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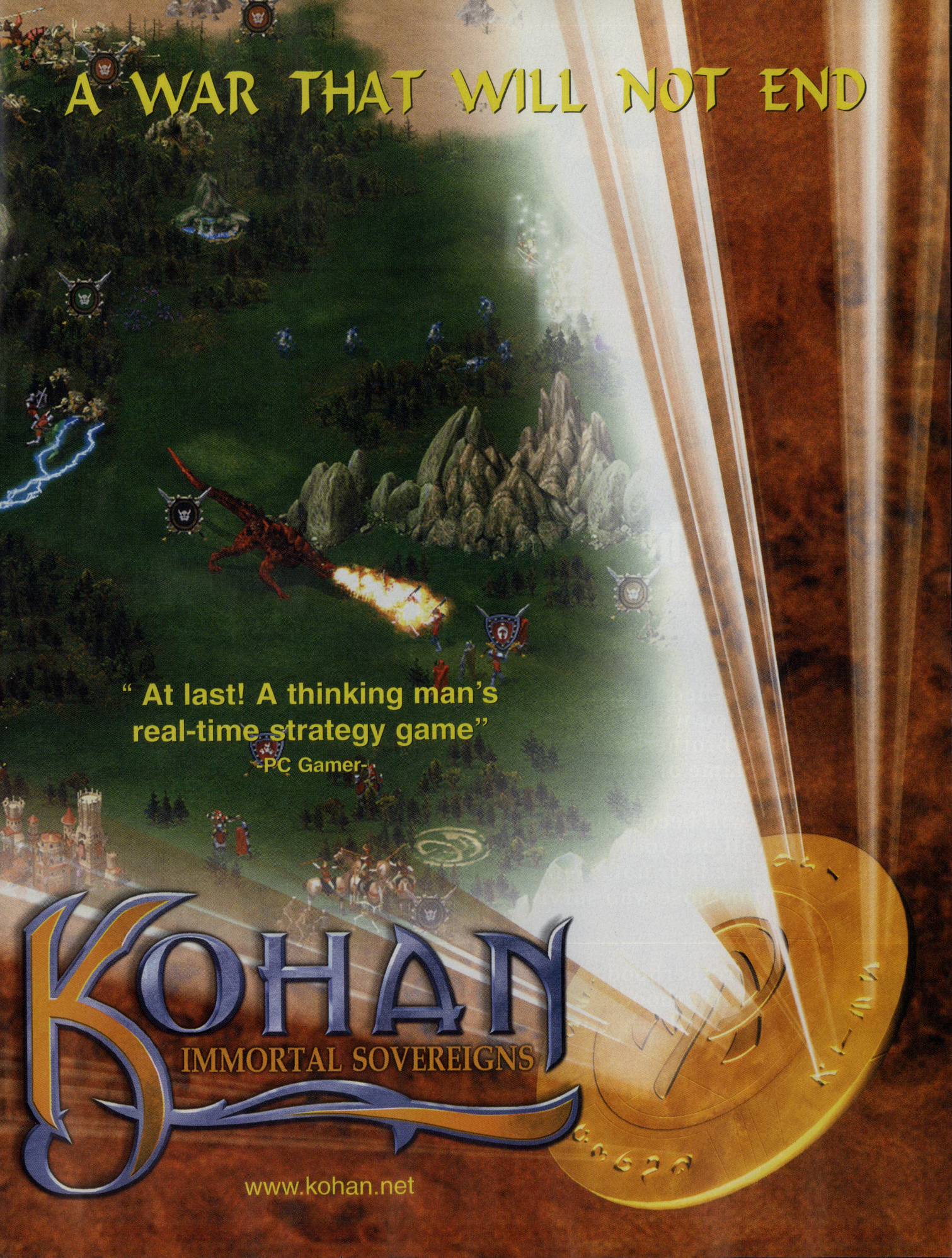
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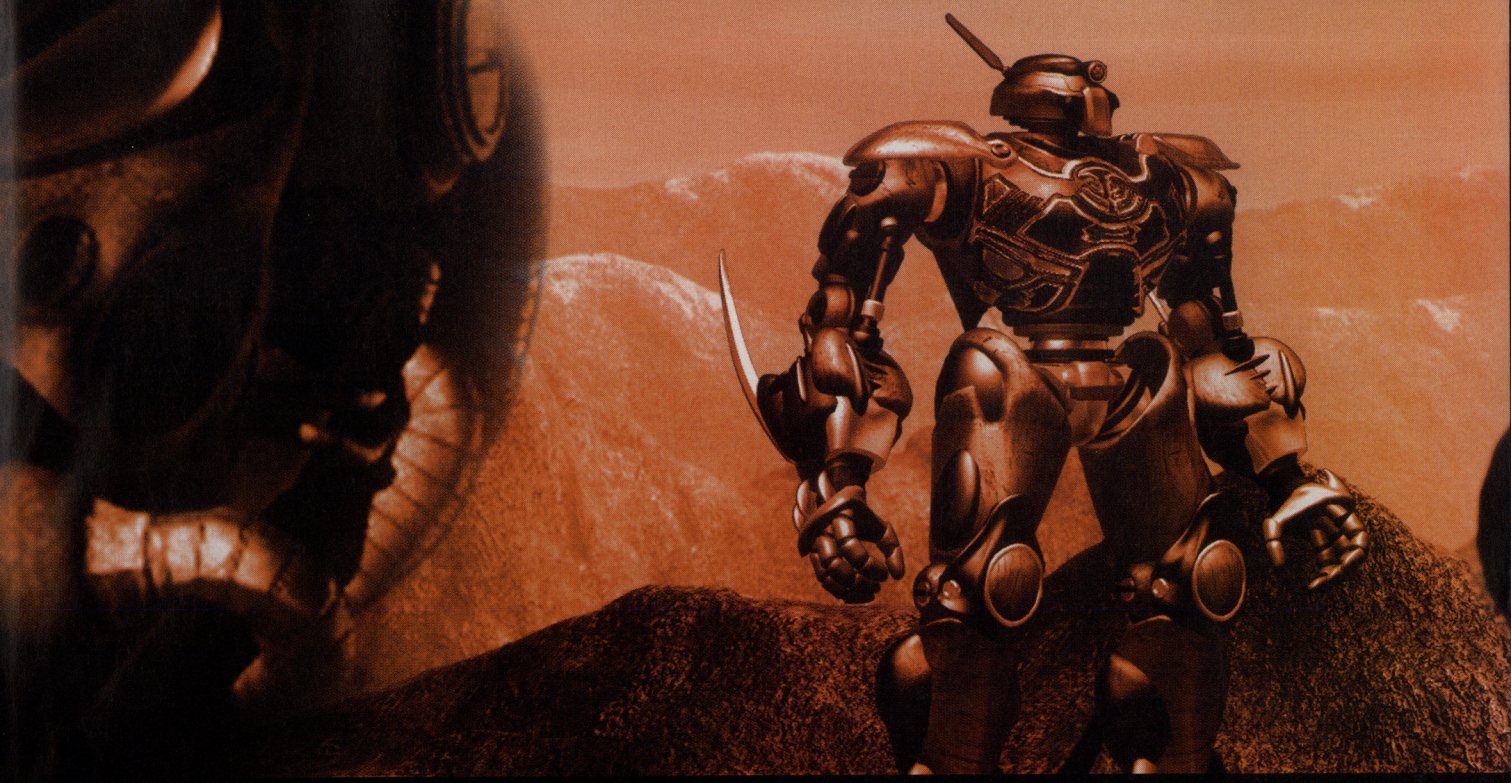
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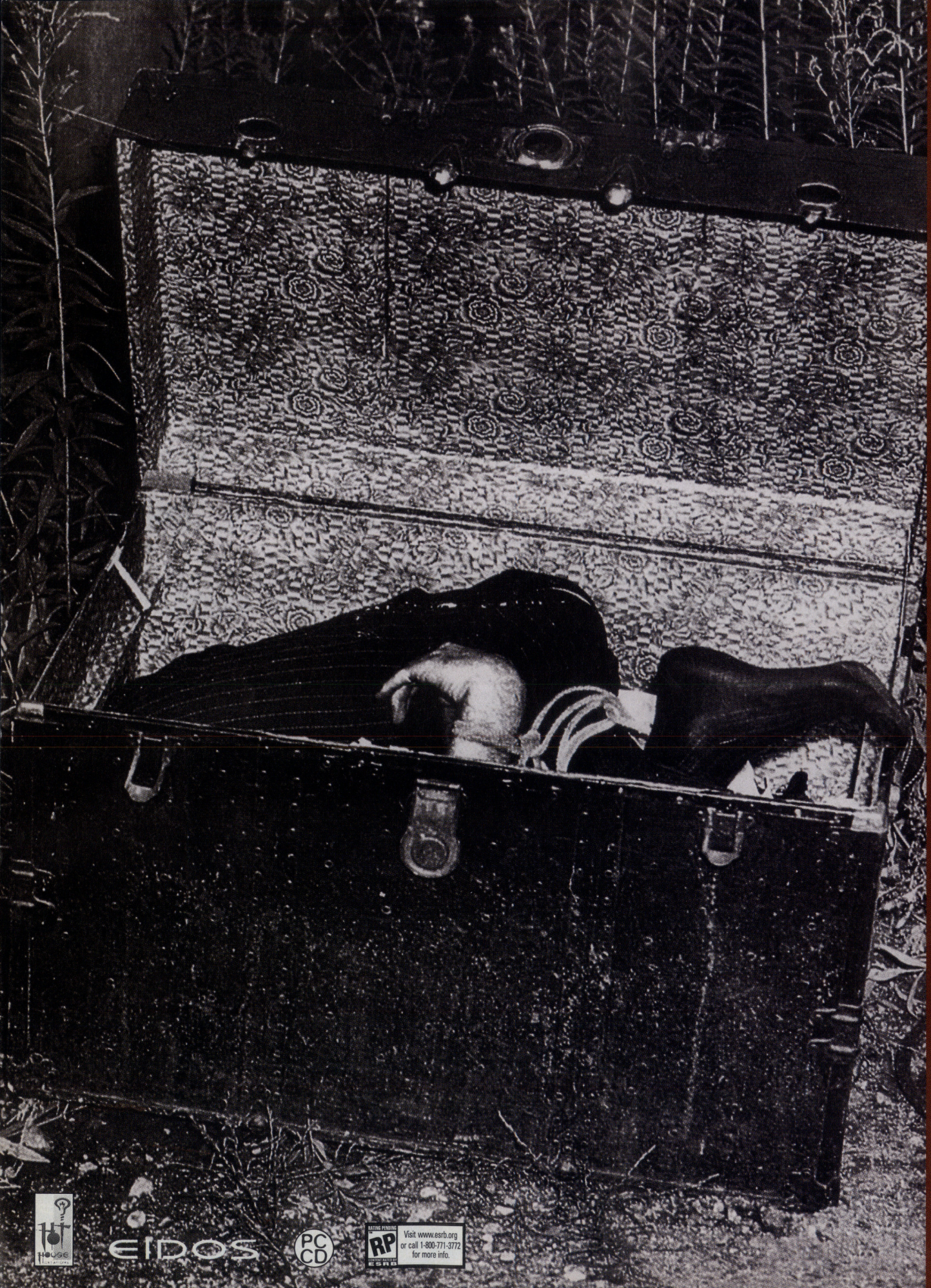
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CONTENTS

COMPUTER GAMES ISSUE NO. 124



Dungeon Siege — pg 40

40 features

Diablo Annihilator
Chris Taylor's Dungeon Siege pushes the envelope as far as it goes
BY CINDY YANS

The New Dawn of the Dark Savant
Contrary to popular opinion, Wizardry 8 lives and breathes in Canada
BY BRETT TODD

Enlightened Online Conflict
Dark Age of Camelot defies current trends and pits players against each other
BY DAVID RYAN HUNT

Almost Terminal
Get ready to take the skies, and Fly! too
BY JASON D'APRILE

68 hardware

FAQs—*You have questions, we have answers. This month: Quake III is not that important*

Raising the Bar
DirectX 8 is a big step forward for PC gaming technology
BY JASON CROSS

REVIEWS—*Guillemot's Game Theater gives you a sound card in a box. Also reviewed: Thrustmaster's Top Gun Afterburner and Microsoft's Trackball Explorer*

76 reviews

A former id-designer tries to outweird Lewis Carroll... with less-than curioser results in American McGee's Alice. Also reviewed this month: EverQuest: Scars of Velious, Oni, Quake III Team Arena, Giants: Citizen Kabuto, Gunman Chronicles, Half-Life: Counter Strike, Hitman: Codename 47, Sudden Strike, Call to Power II plus lots more.

22 newswire

12 Pounds of Role-playing
Tom Hall unwinds as Anachronox journeys down its long, strange trip to completion
BY CINDY YANS

Let the Strategic Gibbing Begin
Myth III bursts forth in new, improved, snazzy 3D
BY JASON D'APRILE

Mastering the European Code
Codemasters lands on US shores with swords and SAWs
BY TOM CHICK

Plus—*Digital Anvil Joins Microsoft and First Looks at Cossacks: European Wars, Infantry and Evil Islands.*

18 upfront

Bloody Nipples
A Giant(s) tale of sex, violence and the letter "M"
BY STEVE BAUMAN

125 rebound

Incoherent and Violent Caption Atrocities
Plus the usual assortment of letters praising this fine publication

148 coming soon

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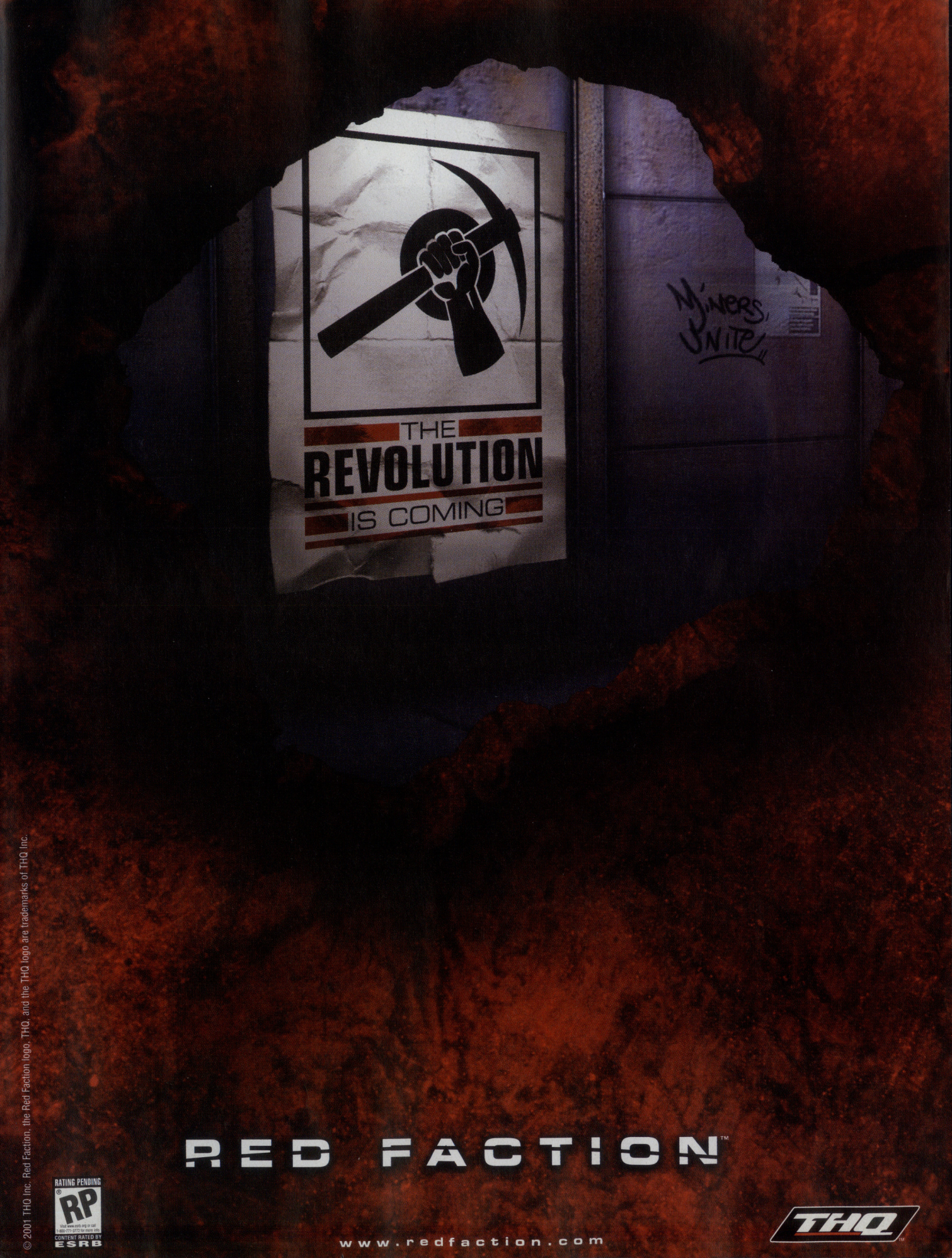
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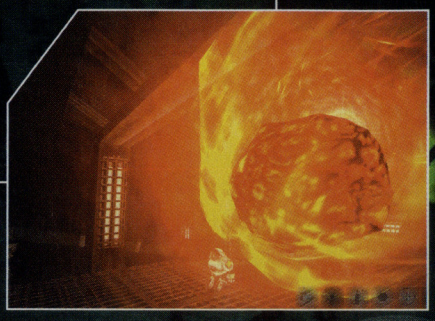
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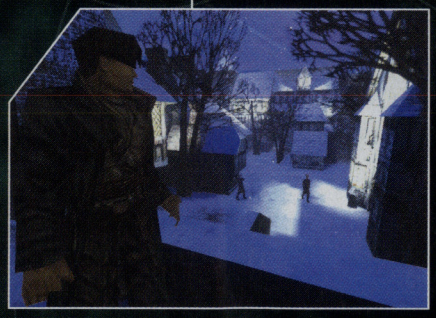
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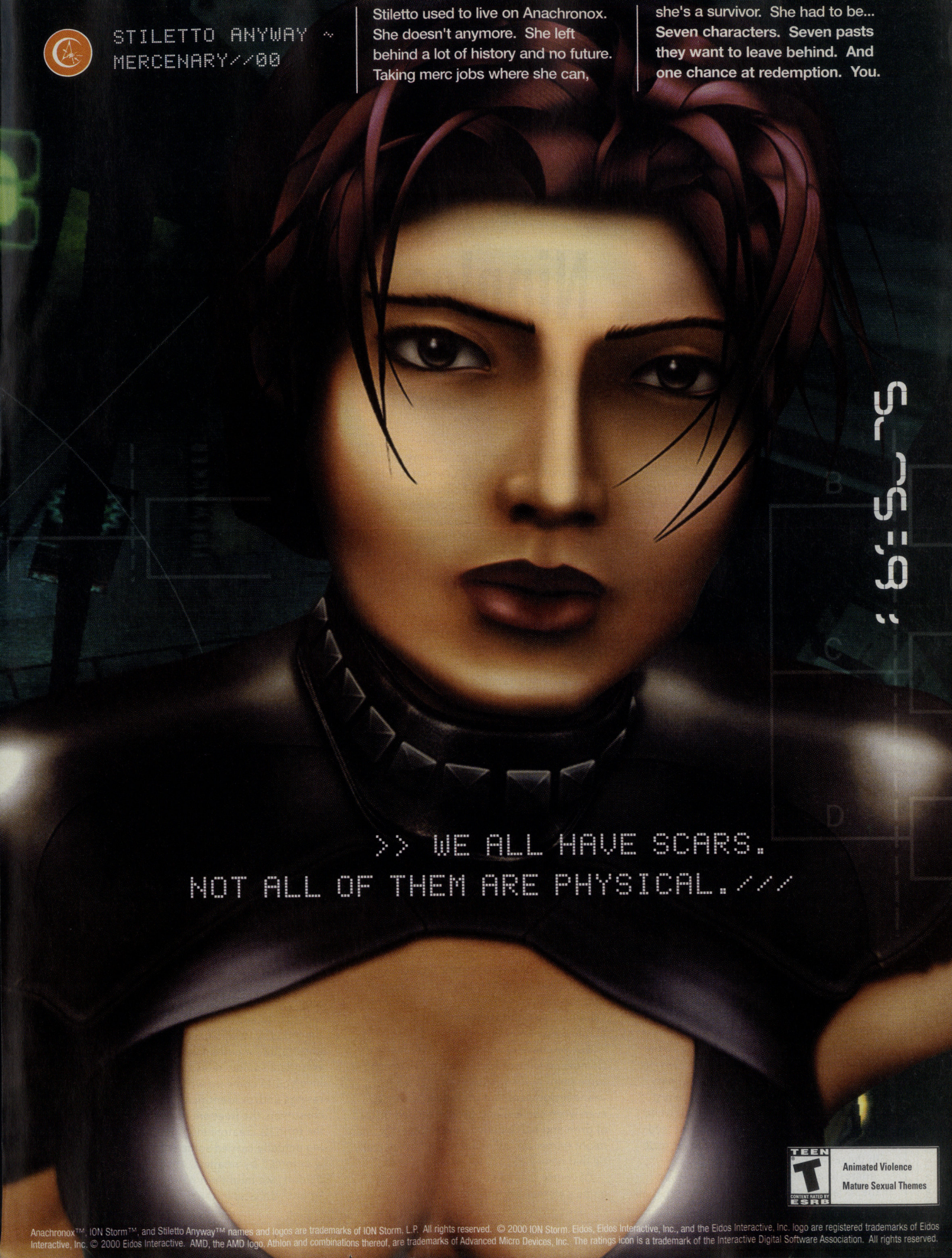
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Bloody Nipples



A Giant(s) tale of sex, violence and the letter "M"

by Steve Bauman

The version of *Giants: Citizen Kabuto* on North American store shelves is not exactly the version its creators intended to unleash on gamers [*see our review on page 82*]. According to the game's publisher Interplay, changes were made to garner a "Teen" (13 and up) as opposed to "Mature" (17 and up) rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board. This would help to assure that major retailers that expressed concern about handling "M"-rated games would be able to carry it. Specific changes included replacing the game's red blood with a lovely neon green fluid and covering up the previously topless blue Sea Reaper Delphi with a stylish bikini top. About the changes, an Interplay spokesperson noted, "We publish games, but we're also a company, and it's good to be in Wal-Mart."

After the news of these changes broke, Bob Stevenson, the co-founder of the game's developer Planet Moon Studios, issued a statement. "Covering Delphi and changing the blood does suck!" he said, but then reiterated that desire to get the game into certain retail outlets. Planet Moon's Tim Williams, in an interview with the online site Stomped, mirrored this concern. He said there was a perception that the primary issue lay with Delphi being topless. "We just wanted to be on the safe side," he said, while noting that they had not received direct feedback from any retail chain indicating an issue with the nude character.

Interestingly enough, the changes were made so late in the development cycle that all of the in-store promotions, artwork, and screenshots on the actual physical box feature a topless Delphi. This will surely disappoint you who are looking for a bit of blue-nippled, red-blooded fun. (You may want to try holding ice cubes to your own nipples for a few hours to achieve a similar effect, hopefully minus the blood.)

To make things even more ludicrous, despite the changes, the ESRB board still gave the game an "M"-rating. "Although we are now stuck with a 'Mature' rating," said Stevenson, "we may still have a chance at getting wider distribution if retailers step back and realize our game is not a 'danger' for the minds of America."

He's right; *Giants* is hardly the equal of a game like *Soldier of Fortune* when it comes to graphic violence. Comedic cartoon violence with non-humans, regardless of the color of blood, does not have the same impact as the grim realism found in many semi-realistic first-person shooters. As for the nudity, the puritanical American attitudes toward sex and the human body are well documented.

What message does this send to consumers, that violence, homophobia and misogyny are acceptable but comedic violence and blue nipples are bad?

But you have to wonder why they made the changes so late—did it not occur to someone at some point in the product's protracted four-year development that gratuitous violence, even when comical and green-blooded instead of grim and red-blooded, and a topless woman might garner an "M"-rating? Could they really be that naïve?

Of course they're not. In the course of the game's eternal development, the country became more conscious of virtual violence and game ratings and, more importantly, so did the retail stores. But there is a real problem with consistency. While it may not carry *Giants* because of nudity and/or violence, Wal-Mart will sell you *American Psycho* on DVD, while Kmart gladly hands over *Fight Club* or an "edited" version of the current poster child for freedom of expression, Eminem's "Marshall Mathers LP" CD. Wal-Mart's website describes that acclaimed release as "the most enthralling and expressive rap album ever... his lyrics and presentation are so hypnotic that it captures you and makes you think of everything from a different perspective." What message does this send to consumers, that violence, homophobia and misogyny are acceptable but comedic violence and blue nipples are bad?

Clearly retailers can pick and choose whatever merchandise they wish to carry; they aren't constitutionally required to carry all games, and they're not practicing censorship. However, they are stigmatizing the "M"-rating by making seemingly arbitrary decisions based on content. This sort of self-censoring is contrary to the whole notion of ratings in the first place. Ratings exist to give purchasers a clear guide to the product's content, and are designed to assist in making sure, in theory, that only those within a designated age range are able to purchase the item in question. Ratings should liberate creativity and allow people to create the games they want to create.

All of this discussion would be rendered moot if the industry and retailers would work together to limit the acquisition of material the industry itself has voluntarily deemed unsuitable for certain age groups. The entire episode also illustrates the failure of everyone involved to come up with a system, via clear ratings and/or identification checks, to give consumers the freedom to purchase a game in the form its creators intended. If the "M"-rating actually carried some weight, was properly enforced by retailers, and was trusted by parents, we might not have seen this sort of "giant" debacle in the first place. ■



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Madame Coucher's Slutopia indeed.

12 Pounds of Role-playing

Tom Hall winds down as Anachronox nears the end of its long, strange trip to completion

AS HE TOSSES HIS LONG CURLY LOCKS FROM SIDE TO SIDE, WITH A maniacal twinkle in his eye, Ion Storm's Tom Hall appears, at first glance, to be some kind of windup toy gone haywire. Although you might be initially bowled over by his animated antics, a second glance reveals that there is nothing "on" about Hall's mania. His charm and genuine passion for his work, the action/role-playing game *Anachronox*, shines through as he proudly shows off his "12 pound baby."



"But Stiletto, honey, I didn't mean to criticize your fashion sense."

Anachronox literally means "past poison," and the metaphor embraces the "inner conflict" that each character carries along with baggage from the past. The game's main character, Sylvester "Sly" Boots, is an intergalactic mercenary/detective who adventures with the voluptuous Stiletto Anyway (yes that's her name), and most of the game will center on their exploits. However, the other characters are quirky and varied and include the tragically flawed Paco El Puno Estrella (de Soto Gutierrez Alonzo Caramba Santa Filipa Sacca Dejunta del Solez Cruz), the elderly curmudgeon Grumpos Matavastros, Fatima, the chica imprisoned in your cursor, and a robot called PAL.

Paco El Puno Estrella is a super hero from a planet of super heroes from which all the humans have fled, because they were tired of getting saved all the time. With no one to save, Estrella has lost faith in himself and his superpowers and became trapped in a military base. The game has one particularly poignant cutscene in which the hero happens upon a little girl with a very pointy teddy bear. The cinematic that ensues is both grandiose and touching as she offers him her bear to try and bolster his sense of self. The engine's lip-sync and facial deformation capabilities are extraordinary, as you can see the tender exchange between the burly hero and the tiny child. Hall tilts his head and appears himself moved (perhaps for the billionth time), "So what is the context here? No wait. Let's let this play out." He watches the scene draw to a close. "It's the moment where he believes in himself again," says the misty-eyed Hall.

Quake II plus

Anachronox is the second one of Ion Storm's *Quake* kids, and the modified-beyond-recognition *Quake II* engine looks a lot better utilized than it did in *Daikatana*. The combat system itself is a tactically oriented blend of *Final Fantasy* and *X-COM*. You move your characters around in a sort of real-time phased turn and can toggle controls between the normal *Quake* setup and something like *Jedi Knight*.

Producer Jake Hughes, has done a lot of work with the game's camera scripter. He's done a lot of work as a director of short films and wishes he had

had it to storyboard all of his short films so he could see right off the bat which shots looked best and then only have to film them once. He shows a *Fifth-Element-Blade-Runner*-esque car chase scene. It looks splendid, and quells some of the fear about using an older re-vamped engine. There will be over three hours of actual cinema in the game, which they estimate will offer an average of a little over 30 hours of gameplay.

We were able to sample a bit of demonstrated combat, mostly in the form of "mini-games," combat-oriented action sequences that, if you are successful at the harder levels, yield a super spectacular item or weapon. The mini-game scenarios do *not* constitute the bulk of the combat but they do represent plot advancement and seemed to be the best running example at the time of the visit. Hall targets an insectoid creature. "Look! It's Skitters... Let's teach these bugs a lesson..."

"Blee-up blee-up, blee-up, ah000ha ah000ha, blee-up, blee-up," say the speakers. "'*Ahhhhhh*!! What's that?'" screams Hall. "'*Aieeeee*! I'm just a bug, I'm a *bug* for god's sake...Step on me! You don't have to.... *Ahhhhhh!* What's that? Eeeeeeeh.' Phfffffft. So, y'know, owww... like, he's a bug."

The game will ship with all of its tools (with the exception of the lip-sync system) including the programming language, APE (Anachronox Programming Language). "I call it my new Apple II because it's so much fun to program in and it takes all the drudgery out of it," says Hall. "It's sort of if you mushed together C, Basic and Java in a way—for programming people it's sort of Windows-based." It began as a defined dialogue window, but provided variables so that you could position and move a picture. "So from there it grew like UNIX with little bits and pieces, and you have things that initialize data to the window, things that constantly update the window, and things that happen *after* the window, in little code chunks and with that you can do any little thing."

So what is taking so long?

Having heard this question time and time again, Hall sighs. "Well, you know that role-playing games have the longest time-frame in development," he explained. "We've spent three or so years, but that's like peanuts compared to the development of other things. We are birthing a new universe and a new way of doing things and once this one's done, the rest of them will just be like, 'Oh great, this is how it works, great, boom-boom-boom-boom-boom!'"

Though Hall believes that the development length for this title is par for the course, it still seems to most of us as though it's been around for quite a while. There are several other reasons for this. As a new company, there was a great deal of resource-sharing going on at ION Storm during the launch of the first few products. When *Daikatana* was becoming dangerously late, the development groups swapped out core people from the other projects. This continues to be true, as *Game X*, a currently unannounced title, is lending its people to *Anachronox*.

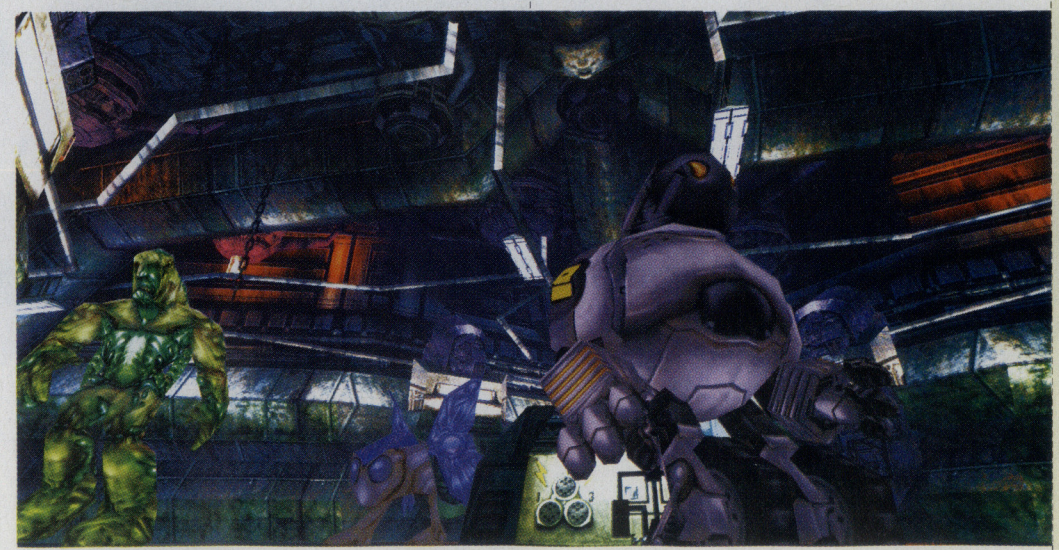
They initially began with the *Quake* engine, and since the contract allowed for an upgrade, they started out again with a new engine when *Quake II* became available. They heavily modified it, using 32-bit color, particle effects, the APE, the Planet spline-based camera scripter, lip-syncing and facial deformation, and a host of other enhancements. Since the *Quake II* engine was significantly different from what they had begun with, what would have normally been a month's transition to a new engine turned into a four-month ordeal.

Another thing that took time was the huge 460-page design document with which they started. This immense conceptual beast had to be trimmed down to a reasonable size, and about a third of it still remains for possible sequels.

The naked truth

One oft-whispered factoid is that Hall conceived of the project while seated upon his porcelain throne. "Yes, *Anachronox* came to me when I was sitting on the toilet," he reminisced. But the potty seat is not the only bathroom inspiration for Hall. He admits to keeping a plastic white board and wax pencils in the shower, because somehow ideas pop into his head at the oddest times. Lately he has added a shower-safe voice recorder to his array of bathroom equipment.

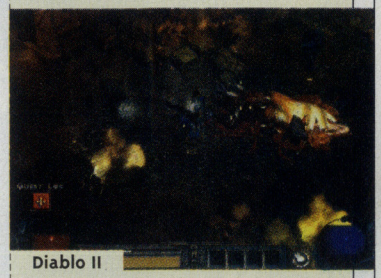
Things conceived of in the nude have all sorts of potential, and hopefully the long-awaited *Anachronox* doesn't show its age when it's released in March (keep your fingers crossed). Oh, and Tom, while you're busy brainstorming, try to remember not to drop the soap. —*Cindy Yans*



There he is, your little PAL, voiced by designer Tom Hall.

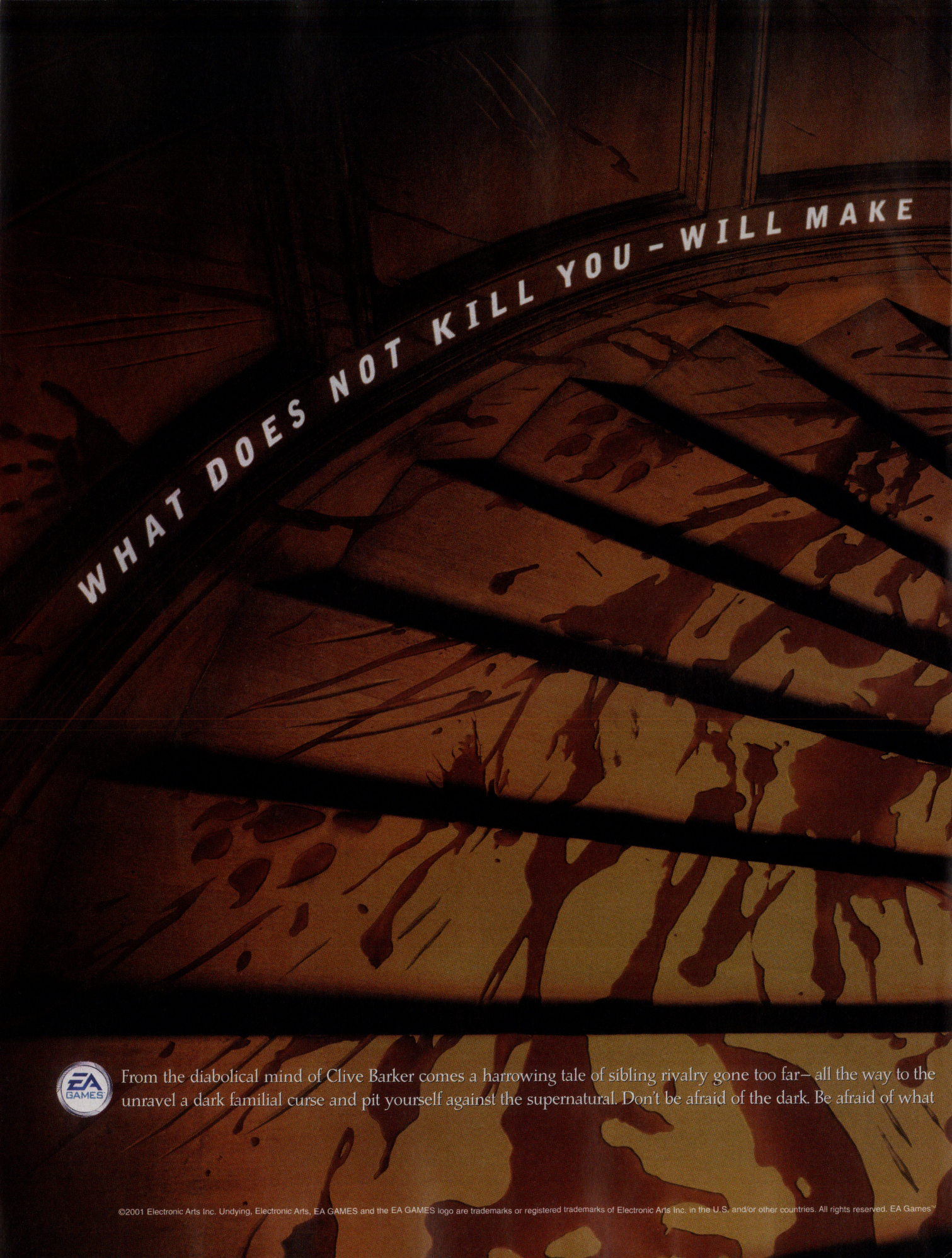
briefs

Nasty bug kills of Diablo II players—Blizzard acknowledged the existence of a nasty bug that caused a variety of problems for players on Battle.net around the Christmas holidays. The bug, which allowed malicious players to play as nearly any character due to an exploitable part of the game's login system, caused players to lose items, skill point, experience and more importantly, the top players on the ladder were all permanently killed off. According to Blizzard the bug has now been fixed, and plans are in the works to restore all hardcore characters that died between December 19 and January 1. Characters will be revived with all the experience, skills, and



Diablo II

items that they possessed as of Tuesday, December 19. Blizzard also plans to provide a method by which players can report losses of skill points, experience, and items so that they can also be restored, although there are no specific details on what this method will entail at this time. In unrelated news, Blizzard also reset the *Diablo II* standard ladder on January 1st. You will have to create a new character following the reset to appear on the new ladder; however, the reset does not affect any existing characters and no characters will be deleted. The Hardcore Ladder was not reset.... **Computer sales dip**—According to the Reston, VA based industry monitor PC Data, sales of desktop computers in retail stores and at direct mail/online vendors dropped 24% in December, which marked the fifth straight month of lagging PC sales. Slightly over one million desktop PCs were sold at retail during December, PC Data reports. Retailers and direct sales outlets sold just over ten million desktop units for all of 2000, a decline of 0.8% over 1999. This dip is the first decline in annual PC sales PC Data has ever reported... **Industry veterans found new wargame company with bad name**—Industry veterans Joel Billings, Gary Grigsby, and Keith Brors have formed a new company, 2BY3, to produce wargames for the PC. >>>


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Animated Blood and Gore
Animated Violence

Billings was a founder of SSI, which published some fifty titles during his tenure there. Grigsby has designed more than 25 games, including the *Steel Panthers* series. Brors is an accomplished programmer in his own right, with many SSI projects to his credit, and teamed up with Grigsby some four years ago. The company, whose name stands for "WWII by three guys," has three games on its plate initially. The first covers the South Pacific in 1942 and 1943, the



Uncommon Valor

second the entire Pacific war from 1941 to 1945, and the third is slated to be a simulation of the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, 1941 to 1945. According to the company, the three games will all appear sometime over the next two years, with the last game arriving in 2002. The company promises "highly detailed military simulations" covering all the major aspects of the featured campaigns. The South Pacific game is called *Uncommon Valor: Campaign for the South Pacific*, and will be published by Matrix Games. The turn-based game will use a map with 30 mile hexes, with turns ranging from one to seven daily phases, each composed of two twelve hour impulses. You'll also be able to play using a continuous time mode, where you can pause the game at will...

Microsoft unveils Xbox production details—In attempt to avoid the



Xbox

embarrassing production snafus that have played Sony's launch of the PlayStation 2, Microsoft is >>>

Digital Anvil Joins Microsoft

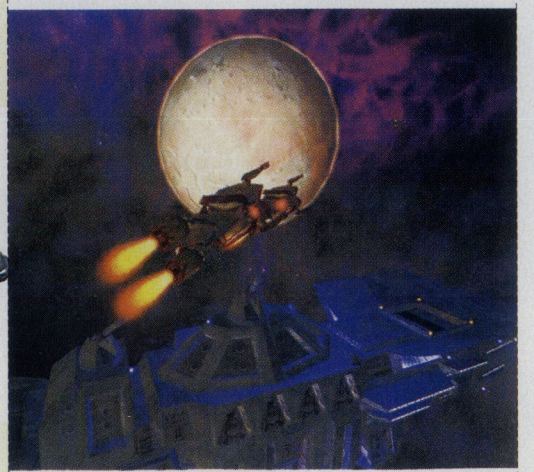
Austin-based developer the latest acquisition

AMIDST A FLURRY OF RUMORS ABOUT PRODUCT cancellations, Microsoft acquired Austin-based developer Digital Anvil. *Wing Commander* creator and Digital Anvil CEO Chris Roberts will leave the company to pursue other creative endeavors. Digital Anvil joins a stable of internal developers at Microsoft that include *Links* creator Access Software, FASA Interactive, and Bungie Software. "The acquisition of Digital Anvil will strengthen our commitment to producing top-quality PC and Xbox titles," said Microsoft vice president of games publishing Ed Fries in a prepared statement.

"This was a perfectly amicable deal," Roberts explained in a phone interview, adding that the difficulties of producing multiple big budget titles independently made this sort of solution inevitable. "If I had to do [Digital Anvil] over again, I probably would have focused on fewer titles, rather than three or four." Fries confirmed that Microsoft plans to do exactly that—the new Digital Anvil will be working on only two titles, one for the PC (*Freelancer*) and an as-yet unannounced game for the Xbox.

Roberts and Fries confirmed that Microsoft not only intends to publish *Freelancer*, but also that they have no plans to make any significant changes to the design. "Most of the basic gameplay is pretty much locked into place," Roberts said. Microsoft will not be publishing either *Conquest: Frontier War* or *Loose Cannon*; however, Roberts has retained the rights to both of those titles, and plans to seek out new publishers for both of them. Erin Roberts may be staying on with Microsoft to work on the Digital Anvil Xbox title (although he has yet to officially accept a position), and Chris Roberts will stay on as a creative consultant for *Freelancer*.

"I don't really want to work for a big publisher again," Roberts explained. "If I wanted that, I would have stayed with Electronic Arts." —*Steve Bauman*



Despite its creator leaving, Freelancer will still be published by Microsoft.



We'll see about who owns this colony!

The Age of Ukraine

Cossacks bloodies Europe in the Age of Reason

COSSACKS: EUROPEAN WARS, FROM UKRANIAN developer GSC Game World and publisher Strategy First, will inevitably be compared to Microsoft's *Age of Empires* series (and in fact covers the time period that a theoretical future sequel, should it ever be produced, would logically cover). While it does share many similar gameplay mechanics, *Cossacks* does manage to come up with a few twists of its own.

The immediate difference, of course, is the time period covered—the 16th through 18th centuries. On the surface, with its 3D terrain, highly detailed structures and units, *Cossacks* looks like a fairly straightforward real-time strategy game, i.e., the gathering of resources (gold, iron, coal, stone, wood, and food), building the various structures that produce weapons, advances, etc. However, the sheer number of opponents and allies, each with their own unique strengths and tech-tree advances (up to 300 upgrades are posssible) help *Cossacks* to stand out. There are 16 nations that you can play as, with, or against: Algeria, Austria, England, France, Netherlands, Piemonte, Poland, Portugal, Prussia, Russia, Saxony, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, Ukraine and Venice. Each country has its own original look, specilaized economic and technical development, military advantages and drawbacks—which should allow for plenty of tactical, strategic, and diplomatic possibilities. Among the military unit types available are infantry, cavalry, artillery, and naval. Nations will use their unique units along with units common to all sides.

Single player games are comprised of single missions, campaigns, and random map mode. Multiplayer will support up to eight players via modem, local network, or Internet, and is comprised of a historical battles mode and a random map mode. Cossacks will feature more than 85 large-scale wars and battles of the 16th-18th centuries for single game and multiplayer. Though not seen in our limited version, the game will support up to 8000 units in a battle (shades of *Shogun: Total War*). The game will also come equipped with an encyclopedia detailing historical and technological data.

Cossacks should be available early in 2001. —*Bill Hiles*

Relatively Harmless

Sony's Infantry offers up another way to kill your friends online

A SMALL COMPANY BY THE NAME OF HARMLESS GAMES has been working on a relatively simple concept: build an engine for an online action game that can be easily modified to create a variety of similar but different experiences. This may not have been exactly what they were thinking, but that's what the result is in *Infantry*. Sony recently acquired the game, and it's now in beta as part of their line-up at the Sony Station (www.station.sony.com). The final stretch of the beta test is open to everyone, and a flood of new Station players round out the pack.

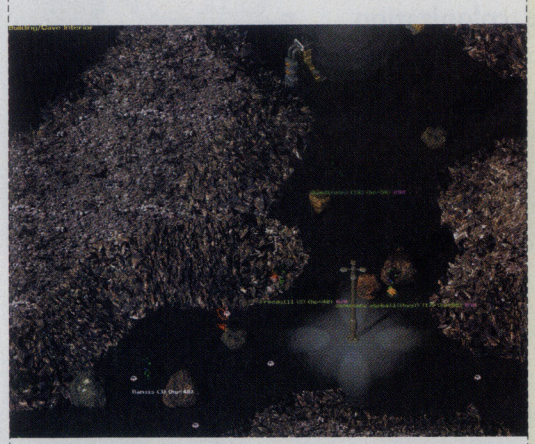
At its core *Infantry* is primarily a simple action game where you run around and shoot other players. There is no primary game; instead it is divided into various "zones" that have different properties. In some zones you will move faster or handle yourself differently, in others you can choose classes. The weapons change in every zone. The game in each zone uses the same basic formula, but the actual play is quite varied. There are currently six zones available: Team DeathMatch, GravBall PvK, Ambush!, Skirmish v2, Infantry: CTF1, and Infantry: CTF2.

Team DeathMatch is supposed to be a team game but it really is nothing of the sort. GravBall PvK is a soccer-like bloodsport similar to the classic *Speedball*. There are two teams, the Europa Pirates and the Elara Kings. A large map with lots of angled walls serves as the playing field and the objective is as simple as getting the ball in the opponent's goal. Of course, everyone has a hover bike and a variety of deadly weapons to keep things interesting. It's really hard to say what Ambush! is like; every time we checked there were only a handful of people in Ambush! That aside, it's *supposed* to be a beginner CTF game.

Skirmish v2 is the second most popular zone, as it's the intermediate area where players can learn the game. This is a class-based game where the winning team is often the one with the most experienced players, as they can make up for a lack of class diversity. Sony has announced that they will be working on more variations in the future. Infantry: CTF 1 is currently the big boy of the current zones, often accounting for over 50% of the people playing. CTF can be the most fun of all the zones, but that's only if you don't end up in a bad team.

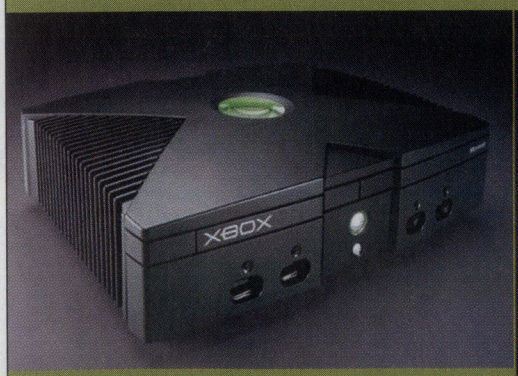
Infantry, as it stands at this writing, has one extraordinary problem: lag. Now you're probably thinking that lag is a problem in every online game, but it is entirely different here. Lag gives players a huge advantage, as the more someone lags the harder it becomes for others to kill them; only weapons with a spread fire or grenades are any good at killing the players that are really lagged, thus classes that lack those weapons are at a serious disadvantage. Some players even deliberately create lag in order to get an advantage. This form of cheating can give the game a sour taste at times, just as when enemies enter spectator mode to find your flags then rejoin their own team.

Infantry looks promising as it nears the final stages of beta, and hopefully any problems will be ironed out in the coming weeks. The community is generally unsavory at this point, as the bad apples tend to be more than vocal. It's getting better, but it wasn't too long ago when it was nearly impossible to get answers to simple questions. With the flood of newbies from Sony's Station there are now more players who recently faced the same difficulties and are thus more willing to help. Even now *Infantry* is certainly fun, and it has a lot of potential for growth. —*David Ryan Hunt*



CTF 1: The experience from victories helps you advance in rank.

MICROSOFT UNVEILS XBOX



Bill Gates showed off the unit at CES on January 6th. The sleek box features a tray for the DVD and four controller ports on the front.



The controller looks quite a bit like the current Dreamcast controller and supports force feedback.

briefs

opening plants throughout the world to handle Xbox production. "Our goal is to carry out a strong Xbox launch that is well-orchestrated and well-supported," explained Robbie Bach, senior Vice president of the Games Division at Microsoft. "Meeting Xbox customer needs is job No. 1." The company plans to roll out the Xbox, which uses many components from traditional Intel-based computers, including the processor and video



Everquest

technology, in the fall of 2001 in Japan and North America. A European launch will follow in early 2002... EverQuest sets record—Sony Online Entertainment announced that *EverQuest* hit 81,858 simultaneous users on New Years day, January 1 2001... For those about to download (illegally)—CenterSpan Communications announced that it would acquire the assets of Scour, Inc., which operates one of the most widely visited digital entertainment portals on the web. CenterSpan evolved from ThrustMaster Corporation, makers of high quality game controls. The company sold the ThrustMaster name in September of 1999 in order to focus exclusively on peer-to-peer communication software. In May of 2000, CenterSpan launched Socket, a peer-to-peer internet gaming application. Currently, CenterSpan is focusing on the digital distribution arena to meet the growing demand for collaborative information sharing over the Internet. Until it shut down the service in October, Scour provided a peer-to-peer search and file-sharing application known as Scour Exchange, which was similar to Napster but also allowed the searching and exchanging of video and images in addition to music. Also like Napster, Scour has been the brunt of many legal attacks from major recording labels and studios accusing it of illegally sharing copyrighted content. Several months ago, >>>

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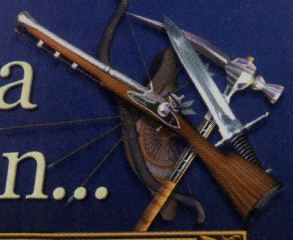
Antik Games

Developed by paradox

RATING PENDING RP CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Cossacks
- European Wars

A New Era Has Begun...



European Wars: Cossacks is a historical real-time strategy based on events during the XVI-XVIII centuries in Europe when nations and states were created and demolished, gold was turned into numerous armies, and never ending wars shed oceans of blood.

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-Huge battles up to 8000 units
-16 rivaling nations with their own distinct graphics, economics and technical development
-More than 85 real historical large-scale wars and battles of XVI-XVIII centuries
-A huge technological hierarchy of more than 300 upgrades
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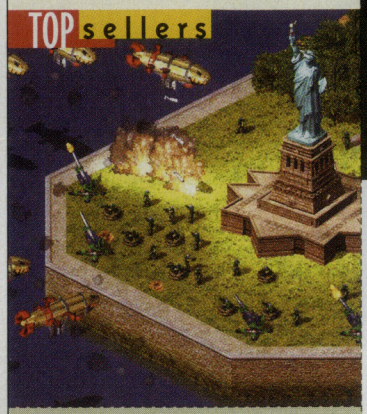
RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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briefs

CenterSpan announced plans to launch a next generation peer-to-peer network incorporating digital rights management, which provides a secure and legal digital distribution channel where people will be able to publish, search and purchase all forms of digital content. Content owners will be able to track their properties within the channel. ■

TOP sellers



1. **RED ALERT 2**
   Westwood Studios
   Price $39 • Rating ★★★
2. **ROLLERCOASTER TYCOON**
   Hasbro Interactive
   Price $26 • Rating ★★★★½
3. **THE SIMS**
   Maxis
   Price $42 • Rating ★★★★½
4. **THE SIMS LIVIN LARGE**
   Maxis
   Price $28 • Rating ★★★
5. **SIM THEME PARK WORLD**
   Maxis
   Price $19 • Rating ★★★★
6. **BARBIE PET RESCUE**
   Mattel Interactive
   Price $28 • Rating N/A
7. **LOOPY LANDSCAPES**
   Hasbro Interactive
   Price $25 • Rating ★★★★½
8. **DIABLO II**
   Blizzard Entertainment
   Price $49 • Rating ★★★★
9. **WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE, 2ND EDITION**
   Disney
   Price $19 • Rating N/A
10. **SIMCITY 3000**
    Maxis
    Price $16 • Rating ★★★★½

11: Age Of Empires II: The Conquerors
12: Combat Flight Simulator 2
13: Deer Hunter 4
14: Age Of Empires II: The Age of Kings
15: Hoyle Casino 2001
16. Unreal Tournament
17. Delta Force Land Warrior
18. 14 Madden NFL 2001
19. Frogger 2
20. Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun

Sales for November 2000. Source: PC Data, Reston, VA



I think it's safe to say that this looks better than Rage of Mages.

From Russia with Evil

The creators of Rage of Mages go the 3D route with Evil Islands

IT MUST BE A TERRIBLE FEELING NOT TO KNOW YOUR own name, why you are where you are, and what you used to do before you got there. It also seems to happen a lot in role-playing games; today's protagonists simply cannot keep from bashing their noggins to the point of complete amnesia. And so it goes with Nival Interactive's upcoming strategy/role playing hybrid, *Evil Islands*. You wake up amongst the ancient ruins of an unfamiliar island. All you remember is a bizarre vision of a tiny winged creature—that's it. So there you sit, with amnesia, a thin piece of leather for armor, and a small hunting knife. You start to wander around the island looking for people to help you solve this peculiar riddle, and thus your adventure begins.

Russian-based Nival is best known for its work on the *Rage of Mages* series. In fact, the setting for *Evil Islands* is part of the ongoing story in the world of *Rage of Mages*. The setting here is on the three islands of Gipat, Ingos, and Suslanger. The islands are actually quite large and feature a wide variety of backdrops.

The 2D top-down look of *Rage of Mages* is a thing of the past, as *Evil Islands* uses a nifty looking 3D engine. The graphics are quite impressive, and complete day and night cycles are included and actually matter; some creatures (there are over 300 monster types in the game) have powers that are dependent on the time of day.

The game itself is a blend of real-time strategy and role-playing. It's heavily quest based; when you complete a quest you advance the storyline and earn experience points, which in turn are used to boost your stats and spells. The magic system is quite extensive. Three schools of magic (Elemental, Sense, and Astral) make up the grimoire. There is also a magical constructor system that allows you to create your own magical items and spells. By taking an item such as a boar's skin or a dragon's hide, you can turn an ordinary sword into a magical fire-blade with spells packed inside or a piece of armor could transform into a magical breastplate that heals the wearer during combat.

The game will contain over 80 missions and Nival says that gamers can expect over 100 hours of gameplay in the campaign alone; full multiplayer support is also planned.

Evil Islands should hit North American shelves in the first part of 2001. —*William Abner*



Fighting White Tigers on the isle of Ingos.



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Endless Adventure



Massive Fighting



Player Interaction



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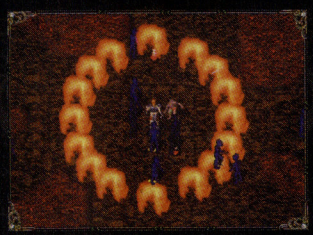
Minimum Requirements:
- Internet Connection Required
- Windows 95/98/NT4
- CPU of 120 Mhz
- 32 MB memory
- 108 MB disk space
- Modem 28.8

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Wild Discovery



Stunning Magic

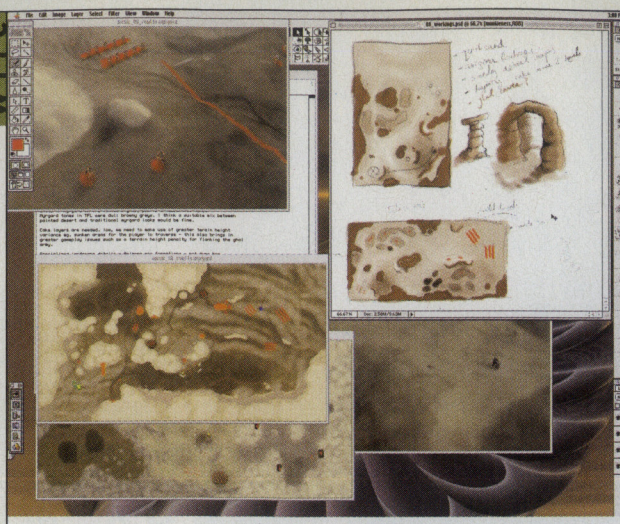


Variety In Career

Last Kingdom is a large-scale fantasy role-playing game with hundreds of monsters, items and a wide variety of magical spells, you can become one of four characters and take their roles in a land of virtual reality. Last Kingdom is enormous and can be explored for hundreds of hours by visiting mystical lands through magical portals. Once you start playing, you will realize just how little you really know about the world of Last Kingdom--and how much there is for you to discover. You can embark even further into the game-playing experience by talking, trading, and exploring with other people over the Internet. Can you save the only kingdom left from the ravaging powers of darkness? We dare you to challenge! Visit **www.netamin.com** <http://www.netamin.com> today to download the game, order the software for free, or check out our software on the CGM disc with this issue.

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Early in development, the game has little outside the design tools to showcase.

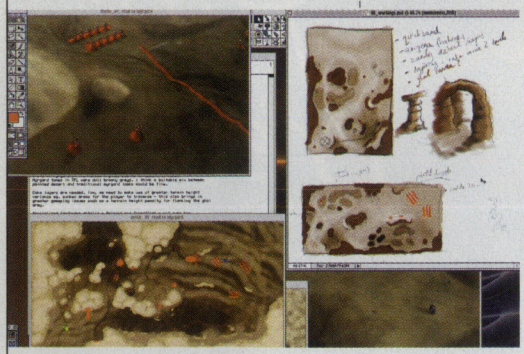


Placing a Ghol on the map.

Let the Strategic Gibbing Begin

Myth III bursts forth in new, improved, snazzy 3D

WITH THE PURCHASE OF BUNGIE BY MICROSOFT, TAKE 2 had already gotten the rights to its recently released *Oni*. But, strategy fans will be happy to know that the company also quietly acquired the rights to the *Myth* franchise. Via GoD Games, the elusive second sequel to one of the best strategy games of the 90s has surprisingly ended up in the hands of Ritual Entertainment—in a manner of speaking.



Deciding terrain height penalties.

It's not actually Ritual taking on the project, but a completely new company created around *Myth III*. Headed up by the now-former president of Ritual, Mark Dochterman, and Ritual's CEO, Ron Dimant, and sporting such talent as Scott Campbell, who is best known for being the story designer of the original *Fallout* game, the new company is barely even formed and still arguing over the name (they started out as Mumbo Jumbo, but may change the name to United Developers). Regardless, *Myth III* is well underway.

With the long awaited sequel in the hands of Ritual members and hard core fans, Myth III is shaping up to be an exciting prospect.

The game design is complete, and the technology portion of the one-year development cycle is in progress full-steam ahead. So what can fans of the venerable fantasy tactics series expect? Their favorite real-time strategy all dressed up in fully 3D graphics, eye candy galore, lots more glorious, gory gibs, and, of course, the same kind of gameplay that made these games such hot sellers to begin with. *Myth III* will also be a cross platform PC/Mac hybrid. So, as with the previous games, PC and Mac players will be able to compete together online.

Myth III is a prequel to the previous games. It actually takes place 1,000 years before *Myth* and sets up the universe. The game centers around the story of Connacht the Wolf—a hero so great that he heralds in a new age for the world, the Wolf Age. Connacht's allies are none other than the very Fallen Lords from *Myth: the Fallen Lords*, when they were still champions of the Light.

Gameplay is shaping up to be roughly the same as the previous games, so fans will be able to jump right into the fray. The game is still mission-based in terms of its battles and objectives, with a very strong story to guide the action, and there's no active campaign mode, so the outcomes of previous missions won't have a dynamic effect on the next. There are 25 levels scheduled to be in the game and five unique netplay maps, along with over 30 types of units; many of them familiar, plus a number of new ones—from Berserks to Myrkridian Pack-Mages, Trow Iron Warriors and Ghol Priests.

The main development in the series is its big move into the total 3D realm. While *Myth* and *Myth II* were both graphically impressive with beautiful 3D terrain and physics, they were still confined to 2D characters and limited 3D acceleration support. In *Myth III*, all models—warriors, monsters, trees, etc.—are redesigned and fully 3D, using Open GL to pump out new eye candy carnage, so most, if not all, of today's 3D cards will be able to run the game on both the PC and Mac. As a result, the general physics and gameplay abilities possible now will be greatly increased. "Our 3D unit models will be using a skeletal-based animation system, allowing them to react to their scenery (like move their head to watch an oncoming foe, or to lean into a slope as they walk up it)," explains Scott Campbell, lead designer. "We are planning for 3D generated foliage that will sway in the wind or deform with a wight's blast. Translucent water will allow you to see into the river, as real-time lighting will play over the scene like a sunset."

With the long awaited sequel in the hands of Ritual members and hard core fans, *Myth III* is shaping up to be an exciting prospect. Whether or not outside developers will be able to live up to the Bungie development legacy is a question that won't be answered until next Christmas, however. Until then, strategy fans can only wait and hope that in the rush towards building a better *Myth* graphics engine, the developers don't forget to build a game worthy of its heralded name. —*Jason D'Aprile*



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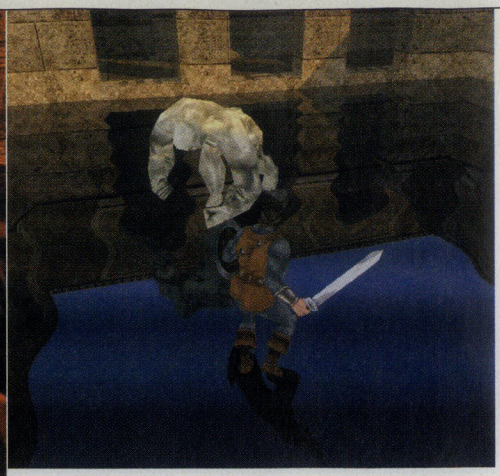
THE ASSAULT BEGINS NOV. 2000 • WWW.MICROSOFT.COM/GAMES/MW4

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB — Animated Violence

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Shadow warrior.

The reflecting pool.

Mastering the European Code

Codemasters lands on US shores with swords and SAWs

Each character has their own sets of combat moves and then as you progress and find different weapons and go up levels, you'll get additional moves.

ESTABLISHED IN 1986, UK-BASED CODEMASTERS IS ONE of Europe's top hardcore game makers, developing and publishing titles such as *Micro Machines*, *Colin McRae Rally*, *TOCA Touring Cars* and *Brian Lara Cricket* for PCs and consoles. Recent Codemasters products to appear on US retail shelves are *Touring Car Challenge*, *MTV Music Generator: Music Creation* for the PlayStation, *No Fear Downhill Mountain Bike Racing*, and most recently, the off-road racing game *Insane* ("It's not just driving, it's driving you *mad*!").

Nowadays, the company is ranging far and wide across the European continent to find games. Spain's Rebel Act Studios has been working for almost three years on a fantasy combat actioner called *Blade of Darkness*. Bohemia Interactive Studio is located in the Czech Republic, and they're working on a squad-level shooter called *Operation Flashpoint*. Both are variations on tried and true formulae, built with new engines by first time developers.



Carrying a torch for you.

Cutting edge

Rebel Act's swordplay game was originally called *Severance* as a reference to chopped off limbs and heads. But in the U.S., "severance" implies getting laid off from your job more than being beheaded, hence the name *Blade of Darkness* for the U.S. release.

The plot is some run of the mill stuff about getting a magical sword to kill a dragon, but John Foster, who handles the U.S. public relations for the company, readily admits this is all just a pretense for some good old-fashioned hacking and slashing. He categorizes it as "fantasy/action/exploration with a real focus on the action." You choose one of four unique characters—the Amazon, Knight, Dwarf, or Barbarian—and play from a third person perspective that shows off the character animation and allows for fairly complex combat. Although the controls are simple, Foster insists you can't get by on just button mashing.

"Because the focus is on combat, they've really worked on developing the combat abilities so that it's not repetitive," Foster says, "Each character has their own sets of combat moves and then as you progress and find different weapons and go up levels, you'll get additional moves. Your skills are constantly evolving."

Dying by the sword

Although this is a game where eating a hunk of cheese after a swordfight will heal even the most grievous of wounds, Foster doesn't shy away from using the "R" word: realism. There's clearly a physics-based system at work here. Successful hits will cause knockback; on one occasion, Foster's Knight is knocked off a cliff. Weapons and shields can get knocked out of creatures' hands. The Amazon's staff has a much longer reach in combat that makes it easier for her to keep out of harm's way during a battle. You can even pick up and throw objects to cause damage. Nearly any object can be used as a weapon. Whenever a character holds something, the interface

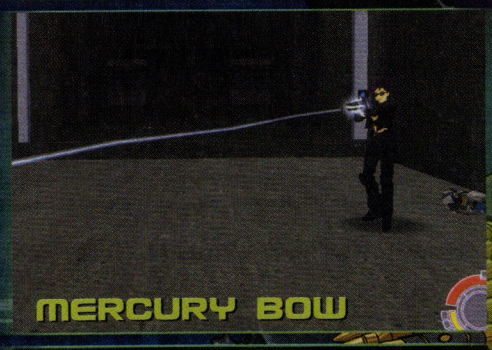
"Oni shines like no other action game on the market." - CGW
"A no-nonsense mix of hand-to-hand combat and double-barreled gunplay." - CNet GameCenter

Oni™

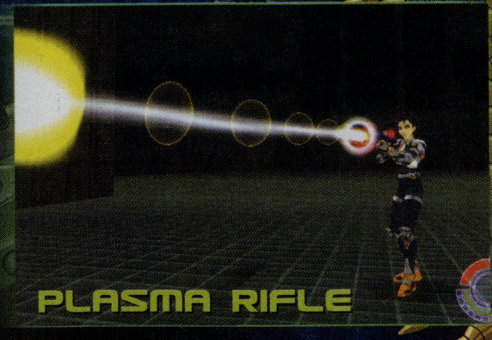
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Attention!

shows its attack power and defense power. Obviously a sword and shield is more desirable than a hacked off zombie limb and an empty bucket, but they're all viable weapons.

The engine doesn't look particularly spectacular, but it does some things well. The most impressive detail is the real time lighting and shadows. Foster picks up a torch and spins around in a dark room. An amazing array of realistic shadows dances across the walls. Rebel Act has also created some beautiful textures and they've done nice work with water reflections. And there are, of course, gratuitous blood splashing effects whenever someone is wounded.

As for the environments, they don't exactly scream innovation: snowy mountains, castles, temples, and catacombs. There will be some traps and fairly simple puzzles along the way. Since *Blade of Darkness* is obviously trying to keep the pace brisk, any items in the environment that a player can interact with are clearly identified by text tags. Whether it's a lever, a loose brick, or a burnable crate, you'll know at a glance that it's part of a puzzle and presumably you won't spend much time wandering around.

There are plans for multiplayer support in which a player's character from the single player game can fight other human-controlled characters in an arena mode. But it's worth noting that the game *Blade of Darkness* most resembles, Interplay's *Die by the Sword*, wasn't able to support multiplayer games over the Internet. Precise sword-to-sword physics aren't very tolerant of even the slightest lag. Foster wasn't able to guarantee that *Blade of Darkness* would support Internet multiplayer games.

When you get in combat, you're running down a village street or something like that and you'll get attacked from an open window or from a cross street because that's where the enemy planted themselves . . .



Hunting for tanks in the woods.

Bohemian strategy

The other game Codemasters will be releasing in early 2001 is *Operation Flashpoint*, which originally featured the unfortunate name *Status Quo*. Foster whips out the "R" word again: "They're really trying for realism with this," he says. "Think about how cool *Delta Force 2* was in a lot of ways. It's like that done right, more realistic." He points out that some of the guys at Bohemia Interactive served in the Eastern bloc military forces. "They've used their own knowledge to bring some realism into the game."

Operation Flashpoint begins with the player as a rifleman in a NATO military group fighting Russian rebels. In a typical early mission, you'll follow instructions from a computer-controlled commander. Depending on your performance, you'll eventually get promoted to the point where you become that commander and you get to lead your own squad of men, commanding them with number key shortcuts and your onscreen cursor.

The build he demos is still pre-alpha, so it's a little rough, with graphics that look washed out and flat. But as he follows a commanding officer down the slope of a hill towards a village, there's a genuine sense of tension and excitement knowing that the enemy might start firing any moment and watching the rest of the squad in action. The commander calls out orders and the men fan out as they approach the village. Foster wanders too far out of formation and gets yelled at.

But then the firing starts and the members of the squad react in a variety of different ways. Most of them drop and take cover. Some fire wildly. Some start calling out targets. It's a slice of chaos that starts to take form as a few enemy soldiers are spotted. Eventually, they're either killed or driven back into the village.

"When you get in combat, you're running down a village street or something like that and you'll get attacked from an open window or from a cross street because that's where the enemy planted themselves," Foster says, moving from house to house, occasionally zooming his view down the barrel of the M-16 to scan the bushes around a building. "They see you and they try to get you in the crossfire," he explains. Sure enough, the firing starts again and this time he gets killed.

However, for all his talk of realism, *Operation Flashpoint* has some definite arcade elements. You can drive vehicles, taking the position of a driver or a gunner. But it's all point and shoot and not terribly unlike *Interstate 76*. There's little effort to recreate the actual instrumentation or physics of the vehicles that have been modeled, which include Huey Cobras and A-10 Warthog ground attack aircraft.

Codemasters will release *Blade of Darkness* in February and follow-up with *Operation Flashpoint* the month after, so at the very least they'll be an interesting contribution from overseas to the post-holiday lull. —*Tom Chick*



Making a low altitude attack in a Huey Cobra.

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"Oni is an action gamer's dream." - CGW

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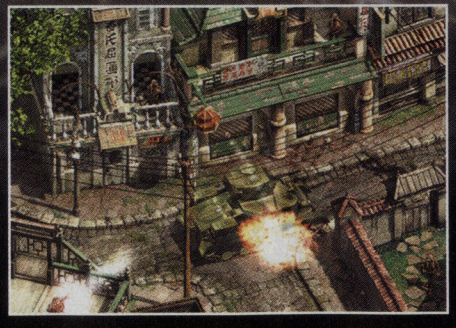
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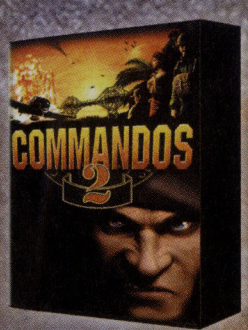




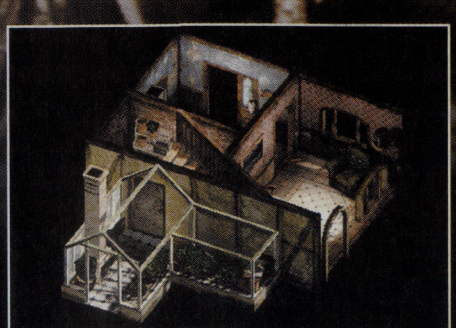
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DIABLO ANNIHILATOR

CHRIS TAYLOR'S *DUNGEON SIEGE* PUSHES THE ENVELOPE AS FAR AS IT GOES



There is magic in Kirkland Washington, much of which is taking place under the Big Top at Gas Powered Games. This small company, just east of Seattle, was tented in May of 1998 by ringmaster Chris Taylor, whose career is well known by lovers of real-time strategy gamers on all corners of the globe. Taylor started his career in the video games business 11 years ago at Distinctive Software, where the successful *Hardball II* helped to boost him into the limelight at a tender age. He served as the designer and project lead for Electronic Arts' original *Triple Play Baseball* and eventually hooked up with Ron Gilbert and Cavedog Studios, where he created the game for which he is best known, *Total Annihilation*.

After the follow-up expansion pack, *The Core Contingency*, Taylor was inspired, er, crazy enough to found his own company, something that he had wanted to do since he entered the industry. His current pet project is under the publishing auspices of Microsoft Corp., and it's rather easy to drool about, at least in its early stages. Under the dexterous fingers of approximately 22 people, *Dungeon Siege* is an action-role-playing game that contains elements of real-time strategy much like the ones in his last game.

by Cindy Yans

GAS POWERED WHAT?

Let's get this out of the way at the outset: Taylor is a madman—a charming and brilliant one—but a madman nonetheless. He describes himself as a "Publicity Whore," who will suck up to the press no matter what. But he does it so well... it actually seems he has nothing better to do than to graciously devote the entire day to show off his new baby.

"When I was five," he begins, as an explanation for his manic, slightly warped world perspective, "I went to the circus..." Although it would probably be inappropriate to bring clown-sex into this discussion, keep it in the back of your mind when you try to make sense of Taylor's own peculiar point-of-view. Clown-references abounded throughout the visit.

Why Gas Powered Games? "There's a couple of reasons," says Taylor, settling into manic storytelling mode. "Besides the fact that trying to come up with the name for a company that's really cool was hard, trying to do name searches costs you $500.00 every time you run the search. You get frustrated really fast, you know? So I said, 'You know what?' It's *Gas Powered* because as I was growing up...well, when I was a kid, er, my parents were divorced, okay this is going to get sad. Anyway, I had this electric lawn mower, you know, on the wet lawn, *Brrrrmmmmmm*. And the guy next door, he had a gas-powered one, you know, *Bzzzzzzzzzz!* And I had this electric weed eater, but all the guys on commercials had the big gas-powered weed-eater—you know, the one where they can just plow through and cut down small trees with theirs, and I was, you know, just stuck with this little *Brrrrrmmmmmm* thing. And *then*, the remote control cars, y'know, the electric ones, well, over the years, starting with when the electric cars were just okay, but the *gas* powered cars were really cool." He gets more and more excited. "And then of course I built my first gas-powered helicopter, because if you're gonna have a helicopter you can't really have a battery-powered helicopter. The only way you're really gonna get that thing to work is, well, actually I think they *do* have them now...after all battery technology is improving—a little caveat here—I don't want to just make blanket statements, since I can get called on them. So it really became a running joke of mine that *gas-powered* things are just..." [He pauses dramatically.] "So now, if you turn that recorder off, I'll tell you the *real* reason." And he did—honestly, you don't want to know. It might give you nightmares.



This bridge collapse illustrates the amazing depth of the terrain.

Producer and Gas Powered Games vice president Jake McMahon smiles and shakes his head as he watches Taylor blast forth like a thoroughbred out of the starting gate. McMahon is a comparatively quieter counterpart to Taylor, but the humor-filled twinkle in his eye shows him to be just as much the dervish, at least inside.

Siege Editor rocks

TOOLS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEVEL BUILDERS

Just like the avid *Quake* player's desire for level-building capabilities, the *Dungeon Master* mentality is prevalent in today's role-playing gamer. The whole notion of being able to customize the experience, populate it, and share it with friends plays a very strong part in the fun-factor for many people. Although everyone will be able to tinker with the Siege Editor, it will still probably be true that only one percent of the population will actually create usable content for the other 99 percent. But that one percent will have at its collective fingertips one of the most comprehensive level toolsets we've ever seen. It's not dumbed down, features are not being hacked and they're not going to try to get you to pay $12.99 a month to rent-a-programming-environment.

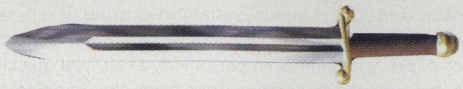
DOWN AND DIRTILY SIMPLE

The editor is not without its complexities by any means, but even beginners will be able to quickly slap together a basic conglomeration of rooms and corridors. Rather than laboriously applying textures to segment after segment, the Siege Editor allows you to stick textures right onto the geometry. Build a wall section for a dungeon and simply choose the texture for it. You can just build a hallway, and in a matter of 10 minutes you'd have the entire series of corridors, all concurrently textured. They hypothesize that if you're using a CSG type of editor, it might take a whole week for you to build a good level, whereas with theirs you can probably build up something worth testing and playing within a single day. "This is a key part of it," said Taylor, "because I think a lot of attention spans drop off after day three or four of trying to build the ultimate dungeon. 'This is not fun anymore. It was fun on Monday when I started but...yawn.'"

This editor offers more complex options in a much more accessible fashion than we're used to seeing. Normally you'd build a typical game dungeon, make some rooms and hallways, put some monsters in the dungeon, put in some treasure and give them all values, and assign weapons, and you're almost there–maybe you have a minor puzzle where you need to obtain a particular item. Of course, you can do that here as well, but to take it to the next level you can instantly build things like corner staircases that disguise hidden doors, pressure plates that open door panels, and walls that crumble away so you can discover secret rooms. You can conceal levers, and add extruded stones that open secret doors that lead to areas with tougher monsters and less intuitive, more rewarding puzzles. They're hoping to accommodate all levels of players from the eight-year-old whose idea of nirvana might be to place three monsters on some grass, to the would-be designer hoping to prototype her first game.



As the pack mules get fuller, their cargo illustration changes.



Taylor does not believe in the type of "Go forth and find this item and bring it back to me" activities in role-playing games. "I don't like that," says Taylor, "I don't know if *anybody* likes it. Here you are, gearing up to save the world, and there's this woman in town insisting you go find her cat.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE STORY

"What's the story about?" rarely evokes a straight answer from any RPG or adventure design team. Certainly you don't *want* to know the story, or at least not much of it, lest the joy of discovery during gameplay is ruined. All you are meant to know about the *Dungeon Siege* plot is this: "It is the basic overcome-the-ultimate-evil type plot." Although that may sound uninspired, the game is about a whole lot more t.han plot. It is mostly about the freedom to play as you wish to play. It is about rigorously full-scale visuals and about consistent excitement and action.

"I think we might get beat up a bit for going with this [much used] 'ultimate evil' premise," guesses Taylor, "But you know, I just really couldn't see fighting anything else. You have to fight for something that's really important. You have to fight for something that's jeopardizing your world." The team agrees that unless this is true, there is really no closure. The "nothing left to lose" motivation is a very powerful one.

Taylor told Writer Neil Halford, "I'm not a heavy text-dialogue guy where you're just clicking 'next, next, next,' and scrolling down, and reading pages and pages of story." In order to breathe some life into the central game story, however, Taylor charged Halford to come up with a huge back-story to provide the game world with a very complete history base, much in the same way that a pre-film or pre-play history helps actors make their performance more realistic to themselves as well as to their audience. "Even though we're delivering small bits of text and dialogue, we're still delivering a rich story experience, because it's *coming* from somewhere," explains Taylor. So how do they plan to deliver the back-story? Why, in the in-box comic book, of course. *Not.* The back-story will be transparent to the player and exists solely as creative inspiration for the story we *will* see.

They might generate little bits of the story for marketing purposes, however, and were able to describe just a bit of the history of the first town you will visit, Stonebridge. This town doesn't have a stone bridge, mind you—a man named Ethan Stonebridge founded it, and, explains Taylor, "That's where it all started." Mr. Stonebridge was a bit of a braggart who swindled the local goblins, making a mockery of them. Unhappy with this, they hired a hit-goblin to assassinate him. Once successful, they decapitated him, left his body in the middle of the town, and ran off with his head. 50 or 60 years later, the head turned up in a different part of the world, became reanimated by magic, and made its way back to Stonebridge where it spent years and years in an inn discussing politics with patrons as they came into the bar. The locals refer to it as Old Stony.

IT'S ALSO NOT ABOUT THE CHARACTERS

You play a young farmer, whom the team calls simply "Farmboy" or "Farmgirl." Taylor thinks that no other layer is necessary. "I really believe that if you've got a character that has a lot of

HAVE YOUR LAWYER CONTACT MICROSOFT

Speaking of prototypes, you will be able to distribute any of your creations on the Internet, but if you want to charge money for them, that's a horse of a different color. Generating revenue is not out of the question, however. Microsoft's lawyers have already established a way to handle licensing agreements. If you do want to self-publish a money-making game, you can get in touch with Microsoft's legal department to find out what type of contractual agreement they are willing to make. Ask for John and say, "Chris Taylor sent me."



A snowghoul.

Is there a certain amount of discomfort in baring the engine to the world? Sure. Just as he did in *Total Annihilation*, Taylor is using a data-driven design model. He has found that, in the past, people have hard-coded games into a fixed experience like a movie or a book. You write a story, you sell it, and that's the end of it. You're not allowed to change the pages of the story. Then when technology improved and engineering improved, a certain nervousness emerged.

"So I'm thinking, 'Hey if I build this engine that costs me hundreds of thousands,

personality and a lot of already-established issues, it separates you from that character," he says. "If, on the other hand, that character is a blank sheet of paper, with almost no personality at all, you quickly *become* that person, because you're going to dress them. You're going to pick whether they are bald, what color skin they have, what they're wearing, or whether or not they have a tattoo."

Initially the plot was going to include a "protagonist's secret identity" type of convention. They scrapped that early on. "I think it's harder sometimes to crawl into somebody else's story than to create your own, and that's what's cool about this concept," says McMahon. "You don't get thrown some random facts; the world unfolds as you play it."

They found that by driving gameplay stakes that are disjointed, random, and difficult into a fertile development arena, the story that you must tell to connect them becomes richer. Conversely, if you have complete, creative license in storytelling you will probably end up creating a smoother but somewhat more ordinary experience. Although that might sound like so much rhetoric, Taylor cements his faith in this premise. "If I were going to write a story now from what I learned," he explains, "I'd put a bunch of names and stuff in a cup or something and I'd pour them all out on the table like chicken bones and I'd say, 'Damnit, that's how I'm making the characters. Okay, he's gonna be the gay guy...she's the lesbian...' just because the pieces of paper... er, I don't know, something, er, okay can you guys help me out here? Feel free to jump in any time." Microsoft PR representative Shon Damron rescues him: "Well, it just forces you to come up with really creative, intriguing ways to connect these seemingly unrelated areas. I mean, you laid them out because the gameplay would be intriguing, but the story to bring them all together..." McMahon jumps in with "The story should not dictate how the game should be played. You should play the game on your own, and the story should evolve."

"Okay, we don't have any gay or lesbian people in

Join the party in the Spider Dungeon.



or, in this day and age, millions of dollars and I let any guy on the Internet create a level, then maybe I'm jeopardizing somehow my business'," explains Taylor. "But John Carmack has proven over and over and over again at id that you can let people go *crazy* and it just builds your brand, builds your audience, it builds everything. *Everything* gets stronger, nothing gets weaker. He gave away source code I don't know how many times. He said, 'here, not only can you build your own stuff, but you can have the source code.' And that made me go, 'What? The *source code*?' But he was like, 'If you're working on my source code from two years ago, I'm working the stuff that's going forward, so it's not helping you as much as you think.' After all, you want to be on the bleeding edge since technology moves so fast, so I managed to convince Ron [Gilbert, formerly of Cave Dog Studios] that this was a good idea, letting the community build and develop their own stuff and we had a great success with *Total Annihilation*. People just loved it, and to this day, three years later I've seen new units come out that surprise me." He's hoping the same thing will happen with *Dungeon Siege*.

HEX DUMPS ARE A THING OF THE PAST

Another exciting feature of the toolset is that it utilizes a text-data system. They used the same type of system for *Total Annihilation,* and indeed this hierarchically structured medium is used in a lot of high-end systems. The game information transcends the binary format so that you can so you can go beyond it into applications as simple as Notepad or WordPad, look at your data in ASCII and troubleshoot your game.

Taylor explained, "When we started Gas Powered Games, we built an even more powerful version of this type of system. We called it called 'GAS.' It is a text format system using straight ASCII that drives everything in the game. Like when you're in the Siege Editor, and you're placing a trigger, and you're doing all of this in 3D, and you're moving XYZ coordinates, and you're doing this and doing that, it writes it all out in a text format." They've already shared this with their colleagues via information they supplied to *Game Developer Magazine*.

GAS does not slow the game down because, of course, at the end of the day, they have a binary compiled version of it. They put all of their GAS into a file called the TANK. ("That's just us being clever," said Taylor. "Put all the gas into the tank... get it?") Eventually when you install the game you have one large but extremely compressed TANK file. At least at this writing, this kind of thing is state of the art in terms of data management.

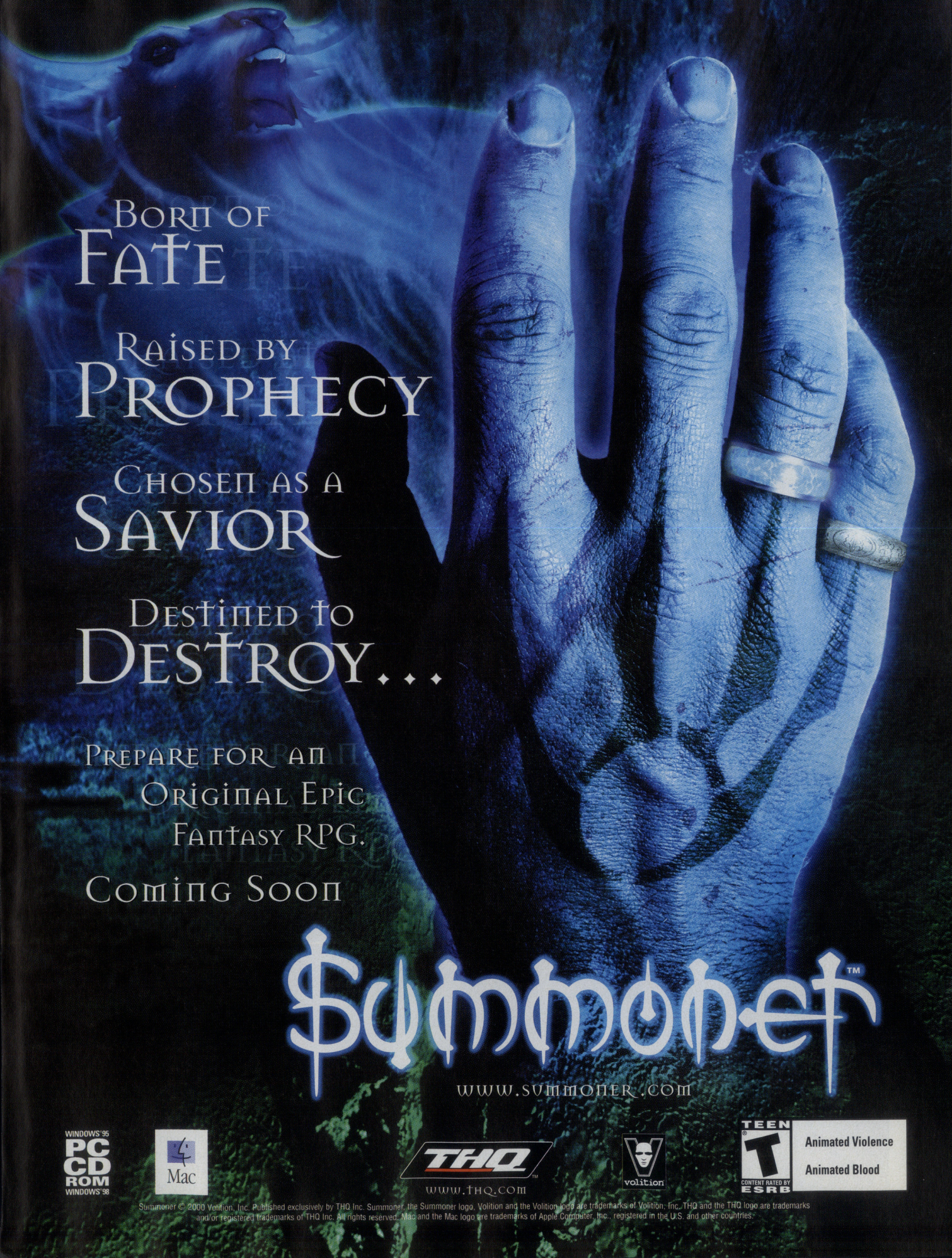
A HANDS ON LOOK AT LEVEL DESIGN

Gas Powered level queen Sarah Boulian provided a hands-on demonstration of the editing tool. The world is broken down into regions, so you load up a place, fill it, and you can "stitch them together" so that eventually they are all one dataset in memory. "There are nodes and node pieces and each node has doors that you can connect to other nodes," says Boulian. "You can see all the lighting information displayed, including the angle of the light, its color...It's like a large 3D jigsaw puzzle."

When she turns on the wire mesh view, it's evident how much you're saving each time you use the level tool. You're saving all the tessellation that the artist has to do manually, and all of the texture mapping. When you put the world together using this tool, saving all of that geometry manipulation, all of that texture micromanagement. Generally it takes an experienced artist to take a texture that maps to itself and repeats



Mangler



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the story, I know that was your next question," quips Taylor. "We have to compensate in real life right here. It's like life in the dwarven mines. You've got [those aforementioned] clowns and dwarves... Can we get all the cards out on the table here? Let's just say that after a good long day in the mines, the soap gets dropped pretty frequently in the dwarven showers." Don't ask.

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE SIDE QUESTS

Baldur's Gate and its sisters are replete with side quests, some of which add to the story, and some of which do not. Taylor does not believe in the type of "Go forth and find this item and bring it back to me" activities in role-playing games. "I don't like that," says Taylor, "I don't know if *anybody* likes it. Here you are, gearing up to save the world, and there's this woman in town insisting you go find her cat. And she gives you the map to the dungeon, and you're going, 'Y'know lady, your cat is really great, but...'" He prefers pragmatic focus on the whole save-the-world issue.

You can have up to eight characters in your party, each of which you hire along the way. They started out with a maximum party of ten, but after some focus research, better known as "asking around," they found that most people feel that eight will be more than enough. You will probably be able to develop enough efficiency with only four or six, but the whole "siege mentality" is probably triggered better the more characters you control. The goal is to be able to get through the game with just one or all eight characters. Now there's just that pesky balancing issue.

Character building is skill-based, and your party develops according to what behavioral decisions you make. Every time you use a skill—melee, ranged combat, or magic—it automatically increases in strength until you eventually achieve the next level of ability. But you won't find the "Go kill rats! Come back when you are a mighty warrior!" type of directive—followed by "okay then! All hail. You are now promoted to *spiders*!" You are immediately drawn into the action portion of the game and then begin to gain information that brings you forward.



in any direction and doesn't show a seam or a crack. Using this tool, you can just slap down tiles, and they all are nodes that work together, so you will not be faced with that problem. Even the greenest builders will find it easy to create a seamless world.

What's really exciting about the editor is that you actually get to see how the game lights and reacts in real-time–the weather, the torches, the shadows–there was even theme music playing. Every monster and character will have pre-set weapons and inventory, which will be parameterized, so you can quickly place things down and they will average out to have the power level that you want. You can individualize the parameters, though, in terms of how much mana is available for characters, how quickly they recover it, how much gold they have, what their equipment will be, and so on.

You can quickly use the sequence editor to issue game-like controls to monsters in the editor and set down patrol points, and multiple patrol points, and then just select another guy and do the same so pretty soon you have your creatures moving exactly as you would like them.

Once that is done you can edit the lighting. The light sources are numerous. You have little point lights, where you can place a single light source that casts in a radius that you determine, in any color you want. You can invoke a large directional light, and turn shadows on so that it looks realistic. Given a radius and a distance you can get pretty much whatever effect you want–in omnidirectional splendor.

SO WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

It certainly involves action. But Taylor and company's philosophy is to center your experience around freedom—around that open-ended feeling that you are able to play exactly as you choose.

Action drives the quest. You experience a cogent but brief connection with exposition each time you encounter another terrain (which they call "thematic regions" because "it sounds sexier"), or meet a character to add to your party. Nowhere in the game will someone ask you to do something trivial or unrelated to the main goal. Nowhere in the game will a conversation with a character unlock a door. Nowhere will you have to return to a character to recapitulate. "We don't want people to have to go *back* to people," theorized Taylor. "Nothing is less interesting than moving your party back through an area you've already been through." Everything you encounter will drive the action forward. And there will be no shortage of terrain. There are no terrain conservation efforts, and no loading screens. They're developing an



Perhaps the rain will wash away that pool of blood.

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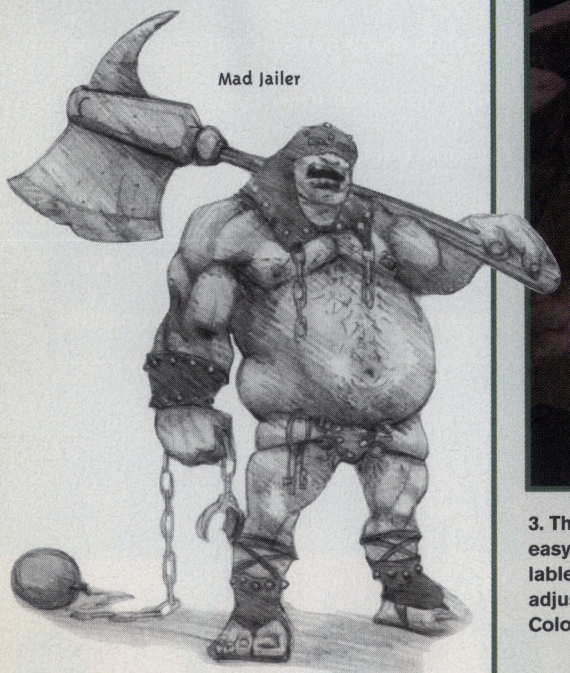
As for the freedom to play as you wish with no consequence except fun, Taylor spent a lot of time asking himself why designers seem to want place limits on your experience. He wants to make a game where you can play with as many or as few characters as you want, with the ability to develop them as you like, and the ability to change your mind about decisions. Picture this: You go to the armory and buy a piece of mail. Then you decide, well, "Oops I don't want it anymore." In most games, the worth of the armor has depreciated to almost nothing the second you leave the shop. Here, the merchant will issue a refund. The shorter the time you keep the item, the more you will recoup, because, the designers believe that even the worst stores have some sort of basic return policy in real life. Of course, if you happen to buy something from that guy with the trench coat in the back alley, well, then you're taking your chances.

"The worst part is if I click on the *wrong damn thing*... because I'm in a hurry, because I'm excited," Taylor proposes. "The game is working, it's got me immersed, I'm having fun, and I click on it and Whack! Oh nooooo. It *punishes* me. 'What are you *doing* getting all excited?' [he says in the voice of the game]. I mean, I'm like, who thinks of this stuff? Who punishes people with this kind of nonsense?"

FEATURES AND CREATURES

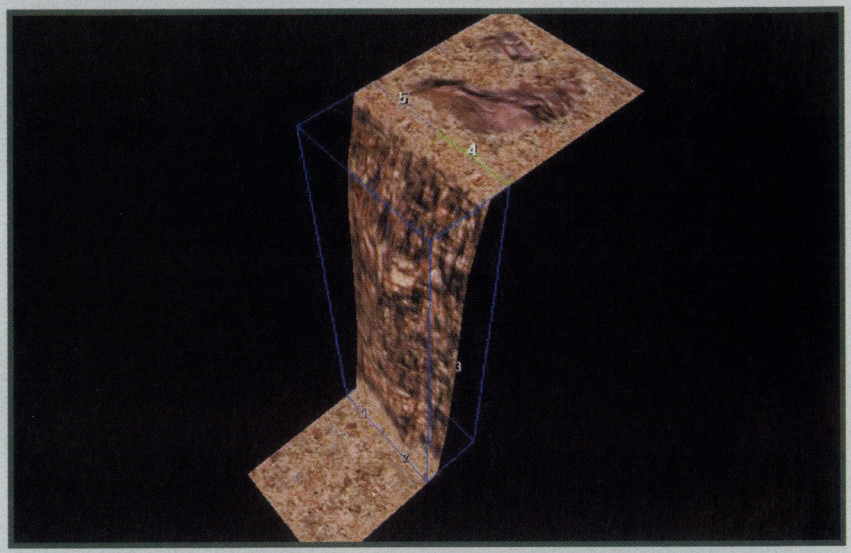
In addition to the freedom to design your own levels [see "Siege Editor Rocks"], the game's interface is just about the most intuitive and flexible in any role-playing game to date. You can move around every element on the screen to suit your style of play, including the character portraits. And of course, you can reconfigure the mouse and keyboard, and hotkey just about everything. You will be able to lasso select not only your party members, but also all the treasure that lands on the ground after battle. Custom formations and "postures" (behavior modes of characters) are completely configurable and savable. You can equip both a melee weapon and a ranged weapon as well as have two "ready spells," all available for selection at any time from the Active Weapon Portrait.

You can access all character inventories simultaneously and transfer items between them. (Hello, *Might and Magic*) And for once, you might (just *might*) have enough inventory space for that extra pair of pantyhose and straight razor. And you'll have four—count 'em, four—ring slots. Potions will be combinable, so you can take a swig of one with-



Mad Jailer

Siege Editor:
TAYLOR MADE FOR A DO-IT-YOURSELFER



1. Each terrain piece, or Siege Node, is modeled in 3D Studio MAX and exported for use in the Siege Editor. Assembling these nodes in the editor consists of selecting a node in the world, then choosing a node to be added from the file menu at the left.



3. There are a number of lighting options in the Siege Editor that set the mood in a few easy steps. Lights are available from uniform world ambience levels to the more controllable Directional Sources, similar to the sun, Point Sources, spheres of light with an adjustable radius, and Spot Sources, cones of light with an adjustable circle of effect. Color, intensity, and modes of effect are all adjustable for single or multiple light sources.

out finishing off the whole bottle.

The characters' inventories are not only a whole lot larger than those you're used to, they arrange items so that they fit automatically, and gold takes up no inventory slots. No more "Let's see, if I move that sword to the left, I can fit three more potions underneath..." Why has this not been the standard? "So the question is, if I give the player a big inventory, what am I losing as a designer?" Taylor asks. "And I sit there and I think, and I think, and I think, and I think...and I go, 'God, they're just gonna have fun.'" He shakes his head dismally. "And they're just going to be able to put everything in there, and they're just going to not have to go back to town so often, and, damnit...they're just gonna be [he gasps] focusing on the game; and on moving forward. And they're just going to have a big fun battle, and be able to drag everything into their inventory. And they're going to be able to pick all of it up so they're just going to be able to go into the next big fun battle right away... [hits himself in the head] OK, I give. Give 'em a bigger inventory. Give 'em what they want." What a guy.

To enhance inventory management even further, there are actual pack mules that are real party members rather than the pseudo-character mules that have become the staple of most inventory-rich games (Hello, *Diablo II*). Mules in your party actually fight monsters, using the dreaded "buck-'em-in-the-teeth" offensive.

With respect to monsters, there will be many, most of which they would not elaborate upon yet, but they may include Snow Gjouls, Beholder-like Furies, Wasps, Ice Warriors, Skeletons, something called a Three Horn, which looks like a triceratops wannabe, Fire Giants, and the requisite Amazing Dragon.

Here is a step by step pictorial describing use of the Siege Editor. In *Dungeon Siege*, all of the levels (er, "thematic regions"), from the Dark Swamp, Fury Dungeon, and Lava Caverns, to the Mountain Man's house and Goblin Inventor's Lair–all were begun step by step using this process.



2, Siege Nodes come in many shapes and sizes, and fit together in 3D space much like Legos. Our primary building set consists of bridges, corners, entrances, floors, halls, paths, ramps, rivers, and walls; both with and without water. These sets support thirteen different terrain types, to create truly varied environments.



4. Items, creatures, and lights are added to the world with simple mouse clicks. Instance modifications can be made within the editor, from simple rotation in 3D space to scale or status changes. Any creature's behavior can be specified through the use of command sequences, allowing NPC's to move and interact with one another and the world without direct player interference.

MULTIPLE MULTIPLAYER MODES

In addition to the ability to build and share levels online, there are several versions of the basic, up to eight-player, multiplayer game. First is the Traditional Game where you can play through the single-player campaign, *a' la Baldur's Gate*. The second is what they call the "Short Game." This version will last anywhere from 20 minutes to several hours. The Short Game is highly configurable and includes traditional concepts such as Capture The Flag, and several new experiences such as Kill the Sorcerer. You will be able to construe just about any goal you like, really, including capturing a specific item or gaining the most kills in a given time limit. You may play individually or in teams, and the game is savable at any time by the game host.

The multiplayer framework starts in an area





With respect to monsters, there will be many, most of which they would not elaborate upon yet, but they may include Snow Ghouls, Beholder-like Furies, Wasps, Ice Warriors, Skeletons, something called a Three Horn, which looks like a triceratops wannabe, Fire Giants, and the requisite Amazing Dragon.



Many contraptions and pressure plates dress up the ordinary dungeon experience.

they call the Staging Area, where the players assemble, choose maps and game options, and chat about how they are going to kick butt. After the game is over, players end up in the same area for a postmortem.

"We are leaving much of the multiplayer game open-ended so that new games can be dreamed up and made available for others to play," Taylor continues. "We are hoping to see lots of new stuff that only the creative minds in the gaming community could dream up. Much of our game has been designed to allow the *Dungeon Siege* community to jump in and start building on the foundation that we are creating."

Here a Krug, there a Krug, everywhere a Krug a Krug.

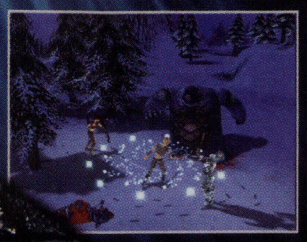
VOUS ÊTES MORTE

In many games, when the main character dies, it's Game Over, another example of punishment-heavy game design. Here, when your characters are reduced to zero health, they fall to the ground and begin to regenerate. Characters continuously heal and generate mana, so that eventually there will be enough health to bring them to their feet so that they can be fur-



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Auto-arranging inventory makes for a very convenient experience.



ther healed or can drink a potion. Hence you don't have to drag folks to town time and time again for resurrection. You can pick up the pieces, pass potions around, and the only penalty for the zero-health moment is that you have to wait, and use up potions. But you don't have to reload the game; you don't have to run to town with dead bodies in your backpack to visit the town healer. "Ayep, Bob died again, there goes another 500 gold."

"Our characters can take care of themselves in the field," explains Taylor. "They have everything they need right in the field, so they learn very quickly that they don't need to continually go back to town. They're always moving forward."

If someone dies *past* unconsciousness such that little pieces of his corpse are strewn all across the landscape, the key to resurrection is his skull. Party members can pick it up and resurrect it. The only exception might be if you are playing with just one character, and there is no one to drag your skull to safety.

This boardwalk was not modeled after Atlantic City's.

CAN YOU SAY "DIABLO?" WE KNEW YOU COULD

There's no getting away from the fact that *Dungeon Siege*'s most powerful influence has probably been *Diablo*. It's almost as though they have taken *Diablo* and "fixed it." Anyone who thinks that *Diablo* does not need much fixing will be surprised at how expandable this type of game really is. Here you'll see no loading screens, a wonderful physics model that doesn't take itself too seriously (remember *Trespasser*?), scalable resolution to your computer's maximum capability, 3D sound support, and incredible particle effects. You'll see a straight path through the game for no-nonsense players, and a curvy one for people who like a bit more exploration with extra rewards, over 60 hours of gameplay—and a complete game creation system included *absolutely free*.

Okay, enough. Others have already climbed the hype ladder to its summit. If *you* think this is something to look forward to, just take a look at the host of salivating fan and industry sites: DS.com, DS.org, DS Historian, DS Vault, Dsiege.com, D-S.net, DSRG, Packmule.net, and Taylor's own three-ring circus, Gaspoweredgames.com.

An open beta test is rumored, but there's certain to be a waiting line—from here all the way to the dwarven mines. Check early, check often. □

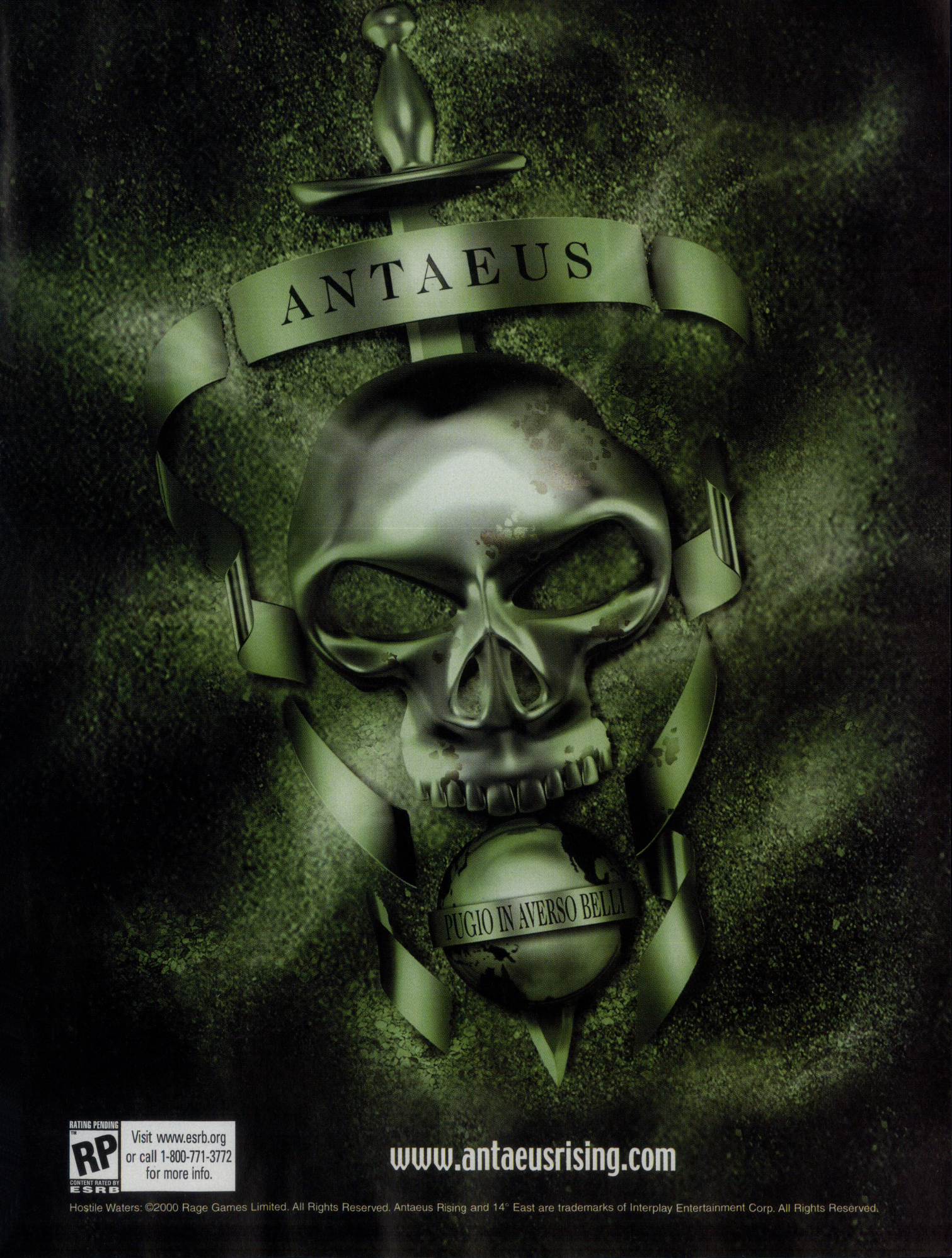
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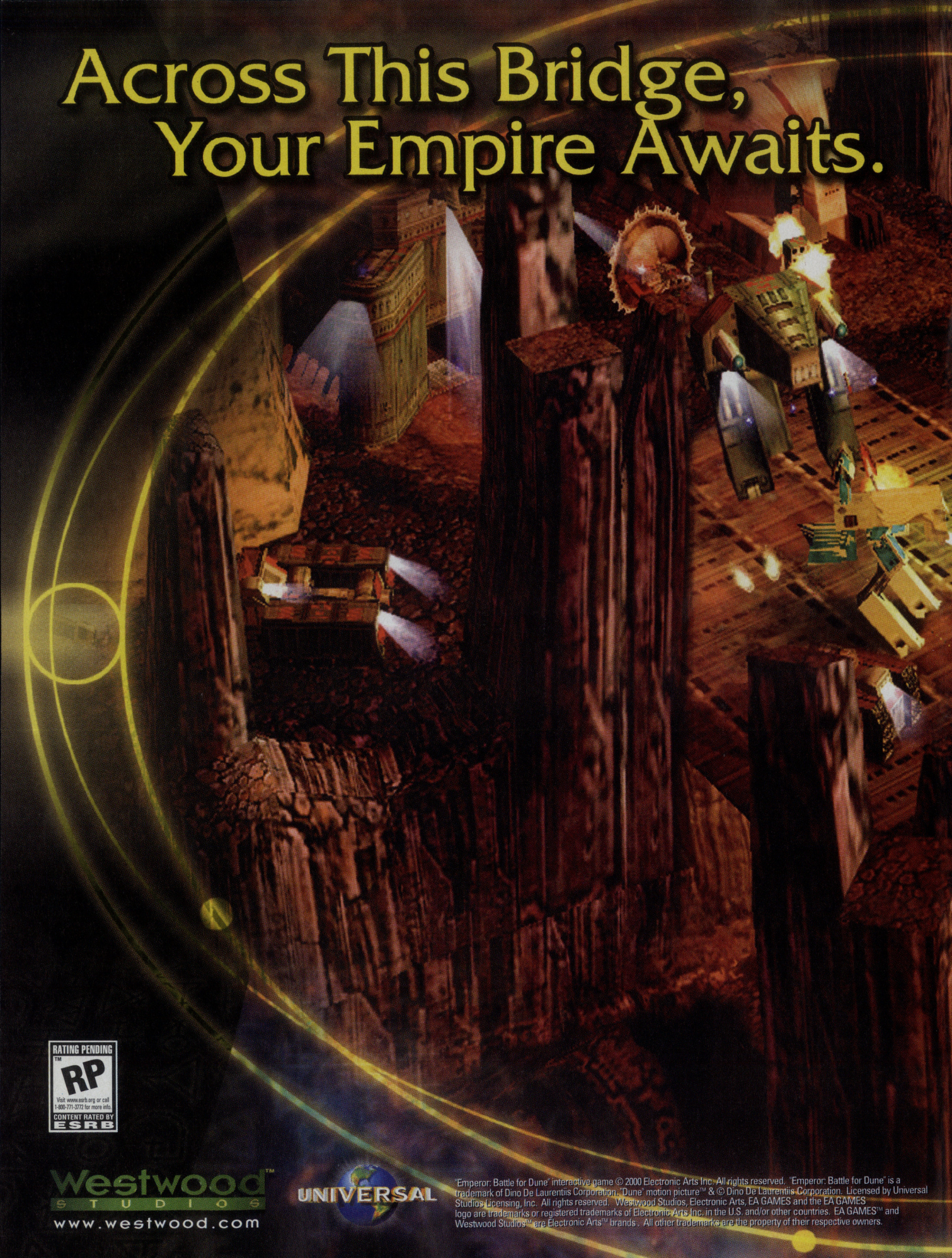
GENRE Role-Playing

DEVELOPER Gas Powered Games

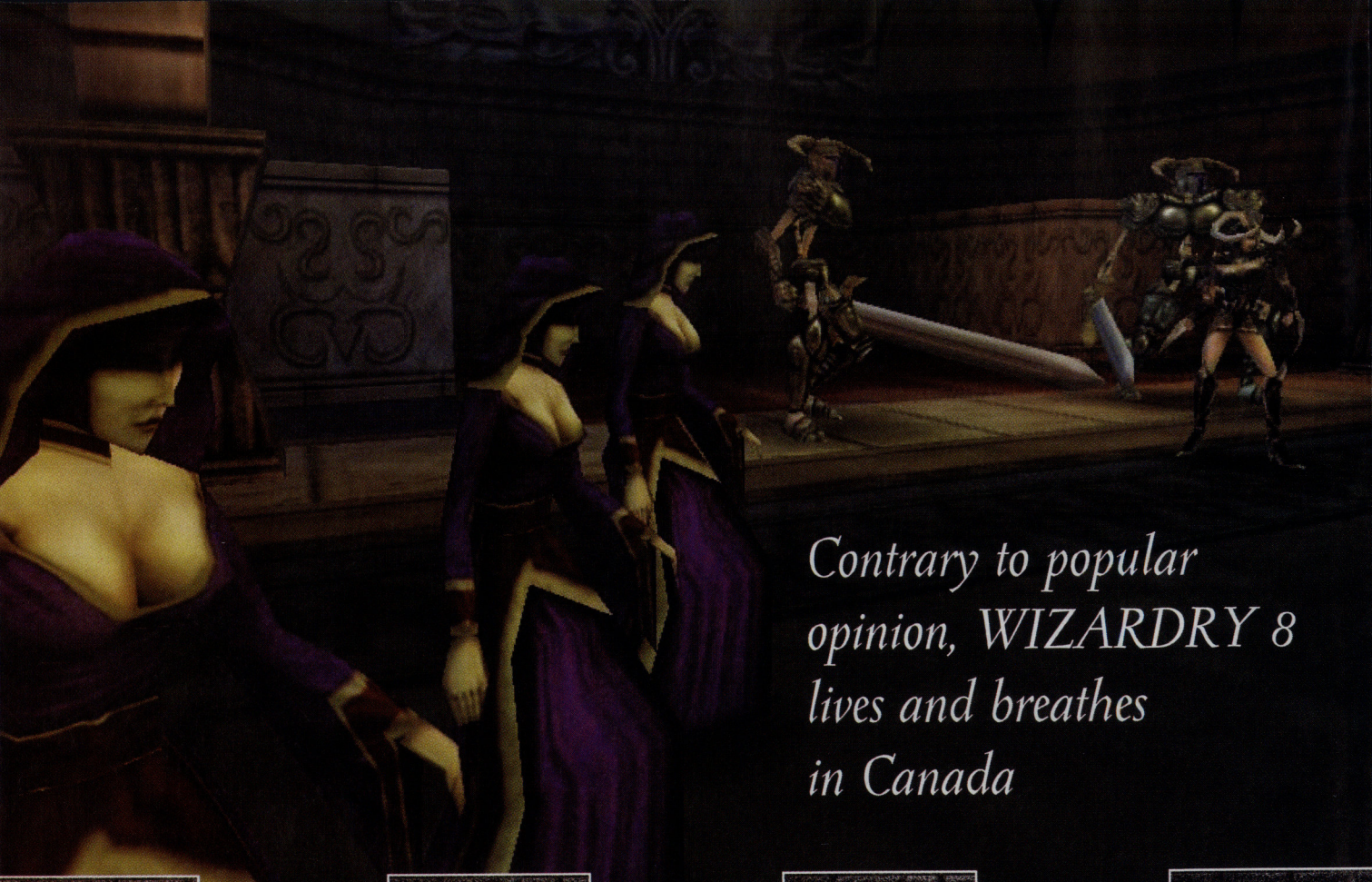
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Contrary to popular opinion, WIZARDRY 8 lives and breathes in Canada

The NEW DAWN of the DARK SAVANT

by Brett Todd

The home of one of the grandest names in computer gaming is a tiny group of offices tacked onto the back of an industrial park building in Ottawa, Ontario as some sort of afterthought. *Wizardry*, the preeminent role-playing trademark way back when Ronald Reagan was getting props for firing air traffic controllers and Huey Lewis could pack venues larger than the Dew Drop Inn, is currently headquartered in a depressingly modern setting bereft of dungeons, dragons, and comely elven maidens with more décolletage than fashion sense.

Somehow, that isn't right. While no one this side of Bellevue thinks that sword and sorcery epics are forged in majestic castles fully equipped with those de rigueur magic swords, any hardcore fan

would be a little shocked to see the illusion stripped away like this. Knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and it's never more oppressive than when it's informing you that the evil monsters who roam the darkened corners of Certain Death Keep began life as wireframe models overseen by some of the nicest people you could ever hope to meet.Said friendly folk are Ian and Linda Currie, husband and wife owners of Sirtech Canada and the custodians of all things *Wizardry*. Courteous hosts, yes, but they're presently going just a little mad with the pressure that comes whenever a game is about to go gold. *Wizardry 8*, the final installment of the trilogy that began nearly a decade ago with *Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge*, was supposed to have been finalized on December 15. So a visitor in late November gets to witness a lot of pell-mell craziness as bug hunting enters the final stages.

"There's been a lot of running around this past little while, as you would expect," comments Ian from across the cluttered desk on loan from his wife while a meeting takes place in his own office. "We've spent a lot late nights and weekends here as we go through the three beta stages on the way to certifying a gold master."

Never surrender

He's not kidding. The entire office is a hive of activity as Sirtech staff members go over last-minute details like adding sound to the opening cutscene and catching little bugs like menu text showing through behind icons. Quality Assurance people like Terry Brose are busily working their way through hundreds of quests and branching storylines. Richard Dancause and the rest of the art department can be found double-checking a seaside village home to a rather fearsome race of amphibians called the Rynjin. Sound specialist George Brooks has sequestered himself in the audio booth with his massive archives of special effect and speech files. Designer and self-professed "monster wrangler" Charles Miles is playtesting an encounter with the demon-like Rapax.

Such frenetic action is proof that the entire Sirtech team is dedicated to the completion of *Wizardry 8*. That alone serves as testament to the managerial skills of the Curries, as the game in question has been in production for some four years. Technical issues were first and foremost behind the delays. The Curries needed to take a fair bit of time exploring their options where a 3D engine was concerned. Some consideration was given to the Dark engine designed by Looking Glass for the original *Thief: The Dark Project*, but this notion was scrapped due to technical issues (Sirtech wanted a true 16-bit engine and Looking Glass was only supporting eight in the early stages of *Thief*'s development).

They finally settled on the "Surrender" engine produced by a Finnish company named Hybrid. Unfortunately, according to Ian Currie it wasn't a complete 3D engine at the time, and Sirtech had to do a lot of work refining and reshaping the rough materials to their purposes. "They provided the camera lens," he says. "But we still had to build the camera around it."

Hybrid further complicated matters by changing programming languages in midstream. Moving from C to C++ forced Sirtech to scrap a lot of material from the early stages of the development process. Once everything was clear to proceed, however, the company ran into perhaps the most significant logjam of all: Sirtech didn't have enough employees to do a proper job. A remarkably frank Ian Currie freely admits that he underestimated both the number of people and the raw skills that would be needed to tackle such a daunting project as *Wizardry 8*.

"This is a small development house here with just 25 people on staff. We didn't realize the resources that would be needed for *Wizardry 8*, and we also had to pull some of those resources away to staff other projects like *Jagged Alliance 2* and *Jagged Alliance 2: Unfinished Business*. We used some of the same producers on all three titles, for example.

"Also, to be honest, a number of the people we had at the very beginning weren't quite as good as they needed to be for a project like this, so there was a lot of learning on the go. It's been a slow and uphill battle getting good people in here, but now we're finally over the hump and have established a great team."

> "Why did we stick with it? Because we love it. Linda and I are both into gaming so much that I can't imagine us doing anything else but creating games or something similar that marries art and technology together. As long as we're able to do this, we will." -Ian Currie

Sticking with it

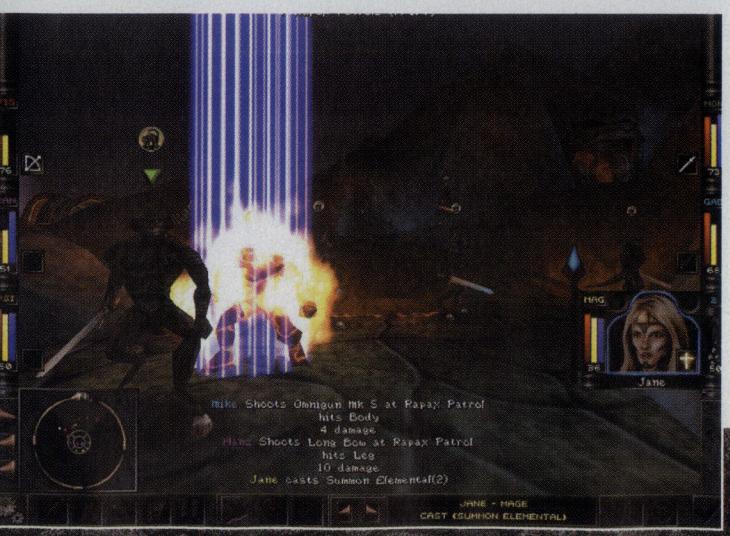
Sirtech Canada has also weathered both the closure of parent company and publisher Sir-Tech Software in 1998 and continuing uncertainty over who will publish the current effort. "We're in negotiations with several publishers at the moment, but I can't say at present who is in the running or even who the favorite might be," explains Ian Currie. "We're assuming a February publishing date, though this really depends on the publisher, so we can't commit to anything at the moment. The last thing we want to do is upset our hardcore fans like we did when we hit delays in getting a publisher for *Unfinished Business* [an expansion pack for *Jagged Alliance 2* that was finished in February, 2000 but not published in North America until November 2000 by Interplay]. We should be in a position to announce a publisher by mid-December when the game itself is finished."

The natural response to hearing such news is to ask why the Curries bother to go on in the face of such apparent corporate indifference. When the latest incarnation of one of the original role-playing series' can't get a publishing deal in the wake of *Baldur's Gate* and its sequels selling millions of copies, the writing would seem to be on the wall. It's not, at least it's not on any wall that Ian Currie has spotted lately.

"Why did we stick with it? Because we love it. Linda and I are both into gaming so much that I can't imagine us doing anything else but creating games or something similar that marries art and technology together. As long as we're able to do this, we will."

No idiot, the Savant

That diligence should come as good news to everyone who's been eagerly awaiting the chance to find out what happened to that nasty Dark Savant. When last we left the evil one, all

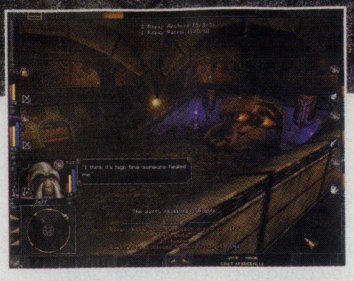




An earth elemental should take care of those devilish Rapax.

A scene that only John Williams could score.







Problem with those thieving Rattkin? They're nothing that a handy Mind Stab spell can't take care of.

Desperate need for healing spells aside, the architecture and colored lighting make this cavernous room an attractive place to visit.

Flint Golem. Glowing eyes. Dark cavern. Anyone else just jump from his seat?

the way back in 1994 at the conclusion of *Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant*, he had just captured the Astral Dominae, a powerful artifact that holds the very secret of life itself. Your bold party of adventurers follows the Dark Savant to the planet Dominus, where he is searching for two additional items, the Chaos Moliri, which contains the power of change, and the Destinae Dominae, which is the repository of knowledge. Whoever combines all three relics will take part in a process known as the Ascension and gain the strength of the Cosmic Lords, godlike beings with nearly omnipotent powers. Many characters are racing to gain this great reward, and you're involved from the moment your spacecraft crashes on the surface of Dominus.

In case you didn't play the last two *Wizardry* games, or if you did but still aren't able to remember all that, there will be a separate introduction to get newbies up to speed. Those who adventured through *Wizardry VI* and/or *Wizardry VII* will be able to pick up where they left off and import their characters (if they still have them lingering around on a floppy after all this time) into the new game.

Daikatana with dwarves?

Despite the lengthy development time, *Wizardry 8* doesn't look like *Daikatana* with dwarves. It uses a fully 3D engine that can go as high as your video card in terms of resolution and it supports both 16- and 32-bit color modes. Playing the game in Ian Currie's office reveals a title that may be a little on the dated side where visual presentation is concerned (if you need a benchmark for comparison's sake, think *Thief II: The Metal Age*), but delivers depth, story, and an interface that might just surpass most contemporary RPGs.

While the saga unfolds from the first-person perspective of *Wizardry*s past, the designers have taken great pains to get away from the "six character tank" criticisms that have plagued this style of RPG. For example, veterans accustomed to first-person shooter-style tactics such as the old "*Eye of the Beholder* two-step" will find that enemies surround the party here. Concern yourself too much with what's onscreen and in your face and you'll be headed to the fantasy world equivalent of Boot Hill in no time. Sophisticated monster AI means that foes will often try to converge on those weak sister mages at the back of the line. Even a lowly group of rats is sure to spread out and assault multiple adventurers simultaneously, and more intelligent adversaries such as the dreaded Death Lords will key on those vulnerable, yet still powerful, magic-users and try to take them down first.

Helping you keep track of the ongoing battles are two radar screens

DOWN THE ROAD...

Full steam ahead on the next Jagged Alliance

Even though a few finishing touches remain to be placed on *Wizardry 8*, Sirtech Canada is going full steam ahead on the latest addition to the company's other flagship series, *Jagged Alliance*. Preproduction work on the third iteration in the critically acclaimed mercenary management simulation line has begun in earnest, even though a publishing date is at least 18 months away.

"A lot of the intricate design stuff is complete," notes Ian Currie, who pioneered the original *Jagged Alliance* concept in his previous life as the owner and operator of Montréal-based development house Madlab Software. "Much of the artwork has been finished and we're just about ready to start prototyping what we've got to prove our design."

At the present time, that design contains a world that is three times as large as that seen in *Jagged Alliance 2*. Most of the gameplay elements will remain the same, although the interface has been tweaked to incorporate the better aspects of both traditional turn-based play and real-time. This is expected to be fairly configurable, so veterans of the series won't feel lost at sea and newbies coming from more commercial strat titles like the *Red Alert* lineup will be able to slide right behind their mice and start hiring bloodthirsty killers.

Multiplayer has been a major component of the design docs since work started on the project. Critics of the previous title in the series focused in on the lack of Internet multiplayer modes of play, and Currie has vowed >> that this will be a strong aspect of the new game. He even goes so far as to say that the designers are looking at the project from the "point-of-view" of the multiplayer option and then adapting this to the single-player campaign.

Of course, Currie isn't planning to fix what isn't broken. The solo campaign will be even more developed than that seen in the previous titles in the series, with a plot that is "character-driven and story-intensive." A general scenario has already been worked out, as has a brand new lineup of, um, colorful mercenaries. Expect to enjoy the company of yet another unforgettable crew of sex addicts, druggies, and cunning killers.

Further beyond *Jagged Alliance 3* lies *Wizardry 9*. Most of details are (predictably) up in the air at this point, though Ian and Linda Currie and top members of the design team are committed to making this title a priority once the current workload has eased up. Lead designer Charles Miles is among those who can't wait to "begin afresh." He's one of a few staffers who aren't completely happy with the current trilogy's blend of fantasy and science fiction, and feels that perhaps some fans never got comfortable with a realm where mages and gunslingers belong to the same party.

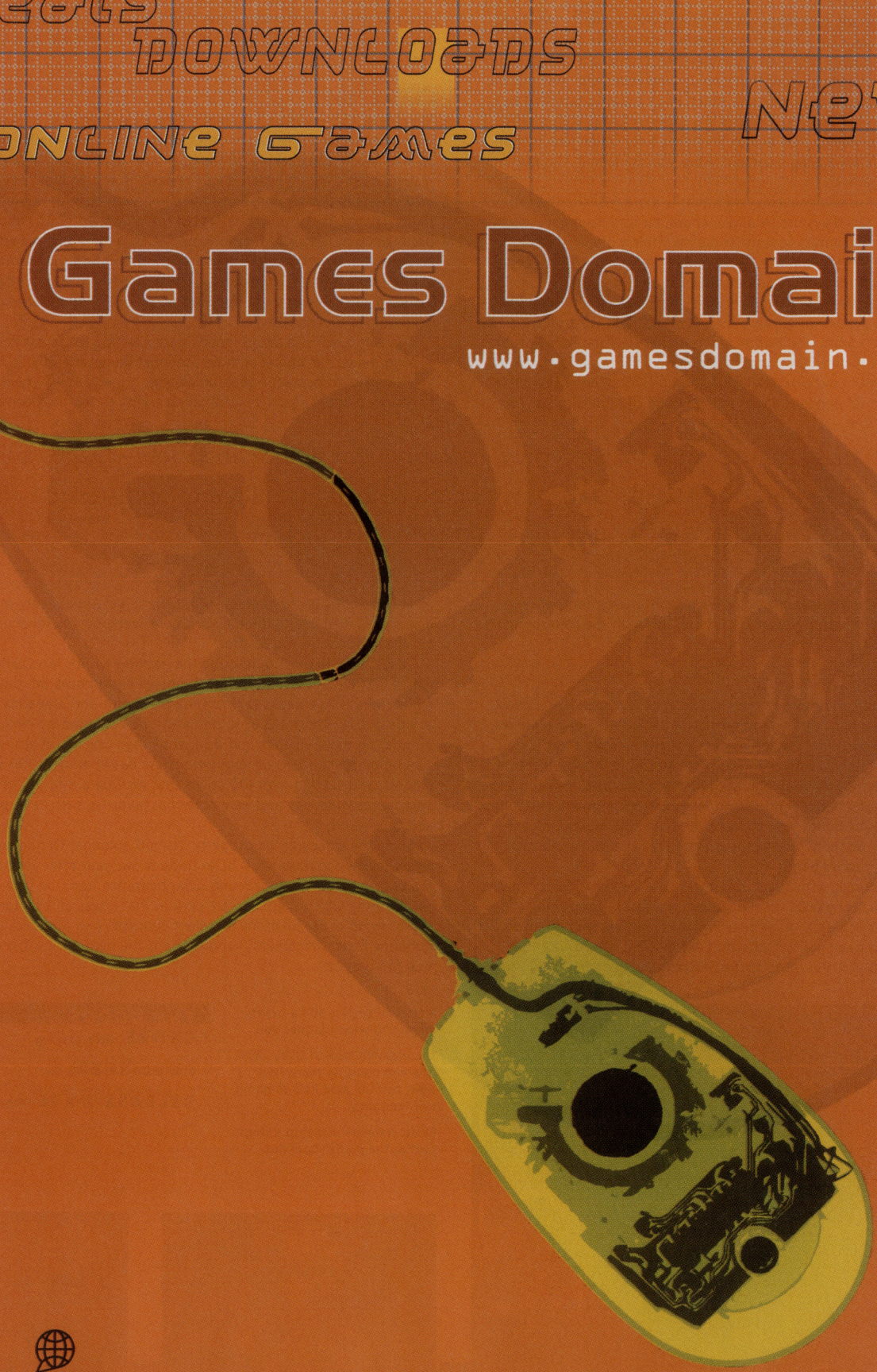
"The plan for the future is to return to a more full-fledged fantasy element," said Miles. "Some people have doubted the sci-fi stuff all along, and we continually run into questions like: 'If we're in a world with spaceships, how come everybody has to walk everywhere?'"

Good point. And a good reason why we'll likely see more swordplay than space travel when the *Wizardry* series resumes. □

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that depict the location of monsters and the party's current formation. The former lets you watch over those flanking maneuvers and the latter depicts the position of your party members. Additional assistance is provided by color-coded chevrons that pop up over monsters' heads in the main viewing window to inform you which beast is being targeted by which character. The end result of this is a complex but fulfilling (and certainly unique) design that blends the immediacy of the first-person perspective with the strategic combat most recently seen in the *Baldur's Gate* family of games.

Combat itself uses a phased system that is more realistic than the standard turn-based system. A player character and his enemy each decide what to do simultaneously at the beginning of every round. Then there is an initiative check, with results displayed on your screen. For example, consider an encounter between a Fighter and a troll. The Fighter opens battle by choosing to attack at the same time that the troll decides to evade. Initiative is then checked, and the troll wins. So during that first round, the Fighter will miss because the troll won the right to evade the blow. This accurately models the basic fact that the Fighter shouldn't know what the troll is going to do. The approach is truer to traditional pen and paper role-playing than most other con-

nize this feature as the same one that lent so much character to memorable mercenaries such as Bobby "Steroid" Gontarski and Cynthia "Fox" Guzzman.

Can we talk?

NPC interaction involves a dramatic step away from the "shopping list" dialogue choices presented in other RPGs. Instead of simply choosing a path to follow and clicking on the appropriate number, *Wizardry 8* players must carefully listen to conversations and pick out keywords to incorporate in further questions. So if you want to interrogate a friendly trader Trynnie (easy-going natives of the planet Dominus) about the Destinae Dominae, pay attention and see if he mentions the artifact. If he does, highlight the relevant words in his text and fire them right back at him in the form of a question. Popular words and phrases can be saved so you can easily ask standard questions of all the characters encountered on your travels.

Characters will also adopt moods based on how you treat them. Fail at picking the pocket of one of those aforementioned friendly Trynnie and you'll make an enemy for good unless you bribe your way back into his or her good books again. In addition to trying to rob the people you meet, you'll be able to interact with them in just about every other way imaginable. Feel free to threaten or cajole everyone you meet until you get the information you're after.

Those 168 or so hours will be occupied by exploring and plundering more villages and dungeons than one could easily count, slaying more than 300 different monsters based on over 100 unique models, and casting over 100 spells that include old favorites... and new...

temporary CRPGs, because the focus is on fluid interaction between adventurer and monster; you must act and live with the consequences, not simply react.

Beyond career counseling

Character creation and development is almost as revolutionary. Choose from 11 races that encompass fantasy standards like elves and dwarves and more sci-fi creations like the Wookie lookalike Mooks and the dog-like Rawulfs. A total of 15 diverse classes are available. Again, there's a nice mix between traditional roles and more eclectic ones. You can stick with the dull as dishwater Fighters and Mages, or experiment with radical professions like the Gadgeteer, a MacGyver-type adventurer who can whip up deadly weapons with nothing more than the proverbial chewing gum and a few rubber bands.

Every class comes with special abilities. The Valkyrie, for example, is able to use her Cheat Death skill to avoid a fatal blow, while the Lord has access to Health Regeneration. Each individual can also be assigned given personality traits that are evident in the way that they speak and act. Veterans of the *Jagged Alliance* series will recog-

"Vast" only begins to describe the gaming world. Ian Currie estimates that the average person will require eight hours per day for a minimum of three weeks to finish the main plot and a healthy number of side quests. Those 168 or so hours will be occupied by exploring and plundering more villages and dungeons than one could easily count, slaying more than 300 different monsters based on over 100 unique models, and casting over 100 spells that include old favorites like Acid Splash and Mind Flay and new potential favorites such as Hypnotic Lure and Quicksand.

Given the legacy of the property, its hop amongst technologies, its weary journey to trade show after trade show, year after year, its aging fan base, and finally its seeming disappearance from the face of the earth during which skeptics were certain that it was all but doomed, it will be good to see all of the excellent concepts and ideas realize a bonafide "release moment," and perhaps the beginnings of a brand new fan base. □



A Fireball spell is still a great answer to what plagues you.



The mummy strikes! Okay, well, he's just hanging there right now, but I'm sure he's thinking evil thoughts.



Rustic hamlets make up a large part of the planet Dominus.

THE GOODS

GENRE Role-playing

PUBLISHER TBA

RELEASE DATE February, 2001

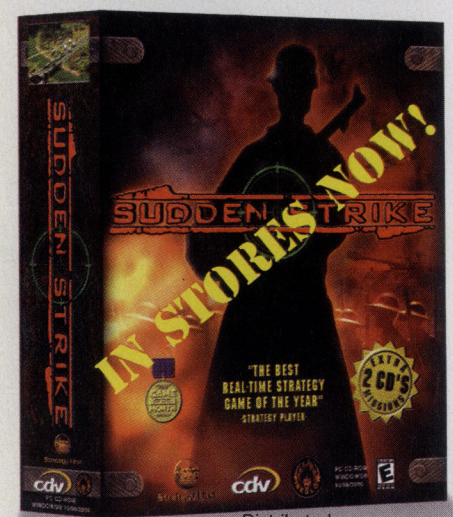

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In this day and age, the concept of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game is no longer exciting. There are countless in production; they need a "hook" to grab gamers' attention. Anyone who's played a game like EverQuest knows that fighting a mobile monster is eventually pretty boring. Once you've slain a hundred or so of these foul beasts, you move on to face others that have the same body model but different texture colors. It has been a general theme in many online games, but some keep things interesting for competitive players by adding a little spice.



Enlightened online Conflicts

Dark Age of Camelot defies current trends and pits players against each other

by David Ryan Hunt

In the case of Mythic Entertainment's *Dark Age of Camelot*, they're defying current trends and focusing their design on player-versus player conflict.

A familiar land

Many online games boast about their unique world background and rich history, but *Camelot* is taking a different road. There are three Realms among which you can choose, each based in a familiar setting. Albion, Midgard and Hibernia are based upon Arthurian Legend, Norse Mythology and Celtic Lore respectively. Mythic hopes to draw from these familiar backgrounds to create a world that is immediately recognizable and captivating for a large portion of the players. Rather than sticking to either fact or fiction, they intend to bring in the best of both worlds.

Beyond their historical backgrounds, each Realm sports four playable races and eight classes, hopefully offering a unique set of abilities depending on which side you choose. And you must choose a side—once you create a character in one realm you will be unable to start in another Realm on that server, and you won't be able to communicate with the other Realms. Rather than allow the random conflicts in a game like *Ultima Online*, there is a structure for player fighting. The three Realms are at war with each other, so you can only fight members of opposing Realms. Player-versus-player conflict is not intended to be a big factor early in the game; instead, it is for mid and high level players. Within each realm there will be several artifacts and relics of power. While these are under the control of the realm they belong it they will boost the strength of the characters within that realm. Since these will confer bonuses to the realm, the primary goals will be to join raiding parties to capture these artifacts and to respond to calls for help when your kingdom is under attack.

The road often traveled

Currently closed beta testers can choose between any of the four Arthurian races and six of the eight classes. You can choose between the average Britons, the intelligent Avalonians, the quick Saracens, and the powerful Highlanders. Each race varies in build, and you can choose your face and your height. Of the eight classes in Albion only six are in the beta: paladin, armsman, scout, cleric, wizard, and sorceror (no minstrel or theurgist). Each class has a relatively obvious specialty, but they are not clones of the classes from previous games. For example, paladins possess various group-enhancing spells, but right now they have no healing capabilities. Eventually it will be possible to choose a career as a means of specializing your class. Armsmen will have the option to become knights, mercenaries, archers or combat engineers.



A group of six searching for relatively high level beasties.

Knights are more powerful than mercenaries, but they are restricted by a code of honor. The combat engineers look especially interesting. These characters will have the ability to build siege engines. We can only wait and hope that turns out to be a really engaging aspect of Realm warfare. Some career paths are shared between different classes; such as paladins becoming knights and scouts advancing to archers.

All of the Realms have their own variety of fighters, clerics and mages, but it is not as simple as that. The fighters that hail from Midgard demonstrate a prowess that extends above and beyond other warriors, but the spellcasters in Midgard are weak. So if you want to play the best fighter you'll go to Midgard, but then what about magic? The mages will be weaker in Midgard than in the other Realms, but then they will be even more important because there will be a deficiency that must be balanced. Thus by sacrificing some of your overall strength as a mage you could become a vital member in Midgard groups and raiding parties. And of course the opposite could be true for warriors in Hibernia.

A simple plan

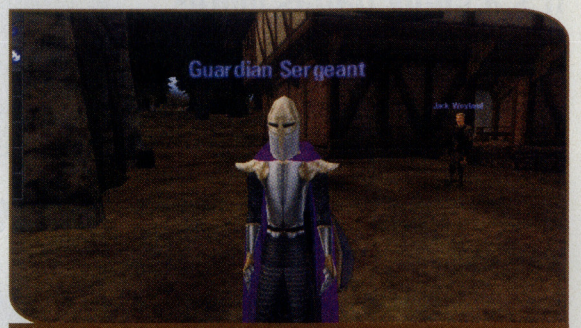
The current build version of *Camelot* can be fun to play and experience, but after a romp through Albion most of the world remains cloaked in shadows since it is in an early development beta stage. However, the game has been in full-scale production for nearly a year now.

Producer Matt Firor says that they were in a good position to make the next generation of graphical online role-playing games, and the initial idea for the game was marked by a simple idea that branched out and took wings to become what it is today. "We were going to make a 3D version *of Darkness Falls* [an older Mythic text-only online RPG]," he explains, "but then Mark Jacobs, our President, came up with the idea of making it based on the Arthurian legends. It was a simple leap from there to add in the Norse and Irish legends, and from that the project was on its way."

Player killing fear

And now they have one of the more compelling online games on their hands. If you've had trouble with getting player-killed in the past, that doesn't preclude the possibility that you'll enjoy this game. Although the player-versus-player system may change once it undergoes testing, it is based on giving Realm points as rewards instead of the loot from a player's corpse. As you accumulate points you can spend them on abilities to enhance your character, thereby making someone who's active in the war stronger without taking away the work of the dead player.

One major concern for this style of game is convenience. Mythic plans to implement faster, but limited, means of travel that will be available to all classes. This includes horses and restricted teleportation abilities. Other convenience factors include a quest journal that is used both as a record sheet and a quest journal. Another possibility is a counter that keeps track of your monster kills.



"I want the kind of armor that guard has!"


Outnumbered but not outmatched.

Currently, monsters can hit you in any of several body locations, and the damage you receive is based upon the armor you have in that spot and your overall defensive capabilities. You cannot target locations yet, but it is an important part of the plan. "We will have combat styles that will attempt to exploit a weakness in an enemy," says Firors. "These are not skills, instead they are styles that you can learn from your trainer, quest, or special NPC."

Substance

The true substance in this game is the player-versus-player conflict. Most games reach the point where, according to Firors, there's simply nothing more to do. "[In *Camelot*], players will get the same experience as *EverQuest* or *Asheron's Call* in the first part of their careers—when they level up by grouping with friends and explore and fight monsters."

The difference for this game is that it does not die when you attain a high level. "That's when *Camelot* really shines," he says, "because that is when the player gets involved in player-versus-player combat, and defending his Realm from invasions, or invading other Realms himself. It's a whole other game at that level—there are Relics to protect and steal, enemies to kill, and enemy Realms to explore."

Player-killing has been the bane of most of the earliest online role-playing games. Perhaps Mythic will realize the way to make it the highlight of this one when it goes live this upcoming summer. ■

THE GOODS

GENRE Online Role-playing

PUBLISHER Mythic Entertainment

RELEASE DATE Late Summer 2001

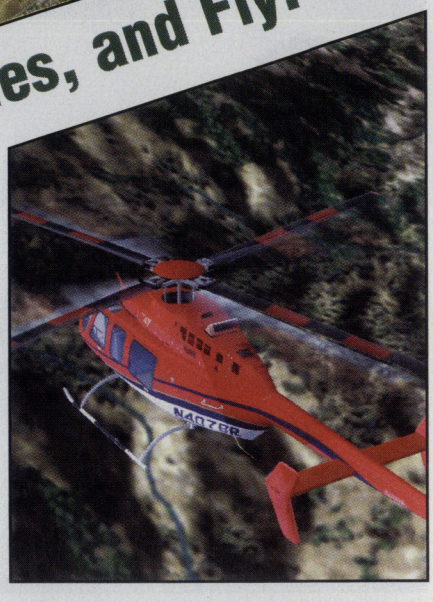
ALMOST TERMINAL

by Jason D'Aprile



Get ready to take the skies, and Fly! too





It's a chilly Dallas morning in December, and below freezing temperatures have caused a record number of vehicular accidents in one day due to the sudden and previously almost unheard of ice that covers the landscape. On top of that, the sun isn't working, virtually speaking. While the ice and cold can be coughed up to divine providence, the whole sun thing is definitely Craig Reichard's fault.

On this day (and most others), everything is his fault, since he's the man responsible for most of the eye candy-laden visuals of Terminal Reality's *Fly! II*. And that's a whole lot of eye candy to deal with. But the sun will soon get fixed, even if the wintry weather outside persists. The scene here is a familiar one, and in a standard game developer's office, replete with various computers, game posters, and a sensible fixation on disarray, Richard Harvey, the game's co-producer and programming lead, and producer Brendan Goss start to talk about the sequel to *Fly!*.

It's Microsoft's fault

"We started working on *Fly!* a few years ago, because at the time, Microsoft had just sent their port of *Flight Sim* over to Windows 95," Harvey explains. "It was obvious that they weren't really innovating or introducing anything new; they were just plastering a Windows UI over the same old stuff with the same old engine.

"We had been working with simulations for quite a while, and had the expertise and talent in house. The timing was right and 3D cards were becoming accepted, so we knew we could pull off the look we wanted."

Harvey's devotion and passion for the project is at once impressive and disconcerting. He introduces himself with the usual salutations, but caps the greeting with the news that he has to leave in twenty minutes for the hospital in order to prepare for his cancer surgery the following day. He just wanted to be here to make sure the game was shown off properly. It would seem that diehard flight sim fanatics on both sides of the fence are equally as passionate about what they do.

"At the time when we rolled out *Fly!* we knew that there was no way in a two year development time frame we could beat anyone, particularly Microsoft. We tried to find out what areas we could be strong in, what we could really stand out in," Harvey continues. "One area was the cockpit. Our cockpits were fully functional, every switch worked. That definitely made us really popular with the high-end guys. Areas where we were really weak were our visual models, eye candy and ground scenery."

Aerial eye candy

Eye candy, it would seem, won't be a problem this time around, especially when the sun actually starts to work again. Utilizing a completely new 3D engine, *Fly! II* will have far improved visuals. Compared to *Fly! IIK*, ground texture resolution is four times greater (30 meter resolution compared to 7.5 meter resolution), the visibility range is five times greater (60 miles, up from 10), and the elevation mesh is four times greater

"We spent quite a bit of time working on elevation data and trying to provide more detail and landscaping," explains Neal Hall, the software engineer in charge of the terrain engine. "In *Fly!* we had one point of elevation for every 2,000 meters. *Fly! 2* has one point for every 300. The Rocky Mountains will look a lot more realistic."

Other notable effects in the game will take advantage of DirectX 8 compatibility, so sim fans will get such goodies as bump-mapped clouds, smoke, contrails, heat shimmer, prop blur, and prop wash (Bell 407). Terminal Reality is also coding its coastline system to make all water in the world reflective (so you

can see the sky reflected in the water). On top of that, *Fly! II* adds moving vehicles at airports like luggage trams and fuel trucks, and there will even be flocks of birds that roam the skies.

Flying for everyone!

"With *Fly!*," Harvey explains, "the manual was basically an instruction for flying a real plane. It didn't explain how to use the product, and people got frustrated. This time, we'll have a tutorial copilot calling things out, and a tutorial script with a trainer pilot, so that people can right get in and start playing without the manual."

"We're hopeful that *Fly! II* will attract both hardcore and casual gamers," Goss adds. "We've tried to design for both, and the adventure mode and multiplayer should help. With the adventure mode, we're trying to push the entertainment value, and the co-pilot can handle all the mundane systems, or you can do it all yourself. We're not removing any of the systems we had in the original, but we're adding layers on top of that so that new users don't have to do everything."

There will be eight planes—small planes to jumbo jets—including a helicopter. It will include 11 new areas, ten cities and a training area. The developers are using their TerraScene technology, which essentially mimics the accuracy and detail of a satellite map by taking all data of land, coastline, rivers, roads, railways, lakes, streams and other natural formations, then creates an image that accurately matches the geography of a particular location. The game will include New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Denver, Washington D.C., London, Paris, Vancouver, Hong Kong, Calgary, and Columbia Gorge (the training area), so expect miles of friendly skies to fly.

Adventure time

The most important addition to the *Fly!* series is its adventure mode. "Some [missions] are skill-based for hardcore players," explains Goss. "However, at the same time, we'll have plenty of missions for the action junkies." The missions will range from training adventures to the fun stuff, like barnstorming, air racings, flying in formation, even rescue and courier tasks. "The mission structure will be dynamic, so you don't have to succeed in every mission. Also, the criteria for successfully completing missions can vary, depending on the player's skill level."

Adding to the level of depth in the adventure system is the fact that the game's editor allows on-the-fly customization of the world. "We built in a scenery creator that you can adjust as you fly," Harvey told us. "You can put a new building or whatever in the world, come out of editor and see the new scenery changes while playing. Players will be able to easily and quickly customize scenery where ever they are."

This built-in editor will allow you to alter the game's scenery, create your own from scratch, change planes and weather in mid-flight, and more. "You can map the whole globe if you wanted to," Harvey adds, "although the editor works on 32 mile squares, which can be easily shared with other gamers." The game will also ship with the Software Development Kit in order to encourage even greater user customization.

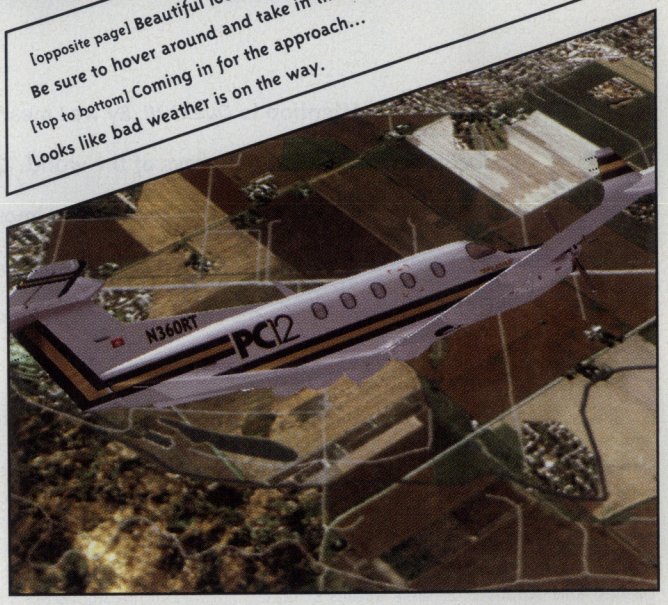
Weathering the winds

Of course, all the customization options in the world won't help a flight sim if it doesn't feel realistic, and *Fly! II* is intent on maintaining the same hardcore realism of the original. "We're trying to apply lessons we learned with the original game," the head physics guy, Paul Russell, explains. "Basically, the feel and physics will be the same thing as *Fly!*, but there are some added features, and sim players will really appreciate the effort there. We've added features to the current model that should help concerns with the original. Twin-engine operations, for example, are more realistic."

One big change is a much more advanced damage system. Since *Fly! II* uses licensed planes, Terminal Reality is unfortunately stuck with the inability to visibly wreck or greatly damage the aircraft, but there is limited damage modeling. Would-be pilots might find themselves contending with gear damage, engine fires, smoke, or broken landing gear. Pilots will actually be able to handle emergencies as a real pilot would and use backup systems, since all emergencies are modeled from the manufacturer's recommendations for real aircraft.

Of course, user-created planes won't be under such rigid restrictions, and the physics and damage modeling system is more than able to handle the wreckage such non-licensed planes could incur. Another boost is a weather system that is more precise and developed than any other flight sim out there. The game will be able to throw upper and vertical wind shears in specific places on the map. You'll even be able to have a tornado, and the game has a weather reporting point every ten miles, and at every airport. Consequently, instead of the basic canned turbulence most sim gamers are used to, *Fly! II* gives you a cylinder of air you can control.





[opposite page] Beautiful looking terrain punctuates the Fly! experience.
Be sure to hover around and take in the scenery.
[top to bottom] Coming in for the approach...
Looks like bad weather is on the way.

These complex weather and on-the-fly editing features will likely prove even more intriguing when it comes to the game's multiplayer aspects. *Fly! II* will include a new multiplayer system that allows participation in a "persistent world." You will be able to do things like gather together for virtual air shows, races, and other Internet jaunts into civilian flying.

Taking off soon

While the original game had its share of critics, Terminal Reality is determined to gain a foothold against Microsoft. With incredible possibilities for user customization, the adventure mode, and extensive training and AI co-pilot help system, *Fly! II* may very well be able to do the impossible, and appeal to both hardcore flight fanatic and the casual gamer. We'll know for sure when it lands on shelves in May. □

THE GOODS

GENRE Flight Simulation

PUBLISHER GOD Games

RELEASE DATE May 2001

FAQs

Quake III is not that important

by Jason Cross

We pay too much attention to *Quake III*. By we I mean the hardware/technical editors and website monkeys of the world. *Quake III* benchmarks are standard, even ubiquitous, in reviews of almost any piece of hardware. It's come to be that, if many websites and some magazines are to be believed, *Quake III* performance is the sole measure of a video card's power. You know what? *Quake III* is not that important.

A good benchmark is one that is easy to run, accurate, repeatable, and relevant to other games. *Quake III* succeeds as a benchmark in part because it's so easy to run benchmarks with and is very consistent. Its relevance is the part I have a problem with. Sure, the *Quake* engines have always been licensed for other games, and usually big-name games at that. But there are typically three or four *Quake*-engined games released every year. In the engine-licensing business, that's not a whole heck of a lot. There are as many games that use the Unreal engine, and there will probably be about 8-10 LithTech games released each year for the next couple years, if not more. Let's not forget licensed engines nobody seems to focus on, like NetImmerse from NDL (the engine behind Munch's *Oddysee*, *Bridge Commander*, and *Prince of Persia 3D*, among others). If less than a quarter of all the games that use licensed engines use *Quake III* technology, why is it the prominent, often sole representation of hardware performance?

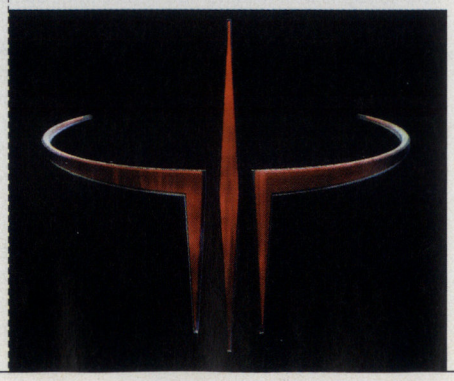
Then there's the OpenGL issue. I won't get into an exposition about OpenGL vs. Direct3D (that's a topic for another column) but OpenGL simply doesn't power the graphics in most games. Of all the 3D games that hit store shelves in a given year, easily 90% of them use Direct3D. *Quake III* is an excellent measure of OpenGL performance, but does that tell you how most games will perform? OpenGL is very driver-centric, too. Performance in OpenGL applications depends on well-built, robust, highly optimized drivers. Video card companies know that *Quake III* is *the* benchmark, so they optimize for it extensively. It's quite possible that a video card which performs well in games using the *Quake III* engine will perform poorly in other OpenGL games, such as *MDK 2*.

I'm not saying we shouldn't benchmark *Quake III*. *Quake III* is a beautiful and well-engineered game that can really push video card and processor performance, and it's licensed for several games each year. We just need to view it in its proper place. *Quake III* benchmarks should be part of a benchmark suite, given weight appropriate to its relevance as an OpenGL-based engine licensed for less than half a dozen games a year.

Unfortunately, we're not really given a lot of options. There are a handful of synthetic benchmarks out there, but any benchmark that isn't done by actually running a game has to be considered very carefully. The only synthetic benchmark I trust to give a decent measure of game performance is 3DMark from MadOnion.com. It doesn't actually run a game, but it's at least powered by a real game engine (the one being used for *Max Payne*) and the final score is determined solely by the frames-per-second of the game scenes. All the other tests—raw triangle throughput, fill rate, and so on—are just there for extra information. There really aren't a lot of other good performance measurements that are terribly relevant, though. A LithTech benchmark would be incredibly useful; it's a good-looking Direct3D engine with plenty of features and, most importantly, is heavily licensed. But no recent LithTech game has benchmarking facilities. Ditto for recent NetImmerse games. *MDK 2* has a nice little benchmarking feature, but we really don't need *another* OpenGL test when there are so few OpenGL games out there.

I guess it doesn't really surprise me that *Quake III* performance gets so much attention from the hardcore gaming community, especially online. After all, these are the same guys who put far too much emphasis on the game itself, devoting dozens of webpages to it and judging every single other game by comparing it to *Quake III*. These guys are apparently oblivious to the fact that there are a couple dozen games this year that have outsold it, and many of them are just plain *better games*. Hardcore id Software fans are like any other die-hard fan, I guess. They've got blinders on.

I'm more than a little disappointed that game developers don't bother to spend the time to build benchmarking features into their games. Many games have a frame rate display but that has two big problems: it hides short spikes of very low framerates, and it doesn't permit reproducing the same exact test multiple times and comparing results. I guess it's not surprising to see performance-monitoring features overlooked in an industry where getting everything done late has



become the norm. When your game is half a year behind schedule and you're cutting features to try to get it out the door, are you going to take two or three weeks to implement a good benchmarking feature? I think such a feature has more relevance than most developers give it credit for, though. The ability to run a test to display overall performance that can be exactly reproduced on different hardware would be a valuable development tool, I'd think. Having your game mentioned in lots of hardware reviews is free publicity, too.

In the future, I'd love to see better benchmark features in games. I'd like to see data that shows the average framerate, worst-case and best-case framerate, and perhaps even more data about a card's performance. The test should do the exact same thing each time it's run without user intervention, to help reduce the margin of error and variability. I asked *Unreal* engine developer Tim Sweeney what he wanted to see in a benchmark, and he said, "The focus has been almost exclusively on fill rate and triangle throughput, which is missing a lot of important metrics. Texture throughput should be a bigger emphasis, as well as state-change throughput." I would agree with that—more can be done to give a complete picture of hardware performance, and nobody's doing it. Come on game developers, step up to the plate!

Q: I am planning to build a new computer soon, but I'm worried that if I build now I won't be able to upgrade because of the Pentium 4 coming out. Do you know if Intel will make the Pentium III and Pentium 4 compatible, or make it easy to upgrade?

-Ben

A: The Pentium III and Pentium 4 are definitely not compatible. They use different motherboards entirely, and have different requirements for adding RAM, among other things. Now, you can use the same hard drives and video cards and other stuff on either system, and both will run the same operating systems and programs, but on a fundamental level they're really very different. If you buy a Pentium III now, you'll still be able to upgrade to a faster Pentium III in the future, but the top speed is something to consider. It's doubtful that Intel will produce a Pentium III chip faster than maybe 1.3GHz at the most, so if you're going to buy a machine in the 1GHz range, that doesn't leave you much upgrading potential. A Pentium 4 at one of the introductory speeds of 1.4 or 1.5GHz would have much more upgrade potential, as you'll be able to replace your processor with a 2GHz or faster model late in 2001.

Q: Assuming I have a Pentium III 700 MHz with an Intel 815 motherboard and a GeForce DDR card, how much of a performance increase can I expect if I upgrade from 128MB 66MHz RAM to 128MB 100MHz RAM and then onto 128MB 133MHz RAM?

-Suresh S.

A: It's really going to depend on the games and applications you're using. If you run programs where memory bandwidth is a big deal, you could see as much as a 50% performance increase when going from 66 MHz to 133 MHz RAM. Really in most games, the difference will be more on the order of 10-20%, and in some games, it won't be faster at all. The performance difference can really vary wildly depending on the application, how cluttered or clean your operating system is, and the graphics options you have enabled in the games you play.

Q: I bought WinProxy and installed it only to find it doesn't work with Age of Empires II: The Conquerors and many other games on www.zone.com. Is there any other proxy software out there that will allow me to play Age 2 through it?

-Wild Bloodhawk

A: What you're most likely running into is an issue where the ports required for DirectPlay games are closed. I haven't seen or used WinProxy in a long time, so I'm not sure if it can open the appropriate ports or how you'd do it. For playing games on the Zone, you should have the following TCP ports open: 6667, 28800-29000. Many DirectPlay games require TCP port 47624 to be open, as well as the 2300-2400 range. If WinProxy allows you to open or close TCP and UDP ports separately, you need to open both TCP and UDP ports in that 2300-2400 range.

Some proxy servers and network hubs only allow you to open individual ports and not entire ranges. You might have a bit of trouble if this is the case for you; to reliably use the Zone and DirectPlay games, you need those entire ranges open.

Q: I want to get a faster internet connection (I'm on a 56k with a decent ISP right now) like DSL, cable, etc., but I need my phone line to dialup work and receive faxes. Is there any better way to get a fast connection without having to pay for a phone line and another connection at the same time?

-Eryn

A: Right now, a 56k connection is the fastest thing you can get through a dialup connection, and it looks like it's always going to be that way. DSL comes through your phone line, and it doesn't interfere with your phone calls, but if you need to dialup work through a standard modem it still doesn't solve your problem. You'd still be paying for both DSL and your dialup ISP.

If you dial in to work directly with your modem (without dialing your ISP and then connecting), you can always just get DSL or cable and cancel your current dialup ISP, since you won't need it to connect to the Internet or work, and receiving faxes has nothing to do with the internet at all. You'd still be paying for phone service and the new faster connection, but dumping your current ISP might really make the difference. ■

Gizmopolis

3dfx to dissolve, NVIDIA buys core assets – 3dfx has begun three major initiatives to protect creditors and maximize shareholder value in the company. First, the company will substantially reduce its workforce to reduce expenses. Second, the Board of Directors will recommend shareholders approve the sale of most of the company's assets to NVIDIA for $70million - $112 million in cash and one million shares of common stock. Third, after completing the sale, the company will be dissolved. The sale of 3dfx's core assets to NVIDIA has already been completed.

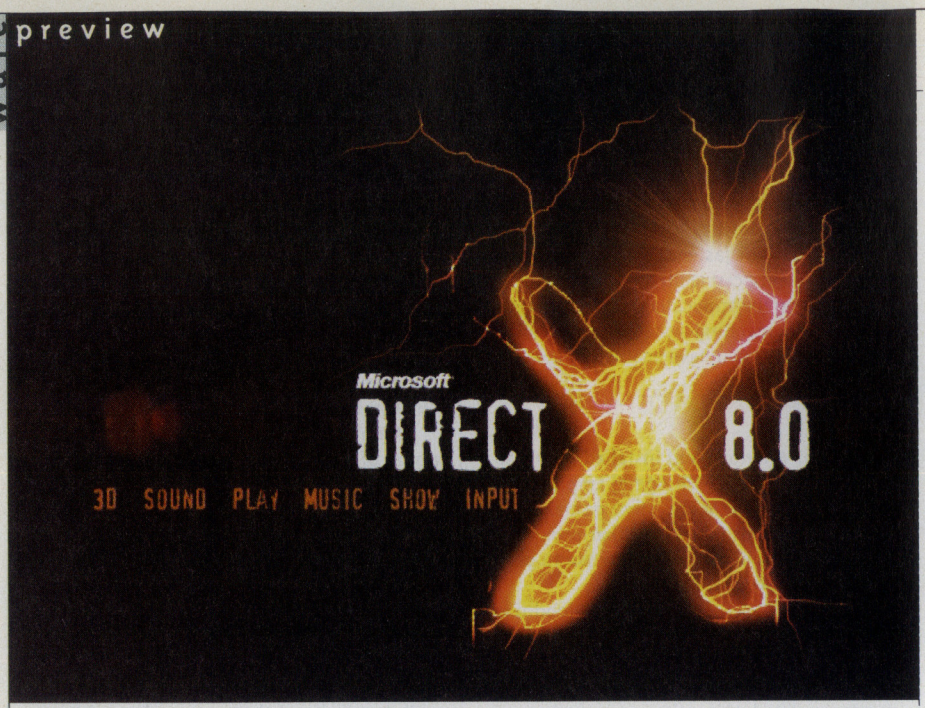
"After aggressively pursuing a wide range of options that take into consideration the interests of our creditors, our shareholders, our employees and our customers," Alex Leupp, president and CEO of 3dfx, said in a prepared statement. "We strongly believe that to reduce expenses, sell our assets and dissolve the company provides the highest return to our creditors, shareholders, and employees."

The cost reductions include eliminating of the majority of the company's workforce by early next year, and they are still awaiting a buyer for their Juarez, Mexico manufacturing facility (which 3dfx acquired when they purchased STB). 3dfx expects to maintain an "adequate" workforce to handle customer support.

As part of the agreement, NVIDIA has agreed to loan 3dfx $15 million to assist with shutting down the company, and all patent infringement lawsuits between the two companies are to be dismissed.

Nvidia primarily purchased 3dfx technologies—intellectual property and both current and pending patents for the existing 3dfx products and those in development. This means that NVIDIA now has the technology 3dfx acquired with their purchase of the Gigapixel corporation earlier this year, as well as 3dfx's next-generation part (code-named Rampage). Exactly if, how, and when these technologies will be incorporated into NVIDIA's products or if they'll ever reach the market is still undecided. The purchase also included the 3dfx and Voodoo brand names and trademarks. At the time of this writing, NVIDIA has not yet decided how it will use the Voodoo name, though they recognize it as a leading retail name in the worldwide market.

It's important to note that NVIDIA did not buy the 3dfx board business, so they will not be selling Voodoo3, Voodoo4, Voodoo5, or VoodooTV products. They are also not obligated to support those products and have no plans to—that responsibility falls on the shoulders of 3dfx. If the company dissolves as it plans to, support for such products could disappear very quickly. The purchase also did not include any 3dfx employees, though NVIDIA has already made over 100 job offers to pick up 3dfx personnel. ■



Raising the Bar

DirectX 8 is a big step forward for PC gaming technology

Microsoft's DirectX is a suite of Application Programming Interfaces that has evolved over the last several years into the ubiquitous method of writing games for the PC. Nearly every game on the market uses DirectX in one way or another—even the Quake engine games, famous for furthering the use of OpenGL, use DirectX for sound and input duties. With DirectX 7, Microsoft brought the APIs to a state where they provide most of the base features developers want when making games. Now, with DirectX 8, it's time to raise the bar. Drastic improvements in almost every aspect of DirectX could make it the means by which games take a very large step forward.

by Jason Cross

Programs for your video card

The most notable improvement in DirectX 8 is in the graphics interface Direct3D. Direct3D has been largely restructured to be a little easier to understand and write code for and includes much-improved documentation and example code. The big deal, though, is the introduction of programmability. DirectX 8 introduces Vertex and Pixel shaders, which are interfaces that allow developers to write programs to tell the video card how to act.

We often talk about triangles, but video cards operate on the points of those triangles, called verticies. The vertex shaders interface is a means of running programs that operate on vertex data. The DirectX 8 vertex shader interface is a very simple language optimized for manipulating vertex data in a 3D scene. It's rather powerful, and can be used for a litany of operations. If a developer wanted to make a game with relatively simple geometry but a very complex lighting model, they could now make that trade-off and still have the video card perform all the calculations. With current video cards that have hard-wired T&L, that flexibility isn't there. Vertex shaders can be used to set up geometry for true reflections, to generate triangles in curved surfaces from just a few control points, to calculate level-of-detail values, to blend together or morph verticies, and to compute complex animation calculations. Game programmers will finally be able to do almost all geometry operations on the video card.

Generating 3D graphics means calculating geometry and then drawing pixels to the screen. DirectX 8 adds programmability to the first part through vertex shaders, and the second part with pixel shaders. Pixel shaders are programs that are run on each pixel, using vectors and texture data. Every texturing feature of previous DirectX versions can be performed via pixel shaders—stuff like environment mapped bump mapping, specular highlighting, reflections, specular highlights, and just about anything else you can think of. These effects used to be performed with multiple rendering passes; the video card would draw the screen, then blend in another texture, and another, and another, and so on until the final result was achieved. With pixel shaders, the calculations to determine the final color value can be done before the pixel is ever drawn. This will save lots of memory bandwidth and fill rate. Video cards that support pixel shaders will be able to produce effects with just one pixel-draw that would take current hardware eight or more rendering "passes" as pixels are drawn, redrawn, and blended together.

If all that stuff is too confusing, here's the long and short of it: DirectX 8 defines programming languages for video cards. Once video cards are released that can run those programs, graphics in games will get a lot more visually impressive, with the potential for a lot more variety as well.

More eye candy

Also new is support for 3D textures, and texture compression for them. The texture compression is very important, as 3D textures take an enormous amount of memory. A 32-bit texture that's 256x256 in size consumes about 256 kilobytes, but a 32-bit 3D texture that is 256x256x256 consumes 64 *megabytes!* DirectX 8 also has a new particle system interface that can come in handy when producing effects like smoke, fire, rain or snow, sparks, etc. Another standard introduced to the Direct3D API this time around is multisampling, a technique that basically does what the T-buffer on a Voodoo5 does. It can be used for anti-aliasing, motion blur, depth-of-field effects, soft-edged shadows, and more

DirectDraw gets a major shift in DirectX 8 as well—it's gone now! This 2D graphics interface is now completely integrated into Direct3D, so developers won't be able to awkwardly switch between the two in games, which is a common source of compatibility problems and visual glitches.

Speaking of compatibility, there should hopefully be fewer problems with video cards that support some features but not others. Previously, developers had to check dozens of "cap bits" to determine what features a video card supports so their game wouldn't crash or revert to painfully slow software emulation. For a video card to be fully compliant with DirectX 8, though, it must fully implement the pixel and vertex shader standards. While video cards will always have their own unique features, the base feature set required for DirectX 8 compliance should make life much easier on developers once DirectX 8 video cards start to appear. We should mention that several video cards have already proclaimed their compatibility with DirectX 8. That's not the same as compliance. If a video card is compatible with DirectX 8 (such as a GeForce 2 or Voodoo5 5500) it just means that the card will continue to work if you install DirectX 8. A compliant card is one that can perform pixel and vertex shaders, and no video card released before 2001 can.

Goodies for your ears, too

Graphics improvements always get the most attention, but Microsoft believes that sound is

equally important in games, and has been underutilized lately. As such, they've made major improvements to the audio portions of DirectX 8. The sound APIs are still referred to as DirectSound and DirectMusic, but there's not a really big distinction between the two anymore. DirectMusic is now powerful and robust enough to handle not only interactive music but time-sensitive sound effects as well, and Microsoft suspects that developers will actually use the DirectMusic interface for most game audio.

DirectMusic now supports the a Downloadable Sounds Level 2 (DLS2) capable synthesizer, which allows for quality custom instruments, six-stage envelopes, layering of voices, release waveforms, and all kinds of other nifty technical mumbo-jumbo. Developers can assign arbitrary sound looping points, submix channels before sending them off to DirectSound for playback, apply filters independently to each voice, and stream sound playback automatically. Music tracks can play back as 3D sounds, so you can have a DirectMusic track playing through a radio on a desk in a 3D game, and it will be represented as a 3D sound. Designers can more accurately control the sound in a game through the use of scripts, too. A game event might call upon a sound script instead of controlling multiple sound events directly. This should make it easier for the sound guys to control the sound in games without so much work from the programmers.

New networking

When developers create games to be played over the Internet they might use DirectX, but usually not its networking functions, called DirectPlay. Most developers have been unhappy with its performance and features and have opted to use their own. Microsoft has a vested interest in making Internet gaming easier to accomplish for developers and more popular among gamers, so they've really overhauled DirectPlay. The interfaces are completely rewritten, with peer-to-peer and client-server architectures now separate. Microsoft hopes the changes will make it much easier for developers to use DirectPlay for their networking needs. Lobby functions, for instance, are now independent from the rest of DirectPlay.

DirectPlay should be easier on gamers, too. Firewalls and network access translators (NATs) are better supported, and the API components that handle network functions are both more scalable (to make them relevant to massively-multiplayer games) and better at memory management than before.

DirectPlay Voice is an exciting addition that is one part networking, one part sound. This voice communications interface should make it almost trivial for developers to create games where we actually talk to each other. It includes a selection of voice codecs that range in bandwidth usage from a paltry 64 kilobits per second up to 1.2 kilobits per second. Developers can control the transmission of voice (directly from one user to another, or through a forwarding server, for example) and easily decide who gets to hear what. Voice channels are integrated with DirectSound, so it's possible to have voices play as 3D sounds or apply effects like reverb or pitch shifting.

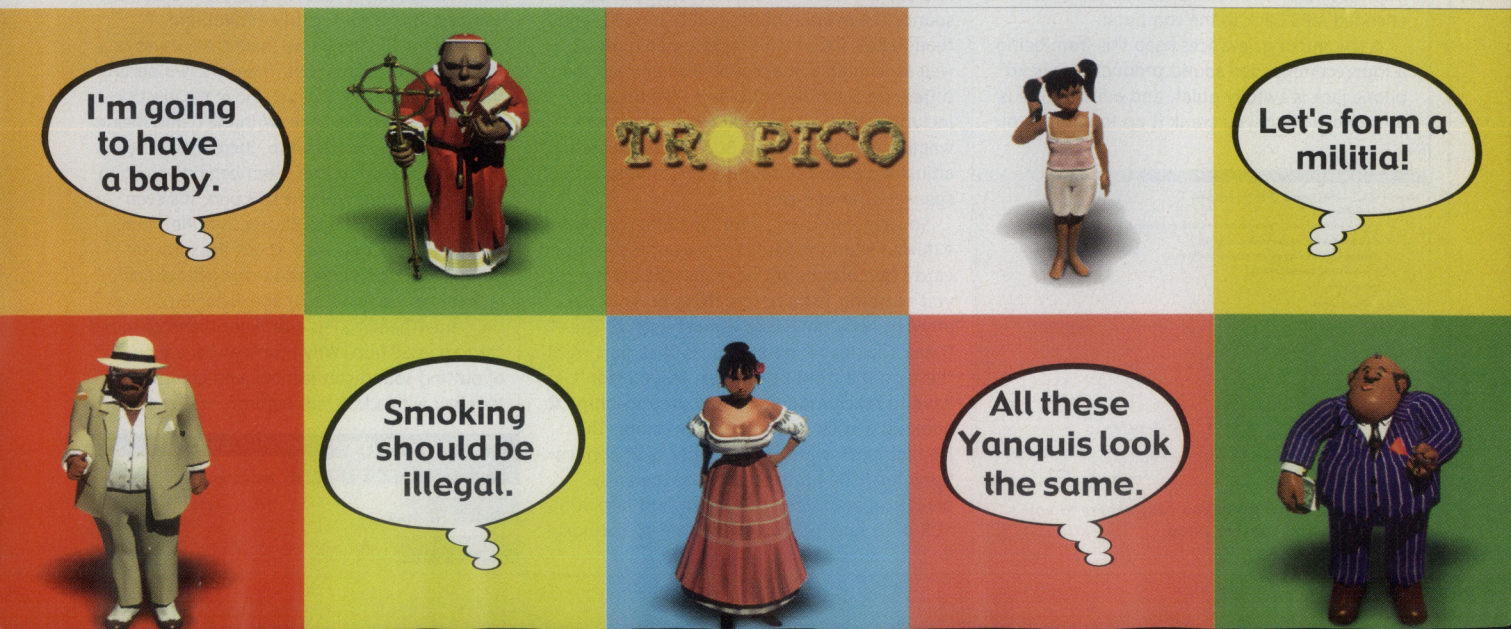


Creating a surface that is both accurately reflective and bumpy is incredibly slow without the proper hardware. Vertex shaders can handle the complex set-up required.

Changing our games...eventually

DirectX 8 is the most significant leap in the DirectX API in years—maybe ever. The creation of a large-scale API like DirectX requires a fine balance between providing what software developers want, what hardware manufacturers want, and taking a leadership position to move the industry forward. It's too early to tell whether or not Microsoft got the balance right. Developers have had access to DirectX 8 in beta form for maybe half a year or so, and it will probably be another half year before games are released that really take advantage of all the new features. The features are certainly exciting, though. A standard for programmable video cards is an absolutely huge leap in PC graphics that we'll see the benefits of once developers start to get their hands on DirectX 8 compliant video cards. Improved sound, music, and networking functions have been a long time coming, as has an easy-to-implement voice communication feature.

We've already started to see games that ship with DirectX 8, such as *MechWarrior 4*, but these aren't really a good litmus test for what a DirectX 8 game will look like. It's not until developers can spend a large portion of their development time working with DirectX 8, using hardware and drivers that support its new features, that we'll see what the new API can do. When that happens, games on the PC will take a giant step forward. ■



Game Theater XP

A sound card in a box on your desktop?

Over ten years ago Roland released the pricey MT-32, an external sound module that provided quality music but couldn't play back sampled sounds like the Sound Blasters of the time. No one else has bothered to release an external sound module for general consumers until now—the Game Theater XP probably shouldn't be called a "sound card." Though there is a card that plugs into a PCI slot, it's purely an interface for the main attraction: the metallic blue sound module that sits on your desktop.

Setup is relatively simple: a PCI card plugs into your machine as a normal sound card would, and has internal connectors for CD-ROM and auxiliary audio. This card has one large connector on the back, into which you plug this monstrously thick cable that leads to a blue metallic box that sits on top of your desk. The drivers install just as any plug-and-play device would. It's in the blue box that all the sound processing takes place, which is why the cable is so thick; the PCI card is just an interface and the cable must be well shielded for the data to make it to the module uncorrupted.

The module uses the new Crystal Soundfusion CS4630 chip, a programmable digital signal processor that supports DirectSound 3D, EAX 2.0, A3D 1.0, I3DL2, Sensaura's MacroFX, and just about any other common 3D sound standard you can think of. There's an 18-bit analog-to-digital converter and a 20-bit digital to analog converter, all of which results in some pretty clean sound. Because the Crystal Soundfusion chip is a programmable DSP, it can perform MP3 decoding in hardware, and even assist in MP3 encoding. However, the latter feature isn't supported in the Game Theater XP, since it's inefficient to transfer all the raw data through the interface card to the box and then send the encoded MP3 back to the computer.

A few minor grievances keep this from being a top-recommended sound product. The headphone jack is awfully quiet, and a little noise is introduced when you crank it up to get the volume to a decent level. The software bundle consists of PowerDVD 3.0 and a whole host of music cataloging, MP3-ripping, loop-mixing and karaoke programs, but the majority are cut down versions offering limited use before you've got to shell out for the full software.



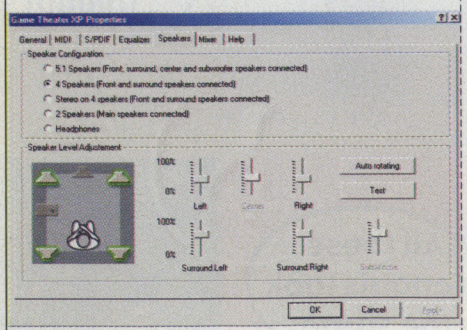
The green thing goes in your computer, the blue thing sits on your desk.

Sound support in games is pretty good. A3D 1.0 and EAX titles all work fine—only games that provide 3D sound solely with the proprietary A3D 2.0 standard will default to regular 2D sound. The overall sound quality is good, and though EAX sound isn't represented quite as well as with an actual Sound Blaster Live!, the difference is hardly noticeable. The drivers include control panel where you can choose whether or not to enable 3D sound acceleration, adjust a plethora of sound levels, and select speaker arrangements.

So why would you want to bother with an external sound module instead of just a sound card? Hercules might have just the answer—if you're going to have this thing on your desk anyway, why not make it more useful? The Game Theater XP puts your joystick port right there on the front of the box, so you won't have to reach around behind your machine to hook up a stick or gamepad anymore. The joystick port is just one of a litany of connections the little blue module conveniently places on your desktop. You'll find left/right RCA plug line inputs on the front of the box, along with a microphone and headphone jack, each with a separate volume control knob. On the back of the module you'll find six RCA outputs for a 5.1 speaker setup in addition to two 1/8" stereo plugs for front and rear four-speaker solutions. There are also coaxial *and* optical Dolby Digital inputs and outputs, and a standard-size MIDI input and output. If you're the kind of person who uses your computer to record to or from external sources, this is all terribly convenient.

Additionally, the Game Theater XP serves as a four-port USB hub as well. There are two ports on the front of the module just above the joystick port and two on the back. With the Game Theater XP in place on your desktop, there should be almost no reason to ever reach behind your computer ever again. With the USB port, it's even handier than the Sound Blaster Live! Platinum.

If you're unconcerned about the software bundle and don't care about the headphone jack (or have one on your speakers you can use), the Game Theater XP is a brilliant blend of sound card and USB hub. Why hasn't anyone thought of putting sound connections and controls together with a USB hub before? —*Jason Cross*



The control panel gives you easy access to volume levels and speaker setup.

THE GOODS

MANUFACTURER Hercules

MSRP $149

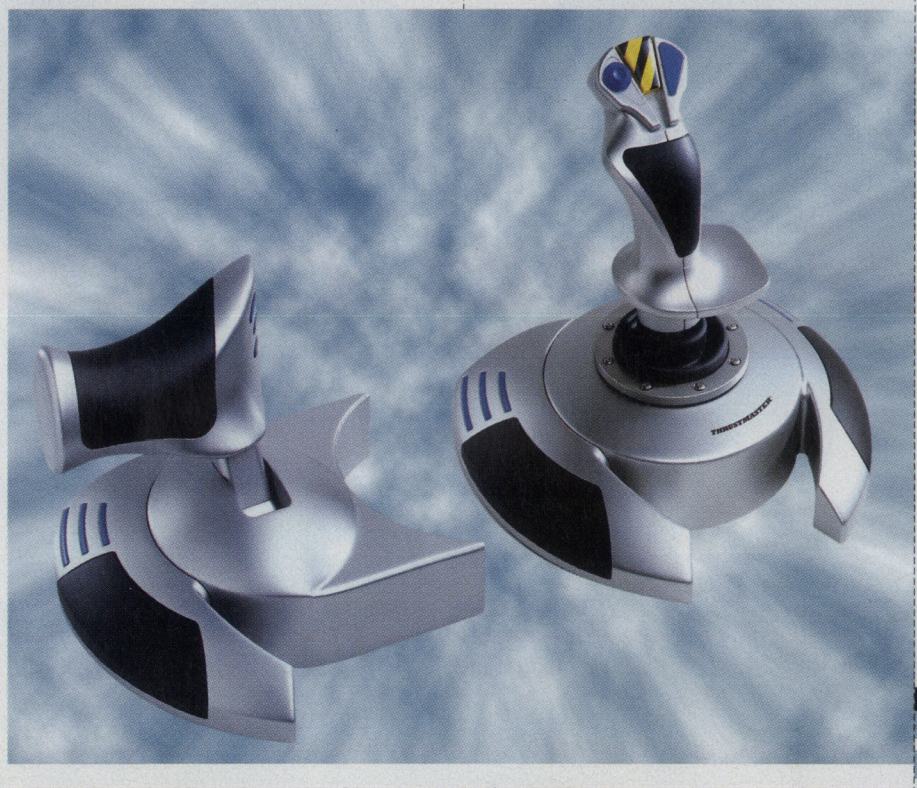
RATING ★★★★☆

A joystick with a split personality

Top Gun AfterBurner

This is definitely not your father's ThrustMaster controller. Unlike their products of old, the Top Gun AfterBurner doesn't look like the real controller of any craft this side of *The Last Starfighter*. However, also unlike the classic products, you don't have to use an arcane scripting language to program the thing.

Out of the box, the AfterBurner is a largish one-piece controller sporting both a stick and a throttle controller. It's a bit unwieldy in this configuration, but you can detach the throttle and use the device as two separate controllers. Even in the split configuration the controllers use only a single USB port; both the joystick and throttle appear as part of a single device to Windows, providing better compatibility with older applications that don't recognize multiple devices.



The stick and throttle can be separated into two pieces if you prefer.

The throttle is nicely designed, with détentes that let you know when you've reached afterburner or idle thrust. The stick is comfortable, but some of the eight programmable buttons suffer from shapes that emphasize form over function. The worst offender is the gimmicky "Mach 2" flip cover over button 2; this just gets in the way. (Tip: This can be easily removed by loosening a couple of screws, but that may affect warranty coverage.) The eight-way view hat is a bit smallish for precise control. A switch lets you choose between two rudder control methods: twisting the stick, or using a Saitek-like rocker switch on the back of the throttle. The latter method works very well, and helps prevent the accidental yaw movements often found with stick twists.

Although the ThrustMapper programming utility is extremely easy to use, it's not lacking in power. When programming keypresses, you can not only program key combinations, but even adjust the amount of time each key is held down, or the gaps between presses, with millisecond precision.

Despite it's somewhat goofy sci-fi looks, the AfterBurner is actually a fairly comfortable, responsive stick. Considering you essentially get a joystick *and* a throttle for under $60, it's quite a bargain. *—Denny Atkin*

THE GOODS

MANUFACTURER Thrustmaster

MSRP $59.95

RATING ★★★★☆




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The web's best computer game coverage...every day.
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Microsoft Trackball Explorer

A clean break from old technology

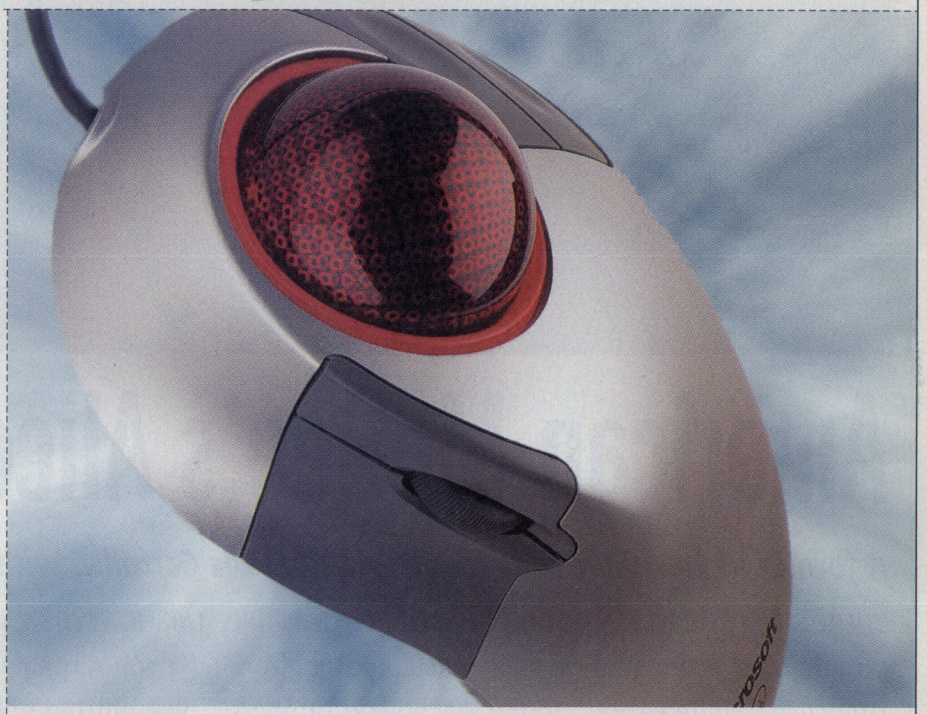
Those who lead alternative pointing device lifestyles will be happy to know that someone has finally built a better trackball. Microsoft's Trackball Explorer uses the same IntelliEye infrared technology as the company's recent mice, making for precise movements and fewer breaks to clean your trackball.

By their very nature, trackballs are a royal pain to maintain. They spend all day picking up gunk and oils from your fingertips or palm, and heavy users find themselves cleaning the device's innards a couple of times a week. The Explorer, though, does away with the gunk-collecting movement sensor wheels, replacing them with tiny cameras that read the movement of a grid on the ball. Finally, we have the zero-maintenance trackball.

It has four programmable buttons (the two extras default to forward and back in a web browser), as well as a mouse wheel, and a style and shape reminiscent of the Intellimouse Explorer. The mouse wheel has been moved between the thumb buttons, a logical place for it, but the overall shape puts more pressure on your wrist than the earlier Intellimouse Trackball. If you switched to a trackball because of carpal tunnel pains, you may find the old Intellimouse Trackball to be more comfortable. That's a mechanical device, though, so it requires constant cleaning.

The Trackball Explorer connects to a USB port or, using a supplied adapter, to a PS/2 port. We had no problems with both a Trackball Explorer (for regular pointer operations) and an Intellimouse Explorer (for 3D shooters) plugged in simultaneously. The included Intellimouse driver software lets you custom-program buttons and wheel functionality.

The finger-controlled trackball is very responsive, and we had no trouble making precision movements with it. Of course, it's not as intuitive as a mouse in some games, but we had no problems using it in *Age of Empires II* and *Red Alert II*. While it works very well with sane movements, if you spin the ball at arcade speeds response gets jumpy; this is usually only an issue if old reflexes come back when playing a *Centipede* remake.



That big red ball is kinda creepy.

Microsoft also manufactures a thumb-based version called the Trackball Optical. However, if you're using a trackball because of repetitive-stress injuries (RSI), be warned that some experts report that thumb-based trackballs are very hard on thumb muscles. They recommend using finger-based trackballs and varying which fingers you use.

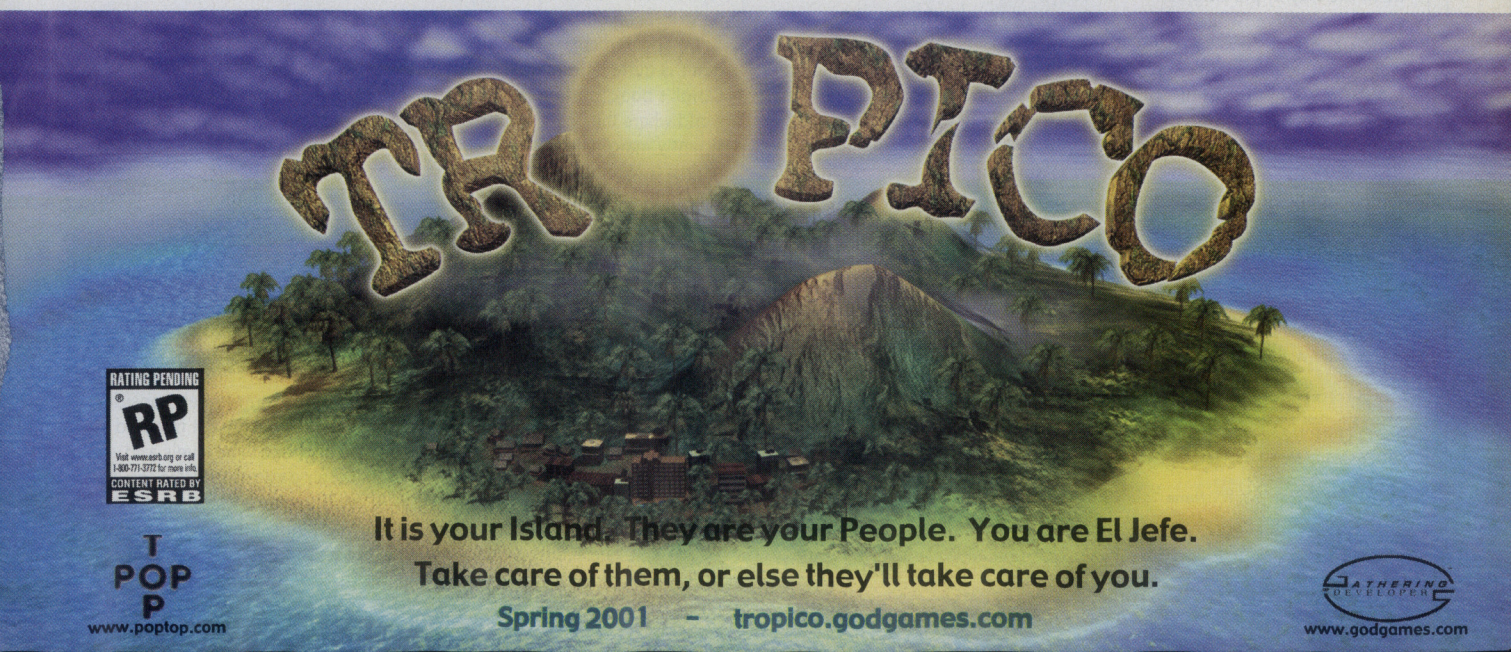
While the optical ball is a revolutionary improvement over earlier-generation trackballs, you should use the Trackball Explorer with a gel wrist-rest to avoid putting too much stress on your wrist. —*Denny Atkin*

THE GOODS

MANUFACTURER Microsoft

MSRP $79.95

RATING ★★★½☆



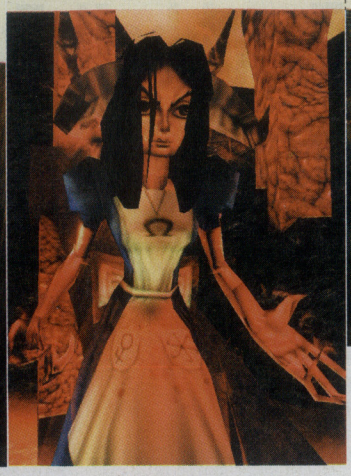


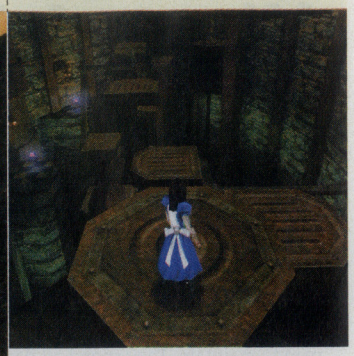
UPSIDE

Beautiful graphic design, great sound and voice acting, parts are faithful to the spirit of the source material

DOWNSIDE

Mundane gameplay, abrupt ending, mushy controls, parts aren't faithful enough to the spirit of the source material





[left to right] Facing off against Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum.

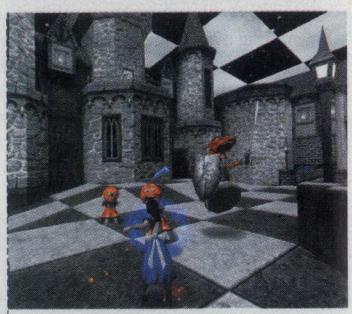
[Insert PMS joke #32.]

Rotating machinery puzzle #112.

American McGee's Alice

A former id-designer tries to out-weird Lewis Carroll... with less-than curioser results

THERE'S PRACTICALLY A COTTAGE INDUSTRY OF PEOPLE TAKING LEWIS CARROLL'S Wonderland down strange and unusual paths, from Jefferson Airplane's acid-drenched "White Rabbit" to the Wachowski brothers' "blue pill/red pill" scene in The Matrix. For his own take on Carroll, former id Software level designer American McGee has prattled on-and-on about how his interpretation—with the hubristic title American McGee's Alice—would be darker and more modern than the source material and the Disney-ed versions that have been burned into our collective consciousness.



Aren't those the cutest homicidal chess pieces?

The off-kilter, borderline insane original books— *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*—are true masterpieces of the surreal, featuring little in the way of plotting or straight narrative. While most people consider them works for children, they're perhaps only fully appreciated by adults, filled as they are with so many obscure references, puns and other oddities. They're also filled with fairly dark imagery—for example, the Queen of Hearts has this odd desire to decapitate everyone person she sees. It's not frightening to most kids because it's tempered with things that kids really like, such as smiling cats, talking animals and fantastical locations.

Always moving

The books can be enjoyed on almost any level because they're always moving forward and are wonderfully unpredictable; you never have any idea what exactly is going to happen next. This *Alice* does share that trait, though it's more about wondering how the next level will one-up the previous one. In McGee's version, our heroine loses her parents in a fire and ends up in an asylum. She's older than she was in the books, and though she's wearing the familiar frock we've all come to associate with Alice, it is now decorated with "dark and twisted" tribal symbols and a skull broach to hold her bow in place. Topping it off with combat boots and dark hair (we all know brunettes are considerably "edgier" than blondes), she ends up looking like a cross between Christina Ricci's Wednesday Addams or, in keeping with other overt Tim Burton references, Winona Ryder's Lydia Deitz in *Beetlejuice*.

On one particular count, the game is quite faithful to the spirit of Carroll's book, putting forth a world where the "bad" adults consistently marginalize Alice. She returns to Wonderland to reclaim her sanity and finds that the Red Queen has gone on a rampage and enslaved the denizens of Wonderland. She immediately runs into the white rabbit (who, in his usual fashion, runs off) and the incredibly well voice-acted Cheshire cat, who with his tribal tattoos and earring makes him, in the words of Alice, look mangy as opposed to "dark and twisted." He offers up occasional obvious advice and disappears, though it's somewhat disappointing that he doesn't leave just his eyes and mouth behind. As you progress through the game, you'll run across various familiar faces: the Queen of Hearts, the Mock Turtle, Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum, the Gryphon, the Duchess.

Alice in chains

Many people will talk about how "dark and edgy" McGee's (or at least his art director's) vision of wonderland is, but the sadly conventional environments are about as frightening as "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride" at Disneyland/world. If you have read the original book instead of relying on the Disney-ed versions, you'll realize that claiming to make a "twisted and dark" version is not only redundant but something of an insult to the original work. The original *DOOM*, for example, felt considerably darker because it inspired a sense of dread. The levels and character designs of *Alice* are infused with a sense of slightly morbid whimsy that owe a large debt to Tim Burton's vision of the

THE GOODS

GENRE Action Adventure

PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 400, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING ★★★☆☆

MATURE 17+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB



Hedge mazes? At least they make sense here.



My, that's a mad hat.

afterlife in *Beetlejuice*—it's all skewed angles and strange doorways. The game can never be truly horrific as it's just too... oddly beautiful.

Whether or not it's truly dark or edgy is irrelevant; the resulting graphic look is utterly spectacular, rendering an amazing Wonderland... for at least the first third of the game. While normally a game with such disparate levels is a sign of a lack of aesthetic cohesion—it's a game-y contrivance that allows designers to create different "types" of levels in order to give more variety—the lava world, the ice world, the dungeon, the castle, and so forth. The Carroll book essentially gives Rogue free reign to create these seemingly unconnected and unrelated environments that unfold in an almost dreamlike way. The resultant game is by far the best looking of the year.

The entire production shows a lot of quality. The two book-ended cut scenes are fantastic, the voice acting (aside from the voice of the Gryphon) is amazing, and Chris Vrenna's superbly evocative music and sound even evokes the nursery rhyme feel of a Danny Elfman score; it's all sleigh bells, toy pianos, jagged violins and children chanting.

The character animation and design, while far from being particularly "dark and edgy," is impressive. Alice looks fantastic and is well animated in the in-engine cut scenes. The Mad Hatter looks suitably mad, the Queen's card troops look appropriately two-dimensional and the chess pieces in the spectacular White Queen levels are incredibly cute even when they attack you.

Pretty vacant

All of this attention lavished on the visuals does a good job, at least initially, of masking the utterly mundane gameplay. When you take the game as a whole you realize that the stunning art direction writes checks the gameplay can't possibly cash. Playing *Alice* is an utterly average experience, coming across like a considerably better-looking and realized version of *Heavy Metal FAKK 2*, minus that game's considerably more entertaining combat. *Alice* is an action/adventure that would probably be a better game if it went further in either direction. The action is relatively dull, with toy-based weapons (from croquet mallets to jack-in-the-boxes) that are interesting and clever but not particularly fun to use. There are very few actual puzzles, but it could have used a lot more—does a setting exist that is more ideally suited to illogical adventure game puzzles than Wonderland?

Everything starts off interesting, but as the game progresses it gets more and more formulaic. The entire game is relentlessly linear, never allowing you the feeling that you can eviate from a pre-selected path designed to get you from point A to point B in the most scenic manner possible.

Making matters worse, everything simply falls apart toward the end. The game ends abruptly, and the map that denotes your progress in the game goes from being half-uncovered (after about seven areas) to completely exposed after two additional ones (it makes you wonder if there were additional levels that were scrapped to make a holiday release). It's as if the designers



Approaching the lair of the White Queen. Oh oh, the red have invaded.

lavished all of their inspiration on the first part of the game and said, "Um, we have to end this thing somehow." Without giving too much away, you progress through some amazingly rendered worlds (such as the black and white land of the White Queen) that stick to the Wonderland aesthetic, only to face off against the Red Queen in her... standard issue "Gothic Castle in a Lava World." This comes right after the ice world. Ice worlds? Lava? Why not throw in a nail gun?

Undeniably average

The gameplay—unlike the level design—is too predictable; it's your standard "turn the corner, face off against the enemy, battle through the level, kill the end-level boss" that you've done hundreds of times before. The game isn't incredibly difficult, as most of the challenges involve running and jumping along the very linear path. The game is full of literal platform jumping and rotating gear avoidance, and while this works for a game like *Tomb Raider*, the somewhat twitchy controls (especially while jumping) and occasional camera wonkiness (something shared with Eidos' cash cow) make it less than satisfying. Jump "puzzles" (for lack of a better term) aren't inherently evil, but jump puzzles with poor controls and/or simultaneous combat are.

There are times, particularly in the first half of the game, where *Alice* manages to be as interesting to play as it is to gaze upon. Unfortunately those times are too few and far-between. As it turns out, trying to out-weird the world created by Carroll proves somewhat futile for McGee and the talented people at Rogue; how can you possibly make the curiouser even more curiouser? It might have helped if the gameplay was as curiouser as the world of Wonderland. —*Steve Bauman*



UPSIDE

Beautiful, addictive, volume, volume, volume

DOWNSIDE

Meals uneaten, girlfriends/spouses enraged by your neglect, extended periods of monotony a necessary part of the game





[left to right] If the Titanic had had one of these...

After he swallows me, I go where?

The Necro's eventually glamorous role—mana dumping on clerics so they can heal the monks kicking Whatshisface to death.

Everquest: The Scars of Velious

When Everfrost Is simply not enough

COMPUTER GAMES STAMP OF APPROVAL

Scars of Velious is the second expansion within a year for *EverQuest*, Verant's reigning overlord of online role-playing games, and most assuredly a critic-proof product for its legions of diehard subscriber/adventurers (more than 300,000 as of this writing). *Ruins of Kunark*, the first add-on, gave you the ability to progress to level 60 and introduced a new playable race, the reptilian Iksar. Of course it also supplied a lot of new stuff to see and kill.

Scars of Velious concentrates more on the stuff. Character levels are still capped at 60. There are no new races. It has less surface area than Kunark (but more than Faydwer). And you can only reach the new continent, which lies southwest of Antonica, via the exceptionally photogenic vessel Icebreaker from North Ro or by hopping along on some wizard or druid's coat tails. It's also a pretty rough neighborhood for anyone below level 40, but considering the rate at which players now seem able to whiz through their apprenticeship (Internet survival guides for every class are pretty thorough), this won't be much of a backbreaker. Once you do arrive, there's quite a bit to see and kill. Including, at long last, little white bunnies.

Velious enlarges and enriches the surface area of Norrath by 16 largish zones. Considering how much of the terrain consists of snow and ice, the designers deserve credit for providing as many permutations with that blue-white color scheme as can be imagined. *EverQuest's* visuals and sound design have always provided a marvelous sense of place, and this time out is no exception. When the arctic imps blow a hard wind from the north, you can almost taste the grit in the powdered snow.

What detracts from this beguiling immersion? Things that the absorbed faithful probably no longer even notice—the long-standing spelling errors that still permeate the text ("Jobarn's eyes gleam with maddness!"), the glassy stares of the NPCs eternally gazing past you outside their guilds and shops, the crew-less boats, the banal zone-chatter, and the anachronistic total absence of blood. One need travel no further than the nearest theater playing *Dungeons & Dragons: The Movie* to feel the outraged shudders of Tolkien and Robert E. Howard from their graves, but *EverQuest* treats the much-maligned underpinnings of heroic fantasy with such reverence, it's easy to see why the sanest of adult folk get so wrapped up in their character's needs and persona.

Verant has managed to run a pretty tight ship over the most organic monstrosity in gaming history for well over a year now, keeping the spell alive and surprisingly stable (less buggy than a Presidential election anyway) for an ever-swelling number of finicky subscribers. It holds up. And it's still the friendliest multiplayer gaming environment on the market. It's also the least instantly gratifying—the first ten or so levels of beating up on insects and raccoons still feel like excessive dues, akin to being invited to the Playboy mansion only to go around emptying ashtrays and picking up cups and condoms before your blindfold can come off.

Scars of Velious has two things going for it besides landmass: some slightly improved interface tweaks and its twin themes of glacial warfare and triangular faction standing. It features three warring races, each with its own frozen city. Thurgadin, home to the persecuted Coldain dwarves, a bluer version of their Faydwer cousins, lies covertly behind a waterfall in the Great Divide. Their enemies, the lanky Storm Giants and the nicely scaly Dragons, also live underground in mutual unrest, in Kael Drakken and the Dragon Necropolis respectively. Though the history of their three-way strife is incidental, your hunting-ground decisions throughout their lands are anything but. Killing the enemies and performing the quests of the race you choose to align with can make a huge difference in your faction standing with all three and govern the degree of difficulty you'll face traveling through their domains.

There's one thing that really distinguishes the *EverQuest* phenomenon from all pretenders to the throne, for better or worse—difficulty. Slaving for weeks through one of the higher "hell levels" isn't just time-consuming, it's quite often *toil*. You come to hear that plangent "ding" of welcome to your next level right in your very pleasure center. No paycheck comes harder earned, and the temptation to overextend yourself isn't entirely a gambler's high, it's civilized practicality. Who has the number of hours those psychos at Verant expect you to invest just to get a spell that makes your guy *float*? More than 300,000 of us, at last count.

—Kelly Wand

THE GOODS

GENRE Online Role-playing

PUBLISHER Sony

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 200, 64 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER Obviously

RATING ★★★★½

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Quake III: Team Arena

Fast and furious online team play, minus the frills

The SVT group at Ford Motor Company makes a limited production version of the Mustang called the Cobra-R. The car is designed specifically for racing, and dealers used to actually require that you present a racing license in order to purchase one. With 385 bhp (at 5700 rpm) and a top speed of just over 170 miles per hour, the car does what it was designed to do very well. It goes fast. It doesn't do much else, however, and it doesn't come with any "extraneous" bells and whistles such as rear seats, air conditioning, or even a radio.

Quake III: Team Arena is the Cobra-R of the gaming world. Its forte is traditional style online team combat, and in this respect it excels. While the original *Quake III* did offer some team-based gameplay (capture the flag and team deathmatch), it was obviously thrown in as an afterthought. Players drew comparisons with *Unreal Tournament*, which offered both deathmatch and team play, and a better single-player game to boot.

With *Team Arena* id seeks to fill the team play void, but whether or not they have succeeded remains a close call. It features a nicely revised interface, a collection of new maps (including several excellent maps that feature vast expanses of outdoor terrain) designed specifically for team games, and four game types to choose from. Standard capture the flag is pretty much what you might expect, but the other three game types are totally new. "One flag" capture the flag puts a single white flag in the middle of the map. You have to nab it and deliver it to the capture point in the enemy base in order to score. Overload requires that you destroy a skull obelisk in the enemy base. The catch? It constantly regenerates hit points, and is likely to be heavily guarded. Harvester is the best of the new game types—when you frag an opponent, a skull in their team's color appears at a receptacle in the middle of the map. You grab opponents' skulls and run them in to the capture point in the enemy base to score, and grab your own skulls to keep the enemy from scoring.

The game also features a few new weapons—a nailgun (basically a shotgun, it bears little resemblance to the original *Quake* nailgun), a proximity mine launcher, and a high-powered chaingun that is very satisfying to use. There are also a number of team powerups that add a class-like element to the game. Grab the Scout powerup, for instance, and you can move exceptionally fast but can't wear armor. The Doubler powerup doubles all your weapon damage. Guard boosts your health and armor to 200 and constantly regenerates your health. Ammo-regen constantly regenerates your ammo supply. The powerups last until you die, and teams only have access to a set number of each (often one) on any given map. They generally seem well balanced, and add an extra strategic twist to the game.

In terms of bells and whistles, however, the game is downright sparse. It adds only two new tournament character models and a collection of rather uninspired team body types (you can switch out the heads to customize them) that are all basically human. The new game maps are excellent, but there few of them, and several are merely slightly altered maps from *Quake III Arena*. Most troubling is the lack of overall game structure. id has dropped even the pretense of offering a solo game—all of the maps are unlocked and available to play from the start, eliminating even the frugal sense of progression that *Quake III Arena* offered.

Bot AI is greatly improved with respect to team play, but without a compelling solo game you will probably spend most of your time playing against other people online. It's somewhat ironic, as Alanis Morisette would say.

There is a grassroots group who claim that id should have given *Team Arena* away for free. The idea is patently absurd, of course—a lot of money and work goes into producing games, and id is not a non-profit organization. They might have helped foster a better reception with their fans, however, if *Team Arena* felt more like a game (or at least an add-on), and less like a random collection of excellent maps and features. *—Benjamin E. Sones*

UPSIDE

Great maps, slick new interface, improved bot AI

DOWNSIDE

Lack of overall structure, no compelling solo game, lackluster character models







[top to bottom] **The game's pretty, you have to give it that.**

You can switch out the heads on each of the team body types to add variety, but there are not many heads, and the body types are disappointingly dull.

Stalk someone else, bozo.

THE GOODS

GENRE First-Person Shooter

PUBLISHER Activision

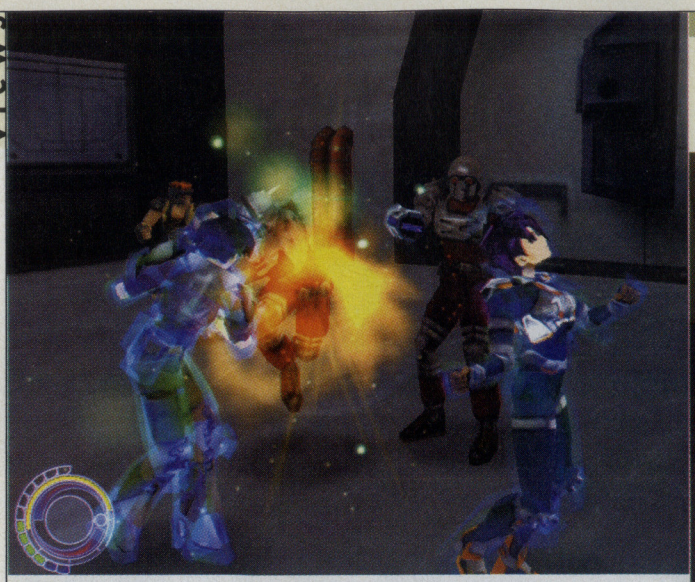
REQUIREMENTS Quake III Arena

MULTIPLAYER 2-32 players; Internet, LAN

RATING 3.5 stars

★★★½☆

MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB



Now this is going to be a tough battle.

UPSIDE

Fantastic and highly visceral fighting and combat, excellent controls, superb animation, story gets better as it goes along, brave enough to end on something of a downer

DOWNSIDE

Limited save options, difficulty all over the map, limited save options, isn't configurable, limited save options, no multiplayer or melee combat arena, limited save options



Konoko engages in some back-breaking combat.

Oni

Bungie's fighting game disappoints and thrills in near-equal measure

There's something undeniably cool about having normal-sized and normally proportioned women running around kicking all sorts of he-man butt. Those graceful and ballet-like martial arts moves seem somehow more believable than when done by the typical Hollywood-style buffed-up action hero. You get a similar effect with martial arts stars like Jet Li.

With her spunky attitude, curiously spiked purple hair, fashionable but functional attire and propensity for kicking the asses of men and women of all sizes and skills, Konoko, the star of Bungie's highly-anticipated and long-delayed *Oni*, has miles and miles of style. She's part of a new generation of female action hero, one that doesn't leave you wondering how she avoids being bludgeoned on the chin by her own breasts in the heat of battle. She's a star in the making; it's too bad she's in a decidedly uneven game.

THE GOODS

GENRE Punching and Kicking Action

PUBLISHER GOD Games

REQUIREMENTS Windows; Pentium II 266, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator, MacOS; PowerPC 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

★★★½☆

The ghost in her shell

Anime and manga stories have always been full of "grrl power;" many feature lead characters that are strong but undeniably feminine. *Oni* takes its visual style and storyline from those particular art forms, setting itself in a near-future cyberpunk-ish world. Konoko is an agent for the Tech Crimes Task Force trying to take down a mafia-style crime syndicate. What starts out as a simple case of bad guys running amok slowly develops into a fairly typical soul mining and quest for identity that turns the hero into a vigilante. "Oni" is a Japanese word for "ghost" or "demon"; read into that what you want. As with Bugnie's *Myth* strategy games, fully animated movies bookend the game, but the opening movie serves merely as a montage to give you a feeling for the game. The surprisingly downbeat closing movie is awfully short and a little disappointing.

Most of the details of the plot are divulged in text-screens that pop up when Konoko visits computer terminals in the game, and during the superbly produced in-engine cut scenes. While they're expertly constructed and shot, they're technically inferior to those found in other games. None of the characters' mouths move when they speak, nor do their manga-styled caricatures. The voice acting mostly resembles badly dubbed anime, and particularly in the early scenes you may wonder if you've stumbled into some sort of parody.

Punch and kick

While the storyline is never really compelling, what really drives you toward completing the game is the absolutely fantastic combat. A third-person perspective game, *Oni* is for the most part a near-perfect marriage of traditional PC first-person control and console-style fighting action. Konoko is quite the fighter, and completing the game's 15 missions (some of which have three to four sub-missions, no pun intended) requires a lot of combat. Konoko can perform a range of moves, punches, kicks and throws that can be chained together into more damaging combos. While martial arts purists may be upset that the moves feel like they came from the World Wrestling Federation rather than the World Karate Federation, they're nonetheless fairly easy to perform and due to the game's fabulous animation, a wonder to behold.

The game also includes ranged weapons-based combat, and it's equally entertaining. You're limited to carrying one weapon, there's limited ammo throughout the levels, and Konoko has a peculiar



Ouch, that's gonna leave a mark.



If you win the game you can play as any character.

habit of starting missions severely under-weaponed, but the mix is interesting—standard pistols and some strange energy and projectile weapons. If you run out of ammo you can use it as a club to batter your enemies. If you have it drawn, your opponents can knock it out of your hand, pick it up, and use it on you (you can, of course, do the same). Though there are likely no hard limits in the game, there are instances where three or four opponents attack you, making things quite challenging. The third-person view helps a lot in those instances; you get a bit of the peripheral vision that a first-person view doesn't allow.

The enemy AI is terrific, and each different type of character has a distinctive fighting style and a myriad of moves. There's also a well-designed feedback system of colored "impact explosions" that change color depending on the health level of the characters (there's no blood in the game), and the collision detection is fantastic. You can kick or punch multiple opponents, throw one guy into another and cause damage, and best of all grab a guy buy the neck, swing around and kick another approaching bad guy.

For those not weaned on console fighting games, learning the rhythm of sequencing your punches, kicks and movements to perform the various combos takes a lot of practice. And you will get a lot of practice because you'll be replaying sections of the game over-and-over again.

Save me

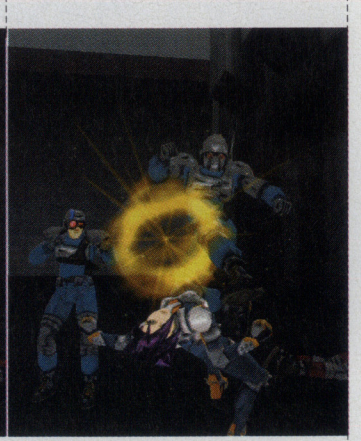
Though designed simultaneously for PC, Macintosh and PlayStation 2, *Oni* was clearly designed with the console market in mind. While Konoko spends much time in the game kicking serious ass, she also should have spent some time working over the designers, because the game has no control configurations at all. Zero. You can't adjust the mouse orientation or sensitivity (it's too slow by default) or even re-map the keys within the game. You can edit a text file in the install directory to change the default keys, but that's no substitute for what should be a standard interface convention for all PC games.

This shows a certain degree of arrogance on the part of the designers; clearly they're free to do what they please when crafting their masterpiece, since they ultimately have the final say on how a game looks, feels and plays. But their decision to only automatically save the game at fixed points causes a lot of frustration and repetition. PC gamers are spoiled by superior storage technology that allows games to save large amounts of data at any time—past console systems had limited saves for technical reasons, not design ones. You can argue back and forth about merits (or lack thereof) of "save anywhere" versus "save points" (or staged saves, or save crystals or whatever other contrivance you want to come up with), but here's a simple solution: if you think a game benefits from limiting a player's ability to save their progress at any point, simply make it optional.

A well-designed auto-save system can make the feature more palatable, but some of the gaps between saves in *Oni* are too large, causing the difficulty level to fluctuate between merely challenging and hair-pullingly difficult. Some areas require a lot of retries and restarts, and in worst case scenarios you may have to backtrack and start the level from scratch to either conserve ammunition or health. While the marvelous flexibility and variety found in the game's hand-to-hand combat makes it feel less repetitive than it otherwise would be, running across the same long, empty hallway 50 times while trying to get past that final bad guy or force field does an excellent job of killing the game's momentum.



Now might be a good time to duck...



... too late. Ouch.

Legwork

After you're finished with the single-player game, you're supposed to turn to multiplayer. While it was first shown to the press with LAN support, that feature was removed due to an inability to get it to work properly over the Internet. While that's a shame, Bungie really missed out on an opportunity to give the game additional legs by adding a single-player melee training/combat arena. It wouldn't need to have any grand fighting game-styled structure—just throw a couple of levels together (some were already built for the demos, or they could use the self-contained areas from the boss battles) and let you fight as any character against as many opponents as you like. They could be unlocked as you discovered them in the solo game.

While it's easy to speculate that feature X would make game Y better, entering a cheat code after finishing *Oni* gives you a tantalizing glimpse of how superlative a melee mode may have been. The code allows you to play the game as any of the in-game characters, gaining access to their special moves (which mirror Konoko's, control-wise). It adds a whole new dimension to the combat; playing as the bad guy in particular, while (understandably) not play-balanced, gives you access to all sorts of cool moves that you only see in the final combat sequence.

Sketch of a game

There will be those that make a big issue over the game's perceived technical failings—the graphics are decidedly flat (though they give the game a sort of old-school animation look), the textures low-resolution, there are clipping problems where dead guys become one with walls and objects, and the environments sparse and somewhat bland. While you can dismiss criticisms of the environments by remembering they serve merely as background noise for a fantastic combat game, being overly critical of the graphics tends to ignore the bigger picture—the incredibly fluid animation does more to bring the characters and action to life than any high-resolution texture.

As it swings between being the best combat PC fighting game in existence and a frustratingly limited one, *Oni* feels somewhat like a sketch for a much bigger, and better, game. It feels a little like the contractual obligation game—the one Bungie had to finish before moving on to bigger and better things like *Halo*. Somehow all of the missing pieces can't completely dilute the impact of what is a terrific, if somewhat slight, combat experience. It's so close to being a masterpiece that you'll inevitably be disappointed, but when you step back and look at the whole instead of focusing on the parts, the one thing that stands out more than save limitations or the lack of configuration is the spectacular action. And that's ultimately what matters most. —*Steve Bauman*



UPSIDE

Graphics are excellent and the script and premise are highly amusing

DOWNSIDE

The serious instability is not quite so funny



[left to right] Two Meccs jetpacking to another island.

Delphi with her magic bow primed.

Giants: Citizen Kabuto

All things considered, one out of three Bs ain't bad

Giants is a game with a strange hybrid of qualities. It combines the look and feel of a classic shooter-style action game, a dash of strategy gaming, a bit of base building, diverse playable sides, and some console-style racing thrown in for good measure. It mixes outstanding 3D graphics and sound with an absurd but delightful British-style comedy science fiction script. It offers single and multiplayer experiences that are fundamentally different. It also, unfortunately, adds to this mix a wide variety of bugs that render the game virtually unplayable for some, and that also make the lack of in-mission saves (the game's only real difficulty factor) an even more annoying omission than it would normally be.

On Island holiday

Giants is set on the planet Island, a watery home to a series of small islands and a variety of absurd inhabitants. Island is ruled by Sappho, Queen of the Sea Reapers, a race of aquatic, spell-casting females that dominate with the aid of their one-eyed Teutonic, lizard-like male counterparts. It is also inhabited by a race of small and exceedingly eccentric creatures with oversized heads and overwrought accents known as Smarties. There are also grotesque two legged cattle-like creatures called Vimps and aggressive bundles of claw and teeth called Rippers.



Kabuto's young stalking a herd of Vimps.

The bane of all of these creatures is Kabuto, a gargantuan Godzilla/King-Kong wannabe originally created by the Reapers as a defense mechanism for Island. Finally, rounding out *Giants'* cast of characters are the Meccaryns (Meccs), a group of five sophomoric but heavily-armed, cockney aliens whose spacecraft has crash-landed on Island in the middle of their trip to Planet Majorca on holiday ("Majorca on holiday" is, not coincidentally, the European equivalent of "Ft. Lauderdale for Spring Break"). While the Meccs primary interests are liquor and libido, they won't be able to escape Island until they've helped save the Smartie civilization from both Sappho and Kabuto.

Over the course of the single player campaign, you start by playing Baz, the leader of the Meccs, then move on to play as Delphi, the rebellious daughter of Queen Sappho, and finally graduate to controlling an incarnation of Kabuto himself. The cornerstone of the campaign is a hilarious script that falls somewhere between Douglas Adams and Monty Python. The parade of ridiculous Mecc and Smartie characters are nicely voice acted and make the between-mission cut-scenes a treat.

Laff track

The cut-scenes are at their finest in the Mecc section of the campaign, and while they continue through the Reaper missions, they fail to add anything to the boring Kabuto missions, which offer nothing in the way of coherent story-line support. The missions are all pretty straight forward—you start at point A and destroy a structure at point B, being sure to kill everything in between—but to add a minor strategy twist, some of the missions require base building and resource collection. The campaign is broken into five Mecc "stories," each composed of several missions, five Reaper (Dephi) stories, and then five Kabuto stories.

The Meccs are defined by their impressive array of gadgetry and team play. You begin alone, but as Baz finds his friends over the course of the campaign, you'll be able to give them simple orders as well. In some missions you also have to build a base that can withstand the assaults of increasingly large and sophisticated armies of Reapers and Rippers. This requires you to find Smarties

THE GOODS

GENRE Action

PUBLISHER Interplay

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II, 64 MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER 2-10 players; Internet, LAN

RATING ★★★☆☆

MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

that you can put to work for you, kill Vimps and collect their meat with which you can feed the Smarties, and then direct your Smarties to build structures, such as turrets and gift (weapons) shops. Once you complete your base, you can then build a Party House, in which your Smarties pass their time downing pints while they wait for you to direct them to build more sophisticated structures, such as SAM turrets and a gyrocopter pad.

In contrast to the Meccs, Delphi fights alone, relying on her sword, powerful magical bows, and spells, although the spells prove to be of limited necessity. Delphi is also the only character that can enter the sea—the indigenous piranhas quickly devour the Meccs and Kabuto—and indeed swimming in deep water heals her. Delphi is also required to build a base complete with Party House in some missions, recruiting Smarties to research spells and collecting Vimp souls to power them. In an incongruous and arguably unfortunate intrusion of console-style gaming to *Giants*, Delphi also must win a series of obstacle course races on a jetski.

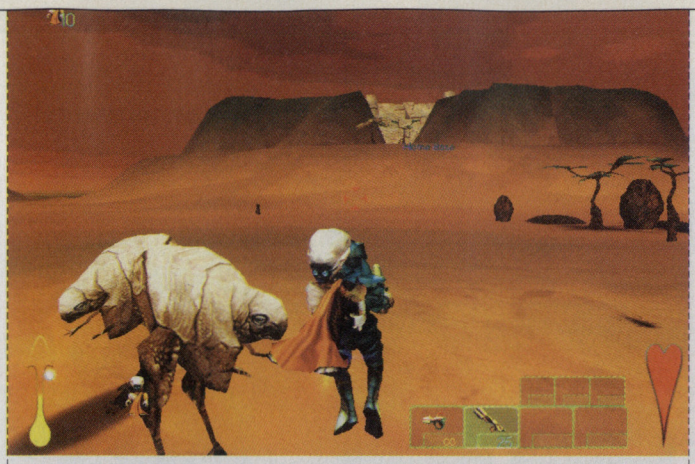
When you adopt the role of Kabuto, *Giants* moves from First-Person Shooter to First-Person Eater. Kabuto enjoys a limited menu of tactics: you can run up to buildings and creatures and smash them; you can pick up enemies and throw them at each other; but more often you'll just want to pop them in your mouth, which restores health and is gratifying to watch as well. As if this weren't gruesome enough, you also have the option of impaling victims on your torso spikes for later consumption. As Kabuto, you'll initially start small, but as you devour Smarties you'll grow, and once you've reached your full size, devouring Smarties will allow you to spawn offspring that you can then send to destroy targets and bring you food. The offspring are not particularly effective, and the interface for directing them is so awkward in contrast to the interface for directing fellow Meccs that you'll not be inclined to waste your time and energy with them, and they certainly aren't needed to complete the Kabuto missions.

The good, the bad, and the buggy

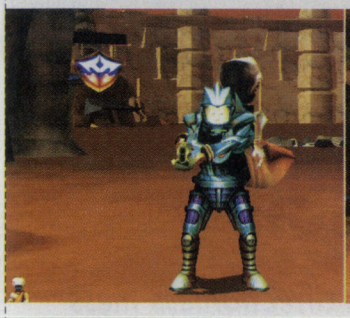
Giants' graphics are phenomenal, blending a palette of bright colors and even brighter sunlight to form the perfect backdrop for its whimsical storyline. There are also many nice touches of detail. For example, the Meccs and Delphi both rely heavily on sniper weapons, and when you zoom in on the omnipresent Reaper Guards from afar, they will be casually patrolling and you'll occasionally even see them sneeze. Drop one guard with a well-placed headshot and nearby guards will scramble and then stop and begin scanning the horizon for the location of the shooter.

Giants is only difficult if you don't take advantage of the long-range attacks that are available. If you do—and once you've mastered the different control configurations for the Meccs, Delphi, and Kabuto—the game is actually fairly easy. Impatience is the only true enemy. There are always ample but time-consuming opportunities to regain health—Delphi can go for a long swim in the ocean, Kabuto can feast on the endless supply of Vimps, and the Meccs can keep returning to the omnipresent gift shops for health injections—so there is little excuse for getting killed on a mission. Unfortunately, there are no difficulty settings for the campaign, so the replayability of single-player *Giants* is seriously limited.

In light of the lack of higher difficulty settings, the absence of an in mission save option might be forgiven. After all, having to complete a mission from the beginning is the only thing adding any real challenge to most of the missions. Unfortunately, the game's atrocious lack of stability on many systems makes the lack of a save even more infuriating. Nothing is more frustrating than to play one of the long base building missions—which can easily take up to half an hour—only to have the game crash for no apparent reason when you are on the verge of completing the mission, leaving you to start again from the beginning.



A Mecc with a Smartie on his back passes a couple of Vimps.



A Mecc standing in front of his Party House



Smarties hanging out inside the Party House.



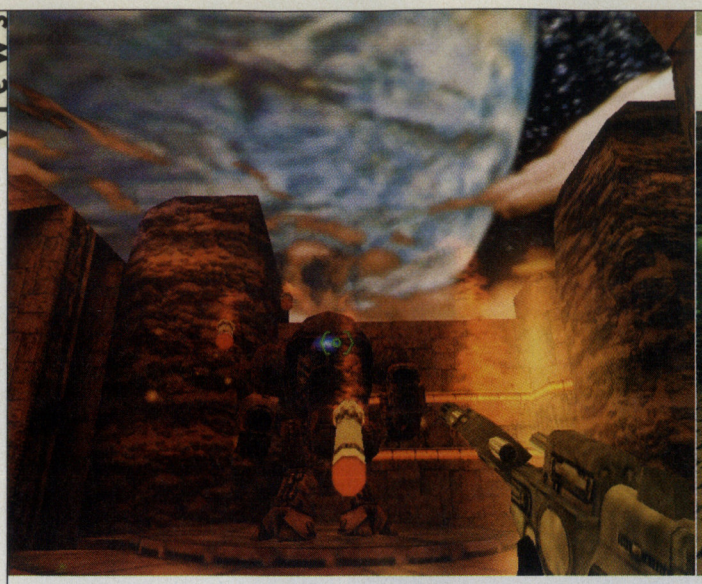
A young Kabuto preparing to eat some Smarties.

Multiplayer divergence

Something feels out of place in the solo game's base building missions. You are playing a strategy game—collecting resources (Smarties and Vimps) and your computer opponent isn't. Once you play the game online it becomes quickly apparent that the base building was incorporated largely for the benefit of multiplayer gaming, and it succeeds in making the multiplayer mode an almost entirely different game. It can be played with no bases or fully established bases on a drop-in basis, as well as with regular base building, and can be played in deathmatch and "capture the Smartie" modes. Multiplayer is team based—unless you are the Kabuto team—and you can play Mecc vs. Mecc, Mecc vs. Reaper, Reaper vs. Reaper, or Mecc vs. Reaper vs. Kabuto for a real free for all. Like the rest of the game, the multiplayer suffers from stability as well as connection problems, but if you can get it to work, it can be a lot of fun.

Of drive-in movie reviewer Joe Bob Brigg's infamous three B's, *Giants'* developers in a politic move took out two (Blood and Breasts). The third, Beasts, is still enough to carry the game, though the addition of a fourth B—Bugs—is certainly regrettable. It is sufficiently impressive in terms of graphics and style, and sufficiently unique, that it may demand a look from action fans that won't be put off by the game's undeniable console feel. The gameplay is good as well, though not good enough to fully forgive the lack of saves or stability. If *Giants* sounds too interesting to pass up—and it does have much to recommend it—make sure to conduct a little research on patch progress and affected system configurations before you head to the store.

—Nick McElveen



UPSIDE

Low system requirements

DOWNSIDE

Convoluted story and setting, too short





[left to right] Fighting a giant missile-toting robot.

Things pick up late in the game after you team up with the rogue AI.

These guys can travel the stars, and yet they can only manage a gyrocopter?

Gunman Chronicles

Half-Life steps in a cosmic cow pie with this directionless mess

Rewolf Software has been working on *Gunman Chronicles*, in one form or another, for a very long time. It started out as a mod for the original *Quake*, and over time evolved into a mod for *Half-Life*. Valve and Sierra took notice and before you know it, *Gunman* became a complete commercial product. Unlike other recent "mods gone commercial," this game has never been and never will be available as a free download.

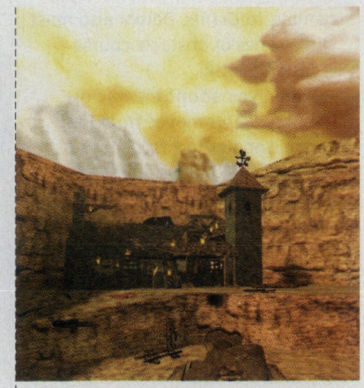
The game opens with a tram ride similar to the opening of *Half-Life*. A southern-sounding voice recounts the morning news as you take a sort of space elevator to the Gunman space-station headquarters. Once you get off the tram you're forced to navigate a few obstacles and visit the firing range, which serve as the training levels. You're then shuttled off on a mission to a distant planet somewhere, and that's when the game starts to fall apart.

To start with, the game never actually explains who the Gunmen are. You're a Gunman, but who are you? What do Gunmen do? They seem to be some sort of military organization, with soldiers sporting uniforms that resemble the Yankee troops of the American Civil War. Is there a war going on? Are you a galactic policeman? You find yourself thrust into a story that doesn't make a whole lot of sense, because you don't really know who you are, what you do, and why you're doing it (whatever it is).

The plot continues to twist and evolve without ever establishing itself. You start by fighting killer dinosaurs on a distant planet. Then you fight Xenomes, which are genetic experiments gone awry. But wait, you also tangle with robot drones under the command of an insane rogue artificial intelligence. Eventually you team up with the AI and help it to defeat the xenomes and the ultimate enemy, which happens to be the hero general whom you previously served under. If that sounds like a mish-mash of every hackneyed plot from every science fiction game or movie ever made, that's because it is.

The convoluted story would make more sense if the environment seemed a little more real. Unfortunately, the level design seems to suffer from the same problem as the plot—it's a mix of styles without a lot of reason or cohesion. You'll visit what looks like a Mayan jungle, a space station, a science facility, and the old west. In a game that takes only about eight hours to beat, there is certainly plenty of variety. Sadly, the levels are strung together and laid out to feel more like themed battlegrounds than actual locations. It doesn't help that the graphics are of the same general quality as *Half-Life*, which was good two years ago but looks rather dated now.

Gunman Chronicles doesn't have a story or environments you can sink your teeth into, but it does offer a few novelties that are amusing. A key feature of the game is the ability to customize your weapons. Your arsenal consists of around half a dozen weapons, but each one has several firing modes to choose from. You can turn a grenade into a timed cluster bomb or a trigger-on-demand trap, for example. The gun customization is a nice idea, but it's not as useful as it could be. There should have been more situations where your gun setup mattered, perhaps even puzzles that required a particular gun configuration to solve. Playing around with your weapons is more fun than using them. Combat is simply not entertaining—most of the enemies are rather dull and they do far too much damage. Couple that with scarce ammunition, and fighting starts to become a chore.



Blowing up stuff in your tank is the highlight of the game.

Things start to improve a bit near the end. You're given the opportunity to drive a futuristic tank around and blow the snot out of things, which is probably the highlight of the entire game. The last few levels display a consistency of vision that is missing from the rest of the effort. Multiplayer is present but not particularly compelling—with only five deathmatch-only maps, it won't pull people away from *Counter-Strike*.

Gunman Chronicles is what you get when you take a talented group of people and put them on a project without an experienced director to call the shots. It contains many individual elements that are quite good, but those elements don't pull together into a cohesive—or enjoyable—whole.

—Jason Cross

THE GOODS

GENRE Action

PUBLISHER Sierra Studios

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-32 players; Internet, LAN

RATING ★★☆☆☆

MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

UPSIDE

Sharp graphics, excellent sound, excellent character animation, and lots of gritty, modern day violence and challenging missions

DOWNSIDE

Missions are too linear and puzzle-like, absurd disguise logic, control problems

Hitman: Codename 47

Adventures in the violent world of mysteriously closing doors



This old dragon lady madam is kind enough to give you the best dish in the house.

There's a certain point in *Hitman* where you can't help but ask yourself whether it's time to turn that troublesome brain off. Perhaps it's the point early on when you kill the chauffer of a Hong Kong crime boss, steal the poor sap's clothes to put a bomb in the limo and no one notices that a really tall, bald white guy has suddenly replaced the small Chinese driver. Or maybe it's the way in which no one notices that the aforementioned tall, bald white guy is suddenly the scariest looking bellhop ever to grace the lobby of an extremely ritzy hotel. Alternatively, it's the myriad of other similar common-sense defying situations that the game requires you to swallow.

As the brain-locked hitman, you awake in some sort of clinic, whereupon you are put through a training gauntlet to learn the control mechanics. After that, it's off to Hong Kong to take down a riotously stereotypical bunch of Chinese gang members. The unknown hitman makes his way through the jungles to annihilate a drug lord, then into a hotel to stop a terrorist bomber, and onward to the final quest to discover the secret of his own identity.

The story is a decent but threadbare yarn that cushions the otherwise vicious blow inflicted by its own point-blank violent nature. The game itself, unfortunately, is an odd mishmash of style, pretty graphics, and stupidity.

The locales look realistic enough for the job, and the characters (especially the dead bodies) are remarkably well animated, with limbs that move realistically (such as when you drag a bloody corpse out of the way of prying eyes). The audio work is quite competent, with a cool soundtrack and solid (if stereotypical) voice work and really good sound effects. The AI is alert to foul play when there are obvious dangers, and guards will sound alarms, or get their friends if they find a body, hear screams and gunfire, or need assistance. The pathfinding AI is commendable.

By the same token, the enemies' inability to tell the hitman from one of their own gang merely because of a change in clothing is laughable. Other times, guards will sometimes attack you and set off alarms for no discernable reason at all. More troubling than that, however, is the general structure of the game itself. This is less of an action game, and more of an extremely violent, usually time-based series of puzzles that range from amusingly clever to nail bitingly hard.

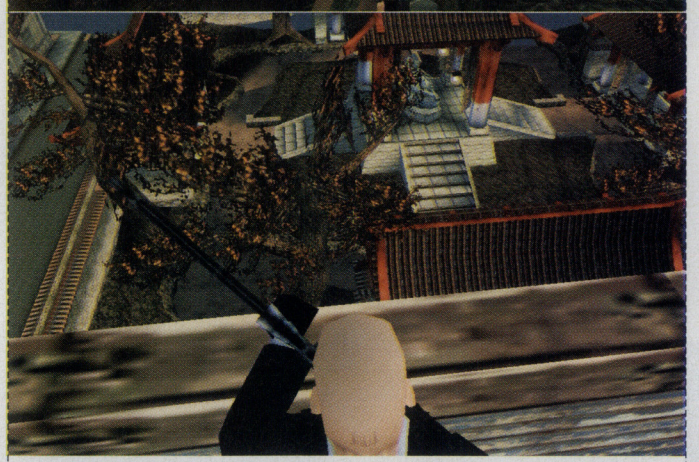
For each mission in the game (all twelve of them), there's generally one—and only one—way to get it right. Sure, there's some variation in how the guards react, but basically the challenge here is to figure out the proper series of steps that will enable the hitman to accomplish his grisly goal and get out alive. Since there's no in mission save option, you will replay each mission over and over until you figure out all the steps in the assassination puzzle. This difficulty is compounded (and to some extent made more interesting) by the fact that events happen at pre-set times.

For instance, a limo that you need to blow up arrives at a specific time, and the crime boss will leave the restaurant to get in the limo at a very specific point after that. So you'll have to figure out how to get the bomb inside the limo within that time limit, without alerting the guards. Before each mission, you can use the money earned from the last one to buy equipment, guns, and ammunition.

Hitman plays in third person, with a control scheme that seems a tad over-complicated. You can click on usable world objects and equipment, and a sub menu will appear over the pointer offering various choices of interaction. Using a mouse wheel, or the forward/back keys, you can scroll through the choices, but when you're on the run and time is short, this system is very cumbersome. There is also a problem with doors, all of which seem hell bent on stopping the hitman. Dragging a dead body into a side room becomes an absurd exercise when you have to repeatedly open the same door that somehow keeps closing behind you under its own power.

With its graphic, stylized violence and emphasis on stealth and assassination, *Hitman* seems styled to appeal to the shooter crowd. Unfortunately, it feels as if the developer lavished too much attention on making the violence stylized and realistic, and then just threw in a game around it. Great concept, extremely sloppy execution. —*Jason D'Aprile*





A few more dirty drug dealing scum bite the jungle dust.

The Hitman gets ready to snipe his way to victory.

THE GOODS

GENRE Action

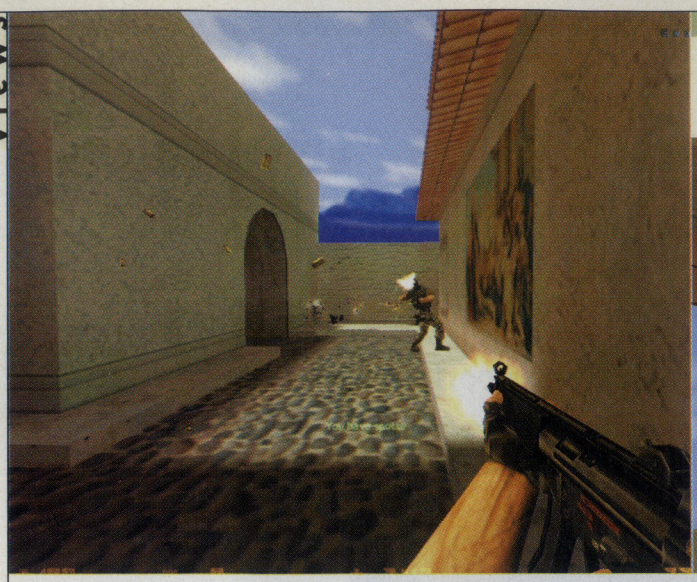
PUBLISHER Eidos Interactive

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64 MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING ★★☆☆☆

MATURE 17+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

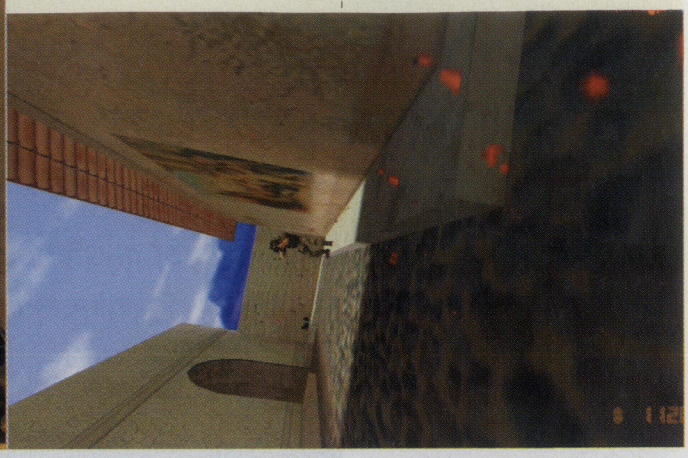


UPSIDE

Exciting team oriented action, addictive gameplay, tactics are actually useful

DOWNSIDE

Some grahics issues (clipping), problematic net code, character animations need tweaking, immature players



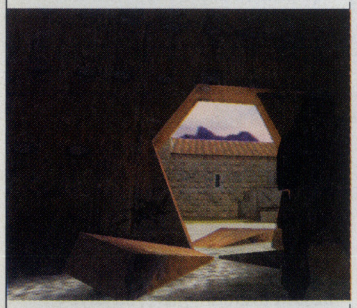
This terrorist is going down...
...or not.

Half-Life: Counter-Strike

Tactical team combat for the masses, and a Mod goes commercial

COMPUTER GAMES STAMP OF APPROVAL

Enemy sighted," crackles through your headphones. Your hands begin to sweat. Your heart rate doubles. The radar indicator shows the violent encounter in clinical monochrome. One by one, the symbols showing your fellow terrorists are disappearing. The relentless fist of justice is slamming your way. You may not know who Richard Cornell is but you're about to experience his classic story, "The Most Dangerous Game." You can run but you can't hide... for long. You grip your AK-47 and shuffle forward as the first two BDU-wearing counter-terrorists round the corner. Have to remember short bursts. Blood erupts in splatters as the counter-terrorists stagger and spin. They join the other ghosts of the dead who hover invisibly around you, anticipating, complaining, and cajoling.... More counter-terrorists appear low around the corner. Flash bangs turn the world a blinding white. Gunfire fills your hearing. Red fills your sight. Suddenly you are watching from above in a virtual out-of-body experience. You are now among the chatting dead. Welcome, boys and girls, to the most popular multiplayer game on the planet. Welcome to the *Half-Life* multiplayer phenomenon *Counter-Strike*.



Though dead, you can follow people around.

THE GOODS

GENRE Multiplayer Tactical Shooter

PUBLISHER Sierra

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 133, 24 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER Internet, LAN, Modem

RATING ★★★★½

MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

To get boxed or not

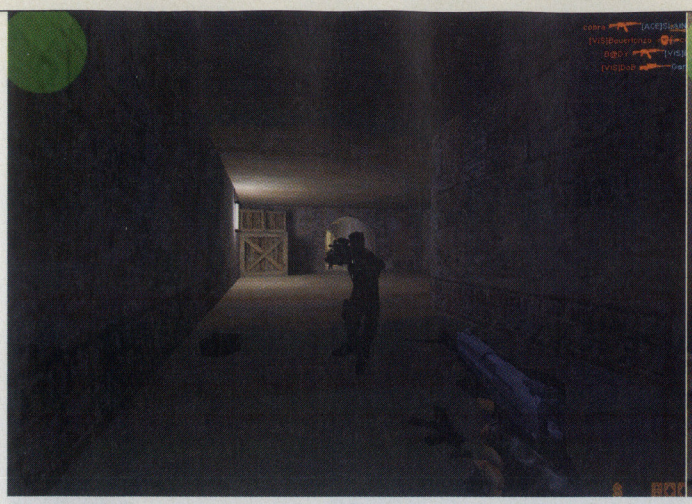
Born over a year ago as a free downloadable (and it still is, actually) multiplayer modification for *Half-Life*, it's been through at least seven incarnations (betas) worth of improvements and additions. With the current retail version, 1.0, hitting the store shelves, the game has emerged from its constant upgrades and gone "official." That's a testament to its huge following. For better or worse, no other multiplayer first-person shooter can match its popularity, not *Quake III Arena*, not *Unreal Tournament*, not even *Deer Hunter* 4. On any given day (or night) you can find over 10,000 people on over 2,000 dedicated servers trying to kill one another over the 'net.

Created by a team of fellow gamers lead by Minh Le (aka "Gooseman"), *Counter-Strike* is an everyman's (or woman's) riff on the in-your-face *Rainbow Six/Rouge Spear/SWAT 3* tactical team shooter—minus the complexities of waypoints or mission planning. It's all about execution. It's about intense close quarters combat. Good guys and bad guys hunting each other down, rescuing hostages, planting bombs—all the fun things that, say, Osama Bin Laden and the Navy SEALS get to do. Fun is the operative word. In fact it's way too much fun—the game is addicting. Frighfully so. It will invade your thoughts while you are on the job. It has turned nice quiet bucolic dreams into adrenaline pumping orgies of blood and bullets. You have been warned.

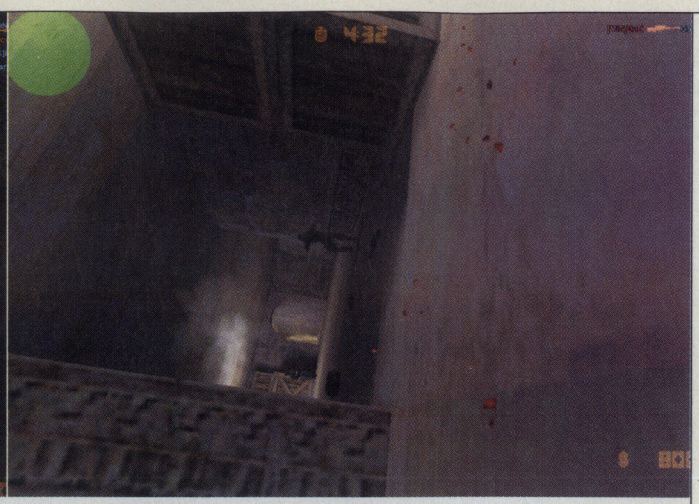
Okay, you ask, why should I buy the thing if I can get it for *free* online? Three reasons come to mind. The first is that you have a modem that downloads like a gecko snorting molasses up a straw. These files are big. The second is more an issue of convenience—everything you need to get online and start shooting is on one disk.—plus, the retail version comes with other popular mods: *Team Fortress Classic* (capture the flag style mayhem), *Opposing Force*



This counter-terrorist is about meet his maker. The goofy looking guys are hostages.



Pistol versus rifle...



...get used to this view.

Multiplayer (capture the flag and traditional deathmatch), *Firearms* (military team action), *Redemption* (a Half-Life add-on), and *Wanted* (a total conversion of *Half-Life* set in the Wild West). Thirdly, the boxed version of *Counter-Strike* 1.0 is a stand-alone game; you do not need a copy of *Half-Life* to play.

Strapping on the gear

For the uninitiated, here's what you can expect when you don the garb of either Terrorist or Counter-Terrorist. *Counter-Strike* features a series of urban and semi-urban maps (the boxed version comes with 13 official maps and four training maps—you can download more from the web) with different objectives for each side (Rescue, Bomb, Escape, and Assassination). For instance, the "Italy" map is a rescue hostage scenario in a small Italian village. "Dust" is a plant/defuse a bomb map set in what seems like a dusty south of the border town. In both scenarios, terrorists and counter-terrorists have different jobs: rescue or prevent the rescue of hostages in the former and plant or prevent/defuse bombs in the latter.

Sounds simple, right? Yes and no. The gameplay can be picked up in minutes but mastering the game will take a bit longer—months even, and teamwork is crucial for success. The Lone Wolf/Rambo approach will shorten your life expectancy to about five seconds. One-shot one-kill is more than a concept here. If you watch the better players, you'll see that they do work in teams, covering one another, assaulting with maximum force and coordinated effort. Many of the better players are also part of clans, which devote much time to practicing their tactics and marksmanship. One clan, or "community" as they like to call themselves, *The Crusty Old Fossil Rockers* (CoFR), is comprised of "older" (26-40+) gamers (with over 200 members to date) who take their fun seriously on private (note: whiny droogs need not apply) servers. The youngest crowd (16-25) who prefer to play with them are known as *The Crusty Young Fossil Rockers* (CyFR)

Each map is played in rounds with a time limit of two to three minutes. If all of one side meets the grim reaper, the round ends with victory for the surviving side. If objectives (planting a bomb, preventing hostages from being rescued, etc.) are not met within the time limit, the round ends with victory for the other side—so you can't just go hide and wait out the round. Winning a round adds cash to you and your team's total, and cash is the only way you can upgrade to better weapons (there's a whole menu of weapons to shop through—from Glocks to SAWs), body armor and equipment, which you purchase at the beginning of a round. Killing an opponent also gives you cash—getting killed does not. Killing a hostage actually subtracts from your total, as does killing your own teammates (if the Friendly Fire option is active on that server), and repeated offenses can get you booted. Getting killed turns you into an invisible "ghost" for the rest of the round. Although you can go anywhere on the map (good for checking out the action or learning the map), you can only communicate with your fellow "ghosts." When the next round begins, you are "reborn."

The journey towards 1.0

Over the course of *Counter-Strike's* journey to version 1.0, it's seen much in the way of tweaking. New ideas were tested and added—or thrown out. Character



What it looks like just as a grenade goes off.

detailing and animations were increased. New maps were added (and then polished both for their look and tactical opportunities), and then dropped if they proved unpopular. Weapons modeling have improved—or not depending on whom you ask. Considering the fact that the *Half-Life* engine is well over two years old, the graphics are still very palatable, and do an admirable job portraying outdoor locations. There are still some clipping issues but it doesn't detract from the experience—you won't have much time to stand there and marvel at your opponent's "stuck in the wall" routine.

There have also been some complaints about the character animations in the current version. In the jump from beta 7.1 to 1.0, the models (though much more detailed) seemed to have caught a severe case of the wedgies. Either that or they're actually gorilla soldiers from the *Planet of the Apes*. There has been talk about going back to the 7.1 models, possibly something to look out for in a patch. The net code of the game has aroused some controversy in that people claim it aids users with high pings through some sort of lag compensation. This might well be the case—suffice it to say that dial-up users with an average ping of 300-250 can play the game without suffering too much frustration. Other issues are mainly about cheating (which seems to be pretty rare in practice), the immaturity of some players, the frustration of staying alive against incredibly (impossibly?) good shots, and the lack of true cooperative play (too many deathmatchers who won't change?).

Despite all of the above, *Counter-Strike*, in whatever version, is still a heart-pounding, visceral experience that gets under your skin. The "just one more round" addiction factor is very high. When you play it properly, with teamwork that clicks like a well-oiled machine, the game offers a sense of accomplishment and comradery that is simply amazing. —*Bill Hiles*



UPSIDE

Attractive graphics, vastly improved interface, sophisticated diplomacy and military model

DOWNSIDE

Not many new ideas, not enough player feedback, no PBEM support



[left to right] An ancient Hebrew empire growing nicely.

The Hebrews had samurai? Who knew?

Call to Power II

A rose by any other name—Activision gets it right the second time around

Last year Activision released *Civilization: Call to Power*, an ambitious updating of the classic *Civilization*. *Call to Power* was chock full of new gameplay ideas and imaginative new units, but the game's reach exceeded its grasp. A clumsy interface and unbalanced gameplay left both critics and players cold. Still, *Call to Power* sold enough units for Activision to give the old 4X (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, eXterminate) formula another try. The result is *Call to Power II* (the *Civilization* name now legally belongs to Hasbro), a game that may not offer many new ideas of its own, but goes a long way toward correcting the original game's problems.



This looks bad for Cork.

The most immediately obvious improvements in the new game are its interface and graphics. While the first game's interface was an impenetrable mess, *Call to Power II's* is admirably clean and intuitive. You can access most of the game's functions either by clicking on a centrally located dial or "helm," or by taking advantage of the useful right-click menu. Overall, the game does a fine job keeping important information no more than two mouse clicks away. If you're at all familiar with 4X games, you should be able to jump right into the thick of things with hardly a glance at the manual. While there was nothing wrong with the original game's graphics, the look and feel are nonetheless improved this time around. Whatever the maps and units may lack in imagination, they more than make up in clarity and crispness.

One nation, indivisible

Sid Meier's games, from the original *Civilization* through *Alpha Centauri*, focus on the city as your primary resource center, making countries seem more like a collection of city-states than a single nation. The original *Call to Power* shifted this focus dramatically by doing away with the requirement that each unit and improvement be paid for and supported by an individual city. The gold and "public works" points with which to pay for units and tile improvements were instead pooled in a central coffer for use in whichever city's sphere of influence you chose. This made for a lot less micromanagement, because you didn't need to pay constant attention to the balance between productivity and unit support in each city.

Call to Power II expands on the "federal" concept of the original game by borrowing a couple of concepts from *Alpha Centauri*—mayors and national borders. Similar to *Alpha Centauri's* governors, *Call to Power II's* mayors allow you to automate the building queues and tile improvements in each city. You simply establish a focus—production, growth, offense, defense, science, gold, wonders, or happiness—and leave the rest to the mayor. The mayors generally do a fine job of maintaining and growing the cities economically (the pooled resources, of course, make their job easier), but if you're involved in a war, you'll definitely need to keep an eye on the build queues in the cities whose



The Wonder animations are nice, but lack drama.

THE GOODS

GENRE Turn-based strategy

PUBLISHER Activision

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 166, 64 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players; Internet, TCP/IP and IPX LAN

RATING ★★★★☆

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB



Adopting a diplomatic tone.



This fleet has a technology gap somewhere.

focus you've set to offense or defense, or you'll find yourself with an army full of catapults when you really need some knights.

The game's colorful national borderlines not only mark the outer boundaries of your empire, they also establish limits in which you can make tile improvements. This makes it very easy to see where you can set down roads, railroads, watchtowers and the like without much experimentation. All this reduction of city-specific micromanagement makes it easy to concentrate on its greatest strengths—its diplomacy and military models.

An extension of politics by other means

For the new game, Activision has scrapped the original game's forgettable diplomacy model and replaced it with one of the most sophisticated systems ever to appear in a 4X game. Although diplomacy options initially appear to be very rudimentary, once you've built a diplomat and opened an embassy in one of the other empire's cities, a plethora of choices fills the diplomacy manager screen. You start by setting a tone for your negotiations. Depending on your empire's size and strength relative to other party, this can range from meek and obsequious to haughty and hostile. The tone you choose will also affect the other nation's "regard" for your empire, which will make subsequent negotiations easier or more difficult. You then select from an astonishingly large array of offers and requests to communicate to the other side. The offer/request phase can range from as little as an exchange of maps to cease fires and peace treaties, to standard saber-rattling threats, to permanent trade and military alliances. The game also sports a new diplomatic victory condition, in which you win by forging a permanent alliance with every other remaining nation in the game.

The only weakness in the new diplomacy model is in its Spartan player feedback. You can spend a lot of time constructing an elaborate offer and request only to receive a cryptic response such as "the Germans have rejected your offer." Unlike *Alpha Centauri*, which has a superficially much simpler diplomacy model, you're left guessing *why* you've been turned down. In fact, the lack of player feedback, which hampered the original game as well, also somewhat mars the otherwise excellent military side of *Call to Power II*. For example, a ranged unit such as a catapult or cannon may fire on one of your armies off screen. You'll hear the sound of the shot, and perhaps the death grunt of one of your units, but even with the battle view on, the screen doesn't shift to show you the action. You have to either go to the army manager and examine all your armies, or scroll around the map to find out what happened.

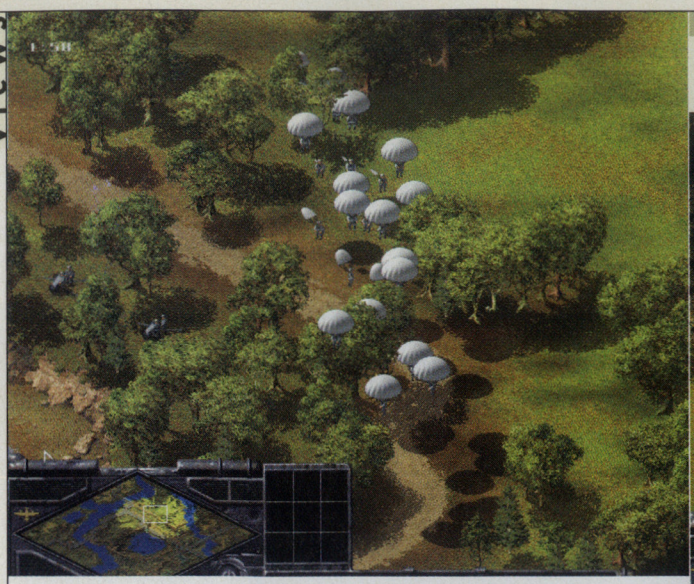
Feedback problems aside, the military model is the real glory of the game. The original game introduced the welcome concept of grouping military units in a stack of up to 12. This is continued with the addition of "flanking" units—usually mounted units like knights or cavalry—that add an attack bonus to your foot soldiers. As in the original, the new game resolves combat by placing the units in two rows, with ranged attack units in the back row. The flanking units generally end up on the sides of the front row—where they should be—although sometimes the computer seems to get it wrong and they're stuck in the middle. Nevertheless, this system is far superior to the one-on-one pairings of opposing units in the Sid Meier games.

Militarily, the most significant improvement is in the game's play balance. Technological advances have been given much more consideration in the new game, so you won't see many incidents like pike men bringing down airplanes with their sharp sticks, which happened all too often in the original. More importantly, the novel unconventional warfare units, like slavers, lawyers, and eco-rangers have been toned down enough so that they don't completely unbalance gameplay. It's now possible, if still difficult, to build some lawyers *after* a corporate branch attack and remain competitive in the game. The time span of the game has also been shortened from 3000 B.C. to 2300 A.D. so that the most powerful unconventional units are in play for less time.

With a random map generator, a map editor, three included scenarios, and the promise of more to come via the Internet, *Call to Power II* offers plenty of replay value. Multiplayer works fine over Activision's servers, but even with the game's relatively brisk pace, the wait during another player's turn can be long, especially late in the game. *Civ*-type games are ideal for play-by-e-mail, and it's a shame that mode is not supported. It's an ideal game for the gamer who prefers managing armies over micromanaging cities. While it doesn't quite have the panache of *Civilization II* or the drama of *Alpha Centauri*, it's colorful, relatively fast-paced, and it has that "one more turn" addictiveness that will keep you burning the midnight oil. —*Jason Levine*



The interface is vastly improved.



UPSIDE

Lots of unusual situations and cool hardware

DOWNSIDE

Sometimes overwhelming and difficult gameplay







Sudden Strike

Not your grampa's WWII game

Sudden Strike is an ambitious entry into the worlds of both real time strategy and wargaming, borrowing heavily from both genres to create a fun yet frustrating World War II combat experience. As a real-time strategy game, it provides some impressive fireworks and scads of unit types without over-burdening you with armor penetration factoids or tables of organization to remember. It deviates from the conventions of the genre, however, by skipping standard features such as technology development trees.

Sudden Strike is a battle game, pure and simple, and it's all done in glorious 2D isometric perspective—another departure from current real-time standards. The graphics are excellent, however, and it's possible to run the game on a five-year-old computer. As a wargame, you get all the hardware and a lot of the tactical considerations found in most WWII games, but are denied detailed information about how these elements interact. Most wargamers will recognize the many tank types in the game on sight. Tiger tanks look like Tiger tanks and most wargamers will know their capabilities—thick armor, big gun, slow speed—but how effective they are against a T-34 is up to you to figure out.

The skimpy manual mentions tanks' general strengths and weaknesses and that's about it. If you are a non-wargamer, this can be frustrating because you have no reference point for what a heavy tank is, or even which tanks are heavy. Wargamers, on the other hand, will be disconcerted by the lack of military organization. There are no squads, platoons or companies, even though some battles will include hundreds of individual infantry, guns and vehicles. There is also no command and control to speak of.

Realism is stretched to the limit by indirect artillery fire that crushes the heaviest tanks, on-call paratrooper drops, ambulances that can heal wounded soldiers on the spot, infantry that can lay instant minefields and supply trucks that do everything from fixing a tank to building a pontoon bridge.

But these features also make the game fun, if ahistorical. It's like a flashback to playing "army" as a kid. You have to physically man guns. Enemy guns can be captured and turned on their former owners. Bunkers, building and ubiquitous watchtowers can be assigned garrisons. Supply trucks scurry about the battlefield resupplying and repairing troops. Meanwhile, air transports drop supplies while Katyushas fire spectacular volleys of rockets. Whole groups of infantry are wiped out in the blink of an eye.

There's a lot to keep track of for a real time game. Fortunately, there is a pause button and you can issue orders while paused. Orders can also be queued. For example, you can assign a crew to a gun, send a truck over to pick it up and move it somewhere else, drop it off and move away to pursue other tasks.

The same level of playfulness is apparent in the heavily scripted campaigns and scenarios that come with the game. There is an Allied campaign that begins before D-Day with French Resistance fighters ordered to wipe out flak units so that bombers can take out a supply dump. The German campaign (*Sudden Strike's* European publisher is a German company, CDV Software) includes a paratrooper drop to capture French anti-tank guns that are used to knock out a column of French tanks. In the next scenario, the paratroopers must steal a truck, tow the guns to a ruined bridge, repair the bridge and cross to the other side. A massive Russian campaign rounds out the menu. These are scenarios you'll probably never see in a traditional wargame or real-time strategy game.

On the downside, the tiny infantry figures are easily lost among the lavish battlefields (there is no zoom) and, even paused, it can be tough to control a battle that might have a thousand troops on a side. Each soldier, vehicle, and weapon is also tracked for health, experience and ammo supply—a high degree of detail for a game that abstracts so many other factors.

Ultimately, *Sudden Strike* may be too complicated for many real-time strategy players and a little too silly for hardcore wargamers. If you don't mind making some compromises in either direction, however, there is ample fun to be had. —*Willie Albright*

[top left] **German Paras drop behind French anti tank guns.**

[top right]**...And the Katyusha's red glare, the bombs bursting in air.**

[bottom left] **The Russian Campaign gets an opening sequence.**

[bottom right] **Just part of an impressive German array.**

THE GOODS

GENRE Real-time Strategy

PUBLISHER Strategy First

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-12 Players; Internet, LAN

RATING ★★★½☆

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

UPSIDE

At times it reminds you why you liked the games in the first place, includes a level editor

DOWNSIDE

It all feels very tired; same dated graphics, some laughable environments, level editor is beyond complex

Tomb Raider Chronicles

Stick a block-shaped and poorly textured fork in Lara, she's done

With the final (for now) PC installment of Eidos' "Indiana Jones with enormous gravity- and physics-defying breasts" series of *Tomb Raider* games, they've finally reached that "milking the franchise" (no pun intended) point that *The Last Revelation* (last year's model) managed to skirt (stop with the puns already). *Tomb Raider Chronicles* feels mostly uninspired and tired, and isn't a fitting sendoff for a game series that's proven one of the most popular in the world.

As Lara "died" at the end of *The Last Revelation*, *Chronicles* starts off with some of her friends reminiscing about her past exploits. Each unrelated "chronicle" is a large-ish playable level, and there are four in total. There's a classic Rome adventure, a journey through a submarine (another poor showcase for the game's block-based 3D engine), a "young Lara" adventure on an island and a final level set in a high-tech building. There are some variations on the standard run, jump, shoot gameplay that's been the series' hallmark; a "young Lara" level features no weapons (and some odd little demon imps that look a bit like the dancing baby from *Ally McBeal*) and some stealth on both the submarine and high tech levels. The gameplay and interface remains the same; you control Lara with either the keyboard or a gamepad and she runs, jumps and shoots her way through these various levels.

The game does have some moderately interesting puzzles, and parts of some levels are nearly as good as those in *The Last Revelation*. But overall, *Chronicles* is a step backward to the less successful second and third games in the series. Though the game isn't overly challenging (as it was in the last three editions), the environments are mostly ugly and uninteresting. After reaching a narrative high point in the last game, the whole "Lara's dead, let's talk about her adventures" theme isn't particularly compelling.



After The Last Revelation's stunning cut scenes, the ones in Chronicles are merely okay.



The snow effects are quite good.

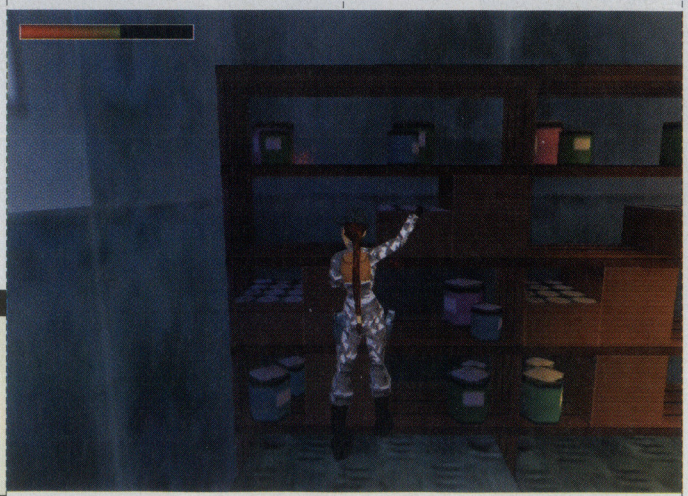


Proof why you don't set a Tomb Raider in a submarine. Ugh.

Then there's the technology, which still features the same blocky environments and low-resolution misaligned repeating textures. The technology still looks and feels five-years old, with Lara still moving through certain objects and things just looking... five years old. On the plus side, the controls still feel right, and jumping is as predictable as it's always been. People often complain about the lack of mouse-look and other modern niceties, but for those that have played all of the games in the series, it's incredibly easy to readjust yourself to that classic control.

The introduction of stealth and non-weapons oriented combat is perhaps a look into the future of the game, a PlayStation 2-only title slated for 2001. Turning it into *Metal Gear Solid*, with the usual running and jumping and climbing and swinging could make for a compelling game. But that's the future, this is the present: it's another year, another *Tomb Raider*.

There's little question that Eidos made a blunder by attempting to produce an all-new game every year. It seems rather pointless to complain about how the formula hasn't changed since the original game; it was a superb game then, and *Chronicles* is still, in parts, undeniably entertaining. Outside of the original and the last game (*The Last Revelation*), however, each has featured uninspiring designs and minor incremental changes, and that's just not enough, especially for one of the most popular characters in gaming. —*Steve Bauman*



Lara can now search boxes and cabinets, though she'll take damage if shot at and you cannot interrupt the animation.

THE GOODS

GENRE Action Adventure

PUBLISHER Eidos

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 16 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING ★★½☆☆

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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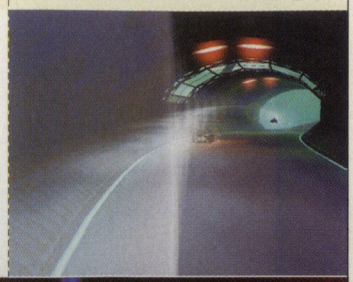
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UPSIDE

Scramble mode rocks, good weapon selection and ultra fast action

DOWNSIDE

Almost all gameplay modes, tracks and cars must be unlocked. Visuals are derivative and the interface is pure console



DeathTrack Racing

Rollcage Stage II... by any other name, would it smell as sweet?

The box, manual, and CD all bear the title *DeathTrack Racing*, but the actual game is another story. Publisher Take 2 took the sequel to the original *Rollcage*, slapped a new name on the box, and shipped the exact same zeroes and ones that comprise *Rollcage Stage II*, right down to the title screens and install directory. Psygnosis was originally slated to publish the game, but since they folded up their US publishing operation, you're lucky this game got to see the light of day on domestic shelves at all—lucky because it's pretty good.

One of the game's few problems hits you in the face the moment you start it up. On top of a console-style interface with no mouse support (better suited to the PlayStation, where this game also appears), about 90 percent of the game is locked up tighter than Fort Knox. You unlock a myriad of tracks, cars and gameplay modes as you complete different portions of the game. Standard racing comes in two flavors. Classic races demand that you finish first by hook or by crook. Total Races are a *Rollcage* specialty where you get points for blasting objects, structures and your fellow racers. This mode will probably hold your interest much longer than Classic. Not only are you pressed to maintain position but you also have to use weapons wisely to earn more points than your competitors.

Outside of Total and Classic racing campaigns, the only other portions of the game that are available from the start are Training and Scramble mode. Training offers you a number of challenges that teach you how to go fast and use the environment to go faster. The ability to drive on walls and ceilings is one of the coolest features in the game. In Training you learn how to use those abilities, combined with the various power-ups, to get to the finish line first. You'll need proficiency in many of these skills for the game's best mode, Scramble.

Scramble features tracks with all sorts of obstacles, a time limit, and point-to-point racing. It often requires that you drive upside down for an extended period of time, make a massive jump, and then navigate a strip of road that is only as wide as your car and covered with loads of bumps. One wrong move sends you into the void and forces you to start over. The track design here and in the other modes is spectacular, and takes excellent advantage of the unique properties of the vehicles in the game. A downside to Scramble is that you have to complete one track to see the next. Sometimes you're stuck with what seems like no chance to succeed. Despite this, even 25 of these tracks aren't enough because it's by far the most fun and unique part of the game.

Fast framerates and good graphics round out *DeathTrack Racing*. Speed is one of its best assets. There are some excellent weapon effects created by innovative weapons like the Leader Missile, which seeks out the leader of the race and blasts him into next week. You'll drive through huge explosions that light up the entire racing landscape. The visuals have one weak point though—they are a bit too derivative of Psygnosis' other futuristic racing game, *Wipeout*. This applies to the music and sound effects as well. Music is racing game cliché pulse pounding techno-style. Sound effects lack punch, considering the on screen pyrotechnics that accompany them. Just once it would be nice to have a combat racing game with some heavy-duty *booms* and *bangs*.

Internet play is included, but matchmaking is not, so you may get more mileage out of the excellent split screen modes that support up to four players. With high resolutions, you get plenty of screen real estate for deathmatch combat games, Rubble Soccer (which plays exactly as it sounds), and straight up racing. The game's high framerates allow split screen to function flawlessly.

There's a lot to like in *Rollcage Sta...* uh, *DeathTrack Racing*. The low price of about twenty bucks helps its case tremendously. If you had access to more of the game from the start and it didn't look and sound so derivative of just about every other futuristic combat racing game, it would really shine. —*David J. Long*



A leader missile turns to pierce its prey. These things are nasty.

Low car polygon count keeps framerates up but limits the distinction between models; bar graphs describe attributes when you make your selection.

"Ugh... I think I'm getting sick."



Hey! The bottom looks like the top! That's because the car can literally drive on either side.

THE GOODS

GENRE Arcade Racing

PUBLISHER Take 2

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 32MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER 2-5 players; Internet, LAN

RATING ★★★½☆



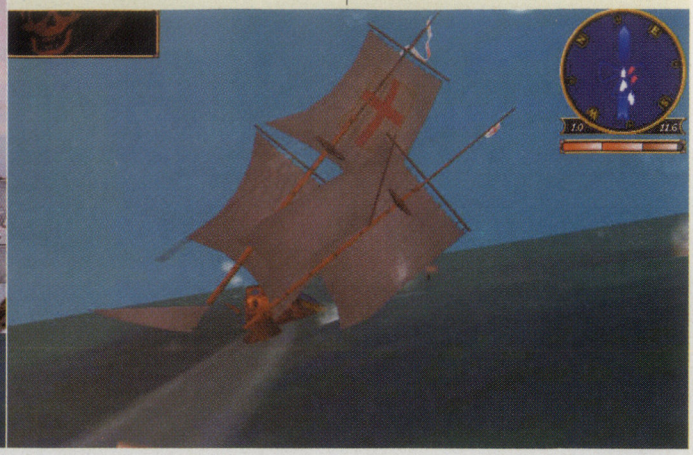
A battle weary squadron.

UPSIDE

Can suck away hours of your life, detailed graphics, engaging ship combat

DOWNSIDE

Buggy, AI issues, can be very tedious at times, can suck away hours of your life



A critical hit sends this English vessel to its doom.

Sea Dogs

A few parrots shy of brilliance

Have you ever played a game that sinks its hooks into you so deep that you cannot stop playing it even though it's buggy and contains numerous design gaffs? *Sea Dogs*, a swashbuckling role-playing adventure from Russian based developer Akella Software and publisher Bethesda Softworks, is such a game. The game takes place in a fictional chain of islands known as the Archipelago. Spain, England, France, and the Archipelago Pirates all vie for dominance. You play the role of a wet-behind-the-ears pirate named Nicholas Sharp. Once you were a merchant for England, but the Spanish attacked your ship and sent you to prison. After escaping, you gathered a crew, stole a small trade ship, and headed back for English waters.

At the start of the game, each nation has a specific diplomatic stance towards you and your new occupation. Spain hates you and wants your head, the pirates don't trust you, France is neutral, and England considers you an ally. Your actions throughout the course of the game may alter these relations. There's technically nothing stopping you from attacking English ships right from the get go; you can even attempt to gain favor with the other nations—and even with the Pirates—as the game proceeds.

A pirate's life we lead

Being a fledging pirate has its price. You start off with a small ship called a "Pink." It's smaller than a Sloop, and very lightly gunned. Your skills are also nil. You earn experience points by defeating enemy ships and by completing quests, and you spend these points to boost certain aspects of your pirating skills. You can also improve certain skills by hiring officers. Master gunners improve accuracy and reload time, boatswains improve boarding, and a master purser helps when trading at the local store. These lads vary in ability and they all cost gold. Keeping a lot of high priced officers on board is a very difficult task to manage until you have the cash to support them.

The goal, at least early on, is to make enough money to buy a better ship. You do this by accepting quests from people in town. Some are basic "errand boy" missions, in which a governor asks you to deliver a letter to a fellow on another island. Others might put you on escort duty. As you begin to gain favor with a particular nation, the quests become a bit more challenging—taking out an enemy fort, rescuing a kidnapped dignitary, or tracking a pirate that is terrorizing shipping lanes. Each completed quest grants experience, reputation points, and gold. Gold is vital to survival and you need to keep a stash at all times to repair damaged ships, pay a monthly wage to your crew and officers, and shop at the local market.

Trading is the simplest way to earn money. There's a wide assortment of goods that are available for trade from coffee to several types of cannon shot. Locating the more profitable stores to sell certain goods is something each new sea dog must do as soon as possible in order to get a foothold.

A more exciting way to make money is by attacking and boarding ships. It's a tricky and risky business, however—you need to sail close enough to grapple the enemy ship, avoiding grape shot if at all possible. Once you have successfully boarded, a duel takes place between Nicholas and the enemy captain. The duel is actual-



This is not the victory screen...



Entering a French settlement.

THE GOODS

GENRE Role-playing

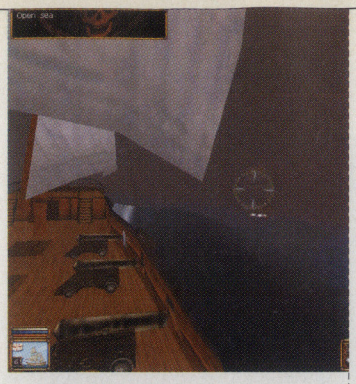
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 266, 32 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING T for Teen — Content Rated by ESRB

★★★½☆



The weather effects are superbly done. Note the Spanish warship in the distance.

ly an abstracted representation of all of the men on board—if you attack with more men, you have more hit points during the fight. Sword fighting takes a *lot* of practice, but once you gain confidence using this tactic, it's great fun to swing in close to an enemy ship and plunder her.

Pirating on crack

What makes the game so addictive is its well-paced combat and the anticipation of buying a bigger and better ship. You'll get a warm feeling when you trade in that tiny Pink for a 16-gun Pinnace, and an even bigger one when you trade that in for a Class 4 Fast Galleon. You can eventually sail a massive 98-gun Man O' War, and that's the warmest feeling of all.

Captaining a 17th Century armed vessel has never been more enjoyable. You can switch between a third-person and first-person view with a click of a button; both camera modes serve their purpose as it's easier to get a feel for what's around you in third person mode, but the adrenaline really starts to flow when the game smacks you on the deck of your ship in first person mode. *Sea Dogs* surpasses every other Age of Sail game to date in terms of pure excitement. It's not a simulation, and it's not intended to be, but it all comes together when you are fighting a huge battle at night in bad weather, when you can't see your enemies due to heavy rain, mist, rolling waves, and the darkness itself. Suddenly that towering Spanish Frigate emerges from the haze, and you can see the cannons fire at point blank range. It's an amazing gaming experience.

The Archipelago Blues

If the rest of the game were as polished and as entertaining as the combat, Bethesda would have a nearly perfect pirating experience on its hands. Sadly, that's not the case. The game is peppered with problems.

First there are the bugs. The game is simply not stable. It locks up occasionally, and crashes to Windows every so often. The controls may stop working during combat or while in town, and even quick-saving your game can be an adventure. Nothing is more annoying than having to replay a quest simply because the game decides to be ornery. The only saving grace is that you can save the game whenever you like—at sea, in a town, or wherever. You can play the game for a few hours without as much as a hiccup, but the moment you decide that the problems are behind you and you forget to save your progress the game locks up or leaves you staring at a black screen.

Other oddities pop up at inopportune times. Sometimes, officers that you hire do not show up on your roster screen, even though you paid good coin for them. There are times when you fail to receive credit for destroying enemy ships. Other bugs are even weirder. The maximum crew capacity on a Light Sloop is 35 men; yet it's possible to carry a crew of over 100 sailors, giving you a hefty advantage in boarding operations.

You use dialogue trees to talk to characters while in town, and often you have a choice of responses. Sometimes the responses are cut off, making it impossible to read your options. It's just sloppy.

There are also AI issues. As the game continues, you have the option of picking up allies that sail along with you. These extra ships are invaluable in large battles, but whoever is steering is either blind or incompetent, or both. One ship actually sank by ramming into another ally as they were sailing out of harbor—no fighting involved, they simply ran smack into each other and an allied Caravel went under.

The game is also needlessly tedious at times. Each town layout is a little bit different and there are only a handful of locations that you can visit, but the game forces you to dock your ship and walk around in full 3D. A "quick town interface" might have helped. If all you wish to do is unload your rum shipment, you shouldn't have to waste time literally running to the store again and again.

Pirating is a tough gig, matey

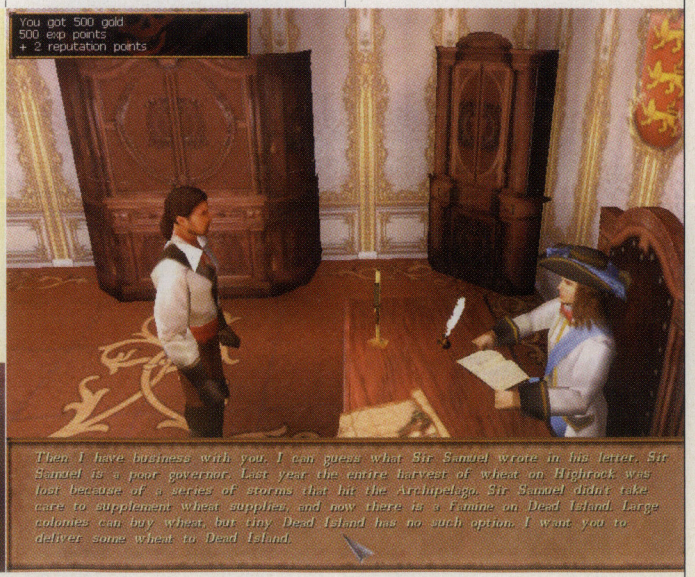
Sea Dogs is a tough game, and reloading previously saved games becomes second nature after a while—especially early in your pirating career. The waters around the Archipelago are infested with ships. It's a wonder there's room to sail at all with the number of encounters that spring up. The military ships outnumber the merchant ships, making it tough to get started, and there are times when you can't escape combat. You may be sailing along peacefully when a message pops up stating that three pirate ships have attacked you. If you are still sailing in your Pink you may as well reload your last save. When you are attacked in such a manner, the game places the enemy ships in shouting distance of your own. It's as if the enemy ships have a cloaking device that renders them invisible until they appear right on your starboard. It's unrealistic and completely unfair. Who's manning the crow's nest? Ray Charles?

Make sail, Mr. Hornblower, with caution if you please

Sea Dogs is, without question, a wildly fun experience... when it works as intended. There's a lot of gameplay here and you can spend dozens of hours questing in the Archipelago. If it had only spent a few more weeks in the dockyard before setting sail, it would be much easier to recommend without hesitation, but it's impossible to overlook the bugs and the other baggage that the game brings to the table. —*William Abner*



The fighting in the game can be exhilarating. Let her have it boys!



The governors of most towns will offer you quests.



UPSIDE

Looks really, really good, plays well, fun overall

DOWNSIDE

Some minor bugs (no pun intended), no in-mission save, no multi-player, nagging inadequacies



[left] Big bugs in the background spell trouble.

[above] Things get hairy underground, and the map shows you've only just started.





A trooper in a jump suit plans a jump near an objective...

...And quickly jumps back to set up an ambush.

Starship Troopers

Immersive but ultimately average bug hunting

MicroProse knew that were going to have a battle when they brought out *Starship Troopers*. Fans of the book would be disappointed if the game were anything other than other than a faithful copy, while the (probably many more) people who just saw the movie would be confused if the game were too different. A compromise was reached: they maintained the emphasis on small-unit tactics, but jump suits and deployment patterns are toned down for playability.

Starship Troopers is a real-time tactical game. It eschews the usual find-mine-build-kill cycle of the typical *Command & Conquer* clone for a more refined recruit-engage-develop cycle somewhat akin to a role-playing game. Your goal in the campaign (really just a series of missions) is to minimize casualties among your core group so that they can develop into seasoned veterans. You may find yourself growing attached to your veterans—you'll remember their names, birthdays and children's ages. You'll cry when they die, especially because some moron on the design team forgot to include an in-mission save option.

Before each mission you have the opportunity to prep, which consists of three phases: briefing, squad selection, and equipping. The narrated mission briefings give you an outline of what types of bugs you're likely to encounter. Each bug has weaknesses, so you will have to equip your squad accordingly. Squad selection gives you the chance to bring your team up to strength in case you lost any troopers on the last mission. Each potential squaddie has a range of attributes that can affect the way they function in combat, so be careful who you take with you. After filling out your squad, equip them with the latest firepower. There's a nice array of short and long-range weaponry available. Of course, the primo equipment is the power suit. These are doled out sparingly and are only available when you reach certain missions.

Each mission starts out on a space-bus-like troop transport that drops you and your squaddies on a planet. This is done via an in-engine cut scene that really looks fantastic, and the terrain is accurate (so pay attention). Your squad comes out in formation. Formations actually make a difference in combat, even if the AI that governs where each trooper falls into the formation tends to be brain-dead (medics *do not* walk point). The first thing you'll notice is how good everything looks. Everything looks gorgeous. You can even see your troopers' breath when it's cold out. Next you'll notice the bugs. They're gorgeous too, but deadly. And they're noticing you as well.

You'll face a wide variety of bugs that, if somewhat on the dim side tactically, look really cool when charging and can be formidable enemies. Your major decisions boil down to "which route should I take to the objective" (nicely highlighted on the HUD), "should I engage at a distance or at close quarters" (depending on bug type and squad composition), and "why am I out of ammo" (happens all the time)? This makes for a very engaging game. You can spend hours planning how to take a particular objective with various weapons mixes and deployments.

When you're actually playing the game, it's a real blast. Troopers fire, bugs die, the ground trembles, there's blood and guts and glory enough for everybody. What drags the game down is a list of nagging shortcomings. The game is buggy (there's a patch out already), there's no in-mission save, no speed setting, no giving orders while paused, weird graphics draw-in in the distance, bad camera angles, interface glitches, no multi-player, no mission editor, bad intra-squad pathfinding, a complete waste of a manual, and other assorted weirdities.

The most distinctive characteristic of *Starship Troopers'* gameplay is its immersive quality. Most real-time strategy titles leave you with the impression of distance from the action—the units can feel like passive game pieces that you push around. In *Starship Troopers* you feel like a member of the squad. You're not actually in the action yourself (ala *Quake*) but you'll feel connected to the team. There will be no "trooper rushes"—not because you can't do it, but because you'll feel too attached to your people to blithely send them to a buggy death. It's a bit like the multimedia squad coordination system from the movie *Aliens*. You are both in control and in close contact with your squad, with all the potential for victory and defeat that entails. Life and death really matter to your troopers, a welcome change from the disposable armies of so many other games. —*Thomas Bitterman*



Note the attention to detail—cracks only appear behind the troopers in icy terrain.

THE GOODS

GENRE Real-Time Tactics

PUBLISHER Hasbro

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233, 64 MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING ★★★☆☆

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

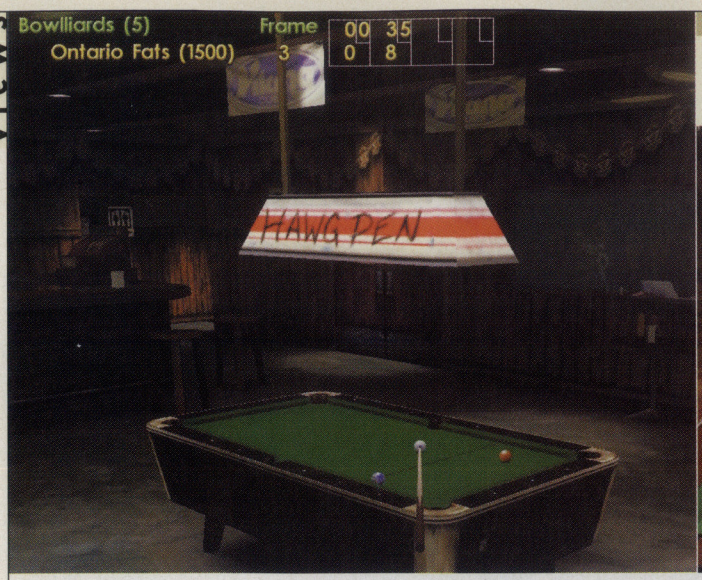


It is written, the wise know when to cheat.

The wise also know not to get cheats from some old dude living in a hut. The most up-to-date cheats, reviews, and demos for games on every platform are all free for the taking at happypuppy.com. It's great for regular gamers, drunken masters, and even old dudes living in huts.

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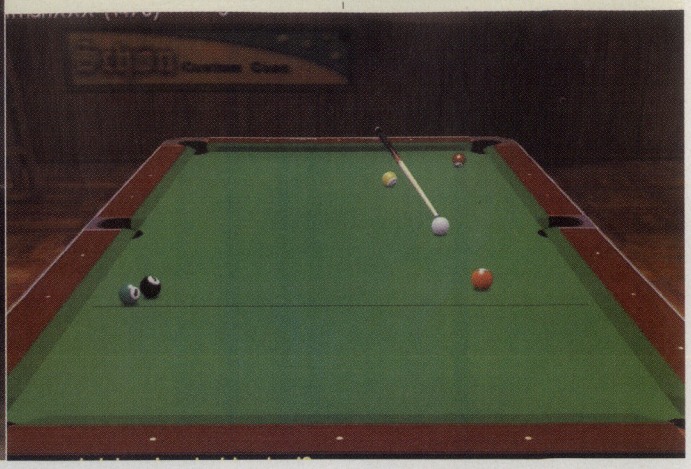


UPSIDE

You won't find a more precise simulation of pool anywhere

DOWNSIDE

Solo play is a little too bloodless to capture your interest for very long



Welcome to the Hawg Pen.

Online play is effortless and lag-free on the GameSpy Arcade system.

Virtual Pool 3

Keep your eyes on the green felt and everything will be just fine

The *Virtual Pool* series has always been regarded as the Cadillac of billiards simulations. That reputation was richly deserved. Nearly everyone who spent any length of time with the original game or its sequel came away convinced that they'd just been to the neighborhood pool hall. The illusion couldn't have been any more complete if the game came with a pack of cigarettes that you could chain-smoke to put that traditional haze in the air.

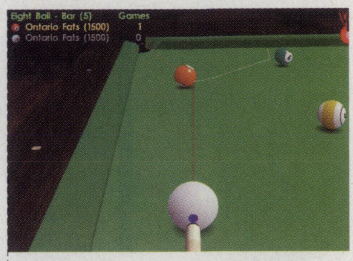
Virtual Pool 3 continues the fine tradition established by its predecessors, offering a game that is nothing short of perfect on the green felt. Ball movement is exactly as it should be. You'll never see any spin or roll that is even remotely out of the ordinary. At the same time, playing it—at least in the single-player modes—is a remarkably cold and sterile experience. This is more of a mechancial simulation than a game, and as such it has all the personality of a vacuum cleaner.

There's too much to do for this to be an issue when you first start out. The list of options and modes of play is well filled-out. More than 20 different games are available, from standards such as 8-Ball, 9-Ball, and Snooker to interesting diversions from the routine like Bowlliards and Honolulu. All these variants can be enjoyed in one-off Quick Play matches, during online action, or in the Career Play mode.

These latter two options really make *Virtual Pool 3* shine. Multiplayer is best supported through the free *GameSpy Arcade* matching program included on the game disc. This excellent service provides lag-free billiards action, and there almost always seems to be someone online. Building a good online ranking is one of the most addictive videogame quests you can embark upon this side of *EverQuest*. Career Play lets you create an amateur, specializing in the game of your choice. You must then work your way up the ladder, starting off with $50 and $100 matches against rubes who can't tie their shoelaces, let alone make a bank shot. As you beat progressively tougher opponents and accumulate a hefty bank account, you'll get the chance to buy better cues and eventually face off in big money rounds with tough pros like the new *Virtual Pool* cover girl, Jeanette "The Black Widow" Lee.

Controls are incredibly accurate, allowing you the freedom to try just about anything you'd like during a match. They are very much keyboard-reliant, though, which is a bother for anyone who wants to simply slide a mouse back and forth. While this hotkey system ("S" readies a shot, "E" adds english, "Ctrl—C" calls a shot, and so on) is fluid and easy to use, the option of clicking on icons and playing with just one hand on the mouse would have been welcome. Although the control layout quickly becomes second nature, having to constantly refer to the keyboard takes the player further away from a natural feel. The basic mechanics of pool are as down-to-earth as it gets—do we really need a control setup that could have been pulled from *Microsoft Flight Simulator*?

Visuals are sharp and acceptable, though much of the atmosphere has been bled away by an almost complete lack of character. Pool rooms in the game are marked by a stereotypical sameness. Every game is played in standard settings—a garage, a mansion, a dingy bar—that we've all seen too many times before. Worst of all, opponents are represented solely by goofy bios and small grainy pics seemingly ripped from some police department's book of mug shots. During actual gameplay, both players are (still) represented by cues that mysteriously float in mid-air. And that isn't good enough for today's market, more than a year after *Expert Pool* introduced actual 3D hustlers who would amble up to the table and chalk their cues.



Ah, if only it were this easy in real life...

Instability is also an issue. The program seems to choke on DirectX 8.0. This forced two complete reinstallations of Microsoft's finest time killer since Windows 3.0 and the drivers for the test system's GeForce 2 GTS video card before the game deigned to boot at all. Everything was fine under DirectX 7.0, however. Even when the game performs properly, it exhibits a tendency to flicker during hard bank shots.

Virtual Pool 3 is the best pure simulation of pool currently available for the PC, but it lacks much in the way of frills and simple user-friendliness and warmth. Focusing too much on the big picture meant disregarding the little touches, many of which have always been vital to sustaining a gamer's interest. While you have to admire the skill involved in programming such an exacting title, it's tough to imagine anyone getting hooked on playing it, at least offline. —*Brett Todd*

THE GOODS

GENRE Sports

PUBLISHER Interplay

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 233, 32 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-32 players; Internet, LAN

RATING ★★★½☆

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

UPSIDE

Provides a satisfying ending to the Blair Witch trilogy

DOWNSIDE

The cartoon-like characters detract from the spooky atmosphere

Blair Witch Volume 3: The Elly Kedward Tale

In the beginning, there was...

Blair Witch Volume 3: The Elly Kedward Tale is the final title in a trilogy of games based on legends from *The Blair Witch Project*. Developed by Ritual Entertainment, the game uses the same *Nocturne* engine used by Terminal Reality and Human Head Studios for Volumes 1 and 2, respectively. If you have played the previous games, you will be immediately comfortable with *Blair Witch 3*—the interface is the same. You will also be able to enjoy this release without distraction, as you should be fully desensitized to the various quirks of the *Nocturne* engine such as shifting camera angles, clumsy controls, and excessive load times.

Blair Witch 3 opens in 1786 with Jonathan Prye, a minister in a crisis of faith. In an effort to restore his relationship with God, he journeys to Blair (later known as Burkittsville) to assist with its "recent demonic plight." Evil has plagued the town since an old woman named Elly Kedward was found guilty of witchcraft, dragged into the woods, and left to die. Now, the dead are rising from their graves and children are disappearing—clear indications that powerful forces are at work. Prye's mission is to search for the source of this spiritual unrest. As every *Blair Witch* fan knows, all journeys lead to the woods.

The menacing forest is riddled with paths that weave through a landscape of undead and stick monsters with pulsing hearts. This time, your travels are made more interesting by visits to the "Spirit Plane" and the "Demon Plane"—two parallel levels of existence that converge near Blair. You are assisted by an eclectic group of spiritual advisors that arms you with knowledge, weapons, Christian and pagan artifacts, and magic spells. In addition to a journal that identifies your objectives, you carry a map that expands as you explore.



Prye has no sympathy for this devil.

While the style of the environmental graphics is similar to *Rustin Parr* and *Coffin Rock*, the characters are more like caricatures and do not reflect the level of detail seen with Doc Holliday or Lazurus. Ritual also chose not to animate any facial features during character dialog. While this eliminates the complexities of lip-synching, it is more than a little distracting.

In keeping with the previous games, the sound track is outstanding and the voice acting is highly professional. Rather than relying on ambient noises to create an atmosphere of suspense, Ritual uses sounds in combination with music and chanting. Especially on the spiritual planes, this creates a very eerie sense of the supernatural.

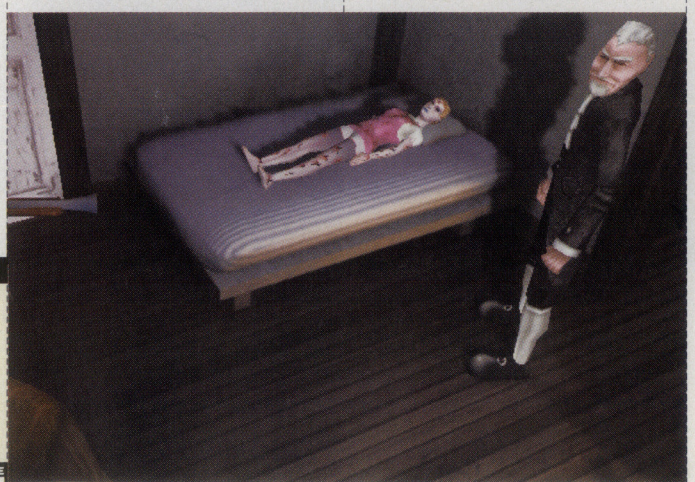
The story itself is not terribly long but the combat is intense and should extend the playtime for most gamers. With the exception of the "boss" demons, the denizens of the woods and the spiritual planes are fairly easy to kill when encountered individually. They often surface en-masse, however, and surviving a group attack can be quite a challenge. Luckily, the management of ammunition, health, and mana is made a little easier by their availability on most corpses.

The game makes few references to the film. *Blair Witch 3* most closely aligns with the story told in *Rustin Parr*, and those who traveled with Doc Holliday will get a strong sense of coming full circle. You will already know much of the background legends and may smile (or cringe) when the visage of Hecaitomix is finally revealed.

All is not perfect in Blair, however. Although the game is generally stable, there are several points at which your character can wander off the screen and disappear. This is generally not fatal, unless Prye encounters a creature off-screen (and is then doomed to certain death as you attempt to battle an opponent that you can't see). If you save often, this is an easy situation to recover from and is more of an irritation than anything else.

Blair Witch 3 provides a very satisfying wrap-up to this series and, in some ways, is the best gaming experience of the group. Perhaps because Ritual had more time to develop the story or perhaps because your visits to the spiritual planes offer elements of visual drama that are a welcome change from basements and forests. Or perhaps it is simply that, having grown accustomed to the quirks of the interface, you are finally free to experience the true essence of Blair.

—Cindy Kyser Morgan



The early residents of Blair are depicted with less detail.

THE GOODS

GENRE Action/Adventure

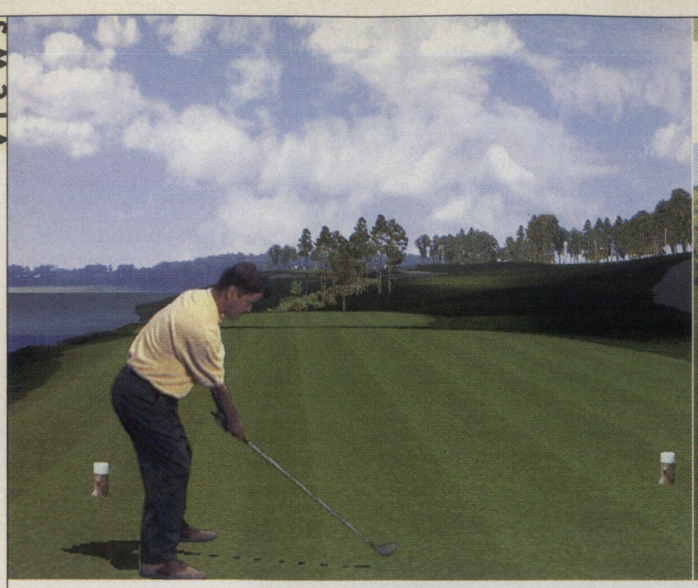
PUBLISHER The Gathering

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II, 64 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

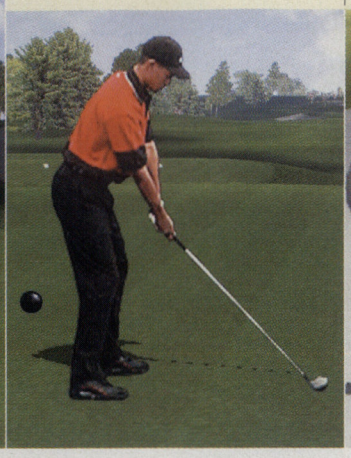
RATING ★★★½☆

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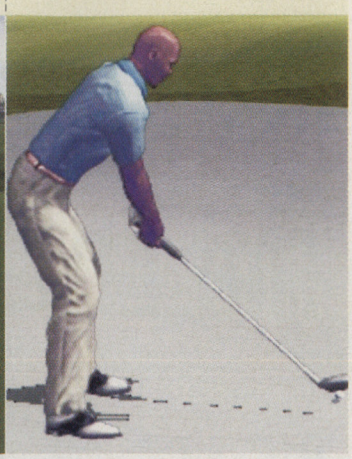
UPSIDE

Game fuels the Tiger Woods craze that keeps Nike sweatshop workers in Singapore gainfully employed



DOWNSIDE

Aside from everything else, the compact discs refused to burn



[left to right] **The best golfer animation in the game, and even it throws a shadow made of Legos.**

Ladies and gentleman, the man who makes the gross national product of Brazil look like pocket change—Tiger Woods!

Wanna bet that the real Michael Jordan didn't pose for this?

Tiger Woods 2001

Didn't EA Sports learn any lessons from last year's debacle?

The kindest thing that you could say about *Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2001* is that the feel is off. And not just by a little bit, either. In this case we're talking about the world class "off" of the sort experienced by Jean Van de Velde while he blew the British Open championship a couple of years ago with a seven-shot 18th. That event caused armchair golfers across the globe to cringe in empathetic embarrassment. Amateur golfers still laugh about "pulling a Van de Velde" whenever they do something particularly stupid, ranking the Frenchman right up there with Bill Buckner as one of the most infamous goats in sports history.

That's a bit like this game, which is certainly one of the most infamous goats in sporting game history. Even with the addition of golfing game pioneer Vance Cook and the rest of the esteemed design team at Headgate Studios (the development house behind the outstanding *PGA Championship Golf* series published by Sierra), EA Sports has produced a disaster of epic proportions. Terrible physics, a clunky interface and terrible swing mechanics, dated visuals, absent sound effects, and some of the sloppiest programming this side of *Battlecrusier 3000 AD* make this title nearly unplayable.

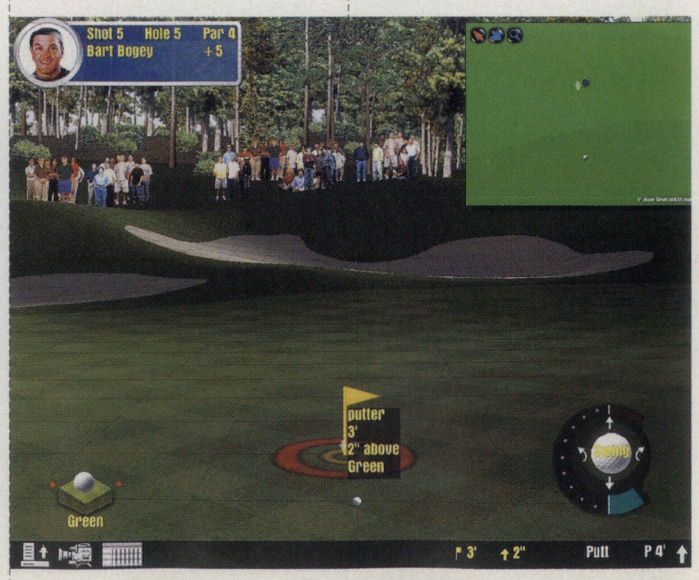
Hackey-sack golf

Faulty physics constitute the most glaring sore thumb. Even though the game features what is arguably the most realistic feature set of all the computer golf titles—all manner of game styles and options, including President's Cup play, 17 courses, full PGA Tour career mode complete with Q-School rounds, Internet action that lets you compete with the real pros during live tournaments, and so on—it doesn't matter when the ball simply doesn't react as it should. This is true both off the club face and when the ball bounces off or interacts with various types of terrain. As for the former, it seems virtually impossible to screw up so badly that you'll slice or hook into trees or water. No matter how badly you miss the bottom contact line on the swing meter, the punishment is generally fairly light. The only exception to this is when you're hitting from sand or heavy rough, which is often extremely deadly.

The latter is even more of an issue. Ball liveliness, or the lack of same, is a real problem. The designers have saddled the game with golf balls as dead as their bigger rawhide cousins used by Major League Baseball in the pre-Babe Ruth days. Drives straight up the fairway are shortened thanks to these leaden projectiles, which thud into the turf like sacks of wet cement. It's even worse if you stray off the beaten path. A few sparse leaves have as negative an impact on the flight of your shot as the most impressive oak trees. Sand traps somehow manage to smother even low-flying balls that would usually tend to skip out of harm on a real course.

Enter Rod Serling

Putting is an adventure into the *Twilight Zone*. Greens don't seem to break nearly as much as they should, meaning that you should almost always take a fairly straight line. More serious flaws are cups that are too large and black hole-like. Get your shot close and it will inevitably be sucked in. This removes all need for cautious play around the hole—when you can simply launch the ball straight ahead with no fear that it will skim in and out, why bother trying following a long break with a delicate putt?



Some greens feature a pretty, if distracting, mix of sun and shadow.

THE GOODS

GENRE Sports

PUBLISHER EA Sports

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 200, 32 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2–4 players; Internet, LAN, Hotseat

RATING ★ ½ ☆ ☆ ☆

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Swinging mechanics are equally wanting. *Tiger Woods 2001* comes complete with the standard tri-click interface and a mouse swing called Pro Swing. Neither is very fulfilling. The tri-click functions adequately enough, but is far too easy to use. Hitting the bottom contact line is a snap right from the very beginning. Unless you're hopeless where hand-eye coordination is concerned, expect to walk into the clubhouse a few strokes under par at the end of every round. If you've got the stomach to endure the game for a while, you'll soon challenge the real Tiger Woods on the leaderboard. Pro Swing is the least realistic mouse swing ever featured in a computer golf game. The less said the better—let's just say that it allows you to hit everything straight. A world without slicing should be a happy place, but as a game mechanic it isn't as nice as it sounds.

Both swings are oddly designed in other ways, too. The onscreen golfer disappears during the setup and execution of each shot. You go through the motions of selecting a club, positioning yourself, lining things up, and then clicking through the actual swing with only the ball and the terrain on the screen. Only after all this has been completed does the golfer return to perform what you just asked of him or her. Needless to say, this isn't very engaging. Why the designers chose to turn you into a spectator for the greater part of the "action" makes no sense whatsoever.

One more word about swinging. Headgate decided to make short-range putting easier by scaling down the distances on the swing meter. So while a putt from 40 feet will max out the meter, so will one from three or four feet. While this seems like a great idea in theory—who hasn't been irritated at golf titles that require one to perform tough triple-clicking maneuvers to sink six inchers?—it doesn't work out that well in practice. It's simply impossible to get accustomed to the sudden change on the putting green. All other shots require you to manually cut down on the gauge when you don't want to hit with full power, making it too easy to forget and hit with half-strength or less when you've finally closed to within five feet or so.



Crappy game or not, that is one majestic view.



Boy, that Canada guy is sure in tough against Tiger.

What were they thinking?

It's hard to say what the people in charge at EA Sports were thinking when they first okayed this graphical engine for use in a golf game two years ago. And even though it's come a long way since the ugly beginning, it is still a hog. It takes forever to redraw the screen, and during that long wait the hard drive churns so much that you might think that the program had just asked the CPU to calculate fuel consumption for a round-trip to Mars. The damn thing even haunts your machine after shutting the game down, mysteriously slowing Windows menu access for an extra minute or two after you've escaped Tiger's claws.

Higher resolutions are unplayable unless you have an absolute top of the line Pentium III system. Performance stutters even at lower settings. The swing meter occasionally jerks a couple of times during movement, essentially sabotaging your shot. Golfer animations also regularly take on the characteristics of a slide show.

Witness the "beauty"

What the game provides in terms of eye candy isn't remotely worth the cost of putting together such a monster system, either. Golfer animations are blurry, pixelated, ugly, or a combination of all three. Some, such as the mannequin-like Michael Jordan (thrown in because his Airness was given a pile of money to show up in EA Sports' *NBA Live* sister title) are hideous holdovers from last year. Trees and background buildings often appear so blocky that Lego Toys would be wise to consider legal action. Water has a strange toxic blue color that looks a lot like the village creek after Union Carbide moved to town.

Audio is nearly non-existent. Some courses seem to have no ambient effects whatsoever. Others feature just the measly tweet of a bird or two and perhaps the sound of waves and the gallery clapping. If not for the occasional announcer's commentary prefacing or summing up a shot, this would be the closest thing to golf in a vacuum since the Apollo astronauts brought their drivers along on a moon mission in the '70s.

Signing up the Headgate Studios experts to handle the *Tiger Woods PGA Tour* series was a good step for EA Sports to take. Forcing them to slap the programming equivalent of a few coats of not-so fresh paint on the last edition of the line was not. While the developer has a great track record and is likely just what is needed to right this listing ship, it will take a lot of time and energy to do this properly. A necessary first step will be to scrap everything that came before and start with a blank slate. Headgate and EA Sports can team up to produce a great golf simulation with Tiger Woods face on it, but it surely won't include anything from the current game. —*Brett Todd*


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UPSIDE

Story-based puzzle game may provide a diversion between "pure" adventure titles

DOWNSIDE

Obscure logic and complex escape sequences are a deadly combination

The New Adventures of the Time Machine

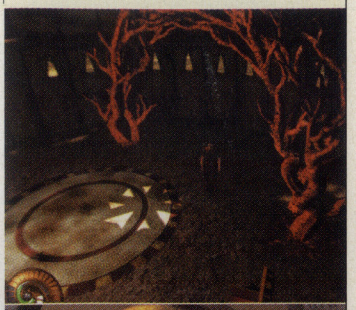
The Time Traveler gets a face-lift, with less than stellar results

The *New Adventures of the Time Machine* is inspired by H.G. Well's classic story, *The Time Machine*. Like the book, the game tells the story of a man voyaging through time from 19th century London to a desert town some 800,000 years in the future. Upon arriving, he loses his machine and must interact with the local residents to find a way home. After the opening scene, the game diverges from the original tale and the remainder of the story has about as much in common with H.G. Wells as *The Deer Hunter* has with *Bambi*.

From a third person perspective, you maneuver the New Time Traveler (a.k.a. Wales) through exploration and combat in a search for a way back through time. The camera angle swings wildly as you move through the environment and the experience is quite dizzying until you get acclimated. You talk to characters, collect inventory items, use objects to solve problems, and engage in combat with weapons and magic spells. You must carefully manage your supplies, your sand points (health), and your Jad Garrul (mana). The game world has real time elements, with townspeople moving about as you play. As a result, you will find key characters in different locations, depending on your own timing. Your adventure will be disrupted by several "temporal storms" that change your physical



One step away from the "Game Over" screen.







[top to bottom] No Golden Arches in this desert town!

Wales-in his middle-aged incarnation.

The desert lifestyle has not changed much in 800,000 years.

age—from an adult, to a child, to an elderly person. Your adventure is also apt to be disrupted by the "Game Over" screen that may appear more times than you can count as you work your way through the quagmire that is *The New Time Machine*.

It is not clear what audience DreamCatcher Interactive hopes to reach with this game. The conversational fact-finding and inventory-based problem solving are apt to wear thin quickly if you are not an adventure fan. Many of the escape and combat sequences require lightening-quick reflexes and the ability to problem solve with magic, weapons, and crates while under fire, however. This is not an atmosphere that lends itself to the thoughtful exploration that is typical of adventure gaming. Whatever your genre preferences, your patience will be sorely tested by design decisions such as rewarding most incorrect moves with "Game Over," killing you just as you complete a difficult puzzle sequence, and exacting a mana toll each time you save your game.

At times the game is so difficult that nothing short of a mind meld with the designers will see you through. What rational person would deduce that a woman complaining about back pain is actually a cue to fix a fountain that does not actually appear to be broken? Or that when some characters say "leave me alone" they really mean it, while others may change their mind if bothered repeatedly? Crates are used to climb over walls or to onto roofs. In some sections of *The New Time Machine*, the crate must be placed exactly where the designers planned and you must climb onto it from a specific angle. Since there are no visual cues for the correct placement of your character or the crate, prepare to spend a lot of time trying to get it right.

The final insult is that the game is unstable. This should not be a surprise to anyone, because the strategy guide contains a technical note: "...due to the real time nature of the game, your system may get bogged down... The solution to this is to save your game and reboot." This sounds suspiciously like a memory leak, in which system resources are not managed efficiently and get used up over time. Depending on your PC, performance may slow to a crawl or you may see the infamous Windows "blue screen of death" on a regular basis.

The sad part about *The New Time Machine* is that it could have been a decent adventure. It is evident that a lot of hard work and creative energy went into the story, the background mythology, and the graphics. But this effort is overwhelmed by nearly extremely difficult escape sequences, ungainly controls, and a lack of any traditional logic. The result is a game that is more frustrating than fun. It is easy to imagine simply uninstalling it rather than slogging through for the sake of finding out whether or not Wales' fate differs from that of the original Time Traveler. —*Cindy Kyser Morgan*

THE GOODS

GENRE Adventure

PUBLISHER DreamCatcher Int.

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 233MHz or higher, 32 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING ★★☆☆☆

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB



UPSIDE

It more or less looks like a real game; it comes with a free book

DOWNSIDE

It's ninety minutes long!



[left] That's Kate and another guy in the futuristic decontaminizer. Ifier. 2000.

[above] This is from minute ten. Of ninety.

Timeline

It's ninety minutes long!

On its official website, Michael Crichton describes *Timeline* as "a game for people that don't usually play games." Whether or not he succeeded in that goal is sort of irrelevant; unless you're reading these words by accident, chances are you play games. And if you play games, take Michael Crichton's word for it—*Timeline* is not for you.

From opening the box to viewing the end credits, playing *Timeline* in its entirety takes roughly an hour and a half. There are arcade light gun games that take more time to solve, not to mention fewer quarters. At forty bucks for ninety minutes from beginning to bitter end, Michael Crichton's vision of gaming is more precious than gold.



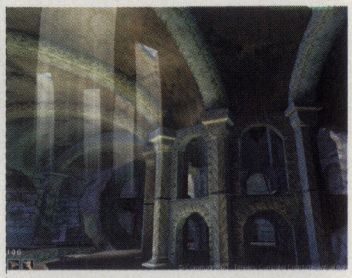
The novel contains a pretty amazing jousting sequence. The game doesn't.

Are you still here? What the hell is it going to take to convince you not to buy this? All right, here are more details. The game is a first-person shooter with swords instead of shooting. It follows the book pretty closely. Well, more or less. A few of the main characters have been dropped, such as Andre Marek, to make it easier to cram all the action into less than two hours. But basically it retains the original plot of traveling back in time to fourteenth century France in order rescue a college professor. The story takes a few liberties with the source material—at one point the time machine gains the ability to turn you into a tiny, fully functioning three-inch tall person, a feature that the novel neglected to mention. Hopefully that's not a spoiler since it happens near the beginning. On the other hand, everything that happens is near the beginning, *since the game is only an hour and a half long.*

Gameplay is structured like a traditional linear shooter. You fight, move forward, and then repeat the sequence. There are some ancillary mini-games to break things up, such as a jousting simulation and a snowboarding sequence in which you slide down a hill on the medieval version of a snowboard, your butt. But the mini-games are all shallow, uninteresting, and easy. You barely have to move the mouse to get through most of them. In general, progressing through the game is a slightly more challenging version of clicking the install program's "Next" button.

Occasionally, there's a simple logic puzzle, such as figuring out how to get up to a ledge or which lever to pull in order to operate some equipment. These are rendered absurdly pointless by the inclusion of a sidekick—the novel's Kate character—who tells you exactly what to do at every turn. She's like the human walkthrough and strategy guide. Sometimes she'll start rattling off the solution to a puzzle before you're even aware that there is one. If she'd just run over and press the damn button herself, you could probably finish the game in under an hour while simultaneously using both of your hands, and both of your eyeballs for that matter, to do something else.

The infrequent sword combat involves walking up as close as you can get to an enemy and pressing the attack button until your opponent surrenders. You're not permitted to actually kill anyone and no blood is ever spilled. Perhaps this is meant to make the game more family friendly. That's fine, except that any family member that reads the novel that comes packaged in the box may be shocked to discover how blood-drenched it is. In fact, murderous rage and its ability to reconnect modern man with the world around him is one of the central themes of the book.



Here's the nicest map in the whole game. It's near the end, so if you put a kettle on before you began playing, you should go check it at this point because it's probably almost boiling.

If you're wondering about the graphics, then you may have missed the previous six paragraphs of the review. They're fine, if that means anything at this point. The 3D engine is about average. There's even a free exploration mode in which you can walk around and admire the environments while Crichton himself gives you a medieval history lesson. It's actually the best part of the game, though many of the facts and observations are straight from the book.

Judging from the design philosophy of *Timeline*, if Michael Crichton decides to make a crossword puzzle for people who don't like crossword puzzles, it'll just be a grid with no clues and all the words already filled in. Let's hope he sticks to novels. —*Erik Wolpaw*

THE GOODS

GENRE World's shortest game

PUBLISHER Eidos

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 266, 64 MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING E — Everyone — Content Rated by ESRB

★☆☆☆☆

UPSIDE

All the goodness of Half-Life in one box

DOWNSIDE

A rather messy collection with no new content for veteran players; not to mention the fact that you can download half of it for free

Half-Life Platinum

Perfect for the diehard Half-Life fan who still doesn't have Half-Life

There's nothing wrong with milking a great game for all its worth, and Sierra seems intent on doing exactly that with *Half-Life*. On top of a couple different versions of the game that are already available—not to mention the add-on *Opposing Force* and the new boxed retail versions of the downloadable multiplayer mods *Counterstrike* and *Team Fortress Classic*—Sierra has released the boxed set to end all boxed sets, *Half-Life Platinum*. This monster contains all of the above in one oversized box with a $65.99 price tag.

Each of the four popular pieces of the collection comes on its own CD and its own manual (except *Team Fortress Classic*, which features only a web page-based manual), but overall this feels like a somewhat sloppily assembled package. There isn't a single cohesive install; instead you have to wade through all four CDs, installing each game and game variant individually. It's a minor complaint, but one that comes with a significant lack of user-friendliness.

There's also nothing really new here. If you already have *Half-Life*, there's no reason to bother with this version. There's nothing new in the two commercial disks, and both *Team Fortress Classic* and *Counter-Strike* have been available (for free, even) on the Internet for quite some time now. Diehard gamers are bound to be scratching their collective heads, thinking "what's the point?" If you are new to the PC world, however, then you may find this easily accessible collection appealing.

Then again, both of the multiplayer games are hefty downloads, and *Counter-Strike* does update *Half-Life* to the latest version (that's one fewer download, and a whopping 30 MB one, at that). Not to mention that the original *Half-Life* is still fairly pricey, as is *Opposing Force*. As a package this works out to be a pretty good deal, especially if you have a slow Internet connection.

If you haven't tried these online-only mod sensations, *Team Fortress Classic* and *Counter-Strike* bring team play to the masses with distinction. In the former, you'll pick a specific character class (soldier, medic, demolitions man, a spy that can look like the enemy, an engineer, flamethrower-equipped pyro, and others). It's a great variation on standard deathmatching and capture the flag, and it's no mystery why this has been a favorite mod premise for various other shooters.

Counter-Strike takes the old capture the flag theme and moves it into SWAT territory with some excellent terrorist vs. counter-terrorist gameplay. Instead of using a flag as the target of both teams, this game offers hostages. It's the goal of the counter-terrorist side to rescue the hostages and bring them back to a designated rescue zone; the terrorists obviously want to prevent this. You gain money for each successful goal that you or your team accomplishes, which you can then use to buy new guns, ammo and equipment.

Both of these games are multiplayer-only, although *Counter-Strike* offers a very nicely done solo tutorial to get new players up to speed. More than that, however, they require a lot of players, so a simple at-home two machine LAN won't cut it—solid Internet access is a must. Ironically, if you have solid Internet access, you can easily just download both of these games for free.

As for the rest of the package, *Half-Life* is only now starting to become overshadowed by all of the other shooters that its groundbreaking use of atmosphere, characters, and scripted AI laid the framework for. It was a great game when it first debuted in 1998—it still is—and though its modified *Quake*-engine is getting a bit long in the tooth, it's still remarkably attractive.

Opposing Force is also worth your time, if you haven't already played it. This expansion pack places you as a soldier stuck in the mess at Black Mesa, where Gordon Freeman is also fighting for his life. It lets you see the events at Black Mesa from another viewpoint, and it works brilliantly, even if it's a bit on the short side.

Sierra has simply thrown all their commercially released *Half-Life* games into one box and given it a decent price... if you are new to the world of *Half-Life*. Veteran fans probably won't find much to like here, but if you want a convenient one-stop ticket to all the wonders *Half-Life* has to offer, this is it. —*Jason D'Aprile*



Heli-strike in the one single mod the pack includes.



A terrorist rounds up the sheep.

THE GOODS

GENRE Action

PUBLISHER Sierra

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 133, 24 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER 2-24 players; Internet, LAN

RATING ★★★½☆

MATURE M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB



UPSIDE

Creative level design, goofy sounds and graphics, fun gameplay

DOWNSIDE

Finicky controls, some levels are frustratingly tough



Sheep

Appealingly ridiculous

[left] Touching the big button with the sheep skull and crossbones does predictably bad things to all those barrels of gunpowder.

[above] Argh... no! Go left, you stupid sheep! Herding sheep onto the control, alt, and delete keys allows you to exit the innards of this lethal PC.

[below] Wonder if Intel factories are actually this dangerous? Check out all the sheep in the upper left corner, flattened by the machine printing the motherboard's circuitry.

Mention *Lemmings* to someone who played computer games back in the era of the Amiga and the 386 and you'll usually get a big grin in response. This silly but addictive puzzle game cast you in the role of savior for a bunch of mindless furry-footed rat men who would blindly march to destruction without your timely intervention. *Lemmings* spawned a number of sequels (some quite good, some bordering on awful), but no similar games have come along for quite a while.

Well, *Lemmings* fans, rejoice! *Sheep* clearly owes a debt of inspired goofiness to its famous predecessor. The premise is truly over-the-top. "Sheep" are actually aliens sent to study Earth that have since devolved into mindless herd animals. Now the mother ship has come to take them home, but hordes of gangsta cows, turncoat sheep, and jealous fruit (the chief villain is Mr. Pear and he's, uh, a juicy-looking pear) stand in the way.



Your job is to save these four-footed idiots from certain death by herding them safely through some of the most fiendishly devious levels ever created. Farm machinery, giant mallets, rampaging dinosaurs, flatulent cows, laser cannons, sadistic chefs, and an endless array of sheep-slaying gadgetry populate the themed worlds your sheep blunder through. For example, the four levels of "Jurassic Playground" throw cavemen, big rocks, and bigger reptiles at your terrified charges, while the "Lost in Space" world witnesses their struggle with mad computers, aliens, Phantom Zones, and the Death Star. Bad puns and movie references are the order of the day, especially in the amusing cutscenes.

Each world consists of four levels that you can play through in any order, but there's a catch. You must herd each of your four breeds of sheep through one level apiece, and certain levels are better suited to certain types of sheep. As an example, Neo Genetic sheep (who look like Neo from *The Matrix*) flock well and are useful in high-tech settings, but they are very easy to scare. Long Wool sheep (the bikers, punks, and bullies of their kind) don't scare easily at all, and they also don't flock as tightly. Long Wools are thus easier to herd close to dangerous areas, since they don't fear them like they should, but this can prove fatal if they get too close to something nasty.

And they will. Each level in *Sheep* requires that you herd a certain number of your charges to the exit before time expires. While this would be simple enough if you could run the gauntlet with just a few sheep at a time, the constantly ticking timer doesn't allow you that luxury. Instead, you'll have to make one or at most two herding passes through the level. Expect to lose all your sheep the first few times you attempt any of the more difficult worlds—divining an approach that's both fast and safe enough to use is definitely a challenge. Of course half of the fun in games such as this one lies in seeing how many ways your charges can die, so that's hardly a drawback.

The game's controls are simple but a bit finicky. Your herder can walk, run, creep, and activate various items (including sheep, which can be thrown), but it's sometimes impossible to move exactly where you wish. This is especially frustrating when your herder has to stand on small buttons to activate sheep-saving machinery and instead runs circles around the target while the helpless flock is reduced to mutton. You'll find ways around these situations with practice, but a control scheme this basic shouldn't require that much effort.

The control issue is a relatively minor problem that doesn't detract (much) from the overall game experience. While *Sheep* isn't a good choice for the die-hard fragger on your shopping list, puzzle fans, Monty Python lovers, bad punsters, and anyone with fond memories of *Lemmings* will find hours of challenging fun within this appealingly ridiculous game. —*Dave Markell*

THE GOODS

GENRE Puzzle Game

PUBLISHER Empire Interactive

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 200, 32 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING ★★★★☆

EVERYONE E CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Battle Isle: The Andosia War

Tank creep! Turn-based and real-time come together in a unique strategy mix

UPSIDE

Unique merger of turn-based and real-time, beautiful visuals, the "just one more turn" syndrome

DOWNSIDE

Pacing problems, big multiplayer woes, some documentation gaffs







[above] **Arrghh! Lens flare!**

[top right] **Back at the base, working through a snowy night.**

[right] **Taking out the enemy Battle HQ—this won't end this scenario.**

Little-known in the U.S., the *Battle Isle* series is nonetheless one of the oldest in computer strategy gaming, and perhaps one of the best known in Europe. While the series sidestepped over into truly tactical gaming in the last game, *Incubation*, it has now returned closer to its roots with *Battle Isle: The Andosia War*. This new title retains and improves on *Incubation*'s use of 3D, and at the same time implements a unique mix of timed turn-based and real-time play, one that comes oh-so-close to being thoroughly engaging, through and through.

Andosia War sports graphics that are both gorgeous and effective. The environments are wonderful, and actually have an impact on your tactics. All this beauty does come at a price, though—it takes a fair amount of computer to run all the options at their best, but Blue Byte gives you an enormous number of options for tweaking the game for your system.

The game's key feature is that it's a true hybrid of real-time and turn-based gaming. The background world is always running; the clock is advancing, day is changing to night and back again (over the course of many minutes), weather and tides shift. Operating in this real-time world is the economic/base-building portion of the game. You can always order the construction of new buildings or units, and resources are continually gathered or used (even during your enemy's tactical turn). Bases are constructed on an "economic" island removed from the main "battle island," which generally gives you a respite from immediate assaults.

While the background world is always moving, the main part of the game, the tactical battle mode, uses timed turns. You're given so many minutes to conduct all you want to do with your tactical units (primarily combat, but also repair and transportation). Each unit has only so many action points that it can use for actions each turn; once these are used up, that unit's done for your turn, even if you have minutes left on the timer. Once your tactical turn is ended, your enemy's begins. This hybridization is really quite an effective way to present this kind of game, and were it not for some early timing issues (see below), it could be a winner.

Units are a familiar mix of fast and light, medium, and heavy. Both sides share the same units, so you'll always know what you're up against. While there's no way to do a tank *rush* in the game (creep, more like), one unit, the Buggy, may come close to imbalance—it's cheap and fast and packs a real wallop.

Multiplayer is either via a LAN or via the beta version of Blue Byte's Game Channel (BBGC). The BBGC is the only way to play on the Internet, a very limiting option to those who want to play via direct IP connection, and the lobby software did not seem to function on either of two different test systems. LAN mode works, and the interface is decent, but you can only play on two teams and some options don't function as documented. By far and away the greatest problem, though, is that *Andosia War* isn't designed to support saves during multiplayer games. There are already patches that partly address this, but no word on when (or if) it will be completely fixed. A number of other things hurt the gameplay, especially if you're caught unawares. The unit path system is confusing and awkward and there are some irritating flaws or omissions in the manual.

Aside from the multiplayer problems, most of these issues don't hinder enjoyment of the game that much. However, *Andosia War* does have one other big problem that drags it down more than any other—the issue of timing in the turn-based portion, especially early on in the campaigns when the challenges from the AI are slight indeed. Scenarios/missions can take literally hours to complete, and when you first start the game you'll spend most of that time just moving units forward, with only occasional interaction with the AI. Eventually the game picks up, and you'll be surprised at how addictive it becomes, but only if you can last through the earlier missions, and only if you have the gameplay tastes that let you enjoy a slowly evolving battle. If you can stay the course, you'll find yourself saying, "just one more real-time turn"—and what better thing can be said about any strategy game? —*Scott Udell*

THE GOODS

GENRE Strategy hybrid

PUBLISHER Blue Byte Software

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 300, 64 MB RAM, 3D accelerator

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players; Internet, LAN

RATING

★★★☆☆



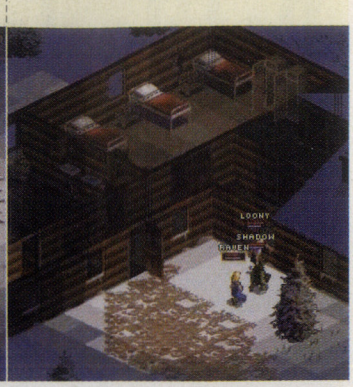
UPSIDE

Challenging tactical battles, oodles of cool guns, full-featured editor allows custom-built campaigns, cheap

DOWNSIDE

Too hard, too short, graphics engine showing its age





[left to right] Get used to this screen.

Blood in the snow, courtesy of Shadow.

Clearing buildings is still one of the tensest challenges you'll face.

Jagged Alliance 2: Unfinished Business

This add-on for the superb original is nasty, brutish and short, and not bad for twenty bucks

Difficulty, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder, but you'd be on pretty firm ground thinking that Sirtech's latest *Jagged Alliance* game is a real bear. *Jagged Alliance 2: Unfinished Business* reprises the tactical, turn-based combat of last year's *Jagged Alliance 2*, minus most of the strategic and much of the role-playing elements that made that game one of the year's best. The short, inexpensive (about twenty bucks) stand-alone game tries to make up for its lack of depth with incredibly challenging combat. To some extent, it succeeds, but at the cost of likely alienating more casual players.

After freeing Arulco from the clutches of the evil Queen Deidriana in *Jagged Alliance 2*, you are contacted by Arulco's leaders and contracted to take care of a new threat, this time from the neighboring nation of Tracona. Seems an evil mining company, lusting after the resources buried under Arulco's soil, is lobbing missiles at the country you just liberated, demanding concessions (that's globalization for ya). Your mission, naturally, is to go to Tracona, track down the bad guys, and put an end to their reign of terror.

You can import the mercenaries you used in *Jagged Alliance 2*, assuming you still have them laying about on your hard drive, or you can start afresh. In the latter case, you're given $35,000 to hire the help, and this time you get them for the whole game, not just a day or a week at a time. Essentially, this means you can have one or two good mercenaries, or five or six mediocre ones, plus the hangers-on you'll recruit during the game. As in every other *Jagged Alliance* title, though, you'll generally get better results with one or two aces than a hand full of low pairs; one Shadow goes a lot farther than three or four Biffs.

Unfinished Business gives you maybe twenty sectors, or map squares, to explore, including several underground sectors in the final base complex. The game is nearly completely linear; you start at point A, and there are only a couple of ways to get to the inevitable conclusion at point B. You can win the game without accomplishing all of the (few) subquests, though. Most significantly, each and every sector is chock-full of very tough bad guys. Combat challenge starts at high and escalates to excruciating shortly thereafter. For the truly psychotic, there's an Iron Man switch, which disables saving in combat, something that only freaks of nature should even consider.

This game is about combat, and secondarily about finding new weapons to take into said combat. Though you get two new features—a cover indicator and a line of sight indicator, both fairly useless—and some new mercenaries, the big attraction here is the plethora of new weapons. You get a whole passel of submachine-guns, assault rifles, sniper weapons, and pistols to play with, and some of them make a real difference. The Barrett .50 caliber sniper rifle, for instance, is an incredible head-popper. As in the earlier games, though, the differences between most of the weapons are insignificant, and one 5.56mm assault rifle is pretty much the same as another, in the hands of a good mercenary.

You'll need all the firepower you can handle, too, because this might be the hardest turn-based tactical game ever. You start out facing odds of 3:1, and not in your favor; it gets worse from there on in. If you choose the quality over quantity approach, you'll run out of people to shoot all of those targets; if you take the full-house route, your mercenaries may never get off a shot before being perforated. Unlike the gradually escalating level of difficulty of the earlier *Jagged Alliance* games, you immediately come up against elite and super-elite enemies in *Unfinished Business*. Yes, you start with better gear than before, and yes, you will soon find excellent weapons and armor, but it isn't enough to offset the twin advantages of quality and quantity that your enemy has on the battlefield. You will win in the end, if you're patient and don't mind reloading dozens of times in a battle, but by then you might not be having much fun.

Ultimately this is a game that delivers its money's worth for true fans of the series, but which is much too hard for anyone not utterly devoted to *Jagged Alliance*. It includes an editor that allows you to create both single-map battles and campaigns, and there are already some online for download, but overall it's just too narrowly focused and too difficult for more casual fans of tactical strategy games. For the devoted, the game offers a goodly measure of entertainment, though, and the battles are interesting enough to make replaying the game with a different crew and strategy entertaining. And after all, who else is even going to buy it, anyhow? —*Robert Mayer*

THE GOODS

GENRE Strategy

PUBLISHER Interplay

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 133, 32 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING ★★★½☆

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

READER SURVEY

Your opinion matters! The editors of Computer Games Magazine would like your input on how to make this publication as interesting as possible for you. As a token of our appreciation, everyone who sends in a completed survey will automatically be entered into a random drawing to win a choice of free PC games.

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- ❍ Other

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- ❍ Less than six months
- ❍ Six months-1 year
- ❍ More than 1 year

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	VERY INTERESTED				NOT INTERESTED
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Stories on console games	1	2	3	4	5

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I am interested in console games.	1	2	3	4	5
I am interested in Xbox.	1	2	3	4	5
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I would be more likely to purchase Computer Games Magazine in the future if it included coverage of Xbox.	1	2	3	4	5
I would be interested in a separate console magazine from the creators of this magazine	1	2	3	4	5
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Gender:

- ❍ Male
- ❍ Female

Which of the following best describes your age?

- ❍ Under 11
- ❍ 12-17
- ❍ 18-24
- ❍ 25-34
- ❍ 35-44
- ❍ 45-54
- ❍ 55 or over

Which of the following magazines do you subscribe to or purchase regularly (three out of every four issues)? (Check all that apply.)

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PC Gamer	❍	❍
Computer Gaming World	❍	❍
Electronic Gaming Monthly	❍	❍
GamePro	❍	❍
Next Generation	❍	❍

What is your overall opinion of the following magazines?

	EXCELLENT				POOR	NO OPINION
Computer Games Magazine	1	2	3	4	5	❍
PC Gamer	1	2	3	4	5	❍
Computer Gaming World	1	2	3	4	5	❍
Electronic Gaming Monthly	1	2	3	4	5	❍
GamePro	1	2	3	4	5	❍
Next Generation	1	2	3	4	5	❍

How many computer games have you purchased in the last year?

- ❍ 0-5
- ❍ 6-10
- ❍ More than 10

How many console games have you purchased in the last year?

- ❍ 0-5
- ❍ 6-10
- ❍ More than 10

I plan on purchasing a new computer in 2001.

- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No
- ❍ Undecided

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- ❍ Yes
- ❍ No
- ❍ Undecided



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Siege of Avalon

Men in tights begin the good fight

Digital Tome is taking an uncommon marketing approach with their episodic *Siege of Avalon*. This traditional medieval role-playing game is packaged in six chapters that are downloaded via the Internet. You can play the first segment for free and then purchase additional installments for a nominal sum. Two installments were available at press time and are covered here.

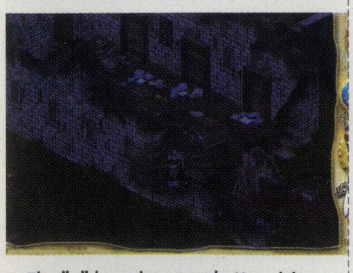
Chapter One begins with your entry into Avalon—a citadel under siege. Upon your arrival, your brother departs on an assignment and you are left to explore on your own. Ultimately, you are called upon to rescue him and join the struggle. You start by choosing your appearance, attributes (e.g., strength, coordination, perception, etc), and vocation (fighter, scout, or magician). As you interact with the characters in Avalon, some provide information and others ask for assistance. With each task accomplished, you earn credits that can be applied directly to attributes or used to purchase specialized training. The game is played from a 2D isometric view with real-time based combat, similar to *Diablo*. The graphics reflect a high degree of detail, both in the environment and the characters.

Although *Siege of Avalon* is designed to satisfy the experienced role-player, it provides a risk-free entry point for those players that are new to the genre. The system requirements are minimal, the landscape is mapped as you go, and the sub-quests add structure to the game. In *Chapter One*, you focus on learning the lay of the land, building relationships, gathering equipment, and gaining experience through simple missions and combat. The only drawback is that there are no clear instructions to help you get started. The in-game documentation is supplemented by the *Siege* web site, but you are assumed to have a certain familiarity with role-playing games. *Chapter Two* expands your party to include two NPCs. Charged with a primary quest of retrieving a magical artifact, you gain access to new sections of the Avalon citadel and explore a vast subterranean labyrinth.

For those new to the genre, party control is simple and effective (i.e., you lead, they follow). If you have played more complex RPGs such as *Planescape Torment*, however, you are apt to feel handicapped by the lack of dynamic NPC interaction. Although you can view the attributes and inventory of each party member, you can't manage their development or equipment. Be prepared for some serious walking, though, as Avalon and the tunnels beneath it contain a lot of repetitive landscape. While the map interface provides an invaluable reference, you can't use it to move between locations.



Lighting effects enhance your underground travel.



The "x" key gives you better vision than Superman.

THE GOODS

GENRE Classic-style Role-playing

PUBLISHER Digital Tome

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 333, 48 MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER None

RATING

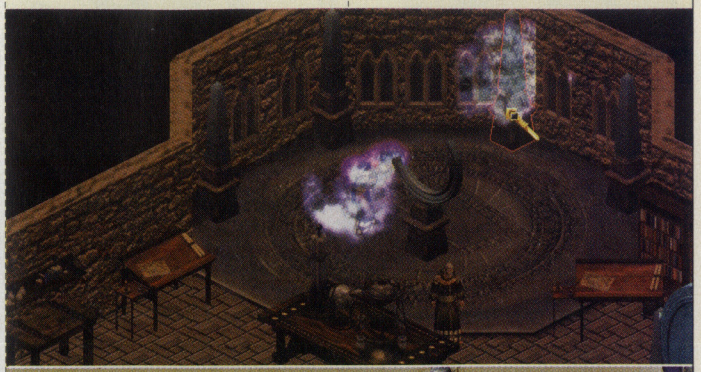
★★★☆☆

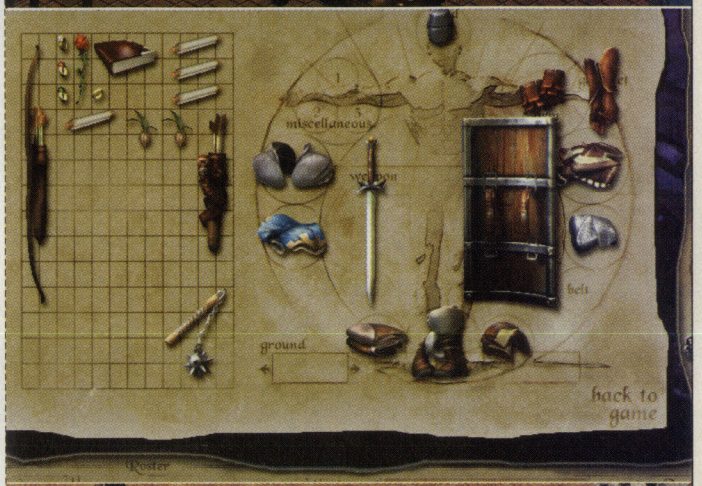
UPSIDE

Incremental release lets you adventure as far as you choose, provides a quality introduction to the genre

DOWNSIDE

Emphasis on reading may cause eyestrain, lack of complexity may be offputting for experienced gamers







[top to bottom] **Casting spells inside causes unexpected effects.**

A detailed "paper doll" interface for inventory.

Put your right hand in, take your right hand out...

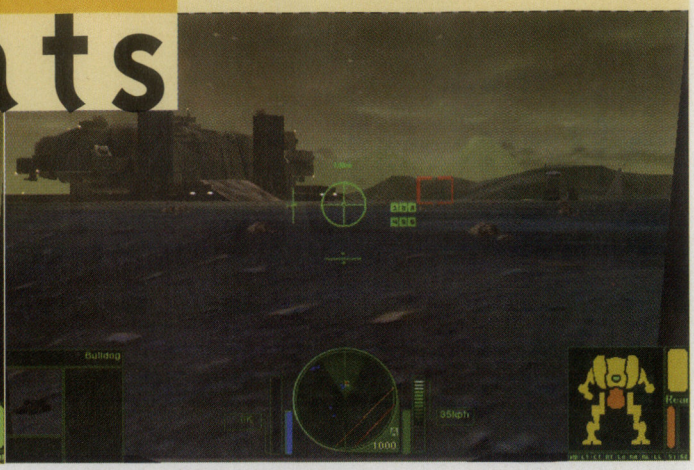
If you enjoy reading, this is a terrific form of interactive entertainment. To minimize development time and download size, *Siege* does not include any animated cut-scenes or voice acting. The sound track consists of music and sound effects, with all dialog presented as text. Your journal provides additional reading opportunities to learn about Avalon's history and to review your experiences.

Given the alternative worlds to explore in other similar games, it may not offer enough sizzle to entice the experienced gamer back. Despite this limitation, the two entries provide a worthy opening for a journey that could turn out to be a grand adventure. With four installments still to come, there is a lot of room for Digital Tome to enhance the saga.
—Cindy Kyser Morgan

The downloadable version fo the game can be found at www.sege-of-avalon.com



The prettiest sight you'll see on the moon.



A lone bulldog, sneaking up on your APUs.

MechWarrior 4: Vengeance

General strategies for beating Steiner from beginning to end

THE SINGLE PLAYER CAMPAIGN OF *MECHWARRIOR 4: VENGEANCE* REQUIRES A VARIETY of strategies. Some missions are assaults on a fixed position. Others require defensive skills, and still others reward stealth. Sometimes you will fight in wide-open terrain (which rewards long-range weapons), and sometimes hilly or urban terrain forces you to get close to the enemy. There are a few helpful principles, however, which almost always apply.

Fight the enemy on your terms

Suppose you need a kill a group of 'mechs. Often the best thing you can do is let them come to you. Don't charge their position. Instead, fire a shot at them from a safe distance and let them approach you.

This technique has two advantages. First, multiple enemies have a hard time attacking as a group. They usually get scattered, letting you deal with them one at a time. Second, if they have powerful long-range weapons, you can hide behind cover while they approach you.

Watch the buildings

Buildings aren't always inert obstacles. Many turrets have a Turret Control Tower nearby (turrets are apparently so complicated in the future that they require an entirely separate structure to operate them). Shoot it and you can deactivate the turrets with minimal effort.

Also, watch out for fuel tanks, both large and small. A fuel tank explosion will heavily damage anything nearby. When an enemy is near one, set it off.

Many missions in urban areas make a Repair Bay or MFB available for your use. Keep your eyes open.



Always take a good look at the map before you begin your mission.

Poke around

Don't feel a need to always obediently march straight from one nav Point to another. Look around. Sometimes, you can find some shut down enemy 'mechs that would normally attack you later in the mission. You can easily and quickly dispatch them on your terms, instead of having to deal with them later on.

Use information that you don't have

For tough missions, feel free to play dirty. If the convoy you're guarding gets stomped when a pair of Uziels comes out from behind a hill, next time take advantage of your foreknowledge and track down those enemies early.

Along those lines, if you are having huge problems with beam weapons (or projectiles), switch to reflective (or reactive) armor for the next attempt.

The following is advice for the more difficult or interesting missions you will face in your quest to free Kentares.

Operation 1, Mission 3: Destroy Steiner Dropships

This is not a difficult mission as long as you keep your eyes on the prize. Let your friends deal with the defending 'mechs and turrets. Ignore them and focus on the dropships. When attacking a dropship, destroy the three APUs at its base first. When they explode, they will heavily damage the dropship. Then focus your fire on its engines. Kill the three dropships as quickly as possible, and the mission will be a win no matter how much of the small stuff you don't kill.

Operation 1, Mission 4: Defend Landing Facilities

This mission can be difficult. When the battle begins, stay close to your starting position and focus exclusively on destroying tanks and missile launchers. Keep an eye out for the lone Bulldog that is sneaking up behind you. When the



First step when taking down a dropship: kill the APUs first.



The big decision. Sister mission is easier, but the supplies mission makes the final mission easier.

small stuff is dead, that will buy you some time to kill the three 'mechs. When you get damaged, there is a repair bay in the base. Hopefully, your friends will keep the enemy busy while you're being fixed.

Operation 2, Mission 3:
Relieve and Escort Friendly Techs

Take your time getting to the techs. Proceed carefully, killing all enemy 'mechs that you encounter. This will make your escape much easier. Use long-range weapons to snipe away the turrets blocking in the techs.

Things get more difficult after your rescue the technicians. It is easy to get bogged down fighting enemies while they move too far ahead of you. Don't be afraid to let your lancemate handle the enemies behind you while you move ahead and support the convoy. Try to select good long-range weapons—such as large lasers and gauss rifles—for this mission. Heat isn't a problem, and it's easy to attack your foes as they come in.

You may have some problems with technician vehicles getting stuck on an obstacle before they could cross the bridge. Don't blow the bridge until all the technicians are across or dead. If technicians get stuck, you may have to kill them yourself.

Operation 2, Mission 4:
Capture Base

This mission has several nasty fights, but you are given some excellent resources. Take long range, high damage weapons and don't worry about heat. When taking the base, snipe at the Uziels and other defenders and draw them out. Don't destroy the turrets in the base. Shoot the turret control tower instead. The turrets will eventually be converted to your side. After taking the base, there is a pause. Use it to heal everyone in the MFB.

The base will eventually be attacked by a lance of tough 'mechs. Let them come to you. Lure them within range of the turrets and kill them one at a time.

Operation 3, Mission 1:
Sweep and Destroy

This mission is uncomplicated but difficult. You have to go to four nav points and kill two to three 'mechs at each one. The two Vultures at the final nav point would be an ugly fight even if you weren't damaged.

When fighting 'mechs at one nav point, don't move too close to another. Otherwise, you may end up fighting four or five enemies at once.

Consider LBX 10s and LBX 20s for this mission. They do excellent damage and the mountains are ideal for close combat. Also, when fighting enemies with strong long-range weapons (such as Vultures), hide behind hills and let them come to you. Fire one shot at them to draw them out and ambush them when they're on top of your position.

Also, at high difficulty levels, consider poking your head out and tempting them to fire their LRMs at you. When they fire, jump back to safety. This will trick them into depleting their ammo.

Operation 3, Mission 2:
Capture Supply Convoy

The forces guarding the supply convoy are not tough, especially after what you had to deal with in the previous mission. However, you may have a hard time keeping up with the convoy.

Fortunately, the terrain is set up in a way that makes it very easy to cut off the convoy. Run south to nav point Alpha. There is a pass to the south that will put you right in the convoy's path. Run through the pass, stand on the road, and gun down the enemy 'mechs as they come into view.



Destroy these towers to free the prisoners.

Operation 3, Mission 3:
Destroy Dropship

This mission is best handled in a very simple-minded way. Charge straight northeast. When you get to the enemy base, let your lancemates distract the enemies and focus on the dropship. Run quick circles around the dropship. Destroy the APUs at its base and then shoot the engines as fast as you can. Once the dropship is destroyed, the mission is over.

Operation 4, Mission 2:
Defend Base

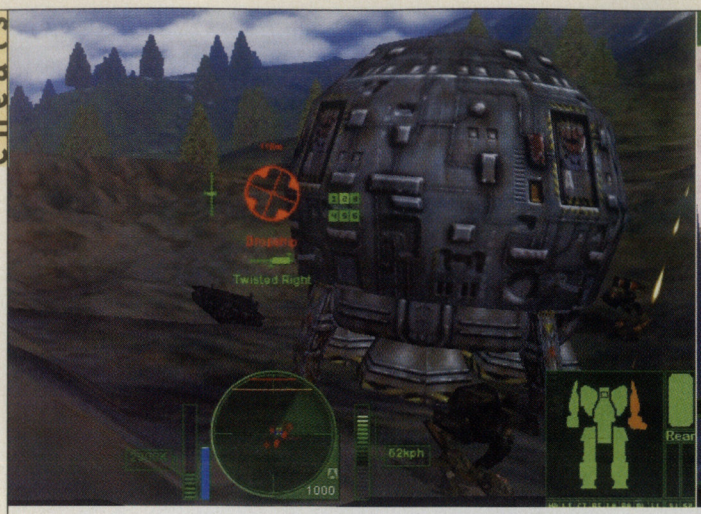
When moving to defend the anti-aircraft turrets at nav point Alpha, don't worry about the guerrila 'mechs. The Shadowcats running around are just there to distract you and lure you into ambushes. Instead, get to the turrets quickly. When the attack comes, destroy the enemy LRM launchers first.

As soon as the attackers are dead, run at top speed to nav point Beta. As long as you move quickly and keep your lancemates near you, the enemy forces in this mission are not a serious problem.

Operation 4, Mission 6:
Liberate Prisoner Camp

This is a difficult mission, with lots of powerful and skilled enemies. Fortunately, by now, you should have a full group of lancemates and powerful 'mechs to stick them in. Managing your lance and letting them take most of the fire will help you get through here.

First, run to nav point Delta. Two Uziels will join your group, providing invaluable extra firepower. When you start to move towards the base, walk slowly along the edge of the zone, letting your lance keep up with you. Watch the camp carefully and pepper it with long-range weapons. This way, you can destroy many of the turrets and draw small groups of enemies into the guns of your allies. Circle the base and keep



When you attack the lone Steiner dropship, just ignore everything else.



If the mission gives you an MFB, the odds are that you'll need it to get through.

drawing enemy 'mechs out.

To free each group of prisoners, shoot the guard towers by their barracks. Before you destroy the last tower, however, have all of your friends use the sole MFB in the base to heal themselves.

Finally, James Kulin and his band of Vultures will attack. Maneuver so that you are standing in the middle of your lancemates and wait for the enemy to come to you. They will come up over the hill into the base one at a time, and you can do serious damage to them before they get any shots off.

Operation 5, Mission 2: Destroy Patrols

Between the weakness of your foes and the constant availability of water to cool your 'mech, most of this mission is simple. Take at least one powerful long-range weapon (a gauss rifle or large laser) and snipe the tanks from a safe distance. Then, when Duncan Burke attacks, you should still be strong enough to take him down.

Operation 5, Mission 3: Defend Exodus

This mission begins with a long, ugly brawl. Advance very slowly and engage the enemy 'mechs one or two at a time. With your lancemates taking heat, this section is not difficult. When the area is clear, run to the docks.

The two destroyers that attack the refugee ships are dangerous, but they mainly rely on LRMs to do their damage. Installing anti-missile systems on your 'mechs makes the enemy ships much less of a threat. Hit them with high damage weapons from a distance and they will die quickly enough.

Operation 6, Mission 1: Reconnaissance In Force

The city is where things start to get difficult. The enemy 'mechs are huge, and they have an uncanny ability to shoot you exclusively in the center of your torso. Having to fight in the narrow confines of the city may interfere with your tactics. There are very few MFBs and repair bays. Worst of all, your lancemates develop a maddening inability to go where you want them to.

Switch to powerful, short range weapons, like LBX 20s, for most of these missions. Make sure that your 'mech has a lot of armor. Proceed slowly, always giving your lance a chance to catch up with you before starting a new fight. When you have the good fortune of having your whole lance in one place fighting the enemy, back off and let them take the heat for a while. Remember, they are expendable. You are not.

For the urban missions, even though it rains frequently, heat can be a real problem. You may want to avoid relying heavily on beam weapons.

This particular mission features many strong enemies, scattered among four nav points. Send your lance to each nav point ahead of you. You can afford to lose a lancemate or two at this point, since you'll have to do the next mission solo.



Don't forget to tell your lancemates to heal themselves.



Ahhhhh. Satisfaction.



Desperately trying to maximize this Shadowcat's damage potential.

Operation 6, Mission 2: Rescue Pilots

Even on easy difficulty, this mission can be difficult. Visibility is very low, you are by yourself, and your many enemies are small and nimble. A Shadowcat is more than capable of seriously damaging you before you kill it.

Fortunately, you don't actually need to kill all of the enemies. If you don't kill any of them, however, they will mob you when the pilots are rescued, making short work of you. Kill as many 'mechs as you have strength to before finding the pilots. Take on the enemy one at a time, blasting them with the heaviest guns you can carry. The nav point with the pilots is determined randomly. When you find it and the rescue helicopter is safely away, run like mad. Use the alleys and corners to avoid enemy guns, and change direction frequently to confuse the game. *MechWarrior 4*'s occasional difficulty maneuvering units through towns can sometimes work to your advantage.

As tempting as the 100 ton 'mechs are, try to stick to an 80 or 90 ton model. The extra speed will be a huge help against the nimble Cougars and Shadowcats.

Operation 6, Mission 3: Destroy Base

Sure, you are given options to weaken the university. But with a good, strong set of four 'mechs, it's not a big problem. Sure, you can turn off the base's turrets, but when are turrets a problem anyway? Go straight to the university. Approach it slowly, firing shots into it to draw out the defenders one at a time. Keep your lance close to you so that the enemy walks into your combined guns. This mission can be done very quickly.

After this mission, you have a

huge choice to make. You can be a nice guy and rescue your sister, or you can be a hard-nosed leader and get a lot of supplies. If you take the latter course, you will also end up ruler of the planet, which has its appeal. If you still have plenty of strong 'mechs left, you can afford to rescue your sister. The sister mission is a bit easier.

Operation 6, Mission 4a:
Rescue Sister

For this mission, take good long-range weapons, such as large lasers and gauss rifles. After the initial battle, walk north to the edge of the zone and then head west. Kill absolutely every enemy you see. Soon, you will encounter nav point Beta. Your sister is there.

Once her ambulance is following you, tell your lance to go to nav point Zeta and follow them at a safe distance. There are four Madcat Mark II's at the exit. Let your lance engage them, and snipe at them from a distance. There is a long, wide road at the north edge of the zone that makes this much easier. Don't get too close to the enemy or they will kill the ambulance (which will neglect to evade them). Once the Madcats are dead, you are home free.

Operation 6, Mission 4b:
Capture Supplies

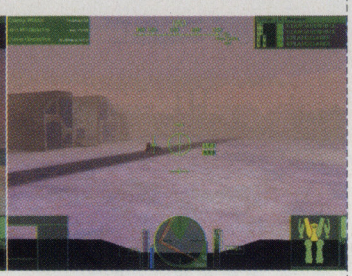
You begin this mission in the middle of a massive firefight. A lance of heavy Steiner 'mechs attack you, and they all focus their fire on you. Take advantage of this by evading the enemy and letting your lancemates handle them. Circle around buildings and run down alleys, keeping obstacles between you and enemy guns. Eventually, your lancemates will manage to kill them.



The prisoner convoy is about to walk straight into you. The best place to ambush a convoy is right in front of it.



Take that, farmers!



This cute little fellow leads you to all of the weapons factories.

From here, use whatever urban tactics have been working for you. Always send your friends to the nav point ahead of you, so that they don't get lost.

Operation 7, Mission 1:
Final Victory

After what you have encountered so far, the enemies in this mission are not actually that difficult. Until the end, that is. Move east slowly, sticking close to the edge of the zone and giving your lance time to keep up with you. When enemies appear, tell your lance to attack. Move in behind them, trying to circle behind the enemies. Whatever happens, don't let them destroy any of your weapons.

Get to nav point Beta quickly and destroy the turret control station. If you don't, all of the enemy turrets will come to life, creating a very ugly situation. About this time, a Daishi and a Madcat Mark II will attack. Let your lance handle them while you take out the power station. Also, take this opportunity to use the nearby Repair Bay.

Next, head east from nav point Beta to the Hrothgar and the two Novacats. You only have a short amount of time to destroy the dropship. Command your lance to attack the Hrothgar and circle around it at a safe distance, concentrating your fire on the engines. If you focus on this target exclusively, you should be able to destroy it while it's still on the ground. Then let your friends fight the Novacats.

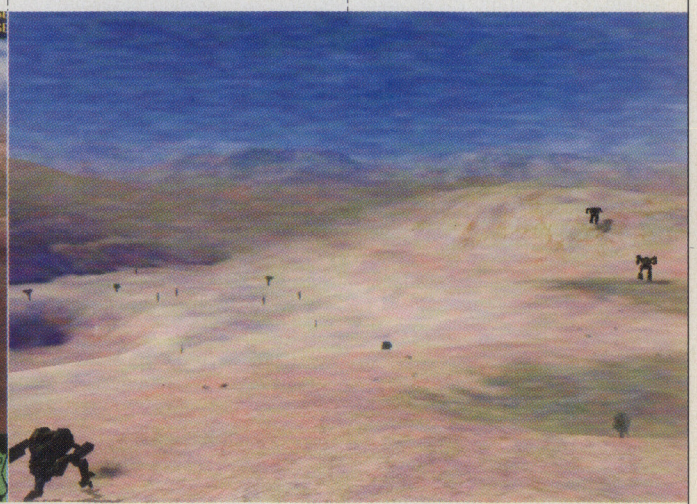
Finally, you have to fight William Dresari in his Daishi. Unfortunately, your bloodlust completely overwhelms your common sense and you not only engage him without using the repair bays first, but you immediately move within his weapon range. When the game deigns to return control of your 'mech to you, immediately flee and move to the Repair Bays at full speed (assuming you took damage destroying the dropship, which is very likely).

Once you are ready, engage William. No matter what, this fight will probably take a few tries. Remember, Daishis are slow. This is your main advantage. You can hit him with artillery strikes and, if you can get behind him, it is not hard to stay there, especially if you took one of the nimbler assault 'mechs (such as the Madcat Mark II or the Mauler). Focus on one spot on his torso, shoot it repeatedly with your weapons (aim for black spots and sparks) and hope that you can get him before he gets you.

At last, vengeance is yours. As a reward, you either get onto a ship and continue waging endless warfare on other planets (if you rescued your sister) or you assume leadership of your world and spend the rest of your life bathing in power, wealth, and comfort (if you didn't). The final strategy tip? If you didn't do so initially, go back and take the power, wealth, and comfort option. After all that he's been through, Ian deserves a break. *—Jeff Vogel*



These tanks were attacking. I was defending.



The look-behind-you option lets you know what your lancemates are up to.



We shall close with our enemies and grapple with them.



We shall shoot pesky Peregrine's from the sky.

MechWarrior 4: Vengeance

Kick some serious metallic booty in Microsoft's big-robot blast fest

You're either into the big robot thing or you're not. Perhaps it's genetics that endows some folks with the aspiration to drive 80-ton mechanized beasties into the heat of battle. Maybe it's a size thing—in the world of 'Mechs, size does matter. Of course how you use it matters just as much. Whatever your inclination, *MechWarrior 4: Vengeance* is here for your romp'em-stomp'em-blast'em pleasure.

So what's it all about? The thousand-dollar question—since the whole *Battletech/MechWarrior* world has an epic storyline. Suffice it to say, it's a fully fleshed out universe that begins something like this...

It is the 31st Century. With the Eureka! of faster-than-light travel, Mankind had leaped into the darkness of space like lemmings, and soon began populating a region more than 1,000 light-years wide. This became known as the Inner Sphere. As the human race spread, it brought with it the secrets of Velcro, macaroni and cheese, and, who'da thunk it, the seeds of war. The conquest of the Inner Sphere led to centuries of zipperless, fast-food eating, petty internecine war.

In 2571, humanity took a breather from all the endless squabbling. The Star League—the new sheriff in town—ushered in a golden age of prosperity, love-ins, and peace... a peace that wasn't given a chance as the darker angels of humanity's nature rose up in a bloody coup in 2767. As the Star League fractured, each member of the ruling Star League Council began posting no trespassing signs and claiming sole ownership to the Inner Sphere.

At the time of the Star League's demise, human-occupied space was dominated by five empires, each ruled by a Great House (no split-level ranch here)—powerful families that wielded vast military and economic power. To this day, the Great Houses spend every waking moment plotting and scheming to dominate the Inner Sphere.

Add to this Machiavellian mix, the remnants of the Star League's military which, under its former commander, checked out of the mess befalling the Inner Sphere and made for new digs. The descendents of these original wandering warriors, now tempered by rude surroundings and a chip the size of Mount Everest on their shoulders, came under the leadership of a visionary motivational speaker. Due to his insistent demands to bond with the inner warrior, a new warrior society was born—the Clans.

In 3050, the Clans returned to the Inner Sphere and they were not dropping off presents. The Clans attacked without mercy, seizing hundreds of worlds and striking terror in the hearts of the citizenry—not to mention enjoying the lamentations of the women.

In 3058 (are you keeping track?), the Great Houses of the Inner Sphere joined forces to create a spiffier version of the old Star League to end the whupping given out by the Clans and stop that god-awful lamentation.

Saying "enough is enough," Inner Sphere forces—led by Prince Victor Steiner-Davion—launched a daring assault on the Clan homeworld of Strana Mechty. Though many Inner Sphere MechWarriors died in the operation, the power of the Clans was broken, perhaps forever (think again).

Back in the Inner Sphere, however, Victor's sister—Katrina Steiner, ruler of The Lyran Alliance, metaphorically stuck a shiv into her brother's backside and took control of the Federated Commonwealth. Katrina, being both shrewed and ambitious, but mainly bored with her station in life, used the thinnest of legal precedents ("well, he's probably dead anyway—sign here.") to seize Victor's domain, angering but also cowing many of the planetary dukes. Duke Erik Scharpe was one of the few who dissed her.

Duke Scharpe—the indignant honcho on Kentares IV—proudly smacked his chest and proclaimed that his only lord was Victor Davion and would remain so. Others loyal to House Davion flocked to his banner.

Now the stage was set for an awful brouhaha on Kentares IV. This is where you come in.

MechWarrior 4: Vengeance tells the tale of young Ian Dresari of Kentares IV. The Dresaris are House Davion loyalists, and when the evil House Steiner forces evict them from their homeworld with extreme prejudice, our hero takes it upon himself to reclaim his birthright. Thus the revenge alluded to in the title—the single player game is the story of your struggle to reclaim Kentares and banish the murderous Steiner occupiers. This exclusive demo includes two early campaign missions. ■

THE GOODS

GENRE Big-robot Action

PUBLISHER Microsoft

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 265MB



See that guy? Down there? He has no clue.

Quake III Team Arena

The team that frags together stays together

Submitted for your *Quak[e]ing III* approval: *Team Arena*, the add-on. Put aside your selfish deathmatching ego and take arms with your brothers and sisters against a sea of fragging troubles. Run amok with large weapons while bearing the colors of your team (red or blue). Learn to assault your enemies in mid-flight. Guard. Defend. Go on the offense. Use tactics. Yes, there will be plenty of timely leaping and propelling to be done before the gibs are scrapped and shoveled and counted. Learn to work together towards a common win as you expend deadly shells and obliterating energy against those who would dare capture your beloved flag. Run, crouch, jump, and strafe in new contests of speed, accuracy, and team work. Collect the skulls of your dead enemies. Invade their territory. Hit them from the left. Hit them from the right. Rain death from above. It's no longer just about you against the gloriously rendered *Quake III* world. It's about us. It's about us against them. It's a group fragfest! Feel the warmth... of shell casings flying past your face.

The demo comes equipped with one map and four game modes: Capture the Flag, One Flag CTF, Harvester, and Overload. The demo has Single Player (with bots) enabled and has multiplayer functionality. You can choose one female and one male model—including two heroic character heads and three clan skins.

You'll also be introduced to a new weapon, the Proximity Mine Launcher—a rather nasty "sticky" bomb that's perfect for ambushes. Other notable additions include three Team Power-ups: Guard, Ammo-Regen, and Doubler, a new in-game UI, and one new useable item—Kamikaze.

While this demo is a stand-alone, the full version of the add-on requires *Quake III Arena*. Happy fragging! ■

THE GOODS

GENRE 3D Team Shooter

PUBLISHER Activision

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 127MB



Quaking through the air.



This guy ain't laughing no more.



CGCD-ROM INSTALLATION

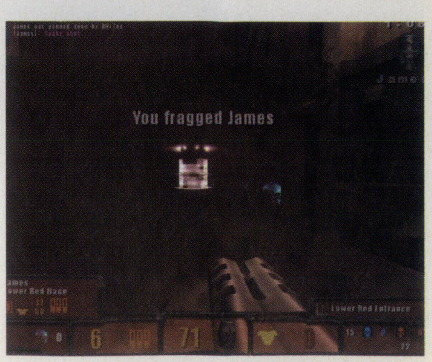
Welcome to the Computer Games CD-ROM (CGCD). To install the demos, place the CD in your CD-ROM drive and the CGCD PDA interface will automatically load. Maximizing the CGCD window will allow the interface to fill your screen.

To access the demos, click on the "Demos" icon. Click the CD icon next to the game you want to install. Additional materials—Trailers, the latest version of DirectX (which some games require)—can be found by clicking on the "Etc." icon.

If the CD fails to Autoplay, double click on "My Computer," double-click your CD-ROM drive (usually drive "D") and then double click the CGCD executable file (CGCD.EXE). If you're still having problems, please send a description of the problem along with your system configuration to cgcdtech@cdmag.com, or mail a letter with the same information to the address below. If you have a defective CD-ROM, a replacement can be obtained by sending the original CD to:

Computer Games
63 Millet St.
Richmond, VT 05477
ATTN: CD replacement





See, running only makes it bloodier!

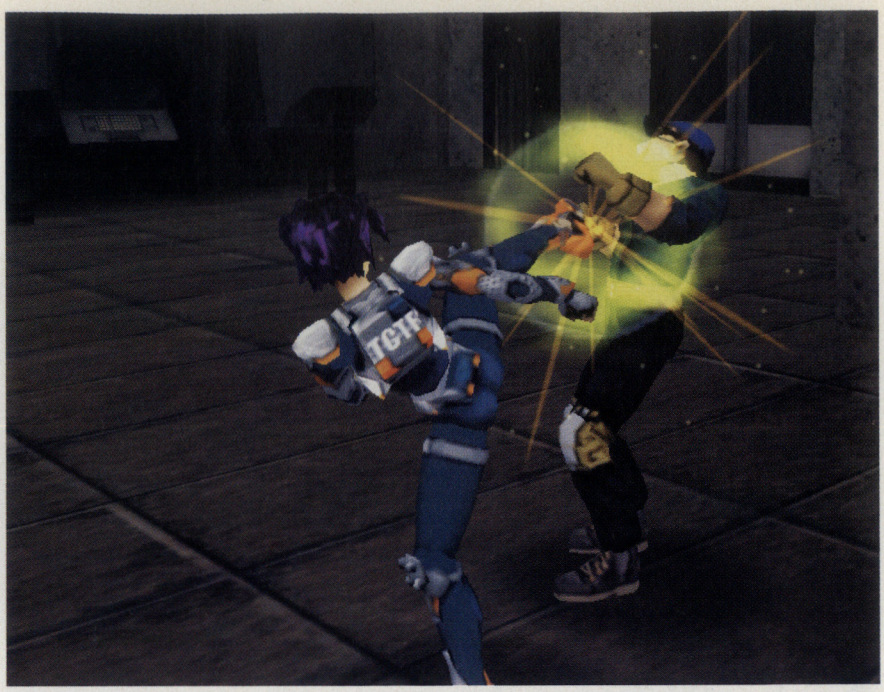
Oni

Black belt moves for the PC

Konoko, the star of *Oni*, has some very nice moves. In fact her fighting style is quite outstanding. This third-person fighting/shooting action game has perhaps the most graceful and fluid character animations to ever grace a computer. Sidekicks, spinning roundhouses, front kicks, jumping kicks, sweeps, combo punches... it's all done realistically and with a minimum of control key frustration. The hand-to-hand fighting is a blast, so much so that you might forgo using weapons (which would be to your detriment, as hand blocks can't stop armed opponents) just to see that running, jumping spinning roundhouse one more time.



Konoko takes as well as she gives.



This should put him to sleep.

There's a story surrounding all these nifty moves as well. *Oni* takes place in a near-future cyberpunkish animé world, and focuses on Konoko—a very lithe and deadly police officer. The story has a pinch of *Ghost in the Shell*, a dollop of *La Femme Nikita*, and a smattering of Frank Miller's dark graphic novel work. Konoko is working to bring down the Kage crime syndicate and, as you might expect, things get pretty hairy for her. On the surface she has wits and fighting skills, and a hardness that should stand her in good stead when she finds herself getting deeper and deeper into her "dark future." Of course, it turns out that the "on the surface" part is key, as deep within she's haunted by the demons of her past—the Oni of the title.

The demo offers a tutorial and a couple of missions set in a multi-level warehouse and an airport. Now go kick some butt! ■

THE GOODS

GENRE Third Person Fighting

PUBLISHER Gathering Of Developers

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 200, 32MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 70MB

American McGee's Alice

Galumphing back to Wonderland with Wednesday Addams

The Rev. Dodgson would have probably considered it an interestingly clothed curiosity hung on a superficial skeleton of his uniquely surrealistic books. Alice Liddell, being a child of the Victorian era, would have, in all likelihood, been horrified. In any event, the darkening and twisting of an already dark and twisted tale amounts to a rather large, "Why bother?"

Had a more benign milieu been chosen for a pastiche, say the world of *Oz*—read Stephen R. Boyett's "Emerald City Blues" for such an effect—the pronounced impact of the game would have been more memorable indeed. But lest we become mired in its deficiencies, it should be noted that the game does sport some wonderful graphics and the first chapter does indeed convey the spirit, if not the actual flesh, of the classic book. Play the demo, enjoy the experience, then run out and read the books.

Beware the McGee, my friends! The scenes that bite, the graphics that catch!
Beware the endgame, and shun the frumious puzzl'd jumps!"

Alice took her vorpal knife in hand: Long time the manxome foe she sought —
So rested she by the Tumtum tree, and stood awhile in thought.

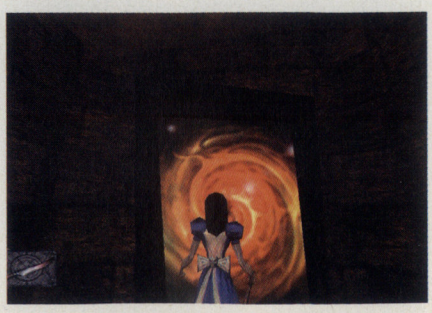
And, as in uffish thought she stood,
The McGee, with eyes of flame, came whiffling through the tulgey wood, and burbled as it came!

"This game be twisted! This be dark!"

And through and through the vorpal blade went snicker-snack! She left it dead, and with its head she went galumphing back.

"And, has thou slain the ill-clever'd McGee? Come to my arms, my beamish girl! O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!" We chortled in our joy.

This game 'twas not brillig, and the slithy public did gyre and gimble in the effort;
All mimsy were the final effects, and the ideas did rather outgrabe. ■



Alice through the amazing swirling portal.

THE GOODS

GENRE Third Person Action

PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 400, 64MB RAM, 3D Accelerator

INSTALL SIZE 79MB

Midtown Madness 2



THE GOODS

GENRE Driving

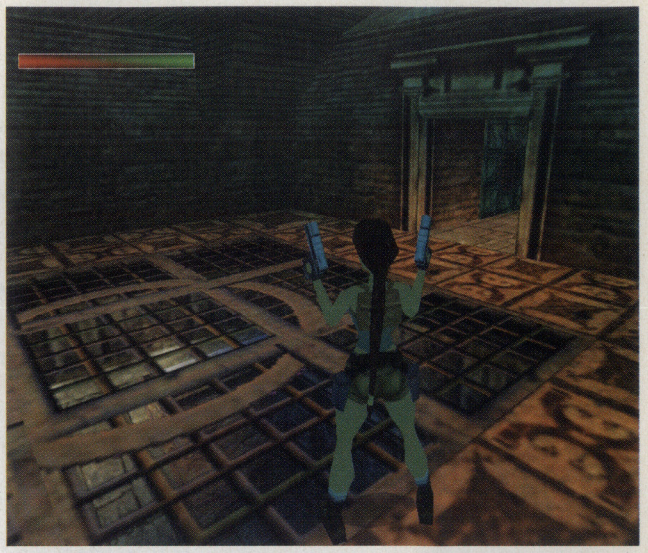
PUBLISHER Microsoft

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 166, 32MB RAM

INSTALL SIZE 30MB

It's about driving like a bat out of hell on the nicely detailed streets of San Francisco and London. Be Steve McQueen in Bullit. Be Mr. Bean. Enjoy the sights!

Tomb Raider Chronicles



THE GOODS

GENRE Action Adventure

PUBLISHER Eidos Interactive

REQUIREMENTS Pentium II 300, 32MB RAM

INSTALL SIZE 15MB

TRC reveals four newly discovered, and previously untold adventures, taking you on a journey from the bowels of a German U-boat, to the rooftops of a hi-tech city in a search of four ancient artifacts.

The Corporate Machine



THE GOODS

GENRE Strategy

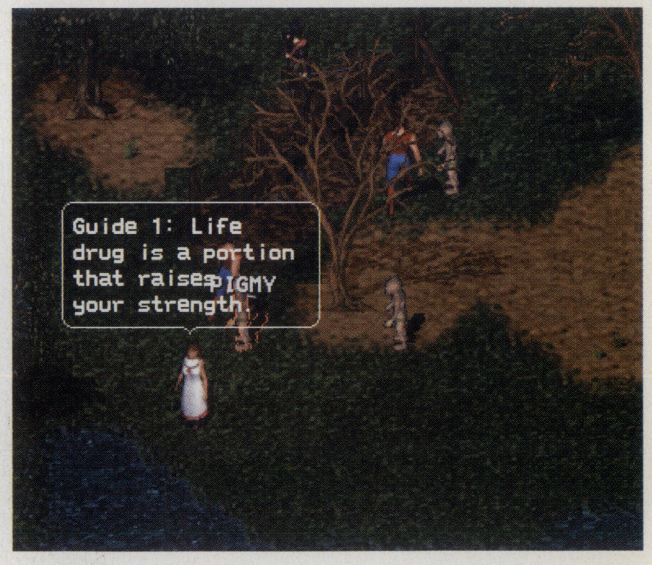
PUBLISHER Stardock

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 100, 16MB RAM, Internet Connection

INSTALL SIZE 26MB

In this sequel to Entrepreneur, you start a company and must conquer the world. How do you do this? Simple—just spread your corporate empire throughout the world into every facet of everyday life and eliminate your competitors. The fun part is getting there. The demo is online only.

Last Kingdom



THE GOODS

GENRE Online Role-playing

PUBLISHER Netamin

REQUIREMENTS Pentium 120, 32MB RAM, Internet Connection

INSTALL SIZE 77MB

Time to shed your mundane life and get Medieval in post-Camelot times. It's massive. It's online. It's a roleplaying game. You get thirty days free. 'Nuff said.

Intra-media Two-step



If you're Star Wars, how hard do you have to try?

by Cindy Yans

Sometimes I wonder if there are groups of marketing professionals in dark hoods in the back rooms of various game companies, making feral noises and plotting, "Pull the plug on the development budget, folks, we're gonna break even on name recognition alone." I know that designers and developers are probably subject to this type of constraint to a certain degree, and it's somewhat interesting to note the relationship between game and film licenses and the products that emerge from them.

Take, for example, the *Star* brothers, *Trek* and *Wars* (take *most* of them, please). Most of the earlier classic *Star Trek* games were mediocre at best, but they continued to pour forth because, of course, *Star Trek* was *the* series for the Baby Boomer through Me Generations (and then some). Only the few latest ones show a touch of the quality that should always have been due the *Star Trek* license. *Star Trek Deep Space Nine: The Fallen* saved Simon and Schuster's rocky reputation with the series, and Raven's *Star Trek Voyager: Elite Force* fared well for Activision, too, as did Interplay's *Starfleet Command*. These last three were born of the later *DS9* and *Voyager* TV shows, and the venerable *SFC* board game, and perhaps by the time of their inception, it was evident that name alone was *not* enough. The disastrous *Phantom Menace*, on the other hand, as well as many of the *Star Wars* titles, ended up as highly anticipated also-rans.

And what of the flash-in-the-pan games based on highly publicized blockbusters? *Men in Black*, *Independence Day*, *Wild, Wild West*, *Return to Gilligan's Island*—all of these and many more have enjoyed limited success—

Pull the plug on the development budget, folks, we're gonna break even on name recognition alone.

especially after they cut the threesome scene with Ginger and the Howells from the latter. As hypothesized, one reason they were lacking might have been because of some "the name is enough" mindset, but more compelling is the fact that the game and movie/TV media are different enough to defy easy portability. The design document and the screenplay do not easily merge. One is interactive, the other is static, one requires "obstacles," even to the point of contrivance, the other relies almost completely on narrative. While both may employ extraordinary CG special effects, it's still easy to see that taking a "given" like a film plot and trying to base an interesting game around it is almost instant doom. *Phantom Menace*, for instance, adhered *very* closely to the film plot, and look what crawled out and got swept under the carpet. Sorry, LucasArts. Just because *Quake* was successfully drawn from *Father Knows Best* doesn't mean that it'll work for just anyone.

On the other hand, films based on games are almost equally handicapped. Look at *Wing Commander* (or rather, *don't*), *Super Mario Brothers* (shudder), *Dungeons & Dragons*, or *Mortal Kombat*, to name a few. The *Final Fantasy* film (not released at this writing) and Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft—both are pretty scary prospects. The *Tomb Raider* teaser/trailer was released not long ago and it looks gosh darn exciting, as does the *Final Fantasy* one. So did the *Dungeons & Dragons* one, though, and what a fiasco it turned out to be. It is just as hard to take a game license and try to build an epic story around it as it is to do the converse. *Gameplay* is the focus during the conception of an interactive product, and hence, the so-called epic created for film almost always seems phony and forced.

The name recognition proviso seems to supercede design concerns in many cases, sometimes even when products are not "crossing over." The *Tomb Raider* series is a good example. When it was such a success, a great deal of care went into its sequel. Now, many sequels, bundles, and gold editions down the road, it almost seems as though the development team does not care any more. "When it says Libbys Libbys Libbys on the label label label..." "With a name like Smuckers..."

It *seems* as though they don't care any more, but again, who's to say? More likely it's a case of resource management. If it ain't broke, throw R&D dollars elsewhere. The really exciting times in this industry are when things emerge from a veil of risk. *The Sims*, *System Shock 2*, *Roller Coaster Tycoon*—tried and true in concept, and not too formulaic. But what we really need is true risk. Ears of corn take over Berlin. Yeah, that's it. ■

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When you're online, you know how frustrating it is to get disconne

DISCONNECTED AGAIN. ENOUGH ALREADY.

There you are happily gaming online when you hear



that one little word you know so well, "Good-bye." Suddenly, you're no longer firing a laser-guided rocket at the back of your buddy's head. Instead, you're left all alone with nothing but your thoughts to keep you company. And one thought in particular keeps popping up.

WHO DISCONNECTED ME AND WHERE DO THEY LIVE?

How are you going to get back at your Internet service provider for ending your session just when you were starting to have fun? A million interesting ideas run through your head but you won't settle for anything less than the "pièce de résistance." Ahhh...you've got it. It's time to take action. It's time to make a call.

HELLO, EARTHLINK.

If you're tired of your ISP disconnecting you, why not return the favor and call EarthLink? You'll find we have what you've been looking for in an Internet service provider all along. Like over 5000 local access numbers in the United States to help you get connected. And a Fast Lane Internet monitor that automatically alerts us if you're having a problem with your connection. So pick up the phone, call your ISP and in a polite but soulless voice say, "Good-bye." Then call us at 1-800-EARTHLINK or visit us at earthlink.net. Because it's *your* Internet.

EarthLink™

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Real-time CPR

Real time strategy does the Lazarus

by Tom Chick



The patient's name: The Real Time Strategy Genre. The diagnosis: two years of untreated stagnation resulting in the onset of terminal recurrence. The prescription: an experimental cocktail of Cyberlore, SSG, TopWare, Ensemble, Shiny, and Creative Assembly. The outcome: the patient is now strong as an ox, selling upwards of half a million copies in some instances and showing clear signs of innovation across the board. You can take him home now.

It was touch and go for a while there, but last year saw a half dozen *Half-Lifes* in the genre of real time strategy: *Majesty*, *Warlords Battlecry*, *Earth 2150*, *Age of Empires II*, *Sacrifice*, and *Shogun*. The effect was galvanizing, a creative defibrillator that administered the same kind of shock to the system that rejuvenated role-playing games after *Diablo* and *Baldur's Gate*, and first-person shooters after *Half-Life*. We see new ways to play now, things done better than before, advances in interface and graphics and AI. What a great year to be a strategy gamer—and what an awful year to be a developer. Perfectly competent titles like *Dark Reign 2* and *Tzar* died quietly, unbought and unplayed.

By my count, there were almost twenty real-time strategy games released in 2000, and only five of them were bad. Most were inoffensive and conventional. But the ones that were good were really good. They stood head and shoulders above the competition in a genre choked with mediocrity and they will hopefully change the way future ones are done from here on out.

Head for the hills

For instance, 3D worlds aren't new, but *Shogun* finally got them right. Real-time strategy games used to be in 3D so gamers could wrestle the camera controls. This was inspired by *Myth*, the first with camera fighting. *Force Commander* was the best camera combat real-time strategy game of 2000. If you defeated the camera, you could zoom in to look at the articulated leg of an AT-AT or maybe the windshield of a TIE Bomber. *Star Trek Armada* had the worst camera combat—to leave the useful portions of the interface where you actually played the game, all you had to do was press a key. Then you were down in the graphics looking at stuff while the game ran away from you.

But *Shogun* demonstrated that 3D doesn't have to be an excuse to support accelerator cards or a way to get better screenshots for the box. Instead, it can be a part of the gameplay. *Total Annihilation* and *Myth* flirted with the concept of holding the high ground, but you didn't need to know this to play. It's like the difference between playing chess when you simply know how the pieces move and playing chess when you know how to think three or four moves ahead.

But *Shogun* really drove the point home. An incline is a terrible thing if you're at the wrong end of it. In feudal Japan, the hills are alive with the sound of units that kick ass from on high. Everyone underneath is walking in the valley of the shadow of death. Your tactical goal in *Shogun*? Get high. The lift is life. Tactically decisive high ground may not fit into more fanciful games like *Earth 2150*, but it demonstrates that 3D terrain doesn't have to be merely cosmetic.

It's like the difference between playing chess when you simply know how the pieces move and playing chess when you know how to think three or four moves ahead.

A long time ago, on an island far, far away...

Shogun also proved that real-time strategy games don't have to restrict themselves to familiar motifs to sell well. Yes, it's true that popular licenses helped *Force Commander* and *Star Trek Armada*, both horrible games, sell more than 100,000 copies. But *Shogun* also broke the 100,000 mark and it was a game that visited Japanese history, an obscure corner previously known only to Koei. And even if you have to ask "Who's Koei?" you will still enjoy *Shogun*. The genre's best selling game of the year, *Age of Empires II*, takes place in that unsexiest of arenas: World History 101.

Real time strategy games were born from god games. First came *Populous* and then stuff like *Dune II*, *Command & Conquer* and *WarCraft*. But it took a while to realize that god isn't the only role you can assume in a real time strategy game. Sometimes you can be a tank driver, like in *Uprising* or *Battlezone*.

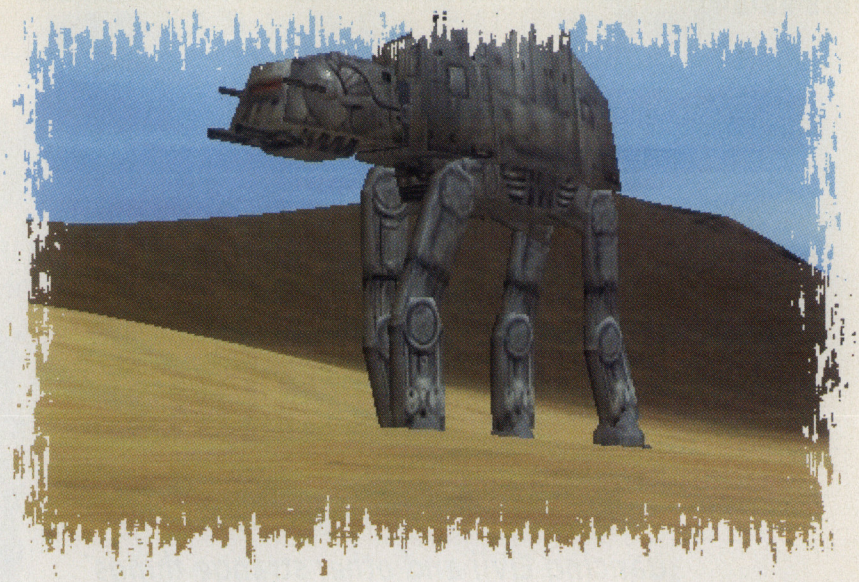
But a tank-sim/shooter real-time strategy game isn't exactly a real-time strategy game. *Sacrifice*, however, is. You actually create your armies and then you move among them. You can run at the vanguard like a devil-may-care cavalry commander or you can surround yourself with bodyguards. You can watch from a hilltop like a general. You can cower behind a tree. You are there. There's no tank to drive or *Magic Carpet* to spirit you away. Your units

aren't just sprites against the terrain or polygonal vehicles. Your favorite Ent or Nightfiend can all but die in your arms. "Earn...this," it gasps.

Majesty was a different way to play god, truer to the genre's god game roots. You weren't the sort of omnipotent god who could drag-select his subjects and give them waypoints. You were a deist's god, the sort of creator whose role was limited after the clock was wound and set ticking. You could cast spells and, more importantly, drop lures into the world: gold was used to set cash rewards, sort of like impromptu papal magnets from *Populous*. But you had to give up a certain degree of control and accept your subjects' freedom of choice.

Adventures in babysitting

But some people have a nurturing side that makes them want to play nanny to Bloodlusted Ogres and Zerg Queens. These people can have a perfectly co-dependent relationship with *Red Alert 2*, in which a squad of 20 GIs hunkered down in sand bags can get chewed up by a lone attack dog if you don't select the whole squad and manually target the pooch. These troops take a gung ho "don't just do something, sit there!" approach. In the parlance of



Force Commander got little right



Sacrifice got a lot of things right.

craving for bad AI so you feel needed, *Red Alert 2* is an enabler.

But last year's better games proved just how much a game benefits from good AI. In *Sacrifice*, your creatures do their own thing just fine. You can help the little dears along, but you're not steering them. The AI is good enough take care of this. You can trust it. A little nudge here or a spell there certainly helps, but you can take a hands-off approach and your troops won't just sit there and die.

In *Age of Empires II*, units arranged themselves in a tactically sound manner. Select a bunch of units and the spearmen go up front to cover the archers. In *Shogun*, select a bunch of guys, drag an area of the terrain, and they'll make their own formations. Let the AI play the drill sergeant while you assume the more glamorous role of general.

Beyond the cutscenes

You used to play just to play. Then the cutscene was invented to give you a reason to play. But it's not enough anymore. Sometimes cutscenes can be so embarrassingly bad they're a liability, (which is the case in *Red Alert 2*, my favorite bad game from last year).

But now we have new reasons to play. *Earth 2150* lets you keep your experienced units between missions, just like *Panzer General*. You have a central staging area where your units live when they're not at war. A space ships drops them off on a mission map and picks them up when the mission's done. There's a sense of leaving to fight and then coming home afterwards, wiser and battle-hardened and wanting a parade. What's more, the units in *Earth 2150* are your own design. You researched their individual components and built them according to your own specs. These are the toys you've made and the troops you've led into battle.

Sacrifice adds a new spell to your spell book each time you finish a mission, depending on whose mission you accepted. Each time you play, your character evolves one step further along a branching series of choices, his book getting fatter by one level of spells. When he gets to the top and becomes an uber-wizard, he's ready to take the book you wrote into multiplayer games.

Warlords Battlecry does it one better and lets you build your own character. It's the same thing that makes *Diablo* so compelling. Who cares about scores or rankings or even winning when you can earn experience points and cash them in for valuable prizes like new spells, attributes, and special powers. Each time you play, your in-game persona becomes a stronger fantasy general with game-bending superpowers. He can become stronger, smarter, faster, better at so many different things. One of the most agonizingly difficult parts of *Warlords Battlecry* is staring at the level up screen and trying to decide how to spend your points. Gamers are inveterate role-players, and *Warlords Battlecry* knows it.

It's been a great year for real-time strategy games. No, a phenomenal year. They're alive, I tell you, alive! We don't have to make any more "Clone & Conquer" references! So let's see, moving down the list from Mr. RTS Genre, next we have the following patients: Sim, Flight. Based, Turn. And Venture, Ad. The doctor will see you now. ■

Improving the Interface



Animated paper clips, dancing Elvii and other strange things

by Phil Steinmeyer

Even the richest software companies can't design decent interfaces. For all of Microsoft's business acumen, its interface stupidity is staggering. "All right, team, here's our two-part plan for world domination. First we'll cut off Netscape's air supply and seize total control of the desktop. Then, we'll earn the love of our customers by adding animated paper clips that pop up any time you press the enter key!" Microsoft's boldest idea for a user-friendly interface was the ill-fated Microsoft Bob. While the rest of the world chuckled, Bill Gates was so enamored with the product that he married its manager (Melinda Gates, *nee French*).

The problem isn't limited to Microsoft—computer programmers the whole world 'round love to torture their users with diabolically evil interfaces. We resolved to fight the trend with our upcoming strategy game, *Tropico*. And now, after over a year of fussing with the interface's design and visuals, I think its *at least* 30% less diabolical and 45% less evil than most games—more like Darth Vader at the end of *Return of the Jedi* rather than at the beginning of *Star Wars*.

A successful game interface meets three criteria: It must be informative, intuitive, and attractive. Unfortunately, all three conflict with each other.

A successful game interface meets three criteria: It must be informative, intuitive, and attractive. Unfortunately, all three conflict with each other. An interface chock-full of information tends to be too confusing and the need for attractive interface artwork often entails cutting down the information content or hiding necessary choices deep within a nest of complex windows. Few games excel in all three areas.



With a person selected, the whole center of the interface fills in with choices and information about that person.

Six screens are not better than one

For our last game, *Railroad Tycoon II*, I think we did a good job of making an attractive interface and presenting plenty of information. Unfortunately, we failed to make it easy to navigate. Aside from the main game world, we had six separate full screen interfaces to which the player had to branch off for various bits of information and choices. We also did a poor job of organizing information—the front page of some screens contained useless information, while more important stuff was buried in the back pages, a couple clicks away.

For *Tropico*, we decided to have only one screen in the game world, with no branching off to secondary screens. All the information would be displayed in an interface bar along the bottom of the screen, divided into four main areas: messages, radar, a center tab area, and a round thing-a-majig (our naming skills were in full force that day).

The message bar and radar are both reasonably common in strategy games, but they should be mandatory. The message bar is for hover help about every button, icon or other control throughout the game. When your mouse hovers over a control, you get a couple sentences explaining what it does. Since most folks only glance at the manual, this makes the game much easier to play. (An unfortunate side effect is that it helps pirates to play the game without a manual. *Railroad Tycoon II* won "Strategy Game of the Year" in Russia, even though it wasn't sold there. Hmmm....).

The radar area is for seeing and maneuvering around the island map as a whole. For *Tropico*, we fixed a major mistake we made with *Railroad Tycoon II*'s radar. Both games are isometric, which means the playing area is effectively diamond shaped. But for the *Railroad Tycoon* interface, we made the radar area square, forcing the player to mentally rotate the radar area 45 degrees to match the playing area. After two years as the game's designer, even I got disoriented dealing with the mismatched shapes. For *Tropico*, we decided to stop torturing players and rotate the radar area to match the playing field.

The center tab area is the heart of the interface. Depending on which button or map object is chosen, it shows one of several displays about people and places in the game. In *Railroad Tycoon II*, we made the player jump to a separate screen for this information. But just as Darth Vader saw the error of his ways and helped his son Luke at the end of *Return of the Jedi*, we decided to help the user by putting all this information in a single, easily accessible, unobtrusive location.

Finally, the round thing-a-majig at the bottom right... for the most part, it isn't very useful at all. It was our excuse to have fun by showing animations, close-ups of people and buildings, and whatever else our artists could cook up. For one tourism-related edict, this window displays a dancing Elvis impersonator. What relationship does this have on the game? Not much, but at least it's better than a dancing paper clip.

Appeasing the stat hounds

About halfway through *Tropico*'s development, we had most of the above implemented, with no plans for anything further. Then, the overwhelming stat-hound and geek in all of us took over and we decided that there had to be more information. Most everything that a player needs to know was in the existing interface, but what if I have a pressing need to know the trend line for crop yields over the last five years? (Hey, it could happen...) We added one major piece to the interface puzzle—a national almanac, filled with all the numbers and stats any hard-core player could possibly want. In organizing the almanac, we allowed our 1950s-era Cuban interface to cheat a little and borrow from 1990s-era Netscape by incorporating extensive hyper-links. We put the most important information up front, and by clicking on any single line item, you can drill-down for a full-page detailed breakdown of it.

The combination of the all-in-one bottom bar with the in-depth almanac will provide (hopefully) a nice combination of simplicity and depth. With just these elements, plus a few other assorted windows and widgets, it seemed the interface would be one of the easiest pieces of the game to complete. Unfortunately, like some giant dam project in the *mañana* loving Caribbean, the interface work has dragged on, in fits and starts, for over a year past its original target completion date.

An artist's life is never easy

The problems began on the art side. The big problem was that the interface was, well... really big. We made it large because *Tropico* supports a variety of resolutions, from 640 x 480 all the way up to 1600 x 1200. If we had just chosen a single resolution to do the interface at, it would have looked stretched and blurred at all the others. So we made all the artwork for the interface at 3200 x 2400, and "down-sampled" to all of the other resolutions, which eliminated the blurring problem. Unfortunately, the large interface required an enormous amount of time-consuming detail work. Moreover, working on huge images stretched the limits of the computers we were using at the start of the project, with simple changes taking over an hour to render. After listening to a couple of months of complaints from Paul, the interface artist, I got him a faster machine, with more RAM, and a new, extra sharp monitor. This had the side benefit of relieving him from all possible excuses for the nightly beatings he takes in the office *Half-Life* games.

Paul's other problem was me. I kept changing my mind, both as far as what elements would be in the interface, and how they should look. My feedback was perhaps not always as clear as it might have been...

Me: *That window sucks. Do something different.*

Paul: *I just spent a week on this! All right, what do you want it to look like?*

Me: *I don't know—you're the artist. Figure something out, something cool and tropical-ly*

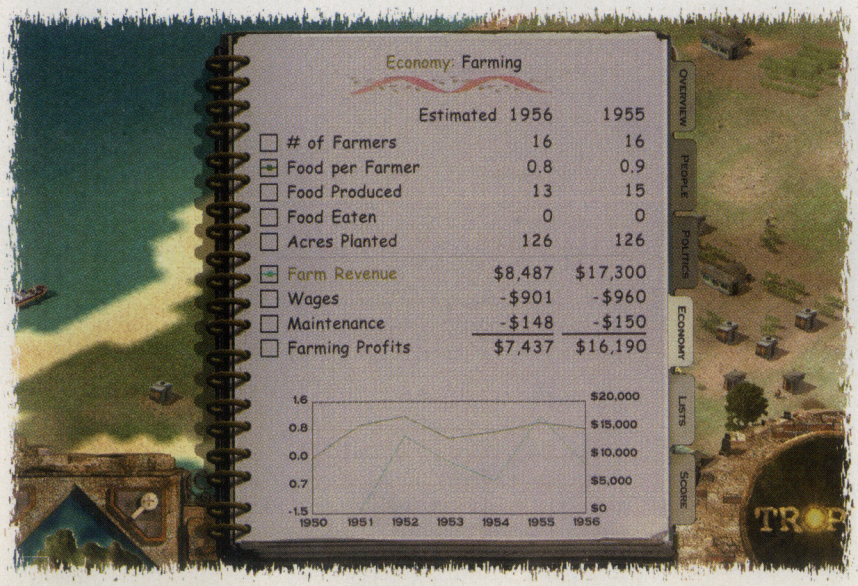
Eventually, Paul would be able to finagle some kind of intelligent response out of me and we would stumble forward. Although I was demanding in what art I accepted as final, it was in part because my end of the work (programming the interface) was also rather excruciating, and I wanted to only program it once, not multiple times with each possible art revision

Rewriting the script

Programming the interface, for the most part, means programming a series of scripts. Unfortunately, to describe even the relatively modest interface of *Tropico*, a total of 10,000 lines of script had to be written. The lines are grouped into bunches of 10 or so, each describing a single button, icon, or listbox somewhere in the game. About half of the lines contain positional data—the screen coordinates and size of the object in question. And every single one of these had to be accurate to within a pixel or so.

And so, even now, about once a week when I have some interface piece to implement, I spend hours nudging buttons around a pixel or two at a time. Change the script, recompile the script, launch the game, get to the point where the button comes into play, take a screenshot, bring up the screenshot in Photoshop, zoom in close to the relevant area and see if everything is aligned, adjust and start again. Then about once a month we make a major interface change to something that we thought was already done, say, remove a button, and reposition all the other buttons. I feel like the frog climbing out of the well; every day he climbs up three feet and every night he slips back another two.

The final result of the perpetual rework and the pixel twaddling is an interface that, I think, finally is an improvement over the ones in *Railroad Tycoon II* and other games. And we promise, no animated paper clips, at least not until the sequel.... ■



No you don't need this information. Yes, there are players who will zealously track every bit of it.

RE bound

Incoherent and violent caption atrocities

A violent world

This is the most horrible magazine that I have ever seen. In particular the January 2001 No. 122 issue. It is no wonder that we have the kind of violence that we do in our world today. I realize that it is not your magazine that is making these videogames, but it is your magazine that is promoting and selling these games through our media. It makes me sick to think that our children are looking through this magazine to pick out Christmas presents. The pictures are horribly graphic and in very poor taste. Please refer to page 12 for a rather upsetting example [*That would be Eidos' lovely* Gangsters 2 *ad. —ed*].

Magazines such as this need to be censored and kept away from young and impressionable children, as if there aren't enough things for them to think about these days. The next issue I see will be taken to the press and shown what you are distributing to young families everywhere.

Name withheld to protect the children

We've only been able to derive the word's meaning through the songs of Alanis Morissette, but we're fairly certain it's ironic to use a free press to promote censorship. —ed

On the other hand...

I am dismayed and frightened by some of the letters you receive whose authors are ready turn the issue of violence and gaming completely over to the government. In an age where our constitutional rights are constantly being assaulted by lawmakers, particularly the second and fourth amendments, I always thought that the first amendment was truly sacred and beyond the government's ability to tamper with.

To adopt the attitude of "bring on the Feds" is to admit that the First Amendment is not all that important to us since we see a greater good by denying a freedom. This indeed would set an extremely dangerous precedent as our other constitutional rights could go by the wayside with the same argument. With freedom comes responsibility, and that is the point that is being missed. Make no mistake: I think these games are pure crap and I am in no way condoning the violence in the games. I do, however, support their right to make these games. That doesn't mean we have to buy them. If the buying public turns their back on this type of product, they will eventually go away (market forces at work).

And this is where magazines like yours can get into the act as well. The First Amendment also protects you: you do not have to print the ads if you don't want to and you can edit freely. By the same token, when a truly objectionable or atrocious game comes along, use the Editorial column to rail against it. Let's not, however, let the government take control of the issue. This would be bad for all concerned and ultimately set a very dangerous precedent.

Kirk Carroll

We're really sorry

Mother of God! The lord is with thy soul! I mean Jesus! I was reading the *NASCAR Heat* review, and then turned to *NHL 2001* [*CGM 122*]. I hope that the Fleet Center doesn't have super high banks like Bristol, and since when did hockey have yellow flags? I'm gonna slap yo momma silly for this. Bad, editor, no sushi for you!

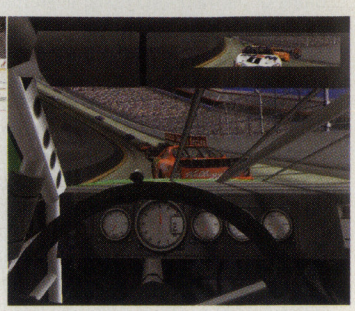
I must go back to my box, my box hole thing now.

Jason
AKA "Jason"

Ouch. —ed



This *is* NHL 2001



This *is* Nascar Heat

We're really, really sorry

I used to think that you guys had the kickass-est of all computer games magazines. Then came the *NHL 2001* review. The picture captions are *all* screwed up. Now I think you guys just suck. Always have, always will. I personally know half of your subscribers, and soon we will all be canceling our subscriptions.

Too bad for you.

Fanoir

That's just brutal. —ed

We're really, really, incredibly sorry

Hey all-powerful writers at my favorite magazine in the entire world. I was looking through the latest issue I got in the mail and I got to the article for *NHL 2001*, and I like looking at pictures, but it seems like all of your captions are for NASCAR 2001 or some other racing game... some of them are kind of funny where they're at but what happened!?

Was your caption editor smoking some funny stuff before he looked over it?

Dabus

We have a caption editor? There are such people? Now there's a job that really stands out on a resume.... But seriously folks, sorry about the captions. Those responsible have been sacked. Please don't cancel your subscriptions. —ed

Chicken incoherence

I like chicken, and if you do not put this letter in your magazine next month I will release a pack of ravenous killer chickens to find you. If you have never seen one, be scared, very scared.

Please keep doing a good job. I am going to eat food now!

(Print my sweet name.)

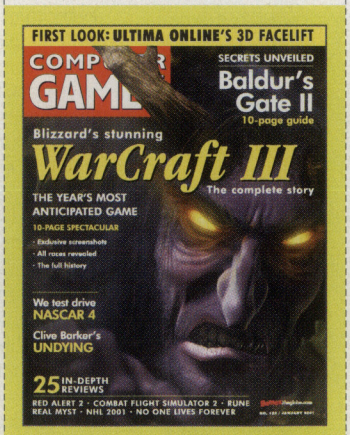
DantHeGoD

Never let it be said we're not here for our readers... ask nicely and ye shall receive. —ed

The piracy issue

Do people out there in the software industry really not know what's going on with software piracy [*Upfront, CGM 122*]? It's just unbelievable. I personally have seen programs that will identify the protection method on CDs and tell you what software and preferences to use to get around it. Seems like every advance the industry makes to combat piracy, they find a way to beat it.

Anonymous



Would we lie to you?

Do you honestly believe that *WarCraft III* is the year's most anticipated game?

Brendan ".derf" Hickey

Yes. —ed

Men of few words dept.

Your game reviews are pathetic.

Matt

At least they're better than our captions. —ed

You love us

Your review of *No One Lives Forever* in the January 2001 issue was terrific. This is the first time I have ever purchased a video game based solely on a review. Rarely do authors skip the hype and just review the game, not the developer's resume or the fan expectations. I know you do not choose products for people, but your articles are a big influence, one that has yet to be wrong. Thank you.

Everything you mentioned was true. The music absolutely made this game. The voice acting was great and humorous and I was genuinely interested in the characters. This is the only first-person shooter game I have enjoyed playing offline since *Half-Life*, and it surpasses that game.

Dallas Hobbs



Everyone loves No One Lives Forever.

You really love us

I just read your hardware review of the ELSA Gladiac MX video card [*CGM 122*]. At first I thought that this was a crappy card that only uneducated people would buy as gift because it was so cheap. I was pretty damn wrong. You see, I have an AMD K6-2 w/ 3D-Now!, a Diamond Monster 3D II, 128MB of RAM, a 4GB hard drive (please don't laugh), and I was thinking of getting a new "bad-ass" gaming PC for Christmas or sometime near the end of winter. I felt that my computer just used up its last lifeline and that it would soon won't be able to meet requirements of the new games.

So after I read your article, I felt that the whole article was straight to me! I mean, the first paragraph almost exactly explained my situation. It was very informative, and I particularly respect the fact that you gave this product a great review despite it not having over 1 giga crap something fill rate etc.

Kudos!

Zheng Tao

You don't love us that much

Your review of *Red Alert 2* [*CGM 122*] was surprising low. It indicates that the game neither broke new ground, nor added significantly to the genre, but also said it is the best of the *Command & Conquer* series. I realize that games must be held to an ever rising standard, but we mustn't forget the reason games were invented... fun. When we strive only for technological breakthroughs or leaps in game play, we end up with games like *Daikatana* and *Ultima Online*.

While *Red Alert 2* is by no means revolutionary, it accomplishes what it set out to do, entertain. I'm not asking for a new rating, but sometimes a game is more than the sum of its parts.

Blake Roberts

We agree with everything you say, but a fun game that breaks little ground is the very definition of an average, three-star game. —ed

Hardware incoherence

I have a problem with my computer. When I try to load it up, my socks smell. Am I right to think that, or am I wrong?

Your expert advice (via the marsh) should help me look up my parents.

Arctic Warrior

This should really be in our hardware Q&A section, shouldn't it? —ed

Incoherent response

This letter is in response to RED59821's "Incoherent Babbling" letter in the December issue [*CGM 121*]. I am deeply offended by your comment about monkeys flying out of your ass. This is nothing to joke about—it happens to me all the time. It's a medical condition, and quite a serious one at that. Every time it happens, I go into my room and cry like a little girl. So please, do not joke about such things.

On a side note to be even more incoherent... I am listening to Marvin Gaye's "Got To Give It Up (Part 1)" right now, and it's making me feel pretty. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to go take my medication. Thank you.

Gridge



The surprisingly low-rated Red Alert 2

Wanker

I've been putting my incredible intellect through considerable pressure lately to assist you in deciding whether Randy Wanker's name is very funny or not [CGM 120], and have come to a decision. It is funny, and that's not funny. Well not to an American, anyway.

In American Mr. Wanker has a perfectly valid name. In English it means... well, actually you know what it means, that's why you find it amusing. Suffice to say, no one in England would call their offspring Randy. If you want to know why, ask the Monkees, and anyone with the surname Wanker would change it. Or go back over to the continent where they belong.

Glad I could be of help.

Deke Roberts
Oxford, England

Advertising games

I was wondering: why don't game publishers get in contact with big companies and have their advertisements in their games and then publish the game for free? The game publishers could charge the advertisers according to the amount of downloads each game gets and then they wouldn't have to worry about copy protection to keep consumers from copying their games. Has this been tried before and failed?

William Woods

*In a world already bursting at the seams with advertising, does anyone really want them in a game? Do you want the local armoury in your role-playing epic having a Wal*Mart swinging overhead? —ed*

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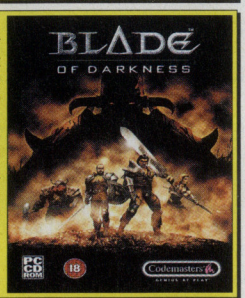
Sierra (Action)
Release: NOW
PC CD
$42.95

'HITMAN: CODENAME 47' Casts you as a hired assassin and chronicles your progress through a series of contracts. Includes some 27 levels that cover five actual hits, as well as the preparations necessary to make those hits - accumulating equipment, information, and the like. Most missions are comprised of about 80% planning and 20% action.



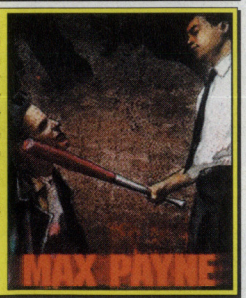
Eidos (Action)
Release: NOW
PC CD
$34.95

'BLADE OF DARKNESS' Dal Gurak, evil arch-mage is trying to take over the world. An advanced combat engine means your weapons leave real damage and you can use almost any object as a weapon. Increase your skills and make yourself better in combat. Choose to play one of 4 unique chacacters, a Barbarian Warrior, an Amazon Huntress, Knight of the Order of the Sword, or a Dwarven Axeman.



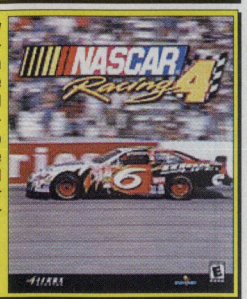
Activision (Action)
Release: 02/01
PC CD
$39.95

'MAX PAYNE' All the bandages and goodies the players have come to expect from a major 3D action title are included. Max Payne is a gritty journey to the present day New York City during the worst winter blizzard of the century. The game shoots from the lowest slum pits to the greatest skyscraper heights, leaving behind a trail of corpses, splatters of blood, and empty brass rolling on the floor.



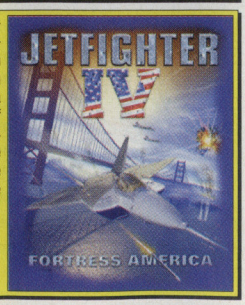
G.O.D. (Action)
Release: 05/01
PC CD
$44.95

'NASCAR RACING 4' Has a new 3D-physics model that adds realism to the reactions of the cars with body rolls, the ability to become airborne, and tires that spin and lock up. The cars also feature a virtual 3D cockpit that allows you to look left and right with a more dynamic arm and steering wheel movement. Use the interactive user interface that includes help for car setup and configuration options.



Sierra (Sim/Sports)
Release: 02/01
PC CD
$44.95

'JET FIGHTER IV' Harnesses supersleek hardware-accelerated graphics, the easiest flight control system available, and the thrill of piloting billion-dollar jet fighters, delivers a heart-pounding, fevered defense of American soil. Pilot the F-14 TomCat, the F-22 Raptor, and the F/A-18 SuperHornet, defending the U.S.A. against an insidious surprise attack.

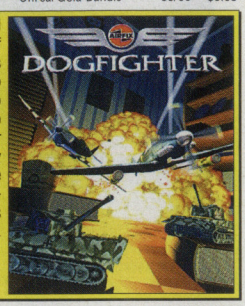


Talonsoft (Simulation)
Release: NOW
PC CD
$38.95

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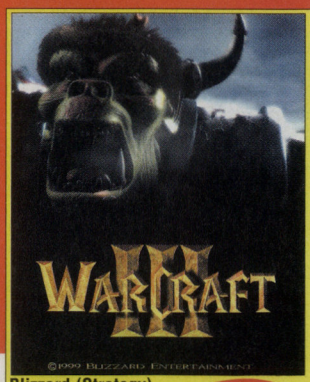


Talonsoft
Release: 03/01
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'SPACE EMPIRES IV' Is a massive space strategy game for Windows. You control your empire in an ever changing and hostile galaxy. Design your starships and use them to explore new solar systems throughout the galaxy. Hundreds of different components are available to place on your ships, and giant facilities are also available to build on your planets.

Shrapnel Games
Release: NOW
PC CD
$42.95



'WARCRAFT III' Is a strategy game set in a role-playing environment, RPS takes the individual combat and interactive environments found in role-playing games and combines them within a competitive strategic environment. Warcraft III puts players in command of smaller, potent parties of heroes and troops. Battle in a dynamic world of living towns, wandering monsters, characters and quests, while simultaneously devising strategies to defeat the enemies.

Blizzard (Strategy)
Release: 06/01
PC CD
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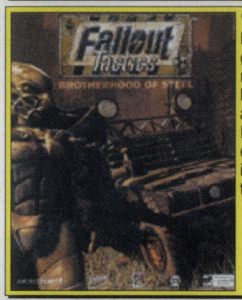
'STARTOPIA' Takes gamers to a once thriving galactic network of starships, space stations and planets left lifeless with redundant scars of the apocalypse. You will lead the way in rebuilding the network of space stations that once served the commerce and communication of the old empire - reuniting the surviving alien peoples under one banner.

Eidos (Strategy)
Release: 02/01
PC CD
$38.95



'COMMANDOS 2' New characters including a thief, a seductress, & a dog. More Action!!! Faster paced gameplay, but still requiring the planning & investigation of mission possibilities before execution. New vehicles include jeeps, tanks, trucks, ships, boats & cars. All of the missions in single player will be playable in a cooperative Multiplayer mode.

Eidos (Strategy)
Release: 03/01
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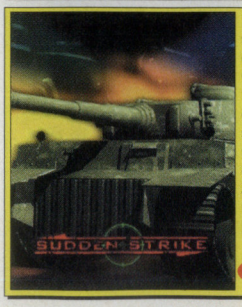
'FALLOUT TACTICS' Is a squad-based, third person tactical combat game with RPG character development and a mission-based story line, supporting both turn-based and Continuous Turn-Based play. It also features a robust multiplayer engine. Fallout Tactics takes place in the post-apocalyptic wasteland in the middle of North America.

Interplay (Strategy)
Release: 02/01
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'STAR TREK: STARFLEET COMMAND 2' Embark on a career as a starship officer and take the helm in the ultimate RTT (real-time tactical) space combat experience. Choose from 8 races to play with all new single and multiplayer campaigns. The new dynamic campaign system (Metaverse) allows players to create an entire career in an evolving galaxy full of intrigue.

Interplay (Strategy)
Release: NOW
PC CD
$42.95



'SUDDEN STRIKE' Is a real-time strategy and tactical simulation game. Set in WWII, with Russian, German, French, American & British missions focusing on tactical fighting. Up to 1,000 units per scenario, giant maps, realistic gun simulations complete with "real" explosions. Units gain experience and make it from one mission to the next. Multi player mode: up to 12 players and 4 teams.

Strategic (Strategy)
Release: 02/01
PC CD
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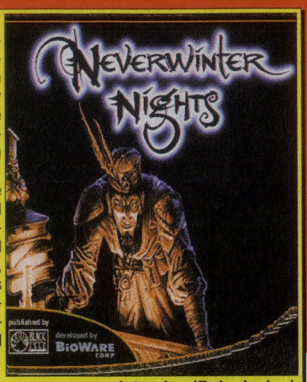
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'NEVERWINTER NIGHTS' Has been designed specifically for the online, multiplayer environment and the latest in 3D technology allowing you to experience all the magic of pen-and-paper Dungeon-Mastering on your home computer! Create and populate entire new modular worlds and stories for others to adventure in. As an all-powerful Dungeon Master (DM), Neverwinter Nights allows you to alter the plot, possess characters, and manage combat from behind the scenes, all in real-time.



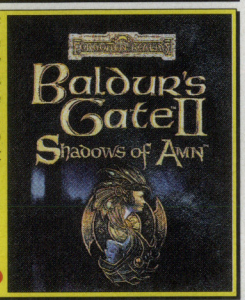
Interplay (Roleplaying)
Release: 09/01
PC CD
$48.95

'ICEWIND DALE: HEART OF WINTER' Continue the adventure in the Ten Towns with Icewind Dale: Heart of Winter, the expansion pack for Icewind Dale. Icewind Dale: Heart of Winter uses Advanced D & D rules and is set in the Forgotten Realms universe. With additions that both increase playability, like the higher experience cap, and add the technical enhancements asked by consumers such as 800x600 screen resolution.



Interplay (Roleplaying)
Release: NOW
PC CD
$29.95

'BALDUR'S GATE II: SHADOW OF AMN' The newest title in the Baldur's Gate series adds new classes, spells, and items and uses an isometric, top-down view. The game is real-time but is pauseable, and actions may be assigned to characters in your party at that time.



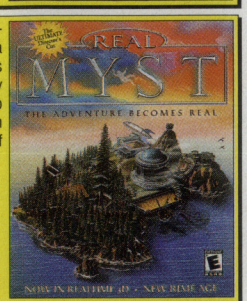
Interplay (Roleplaying)
Release: NOW
PC CD
$38.95

'ANACHRONOX' Is a 3D RPG from Ion Storm that uses the Quake II engine in a third-person, single player game with real-time combat. Control up to three characters as they trek across the galaxy and three different dimensions. Search through more than 100 levels and fight over 150 monsters in your quest to find the truth.



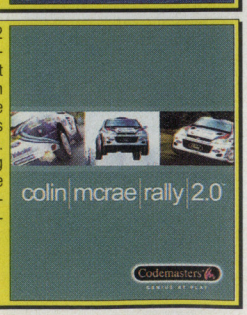
Eidos (Roleplaying)
Release: 03/01
PC CD
$38.95

'REAL MYST 3D' This final director's cut version of Myst uses a state of the art 3D engine. Players now walk and look anywhere they choose in real-time. Day turns into night and weather changes from sun to rain. This is the version of Myst that you've been waiting for!



Mattel (Adventure)
Release: NOW
PC CD
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'COLIN McRAE RALLY 2' Drive 12 of the greatest rally cars in 8 different countries. Experience the most authentic rally driving ever with an all new multi-car Arcade Rally mode with over 8 unique looped circuits with 6 cars racing simultaneously. Drive through constantly changing weather conditions all over the world with new and stunning visuals created from actual photographs.

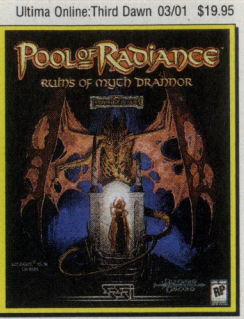


Activision (Sports/Sim)
Release: 02/01
PC CD
$39.95

COMPUTER GAMES: ROLE PLAYING

Title	Release	Price	Title	Release	Price	Title	Release	Price	Title	Release	Price
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Arcanum	05/01	$42.95	Heroes M&M Compendium	10/97	$28.95	Star Trail	11/94	$12.95	Ultima Collection	02/98	$12.95
Asheron's Call	11/99	$29.95	Icewind Dale	07/00	$38.95	Star Trek ConQuest	06/00	$24.95	Ultima Online: Renaissance	05/00	$18.95
Baldrs Gate: Tale Swrd Cst	05/99	$18.95	Icewind Dale:Hrt of Wntr	01/01	$29.95	Star Trk Final Unity	07/95	$8.95	Ultima Online:Third Dawn	03/01	$19.95
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Baldur's Gate	12/98	$26.95	Lands of Lore 3	04/99	$14.95						
Baldur's Gate II	09/00	$42.95	Legacy of Kain Bld Omn	09/97	$12.95						
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Call of Cthulhu Drk Crnrs	12/00	$42.95	Legends of Might & Magic	02/00	$44.95						
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Diablo	01/97	$9.95	Might & Magic Compilation	11/98	$27.95						
Diablo II	06/00	$39.95	Mordor 2	06/01	$38.95						
Diablo II Expnsn Pck	04/01	$29.95	Neverwinter Nights	07/01	$48.95						
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Elder Scrolls 2	09/96	$27.95	Odium	11/99	$6.95						
Eldr Scrlls Mrrowind	04/01	$54.95	Planescape Torment	12/99	$14.95						
EverQuest Scars of Velious	12/00	$17.95	Pool of Radiance 2	03/01	$39.95						
EverQuest:Ruins Kunark	04/00	$24.95	Rage of Mages 2	10/99	$12.95						
Final Fantasy VII	06/98	$18.95	Revenant	10/99	$19.95						
Final Fantasy VIII	01/00	$28.95	Septerra Core	11/99	$16.95						
Forgttn Rlms Silver Ed	08/99	$24.95	ShadowBane	09/01	$39.95						

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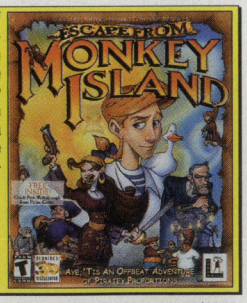
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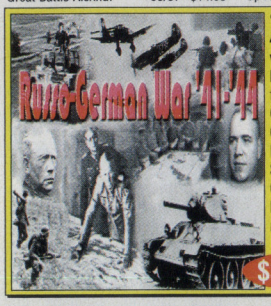
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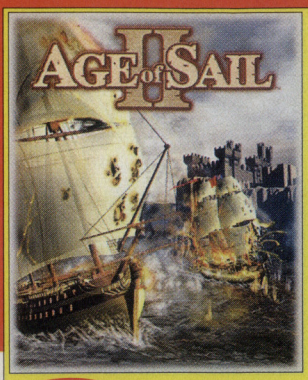


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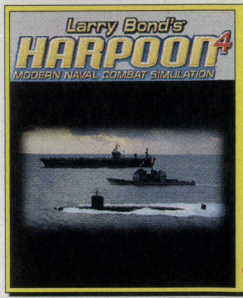
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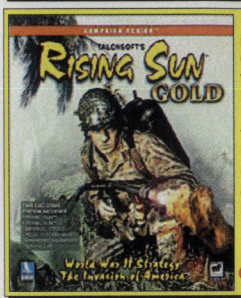
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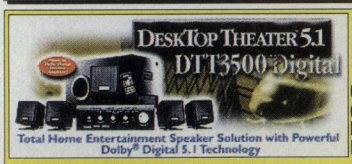
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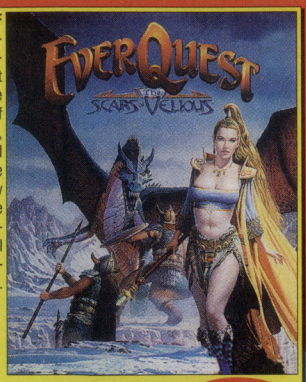
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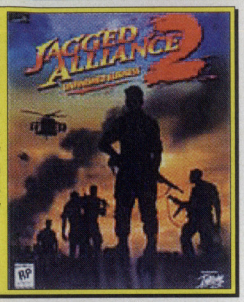
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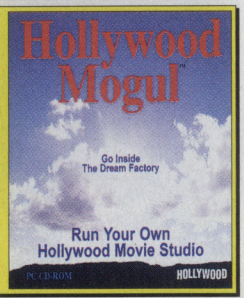
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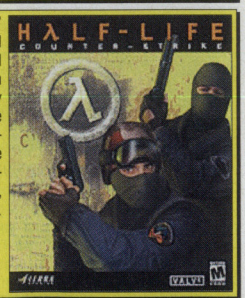
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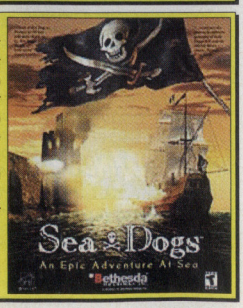
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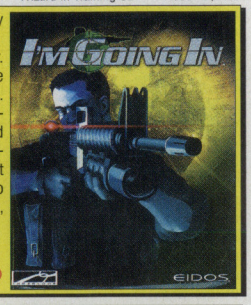
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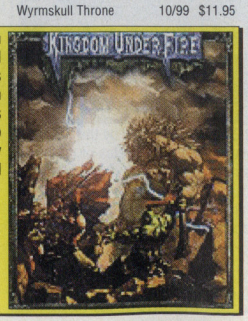
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Rugrats in Paris	11/00	$39.95
Sledstorm	08/99	$19.95
Spider-Man	08/00	$39.95
Spyro Year of Dragon	10/00	$39.95
Streetfighter Alpha 3	05/99	$29.95
Syphon Filter 2	03/00	$39.95
Tekken 3	04/98	$24.95
Tenchu 2	08/00	$39.95
The Grinch	11/00	$39.95
The Mummy	11/00	$39.95
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Tiger Woods 2001	11/00	$39.95
Tony Hawks Pro Skatr 2	09/00	$39.95
Triple Play 2001	03/00	$38.95
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Valkyrie Profile	09/00	$44.95
WCW 2001 Backstage	11/00	$39.95
WWF Smackdown 2	11/00	$39.95
War:Final Assault	11/00	$39.95
Warriors Might & Magic	11/00	$44.95
Warzone 2100	06/99	$34.95
Wheel of Fortune 2	11/00	$29.95
Wild Arms 2	05/00	$39.95
Winnie the Pooh	11/00	$42.95
World Destrctn Lg Tanks	11/00	$39.95
World is Not Enough	11/00	$39.95
Worms Pinball	11/00	$29.95
X Men 3D Mutant Acad	08/00	$39.95
You Don't Know Jack 2	11/00	$29.95



'FINAL FANTASY IX' The world of Gaia is at war. Young bandits are enlisted in the fight against the ruthless queen of Alexandria. Featuring 4 characters, wizards, knights and crystals from earlier titles and many other old-school elements.

EA (Roleplaying)
Release: NOW
PSX
$49.95

PLAYSTATION 2

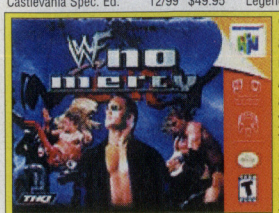
Title	Release	Price
Armored Core 2	10/00	$48.95
Dead or Alive 2: Hardcore	10/00	$48.95
Drakan	11/00	$48.95
Dynasty Warriors 2	10/00	$48.95
ESPN Track & Field Sydney	10/00	$48.95
Eternal Ring	10/00	$48.95
Evergrace	10/00	$49.95
Fantavision	10/00	$48.95
Gran Turismo 2000	01/01	$48.95
Gun Slinger	03/01	$48.95
GunGriffon Blaze	10/00	$48.95
Hidden & Dangerous 2	10/00	$48.95
Kessen	11/00	$49.95
Madden FB 2001	10/00	$49.95
Metal Gear Solid 2	02/01	$48.95
Midnight Club Street Race	11/00	$48.95
NBA Live 2001	11/00	$48.95
NFL Game Day 2001	10/00	$48.95
Orphen: Scion of Sorcery	10/00	$48.95
Quake III Arena	04/01	$49.95
RayMan 2	11/00	$48.95
Ready 2 Rumble 2	10/00	$48.95
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Swing Away Golf	11/00	$48.95
Tekken Tag Tournament	10/00	$48.95
Time Splitters	11/00	$48.95
Unreal Tournament	11/00	$48.95
X Squad	10/00	$49.95

DREAMCAST

Title	Release	Price
4x4 Evolution	10/00	$39.95
Ecco the Dolphin	08/00	$39.95
Evil Dead Hail King	10/00	$44.95
Grandia 2	12/00	$48.95
Jet Grind Radio	10/00	$46.95
Metropolis	11/00	$46.95
Power Stone 2	08/00	$44.95
Rush 2049	10/00	$42.95
Samba de Amigo	10/00	$49.95
Sea Man Forbidden Pet	08/00	$49.95
Sega Sports NFL 2K1	09/00	$49.95
Shenmue	11/00	$46.95
Skies of Arcadia	11/00	$46.95
Tokyo Extreme Racer 2	10/00	$46.95
Tony Hawks Pro Skatr 2	11/00	$44.95
Ultimate Fight Champ	09/00	$46.95
Virtua Tennis	07/00	$38.95
World Series BB 2001	07/00	$48.95
Worldwide Soccer 2K	09/00	$44.95
WWF Royal Rumble	08/00	$44.95

NINTENDO 64

Title	Release	Price
Aidyn Chronicles	01/00	$59.95
All Star Baseball 2001	03/00	$49.95
Banjo Tooie	11/00	$49.95
Batman Beyond	11/00	$49.95
Battle Tanx 2	10/99	$39.95
Beetle Adv. Racing	03/99	$39.95
Big Mountain 2000	10/00	$42.95
Castlevania Spec. Ed.	12/99	$49.95
Cruisin' Exotica	10/00	$49.95
Diddy Kong Racing	12/97	$39.95
Donkey Kong 64	12/99	$54.95
Dragon Sword	10/00	$59.95
ExciteBike	05/00	$44.95
F1 Championship	10/00	$39.95
Fighters Destiny 2	06/00	$42.95
Hey You Pikachu	11/00	$82.95
Hydro Thunder	03/00	$49.95
Indy Racing League 2K	06/00	$39.95
Jet Force Gemini	10/99	$45.95
Kirby 64 Crystal Shards	07/00	$49.95
Legend of Zelda	11/98	$36.95
Legend Zelda Majora Mask	10/00	$59.95
Madden FB 2001	09/00	$49.95
Mario Golf 64	08/99	$44.95
Mario Party 2	02/00	$49.95
Mario Tennis	09/00	$49.95
NBA In Zone 2000	03/00	$24.95
NFL Blitz 2001	09/00	$49.95
NFL QB Club 2001	08/00	$52.95
Ogre Battle 64	10/00	$56.95
Paper Mario Story	01/00	$49.95
Perfect Dark	05/00	$59.95
Pokemon Puzzle League	09/00	$49.95
Pokemon Stadium	03/00	$54.95
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Rainbow Six	11/99	$54.95
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Rush 2049	09/00	$52.95
Sea-Doo Hydro Cross	10/00	$52.95
Shadowgate Rising	10/00	$54.95
Spider-Man	11/00	$52.95
Star Wars Battle Naboo	10/00	$56.95
Star Wars Racer	05/99	$26.95
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Super Mario Adventure	12/00	$59.95
Super Mario Kart R	02/97	$39.95
Tony Hawks Pro Skater	03/00	$46.95
Top Gear Rally 2	06/00	$54.95
Triple Play 2000	03/99	$39.95
Turok Shadow Oblivion	08/00	$49.95
War:Final Assault	09/00	$54.95
WCW 2001	11/00	$49.95
World is Not Enough	11/00	$49.95
WWF No Mercy	11/00	$54.95



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THQ (Sports)
Release: NOW
N64
$59.95

GAMEBOY

Title	Release	Price
102 Dalmatians	11/00	$28.95
Alice in Wonderland	09/00	$28.95
Army Men Sarges Hero 2	11/00	$28.95
Bust a Move Millenium	11/00	$28.95
Donkey Kong Country 2	11/00	$28.95
Dragon Warrior 1 & 2	09/00	$28.95
Gobs of Games	10/00	$28.95
Legend River King 2	11/00	$28.95
Little Mermaid Pinball	09/00	$32.95
Pokemon Gold	10/00	$29.95
Pokemon Puzzle Challenge	12/00	$28.95
Pokemon Silver	10/00	$29.95
Spider-Man	10/00	$28.95
Super Mario Brothers	05/99	$28.95
Tetris DX	01/99	$28.95
Tony Hawks Pro Skatr 2	11/00	$29.95



'LUNAR 2 ETERNAL BLUE COMPLETE' Join Hiro & Ruby as they try to unlock the secrets of the Blue Spire & the strange young girl within it. Meet new characters, fight monsters, climb mountains & crawl through dungeons as you continue your quest to defeat the evil Zophar!

Working Designs (Roleplaying)
Release: NOW
PSX
$59.95



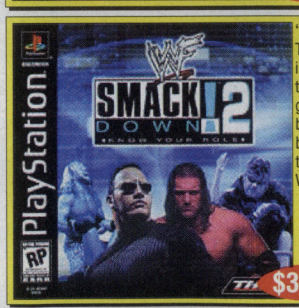
'TORNEKO: THE LAST HOPE' This RPG-style game features classic gameplay and a game design with monsters and items from the Dragon Warrior series. Randomly generated dungeons in 9 enchanted areas and 132 types of monsters!

Enix (Roleplaying)
Release: NOW
PSX
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'DRIVER 2' Explore four new cities - Chicago, Las Vegas, Havana, and Rio de Janeiro. Hop out of the car perform tasks on foot, and even commandeer a new ride to complete your objectives. You'll face 40 unique and challenging missions that will test your driving skills to their extreme.

Infogrames (Sim)
Release: NOW
PSX
$42.95



'WWF SMACKDOWN 2' The #1 rated show for teens is back for the PlayStation this holiday season It's bigger and badder then ever before. Brawl in the ring, backstage, in the VIP room, the parking lot, or the new WWF Restaurant.

THQ (Sports)
Release: NOW
PSX
$39.95



'SKIES OF ARCADIA' Follow the adventures of the young hero Vyse. Through his voyage he will wage epic battles against savage monsters, evil Pirates, and a powerful enemy nation. Accompanying Vyse will be Aika, his childhood friend, and Fina, a mysterious girl from a distant land.

Sega (Roleplaying)
Release: NOW
Dreamcast
$46.95



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Nintendo (Adventure)
Release: NOW
N64
$49.95

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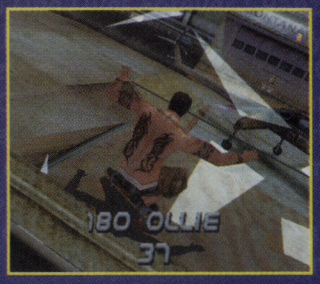
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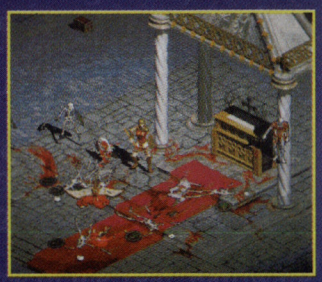






Game of the Year

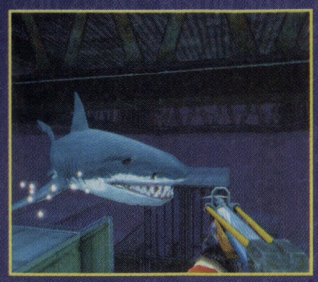
We said System Shock 2 was the best game of 1999; next month we pick the best games of the (not quite) new millennium. Plus we'll pick the top manuals, box art, voice acting, story, sound, music, graphics, art direction, and whatever categories we can make up. We'll also pick the worst game of the year, the biggest train wreck, the lamest box, dumbest advertisements... you get the point. We'll also predict the best of 2001. We'll probably be wrong, but at least you can keep the issue around and laugh at us later.





Pick up our next issue to find out.

Issue 125—on sale March 6.









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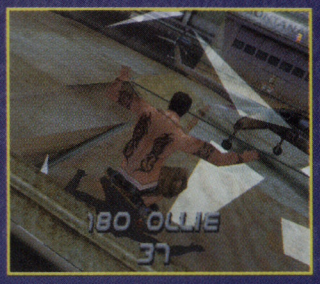
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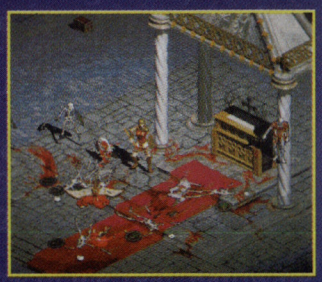






Game of the Year

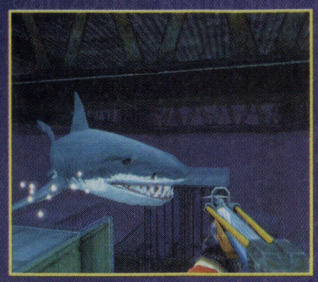
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