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Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE
ISSUE 06 MAY 2007

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TWO NEW CAMPAIGNS • TWO NEW ARMIES

INTERVIEW
JOHN CARMACK
DOOM CREATOR SPEAKS

SPECIAL REPORT
VIDE G A M E D O C U M E N T A R I E S
FIVE UPCOMING FILMS:
EVERY G AMER NEEDS TO SEE

REVIEWED
IS VISTA WORTH IT?
PLUS: 20 ESSENTIAL TIPS

PREVIEWED
CRYSI S
6 PAGES OF EXPLOSIVE, ALL-NEW SCREENS

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Contents

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DEPARTMENTS

08 Editorial
The resident spokesperson for pasty-faced, antisocial shut-ins complains because it's sunny outside. Next month: why food and shelter are bad.

10 Letters
As usual, you write us some snarky letters and we write you some snarky replies.

14 Start
Take a fresh look at DirectX 10 poster child Crysis and Sins of a Solar Empire—the next game from indie powerhouse Stardock. We also pick cofounder John Carmack's brain a bit and take a peek at a few videogame documentaries currently under way.

COVER STORY

46 Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts
Don't call it an expansion! Check out our world-exclusive first look at the ambitious stand-alone follow-up to Relic's groundbreaking RTS.

FEATURE

56 Windows Vista
Should PC gamers install Vista? We threw a couple dozen games at Microsoft's new OS to find out. Also: 20 tips to maximize your Vista experience.
THE GENETIC EMPIRE HAS BEEN BORN.

GENESIS

3000 YEARS IN THE FUTURE, THE HUMAN RACE DOMINATES THE UNIVERSE, WITH MASSIVE FLEETS OF ORGANIC STARSHIPS, GENETICALLY ENGINEERED FOR WAR. HUMANITY SETS OUT TO CONQUER THE LAST REMAINING INDEPENDENT GALAXY.

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Reviews
Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars finally arrives, and we’re pleased to discover that it’s one of the best recent games in its genre. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about Vanguard: Saga of Heroes.

Extend
This month, battlelogs Tom Chick and Bruce Geryk go head-to-head to see who is the truly Supreme Commander, and MMORPG connoisseur Cindy Yens explores the wide world of online griefing.

Tech
Think you need some big, black obelisk of a PC to get your game on? Think again. In the first part of a three-part series, we walk you through building a gaming-worthy small form-factor PC.

Greenspeak
The world’s worst preview of the world’s most generic fantasy action-role-playing game!

GAME INDEX
76 Blitzkrieg II: Fall of the Reich
76 City Life: World Edition
83 Combat Mission: Shock Force
86 Command & Conquer 3: Tiberian Wars
46 Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts
74 Galaxy
70 Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar
83 Lux Deluxe
83 Risk II
77 Sam & Max: Episode 4—Abe Lincoln Must Die!
72 Secrets of the Ark: A Broken Sword Game
36 Sins of a Solar Empire
80 Supreme Commander
74 Vanguard: Saga of Heroes
24 The Witcher
28 World in Conflict

THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM
64 Reviews
68 Extent
70 Tech
76 Greenspeak
76 Blitzkrieg II: Fall of the Reich
76 City Life: World Edition
83 Combat Mission: Shock Force
86 Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars
46 Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts
74 Galaxy
70 Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar
83 Lux Deluxe
83 Risk II
77 Sam & Max: Episode 4—Abe Lincoln Must Die!
72 Secrets of the Ark: A Broken Sword Game
36 Sins of a Solar Empire
80 Supreme Commander
74 Vanguard: Saga of Heroes
24 The Witcher
28 World in Conflict
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- GameSpy: Editor’s Choice Award; 5 Stars
- IGN: Editor’s Choice Award; 9.0 out of 10
- SciFi.com (Sci Fi Weekly): A+
- UGO: A

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GREETINGS FROM COUNT NERDULA

The sunlight—it burns!

As I type this, it is a glorious day in San Francisco, California: sunny, warm, not a cloud in the sky. Good news? Maybe for you. For me, it presents a serious psychological impediment to my gaming habit. It’s hard enough sometimes to spend six or seven hours (or more) in front of the computer on a weekend day without feeling a little gross and guilty, but it’s even worse when Mother Nature herself is mocking me. “GO OUTSIDE,” she beckons. “Yeah, well, do you know what? I am “outside,” right here in Azeroth, lady, and this sun won’t give me skin cancer, OK? So go burn someone else and leave me alone with my games, Sheesh.

But though the sunlight burns me out, I am happy about this issue of GFWM, and I hope you will be too. While I have nothing but praise for the full-time crew here, I want to single out for special attention some of the freelancers who contributed some really stellar work this month. Evan Shamoan, former editor-in-chief of XBIN magazine, conducted a great interview (pp. 32) with the folks behind Fracture, a groundbreaking work in interactive storytelling. Regular contributor Scott Ashley wrote one of the funniest pieces I’ve read in a long time (pp. 24). And freelance writer Ed Halter, who has previously graced these pages with excellent, thought-provoking pieces on Islamogaming, the gaming scene in China, and Christian videogaming, returns this month with a report on upcoming film documentaries about videogame culture (pp. 42). Finally, a personal shout-out and warm welcome to longtime industry writer and friend Cindy Yans, who joins us for two articles this month: a review of the latest Broken Sword game (pp. 72), and an amusing tale of her secret life as a vindictive ganker in our ongoing MMO column Crisis on Infinite Servers (pp. 84). Yay!

Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to pull the shades here, wrap my black cape around me, and get back to my game. Soon the sun will set, and all will be well again.

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

Now Playing: Titan Quest: Immortal Throne, People, World of Warcraft
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
Managing Editor

A personal post—Burnin’ Crusade guild crisis has forced Sean to take a break from WOW and discover there are other games to play. Actually, just alls to create. Now Playing: Galacticraft: Return to Dark Arder, World of Warcraft
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
Editor (Reviews, Ext & Int)

Ryan is currently bouncing between WOW, Ultima Online, EverQuest, and City of Heroes. Daylight? Feh! Who needs it?
Now Playing: LotS of MMOs
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
Editor (START!)

One New Year’s resolution down Shawnbugged in the SoftX7 night flight and is finally flying X-20 without setting his engine on fire and chewing his way out. Now Playing: STALKER, People, 623 Starmash, Crosswind
1UP.com Blog: GFWSwan1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
Art Editor

Michael was disappointed to discover that his winter of discontent will actually not end with the coming of spring.
Now Playing: Battlefield 2
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
Senior Editor (Features/Tech)

Unlike Jeff, Rosemary will not be avoiding the sun this month. Once this issue is finished she’ll be at the dark postures of the GW office and lounging poolside in Vegas with a cold drink in her hand. Now Playing: Blackjack
1UP.com Blog: GFWPonk1UP.com

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BECAUSE THE FATE OF ALL MANKIND IS TOO GREAT TO BE DECIDED ON A CONSOLE ALONE

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BUNGIE

Microsoft

MATURE

Blood and Gore
Language
Volcano

Games for Windows LIVE
ONE OUT OF TWO

Kudos on your “Love + Hate” article (GFW #5, p. 84). Usually, we only hear from developers not when they’re hawking their latest wares, so it was interesting to hear them discuss their broader views on the art and industry of gaming. Some thought-provoking stuff.

On the other hand, the “Confessions of an Electronic Hit Man” article (GFW #5, pg. 22) was a surprising deviation from the usual high standards of CGW/GFW. Why devote two whole pages to the unsubstantiated—and, by your own admission, dubious—claims of some anonymous gamer? I realize you’re a trade magazine and not Newsweek, but please stick with the verifiable facts and leave any rumors, myths, and tall tales to Internet forums.

Samhain

We are big fans of the non-ware-hawking interviews ourselves, which is what we try to do every month in the GFW interview piece. This month’s interview with John Carmack, for example, finds him being his usual brainiac self with nary a product plug in sight. Yeah, that’s right—we said “nary.” As far as the “Confessions piece” goes, we found the concept of a “paid griever” to be an interesting one, but we agree that more substantiation could have yielded even better results. We’ll try to follow this one up down the line.

MORE LOVE, MORE HATE

I was simmering over Warren Spector’s “hates” in your “Love + Hate” story and was bemused by his Number Seven hate. (For the record, Spector’s Number Seven hate was “All game stories are terrible.”—Ed.) Warren has been free to create whatever storylines and games he wanted to. Yet he is guilty of his own so-called “greatest” hate. Look at the most popular games on the market: World of Warcraft, The Sims, and so on. Hell, Microsoft Flight Simulator is quite popular. At one time, Myst was popular. Looking at these games, only World of Warcraft falls into his Number Seven hate category. However, System Shock: Thief: The Dark Project, and Deus Ex—games he was responsible for—all fit into his Number Seven hate category. Look in the mirror, Warren.

Todd Steen
MAN MADE HELL

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Use of Alcohol
Consoles,” several folks from Epic and Electronic Arts seemed skeptical that it was possible. Check out our Windows Vista report card on pg. 56 to find out how it’s going so far.

During that same panel, by the way, Epic Games president Mike Capps cited piracy as a main reason why all the cool FPS games are going to consoles now. Yeah, it’s the piracy death knell again…but whether it’s true or not isn’t as important as the fact that game developers think it’s true. So stop pirating stuff, kids. Oh, and you older folks, too.

GRAY SOLIDARITY

As a 35-year-old gamer, I feel the “Gray Power” article by Jeff Green (GW #5, pg. 104) hit on some good points. Perhaps the older crowds aren’t as ridiculed in some gaming communities as [in] others, but let’s face it; generally speaking, if you’re beyond your early (very early) twenties and caught playing an MMO, then the unofficial imaginary teenybopper handbook states: “You have become too old to play games or enjoy yourself; now go die.”

Oh how I treasure those golden “You’re how old?!?” moments while playing a game because, hey, that’s not to love about being made to feel like an outcast freak? So I play games at 35 years old. At least I can take comfort in knowing I’m not alone in my senior citizen–gamer status. My wife is an avid gamer too, and we’re celebrating her 48th birthday very soon.

Stephen

HI, I’M A CORRECTION

In “Five for Fire” (GW #5) on pg. 101, you wrote, “No, Macs don’t beat similarly priced PCs in game benchmarks, but then again, you can’t run OS X on a Windows PC.” This is wrong. You can now legally (or at very least almost legally) install Mac OS X on a Windows PC. First, you go and buy Mac OS X. When you get home, open it or anything. Don’t try to install it. Now download Mac OS X (a homebrew version of Mac OS X designed to run on any generic Windows PC) from a torrent. Technically, you own a license, assuming it is the same version. You can legally install OS X on a Windows PC.

Joe-1

FAIR SHAKES

I am compelled to write this because I have a feeling Vanguard: Saga of Heroes is going to receive an unfair review and be rated much lower than it should. Especially after I read some shortsighted reviews and saw that VSOH got the “Ugly” in your April 2007 issue’s “Good, Bad, and Ugly” (GW #5, pg. 36). Ironically, VSOH was never really meant as a WO killer as WO players were not its target market. The only bad thing about the timing was that it was difficult to get ad space with all the WO stuff up advertising The Burning Crusade.

Now I’m no “Vanb0i,” but I do insist that when someone reviews a game they play it thoroughly and give it a fair shake. Nobody can deny that the game is riddled with bugs and that is unforgivable, but you also have to see what the active players see in the future. If you look past the bugs, the actual game itself is really fun.

I can only hope that if it does get a bad review the reviewer points out that it would have received a much higher score if it wasn’t so buggy. There is so much great stuff in the game from character creation, diplomacy, breathtaking graphics, boats, flying mounts, and so on. It would be a shame that some people may not even give it a chance. Once the game is mostly bug-free (which they are diligently working on fixing with weekly patches) it will truly be a game I will enjoy playing for a long time. I hope that maybe people will check the game out in the future and not dismiss the game forever (because of) bad reviews based mostly on bugs that will be fixed. It is actually much better today than it was at launch.

Bryan Lucke

MAIL BYTES

Pirating software was big before PC and Windows even existed. These companies knew that going in. So why is it now a big deal?

baron calamity

Issue #1 of Computer Gaming World and Issue #1 of Games for Windows both have a dragon on the cover. Is this mere coincidence, or are you guys trying to get a gimmick going?

James

The real crime would be if Command & Conquer 3 scored higher than Supreme Commander.

Laughterkilsme

#12 • GAMES FOR WINDOWS THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE
games with their advertising pollution? Apparently so, and this is why none of your reviews can be trusted by serious gamers. With the steep system requirements of Rainbow Six, only serious gamers would have a machine capable of playing it. And here’s the deal: My Alienware Area-51 is now two years old, and I was going to buy a new one in six or seven months, but not now. I’m not going to pay several thousand dollars for a new PC so some advertising pig can put ads on it. So you must think that by not mentioning the in-game ads that I can be tricked into buying this game? What is your interest in deceiving your readership?

This dishonesty will have a trickle-down effect. Not only will I not buy any game with advertising. I will not need the hardware to play it. That means: goodbye Nvidia, goodbye Creative Labs, goodbye Corsair RAM, goodbye Alienware, goodbye Intel, goodbye Logitech mouse, goodbye mbob manufacturer, and goodbye to any gaming magazine that is party to this rip-off of gamers.

Robert Matthews

You didn’t happen to find a baby in there with that bathwater, did you?

FUTURE MARKETERS OF AMERICA CLUB

On the GFW Radio podcast, the editors of GFW asked listeners to take a GFW, Computer Gaming World, and/or 1UP Network review of a bad game and...um...“rework it” into a positive one exclusively through omission. That is: You can’t add words or rearrange them...just replace them with ellipses. Here are a couple of our favorite entries.

FLYBOYS SQUADRON

“...fun action...drama.

Hey, guys, have you seen that cool new...WWI air-war...online sim? Single-player missions...tie into the film... Brilliant!

Flyboys Squadron...certainly...gets...this flight simulation...online...in this package... The game immerses you in a world rich with the drama and camaraderie of war... The delivered game features a...set of 12 individual missions...and in the first of those, you...even fly the plane.

A few of the later missions pack in...entertainment value...In any case, the film-inspired missions...lure retail shoppers that dig the movie...It’s a...MMO flight sim—if you’re interested in it...you can download it at FileFront.com.”

Original GFW score: 3/10 (Bad)

Erebus

25 TO LIFE

“I can really relate to 25 to Life, perhaps more so than with any other game...because my life matches up all that well with that of a murderous drug-dealing gangbanger...

To play 25 to Life is to subject yourself to...a delightful combination of...third-person shooter...and...a...homage to...Rasha-motherf***ing-mon.

25 to Life accomplishes...one goal...innovative gameplay... You can take hostages to protect yourself.

 Seriously, the final fight finds you squaring off against your old boss...with a rocket launcher... 25 to Life sets the gaming bar.”

Original CGW Score: 2/10 (Terrible)

NoFXcKy

Erebus and NoFXcKy (if those are your real names), feel free to show this magazine to any prospective employers in the marketing field.

MAIL US!

Want your words to appear on these pages? Then write something intelligent—or write something insane—or carefully craft something that simply looks insane but is really just a put-on in a manner that doesn’t set off our B.S. detector—and it’ll probably end up in print! It’s that easy! The addy equals GFWletters@ziffdavis.com.

Check it out at www.chproducts.com 760.598.2518

(templates shown above may be downloaded from the CH Products website)
"We want the player to be able to explore an open environment and not feel too confined by artificial level borders," says level designer Morten Sandholt. In Crysis, that means high mountain ranges, Korean People’s Army-cruiser blockades, and shark-infested waters.
**INFINITE CRYYSIS**

Limitless possibility (and possible limits) in Crytek’s sci-fi shooter

**DEVELOPER**: Crytek  
**PUBLISHER**: EA Games  
**GENRE**: First-Person Shooter  
**RELEASE DATE**: 2007

**PREVIEW**

Crysis hangs its success on DirectX 10 supergraphics, holy-s*** moments involving absolute-zero alien death machines, and possibly too-high technology—but it hangs its hat on permutations. Pile custom weapon loadouts (no matter how nonsensical) on top of nanosuit configurations on top of everything-breaks-physics, then add a layer of ice and toss it all into zero-g, and we’ve got n-factorial questions. What happens when x + y is divided by z? What happens when you introduce w? If Crysis is a collection of details from which complexity violently erupts, where’s the limit? The Crytek crew pauses to bring Crysis’ high concepts back to the ground, and to explain what could happen—and what probably won’t.
X FACTOR: THE NANOSUIT

Call it a pragmatically shifting nanosuit, or call it what it feels like: running fast, punching hard, and jumping high. Whatever the nomenclature, Crysis' signature fashion statement gives players a few puzzle pieces to work with: speed, strength, armor and stealth, available in superpowered doses.

"Using strength jumps, the player can be on top of a cliff in a matter of seconds, while the A.I. has to take the long way around," says Crytek CEO Cevat Yerli. "The player can jump over cars, on top of large rocks and buildings, from rooftop to rooftop. He has an extra dimension in movement: that the human A.I. doesn't, which can buy those extra seconds that keep the player alive long enough to turn the tide of a battle. Subtleties complicate—armor mode allows you to absorb falling damage better, strength mode helps with weapon recoil, speed mode makes certain actions, aside from shuffling your feet—such as reloading a weapon—faster."

Crysis' environments are tailored to the suits' capabilities, taking the versatile outerwear from advantageous accessory to absolute necessity. "Rocks and structures are tweaked to the correct height so that players can use strength mode to jump up without problems," says level designer Morten Sandholm. "The distance between rooftops needs to allow the player to jump between them."

Major cover objects such as houses, rocks, and trees are placed so the player can sprint between them in speed mode without running out of energy midway or bumping into debris. Soft cover, such as bushes, is placed so the player can use the cloak mode effectively. Objects for the player to throw at the enemy are always within reach in combat areas.

Line everything up, and patterns start to emerge. "Speed-sprint up to a rock with an enemy hiding behind it and make a strength jump over both the rock and the A.I.," Sandholm says, "and take him out with a well-placed punch." "Lure an A.I. into a hut, exit through the other doorway, jump on the roof, drop down on the other side, and perform a surprise attack from behind. Emerge from behind a bush and speed-sprint straight for the enemy and take him out before he has a chance to react."

"We pose a hypothetical of our own: jump across rooftops with strength jump—but miss the landing, and switch to armor mode to absorb the 9.8-meters-per-second-squared shock. Spot a vehicle careening down the alley toward your landing spot, and switch to speed mode quickly enough to cut away. Totally plausible," Yerli says, thanks to Crytek's insistence on making suit-mode-switching fast and easy, if not reflexive.  

---

X²: MULTIPLAYER MATH

Multiplayer further complicates the nanosuit part of the equation. "The suit is a huge part of the multiplayer campaign," Yerli says. "It was the perfect catalyst, giving players a fighting chance against vehicles. Two players in suits might be able to join forces and destroy an APC [armored personnel carrier] by raising the suit strength on armor modes and repeatedly punching components until they are damaged.... Speed mode is a useful tool to distract the vehicle while another player sneaks up and uses the suit strength to flip it over!"

Each vehicle has different components—wheels, fuel tanks, windows, and engines—on which to train your sights. Common knowledge prevails over flashing arrows and HUDs, and enjoyment trumps logic where appropriate, according to lead multiplayer designer Chris Aver. "After countless hours of testing, we decided that it's more fun to keep the mounted weapons working until the vehicle is almost destroyed."

And quash your rock 'em, sock 'em dreams of punching the rotor off of flying choppers, because here the sky is, quite literally, the limit. "The suit makes you jump much higher than a human could possibly go," Sandholm says, "but not as high as our helicopters or VTOLs normally fly."—a limitation by design as much as technological necessity. Landing on top of flying vehicles is also limited by the physics engine, which has to work on the low-slip machines in the same manner to guarantee the same chances to every player.

---

* Earn multiplayer prestige points for using a repair torch to fix a vehicle, planting portable radar, or tagging enemies to be tracked. Or just earn 'em the old-fashioned way.
EXTRATERRESTRIAL TECH
The next layer: Crysis’ prime alien foes, whose icy and zero-g environmental contributions could potentially send everything—suit powers, weapon behaviors, etc.—into a tailspin. But to what degree?

"In the flash-frozen alien environment, don't expect anything to behave as it would in our world," Yerli says. "If you've ever tried to start your car on a cold winter morning, you'll know what I mean. Our organic life cannot survive in this cold environment—it becomes brittle and breaks easily. You'll have fun with a shotgun in there." In the extraterrestrial gravity-free zones, "everything the player does physically in zero-g behaves accordingly; bullet casings from your weapon and objects punched or thrown by the player drift and rotate with inertia, weapon recoil actually pushes the player back according to the laws of physics, and grenades bounce realistically. That's all we can really say at this point."

Alien shores produce their own otherworldly weapons. "The aliens have two main technologies at their disposal," Yerli continues. "One projects high-velocity ice shards, the other one [freezes] objects on contact. If the alien technology overcomes your suit's heating system, your entire body will become frozen, and you will be an easy target... [The aliens] won't always obey the same inconvenient physical rules—like gravity—as we do. The smaller trooper aliens are incredibly agile and mobile—surrounding and killing you is just like a game to them."

Alien magic, in the absence of killer cold viruses, can only be countered with human ingenuity. "Towards the end of the game when the situation is getting more and more out of control, the player will be able to call in airstrikes and even use the TAC Launcher: a nuclear grenade launcher, and also alien-based technology like the MOAC [molecular accelerator], which fires ice shards."
**VARIABLES Y AND Z: SCOPES AND ACCESSORIES**

"All weapons in Crysis have a rail system, so most attachments are interchangeable," Yerli says. Affix whatever combination of weapon sights, silencers, laser pointers, flashlights, and underbarrel attachments (like grenade launchers) you like, depending on the weapon. "Even things that don't make sense, such as a shotgun with a sniper scope, are possible configurations." Possible, fine...but useful? Don't discount the oddball weapon loadout.

"One combination that turned out to be really popular among our testers is the SMG with a silencer and a sniper scope," Auty says. "We even had to change the weapon balance a bit because it turned out to be almost a death ray in multiplayer. People used it in single shot for long-distance sniping, and in combination with the silencer, it was very hard to locate the shooter. Even if you managed to find him, the full-auto fire rate of the SMG was sudden death at close range."

Configurations aren't locked once you enter a level. Change attachments on the fly—pick your poison, mouse or hotkeys—to trade one trade-off for another. "The only difference [in multiplayer]," Yerli says, "is that you must purchase the equipment loadouts you'd like to use first, basically creating your own class type. A player could purchase a stealth kit, C4, and a silenced pistol while his teammate buys binoculars and a sniper rifle. Working together, one could set targets and advise the other while he infiltrates the enemy base and plants C4 inside the HQ."

**THE NTH DEGREE: A GLITCH IN THE SYSTEM**

Accidents happen. Famously, Crysis' giant alien walker was never really meant to tear up trees looking for human targets. It just sorta worked out that way.

"Every once in a while, the A.I. looks like it is doing a new exciting behavior when, in fact, there is a bug in the code," Yerli says. "That often spawns interesting design discussions, and the bug may end up getting a proper implementation and become a feature. We recently had one of the aliens writhing itself around on the floor after being shot by the player. It was a bug in the physics system, but [it] actually added a lot of character to the alien. Whether we turn this bug into a feature remains to be decided."

Sean Molloy

**MARTIAN WAR MACHINE**

While Unreal Engine 3 is poised to be the de facto middleware for the current generation, Crytek's own CryENGINE 2 could prove a potent rival. Its raw power seems unchallenged, but with the high user entry barrier, how many outside developers will bite? One MMO maker, Avatar Reality, is ready—it plans to use CryENGINE 2 for its upcoming MMXY (massively multiplayer virtual world) set on a "terraformed Mars." Second Life on the fourth planet—with simply astonishing motion-blur effects.
THE GFW INTERVIEW:

JOHN CARMACK

Doom bringer, rocket launcher, Emmy winner

BY DARREN GLADSTONE AND SHAWN ELLIOTT
Fifteen years ago, with our Wolfenstein-level games, we'd scrub out some tiles and wrap an entire level in a day. If someone said, 'Wait, I wish I could get from here to there,' you'd just take some tiles out and all of a sudden, he's there. Not that we took great amounts of time tweaking gameplay there, but the feedback cycle was faster.

GFW: This isn't pining for the "good old days," is it?
JC: Well, only in that at 36, I get to be the grumpy old man of the industry. Ten years ago, we were undisciplined prima donnas and auteurs. These days, the big leagues don't afford that freedom. Even if he works his brains out every waking moment, there's just no way one person can create a triple-A game on his own. Maybe that's a sign for me. Maybe the more exciting work is in something besides the hypercompetitive first-person-shooter category. Working on a small project is where you're most innovative, as well as nimble and speedy in your responses and thinking. However, when you're competing in genres with continuously growing demands, you must accept the inefficiencies, take on more people, and divide the work. So, yeah, I definitely do miss some aspects of the early days.

GFW: How has your role within id evolved?
JC: I've positioned things so that I focus on graphics rendering, but most of the stuff that I used to fret over (networking, game logic codes, overall system architecture) is now parcelled out to other people.

GFW: Is Enemy Territory: Quake Wars your sort of game? At one point, you said that Quake III was your ultimate multiplayer experience.
JC: Personally—and this is one of those things where I don't represent the biggest chunk of the buying market—I always preferred solo games to team games.
I understand why team games are great: if you're a so-so player and you jump into a multi-player deathmatch game, you're never going to be No. 1. But with a team game, the so-so player who gets on the good team has a decent chance of winning. You know, there are more winners and fewer losers in team games, and I think that's important. But I still like the other sort of simple, elemental gameplay, and we may yet make another game in that style.

GFW: Where do you find new talent nowadays? The game-design schools that are springing up?
JC: Honestly, if someone is able to make a noteworthy mod, that would probably make a better resume than going to one of the game-development schools. We've got [Southern Methodist University's] Guildhall here in Dallas, and we've hired graduates from there; it's worked out OK. But the actual credentialism of it doesn't mean anything. We don't think they're learning critical skills there. It's more a matter of getting people together that have an expressed interest in all of this and are willing to dedicate a significant amount of money and time to it. But certainly our best hires have been people who have done great things in the mod community. Jan Paul [van Waveren] is one of the best programmers that we've ever had here, and he did bot work in the mod community. If somebody can make an awesome mod—that right there looks like a wonderful resource to a game company. I mean, that's so much more compelling than a credential from some game school.

GFW: A few of the final projects that come out of these schools are pretty impressive.
The students who mastermind Nebular Drop are now making Portal at Valve.
JC: Yeah, but I wouldn't say that they learned those skills in school.

GFW: You recently received an Emmy. What was that about?
JC: We picked up two Emmys—both for 3D engines. One for Doom, one for Quake. I wasn't familiar with the technical Emmys, but they've been awarding them for 45 years or so, only they're usually for staged things like, I don't know, improving chrome and its response on TV picture tubes. Almost all at once. This particular ceremony addressed digital media: compression, streaming, Internet devices. The game-engine award was definitely the odd man out there, especially since it was for something historical, whereas the other awards went to modern products.

GFW: You've turned your attention to cell-phone games. Do you see this as a return to gaming's roots?
JC: It was fun working on Orcs & Elves during an interlude in our massive internal development product. It was neat just working with my wife and her company [Fountainhead], and it did allow me to make a difference. And again, this is one of the aspects of the rocketry stuff that I enjoy. Carmack competes for the Ansari X PRIZE, which awards $10 million to the first non-government organization to launch a reusable manned spacecraft twice within two weeks—Ed.] Our entire team on that project totals to eight people, and a single person makes a massive difference.

GFW: Will you continue to create cell-phone games on the side?
JC: The Fountainhead team is still working on this stuff. We're sitting on their Orcs & Elves sequel to see how well Orcs & Elves itself does, and we're also considering an enhanced version for Nintendo DS. I spent some time going over DS technical docs and figuring out what we'd want to do with it engineerwise. I'll likely wind up taking a week to write a 3D engine there, which will be fun.

"UNFORTUNATELY, IT PROBABLY IS POSSIBLE TO DEVELOP AND RELEASE THE BEST-PLAYING GAME EVER, IF ONLY TO HAVE IT VANISH WITHOUT A TRACE."
We were talking about this with EA yesterday. They wondered about doing Orcs & Elves on the Nintendo DS, and we wanted to talk about the Wii and how it'd be great to have a magic wand or sword that you wave around—turn it into a kinesthetic game.

**GFW:** OK, so that's the Nintendo DS and Wii—but have you considered using Orcs & Elves or one of your other pet cell-phone project as a kind of proving ground for new PC IPs?

**JC:** That's one of my ideas: Turn the model on its head. Normally, people think about exploiting the cell-phone space with existing IPs—some shoddy little thing with a well-known name. But, because I've been concerned about top-notch PC or console titles costing $20 million to produce, I like the possibility of trying out an idea for a half-million dollars on phones. If that works well, you upgrade it to a new platform. That would be wonderful—to create a world and characters and a style in a minimal scale and then upgrade it—and a great help to the game industry.

**GFW:** What was the turnaround time on Orcs & Elves and Doom RPG?

**JC:** The initial stuff I sort of did while vacationing in Hawaii with my wife and son. I sat there, and the idea was that I was going to get away from everything so that I could sit there and work uninterrupted on this.

**GFW:** So they're on the beach, and you're in the hotel room?

**JC:** Yeah. And this was one of those things where something I'd always suspected proved pretty conclusive: My environment means absolutely nothing to me when I'm working. I could be in paradise or an oil refinery, and it just doesn't make any difference.

**GFW:** You've been alluding to another project; is this Wolfenstein?

**JC:** No. It's a different, internal project. We're planning on simultaneous release, probably on 360, PS3, and PC.

**GFW:** Is any one platform acting as your lead platform, or are you creating a general code base?

**JC:** We're designing with the different platforms' quirks in mind. Xbox 360 is great; we're paying a little less attention to the PS3. We've got the project running, but it's not our primary focus. The consoles have slipped some over the last six months, and now we're looking at things like, "Oh, the big levels aren't running on the 360 right now, and we need to start crunching some memory." The PC is still convenient to develop on.

**GFW:** You've credited other companies with being better at blocking out levels, finalizing gameplay before applying finishing graphical touches....

**JC:** Yeah. We've done a decent job with the internal project—not fretting so much about the visuals at first. Sometimes it's hard not to say, "OK, let's try and throw everything in now and make it look excellent."

**GFW:** It's tough enough around the office when we want to tweak an article at the last minute....

**JC:** And imagine that with a four-year development plan!

**GFW:** Are you envisioning the Enemy Territory line as a larger brand?

**JC:** Yeah, we've talked about it. A Doom: Enemy Territory with demons versus Earth and stuff. No negotiations or firm plans for it now, but the thought's been there.

**GFW:** Or Commander Keen: Enemy Territory. What are your thoughts on making games work in Vista and with DirectX 10?

**JC:** Not a ton of things are attractive people to it. I mean, the smart money says that the Microsoft juggernaut will roll on with Vista ending up everywhere. You know, yesterday [id programmer] Robert Duffy asked this—whether or not we should make our next game Vista-only, and it was sort of a bolt from the blue. I hadn't thought about it, and none of us knows the answer yet. It'll be interesting to see how things play out, what the adoption rates are, and, you know, if any major problems pop up. From a raw operating-system standpoint, XP is pretty good, and other than the fact that every new computer will come with it. I'm not sure Vista will prove an incredibly large draw. I'm not running Vista right now, and I'm not in any huge hurry to. None of the things that I do are made any better by it. Eventually, I'll wind up upgrading, but I probably won't be an early adopter because it just won't immediately impact my life. It's not like in the early days when we were really, really excited to get to Windows NT, or especially XP, where Microsoft fixed so many things about Windows that sucked. Not a whole lot of things suck about Windows anymore.

**GFW:** Do you intend to take advantage of DirectX 10?

**JC:** I've explicitly designed it to not use any DX10 features because when we started, we didn't think that we'd be Vista-only. The DX10 stuff is lots of sensible little improvements and a few other features that may or may not turn out to be all that important. Similar to Vista, the current setup isn't so bad that you're just desperate to jump to the next generation. That said, there's a very good chance that the game we're developing will wind up Vista-only, but only because that's where the market will be and since it saves us the support headache and so on.

**GFW:** In the past, you've been open about sharing your code base with other programmers. Have times changed? Is it still practical to share with potential competitors?

**JC:** Early on, some people thought this was a bad idea. But we were encouraging our competitors and complained that we weren't taking maximum advantage of leads that we generate internally. It's possible that there's some truth to that. But it's a whole lot nicer working in an environment where information flows freely, where you aren't worrying about what you talk about, where you can sit down with any programmer and chew on the problems you've had and the solutions you've developed. It's a lot more pleasant way to be a programmer than to live in this world of having hoarding secrets.

However, with computers, it's often the case that, if you set down a bunch of smart people and say, "This is the problem. These are all the resources we're bringing to bear," several people will arrive at very similar solutions or with alternate solutions that perform the same job just as well. Put 10,000 programmers on a similar set of problems, and people simultaneously arrive at the same solutions. Case in point: I thought that the shadow technology I developed for the Doom engine was extremely elegant, and I coined it "Carmack's Revenge." It turned out that someone else invented and filed a patent for the exact same thing a month prior, and we got into the whole thing where Creative had bought the patent, and we had to cut a licensing deal with them, and...that type of thing bugs me, because it was a crystal-clear case. I even documented everything that I was doing—but because somebody else had gone through the exact same process and their company had filed a patent for it first, that scored the squabbling rights.

The intellectual-property stuff is a serious train wreck. It's a farce. When you look into it, like on the hardware side, all the graphics vendors—every single one of them—are infringing on other people's patents. They know it, and they explicitly tell their engineers, "Don't ever look at patents; just do your job, and we'll sort it out later." The whole point of the patent system is long lost, and it is getting worse and worse in software.

**GFW:** You still have spacecraft....

**JC:** There's a good chance we're gonna do the vertical drag-racing stuff—a quarter mile straight up—some time next year. People want to skydive off the top of the rockets, which would be exciting. Oh, and both the Department of Defense Air Force research labs and NASA are talking with us about different things that we may do in the coming year.

**GFW:** No kidding. What would the Department of Defense use your technology for?

**JC:** At the moment, it takes 18 months and millions of dollars to loft something up. And [the delivery system] is disposable. Having a vehicle that goes up and down and up again is gonna make a difference. Now that's not a massive market, but the big part is suborbital tourism, where people take the 100 kilometer joyride.

**GFW:** Well, I'll start saving now.
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Geralt, hero of Polish writer Andrzej Sapkowski’s fantasy novels, lover of ladies.
THE WITCHER

Myth, monsters, and milkmaids

PUBLISHER: Atari  
DEVELOPER: CD Projekt  
GENRE: Role-Playing  
RELEASE DATE: Spring 2007

PREVIEW

Seeing a fledgling game in the presence of its marketing team can be uncomfortable. They watch your reactions carefully and always want to know what you’re thinking, preferably on a scale from one to five. I think I’m safe for the moment, sipping at a tiny plastic cup of coffee in the break room of CD Projekt, the Polish developer behind a new fantasy role-playing game called The Witcher. But as I space out staring at the walls, a Blackberry-toting Jeremiah Cohn, one of Atari’s American folks sent here to Warsaw to think of ways to sell the game in the States, swoops in beside me.

“So what do you think?” he says, studying my face for clues. “It’s cool,” I reply, totally stumped. “I’m just checking out these posters.” We scan the row of promotional prints on the wall together. The framed one directly in front of us paints The Witcher’s hero, white-haired swordsman Geralt, running a blade through the guts of a puke-green, apparent evil monster with bare, enormously grotesque breasts. Further down the line, another shows a woman crouched down under the game’s title, legs spread, her hand reaching down to pet a strategically placed black cat. A real subtitle. We observe an awkward silence. “Yeah,” Cohn says. “We’re going to have to work closely with the developer to make the M rating.”

Awkwardness is the constant companion of all travelers, an unavoidable consequence of leaving one’s own culture for the unknown customs of a foreign land. The Witcher, developed in Poland and to be published in the U.S. and Western Europe, is itself a traveler. Based on a series of novels by Polish fantasy novelist Andrzej Sapkowski, the game is at once familiar in its Western gaming influences and exotic in its origins—though chief designer Michal Madej disputes any cultural barriers to enjoying his game.

“This is a very international game,” Madej says. “People from a more Anglo-Saxon culture, the U.K. and the U.S., will probably understand it better than Polish people.” The Witcher is as easy to understand as any other fantasy RPG, which is to say it’s a dense packet of jargon and lengthy mythology. The player explores an open world with Geralt, a professional monster killer (or Witcher in the lingo), following a branching storyline punctuated with fuzzy moral choices.

As in other games in the genre, The Witcher is about options and possibilities. It is possible for Geralt to get drunk. It is possible for Geralt to sober himself up with a potion. It is possible for Geralt to align or not align himself with certain groups. It is possible for Geralt to study alchemy or learn new fighting styles. Geralt does magic. Geralt does swordplay. Geralt beds the ladies.

The game’s central European origins are most apparent in its medieval towns and castles—the authenticism comes from being a short train ride away from the real deal—but CD Projekt is uniquely equipped to take the awkwardness out of cross-cultural trade. Though this is its first original game, the company has long published and localized games for the Central European market, translating mostly hardcore RPGs like Diablo and Neverwinter Nights for gamers in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary.

“Our first localized game was Baldur’s Gate,” Madej says. “It was huge. Before, a game [in Poland] would sell a few hundred units. Baldur’s Gate sold almost 200,000. It was the first big game in the Polish market, and it opened the market completely.” The success turned CD Projekt into the go-to localizer for RPGs seeking shelf space in Central Europe. “Almost all the RPGs here are published by our company,” Madej says. “That’s why we decided to make one. We are RPG experts.”

One area where that expertise shows through is The Witcher’s combat system. Sitting down to a play session guided by Michal Iwanci, a 3D programmer on the team, I get the basic idea. “We wanted to avoid this typical Diablo-style clicking,” Iwanci says. He taps violently on the table. “Here, you click on the enemy, and Geralt starts his first attack. During that period, you shouldn’t be clicking, because you will simply interrupt his attack. You have to wait for the proper moment.” I quickly get a feel for The Witcher’s timing-based style as Geralt gracefully slashes through hordes of some kind of swamp creature. It’s a simple mechanic, but mixed with the various skills, magic, and weapons at your disposal, it adds some much-needed depth to the old formula.

Having grasped the basics, Iwanci thinks I’m ready for the big leagues. “Now for the mature content,” he says. “In the game, you can pick up girls. I’m going to show you where to find one, and you can go to bed with her.” Um...OK. We hit the village and quickly find a milkmaid willing to chat. After being impressed with a bouquet of flowers, the milkmaid leads Geralt off the screen to do the deed. In return, I am rewarded a playing card and a painting of the milkmaid topless and pouring a ladle of milk over her bare breasts. “Through the whole game, when you pick up a girl and go to bed with her, you receive a card like this,” says Iwanci. “We observe an awkward silence.”

Robert Ashley

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WORLD IN CONFLICT
An exclusive hands-on tour of duty with Massive's next RTS

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

Resource gathering (or, as we at G/W like to call it, dirt farming) is one of the sacred cows of the real-time-strategy genre. Most of the RTS games that we now regard as "classic" established the resource-centric gameplay model early on—and just about every RTS since then saw fit to copy it, to the extent that we mentally slot 'em into "Age of Empires clone," "WarCraft clone," or "other" categories. People tend to forget that "other" designation way too quickly, though. Take, for instance, Massive Entertainment's Ground Control games, which threw dirt farming out the window in favor of immediate and frequent firefights. A pool of self-replenishing requisition points and an array of drop zones stood in for resources, while captured territory provided shrewd players with more unit-deployment options. Now imagine that, except a whole hell of a lot prettier, and you've got Massive's next military-themed RTS game, World in Conflict.

DARK KINGDOM

Well, that synopsis doesn't entirely do it justice. Yes, WIC looks better than its predecessors; it's designed to scale on everything from midrange systems to DirectX 10, and all those explosions look mighty nice on high-end hardware. Maps take on increasingly dark, apocalyptic tones as napalm strikes bombard the terrain, while the burned-out buildings and razed forests effectively convey the grim gritty feel that WIC shoots for.

And like we said, the deployment methodology is Ground Control redux—which isn't a bad thing, especially for armchair generals with short attention spans who don't want to spend half the game mining ore and executing exactly complex build orders—but the control scheme really sets WIC apart from its predecessors and its contemporaries. Forget your typical mouse controls; camera movement's mapped to the WASD keys, while the middle mouse button rotates and zooms (from detailed close-ups to a fully controllable eye-in-the-sky satellite view)—like Supreme Commander's made its mark on the genre already. It's an odd system to acclimate to for strategy enthusiasts that are accustomed to more traditional controls; we had a tough time getting the hang of it during our exclusive play session and it's hard to say at this point whether it yields much of an advantage (if any) over typical mouse-dominant control schemes, but it certainly works—think of it as an RTS/FPS hybrid.

That genre-bender's not such a stretch when you look at WIC's military backdrop. The single-player campaign begins circa 1989 and spins a bit of revisionist history. The Soviet Union—on the verge of an economic collapse—invades the U.S., desperate to harness the latter's resources. Of course, all hell breaks loose, and the two sides are at war. It's a world in...well, conflict.

The opening Battle of Pine Valley took us on a tour of a quiet Midwestern city, where one extraordinarily pissed-off Master Sergeant Sawyer continually screamed at us to secure various primary objectives around the map. The process sounded easy, in theory: Requisition a few foot soldiers and Abrams tanks, point 'em in the direction of the little green circles, and hold the appointed territory until the game decrees you victorious. Our Soviet oppressors obviously didn't take kindly to that, though—the A.I. played viciously right from the start, supplementing its troops with antiarmor installations to counter our armor, while infantry—

* Break out the Criscol! In-engine cut-scenes make for lots of greased-up-looking character models.
Pine Valley’s about to have a very, very bad day.

Tactical nukes make things go boom.

In multiplayer, each participant takes on a specific duty, like air or armor.
cleverly took cover behind tree lines and in nearby buildings. All told, pretty basic behavior at this point in RTS design—but after getting wiped out a couple of times (we blame it on the controls!) and waiting for our deployment points to slowly replenish, we decided to bring in the big guns.

WIC’s got some big freakin’ guns, too: Tactical Aid points accrue as you fight and capture territory, and you can spend them to call in everything from artillery barrages to nuclear explosions. The A.I. didn’t seem so tough after we ordered a couple of napalm strikes, and we eventually stood victorious over Pine Valley in all of its wrecked-and-bombed-out (and probably uninhabitable—for-several-years-to-come) glory.

Satisfied with our conquest, we decided to take a quick peek at WIC’s multiplayer features before signing off. Eight-on-eight U.S.-versus-Soviet battles are the name of the game here, and each player fills a very specific combat role, selecting from infantry, air, armor, and support (which encompasses stuff like artillery, unit repair, antiair, and bridge laying). A multiplayer victory meter (represented by dueling U.S. and Soviet flags) swings between the two sides as they capture territories—think Battlefield 2, or even World of WarCraft’s Arathi Basin. For an idea of how these skirmishes go down. A built-in communication menu lets you send help requests to your teammates; it’s as easy as clicking on the “ground support” or “request artillery strike” buttons in the command panel, and then pinging the appropriate map grid location. Fast, simple, and to the point—who’s got time to chat in the middle of a war zone, anyway?

—Ryan Scott

**CAMERA MOVEMENT’S MAPPED TO THE WASD KEYS... THE MIDDLE MOUSE BUTTON ROTATES AND ZOOMS.**

**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**
As depicted in World in Conflict’s multiplayer mode, the U.S. military employs wide-range strikes, assaulting clusters of grouped units. More bang for the buck!

**soviet union**
In contrast, the Soviets prefer to take out their enemies using single shell pinpoint attacks. One shot—one kill.

*Zoom out to a bird’s-eye view—or even farther—and still retain control of the battlefield.*
TYPE WHAT YOU FEEL

Facade served as proof that someday a videogame will make you feel more than just the need for revenge. Its follow-up, The Party, looks to make this hope a reality.

CULTURE

Facade served as proof that someday a videogame will make you feel more than just the need for revenge. Its follow-up, The Party, looks to make this hope a reality.

Facade is a one-act interactive story released in 2005 by Mateas, an A.I. professor at Georgia Tech (now at University of California, Santa Cruz), and Stern. The man behind such fuzzy (logic) wonders as the Dogz, Catz, and Petz “virtual life” games. Under the name Procedural Arts, the two stared away on the project for five years and no pay, and the game has been available gratis since its launch. It won the Grand Jury prize at the 2006 Sundance Independent Games Festival, and the attention of many in academia, if not the mainstream press.

Facade doesn’t make many assumptions about your character. You choose your name and sex, and your personality is essentially your own. You are without machine guns, chain saws, or machine guns with barrel-mounted chain saws. The story takes place over the course of a single evening, just as you arrive at the home of a married couple, Grace and Trip. They’re college friends you haven’t seen in some time, and who are now living in a swank apartment that looks out over an unnamed city. Essentially, your function throughout the evening is that of a third wheel: Grace and Trip’s relationship is crumbling before your eyes, and your reactions to the events as they unfold—how you respond to their queries for support—which one you ultimately side with, who you decide to make a sexual pass at—will dictate how the evening, not to mention their marriage, progresses. Everything unfolds from a first-person perspective: You can move around with the arrow keys and speak by typing your own text on the keyboard. Grace and Trip speak back to you (and to one another) in recorded audio; you can even use the mouse cursor to pat, hug, kiss, or grope either one of them.

Unsurprisingly, the game is rough around the edges—its tiny budget and resources resulted in relatively simple A.I. and limited narrative content. What’s amazing is that despite these hindrances—a mere glance at the screen makes it abundantly clear that this is a primitive attempt in many ways—moments arise when you feel genuine concern for, or at least interest in, what’s happening between Grace and Trip. Beyond the “sandbox” aspect—what you know, seeing how many times you can fumble Grace before she flips and tells you to get the hell out—what’s stunning is that you actually care about the content of what you’re playing. It’s an odd feeling, but one that makes Facade a must-play for anyone interested in the future of virtual games.

Such moments—when sunshine streams through the walls into your windowless gaming room and you suddenly gain unwavering faith that the future will include more than sequels to Doom and promises of sequels to Duke Nukem 3D—come at different times for different people. It hit me halfway through, when Grace was going on about how Trip had changed from when she first met him, and
asked me whether or not I agreed with her. For several seconds, I thought about Trip as if he were a real person; though short-lived, the moment was legit.

Stern and Matteas are now hard at work on their second project, which they’re calling The Party. We spoke to them about the past, present, and future of interactive narrative. • Evan Shamoon

**GFW:** In a recent GFW interview, writer Orson Scott Card said that “text-driven dialogue is a dead end precisely because computers do not understand human language and never will.” Care to respond to his claim?

**Andrew Stern:** We agree that text interfaces to date have been overly limiting and often frustrating for players. Command-based input, such as “pick up the axe” requires players to learn commands, hunt for keywords, and generally feels too limited, especially for conversation. Open-ended natural language input, such as with chatterbots, has at best resulted in very shallow, generic, and often uninteresting responses from NPCs.

When Card—an excellent novelist, by the way—says computers will never understand human language, perhaps he is saying developers will never create an A.I. that is as fully creative and intelligent as a human. That grandiose concept is so far off in the future, it’s not even worth worrying about right now. Luckily, we believe that level of A.I. isn’t actually needed for a satisfying interactive story experience. We think an A.I. that can understand the gist of what the player is saying—for example, the player’s tone, attitude, and topic being addressed—can be very effective for driving the reactions of improvisational NPCs in a rich, flexible, and robust interactive story world. This requires careful design and engineering of the NPCs and story world, but we believe it is doable. Façade was our first stab at it, from which we learned a lot, and we are now working on several obvious, feasible improvements for our next project, The Party.

**Michael Matteas:** It’s dangerous to make arguments about what computers will never be capable of doing. Just as to Card it feels obvious that computers can never understand human language, to me it feels equally obvious that computers can be made to understand it well enough to create rich interactive experiences. Game worlds are not open-ended like everyday life—game worlds take place in constrained microuniverses (even open-world games are microuniverses compared to the real world); you don’t need general language understanding, just language understanding in the context of these microworlds. Instead of arguing about what’s doable or not, we believe in rolling up our sleeves and doing the research and design necessary to make it work.

**GFW:** Façade succeeded in many significant ways, but what, in your opinion, were the final product’s biggest problems?

**AS:** In our conference presentations, papers, and posts on our group blog, Grand Text Auto, we’ve been very open and vocal about the numerous failures and limitations of Façade, as well as the successes. The two primary problems were: one, Façade did not achieve an overall satisfying level of agency, and two, the natural language interface too often fell short. These problems were party due to a lack of development resources—virtually all of the design and engineering was done solely by two people, self-funded—but also due to the difficult nature of the problem we are tackling, which in truth will require years of experimentation to make headway on.

**MM:** The riskiest single piece of Façade is the therapy game—the last third or so of the experience, where you influence the characters and story by telling them what’s wrong with their relationship and offering advice. By its nature, the therapy game is potentially much more open-ended than the kinds of interactions you have in the first half of the experience. I’m glad we tried this, but we definitely didn’t fully pull it off.

**GFW:** To what extent are the limitations in Façade—and, presumably, those you may run into with The Party—a function of technology, and to what extent are they a function of resources? Put another way, with unconstrained human resources, could you make the game you dream of making?

**AS:** The limitations were more about resources—time, money, person-power—because with more resources we can get past many technological limitations. But, even with unconstrained resources, we think it would still require a steady amount of R&D and experimentation over a period of time, say 10 years or more, to continue improving the techniques for making satisfying interactive stories. Throwing tens of millions of dollars into A.I. research would...
"IT'S DANGEROUS TO MAKE ARGUMENTS ABOUT WHAT PLAYERS WILL NEVER BE CAPABLE OF DOING."

- MICHAEL MATEAS, CODESIGNER FACADE

speed things up, but not bring about a solution instantaneously.

GFV: Façade uses typed dialogue entry instead of voice recognition. Was this a decision based on the limitations of current voice recognition technology or a stylistic decision? Which route are you taking with The Party?

AS: It was primarily a technological limitation. Currently, voice recognition works alright if you train the system, which players may not be willing to do. But more significantly, today's voice recognition technology requires you to speak in an even voice, like giving dictation, and avoid speaking in little fragments. In normal conversations, people do speak in little fragments, and also, if the NPCs are yelling and screaming and acting emotional, the player will also yell and scream, causing the voice recognition to fail.

Also, people can speak far faster than they can type; text-based input slows down the input a bit, allowing the NPCs and story to "keep up" better with the player. We're planning to use an improved version of our open-ended text interface for The Party.

GFV: What's the most exciting moment you've had with artificial intelligence or artificial life?

AS: That's the problem—besides exciting moments during the development of our own projects, I haven't felt that kind of excitement in a long time. Exciting moments from the past for me were seeing Karl Sims' Evolved Virtual Creatures animations in the early 1990s, and playing Eliza as a kid in the 1980s. The desire for that kind of feeling is part of what motivates our efforts.

MM: What excites me the most about AI-based art and entertainment is a sense of the system having a mind of its own, of it responding to me in unexpected and pleasing ways. Unfortunately, in games I haven't seen much AI that evokes this feeling. More generally, in AI-based art, work like David Rakelb's [The] Giver of Norses, which speaks poetic commentary based on the physical objects you place in front of its computer vision system, or Simon Penny's Petal Man, an animal-like robot that interacts with museumgoers, evoke the sense of mystery and excitement that really drives me to pursue expressive AI systems.

GFV: How does the variety of emergent gameplay Will Wright is experimenting with in Spore compare with your work?

AS: We're working toward creating game systems as open-ended and emergent as Will's amazing games are, but it's tough, because the design goals we've chosen for ourselves make it harder for us. We're working with the English language, not more abstract Simlish or nonhuman creatures, and we're going for deep, first-person, peer-to-peer character interaction. In Will's games, the player is a god looking down on the action of many small agents, and therefore each agent can be behaviorally simpler—be it a Sim, a Spore creature, or a city piece. When talking to Will, he's suggested we try to be even more generative with our approach, which we're enthusiastically working toward.

GFV: While most videogames are purely action, Façade was almost purely dialogue. Are you trying to strike more of a balance with The Party?

AS: Yes, we intended Façade to incorporate more physical action, but ran out of time to implement it, and the experience suffered some for it. While dialogue will certainly be an essential part of The Party, action will play a much bigger role.

GFV: You've said that The Party will be more of an attempt at comedy than Façade. Is this a bit risky? Of all forms of storytelling, comedy is arguably the most dependent on timing and, therefore, authorial control....

AS: It's true. In some ways, comedy is harder to achieve than drama. However, the presentation of the comedy in The Party won't strictly mimic how comedy is presented in traditional media such as film and TV. A lot of the comedy we're striving for comes from the player's pleasure in manipulating the plot in clever and amusing ways—which is less about the timing of punchy dialogue and more about creating a true agency for the player.

GFV: Who's funding The Party? How does the cost of creating a game like this compare to creating games in more traditional genres?

AS: We're focusing on talking to investors whose motivation is not solely to make money but also to produce innovative work. Angel investors of this type are hard to find, but they are out there. We're still in the process of raising funds, and in the meantime have poured a great deal of sweat equity into the project.

We're doing our best to keep costs down to make it easier to fund. A small team of expert designer-programmers is creating the A.I., a large part of the product effort, so the production cost is more about time, not money. In traditional game development, a large part of the cost goes into creating extremely rich and large environments: our products, by their nature, depend far less on large environments, so we have cost savings there. However, we do require extremely expressive characters; our primary budget challenge is to come up with an animation solution that is inexpensive yet very expressive and visually engaging.

GFV: The term "videogame" seems a particularly inappropriate way to describe Façade. Have you thought of any good, populist alternatives to describe the art you're trying to give form to?

MM: When we first started Façade, we made a big deal about distinguishing what we were doing from games. But over time we stopped caring whether it's called a game or not. Games are the most successful high-agency interactive form, even if currently its mostly local, not global, agency. With both Façade and The Party, we're creating interactive experiences that offer the agency of games but the character richness and structure normally associated with stories. Normally you get one or the other in inverse relationship to each other—think low-agency design approaches to story like cut-scenes. Since we totally agree with most game designers about the primacy of agency as a design goal, its OK to call what we do games. "Game" is an elastic term that keeps expanding anyway.

GFV: It seems that the last major structural shift in the world of videogames was Grand Theft Auto III. Will the next significant change be to a more refined narrative experience, or are we stuck capturing the "feel" of the physical world?

AS: I doubt the next big thing in games will be about narrative per se, since it's such a hard design and technical challenge; there will probably be other breakthroughs first. Perhaps interface will be the next big thing, with the Wii mote leading the way.

GFV: Will the shift to and embracing of user-created content—Time giving its Person of the Year title to "You" being a prime example—have an effect on the interactive space? It seems people are being a bit more DIY about their media consumption and production....

MM: It would be awesome to enable players to create their own dramatic worlds. But for this to happen we need more research on generative approaches to interactive drama. Though the A.I. techniques we developed in Façade made interactive drama possible, there's more work that has to happen to move it from "possible" to "easy." Creating Façade or The Party still takes people who are both good designers and understand the A.I.—we're working on [creating] tools for The Party that ease authoring a bit, but still wouldn't be appropriate for players. In order to move toward more radical end-user authoring, the authoring tools themselves have to start knowing something about characters and stories and offer AI assistance to the author to take the bit of authoring they do and multiply the effort. As a concrete example, in Façade, Trip and Grace play head games with each other, but the A.I. doesn't really know about the head games the situations in which someone loses face, when certain is appropriate or not, etcetera. That knowledge is implicit in the beat structures. If the authoring tools knew about head games in general, then you can imagine players instantiating head games and doing AI-assisted tweaking to specialize them for their particular characters and story.

AS: If you think about it, the best high-agency videogames have always been about you, the player. User-created content on the Internet is sort of catching up to what videogames have already been doing for awhile now.

Download Façade for free at www.interactivestory.net and get in touch if you think you'd be a good fit for The Party. They're currently looking for experienced programmers to join the team.
Occasionally leave the comfort of my Fortress of Mochitude. You go out and mix it up with the average man on the street. Those Costco pallets of Mountain Dew aren’t driving themselves home. But I do digress.

During a recent trip to San Francisco, I had the distinct pleasure of meeting up with some fine game-industry folks. No, not the GFW gang—something about a 100-yard restraining order kept me from making that social call.

I’m talking about the Game Developers Conference. More specifically, the developers involved in the Independent Games Festival competition (www.igf.com). It’s a celebration of the indie spirit. It’s a gathering of hungry, creative types hoping to make their mark in gaming. Many people compare IGF to the Sundance Film Festival—it also happens to be a great spot for learning about free games.

Many of the games covered in previous Freeloader columns (Tobi, Invalid Tangram) earned honors this year. Now it’s time to look forward to 2008...will any of these “out there” games be finalists next year?

Rocky IV’s Red menace Ivan Drago has fallen on tough times. How is the steroid-riddled wunderkind supposed to live in a post-communist Russia? This Final Fight-style Flash game (also available for download) dares to answer that question. Drago has to punch his way through Segway-riding jerks and drug-addicted victims of capitalism. Running low on health? Vodka works wonders.

As Gorbys says in the game’s intro: “Drago! I have kept you locked in the Soviet Embassy all these years, preserved and waiting for the exact moment to unleash your powers once again. The Americans have grown weak, fat, and lethargic. It is now time to restore order to this society!”

Finish the game to unlock more Rocky “greats”—and some other surreal stuff.

Forget cool music, ridiculous special effects, or crazy features for just a second. In some Zen circles, all you need for a game is a room, a couple of blocks, and some pistol-packing poultry.

Oh, come now, don’t pretend you’ve never heard the saying: “Which came first, the chicken or the gun?” That old adage is Kumaon in a nutshell. You control a bad motherclucker armed with a pistol, musket, and rocket launcher.

This fire-powered fowl hides a clever physics-based puzzle game beneath its feathers. Throughout the game’s 39 levels, you try to knock over strategically placed blocks with as few shots as possible—trying to nail the perfect shot is surprisingly addictive.

Someone really needs to lay off the controlled substances—or needs to share ‘em with me—because Clean Asia! is too loopy to properly describe. But I’m gonna try anyway. Sometime in the future, our eyes get tired of all the crap they have to endure seeing day in and day out. So what do they do? Rebel. The collective peepers of humanity hop in a ship and take off for the moon. Fast forward 10 years, and the evil eyes are fixed upon Asia. Now Thailand, New Korea, and China are up to their eyeballs in, well, eyeballs.

Who better than the Americans to roar in and save the day? The fate of the world lies in the hands of two pilots with extraordinary sixth senses and some serious spaceships. Trippy music and vector graphics only add to the weirdness.

All you loudmouths in the house, raise your hands and make some noise! Scream! Shout! Let it all out! Playing Racing Pitch will seriously piss off your neighbors, roommates, and anyone who happens to walk past your front door.

In this racing game you’re not so much driving a car as you are revving its engine. More accurately, you are the engine. Hook up a microphone to your PC, and then start yelling your vowels like a complete fool. As you mimic the engine sound, the car’s engine fires up. The louder the screech, the faster you’ll get to the finish line. And here’s something else you should do if you start playing this game: Set up a webcam, record yourself racing, and post it on YouTube. Thanks in advance.
**PREVIEW**

> On a dim starlit map, scores of planets twirl in place like floating cat's-eyes. Between two, a miniature battalion of ships inches along a colored line until it reaches its destination, popping out of hyperspace and ringing the planet in a halo of dots. Roll closer—all the way in—and those dots become attacking ships, skirmishing a gravity well slung around the planet like a disk. At the disk's edge, a lone defending fleet led by several mammoth capital ships bristles and broods for attack as scouts and colony ships scramble for safety.

As the enemy prepares a crippling barrage of shield-skirting phase missiles, you grin and roll the view back out to hatch the rest of your plan. While your opponent's busy throwing his top muscle at your weakest fleet, you'll be selectively targeting his home turf's science...
SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

Sinners in the hands of a seamless interface?

Publisher: Stardock
Developer: Ironclad Games
Genre: Real-Time 4X Strategy
Release Date: August

An Advent fleet enters hyperspace (the void between worlds) after barely escaping the gravity well of an enemy planet. “You’re particularly vulnerable during the charge-up period,” explains creative director Craig Fraser, referring to the suspenseful moments necessary to prep for hyperspace flight. Few ships have real weapon banks, i.e., weapons on multiple sides, so if you’re facing away to charge up for the jump, your opponent can just pound you from behind. If you’re playing as the “PatTech” Advent, you can alternately employ one of that faction’s unique psychic abilities to draw fire by compelling enemies to focus on a single ship, excluding all others.

The industrious but technologically antiquarian Trader Emergency Coalition (TEC) defends itself from an enemy onslaught with boky-looking capital ships, frigates, and fighters. “You can customize your capital ships by settling fighter launch orbits, say interceptors versus bombers,” says Blair, noting that fighters can also be set to auto-launch or dock per situation. “Every one of [a capital ship’s] abilities can be right-clicked to auto or not, and there’s an A.I. stance section which lets you set its behavior when [the ship] does autoattacking.” To defend the gravity well, or attack within that specific zone over here.” In short, the design goal looks to be: Automate as much as you like—or as little.

centers to neutralize his ability to research multiple technologies at once. You can’t wipe out his existing discoveries, but you can raze his infrastructure, effectively thwarting his ability to fend off your fleet of first stringers. You’ve of course taken pains to squirel several “buffer” research stations of your own away in a few remote spots, just in case he has the same idea.

For the coup de grâce, you grab the best fighters in your fleet—sequestered in a nearby asteroid field—and send them racing toward your embattled “decay” planet. Except as they pop into orbit and you zoom in to eyeball the massacre, someone else rolls in from the opposite direction...with three times as many ships and designs as both you and your opponent. As the battle turns bloody, you rally your flagging fleet for a hyperspace escape, but the gravity well impedes your getaway. Too late—all that’s left as you’re pounded into space rubble is to mount a final punishing defense, and face up...to the sins of your solar empire.
ALL I NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED FROM BUCK ROGERS...

Take two brothers with a thing for the original Warcraft, dial-up multiplayer mogul Trade Wars 2002, turn-based fare like VGA Planets and Spaceward Ho!, and, of all things, the board game version of Buck Rogers, and somehow you get Sins of a Solar Empire. “One of the biggest inspirations was that board game,” confides producer and lead designer Blair Fraser. “You had all these little planets and your hero characters from the series, and they each had special abilities and character fleets. [My brother] Craig and I have been dreaming about that game since we were 13 or 14. We went our separate ways for years, and when we returned to videogames, it was like, hey, we can actually do this now, we can actually make that board game a reality.”

But the real trick with Sins is less about nostalgia than “how the heck do you manage a 4X (explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate) game’s worth of info in real time?” Automation without trivialization,” Blair says. “Most of the automation is for fleet management, setting custom behaviors for tactical behaviors and stuff.” If you want to babysit, in other words, you can, but the tactical challenge lies more in anticipatory preparation and handcrafting default behaviors than actually company-commanding the battles when they occur.

Even the high-level (as Blair puts it, “4X-y”) stuff has elements designed to let you fight the war not the interface. “If you’re sending a huge fleet to attack a planet, you can click the little picture-in-picture group instead of going in and handboxing everything, then tell the [group] to attack another PIP group,” he says. “They’ll automatically divide themselves up and attack appropriate targets.” Translation: With two clicks, you can send one fleet against another fleet, and they’ll know how to get there and whom to target. “And then, if they destroy the enemy and you haven’t given them any orders, anyone in the fleet that can bomb the planet will, automatically,” he continues. “After that, they’ll move back to the edge of the gravity well to be ready for a phase jump when you get around to them.”

In the meantime, you’ll be busy sponging trade ports for depletable resources and shipping them back to your refineries, attempting to jump your economy from one that’s resource-based to one that’s commerce- and goods-driven. Trading between players is crucial, of course, but so is backstabbing and, in particular, bounty hunting. “You place a bounty on a faction as a whole, then get points based on the value of the factional ships you destroy,” explains Blair, but adds that it’s really intended as a way to unify players against a single power. “It comes from my frustration in other games where there’s some super-powerful player and you’re telling people. ‘Come on man, why are you attacking me? We should be going after this guy—he’s going to win the game!’ and yet there’s nothing else in the game that makes them actually want to cooperate.” And if that doesn’t work, there’s always electroshock feedback.

Matt Peckham
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NERD WATCHING

For a new crop of documentaries, geek is chic

CULTURE

The global success of Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings films cemented it, or maybe it was the mainstreaming of geek-speak through online gaming, or perhaps it happened when MySpace and blogs became cultural phenomena and made nearly everyone under 25 into an amateur coder. Wherever one marks the decisive transition, the trend remains clear: We’ve become a nation of nerds. Web surfing, fantasy roleplaying, cybersexing, manga-collecting, handheld-toting, text-messaging nerds unabashedly consumed by fan-fish obsessions, more comfortable in an electronicized existence than otherwise. Witness the nerd shark, already jumping. This past March, Calvin Klein launched a new fragrance, dubbed “CK in2U,” purportedly aimed at “techno-sexuals.” Clearly, there’s no turning back the tide.

Documentaries have long tackled sociological transformations. No wonder so many have begun to focus on the ever-more compelling spectacle of nerdism. Take back to 2002, when Spellbound, a look at the real-life drama of the Scripps National Spelling Bee, became a surprise hit, doubtless inspiring the later \"Nerd Wars, a documentary delving into the world of competitive Scrabble tournaments, and last year’s Wordplay, a profile of New York Times crossword puzzle connoisseur Will Shortz and his devotees. But filmmakers aren’t just chronicling pencil-and-paper pastimes. Electronic gaming is getting its due as well. Earlier this year, the Sundance Film Festival premiered Cheating Ghosts: Beyond the Arcade, a documentary about the 1982 Video Game World Championships and the Twin Galaxies high-score database that remains its legacy, while the simultaneous Sundance Film Festival screened The King of Kong, a look at a set of retro-arcade fanatics, who are vying to enter into Guinness World Records for the highest score on Donkey Kong and others.

Now, another wave of game-geek documentaries looms on the horizon, focusing on ever-more specific subcultures. Currently making its way through indie theaters across the US, Luke Meyer and Andrew Neel’s Darkon delves deeply into the obsessions of Maryland LARPers—live-action roleplayers who don homemade swords and armor to act out Dungeons & Dragons- or World of WarCraft-style battles in the actual outdoors (remember that place?). Marcin Ramocki and Justin Stawarski’s 8 BT investigates the interrelated phenomena of making music and visual art with old videogame technology. Not one but two documentaries about the geeky hip-hop spin-off known as “nercore” currently near completion: Dan Lamoureaux’s Nerdcare for Life and Negin Fanadi’s Nerdcare Rising. Focusing on the global implications of the rise of digital entertainment, Ge Jin’s work in progress on gold farming reveals how the trade in gold and items in World of WarCraft, Lineage, and other MMOs has created a cottage industry of professional gamers in China.

DARKON

On any given weekend, hikers tramping through wilderness outside of Baltimore might stumble onto a bizarre sight: scores of adults garbed in quasi-medieval armor and padded weapons, shouting boasts and war cries as they plunge into realistic-looking battle with one another. Since 1986, the Maryland-based Darkon Wargaming Club has been enacting these large-scale fantasy melees, complete with Elvish mercenaries, spellcasting mages, wooden castles, and bungee catapults. Known as LARPing—short for “live-action roleplaying”—the practice has its roots in old role-playing games like Dungeons & Dragons and historical recreation groups like the Society for Creative Anachronism.

Darkon tells the story of the club’s members by weaving between their real-world lives and the ongoing sagas of the fantasy characters they’ve created. The film centers on the game-world rivalry between two men: Skip, a stay-at-home dad who roleplays Baron, an upstart war chief of a ragtag coalition, and Kenyon, a middle-of-the-road type who plays Koldar, the ruthless effective ruler of the largest and most powerful polity in Darkon’s world.

So what kind of person is drawn to LARPing? “I tend to think you can make some generalizations,” says codirector Andrew Neel. “A lot of people use the game as a form of therapy—though not all. There certainly are a lot of people who feel disenfranchised: former kids who played D&D and were outcasts in school. A lot of the older guys got into it when they were young, being the outsiders—the hippies or the techno kids or whatever they were. So they get into the game and find each other.”

If this profile seems reminiscent of the stereotypical hardcore gamer, then it should come as no surprise that “there’s a lot of computer gaming in the crowd;
according to Neel. "A lot of EverQuest, World of Warcraft, and so on. But the thing is, Darkon is a search for a visceral, face-to-face, flesh-and-blood virtual world. I think, in the end, it’s much more satisfying than a videogame, at least for the people who play it. Videogames allow you to kind of separate yourself from your virtual identity. Live-action roleplaying is exciting because you mix who you are with what you want to be." (The not-so-secret allegiances between electronic and real-world roleplaying have been marshaled to promote PlayStation 2 game God of War II. On the viral videos hosted on www.battleoftheheroes.tv, Skip and other Darkon members play Greco-Roman fantasy warriors, playing up their LARPing skills for comedic effect.)

The film makes clear that for Skip, Kenyon, and their ilk, Darkon is much more than just a game. Aside from requiring serious investments of actual physical training, it’s the nexus of some of their most important social relationships: they take their “sport” as seriously as any professional athlete. The players’ sincerity and intensity allows Neel and Meyer to largely eschew easy ridicule in favor of a more sympathetic, humanistic portrait. "I think [Skip] has the desire that so many of us have," Neel says, "to move beyond the kind of finite elements of our everyday lives. That’s even more intense for people who live in suburbia and have 9-to-5 jobs. They feel their life is determined." LARPing appears to grant them a whole other existence, one more under their control.

"Do people get carried away? Yeah, it happens," Neel says. "The stereotype is that they don’t know the difference between fantasy and reality. But I think a measure of that happens with people with all sorts of hobbies. What you’re getting at is one of the more philosophical aspects of the practice. When you get people in real time, and they’re challenging each other—that’s real. The game truly becomes incredible when there are those moments when it does become real, and you do somehow become a part of what you’re taking. And I think a lot of people out there are searching for that moment. It’s the romance in it.”

**8 BIT**

From music made with hacked Game Boys to gallery art constructed from thrifted Commodore 64s, Ramocki and Strawhand’s 8 BIT is the definitive study of how the videogame generation is changing the rules of creative production. Featuring visual artists like Cory Arcangel, who appeared at the 2004 Whitney Biennial with "Super Mario Clouds," a cartridge of Super Mario Bros. hacked to generate only the sky and clouds from the game, and Edith Stern, who created a history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with footage from first-person shooters and strategy games, as well as performances by musicians like Tree Wave, Glionaq, Bit Shifter, and Bubblyfish, 8 BIT makes a compelling case for geek art as the new punk rock. Though the journalist you’re reading may be biased (in full disclosure, author Ed Halter appears as a soundbitten talking head—Ed!), the film’s relevance has been already shown: After its premiere at New York’s Museum of Modern Art last year, 8 BIT has been invited to screen at art centers and movie theaters across the country, encountering new 8-bit artists and musicians wherever it goes, and it hasn’t even nailed down a distributor yet.

Ramocki, himself a digital artist and gallery owner, began shooting the documentary in 2003; originally, it focused only on Game Boy music and “chiptunes” in general. "At that time, it was a tiny little phenomenon that was happening in the gallery or sometimes in underground music venues," he remembers. "The only thing you could kind of compare it to was punk rock but this was like geeky, wimpy punk rock." Although Ramocki sees a relationship between punks do-it-yourself ethos and chiptunes open-source techno-fiddling, he says that there isn’t necessarily a "distinctive" 8-bit sound. "The interesting thing about chiptunes is that it’s really about what gear you have to make the music, rather than what the music sounds like. It’s mostly about the ideology of producing music. Some of it sounds really hardcore or computery or even like country music. In that way, its really conceptual." As the project broadened its scope, Ramocki brought on Strawhand as producer and codirector.

Though Ramocki says the artists profiled are "all such different personalities," he can nail down a few commonalities. All of them "are interested in games and music and spend a lot of time programming. Usually, they’re kind of geeky by definition." And there’s a specific demographic cross-section familiar to gamers: "One thing for sure—it’s white guys and Asian girls. Until now, I don’t think there’s a single exception to the rule. It’s basically happening in Northern Europe, the States, and Japan."
Though 8-bit art and music has inspired a growing scene, Ramocki estimates that it remains a small crowd: "Maybe 30 or 40 people in the States," he estimates. "It's pretty much a 100 percent city crowd," Ramocki says. It's New York, Vienna, it's Stockholm, and other Nordic cities. It's Tokyo. Paris, definitely. Then there's little pockets here and there. But that would be it. In the States, at this point, you've got a chip scene going on in every major city. As we screen in every city, venues ask me to do live events, and I can just find people who do chipmunks in each city. The movie is like a self-fuelling prophecy now. The 8-bit thing is kind of spreading partially because of the movie itself.

Ironically, not everyone who uses games creatively has the time or inclination to play them for fun.

"Half of the people are avid gamers; they play all the time, and [making art and music] is a like an extension of their leisure time," he says. "The other half don't actually like games as something you do for fun." But the link to games is also an expression of generational identity. The fact is that this is the first generation that's looking critically at this technology. We sold these games, and we instead tried to break them and mess with them. So there's this element of subversion.

**NERDCORE RISING AND NERDCORE FOR LIFE**

You might not know it has a name, but you've undoubtedly heard nerdcore before. Maybe you downloaded the MP3s from the mock website for MC Hawking, the gangsta-rap after ego of physicist Stephen Hawking, who lays down computer-generated rhymes like "F*ck the Creationists" and "E=MC Hawking:" Or you heard the stylings of MC Chris, featured on *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. Basically hip-hop by and for geeks, nerdcore MCs rap about a variety of intelligent subjects: Dungeons & Dragons, J.R.R. Tolkien, programming languages, otaku obsessions—and, of course, videogames.

MC Frontalot, the subject of Negin Farsad's *Nerdcore Rising*, lays claim to the invention of the term, although some Internet chatter disputes this origin. "Frontalot raps about all the things I care about," says one bespectacled fan in Nerdcore Rising's trailer; "like Magic: The Gathering and Internet porn addiction." Farsad says that nerdcore has become more popular and spread through the Internet as needs themselves have emerged as a self-conscious subculture. Nerdcore fans, she says, are "software engineers, they're IT guys, they have computer science degrees. It's such a large group because the service economy in the tech sector has really taken off."

While Nerdcore Rising follows MC Frontalot on his first nationwide tour, Dan Lamoureux's *Nerdcore for Life* looks at the movement as a whole, profiling a wild gaggle of nerdcore rappers with monikers like MC Pula+, Spatarie, and MC Router: "They have an online community, and basically, nerdcore is their world." Lamoureux says. "Nerdcore was pretty small in 2005 when I started working on Nerdcore for Life."

I have a friend who has operated a gold farm in Shanghai since 2003," Jin says via e-mail, "and I visited his gold farm in 2005. What I saw in that trip was so stunning that I immediately decided that I would do research on the phenomenon and make a documentary of it. For me, the gold-farming phenomenon condensed and crystallized many social issues, i.e., global economy, cross-cultural interaction, etcetera. And the virtual and real lives of games are good humanistic stories, too. It's not geeks sitting in front of computers all day; rather, it's youth living on the border between the real and the virtual, between work and play, and certainly between cultures."

Though the industry isn't exactly legit, it's less clandestine than many outside China might think. "Most of them are underground because they don't pay taxes," Jin says. "But there is no law or policy that can be easily applied to this new industry yet in China, so it's often left up to the local officials to decide whether this industry is legitimate. For many officials, it reduces the unemployment youth on the streets, which is good for economy and security, so the industry rarely has conflicts with the Chinese government."

While Jin says you might call these operations "swaps" or "jiao schemers," the impression he brought back with him isn't as brutal as that word implies. "The gold farms reflect China's current role in the global economy, which is basically a source of cheap labor," he says. "Staring at a computer, clicking the mouse, and killing imaginary monsters for 10 to 12 hours a day is certainly an exploitative job, but not more exploitative than other factories in China." And on top of that, it's a job some Chinese seek out because they're already gamers. "In some sense, they are making a living off their hobby, which is an unachievable dream for many people. In contrast to their impoverished real lives, their virtual lives give them access to power, status, and wealth which they can hardly imagine in real life. This is a reason why they are so addicted to their jobs." While there might be a level of exploitative exploitation taking place, Jin says, it's "entangled with pleasure."

So what is the typical gold farmer like? "The gold-farming population is actually quite diverse in education and family background," Jin says. "But they are typically male, 18 to 28 years old, and had gaming experience before. Some of them are college students, some are peasants who just came into the city, some stay in this business for years, and others only work for several months. But, again, they have something in common—although they complain about how unstable this job is, it's hard for them to find a better alternative. The unemployment rate in China is really high."

"Many of them probably fall into the nerd category by U.S. standards," he says, "but in China, there's less discrimination against nerds—kids obsessed with computers are considered normal, or even cool.

But like their American nerd counterparts, gold farmers are an estrogen-challenged bunch. "I actually have never seen one female gaming worker," Jin reports. "I met a female gold farm owner, but she does not like the games herself. Men are more socialized into gaming culture than women in China. On a specific level, a strong male culture is established in an Internet cafe or a gold farm, it's hard for a girl to fit in. In addition, for a girl aspiring to be a gold farmer living together with all these boys in the dorm provided by the owners can be daunting."

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*Ed Halter*
PIPEDINE

Save some cash for these upcoming games

APRIL 2007
- Brothers in Arms: Hell’s Highway - Ubisoft
- Infernal - Rider Interactive
- The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar - Midway
- Monster Madness: Battle for Suburbia - SouthPeak Games
- Resident Evil 4 - Ubisoft

MAY 2007
- Alone in the Dark - Atari
- Anarchy Online: Last Eden - Funcom
- CSI: Hard Evidence - UbiSoft
- StarCraft: Extreme Metal Racing - Metrol3D
- Haze - Ubisoft
- Interstellar Marines - Zero Point Software
- Marine Sharpshooter III - Gremlin Games
- Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End - Disney Interactive
- Soccer Fury - NCsoft
- Thellos - track8
- Tomb Raider: Anniversary - Rider Interactive
- Two Worlds - TopWare Interactive

JUNE 2007
- BloodRayne: Thorne - 2K Games
- Enemy Territory: Quake Wars - Activision
- Gods & Heroes: Rome Rising - SOE
- Halo 2 - Microsoft
- Hour of Victory - Midway
- Kane & Lynch: Dead Men - Rider Interactive
- Rogue Warrior - Bethesda Softworks
- Shadowrun - Microsoft
- The Wheelman - Midway

JULY/FALL 2007
- BlackSite: Area 51 - Midway
- Call of Juarez - Ubisoft
- Crysis - Electronic Arts
- Dungeons & Dragons Online - Atari
- Forza Motorsport 3 - Microsoft
- Frontlines: Fuel of War - THQ
- Ghost Recon Advance Warsfighter 2 - Ubisoft
- Hellgate: London - Namco Bandai
- Huxley - Webzen
- Madden NFL 08 - EA Sports
- Project Offset - Offset Software
- Storm of War: Battle of Britain - Ubisoft
- Stronghold - Midway
- Tabula Rasa - NCsoft
- Unreal Tournament 3 - Midway
- World in Conflict - Vivendi Games

RANDOM ACCESS

10 things we’re into this month

1. MURLOCO’S T-SHIRT
   Nothing says “I am cool and you should date me” better than a black gaming T-shirt. The ladies will go wild and your friends will envy your style when you sport a WOW shirt advertising “Muroloco’s Best ‘Fish Tacos on Azeroth’! Paging Vague magazine! Check you out! (www.jinx.com)

2. GTA & ROBOCOP
   It shouldn’t have surprised us that the man behind the Grand Theft Auto series would create an open-world action game that addicted half the office—but Crackdown for Xbox 360 caught us off guard anyway. Gears of War and Lost Planet are sitting on the shelf collecting dust.

3. SPIDERMAN 3
   The new flick can go one of two ways: pants-changingly legendary or celuloid train wreck. Director Sam Raimi smashes together Green Goblin, Venom, and Sandman — more villains than any movie since Batman and Robin (shudder).

4. THE OTHER SIDE
   The new Vertigo comic miniseries The Other Side offers two different perspectives during the Vietnam War — those of a green Marine and a Vietnamese farmer’s son, both fighting for what they believe in. By the time you read this, the complete series should be on store shelves.

5. CONTRARIAN
   This month, we run Windows Vista through the paces and come to a favorable conclusion, but some people are less than thrilled with Microsoft’s new OS. The folks fronting the anti-Vista campaign at BadVista (http://badvista.psf.org) make some interesting points — especially if you love indie games and freeware.

6. ANIME DATE
   Calling all otaku, otherkin, game nerds, and anime fans who have a burning desire to date fake pixie ladies: This game is for you. Other Age (www.deviantart.com) makes you the pretty princess of Zeva. For your 16th birthday, Green Mage Nitarou gives you the magic “lub-lub” machine to summon your dream guy. Based on a true story.

7. DATABREAKER
   You’re paranoid—but are you paranoid enough? The rule of fear is in effect for gamers who leave their PCs on overnight. The $40 Databreaker (www.databreaker.com) gives you some peace of mind by cutting your Net connection while your PC monitor sleeps. Start typing, and the connection comes back.

8. MOD SQUAD
   The best way to sum up the Half-Life 2 mod Eternal Silence (www.eternal-silence.net): a little bit of Wing Commander and a whole lot of Counter-Strike. It’s still an early beta game, but the space marines/pilots/hackers firefight dynamic has lots of promise. The best part: it’s free.

9. HL2: THE MOVIE?
   One thing struck us while we were watching the bleak, near-future cautionary tale Children of Men: It sometimes feels like you’re looking at Half-Life 2’s City 17. If you missed it in theaters, rent or buy the DVD.

10. SIN CITY: THE GRAPHIC ADVENTURE
   If you’re sucked in by stark noir comics such as Sin City, there’s a cool graphic adventure called Vici (www.fregamer.net) that should be right up your alley. For a mere 20 euros (that’s about 40 bucks), you get a stylish black-and-white point-and-click trip created by seven game developers sick of making the same old games.
COMPANY OF OPPOSING FR

Chapter two of Relic’s World War II  BY SHAWN ELLIOTT
“Compare real-time strategy games to kids at the anthill,” says Company of Heroes producer Shane Neville. “In any average RTS, you’ve got a magnifying glass. You’re sky-high, scorching ants here and there.”

“Orbital laser,” I offer.

“Right, and COH is down and dirty. You hose down the hill, spray the hell out of it, and the ants start scurrying. You put your foot through it. In other games in the genre, all you do is zap little units...”

“Here, you pluck bug limbs away little by little, stand a firecracker in the nest like a big fat birthday-cake candle—real ant-abusing sadism,” I add, a yes-man had not the RTS’ bird’s-eye, worm’s-eye brilliance pegged Company of Heroes as GFW’s penultimate 2006 game of the year.

“What we were saying the other day,” says a puffed-up Neville. “Is that Company of Heroes is the strategy game that all the other strategy games want to be when they grow up.” Mission accomplished or just “mission accomplished”?

Substantiating that kind of statement is tricky, and Neville knows it. (THQ PR, listening from elsewhere in the office, pleads that the company’s Supreme Commander is yin to COH’s yang. Strategy to tactics.) “Fundamentally,” argues Neville, scratching his head. “It’s the fact that the action is awesome from top to bottom, phase to phase; from the macro economy and map strategy down to the micro of deciding when I’m gonna throw a grenade.”

Lead designer Josh Mosquera nods along: “Other RTSes are a little cartoony, a little abstract, and it works well for them. We wanted to portray a visceral virtual experience for the player, and I think that complements the tactical component well. You win or lose not by outsourcing your opponent or mining more gold, but by gauging the battlefield, appreciating that a machine gun in this building creates an arc of fire covering that approach.”

Whatever the case, everyone can agree that we all want more.
DON'T CALL IT AN EXPANSION PACK
Relic and THQ aren't tolerating two words—take a stab at them. (Upon returning from the developer’s Vancouver offices, I’d discover a “Well, what he really meant was…” message regarding the single staffer who slipped up packed in my inbox.) *Company of Heroes: Opposing Fronts*—get it straight—is a standalone game. Not only because it literally works with or without the original *Company of Heroes* installed (like Relic’s *Dark Crusade* did with *Dawn of War*), but because it comes with at least double the campaign content.

From the get-go, the intention was to “capture the whole mosaic of the Second World War, one chapter at a time,” Mosquera explains. “We envisioned an evolving, all-encompassing franchise that covers the major theaters, major operations and campaigns. Most of us would be happy devoting the next 10 years to developing top-of-the-line instalments.”

*Company of Heroes* zeroed in on the American landings at Omaha Beach, the battle for Cherbourg and the Cotentin Peninsula, and finished with the encirclement of the German Seventh Army and Fifth Panzer Army at Falaise-Argentan. *Half of Opposing Fronts* tells the sister story of the British and Canadian troops at Gold, Juno, and Sword beaches who went on to fight for the French city of Caen. “Caen was crucial and likely the largest objective of the Normandy landings,” Mosquera says. “If the Allies controlled this crossroad town, they’d have a pathway into Paris and Germany. First, however, they must face the might of SS panzer divisions because, at this point, Hitler feared the British, who he’d been fighting since 1939, more than the Americans.”

D-Day redux not what you wanted? Relic’s “we’ll get to it” attitude aside (which all but guarantees the game will draw on WWII’s gargantuan Eastern Front in due time), Tommy’s tactics are less like the Yanks than you’d guess. “This is neither a cookie-cutter army, nor Americans in British uniforms,” Mosquera insists. “Each and every faction we introduce needs to work in very different and distinctive ways, especially when it comes to multiplayer content.”

Defense defines the British Commonwealth. Canada included. Of all four armies (more on the mysterious fourth in a bit), the Empire’s spade brigades embody protective options and build the widest variety of emplacements—priorities evident even in the way infantry walks. “Brit squads adopt an assault stance inside their own territory,” Mosquera says, “purposeful movement at a normal pace. The minute you march them into neutral territory or no-man’s land, though, they adopt a patrol stance, sacrificing some of their speed for safety. They react to and return fire a bit faster, but aren’t able to run around the battlefield as frantically.” Lieutenants get the lead out. Any riflemen within one’s command radius benefit from offensive...
According to lead designer Josh Mosquera, “(the Dutch city of) Arnhem is an urban environment unlike the urban environment of Caen (shown here). The Allies chose not to carpet bomb the Netherlands, so its towns are intact. You’ll see some intense house-to-house fighting.”

MOBILE BUILDINGS
In place of bases and tech buildings, the British use mobile command posts. Mobile HQs unlock Tommies, Universal Carriers (think: troop taxi), and lieutenants; infantry command posts allow players to call in Sappers (antitank specialists), M3 Stuart light tanks, and captains; and armor command posts create Cromwell medium tanks and the Firefly heavy tank hunter.

“WE ENVISIONED AN EVOLVING, ALL-ENCOMPASSING FRANCHISE THAT COVERS THE MAJOR THEATERS.”

—Josh Mosquera, Lead Designer
DIGGING FOR VICTORY

Don’t laugh. Infantry-dug ditches—a Brit- only ability—probably provide the safest haven in hell. Armor rolls right over. Artillery obliterates buildings but leaves trenches untouched. “Basically,” Mosquera says, “you’re not going to beat these guys by standing back and bombard ing their positions. Instead, you’ve got to get in with grenades and Panzerschreck and flamethrowers.” Once they barbecue, snipe, or blow up a slit trench’s occupants. Germans are free to garrison the prefab foxholes themselves. Ditto for John Bull’s fortified mortar pits and hard-to-flank antitank emplacements. On the one hand, Brits can build cover everywhere on the map, but if they lose those positions, they are also losing any advantage that they produced.

Is it counterintuitive that a defense-oriented doctrine outshines brick-and-mortar buildings for mobile bases? Brit HQs and tech-tree structures aren’t static, rooted to starting territory in the way that American and Wehrmacht armies are. A commander can pack up or pitch where and when he pleases. According to Mosquera, “Axis and American armies must capture and secure as many points as possible. Build up a broad front line. With the British, you can decide, ‘I’m securing one munitions depot and one fuel depot, and I’m setting up headquarters and an infantry post over here, and the armor command post over there, and that’s that. Those are the two territories I need to worry about.’”

Question answered. “The idea introduces a new and interesting way to command in Company of Heroes,” he says. “And one of the commander trees, or regiments, called the Royal Engineers enables emplacements and mobile bases to become tougher over time. There’s this push and pull—flexibility at a price. You’re vulnerable while relocating from place to place; you aren’t picking up resources. And it’s vital to set up somewhere unpredictable, although you can camouflage your HQ.”

Parking and unpacking your mobile command posts (see “Mobile Buildings,” pg. 49) not only secures capture points, it improves resource-extraction rates beyond those of the other belligerents’ observation posts. “In other words,” Mosquera says, “if you want munitions, you set up at a prime munitions point and start ‘teching’ up.” Munitions. I later learn, are almost all that matters in Caen.”
BRANCHING OUT WITH OPPOSING FRONTS' BATTLE OPTIONS

Triple-choice tech trees provided three ways to play each of Company of Heroes' Axis and Allied armies. The fruit on each of Opposing Fronts' branches bears even more pronounced flavor.

BRITISH REGIMENTS

ROYAL CANADIAN ARTILLERY

The 105mm Howitzer Motor Carriage, or M7 Priest, is the long arm of the Commonwealth's artillery arsenal. Unlike the hurriedly assembled American howitzers, it propels itself around ranging problems to smash Jerry with three types of salvos. Overwatch fire automatically drops all on enemy who enter a designated area; a creeping barrage acts as "anti-retreat" artillery in that it walks along a preset line, using an avalanche of earth and rock along the way; and finally, counterbattery fire—something lead designer Josh Mosqueda says the British pioneered in the Second World War—locates and launches shells at active enemy artillery, in addition. RCA commanders can "supercharge" ammunition for added range.

ROYAL COMMANDOS

Special Air Service units are armed with 2-en submachine guns and smoke grenades (which work like a sniper's ghillie suit for a few seconds). Veiled in ludics, they deploy behind lines via glider to break links in German supply chains. Gliders drop Tetrarch I light tanks, too, and, according to Mosqueda, "turn into mobile bases that build a number of specialized infantry squads."

On the other side of the Commando tree are stealth- centered, info-operation abilities. Building three radio beacons rolls back the fog of war with triangulation; ULTRA decryption cracks Axis communications, giving Britain commanders cues to when and where the enemy is building, as well as insight into his tech tree and decodes speech German into second-guessing artillery strikes and glider drops. "Be the boy called Wolf," Mosqueda says.

ROYAL ENGINEERS

The first of the Royal Engineers' twin branches involves iterations of the British Churchill tank. Its infantry support variant serves as an officer to troops in its vicinity: the armored vehicle variant lifts fortifications with its 250mm Epigat mortar and 13-pound high-explosive cannon; and the Churchill Crocodile combines antitank and anti-artillery capabilities with its 75mm main gun and flame cannon. The Royal Engineers' other branch emphasizes enhanced defenses. The improved reinforcement power is more or less self-explanatory, strengthening machine-gun nests, mortar pits, and the like; Hull Down creates cover for tanks; and Improved Command Vehicle toughens up headquarters over time.

"The tech branches are far more focused this time, but made to work well together," producer Joshy says. "Our balance team—top-ranked StarCraft, Dawn of War, and Company of Heroes players we've hired—sees it to that no two trees are too complementary."

PANZER ELITE DOCTRINES

Panzer Elite doctrines are all flux—sketched out, just not drawn in. "They're developed in parallel on the paper side," Mosqueda says. "With gameplay, we kind of flesh one out first."

SCORCHED EARTH

Says Mosqueda: "At this point in the war the Axis was on the run, so under Scorched Earth you're boxy-trapping terrain, disabling territory as the Allies advance. Think: fairly indestructible mudholes. It'll take demolition charges to crack them, and force the enemy to field different units. We're considering what you call crater mantles—drop one in the middle of an intersection and blow a big hole in it, deny access to the enemy. They don't have a lot of defenses, so they rely on environmental strategies."

LUFTWAFFE

Fallenschmökerei fall under the Luftwaffe doctrine. So do Stuka bombers and the Heinkel He 113 tank hunter, an aircraft armed with a gigantic 75mm Panzer IV gun.

TANK HUNTERS

Home of the Jagdpanther heavy tank hunter and formidable Tiger II "King Tiger." Finding the right fit for such hard hitters (the later could kill a Sherman from well outside of a mile) is proving tricky for Relic.
MARCH TO WAR, MARCH OF TIME

The British bomb Caen to cinders before storming the city. Two likenesses characterize Company of Heroes: take on the location: urban warfare in an obliterated, smoke-obscured wasteland, and ripping tank battles between armored regiments such as the Black Bull and SS panzer divisions.

According to Mosqueira, "Among the most commented-on missions in COH are those in which you seize a position, secure it, and then repel a counterattack over the course of another mission set in the same environment. We want to take persistence well beyond that in the battle for Caen and the surrounding countryside."

Case in point: The campaign's Hill 112, where Waffen SS and Wehrmacht units crouch in picturesque orchards. "We're letting you toy with the artillery and turn a lush landscape into Mars," Mosqueira says. "Just teaching you tactics like the creeping barrage [see "Branching Out," pg. 51] and the corridor of destruction it creates. Then comes the counterattack. Now you're sitting in a cloud of churned-up dust on a hillside scuffed and scraped clean. Tightly riveted machines lay ripped open all around, and the cover you razed is now cover you could've used. The results of one mission reach on over to the next.

Time and weather change, too. Not only across several battles, but also in real time within the course of single battles. "Part of war is persistence, and we wanted to show that," says art director Nick Caroia. "Every environment develops an identity, and we're adding to that with storms, surrises... the story of these three days of this battle, is specifically yours."

"Right," says Mosqueira. "It's more immersive in that: if you start in the morning, it might transition into midafternoon, or if it's in the middle of the night, it'll turn into day. You're not just completing individual, isolated missions; you're taking part in epic military campaigns. Plus, on the multiplayer side, we're retrofitting the original Company of Heroes so that you can set sunlight and weather conditions on multiplayer maps."

ACHTUNG PANZERJAGER!

A squat silhouette rolls onscreen, flattening barbed wire beneath the steel sections of its treads. A Balkenkreuze shows through its camouflage. The racket is overwhelming. Audio lead John Tennant, who has had to build up the monster's roar from layered bulldozer noises because old footage only offers stock sounds, says that "hearing is enough to identify the types and sizes of Opposing Fronts' tanks. Believe it—using the soundscape to survey the battlefield is more effective than ever."

This particular juggernaut is a Jagdpanther, a 50-ton tank hunter armed with the infamous long-barreled 88mm gun and junior only to the menacing Jagdtiger (which smart money expects to see later on in a Soviet-themed episode). To senior artist Kim Gill, it and the King Tiger, the game's largest vehicles, symbolize hundreds of hours of
"Every environment develops an identity, and we're adding to that with storms, sunrises..."

—Nich Carota, Art Director
labor. ‘It’s almost scary the way we agonize over this stuff,’ he says.

“We sort of ask, ‘What’s this thing’s story?’” Corota adds. “How many wells has it torn through? How many tanks has it battered? We answer with visual cues on the vehicle—some dark stains where the machine-gun mount was as if someone died…”

‘Grime, rust, dust, mud and blood,’” Gill adds.

In contrast to the inexorably marching British, Opposing Fronts’ other army, the Panzer Elite, epitomize blitzkrieg and are based on Wehrmacht Kampfgruppe, or flexible combat formations, combining tank, infantry, and antitank components. “They’re lightning-fast and vehicle-dependant,” Mosquera says. They don’t do static defense, so no digging trenches, no stacking sandbags. Instead, they field a wide variety of light and medium vehicles like half-tracks with mounted mortars, as well as Heizrer- and Marder III-type heavy tank hunters. Fallschirmjagers, or German paratroopers, round out the package.
FOR THE FUTURE
Three faces of COH’s tomorrow

1. “One of the things we’re experimenting with is objective-based multiplayer maps,” says lead designer Josh Mosquera. “For instance, you’d need to seize and secure two bridges for a specific amount of time in order to obtain reinforcements. We want to make these feel closer to the campaign experience than multiplayer victory-point matches. Another idea we’re tinkering with is last man standing.”

2. Relic is considering a cooperative campaign, says Mosquera, “but because of the dynamic, destructible nature of COH’s environments, it’s complicated. We could do it, and we want to come back to it, but the initial experiments ended up making missions too constrained and linear.”

3. “Don’t write off air- and naval-based battles as unplayable. Our goal is to be the definitive World War II game,” he says, “but we won’t add planes because planes are hot. They have to have a huge impact on gameplay. If we start adding ships and big air battles, we’ve got to have really good reasons—better than ‘We want the bullet point on the back of the box.”

By 1944, fuel shortages and poor production capacity had crippled Germany’s Luftwaffe, so these guys aren’t leaping from planes. In light of the strategic situation, they turn to motorized infantry and, at least in Opposing Fronts, stealth. Says Mosquera: “They’re able to infiltrate the battlefield sneak behind lines, and set up booby traps and ambushes. They’re devious and dangerous—yes to the British yank—and pack a tremendous punch, but they can’t take punishment, so you have to be careful, have to favor hit-and-run tactics.”

FIRING ON OUR GRANDFATHERS
From the get-go, Relic’s plan was to tell part of its war-spanning saga from the German perspective (radio press and fan feedback put in a reminder). “Market Garden makes so much sense,” Mosquera says of Opposing Fronts “and here we have it” campaign. “In this last strategic victory, the Axis army prevented three airborne divisions from securing the bridges that would have let the Allies steamroll right into Germany and likely end the war by Christmas. We’re letting you play the Wehrmacht to prevent the Allies from winning.” Touchy territory, this.

As he talks, the designer differentiates between Wehrmacht fighting in defense of the “Motherland” and dyed-in-the-wool Nazi SS divisions—the former a story he’s willing to tell; the latter, not so much (in fact, Mosquera served in Canada’s Black Watch Royal Highland Regiment, which helped liberate Holland in WW2—he points out that in his game, he’s firing on his grandfathers). “Given how cinematic the game is, and the way we take time to develop characters and encourage you to care for the units you command, we have to tread carefully,” he says. “So, no, they’re no longer loyal to Hitler. Now, as far as gameplay goes, Market Garden is just great. You’ll be blowing up gigantic bridges, pressing the plunger on British infantry, who ragdoll into the river.”

Holland’s canal-crossed lowlands call for bridge-laying, too, and its dense forests set the stage for something else Relic’s wanted to do from day one: a devastating rain of wood-clearing fire. “At last, we can have a forest fight in this location,” says Corcio. “It’s early morning and misty. You’ve got trees exploding everywhere, guys scrambling for cover behind collapsed buildings and trying to detonate the bridgehead, and you’re right down in it.”

So not so similar to ants after all.

“No.” Mosquera boasts. “This is why we’re now No. 1, so to speak. Before Company of Heroes, we were No. 3—Blizzard and Westwood were on top, and we were No. 3. From now on, every RTS to come will compare itself to Company of Heroes.”

See more screens at GFW06.1UP.com and Esten to GFW editors gab about the game on our weekly podcast, GFW Radio, available at podcasts.1UP.com.
THE VISTA GAMING

Is Microsoft bringing its “A” game with its new OS?

We’ve spent a lot—and we mean a lot—of time with Windows Vista. We’ve lived with it since it went gold in November. We’ve examined the ins and outs. Now, after months of tracking its progress, discovering hidden tricks, and hammering PCs with well over 30 games, we’re ready to give you the definitive word on Microsoft’s new operating system. Is Vista really worth it? Can it really deliver a completely new experience for gamers? And, really, how good is that experience going to be?

BY JASON CROSS AND DARREN GLADSTONE
GAUNTLET

THE TEST PILOT

For the sake of the tests in this article, we decked out a decidedly high-end computer, but not ridiculously so. This box is something any gamer would be proud to have, and it shows an Experience Index score of 5.1 in Vista (not bad, considering the scale currently goes from 1 to 5.9).

Note that for all the tests here, we didn’t do anything unusual to tweak the Vista installation — no changes to User Account Control, the default user levels, or monkeying with security measures. We simply installed Vista with all defaults intact, installed the latest updates and drivers, and changed the resolution.

Drivers are one of the areas where Vista gaming has been a little bit of a headache, but luckily, some much-needed improvements have dropped in with Vista’s launch.

ATI is the furthest along, having been working closely with Vista from the get-go, so it’s little surprise that the Catalyst 7.10 drivers for Vista support the company’s whole card lineup. The drivers also support current Crossfire dual-card configuration supported in Windows XP, and will soon support the “alternate frame rendering” default in all games’ feature recently added to the Windows XP driver. ATI’s OpenGL driver in Vista is totally rewritten from the ground up and offers better performance improvements — performance improvements are coming in future drivers. ATI’s Direct3D performance under Vista is quite good — many games appear to run around 5 percent slower than XP, while some are more like 10 percent slower. And some games even run a little bit faster.

In our test machine, though, we’re rocking an 8800 GTS. Now that Nvidia finally has Vista-friendly drivers for its DX10 card (ForceWare 100.54), we’re happy to oblige it here. Unfortunately, 100.54 still isn’t as feature-complete as the Windows XP drivers. The control panel lacks a few features (flat-panel scaling, video color controls), and SLI support is in its early stages. Meaning: You might as well yank out that second card you spent a couple hundred dollars on for the time being. Yay!

On the audio side, Creative faces some problems of its own. Microsoft has really done a lot to improve compatibility and performance of integrated audio. Vista’s audio stack is dramatically different from the one in Windows XP, and OS itself handles most audio-processing chores (including EAX functions) before handing the data off to the sound driver for final audio output. This makes for a much better experience for those using integrated audio or other host-based sound solutions, and greater stability. But for Creative, which makes the only popular soundcard with hardware audio processing, it’s a setback.

Fortunately, OpenAL (www.openal.org) allows audio cards to support nearly the whole audio stack in Vista and perform all audio operations on the soundcard, so you get your high-performance hardware 3D sound acceleration. Creative’s little workarounds is a program called Alchemy (http://preview.creativelabs.com/alchemy/default.aspx), which will replace the DirectSound DLL file for specific games with a new one that simply takes all the function calls and remaps them to OpenAL commands. Just like that, you get full 3D sound acceleration in hardware. Unfortunately, in its current beta state, it only supports the X-Fi, and we have a more common Audigy 2 in our test PC.

So, remember a few months back when we gave a late test-drive of Vista (GF3, pg. 1G2)? Back then, we saw a 5 percent performance dip from XP to Vista. We thought that drivers might improve that situation, but that just isn’t happening yet. As drivers get further optimized, expect to see some better speed scores in Vista games.

THE PROVING GROUNDS

Before we get to testing a bunch of games, let’s give our favorite synthetic 3D benchmark a quick spin. 3DMark06 installed without incident. Curiously, the install program proclaimed that we would have to install a DirectX 9 update in order to run 3DMark06 — it didn’t correctly identify the version of DirectX in Vista. We went ahead and clicked “Yes” to install DX9, knowing that it wouldn’t actually overwrite any of the newer Vista DirectX files. After patching the benchmark to the latest version, it worked much as it does on Windows XP.

In fact, performance is really quite impressive. Our 3DMark06 test score at default settings was 8552, compared to 8830 in our original GeForce 8800 GTS review. That system used an Intel Core 2 Extreme-based test system that, all other things being equal, should outperform the AMD Athlon 64 FX-60. We’re testing Vista with here. So, yes, there is a performance difference, but it’s not nearly the 10 percent it looks like — much of that is due to the difference in CPU speed. Just for kicks, we also ran the benchmark at 1600x1200 with 4xAA and 8xAF enabled and scored 5408. For comparison, our original review of the 8800 GTS — in the Core 2 Extreme system running Windows XP — scored 5773.
STEAM GAMES

First up, Valve's Steam digital-distribution service, *Half-Life 2* (and subsequent pieces like *Lost Coast* and *Episode One*) ran like a charm. Performance was just fine, but this system is sorted of overkill, so we shouldn't read too much into it. *Counter-Strike: Source* and *Day of Defeat: Source* confirm that multiplatform variants built on the same engine work just as well. They even work fine running in a window. For fun, I even loaded up the original *Half-Life*, an OpenGL game that's ancient by today's standards. It, too, had no problems running.

What about other titles you can find on Steam? *Darwinia* is another next indie game available on Steam—one that runs via OpenGL rather than Direct3D. Nvidia has had OpenGL drivers in its Vista package for some time now, and ATI's final Vista release finally adds its new OpenGL driver as well—though it's tuned more for stability than performance. Whether its Vista or Nvidia's fault, *Darwinia* runs like a pig. The main screen gives a nice solid 60fps—but in-game, it crawls along at about 11fps. That's inexcusable on a GeForce 8800 GTS.

Most Steam games don't show up in the Games Explorer, and neither does Steam itself. Several links that looked like they went to *Half-Life 2* gave an error ("H1Z1.exe has stopped working") when double-clicked. Even though these had names like *Half-Life: Source* or *Half-Life 2*, the shortcuts actually appear to go to other *Half-Life*-based games like *Counter-Strike: Source*. This isn't just because Steam wasn't running; either—it happened even while logged on. *Psychonauts*, though it appears in the Games Explorer, would give us a "Failed to locate Steam" error every time we tried to launch it from there, even if Steam was clearly running.

You know, it's funny. Well over a year ago, we asked Microsoft spokespeople on multiple occasions about how the Games Explorer would handle things like Steam—single-launchpad applications housing multiple games. Would individual games all get Games Explorer icons? Would you just get a "Steam" link in there? They kept telling us, "We're working with Valve on a solution." Guess that phone call never happened. The solution for Steam games is to ignore the Games Explorer and launch everything through the Steam application as you would on Windows XP. So much for progress.

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HOW DID OPENGL OPERATE IN A WINDOW ON THE DIRECT3D-ENABLED DESKTOP? JUST FINE.

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F.E.A.R.

Monolithic's paranormal shooter is a graphical showcase that really pushes PCs, so we frequently use it as a benchmark title. Installation and patching on Vista went smoothly.

Running our standard F.E.A.R. benchmark (everything maxed, soft shadows turned off) at 1600x1200 yielded a perfectly reasonable 97 frames per second. That's a bit lower than the 108fps we scored when we benchmarked the 8800 GTS card under Windows XP, but that machine had an Intel Core 2 processor that's generally faster in games than the dual-core AMD Athlon 64 we used for these tests. Interestingly, PunBuster-enabled servers worked fine the first time out, even though we didn't go through and enable "Run as Administrator" in the shortcut.

VANGUARD: SAGA OF HEROES

The new MMO is an absolute hardware hog, bringing even the mightiest of systems to their knees when you crank up the graphics. The game installs without incident. Like so many others, it craves the latest version of DirectX 9.0c installed and fires off the DirectX install wizard, which naturally finds no components to upgrade and finishes without really doing anything. The Sony Online Entertainment launchpad triggered the Windows Firewall, but fixing that is as simple as clicking that Unblock button we're familiar with by now. It might seem a little annoying that so many games (and other online apps) do this, but they only do it once—and while annoying, we'd rather Vista err on the side of caution and warn us about this kind of thing. Still, the game ran reasonably well at 1600x1200—until we entered the few highly populated areas: Then the entire world halted.

Even after exiting the game, Vanguard never showed up in the Games Explorer. Of course, you can drag links in there yourself, but the box art and ratings don't show up. Is former publisher Microsoft trying to tell us something?

DOOM 3/PREY

While it's not quite new, *Doom 3* is OpenGL-based. We didn't expect problems, and we got good performance at 1600x1200 with all visual options cranked up. Flipping on 4xAA and 8xAF, we cruised at 70.2 frames per second.

So why does the most recent *Doom 3* engine-based game, *Prey*, take issue with Vista? Upon launching the game, the screen flicked black and the CD drive started to spin, and then dumped back to the desktop. Right-clicking the Games Explorer box image and editing the Play menu to check the "Run as Administrator" box fixed the problem. Once it was up and running, performance was decent. Running our *Prey* benchmark at 1600x1200 with 4xAA and 8xAF gave a score of 42fps. When we first tested the GeForce 8800 GTS on Windows XP with a Core 2 dual-core CPU, we got 52fps at those settings. That's a faster CPU, which should result in a slightly higher score even at this high resolution—but we're still not thrilled.

OpenGL performance is generally good, but Nvidia still has some driver work ahead. Oh, and what happens when you run an OpenGL game on the Direct3D-accelerated desktop in a window? *Prey* worked fine in a window with the Aero glass effects on, and Flip 3D still worked. So much for all those conspiracy theories about Vista somehow killing off OpenGL.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GAME TITLE</th>
<th>GAMES EXPLORER COMPATIBILITY?</th>
<th>FULL GFW SUPPORT?</th>
<th>INSTALL NOTES</th>
<th>OBSERVATIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Battlefield 2</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Gave a warning box saying that game is only Windows XP (32-bit) certified. It works though.</td>
<td>Ran into problems joining servers using PunkBuster. We solved the problem by selecting “Run as Administrator.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Call of Duty 2</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating. Two boxes appear in the window, both point to the same executable.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>A scary compatibility warning pops up with the install.</td>
<td>A strange anti-aliasing bug cast a major fog of war. It can be unplayable if you’re not careful. (see “Call of Duty 2,” pg. 60).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization IV (and Warlords)</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art, ESPR rating, Windows Experience Index score, and Web links.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>One of the few games that shows off what it can mean to be a Games for Windows-branded game. Works like a charm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company of Heroes</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art, ESPR rating, and Web links.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Works fine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark Messiah of Might and Magic</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Single-player mode works great, but trying to switch to multiplayer from the main menu leads to a desktop crash. To get multiplayer to work, it needs to be launched within Steam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doom 3</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Solid performance; works fine (see “Doom 3/Prey,” pg. 58).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.E.A.R.</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Unlike BF2’s PunkBuster servers, there were no problems (see “F.E.A.R.,” pg. 58).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gametap</td>
<td>Like Steam, this service operates outside of the Games Explorer window.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Well, you could say that there was a problem or two…</td>
<td>Couldn’t even get the installer to work. (see “Gametap,” pg. 51).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gothic 3</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Hoo-boy, were they ever!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guild Wars</td>
<td>Every Guild Wars title that you subscribe to or bought pops into the Games Explorer window, even if you’re only installing one of the games.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Works fine with all the settings cranked.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTR: BFME II</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Adds itself to Windows Firewall exception list, as if XP.</td>
<td>Works fine and looks great.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neverwinter Nights 2</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with ESPR rating, Windows Experience Index score, and Web links.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>It supports everything and the auto-updated patches work fine. It may not have the GFW branding, but it works just like it should.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PopCap Games (Bejeweled 2, Bejeweled Wars, Zuma)</td>
<td>Steam game, not in Games Explorer.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No surprise: PopCap’s casual games work full screen and in Windows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prey</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Installation was fine. Playing it? That’s a whole other matter.</td>
<td>We ran into a number of roadblocks (see “Doom 3/Prey,” pg. 58).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychonauts</td>
<td>Steam game. Appears in Games Explorer with game box and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Won’t launch from Games Explorer, even with Steam open (see “Steam Games,” pg. 58).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rise of Legends</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>In previous builds of Vista, this caused all sorts of audio and graphics problems. Now it’s flawless.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sid Meier’s Pirates!</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with ESPR rating and game box art from the old 1987 Microprose version.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Works fine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Let’s just put it this way: Starforce isn’t your friend.</td>
<td>Serious copy protection issues (see “Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory,” pg. 60).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steam Games from Valve (Half-Life, Half Life 2, and so on)</td>
<td>Steam and most of its games do not appear in Games Explorer. Some games, like HL 2, show up twice with only box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No serious crashing problems, but enough to cause some head scratching (see “Steam Games,” pg. 58).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supreme Commander</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art, ESPR rating, Windows Experience Index score, and Web links.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>One of the few games that shows off what it can mean to be a Games for Windows-branded game. Works like a charm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Runs at 1600×1200 with HDR enabled; even in a window, it works fine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sims 2</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Works fine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Runs great at 1600×1200 with 8x anisotropic filtering enabled and all the details jacked. Even ran fantastically in a 1280×720 window.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanguard: Saga of Heroes</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Problems with SOE’s Launch Pad and Windows Firewall.</td>
<td>It’s odd that a brand-new game seems almost hostile to Vista (see “Vanguard,” pg. 58).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World of Warcraft</td>
<td>Appears in Games Explorer with game box art and ESPR rating.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Blizzard patch downloaders summons Windows Firewall warning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ah, our good old friend, StarForce. How well does the draconian copy protection scheme work in Windows Vista? You're so protected, you can't even play the game at first. Sweet!

Call of Duty 2
Heads up! Call of Duty 2's install disc yields a "Known Compatibility Problem" warning. Clicking the Check for Solutions Online button didn't reveal any info. It's just a more long-winded way of saying, "Call Activation—it's their problem." Still, the install presses on. COD2 appeared in the Games Explorer—twice! Not sure what's up with that, but both boxes in the Games Explorer point to the same executable, the one for the single-player game. They appear identical. Choosing Hide This Game for one and launching the game from the other seemed fine at first. That is, until enabling anti-aliasing. The entire screen was just a hazy shade of gray or brown (depending on the level). After blindly stumbling around for a few seconds, the game crashed. Without AA enabled, the game works well and keeps steady. Strange, for sure, but the game is at least running. Multiplayer worked fine, too. You can easily download custom maps within the game and join PunkBuster-enabled servers sans hassle.

Gothic 3
At present time, trying to test this game is like throwing a grenade in your living room and wondering if the TV inside will still work afterward. But the initial problems stem from the fact that we're using a GeForce 8800 card with early Nvidia drivers; we can't blame this one on Vista. At least, not yet. The game dumps out, flickers, and even Vista starts getting display errors. The only cure here: rebooting the computer and uninstalling the game until the next set of Nvidia drivers come along. After a few abortive seconds, the screen flickers on and off with the sounds playing in the background, until it unceremoniously dumps you to the desktop. Vista comes back to life with an error message that the display driver has crashed and restarted, but even that is an infinite loop of crash/recovery that continues until you finally give up and reboot the machine. On the bright side, you do get to see the box and rating in the Explorer window.

Splinter Cell: Chaos Theory
Last year, we discovered a major problem with StarForce copy protection inside earlier builds of Vista: games using it wouldn't run. As with all the games before, the solution now is to "simple" as right-clicking and setting the game to "Run as Administrator." This allowed Splinter Cell to install the necessary StarForce protection system, after which you have to reboot. Except that Vista had a hissy fit. It told us the StarForce driver was not installed due to incompatibility. It asked us to install a new driver for "unknown device" (StarForce). It required a trip to the StarForce site, additional drivers, another reboot, and then—finally—we could play a two-year-old game. Whew! To make a long story short: StarForce is not your friend, and games that require StarForce require a bit of work to get running on Vista.
Vista is great, but still not perfect. That’s mostly due to rough early drivers.

**GAME TAP**
GameTap is Turner Broadcasting’s special games-on-demand subscription service, and it’s cool. For $10 a month, you can download and play any of over 800 games (and growing each week) as much as you want. Titles range from console classics from the 16-bit era played under emulation to PC games that are usually a year old or more. It made big waves by offering up Myst Online: Uru Live and the new episodic Sam & Max games. Unfortunately, it doesn’t work at all in Vista. Not only is Vista not supported, but the GameTap application—through which you download and access all games—does not install.

This is hardly going to be the case for long. Many of the bugs may be squashed soon, but as we go to press, GameTap is a big dud on Vista. A total goose egg. A zero. F-minus-minus.

**RUNNING WITH ADMINS**
Throughout all our testing, whether it was Battlefield 2, Prey, or anything in between, simply choosing to run the game as an admin is the common cure-all for most Vista compatibility issues that we encountered. All we know is that right-clicking the BF2 icon in the Games Explorer and checking off the “Run as Administrator” box cleared up the problems with PunkBuster access.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**
So let’s break it down: Has Vista got game?
The basic answer is that, yes, Vista is a gamers’ OS. It’s great, but it’s not perfect. The final version of Vista is an “A-minus” gaming platform, dragged down to a “B-minus” by rough drivers. Assuming the driver situation is improved in the coming weeks and months, Vista will be a great gaming OS—just a handful of titles needed a minor tweak or two, like running the game as an Administrator. Steam is hit-and-miss. The app and all its games seem to work fine, but the way it interacts with the Games Explorer is erratic. And GameTap? Ugh.

Also, one thing you’ll notice here is that we didn’t try any DOS games for these tests. Under Windows XP, we’d always recommend every DOS game run under DOSBox—and that’s doubly true with Vista.

Vista may have a lot to offer gamers in the future—after all, Windows XP wasn’t the best choice for gaming the day it was released, either. Vista’s Parental Controls, the Games Explorer, DirectX 10, and the Games for Windows branding can all be good things for PC gamers. The only thing holding back the OS? A couple of months’ worth of patches and driver improvements.

We’re generally happy gaming on Vista. Gamers shouldn’t feel compelled to run out and upgrade immediately just for the games, but those who do won’t be disappointed. The standard “your mileage may vary” caveat applies, but Vista gaming is a surprisingly pleasant and relatively painless experience so far, and it only stands to get better.

**VERDICT**
8/10

A good start with a lot of potential with DirectX 10.

Rough driver and legacy support that needs ironing out, stat!
BEGINNER

1. That frosty new Aero interface cheesing you off? Click Start > Control Panel > Themes and choose something more drab, like Windows Classic. It may be boring, but it might give a slight performance boost.

2. Always looking for something? You can save specific searches in a special folder—by default, the Searches directory. Every time you open it, the search results get updated.

3. In Windows Vista, you can add additional clocks to the system tray. Click the clock, and then click Date and Time Settings. Click the Additional Clocks tab. You can add one or two additional clocks to the tray and select their time zones. Perfect for synchronizing races with your buddy in London.

4. Need a quick and easy RAM upgrade? Specially enabled USB flash drives (over 1GB) give you extra virtual system memory. They call it “Windows ReadyBoost.” We call it a godsend.

5. Hey, gramps, having a hard time making out some incredibly small fine print? Whip out the magnifying glass stashed inside Vista. Click Start, then search for “magnifier.”

6. Try holding the Shift key the next time you right-click any item. This opens up all the possible things you can do in Vista. For example, you can copy a path location for a shortcut.

7. Welcome to the Alt-Tabling of the future! Just hold down Windows key along with Tab. Use your mouse wheel or the keyboard arrows to navigate to the window you want.

8. Want to snip a screenshot? Type ‘snip’ in the Start menu search box. With the Snipping Tool, you can easily grab a part of the image, a window, or the full screen. Just draw an onscreen box and snap away.

9. You’ve got a lot more control over the audio than you think. Hover your mouse over that cute little speaker icon in the tool tray and select “Audio Devices.” From there, a menu pops up showing not just the master volume of the PC, but also any audio applications. You can individually remix the applications so that, say, Vista system sounds are at 25 percent and I7 at 50 percent while you crank up Media Player all the way.

INTERMEDIATE

10. Why is it that the Start menu button defaults to “Sleep” instead of “Shut Down”? Let’s fix that! Open the Control Panel and go to Power Options. Click Change Plan Settings. In the Advanced section, look for Power Buttons and Lid. Then, after clicking Start Menu Power Button, change the setting to Shut Down.

11. Not sure about all the nitpicky tweaking? Let these helpful programs do the hard work for you: TweatV1 (www.totalidea.com), TweatVista (www.tweakvista.com/tweakvistautility), and VistaBootPRO (www.vistaboopro.org).

12. Another useful tool is vLite (www.vlite.net). It can easily remove all the unwanted components in Vista (of which there are, no doubt, plenty) before you even install the OS. Sound crazy? It is! However, it lets you create a tweak-applied, customized bootable CD or DVD.

13. Windows Defender isn’t just an anti-spyware program. It’s also a useful diagnostic tool. The Software Explorer inside Windows Defender keeps tabs on everything. For example, it can scout out unwanted start-up programs.

14. Your PC should see a doctor often, and Vista offers a 60-second checkup. The System Health Report is incredibly useful. Look for it in the Control Panel under System and Maintenance > Performance and Information Tools. Click Advanced, and generate a report.
15 You can resize partitions during Vista setup easily, so save some scratch on having to buy a partition manager. Speaking of which, try doing it inside the CP as well, without causing data loss.
   A) Click Start, and then right-click Computer. Select Manage.
   B) In the Storage section, select Disk Management.
   C) All you need to do now is right-click on a partition. Expand, or Shrink to your heart's content.

16 Is Vista's boot screen bugging you out? Try the B31 "Secret Screen" on for size:
   A) Click Start, and type "MSCONFIG" in the textbox.
   B) In System Configuration, click the Boot tab.
   C) Check No GUI Boot.
   D) Click OK, then reboot to see the new screen.

17 Beat hackers at their own game. Viruses sometimes try to fool you into opening them because they have a zip icon or some fake name or extension.
   A) Go to any folder—for example, My Documents.
   B) Select Layout > Menu Bar. Then go to Tools > Folder Options.
   C) In the View tab, uncheck Hide Extensions of Known File Types.
   D) Close out—and you won't get fooled again.

18 Keep security in check. The User Account Control (UAC) fights hackers and n00b mistakes, but it's a bit of a paranoid pain. You wanna approve every single action the PC performs? Didn't think so. We found out that it doesn't need to be on all the time. Just be wary. Don't touch this if you're at all unsure of tweaking the security protocols.
   A) Click Start, then run "secpol.msc" to open the Security Options Menu.
   B) Look for the Local Policies > Security Options.
   C) Scroll down until you hit User Account Protection settings. The handy list below shows various settings (default values are in orange). If you want to change anything, just right click and select Modify.

- User Account Control: Admin Approval Mode for the Built-in Administrator account
  - Enabled
  - Disabled
- User Account Control: Behavior of the elevation prompt for administrators in Admin Approval Mode
  - Elevate without prompting
  - Prompt for credentials
- User Account Control: Behavior of the elevation prompt for non-administrators
  - Prompt for credentials
- User Account Control: Detect application installations and prompt for elevation
  - Enabled
  - Disabled
- User Account Control: Only elevate executables that are signed and validated
  - Enabled
  - Disabled
- User Account Control: Only elevate UI Access applications that are installed in secure locations
  - Enabled
  - Disabled
- User Account Control: Run all administrators in Admin Approval Mode
  - Enabled
  - Disabled
- User Account Control: Switch to the secure desktop when prompting for elevation
  - Enabled
  - Disabled
- User Account Control: Virtualize file and registry write failures to per-user locations
  - Enabled
  - Disabled

19 There's a slight slowdown, thanks to the Start search panel in Windows. Blame the size of your file index (which includes all the searchable files on your PC). Wanna speed up the process? Narrow the searches down by indexing fewer things on your computer.
   A) Click Start, then type "regedit" in the search bar.
   B) Follow this file path: HKEY_CURRENT_USER > Software > Microsoft > Windows > CurrentVersion > Explorer > Advanced.
   C) Right click on Start SearchFiles and select Modify.
   D) Set the Value to 0. Once you restart, you're off to the races.

A less extreme measure: Just narrow down the search criteria. Instead of searching browser histories and every friggin' file on your computer, have it only look in specific places on your PC. Follow this path to get there: Right Click in the Vista toolbar > Properties > Start Menu tab > Customize. From here, you can tick off where you want to search.

20 Who needs to hibernate? Windows plops a file on your hard drive that it uses when your computer goes into hibernation mode. If hibernating isn't your thing, you may want to disable it outright. The bonus is this frees up space on your computer (for every megabyte of RAM you have, you lose a megabyte of hard drive space).
   A) Click Start, and right-click Command Prompt.
   B) From the context menu click Run as Administrator.
   C) In the command prompt window, type "powercfg -h off" (without the quotation marks).

Or, just delete the hibernation file:
   A) Click Start and type "Disk Cleanup".
   B) Choose the drive with the Windows Vista installation.
   C) Disk Cleanup scans the hard drive for deletion candidates.
   D) Check Hibernation File Cleaner, then click OK and confirm the delete—you've got a relatively clean slate.
See that "Version Reviewed" line in the info box on every review? It's more important than you may realize—think of it as full disclosure. Videogame publishers usually wind up sending us early "reviewable" games to meet our deadlines (which are significantly earlier than those of our online competitors): these builds are typically close enough to "gold" (i.e., retail-ready) status to treat as final, though we're not shy about calling out important features that we had no or limited access to.

Case in point: Command & Conquer 3. Our reviewer played the game off of a "near-final beta" (dated February 18) so that we could get it into this issue (at press on March 14) in time for C&C3's street date (March 26). One of C&C3's important features, Battlecast (which you'll read about in the review), necessitates playing under live retail circumstances—something obviously unavailable to us at the time of review. You can count on us to provide a more thorough assessment of this feature in the 1UP.com review (same goes any time something like this happens), as—unlike some other publications—we aim to inform our readers as thoroughly as possible about the circumstances surrounding any review. —Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor

SCORE KEY

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

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

9-10: Excellent
Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

7-8.5: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

6-6.5: Average
Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

3-4.5: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

0-2.5: Terrible
Never should have been made.
IT'S A "KATIE BAR THE DOOR!" REVIVAL OF STEELY ACTORS STARING YOU STRAIGHT IN THE EYE AND DECLAIMING "SAVE OUR BACON OR ELSE!"

Most missions have clever (if positive) bonus objectives such as "complete the mission using only this unit."

Harvesters are a bit overaggressive and tend to wander anywhere in search of Tiberium, to the extent of stupidly rolling into enemy territory. If ever a unit needed a behavioral option, it's this one.

One of the game's few faults is the way smaller units can get lost in the chaos. You'll want to keep everything CTRL-assigned to avoid sacrificing precious second's foraging for those pygmy-sized commandos.
COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

‘Cause you’ve got (walk, talk, smile, charm) personality

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts DEVELOPER: EALA GENRE: Real-Time Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 1.2GB RAM, 5.0GB hard drive space MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Final Reviewable

COMMAND & CONQUER 3: TIBERIUM WARS

Great news: Command & Conquer is back, like a reunion band after seven hit albums and an eight-year hiatus. We’re talkin’ harvesters, right-hand-sidebars, superweapons, and over 90 minutes of splatific full-motion video with real actors. Real actors! The last time we saw live bodies in a game was... what, last century?

Consequently, this sequel to 1995’s Tiberian Sun has something that most of its peers don’t: personality. Whether it’s Tres Hefner (Battlestar Galactica) preaching you up in puny fishnets, Josh Holloway (Lost) drawing like everyone’s favorite Southern-fried wiseass, or even the terrific Michael “Sam Fisher” ironclad coaxing plausibility out of the script’s predictable military hoo-hah, personality’s the reason why you really can’t miss Tiberium Wars—it’s not just a great RTS, it’s a “Katie bar the door” revival of steely actors staring you straight in the eye and declaiming, “Save our bacon or else!”

AND THEN THERE WERE THREE

You probably remember the neofascist Global Defense Initiative (GDI) and its nemesis, the cabalistic Brotherhood of Nod... and, yes, they haven’t changed much. The GDI still employs dependable meat-and-potatoes military toys: whether that’s rifle/grenade/sniper infantry teams, mektanks, and mobile missile-flingers, or the ‘juggernaut’—a two-legged tank bristling with long-range artillery weapons. The Nod still complements its arsenal with clandestine units such as fanatics (suicide bombers), saboteurs, stealth tanks, and the high-end ‘avatar warmech,’ a colossal robot that actually upgrades itself by cannibalizing friendly vehicles. The Nod’s support abilities (they’re like The Battle for Middle-earth’s “ring” powers) are also cruder than the GDI’s... so where the GDI gets airborne unit drops, radio-call aircraft strikes, and a high-tech orbital ion cannon superweapon (environmentally safe disintegration!), the Nod gets stuff like “cloaking field,” “decoy army,” “shadow strike teams” (gilder-borne assassins), and good old-fashioned nukes.

But C&C3 debuts a third faction: the Scrin. They’re slylier aliens after Earth’s Tiberium supply; their tech tends to be more organic, letting you combine little gnattlike swarms of “Buzzers” (flying razors) with three-legged “gunwalkers” or long-range “devourer tanks.” They also pack some incredibly powerful high-end units (their “planetary assault carrier” comes with its own complement of lighters) and wield impressive special powers such as “vormholes” (teleportation), “motherships” (think Independence Day), and “lift,” a weapon that tears open a mini black hole.

Trouble is, you don’t actually see the Scrin until late in the GDI or Nod campaigns, and you need to beat either campaign to unlock the Scrin offensive, which is really just a brief four-mission “in-and-out” of Europe. So, while the Scrin are unquestionably deeper than some are crediting, they don’t get the narrative treatment they deserve. That’s too bad, because where the GDI and Nod campaigns are first-rate gonzos, the Scrin campaign feels more like an underdeveloped codas.

THE BATTLE FOR (MIDDLE) TIBERIUM

It’s no accident that C&C3 looks like Battle for Middle-earth II draped in industrial grunge. The game uses an improved version of the SAGE engine originally designed for C&C: Generals, and the scale is almost identical. Hovering a couple dozen meters over square battlefields, you place industrial and defensive structures after ‘click-building’ them in the right-hand sidebar (one at a time until you build “expediting” tech). It’s an old and remarkably well-aged C&C convention that limits peasant pushing to harvesters that automatically trundle off and scoop up glowing Tiberium, a greemish, crystalline substance that funs new structures and upgrades.

Said structures require sufficient power for operation, which you must supply by dropping power plants (“reactors” for the Scrin) and ensuring you don’t totter over budget and flintone a chunk of your base. If you do, you’ll have to whip up more power plants or manually shutter buildings and defenses. For all its subtleties, C&C3 might as well be sub-titled “screwed trumpa tactics,” something that’s especially obvious if you’ve seen the videos of C&C3’s Battlecast feature (our review build shipped without Battlecast, which lets you broadcast your multiplayer games as pundis comment and draw over the action... we can’t thumb it up or down in this space, but check our updated review on 1UP.com for the definitive word on this). You have your base laid down and upgraded in minutes, and in battles—save for long-range weaponry—positioning means little. Winning’s all about swiftly countering one unit type with another, or simply overwhelming the enemy with superior numbers of just about anything.

But then, that’s what a C&C game does, after all. Real actors, over-the-top stories, hyperkinetic special effects, and straight-up pulp without any silly self-awareness. Let the RTS works and contrarians toss it overboard for what it regurgitates—it won’t be one iota less entertaining. *Matt Pechham

VERDICT

9/10 EXCELLENT

- Personality where it counts: C&C conventions still top-notch: elegant interface.
- Tough to locate certain units; harvesters wander too liberally.

MISSIONS are individualized to prevent “build-and-rush” monotony, and several will see you juggling energy use, repairs, and build queues on zero-sum budgets while fending off incoming attack waves.

The Brotherhood of Nod is an insurgent cult led by the fanatical Kane, here played with obvious maniacal relish by returning series actor Joseph D. Kucan.
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Galactic Civilizations II: Dark Avatar

eXceptionally eXecuted, eXpansive eXpansion

You can count the first Galactic Civilizations II expansion's major improvements on one hand—a new campaign, planets that require specific tech pushes for colonization, mineable asteroid fields, spies, and custom opponents—but in this case, little things add up to a lot. Dark Avatar is Stardock's way of "fixing" a game that didn't really need repair, and proof that the old "if it ain't broke" adage is a bunch of Anterrellian tubeworm leavings.

Dark Avatar's best and most game-changing (and most "well, duh") addition is a new tech track that makes "uninhabitable planets"—toxic, supergravity, whatever—perfectly acceptable places to park your colony pods. While it doesn't entirely eradicate the frantic Monopoly-style land grab of Galactic Civilizations II, it does make the early game a lot more interesting. Come across a Class I (that's Galactic II speak for "potential utopia—grab it quick!"") toxic world, and you're suddenly faced with some tough trade-offs. Rush to research what you need to colonize it, but risk falling behind in other key early-game technologies. Bump up espionage spending and carefully monitor the Krynn Consulate to make sure they're not researching the tech yet, but stunt your own economic growth—or bump up taxes and gamble on your citizens' morale.

The other additions have less of an impact on gameplay, but all of them are good: Asteroids offer an easily divertible resource (planets even occasionally explode and leave 'em behind—catastrophicportunity!), and a couple of new diplomatic treaties offer fairly potent ways to manipulate your opponents. Spies are the only sketchy newness. You place them in other civs' colonies to sabotage buildings, effectively shutting 'em down—that part's lovely and good—but they feel a bit like cheating. Since as long as you have an agent to place, you're allowed access to all your opponents' planetary layouts...a privilege previously available only once you'd attained an advanced level of espionage on that civ.

The 10-mission campaign does a good job introducing each of the new concepts and techniques in situations you normally wouldn't encounter in skirmishes (stealth? Really?). The story arc puts you in control of the evil Drigg Empire, fighting against its more evil Korath sub-clan...but narrative certainly isn't Galactic II's strongest suit. Custom skirmishes, however, are—and that's where Galactic Civilizations II's most surprisingly compelling new appendage sprouts: custom enemy races. What sounds like a throwaway feature actually proves to extend the game's life expectancy more than any other bullet point. New Glyns vs. old Glyns vs. the Borg, Ur-Quan vs. Vogon vs. the Spaceballs crew. You can drop your own alien portraits in the "Gfx" folder, too. If that's your thing—but few "famous" galactic civilizations exist that you can't satisfactorily model using Dark Avatar's stat bonuses and racial superpowers.

Dark Avatar does what a good expansion pack should—it makes it tough to imagine ever playing the base game without it. It makes a great game greater, even if its achievements are measured in pinky widths instead of leaps and bounds.

Sean Molloy

Proof that the old "if it ain't broke" adage is a bunch of Anterrellian tubeworm leavings.

VERDICT

9/10

Excellent

Games for Windows

- Early game's loss of a land grab; custom opponents are great fun.
- No multiplayer: graphical overhaul's pretty minor; spies feel a bit like cheating.

This alien shore: The Dark Avatar recycling program transforms toxic wastelands into habitable territory.

The forever peace: Dark Avatar's diplomacy still boils down to "make demands 'til the words turn green," but new treaties help strengthen unpredictable relationships.
SECRET OF THE ARK: A BROKEN SWORD GAME
Lots of cheek, filled with really good tongue

REVIEW

When you start saying things like, “Give the salami to the Rottweiler” to yourself, you're either into zoophilia (yuck), remembering Zoo from the 2007 Sundance Film Festival, or using really elementary adventure-game logic. Let's choose option C. In Secrets of the Ark, sure, you'll see that kind of sophomoric solution, but this title also manages to conjure up some of the best puzzle-solving you've seen since the heyday of LucasArts adventures. If you don't remember those, think a whole lot of great brainstorming.

This is developer Revolution's fourth act in the Broken Sword series that debuted over a decade ago. Returning hero George Stobbart—self-proclaimed private dick—has become a bail bondsman after his last (mis)adventure, but gets drawn once again into investigative mode when a mysterious blonde shows up, stammering about a lost manuscript/treasure map. The game premise is pretty well-worn; yet another case of “What are those wacky Tempiars up to now?” And with Da Vinci Code-ism running rampant, you don't feel anything truly fresh here. With nods to Indiana Jones all over the place as well, you really don't feel anything fresh... but for some reason, the story works (don't hold your breath for a finale, though). Even in its predictability, the game builds enough tension to drag you through the longest stretches of dialogue. Yards and yards of dialogue. Miles of it (which you sadly can't skip when you're replaying a scene). The thing is that—even when tediously verbose—much of it is really... catchy.

If your ears are double entendre-sensitive, you can pick out tongue-in-cheek stuff from the most deadpan delivery, you might question the Everyone rating. Hey, the subtleties probably went right over the collective head of the ESRB.

NO, NO, PLEASE DON'T MAKE ME DANGLE

The minute you start having fun with the puzzles (the hacking and circuit-building ones are particularly awesome) and enjoying the weirdness of some lesser characters, gamedes interruptus sets in. You'll get hung up on the scenery and never quite get comfortable with the keyboard-mouse controls, even if you WASD-configure them. Same goes for the re-aiming, switching, reversing, and fusing with directionally challenged camera angles. You'll run into walls or back into the room out of which you just exited.

And then we have the dangling. For some reason, the creative types at Revolution believe that even a semblance of arcade action is better than none. It isn't. They think it adds richness. It doesn't. You'll find yourself sliding along ledges—on top of them or dangling from them—swinging from fire escapes, and dangling some more. If falling to your doom were a real possibility, that might offer a challenge...but, as it is, you can’t fail, making this sort of navigation feel like a complete waste of time.

You might learn fun stuff, though—like how to translate Latin, or that England's St. George was actually born in what is now Turkey, or what to say to naked priests frolicking in bathhouses, or how to tamper with Communion wafers. Really. The dev's are going straight to hell.

VERDICT

This title manages to conjure up some of the best puzzle-solving you've seen since the heyday of LucasArts adventures.

7/10

Games for Windows: The Official Magazine

Clever dialogue; creative puzzles; maintains tension without punishing you.

Clumsy controls; confusing camera; noninterruptible dialogue; primitive visuals.
Everything looks great from the air... but not quite as good for the 50 levels it takes for you to get there.

We almost hope they don’t fix Vanguard’s appearance-randomizing bug. Right now, it’s probably the closest we’ll ever come to a Quantum Leap MMO.
Vanguard: Saga of Heroes

“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning for corpse runs, travel time, and years of leveling!”

For those long-neglected EverQuest refugees out there, Vanguard is the new world. The prevailing opinion among its hardcore fans (and the game’s garnered an awful damn lot of ‘em) is that World of Warcraft is just too “liddle.” EverQuest II went too casual, and nothing else out there offers the same level of immersion, where major accomplishments are made meaningful through long-term devotion...and failure carries serious penalties. Vanguard’s zone-free world, lack of instantaneous travel, absence of instanced content, and less-stylized character and environment design all work toward an uninterrupted sense of reality: frighteningly customizable in-game housing that’s actually constructed from those crafted commodities—and assembled by specialized player character craftsmen—also contributes to the concrete realism the game tries so hard to foster.

From a more common point of view, it’s a poor illusion: The things that make Vanguard so appealing to the cult can also be described as tedious, frustrating, dull, and just plain bloody-minded. The “average” MMO player won’t enjoy the prospect of traveling through three hours every time he needs to train once his guild moves to a continent that doesn’t have any priests. Immersion be damned—that’s no fun.

Everquest 1.5
It’s easy to think of Vanguard as what EQ might’ve been were it made today. It’s stuck in time, in a way that might be comfortable for some, but just plain aggravating for others. Its quests retain the same structure...and the game world, races, and mythology are almost indistinguishable from EQ’s paint-by-numbers high fantasy. Hell, even the names over characters’ heads appear in the same font.

Likewise, most of Vanguard’s core gameplay only elaborates on what came before, though chained attacks, assist, and countermagic do make combat less rote. Extra options and occasional complications create an interesting crafting system, and—almost incidentally—it’s practically unattainable. This stuff’s nice...but pretty minimal, considering the last few years of MMO evolution.

Vanguard’s most unique feature is its diplomacy system, which takes the form of a card game played against NPCs. The simple rules provide great emergent complexity—and bandishing cards like “Blanket Accusation” and “Acid Tongue” to drive a conversation definitely beats the hell out of the usual kill-X-of-Y quests that make up most of the game. Unfortunately, the conversation that spoils off as you successfully manipulate an NPC has nothing to do with the tone of the cards you use. Also, diplomacy exists completely separate from regular quest lines—you can employ it as an alternate solution to nondiplomatic problems, which might have made it a more interesting long-term pursuit.

Double Bagger
If all that didn’t make the game exclusive enough, Vanguard requires a beast of a machine to run—and for its minimum specs, it really should look a lot better. Everything’s attractive enough at a distance...but up close, many of the textures look plain embarrassing—especially in the Thranian continent, which (not coincidentally) was the first part of the game to be completed and is home to the greatest concentration of boring quests and high fantasy clichés. Oh, and character animations range from lacking to laughable. The worst offender: the skinny animation, wherein your character is apparently sitting on his own wrists.

Imperfect as the gameplay and graphics are, what should erase any lingering temptation for any MMO player—serious or casual—is Vanguard’s mass of bugs and missing content. NPCs important to multiple quests vanish for days at a time...and character appearance (and sometimes even equipment) is prone to randomization each time you log in. The option to toggle the appearance of headgear doesn’t do anything, because the headgear graphics were actually unfinished. Vanguard’s most dedicated enthusiasts might be able to forgive all that, but they really shouldn’t have to; it’s a heaven or hell proposition, dependent entirely on just how badly you want to forget that you’re playing a game and how hard you’re willing to try to convince yourself that you’re having a good time.

Verdict

- The diplomacy system’s kind of OK.
- Embarrassing graphics and bugs; grind-heavy gameplay model brings tedium to the masses.

Scott Sharkey

3
BAD

Games for Windows
CITY LIFE: WORLD EDITION

Renovated city

City Life: World Edition is a curious product—an expanded rerelease of 2006's City Life, a critically acclaimed city simulator that showed great promise but lacked a certain je ne sais quoi. World Edition's changes to the original game are—relative to your average expansion pack—minor...but their effect on the game is magical, transforming it into the kind of mesmerizing lever-pulling life-suck that sim junkies crave.

With the recent drought of city simms, it's little wonder that City Life stirred souls, thanks to its interplay of infrastructure and class warfare. Cities had to be carefully structured with social classes separate enough to avoid conflict but close enough to serve each other's needs. The premise was disarmingly engaging, but the charm dimmed quickly—the same formula worked on every map. Variations in topography, tourist appeal, and environment didn't make things challenging enough to warrant building the same city all over again.

World Edition remedies this by correcting a seemingly superficial flaw: the gorgeous but anemic selection of buildings. With only a handful of business buildings for each class, neighborhoods became monotonous stretches of identical storefronts; World Edition adds dozens of new buildings—employers, leisure destinations, service structures, and 15 real-world landmarks—and an accessible building editor for designing and adding even more.

Turns out, more variety is just what City Life needed. The game's fit and finish is still marred by a litany of bush-league typos (the gaming equivalent of the boom mic in the frame), but these nitpicks shouldn't keep city-game lovers from buying this City Life in a visit.

Greg Kramer

VERDICT

More building variety: easy-to-use building editor; more Free Mode maps.

Sloppy localization: crashes on reload.

8.5/10

BLITZKRIEG II: FALLOF THE REICH

Falls down, gets right back up

Holy cow, is this game hard. Hard like getting ants to fight beetles or cats to march in columns, or playing rock-paper-scissors with an octopus. From the manual: "Fall of the Reich...is primarily aimed toward the players who have played the original game (Blitzkrieg II)...and...finished at least one campaign." Yeah, no kidding.

This $30 stand-alone expansion to 2005's semirealistic World War II RTS Blitzkrieg II pits demoralized Germans against Pyrrhic Soviets in two campaigns that loosely engage the 1944 Eastern Front. Whichever side you play, though, the enemy's better entrenched with tougher, more abundant units, and must get a kick out of watching you clumsily wrangle infantry, armor, and air units into some caricature of an attack formation. Counter air with AA, or armor with tank destroyers. Flank, camouflage, snipe, mine, and sweat every inch of your firing arcs...parry all you like, you'll still get caught pants-down by an A.I. that can work Fall of the Reich's clumsy interface better and quicker than you. A better substitute for this game? Retries "R" Us.

The game's biggest hang-up is that it's simply too hard to tell what the hell's going on half the time. Infantry dissolve into bombed-out backgrounds and balk at inexact selection, and enemy AT and artillery always crouch just out of sight and in perfectly staggered waves, reliably razing your shrewdest scouts.

With Company of Heroes playing loose with reality, a market certainly exists for more realistic WWII RTS games. But unless you're a Blitzkrieg II apologist, Fall of the Reich won't be tapping it.

Matt Peckham

VERDICT

Hundreds of historical units: tactical complexity; nearly budget-priced for a stand-alone expansion.

Poorly implemented interface: incredibly difficult.

5/10
Sam & Max: Episode 4—Abe Lincoln Must Die!

So this dog and this rabbit walk into the Oval Office...

PUBLISHER: Telltale Games/ GameTap
DEVELOPER: Telltale Games
GENRE: Adventure

Y'all know the drill by now: Sam and Max get a phone call. “You gotta stop the [blank]!” Erstwhile tattoo artist/psychotherapist/professional trial witness Sybil's got another brand-new job this month—running a dating service—that’ll probably come in handy an hour or two from now. Down the street, convenience store owner Bosco’s faking a new foreign accent, and he’s got some high-tech, supersecret puzzle-solving gizmos for you if you find a way to land $1 million dollars (just tack another zero onto last episode’s sum). We hear a knock at the door: Jerry answers with “Hello...Newman,” and everyone heads down to the “Restaurant” to chat.

Abe Lincoln Must Die! is the longest of the four Sam & Max exercises (featuring—as usual—only three new “rooms” you haven’t seen already...but quite a bit goes on in those rooms), and it’s also the best. The gonzo plot traces a surprisingly epic course—jokes range from prank exorcisms to the destruction of Krypton, and this episode’s Soup Nazi is none other than the President of the United States—and its witty puzzles require a bit more head-scratching than previous episodes. As in past installments, you’ll never need a walkthrough, and you think like an Acme engineer. Sam & Max follows a formula, sure, but sitcom predictability is proving to be this series’ secret strength—it’s rare to see a game conjure up such strong narrative continuity and familiarity in so short a time span. In Telltale’s hands, recycled assets take on the aspect of recurring joys.

VERDICT

8

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GRAB BAG
We’ve got no fancy themes for you this month—just a random assortment of five games that you really owe it to yourself to play.

THE CHRONICLES OF RIDDICK: ESCAPE FROM BUTCHER BAY—DEVELOPER’S CUT
Games based on movies usually suck—especially when the movie itself is a train wreck. The Vin Diesel flick The Chronicles of Riddick failed to meet even the lowest expectations...but the tie-in game (co-developed by Diesel’s own Tigon Studios) bucked the trend, standing out as one of 2004’s most entertaining and atmospheric action titles. The PC version even comes with developer commentary, something we wish more games featured.

MAX PAYNE 2: THE FALL OF MAX PAYNE
Are you totally pumped for John Woo Presents Stranglehold? You might want to take Remedy’s Max Payne games for a spin: Run-n-gun third-person action, “bullet time” effects (an innovative feature at the time, we swear), and a seedy, melodramatic film noir story—told chiefly through stylized onscreen comic panels—combine to tap the same John Woo-inspired energy that Stranglehold is trying to channel.

NO ONE LIVES FOREVER 2: A SPY IN H.A.R.M.’S WAY
We’ve stormed the beaches of Normandy and assaulted Stalingrad more times than any one gamer should, but—every now and again—a World War II shooter comes along that renews our interest in a very stale genre. What’s this got to do with No One Lives Forever 2? Absolutely nothing—we just hate reading articles on WWII games that start this way. Please stop now. Oh, and check out NOFX for lots of quirky, retro-style espionage-shooter action.

TRON 2.0
Elder geeks remember Disney’s inside-the-computer world of Tron for its then-awesome special effects (it was 1982, 2007 after all) and the arcade game it spawned. You probably just remember that someone talked Jeff Bridges into wearing a Day-Glo neoprene jumpsuit for two hours. Developer Monolith (who would later go on to make a little game called F.E.A.R.) resurrected the obscure 20-year-old movie with this incredibly creative FPS. It borrows some elements from System Shock 2, but the game is pure Tron art and style.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE SANDS OF TIME
Most classic series revivals result in utter embarrassment—like, say, Dark Messiah of Might and Magic, or Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude. Ubisoft expertly nailed Prince of Persia’s rebirth, though, blending wild, physics-defying 3D action with clever puzzles, all connected by a unique time-manipulation mechanic and a fun story. The two sequels are worth your time, too—but if you haven’t played Sands of Time yet, you’re missing out.
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“ALL I KNOW ABOUT THE TWO SIDES IS THAT ONE OF US IS ROBOTS AND THE OTHER IS SOME OTHER KIND OF ROBOTS.”

“Tom’s robots must have special anti-shield weapons, like the Bene Gesserit.”

“Just in case Bruce didn’t surrender after his base was destroyed, Tom was building this thing.”
**TOM vs. BRUCE**

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

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**SUPREME COMMANDER**

*Publisher: THQ*  
*Developer: Gas Powered Games*  
*Genre: Real-Time Strategy*  
*ESRB Rating: Everyone 10+

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**HOT ROBOT ACTION**

**BRUCE:** “Those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it.” That’s not just a smart quote people pull out when they want to convince you that it isn’t their fault they lost a war—it’s an actual law that’s the basis for the behavior of those people who dress up in fake armor and fight with foam swords and stuff. Because I lose to Tom so much, I thought I’d spend some time researching the history of *Supreme Commander*, to see which side lost, and what mistakes it had made, historically speaking, so I could make sure to avoid them. It turns out that it doesn’t matter, because all the sides are exactly the same—everybody is a robot. Who cares about robots?

**TOM:** In *Supreme Commander*, everything is a robot. Everything. So when Bruce says, “He ha, I just shot down your pilot,” I have to explain to him that there was no pilot in there, that it was, in fact, a pilotless drone. At which point he berates me for calling it a pilotless drone, the same way he did when he called in to the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Actually, the supreme commander himself is not a robot. He’s inside an armored suit that lets him travel through quantum gateways. As for exactly quantum gateways are, I couldn’t tell you. I wasn’t paying attention to that part of the backstory because I was too busy studying spreadsheets trying to figure out the difference among the three sides. Speaking of which, Bruce takes the United Earth Federation because it’s the most human. I take the Annoy because if we were the Cybrans, I’d win too easily by Mantis-nuking Bruce, a tactic I developed from studying the spreadsheets.

**BRUCE:** All I know about the sides is that one of us is robots and the other is some other kind of robots. I think Tom is the evil robots.

**TOM:** You have to play through the single-player game and watch all five hours of goofy cut-scenes before you can make any value judgments about who’s evil in *Supreme Commander*. Incidentally, this is also how long it takes to watch the tutorial videos.

**BRUCE:** The first few times I played the game, my economy tanked out because I wasn’t extracting enough mass or energy or mana or whatever you use to make robots. So I spent the next week watching tutorial videos, and they say that you should start the game by building three mass extractors and three power generators, then build engineers. I wish the tutorial would just keep going and telling me what to build all the way through the game. Maybe a little helpful Chris Taylor face could show up and say, “Time to expand your naval factory!” when it’s time to expand your army. Except I’m playing the EUF, and I don’t think the EUF has a navy.

**TOM:** Bruce might be allergic to navies. He whines whenever we play RTSes that have navies. He usually has a point, because navies are poorly integrated into most games. But *Supreme Commander* is one of those rare real-time strategy games for the clever way it works naval warfare into the full game (*Rise of Nations* and *Age of Empires III* are two others). There’s nothing quite so satisfying as bombarding someone’s base with a battleship, but I only got the chance to do this once to Bruce in *Supreme Commander* before his naval allergy kicked in and he passed the following edict: No Maps With Water. So we’ll be playing on Open Palms, a landlocked 10 km-by-10 km map, and I’ll just have to make do with using regular land-based artillery to bombard Bruce’s base.

**BRUCE:** Tom told me that he usually starts out building an air factory, because they can build engineers and that lets him get an air scout out faster. So imagine my surprise when I catch a land scout sneaking around my base two minutes into the game. I guess he can’t be trusted to even take his own advice.

**TOM:** If we’d been on a naval map, I would have made an air scout. Instead I start out with a few cheap land scouts and send them to look for Bruce’s base. I find it pretty quickly. The thing with *Supreme Commander*’s variable starting locations is that they’re variable. In this case, although there’s plenty of room on the map, we’ve been placed right next to each other.

**BRUCE:** Because of the philosophical history of the *Total Annihilation* series, the best defense is a good defense, because it sure beats a good offense. A couple point defenses can easily hold off a horde of level 1 units. That means that you need to build air defense around all your installations, because a couple bombers can easily take out an undefended mass extractor, but against a...
Tom vs. Bruce

Couple air defense turrets, they can hold out forever. Or at least until the level 2 units show up.

**Tom:** As they say, point defenses make good neighbors. Point defenses, antiair guns, and a radar installation make even better neighbors.

**Bruce:** I have Tom cornered! Actually, I have the top corner, and it looks like the bottom corner hasn't been developed yet. I probably have a lead in mass production, because you mainly get mass by building extractors at the mass extraction points on the map.

One odd thing about *Supreme Commander* is that it's an Inconvenient Truth style, the game keeps track of how much energy you waste. In the endgame, there is a whole thing about how much wasted energy you had and how that affected the environment. OK, I made that last part up, but because I feel like the game is watching me, I build a bunch of energy storage units around my power plants. That's my way of pitching in and recycling to preserve this giant, precious map. Which I control most of, by the way.

**Tom:** The great thing and the annoying thing about *Supreme Commander* is that you don't really need to control the map to win. Map control is a central tenet of most real-time strategy games. It encourages early and frequent conflict, and conflict is generally good in a real-time strategy game. Otherwise, we'd be playing *The Sims*. But it's entirely possible to turtle in *Supreme Commander* because you can build a surplus of power and then use mass fabricators to convert it to mass. I try to make a habit of doing this even while I'm trying to claim mass extraction points, just to hedge my bets. Plus, you can toggle mass fabricators on and off if you feel like micromanaging your economy, which is a cinch at the speed Bruce likes to play (i.e., run really slowly for five minutes, then pause and give orders for three minutes).

**Bruce:** The reason I have to pause all the time is that I keep losing track of what's going on in the game. Everything looks like everything else. Is that a tank? No, it's a mobile artillery robot. Oh wait, nah, that's actually an antiaircraft robot. And since there isn't much variety to the terrain, when I click on an idle engineer tab, I'm immediately disoriented when it takes me to that unit. Every now and then I zoom over my factories just to remind myself what I'm building in my endless repeat building cycles. A Stinger, eh? What's the heck is that? Oh yeah, a level 2 airplane. Robot.

**Tom:** Welcome to the wonderful world of total annihilation and, by extension, *Supreme Commander*. You can find a spark of soul in the names given to the units. Hardcore players, which is pretty much anyone who plays *Supreme Commander*, refer to tech 1 tanks, tech 2 artillery, tech 2 gunships, and so on. But I like to use their given names. Klink Hammers, Shimmer, Flapjacks, and Evensons. Waggers, Ripples, and Loyalists. And, of course, the Monkey Lord and Fatbaby. If you learn these names, you can actually pretend there's a glimmer of personality in *Supreme Commander*.

**Bruce:** It would be a lot easier to appreciate the glimmer of personality if you ever saw a unit up close. As it is, I spend most of my time mousing over things, because even at 1600x1200 on a 22-inch monitor, I can't make out the symbols on the zoomed-out map. It's just blue diamonds, yellow moons, orange stars, and green clovers. Which is disappointing, because I really do appreciate the ability to see the whole map at once. It's the best part of the game. But I guess it shows that the real genius in RTS game design is not deciding whether or not to allow players to zoom the map out in all the ways—it's how to make the presentation compelling when you do.

**Tom:** Even though Bruce hates all real-time strategy games, he's just made an excellent point. There's a reason developers don't let you zoom all the way out. It's because they knew you'd do it and never zoom in. And if you play from this high altitude, all their fine work and any personality they've breathed into the game will be lost on you. *Command & Conquer 3* is a sloppy and colorful action movie of a game brimming with personality and charm and, by golly, it's going to force your nose into it so you'll appreciate it. But *Supreme Commander* has paid a dear price for its unique gameplay. It sold its soul to show you the entire map at once.

**Bruce:** I could have sworn I had some mass extractors down there along the southwest edge of the map. In fact, they looked just like that. But now they're green. Is that possible? They are quitting robots?

**Tom:** Oh, right, we're in the middle of a game. I forgot. Waiting for Bruce to unpause gives me a lot of time to wax philosophical about real-time strategy games. What happened here is that engineers have the little-known capability to capture units and buildings. It takes them a little while to do it, so they don't fare very well under fire. But when you've sent out a lone engineer to claim mass extraction points, you can just have him capture them out from under your opponent. And even better, if you come across an unattended enemy engineer and the other player isn't paying attention (or perhaps he's paused the game and is poring over his build queues), you can capture his engineer.

I put Bruce's enslaved robot to work building a factory in the distant corner of the map where I captured him—a UEF factory that I will use to train Bruce's own robots against him.

**Bruce:** Great, now Tom has a factory building my own units to come attack me. This is like a scene out of *Screamers*. Except, without Peter Weller, since he wasn't a robot. Sorry for the spoiler there. Anyway, one thing Tom probably didn't anticipate was my level 2 air! I mean, my Stingers coming down to take out his point defenses. Level 2 beats level 1 any day. Blue trap-explodes totally rock green boxes.

**Tom:** I don't mind these little raids back and forth. Because map control isn't important to me in this game, they're little more than sidehows to keep Bruce from scouting out my base where I'm constructing a battery of tech 2 artillery emplacements. Or Miasmas, as I like to call them. Once they're up and running, I build a bank of tech 2 tactical missile launchers. Serpentines, by name. While the Miasmas hit hard, they're not very accurate. That's what the Serpentines are for. They strike precisely where you tell them to strike.

However, thanks to periodic visits from air scouts that Bruce destroys and then gloats about having shot down, I have reliable intel that Bruce has built a tech 2 tactical missile defense. These things are appropriately called Buzzkills. So I tell my Miasmas to concentrate their fire on it, which means "fire in that general direction and you'll hopefully hit it after a while, or at least splash damage to it death. Once this has happened for a while, I send in a scout to update my reliable intel. Sure enough, the Buzzkill is gone. Faster than Britney Spears checking in and out of a rehab center. I fire four Serpentines at a time into each of his six factories.

"Awww, OK, that's it," Bruce says. But this isn't the "that's it, now you're really gonna get it" information. It's the "that's it, the game is over" information. I have successfully broken Bruce's morale with my missile-based terror campaign. I accomplished this with my Serpentines what the Germans couldn't accomplish with their V2 rockets. Plus, when it comes to RTSes, Bruce Geryk is no Churchill.

**Bruce:** I played a few practice games against Tom to learn *Supreme Commander*'s historical lessons firsthand. So in this game, I built a shield generator to protect myself from Tom's artillery. Tom's artillery made it through anyway, I built a Buzzkill to protect myself from Tom's missiles. Tom's missiles made it through anyway. I built a strategic missile launcher to retaliate. Tom blew it up before I even finished it.

So much for learning from your mistakes.

**Tom Wins**

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*Tom's base is neat*

*Tom's tech-up defenses render Bruce's obsolete defenses even more obsolete.*
**LINE OF ATTACK**

**Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming**

**COLUMN**

**Bruce Geryk**

In an industry where turn-based gaming has become a vanishingly small slice of the overall pie, you could always count on war gaming (seemingly a vanishingly small slice itself) to be a reliable repository for what is ultimately a very board-gamey mechanic. While real-time gaming now dominates the strategy genre, war games have, for the most part, preserved such e-mail-friendly mechanics as IGOR/USO and WEGO. (For the uninitiated, this is “I go, you go” for sequential moves and “We go” for moves planned and resolved simultaneously.) Now one of the genre’s most successful titles is moving on. Battlefront’s upcoming *Combat Mission: Shock Force* is being advertised as using a “game engine designed and programmed from the start to be real time.” That’s right—you’ll be commanding all of that advanced firepower (the game is about a future Middle East conflict) without the benefit of turns to think about where to move that Abrams. That is, if you want to. The game will preserve the classic simultaneous planning/move sequence for those who want to keep playing *Combat Mission* the way they’ve always known it. But this raises a number of interesting questions about why the designers feel the need to move to real-time in the first place, and how a game can be designed for one mechanic while still preserving the quality of the design in accommodating a radically different one. The approach is philosophically very different, and what plays well one way may not do so in the other.

In typical marketing speak, Battlefront boasts that the game “is about to raise the bar for war games and change how they are played and made for years to come.” The real question is do war gamers want to move the bar in that direction?

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**FALLING PIECES**

**The best in casual games**

**COLUMN**

**Robert Coffey**

When I want a week of peace and quiet—seven precious days without the demands of family—I make them all play *Risk* with me. Within an hour, I’ve seized the board and turned everyone against one another (and especially) me. The downside: No one will play *Risk* with me anymore. Fortunately, MicroProse’s impossible-to-find 2000 release of *Risk II* is now conveniently downloadable at www.genimo.com for just $20.

Digital versions of classic strategy games like *Risk* definitely have their advantages. First off, your nagging wife can’t spend the board as she speed-dials her lawyer.

*Secondly, you can enjoy the simultaneous-turn mode, which is a very different type of game with very different strategies. And finally, your cat will never choke to death on a plastic cavalryman in front of dinner guests.*

**KING OF ALL WORLDS**

On the other hand, you could spend $25 on *Lux Delux*, which has a less snazzy *Risk* game (and about 400 more games on top of that) built into it. Frankly, I can’t recommend this game highly enough for both casual and hardcore gamers—it may very well be the best game I’ll download all year. All the games in *Lux Delux* revolve around a tweaked *Risk*-style rule set; it’s got pirate conquest games, Vietnam games, weird conquer-the-geometric-figure games, a U.S.A. War Zone game, and even a World War II version built around a *Monopoly* board. Most of these variations were created by rabid fans with the included game-editing software—and not only have they created maps and games, they’ve also created new AI routines you can download and play with.

If you don’t want to play against the AI, you can always join one of the dozens of games being played online at all hours. Most are ranked, so players can fight for spots on the global leaderboard. You can check out the leaderboard and—more importantly—download the game at www.sillysoft.net/lux.
Crisis on Infinite Servers

So...a priest, a rogue, and a warrior walk into a bar. TeamSpeak is up and trash talk flies furiously. This small corner of WoW...ahem, an MMO I hadn’t visited in a while, is in “hot” mode. With all of us at max level, and all of us spewing one-upmanship, folks flash their latest pieces of übergear. (“Hah! Only +8,455 to Agility? Take a look at this.”) Then, in walks one of “them”—the enemy, the other faction, the scum of the planet. In other words, fresh meat. He’s a lowbie, and he’s alone, and I gave him a shot, laughing uproariously as he falls.

Silence.

What’s going on? Is this not the PVP server I’ve played on since the game launched? Aren’t these folks the guys I used to run with, picking off the player-character rubbish and vermin that dirtied up the landscape? In hushed tones, someone explains that, in the wake of a new expansion (the main reason for my return to the game), an informal “truce” has fallen into place—a five-and-let-live mentality that allows players to experience the new content without having to constantly watch their back. What’s up with this kinder, gentler crap? He’s gotta be kidding, right? Then it dawns on me that I used to be one of them: the humanitarian, the bleeding heart. The weird marshmallowy thing many players nowadays call a “carebear” (or worse). So what happened to me?

Payback’s a bitch

Early on (as far back as Ultima Online), I spent a lot of time floating around in a holier-than-thou bubble, putting down griefers, gankers, and self-proclaimed PVP “experts.” It simply didn’t seem fair for a random group of terrorists to knock any defender back in their path, coldheartedly loot the still-warm corpse, and cause the victim to lose whatever hard-earned experience he or she had accumulated that day.

This perfectly describes the PKs from Diablo II—the damnable griefers that ape the camping snipers from the likes of Doom-land. They hated those guys at the time...but as combat models evolved, and player confrontation required consent more and more. I eventually found myself gravitating toward open-PVP games/servers/shards. I ultimately realized that I simply wanted to do unto others as they had done unto me...over and over again. And when I attained a high enough level to always win the unfair fight (and even the occasional fair fight), a previously undiscovered sense of vengeance kicked in. It was payback time.

I’ve found plenty of ways to laugh in the face of death. Ambushing anyone—regardless of level or whether or not it would be a fair fight—became a delicious prospect, and the prospect of being killed only pumped more adrenaline. I’d turned into what I used to despise.

Leggo my ego

Even sweeter than revenge, though, is the ability to prove that you’re better than them—right? You can outsmart a game’s AI...all day long, but facing another player creates a much better test of skill, and “who won whom last night” is a great source of pride for some...and humiliation for others. While players still spit upon and corpse-hump one another (OK, even I really hate that), the real humiliation in losing is the knowledge that your tactics sucked.

I ultimately realized that I simply wanted to do unto others as they had done unto me...over and over again.
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This month’s topic: The return of full-motion video (FMV) in Command & Conquer 3: Tiberian Wars

SHAWN: So were you standing at attention when—who was she?—“the chick” called you “commander”? When Kane took off his Kanor eye patch—see Mortal Kombat—and addressed you from the Spirit Halloween Superstore? Or was that EA’s server bank?

JENN: I can’t pay attention to what any of these actors are saying. I just keep staring into their eyes and seeing that look of: “God, this is embarrassing, and I’m sorry I had to take the job.” But hey, it’s gotta pay for our new hardwood floors.

RYAN: Weren’t you all over that one chick from Battlesstar Galactica when she was cast, though?

JENN: Yeah! She sucks here. Actually, she sucks on BSG, too. Not Tricia Helfer, the other one. But she’s great to look at. I’d download her wallpaper!

SHAWN: OK, Spanky. So what’s up—we love it, loathe it? What’s it doing for the bigger picture?

SEAN: Watching Michael Ironside and that Cylon girl give me mission objectives is like being John Malkovich-ed into the husk of a drooling persistent vegetable. I didn’t have this metaphor back when Dane Plato was telling me to watch out for the black-tights dancers in Night Trap, but that’s it exactly. It’s unsettling, uncomfortable—but I cannot look away. But I believe in the power of high camp, so I’m also extremely entertained. Now the real question is: Does EA realize just how stupid this is? I actually thought the voice acting in the original Resident Evil for the PlayStation was some sort of put-on, but when I realized that no, it was just honestly terrible, it lost a lot of its charm.

DARREN: I dunno. I liked Resident Evil for its awesome action—and especially since it’s unplanned. People like me flock to B movies, savoring every wooden performance like a fine wine. The catch, though, is that the second someone gives that知道 wink-and-nod to the camera, that’s the second the pendulum swings back from ironic-funny to painfully sad. This reminds me, we really need to host a Digital Pictures and Wing Commander marathon. Mark Hamill FTW!

SHAWN: I just wonder how well the FMV is performing the task it’s intended to. Narrative and itsy-bitsy-looking real-time strategy are strange bedfellows as it is, but real-life flesh and blood and wee warriors? Graphics have improved a great deal since the last C&C: it’s just that they aren’t lifelike. And the discrepancy is jarring. Then again, I don’t mind the picture-in-picture updates so much as the point-of-view pops up between battles.

SEAN: I think it works, but only because the makers aspire to a Stargate level of drama. I’m willing to accept that bar placement. I certainly enjoy it more than I do watching most gamers’ digital actors, which I usually find pretty inert—though there are exceptions in Half-Life 2 or even Final Fantasy XII. But I’d say those games are aiming to do something bigger in terms of narrative than C&C does. I picture an FMV Alyx. I cringe.

JENN: I agree—I think it works, and swimmingly so! For older fans of the C&C series, they’re obviously playing on our nostalgia. But even for gamers approaching these series for the first time, I think that the cheese factor is so obviously done with a wink here that you’d have to be pretty humorless not to appreciate it. Besides, who doesn’t like to see TV stars alumining? And I agree on another point, too. I get way more distracted by animated NPCs who look more lifelike the more the artists try to inject life into them.

SHAWN: They call these RealDolls—and you really think EA threw 360 sound power for cheese factor?

SEAN: Hey, our reviewer liked the FMV, so maybe you should all just shut up! Ha!?
Casually Speaking

Gaming's next evolution: a blast from the past

I’m sure the day will come when I must explain to my kids that at one time, the only games you could play on PC were text-based—and displayed in stunning monochrome. Or that to enjoy digital diversions in color, you had to go down to the local arcade or bowling alley and feed endless quarters into a machine.... in short, that there was no MSN® Games.

Happily, though, what I won't have to explain is that they are missing out on anything. After all, many of the fast, fun, accessible titles so popular in the early days of the industry aren't just still readily available. They're also enjoying new life via an exciting new medium we call "casual games." Why, one look at the free online version of InterAction Studios' Chicken Invaders 2 at http://games.msn.com, and they'll instantly comprehend where all that allowance money went.

It's an interesting phenomenon. As the world has evolved, so have I. Whereas I once had hours each day to dedicate to playing games, work and family life have since taken their toll on my free time. Occasionally, I can squeeze in a couple of hours on the weekend to dedicate to my favorite MMO. But, for the most part, I have to grab a few minutes here and there—in between helping with the kids or finishing assignments at work—to play.

Thankfully, the visionary designers at Microsoft haven't just anticipated all my needs. They've also recognized that millions worldwide find themselves in a similar predicament. Consider just two of many great casual game choices available on MSN Games:

• **Star Defender 3** by Awern Studio—A personal favorite. Blasting hordes of alien beasties proves to be a great way to blow off steam without having to commit hours at a time.

• **Magic Match: The Genie's Journey** by Friends Games—A puzzlingly addictive follow-up to the hugely popular original that offers a 50-level journey across the deserts of Arcania. Outwit a master thief, explore the pyramids, and traverse the City of Gods!

Windows Vista™ couldn't be more casual game-friendly, either. Since upgrading my PC, several titles have really amazed with their enhanced graphics and sound:

• **Darwinia for Windows Vista™** by Introversion—Combines fast-paced excitement with strategic battle planning. Featuring novel controls, a retro-futuristic visual aesthetic, and gripping sci-fi storyline, this one's an immediate standout.

• **Crystal Quest for Windows Vista™** by Codemasters—Pilot a ship through 60 waves of frantic assaults, collecting crystals and evading the Nasties. Your singular, oh-so-satisfying objective: Vaporize every foe in sight.

• **Jewel Quest® II** by iWin—Sequel to the classic pattern-matching mind-bender. Rearrange precious relics to advance through relentlessly challenging puzzles. The wilds of Africa await your discovery, as does a gripping tale filled with treasures and twists!

Long story short: Gaming's come a long way since I was a kid, and the range of available choices grows larger by the month. Best of all: You can now play how you like, when you like, courtesy of casual providers like MSN Games—no quarters necessary.

—The Casual Gamer
Choosing to play with Windows Vista™ isn’t just the smartest option for any interactive entertainment enthusiast. With research clearly showing the biggest barrier to limiting children’s exposure to inappropriate content is parents not having time to monitor their activities, it’s also one of the most responsible decisions you can make as a concerned parent.

Happily, thanks to the new Parental Controls in the Windows Vista operating system, the power to provide loved ones a safer, more secure environment in which to enjoy Games for Windows® is finally yours. No technical expertise required, either. Now, with the click of a mouse, anyone—no matter their level of familiarity with computers or gaming—can help to safeguard their kids from questionable material and unhealthy computing habits.

**Note:** Parental Controls are easy to locate and reference. To access them, simply:

1. Click on the Windows Vista Start button to open the Start menu.
2. Click on the Instant Search field and enter “par.”
3. Click Parental Controls to open the settings.

Alternately, you can load them directly from the Games Explorer, located right off the Windows Vista Start menu (the same central launching pad for all games on your PC).

Available right out of the box, these features make the process of limiting kids’ admittance to dubious games, websites, and programs convenient—and provide notification when any attempt has been made to do so. Better still, an icon-driven menu system complete with step-by-step help functions guides you through the procedure. Mere seconds is literally all it takes to quickly confine playtime to specific hours, or block titles featuring improper ratings or unsavory subject matter.

Here’s how this interactive safety net works:

**USER MANAGEMENT**

Every family member utilizing your PC can be assigned their own individual User Account and password. Turn Parental Controls on for a desired user, and you’ll have full control over what games, programs, and websites they can enjoy. To set specific details for each child, start by creating personalized log-ins. We suggest something easy to remember: For example, consider divvying up admissions by tots’ first names or initials.

**Hint:** Passwords should be simple to recall, yet difficult enough to confound unauthorized entrants. Say, a combination of sprouts’ birthdays, favorite colors, beloved pets’ names, and/or lucky numbers.

**CONTENT SETTINGS**

You set the boundaries for your children and decide what’s appropriate. Start by picking a ratings system, with several choices from North America’s ESRB standards to Europe’s PEGI, Japan’s CERO, and Australia’s Office of Film and Literature Classification guidelines also available to select from.

Turn Parental Controls on for a desired user, and you’ll have full control over what games, programs, and websites they can enjoy. To set specific details for each child, start by creating personalized log-ins.

You can access Parental Controls directly through Windows Vista’s Games Explorer.

You can choose to filter games by specific ratings or based on individual content descriptors assigned by each ratings board (allowing “E for Everyone”—stamped titles, but not “M for Mature,” for instance).
You can automatically choose to filter games by specific ratings (allowing access to "E for Everyone"-stamped titles, but not "M for Mature," for instance) or based on unrated content. Likewise, you can further choose single or multiple games and programs to block, or provide unfettered access to those titles based on personal preference. Web filters, which can be set to medium, high, or custom settings, additionally offer the option to help prevent content designed for mature audiences and/or featuring drugs, weapons, and pornography from getting through.

**Hint:** You can also take a more hands-on approach if you’d prefer, blocking games based on individual content descriptors assigned by each ratings board. This way, it’s possible to let older children or teenagers be exposed to “cartoon violence” and “comic mischief,” for instance, while keeping them shielded from “blood and gore” or “nudity.”

**TIME LIMITS**

No more playing games when children should be doing their homework—you decide when they can go off, and for how long. A simple, easily interpreted visual grid shows you the days and hours when computer use is free to any given user, with details set to “anytime 24/7” by default. To change these settings, just click to highlight times when you’d prefer that access be restricted. No nasty surprises here, either—twin warnings are provided 15 minutes and one minute before sessions expire, giving kids plenty of time to shut down and save their work.

**Hint:** If time expires before your child logs off, Windows Vista suspends their session. A log-in screen is then presented, giving another user the chance to jump on. However, suspended sessions remain active in the background, ensuring that the next time kids sit down in front of the keyboard, they can pick up right where they left off.

**ACTIVITY REPORTS**

You know what they say: “While the cat’s away, the mice will play.” But with Windows Vista, they won’t do so for long—automatically generated activity reports actually let you keep tabs on games played, applications run, websites visited, login times, e-mails, instant messages, and more. Reviwable on demand, these monitoring tools help you follow exactly what’s gone on in your absence and keep track of what kids see, hear, and do. Better still, using this feedback, it’s possible to go back and adjust Parental Controls as needed depending on each child’s individual behavior. The kicker of course, being that you’re provided greater insight into and command over the games, programs, and websites that kids can experience than ever.

**Hint:** Because it’s important that trust works both ways, children can see when Parental Controls are active simply by looking for the associated icon in the system tray. Honesty is, after all, a two-way street.

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**SAFETY IS NO GAME**

New tour asks: Is your family set?

Talk about driven. Determined to put family first, trailblazing sponsors Microsoft, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and Best Buy have recently kicked off a nationwide bus tour touting Xbox 360™ Family Settings and Windows Vista™ Parental Controls.

Featuring a parent- and caregiver-targeted curriculum, “Helping Parents Protect Kids: A Family Guide to Games,” the tour is designed to offer hands-on training with these pioneering features. Look for the caravan coming to your town soon.

A custom-kitted bus outfitted with eight Xbox 360 consoles and three Windows Vista®-based laptops will be stopping in 15 cities including Austin, Chicago, Denver, Detroit, Indianapolis, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.

For more information, call 1-800-4MYXBOX or see the official Family Settings website at www.gamesforwindows.com/isyourfamilyset.
Jedi Mind Tricks

The Force is strong with LEGO® Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy™

If there's one thing that's given where Games for Windows® are concerned, it's this—there's no shortage of amazing titles suitable for all ages, interests, and player types. Case in point: LEGO Star Wars II: The Original Trilogy™, which transcends all barriers and appeals equally to action and adventure fans, kids and adults—not to mention, of course, sci-fi and fantasy enthusiasts alike. A quintessential family-friendly selection, it's just one fine example of the many great games available to both Windows XP and Windows Vista™ users from hundreds of industry leaders, including creator LucasArts and Microsoft.

A single peek at the game's comical approach and candy-colored aesthetic, and you'll be convinced. Playfully chronicling the biggest battles and most storied shoot-outs of the legendary cinematic franchise's first three films, the title seeps fans step into the heavily armed boots of dozens of blockheaded heroes. As Luke, Leia, Obi-Wan Kenobi, or even Darth Maul and Greedo, take up blaster rifle or lightsaber against your opponents in a fight to save or subjugate the galaxy. (Note that dozens more can be unlocked with a game save from the original LEGO® Star Wars®, or through active play.) You even have the option of assembling your own custom headliner by mixing and matching body parts from all characters featured in the tale.

Solving puzzles and using high-tech weapons and jaw-dropping Force powers to slug it out with stormtroopers, Jawas, and Gamorrean guards isn't the only thing, though. Even if, that is, ripping enemies' arms off as Chewbacca or choking them using Darth Vader's special abilities does prove incredibly cathartic. Battles through the biggest scenes from Episodes IV, V, and VI, you'll also be able to mount creatures like banthas and tauntauns, and annihilate enemies using vehicles such as AT-ST walkers and speeder bikes. From X-Wing assaults to split-second escapes aboard the Millennium Falcon, a thrilling variety of space-based encounters is additionally provided.

But just because you won't find a more authentic motion picture spin-off doesn't mean you can't have some fun as well. Despite the utmost respect with which the eye-popping outing treats its subject matter, LEGO Star Wars II, happily, isn't the sort of title that takes itself too seriously. For laughs, try keelhauling opponents with Leia's slap attack or rewriting history by making the Death Star trench run from inside a TIE fighter.

Still, the game's best feature is built-in co-op multiplayer support, which lets excellent-crawling film buffs jump in at any time and wage war simultaneously along with a friend or relative. You haven't lived until you've sat down with a loved one and filled the living room with the gleeful sounds of laughter—and screeching laser beams. With over 18 levels to explore, including Mos Eisley, Hoth, and Jabba's sail barge, there's no end to the fun. Let alone, naturally, once you discover just how many secrets and hidden areas are scattered throughout on a second attempt.

A surefire hit with children and grown-ups, consider it just another gift from the Games for Windows family to yours.
GFW Radio broadcasting weekly from a digital device near you.

Imagine the sharpest minds in PC gaming sitting around every week, discussing everything from World of Warcraft to the impact of Vista to Game X’s beta release. No holds barred—every sacred cow spitted and roasted, every lame game exposed, every great title championed. It’d be really cool—like the Algonquian Round Table of Gaming or something, right? In a perfect world, you’d get that. Instead, the editors of Games for Windows deliver an aural hour of musings, ponderings, and cognitive flatulence in the totally original Games For Windows podcast. Every week. As close as your computer. Tune in today!

Here’s what some of our listeners are saying on the message boards...

“The GFW podcast has got to be one of the most consistently hilarious things that I have ever heard!”
—Solo 327

“Kudos on a very entertaining podcast, and I look forward to my next long drive, which will give me a chance to listen to the two most recent podcasts.”
—Gigity

“I don’t even really play PC games anymore, but this is still one of my favorite podcasts. For some reason, Shawn’s "nerd/geek" voice never, ever gets old. Please continue to do that voice for many, many years.”
—mmilemay
THE INCREDIBLE SHRIN
PART ONE: SMALL FORM-FACTORPCS

In the beginning, computers were big—baseball stadium-sized big. Over time, the PC shed its baby-fat, and by the start of the new century, the idea of a small form-factor box was realistically possible—small(ish) devices capable of browsing the Web, sending e-mail, processing words, and, if you’re lucky, playing Minesweeper. But not much else.

Yes, early small form-factor machines (let’s just call ’em SFFs) had some issues. OK, a lot of issues. Designed for the gimmeits casual user, these mini-PCs didn’t offer many options in the way of upgrades or power. The cases were often too small to fit a full-size videocard, the available motherboards allowed for only paltry memory, and the power supplies were too weak to provide the necessary juice to do, well, much of anything. The first machines topped out at P-III support, offering a single PCI slot (AGP? What’s that?), a 2GB RAM ceiling and a blazing 133MHz system bus. If the onboard S3 Savage4 graphics didn’t zingle your knicker, you could be rocking Quake III with your GeForce2 MX 400 in this bad boy.

Still, two very specific users saw the SFF’s potential. First, home theater enthusiasts realized that these pint-sized PCs made for ideal media center hubs, and second, LAN partygoers naturally gravitated to them for the portability factor. The only thing holding both back was the lack of enough muscle under the hood and enough room to jam in a serviceable videocard.

These days, the small form-factor is a much more viable option. More manufacturers jump into the field every day, providing machines (and the components to build your own) that are fast and powerful enough so you won’t need to schlep a 70-pound tower to the next QuakeCon. Maybe they’re not quite as small as the original SFF vision, but now they offer a fantastic balance of power and size. *Joe Rybicki*

OFF-THE-SHELF SYSTEMS

Currently, you have more game-ready small form-factor machines on the market than rugs in a Persian bazaar. Looking for a tiny box without the hassle of building one from scratch? It should come as no surprise that one of the mightiest mites comes from Shuttle (www.shuttle.com), a pioneer of the SFF PC. The XPC 1337 Series SDXi shoeboxs a pretty serious amount of muscle into a chassis roughly 9-by-9-by-13 inches—a little bigger than a shoebox (depending on whose foot you’re measuring). Inside: an Intel Core 2 Duo E6600 at 2.4 GHz, dual Radeon X1950 Pros in CrossFire, and 2GB DDR2 667 MHz RAM. It’s liquid-cooled (of course!) by an internal CoolIT MTEC system. The state of the art doesn’t come cheap, of course; expect to drop around $3,500 before options. Oh yeah, and it’s also hand-painted. With flames.

There’s also, of course, a competing system from Falcon (www.falcon-nw.com): the FragBox II. This slightly more modest system rocks an Intel Core 2 Duo E6300 running at 1.86 GHz, a GeForce 7600 GT, and a gig of DDR2 800 MHz RAM. The FragBox chills with a Zalman cooler and costs a cool $2,600 to own. If you’re feeling slightly less “Leet” (1337, get it?) Shuttle’s XPC P2 3700g scales down the 1337’s setup, offering a paltry 3GB RAM, a single Radeon X1950 Pro, and none of that fancy-pants liquid cooling (or hand painting). Only $1,600? Pocket change!

There are a couple issues with buying off-the-shelf, though. First is the standard complaint of do-ityourselfers: The manufacturer often throws in—and charges for—items you don’t need, won’t use, and don’t want. Like, say, a hand-painted flame design. With SFF machines, though, this problem becomes compounded: With internal real estate at a premium, unnecessary gear is a waste of both money and precious space. The solution? DIY. >

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>OFF-THE-SHELF SYSTEMS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Product</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XPC 1337 Series SDXi</td>
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<td>FragBox II</td>
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</tbody>
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KING GAME MACHINE!

Part One: The Small Form-Factor PC
BUILD YOUR OWN...WITH HELP

These days, building your own PC doesn’t have to be an all-or-nothing proposition. Rather than buying every single component separately, you can often start off with a basic setup of case, cooling, power supply, and motherboard, and go from there. SFF machines are no exception. Shuttle dominates this “bare-bones” market, with a broad range of setups. The best option for the gamer is the SD37P V2, a minimalist case with a 480W power supply and a motherboard based off Intel’s 975X chipset. The board offers two PCIe slots for CrossFire action and four memory slots for up to 8GB of DDR2 memory, and support for quad-core processors. For a bit over $400, that ain’t bad.

Most other systems that pack in a motherboard top out in the Pentium 4 category, though you can pick up middling-to-good Athlon 64-based systems from Shuttle. Biostar, and a handful of others for around $300.

BUILD YOUR OWN...FOR REAL!

But of course, building from scratch, component by component, offers the maximum customizability and the maximum upgradeability. And while it offers the minimum cost, sorting out the components can result in a maximum strength headache.

Let’s start with the chassis. You’re going to want to look for a case that accepts microATX (mATX) components, but for gaming you’d prefer a case that will accept a standard ATX power supply (we’ll get into why in a bit). Thermaltake (www.thermaltakeusa.com) makes the gaming-focused Lanbox, which boasts reasonable onboard cooling (with a 90mm intake fan and two 80mm exhaust fans) and the added bonus of an entirely modular chassis, which can come almost entirely apart with the turn of a few thumbscrews.

Other reasonable, reputable cases are the Ultra MicroFly (www.ultraproducts.com), which boasts a front carry handle, one 80mm and one 120mm intake fans, and an optional 600W power supply; and the Silverstone SG01 (www.silverstonetek.com) which features three 80mm fans and a sleek, audio-component look.

If you’re looking for something a little more unique—and a little more high-end—PC Design Lab (www.pcdesignlab.com) makes the sexy-as-hell Qmira. It boasts sound dampening, a modular design, and an unusually open architecture that allows for lots of options. That extra headroom is huge when it comes to placing hard drives, video cards, and cooling units—an important consideration when you’re working with such a small space. But at $300, it’s around three times the price of your run-of-the-mill SFF case.

ACCESSORIZED!

Now that you’ve got your tiny god tricked out, you might want to look around for some gear to go with it—you know, gear that’s small, portable, and sexy. Start off with a bag. SilverStone (www.silverstonetek.com) just happens to make a carrying case specifically designed for SFF PCs. The Sugo Pack retails for about $50.

Next, how about a roll-up keyboard to stuff into that bag? Manhattan (www.manhattan-support.com) makes the True-Touch Rolling Keyboard, available for a mere $24. Too gimmicky? How about the Wolkfing Warrior (www.wolfgangusa.com), a circular keypad that features only the keys essential to FPSes. It’ll run you about $35.

Since you can’t take your surround-sound setup with you, why not pick up a pair of surround-sound headphones? The Speedlink Medusa 5.1 (www.speed-link.com) is a fairly good set as far as these things go, boasting a high-quality boom mic—even at $125 they’re not cheap.
At GFW, we want to know what you think.

While we're pleased with all the great letters we've received since our first issue, we want to know MORE – about you, your PC gaming life, and how you feel about Games for Windows: The Official Magazine. We value honest feedback, because it identifies areas for improvement and helps us provide you with a better experience.

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We are looking forward to hearing from you.
HEART AND SOUL

Now that we've selected a case, it's time for the great motherboard debate: Intel or AMD? We're not even going to try to address that in this space. Whatever your camp, here's what you need to look for in a microATX motherboard.

First, the state of the art demands a PCI Express x16 slot, and if you have any interest in setting up dual graphics cards in an SLI rig, you're going to want two. (Yes, a single GeForce 8800 GTX will post better benchmarks than any SLI setup—but what about next year? Best to prepare for the inevitable.) Unfortunately, as of press time SLI-capable mATX boards number exactly one: the AMD-based N44 nForce SLI from EVGA (www.evga.com), which supports Athlon 64 X2. That should change in the very near future, though, as it's rumored to be coming out with an Intel-based board sometime this year.

If you simply can't wait but you must go Intel, pick yourself up a P5L-VM 1394 (just rolls off the tongue, doesn't it?) from Asus (http://usa.asus.com). With quad-core support, it should provide plenty of headroom in the CPU department, at least.

And as for the processor? The old bit about buying the most expensive one you can afford usually holds true...except for right now, with the quad-core Intel going for an absurd $900. Unless you have money to burn and a pretentious sense of processor speed, go with the Core 2 Duo for a third (or less) of the price. For an AMD machine, the Athlon 64 X2 is the way to go, priced right around the same range as the Core 2 Duo. These'll serve you well at least until the next round of processors hits the same price point.

SO IT'S COMING TO THIS

You may have noticed that we made a lot of choices in terms of case and motherboard with video cards in mind. Here's why: The machines we've dreamed up in this article will all support the very best video cards. Beware: Some SFF PCs are simply too small to fit a full-sized video card (at least without removing essential components). But if you've been following along, this won't happen to you.

Right now, the undisputed king of the video arena is the GeForce 8800 GTX. Small problem: Good luck finding a machine that fits it—we have full-sized towers in the office that can't house this 10.5-inch-long beast. As of this writing, the Qmica is the only SFF case that will fit the card without your having to perform minor modifications on the interior; with the others you'd need to trim out anything from a nonessential clip or two to a hard drive bay.

The slightly more modest 8800 GTX is much more reasonable at only 9 inches long, but even that sells for close to $500. It's a little on the expensive side, but it is DX10 ready and won't require you to drop more money on another card right away. If you're keeping an eye on the bottom line, you can score ATi's Radeon X1950 XTX from Sapphire (www.sapphiretech.com) at less than half the price.

Wow! That was easier than we thought. So, now that you've got a walk-through graphics card, you're probably going to want to make sure you're keeping things cool. And while the fans onboard your graphics card will do the job, they're loud, and in some SFF machines they actually might not fit. Enter the after-market cooler. And when you're looking to balance performance with size, we haven't found a better option than zalman's V900-Cu (www.zalmanusa.com). This superquiet cooler should keep your video card at a healthy 55 degrees Celsius.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Of course, all this fancy tech would just sit soit without something to you know, power it up. Remember how we selected cases that would take a full-size ATX power supply? Here's why: With videocards and processors getting faster and faster, the demands on the power supply are becoming greater and greater. Limiting your options in this arena is never a good idea.

See, all power supply units are not created equal. And you're not just looking for the obvious things: like noise level and efficiency. In modern PCs—especially gaming machines—you need a PSU that will deliver steady, uninterrupted power to your videocard, CPU, and storage devices. That means you need a PSU with a +12V supply rail that will put out sufficient wattage of at least 220-230V continuous output. (Contrary to popular opinion, it turns out it's less efficient to have multiple +12V rails, since each individual rail will barely be drawing its full capacity.)

If all that sounded like gibberish to you, here's a shortcut: Pick up an OCZ PowerStream at $200 (www.occtech.com). It delivers enough power in the right places to make everything run well. It's pricier than many PSUs, but that extra cash buys you the ability to manually adjust the settings on the different supply rails. And it buys you a badass blue glow coming out of the back end of your machine.

THE FUTURE IS JUST BEGINNING

As should be painfully obvious by now, a small form-factor PC can run the gamut from bargain basement to ridiculously expensive. Of course, like every other area of PC gaming, SFF machines are constantly evolving. The most significant recent development is AMD's announcement in January that the company is attempting to create a new standard for SFF PCs. The DTX standard will focus on energy efficiency, standardized component size, and power. If it takes off, we could see the SFF market gaining a lot more momentum.

Until then, enjoy being the first on your block to squeeze a full-size tower's worth of top-level gear into a shoebox-size package. Size does matter.
You'll notice this month there are some changes in store for Merma Gladstone's favorite dock. Y'see, the Tech section was feeling a little lonely, so I decided to pack my bags and move Gladstoned from the Start section over to the nerd side of the tracks. Oh, don't worry. You get the same half-baked jackassery, now with half the calories and twice the 101001 jokes. LOL! ROFL!

And while we're at it, I'm gonna try something a little different back here—tell us what's on your mind. Want to know what sound and graphics cards are in my computer? Looking for some tweaking tips? Maybe you're trying to do a report on The Guevara or you're dying to know the key ingredients inside those nuclear orange-colored Cheesos. PC advice, love advice, how to deal with rashes, how to deal with all of them at the same time—ask me anything! Just send a note to darren.gladstone@ziffedavis.com with "Gladstoned Questions" in the subject line and watch me pretend to know what I'm talking about! Now, back to our regularly scheduled column...

There are no hobbies in New Zealand. Yeah, I was kinda shocked to learn that as well. Despite a slightly nerdy Lord of the Rings side quest, my honeymoon was all about spending some quality time with the new missus. No DS, no PSP, and most importantly, no World of Warcraft.

Goodbye, Azeroth. For the next 14 days I'd be living in meatspace, talking to people without question marks or exclamation points over their heads. I must be fidgeting a little when Amy asks, "Everything OK, baby?"

This is where it could go bad. The shakes, uncontrollable itching, total game withdrawal. I might enter some kind of fever dream, thinking that New Zealand is just part of the next WOW expansion. But before I start convincing myself that jumping into a giant plastic ball and rolling down a hill is a new mount (they call it Zorbing—it's awesome), I snap out of it.

"I'm fine, babe."

What I didn't expect was stumbling upon the New Zealand gaming scene—and learning something in the process. Y'see, for those who live Down Under, things don't come cheap. The New Zealand dollar won't get you very far. So people learn early on to make the most of what they have.

Day one of our adventure finds me stepping into one of the many Internet cafes littering downtown Auckland. Since I needed to e-mail mom and let her know we landed. Neurotic moms—what's up with that? The place is packed. Guys laughing, shouting—and going on a high-level WOW raid. It's 11 a.m. on a Wednesday. One, I'm thinking, "Damn, these guys are hardcore. Two, I'm wondering, "Why don't they play at home?" "Well," a guy explains, "gaming is an expensive hobby." Don't I know it? However, as bad as you might think it gets in the States, games are ridiculously expensive Down Under. A brand-new release will run you as much as $100 N.Z. That's about $70 U.S. Maybe, I thought, that's just the case in Auckland—it's a metropolitan area, after all—but the same held true throughout my trek. Whenever the newly minted wife wasn't looking, I'd sneak a quick peek to eyeball game prices. They were equally out of whack nationwide. I encountered Internet cafes even in small towns—and whenever I'd pop into one to send off an e-mail home, I'd always spot folks fighting in Battlefield 2142 or knocking off a couple quick quests during their lunch break.

If games are that expensive, one can only imagine how much a new graphics card would run a New Zealander. That's when someone mentioned "Kiwi ingenuity." Whether it's fixing a broken fridge rather than buying a new one or figuring out how to tweak your computer to get it to do things it's not supposed to do, they find a way. This is a ration of MacGyvers! As GFW's tech dude, whose job it is to find the latest and coolest gadgets, I'm instantly humbled. Despite all the new products coming out every month, we should work more with what we have instead of looking to throw out what we just got. Before this starts sounding too preachy—and trust me, if there were more room, it would be—we can learn a thing or two from these guys. Even though I get racks of new computers all the time, I'm going to try to consume less and tinker more. If I figure out some cool system hacks, I'll let you know about em. You do the same. Don't be afraid of playing open the case. Learn to tweak some code on the side. Don't be afraid to get your hands a little dirty. And just because some shiny new tech bauble looks sweet, it doesn't mean you actually need it.

So much for not thinking about work while out of the country. Hey, left: Any chance I can write off my honeymoon? -Darren Gladstone

THINK GAMES COST TOO MUCH? A BRAND-NEW GAME IN NEW ZEALAND COSTS $100—THAT'S ABOUT $70 HERE.
Cudgel of Xanthor

World exclusive hands-on first look

Jeff Green

fantasy strategy games (Blade of Xanthor, Sword of Xanthor, Dagger of Xanthor), I had to take a break of all. As the first journalist to see their new game, Cudgel of Xanthor revealed here for the first time in this exclusive first look, I was literally shaking with excitement. And that was before I even saw the game. Afterward, when I was certain that what I had just seen was not only well on its way to being a certifiable masterpiece, but, more important, the likely recipient of our coveted "RPG of the Year" award, I was more than shaking: I was literally foaming at the mouth. It’s not often that a computer game makes you feel that way, but, then, not every game is as amazing as Cudgel of Xanthor.

"This is the best game I’ve ever seen," agreed Braak’s PR and marketing director Hans Schok. "It is simply astounding in terms of what it brings to the party for PC gamers. I look at this game and think, ‘World of What?’ High praise indeed.

While Braak Studios has cut its collective teeth on strategy games, Cudgel represents a giant leap forward into serious envelope-pushing, expanding the series into the fertile yet deep waters of RPGs. It’s not the first time the company has taken a risk, nor will it be the last. ‘Last night I ate an entire block of cheese,’ boasted creative director and team leader Vet ‘Slap’ Bilben, as if to illustrate the point.

With a staff of 50 full-time employees working hard on Cudgel, the effort is obviously paying off in copious spades, as the hands-on time I had with the game more than amply proved. You begin the game in standard RPG fashion by creating your character from a variety of interesting classes, such as rogue, and then customize your look with a robust set of sliders and buttons to put a unique spin on things for such details as eye color. Choosing a character class further adds to the customization by letting you play as, for example, a fighter, who would use melee weapons to "hit enemies," according to lead designer Helge Bendt. This is just one example of the many different ways you can play the game, all of which will affect how you interact with the game’s unique world.

And what a world it is! Though I don’t really want to spoil too much, I will say, as the first game journalist in North America to get to play the game, it is one of the most unique fantasy settings I’ve ever seen, bar none. The first time I gazed upon the gorgeous water effects on display in the waterfall outside the starting area, my eyes literally popped out of my head. And that was just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Around every corner in this stunning open-ended fantasy world is yet another jaw-dropping splendor to behold, be it a magical bean field or something similarly awe-inspiring of a magical bent. It’s the type of world you wish you could just jump straight into the monitor to be part of, rather than living in the mundane world of today the way we are now.

Sound is another of the game’s many strong points. At times when I was playing, some of the sounds in the game seemed so "real" to me that
Stop Poking Me!

Lazy Peons

Orc Hero Required
Lazy Peons enters play exhausted.

Exhaust Lazy Peons to complete this quest.

Reward: Draw a card.

"Stop poking me!"

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