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ISSUE 17 \ APRIL \ MAY 2008

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PREVIEW
MASS EFFECT
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WHAT'S NEW FOR PC

REVIEW
SINS OF A
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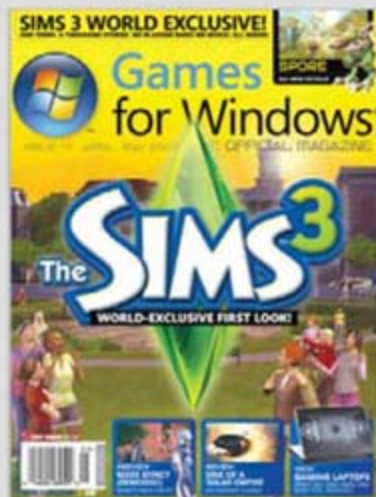
COVER STORY

Who knew? Apparently, that *Sims 2* game and its 18,000 expansions did, ya know, moderately well for EA. This month, we've got the world-exclusive scoop on *The Sims 3*, where the world outside your Sims' own personal circle is always turning.

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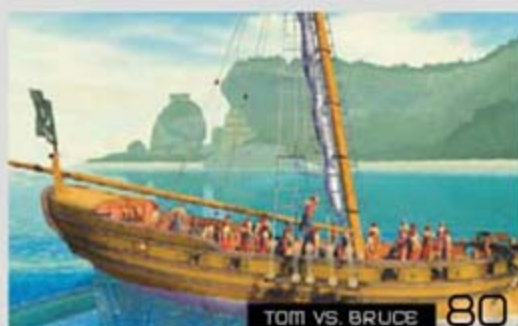
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WELCOME BACK TO THE DOLLHOUSE

The Sims 3 is coming, and yes, you should care

So *The Sims 3* is on our cover this month, in case you didn't notice, or in case our sales team put one of those annoying "fake cover" ads over the real cover—and I feel the need to write an editorial that I am pretty sure I have written before. The gist of which is this: You are not cooler than *The Sims*. Yes, I know you think you are. I know that this series has long since lost its übergeek cred. I know that it's hard to get excited about a franchise that never seems to go away, with what feels like a nonstop bombardment of *Sims 2* expansion packs (the latest of which, *The Sims 2: FreeTime*, is reviewed in this issue), and what feels like a takeover of the fan base by teenage girls (one of whom, my 14-year-old daughter, is, in fact, the reviewer of *FreeTime*.)

Nevertheless, I am here to say that even if you think you are "over" *The Sims*, I urge you to drop the cynicism just long enough to flip to the story and give it a read. Senior executive editor Sean Molloy and I spent a full day with *The Sims 3* design team, and it was one of those great experiences that really make me love this job: a group of supersmart, ambitious game designers sharing their creative process with us. Listening to them describe their goals for this game, the challenges of working with this franchise, and all the pressure and expectations that come with it, you come away realizing—as you do with all the best designers (or artists in general)—that all the "success" in the world isn't going to matter to these folks if they don't feel they have created something that they themselves are proud of.

The Sims 3 is not just another *Sims* game. It's not *The Sims 2.5*. It's a bold step forward, a reimagining from the ground up of what a "people simulator" can and should be. Oh yeah, it also looks like it should be a heckuva lot of fun, too. So don't let the success of *The Sims* franchise turn you off completely. Don't let its mainstream success make you think there's not also a compelling strategy game here for you, too. As the cover story should make clear, the developers haven't forgotten about you at all.

So that's my sales pitch. Pardon me if I get a little worked up about these things. I'm a *Sims* geek going way back. I've got the love. And like all people with a little love in their hearts, I want to share it with you. Just look how high my happiness meter is!

Jeff Green
Editor-in-Chief

Now Playing: *Sins of a Solar Empire, SimCity: Societies, World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWJeff.1UP.com

MEET THE STAFF

SEAN MOLLOY
SENIOR EXECUTIVE EDITOR

The *Sims 3* version of Sean will have the following Traits: Sanctimonious, Allergic to Synthetic Fabrics, Loves Trapezoids, Colloidal, Bluish-Green.

Now Playing: *Sins of a Solar Empire, World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
MANAGING EDITOR

The notion of a *Sims 3* version of Ryan is a very boring one indeed.

Now Playing: *Team Fortress 2, World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

SHAWN ELLIOTT
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

The *Second Life* version of Shawn has the following items: beer hat, water bong, banana-seat bicycle with pinwheels on the handlebars, stiletto heels, lace panties.
Now Playing: *Sins of a Solar Empire, AudioSurf*
1UP.com Blog: GFWShawn.1UP.com

MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

The *Sims 3* version of Michael features knowing glances and crazy eye.

Now Playing: *Call of Duty 4*
1UP.com Blog: GFWMichael.1UP.com

ROSEMARY PINKHAM
JUNIOR DESIGNER

The *Sims 3* version of Rosie is a raging bitch, obviously.

Now Playing: *Nintendo DS*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRosie.1UP.com

ROBERT ASHLEY
CONTRIBUTING GOOFBALL

The *Sims 3* version of Robert will feature a bladder so large that no level of player cruelty will be able to cause him to wet himself.

Now Playing: A little of this, but not a little of that
1UP.com Blog: RobertAshley.1UP.com

Letters

Even our own mothers wrote us hate mail this month. /Cry.

GAMING GULAG

"Gaming Green" (*GFW* #15, pg. 37) was the last straw. Please keep the socialist rantings of a bunch of San Francisco Bay Area Twenty-somethings led by a Forty-something from Berkeley out of *GFW*. I care about your opinions on computer games and nothing else.

Ken

POLITICALLY CORRECT PERSONAL COMPUTING

Lara Croft is too sexy. Christians bitch about *Bible Fight*. Street-racing games encourage unsafe driving and gaudy-looking cars. Ban them right quick. Shooters promote violence and have you kill cops and civilians. I say no shooters with people who could be misconstrued as Middle Eastern, Indian, Chinese, Russian, or even Americans, or people of any particular religious persuasion, skin tone, etc. Let's just use black jelly beans as avatars. No one likes those.

Leisure Suit Larry—OMG, where to start? *Civilization* and *Age of Empires* will breed new Hitlers and Stalins. I am truly concerned about all the freakish little prepubescent girls in *F.E.A.R.* and *BioShock*. Please only cover *Pong* from this point forward.

Colby Feller

DIY? F YOU!

I love these excuses that developers are offering for not including single-player campaigns in their games. From Gas Powered Games on *Demigod*: "We still have this fantastic world with stories we could tell...we just don't think people want that." How about this beauty from Ironclad Games on *Sins of a Solar Empire*: "We've banked on players preferring to create their own epics over having us provide a pre-canned one."

● [Noun] hit the [adjective] [noun] and then [verb] [adverb]. [Exclamation]!

Note to GPG: You are telling a story. It's just not very believable. Note to IronClad: "Banked" is the right term. The development cash you saved by eliminating the single-player campaign is probably being banked right now.

How much research did these developers conduct before concluding that gamers no longer want single-player campaigns? I'd wager that any research extended only to development budget (i.e., "it takes money and time to create a good single-player campaign, but we're over budget and behind schedule; therefore, gamers don't want a single-player campaign").

Message to developers: I'm too busy to create my own "epic story." I've just paid money for your game, so I want you to entertain me. I like playing games with stories that unfold via well-written storylines that are supported by professionally crafted CG and voice acting.

If the current trend holds, I'll just have to climb inside a cardboard box with my computer and use my imagination. Excuse me, I think my neighbor just bought a refrigerator.

B. Reese

You probably won't like this issue of *GFW*, then—we've decided to let readers create their own articles and form their own opinions this time around.

CRITICS OR MARKET ANALYSTS?

I love the magazine and enjoy listening to the *GFW Radio* and *1UP Yours* podcasts, but what is going on with this "PC gaming is dead" crap? Every time I hear the *1UP Yours* crew talking about NPD numbers, I feel like I'm listening to a food critic telling me how much money McDonald's and Applebee's are making. Clearly, that's what I should be eating.

Meanwhile, I'm buried in a feast of great PC games. PC is still the place to be for fans of shooters, MMOs, and strategy games. Even for RPGs. I love BioWare's games, but *The Witcher* is the fresher, more fun, and more interesting game in the genre.

We've got *Crysis*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, *World in Conflict*, and now *Sins of a Solar Empire*. The good stuff just keeps coming. Maybe the talented developers are going to follow the money and jump to console exclusives, but it sure hasn't happened yet. So

straighten that spine, soldier! Stop apologizing for the sorry state of PC games. The games have never, ever been better. You need to start giving those console kids condescending pats on the head.

Ben Swainbank

● Proof that PC gaming isn't dead (exhibit no. 4956113B): Ironclad's *Sins of a Solar Empire*.

Generally, we prefer not to get into shouting matches over console versus PC—we like to think we're a little more grown-up than that. In any case, you'll be glad to know that *GFW*'s own Shawn Elliott is now a regular on *1UP Yours* (1UPYours.1UP.com), our cross-platform podcast, where he'll be sure to set those ill-informed naysayers straight.

CRITICAL ASS

As a longtime gamer I was happy to hear that *Crysis* tanked, though not so happy to hear *Unreal Tournament 3* sold poorly. I purchased both games, and I don't think piracy explains the sales figures. UT3 did deserve better—however, I throw up a little in my mouth every time I hear a game critic wax poetic about *Crysis'* "breakthrough design." The game is completely derivative and badly designed: Take the oft-copied and tension-killing health-regeneration system from recent *Call of Duty* games; balance it with frustrating, instant death at every turn; add watered-down *Crackdown*/superheroic powers (but make sure they're only available in three-second spurts so it's not too fun!); crap out another *Far Cry* game for the basic framework; and this time make sure the writing is predictable and crammed with dispensable, one-dimensional characters. Presto, we have *Crysis*, a game that "deserves" and gets a high score in every review, but that, I'm happy to hear, is a game we ain't buying.

Robert D.H.

Not so fast: EA has recently claimed *Crysis* sales figures in excess of 1 million. Maybe it's just a late bloomer.

Write us at GFWLetters@ziffdavis.com. ●

MAIL BYTES

I wanted to say thank you for letting your Person of the Year Ken Levine shamelessly plug *Mount & Blade*. It's perhaps one of the most creative and enjoyable games I've played in a long time.

John Mark Aiken

I haven't slept more than 12 hours in the past four days because of damn *Puzzle Quest*. I place the blame on all of you and wish you be damned to some horrible place.

Carl Yarber

This can't be true. I am reading Ryan Scott's article on *Blood Bowl* in *GFW* #16, pg. 32. Did he really write, "Football: dumbest thing ever"? Someone give this nerd a wedgie and lock the dork in his locker.

S. Palmer

Start

● "Our approach was to work directly with the core *Mass Effect* team so that any changes met with their original vision," says project director Diarmid Clarke.

● You now get individual control of your squadmates, but still not *direct* control.

MASS EFFECT
COMES TO PC

Star port

PUBLISHER: **EA** DEVELOPER: **BioWare** GENRE: **Role-Playing Game** RELEASE DATE: **May**

PREVIEW

When games are big enough to have their own gravity well, drama tends to accumulate in orbit. That's precisely what happened with BioWare's Xbox 360 epic *Mass Effect*, as both the target of an insane political and mainstream media attack and as a sort of whipping boy for nitpicky gamers who focus on the sunspots instead of the star—this gamer included. When people ask how much I loved it, I trot out my practiced litany of complaints: Why can't I directly control my party mates like I could in BioWare's *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Baldur's Gate*? The inventory system is a mess. The *Halo*-pandering driving scenes are crap. The conversation system isn't half the revolution people seem to think it is—mostly because it oversimplifies morality into "push down for evil" and "push up for good." But I point these out because I care! Every criticism comes with a rider: "I really like you...I'm just saying this so next time you'll be *perfect*."

With the PC version of *Mass Effect*, BioWare's at least trying to correct some of the superficial flaws. "You'll see a number of changes within the inventory interface to take advantage of the keyboard and mouse," says project director Diarmid Clarke, acknowledging that the Xbox 360 version's mass of button presses and confusing submenus would have been a bigger mistake on the PC than on its home system. "Being able to point directly at the screen with a mouse makes menus very easy to navigate—and we wanted to take advantage of that."

"We're [also] giving the player the ability to command each of their squad members individually," adds Clarke, half-addressing another complaint that protagonist Shepard was the star and your squadmates felt like little more than "bonus powers" accessed abstractly through a radial menu. The 360 version allowed players to tell squadmates to hold position, follow, or move to a particular location via the controller's D-pad, but only in tandem—which often made no strategic sense. "This gives the player more tactical flexibility in their combat choices. You can send [soldier squadmate] Ashley, guns blazing, into combat, while [tech and long-range specialist] Garrus can be commanded to stand back and use his sniper rifle."

Players can assign Biotic powers (*Mass Effect* lingo for "magic") to remappable hotkeys now, too, where as the Xbox 360's Biotic radial menu brought the action to a screeching halt. "The game has to look and feel like a PC title," says Clarke, which is something the Xbox 360 version most definitely *doesn't*. The mouse is a more suited match for *Mass Effect*'s pseudo-first-person-shooter combat system, too, but as a role-playing game, hand-eye precision is hardly a prerequisite for success.

THE PRICE OF CHANGE

What won't be any different is the content. No new planets to explore (we hope BioWare will be kind enough to include Xbox 360 postrelease downloadable content packs such as "Bring Down the Sky," but the company won't commit), no new subplots to uncover, no confirmed heterosexual suddenly discovering he swings both ways. No cutting-room-floor material that the developers didn't have time to finish off for the console release, either. "When you're dealing with a game that's received as many awards and critical acclaim as *Mass Effect*, you have to be very careful about any changes you make," says Clarke. "There's so much content in this game already that adding the odd thing here and there would get lost in the wealth of things to do." You can interpret his "it's already *soooo awesome*!" as a lame excuse, if you like, but we can't say we blame BioWare. Epic went out of its way to add whole new campaign missions and special multiplayer modes to *Gears of War* for PC, and that netted them little but complaints about GFW Live.

Mass Effect's changes don't amount to a reinvention, but they're enough to make platform agnostic gamers wish they'd held out just a little bit longer to play. I'll bet most of BioWare's efforts are directed toward reengineering the central social hub of the Citadel, anyway—retrofitting elevator shafts to accommodate different load times has got to be a monumental chore. ●**Sean Molloy**

● **The new inventory takes advantage of points and clicks.**

WITH THE PC VERSION OF *MASS EFFECT*, BIOWARE'S AT LEAST TRYING TO CORRECT SOME OF THE SUPERFICIAL FLAWS.
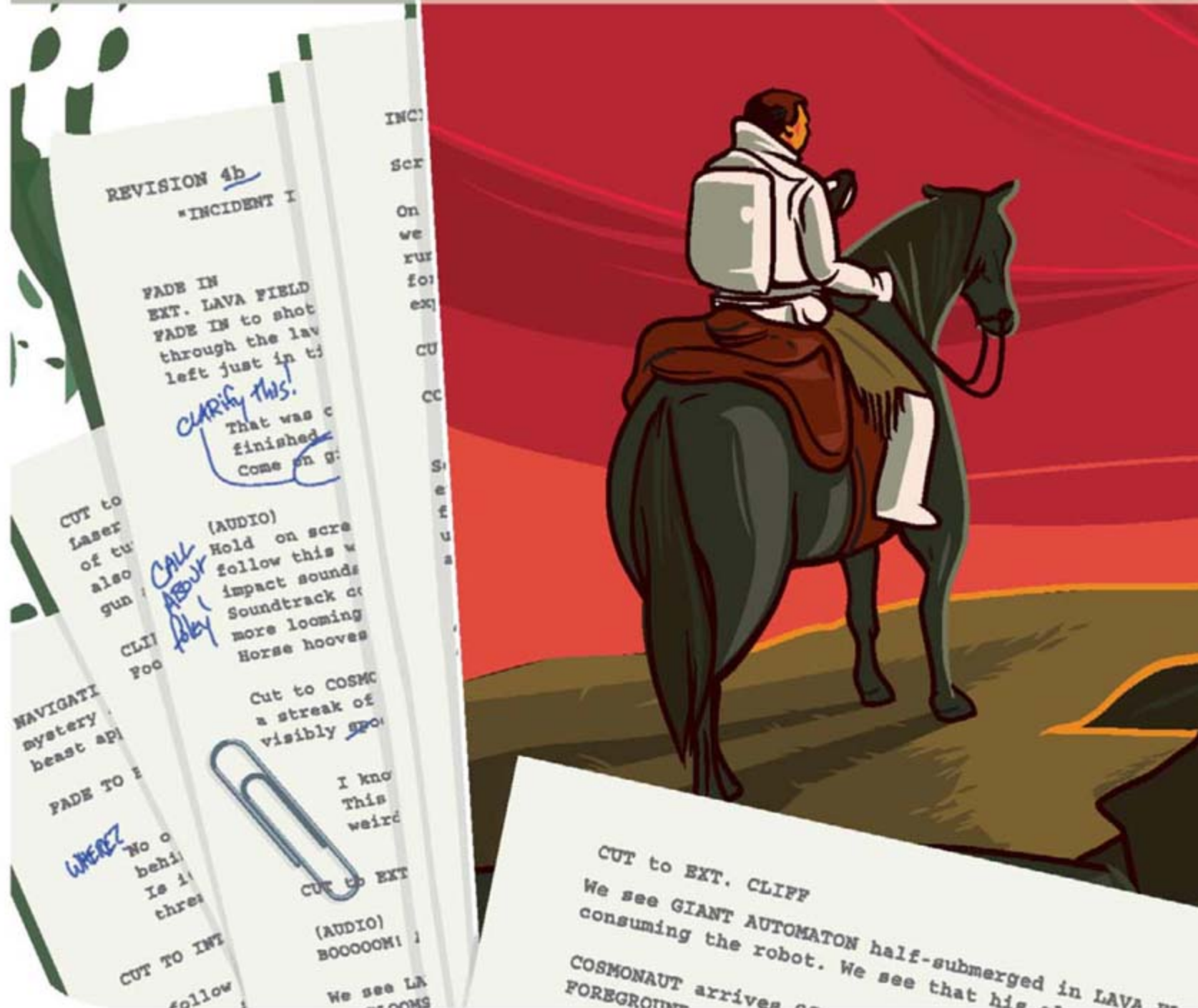
WORDS, WORD

Game writing finally comes of age—or has it?

CULTURE

↗ **When the Writers Guild of America**—the union representing U.S. film and television writers—announced it would introduce a new "Best Videogame Writing" category to its 2008 Awards, it felt like a move long overdue.

After all, game writing has evolved since the days of *Wolfenstein* and *Tetris*. We've moved past the point where storytelling in games was about as sophisticated as the writing in porn—plot as excuse for the action. These days, games offer rich settings, complex characters, and intricate narratives. Surely the WGA's award

meant the mainstream writing community finally saw games as a new medium, a form of modern literature just like film or television.

But then the WGA released its list of nominees. The list shocked gamers—not so much for what it included but what it left out. Sure, *The Witcher* and *World in Conflict* were written well enough, and *The Simpsons Game* certainly had its fair share of good jokes. But how did *Crash of the Titans*— the 14th *Crash Bandicoot* game—and PSP no-name (and eventual award winner) *Dead Head Fred* end up on the list when *Portal* and *BioShock*, two of the best-written games *ever* to hit PCs, didn't?

"[Creating the award] was the right move, but if you look at the nominees, you go, 'Huh?'" says

Stephen Jacobs, executive board member of the International Game Developers Association's Game Writers Special Interest Group and professor of game design and development at Rochester Institute of Technology.

The logic behind the list, explains Jacobs, is that writers had to be members of the WGA's New Media Caucus to be nominated. But few writers in the industry currently belong to the WGA, much less the Caucus.

"I'd never even heard of it," says Ken Levine, creative director of 2K Boston and writer of such games as *BioShock* and *System Shock 2*, praised for their stories. "I don't even know where to start to get involved."

S, WORDS

The stereotypical gamer isn't a teenage boy but a harried father, a working mom, an ambitious professional—someone with limited time "who wants more out of the time they do get to play their games," says Jacobs.

"If they're going to devote the time to gaming, they want something rich, something that has depth to it," he says. "That something is better served by better writing."

Of course, what makes writing "good" is as difficult to define for games as it is for a poem. "This is a medium in its infancy," says Levine. "It's like going back in time to 1923 and asking, 'What are the great screenplays?'"

Not all games even require writing, and snappy dialogue and well-developed characters can't hide bugs and design flaws. Nor does top-notch writing ensure commercial success. Critics lauded 2005's *Psychonauts* for its wit and eccentricity— the game even scored the 2006 Game Developers Choice Award for Excellence in Writing. But two years later, Double Fine founder Tim Schafer revealed on his blog that *Psychonauts* had sold only 400,000 copies at retail (not counting >

THE NUMBERS GAME

Recently, the gaming industry realized something: Well-written games sell. *BioShock* sold nearly half a million copies in its first month of release. For months, *The Orange Box* (which, with *Portal* and *Half Life 2: Episode Two*, offers some of the best narrative in gaming today) has held steady on PC best-seller lists. Even WGA nominees *World in Conflict* and *The Witcher* sold well. So while not every well-written game becomes commercially successful, quality writing has increasingly become part of that elusive formula for blockbuster magic.

Part of that comes down to shifting demographics. According to the Entertainment Software Association, the average gamer is now 33 years old, and almost 40 percent of gamers are women.

NOT ALL GAMES EVEN REQUIRE WRITING, AND SNAPPY DIALOGUE AND WELL-DEVELOPED CHARACTERS CAN'T HIDE BUGS AND DESIGN FLAWS.

Case Studies in Game Writing

THE RISE AND FALL OF ADVENTURES

Back in the mainframe heyday of the 1970s, computers had no graphical capabilities. Even the parser was considered the height of modernity. But still there were games—and lots of them. America had discovered the text adventure, the first commercial giant of the PC gaming world.

Text adventures were like interactive books, where you, the protagonist, could shape the story with your choices. Narrative was king (and, indeed, everything), and some of those early games—*A Mind Forever Voyaging, Trinity, Planetfall*—still rank among the best games ever written. Even some mainstream authors jumped on the text adventure bandwagon; Douglas Adams cowrote Infocom's adaptation of his best-seller *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.*

Early game writers often pulled from their favorite books and movies, especially fantasy stories like *The Lord of the Rings.* But writers found inspiration in other sources, too. "This was an era where there really weren't a lot of other computer games," says Bob Bates, former IGDA chairman and erstwhile text adventure author. "People played board games, nontraditional games, games they made up with each other. I think that seeped into the games they wrote themselves."

As computer graphics matured in the 1980s, text adventures were eventually replaced by graphical counterparts. These new adventures, like *Maniac Mansion,* the *Monkey Island* series, and *Myst,* still kept the exploration mechanic that had made their predecessors so striking. But the addition of believable visuals took immersion to a whole new level.

The graphical adventure thrived for years. LucasArts and Sierra built entire gaming empires on the strength of adventure franchises.

And then, almost overnight, it stopped. Action games—especially FPSes—skyrocketed in popularity, leaving adventures to flounder. In the tug-of-war between visuals and narrative, graphics had won out over story. And while adventure games continued to be released, they sold poorly, if at all. Technology had killed the adventure star.

whatever new life the game may have found on Steam and Xbox Live).

So if there's no guaranteed payoff to good writing, why worry about it in the first place? "If you use writing in the right way, you can build a world people can really buy into," says Levine. "If you trust the player, giving them the choice to opt into the story instead of putting everything in a cut-scene, players can really get immersed in that world."

But "storytelling is still so rudimentary," he says, and real innovations are few and far between. The tools game writers have to work with—cut-scenes, journal entries, voiceovers—can only be done in so many ways.

"I think that's why, when games like *Portal* come out, they have such an impact," says Levine. "We're working in relative space here."

WHEN I GROW UP, I WANT TO WRITE GAMES

When game writers show up for work, they face two main tasks: interactive dialogue scripting (or composing the in-game dialogue and narration) and narrative design (that is, creating a game's background and story). Some writers also come up with copy for manuals and even promotional materials, like short stories or webcomics.

Writing for games, says Jacobs, is fundamentally different from writing for books, television, or film. "In any other medium, the writer is in the driver's seat, and the audience is captive," he says. "But game writing's different. You have to let your audience interact with the medium itself."

It's also more work. Games often include thousands of lines of dialogue, from minutes-long soliloquies to succinct "barks," interjections, or snippets of exchanges from nonplayer characters (like "Oof!" and "Ow!"). For example, *Planescape: Torment* contained an estimated 800,000 words, and the upcoming *Fable 2* tips the scales at 250,000 lines of dialogue. Even *The Simpsons Game* has more than 8,000 lines—that's more than an entire season of the show.

All that scripting takes time. Usually, studios bring in freelance writers at various stages of a game's progress to handle dialogue creation. (In-house writers often take care of narrative design.) This means contractors could join a project at any time, from preproduction to as little as a month before release. "It's all over the place," says Jacobs. "It's still too rare when writers come in at the beginning."

To make things more confusing, developers in smaller studios often wear several hats; a game's lead designer might also act as its creative director. In larger studios—especially those with licenses for established intellectual properties—this multitasking has diminished. Red Storm Entertainment, for example, has a Central Clancy Writer for its Tom Clancy franchise. MMO powerhouses like Blizzard employ large pools of dedicated writers—both in-house and freelance—focused on everything from novels to dialogue trees. Even casual gaming giant PopCap has a dedicated writer on staff.

But these changes are slow and few. "It would be wrong to say this is some major trend, or that it's even happening in a majority of studios," says Jacobs. Still, "the industry's starting to see it's worth putting in the money to get a good story."

THE SIMPSONS GAME HAS OVER 8,000 LINES OF DIALOGUE—MORE THAN AN ENTIRE SEASON OF THE SHOW.

WRITING THE FUTURE

Could game writers' unions be next on the agenda? Maybe. Since most game writers are freelancers, a union could help provide legal protections, especially in copyright and contract disputes. It could also help writers lobby for increased pay and expanded benefits. It's not surprising, then, that the IGDA's Game Writers Special Interest Group has recently pushed for better relations with the WGA.

In fact, the WGA has been eyeing game writers for some time; part of the union's rationale behind its new award category was to entice game writers to join. "By recognizing the skill and craft of video-game writing, the Writers Guilds intend to raise the profile of these writers so they can get WGA contracts and benefits for this work," said WGA West president Patric M. Verrone in a public statement. "We aim, we shoot, we score."

Of course, few industry bigwigs would welcome the prospect of a new union—especially considering how the recent writers' strike brought Hollywood to its knees. (The strike, resolved in February, had stopped production on dozens of shows and movies, idled 11,000 film and TV employees, and cost the Los Angeles economy an estimated $1.8 billion.)

"There are all the reasons in the world why [a game writers' union] should happen," says Jacobs, "but what industry wants to let in a new union?"

Not all potential members are even hot on the idea. "Any forum in which writers could share ideas, I think that would be an important thing," says Levine. "But game writers are, at the end of the day, game developers as well. I don't think a separate entity from other game developers makes sense."

Adds Jason Kapalka, PopCap's chief creative officer, "I'm not so sure they'd want to let the guy who wrote *Peggle* into the WGA."

Even if a union never materializes, the IGDA's Game Writers Special Interest Group is hard at work codifying standards for the business of game writing. Their first plan of attack: working with studios, the Internet Movie Database, and online game archive MobyGames.com to standardize game credits so that studios have a systematic way to acknowledge writers for their work. The group also plans to release two more textbooks on narrative design, as well as sponsor a writing contest and establish an online Game Writers Hall of Fame.

And, of course, they're trying to help game writers score more work. "It's not just about hiring someone who knows how to write," says Jacobs. "It's about someone who knows what goes into a game, who's familiar with the volume of work required." ● **Lara Crigger**

THE FUTURE: CASUAL GAMES

Like FPSes, casual games began their life as an exercise in pure game mechanics. Early successes included Microsoft's *Solitaire* and Alexey Pajitnov's *Tetris*—neither of which even pretended to have a plot. Even when *Bejeweled* kick-started the modern casual-game movement in 2001, these games remained simple and storylines nonexistent.

Then, in 2003, *Diner Dash* hit the scene. The "career mode" centers on perky restaurateur Flo, who quits her job as a stockbroker to open a diner. As the game progresses and Flo makes more and more money, she renovates her restaurant and opens three new franchises, becoming an apron-clad restaurant mogul.

Diner Dash wasn't the first casual game to use a storyline, or even a real-world setting. But it was the first such game to be a breakout success, garnering critical acclaim and spawning dozens of clones. "It's not a particularly complex storyline," says Kapalka. But "it was a refreshing change from the space setting" of *Bejeweled* and its clones,

he says, and "Flo was someone people could understand and really get behind."

Diner Dash spawned several imitators (including the best-selling *Cake Mania*), and many casual-game companies leapt on the new storytelling trend. *Bookworm Adventures* and *Mystery Case Files: Huntsville* combined narrative with simple gameplay for industry gold: *Bookworm Adventures* has broken casual-gaming sales records, while *Mystery Case Files: Huntsville* sold $1 million in digital downloads in just three months—astronomical numbers for a casual game. Even last year's *Puzzle Quest*, which married match-three *Bejeweled* mechanics with a Tolkien-inspired fantasy tale, was a crossover hit.

But the casual-games market is still very new. Where storytelling might head in the future is anyone's guess. "In the casual space, we're kind of reinventing the wheel," says Kapalka. "Hardcore games already went from no story to full narratives. We're still figuring this out."

CULTURING THE FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER

Emily Dickinson poems in *Portal*.
Objectivism in *BioShock*.
The humble first-person shooter has come a long way since *Doom*.

Back then, players wanted one thing only: to blow stuff up. And who can blame them? In the early 1990s, the first-person shooter mechanic wasn't just new—it was a technological marvel.

Before, placing a player *inside* an action game character had been impossible to visually represent. But now it was no sweat, thanks to advances such as faster processors and VGA graphics. In fact, most early FPS games like *Quake* and *Marathon* focused simply on the sheer joy of the mechanic, leaving story entirely behind.

While 1994's *System Shock* made great storytelling strides, the genre's real turning point came with *Half-Life* in 1998. Artfully combining graphics and narrative, action and puzzle-solving, *Half-Life* was unlike anything players had ever seen. "The story, that's what really made *Half-Life* such a strong property," says Jacobs.

Half-Life's success ushered in a storytelling renaissance. In 1999, *System Shock 2* incorporated a number of innovative storytelling techniques to create its unnerving, wet-your-pants atmosphere, including "audio logs" (a technique cocreator Ken Levine later revisited in *BioShock*) and the malevolent computer SHODAN, a foe that makes *Portal*'s GLaDOS look like a sissy. 2000's *Deus Ex* mostly eschewed a traditional plot and let the players mold the story through their choices. And that same year, witty Bond spoof *No One Lives Forever* proved that first-person shooters could be exciting *and* funny. (Its 2002 sequel was nominated for a Game Developers Conference writing award.)

The genre has continued to evolve, especially on the console side, and improved technology still leads to storytelling advances. Take *Half-Life 2*: Alyx's realistic facial expressions and body movements weren't even possible until relatively recently.

Levine agrees. "In *BioShock*, I was able to tell narratives in ways I couldn't in *System Shock 2* due to eight years of technological development," he says. "I couldn't have made a Little Sister back then. And our ability to present believable visual moments in every corner of Rapture—that's a function of having enough polygons."

CREATURE FEATURES

Customization in *Spore* isn't all cosmetic. According to creator Will Wright, "Every animal has stats associated with aggression, movement, and stealth—same with vehicles—which the A.I. will then use to select what goes where. If I need a tough fighter to populate the world, it'll look at the stats for the creatures I've downloaded and then select one that fits."

As for the toughest of them all, think T-Rex. In *Spore*'s space game, players can earn the ability to "epic," or giganticize, any creature. "That's one of the comments that I want other players to make about the creatures that I've created," executive producer Lucy Bradshaw says, "that they're so cool somebody had to epic [them]."
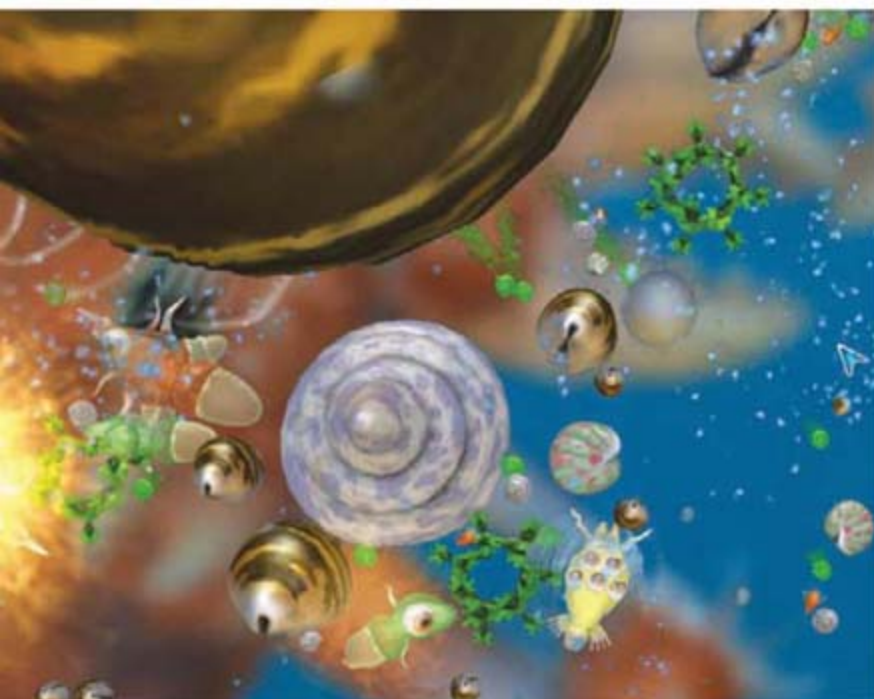
• Decisions made in the primordial pool constrain choices to come.

SPORE

Survival of the hippest

PUBLISHER: **EA Games** DEVELOPER: **Maxis Studios** GENRE: **Creature/Culture/World Building** RELEASE DATE: **September**

PREVIEW

↗ **At workstations** throughout Maxis' Emeryville, CA, studio, intelligent designers pinch and pull creatures like clay. Their procedural animation system breathes life into improbable beasts that evolutionary pressure would punish with brief existences and empty nests, letting them walk on any number of legs jutting from alien anatomies at all angles, blink with eyes that bud on hands, and hoot with throats that grow from tails. Over here, a protozoan jets around its primordial pond; over there on another computer, its descendants "discover" sexual reproduction; while on other screens, genealogically distant grandsons and daughters go from family- to tribe- to civilization-sized groupings, mastering earth, sea, sky, and ultimately—at one desk where designer Will Wright awaits—space itself.

Spore is more interested in memes than genes. Indeed, the focus of each stop among Maxis' series of monitors, and the aspect of the game that its masterminds talk about most, is what you make when you play and how it will end up on other players' machines by dint of just being cool. Critters, vehicles, cities, and eventually the very the planets they live on, commute across, and congest are

all raw material for your taste and imagination to mold in whatever woolly shapes they see fit. Where Darwinian fitness describes an organism or gene's propensity to reproduce, in *Spore*, quirky content proliferates on the strength of its catchiness.

THE SENTINEL

Strictly speaking, Wright's is a game for one. Players do not interact directly, and you won't, in other words, order your starship to either annihilate or educate the inhabitants of another player's homeworld. Instead, you and acquaintances will swap copies of the content you create and use it to cross-pollinate your own universes. You can open your ports, so to speak, letting in would-be immigrants at large (a little like playing work-safe YouTube roulette where, at worst, you'll find phallic cars carrying phallic passengers across phallic continents), and you can search for specific terms such as "alphabet menagerie" or "yellow submarine" for an A-through-Z bestiary based on the shapes of letters in the English language or the Beatles' psychedelic submersible (each of which Maxis staff has already made).

According to executive producer Lucy Bradshaw, these are the elements of *Spore*'s massively single-player metaverse (which also include the ability to directly upload videos captured in-game to YouTube) that devour the team's time: "The concept of pollinated content is pretty new, and even as we envisioned what it might mean, we never knew precisely *how* players would interface with it. We then wanted to improve the ways in which players interact with one another." Although trading, alongside crafting, will likely consume the majority of many users' time at the keyboard, *Spore* is also a goal-driven game with an ending. Acquire evolution points to build brains big enough to fashion tools and form

religions; use tools, rites, and other cultural creations to civilize tribes; conquer rival civilizations and reach for the stars; colonize the stars and gradually travel across your galaxy's spokes to its nucleus, where, as Wright teases, "something interesting" awaits.

There's *Spore* the 21st-century monster-mix-up book, and *Spore* the smarty-pants game that makes the covers of nongaming magazines. With the latter in mind—and with a straight face—I ask Wright what implicit statements *Spore* makes about specific scientific fields. "Well, we're obviously taking a firm position on intelligent design," he says and chuckles, perhaps uncomfortably. "Polytheism, once you're thinking about who your neighbors are. We blow away the Copernican principle after about the civilization phase. We resolve the Fermi paradox pretty neatly." Which is to acknowledge that this is a lowercase "god" game, that extraterrestrial civilizations abound according to estimates, and that Wright's preproduction reading included "astronomy, a bit of anthropology, some sociology, but mostly cosmology."

Maxis' scope is so all-encompassing that game-design decisions take on the appearance of philosophical positions. When a *Spore* society waves goodbye to its own solar system, does its religion fade into the distance along with its planetary cradle? And will such messages sit well with theists? "At the space level," Wright says, "the people that you meet tend to be trade partners, maybe political allies or opponents. At the moment, we don't have religious relationships at the spacefaring stage. That stops at the civ section." However, it is possible to inspire religious reactions in lower-order species. "If you visit a troubled planet, we still want its inhabitants to have the ability to worship you or see you as a god," he says. But these beings won't go on to, say, create cities with shapes inspired >

> "IF YOU VISIT A TROUBLED PLANET, WE STILL WANT ITS INHABITANTS TO HAVE THE ABILITY TO WORSHIP YOU."
> —WILL WRIGHT, DESIGNER, MAXIS STUDIOS

• **Says Will Wright: "I probably spent two and a half years just researching *Spore*, working with one programmer on several small prototypes."**
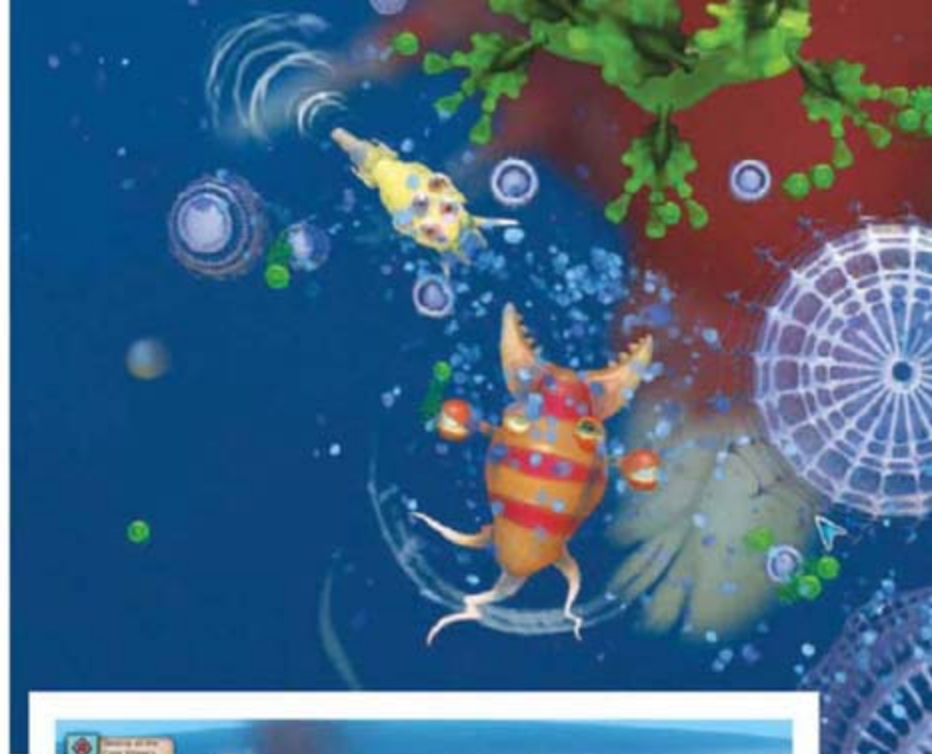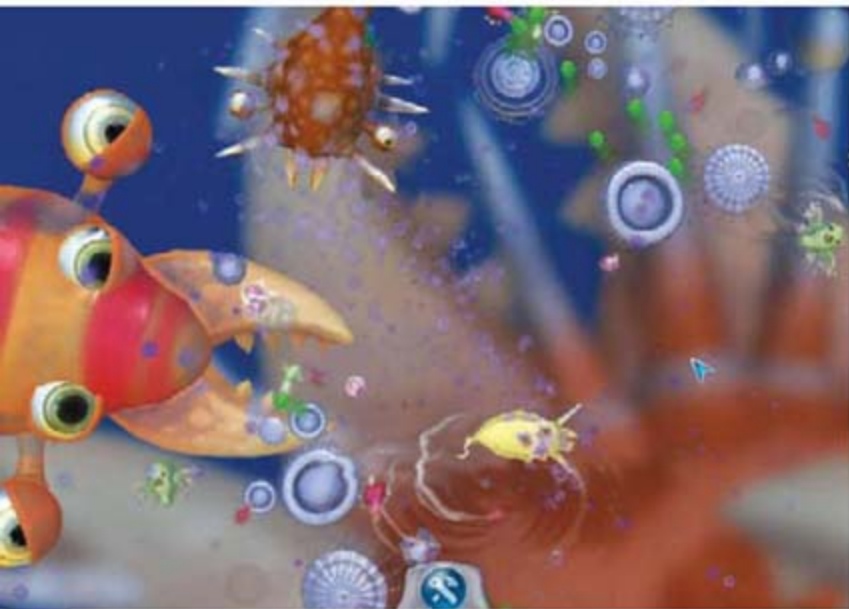
● Wright says he "fully expects people to have favorite levels and to play these again and again—which is why we let you try any level at any time."

by your own godly technology. "I can accelerate their development to civilization and then to space stages," he adds, "at which point the relationship transitions from a form of worship to an alliance." Listen closely and you'll hear strains of sci-fi novelist Arthur C. Clarke.

THE RELATIVITY OF TIME

Interesting as it is to biology lovers, the idea of *indirectly* influencing the evolutionary courses of other creatures (as opposed to messing with an animal's anatomy in an editor) isn't all that important in *Spore*, even at the point where we're tinkering with entire ecosystems, turning cold, dry worlds into warm, wet ones. "We've made games, *SimLife* in particular, that in fact computationally simulated fitness-selection pressures," he says. "To get meaningful selection and evolution on a computer requires much larger populations than you'd imagine, and many more generations. You can't really do it with a few hundred individuals over 10 generations. You need 10,000 individuals over 300 generations—at which point you're removed from the experience. You have to deal with very large data sets that become meaningless in the context of a game."

Yet, rather than bounce between game levels, you do grow gradually and with the awareness that your decisions now will affect what you become later. Choices you make in the creature

stage determine your tribe's status as carnivores, herbivores, or omnivores. Tactics used in the tribal game influence your civilization's culture and whether it looks to military, religious, or economic solutions to life's problems. Enterprising players will, of course, combine survival strategies in the tradition of the Trojan horse, for example, plying a neighboring people with food or musical performances and then dropping the diplomatic guise when their guard is down. I imagine that many *GFW* readers will prefer to play at the margins like this—eradicating an enemy's food source to starve him into submission—and in the process write their own version of what it is to play *Spore*.

Sometimes the game surprises its creators. "Even in the creature phase, you can encounter a pair of species that somehow end up eradicating each other," Bradshaw says. "It gives you free rein to gather the spoils."

"We want a very open-ended and surprising experience, but every now and then, it'll spin off into a weird space that's hard to play in," Wright adds. "We have to watch those boundary

conditions and put in some protection to prevent these things from going too far out of control. We had these enormous dinosaurs, and when they arrived right next to your hut, you were hosed."

I'm surprised *Spore* has failure conditions at all. Given the variables, how does Maxis determine where things begin to go wrong before resetting a player's progress to a point that guarantees things won't go wrong again? Wright responds: "That's the problem. Taking players back to an untenable position—we have to prevent that from ever happening, especially where you've worked your way through cell, creature, and tribe stages. You never go farther back than the start of the stage that you're currently in."

"Between the five phases we're tuning, I've probably spent more time on [*Spore*] than any other game I've worked on," Bradshaw muses while looking at Wright.

"Actually, it's about the same amount of time I spent on *The Sims*," he replies. "On and off, I worked on that for seven years, so for me it's gone by real quick." ● Shawn Elliott

"YOU CAN ENCOUNTER A PAIR OF SPECIES THAT SOMEHOW END UP ERADICATING EACH OTHER."
—LUCY BRADSHAW, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, MAXIS STUDIOS
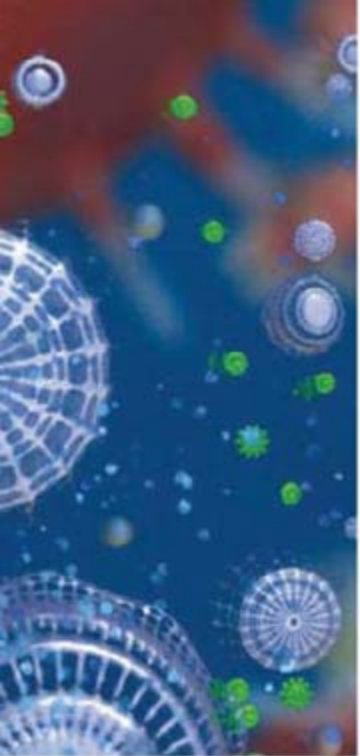
● **Wright doesn't object to the idea that some players will want to create creatures in a game-free vacuum. "They paid for it," he says. "Even with** *SimCity*, **some people just loved to edit terrain. They wouldn't even start the game; they'd just make mountains, valleys...."**

FULL CIRCLE

Say you're still in *Spore*'s creature phase and put your species up for the world to inspect and play with. Weeks later, when you've evolved and are exploring the cosmos, you could very well come across a version of your own ancestors, which other players have tinkered with and you've inadvertently downloaded back into your own universe.

Alien abduction offers another means of meeting long-lost relatives: A UFO from a more evolved race might drop by before you've even discovered fire and lasso some of your kind in its tractor beam. Creator Will Wright says to look for them down the line: "We're foreshadowing what you'll be doing later on."

• For every correct answer you score in FreeRice.com's vocabulary quiz, the site donates 20 grains of rice to the United Nations World Food Programme.

FREE RICE

Playing games to fight world hunger

TRENDS

Politically active, financially reactive, and creatively proactive, John Breen has been struggling to do *something* about world hunger for the past 20 years. In January of 2007, he started Poverty.com to educate the well-fed Internet masses about the need for international action to feed the 850 million people worldwide without enough to eat.

By the spring of 2007, the self-employed computer programmer from Bloomington, IN faced a different kind of struggle: His son wouldn't study for his SATs. "He hated studying vocabulary," explains Breen, "like normal people, including me."

Killing two birds with one stone, Breen devised FreeRice.com, a humble online vocabulary game with the not-so-humble goal of ending world hunger.

In an era of increasingly sophisticated browser-based games, FreeRice.com is anachronistic. Simple and silent, the site features the game itself, a rotating banner ad, and virtually nothing else. The rules are as simple as the layout: You are presented with a word and four possible definitions. Choose the correct answer, and the quiz becomes harder—and FreeRice.com donates 20 grains of rice to feed the hungry, primarily refugees in Bangladesh.

It sounds simple, even simple-minded, so it's hard to imagine such a game could actually make a difference. But in the four months since FreeRice.com went live, more than 17 *billion* grains of rice have been distributed—

enough to feed 850,000 people for a day. As the days grew shorter in 2007, FreeRice.com spread across the Internet like a philanthropic LOLcat, propelled by early notice on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* and a Facebook support group that garnered 85,000 members. FreeRice.com's traffic continues to grow. Traffic brings advertisers. Advertisers keep the rice flowing.

FreeRice.com is addictive for the same reasons most good games are: It's challenging, it rewards success with progressive difficulty, and it empowers players. "It's a lucky combination. I didn't think the vocabulary would be fun. I kind of just settled on it. It turns out people just got addicted to it, grinding the levels," Breen says, with no apparent knowledge that the word "grind" has a special entry in the lexicon of gamer hell.

Breen did more than just make a word game. He convinced the United Nations World Food Programme—the world's largest humanitarian organization, with a $2.8 billion relief budget—to partner with him. Jennifer Parmelee, the public affairs officer at the WFP, says FreeRice.com isn't really all that much about the rice. "The gift that John Breen has given us, which in a way outshines any amount of money, is that of public awareness," she says. "This is an invisible issue."

But for the 500,000 people a day who mitigate staff-meeting boredom with FreeRice.com instead of FreeCell, the issue is just a little less invisible. And for the thousands of refugees in Bangladesh who are living on John Breen's rice, the world is just a little less cruel. • **Julian Murdoch**

SIDE QUEST

There's more than one way to feed the hungry. FreeRice.com founder John Breen offers an alternative to guessing definitions. "The amount of money that needs to be raised is huge," he says. "To really do the job, it's $195 billion a year. You want to *really* solve world hunger? Vote. I truly believe that. It's voting and asking candidates about it, so it's on their radar. When they vote on these huge budgets, it's a stroke of a pen for a couple of billion dollars, which makes a huge difference. That's how I look at it. That's the big picture. That's the big money."

● "I have the lowest breaking-even point in gaming history," says creator Eskil Steenberg. "I only need 400 players [subscribed at $10 a month] to break even. I really don't need a publisher."

● *Love* throws out the traditional MMO leveling system, replacing individual achievement with the progress of communal towns.

LOVE
One man's labor of love

PUBLISHER: **Eskil Steenberg** DEVELOPER: **Eskil Steenberg** GENRE: **MMO Adventure** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW

↗ **Eskil Steenberg might be** the most ambitious indie game developer in the world. Bankrolled by a former career in private research, the 31-year-old Swedish designer has spent the last year creating a massively multiplayer online game completely on his own. Or rather, he's writing a program that will create the game for him, over and over again.

Steenberg works in the realm of procedural game design, a technique you've already seen at work in the likes of *Spore*, wherein the game itself (not the game's maker) builds worlds, creates creatures, and defines the way they behave. Think of it like this: In a normal game, if a designer wants an oak tree in the world, he has an artist create every inch of it, from root to leaf, by hand. In a procedural game, the designer creates just the seed of that tree, and all the tiny details of its existence, from the way light reflects off its bark to what happens when you drive a car into it, are defined by that seed. The

double-sided benefit of such a technique is that game designers can create a huge amount of content in little time, and the objects and possibilities procedural programs produce can be far more varied and numerous than any big-budget army of developers could create the old-fashioned way.

With *Love*, a cooperative sci-fi adventure meant for around 50 people at a time, Steenberg wants to see just how far he can push the idea. Everything, from the game world's terrain and the layout of cities to the design of characters and enemy creatures, pops out of Steenberg's lines of code, not his imagination. At least not directly. "I'm trying to make a significantly large game by myself," says Steenberg. "That means that I need to be very, very innovative with how I deal with the world and how I generate things. [*Love*] is not a sandbox game. It's a sandbox that creates the game."

The player will also create much of the experience by using *Love*'s simple terrain-sculpting tool. Players inhabit a spherical world large enough to play host to a large adventure game but small enough that you can make out the curve of the

planet on the horizon. The planet's terrain consists of blocks that you can pull and stretch, sculpting environments that every other player in the game will be able to interact with. "You can also make holes in the blocks," says Steenberg. "So you can essentially walk up to any mountain and just dig out a cave. If you grab the ground, you can just pull up a pillar. If you pull up multiple pillars, you can build a house. And on these blocks, you can place objects like trees, machines, and weapon turrets."

For the enemy forces who oppose the players, these kinds of structures will pop up throughout the world on their own, creating impromptu areas of conflict. "There won't really be missions," says Steenberg. "Rather, when you go out and explore the world, you'll find stuff you want to do. Like, 'Oh there's a fort, I want to destroy that.' When you defeat the fort, it will be destroyed, gone forever."

Steenberg aims to give players a feeling of power over the world, something usually lacking in MMOs. "It's a change for a multiplayer game to allow you to really have an impact on the world," says Steenberg. "With other MMOs, if you kill a dragon, it doesn't mean the dragon is gone. It just means that you killed him, and other people get to kill him afterward. It's not like the whole world says, 'Oh, the dragon's gone. Now we can live a free and happy life, and that guy's the hero because he did it.' *That's* the game I want to do." ● **Robert Ashley**

"LOVE IS NOT A SANDBOX GAME. IT'S A SANDBOX THAT CREATES THE GAME."
—ESKIL STEENBERG, CREATOR

Game Over

How different gamemakers cope with death

By Evan Shamoon

TRENDS

↗ **In videogames,** there are but two certainties: death and boxes. ("Crates" just doesn't have the same ring.) From 1979's *Asteroids* to 2007's *Crysis*, technology hasn't changed the fact that death—both dishing it out and avoiding it—remains the most valuable currency of games, to the point where death has become synonymous with failure. (How many times have you said "I died!" after merely crashing your car or missing a checkpoint in a game?)

Whether you believe death to be a permanent state in real life or not, in virtual territory it's generally anything but. But is game design's reliance on death as a gameplay mechanic simply a holdover from when game narratives consisted of "You're a spaceship—shoot bad things and don't die"?

BASIC INSTINCTS

Even after working on a slew of rather forward-thinking titles (the *Thief* series for Looking Glass Studios, and now a project with Steven Spielberg for Electronic Arts), designer Randy Smith admits that the portrayal of death in games is very different from its portrayal in other forms of media.

"In a movie or book, even one about violent events, death typically carries significant narrative gravity," he says. "Something to contemplate and reflect upon: mortality, tragic loss, the finite versus the infinite, all that jazz. In a videogame, by contrast, death is often just a temporary nuisance—a failed jump or missed bullet, a lightweight frustration. The videogame version [of death] emerges from a collection of assumptions about what games are supposed to be: Games are supposed to be about goals; the goals are supposed to be judged and scored; consistent inability to achieve positive goals should lead to

failure; games are supposed to be about dangerous and violent topics...altogether they mean that in a game, you should sometimes fail, and the failure should be death."

Perhaps it's more than merely a matter of life and death. In real life, our animal instincts demand that we, as living organisms, survive. We drive cars knowing full well that a momentary mental lapse could mean life-threatening disaster, and we cross the street on the same sensory autopilot. When gaming, these instincts are often the most heavily stimulated: We have a gun, or a clenched fist, or a level 43 Wand of Verisimilitude, primed and ready at all times, for use against gnomes, cacodemons, Nazis, and various combinations thereof. We are, essentially, stuck in a constant fight to preserve our virtual life against an unrelenting threat.

All of which works to create a particular brand of tension—even stress—that some designers like Gas Powered Games' founder Chris Taylor (*Supreme*

IN VIDEOGAMES, THERE ARE BUT TWO CERTAINTIES: DEATH AND BOXES.

Here lies
A.S.S.
Ran out of
quarters

Cpl.
Action
stealth

Unsure why the
A.I. saw him

Player
One

Not a save
point in sight

Commander, Demigod) perceive as an entry barrier...or even a reason why some gamers eventually lose touch with the medium. Games can feel too much like work.

"I've been saying this for the past couple of years," Taylor says. "I use this exact argument to explain why so many people are playing casual games these days...much to the surprise of many. Even hardcore gamers that I know are playing casual games. I think we need to think not in terms of complexity or difficulty, but instead in terms of entertainment value—good writing, great story, great characters. It doesn't always have to be about technology, but bringing all of these elements together will ultimately deliver the most entertaining experience."

After a long day of trying to stay alive (or at least afloat) in the game of life, coming home to the stress of staying alive loses some of its appeal. So, would a different approach to death open

gaming to more people—or is it a necessity of design and something vital for maintaining drama and tension?

Taylor believes that the industry's reliance on "staying alive" is essentially a holdover from the days of old. But "we're realizing that it's not about eating quarters—it's about entertaining our customers and giving them the most entertainment for their buck," he says. "Look at Lego Star Wars. Your character is still in peril, still shoots, still blows up into bits—but with very little penalty. It's really quite brilliant game design."

TENSION AND THE TENTACLE
"I think, sometimes, people confuse meaning with dramatic tension," says Telltale Games designer and programmer Dave Grossman, one of the main brains behind the episodic Sam & Max: Season One and Two. "If I'm playing a game set in the middle of a war, then sending coded messages

to the Allies or rescuing classic works of art from a bomb raid are meaningful actions regardless. But the game might still feel unexciting if I'm not worried about the survival of my character. The possibility of death generates tension, but not meaning. Fortunately for interactive storytelling, there are other ways to provide both, and many of the classic LucasArts adventures contain good examples of techniques for doing so."

While at LucasArts, Grossman wrote and programmed classics like The Secret of Monkey Island and Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge and codesigned Day of the Tentacle—point-and-click adventure games that successfully eluded the standard "death avoidance" scenario by ensuring that the player never dies. "Dangerous" decisions are generally rejected by the game in favor of more creative, life-preserving approaches to problems. His current Sam & Max series follows the same rules. >

● **Right:** *BioShock* excuses death with its Vita-Chamber device. **Below:** *Thief: Deadly Shadows* sent players to jail instead of six feet under.

"My games are hardly ever focused on life-and-death struggles, so it's usually the case that the central character does not die at all," Grossman says. "I tend to prefer this anyway, because I want the player to be engrossed in what's going on and forget they're sitting at a computer, and that's hard to accomplish if they're worried about saving the game at every corner. This invulnerability can make trouble for me at points where I do want it to feel like the character is in peril, so sometimes I'll introduce a combination of faster action and the threat of a small, nonfatal setback to back up that peril, and it works pretty well."

On the other hand, Running With Scissors' Mike Jaret, project manager of *Postal 3*, thinks death is beside the point. "Gaming is about skill and fun. As most games nowadays are about true life, death is a must—plus it's really the only way to gauge someone's true skills within the realm of gaming. I don't think we're trying to find ways 'around' it, just ways to justify it." Jaret cites *BioShock*—certainly one of the headier games to come out in recent years. It still relies heavily on this strain—and its use of Vita-Chambers as visually justified checkpoints.

Jaret admits that his games haven't really dealt with death in many ways, other than offering the option to avoid killing if you're not in mortal danger. "You didn't have to shoot anyone in *Postal 2*

to finish it, but as the game progresses, more and more people are shooting at you for little to no reason. This tests your humanity: Are you willing to die? Or would you rather kill the person shooting at you? Or would you rather smoke some catnip to slow down time so you can get away from him?"

SECOND CHANCES

Some developers have come up with creative alternatives to dying—or even creative reasons *to* die. In Smith's *Thief: Deadly Shadows*, protagonist Garrett doesn't die the first time he gets caught by city guards; instead, he wakes up in jail (a concept mimicked in Starbreeze Studios' *Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay*)—transforming potential failure into a dramatic and fun story event with its own opportunities. Black Isle Studios' 1999 RPG *Planescape: Torment* famously required its main character to die in order to solve puzzles.

But Smith admits that *Thief* illustrates the challenges of this approach: How enjoyable (or plausible) is it to go back to jail again and again? How do you justify such alternatives to dying while still maintaining narrative credibility?

"In a *Die Hard* movie, if John McClane can't hold on to a ledge, his fall will inevitably be broken by some fortuitously placed awning or pile of empty boxes," Grossman says. "He doesn't

make it to the rooftop, but he doesn't die, either. The idea that failure results in a setback which stops short of the death of the character is perfectly compatible with an action experience, though it may require a bit more creativity and effort to implement than 'Game Over' does. Whether it makes sense to treat it that way ultimately depends on whether the protagonist is meant to be an invincible superhuman like McClane or a regular human being like, say, a soldier in *Platoon*."

So if alternative approaches exist, as Grossman suggests, is the relative emotional insignificance of death in games simply a function of the relative insignificance of *emotion* in today's games? "This conclusion creates a bunch of design problems that need to be solved, such as how to resolve the narrative's continuity against the protagonist's demise, how to provide feedback about partial failure and guide the player back

"I DON'T THINK WE'RE TRYING TO FIND WAYS 'AROUND' DEATH, JUST WAYS TO JUSTIFY IT."

—MIKE JARET, PROJECT MANAGER, *POSTAL 3*

toward success, and so on," Smith says. "Some imaginative and effective solutions to these design problems have been invented over the years, but it seems clear to me that these assumptions about goals and death are pretty limiting when considering the entire space of what games can be about."

Still, Smith contends that death as a consequence of failure is not what makes some games feel like work—it's likely another flaw in the game's design. "I think some games provide lots of repetitive tasks with incremental rewards that bear insignificant appeal and little direct relevance to the gamer's life, and therefore feel like a chore. As just one counterexample, I die all the time in [Nintendo DS game] *The Legend of Zelda: The Phantom Hourglass*—but since the backtracking is minimal, the game keeps me focused on the steady flow of progress and rewards."

And, of course, plenty of amazing games are essentially nonviolent. Smith names *Gran Turismo*, *Rock Band*, *Nintendogs*, *Animal Crossing*, and *Tetris* among them, but admits they form a small segment of a very long list. "So those more difficult questions about what death means and how design should handle it come up because games, especially hardcore games, disproportionately cover the narrow topic of deliberate and fatal personal violence."

Or maybe it's simpler than that. Says Grossman, "I think the relative emotional insignificance of death in games these days is largely due to frequency rather than anything about realism or other aspects of portrayal. If your character shoots a hundred people every hour, death becomes a sort of a background hum, whereas if she only shoots one, then it might carry more weight."

For now, we suppose we can only offer this advice: Keep shooting, and don't forget to strafe. ● **Evan Shamoon**

MORE WAYS TO DIE
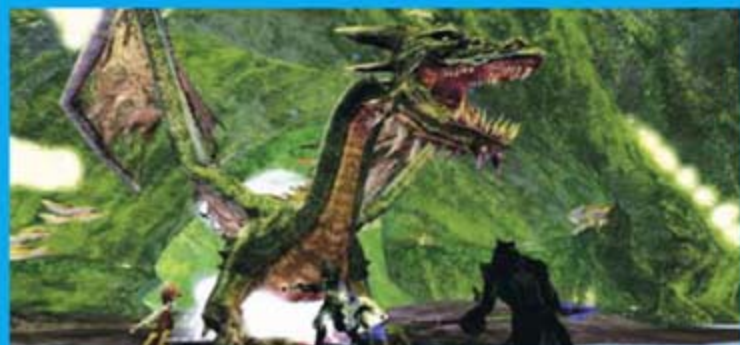
In MMORPGs, death—and especially its consequences—is a particularly touchy subject. *EverQuest* designer Brad McQuaid stressed the importance of corpse runs—i.e., the punishing act of running halfway across the world to get your body and recover your items before your body decayed—as an essential part of the game's risk and reward system. Without it, he contended, people would invariably take stupid risks with no consequence, thereby eliminating any real sense of danger and apprehension. Naturally, some gamers felt abused. After McQuaid left the company, SOE tore some of McQuaid's most draconian measures from the game (corpse runs remained, though players now had weeks instead of hours to perform them). Corpse runs later resurfaced as part of McQuaid's next project, *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes*.

Even further along on the severity spectrum is the concept of "perma-death." In the original incarnation of *Star Wars: Galaxies* (the game has since gone through several major overhauls), the hardest of the hardcore could eventually unlock a Jedi character—only to have it killed forever by a single bounty hunter, forcing players to build a new one from scratch and lose months of work in the process. The Jedi system was almost universally loathed, and SOE soon scrapped it.

Compare these rigorous approaches with that of *World of WarCraft*, whose popularity is due in no small part to its death philosophy: that a little time and a small gold tax are penalty enough. Which tells us one of two things: Either we're not ready to deal with "realistic" consequences of death in games...or that maybe, *just maybe*, someone needs to invent the virtual Irish wake.

Macon: tantrum
Joe and Mac: man it's filled with robots in here
Joe and Mac: these bots are freakin me out man

● When rock shows don't draw enough of a crowd, a *vLES* host (the guy with the microphone icon) will drop in an army of hipster bots.

[bot3]

[bot24]

Joe and Mac

[bot9]

[bot12]

[bot14]

THE GAME PULLS IN A STREAM OF NATIONAL INDIE BANDS. CREATING A KIND OF ONLINE AMERICAN BANDSTAND... IN THEORY.

● *VLES*: One of the only outlets in which MTV shows music videos.

KATZ'S DELICATESSEN

● You can't clobber, shoot, or swing a sword, but you can select from an extensive menu of facial expressions, slacker shoulder shrugs, and breakdancing moves.

● A *vLES* rock "show" consists of watching videotaped live performances while chatting with fellow audience members.

A NEW YORK NIGHT IN

MTV turns NYC hipster berg into a virtual club scene

TRENDS

Like so many storied neighborhoods in New York City, Manhattan's Lower East Side has defined its own brand of cultural cool. Once a slum for immigrants and working stiffs, hipsters colonized the LES in the 1990s and made it their capital, a home for visual artists and would-be rock stars—skinny people with a taste for tight jeans, herky-jerky rock music, and asymmetrical hairdos. The place blew up. Successful bands like The Strokes and Interpol got their start in LES clubs, imbuing the neighborhood with an internationally renowned hipness, a fleeting cool factor that MTV plans to bottle and sell in *Virtual Lower East Side*.

Transporting landmark storefronts like the Mercury Lounge, Cake Shop, and Katz's Deli into a stylized 3D world, *vLES* invites envious non–New Yorkers to join the cool club from the comfort of their computer chairs. The streets are appropriately gritty, and the bars and clubs do their best to re-create the ambiance of a New York night out for housebound indie socialites, but calling *vLES* a "game" might offend gaming puritans. The only kinds of interactivity on offer here are the ability to slump onto a bar stool or choose from a laundry list of actions for your avatar: dance moves, physical gestures, and snapshot poses. Like *Second Life*, *vLES* is just an elaborate chat room.

But where *Second Life* tries to reel in players with a wealth of customization options, *vLES* hopes to hook them with live music. Well, recorded live music. MTV camera crews film real-life rock shows and play them on in-game video screens in virtual versions of famous New York clubs. The game pulls in a stream of national indie bands to fill their schedule, creating a kind of online *American Bandstand*, at least in theory. My explorations of *vLES* (the game is in a public testing phase) were marked by lonesome, empty spaces, creepy encounters, and technical gremlins.

Admission to *vLES* events, unlike to shows in the real world, is free. That's because *vLES* is really a Trojan horse for MTV's answer to MySpace. Like that online orgy of musical self-promotion, vLES.com (the game's web browser counterpart) hopes to hock profile pages to every garage band on Earth.

But how can MTV compete with an entrenched user base of tearful singer-songwriters and basement rappers hooked on a site owned by Rupert Murdoch? Airtime. The network invites musicians to compete in an online battle of the bands, a popularity contest played out in the virtual clubs of *vLES* for a sought-after prize: a spot on MTV2's late-night music show *Subterranean*.

It was that competition's first winner I set out to see. My avatar, appropriately decked out in horn-rim glasses and a Western shirt (but not appropriately pudgy, because being overweight is not an option in the LES, real or virtual) materialized at the corner of Stanton and Orchard. I made my way to the Bowery Ballroom through streets empty enough to be from the set of *I Am Legend* if it weren't for the surreal number of homeless characters with names like "Charlie the Cat Wrangler" passed out on the sidewalks. Interpol songs cycled through the in-game music player one after another, as if to insist you *are* in New York City. The Ballroom was dead. No bartenders, no doorman—just one fellow music fan sitting on the floor, staring at a video screen where the band should be. An old Iggy Pop clip for "Lust for Life" flickered on and off every few seconds.

"Moosebaloney" and I struck up a conversation while the show that was supposed to happen failed to materialize. Within minutes we were joined by a female character. "Mandy" circled around us a few times like a hungry shark, exchanged her hipster wear for a bikini, and introduced herself: "Yo. I'm horny, lol!" Like a live version of the typical MySpace hot-girl spam, "Mandy" proceeded to try to initiate sex talk while periodically asking us to add her to our friends lists. The music videos flickered on.

By the time the show started, Moosebaloney and Mandy were long gone, replaced by a handful of clubgoers and *vLES* "hosts," MTV reps trying to facilitate a good time. We all stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, watching the screen as an all-girl group by the name of ModRocket, winner of the first battle of the bands, started their set. It was

● *VLES's* creators obviously paid careful attention to detail in re-creating NYC's nightlife spots.

a lot like a real indie rock show, except the band disappeared periodically. Eventually people started to dance. My character flailed around to a beat unrelated to the music while an army of audience bots flooded the club. Technology has taken music in many cool directions. This is not one of them.

TEN YEARS TOO LATE

For fans, *vLES* is a bore, but for bands, it's a better deal. The chance to have your show captured by a professional camera crew and enjoy the remote possibility of stealing cable airtime away from the well-funded rock 'n' roll competition are great incentives to participate, but MTV's single-minded fight with MySpace gums up the works.

"The problem with it is they don't let you connect to MySpace at all," says Stephen Lipuma, leader of *vLES* battle of the bands runner-up group, The Exeter Popes. "It puts a damper on things because, if you manage your band through MySpace, you're not going to take on this entirely different platform and try to manage yourselves in two different markets."

MTV's real problem may be that cool is a moving target. "The Lower East Side is almost dead," Lipuma says. "All the cool clubs that existed there are gone. Instead, there's an American Apparel and a Starbucks on every other corner." For the last few years, he says, New York's rock bands have migrated en masse to Brooklyn: "Back in the day, the Lower East Side was cheap, and bands and artists were living there because of that. Now, the average band definitely can't afford to live in the Lower East Side. It's like they're 10 years too late." ● **Robert Ashley**

● *VLES* offers plenty of fashionable clothing, but making your character ugly or overweight is not an option.

• Here's hoping *Jumpgate: Evolution* sticks around longer than NetDevil's failed *Auto Assault* project.

JUMPGATE: EVOLUTION
See you in space

PUBLISHER: **Codemasters** DEVELOPER: **NetDevil** GENRE: **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE: **2008**

PREVIEW

↗ **"What is *Jumpgate: Evolution*?"** That's the question I pose to Herman Peterscheck, lead producer on NetDevil's upcoming sci-fi MMO sequel. Yes, sequel: 2001's sleeper *Jumpgate: The Reconstruction Initiative*, initially published through the now-defunct 3DO Company and then handed off to Themis Group and German publisher Mightygames, gets a makeover later this year.

"*Evolution* is a totally new game [and] an accumulation of everything we've learned over the last 10 years of game development," Peterscheck tells me. "Players choose one of three factions and then take part in their own space adventure. This includes combat, trading, mining, crafting, and so on. Many typical MMO experiences are in the game, including quests, advancement, loot, and things like that—but it's essentially a space-combat game."

Totally new, he says...but what about that big white elephant-shaped mothership—the vaunted *Eve Online*? Of course, Peterscheck thinks *Eve*'s just great, and he's quick to point out the big-picture differences between that game and his: "In *Jumpgate*, you fly your ship, and combat is skill-based as opposed to [*Eve's*] more strategy-centric type of control scheme. We've also tried to give the game a gentler learning curve [than *Eve*]; while we will have a deep and player-driven economy, we want to make sure that people can jump right in without spending a lot of time learning how to play."

EVE-OLUTION

And not to keep comparing the two, but as with *Eve*, don't expect to explore any far-flung planets because ship-to-ship combat's the key focus. Your ship and its capabilities define your role (rather than, say, a strict character class, which *Evolution* eschews); as you complete missions and accrue experience, your character earns licenses that yield access to better equipment, resources, and economic benefits. Again, Peterscheck stresses that success depends on player proficiency: "Leveling up does not mean you automatically get tougher or get some special set of skills that you train."

With any luck, he's not just pulling my leg—*Evolution*'s geared toward both PVE *and* PVP play. "My hope is that we can create a game that has opportunities for both," says Peterscheck, who notes that most MMOs fail to properly balance the two play styles. "There's a tendency for developers to pick one side and half-support the other, which really makes people understandably angry. I think a better [solution] is to support both. If you are doing lots of cool PVP stuff, the rewards should be equal to the PVE rewards but tailored for the PVP experience. If you add some badass PVE content, make sure that you give the PVPers some good stuff as well."

Peterscheck describes the combat as more FPS than RPG. "*Jumpgate* is primarily an action-combat game, so if you want to hit someone, you line up the shot and fire. There's no to-hit roll, so to speak. We're still working on specifics, but there will be some kind of PVP in space—either through PVP servers, regulated and unregulated space, PVP flagging, [or] a mix of the above. We're also looking at instanced PVP experiences."

As for Peterscheck's ideal combat scenario, think *Star Wars*: "When I imagine cool space battles, my mind goes to the typical scene of two giant capital ships coming closer and closer together, volleying shots at each other while tons of smaller ships fight and aid their side. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Yes, it would. ● **Ryan Scott**

AMERICAN MCGEE'S GRIMM

American in Shanghai

PUBLISHER: **GameTap** DEVELOPER: **Spicy Horse** GENRE: **Adventure** RELEASE DATE: **Spring 2008**

PREVIEW

↗ **Game design** isn't architecture. Software studios, unlike construction crews, aren't about literally realizing one person's plans. So if it's an iterative process, in which developers evaluate and reinvent games as they go (the equivalent of carpenters changing blueprints while they build), why is American McGee's signature stamped on *Grimm*? What is a McGee game?

"Story and art," he answers. "And the world of fairy tales always appeals to me." It's as if I've asked Colonel Sanders for the recipe that made him rich. He's corresponding via e-mail and, I assume, hurriedly jotting just enough to satisfy his PR person's expectations. Nonetheless, I figure that, after contributing to *Doom* and *Quake*, as well as creating a trio of computer games whose titles include his name, McGee must have honed his mission statement and game-design goals for fund-seeking trips, and has perhaps framed this philosophy for hanging somewhere in his overseas studio. It's hard to say. A cynic, however, could jibe that when your production houses are located in Hong Kong or Shanghai and use local labor, the question is more properly, "Why *not* attach your name to the title?"

Upon finishing the critical flop called *Bad Day L.A.*, McGee again followed global trade winds, moving from Hong Kong to Shanghai. "The cultural and communication differences dividing China and the world would fill volumes," he says. "Instead of trying to bend China to meet our expectations, we accommodate ourselves to new surroundings. But my favorite benefit of being here is that people have fewer preconceptions about how game studios should be structured.

In my opinion, that translates to more creative freedom, more interesting output. Drawbacks? There's *mafan*: the notion that things are more difficult, complicated, and time-consuming than you'd assume. But the longer I'm here, the better I become at minimizing *mafan*."

To meet *Grimm*'s schedule, McGee and his Spicy Horse studio might have to avoid *mafan* altogether—the plan is for a new episode to appear exclusively on GameTap each and every week for eight weeks, followed by a brief "midseason break" and then two more eight-episode volumes. *Grimm* visits 24 famous fairy tales from Cinderella to Rumpelstiltskin, a scenario that McGee believes is "ideally suited to this episodic development and distribution model."

When he says that "the game is all about turning 'light' tales 'dark,'" the transformation he has in mind is literal: idyllic Dutch windmills become *Nightmare Before Christmas* contraptions; cutesy townsfolk lose limbs and wander around bleeding. According to McGee, "The more the darkness spreads, the more powerful Grimm becomes, and the larger the things he's able to convert. You overcome a variety of obstacles, including the clock/timer and other characters that clean your mess," he continues. "In a typical scene, you need to convert and hold a certain number of children, who are transformed into matchsticks with legs. Once you've converted enough, they'll run over and start a bonfire, which burns down an obstacle, allowing you to pass to the next area." I hear Tim Burton and *Katamari Damacy*, and that sounds like a good—if not an American McGee—thing. ● **Shawn Elliott**

● **Grimm takes his name literally and changes the world from vibrant and happy (left) to dismal (right).**

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WRAPPED

A history of game packaging trends—from awesome to awful

TRENDS

↗ When asked why certain retail entertainment products (be it movies, music, or games) are so expensive, a lot of people tend to believe that you're "just paying for the packaging." And while that's generally a pretty nonsensical belief for a number of reasons, it used to be at least partially true. In the early days of PC gaming, trendsetters like Infocom and Sierra On-Line took game packaging from minimalist to majestic; in recent years, however, we've witnessed a decline in quality when it comes to common packaging practices. Over the next few pages, we examine a few of the most memorable PC game–packaging trends (and the publishers who pushed them) of the past three decades. ●Ryan Scott and Scott Sharkey

1980-1986

From plastic to platinum

IN THE BAG

Starting small

↗ **Picture this:** Back in 1980, some snot-nosed punk (and ComputerLand retail employee) named Richard Garriott coded a little RPG for the Apple II, which he called *Akalabeth: World of Doom*. Lacking the funds or the connections to get it published in any sort of professional capacity, Garriott hand-copied a stack of labeled disks and instructions, stuck 'em all in plastic baggies, and personally peddled them to software stores. That is, until word of *Akalabeth* spread like wildfire and California Pacific Computer Company picked up the publishing rights. Thus did Garriott's alter-ego, Lord British, rise to power.

Today, of course, the *Ultima* series that *Akalabeth* spawned spans over a dozen critically acclaimed products. Garriott himself went on to become a world-famous game designer; he currently owns his own *castle* in Texas, and he's taken multiple trips into the Earth's orbit. In fact, we were unable to reach Garriott for comment as part of this feature since (as of this writing) he's over in Russia prepping for a trip to the International Space Station in October.

Not bad for a career that started with a simple little game that came in a plastic bag.

● **The birth of awesome.**

JAM-PACKED

The Infocom years

↗ **Once upon a time,** graphics weren't something people took for granted. Infocom's text-only interactive fiction never suffered for the lack of them, though few modern gamers can appreciate all those words, since we've become a bunch of murder-happy rageaholics with the attention spans of coked-up ferrets. Or so we're told.

But really, they weren't so minimal as all that. Infocom titles came with a bizarre range of pack-in doodads called "feelies." They ranged from the slightly silly, like the 3D comic book and glasses of *Leather Goddesses of Phobos*, to the absolutely necessary, like the map and game pieces used to keep track of all your robots in *Suspended*. Again, these often doubled as a form of copy protection. *Wishbringer* included a sealed letter that matched the one you were tasked to deliver in the game. The game instructs you when to open it, but the contents were not disclosed within the game itself. Others were awesomely useless: *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* included a set of black, nontransparent cardboard "Peril Sensitive Sunglasses." Cool, yes, but these days it seems like a great length to go to for a joke. Less dramatic—but equally impressive—were all the uncompromisingly in-universe pamphlets, ID cards, tourist brochures, and correspondence that doubled as game manuals. The immersion they fostered makes playing without 'em feel like only about half the experience.

● **"Feelies?" What the hell kind of name is that, anyway?**

MANUAL-O-RAMA

Serious games are serious business

● Top: The tech manual–esque packaging. Bottom: What you're getting yourself into.

◈ **If you think** today's generation of *World of WarCraft*–obsessed raiders get way too serious about their games, you've got it all wrong. At one time, many games—particularly flight simulators, hex-based historical war games, and god games—came packed with (or, as you can see from the illustration, *in*) entire binders bursting with maps, grids, diagrams, procedural instructions, and other paraphernalia designed to help ensure you were the best you possibly could be at pretending to do whatever it is you were doing. Back then, if it didn't have what amounted to a 200-page technical manual, it wasn't a *real* game.

The "read-along" game was a particularly annoying tangent: Instead of displaying vital story elements in the game itself, some older RPGs (SSI was notably guilty of this) would, at various points, insist that you follow along by reading a particular passage of fiction from the included documentation. Thankfully, these strange, immersion-breaking methods of copy protection are a thing of the past. But contemporary games like *Falcon 4.0* and many of AGEOD's boxed editions still include plenty of the beloved old-time bells and whistles.

ROCK 'N' ROLL

EA's greatest hits

◈ **Thousands of years ago,** Trip Hawkins and a few others broke away from Apple to form a new company that would become known as Electronic Arts; EA's first great innovation was its then-revolutionary policy of not treating their employees like crap. Standard practice at the time was to actually avoid giving credit to game programmers to avoid head-hunting, and while other breakaways like Activision and Imagic made progress in the area of not-being-jerks-to-designers, EA went even further.

The company likened its employees to rock stars, crediting their work and even going so far as to include their photographs on packaging and magazine ads, all while giving them a generous share of the profits. This policy was reflected by the company's name: Electronic Arts' developers were artists.

This is most evident in the design of the game boxes themselves, which resembled vinyl LP sleeves. Graced with art that ranged from beautiful to just plain indescribably weird, each package even went so far as to include interior gatefolds featuring arty black-and-white photos and profiles of the designers. Pretentious? Maybe, but unlike the Ion Storm developer-image debacle more than a decade later, EA delivered on that pretension with every one of its titles.

● Born to be kings.

1987-1993
The golden years

QUESTING FOR GOODIES

Sierra sets a new standard

Oakhurst, California–based adventure-game titan Sierra On-Line ruled the lion's share of the PC-gaming market from the early 1980s into the mid-1990s. From humble beginnings with 1979's *Mystery House* (which added then-revolutionary graphics to the traditional text-based adventure) and through the company's meteoric rise by way of now-classic franchises like *King's Quest*, *Space Quest*, *Leisure Suit Larry*, and *Police Quest*, Sierra always had a way with product delivery. As was common for this era, decorative box sleeves and unconventional pack-in literature (which, as with Infocom's games before them, typically doubled as documentation and copy protection) characterized the majority of Sierra's hits: *Space Quest II*'s Space Piston comic, *Police Quest*'s procedural guides and city maps, the *Quest for Glory* games' Famous Adventurer's Correspondence School handbooks, and *Leisure Suit Larry 5*'s Playspy men's-magazine spoof are just a few good examples.

And like EA, Sierra was one of the earliest companies to celebrify its top designers; the images of people like Roberta Williams, Al Lowe, Jane Jensen, Jim Walls, Scott Murphy, and Mark Crowe graced these game boxes, acting as both marketing bullet-points and seals of quality. Sierra's success in the mid-1990s also brought about a subscription-based house magazine called *InterAction*—sort of a PC-gaming equivalent to *Nintendo Power* preaching to the company's devoted customer base. Alas, Sierra's "fun" way of product presentation eventually died out over the back half of the 1990s in the name of cheaper manufacturing costs. Yay, capitalism!

BACH IN THE DAY...
Al Lowe (designer, *Leisure Suit Larry* series)

"Once everyone could steal anything on disk, we integrated the documentation [copy protection] into the gameplay. Of course, that failed, too, once everyone had scanners and CD [burners]. As competition heated up in the 1990s and CDs became prevalent, there was pressure to lower prices, and the tchotchkes fell aside. But it was fun while it lasted, eh?"

CODE WHEELS OF DOOM
Crazy copy protection

Software piracy breeds paranoia, and this was true even way back when. Most disk-based copy protection proved easily crackable and hence ineffective, so developers resorted to manual-based measures. In the most simplistic cases, a game might merely request a specific phrase from the instructions—say, the second word from the fifth paragraph on the ninth page. A few Sierra games got exceedingly weird; *The Colonel's Bequest* came with a foldout poster that had an infrared viewing window and demanded that you match a specified character to his fingerprints (printed on the poster) before beginning play. *King's Quest III*—one of the most outlandish examples—forced players to type entire passages from the documentation, word for word, error-free, on pain of a "game over" screen.

Conversely, the sharp minds at LucasArts often designed their copy-protection schemes around more logical and in-depth puzzles. The first two *Monkey Island* games had those infernal phrase-matching code wheels, and *Maniac Mansion*'s mechanism echoed the aforementioned infrared strip scheme. *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* famously came with a well-crafted mock Grail Diary pack-in designed to mimic the movie's; Indy (and the player) follow clues throughout the game, matching descriptions of the elusive Holy Grail to accounts laid out in the diary and eventually deducing the correct Grail during the game's final puzzle. *Loom*'s Book of Patterns took a similar tack, assisting players with puzzles over the course of the entire game. Sometimes fun and occasionally infuriating (don't lose those manuals!), old-school copy protection is (if you ask us) far preferable to today's StarForce- and SecuROM-powered "safety measures."

1994–2000 Identity crisis!

THE AGE OF CD-ROM
...is upon us!

The CD-ROM craze took off in the early 1990s, and by golly, game publishers made sure we *knew* about it. Back then, when they weren't shoving the new media in our faces by teasing the discs through clear windows on the boxes (see photo), they were inventing new buzzwords to communicate exactly what sort of horsepower our PCs would need to boot these cutting-edge games. In the days before folks learned how to read system requirements, software was rated according to multimedia PC levels. An MPC1-compliant PC (16MHz CPU, 2MB RAM, 30MB hard drive, 256-color videocard, 1x CD-ROM, 8-bit soundcard, and Windows 3.0) was sufficient to play games with an MPC1 designation, and so on. It lasted a whopping six years (making it all the way to MPC3) before everyone stopped caring.

• Someone has been kind enough to appropriate the *Sam & Max Hit the Road* disc from our LucasArts Archive collection.

SHAPE SHIFTING
Why won't they just *fit* on the damn shelf?!

The mid- to late 1990s featured a brief **and**—for game-store owne**rs, at** least—irritating flirta**tion** with irregular box sh**apes. On** one hand, having a t**riangular, trape**-zoidal, octagonal, or **whatever**-the-hell shaped box might make your game stand out on a shelf. On the other hand, eventually it'd **be** just part of a growing **nest of** competing angle**tangles. Better still,** getting them on the **shelf at all in a space**-efficient way became **a puzzle in itself. They** didn't just stand out—**they fell off. Take oddities like** the incomprehensibl**e hyper-origami of the** *Marathon* box: It looked cool, but it didn't stack or store well. The lamentable condition of *GFW*'s archive copy bears testament to this.

DORKS AND DRAGONS

Cloth maps and action figures: actually not that cool

Some games got just a little *too* dorky (you know, *other* than the nerdy war games that came stuffed with hex maps and battle plans). Though this isn't exclusive to a particular era in time, early MMOs like *Ultima Online* and *EverQuest* are particularly guilty, throwing in everything from painstakingly illustrated cloth maps to (in the case of *UO* expansion *Lord Blackthorn's Revenge*) unpainted action-figure molds. Other than acting as stop signs for potential romantic partners, these crazy props served no practical purpose (the maps often were notated in whatever crazy symbol-language their game world utilized). Remember the ill-fated *Ultima IX: Ascension*? In addition to conforming to the organization-defying box-design pitfalls outlined above, *U9*'s gigantic container housed a cloth map, ye olde spell-book replicas, a small deck of tarot cards, and a certificate of authenticity signed by series creator Richard "Lord British" Garriott himself. If that sort of collection doesn't get you labeled "King of the Hardcore Geeks" by everyone you know, we're not sure what will.

• This spread says it all. Note the "*Ultima Online 2*: Coming in 2000" proclamation on *Ultima IX*'s jewel case. Uh huh. Yeah.
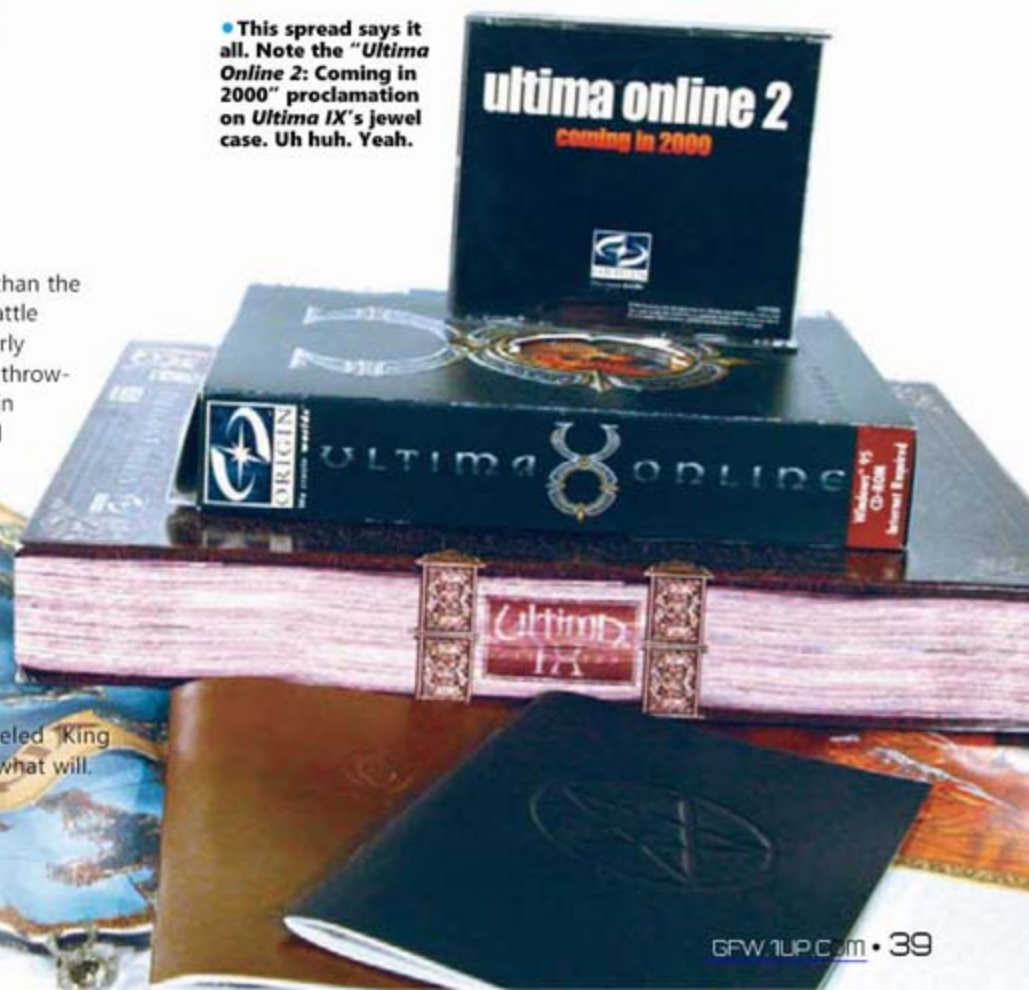
2001-PRESENT

Packaging trends take a nosedive

COLLECTORS' CORNER

Special (and not-so-special) editions

⚡ **Every now and then,** a publisher still goes balls-to-the-wall with its marquee games. Blizzard's big *World of WarCraft* collectors' boxes include mouse pads, behind-the-scenes DVDs, and heavy hardcover art books. And *Civilization Chronicles*—a truly impressive labor of love—collects Sid Meier's entire *Civ* series in a sturdy case, including every expansion (updated for modern PCs), a book chronicling the series' history, and a DVD chock full of interviews. But these kinds of deluxe treatments don't happen very often—most so-called "Collectors' Editions" really aren't. One recent example: *Sins of a Solar Empire*'s CE box touts a tech-tree poster and a hotkey card. Huh?

MMO special editions are particularly prone to superfluousness. In-game bonus can't grant an undue advantage to a player, thus the prevalence of useless but presumably envy-inspiring special-edition pets and cloaks. The other typical inclusion is a game soundtrack; that would be a perk for just about any game that isn't an MMO. A massive game could possess the greatest musical score ever created in human history, but after 100 hours of killing boars, it's the last thing most players want to hear when they're *not* playing.

● **Can you pick out the collectors' edition that doesn't suck? Think carefully.**

MASS MARKET

Stick the disc in a sleeve and call it a day

⚡ **Nowadays, you're lucky** if the typical PC game comes with anything more than a flimsy black-and-white manual, a couple of discs in paper sleeves, and a cheap cardboard packing frame. In an era where just about every multimillion-dollar game release puts a publisher's bottom line at risk, the only good corner is a cut corner. It's undoubtedly just the nostalgia talking, but we shed a tear for the days when a few tchotchkes and a nice box were the rule rather than the exception. Nowadays, we just wind up paying an extra $20 for the "privilege" of owning a bigger piece of cardboard and a flimsy book filled with crappy concept illustrations. And with download-on-demand services like Steam fast becoming stable PC-gaming superstores, it can't be long until "bargain bin" becomes synonymous with "deluxe edition."

THESE DAYS. IT SEEMS THE ONLY GOOD CORNER IS A CUT CORNER.

● **Welcome to the age of corporate penny-pinching—and the tragic death of awesome game packaging.**

● **The future looms large.**

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FREE PLAY
The best games that money can't buy

COLUMN

The Freeloader
Know about some sweet free games? Tip off our resident mooch! Freeloader@ziffdavis.com is the best way to reach him.

The best games speak to our most basic drives: our need to acquire things, impress peers, explore, or just kill the hell out of something that spooked us. In this month's Free Play, we take a look at games that appeal to our primal need to hunt prey. We stalk the deadly (and delicious) velociraptor, along with assorted fish, untrustworthy whales, our fellow humans, and the most dangerous prey of all: Charles Barkley.

I give up. You caught me. None of these games have anything in common whatsoever—other than being excellent, free, and begging for download. Also, I think two have water in them. But who needs a theme? We need not constrain ourselves when talking about free loot. I am a free man! Free to run over dinosaurs, explode whales, and slam dunk when and where I please. Stop trying to control me, Mom. ●**The Freeloader**

OFF-ROAD VELOCIRAPTOR SAFARI

FILE UNDER: **Tastes Like Chicken** URL: **www.raptorsafari.com**

FREE GAMES!
Visit FileFront.com and freegames.1UP.com for more. And check out *Aquaria* creator Derek Yu on *The 1UP Show* at GFW.1UP.com.

File Front

Once you've got a title like that, pretty much your whole task is going to be matching the awesome mental image it conjures up. Thankfully, *Off-Road Velociraptor Safari* does a better job of living up to its name than *Snakes on a Plane*. In fact, it's far, far better than you could even hope. Not only is it the most attractive 3D browser game we've ever played, it's also one of the best free sandbox titles, period. Running over raptors in a jeep would be enough, but there are plenty of stunt bonuses and doo-

dads to collect on the way if you're so inclined. In case it wasn't clear that horsing around is pretty much the whole point, there's a score bonus for just about every stupid thing you can attempt. Clothesline raptors with a chain. Hook them with a flail-like spiked ball and then swing them into other raptors. Toss them off cliffs or into teleporters. Or just boost off a ramp, bounce off a palm tree, and see how many times you can flip end over end. When you're all done, online leaderboards and "achievements" show how you stack up.

Be warned that *Raptor Safari*'s pretty beefy for a browser game, and there's the chance that it might choke and stagger a bit depending on your rig. But at zero cost and a minimal investment of time, you've got nothing to lose by trying it out.

INDIE PICK OF THE MONTH
It's not free—but it's close enough!

Aquaria
PRICE: **$30** DEVELOPER/PUBLISHER: **Bit Blot**
URL: **www.bit-blot.com/aquaria**

Aquaria is what you might get if you melded the controls of *Ecco the Dolphin*, the exploratory gameplay of PlayStation classic *Symphony of the Night*, the visual style of PS2 action/RPG *Odin Sphere*, and a sushi bar; a deep, haunting, beautiful game you can lose yourself in for dozens of hours. Even better, *Aquaria* is just massive, with miles of hand-painted underwater landscapes and hundreds of weird critters to mess with. There's a reason this thing has won a crap-ton of awards and comparatively extensive media coverage for a game made and self-published by two guys. But you don't have to take my word for it (*Reading Rainbow* da-na-*na* sound goes here). Developer Bit Blot has a demo of the game on its site that'll give you a good idea of whether it's your kind of thing—and if it is, the full version will run you only 30 bucks.

BARKLEY. SHUT UP AND JAM: GAIDEN

FILE UNDER: **Ballpocalypse** URL: www.gamingw.net/forums/index.php?topic=56768.0

It's easier to forgive *RPG Maker* for its glut of unfinished *Final Fantasy Starring Mary Sue* games when a screwy, consistently funny, and *completed* game like *Barkley, Shut Up and Jam: Gaiden* comes along. We can't top the game's own description:

"Thousands upon thousands of the world's greatest ballers were massacred in a swath of violence and sports bigotry as [basketball] was outlawed worldwide. The reason: The Chaos Dunk, a jam so powerful its mere existence threatens the balance of chaos and order. Among the few ballers and fans that survived the basketball genocide was Charles Barkley, the man capable of performing the 'Verboten Jam....'

Flash forward 12 years to the post-cyberpocalyptic ruins of Neo New York, 2053. A Chaos Dunk rocks the island of Manhattan, killing 15 million. When

the finger is put on the aging Charles Barkley, he must evade the capture of the B-Ball Removal Department, led by former friend and baller Michael Jordan...."

URBAN TERROR

FILE UNDER: **Reality Gets Bent**
URL: www.urbanterror.net

This *Quake 3* mod deserves another turn in the spotlight—mostly because it's now a complete, self-contained single download with no *Quake 3: Arena* required. Billed as "when *Quake* meets reality," the game tones down some of the more over-the-top speed and physical impossibility of *Quake* while adding real-life weapons with recoil and increasing inaccuracy when fired for long bursts or while moving. Meanwhile, you get John Woo–style wall jump-

ing, powerslides, and ledge grabs. Damage is body-part specific, allowing you to cripple an opponent's legs and make him limp around. It's *Quake* leaning toward the more realistic end of the spectrum without going so far as, say, *Rainbow Six*.

HARPOONED

FILE UNDER: **Delicious Science**
URL: www.harpooned.org

Hey, kids! It's time for some cetacean biology! Doesn't that sound fun? It does when you're turning the cetaceans into cat food with explosive harpoons for *science*. Look forward to great big piles of blubbery gore and cute in-game messages like "The whales seem to be afraid of our ships. We must kill more whales to discover why they fear us." The best part? This is pretty much how the Japanese government officially justifies sending out a fleet every year to explode a bunch of whales: They paint "Research" on the side of the ships. All that science just happens to make for good eating. So yeah, *Harpooned* is
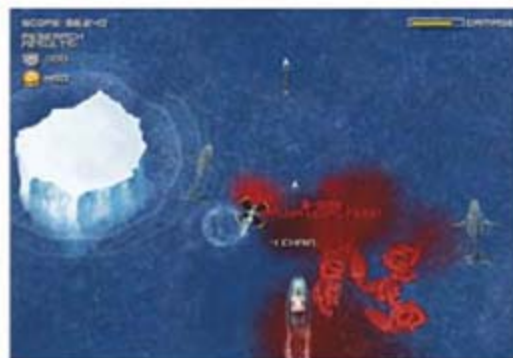
agitprop. It's also a darkly funny, quality shooter with a soundtrack that's both as sad and energetic as the game itself. This is actually the best possible kind of "activist" game: one that succeeds not despite its message but because of it.

CREATOR'S CORNER

• **Two-man show: San Francisco–based Derek Yu and Canadian Alec Holowka crafted *Aquaria* remotely.**

• **One of Derek Yu's other games is *I'm O.K.* (above), a response to Jack Thompson's bizarre invitation to create a violent videogame based on the plot he'd written.**

Our Indie Pick of the Month, *Aquaria* (see pg. 42), intrigued us so much we just *had* to know more. Spookily, it turns out that one of its creators, Derek Yu, lives just a few blocks from this magazine's office—so we took advantage of the happy coincidence and had a chat with him about the game.

GFW: You're not even garage programmers—you don't have a garage. How many of you worked on this?
DY: There were really only two team members: me and Alec [Holowka]. Alec lives in Canada, and I live here in San Francisco. We work mostly online. I don't know what to say other than that it works for us. I don't know if I can recommend it for anyone else. I think the voice acting was the one thing that neither of us could do.

GFW: You don't have a good falsetto?
DY: I tried. I do have recordings of me trying somewhere.

GFW: You guys are fully supporting mods?
DY: We released the same tools that Alec and I used to make the game, and people have already started coming up with some interesting ideas.

GFW: So what's next for you guys?
DY: That's tough. We're definitely going to start working on another game. We're definitely trying to use the money we've made responsibly. I bought a few Ferraris.

• Wanted: Archenemy for MMO. Experience preferred. Dentistry not required.

• Who wins: Lord Nelson or Lord Vader?

THE DAY

Back to the future

PUBLISHER: **TBD** DEVELOPER: **Reloaded Studios** GENRE: **MMORPG** RELEASE DATE: **2010**

PREVIEW

⏎ **"Roads?** Where we're going, we don't need roads."

With these words, Doc Brown ushers Marty McFly and Lorraine Baines into the future from the driver's seat of a tricked-out De Lorean. We love time travel, and not just in the goofy *Back to the Future* sense. The concept remains one of the enduring dreams of science fiction—and it's the whole point of Reloaded Studios' upcoming MMO, *The Day*.

By the early signposts, Reloaded is building a fairly familiar game—multiple races and classes, skills and professions, quests and loot—around this big idea. Players choose one of two factions (on one side, the nobly oppressed; on the other, the power-hungry dominators) to engage in a constant power struggle and endless PVP battles. An unplayable third-party bad guy, currently called "The Arch Enemy," acts as the story driver.

"Most other MMOs, they're just 'Here is the world; play in it,'" says lead producer Jino Lee. "We want a game where players get the sense they're moving the game along."

It's certainly a noble goal. It also describes the ambition of pretty much every MMO that has launched since Blizzard's *World of WarCraft* set the current standard. But where games like *The Matrix Online* and *The Lord of the Rings Online* tell their stories through content updates and in-game events, *The Day* tries to build its tale into the framework of the game itself.

"Our inspiration is our dreams as a kid—traveling back in time, changing the world," Lee says. For sci-fi buffs, it's an instantly compelling theme. The concept art alone is exciting—what self-respecting geek wouldn't want to bring a plasma rifle to Little Bighorn or pilot an X-wing over Iwo Jima?

But as even the most casual science-fiction fan will tell you, traveling back in time is almost always about changing the present—and so players, even at low levels, will be able to travel between the near future and the distant past. And when you change something in the past, Lee insists it matters.

In one example mission, players travel back to 1806 for the construction of the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. In *The Day*'s alternate reality, the Arc is not a celebration of Napoleon's victory in Austerlitz but instead merely camouflage for something valuable in the ongoing war among the as-yet-unnamed factions. Depending on which faction you choose, you might be seeking to destroy it or protect it. Success or failure ripples through time into the present day.

"It could be as simple as a new item or a new skill that can be acquired," Lee says. "But if the mission is big enough, it could change a world landmark and trigger new villains or new settings to be open to players. So everyone—whether they participated or not—will experience the results."

The idea of time travel in games is nothing new. Just last year, Saber Interactive released *TimeShift*, a time travel–based first-person shooter for PC and consoles. Even the 1995 SNES game *Chrono Trigger* toys with the idea of changing the past to affect the here and now. But these games are single-player: When thousands of time-traveling players start stomping thousands of butterflies, the ripples become harder to track—and plausibility becomes harder to swallow.

"We know this notion could be superficial," Lee admits. "But we've come up with some ideas [to make] players feel they're being treated reasonably, not cheated."

One of Lee's ideas is to set *The Day* not in a fantasy world, but in *our* world. Players will interact not with a make-believe environment but with landmarks, people, and events that are familiar—perhaps even beloved. "We're trying very hard to create a world where players feel like it's an evolution of our current world," Lee explains. "We want it very emotional."

How this actually plays out for a multinational, diverse audience could be problematic. Most seminal historical events are periods of conflict and controversy. Postulating a world in which Hitler won—or Napoleon's march on Russia succeeded—could be very emotional indeed. ● **Julian Murdoch**

● Half machine? Half alien? They ain't saying.

FAMILIAR NAMES, FAMILIAR PLACES

In late 2007, a small band of developers left South Korea–based MMO developer Webzen (led by Webzen cofounder Kiyong Cho) to hang up their own shingle as Reloaded Studios. It's a pedigree worth noting: Webzen is the studio behind *Mu*, a fantasy MMO with over 3 million subscribers. They're also developing *Huxley*, the upcoming sci-fi-shooter MMO (see *GFW* #15, pg. 18). The Reloaded team, rounded out by other veterans from NCSoft, Phantagram, and Capcom, set out to design a different kind of MMO.

THE

The Sims is a house divided—not against itself, but into two distinct wings. One side regularly puts titles like *The Sims 2: H&M Fashion Stuff*—an add-on pack devoted entirely to the acquisition and wearing of store-branded clothing—on PC-game best-seller lists. It pushed British songstress Lily Allen's Simlish rendition of her hit single "Smile" past 3 million views on YouTube. "We had a Girl Scout troop visit our studio last month, and there wasn't a single girl who didn't play *The Sims* on some platform," says EA's Sims Division President Nancy Smith, putting a period on why "real" gamers tend to shrug off the series as little more than a virtual dollhouse. But don't confuse superficial with creative: This is the storytelling wing, too, the one that uses *The Sims* to make movies and designs furniture for content-craving peers—and no doubt led Will Wright to the concept of Sporecasts (a way for players to subscribe to each other's custom-made stuff) in his current project.

And then there's the other wing, where Sims studio head Rod Humble and design director Matt Brown toss around phrases like "buffs and debuffs," "grind," and "consistent randomness." This side constantly reminds itself that *The Sims* is short for "simulation" and remembers its roots in 1984's *Raid on Bungeling Bay*.

"A lot of gamers felt that [*The Sims*] had moved past them and into a creativity-tool-only kind of area," says Humble. "So in *The Sims 3*, we're putting a lot of the game back—for people who *want* it."

SIMS 3

EA's juggernaut gains a broader perspective
BY SEAN MOLLOY AND JEFF GREEN

■ Life advances constantly in town, but you still control only a single household. If one of your Sims shacks up with a neighbor, it's up to you whether to control the new household or the old.

HAMSTERS WITH JOBS

Meet the new simulation, exponentially more complicated than the old one—mainly because the scope has shifted from household microcosm to community macrocosm.

"While you're playing in one home [in *The Sims 2*]," says *Sims 3* executive producer Ben Bell, "nothing else changes in the other homes in the neighborhood." Unless you were pretending your family lived in *The Twilight Zone*, the selective march of time screwed up stories and kept your familial snow globe disconnected from the rest of civilization. Says Smith, "If you had a little boy next door you were fond of, but you kept playing your family on your lot and didn't move the other family along, you'd be 30 years old and he'd still be a little boy."

And so in *The Sims 3*, the den becomes a warren, and "everything you would expect to be happening is happening, whatever the time of day," says Bell. "All of the characters in the town are changing together. You can zoom in on your Sims. You can go next door to visit your neighbors. You can knock on the door or peek in the window. You can go downtown, and the people you meet are people in your Sims' lives. What would happen

THE SCOPE HAS SHIFTED FROM HOUSEHOLD MICRO-COSM TO COMMUNI-TY MACROCOSM.

if you ran into your boss on the weekend in town? Would you ruin your Sim's life by doing something embarrassing?"

That time-lost little boy next door from *The Sims 2* now ages and changes alongside your own child. "They can become high school sweethearts," says Bell. "They can grow up together, get married, have a family of their own—and those characters will advance along with your family. These Sims will act out their lives in an intelligent way depending on the personality traits they have."

Sims players know how overwhelming it can be to manage a family of four confined to their own living room—so it's easy to see how running into an ex-husband while shopping for Jimmy's back-to-school supplies could just complicate, not complement. And so Humble's *Sims 3* directive was to scale back some of the primal trappings of day-to-day life. That includes what he calls the "motive grind," the endless plate-spinning required to keep your Sims' eight attributes—comfort, hygiene, bladder, et al—topped off in order to prevent them from pissing their pants while company's over for pizza.

"Matt [Brown]'s phrase was always, 'The Sims are hamsters with jobs,'" says Humble. "Now we're trying to make the hamsters a bit more interesting."

To that end, the number of attribute bars has been reduced from eight to three, with one—a "stress versus fun" meter—standing out as the most essential. Sims still need to bathe, sleep, and eat, but the gauge presenting liters of urine versus free bladder space is hidden behind the curtain.

"We've added one-off mechanics like the buffs in *World of WarCraft*," says Brown. "Of course, you don't get poisoned by spiders, and you don't have armor or spells. In our case, if [your Sim's] out in the rain, he would have a debuff—we call them moodlets—that would just say that he's

soaked now and he's miserable. Or if his mom dies, he'll get a moodlet that makes him miserable. It'll go away after a certain amount of time, or you can get rid of it. *If there's a way to get rid of it.*"

Moodlets range from simple things like "I'm thirsty!" with immediate psychological effects to "I just got a promotion!" that can grant a boost that carries for days. Such buffs and debuffs exist in the original game, too, says Humble, but are kept hidden from the player—a fact that made for some confusing (or funny, depending on your disposition) situations. Picture this: Your Sim's mother just died. You don't play for a few days—and when you return, your Sim has his first kiss and he bursts into tears for reasons you've entirely forgotten.

THE FOURTH WALL

In some cases, eliminating the grind meant tearing down barriers—and entering territory that was previously taboo. In the first two *Sims* games, picking up garbage and putting away dishes are an almost absurdly routine part of life for your Sims. The only way around it is to hire a maid or concoct a housemate specifically designed to do chores. "In *The Sims 3*," says Humble, "you're able to do that *for* your Sim. To just go, 'Look, I know you're busy, so I'm gonna put my hand in the world and pick up that garbage.'"

"I don't think that's something we would have designed on purpose," admits Brown. Indeed, unless you're aiming for laughs, breaking the fourth wall is generally a giant narrative no-no. "But when we put that in the prototypes, a lot of people just couldn't help it. A Sim would leave a book on the bed, and then [players] would just reflexively grab the book and put it on the bookcase. OK, well, we honestly didn't mean for you to do that, and we aren't going to force you to do it—but if you want to do it, that's awesome. So now you can get in and..."

"Tidy up the hamster cage," says Humble.

While seeing books file themselves away and leftover lasagna hurl itself into the garbage disposal would drive a normal man to madness, Sims' reactions are much more mundane. "We had to choose whether they would be afraid of you and all the crazy stuff that was going on around them by the hand of God, the cursor of God," says Brown, "or if they were more just 'This kind of stuff happens all the time—now where's my book?' And they do the latter.

"A lot of the grind goes away because we've taken away the specific pressure to pee or to sleep—but this goes hand in hand. [Maintaining your house] was a really key part of the *Sims 1* design, and it was very elegant—it's just that we've shifted to something that's a little more about progression, character growth, and exploration."

A LEXICON OF POSITIVE THINKING

Also contributing to Humble's "grind" was *The Sims 2*'s reliance on Wants and Fears—a slot-machine row of goals to accomplish and situations to avoid, intended to give Sims' lives direction and meaning. "A lot of players told us those were a little demanding and made your Sim seem a little whiny," says Brown. "It was nice to have those goals, but your Sim was always going 'gimme gimme gimme.'" Humble adds that few players even care about—or notice—their Sims' Fears. When > *(continued on pg. 53)*

WHERE'S THAT TPS REPORT?
Say hello to your humorless, uptight manager, who'd love it if you could work this Saturday! This Sim has the following five Traits: Workaholic, Perfectionist, Unforgiving, Paranoid, Light Sleeper. A real barrel of laughs!

GET OFF MY LAWN, PUNK!
OK, so grandma here has seen better days. She just doesn't remember them anymore. Don't expect too much out of an old broad with these five Traits: Grumpy, Gloomy, Family-Oriented, Worrywart, and Frugal.

HACKY SACK, ANYONE?
This dude, who thinks getting "dressed up" means putting on actual shoes, has the following Traits: Dreamer, Friendly, Easily Bored, Slob, and Mooch. Perfect for joining a frat or maybe working at a gaming magazine.

BRO, CHECK OUT THE GUNS
Jock boy here never met a game he didn't want to watch or a brew he didn't want to drink. It probably has something to do with his five Traits: Athletic, Flirt, Partier, Pizza Lover, Inappropriate.

OI, FECK OFF!
Someone forgot to tell this guy it's not 1977 anymore. Oh, well. Maybe his bad attitude can be blamed on his five Traits: Hot-headed, Artistic, Rude, Childish, and Cursed.

● Flexible body options match your looks to your Traits. See page 57.

SINGLE WHITE SIM LOOKING FOR LOVE

While *The Sims 2* goes a long way toward letting you give your Sim a "personality," *The Sims 3* team still feels their last game's system is limiting, doesn't allow for enough differentiation, and often encourages players to make a more "neutral" character rather than going to extremes. *Sims 2* players have five personality sliders to work off of; you position your Sim somewhere along the line between sloppy and neat, shy and outgoing, and so on. Putting your Sim at one end of the spectrum—making him a neatnik, for example—wouldn't necessarily be an endearing characteristic as much as it would be a game-limiting pain in the ass, because he'd constantly be in a lousy mood unless everything was clean all the time.

So *The Sims 3* rectifies this by killing the personality sliders entirely and replacing them with a system of Traits: 80 or so defining terms of different flavors that you can use to establish your Sim's identity. You can pick up to five Traits for each Sim, only some of which are mutually exclusive (for example, you can't be both "good" and "evil"), to create an almost endless variety of personalities. Some Traits are behavioral, such as "inappropriate," which might cause your Sim to interact rudely with other Sims, while others are more strategic gameplay modifiers, like "genius," which would let you gain any intellectual skill, like reading books, faster.

"We looked at personal ads, like Yahoo Personals and in newspapers," said Matt Brown, "because we were trying to find out how people describe themselves to other people. This is how they do it. They never say they're '5 Shy.' They say 'I don't like to go out.' So we picked about 100 of these little atomic traits. If you guys are familiar with GURPS or any of those kind of role-playing games, it's not altogether dissimilar, other than these are goofy and fun and Sims-like, everyday Traits instead of something like psionics." Players can drill down as much or as little as they want. "They can always randomize it or choose from a prerolled Sim," says Brown. "They might want to pick a jock, and a jock would always come with these five Traits—always liking pizza, say. They don't have to give us a lot of detail if they don't want to."

Traits can directly affect a Sim's feelings toward his environment. If he hates the outdoors, for example, he's going to be miserable every time you tell him to go fishing. If the Sim is a shy bookworm, she can try to advance her career by just reading a lot of books or building their cooking skill—or advance a relationship by cooking another Sim's favorite food. "It's just another interesting way to let the player choose, once again, how to tell the story they want," says art director Morgan Godat. Certain careers will of course require some amount of maintenance—a politician will still need to acquire a number of friends—but the Traits system adds much more variability. And the team did this largely as a result of fan input. "We find that whenever we try to enforce a very strict rule," said Godat, "inevitably players are going to find a way to turn that off and tell the story they want. So now they can feel out and find a path that feels natural and go with it, and they can say, 'Holy crud, I made it this far just by doing *that*!'"

Of course, it's not just your Sim that has Traits, but every single Sim in the world. And so part of the gameplay in *Sims 3* will be to figure out how to socialize and interact with others based on the Traits they have. When you meet someone new, you'll need to spend time with them to learn what it is that they find appealing. If you tell jokes to them, for example, you'll learn whether or not they have a sense of humor. Maybe they'll laugh. Maybe they won't. Maybe they'll befriend you. Maybe they'll tell you to get lost.

Traits have a chance of passing down from parents to children, too, and a Sim's actions during her pregnancy can affect the Traits of her offspring. Same goes for same-sex couples who adopt, too—though the mechanics of that are proving a bit trickier.

WELCOME HOME

Welcome to Pleasant Valley, the new home town in *The Sims 3*—and a town that will begin as the same consistent, open world for every starting player. Everyone will find the same characters living in the same places, but how this town evolves—what happens to all of the characters and to subsequent generations—is entirely in your hands.

Remember that in previous versions of *The Sims*, no matter how many buildings or places the developers added in the 10 million expansion packs, the only life that *really* matters, that time really exists for, is that of your own Sim. Going to a new location means loading a discrete unit, and while in that discrete unit, time basically stops for everyone else. (This is why in *The Sims 2* you could often end up older than your parents.) In *The Sims 3*, however, your Sim will now walk out of your home and see and visit other Sims, other buildings, and other neighborhoods in real time. The world is changing and evolving around you, characters are going on with their lives, marrying, aging, and dying, as you proceed with your own life. And every action you take may have a ripple effect that spreads across the town and affects the lives of multiple generations.

The tough part for the designers has been to make the world big enough to be interesting without making it too overwhelming for players or too complicated for themselves to design. "We started kicking around big-city ideas," says art director Morgan Godat, "but what we came to pretty quickly was that we didn't want to put in entire buildings that were just there as a backdrop. We were worried that if the player goes into this world and there are 100 buildings, but only 25 of them can be interacted with, they're going to be disappointed."

As such, all of the buildings in Pleasant Valley—some of which we've highlighted here—are places you can visit and interact with. Exactly what that interaction will be depends on the situation, but in a nutshell, the designers have broken locations up into two broad categories. There are "rabbit holes," the informal in-house term for a building your Sim will disappear into without you actually following inside (for example, you won't follow your Sim into his office job and watch him space out on the Web for eight hours), and there are venues, which are locations such as a pool or park, that will be filled with lots of Sims and accoutrements of all types to interact with.

And, of course, expect the town to expand and grow over time, both from users' custom content and from the team itself. Says Humble, "A lot of those locations, and also the scope of the world, are designed to be able to go deeper and expand over time. As we work through this year, we may change some of the locations' functionality, whether you can go in and walk about. [And] then we've got our expansion packs going forward. Actually getting a freaking world done on day one is going to be hard enough. We'll see what we can do with that as we go on."

BOOKSTORE
Remember books? Your Sims can go here to keep themselves entertained, learn new skills to improve their lives and careers, or possibly even get a part-time job, should your Sim not desire to participate in any full-time career path.
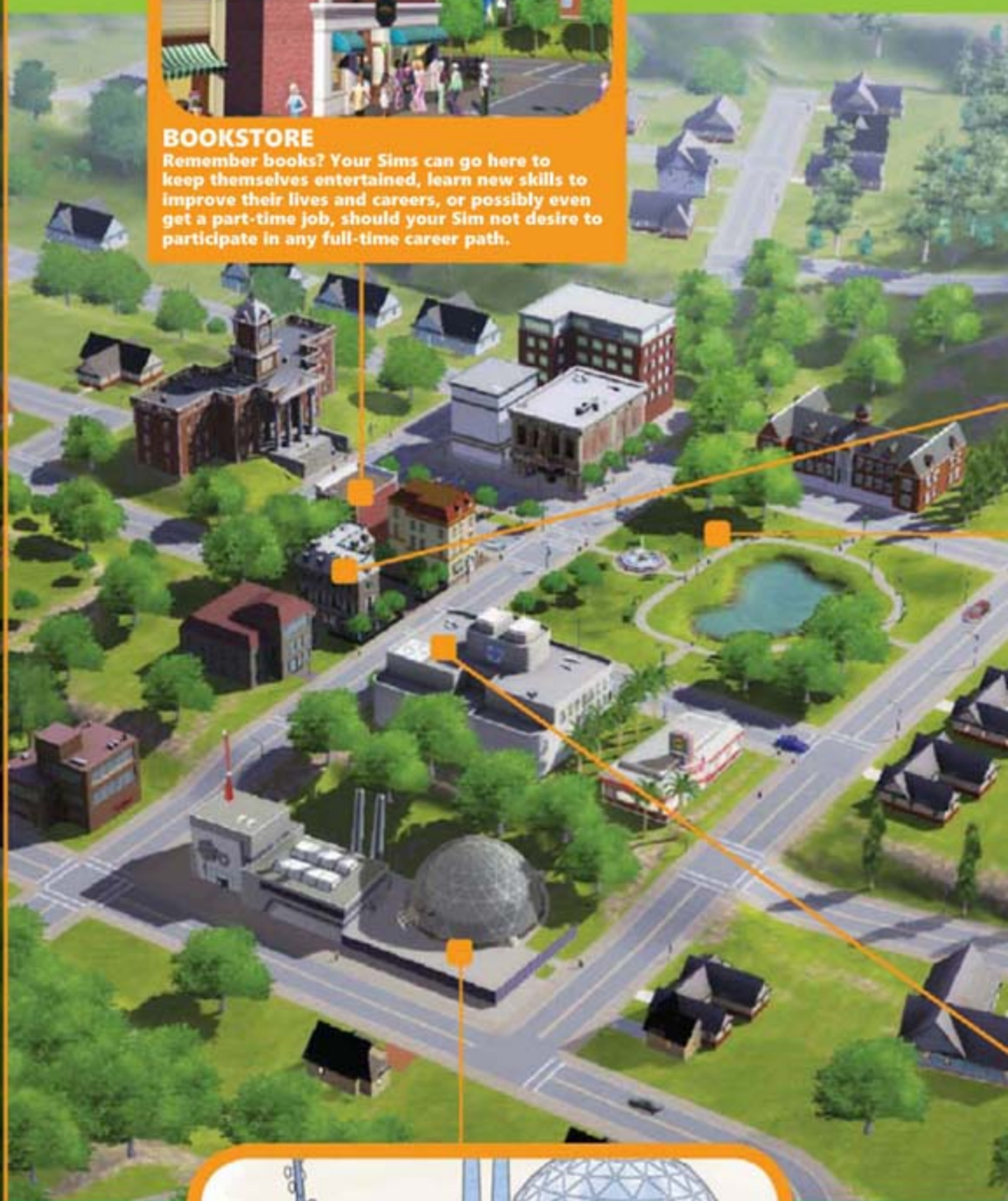
SCIENCE LAB
The science lab is the home of the science career, oddly enough. We don't know much about this one yet, other than that the team intimates that you may not want to eat any of the fish from the nearby pond.

BISTRO
Some locations will serve multiple purposes. At the bistro, for example, you can eat, socialize, date—and also go to work if you are on the culinary career track.

PARK
This is the center of outdoor recreation in town, where Sims can step out of their busy lives and enjoy a little sun. Sims will come here during their time off to relax, have picnics, or goof around. If your Sim has a trait like "Loves Outdoors," he'll be instantly happy here. Curmudgeonly, gothy types may be less thrilled.

CLOTHING STORE
Take one guess what you do at the clothing store. This is an example of a building that might (subject to change) just be a "rabbit hole," where your Sim doesn't necessarily walk around the interior. Instead, you might click on the building to bring up a set of options or interactions, and then the Sim will go inside, do his thing, and come out with whatever you specified—like that new 97.5 "The Brodeo" T-shirt.

UNFULFILLED DREAMS AREN'T PENALIZED... BROKEN PROMISES, HOWEVER, MAKE FOR MELANCHOLY SIMS.

Fears triggered, players would often wonder if the bad thing that just happened was a bug.

"Learning from that, we have a system in *Sims 3* called Dreams and Promises," says Brown, "which are a lot more nurturing—and a lot more contextual. Your Sim might walk past a cute Sim on the street and think, 'I'd like to get to know her better.' And you can Promise that you're going to make that happen. You can basically 'sign up' for that." Anything can trigger a Dream at any time, and a new Dream is represented by a thought balloon over your Sim's portrait. Buy your child a telescope and he may Dream of being an astronaut after a few nights of stargazing. Promise to make his Dream come true—even if you can't until the day before he dies—and he'll gain a significant mood boost. A Dream might also be as simple as wanting to buy a book—inspired by walking past the bookstore downtown, learning how to cook, or simply sitting idly on the couch with nothing better to do.

Unfulfilled Dreams aren't penalized; they're just forgotten until another one comes along. Broken Promises, however, make for melancholy Sims—like a *Sims 2* Fear realized, only players get to determine whether to be afraid in the first place. The philosophy is opt-in gameplay, *The Sims 3*'s attempt to make itself if not everything to everyone, then at least as much as possible to as many as it can. The creative types can forget the Promises entirely and major in movie-making and fashion design; those in it for the "game" can choose to challenge themselves as they see fit.

The new Traits system (see "Single White Sim Looking for Love," pg. 51, for an explanation) serves a similar function: Load up a Sim with five gameplay-oriented characteristics—granting boosts to fishing skill, cooking skill, or athleticism—to maximize your "stats" and boost your DPS (dumplings per second), or you can intentionally stack the deck with social awkwardness, intense paranoia, or general ineptitude to maximize the less tangible metric of human interest.

The opt-in attitude extends to how *The Sims 3* handles work and play as well. Where in *The Sims 2*, Sims would vanish to work for a set amount of time and do god-knows-what till it was time to punch the clock, *Sims 3* allows players to customize what they do while in the office—even if the game doesn't go so far as to let you control them as they chop broccoli or process purchase orders. (Work is still mainly off-limits, for reasons as simple as it would be a crushing bore).

Associate producer Lyndsay Pearson dubs these options "work tones." "You can decide if you want to leave early or stay late—if you want to take it easy or suck up to your boss," effectively sleeping your way to the top. "Of course, if your boss dies or gets married to someone else, you're kinda screwed," laughs Brown.

One side effect of staying late: more control over what you do and when you do it. "It's easier to schedule your Sims' days," says Bell. Choose to have a Sim work overtime and "you don't have to think about him for a while—so you can focus on the story you care about right now."

Careers also form the base for another new *Sims 3* system called Opportunities, the functional equivalent of MMORPG quests—only instead of fetching 15 landshark fins, you're planting 15 tomatoes or shacking up with 15 women. "[A Sim pursuing a culinary career] might be given an Opportunity at work to wash some extra dishes because the dishwasher at the restaurant broke," Pearson explains. "He goes home with the plates, and now it's his job to clean them." Sims will get Opportunities based on their profession and skill set—and, in keeping with the pattern—choosing to pursue them is entirely optional.

The game's social interactions follow the opt-in philosophy, too. When players choose to interact with another Sim, the familiar social radial menu appears...with one significant difference. "At the bottom you have a menu that lets you change the tone of a conversation," says Pearson. "So you can chat, share interests, and talk. And if you decide you want to flirt with a Sim, you can change the tone to flirty. In *The Sims 2*, the more you talked, the >

"I FELL IN LOVE WITH
THE PAINTING FEATURE IN
THE SIMS 2...THAT WAS
MY FAVORITE FEATURE."

-ROD HUMBLE, HEAD OF THE SIMS STUDIO

more choices there were, but they didn't always do what you wanted them to do...you'd find that if you tried to make someone your best friend, you'd get all the menu options to flirt with them as well. Here, you actually make the conscious choice of pursuing a romantic relationship with that character." In other words, marital infidelity's no longer the natural punch line to an evening of exchanging jokes.

All of this ultimately makes materialism—the accumulation of better couches to fill a comfort meter faster—much less important to the game. "The fact that the metaphysical objects are now displayed separately, that you have these little buffs and these little Dreams, means you can opt out of a regular commercial path," says Humble. Painter Sims can sell their works and musicians can play guitar in the park for money, and the better you are, the more money you'll make from the people wandering by. "[You can make] a self-sufficient cook, a bum who doesn't have a job who just is the hippie going roundabout—it definitely gives you more freedom."

The *Sims 3* glossary so far—Dreams, Promises, Opportunities—paints the sort of positive, sunny picture custom-tailored to turn off the hardcore, but the intention is just the opposite. "Having optional game systems has proven tricky," says Humble, "which is why we have to spend so many years prototyping it out." (*The Sims 3* has been in development for two years.) But scientific process only gets you so far—and success, when it comes down it, is determined by the hard-to-pin quantum of how much fun you're having. "I think it feels right when we're playing it.... I hope gamers will look at it and say, 'Yeah, this feels like a role-playing game set in regular life.'"

VINCENT VAN GOGH AND CONSISTENT RANDOMNESS

"I fell in love with the painting feature in *The Sims 2*," says Humble. In that game, Sims with artistic leanings and a blank canvas would slowly develop a picture over time—and even though the output was just an image selected from a texture pool, it was hard to resist hanging the fruits of your labor on the bedroom wall. "For some reason, I just found it really philosophically attractive, that inside a creativity tool there's a creativity tool your agent uses. For whatever reason, that was my favorite feature in *The Sims 2*."

The Sims 3 takes the notion a step further. Says Brown: "The idea was that without us hand-creating paintings, or even hand-creating filters, that every Sim would have a unique signature of parameters [to be used in] a painting algorithm. And that would generate different styles—so that one Sim might go to the beach, come home, and paint one version of a sunset. And if you bring another Sim to the beach, he'll paint a different version of that exact same sunset." So while the base images are the same, different Sims might have an Impressionist take, Dadaist, postmodernist, or realist, determined by a set of algorithmic genes.

"It's a technique we use a lot: consistent randomness," says Brown, coining what sounds like an oxymoron. "We pick a random set of parameters, but for a given Sim, he always chooses the exact same random set of parameters. Every Sim feels different, but a given Sim feels like he's consistent, has a style." The concept extends from creative output to trivial personal tastes: Each Sim has a favorite coffee drink—a double half-caf cinnamon macchiato or a low-fat latte, for example. He always drinks the same thing—but every Sim in the world has a different drink.

It's mostly for flavor, but the devil is in the details. "We want the Sims to feel like unique snowflakes in *The Sims 3*," says Humble. "and less like the only difference is their clothes and their hair. If you don't want to get to

● **The Sims 3**'s potent customization tools allow anyone (even folks without digital arts degrees) to design patterns and apply them to any surface—upholstery, posts, hats, hair....

know him—if you just want him to pee himself—well, that's fine, because you can still do that."

Consistency trumps randomness when it comes to town design. One single, set map of Pleasant Valley is all that ships with *The Sims 3*, partially because randomly generated towns simply wouldn't jell artistically, and partially because, even though *The Sims* is a single-player game, history's shown that its player base wants to share.

"One of the things that I actually felt was missing the most from a game like *Oblivion*," says art director Morgan Godat, "is that I can be playing in the same room with my friend and we still can't talk about this dungeon I just went in—because it's random."

The train of thought extends from town layout to townspeople. "The example from *Sims 2* is Goopy GilsCarbo," says Brown, name-dropping one of that game's randomly generated "townies"—neighbors that would walk by your home and interact with your household. "[Townie] names were generated from first and last names of people on the dev team. Goopy [Rossi] was our animation director, and Gabe GilsCarbo was one of our testers. So Goopy GilsCarbo was just a randomly generated name, and he happened to be in plaid shorts and a sweater—he looked like an idiot. He was mean and sloppy, maximally so. He was a horrible person. But he was horrible in everybody's game, so everybody would have some experience with Goopy GilsCarbo. He would come over and steal their wife, or he would come over and leave garbage everywhere. That's an example >

Inside the Process

● Designers brainstormed by creating simple prototypes in a single day.

Before even one line of code was written for *The Sims 3*, Sims studio head Rod Humble and design director Matt Brown gave all of the core designers an exercise to complete: Take a day to build a small, 2D prototype game based around the theme of socialization. Why? Because this, the team had determined, would be the overall theme of *The Sims 3* itself, the topic they wanted to "go deep" on this time around. The hope was that by building prototypes, the designers might discover new ways—intentionally or otherwise—during these warm-up exercises in which they could express these social behaviors in their game. How do Sims relate to one another? How do they decide who they like and don't like? How do they relate to you, their creator? How does their environment play into their relationships with others?

These were the kind of questions the designers asked themselves, and the resulting prototype minigames yielded all sorts of cool,

funny, and sometimes weird results, many of which the team graciously demoed for us during our studio visit—a rather rare opening of the hood since most game companies don't want you to see anything that looks so "crude." But the glimpse into the thought process was fascinating. In one prototype, a group of characters on screen (basically just 2D circles with faces) were engaged in a "witch hunt" in which they would mill around trying to determine which member of the group was "made of wood." Characters would single each other out by looking for physical traits that were different—although each person's notion of what was "different" varied. Eventually a "vote" would be taken, and the group would then kill the one supposedly unlike the others. And then all would be well...until it started again. Same characters, different results.

Most hilarious was a crude 2D version of *The Sims* in which the entire game has been reduced to a simple treadmill of fulfilling

motives: hunger, energy, bladder, comfort, et cetera. Your character would do nothing but go back and forth from the bathroom, bedroom, living room, and kitchen, over and over, satisfying the need to pee, sleep, rest, and eat. "We asked ourselves, 'What if we took all the stuff that most people tend to hate about the game," says Brown, "and that's all you had to do.'" And what did they learn? "It was surprisingly fun," laughs Humble. "We learned that the grind was actually fun."

But the coolest one of all is the one the developers are still playing: a 2D version of *The Sims 3* itself—the entire game done in simple line graphics and text, but with the depth of the "real" game. If we all weren't so fussy and needy for fancy 3D graphics and polish and sound and music, they could probably just ship this one today.

For a deeper look at these prototype minigames (and a bunch more), visit GFW.1UP.com.

RETRONAUTS PRESENTS

MICROCO-SIM

The evolution of the series that models the world—at every level

Will Wright's revolutionary *Sim* franchise has been offering challenging yet goal-free sandboxes for gamers to play in for two decades now. In the course of the series' evolution, it's taught gamers the importance of zoning, biospheres, and properly scheduled bathroom breaks. A look back at some of the most important *Sim* games reveals an ambitious sense of scale...and some startling similarities. ● **Jeremy Parish**

SIMCITY (1989)

SimCity was like nothing else in its time—a strategy game without warfare or an endgame. Wright's creation had a simple goal: to create a functioning, self-sustaining city...but the means to that end required careful management, bold experimentation, and the ability to think ahead. At its best, it was a constant balancing act, the potential for disaster inherent in every variable. Few things were as rewarding as seeing your city finally come together in perfect harmony... or as frustrating as a single sudden change that sent your civic economy into a violent, chain-reaction tailspin.
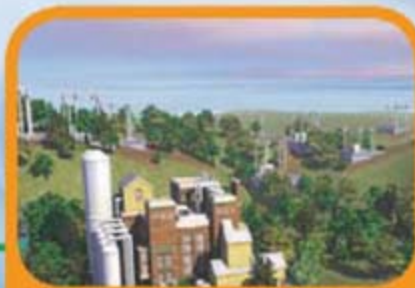
SIMCITY: SOCIETIES (2007)

As its title suggests, *Societies* presents a point of view similar in scope to *SimCity*, but which focuses instead on the social dynamics of *The Sims*. The placement of general zones within a city took a backseat to the specifics: namely, determining how the development of a city's zones affects the livelihood of its inhabitants.

SIMANT (1991)

While *SimAnt* is the smallest chapter in the series, at least in terms of physical scale, it also plays the most like the original *SimCity*—like human habitations, ant colonies are collective communities affected by a wide variety of internal and external factors. From down here, they look like people.

again of consistent randomness. It's consistent, so everybody can share it—but what's actually there we didn't put there on purpose."

"That's why the baseline is so important, at least for that first generation of Sims," says Godat. "'I fell in love with that guy...you were a jerk to him? That's my man!' That kind of thing, that sort of story. It's really important for people to at least have a baseline to communicate from, and then people go crazy and start making movies and stories and putting them on the Web. How many different stories can you tell with the content we've put in the game?"

But content creation, the developers know, is the key to long-term success. Walking into EA's Sims studio, we expected *The Sims 3* to have been infected by the same community bug that bit *Spore* (see pg. 20), with other players' futon designs spread from PC to PC as *Spore*'s species pollinate other players' galaxies—but if that's in the cards, EA's not ready to show its hand.

"We're going to be releasing world-building tools," says Bell, "advanced tools definitely for the modding community. On TheSims3.com, there'll be an exchange where you can download towns from other players."

Godat hints at how the exchange might operate: "People put hundreds of thousands of *Half-Life* maps out on the Internet. The Web has a way of giving them a star rating, and people go and download the five-star maps—it's the same kind of thing here. We know that people are gonna go and build new versions of our buildings. We can elevate these things through our connection to the community—find some way to tell a player that, 'Yes, this building slows your game down.' Find some way to let them find the content that they're really excited about and tell that story that they want to tell. That's what keeps it going for so many years."

For now, Humble's happy to wait for Will Wright's *Spore* experiment to play out. It wouldn't be the first time the studio turned to its former captain for advice or inspiration.

"We showed Will some prototypes," says Brown, "just to see how much they scared him."

SIMCITY 3000 (1999)
The second true sequel to *SimCity* expands the scope of the game considerably—*SimCity 2000* introduces the need to manage multiple cities, but *3000* places gamers at the helm of an entire region, guiding the growth of dozens of towns and constantly balancing their relationships.

SPORE (2008)
Spore isn't out yet—September, we're told—but when it arrives...well, it'll basically be the Grand Unifying Theory of the *Sim* universe. Supposedly, the game was first developed under the name *SimEverything*, which describes *Spore* exactly. It's almost like a "greatest hits" take on Sims, spanning from microscopic organisms to galactic civilizations—and everywhere in between. *Spore* is less about hard simulation than customization, randomization, and the fractal chaos that will result from millions of gamers seeding their creations into others' universes—but we bet it'll be educational despite our best efforts.

SIMEARTH (1990)
After *SimCity*, the series' next major step was to go bigger—*much* bigger. Worldwide, in fact. Where *SimCity* is a lesson in civic planning, *SimEarth* models the entire global ecosystem. Considerably more abstract than its predecessor, *SimEarth* represents the simulation genre at its most epic scale.

THE SIMS (2000)
With *The Sims*, Wright created something different from the game's predecessors—a truly small-scale simulation. Unlike *SimAnt* (which technically is smaller, in a physical sense), *The Sims* makes players responsible for the life of individual suburban dwellers, managing things like "hunger" and "bladder discomfort" rather than "infrastructure zoning" and "public transit budgeting." Even so, each Sim is very much a part of a larger social structure, and managing interpersonal relationships is a crucial component of a Sim's personal happiness. It's also an interesting litmus test for the player's personality since the individual focus allows for a wide array of possibilities for humorous cruelty, inescapable hedge mazes, and neat freaks forced to live in pigsties. Along with other things, of course, like family dynamics and job satisfaction. But mostly the cruelty.
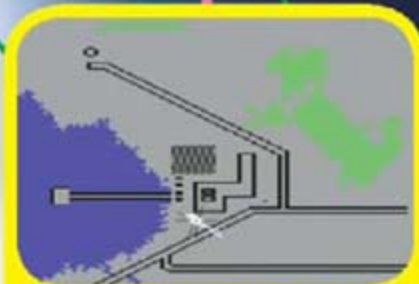
RAID ON BUNGELING BAY (1984)
The roots of the *Sim* universe can be found in this somewhat obscure strategy game in which players launch aerial strikes against the evil Bungeling empire and bomb the crap out of their ground installations. Legend has it that Wright found the underlying simulation that drove the Bungeling's infrastructure much more interesting than the combat aspect of the game; left to its own devices, the enemy would gradually develop a more effective military force. Wright transformed this invisible aspect of the game into a full-fledged civic simulator, and *SimCity* was born.

"He's never said anything negative about anything we've ever done with any of the babies he worked on," says Humble, "which is kinda weird, because we're essentially dating the guy's daughters.... And here's the one thing that I really get out of Will that I love. Every time I've spoken to him, I have never heard him talk about anything that wasn't game design–related. Even while walking to get a cup of coffee—the guy is always thinking about it. If that's what a genius is like, then Will's a genius. We don't want to let him down. We hope he loves it." If only most games set their sights half as high. ●

"WE SHOWED WILL [WRIGHT] PROTOTYPES JUST TO SEE HOW MUCH THEY SCARED HIM."

—MATT BROWN, DESIGN DIRECTOR

From Thick to Thin

For all the customization available to players in *The Sims 1* and *2*, the one thing that isn't very flexible is body type—choices the developers describe as "thin" and "a little bit less thin." In *The Sims 3*, you'll now be able to use a slider to adjust your Sims' body weight over a much broader spectrum, from relatively obese to skeletally thin and everywhere in between. You'll also be able to use a separate slider to adjust musculature—separate from body weight—allowing for a huge amount of variation: fat dude with spaghetti arms, skinny dude with big guns—basically, any body type you can think of. And that body type won't remain static depending on how you play the game. Get your fat Sim on an exercise regime, for example, and you may see him slim down over time. Alternatively, have him constantly pigging out and sitting on his duff playing computer games and, well, you know the rest. The designers also promise much more detail and expression in the Sims' faces—the net result of all of this being an avatar that feels more "real" to you, a tiny digital human that plays differently than all the other tiny digital humans in the game's universe.

THREE

Game genie grants developers their hearts' desires

WISHES

SPECIAL REPORT

"Dear developer," our offer went, "if you could, at the wave of a magic wand, overcome some technological hurdle in game development, what would it be? And, more importantly, what would it allow you to do that you can't do today? Ultimately, this is about you making the games you want to make. You can make one wish, or you can make three." Seventeen prominent gamemakers wished away—and, in the process, revealed what troubles they face today as well as the trajectory the medium might take tomorrow.

BY SHAWN ELLIOTT AND ROBERT ASHLEY

PAUL "LOCKI" WEDGWOOD

Creative Director, *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars*, Splash Damage

On gameplay: I've learned the hard way that ideas are cheap. Naturally, the more time you invest in the study of game design, the easier it gets to have great ideas. But it's the actual execution that's so important and expensive. Even with advances in our approach to prototyping—to make sure something is fun before we commit considerable resources to its implementation—I still get frustrated having to wait to see whether our latest idea is as good in practice as it sounded when we all got excited about it in the blue-sky stage. My first design wish would be to have an instant prototyping box—a system that I can just explain my design ideas to and see them immediately materialize as a simple blockout that I can then test hands-on and perhaps discard before inflicting my bad idea on our poor development team.

On immersion: For some time now, I've been interested in—and experimenting with—dream control. I know it's discounted as New Age–ish or dismissed as advocating escapism, but these are hardly new criticisms for game development, either. What really strikes me, however, is that despite my being absolutely aware that I'm dreaming when in this state, the level of immersion is still far higher than gaming. Frustratingly, this goes against my preferred belief that rendering is less important than gameplay. My second design wish, then, is that rendering and physics finally catch up with reality—such that, regardless of the style we want to achieve with a game's design, we finally shift from the dull pursuit of trying to attain realism to a plateau where the environment is simply, and absolutely, believable. When rendering is at least as believable as my dreams, it will finally be our design choices that limit what technology we choose to use, rather than technology constraining the design.

On mass appeal: I like to think that I pursued a career in game development because I loved the art of game design, not the science of the game-development business. I hate phrases like "SKU," "decay-curve," "franchise," "product," "nonadopter," and "player churn," but they are necessary evils as long as marketers are needed to match up gamers with the experiences they want to have. At the same time, the "hardcore"—who were once newbies themselves—prove through their obsession that games with great depth and longevity can be much more immersive and compelling than casual gaming. I've long believed that if only we could efficiently partner the right new gamers with the right hardcore games,

then the issue of accessibility would go away. My third game-design wish, then, is that an automated partnering device be created, analyzing the hidden potential within all game newbies to become hardcore gamers, and then matching them automatically with a game they'll know is worth their time—overcoming initial accessibility hurdles. Hardcore sales would outpace casual, the industry would be less constrained by focus testing, the best-selling game of the year would not be the lowest rated, and creativity would drive the industry, rather than dollars.

CHRIS DELAY

Creative Director, *DEFCON*, Introversion

The imagination of the developer is still very much constrained by the reality of production. You can have a really great idea, and it can be literally years before you see it realized on your screen. It requires huge amounts of patience, the original idea often gets diluted along the way, and you lose all of the spontaneous excitement. For me, the ultimate dream as a game designer is *Star Trek's* holodeck. Being able to step into an empty warehouse and start issuing vocal commands to the computer to build your content is an astonishingly exciting idea. And, of course, it would still take a very long time to make anything of any quality—but being able to explore your game world as you develop it and to perform the act of creation with vocal commands would be incredible.

RANDY PITCHFORD

President and CEO, *Brothers in Arms: Hell's Highway* and *Borderlands*, Gearbox Software

Magic mind-reader development interface: We think it, and it appears. Tools are no longer relevant. Creativity can be instantly translated to results.

Infinite memory and performance: No concern for framerate or the surfaces and materials we're rendering. I want to render better-than-life images at framerates that exceed our brains' clock speeds.

Customer service and a feedback hive mind and distribution service: Distributed dynamically and without loss, developers have an instant and perfect mental understanding of how gamers are responding to the game, and customers have instant and perfect, almost telepathic, understanding of their gaming options along with the ability to immediately purchase and play anything on demand.

"A STANDARD PLATFORM ACROSS ALL CONSOLES AND PCS FOR GAMES."
—TODD HOWARD, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, *FALLOUT 3*

CHRIS TAYLOR
Creative Director, *Supreme Commander*, Gas Powered Games

I like the concept of this article, but the thing is, technology has been very kind to us these past couple of years. We can do almost anything we can imagine now, whereas when our industry was in its infancy, it seemed as though we struggled with almost everything: computing power, graphics fidelity, memory, hard-drive space, Internet connectivity, reliability, delivery medium size—you name it. And now, new advances give us more of everything—we're starting to feel downright spoiled! To use an analogy, our canvas, paint, and paintbrushes are of such quality that the *Mona Lisa* can emerge at any time, and without compromise.

I promise I'll still answer your question, but I will say it's not technology that's standing in the way of creating the ultimate videogame experience. It's inspiration, it's creativity, it's sweat...and, of course, it's money or production value. Try *Call of Duty 4*; it's an amazing game that combines all four of these ingredients.

OK, with all that out of the way, if I were going to snap my fingers and invent some cool technology that would help us to develop today's games, it would probably be a device that would scan an entire real-world environment and, constructing the geometry and textures, turn it into a virtual 3D version for a game world. In a matter of hours, you could find and scan locations and use these for FPS, RPG, and RTS games. It would save us millions of dollars in development costs, and we could get games made sooner. I bet this is already in development in one form or another today someplace, and I seem to recall Google has something like this....

TODD HOWARD
Executive Producer, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *Fallout 3*, Bethesda Softworks

A standard platform across all consoles and PCs for games. [The time spent] supporting multiple systems, videocards, memory, and more is time we could spend innovating better gameplay and experiences. Think about a DVD—you can play it on your PC but also on your TV. Or in your car. Why not a game?

WARREN SPECTOR
Creative Director and President, Junction Point Studios

I'd create a game engine as generally useful, as easy to use, and as readily accessible as the equipment required to make a movie. The fact that we have to basically reinvent the camera every time we make a game [and] have to rework our A.I., user interface, physics, and gameplay tools with each and every game is crazy. Used to be, I thought we'd eventually reach a point where hardware development would slow down and things would stabilize on the software side as a result. After doing this for over 20 years, I no longer have such high hopes. I don't actually expect the tech/engine situation to change anytime soon—frankly, I'm not

sure it can ever change. But you're the one who mentioned magic, so there you have it. Give me a cheap, easy-to-use, totally flexible engine with great developer tools that don't have to be reworked from game to game, and I'm a happy developer.

What would it change? Development would get cheaper and faster. Development teams wouldn't have to learn new tools for every game. We could do a better job of training people in schools and universities. More time could be spent on game quality and less on tools. Everything would get better. But, remember, it isn't going to happen—we're in Tinkerbell territory.

RICHARD GARRIOTT
Executive Producer, *Tabula Rasa*, NCsoft

Tools that keep pace with evolving hardware and game needs that don't require periodic rewrites and instead allow us to get content in games as fast as we can develop it. Currently, teams can waste years and millions of dollars rebuilding tools to keep up with the state of the hardware, which leaves us less than half the total time of the project to create our worlds. If we could cut out this issue, teams could focus on great gameplay for longer periods and create games more in tune with customer desires.

SOREN JOHNSON,
Designer/Programmer, *Spore*, EA Maxis

A self-service digital-distribution network. Digital distribution is key to a bright future for PC gaming. First, it tilts the economics strongly in favor of both the developer and—once retail is challenged—the consumer. Further, with services like Steam or TotalGaming, digital-rights management is a bonus, not a penalty, as players can download their games to any PC in the world with an Internet connection.

However, Valve and Stardock—regardless of their commitment to independent developers—are still acting as gatekeepers; their services are not the same thing as a truly free marketplace. I would love to see a robust digital-distribution system that worked something like Amazon's WebStores. Developers could sign up using an automated system to upload their game, set prices, and manage their hosted pages. The owners would take a standard cut from all sales, and updates and support would be the responsibility of the developers. Some would falter under so much freedom, but the best talent—and the best games—would rise to the top. >

AMERICAN MCGEE
Creative Director, *American McGee's Grimm*, Spicy Horse

A brain-input device that does away with the clunky—and antique—keyboard-and-mouse input system and upgrades to a mind-linked "what you imagine is what you get" system for the creation of art assets, music, animation, text, and so forth. How much easier and faster would production be if we could build in our minds? And how many more people would discover that they have truly amazing talent if getting their ideas "onto paper" wasn't a barrier? The downside: as many crappy games as there are MySpace pages.

WILL WRIGHT
Creator, *Spore*, EA Maxis Studios

Good pathfinding. It's surprising. You'd think that pathfinding's a solved problem, yet even to this day, with incredibly powerful computers and software, pathfinding still ends up being the biggest pain in the ass imaginable. That's where many, many games have the worst bugs and the biggest frustrations. Aside from that, I think general A.I., which is probably even more solvable than pathfinding.

KYLE STEWART
Associate Producer, *Lineage*, NCsoft

No language barriers when dealing with multiple territories worldwide. This would enable us to get a lot done—faster!

MATT MILLER
Senior Lead Designer, *City of Heroes/Villains*, NCsoft

Eliminate bugs. If every line of code were written perfectly, every system designed took into account all factors and were free of exploits, if every piece of dialogue had perfect grammar, and if every art asset rendered perfectly the first time, we'd gain an immeasurable amount of productivity. Bugs are the single biggest impedance to game development, and as games grow bigger and more complicated, bugs get worse and worse. But today, I'll settle for a bug list that is brief and includes no game-breaking showstoppers.

> "A.I. SMART ENOUGH TO PASS THE TURING TEST."
> —DR. RAY MUZYKA AND DR. GREG ZESCHUK, GENERAL MANAGERS, BIOWARE

DR. RAY MUZYKA AND DR. GREG ZESCHUK
General Managers, BioWare and Vice Presidents, Electronic Arts

At BioWare, we have only one wish, and if this one wish is fulfilled, we will be eternally satisfied. Well, not really. We're also hoping for enduring world peace, and our talented teams are always striving for continuous improvements in gameplay and story in all of our future games. But this one would be nice as a starting point. Here it is: We've been striving to push the boundaries of digital acting in our games ever since we formed BioWare close to 15 years ago.

We've been able to capture increasingly powerful and compelling emotional moments in our recent games like *Mass Effect*, but we're still haunted by the elusive level of immersion that a truly intelligent artificial intelligence could demonstrate. When we talk about intelligence, we mean A.I. smart enough to pass the Turing test: A.I. that, for all intents and purposes, is indistinguishable from a human. Think HAL 9000 from *2001: A Space Odyssey*, minus that creepy red eye. By helping us to bring our characters even closer to "life," we believe people experiencing our games would benefit, as we could provide near-infinite variety and depth of experience plus infinite replayability.

Imagine the worlds of *Mass Effect* or *Dragon Age*, or even the world of BioWare's as-yet-unannounced upcoming MMO, if the "people" you encounter in these worlds continually keep you on your toes...much as they do in real life, except that in real life, the people don't drive spaceships and wield blasters...or ride horses and swing longswords!

JOSH MOSQUEIRA
Design Director, *Company of Heroes*, Relic Entertainment

Aside from wishing for the obvious time machine, this question had me stumped—because at Relic, it seems we overcome technological hurdles by making the impossible possible thanks to our talented programmers and artists. We wanted realistic-behaving squads for *Company of Heroes*, and voila, we got that. We wanted a fully destructible environment, and we got that, too. FPS-quality graphics for an RTS? Check. But if I had to make two wishes to make my ultimate game, I'd pick techs that wouldn't just allow me to make the game I always wanted but that would ensure the PC remains

the gaming platform.

Wish one: nonintrusive, unhackable copy protection. Piracy doesn't just hurt—it kills games. And worst of all, it punishes gamers everywhere. First, it forces publishers to slap on clunky—and oftentimes intrusive—copy-protection schemes that seem to do more to annoy legitimate buyers than stop people from downloading cracked bit torrents. Even if this is not an issue, most publishers see PC titles as a black sheep because of piracy, since it's near impossible to crack console games as opposed to PC titles. Why invest millions of dollars when piracy will eat into your profits? And the evidence is out there. Both *COH* and *Call of Duty 4* have shown that a good percentage of people playing are playing with cracked copies. Sure, Activision isn't batting an eye after having sold over 7 million copies, but that's because the majority of these sales are for the PS3 and Xbox 360 versions of their game. They can afford to take the hit. Now imagine a starting developer working only on PC titles. That amount of piracy would kill the game and likely the studio.

And why would I pick nonintrusive, unhackable copy protection? Because it would ensure that PC games remain viable—more sales equals more people playing—and you'd see less cookie-cutter games and even see publishers take more chances on innovative games. It would also protect the player; it would be a guarantee that the game you bought would install no matter what hardware configuration you're using and not force gamers to sign Faustian pacts with online-activation devils.

Wish two: an end of the hardware arms race. Sacrilege, I know. But if the hardware arms race continues, it's only going to result in PC gaming becoming a hobby of the elite few and, even worse, allow consoles to reign as the de facto gaming platforms. I'm not suggesting that PCs should not push hardware to its limits, but we have to be aware of the cost of pushing those limits. First, laptops have passed desktops in sales, which means that every year, there are less and less "gaming rigs" in people's homes. Less gaming rigs means less gamers able to easily run games, and that means less sales. Less sales means publishers are less interested in pushing limits. If we don't want to see PC gaming relegated to *Peggle* and MMOs, my wish would be for an end to forcing players to shell out $3,000 every year just for the privilege to play games "the way they were meant to be played." It's not the hardware manufacturers at fault here, but ours. In our pursuit of technological perfection, we oftentimes ignore that, in the end, it's the game that matters and not the polygons.

Why pick these as my wishes? Because if we want to see PC games continue to innovate and reign supreme, we need to guarantee that both developers and publishers work to ensure our games have the widest possible audience. If not, PC gaming will become a place for ports, MMOs, and free-to-play games. I shudder to think of such a future.

BLAIR AND CRAIG FRASER
Directors, *Sins of a Solar Empire*, Ironclad Games

The most fascinating thing for us about making games is the magic of bringing a universe to life. This virtual world has its agents and rules, and the simulation just executes step-by-step, evolving over time just like ours. It's as if each game is some alternate universe where its Big Bang shifted the symmetry, breaking just a bit more to the left than the right than the one we are familiar with. In some strange way, it's like games are really an expression of our interest in humankind, the universe, life, God, and the deepest of philosophical questions. It isn't a new idea, but it's one that we love very much. Ideally, we dream of a game where we could implement the Theory of Everything and have it run at full speed—obviously a contradiction, but we're dreaming here—simulating our reality, and then tweak all sorts of parameters to see what other kinds of universes can come out. We'd then love to be able to immerse ourselves in one of these environments with a device that overrides our normal sensory input and feeds the virtual input directly into the brain—perhaps even providing completely new senses. Such a system may provide us with a realistic sensation of flight, superhuman strength and agility, a feeling of profound understanding, or a synesthetic experience currently unknown. Finally, and possibly the most exciting, would be the ability to interact with intelligent beings in these environments so we could ask them what they thought about these questions and the answers we're seeking. With the right technology, will games become both a source of entertainment and enlightenment? In some small ways, we feel they already are. ●

"IF THE HARDWARE ARMS RACE CONTINUES, IT'S ONLY GOING TO RESULT IN PC GAMING BECOMING A HOBBY OF THE ELITE FEW."
—JOSH MOSQUEIRA, DESIGN DIRECTOR
RELIC ENTERTAINMENT

BRAD WARDELL
President and CEO, *Galactic Civilizations II*, Stardock

The ultimate gaming experience, in my opinion, is virtual reality. That is, whether it be an action game, strategy game, or role-playing game, the player actually feels like they are there. A historical RPG, for instance, could put the player literally in Braintree, Massachusetts, in 1794, talking to John Adams and wandering Colonial America. A strategy game might put the player in the shoes of a general in the situation room as they move divisions and forces into play, getting reports from the front back. And, of course, action games would literally put the player on the front fighting their way through objectives.

How virtual reality will ultimately manifest itself remains to be seen. In the long run, something like *Star Trek*'s holodeck seems pretty feasible. But I wouldn't be surprised if, in 50 years, there's some sort of gaming device that players can physically hook into that lets them seemingly experience this ultimate gaming experience.

Reviews

Opinions you can trust

THIS MONTH IN REVIEWS...

Let me preface this by heading off any fears that we're suffering some sort of identity crisis: Since 2005, *GFW* (and *Computer Gaming World* before it) has weathered no less than three different review score scales, jumping from a five-star system to a complete absence of scores to a 10-point scale in line with the rest of the 1UP Network. And this month, we (in a concerted group effort alongside *Electronic Gaming Monthly* and 1UP.com) switch to letter grades. Don't panic— this system's here to stay.

We recently took a long, hard look at the way our scores are generally perceived, and arrived at at the conclusion that it isn't always readily understandable to every reader that, say, a 7 out of 10 is indeed a *good* game and well worth your hard-earned money. To solve this problem, we decided that letter grades (similar to the U.S. educational system's grading scale) provide an easy, elegant, at-a-glance method of communicating a game's quality. After all, everyone knows what an A, B, C, D, or F means (and as you can see from our score key, our defining parameters haven't changed). Tell us what you think of the new system at *gfwletters@ziffdavis.com*.

● **Ryan Scott, Managing Editor**

SCORE KEY

GFW uses a letter-grade scale to inform you, at a glance, whether or not a game is worth your hard-earned money. We strictly enforce C as the middle of the scale, meaning that any game receiving a score of B- or higher comes recommended and is certainly worth playing. Here's how the scores break down:

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

A+ to A-: Excellent
Genre benchmarks—universally recommended.

B+ to B-: Good
Enjoyable throughout, with minor flaws.

C+ to C-: Average
Status quo. Only genre enthusiasts need apply.

D+ to D-: Bad
Significant bugs or fundamental design issues.

F: Terrible
Never should have been made.

MEET THE CREW

The Review Crew is the 1UP 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*.

TOM CHICK
STAFF REVIEWER
Tom Chick is a hifalutin, Ivy League–educated, beret-wearing ponce who lives in Los Angeles.
Current Faves: *Sins of a Solar Empire*
1UP.com Blog: tomchick.1UP.com

SARAH JAISSER GREEN
STAFF REVIEWER
Ain't nepotism grand? We kid, of course—big boss Jeff Green's Little Miss Sunshine shares dear old dad's penchant for prose.
Current Faves: *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: None of your business!

RORY MANION
STAFF REVIEWER
Alongside griefing partner (and *GFW* editor) Shawn Elliott, Rory's mission in life is to annoy as many Internauts as possible.
Current Faves: *Savage 2: A Tortured Soul*
1UP.com Blog: Neato_Jinkins2.1UP.com

SEAN MOLLOY
SENIOR EXECUTIVE EDITOR
Sean begs you not to ask what sins the Lunar Empire has committed.
Current Faves: *Sins of a Solar Empire, World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: GFWSean.1UP.com

ERIC NEIGHER
STAFF REVIEWER
Eric's a high-powered corporate attorney, which basically means he spends all day looking for dumb videos on YouTube.
Current Faves: *Team Fortress 2*
1UP.com Blog: TheFrimFramSauce.1UP.com

RYAN SCOTT
MANAGING EDITOR
Between *Team Fortress 2*'s content updates and *Puzzle Quest* finally hitting Steam, Ryan's stayin' plenty busy.
Current Faves: *Team Fortress 2, Puzzle Quest*
1UP.com Blog: GFWRyan.1UP.com

Head to ReviewCrew.1UP.com to meet all of the 1UP Network's expert reviewers.

The Empire Tree (left) looks scary, but it's surprisingly easy to understand.

JUST AS THE PACING MAKES *SINS* POSSIBLE, THE INGENIOUS INTERFACE MAKES IT PLAYABLE.

Sins is a Games for Windows–branded game, but it doesn't use GFW Live. Instead, it uses Ironclad Online and offers its own version of Achievements. You can save online matches and resume later.

A.I. civilizations offer you missions (not unlike MMORPG quests) that affect your relationship—positively if you complete them, adversely if you ignore them.

SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE

It's about time

● The musical score, which changes from frantic to serene to menacing depending what you're looking at, reflects the enormity and isolation of your empire.

REVIEW

Conventional wisdom says that if a strategy game's to have the depth of, say, *Civilization*, where one is expected to simultaneously deal with labor riots in Turkestan, elephant-mounted barbarians in Greece, cultural revolution in Sicily, and a sudden influx of whale-meat traders from the newly discovered Arctic north, taking turns is a design necessity. *Sins of a Solar Empire* begs to differ: It's not about turns—it's about *time*.

PACE IS THE TRICK

Consider this sci-fi concept: In *Sins*, all activity takes place in the spheres of gravity around planets, asteroids, or stars (the gameplay is ostensibly 3D, but the third dimension proves to be almost inconsequential). These isolated pockets of play are connected by phase lanes—straight lines—through which ships can travel at astounding speed, and in which they are entirely off-limits, invulnerable to attack and unable to process player input. Before making a phase jump, wise players wait for their fleet (often 100 strong) to crystallize at the edge of a gravity well so they can jump in synchronicity. Add an extra minute if a single ship's antimatter chambers aren't charged enough. In *Galactic Civilizations II* (the game's closest cousin, and not just because both are published by Stardock), similar transactions are abrupt, businesslike. Here, I'd almost call them poetic.

But these serene dead spaces enable the living ones. While your fleet's in transit, engage in an anonymous bidding war—analogous to the final 60 seconds of a heated eBay auction, only the prize isn't a *Momma's Family* VHS collection but a band of pirate raiders you can sic on a rival civilization (*Sins*' clever way to give economy-minded players a counter to early-game war-mongers). Excavate the surface of your newly acquired ice planet to discover alien artifacts (manifested as, say, a percentage boost to frigate construction speed). Culture-bomb a rival planet (quite literally, in the case of the Advent race's superweapon) to make its inhabitants susceptible to your propaganda and potentially turn traitor. Swing your attention to the ongoing skirmish around New Iota IV, where your cruisers' swarms of bombers repel a fleet of enemy capital ships, *Sins*' versatile answer to hero units (though how many RTS games feature heroes that debuff an enemy's economy?). All this and more can be taking place at any given moment in *Sins*—or none of it at all, a fact that will make you wish upon a star for an in-game speed slider. *Sins* is graceful, but its rare lulls make you realize the potency of an End Turn button.

The game's scope makes for marvelous upheavals; a single civilization can uproot and crawl, spiderlike, around the galactic web to make a new home on the other side. Smart retreats are as important as offensives, and a single colony ship snuck through a wormhole can yank a civilization from the brink of extinction. This back-and-forth is a huge part of *Sins'* appeal and is one of the reasons a single game stretches on for hours.

Just as the pacing makes *Sins* possible, the ingenious interface makes it playable. *Sins* is the fulfillment of *Supreme Commander's* promise—zoom in to see the tracers of a fighter squadron launched from a carrier ship, and zoom out to take in 60 planets and five star systems at a time as utilitarian icons. Halfway through your mouse's scroll wheel, you're playing a different game. Don't be scared by the daunting cluster of candy-colored icons and collapsible arrows in the Empire Menu at the side of the screen—it's programmed in the language of pure instinct, and finding your way around your expansive empire is far, far easier than it should be for a game that necessitates a "search" function.

RELATIVITY

While games like *Medieval II* have tried to marry the tenets of *Civilization* and *StarCraft*, *Sins* is the first game to successfully do so without storing them in separate compartments. But I wonder if the game's triumphs may be a direct function of its setting. The contrived sci-fi notions of hyperspace, synchronous jumps, and vast dead spaces make the game possible *and* plausible—all are central to why it works, and I can't think of conceptual analogs in Tolkien, Homer, or World War II history books that'd fit as well. Maybe someone as clever as the folks at Ironclad will figure out how to take this concept beyond the stars, but I'm skeptical. *Sins* may, in fact, be one of a kind. ● **Sean Molloy**

VERDICT

➕ **Ingenious control scheme; great depth and pacing.**

➖ **No single-player campaign; no speed slider.**

A-
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| Processor	Price
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● If you like chicks with guns, the Sisters of Battle gotcha covered.

WARHAMMER 40,000:
DAWN OF WAR—SOULSTORM
You've come a long way, baby

PUBLISHER: **THQ** DEVELOPER: **Iron Lore** GENRE: **Real-Time Strategy** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5.1GB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **2-8 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

The back of the box would have you believe the stand-alone *Soulstorm* expansion for future-fantasy RTS *Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War* adds two factions, flying vehicles, and a brand-new strategic campaign. But the more notable addition is dairy farming. That's right: dairy farming. *Soulstorm* demonstrates how to shamelessly milk a franchise.

NUNS WITH GUNS

Not to say the new stuff isn't cool—the new races are full of that *Warhammer* piss and vinegar that makes this such a spirited RTS. The Sisters of Battle constitute the first playable side in *Dawn of War* that isn't a full-fledged *Warhammer* faction. Instead, the Sisters are the religious arm of the Imperial Guard (a faction added in the first expansion pack, *Winter Assault*). So it's no surprise that they play a lot like the Guard, but sexier; they talk with the self-assured fanaticism of the Space Marines, but their units rely on add-on leadership. To power many of their special abilities, the Sisters use a resource called faith that accumulates based on the number of "faithful" units they recruit. You can just call it mana, because that's pretty much how it works.

We also get the Dark Eldar, who play like the non–Dark Eldar (albeit a purple-themed, Chaos Marine version). Their main twist: They power their spells with souls, represented here as purple blobs left lying around after a battle. It's also OK to call this mana, because that's pretty much how it works. As far as tone, the Dark Eldar are even more Clive Barkery than the Chaos Marines, and they're totally bitchin' because of their Green Goblin hoverboards...and a pleasure barge built around a mattress, complete with chained-up slave girls. If this barge is a-rockin'...!

COME HOVER WITH ME

Each of the previous factions gets a new unit, mostly so they have something that flies. Well,

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE TWO NEW RACES...BUT NEITHER FEELS SUBSTANTIALLY DIFFERENT.

"flies." It's more of a "hover," bound by the same map rules as most of the other units. It's not much of an airplane if it can't get over a wall. The new campaign is a reskinned version of the *Dark Crusade* expansion's campaign, but with a fussier map and strategic powers anchored in each faction's home territory.

So, it's all about the new races...but when the chain saw hits the bone, neither feels substantially different. They certainly don't bring the same kick that *Dark Crusade* brought with the Tau and the Necrons. The mana gimmicks are a nice try, and the artwork and voiceovers remain as lively as ever. But fans of the series will see far too much overlap with the previous races, and the fact that the Sisters can summon an angel and the Dark Eldar shoot purple beams won't count for much after the initial "cool" factor wears off. At this point, three expansions and three years after the original game, the factions in *Dawn of War* feel like the various menu items at Taco Bell: The order in which you pile on the beans, cheese, or lettuce doesn't make that big a difference. ●**Tom Chick**

VERDICT

➕ Two new races.
➖ Same old gameplay.

C+
AVERAGE

Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

● Who let the Warp Beasts out?

SAM & MAX:
EPISODE 2X03–NIGHT OF THE RAVING DEAD
So this dog and this rabbit walk into a vampire's castle...

PUBLISHER: **Telltale Games/GameTap** DEVELOPER: **Telltale Games** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (snm.telltalegames.com)** ESRB RATING: **Not Rated**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.5GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 350MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

While *Sam & Max: Season One's* episodic storyline revolved around nefarious mind-control schemes, *Season Two's* main thread is "weird whereabouts." Having checked Easter Island and the North Pole off their "places to visit before we die" list, always-sarcastic sleuths Sam and Max spend the lion's share of this latest episode in the unhallowed halls of a vampire lord's castle. In emo prince of darkness Jurgen's world, disco never died—and zombies (including, for a significant portion of the episode, our favorite Freelance Police) rule the night. Meanwhile, back on Sam and Max's trusty street corner, career career-changer Sybil Pandemik is accepting any and all boyfriend applicants after recently kicking

Abraham Lincoln's disembodied stone head to the curb.

Yep, sounds just as strange as ever.

And it's just as fun as ever, too. Compared to *Season Two's* fantastic *Ice Station Santa* (definitely one of Sam and Max's best capers) and ho-hum *Moai Better Blues* (arguably the series' worst entry thus far), *Night of the Raving Dead* falls somewhere in the middle. The narrative takes one of the more creative turns by giving us Zombie Sam and Max (along with a surprise return to one of *Season One's* most memorable locations), and the humor's thankfully back in fine form after last episode's slump. Some of the puzzles feel a bit ill-conceived, though, even with liberal use of the in-game hint system. Call it a mild annoyance—nine episodes in, we still haven't played a *Sam & Max* game we didn't like. ●**Ryan Scott**

● Rough translation: "Crime is an invitation to the crypt."

THE HUMOR'S THANKFULLY BACK IN FINE FORM AFTER LAST EPISODE'S SLUMP.

VERDICT

✚ Creative plot; jokes are far more "hit" than "miss."

▬ This series has certainly seen better puzzles.

B
GOOD

Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

THE SIMS 2: FREETIME
Never has play been so much work

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Electronic Arts** GENRE: **Strategy/Simulation** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (eastore.ea.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.3GHz CPU (2GHz in Vista), 512MB RAM (1GB in Vista), 1.5GB hard drive space, *The Sims 2*** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Gold Master**

REVIEW

In *The Sims 2*, when your Sim's not busy working, socializing, or discovering alien life, he or she can kick back and relax. The *FreeTime* expansion, however, adds a whole slew of hobbies, all with their own goals and rewards to pursue—so now, even doing things "for fun" is work.

Any leisure activity your Sim pursues now awards "hobby enthusiasm points" in one of 10 categories. Reading or watching movies bumps up your Film & Literature score; working on those biceps develops Fitness; and bustin' a move increases Music & Dance. When your Sim gains enough enthusiasm, new features specific to that hobby unlock, such as the ability to blog or browse the Internet about that topic. With enough points, you'll get invited to the hobby's secret club, which unlocks even more stuff. You have to keep pursuing the hobby, though, or you'll *lose* enthusiasm points—and all those features you toiled to unlock.

The problem is, with all the other things to do in *The Sims 2* (and its numerous expan-

● Pump that iron, geek boy!

sions), most Sims hardly have free time at all. Sometimes enthusiasm-point accruement conveniently coincides with things like career requirements, so that helps. But the hobbies can get overshadowed, and they're frankly almost forgettable. It's still a nice add-on, and *Sims* fanatics will appreciate the five new careers and new features like the ability to let three NPCs grow older with you. If you're still playing *Sims 2* at this point, you could do worse than to fritter away *your* free time directing your Sims' free time. ●**Sarah Jaisser Green**

VERDICT

✚ New hobbies add lots of new goals and rewards.

▬ Now even your free time is a stressful affair.

B-
GOOD

Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

Assaulting an enemy garrison.

Trust me—all these colors and sparklies make sense in context.

LIKE MOST MULTIPLAYER GAMES, *SAVAGE 2* SUCCEEDS NOT BECAUSE OF WHAT YOU FIGHT FOR, BUT *HOW* YOU FIGHT FOR IT.

If the sky fills with embers and demons start popping up out of nowhere, you did something wrong.

The battle for Incredibly Generic Hill.

SAVAGE 2: A TORTURED SOUL

Real-Time Action-Strategy RPFPS

PUBLISHER: **S2 Games** DEVELOPER: **S2 Games** GENRE: **Most of them** AVAILABILITY: E-tail (www.s2games.com) ESRB RATING: **Teen**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 1GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **6-24 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **E-tail**

REVIEW

The theory of the player commander, in the minds of developers both amateur and professional, must look something like this: One player assumes the role of master tactician, able to survey the war zone from a satellite's-eye view, direct the combat, and anticipate enemy exertions of force with the prescience of a chess master and the eyes of an eagle. This god-king of the voice-communication button demands obedience and respect from his troops—and in return, he showers them with useful supplements to their arsenals.

In reality—where players aren't the altruistic paragons of togetherness that many starry-eyed devs seemingly expect them to be—commanders are just as individualistic as their subordinates, and troopers rarely have incentive to ten-hut until they're in need of an airdropped goody bag. Enter *Savage 2: A Tortured Soul*, a "genre-bender" with enough abbreviations on its fact sheet to warrant the cliché...and a commander mode that excels despite the proclivities of your average multiplayer gamer.

A (CONTRIVED) TALE OF TWO TEAMS

Welcome to the embarrassingly derivative fantasy land of Newerth, where the Legion (which is not an Alliance) of Man constantly clashes with the Horde (which is not *that* Horde) of Beasts on utterly forgettable geography dotted with fortuitously proportional gold mines to fight over. The player classes can be similarly reduced to archetypal standbys: Rangers, melee guys, healers, summoners—they're all here. A contrived storyline attempts to mold *Savage 2*'s factions and setting into something more meaningful than standard RTS base vs. base warfare; but, like most multiplayer games, this one succeeds

not because of what you fight for, but *how* you fight for it.

Think *Fable* meets *Guild Wars* on the plains of *WarCraft III*: Every class (save for building-busting siege units) has third-person melee and first-person projectile attacks at its disposal as well as a host of spells and special abilities. Melee duels erupt in frantic bursts of full-contact rock-paper-scissors, where blocking and interrupt attacks create openings for slashes and skill bar–based spellwork. Even support classes—usually relegated to second-rate-citizen status by the hardcore—are dynamic enough to guarantee a healthy number of healers and builders on any given team.

GOD GAME

And then we have the commander, an elected (and unimpeachable) leader duty-bound to erect skill-unlocking structures and sling helpful buffs and debuffs into the fracas below. What was true in *Battlefield 2* is true here: When the commander starts *commanding*, players tend to get busy doing whatever the hell else they'd rather do...and for the ignored emperor in the sky, it doesn't take long for fits of Old Testament vindictiveness to set in. Blow off an order or challenge a decision and you run the risk of being forsaken by the higher-up, denied the heavenly buffs that can win battles.

Ground-pounders left in the lurch get their own shot at schadenfreude when the team's prospects for victory turn south: When income slows due to depleted or seized mines, the commander must rely on the generosity of players willing to dip into their own kill-earned coffers to keep the war effort afloat. Donating gold so that Big Brother can continue producing public works might seem like a no-brainer on paper, but charity for the good of the team doesn't come naturally to most players. Many of them would rather live free *and* die.

These observations aren't intended to deter you from *Savage 2* or its commander mode. In fact, developer S2 Games comes closer to balancing the player commander formula than anyone else by managing to instill a sense of reciprocal dependency between players and commander and a fear of mutually assured destruction for the team that refuses to act like one. An understanding of this dynamic seemed to dawn on a great deal of players during the game's early weeks; *Savage 2*'s designers did an admirable job of inspiring teamwork rather than forcing or ignoring it.

Leave it to a team of 11 developers to succeed so resoundingly where behemoths have failed. *Savage 2* isn't perfect—squads are semirandomized smatterings of players
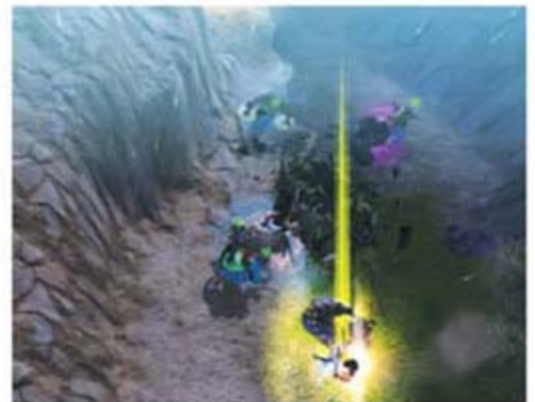
● **Finishing the enemy base.**

unable to communicate or coordinate fluidly as of this writing, and the game can be overwhelming to new players—but its ambition is matched only by the amount of fun you'll have playing. ● **Rory Manion**

VERDICT

➕ **Great combat system; excellent commander mode.**

➖ **Good teamwork could be further encouraged.**

B-
GOOD

⊞ Games for Windows

● You can lean around corners in *Denied Ops*. And how—apparently the main characters have dislocated vertebrae!

CONFLICT: DENIED OPS

Gonna be Conflict: Denied Promotion for these developers

PUBLISHER: **Eidos Interactive** DEVELOPER: **Pivotal Games** GENRE: **First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 7GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-16 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

Denied Ops, the latest in Eidos' *Conflict* series, starts off with a promising concept: You continuously switch between controlling two complementary characters to achieve a tactical advantage you couldn't get in a solo FPS. If only the story weren't as tired as Rip Van Winkle, and the dialogue as poor as a pauper, and the missions as boring as crap....

I WANNA HOLD YOUR HAND

Yep, *Denied Ops* features a setup so lame you'll expect the characters to walk with a limp. Which, in a way, they do—only the limp is in their artificial brains. Baddies routinely sit around in the open, staring deerlike into the "ooooh, shiny!" of your rifle scope. Meanwhile, your A.I. partner, whether it's machine-gunner Lang or sniper Graves, requires constant babysitting to keep from becoming a float in the 35th Annual Tournament of Bullets parade.

"Partner management" could've been a total disaster, but because *Denied Ops* is designed to be console-friendly (the load screens incongruously display the Xbox 360 controls, even if you're using a mouse and keyboard), the necessarily limited options make things simpler. Your choices for ordering your buddy around are basically: follow, move to a spot, and cap a fool. Of course, the console-centric design will piss you off plenty, too. Example: *Denied Ops* features a frustrating checkpoint-save system instead of the PC-friendly save-anywhere model...which basically means you'll repeat the same areas more often than Jeff Gordon turns left on race day.

WE CAN WORK IT OUT

Some of this nonsense is ameliorated by *Denied Ops'* primary saving grace: co-op mode. Grab a friend over a LAN or the Internet and the two of you can do your best *Tango & Cash* impersonation on the bad guys. In a firefight, one suppresses while the other flanks and finishes, or, if you hop into

> DENIED OPS FEATURES A SETUP SO LAME, YOU'LL EXPECT THE CHARACTERS TO WALK WITH A LIMP.

a tank, one of you drives while the other handles blowing crap up. And *Denied Ops'* crap blows up real nice: Destructible environments are all over the place and have a real effect on combat. If foes cower like girlie men behind a wooden fence, just put your favorite 7.62 mm round right through it. If you want to collapse a tower or a piece of concrete wall, that tank cannon will do the job.

Even when *Denied Ops* is at its best, though, it still suffers from a critical lack of inspiration. Apart from the hackneyed story, the maps are mostly conventional room-to-room affairs with the predictable "tough," wide-open battle coming at the climaxes.

OLD BROWN SHOE

In the final analysis, while the "buddy system" approach *Denied Ops* takes with the genre is novel (and certainly well-suited to co-op mode), the statue it builds on that skeleton is ugly enough to be a modern-art masterpiece. Between this game and *Kane & Lynch*, Eidos has caused more damage to a promising idea than anyone since Joel Schumacher. ● **Eric Neigher**

● The maps are littered with tactically placed combustibles. Why this monastery is filled with loose propane tanks and oil drums is unexplained.

VERDICT

⊞ **Co-op mode; destructible environments.**

⊟ **Bland gameplay; horrible A.I.; hackneyed story; generally feels unpolished.**

C-
AVERAGE

Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

ARMA: GOLD EDITION

More map pack than expansion pack

PUBLISHER: **Atari** DEVELOPER: **Bohemia Interactive** GENRE: **Tactical First-Person Shooter** AVAILABILITY: **Retail** ESRB RATING: **Mature**
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 6GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **2-40 players** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

REVIEW

A grenade launcher. That's the only new weapon you get in *Queen's Gambit*, the expansion included in the *Gold Edition* of small-squad tactical shooter *ArmA: Armed Assault*. And new vehicles? A pickup truck with a machine gun strapped to it and a Hummer limousine. I don't know about you, but when I watch *Black Hawk Down*, the first thing I think is, "You know what this realistic depiction of modern warfare is sorely lacking? Marines driving luxury SUVs." Considering that *ArmA*'s many resourceful modders already created several new weapons and vehicles on their own, developer Bohemia Interactive's got some 'splaining to do with the paltry offering they've got here.

The only really worthwhile goods in this expansion: its two single-player campaigns.

"Rahmadi Conflict" winds up the story from the original *ArmA* in three lengthy, slow-paced missions while "Royal Flush" follows a team of hired guns as they handle seven smaller, more action-packed sorties.

Neither campaign does anything particularly innovative. The same blocky textures and horrible voice acting continually break the illusion that you're in a "real" firefight, while the A.I. carries on its Oscar-worthy stint in the role of Chief Sitting Duck throughout the game.

Sure, it's not all bad: Co-op multiplayer remains a major strong suit, the soundtrack rocks socks, and the new level editor will doubtless spur the robust mod community on to even greater feats of unpaid labor. But when we're asked to shell out 30 bucks for something a bunch of 16-year-olds could've designed for free, we've lost the gambit.

● **Eric Neigher**

THE A.I. CARRIES ON ITS OSCAR-WORTHY STINT IN THE ROLE OF CHIEF SITTING DUCK THROUGHOUT.

● **Here, my A.I. ally lies down in the open with a large bush directly in his line of fire. With friends like these....**

VERDICT

➕ New multiplayer maps are great; level editor; highly realistic depiction of combat.

➖ Graphics still crappy; acting still crappy; level design even crappier.

C
AVERAGE

Games for Windows
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REVIEWS WRAP-UP

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

PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA

PUBLISHER: Sony Online Entertainment DEVELOPER: **Flying Lab Software** GENRE: **MMORPG** AVAILABILITY: **Retail, E-tail (station.sony.com)** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space, 128 MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale**

What the hull? Seasoned MMO players weaned on [insert high-profile game here] will look at *Pirates of the Burning Sea* and not quite know what to make of it. Set across various ports on the Spanish Main in the early 1700s, it's certainly not the kind of "Dwarven Superhero from Outer Space" fodder we've come to expect from the genre.

At a glance, it's probably most similar to *Eve Online* with its "you and your ship become one—kumbaya kumbaya" sort of flavor, along with its robust, playercentric economic model and social structure. Naval combat is the star of the show, and the detailed onboard activities are amazing to watch...except that you can't really control the battle while zoomed in far enough to appreciate them. The characters' animations seem stiff and unnatural, but when you take into account the overall depth of gameplay, it begins to matter less and less. Look for a full review in our next issue!

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2:
MYSTERIES OF WESTGATE

PUBLISHER: Atari DEVELOPER: **Ossian Studios** GENRE: **RPG** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (www.atari.com/us)** ESRB RATING: **Teen** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **2.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 300MB hard drive space, *Neverwinter Nights 2*** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

Anyone and their dorky mama can make a *Neverwinter Nights 2* mod, but some mods are better, fancier, and more professional than others. Case in point: *Mysteries of Westgate*—the first officially sanctioned "adventure pack" for *NWN2*—is as worthy of attention as Obsidian's great *Mask of the Betrayer* expansion from last year. It's no big surprise, as it was made by Ossian Studios (helmed by a former BioWare producer), who made the acclaimed *Darkness Over Daggerford* mod for *NWN1* in 2006. Ossian delivers again with a great-looking and engaging 10-to-15-hour (depending on side quests) RPG that any *D&D* dork should feel right at home with. The module—which is completely unrelated to *NWN2* or *Mask*—starts you off at level 8 and is set in the city of Westgate, where you mix it up with the local thieves' guild after landing yourself a cursed mask. You know the drill. Well worth the $10 download—and if you passed on the full game originally, snag the *NWN2* Gold Edition box due this April, which includes *NWN2*, *Mask of the Betrayer*, and this mod. Huzzah!

PENUMBRA: BLACK PLAGUE

PUBLISHER: Paradox DEVELOPER: **Frictional Games** GENRE: **Adventure** AVAILABILITY: **E-tail (paradoxplaza.com/penumbra)** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 300MB hard drive space** MULTIPLAYER: **None** VERSION REVIEWED: **Near-Final Reviewable**

Despite the horror theme, *Penumbra: Black Plague* doesn't rely on unwieldy weapons and sparse ammo to drive up the tension. In this follow-up to last year's *Penumbra: Overture*, your brain is your only weapon: Rather than use brute force, you'll stealth around enemies or get the better of them by taking advantage of your surrounding environment. Combine this with *Penumbra*'s signature physics puzzles—think *Half-Life 2*, but a little more in-depth—and you get a pretty hefty mental workout.

It's strange, though; despite handily mixing adventure with survival-horror—making us rely on our brains instead of our ability to bash skulls—*Black Plague* utilizes one of the most clichéd and annoying game mechanics: save points. Being forced to search high and low for a save point when you desperately want to take a break feels a bit out of place these days. Still, when that's our biggest complaint, it's hard not to recommend *Black Plague* as one of the scariest games we've played in a long time. The $20 price tag doesn't hurt, either.

THE HOT LIST

Five still-available games to buy right now

SIMAWESOME

With *The Sims 3* on the horizon, now's as good a time as any to see what these games are about. If you're itching to get into *The Sims 2*, here's what you need to know about its myriad expansion packs.

THE SIMS 2: UNIVERSITY

College is a universe unto itself, tethered to our world and mythologized in story and song, but otherwise alien. Intentionally or not, this connection is mimicked perfectly in *University* with its auxiliary neighborhoods, engaging college-education game, communal living arrangements, and new Young Adult life stage. This parallel side game is optional (your teens only go to college if you want them to) but unlocks four college grad–only careers and benefits. The Sim-eating Cow Plant object alone is worth the price.

THE SIMS 2: PETS

Folks love their pets. Sims love their pets. Folks who love Sims love Sims to love their pets.

Summary: *The Sims 2: Pets* expansion's got pets. But not pets-as-mere-glorified-objects à la the old *Sims: Unleashed* pack. No, these beasts are actual simu-lated entities with their own pet-specific needs, moods, genetics, life cycles, and careers. Buy them stuff and teach them tricks and they'll be the best friends (and breadwinners) your Sims could ever hope for—without all that messy socializing. Even the amazingly flexible Create-A-Pet tool provides hours of entertainment.

THE SIMS 2: OPEN FOR BUSINESS

As much spin-off as expansion pack, *Open for Business* adds an entirely new tycoon-game layer that allows Sims to own community lots, manufacture and sell objects (make your own flowers, toys, robots, and so on), run res-taurants, offer services, and charge for access to high-powered objects.

Entrepreneurial Sims must navigate the treacherous waters of employee relations, cre-ate and manage inventory for their chosen trade, and improve their businesses' power with a tech tree–esque business-reward system. And trust us: You haven't lived until you've seen an evil water wiggler.

THE SIMS 2: SEASONS

Weather was the most howled-for feature among *Sims 2* fanatics, and this pack deliv-ers with rain, hail, and snow, plus customizable seasons. The most under-the-hood of the expansions, *Seasons* adds only a few new gameplay elements, but it's all good stuff. Fishing and gardening offer new food sources...and the interplay of Sims' body temperature, the weather, and various outdoor activities adds a new wrinkle to the everyday plate-spinning game.

THE SIMS 2: BON VOYAGE

Vacations, like pets, were among the most beloved expansion pack additions to the original *Sims*, making this the last vital missing piece for *The Sims 2*. Now Sims can get away from it all, traveling to the mountains, the islands, or the Far East and staying in hotels (from swanky to skanky), no-frills camp-grounds, or their own vacation homes. Each destination offers its own sights and secrets.

REVIEW INDEX

Game names in yellow indicate *GFW* Editors' Choice award winners
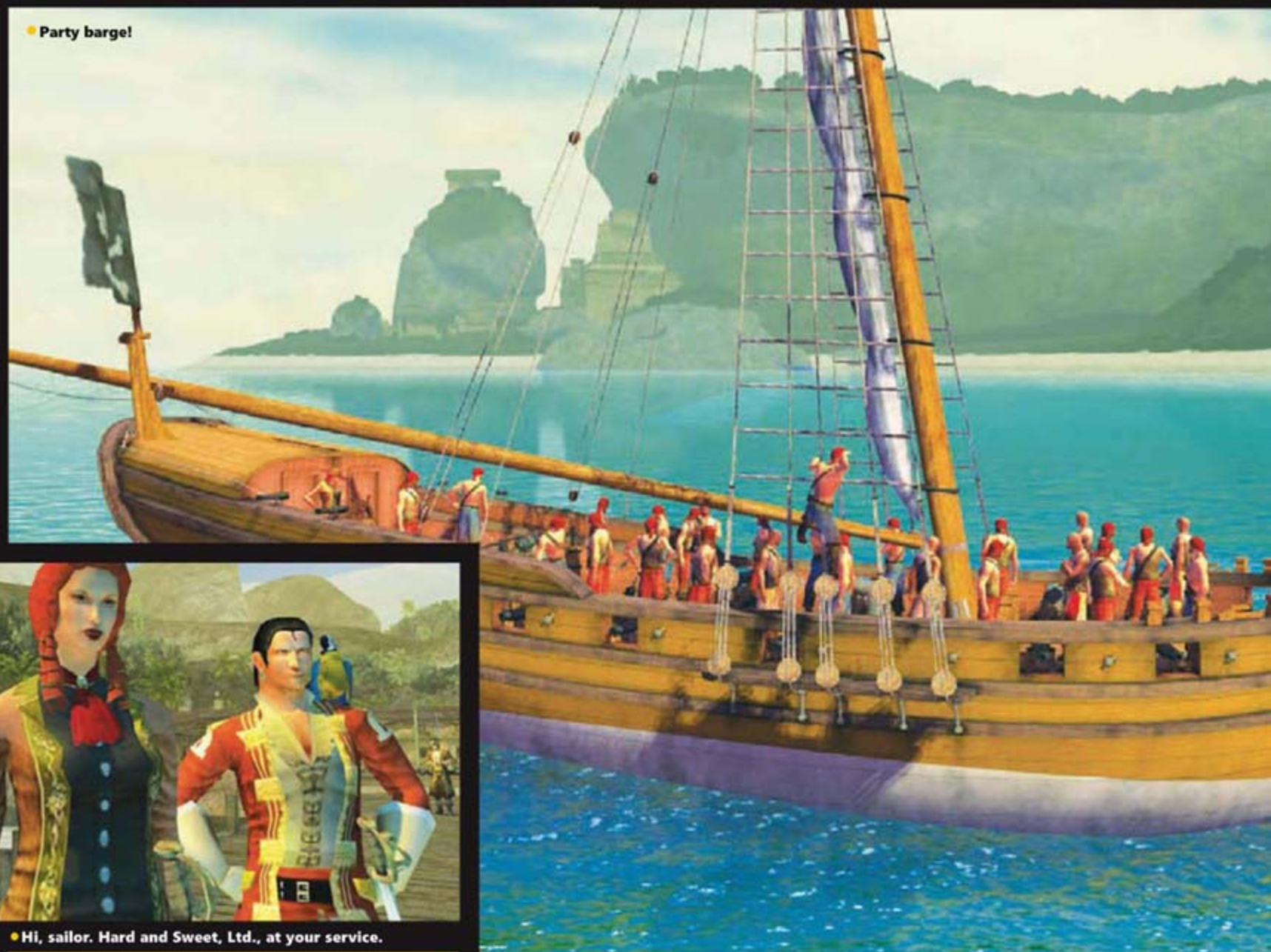
Extend

Where your games live on forever!

• Party barge!

• Hi, sailor. Hard and Sweet, Ltd., at your service.

• The iron ingot market bottoms out.

TOM vs. BRUCE

Two gamers enter. One gamer wins.

PIRATES OF THE BURNING SEA

Hard and Sweet, Ltd., now with more swashbuckling!

PUBLISHER: **Sony Online Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Flying Lab Software** GENRE: **MMORPG** ESRB RATING: **Teen**

COLUMN

Tom Chick

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

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

+ The game is *Pirates of the Burning Sea*. The server is Bonny. The faction is pirates. Duh. It's not called *Frenchmen of the Burning Sea* or *Brits of the Burning Sea*.

TOM: When naming my character, I somehow inverted her first and last names. She's named Lass Chick, instead of Chick Lass. I guess they're equally dumb names. After idly stabbing at the "Random Appearance" button on the way to the "Accept" button, I end up with a character who looks like a transvestite version of the Wendy's mascot. So I got her a hat from the tailor in Marsh Harbor. Now she looks like a transvestite version of the Wendy's mascot wearing the kind of hat your grandmother wears when she goes out to do some light gardening. But at least she stands out, because everyone else in the game has rolled up a female variation of Sexy Pirate, Hot Pirate, or Pirate With Her Bra Hanging Out. Running around Tortuga is like going to a Halloween party in Los Angeles, so I guess my transvestite Wendy's mascot fits right in. Bruce blames Johnny Depp.

BRUCE: I'm really looking forward to roleplaying a character that truly fits into this universe of constant battle and intermittent swashbuckling. OK, that's not true. I'm not going to roleplay anything. The only game I would even consider roleplaying my character in is a *Warhammer 40K* MMO, because in the grim darkness of the far future there is only war, and I am pretty sure I can roleplay that. Swashbuckling? Probably not. But I do choose the name Trogdor Burninator, so that all the NPCs call me "Captain Burninator" in the

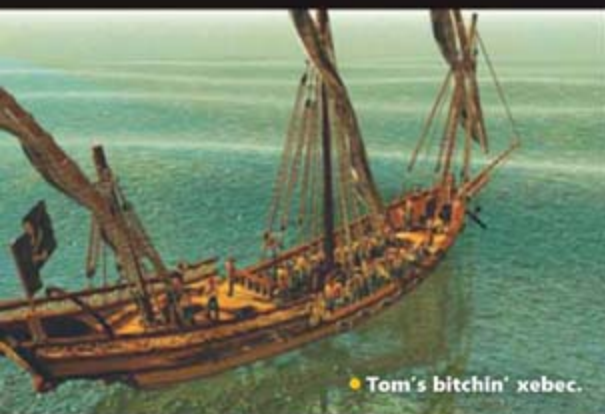too-small dialogue boxes that I cannot read. Who made this game? Anton van Leeuwenhoek?

TOM: Send your entries for this month's Get the Obscure Geryk Reference to *GFW*, San Francisco, CA 94080. No fair reading ahead first!

BRUCE: Anton van Leeuwenhoek invented the microscope. I didn't even have to look that one up. It was in one of those Golden Books that I read when I was a kid, I think.

TOM: Bruce and I run through some obligatory tutorials, which include a lot of shenanigans where a character has you walk in and out of a room to talk to various incarnations of herself. It's downright weird. "Let's go into my office," she'll say, and then she'll just stand there. So you finally go into her office ahead of her, only to discover she was already in there the entire time. It's like something written by Borges. My Obscure Reference skill is only level 1, so that's the best I've got.

BRUCE: Looking at the extremely nonfunctional chat window, I notice that someone is asking for advice about whether to "report" me for using the name "Trogdor Burninator," which he alleges to be a copyright violation. This guy a) doesn't know a lot about copyright law and b) is just making an excuse for the fact that I am ruining his own roleplaying experience. That's pretty obvious when you see people named "Bonnie Mae" or whatnot. And hey—I'm all about them roleplaying their characters. Just like they should be about me roleplaying my peasant-burninating dragon. Why can't we all just get along?

TOM: I actually see that chat and think to myself, "Ha, some stupid Internet dork named himself Trogdor Burninator." And then Bruce comes sashaying up with that name floating over his head. Great. Now I have to walk around with Trogdor Burninator by my side. At least it makes my own character's name look slightly less silly. As we play *Pirates of the Burning Sea*, we're fond of pointing out to each other that this game was made by the same guys who did *Rails Across America*. Sometimes we intend this as a compliment, such as when we're dazzled by the possibilities of such a wide-open player-driven economy or when we're carefully shredding the sails of a powerful ship so we can steal it for ourselves. Other times, we say this out of a sense of incredulity, **>**

• I'm not going to stand here and see that little Kintner boy spill out all over the dock.

● Tom's bitchin' xebec.

such as when we're stuck having to play one of the awful missions that involve walking around and swordfighting. In fact, this part of the game is so bad that we've come to dread putting into port and having to get out of our boats.

BRUCE: Tom really isn't kidding about the "dreading" part. The avatar combat in this game is just so dreadfully bad that we ask each other nervously whenever we start a quest, "Do you think this will be about avatar combat?" Because if it is, the result usually is we die a hundred times but then rez ourselves with the handy bandages in our inventory while the NPC sidekicks off-tank the bad guys. Then we dive in and die again until the bad guys finally run out of hit points. It's a great system!

TOM: I eventually warm up to the avatar combat once my pirate learns to do the pirate equivalent of shooting guns, hucking grenades, mezzing mobs, and managing aggro. It's palatable enough when you're boarding a ship, but I could do without those missions where you have to infiltrate a fort or work your way through that same cave yet again. The whole time I'm playing those bits, I'm not thinking about pirates at all. Instead, I'm thinking about that meeting where someone from Sony told the developers to make the game more like *World of WarCraft*. But when *Pirates* isn't trying to be more like *WOW*—in other words, when it's itself—it plays like *Sid Meier's Pirates!* meets *Microsoft's Excel!* I mean that as a compliment.

BRUCE: The only thing I'd compliment this game on is the naval combat, which is clearly the most polished—and most enjoyable—part of the game. I love Age of Sail war games (in general—not the game called *Age of Sail*), not because it's a great subject for real-time strategy, but because it can be played at my pace, which is more 19th-century. I'm less sold on *Pirates'* economic game, which seems to be the other focus here. Lots of running around from port to port with cargo, which sure seems realistic, if not very much fun.

TOM: Since I'm not nearly as cynical about the *Microsoft's Excel!* part of the gameplay, I figure I'll be the brains behind our commercial enterprise. I have one word for us. Actually, two words: sugar and iron. We'll be T&B Sweet and Hard, Ltd. We'll get logos printed up on our sails. We'll be renowned across the Caribbean as the go-to guys for all your sugar and iron needs. We'll set up shop in La Isabela, a Cuban port where we can grow sugarcane, mine iron ore, and wait for Castro to take over so Bruce can rail against the Communists. Then we'll work our way up to building a sugar refinery and a forge and then importing limestone from Santa Clara on the Yucatan peninsula, which we'll use at a forge to smelt iron ingots. After all, everyone needs iron ingots, right? It takes no small

amount of cash to get a modest production chain up and running, not to mention plenty of sailing around to buy and collect the resources necessary to build these plantations, refineries, forges, and warehouses. It's not quite the life of a pirate, so we make sure to ambush plenty of French ships along the way.

BRUCE: *Pirates of the Burninating Sea* wholeheartedly embraces the idea that if you're crazy enough to play an MMO, you certainly must have enough time on your hands to research all the different techs and recipes and whatever else might be on some wiki that Tom found. The whole game is this elaborate economic system that is completely player-driven, which sounds like a cool idea until you actually try to do anything.

TOM: Unfortunately, we don't really know what we're doing. It turns out that I can't just grow sugarcane, process it into refined sugar, and then make money selling it to an NPC. The demand for sugar comes only from other players. And once I realize this, I have no idea why someone playing this game would want sugar. Do you need it for potions? Does it increase your mana regeneration rate? Is it used to craft magic hats? It turns out that the endgame consists of building and fighting in powerful high-end ships, such as the mighty Ships of the Line and other such vessels that won't make an appearance until the game has been live for a while. And making these high-end ships requires, well, pretty much everything. Sugar is necessary to make "provisions," which are a crafting component along with things like masts, rigging, and hulls, all crafted from items like nails, sheets, and planks, which are all crafted from goods like iron ingots, wool, and logs, which are all crafted from raw materials like ore, sheep, and wood. There probably won't be much demand for sugar for a while. So I mothball our sugar plantation and refinery and focus instead on digging up ore and limestone and smelting them together to make iron ingots.

BRUCE: *Pirates of the Burninating Sea* is interesting in that the resources are, in effect, unlimited. Because La Isabela has iron or limestone or whatever it has, as many players as are interested can set up mining operations there, unlike *WOW*, where everyone is always running to grab those yellow mining dots. All you have to do is build a warehouse and a mine. The rest is labor and money to fund the labor. Except there is one way to limit the resources: Contest the ports producing them. That's the key to controlling the economy. If you want to limit the amount of iron or limestone making it to the auction houses, you need to contest the ports producing them. That involves sinking ships in that area and delivering "unrest packets," which I assume are elite commando frogmen.

TOM: After much toiling, I post 100 iron ingots for sale. Unfortunately, I realize too late that I've overpriced them at 200 doubloons. The going rate seems to be 150 doubloons and falling. My iron ingots sit on the auction house, forlorn and unbought. It turns out I'm as adept at being an iron ingot baron as George Bush is at running an energy company.

BRUCE: Or they might just sit around unbought because the auction house interface is so awful. I thought everyone was just copying *World of WarCraft* now, so in order to make something this bad, Flying Labs must have thought it up completely on their own. Maybe they are trying to make it a superrealistic auctioneering simulator where you have to yell out the price yourself,

except instead of yelling you type into a tiny box and click "Submit" and hope the price is above the threshold set by the seller. If you're unsuccessful, you have to type in a new number. It's the fiddliest, lousiest system I've ever seen, and it has the added bonus of not being anything like an auction simulator that maybe they were envisioning.

TOM: It does kind of suck that if you want to min/max your bottom line—and what iron ingot baron wouldn't?—you have to increase your bids by a doubloon at a time. It doesn't help that the NPC auctioneer loops through a single sound bite every few seconds while you bid in increments.

BRUCE: There is another aspect to the price of goods like Tom's iron ingots: labor. Because the game runs on a real-time clock, you can only make so much of any resource before you have to go play *World of WarCraft* until the production timer resets. For example, you can only make 10 ingots an hour. When you log in, you check how much labor you have accumulated and then convert as much of it to goods as you have money for. So the goods that have a lower production rate need to have a premium built into the price relative to the goods that accumulate more quickly.

TOM: Whatever. I don't understand all that. Why can't it just work like *Settlers* or *Caesar IV*? Grow stuff, make stuff, make money. Period. Plus, the spreadsheet runs entirely under the hood. I'd like to see my plantation at La Isabela. I'd like to hear the hiss and clang of my forge, or whatever noise forges make. But *Pirates of the Burning Sea* isn't here to immerse you. At least not when you're on land.

BRUCE: The real star of this game is the naval combat. It is tense, engaging, and requires you to take advantage of your ship's characteristics, like turning radius, ability to sail close to the wind, durability, and gunnery. Your style of play will depend a lot on the ship you use.

TOM: I see a lot of players in ships called xebecs. These are Algerian boats, traditionally sailed by Berbers in the Mediterranean, but the Caribbean is lousy with them. They've got a pair of rear-firing guns. These guns are a great way to harass the A.I., which is too stupid to know when to quit. An A.I. ship will follow you to the ends of the earth even as you're lobbing shots through the hole you've punched in its bow armor. The xebec is also pretty maneuverable, and it's got more side guns than the similarly sturdy ketch. Plus, the triangular sails look suitably exotic. Ketches, corvettes, and sloops are played out by the time you're level 16. Xebecs are the new hotness. As we play, Bruce uses fancy terms like "having the gauge" and "tacking." I contribute my own fancy terms, like "booty."

BRUCE: Last winter, Tom was obsessed with the movie *Booty Call*. At the time, he told me it was to get him in the right frame of mind to roleplay a pirate. Based on this game, I'm not sure how anything pirate-related helps you mine iron and limestone, which apparently were the real goals of pirates back in the swashbuckling days. I think that's actually what "swashbuckling" meant—mining iron and limestone.

TOM: Not anymore. Until someone buys my overpriced iron ingots, I'm shuttering T&B Hard and Sweet, Ltd. Let's go plunder some French booty. ●

🏆 **WINNER:**
EVERYONE BUT FRANCE

CRISIS ON INFINITE SERVERS
Trekking across the vast MMORPG landscape
This month: Confessions of a former *World of WarCraft* hater

COLUMN

Ryan Scott

Ryan thinks *WOW* is awesome. If you have any Karazhan advice, hit him up at ryan_scott@ziffdavis.com.

As I'm sure those closest to me would vigorously attest to, I am a man of extremes and absolutes. I'm stuck in my myriad ruts, and I *like* them—and most attempts to force change are met with a resounding and occasionally irrational stubbornness (yes, I'm also a Taurus). This ones-and-zeroes mindset's long formed a bizarre roadblock of sorts to my MMO exposure.

A little history: Back in 1999—post–high school, during the throes of my first fruitless college year—I got hooked on *Ultima Online*. For roughly four years I played this game, basking in PVP, contributing to my server's sizable in-game community, and generally leading a fun and fulfilling second life, if you will. I briefly flirted with *EverQuest*, quickly deciding that it couldn't hold a candle to *UO*'s depth (not to mention its potential for player-driven conflict). After EA basically scuttled the *UO* I'd been playing with an incremental series of changes designed to coddle the crybabies that comprised most of its population (there goes my narrow-mindedness again!), I drifted from *Shadowbane* to *Star Wars Galaxies* to *City of Heroes*, never feeling quite at home. Bah! These weren't anything like my precious *UO*.

World of WarCraft dropped in November 2004, amidst elitist eye-rolls from me, and cheers from everyone who wasn't me. I played a rogue to (as best I can recall) level 8, in a *very thorough* effort to confirm my suspicions: This thing was just *EQ* with prettier graphics and a better interface! I scoffed at my friends' and peers' fast-growing *WOW* addictions, with the game's rapid mainstream adoption further spurring my armchair opinion that *this is a lowest-common-denominator piece of crap.* "Have fun, losers," I thought to myself. "I'll be over here in *Eve Online*—this is a *real* MMO." And—not to disparage *Eve*, because it *is* a fantastic game—it's also a serious time-sink...kinda like *UO* was. Then the realization struck me: As a responsible, gainfully employed adult, I don't have quite *that* much free time anymore.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD (OF WARCRAFT)

Fast-forward to January 2007: After two years of friends telling me how easy and casual-friendly *WOW* was, and after seeing throngs of fans lining up outside software stores on *The Burning Crusade*'s launch day, I hesitantly agreed to give the game a second, honest shot. "Just play to level 20," my buddy told me. Level 20...fine.

● 27 days, 11 hours, 9 minutes, 53 seconds...and counting.

I was willing to put up with that, even if the game *was* just a modernized *EQ* clone.

As of this writing, that was just over one year ago. I now have a level 70 Tauren Hunter on the Deathwing PVP server, and I'm currently flirting with the idea of leveling my lowbie Warlock, or perhaps starting a new Shaman. I've systematically cleared just about every soloable *Burning Crusade* quest, I've clocked innumerable hours in the Battlegrounds, I've pieced together a passable set of PVP armor, and I'm preparing to finish my Karazhan attunement questline. Not to mention the fact that I'm now considered savvy enough to cohost 1UP.com's own *WOW* podcast, *Legendary Thread*. I think it's safe to say that I've changed my attitude toward this game.

So, I am unashamed to confess that the two straight years I spent jeering at *WOW* were fueled by complete closed-minded stubbornness. It's far from the *EQ* doppelganger I wrote it off as, it's accessible enough to jump into and out of without monopolizing days on end (which ironically leads to more binge sessions than I'd care to admit), and the reason 10 million people play it is because it's *awesome*. It's got the community, it gives me my PVP fix, and I don't have to *work* to earn my fun. But hey, you probably already knew that, right? ●

● My big, cuddly Tauren Hunter.

● The Caverns of Time: Almost to Karazhan.

I THINK IT'S SAFE TO SAY THAT I'VE CHANGED MY ATTITUDE TOWARD *WORLD OF WARCRAFT.*

LINE OF ATTACK

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

COLUMN

Bruce Geryk

Bruce Geryk—brainy brain surgeon by day—is *GFW*'s resident expert on anything involving a hex grid.

In the old days, "monster game" was a term used to describe a board game so large it threatened to overwhelm the limits of both floor space and free time. But with the proliferation of computer war games with giant virtual maps and thousands of units, the term has dropped into disfavor. Any one of John Tiller's HPS Simulations games dwarf the largest cardboard monster ever produced.

Decision Games' *War in Europe* is probably the best-known of the old monster games of the 1970s, and a PC version's been available for over 10 years now. The old version is a DOS game with no A.I. (in other words, PBEM or hotseat only). *Computer War in Europe II* is now in its late beta stages; the whole thing's updated for Windows, and while it still looks like it's from 1995, it's a significant step up from its predecessor.

●From the Eastern Front...

●...to North Africa.

It also has no A.I.

Last month in *GFW* #16, I talked about *Empires in Arms* and how its poor interface and A.I. seriously reduced the value of the game for me. *Computer War in Europe II*'s complete lack of A.I. makes the aforementioned Marshall Ellis product seem that much more impressive. However, I'm also much more willing to forgive *Computer War in Europe II* for that transgression because it's a different kind of game. At the same time, it's the kind of factor-counting game

that Strategic Studies Group has done great job writing A.I. for. So what gives? I'll have more for you next month. You can get more information about the *Computer War in Europe* games at www.decisiongames.com, where you can also download a demo.

Finally, last summer (*GFW* #10, pg. 86) I reported that Mark H. Walker's *Heroes of Stalingrad* was slated for a December/January release. The latest news: Walker hopes to release it at the Origins convention this June. ●

FALLING PIECES

The best in casual games

COLUMN

Robert Coffey

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

Who among us doesn't need a pat on the back once in a while—the occasional *attaboy* that lets us know that, while everyone else in the world is a soulless lemming scurrying eagerly to the cliffs of oblivion, *dammit, you're special*?

That's why games that reinforce our (alleged) superiority and dominance are so popular...and why games are so rarely titled *After You Die They Will Build Luxury Condos on Your Forgotten Grave*. What better way to feel a

fleeting bit of goodness than with a game that slavishly declares you "Master"?

Happily, *Master of Defense* ($20 at www.bigfishgames.com) is good for other reasons. Gameplay is totally defensive: It's up to you to defend your cowardly citizenry from hordes of rampaging monsters. Your only tools are an assortment of protective towers, all of which are upgradable multiple times. An RPG-style experience system lets you purchase special abilities and permanent upgrades, the better to repel multiple waves of monsters in each level. The key to success is exploiting chokepoints and mixing up your defensive attacks so that your little kingdom is a killing ground for any type of monster. While this game holds obvious appeal for real-time strategy fans that really get into turtling and building up their bases, any gamer should enjoy it. The only real knock against it is that it's a tad on the short side.

●**Maximizing tower coverage along multiple paths and checkpoints is the key to victory in** *Master of Defense.*

If you're looking for something you can play over and over again, I suggest checking out the free online version of *Mastermind* at www.irt.org/games/js/mind/. This colored-peg logic game is one of the all-time classics of its kind, and it's presented here with no bells or whistles in all its stripped-down, brain-busting beauty. Other online *Mastermind* versions exist, but this one offers much more control over game parameters. ●

WHAT BETTER WAY TO FEEL A FLEETING BIT OF GOODNESS THAN WITH A GAME THAT SLAVISHLY DECLARES YOU "MASTER"?

▽UPDATES

Our two cents on the latest mods and patches

• So, where are the midget druids?

Liverpool

HELLGATE: LONDON—
THE STONEHENGE CHRONICLES
Grinding for gumballs

• Whose woods these are I think I know.

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Flagship Studios** GENRE: **Action-RPG** AVAILABILITY: **Free Download** ESRB RATING: **Mature** MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: **1.8GHz CPU (2.4GHz in Windows Vista), 1GB RAM (2GB in Windows Vista), 6GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard,** *Hellgate: London* MULTIPLAYER: **Massive-scale** VERSION REVIEWED: **Downloadable Patch**

PATCH REVIEW

➕ **Hey,** it's new content for *Hellgate: London*! It's only available to subscribers, who have to wonder why they're paying extra now that everyone gets hardcore mode and extra character slots. In exchange for their monthly fee, subs can now step through a gate from the Templar Base (a subway station, natch) to Stonehenge. Finally—a new hub that doesn't look like all the others! It's built from floating chunks of land where the monument made famous by Spinal Tap used to stand. It's wide-open, sunny...and a little eerie.

This change of scenery is the sort of thing *Hellgate* should have provided all along. Unfortunately, Stonehenge is little more than a place to sell your junk. Beyond it lie two instances of the same dark, open forest; one instance is built for high-level grouping and the other is an antechamber for sub-boss lairs, which hold the keys to the new überboss lair. Naturally, you'll want to head directly into these lairs to take a peek.

Not so fast, you—first you've got some grinding to do. Go back and play through the same old areas to kill rare creatures or bosses

until they drop colored gumballs. Five of the same color get you into the appropriate sub-boss lair, at which point you'll discover that Flagship hasn't really built any new locations. Remember these terrain sets: Red Catacombs? Twisty Bio-Cave? Black Lava Plain? It's like *Hellgate*'s Greatest Hits, which is to say it's like replaying *Hellgate*, which is what you've already been doing for a while. Kill all four sub-bosses and you'll get the keys to the über-boss's lair, which is nothing if not vertical. At the end of it all, you fight a nondescript fellow named Moloch, who may drop some nice loot to help you grind him again.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE
If you're not a subscriber, you might discover a treat in your inventory. Evokers and Guardians have their skill trees jiggered a bit, so they get a one-off respec token...and everyone else gets to use the same skills they've been using. The chat is still clunky. The party system is still messy, but it's better in that it's actually in the game now. The character advancement is still slow and mostly stagnant. The skill point achievements still do absolutely nothing. Faction reputation still does absolutely nothing. The environments are still mind-numbingly

• Enjoy this chasm, which is one of the few new areas you'll see.

repetitive, even when they make an appearance in the supposedly new levels. The interface for improving your weapons is still a huge pain in the ass, especially now that you have to grind for "Nanoshards," a new requirement for upgrading items. This was presumably introduced as a stopgap for rampant gold inflation. Along with grinding for essences, Nanoshards constitute the game's economic stimulus package. But you know what *Hellgate* really needs? A *fun* stimulus package. ● **Tom Chick**

VERDICT
✚ **You might be the lucky recipient of your own respec token!**

✖ **New content is mostly like the old content.**

D-
BAD

⊞ Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

○○○ IT'S LIKE *HELLGATE*'S GREATEST HITS.
○○ WHICH IS TO SAY IT'S LIKE REPLAY-
○ ING *HELLGATE*. WHICH IS WHAT YOU'VE
ALREADY BEEN DOING FOR A WHILE.

SOUND OFF

Things you might hear on the GFW Radio podcast

ROUND TABLE

GFW RADIO
Games for Windows
THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE

THE CREW
Got podcast comments? Hit the *GFW* message boards at boards.1UP.com, or send us feedback via e-mail at gfwletters@ziffdavis.com.

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Editor-in-chief

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Ryan Scott
Managing Editor

Shawn Elliott
Executive Editor

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 one of this month's articles.

THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: If a genie could make any three of your game-related wishes come true, what would you wish for?

• Who wouldn't want a new *Space Quest*?

SEAN: Wait, these aren't ironic wishes, are they? Like, if I asked for a mint-condition, first-run, signed copy of Richard Garriott's *Akalabeth*, it wouldn't appear in my lungs and choke me to death, right? I'll assume this genie isn't that clever, so the first thing I'd wish for is complete 100 percent PC stability. No matter how many machines I've built over however many years, my biggest frustration is when a game has some horrific, game-crashing bug that stems from some quirk in my RAM timing or videocard brand or driver combination or IRQ settings. Well, maybe not that last one so much anymore. But I know people who quit PC gaming and cite this as the only reason. Can't really argue.

RYAN: No doubt many people will roll their eyes and think to themselves, "There goes that crazy Ryan again!" but the first thing I'd wish for is a return to absolute dominance for the adventure-game genre. Starting with *Space Quest 7*. Is that really too much to ask for?

JEFF: I guess I'll have to keep saying this forever until someone pays attention to me: I wish Blizzard would release *WarCraft Adventures*. I don't even care if it looks old and the game actually sucks. I want it anyway. I wish Bungie would come back to the PC—or Mac—and make an

FPS as great as the *Marathon* series. And I wish LucasArts would remember what it is they used to do best, forget about *Star Wars*, and give us another *Monkey Island* or *Day of the Tentacle* or *Grim Fandango*. Do we only get three wishes? Because I have like 20 more. At least.

SEAN: Only three. You probably should have wished for more wishes. And I think it goes without saying that Ryan wasted his first one. So good luck to you. Here's my second, speaking of Blizzard: I wish they'd stop doing 25-man raids in *World of WarCraft*...and that in *Wrath of the Lich King*, even the highest of the high-end content is designed for 10 people, max. Or they'd at least find a way to make it so 25-man raiding isn't such a freakin' cumbersome, fragile, stressful process. Or maybe just restrict them to one-off Onyxia- or Magtheridon-style encounters.

RYAN: Hey, everybody knows you can't wish for more wishes—that's against the rules. I second the idea of a 10-man ceiling for *WOW* raid content. All the elitist raiders out there are probably going to turn their noses up at the suggestion, but endgame content needs to be accessible to more than 5 percent of the game's player base.

SHAWN: One: Mandatory cooperative modes in first-person-shooter campaigns. Two: For

Ryan, Sean, and Jeff to shut up about *World of WarCraft* already. I should let you guys respond to that before I waste my third wish.

SEAN: My third wish is that Shawn realizes how deep, immersive, and richly meaty the *WarCraft* lore is...so much so that he starts a *WOW*-themed LARPing society and goes dressed as Ther'adal Whisperstride, a Blood Elf Mage who went mad and locked himself in a tower when his one true love—Stormcow Cloventoe, a blind Tauren Shamaness who sang softly to the wind as she carried buckets of water from the well to her home village—turned everyone she loved into mindless, undead Scourge because she made her famous Plainstrider Festival Stew out of Plague-tainted well water, unaware that the water was tainted so. Because she is blind, you see. Slash cry. Oh, and I get a fourth wish.

RYAN: I think you just used up the last of the magic genie dust, weirdo.

SHAWN: I wish our human-resources department would pick up the phone. •

Age of Conan: Hyborian

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The mighty barbarian has finally seized the throne as king of Aquilonia, but Conan's rule is on the brink of chaos, spiraling towards the doom of ancient evils. In this twisted fantasy world, dark magic and brutal combat lurk around every corner, and each man and woman must carve their own unique destiny under Conan's reign.

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Get Ready to Ride—My Horse

Atari's feature-packed equestrian sim has something for everyone

Whether you're into family-oriented games or all things equestrian, look no further than *My Horse and Me*. Developed by Woedend Games, Atari is bringing the first official Federation Equestrian International (FEI) title to store shelves in early February.

My Horse and Me features an awesome variety of game modes that allow players to participate in competitions around the world and features several locales from rustic stables to famous equestrian tournament locations. Fun mini-games offer gameplay situations surrounding horse care with extensive customization options including dialogues, time management, tutorials, and more.

Although there are not specific breeds you can choose from, the type of horse represented in *My Horse and Me* closely resembles a Warmblood sport horse. Players choose one horse to bond with and will give it a name. Players decide on color and mane style as well as saddle type. Different equipment becomes available throughout the title but the color of the horse can be changed at any time.

The title also boasts an impressive amount of unlockables—there are so many combinations that only the most determined and skilled rider will be able to unlock them all. The realistic features like saddle types, rider gear, and horse grooming accessories makes *My Horse and Me* the most advanced equestrian game to hit store shelves.

Additionally, owners will have the ability to manage every aspect of their horse's care, grooming, and stable management. Each feature set plays an important part in your horse's overall ability to achieve. For example, proper grooming is just as important as performing well in tournaments if you want to get ahead.

The PC version of *My Horse and Me* will feature seven mini-games which can be played at any time. After Challenges or
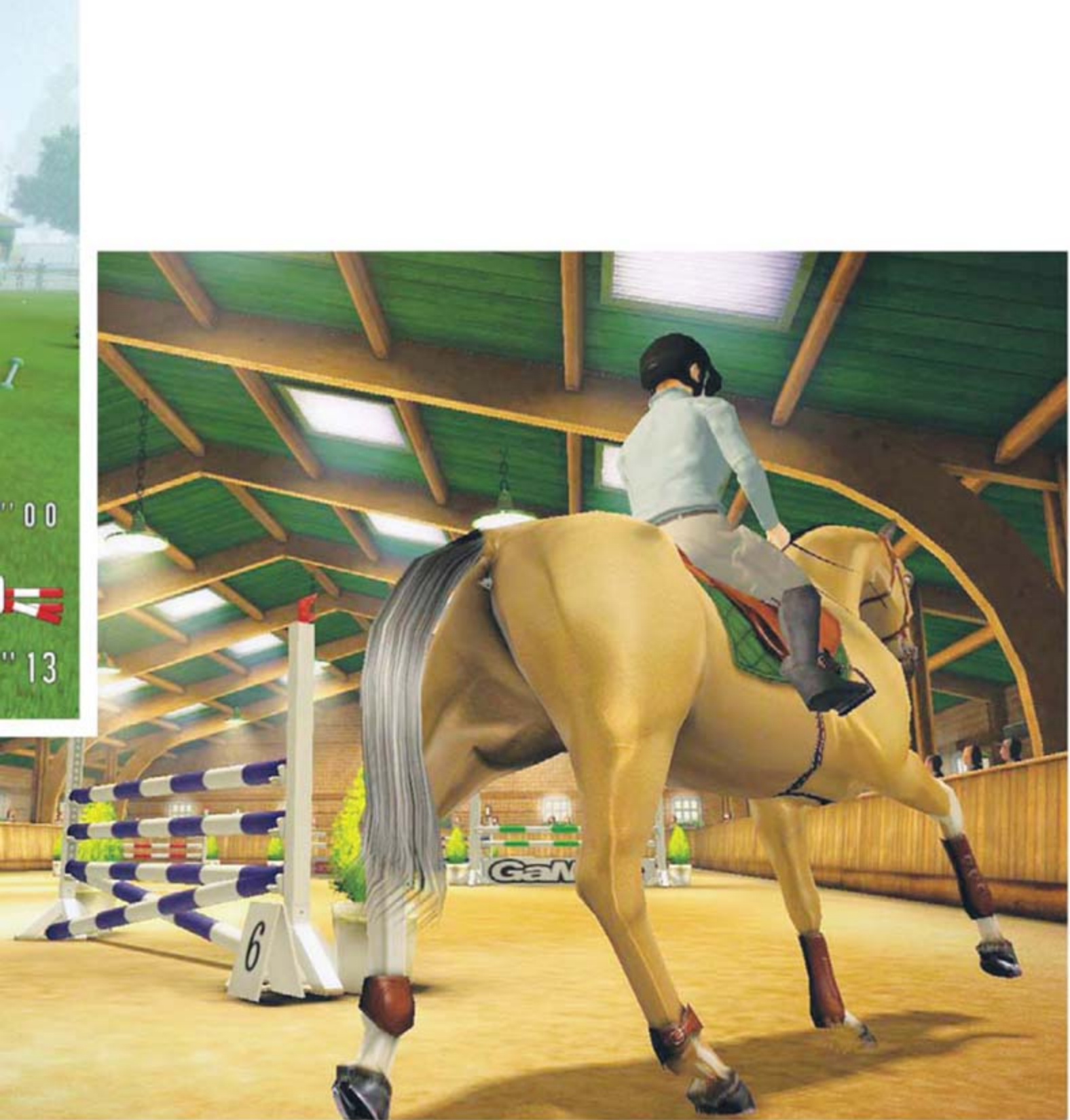
and Me Gallops to the PC

Competitions are completed, in order to better train yourself and your horse, players will have a playback option that will include (if selected) commentary from a trainer. Pointers on how to best ride each course are included in the dialogue and can be turned on or off to the player's preference. A handy screenshot option is also available to capture the amazing moments and are shareable.

The Windows version of *My Horse and Me* offers a fun multiplayer mode, in which you'll ride against each other to see who can achieve the best overall score. At this time online play is not featured for this title.

My Horse and Me, available in early February, is priced at $19.99 for the PC.

Giddyup!

Learn more at: www.gamesforwindows.com/en-US/Games/Pages/ myhorseandme.aspx

EVERYONE

E

CONTENT RATED BY
ESRB

THE NOTEBOOK GA

What to look for (and run from) in a gaming laptop

FEATURE

If you're reading this magazine, your primary gaming PC probably isn't a notebook computer—but today's laptops are more potent than you might think. Too many gamers equate PC gaming with excessive power—and while liquid-cooled, quad-core, resolution-maxed *Crysis* sure is keen, there's more to computer gaming than just high technology. The PC is a haven for hundreds—even thousands—of fun indie and casual games that'll run great on laptop systems. PC gaming's back catalog spans decades—and just because a game's old, it doesn't mean it's not *good*. *GFW* hooked up with ExtremeTech.com to tell you what to look for—and what to avoid—when you're in the market for a good notebook for PC gaming on the go. ● *GFW* Staff

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Let this handy checklist aid your notebook-shopping endeavors

✓ **Not too heavy, not too light.** Light is great, but light is more expensive...and likely has a smaller screen...or less storage space...or a less powerful graphics card. All of which is fine for spreadsheets and e-mail, but it could cost you gaming power. Think about where you plan to use your machine most.

✓ **Long warranties.** Most notebooks come with one-year warranties, and three- to five-year options are normally available at an added cost. Unlike desktop computers, laptop parts often can't be swapped out if something fails, so this may actually be a wise investment.

✓ **Starting power.** Get the fastest and most powerful CPU and graphics card you can afford right off the bat. Don't think "Eh, I can always upgrade." Again, it often isn't even possible. (It *is* easy to add RAM, however.)

✓ **Features and extras.** Be wary: Sometimes you end up paying for features you can't exclude, such as built-in webcams (which may even end up restricting where you can carry the laptop). And do you really need a DVD burner on road trips?

When you decide to jump from a desktop computer to a laptop for your gaming pleasure, you have to be willing to make compromises. Some you can avoid or work around—some you can't.

THE SACRIFICES
The first thing you give up in laptop gaming is lots of money. Notebooks are more expensive per component than desktop computers; a typical laptop runs anywhere from hundreds to thousands of dollars more than a comparable desktop. That's because small and portable ain't cheap, as factors ranging from more expensive manufacturing processes to more precise cooling methods add up. Every laptop component needs to be hardwired to the main board or attached via expansion cards, often with proprietary interfaces. And propriety generally means "expensive," too.

The second sacrifice you make is upgradeability. PC gamers tend to be extreme tinkerers—and laptops are basically antitinkering devices. Sure, you can add external stuff through USB and cards and things like that—but laptops aren't designed for users to swap out the CPU or the motherboard or the graphics subsystem. Crack open the case and you'll likely void the laptop's warranty, too. Hardcore tinkerers should stick with desktop PCs.

Sacrifice three: Mobile CPUs and GPUs often aren't as robust and powerful as their desktop cousins. In some cases, laptop companies require the use of *their* drivers and not widely available and distributed reference drivers; these special drivers aren't updated nearly as often as Nvidia or ATI releases new versions of their own. So be wary when buying the latest games: You may not be able to play them optimally (or play them at all) until your notebook manufacturer gets around to updating its video drivers.

If you stick with the laptop keyboard and touchpad, you sacrifice the ability to play first-person shooters, making games such as *Crysis*, *Call of Duty 4*, or *BioShock* impossible to control with any precision. Real-time strategy games such as *Command & Conquer 3* or *Supreme Commander* fare better with a touchpad, but are still hardly ideal. Top-down role-playing games and turn-based strategy games (both of which are becoming rarer and rarer these days) are easily the most laptop-control-friendly games. You can play *The Witcher* and *Neverwinter Nights* without much hassle since these games have touchpad-friendly click-to-move control schemes. Casual games, city builders, and *Sims*-style games are generally quite playable with a laptop's native input devices. Also: Watch out for laptops that don't have a dedicated numeric keypad (on some notebook PCs, a block of keys in the center pulls double duty). Some potentially perfect on-the-go games such as *Sid Meier's Pirates!* suddenly become incredibly awkward.

GAMING LAPTOPS VS. NONGAMING LAPTOPS
When you buy a laptop with gaming in mind, you're often making trade-offs you wouldn't likely be making if you purchased a laptop solely for e-mail, Internet browsing, or office applications. For example: Visit Alienware (www.alienware.com) or Falcon Northwest (www.falcon-nw.com) and you'll notice their gaming laptops are *huge*. True desktop replacements—with 17-inch LCDs and keyboards with touchpads—weigh in at more than 12 pounds. They tend to run hot, too, meaning odds are you won't actually *want* that monster on your lap (and will likely opt instead to use it on a table).

Another sad fact is that when you load up a laptop with a dual-core CPU, two GPUs in SLI or CrossFire, and 2GB of memory, you suddenly have an insatiable battery eater. Recent gaming laptops we tested yielded from 18 minutes to 35 minutes of heavy use before they simply had to go to sleep—you'll probably want to keep yours tethered to an outlet. These major notebooks aren't meant for flying in coach: You'll never fit one on the tray, and even if you do, you probably won't get through a game or a movie before the notebook dozes off.

This sort of laptop is, however, ideal for that last bastion of gaming geekery: the LAN party. All notebooks these days have 10/100/1000 RJ45 Ethernet, and most also have Wi-Fi support. >

MER'S HANDBOOK

The laptop's smallish nature also makes it perfect for exotic setups, ideal for building into, say, a racing-game rig with car seats and multiple monitors. A nice, compact computer would be easier to stash and quieter, and it keeping it cool would require less effort.

IDEAL ADD-ONS AND ENHANCEMENTS

Gaming laptops have monitors, touchpads, displays, and sound, but most of these components are pretty basic. Add-ons can help enhance the audio, visuals, and feel.

Laptops have USB ports and PCMCIA/CardBus slots, so if your keyboard's too small or your touchpad's too obnoxious, you can plug in a keyboard or mouse. Trackballs make ideal traveling companions since you don't need a flat space to operate one—just rest it on your couch at your side. (It's really all you need for a game like *World of WarCraft*.) Laptops with Bluetooth can use compliant peripherals, too. An Xbox 360 controller can also come in handy.

If the display isn't to your liking, you can add a bigger one. Laptops have VGA, DVI, or even HDMI ports to export video to larger displays. For sound, you can plug in a pair of headphones or use compact laptop audio systems. Logitech's AudioHub, for example, is a compact USB speaker system with terrific sound.

GAMES THAT WON'T TAX YOUR LAPTOP

You shouldn't be stuck playing *Spider Solitaire* just because you can't afford a monster notebook. These games work well on a wide range of laptop machines—and don't really require precision control.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT
WOW will run on even middle-of-the-road laptops. All you need is access to the Internet. And may we suggest a trackball?

GALACTIC CIVILIZATIONS II: DARK AVATAR
Turn-based strategy works great on the go. Plus, Stardock's copy-protection policy means you can still play even if you forget to bring your CD.

SAM & MAX: SEASON ONE
Any old point-and-click adventure will do, but we keep coming back to Telltale's serial. Requirements are low, and the touchpad works just fine.

GAMETAP
It's got hundreds of older (read: should run fine) games we once paid full price for. The big caveat (and maybe deal-breaker): Internet connection required.

FREEWARE EVERYWHERE!
PC gaming is a haven for homebrew projects. Keep a folder on your notebook's hard drive loaded with what you find at freegames.1UP.com.

THE PORTABLE PARADOX

Tweakers won't have access to the insides—that's only for the manufacturer unless you want to void the warranty—and you might need to invest in a number of extras to make certain games tolerable. You'll lose some power compared to that provided by the latest cutting-edge desktop components. You'll be a hit at LAN parties and have access to your games on the road—though not for long if you don't have access to an outlet. Is portability worth these trade-offs? That's up to you. ●**Joel Durham Jr.**

TRAVELING COMPANIONS

Whether you're looking for a laptop to handle *Peggle* or a powerful desktop replacement, these three recently released notebooks might fit the bill.

Asus G1S
If breaking the bank doesn't sound pleasant, Asus's G1S offers a ton of bang for the buck. It's also a mere seven pounds, making it a lot more portable than its potent rivals. Neat freaks might flip out, however, when they start up the system for the first time: Our test notebook came absolutely loaded with unnecessary software that clogged the system tray.

Alienware Area-51 m9750
Want pure power? Weighing in at 13 pounds, an Alienware Area-51 m9750 ($4,008 as specced below) isn't exactly pleasant to carry—but it's a powerhouse that can play games like *Team Fortress 2* and *Supreme Commander* at good detail levels and at the notebook's native 1920x1200 resolution. Less expensive versions start at $1,499.

Dell XPS M1730 World of WarCraft Edition
If *WOW's* your poison, this is the laptop for you. Choose which faction will decorate your case (both Horde and Alliance insignias are available); it also comes with a beta key card that gets you into the next *WOW* beta test, collectors' editions of both *Burning Crusade* and the base game, and a ticket for a FigurePrint custom statue of your character.

	Asus G1S	Alienware Area-51 m9750	Dell XPS M1730 World of WarCraft Edition
CPU	2.2GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7500	2.3GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T7600	2.4GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T8300
Memory	2GB	2GB	2GB
Hard Drive	140GB (dual-partition), SATA	2x200GB, RAID 0	160GB
Graphics	GeForce 8600M GT	2xGeForce 8700M GT (SLI)	2xGeForce 8700M GT (SLI)
Display	15.4-inch widescreen	17-inch widescreen	17-inch widescreen
Native resolution	1680x1050	1920x1200	1920x1200
Audio	RealTek HD	7.1 channel	5.1 channel
I/O Ports	FireWire, 4x USB 2.0, HDMI, eSATA, VGA	FireWire, 4x USB 2.0, VGA, DVI, S-Video	FireWire, 4x USB 2.0, HDMI, DVI, VGA, S-Video
Price	$1,599	$4,008	$4,349

GATEWAY P-171XL FX

Gateway takes on laptop gaming

REVIEW

Gaming laptops need to go on a diet. Increasingly, high-end gaming laptops have become the sumo wrestlers of the notebook world. We've seen some that weigh over 15 pounds—not counting the power brick. Of course, pricier units now include RAID arrays, SLI graphics, and even 19-inch screens—but at some point, you might as well carry around a small PC and a separate monitor.

TEN POUNDS

Now Gateway brings a gaming laptop to the table that weighs under 10 pounds—and still manages to contain a RAID 0 hard drive array, 17-inch 1920x1200 display, 2.8GHz Intel Core 2 Duo X7900, 3GB of RAM, Nvidia GeForce Go 8800 GTS, and HD-DVD drive. It all comes in an attractive black package with orange accents, a full-size keyboard (including numeric keypad), and nifty, glowing, touch-sensitive transport controls.

The keyboard is one of the best we've used on a laptop—it feels crisp and offers good tactile feedback, though it's a bit bulky and some keys have overloaded functionality; using Print Screen, for example, requires pressing the Function key.

The P-171XL FX we tested (less expensive—and less loaded—versions are available) arrived with Windows Vista Ultimate installed—however, we quickly found out that DirectX 10 support had been disabled (most likely in the Nvidia driver), as all the DX10 options in *Company of Heroes* and

World in Conflict were grayed out. *Crysis* simply didn't run in DX10 mode. Its BIOS allows you to clock it up to 3GHz, but the games we used in tests were more GPU- than CPU-bound. *Supreme Commander* might be one exception—but a 200MHz performance gain at these levels won't buy you much in most of today's games.

In our game benchmarks, the framerate scores were low—but in real gaming situations, we found the system performed better than the scores would have led us to believe. We fired up the unit with *Supreme Commander* and *Crysis* and were generally happy with performance—though in the case of *Crysis*, you do *not* want to run at 1920x1200. The display supports 1280x800 and 1440x900, but alas, it doesn't support 1680x1050.

Our MobileMark 2007 benchmarks revealed a battery life under office workloads of 112 minutes—so we anticipate most games will suck

the battery dry in less than an hour since the system fans will be cranking and the GPU will be doing lots of work. DVDs and HD-DVD movies look great on the built-in 17-inch display and on larger screens, though battery life could pose a problem for movies longer than 102 minutes (the laptop's score in MobileMark 2007's DVD test).

REASONABLE COMPROMISE

You could spend well over $4,000 for a very high-end gaming laptop (like Dell's XPS M1710 *World of WarCraft* Edition)—but most gamers can't throw around that much cash no matter how dedicated they might be. The Gateway P-171XL FX offers a reasonable compromise: Gaming performance is pretty darned good, though you'll have to dial down the eye candy (including DirectX 10 with the current drivers) in some of the most demanding titles. However, it's a gorgeous package with a great display, excellent keyboard, and performance that's good enough. ● **Loyd Case**

	Gateway P-171XL FX
CPU	2.8GHz Core 2 Duo X7900
Memory	3GB
Hard Drive	2x200GB, RAID 0
Graphics	GeForce Go 8800 GTS
Display	17" widescreen
Native resolution	1920x1200
Audio	2-channel
I/O Ports	FireWire, 3x USB 2.0, HDMI, VGA, eSATA
Price	$2,999

BY THE NUMBERS

■ *Crysis*, High detail, DX9, 1920x1200
■ *World in Conflict*, DX9, 1920x1200
■ *UT3* bot match, DX9, 1920x1200

GATEWAY P-171XL FX
3DMARK SCORE: **8,032**

Crysis: 13
World in Conflict: 21
UT3: 43

FRAMES PER SECOND   0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70
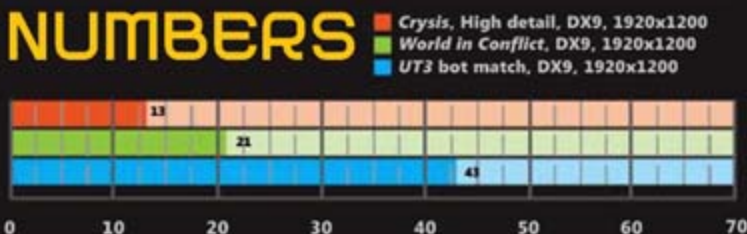
NOTE: 3DMARK06 SCORE MEASURED AT DEFAULT SETTING

VERDICT

✚ **Attractive; lightweight; good performance; great keyboard; lots of amenities.**

✖ **Don't expect to get all your games' eye candy.**

B+ GOOD

Games for Windows

RADEON HD 3870 X2

It's like two cards in one!

● **The Radeon HD 3870 X2 is just what it sounds like—two Radeon HD 3870 cards in one.**

Radeon HD 3870. ATI claims this card uses less power than two HD 3870 cards despite higher clock speed and a PCIe bridge chip that consumes a good 10W to 13W—our own power tests didn't quite bear this out, but the power draw is still quite reasonable.

REVIEW

We've seen this method of accelerating "single-card" graphics performance before—you take two midrange graphics chips and stuff them together into one double-wide card that fits into a single slot. AMD's new Radeon HD 3870 X2 takes the excellent RV670 chip (used in the Radeon HD 3850 and 3870) and does just that. The card is good—but we can't recommend it without reservation.

NEW MATH

The 3870 X2 comes in a variety of sizes (512MB, 1GB, 2GB) from different vendors; we tested the 1GB version, the first one out of the gate. And while AMD's marketing materials push this as a 1GB graphics card, it's really two 512MB cards—the difference is important. In a CrossFire setup, each GPU has its own bank of memory and most of the graphics data (textures, vertex buffers, and so on) must be replicated in each card's memory—so for most practical purposes, this is really like having a 512MB card (just as all dual-GPU setups don't *really* give you much more in the way of usable graphics RAM).

Physically, the card is substantial. It's 10.5 inches long, the same length as GeForce 8800 GTX and Ultra cards, with a heavy dual-slot cooler that runs the length of the entire board. The heat sink is a mixture of copper and aluminum, primarily to save weight. The card has two power plugs—one six-pin and one eight-pin—but if you don't plan on overclocking the card, you only need to use the single six-pin connection.

Fortunately, despite its large size and dual GPUs (clocked higher than the HD 3870 model), the X2 is one of the quietest graphics cards in the $400-plus segment. You'll hardly notice a difference in noise between this card and the already easy-on-the-ears

PERFORMANCE

In the synthetic 3DMark06 benchmarks, it's clear ATI has done a great job optimizing the X2 drivers for multi-GPU scaling, and the numbers pay off big (see "By the Numbers" below). 3DMark performance is great even at high resolutions with antialiasing (AA) and anisotropic filtering (AF) enabled. But 3DMark is just a synthetic test and no substitute for real game benchmarks.

In our *Unreal Tournament 3* (a DirectX 9 showcase) tests, the X2 performed roughly the same as two 3870 cards in CrossFire. Similarly priced single cards from Nvidia, like the GeForce 8800 GTX, run the game faster at lower resolutions but slower once you jack up the resolution. *Crysis* tests prove

the most surprising—in DirectX 9 mode, Nvidia goes home with all the marbles. In fact, the X2 (and single-card CrossFire configurations) actually perform a little *worse* than a single Radeon HD 3870, especially at high resolution with AA and AF enabled. Turn *Crysis* to DirectX 10 and it's another story entirely—suddenly, the 3870 X2 runs the game better than any other card on the market. This performance shows that the 3870 X2 has a ton of potential once ATI gets their drivers in order.

NOT QUITE TWICE AS NICE

The Radeon HD 3870 X2 is ATI's answer to the high-end graphics card market—and at $449 (the manufacturer's estimated cost), it's one of the better single high-end graphics cards you can buy. Nvidia's new G92-based 512MB GeForce 8800 GTS card is about on par, overall, with the 3870 X2—but the Nvidia card sells for about $379. The GeForce 8800 GTX, which is usually about $469, is a little faster in some cases and a little slower in others.

If this were the end of the story for the 3870 X2, we'd simply say you should buy a GeForce 8800 GTS (the new G92-based card with 512MB) and be done with it—but it's not that simple. If ATI really gets its driver act in gear, improving performance in key games and dramatically improving multi-GPU scaling over a single 3870 X2 card, this could be a really killer product. Or, if the driver improvements don't happen, it might only solidify Nvidia's position as the best multi-GPU provider. ● **Jason Cross**

VERDICT

B− GOOD

➕ **Very quiet for a high-end card; good performance-to-dollar ratio.**

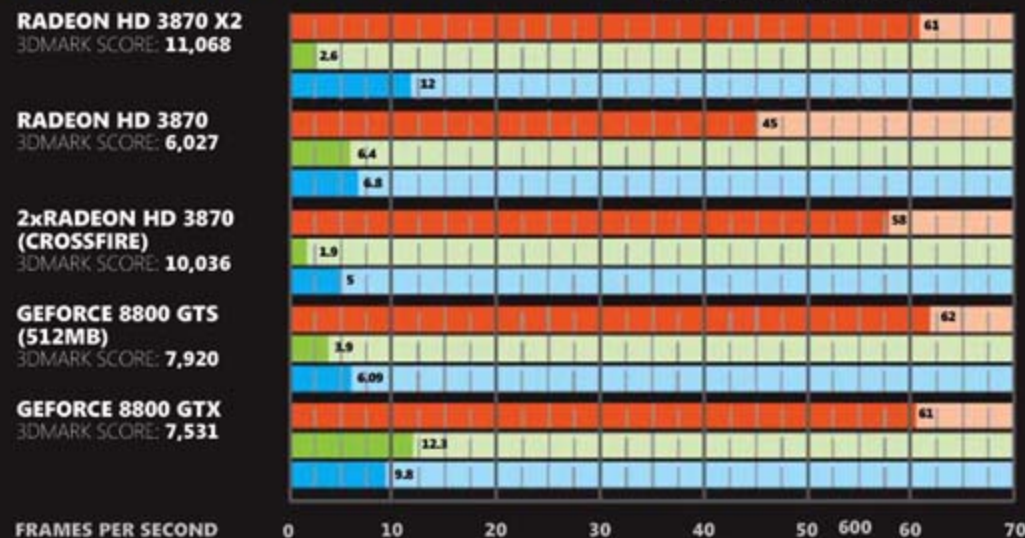➖ **Too long to fit in smaller cases; doesn't scale as well as it should.**

Games for Windows

BY THE NUMBERS

	Unreal Tournament 3, DX9, 1920x1200	Crysis, DX9, 1920x1200 4xAA	Crysis, DX10, 1920x1200 4xAA
RADEON HD 3870 X2 3DMARK SCORE: **11,068**	61	2.6	12
RADEON HD 3870 3DMARK SCORE: **6,027**	45	6.4	6.8
2xRADEON HD 3870 (CROSSFIRE) 3DMARK SCORE: **10,036**	58	1.9	5
GEFORCE 8800 GTS (512MB) 3DMARK SCORE: **7,920**	62	1.9	6.09
GEFORCE 8800 GTX 3DMARK SCORE: **7,531**	61	12.3	9.8

FRAMES PER SECOND   0   10   20   30   40   50   600   60   70

NOTE: 3DMARK06 SCORES MEASURED AT 1920X1200 4XAA 8XAF SETTING

DELL ULTRASHARP 3008WFP-HC

Multifunction monitor is a jack-of-all-trades

PRODUCT: **UltraSharp 3008WFP-HC** MANUFACTURER: **Dell** PRICE: **$1,999** URL: **www.dell.com**

REVIEW

As each successive generation of 30-inch displays comes out, you'd expect new technology and lower prices. So far, you'd be half-right; we're getting new technology—but the prices are creeping *up*.

These days, all 30-inch desktop displays support 2560x1600 resolution. Most of them, with the exception of the recently released Gateway XHD3000, use the PC's graphics card for all video processing. That means you can't really connect devices like game consoles and DVD players to these monitors...until now.

Dell's UltraSharp 3008WFP-HC is a 30-inch display with a boatload of connections, including a shiny new DisplayPort connector (an up-and-coming connection type with higher bandwidth than DVI). An attractive chassis with a brushed metal bezel houses the display. Like other premium Dell displays, the monitor offers both USB ports and a 9-in-2 card reader, which works with high-capacity compact Flash drives as well as the newer generation of SDHC secure digital cards. And like most such displays, the connectors are mounted on the bottom—they're annoying to access, but we're willing to forgive since the 3008WFP-HC has the most complete set of connections of any display on the market.

handles 1280x800 and 1920x1200 just fine, but for some games (*Crysis* comes to mind), we prefer this middle resolution. (Dell says they're looking at the issue—a firmware update could theoretically add the missing resolution to existing models.)

If you watch DVD or HD video on your PC, the Dell looks great—you'll get good image quality, and the display handles scaling fairly well. However, if you pipe in a consumer electronics source—say, a DVD player—the results are less than optimal. If you're a photographer or have other uses for a wide color gamut, then the Dell's price may be well worth it. If you're mostly looking for high-resolution gaming or a consumer-oriented multifunction display, there are better choices. **● Loyd Case**

CONTRAST RATIO AND UNIFORMITY

When used as a PC display, the Dell is bright and offers excellent image quality once you spend a few minutes fiddling with calibration. We noticed some smearing in fast action sequences in games, though for the most part, the Dell proved a capable gaming display—except for one quirk. The 3008WFP-HC doesn't support 1680x1050. It

VERDICT

B- GOOD

➕ Wide color gamut; lots of inputs, including DisplayPort.

➖ Expensive; not ideal for standard-def video; visible smearing in fast games.

Games for Windows

COMPARE AND CONTRAST		Gateway XHD3000	Dell Ultrasharp 3008WFP-HC
	Display size	30 inches	30 inches
	Native resolution	2560x1600	2560x1600
	Viewing angle (typical)	178 degrees	178 degrees
	Video connectors	Analog VGA, 2xDVI (single and dual-link), HDMI, S-Video, composite, component, 6x USB 2.0	Analog VGA, 2xDVI-D (with HDCP), HDMI, DisplayPort, S-Video, composite, component
	Response time (rated)	6ms	8ms
	Luminance (max rated)	400 cd/m²	370 cd/m²
	Average contrast ratio (measured)	927:1	748:1
	Dark uniformity (measured)	69.6 percent	76.1 percent
	Brightness uniformity (measured)	77.6 percent	85.1 percent
	Price	$1,699	$1,999

⚠ GREENSPEAK
Because we have the extra page

GIRL TALK
One enlightened man explains the gender divide
COLUMN

⚠ **Jeff Green**

Jeff Green is still traumatized from being kicked in the groin by Susan Rufus at age 14. Send ointment to jeff_green@ziffdavis.com.

⚠ **As something of** a cultural anthropologist, I have noticed, over my decades of study, that there are many differences between males and females. Just recently, in fact, while perusing one of my favorite periodicals at my local adult entertainment emporium, I discovered a number of astonishing differences, mostly on page 46, that, quite frankly, I was heretofore totally unaware of. That page is now taped to my ceiling for further study. In any event, it is important that scientists and academics continue to study gender issues, because it is only by learning what "makes us tick," as I like to say, that both men and women can learn to "understand one another" so that our "society" will be a better "place" to "live."

Let me start again.

On the day that I am typing this, my daughter is on her last day of being 13 years old. Thank god. I don't know if all newly minted teenaged girls are as moody and high-maintenance as mine, but if so, I now understand much better why I did not have my first date until I was almost out of high school. It was not, in fact, because I was a pigeon-chested geek with red hair, pimples, glasses, and braces as I always thought. Well, at least, that wasn't the only reason. It was also because teenage girls are just really scary creatures.

My own is very different from the one I started out with 14 years ago. Take gaming, for example. She and I have a long history of playing PC and console games together, going way back to when she was still a toddler. While the wife was busy working on such useless nonsense as language and mobility, I was embarked on a much more important mission: teaching her the value of playing games over facing life's crucial tasks—like, say, learning to walk.

My early efforts were a grand success. Before she could deal with the mouse and keyboard herself, she would sit on my lap and watch as I trundled along on my endless *EverQuest* corpse runs. Later, once she could play on her own, she got hooked on Humongous Entertainment's gloriously great kid-oriented adventure games, like the *Pajama Sam* and *Freddi Fish* series. From here, her gaming proceeded apace: *Paper Mario*, *Sly Cooper*, *The Sims*, and, most triumphantly, *World of WarCraft*, which was her graduation into the big leagues. She was 10 when *WOW* came out—young enough for her mom to question the idea of letting her kill orcs in her spare time, old enough to actually do it, and do it well. It wasn't long, in fact, before she had a better grasp on the game's subtler dynamics, like damage modifiers and auction-house profit-making, than her somewhat dim-witted old man. By age 12, she was a full-on *WOW* veteran—and one of the main officers of her guild. How proud I was! I had succeeded, against considerable odds, in dorkifying an otherwise pretty cool kid.

But a funny thing happened on the way to her 13th birthday. Unexpectedly, seemingly without warning, she began to lose almost all interest in gaming. I was crushed. Devastated. Betrayed. But I also should have seen it coming. The signs were there. The first one I remember clearly: Watching *The Two Towers* on DVD, and hearing her and my wife start debating, right in the middle of the Helm's Deep battle, who was "cuter," Aragorn or Legolas. The fact that they were debating this at all was ludicrous—because it is so clearly Aragorn—but what was worse was that my kid was now thinking about *that* instead of, you know, the story. What the heck was going on?

This, of course, was just the beginning. It's been downhill since, as gaming has given way, despite my best efforts, to Facebook and MySpace and text messaging, and—worst of all—academic achievement. Yes, my daughter has in fact become just another statistic verifying the depressing accepted wisdom: That once they enter teenage years—an age where a great number of boys descend exponentially deeper into dorkdom, the majority of girls decide they have had enough. They begin to opt out of gaming. They begin to "mature."

This is why our society is so messed up. This is why men and women have so much trouble relating to one another. Because exactly at the point in life when we begin to crave their validation the most, the females begin to realize that we—and most of the things we believe in—are largely a waste of time. They begin to understand the value of communication, of advancement, of personal appearance, of empathy towards others and the world around them—none of which does the guys, who are merely trying to find a decent *Team Fortress 2* server where someone knows how to actually *play* the freakin' medic, any good at all.

So here's the thing. We know women are smarter than us. We know that they secretly control the world. By adulthood, most men's actions are centered on trying to please women, or at least on just not pissing them off. I thought maybe with my own kid I could succeed where others have failed, in keeping her at our more primordial level. But it appears that I have blown it. It appears that another bright and successful young woman is getting ready to enter society at large and make the world a better place. I don't know what I did wrong, but maybe there was nothing I *could* do. Maybe the truth is that women are just an utter mystery to me.

It drives me crazy. But I wouldn't have it any other way. ●

ILLUSTRATION BY BRIAN TAYLOR