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Games for Windows LIVE
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Extend
Casual-games columnist Robert Coffey examines a few casual-gaming websites, while MMO maven Miguel Lopez discusses World of Warcraft’s competitive side. Also, Tom and Brucle battle to the death in Peggle, Diner Dash, and Solitaire. Hey, you guys forgot: Minesweeper.

Tech
Don’t let your lame PC hardware keep you from enjoying the latest games. Our Poor Man’s Guide to Graphics tells you what high-tech features to turn on (or keep off) with minimal effect on performance.

Greenspeak
Get your water effects away from me! Graphics don’t mean diddly if you don’t have anything fun for Jeff to do in your fancy little game.
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A yay! A console port that’s not going to take five years to get here! While it was frustrating that Epic’s Gears of War was an Xbox 360-only game last year, the good news is that the PC port is already well on the way, as detailed in this month’s fine cover story by Staff editor Shawn Elliott. As he always does, Mr. Elliott asks real questions in this story, and not just the easy softballs and ass-kissy obsequiousness (“How awesome is your game?!?”) this industry of ours tends to revel in. It helps, for sure, that the guys at Epic are so forthright and honest. Folks like Mark Rein and Cliff Bleszinski are, in fact, quote machines: All you have to do is turn on the voice recorder and off they go, writing your story for you, with no nervous PR folks in the background flap-sweating as they try to “control the message.” Check it out even if shooters aren’t your thing—it’s a great road.

While we’re on the subject of upcoming games, let me also direct your attention to one more preview guaranteed to delight and amaze you, or at least make you forget for a few moments that you are a mortal being whose life will one day end. I refer to Fallout 3, the long-rumored, long-awaited reboot of the legendary RPG series that seemed—what with the original design team at Interplay/Black Isle Studios long gone—like it would remain on ice forever (Fallout 2 came out in 1998). When we learned a while back that the franchise was being picked up by Bethesda Softworks, makers of the sensational The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion—our 2006 Game of the Year—we were excited, but many questions remained. Would Bethesda be able to maintain the series’ distinct tone and humor? Would they be able to take the gameplay and graphics to a level that makes sense for today’s gamers? We sent freelance writer (and former OPM senior editor) Joe Rybicki out to Bethesda, Maryland, to look at the game—and his preview is in this issue. Decide for yourself whether to praise or bury the game.

Finally, while I am in sales mode, let me remind you once again to join us every Tuesday for GFW Radio, our weekly fantasy into the wacky world of sound. We hear it’s gonna be big someday! Jump on that bandwagon at podcasts.1UP.com, mmm mkay.

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine
Now Playing: Tomb Raider: Anniversary, World of Warcraft, Pinball Arcade, Overland 1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
MANAGING EDITOR
After a trip with some Vista shooters, will the relatable, calm world of World of Warcraft welcome me back? $1.99 says “yes.”
Now Playing: World of Warcraft, Shadowrun, Halo 2 1UP.com Blog: GFSian1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS/EXTEND)
After weathering what was possibly the biggest confrontation of editorial disasters in a single issue of GFW, Ryan’s settling down with The Lord of the Rings Online again.
Now Playing: The Lord of the Rings Online 1UP.com Blog: GFWryan1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR
A big thanks to the Epic team. Woo-rah!!
Now Playing: Gears of War (Xbox 360) 1UP.com Blog: GWMichael1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (START)
Shawn publicly posts on message boards arguing that Gears of War 2’s commentary is among the most awful social satires of our time.
Now Playing: Enemy Territory: Quake Wars, World of Warcraft 1UP.com Blog: GFSwan1UP.com

CARL HAYDEN
EDITOR (FEATURES/EDITORIAL)
Gears secretly plots on message boards arguing that Gears of War 2’s commentary is among the most awful social satires of our time.
Now Playing: Sam & Max: Season II, Overlord 1UP.com Blog: GFSCar1UP.com

JIM DUNLOP
EDITOR (DEVELOPERS)
It’s just a game. It’s just a game. It’s just a game.
Now Playing: Halo 3, Gears of War (Xbox 360) 1UP.com Blog: GFJim1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
ASSOCIATE EDITOR
War—is it good for you? Apparently it’s perfect for the titles of PC games.
Now Playing: Do I really need to say it? 1UP.com Blog: GFSPink1UP.com

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NICELY PLAYED. BUT WERE YOU EXPECTING CONTAGIOUS EXQUISITE DECODER RING OF THE NIHILISTIC CROCODILE? YOUR TURN, HOWIE.

THE WORLD HAS MOVED ON
It's nice that the people you interviewed in the World of Warcraft cover story (GFW #7, pg. 48) mentioned their favorite areas, bosses, and raids. It's too bad that most of these are no longer visited as the content in The Burning Crusade has rendered any and all loot out of these instances obsolete in less than three weeks of questing. Ragnaros was mentioned two times. As a denizen of Molten Core, he gets very few if any visitors these days. Ornyia? When was the last time her head (never mind Nefarian's head) was seen in Grimmrmar or Stormwind? Blackwing Lair? AQ40? NaXx? Pfft! Why bother?
And that is the biggest failing of TBC. In one expansion, Blizzard has removed any and all reasons to venture into pre-TBC end-game instances.

Rick Fortier

Are you seriously complaining that you never have to go back to Molten Core again? Really?

SPOILER ALERT
Sean Molloy is on my list, and not the good one. I've been a faithful subscriber for some time now, all the way back to the glory days when you were known simply as CGW. I finally have the motivation to write to you mostly harmless magazine. It was only a few paragraphs into the BioShock preview (GFW #8, pg. 22) when a nasty spoiler was burned into my brain. And while it wasn't as nearly as cruel as an idiot screaming [spoiler alert--Ed.] "Snape kills Dumbledore!" out the window of a passing car to fans outside a bookstore, your unforewarned spoiler has ruined at least a small part of the game for me. A bit of vagueness would have been in order, or at least some spoiler warning before you basically gave it play-by-play of the game's opening. I understand that this is a preview of game and at least some of the information will be revealed, but please, leave the details out. And just for a bit of payback: In Titanic the ship sinks, in Apollo 13 they make it back home safe, in 300 they all die, and Vader is Luke's father.

Jeff Jankosky

MAIL BYTES

WHY WOULD YOU TELL US ABOUT PEGGLE? WHY?! I HATE YOU.

Anonymous

I AM ESPECIALLY ENRAGED WITH [YOUR] FREE PLAY SECTION. WHILE BOTH MICROSOFT AND SONY HAVE TOUTED THEIR [CONSOLE] SERVICES AS A HAVEN FOR INDEPENDENT AND SMALL-TIME DEVELOPMENT HOUSES, THE PC CONTINUES TO SERVE AS THE HOME FOR A THRIVING WORLDWIDE INDIE GAME-DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY.

Charles Ellis

AS I SIT AND WATCH OTHER GAMERS PLAY, I NOTICE THEIR FINGERS CRANMED ONTO ARROW KEYS WHILE STILL USING THE MOUSE IN FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS. WHEN I INFORM THEM OF THE BOUNTIFUL FRUIT OF WASD, THEY GLEAM AND SAY THAT THEY CAN'T REMEMBER WHERE TO PUT THEIR FINGERS.

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“I wouldn’t say we were dying to do [Modern Warfare] off the bat—like, ‘oh my God, no more World War III’—but it was a natural move for us.”

—Vince Zampella, Chief Creative Officer, Infinity Ward
WORLD WAR NEW

Infinity Ward talks Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare multiplayer

PUBLISHER: Activision	DEVELOPER: Infinity Ward	GENRE: First-Person Shooter	RELEASE DATE: Fall 2007

INTerview

Vince Zampella
CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER, CO-STUDIO HEAD

Jason West
PROJECT LEAD, CO-STUDIO HEAD

Todd Alderman
MULTIPLAYER LEAD DESIGNER

GFW: How is the contemporary setting shaping your multiplayer content?
VZ: Well, we’re able to do a lot more with the weapons, for one thing. As I said, we’re introducing different attachments to customize your weapons with. You can camouflagage guns, tweak the way they look. And we have high-tech perks, like radar jamming and eavesdropping, which lets you hear the enemy team’s voice chat.

GFW: Are you creating new modes to capitalize on these changes?
VZ: We’re not ready to divulge all of the multiplayer modes right now, since some of them are still in testing. We’re bringing back some stuff from Call 2, though: Team Deathmatch, Free-for-All, Search and Destroy, Capture the Flag. In addition, we’re adding different rules over these, so while you’ve got CTF, you can also play Hardcore CTF, which is our realism mode.

GFW: This makes sense on PC, since realism mods are so prolific, right?
TODD ALDERMAN: Really, that’s where it comes from. The community always adds that to the game, so we’re giving it to them straight out of the box.

GFW: Let’s talk about unlockable perks. What’s the plan?
VZ: Well, we’re doing good balancing the game…you start with your base classes—all of which begin with perks—and, as you level up, you get new perks. These change the game, but not to the point that a high-level player is clearly more powerful than you. So you look at the list of possible perks, decide to take this or that, and the downside is that you only get one. When you pick that perk, you’re eliminating the other 10 that you could’ve taken, so it balances itself out that way. Same thing with weapons—all the guns and attachments have strengths and weaknesses. If you equip a silenced weapon you’re not dealing as much damage, but then you’re not showing up on the radar either.

TA: Yeah, perks are divided into three different categories. So, say, the radar jammer is in the same category...
VZ: …as Stopping Power, which doubles bullet damage, or Juggernaut, which boosts health. But you can only take one for each build, and that’s where the balance is.

GFW: Are we swapping these in and out every time we spawn, or only once when we join the server?
VZ: When you join, you’re allotted slots with the class you create, and you can change what goes in from outside the game. Once you join a server, though, you’re committed to that class. You can create five different classes and can change whatever you want while in the menus or lobby.

TA: Make an offensive guy, a flag runner, ...

VZ: Absolutely. It all depends on the modes you prefer playing.

GFW: Any medic-like loadouts?
VZ: Not healing or reviving. We do have the Last Stand perk, though—instead of dying instantly, you drop down and pull out your pistol before you bleed out. There’s Martyrdom, where you drop a grenade as you die.

GFW: You want to reward people who play over and over again. How confident are you in your ability to avoid scenarios where first-time players are facing pros who have the added advantage of perks?
VZ: Juggernaut and Stopping Power are some of the starting perks. You get the ones that offer an advantage right at the beginning. We’ve been balancing this thing for over a year now.

GFW: Can you choose to play on “pure” servers with no perks whatsoever?

VZ: Yeah. We’ll have ranked and unranked servers. Unranked games are completely customizable.

GFW: Are you paying much attention to other multiplayer shooters with similar systems? Specifically, Battlefield 2142.

TA: Yeah, I’ve played pretty much every multiplayer game. You see what works and what doesn’t work. Diehards who play all day and all night get rewards, just not ones that unbalance the game. It’s like you can pimp yourself out with a gold AK-47...

VZ: ...scopes for your assault rifle, sights, silencers, foregrips to stabilize your weapon.

GFW: You can carry only two weapons at once?

VZ: Yeah, you get one primary weapon—an assault rifle, submachine gun, sniper rifle, whatever—and a sidearm. Attachments work with pistols, too. Then there’s the Dual Wield perk, which lets you swap out the pistol for a second primary weapon. You sacrifice Stopping Power or Juggernaut, but you’re packing two weapons.

GFW: What about lifting weapons off of dead opponents?

VZ: Yes, so if someone has a supercool customized weapon you can use it until you die and kind of preview potential unlocks.


TA: Maps with vehicles tend to be larger, where the fighting is less centralized and... it’s just not as intense, not the experience we’re going for.

VZ: What we’re doing with air support, the air strikes and helicopters, gives us the same feeling that something big is going on but without the problems that vehicles introduce: too much traveling, too many guys fighting to fly the helicopters...

GFW: Can you shoot down the helos that opponents call in?

VZ: Yeah, but rocket launchers aren’t perfectly accurate. The longer the shot, the more your rocket wavers on the way in, so it’s not exactly easy. You’ll see lots of cool scenes where a chopper’s coming in and everyone’s shooting rockets, with smoke trails everywhere.

GFW: And those smoke trails tell the enemy where you’re firing from. What other cool moments are emerging?

VZ: OK, we’re fighting in this hallway, and one of my buddies drops down, pistols firing, in Last Stand. He hits one guy and knocks him into Last Stand, and they’re fighting from the floor.

TA: A three-kill streak gives you radar, and if you’re fast enough, a five-kill streak gets you an airstrike.
So you use the radar information to designate the airstrike, jets fly in, drop their cluster bombs—and with that, a seven-kill streak gets you the helicopter.

**GFW:** Are your multiplayer maps largely reworked from existing campaign assets and locations?

**VZ:** We’ve made original maps just for multiplayer, and we’ve pulled some stuff from single-player. This time around, we’ve even had times where we’ve taken single-player stuff from the multiplayer.

**GFW:** Were destructible environments and/or a cover system ever in the design document?

**TA:** Can blow up, and the wreckage serves as cover...

**VZ:** Cover is important. We don’t want to leave a bare landscape for firefighting. But we also have bullet-penetration properties—you can shoot through walls and wood fences.

**GFW:** Are all interior props still glued into position the way they were in *Call of Duty*, or will grenades blow them around?

**VZ:** Yeah, you throw a grenade into a room, and lamps and whatnot go flying.

**JASON WEST:** During prototyping, we tried a destructible system. Walls broke away from buildings, everything blew up, top to bottom, and it was fun for like the first minute of a firefight. But after shredding these buildings, you’d just walk through two-by-fours and the gameplay just broke down. We wound up throwing that out.

**GFW:** No man’s land: That might work with few players and a no-respawn rule. Hacking was pervasive in the PC version of *Call of Duty 2*. Eventually you added PunkBuster cheat prevention, and players circumvented that almost immediately.

**VZ:** We will have anticheat out of the box. I can’t say what right now, but we’re committed. We also support ranked servers, which track things...

**GFW:** And the Killcam almost always gives cheaters away. Maybe it’s not so much that *Call of Duty 2* attracted more cheaters than most games, but that we could confirm our suspicions.

**TA:** You just made Jason’s day today. [laughs]

**JW:** You get the prize for appreciating that.

**TA:** And Killcam shows you perks. So say you’re shooting someone and it’s like, damn it, this guy just won’t go down. Then in the Killcam you see that he’s using Juggernaut and Iron Lung perks.

**JW:** Iron Lung lets him hold his breath longer while sniping, so he’s a sort of supercamper. I’m a sucker for asymmetric balance, so I love the create-a-class stuff.

**GFW:** Back to the single-player: You’ve said that everything, including exposition, works from first-person perspective. How thoroughly are you integrating narrative with rat-a-tat gameplay?

**VZ:** For example, you’re in a Blackhawk helicopter, belted in—that’s how we impose some control on the situation. You’re free to look around, only you’re in a fixed place.

**JW:** Or in the coup sequence...guys have got your arms and are dragging you out of the palace. This isn’t a cut-scene. They throw you in the back of a car and train a gun on you. You’re trapped there, looking around as they drive you off to assassinate you. You’re helpless, but you’re playing.

**GFW:** Are you designing with downloadable content or expansion packs in mind?

**VZ:** We will support this game. We don’t have any plans in place, though, not like “three downloadable maps in February” or something.
Your brain’s a curious thing. Somehow that squishy, unremarkable blob manages to keep your heart pumping and your pancreas doing whatever it does while also overseeing the virtual framework of the mind. How exactly the brain does all this has puzzled researchers for centuries, and scientists have relied on everything from drills to electroshock therapy to unlock its secrets.

Now the brainiacs have brought in the big guns—videogames.

In recent years, scientists have turned to games as a tool in neurological research. Some psychologists use games to explore and decode the mind-body connection, deciphering the roots of depression or how the visual system works. Others use games to diagnose and treat emotional disorders like anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder.

So what is it about videogames that makes them so appealing to researchers? “There’s just so much creativity in the game industry,” says Skip Rizzo, a clinical psychologist at the University of California, and director of the school’s Virtual Environments Lab. “If we can just funnel a fraction of that into things that have some social relevance beyond entertainment, we can really take [computer games] to great heights. We could revolutionize psychology.” We talk to three researchers trying to do just that.

TRENDS

TREATING POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

If a videogame looks like Iraq, sounds like Iraq, and even smells like Iraq, does it still count as a game? Maybe not, thinks Rizzo. Maybe it could be more.

Rizzo and his colleagues have spent years developing a virtual reality therapy called Virtual Iraq, designed to rehabilitate returning veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

According to current estimates, PTSD, an anxiety disorder that results from exposure to life-threatening events, affects as many as 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. But treating the disorder is difficult due to the military stigma attached to touchy-feely “talk” therapy.

Virtual Iraq takes a different approach, instead allowing vets to literally step inside their traumatic memories via a virtual environment based off Pandemic Studios’ Full Spectrum Warrior. Patients view a 3D rendition of the Iraq landscape in a head-mounted display, while the therapist, sitting at a control panel, tailors the terrain down to the smallest detail, from the time of day to the number of pedestrians, in order to better mimic patients’ specific memories. The setup also includes vibration mechanisms and a smell box, which pumps eight distinct aromas into a subject’s nose, such as cooled lamb, burning rubber, body odor, and rotting garbage. The point is to make it real—scary real. “We take a lot of feedback from people who were in Iraq,” says Rizzo. “[As well as] the clinicians who listened to what those soldiers had to say.”

Usually, patients start off slowly. In his or her first session, a vet might just stand outside a Humvee, with no engine sounds, passengers, or even roads included. But that simple scenario is enough to make many PTSD sufferers anxious.

Gradually, however, the person acclimates to that scene, and when they become comfortable enough, the therapist introduces more stressful elements, like screaming insurgents, nearby explosions, and wounded bodies. Eventually, with practice, patients are able to confront their worst memories without anxiety. “It’s because you introduce stimuli that’s more provocative—that raises anxiety levels, but at a manageable pace,” explains Rizzo.

Recently, Virtual Iraq entered clinical testing at 10 research facilities. “We’re just now starting to get the results,” says Rizzo. Four people have completed the full course of treatment, he says, and in three of those studies, patients completely overcame their PTSD.

Rizzo wants to improve the simulation enough so it could be used as an assessment tool to determine which returning vets might develop PTSD. “Instead of just throwing questions at them when they get off the plane, we can have soldiers try out this scenario,” he says. “We want to evolve it into a comprehensive research program.”
VIDEOSAMES

IMPROVING VISION

Forget carrots: now videogames can improve your vision, too. According to a new study from the University of Rochester, playing action-based videogames, particularly first-person shooters, can beef up your feeble eyes by strengthening your ability to resolve visual clutter.

How well we can pick out one object from many is a crucial component in our visual systems. “If you have a better ability to resolve clutter, you’ll be able to read smaller text,” explains Daphne Bavelier, associate director of the Rochester Center for Brain Imaging and lead researcher on the project. It’s also the same skill that helps a gamer distinguish enemies from allies or heartbeats from scientists. “We think action videogames actually force the visual system to extract information from the visual scene more efficiently.”

Bavelier and Shawn Green, her PhD candidate, gave 32 gamers a visual acuity test in which subjects pick out the orientation of one T surrounded by other Ts. The subjects were then randomly divided into two groups: one that played Unreal Tournament 2004 for 30 hours, and another that played Tetris for the same amount of time. Afterward, the subjects were given the eye test again. The Unreal players showed a 20 percent improvement on their scores.

Bavelier believes that Unreal “improved subjects’ vision because the game requires constant focus and attention.” You’re on the edge all the time,” she says. “You never know when or where things are going to happen.” That visual uncertainty, she says, drives the brain to improve its neural pathways so it can keep pace with the action.

Tetris, on the other hand, doesn’t feature the same kind of visual uncertainty in its gameplay, even though it too requires fast reflexes and good hand-eye coordination. “It’s not particularly demanding for the visual system,” says Bavelier. “You have one object to interact with.”

But the changes experienced by the Unreal players were in their minds, says Bavelier, not their eyes. “We’re not going to put LensCrafters out of business here,” she says. Eyes with physical defects will remain bad eyes, no matter how many videogames you might play.

Instead, she hopes to one day apply this research in a prototype for visual rehabilitation software. Patients with reduced or low-level vision problems like amblyopia (lazy eye) could use programs that mimic FPSes to teach their brains how to recognize objects more efficiently.

Bavelier is expanding her research into other genres. “It’s not that we’re invested in action videogames. We’re invested in changing vision.”

UNDERSTANDING DEPRESSION

Beware, depression: Neda Gould is here to kick ass and chew bubble gum, and she’s all out of gum.

She and her colleagues at the National Institute of Mental Health’s Mood and Anxiety Disorders Program used a modified version of Duke Nukem 3D to explore the underlying factors behind clinical depression (as if waiting for Duke Nukem Forever weren’t depressingly enough).

Clinical depression, a debilitating cocktail of lethargy, anxiety, and overwhelming sadness, strikes about 21 million adults in America each year. The exact causes are still unclear, but recent research suggests that there’s a link between depression and the size of the hippocampus, a seahorse-shaped squiggle in the brain that regulates mood, memory, and spatial navigation. Depressed patients have considerably smaller hippocampi than healthy people, but “we don’t know if that’s a cause of the depression, or something that happens after an individual becomes depressed,” says Gould.

To better understand that chicken/egg relationship, Gould’s team tested 30 people who suffered from depression and bipolar disorder—plus 19 people who didn’t—to see how well they could remember their way around a 3D virtual town. The researchers used a bare-bones version of Duke Nukem 3D stripped of its characters, enemies, and missions, with only the map itself left intact. As users navigated the simplified environment, screenshots of specific locations—such as a bar or a cathedral—would pop up. When players went to that spot in the game, they’d receive a new destination to find, like a visual scavenger hunt.

After a short training session to familiarize themselves with the map, test subjects had to find as many destinations as they could within two three-minute trial runs. Three days later, they returned to the lab and performed the same task again, but this time with different destinations.

*Clinically depressed subjects performed poorly when asked to remember their way around a rudimentary Duke Nukem 3D map.

The healthy group had no trouble recalling the layout of the town; on average, they found 3.8 locations within the allotted time period. But the depressed patients scored far worse, finding an average of only 2.4 locations. In addition, the more severely depressed the subject, the worse he or she performed on the test. That suggests the game, or at least the idea of navigating a 3D environment, could be used to identify the exact degree of depression in affected patients.

But Gould says Duke Nukem has a long way to go before it could be used as a diagnostic tool. In its current form, the simulation doesn’t provide enough information for any in-depth analysis. “Depression varies from individual to individual,” she says. “There’s a lot of heterogeneity within the disorder and we wouldn’t want to miss that by simplifying things down too much.”

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Fallout 3’s “action point” system allows twitchophobic players to queue up attacks as in a turn-based RPG.
"War. War never changes." These words are a trademark of the Fallout series, from its spectacular beginning to its embarrassingly opportunistic spin-offs. Gravel-voiced Ron Perlman delivers the lines with a world-weary gravity formed fit to the bleak setting of this retro-futuristic, postapocalyptic future, while mellow oldies noodle in the background, exemplifying the series' black humor.

The funny thing is, war does change. It changed when Fallout 2 introduced bizarrely out-of-place pop-culture references. It changed when Fallout Tactics streamlined the game to nothing but war. It changed when Brotherhood of Steel (Xbox and PS2) foisted its hack-n-slash atrocities upon an unsuspecting public.

And it's changing again with Fallout 3. With new developer Bethesda applying its Elder Scrolls experience to the now-classic series, the game can't help but be a departure from what we've seen before. But here's the thing: In many ways, it's changing back—back to the original vision of a serious role-playing game set in the grim remains of an ironically optimistic world. Back to the complex story and characterization Tactics and Brotherhood of Steel forsook. And back to the dark humor and legitimately adult themes the series slowly edged away from.

SETTING THE TONE

Executive producer Todd Howard cites character and story development, '50s-influenced, world-of-tomorrow style, and "funny violence" as key features the new team is attempting to evoke with Fallout 3. "Fallout 3, in particular, is our model," or our "tone setting," for this game," he says. "Tactics and Brotherhood of Steel—we pretty much ignore their existence, much in the same way I ignore Aliens 3 and 4."

Howard further explains the tone: "Picture the [future] as they saw it in the 1950s, but that world has been nuked, and it's a hundred years after that". Imagine the unlikely mix of optimism and paranoia that characterized the '50s, frozen in time by a civilization-crippling nuclear war. Bulbous-headed robots and nuclear-powered cars exist alongside vacuum-tube radios and war-bonds posters. Now imagine groups of survivors living in town-sized fallout shelters called vaults, with little or no contact with the outside world. It's a complex, fascinating premise, and unquestionably one of the primary reasons the series has drawn in so many fans, most especially thanks to the designers' commitment to this retro-futuristic theme in every aspect of the game's story, setting, and interface.

Aside from these fundamental ideas of setting and tone, plenty of specifics in Fallout 3 remain faithful to the original games. The game begins 30 years after the events of Fallout 2 in Vault 101, which sits amid the radioactive wasteland surrounding Washington, D.C. The important point here is that no one ever leaves Vault 101. Ever. You're born there and you die there. Except, once morning during your 19th year, you wake up to find that your father (voiced by Liam Neeson) has left the vault. Now you need to find out why—a quest that takes you out of the vault after him, and leads to the primary story of the game.

Other familiar elements include creatures (such as deathclaws, radscorpions, and two-headed cows), perks (unique bonus abilities earned as you level up), the SPECIAL stat system (strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, and luck), and the Pip-Boy (model 3000) personal management system, which tracks stats, inventory, weaponry, and so on.

THE OBLIVION FACTOR

But of course, this is no simple retread of the earlier games. For example, the DC setting allows for a striking variety of new locations and characters. From wasteland shantytowns to the bombarded-out monuments of the capital, linked together by one vast subway system that presents its own unique challenges. And gone is the venerable isometric viewpoint, replaced by a first-person view that permits meticulous exploration of the game's striking retro-futuristic technology. (In addition, a fully customizable third-person view can shift from a close-up, over-the-shoulder setting to a much more distant overhead perspective evoking the original games.)

Comparisons to Bethesda's blockbuster Oblivion are inevitable—and not entirely unfounded. Fallout 3 does use a modified version of the Oblivion engine; it does share the first-person perspective; it does feature a wide-open world that you're free to explore at your own pace. But don't make the mistake of thinking this is just Oblivion in the future, with guns and radiation and two-headed cows. Fallout 3 looks to be a dramatically more focused experience, turning Oblivion's staggering breadth on edge; in other words, expect this game to be deeper than it is wide, and, in its targeted 40 hours of play, far more focused than Bethesda's previous efforts.
This is due in part to a much narrower cast of characters. "Oblivion has 1,500 NPCs," says Howard. "With Fallout we're dealing with a few hundred, which makes it much easier to construct those characters and how they're going to behave. It's not just people walking around, eating or sleeping, or things that you don't see anymore; we found lots of good ways to get unique behaviors onscreen. Plus, the conversation system -what they do and what they say—is very unique, for almost every character. So, focusing on characters is a very big priority for us. This means that you won't run into anything like those awkward moments in Oblivion, where you overhear a husband and wife discussing the burgeoning population of mudcrabs with bizarre formality. Character models vastly improved from those of Oblivion complement the conversation system. Gone are the blotchy, vaguely reptilian features; characters in Fallout 3 are dramatically more lifelike in appearance and animation.

LIVE FREE OR DIE

Bethesda's dedication to a greater degree of moral freedom for the player complements the complexity of its NPCs. "We're supporting choices for good and evil," says lead designer Emil Pagliarulo (the man responsible for Oblivion's Dark Brotherhood quest line), "but we're also taking pains to support choices for the neutral, making sure those are valid character choices and that you can play in that gray area, where you're not the knight in shining armor or the really evil bastard-you're somewhere in between, with all the moral ambiguity that comes with that."

This concept of true moral choice permeates every aspect of the game, Howard contends. "With each character, I can be a dick, or I can be a good guy," he says. "We try to treat every character in the game that way. The whole game is: how do you want to role-play? What kind of character do you want to be?" While you won't break the game by pissing off the locals, you can mix out on certain storylines—and, presumably, your behavior toward NPCs will affect which of the game's multiple endings you'll achieve. (The designers hint at nine to 12 possible endings.)

The hard choices begin at the moment of birth. "We were very interested in this idea from the first game," Howard says, "where they say, 'You've lived your whole life in the vault,' and then they kick you out. Well, let's do that. Let's make the player feel like he's lived his whole life in the vault. So the game actually starts when you're a baby, and flashes through various periods of your life in the vault. You'll jump through the 19 years of your life in the vault, witnessing significant events like your 10th birthday (when you receive your own Pip-Boy), your 16th year (when you take the generalized occupational aptitude test, or GOAT, which helps determine your in-game skills), and of course the inexplicable departure of your father—whose physical appearance, incidentally, is dynamically generated based on the appearance of your own created character.

WAR CHANGES

This depth extends to the complex combat system, which riffs off that of the previous games by allowing you to target specific areas of your enemy's body in order to achieve specific goals: slowing your enemy by aiming for its legs, for example, or disarming it by aiming for its weapon. Tap a button and your viewpoint zooms in on the enemy, showing relative health of each segment as well as your chances of hitting it.

YOUR WEAPON IS ALMOST A SEPARATE CHARACTER, WITH ITS OWN HIT POINTS AND CUSTOMIZABLE OPTIONS.
with the amount of information governed by your perception statistic.

Your choice of weapon affects these stats. In fact, your weapon is almost a separate character with its own hit points and customizable options. A weapon in poor shape will fire less quickly, spray shots more widely, and jam more often—problems that you can counteract by scavenging parts from similar weapons. Going a step further, Bethesda also reveals that you’ll be able to build your own weapons, though the designers declined to go into detail at this stage.

But don’t make the mistake of thinking combat in Fallout 3 is a run-and-gun affair. By zooming in on target areas, you can queue up attacks like in a turn-based RPG, choosing between sensitive areas that are harder to hit or easy targets that might not incapacitate your enemy as quickly. You don’t have to use this “action point” system, but even if you’re fighting in real time, the system will select targets and hit percentages based on your character’s and weapon’s stats—not on the speed of your trigger finger. “We don’t necessarily want to reward twitch play,” explains Howard. “We want to reward roleplaying your character well.”

**BACK TO THE BEGINNING**

Fallout 3’s diverse moral choices and variety of possible endings should encourage multiple play-throughs. For example: In the demo we witnessed, Howard exited the vault and came upon a city built around an ostensibly inert nuclear bomb. He visited a saloon where a shady character hired him to detonate the bomb. Later, we watched the entire city vaporized—in real time—from a safe distance. But the player could just as easily have reported the shady character to the local sheriff, defused the bomb permanently, and become a hero to the townsfolk. You’ll also encounter a multitude of less earthshaking choices, including the option to hire mercenaries to back you up in your trips across the wasteland, a much-acclaimed feature of the first two games (though this time you can expect less control over your hired help’s behavior than Fallout 2 offered).

Taking on the stewardship of a classic franchise is a weighty task, made even more difficult by the poor reception of the two most recent titles in the series. Fallout fans have been hoping for a satisfying sequel for nearly a decade now and have found little but disappointment. “People really like [Fallout],” Howard says, “and they’ve had a lot of folks telling them, ‘Here’s the next game in the franchise, and you’re going to love it.’ And the last two [games] don’t have the heart of the series in mind. At the end of the day, I think they just want us to treat [the series] with respect, to take it seriously, because they take it seriously. And we do, too.” —Joe Rybicki
Support Your Local FMV Actor

Are 3D graphics putting bad actors out of work?

Interview

Roger Action is an actor who made a career out of starring in full-motion video (FMV) titles. These games were a combination of recorded movies and gemelike interaction that had limited success in the '90s not only on PCs but also on consoles and in arcades. Roger has made it his goal to keep this struggling genre alive, and he joined us for this rare interview.

GFW: Tell us about what you’re doing to help FMV games, Mr. Action.
RA: When I started the nonprofit organization to help support FMV actors, I called it K.A.B.L.A.A.M., which I plan on making into an acronym as soon as I can come up with cool words that start with those letters. Basically, what we do is encourage companies to hire and provide benefits for FMV actors and actresses in their games, as opposed to robots or graphics and whatnot. With your help, we can make sure the next Corpse Killer or the next Pit-Fighter comes to be.

GFW: Aren’t you worried that 3D modeling and rag-doll physics have made your industry obsolete?
RA: How can rag-doll physics appear, as if from nowhere, right in your face with a pipe wrench? Can rag-doll physics drive their kids to soccer practice and still make it to the photo studio in time to film themselves dying up to one dozen different ways? I tell you what—if a 3D model were here right now, we’d see how well polygons stand up against an orange belt in Shorin-ryu karate! Cho!

GFW: For readers unfamiliar with your work, what are some of the highlights of your FMV career?
RA: I got my start as the second assistant caterer in Sierra’s Phantasmagoria, and I played that into a role as a space pirate in Space Pirates. Later in my career, I won two Daytime FMV Awards for my work as a forklift driver in Crime Patrol and as Gallagher’s stunt double in Gallagher’s Gallery, both by American Laser Games. Did you hear that? American Laser Games!

GFW: Some say the FMV genre has been dead for over 10 years. Others say, “Three or six games count as a genre?” How do you respond to those critics?
RA: Maybe you’re not listening. It really said that on my paycheck. American Laser Games! Until Hulk Hogan starts a videogame studio called Me Riding a F***ing Bear, that will be the toughest name for a game company ever. Hold on...note to self: Start production on Rocky III hologram adventure game starring the film’s actors set in the time of Dracula. OK, where were we? Oh, yes, I was talking about how I went to somersault school with three of the stuntmen from The Beast Within: A Gabriel Knight Mystery.

GFW: Is it difficult work, acting for cutscenes and digitized action sequences?
RA: “Difficult?” Try “the most difficult!” For example, there was a light-gun shooter where I had the role of a man jumping in front of the camera screaming. “Don’t—ARRGHHHHH!” During production, I had to go back in and film a second take for when the player doesn’t actually shoot me. In this one, I had to read the line in full: “Don’t shoot! I’m just a guy leaping at you during a gunfight!” Do you think a rag-doll physics can convey the emotional depth of a line like that? No, because a rag-doll physics doesn’t know it’s going to die!

GFW: I’m glad you brought that particular role up. A lot of the characters you play are noncombatants leaping into a shooter’s line of fire. Are you worried about being typecast?
RA: When you’ve seen what I’ve seen, you only worry about one thing in lifes: men disguised as women. So the long answer is “no.” I think I bring something unique to each performance, even impossibly stupid target-recognition challenges. For example, when I’m portraying an innocent warehouse employee who jumps in front of the player’s gun, I try to die with regret in my eyes, yet with the essence of grim acceptance. As opposed to when I play the part of a masked robber, where I try to die to the left. My goal is to one day have a classical-theater background.

GFW: How can people at home get involved in your cause?
RA: Boycott any products that don’t feature digitized actors. This includes games, films, yogurts, and magazines. Send a message that videogames about the hit comedian Gallagher don’t have to be a thing of the past. Remember Sewer Shark? Don’t let our children grow up without a Sewer Shark of their own. #Saannbaby
The Age of Empires III Heads East

Brian Reynolds and Big Huge Games take on a big, huge franchise

While it's no big surprise that another Age of Empires III expansion is on the way—2 million copies sold guarantees franchise longevity—the recently announced Asian Dynasties expansion did throw us for a couple of loops. The first is that, for the first time in the franchise's history, Ensemble Studios isn't developing the game (they're too busy betraying us with Halo Wars for the Xbox 360). Instead, they've turned over the reins to Big Huge Games, makers of Rise of Nations and Catan for Xbox Live Arcade. The second surprise is that both the original Age of Empires III and the first expansion were set in the New World, the new game as the title makes clear. Shifts the action away to Asia, trading the Native American civs for three new ones: Japan, China, and India.

We caught up with Big Huge Games' head honcho Brian Reynolds to pick his brain.

**GFW:** How much of the design in Asian Dynasties is yours, and how much—if anything—is being supplied by Ensemble? Do you have freedom to do what you want and veer away from core gameplay?

**BR:** For us, it's kind of like getting to be the "special guest director" on an episode of our favorite TV show. We've tried to give the game our own unique "Big Huge Games" spin while at the same time staying true to the spirit of the original game and the Age of Empires franchise. Obviously, Ensemble has been very kind to let us play in their sandbox, so we don't want to let them down. Occasionally, something comes up where there's a question, like "does this fit with the Age universe?" and we all discuss it together. Really, though, both sides have pretty much been in agreement about where we want this expansion to go all along.

**GFW:** How satisfying is it, though, really, to work on a game that is based on someone else's rules and gameplay? As opposed to developing your own game from scratch?

**BR:** It's actually fun and refreshing and educational. When you use someone else's tools, you get a perspective on the way they chose to solve particular problems, and sometimes that's completely different from the way you're used to solving it.

**GFW:** OK, well, Chinese Dynasties! WTF? Age of Empires III has been set in the New World—how is the campaign going to present the move East? And what happens to all the Native American units?

**BR:** Age of Discovery, baby! Where were the Europeans sailing to when they weren't headed to the New World?

**GFW:** We flunked history.

**BR:** The Far East! Where did Columbus want to go when he accidentally found the New World?

**GFW:** Disneyland?

**BR:** China! So all of our new maps represent parts of eastern and southern Asia—Honsiu, the Silk Road, Indochina. You've got the Europeans arriving in Asia, bringing both opportunity and conflict, and you've got rivalry between the Asian powers themselves. Most of the single-player campaign takes place in Asia as well, though Gavin Menzies [author of 1421: The Year China Discovered the World] fans will be happy to know we have a brief nod to the idea of a Ming treasure ship finding the New World.

**GFW:** What is Big Huge Games bringing to the series as far as gameplay innovation goes?

**BR:** Well, first of all, the classic Age of Empires II features are "returning in style," including Wonders. All three Asian civilizations build unique Wonders whenever they want to "age up." Each Wonder provides a lasting benefit or ability in addition to a one-time bonus. We've also introduced a new Asian building called the Consulate, which represents the opportunity to ally with one of the European powers. The Asian nations had silk, spice, and tea that the Europeans desperately wanted, so we allow Asian civilizations to exchange these exports for European units and technologies. Each Asian civilization can ally with certain European nations, and Japan has a unique "isolation" option. Finally, there are lots of little features such as [the] Daimyo, which is perhaps the most strategically powerful unit ever introduced into the game system, the Chinese Banner Armies, and some very cool new map mechanics, which we can't spill yet.

**GFW:** One cynical Internet whiner recently said something like this: "Wow, how did Big Huge Games go from being the maker of awesome original PC games to making console ports and expansions for other people's games?"

**BR:** Ah, the good old Internet. Actually, as most of our fans are probably aware, we are developing a major new PC game of our own, the RPG that we've recently announced with THQ. Doing the Age expansion made a lot of sense for us as a shorter project our RTS team could work on while we got the big RPG project underway. Similarly, I thought of Catan as a great chance to get our engine ported to consoles, not to mention the fact that Settlers of Catan is the best-selling European of all time and we felt like we had a chance to create the best board-game port "EVAR"—as they say on the Internet. Jeff Green
**Start** / Universe at War

- Humans: "WTF?"
  Hierarchy: "FWNED!"

- The Novus essentially ride speedy fiber optic lines across the map.

- The Hierarchy is a fully mobile faction, which means you'll get to tell your friends "my base totally kicked your ass" after your base totally kicks their ass.
UNIVERSE AT WAR: EARTH ASSAULT

Hands-on with all three factions in Petroglyph's next RTS

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

With StarCraft II fever sweeping the PC gaming world, it’s easy to forget some of the other big real-time strategy titles on the horizon. And while Blizzard’s seemingly adopting a “don’t break what already works” mentality with itsreed-pound RTS gorilla, development Petroglyph Games (the team of Westwood Studios castoffs that brought us last year’s Star Wars: Empire at War) is taking some liberties with sophomore strategy effort Universe at War: Earth Assault that make even Blizzard’s new toy look a bit tame by comparison.

As we discussed in our last preview of UAW (GW #5, pg. 18), the game’s “Conquer the World” multiplayer mode consists of more than just picking a map and hitting “start”; it records your progress as you occupy territories that surround the globe, while a matchmaking service pits you against other players in control of areas that coincide with your own world-domination agenda. Leaderboards track individual players’ victories and defeats, and skillful play awards bonuses that are used to bolster your online army.

UAW will also be one of the first—if not the first—third-party games to support Microsoft’s Games for Windows Live. This, of course, means the standard Achievements and voice chat, in addition to cross-platform play between PC and Xbox 360 users (once the console version’s done, in any case—Petroglyph asserts that the PC version’s the top priority). It’s unclear what sorts of advantages and disadvantages either platform might have over the other; we’re speculating that PC hotkey masters will wind up with the upper hand online.

It is clear, however, that the PC version plays quite differently than a conventional RTS. We recently took UAW for a spin (in both single-player and multiplayer modes), and the game’s three factions—the Masori (revealed for the first time here), the Hierarchy, and the Novus—exhibit profound levels of diversity that rival those of StarCraft and Rise of Legends. Here’s a peek at each side’s history, tech trees, and modus operandi.

THE FACTIONS

THE HIERARCHY

BACKGROUND
Malevolent and conquest-hungry, the Hierarchy personifies every alien-invasion fear you’ve ever had. Cruising from world to world, these extraterrestrial conquerors steamroll over everything in their path and enslave whatever survives. The Hierarchy arrives on Earth in the year 2012 (not-so-coincidentally the same year that the Mayan calendar predicts the end of civilization as we know it), and the single-player campaign begins just three days into the incursion.

PLAY STYLE
The Hierarchy’s an entirely mobile faction. Production facilities take the form of giant, lumbering walkers that clamp across the battlefield (and double as massive combat units), and the faction’s resource-gathering model consists of sucking up every object in sight—living or otherwise. In practice, the Hierarchy’s probably one of the most unconventional armies we’ve seen in an RTS; the plodding pace makes for a slow start, but once your army’s up and running with a couple of walkers spitting out infantry units, it’s a clear case of raw power over speed. Each walker features a number of armor hard points that you can fortify with offensive and defensive upgrades on the fly—and later reconfigure once you figure out your opponent’s plan (it’s a different kind of micromanagement that you’ll have to wrap your head around). This sort of adaptive strategy is core to UAW’s design and is an effort to curb the “build order syndrome” that typifies most online RTSes.

TECH TREES
Each faction enjoys access to three tech trees apiece—think of them like World of Warcraft talent trees in that you may spend points to climb any combination of the three trees and change your allocations later as the situation demands. The Hierarchy’s Mutagen tree augments radioactive attacks, which infect the Earth’s population (and enemy units), allowing the Hierarchy the possibility of controlling them; the Quantum tree gives access to fancy future tech like phased and armor upgrades; and the Assault tree makes your weapons of mass destruction even more massively destructive.

THE NOVUS

BACKGROUND
Victimized by the Hierarchy’s oppression, this faction once saw humanoids and A.I. living together in harmony in a sort of bizarre Matrix. Once the Hierarchy put an end to that, the species’ scarce remnants—all machines, save for a single humanoid survivor—rebuilt themselves, taking the name “Novus” (roughly translated as “the children of” in the faction’s own language) and pursuing their assailants across the galaxy using wormhole technology in an effort to sabotage subsequent war efforts. Now the Hierarchy’s landed on Earth—and it’s time to rumble.

PLAY STYLE
These space-age Internauls maintain a more traditional base infrastructure than the Hierarchy, with central energy generators and “power tower” extensions fueling their production facilities (for resources, the Novus harvest scrap metal from surrounding environments and fallen enemy units). In a sort of mirror image of the Hierarchy, the Novus trade durability for speed, as their energy grid forms a connected network that they can use to “flow” seamlessly across the map, to and from any location anywhere.
TECH TREES
The Novus' Computing tech tree magnifies the power of their viruses, allowing them to spread their virtual illnesses more quickly and completely shut down infected enemy units. Nanotech's a defensive tree, imparting structural reinforcements and other powers like stealth camouflage, and the Signal tree basically increases the Novus' network bandwidth, allowing units to flow faster and farther across the map.

THE MASARI
BACKGROUND
This highly advanced spacefaring species once sought to help a dying race that possessed (in the Masari's eyes) great potential. Unfortunately, after rescuing these would-be victims from their decaying world and teaching them just a little too much, the Masari found themselves on the losing side of a brutal war against their one-time wards. Left for dead, the crew of the Masari's single surviving ship made their way to the primitive planet Earth (thanks to a bit of experimental tech), where they submerged beneath the ocean, slowly working to restore their race while subtly shaping the course of Earth's history. (Appearances suggest that the Masari had a hand in everything from the pyramids to the fabled Atlantis.) Now, centuries later, the reinforced Masari awakened to find their genocidal nemesis—now known as the Hierarchy—at the proverbial doors of their adopted home.

PLAY STYLE
The Masari are aces at manipulating matter, and the Masari architect units—central to the faction's entire strategy—essentially spawn new buildings into existence through sheer will and act as permanent power/efficiency amplifiers for specific buildings if you order them to do so. Reactor structures convert atmospheric energy into consumable resources (meaning no dirt farming of any kind for the Masari), and as an added bonus, these reactors are extremely volatile—build 'em near an enemy base and, if the other guy's dumb enough to tear one down, the whole area goes boom.

The central tenet behind the Masari's warfare efforts is a pair of stances that amount to two very different play styles. In the default Light mode, the Masari maintain air superiority (downed aerial units can rebuild for free, provided your pilots survive the attack) and excel at ranged combat, with high-damage units and weak buildings. Click the Dark button, though, and all of your structures are slowly reinforced by "dark armor," your aerial units transform into ground units, and your army trades ranged superiority for hand-to-hand dominance. Stance changes come with both warm-up and cooldown phases, but the turnover happens quickly enough to encourage adaptive use. Overall, the stance mechanic makes the Masari feel like the easiest faction for the average RTS player to understand and use effectively right from the get-go. Oh, and avoid midrange battles—they're the Masari's Achilles' heel.

TECH TREES
The Light and Dark tech trees boost their associated combat stances. Light focuses heavily on long-range firepower and gives doomed aerial units the resurrection powers of the legendary phoenix, while Dark adds extra defense, healing abilities, and the power to cleanse negative effects (like the Hierarchy's radiation poisoning and the Novus' pesky viral attacks). The Masari's third tech tree, Balance, blends facets of the Light and Dark stances, offering cloaking, stealth detection, unit regeneration, and resource-accumulation bonuses. Like the Mayan doomsday tie-in, that yin-yang symbolism's no happenstance, either. These otherworldly armies are gearing up for a war of mythical—even apocalyptic—proportions. —Ryan Scott
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Squint hard and see the sledding “Dude” start his speedy descent here.

LINE
How Eastern Europe,

PROFILE
Boštjan Čadež, a Slovenian industrial design student, wrote Line Rider on a whim. “It was more an accident [than] anything else,” says “Bosh” as he prefers to be called. “I just like programming, and it seemed a nice idea.” Like most kids, Čadež was a doodler growing up. He’d sit in class, bored—“I’m not a very good student,” he admits—and construct elaborate hills and jumps on his sketchpad, then trace the path of an imaginary rider (the “Dude” in Line Rider—speak) sliding and flipping down the page. “Then it hit me. If it was fun to just imagine, how fun would it be to watch it live?” So he started coding up a virtual sketchpad in Flash—little more than a pencil, a line tool, and a “play” button. At first, it was an exercise in frustration. “I knew it needed physics to be interesting,” recalls Čadež. But he was an art student, not a physics major. So in the time-honored tradition of artists throughout history, he looked for something to copy. He found it in an article on simplified physics at Gamesutra.com, a website that focuses on the developer side of the industry. “The person who wrote the article explained everything with pseudo-code—really simple code,” he explains. “When I found it, I was thrilled!”

Armed with physics code, he added the skel-let to the drawing tools, and Line Rider was born. In September 2006, thinking nothing much of it, he posted the program to deviantART.com, a virtual museum for budding artists. Čadež didn’t even think of it as a game. “I think the way I [saw] it, it was a kind of new medium,” says Čadež. “Something between a comic, a cartoon, and a game.” In the end, he just called it a toy.

By October 2006, Line Rider had become an Internet phenomenon, hopping from blog post to e-mail to IM, as all Flash-based time-wasters seem to do. Suddenly, 10,000 people were pulling down the game on any given day. And people started posting their best tracks as videos on YouTube—the nerd equivalent of skateboard footage.

THE EVANGELIST
Five thousand miles away, Matthew Nelson discovered Line Rider in his Minnesota home when his 9-year-old son said, “Hey, Dad—check this out!” Eager for anything to connect him and his children, he started dabbling, sharing tracks and ideas with his son. “I crashed the little Dude over and over again,” Nelson says. So he started

LINE RIDER’S GREATEST HITS

“DISCARDED” by TechDawg
A poignant tale of the Dude having a bad day.

“CRAZY CASTLE RUN” by bananafc
A guided tour of the Dude’s house.

“SUPER MARIO” by shadow9inja
the Midwest, and Orange County came together over a little dude on a sled

poking around the Internet for advice and tips. “I found all the videos others had done,” he says. By winter 2006, those videos already numbered in the thousands. “I felt challenged,” he recalls. For Nelson, soon to be “TechDawg” to the Line Rider faithful, a gauntlet had been thrown down.

Nelson, a frustrated artist, decided to take this simple little toy and see how far he could push it. He started constructing incredibly elaborate tracks for the sledders, courses that were themselves works of virtual pen-and-ink art. “When combined with the right music and presented in the right way, a Line Rider track becomes more than just a set of lines and a little sled,” Nelson says. “It becomes a story, a world that you can enter, suspend your disbelief for a few moments.” The results of Nelson’s efforts are stunning, leaving the uninitiated slack-jawed at the complexity and timing of his creations.

“TechDawg” became the de facto leader of the Line Rider community, hosting forums, tutorials, and movies at iRideTheLines.com. Along the way, he and Cadez got to know each other, with Nelson serving as Cadez’s unofficial one-man beta-test team and chief evangelist.

In December 2006, Brian Fargo, CEO of Newport Beach, CA-based inkle entertainment, discovered Line Rider and immediately saw the potential in Cadez’s baby. “I contacted him right away and requested his phone number,” recalls Fargo. “He finally e-mailed me back and told me he doesn’t have a phone where he is in Slovenia.” This was not the interaction Fargo expected. “So first, I looked up on the Internet where Slovenia is....” Eventually, entirely by instant message and e-mail, Fargo and Cadez negotiated a deal. Fargo (no stranger to making deals—he started publisher/developer Interplay back in 1983) wasn’t looking to get into the “small game” or “casual” part of the gaming market, but he admits that “smaller games do allow for more creative risk, which reminds me of the good ol’ days.” Deal done, inkle immediately started developing an expanded version of Line Rider for Nintendo’s Wii and DS consoles. inkle immediately realized the value in Nelson’s contributions. Both Cadez and Nelson are now working on the new games, which will take the simple idea far beyond the Flash toy you can play on the Web, adding levels, puzzles, challenges, and a storyline that reveals why the little Dude is on the sled in the first place.

Cadez has gone from doodling in class to designing console videogames in six months. He still doesn’t own a phone, and he lives with his mom.

Nelson, a father of four from Minnesota, has gone from designing photo IDs for beauty schools to having his name on a game his kids will want to play with their friends.

And Fargo? Fargo’s going to take them both down the slippery, twisting path of commercial game development. All three of them have stepped out of their element. Three “dudes,” separated by thousands of miles, all heading down the same track.

It’s sure to be a wild ride.

Julian Murdoch

Watch these videos at GFW09.1UP.com.

"JAGGED PEAK ADVENTURE" by un conex
An early and influential tour of Dudeland.

"ONE EYED GIANT" by skate2skamusic
The Dude zips across a giant’s banquet table.
Co-op, yes. Competitive multiplayer, no. “We had to pick our battles,” says lead designer Scott Warner.

RECRUIT NPCs INTO YOUR OWN PRIVATE BLACKWATER TO RUN THE OPERATION AND DELIVER GEAR FROM YOUR STASH TO THE FIELD.

Commandeering vehicles starts a minigame. Succeed, and the vehicle’s yours. Fail, and fall down to the ground.
Mercenaries 2: World in Flames

Two for the price of one

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

“Sandbox” is becoming a dirty word, overused to describe any game where you can knock over barrels and push NPCs off their rails anywhere in the world, anytime you want. Execute properly and you get Grand Theft Auto. Implement poorly and stacking rag-doll corpses onto staircases turns out to be more fun than your game proper. Freedom isn’t free—even in game design.

So when you hear Mercenaries 2: World in Flames is a sandbox, we understand if you want to mix in a grain of salt. The basic structure isn’t too far removed from its Xbox and PlayStation 2 progenitor: You’re a modern-day gun for hire, selling your services to whichever of the game’s factions you wish, earning cash for taking out targets, and completing morally murky contracts at your own discretion. Only now, developer Pandemic puts a toy box next to the sandbox.

“Since Mercs is deeply nonlinear, we already design our missions such that the multilayered approach is accounted for,” says Warner.

“In some ways, our game has always been designed with co-op in mind. That said, we devote a chunk of each designer’s daily routine to running through their missions, making sure everything they’re doing for the single-player experience translates into an entertaining co-op experience as well. We’re really not fans of adjusting the player’s fundamental experience. [So we’re not] changing his understanding of how many shots it takes to kill something, spawning in more enemies to account for the presence of a second player, et cetera.”

One possible outcome (out of many): Objectives occur in tandem instead of succession. Warner cites an example involving one of Mercs 2’s showpiece missions, the destruction of an oil rig in the sea surrounding Venezuela—after the player takes care of business on top of the platform first. “In a single-player campaign, the player would have to choose between the air and water approaches to get to the rig, complete the objective on top of the rig, and then fight his way off it before planning the destruction phase. In co-op, one player could get to the top of the oil rig while the other carefully plants C4 charges on the support pillars below. Instead of fighting his way off, the player on top of the oil rig could run for his life and jump off the rig just as the other player was detonating the charges.”

Players can share weapons and ammo, of course—but parity breaks down once the PMC comes into play. “Player one will progress through his game earning the money, items, and progression,” says Warner. “Player two will be able to use any of player one’s resources at anytime but will not be able to take any of it back with him to his other campaigns.”

A mercenary hired by a mercenary—the sandbox goes deep. Or maybe I’m just overcomplicating a G.I. Joe collection and summer in your parents’ backyard. —Sean Molloy

PLAY NICE NOW

Mercs 2 welcomes a second kid to the sandbox, too, with a new join-anytime co-op mode so you and a friend can knock down castles and fight over plastic fire trucks together; luckily, a good number of those trucks have multiple gun turrets mounted on the roof. Balancing gameplay in such an environment isn’t so much difficult as it is futile—in a system that’s already so much chaos theory, what’s another butterfly flapping its wings?

* Your hirelings don’t hang out by your side on the field but rather deliver specialized goods and services from your HQ when you call on them.
While Bizarre likes to draw comparisons between The Club and its Project Gotham Racing series, it also has a heavy dose of high-score obsession, courtesy of the studio’s Xbox Live Arcade shooter Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved.

Says Matt Cavanagh, lead designer: “The Club is about perfecting your run through a level and changing the way you play.”
THE CLUB

Genre-bending with abandon

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

If you've already grown tired of schizophrenic genre mashups in revolutionary music, from synthesized-titling country to sample-based rock 'n' roll, you might want to steer clear of games for the next few years. In the absence of revolutionary new ideas, developers are focusing on blurring the boundaries between established genres, creating surprising hybrids out of familiar concepts. Get used to hearing things like this: "The Club is a shooting game with a racing mentality." That's Matt Cavanagh, lead designer of The Club, a prime example of the mashup school of game design. With The Club, Cavanagh's team at Liverpool-based Bizarre Creations wants to cook up the gaming equivalent of wasabi peanuts—unconventional but tasty flavor combination.

Let's run down a list of The Club's ingredients. You've got your third-person shooter (the dominant flavor), your fighting game (eight characters from different backgrounds and countries in a tournament), racing game (levels in The Club are designed more like racetracks than battlefields), your '80s arcade game (high scores are everything), and your light gun game (enemies act more like the rock police in Aerosmith's Revolution X than the A.I. opponents in modern shooters). If that sounds inedible, Bizarre's official recipe is simpler: shooter + racer = The Club.

"I know that may sound weird," says Cavanagh, "but think of it like this: Every enemy in The Club is a corner. How you take down those enemies is the same as how you take corners in a racing game." Bizarre certainly knows racing; they're the brains behind the Project Gotham Racing series on the Xbox. But there would seem to be a great distance between racing cars around a track and shooting waves of contestants in an underground blood sport, "it's about killing as quickly and effectively as possible," says Cavanagh. "And it's about exploring the way in which you play the levels and honing your performance through them to attain the best score possible."

In a hands-off demo, the combination seems to click. We watch as Seager, a killer in dreadlocks and an orange tech vest, runs through a Russian steel mill in the game's time-attack mode. Just like the orange cone races in PGR3, time-attack mode in The Club is all about adding seconds to a timer that remains perpetually on the verge of running out. The only way to extend your time is to complete a small goal. In PGR3, that goal was to drive through the next set of cones. In The Club, you gain time every time you kill someone. This is where the jack-in-the-box-style enemies come in. It's not that Bizarre has tried to create believable enemy AI and failed—they want you to memorize enemy spawn points and behaviors. "Indeed, this was a design decision," says producer Omar Woodley. "Very much like in racing games, you begin to learn the right angle to powerslide into turns or when to apply the foot brake instead of the hand brake. The courses and AI are meant to be memorized by the user, leaving less and less room for error. Eventually, the user becomes the best run-and-gun marksman ever."

"Run-and-gun" is the official Club catchphrase—a strange term to associate with your game, as it's often used to describe shooters that lack satisfying depth. But here the meaning is literal. Our murderer is sprinting through rusted corridors, nailing one target after another, looping around the level like a race car running laps. The player obviously knows his stuff, anticipating the location of his victims before they arrive. He's building up combo points like a YouTube-worthy Geometry Wars run, searching out victims like Pac-Man chomping power pellets, and nailing trick shots (ricochet kills around corners) like special tricks in Tony Hawk's Pro Skater. The Club is so full of influences and sampled ideas. It's like a Rorschach test for your gaming subconscious.

Robert Ashley

--The Club--

The Club may have as much in common with Pac-Man as it does with your typical shooter.

The Club refers to a secret deathmatch tournament held for the gambling enjoyment of an elite group of wealthy patrons. Sounds like our public school system.
"Draw this turtle's ass and you can be in art school!" You've seen those old ads in the back of comic books, right? Or maybe you got the matchbook that asked you to sketch a picture of Terry the Developmentally Challenged Pirate to "qualify" for some pay-by-mail illustration course. I took those lessons—all $300 worth of em. Did I care if my "higher education" amounted to a ream of tracing paper and a couple chewed-up No. 2 pencils? Hell no! I had a dream. I'd make something of myself! But by

the time I showed up at a properly accredited art school, I realized two things: One, I have zero talent. Two...

"What does this have to do with free ga— Hey, don't interrupt me! Anyhow, I got these neighbors. Art students. They came in at all hours, making noise and drinking and smoking whatever's lying around. Then they start creating wacky stuff. My personal favorite? A top hat made out of ground beef. That's when I realized we shared a common goal: sponging off loved ones to keep doing what we truly love. Anything to stave off exposure to the "real world." Gotta respect that kind of dedication. For that alone, this month's column goes out to America's unsung heroes of moochery: the art students.

What better way to do that than to scope out surreal games that make the stuff sitting on store shelves look stone-cold sober? So here's to you, Mister "I'm so emo, I want to cut myself and doodle on canvas with my blood."

The Freeloader

All great artists have to start somewhere. Picasso's first medium? Construction paper, paste, and safety scissors. And did you know DaVinci's mom stuck her son's fingerpaintings to the fridge door?

Crayon Physics is simple, fun, and a fine example of truth in advertising. It's a goofy physics game using crayons. You have a little red ball, and you need to figure out how to get it to the star somewhere else on the screen. Nothing fancy, right? Well, as you can see from the screenshot, it's all about the presentation. What really knocked me out is that the entire game looks like I shoved over some kindergartners, sat at his desk, and started hoarding his box of Crayolas.

Once you start drawing shapes with the mouse, the in-game physics take over and knock the ball around. It's not exactly a perfect implementation—a couple levels in, I was trying to draw a tiny rectangle and wound up with a planet-devouring square.

Hey, I already warned ya earlier—I have no artistic talent whatsoever.
The game entitled *Chalk* really has no plot, but I’m going to wing it and make something up on the fly. Otherwise, I’d have no idea why I’m doing what I’m doing. Here goes. Wendy is daydreaming in math class, just like she does every other day. But this time when she falls asleep, she finds herself trapped in a hallucinatory, mathematics-filled dreamland. Armed with nothing but the titular scholastic drawing implement, Wendy needs to fight her way out past the sinister polyhedron army and its sketchy sidekicks.

The cool part of the game is the simple style and how you wield your weapon of choice: You control your chalk just as if it were your mouse cursor. With it, you're drawing lines through enemies to cross them off your list of threats, creating line shields to block attacks, or grabbing enemies and redirecting their attacks back at 'em. Now all you need to do is draw your way to freedom!

---

**Ballena.** To win a dance your Prima Ballerina has to throw flowers at the other Ballerinas until they are all happy. They try to do the same with your Prima Ballerina. But if they succeed and your Prima Ballerina is happy, you lose the dance. During a dance you can always choose which Ballerina should take the leading part of the Prima Ballerina. Throw blossoms at the masses and they will spend [sic] your Prima Ballerina talents.

So basically, you have to make other people happier than you make yourself. Who designed this game, my mom? As I played Ballena, I found myself scratching my head on more than one occasion. As with most modern art, I had no idea what the hell was going on. All the colors, flower-powered "explosions," and onscreen chaos kept me from attaining my inner Prima Ballerina. But it sure was cool to look at for a while.

---

You are a god bird (or a bird god—don’t ask me; I ain’t no ornithologist) with the ability to command lesser birds. Get some to join your flock. Go out and rain poop down on your opponents. All right, the real goal is to zip around and combat enemy “birds.” Wait. What? Birds? I’d crap myself where I stand if any of the geometric monsters I’m attacking resembled anything remotely avian. All right. Sorry about that. Where was I? Oh, right. When you reach the creatures that command enemy birds, sink your posse on the interconnected orbs, and eventually the wily wildlife will drop like stones. Pay no mind to the fact that these shapes look more like sleek paper airplanes than birds—the game is damn fun.

---

After an entire month of scoring freebies, I occasionally get pangs of guilt about not dropping any money for my habit. Rarely, to soothe those pangs, I pick some indie-developed games worth checking out.

This month I’m soothing my conscience by entering Loonyland. Well, Hamumu Software’s (www.hamumu.com) Loonyland II: Winter Woods, specifically. The game is straight-up goofy. Never would I thought that with a name like Loonyland II, I know... but let me explain.

The game appears innocent enough with its cutey Claymationish art style. With its little wooden soldiers trying to knock your lights out and wind-up mice that projectile vomit, you’d think it’s a kids’ game. The trick is that it also happens to be an action-RPG. You level up and acquire skills and do all the things one expects—though somebody somewhere was smoking something when designing this indie title. What would make me say such a thing?

Maybe it’s the overly happy music. As you’re hacking and slashing your way through this colorful world, this upbeat soundtrack—like something out of some psycho Wonder Showzen—loops in the background. Oddly out-of-place characters meet you along the way, including a “legitimate businessman” with an accent thicker than Tony Soprano’s. In the same way that SpongeBob SquarePants seems aimed at stone and schoolkids, I’d say that Loonyland II: Winter Woods might attract a similar crowd. And at 20 bucks, I’d say I got my money’s worth.
TRENDS

Sure, playing games grants us an escape from reality, an outlet for unresolved frustrations, and the opportunity to interact with people we wouldn't otherwise be able to. But an increasing number of professional gaming leagues are betting that we're just as keen on watching as playing.

The World Series of Video Games is forging a long-term partnership with mainstream broadcast giant CBS that will bring highlights from its numerous tournaments to TV audiences. By the same token, the broadcasting establishment spawned DirectTV's Championship Gaming Series with the intent of codifying the anarchy of e-sports scene's rules and conventions. Meanwhile, the Cyberathletica Professional League—one of the market's most venerable names—seems mighty dismissive of the role that televised broadcast can play in this scene.

Essentially, no consensus exists on how (or even if) competitive gaming broadcasts can tap into the American mainstream. Everyone just seems to hope that the essence of what draws us to play games will also make us want to watch them. But even the most seemingly obvious solutions can prove problematic.

World of Warcraft seems woefully unsuited to big-draw broadcasting. 8 million players worldwide be damned. Despite all the work that publisher Blizzard has done to make the game's characters an order of magnitude more physically expressive than anything the genre has seen, there's just too much information written into every second of gameplay for a casual audience to make heads or tails of it. "MMORPGs are particularly difficult to broadcast," says Jang Jae-Hyuck, production department director at MBC Game, one of South Korea's most prominent broadcasters in the competitive gaming field. "It's challenging for commentators to follow the progress, and it's hard for viewers to catch what skills competitors use in-game. And the matches are over so quickly."

So what could explain the World Series of Video Games' decision to include the game in its tournaments? It comes down to numbers. WOW is a world-class brand with a huge global player base—and to the World Series of Video Games, CBS, and Blizzard, this means a sizable built-in audience. In the mind of Sam Lingle, editor-in-chief of competitive gaming portal Amped eSports, this is the most important piece of the puzzle. "One thing to note here is that, no matter how "suitable" [for broadcast] a game might be, it won't be successful if it isn't a fun and popular title." By that reasoning, there's likely no game better positioned to push e-sports into the North American mainstream...provided Blizzard works to make its game more teligenic.

BROADCAST YOUR TRIUMPH

A hugely popular title, however, is only one component of this possible perfect storm. Depending on whom you talk to, leagues and broadcasters need to take cues from professional poker, the WWE, and...Magic: The Gathering? If you ask Magic-maker Wizards of the Coast's Randy Buehler, the answer is an unequivocal "yes." As vice president of digital gaming at Wizards of the Coast, Buehler is responsible for organizing Magic's annual Pro Tour, which has drawn hundreds of thousands of participants from all around the world in the 11 years since its launch. Magic tournament broadcasts have amassed an immense following online, so much so that Wizards of the Coast parted ways with former broadcast partner ESPN five years ago and hasn't looked back. The possibility that competitive gaming can somehow mirror Magic's trajectory calls the perceived need to ally with traditional broadcasters into question. "We've moved away from that because we're getting so much traffic to our website," Buehler says. "If I've got 100,000 people watching one of these broadcasts, it's staring to hit the point where it registers on the Nielsen radar. It's not clear that you have to go to broadcast to get [people] to watch these things."

By focusing on already enfranchised audiences—and serving them directly via outlets like YouTube...
or spectator features implemented into the games themselves— aspiring broadcasters’ need of mainstream support is diminished. However, according to Flagship Studios’ Bill Roper—who, as a Blizzard alumnus, is no stranger to the scene—TV may be where the ultimate expression of this idea will live.

“I believe that we’re going to see some strides made in games broadcasting online first. This would transition to live and time-delayed broadcast of events over the Internet and, potentially, television,” Roper says. “Again, a key to this will be for TV to work with the gaming industry on finding the right games and the right ways to bring those games to audiences.”

Angel Munoz, president of the Cyberathlete Professional League, isn’t convinced he needs TV to maintain a healthy audience. “Beyond the fact that videogame competitions are simply not interesting to the average television viewer...” 5 million fewer people [are] watching ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox than at the same time last year,” he says. “This gradual—but significant—transformation will make it even more difficult for videogame competitions to make as traditional televised shows.” Meanwhile, Matthew Ringel, Munoz’s counterpart at the World Series of Video Games, thinks TV should play a role, if a secondary one: “We strongly believe that broadcast television is part of the mix, but only a part. Broadband video is the main driver—that’s where

the principal audience for this content lives. While we’ll produce 20 hours of broadcast television in a given year, we’ll do 250 hours of broadband.”

“AN ACTOR IS AT MOST A POET AND AT LEAST AN ENTERTAINER.”

Buehler freely admits that Magic is much more of a niche pursuit than, say, Counter-Strike or WOW, but he also feels the success of his formula has just as much to do with the personalities controlling the decks as with the game itself. “We spend a lot of time thinking about star-building,” he says. “We know that the goal of the Pro Tour, from a cold marketing point of view, is to get people interested in the game, and we know that the way to do that is by getting them invested in the human drama.” Jang agrees: “Most important of all is to foster star players—everybody wants to root for a hero.”

While someone like Unreal Tournament and Quake champion Johnathan “FatalItY” Wendel might beg to differ, Roper stresses that the U.S. has a way to go before pro gamers can comfortably occupy a spot in the limelight. “The professional gamers in countries like South Korea are stars. They gain sponsorships, are spokespeople for products, have fan clubs with hundreds of thousands of members,” he says. “In the U.S., we’re just starting to see parents who grew up playing videogames getting their kids into [them]. But for now, we’re still fighting our whole ‘geek’ pigeonholing.”

If Roper and company are right, then the key to competitive gaming’s mainstream success may lie in larger-than-life personalities in the vein of professional wrestling. Now, there’s no question that pro gamers can bring the smack talk when it comes to Internet forums. Thing is, when the cameras are pointed at their faces, will we want to look at them long enough to learn to lionize them?

The gaming industry is fraught with unfortunate examples of failed, mismanaged attempts at mainstream crossovers, and the e-sports scene could very well be the next victim of these ill-conceived methodologies. As we’ve seen, though, the industry has always been able to rebound from even the most blatant pandering. The grassroots communities that already care about competitive gaming are the e-sports scene’s insurance policy, and they’re the ones whose continued support will anchor it in the face of any potential murder-by-mishandling. Whether or not its flirtations with the broadcast establishment will pay off is anyone’s guess, but one thing is certain— it wouldn’t be wise to alienate the core audience. These gamers are the ones who the leagues can guarantee will continue to watch, regardless of whether the broadcasts air on MTV or SourceTV.™

Miguel Lopez

VIEWING

seating to human drama
THE GFW INTERVIEW:
BRIAN FARGO

Living in the fallout  BY DARREN GLADSTONE
1983  
Brian Fargo forms Interplay Productions.

1985  
*Tales of the Unknown Volume I: The Bard’s Tale* becomes Interplay’s first hit. Fargo made the maps for the first two *Bard’s Tale* games and directed the third.

1988  
*Prodeus*—Interplay’s first post-nuclear role-playing game, *Wasteland* (the spiritual *father* of *Fallout*), which ships the same day as *The Bard’s Tale II: The Destiny Knight*.

1989-1996  
*Interplay* breaks off from EA to become a game publisher and gives breaks to little developers like Bioware and BioWare.

1997  
*Interplay’s Black Isle Studios division releases* *Fallout*.

1998-2001  
*Interplay* releases a string of classic RPGs like *Fallout 2*, the *Baldur’s Gate* series, *Icewind Dale*, and *Planescape: Torment*.

2002  
Fargo leaves *Interplay* and founds *inXile Entertainment*.

2003  
*Acquires rights to Wasteland and The Bard’s Tale from EA*.

2004  
*Releases first game under inXile brand, action-RPG parody* *The Bard’s Tale*. It ships the same week as *GTA: San Andreas*.

2007  
Currently bringing *Web game Line Rider* to consoles and working on *Heidis* (set for release this fall).

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**GF**: How do you think the game industry has fundamentally changed since you started making games in 1985?

**BF**: Wow, so much for starting small! Well, you know, it’s night and day. Back then it was just a hobbyist/entrepreneur business. You couldn’t even begin to imagine how you’d make a living at it. We’d try all sorts of different creative things out. You weren’t betting your life on every project. The stakes weren’t as high, so you could tinker with different things and different ideas. Everybody was pushing the envelope in every category.

*Wolfenstein 3D*—the first time you saw that, you knew it was the start of something. Same with *Dune* into *WarCraft*, and so on. People were inventing categories with every game. Some worked, some didn’t. Now it’s all sequels, so you don’t get that same “inventing of the categories” as you did back then. Everything’s very stylized today and very professional. There are good and bad parts to that. I was thinking the other day that our industry is very interesting. Designers don’t have [the same clout] they do in different entertainment businesses. Spielberg can walk in somewhere and say, “This is the game I want to make.” We don’t have that. [Sim* creator* Will Wright] is the closest we have to that, and he’s still an employee. You give designers some freedom, and what do you get? *Spore*. That’s the way the business is structured these days, and you can’t really blame publishers, because they’re just doing what they can to survive.

**GF**: And your post-*Interplay* survival tactics include...?

**BF**: Well, the trick is trying to keep your team small and costs relatively low while finding the right people to work with. Since leaving *Interplay*, I wanted to ramp up very slowly and look for new talent. That’s why we’re working with *Line Rider* [see “Line Rider,” *page 36*—Ed.]. I saw that as something completely innovative, creating a new breed. I’m proud that at *Interplay* we gave [some] big developers their first deals—Bioware, Blizzard, and *Treyarch*, to name a few. I always had a talent for finding good people.

The reality, though, is that for every 20 Psychonauts—critical successes that don’t sell well—only one becomes a true hit. If you had that kind of track record today, you’d quickly be out of business. That’s why you’re mostly seeing sequels and licenses—because that’s what people are voting for with their dollars. People still say to me, “High fantasy, science fiction is that the cleverest stuff you guys can come up with?” No, but that’s what our users love. That’s why we see the same stuff over and over again.

**GF**: You seemed to pull that off in the recent Bard’s Tale remake. Was that because you had a smaller team?

**BF**: That’s part of it. The game has a lot of subtlety—characters that appeared from level to level, a running joke, a story—it took a lot of effort and a lot of discipline, but we sat around the room and fake-played through the game. We created funny moments that we could’ve easily missed otherwise.

**GF**: Well, the humor has always been there in your games. It really stood out, and—in some ways—defined your work.

**BF**: Yeah, but it’s not like we can put on the to-do list that “the game has to be funny.” When we started the new *Bard’s Tale*, for example, I had taken time off to play all the latest RPGs, and the games were doing the same stuff from 25 years ago. We were joking that I can’t play these games. But we went into it with a philosophy, ‘Well if we can make this game funny and have it be fun, then it will stand out among the competition.”
Start \ GFW Interview

“GAMING IS THE ONLY ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY WITHOUT A COMEDY SECTION.”

believe this modern game is making me kill rats in the cellars... I can’t believe that there are this many Chosen Ones.” I thought, “Wouldn’t it be funny if the main character also saw things the way we as gamers do everyday—that the Bard himself had had enough?” I think that’s where the humor succeeded in that game. Basically, we have to look at what really inspires us, and then the humor should follow.

GFW: So writing The Bard’s Tale came pretty easy?
BF: I couldn’t have made that game 20 years ago. I didn’t have enough real-world experiences to draw upon at that point. Our audience is very intelligent, and very cynical, especially you guys (game journalism). Stupid humor doesn’t work. Some of the best stuff that LucasArts did, like BioWare does—requires a level of maturation that a 22-year-old making games probably hasn’t yet.

As designers, if we make a game with humor as a main selling point, we need to make sure that it’s genuinely funny and that it doesn’t get annoying as you play. Some games do pull it off in small amounts, but for all the talk of stories and plots, only a handful of games are truly funny. You know gaming is the only entertainment industry without a comedy section. And I don’t know if that’s going to change anytime soon.

GFW: While not many games are straightforward comedy, some do have it in degrees. Take your work on Fallout—it bridged the gap, but in a very dark way.
BF: Oh, yeah—we love the dark humor. (Laughing) And the older we get, the darker we get. When you mix the absurd with the hyperviolent—like what Tarantino does in films—you can get some great results.

GFW: Bethesda [the developer making Fallout 3—see page 26] hasn’t really done dark humor in their games. Do you think this will matter?
BF: Yeah, their stuff is a little more serious. A little drier. Humor is tough to do, but you know what? They’re clever guys, and I can’t wait to see what they do. I know that they’ll do well. In fact, I’d trust maybe three developers with Fallout—and Bethesda’s definitely one of them. One thing I can tell you, though, is that our Wasteland would be much darker than their Fallout.

GFW: That’s right—you’ve acquired the rights to Wasteland.
BF: It started it all. If the right design idea comes along, we would love to make another Wasteland game. I think Bethesda is gonna do gangbusters with Fallout—just great—and if they make a huge hit, maybe people will be curious to get another look at what inspired Fallout in the first place.

GFW: Why didn’t you just make a Wasteland sequel back then? Did it not sell well?
BF: It was strange. You see, EA released Wasteland on the exact same day as The Bard’s Tale II: The Destiny Knight. They were trying to meet financials for their quarter end. We were like the BioWare of that time, known for our RPGs. Imagine if BioWare released two games on the same day. That wouldn’t happen—it makes no sense. So, end of story, the game did well, but it fell under many people’s radar because of when it released. We did actually try to get the rights to Wasteland to make a sequel, but EA considered us competitors at that point. We had to create Fallout as a result.

GFW: Interplay used to be the place for all the great RPGs—between BioWare and Black Isle Studios, you guys had a lock. Then Interplay imploded. What happened?
BF: My cost of making a game back in The Bard’s Tale days was $30,000 to $40,000, Descent—which we published about 10 years later—was $300,000. Get to the late 90s, and things are costing millions. That means little room for error. Look at it this way: Tony Hawk sold 4 to 5 million, making Activision what it is now. Take-Two has Grand Theft Auto. THQ survived off wrestling games. EA? Well, with the lock on Madden, that paid for a lot of other games that didn’t sell as well—and that’s to say nothing of SimCity and so on. If you didn’t have one game that carried the day, you were in a world of hurt. All we had was Baldur’s Gate. We had a heavy royalty load to both BioWare and TSR. So we’d sell 1.5 million copies, but after royalties, that amounted to something like 750,000 copies sold. We were making all these really told efforts, whether it was Descent, Planescape: Torment. We just didn’t have one that was really going to break us out.

That’s when I brought in Titus Interactive to raise capital, but it turned out that the whole relationship was a bad one. Culturally, we couldn’t have been more different. They never actually shipped a good product before—after 20 years, all they had to show was a game about a fox? The budgets were hard enough to get a game made, but fighting over fundamentals with the executive board was ridiculous. Basically, I said, “It’s time to sell and get a different partner.” I had some buyers ready, but Titus’ demands pretty much stopped anything from happening. It was an untenable situation, and by that point, I handed Titus the keys to what was left and said, “Good luck!”

GFW: With Interplay gone, you don’t see as many RPGs as you once did. Why do you think that’s the case?
BF: I just don’t see many publishers willing to take the chance these days. We went to Microsoft with an idea for an RPG. They didn’t even want to hear it. They don’t care how great an idea is at this point. It was simply, “Nah, we’ve got RPGs covered.” End of discussion. They have their boxes to check—their shooters, their RTS games, their RPGs. (With) those boxes checked, they aren’t interested in hearing about anything else.

GFW: And experiences like that don’t sour you to the game industry?
BF: Truth is, it’s very hard to make money in the game business. Take my buddy, Jason Rubin from Naughty Dog [creator of PlayStation games such as Crash Bandicoot and Jak and Daxter]. He’s left the game business saying, “Screw this—I’ll make Internet applications.” He said that it was 10 times easier to make a game, but he just sold his company for over $20 million, and he wasn’t even in business a year. You’ve really got to be in this because you love it. And I do.●

●The Bard (2004 version)
1. Barbaric

We can’t wait to play Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures — so we’re eyeballing home-video shelves to hold us over. 300, Frank Miller’s stylized clothed-sword porn slashfest, comes out on all those fancy disc formats at the end of July. If you’re queueing for an equally raw take on Viking marauders, check out Pathfinder. It sailed through theaters with good reason — but it could make for a fantastic drinking game.

2. Muahahaha!

Looking Glass Studios (Thief, System Shock) alum Austin Grossman recently penned his first novel, Soon I Will Be Invincible — a look at ambition, love, and trials that come with being a superhero (or supervillain). Oh, yeah, and all that “truth and justice” junk as well. Maybe it’ll help us appreciate City of Heroes/City of Villains on a whole other level now.

3. Guitar Zeros

Some reduce Guitar Hero to a simple game of musical Simon. Try telling that to the dedicated nerd rockers at www.theguitarzeros.com. They’ve modded GH controllers to make real music. Visit their site to listen to the music and watch the concert video — and if you’re motivated, download the software tools to mod your own controller for music-making.

4. Classic Rock

The year: 1986. Mullets were cool, pants were acid-washed, and a couple of guys filmed a documentary outside a Judas Priest concert. Heavy Metal Parking Lot is one of those cult classics that’s been floating around for ages (pre-Internet, people dubbed it onto VHS). Twenty years later, it’s on DVD with an encore of extras.

5. Board Gaming

For the early nerd (before Catan arrived on Xbox Live Arcade), multi-player board games consisted of “men” huddled around a kitchen table, chomping down on Ding Dongs, and moving tiny pieces around a board. Looking to recapture those glory days? Try Mare Nostrum, in which ancient civilizations such as Babylon, Carthage, Egypt, and Rome battle for supremacy.

6. Gremlins

In Overlord (see review on pg. 30), a small horde of minions steals the show. It’s fun being a bad guy and all, but we got a whole new appreciation for little havoc-causing critter sidekicks everywhere.

7. NPC: The Game

Here’s a goofy concept for an RPG game: You’re the NPC. Well, kind of. In NPC Quest (www.hamumu.com/gamelets.php), you shop, prep your character for whatever battles lie ahead, and then kick back and watch how well you did. You have zero control over your in-game avatar. That’s still some strategy to it, sure; it’s just a little more passive than your typical RPG.

8. Mash-Ups

One industrious U.K. DJ lays down solid tracks — and was also kind enough to provide us with a Windows-themed mashup for our podcast. Head to his website (www.thriftshopx.com) and check out some of his other work — and while you’re there, maybe buy a T-shirt or something.

9. Planescape: Torment

Fallout spreads anew, SimCity 3000 reconstructs itself, and StarCraft II launches — while having these classic games come back 20 years later. We can’t help but think of some other great games we’d like to see back in the spotlight. If anyone is counting our vote, here’s one suggestion: Planescape: Torment.

10. Big Daddy

Do you enjoy decorating your bedroom shelves with disturbing images of horror? The Limited Edition of BioShock comes with a figurine of a Big Daddy (early prototype shown), the creepy lumbering deep-sea monster-thing that protects the city of Rapture’s slightly creepier zombie children.
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GEARS
Epic’s blockbuster shooter looks sharper and lasts longer on PC

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT

"Remember Chris Rock at the 2005 Oscars, right? The comedian and his camera crew go to an L.A. Magic Johnson Theater and ask, what’s your favorite movie this year? Everyone agrees it’s either Alien vs. Predator or The Chronicles of Riddick." Producer Rod Fergusson underscores the populist idea: "We weren’t necessarily working to conceal every rough edge from game critics. It’s always about what resonates with the audience you’re trying to reach."

Whether or not Tinseltown tastemakers argue the other way around—that those movies are more like videogames—Gears of War is an interactive Jerry Bruckheimer flick. As the Xbox 360’s fastest-selling game, it’s triumphed at the "box office" to boot.

Despite superficial similarities to H.G. Wells’ The Time Machine and its underground-dwelling Morlocks, Gears’ story dodges moral ambiguity (even Marvel Comics’ Namor: The Sub-Mariner dives fathoms deeper into its culture-clash theme). Until inevitable sequels mine the Locust’s will to power, they remain monsters through and through, and the ethically black-and-white game gets so
arterial red as its Mature rating allows. Evil deserves to die.

_Gears_ encourages players to buzz saw through both CPU-controlled golems and online opponents, to squash heads and march through the dead meat. I ask lead designer Cliff Bleszinski about gratuitous gore and whether it’s a guaranteed draw. Provided the presentation is state of the art, Doom and _Mortal Kombat_ say so. “It goes back to the time-honored tradition of over-the-top entertainment,” he answers, “way back to bloody Shakespearean and savage gladiatorial times. We’re playing to the crowd and loving it.” Then he turns pensive, thinking perhaps of opportunistic attorneys. “I can tell you one thing. I’m not some crazy masochist sicko. The blood you see flying from soldiers you shoot in a game like _Gears_ indicates success. You know that your bullets are, in fact, hitting home. The bright red stuff stands out in this desaturated dystopian world. That’s why it’s there. That and, of course, the larger feeling of success you get when your foes break up into bits and go flying.”

Guts notwithstanding, one word—visceral—works almost too well when talking about _Gears_ and the vivid sensation of physical substance permeating its play. Even roadie running—named to reflect the feel of shaky footage captured by another person following players—intensifies the illusion. “You aren’t just Marcus Fenix or (co-op buddy) Dominic Santiago,” says Bleszinski, “you’re also the embedded cameraman behind them, which is one reason why _Gears_ feels so CNN-ready.”

Ferguson describes Bleszinski in director mode, leaning over shoulders and e-mailing memos: “Characters going into cover aren’t grunting enough, aren’t kicking up enough dirt and dust! Cuz, you know, Cliff wanted that weight there. And that’s the thing about the game’s marble-and-granite architecture. It’s not neon, not glass, not chrome—it’s grounded. You’re in it, and you feel the mass and weight of our world.”

_Gears’_ narrative world weighs less, at least as the game itself goes. While extracurricular site browsing and book reading (see: _Destroyed Beauty: An Inside Look at Gears of War_, available with the 360 collectors’ edition) reveal planning on Epic’s part, the gamer seeking a self-contained story doesn’t see it develop.
GEARS’ ANSWER TO ALIENS’ QUEEN

A towering 30 feet tall and scale-tipping 11 tons. All teeth and alligator hide, a back like a battleship, and...nowhere in sight? After appearing in Gears’ promotional material, Brumak—Epic’s name for the disaster-bringer prominent on these pages—made little more than an in-game cameo on Xbox 360. “People were—well, I won’t say disappointed, that’s too strong a word.” VP Mark Rein sort of admits. But we were disappointed: incredulous, too, as GeartChick proved with a GearsOfWarBorum.net post asking what she needed to do in order to trigger the showdown she was somehow skipping. At the time, the answer was “We won’t tell you to stop posting since this site is such a sausage fest.” As of now, it’s “Switch to Windows.” “We got a couple of phone calls from [Brumak’s] agent,” Blezinski kids. “He bargained for screen time, renegotiated his contract. We’re only now getting the jock out of our motion-capture studio.”

The Windows game’s new five-chapter act picks up after the escape from Adam Fenix’s estate. “The section is called Timgad,” lead level designer Jim Brown says, “and fills in the gap before the train station: it’s like lost content telling you what happened along the way, why you’re heading to the train, and all that. It’s not for beginners by any means. We want to push players, to test them on every lesson they’ve learned so far.”

“One section in particular—it’s more or less a Therion Guard nest [Locust in long leather capes]. They’re among the more fiercely intelligent enemies you’ll face. We split co-op players so that one guy is up on balconies duelng snipers, and the other is down on the ground handling Therons who run at him. There’s a Thraja [turreted], there’s a Seeders [large, explosive launchers that emerge from subterranean tunnels]. We throw it at you all at once, and you have to work well as a team and nail your active reloads or risk running out of ammo or relying on hand-to-hand combat. You don’t have the Hammer of Dawn [orbital laser]—Timgad is occupied territory, so Nemecyts ink the sky and interrupt the Hammer’s targeting—so you have to find other creative ways to take care of the Seeders, such as shooting the chains that support a theater’s stage dressing, dropping the walls on its hole.” Blezinski blows the lid off one last impediment, and it’s the real bitch: “Brumak stalks you throughout the entire level. It’s like you need a restraining order on the bastard.”

“In some respects, the battle is like the Corporal encounter in the cave,” Ferguson says, “but where that was on a rail, Brumak chases you around the arena. There’s no time to stand still and press the Y button or Q key. You’re mobile running for distance, and Brumak destroys any cover you stick to. We’re not giving gamers all the answers in the way that we did with the Corporal.”

Blezinski again: “He bites your head off. You’re going to get a big, big kick out of it.”
“Turrent sequences and one of two ways,” lead designer Cliff Bleszinski says. “They leave some savvy gamers feeling like what they expected to happen happened, and others disappointed that a dozen enemies didn’t burst in. In Halo 2, you get on a turret, and it’s like, ‘Hello, anybody here? It would be great to hear it go. Is this the part where they send in reinforcements so we can shoot them down?’”
in his series of shootouts. This isn’t as serious of a complaint as it sounds. Those of us who’ve played the game agree that it’s great. Great enough, in fact, to start splitting hairs over its award-worthiness (even if enthusiast press end-of-the-year nods aren’t Oscars).

“I’d rather have people say the story isn’t deep than complain that they had to skip nonstop cut-scenes and comlink communications,” Bleszinski says. Epic vice president Mark Rein agrees: “At what point are you taking too much control of the camera, making movies and things that aren’t interactive? We have so much manpower to produce so much content and we want what we make to be playable.”

I find the either/or unfair. Most games either go the way of Metal Gear Solid—bogged and intrusive, as Bleszinski suggests—or be purely challenge-based Pac-Man? What of interactive information? The very thing that does go on when we tour Sera’s slums and when one character yells to another during combat. The very thing that could turn our trek through the Illusion mines into a window on the theme, obvious in Gears’ Wikipedia entry, of cheap energy extracted at the expense of the Locust who live at its source. The very thing that defines Valve’s Half-Life 2 direction.

“Honestly, man, we would rather have any narrative elements carried in cut-scenes just happen naturally,” says Bleszinski. “But the truth of the matter is that there are certain things you can’t count on players seeing... like the big bad Locust stomp... little rats. People could be overstudying the detail on a column or something, missing the cool moment. At some point it’s OK to break from convention for brief moments of noninteractivity in order to show important exposition. And, as amazing as Half-Life is, when you compare main characters, Halo’s Master Chief is far more iconic, for the fact that he says memorable lines and looks badass in cut-scenes.”

Addis Fergusson: “Nobody looks at Half-Life 2 and says, ‘Boy, that’s blockbuster pacing.’ People want characters diving through windows with explosions chasing them, and you can’t have that in purely first-person perspective.”

Directing our attention is one of any developer’s chief concerns and, like storytelling, yet another potential problem with no cut-and-dried solution. Gears’ work-around jibes well with what Bleszinski calls the company’s “summer popcorn blockbuster.” Pressing the Q key or V...
Epic outsources some prop- and character-creation work to offshore asset shops Epic China. So what, I ask, is missing the Made-in-USA sticker? According to Rein, "In Gears, it's usually secondary characters such as the Stranded [destitute slum dwellers]. Any modeler can make a good garbage can, so if you've got someone who specializes in making great vehicles or weapons or facial animations, it makes sense to outsource the garbage cans and benches and stonework." Ouch.
button when prompted either snaps the camera to points of interest or offers progress-helping hints. "It's our nudge," he says. "Halfway between noninteractive cut-scenes and the completely immersive experience. A friend of mine said that you can figure out a movie's plot by keeping in mind that every line costs money. We spend money to make cool stuff happen, and we want our customers to see it. So a chopper buzzes by and blows up the bridge—it's so sad to say, 'Hey, you might want to look to the left.'"

Movies use "look buttons, too—movies like Alien vs. Predator more so than those that win Academy Awards. Bleszinski replies: "Videogaming in general sees lots of snobbery, which in some ways can limit success. Look at how cinema handles it, how, when a character comes back, there's the beat-you-over-the-head flashback to the scene of that same character. Savvy moviegoers are like, 'You didn't need to do that. I can see that it's the same character only older because he has the same friggin' birthmark on his face.' But another audience is like, 'Ooh, that's right! That's her; that's the girl.'"

Gamers, unlike moviegoers, indirectly tip off gamemakers to their degree of awareness. Now and then Gears adapts accordingly. "In one place flames burst from a pipe. To get through, players need to turn the gas main off with a wheel," lead level designer Jim Brown explains. "If you burn yourself a few times by walking into the fire, the game gets what's happening and gives you a hint."

On Windows, Gears of War's new campaign content (see page 55) offers further opportunity to address player input. In particular, Epic discovered that, with Colonel Victor Hoffman debriefing troops during gunfights, the signal sometimes disappeared into the noise. "We have no regrets about the way we get important information to gamers in a dynamic environment," Ferguson says. "We just realize that we should repeat some things more often to drive different points home. Some people weren't sure why they ended up on a train, what the Lightmass bomb was, and what the Resonator really did. We provide more information with the new Timstad mission. Marcus actually asks, 'What's the bomb on a train?' which is what players were asking, too. We then use the opportunity to explain why. We also hint at intrigue. For instance, Marcus' dad worked to prevent the war. Dom says, >
HOW YOU HANDLE IT

Inspired by kill.switch, Namco's underplayed shooter, Gears' gameplay swaps "run and gun" for "stop and pop" (as Bleszinski puts it). Players squat behind hard stone barriers, fire, bound between safe spots, and sometimes hurdle into the open, chain saws howling. While the Windows game's interface is identical to the 360's when played via gamepad, keyboard and mouse users can seek cover with either the space bar or double-tapped WASD keys. Additional tuning addresses the mouse's superior sensitivity. Says Ferguson: "On Gears 360, a sniper's aim is steady even as he's getting hit. Basically, it's a battle of attrition. Can he drop you before your barrage drops him? With Gears Windows, the screen shakes and throws off a sniper's accuracy as he's struck." Similarly, Epic continues to tweak accuracy and recoil variables to prevent pixel-perfect shooters from zipping through campaigns.
"His data's gonna end it." Marcus responds, "I don't think he'd appreciate the irony." We're leaving threads open, though; we don't explain the Locust's origins, we don't reveal what's going on with Marcus' father, and we're not closing questions we purposefully left open. Like you say, we're separating signal from noise and trying to take advantage of the ability to tell more story.

"We'll answer other questions in novels," Rein kids, "and certainly in the New Line Cinema movie"—another probable hit among the same Magic Johnson Theater audience Chris Rock polled. I ask Rein why Epic isn't calling this edition a director's cut, and he laughs, "That's a good idea! I hadn't even thought of that." However, he's not much interested in commentary modes: "I'll tell you why I don't want to do that. We'd spill too many secrets. I like commentary with my comedy—The 40 Year-Old Virgin or something, where they're talking us through the waxing—but otherwise it's information that should be on the screen." Or in the books and on the big screen, as it were. As more and more developers divide their games into microtransactional chunks, it worries me to see stories chopped for piecemeal purchase, too.

MODMAKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE AND TAKE OVER

Drawing on the editing and content-construction tools included with Windows' Gears, enterprising types can try directing for themselves. According to Ferguson, "this is the same kit we use" and "you can create single-player, cooperative, and competitive multiplayer maps with it." Epic's commitment to garage talent and DIY game designers is a point of pride evident for everyone I talk to at the company whose "Make Something Unreal" contest turned Red Orchestra modmakers into Red Orchestra: Ostfront 41-45 retail developer Tripwire Interactive, to cite just one inspiring example.

"It's in our DNA," Rein insists. "With [Unreal Tournament], we gave good mappers money to make improvements, and then shipped their work with our games and bonus packs. With Gears, I certainly see opportunity later on to bring user-created content to Xbox Live and Games for Windows Live—some of it for free, and some of it for a cost, which means modmakers might see some money. We don't have the answers on how that's going to work today, though."
HOW YOU LOOK AT IT

Mark Rein reads the mere mention of Crysis as a call to arms. “Is Crysis a better-looking game than Gears of War? Is that the quote you want? I don’t think so. It’s great in its own way but it doesn’t top Gears. Here’s my challenge: Let’s see how Crysis looks on the PC you own.” One thing’s certain: Epic’s game pops on Windows in ways it won’t on 360, with sharper resolution, enhanced detail, and, for those running DX10, antialiasing. “Nobody with a decent DX9-class system is getting gypped, though. I hate people who think that they have to go out and buy Vista and a new graphics card....” As I’m wondering whether I’ve heard right, Rein wraps that very sentence with “we love those guys; we certainly make our games to shine on those systems. That’s our modus operandi.”

“Microsoft and Epic share the same ultimate goal—let’s make the most money possible,” says Rein. “On 360, we felt that giving [maps and Annex mode] away for free was the way to go. They thought that asking people to pay for that content would raise the pile higher. Ultimately, it’s their store and their choice. We can’t walk into Wal-Mart and say, ‘We’ve got a box of 400 brooms in the back of our car. Would you put them on the floor and give ‘em away for free?’” Their compromises? Charge a premium for the content at first, and then offer it for free later on.
"UE3 is probably the most moddable engine in existence."

—MARK REIN, VICE PRESIDENT, EPIC GAMES

A number of Gears' online-related details remain to be decided ("TBD" as Rein and co. continually respond during our conversation). Whether conflicting information from Microsoft PR and Epic indicates normal negotiation or serious unsettled differences is tough to tell, and while the one insists that the game will not support dedicated servers, the other says the matter remains very much up in the air. Outlining the less-convenient scenario, Fergusson says we'll at least see "websites hosting custom content that you can copy to your directory, and which the game will then locate and slip into your UI" but hopes Microsoft will allow automatic distribution via servers (see: Valve's Steam network). If managed well, Epic's editor will offer enormous value to Windows users by way of an ever-expanding suite of mods.

"Simple" projects such as last-man-standing scenarios that pit players against Locust mobs wielding saws and little else, are likely in the short term, while grueling total conversion jobs take generous time and talent (lead developer Steve Superville warns that incremental modeling, which sits somewhere between scripting tweaks and ground-up world building, is a bugger in Gears of War).

"Have you heard of Marcus Golf?" Rein asks. "One of our Korean licensees wants to build casual, subscription-based games with Unreal Engine 3. We said, sure, no sweat. So one of our programmers goes, 'I'm gonna make a golf game out of Gears of War.' An animator gave Marcus a golf swing, another guy created a club and ball, and this dude did the rest: made mounds in the Gridlock multiplayer map, used the grenade throw and the arc that you get to indicate where the ball would go... It's not something we'd ship, but it shows what you could accomplish in one day. Unreal Engine 3 is probably the most moddable engine in existence, and I don't believe anybody will beat it in that respect. Plus, we're working on a how-to book." Ever his own Barnes & Noble.

For a moment, Rein passes off cross-pollination projects between Gears of War and UT 3 and then pauses. I think I get him with "players in Necris walkers laserin CPU-controlled Brumaks."

"OK, you're right," the Alien vs. Predator fan in him agrees. "That's cool, and I guarantee you that modmakers are going to go with it. I don't know whether it'll make us angry or happy, but I'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

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NEW MAPS, NEW MODES

"People are probably sick of hearing about how Gears’ gameplay is ‘stop and pop,’" Brown apologizes, "but it’s true. I think we ended up with something solid in terms of not necessarily shooting enemies the second that you see them, of encouraging tactical splits—pursuing flanking opportunities and that type of thing."

"We take what other multiplayer shooters have played with and just push it, push people to think about approaching [the genre] in ways other than jumping around like an idiot," Bleszinski agrees. "Gears doesn’t devolve into how fast you can swing your crosshairs over the other guy’s head. We’ve taken tactical gameplay—which is often painfully sluggish—and turned it into something fun, fast-paced, and intuitive."

I agree. Unlike Halo, Epic’s game is unique enough in third-person form and function to distinguish itself on PC, and as something other than the console take on experiences established in the UT and Battlefield series. Nor should reduced player speed, optimized for analog-stick aiming, matter much, since the “jumping idiot” thing is out.

Cross-platform play is out, too. Says Ferguson: "Of course, it came up—you can’t have a game on Windows Live and Xbox Live without somebody asking the question—but we weren’t able to because of balancing. It’s a great bullet point for Shadowrun, but I’m [not sure] about the implementation and how interested people are in it." Instead, Epic’s adding a mode and three new maps.

"King of the Hill’s a hoot," says Bleszinski. "It’s a spin-off of the previously available Annex mode but has become its own thing." Instead of seizing territory here and there, teams accrue points by controlling (read: standing in) a single, contested circle. One member must remain inside at all times, and "execution" rules apply: Only explosives and sniper rounds to the skull kill at range, other guns stun for the chain saw and "curb stomps" coup de grace.

"This great dynamic develops where one guy stays put and I go off to the side and pick off anyone trying to get in," he says. "They can’t just clear the circle from a distance, they have to actually close in and wipe us out altogether."

"We’re making sure that the mode is particularly fun on the new maps," Ferguson adds. "Elevation differences—and Gold Rush has three levels total—are all important. Imagine an oil rig in a lunar crater, that’s Gold Rush. The second one’s called Sanctuary. It’s sort of a non-denominational religious setting with big arches, broken walls, black skies, rolling clouds, and an old-school horror-movie feel. The third, Courtyard, is a park inside a metropolis. You spawn at high points in the battlefield and dash downstairs at the beginning to snag the Boomer shot or Hammer of Dawn and stay low or the sniper rifle and return to the top."

"GEARS DOESN’T DEVOLVE INTO HOW FAST YOU CAN SWING YOUR CROSSHAIRES OVER THE OTHER GUY’S HEAD."

—CLIFF BLESZINSKI
Free Games for Windows Live Silver subscription offers both person-to-person chat and integrated VOIP support for unranked games. Only Gold members, however, have integrated chat in matchmaking games. "I think we're going to get a generous [Gold] trial membership with the game, too," Rein says.
For every game currently getting heaps of hype, countless others deserve credit for inspiring what we play today. That's why, years ago, when Games for Windows: The Official Magazine went by the name Computer Gaming World, we created a computerized Cooperstown—the CGW Hall of Fame—to serve as a record of some of the greatest PC games ever made and the people who made them.

We plan to continue this tradition both in our magazine and online at GF1.com. To kick things off, here are five new Hall of Fame inductees: four games, and one game designer.

**DUNGEON KEEPER**
Everybody's been a dungeon-rafting hero at some point in their life. But what about the poor schlub who stocks the place, has to reset all the traps, and makes sure that the goblins get fed on a regular basis? When Dungeon Keeper shipped in 1997, it flipped the god-game genre on its ear by casting you as the "bad" guy building an evil fedom. It was a sinister combination of Bullfrog's genre-defining hit Populous infused with a unique perspective and wicked sense of humor.

The interactive black comedy shone through your disembrodied, omnipotent hand hovering over the playground. Grab minions and drop them where they need to go...or slap them around if they start getting out of line. Few games since then have been as challenging, interesting, and uniquely funny as this.

**DUNE II: THE BUILDING OF A DYNASTY**
Try to chronicle the genealogy of this genre or that genre—attempt to find the Adam of the FPS or Eve of the RPG—and you'll usually wind up confused. All roads lead to Wizardry—but detour through Akalabeth, Dungeon, Dungeons & Dragons, and Rogue. Is the common ancestor of the RTS a 1990 console game called Herzog Zwei? Does it reach even further back to 1988 and Danielle Bunten Berry's Modern Wars? Or back to 1984's Ancient Art of War? The GF1M historians argue that the "modern" real-time strategy game—three sides, dirt farming, base-building, tech trees, etc.—goes back to Dune II: The Building of a Dynasty, Westwood's blueprint for Command & Conquer, and therefore the blueprint for everything from Total Annihilation to Company of Heroes to Tiberium Wars.

**PAST INDUCTEES**

**People**
- Gael Bostrom Berry, Game Designer
- John Carmack, Programmer
- Richard Garriott, Game Designer
- Ron Gilbert, Programmer and Game Designer
- Sid Meier, Game Designer
- Ray Muzyka, Game Designer
- Tim Schafer, Game Designer
- Warren Spector, Game Designer
- Jon Van Caneghem, Game Designer
- Roberts Williams, Game Designer
- Will Wright, Game Designer
- Greg Zeschuk, Game Designer

**Games**
- AD&D "Gold Box" Games (late '80s and early '90s)
- Age of Empires (Microsoft, 1997)
- Alone in the Dark (Interplay, 1992)
- Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn (Interplay, 2001)
- BattleField 1942 (Electronic Arts, 2002)
- Beeware (PopCap, 2000)
- The Bard's Tale (EA, 1985)
- Battle Chess (Interplay, 1988)
- BattleGround series (Blizzard, 1995–present)
- Cheesemaster (Software Toolworks, 1986)
- Civilization (MicroProse, 1991)
- Command & Conquer (Westwood Studios, 1995)
- Crusader Kings (Paradox, 2008)
- Crusader No Remorse (Origin, 1995)
- Dark Forces II: Jedi Knight (LucasArts, 1997)
- Day of the Tentacle (LucasArts, 1993)
- Diablo (Blizzard, 1997)
- Doom (id Software, 1993)
- Dungeon Master (FlySoft Software, 1997)
- EverQuest (Sony Online, 1999)
- F-19 Stealth Fighter (MicroProse, 1988)
- Gunship (Electronic Arts, 2002)
- Half-Life (Valve Software, 1999)
- Harpoon (360 Pacific, 1999)
- Heroes of Might and Magic II (New World Computing, 1997)
GRAND THEFT AUTO III
Interactive sandbox. M-rated blueprint of debauchery. Political lighting rod. Just about everything there is to say about the Grand Theft Auto series has already been said to death. That, however, doesn’t take away its impact on the gaming landscape since its console release in 2001 (the PC version came out in 2002). Learning lessons from RPGs, GTA3 offered action games a way to advance (or not advance) through a 3D world at your own pace. Here was a game where it was just as much fun (if not more) to run over pedestrians as it was to advance the storyline. Whether it’s the ridiculously stereotyped gang, the mature themes, or a dial-full of radio stations with original music and chatter, the game market became more than just a kids’ playground. Love it or hate it, GTA became a spate of thug-life emulators (none of which ever manage to stack up to the sophistication of the GTA series)—and has become the whipping boy of political agendas.

MANIAC MANSION
In 1987, fledgling developer Lucasfilm Games (known today as LucasArts) kicked off a legacy of award-winning graphic adventures with this bizarre tale of mad scientists, abducted cheerleaders, brain-sucking meteoroids, and oddball tentacle monsters with aspirations of rock stardom. Maniac Mansion’s point-and-click interface (something we take for granted these days) offered an elegant alternative to the arguably maddening text parser common to Sierra’s adventure games of the era—and the far more forgiving plot structure taught the genre’s designers that death need not pose an ever-present threat. The game’s popularity eventually bore a sequel (Day of the Tentacle), an oddball television sitcom starring a group of SCTV alumni, and even a fan-made remake. Here’s hoping that LucasArts hasn’t shelved this legendary franchise forever—and that it one day gets back to its roots.
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I'm just gonna come out and say this: Microsoft sucks at handling first-party PC games. Obviously, the folks up top are keenly interested in rolling Windows Vista out to as many consumers as possible... so how does Microsoft's gaming division pitch in? With two Vista-exclusive releases: Halo 2, a port of a 3-year-old Xbox game; and Shadowrun, a cross-platform online FPS clearly designed with console gamers in mind, with none of the pizzazz that we've come to expect from most quality PC shooters. That's the best Microsoft can do? Go Vista!

Now, I don't mean to turn this into a console-versus-PC rant, but it's painfully obvious that PC games play second fiddle up at the Redmond mothership—and the weak efforts to push Vista as a gaming platform are barely justifiable as "efforts" at all. How about a PC version of Halo Wars, or—if Microsoft really wants to put its money where its mouth is—a simultaneous PC/Xbox 360 launch for Halo 3? And when are we going to get an implementation of Games for Windows Live that actually furnishes the same level of connectivity as its console counterpart? (Hint: It needs to run independently of whatever game you're currently playing.) Are these guys even paying attention? • Ryan Scott, Reviews Editor
**Tomb Raider: Anniversary**
Play Lara Croft's original adventure for the first time again.

**Dungeon Runners**
GUILD WARS 2.5, or something more?

**Call of Juarez**
We reckon y'all will enjoy this well-written Pierogi Western.

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**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:

- **9-10**: Excellent
  Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.
  
- **7-8.5**: Good
  Enjoyable throughout with minor flaws.
  
- **6-5.5**: Average
  Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.
  
- **4.5-3**: Bad
  Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.
  
- **0-2.5**: Terrible
  Never should have been made.

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

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**MEET THE CREW**

The Review Crew is the IUP Network’s ensemble cast of game critics from all of our print and online publications. We believe that games are more than the sum of their parts, so we tackle them subjectively, as experiences.

- **RYAN SCOTT**
  REVIEWS EDITOR
  Red Dead Redemption and GW2 reviews overlord. Ryan Scott splits his free time between comics, video game speculation, and way too many MAXRPGS.
  Current Faves: The Lord of the Rings Online: City of Helm’s Deep, Digital Dragon: Tomb Raider: Anniversary
  1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.IUP.com

- **SEAN MCKENZIE**
  MANAGING EDITOR
  Still holding tightly to the iron grip of World of Warcraft. Sean breaks fast every week and again for a good RPG, strategy game, or first-person shooter.
  Current Faves: Horned WarCraft, Half-Life 2: Tomb Raider: Anniversary
  1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.IUP.com

- **DARREN GLADSTONE**
  SENIOR EDITOR
  Neat, tuck, old-school gamer. Born with a 11-59-14A in his hands, Darren’s played on just about every computer and console house to make.
  Current Faves: Sim & Merc: Season 1, Battle for Wesnoth
  1UP.com Blog: GFWDarren.IUP.com

- **SCOTT SHARKEY**
  SENIOR REVIEWER
  GFW Werewolves, IUP.com
  Scott was raised by wild woodland creatures until the tender age of 5, when they all died. His upbringing was completed by a Nintendo.
  Current Faves: The Lord of the Rings Online: Dungeon Runners
  1UP.com Blog: GFSSharkey.IUP.com

- **ERIC NEGEHR**
  STAFF REVIEWER
  A no-fault lawyer by day, Eric started gaming at 6 years old, and has since spent countless hours on games.
  Current Faves: Europa Universalis II, Command & Conquer 3
  1UP.com Blog: ThelFeetFlameLawes.IUP.com

- **JOE RYBICKI**
  STAFF REVIEWER
  Official PlayStation Magazine alum Joe is now a rogue agent, ready to champion the cause of the innocent in a world of criminals who operate above the law.
  Current Faves: P2X, Practical Intelligence Quotient, Cooking Mama, Cock Off
  1UP.com Blog: GFWJoe.IUP.com

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Head to ReviewCrew.IUP.com to meet all of the IUP Network’s expert reviewers.
**Console Cross-Play**

1UP.com gave the Xbox 360 version of *Shadowrun* an 8 out of 10 score—but what's good for the goose isn't always good for the gander. The game simply screws up stuff that PC players take for granted. It has extremely limited server-browsing (when it works); no visible stat-tracking aside from Achievements (without transparency; TrueSkill matching might as well be voodoo); no text chat or command console; no way to make custom maps; and obvious aim/interface concessions. *Shadowrun*'s biggest lure is the chance to play with console-only friends. Maybe...since you can't even be sure which team you'll end up on.

To keep players from being resurrected by their teammates, disembowel their corpses. Sounds grisly, but they just vanish in a flash of purple smoke.
Shadowrun

The Pledge

PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: FASA Studio
GENRE: Multiplayer/First-Person Shooter
AVAILABLE: Retail
ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.2GHz dual-core CPU, 2GB RAM, 4.5GB hard drive space, 256MB videocard, internet connection, Windows Vista
MULTIPLAYER: 2-16 players (online only)
VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

Kit out your own miniclass following the loose rock-paper-scissors model of well-balanced (and smartly restricted) metahuman powers.

AS WITH MOST MAGIC TRICKS, SHADOWRUN TURNS FROM "OOGH!" TO "OH" ONCE YOU SPOT THE ACE TUCKED UP THE PRESDIGITATOR'S SLEEVE.

REVIEW

It's one of the most protracted tutorials you'll ever play, but it's also one of the most promising: regenerative golden trees straight from an Aranoi/Film; magic-sucking grenades that weaken minds and 'Trolls' armored hides; energy monsters summoned from the place between worlds; brain gear that lets you spot enemies behind walls—and juju that lets you teleport through those walls. Work your way through Shadowrun's offline training missions, and you'll begin to believe its tagline's bold claim that, by gum, the rules of engagement have been rewritten.

THE TURN

But, as with most magic tricks, Shadowrun turns from "OOGH!" to "OH" once you spot the ace tucked up the presdigitator's sleeve. That summoned beast from beyond? Well, he's pretty much a turret. The noble Tree of Life? A health dispenser placed by another game's medic. Enhanced Vision? Teleport? Developer-sanctioned wall hacks. Derivation is no sin by default, of course—so why does this shooter wear out its welcome so quickly?

Maybe it's the game types: You basically get only two versions of Capture the Flag and one version of Deathmatch, and that's it. Maybe it's the waiting: Click "Play," and it can take up to five minutes to find your first game, assuming you haven't messed with your game-type preferences (to be fair, once you're hooked up with a party, play moves smoothly from match to match...unless a server goes down; then it's back to square one).

Maybe it's the maps—complex anthills of zigzagging corridors and crisscrossing ramps, with multiple high roads for gliding types, underground tunnels for folks who prefer to crawl up ladders the old-fashioned way, and compound layers to mitigate the tactical tripod card of X-ray vision and teleportation. The magical backdrops hang together better—both structurally and thematically—than the unappealing shantytowns and warehouses, and so only half of the nine maps really qualify as much fun. Maybe it's the overall lack of variety. Many single-player shooters (or their free mods) have more multiplayer content than this stand-alone game.

Or maybe it's Shadowrun's ultimate solution to cross-platform play. Depending on how you look at it, FASA has either given Xbox 360 player's luxurious aim assistance (get your enemy in the big pizazz-sized targeting circle and you're set—or purchase Smartlink technology for even more tracking help), or they've gimped PC players by eliminating the advantage of pixel precision. As in some other tactical shooters, moving temporarily widens your cone of spray, which would be fine if most weapons weren't hugely inaccurate even when you're crouched and statue still. Only the sniper rifle takes much advantage of the mouse. Even hotkeys are gimped—you can purchase a large number of powers over the course of a game, but you can map only three at a time (exactly the right number to fit on the 360 controller's bumpers and triggers).

PC shooter buffs will rightly resent this—and FASA succeeded in making a PC FPS that will appeal mostly to people who don't like FPSes. That kind of paradox would normally stop a game's development cold on day one.

This is also the first time I've seen Live Achievements actively work against a game. In public matches, team tactics vanish as folks spam Trees of Life ("I'm trying to get my Healing Achievement!") or run rampant with swords simply so they can finish up their MMORPG-ish quota of 100 katana kills. I know this because people announce these intentions over Live chat as often as they yell, "Rez me! Rez me! Rez me!"

THE PRESTIGE

The PC version of Shadowrun does come with its own unique joy: Your rare arrival in a game lobby is treated like the return of a lost astronaut, the discovery of the last unicorn, or the birth of a messiah. The heavens open; the fated caval is slaughtered; Achievements unlock in your wake.

The Live voices stop jabbering and whisper, awed, "The Vista player...he is here." Sean Molloy

VERDICT

Cool setting; useful tactical powers; interesting race/class mix.
Not enough to its cross-platform compromises neuter PC's strength.

5

AVERAGE

Games for Windows

DFW1UP.COM • 75
**TOMB RAIDER: ANNIVERSARY**

**A worthy celebration**

**REVIEW**

Poor Lara Croft. She's spent an awful lot of time getting kicked around by her creators. But last year's *Legend* went a long way toward redeeming Lara and compensating for the many wrongs done to her and the franchise. Now, *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* proves that was no fluke.

As a retelling of the original story, *Anniversary* is all about archaeology and exploration—indeed, *Tomb Raider* was always intended to be. The story is the same, the levels are named the same, and they're set in the same areas...but virtually everything else is different. Gone are the vast black, cubist spaces of the first game, replaced by enormous, gorgeous, detailed levels with plenty of opportunities for vertical movement and vertigo-inducing acrobatics.

I do miss those open spaces, though; being in the middle of a small pool of light in a seemingly limitless cavern gave a sense of scale and exploration that *Anniversary* doesn't quite match. But that's a small complaint: that's more than made up for by the excellent pacing and level design, which provide some nice scares and genuinely tense moments.

**VERDICT**

- Gorgeous levels; some interesting puzzles.
- Squirrelly camera and controls.

8.5/10

**GOOD**

Games for Windows

As a retelling of the original story, *Anniversary* is all about archaeology and exploration—in short, raiding tombs.

> *Tomb Raider: Anniversary* has nice cinematic scenes...it's just too bad you have to fight the camera to switch from "cinematic" to "usable."

Joe Rybicki

---

*Anniversary is rife with familiar scenes from the first game, restored with graphics that don't suck ass.*
DUNGEON RUNNERS
Contagious Exquisite Online Action-RPG from the Ghetto

It's one thing to completely nail that carrot-on-a-stick thing that Diablo did so well; we've seen lots of games pull it off since then, and even more that tried. But to pull it off while simultaneously taking the piss out of every cliché in the genre—that's a trick.

Dungeon Runners knows it's a Diablo knock-off, and it beats you over the head with that knowledge, constantly and hilariously. Remember Diablo's Deckard Cain and his crazy Sean Connery voice? Half the people you talk to have even crazier Sean Connery voices and make stupid martini jokes in them. That "Godly Plate of the Whale" loot-naming convention everyone unabashedly ripped off? Dungeon Runners does it, too—except you'll be picking up crap like the "Contagious Exquisite Decoder Ring of the Nihilistic Crocodile" or the "Rambunctious Cardboard Ax from the Ghetto." NPCs sarcastically thank you for busting into their houses and raiding their chests. The whole thing doubles as not only a pretty good action-RPG, but as a send-up of the entire genre.

Better still, it costs exactly jack—unless you want to actually equip the game's rarer drops, in which case it'll run you five bucks a month. With no price tag for the game itself and a subscription fee that asks about the same as a single gallon of gas, Dungeon Runners has a pretty nice cost-benefit ratio going for it...and they'll probably even refund your $50 if the game doesn't do anything for you. #Scott Sharkey

VERDICT
8/10
GOOD

### Did we mention that the rat dungeon is named Algernon? Well, it is.
Halo 2
The simplest enigma

PUBLISHER: Microsoft DEVELEPŒR: Bungie/Hired Gun GENRE: First-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, Windows Vista MULTPLAYER: 2-16 players VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

REVIEW

Time’s slapped a big gold “console classic” sticker on Halo 2. I can see why. Halo 2 was a benchmark for FPSing with analog sticks; its dual-wielding expertly worked the button layout of an Xbox control pad. Co-op was a blast. Vast multitudes still play on Xbox Live, and for good reason—it’s simple matchmaking tools and party system (which lets you tag along with friends from match to match with minimal effort) were a revelation and a revolution. For co-ops. In 2004.

A CARNIVAL OF SORTS
Transported to PC in 2007, however, Bungie’s console classic looks downright primitive—especially when landmark games like Half-Life 2 and Battlefield 2 have reset the bar for what a PC FPS can and should do.

If you’re considering picking it up for the singleplayer campaign, reconsider. Switching viewpoints between Master Chief and one of the game’s nonsensically religious outer-space shark-monkeys was, and is, a narrative disaster—and the game’s ending, an abortion on the Xbox, is still an abortion here. The original Halo’s story was better. The shooting-gallery-style gameplay was simple then and is even more so now, as the chunky, Muppety Covenant seemed unprepared for the precision and speed of the mouse. Enemies and effects look slightly sharper and shinier, but textures and level structures that worked just fine on the Xbox look gross on modern PCs. Characters not clad in shiny helmets or made of pure energy have a bad case of cookie-dough face, and corridors and stairwells consist of repeating patterns of trapezoids and triangles. It’s all fun and colorful, but so is a carnival—and equally run-down.

UNIVERSAL QUESTIONS
As proof of concept for Games for Windows Live, Halo 2 is partly convincing. You won’t have trouble finding a game online, and enough folks play to keep a half-dozen or so public servers full at any time—though unless you happen to have a dozen friends with Halo 2 and Windows Vista, you’ll have to settle for whatever mode the masses are playing, which is usually Slayer (deathmatch)...or if you’re lucky, Team Slayer (even the more “complicated” modes are simplistic: suck it up or sit it out).

The control scheme makes few concessions for PC gamers. Instead of using a run key, you move at the console version’s “walk speed” which barely qualifies as a light jog. Plug in an Xbox 360 control pad and you’re treated to instant transformation of HUD elements and generous aim assist. Nearly two dozen maps populate the game—though the online community’s already settled on its subset of choice. Despite some silly level design (and spawn points that stick you in instant-frag situations), the fun weapons and vehicles prevail through brute force—no apologies or excuses.

But I’m left with the same questions I had when Halo 2 for PC was first unveiled to thunderous confusion: Why Windows Vista? If the answer really is just GFW Live, then why no cross-platform play, when the game would clearly benefit from the immense Xbox community? It’s as simple as technical constraints, then why even bother? A game this simple shouldn’t be so damn puzzling. —Sean Mollol

VERDICT

6

Lots of multiplayer maps to choose from: GFW Live implemented decently.
Not many people online; primitive visuals and gameplay; Vista required.
Evidently, the French don’t hate everything united

REVIEW

The days of Pole Position are gone. No longer can you toss a quarter into a machine, grab the wheel, and careen headlong into an 8-bit winner’s circle. These days, the most popular racing games require you to manage everything from gear ratios to suspension tightness—and manage them well, if you hope to take that coveted champagne shower. Now, don’t get me wrong: I love me some gear ratios, but even I sometimes find myself waxing nostalgic about the heady days of pick-up-and-play racing.

Enter French developer Nadeo and the latest iteration in its TrackMania series: TrackMania United, a "classic" racer in the Pole Position mold. You need little more than two buttons and a thumbstick to enjoy the hundreds of tracks United offers; the simple system is perfect for those intimidated by Gran Turismo but still jonesing for a little velocity. Unfortunately, that velocity often hits zero as a result of United’s penchant for locking up—both on the track and in the custom map editor.

And that map editor—when United maintains its stability—is undoubtedly the game’s marquee feature. Although it could’ve used a tutorial for the more esoteric elements, with a little trying and erasing you’ll be laying down tracks faster than John Henry with a scorpion in his boxers. Indeed, a big part of United’s entertainment value lies in spending hours tweaking every detail of your custom maps until your OCD temporarily abates. More importantly, the map editor takes United beyond its spiritual racing ancestors: Pole Position may have been white-knuckle fun, but United combines that with the shear mad-scientist fun of building something and watching it come to life.

The system is perfect for those intimidated by Gran Turismo but still jonesing for a little velocity.

Eric Neigher

VERDICT

Simple learning curve and matchmaking; creating custom tracks is a blast.
Racing mechanic is a bit limited; editor could use a tutorial; stability problems.

7/10 GOOD

TrackMania United

CALL OF JUAREZ

Skin that smoke wagon and see what happens!

REVIEW

Holy slots! Who would’ve thought a Polish developer would create one of the best-written English-language games of the year? And a Western, too. Joseph Conrad, your countrymen have taken up your legacy; whoever penned this script deserves to be lauded profusely.

Juarez follows the exploits of two protagonists in its Leone-worthy setting: the shiftless Billy Candle and his stepuncle, the redoubtable reformed ruffian Reverend Ray. While Billy is a compelling character—props to the producers for not shying away from the racism he encounters because of his half-Mexican heritage—the real star here is the Reverend. Forget Gordon Freeman, Master Chief, even Duke Nukem: The Reverend is the most badass, gun-tooting, bullet-time-engaging, Bible-spouting son of a bitch ever to be transformed into ones and zeroes. I dare anyone not to crack a slow grin at the Rev hurls: AND THEY SHALL KNOW MY NAME IS JEHovah!

Whoever penned this script deserves to be lauded profusely.

Erin Neigher

VERDICT

Engaging, exciting story; Reverend Ray is the coolest game character ever.
Looooooong load times; a few lame stealth sequences; kinda easy for the FPS pros.

8/10 GOOD
OVERLORD
For the horde!

PUBLISHER: Codemasters DEVELOPER: Triumph Studios GENRE: Action-Strategy AVAILABILITY: Retail & SRB RATING: Teen MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4.5GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended) MULTIPLAYER: 2 players VERSION REVIEWED: Near-Quad-Reviewable

REVIEW

Being evil! Hell, that’s easy. Letting players unleash their id and make ’em laugh at the same time? That’s the hard part. Yet, between ordering the demise of countless sheep and gutting rabid unicorns, that’s exactly what’s happening in third-person action-adventure Overlord.

Many games try dangling that cause-and-effect karmic pendulum, yet it rarely works: you don’t care what happens. Embracing that, Overlord essentially says, “Go on, be the most insufferably evil bastard on the planet, and we won’t punish you any more than we would if you actually decided to help people.” Saving the town’s food supply is an option, sure—the people will give you a hero’s welcome. On the other hand, hoarding the slash and killing witnesses can lead to additional side quests...like, say, kidnapping women to create your own harems. Since evil deeds unlock so many more cool options, the challenge becomes doing the “right” thing (achieving a zero percent corruption rating’s easier said than done).

THE POWER BEHIND THE THRONE

Still, Overlord isn’t really about the overlord. Yes, you can buy weaponry or kid the castle with everything from torture gear to coffee tables, but your gang of adorably sadistic minions steal the show. Point in a direction and let ’em go: they know to attack targets, loot the area, or move objects...and if you’re low on health, your subjects willingly jump into a nearby shrine and die to restore you. At first, they’re ladder to fling into lights, consequences be damned. If they die, you just call up more. Something happens along the way, though: You get attached to the little guys. You want to keep that pumpkin-headed, dress-wearing imp alive—not only because you’ve had him since the beginning, but because new gear means a more powerful minion. Besides, the aforementioned “meat grinder” strategy only works for so long. Tactics eventually come into play with new minion types: Reds hurl fireballs, greens excel at stealth, and blues hang back as healers. Suddenly, combat requires more finesse than just throwing those brown scribbled minions at every dilemma.

The problem is that you need finer control than the keyboard-and-mouse setup offers. Play enough battles requiring simultaneous attacks from a gremlin horde and your archers, and you’ll notice a huge difference when using a gamepad. As is now becoming standard, Overlord maps its controller layout to the ubiquitous Xbox 360 pad—the left stick moves the master, and sweeping the right stick gives total control of the minions. So if you don’t already own a gamepad, add that to the price tag.

Your lackeys also embody Overlord’s one weak point: Loosen the iron grip, and they’ll stupidly drown themselves chassing after a bird...or race headlong into overwhelming odds. Maybe the boneheaded A.I. is intentional; maybe they’re supposed to be feral lemmings, and the game’s forcing you to slow down for tactics—but I ain’t buying it. With a throng of mischievious pets as the game’s centerpiece, you’d expect ’em to be a little better housebroken. I lost track of how many times I voluntarily restarted from a checkpoint to keep one dopey übergremlin alive. Then again, any game that makes me want to restart—rather than making me have to restart—can’t be all bad. —Daren Gladstone

VERDICT

8/10

A genuinely different—and darkly funny—game.

No map means getting lost frequently; boneheaded minions occasionally bone themselves accidentally.

Here we’re ransacking Melvin’s kitchen and equipping the horde with whatever’s lying around—including butcher knives and pumpkins.
REVIEW WRAP-UP

The games that were too late (or too lame) to review in this issue

RESIDENT EVIL 4

PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Capcom
GENRE: Survival-horror
AVAILABILITY: Retail
ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.6GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 768MB hard drive space, 128MB videocard (gamepad recommended)
MULTIPLAYER: None
VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

How’s this for scary: a PC game, released in 2007, with zero mouse support. None. So the one thing you might hope to get from the PC port of Capcom’s brilliant Resident Evil 4 is the one thing you don’t get. Bravo! Way to miss the point of a PC port! On the other hand, the game is brilliant—one of the best survival-horror games ever made—so if you didn’t play the console versions, it’s worth it, as long as you have a gamepad or don’t mind using just the keyboard. The higher-res graphics are great, too, which makes blowing the heads off zombies that much cooler.

FREESTYLE STREET BASKETBALL

PUBLISHER: Vresedi Games
DEVELOPER: JCEntertainment
GENRE: Sports
AVAILABILITY: Free Download (freestyle.stores.ondemand.com)
ESRB RATING: Everyone
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1GB hard drive space
MULTIPLAYER: 2-6 players
VERSION REVIEWED: Final Downloadable

Buy a new pair of Nikes, but don’t kid yourself—they’re not adding an extra 12 inches to your vertical jump. Still, that’s exactly what the deal is in Freestyle, the b-ball MMO. The game is technically free (go on, download and play it right now), but once your urban-outfitted avatar starts leveling up, you’ll want to pay for stat-boosting gear. The online matching system ensures that your rookie player won’t get cloven by level-awesome pimps, but you just won’t dig the keyboard-only gameplay—even in the Dr. J and Larry Bird Go One on One days, you could plug in a joystick.

MONSTER MADNESS: BATTLE FOR SUBURBIA

PUBLISHER: SouthPeak Interactive
DEVELOPER: Artificial Studios
GENRE: Action
AVAILABILITY: Retail
ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.56GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 800MB hard drive space, 128MB videocard
MULTIPLAYER: 2-16 players
VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

Nothing beats grabbing a buddy and collecting absurd weapons to mow down hundreds upon hundreds of monster-movie clichés. Monster Madness would be a pretty spiffy remake of Zombies Are My Neighbors...if it weren’t hampered by lousy, unmappable controls, insta-death environmental hazards, a frustrating checkpoint system, and vehicles that steer like a fat kid in a go-kart. The competitive arena mode is a curious (and wasted) addition, considering that online co-op play—the one feature that might’ve made Monster Madness an attractive purchase—is nowhere to be found.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN: AT WORLD’S END

PUBLISHER: Disney Interactive
DEVELOPER: Eurocom
GENRE: Action
AVAILABILITY: Retail
ESRB RATING: Teen
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 1.56GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 1GB hard drive space (gamepad recommended)
MULTIPLAYER: 3-2 players
VERSION REVIEWED: Retail Box

This Pirates of the Caribbean movie tie-in is pretty much the textbook definition of “sloppy”: boring, tactically bankrupt combat that boils down to simple button-mashing; connect-the-dots mission objectives; multiple characters with no real differences in play style; and awful graphics that don’t scale beyond a Stone Age 1024x768 resolution. At least developer Eurocom got the voices right, with some dead ringers standing in for Johnny Depp and company. If we were going to make a cliché plank-walking joke while advising you to avoid At World’s End, now would be an excellent time.
THE HOT LIST
Five still-available games to buy right now

GRAB BAG

Fiending for a good game to play over the long, dry summer months? Here are five excellent titles to take a peek at if you missed out on 'em.

COMPANY OF HEROES
Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War developer Relic Entertainment shifts from postapocalyptic Orcs to battle-hardened World War II soldiers in this beautifully gritty real-time strategy game. Company of Heroes embraces the same capture-and-keep gameplay style as Dawn of War, with even better AI that intrinsically understands concepts like cover and suppression fire and messy, war-torn battlefields that don't waste any time with old-school dirt-farming concepts.

INDIGO PROPHECY
This modern reinterpretation of the classic adventure-game genre from gaming auteur David Cage casts you in the unlikely role of a murderer—and then a homicide detective—and then the murderer again. Mature, complex, and unlike most of what you see on store shelves these days, Indigo Prophecy (renamed in the U.S. from its original title, Fahrenheit, much to Cage’s dismay) is the gaming equivalent of an indie film that somehow got released into mainstream channels. Unlike minigame sequences (think Dragon’s Lair or Simon Says) and convoluted third act aside, it's one of those envelope-pushing underdogs we all wish they made more of. If you buy it, then maybe they will.

TICKET TO RIDE
This PC conversion of Days of Wonder’s award-winning board game is one of those guilty pleasures that sucks you in and never lets you go. Up to five players race to connect various railway routes across U.S. or European maps (it plays much better than this paltry description suggests). This port also lets you tap into a thriving online community. Get it at: www.daysofwonder.com.

GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II: GOLD EDITION
If you still have a copy of 1996's Master of Orion II on your hard drive, that's probably because you haven't tried Stardock's 2006 heir to MOO's intergalactic throne, Galactic Civilizations II: Dread Lords. Build colonies, trade tech with aliens, and construct your own custom fleets from a toy box full of spaceship parts. The Gold Edition package is even better—it comes bundled with the indispensable Dark Avatar expansion. At the rate quality single-player space-strategy games come out, you'll be hard-pressed to find something to top it until the year 2016.

GRAND THEFT AUTO: SAN ANDREAS
The latest GTA's biggest claim to fame may be its hidden sex minigame that lit up the ESRB like a Christmas tree (the current Version 2.0 removes this “unintentional” feature), but the actual game itself is a pretty good takeoff on Boyz n the Hood-style gangster culture, with the usual display of carjacking, mofa-capping, and general political incorrectness. San Andreas also features some light RPG-ish character-building mechanics and spans three huge cities.

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Game names in yellow indicate GFW Editors’ Choice award winners

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Building a Better PC

How to maximize your Games for Windows® experience

News flash: With the fall and holiday months fast looming, every gamer worth his weight in joysticks knows that the coming weeks will bring a dizzying whirlwind of high-profile Games for Windows®-branded releases.

Mind you, the average high-end Windows XP or Windows Vista™ user can readily dive right into blockbuster titles like Hellgate: London™ and World in Conflict™. But to fully appreciate these all-star outings, it’s a given that you’ll want to invest in an ultrapowered PC.

Thanks to manufacturers like Dell™, cooing on technology’s bleeding edge needn’t cost a fortune or require that you possess a masters in computer engineering. Dell gaming guru Abizar Valkaria reveals the secrets to shopping for a killer desktop rig without breaking a sweat.

Case—Your system’s chassis is its backbone, Valkaria insists, and should provide maximum flexibility. That means boasting four to six USB ports for connecting add-ons like an Xbox 360™ Controller for Windows and an equal amount of slots for devices like a CD-RW drive, DVD drive, and sound card. A couple bays should be free for further expansion as well, “just in case something else cool comes out in the next six months.”

Central Processing Unit (CPU)—“Choose systems with multicore processors,” Valkaria advises. “As more games become optimized for use with them, they’ll deliver better performance.” Certainly, you can save in the short run by choosing a dual-core system, which offers solid results. But Valkaria counsels springing for a quad core unit if possible, as it’ll provide greater scalability in the future. See Dell’s XPS™ 720 H2C™ ultimate gamer’s PC for a prime example.

Graphics Processing Unit (GPU)—As gaming accessories go, your computer’s video card offers maximum bang for the buck. The more power and memory (256MB should be a bare minimum, with 512MB recommended) it possesses, the sharper in-game visuals will look and the faster and smoother they’ll run. “When shopping for a GPU, DirectX® 10 support is also a must,” adds Valkaria. “Your video card should further offer the ability to be pared with a second GPU to achieve even more impressive results.”

Monitor—Gorgeous, big-screen viewing, e.g., like that provided by Dell’s 30-inch 3007WFP HC flat panel monitor, is the way to go. The bigger your monitor and the higher its resolution, the more colors and details will jump out. If money’s no object, you can additionally link two, or even three, separate monitors to form the ultimate viewscreen. Valkaria recommends LCD models, which are just as speedy as their CRT counterparts yet frequently provide sharper visuals.

Hard Drive—“The hard drive directly supports your gaming experience,” says Valkaria. “That’s why I suggest buying as much space as you can afford.” Games have a large footprint, he explains, as do videos and music. “The worst part is figuring out how to scale upward later,” he chuckles. Using a RAID solution—which writes information on several drives, thereby improving speed and facilitating data recovery— is also recommended.

Prefer something a little more portable? Keep your eyes open for a jaw-dropping announcement in just a few weeks as Dell’s laptop division gets ready to redefine the possibilities for gaming on the go.

The best part, however you choose to play: Either way, with Dell’s PCs and Microsoft’s Games for Windows initiative, you just can’t go wrong.
Hardware Helper
Getting the most from your gaming accessories

Ask any PC gamer, and they’ll tell you the benefits of investing in Microsoft Hardware’s many gaming products are both obvious and substantial.

Do so, and you won’t just experience interactive outings stamped with the pioneering Games for Windows® brand the way their creators intended. You’ll also be playing in the lap of luxury, enjoying devices custom-engineered to improve performance, enhance immersion, and provide a level of comfort rivals simply can’t match.

Little-known secret, though: For every wide-eyed enthusiast dreaming of copping a killer wireless game controller or slick, fully customized keyboard, several dozen who already own them have yet to fully take advantage of these awesome accessories. Put bluntly, while you may already possess the essential tools needed to get an edge on opponents, you might not truly be doing everything within your power to play to win.

Keen to understand more, we cornered Bill Jukes, product marketing manager for gaming devices, to get the scoop on the hottest features hiding within these first-class, high-tech peripherals. And, naturally, learn why the industry’s leading Windows XP— and Windows Vista™-compatible hardware add-ons are even more exciting than you think.

HINTS AND TIPS

Habu™ Laser Gaming Mouse
Recommended Genres: Action, Adventure, Puzzle, FPS, Strategy

- Dynamically toggle sensitivity (400, 800, 1600, and 2000 DPI settings available) to fit individual games at the press of a button. Lower sensitivity helps in games like Halo® 2, where pinpoint precision is crucial. Higher sensitivity, however, is preferable in titles such as Supreme Commander™, where speed’s more important.
- A plug-and-play device, the Habu makes a great fit for gaming on the go, such as when playing on a laptop. Its high degree of sensitivity further pays off when enjoying Games for Windows titles in cramped spaces, e.g., while reclining in an airplane seat.
- Wrist cramping? Removable side button panels let you soothe aches by allowing you to adjust layouts to fit the size of your hand or personal preference.
- All seven buttons on the mouse are programmable: Save time in sticky situations by putting superpowered attacks and eye-catching moves right at your fingertips.

Xbox 360™ Wireless Controller for Windows®
Recommended Genres: Action/Arcade, Casual, Racing, Sports

- Intuitive design and responsive handling make the controller your best bet when enjoying thrill-intensive challenges—just bolt it out and watch your skills quickly improve. See Lego Stars II: The Original Trilogy™, or any of the hundreds of great casual games compatible with Windows XP and Windows Vista.
- Ready to rumble? Connect the controller to your PC to experience racing games, flight simulations, and raging firefights in an exhilarating new way, as built-in vibration feedback literally leaves you shaking with excitement.
- Get connected with Games for Windows® LIVE, which lets you play against your Xbox 360™-owning friends in acclaimed titles like Shadowrun™ and finally determine which dominates: keyboard/mouse or controller. You can also plug the device right into your console for immediate thrills.

Reclusa™ Gaming Keyboard
Recommended Genres: Action/Arcade, FPS, Role-Playing, Simulation, Strategy

- Swap weapons on a dime with a dozen programmable buttons that are configurable to your tastes. Jog dials and hotkeys prove especially useful, giving your mouse-warped fingers a break from manual grueling or queuing up complex finishing moves.

Habu™ Laser Gaming Mouse
The device's blue LED backlighting proves excellent for gaming in low-light conditions, so you can enjoy sprawling epics like *BioShock* into the wee hours. Not only will the *Roclusa* provide ambiance—those macros you've created will come in exceptionally handy during extended campaigns.

- Capable of storing multiple user profiles, the keyboard can be preloaded to your tastes with a wealth of game- and genre-specific configurations. That way, no matter what disc you pop in your drive, you'll always be ready to play like a pro at the press of a button.

IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0
Recommended Genres: Action/Arcade, Adventure, FPS, Sports

- Because the IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0's scroll wheel has deters, it's easy to tell when commands have been successfully inputted. FPS and Action RPG fans especially should take note of this feature, as it helps to convey an increased level of confidence during real-time exploration and combat.

- With optical tracking that's fast and dependable, accuracy's the watchword here. Couple the device with games accordingly: It'll be that much easier to execute desperate headshots or sink that final putt.

- Capable of gliding smoothly across numerous surfaces, the IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0 makes a reliable companion when operating under suboptimal conditions, like when you're gaming on a park bench or buddy's basement floor.

More good news: The IntelliMouse Explorer 3.0 isn't the only legendary name making a comeback this summer, as Microsoft reaffirms itself as the final word in gaming hardware.

Stay tuned for more exciting announcements around the end of August, including a one-of-a-kind look at what the future of Games for Windows holds. Consider yourself warned....

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**THE BEST FOR LESS**

Score more with GameSpring™, the casual gamer's subscription service

True Story: I was recently accused of having commitment issues.

*Granted, I love downloading stand-alone versions of the award-winning amusements being offered at MSN® Games (games.msn.com) as much as anyone. However, I'm sometimes reluctant to purchase them simply because I know that another irresistible new game will arrive days later—It's only natural.*

Playing the Field

Fortunately for my virtual love life, there's GameSpring®:

Available from MSN Games, GameSpring® is a game-rich subscription plan that allows players unlimited, ad-free access to full-featured versions of many of the leading attractions found on MSN Games. What's more, you can also download as many games as you desire from the ever-expanding GameSpring® library and play from your PC just by using your Windows Live™ sign-in.

With over 100 awesome titles like *Diner Dash 2*, *Bejeweled 2*, and *Monopoly: Here & Now* to choose from, it's a beautiful sight.

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**THE DATING GAME**

Cooler still: Membership costs just $14.99 per month for unlimited access to these amusements. That’s less than the cost of a single title!

What’s more, GameSpring® offers even greater value for high-volume players. Three-month subscriptions cost a mere $38.97 ($12.99/month), and a full year costs only $95.98. An incredible $7.99/month!

Translation: For literally less than half the cost of a lone online purchase each month, you can instantly savour 100-plus mind-blowing games with tons of new games being added regularly!

Happily Ever After

Realizing this, I guess I don’t really have serious commitment issues—just trouble finding the right relationship worth committing to.

So before writing yourself off as a lifelong bachelor/bachelorette and developing short-term attachments to individual games, consider settling down and enjoying the total package on a long-term basis.

Personally, I've found the perfect match in GameSpring and am willing to fully commit—at least for the coming year. Now if only all relationships were this easy....

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*—Andy Peterson, MSN Games*
Kingdom Come

Expand your desktop horizons with Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword

Think you’ve seen it all? Guess again: Despite simulating the whole of human history and the lives, times, and struggles of mankind’s most famed leaders in stunning 3D, worldwide smash hit Sid Meier’s Civilization IV’s once again about to blow the lid off sociology.

Enter all-new expansion pack Beyond the Sword, which offers 16 new leaders, 11 new scenarios, 10 new civilizations, five new wonders, additional units/buildings/technologies, and options to form corporations or spy on adversaries.

From founding empires to battling natural disasters and even rocketing into space in high tech starfighters to conquer the cosmos, the game’s creators are all too happy to educate players about the most exciting elements of the biggest Civ expansion pack ever.

CORE GAME ADDITIONS
By Alex Mantzaris, Designer/Programmer, Firaxis Games
“We’ve added a ton of great stuff. Corporations consume specific resources in order to provide benefits to their city and make the second half of the game more exciting. Espionage adds a whole new dimension—its importance to your empire is now comparable to scientific research, culture, or income from taxes. Random events give Civilization IV even more historical flavor and immersion. Advanced Starts are a pre-game setup phase players use to purchase cities, improvements, buildings, technologies, and units. Also, there’s now a new way to win the game through the Apostolic Palace. This is a wonder that allows a religion to play a major part in international affairs centuries before the United Nations makes its appearance.”

FINAL FRONTIER SCENARIO
By Jon Shafer, Designer/Programmer, Firaxis Games
“Final Frontier” takes place in the distant future. Mankind has recently started colonizing distant star systems. When all appears to be going well, the new colonies mysteriously lose contact with the Earth. Players begin as one of these scattered colonies, each with a unique background and different strengths/weaknesses.

Beginning in 2302 AD, each faction must explore, colonize, and conquer the universe as normal. A number of details on the history of Final Frontier will be presented to players as they research new technologies. All units in Final Frontier will be new but have rough parallels to core game staples. There are no land units in the scenario, only starships. Non-combat units include Colony and Construction Ships. There are also three tiers of combat units which include Scouts, Invasion Ships, Destroyers, Carriers, and even Starbases, plus many more.”

AFTERWORLD SCENARIO
By Tim McCreaden, QA Manager, Firaxis Games
“We are completely alone in this future. Part of its technological luxury involves being able to unplag your consciousness and become physically indentured for decades.

Military forces are all but nonexistent. In their place are the Bodytanks, capable of calming the harshness of conflicts without causing devastation, for these units utilize non-lethal weaponry. If lethal force was ever necessary, well, they didn’t earn the name ‘Gravebringers’ for being friendly. After unusual events occur and a science team mysteriously disappears, a squad of Gravebringers is sent in.

[As you can see.] I went in a different direction than the typical scenario. My goal is to emulate a dungeon crawl. Of course, while Beyond the Sword may initially seem like a refuge for sci-fi addicts only, history fans, fantasy fanatics, and destruction seekers will all find something to like.

Historically inclined players can leap headfirst into World War II in Road to War, travel the Silk Roads in Crossroads of the World, or become Holy Roman Emperor in Charlemagne. For [armchair generals] there’s the near-future Next War scenario. Beyond the Sword even has two unique fantasy-based scenarios: Fall from Heaven: Age of Ice and Gods of Old. So whether you’re an avocational antiquarian or Earth-shatterer-in-training, Civilization IV: Beyond the Sword’s many choices will satisfy your cravings.”
Games for Windows: The Official Magazine, the foremost authority on PC gaming, is giving away 10 Sony Online Entertainment Game Packs.

*Each Game Pack includes the following games, plus a free 90-day Station Access subscription:

- Vanguard: Saga of Heroes™
- PlanetSide®
- EverQuest® II
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Extend
Where your games live on forever!

Peggie’s freaky monkey-face level.

Thank You

No is less than pleased.

Dragon Ballys!
TOM vs. BRUCE
Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

CASUAL GAMES
Who’s the most casual? Tom vs. Bruce in Peggle, Diner Dash, and Solitaire!

PEGGLE
I play a lot of Peggle on my laptop, which I keep open on the desk beside my main computer. I play on route from Free to the Bowery-downs on autorun, going to meet the rest of my Fellowship. When we need to rest to recover power I can swivel slightly to the left to fire off a Peggle ball and watch it work its way down, down, down, up, down, up, down. I’ve even played during that brief downtime waiting for my first refinery to be built in C&C3. Peggle is the perfect way for a busy gamer to keep himself occupied during the in-between moments. It’s like Spacelo. Plus, there’s really no skill involved, which takes a lot of pressure off the player. If you play Peggle enough times, you will win. With only a mild degree of perseverance, you’re guaranteed to get through the story mode, which introduces you to talking unicorns and whatever, each with their own special balls. Bruce and I will play three random Peggle levels with random characters. Best of two out of three.

BRUCE: I never really understood Peggle. I mean, yeah, I get that it is like a pinball game but with sapient animals. But unlike some of the other casual games I’ve tried, I never really get that, “Man, I gotta play Peggle!” feeling. If I cleared a level, I would kind of feel obligated to play the next level, just to see if the skateboarding beaver would come and tell me anything. But failure to progress was nice because then I felt like I was justified in doing something else. Sometimes I would kind of lose interest in the middle of the level and hope the ball would fall into the missile silo soon so I could quit. I know—everybody is all like, “Whoa, this guy is immune to the Peggle disease!” He must be a Soviet sleeper agent or one of those things from that Star Trek episode in which the guy on another planet could see Earth through a telescope and tried to re-create it, but nothing had any taste because you can’t see how stuff tastes!” And I’m saying, yes, that’s both possible and likely. But that doesn’t make Peggle a more important game qua game than S.T.A.L.K.E.R., which is what someone said on the 1UP.com boards. Essentially, I may have deleted some swear words and stuff. Which reminds me. How come The New Republic can say “f***” but Games for Windows magazine can’t, even though the average computer gamer is 31? None of these questions is answered by Peggle.

TOM: My first game is the spiderweb level, which is awesome because the screen is full of evenly spaced pegs. But I get the pyramid-wing beaver, which sucks. I manage to rack up six free balls, but there’s pretty much no way I’m not going to clear this level. At the end, the stupid ball goes into the 10,000 point cup. My score is 220,380.

BRUCE: The whole game is dependent on the hypertonic effect of pinball bumpers. Do you like watching where the ball will go? If so, then fine. Frankly, I think this is one of those tech-worker-in-jokes that people who don’t sit at computers all day won’t quite understand. I watched the ball get me 134,000 points. You need to do better next time, ball.

TOM: My second game is the freaky monkey-face level, and I get the dragon who makes a fireball if you hit the special green peg. On my third ball, I get a double fire! I execute a secret bounce with the first fireball, cutting a swath through the pegs, but I botch the second fireball. Peggle gives Peggle takes away. So now I’ve ripped the monkey’s face wide open and I have six balls left. On my next ball, I get a sweet long shot, a purple peg, and three orange pegs. I get down to two balls and two orange pegs left, but they’re behind obstacles. This is like bowling an 8-10 split! My penultimate ball misses either orange peg, but it goes into the free-ball bucket. Still two balls and still obstacles to clear. I manage to get one of the orange pegs and the free-ball bucket again! On my last ball, I have to pull off a bank shot around an intervening peg to hit the last orange peg. I get it! I have beaten the freaky monkey face and earned 139,100 points.

BRUCE: Here is the secret to Peggle. You want Renfield. This is possibly the most cryptic Tom Waits reference I have ever seen, which doesn’t mean you’d like Peggle if you like Rain Dogs. Still, having your pinball flow through to the top when it goes off the bottom is great, because it will almost always get you an extra ball by hitting the 25,000-point threshold. On some of the challenge boards, you can get multiple extra balls if you can chain the Renfield ability and hit 75,000 points. Like almost every power-up, you want to use it at

COLUMN

Tom Chick
Prominent freelance videogame critic. Tom Chick also runs the popular website QuarterTo3.com.

Bruce Geryk
Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is GWFW’s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

Since PC games will soon be nothing but World of Warcraft and casual games, and since Tom and Bruce have already done World of Warcraft twice, they’ve finally resigned themselves to going head-to-head in a series of casual games. This month, they present some of the most wildly popular, wildly profitable, and wildly prosaic games you’ve probably never played because you’re too busy with the latest triple-A licensed boondoggle.

TOM: I love casual games, because no matter how many hit points I have or what my magic sword bonus is, they only last about 10 minutes. Let’s say you’re talking to the president, but he got called away from the phone on important business. You have 10 minutes to kill. By the time you choose your character’s facial features, pick a name, choose a class, and create the rest of your party, you’ve kept the president waiting for 20 minutes. Much better to play a casual game! If you’re the kind of person who would use those 10 minutes to silently review your presidential talking points for the hundredth time, you’re probably not the kind of person who is playing games in the first place.

BRUCE: I don’t see the point of talking points. I’m sure there are a lot of freedom to play hardcore games and be a hardcore gamer. Which sounds pretty stupid, but it’s what you have to call it when you’re the opposite of someone who plays casual games.
the beginning, because it is more effective with more pegs on the board. I used to think that the unicorn power—seeing where a ball will bounce—was pretty cool. Until I played about twice, at which point I felt I had at least as good a grasp of imaginary physics as a horse with a pointy horn on its head. Once you’ve figured out where the first few bounces will go, the rest is totally up to the beavers. And if you’re saying that no, you can figure out where the ball will bounce on the seventh flick, then I’m saying that you really need to invest that energy in something that doesn’t involve unicorns. Unfortunately, I don’t get Renfield—I get that wacky Egyptian cat. Who is—surprise—pretty useless. I clear the level but get 138,000 points. I get exactly the same score on the next one, with the lobster.

**TOM:** I wouldn’t begin to know how to describe what this level is. It’s got these curving patterns on either side and a lot of junk in the middle. My character makes explosions when I hit the green pegs. It’s an unremarkable round, but as I clear the last orange peg, the ball plunks neatly into the 100,000-point cup. With my good luck, I have truly earned the “Ode to Joy” that plays at the end of the round. My score is 266,716.

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**PEGGLE WINNER: TOM**

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**DINNER DASH**

**BRUCE:** Dinner Dash is possibly the most clever—or, in game-journalism speak, “innovative”—game idea I’ve ever seen. You are a waitress. You also play one in Dinner Dash, where the goal is to serve your customers before they get mad and storm out of the restaurant. The board, or map, or whatever you call the playing area in a casual game (which, everyone knows, isn’t really a game) is a restaurant with a bunch of tables for diners. Tables can seat two, four, or six, and you have to manage the parties who show up at the greeter’s podium, seat them, take their orders, bring them food, bring the check, and clear the tables for the next group. You get points for each of these acts you successfully perform, and a multiplier for chaining the same action, which is how you rack up hella points. The dramatic tension arises from the fact that the longer the eaters wait for whatever they need (getting their orders taken, getting their food, or check) the less happy they are. How happy they are determines how much you make in tips, based on a couple of outrageously bigoted stereotypes (college students and seniors are cheap, while businesswomen are generous) that are nonetheless relentlessly accurate. Further establishing this game’s bona fides as an ultra- realistic business-management sim, college students hang out longer before asking for the check, while senior citizens take longer to do anything, and businesswomen are very impatient. Special scenarios have you simultaneously accommodating parties comprised of the entourages of Newt Gingrich and Pacman Jones. You get bonuses for seating eaters wearing certain colored clothes in matching-colored seats, which represents their political affiliations.

**TOM:** I didn’t realize the part about political affiliations, but being the kind of guy who wants to call the president a dumbass, I feel better about leaving red people waiting in line and giving preferential treatment to the little blue people. Not that it helps my score. I am terrible at Dinner Dash. Play is excruciating. I get flustered and then it makes my stomach hurt. Plus, I’ve waited tables. I think I have post-traumatic stress disorder from the time I was opening a wine bottle for a table. The manager called me over and hissed angrily at me for doing it wrong. “You’re not cutting the head off a chicken,” he scolded, demonstrating the right way to do it. So when I put two blue people and one red person at a table with four red seats just after a group of four red people has come into the diner, I start looking around to see if I’m going to get in trouble. Bruce and I will play three endless shifts at medium difficulty. In the first one, I make 8,648 points before the diner collapses under the weight of my ineptitude.

**BRUCE:** Dinner Dash is frustratingly frustrating, which I’m sure makes it a lot like real waitressing. This uncompromising verisimilitude makes it both a hardcore sim and an action-role-playing game. It is also a hard-core sim in its ability to draw me in for brief periods and leave me resigning myself to playing it while I’m doing something else. I keep wanting to hit the next level, which levels up both my table capacity and appetizer abilities. If I were to actually describe this game to a normal person—meaning someone who doesn’t play games—they would think I was making it up. If I were to describe this to a gamer, they would call me a noob. Which is ridiculous, because Dinner Dash has all the elements of real-time strategy without the annoying rock-paper-scissors derivative gameplay. It also doesn’t have elves. Unless you count the customers with green outfits.

**TOM:** The whole idea of this terrible, terrible game is that you’re confronted with multiple tasks that are impossible to do at once, so you have to quickly prioritize them while more tasks pile on. However, I have found that playing Dinner Dash can improve several real-world skills, such as real-time strategy game micromanagement, keeping a party heaved during a raid gone bad, and working on a Tom vs. Bruce article in one window while playing Peggle in another. Right, the ball went into the 10,000-point hole.

**BRUCE:** Sounds like Tom is describing a real-time strategy game there. The key to Dinner Dash is getting everyone to eat at the same time. This is even more important when the appetizer cart shows up, because using the appetizers to satisfy your customers breaks the continuity chains of your other actions. In fact, if some guy at some university were to use this as a basis for studying restaurant management—which is probably already happening—you would have to conclude that appetizers make your customers move faster than not, because you can never serve them in time to keep them from getting mad. Of course, you staff your entire restaurant with only one waitress.

**TOM:** I’m so bad at Dinner Dash that I didn’t even know there was an appetizer cart. Hey, I just got a long shot after hitting one of the purple bonus points. Sweet!

**BRUCE:** That’s actually one of the most frequent emotions engendered by Dinner Dash—getting mad. That’s not surprising, because the whole premise of the game is that people slowly, inexorably get madder and madder unless you act on them. If that’s not social commentary disguised as gaming, then I’m not Hannah Arendt. I’ll leave the 5,000-word follow-up article to The Escapist.

**TOM:** On my second game, I barely broke 10,000 points, but I managed to get Flo a nice set of new shoes. On my third game, the diner shut down after I made only 6,742 points. Ouch. However, in the process, I dropped the Peggle ball in the 100,000-point cup twice!

**BRUCE:** Thanks to me. Flo opened up her fourth restaurant just now. Nice work, Flo!

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**DINNER DASH WINNER:**

**BRUCE**

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**SOLITAIRE**

**BRUCE:** And I will now play the ultimate casual game, Solitaire for Windows, which is probably the single most popular computer game ever. Even your mom has played it. Heck, her mom has probably even played it. Now Bruce and I will play it.

Unfortunately, the newest version of Solitaire requires Vista. There is no way I’m installing Vista until at least the first service pack update. So, unfortunately, Bruce and I have to play the old version of Solitaire that ships with Windows XP. As before, we’ll play three games and compare scores. I’ll be playing the deck that has astronauts on it and Bruce will be playing the deck that has the cute little green cartoon frogs.

**BRUCE:** I remember this game! I wonder what these frogs do.

**TOM:** Game one: 81 points. Then I’m stuck. Lame. On my second game, I got lots of points and then lose most of them when I turn to my laptop to play a few rounds of Peggle, and then quickly log onto Lord of the Rings Online to check the Auction House. Apricot Solitaire is real time, because you lose points the longer you take to play. When I turn back to Solitaire, I have only zero points. I managed to earn another 31 before getting stuck again. On my third game, I’m pretty sure I’m stuck at 65 points and decide to quit before my score gets lower. One of the biggest challenges in Solitaire is not falling asleep, so even if Bruce wins, I consider it a moral victory that I stayed awake. My total score is 117.

**BRUCE:** My best score is 177. Thousand.

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**SOLITAIRE WINNER:**

**BRUCE**

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UPDATES
Our two cents on the latest mods and patches

CITY OF HEROES
ISSUE 9—BREAKTHROUGH
Mad scientists, rejoice!

PATCH REVIEW
City of Heroes/City of Villains developer Cryptic Studios always releases new content for its dynamic superhero MMORPG duo in the form of free comic book-style "Issues." The current ninth issue, titled Breakthrough, adds the usual stuff for these sorts of updates—such as various costume pieces and a new high-level Task Force mission—and also revises the popular Hamilton raid encounter, which pits players up against a giant blob. Yeah, an exciting fight with a blob...made even more exciting now that Cryptic's excised most of the raid's frustration factors. That's not really the big news, though.

What makes Breakthrough important is the inclusion of a new invention system that lets you craft enhancements for your hero's superpowers. Whenever you defeat an opponent, you now have a chance of finding a piece of salvage or an invention recipe for some new enhancement or costume piece. These salvage items run the gamut of stuff you could define as random junk: computer viruses, funky tattoos, and magic weapons you can't actually wield, just to name a few. Collect all the pieces required by a recipe, and you can whip up a new toy for yourself—one that might even yield multiple bonuses to one of your powers at the same time.

Basically, the invention system introduces the same loot-farming routine present in just about every other MMO...and, by itself, that'd really suck when applied here. After all, the biggest weakness in COH/COV is the inescapable grind, especially in needing to replace your perpetually expiring power enhancements as you climb in level. How can the need to farm endless amounts of invention salvage on top of that be a good thing?

GOING ONCE, GOING TWICE, SOLD!
Thankfully, Breakthrough also includes the advent of consignment houses (and a black market for villains) that you can use to buy and sell salvage and recipes. The Windows Explorer-style interface makes it a little hard to find what you want to buy at times—and I can't help but wonder why you're forced to click a button to acknowledge that you sold something before you can get paid—but overall, the system works just fine. The key thing is, if you take the time to sell your salvage on the auction block, you can earn all the influence (COH's currency) that you'll likely ever need. So, Breakthrough winds up alleviating the grind...and you wind up enjoying the game a lot more.

Granted, you'd think Cryptic would've made this update a long time ago, since the whole auction-house thing is pretty standard in MMOs at this point—but either way, Breakthrough constitutes a big step in the right direction for COH/COV. Now, if only Cryptic would do something to alleviate the barbaric concepts of experience debt and outlevelled mission contacts...that'd be the real breakthrough.

Matthew Chase

VERDICT
- Auction houses add a lot more variety to your character options.
- Some minor auction-house interface gripes.

THE INVENTION SYSTEM INTRODUCES THE SAME LOOT-FARMING ROUTINE PRESENT IN EVERY OTHER MMO.
For a year now, I’ve teetered on the edge of quitting World of WarCraft altogether. I’ve done it all—levelled alts, survived the honor grind, and endured the senseless tedium of 40-man raids. I went on hiatus for a couple of months prior to the launch of The Burning Crusade with the intent of taking a long look at my relationship with WOW. By this point, I knew what I loved. PVP. Slaying internet monsters in order to get good enough gear to kill newbies wasn’t a worthwhile proposition for me. To my delight, however, all that I’d heard about the post-expansion PVP game sounded very promising. Gear acquired through PVP would, in most cases, trump raid gear when it came to fighting other players. A brilliant move on Blizzard’s part, and the singular factor that kept me from canceling my account.

Fast-forward to mid-February. My Rogue had long since dinged level 70, and I was essentially

COLUMN

Miguel Lopez

Thanks to World of WarCraft, Miguel will probably never achieve anything notable in his entire life.

COLUMN

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—GMG’s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

I’ve complained about the dearth of simple-yet-engrossing computer strategy almost since I started writing this column. But some war gamers are filling that gap using Rodney Kinney’s VASSAL application, which he originally wrote to facilitate online Advanced Squad Leader 10 years ago. Now module designers are writing game conversions that really take advantage of the engine, and the results are sometimes stunning.

One of the most impressive modules has to be for Twilight Struggle, GMT Games’ superlative take on the Cold War. The game itself is a quite simple yet extremely clever combination of card play and area control, in which players vie to dominate strategic regions of the globe while avoiding nuclear war. The board game is pretty clean in that it doesn’t have a lot of fiddly counters or number crunching, and the VASSAL module really drives this home. While it doesn’t police the rules for you or act as A.I., it does a great job of managing the display in context-sensitive ways that are unique to the game itself. And it does so with style, because the module designers adapted the artwork to the medium without losing its originality.

It’s pretty clear that simple-yet-deep games of this type aren’t about to proliferate as computer games. But the Twilight Struggle module shows off just how good these designs really are, and it makes them available to people who would otherwise have no one to play with. Heck, you can check out the game’s rules yourself by downloading them from the GMT Games website (www.gmtgames.com). Imagine the possibilities for game designers.

You can download the VASSAL engine (and its modules) from www.vassalengine.org.
living in WOW's Battlegrounds, gearing up in preparation for the Arena system's launch. I began soliciting players to join my ill-fated 5-vs.-5 team. Long story short: I couldn't find enough "good" players to fill a five-person roster, so I settled on starting a 3-vs.-3 team. Throughout the course of one week, the problem players were kicked to the curb, and the roster solidified. This is when I began to realize what this newly acquired competitive drive was doing to me.

"A FRIEND LOVES AT ALL TIMES, AND KINSFOLK ARE BORN TO SHARE ADVERSITY"

Plainly speaking, I wanted to win—and winning meant recruiting the best players I could find. By my reckoning, all the close friends I played with weren't necessarily the "best." Indeed, I ended up selecting a few people in my quest for "teh win." Perhaps karma is to blame for why my team ultimately floundered. We started out well enough; our gimp combination of Rogue, Hunter, and Shaman did OK despite the relatively weak matrix. We topped off near 1,800 points when the highest-rated teams were just breaching 2,000. We were casual as well—we only fought the requisite 10 matches per week, my rationale being that the 3-vs.-3 team was a placeholder for the 5-vs.-5 team that I aspired to build. I had big plans.

"PHILOSOPHICAL BUILDING BLOCKS FOR WINNING AT WOW ARENAS AND AT LIFE"

Unfortunately for my budding career, the launch of the Arena system happened right around the time ESPN aired an awesome documentary about UCLA's legendary basketball coach John Wooden. Immediately, I began copy-and-pasting Wooden quotes to my teammates over AIM. The stream was relentless—but they humored me, bless their souls. In the end, though, they didn't suffer me too long. Right around when The Lord of the Rings Online's beta hit, the Shaman left. Soon after, my Hunter got into a pretty solid 5-vs.-5 team...and, naturally, the 3-vs.-3 took a backseat. Perhaps all the motivational propaganda wound up getting to them. I was left in the lurch—a half-equipped Rogue (not a terribly hot commodity in 5-vs.-5, in case you're wondering) without an Arena team. My prospects were grim indeed.

But this story can't end with me quitting WOW and finding some productive channel for all my competitive energy. Quite the contrary: Disillusioned with the Rogue class, I've decided to start leveling my old Warrior alongside an old buddy's new Paladin. A cheesy 2-vs.-2 combo—and one that hopefully evades the next beta for a while more.

In retrospect, I should have tempered my competitive ambition with a sense of the big picture in mind. I wound up with what amounts to jack—a no Arena team, a few disgruntled friends, and a lot of wasted effort. I hope to get it right with this second go. With one caveat: All my Rogue friends are out of luck. If my Rogue can't play, then neither can anyone else.

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COLUMN

Robert Coffey

Former CGW editor Robert Coffey now spends his days playing word games and block puzzles. What a life!

Simple game mechanics, tidy downloadable, and low price are the three points of the casual-gaming pyramid of success. But just in case those points are just a bit too...well, producer you, a couple of casual gaming websites asiduously sand down those pyramid tips so you don't poke your eye out. Titans like PopCap aren't about to be overtaken by these upstarts, but they should pay close attention.

One such casual gaming website is Kongregate (www.kongregate.com), which smooths all three success points with very simple Flash-based games, no downloads, and the low, low price point of...free. Such a low barrier to entry is usually synonymous with low quality, but not here—this site features a bunch of really addictive little games, from weird arcade puzzlers like rotaZon to simple shooters like The Endless Zombie Rampage and Bodehead. Since Kongregate titles don't enjoy the luxury of even a 30MB download, they rely on a stylishly stripped-down aesthetic that the best of the games—like the platformer The Fancy Pants Adventures—use to great advantage. How does Kongregate attract such high-caliber games? By offering cash to the developers: Users vote for their favorites, and the site doles out the dough (as of this writing, upward of $40,000 went to 60 winners since the beta version of the site went live in March).

Fans of more mainstream casual fare like the solid match-three game Cradle of Rome or the incredibly popular Mystery Case Files series should check out Win.com, which offers these and tons of other games for just $10. Don't let the weird little iCoins subscription plan scare you off: You really are paying just half the price for these games and not getting charged extra for the privilege. The half-price program comes with all sorts of community-building features (things that Kongregate does better, incidentally)...but the bottom line is all that matters here: superpopular games at a superlow price.
Round Table

The Crew

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Darren Gladstone
Senior editor

Ryan Scott
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Shawn Elliott
Editor

Things you might hear on the GFW Radio podcast.

Every week, the editors of GFW toss aside their inhibitions on GFW Radio, a podcast (it's like a magazine, only talked!) dedicated to what we love and loathe in the computer-gaming world. Subscribe at podcasts.1UP.com or the all-powerful iTunes Music Store. Want a sample of the hijinks? Here's a conversation around the office inspired by a recent podcast.

This Month's Topic: Too many console games?

SEAN: Cover story on Gears of War. Review of Halo 2, Shadowrun, Overlord, Mercenaries 2, Fallout 3, and Call of Duty 4 are all coming out for consoles... We're a PC gaming mag, right?

DARREN: This month, I feel like we're getting a console's used-up bloopy seconds. Nothing against Gears, of course—that game continues to look hot. It'd just be nice to play a game that people designed with a keyboard and mouse in mind.

SEAN: Credit to Gears for at least trying not to seem like charity work. They're adding a whole new, fresh chapter to clean up that big Gears of War narrative mess—presumably adding a whole new narrative thread—and at least: we're not all sitting here playing the Gears 2 beta on our Xbox 360s.

DARREN: Epic's always been great with providing postrelease content gratis. Extra levels, weapons, play modes—you name it. I just hope that we don't have to drop MS points to get the extras.

JEFF: Gears does seem like an example of a port being done more "right," but it'd still be cooler if the universe could evolve to a point where we can just get simultaneous launches for every product, and gamers could just buy it for the platform of their choice. I have a really hard time believing that if a game like, say, Halo 3 came out on PC at the same time as the 360 version, that it would eat into the 360 sales that much. Maybe I'm just a dreamer, like John Lennon. Imagine there's no platforms—it's easy if you try.

SHAWN: That Epic's tweaking Gears for mouse and keyboard rather than designing for the interface from the ground up isn't irking me much. The game isn't another Halo, isn't a console take on a purely console game. And it matters enormously. Marcus won't seem to move like he just left the intensive care unit, simply because I'm not expecting "sprint, strafe, sprint"—style shooting.

SEAN: Honestly, even if Halo 3 did come out for PC simultaneously, I'd probably play it on Xbox, since the game's designed for it anyway. Unless it had cross-platform co-op. That would be rad... I play co-op games at home, so any alternative to console split-screen is golden.

SHAWN: Now, if Gears 2 comes out for PC and 360 simultaneously...?

SEAN: OK, so then I'd pick PC. I think. I haven't tried the PC version of Gears yet, so maybe there'll be some lurkingness I didn't anticipate. But I still love the game. I chose Oblivion for PC over Xbox 360, even though I knew my PC at the time wasn't as powerful as my 360. Is that telling something?

JEFF: I too chose Oblivion for PC rather than for Xbox 360. I got both copies on the same day and just instinctively went for the PC. Why? Mostly because I was thinking about mods, patches, and so on. And you'd have keyboard and mouse. With a theoretical Gears 2 it's definitely harder to say. But I would contend again, because I like repeating myself, that putting it out on PC simultaneously doesn't seem to be like something that would cannibalize or diminish Xbox 360 sales. I just don't see it. All it would be doing would be expanding the exposure, the fan base, for the franchise.

SEAN: I bet the people making those decisions have tables, charts, and graphs proving exactly otherwise. I'm picturing a room full of gentlemen wearing lab coats. Monkeys with Xbox controllers inputs wired to their brains, and chalkboards with calculus equations yielding the exact day and time releasing Halo 3 on PC will maximize profit.

SHAWN: I have to add that the old "life's better on the couch" chestnut is bunk. Nowadays, I feel less immersed when my grill isn't inches away from the action.

RYAN: Yeah, that's what I told your mom.
IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

Fight back at theeca.com
VIDEO PERFORMANCE TWEAKS

Everyone’s getting ready to play BioShock; you’re lucky you can play System Shock 2. You lug underpowered, overheat towers to LAN parties and hang out in the back of the room so no one sees you. Your desk sags under the weight of a crusty CRT, and you keep your texture setting and life expectations low. Sound familiar?

Getting by with crap hardware is no way to live, friends. But sometimes, you’ve got no choice. If you have a less-than-state-of-the-art system, you’ll need to resort to other options—in-game options, that is—to play the more demanding PC games. The trick is figuring out what all those options are, and what you can live without, in order to get maximum performance with minimum onscreen bilge. To do that, you first need to understand which features are the biggest performance killers. So let’s run ‘em all down.

1. ANTIALIASING/ANISOTROPIC FILTERING

Jam your eyeballs up into that monitor of yours. Do the edges of buildings and characters in games look all jagged and jittery? That trippy starstep pattern is the result of stacked pixels that stick out like sore thumbs. Find a fence or lattice-worked area in a game, then sidestep left and right. If it looks like the fence is crawling along, you have a problem. The easiest way to fix it is to jack up the antialiasing (AA). Your graphics card smooths out object edges—but that’s gonna slow things down. Set the AA level too high, and you can host a single-digit-frame-rate slideshow on your desktop. We’ve tested a number of current high-end and low-end cards at the office, and there’s one rule to live by: If you don’t have a bleeding-edge GPU, don’t go beyond 4x AA. The visual difference between 4x and 8x is negligible and definitely not worth the performance hit. And yes, even if you wield the mighty GeForce 8800 GTX, you can push it into the red zone if you crank the AA levels hard enough (depending on the game, 8x and 16x could degrade performance).

Anisotropic filtering (AF) often tag-teams with AA. To explain how it works, let’s look at something like, say, a runway. Your jet’s coming in at a high angle; with AF turned up high, you can see every peckmark in the asphalt stretching off down toward the hangar. Turn it off, and its detail quickly blurs out. Games often swap in low-quality textures in the distance to save memory. AF cleans up and bridges the gap between the high- and low-quality textures. Mercifully, AF doesn’t really affect graphics cards like it once did. You can jack up the settings to 4x, and it won’t make a blip on a modern graphics card (although anything from the Radeon 9900 or GeForce FX lines might still run into a couple of slowdowns). In fact, if you’re packing heat, go ahead. You can probably get away with going up to 8x or 16x without your PC breaking a sweat.

2. SHADOWS

Raise your hands if you’ve seen a good noir flick. How about an old detective movie? So you know that shadows are important. They help set the mood. Same goes for games. The right use of shadows (and lighting) will get to that in a second) can spell the difference between a boring room and a dynamic one. It’s easy to crack jokes about Doom 3. “What shadows? The entire game is pitch black!” Still, if you go back now and play it, try focusing on the shadows and off and you’ll see the difference. It actually adds suspense—but at the cost of game performance. Of course, that speed drop varies from game to game based on the number of shadows you’ll allow in the game world and the level of shadow detail. Fortunately, many games have sliders and toggles for each.

Do you want to add shadows to every NPC and object in the game world? It’ll cost ya. Same goes for shadow detail. You can opt for low-detail shadow blobs that linger on the ground, or you can simulate the real deal. Just remember—as tempting as it may be to move the slider to the “ludicrous” setting, your CPU and GPU are drawing out every single object and shadow onscreen. While the visual difference is literally night and day (just say!), fiddle with it until you find what works best for you in terms of system performance. A good middle-of-the-road option, if available, is the use of soft shadows.

GUIDE TO GRAPHICS

Getting the most outta what little you have
 Fine-tuning four games for maximum performance—and minimum crap

After installing yet another overclocked 168 graphics card (SLI, no less) in that $5,000 supercomputer, you probably don’t... Wait, what’s that? You haven’t upgraded that rig in over a year? You’re either broke, too lazy to crash the case on your PC—or a little from Column A and a little from Column B. And you’re not alone. Value recently conducted a hardware survey of Steam users, and the results were, well, interesting.

According to those polled, most people (47.04 percent) play with less than 16GB of RAM, 77.87 percent “rock” a single-core CPU, and more than 45 percent haven’t bought a new graphics card in about a year and a half. Do you fall even close to these categories? Well, it’s time we try and squeeze the most out of the rickety jalopy a call a computer on four demanding games.

CALL OF JUAREZ

The gunspinning first-person shooter Call of Juarez is all about HDR and Shader Model 3.0. Shaders—A shader refers to the special effects applied to an object. If you have anything in the Radeon X1000 or GeForce 6600 families (or higher), you can turn on Shader Model 3.0—and all its crazy special features. This includes HDR. Performance problems? Dial back individual features or drop down to Shader Model 2.0.

Long Load Times—Every time you switch settings, the game generates a folder (game’s main directory)\Out\cache\Shaders\ that houses thousands of tiny files detailing everything from shadow maps to textures. But, once you stick to your guns and find a setting you like, you still have to wait. Why? The game still needs to load these thousands of files before starting a lap around the ponderosa. To optimize performance and load times, here’s a tip...followed by a humongoid caveat. In that: Shaders directory, delete all the subfolders. Now quit and defrag your hard drive. Some people have reported that removing this directory caused errors. So play it safe by removing the offending Shader files and storing ‘em in a temp directory.

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

With all the postrelease content, mods, and tweaks, Oblivion remains on many hard drives even a year after its release. It can be a beautiful-looking game—if you’re willing to sacrifice a lot of game performance.

Stuttering—Noticing some st-stuttering as you roam? Patches will fix some issues, but hey, the game loads an entire world—roughly 5GB of data—every time you play. Defrag that hard drive immediately! Another tip: Do a 360-degree spin once you start playing. That little pirouette just helped load in a little of the world.

Mods—Don’t want to muck around tweaking code? Mods can do it for you. Places like tessorve.net and planetelderscrolls.com have piles of files worth using. The short list includes Qarl’s Texture Pack III (for high-res textures), Noise Replacer (texture noise replacer), and a whole bunch of LOD texture replacement packs.

V-sync—Want to get a little extra boost? Uncork the frames-per-second bottleneck by disabling V-sync. The only catch is that you might notice some image tearing at the edges of the screen. It’s really an eyesore, go back to V-sync-ing—no harm, no foul.
IF YOU HAVE A WEAKSAUCE GPU—AROUND THE GEFORCE 7500 GT LEVEL—you're gonna have to live with compromises.

TEXTURE MAPPING
Think of texture mapping as the skin that wraps over the in-game polygonal models. It could be something simple like the billion look-alike crates you bash apart, or it can be an incredibly detailed face with 5 o'clock shadow. You can spot the difference between high- and low-quality textures in a heartbeat. One yields an amazing amount of detail—cracks in walls, zits on faces, whatever—the other, well, it works and lets you play the game. That's when you start relying on a great art style, like in World of WarCraft, to hide the low-detail blunders. But we digress. Install some games, and they'll automatically draw high-resolution textures once they detect a high-end videocard sporting tons of memory.

Have you ever played a game that takes two lifetimes to load (Battlefield, we're looking at you)? That's because the game needs to load every single texture into memory. Are you looking for faster load times and improved in-game performance? Then you'll need to adjust your video settings—and your expectations—just a smidge. Here's a quick look at what settings to use:

- **Video RAM < 128MB**: Run low- and medium-level textures on new games.
- **Video RAM > 256MB**: Now you're entering medium- to high-detail territory.
- **Video RAM > 512MB**: This is only for the hardest of hardcore cards—you can roll with ultra-high detail.

One last thing to keep in mind is that the differences between the detail levels can be a little subtle as you jack your resolution higher. Of course, your mileage may vary depending on games, so do a little tinkering and see what works best for you.

MODEL/GEOMETRY DETAIL AND DRAW DISTANCE
In some games, you can modify the landscape. It could be something like showing the blades of grass or increasing the number of rocky details on a mountain range. Stuff will look more realistic, sure, but at what cost, man? AT WHAT COST?!! You're an idiot if you think adding more detail to the environment isn't going to slow your PC some.

POSTPROCESSING
One of the ways designers pull off some cool special effects these days is through postprocessing, a term stolen from the film industry. In the case of games, it refers to all the extra effects layered on top of what you're seeing onscreen. In demos for the upcoming Enemy Territory: Quake Wars, we've seen postprocessing used to an insane level. The game world is generated in the same way, but Strogg players see the world through a pair of Terminator-visioned, postprocessed eyes.

Can't wait for Quake Wars? The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar has a great example of postprocessing effects: When you walk near a ringwraith, the Eye of Sauron falls over you. The screen becomes slightly hazy and distorted with some kind of evil-O-Vision™. Want to see the difference? Toggle the slider, and—boom—it's off. The game remains pretty, but it won't bog down with the extra special features. Mark my words: In the coming years, this is going to be one of the most appreciated features in games. The visual impact it can make, if done right, is downright amazing.

Most of the current graphics cards (we're talking GeForce 7800/Radeon X1900 series and up) should have little problem hosting a postprocessing party on your PC, at least at the simplest settings. If you're in GeForce 8800/Radeon X2900 territory, jacking up the effects won't drastically affect your performance.
“Put hands or blow my leg!”
What the. Fu—? Is this even English? Yeah, we’ve all had those moments playing games that were not so much localized as dumped at the border. Despite better quality control these days, you can still stumble across an otherwise surprising title that makes absolutely no sense in English.

One reader, who apparently only goes by the chick-magnet handle of Tim07Z, is a lot like me. We both appreciate the finer points of bad voice acting strangled already miserable dialogue. We celebrate crap. But what if an original game coming out of a country like Poland or Korea is the real deal and we’re just one good translator shy of a masterpiece? The Polish equivalent of Half-Life 2 could’ve already come out, and we’d never know. To get a little more insight into the matter, I called a buddy who punches up plots and saves scripts from themselves.

“So I’m doing the translation for some Eastern European game,” says my pal, “and holy crap, did these guys need help!” He paints a picture of a modern combat game that takes place on America’s mean streets. The game is supposed to be gritty. And by “gritty,” he means that the dialogue is filled with profanity and incorrectly used racial epithets. Like if I were to call a Japanese guy “cracker”—but way worse. Maybe that’d work for a game starring a Tourette’s patient. Or not. One line from a drug-cartel bust in the game:

Police Officer 1: “Put hands or blow my leg.”

Looking at this quote a second time, I still have no idea what they want supercop to say. But I’ve got a couple of guesses that involve a trip to Tijuana.

This got me thinking. Bad translations go both ways. I’m sure that with even the tightest script, all it takes is one dude with a half-assed handle on language to unravel an otherwise good game.

Lecking a staff of U.N. linguists, the Internet’s gonna do my dirty work. So let’s see what happens when you translate Half-Life 2 into other languages (and back again). Babelfish.altavista.com, take it away!

BARNEY, IN JAPANESE
Original: “I’ve been working undercover with civil protection. Can’t take too long as I’m already behind on my beating quote.”
Translation: “I directly citizen protection and undercover am to work. When rear already it is in the allotment which I strike me you take simultaneously excessively long, it is not possible.”

DR. KLEINER, IN KOREAN
Original: “Great Scott! Gordon Freeman! I’d have expected more warning.”
Translation: “Company one Scott! Gordon free, man! Me warning will forecast compared to theym the place.”

And there you have it, gang—definitive proof that our games sound just as ridiculous overseas to them as their stuff does to us. Just don’t ask me to translate my tech section into Russian and back. It barely makes sense reading it the first time around!

And from now on, before you send any e-mail to darren.gladstone@ziffdavis.com, please translate it into Russian first.
DOT BOMB

In the fine art of gaming seduction, less is more

COLUMN

Jeff Green

Jeff still can’t chain 16 ghosts together. Tell him how to do it and he’ll love you forever at jeff.green@ziffdavis.com

Part of the unbearable burden of being me is going to visit game companies and looking at new games. As you might imagine, it is hell. Think of the worst possible job in the world—clean-up crew at the diarrhea clinic, for example—and you’re beginning to approach the kind of nightmare it is to be paid to look at videogames for a living.

Two things in particular are always guaranteed to drive me nuts during game demos. The first is when an overenthusiastic PR wessel—who’s been hovering over me the entire time while plying me with Diet Cokes and cookies—starts fishing for compliments while the demo is still in progress.

“Woah, that’s cool, huh, Jeff? You ever see an Elf shoot an arrow before?”

“Dude, how great was that? I’m totally thinking you should put this game on your career!”

Dude, I bet you do! You know what I’m totally thinking? I’m totally thinking you should shut up so I can hear the freakin’ demo. OK? Also, dude! What’s with the ass breath? Try Altoids!

The other thing I dread in demos is the Inevitable Water Discussion. Perhaps you are not familiar with this phenomenon, I will explain it to you. The Inevitable Water Discussion is the point of the demo at which, no matter what the game is, the designer will go into an extended monologue about the apparently magnificent water that has been programmed and how it should be impressed. No one has ever made more realistic water for their game. Look at how the water shimmers in the sun. Look at how the Elf’s arm reflects in the water. Wouldn’t you like to drink that water, Jeff? It sure looks like you could, doesn’t it?

This can go on for minutes. If it goes on long enough, past the point at which I’ve already thought about lunch, imagined myself floating on a raft with Jessica Alba, replayed the entire third season of Battlestar Galactica in my head, and clawed two deep fingernail furrows in my arm to stay awake, I can actually palpably feel my will to live begin to slip away.

Because here’s the thing: I don’t care about your water. I just don’t. I am not playing videogames to look at realistic water. I have easy access to actual, real water. If it’s that important to me, I can get a glass of that actual water and set it next to me while gaming so that I can marvel at it.

What I want from your game, and what I would like you to focus on when showing me your game—and I know this is a bit of a stretch here, so bear with me—is something we are in the business like to call “fun.” Perhaps you have heard of it. While I am happy for you that your education and talent have yielded such impressive results, and while I am sure your mom must be awfully proud of you—“My son made that water! Look at it!”—I am humbly submit to you that, with all due respect, I won’t care whether you modeled every single drop in the Atlantic Ocean with perfect scientific accuracy if the actual gaming part that takes place around that water is lame or derivative or uninspired. Logic puzzles, brain teasers, challenges of dexterity and accuracy—that’s what we’re in this for. Not a sales pitch for a beach house.

Which brings me to a little round yellow guy by the name of Pac-Man. All mouth, no body? Lives only in two dimensions, loves to eat, and has a problem with ghosts? Sound familiar? If you forget, or think I am about to drift into old-man nostalgia here, then you probably haven’t yet played one of the best games of 2007 by far—Pac-Man: Championship Edition for Xbox Live Arcade. Yes, I know this is a PC gaming magazine and that mentioning a console game is akin to joining the Vichy collaborators—but in this case, I am pulling rank and saying “too bad.” If you have a 360, then pony up the $10 and buy it. If you don’t, then go play it at a friend’s house.

Because what we have in this game is Exhibit Freakin’ A in the case of Gameplay over Graphics. Here we have a remake of a 27-year-old game that is little more than a few primary colors, dots, and lines on a 2D surface that, with a few clever gameplay twists, has managed to enthrall me and tons of other gamers for dozens (if not hundreds) of hours. So if you want I understand. There have been roughly 8 billion Pac-Man sequels and clones over the years, and the last thing it seemed the world needed was another one. But in this case (the first new Pac-Man, by the way, to be made with the help of Toru Iwatani, the original game’s creator), we have a game that: brilliantly re-discovering the Rosetta Stone of game design: Upon defeat, you simply must play one more time.

I am not arguing a Luddite return to the days of yore. Like you, I have marveled at the graphical splendors of Crysis. I have moved out Lord of the Rings Online and squealed with delight at Hobbiton come to life. And I have even gazed upon the water in Oblivion and acknowledged that, yes, by golly, that does in fact look pretty realistic.

But for just one moment, I ask every game designer reading this to forget all that. Go play Pac-Man: Championship Edition. Eat those pellets. Dodge those ghosts. Zip your way through those maze and acknowledge to yourself how little it takes to make you happy. This is gaming’s bottom line. One Pac-Man eating one ghost is more powerful than all the digital water on Earth.™

Xtreme Gear recommends Windows Vista™ Home Basic

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