The CTO of one company even flew out with a bunch of parts and spent all day under our watchful eye trying to get his UGM entry stable.

In the end, three of these hot rods never made it back on the track after their extended pit stops. We’re perfectly happy to review a system that finishes all our tests with a few random problems—we’ll simply point out the system for its stability issues and give it a lower score. If it’s not even stable enough to finish a round of testing (and some didn’t come anywhere close to the finish line), we have to wave the yellow flag and get the wrecks off the track.

Frankly, that makes the overclocking success and stability of most of the other UGM entries all the more impressive. Word of mouth and reviews in magazines like ours mean everything to these boutique-PC vendors—and in an effort to win the Grand Prix of enthusiast game PC roundups, nearly every company pushed these machines to the limit, maxing out high-wattage power supplies and cutting-edge processors and motherboards. Some of them, clearly, just pushed a bit too hard.
Why would four entrants in the Ultimate Gaming Machine competition stock up their rigs with fresh-off-the-production-line hardware? Because they know these cards are ridiculously powerful. So let’s not tap-dance around the obvious and just cut to the chase: The GeForce 8800 GTX is the most significant piece of graphics hardware since the original GeForce 256. Back then, haters said the GeForce 256 was too large a chip and too power-hungry a card. It’s like that scene in Major League when an Indians fan says a home run hit was “too high.” Well, those same people are about to say the same thing about the 8800 GTX. It’s a huge card, no doubt, but for good reason. In our tests, this one card performed as well as two—count ‘em, two—7900 GTX cards in SLI mode.

You can read all the stunning results throughout the feature or online at ExtremeTech.com, but when a benchmark-crusher like this comes along, you just get out of the way. The computer-killing Company of Heroes ran more than twice as fast as on the latest top-dog Radeon cards. We played F.E.A.R. at 2560x1600 resolution at an ungodly smooth 80 frames per second. How about DirectX 10? Well, we still have to wait since there are no benchmarks or games that show off the true next-gen 3D API. But at least this card is ready for the jump to DX10.

So, does this gargantuan graphics solution draw power from a nuclear reactor? No, but you’ll at least want to get your hands on a 450W or better power supply with a 12V current rating of 30A. According to Nvidia, the highest it will rev is 180W for peak loads while gaming hovers around the 145W mark. Oh, and make sure that you plug in the two 6-pin connectors or you run the risk of the computer either not booting properly or crashing whenever you start a 3D-based application.

You know what? Let the people talk. Let them complain that the card is too big (and good luck trying to squeeze it into a compact case). The simple matter is, while the card is costly and beefy, it’s a whole lot cheaper and smaller than two 7900 GTX boards—and if size or cost is really a concern, a leaner 8800 GTS model will sell for about $450. What’s important for now is that the 8800 GTX is a must-have card.

REVIEW
MANUFACTURER: PNY
PRODUCT: GeForce 8800 GTX
PRICE: $599
URL: www.pny.com

ONE 8800 OUT-PERFORMS TWO 7900GTX CARDS IN SLI CONFIGURATION!

VERDICT
9
EXCELLENT
• Incredible performance even with AA and AF jacked up. Ready for DirectX 10!
• As expensive as it is big.

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AND THE WINNER IS...

VOODOOPC

Nine systems, four weeks, three failed computers, and it all comes down to this—one winner, one vendor that has built the best machine on the planet.

When the dust settled and the race had been run, six competitors crossed the finish line without stability hang-ups—and each has something special going for it.

CyberPower somehow managed to keep the price of its machine down to just under $4,000—and that’s with a 3.46GHz dual-core Intel CPU and two GeForce 8800 GTX cards, making it an impressive value. You might need to tack on an extra $100 or so because CyberPower omitted a dedicated soundcard, but still, four grand is a great deal.

Dell’s system was striking in its design, and also striking in its conservatism. On the other hand, good ol’ Gateway came out of the gate flying with an overclocked Intel quad-core CPU. Sure, it’s “only” 3.2GHz, but that’s air-cooled—and it’s the most compact and quiet system we tested for those whose space is precious.

Alienware’s William Joyce–meets–H.R. Giger case design will turn heads, but the system offered curiously conservative performance for a company that prides itself on trying to be bleeding edge.

But, in the end, it really came down to two systems: Falcon Northwest pushed new technology a bit more than VoodooPC. While both companies are shipping the spiffy new GeForce 8800 GTX graphics cards in SLI mode in these über-rigs, Falcon Northwest gets props for shipping an overclocked Intel quad-core CPU. The boys from Oregon managed to push the clock frequency to 3.51GHz, and it was rock solid in all our testing. But we found the case design to be somewhat dated, and while the custom paint job was slick, it also seemed just a little garish.

VoodooPC was a little more conservative on the CPU choice, going with a dual-core Core 2 Extreme X6800 CPU, but the Canadian company managed to push the clock frequency to 3.8GHz—and once again, it managed to do so while maintaining stability.

And so VoodooPC takes the checkered flag. It was close, to be sure, but the VoodooPC system offered excellent performance, rock-solid stability, and a case design that’s elegant and refined in an almost Bang & Olufsen way. In the end, the VoodooPC system edged out the Falcon Northwest system around the margins—it was a little faster in some games and came with a sexier case. Both are excellent, but this year, the prize goes to VoodooPC.●
ULTIMATE GAMING PERIPHERALS

Three hardware editors pick the best game gear

Buying the ultimate machine is a big piece of the puzzle, sure, but you still need all the tech trimmings to properly pimp your rig. Sticking with the “money is no object” credo of our PC contest, Loyd Case, Jason Cross (both from ExtremeTech.com), and Darren Gladstone (from good ol’ GF-dubya) argued over the perfect peripherals for the job.

MONITOR
Dell’s 30-inch LCD 3007WFP was unanimously voted the most monstrous monitor around—until we found out a new model was on the way. The 3007WFP-HC promises a 92-percent color gamut—and will eclipse the sun and hypnotize passersby.
3007WFP-HC: www.dell.com $1,800

HEADSET
Picking the perfect headset is tough—and nobody could agree on what makes up the best set of cans. Can you get a good headset with a built-in mic? Does it simulate 5.1 sound? Do you care how dumb you look with these things on? Darren continues to appreciate the gimmicky Barracuda HP-1 headphones—and continues looking like a tool. Still, Sennheiser makes some incredible-sounding headsets for hardcore audiophiles. Hell, listen once to the HD580s and you won’t miss the mic.
Who needs to talk to other people, anyhow?
Barracuda HP-1: www.razerzone.com $130
HD580: www.sennheiserusa.com $270

CONTROLLER
The perfect controller for PC gaming is...wait for it...a console controller. It’s just crazy enough to make sense. By making the Xbox 360 Controller for Windows (which amounts to XP drivers for the console controller), Microsoft has pretty much rendered everything else obsolete. No arguments on this one.

Wired Xbox 360 Controller for Windows: www.xbox.com $40

MOUSE
Are you ready to cut the cord? That’s the ongoing debate here at GFW. Loyd is convinced that wireless mice can introduce game-killing lag—so he sticks to the wired-and-weighty Logitech G5. Darren likes the G5 for more superficial reasons: its heft, mouse-speed-adjustment buttons and sensually textured rubber grip (but in a non pervy way). Ever the contrarian (“Are you two on crack?”), Jason loves the MX Revolution’s wirelessness and high-performance feel.

G5: www.logitech.com $70
MX Revolution: www.logitech.com $100

KEYBOARD
Darren and Jason agree that Logitech’s G15 is sweetness incarnate. Glow-in-the-dark macro keys and a nifty programmable LCD display instantly elevate n00bs to 73st—at least until they start getting pwn3d in-game. Curmudgeonly Loyd swears by the non-sense CVT Avant Prime that, apparently, is tougher than a tank despite looking like a standard keyboard.
G15: www.logitech.com $100
Avant Prime: www.cvtinc.com $150

SPEAKERS
Jason prefers Logitech’s Z-5450 Digital wireless 5.1 speakers. His reasoning: The digital decoder box allows him to plug in console game systems as well. But decoder boxes are a little superfluous. Loyd and Darren are all about getting Creative, and the GigaWorks S750 is the Cadillac with chrome-spinner dubs of PC speakers. Yeah, it’s wired, but if you’re planting your rig in one place, this 7.1 system is the only choice.
Z-5450 Digital: www.logitech.com $500
GigaWorks S750: www.creative.com $500

STEERING WHEEL
If you cut the steering column and pedals from a NASCAR racer and turned ’em into a controller, you’d get the Trackstar USB HD Ultra. A lush leather wheel sits atop heavy metal construction; fierce force feedback and metal camshafts are housed inside.
Trackstar 6000 system: www.ecci6000.com starts at $1,100

FLIGHTSTICK
Before flying away to the danger zone in MS Flight Simulator X, Loyd plugs in his Saitek X52 Pro stick and rudder pedals with those slick on-board LCD panels. Then he throws on some aviator shades and cranks up the Kenny Loggins. We don’t ask.
X52 Pro Flight Control System: www.saitekusa.com $200

WIRELESS GAMING ROUTER
Routers may not seem sexy, but they’re vital if you’re hooking up more than one net-hungry device in your pad. D-Link’s DGL-4300 is a great 802.11b/g router that has all this nifty packet prioritization and upstream limiting stuff, is Gigabit Ethernet, and still—straight—doesn’t cost much.
DGL-4300: dlink.com $150
One gamer formally resigns as beta tester

COLUMN

Once upon a time, my wife and I bought a new refrigerator. At the store, and in the brochure, we were told of many exciting and wonderful features our refrigerator would have: a water dispenser and ice maker on the front door, slide-out shelves for easy access to food, digital temperature controls. When we brought the refrigerator home and plugged it in, however, things were not quite as we had been promised. The water that came out of the dispenser was brown. The slide-out shelves jammed halfway open. And the digital temperature controls weren't included at all, though there was a note in the packaging saying that they were sorry about that and they'd deliver that component to us as soon as they were done making it.

OK, so I made all that up. Duh. Who buys refrigerators? I've had the same one since, like, I was born. And whatever the hell that green lumpy thing is on the middle shelf has been there since then, too. The idea here was to plant an image in your head of a faulty product. A dud. A lemon. Because, in this case, you know exactly what we would do next: We would return it and get our money back. We would not be patient and wait for the company to get its act together. We would not troll message boards looking for fixes. We would not take on part of the blame ourselves for having too high expectations. Because why should we? We pay our money, we expect a product that works as advertised. Period. The end.

But if Games for Windows is to be taken seriously as a real platform that gamers can trust, then the publishers of PC games need to take the games more seriously and treat their customers with more respect. Given the amazing alternatives readily available on the next-gen consoles, and given that, you know, those games work the first time you pop them in, PC gamemakers need to stop relying on postship patching, stop making excuses, and finish their damn games before shoving them out the door. And, really, is that asking for a whole lot?

What stuns and annoys me the most every time this happens is the way some game publishers react in the face of criticism like this. As if it were our fault their game is so buggy. As if they didn't know they were releasing it prematurely, just to avoid more production costs or the wrath of their stockholders. They are shocked (shocked!) that they received a bad score for their unfinished product! Sure, the game hardly runs, sure, there have been three patches already, but come on, GFU! Stop being so uptight!

Here's just one humble thought: If you spent as much time worrying about quality control as you do about your precious GameRankings.com score, then, you know, maybe your game would actually deserve a better score. Karma: It's a real bitch.

Jeff Green

What Jeff doesn't realize is that his own personal GameRankings score is 3.2. Ask when he's getting a patch at jeff_green@ziffdavis.com

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WE DON’T JUST ‘KNOW’ MUSIC, WE PARTIED ON ITS YACHT THEN PAID FOR ITS REHAB.